

UNSCRIPTED

A DATELESS DIARY

DR CHHAYA CHORDIA



BlueRose ONE^{.com}
S t o r i e s M a t t e r

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Dr Chhaya Chordia 2025

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-93-7139-157-3

Cover design: Daksh
Typesetting: Tanya Raj Upadhyay

First Edition: November 2025

*... because memories revisit as they please, without a
timestamp.*

*To Papaji—the wind that once filled my sails and still guides
me in whispers.*

FOREWORD

One regret I have carried through forty blissful years of marriage is that I stood by as a silent spectator when Chhaya chose to sacrifice her promising career as a lecturer and discontinue her PhD to build a home for us. She made this choice without complaint, shouldering the cost with quiet grace. My guilt was only somewhat eased recently when she finally earned her doctorate—an achievement that was entirely her own, with my only contribution being that of an enthusiastic cheerleader.

From the modest classrooms of a government school in Narsinghpur to the esteemed office of the Director General of Administration at Amity University, Chhaya's journey has been fascinating. Her first teaching assignment came effortlessly when she graduated with a Gold Medal. After marriage, she embraced diverse roles in education, first prioritising the family before turning to social, cultural, and welfare initiatives. It was only in the last 25 years that she could fully focus on her professional aspirations.

A paratrooper, an NCC cadet, a sportsperson, a dancer, a student leader—Chhaya has lived many lives in one. She tells her story, which includes the stories of people who have left an imprint on her. Her diary, though not organised in chronological order, is a testament to her resilience, passion, and her indomitable go-getter spirit. It is the story of a woman determined to win hearts and leave her mark—a life well-lived and beautifully chronicled in these pages.

A perfectionist with an unyielding drive, she stands as a role model in every aspect of life—a devoted daughter, daughter-in-law, wife, mother, grandmother, godmother, teacher, mentor, leader, and, above all, a woman of substance. Whenever I find myself in a tough spot—which happens oftentimes—I simply ask: *What would Chhaya do in such a situation?* The answer never fails me.

Here's to her!

August 30, 2025

Group Captain Ashok K Chordia
IAF Veteran

PREFACE

I was anxious and afraid when I attempted my first parachute jump as an NCC Cadet. Being lighter than most other jumpers, I kept floating, uncertain of where I would land. Though I stayed aloft longer, I eventually landed safely. With each subsequent jump, I came to realise that lingering longer in the sky meant more thrill—and more fun.

Looking back, those jumps mirror my life: taking plunges, lingering to savour the experience and eventually, landing safely. I've loved being a homemaker as much as a working woman. I've cherished being a school principal just as much as I enjoyed lecturing in college. Today, serving as Director General of Administration at Amity University gives me as much professional satisfaction as my time managing the prestigious Club 15A in Noida.

It has been a long journey—from the sleepy town of Narsinghpur, Madhya Pradesh, to the campus of a leading university. I was a darling to my parents and siblings, a diligent student to my teachers. Cultural activities, sports, paratrooping, and NCC camps shaped me into a student leader. I once dreamed of a military career, but I was born too early—women were not yet welcomed into the armed forces. Instead, I donned the uniform of an NCC lady officer during my years as a college lecturer.

I've been fortunate to cross paths with extraordinary people who enriched my life. Conversations about them have often made for engaging storytelling. On many occasions, friends and acquaintances have suggested that I put my experiences into a

book. “If nothing else, in your twilight years you’ll cherish revisiting your past through these pages,” a friend once remarked.

So, here I go.

This book distils 60 years of an unscripted life into memories that keep returning to me. The people I write about—including the students I’ve cared for—have illuminated and shaped my life. They awakened my curiosity, nurtured my dreams, and gave purpose to my journey.

These pages capture moments I treasure. Like the time a former student spotted me in a crowded Heathrow Airport just to reminisce about her days in the Amity hostel. Or when another walked into my office with her grown daughter and said, “Ma’am, two decades ago, you looked after me. Now, please guide my daughter.”

This is not a self-help book—far from it. It is a timeless diary, a life lived fully and cherished deeply. In an endeavour like this, chronology matters little. I have changed the names of some people, and many—truth be told—I have simply forgotten.

I would be delighted if readers discover reflections of their own lives in these pages and the stories resonate with the most cherished moments of their own journeys. And if, after turning these pages, someone, somewhere, muses, “I wish I were her!”—I would count myself fortunate beyond measure and consider this effort worthwhile.

August 30, 2025

Dr Chhaya Chordia

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For nearly half of my adult life, Amity University has been much more than just an institution—it has been my oyster, my sanctuary, and the very soil in which my aspirations took root and blossomed. It is with profound reverence and gratitude that I express my heartfelt thanks to the visionary Founder President, Dr Ashok K Chauhan, whose faith in my abilities and unwavering trust in my intentions provided me with an extraordinary platform to explore, innovate, and lead. He gave me the freedom not only to act but also to dream—and more importantly, to turn those dreams into tangible realities. It was here that I found my *karmbhumi*, my sacred field of action, where each day brought purpose, challenges, and fulfilment.

The enduring sense of purpose and steadfast commitment to excellence demonstrated by Dr Atul Chauhan has served as a guiding beacon in my journey. His leadership, characterised by profound wisdom and compassionate integrity, has cultivated an environment in which I have felt genuinely valued and deeply inspired. I appreciate his persistent support in everything I have done.

I thank Dr Amita Chauhan and the entire Amity family, who have stood as enduring pillars of strength. Their belief in my contributions has been both empowering and humbling, helping me stay grounded even as I aspired for excellence.

Throughout this long and fulfilling journey, I have been blessed to be guided by mentors who shaped my vision and character.

Major General K Jai Singh and Lieutenant General R Sarin were not just senior colleagues—they were guiding lights, my *gurus* in the truest sense, who illuminated my path. Their encouragement, guidance, and trust in me have left an indelible mark, and I owe much of whatever I have achieved in my time at Amity to their mentorship.

Many people have recognised me over the years, particularly the parents of residential students, as a symbol of effective and compassionate Hostel Administration. I share that recognition wholeheartedly with my colleagues and dedicated team of supervisors, wardens, and staff members who have worked tirelessly behind the scenes. They are the invisible, gentle winds beneath my wings—steadfast, sincere, and selfless. It is their dedication that enabled me to soar, and for that, I am forever indebted.

My sisters, brothers, and *Jiji* (my sister-in-law) have not only been an integral part of my life's journey but have nudged me all along to pen down this diary. I thank them from the bottom of my heart.

I must also mention my son Mudit and daughter-in-law Anjali, both of whom are die-hard academicians, passionately committed to the pursuit of knowledge. Their academic discipline and love for learning have been a silent but powerful inspiration behind my decision to pursue a doctorate, and then, to pen this journey. Their encouragement gave me the resolve to articulate my reflections and experiences in these pages.

Finally, and most importantly, I bow my head in deep remembrance and gratitude to my late parents and in-laws. Their unwavering belief in me, their constant encouragement, and the

strength they instilled in me form the very foundation of who I am today. Though they are no longer physically present, I believe their blessings have guided me throughout this journey. Somewhere in the heavens, I am sure they are smiling down, content and proud to witness this fruit of my labour.

This book is a tribute to all of them. It is not just a dateless diary—it is a heartfelt chronicle of dreams nurtured, and a life lived with purpose.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 Shona	1
2 Khajanchi.....	9
3 Between Heaven and Earth.....	15
4 Courtship	21
5 Que sera sera... a kerosene chronicle.....	27
6 Blame it on Shona.....	35
7 Oh, that train journey!	41
8 Home they brought Shona's bag	53
9 Driven by a Purpose	61
10 Challenging the Default	69
11 "Before Chhaya cracks down"	75
12 "You know who I am?"	79
13 Life Takes a Turn	83
14 "You have my support..."	89
15 Litter to Leadership	99
16 Divya.....	105
17 More equal than others	111

18 “Elementary, my dear Watson!”	117
19 Party Continues	127
20 Gate-crashing a Party	137
21 Hunger Pangs at Night	143
22 Between Two “MYs”	149
They say.....	154

1
SHONA



*He bowed and said, “Thy wish is my command,” and, never
deviated.*



A name, conspicuously missing from the acknowledgements section of this book, is that of Group Captain Ashok K Chordia, my dear husband. I call him, “Shona,” and sometimes, “Sona.” That, indeed, is a deliberate omission on my part. Often, readers give a ‘pass’ to the acknowledgements section, and I could not bear to have his name skimmed over. Although he modestly refuses to accept, his contribution to the publication of this book and to so many of my life’s endeavours has been immense.

Always cheering from the sidelines—and sometimes right there on the centre stage—he has been an inseparable part of the story of my fascinating life. In fact, calling him a supporting actor would be unjust; he has, in many ways, co-authored the narrative of my life.

He was overjoyed when I began writing this book. With a calm and considered tone, he would suggest what might interest readers. He pushed me gently but firmly whenever I slowed down. Straining his eyes to read my scribbled notes, typing and retyping them, he was my steadfast scribe. But his true gift has always been far beyond editorial support—he has kept me smiling through every twist and turn of life’s journey.

Following are just a few stories from our life together—little things, perhaps, but they bring cheer and warmth every time I recall them.



A day into our marriage, in my new home in Ujjain, I was scanning the labels of a stack of audio cassettes, indulging in my love for film music. I asked Shona, “Do you have *Abhimaan*? It’s one of my favourites.” He scratched his head and said, “I’m not sure... If I do have it, it’ll be in this pile. But for now, let’s get moving—the breakfast is laid, and everyone is waiting.”

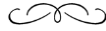
We joined the family for breakfast. I was the new bride, very much the centre of attention. My affectionate father-in-law, Babuji, made sure I felt at home. Shona, however, used this distraction to slip out of the house unnoticed and procured an *Abhimaan* cassette from a nearby shop. Two hours later, when we returned to our room, it was right on top of the pile. I looked at him, wide-eyed and teary, overwhelmed by the love I couldn’t imagine existed between two people who had, until then, hardly met.

“Thy wish is my command, my lady,” he said with a theatrical bow.

All these years, he has stood by that promise—quietly, faithfully, and lovingly.

Another time, for my first birthday after he entered my life, he gifted me a tiny brass mirror for my tote bag. I loved its old-world charm, but it was the accompanying note that made it unforgettable: “*It’s my heart; you’ll always find yourself in it.*” That

mirror still rests in my bag. Although time has dulled its shine, it reflects a memory, not just the face.



When we moved to Agra a month later, we invented two little rituals for ourselves. First, to offer the first morsel of food to each other at every meal. The second was to quickly settle our differences, if any arose as we moved on in life together. We pledged to stay cool under all circumstances. And, if at all, things seemed to become unpleasant, we'd immediately fill specially earmarked goblets with water, and say, "Cheers!" It was a symbolic way to drown evil thoughts.

We've religiously followed the first ritual to this day. The second, the goblet-clinking—well, that faded with time, used infrequently to end a mock-dispute. I can't recall when we last did it. But even the memory of it makes me smile.



Our courtship lasted nine beautiful months. It was the pre-digital age—no smartphones, no WhatsApp. STD calls were expensive and required patience. On Sundays, we'd book a call and wait half a day for three precious minutes of conversation. With people behind us in the queue smiling at our excitement and making us conscious, we turned to a more reliable method—letter writing.

Almost every single day for those nine months, we exchanged letters. Each word carried our thoughts, joys, and dreams. I still

have them, tied with a red ribbon—tinder-dry papers, full of caring emotions.

It wasn't possible to shuttle often between Agra, where Shona was posted then, and Ujjain--600 kms plied by some very slow-moving trains. And although Shona's seniors always cooperated, leave was a privilege, not a right. Periods of temporary separation were a norm even later, when he was posted in the exotic east (Tezpur, Assam) and still later, in Bangalore and in Chandinagar.



We are senior citizens now, but nothing has changed. We don't wait for Valentine's Day to express love. It lives in daily gestures—like this one:

Shona is an early bird. I, not so much. Therefore, very early in our lives together, he took it upon himself to make our morning tea—tea for him, and coffee for me. There's a story behind my preference for coffee, but more on that later.

One day, he noticed I'd been scraping off the cream from the overly sweet cream biscuits we'd bought by chance. I didn't like the cloying taste. "Shona, I think we shouldn't have bought these," I lamented. The next morning, when Shona brought the tray laden with coffee, tea, and biscuits, I gave him the usual 'good morning' hug. Then, still in half sleep, I picked up a biscuit and tried to claw away the cream. But, lo and behold, there was no cream. Instead, I found a little paper tucked between the biscuit halves. I rubbed my eyes to find two little red

hearts drawn on the piece of paper. Shona had scraped the cream neatly with a knife and placed the hearts in its place.

“Only you can do that,” I whispered, touched by the quiet creativity of his love.



And now, the coffee story.

I was a little child when the 1962 India-China war broke out. Like many others, I absorbed the strong anti-China sentiment. One of my uncles, in protest, gave up tea—he viewed it as a ‘Chinese’ drink. We, the children, followed suit. Years passed. Tea returned to most lips. But when I tried to resume it, I found I no longer liked the taste. And so, coffee became my beverage of choice—a daily ritual rooted in childhood patriotism.

Now, my day begins with coffee, care, and love served in a cup.



2 KHAJANCHI



The weight of a secret, and the value of trust.



Narsinghpur.

That's where I was born and where my earliest memories live—of running around with my siblings in a house with big open spaces and bustling with people. Thoughts often fly back to the old town. Sometimes, in my dreams, I find myself walking those familiar lanes again.

One of my most cherished memories from those days is of a secret pact my father made with me just as I was stepping into my teens. One evening, he called me after returning from the court and said in a hushed tone, “Chhaya, I want to share a secret with you. Can you promise to keep it to yourself?”

I was surprised and a bit curious. Curious because, for me, it was a wonder that, in a family of eleven members, which included my grandparents, my parents, two of my father's siblings, and five of us (two brothers, two sisters, and I), my father chose me to share a secret with. I felt privileged.

I closed my eyes, pinched my neck—a childhood gesture of solemn promise—and whispered back, “God promise, Papaji, I'll keep it to myself.”

He came closer and looked around cautiously, as if to ensure that no one was watching or listening. Then he drew some clumsily folded rupee notes from the inside pocket of his black lawyer's coat and placed them on my little palm, closing my

fingers gently over them. “Now, go, hide them,” he whispered, “I’ll tell you what to do with them, later.”

I tiptoed into a corner of the house—the place where I kept my belongings. In our large family, we children were sharing rooms. I opened my steel trunk, lifted the newspaper lining its bottom, and tucked the notes safely beneath it, hiding them under layers of folded clothes. I was confident no one would find them there.

When I returned, he was smiling. My grandmother had joined him by then. With a playful gesture—a finger on his lips—he signalled me to stay quiet. I nodded solemnly, lips pressed tight, and waited for a chance to speak with him later. That ‘later’ couldn’t happen for four days. I couldn’t find him alone to talk about the money I had hidden. On the fifth day, when he returned from the office, he handed some money to my mother and said, “I hope that’s enough.” Mummyji accepted the amount with an affirming nod and headed for the kitchen to fetch a glass of water for him. While she was away, he quickly handed me some ten- and five-rupee notes and whispered, “Hide them too!”

