



Life – As I Know It!

SUDHAKAR

A Collection of Short Stories, Essays and Poems

A Big Thanks!

I always have enjoyed writing stories. I personally think, that's exactly how I managed to get through my University Exams. This tiny little ebook is a humble collection of some of my works which I've had fun writing. I sincerely hope you enjoy reading them too.

A Big Thanks to everyone who encouraged me to do this. Thanks guys. I still don't know if you guys were really serious or pulling my leg.

Viji,

This one's for you.

Why do writers write? Because it isn't there.

-Thomas Berger

Reach out to Sudhakar at

sudhakarking@gmail.com

<http://www.facebook.com/sudhakarking>

<http://twitter.com/sudhakar>

<http://sudhi.blog.co.in/>

What's Inside

Never Too Far.....	6
The (K)Night Riders.....	11
The Door.....	20
Overtime.....	25
One Love Too Many.....	30
The Call.....	34
The Deeku Chronicles.....	39
Chronicles of a 'Non Drinker'.....	53
Love Thy (English) Neighbor.....	57
To Hell, And Back.....	59
Took My Breath Away.....	62
Birds on a Falling Tree.....	64
A Dozen Red Bricks.....	66

Never Too Far

Come on... You want to know my story? For a Short Story Contest? The friendship saga of Ajay and me? Yeah right... I get that all the time... Ha ha ha.

Gosh Aarthi... you are serious aren't you? Well, you know what, I don't do this a lot. I've had quite a few people trying to interview me and all that, but I've never spoken much to any of them. Especially these goras here. But since you told me you are from Chennai as well, from Anna Nagar and a good looking '*Tamil Ponnu*', :) I think I'll make an exception. Go on shoot. But let me warn you, there is nothing interesting about our story, and I'm a bad story teller, and you will get bored. Ajay is better at this stuff. You should wait for him.

You are quite an adamant soul, aren't you? Ok cool. Dinesh... Dinesh Rajendran is my name. I was born, brought up and spoilt in Chennai. :) I grew up in Anna Nagar in an upper middle class locality with a huge bunch of friends. Ajay, my best buddy, is also from the same area and pretty much identical to me in most respects, if not all. And together, we were the family's, school's, and the neighbourhood's worst nightmare. :) Gosh, I sound like a history book, don't I?

Hmmm... How long have we been friends? Oh only since the kindergarten days. From the time Ajay wet his shorts and made the whole class smell like the school toilet. Yeah yeah... if you ask him, he'll say it was me. Trust me, it was him. They did not call him 'number one' Ajay for nothing you see. In the midst of all kids teasing him, and the teacher shouting at him, I was the only one who sympathised with him. I remember I told him, "Its OK, I've done this earlier too." And that was the start of a beautiful friendship, under the most smelliest of circumstances. We were quite something during school too. Ever heard of school kids bunking school to watch a movie. Oh you have? In class 5? Ha ha... Well we did. To watch Rangeela. And boy, what a movie. We were A.R.Rahman fanatics, Aamir Khan fans and with Urmila dancing like that, which self respecting young man wouldn't wanna see all that on big screen? Too bad Ajay's mama had similar plans. He caught us in the front row salvating at Urmila's jhatkas and matkas. Boy did we get beaten up or what. To this day whenever I see Urmila dancing to 'Tanha Tanha' on TV, my ears start twitching with pain. I guess even my ears remember the pinching they got from Mommy dearest for bunking school. Well, Ajay tells me that his behinds exhibit the same reaction too. :D

We were big movie buffs, and thanks to a heavy dose of tamil movies we were nothing short of the Kollywood heroes during school days. In school, Ajay was really

really fond of this sweet Keralite girl in our class called Divya. He was so in 'loove' with her that at times, Divya and Ajay would walk back to the bus stop from school, Ajay holding her bag in one hand and her hand in another, and talking as if nothing else mattered in the world for a teen. As for me, I promptly walked ten paces behind them, holding Ajay's bag as well as mine, watching for other 'friends', who might see this, spread the word and end up embarrassing Yours Truly. Now, since Divya was 'way-out-of-our-league-really-cute', she had quite a fan following in school. A particular class 9th boy had apparently watched a few Tamil movies himself as well, and confronted us with a few of his rowdy friends one day after school, in a scene straight out of a movie. Ajay was ready to forget the spelling of Divya when he saw these overgrown guys. But then Dinesh Rajendran knows no fear, you see. I fearlessly stood before them, unbuttoning the top 2 buttons of my shirt, dropped the bags, brought out that intimidating expression on my face, and asked them to mind their own business, punctuating it with a modest swear vocabulary that Kabilan from the 'C' section had taught me. Wow, you should have seen me then. Certified hero material.

And then what happened? Obviously, we were beaten black and blue, me in more darker shades than Mr. Romeo; and Ajay has not even looked at anything that rhymed with Divya after that day.

We were together from Kindergarten until our 12th, after which we headed off to different places for our Engineering. I went to Coimbatore for my Mechanical Engg course, while he zipped off to Pondichery to do his EEE. You know, I was completely jealous of this guy that he was staying at Pondichery. Twice a month, I would head off to Pondichery and get completely sloshed and mess up Ajay's room. What's the matter? Tell me one self respecting guy, who's not gotten high and thrown up. And that too in 'Thanni'chery? But trust me, Ajay wasn't too much of a drinker. While I did most of the drinking, he did more of the 'side-dish eating'. He knew all the brands of spirit by heart and could easily budget how much of the stuff we would need to buy and how much it would cost us. But inspite of all that, he would be the guy who'll walk me home no matter how drunk I was, and make sure that I was safe and sound. :D And that was one of the reason we gelled so well.

After college, as luck may have it, both of us landed in the same IT Company on OMR. Well, actually, I had given up on a few better paying, better positioned companies, to be with Ajay. We weren't in the same project, and thank goodness for that. Atleast that way, each of us wasn't aware of the 'praises' we got from our Leads and Managers. We met for tea everyday, sharp at 11 and 4, sipping on to the countless cups of the hot beverage, cursing our respective projects and everyone associated with them, and more importantly, seriously debating, if that coy, beautiful Keralite standing near the window was looking at him or me. During lunch at 1:15 it was a different location, but the topic of the discussion was nearly the same.

Hobbies? Well, Cricket is in our blood, so you know... Cricket matches on TV meant no office, no food and no one else in the family got to hold the remote. Evenings were usually spent in the T.R.C School ground. And Sundays usually meant bet matches. We are both bike freaks and driving to and from OMR to our place was something we really enjoyed. He has an awesome Yamaha that his Uncle had passed on to him, and I, a Pulsar which I made my Dad buy me. Although we loved driving on our bikes alone, during crunch times, we shared a ride to office and home. We were speed freaks and driving on OMR was the best stress buster for both of us.

Accidents? Hell yeah. We shared a whole load of accidents together. :) We've got beaten up a lot, so we have a few scars on our bodies from that. Knuckles punctured out by the cricket ball, a few broken ribs, and Ajay had that bump on his forehead from his college cricket tournament. During school, Ajay and me, when trying 'doubles' in a cycle, went and hit Sasi Uncle's parked Esteem. I bruised my knees and Ajay broke his nose, and Sasi Uncle pulled out his hair. Once during college, I had a major accident in Coimbatore, and Ajay rushed in even before my parents did. I heard from Geeta later that he almost broke the face of Ravi who was driving me when he skid on the road. Ravi was unhurt, while I shattered my knee-cap. I was banned from touching the bike for the next few months. Actually it took a lot of convincing from Ajay, for my parents to give me back the keys to my Pulsar. But then, you can't teach an old dog new tricks you see. A few months ago, I crashed into a lorry in TNagar, with Ajay behind me. I hit my head, broke my leg, got a metal plate inserted here, and became the Iron Man. I set off all Metal detectors in a 2 meter radius. Ajay had a few bruises too. But my bike was totalled beyond recognition. I just had a few beers that day and lost control, but my parents stopped talking to me, so did Ajay's parents, but I didn't really care. Ajay made me promise not to go near anything with wheels after that, and I've never ever broken a promise that I've made to Ajay.

That incident brought a transition in us, and we decided to change our careers. We quit our high paying jobs, and ventured out as a small web page designing company. Ajay was good at the technical stuff, while I handled the finances and the overall business side of things. It was just the 2 of us in the beginning, and Ajay wanted me to be the CEO. :) Oh yeah, CEO of a 2 man company. He was the CTO. :) We suffered a lot initially, with our families shouting at us to stop this buffoonery. My mom cried, asking me to be normal and do what other normal kids do. Frankly I didn't understand what their problem was, I don't know what's so wrong in doing things differently. But I guess, they eventually realized that we were in the right track. And sure enough, in a few months, we were breaking profit. We began hiring more people. My dad told me that he was happy in my success, but I was not sure why he kept silent most of the times. I saw him cry a few times, but I think that was out of happiness, than anything else. Ajay's parents were clearly not happy with something. I asked Ajay the reason a few times, but he avoided the question everytime. After a while he left home, and began staying with me. He only told me that he was doing it for me, and that his parents did not understand it at all. I left it at that.

Our company slowly grew into a decent sized organization. We called ourselves Dreamweavers. It was my idea, and Ajay loved it too. And now Dreamweavers has quite a reputation in the market. We moved to London almost a month ago. Dad tagged along as well. Guess he thinks we're still young kids who don't know to look after ourselves. I don't think he's come to terms that we're grown men now. Well, I didn't want to hurt his feelings either so I did not say a word. I'm loving London actually. It's a beautiful place to work, but given a chance I'd love to go back to India soon. Ajay's designs have got these people here really interested. I've got people lined up everyday wanting to talk to the prodigy. However, being the shy guy that he is, he lets me do all the talking and interviews. We are growing steadily and consistently. Not bad for a humble startup, don't you think? Phenomenal growth. But I have a hunch you'll be bored with all that biz talk. That's not what you want to hear isn't it? You want a successful 'Friendship' story? Ours is one.

Love life? Well, with a life like ours, you hardly find time for any of that. Ajay was quite a ladies' man. He had this thing for Keralite fig... err.. girls. :) Marriage was on cards for him too, but then I think he refused. I tried to talk him into it too, but he just said that he wasn't ready. There is a certain personal space for a person that you should never invade upon, no matter how close a friend you are. And thankfully, both of us, understood that simple truth, and perhaps the reason that we have been friends so long has been that understanding. This was clearly his personal opinion, and I didn't want to interfere with that. I've heard nothing about any other girl after that, and he's kept himself too busy for all these. But mind you, we can spend countless hours ogling at the opposite gender, without the slightest of hesitations, anyday. No offence. Me? Well, I've never been serious about anyone else. Except maybe Urmila? :P

Guess, I've bored you enough, huh? This isn't really a story right? It is just a few random incidents strung together. Well, Friendship isn't a big thing, my dear - it's a million little things, isn't it? And **whatever happens, Ajay is never too far away from me.** And in my opinion, that's all that matters in a successful friendship. Ok, tell me, what else do you want to know for your story?...

Interview Transcript - July 1, 2009

Case File : 1108231

Subject Name : Dinesh Rajendran

Diagnosis : Acute Schizophrenia

Comments : Subject claims to be the CEO of a Software Company in partnership with a 'friend' - 'Ajay Kumar'. 'Ajay Kumar' was Subject's best friend from school, but was killed in a motor bike accident in Chennai, India, in 2008. Subject was driving the motor bike with 'Ajay Kumar' on pillion and suffered serious head injuries as well. Severe sub cranial injury and guilt, may have driven Subject to this condition. Subject does not exhibit violent traits. Motor skills intact. Subject is open to interviews by familiar people.

Suggested Treatment : Increased dosage of Risperidone, Should be solitarily confined ONLY during extreme behavioral changes.

Case handled by : **Dr. Aarthi Sridharan**, Institute of Psychiatry, South London.

***** THE END *****

The (K)Night Riders

"Boss... Please understand. Perfection is everyone's business..."

I could hear 'Hitler' screaming at the new joiner in the adjoining cubicle as I moved towards the door. It was 11 pm, the deadline for the design documents was the next day, and the entire team of 8 glued to their monitors was 'almost' there. 'Hitler' Sekaran, the amazing rescue man that he was, was reassigned to this project to pull it back on track, and had succeeded to a great extent. The team thought he was too demanding, but extreme situations did call for extreme measures. I was sick of reviewing these documents since morning and badly needed a break. Break at 11 pm meant the lone coffee machine near the building entrance, and a lazy walk to the Car Park.

