



Muthassi

Prologue	2
Innocence	6
Primary School	7
Higher Elementary School	15
The “six miles away” School	23
Options	30
Peripatetic Days	33
Nursing - Getting Started	34
Finishing studies and off to work	41
The next town: Vizag	48
North to the land of Ganges: Patna	53
The Capital beckons: Delhi-58-60	60
Her Time in Delhi:60-62	67
End of an Era: Delhi 63-65	74
Getting Hitched Finally	81
Family	89
The Next Generation	90
House and Home: 1970-1975	99
Hearth: 1975-1984	106
The Final Weaning: 1985-1991	114
Home	120
Homeward Bound: 1991-1994	121
Grandchildren And More:1995-2002	130
Frailty: 2003-2009	140
Taking Stock: 2009-2014	152
Epilogue:	158
Afterword	161

Prologue

Once upon a time in a land far far away there lived a young girl, the oldest girl in a family of many girls and few boys. She was important, the family followed a matriarchal system and that made her the head of the family for her generation.

Short, both in stature and temper, she grew up in the old house which had somehow more doors than rooms. Built in earlier, more opulent times, the house was a living relic, artifacts, some more than 100 years old, lay gathering cobwebs in the dark, dimly lit corners. The windows, like all other architectural elements in house, were slightly crooked and looked both strong and ramshackle at the same time but were so useful, they let in light. Standing there she could comb her long, thick, wavy black hair. She could read. She could stare out and see the million shades of green. All this, through the small, almost frog like, protruding windows.

She was born in 1934. The first of five girls. There were two boys, one older and one younger than her. When Muthassi took her from her daughter at childbirth, she marveled at how perfect she was. The continuing of the lineage, born on an auspicious day, Uttradam, the star she was born under, is the penultimate day of the ten-day Onam festival. Thiruonam - is the last day which was celebrated all over Kerala to mark the ten days of King Bali's return to his homeland. The family would henceforth celebrate Uttradam instead of the traditional Thiruonam. She would grow up in the women-centric, strongly matriarchal household, aware from the day she was born that she was extra special, that she had to carry the burden and bear the responsibility of being the eldest daughter of the only daughter of her grandmother.

As the years rolled by, she became at different times, a friend, a student, a confidante, a rebel, a fighter and then a matriarch. She was a product of her unique position in a small dwindling community that was facing the changing times with the kind of strength that few people would have credited them with. The entire community was not matriarchal, just the part that belonged to the Malabar Coast. It was an old family; they had temples which were over a few centuries old, some now defunct and some still active.

She stood outside the room, as her mother died in childbirth. The twins, tiny and beautiful were also still born. She was not yet ten but she was already on her way to being the adult in the time-honored tradition of matriarchy. There was the memory of a man, someone who visited from time to time, someone who was like a father, or was a father...there was never any real talk with him or about him or around him. He, like the fine particles of dust that showed up in the sunshine through the windows, came and went, never leaving a trace of ever having been there. After her mother died, the sun shone a little less, the dust was not so visible now and the mistrust for that fleeting figure of the man, who was the father, became an overriding distrust for all men. Tiny, though she was, she swore off men well before she knew what good they were for.

It was during her mother's funeral that she learnt that babies were not cremated, they were buried. For years later she would not go near the site of the burial, a short walk from the ancestral home, even just passing by would bring back awful memories of that dreadful night.

She took on the mantle of a mother to her youngest sibling and a mentor for all the others. She was there when they needed her, emotionally, physically and later on in life, also financially.

Muthassi, the real matriarch, mother to only one child, now grandmother to a brood, belonged to an era that did not exist anymore. The large family, which she belonged to, had divided up the land and assets. The matrilineal inheritance, which meant that the inheritance was one share each for the direct descendants and every girl in the family got one share additionally for the children she had and so on, was not enough. Muthassi had received nine parts, one for her, one for daughter and one part each for her seven grandchildren. In spite of this she had been effectively sidelined; given the scraps because there was no one to speak up for her, no eldest son to manage the dirty details. Having known only luxury and never having had to worry about managing the luxury, to be left in charge of so many little children and little to go on, made her turn to the one in the family who would be the next matriarch.

The oldest boy was around eleven when they divided the property; this was before her daughter died in childbirth. Muthassi pleaded with the family elders, the many uncles and aunts to not divide until he was old enough to participate in the discussions but she was over ruled. It was not as if the family was unfair, they were fair, but fairness like truth is no absolute. She could do nothing but accept what was given and then make the most of it. The biggest challenge would be monetizing the crops in the years to come. At least all the land was given in a single parcel and she was also given the two temples which lay on the land.

Followers of Shiva, the temples would be her and her granddaughters' source of strength in the years to come. They had festivals, celebrations, temple dances, performances; so much of their life would be tied up with how they managed the temple. One of the two temples, would slip into ruins, too big and too isolated to manage, they would only use the temple pond for bathing. The other temple, set next to a major road would become the pride and joy of the village many years later.

With the passage of time, the changing mores would bring the matriarchy to be no more than a matrilineal system and then the courts would intervene and even change that to bring inheritance systems in line with the rest of the state. All through these changes the little girl, with the shiny braids, would watch and grow and move quietly through life. A journey that took her to many places and let her meet many people and live an interesting life in very interesting times.

This then is the story of that little girl, today eighty, still small in stature, but larger than life in all things that measure a life well spent.

Innocence

TIME IT WAS AND WHAT A TIME IT WAS
A TIME OF INNOCENCE
A TIME OF CONFIDENCES
LONG AGO IT MUST BE
I HAVE A PHOTOGRAPH
PRESERVE YOUR MEMORIES
THEY'RE ALL THAT'S LEFT YOU
-SIMON AND GARFUNKEL, "BOOKENDS"

Primary School

She was all of four, two pig tails, a neat dress, a small piece of chalk and a slate board. Her slightly older brother waited impatiently, he could not quite understand the fuss. It was the 1st of July. Her age in the school records would be written as five. Without the right number of children in the class, the teacher did not get a salary. Every year, if the number was less or slightly less than the required quota, kids like her were rounded up. Families were cajoled. Greater good was discussed and underage kids were included in the roster. Age after all was relevant only on the piece of paper it was recorded, so if that recording helped keep a teacher in the village school, there was a measurable greater good.

From the house to the school took ten minutes to walk. If it was raining, a little longer, during the dry months, a little less. Footwear was an unknown or barely known luxury. Footwear for kids a real luxury. She did not have shoes or sandals or even a chappal. Groomed from birth to be the next matriarch there was no sign of tears, tantrums were an alien concept. She was dressed to go to school. She went.

The first woman in that impressive lineage to go out to study. To sit amongst commoners, kids from all communities. Muthassi spent hours agonizing about the appropriateness of her decision. Muthassi did not know what the right thing to do was. The importance of education was not in question. Muthassi and her only daughter were also lettered, but privately educated at home by women from the family or priests of the temple. These winds of change would augur well for the life the next generation was born into. Reluctantly she had given her consent. Yet that morning, watching the little girl, dressed in her school finery, no signs of hesitation, made Muthassi wonder once again if this was what should be done.

The grandmother gave her and the boy a ball of rice soaked in ghee. Like every Malayali, Muthassi knew that this was food perfect for the pursuit of knowledge, then stood watching the two children, so similar and yet already so different. The boy with his mischievous ways, kicking at pebbles, gobbling the rice and the little girl, so proper, so grown up already in the ways of the world. The mother was busy with one of the younger ones, already pregnant with the next, tired, always tired, she did not come out to see her children go off to school.

All of her memories, all the school days, all through the next twelve years were inextricable linked with the rice ball with ghee and her grandmother's worried face; never quite convinced that she had made the right choice. The expression never changed. What if it had all been mistake?

They left then, the boy who would not wait anymore and his little sister running to keep up with him. The first day of school. So much excitement. From a cloistered environment to one where she would smell and taste freedom, not just notional, but real freedom.

Primary school was set in an old building, one blackboard, rarely more than one teacher, five grades. The intention was to hammer the three R's into the thick, unwilling to learn skulls. A routine that rarely varied. Morning began with the rice ball soaked in ghee, a brisk walk to the school. Reading, writing and arithmetic. Some literature, mostly Malayalam poetry that was taught and expected to be retained and delivered back verbatim. School was from ten in the morning till four in the afternoon. There was one text book for all the grades. From the second grade on they were to use pencils and paper notebooks. Both very expensive items and not easily available. There were hardly any stores, definitely no stationery shops. No paper was wasted, no paper was torn. The chalk or pencils were used

until the stub could not be held anymore. Frugality was not a statement it was the way of life.

She was an unusual child. A quick learner, she saw school as an escape from what life had given her mother. The teacher was quick to notice the spark and encouraged it. The independence fervor was thick; the socially aware populace though hardly troubled by the British or the war that raged across the seven seas was feeling the change that was to come. The crumbling of the rigid caste hegemony seemed only days away.

The brother and then other siblings all were part of this journey. The only time a child was held back in a certain class was if the number arithmetic was not good for making the salary of the teacher in question. There were no public exams in the primary school. There were no inspections. The teachers were passionate. Attendance was mandatory but rarely enforced. Children came anyway, some like her because they enjoyed it, some because the drudgery at home was a poor substitute for the freedom that was school.

They were receiving an education. She found books and the teachers got her more. The window in the old house was her favorite place to be.

Walks along the paddy fields, watching the tiny crabs crawl out of the mud, the birds that trilled and the cows, goats and other wildlife that seemed to be with her every step of her walk to and fro from the school. Raw mango plucked from the tree, berries, so many of them, the rose apples and the jackfruit in season. Life was in equal parts, sour and sweet. They bathed every morning in the pond by the house. She learnt to swim before she turned six. Since the pool was away from the outside world, she could stay for hours in the water. During the holidays they used to go to bathe in the river.

School meant being away from the worries of the babies and the problems of her mother. She longed for and enjoyed the freedom to be an ordinary child that school afforded her. Silence was her companion, given the caste status she sat alone, aware of how important this was to her grandmother, she did not really need friends and studies were enough, the gaps she could fill with books and poetry and the interesting things that the teacher taught every day.

One day, while still in grade one, she felt unwell. A fever that was starting. There were too many little ones at home so she went to school anyway. A silent student, a pretty little girl, so grown up. She managed to last through the whole day. At the end of the school day, she was too weak to get up and walk the ten-minute walk through the paddy fields back to the house. Her brother, her protector, could not be bothered, hungry for lunch he ran back leaving his little sister in school. Muthassi, still unsure about the appropriateness of her action, waited for the children to come home. When the boy saw her face, he finally realized what he had done by leaving her behind in class. Muthassi, did the unthinkable, she rushed out to go fetch her little girl. As she reached the family temple near the school, she saw the kind teacher carrying her little one back from school. She thanked him, he, who she was not to ever have had any contact with; she thanked him for taking care of her little girl. She took the child by hand and led her to the temple pond. There she made her strip and take a dip in the cold water. With a fever raging, it never once occurred to her that the little girls' health was more important than the cleansing she needed done because the teacher had picked her up. Once cleansed, she picked her up and went back home to put the girl in bed, to rest and recover. She wondered again if she had done the right thing by sending her to school. The little one, so small, knew and understood the conflict. She said nothing but

the silence told her grandmother that it did not matter how many illnesses she went through, how many cleansing dips were needed, not going to school was not an option.

Grade one was by far the most difficult and the most fun. She was only four years old, an age where children are barely able to cope without their moms. She not only managed without her mother, she truly blossomed in the first grade. Over the year she learnt the alphabet, reading and writing and was introduced to basic counting. She loved all of it, the writing, the reading, the singing, everything about school was good. When they came home from school, she looked as neat as she had in the morning and the boy looked like he had rolled in mud and other filth every day. The comparisons were starting and the feedback was also making its way back home on how different the brother and sister were.

Grades one through five, the younger brother and sisters in tow, not one other sibling showed her interest in the education. She did not care, she was growing up, almost nine years old, and the puzzles that were home were beginning to make more sense.

Her older brother and she were the next in line to help out at home. There was a retinue of servants who plowed the fields and looked after the cows. A strictly vegetarian household, a highly observant home, the rules were never defined and yet were never questioned or broken.

Thiruvadara, Vishu and Onam were celebrated in as grand a manner as possible. There was a saying that the Warrasiers (the women of the Warriar clan) could not really cook. It never seemed to have mattered. Meals were simple, rice, sambar, buttermilk, pickle and poppadums. The traditional sadya served on Vishu and Onam were more elaborate and had in addition Ellassery, Avial, Inji puli, Manga Perek, Olan, Kalan and Upaairi. New clothes were

bought only for the festivals and birthdays. All the important occasions were celebrated at the temple. The only part of the inheritance that still was a throwback to the real days of opulence. Rich in produce, they only lacked in what could not be bartered for. The absence of an adult male in the family meant that transactions were often done in a very convoluted manner. Muthassi was often duped, sometimes cheated. Gifted with an intellect but no training whatsoever, over time, she became a shrewd business woman who never deviated from the old principles but whom, the others found harder to take for a ride.

The siblings were also tagging along; all separated by a year or so, every year saw another child joining her and her brother as they walked to school. She was not the oldest but it was her responsibility to see that they all made the journey to and fro together. There were only two boys, one older and one a little younger. Not quite nine, she was already learning what it meant to be the matriarch.

By the time she was in grade three, she could read and write and do math at the same level as the grade five students. Because she was not naturally disruptive her achievements were noticed slowly. The teachers gave her more to do, they set her to help with the younger kids and saw that she was a natural teacher. How unusual it was to see a seven or barely eight-year-old little girl teaching someone more or less the same age. It gave her something to do, she was not disorderly but she was beginning to feel bored. The school teachers went out of their way to source books that the child could read and enjoy. Like a true bookworm, she read everything that came her way, often lugging back books that seemed to weigh more than she did.

The school wanted to award her for academic excellence. In the small school, this was a big event. They were to have a proper ceremony with invited guests. She was thrilled. She knew that no one from home would attend but it did not matter. Her efforts were being recognized and the recognition would come in a public forum. She wanted a new dress. New clothes were only bought for festivals or birthdays. She broached the issue. Amongst the babble of babies, it was ignored. She persisted. It did not make the priority list. The day before the ceremony, she threw her first real tantrum. Angry, annoyed, overlooked, she had had enough. She must have been just eight or nine but she wanted a new outfit for the presentation ceremony and she was going to get it. The only thing that could be got was cloth, readymade outfits did not exist, and no tailor would make the dress overnight. Cloth was bought, cut into shape and hand sewn that night. She remembers that a blade was used to cut the cloth because that was the sharpest instrument they could find. She wore her new clothes to school the next morning and when she came home to her Muthassi waiting as always with some piece of paper that certified her achievements; her grandmother looked at her, more closely than before. Her quiet, pretty child, who got what she wanted.

She was growing up; soon it would be time to go into the Higher Elementary School. Further away and with more children and more teachers and more chances of caste pollution. She noticed how the locals moved away when an adult from her family walked from the house to the temple. Depending on their status, it could be just giving way all the way to moving away and covering their face.

Muthassi was still worried. Now the question was whether, any more education was really needed, the child was already better educated than anyone in her family. For

someone who would get married soon after puberty, did more education really make any sense?

A rebel to the core, albeit a silent one, Muthassi finally saw the steel in her and knew that however worried she might be, this young matriarch was forged from the same metal as she was. The grandmother chose not to battle, the little one would go on at least until the end the Higher Elementary School. Another three years. Thankfully a school had been started in the town nearby so all Muthassi had to do is give the ball of rice soaked in ghee in the morning and then wait anxiously until the children came back. Her brother would go as well.

Higher Elementary School

July 1st 1943, her brother and she walked to the school in the town. They walked on the tracks and got off near the crossing. The school had two buildings, well one building and one barrack. The building housed the slightly better students. Her brother and she were in the same class in the building, she because of her grades and he because of his relationship to her.

The classes were larger, almost forty students in the section. It felt new and different and crowded. She walked down to what was obviously the girls' side of the class and sat down in the first row. She waited impatiently for the classes to start. She wanted to get on with the business of studying, leave behind all the worry at home and immerse herself into new things.

The situation at home was also different. The youngest was just about a year old, there was no mother and there would be no more babies. Muthassi looked even more worried but she did not change the ritual of the rice ball soaked in ghee. In the primary school, they used to run back during the lunch break to gobble some food and then used to return after afternoon classes at 4:00 in the evening to eat more substantially. The food at 4:00 was either what one eats at breakfast or sometimes a substitute lunch or sometimes, when her grandmother had the energy, real snacks. Batter fried bananas, jackfruit jam, vegetable fritters, sweetmeats, glorious things to look forward to. Higher Elementary was a good fifteen minutes brisk run on the tracks away from home during the dry months, it did not make any sense for them to return home for lunch. The lunchbox was introduced. A small, multi container steel box, which held rice and some gravy. Pickle or buttermilk was a much-

anticipated bonus. By the time they got back at 4:30, the children were starving and really appreciated whatever the grandmother had made for them.

This was the winding down time, the shadows through the tall areca trees became longer, the birds would get shriller, and everyone would begin to get ready for the dusk that lay just around the corner. This was the only time in the day when she spoke freely, recounting the many events that happened at school or things that happened during the walk from or to school or news about the current events or gossip...hearing her during this one hour; no one would believe that she was basically a very quiet child. Once the food was consumed and the conversation ceased, she went back to her chores or books or to looking after the baby, quietly as if she had used up all the words she had allocated for the day. Her family let her have the lion's share of the snack time conversation mostly because she spoke so little otherwise and they started using her silence at snack time to gauge that she was either unwell or very upset.

She made friends over lunch. She already had to share the front bench with other girls; there was no question of sitting separately. The girls sat in one part of the class and the boys in the other half. There were two boys to every girl in class but the class was still divided down the middle leaving the girls section less crowded. She liked the arrangement. Hesitant to talk with others, she made friends with a Nair girl whose family owned land next to them. Both set of guardians were relieved because it meant that they walked to and fro from school together. The brother was very happy with the arrangement at not having to walk his sister to and fro from school. The girls ate their meagre lunches together and formed a friendship which saw them through the next seven years of life.

The classes were becoming more demanding, they had to study more and they had homework to do. Used to having it really easy in the primary school, she began to understand that getting an education would need her to put in the requisite effort. Her share of work at home had also increased; Muthassi had started expecting her to help out at home. A born manager, she began to also delegate to her younger siblings who anyway did not seem to have much interest in school. She did spend a lot of time with her youngest sibling though, almost as if she wanted to compensate for the absence of their mother. That child was cared for unlike any of the others. Surrounded by pity at having lost the mother before she even began to talk, the child actually got looked after better than any of the older children.

Mathematics, science, history, geography, Malayalam literature, grammar was all introduced in grade six. It was still being taught by one teacher but they sometimes had other teachers give lectures on specific topics. Like a sponge, she took it all in. If anyone asked about her favorite subjects, she would honestly not have known what to pick, she like it all.

There was a public exam in grade eight and they were being groomed for that. For the children interested, the final four years of school was available far away from the village and getting admission there was anything but easy.

In grade seven, English was introduced. It sounded funny to the ears that had never heard any language other than Malayalam. In a whole year all they managed was to learn to read and write and say the alphabet. She was fascinated and English seemed to hold more

promise than the entire set of other subjects put together. She was plotting an escape and she figured English could play a part in that currently nonexistent plan.

For the first time, she faced competition. She was still one of the best but she was not the best. There were a few boys who seemed to do well without sitting on the first bench like her and who seemed less troubled by the increased work load. She inquired discreetly and found out that like most of the class they came from neighboring villages, walking almost 45 minutes each way every day.

She was not troubled. The certificates were only for proficiency not for the rank. Every year after the final exams, the school was closed for two months. When they returned to school, the list of students who were promoted was read out and a few were also given the piece of paper that proclaimed that not only had they been promoted to the next grade but that they had also done well in the previous one. She always got the coveted piece of paper and then would wait anxiously to hear if her brother had made it to the next grade or not. In the eighth grade he was promoted along with his sister but they finally told him to sit in the barracks because his grades were just not good enough. He was not yet fourteen but he had started to handle the farm and finances and help out with his grandmothers' many dealings. Being of a happy go lucky disposition, he was not too worried at this "demotion", on the contrary he was now free to come and go as he pleased without having his sister giving him dirty looks when he showed up late to or from class.

In her more adult conversations with Muthassi she would bemoan the lack of academic interest in her family. She truly believed that education was the ticket to a better life. She could not describe what this better life entailed but she was sure there was a better life out

there. The nation was in the throes of the final fight for freedom. They had begun to hear about the protests and agitations, about the need to overthrow the Raj, it was filtered news but the young men were leaving in large numbers to Madras and beyond and they formed a viable link for the news that trickled down slowly. For a young, idealistic girl, these were the beginning of heady days where the promise of freedom had a much deeper personal meaning than just the overthrow of the British.

Her Muthassi would comb her long tresses and neatly braid them every night. She felt the need for alone time with this, her oldest granddaughter. She would ask questions, answer queries, recount stories, in general catch up in a more private setting. Muthassi also needed the comfort provided by her granddaughter to keep on going, raising a family that was not hers to raise. Muthassi was generally a vivacious person, talkative, argumentative, provocative, a true power packed woman. She spoke her mind and cared little what others thought and she was finally learning the ropes of heading such a large family. They were in many respects polar opposites of each other and yet they found solace in these very differences.

Many nights, Muthassi would gather the children and tell them stories from the Puranas. Stories told in the time-honored fashion of oral stories; the tales made a lasting impression on the kids. Deeply religious, Muthassi also imparted a strong sense of spirituality to all her grandchildren. Though deeply caste conscious, she never transferred any bigoted notion of their position in the community, they were what they were, an accident of birth brought them here and that meant a certain manner of living but that did not make them superior in any way. In this lifetime, they were bound by the rules of the community they were born

into and that did not guarantee any position in their next birth. That would be determined by their work, their karma not by their station.

And so, the years rolled by. They were in grade eight. They had an option of doing grade eight public exams in the school in town or transferring to the more established school six miles away and completing what was called the third form there. Most of the children chose to stay back thinking they could join the fourth form after successfully completing the eighth grade here. The examination was difficult but the twelve-year-old was confident that she would do well. No one was really sure about the brother, least of all he himself. When the results were announced they had both passed. He not in all the subjects, but enough to go through to the next school.

Pre-pubescent, attractive, with long hair, there was no way Muthassi wanted her to walk to school that was actually six miles away. She had hoped the brother would fail and that way she had an easy way to stop her child's further education but even he managed to scrape through. She really wondered if there had been some collusion on the part of the teachers because it really seemed like everyone wanted her child to study further.

The girl sat back, she did not have to battle, her teachers, neighbors even the family priest was talking and working to convince her grandmother. Muthassi remained unconvinced. The child did step into the battle field with well thought out arguments and whilst the girl did not lose her cool, she did not yield either. Muthassi had watched her take a back seat in the decision-making process and although she did not know what was the right thing to do, she definitely did not want her child to think she would get her way without being a part of the process. Many heated moments later, what finally sealed the deal for the

grandmother was that the girl next door, her companion for the last three years would also continue. The six mile walk to school would be a reality the coming July. Now it was just a question of working out the logistics.

