

Mornings in Bangalore

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Part I

1 with every night and every morn,
2
3 some to misery are born,
4
5 with every morn and every night,
6
7 some are born to sweet delight
8
9
10 - William Blake

Chapter 1

It was one of those clear mornings right after a heavy rain long in waiting. The whole city looked like a painting that had been recolored. Every building looked newer, every tree greener. Sapna waited impatiently on one side of the road to find a break in the heavy morning traffic flow, she was anxious to catch the sole auto rikshaw standing on the other side who looked like he might run off at any instance—it was her only chance of reaching office in time. It was one of those Fridays when the work of a whole week is due in 5 hours.

The traffic in Bangalore isn't considerate towards souls on foot though. There are many road crossings, the one in question being an example, where crossing a road against

the traffic (that's the only way, there isn't a red light for a span of 2 miles), requires one to organize a small mass movement. If you find yourself in one of these situations, you must first wait for enough people to gather who need to cross the road. Then, one of them must find the courage to step into the running traffic, which hopefully encourages a few other people to do the same. Soon the whole mass starts to move. Mass of people against the mass of traffic: the only way to make way for the pedestrians in the city. This can take anywhere from 5-10 minutes at the usual hours. Sapna was unusually early; it took her 15 minutes. But she got her ride.

The auto-rikshaw plodded it's way towards the office, she had 45 minutes to herself now. It had started to drizzle again, Sapna relaxed and leaned against the backseat. She felt the cheerful wind on her face and looked dreamily at the world move outside. She put on her headphones and started an appropriate melody for the occasion, "rim zhim gire sawan, sulag sulag jaaye man" (the rain falls in trickles, my heart smolders on). She saw the people in restaurants take their first tea of the day, the leaves of withered trees on the road side dancing in the light raindrops, endless caravan of vehicles driving past her, unprepared folks running for cover against the rain, and imagined everything move to the rhythm in her ears, "Bheege aaj is mausam mein, lagi kaisi ye agan" (in the wetness of this season, what is this fire catching on?)

"Everybody has been waiting for the rain madam, it's

been too hot lately”, said the driver. They were waiting on a traffic signal, and wouldn’t be moving for another 5 minutes. Sapna came back from her thoughts, “That is true, very much needed, this rain”. “But it looks like it’s going to get better”, he said looking out at the overcast sky, he looked in his 60’s. He didn’t look hopeful, he didn’t look anything. Sapna followed his gaze but got distracted by the traffic light turning green, “Oh look Bhaiyaa! You can start the engine now”. He got back his eyes on the road, his hands on the steering, looked at the motorbikes starting to race around him, and replied tersely, “Of course madam.”

Chapter 2

7:15 pm: 9 hours and 6 cups of coffees later, Sapna wrapped up her day with the final email to her manager. She packed her bag and was about to take off, but suddenly remembered that her coffee mug needed washing. From the kitchen, she noticed Jayant and Akash playing foosball in the lounge. “What are you losers doing here on a Friday night?”, she asked teasingly as she washed her cup. “Look who’s asking macha, Miss work all-day here did not even show up for lunch today... ah damn it!”, Akash took the advantage of his distraction to score his final goal. “Well, that just about wraps it up, 5-0, we’ve established a new champion! As for your question Sapna ji”, Akash continued as he brought his hands down from the glorified stance he’d assumed for the grand announcement, “we are in fact waiting for Nistha to pick us up, and then we go to Legends

of Rock for a round of drinks.”. “You wanna join?”, Jayant inquired. “Might as well actually, Priya won’t be home today anyways, I’ll get bored only.”, said Sapna after a little thought. “Awesome! and with perfect timing as always, Nistha is right at the gate.” “Hang on, I need to pick my bag, I’ll see you guys at the door in 2 minutes.”, she rushed towards her desk.

“Hey what a nice surprise!”, Nistha exclaimed as Sapna found space for herself and her bag. “Yeah good to see you too, sorry wasn’t able to return your call earlier, I ...”. “Forget it, I was only inviting you for this, Universe found another way to get you here”, she winked as she started driving out of the parking, “OK folks, we’ll need to make one stop, I need to pick something from a friend at Koramangala,” “Man can’t it wait, we’re already ...”. “Shut up you whinner!”, Nishtha shouted at Akash as she turned out on the main road. “OK”, he replied looking at the street lights passing by, with a voice 5 notes down. “Sorry, didn’t mean to yell”. “It’s okay”, he said, but she knew the damage was done, he was going to be silent for most of the night now. Jayanth seemed to be lost in his phone, he had found the latest reviews of a new smartphone he was interested in. “Damn why do I always do that, “ Nishtha thought to herself. As she looked in her rear view mirror she found Sapna looking out the window humming a tune, lost in thought. She looked very pretty.

It had started getting dark, and the street lights had started coming up, competing against the setting sun. The whole

sky was filled with different hues of blue and orange. Sapna was thinking about a friend from school. She hadn't spoken to him in 3 years, but she just received an email from him inviting her to his marriage. "Wow, some people do move fast in life," she had thought. At the time, she was engrossed in her work, and just replied with an obligatory "Congrats! ... can't make it unfortunately ...". But now she had time to muse about it. She had been facing a little pressure from her family to get married as well, but she wasn't ready for it. She had her own ideas about falling in love, and wasn't willing to compromise. Unfortunately, her ideas were based on a romanticism that was rare in life. Most romantics find life to be a dull excuse for what they imagine it should be; some of the lucky ones though, find little detours on the dreary roads.