Unlike other 'normal' human beings, coffee does nothing to keep me awake. On the contrary a warm cup of coffee makes me even more sleepy. But as all other 'IT' guys of the world, I just could not break the habit. But what coffee succeeds in doing very well, is make me nostalgic. And every time a cup of 'midnight' coffee touched my lips, my brain always played back beautiful memories of the three of us, sipping on to a 'two by three' cup of the best, authentic and delicious '*sukku-kaapi*' in the whole wide world, at Selvam Mess, Pondicherry, a place that Kumar Master always said, was 'World Famous in Pondicherry'.

Abhi, Barani and Me were perhaps, the most interesting of characters that ever took shelter under the same roof, ever. We were complete strangers when we stepped into the college hostel in the first year. I was from proper Chennai, Abhi was from Tambaram and Barani came all the way from Salem. I was in the CSE Department while Barani and Abhi were in Mechanical. We got ragged by seniors on the same day. I sang a song; Barani did a 'march-past' around the hostel while Abhi was asked to measure the room with a matchstick. (Sadly Abhi was asked to do this for a week, after he asked his senior if they would ask him to give a rose to a girl in college as well.) Our bond got strengthened further, when the 3 of us threw up, after tasting the '*sambar*' in the Hostel. We were contemplating moving to a rented house from second year. And after Abhi 'accidentally' locked up the Warden in the Toilet, we were thrown out in the end of the first year itself.

I remember the night quite vividly. It was in the third year, during the University exams. The last exam for CSE had got over that day, but I was staying back for ECE and Mech to complete their last exams the next day. I couldn't possibly leave my roomies alone. Besides, Raji of the ECE department would also leave for Chennai only the next day. Some company in the bus wouldn't hurt, right. I had done my exams pretty well. I wasn't exactly a 'competition' to the top scorers in the class, but I had a decent '2' in my arrears tally thus far, which I had cleared in the second year itself. Chemistry and Math weren't exactly my strength. Besides, which self respecting Software Engineer would need Chemistry and Math in his career right?

But Barani and Abhi were a different story altogether. Barani had a slightly embarrassing 5 arrears out of which he had managed to clear two. And Abhi... Well let's just say that his favorite quote was '*There is no career without some arrears*', and he was taking it a bit too far. Some of us CSE guys had decided to go out for a movie after the exam, and Barani and Abhi were so possessive of me, that they joined us in the theater despite having an exam the next day.

"Chill dude. I wrote that stupid Automobile Engineering paper well, in spite of knowing nothing about it. This Heat Transfer paper is after all Saritha madam's subject da. And you know how attentive I am in Saritha ma'm's class, don't you? ;) Let's enjoy the movie now." Abhi lectured me, with Barani nodding his head and a sly smile on his lips.

At around eight in the night, with a bad headache from a horrible movie, we walked back to our room. Barani broke the silence after a while. "Dude, I am kinda scared" he said. Before I could ask him the reason, Abhi chirped in, "You know what? Me too, buddy. Me too". Barani then asked Abhi. "What book did you use to study?" "That Blue one. The one with strange shapes in the cover. Written by some R.G.Theory guy." Abhi replied.

"R.G.Theodore ?" Barani quizzed.

"Yeah... That's the one... I think." replied Abhi.

"Dude. That's just for reference. Saritha ma'm asked us to check it out as a reference for only a part of the first Unit." replied Barani, before he asked - "I have that Seshan book that we can use. You don't have any other books, than this. Do you?"

"There are other books?" Abhi asked with a terrified look on his face.

Barani looked at me as if he was about to cry, I looked at Abhi and Abhi was looking at the sky for some divine intervention. And suddenly the three of us echoed in chorus - "*Karthi!*"

Karthi was the Mech department topper who stayed in a room not too far from ours. He was the consistent 'Best Student' of the college and was always surrounded by girls, some asking him for his notes, and some asking him to clear their doubts. A fact, that did not go down well with other guys. But desperate times did call for desperate measures. And before we knew it, we were surrounding Karthi who was busy going through his notes.

"Of course I completed studying, I'm just doing my third revision. What do you think, I am like you guys?" Karthi responded to an unusually polite Barani.

"Sorry buddy. I cannot give you that 'made-easy' book now, man. I need to do a fourth revision you know. Can't take any chances." He added. "Ask me if you have any doubts guys, I'll help you in the best way I can." Abhi and Barani looked at each other.

Abhi had, what the guys called, a 'Gym Body'. And being heavily built, does have its advantages. That 'made-easy' book of Karthi's on Heat Transfer, was easily lying in 2 pieces in our room after half an hour. One part of it for Units 1 to 3 was near Abhi, and the other one was near Barani. They had also managed to 'borrow' the syllabus sheet and some notes that they could find in Karthi's room, which was scattered all around the room on top of the photo copies for the last exam. The room was in a mess. So was their plan of clearing the 'Heat Transfer and Thermodynamics' paper.

They had only looked into the Syllabus for a few minutes, when Abhi remarked, "This looks easy man... You just have to study this and this, and this you could leave off as a choice." pointing to the topics listed. "Why don't we have a coffee before we continue to study?" asked Abhi.

"You meant 'before we START' right?" clarified Barani.

"Yeah yeah. Same thing." explained Abhi. "One strong coffee and we will be back immediately." he added.

And for the next one hour, we were sipping coffee and chatting with Kumar Master. We told him how horrible the movie was and that it would be a total flop. We discussed how Politics had gone to the dogs and that there was no strong leader left in the TN Political scene. We were heaping praises on Ganguly and how he was leading India to some wonderful wins in recent times, when Abhi remembered all of a sudden. "Boss we have to study, no?", and a stark realization drew upon Barani as well. While we were running back, a couple of juniors from our college stopped us in the way. "Sri *Anna*, you haven't left yet?" they asked me. I pointed to Abhi and Barani, who were fuming already. "Oh Mech has exams tomorrow right? All the Best to you. Hope it is an 'All Clear' for the both of you" he added. (*Def: All Clear - Passing all the exams in a semester. Rare feat for the guys like Abhi and Barani. Antonym: Wash Out*) Barani and Abhi followed me with smoke bellowing from their ears. "We will deal with them later*machi*" he told Abhi. The only 'All Clear' that Abhi knew was on the label of a shampoo sachet in his bathroom.

"I can't fail this one guys. My Dad might strike my name off the Ration Card, if he sees one more arrear against my name." Abhi cried, as we entered the room by around 10 pm.

"11,12,1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9. We got 11 hours before the exam starts. That gives us approximately 2 hours per unit. And we would have one hour for revision too." calculated Barani.

"Super *da*. We can do this easily" chipped in Abhi.

For the next half hour, there was absolute silence. A few dogs barked occasionally, but then they didn't have an exam the next day, did they? Abhi and Barani were concentrating like never before.

"Oh.. So this is how they spell 'Bernoulli'?" Abhi shouted all of a sudden. "I thought we were talking about Burnol or something like that in class. This is actually interesting buddy."

Barani was hitting his head with that photocopied bundle of notes that he was holding, perhaps with the intent of transferring the information directly into the brain. I could only smile.

An hour later I decided to hit the sack. I was just about drifting asleep when Abhi woke me up. "*Dai*. Get up. Ask me this question na? Please?" I woke up half sleeping and asked him "What now Abhi?"

Abhi smiled "Yeah, *abhi abhi*..." he chuckled. "Ask me what is the Zeroth Law of Thermodynamics."

"What?" I questioned.

"No you ask me. 'What is the Zeroth Law of Thermodynamics?'" Abhi explained.

"What is the Zeroth Law of Thermodynamics?" I repeated like a zombie woken up from the grave.

"Listen to this. There are 3 objects. When A is in Thermal Equilibrium with C... And C is... No wait..." Abhi looked down into his notes again "Sorry. When A is blah blah with B and B is blah blah with C... then B is blah blah with..."

"D?" I asked. "Wow. I hope you don't want me to repeat the answer too?"

"Dude you are of absolutely zero help to your pals. Where is your commitment to Friendship?" asked Abhi.

"Where is Barani? Can't he fulfill the commitment tonight?" I asked.

"He is in the terrace man. He said he wasn't able to concentrate here." Abhi replied.

"Oh really? I can't imagine why?" I chuckled.

After that Abhi talked to me about a lot of things, ranging from the laws of Thermodynamics, Boilers, Engines, Valves, The *Parotta* at the hotel, the 'hawt' heroine from the movie that we saw that evening, the crush that he had for CSE's Aarthi, and how she had a thing for intelligent guys, and how much he hated Karthi for trying to impress Aarthi, and a whole lot of other things, which never went into my sleepy head. It was only after I snored, that he realized that I was asleep. I was sound asleep, for exactly 23 minutes, if I can recall correctly, before a loud bang woke me up.

I woke up to see that huge book that he had picked up from Karthi's room on the floor. That was Abhi's way of celebrating the completion of the first unit. I decided that it was impossible to sleep anymore with this raucous around, and picked up a magazine to do my part of midnight study.

Barani chimed in at around 1 am, "Dude. its tough to remember these equations man. All of them seem similar. What do we do?"

"Never fear." shouted Abhi. "My transparent Nataraj Ruler is here."

"How many equations are there?" I asked.

"Let's just say, we might need a few more rulers." Barani replied.

The finest of the Goldsmiths would never have done anything with as much precision as Barani and Abhi wrote with a pencil on their rulers that night. To the naked eye it looked like mere scratches. But if you looked closely, it contained most of the formulae that Thermodynamics needed. It was tough to find out which formula was for which condition, but Abhi and Barani weren't bothered. I questioned them if it was ethical to cheat but was vehemently drowned down by their arguments. Abhi even quoted Einstein -

"You know what Einstien *thatha* once said?" he asked. "I don't burden my mind with facts that can be looked up in books. I am doing just that."

And with the time being 2 am, I was in no mood to argue.

With each ticking minute, the three of us grew very sleepy. I tried to catch a few Z's whenever possible, but Abhi and Barani took turns to wake me up and ask me if I was sleeping. But soon, they grew tired as well and let me sleep like a baby.

I had no idea of what happened rest of that night, but when I woke up at 7 in the morning, I felt like waking up in a warzone. Barani was sleeping in the Balcony, making the best use of a footmat as a blanket and Abhi was snoring away resting his head on that thick Fluid Dynamics book of his. Both of them had an alarm clock next

to them set to 4 and 4.30 respectively, which I guess were promptly switched off when they had beeped.

"*Dai*. Wake up. Its 7 in the morning" I tried waking both of them up.

"I love you too Aarthi" replied Abhi still in sleep, While Barani got up in a flash, looked at the clock and shouted - "We are dead, man. Totally Dead."

We managed to shake up Abhi as well and the guys tried to cram in as much as they could while getting ready for the exam. I've never seen Abhi pray, but that day he prayed like a Mantis. I tried telling them that this was a Madras University exam after all so just try to answer your questions with as much theory as possible. I told them to at least look at the diagrams for the units that they had not even touched yet. But I could make out that nothing was registering in their heads.

After a good bath and some positive energy, both of them looked ready for the exam. Abhi was unusually cheerful and decided to leave his books behind. Just for the fun of it, I asked him to tell me the Zeroth Law of Thermodynamics again. He smiled at me, thought for a while, kept thinking, frowned at me in the end and said, "I hate you man."

...

That afternoon Abhi and Barani came back with wide smiles on their faces. "Mission accomplished", Barani mentioned with a content smile on his face. "Dude, I think I might even score a bloody centum." Abhi remarked. "That crackpot Karthi has competition coming his way." I was happy for them.

And as expected, Barani scored his sixth arrear and Abhi piled on a couple more after this one as well. But a few bad words for the 'guy who corrected their paper' and couple of beers in Pondicherry washed out all the 'sorrow' from their hearts. Abhi's

dad blew his top, but then, isn't that what all dads who have their boys in college supposed to do by default.

And as our dear HOD, our respected lecturers, lecturers of other departments, our dear parents some of the 'centum' guys, Karthi and even the canteen *anna* had predicted, we did not exactly end up as coolies, peanut sellers, watchmen or bonded laborers in our careers. All of us somehow scraped through college, managed to get placed and earn a decent living. The Knight Riders did actually turn out alright. Barani works for a leading Car manufacturer as a Senior Engineer. I am not doing too badly as a Software Engineer either. And as for Abhi, well let's just say that Abhi found his calling in the tough, bad world of IT, as well.