There was bad news though. Though they had all written the public exam, the school six miles away was refusing to take the children in the fourth form. The reason was English, no one was entirely sure how that could be a reason but nonetheless, not one child from the school was taken in the fourth form. They had the choice of doing the third form again or looking for another school. Since this was the closest school, the second option did not really exist.

Independent India was just one year away, patriotism hung heavy in the air. The pre-teen and the teenage population were not sure why they had to celebrate but the feeling was that the time for celebrations was almost at hand. One of her uncles worked in the newsprint world and he would always make it a point to call on them when he came to town. Like many men in his generation, he was unattached, childless and very much a part of the extended family fabric. He had not been around when the partition of the property was done and had been unhappy at the way things had been handled. Like an affectionate elder, he not only called on her family but would sit and talk with her for hours, interested in hearing her voice her opinions. He actively encouraged her to go forth and study and pursue a career. She was thrilled to be the center of this adult attention and looked forward to each of his visits. He on his part, started to bring books and magazines, even in English, so that she had something to practice her new skills with.

Muthassi would watch her quiet child beam and grow in stature when she was a part of these conversations and then would turn away knowing that as much as she would have liked to keep her at home, this child would break free, it was just a matter of time.

Graduates of the Higher Elementary school, the boy and girl, were all set to go on to study in the High school. They would be the first ones in a rather large family to be so educated. The brother was happy to have made it this far. He knew, as did the others, that his sister was the one with the brains, he was just along for the ride, he was nevertheless happy to have reached this stage. Always so different, the boy and girl, companions, friends, call it what you may, shared a bond that was deep, built over the long walks together and cemented by the constant reassurance that Muthassi needed from one or the other.

The “six miles away” School

When Malayali's met in far off places and their children got together, they all compared the stories of how their parents had walked six miles to school. The story was always centered around six miles. Unless by some strange and complicated design the authorities had managed to find school sites that were exactly six miles away from all the houses in Kerala, this was just another part of popular folk lore.

Her school however was about six miles away from the old house. It meant a walk that took almost one and a half hours to reach school

They all enrolled in the third form and then coasted for the first year; they were not expected to write the public exam again, it was just an internal assessment that was done.

The first class was always art, designed so that the students who reached late did not really miss any class. She was on time, her brother late most days. She would see a bunch of boys hanging around outside during the art class. She looked down on them, she felt privileged to being introduced to art. Strangely, this was the first year that they had anything like this. She was not too great an artist but she liked color and was grateful that this was a part of the curriculum.

The third form was easy, there was more English, the sciences were introduced, math was more complex and it vexing that it did not come as easily to her as it seemed to come for some of the back bench boys and there was history, geography and social studies. The year was 1946.

The school followed the Kerala calendar which meant that apart from the summer break, Onam and Ramdan were the longest breaks with holidays given for Vishu and some other festivals like Shivarathri or Thiruvadara.

One year and time passed slowly, it was a relatively easier year than the previous one. The six-mile walk was now a matter of routine, very much like the rice ball soaked in ghee or the more substantial lunch box. They had their summer break and then assembled on the 1st of July 1947 for their results. She was promoted; she got her little piece of paper for proficiency in something or the other. Her brother finally failed that year and had to repeat the third form. A feat he had avoided all this while.

One and a half months after school started, India was free, the British flag was not flown anywhere, the mood in the village and the school changed. The partition was happening far away, the riots did not affect this very plural society. The class had equal parts Hindu and Muslim students and there was a small minority of Christians as well.

Partition, rioting, looting, neighbors turning against one another, it all seemed to be news from another country. The stories filtered through to their far away village. Closer to home the kingdoms of Travancore and Cochin had joined with the Union. Madras Presidency, of which their part of the world belonged, was organized into Madras State in the same year.

Little seemed to change in the quiet little village, life continued at its languid pace but there was a new "Indianness" in the air. There was discussion about the need to assimilate with the whole nation, with the states north of Madras. All the conversations seemed to have no real conclusions. No one was really sure how integration was supposed to be done;

there was discussion on the need to learn the new Indian language Hindi so that the south could be better embraced by the nation. The way to do this however was still some time away.

It was October 1947 and the first war of Independent India had already begun, the war was with Pakistan, the fires of the riots had barely been put out when the nations decided to go to war. Her younger brother, younger by almost four years seemed to know all about the war and the things that were happening in the north. How much of this was fact and how much of it the product of a very active imagination could never really be determined. The evening snack slot was slowly being handed over to him. Barely nine years old, the older sisters did not really know whether he was in school or was spending his time at the town center, although unlike with his older brother, the teachers saw little reason to complain. He was never in any danger of not being in the list of students promoted to the next grade.

There were also discussions in school about what they should be doing. The teachers were practical and assured the children that their biggest contribution to the new India would be to study and grow up and take their place in all the professions that needed the educated youth.

An idealist, she loved the discourses, she looked on kindly at her baby brothers' antics and quietly worked at making sure that she did well at school. For a girl who had five sisters, her relationship with her brothers was surprising. Her older brother was her friend and sometimes confidante and the younger one looked up to her for everything. He could be stopped in the midst of his rhetoric only by her. He wanted her to approve and agree so much that he would stop to listen if he thought she had anything to say.

The two big events of her year in the Fourth Form were, the nation got its independence after 200 years of British rule and she got her periods. She was thirteen. No longer considered a child. The skirts had already been replaced with the pavadas or the long skirts when she had started high school.

The start of menstruation was celebrated as a rite of passage. For three days she was secluded in the inner room with a brass lamp for company. She was initiated into the custom of cloth and the notion of separation during these days. On the fourth day, the extended family of aunts and older girl cousins came with presents. She was ritually bathed in the pond and a sadya as grand as the one served for Onam was prepared.

Her bewildered siblings were not a part of any of the ceremonies. She was always a little different from them, all this attention only made her seem even further away.

Muthassi was thrilled, a child, she always treated as an adult was now truly one. The other girls would also go through this passage but it was her puberty that would be remembered. Many years later one of her sisters would describe a similar function held for her daughter and tell her that it was almost as grand as the one they had held for her.

Life continued in its otherwise unhurried pace. The days of menstruation were spent at home. This was not uncommon, girls were not expected to go anywhere anyhow during those five days, it meant she lost five odd days of school every month. If her brother had been in the same class, she could have kept up but he was one grade behind her. She managed as best as she could, struggling only with Mathematics, a subject she had no help in. There were boys in her class who seemed to be doing well but it was unthinkable to ask them for any assistance.

It was January 1948 and the Father of the Nation was assassinated. While the previous year's Independence, rioting, the war with Pakistan were all barely felt in the little village, this was an event that affected everyone in the village. The news was brought home by her little brother. They mourned together as a family. Strange that a man they had never met or heard speak could invoke such a strong reaction in all of them. It was as if the link that tied them to the land beyond the borders of Madras were cut.

The immersion of the ashes of Gandhi in Tirunavaya on February 12 was attended by most of the high school children. A large crowd had gathered to see what was essentially a five-minute function. She should not have spotted him in the crowd but she saw her baby brother who had no business being there standing close to the edge of water. She said nothing about it to him or her grandmother but decided to pay more attention to the stories he told at home.

She did the best she could academically and went on to the Fifth form. Just two more years of high school and then the whole wide world waited for her. She discovered that she was good in the sciences and languages. When she managed to attend all the classes she did well in Math's as well. History and Geography were interesting, more like the stories she heard or read. The radio had arrived and while they did not have one at home yet, the village did and her brother would come back and parrot everything he heard.

The village temple festivals began to become more elaborate or maybe she was just more involved in it. Her rank along with her older brothers was that of the elders in the family. Thankfully he had also cleared his exams so he was only a year behind.

From Fifth to the final year the transition was the easiest so far. Sixth Form would mean the end of formal education as they knew of it in and around the village. There were many educated people in the family. The women of the extended family had already started visiting and discussing possible marriage offers. She would be sixteen in a year, old by the ancient traditions. Yet there was no talk of pressuring her into considering marriage as an option. They discussed it in her presence, talked about others in the family, her contemporaries, who were already married and settled, some even had children. She would listen quietly, only sometimes responding about not being sure of what she wanted to do next. She would assert that she wanted to finish her high school before she thought of any future.

Her allies, in this matriarchal society, surprisingly were the men. Her uncles and grand uncles who told her of family that lived away from the village and encouraged its girls to study further. They fueled her strong desire to better herself. They brought with the notion of a life that could be lived far away from her old house. They explained that the house would be hers forever anyway, whether she married or went away to study. They felt she had the potential to do things for herself and that she needed encouragement. Muthassi would listen to both sides as they talked to her and in both cases argue for the opposite. It amused her to see her small grandmother take on both the women and the men telling them all that no decision was going to be made anytime soon.

The Imbrandri, the priest of the temple, brought some proposals from suitable boys. The days of wedlock where the boy would stay in his house were beginning to fade. Most of the current generation would either stay in the wife's house or the husband's house. There was

a lot of interest given her age and position in the family. He too was told to put all proposals on hold until she finished Sixth Form.

A journey that started at the age of four, now twelve years later seemed like it had started just yesterday. She could remember the look on Muthassi's face when she had run out after her brother, hurrying to keep pace with him. All the experiences, all the knowledge, all the many teachers and innumerable certificates, just one more hurdle to cross. She had to write the public exams that would award her a high school diploma, one that she could then use to join Pre-University or even a professional course.

She studied as she had never done before, she worked at all the subjects that troubled her and the ones at which she excelled. She wanted to get good grades. She knew that would be what decided what the future held for her.

Options

Sixteen, out of Form VI, a school graduate, ready for college. It was 1950, a few years after independence; the new India was there in all things they did. It spoke of new opportunities, new possibilities, all over the country. There was a country, the borders of which extended far beyond Madras, the furthest they ever imagined anyone going to. This would be the “grandmother” of all battles. School, middle school, the high school were all skirmishes compared to the battle she was preparing for. She wanted to become a doctor. The nearest place for higher education that was acceptable was Madras (Chennai in today's parlance). A medical degree meant two more years of intermediate studies and then four years of medical college before residency. Indeed, a battle royale was in the offing.

She had been planning this all along. The problem was it was a plan with no substance. All she knew was the where; she had no idea about, how, how much, what or any other details. Speaking to someone to clarify her doubts meant letting the genie out of the bottle. In a two-bit town there were no secrets. It was already no secret that she was one of the best students in her year. There was already talk in town about what her next plans should be. Again no one really knew, there were no engineers or doctors from her village. No girls went on to study after high school. She was a large part of a miniscule minority. The obvious choice was to arrange a marriage. Luckily the community had no problem with educated girls, indeed education was an asset.

Tired of all and everyone waiting for her to drop the bomb, she finally brought the matter to the discussion table. Muthassi was wary, she had already lost the previous few rounds and with no mother in the picture, it really was all up to her. She also saw that the younger ones were quite content to let the oldest one do all the fighting and then follow on

with whatever suited them best. She made it easy for all to follow in her footsteps. There was also this wretched issue of no male involvement. Of a person who could provide some advice, some perspective of life outside the house. Of late the Imbrandri, the priest of the temple had taken to meeting with Muthassi. The caste norms made it permissible for them to talk and for him to visit.

The idea of her being a doctor was discussed and quickly put to bed. There were no hostels for women at all. Not for intermediate and not for medical school. There was no family that could take care of her and all other options were nonstarters. Along the way, nursing emerged as a strong option. Not only were girls needed but the infrastructure also existed. She could take an interview and enroll straight away. The hostel facility was adequate, there was a stipend given once enrolled which was more than enough to cover expenses of boarding and lodging and even left some over for pocket money.

Out of nowhere, came an idea which made sense to everyone. It was cloistered, safe and would cause only limited damage, to her and her clan.

The process was completed; she was accepted to the Government General Hospital Nursing program in Madras. She was given admission to the college and given a place at the women's hostel too. Now all that remained was to pack her bags and leave. The baggage was a bedroll and a tin trunk, small enough but still strangely empty. She who had at any given time 3-4 outfits did not have enough things to pack. Then there was the question of who would accompany her to Madras and see that she was settled all right. She, who had never in the sixteen years, slept anywhere but at home, for her going away was just the start of what promised to be a great adventure. The Imbrandri offered, the grandmother

acquiesced for he was a friend of the family and could be trusted to do the right thing. The brother went along for the ride. The brother had always looked at her as one would look at a small slightly injured animal, someone who needed to be looked after but not all the time. He did not share or even understand her desire to study. He was over a year older but had yet to graduate high school. As he went with her on the train he wondered if he had just mistaken her silence and her shyness for timidity. Watching her smiling face, her obvious pleasure at getting away, there was no hint of any apprehension. He wondered how he had gotten it wrong all those years they had walked to and fro from school. His kid sister was every bit as tough as his granny was; she was just so much quieter that he had missed it.

She wanted to travel; she wanted to see as much as she could of the world. She had to leave the stifling world of the old crumbling house behind. She wanted to be where no one knew or cared that she was a Warrasier. She wanted friends she could talk with, go out with and get to know. She would have loved to have become a doctor but the important thing was to do something that took her away from home first and then she could figure out whatever was needed. She was sixteen and already felt liberated.

Peripatetic Days

HE LEFT HOME WHEN HE WAS SEVENTEEN
THE REST OF THE WORLD HE LONGED TO SEE
AND EVERYBODY WHO KNOWS WAS BOSS
A ROLLING STONE GATHERS NO MOSS
- "JIMI HENDRIX "

Gone were the days of the rice ball soaked in ghee. A very British establishment, the breakfast served was not Indian. The hospital, the oldest in the country had been set up for British soldiers and the nurses were being trained in the best of the British tradition. Morning breakfast was porridge, mostly oats. She ate because the sessions were grueling. The classes were equal part theory and practical. They were on their feet from eight in the morning till around six and then they had homework as well. Skipping the horrible white tasteless mush was not really an option but she never grew fond of it and once out of the hostel never touched it again. Many moons later, she saw her daughter feeding it to her grandson, who seemed to enjoy it. She grimaced and then commented on how this must come from the grandsons' non-Malayali genes. The other meals were more palatable, more Indian, though not food she was accustomed to. Then there was the issue that the kitchen was non vegetarian. This was a line she could not and would not cross. It did not bother her though; she stuck to her vegetarian diet. Part of the indoctrination was also the importance of a balanced diet. Milk, something they never really drank at home was heavily advocated, luckily she liked the taste and it agreed with her, she made it a part of her regular diet. She saw cutlery for the first time and learnt to handle silver ware. The girl who had eaten most of her meals on banana leaves was being introduced to the western concept of dining.

All aspects of her personal life were done differently. Someone who was brought up to bathe everyday (and that meant washing your hair as well) learnt that long, thick hair washed daily was difficult to dry and tuck under the nurses cap. It meant waking up two hours before everyone else just to give the hair time to dry. The choice was to chop off the tresses or wash less frequently. A girl who had heard nothing but compliments for her locks all her life was

loath to take the scissor to her hair and so compromised on the daily wash and instead did it as often as she could.

Of course, back at the old house, she slipped back into the old habits as one would slip into an old comfortable outfit, as if the two lives were being lived by two different people. She wrote self-censored letters home and they wrote back to her. Every trip back was laden with presents. She had no real need to shop for herself, whatever little she splurged on self was on books or the occasional movie, with the rest of the stipend money, which was not insignificant, she bought gifts for her family. The act of taking home gifts for the family, gifts she bought with her own money, brought her more satisfaction than anything else she had done till now. This made her feel that she was becoming the matriarch her grandmother had been grooming her to be. In her heart she knew that all Muthassi really wanted from her was to be happy, to live in the old house, be in a happy marriage and give birth to the next generation so the lineage would continue. Muthassi had a big heart, she knew that day when she had let her walk away to school for the first time that this particular child would be happiest doing her own thing, and that one day she would have to let her leave forever. Muthassi, acting often against her own better judgment, had allowed the child the freedom to live her life and the girl once she grew up, knew what a gift she had been given.

The days were busy, holidays few. There was no time really to feel homesick or brood on all that might have been. The studies were in English, a relatively new language for her. She struggled a little bit, until a kind matron told her that she needed to start to read everything she could in English. Already fond of books, she found nonexistent time in her busy schedule to read all that she could get her hands on. As in school, she found herself enjoying the role. She was an exceptional student; she had no problems with the gore or the grime. She

understood anatomy and physiology and her gentle disposition and quiet countenance were a big asset in this field.

She realized soon that most patients who came through the doors of the hospital were intimidated by the set up, too scared of the infrastructure and the physicians, they often turned to the nurses not just for comfort but also for clarifications and to act as intermediaries between them and the physicians.

Her knowledge of English had crossed the basic levels, she was also learning Tamil. The patients spoke mostly Tamil and her teachers and the Matron English. Within a year she went from knowing one language to being fluent in three. It pleased her to know that she had the gift for languages, this would be a big help in her plans to travel further out.

Just a few months after she started at the hospital, one morning, during the daily rounds with the matron and the doctor on duty, she heard someone call out her name. She was sure she was imagining it, so she continued the rounds; but then more insistently and definitely her name, not that common, was being called out. The matron turned to the noise. There was a young man, more or less the same age as her, sitting up in bed, calling out to one of her nurses; the matron turned quizzically to her, in response the young nurse shrugged, and although she did not look very sure but she walked over anyway.

He was Raman, he said, a classmate from school, he had come for a tonsillectomy, did she not remember him? They had been classmates for seven years all through Higher Elementary and High School. Embarrassed at the attention and the amused looks of her seniors, she quickly, curtly acknowledged his presence and then went on with her work. The next couple of days, she avoided the ward he was in although he asked for her whenever the nurses did

their rounds. She had nothing in her armor to deal with this. She had never spoken to the boy once in the seven years, she knew him of course, he was one of the brightest boys in class but she had never spoken to him. She was looking to make friends just not with boys and definitely not now while she was under the very strict watch of the hostel matron.

She hoped he would get his operation, recover, go away and then they could all forget about it. She was teased by her classmates, but they did it gently because most of the others saw how young and inexperienced she was. She was barely seventeen and she had obviously come from a very sheltered background. Boys were a trouble she did not want to and could not deal with.

There were three and a half years to get through. Vacations were for less than one month every year. The festivals and birthdays all came and went. Instead of Vishu, Onam and Thiruvathara, the holidays were for Easter and Christmas. Not only was she being exposed to other languages but also other religions. She thought back to the big concerns of caste pollution her grandmother had. Here it was not other Hindus she interacted with but Christians, Muslims, and others she did not even know about. For the first time her caste did not matter. There was a subtle attempt to introduce all the nurses to Christianity, the missionary zeal was strong. However the effort was subtle and not very overt. They left her alone. Her strong faith in who she was made it easier to avoid all the situations which would have led to discussions or dialogues or even confrontations. She bought herself an abridged Bible and Koran so she could know about the religions. For the first time in her life no one cared about her background, no one moved away as she walked, no one hesitated to speak with her or tried to keep away. She loved the feeling of belonging that had eluded her for the first twelve years of her education.

She devoured books, with no one to really guide her, her reading was eclectic. Classics, popular fiction, westerns, romantic novels, anything and everything she could lay her hands on. Her happiest hours were spent curled up somewhere in the large hospital where she could read without being disturbed. The seniors encouraged her, she showed real potential to succeed. English was necessary and not that easily learnt. First hesitantly then with increasing confidence she also started speaking, her diction cues coming from the many Anglo-Indians in the hospital staff.

The annual reviews were all good, they wanted her to finish her residency in the hospital and then they assured her that she would be given a job and a career path would be chartered. She seemed happy at the offer and promised to work towards the goals they outlined for her. In her quiet scheming mind, she was already planning something else.

She had a group of girlfriends, they hung out together, talked about their lives, their plans, boys, all things that young girls do. She did not really have much to contribute but she loved being a part of this. Her family had five girls and yet she had never had this with her sisters. She had always been aloof, a little different from the others. Her grandmother had treated her as an adult even when she had been a little girl. Now her hostel friends felt like the sisters she had but never really bonded with. Together they went to the movies, mostly American, some Tamil, she read magazines and watched how people dressed and behaved in the big city. She learnt about rose water and glycerin; a combination which when rubbed on the hands helped to keep them both soft and helped overcome the smell of disinfectant. Some days, she did think about cutting off her hair, it seemed to gather the hospital smells more than any part of her body or even the clothes she wore.

Every day that passed took her a little further from the old house back in the village and closer to wherever it was she thought she should go to.

Over time she realized that she was the recipient of many admiring looks and that she had many admirers. Initially it made her uncomfortable, not so much because of what was happening but because everyone noticed it happening. Her confidence and her poise made her attractive to the boys; these were doctors, doctors in training or doing their residency, attendants, and sometimes even the patients. She was not interested in any of them. Finally, her way of dealing with the unwanted attention was to ignore all of it. It did not reach the levels of harassment but it had begun to bother her somewhat. It became a lot worse when the girls in the hostel, or the older doctors or sometimes even the matrons began to match make on her behalf. She was still inexperienced but, she was sure. She was not looking for any romantic liaisons; she was just not interested. She had other plans, if asked, she may not have been able to properly articulate the said plans, but she had plans that did not include, men, marriage or babies.

The other girls did not get this; they all had decided that if a doctor married them, they were sorted for life because that would mean that they could have their career and family. A doctor was a big catch though and the competition was tough. Some of the girls were willing to play a little given that the prize was so good. So, they did not get it at all, here were good guys, good doctors wanting to get to her and not only was she rejecting them, she was also obviously not interested in any way.

Once the half way mark was crossed, it seemed to get easier, the seemed to be enough hours in the day to do everything. Work, play, read, shop, rest, it all seemed to come together.

They talked about home and she had nothing bad to say. They were fascinated about her stories of the functions in the temple or about the amount of land they cultivated. Most of the girls in her group came from much more impoverished backgrounds. For them this was their ticket to the good life. Like so many other things about her, they could not understand why she would want to give up that life of comfort for this when the choice was hers.

Finishing studies and off to work

The final year and half were tough, there was a great deal of practical experience being imparted. The lectures were more detailed, more midnight oil was burned. All her friends took it seriously. This was the period in which the residency decisions were made, the future jobs were decided. It was crunch time.

They were also exposed to the many job opportunities that existed. Government jobs were by far the best, they promised stability, job guarantee, family care and finally pension benefits. All jobs were advertised in the Gazette, a copy of which was available in the hospital. She read through the posts. Pan India jobs were being advertised and she knew the reputation of her institute coupled with her great scores and good recommendations she could apply anywhere with a reasonable certainty of getting accepted. She ideally would have like to get a job that would allow her to travel and see the country. She looked out for posts in organizations like that. She did all this quietly, any discussion with anyone would only put her in the spotlight, open her up for criticism. It was not time yet to show her hand.

Before they knew it, three and a half years were over. The final six-month internship could be done anywhere. She had never admitted to anyone why she wanted to be a doctor or why she had agreed on nursing. She could have gone on to become a teacher, that too would have been an acceptable career. Sometimes, when she was upset about something, or it was a festival or a birthday, or sometimes for no reason at all, she still remembered the night her mother had died. She knew the death had something to do with the twins; she could close her eyes and still hear the anguished moaning. Perhaps the reason she never really got close to her siblings was because in her mind, her mother's life as she remembered it and her death had something to do with them all being born. With a resentment only a child could harbor,

she never forgave them. She chose to specialize in Obstetrics and Gynecology. She had to know.

