

In the CLOUDS

A Daughter's Journey, a Sister's Dreams

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*Dedicated to my family –
filial and those whom I crossed paths and minds with
and will.*

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PROLOGUE

Asha wished she could erase the last ten years of her memory. So that she could get back to the carefree, dreamy - some might say out of touch with reality - world that she thought did exist. Her world had been the pre-9/11 world, unscathed, still filled with endless possibilities that the New World could conjure up, possibly more than her imagination would let her go. But she was soon to be knocked down, 10 years after, from ripple effects of that fateful day that had changed America forever, along with the rest of the world. For these are the present times, where no act is inconsequential or isolated. No word is merely a passing thought; it can be drummed up to a frenzy by partisan supporters or misconstrued to incite mindless violence by rioting mobs. We all get affected, one way or another. Asha was too inconsequential to be shielded from the repercussions.

One dream leading to another, that was the way she had led her life. Devouring books that let her imagination decide her actions and engulf her thoughts, she never really had to “deal” with day-to-day life, until she was forced to step out of her bubble into reality, more than ten years ago. Those were the years she wanted to erase from her memory now.

Little did Asha know as she was stepping out of her bubble, that the whirlwind of treachery, greed and deceit that was about to engulf her would oppose her with magnetic precision.

Never quite letting go, fearful of losing their meaningless, superficial albeit lucrative existences, those who sought to destroy her were after the one thing that threatened all that. Her ideals.

It went beyond power, money and social acceptance. To the very core of their shaky values.

OFF TO CHENNAI – HOMECOMING

Asha was jumping with exuberance; all her hard work, blood, sweat and tears had paid off. She was about to get into a Master's degree program in one of India's premier universities. Although she had just aced another Master's program in Trichy, the town where her Dad was currently posted, her teacher there insisted that it was a wonderful opportunity for her to continue her education.

"The practicals will be good there, Ma", her teacher had said, referring to the research work being conducted there, when Asha had gone over to inform her of the acceptance letter that she had received.

"In fact, I want you to go over to the principal immediately and inform her that you got accepted into this University", she said.

Her initial fears allayed, Asha marched over to the principal's office. She had in fact wanted to get into a doctoral program after her current postgraduate degree program but this seemed to make so much more sense. If the research work being carried out was better at this new University, then it was just what Asha needed to hone her skills before she plunged into a subsequent research program for her Ph.D.

She went into the Principal's office to inform her of the acceptance into the University.

"I always knew you will get in", said the College Principal. "Good Luck".

Asha left her Principal's office a bit bemused. 'What did she mean by that?' thought Asha. 'How did she know who I was?' Asha wondered. She had no clue that the Principal would know her and had gone in to introduce herself before informing her of the acceptance from the University. Apparently, the Principal knew who Asha was. There were two instances that Asha could think of that could have made the Principal aware of her. The first was when Asha had won a creative writing competition, beating the English Major college head girl. The second instance was a rather distasteful incident, where a professor from another University had replied in a letter in response to Asha's summer training request with a rather derogatory comment of her current college. The Principal could have been aware of either or both these incidents.

Anyway, Asha was now elated as she went back home to pack all the things that she would require for her move to Chennai. Chennai was approximately 320 km away from her current home in Trichy and she would have to stay at the University hostel. Chennai was one of the four major metropolitan cities of India. It was however, not a major move for Asha. In fact, she had grown up in Chennai, completing her schooling and undergraduate studies there before she had received her acceptance into her first postgraduate program at the college in Trichy. Her Dad had moved to Trichy (when she had been an undergrad in Chennai, due to a government job posting) and it only seemed logical that she continue her education at Trichy.

But now she was looking forward to move back to Chennai. It was Homecoming!

TO BE WITH GOOD PEOPLE

Although Asha had worked hard to have gotten admission into the prestigious University, the only thing that tormented her was the fact that there were people out there who could not accept or handle her success. She had spent endless hours, working day and night on her course work during her Master's program at the college back in Trichy and yet she had faced a great deal of animosity from some students and more shockingly from some of her class instructors. For the first time, Asha realized personal success incites mistrust and animosity in some people that one comes in contact with. This thought haunted her, all she had done was to work hard and be successful. 'Why would this bother people?', she wondered. This was the state of mind she was in, when she reached Chennai for the beginning of a new chapter of her life. She felt that she wanted to be surrounded by good people instead, at all times. She did not want any of the bickering and negativity that came with success and instead vowed to concentrate on creating and maintaining nurturing relationships.

The University was a sprawling campus with huge trees lining the roads that led to different areas designating different departments that were in session. Asha had applied for Biotechnology and as she made way to the counselling center to secure her admission, she noticed numerous sporting arenas and cafeterias dotting the campus. The auditorium where the counselling session was in progress was in mayhem with numerous stalls representing various

departments that were accepting students, filled with both prospective students as well as their friends and relatives who had come to see off their wards to their new venture. Asha made her way through the crowd and found a seat at the back of the auditorium, near her admission area. As she waited for her turn, she noticed two people sitting in front of her. One of them was a young man who was smiling at his companion, probably his father who had accompanied him to the admissions. For a second, Asha felt a sense of serenity amid all the noise and chaos of humanity surrounding her.

As she waited, it dawned upon Asha that her admission was not going to be direct, instead depended on her ranking in the National test that had been held earlier. There were only twelve open slots and she had to know if she was ranked within that. So, she went up to the Biotechnology department with another fellow aspirant she had just met during the counselling session. She found out that she had ranked within 10th. Unfortunately, the other girl she had gone over with had ranked lower.

It was almost dusk when Asha finally was able to complete her admission procedures and was informed to go over to the Biotechnology department for a meeting with the faculty advisor. There was a small group of people outside the department building when she arrived. She realized that this was the group she was going to be attending classes with. One person from the group turned around as she approached and smiled. It was the same young man who had been sitting in front of her in the auditorium during the counselling session.

FIRST SHOCK

Asha was looking forward to immersing herself in the field of Molecular Biology at her Biotechnology course. This was the field that had excited her the most during her earlier Bachelor's and Master's courses. It was finally time to concentrate solely on the field she was interested in.

Classes began in earnest and Asha was excited to learn that she would have to take a few courses in chemical engineering amongst various other engineering subjects. She wasn't bothered too much. She waited for the hard-core molecular research sessions to begin. She was in for a rude shock. First the research intense work that she was looking forward to would only be in the form of a project in the 3rd and final semester at the University. What shocked her even more was that the faculty advisor in-charge of their class, Dr. S Nandhan would not allow science grads like herself to take advanced molecular biology courses. Instead, he wanted them to take the engineering courses. Similarly, those of her classmates with an engineering background had to opt for the molecular biology courses instead of the engineering fields they had been trained in and hoped to specialize in future. It was ridiculous, alleviated only by the fact that they were at a reputed University. It was grad school all over again and not the research-oriented environment Asha thought she would be in. Anyway, Asha hoped that the predicament would only last for the first semester and that she would be able to take courses she was interested in, in the 2nd semester.

Asha also got to know her fellow classmates. They seemed to be a good bunch and she was heartened by the fact that she would at least be making good friends while she studied at the University. She came to know that the young man she had first seen during the counselling session was Rishi. Rishi came across as smart although she could not comprehend some of his thoughts in the first few weeks of her acquaintance with him. She felt that she may have found a friend in him. “Don’t worry. I’m normal” he said after one of his endless conversations. Asha knew she could learn a lot from him that would help widen her understanding of the world beyond what she had perceived.

However, she was soon sequestered by some of her other ‘southern classmates’. They came from an engineering background and sought Asha’s assistance in the science courses. Asha felt obliged to help, she could not turn her back on them, although she rather wished she could spend more time with Rishi. Although she helped out with the science courses, she never took help from them for the engineering courses that she had to take. In fact, she was able to interact with Rishi at the sessions whose background in science put them together in the engineering classes. She in fact ended up writing assignments for the two of them on one occasion and even owned up to the professor afterwards.

They had a lot of free time between classes that were mostly spent at the cafeteria by the entire class. That was where she first started to enjoy steaming cups of coffee. One of her classmates, Dhruv was a happy-go-lucky person who absolutely enjoyed his coffee and it soon became a ritual of hers to join him for regular coffee breaks.

The class spent time together after hours as well. Chennai was a big city with a lot of entertainment to offer, and they spent days going out for movies, restaurants and the beach. Asha sincerely felt that these were the most carefree years of her life. She was also getting infatuated with Rishi over some of his advances and she began to wonder if that was the end of the friendship she had earlier hoped for and the beginning of a non-platonic relationship.

WATSON!

The first semester was coming to an end when it was announced that James Watson, the renowned molecular biologist would be visiting the University early the following year when the National Science Conference was being hosted there. Asha was stunned. Watson, was her idol and she could not believe that she would have an opportunity to see him at the conference. There was one major hurdle though. The conference would be held during the semester holidays and all those who stayed at the hostels were told to vacate in order to accommodate the hundreds of participants who would be attending the conference from all over the country as well as from abroad. Shristi, a Ph.D student who stayed at the hostel with Asha came to her rescue. "Come and stay in my room during the conference, Asha," said Shristi. Ph.D students who had to work year-round were allowed to continue to stay at their hostel during the period of the conference. Asha was immensely grateful and went over to stay with Shristi after a brief vacation in Coimbatore where her father was currently posted. "We can go to the conference together in the morning," said Shristi. "Let's attend sessions that would be of interest to the both of us" she said.

After confirming that Watson's plenary session would be held later in the afternoon, Asha and Shristi left to attend the opening ceremony of the conference early next morning. Asha was surprised to see a number of foreign scientists seated on the stage during the ceremony. Asha had no idea if Watson was present amongst them. She had only seen photos of him

during his earlier years when he had conducted research that had later won him the Nobel Prize. It was almost 40 years later now and she was not sure if she could identify Watson. There was one older gentleman in a suit and a red tie who caught her attention. Her hunch was soon confirmed when Watson was introduced at the inauguration ceremony. She was looking at Watson! The person whose work had inspired her, creating a new field of research for hundreds of people that now Asha too was on the verge of entering. She was not only a follower of his work but had also read his autobiography on how he had carried out his research. She had imbibed every word he had written and had in fact a copy of it with her. She longed to carry out research the way he had described in his autobiography. Once the inauguration was completed Asha and Shristi went to the registration office to register for the conference. It was still too early for most participants to arrive. The scientific sessions did not begin till later in the day. As they were waiting to get registered, Shristi said “Asha, turn around and look at the person seated outside”. Asha turned around and her heart skipped a beat. It was Watson, sitting outside with one of her professors! No one else seemed to recognize him as he sat there, talking to a lady seated next to him. Asha immediately fumbled around her bag looking for her note book to get an autograph from Watson. She went over in a trance with Shristi and both of them got his autograph. Word soon spread and others went over as well to do the same. Asha slowly regained her senses and realized that she had her camera with her. She slowly walked over to Watson, waited until he completed his conversation with the lady next to him and asked if she could take a picture of him. He nodded and as Asha stood there focusing her camera, the

lady sitting next to Watson asked if Asha would come into the picture with Watson instead and rose to take the camera from her. Dumbfounded, Asha walked over, stood behind Watson and the lady took their picture together. Her professor who was standing nearby said something to his colleagues as they watched. Asha was too dazed to follow their conversation. There was one line that ripped through her senses though. "One Nobel Prize winner with a future Nobel Prize winner" her professor had said.