Some story huh? All right. Break over. Gotta get back to the reviews. Abhilash 'Hitler' Sekaran may have been my roomie. But when it comes to work, he is quite a Perfectionist. And in his own words –

"Perfection, is everyone's business..."

***** THE END *****

The Door

"He must be rich. Insanely rich." Narendran Iyer mused to himself, as he rested his old legs on the comfortable couch in the middle of a huge hall, of a palatial bungalow, sipping on to a hot cup of tea. All of which, belonged to the affluent Ramakrishnan family. The Ramakrishnans had a reputation for generosity, stories of which, were widely popular in and around the cool hills of Ooty. Never had the Ramakrishnans disappointed the needy, with their copious donations to charitable organizations. The family had seen its share of problems and suffering. Yet, their hearts and wallets were always open to those who required it. And hence, understandably, their palatial bungalow, often played host to hundreds of people, seeking generous donation to their charity. Narendran Iyer, was one of them.

As Narendran sat there, extracting the last drop of the delicious, hill side tea, from the soaked tea leaves in the bottom of the cup, he was making mental calculation of the amount of money he would pocket. "Eeshwara. If all goes well, I should be able to bring home the colour TV, that Sulochana was pestering me for, Bhagawaane.." He only wished that the huge rear door of the bungalow, which opened to a beautiful scenery of the lush green, tea gardens, which parted to show a wide path which tapered down into oblivion, and which conveniently invited the nippy, Margazhi fog inside the bungalow, were closed. The buzzing heater in the corner of the hall, did little to camouflage the winter chill drafting in through that open door.

"Mama will be down here soon. He is taking his medicines." announced the young man to Narendran. "I hope you are comfortable sir. Would you care for another cup of tea." he enquired, looking at the empty cup in Narendran's hand. "No Thambi. Thank you. I'll wait for Saar here. Ask him to take his time. You are truly generous people pa." he said in the politest tone possible, rubbing his palms together to beat the cold. "But Thambi, you are....?" he hesitantly enquired to the identity of his young host.

"You are new here Sir, aren't you?" spoke the young boy, not more than 18 year old. His new, juvenile, sprouting moustache was the only counter argument to his eyes, which shone with an intensity much ahead of his age. His casual T-Shirt over his faded jeans could have advertised him as yet any other school/college going youngster, if he hadn't properly introduced himself "My name is Karthik, dear Sir. Karthik Ramakrishnan. I am Vaidi Ramakrishnan's nephew." He introduced himself, hinting a dash of pride when he said the last line.

"Of course Saar." continued Narendran. "The reputation of your family, shines in your eyes Thambi. Oh generous Sirs, I am sure Vaidi Saar will donate generously to our temple fund. We will perform a special Abishekam in your family's name. And..."

"Sir. Please talk about these to Mama when he comes down." Karthi cut short

Narendran's sales bid. He saw Narendran shivering in the gust of wind that came through the door and asked him. "Sir, I think this will be the first time you'd be talking to Vaidi Mama?"

Narendran nodded in agreement.

"Well in that case Sir, it is my duty to educate you about certain facts and truths that you should keep in mind, before meeting Mama, lest you do not irritate him asking wrong questions." continued a solemn faced Karthik.

Narendran sat in rapt attention.

"Well you may perhaps be wondering the reason for keeping that big door open, in the middle of Ooty winter? It is permanently kept that way because of Mama. There is a rather sad story attached to it. A story which explains Mama's current condition." Karthik continued, with Narendran listening to him like an attentive child.

"Vaidi Mama, had a beautiful wife and a lovely young son. They were his greatest possessions that he guarded fiercely with his life. His life revolved around these two. In short he was the happiest person in the whole wide world. Until that cold, December Morning. That cold fateful December Morning."

"What happened Thambi?" asked a curious Narendran, judging the lump in the throat of the narrator.

"They started from here in the morning. Atthai had said that she was off to get some vegetables from the market. She refused the car, saying that the baby needed some sunlight to keep it warm. Dressed in a red saree, with the baby sleeping on her shoulder, our little, white, Pomeranian, to keep them company, the three of them walked that very same road, and disappeared around the end." said a choking Karthik, pointing out of the open door, towards the winding road between the tea gardens. "They never came back."

"Some say, they were kidnapped. Some say that they died in that marsh, which devours every living creature it comes in contact with during December. There are a lot of things that have been said. People have looked around for them. Police has given up after an intensive search. They never found any bodies. But my poor Mama, was driven Mad."

Narendran jumped from his seat.

"Relax Sir. He is not like what you think. He is perfectly normal in every sense. Except that he has not come to terms with the loss of his life, yet. He keeps looking out of the Door every day and every night, expecting the love of his life to walk back the path and into the door, with his baby in her hand, and the cute little dog to come running to his heels. We have tried explaining to him, but he gets insanely angry when we try to. His medication has been increased off late, and that is why he doesn't make as many public appearances as he used to. My Uncle is ill Sir. I hope you treat him with some pity, that an ailing man commands. Please do not ask him anything that might hurt him. I beg of you sir, Please." Karthik said with tears in his eyes.

Narendran wiped away his tears and said, "Do not worry sir, God is watching. He provides only good things to good people. By God's grace everything will be fine. I will pray that Saar gets cured soon. You do not worry Saar."

Just around that time, a man in his thirties, with unkempt hair and an overgrown stubble, wearing a spotless white dhoti and shirt, descended down the stairs. Karthik wiped his eyes, and addressed him, "Mama. This gentleman is here to see you."

Narendran folded his hands in respect, stood up and paid respects to Vaidyanathan Ramakrishnan, a man about whom he had heard from his elders in his village miles away from here. Someone, whom they had said, would generously contribute to the already rich, temple fund. As Narendran talked about his plans for the temple and why he needed a nice, big donation from the Ramanathan family. Vaidi listened attentively and then nodded his head in affirmation. Then in a minute his eyes turned pensive.

"Mr.Iyer. Would it be possible for you to wait for a while? My wife will be back soon. I'll give you a cheque after that."

Narendran was shocked. He saw Karthik on the other side, clutching his head in despair. Narendran did not know, if he were to pity at the poor state of the generous man, or humor him by accepting to stay for a while expecting someone who would never return.

"Err..." He muttered.

"It won't be long Sir." Vaidi explained. "She left this morning to get some vegetables. She said the baby needed sunlight. She refused the car. Little Fluffy also went along with them. It has already been late, they should be back any moment." Vaidi continued, looking gingerly out of the door.

Narendran was devastated to see the plight of this man. Why did God choose good

men for such a plight, he wondered. He said a silent prayer for the man. He hoped he would realize his loss soon.

"There they are..." cried Vaidi.

Narendran felt, it wasn't right for him to stay there anymore, so he started to rise from his seat, when his eyes hit upon a couple of tiny figures at the horizon visible from the door. He strained his old eyes even harder. To his horror, he saw a lady in a red saree, with a baby on her shoulder, and a bag in her other hand, and a white, fluffy dog running around her legs.

"There, see. There they are." Vaidi repeated pointing out and breaking into fits of cough.

Narendran looked at Karthik who reached his Uncle's shoulders and held him softly. Couldn't the boy see the figures there. Was he sharing the visions of that sick man sitting across him. Was he making him sick as well. Narendran's heart started beating faster. He rose from his seat and darted out in a flash, fear writ large on his face, with a surprised Vaidi looking at him. Narendran ran as fast his legs could take him, with Vaidi yelling "Iyer Sir... Iyer Sir..."

"There. That patch of dust on your shirt looked hideous." said Karthik, who dusted off the shoulders of his Uncle's shirt.

"What's wrong with him Karthi?" asked Vaidi.

"Nothing Maama. Nothing at all." Karthik continued, as he traced the stumbling figure disappear over the horizon. The man had gone cuckoo, and Karthik cracked a sly smile. He walked towards the portico, a thousand thoughts riding his head on what Mr. Narendran Iyer would be feeling at this point, when suddenly he was startled by a lady in red saree, with a kid in her hand.

"Atthai... You scared the living daylight out of me." shrieked Karthi to a beautiful, smiling lady in her late twenties, with a smiling baby in her arms. His aunt walked in with a huge bag of vegetables. The dog ran towards Vaidi and began licking his feet.

"Dai shoo..." shouted Vaidi, chasing the little dog away. "What happened di? What took you so long? Why didn't you take the car?" Vaidi had all the enquiries directed at his coy wife.

"You know how the markets are, don't you? Crowded like the village fair. The prices

are going through the roof. And Karthi, who is that poor old man who ran away from the house like he had seen a ghost?" asked Vaidi's wife.

"Oh, that's nothing Atthai. Just some poor old guy, who suffered from some mental ailment. He had come asking Mama money for the temple fund, but I think he needed the money more for his own treatment. Guess the poor thing had one of its mental breakdowns here. Poor thing." explained Karthik with a glint in his eyes.

"Oh that's so sad. God bless him." said his Aunt, as she continued, "Karthi close that wretched door now, we should get that lock fixed soon. This would only aggravate the terrible cold and cough your Mama has. Go close the door."

Karthik was more than happy to oblige.

18 year old Karthik Ramakrishnan was a student of English Literature. Clearly, Short Stories, were his forte. :)

***** THE END *****

Overtime

"Some time to be back from a vacation." Viji thought to herself, in her deserted cubicle of her deserted floor, as she saw the clock creep past 11.00 PM on a lazy Friday night. "Friday is the most horrible day to come back after Vacation." she mused. "Oh, Why wouldn't Sathish Sir just give me this day off too." But Viji herself knew the reason. It was the end of the year, and almost everyone she knew planned their vacations around this period. She was lucky that Mr.Sathish Raman, her boss at office, allowed her the indulgence of a week's leave on the condition that she would be working overtime from Friday, to cover for the thin workforce at office. The joy of a possible vacation had blinded Viji's little eyes so much, that she had immediately agreed to the condition. And hence, the sullen soliloquy was a direct consequence of that. She felt worse especially today, when not even a single soul was available in office.

She waited for her printer, to start printing out that 200 page report, as she loaded sufficient paper into the tray, and hit the 'print' button. Despite the real-estate boon, Raman Builders could only afford large, primitive, ink-jet printers. She had so wished, that a company like hers, which had grown from a single room establishment near Vadapalani to afford itself a couple of floors on a sufficiently posh commercial building on TNagar, could have thought about investing in a Laser printer. She imagined how simple her job would have been then. Simple, fast and noiseless. Perhaps, a Laser Printer could have saved her from what was about to happen to her that night. Perhaps...

As the inkjet printer commenced the monnotony of churning out hot printed sheets from the slit at its top, something pierced the eerie silence, like a hot knife through butter. A shrill, cry of a man in pain, echoed through the building, sending a cold chill through Viji's veins. "Aaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh..." The shriek lasted a few seconds, followed by something hitting the ground, hard. With the air conditioning turned off, and not a soul in sight, one could hear the faintest heartbeat. The eeriness of the sound, made her heart go into overtime, and prompted cold blood to go rushing through her body. She gathered only her wits, leaving the bundle of paper that she had dropped spread across the floor, and rushed to the nearest exit. She ran as fast as her delicate legs could take her, with a fear of someone following her. Now Viji was in no way, a scary cat. No Sir, not by a long shot. She had once walked around mid-night, through her notorious street, dotted with several bars and wine shops, with drunk mortals, allowing a few drops of smelly liquid become more powerful than the muscle in their heads. A lame and foolish act of Viji's, no doubt, done more in desperation than choice, with which she tried to advertise her bravery to all her friends who were amazed at her courage. But tonight, it was different. Tonight was going to be very different.

As she walked by her floor's access door, the empty hall-way, which echoed with eager and chatty employees in the morning, reverberated now with the unsure footsteps of a young lady playing Agatha Christie. The printer was still printing that report of hers, and she was secretly glad, that there was something she could hear, to which she could attribute a source to. She moved slowly, measuring each of her steps, with a prayer on her lips. As she approached the switched off lifts, she heard someone running in the stair-well. Fast hurried steps, and heavy panting, which sounded like someone was being chased. Chased, by someone, or perhaps some 'thing'. The footsteps passed through her floor, and Viji just stood there out of fear. Slowly the sound of the steps faded out. The lifts weren't working, and her only way out were the stairs. Although, her mind felt otherwise, her footsteps crawled towards the stairs to figure a way out. As she inched near the huge white door with the round glass window, she prayed that she found only an empty stair-case on the other side of the door. As she pushed the heavy door open to a spooky, creaking sound of the hinges, her heart almost stopped beating. Just outside the door, a dark, brooding figure stood with a torch shining at her face. Thankfully for her, she recognized the silhouette before she could pass out of shock.