She chose the hospital at Egmore and specialized in Obstetrics and Gynecology, her hospital staff was shocked, it had seemed like a done deal for her to do her residency with them, possibly with an OT specialization. They could have offered her OBGYN as well but she was already restless, three and a half years in one place when she wanted to see the world seemed too long already. She wanted to try out the other big hospital in the city before she went further out for a job.

She was accepted and she started her residency in the OBGYN department. Dressed in the nurses' uniform of a white tunic, white stockings and white pumps with a nurse's cap on her head she looked like an oversized doll. It was in her brisk, confident manner that she managed to be taken seriously. She was too cute otherwise, but there was a no-nonsense air about her, cultivated over the years, through all the unwanted attention that kept, the doctors, patients and even the matron at bay.

Maternal and infant care was taught on the job. Fluent now in Tamil as well, she learnt both from her formal teachers and from the many mothers and grandmothers who were part of the daily delivery charts. The hospital was once considered the last option, mostly only where the local mid wives could not help anymore but the scenario was changing fast. At least the educated population had begun to prefer child birth in hospitals. And so she saw enough of the hopeless cases and of the normal ones. She had also received training as a mid-wife and when she delivered the first baby on her own, she could not but remember her mother and how futile her death had been, the only complication had been the twins and the mid



wife who had assisted her mother had probably been inexperienced. There was no way to re-write history but she intended to at least help all those that she could. Birth control, tubectomy, vasectomy was all also part of the learning. Again, contraception would have given her mother a better life and possibly a longer life, if only she had known how.

A lot of the hopeless cases were accompanied by the mid wives. The good mid wives were an incredible source of information. She heard and assimilated everything, still a girl from the village, she was not going to reject all she heard as useless superstition. She knew that some of the mid wives came with knowledge from many generations. Modern medicine was still in its infancy. She knew or had begun to already see limitations of the western medicine.

Her family was related to the Arya Vaidya Shala Warriar's. Their tradition dated back centuries and while some of their cures took time, it did work. Luckily for her, she kept most of these thoughts to herself. It would not have helped her career much if she started to question the rather exclusive education, she was receiving at the states expense.

These were interesting times. She was almost twenty years old. She already had her diploma in hand and once the residency finished there were at least two hospitals where she could start her career. Instead, she applied to the Govt. District Headquarters Hospital, Pudukkottai. They had a shortage of trained OBGYN nurses and she was not done learning yet. Continuing in Madras would mean more general work; she wanted to specialize at this stage. She had her demons to exorcise; she needed to help other women during childbirth.

After she went to join at the Govt. District Headquarters Hospital, Pudukkottai, she went home to be a part of the first wedding in her generation. Her younger sister, well not the one immediately after her, but one younger than that was getting married. Supposed to be the beauty in the family, the proposals had been coming for some time. The sister had wanted to wait till she finished high school but was not really bothered. No one else in the family, except maybe the boys would go out to work. Her example would not be emulated by any of the sisters except the youngest one who would go on to become a teacher. There was no point in waiting, the offer was good, the family solid and the groom seemed really interested. They wanted an early marriage. Muthassi wrote to ask her opinion and although she did not really care, she was touched to be included. She suggested going by what the sister wanted. A date was set for the marriage. She bought gold ornaments with her first salary and went as an honored guest, an elder, to be a part of the ceremony. She had no patience really to participate in all the festivities. She found it tiresome and somewhat removed from her reality. She did however have a chat about the bird and the bees and birth control with all her sisters except her youngest one. She could not have alienated them any more effectively than with this information session she conducted. These were not matters to talk about, definitely not with unmarried girls. Muthassi did not know, the sisters did not tell, they just kept away

from her, it was easier that way. Other than that, she was a good sport so she said all the right things and did all that was expected. The older brother, now the male member in charge of meeting and deciding, started including her in the decision discussions. The matters being discussed were mundane and she countered her brothers' diffidence with common sense and family convenience. This was not received all that well by the groom's family but she had been away for too long already to care and besides she would leave again so she chose to contribute where she felt it appropriate.

Muthassi was thrilled; her little girl had come back, a professional, educated, fluent in two more languages, a modern-day matriarch. She could finally stop worrying she thought. It would have been more appropriate if she was the first to marry but finding a groom for her would have been an uphill task. When the time was right it would happen. In the meantime, the younger sisters could get married. After all she was also underwriting most of the marriages.

She left the day after the wedding, back to the Govt. District Headquarters Hospital, Pudukkottai. There was so much more to learn and see and be a part of. The patients who came seemed to resonate with her more than the patients in Madras. Any one of them could have been her mother, somewhat literate, sometimes landed rich, sometimes just too tired from all the birthing. The hospital was pushing birth control and she was a good spokesperson. She did it quietly, so young and so collected, she probably did more for birth control in the year she spent there than all the posters did in the next ten years. Mass campaigns would not work, birth control was not something the mothers knew about or the grandmothers approved. The men definitely could not care less, even the ones who really cared for their wives and the wives, for most part just thought that this was their lot in life, they did not think

there was any choice but the government was many years away from realizing this. She had the zeal of a young missionary. She talked to them in their language, explained to the women why this was important. There were quite a few converts and quite a few annoyed family members. She never sparked a riot but she was beginning to get noticed. Maybe her time in this was finishing. The world beckoned. She seemed all done with OBGYN.

Like the many places she was a part of, she left in her wake, many friends and admirers. She was liked and her quiet dignity and grace belied her years. Without the experience, she still was an automatic choice for more responsibility. She was hard working and willing to walk the extra mile. Organized, meticulous, a perfectionist to the core, she took her job and duties very seriously. Everyone knew she was headed for greater things. Someone in Puddukottai was amongst the first to publicly admit that she would have made a fine doctor and that it was a pity that she had been denied the opportunity. She herself had no regrets. She was in the field of her choice and she did not think nursing to be any less a noble profession. It was still early days but she was the start of a wave of nurses from Kerala who today form a large majority of the Indian nursing community. Pretty much any hospital worth its name will have nurses from Kerala in significant numbers. For very similar reasons like hers, young girls chose nursing as their career choice. If you are a Malayali, you are bound to get a slightly better care anywhere in India just because the care contingent is likely to speak your lingo.

It was this year that also introduced her to another lifelong love affair. She loved the clothes the villagers wore. So different and colorful, such lovely fabric. The older women would often show up after the birth in the most incredible silk saris. Rich tones, beautiful weaves, the richness of the simplicity that would take her breath away. As with all other things, she dived deep and built-up knowledge about handloom textiles. She found that there

were government agencies that were promoting this in their own way through outlets everywhere. Years and years later she would still find shops like this and remember fondly the first women she saw dressed in the traditional textiles. It was so different from her Muthassi's white mundu-veshti, the white and off white which seemed to be the only colors in her family's wardrobe. Its only concession to grandeur being a strip of golden on the border. They even married in white.

A year later she felt it was enough; there was a job offer in Vizagapatam. She applied, got accepted, packed her bags, not just one tiny tin suitcase, but bags in which there were her first pure silk and cotton saris, in every color imaginable, and she left.

The next town: Vizag

She had discovered coffee in Madras. So many brews to choose from, milk, tea, juices and coffee. She chose coffee. She found it helped her stay both awake and focused. She could function better with the caffeine. She invested in her first thermos and then made sure she had the coffee made available to her when she felt the need to stay awake. The odd hours had begun to take a toll. A creature of habit, she was happy going to bed early and waking up early. Of the three children she would eventually have only one child would inherit this from her and she would forever be in fights with the other two about the unhealthiness of their need to stay awake late into the night and never wanting to wake up early. But that was later. For now, her life demanded both night and day shifts and sometimes in emergencies, even 24-hour shifts. Like all things else, she managed and the coffee helped.

She was getting exposure into other aspects of the hospital. For the first time she was helping out in surgery. The operation theater experience she had forsaken in her first place of work was again offered to her. She enjoyed the rigor and learning immensely. It moved her from a place of patients to a place of procedures. Although much more demanding it was also much more satisfying.

Vizag was a small city. The port made it important and the beach made it attractive. Given her posting in the OT, she had more ordered hours, most surgeries were scheduled so she could plan her days better. She started going out to the sea shore, began to check out the rich Andhra traditions, tasted the local delicacies, and was introduced to a plethora of pickles. It was a great adventure. She started to pick up Telugu, first because she thought it would help with the patients but later because she could, it came easy to her.

It was beginning to resemble an idyllic existence. Her family back home was also settling, two of the sisters were married, the older brother looked like her would get a job with the panchayat and the younger one; the family philosopher had joined the navy as a seaman.

And then just like that it began to fall apart. There was a young doctor, a surgeon in training. He noticed her when she transferred to the OT. First, he was just amused by her seriousness, then he was amazed by her thoroughness and then he admitted to someone that he was just completely in love with her. He was an honorable man, just totally and absolutely love-struck.

She, who had been getting very good at ignoring unwanted attention from the age of sixteen was aware of the situation and thought that if she handled it like she did all the others before, this too would peter out in time. She was wrong, he was persistent. Never direct, just persistent. He had already conveyed his feelings for her both directly and through several emissaries but to no avail. She was not interested. When she realized that ignoring was not having the desired result, she wanted to be transferred back to general duty but that the HOD would not allow that. She was an asset in the OT, and without her getting the doctor in trouble, she could not explain why the sudden change was important to her. She did the next best thing, she began to use the Matron to assign her time that would not have them in the same room too often. It worked for some time until she started getting out of turn shifts, other nurses who developed short lived illnesses or had other emergencies. Obviously, he too had begun to work the system. He was also getting more confident. He was serious, what he wanted was marriage, not some casual affair and he maintained that his intentions were honorable. This line made him the obvious person to support, if there had been an office pool, the odds would have been in his favor. He did not do one thing wrong, he was polite, did not

invade her privacy, there were no inappropriate comments or gestures, he was behaving like a gentleman, just one who was not making any headway in his wooing.

She went home for a break. It was the first time she sat and really tried to figure out what to do with this particular doctor and with others that might pop up later. Her first idea was to run, get a posting somewhere else but she wanted to travel not because she had annoying suitors but because she wanted to see and live in new places. She had no one to turn to. Her frequent moves since completing her studies meant that she was not really in touch with her friends from the college. The home front had no one she could turn to either. Her grandmother would have just had a panic attack and the sisters and the brothers were just not that close.

She returned to Vizag, had a good open conversation with one of the senior Matrons. She put her story across and then she expected that she would be left alone to study further. The doctor had also gone away for some time.

Things began to settle down once more. She found the textiles and handloom prints that Vizag and the adjoining region was famous for. She explored, shopped and increased her collection of unique saris. She also started picking up hand woven and hand dyed linen. She was introduced to crochet and embroidery. Fine work which required both precision and patience. The town was small so there were no movies or shows to go to. The free time she had she filled with these other activities she picked up and with books. She would soon need a tin trunk just for the books she was collecting. The books gave her the release she needed from the world of the hospital. They, in many ways gave advice on how she needed to deal with the pressure of the suitors. Although things had become quiet, it was an uneasy calm.

No one quite liked the situation and no one had any means to put it right. She had gotten her way but it had made the whole unit uncomfortable.

It was almost a year since she joined. She decided to apply for a job in Patna, as far away as she could. She was accepted and she once again packed her bags to leave. She did this quietly; she did not really want to create a fuss. Just before she was to leave, she spoke to her team. Almost everyone felt bad; it was as if she was leaving because they had not found an adequate solution to her problem. Anyhow, they admired her grace and poise and wished her well. By the time the doctor heard about her decision she was already enroute to the station. He showed up at the station bearing a garland, begging her to reconsider. He was accompanied by another senior nurse, his abettor and her well-wisher, or so the nurse thought. Everything that defined her, her dignity, her grace, her quiet demeanor, they were all outraged. For the first time in a long time, she lost her cool. On that somewhat deserted platform, in the twilight, she spoke her mind. The last six odd years of silence came to the fore. She said it all, how it was inappropriate, how in spite of her dis interest she was still well being harassed, how all she wanted to do was work, learn and live like all the other unattached men in the profession. It was like a tidal wave, angry but collected; the poor man received more than was his due. In the dim lights, she could see the flowers in the garland wilt and the man too began to shrink. She was not shouting, but the impact was nevertheless, very visible. The accompanying nurse moved back so that she would not be caught in any cross fire. In the final tirade, she did turn to her as well, telling her what she thought of her misguided support. Finally, once all the anger had drained, she was calm and calmly and gently she told the doctor that honor was not just in proposing but was also in the acceptance of rejection. She turned and boarded the train without any more conversation. The sleepy

little station with two forlorn figures, one holding a wilted garland was all she left behind that night.

The encounter gave her new courage; she knew she could deal with this and any more things that came her way. She figured that unless she got married or got older, she would always be viewed as fair game. It was part of her lot and she had to take it in her stride. In the last visit home, Muthassi had asked if she intended to marry and whether they should get started looking. To keep them quiet she had said that this was not part of her plans at all. For now, she wanted to get ahead in her career. Privately though she was re thinking the options. The thoughts were slowly moving from a never to a not now anyway scenario. The deep abiding dislike she had for men, she realized was not based on any real events. She knew enough now to forgive both her parents. It did not mean she liked her father but at least he was not the monster she had made him out to be in her childhood, he and her mother were just products of their ignorance, they just had not known better. With wisdom beyond her years, she also realized that her mother had probably liked her father or he could not have been welcome in her house; that strong matriarchal set up which always stood by its women.

She was on a north bound train, a journey that would forever break the bonds with her village and the old house. It was lonely, the thought of her going so far away with no one waiting at the other end. She was not only leaving home behind but also the comfort of the south. Except Karnataka, she had lived in the three southern states and she knew the languages as well. Now heading into the Hindi heart land, she was apprehensive but she wanted to go, see where the Ganges flowed, and see the other half of her India.

Somewhere during her days in school, driven by the national integration sentiment that was sweeping the country, she had started taking Hindi classes under the aegis of the 'Dakshina Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha'. These were not part of the syllabus but you were granted a certificate of proficiency if you cleared the public exams set by the organization. A foundation closely linked to Mahatma Gandhi, it was part of her nationalistic aspirations and also gave her something else to put her mind to.

The first level was "prathamik". She found it difficult but she persisted. Half the problem she realized was that the teachers themselves were not too great. It was a major thing to even think of teaching a language that pretty much nobody had heard at all in that tiny little village. But she persisted, even then she wanted to travel and she figured that Malayalam would not take her too far. The foreign languages on offer were English and then to a limited extent this course in Hindi. She cleared "prathamik" and then also went on to clear the "madhyamik" or the middle level. There was no facility to study any further, the people from the organization actually suggested that she go onto the 'Rashtrabhasha Visharad' course which was the equivalent of a pre university course so that their collective would have another teacher but there was just no one to teach her the next level.

The train journey from Vizag to Patna was the longest she taken so far. The journey skirted the sea, touched Bhubaneswar and then turned inland at Balasore. It took all of four days. She was still unnerved by the events at the Vizag station and was not willing to talk to anyone except the railway staff and there too the conversation was limited to food and drink queries and answers. No one waiting for her at Patna, her Hindi, purely text book, she could not speak

it, almost not at all, and a little unsure if Patna would even be speaking the Hindi she was taught. She journeyed.

Much to her surprise, there was a receiving committee at the station. And they were warm and seemed genuinely excited that she had decided to join. She was received by the senior Matron and a resident doctor. The town was small but the smells and sights and sounds of the morning were like nothing she had ever imagined. It really felt like she had travelled to another country. She was excited. Dressed in one of her fabulous cotton saris, she noticed the worried look on the Matrons' face, not unlike her Muthassi's look that had awaited her day after day during her school years. She realized that she must have appeared very young, she was very young, but in her nurses' uniform, her demeanor could mask her real age. Dressed in colorful clothes, all bright and eager, small as she was, she realized she must appear very childlike. She reined in her excitement, brought back on the mask of propriety and started a conversation about the hospital and what her duties would be. Once they arrived at the medical college gates, as they walked slowly, the three of them, and a porter carrying her many bags, she sensed that the Matron was beginning to relax. That the conversation was conducted in English was also reassuring for the Matron. This was the first south-based candidate they had accepted and everyone had expressed their individual and collective concerns. What had won the day was that they were so short staffed; they would have hired someone from anywhere so long as the person had the right paper qualifications.

The hospital was comparable to the one in Vizag, a little bit dirtier than what she was accustomed to, but not small by any standards. The hostel was actually nicer, she had a room to herself (they had spare accommodation, a fact that did not escape her attention) and was set in a very nice space surrounded by trees. The hospital was set on the bank of the Ganges.

Since the time she had left her village, she had never been this close to a river. And what a river it was; so much a part of her religious life, she felt truly liberated. It was said that bathing in the holy waters would cleanse all her sins; she could do that every day. It was a quiet, clean, beautiful body of water that made her feel close to her family in some strange manner. So far from everything she had ever known, she felt comfortable. For the first time she admitted, at least to herself, how unsure she had been about accepting this job even after all the paper work had been done. And yet, as she rested in her room, it seemed all right. It felt all right, as if in some previous life, this; the north had been her home.

She quickly settled down. Breakfast was parathas, puris, rotis, with freshly cooked subji served with hot piping, milky tea. She still needed her coffee but she switched to the milky tea in the morning. Lunch and dinner were also different, dals, rajma, chole, kadhi served with roti and sometimes rice. Curd was also part of the meals, sometimes served plain but also served as raithas. Then there was salad, so refreshing and cool, she could make a meal of just the fresh tomatoes, radishes and cucumbers but there was so much variety of the main course for her to try. She loved the food, so very different from anything she had before. Even the pickles and the poppadum were different. She came to know the cafeteria staff quite well. The strong British influence that was there in all the previous hospitals was missing here. No oats or porridges of any kind, lots of ghee and butter used in all the food and staff that loved to see her try out new things and encouraged her to eat. Best of all, the cook was a Brahmin and the kitchen purely vegetarian. She could drop her guard. The best meal of all however was snacks at 4:30 in the evening. A time that she had come home from school and eaten every day. A routine that was not followed in any of her other institutions. They all had tea but no real food was served with the tea or the coffee. In Patna the snack time meal had all

things fried; pakoras, samosas, kachoris served with mint and tamarind chutneys, sometimes accompanied by hot jalebis. There were so many sweets, some she had in the canteen and some she found outside in the city. She had a sweet tooth and finally she was discovering all kinds of amazing things that satiated her. Food was serious business and she was finding another love in her life, always indifferent to food till now, something she only considered a necessity, food and she were not destined to remain mere acquaintances. She practiced her Hindi with the canteen staff and they were patient and loved that she was making an effort. The lilting dialect they spoke in was like music to her ears. They allowed her to see how they cooked, what ingredients they used and did not seem to mind her childlike enthusiasm and it did not take anything away from her formal role as a senior nurse. She was always respectful and never a nuisance. She did not think of them as servants and treated all the staff at the canteen with politeness and that meant that she was always remembered whenever they celebrated festivals or cooked specialties based on seasonal vegetables. They also introduced her to fruits she had never seen before. Through all her gastronomic adventures in Patna she did not gain an ounce of weight because her work was hectic and kept her on her toes. She definitely made it a point to have all her meals and then some; often well after the meal time was over. The staff always kept food for her, and if it all had finished, they never hesitated to rustle up something fresh.

There was also all the street food she found out about. Crisp corn, roasted over coal, smeared with lemon, salt and other spices, groundnuts, not the boiled kind but in their shells, sweet potatoes, boiled and sold at the corner, gol gappas, chat, it really was an amazing journey into the world of food for her.

Work soon fell into a rhythm as well. She was liked and the Matron trusted her and was quite amazed at how much experience she already had. The matron started grooming her for more responsibility. Being a South Indian, for the first time, the men began to leave her alone, this one, they quickly realized, was a person not available and they attributed that to the fact that she came from so far away. No longer wary of the doctors, she really blossomed as a nurse. She learned the administrative aspects of the nursing profession, learnt to handle charts and began to prepare the pre and post round materials for the visiting specialists and the resident doctors.

The weather in Patna was strange or so she thought. It was warm, then hot not very wet and then there was the cold, oh so cold, winter. Her first introduction to woolen garments, sweater, stockings, gloves and scarves. Somehow, her ears seemed to have the most trouble adjusting to the cold. Hot water baths, if it had been a struggle to move from washing her hair daily to washing it every other day, the winter made her move to washing it once a week. Every time she oiled her hair and washed it; she would think wryly to herself about what her Muthassi's reaction would have been. Raised on coconut oil as THE oil for her oil baths, she was stumped when it solidified in the first chill of the winter. She continued to use it using hot water to melt it but she knew that she would have to find alternatives to her Muthassi's oil and find it before the next winter.

She learnt to knit. She had seen the women sit out in the winter afternoon sun, click-clacking away and watched in wonder as they knitted the most amazing things. Sitting on the banks of the Ganges, on one of her off days she talked to women who were somehow related to the hospital and they taught her, laughing gently at her while she struggled. Like with the embroidery and the crotchet she picked up knitting too. She sourced wool, pattern books and

then hunted down volunteers because she had to knit for someone. Canteen staff and their extended families was the most willing target. She knitted for them and they cooked more delicacies for her, it was a great arrangement, both sides really grateful for the efforts of the other.

In her off days she began to explore the city. An ancient city that was important as a point of passage, it was great for her to see the vestigial remnants of the British Raj melt in and become part of the older city. She got hold of history books in which she could trace the glorious past of Patna.

It was also a young city; the university was next door and the place teemed with students. There were concerts and dances and performances in the city, often set outside in the open when the weather was good. There were movies to go to, the age of Bollywood had begun. The radio (she had one) played the most incredible music. She was taking it all in. What fun to be young, independent, no longer harassed by men, no proposals to turn down, it was a glorious period in her life. She was finally free to be who she had set out to become. There had been so many ups and downs, so much to prove, she had been so careful about what others thought and how she was perceived. Here, in far off Patna, she could finally step out into the sun.

She spent nearly two years in Patna. She did not need to run. She saw an advertisement of the Northern railways looking for nurses to work; the first posting would be in Delhi. This was a break she had been looking for, the job was transferable so she would not need to look for a new job every so many years, the pay promised to be in line with what she was making and most importantly she would have the right to travel on the Indian railways without having

to pay. It was an incredible option; interestingly the Matron had brought it to her notice. The Matron had seen the spark, spent time with the young girl, listened to her when she had finally begun to open up and share, and the Matron knew that it was a matter of time before the young girl would get the itch to move again and figured that this was a good career move for her.