Chapter 3

Sapna was born in the small town of Dehradun in northern India. Among the northern towns in India, Dehradun is peculiar in being small but famous. It's famous both as a tourist attraction, and for the Indian Military Academy, a training academy of the Indian military service. Sapna hadn't stayed in Dehradun for long, her parents had shifted to Delhi when she was 2 years old. Her only memories of Dehradun were standing in front of her Dad's scooter, a Bajaj Chetak, as he negotiated his way through the traffic for some small errand – it was common for kids to do this at the time, it seemed as if the scooter's designers

intentionally provided extra space between the handle and the driver's seat just for the children to be able to stand there, and perhaps also consciously restricted the speed of the vehicle for that very reason (you couldn't take one of these beyond 70 km/hr). You don't find the Bajaj Chetak and her siblings on the roads of India today, they've given way to faster and fancier alternatives. (Chetak's production was discontinued in 2009). You might still find one of these in some small town somewhere; they are relics of a bygone time.

Growing in Delhi, Sapna met people from all parts of India. She had done well in school till the age of 16, but in eleventh grade, she developed an affection for one of her classmates. Nothing really happened between them, except a few secret meetings during the school breaks, when she blushed red at every sentence he spoke. However, the romance quite consumed her, and it affected her studies thoroughly. Her mother got worried, and changed her school – despite the protest of her father – having some inkling of what was going on. Sapna rebelled, but had to give in eventually. Once in the new school, Sapna quickly regained her grades, but not the trust in her mother.

After school, she went to college in Bangalore, choosing computer science, because that was the only subject she was vaguely interested in, and because one of the family friends had talked to their parents and had assured them, “it is the growing field, she will easily land a job sir!”. He proved right eventually. After moving to Bangalore, once

she was over the initial shock of leaving a place that she had stayed at forever, she loved her new freedom – this was the first time she had really stayed away from her parents. She made a lot of friends, took up a lot of new things, and fell in love with the city. After graduating, she had two job offers, one from an established firm in Delhi, another from a small start up in Bangalore. She chose Bangalore.

Chapter 4

Nistha pulled into her friend's place, "It'll just be 2 minutes, I promise. Oye Sapna, come with me na ...". They knocked on the door and waited for someone to answer. "My day was crazy today yaar! I had like 5 years of work due, oof! I am so looking forward to a cold pint of beer". "Yes, me too, although I don't any good excuse whatsoever for being so, oh here", Nistha jumped at her friend as soon as the door opened, "Hello my darling, what are you upto?", you could tell this was an old friend. Her friend looked unprepared for the flamboyant greeting, but quickly adapted to the situation, "Nistha my jaan, I haven't seen you in ages. Come in! Hi, I am Pooja." She made way for them to come in while putting her hand forward to Sapna. "I am Sapna", she looked around the apartment as she entered, it was well decorated, "I like what you've done with the place". "Thanks, I just moved in yesterday. Although I can't take all the credit, Vasu!", she shouted towards the room at the other end of the living room. The summoned man came out with paint smeared all over his clothes. He noticed the

guests and quipped, “Ahem, Miss Pooja, can you please tell me if you have friends next time so I don’t come out looking like a fool? Hi, I am Vaastava”. “But you can call him Vasu”, Pooja interrupted, “this is Nistha, my friend from undergrad I told you about, she’ll come with me to my room to pick some of her stuff, and this is Sapna, you’ll entertain her till we’re back ... “. “Yes ma’am”, Vasu did a military salute, “how about we hang out in the balcony Sapna, I love the weather today.”

“Wow, it’s getting a little foggy. So what are you guys up to tonight?”, Vasu asked Sapna as they walked out into the balcony.

“Nothing spectacular, just going to have a few drinks with friends. What about you?”

“I am going to help Miss Pooja here with some of the final set up, and then may be watch a movie.”

“Why do you keep calling her Miss Pooja?”

“Hah, well, she shares her name with a very, very prolific artist.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah man, you should totally check her out”, he had a mischievous smile as he said this.

“Cool, and what plans for the rest of the weekend?”

“Well, tomorrow I have a class, I am an instructor with a dance school here.”

“Nice! what do you teach?”

“Hip-hop mostly. I started 4 years back. It started as a pass time, I work as a security consultant – the one about protecting computers, not people – so I work mostly from home. It was good to find something where you actually meet people every once a while. Then I just got into it. Miss Pooja also teaches sometimes.”

“I see, is that where you met her?”

“Oh no, I met her at the temple.”

“The Temple?” she asked way to hastily to sound natural.

Vasu laughed, it seemed he was used to this getting people by surprise. “I know. Yup! In the temple. I go to the temple, every week, I am a religious sort.”

“Sorry, wasn’t trying to be offensive.” she meant it. It was just surprising.

“I know, it’s just a shock to most people, I guess I am in a circle where most people relate differently to religion. You aren’t big on religion, I suppose?”

“No, but I can respect faith”. That, she didn’t mean. She was quite judgemental of religious people.

“Well, that’s good to hear”, he said with a wry smile, as if he caught her lie. She felt uneasy.

Nishtha came out and interrupted them, “Alright people, we’re done here, sorry took so long. We were not able to

find some of my stuff.” Pooja had followed her, “That’s no surprise given how much stuff you have!”

“I know”, Nistha was obviously quite proud of the fact, “let’s go Sapna, the guys must be about ready to kill me”.

“It was nice meeting you Vasu”, Sapna said as she walked out.

“Same here, see you around.”

Chapter 5

In later years, Sapna often remembered this first meeting with Vasu. She could never quite place what she had felt, even though she remembered in exact detail everything that they said. She had noticed that his voice had a confident ring that attracted her, and he wore a light colored T-shirt that she thought fit him famously. He had come across as someone who knew his place in the world. But she felt uneasy.