Soon, it became a ritual. Every evening, Papaji would return home, hand over his earnings to Mummyji, and, when he found me alone, give me a small amount to hide. One day, when we were alone, he told me, “Chhaya, you are my *khajanchi*—my treasurer. I give all I earn to your Mummyji to run the house. The little amount that I give you to hide is for a rainy day. I expect you to chip in the day she needs money and I don’t have it. Get it!”

Papaji's love for Mummyji was profound. Within his means, he always wanted to fulfil her wishes. That day, I received a life lesson in trust, partnership, and quiet responsibility.



Papaji was a lawyer by profession, but he began his career as a college lecturer. That's where he met Mummyji—then his student. It was love at first sight. But there was a problem. He an Agrawal, and she a Punjabi—their families didn't approve of their tying the nuptial knot. So, after waiting patiently, they took their silent vows and signed the marriage register at the registrar's office. In those early years, they lived on love, fresh air, and a modest income until Papaji eventually established himself as a respected lawyer in Narsinghpur.

Their love never dimmed. Papaji often took Mummyji to the local cinema to watch the latest films. Like hydrogen atoms, they were inseparable. Once, Mummyji was scheduled to visit her family alone. Travel arrangements were made. Bags packed, when she was about to leave, Papaji asked her, "Raj, are you leaving, alone?"

That was enough. Mummyji cancelled the trip on the spot. For the rest of her life, she never travelled without him.

I don't know if that episode in our parents' life influenced me, but in the forty years of our married life, I have rarely visited my parents or my in-laws without Shona by my side.



Papaji was a living encyclopedia. His knowledge of world history and geography was vast. He spoke with insight and authority about different religions and culture, and could recite Urdu couplets with ease. Thoughts flowed from his heart when he put pen to paper. His handwriting—elegant and cursive—turned every letter he wrote into something to be treasured.

Narsinghpur evokes another memory. We, the five siblings, used to gather at the breakfast table, listening to Papaji as he shared the latest news, discussed national and international issues, and encouraged each of us to join in. Boy or girl, he treated us, the five siblings, equally. He gave us wings and nudged us gently to soar across the big blue sky. These sessions continued unabated even when we moved to Ujjain.

Long live Papaji—in legacy, and the quiet strength he left behind in each of us.



3

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH



“The reason birds can fly and we can’t is simply because they have perfect faith, for to have faith is to have wings.”

– JM Barrie, The Little White Bird



The roar of the engines faded as I plunged out of the open door of the aircraft into nothingness. In the blink of an eye, there I was, suspended between heaven and earth, all alone. My heart pounded in my chest. I was drifting, uncertain of where I would land. There was fear; there was awe; and, above all, there was wonder.

That was my first parachute jump as an NCC cadet from the vintage C-119 Fairchild Packet aircraft at the Paratroopers Training School, Agra.

My palms were slick with sweat as I clung firmly to the harness connected with thin suspension lines to a large olive green canopy. There was nothing around me to relate to. The other cadets who had jumped with me were far below me; some had already landed. The loose talk in the barracks the night before—of how and where one might land—suddenly felt urgent. “Wasn’t I descending,” I wondered. “Would I touchdown softly on the ploughed drop zone or land with a thud onto a rooftop, or in a tree, or head for high-tension power lines?” From high up in the sky, I could see my mates who had landed. They were euphoric, folding their parachutes with the joy of having completed their first parachute descent. Lighter than most, I remained aloft.

The selection process for the Basic Parachute Descent Course was tough. There were rigorous physical, intelligence, and aptitude tests. I cleared them all with distinction. But there was

a hurdle; I was underweight. “Chhaya, you are the best of the lot, but your low weight is an issue. I’m afraid, after bailing out of the aircraft, you might just keep floating,” my NCC Battalion Commander in Indore had warned. “You have a month before the jump training starts. Eat well and exercise hard. You will be sent for the course only if you meet the criterion.”

From that day, I went on a force-fed diet of bananas, milk, and raw eggs--something I detested. The high-calorie and protein diet did make a difference. I gained just enough weight to clear the hurdle and be nominated for the prestigious course. “Don’t worry, you can carry some pebbles in your pockets to make sure that you come down,” my friends had joked. That’s exactly what I had done--stashed some pebbles and toffees to add weight. Sadly, the secretly stuffed pockets of my smock hadn’t helped much. The sky wanted to hold me longer.

When I finally touched down, it was with a sense of great relief and elation. Laughing and trembling, I shared the toffees with my friends on the drop zone. That descent was only the first of the five. And, though I remained the last to land each time, my lightness turned into a secret joy. What once felt like a limitation became something I began savouring--those extra moments of floating, of seeing the world from above. I went on to be adjudged the Best Paratrooper of my course.

In each subsequent jump, I discovered a version of myself I hadn’t seen before--someone who could bail out of a flying airplane, who could land, who could fall, and then was ready for another jump. Looking back, those parachute descents in 1978 mirror the journey of my life. I have taken many plunges since--be it into academia, administration, or life itself. I have been a

lecturer, a school principal, and now, as Director General of Administration at Amity, I find similar rush, similar stakes, and occasionally, the same urge to just breathe deeply and take a leap.

My association with parachutes didn't end there. Life's story unfolded in a way I could never have predicted; I married Shona, then a Pilot Officer and a Parachute Jump Instructor. He not only jumped for a living but made others jump too. Years later, during adventure parasailing sessions in Kharagpur, we encouraged and enabled the families of air warriors—the ladies and children—to take their own little leaps of faith. Later still, our son also took to the skies. He too became a certified parachutist. I guess some journeys get inherited, even if unintentionally.

For me, the mystique of parachute jumps resides not in their rarity but in what they stirred in me: a primal urge—to leap, to trust the unknown, and to always believe in the promise of a safe landing.



4

COURTSHIP



Moments that became memorable.

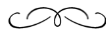


The morning after my engagement, our doorbell rang around 7:00 am. To my surprise, it was Babuji—my father-in-law-to-be. He read my face and placed a finger to his lips, the universal sign to stay quiet. I complied.

“Don’t wake the others,” he whispered with a warm smile. “I just wanted to say good morning—and bring you this breakfast. Bai (my mother-in-law to be) made it especially for you.”

I was deeply moved by his gesture. I took the packet, touched his feet, and said, “Thank you, Babuji”.

This ritual repeated the next day, and the day after that, and for the nine months leading up to my wedding. Every morning, without fail, he would arrive with a lovingly prepared breakfast and a bounty of blessings. People find it hard to believe, but it’s true—he came every single day. His love wasn’t expressed through grand declarations but through consistent, thoughtful acts. Thus, I came to understand the silent power of parental affection—unconditional and understated.



Sometimes Babuji stayed a little longer to share tea with Papaji. The two of them had an easy camaraderie. Babuji had a gentle, mischievous sense of humour. One morning over tea, he joked, “I’m so glad Ashok is engaged. Earlier he’d come home on leave

once in a blue moon—now he lands up here almost every month!”

They hadn’t stopped laughing over that joke when the sound of an aircraft overhead caught our attention. It was flying low—low enough for me to recognise it.

“That’s a Packet aircraft—the same kind I’ve done my para jumps from!” I said, filled with excitement.

It was rare to see a Packet aircraft over Ujjain, so everyone came out to see it. “Shona could be travelling in this aircraft,” I said intuitively.

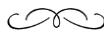
Mukul Bhaiya, my elder brother, laughed, “Now, for you every Air Force aircraft will have Ashokji on board.”

I smiled, wishing he really was there in that aircraft.

The aircraft circled over the area once before heading south. The teasing died down soon after.

But after about two hours, the doorbell rang—and there he was. Shona stood at our doorstep, smiling from ear to ear. Everyone was surprised and amused. “I must say, your telepathy with Ashokji is great,” appreciated Mukul Bhaiya.

It turned out that a Packet aircraft had developed a snag and landed in Indore the previous day. Another aircraft from Agra was bringing technicians and spares. Shona had seized the opportunity; he took leave and hitched a ride. When the aircraft approached Indore, the air traffic control instructed it to hold position over Ujjain for a few minutes for some reason. That was the very aircraft we had seen.



A few months later, I had my chance to surprise Shona. Around his birthday, I felt a deep longing to be with him. In those days, meetings between a couple before marriage were rare. But thanks to our parents, a plan took shape: I would travel to Agra to be with him, accompanied by my younger brother Ashshu.

We reached Agra in the morning and called the Air Force Officers' Mess. As luck would have it, Flight Lieutenant RP Deo, a colleague of Shona's, answered the phone. Shona was on drop zone duty and wouldn't return until about 11 am. Meanwhile, Deo took us to the residence of Flight Lieutenant VP Lal.

Mrs Indu Lal greeted us with warmth and generosity. "Chhaya, please be my guest while you're in Agra," she said.

Then Deo called Shona and, without telling him that I was there, he asked him to come over to Lal's residence, "Mrs Lal has invited the two of us over for a cup of tea after your DZ duty. She has baked a cake for you."

Shona's reaction when he saw me at Lal's home was priceless. He was completely surprised. It was our first time celebrating his birthday together, and everything about it—the spontaneity, the warmth, the stolen time—made it unforgettable. We spent three joyful days in Agra, and the memory is etched in my heart.

Interestingly, the visit ended like a scene from one of those Amol Palekar-Utpal Dutt comedies. A day after Shona's birthday, his uncle unexpectedly arrived in Agra. He was not known to be as liberal as our parents, and we feared he might disapprove of our meeting before marriage. So, Shona asked me to keep away from him. He juggled between the Officers' Mess and Lal's residence

for the few hours that his uncle was in Agra—spending time with me on one hand and entertaining his uncle on the other. It was comical.



Those nine months of our courtship were filled with moments like these—moments that became sweet memories. We met whenever we could, exchanged letters almost daily, and made phone calls. In a time before instant messaging and video calls, love grew slowly—through effort, anticipation, and the joy of connection.

Looking back, those were some of the happiest days of my life. They weren't marked by grand gestures or dramatic declarations, but by warmth, laughter, and the tender rhythms of two families coming together. What made those days truly unforgettable was not just being in love, but being lovingly embraced—by parents, siblings, and the universe conspiring in small but magical ways.



5

**QUE SERA SERA... A KEROSENE
CHRONICLE**



If love is fire, ours got forged on a smoky kerosene stove.



Just married!

And they called it *a child marriage* because Shona was still twenty-four years and three months when we took our wedding vows. It'd be nine months before he'd be eligible to rightfully claim his service entitlements as a married officer. Of all the perks, accommodation mattered most. We were lucky on that count. A modest two-room temporary accommodation, which was vacant with no eligible contenders in the queue, was allotted to us.

We thanked God and moved in—hearts full, cupboards empty—clumsily navigating the rites of coupledness. Thereafter, everything we did was a shared adventure—experimenting with new dishes, managing supplies, arranging and re-arranging the furniture, and figuring out how to make do with whatever little we had.

Those days, an LPG gas connection was a distant dream. It entailed a good amount of paperwork, which moved at glacial speed. Electric appliances offered little respite either, because power cuts were routine. The fridge was a showpiece; the toaster, a relic; and the fan, a sorry spectator to our daily struggle. So, we inaugurated our kitchen with a kerosene stove. Ah, the stove! A dozen stubborn wicks spitting black smoke before it agreed to light up.

In a few days, the burnt kerosene smell crept into our curtains, our clothes, and even our dreams. It mingled with the neighbourhood air like a stubborn guest determined to stay on. Saraswats and Sharmas living next door understood our predicament; never complained. In fact, they occasionally offered us cooked food to stop us from lighting our stove and polluting the air. We got more than their fair consideration as newlyweds.

Needless to say, using that stove was a test of patience. It took forever to heat up or cook anything.

One July afternoon—it happened to be a Sunday—a failed power supply had left the fan blades frozen mid-spin. The air was thick and sluggish; time itself had come to a standstill. Sultriness at 35°C had taken its toll of our siesta. “How I wish there was rain and the temperature came down,” prayed Shona as he fanned his face with a folded newspaper.

“If wishes were horses...” I teased, grinning from the door of our makeshift kitchen. I had just deposited the used plates under a leaky faucet in the sink.

Another hot afternoon lay ahead.

At 4 pm, when he couldn’t stand it anymore, Shona suggested, “Let’s have early tea and go to Sadar Bazaar. From there we can proceed to Agra Club. Let’s salvage the evening, at the least.”

“... a good idea, indeed,” I said and reached for the milk container.

I placed the pot of milk on the sickly flame and suggested, “Let’s get ready while this warms up.”

Seldom have I seen prayers being heard so soon. While we were getting ready, a sheet of dark cumulonimbus clouds appeared from nowhere and obscured the sun. A few drops hit the tin roof like hesitant drummers. Then, within minutes, it began raining. We were delighted.

“Let’s take a walk in the rain.” Shona suggested gleefully, and before I could say a word, he pulled me out of the house and locked the door. In a few minutes, we were out splashing in the just-formed puddles like ecstatic children. After spending the afternoon in the house, which had felt like an oven, the smell of wet earth was bliss. We felt liberated. It was our first monsoon together. Raindrops smudged the boundaries between reality and magic.

A few minutes of walk on the road saw us in front of Flight Lieutenant MM Pande’s residence. Unhesitatingly, Shona rang the doorbell, and before anyone could answer, we plopped ourselves into the lawn chairs like uninvited garden gnomes.

When she opened the door, Mrs Pande was first startled, then amused to see two grown up children frolicking in the rain. “Come in, Chhaya and Chordia, I’ll hand you a towel each,” she urged, gesturing toward the dry indoors. She thought we had been caught in the rain, unaware, unprepared.

“No, thank you, Ma’am,” Shona stopped her, “we are out by choice... to enjoy the rain!”

So, the Pandes joined us from their verandah, sipping something hot while watching us enjoy on their lawn.

Sense dawned on me when, after about half an hour, Mrs Pande brought steaming mugs of coffee and a plate of biscuits for us.

“Oh my God, Shona,” I exclaimed, “the milk... we have left the stove burning. It’d have boiled over by now.”

Shona was cool; he brushed aside my concern, humming with an impish smile, “...whatever will be, will be... que sera sera....”

We sipped the coffee hurriedly, begged leave of Pandes, and rushed home, hearts beating fast.

As expected, the disaster awaited. The milk had boiled over, and crusted onto the pot. Some of it had scorched into the burner, filling our little home with the smell of burnt milk and kerosene.

We flung open the doors and windows and turned on the fans to get rid of the obnoxious odours. That didn’t help. So, a resourceful Shona sprayed *Brute* and sprinkled half a bottle *Old Spice* around the house like holy water from the Ganges. He said as he went about trying different methods, “Gool, you know what they say about milk boiling over?” [Gool--he calls me lovingly by that name, which was given to me by my mother.]

When he had my attention, he added, “It is considered auspicious and a sign of prosperity. It is a ritual to deliberately boil over milk at the time of *grih-pravesh*. I consider this as our housewarming.”

We laughed and everything felt normal.

No Sadar Bazaar, no Agra Club; we spent that evening at home sipping tea and coffee made from powdered milk because all fresh milk had vapourised and burnt. It was bliss of another kind. For several days after that incident, the soothing scents of the deodorant and the after-shave lotion vied with the repelling odours of burnt kerosene and scorched milk.