THE ARMY

Asha had applied for entering into the Short Service Commission (SSC) with the Indian Army a while ago and was pleasantly surprised when she received a letter asking her to report for the entrance tests to be held in Bangalore. The duration of the testing period would range from a day to a week or even longer depending on how she would fare at the various stages of testing. Asha immediately booked her ticket to Bangalore. It would be the first time she would be travelling alone to a place other than her home or her educational institution.

Bangalore was Asha's favorite city in India then. It had a pleasant climate and a cosmopolitan vibe that Asha had fallen in love with the first time she had visited. She had been to Bangalore a couple of times earlier either with friends or with her family and looked forward to her trip to Bangalore again. According to her Bangalore was the place to settle down in India.

Arriving at the army testing center, Asha realized she had arrived much earlier in the day than anyone else in her batch that were to take the tests together. She saw a person inside the center to whom she explained about her scheduled tests. As she was waiting, she saw a couple of male candidates who had cleared the tests earlier. Some mentioned that a previous batch had been a washout with no one being selected. Subsequently an officer came out to meet her and suggested

that she might want to go over to the barracks where she would stay for the duration of the testing period.

At the barracks, Asha met with the girls who had been selected in the earlier batch. Six of them had cleared and were currently at the medical testing stage after which they would return home and await the call letters to the Officers Training Academy (OTA) at Chennai. Soon, those in her batch arrived. There were over 50 girls to take the first stage of the testing, the written assessment the next day.

The written exam consisted of various sections of aptitude testing and Asha gave it all she had. She was, however, fearful that as with other tests in the past that she had given, the mathematical section would do her in. Although she was confident of the other sections, all Asha hoped was that she was good for the Army in spite of her less than confident performance in the mathematical section.

The results were announced; Asha had made it to the next level. Around 24 candidates had made it to the next round spread over the next two days. It included a number of physical activities as well as extempore speaking and group interactions. Asha was in the freshers' group who were taking the test for the first time while the other group consisted of people who were earlier tryouts.

Everyday Asha put in a level of commitment and focus that she had never before in her life. During the group activities, Asha found her responses were always focused on the Army and wanting to be a part of it. Earlier she had been disappointed to find out that women candidates at SSC were not permitted to take part in combat, which had made her

lose her sense of purpose to an extent. Nevertheless, she was keen on getting into the Intelligence Corps division at the SSC. She knew she would leave her current Biotechnology course in a heartbeat if she was accepted into the Army.

Before she had left for the Army tryouts, her sister had said that Asha would breeze through the extempore tests, which had then surprised Asha for she had always been more of an athlete than a public speaker since early childhood. However, of late in college she had taken up or had been entrusted with numerous speaking assignments that she had become quite good at, to which her sister was alluding to.

So surprisingly, Asha found herself faring quite well at group discussions and extempore speeches. At physical tasks, Asha found out that she psyched herself out of some of the tasks she would have otherwise attempted. Nevertheless, there was one final physical activity to be completed and as Asha ran with her group to the sand pit where it was to be held, she twisted her ankle on slipping into a small hole in the ground and found herself unable to even walk. Tears welling as she willed herself to walk towards the pit, it dawned upon Asha that she might have to drop out of the final challenge, which could potentially disqualify her from the selections. Asha decided to give herself a few minutes before she went over to the test administrators to report her injury. Strangely, her heel recovered before the start of the activity which would become one of her best experiences at the testing. The challenge was called a snake race where her group of freshers had to compete against the other group of repeaters. There were a set of obstacles that they had to tackle after which everyone in the group had to reach the finish line. To win, the last person to

cross had to reach before their counterpart in the opposing team. Asha had become comfortable with one of her fellow groupmates, Ana and not surprisingly both of them took over leading their group. As the group reached one of their obstacles, a high wall they had to climb over, Asha decided that she would help hoist the girls up the wall and would be the last to go over the wall. Ana ended up pulling the girls from the top of the wall where she and a few others had positioned themselves. Once everyone was over the wall, Asha reached out to be hoisted up and found that without a push from below, the girls were unable to lift her up. After a brief instant, Asha lurched against the wall and propelled herself upward after which the girls were able to lift her up with ease. It was a triumphant victory for her group, they were after all first-timers at the tests opposed to the other team which consisted of those who had taken the same tests on previous occasions.

Each candidate had to appear before a panel individually for the final assessment. As she awaited her turn, Asha noticed that the panel took more time before they called in certain candidates who Asha thought had a good chance of qualifying. Before Asha was called in, the panel did take more time deliberating.

“What was your best activity here” one of the panelists asked.

Asha found herself saying “The snake race, for it was where each one helped out the other”.

It was the day the final cut was to be announced. An officer took over the podium in the room they were assembled.

“Do not give up whatever you are currently engaged in, until you get the final call letter” he warned. Before announcing the results, he questioned them as to what was the most important attribute to have in securing a spot. There were a number of responses from the group that had gathered. “Intelligence” said the officer, which was what Asha had thought of but had kept to herself.

Six people were selected from Asha’s batch. She was one of them.

The six of them had to undergo medical evaluation in the next couple of days before they returned to their home bases to await the call letter to the Officers Training Academy.

FIRST RELATIONSHIP

The second semester was a lot more appealing to Asha when she was able to take courses like Genetic Engineering that she was more passionate about. Her classmates were an eclectic mix from all over the country and she enjoyed learning about their diverse cultures and their characters. Dhruv was the most fun to be around with. Moreover, he was also from Coimbatore, the same city her Dad was currently posted at. However, it was Rishi that she could not stop thinking about. She was beginning to become convinced that Rishi had a special interest in her and had kind of made that known a couple of times they had gone out along with the rest of her classmates. She was now constantly thinking of him and let her friends at the hostel know about it. They would tease her about this fact and it continued this way until near the end of the semester. Soon, everyone would complete their coursework and shift to different cities to pursue their project work for the 3rd and final semester.

Asha was sitting in the library when Rishi walked in and sat beside her.

“Eh, what do you think of me” he asked.

“You mean the world to me” Asha replied with no hesitation.

He asked Asha to come with him, and took her to one of the stadiums. He sat her down and told her he wanted her to know something about him. He had contracted tuberculosis a few years earlier. The doctor had said that there

was a 5-year period to confirm that there was no latent infection once he had been cured. It was a non-issue for Asha.

Rishi then explained that one of their classmates had told him how Asha felt about him. They soon started going out together. And the fights began almost immediately. Asha noticed Rishi looking at other girls obsessively after professing his love to her and was hence upset over it. Unfortunately, Asha did not really step back and realize that it was not a good relationship. This was the first time she had let any man know of her feelings and in her book, this was the man she would spend the rest of her life with. So, she sought to make him understand of his wrongdoings although not in a very subtle way. Once it became so bad that she threatened to cut her arm with a knife. Rishi slapped her right across her face at that and it would have gotten further if it had not been for Dhruv who happened to be there and stepped in. They eventually made up and the third semester began with the two of them doing their projects at their department's research center although under different advisors.

Asha was the interpreter whenever they went out, for Rishi was from Calcutta and did not know the local language of Chennai. So, it was Asha who played the lead role when it came to handling any situation that they faced together. Little did she know that Rishi was actually an awkward and reticent person who did not have much confidence in himself. Also, she would later come to know that his justification to his family for choosing her was that Asha would be an asset to him economically.

Asha was too smitten to see it. Even when some of her friends cast their aspersions, she simply shrugged them away.

Since Asha's project advisor was not currently employed at their department she had to work under a co-advisor for access to her department's laboratory equipment. In addition, she also had to avail services at the research center where Rishi was doing his project. Their relationship was noticed by the Director who took an exception to it. He would bad mouth about them to her fellow classmates when Asha and Rishi were not around. When Asha came to know about it, she confronted the Director. He had come over to the research center to talk with Rishi's advisor.

"You will lose the use of your own hands if you depend on someone else" he said.

"Why are you here at the research center?" he asked.

"I need to work with a refrigerated centrifuge that is not present at the department" Asha replied.

"I did not even know that I would have to come over here to work when I began to work on this project" Asha said.

"Well, it seems those in charge of her project are to blame" the Director told Rishi's advisor as he walked away.

Asha had been working in Rishi's advisor's lab whenever she had come over to the research center.

"She will always be a nomad" Rishi's advisor had told him. Moreover, he had asked Rishi not to share the Pipettemans with Asha.

When Rishi told Asha about this, she immediately went over and collected Pipettemans that had belonged to her advisor when he had been employed at the department the previous semester. She was mad at these authority figures who

seemed to have a hidden agenda and would choose to attack an easier target like herself. The fact that Rishi did not come to her defense of her use of his Pipettemans completely escaped Asha's attention.

MOVE TO CALCUTTA

“Remember that you are the most important thing in my life in spite of all that has happened” Rishi reassured her as he came to send Asha off to her home on completion of their final semester. They had decided to do their Ph.D.’s in Chennai under their earlier advisors and would meet again after the holidays.

As they were waiting for Asha’s train to leave, Dhruv who had come along with some of their other classmates to also send her off told Rishi to take care of Asha.

“It will have to be the other way around” said another classmate pensively who had come to know Rishi well. Asha was bemused by this statement and could not comprehend what he had meant. Soon she was on her way home where she would spend her holidays before she began her Ph.D. research.

Back home, however, she could not stop thinking of Rishi and spoke to him over the telephone every night. It was she who made the call everyday for she thought it made it easier on Rishi, whose family seemed more controlling of their actions with him. On one occasion Rishi said that one of his friends had found a Ph.D. position for him back in Calcutta. He had spoken about it to his father, who also thought that it was a good idea for Rishi to pursue his Ph.D. in Calcutta. Asha told Rishi to do whatever Rishi felt was best for him and that she would join him wherever he chose, Chennai or

Calcutta. In the meantime, she sent him Asterix comics from her library for him to read as Rishi was a huge Asterix fan.

“I am upset with my mom,” said Rishi. “She is not happy to give me money to post your library books back to you after I’ve read them” he complained.

Asha stopped sending books after that.

Rishi started working for his Ph.D. in a lab in Calcutta and soon found a lab for her to work in as well. However, she had to clear an interview that would be held in Calcutta. Asha booked her train ticket for her journey to Calcutta.

On the day she was to leave, her mother who had been distraught over her relationship with Rishi begged her not to go to Calcutta alone but with her father who would be returning home the next day after a brief religious pilgrimage. Asha agreed and set out to Calcutta with her father the next day.

The train journey took a miserable 39 hours and she was relieved when they finally reached Calcutta. Her relief was however short-lived. She was taken aback by the dilapidated building that housed the floor that was shared by Rishi’s family and his cousins. The other floors were occupied by his uncles and their families. The door was opened by Rishi’s mother. Asha’s broad smile was met with one of scorn by Rishi’s mother. Although, initially taken aback with the reception, Asha soon settled down to prepare for her interview to be held the next day. However, it was a look that would continue to haunt her for the rest of her relationship with Rishi.