By the age of 21, Sapna had decided that she did not believe in God. It was a difficult choice for her, her family was deeply religious. She was confused for a long time. One day she had found a book of quotes by Vivekananda, the great Indian spiritual leader, who had found some international acclaim after representing Hinduism in the “Parliament of World Religions” in the States in 1893. He had written, “If there is a God, he would rather have you be rational and use your thinking than to blindly believe him.” This made

sense to her. Over time, ideas took concrete shape in her mind, and as she read about and discussed this issue, she gravitated more and more towards atheism. In her mind, religion came out of not willing to question.

She always wondered if she would have felt differently if their first conversation had followed a different route. If she got to know he was religious before she knew anything else about him, would she have dismissed him instantly? These are difficult questions – in hindsight, we always wonder, playing different scenarios in our minds, twisting and turning reality here and there, to see if a different flow of events would have taken us elsewhere. Is there a reason to why things happen the way they happen? Perhaps there is a grand scheme to all that happens, perhaps it's all chance. Who can say? We do not concern ourselves with these questions here.

On 25th July, 2008, on a foggy evening, Sapna met Vasu, and fell for him. But she didn't know it at the time.

Chapter 6

A few weeks passed. Sapna got busy with more deadlines. Her team was working on an exciting new project and she had a major component in it. On the final milestone of their project, her whole team went for dinner together to celebrate. As she entered, she thought she saw someone she knew at the adjacent table. A few minutes later, she noticed him come towards their table: it was Vasu.

“Hey, how’s it going? Remember me? I am Vasu, we met a while back at Miss Pooja’s house.”

“Hey! Of course, excuse me guys ...” she got out of her chair and they walked to a quieter corner. Bangalore restaurants have pockets of noise.

Vasu looked in a great mood, “So, how’ve you been?”

“Good good, we just got done with a milestone. Came here with my team to celebrate. What about you?”

“Oh I won a major contract a few days back, so got a few friends here for dinner. We’re going to purple haze after this.”

“That sounds great!”

“You wanna join?”

“Umm...”, she hesitated. “may be another time?”

“Sure, uh”, he looked like he was going to ask another question, but then just said, “See ya around!” and walked back towards his friends. Sapna walked towards her table too, she had almost said yes, but then stopped because she noticed that she knew no one in the group.

For the rest of the night, her eyes kept wandering towards the table Vasu and his friends occupied. He laughed frequently, and made everyone around him laugh with him. He waved to her as they left the restaurant. She waved back. She noticed as they left that she actually did know two people in the group from some meetup earlier that month. “Well, at that rate, we’re bound to meet sometime real soon

again.”, she thought, may be there was a glimmer of hope in that thought. Bangalore is the place of connections. It’s like a microcosm of the entire country, all relationships seem to concentrate in this one city. It feels like every person you meet is related to you through some connection. She was wrong in this case though, they didn’t see each other for another 3 months. Vasu’s new contract had taken him to Africa.

Chapter 7

It was October, and the wind had started to acquire its characteristic chilliness. This is the time in Bangalore where it’s still quite warm, but you can feel the winter coming with a certain change of the air. The skies are more overcast than usual, but it isn’t gloomy. Bangalore is never really gloomy, you almost feel like it’s always in the middle of a life long festival. The clouds hide the sun, but the clouds themselves are a picture of warmth. If the summer sun in Bangalore is a boisterous laugh, spreading radiance all around and making a colorful canvas out of the dresses of people, the clouds are a restrained smile, that sets upon you slowly, and fills you with a mellow happiness. Summers in Bangalore are a grand party, winters, a mellow meetup with close friends.

It was October 3rd, 6:30 pm, and Sapna had stopped at the tea stall close to her house to grab a cup of tea. This was her usual routine, she’d walk back from office around 6, grab a cup of tea, take it to the terrace of her house (on

3rd floor), and watch the last rays of the setting sun go down on the numerous buildings around her, with sips of the tea – usually overboiled. She would sit on her terrace for anywhere from 15 mins to an hour, at which time her roommate, Priya, would arrive, and they would cook a meal. They had a good domestic setup.

In one corner of the shop – there were usually anywhere between four to ten people standing at the shop drinking tea – she noticed Vasu.

“Hey! What’s up?”, she said as she approached him.

“Oh hey, what a nice surprise! Sapna, right?”

“Yup, how are you. It seems I haven’t seen you in ages.”

“Yeah I was out of town. I just came back a week back. And then all this headache of shifting. Saw this tea stall, so thought I’ll get a cup of tea.”

“Oh, where are you shifting?”

“Right there.” He pointed towards a building about a block away.

“No way! I live right here.” she pointed towards the building, a block away in the opposite direction.

“That’s wonderful. I guess I got lucky, I already have neighbors I know”, he smiled as he threw his empty cup in the trash. “All right, I must go back and finish up the final packing. “

“Do you need help?”

“Nah, it’s mostly done. My roommate, his name is Deepak, is on high adrenaline today. I haven’t really had to do anything. Oh by the way, we’re having a house warming party tomorrow, around 8 pm, why don’t you join?”

“I think I should be able to make it, but not sure.”

“No problem, let’s share numbers so we can coordinate? What’s yours?”, he took out his phone.

“9980182527, send me a message?”

“Sure, will do, message me if you’re coming.”

“Will do, bye!”

“Take care!”

Chapter 8

Vasu was born in Kanpur, but like Sapna, had spent most of his early childhood in Delhi. He came from a Brahmin family. Vasu was always a mischievous boy. As a kid, he would routinely exasperate her Mom by mixing the labels on the jars she so carefully organized, Dalchini would become sugar, garam masala would become tea leaves. One day, he must have been 7-8 years old, he exchanged the labels of salt with granulated sugar. There were guests home that day, her mother made a wonderful dish of Rajma (black beans), perfect in every respect, except, it was as sweet as it should have been salty. The resulting embarrassment caused much inconvenience for young Vasu, his pocket

money was slashed by half, and he was not allowed to watch television during his regular hours from 7 pm to 10 pm for two weeks. It is during this time that he, bored out of his mind and looking for some way to kill time, picked up the copy of BhagvadGita lying on a shelf in the living room and started reading it. Initially, it was just out of curiosity, he knew the story of Mahabharata – BhagvadGita is one small part of the epic novel – from watching the popular television show (to understand how popular this show was, imagine the traffic on roads coming to a standstill from eight to nine pm every Friday night). However, as he read through the pages, he became increasingly fascinated by the ideology of the book. This was his first introduction to religion.