P.S. It's 6:00 a.m. on May 2, 2025. Yesterday, Noida baked under a brutal 40°C sun, and the night offered little relief. The air hung heavy and warm. At around 5:00 am this morning, fierce, dust-laden winds swept through, followed by a power outage—and then, as if on cue, the skies opened up in a dramatic downpour. It was sudden and generous, and oddly soothing. I'm overwhelmed by a vivid sense of *déjà vu* as I write this page of my diary. It feels like a replay of that day in Agra, forty years ago. Only this time, I'm impelling Shona to come out for a walk and I have an umbrella in my hand and... there is no milk on the stove.



6

BLAME IT ON SHONA



Shhh...why India lost to Pakistan at Sharjah?



Ah cricket! It evokes a cocktail of nostalgia and excitement in me. I loved the game. I still do.

Growing up in Ujjain, I spent countless hours batting and fielding with boys my age, and older, on the dusty playground adjoining Ashok Talkies. The sun was harsh, the field uneven, and the gear barely passable—but none of that mattered. With a bat in my hand and dreams in my heart, I made it to my college team and was tipped to play for the MP State Team. That was the precise moment I made a decision that shocked everyone—I quit cricket.

“Why do you want to leave it at this stage? With a little more practice and coaching, you can make it to the Indian Team,” said our sports in charge. He was terribly disappointed. But for me, the choice was between playing cricket and pursuing an MSc, and the scales tipped in favour of academics. To me, the idea of representing the country someday wasn’t alluring enough. Driven neither by impulse nor by emotions, it was a well-considered, rational decision. No regrets!

My love for the game did not diminish because of that decision. Far from it. I followed every series, especially when India faced England, Australia, or the mighty West Indies. Gavaskar’s discipline, Kapil Dev’s dynamism, Srikanth’s fearlessness, and Kirmani’s quiet confidence—they were my heroes. Sitting around

the transistor and listening to the cricket commentaries was a family ritual; none missed an opportunity.

Talking of cricket, two things changed for me when I married Shona and moved to Agra. One, colour televisions replaced radios and transistors. We brought home a bulky 21-inch UPTRON pretty soon. And two, I discovered that Shona wasn't a cricket buff. A former footballer and a long-distance runner, he was more likely to lace up his running shoes than sit through an ODI. That said, he was never dismissive of my passion for the game. He often kept me company during matches, smiling indulgently as I yelled instructions at the screen like a crazy coach.

Then came Friday, April 18, 1986—one of the darkest days in the history of Indian cricket.

It was the much-awaited final match of the Austral-Asia Cup Cricket Tournament. Arch rivals India and Pakistan were to fight for the top spot at Sharjah. Shona had taken pains to set the rooftop antenna to ensure a perfect signal. Back then, adjusting the TV antenna was an art—a millimetre off and the display would morph into a psychedelic blur. I was touched by his concern.

"I expect fireworks, today," he said as we settled down to watch the match.

"It is Friday; the Pakis will draw special power from their prayers," I said jokingly.

"So what if it is *Jumma*; I'll wear a green tee shirt to counter the divine indulgence in their favour. Stars foretell that my wearing green will favour the Indian team," he said with a straight face,

but couldn't hold his laughter even for a millisecond and began giggling. He was not the one to believe in God's intervention in human affairs of a trivial nature.

It turned out to be an interesting match. Batting first, India posted a competitive total of 245 for seven in 50 overs. The match was gripping with nail biting moments. I barely moved during the innings—every ball, every run, every dropped catch by Pakistan felt deeply personal. Shona, on the other hand, floated in and out—fetching water, making tea for himself and coffee for me, and getting snacks for us. He even went out once to answer the doorbell when Sheela, our domestic help came to clean the dishes and utensils.

During that first half of the match, I observed certain things and drew, rather freak conclusions: “Whenever Shona was not watching, the game was going in India's favour; we were gaining momentum—scoring runs. And Pakis were dropping catches and mis-fielding.”

Ludicrous, I know, but the pattern planted a seed in my mind. I kept that observation to myself until Pakistan began batting. A few overs in, the match turned into a thriller.

Seeing the seesaw performance of the Indian team, I was inclined to check the veracity of my inference. I urged Shona to get me a cushion from the bedroom. Oblivious of my true intention, Shona abided, and went to the bedroom. And, lo and behold, Pakistan lost a wicket.

Next came an errand for snacks. And loss of another wicket got Pakistan into a precarious situation.

A water refill—and another setback for the Pakis.

Was it coincidence? Absolutely. But I began to truly believe that Shona's physical presence was tipping the scales in Pakistan's favour. Of course, I couldn't share this mad theory with him. Not without sounding utterly insane. So, I kept mum.

But I couldn't resist myself when the game reached the climax. It was the last ball of the game; Pakistan was trailing by three runs. Javed Miandad was to face Chetan Sharma. It was a nerve-wrecking situation.

"Shona," I said with my heart pounding, "I know this is crazy, but if you leave the room now, I bet we'll win this match. Whenever you have been away, Pakistan has suffered a setback."

Shona laughed, "Anything for India," and stepped out of the room. I felt assured of India's win. After what he thought was an eternity, Shona returned. His re-entry turned out to be a bit early. That very moment, Chetan Sharma bowled a full toss ball, which Javed Miandad hit over the boundary for six runs.

India lost the match.

To this day, I blame Shona for that infamous loss to Pakistan. It's our private joke, our shared history, and an unspoken pact that cricket, like life, is unpredictable, illogical, and utterly captivating.



7

OH, THAT TRAIN JOURNEY!



“Coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous.”

— *Albert Einstein*



“Help! Help! Stop him! Somebody, catch him—he’s stealing my bag.”

My scream sliced through the stillness of the compartment, but it couldn’t stir my co-passengers, who were lost in deep sleep on their berths. Panic surged through me as I lifted Mudit – my little boy, barely two – whom I had been feeding, and ran after the man who was striding away swiftly with my suitcase. But before I could reach him, he leapt off the train, which had just slowed to a halt at Gwalior station.

For a moment, I froze at the door, watching helplessly as he ran along the dimly lit platform and disappeared into one of the rear bogies. I could still see the glint of the grey VIP suitcase in his hand – the one that held my best sarees and the few pieces of jewellery I had packed carefully for a family function in my hometown three days later.

Mudit started wailing in confusion, unable to comprehend what was happening. I held him close, my pulse surging. Slowly, the quiet compartment came alive. Sleepy passengers stirred, switching on the lights and rubbing their eyes in alarm.

“What happened?” asked an elderly man, his voice heavy with concern. “Are you alright?”

“I am okay,” I said. “But that man has taken away my travel bag,” I gasped, trying to calm my child.

“Someone, please call the police,” the old man urged.

A young man immediately got off the train and ran to alert the Railway Police Force (RPF). Within minutes, the air inside the bogie shifted – from sleepy silence to uneasy commotion. People

began checking their luggage, clutching their handbags, and looking around suspiciously.

“Our train journeys have become very insecure,” started off the lady sitting opposite me, “the other day a man snatched my sister’s gold chain and jumped off the Frontier Mail.

“They have become so daring,” contributed another. “It’s scary to travel at night.”

“Thank God, you are safe,” said a woman travelling with her husband and little girl, her eyes filled with empathy.

Inside me, there was a surge of fear, anger, and helplessness. This unsettling incident took place when I was travelling by the Malwa Express from Agra to Ujjain with Mudit for his *mundan* ceremony. My husband, Shona, hadn’t come along. He was due to leave for Bagdogra the next morning on temporary duty.

When the RPF team finally arrived, their head constable tried to calm me as his men began searching the platform and adjoining bogies. “Madam, please don’t worry,” he said kindly. “We’ll do our best to find the thief. What did he look like?”

“He was tall, wearing a white shirt and jeans,” I said, recalling every detail. “He had a slight limp and carried my grey VIP suitcase. I don’t think he could have gone far with that heavy bag.”

The head constable sighed, “Madam, we’ll try hard, but it’s a difficult manhunt. The platform is long, and there are too many places to hide. A bogie-to-bogie search of the entire train is almost impossible.” He hesitated, then added in a lecturing tone, “If only you had chained your bag to your seat, this might have been avoided.”

His sermon stung me hard. I straightened and said sharply, "Mr... err...", I squinted to read his name tag, "Mr Mehtab Singh, my bag was chained. The man broke the chain and took it. I called for help and even tried to follow him. Now I'm not asking you to search the entire train. I saw him enter one of the last bogies. If you check those immediately, you might still catch him."

He looked uncomfortable. "But, madam, the train is already running fifteen minutes late. Checking the bogies will..."

"...cause further delay," I interrupted, my voice rising. "Is that what you want to say?"

He was taken aback.

"I don't care about delay," I continued firmly. "If this train leaves without your men checking the last few bogies, I'll pull the chain myself and report your inaction."

Several passengers supported me. "Yes, yes, check the bogies before the thief escapes!" they chorused.

Under pressure, Mehtab Singh ordered his men to get cracking. But after an hour of anxious waiting, there was still no trace of the man or my suitcase. The constables returned, perspiring, and said, "Madam, we searched thoroughly. It's possible the man slipped away through the other side. We're now checking the tracks and the other platforms."

"Meanwhile, may I request you to please come to Platform No 1 to file an FIR," urged Mehtab Singh. "And, if you don't mind, can you board the next train so that we can flag off this train without causing further delay and inconveniencing the others."

I looked down at my sleeping child, then at my half-empty berth. "I'll return to Agra," I said quietly. "I don't want to continue the journey after this. I'll take the next train back." I therefore got down with Mudit and whatever was left of my possessions.

At the RPF office, they registered my complaint promptly. "We'll keep you informed," Mehtab promised, handing me the FIR copy. I thanked him and began the long wait for the next train.

Just then, a man in a soiled uniform entered the office holding a bundle of clothes. "Jai Hind, Saab!" he said, greeting the officer. "I found these near the tracks. Thought someone might be injured, but it seems these just fell off a train – or someone threw them out."

The head constable turned to me. "Madam, could these be yours?"

One glance and my heart leapt. "Yes! These sarees are mine – and these tiny clothes belong to my son!" I was relieved. "But this isn't everything. There were more clothes, footwear, and a pouch containing jewellery."

"This is all I found," the man said apologetically. He introduced himself as the track examiner. "I'll check again, but I doubt there's more."

The RPF men combed the area, but nothing else was found. They handed over the few recovered clothes to me, had me sign a receipt, and helped me board the train back to Agra.

Later that morning...

Shona was shocked to see me back at home. He was ready, in his overalls, waiting with packed bags for the aircrew van to take him

to the tarmac to board the aircraft to Bagdogra when I rang the door-bell.

“Why? What happened?” He exclaimed.

I told him everything – the theft, the search, the FIR, the long night – my voice breaking at the end. He wrapped his arms around me and said softly, “Don’t you worry about the jewellery or sarees, dear. They can be replaced. I’m thankful you and Mudit are safe.”

“What next?” he asked me.

“There are still two days to go before Mudit’s *mundan* ceremony. Everyone back home is waiting so eagerly for us. I’ll set course for Ujjain again by this evening’s Malwa Express.”

“I’ll be gone in another half hour. Will you manage on your own? Or, shall I seek leave to accompany you?” Shona looked concerned.

“I’ll be fine, dear. I can manage. Will ask Flight Lieutenant Deo for help, if required.”

Another hug, and Shona was gone.

That evening, I boarded the Malwa Express again, my heart heavy but resolute. The journey was uneventful, yet I couldn’t sleep. Every sound – a footstep, a cough, the rattle of the chain – made me tense. I kept the bag close and my eyes open until daybreak.

Everyone at home was happy that Mudit and I made it to the organised family function in spite of the unfortunate incident. That we came out of it unharmed was a big relief. My father, ever the calm problem-solver, shared the details of the FIR with some

of his close friends in the judiciary and the civil administration hoping to speed up the case.

Days went by. The memory of the untoward train incident receded to a less accessed corner of my mind; and, I almost stopped expecting any news of my lost bag.

About six months later, I was in Gwalior once again—this time, it was on the occasion of *Karwa Chauth*, with Didi, my elder sister. We had planned to be with her sister-in-law. After the evening *pooja*, we decided to spend some time at the Gwalior Industrial Fair—a yearly event, full of lights, laughter and a range of handicraft and industrial products on sale. As a matter of chance Shona was again away on an outstation temporary duty.

What happened at the Fair was amazing. I had never experienced stars and planets aligning the way they did that day. Until then, I had seen such things happening only in Hindi films.

In the heavily crowded venue of the Industrial Fair—of all the people—I saw my brother-in-law. “Daddy,” as we affectionately called him, was standing at a stall and discussing something animatedly with the company’s representative. Not his physical presence at the venue, but his *raison d’être*, as it became evident later, was an unimaginable coincidence.

“*Pranaam* Daddy,” I greeted him and touched his feet.

“Oh my God, Chhaya! What a pleasant surprise! What are you doing here?” He said, wide-eyed. “I thought you were in Delhi with your sister.”

“I came with Didi for *Karwa Chauth*,” I laughed. “But what brings you here?”

He looked relieved. "You won't believe this coincidence. I had gone to Agra today to meet you – but your house was locked. Your neighbour said you'd gone somewhere with your sister, but didn't know where. I was about to head back when I decided to stop by the fair. And look – here you are!"

"You have been to Agra to meet me? Why?" I was surprised.

"Why would he travel to Agra to visit us, unannounced," I thought.

He smiled knowingly. "A letter arrived at our Ujjain home, addressed to you, from the RPF office in Gwalior. They've arrested some suspects and recovered stolen luggage. They need you to attend an identification parade tomorrow morning. I came to hand over the letter and escort you from Agra – and by some miracle, found you here instead."

I just smiled. It indeed was a rare coincidence.

"Now we can be there for the identification parade tomorrow." Daddy heaved a sigh of relief.

The next morning, Daddy and I reached the concerned office, a half hour before the scheduled appointment. It was a dusty building, crumbling in places; its walls streaked with age. A lone clerk was cleaning his typewriter with a rag when we entered at 09:30 am.

Daddy showed the man, the letter. "Can you please tell me, where we can meet Mr Abhay Shukla?" Daddy asked the clerk.

"Shukla Saab will be here anytime," he said as he unmindfully and mechanically inserted a thin sheaf of papers and carbons into his typewriter to commence his day's work. Then looking at the letter, he said knowingly, "Oh yes, this must be about the

Malwa Express theft. Please be seated.” He offered us chairs to sit and continued, “Here are some forms to be filled.”

As we filled out the paperwork, I felt my stomach twist in anxiety. The idea of identifying a thief from a group of men frightened me. What if he remembered me? What if he came after me later? Those thoughts cluttered my mind.

The clerk read my mind as he helped us fill the forms. “Don’t be afraid,” he said kindly. “You won’t have to face those men directly. You’ll be in a separate room with a small peep hole. They won’t see you.” He explained the procedure and put all my doubts and apprehensions to rest.

When the officer, Mr Abhay Shukla, arrived, he explained the procedure again. “Be absolutely sure before you identify anyone. Among the men lined up, some will be plain-clothes policemen. If you pick the wrong one, the case collapses.”

My heart pounded in my rib cage as I approached the room to look at the assembled men. My lips dried and my hands trembled as I peered through the narrow slit. Six men stood in a row. My eyes scanned their faces, my mind replaying that chaotic night – the tall frame, the limp, the white shirt. Then I saw him – third from the left – now in a striped shirt and black trousers. But those sharp eyes and the slight tilt because of the limp, were unmistakable.