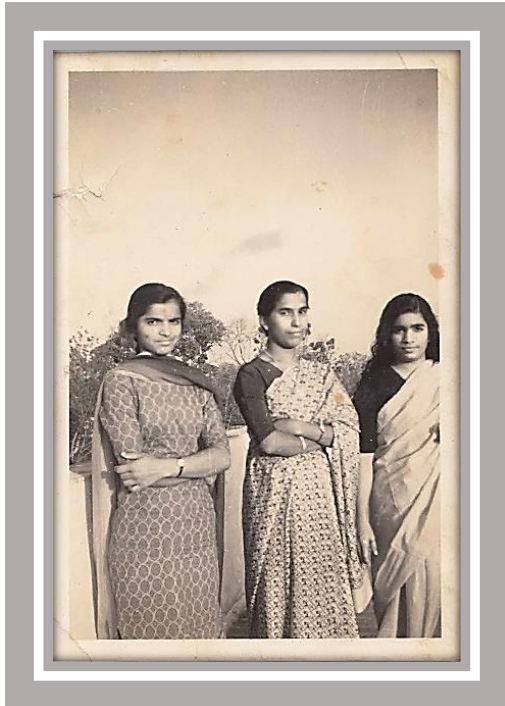
She wrote the test, cleared the interview and bid a sad farewell to a place that had really welcomed her and made her feel like she belonged. Unlike the quick goodbyes in the night, they had a farewell party for her and her friends at the cafeteria went all out to make her favorite items and everyone, from the Chief to the lowest of orderlies came to wish her luck.

Her departure at the Patna station could not have been any more different than the one at Vizag. Onwards, this time to the nation's capital, now speaking Hindi reasonably well, older, more mature, still with the same excitement that she had when she left her home at the age of sixteen.

Dili, the old station, in the winter chill of early morning, after a journey of twenty-four hours, she was ready for this, the next chapter in her life. The job she had wanted to get since her days as an intern, a gazetted job with the Northern Railways. Apart from the actual job, she got free tickets to travel on the trains. Home seemed so much closer now than the actual 2800 kilometers it was. Patna had been kind, it had healed the scars of Vizag, she had matured into a woman who was ready to take on more. There had been very few suitors; the matron had kept any unwanted male attention at bay. She was happy to interact with the doctors and she was really good at her job. She was ready for all that the Capital had to offer.

The Northern Railway Hospital was in Connaught place and the hostel was right behind it. The journey from the station to the Hospital was a short ride she did by Taxi, her first car ride alone. Unlike in Patna there was no reception committee, but it did not bother her very much. She felt quite safe making the journey alone. No one would dare mess with this little wisp of a girl who spoke Hindi without an accent and knew where she wanted to go.

She was greeted by the senior Matron, an Anglo-Indian woman, large both in size and personality who from the get go liked this little thing that had come so highly recommended. She was shown her room in the hostel, shown the cafeteria and given her duty roster. With her previous experience in the OT, she was assigned to an OT job immediately. The chief surgeon was this gentle giant of a man, a Pathan, Dr. Khan. He too was amused at her size and for the next six years that she worked with him, he would comment on how everything was arranged at midget height, arranged well and correctly, just not at the level it would have been comfortable for him.



She loved the hospital; the size of the organization behind the hospital was reassuring. They had access to equipment, medicines and medical knowledge that was only read about in the other places she had worked in before.

Life very soon fell into an easy rhythm; work in shifts, food at the cafeteria, going out with other colleagues, shopping, sightseeing, reading journals that Dr. Khan asked her to and then the movies at

the theatres nearby. She found out about the daily red-rate movies, red meaning reduced, the precursor to the matinee shows. English and Hindi movies, this was the end of the Fifties, both Hollywood and Bollywood had many movies to showcase. She had the money and most days the time to catch a show. She did not go to the movies every single day but the weekly average was four or more after the first six months at the hospital.

The first year went by in a flash. She managed to make two short trips home. Muthassi had begun to age very quickly. She worried about her. Her younger brother was happy in the Navy and the older one seemed to be holding things together. One of the younger sisters wanted to come and stay with her in Delhi, she promised to arrange a visit soon. She needed her to stay back and look after her grandmother.

The village had changed in the six years she had been away. Her working so far away from home inspired respect and in her all too frequent short trips had people visiting from many places to meet with her and hear her tell her stories. She was polite but indifferent; she only

spoke to those she thought really needed her help. For the rest, she maintained her quiet aloof persona and only spent time with her immediate family. Her brothers and sisters treated her like royalty, they could not get enough of her and her every whim and wish was their command. She always came laden with gifts but even without bearing gifts, the family was happy to see her. Finally, the roles were reversed, she had the worried look every time she saw her Muthassi who was aging and obviously not doing so well. Muthassi would sit with her and listen to her stories, quietly as she had when this woman had been a little girl and the woman would open up to her as she had all those years ago.

The unwanted male attention was starting all over again. There were a lot of south Indian doctors and other government officers in Delhi. There were a lot of Malayalees as well. She had as an ally the watchman of the hostel, a Tamilian who could be instructed to keep people away. One time, her brother sent her some goodies from the village with a family friend. They had been in school together. She was thankful for both the bag of goodies and the lack of interest on the part of the person. How was she to know that he had already told another village boy that she was living and working in Delhi. The “other” boy showed up at the hospital the next day. This cool dude, painfully thin but with a very confident air about him. She was at the hostel they told him, so he walked over to the hostel. His boss’s wife was also staying at the hostel; they were waiting for an allotment of accommodation, so he asked her if she knew this young nurse. She gave him the room number. He climbed the stairs and reached her room and then knocked at the door. She opened the door to this thin, gangly boy, almost a man, who asked her if she knew who he was. She was stunned by his audacity. She knew him, she remembered him from her first day at the Higher Elementary School, this was the boy who had then bested her for seven years in school, she knew him as the boy who had

been late every day in high school, she knew him as the boy she had grudgingly recognized in her college days in Madras when he had hollered her name across the hallway....she knew him all right. She, always so sure of her words had no response to give to the cheeky, yet polite boy who stood at her door. Her silence actually had been her best response, when she said nothing, he began the rather painful process of introducing himself only to have her cut him mid-sentence and be told that she knew who he was. She wanted to know what he wanted. He made some lame comment about wanting to just meet and greet a fellow villager. He told her that he had a job with the Central Government and that he lived not far away. They both mumbled some more and then he left.

She was not sure she understood the impact he had on her. She was all of twenty-five, she had been out in the world for nine years, there had been endless suitors and marriage proposals and yet this boy from her past, who said and did nothing to suggest that he was the next in line, made her uneasy.

They had not agreed to meet again; the first awkward meeting at her door had no definitive conclusions. Oh well, she shrugged it off, there was no one to consult really, the ones who knew just teased her and so she ignored it all and returned to her normal life.

Like a bad penny he showed up again, a couple of weeks later. Conversation was easier, they talked about school and friends from school and their village so far away and about their families. Nothing awkward, nothing more than a conversation between friends from a long time ago. They started meeting on and off, there were no proclamations or plans for the future, they had a coffee together or got a bite to eat or walked around Connaught place. He made it sound as if the shortest route back from his work to his bachelor pad was through the

hostel gates, she was not that naïve but it was a cover that worked all right for them. The interested others left them alone, despairing sometimes at how the two of them could not or would not see what was visible to the rest of the world.

Since there was no proposal, there was no need to get worried, he was just a friend. The helpful Tamilian watchman checked discreetly if this one also had to be barred and then smiled when she blushed and said he was all right and should be allowed to call on her. In an age of discretion there were no lewd comments or snide remarks. His friends were also getting the picture that this might have been more than just a “friendship” but they too kept their own counsel.

Living in Delhi meant being in the thick of things. The fledgling country was trying to put its third world image out of the minds of the Western world. Moving from a drought and famine-stricken nation in 1947, India was moving towards becoming really independent. The early signs of fatigue at managing such a big and diverse country were all too visible in Delhi. The Dalai Lama coming to India and to Delhi was a very big event. She loved to read the newspapers, she was fascinated by the story of the young monk who with Indian help managed to come away from China and was now settling down in the north. She wanted to go to the mountains; all the way from Kerala to the Himalayas she told herself was the journey she was meant to make. She had already found out about Christianity and Islam, Delhi introduced her to the Sikhism. The warmth and camaraderie, the absence of any caste at the Gurudwara’s langaar and the simplicity of the religion was very welcoming. The arrival of the Dalai Lama introduced her to the Buddhist tenets and she later met and interacted with enough Jains as well. Looking back at the very particular upbringing she had, she went from being a strictly observant Warrasier to one who adhered to the spirit of the restrictions not

the letter. It was her years in Delhi which molded her for life. She remained a vegetarian for life but allowed meat and fish to be cooked and eaten in her home and she never influenced her children in any way to follow her faith or her beliefs.

Life in Delhi in 1960 was a good life. She and her young “just a friend” both had spare cash; they could pay bills, send money home, shop and live freer than they ever had. It was a simpler time, life was unhurried, it revolved around sleep and work and waking up and doing a whole lot of nothing. There was fantastic music, both Bollywood and Classical. All you needed to own was a radio; they could listen to the BBC or Vividh Bharati or Radio Ceylon which always played the songs she liked, she used to pretend it was because they were broadcasting from closer to her home. Neither of them had any grand plans, they had wanted to leave their houses far away, earn a decent wage and travel and indulge in some basic luxuries. At all of twenty-six, they were already living their dream. Marriage offers were a-plenty for both, in Delhi or via blue inland letters or postcards that came from home. This was the one thing they did not share with one another but it also did not prompt them to do anything more about their “just friends” relationship either.

Another year in Delhi, this was the longest she had been in any one place since she had left home. She was not even trying to get a posting anyplace else. She was working for the one organization that would have let her travel anywhere (there was still so much in the North she had to see) and for the first time she was not in the flight mode. Mrs. George, the dragon lady who looked out for her had left, the Matron her boss was also on her way somewhere else. At just 27 years of age, she looked like she might be actually doing the work of a Matron. It was still a year or so away but there was no attempt to hire someone to replace the departing senior nurses.

She and her friend, explored Delhi and were fascinated by its history. From Purana Qila to Qutub Minar and in Chandni Chowk visits to Dariba Kalan and Paranthi Wali Gali, every day off she had, she was either at the Movies or taking in the sights, smells and the incredible food that Delhi had on offer. His life as a government employee meant he had a more structured life but he seemed to make time for some of these outings.

She learned the fine art of making rotis and paranthas. She learned to cook and eat dal and rajma and chole and so many other Punjabi dishes from people at work. Like with the staff in Patna, she managed to charm her coworkers in Delhi as well. She went and bought herself a brass Parath, a dish which stayed with her through all her years. She claimed that the dough she kneaded in this is what made her rotis just right.

“There he comes, swaying in the wind” her friend would say every time he showed up, a reference to his painfully thin frame and then she would giggle. Her friend and she would talk about everything except the nature of the relationship between her and her boy-friend. It was off limits, although they were spending more time together, seemingly getting serious, there was still no talk about taking this relationship to any other level.

One trip back home, she was at the railway station, a friend of his was traveling as well and he had come to both see this friend off and also introduce her. There was only one train that went once a week or so all the way to Madras and most of the Malayalees took this train. In the hustle he overlooked another acquaintance who was also on the train. Once the train left, this acquaintance then proceeded to rant and rave about the young man’s arrogance. When the friend returned, he was chided for his behavior. The boy’s response was that he had not noticed him, not realizing for a moment what he was saying. Anyhow, to make matters right he wrote to the acquaintance and apologized. She thought it was not needed but did not push him too much. Ever the gentleman, he wrote a proper apology and got a suitable response. Only then did she tell him that this too had been someone who had been in the habit of “looking” her up, against her wishes and had been then barred by the helpful Tamilian watchman. They were naïve, not stupid and it was dawning on them that they needed to decide where they were headed.

Not giving a name to the relationship however meant they could continue to hang out together.

She went home, Muthassi was better, she liked going home. She was being asked about marriage plans. She was already twenty-six years old. Two of the younger sisters were married. The youngest had finished high school and joined college for higher studies. The only one in the family to want to have a career. She returned back to Delhi with one of her unmarried sisters. The sweetest one of the lot, she wanted to see a bit of the world as well. They came back and she had her sister as her roommate for almost a year. The younger sister joined some classes, saw Delhi, and loved the life her older sister was living. Not having studied after the 10th, it was too late to be a career woman but she enjoyed the exposure she was getting. She learnt Hindi, learnt to cook and took some stitching classes, basically filled her time with a lot of nothing. For the first time, the sisters spent time together as adults.

In the whole year that her sister lived with her, she never once let her meet the man in her life. He still came by; they still did things together but the two worlds never met even once. If her sister guessed about this, she never let on either. It was only after she returned from dropping her back home that she told him that her younger sister had been in residence all along. If he found that weird, he too did not comment on it at all. Their worlds were so close by and yet the two never met in any way.

She had another house guest. The younger brother of her first brother-in-law. He was working as a scientist in Bangalore and was called for an interview with an allied Railway institute. He came and stayed in her quarters for a week or so. She introduced him to her man. They got along well, both had an easy-going natures and he was even taken to the bachelor pad she was yet to visit. Her guest went with her man and also looked up some other Warriors he knew in the Arya Vaidya Shala outpost which was near the bachelor pad. She was being selective about who could and could not meet him. Maybe it was just a coincidence but

it seemed strange to him that he did not meet her sister who stayed with her for a whole year and then was allowed to meet the man who was visiting her for a week. Maybe she had advisors who told her the men had to be introduced... he did not think too much about it. Theirs was an easy relationship; he did not intend to complicate matters.

He had written the Civil Services exam and qualified in the written exam in 1959. The interview process was underway in 1960. He had started the process late, and was already over age for most of the services. He did not make it through the interview and at twenty-six was left wondering why he had listened to his well-wishers earlier who had basically told him that he stood no chance at such a competitive examination. Meeting her and seeing how easily she got what she wanted helped revive the spark of competitiveness which had been such a telling feature of his through the school days. And yet when he did not qualify in the interview, life went on.

There was an exhibition of handloom weavers in Delhi. He went and bought her a silk handloom saree with a green and yellow geometrical pattern. The saree came without a blouse piece so he bought plain silk and got it dyed in a matching color. She was touched by the care and the attention to detail. He had seen her varied wardrobe and they had talked about the interest she had in handloom, for him to go to an exhibition alone and buy her a gift was a big deal and she really appreciated the gesture.

Time went on and coffee and snacks became long walks and deep talks. All things on the table except what they were to one another.

There was a senior officer from the Railway Protection Force posted in Delhi, he too was a Warrior. Once when his wife was sick and in hospital, she was on duty, as with Malayalees

everywhere, they soon got talking. They were amazed to find a young Warrasier nurse who was working in the hospital. They kind of decided to take her under their protection little aware that she was in no need for the said protection. Polite as always, she accepted offers for dinner and other meals including meals on special occasions like Vishu and Onam but steadfastly kept turning down offers they made of suitable boys. Unlike her clan from back home, these were modern Warriors, they offered a few times and then decided to leave her alone as far as marriage was concerned. Discreet enquiries had already revealed that was some other Malayalee in the picture. They never brought that up either.

It was like some elaborate game of blindfolds; she and he were both the only ones who could not see the dance they were dancing. In the early sixties, no one thought it any of their business to butt in either; they all wanted to wait it out until the blindfolds were finally off.

She had been in Delhi for over three years now. She had celebrated Holi and Diwali and Lohri with the locals. She knew the ticket sellers in Regal, Plaza and Rivoli the three theatres in Connaught Place. There was a sweet shop in the lane just behind Plaza Theater that made the best boondi ladoos. She was there so often that almost every person in the shop knew who she was. Her friends introduced her to the elaborate zari work that used to come to Delhi from Benaras and the tie and dye fabrics from Rajasthan. She had enough leave to take short trips around Delhi. They went as a group to the Taj Mahal. The surrounding area was so dirty and the Taj truly stood out like a jewel. She had read up the bitter-sweet tale of the Taj. The sixties were all about larger-than-life love stories that ended in tragedy the most impressive of the lot so far had been the Bollywood biggie, Mughal-e-azam.

She and some of her colleagues visited the Parliament, courtesy of the sitting MP from Ponani, a place not far from her home in Kerala. The MP was also fascinated by this young Malayalee girl and showed up one day at the hostel to meet with her. The young man was also paying a visit. Listening to the young man talk, the MP asked him if he was writing for any magazines or was interested in writing at all. "Government memos" was the response he received. The MP offered to publish him in their propaganda magazines if he so wanted. The young man declined. The MP then offered to take her and her friends to Agra and other places "to visit". She told him rather haughtily that they had been already to the Taj and were quite capable of going around on their own. The MP was included in her very own "do not disturb" list with the watchman.

A colleague from UP was getting married and she was invited to the wedding. Once again, a group of nurses and others travelled together this time from Delhi to Meerut. It was the first North Indian wedding she was to be a part of. In Delhi, during winter, there were many weddings one could just watch or even be a part of. Colorful, loud, chaotic but enormously fun with a full band accompanying the horse-riding groom, it could not have been any more different than the quiet muted weddings she had been a part of in her village. This then was a real opportunity. The sangeet, the mehndi, the upside-down order of food followed by the marriage, the bidai or send off, the crying... that was the most shocking, why did the girl's family cry so much at a joyous occasion. No one could quite explain that this was a one-way street, the departure of the girl from her house to her husband's house closed the doors of her own home for life. This was too difficult for her to comprehend.

It was almost 1962; war with China already seemed more real in spite of all the talk by Nehru of the Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai. One day the young man got a brief telegram from home

telling him that his mother was serious. It was sent by his older brother whose grasp of English was as good as anyone's. He went to her and told her that he was sure this was much worse news than the telegram seemed to convey. She helped him with emergency tickets on the next available train. She too knew about the older brother and thought given the way the telegram was worded; it would be all alright. Since she was not planning to travel anytime soon, she asked if he could come back with white cloth known as MS-55. This was apparently what made for the best uniforms. This ability of hers to take what was an extremely stressful situation and turn it into an almost everyday activity was what took his mind off what might have been going on at home. When he reached home, he found out that his mother had passed away and that although his brother had sent the correct message the local post office had re worded the message in the belief that this would hurt him less and allow him to deal with it better.

Since they saw him so infrequently, even though the timing was highly inappropriate, his family decided to seriously speak with him about marriage. Most of the talk was from his sister, she who loved him almost as much as his mother did. He shrugged it off and told everyone he was not sure who he wanted to marry and was even less sure about the when.

He returned to Delhi with a full ("than" – in Hindi) length of MS-55. He had missed her quite a bit. The family gathering in his village had kind of made him think they should be moving things along. They did. They went and saw a movie together, their first one together, Sahib-Bibi aur Gulam. Many years later he would say that he started as a Sahib and ended up as a Gulam, this comment typically coming after some or the other rant from her on what he did not do for her.

At work she was given independent charge of the OT, a role typically held by a matron, some three grades above her pay scale. Dr. Khan was completely sure that she could handle the responsibility and the impending war meant that the senior personnel were being moved further to the north of the country. They could not get a replacement and Dr. Khan thought it was unnecessary anyway.

In October the country was at war again, this time with the Chinese. It was a short and fairly painful exercise; India lost more than just the war. The direct outcome however was that India decided to start sidelining the old strategies and began modernizing its Army and infrastructure rather aggressively. Being part of the government machinery, something they both were, made for interesting times.

End of an Era: Delhi 63-65

They were both traveling to Kerala regularly, he less than her but still frequently enough. A year and something after his mother's death, he visited Kerala again. He was yet to meet anyone from her family. This trip he decided to go and catch up at least with the youngest sibling. She was teaching at a school in Tirur, a village not far from his own. He went there to meet her and made up some story about having been asked to meet up with her. It was an awkward meeting because there was no real basis for the "why" he decided to look her up. In the meantime, he was being inundated with marriage offers. There was this very eligible daughter of a former teacher of his. Very mindful of the impact his rejection would have, he declined the marriage proposal. The girl was then married to another classmate of his.

His family had no idea what to do with him. His sister, who loved him dearly tried to talk sense to him. He had qualified in "clerks exam" the IAS and other senior posts were now out of his reach given his age.

Meanwhile, in Delhi, she was doing very well at her job. Her efforts were appreciated and her scope of responsibility was only growing. She too was being pressured somewhat for marriage but no one really wanted to push her too hard. One visit back in 1963, she told Muthassi about the young man in her life even though she had not proposed nor had been proposed too but that seemed to be where they were heading albeit at a snail's pace.

Muthassi came around immediately and kept her secret safe until she wanted to tell the others. After those cleansing dips to all the many comments, the caste consciousness which lived and breathed in every cell of her body, which was part of the entire house hold she managed, that part which even the timber and tiles in house seemed to know about; she was

the first one to tell her that it was a good choice. The boys' family was known to her. Well, they did not really meet ever, that would have been too much. She had known of the boys' father. In her words, if she could not find a suitable boy from the community, it was good that she at least picked someone whose family standing and reputation was at par with theirs. Although the boy and girl were deciding to get married, marriage was bigger than just a union of two, it meant also an alliance for the families and so she was glad that the choice was appropriate. Besides that, she was really happy that her little girl would marry, all those years of waiting anxiously for her to return from school, from the hostel, from her many travels, she had been worried about what would happen to her, worried about who would worry about her once she was gone.

“Love marriage” a phrase which brought to mind endless Bollywood songs... so farfetched from reality that it just did not happen, at least not in the manner these two meant to do it. That they were both almost thirty meant nothing, that they had known each other from the sixth grade meant even less, all that really mattered to all who did not matter at all, was the caste pollution. Of course, the objections would all come from the girls' side. As she would someday wryly tell her girl, patriarchy also meant double standards that did not always favor the women. He was from the Nair community, fairly high caste, definitely well off, they had more land assets than her family did, he was educated, had a good job but he had to be either a Warriar or an Imbrandri or a Namboodri; the only castes she was allowed to marry into.

It was 1964, a year where so much changed in her life.

They were both in Delhi and he showed up one day with tickets for the movie Psycho. A surprise he said. She pursed her lips and said nothing. They saw the movie together and then

had a bite to eat. When he dropped her back to the hostel, she told him that he had to stop seeing her and that she would not meet him again. He could not believe his ears. He also could not figure out what he had done wrong, Psycho was not a romantic movie but it really had not been so bad, had it? She had been very clear; it was the end of the road for them. Like a hurt puppy he went back to lick his wounds and figure out what to do next.

Three days later, he got a call from her roommate. He was told that she had come down with a high fever and that he needed to bring his sorry butt back to the hostel and fix whatever it was that he had broken. Like all men, action was an item on his list only when all avenues of dithering were shut down. He was naïve but understood that if a proposal was not forthcoming, he was in real trouble. Bearing no gifts, he went back to see her. The bottom line, they decided they would get married. They were both 30 years old and had known each other for the last twenty of those years, the last seven or eight years as adults. By any standards this had been a slow courtship.

The relief at being able to now officially broadcast to the world what the world already knew was unimaginable. The teacher's daughter who married his classmate had another sister and his friend wrote to him with a proposal. He declined, this time telling his friend the name of the person because of whom he was still a bachelor.

Muthassi was unwell, she had to go home. Happy that things were working out for her man and her she went home, sure that Muthassi would recover.

She was home for almost a month and a half. Muthassi was very happy to see her and announce her decision to the rest of the family. Most of the members covered up their true feeling about the upcoming nuptials keeping in mind how sick Muthassi was. Some days were

better than others but it was very obvious that Muthassi was fading fast. She was not very old, maybe in her late sixties. This was in a time when the life expectancy was around 45, so she was very old. Now that her favorite grandchild was about to get married, she could finally let go. She passed away peacefully in the night. He wrote her a letter, of condolences, in English so that no one else would read it even by mistake. There were some raised eyebrows and pursed lips but no comments. This was inappropriate. Family came in droves to pay their respects. The uncles she had not seen since high school, cousins, aunts, the family got together to remember a remarkable lady and laud her life. They looked at her and asked her about her plans. She politely refused to be drawn into any discussions. The rest of her immediate family too kept quiet, scared enough to not want to face her wrath.