His father was well versed in scriptures and could easily compete with any Pundit on the finer details of the Vedas. His mother was knowledgeable about the scriptures too, but was also a highly practical person. She found a way to merge the teachings of the scriptures in the numerous struggles of a middle class Indian household. Growing up, Vasu learned his life lessons more from watching his mother deal gracefully with little issues through the day – from being a strict taskmaster for their housemaid while being respectful of her dignity, to negotiating calmly over the price of a cauliflower while the vendor was losing his wits in anger, to making anyone who talked to her feel special – than from his father quoting scriptures at meals. The philosophy underlying these religious ideas were attractive to his intellectual mind. The existence of God, he

accepted as a pre-requisite underlying all the teachings, and did not question it. If the end goal is a consistent system of values and principles that allows you to make a firm choice in every situation that demands judgement, what reason is there to question a basic assumption made by the system? It's the means to the end. He believed in God, not as an entity that lives in the sky and keeps a score of all his wrongdoings, but as a representation of the ultimate reality and the sum total of everything that he didn't understand.

Chapter 9

Sapna actually had a meetup planned with some of her friends the next evening. She thought about it all morning, then at noon, she messaged her friends and opted out. She finished some of her office work in the evening. She wasn't very style conscious – doesn't mean she didn't have a style – but for the house warming party, she tried three different dresses, two of them twice. Once ready, she found it hard to kill time. You wait for something important, but you can't make it happen rightaway. There's always that time before it starts when you've run out of things to distract you, and all you have left is the wait. She wandered in the house for a while, then knocked on Priya's door. Priya was in her best mood, "Hey, what's up jaaneman?" She made way for Sapna to come in who threw herself in the bean bag, "Nothing much, just trying to kill time before this party at eight, what are you up to?". "Just watching a movie, I took a complete break today", she did look well rested. "Good,

you deserved it, you've been working really hard for the past two weeks."

"I know, hai na? I feel like I haven't had a break since the time I joined this new company. I love the work and the people, don't get me wrong, but it's, umm...a lot more intense than I've been used to."

"Good, at least you're enjoying it."

"Yeah, actually, kuch gossip bhi hai (I have some gossip too)"

"I am all ears!"

"This guy from another team, he was in the orientation with us, asked me for a coffee yesterday", Priya said, blushing a little.

"Nice! And did you say yes?"

"No, I said I was busy, and may be we could meet another time."

"Wait, is this the guy you were starting to get a little crush on."

"Yeah".

"So why didn't you say yes?"

"I was umm ... I was not sure, I didn't want to send a wrong signal."

"Priya you're crazy, what signal man, it's just a bloody coffee! You should have actually asked him out, I could see you liked him. But that's fine, now he took the initiative."

“Yaar Sapna, you don’t understand. You don’t want to say yes rightaway, you don’t want to seem too eager ...”

“That’s total rubbish, why all these games yaar? You like a guy, you go for a coffee with him. May be you’ll feel some chemistry, then want to meet more. Or may be you’ll find you were totally wrong, and never meet him again. I don’t get this whole playing hard system you’ve built.”

“OK meri maa “, Priya laughed, “I’ll ping him again and meet him, bas? I am craving a cup of tea, do you want some?”

“Only always!”

They boiled some tea and talked for another hour on the terrace. It was a beautiful evening with a clear sky and a light wind. The sun had gone down, but still made its presence felt by a vast orange color spread over the entire sky. They about life, politics and the mostly useless things you talk to friends about when you’re talking just for conversation and being together, not for the content. Then it was 8.

Chapter 10

“Hey, come on in, you must be Sapna right? I am Deepak, Vasu will be back, we ran out of ice, he just went to get some more”. “Nice to meet you.” Sapna took stock of the people as she entered, there were about 15 people spread around the living room in three groups having separate conversations.

Somebody was playing light music from their laptop: it looked like a party that had settled. There seemed to be a few people in another room next to the living room talking. “Let me introduce you to some of our friends here, this is Roshni, Mrinal and Rahul. Guys, this is Sapna.” “Hey everyone.” Sapna used her fake smile. “You want a drink Sapna?”, Deepak asked, “I am going to get myself a refill.” “Sure, you have vodka?” “Yeah sure, I’ll get it for you, with Sprite is good?” “Sprite’s perfect.”

“So how do you guys know each other?”, Sapna asked the little group she had joined. Her eyes kept wandering towards the door.

“Roshni and Deepak work in the same company and Mrinal is a college friend of Vasu’s. I used to work with Mrinal before I left the company.”

“What do you do now?”

“I started a company that creates custom personalized gifts. It’s been 6 months.”

“That’s great, are you enjoying it?”

“Most of the times, although sometimes it’s just a pain. Ah Vasu is here!”

Sapna saw Vasu enter the door, there was a loud shout from inside, “Vasu get the ice here!”

Vasu noticed Sapna, “Hey, glad you could make it, be back in a second.”, and disappeared in the room. He came back with a drink.

“Hello hello people, here Sapna, Deepak asked me to give this to you. He got stuck in ahem, a conversation in the other room.” Sapna noticed the conversation from next room get louder, “they’re discussing the implications of the new bus service BMTC started, I am not in the mood for heavy discussion today though.”