"Aaaaahhhh! Kannan Thatha? What the hell?" She cried, more out of relief than anything else...

"Aaah... What? Who? Who's there?" Clearly she had scared the poor, old, Security Guard - Kannan, out of his wits.

"Viji? Viji madam? What are you doing here at this time child? You almost gave me a heart attack there." said Kannan, as he recognised her lovely little face in the glare of the torch.

Kannan Doraisamy, was an old timer at the office. A security guard by profession, he pre-dated most of the employees at Raman Builders. He sat on his little desk at Ground Floor, and carefully kept a watch at any one or any thing coming into or going out of the building. He had this old world charm around him that made everyone passing him greet him with a warm smile. He called the employees, almost less than half his age, as Sirs and Madams, and they in return honoured him by calling him Thatha or Grandpa. People said he came from a Military background or something, which clearly reflected in his nasty temper. But age had caught up with him. He had withered over the years, shoulders had began to sag, and his imposing baritone was punctuated with bouts of dry cough. But Kannan Thatha, was clearly, the man who protected the employees of Raman Builders. Someone, who Viji was glad to have around her at this time.

"Overtime, Thatha... I was about to leave in another half hour, when I heard someone shout. I got scared and ran out. I am so sorry for having startled..."

Even before Viji could complete her sentence, they heard footsteps again at the floor above them.

"You stay here child. I'll check that out." Kannan ordered, as he marched with an absolute resolve to put an end to this.

"No Thatha, I am coming with you." yelled Viji, as she tried her best to keep up with the aging, yet fit frame of her hero of the moment. Kannan tried to shoo her off his trail, but Viji was way too scared to stay anywhere alone. She tagged along.

As Kannan led the way shining his torch through the dimly lit stair way, he mumbled reassurances to Viji. "Don't you worry ma, I'll take care of this. I'll see who has the guts to enter my building under my watch." Viji felt comfortable with those words of re-assurance. She was so calm and composed, that she almost did not shriek, when she saw a dark sinister figure standing at the exit of the top floor of the building, shining a torch at them. The figure had a strange build, almost human. Except for the head which looked un-proportionately bigger. The scary silhouette was clearly startled by their presence, and darted into the floor, bursting the door open and blinding Viji and Kannan temporarily by the light from the fully lit fifth floor. Kannan winced for a second, and then darted behind the figure in equal gallop. Viji, needed more time to get her eyes accustomed to the light, and gingerly followed in the direction where the two had disappeared.

As she entered the fifth floor lobby, her heart was pounding like a jackhammer. It was insanely silent there. Silent enough to drive her mad. She thought twice before taking a breath, lest she advertised her whereabouts to that mysterious thing in the fifth floor. She tried to shout out to Kannan, but not even a whimper escaped her terrified lips. As she reached the middle of the lobby, trying to peak in at the other side for any sign of Kannan Thatha, the uneasy silence was broken by the lifts coming to life. As her body trembled at this sudden development, she pacified herself that Kannan might have flicked the switch of the lift. While trying to drive fear out of her mind, she heard hints of a struggle from the direction of the electric mains. As she limped towards the direction of the commotion, she was stopped in her tracks, by a torch being flung in her direction. She immediately recognized the torch as Kannan's, as she had seen him carry that a lot of times during his inspections.

By this time, Viji decided that she had enough. She wanted to be as far away from this insane commotion, as humanly possible. Gathering all the energy that she could muster, she turned around and hit the button of the lift. She did not want to take the stairs, as she knew that her heart could not handle another scare. The lift reached her floor soon, and she ran into it amidst fast paced footsteps in her direction. She pushed '0' and kept on hitting the close button. "Close... Come on Close the door... God, save me. Please..." she prayed as she kept hitting the button. As the door was about to be closed, a hand jammed in to open the door. Viji's legs couldn't hold her now. She collapsed on the floor of the lift, and with her tear laden eyes, she saw a middle aged man enter the lift, forcing the door open, with an expression on his face that could have scared even the boldest on Earth. He wore a monkey cap, with a cheap shawl folded up as a turban on his head, and another shawl covering up his body. He seemed to be trembling too. Viji realized the silhouette. It was the 'thing' that stood at the door.

"Don't hurt me. Please don't hurt me... Please, God, Please..." She begged, crying her heart out.

He said nothing, looked at Viji with shock, and went to repeat the same exercise that Viji had indulged a few seconds ago. He punched the close button as hard as he could, and waited for the lift to reach Ground Floor.

Those were the longest 30 seconds of Viji's life. As the lift hit Ground Floor, Viji dashed out of it like a raging bull. The other guy also followed suite, as Viji dashed towards the front exit, she found it locked from inside. Before she decided to give up on her life, she heard a deep, yet trembling sound behind her.

"That gate is closed madam. Please use this." said the guy who shared the lift with her.

He had got rid of his ugly shawls and stood there wearing a blue full hand shirt, with a logo on his pocket that seemed vaguely familiar. 'The Creature' was human after all. Viji strained to look at him, and relaxed after she saw the logo. "Raman Builders Security" it read in bold, as Viji came out of the building, onto the busy TNagar road along with the guy.

"Building Security?" She asked him gingerly, still keeping some distance from him.

"Yes Madam. You must be an employee? I see your ID card." he enquired.

"You bet I am. And what the hell just happened there? I saw Kannan Thatha running in..." she was cut short.

"Madam. You are right. I saw him too. It was horrible. He just went about running over there. I was so scared that I just screamed my guts out." he explained.

Viji hinted a smile. Some security guard he was. Scared of just looking at the other Security Guard? Creating such a ruckus and giving a poor employee a heart attack. She shouted at the guy.

"Are you crazy. Don't you know that it is just Security Thatha, our Kannan Thatha, your senior. Why the hell did you have to shout like that. Look, you must be new, and you are just too paranoid and unfit for this job. I'll complain to Thatha once I see him. What is your name? Where are you.." She kept on saying, releasing her vented up fear as anger directed at this guy.

"No Madam. Wait. You don't understand Madam." the new guy tried to composed himself unsuccessfully, as he continued with a tremble...

"Kannan Mama died 3 nights ago while chasing someone in the fifth floor. He died of a heart attack, running those stairs. I am his Nephew - Karthi. I am supposed to be his replacement." he whispered, looking at the building, bathing in the full moon's light, as if sporting a sinister smile.

Viji stood there stunned, fighting the temptation to conveniently fall into the comforting arms of unconsciousness. She realized, that she wasn't the only one. Someone else had also stayed Overtime at Raman Builders tonight.

***** THE END *****

One Love Too Many

Hey there. How are you doing? My name is Vignesh. Vignesh Narayanan. Friends call me Vicky. Male, 28-ish, and married for almost a year now. I manage a small mobile showroom just off the Vadapalani main road. Well, one of the many that dad owns. I drive an old Esteem and have a truck-load of spare time on my hands. Yeah, I'm exactly the spoilt rich kid types, that you've seen on TV. But then, trust me, it ain't that bad. I understand that you might be interested in listening to a Romantic Story. Well, I hope you can keep a secret, because I am going to tell you one. I love Janaki, my beautiful wife, and my best-est friend, ever. No, that's not the secret I wanted to tell you. Janaki isn't the only woman I was/am/would be in love with. This is my, strange, dysfunctional, alleged 'Love' story. :D

I am not exactly sure, if my story qualifies to be a 'Love' Story in its true sense. But, I'll be honest with you. I actually did, (and perhaps still do) love all the women I am going to tell you about. It has never gotten serious, and I think even Janu knows about this. She has never raised an objection, and there has never been a quarrel. She is so sweet that sometimes she just laughs these off. Perhaps it is trust. Perhaps this is what they call true love. What could I do, if Cupid actually uses me for target practice. I just can't help falling in love.

My mom keeps telling me, that when I was born, some good looking nurse in that small hospital in Kumbakonam, planted a kiss on my cheeks, looked at me and told me that I was one handsome guy, who was sure to have a whole lot of girl friends when I grew up. I must have taken her words very seriously. Oh yeah, I was born a Casanova. I apparently had more girl friends in my LKG than guys, and I, I'm told was absolutely possessive about each and every one of them.

Off late, all this started that day, when I first saw Elizabeth, talking to her friend in that building, near Mount Road. Just one look at her, and I was in love. She looked like an Angel on earth. Her eyes twinkled with mischief; lips curved the right way to show a beautiful smile, and that little lock of hair that kept falling on her face, perhaps as much in love with her as I was. My words can absolutely do no justice to her divine beauty. And, as it happens a lot with me, she did not notice me at all. But I was undeterred, and as most kids of my age did, I kept following her. And it was during this time, that Janu came into my life.

Janaki Gopalan. The unbelievably talented, and insanely beautiful, Ms. Janaki Gopalan. "Gosh, you are beautiful" those were the first words I spoke to my 'would be' wife, when we were introduced by a common friend, some years ago. She blushed initially (rather uncharacteristically, as the friend told me later), gathered

herself, and hit back at me immediately with a smile - "I wish I could say the same about you, Mr..."

Holy cow. I was in Love. Err... Once again.

Janu was an artist, and an absolute no-nonsense woman, with no time for useless talk, and with a very bright head, firm on her shoulders. And me? Well... I, to put it mildly, was exactly the opposite. I loved books. Oh yes. Especially the big, hard bound ones. They made excellent pillows. However, Janu, sadly, didn't share my enthusiasm. To her, books were her 'best friends' (Oh yeah, that's what she called them), someone she can go to find solace and peace, when she needed. You know, she could quote Shakespeare as effortlessly as the Bard himself, whereas I used to ask doubts even in the comics I read. Her idea of a movie was to understand the shot picturisation, admire the acting of the lead actors, the direction and all the other artistic elements of the movie, whereas, my idea of a movie was, to sit and drool at the actress/actress' female friends/their friends, etc.

For some weird reason in this world, atoms and molecules are so precisely arranged, and Physics so strangely schemed, that somehow, opposites always seem to attract. And trust me, I must have been the most happiest person, that Physics is always right. Forget about me, the only opposite I need to get attracted to, is for it to be of the opposite gender. (Thank God, atleast for that) But what was even more surprising, was Janaki seemed to like me too. It wasn't sudden in any way, and me being me, it did require a considerable effort to woo Janu. I remember it like yesterday, I had parked my car at some spot near Tnagar, and jumped out to walk Janu home, in true filmy ishtyle. We had only met a couple of times then, but always with some of those pesky friends around. This was my 'once-in-a-long-time' chance to walk her home that wet evening, and perhaps attempt to indulge in some sweet nothings, just me and Janu. It was beautiful, the faint drizzle on our faces, she, loving the drops of rain kissing her cheeks and her beautiful eyes almost jumping out with joy, and me, just looking at her and loving her love the rain. It was totally beautiful. Though, it would have been perfect, had my car been not towed away for being parked in the no parking zone. :)

I was head-over-heels in love with Janu, but that did not stop me from being me. I came across the absolutely hot headed and short tempered Priya. Priya, oh Priya. Her anger was very well known. Things defied gravity when she got angry, and you had to hope against hope when you met a fuming Priya, that you don't come in the way of the flying projectiles. But then she had a very sensitive side to her, that not most people realized and would have been a wonderful companion if only you could understand what really ticked her off.

And then there was Kayal, the gorgeously traditional Ms.Kayal Vizhi. She was truly, a refreshing 'sight' for sore eyes. An oasis of the classic 'paavadai dhavani', among the sea of jeans and churidaars. She was everything a guy looked for in his lady love. A pretty face, a shy smile, and a voice so sweet, that she almost sang every time she talked. I would have fallen for her, when a radical antonym of Kayal, grabbed my attention.

And then, enter Divya, who could give Kareena Kapoor and her size zero, a run for their money. I fell hook, line and sinker for Divya, when once while talking to a friend of hers, I guess she just totally forgot what she was saying, when she saw me looking at her. Ok, I agree, I am not exactly 'Imraan Khan' material, to have warranted such a speechless reaction, from an absolutely stunning lady like her. But then they do say Love is blind after all, don't they.