After the ceremonies and rituals, she returned to what was now home for her, Delhi.

She picked up the threads of her life. Now she felt orphaned. Her mentor, her parent was no longer there as a fall back. She, who had been yearning for independence for as long as she could remember, did not know what to do with herself now that she truly was on her own. She turned to her one other source of comfort. They began to plot their life together; she visited the bachelor pad. Luckily for her and the roommate, they never went unannounced so they were impressed by how neat the living arrangements of the young men were. Minimal but functional. They had a full-time man Friday, in charge of cleaning and cooking and odds and ends. It was impressive. What really surprised her was the reaction of all their common friends and acquaintances. They all uniformly seemed relieved. It would take them many years to work out, from many chance comments they heard, that no one in their circle of friends quite understood why they had waited for so long. She too now wondered if by not bringing it up earlier she had denied her Muthassi the joy of being a part

of her marriage, but always a believer in “the right time” philosophy which basically argues that all things happen at the destined time and in the destined manner, she did not dwell too long on the timing.

It was almost the end of 1964, there were signs of trouble brewing with another neighbor, Pakistan. Both of them went on with their lives as if nothing had changed. Marriage also seemed inevitable. The tallish, gangly young man whom she had known from the age of ten was very persistent. There was a marriage to plan, relatives to inform, most already knew what was in the offing but everyone was waiting for an official communication.

At work, she was still handling the OT independently, there had been no replacement made for the matron who had been transferred out in 1962. She was professional, committed and a perfectionist. The Railways were getting a job done without having to pay the perks that came with the post.

Their circle of friends was growing, she was now introduced to many of her man’s bachelor friends, all of whom were also in the process of settling down. Some already married, some engaged, some already with kids, it was a great group to spend time with. She did maintain her distance though; she was the only working woman in the group and had carved out a career that was at par with most of the friends. Home and hearth were not her calling and she felt awkward dealing with the non-working wives.

The dates were finally agreed upon, August 1965, they planned ahead for a wedding in Kerala. There was talk about him moving to Nepal on deputation and of her being transferred to Kanpur. A typical posting in the Railways was for three years, she had already been in Delhi from 1957. The wheels were already in motion. In February 1965, his definite posting orders

came through. He packed and prepared to be apart, unsure of how the next few months would pan out.

Every year the Railways celebrated the Railway week. Celebrated in or around April, the



organization would recognize exceptional workers. Her name figured in this year's list. The reason for the award was that she had independently handled a matron's post without the official designation and had done so for over three years at a hospital which was located in the Northern Railways main city Delhi. Obviously, Dr. Khan must have recommended her name. She, who had done so much in her life was mostly embarrassed by the nomination and the attention it was bringing in its wake. She did not even really mention it to her man. They called for her photograph to be included in the journal, she found excuses to not comply. The award ceremony itself was scheduled for the 14th of April. Her man was leaving town on the 11th of April. She chose to spend time with him and discuss their wedding plans. The ceremony

that awarded her the “Merit Certificate” was an impressive one. She was the only woman to be awarded that year. The newspapers carried many reports about her, touching about her diffidence and her strength. Interviewed by Usha Rai, photographed by Rahgu Rai, the shy, almost retiring personality had no idea how to deal with all this attention.

He was already in Butwal. A friend of his very diligently cut out the articles and the newspaper reports and sent them to him. She took no cuttings and preserved no photographs except a copy of photograph-less Railway Journal and the actual medal. She really had no tools in her arsenal to deal with all this very new kind of attention. She re-iterated many times to all those who asked that all she did was her job and medals for doing one’s job really did not make sense to her. The award came with the recognition, the medal and monetary reward as well. That she happily used in her preparation for the wedding. As with most of her life she looked ahead just a few months out and was happy with what was on offer, exactly what they would do once married was too much in the future to worry about now.

Getting Hitched Finally

It was June 1965, this time the Indo-Pakistan war seemed like a possibility. India had yet to recover from the insulting defeat at the hands of the Chinese. The nation's mood was a somber one. It was time, the decision had been made, Muthassi had blessed the proposed union before she had died. There was very little to wait for. Long distance relationships did not really work or so they were told time and again. From April 11th he had been in Butwal, Nepal and her transfer orders to Kanpur had already been put in place.

During the period that they stayed apart they wrote to one another, the deal was at least one letter a week. They also agreed not to wait to receive each other's missive but to write every week. The mail went in the government pouch from and back to Delhi, this was the safest way for them to communicate. If they had relied on the Postal services of either country, they probably would have never heard from one another. For one as organized as she was, regular letter writing was a chore she did not look forward to. She loved receiving his letters, his letters were fun to read, informative and yet light, reporting from the new terrain, the new experiences, it really was worth the wait. Hers were more reports, written in the only style she knew, to the point, brief and always left her thinking that she was being unfair, but finally she figured that he welcomed her meagre scraps just as much as she longed for his tomes.

She had bought her trousseau carefully. The girl never really interested in fancy attire or jewelry now shopped for the wedding she never thought she would have. A gorgeous blue and silver Banarasi sari, many hued beautiful georgettes, other sarees with zari, sarees in silk, so much more. She went with her colleagues to shop. She really had no idea about preparations for weddings; she had been a guest in the weddings of her sisters, a source of

money and gold, never really a participant. Ornaments she got only a little, she wanted traditional jewelry made by the same “Nanu” also known as Narayan, who had made jewelry for her family for generations. She had a lot of leave left and she intended to spend a good month in Kerala, shopping, as she had done in the past, for weddings, only this time it would be more than as the financier. The white weddings were basically a simple affair. An auspicious time, an engagement ceremony when the wedding time would be determined, normally immediately after the engagement, a lit lamp, white mundu-veshti’s with gold borders, fresh flowers for the hair and chetti and mulapu garlands followed by an elaborate meal, a ceremony that recognized this was a beginning and hoped that the union would prosper and be fruitful.

They both came to Kerala, he from Butwal and she from Delhi, they met in Kanpur and travelled together. They came in the end of July, planning a marriage in August. They planned to marry at Guruvayoor, a temple town where marriages at the temple were easy to conduct and where the arrangements would not take too much time to put together.

He was the spirit of organization, he had to be, he was on limited leave, unlike her, he was not the blue-eyed boy of his organization, and he still had a long way to go. In her case the Railways seemed to want to bend over backwards to accommodate her every whim, especially in the wake of the award. He spoke with his family, spoke with the priests and the other elders and agreed upon a date. He sent her a message, this was not Delhi, he could not just show up at her door step there were protocols to be followed. Once in receipt of the answer, willing friends ferried the messages to and fro, he went ahead and designed the wedding invitations. There was to be a formal meeting between the families before they could start the actual inviting and this was just not happening.

The once wretched lack of male opinions was now no longer evident; the many sisters had married and their spouses, normally expected to stay invisible, were of the new breed and felt that since their children belonged to this house, it gave them the right to speak up and speak against. As long as Muthassi was alive, they only dared to mutter. When she died in 1964 the quiet grumbling became an angry, indignant out of control outburst. They figured that with no Matriarch in the picture and the next one in line living far away, they had a right or at least their wives had the right to assume the vacant spot. The sisters did not say much. They had grown up with her and had known that the quieter she got, the worse the final outburst would be. It was a strange mood for a family with a wedding to plan. All that one could feel was the stress and tensions, mutterings and vague caste comments. Even the braver brothers-in law could not really bring themselves to openly speak with her, discuss or even begin to dissuade her from going ahead with the marriage. Somewhere they knew their correct place in the pecking order and feared that one comment too many would find them on the wrong side of the wall of the property. So, they kept the chatter to just the level where it was annoying but not actionable.

The boy came to meet and finalize the details. The cards were printed and he wanted to know how the meeting of the families would be held. The pompous brothers-in-law met with him as was appropriate. A short-tempered man himself, the husband-to-be was already annoyed with the set up. He had informed his family what they planned to do and they had been happy, if a little worried, for him. In her house, he could sense the hostility and though he did not care, was also aware of the caste problem. After a few meetings which led nowhere, one of the no-good brothers-in-law flippantly suggested that the best thing to have done was for them to get married in Delhi which after all was where they had made the

decision and where they lived and where obviously the caste issue was not an issue at all. He turned and looked at the older brother, he who had been the friend and protector and his classmate too. The brother looked sheepish but like all the men in the matriarchal setup, betrayed the pressure he was under. He nodded and said the same. A marriage in Kerala would only cause everyone grief, there were still younger sisters who needed to get married. They offered the bride gold ornaments as a small consolation.

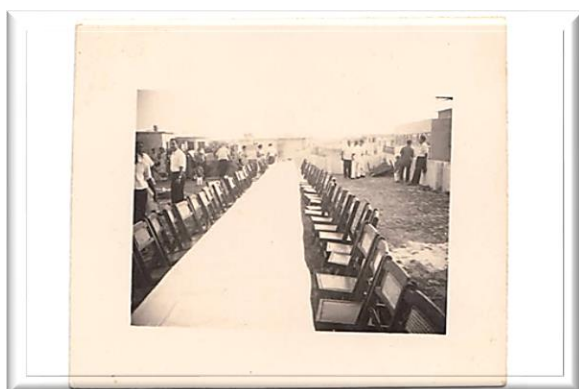
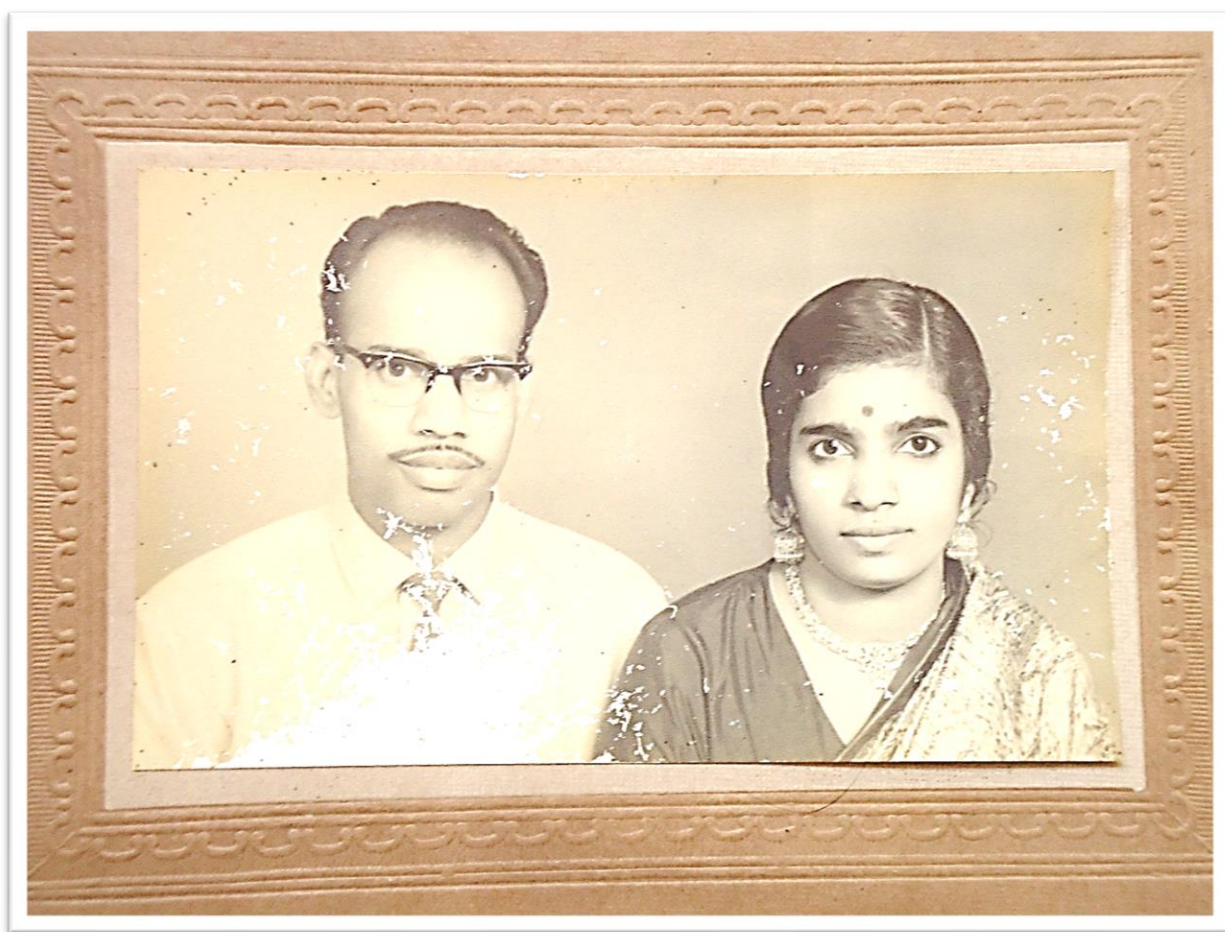
What he did next took everyone by surprise. They had expected an outburst from her and possibly him too. They expected a confrontation. Instead, he went out; bought two tickets back to Delhi and with his girl who was not yet a bride and her brand-new trousseau he declined the ornaments and left without getting married. The unused wedding cards the only reminder that this was how they had wanted to celebrate their marriage.

Delhi was in the throes of war. Blackouts were common, travel was not easy. There was big group of friends and well-wishers who rallied around this young couple that was struggling with a caste conundrum that very few of them understood or wanted to be in the middle of.

On the 2nd of September, they had a simple ceremony at the Birla Mandir. A northern priest conducted the marriage, the ceremony and rituals made no sense to them. A marriage at Guruvayoor would have entailed a five-minute ceremony around a filled urn of grain and tender coconut flowers. There would have been a lamp and he would have tied a golden bead called a matra on a thread around her neck to signify their union. Instead, there was sacred fire, garlands of flowers, seven perambulations around the fire, chanting that made no sense and then the marriage was a done deal. There are hazy sepia tinted photographs to show that it did take place, not quite in the manner they wanted it to happen. There was no one from

either family to witness, to bless or celebrate. Like immigrants all over the world, they felt all alone, surrounded by friends and many many colleagues; it was a bitter sweet experience.





He arranged a reception dinner at the South Indian Hotel terrace. For a princely sum of Rupees fifteen per person their small gathering had over a hundred invitees, most, if not all showed up. There were air raid alarms which went off at 6:30 pm and a total blackout was imposed. The party was in shambles. Yet, the invitees rallied. The war did not matter, the darkness did not matter. The blackout would be lifted and their marriage would be celebrated. Thankful for the warmth and camaraderie, the young couple took it all in. They wondered if all these things going wrong was an omen for the life ahead... and then let the thought die, the omen to be read was in the warmth of this urban alternate family, far away from the caste pressures and the mutterings, it portended their ability to manage in this changing world. They had each other and as a fall back a big group of friends. They would be all right.

The Warrior gentleman from the Railways and his wife attended the reception and as was the norm invited the couple for a formal meal. This was the first of many such invitations. If they had been in Kerala, they would have visited their extended families, the tradition was both to get to know the families and receive blessings from elders. This couple's new age urban family was trying to do the same for them. The many friends and senior colleagues, elated that they had finally tied the knot, dismayed at the reception of their families, now attempted to offer comfort in the only way knew how, by stepping in to perform the usual ceremonies.

Their honeymoon was in Delhi, they had a room at a friend's place, the house where he had lived a bachelor's life. Tired of the emotional roller coaster they had been on, the war still raging, there was little they could do or wanted to do and so they stayed and spent time with one another and with their friends. There were telegrams from wherever she had worked and

from his family and friends. Her family or rather the husband of her younger sister sent a letter. It told her that she had been excommunicated or ostracized from the caste and could not consider herself a part of the family anymore. The matter they had not dared to broach while she was in Kerala, he thought he could do via a letter. Little did he know, the unwritten rules did not always favor those that obeyed. He had no right and he was definitely in no position to write the letter. She was the matriarch; marriage outside the community could ruffle feathers but do little else. This was her birth right; no one could take it from her least of all a man who was married into her family. She did not know when she would go back, but she knew she would return to lay claim to what was hers. She preserved the letter carefully.

Dr. Khan, her mentor, asked them if she intended to continue working. If their courtship had seemed weird, their post marriage arrangements seemed positively bizarre. It was unheard of for a young married couple to go their separate ways just two weeks after their marriage, there were parallels where often after a woman conceived, she would go back to either her maternal home or even to her in-laws just to ensure that she was being looked after well but for a couple to marry and then go their separate ways for their careers was a concept not part of anybody's understanding.

Two weeks later they both left, he for Butwal and she for Kanpur. They did not know it yet but she had already conceived.

Family

WHEN YOU WERE BORN INTO THIS WORLD
YOUR MOM AND DAD SAW A DREAM FULFILLED
DREAM COME TRUE
THE ANSWER TO THEIR PRAYERS
YOU WERE TO THEM A SPECIAL CHILD
GAVE 'EM JOY EVERY TIME YOU SMILED
EACH TIME YOU CRIED
THEY'RE AT YOUR SIDE TO CARE
CHILD, YOU DON'T KNOW
YOU'LL NEVER KNOW HOW FAR THEY'D GO
TO GIVE YOU ALL THEIR LOVE CAN GIVE
TO SEE YOU THROUGH AND GOD IT'S TRUE
THEY'D DIE FOR YOU, IF THEY MUST, TO SEE YOU HERE
HOW MANY SEASONS CAME AND WENT
SO MANY YEARS HAVE NOW BEEN SPENT
FOR TIME RAN FAST
AND NOW AT LAST YOU'RE STRONG

-“FREDDIE AGUILAR “

The Next Generation

She was over seven months pregnant. The Railways was a benevolent benefactor, it allowed 6 whole weeks of paid maternity leave and she still had left-over accumulated leave. She, in the absence of any help or elderly advisor, chose to travel to Butwal when she was seven months pregnant. They had only met once since they had married, he had come to Kanpur for a short break, all too short they both felt. In April now visibly pregnant she left for Butwal via Gorakhpur. No one in their right minds travels to the hills in such an advanced stage of pregnancy but she had free travel passes and she was covered by the Railway hospitals incase anything went wrong, that is until she crossed into Nepal and then his benefits would come into effect. Barely one month later, they made the journey back to Delhi via Kanpur, stopping enroute to pick up an ayah for the baby yet to be born.



It was sweltering; the heat in May was unbearable. It was positively uncivilized to have children in May. Who ever heard of people birthing in May in Delhi? If she thought about it for a bit, she could even be convinced that even animals, reptiles, insects et al suspended the cycle of life during the forty-five-degree Celsius heat wave of Delhi. She could have had her baby in Butwal, Nepal, a place where summer was only a pleasant mid twenty. The childhood, her grandmother, her status however did not allow her to consider giving birth in a place less developed than her home country. So, she came back to India to give birth. Whether it was the last trimester travel or the change in weather, her water broke about two-three weeks before the due date. But after the water broke, the baby refused to come. Whether it was her small stature, or the heat, twenty-four agonizing hours later there still was no baby. Her intervening years in the medical

world had never quite erased the last memory of her mother. She remembered that night all too well. Finally, the doctor, also tired, told her that if birthing did not happen by late afternoon, she would operate. No sensible doctor was going to risk operation during the summer afternoon heat. She wanted it to cool down before she went ahead. Obviously, the baby heard and assimilated the threat and was born normally just after the day began to cool down a little.



Born in summer, they named him for the Sun. The little woman, now a proud mother, still small, picked up her adorable baby boy and went back to Nepal. She swore that



if there was another one, she would have him or her in Nepal, less development trumps heat every time.

The conflict of every working woman choosing between being a stay-at-home mom and a working mom was no different for her than it is for women today. She had gone through a lot to reach both the position and to gain the respect she had in her profession. No women in her family had ever worked. They were the upper caste, the landed gentry, landed rich but without cash for luxuries. Her younger siblings had studied but she had been the trail blazer. She left the comfort of home and had lived and travelled all over for work. Was the boy really worth it after all? Would he or even she herself remember the sacrifice years from now? Was

she going to be like all other wives she met at the office gatherings, dressed in the floral print saris, blending so effortlessly into the drapes at the windows? Would her life become an endless chore, from washing bottoms to cleaning, cooking and knitting? Domesticity, something she found she enjoyed and was good at; was this her taking the easy way out. “A short break”, she said. “There would be no regrets”, she said. In the final reckoning, it would all have been worth it. Her pretty boy and besotted husband made it seem just right. In the final argument with herself she said that it was temporary, only until they returned to India.

Soon after the birth she did report back to duty, unsure of whether she should quit or not. It was only to keep her working status intact. She had been reposted back to Delhi; the Railways really did not want to lose her. A couple of days later she again applied for leave and a month after the birth of her child they were back in Butwal. They planned to take the ayah with them to Nepal and organized the papers accordingly. On the way back they travelled together as a family with the Ayah traveling in the third-class compartment. When they reached Gorakhpur, the Ayah was not on the train. He went everywhere looking for her, they were responsible for her, and he already had enough on his hands to deal with what with a new born baby and an inexperienced mother. He finally found out that the powers that be had made the ayah leave the train because her tickets were with them and the Inspector did not buy her story of being an ayah traveling with a paid for reservation and she could not tell the inspector which compartment they were in. He did the most sensible thing that he could do, he traveled on with his wife and infant and a couple days after settling them into the house in Butwal, he returned to Kanpur to look for her. He did find her, justifiably angry and upset, no entreaties would convince her that they were not to blame, well not technically

anyway. He paid her for her troubles and went back to Butwal where he hired a local woman to come in and help out with the baby.



Playing housewife, she watched over her pretty boy, she cooked and cleaned and ignored the entreaties, the urgings, the requests and finally the threats from her erstwhile employers. She

was not sure she wanted to work anymore. She was weary of work. The faintly antiseptic smell that never quite seemed to leave her. The rose water she used to scent her hands with every day, which she mixed with glycerin to make her hands soft so that she could forget the drudgery and move away from the endless shifts, day and night at the hospital. She had come a long way from the days in the old house and for the first time, with movies and books as her guidepost, she was living her dream with her man and her baby. White picket fences,



an idyllic setting, unbelievable weather, rural living, a life so different from her childhood and yet so reassuringly familiar in its simple rustic format.

They took a trip down to Kerala, she, her man and her little boy. The boy was just over two years old and she was in her second trimester of her second pregnancy. Though the matriarch now, her



marriage had been extremely controversial. They had not come back in the intervening years at all. Resentment once again became a focal point. She had worked and earned and supported all the siblings. For them and their spouses to now turn around and question the

legitimacy of her choices was unbearable. Her husband's family welcomed all three of them with open arms. She insisted on going home. A house now in better shape than ever, even the windows seemed less crooked, repairs funded by her during her decade and more of work. Yet, she noticed that the artifacts were being pawned off, sold for pittances. It was a thankless job. Now that her grandmothers' intervention was not an option, she could see that it was a matter of time before it would all begin to unravel. Matriarchy was a great concept but like a lot of things not one that could be exercised from long distance. All she did was let them know that no person, least of all a man not from the family but married into her family had any say in the family matters. Her older brother, embarrassed at the role he had played in the marriage episode, made her welcome and doted on the pretty boy who was his nephew.