“Vasu must be at least this drunk to get in that mood, anyways,”, Roshni turned to Sapna, “So Sapna, tell us about you, how do you know Vasu?”

“Oh, we just met once through a common friend. I actually live two blocks away, we bumped into each other yesterday.”

“Yeah that was crazy, glad you could make it. How are things?”

“Not too bad, I had a busy week, so took it real easy over the weekend. How about you?”

“Me good too! By the way, Roshni here has the best singing voice in the entire city. May be we can convince her to give us a performance tonight?”

“If we can convince Suraj to play the guitar, hey Suraj!” Roshni shouted towards the other room. “You got your guitar na! Good. Bring it out! I feel stuffy in here, plus too much noise from the other room. Let’s go to the roof. Suraj will join us there.”

So the whole party moved to the roof, Suraj joined in a few minutes, and started strumming. People seated themselves

in various nooks and corners of the roof. Vasu sat next to Sapna. “Any requests?” Roshni inquired. “Can you sing baanwara man?” “Sure. Suraj, tell me if I am in the right scale okay?” “Just start singing, I’ll adjust.”

Roshni really did have a good voice. “Baanwara man dekhne chala ek sapna ...” (the stupid heart is looking to find another dream). Once started, they played song after song – they were a good team. It was a windy day with a clear sky. Everybody sat on the roof and listened to the mellow songs as they watched the stars make their entry one by one on the crimson sky.

Over time, people started talking again in low voices; Roshni and Suraj played light tunes in the background. Vasu and Sapna got a chance to get acquainted. The initial conversation went like any other, they found out about each others school, college, where they grew. It then moved to other topics – conversation with a new person starts in little streams of disconnected questions, while your thoughts find ways to connect to each other. Slowly the streams start merging and the conversation gets a direction and a momentum, and starts to flow – to new and unpredictable places if you’re lucky. Sapna and Vasu eventually landed on the issue of morality.

“So given a choice, how do you decide what’s the right thing to do if you don’t have a fixed moral code?” Vasu asked Sapna as he refilled her drink. “Well, don’t you always know what the impact of your actions would be? As you experience the world, you become more and more

aware of the consequences of your action, isn't it? Thanks” Sapna took her drink. “Isn't that information enough to act.”

“That's true, but sometimes it might not be enough. My question is why not depend on the wisdom gathered over centuries and use it to your advantage?”

“Because the wisdom of a thousand years back may not apply today!”

“Well, somethings never change. Do you think it'll ever be morally right to kill a man for his money?”

“Okay, I agree with you on that, somethings don't change. But I think it's still important to reassess every fact before you believe it.”

“Sure, but most people today just wouldn't touch anything that's remotely associated with religion with a 10 feet pole. Most of my friends dismiss religion without consideration, without even thinking for a second that there might be something useful there, something intelligent. It's fashionable to bash religion, most people don't even think about, they just go with the flow. To me, that's as close-minded as believing in religion just because everybody else around you does. I try to respect everybody's opinions, but it's difficult when you are just reflecting the opinion of your friend's circle and blog articles with zero reflection.”

“Hmm...I think I see your point.”, Sapna had to admit. The party had started thinning, people were leaving in small groups. Eventually, there about 4-5 people left on the roof.

Sapna and Vasu were just leaning against the roof now, feeling the wind on their faces. Suraj hit a new tune. “Hey Sapna, I love this song, you wanna dance a little?”. “I am not much of a dancer.” “Don’t worry, I’ll cover your mistakes”, Vasu smiled and took her hand, and Sapna followed him reluctantly. They started dancing to the slow tune. Once she got over her initial hesitation, Sapna enjoyed the dance, she was quite fond of this song too. Vasu’s dancing showed he was an instructor, and Sapna let him lead her through the moves. She was carefree that night; she loved her work, she loved her city, and she loved her friends. She was happy.

Part II

Chapter 1

Vasu got up a little late the next morning. He scrambled together a quick breakfast, he was getting late for temple. This was a ritual for him: he walked to a temple 2 miles from his place every Sunday morning, prayed, then sat there for a while. This was the time he took for himself. As he entered the temple doors, he could smell the sweet fragrance of the flowers that people had offered to the deities and heard the bells ringing. He had got to know the other regulars at the temple, and they smiled at him as he went in. He offered his prayers, and then sat in one corner of the main hall. There were other people sitting

with him, sometimes he would start a conversation with someone he had got to know over his earlier visits. They talked about weather, politics, philosophy, movies, news. He felt safe in this space, he felt in touch with himself. This is what made him come week after week. Going through the world living your everyday life, being with other people all the time makes you feel like you're drifting away from yourself, makes you feel uneasy: everyone has their own way to deal with it and reconnect to themselves. For Vasu, it was this Sunday morning visit.

When Vasu was in his fourth year of college, he was confronted with a difficult choice: whether to take up drinking or not. He had friends who used to drink, and so he knew that you don't necessarily become a drunkard, that it can be a normal social activity, a contained thing, without serious repercussions on the rest of your life. He wanted to try it out, but he felt that his religious beliefs were against it. His father had never taken up drinking. Faced with a difficult practical choice, he turned to his mother for advice. She had absolute clarity on the issue, "Keep religion as a guiding force in your life, but don't let it stop you from taking risks, taking chances. You believe in yourself, right? Well, I do, I know you won't become a drunkard just by taking a few sips of Whiskey with friends. I doubt Lord Krishna would have a problem with it either. Don't follow rules blindly, if you're not sure, choose taking action over inaction. That's the important thing."