Asha cleared the interview with flying colors and was given a Ph.D. studentship at the Nuclear Medicine lab. Her father made sure she would have her independent housing accommodation at the research institute's guest house before leaving her to return back home.

A BAD CHOICE

The Central Research Institute (CRI) where Asha had joined to pursue her Ph.D. was a well renowned institute in research circles and boasted of many eminent scientists working within its various departments. Though it was a bit crowded for Asha's liking she looked forward to immersing herself with her research. She soon started to look at relevant literature and found a DNA-related area that she was interested to work in. However, she could not start her work immediately as there seemed to be a conflict between her advisor and the emeritus head of Nuclear Medicine department. It was an ordeal even to find a work bench for her. Moreover, her advisor did not seem too keen to get Asha working on her project and instead got her to work on organizing a scientific conference that she would be hosting at the institute. Although, Asha did not mind helping in organizing the conference, she was beginning to doubt her advisor's scientific capabilities.

Rishi's lab was just across the hallway and had some excellent ongoing projects. Asha, however, did not prefer to work in Rishi's lab for she thought it would be best if she stayed out of the complications of having to deal with her emotions over Rishi's work environment obligations. She was able to leave work earlier and would get back to the guest house where her apartment was and wait for Rishi to arrive. Once, she waited for him looking out from the balcony for hours. She finally went in after receiving unwanted attention from street vendors who had their stalls outside of her

building. When Rishi finally arrived, he was completely unapologetic and did not seem to care that he was late by hours. On the contrary, he was irritated that Asha questioned his tardiness. Asha was aghast that Rishi could not appreciate the fact that he had kept her waiting.

It was a new environment for Asha both in the professional and personal fronts. It was the first time she had ever travelled to eastern India and though Calcutta was a major metropolitan city, it was different from other cities she was accustomed to. She got to see much of Calcutta with Rishi. Calcutta had beautiful Victorian architecture and expansive lush playgrounds that were host to its renowned cricket clubs and seasonal fairs. However, that was where its beauty ended. Its vast majority lived in dilapidated cramped quarters. Its earlier glory did not seem to have been matched by a present-day prosperity and growth that would befit any modern metropolis. It seemed to have a stagnated growth that was compounded by a bulging population, generations attracted to the metropolis from neighboring rural communities, who stayed on to eke out any form of livelihood they could. It was this crowded environment that Asha found herself in. Moreover, the local language was Bengali and unfortunately for Asha, she not only did not know Bengali, she also could not speak Hindi, the national alternative to a local language. She was from down South, fluent in Tamil, one of the 4 southern Dravidian languages of India and of course in English, so her conversations if any at all were limited with anyone other than Rishi for, she found that Calcuttans preferred to speak in Bengali even if they knew English. She found this odd and soon found herself resenting this fact, for where she came from, conversations would

quickly transition to English if it was known that there was a non-local amongst their midst. But, the one thing that made Asha feel good about Calcutta was that even its poorest of the poor could get a full stomach of food and a cup of tea at an affordable price.

It was increasingly becoming clear to Asha that she would not be fulfilled intellectually by carrying out her Ph.D. work under her current advisor who seemed to lack scientific acumen to guide her research. Soon Asha found herself hiding in the library to avoid non-scientific menial chores handed out by her advisor. Asha finally decided to resign her research position, which was compounded by the fact that subconsciously Rishi's lack of affection towards her made her feel less despondent and more in control of herself. She decided to go back home and prepare for national examinations that would secure her an independent fellowship with the freedom to choose the lab she was interested to work in.

BACK IN CALCUTTA

Staying home in Coimbatore this time around was not as painful for Asha. She was able to carry on without the nightly calls to Rishi that had sustained her the previous time. Nevertheless, she labored to prepare for a number of exams she planned to give in order to secure an independent research fellowship to avoid landing in a lab as her previous time at the Nuclear Medicine lab back in Calcutta.

Asha's preparation was rigorous and as the exams grew nearer, she became more anxious. There were times when she had to take sleeping pills so that she could sleep during the day in order to maintain her study schedule overnight.

Although, she chose to move to Calcutta for her Ph.D., the underlying fact was that she would eventually start her life together with Rishi.

She had no intention of marrying him without her parents' consent. She was prepared to wait for as long as required to obtain their consent. When she had been back in Calcutta, Rishi had told her that his parents preferred that they get married immediately. Asha did not take that seriously and told Rishi that she would wait for her parents' consent. She did not realize then that the beginning of feelings of hatred was being formulated in Rishi's complex mind. Asha lived in her own bubble and thought that it was Rishi's parents who had negative thoughts towards her and that Rishi would always be there to defend her. When Dhruv, her friend and classmate from the University came over to talk to her

about her future life, she brushed aside his concerns. On the contrary, she was surprised that Dhruv would even have those concerns. Dhruv was also from Coimbatore which gave him an opportunity to meet with Asha. He told her that he was afraid that she would end up as a submissive daughter-in-law such as those depicted in numerous Indian soap operas. Asha assured Dhruv that it would never happen to her and that she was also strong in her conviction to be with Rishi.

In addition to the exams, there were a couple of interviews that Asha had to attend for various fellowship offers. Her first interview was in Delhi, India's capital city, that she planned to attend with Rishi after meeting with him in Calcutta. By this time, Asha also came to know that she did not get the Army Commission. Though disheartened, Asha knew that she had an exciting career ahead of her and made her way back to Calcutta to realize it.

The train journey from Calcutta to Delhi turned out to be an ordeal. It was the middle of the Indian summer and travelling in a non-airconditioned coach proved to be too much for Asha. She became dehydrated and had thrown up towards the end of the journey. Delhi was a majestic city that Asha had visited before college a couple of times. But her visits had always been during winter when she had relished the crisp air that she never got to experience back home where there was literally no winter, with temperatures rarely falling below 25 degrees centigrade. Earlier at the University when some of her batchmates had complained of Delhi's hot weather, she had always defended the city. But this time would prove to be different. She reached Delhi in the middle of a heatwave. She could not be out in the sun for more than 5 minutes at a

stretch before taking a break to rehydrate herself with mouthfuls of water. Never had she experienced Delhi this way and ended up staying indoors until her interview. On the morning of her interview, Asha felt quite confident for she had prepared sufficiently. But the day wore on with the panel interviewing other candidates before her. By the time her turn arrived late evening, Asha was worn out. She met with the member of her interview panel and found herself responding well to their questions in spite of her tiredness that did not go unnoticed by the panel members. It was only when she was asked to describe her proposed research project in length that Asha's voice cracked. She continued nevertheless, and was mortified at the end of it. But the interview ended well, with one of the panel members noting that she was making a move from Chennai to Calcutta, similar to a renowned Indian Nobel laureate. On her way back to Calcutta, she got news that another interview at the Forensic Laboratory in Calcutta was scheduled within the next couple of days.

In addition to her passion for DNA research, Asha had also been intrigued by the forensic science field, her interest piqued after watching endless episodes of Medical Detectives on the Discovery Channel. She had in fact stopped short of pursuing a Masters degree course in forensic science, opting instead for a more research-oriented biochemistry major.

The Forensic Laboratory (FL) was around 10 km away from Asha's earlier work place, the Central Research Institute. Rishi accompanied her for her interview and while waiting to be interviewed, Asha received unexpected news from Rishi's father. He called up to inform that the results of the NET that Asha had given had been published in the newspaper and that

she had qualified for the fellowship. Asha was thrilled and informed the interview committee of the results. One of the scientists in the panel commented that now Asha could look for other labs to join. Asha immediately said that she was more interested to join the Forensic Laboratory than look for another lab. “We would love for you to work here”, said another interviewer who Asha assumed was someone of importance within FL. FL pioneered in DNA fingerprinting in India and for Asha it was the perfect place for her to combine her passion for DNA research and forensics. When she had attended the plenary session of Watson in 1999 in Chennai, he had mentioned that it would take 5-10 years for pure DNA research to be conducted in India. Now she felt she was on the verge of achieving it right there in Calcutta. After the interview Asha asked Rishi if he thought FL would be a good place for her to work especially after her unsuccessful attempt at CRI. Rishi mentioned that he had seen PCR machines placed in laminar flow hoods at FL, something he had not seen earlier before at the labs he had worked in. Now, confident that FL would be the right place for her to work, Asha contacted FL about her research position a couple of weeks after the interview. As she had her own fellowship, Asha had no trouble in getting accepted into FL to pursue her Ph.D.

DNA RESEARCH

Asha could not wait to get started on her research. The first time that she got to isolate DNA, she stared in awe at the white strands of DNA that swirled about in her microfuge tube. For her it was an awe-inspiring experience that she was physically able to see the genetic material that was the fundamental molecule of life. She was excited at the prospect of unraveling multitudes of mysteries that it held, mutations, functional and non-functional and their implications in disease diagnosis and human identification respectively. She got to isolate hundreds of DNA samples and every time she would stop to wonder in amazement at that white strand of life. In the future, no matter how complex her subsequent experiments were, she would always feel a child-like excitement whenever her work would lead to an opportunity for her to visualize isolated DNA. She quickly moved onto sequencing DNA and scoring mutations that differed from one person to another. Although she would have loved to concentrate on disease genetics, her lab was more focused on DNA variation in non-functional regions of the human genome, the essence of DNA fingerprinting in forensic analysis. She would spend hours in front of her computer as well, making sure the mutations designated by the analysis software were called correctly by visually checking every peak that represented a nucleotide base in her automated electropherogram results.

When Asha started her work at FL, she was assigned to learn the lab protocols from her seniors who had joined the

lab 1-2 years earlier. Being a quick and thorough learner, she grasped the techniques effectively and on occasions started troubleshooting problems the rest of those in the lab would encounter. Her mentor, Dr. Vikrant Kohli, being impressed with her skills, urged her to forge ahead with her research so that she would be able to publish her first research paper in record time. Needing no further encouragement, Asha sought to work at a feverish pace. However, she was taken aback by the resistance she met at the hands of her seniors who were supposed to assist her. She found them quickly turning against her. Not sure why they would behave in such a way, she went ahead with her work independently and on one occasion, even went over to the lab on a weekend to complete a crucial experiment before sending her paper for publication. She had published her paper in a shorter period than anyone before in her lab and unknown to her it would start a multidirectional campaign against her not only by her colleagues but also by the staff that felt threatened by her abilities. Unable to understand the root of this animosity, Asha retreated into a shell, concentrating solely on her research and limiting her social interactions, if any, in the lab. Her mentor Dr. Kohli was also the director of FL. However, Asha came to know that the person who had asked for her to work at FL during her interview no longer worked at Calcutta. He had been FL's former director who had now moved onto a higher position in Delhi. Asha was disappointed that she did not get to work under him. Moreover, she soon came to know that the deputy director, Dr. Ramy Tripathi was married to the current director, Kohli, which would soon lead to complications of enormous proportions, jeopardizing Asha's research career.