Three years later, this time in Kathmandu, another birth, another boy. The heat, the long labor, all a distant blur. Lying down in the hospital, her first born and proud husband watched the chubby little one in wonder. It could



not have been any more different. Tired, as she was drifting off to sleep, she felt someone picking up the baby and walking away. She woke up, alert as only a new mother can be and screamed. The ruckus, the aristocratic Indian, the scared Nepali staff, the baby was brought back. Some poor mother who had lost her new born decided it was easier to take a child away than to go through the agony again. All the reasons of why it was better to have a baby in India were reinforced. Never again she swore. No more kids, but if there was another, God

Forbid, the child would be born in civilization not in this, not even a third world country. They named him for the god of wind.

A proud mother of two boys in a region where a woman's worth is measured in her ability to beget sons; she was feted where ever she went. The matriarchal society for which she was a torch bearer could not be explained to these northerners where a daughter was always thought of as a burden. Never one to talk much, she chose to smile and accept the compliments in her stride. A picture-perfect pram with a bouncy baby in it and a pretty toddler at her side. Life was as good as it got or so she thought.

Like a fertile cow, she got pregnant again, barely three months after the second one was born. By the time she realized, it was too late to do anything about it. Two children under the age of four and a third on its way! What good was all the careful planning? How was she to cope? All that education, diet, medical know how, what a waste. She thought her life would end up like her mothers, a destiny she was escaping from, running away from ever since she could remember.

It was a difficult pregnancy, so close to the earlier one, without the benefit of a large family to take over from the new mom, it was all too much. There was hired help but the boys were small and needed their mom. She was weak and exhausted and the dream that was domesticity was fast losing its charm. She often wondered how her mother had coped and even began to understand why she had given up. The deep-seated resentment and her abandonment issues seemed irrelevant when held up to the mirror of giving birth to a child pretty much every year. The father who was not there in her life had obviously been around a lot more than she ever realized. He was all of a husband and not much a father at all. She

also realized that after her mother passed away, he too had gone away from their lives. With an insight she had lacked all through her adult life, she understood finally all that her grandmother had done, for her daughter and her daughters' children.

Further complicating matters was that the younger boy gave up on the breast almost as soon as she got pregnant. Formula was not a commonly available thing. The husband sourced it from Calcutta and managed to have a supply delivered to Kathmandu but it was a difficult process. The boy became thinner but stayed very active. He turned early, crawled early and showed all signs of walking early too. The boys were all right.

The baby was to be born in January, the absolute opposite of her first born. The weather in Nepal in January was cold, bitterly cold. She wanted to be back in India. She cajoled and begged. Her husband greased the wheels. They had to be back by November because any later would mean the journey was not possible. Very pregnant, with a three- and something-year old boy and a precocious nine-month-old boy who was already walking and talking, she was at her wits end. The Gods had other plans. The transfer did not come through. There was no choice.

In January, it was back to the hospital. On a cold, wet, very stormy day, almost exactly eleven months after the birth of her second child, her third child was born. There was an operation to deliver the baby. Finally, a girl! Scrawny, tiny like her, the lineage was intact. She also made sure there would be no more babies.

The men gathered around to watch their women. Two little boys and a besotted husband once again stood just outside the inner circle and watched a mother and her little girl, they watched in wonder, bewildered at the miracle that is life.

The long-awaited transfer orders had come through just one week before the baby was born. They stayed another month in Kathmandu and then returned to Delhi with the three kids. The little one was named by the hired help. A small name which meant “tiny” in Nepali. It was apt and the boys loved it so it stuck. She was given another name later, grander and more hopeful by the husband, it meant someone who is modest, or elegant or even calm and quiet, all attributes never in evidence at all. She needed a grander name; after all she was to be the matriarch in her generation. The only daughter of the eldest daughter, a matrilineal lineage that could be traced back for more than five hundred years without having to refer to any external sources.



A flight from Kathmandu to Patna, an overnight stay in Patna and then a train journey to Delhi, a long and arduous journey with three small children. They were welcomed back to the house that had been

the husbands' bachelor pad, their honeymoon suite, their first-born baby's after birth suite and now the family room. The house was now occupied by one of the oldest friends of the husband and his small family. The husband looked for accommodation in the same area and reported to work. Her job no longer existed and she did not think that with three babies she was going back to work any time soon anyway. A small apartment was found, basic furniture bought, the kids, mom and dad moved into what was their first home together in India. Finally, the family was ready to start living the long overdue, Indian dream.

It was 1970, twenty years after her first trip away from home. Twenty years that she had lived and travelled and read and learnt so much. The pace had been hectic, as if she had known that the next stage would slow her down and she had needed to pack what most people do in one lifetime into her first twenty years away from home.

Quiet domesticity beckoned and she looked forward to it. She would cook and clean and watch her babies grow. She wanted to be the mother that she never had and also be the grandmother that her kids would never have.

House and Home: 1970-1975

This was a journey so different from all the ones' before. She was back in Delhi, she had three kids and a husband, she did not have a job and she did not have any maids. The tiny house, one-bedroom, little hall and kitchen bathroom was really no bigger than the rooms she had in the hostels, except that now there five of them living in the same space. Neighbors were surprised to see a woman who looked so young with three little ones and no family to call upon for help. The landlords of the little place used to sell eggs, butter, bread and milk in a little outlet in front of the house. The lady would also keep an eye on the boys when they went downstairs to play. Her middle one, now just over a year was really a handful, mischievous, cute but always up to something. One day when she went down to bring the boys up, she saw the older one playing on his own and the little one sitting in the middle of what looked like an egg massacre; he was picking up eggs one by one and throwing them on the ground and then giggling every time they broke. By the look of things, he had been at it for some time as well. She was mortified; she picked him up, called out to the landlady wondering how they would afford to pay for what seemed like a lot of eggs. A jolly sort, the landlady came out; saw what had been done and burst out laughing. It was a funny sight. The little boy who thought he was in trouble with his mom was happy at this new found support. Too young to understand what he had done; he was happy to see another laugh. The landlords absolutely refused to take any money for the damaged eggs, like so many in the North, they believed that kids should not be penalized for being kids.



The next move was to a nicer, bigger house in Moti Bagh. Over the next three years they would shift houses four times, each move prompted by a different reason. The house in Moti Bagh was an accommodation given by the government to her husband's colleague. Since this colleague had his own house, and it was silly to return the accommodation, he gave it to them on a nominal rent. Her husband decided then that since it was not sure when he would get accommodation from his employers that he was better off building his own little house. With a small loan from the office, he bought a tiny 1200 sq ft or as they recorded it in the papers, a 133.33 sq yard plot in Faridabad, a suburb of Delhi. There was a railway station nearby and he could take the train to work. Over the next year he went back and forth to build their very own tiny house, two small bedrooms, an even tinier sitting space and a little kitchen. The bye-laws in Faridabad insisted on an 18-foot-long back yard and a 12-foot-long front yard. It suited them fine, they wanted their little patch of soil anyway.



In 1972, they shifted to the barely finished house. The oldest boy was now 6 years old, the youngest 2, they thought they would stay in this very, very small house and grow old together. The oldest who had been going to school in the old house got admission into a Central School in Old Faridabad and a cycle rickshaw was engaged to pick and drop him to school. The younger boy, who wanted to do

everything his older brother did was just about three years old but was admitted to St. John's school nearby. The routines began to get set. Getting the boys ready for school, making

breakfast, seeing them all off and then spending a few hours with the little girl, bathing, washing, cooking, cleaning, drudgery but not killing. The boys kept her on her toes once they got back and she liked this little bit of alone time she had with just her and the baby.

Unlike the boys the little girl was all right to play on her own or potter about the back yard. Once her brothers were back, she would be as much of a terror as they were but left alone with her mother, apart from her incessant chatter she was fairly manageable. And so, she, her husband and her kids, planted vegetables in their little 360 square foot garden. They grew potatoes and spinach, cabbage and cauliflower and all kinds of other seasonal vegetables as well. So many years after they had left their rural backgrounds behind, they managed to salvage a little of their farmers heritage. The house, though well connected by road and rail was still surrounded by villages. There was fresh milk for the asking, what they did not grow themselves, others did, it was simple but incredibly fresh and very healthy. She churned her own butter, made her own ghee and set her curd and made sure her kids had plenty of milk to drink.

Although the younger boy and girl were a year apart, she brought them up almost like twins, when back from school, they were together all the time. The little boy was friends with both his brother and sister but used his little sister almost as his fail safe for all the naughty things he did. He figured that if she was by his side, he got into a lot less trouble. It would be many years later that she found out that the kids were using each other in more than one way. The girl disliked milk intensely and the boy loved it, more often than not; especially when she was not watching, food and drink meant for the little girl would be passed on to the boy, who for some price, negotiated between them, would consume it and the mother would not know.

One day the little boy returned but the rickshaw that brought back the older boy came back without him. She did not know what to do, luckily the husband was home, paying taxes or something. He called for another rickshaw and rushed towards the school, a million thoughts rushing through his head. What ifs and buts and so on. Well before he reached the school, he saw the regular rickshaw guy, with his precious boy coming back towards their home. A silly mix up, once the rickshaw driver realized his mistake, he rushed back to school to pick him up. This, however was enough for both of the adults. They moved the older boy to St. Josephs, a school near enough for her to go and pick him up. The little boy threw a tantrum like none before and also was accepted into nursery in the same school.

The kids were getting bigger, life was settling into a great rhythm, slow and comfortable. The vegetables were growing under their watchful eyes. The peacocks were an added bonus. There were frogs and snakes a little too much maybe, but once again they felt like this was closer to their childhood in Kerala.

Just over a year after they moved into their own house, he was allotted government accommodation. There was no question of not accepting the housing, once refused, he would not be offered again in the future. And so, they packed their bags once again and moved to Khyber Pass. Almost as far from his workplace as their own house, this too was a laid back, large residence with some land to call their own. The journey from Faridabad with their luggage was more difficult because now they had also accumulated furniture and other bibs and bobs.

Three months, just as they were settling in again, they got another accommodation, this time in South Delhi. A first floor, two-bedroom flat, fairly spacious, a terrace of their own, no

dirt to plant but too good a location to pass up. One more shifting. A new school for the boys, the girl was still just three, thankfully too young to go to school. The boys were admitted to Kerala School, the older one in grade three (they figured he was too advanced for grade two) and the little one in Nursery.

There were school buses with proper teachers and this let them make friends with other students and parents from their homeland.

The little girl would get sick every time she boarded a moving vehicle. The only schools that were a walk away were not suitable. They waited for her to get a little bigger and for them to narrow down more schools. Kerala school was a full day school, it was difficult enough for the little boy, it would have been impossible for the little girl.

The little one was almost four and half when the husband finally decided on the school. There was a convent school, not very far from home with a school bus that came right where they lived. He was told that admissions were very difficult and it was a long shot. He went anyway to meet with the principal at the school. These days he was sporting a rather longish beard and looked fairly radical. The principal met him and explained that the little one had missed half a year of school anyway. He assured her that she could cope and anyway over the summer break they would bring her up to speed. The principal, a patient, kindly nun, asked to meet the child. Whilst he was trying to figure out when, the principal turned to him and told him to pay the fees and admit the child. When people asked how he had managed to get the admission, he really had nothing to say, all he had done was to have gone and met with the principal. Many years later the little girl would tease her father saying it was the unconventional beard that had sealed the deal.

Another year passed by, it was five years since they had come back from Nepal and seven since they had travelled to Kerala. The little baby was five, they decided to brave it, they booked their tickets and left Delhi during the school summer break in May.

The journey which lasted two days to reach Chennai was memorable for all the wrong reasons. They had a little coupe all to themselves. The little girl threw up all the way from Delhi to Chennai. She was at her wits end, there was little to do, her husband managed the boys while she did as best as she could with the little one. A journey they both had done so many times before seemed to stretch on forever and seemed to be so much more difficult than either of them remembered it to be. Once in Chennai they met the husbands' older brother and changed trains to their village. On his insistence, they went straight to his house. He was not going to allow her family to behave badly with his kids.

The kids could not believe their luck, this was stuff dreams are made of. There was land to run around in, a river and ponds to swim in and if all else failed to keep them occupied, a hill to climb and a waterfall to bathe under. It was magical, the boys immediately went wild. After the journey, she kept the little girl close to her. She was anyway itching to go back to her house but the boys made it very clear that they would prefer to stay here, in this piece of Eden. The little girl was torn, go with mom or stay and have fun with the boys. In the end they all went, to her house. Nothing like the house they came from, the boys and the father left a teary-eyed little girl behind with her mother, not before she extracted a promise from her father to come back and rescue her.

In a couple of days, he did. The little girl would be looked after by his sister and others, she did not have to worry. Holding her by hand they walked back to the promise of raw and

ripe mangoes, of jamuns and many other exciting fruits and berries that her cousin had promised her.

Returning to Delhi, the kids were forever changed. Outsiders in the little colony they lived in, growing up to the taunts of “Madrasī”, they would always be a little different, sure as they were that their heritage was, unlike most of their neighbors, not restricted to the two-bedroom house they lived in. The land and the houses they had and their extended family that welcomed them with open arms would always be a part of their collective psyche and help them deal with the North Indian bullies they met.

Hearth: 1975-1984

The next nine years went in a haze of school, events, birthdays, the humdrum of ordinary everyday life. The boys grew up and the girl too. The younger boy taught the little girl and she was little; to stand up for herself. She was ballsy, small, very confident and had a mouth and a tongue that was far ahead of her age. The square or block where their house was full of boys, most of whom wanted to be her protector. Early on, she learnt that valor was not just in standing up for yourself but also in asking for help from those willing to offer. The oldest was studious, ahead of his age and did well for himself. He was often pitted against the younger two. The middle child, like middle children everywhere was the peace keeper. Naturally inclined towards pushing the envelope, he was more often in trouble than he wanted to be but he was great friends with both his siblings. The older and the youngest did not get along too well, she irritated him and he patronized her.



Three years later they managed to get a ground floor house allotted in the same square, this meant they had their little garden to plant and harvest from. It came with a mulberry bush and a guava tree already in it, the rest was theirs to do as they pleased. In the subsequent fourteen years they lived there it never once occurred to them to cut down the trees to make more space, they just created a garden around what was already planted.

Most days, the mother's role was to just manage. Manage to pack and send the kids to school. Get the cooking and cleaning done, lie down for a short nap, catch up on the newspapers and then wait for the kids to come home. All the in between things also happened, a kid who fell asleep on the bus, someone who got bitten by a dog and then had

to be taken for the fourteen painful rabies injections, chickenpox for the whole family, jaundice for the boys, life in short.

Suddenly she found her health had begun to bother her. A nurse by tracing the symptoms clearly pointed to elevated blood pressures. It was checked and confirmed. The medication, covered by her husband's Central Government hospitals, were very strong and very sedative in nature. The weight she had gained in the two consecutive pregnancies was still strongly attached to her frame. She just had not found the time to shed the few or not so few extra pounds.

And so, she took the pills, slept a little bit more, was quiet and managed as best as she could. The modern appliances had begun to be available and she managed to get them all one by one. The food processor known commonly as the mixie, the fridge, the TV and finally the washing machine all found their way into her home. She hired temporary maids to help with the dishes and the clothes. The kitchen was sacrosanct, her domain. Here she would have no other. She was good in the kitchen and she kept learning. She got herself a small oven and learnt how to make basic sponge cakes. In her rather small fridge, she would set ice cream and jellies. During the festivals she would make sweet and savoury tidbits. The routine was a big breakfast for the men, the little girl almost hated food so cooking breakfast for her was not in the equation. All through the fourteen years of school, the girl would take mini poories and fried potato slices, the only food she claimed she would eat and so for fourteen years, every school day would begin with her getting up at 5:30 am and cooking this small lunch for her girl. The only thing the girl would have before leaving for school was a glass of milk, an item she tried very hard to fight over but it was battle that the parents won. A small lunch for

herself and the girl when she returned from school and then a big cookout for tea and snacks before settling for a simple full family dinner.

The kids grew bigger and started being more independent. Though they always seemed to be fighting there was also obvious friendship there, the middle boy was the peace keeper designate. She started setting chores for them to do, first because she wanted them to learn and later increasingly because she was getting more and more unwell. The younger boy would do most of the chores, his and those of his siblings, he found their bickering over whose turn it was just not worth the effort.

They got themselves a dog, a mix between a Pomeranian and a mutt, a strong-willed delightful dog they named Terry. Although the two younger ones had sworn, they would look after the dog, it was just one more thing for her to do, another kid in the house as willful as the other three. She also had a cat she named Koru. A really cute small thing and the dog and cat got along well together.

Life was once again at a pace that was manageable, birthdays, holidays, school, small and sometimes bigger sicknesses, the days just went by. Four years after the last trip to Kerala, they went again. She was prepared to deal with the little girls travel sickness but the girl was all right and managed the journey without too much trouble. It was long trip almost a month and a half. This time they spent time at both places, her house and his. The kids made no bones about which one they preferred. The little girl was happy in both the places. She had uncles who doted on her and every whim of hers was not too trivial. Her mother's brother would keep commenting on how much she looked like her mother, a comparison that made no impact on her. These were really special days. The girl went to school, the village school

her parents had studied in and which her cousins now attended. It was a far cry from her prim and proper convent school in the other end of the country but she liked what she saw and had many questions for her parents. The waterfall was full and the so were the ponds and the river. Tiny crabs in the paddy fields, birds everywhere, berries, some the kids had never seen before, it was an amazing experience for the kids. They made a trip to Guruvayoor with the kids, a trip that was to be made at the wedding now happening almost fourteen years later. Strangely enough the kids fell sick and really disliked the trip, although unaware of the full history they were beginning to feel that there was some story about their parents, some past that their relatives were all keeping from them. The kids were the happiest at their dad's old house or then at their mother's older brother's house. Other relatives the boys flatly refused to visit. The not so little girl would tag along reluctantly but invariably say or do something to scandalize her mother. One time, some old woman, a relative no doubt commented on the girl's hair, specifically its length or the lack of it, before the girl caught the warning look her mother flashed, the girl, with no hesitation shot back "my head, my hair". The mother did not know how to deal with this miniature version of herself, she was one used to silence and it was as if her daughter was born to talk, spit out whatever was on her mind, fear was not part of her lexicon and she really did not seem to care who was at the receiving end. The boys were much quieter or at least knew how to hold it in more, the mother despaired for her daughter but knew that there was little she could do.



The babies had grown up through the toddler years and were now firmly in the teenage era. There was western music at home, the boys had begun to stay out more and the girl had a large group of friends who came over often or she went over to their places. Their group of friends was

growing and the additions were all through the kids. They still met up with their friends from before marriage and quaintly that segment of friends was called “family friends” and the newer group were the childhood or school friends’ category. It was good keeping in touch with old friends. The only family she had was a cousin twice removed who had slightly older children but who stayed in touch all through the years they stayed in Delhi.

The horribly hot summers followed by the all too brief rain and then the cold winters all seemed to come and go year after year. Life revolved around the kids, their birthdays, the festivals, school, school events, illness, and celebrations. Living in Delhi also meant being at the forefront of the political changes. They lived through the emergency years, the sadism of the people in power, maids and help disappeared one day when the slums and the dwellers were forcibly evicted. The national outrage was felt all too clearly in their little colony. Close enough to the center of Delhi the big wigs would come calling, literally house to house. She went to hear some of them address rallies in the neighborhood and would later lament on how the politicians of the seventies were so different from the crop that came in the last couple of decades of the millennia. The government was toppled, faith in democracy restored but the lines at the ration shop did not really change. Scarcity was the norm not the exception. They were entitled to a certain amount of Atta, rice, sugar and oil at subsidized rates. The owner of the ration shop used to run a private store selling the same items at much higher rates and yet there were no complaints. Milk, before the introduction of the Mother Dairy kiosks was also a nightmare. Come summer and the milk supply would be slashed. Since she was convinced that the kids had to have milk, it meant queueing up before dawn with the glass bottles. Power cuts, mosquito menace, all the illness associated with the short but miserable rainy season, this all was the pattern that made life interesting.

1980 and she had enough of her medicines, all they did was sedate her and had started affecting her memory. She was already using homeopathy as an alternate medicine for her kids. When the oldest was told he needed to have his tonsils removed, she quietly went ahead and put him on a homeopathy course which cured his problem. The younger too were treated by the same doctor but they showed lesser responsiveness than the oldest. She wanted to give up the allopathic medicines but the homeopath told her that her blood pressure levels were too elevated and unless they were brought under control it was not advisable to stop that medication. In her search, she found a naturopath, an old man who lived near their house. He bluntly told her that her single biggest problem was her weight and that every other issue stemmed from that. He put her on what was a draconian diet. She started her morning with the juice of a white pumpkin, not flavored and not cooked. The days' intake was restricted to a minimum number of rotis and boiled vegetables. Such was her determination to be independent of the medicines, she kept up with the diet for almost two years, the time it took her weight to come down to an acceptable level. She tried to convince her girl to take some of the juice as well since more often than not the girl was sick. Like the many chawanprash supplements, the girl very quickly rebelled and no bribes would make her swallow the pale white liquid her mother had every morning. At the end of the two-year regime, she still was on the medicines but felt much better, she had also started finding time to go for morning or evening walks with her husband, the dog was a great reason and it helped and her husband stay in better shape than they had been for a very long time.

1983, the oldest one finished his high school, sure he would clear the IIT, it was rude shock when neither his grades were great nor did he make it to IIT. The next one year, she saw him work day and night, preparing with a single-mindedness he had not shown before. He was

also enrolled in a BSc Mathematics program in the university but that was really just to have something to fall back on. His friends, more than a dozen, were also enrolled at various colleges around town and they would visit often. Having seen them all from their early teenage years, she would cook for them and almost every day there would be more than just the family for the meals.

A year later, the boy cleared the IIT entrance and the first of her brood was ready to fly the coop. On advice from his dad, the boy who wanted to pursue pure sciences, enrolled for civil engineering in far off Kharagpur. It was momentous, he was eighteen, two years older than she had been when she left home, but she was so much more apprehensive about him going away. He refused to allow anyone to accompany him, adamant that he would do the journey alone, she acquiesced and watched as her first born left the house.

It was a momentous year, in October 1984, Indira Gandhi was assassinated. The death took place at a hospital very close to where they lived. The kids were in school and the news was not yet really public. By afternoon the kids and the husband were home and then they stood and watch the city burn. Looting and rioting in the streets of their peaceful colony, mobs which obviously had been paid to incite trouble. A man who rushed into the square, taken into one of the houses and the mob made to disperse. Neighbors who reached out to their Sikh brethren and kept the madness at the borders of their square. When the smoke stopped and they stepped out, the few shops owned by Sikhs in their little neighborhood market had been ransacked and burnt. The sense of collective shame, she did not know what to tell her wide eyed kids who were watching with horror and discussing the events as they unfolded. There was a month-long holiday from school, a free pass effectively. When the

daughter returned to school, the school was involved in rehabilitation work. She came home with grisly stories and questions on what made people behave the way they did.