“That’s him,” I said quietly. “The third man from the left. I recall, that night he was sitting on a nearby berth and even helped me with arranging my baggage.”

“Are you sure, he was the man, Madam,” Mr Shukla asked me.

“I am certain,” I said.

“You are right, Mrs Chordia, he is the man,” said Mr Shukla radiating satisfaction. “He is Raja—the notorious kingpin who controls organised thefts along the Agra-Pune route. We have been able to retrieve a cache of stolen things from his premises. He had been evading us for a long time. We have also been able to establish that he was on board Malwa Express on the fateful night and was travelling in your bogie. Three of his accomplices were in the other bogies.”

Relief flooded me. They guided me to a large hall filled with recovered items — clothes, bags, shoes, utensils, even toys. Among the heaps, I spotted my own sarees, Mudit’s small shirts, and a few familiar things. The jewellery, however, was gone. Still, when I signed the papers in the presence of a magistrate to reclaim what was mine, I felt a strange sense of closure. It wasn’t just about the stolen belongings — it was about finding justice, and with it, a quiet reassurance that life has its own way of balancing loss.

As Daddy and I stepped out into the bright morning sun, I smiled and said, “Maybe this is my *Karwa Chauth* gift.” He laughed and nodded.

Years have passed since that night, but the memory of the grey suitcase, and the chase on the platform has never quite left me. Whenever I travel now, I carry something invisible: a deeper trust in the mysterious ways of life.

Sometimes, the universe conspires to return what you thought was lost — not just your belongings, but your faith in its quiet, unseen justice.



8

**HOME THEY BROUGHT
SHONA'S BAG**



*The longest journeys are often those of the heart—between
goodbye and the unknown.*



Agra. Thursday, November 3, 1988. I can never forget this day.

The night before, Shona had packed his bag meticulously, as always. Besides the usual things he would need for a three-day outstation temporary duty, he had kept his neatly ironed white overalls, along with all the ceremonial badges and paraphernalia; and his skydiving kit, which included chamois leather gloves, jump goggles, and an altimeter. He was headed to Khadkwasla to lead a skydiving demonstration at the National Defence Academy. It was a much sought after jump demonstration. And, why not? Nothing could be more exhilarating than returning to one's alma mater to motivate young cadets with a thrilling display by *Akashganga*, the Skydiving Team of the IAF.

After breakfast, he gave me the usual hug, "Love you, Gool. Take care."

Then he kissed Mudit, who was still asleep in bed, and continued, "I might find time to go to Pune. Do you want me to get anything? Something from Kayani Bakery or some *chivda*?"

"You needn't go to Pune just for those things. You might find the same stuff in the Gole Market in the NDA. Get some cookies for Mudit, and maybe some *chivda*." I suggested, and bade him bye, "Happy landings, dear!"

The aircrew van arrived at 7:00 am. Shona got his bag loaded in it and drove off as I stood there and waved. I got a glimpse of his smiling face for a last time as the van turned the corner. He waved back at me, and then he was gone.

Back in the house, I got busy with the morning chores and the usual routine. At 8:30 am, Mudit and I left home—Mudit, for his play-school and I, for Shishu Niketan, where I had joined as a teacher.

We were back home for lunch.

“Where is Papa,” Mudit enquired when I laid the table.

“Have you forgotten, Papa is out today for a jump in Pune?”

Just then, the doorbell rang. I opened the door, thinking it was Sheela, our housemaid. To my surprise, it was Shona.

“What happened? You didn’t go? Has the demonstration been cancelled or postponed?”

“No, there is a delay. We have been asked to standby. So, I thought I’d join you for lunch.”

Mudit was thrilled to see Shona. “Dad, we’ll buy a new *Hot Wheels* car when you are back.”

“Of course, dear,” Shona promised.

Shona left again after lunch.

In the evening, Mudit went out to play with his friends.

I locked the house and went for my walk. A neighbour joined me on the way. “Chordia is away; why don’t you join us for dinner today?” she suggested.

I accepted the kind offer.

It turned out to be an impromptu potluck at her place. Others also joined in.

We settled down with our usual chats after exchanging the usual pleasantries.

“Ma’am, Chordia Sir is very lucky,” said Sikroria, after making cordial enquiries. He was a fellow parachute jump instructor of Shona’s.

“Lucky? What do you mean, Siku?”

“Don’t you know Ma’am? He has gone to the Maldives.” he said with surprise.

“What? Maldives... I thought he’s left for the NDA.”

“That programme was changed suddenly. Perhaps he didn’t have the time to come and tell you. And, I’m sorry, there was so much chaos, we too forgot to inform you.”

“To the Maldives? What for...?” I asked, anxiety creeping in.

“It is a Special Operation.”

Siku told me that full details were not available. Apparently, the Maldivian President was surrounded by terrorists and had sought military assistance from India. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had acceded to his request. Troops had been airlifted by the Air Force, to be either airlanded or paradropped in the Maldives to rescue the President.

“Chordia Sir is heading a team of instructors in the lead aircraft, to prepare the troops in case it is decided to paradrop the troops,” Siku explained. “And that would depend on the situation, which is very fluid at the moment. It isn’t clear

whether the terrorists or the government troops are in control of the islands, the airfield in particular.”

Siku went on, elaborating how prestigious it was to be a part of a military mission which could possibly turn out be a historic event.

The prestige and glory associated with the mission didn’t impress me. I was aware that under such circumstances, an aircraft approaching the runway could be an easy target for the terrorists hiding alongside the runway.

I was shell shocked.

Mudit was just three, too small to understand these things. Besides, I did not want to scare him. So I kept everything to myself. Sleep eluded me, and dread had taken its place—each hour stretched endlessly; strange fears kept doing the rounds. I tossed and turned in the bed until daybreak.

Mudit was still asleep. I prepared myself a cup of coffee, and half-heartedly, began preparing *poha*, a dish Mudit relished.

We took our seats at the dining table to eat breakfast. I was missing Shona like never before; didn’t feel like eating anything. It was 8:00 am.

Barely had I taken my first spoonful when the doorbell rang.

No, it wasn’t our housemaid.

Standing at the door were two men in Air Force overalls. They had arrived on a scooter with a bag. Their faces were devoid of any expression.

“Good morning Ma’am. I am Sergeant K Singh. We have come to deliver Flight Lieutenant Chordia’s bag,” said one of them, who appeared to be the senior of the two.

I was happy--Shona was back and would be home soon.

I thanked him and, in passing, asked, “Where is he?”

“We don’t know, Ma’am. We’ve just been asked to deliver this to you.”

“What about the others who went with him?”

“They returned in the wee hours of the morning and have been asked to come late to the unit. I had gone to receive the aircraft. That’s when one of them gave me this bag. Chordia Sir was not there.”

Like in Hindi films, where a soldier’s belongings arrive before the bad news, the arrival of Shona’s bag gave me an eerie feeling. Uneasy questions and doubts began swirling in my mind. I couldn’t hold back any longer. Tears began rolling down my cheeks.

Sobbing, I asked them, “Please tell me the truth. Where is he?”

“We have no news about him,” they re-iterated.

I requested them to find out from the unit and let me know. The two greeted me, put on their helmets, and drove off.

The bag wasn’t locked. I opened it, sincerely hoping to find a note from Shona. He was in the habit of writing beautiful notes and messages for me. Sadly, there was none. What was intriguing was that everything in the bag was untouched.

For me, the suspense thickened.

In about ten minutes, three officers from Shona's unit arrived. One of them said, "The Operation has been successful. Our troops have rescued the President. No casualties have been reported."

"But then, why has his bag arrived, and he has not?"

"He sent back his bag with others because, in the situation he was in, he couldn't have lugged his belongings."

That answer didn't satisfy me. So, some more officers came with their wives and assured me that all was well and that Shona would return in a day or two.

A day later, a smiling Shona rang the doorbell. I held him tight and wept bitterly. Poor guy, unaware of what had happened, kept consoling and asking me. "What happened, Gool? Is everything okay."

We had a hearty laugh when I told him what had followed the delivery of his aircrew bag.



9

DRIVEN BY A PURPOSE



*“Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on
Earth.”*

– Muhammad Ali



Our posting to the sleepy little town of Manauri was a throttle back on the pace of life. It was a switch from the hustle and bustle of an Air Force station with its hectic flying activity to an equipment depot where things seemed to move at a snail's pace. Agra was happening; Manauri, laid back.

After settling Mudit into a new school, I began the ritual of looking for something to keep myself gainfully engaged. Sherwani Public School, next door, gave me some hope; they were looking for teachers. I decided to take a chance and sent them my CV. Three days later, I received a call for an interview.

I arrived at the school on the given date and time. The school had modest infrastructure—an old, less-cared-for building. Children were frolicking in a small yard. Their uniforms were unkempt; their hair, ruffled. Some were rote learning the alphabet in one class. They were repeating after the teacher: “A for apple, B for ball....” In the next room, they chanted multiplication tables with their plump teacher, who balanced her specs precariously on the tip of her nose, while waving a ruler menacingly at the back-benchers who were not joining the chorus. Two other classrooms were devoid of teachers; children were throwing bits of chalks at one another.

I was ushered into the last room at the end of the corridor. There, I met Mr Khan, the manager. “Good morning, Madam,”

he said, in a mild East UP accent. "Would you like to have a cup of tea?"

"No, thank you, Mr Khan. I don't take tea."

"Shall I ask for some *nimboo-paani* (lemonade)? We get farm-fresh lemons here. Children's parents from nearby villages bring kilos of them." Taking my 'yes' for granted, he called the peon and ordered him to fetch two lemonades.

The peon returned in a jiffy with two glasses of lemonade. He placed one in front of me and said, as he placed the other in front of Mr Khan, "Sir, today, 37 children are absent."

"Ramu, please ask Sharda Madam to bring me the attendance registers after the second period," Mr Khan told the peon. Then, turning to me, he said, "Madam, it's so difficult to get students to come to school. They stay back for the smallest of reasons. And our teachers are just not able to keep them engaged in their studies."

He picked up my CV lying on his table and continued, "Madam, your case was discussed in the managing committee meeting the other day. Your credentials are good. The members found you suitable to join our school as the Principal." He sounded overjoyed. "When can you take charge?"

I couldn't believe my ears. They had sought applications for the post of a teacher, and here I was being offered the role of principal.

"Any time," I said happily.

"You may join in a day or two, as per your convenience," He sounded genuinely enthusiastic and added, "But, I must tell you, our school is run by a charitable trust. We do not have much to

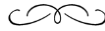
offer in terms of pay. I hope you wouldn't mind accepting ₹500 per month."

I was dumbstruck. Even though it was 1989, and the school was in a village with just about 200 children and a four-hour workday, the emolument was ridiculously low. Perhaps someone in dire need of 'income' would go for it. But anything below a thousand rupees made little sense to me.

"Do I need this job? Or, I might as well spend time at home pursuing my hobbies," I asked myself.

"I'll revert in a day or two," I said with no expression on my face.

"Madam, we'll look forward to you joining us soon." Mr Khan said, smiling.



I discussed the issue with Shona at the dinner table. He felt that the pay was too small an amount to work for. Accepting such small remuneration would set a benchmark and adversely affect my future employment.

"Think of it—it's just four hours a day," I said, trying to sound casual, "and... it's not like I'd be missing out on anything at home. I'll leave home after you leave for office and Mudit for school. I'd be back before both of you."

Shona raised an eyebrow. "Four hours, yes. But for what? Peanuts? And, you'd spent half that amount on petrol."

"Shona, my dear, what more can one expect from a village school run by a charitable trust and one which is meant for children from rural background."

Shona went silent for a long moment and then spoke with all seriousness, “You said it’s a village school, right? You want to reform them? Well then, I have a suggestion...”

“... teach for free,” I interrupted. “Do good and cast it into the river... Is that what you have in mind?”

“Yes, exactly. I know, you want to enjoy what you are doing; monetary return is secondary for you. You keep looking for opportunities to repay society. Here is one, knocking at our door. I feel you must avail it and do it selflessly, for the sake of those village people.”

The decision was made. Driven by a purpose, I took on the role of principal without remuneration.



A week of going around, meeting teachers, staff, and occasionally interacting with the children and parents, I discovered the areas I needed to focus on. I took all the stakeholders into confidence and began making small changes. Gradually, attendance improved. The children now turned up in clean uniforms. They gained confidence and began participating in co-curricular and cultural activities. Parents began expressing their gratitude by visiting my office with bags of fresh fruits and vegetables, which I politely declined.

An interesting thing happened one Sunday morning. Shona and I had taken Mudit to the riverside, about five kilometres from home. We sat on a bedsheet, relishing a breakfast of *aloo parathas* and mango pickle when we saw a man struggling to pull his bicycle on the sandy bank. The carrier of his cycle was loaded with *hirmanjis*, small round watermelons. He was carrying them

to the nearby vegetable market to sell. I just asked him, “Are these for sale?”

The man heard me and stopped reluctantly. Perhaps he was in a hurry. I walked up to him, and without much ado, began to choose. I picked out three *hirmanjis* and asked, “How much?”

To this, he seemed to take offence. He said, “These are not for sale. At least not for you. Aren’t you Chhaya Madam? You have transformed the lives of our children. How can I charge you a paisa?” He brushed aside his mock annoyance, and with hands joined in reverence, urged me to accept his gesture of gratitude. After much haggling, the man finally accepted a token payment, touched the rupee notes to his head, looked heavenwards with wet eyes, and pocketed them.

Then came Deepawali. Mr Khan visited our home to convey festive greetings. He brought a packet of sweets and sat for a while. “Madam, you have transformed the school in a big way. The management committee is pleased with the devotion you have shown and the changes you have brought about. They have directed me to give this to you.” Saying so, he handed me an envelope. I thought it contained a greeting card. But no, the bulge in the middle didn’t feel like a greeting card.

So, I opened it in his presence. To my surprise, the envelope contained a bundle of crisp hundred-rupee notes.

When I looked quizzically at Mr Khan, he said, “The management is pleased to refix your pay at ₹1,500 per month. These are your arrears. Kindly accept and oblige.”

I was rendered speechless.



10

CHALLENGING THE DEFAULT



*"Success is not about proving the world wrong. It's about
proving yourself right."*

– Jessica Watson



“I am sorry, Ms Chhaya, although it was not mentioned specifically in the ad, we are looking for a male candidate for this post.”

That was Mr PK Kaul, the legendary former Indian ambassador to the US, interviewing me for the post of the Manager at the Sports and Cultural Club, Sector 15A, Noida, better known as Club 15A.

It was early 1997. We had just arrived in Delhi following Shona's posting to Air Headquarters. Relocating, leaving behind a stable job, and searching for a new one had become a routine part of my life as the spouse of an Air Force officer. The dilemma resurfaced with each transfer: career or family?

I had chosen family early on and stood by that choice. That was why I gave up my job as a college lecturer and left my doctorate halfway through when I got married in 1984. Friends had questioned my decision, but I never second-guessed it.

Job hunting was not new to me. Finding a teaching job at every station where Shona was posted had been relatively easy. But in Delhi, where teaching jobs were scarce despite the number of schools, the standard response was, “Leave your CV; we'll revert if a need arises.”