But, in spite of all these distractions, I just could not stop thinking about Janaki. A few months after our first meeting we had become pretty good friends. I began planning my days with her in mind. Running your own business had certain perks, that my friends in the IT industry never seemed to enjoy. I had a lot of time, after business hours to pursue my 'other activities'. By this time, Janaki had totally understood my interest in women, and she never seemed to mind or turned jealous, which brought with it, both, a sense of relief and a whole tinge of concern if she really liked me that much. :) Our mobile bills followed the inflation trend, and as time went on, our parents, slowly but surely, kind of smelt what was cooking. I was beginning to contemplate the option of spending my life with just one girl. And obviously, I wanted that girl to be Janaki. And then one warm September evening, when I was walking Janaki home, I popped the question all of a sudden. I never intended to be so abrupt and so sudden, but I guess it just came out. I asked Janaki if she would marry me.

Now if this was the movies, there could have been 2 distinct possibilities. 1) the heroine would have nodded her head in coy affirmation, and hugged the hero and broken into an impromptu song and dance routine in the Swiss Alps. Or, 2) the heroine would have looked at the hero and 2a) Slapped him, and insulted him before the entire public, or 2b) Pitied at the hero and said "I never thought of you like that, let's just be friends." But then, it wasn't the movies anyway. She just stood there for a few seconds, and then burst out laughing like crazy, with me standing there looking at Janu, wondering if she indeed was mentally unstable as I had thought of earlier, because she has already shown signs of liking me. Then Janu, got in control of herself as we reached her apartments, looked at my serious face and said, "Oh my God. You are serious?" She went in, and I felt absolutely stupid at myself. I swore that if Janu ever talked to me after that incident, I would never ever pull off something like that. I vowed, never to talk about what had happened that day.

She was absolutely normal the next day, and I decided to leave it at that. A few weeks passed, with me ogling at Freeda in the meantime. Then one day, when I was

driving Janu home, she asked me in a very matter-of-fact manner - "Were you serious that day?"

"Which day?" I quizzed her, although being perfectly aware of what she was talking about.

"Do you really want to marry me?" She asked, and then I finally realized, that there was a God. There was finally traffic from the other side as well.

I will save you the embarrassment by not revealing the mushy emotional dialogues that we exchanged that day, and by just letting you know that Janu and I got married a few months later, sans major opposition from our parents. And 11 months down the line, we are loving every bit of the wedlock that we got us into. But if you are tempted to believe that marriage has refined Yours Truly, or has tamed the Casanova within, then I can't tell you how wrong you are. I still am the same old Vicky. There is still the occasional Shalini, the very rare Sita, and the tomboy Kalyani who grace my life, week after week.

Yet, there was something common in all these beautiful ladies that I'd known. Something so enchanting, and so mesmerizing, that when I look at them, I forgot myself. It was those beautiful blue eyes. Beautiful, blue, eyes, that made me fall in love all over again. Now you can't hold that against me now, can you? I wasn't a roadside Romeo. I was in fact, a connoisseur of all things beautiful. And this, ladies and gentlemen, is my love story.

Well then, I'll see you around. I have a date again today. A date that I've been on, week after week for so many months, sitting in the front row of some auditorium and drooling like crazy watching a play. My blue eyed sweetheart Janaki is on stage at Alliance Francaise tonight. Apparently she is playing a hilarious, shy, Brahmin, wife, travelling to America for the first time. You should see her; she just floors the audience with her sense of comedy. But frankly, all she needed to do was stand there and smile, and I would have given her a standing ovation until my hands turned purple and broke off.

Janu's character in this play is called Bharghavi. :) And as I had been doing it all along, in the line of Elizabeth, Priya, Kayal, Divya, Freeda, Shalini, Sita and Kalyani, the characters that Janu has played on stage, I'm in love with Bharghavi now... :D

***** THE END *****

The Call

"...Please do try to stick to the deadline. Let me know in case of issues.
Regards,
Sushil Damodaran"

There is a certain peculiarity to these task delegation mails, that makes them odd and yet interesting at the same time. You need to be polite to ask your team to complete their work on time, and yet, make a point to ensure that you are quite serious about them doing their work perfectly. A skill, which I had acquired from my seniors, and had grown to master with time. I had just sent out a mail to my team, splitting up the new batch of mainframe programs, among 5 individuals whom I was just beginning to understand, late on that humid Friday evening, when my old little Nokia, sang to life. It was a strange number that flashed across the screen, which made me sure that it was a call outside of the country. I answered the call with a serious 'hello', expecting my onsite coordinator to scream a 'mornin maite' with the vigour of his San Fransisco morning, oblivious to the fact that a poor soul in India was spending his Friday evening in office. But instead, I heard a sweet voice just managing to utter a crackled "Hello!!", owing to the poor reception at my seat. I darted towards the exit, phone stuck to the ear, wishing that the access card didnt make that loud a beep on the reader, as I screamed "Who's this?", to a reverberating and empty production floor. The query was more for confirmation than out of curiosity, and possibly to delay the conversation, until I reached someplace with better signal strength. I would have known that voice anyday. A voice, I had grown to love with time. A voice, I hadn't heard for 4 months now.

"Hey, Its me Keerthi." said a calm and composed voice on the other end.

I stood there for a while, trying to take it in. There was so much I wanted to say. So much of anger, so much of love. A few months ago, I would have started yapping away to glory or (more often) given her a piece of my mind, if I wanted to. But things had changed now.

"Hi." Was all I could muster at the moment. And after a few seconds of uneasy silence, I asked - "How are you doing KD?"

A brief spell of silence, was broken by the sweet voice on the other end.

"Good.. Very good." said a voice, sounding otherwise. I instantly knew she wasn't happy. I knew her long enough to know, when she was lying.

We had always been the best of friends. So close and so true, that we never needed to tell each other how much we loved each other. We were always there when we needed each other, and always expected the same from the other, no questions asked. There were no sorrys, no thank yous and absolutely no pretense of liking something if we did not, in this relationship of ours. There was nothing that we shared in common. Interests, likes, dislikes, movies, music, even people. There was absolutely nothing that we ever reached a consensus on, ever. Yet perhaps, that's what brought us so closer together. We complemented each other. We were like those black and white squares on the chess board. The black, radically different from the white. And yet, staying together, close to each other. So close, that we had started taking each other for granted. K.D and Sush, were the best of friends, and the whole wide world knew about it.

"So... How's Vinay doing?" I prodded, trying my best to lighten things up. "Does he still drive around LA, like the maniac he was back here?" I added, faking the mischevious tone that I threw in when I was pulling someone's leg. I hated to talk about that guy. But then I knew, there was nothing more Keerthi loved talking about.

I still remember the time when Keerthi introduced me to Vinay, one of her colleagues. He was every bit a show off, that his car keys, imported shoes, and expensive glasses advertised him to be. He looked good, dressed smart, and spoke with as much politeness enough to sweep any girl off her feet. I despised him to the core, and Keerthi liked him a lot. Well, maybe not necessarily in that order. Keerthi and Vinay became good friends, and I just became jealous and less important. I was losing her, to a guy I hated the most. Maybe she knew it as well. He gave her the attention I couldn't, and she really liked that. But at the same time I knew, that her love for me had never diminished. I was just upset, that she never even bothered to tell me how much she loved me. But then, she never did. For that matter, never did I.

All her attempts at making me and Vinay, pals, was fought with extreme opposition from my side. There were a couple of times when Vinay really tried to mend fences, which were created broken. But after a point of putting up with my snootiness and facing my needless, he gave up, and retaliated. Be it lunches, dinners, or parties, it was either him or me who accompanied Keerthi, Sadly, for most times, it was the former. But then, I hoped against hope, that this was a passing phase. But sadly, it

wasn't. It grew serious, and culminated in matrimony. My dearest KD, was now Vinay's wife.

"Don't talk about that idiot da. I hate him." Screamed back Keerthi, punctuated with sobs. I was taken aback. It was usually my dialogue. Something was clearly not right. She continued - "You were right Sush. He's not my type."

I composed myself and thought deeply before opening my mouth to console her.

"Heyyy KD come on. What hapened? You had a fight with him or something?"

"Yeah da. He screamed at me today. Something he has never done. I feel miserable. I want to be there. I want to be near you. I hate him." She kept on saying this, which would have brought a smile to my face a few months ago. But now things were different. I was scared. I was worried for my KD. I was quiet that day, when she held the hand of the guy I had come to hate and took those marriage vows, only because I wanted to see her smile. I shook Vinay's hands that day, and hugged him, truly trying in all earnest to like him, from that day on, just because I wanted to see my dear KD smile. Alas, there was nothing I could do today. Nothing at all. Except perhaps, tell her that I'll always be there for her.

It was a wonderful wedding. The best I have seen so far. She looked so beautiful that day. Decked up in bridal glory, yet as simple as traditions would let her be. I sat watching her like a child. She resembled those fairytale princesses gracing those glossy, fairytale books. Perfect. And then, like a fairy, she vanished completely from my life.

"You never understand," they say, "about how much you've loved something, until you lose it, one day". I had never cared for her when she was around. But now, when she was no longer around to disturb me, annoy me or pick a fight with me, I felt lonely. There was no more KD around. No more punches to throw at her. No more silly arguments. An insane peace lingered around me, which I had began to hate. Why we lost touch, perhaps, I may never know. I immersed myself in my books, trying to forget her and move on. She moved in with Vinay and his parents in a distant city. I came to know later, that she had moved to California. I was happy for her. I did not write to her. Her Yahoo Id's password had changed. Maybe, it was her way of telling me that she needed her space now. I did not want to call her. I thought she would call me some day. But then for the past 4 months, she never did. Until today.

"You didn't hit him or something, now, did you?" I barked, trying to lighten the mood. There was no answer. As usual, she wasn't listening to me.

"Why didn't you call me da?" She wanted to know. "I know you are all macho, and all that crap. But why can't you call me up and ask me how I was doing?" she said, still sobbing.

I had no answer.

She continued - "You weren't around when I left the city after the wedding. You know how bad I felt. You couldn't even see me off? What was wrong with you? I was furious with you, and that's why I did not want to call you. But why didn't you call?"

"Because I did not want to see you cry re." I said.

"Now please stop your stupid filmy dialogues. Even Bollywood doesn't speak the way you do nowadays." She retaliated angrily.

I could only manage a muffled giggle. She smiled and asked.

"What's the matter? You're not going to fight with me? What's... Hang on just a minute." She got busy at the other end. The beeps and crackles on the phone hinted that she was doing something with her phone.

"Hullo." I enquired. There was a brief moment of silence.

"Vinay sent me a text just now." She said.

"And?" I enquired...

"And what? He said he was sorry, and he is really ashamed, and... Well... Its a private text, why should I tell you that." Keerthi was her usual self now.

"See. I told you right. He's a good guy." I supported Vinay.

She burst out laughing. "Wow. You really have changed da. Supporting Vinay, huh? Now that's a rarity. What's gotten into you Sush?" she exclaimed, still squealing in laughter. "Oh boy. Wait till Vinay hears this."

I joined her, laughing my heart out. It felt like old times. for the next few minutes, we did nothing, but laugh. I felt recharged. My KD was back. And it felt good.

Keerthi then told me that she had to go. She needed to call up Vinay. Her voice was back to normal again. The bubbly KD was back to her vivacious self again. Things were ok now. "You are going to keep in touch every week from now on. Yeah?" she thundered. I could not tell her, that there was nothing more I wanted to do. She parted with a really sweet Good Night, and just as I was about to cut the call, she said - "Love you da. Love you loads." As I cut the call and wiped those tears, making sure no one saw them, as I walked back to my seat with a big smile, I thought to myself - "Sisters, sure are strange creatures." I had a feeling, that somewhere in California, the erstwhile Keerthi Damodaran, now Keerthi Kumar, may have said something similar, about brothers as well.

***** THE END *****

The Deeku Chronicles

Deeksha couldn't stop smiling.

While almost all her friends, who were on the wrong side of 20s as her, were happily tied up in holy matrimony, Deeksh was clearly in no hurry to catch the bus. Though quite ardent in her heart, on relinquishing this 'curse' of spinsterhood that destiny had chosen her to endure, Deeksh didn't actually care too much. She was quite content with the freedom she enjoyed. She could sleep as much as she wanted to without any male voice playing 'Alarm Clock'. She did not need to listen to anyone of the opposite gender telling her what to do and what not to. (Save, at times perhaps, her dad) But most importantly, she had now perfected the art of picking out good looking males in a crowd, do a spot analysis of their handsomeness quotient, and then finally deciding if she needed to look at her prospective, 'Prince Charming', and to smile at him or not. All of that in a matter of seconds. Quite clearly, she wasn't looking forward on letting this skill go to waste anytime soon. Perhaps not even after her marriage, if that were to happen in the near future. And it was a result of this talent of hers, that she was grinning away to glory today. Deeksha, had prospected her Prince Charming today. And in the most unlikeliest of all places, in her office bus.