Once the dialogue began, she would chat with her daughter at tea time, a busy young girl with a million commitments, they still made time for one another. A ritual that she had shared with her grandmother, now restarted with her daughter. She figured that if the girl was asking questions about the riots and the unpredictability of the human race, she was definitely old enough to hear about her life. She also wanted to give her daughter the chances and choices that had been denied to her. All through the years, her husband and she had put in a little bit more into the girl, knowing that growing up in a male dominant North Indian society, going to a school which basically considered good housewives as their successes, if they wanted her to be independent, they had to invest more. And so, the tea time tales began. She would tell some, the girl would probe, ask her dad who refused to be drawn into the conversation and then draw her own conclusions.

It was a brilliant time, tasty snacks, tea and tales.

The Final Weaning: 1985-1991

The oldest had already been away for a year, the hostel life had tamed him somewhat. He returned for his summer break and the friends, a lot of them studying in Delhi dropped by to meet. They celebrated his birthday with a party which had her cooking for hours. Her girl, now fifteen, totally useless in the kitchen helped out as best as she knew how.

They decided to take one more trip together as a family. They went to Bombay, stayed in



Tony Fort area, a guesthouse of someone who knew her husband, then took the bus to Goa where they stayed with his nephew and then took a coastal trip down through Mangalore to Kerala. In Kerala apart from their

usual visits to the family they also went down all the way to Kanyakumari. Her first trip, in her words she had now seen the whole length of India, from the top till the tip. It was good for the family to hang out together like this, she could already sense that this might well be the last time they travelled together.

In 1986, the younger boy got accepted into the Institute of Hotel Management at Chennai. And the second one flew from the nest. Like the older one he refused to have any one accompany him to Chennai. Learning from his older brother's experience, he was both better packed and better prepared.

And then there was one...

She and her daughter, over the next two years they would bond like never before. The girl was initially quite annoyed with the attention. She had hidden behind her brothers and their independence to stay out of the house. Now an only child at home, she was straining at the leash with restrictions that seemed to increase every day. Luckily there was a phone at home so the girl could call and let her mother know but that was how far she was willing to go towards surrendering her independence.

The tea time ritual was still there, on good days they had a great time, on a day when they had finished sparring over some or the other trivial issue, not so great. She was also using the time to tell her daughter about men and boys and what they wanted from a woman. The girl raised among boys, educated in a girls' school, always more at ease in jeans, with little interest in the baubles of teenage girls, would just get annoyed at this line of talk. Her mother tried to tell her of all the years she had worked and the kind of male attention she had to put up with and deal with but to no avail. Nothing she told her girl seemed to make any difference to her.

Her daughter and husband shared a special relationship, he stood by all her small and big run-ins at school and with authorities. In his words some people could learn from the mistakes of others but their girl would learn only from making her own mistakes. He would go every time they called from the school, when they would ban her from competitions, when they would felicitate her for her many awards, state and national and when they just wanted to complain.

That summer she brought her niece, her brother's daughter to Delhi for the summer. Both the girls had finished their 10th Grade examinations and it seemed like a good time to have her spend some time. The niece was everything the daughter was not, pliant, responsive, polite, grew her hair, all things she would have liked her daughter to be. As it turned out, the cousins got along well together without an iota of influence visible to anyone from either side.

And then she also lost the battle of the tresses she had been waging with her daughter. She wanted her daughter to grow her hair, over the years, she had grayed and her hair had thinned out but her daughter had the same thick locks that she used to have. Unlike her, though the daughter was happiest with her head shorn, she hated having it oiled or combed or in fact touched in any way. Through all the years of growing up the husband had managed to find some sort of half way and helped facilitate an acceptable length. Once when



the younger boy was visiting, he heard his sister sparring once more about a haircut, threatening to shave it all off the minute she turned eighteen, He had had enough, he told his sister to go and get the haircut she wanted and that he would handle the aftermath. There was none. The girl could not believe that it was easier to force the issue than to drag it on endlessly through talk and debate.

Two years later, the girl finished high school and insisted on going on a holiday to Calcutta and possibly to visit her brother at IIT. She really did not want to let go and so she suggested that the girl try and get tickets in the Rajdhani Express, sure that the girl would not get a reservation. The girl managed to get a seat and then there was no way she was not going, she was all of eighteen, two years older than she had been when she left home, a fact her daughter was quick to point out. The daughter went for her holiday alone, first stopping in Calcutta at her cousins' house and then meeting her older brother while he wrapped up his years at the IIT. They returned together, he to join a firm in Delhi and she to join college for a B.Sc. in Physics.

It was strange to have her first born back at home, working no less, earning a salary, not a big one but a salary nonetheless. He bought himself a bike and other things he desired. It was good to be earning a salary while living at home.

The following year the younger boy returned and the girl left for college in Pune. Unlike the boys, she insisted that her husband accompany their daughter at least when she went to pay for her admissions and finalize the hostel. However, the trip away from home to college, in true tradition established by the oldest, the daughter did alone. The third baby had flown away. It did not seem so empty though because the boys were both back at home and working in Delhi. Their hours were erratic but she was happy to have this; what she considered her bonus time with the boys.

Her older brother came to Delhi with his wife. Almost forty years after he had dropped her off at the hostel in Madras, he came to spend time with her in Delhi. The boys were living with them but they had their own lives really. Her husband and she showed the sights of Delhi

to her brother. They visited Agra and spent quality time together. They even booked tickets for them and sent them to Rishikesh and Haridwar. The family was really happy to make this trip.

Their time in Delhi was fast coming to an end. Over the last few years, her health had begun to deteriorate further. She was finding spending time in the Delhi winters very difficult and had started traveling alone to be in Kerala for most of the winter months. She would go and stay with her brother and bemoan the loss of the family home. Her husband and she had decided to return to Kerala once he retired, an event now only a few years away. The family was skeptical, not convinced that anyone could make the journey back after such a long time away from the rustic life that was Kerala. She treated these short trips as a preparation for their return. They would have to build a house and she was not sure where they should be building. In the meantime, she went back every year and her kids moved further away from her.

Her daughter did one trip to Kerala alone, with some school friends of hers. This was the only child who showed any interest in coming to visit. By all accounts, her daughter and her two girl friends had a blast. The family, both hers and her husbands, went out of their way to make the trip memorable.

And then it was 1991. Her husband was turning 58 according to the official records. He would retire and then they could move on with the next phase of their lives.

The two older ones were already independent, the youngest in her final year of studies. A school friend of the oldest was also soon to be homeless his parents were too retiring and moving to Chennai. The boys, her two and the friend decided to home together. This was the

most exciting phase of her life. Now two decades after they returned to Delhi, it was time to move again.

Her husband got an extension posting in Bangalore. Unexpected but very welcome. She had not stayed in Karnataka during her early days, and now the opportunity was being presented.

They figured it made sense to make the trip back to Kerala in two parts. The first one to Bangalore and then to Kerala, using the two years in Bangalore to build a house in Kerala. She was still smarting over the fact that the Tharavad had been sold off, she had told her siblings many times that she would return to live in the old house but no one had believed her. She had been away from Kerala now for over forty years. It was a long time.

So they moved out. She left the household items behind in Delhi for the boys. They seemed unwilling to hold on to jobs or to find accommodation suitable to their incomes. She had done all she could. They could swim or they could sink, the choice was theirs.

Almost twenty-five years after their marriage they would live in a house, alone, just the two of them. It was as if they would finally have a chance to play house without the babies or the kids or all the things that went with that territory. They both looked forward to the arrangement.

They called for a container, a railway container, loaded the remainder of the goods that they were not going to leave behind, which included the furniture they had accumulated over the years and a lot of odds and ends and left the shores of Delhi, homeward bound.

Home

OLD FRIENDS, OLD FRIENDS SAT ON THEIR PARK BENCH LIKE BOOKENDS
A NEWSPAPER BLOWIN' THROUGH THE GRASS
FALLS ON THE ROUND TOES OF THE HIGH SHOES OF THE OLD FRIENDS
OLD FRIENDS, WINTER COMPANIONS, THE OLD MEN
LOST IN THEIR OVERCOATS, WAITING FOR THE SUN
THE SOUNDS OF THE CITY SIFTING THROUGH TREES
SETTLES LIKE DUST ON THE SHOULDERS OF THE OLD FRIENDS
CAN YOU IMAGINE US YEARS FROM TODAY, SHARING A PARK BENCH
QUIETLY
HOW TERRIBLY STRANGE TO BE SEVENTY
OLD FRIENDS, MEMORY BRUSHES THE SAME YEARS, SILENTLY SHARING
THE SAME FEARS

Old Friends- Simon and Garfunkel

Homeward Bound: 1991-1994

The posting was good, a great accommodation, great perks and Bangalore was a lovely city to start the next chapter of their life together.

It felt strange at first, just the two of them, both of them almost sixty. If she measured her life in blocks of twenty years, she had had her childhood, her travel and early years of marriage, the settled life in Delhi and now this, her time, once again for herself. She wanted a house to call her own, to go back to doing things that did not have to take her anywhere; she had seen the world and lived a life that was full and now she wanted quiet and time to call her own.

They travelled together when he went out on his trips to the coffee country around Bangalore. He liked his job and she enjoyed the carefree life. The kids were all right, they came to Bangalore to visit, sometimes separately sometimes together. The youngest had also finished her studies but chose to go to Delhi instead of coming to Bangalore. She had some sort of a job; the boys were also doing all right. She did not ask too many questions, the lifestyle of her kids bothered her; they obviously were partying and living a life that she would not approve of. Her ability to not ask questions was good for them and for her.

They did show up periodically in Bangalore. The oldest came when the alcohol and bad street food got him a bad bout of Typhoid. The middle one when he wanted a break from the business he was doing. The youngest, flew down when she broke her leg. The details were sketchy, her husband crazy with worry. The kid was all right, it would just take six weeks for the leg to heal. How strange that although all of them had moved out when they were eighteen, they still treated this as the base to which they kept coming back. The girl had the

chance of getting a job in Bangalore that she refused. She wanted the comfort of the base not the restrictions that came with living at home.



Her family from Kerala came to visit her in Bangalore. Her brother and his family spent time with them. Her niece, now married and a mother of a young child came with her husband. She enjoyed the visits. After always having someone or the other over in Delhi, her kids' friends used to treat the house as their own, it had been a little difficult getting adjusted to being just the two of them. A childhood friend of her daughters', now based in the US, actually

wrote about how much a part of her life, the house in Delhi had been, she said that knowing it was no longer there made her move to the US seem more final.

When she looked at the life of her kids and thought back to her life, it made her wonder if the things that drove her were missing in their lives. The boys were working, not very seriously but they were managing. The daughter had a job too having decided against studying further and also had found a part time job at All India Radio, the one thing she was really proud of.

It took time to learn to take time for herself. She had gone from being a school girl to a trainee nurse to a career woman to a full-time mother, there had been no breaks, and now she had to learn to be happy doing nothing, to put herself ahead of the world. It was the start

of a wonderful time. After decades in Delhi, the weather in Bangalore was a welcome relief. A quiet, very green city, their house was close to the city center and her husband had been provided with a car. The morning walks they had started in Delhi were so much of a pleasure in Bangalore. The city had these amazing flowering trees and almost every month, the city was awash in another color, purple from the jacarandas, or red from the gulmohars or the odd yellow or pale pinks and all around the enormous canopies of the raintrees. It was a really important step in their transition from Delhi to Kerala, it helped her to come to grips with what life was like without the kids.

They started to look at where to build their retirement home. They had land both in her part of the village and his part. It may have been easier to build on his land parcel but she wanted to spend the rest of her days in “her” house. She was almost sixty. The kids were likely to marry and settle in Delhi or somewhere, not Kerala, she wanted to finally be the matriarch her grandmother had groomed her to be. The less than one acre that she owned was enough, they needed to have at least three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a nice large kitchen and some sort of a dining and living space.

The biggest problem was the access; there was a path to the property, no proper road. The husbands’ property was more appropriate even if it meant not retiring to a house built on her land. There was an old house on her husbands’ property, unfinished but big, that too was offered and the offer declined. She knew exactly what she wanted and she was going to get it. This, after the first house they built in Faridabad would be the only house for them to call their own and they wanted to do it right.

The place was finalized, her land. It was a plot just below where the old house had stood. The old temple pond would be in their front yard and behind the house would be the old abandoned temple, the one that Tipu Sultan and his troops were supposed to have visited.

She still did not believe that the old house had not been given to her. They had partitioned it in a way that two sisters (whose needs were greater than hers) got it. One of them immediately sold her portion of the house which was then torn down by the buyers and the other portion her younger sister continued to live in with little modifications.

Living in Bangalore they started the process. Their first born, with his strong desire to not work anyway, was a willing participant in the design process. In 1993, her husband retired for good this time and they headed back to the place it had all begun.

They decided on a Laurie Baker styled house, it made sense to them both aesthetically and financially. They reached out to COSTFORD the organization which had been set up by Laurie Baker for this very purpose. The team visited the site and they agreed upon the actual location, behind the pond. It would mean that some of the arecanut trees would have to be cut but nothing more than that. The husband kept the house in Bangalore for a further three months and they moved in with her brother while they tried to figure out the details. They rented out a small house not far from the river and once again moved from Bangalore to Kerala.

The house building budget was set at Rupees Five Lakhs, it was a big drain on their savings but their kids were all done with their studies and they had the money. It was a go. A brick house built with the characteristic “rat –trap bonds”, arches in the balcony and a thin cement

roof topped with Mangalore tiles. Three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen and dining and living room space, the design was drawn.

The oldest came to be a part of the project. Her husband who had already built a house before was an active participant, her contribution limited to making sure that she got the bedrooms, bathrooms and her kitchen.

It took about a year to complete and had red oxide flooring. It was over budget and left them more stressed for money than they had planned to be. Having no road access was the single biggest reason it became so expensive, they had to hire labor to carry most of the material to the site. They saw it taking shape before their eyes, the husband was at the site every day and her brothers' son helped out a lot as well, she went as often as she could. Once



finished, it was everything they had wanted it to be, rustic yet with all the modern amenities,

in tune with the natural environment, a red brick house whose front verandah looked out into the pond she had bathed in as a child. The nearest she could get to having her old house back.

Moving back to Kerala was more difficult than she had ever imagined it to be. Even basics like Atta were not really available. Having lived an urban life for the past four and something decades, returning to the little village with its small grocery stores and the under stocked chemists was quite shocking. They would have to travel up to the nearest big town periodically to buy the essentials.

The oldest boy returned back to Delhi to join a company. The younger one was traveling and doing something with computers and seemed to be doing all right. The youngest had dabbled a bit at some business venture and had now joined a well-known company in their software division. A more typical settled retired life seemed to be beckoning.

In late 1993, they got a call from a boy, a friend of the oldest, telling them that he would like to marry their girl. It took her by surprise, she spoke with her daughter and tried to tell her to wait. Almost immediately after wards, her oldest called to tell them that he was going to marry their daughter's ex-roommate and friend from college. The girls were just 24 and the boys 28. They gave their blessings and then waited to find out what more had been planned. The girl's marriage was planned around spring and the boy would marry in the autumn.

They moved into their house and then left for Delhi to be a part of the first wedding. A marriage conducted in the Guruvayoor Temple in Delhi, a simple enough ceremony. She tried telling her daughter that there was no need to rush, that it was all right to wait but like with everything else she was in a hurry.

One down, two to go. The boy was getting married to a girl from Andhra. Whilst in Delhi to get her daughter married, the girl's father came to meet them formally. Her husband was out of town. He waited rather impatiently until she finally asked what he wanted to talk about. He hemmed and hawed and indicated he was more comfortable speaking to her husband. Annoyed, irritated, she snapped that she was the head of the household where they came from and he could just as easily speak with her as with her husband. Taken aback, the poor gentleman, flustered, said it was just the protocol for the girl's side to formally meet with the groom's family.

It all worked out well in the end. Her only condition was that she and the family would not accept any gifts at the time of the wedding. Whatever they managed to get the groom to accept was between them and their future son-in-law but the rest of the family was to be left alone. The norm was to gift rather expensive gifts to the groom's immediate family and she



was adamant not to be part of the perpetuation of any such custom.



The wedding was quite a rather long and fancy affair. Since all they had to do was invite guests and show up, they were not too put out.

Both she and her husband had turned sixty, two of their three kids were married. They had built their retirement home with their own funds. Life could not have been more settled even if they tried.

Returning to Kerala after the trips to Delhi for the weddings, they took a break. A lady from the village who worked at her brother's house agreed to work with them part time. The power situation was nothing like what they were used to. Getting a gas connection was also really difficult. Most of the village kitchens were still using wood fire. There was kerosene as well but LPG was hardly the norm. Her husband worked at it and managed to get it organized. The next big struggle was to get a phone connection. Again not exactly easy in a town where there was one exchange. The fact that the husband was entitled to these very basic perks given his position and tenure with the government was fairly useless. They got a phone when they got it; that just was just how it was. Television, was probably what took them the longest to sort out. Initially they got a gigantic satellite dish and installed it at the end of the pond, normal antenna's, cable connections etc. were a long way off in the future of that little village they now called home.

The sisters all came to visit, all except the one whose husband had sent her that letter all those years ago. The daughters of that sister did reach out to her though. She also reconnected with the family of her younger brother. The ever-questioning boy, the live wire, the one who had joined the navy as a seaman and had died very young. The brothers' wife had raised her two kids alone with a job with the coffee board, the last employer of her husband and a lot of help from her mother but had stayed away from the rest of the family. In the years that she had been returning to Kerala, she had sought out the family and mended the broken bridges and had come to know her sister-in-law and her kids quite well. In this, her taking over the matriarch mantle, she wanted to do right by all. They all came for her son's marriage in Delhi.

Her older brothers' health had begun to fail a little. He was barely two years older and it made her sad to see him suffer so. He would come by the house often. She had been back in Kerala now for over a year full time but the last decade had seen them repair their childhood relationship. They, who had walked to school together for eleven years, all through primary till high school, had then lived separate lives. They picked up the threads as if the intervening decades just did not matter. And now he was beginning to fade and the family was not sure why.

The daughter-in-law had a job that was sending her to the US. The daughter seemed to be itching to do something on her own again, the comfort of a job was apparently not enough for her. She started a venture on her own. A software consultancy, she mortgaged their house in Faridabad and with the loan started something which seemed to be doing well. She thought of her Muthassi and her wheeling and dealing, it seemed that her daughter had inherited the business gene and obviously had a hankering to be not beholden to any employer.

She was happy to see the girls creating a career for themselves. She had been worried that her daughter and daughter-in-law might get married and then quit working very like she had the only difference had been that unlike them she had married late and had started to work very early on in life.

Her oldest called her one day to tell her that they were expecting their first child. His wife was still in the US and she had found out after she reached the US. There was nothing much to do. She would return after three months and they would deal with all the finer points once she returned.

Just like that she was going to be a grandmother. It filled her with joy, the thought of having a baby in the family was a welcome idea. They had been having her nieces' infant son over very often but this would be different or so she thought. They were excited.

A granddaughter, born in December, unexpectedly looking a little like what her daughter had looked like. What a beautiful gift. She did not feel good enough to travel to Delhi so her daughter-in-law brought the baby and herself exactly one month after the baby was born. She would be called nannamma, the word for Muthassi in Telugu.

On the home front, her husband had just lost a bundle on his first and hopefully last farming experiment. Having lived away from the land for so long, in hind sight it seemed only normal that he should lose rather than make money at farming. They laughed about it and agreed to let the real farmers do the farming. They had their arecanut, coconuts, mangos, black pepper and tamarind to deal with anyway. The pond needed fixing, it overflowed in the rains and access became that much more difficult, the house, now a couple of rains old needed repairs, family crises small and big, for retired people they were quite busy.



Good times and bad. Her brother passed away without too much suffering. She was devastated. She had just started a phase of her life where she was gathering her brood, her family together and her brother had gone and quit on her.



The next couple of years were relatively quiet. Her daughter seemed to be coping with her business venture, there was some talk of business losses but it seemed to be under control. The son and daughter-in-law were rearing the child, the daughter-in-law had quit working but seemed quite sure that she would return once the baby was a little older. All in

all it seemed quite all right. They visited Delhi and met up with their kids and spent time with their granddaughter.

In the village, things were beginning to get easier as well. They had figured out where to source most of the staples from, their vegetables would come from their land once in a while and what was not available, they just did without. Of all the things she would miss the most was sliced bread. The bread baked in the village was unbearably sweet.

Her husband was drawn into some sort of block development role, an almost para-government project that used his expertise in overseeing projects done at the Block level. It was good that he was kept busy, farming was obviously not his forte and after a lifetime of working, him sitting idle was driving her nuts.



In 1997, her daughter announced that she was leaving for the US, in search of business. She was thrilled because she really had wanted her daughter to travel just as she had all those years ago. There was some anxiety but there were very good friends of the daughter in the

US and she was not too worried. She knew that although somewhat absent minded, the daughter could take care of herself.

The trip was obviously successful, whatever business trouble the daughter was going through seemed to have been sorted. On her personal front though, all did not seem right. They waited to hear from her instead of bringing it up.

The family temple, which her brother had been looking after was slowly falling apart. This was more than she could bear. She wanted it restored to its old glory. This had been the place where the whole family had gotten together and if it had survived all these years, she could not let it go to ruins on her watch. She knew that she needed a man to do all the running around and she started working on her husband to take charge. The last thing he wanted to do in his retired life was to deal with her family. He had made peace with most of the people but some of them still managed to annoy him. He resisted but not for too long. He knew how important it was for her. He started looking into how to make the temple operational and the immediate way forward seemed like creating a town committee that would manage the place. This of course meant getting the family to agree to give up operational rights to the temple. She was all for it but decided to approach the issue on two fronts. One she needed some money to fix the temple and get a priest and get it to function and then look at management long term.

Her daughter planned to visit in the summer. She was working and living in the UK and this seemed like a good time to talk to her about the future of the temple. A routine blood test had shown that her husband had elevated sugars but he was adamant about not starting medication, strongly believing that he could control it by diet and exercise. She was looking

out for an ally. When her daughter called to speak with them, if the husband was at home, she hardly ever got a chance to chat alone with her daughter. They had two extensions but the husband kind of got the lion's share of the time. Very quickly the daughter learnt to call also when sure her dad was out so that it was possible to catch up with her mother.

The son of her husbands' brother had recently gotten married. She approved thoroughly of the new daughter-in-law and they quickly bonded. Even though they lived at her husbands' childhood home, they visited often and she enjoyed having them over. She took time to share stories and recipes and cups of tea, it was as if she had a daughter at home again.

The daughter visited, took her dad to task, made sure he would start medication for the diabetes, started of the work on the temple with some funds and then left for the UK again.

The end of 1998, the daughter was back, with a device to check their sugars and blood pressures. Just as well, because the daughter also told them about her decision to leave her husband. No details were needed. Her husband's only words of advice were that there was no need to keep on doing something just because you had already made a mistake. She had been expecting this for some time and her words to her daughter were to pick up the pieces and move on with life.

The daughter did and went off for six months to New Zealand. It still pleased her enormously to know that her daughter was also bitten by the travel bug and what she had done on trains and buses in the country she was doing on flights around the globe. Like her, a large part of her travels had been for work.

The daughter returned in the middle of the next year, finished with her marriage, and then went off to Israel. She enrolled for higher studies in the Tel Aviv University, something the daughter had been hankering to do. The oldest son was expecting his second child and his mother-in-law had recently passed away. She knew that she would have to go to Calcutta for the delivery to help out in any way she could.