Browsing the Times Classifieds had become a daily ritual. For a change, I even considered working at Kailash Hospital. Dr

Mahesh Sharma, who interviewed me, was warm yet candid: “Mrs Chordia, with your qualifications and experience—and of course, your exceptional background—we would love to have you on our staff. In fact, I’d want you to join immediately. But, to be honest, you deserve better. Working at Kailash Hospital would be a demanding eight-hour job with a modest pay cheque. Take your time. The decision will be yours.” I appreciated his candidness and valued his words; I didn’t join Kailash Hospital, but the bond established with Dr Mahesh Sharma and Kailash Hospital only grew stronger with passing time.

While I was weighing my options, the opportunity at Club 15A presented itself. And there I was, face to face with Mr PK Kaul. The seasoned diplomat that he was, he sensed my thoughts and asked, “Do you have anything to say?”

This was my chance.

Meanwhile, the other interviewers had taken the last sips of their coffee. Some had even pushed back their chairs, ready to leave—a clear indication that, for them, the process was over.

I didn’t want to give up; at least not without giving it a try.

Taking a deep breath, I steadied my voice. “Sir, do my credentials and experience meet your expectations for the Manager’s post?” I asked Mr Kaul.

He became curious.

“Is being a woman my only disqualification?” There was added emphasis on the word “*only*.”

Those who had started to leave, now settled back in their chairs, suddenly interested. The air in the room got charged; I could feel the weight of their collective attention.

“I am confident that I can fulfil the responsibilities of the Manager,” I asserted, my hands clasped tightly in my lap.

Each member re-evaluated their judgement of me.

After some thought, a member spoke his mind, “Besides overseeing daily operations, you will have to enforce discipline—dress codes, timings, and so on. Members might not always appreciate it and may even be rude. Your evening office hours will be from 7:00 to 10:00 PM, sometimes even later. With a family to look after, do you think you’ll be able to manage? Commuting at night in Noida could also be a concern....” The litany was long, and though not aimed at discouraging me, it laid bare what was in store for the would-be Manager.

His concerns were genuine; he was looking for stability. He didn’t want the Club to look for another Manager a few days hence. But I wasn’t also ready to walk away just yet. The stakes were higher now; it wasn’t just about securing a job—it was about proving a point. I needed a chance, so I made a suggestion that aroused their collective interest.

“Sir, you haven’t yet found a male candidate for this post. May I suggest you let me take charge on a trial basis? If I find it too challenging, I will step down. Likewise, if you find me lacking, you may ask me to leave. Meanwhile, if you so please, you may continue your search for the right male candidate.”

Mr Kaul leaned forward, his elbows resting on the table, fingers steepled. He exchanged glances with the other panellists. There was a flicker in his eyes—it was a mix of curiosity and admiration.

“That sounds reasonable. We accept your proposal,” he said, a gentle smile spreading across his face. “Please take some time to

reconsider your decision. If you're comfortable, we'll expect you to join in two days. Mr Sawhney will brief you on your responsibilities. And you will have our full support." Then, turning to Mr Sawhney, he added, "And, you may please go slow on our search for another manager for now."

Could I meet the demands of a job traditionally held by men? Would my experience be enough? How would members react to a female manager? What about Mudit's homework? My family? Commuting late at night in Noida? The questions swirled in my mind, with no clear answers.

That night, as I tucked Mudit into bed, I watched his peaceful face, his hand holding mine. I thought of Shona, who had always believed in me more than I sometimes believed in myself. A strange mix of excitement and apprehension ran through me. Shona, ever my pillar of strength, encouraged me to give it a shot despite the additional challenges it would pose for us as a family.

A day later, I stepped into my altogether new role—Manager, Club 15A.

The journey thereafter was not without its struggles, nor was it without its victories. There were days when I questioned my own audacity, and times when I felt exhausted. Not being able to spend time with Mudit and Shona the way I used to, often weighed on my heart. There were also moments of quiet triumph, of knowing that I was changing something—however small—for women who'd come after me.



11

**"BEFORE CHHAYA CRACKS
DOWN"**



*To hold the line with dignity is to draw it for
others to follow.*



I spent my first few days at the Club observing operations and making small, meaningful, and noticeable changes. I elicited suggestions from members and implemented them—small improvements at a time. Some called it *Kaizen*. The members appreciated the renewed focus on cleanliness and general upkeep. Over time, even the staff began to open up, sharing their concerns more freely.

One persistent issue troubled them—the habit of members lingering well beyond closing hours. This not only affected their morale but also disrupted their work-life balance. I brought this concern to the President, who agreed that enforcing club hours was a necessity.

When I began implementing ‘last order’ timings, reactions were mixed. Some members appreciated the discipline, while others resisted the change. However, within days, most adapted. But soon, another challenge emerged—members would place their final food and drink orders within the permitted time but would remain in the dining area well past closing hours.

One evening, a member and his guests continued drinking and did not leave the dining room even until it was 11:00 pm, the closing time. He paid no heed when I reminded him discreetly, thrice, of the club timings. He got infuriated when, at 12:00 am, I directed the staff to pack the food he had ordered. He walked into my office and burst out, “Who are you to tell me to wind

up? I'm a member—I pay for these services. You're just an employee. Know your place."

He had had a drink too many.

I remained composed. "Sir, these regulations were set by the Club's Managing Committee, elected by you. My role is simply to ensure they are followed."

"Spare me the lecture," he snapped, though his family, sensing the tension, tried to calm him down.

The next morning, I reported the incident to the President. A disciplinary committee was promptly convened. By evening, a notice appeared on the board; the gist was: "By a unanimous decision of the Disciplinary Committee, the Club membership of Mr Ajit Chawla (name changed) stands suspended for a month."

No explanation was provided, but the message was clear. Through the grapevine, everyone understood why. From that point on, members became more mindful of winding up by 11:00 pm.

A few days later, an amusing anecdote surfaced in *Samvad*, the monthly newsletter of Sector 15A residents: At a house party, a guest raised his glass and quipped, "Ladies and gentlemen, please get your last drink before Chhaya cracks down!"



12

"YOU KNOW WHO I AM?"



*A name can open doors, but character decides who stays
in the room.*



A month or so later, I noticed a man in his twenties perched on a barstool, waiting for his drink. His round-neck T-shirt was a violation of the Club's dress code.

Before approaching him, I inquired about him from one of the bartenders.

"Arun Sharma," the bartender murmured. "He is the nephew of Mr Raman Sharma, the big-shot media guy. The committee has tried correcting him before, but he doesn't seem to listen."

Despite the advice, which sounded more like a warning to stay away from him, I walked up to him.

"Hello, Mr Sharma, how are you?"

The man looked at me. "Yes Ma'am, what can I do for you?" his eyes seemed to say.

"You're inappropriately dressed. May I request you to leave the bar?"

He gazed at me with disdain but quickly collected himself and smiled. "But... don't you think I am decently dressed?"

"I appreciate smart attire, but I am expected to enforce the dress code set by the Managing Committee," I replied evenly.

Leaning back, he smirked. "And what if I don't?"

"In that case, Mr Sharma, I am afraid, you will not be served."

His smirk turned nasty. "Ma'am, do you even know who I am?" His voice carried a veiled threat. "I'm Mr Raman Sharma's

nephew—the same Raman Sharma who got a Chief Minister to resign. I can create enough trouble for this Club. You can all be in a spin.”

I met his gaze and let my words land deliberately. “Oh, I see. You’re Raman Sharma’s nephew. If I’m not mistaken, he’s contesting the next Lok Sabha election—a well-respected man. But what about you? What is your claim to fame? Just that you’re his nephew?”

I let him absorb it before continuing, my tone adopting the patient firmness of an elder addressing an errant child.

“Think about it. You’re in your twenties now. Isn’t it time you stepped out of your uncle’s shadow and had an identity of your own? Besides, I’m sure he wouldn’t want to be troubled over something this trivial.”

He exhaled, his confidence faltering. Then, without another word, he slid off the stool and walked out of the bar. The staff exchanged glances, having witnessed it all. They talked in whispers. One of them told me later that they thought my days in the Club were numbered.

The next evening, at the same time...

Arun Sharma was at the bar again. But this time, he wore a neatly pressed grey checked shirt, black corduroys, and polished black shoes.

As I passed by, he caught my attention. “See, Ma’am? I’m properly dressed today,” he said with a genuine smile.

I allowed myself a smile too.

It was a win-win.



13

LIFE TAKES A TURN



“Make a deliberate effort to look old.”

– Lieutenant General R Sareen



Shona's transfer from Delhi was expected by December 2000. But the actual orders arrived in September—much earlier than anticipated. It struck us like lightning because the Directorate of Personnel had given him a tacit assurance that he would not be moved until April of the following year, to enable Mudit complete his Class XI exams. A transfer before the end of the academic session would disrupt his studies. A three-month deferment brought small relief, giving us time to put our act together.

Tezpur lacked good educational infrastructure, and moving Mudit to a new school then would mean a difficult transition for him, both academically and emotionally. After much discussion, we decided that Shona would proceed to Tezpur alone, while Mudit and I would stay back in Delhi to enable him to complete his board exams without interruption.

That choice triggered a cascade of complications. We would no longer be eligible to stay in the hired accommodation in Noida and would be required to shift to separated family quarters in Palam. Having grown accustomed to our life in Noida—with its familiarity and comfort—I hesitated to uproot ourselves. But rejecting the allotted quarters in Palam came at a cost: Shona would lose eligibility for House Rent Reimbursement. It was a substantial financial blow. And without housing, continuing

with my work at the 15A Club, which depended on proximity and routine, was out of the question.

Just as we were trying to adjust to this new uncertainty, an opportunity came my way to work at Amity Business School as Hostel Administrator. We considered it carefully. The job came with one particularly helpful benefit: free accommodation on a secure campus. That could offset the loss of the house rent allowance. The role itself seemed interesting, albeit demanding.

I shared my predicament with Mr PK Kaul, the President of Club 15A, and sought his permission to go for the interview.

On the given day, I found myself in front of Lieutenant General R Sareen, the Director General of Amity Business School.

“Good morning, Ms Chhaya Chordia,” he welcomed me, scanning my CV. “I’ve gone through your profile. It’s impressive... do you think you’ll be able to manage the students? And will Club15A relieve you?”

“Sir, I’ve handled challenging people and situations during my time at the 15A Club. I’m confident I can manage these young adults as well. As for being relieved by Club 15A, I have already apprised Mr PK Kaul about this interview and taken his permission.”

He nodded, though his eyes still judged me carefully.

“You do know that staying on campus and the nature of your job means undefined work hours? You might be called in at odd times.”

“I understand, Sir. I’m prepared for the commitment.”

“I appreciate your confidence, Chhaya. I am recommending your name to the President RBEF and the Founder President of Amity.”

I was interviewed by the President and the Founder President, who summed up his expectations with warmth and clarity:

“Chhaya, treat these children as your own. Look after them. Create an environment in which they forget their homes. Free their minds from worries so that these future leaders can focus on making India a Super Power. For that reason, I want our hostels to be among the best in the world.”

His clearly stated vision struck a chord. I wasn't just taking a job; I was stepping into a role that demanded care, empathy, and dedication.

Thus, I bid farewell to 15A Club.

While handing me the appointment letter, Lt Gen Sareen explained the job profile in detail. “You can move into the allotted accommodation and join duty next Monday.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Just as I turned to go, General Sareen stopped me. “One last thing,” he said with a knowing smile. “Appearance matters. You look too young to be managing the hostel. The students might take you to be one of them. To command respect, and to exercise authority, you'll need to radiate experience.” He couldn't help laughing as he added, “You could make a deliberate effort to look old. To begin with, you might even consider dyeing your hair grey.”

Looking back now, joining Amity was more than a career decision—it was a turning point. It led me on a journey of self-discovery and profound personal growth.

On paper, I was responsible for the care and discipline of about 250 young adults. But in reality, my responsibilities were far broader: I was their confidante, disciplinarian, counsellor, and sometimes even a foster parent.

Their energies were boundless. So were their emotions. Many were away from home for the first time, eager to test the waters of freedom. And I was tasked with guiding them.

Being a hostel administrator wasn't a nine-to-five job. It was 24/7. There were late-night knocks on the door, hostel dramas that unfolded like soap operas, urgent medical runs, and moments of unexpected laughter that filled the corridors.

There were times I questioned my choices—especially during exhausting stretches. But more often than not, I found meaning in the smallest of victories: a troubled student settling down, a parent calling to thank me, or a graduation hug that said more than words ever could.

Every one of those young adults touched my life in some way, and I'd like to think I touched theirs, too.

From navigating military postings to embracing this role in academia, life had indeed taken a turn. But in the process, I found purpose, strength, and a renewed sense of self.

Somewhere along the way, I stopped pretending to be older. I simply grew into the role.



14

"YOU HAVE MY SUPPORT..."



*A single phone call changed how I saw myself—and how the
students saw me.*



Until I took charge as the Hostel Administrator, students had the freedom to leave the campus at will and return as per their convenience. I felt that their return to the hostel at a reasonable hour was important. Disturbing the status quo would antagonise the students, so, any changes would have to be introduced in small doses. To make a beginning, I asked them to meet in the mess for a heart-to-heart talk.

“Students, I am Dr Chhaya Chordia, your Hostel Administrator,” I introduced myself.

“Oh my God, I thought she was a PG student,” I overheard someone remark in a muffled, yet easily audible voice. That reminded me of General Sareen’s advice the other day on the need to look old and experienced.

“Thank you. I hope that is meant to be a compliment.” I began.

When I had their attention, I continued, “I have called you to discuss issues that concern you. I want you to come up with suggestions to improve the quality of life in the hostel--things that can make this hostel feel like a home away from home for you.”

“Ma’am, we miss home food. The menu in the cafeteria is so repetitive... one day we have *aloo-bhindi*, the next day, it is *bhindi*-

aloo, then either *aloo* or *bhindi*... just permutations and combinations of the same vegetables,” said Amit Tiwari.

“...and sometimes the *chapatis* are half-baked,” added Kriti Bhaskar.

“...they don’t serve South Indian food,” complained Srinivasan.

“With a little imagination, the caterer could serve different breakfast every day—*parantha*, *purie*, *dosa*, *poha*...,” suggested Sanjay Singh.

“Okay, I get it. You are looking for variety in the menu and an improvement in quality,” I intervened after a while. “I propose we take up these issues with the caterer. I want two volunteers from amongst you to join me in the discussion, and then to follow up the points. Let’s see how we can proceed.”

Kriti and Sanjay volunteered to be on the Mess Committee. I directed them to collate the points raised by the hostellers and fixed up a meeting with the caterer.

The caterer was amenable. “I can meet those requirements, Ma’am. But, if you permit me, I have an issue of my own,” he said, “the students waste a lot of food. That adds to my cost. If only something could be done to reduce wastage.”

I directed Kriti and Sanjay to share caterer’s concern with the hostellers and monitor the quality and variety of food over the following days. A weekly bill of fare was also created and generally adhered to thereafter.

The students were pleased with the changes.

In the subsequent meetings, which were attended by more students, I addressed their points of concern, including issues

with power and water supply, plumbing, geysers, and furniture. “You can log repair or maintenance issues in the reception registers—or walk into my office anytime to share your thoughts with me. Don’t carry your worries to your classrooms,” were my parting words.