Deeksha couldn't stop smiling as she picked up to call her best friend of many years, Vidyut, who worked in the same campus, albeit, a few buildings apart. Deeksha yelled at the top of her voice, so loud that her colleagues who shared her cubicle, wondered if she actually needed a phone...

"Hey Dumbo... I saw him today... I finally managed to... Yippee... I'm excited..."

A serious, composed voice at the other end of receiver quipped -

"Err... Good Morning to you too..."

"Ya whatever. But listen. I finally managed to spot my Price Charming yaar. In the bus today. Can you believe it. Our own R11."

"No kidding? You? And in our bus? I thought, I was the most eligible bachelor in that bus? Or perhaps, because I came in Vijay's bike today, you could actually see other faces around. :)"

"Whatever... But he's soo cute re, idiot. Totally. And he actually smiled at me yaar. And more importantly, I smiled back." :)

"Hmmm..."

"I don't know his name yet, but I'm sure we can find that out tomorrow. You'll help me out tomorrow, wont you Viddu dear."

"Hmmm..."

"Oye idiot.. I'm talking to you."

Vidyut was paying absolutely no attention, as he finished reading his mails from his onsite coordinator. He had forgotten, he was talking to Deeks, his long time friend. A friend whom he could do anything for, except perhaps, pay attention to her 'Prince Charming' stories. He had heard so many of them, that he had forgotten paying attention to them. And precisely because of this, he had incurred the wrath of Deeksh a lot of times, and had spent a small fortune, buying ice cream for her, in repentance. But he enjoyed her company a lot. He knew, that the otherwise serious, a terror to her team members, and hard to convince, Deeksha Srinivasan, completely metamorphosed into a bubbly, chirpy, college kid, in his company. He loved it immensely, even if it meant listening to the odd Prince Charming story, once in a while.

"Huh. Who. What."

Viddu said, realizing that the choicest words he was hearing on the phone, were diverted on him.

"Dumbo... You are going to help me out right."

"Like I have a choice. I'm not exactly in a mood to have my behind kicked again today."

"You're a dude da. But I don't understand this. Your best friend is so excited for the first time, seeing her dream guy. And you..."

"Wow hey. Yippie. Hee haw. The great Deeku, finally has a guy whom she likes. Lets all celeb..."

Viddu realized that Deeks had caught the sarcasm early on and had already cut the call sometime ago.

"Bye Deeks" said Viddu to himself with a broad smile looking at the phone. He just loved to irritate Deeks like that.

Deeksha was a very pretty lady who had her share of admirers. She had seen herself through all the senseless flirting, needless gifts, openly made proposals and even the not so brave ones, dished out by so many guys around her, and handled them all with aplomb. Which is to politely say that she did not give a damn. But the problem with Deeksh was that she was unbelievably picky. She just couldn't like anyone, unless her head told her so. And no wonder, the people whom she liked were only a handful. Perhaps, it was in the stars. Her mom had told her of the peculiarity in her horoscope, that her parents had trouble following a suitable groom for her. Her horoscope was giving them so many nightmares, that they considered adding a few r's and rechristen it Deeksh's 'horroroscope'. Deeku had considered taking matter into her own hands. And frankly, her parents were more than happy to let her.

And ever since that day, the 'Man Hunt' was on. On the road, in the coffee area, during lunch, in the lift. Anyplace where Deeku went, she had her eyes wide open.

And this morning, those very eyes had introduced her to her dream guy. A good looking, lean, smiling dude, who, Deeku thought, (as any other girl smitten by the

love bug would have), looked like a Greek God. And he had swept her off her feet, with just two little words - "Excuse me", as he passed her to get seated behind her. A new Prince had been crowned. :) And Deeks was already singing duets with him in her dreams in office. She hadn't seen him earlier, and so Deeks concluded that he had to be one of those 'back-from-onsite' heroes. She was pretty sure that he wasn't a new joinee as he looked a bit too mature for it, but even if he was, she always had the Tendulkar couple for inspiration. :) She tried if she could see his Id, but he did not have a ID card on him. She was pretty sure, because she saw him being diverted to the Security Room to get his temporary ID card after getting down from the bus.

That day during lunch, Deeks spent the entire hour looking around for her 'u know who' amidst the scores of hungry heads in the cafeteria, occasionally nibbling at that plate of food, that Viddu was more than happy to assist Deeks in eating. As plate carrying employees surrounded them, not saying a word yet shouting "Get Out!!" with their expressions, Viddu asked her.

"You are not going to finish that sweet are you?"

"Where is he re? Why cant he eat on time?"

"Thanks madam ji. And what about that poori over there?" - Said Viddu munching on the laddu.

"Hey idiot. Grow up. I am talking about my life here. And you are concerned about a stupid poori."

"Come on what do u want me to do now."

"Listen to me and help me out. I want to know his name. Hope he takes the same bus we do in the evening."

"Mmm... Ya whatever... I m listening... Er... can I have that ice cream please."

And thus promptly at 6 o'clock, Deeks, stood at the bus area, scouring the sea of faces of happy employees eager to get back home, for that face, that had never left her mind since morning. She had managed to get herself spotted by her manager who was under the impression that she was not keeping well and going directly to home, her friend, to whom she still owed that 100 Rs, but not her Mystery Man, whom she so badly wanted to see. She missed a couple of buses, and a visibly irritated Viddu had to literally drag her to the next bus, consoling her that he might have left early, or he might leave late. He assured her that there was a higher probability of spotting Mr. Nice Guy, next day, in the morning bus. Deeks was not too happy to leave. Tomorrow never comes, they say, and Deeks knew that pretty well. But Viddu was in no mood to listen. And hence, with a heavy heart, and a head peeping out of the window looking for the mystery man, Deeks and Viddu, went home.

"What if he doesn't come tomorrow re Viddu? We should have waited."

"Whatever..."

"No come on seriously. What if he's also waiting for me there. It's not good manners to keep someone waiting re."

"Dream on girl. You know, these stories actually bring out the creative side of you. Now stop imagining it to be one of those filmy romances or those stupid stories that we get in forwarded mails everyday. Get real, you idiot. You can see him tomorrow."

"What if tomorrow never comes...?"

"Well, then there's always the day after." :D

A fierce punch numbed Viddu's shoulder for a while, before he started reading his book again, with a visibly upset Deeksh sitting next to him, nursing her paining wrist, who just could not wait for 'tomorrow'.

Well... 'Tomorrow' did come this time... And how... :D

Deeksha had slept really well the previous night. She wasn't intending to, because the thought of meeting Prince Charming the next day, was more than a potent dose of caffeine to keep her up all night. But Viddu, the nice guy he was, suggested, that if she is up all night, she would look really ugly and sick the next day, and that her Prince Charming wouldn't even look at her then. And promptly, Deeksha hit the bed by 10pm and woke up at 6, all rested and fresh. She took her own sweet time to get ready in her most favourite dress, and was standing near the bus stop a good 15 minutes before the bus even came. She even made the normally late Vidyut, arrive there earlier than usual, with her countless calls from 7 in the morning, asking if he was ready.

"You arent coming with me dressed like that."

Quipped Deeks, looking at casually dressed Vidyut as he walked in, with his rolled up sleeves, shabby shoes and all.

"I dont know you today, ok. Absolutely not." She added

"You sure about that? That means I am under no obligation to help you or anything right."

A strong punch landed on Viddu's shoulder.

"Shut up idiot. The bus is here."

Theirs was the starting point for the morning bus at 8am. The driver was surprised to see the very same souls who made the bus wait til 8.05 everyday because both of them, had this horrendous habit of catching the bus late, waiting for the bus today, for a change, and at 7.45 in the morning. The driver checked his watch again, and then the calendar even, as he parked the bus in the regular spot, wondering if the sermon he had administered on them about punctuality and time, a few weeks ago, was finally working. He had no idea of the motive behind this early arrival.

As Deeks entered the bus, she was confused about where to sit. She could sit in her regular place and get herself looked at, by the mystery man, perhaps even have him utter something more than "Excuse me.." this time around. It sounded perfect to

her. She could have Viddu take the back seat, and do his 'stuff', to find out the name and the employee id of her Prince Charming.

'The Stuff', was Viddu's very own proud discovery. It wasn't exactly rocket science anyway and Viddu was sure that all his fellow bus mates would have tried their hand at it, sometime or the other. He was just utilizing it to the best level possible.

The Admin team of their office had come up with a way to monitor the usage of the office buses. They had attendance sheets which were circulated within each bus, which everyone had to sign along with their employee ids and names. Viddu, when the situation called for it, carefully analyzed the pattern that the attendance sheet followed before reaching him. He could list down names of anyone in the bus at will, provided they had signed the sheet. Heck, he could fill the entire sheet by himself if needed. It wasn't totally foolproof, but it was way better than Deeksha's sneaky looks at someone ID Card. Now that was really embarrassing, if she was caught in the act. And at times, a sheepy grin was all that she could manage in those times. His best friend needed his services today. He could only oblige.

"You sit in the last row ok. I am going to sit right here."

Said Deeku, with an air of authority around her.

"Come on Deeks. That guy might think you are desperate. Now we dont want that sort of a first impresrion do we? And besides, lets see if the guy actualy searches for you. Thats how they do in the movies." :D

"Really. You think that will work." Said Deeks with utmost sincerity, oblivious to the fact that Viddu was enjoying pulling her leg.

"Why not? And when he searches for you like that, you could look at him from behind the seat, and the radio might play a real romantic situation song. Why, the rest of us could be background dancers, even."

"Shut up idiot." Deeksha hit Viddu again, and continued.

"As crazy as it sounds, you actually have a point there. Let's sit at the back. But that means, you shut your mouth and don't make fun of me. Deal?"

"Deal..." :D Smiled Vidyut. It was going to be a beautiful morning indeed.

As they settled down in their seats, the bus began to fill up. People started pouring in, and for a change, the bus started sharp at 8.

"Where's your guy? Not coming today?"

"Watch it dumb. He got in at the next stop, yesterday. And if he doesn't today, you're dead."

5 minutes later, Viddu was very much alive and kicking. The Mystery Man had entered the bus. And as expected, Deeksha was getting restless. Dressed smartly, in a white shirt and dark trousers, he looked around for a vacant seat, and as if by pure accident, he did spot Deeksha in the last seat and smiled at her, who was almost 'invisible' there, standing and chatting to another friend creating so much of a raucous, as humanely possible. Well actually the entire bus 'spotted' her.

"Him?" Asked viddu in his trademark, sarcasm laden tone, as Deeku returned to her seat.

"Of course. Doesn't he look cute? And he looked for me, did you see? And he smiled too."

"Well... That was more like a laugh. Something which the entire bus did on that stunt of yours. You embarrassed me there. What were you thinking?"

Deeku wasn't listening at all. She was looking at her Mystery Man, and murmuring.

"Say NO... Say NO... Say NO..."

A good looking girl who had just got in, (and whom Deeku had always hated) was talking to her guy. She was praying that it was only for taking the seat next to him, and absolutely nothing else.

"Say NO... Say NO... Say NO..."

And then it happened. She had sat next to Deeksha's Dream Prince, chatting away with him, with a smile, that Deeku just plain hated from the last seat. Vidyut was equally angry.

"Aw that's not fair yaar. I've sat alone so many times, she never sits next to me. I feel insulted yaar."

"Can I borrow your phone Viddu?"

"What? You're gonna call him now? How'd you get his number?"

"Nah.. I just want to throw it on her and break her head. Your phone, is obviously heavier than mine."

"How dare she sit there yaar? Why couldn't she sit somewhere else. See Viddu, I told you right. This female obviously has something against me."

"Chill Deeku. She is just sitting next to him. She's not marrying him or anything, is she?"

"My god... What if the guy's married?"

"Well then obviously your attempt at wooing him, would qualify to be, plain unethical, won't it? Next time perhaps, you could check that little detail first..."

"Shut up. No he won't be... He can't be... Hey, which state does he look to be from?"

"Err.. Solid?"

"Shutttt uppp... He doesn't look like a Tamilian right. I hope my parents would agree."