Chapter 2

Sapna kept coming to Vasu's thoughts all day the next day. They had found an immediate connection. As they talked, one thread of conversation gave way to another and they never knew how time passed. It flowed from complete seriousness to absolute silliness with ease – one moment they were talking about the issues of morality, the other moment they were laughing at an old advertisement from the 90's. He had developed a liking to her, but he saw a clear issue. Sapna was an atheist, he could respect that – but he didn't know if he could be with a person who did not believe in something he so deeply did. He knew he was thinking out too far, they'd just met, but then, this was an important part of his life.

“What's distracting you Vasu-man?”, Mrinal said as Vasu missed another easy shot. They were playing their usual game of badminton on Sunday evening. “ Nah, nothing much. Listen, tell me one thing Mrinal, when did you know you wanted to get serious with Roshni?”

“The moment I met her.”

“Really? I thought that kind of stuff didn't happen once you were past school.” The comment was accompanied by a half questioning, half mocking look.

“I mean I am exaggerating of course. But I knew there was something about us the first time met her. When I met Roshni, it had been five months since I had broken up with my ex, Shruti, you remember?”

“Yeah, you were quite in the dumps.”

“I was okay by then.” He wasn’t, like all of us, Mrinal had built an alternate history for himself. “Anyways, we met and I thought she was great. I connected to her at almost every level. So we kept meeting more and more and one day I just asked her out. As simple as that.”

“But didn’t you ever have any doubts?”

“No not at all. That was the thing. With Shruti, I always had a doubt because there were fundamental things we differed on. With Roshni, even though we disagree about many things, we are on the same side on the things that matter.”

“Yeah I guess that’s important, right?”

“Totally, I’ve never known a relationship to work unless you have some agreement on the fundamental values.”

“Neither have I”. Vasu said as he missed another shot. This was the third game he lost that day.

Chapter 3

Sapna was having a difficult day as well. Sunday was her day of the week that she never planned in advance. She didn’t meet anyone, and didn’t talk to anyone: Sunday was for herself. This Sunday though, she was restless. The previous night kept coming back to her from memory: the slow wind, the guitar, and being in Vasu’s arms. She wasn’t

in a sad place in her life anyways, but this day, she was ecstatic. She kept humming old movie songs and moved aimlessly through the house. She cooked three times, even though she didn't feel like eating. She called her friends, but then didn't know what to say. She wanted to talk to someone, but didn't know about what. Finally, Priya noticed her restlessness, and asked her, "Sapna dear, what's going on?" Sapna blushed and admitted, "I met someone yesterday. I think I am falling Priya." "What the hell! Tell me all about it". And so Priya got to know everything about Vasu, or the little that Sapna knew. She didn't know much, admittedly, but there is no dearth of things to talk about when you fall for a person. You notice the tiniest details, the way they laugh, the way they walk, the pigment in their eyes, even the way they sneeze. Everything about this person is suddenly of utmost concern to you.

How someone falls in love like that, we'll never know. It's irrational, and so you can't reason your way out of it. There is no intellectual tool at your disposal to deal with it. It takes you out like a hurricane, and you're left helpless, stuck on a shore with waves of emotion hitting you unexpectedly, all the time. It drowns you. There's enormous hope, fathomless despair, limitless happiness and maddening doubt – mostly all within a single second.

There was no hope for Sapna, she had fallen in love, and now had admitted it to herself. That's when the crisis begins.

Chapter 4

Priya suggested that Sapna take her own advice and send a message to Vasu, she had his phone number. Sapna was anxious to take any action though. You build a castle of dreams, about things that might be, and are too scared to take any action in the real world that might shatter the castle. It feels better to keep the dreams preserved in your mind than let it face the storms of reality that might destroy it like a pile of cards. But Priya was a convincing woman, Priya gave in after a while and texted Vasu, “I had fun the other day, thanks for inviting me :)”

She didn’t have to wait long for the reply.

”: Glad you could make it.”

”: :)”

Sapna didn’t have the courage to go further that day.

Next day she was buying some small groceries at the shop close to their house – there’s always a cohort of small shops in residential areas in Indian cities where you can get the most basic necessities, shampoo in this case – when she bumped into Vasu. “Wow, what a surprise!” Vasu said, being cheeky. Sapna rolled her eyes while smiling, “I know right, what are the chances of we meeting at the only grocery store within a mile.”

They had talked for just a few minutes when it suddenly started raining. Bangalore’s unpredictable like that.

“Damn it, why does it rain at such odd time man!”, Vasu wasn’t thrilled.

Sapna stretched her hands out in the rain. “What was the last time you walked in the rain?”

“When I was 4 years old and stupid.”

“Well, may be you weren’t so stupid back then. Come with me.”

“Are you crazy, I’ve got groceries right here.”

“Give it to Madan Uncle, he’ll take care of it for a few minutes”, she grabbed both their bags and gave it to the shopkeeper; he knew her well, she had been buying stuff from him for the past 5 years.

“Now, let’s go Vasu-ji.” And she stepped out in the rain. Vasu hesitated for a second, it had started pouring quite heavily. Then groaned, “Ah man, I am so getting sick after this.”, and walked right out and caught up to Sapna.

They walked on the drenched streets. Vasu lost his anxiety soon, and enjoyed the rain dripping on him and penetrating through his clothes. Every one around them ran for cover, but they just walked. Vasu felt like he was a part of a different world then the people around him, he felt free. He saw Sapna who kept walking into puddles and splashing water all around her. She didn’t seem to much care about anything in the world at the moment.

“I love the rain so much! This is so much fun.”

“You know Sapna, you are one weird girl.”, Vasu said looking at Sapna, but he was smiling.

They walked for a while. As the rain started to thin down, they walked back towards the grocery store. “Thanks Uncle”, Vasu said as he picked up his groceries back, “but I hope I don’t catch a cold.” “Call me if you do, I have a way to fix all sorts of cold.” Sapna got her groceries settled in her arms.