The happiness quotient in the hostel began rising, as was evident from the random feedback I received from the students. Therefore, a few days later, when I demanded that the hostellers adhered to the checking-in timings in the hostel after dinner or after availing out-passes, there was very little resistance. After some haggling, for which I was prepared, I managed to get them to accept my terms for returning to the hostel. Some complied willingly, while others agreed half-heartedly. Then there was Anil Singh, a second-year law student, who took the directive as a ‘restriction’ and an assault on the freedom of the students. He took it upon himself to convince me to remove the hostel-in time limit.

One day, he came to me with a devilish smile and said, “Ma’am, we are not children. We are responsible young adults. Most of us are eligible to vote and choose our own government. And you want to bind us with these hostel-in timings?”

“Mr Anil Singh, this is not a new norm. The hostel-in timings were clearly stated in the joining instructions for students. Don’t you remember signing an undertaking to abide by the hostel rules? These timings have been laid down for the safety and security of the students, not to cause them inconvenience. It is just that I am implementing them with seriousness.”

“But I don’t think this is necessary. Sometimes, we have commitments outside the campus and are delayed. We are

responsible enough to return as per our convenience. How does it matter if we return after midnight, or even the next morning?" His words were laced with arrogance.

"Now! Now! What is necessary and what is not? Mr Singh, don't you think we could leave that judgement to the management? You are a senior student. I expect you to set a good example. I am afraid there can't be any leniency on this."

"You cannot chain us like this," gruded Anil Singh as he left my office noisily.



As if to prove his point, Anil Singh left the campus next evening and returned after midnight. Under my instructions, the guards stopped him at the main gate and sought my directions. I told them to let him sit at the reception and wait for me.

When I reached the gate, Mr Jaspal Singh, the guard commander, took me aside and said that Mr Anil Singh was misbehaving with the guards. He added that he was related to a serving MLA and had been threatening the guards with dire consequences for stopping him. A minute ago, he had called the Founder President, complaining of harassment at their hands. "You might get a call from the Founder," Jaspal sounded disturbed.

"You needn't worry, Mr Jaspal Singh. You are following my instructions," I assured the guard commander, who immediately relaxed.

Within minutes, my mobile rang.

“Chhaya, who is this, Anil Singh? What is his problem?” The Founder President was on the line. At 1:00 am, his voice suggested that he was wide awake.

“Sir, he is a second-year student. Despite instructions to abide by the hostel-in timings, he has returned late to the campus. He has been threatening the security staff with dire consequences for stopping him at the gate. They say he has political connections.”

The Founder listened to me without interrupting. When he spoke, his instructions were clear, “Chhaya, deal with this your way. I want some semblance of discipline on the campus. You have my support for it. I am instructing my staff not to take any more calls from this student. Good night.”

“Good night, Sir.”

In that first professional interaction with the Founder President, which lasted barely two minutes, he lit the path for me and made me realise my importance in the organisation. I was well-prepared when I met the student a minute later.

Anil Singh did not give me a chance to speak when I entered the room. “Ma’am, these people cannot stop me at the gate like this,” he said.

“Mr Anil Singh, cool down” I said, “Don’t point a finger at the security staff. They are acting under my instructions. You have returned to the campus after midnight, well after the hostel-in time of 11:30 pm. You have flouted a rule.”

I gestured at Anil Singh to keep quiet when he tried to interrupt me, and continued, “I had asked them to detain you at the gate. Now, what do you want me to do with you.”

“What do you mean, Ma’am... what can you do to me?”

“I mean exactly what I am saying. My security staff have told me about your political affiliations. I am sure your minister uncle will not be pleased to be woken up at this hour and be told that his nephew has returned to the campus well past midnight.”

I impressed upon him the adverse publicity his actions might generate for his uncle.

“Please do not tell him, Ma’am,” Anil Singh mellowed.

“I assure you, Mr Anil Singh, the matter will end here and now, but only if you promise that there’ll be no recurrence.”

“I promise, Ma’am. It won’t happen again. Take my word for it.”

“And...”

Anil Singh read my mind. He didn’t let me complete my sentence and walked up to Jaspal Singh and spoke with earnestness, “Mr Jaspal Singh, I apologise for raising my voice with the guards. I carry no ill will against them.”



Five years later, Anil Singh walked into my office with a young lady by his side and a baby in his arms. He touched my feet and said, “Ma’am, meet Shikha Singh, my better half. We were blessed with a baby boy. Tanmay is three months old now. I have brought Shikha and Tanmay to seek your blessings.”

As I looked at the once-defiant student, now a young father, humility in his eyes, I realised that discipline, when delivered with empathy, has the power to transform lives. I wished the couple well and enquired what Anil Singh was doing. With a

sheepish smile, he told me that he had joined politics and would be contesting assembly elections soon.

“All the best. I am sure you’ll do well. May God be with you.”



15

LITTER TO LEADERSHIP



Example is better than precept.



It was Pammi Garewal's misfortune that I happened to be walking behind her that day.

A second-year student, Pammi had a reputation—cheerful, outspoken, and fiercely independent. She said what came to her mind, without filters. She wasn't one to care about how she was perceived. That was Pammi.

That afternoon, I saw her strolling down the corridor of the Food Court, munching on salted peanuts. With the last of the snack popped into her mouth, she crumpled the shiny silver packet into a ball and lobbed it casually at the dustbin. It missed the trash bin by a foot and landed on the floor.

She didn't stop. She didn't even glance back.

"Pammi, that was a near miss," I said. "Why don't you give it another shot?"

She turned, mildly surprised—then a little annoyed—until she realised who was speaking. Her expression changed instantly.

"Good afternoon, Ma'am," she said, straightening up.

"Please don't litter the premises, my dear."

"But Ma'am," she replied, half-laughing, "I aimed for the bin. My bad luck it didn't go in."

"Then I expect you to pick it up and try again."

She looked slightly irritated. "I'm getting late for class. Some *safaiwallah* will remove it."

Her words carried a tinge of defiance—not insolence exactly, but enough to warrant a pause.

"In that case, please meet me in my office after your last class today."

Pammi gave a brief nod. "Right, Ma'am."

She disappeared down the corridor.



She arrived punctually in the evening, knocking softly before entering my office. She looked subdued but not apologetic.

"Pammi, what you did this morning was disappointing," I began. "You're a senior student. Your actions set an example for juniors. And your response to my request—well, that was worse."

She said nothing. Her gaze rested on the paperweight on my desk.

"I spoke just last week about the importance of keeping the campus clean," I continued. "You all nodded in agreement. I thought we had an understanding."

Pammi was silent. Her face gave little away.

At that moment, my assistant Harish walked in to get a quick signature on a document. I signed it and told him, "Please make sure I'm not disturbed for the next ten minutes."

Once we were alone again, I looked at her more closely.

“Pammi, it’s not about a peanut wrapper,” I said more gently. “It’s about taking ownership. You’re a smart young woman. I expect better from you.”

She finally spoke—quietly this time. “I was wrong, Ma’am. I own it. No excuses.”

Her voice had changed. She was no longer defensive. Her eyes met mine with sincerity.

I was about to let her go when she surprised me.

“If it’s alright, I’d like to make up for it,” she said. “I want to volunteer for *kar sewa* in the Food Court for a week. One hour every evening. I’ll pick up litter. I think it’ll help me, in a small way... to be a better person.”

I was taken aback—not by her gesture, but by her integrity.

“That’s commendable, Pammi,” I said.

She left silently.



Pammi started that very evening. For the first two days, she moved quietly through the Food Court, picking up discarded cups, wrappers, and bottles, and depositing them in the bins.

Most students ignored her. A few looked puzzled. But she didn’t seem to care.

On the third day, someone noticed.

“Pammi, what’s wrong with you?” one of her friends asked, half-joking. “Why are you picking up other people’s trash?”

Pammi just smiled and bent down to pick up an empty Coke can that had just been dropped by another student. She walked over

to the student, handed it back gently, and gestured to the dustbin.

Surprised—and embarrassed—the student took the can from her, murmured an apology, and disposed of it himself.

Word began to spread.

By the end of the week, Pammi's quiet effort had sparked a change. A few students began joining her in the evenings. Others stopped littering altogether, having seen someone like Pammi—bold, respected, and previously indifferent—take a stand through action, not words.

The transformation was subtle but real. The Food Court looked cleaner. The bins were used more. And Pammi? She never spoke of it. Not once.



A few weeks later.

"I heard you've been leading a little cleanliness revolution," I said.

Pammi shrugged, then grinned. "Just trying to balance the scales, Ma'am."

"Well, thank you," I replied. "You've done more than just pick up litter. You've passed on a contagious habit."

She chuckled. "Good contagions are rare. Might as well spread the ones that matter."



16
DIVYA



*Some truths arrive with tears. Others with silence.
Both are equally honest.*



As the Director General of Hostel Administration at Amity, I've had countless conversations with students and their families—some brief and procedural, others deeply personal and unforgettable. My office often becomes a space where concerns are aired, stories unfold, and unexpected truths emerge. Along the way, I've encountered all kinds of parents—some anxious, some curious, and a few who wear their hearts on their sleeves. Each interaction brings its own story. Some are short-lived concerns that end with wagging the tongue or a phone call; others linger in memory.

Here, I recount two of the many stories that have stayed with me—one that gently exposed a harmless parental request and another that revealed a mother's quiet grief. Both remind me that every student carries a story, and sometimes, so do the parents who accompany them.

Uday Manjunath was allotted a shared room on the third floor. His parents came with a very specific request. His mother said, "Please allot Uday a single occupancy room," she said, "Since childhood, he's always had a room to himself. He's uncomfortable sharing his space. It'd be nice if the room were on the ground floor."

I nodded. I had received similar requests before. Often, they came from well-meaning parents unsure of how their children would adapt to communal living.

After two days, I called Uday and discussed his needs. Uday had no issues with sharing a room. In the following week, he'd formed a friendship with his roommate, Abhay Saha, a cheerful student from Assam. The two were often seen playing badminton in the evenings. I never heard back from the Manjunaths. That chapter closed itself.

But not all parents come seeking adjustments or special provisions. Some arrive with unseen burdens.

Divya Saxena, for instance, came all the way from Lucknow with her daughter, Ankita, for admission. They were accompanied by Divya's sister-in-law. The office was relatively quiet that afternoon; there weren't many visitors. While Ankita filled out forms and answered questions, Divya sat quietly, taking in the surroundings calmly.

Once the formalities were over, I turned to Ankita. "We have excellent faculty, infrastructure, and opportunities here," I said. "Make the best of your time—focus on academics, but don't ignore sports and co-curriculars. Your parents will be proud to see your all-round development."

As I spoke, I noticed Divya silently remove her glasses and dab her eyes with the edge of her sari. The tears hadn't yet fallen, but the emotion was unmistakable.

"Ma'am, is Amity campus safe for girls?" She raised a concern shared by most parents.

"Rest assured, Ma'am, we provide students with a *home-away-from-home*. Ankita will be well looked after."

She seemed relieved, but her tears finally rolled down her cheeks. Her sister-in-law reached out to console her. She placed

her hand on her shoulder and said to me, “Ma’am, we lost Ankita’s father a month ago. Divya has two daughters. The elder one is also away in Ghaziabad. When Ankita joins Amity, she’ll be all alone.”

I got up from my seat and walked up to Divya. I offered her a glass of water and said, “I am sorry to hear that. I assure you that your daughter is in safe hands.”

There was a moment of stillness. I looked at them, and a question began forming in my mind—was there a way to support them?

“Are you working in Lucknow, Mrs Saxena?” I asked.

“No,” she said.

I prodded, gently but with purpose. Sometimes, silence needs space to open up, and she found it that day. She spoke of her late husband, a successful individual who had left behind ample resources. Her children’s education and future were financially secured.

“So, how do you spend your time?” I asked to break the silence.

“I am a homemaker.”

“What if I could get Divya to join Amity in some capacity,” I thought, “then she would be occupied and be close to her daughter too. It would be an ideal thing for the two of them.”

With that thought uppermost in my mind, I asked Divya, “Would you like to join us as a warden?”

“I have never stepped out of the house. I don’t think, I can take that responsibility.” She said, and prepared to leave.

“If you do join, you’ll be occupied and be close to Ankita. You’ll be there if and when she needs you. Think it through. It’ll not just be a job—it’ll be an opportunity to stay connected. Mrs Ghatak had joined us likewise. Her daughter has since graduated, and she has moved on.” I gave her food for thought as she left.

After some time, Divya was back in my office.

“Ma’am, can I really join Amity? How can I apply?”

“Just leave an application with me,” I told her.

About two months later, Divya Saxena joined us as a warden. Quiet, composed, and deeply committed, she served Amity for several years. I often saw her walking the corridors, a reassuring presence to many girls in the hostel.

Divya stayed with Amity for a few years after Ankita’s graduation. Her association with Amity changed her life--turned her into a confident professional. To some in her family, Chhaya Ma’am became a godmother.

These exchanges remind me that hostel administration is not just about room allocations or facility management—it’s about people, transitions, and silent battles. Parents often leave more than their children at the gates of a university; they leave behind their hopes, anxieties, and pieces of themselves. In listening to their stories, I’ve learned that compassion is not a soft skill—it’s an essential one. And sometimes, the smallest gestures can mean a lot.



17

MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS



Some people are more equal than others.



Admission time at Amity is a period of intense activity, especially for the Hostel Staff. New students are allocated rooms and guided to their blocks. Many arrive with anxious parents, who, despite the clearly publicised details on the university's website, have countless queries. They want the best for their children and ask for preferences:

“Please give my son a room with a window facing east.”

“...A single-occupancy accommodation; my child has never lived in a shared room.”

“...A shared room with someone from Jharkhand—my son is too simple. He'll be uncomfortable with boys from other states.”

Once, a parent of a student, healthy and well-built with no medical history, pleaded, “My son is very weak and claustrophobic. He cannot get into a lift, nor can he climb stairs. Also, he has breathing difficulties. He must get fresh air. Kindly accommodate him in a ground-floor room facing the lawn.” They even went so far as to suggest an ideal hostel layout!

Their demands and suggestions remind me of an oft-repeated joke:

In pre-independence India, when trains lacked lavatories, a wealthy businessman faced a dilemma. Seated in the last wagon, he would rush to use the

facilities at enroute stations, only to be cut short by the guard's whistle. Frustrated, he wrote in the destination station's suggestion book: *'There should be no last bogie in trains. But if there must be one, it must be positioned in the middle!'*

Within available resources, it is humanly impossible to satisfy every parent. Yet, the comfort and welfare of hostellers remain my responsibility. Before leaving their loved ones in the hostel, parents want to meet me. They sit in the lounge near my office and await their turn to discuss their concerns. Harish, my man Friday, ensures order. He has strict instructions: show no favour; treat all equally. That's the democratic way. But some always consider themselves more equal than others.

Mr Satya Narayan Pradhan was one such person.

An ex-MLA, he was not accustomed to waiting. He arrived with his son, a fresher, accompanied by his PSO. The man tried to enter my office, but Harish stopped him and requested him to wait in the lounge, as some parents were already sitting with me. He offered him a cup of tea, which he declined. The khadi-clad ex-leader wasn't amused. He didn't wait for long and barged into my office; his annoyance was evident.

"Hum janta ke pratinidhi hain... kya aap humko bhi line mein bithaiyega?" ["I am a representative of the people... will you make me also sit in a queue?"]