At the homefront, Asha realized that Rishi's parents were controlling in more ways than one. She believed that their interference in her relationship with Rishi would last only as long as they were in Calcutta during their Ph.D. Her dream for long as she could remember was to settle down in the United States and she was on target to reach there for her postdoctoral work. Although she would have had preferred to reach America much earlier than that, she was guided by the words of one of her teacher's during her Bachelor's studies, who had stated that going abroad for postdoctoral research was ideal. This dream of hers was enough for Asha to tolerate Rishi's family. However, she started having regular arguments with Rishi, which she assumed were always brought about by Rishi's parents' interference to his personal actions. She disapproved of the fact that they would not allow him to be independent. Only years later would she come to realize that Rishi himself was the cause of the strife. That is when she would question his decision to be with her, only too late.

Asha found an apartment to stay while she worked at FL. The apartment was closer to Rishi's house than to her lab for he insisted on having dinner every night with her at his house. But Asha was in an unfamiliar neighborhood in an unfamiliar city speaking an unfamiliar language and found it hard without Rishi's support. Rishi's father had told him to stop escorting Asha around the city saying that she would never be able to otherwise manage on her own. On one hand Asha could understand Rishi's parents' protectiveness over him, for he was their only child, but she found it difficult to come to grips with Rishi's increasing lack of support towards her. One weekend when she was all alone in her apartment, burst out an eerie cry. She had never cried out like that before, a ear-

splitting scream that she feared her neighbors had heard. She collected herself a while later and headed for Rishi's home, alone, by herself. Although she would never cry out like that again, her disagreements with Rishi continued on many other occasions that led her to cry, albeit more softly.

Her father would often question her over the stuffiness in her voice during his frequent phone conversations with her that she would invariably fend off with an explanation that it was due to her penchant for catching colds periodically.

What Asha found more disturbing was that on every occasion, Rishi would start acting out as being the victim. She was puzzled by this as she would be the one crying over his action and instead of consoling her, he would invariably get angry, never once owning up to his actions. Had she known any better, Asha could have detected a psychological deficit. But being caught up in her research, she failed to understand that it was not a good relationship that she was having with Rishi. Slowly, she would begin to wind down after these arguments and continue on with her every day activities with the hope that once Rishi and she were together in America, away from his parents' influence, they would finally begin their life, together.

UNEXPECTED HAPPENINGS

9/11 happened. She sat glued to the TV, watching the buildings and people fall. When Rishi's cousin had first informed Asha and others that an airplane had crashed into a building in America, she did not take him seriously, thinking the pilot would have tried to maneuver out of a major collision. As soon as Asha turned on the TV in Rishi's room though, she realized the magnitude. She was also surprised that so many people that perished were at work even before 9:00 am. She came to know that it was a terrorist act, but she had never heard of the terrorist group before. A couple of her colleagues who were to attend an FBI conference in the U.S., would not get to go as the event was cancelled as a result. This was the extent to which 9/11 affected Asha's life. Little would she know that the day's events would define her life forever, years from then.

She did not realize that the war on terror had begun and would continue for years to come. She did not understand war.

Meanwhile, Asha encountered considerable impediment to her research from her senior colleagues and in a veiled way from Ramy Tripathi that was quite difficult to comprehend. She found it harder and harder to carry out her research as she would have liked. She was being slowed down from working by some of her senior colleagues, who were responsible for distributing chemicals for the research work. She would either not get the required chemicals on time or

would be given expired chemicals that would result in failed experiments that would eventually require time-consuming troubleshooting. The enormity of the situation dawned on Asha when two research papers were published by two other labs in the same area that Asha had been working on. It was devastating for Asha to see those papers, especially the data on genetic mutations, the very ones that Asha stared at in her lab notes in front of her. She could not help but think that she had been sabotaged from getting her work published earlier. Kohli immediately collaborated with another scientist and made Asha publish some of her data that although would not make the same impact as would an early, complete publication would have had. Nevertheless, the silver lining at the time seemed to be a communication regarding a collaboration from one of the authors who had earlier published the same work. Tripathi somehow got to get in touch with Dr. Peter Ashton, who seemed eager to further collaborate on Asha's research work. This collaboration seemed to further strengthen, after Kohli met Ashton at his lab in England, on a scientific trip. Ashton soon sent details on how to proceed with subsequent experiments that once again sent Asha back to her work bench. It was then that Asha encountered Tripathi's devious acts. She found herself being called into Tripathi's office constantly day after day to discuss inconsequential research topics. Asha was aware of Tripathi's lack of scientific acumen but not wanting to offend her, would spend long hours discussing whatever Tripathi would fancy. This disrupted Asha's research work. Asha would then be sent back just before Kohli would come around for his daily rounds, who would invariably assume that Asha had been working on her experiments. Asha did not realize at the time

that this was a ploy of Tripathi to slow down Asha's work. It would take years for Asha to analyze and understand Tripathi's actions. First, they were the actions of a failed scientist who was unwilling to let another fledgling scientist like Asha rise meteorically and second, the insecurities of a wife who found herself redundant in the work environment of her husband, who could not tolerate her husband prioritizing someone more adept at work than she could ever be.

To a rational outside observer, it would have been obvious that Asha's current personal and professional lives were heading towards a cliff. Unfortunately for Asha, her idealistic nature prevented her from observing these stark realities. She was instead mired in continuing with her research projects at FL while her personal life started to fall into an uneasy routine that temporarily halted her emotional turmoil. She would return to Rishi's house after finishing her lab work, have dinner there before heading over to her single room apartment. She had recently changed apartments, moving to one that would allow Rishi visiting rights. But it was a dingy room and Asha soon realized that neither could she open the windows that would allow the hawkers and passersby from the busy street outside to peer inside nor could she use the common bathroom regularly, for other boarders had rented other rooms since she had first moved and used the same bathroom as well. Moreover, there was no running water and she felt uncomfortable using the stored water from the same bin that the other boarders used.

She soon, therefore, found herself spending more time in Rishi's house, sometimes staying overnight on weekends

that would extend into a few weekdays as well. It was then that Asha's father called with the unexpected acquiescence to arrange for her wedding with Rishi. Although she had not hoped to be married before completion of her Ph.D., Asha was eager to get on with her life and agreed to it. After negotiations with Rishi's family, the date was set. Rishi's family insisted on the wedding to be held in Calcutta, leaving the wedding date to be decided by Asha's father. Asha had either wanted a simple marriage with only immediate family members, preferably at the court house or an elaborate Indian wedding. Since she doubted the latter would be possible, she inquired on the possibility of the former. Her father, however, had other plans and the wedding fell somewhere in between. The biggest surprise was that her father ended up transporting almost all of Asha's immediate and extended family from down South to Calcutta. Logistically, once they all were in Calcutta, it turned into a nightmare. Around 30 odd of Asha's relatives had to be fed during their stay and unlike down South where restaurants could be found in every nook and corner, it was difficult to find a good restaurant outside of known areas, let alone one that would agree with the Southern palate. So, Asha's father was not only busy finalizing the wedding arrangements but also had his hands full looking after the relatives for he was the only one who had been in Calcutta earlier. On the day of the wedding, Asha came out of the hotel where she had been staying overnight, dressed in her bridal attire, expecting transportation to be waiting. However, there was no sign of any car waiting for her. Taken aback momentarily, Asha quickly collected her wits and hailed a taxi and transported herself along with her Mom who had stayed with her at the hotel, to the wedding venue. This did

not bother Asha too much, for there was no joy in the event for her anyway. Earlier when Asha's father had asked Rishi's family to pay for the customary mangalsutra, a traditional Indian pendant made of gold to be worn by the bride signifying the union in marriage, similar to a wedding ring albeit only worn by the bride, always bought by the groom's family, Rishi's father had instead asked Rishi and Asha to pay for it. Asha ended up paying for her own mangalsutra! Although she was disgusted by the pettiness of Rishi's father, she felt empowered that she was in a position where she could pay for her own mangalsutra without feeling helpless. The wedding saree was also customarily to be bought by the groom's family, which Rishi ended up paying for. Yet, when Asha's father came over to Rishi's house, his father asked that Asha's father pay for a new cot and bed according to the Bengali custom, which Asha's father immediately fulfilled.

Asha had only taken a couple of days off from work for the marriage. She had no intention of going on a honeymoon, preferring to put it off until she had lesser workload. However, all her relatives insisted that she take another couple of days off and head over to a nearby sea resort. Asha gave in, caught up in the rituals and friendly faces. But Rishi not only did not consummate the marriage on the wedding night but spent the entire honeymoon watching cricket matches at the resort. Asha could have sensed something was amiss, either with Rishi physically or more importantly with his character, which was not what Asha imagined him to be. But being a die-hard cricket fan, Asha found herself enjoying watching the matches. She was content with the break from her grueling work schedule that the "honeymoon" provided and spent time with Rishi as she had on prior vacations. The enormity

of the situation failed to dawn on her and she did not realize that her relationship with Rishi should now move onto a higher level, at least emotionally if not physically on his side.

GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS

When Asha returned to her work the following week, she expected to continue from where she had left off and so was puzzled when Vikrant Kohli asked her if her work productivity would increase or decrease, now that she was married. Although it was an odd question, Asha not having had to deal with twisted minds till now, failing to sense his intentions, simply answered that it would remain the same and promptly forgot about the incident. She knew that she would continue to work hard as she always had, knowing that she could not possibly work any harder. She did not realize that Kohli himself would begin to impede her progress every step of the way.

It was during her second year of research under Kohli at FL, when Asha had married. A few weeks later she noticed an alarming change in Kohli's interaction with her. He would begin to make her write a number of research manuscripts that effectively prevented her from carrying out any bench work. More alarming was that he would make her rewrite the manuscripts a number of times. Asha initially took all that in her stride thinking that Kohli was trying to teach the juniors some kind of lesson in research. She failed to comprehend the hindrance being directly caused to her labwork by Kohli.

Kohli would come to her twice a day to inquire of her progress. He made sure that her labwork would be impeded. Even worse, he would begin to talk to her harshly. Asha remembered that during the first few initial months after she

had joined FL, Kohli had been taking out his ire on one of Asha's senior colleagues. Asha thought that the buck had been passed onto her now. However, she was determined to bear the brunt of Kohli's attack and not let her junior colleagues suffer the same abuse she was being subjected to.

What helped Asha to trudge along was her insatiable passion for research. Moreover, Tripathi was entrusting Asha with a lot of forensic cases that Asha would thrive on. Asha felt a deep sense of satisfaction solving even the messiest of cases that were given to her. This training would provide Asha with 2 lines of work to choose from in the future, either DNA fingerprinting in criminal justice or population genetics. This excitement from doing the work that she loved was what helped Asha to keep going.

During this time, Asha got entrusted with another job she dreaded. This was being in charge of the Saturday Club at FL. Not that she did not like the duties that this job required, but it was another opportunity for Kohli and Tripathi to berate her if they were ever displeased with any aspect. Being in charge of the Saturday Club meant organizing the seminars that would be held on the weekend and also arrange for refreshments. Asha took on this challenge as well but said that it was the one thing she had been dreading, being given the responsibility when the decision to head the Saturday Club was given to her. This confession brought a fit of laughter from her colleagues who were gathered at the meeting. Maybe the ice was slowly melting after all!