"Girl... Trust me, the condition your parents are in right now, they would marry you off to an alien if they had to."

"Shut..." Deeku had only half finished saying it, when she just could not believe her eyes. Her Prince Charming had turned back, and was looking at her. Deeksha was frozen. And then, something equally unbelievable happened. The guy, rose from his seat, excused himself from the chatty lady sitting next to him, and walked down the bus aisle towards the last row, with his eyes trained on Deeksha and sporting a smile. You could have hit Deeku at that time, and she wouldn't have known. She stood up automatically. Viddu was equally puzzled.

"Hi... Deeksha Srinivasan, right?"

Deeku would have fainted, if not for the giggling Viddu on her side waking her up. Her name had never sounded so sweet, ever. The acquired, American accent, clearly resounded with the 'Back-from-USA' echo. Deeku could only nod her head in affirmation.

"Deeksha? Hi. My name's Rahul."

"My name is Deeksha. Hello Rahul." murmured a visibly nervous Deeku. How did he know her name. That was strange. Did he actually do an analysis on his part. Did he

outsource the attendance sheet analysis to someone as brilliant as Viddu. Did she know this guy already. If she did, was she blind or something earlier? A million questions sprang up in her head. But she was clearly enjoying this conversation.

"I need to talk to you Deeksha. May we talk in private."

This was getting wierder by the minute. Whatever she had rehearsed, was being said by Rahul. She had no idea, what to so. She was ready to get down from the bus, if His Highness had wanted her to. But then a private place in a crowded bus, wasnt exactly a feasible requirement. Deeks was too overwhelmed by the sudden turn of events that she could not say anything. Viddu was smiling away to glory. He wasnt going to let this pass by.

"You guys can talk here. I wil get back to my ipod on full volume."

Viddu plugged in his ear plugs and threw in that added effect of nodding his head to loud music. Deeks knew that the ipod was not playing anything at all. She would take care of that and Viddu later, and she didnt really mind. There was nothing she had hid from viddu, ever. But Prince charming was sold to Viddu's suggestion. Rahul started speaking.

"I was wondering if you could help me. Do you know Sangeetha, er, Sangee of the Zenith project?"

Deeksha, did not like where this was going. Oh God, please don't tell me, Sangee is his girlfriend. Please don't. Please. Of course she knew Sangee from Zenith. The dumbo was a junior of hers in college, who had quit the company a few months ago and joined somewhere else. She was her friend's roommate.

"I'm sorry Rahul. Sangee who?"

"Well.. Sangeetha Krishnan. She was in the Zenith project till May. I understand she has moved out of the company."

"Oh Sangee... Yes, of course I remember her. How can I help you with that Rahul?"

"Well you see, I was her team-mate. I need to send her something. I don't know her current address. I don't know her email id either. I was hoping, you would be able to help me out with it."

As much as Deeku did not want to tell him anything about any other girl, the thought, that she might be able to get his email id without the services of the lazy Viddu was tantalizing. This could lead to bigger things now.

"Sure. I think I have it in my mailbox. I could send it to you. Your Employee ID is?"

"Wow, thanks Deeksha. Its 1891812. Do you want to write it down somewhere."

Nah, it was already branded in her head. She could forget her ID but not Rahul's.

"If you don't mind, can I have your Employee ID as well please?"

As Rahul noted down Deeksha's Employee ID in his fancy, little Blackberry, Viddu was giggling away to glory, at a blushing Deeksha. It was getting wierder by the minute.

"Thanks Deeksha. I hope you clear your inbox regularly, the attachment I send you could be slightly heavy."

Deeku was delighted. Rahul was hands-down, handsome, he had asked for her Employee ID, and he was probably going to send her his photos, all in a matter of few minutes, and with Deeksha hardly opening her mouth. Perfect.

"I will see if I can send them out today. You see I'm leaving the company this week. I'm going to Bangalore and...."

The rest of the sentences did not matter too much. Deeku was heart broken. A love story was about to end within 24 hours of its start. Viddu looked at her, one half of him bursting with laughter, and the other with pity for his best friend.

"Wow, that's great. My best wishes."

There was no need to continue the conversation anymore, and get even more hurt. Deeksha was now back to her more normal self. The serious, hard to please, and no-nonsense Deeksha.

"Save your wishes Deeksha. I'm hoping you are free on the 3rd of next month. I'm getting married here in Chennai. I wanted to send the invitation to Sangee, and I'm delighted you are helping me sort that out. :D Thank you Deeksha. I'd be delighted if you could come."

The world came crashing down around poor Deeku. All that good stuff that she had imagined about Rahul, almost vapourised. Given the chance, she would have knocked that Rahul's head off his shoulders, but she controlled herself and politely replied.

"He he he... You are welcome Rahul. And Congratulations. Bye."

As she saw Rahul go back to his seat, she turned to Viddu, who was looking out of the window, trying his best, controlling the laughter that he just couldn't stop. Deeku punched him hard on his shoulder, and said -

"Now don't you say a word Idiot. What kind of guy is that. He came and wanted to talk to a poor, helpless girl alone, and you got busy listening to the ipod. What kind of a stupid friend are you? Idiot... Donkey... Why did you let him talk to me. I think the guy's a psycho or something. Uff."

Deeku punched him again, and then with a shattered heart, leaned onto his shoulder for solace. A lone tear trickled down her cheeks.

"Why the hell does it only happen to me da? Why only me?"

"Because, you are the best girl that I know, who is going to get the best guy that this world is going to offer. Patience my dear, patience. And I'm sure you guys will be the best couple in the whole wide world."

"Really? You think so? Even better than you and Deepti?"

"Much, much better than me and Deepti."

"Love you re. You're the bestest friend I've got."

"Ya ya... I know. Now, the next time you punch me, try the other shoulder, ok." :)

***** THE END *****

Chronicles of a 'Non-Drinker'

I studied (well, so they say) for my engineering degree in Pondicherry. Four glorious years of my life were spent in this beautiful Union Territory, of pristine beaches, French architecture, tranquil places, and sweet people. And that's not all what Pondicherry is famous for. Well, if you are even remotely aware of Pondicherry, you would be pretty sure what I am coming on to. Liquor. (Booze / *Thanni* / *Madhira*)

Call me a wasted, tasteless bloke, who doesn't know to enjoy life. But I have to admit that I have never tasted that amber liquid yet (nor have any plans for it in the future), inspite of being surrounded by bottles of *thanni*. Proud to be a teetotaler. "Yeah right" if that's what you are saying now, don't worry, because I get that line (and different tamil equivalents of it) all the time. But then that's the truth, no cigarettes as well. Perhaps the biggest achievement during my college days (Next to getting my B.E degree of course) was to resist these very temptations even on being away from home and staying in perhaps the holy ground of drinkers. Well frankly, wasn't much of a temptation either. Never did like booze and its manifestations on mortals (blame it on Pankaj Udhas if you want) or the smoke and things it does to the people around.

Alright. Before I chase away the perennial drinkers viewing my blog (and they are quite a substantial lot), let me clarify. This is not a lecture on the harmful effects of booze. Well.. not exactly atleast. You see, being a non-drinker among a heap of drinkers, does have some perks attached to it. This is just a harmless recollection of a few.

They say – When in Rome, be a Roman. Well I tried to. A Pondicherrian that is. But, remembering the brands and suggesting the side dish was the maximum I could go to. Well, you can't be less educated than that if all your roomies are part of the tippler gang. The inhabitant of my palace, were a bunch of wonderful guys, with hearts of gold. Alas, hearts that can be melted by a bottle of beer. (Ya ya I know,

beer is a cool drink. I've been told that a zillion times too. Hey wasn't whiskey recently added to that list. Ow come on, give me a break...) They say that a few sips (or gulps) of the fluid harms no one. But then, a college goers mind understands "moderation", only as much it understands the "Theory of Computation" lecture. So a college goer party's liquor requirements at that time were either 'Fulls' or 'Crates' (Well.. it depended on the financial constraints as well). And it was those times, when I got reduced to the role of a bar-tender inside my own house. The reason for me being conferred the honorable role of a vending machine was apparently because I was impartial in the allotment of resources. Yeah right. It was one of those days, when I had loads of Pepsi to drink, and a huge variety of side dish to feast on, as I sat back watching the wonderful sight of a pack of perfectly normal men being turned into clowns and monsters in succession by an innocent looking smelly liquid. Hmm, I was in heaven.

There is something to this spirit that brings transformation to men. Once inside those craving stomachs of mortals, it just frees the mind and elevates it to a different plane altogether. And trust me, it is quite a funny 'plane'. Trust me, you may never see the amount of emotional outpouring anywhere else than you can when a man is drunk. For some reason, one loses the inability to lie with a sufficient amount of booze inside. I wonder how long, before a polygraph is replaced by a mini-bar. And confessions of friendship, unrequited love for a friend, and life pledges for a fellow drinker are as customary in that situation as Mango Pickles are to a glass of MC. Romeo may have never professed love to Juliet as much as a drunk Raghu would do on a Saturday night to a sloshed Rajesh. "*Machaan, nee enoda friend da.*" (Dude, you are my friend) I cannot remember how many times I have been told this by the dude sitting next to me, just for passing him that half empty bottle of soda. If only everyone was as courteous when sober, wouldn't we be the politest race to walk on this planet. And if you are the 'un-drunk' among these tipsy crowd, you'll have a hard time remembering the love stories and crushes that everybody utters. Some with pain, some with utmost happiness. In simpler words, they provide you with the blackmail material when you desperately need a bike to go downtown, or you need somebody to buy you lunch from cafeteria. Like I said, it has its perks.

But out of my own experience of losing my pocket FM radio, I can say for sure that booze and technology don't mix at all. If you are unfortunate enough to have a

stereo, tv, radio, computer, a mobile, a whistle or even remotely anything that can play a tune – Beware. These guys can create a raucous, loud enough to wake up Pakistan. Ask my neighbors at Pondicherry. I guess they must have been the happiest souls to see us leave. Maybe their neighbors too. And if you are unfortunate enough to be at the helm of operating these gadgets at these times, get ready for some harrowing times. A DJ wouldn't have change music that many time in an hour, as many you would in five minutes. I had a beautiful pocket size FM radio sacrificed to the fury of a 'high' roomie of mine, just because it did not play '*Althota Boopathi*' when he wanted it to. Thank God, I did not have an iPod then. Occasionally you may be asked to turn to 'Raj Sports', 'Channel Free' (I later realized in the final year, that they had meant Channel[V]. However Raj Sports – I am still not sure) on the TV. What was I to do, launch a new channel? Their dance can put the nimblest of bollywood hips to shame. Shakira, move over. It's the perfect comedy material for a dull Monday, if you can record it and save it. Although your computer / mobile can then become the target of many an evil eye, if word of your possession of their Saturday night jig, comes out. Or worse, your life may be at risk, if you even remotely mention about this to a girl.

Atleast these aforementioned atrocities were confined to the four walls of a room. But it becomes a serious pain in the neck when you are the only sober guy with a bunch of intoxicated maharajas on the streets of Pondy, each one, thinking of himself as the king of the world. I am always inducted in this gang, some times threatened into it, as I am by default assigned the task of bringing the sheep home. Atleast for that night, I become their Guardian Angel, herding them in an auto, explaining to the bemused onlookers, shutting up these chatterboxes shouting at the hero in the cinema theater, consoling the auto driver as somebody won't stop giving directions to him from behind, I've done them all. In other words protecting the general public from these bunch of inebriated men who had beer flowing in their veins that night. Well, actually, vice-versa.

And then on having these guided these rudderless ships safely into the harbor, with the efficiency of a skilled seaman, I am sometimes more tired than them. After having laid down these spirit-filled bodies, in the nearest unoccupied ground space, I can only lay down next to them. And unmindful of the smell of whisky, beer, rum, cigarette smoke surrounding me, and the odd limbs of my neighbor resting on my

aching chest, I can only sleep like a log, hoping fervently, that tomorrow will be a better day.

Usually, I am the last one to get up the following day, last one to wake up and see the sober bunch clinging to their heads with a bad hangover. Someone would give me a sly smile, and ask me – “what’s with you dude? Were you drunk yesterday as well.” I would have buried him alive at the very place, but then somebody else would interrupt. “Hey come on guys, he was the one who brought us safely home. We should thank him. *Machi*, lets have a *thanni* party tonight at t...”