Two parents, already in my office, shifted uneasily, ready to step aside for the VIP. Their body language was clear: *"No issues, Ma'am... we'll return after you're done with the VIP."*

Yielding would set a wrong precedent. Rejecting him outright risked damaging my role as a bridge between university management and visitors—not to mention the potential trouble influential people can create. In a split second, I charted my course.

I gestured to the parents to remain seated and calmly requested the ex-MLA to wait in the lounge, assuring him I'd call him next. It was a tactical move. I had no intention of antagonising a dozen other parents for the sake of one individual.

To the chagrin of others in the lounge, I summoned him next—not out of deference, but to make a point.

He entered with a sense of victory. His son and the PSO followed.

“*Namaskar*,” I greeted and gestured towards a chair. He signalled his son to take the other seat. But before the boy could sit or the PSO could take position behind the ex-MLA's chair, I intervened.

“Your son and your PSO may wait outside until called for.”

The MLA squirmed but remained calm.

“Harish, please get a cup of tea for the Honourable MLA and ensure no interruptions.”

Then, I turned to my guest. “Yes, Sir, how can I assist you?”

“I have come to leave my son in the hostel. I have some queries.”

“That's exactly what we are here for. Everyone in the lounge is waiting for their turn. It isn't taking long. You could kindly wait too.”

“But I am an ex-MLA, a representative of the people. Don’t I have any privileges?” His voice was firm, his face turning red with incipient rage.

“Of course, Sir. May I ask whether you are here as an ex-MLA or as a parent?”

He saw where this was headed and shifted uneasily in his chair.

“If you’re here as a guardian, we would like to treat you like other parents. But if you are here as a people’s representative, I wish you had informed us in advance, then things would have been different.

Pradhan remained silent. His son was called and all their queries were settled. The MLA left satisfied and happy.



18

**"ELEMENTARY, MY DEAR
WATSON!"**



A prankster, only intuition could spot.



5 :00 am, on a foggy December morning.

I lay in bed, pretending to be asleep, quietly observing Shona as he tiptoed around the house. Ever so considerate, he hadn't even switched on his bedside lamp. He had stashed his golf bag, shoes, cowboy hat, and a change of clothes in the car the night before to avoid last-minute delays. Moving with quiet efficiency, he brewed a cup of tea and sipped it with two biscuits—dog biscuits, as he had called them since his NDA days. As always, he kept a beautifully handwritten *have-a-nice-day* note under a glass tumbler on the dining table and prepared to leave.

My phone rang just as he reached for the door. He sprinted back into the bedroom, ready to intercept the call if it was unimportant. But I had already picked up the phone.

“Hello, Ma’am, good morning. Sorry to disturb you so early...” Basu, the warden of Hostel-3, sounded uneasy.

“It’s fine, Basu. What’s the matter?”

“Something unusual, Ma’am. Nearly a dozen tube lights from the third-floor corridor are missing. A few are broken—some glass pieces are scattered here and there.”

“Any clues?”

“None at all, Ma’am. A student reported the blackout when he woke up to study. It’s not an issue concerning electricity supply—the MCBs are all ON.”

“Keep a watchful eye. I’ll be there in a jiffy.”

Shona overheard my side of the conversation and concluded that it was an emergency and I’d be gone long. So, while I got ready, he prepared me a cup of coffee. Sadly, I couldn’t take a sip and prepared to leave.

“There goes your morning,” he mused. “I think I’ll skip golf and tag along—just in case...”

“...I need you?” I finished his sentence with a smile. “Don’t worry, it’s probably a prank—someone messing with the early risers, the studious kind. A routine matter, I suppose. You could carry on with your round of golf.”

“Let’s hope it is a routine matter. But, God forbid, if guys have tried settling scores and someone needs to be taken to the hospital... I’ll wait outside.” Shona was imagining things.

Not wanting his weekly game to be compromised for my duty, I said, “Your four-ball will blame me for a last-minute ditching.”

“Kaushik, Beni, and Sandy are considerate guys. They will let me off with a token fine—a breakfast after the next round of golf together,” he joked. Without another word, he called Wing Commander Kaushik and excused himself. No questions were asked; no explanations given. That’s friendship.

Basu was waiting for me in the hostel lobby. He switched on his phone’s flashlight and led the way. There was graveyard silence in the corridor, broken only by the crunching of shattered glass underfoot.

Something was amiss. This wasn't just mischief—it felt like a warning.

“Mr Basu, please call the student who reported this.”

Basu promptly summoned Avi Aiyar, a second-year Law student. “Ma’am, his door was bolted from the outside. I unbolted it during my 5:30 am round when he called for help.”

Avi was in a thick pullover and thermal bottoms. His head was covered in a balaclava. He was rubbing his eyes and dragged his feet.

“Good morning, Ma’am,” he yawned.

“Could he have done it and staged his own entrapment to prove his innocence?” I wondered.

“Mr Basu, assemble all the students residing on this floor.”

When Basu knocked on the doors, boys called back: “Sir, our doors are bolted from the outside.”

Basu was puzzled. “Ma’am, this is strange. Just like Avi’s room, other rooms are also bolted... I’ll unbolt them.”

The students finally gathered—groggy, wrapped in jackets, pullovers, and hoodies, hands tucked in pockets. Low murmurs filled the air, each new arrival asking the same question: “What’s going on?”

I let my gaze sweep over them, searching for clues. Then I addressed them.

“Good morning students! I am sorry for pulling you out of your beds early on a cold Sunday morning. But it is a matter of concern. One of you has removed the corridor’s tube lights; some of them are broken. I want to believe this is just a prank.”

I paused for the murmur to subside. “Now listen carefully—it is only a matter of time, I assure you whoever has done this will be found. I have the means to trace the person.”

I could sense tension mounting.

“I urge you to end this joke right away. If you, whoever it is, own up now and replace the tube lights, you’ll be let off with a written warning and maybe a small fine. If I have to find you, this will be treated as vandalism.” I let my words have the desired effect. “And that’ll lead to a very severe disciplinary action. You have fifteen minutes to make up your mind and act... mind you, fifteen minutes.”

Murmur. And, more murmur.

Then, I had a word with Basu, “Considering that all the rooms of this floor were bolted and the rooms on the three lower floors are vacant, the miscreant could be from the fourth floor. So, get all the fourth-floor students out as well. Avi has just reported that only a few rooms on the fourth-floor are bolted—this could mean something.”

I took time to go out of the building and allay Shona’s anxiety. “Things seem to be getting under control. I am trying to get at the root of the problem.” I told him, and returned to the fourth floor. Shona left the place.

Like zombies, the students of the fourth floor also poured into the corridor; the same question on their lips: “What’s going on?”

While they were still assembling, a thought crossed my mind: “People who do such crazy things like to boast about them. They tend to keep a trophy or a souvenir to claim their fame among

friends.” I now needed to identify suspects and find a discreet way to check their rooms.

To the students gathered in the lobby, I repeated my warning: “Own up, pay the damages, and a fine or be prepared for severe disciplinary action.”

As more thoughts came to my mind, I asked them to spread out and stretch their hands forward—palms facing up.

“She can’t punish us like this,” someone muttered.

“Who said, this is punishment?” I shot back. “Call it what you will, I’m looking for something else.”

The murmur died down.

The boys displayed their palms. I went around inspecting them. I stopped in front of a student and asked him, “Why is there a tremor in your hands? Have you removed the lights?”

“No, Ma’am,” he stammered, “I have done nothing. I am shivering because of the cold.”

“Oh, I see,” I said and continued seeing their hands.

My question made the students conscious; they began making a deliberate effort to hold their hands steady. My observation included smelling hands at random.

Then, a guy in a thin cotton T-shirt caught my eye.

“Are you unwell?” I asked.

“Mild fever and cold, Ma’am.”

“Yet, no warm clothes? Unh..?”

“Oh, I was in a hurry, Ma’am. Forgot to put on my pullover.”

I felt his forehead with my palm—no fever.

“Your name?”

“Sumer Singh, ASCO.”

“Son, you are unwell. Return to your room and take rest. And, visit the clinic later in the day,” I advised him.

Sumer trudged towards his room, which was twenty paces away. Behind his back, I gestured to Basu to take charge and followed Sumer. He was taken aback when I entered his room after him. He tried in vain to block my path but I pushed him aside and found my way.

His room was a junkyard—dirty laundry, torn shoes, and unwashed dishes. On his study table, among other things, there were two broken ends of tube lights—the souvenirs I was looking for.

Our eyes met. His face turned pale.

Sumer stammered, “Ma’am... I—I have removed the lights.”

My gut feeling led me to look for more clues in his room. He tried to block my way when I tried to go to the other side. Kept in one corner were unauthorised items of electrical equipment—an electric kettle and a toaster.

The two beds in his room were joined.

I asked Sumer, “Why are these beds joined and... where is the other occupant of this room?”

“Ma’am he is away on leave.”

On a hunch I asked him to separate the beds. He obeyed very reluctantly. I was utterly surprised to see a student hiding under

the beds. Sumer admitted that he was his friend—not an Amitian—who had dodged the guards and entered the hostel clandestinely. He had helped him remove the tube lights; some broke in the process.

Sumer said with a hung head, “We did it, just for kicks!”

Sumer’s father, a police officer, couldn’t believe what his son had done.

Later, Sumer faced disciplinary action.

Back home, I told Shona briefly what had happened. He asked me, “How did you zero in on Sumer?”

I smiled. “Elementary, my dear Watson. First, I checked and smelt their hands for dust. Anyone who had removed old, used tube lights would have had dust marks on the palms. More importantly, I saw a straight dust streak on Sumer’s T-shirt, which could only have been formed by a straight object. It was a telltale sign which confirmed his involvement.”



19

PARTY CONTINUES



*People apart, even stars align favourably when the concerns
are genuine and non-negotiable.*



The hosts had cut the cake to celebrate twenty-five years of their togetherness. By 10:00 pm, it was a decent time for the party at Akash Air Force Officers' Mess to be gradually winding down. I was happy--we'd be home well before midnight. I was exchanging last-minute notes with friends when my phone rang. I stepped aside and answered.

"Is that Chhaya madam?" a voice enquired. It was a male voice, a little abrasive. It lacked the courtesy one might expect, especially of a stranger calling a woman.

"Yes, I am Chhaya ma'am."

"Are you from Amity?"

"Yes... and who am I speaking with?"

"Sub Inspector Anubhav Misra... from Noida... Atta Market, Noida...."

His pauses sounded like he was chewing something. His accent and tone painted a vivid picture in my mind--someone from the wilderness of Chambal Valley. Chewing paan, perhaps. If phone lines could transmit smell, I'd have smelled *Banarasi paan*.

"Yes, Mr Misra. What's the matter?"

"Two of your students are here with me. They were involved a street fight. We're registering an FIR. They wanted to speak with you." Without waiting, he handed the phone to one of them.

“Ma’am, this is Shantanu, BBA Second Year,” came a nervous voice. “We’re being detained for no fault of ours. Two drunk bikers collided with us and got into a scuffle. When the police arrived, those guys fled. We’ve been held.”

“Are you hurt?” I was concerned.

“Just a few bruises. My friend’s bike is damaged, but we’re okay.”

“Out in Atta Market at this late hour? Aren’t you a hosteller?”

“No, ma’am. I live in PG accommodation in Raipur.”

“Hosteller or not, you’re an Amitian. That’s what matters. Don’t worry, I’ll be there soon. Avoid giving a statement as far as it is possible, and delay signing anything until I arrive. Do you get it?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Now, hand the phone back to the SI, I want to have a word with him too.”

There was a pause. “... Hello...” the officer said, now a little less aggressive.

“Mr Misra, if it can be helped, please pause raising the FIR until I reach there. I’m in Delhi, on my way to Noida.”

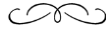
“Madam, please hurry up. We can’t delay this indefinitely. Some media persons are already here,” he warned.

That was unexpected—and worrying. I spoke with Shantanu once more and told him to stay away from cameras and media interviews.

We prepared to leave instantly. The host, understanding my predicament, said, “I wish you had stayed back for dinner, but

then, I appreciate the urgency.” On a lighter note, he added, “It seems, for you, the party continues elsewhere.”

I smiled wearily. “I hope it doesn’t last long.” We thanked them for the lovely evening and made our way out.



Trucks, honking along, tore down the highway. Nearing midnight, they owned the Delhi roads. Shona drove in silence, letting me gather my thoughts. I debated whether it was too soon to inform the Chancellor or the Vice-Chancellor. I chose to defer reporting until later in the evening, once I had some concrete information.

“A zealous cop; media eager to get news; time slipping away... how do I get the boys out of this mess?” I thought.

Shona tried to lighten the moment. “Well, my dear, I see this as a bonus—a small drive together after a good get-together. Shall we have Lata, Mukesh, Rafi, or Kishore for company?”

Instead of replying, I asked him, “Remember the name of the SP who spoke at 15A Club last month about police reforms in Noida?”

“Hmmm... wait a minute ... I think it was some Kashyap... Yes, Ravi Kashyap, SP City.”

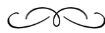
“Exactly, that’s him.” I scrolled through my contacts and found his number.

“Hello, Mr Kashyap! This is Dr Chhaya Chordia,” I said when he picked up. “We met last month—at 15A Club—during your talk on crime prevention initiatives.”

“Ah yes! Amity University, right? I recall having spoken with you at length. I had saved your number,” he said warmly. “Calling me at this hour—hope everything is okay?”

“I wish it were. Two of my students have been detained by your people in Atta Market. I believe there’s some misunderstanding. Could you ask your team to wait until I get there?”

“Consider it done, ma’am. Call me if there's any problem.”



The SI who met us in Atta Market was not the same man I'd spoken to on the phone—at least, not in behaviour. This Anubhav Misra, though unmistakably chewing *paan*, was now politeness personified.

“Mrs Chordia, I am sorry you had to be troubled,” he sounded quite different.

His quick transformation made sense when he asked, “Madam, do you know the SP City, Mr Kashyap? He called me a while ago enquiring about this case.” As an afterthought, he added, “With great difficulty, I have managed to keep the media away. You know how nosy they are. They were keen to report on Amity boys involved in a fight.”

The two students stood like frightened schoolboys.

“Relax,” I told them. “Tell me what happened.”

Shantanu introduced his colleague and elaborated, “Ma’am, he is Ajit Verma, my childhood friend. He’s not an Amitian; stays with his cousin in Noida. He and I were heading for The Great India Place on his bike when another bike hit us from behind.

Those guys were carrying some liquor bottles, which broke when their bike skidded. They started blaming us for the accident. A scuffle ensued. They fled when the cops arrived. These cops smelt alcohol and assumed we were the ones drinking and causing nuisance.”

Standing near Shantanu, I didn’t get the smell of alcohol.

“A breathalyser is not readily available with them, so they have been detaining us,” Shantanu lamented.

While the cops were busy organising a breath analyser from a nearby police station, I asked Shantanu, “Where do you live? Have you informed your parents about this incident?”

“I live in a PG accommodation in Raipur. I have not informed my parents yet.”

“Please call your father and tell him. Where’s he and what does he do?”

“Mmm... my father is Air Commodore PC Ghosh,” Shantanu stammered. “Presently, he is the Air Officer Commanding, Air Force Station, Manauri. I needn’t inform him. He’ll be unnecessarily bothered.”

“He must know about it, anyway.”