“Yeah what’s that?”

“Well, it’s a secret,” Sapna’s eyes danced. “only told to good friends in need.” “Well, then I hope I am in the good-friend circle by now.” he winked at her, “cya later!”

Chapter 5

Time went by, and they kept meeting more and more. It started with meeting every two or three days at the tea stall. The tea meetings started to turn into walks. The walks became longer. They talked about their family, they talked about their friends, they talked about their work. They talked about everything. They found it easy to connect with each other, since they’d had similar upbringing, but there were all kinds of surprises too. At times, Vasu was fascinated by the spontaneity of Sapna. A other times, Sapna was baffled with his perspective.

But there was a difference in the way both looked at this relationship. Vasu saw Sapna as a good friend, but he had

closed the doors in his mind about the possibility of a relationship between them. For Sapna, on the other hand, every single event was a confirmation or denial of that possibility. She kept elaborate scores of the times Vasu messaged her to go on a walk. She couldn't make anything out of Vasu's behaviour. She knew he liked him, but he never made any romantic overtures. In one part of Sapna's mind, it came out of the conservative nature of Vasu; may be he just didn't know how to propose to her? In another part, she thought that may be he didn't really like him at all. She tried to avoid the latter part. Priya kept pushing her to ask him explicitly, but she kept avoiding it on a myriad set of reasons. The truth was, she didn't want to know. Why shatter a dream when you can live in it another day?

One day, Vasu mentioned a friend Sneha who had just moved to Bangalore. They had been in school together, she had looked him up and they had gotten back in touch. Over time, Vasu kept mentioning her more and more. At some point, Vasu started cutting walks short because of a call from Sneha. Sapna felt the pinch of jealousy every time that happened. One day, they were taking a walk when Vasu got a call, "Wait, I have to take this. Is that okay?" "Sure", Sapna shrugged. "Hey Sneha!". Pinch. "Sure, can we talk in some time? I am with a friend ... ". Sapna noticed that his voice changed a little when talking to Sneha. When they resumed, she knew he was distracted. She bailed off early, and went home in agony.

Sapna spent her days trying to find reasons for one possi-

bility or the other. She couldn't stand this for long now, she had to know.

Chapter 6

8th November 2008, Sapna asked Vasu out for dinner. They met at 7 in front of the juice shop near their place and found an autorikshaw to the restaurant. It was a chilly winter night, the sky was clear. Sapna asked Vasu how his week had been – Vasu had a lot to tell. He was just offered a new contract, the work seemed exciting, but he had to finish another project ... it went on. Sapna was relieved. She didn't want him to stop, that would mean she would have to keep the promise she made to herself for that evening: of dropping the question.

They ate at an Italian restaurant close by. Sapna was the least bit interested in the food. That was a good thing for the restaurant, the Chef had screwed up her dish – too much salt. After dinner, they decided to take a little walk, the weather was slightly chilly, but not too cold. They could smell the flowers from the trees besides the road next to the restaurant. The traffic wasn't too bad at the time.

“Do you like me Vasu?”

Vasu knew what the question really meant, but wasn't ready to answer. “Of course, why do you think we're friends?”. He gave her a smile that betrayed the nervous look on his face.

“That’s not what I meant. Do you think we could be together?” But she knew the answer from the expression on his face.. You get your answer in the first sentence, no matter what the sentence is.

Vasu shrugged. “Sapna, I like you, you’re like the nicest person I know. And I am attracted to you too, I think. But I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to be together.”

“Why?”

“Because! We’re really different people. I don’t think we’ll last long. You have a very different set of beliefs, and I think sort of ...” Vasu stopped.

“Please complete?” It took everything in her to keep talking. She was trembling, she knew what he was going to say.

“I think I sort of like Sneha.”

Her heart sank. It’s like a tornado that you can see coming, and there’s not a thing you can do about it. You wait, it sweeps over you, and it takes every ounce of energy in your body to just keep breathing. They didn’t speak for the rest of the walk. Sapna caught an autorikshaw. They got in, then got off near their place. The place where the roads to their houses forked, Vasu turned to Sapna and said, “Sapna, I am not worth it.” Sapna had no emotion on her face, “That’s not for you to decide.” And then walked back home. She came home, slipped into sleeping clothes and sat on her terrace. She looked at the stars, she looked at the traffic on the road below. She had no idea what to do. After sitting there for about half an hour, she called Akash, “You want

to go drinking?”

“Sure, I am bored at home. Is everything okay?”

“I am not sure.”

She stayed with Akash for a long time that day. Akash wasn't aware of the situation till then, but he'd known Sapna for a long while. It didn't take him long to understand where she was. He didn't judge, and he didn't offer solutions: he just listened. She knew she would be okay one day, but she knew that day wasn't today.

Chapter 7

The next few days, she avoided all social situations. The world seemed more silent, and she wanted to dissolve herself in the silence. She said little, and spent most of her time at office. She had always used work as a remedy. She felt, she wasn't sad, she was mourning for the death of a dream. She knew it wasn't the end of the world. She didn't worry, she didn't hope. She didn't think about the future. She just breathed, and did her job. She went on.

Sapna's friends quickly got to know about it, and she got many calls. Some suggested to get over and find someone new, “There is no dearth of good guys, yaar!” Some suggested to stop talking to Vasu at all. And some suggested fighting for it. Some suggested strategies, “Make him jealous, make him miss you. Let him see what he is missing out on.” She listened to everything, responded to none. She

knew nothing was going to work at this point. Vasu just wasn't in the place she was at.