Meanwhile, at home, she found herself slowly falling into an acceptable rhythm. Her mother-in-law would bring food to her room most of the time, which she would often eat along

with Rishi, watching TV at the same time. Rishi and she would go out for shopping numerous times although Rishi detested shopping. But Asha could still not muster up the courage or feel comfortable enough to join the womenfolk in the living room where they would assemble everyday with the day's gossip. Moreover, they would converse in Bengali that Asha still had to master. She was still an outsider.

Immediately after her marriage, one day when a feast was being organized, Asha was summoned to where a dozen of Rishi's aunts, sisters-in-law and mother were gathered. They were cutting vegetables and wanted to play a prank on her. It was apparently customary to ask the new daughter-in-law to cut the most difficult vegetable to prep. They gave her a huge pumpkin barely concealing their mirth. Ironically, it was one vegetable Asha had no problem in cutting as she was used to cutting up her favorite fruit, watermelons back home in Chennai. Imagine the surprise of the womenfolk when Asha nonchalantly cut the given pumpkin expertly.

The sisters-in-law, aunts, mother and other relatives of Rishi soon became gradually accepting of Asha. She received numerous gifts on special occasions. She still rarely came out of her room other than to leave for FL everyday and kept her interactions with everyone other than Rishi to a minimum. She guessed they finally realized she was an introvert and let her be. But Asha failed to remember that she had been a happy-go-lucky extrovert back in Chennai until whenever she came across resistance or unacceptance of her, when she would invariably retreat into her shell.

DIGGING HEELS IN

Asha continued to endure the injustice in her mind that was meted out by Kohli. All she cared was to carry out good research. She further had her dreams of going to the U.S. after getting her Ph.D. This was enough fuel for her to be focused on her research, disregarding any other inconvenience.

In spite of Kohli keeping her bogged down writing research manuscripts, Asha managed to carry out her experimental work as well. Towards the end of her 4 ½ years of research under Kohli, she had written articles for almost all her senior and junior colleagues in FL.

During her time at FL, Asha was able to attend a few conferences. One of those was a forensic conference at Mumbai. Asha looked forward to the conference especially since Mumbai was the last of India's 4 major metros that she had yet to see. She was in awe when she saw the majestic Taj Mahal Hotel. This was much before the terrorist attack that would devastate it, only to be rebuilt again. Although Asha presented her work, she was not in it to win the award that would be given to the best presenter because Kohli had said that one of her senior colleagues would vie for it. However, another of her senior colleagues made sure she did well enough and was given the award instead.

A second conference that she attended was the one that brought Peter Ashton to India. Asha was excited to meet him in person. It was then that Ashton realized that it was Asha's work that Tripathi had been mailing him about, projecting as

it were her's. Moreover, there was palpable friction in Ashton's interaction with Tripathi and Kohli and Asha feared that the fragile collaboration would break down irreparably.

The third conference Asha got to attend was when her abstract got selected for the Young Scientist Award at the National Science Congress. It was the same conference where she had seen Watson a couple of years earlier. This time the conference was being held in Ahmedabad, Gujarat in India.

Although Asha was not given the award in spite of her good performance, her dejection was muted by a trip to see Mahatma Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad.

It was over 4 years of research under Kohli when he got transferred from FL, accepting a more lucrative position at Biologic Inc. (BI) in Noida. Kohli wanted Asha to work under him there. This was the last straw for Asha. She resisted all efforts including sacrificing her fellowship money for the forthcoming months by staying back at FL to complete her research work.

Asha then started to compile her thesis for submission at the University of Calcutta (UC). This was when she realized how important her time was. Some of Kohli's junior officers tried to make Asha and rest of Kohli's Ph.D. students to teach experimental procedures to their own students. Though Asha taught them, she soon realized that she had to concentrate on her thesis as well if she wanted to finish it on time.

She started to write the introduction since most of the other chapters had already been written in the form of articles and had been published. However, her main work in collaboration with Peter Ashton was yet to be published.

FREEDOM?

Asha finally finished all her experimental work and felt confident to leave FL for BI in Noida, which is in the National Capital Region of New Delhi to finish her thesis and get it approved by Kohli for submission in University of Calcutta.

When Asha arrived at BI, she was amazed by the mammoth infrastructure. There were multiple floors to accommodate numerous labs, with facilities on par with international standards. As much as Asha was impressed with BI, she made it clear to Kohli that she had no intention of continuing to work with him at Noida. She had had enough of his tyranny.

It was immediate clarity, a lightning strike, clearing of a fogged mind, call it what you like, but Asha felt liberated. In fact, Asha would later confide and let Rishi to know that she had felt much happier and better the few months she had spent away from him at Noida. It was probably the first sign, if not the sign that her marriage with Rishi was over. Asha, however, did not comprehend it at the time, she needed a bigger, larger impact that would occur later in her life for that realization to take place.

Meanwhile, at Noida, Asha got into compiling her thesis for submission to University of Calcutta. She started to write her acknowledgement, which was when she realized that she simply loved to celebrate the goodness in people. She thanked all those who had been in contact with her during the years of her doctoral work. Though some of them had hindered her

in her work, she did not hesitate to acknowledge them for the other ways in which they had aided her. This was not the first time she had written such an acknowledgement. She had written a similar one for her postgraduate thesis, which had made her thesis reviewer to comment on it as well. Maybe, this was the core of who she was, which would make her fall into similar unfavorable situations time and time again. She had the capacity to forgive people's shortcomings. However, a strange happening did take place soon after she handed over her completed thesis to Kohli. Rami Tripathi called her over and appreciated her for having mentioned all those she had in her acknowledgement. She then urged Asha to include her in-laws in her acknowledgement as well as Asha had omitted them in her thesis. She still needed time to see the goodness in them perhaps. Nevertheless, Asha did include them into her acknowledgement eventually.

Asha got her thesis typed, bound and signed by Kohli, ready for submission to the University of Calcutta. She left Noida, hopefully never to return again.

Meanwhile, Rishi had secured a postdoctoral position at Howard University in Washington, D.C. He wanted Asha to go with him to America. When Kohli came to know that Asha might be leaving to the U.S., he called Asha and her other colleagues into his office. He went on to ramble on how it counted only if she stayed back in India to make a mark in research, and that doing research abroad somehow was tainted. Asha had never seen him in such a state. It almost seemed like a futile last-ditch effort to hold on to some semblance of power.

Back in Calcutta, Asha did not have much time to revel in her newly-found freedom. She only had a couple of weeks before leaving for America with Rishi. She submitted her thesis at the University of Calcutta. She appeared for her visa interview and then went home to Trichy for a week to be with her parents and sister. She then returned to Calcutta and began to pack her belongings that she would take with her to the U.S. That was when it hit her that Rishi wanted her to go with him to the U.S. only because he needed her expertise for resolving situations that he would not be able to handle by himself alone. Asha then confronted Rishi sobbing, saying that she was unsure if she should go with him to the U.S. She felt she was being asked to go only because Rishi needed her not because he wanted to be with her.

NEW BEGINNINGS

The first inkling of the difference of perspectives that Asha would begin to encounter occurred on her flight to America. She asked the flight attendant for vegetarian food when meals were being served. The attendant promptly told Asha that in future when she traveled, she would have to request for 'special food' while booking her flight ticket. Asha was thrown aback by this for back in India, special food invariably meant non-vegetarian food! A harbinger of times to come!

Asha reached Dulles International airport at Washington, D.C. with Rishi. Thinking about it later, Asha would draw parallels from waiting in line for the immigration checks at Ellis Islands of the past. It was kind of unnerving for Asha especially when the Immigration Officer had to take her photo.

After clearing the Immigration, Asha and Rishi collected their bags and went on to meet Rishi's research supervisor who had come to the airport to pick them up. He took them over to his house as it was a Sunday with the University housing offices being closed. His house was in Maryland, and when they arrived at his town-house styled home, Asha thought it was an absolutely gorgeous style of architecture exuding warmth and a sense of community.

The next day Rishi's supervisor drove them to the University housing office. As they set out from Maryland towards D.C., Asha took in the beautiful scenery that passed

by. She loved the greenery and the houses nestled in. However, soon the landscape began to change. They began to drive through a stretch of endless worn and run-down buildings that lined the streets on either side. The buildings were close to each other with a lack of vegetation between any two. Asha was puzzled by this change in architecture but was not too concerned as she expected Howard University to be further down from the run-down buildings. Imagine her surprise when they turned into one of the streets right in the middle of this landscape. They stopped in front of a twin multi-storied apartment complex. Asha stayed behind in the car while Rishi and his supervisor went in to complete the paperwork for the housing. Asha saw a number of the University students walking to and from the buildings. She again was not too concerned for she surmised the apartments were for the University students, while accommodation for postdoctoral fellows would be at a different location.

Before coming over to the U.S., Asha had envisioned Howard University as a sprawling campus with lakes and waterbodies as the online maps had indicated. Further, she imagined they would be given a single-home styled housing to reside in. She visualized walkways and waterbodies in front of their house where joggers would go for their morning run. So, imagine her surprise when she came to know that she would be staying in a studio apartment at the 10-storied building they were parked in front of.

Asha had always read about how Western travelers to India were often shocked by the difference between the rich and the poor. She could never quite understand what they meant by that though. It was only when she was in America

that she understood what that meant. For she could never see anyone who was ‘poor’ in the U.S., she could not identify the poor! It was only after some conditioning, did Asha realize that the ‘poor’ were probably the ‘well-dressed’ men that asked if she had a quarter to spare when they passed by. It also took time to register to her that the ladies walking slowly with shopping carts loaded with knick-knacks were probably carrying all that they possessed in the world with them. And that those men she found huddling near the steam vents for heat were actually ‘homeless’.

Back in India, some of Asha’s favorite T.V. shows included Law and Order-SVU and House M.D. She used to religiously wait for the episodes to air once a week on cable T.V. She had transitioned from being a voracious reader to an ardent viewer of news and entertainment on T.V. Here in the U.S., she was pleasantly surprised to see ‘marathons’ of her favorite shows running for an entire day if not the weekend! Heavens! Of course, now she could binge-watch her favorite shows on Netflix.

The U.S. for her, Asha realized was about its people and there were numerous incidents that led Asha to this conclusion. The first incident happened right after she moved into the new apartment. Some of the light bulbs in the apartment were not working and so maintenance had sent Mr. Whitman to change them. He came into the apartment, had a quick glance and said he would be right back. He returned with a chair, using it to change the light bulbs. Asha thanked him for changing the lights and as he was leaving said that she could have the chair if she wanted it. Asha was ecstatic and thanked him for that too. It was only after he left that

Asha realized that while Asha had been proudly standing in her new apartment, with four huge suitcases, Mr. Whitman had offered her, her first piece of furniture.

The next experience she had was with Angela, a co-worker of Rishi. Every week, Angela would take Asha and Rishi, along with a couple of other colleagues from Rishi's lab in her car for grocery shopping. She was then the only one who owned a car amongst the group and would take them to different bargain stores for their weekly groceries. She never once made a deal of the fact that she was helping them, just nonchalantly shopping with the rest of them. It was only a few months later, when Angela's car quit for good that Asha realized Angela had shared all that she had with the rest of them.