“Let it be ma’am...,” he sounded determined, a bit adamant.

His continued resistance to informing his parents raised a doubt in my mind.

“Give me his number,” I said firmly. “I’ll call him.”

“Please don’t insist, ma’am. Phone numbers of service officers cannot be shared with everyone.” Shantanu did not know of my

association with the Air Force. In his effort to outfox me, he had stepped on his own tail.

“Okay, so be it,” I said coolly, and turned to Shona, “There must be a way to connect with AOC Manauri? Can you please try?”

Shona called the Air Headquarters exchange, briefly explained the situation, and got through to AOC Manauri.

“Good evening, Sir. This is Group Captain Ashok Chordia. Sorry to call you so late. It’s something concerning you... a personal matter.”

Shona was on the speakerphone; all of us could listen to the conversation. Shantanu became fidgety.

“Good evening, Chordia. Please go ahead.”

“Sir, I’m calling from Noida. There has been a minor incident here, and your son has been detained by the cops....”

“My son... detained by the cops in Noida?” a stunned AOC exclaimed. “Impossible! Akhil, my only son, is in Bangalore. My wife is there with him. They were on a video chat with me an hour ago.”

When Shona didn’t speak for some time, the AOC continued, “Someone’s impersonating my son. Let the cops handle the guy.”

“Thank you, Sir. Jai Hind!”

That telephonic conversation hit Shantanu like a sledgehammer.

“Would you like to give me a different story?” I asked him.

He looked down. “Ma’am, I’m sorry. My father is Warrant Officer PC Ghosh, an Equipment Assistant at Manauri. I was

scared of letting him know that I was involved in a brawl, so I gave you AOC's name, hoping you wouldn't call a senior officer at this late hour."

"You were mistaken," I said, not so unkindly. "Now, call him and tell him everything."

Shantanu called his father and apprised him of the incident, "Chhaya ma'am has come from Amity. She is talking to the cops. Please don't worry. I'll call you when I get back to my room."

I reasoned with the SI and convinced him that the boys were innocent, "Mr Mishra, I request you to let them go."

"I am leaving them this time because of your intervention, madam. They were not drunk, but I am told they were driving rashly. Please tell them to follow traffic rules." SI Mishra found a decent way of closing the chapter.

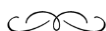
His phone rang as we prepared to leave.

He stood erect and almost saluted before answering. "Sir! Yes, sir... she's here, sir... just a moment, sir" He turned to me. "Madam, SP Saab would like to speak with you."

I took the phone. "Thank you, Mr Kashyap. The students are with me now. You've been a great help."

"That's what we're here for," he replied. "Good night."

I gave the two students a mild reprimand and a short lecture on integrity, and let them proceed.



In the following days, tales of Chhaya ma'am's struggle to get a student released from police custody spread across the campus. They also talked of a telephone call made to a senior Air Force officer in the dead of night during the episode.

Some of those stories were much exaggerated, some imagined. But the truth is: such incidents aren't just matters of protocol or official duty. Instinctively, for the sake of my students I must move mountains, if required. And when the concerns are genuine and non-negotiable, not just people—even the stars and planets align favourably.



20

GATE-CRASHING A PARTY



Discipline doesn't always need a reprimand.



Just as I reached to switch off the bedroom light, my phone rang. It was past midnight.

“Now! What’s it?” I wondered.

“G-good good eevening, Ma’am. M-Mohan Reddy here. First year M-MBA General,” the caller stammered.

“Yes, Mohan. Tell me, what’s the matter?”

A long pause.

“Mohan? Can you hear me? Speak up. I am listening.”

“Sorry to bother you so late, Ma’am,” Mohan steadied his voice.

“Go ahead,” I said.

“I’m calling from the second floor of Boys’ Hostel.” he continued hesitantly in a hushed tone. “Senior students on the first floor are partying and making noise. I am unable to sleep.”

“It is rather late. I thought they’d have turned in by now. Did you speak to them? Did you request them to be quiet?”

“Ma’am, they are my seniors, how can I...,” Mohan was uneasy.

“OK, I understand that. I’ll look into it,” I assured him.



I called a guard on duty to accompany me to the Boys' Hostel. We heard loud noises and observed some movements in the hostel when we began walking towards the building. A student standing in the lobby of the first floor raised an alarm in a muffled voice, "Chhhhaayaaa Maaa'aam is coming... *bhaaago* (run for cover)," when we stepped into the ground floor lobby.

Although meant to be discreet and subdued, the warning was quite loud; I, too, heard it. This was followed by many more muted squeaks and footsteps of students scurrying on the first floor. Alerted by their messenger, the congregation dispersed. The celebration came to an abrupt stop, and by the time I reached the first floor, there was hardly anyone to be seen—pin-drop silence, as if nothing had happened. I moved around, making my presence felt. Then I walked back to my flat satisfied that I had dowsed the disturbance.

I was mistaken.

The noise resurfaced even before I reached my door. So, I backtracked to the hostel, accompanied by a guard. But once again, when we neared the building, a student sentinel alerted the others, and in a jiffy, everyone vanished into thin air, and peace descended. I realised that that was the beginning of a *cat-and-mouse* game—a student on watch would announce my arrival every time, and his friends would wind up and return to their rooms.

I wish I could gate-crash the party to put an end to the noise and din. But, with a student on the watch, that was not a possibility.

There had to be a way to get past this hurdle. Soon, I stumbled upon an idea. I called another guard on duty and told him to switch off the main power supply to all the buildings at 1:00 am

sharp and to turn it on after 40 seconds. That was to simulate a power outage. I'd need just about 30 seconds of cover of darkness to walk across to the Boys' Hostel unseen by their sentry.

The stratagem worked. I, along with the guard, slipped into the Boys' Hostel under cover of the temporary darkness caused by the deliberately tripped power supply and tiptoed to the first floor. The student sentry was flabbergasted on seeing us. He ran towards the room in which the celebrations were going on. On being warned, the students ran helter-skelter. But this time, they had very little reaction time—only one or two could exit the room. Others, who could not leave the room, tried to hide themselves—behind the almirah and under the beds. One of them, who couldn't find any place to hide, went under a pile of dirty linen.

When I entered the room, there was silence. I found the three occupants of the room sitting on the beds, and two others occupying the chairs. I asked them what was all the noise about.

“Ma'am, we got our placements today and were celebrating the occasion. We are just five of us, and we are not making much noise....”

Some kind of tension filled the air. The students anticipated a reprimand.

“Congratulations! So, it is a placement party! I see.” The five students heaved a sigh of relief when I congratulated them rather than pulling them up.

“Akshay has got a placement with HCL; Tarun, with Indiabulls and I, with Godrej,” chirped Manish.

While I was talking to the students, my roving eyes fell on a foot with a shoe on, jutting out of the pile of dirty linen. It moved, and I found it funny, but ignored it purposely. “How long will this fellow lie under that pile?” I wondered.

One of the students also observed the foot and thought that I had not seen it. To help his friend, this student threw a towel on the shoe to cover it.

I continued talking to the students about their placements. The conversation carried on for some time until the student hiding under the pile of clothes couldn’t bear the foul smell any more. He threw aside the clothes and stood up, “Oops, I can’t take it anymore!”

It was like a comedy film. Everyone burst out laughing. Seeing him, others followed suit; they came out of their hidings one by one.

I, too, couldn’t hold myself, and laughed. “Enjoy yourselves boys, but don’t disturb others.”

Peace descended on the hostel. As I walked back, a smile lingered. Discipline doesn’t always need a reprimand; sometimes, a laugh is enough.



21

HUNGER PANGS AT NIGHT



Care wears a stern face.



A half hour after midnight, I had completed my random round of the hostels. The wardens had submitted all correct report; all students were either in their rooms or accounted for. It was indeed a rare day—there was nothing that deserved my personal attention or follow-up. I'd soon be home and asleep. I was about to thank God for that small mercy when I noticed a lone figure whistling softly and walking toward the campus gate. I tiptoed behind him.

On reaching the gate, he spoke to someone through the peep window. He paid some cash to the person on the other side of the iron gate and accepted a carry bag. He was stunned when he turned back and saw me standing in front of him.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“Ma’am, Amit Sharma.”

“Second-year, BTech Biotech,” I added.

He acknowledged my instant identification of him with little surprise.

“You are supposed to be in your room at this time. What are you doing outside the hostel?”

“I fell asleep in the evening and missed dinner in the cafeteria. So, I ordered food from a *dhaba*.” He held up the carry bag. “I have just picked it up from Gate No 4A.”

“Didn’t the guard stop you?”

“Wasn’t there. He had gone to the loo.”

“You’re a second-year student. You know well that outside food isn’t allowed on campus. Those sources are unreliable; their preparations have caused food poisoning in the past. Why don’t you people think of the risk involved?”

“Ma’am, the food court was closed and I was really hungry,” he muttered. “I won’t do it again, I promise.”

“Whatever it be, I can’t allow you to consume that food. Please return it.”

Reluctantly, Amit tried to give back the packet to the food bearer outside the gate, but he didn’t accept it.

He took it away without returning the money to Amit when I insisted, “Take it away, don’t waste food.”

“What’s your room number?” I enquired of Amit.

“Room 2, Lower Ground Floor, Hostel-6,” replied a grumpy Amit.

“Go back now. And... meet me in my office at 11:00 am tomorrow.”

He uttered a feelingless good night and trudged away.

On my way to my residence, I called the attendant on duty, “Malati, come to my residence right away.”

On reaching home, I took out some leftovers from the fridge and warmed them, cut some salad, and then baked fresh chapatis. I placed everything neatly on a tray along with some pickle. When Malati arrived, I handed the tray to her.

“Take this to Boys’ Hostel-6. Hand it over to the guard on duty. Ask him to deliver it to Amit Sharma in Room 2, Lower Ground Floor.”

Next day, at 11:00 am in my office:

I had barely settled in my chair when Amit walked in, his gaze fixed on the floor. He stood still, grappling with some thoughts.

“Ma’am,” he began hesitantly in a low voice. “Last night, I was so angry with you. I cursed you as I walked to my room. I thought you were just another strict disciplinarian—I called you a devil woman more times than I can count.” He swallowed hard. “But then, the guard brought the food. And I realised...” His voice cracked. “You didn’t have to do that for a guy like me.” His eyes were wet. “You are a real mother to us. I made a mistake in understanding you. I am sorry from the bottom of my heart.”

Tears rolled down Amit’s cheeks when I gave him a hug.



22

BETWEEN TWO "MYs"



“Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away.”

— Anonymous



As I sit down to write this final chapter, a part of me hesitates. It is not because I have run out of stories; in fact, many anecdotes that once slipped my mind are now returning as sweet reminders of the beautiful times I have had. The hesitation is, in part, because concluding feels unnatural. I believe life is not confined to a few chapters – it continues to flow, to meander. Sometimes it is hard and challenging, but mostly exciting. Quite often, one takes a leap into the unknown, and a new adventure follows. It has been so in my case as well. I have loved and enjoyed my journeys as much as my arrivals. Although I am stopping here, my story continues; fresh chapters keep getting added. There will be the last one. I don't know when.

When I sit back and think, some memories keep returning time and again.

Two years ago, Shona was rushed to Kailash Hospital with chest pain. The moment I called Dr Ashok K Chauhan and Dr Atul Chauhan, they responded with deep concern about his health. The latter even reached out to Dr Mahesh Sharma, then busy campaigning for the General Elections. Yet, he took time off to direct his hospital staff. Needless to say, Shona received the best care we could have hoped for at Kailash Hospital. Likewise, friends and the Chordia and Jindal clans descended upon Noida to stand by me. After angioplasty, Shona bounced back—fit as

ever. We now continue to travel, party, play cards and watch films, as if nothing had happened. I cannot thank God enough for the immeasurable blessings He has bestowed upon me — my family, my friends, and my cherished association with Amity.

But I carry a regret too. I still cannot hold back my tears when I recall the day Mudit left for college in Bangalore. Shona was in Tezpur, and I was engaged with the new arrivals at Amity. Like most parents when their children step out for higher studies, I could not give him a warm send-off. When I said goodbye to him with tearful eyes, he gently said, “Ma, don’t cry. I’ll be fine in Masi’s care in Bangalore.” The memory still gnaws at my heart. How I wish life had an “*UNDO*” button!

When I think of the best things that ever happened to me, one stands out — Anjali and Mudit meeting by chance and finding each other. Their marriage truly feels made in heaven. Together, they remind me of the old *WILLS* advertisement tagline: “*Made for each other.*” More than a daughter-in-law, Anjali is my best friend — one with a golden heart. If I could turn back time, I would do so many things the way she does — with care, meticulousness, and perfection. Today, the two of them are living many of my dreams — doing the very things my younger self would have loved to do.

A memory, more than forty years old, glows brightly when I travel back in time. It is that of a cultural event in my college. I was young, overflowing with confidence. I was literally everywhere. I was also the master of ceremonies. The event went off exceedingly well as expected. There was standing ovation from those present. I cherished the applause greatly, but one remark stood out, overwhelmed me. Seated among the audience

was my mother and Bai, my mother-in-law to be. “She is MY daughter-in-law,” said Bai, as we engaged with some eminent guests after the function. For forty years, I have believed that none would ever be able to match the affectionate emphasis on the word, “MY,” the way Bai articulated it that day. I was quite right until the other day, when on a video chat, Maya (3), my granddaughter pointed at me and told her cousin Aisha (2) with the same affection, “She is MY Dadi.” Between those two “MYs” life has been B-E-A-U-T-I-F-U-L. Beautiful, as beautiful can be. That is my true wealth. It would be unfair of me to pester God for more. The only wish I can possibly ask Him to grant is this: to give these gifts of peace and unadulterated happiness to others too.

So be it. *Tathastu!*



THEY SAY...

Chhaya is synonym of grace, perfection and versatility... her presence spells success. A custodian of art and culture, she is adored as a torchbearer of knowledge by artists.

— Dr Nalini Kamalini, Padmashree
SNA Awardee Kathak Exponents

I am so proud of my younger sister Chhaya for writing this wonderful book. Her creativity, hard work and dedication truly inspire others. Keep shining and reaching new heights!

— Advocate Mukul B Jindal, Brother

These stories remind me of carefree time spent in Agra. Life then was beautiful because of wonderful friends like ‘Chhayashok’. Every moment was so enjoyable. Chhaya has managed her home, family and job perfectly. Now her talent as a story-teller comes as a pleasant surprise. Best wishes for more such projects.

— Ms Vijaya Pande
(part of the Que sera sera story)

To me, Chhaya Ma’am is more than a mentor—she is like a second mother. Among all the blessings I received during my journey at Amity University, meeting Chhaya Ma’am stands out as one of the most cherished. She is someone who doesn’t just teach or lead—she shapes individuals. Working under her was like being in the best school of life.

— Vaishnavi, Amitian

Sometimes strict, but always full of love, Chhaya Ma'am was like a coconut: tough on the outside, but soft, kind, and deeply caring within. Her silent sacrifices, wise words, and unwavering dedication will forever stay etched in our hearts. She is not just a part of our hostel—she is its soul.

— Gaurav Mittal, Amitian

A woman with rare balance of discipline and compassion, she leads with quiet strength, creating an environment of calm, clarity, and care that makes the surrounding feel like home. She has been one of the most influential people in my life. A part of who I am today is because of her.

— Sameeksha, Amitian