On November 6th, Sapna went to the Mall with a few of her close friends. They had planned to watch a movie. This was the first time she had gotten out in two weeks. Sapna went to get the tickets. As she negotiated the show timings at the counter, she saw Vasu in the shop next door. He was with a girl, they were laughing; they looked happy. She stared for a second, then got her tickets, paid the money, and went inside. She didn't say a word over the rest of the movie, but invited her friends to her house for dinner. She didn't want to be alone. That was a good decision.

At 7:35 pm, Sapna was in the kitchen, making dinner. Nishtha was mixing a few drinks for everyone. Jayanth, Akash and Priya were talking in the living room. Suddenly, Sapna's phone rang. She wasn't expecting a call from anyone at the point, she ignored it for a bit, but the ringing didn't stop. She asked Nishtha to look at the simmering dish on the stove, and went to her bedroom to pick up the call. It was her mother.

Chapter 8

“What?”, Sapna shouted, “Akash stop the music.”

Nishtha ran to the bedroom, she found Sapna in tears. “Is he going to be okay? Please tell me ma.” Everyone was in the room now, and looked at Sapna, they didn't know what had happened, but they knew it was bad. “Haan, yeah ...

yeah, I am booking the ticket now, but ...” her voice choked, “he’s going to be okay na? ... Theek hai, theek hai ma, ap dhyan rakho apna (please take care of yourself), I’ll be there in a few hours.” She kept her phone and just broke down in tears. Nishtha hugged her, she didn’t know what to do. Sapna couldn’t stop crying for a long time, and then, still in the midst of sobs, told them, “My dad met with an accident, it’s really bad ... Jayanth, can you please book me the earliest ticket to Delhi?”

A thousand things rushed through her mind as she packed her bag. Her parents had been asking her to come back to Delhi, but she had always resisted.

“Tickets booked, flight in two hours, I’ll drop you to the airport.”

“Thanks.”

What if he doesn’t survive this. She pushed that thought away.

As she got off at the Bangalore terminal she looked at the installation that consisted of a revolving globe with a water fountain around it: she had always liked this installation. She looked at the Bangalore sky behind the airport, the setting sun broke it into many shades of orange. Jayanth walked with her till the security entrance of the airport, but they didn’t say anything. She got into the line, and looked back at Jayanth, there was no expression on her face. As she crossed the gate, she waived him goodbye. Jayanth had one thought in his mind, “What kind of an idiot am I, why

didn't I go with her till Delhi?"

Chapter 9

Nobody heard from Sapna for 3 days. Then, Priya got a call. "He's out of danger now" she still seemed a little shaken, "I'll ask my manager for a few days leave. But may be I should really move here, I mean, what if something had happened to him ...", she choked on the phone again, "I have to shift to Delhi."

Sapna stayed in Delhi for about three weeks. She mostly spent her time taking care of his father in the hospital. He was having a quick recovery. "That's why I say you should always exercise, see how quickly I am getting better", his father would say frequently once he was able to talk. Old family friends and extended family came to visit. She helped her mother arrange accommodation and food. And then, when everybody was asleep, and the final chores of the house were taken care of, she sat with her mother on the porch and talked. Her mother had been shaken by the whole incident. She was a stern administrator at home, and not the one to express emotions easily. The only person she really was completely herself was her husband. In the 35 years of their marriage, she had lost touch with most of her friends, he was the center of her life. One of these days, they were sitting on the porch, Sapna brought a glass of orange juice, "here ma, you looked tired." She took the glass from Sapna and looked at her with tender eyes, "Sapna, you know I love you, right?" Sapna was taken aback, "I had a

feeling, but it's good to hear it in words" and she put her arms around her mother. That was the first time they had hugged in five years.

After coming back to Bangalore, it took her a while to revive her old life, but she got back into it eventually. It was December, and Bangalore was about as cold as it gets. She also started applying for jobs in Delhi. One day she was buying groceries, and she saw Vasu. He walked to her, "I heard, I am so sorry. Didn't call because didn't know what to say." Sapna looked at him and smiled, "It's okay, I understand. Dad's fine now. How've you been?" "Same old," he managed a little smile too. "Listen Sapna, I am really sorry about what happened." "Forget it Vasu. You know what, I have no hard feelings, or regret about what happened. Don't even worry about it."

Vasu looked like someone literally took a load off his shoulders. "So friends?"

"May be, in a while." Sapna smiled, "Life is long, I'll see you around, I am sure."

Chapter 10

July 2008: Sapna met Vasu. Jayanth's sister got married. Akash heard about the death of a school friend.

November 2008: Sapna heard about her father's accident. Mrinal broke up with Roshni. Jayanth was fired from his company.

February 2009: Vasu and Sneha started dating. Sapna got a promotion. Akash moved to Hyderabad.

November 2009: Sapna left her job and moved to Delhi. Jayanth met with an accident. Nishtha got married.

January 2010: Roshni got admitted to the MBA program at IIM Calcutta. Vasu and Sneha broke up. Rahul found out about the demise of his grandfather.

March 2011: Sapna met Vasu at the Bombay airport, where they both had gotten delayed for their flights. Jayanth decided to take up teaching. Sneha started her own company.

July 2011: Vasu asked Sapna out. Mrinal got into the Indian Administrative Services.

April, 2012: Sapna and Vasu got married.

Most of the ceremonies were over. Sapna was talking to the caterer to make sure everything was in place for the reception the next day. It had been a long day, she felt a little tired – Indian marriages do that to you. She passed by the sweets stall, and grabbed one of the sweets. She looked around as she took a bite, and saw Vasu seeing off Jayanth at the entrance who had to leave early. He looked good in his suit. The whole park where they had their marriage was colorful with the drapes, now being taken off laboriously by the workers. The air had a sweet smell hinting at the coming spring. Her father was standing next to her mother, who was haggling with the flower contractor about the prices. He turned around, noticed Sapna and winked. She

smiled back.