And then in the bus, travelling around D.C., Asha went to the door in the middle of the bus to alight at her stop. The door did not open automatically and Asha was both petrified at the prospect of missing her stop and mortified that people would notice her stranded, when voices reached out to her. "Push, push", they said. "You've got to push open the door". Asha got down, thankful for all those strangers who came to her rescue.

The initial days at the apartment in Howard University for Asha comprised cooking (for the 1st time in her life), watching T.V. (including the Food Network) and scouring the web for sites to visit in and around Washington, D.C. and how to get around using public transportation.

Strangely, though Asha had always envisioned that her life with Rishi would start anew once they were in the United

States, the opposite was starting to occur. Rishi was becoming more distant, demanding and more critical and cold towards her. Asha was yet to get a job herself, and so was at the apartment by herself all day. When Rishi returned home in the evening, he would question her as to what she had done the whole day especially if she had not cooked anything by then. This was a surprising dark side of Rishi, that Asha was beginning to see. Furthermore, Asha was learning to cook herself and Rishi expected her to be cooking three meals a day. Further, he would talk to his folks back home every single day, sometimes both in the morning and evening and it seemed to Asha that they never really had left India. In fact, it was worse than it had been in India, with Rishi receiving daily instructions on how he should be running life with Asha.

Thankfully for Asha, the veil inside of her was beginning to lift. She loved D.C., loved exploring it and discovering quintessential American features from motion-activated faucets to super-sized coffee. Her spirit was breaking free and sooner rather than later Rishi and she fell into a rhythm of spending weekends checking out different monuments, historic sites and museums around D.C., all based on Asha's research of how to travel to get to the places they wanted to see. The National Mall was one of her favorite places to go to, especially when the cherry blossoms were in bloom at the Tidal Basin. She saw her first snowfall in D.C. and was blown away by the burst of color in springtime. Back in India, in her hometown, the trees had leaves all year around and so this colorful display of beautiful blossoms on various leafless trees, in spring, from cherry, apple to dogwood, magnolias were simply enchanting to her. And of course, the forsythia bushes, heralding spring!

But life of course did not turn overnight into a bed of roses for Asha. On one instance, when she was returning to D.C. after visiting her sister, who lived in a different state, Rishi had come to pick her from the airport. They took the Metro to the station nearest to their apartment and then waited to take the bus that would take them back to the apartment. They waited for a very long time and Asha soon started to feel the bite of the cold weather. Rishi refused to hail a cab and they reached their apartment hours later. Consequently, days later, Asha came down with the flu, her first experience of the bone-crushing illness. They also walked blocks to the grocery store every weekend and carried back loads of bags filled with the weekly requirements. It was especially tough in the middle of winter when any part of her that was not covered would become numb from the freezing wind.

A curious incident occurred during her initial days at the apartment in Howard University. Asha could see both the Capitol and the Washington Monument from her 10th story window. It was a beautiful view and wanting to also focus on the closer sights, Asha used her binoculars to look out the window at the streets and parking lots below. Next time she looked out, she noticed a couple of police cars stationed below at the apartment parking lot. Asha was unsure if they had been there earlier, but they were now there every day whenever she looked out the window.

POSTDOC DREAMS

6.6.06. Hardly a day to forget, for that was the day when Asha first stepped into the National Institutes of Health, NIH. It was the day when Asha would meet people who represented the best of American character and those who misrepresented it.

Even before coming over to America, Asha had been writing to labs that suited her line of research in order to secure a postdoctoral position. One investigator at the University of Maryland had responded positively and Asha was ecstatic at the prospect of joining that lab. Once, she reached the United States, Asha emailed the scientist once again and was informed that the investigator was about to go on a maternity leave. So, Asha waited for a month or so and contacted the lab again. She received a stunning reply saying that a different person had been chosen for the lab instead.

This was a gut-wrenching blow for Asha since she had placed all her hopes in securing this particular lab and had not applied to any other lab. Deeply shaken, Asha began applying to other labs in the Washington, D.C. metro area. She had always dreamt of joining the NIH, but she equally believed that she would work there only after gaining experience at a different institution as her first research stint in America. So, she was pleasantly surprised when she received an email from one of the investigators at NIH. Dr. Mia Furlough had seen Asha's resume on the National Cancer Institute's website and wanted to explore the

possibility of working with Asha. After a few back-and-forth emails, a date was set for a telephonic interview. The conversation though obviously a success was a blur to Asha and she was invited to present her Ph.D. work in person at NIH. The date was set - 06.06.06. Asha walked apprehensively down the hallway up to the laboratory of Dr. Mia Furlough at the National Cancer Institute. She noticed another individual coming towards her from the other end of the hallway and entering a room to her right. Asha realized it was where Dr. Furlough's lab was and so followed through the door. Apparently, a postdoctoral fellow himself, this individual seeing that Asha had followed him inside, turned towards her and asked if he could be of help. Asha replied, saying that she was there to meet Dr. Furlough, to which he pointed to a door beyond table top laboratory shelves, across the room. Asha thanked him and proceeded to meet Dr. Furlough, smiling on her way at another postdoc she recognized to belong to Dr. Furlough's lab through her perusal of the lab's website. Dr. Furlough was waiting for Asha in her office. She told Asha that she had planned on a lunch with the rest of the lab personnel before Asha's presentation, so that gave her time to show Asha the rest of her lab. She introduced Asha to her lab members and showed her the facilities of her lab. Asha was pleased with the infrastructure, a modern well-equipped laboratory and looked forward to working there. The lab's focus was DNA replication, Asha could not have found a scientific field closer to her heart even if she had tried, except perhaps to work directly on DNA polymerases.

Dr. Furlough took down a framed document from the wall in her office and showed it to Asha. It was the Watson

and Crick DNA structure article signed by Crick to Dr. Furlough. Asha had reached her destination!

Lunch was at a quaint Mexican restaurant. It was one of the few times Asha had been to any restaurant since arriving in America and probably her first Mexican one. She was completely a fish out of water with the available food options, moreover, not acclimatized to eating pork or beef yet, she stayed away from any meat and ate the other available, ubiquitous vegetarian Mexican option: beans. She noticed that the lab members though cordial were definitely not warm or eager to make her feel comfortable. Dr. Furlough noticed Asha was eating only beans and suggested she might try a tortilla that was being made fresh to order at the buffet counter by the restaurant staff. Asha was too self-conscious to leave the table to try one, moreover, she had no clue on how to order a proper tortilla. She was already uncomfortable at the table and to make matters worse, Dr. Furlough finished her meal quickly and proceeded to head back to the lab with Asha. Whatever thoughts Asha had of heading back to the buffet counter once she could muster some courage dissipated quickly.

Heading into the conference room back at NIH for her presentation, Asha was filled with nervous energy. She started her presentation not too confidently though she knew she could do much better. However, she soon found her stride and was soon taking questions during her presentation from Dr. Furlough and the rest of the lab. Her Ph.D. thesis had essentially been on human genetic variation and having a strong understanding of not only the genetic diversity or the lack thereof in populations she had worked on as well as those

around the world, she was able to paint a picture of human history and migrations around the world, revealed by their genetic imprint signatures.

After the presentation, Asha discussed about Dr. Furlough's research with her and similar research being conducted at the NIH. Eventually, Asha returned home, having been advised by Dr. Furlough to contact her after a month as she would be away from office for her summer vacation. It was an uneasy wait for Asha, and she contacted Dr. Furlough once the month was up. They met again and this time Asha was offered a position in Dr. Furlough's lab.

The first couple of months, Asha volunteered at the lab as her paperwork was yet to be completed. But it made no difference to Asha as she was LIVING HER DREAM, doing research at the National Institutes of Health! However, reality eventually set in. Living one's dream is rarely a bed of roses. Setting aside the fact that Asha was working on a formidable project (though she relished the fact that she was not working on an easy project), she hardly received any assistance from either her labmates or Dr. Furlough. Her labmates seemed to view her as their competition rather than as a collaborator with whom they could answer tantalizing questions in science. And on the other hand, Dr. Furlough did not seem to be a proponent of training her recruits. She gave Asha her research project and told her to follow techniques from the 'red book' in the lab shelf. The red book was a compilation of current trends in Asha's area of research but which had been written decades ago. Though the principles of the techniques laid out in the book were sound, the techniques themselves were laborious and time-consuming. Modern research had

overtaken those archaic techniques and Asha had to strike a balance between the two. But what was exhilarating for Asha was the research environment of NIH as a whole. There was a plethora of scientific meetings presenting cutting-edge research by scientists both from NIH and from all across America. It was an assault on Asha's brain cells and she imbibed the offerings with gusto. This was the foundation of her training in USA. And with scientific articles from leading research journals adding to her repertoire, Asha soon stopped looking towards Dr. Furlough's guidance or its lack thereof.

Although her lab offered few if any opportunities for scientific discourse, other than within NIH in general, she received indirect mentoring from unexpected sources. Her lab chief was the epitome of what Asha had expected scientists to be. His lab occupied contiguous lab space adjacent to Asha's filled with talented postdocs a few years senior to Asha. She attended lab presentations of these budding scientists which were exciting and provided sources of inspiration and the drive to join that club of stellar researchers. She also found support from those colleagues that she sorely missed in her own lab. Unlike her lab, her extended lab colleagues were warm and cordial and she found fuel to propel through her hard research from their everyday amicable dispositions.

Although she had worked hard in India during her Ph.D., Asha wanted to work even harder in the United States. That was why she was there! She was driven by the images of exciting research environments she had envisioned from the writings of Dr. James Watson. In one of his early books, he had mentioned the exhilarating research carried out by his colleagues, stating that one would work on weekends

obviously only when one's research was going on so well that they could not force themselves to take a break during weekends. At NIH, Asha noticed people coming in early to work, and proceeded to do the same, arriving at the lab at seven in the morning, sometimes even a couple of hours earlier. Being a night owl, working late came naturally to her and she stayed late in the lab sometimes even after eleven at night when she had her DNA footprinting experiments to be completed. As much as she relished the exhilaration of this consuming research, its true purpose was not lost on her. She was working to provide relief from cancer and envisioned all those suffering from it who relied on people like her to bring about much awaited cures that were not reaching them as fast as they would have preferred. Asha felt it was her moral imperative to strive to deliver from her side and pushed herself to achieve those results while working in this exhilarating environment at NIH. That there were driven, hardworking individuals all around her was not lost on Asha. Regardless of the time of day, at the crack of dawn or the wee hours late into night, there always seemed to be people arriving or leaving like Asha. She was amazed by the drive and dedication of these people and felt a little deflated wondering if she was as good enough. But then realizing that perhaps she was one of those few arriving both early and leaving late, she motored on through with her lab work as the seasons went on by.