Usually, at this point, I am either knocking the lights off my fellow room-mate who was bright enough to give that idea, or out at the bus stop trying to catch a bus to Chennai for the weekend. But I believe it is usually the latter. May God save the ‘**non-drinker**’. May God save this ounce of sanity in this insane world. Hic....

***** THE END *****

Love Thy (English) Neighbor

It was the usual, cold evening in London in the first week of May when the protagonist of the story - Maks and his friends were swinging to some Tamil gaana songs in an up-market suburban flat in the outskirts of London. Now the British are generally very sweet people. They will go from 60 to 0 in their shiny new cars in under 6 seconds flat, just to let you cross the road even before you think about doing so (Now wouldn't we do just the opposite here). Like I said - sweet. But, beware. Any disturbance to their daily schedule could get them as angry as... well... as not having their cup of tea in the morning. The flavor of which, some of us savored in that cold, May evening in London.

Our abode was a 2 bed room flat on the first floor, sandwiched between a rich (his large screen plasma TV and the brand new Playstation3 confirmed this adjective for me), bachelor, Pakistani student (who had an eccentric taste for loud, heavy metal music) in the ground floor, and a middle-aged British couple in the second floor. The apartment had wooden floors, which meant that you could wake up the entire building if someone sneezed a bit loud in the night. But, we realized all this late, as we were used to our sound proof, concrete flats, back in Chennai.

'Loud' is a word which is, perhaps, as subjective as the word 'music'. And that was precisely what was playing that night. We had a big amplifier connected to a couple of huge speakers in our flat which, had they been in India, would have found excellent use in any of the marriage ceremonies back in Chennai. The volume was miniscule by our standards, as we were grooving to some popular Tamil hits, when we heard a knock at our door. Initially it was drowned in the percussion coming out of speakers, lost in those thumping beats of A.R.Rehman. But then, when we realized that the vibration on the walls was not because of the music, but because somebody was trying to break the door, we muted the volume wondering who the visitor was.

Maks went on to answer the door, as we were getting our ears adjusted to that unusual noiselessness. In that silence we could hear a sleepy, unhappy, angry British voice, in a tone that sounded similar to an employee complaining after his

appraisals. He sounded distraught and fed-up, and we already knew why. Then we heard our John Doe saying in the politest way possible – "Mates, what's happening here? Do you know what the bloody time is now?"

There was a sudden rush of footsteps and a huge commotion that followed, before Maks rushed inside the room like a raging bull. He was searching the room like a man searching for a weapon to defend himself from a gang of thugs. We were under the impression that Maks was getting beaten and rushed to the door to save him.

We found a middle-aged man, in his thirties, standing at our door in his night-pants. I recognized him to be our neighbor from the second floor, as I had caught him looking at me several times, as if I was from another planet, whenever I passed by him in the stairs. His unkempt hair and reddish eyes clearly showed that he was trying to get some sleep with little success. Seeing so many of us standing there, his anger changed to more of an appeal, as he again said the same thing – "Do you guys know what time it is?"

I was about to say – "We are really sorry Sir. We promise to keep the music down. This will not happen again", when suddenly, Maks rushed in, pushing us behind, with the enthusiasm of a kid who had just found a bag of chocolates. In his hand was a digital alarm clock that he had found in one of the drawers. Before we could realize what was happening, Maks thrust the digital clock on his face and said, with a tone of achievement and absolute innocence – "Nine Thirty!"...

We tried our best to control our laughter, but couldn't hold back. We were rolling on the floor with laughter, as the poor guy walked back to his flat with utmost disgust, murmuring that he had to get up at 4 AM the next day, with Maks standing at the door, clock in hand, this time shouting "Nine Thirty-one"...

***** THE END *****

To Hell, And Back

It was hard, very hard. I was hanging there for nearly half an hour now. My arms and shoulders were aching beyond belief, crying out to me for freedom. As much as I wanted to let go, I couldn't, I simply couldn't. Death was hovering below with its arms wide open. I mustered all the strength that I had to hold on to that piece of metal for some more time, competing for a better hold on the edge along with other mortals like me.

Oh yes! I wasn't alone. There were other men, ill-fated or foolish in thought as me, crowded together at the very same point, fighting for existence, for that little space to survive this ordeal. Any naturalist would have loved to describe the scene as a perfect illustration of Darwin's Theory. And then, as it was for the past 20 minutes, the ground started moving again.

We were not put there by force, or because some evil, demented force wanted us to be there. We chose to be there, by our own will, by our own accord. Foolish, Maybe. But for some of us, there was no other way. There simply wasn't. Although most of us did not want to be there, we had to as there were no other means available. I was young and strong, and despite what 'IT' had done to my body, I could 'barely' manage this assault on my ill-developed muscles and flirt with death. But it hurt me to see that there were other men, much past their prime, who were sharing this ordeal with me, and even sometimes helping the others survive there. Maybe they had got used to this, but I truly did not belong there.

There were children and women-folk with us too. But the males, being the gentlemen they are, always protected them and provided them with safe passage and more means of survival, taking on all the hardships and risks on themselves. But there were other species of the masculine gender which foolishly considered this entire ordeal as some sort of a sport to prove its masculinity to the fairer gender and win a few, strange, puzzled looks from the females. They never realized the grave

dangers they were venturing against. But, having passed that stage myself, I knew that they would grow brains with age.

By this time my arms were ready to give up and I was trying to shuffle my position to divert the pain to some other tolerable part of my limbs, which could take a little more pain than the others. Amidst the scruffle, my ears picked up a cacophony of hoots, scorns, and wails. As I lifted my eyes above the sea of heads in front of me, I saw a pair of eyes looking at me with all the discontent and repugnance it could garner. *'The Master'* was here. Before he could say anything, I handed him those pieces of metal, which I had saved in my hand anticipating his arrival. He studied them in his palms, and in retaliation, threw bits of torn paper at me. I just managed to catch them and still hang on, fighting for survival.

I was holding on to dear life by my hands for 10 minutes now, when I realized that my suffering was going to end soon. The sheer thought of it had me rejuvenated and my arms were beginning to feel that extra strength going into them. I managed to give that extra bit of effort trying to stay straight, as I felt the weight of a few frustrated eager bodies falling on me, who were as eager as me to leave this arena of suffering. Just when I thought I was about to leave my hold, God decided I had enough and we stopped.

I jumped down, and was never so happy to have solid ground below my feet. As I stood there filling my lungs with much needed air and giving my limbs nothing to do, I thanked my stars. A few of my mates from the Inferno joined me as we looked at the rest of the unlucky people who were still stuck there. "Fare well my friends. May God be with you", All of us wanted to say to them, as they started moving again.

As I saw them disappear at the horizon, riding that big, six-wheeled, BOX, with thick black smoke engulfing me - I wondered how people took the supremely overcrowded MTC Buses at peak-hours everyday. How could they travel in footboards, risking their life and limbs, just to reach office on time. I was amazed at the commitment of the middle-class Chennai-ite, but was seriously concerned of his

safety. I got a first-hand lesson about survival today. People struggle to stand straight in a MTC bus during peak-hours. And I was worried of my 'much-comfortable' office bus being too bumpy on the speedbreaker, or my push-back seat, not 'pushing back' enough. This assault on my mind and body, was an experience I did not want to have again...

I could only warn myself - *"Don't miss the office bus tomorrow. Please."*

***** THE END *****

Took My Breath Away

*Tired of tired fingers, turning its pages again.
An old, open novel, fanned down on my chest in disdain,
As tired eyes, sought oasis in the desert of boredom,
I scoured the world, through the halved window of my train.*

*Ten and two hours'd tired me, yet I had more time to kill.
I'd even used all bits of paper to clean out the window sill.
And then it came, like a fresh breath of fragrant air.
And even in the melee of a moving train, time seemed to stop still.*

*Poets often say, a thing of beauty, is joy forever.
But if anything ever gave joy to beauty, it had to be her.
I pinched myself, saw an angel in blue, walking right towards me,
A funny new feeling engulfed, felt like a Summer Sun in December.*

*Like clear sparkling water, that rushes down a splendid ravine,
Like a new tender leaf swaying in the breeze of God's design.
She came and sat herself on that vacant seat before me
No language had a synonym of beauty that could match her form divine.*

*My tired, slouching body, found an excuse to sit up straight.
That old, open novel, sprang up to a sprightly life before my face.
The top edge of my book, would have never had this much of eye time,
Pity, I forgot those reading glasses, on my head which were placed.*

*Day turned to night, and then night turned back to day.
I stayed a silent admirer, but not a word did she say.
She looked straight at me sometimes, and made me weak at the knees.
God'd been unfair to her, He must've took ages to make her this way.*

*And then like how she'd come, she was gone in a flash.
Feeling her way through the compartment, holding her father's hands.
I stood there shocked, muted, I wanted so much to say.
She'd left her Braille books behind, but she'd taken my breath away.*

***** THE END *****

Birds on a Falling Tree

*Feathers flying around, closed beaks that would never tweet.
A whole flock of crying eyes, mourning for hearts that would never beat.
They were scared and worried, although they were living a life so free.
They were birds of different feathers, nestled on a falling tree.*

*A branch had been cut, their nests disturbed.
Some had lost all hope, a few, chirped un-perturbed.
The cutting had started to be very frequent of late.
The birds, crying and desperate, blamed it on their fate.*

*Birds of a feather flock together they say.
But this banyan proved this wrong in every way.
The parakeets shared their nests with the doves.
While the crows kept watch, as ordered by the eagles above.*

*But alas, the watch wasnt good and a branch was cut.
It was becoming a habit, many lives were lost, but.
Lives always returned to normal in a few days.
Birds from other branches mourned, sighed, but kept going their ways.*

*The birds knew well, whose bloody axe it was.
A monster in a hood, terror on his mind, anger in heart.
No one new what he wanted, perhaps wood from the tree.
The trunk was strong, and so he began felling branches, three.*

*The eagles swore, that they will tear him apart.
But the truth was, they were a few hundred birds short.
The monster, had made slow enemies of erstwhile friends.
The birds had to be right always, while the evil just once.*

*The parakeets no longer chirped in the doves nest.
They blamed each other, complained without any rest.
The peaceful banyan, was now becoming chaotic.
The plan of moving to another tree, sounded realistic.*

*But there were still a few birds who held their resolve.
This was their home, their banyan, be it spring or fall.
True, the tree was falling, with the axe's vicious pound.
But they knew the banyan's roots went deep underground.*

*They consoled themselves, that the branch would soon grow back.
And grow back much stronger, than the evil monster's axe.
They promised to guard the tree with their life.
The monster was no match for even a hundred birds, their size.*

*And with that resolve a few adamant birds sat.
Awaiting to punish the terrorizing monster, that evil rat.
Of course they were scared, but they still tried to live free.
They were birds of different feathers, nestled on a falling tree.*

***** THE END *****

A Dozen Red Bricks

*A dozen red bricks, on top of his head.
Carried a soul, to earn his daily bread.*

*His tottering steps, burnt dark in the sun.
The bricks were laid, his job was done.
A shadow waved on his face, a wave of respite.
He pulled his weary head up, with all his might.*

*In a distance, on a pole, newly painted white.
Fluttered the tricolour, oh what a pretty sight.
'Twas a sight to behold, what the poor soul had seen.
A proud wave of the banner, in Amber, White and Green.*

*A smile showed his lips, and then faded away.
He thought to himself, what was he today?
Only then he then realized, his country was free.
And had been so, for long, he realized - years Sixty.*

*This freedom was a gift from his father too.
A freedom fighter, his stories he always knew.
In a way, like his father, he was a fighter as well.
His father fought the British. He fought poverty's spell.*

*He saw near the pole, in whites, people, very few.
Dragged out of their beds, their faces rue.*

*None seemed to realize, what the day actually meant.
They hoisted the flag, and back home they went.*

*An ignorant world, locked up in their homes,
Stuck to their TVs, and their cushioned thrones.
He wondered why, only he had to work today,
Where was his freedom, on Independence Day?*

*He realized soon, he was much better than them.
Among heaps of coal, a rare polished gem.
Although to poverty and despair, he had succumbed,
He harbored a heart, that understood freedom.*

*He had no money, he had no wealth,
But he was free to do, what he felt.
His country didn't give him much, he did confess.
But freedom was his wealth, which he did possess.*

*And he carried on with his chore for the day.
He wanted to do something for his country, his way.
He knew no miracles, to make it quick.
So he built his country, brick by brick.*

*A dozen red bricks, on top of his head.
Carried a soul, to earn his daily bread.*

***** THE END *****