Her second grandchild was born in October. A boy, adorable, amazing how the second one is so much easier. Both mother and child were doing well. Her daughter came to visit and also to engage with the older grandchild. She tried talking with her daughter, telling her that she should look at getting on with life, that one mistake should not put her off the idea of finding a life partner.

Back home in the village, the temple seemed to be taking shape and looked like it could function. Her husband had come up with this great idea of involving the townsfolk. For the first time in generations, someone other than the family would be involved in the day-to-day functioning of the temple. It was a simple yet brilliant idea, one whose time had obviously

come. Predictably there was loud and then even louder protests from the family. All those who objected to “foreigners” being involved in family business. She had one meeting and got them all to be quiet. The family would be represented but her decision was final, the most telling point was that the money was hers so they really had no say in it anyway. And so a committee was constituted and her husband took a management role and it was all set up.

It all began to take shape. She and her husband were living their dream retired life. Their half acre of land around the house with the coconuts, arecanuts, bananas, mangoes, rose-apples, pineapples and jackfruit, fish and turtles that swam in the pond, birds of all hues; it could not have been more idyllic even if they had tried to script it themselves.

The kids came calling, they travelled as well. A couple of years later, her daughter, just about to complete her Masters called to say she had decided to get married. She also was 31, the same age as her when she had gotten married. She hoped this one would work out better for her daughter. The man she was marrying was about as far removed from the caste as was possible, the trend she had started seemed to be continuing. Her sons intended to go for the wedding. There was no way they could get married in India so they promised to come home after the marriage.

And they did. A big foreigner, obviously wanting to be accepted and wanting to be a part. She and her husband received him with open arms. It was a big thing to have this “firang” dressed in a traditional mundu, walking down the village streets. Her daughter was happy and that made the two of them also happy.

She asked her daughter if she planned to come back to live in India. The marriage brought to mind the question that maybe she too would make the distant shores her home and how often she would end up seeing her.

The middle child was living in Delhi and doing well for himself. They decided to sell the house they had built so long ago in Faridabad. The kids were in their thirties and she and her husband were almost seventy. Her health had begun to act up again. They visited Kottakal to consult with P.K.Varrier, the head of the Kottakal Aryavaidyashala, he was gentle but firm. She could not give up the prescribed medicines, all that she could do was really supplement and maybe stem further deterioration.

Her oldest son was expecting again. The daughter-in-law had not returned to work after the second child and now it seemed that she, mirroring her life would not return to work.

The daughter and her husband were considering moving to India for some time and decided to come looking. The father-in-law also came with them and insisted on visiting Kerala. He spoke several languages, Hebrew, Russian, German, even a bit of French just no language that she or her husband spoke. One morning, all of them being early risers, the daughter came in to see them standing on either side of the dining table trying to speak with one another. He kept saying wasser-wasser and they, because they did not understand, were offering him chai, coffee, water even. Once the daughter stopped laughing she explained to her parents that wasser was water in German and all the old man wanted was a glass of water in the morning. With no language in common, just their kids, they got along well enough. She was amazed at this eighty-year-old man who was willing to come all the way to a land he had

never been to before, dealing with the strange foods, life and languages, just so he could meet with his in-laws.



In mid-2002, her daughter decided to return to India and they picked Bangalore to settle down in. Her oldest boy had his third child, a boy, a little angel, and she went for the delivery once again but the weather in Calcutta did not quite agree with her and they returned back to Kerala rather quickly.

Her daughter had barely settled in and she knew there was something wrong, she called her up and told her that they were both going to come to Bangalore. The daughter, also in tune with her mother knew that there must be something really wrong for her mother to show up in Bangalore at such short notice.

She came off the plane in a wheelchair. Her husband was worried sick, he had no idea what had happened. Over the next few weeks, his daughter and he would make numerous visits to specialists all over the town until they found a doctor they liked. An impeccably dressed lady, kind, comforting without being patronizing. She would be their doctor from then on. The diagnosis was quite simple. She had all her old problems and these had been causing her to have small strokes. Basically, parts of her brain were fried, a description given quite graphically by her daughter, as with all things scary in a manner that made her laugh before she had a chance to worry. Since no major part had been affected, she had been managing. Her small and big episodes were all explained by these minor strokes. Even more disturbing was that when her husband was checked up, a process he heartily tried to resist, it turned out

that he needed to have a by-pass surgery. They went back to Kerala to make sure their affairs were in order and then came back for the surgery. The younger son came down to Bangalore and after the surgery the older boy and his family came down too.

For the first time since 1958-59, she was really worried. The relationship she had with her husband was special and now after all the years that she had been sick, he was going in for surgery. The surgery and the recovery were both quite remarkable. They were back home a month later. What a year it had been! A new grandchild, knowledge that she had been having parts of her brain fried and then finally, a bypass surgery. Most of all her daughter was back and within hailing distance. They were going to be fine.

Frailty: 2003-2009

They went about life as before. Her husband did not know how to slow down and she did not know how to get him to slow down. There were some scary episodes but on the whole, it was life as usual. The bodies were aging faster than their minds were willing to accept and while she was more pragmatic, her husband simply could not come to terms with what was



expected of him. They had to visit Bangalore every six months for checkups but that just meant they would meet up with the family.

They began to rely even more on her husband's nephew and his wife. They became the kids they could call upon in an emergency. It was a great arrangement. She already had a wonderful relationship with the daughter-in-law and the nephew became their surrogate son. They had a little girl who was the grandchild they needed to have around.

Her daughter bought farm land in Bangalore, emphasizing that if they were to consider moving to Bangalore, at least it would not be to a flat or a house but to another house with its own patch of green. She laughed and told her daughter that after all those years she had no intention of living anywhere but in her own house. Unable to debate with her daughter she told her emphatically that she was determined to not just live in her house but die there too. The daughter let it pass. They would have this conversation another time.

They were both now 70, they had outlived all their relatives and were constantly amazed at their health and longevity, a conversation line that their kids did not like or welcome.

They had a “pat” or a “song” ceremony in the temple. An elaborate ritual, one she remembered from her childhood, one of the many things that had been discontinued and was now being revived. An elaborate image of Shiva as a hunter is painted on the temple floor. Only natural coloring agents are used, and only in powder form, turmeric for yellow, rice powder for the white, powdered leaves for the green and vermillion for the red and soot for black. Using the powders, an almost 3-D image is etched. An elaborate over 8 feet long image is crafted painstakingly. At the end of this process, once again ritualistically through a dance, the image is wiped and the mixed powders are distributed as an offering.



This and many other such events brought the temple to its former glory and helped bring the village together. A priest was appointed full time and the accounts were handled properly under her husband's eagle eye. The family would mutter and complain and she would shush them. They really had no business to talk.



She would talk, plead, cajole, attempt to coerce her younger son into considering marriage and be repeatedly rebuffed. She tried to convince her other kids to join her in her quest but they flatly refused. To each his own, they reminded her, had been her teaching to them, it was too late to change her tune now.

And the seasons came and went. Every year, life became a little easier, a little more predictable. They had a lady helping them at home. They paid for the lady's daughter's education and ensured they were giving back a little to the community that had given them so much. For all practical purposes her husband and she were the head of their respective household's and that meant that they were expected to be present at all the family events. Having spent so many decades away from a familial social set up, it was great to be included but it soon began to get tiresome. Neither she nor her husband were up to the demands being made on their time. They learnt to say no or at least to make sure they did only as much as was absolutely necessary.

Her daughter planned her house promising her that there would be a bedroom for them on the ground floor. Privacy and convenience were the design specification. It was turning



out to be a big project. Her husband, now two houses old had a lot to offer in terms of input but her daughter, carrier of her genes also had very few but very specific demands, one of them being a large kitchen, as it finally turned out, it was the biggest single

room in the house. The planning took over a year to complete. The construction another year.

They visited often and when it was done, they all went for the inauguration of the house. The farm was brown, a eucalyptus plantation, everything had been dug up and the new trees were still small. A red brick house that you could see from the village road, fruit and flower trees with lots of evergreens. In the sylvan conditions of Bangalore nothing stays brown for long and year after year they would see the trees grow tall and land blossom.

She had many arguments with her daughter about the sensibility of continuing to stay in Kerala. In one epic conversation she reiterated her desire to die in her own patch of heritage. Her daughter sidestepped this once again but asked her what she wanted done after death. Her mother's response was clear, she would prefer burial over cremation because she did not want trees to be cut just to return her remains to the earth. In the traditional cremation, mango trees are used as firewood and she was insistent that chopping down a mango tree would be criminal. She also insisted that there should be no ceremonies or rituals, she wanted it kept simple and basic and of course she wanted to die in her own house.

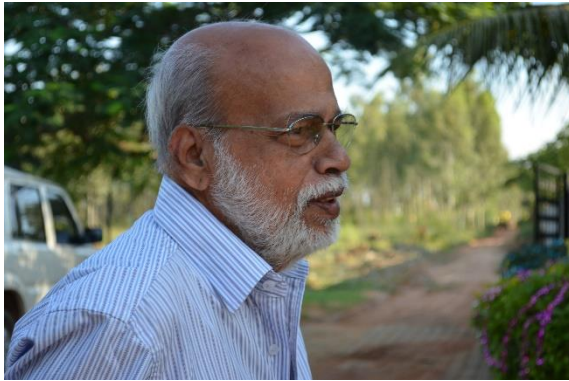


They were doing alright and so the kids left them alone, they all had full lives anyway. The oldest had become more radical in his views and decided that his kids were to be homeschooled. A decision she had her reservations on but apart from offering their viewpoint

on the matter, her husband and she decided to keep out of it. They spent some time with them in their house and they enjoyed the time they had with grandchildren.



There were health scares, hers and his, they went to Bangalore, got yelled at, all of them laughed about it and then life went on. It was agreed by all that this is who they were and this is how each one in the family chose to live, the others could disagree but do little more than that. The doctor who had treated her husband had become their single point for all their health complaints. She was having trouble with dizziness and was told that it could well be



the result of the many small strokes she had had in the past.

The younger boy was also living in Bangalore and had started a restaurant, a dream he had had for a long time.

Her daughter's mother-in-law came to visit, once alone and once with a friend. The father-in-law had passed away. Like with the previous visit, this too was a much anticipated and much enjoyed visit. With her too they had no common language and there were many comical moments but they were better prepared for these visits.

Others came too, friends, friends of their kids, now with kids of their own. The house was weathering well, the new trees had all grown and the walls of the pond had been fixed. The access to house, a decade on, was still a disgrace but a small vehicle could reach them and then over time it was drivable for most of the year except maybe during the heavy rains.

Over time the village too had changed, things were available more easily, they had installed a satellite dish the size of a flying saucer but now could manage with cable. Power, television, telephones were all kind of functional. There was emergency care available in the village and the local GP was a great guy to call on.

After what seemed like forever, one morning her daughter announced that she was going to have a baby and her joy knew no bounds. She had almost given up, like with her son, her daughter too had little patience when questioned but now she was finally having a child. They went and spent time with her in Bangalore and stayed at the farm. Now two years later, the brown was less visible and the trees were in bloom. They even had mango from the farm that year. In October 2007, her daughter gave birth to a baby boy. An adorable child who looked



every inch like his firang father. She touched honey rubbed with gold on his lips and held him

close while her daughter and the husbands looked on. Finally, a child who would call her Muthassi.



They celebrated all the traditional ceremonies, the one on the 28th day where her younger son whispered the child's name in his ear and the first meal six months later. This, they celebrated at the temple, the first real family function

she had held there since taking over the operation of the temple. The whole family, hers and her husband's participated. It was after many years that they were hosting anything like this and pretty much the first time they were hosting such an event in their house. She could not have been happier. Family, friends, colleagues, from far and near, traditional food, it was a wonderful event.

Three kids, four grand kids, numerous nieces and nephews and their children, an honorable measure, a life that counted well. In her house, on her land, she was in her element, she was all that her grandmother had wanted her to do and be all those many moons ago.



Her daughter came often with her little bundle and they would chat and banter and argue as they always had. The other grandkids also visited often and her sons dropped by often; she kept asking her younger son to marry but he continued to ignore her. In all fairness she could not ask for more.



The summer of 2009, now almost 75 years old, marveling at her own longevity, she knew something was amiss once again. She and her husband went to Bangalore, ostensibly for their regular checkup. She stumbled in the bathroom and seemed a little disoriented. Her daughter was at home. She was taken to the clinic and assessed by their regular doctor. It turned out that she was undergoing a stroke, somewhat more serious than the previous ones. There was little to do in the hospital, she was in control enough to insist that she wanted to return home and so they took her back. The effect, permanent this time, was a right-side paralysis. She refused to accept her condition. Her daughter, more practical, arranged for home care and aids like wheelchairs etc. Whatever foresight it was, her daughter had put in a ramp in the

house when it was built and it seemed to have its uses. All she could think of was when she



would go home. Since the treatment was only physiotherapy, that too was arranged. Tired about the daily bickering, the daughter finally agreed to send them home if they agreed to a full-time caregiver and if she could stand unaided and move her paralyzed right hand. Stubborn old woman that she was, she achieved her milestones in three months and with hired help left for Kerala after having rather reluctantly having stayed back for celebrating her seventy-fifth

birthday at her daughter's house. The doctors, hers included, had really not expected any improvement given her age and that her gait had already been unsteady; she, who had never done what others expected of her, surprised everyone with her improvement. All involved knew that the concessions she was making would hold only until she returned to her own fiefdom, once there, she would again do as she pleases. Exasperated but amused, her kids did not push too hard, as her son said, age did not change who the parent was.



The next couple of years were very difficult for her husband. She knew somewhere that she was being unreasonable but after having lived all her life on her terms she just could deal with the idea of giving up control. She would be helped to the kitchen and sit cooking on a high-stool or if unable at least direct from her vantage point. She still was part of all the temple decisions and of the everyday management of her house hold. She spoke with her kids very often and told them she was fine.

She found herself a young physiotherapist couple in the village. For someone who refused to be ordered around by almost anyone, she let the young doctor have her way. She liked her and liked processes and so she did what was asked of her. There was a significant improvement but she still could not move about unaided.



They had full time maids, they lasted for very short intervals. She was a very difficult patient, most of all because she refused to believe that she was a patient. Her physical body was affected but her faculties were fairly sharp and she could still terrorize the help. Three to six months was the average stay for the hired help. Most quit even faster. The only way they could now travel to Bangalore was by road, the flight was too complicated and the train was just not an option. The drive however was a long 8–10-hour drive and at the best of times a nightmare, with her and her limited mobility, it was really not easy. They still did the trip, the kids bullied her until she would agree to come at least once a year and then they would try and keep her in Bangalore for as long as possible.



On one of her annual visits to Bangalore, she had another stroke about a year and a half later and that cut down her mobility and independence even further. It did nothing to her desire to live alone or in her repeated phrase, to be allowed to die in her own home.

Her husband was getting tired. He was there for her every beck and call but it was beginning to take its toll. Managing often without live-in maids or any kind of help, he was being stretched to the limit. His last visit to the doctor in Bangalore had her tell him in no uncertain terms that he needed to take a break and that he could not make his life only about taking care of his wife. Very quietly he answered that she had done it for the last four decades, now it was his turn. In 2011, he had his first stroke, like her many previous ones, it was an ischemic one and left him with no permanent damages. What it did do however was force her to move more permanently to Bangalore. Her daughter told her that it was not about where she wanted to die but about where she wanted her father to live. Their kind physician



in Bangalore was also explicit in her message. He too was the same age and any more aggravation would mean that he would be in the same state as her. There was just no question after that, they had to make peace with Bangalore being their

home. However reluctantly she agreed, she did agree and the room with its own little terrace, the privacy and convenience specification in the design was finally being used.

The daughter had started practicing meditation and she introduced her parents to it as well. She liked the practice and her husband reluctantly joined in. Life began to find its own rhythm in Bangalore. They were largely left alone and it did not feel as if they were interfering with their daughters' life and she too tried to keep their life as simple as possible. For some time, it actually seemed to work. They could watch their grandson grow and be a part of the larger farm life. Their daughter had brought in cows and rabbits and ducks and there already were dogs and cats anyway. Every year they would watch more trees being planted and

vegetables being harvested. She really could not fault the place but for the fact that it was not her home.

They celebrated all the festivals, Onam and Vishu and Diwali and Dussera. Even the Jewish son-in-laws festivals were celebrated. They got to be a part of the birthdays and the other small and big events in their daughters' life. It was not perfect but it was not a bad compromise. And yet she wanted to go home. Finally, the daughter unable to see her mother so unhappy, agreed that if they could find a care-giver who would last more than the current two-month average and who would agree to accompany them to Kerala and if their surrogate family would be willing to stay with them in the house, she could go for at least a few months. Her husband made it very clear that he was not in favor of the plan at all. As with all that she desired, they found that maid, the surrogate family was remodeling their own house and were living in her house, it all seemed to be working out. The kids came from Kerala, appropriate transport was arranged and she left for Kerala with her husband. The return was triumphant. The surrogate family had almost finished the remodeling and their oldest had said he wanted to make Kerala his home. It almost seemed as if she would get her way, again. The family came in droves to visit, to wish her well and to pay their respects. She was just so happy to be home, when she stopped talking and began to have trouble swallowing the care givers just did not understand what happened. Her daughter was out of the country and no one picked up on what actually was happening. Her daughter returned and visited her in Kerala. To the daughter who had seen her every day, it was obvious, she had had another stroke. Whether it was the cumulative effect or just a more serious stroke, this one really knocked the wind out of her. She almost stopped talking completely and was virtually bed ridden. She could no

longer sit or move even with assistance. She attended the inauguration of the remodeled house, the only trip outside she managed to make.

A couple of months after this, she and her husband came back to Bangalore, the only way she could make the journey was by an ambulance and that is what they did. She got a little better, a lot worse, there were good days and bad. She would get agitated if her husband was



not by her side and he increasingly would also stay in bed with her. The doctors all agreed that it was a matter of time. It was 2014, almost eighty now, married for forty-nine years, a full life, the tide was receding, a life that was ebbing away.



Epilogue:

"IT'S AMAZING HOW YOU
CAN SPEAK RIGHT TO MY HEART.
WITHOUT SAYING A WORD
YOU CAN LIGHT UP THE DARK.
TRY AS I MAY, I COULD NEVER EXPLAIN
WHAT I HEAR WHEN YOU DON'T SAY A THING.
THE SMILE ON YOUR FACE
LETS ME KNOW THAT YOU NEED ME.
THERE'S A TRUTH IN YOUR EYES
SAYING YOU'LL NEVER LEAVE ME."

"WHEN YOU SAY NOTHING AT ALL" RONAN KEATING

It is 2014, she lies in bed and reaches out with her left hand to hold the hand of the man who has been by her side for most part of the last seven decades. Her grandson comes in every day to wish her good morning. Since the last years stroke, she speaks very little. Most times it seems as if she chooses not to talk. He will not let her get away, he says it again "gooooood morning Muthassi" and some days again and again until she smiles, opens her toothless mouth and says good morning to him. Triumphantly he looks at his mother, convinced that he has managed another miracle. When he travels, he will still call and ask about her and if he gets her on the phone, whatever time of day it might be he still wishes her good morning and she always answers him.

The routine is still the same. Morning meditation, an early breakfast, she struggles with it some days, going out into the morning light, some rest, a snack, a bath, more rest, lunch, a nap, tea time, going out in the evening light, rest, evening meditation, dinner and then sleep. She can no longer move without help. Someone has to bathe her and attend to her basic needs. They have had maids come and go, most lasting less than two months. There is one lady, her grandsons' nanny who has now become her primary care giver. When she goes away on leave her daughter manages and her younger son pitches in. On her good days she still manages to feed herself. If it is possible, she seems to get a little smaller every week.

She is almost eighty, her husband just turned eighty. She is quiet, does not talk much these days but then she never did. No one is really sure if she cannot talk or if she is choosing not to. Her husband describes the behavior with a Malayalam word "dunm", roughly translated it means someone who is stubbornly misbehaving. Every time he says it, gently of course, she smiles. Every day, she seems to be withdrawing a little bit more into herself and then suddenly she will surprise everyone by some act or gesture or words. Like this time when the nanny had gone home and her daughter nearly dropped her after giving her a bath, she waited till she was in bed and then asked when the nanny was returning, when told that she was expected back a week later, she giggled and said that she would wait a week for her next bath.

She knows about this book, she did not want to read it; she did not want it read to her. She seems happy that all those tea time stories are being preserved. She hopes her grandchildren will read it someday.

Her only daughter has only one boy. The five-hundred-year-old lineage is over. It is about time anyway. She only hopes that the boys and girl that are her grandchildren will live life

with at least as much freedom as she had and would have the courage and good fortune to live as they would want to.

She hopes that love of a good person will find them just as it did her.

Afterword

She passed away on the 26th of August 2014, according to the Malayalam calendar, about 10 days before she would have turned eighty. It was peaceful. In keeping with her wishes no rituals and ceremonies were performed. She was cremated at an Electric crematorium in Bangalore and the ashes were immersed at the Kaveri Sangam and at Tirunavaya. Before the immersion at Tirunavaya, her ashes were brought home to her patch of land, kept overnight, her trip home one more time.

As planned, her eightieth birthday will be celebrated, her life must be remembered by celebrations not in mourning.

I THREW A PEBBLE IN A BROOK

AND WATCHED THE RIPPLES RUN AWAY

AND THEY NEVER MADE A SOUND.

AND THE LEAVES THAT ARE GREEN TURNED TO BROWN,

AND THEY WITHER WITH THE WIND,

AND THEY CRUMBLE IN YOUR HAND.

HELLO, HELLO, HELLO, HELLO,

GOOD-BYE, GOOD-BYE, GOOD-BYE, GOOD-BYE,

THAT'S ALL THERE IS.

AND THE LEAVES THAT ARE GREEN TURNED TO BROWN.

“SIMON & GARFUNKEL”

Soudamini, (Damini means lightning and Soudamini means -forked lightning) the matriarch, around whom this story is woven, was born in pre independent India in the year 1934. Born into a Warriar family, an upper caste, very select community in Kerala, the story traces her life, its tribulations, its successes, the whole nine yards of a life lived well. The community is one of the few which was strongly matriarchal, not just in everyday life, but in terms of inheritance, asset administration and lineage. Over time it became more matrilineal but Soudamini was born when it was still matriarchal. She was the oldest girl of an only girl which automatically gave her the position of the matriarch in her generation. The story is written in four parts, her childhood, her independent life as a nurse (a career woman at a time when women did not leave their homes at all least of all to work), her married life (she married for love, outside her community) and finally the retired life of a grandmother and a matriarch who returns to her roots. Biographical in large parts, some amount of poetic license has been taken with the delivery and some timelines.

Author's Bio:

I am a 44-year-old vegetable growing, animal loving, strong willed or in my father's words a plain crazy woman; an Indian wife of an Israeli husband, mother of a young son, daughter of the matriarch and the holder of an MBA from the Kellogg-Recanati school. I have been an entrepreneur my whole life and have seen some spectacular successes and some huge failures. A very strong sense of identity that helps keep all things grounded comes from the matriarchal background. I have been toying with the idea of this book for over 15 years. Finally, out of excuses with one more failed enterprise put to bed, this seemed like the perfect time to put pen to paper.