One aspect that smacked Asha right in the face was how quickly dreams were realized in America. Since middle school, back in India, Asha had idolized the pop singer George Michael. Her home had been plastered with posters of the singer and she had even once worn a cross in one ear as the

singer had. One New Year's Eve, she had spent the evening listening to his songs on her Walkman and welcomed the New Year with his melody ringing in her ears. So imagine her incredulity when she found out that George Michael was touring for his 25Live concerts in America. After all those years of growing up with the image and dreams of the singer, here she was in America, about to see him in the flesh for the first time in her first concert ever. It seemed like a happy coincidence that she was there in America when George Michael was on tour after 25 years!

At around this time Asha became drawn towards American politics. It was the year of presidential campaigns with gripping coverage on the television of the candidates and where they stood on the issues that Americans cared about. She was drawn towards the coverage impressed by the passion and intensity with which issues were debated and how distinctions were drawn between the candidates. Serendipitously, a democratic presidential debate was to be held at Howard University, giving her access to free passes to the event. Excited, Asha attended the event notwithstanding the pouring rain that drenched her linen jacket as she arrived at the venue. Previously, she had favored Hillary Clinton, but was stirred by the presence of another candidate at the debate, Barack Obama. The primary debates had just begun and hardly much was known about Barack Obama to the general public. Much more than having been captivated by Mr. Obama's grasp of the issues, she was simply stunned by his mere presence on the stage. He exuded a certain charm, confidence, humility and empathy that was palpable across the rows of seats far away from the stage, where she was seated.

Things finally seemed to be looking up. Asha moved from D.C. to Maryland, closer to NIH. One of Rishi's friends literally forced them to buy a car, and so commuting became a lot easier if not a whole new experience. She had been traveling to NIH, mainly underground on the Metro and it was a whole new world on the surface. Yet, strangely, Asha had seen much more of the historic sites and other places when they had not had a car back in D.C. Asha dismissed it due to her commitment to her work as weekends were now spent either in the lab or grocery shopping and doing laundry, not realizing that Rishi and she were drifting apart.

TURBULENCE

It was soon déjà vu all over again. Her relationship with her boss at work deteriorated as her relationship with Rishi began failing. She had thought she had left all the heartache behind in India and expected to actually start living life as it should be.

Her boss, Dr. Furlough not only failed to support her work but deliberately set out to make Asha fail. Further, more shocking was her unethical behavior of using Asha's results that only she as a supervisor had access to and to give them to another postdoc working with Asha on the same project. Asha had expected to continue with mutation experiments on the DNA bases she discovered that had exhibited protein binding in her footprinting experiments. Imagine her surprise and horror when the same sites were being targeted for mutation by the other postdoc. There was no way for the other postdoc to know which precise bases to mutate if it were not for Asha's precise single base pair resolution footprinting. A troubling pattern was re-emerging. Asha had noticed that of Dr. Furlough's two earlier postdocs, one had been given solid work resulting in substantial publications while the other seemed to have had only minor contributions to various projects in 5 years with no first-author publications.

Even more disturbing was Dr. Furlough's own confession that during her tenure after her Ph.D. with Dr. Jeffrey Wall at the Salk Institute in California, she had simply inverted the methods of a postdoc working across her lab to

get her own results which were published in the high-impact journal Science. Recurrent publications in Science, no doubt played a crucial role in her securing a job at the NIH. Dr. Mia Furlough seemed more and more of a cheat rather than a serious scientist. So, Asha withdrew more inwards and became more independent than ever with her work. She proceeded to carry out her research in the direction she thought was the best way forward than trust Dr. Furlough and her questionable guidance.

So, once she completed her footprinting experiments, Asha next wanted to focus on identifying which proteins occupied those footprinted sites. Dr. Furlough's first project for Asha previously had been to biotin-tag certain proteins, over-express them and then to identify their binding to the replicator regions she was interested on the human beta-globin gene. This approach was flawed in two ways. One, there were numerous other proteins *in vivo* that were already biotinylated and competed with any downstream purification and isolation attempts. Second, a more glaring flaw was her approach to identify candidate proteins. She asked Asha to carry out a bioinformatic analysis of the replicator sequences and identify candidate proteins from previously published sequence motifs of protein binding. Now this would only yield results on similar regions that had been researched on thus far. They would not cover the entire replicator region and might result in false positives. This was exactly the scenario that Asha had faced and had set her research back by a year. None of the proteins proved to bind to the beta-globin replicator region. Dr. Furlough asked Asha to work on additional proteins that she was interested in, perhaps those

she had read about or heard about from her colleagues. However, those proteins too proved to be dead-ends.

In addition to losing months of research to unsuccessful outcomes, Asha's confidence suffered a huge blow. She began to question her abilities as those in other labs were presenting mountains of data in joint lab meetings. Compounded with her difficult footprinting experiments, Asha was cornered into a position from which there seemed to be no recovery. Further, Dr. Furlough did not suggest any other experiments in order to pursue other lines of research. This was where Asha's meticulous approach to scientific research came to the fore-front. She was a fervent researcher of past and current scientific progress and had established a work-flow of experiments needed to be conducted to achieve the results desired. These she had collated from various publications of scientists well-established as well as lesser known. The way forward became crystal clear and Asha now had a blue-print of what her future experiments would be.

So, Asha explained to Dr. Furlough that she would no longer be targeting random proteins for biotinylation but instead would be biotinylating the DNA sequence of the replicator region itself, and then pull-down those proteins that bound to their region of interest. This seemed to come as a shock to Dr. Furlough who was either or both unprepared for Asha's ingenuity and for a change in tactic to solve a scientific conundrum.

With her future work planned out, Asha jettisoned off to India to attend her second twin sister's wedding. This was the first time Asha was returning back to India after a three and a half years' stay in America.

There seemed to be a stark change happening-at least in Calcutta. Huge expansive housing complexes were arising from ashes of previous businesses, not at the outskirts of the city but within the heart of the city.

People HAD changed. The younger crowd seemed more ruthless and cut-throat, seemingly returnees from America and elsewhere, had loads of money to flash. But Calcutta was still hot and dusty. If not hotter than ever!

There was one instance which drew a poignant sketch in Asha's mind. She skipped newly erected malls and ventured back to her earlier haunt, New Market. There, she sought out a leather bag stall she had once visited. Then she had seen a cool leather briefcase suitable for her research paperwork, but the shop owner had refused to sell it to her at a lower price and had offered to sell an inferior quality bag instead. Asha hoped to buy the bag she had set her eyes upon all those years ago, when she had been doing her Ph.D. in Calcutta. So, she went up to the same storekeeper and asked to see some bags. Not liking the displayed bags, she showed her ultra-soft leather bag from the U.S. asked if the shopkeeper had something like it in stock, hoping he did. But Asha was not expecting the reaction she received from the storekeeper. It was one of defeat, clearly, he recognized the quality of Asha's bag and probably deduced it was bought abroad. He shook his head, indicating his shop had nothing like it. Perplexed, Asha moved on from there quickly. 'Was it victory or defeat?' she thought. She had so badly wanted to buy that bag she had seen years earlier. And yet the person who had refused to sell that bag earlier to her, now was unable to sell one!

Changes were afoot on the home front too. Though her brother-in-law was as nice as ever and had a box of sundae awaiting her arrival in their mini-fridge, her frigid mother-in-law seemed thawed out at least temporarily. Money talks – literally! Must have been due to the daily Skype updates that Rishi had religiously kept his father informed about. Asha’s almost double the pay than Rishi’s definitely had greased wheels back in Calcutta. An air-conditioner was fixed temporarily in their room for the duration of stay. Asha never remembered Calcutta being this hot. Yes, it had always been uncomfortably humid, but the mind-blowing heat like this – not really. The rest of the folks back in Rishi’s house were still the same, thankfully. Asha never had too much problem with them and they showered her with gifts as Asha did with her souvenirs back from the U.S. She couldn’t really shop exactly what she hoped for from Calcutta, somehow she seemed to venture out when those sellers were closed for the day.

Asha took a flight to Trichy from Calcutta ahead of Rishi and his parents to be with her parents and sister for the wedding preparations. Her sister had been the typical, tantrum-throwing bride-to-be according to her mother. After rejecting a number of matches, mostly doctors, for her arranged marriage, her sister had fixated on marrying the first engineer she was made to meet. A pity indeed, as future would attest to. Nevertheless, it was wedding time in Trichy, halls had to be booked for the event, sarees to be bought, specifically designed blouses to be stitched according to the bride-to-be’s specifications, garlands to be ordered, beauticians booked, and oh! jewellery had to be purchased. And then there was the father’s side of arrangements; the wedding feast needed to be arranged for every meal that would

be served during the course of two to three days, cooks to be booked, invitations to be printed and sent out in time. Asha reached Trichy after most of these tasks had been more or less completed. She of course, fell ill first, with all the air travel.

After a week of requisite recovery time at home, Asha ventured out in Trichy to shop for her silk saree that she would wear at her sister's wedding. So, she visited the top silk saree store in Trichy and scored a saree exactly as she had envisioned – the color and in its appearance. Now, her second twin sister arrived from the U.S. as well. It was a hoot for Asha to see the two twins together, a wedding in the offing notwithstanding, they started fighting like cats and dogs as Asha remembered them doing as kids in Chennai! Some things never change, thankfully.

Divine retribution, at least for the men was beginning to take shape around this time. For the wedding, Asha's parents had invited Rishi's family as well. So, they came down from Calcutta, attended the ceremony and then were whizzed off to Tanjore to see the temples and palaces there. On their return to Trichy, Rishi and his father were struck down with severe diarrhea that according to Rishi's mother was from drinking all the holy water that was offered to them in the temples.

With fingers crossed for the wedding couple's new beginnings, Asha returned to the U.S. with of course bearing gifts for her abhorrent colleagues back at NIH. And what a dramatic change awaited her! Now not just her lab, but the entire department that had earlier only been indifferent to her now turned down-right hostile. When the cat is away, is it so easy to poison the well? Well, since there had been no love lost earlier anyway, it was only a minor thorn in Asha's mind

as she pushed on with her new set of experiments. These were low risk-high reward everyday projects that propelled Asha at a speed that completely left everyone including her supervisor Dr. Furlough in the dust. Dr. Furlough must have envisioned that Asha's days at the lab had been numbered, but now she had a hurricane to contend with! But remember, the Jews are a hardy bunch and taking a pound for a pound is in their blood. And thanks to Shakespeare, Asha was well-prepared!

SUPPORT

Now the pull-down experiments that Asha had engineered were really cool and provided her with tons of concrete data to complete her research project at NIH. Wily Dr. Furlough made it her existence to tamper down on the impact of Asha's research results every week. She would later try to publish those very results years later once Asha had moved on from NIH. However, the newly instituted weekly meetings and exchange of work data online were perhaps being monitored by those above Dr. Furlough's pay grade and the chickens were finally beginning to come to roost at NIH. The quality of Asha's scientific contribution was not lost on the research community there and a band of hard-core loyalists began to support her in all her endeavors moving forward. Make no mistake, the power was in the hands of those that cooked up results to support their theories, however, science neither covets power nor money and if truth needs to be hidden from falling into unstable mind-boughs, then that was what was going to happen at NIH under Asha's helm. Without any direct interactions with the scientific community outside of her group, she was unaware that she was beginning to rise as a cult figure. Every week, her results were unchallengeable, though unheralded, but make no mistake, no one could fire her now unless she chose to leave the toxic environment. Within the larger research unit, she could sense people warming up to her. Some were directly showing their support to her. Though grateful, Asha was cautious to not endanger their prospects, careers, lives at NIH. She was at this point, essentially single, not having children

depending on her continued pay check. She could always be a rebel, working only for the cause, which, made her formidable and the powers that be would have to bow down to her eventually. Such is scientific truth!

Also true is science, for Asha felt she had reached a point where she could wrap up her work at NIH. She had true to her heart and mind, completed all scientific research plausible in her work at that point in time and decided to communicate that to her superiors at NIH. So, she reached out to her lab chief and succinctly informed him of her decision to leave NIH and also clued him on the problems she had faced under Dr. Mia Furlough. Reiterating that no future researchers should have to undergo what she had endured at NCI, NIH, Asha left on a positive note from the NIH. Dr. Mia Furlough never tried to stop her from leaving.

Now, Asha was onto the next phase of her life. She wanted to concentrate on her home-front and also take a vacation as it was ages since she had taken one. As far as she could remember, apart her sister's marriage, her honeymoon, seven years ago was the only time she remembered taking time off from work, albeit a forced vacation. But this time, she really wanted to see the U.S. and since she was not tied down to research at the time and it was going to be summer time in the U.S. soon, Asha could not wait to get going. She had not holidayed much in the U.S., she had a ready-to-go list of the places she wanted to visit over there.

At the top of her list was Yellowstone National Park. She had mapped out Wyoming, Idaho and Montana for this adventure. Next was New Orleans during Mardi Gras. This was one place Asha had fantasied visiting, ever since she had read about Mardi Gras from storybooks in elementary school.

Other than the top 2, there were other places of interest Asha did not want to miss. New York was one. Other than that she was not going to say no to the Grand Canyon or Mount Rushmore if she got a chance to visit.

With all these dreams fluttering before her eyes, she approached Rishi with the idea for the holidays. But to her bewilderment, he did not seem to have any inclination towards a vacation although the summer holidays were on the horizon. Nevertheless, Asha still believing she would get to the holidays, began spending her days alone at home after her resignation from NIH. She became more and more engrossed with cable news especially Andrew Hayes from MMW. Then the BP oil spillage occurred. It was devastating to see New Orleans once again affected so badly after Katrina. This was the beginning of the end or was it the end of new beginning for Asha? Unknown to her sense of reality, due to the immense stress, Asha began responding to certain stimuli outside of normal reality. She began to believe that Andrew Hayes was communicating to her particularly, through television. Her whole focus now turned towards the welfare of America. Like Andrew Hayes, she too deeply cared for the country and its people and wanted to keep them safe from any harm. As Asha was unraveling, Rishi's hostile actions increased. He seemed in no mind to take a vacation during the summer holidays and contrary to his nature, seemed enjoying going to the lab. Was he having a secret affair? He even started telling Asha to start applying for jobs, though he had initially supported her decision to leave NIH. Asha was not intending on returning to research in the near future. She had wanted to concentrate on her family life, whatever that

would mean. Was Rishi's target, the paycheck Asha would bring home with a job?

Everything seemed to fall into place. Just a week at home with no thoughts of work saturating her brain cells was all Asha needed to decipher her home-front. The straw that broke the camel's back came in the form of a trip to buy Asha's favorite food – ice-cream. Asha tremendously relished her car trips to Brewsters, notwithstanding the availability of her favorite flavors there. It seemed like Rishi drove to Brewsters only because of the discount gas station nearby. After one such trip, Rishi proclaimed that all his savings from the gas station was squandered by Asha at the ice-cream store. Asha was stunned. She knew then her separation and divorce from Rishi was imminent.

Asha may have missed all the writings on the wall and other signs during her approximate ten-year relationship with Rishi. But it took her just ten days with only the two of them in the equation, alone in a foreign country to impress upon her; Rishi's devious mind. All the pieces now began falling in place. Asha had married for love. Unfortunately, it had been a defunct marriage from the beginning for Rishi had brought no love into the marriage. For him, it had been a business proposition. How was a dreamy-eyed girl supposed to understand, comprehend or analyze this in the beginning of the relationship? Asha had always blamed the outside forces of sabotaging her marriage. She did not realize that Rishi was in a business venture, not in a relationship with her.

All the years of yearning, hope and dreams for the future now lay open-thread bare. But for Asha, it was not in shambles, it was a worn-out carpet, a carpet with a path to her future – alone.

SEPARATION AND RECOVERY?

Asha knew her marriage was over. All she needed to do now was to convey that to Rishi. Asha somehow became overcome with sorrow and cried like she never had before. Non-stopped from morning to evening, the tears came. She pulled herself up as Rishi would soon return to the place, she called home now. When Rishi finally arrived, she asked to go out to get a burger since Asha had not eaten anything that day and all her energy was spent crying.

They had their burgers and then Asha told Rishi that she no longer wanted to be in the marriage. For Rishi, it didn't seem to bother much, like he had been waiting for it. He asked if she had cried and Asha answered in the affirmative which seemed to satisfy Rishi. They went back to their apartment and Asha moved to the couch. Everything that she had shared with Rishi, now became alien to her. The shared bed, the car, even the phone both of them had bought together. The next day after Rishi left for his work, Asha started packing. She was falling apart. She would have never had the gumption to separate from Rishi if they had been back in India. Because one gets to think of the repercussions to their respective families. Thankfully, she was in America, and thinking about divorce became easy for Asha. She was quite fragile now and was taking cues from the television and complete strangers. Through television, Asha figured out what to pack in the one suitcase she knew she could take. She had no plans of where to go or when to leave. A few days passed. She chose to complete her knitting while she was waiting. It calmed her to

some extent. After she finished knitting, she waited near the door until someone would come around that she could trust. It came in the form of a person who also came from southern India as her. This person just walked past and Asha felt that it was her cue. She bundled out of the apartment and to the airport, with just one aim-she had to meet Andrew Hayes at MMW. It was the first time she was venturing out alone. She did not even know where to go, but taking cues from the television, it was to Florida-Disney World to be precise. She thought of meeting Andrew Hayes there. Her mental breakdown had begun. She got her tickets at the airport and while waiting to board her plane, she realized she might have to stay at a hotel, something she had never done on her own before. The closing sound of the flip phones of those around her almost drove her over the cliff, for she was on the edge. Her connecting flight was from Charlotte where she completely lost it. She thought that Andrew would come get her in a private aircraft, so she found herself going to the tarmac and climb into an aircraft that was parked. Through this aircraft she walked into a support crew center. There she was picked up and made to wait for hours. Finally, a couple of people arrived to question her. All she could blurt out was that she had to meet Andrew Hayes of MMW. She asked them to call him. They told her, he was a busy man to which Asha ceded. Now she had to find a place to stay for her flight to Florida had already left. She was taken to a kiosk from where she could book a hotel from the airport. She found herself booking a hotel and staying there a night hoping Andrew would come get her. It was Juneteenth. She vacated the hotel room the next day for Andrew had not come. To Asha's mind everything was blank and still taking cues from elsewhere. She

waited near the hotel. There came a couple in a car and asked if they could help her. Then a cab arrived and so Asha told them that she did not want to impose upon them and took the cab instead. To the driver of the cab, Asha said she needed to get to New York. Probably, the cab driver could assess her mental state and gave Asha a room to stay in at his apartment for the night. The next day, he gave her lunch and then dropped her at a women's shelter. There, Asha was asked to fill out a form which she did, but remembered she had a credit card to use and so told them she did not have to stay there and sought out another option to get to New York other than by taking a cab.

She took a flight from Charlotte and landed in New York and still she did not know which hotel to stay in. After trying out a couple of hotels she finally went to China Town and found a hotel where she would stay holed up for almost a month. She had no phone for her family to contact her for she had left it behind in the apartment which Rishi and she had shared. It was hell for her family but Asha not being right in her mind during that time, was still taking cues from the television. Somehow, she connected with her family and she could hear how distraught her mother was over the phone, for Rishi had informed them of her disappearance. Asha told her family where she was, which Rishi came to know of, and came to the hotel not to pick her up and head back to the apartment but to cut her working credit card into two. Before leaving her to herself, Rishi said he did not want anything to do with her anymore-he said he did not want to know if she lived or died anymore. How had Asha ended up with such a person? Anyway, the next day Asha called up her sister who was also in the U.S., from the hotel's phone and asked her to come get

her. Asha's lonely travail was finally over, for she booked a ticket back to India. At her sister's place, Asha bought some presents for her family. She had recovered to some extent realizing then that Andrew could not get to her for some reason. Without realizing, Asha had rebound to Andrew once she knew that her relationship with Rishi was over. But she could not stay back in the U.S. for she did not know of her dependent visa status. At the airport, when she was about to board her flight to India, one last time she looked at Andrew through television. She said a silent goodbye and proceeded to board the plane.

Back home in India, Asha slowly recuperated in the comfort of her mother and father's protection. Things that had given her solace during her childhood came rushing in to kindle familiarity. This was crucial for her family was in Trichy, not in her Chennai. But her mother's home-cooked food and the torrential rain and the balmy weather made it feel like she had never been away. These were the two things that were crucial to Asha's psyche. The third was the game of cricket that for not only Asha but was to a large population in India-a religion. So, it seemed like Asha was on the road to a full recovery but she missed Andrew Hayes and America.

A SECOND TIME

There was nothing her parents could do for Asha stayed inside her room glued to her television. The recovery that she had made was short-lived as Trichy was no Chennai. She practically knew no one other than her parents there and refused to socialize with anyone else. Andrew Hayes was still an anchor at MMW, while she kept waiting for him to come and take her with him to the U.S. She even fantasized that it would be like the arranged marriage, typical of where she was from and that Hayes would be invited for lunch at Asha's parents' home. She felt like then she would be able to go with him, once he had obtained blessings from Asha's parents. However, Andrew did not come, the day she thought he would come home to Trichy, he flew over to England. Asha spiraled into a breakdown-again, taking cues through television. Months passed by and Asha was in the depths of despair. Her family finally got an opportunity to take her to see a psychiatrist. She got admitted to the hospital. After a few days she returned back home forgetting all about Andrew and focused once again to get her scientific research back on track. Strangely, Andrew Hayes had announced the start of his new show - 'Live in New York', the day Asha had left the U.S. That gave an opportunity for Asha to see him, as audience members were allowed to get tickets for the show. So, for a second time, Asha went back to the U.S., on her own visa this time and with prescribed medication that would enable her to function normally. However, like the first time around, the research project was great, but she was at odds with the principal investigator under whom she had to conduct her

research. Still, the project kept her buoyant for a year and she returned back to Trichy after a year. But it seemed worth it, for she got to see Andrew Hayes at his show on New York! Asha had been befriended by Elle, a southern Indian like Asha, in Pittsburgh where Asha was doing her second stint in research. Together they booked for the 'Live in New York' show in New York and went to its recording. And there Asha got the opportunity to talk with Andrew! She could only speak about her scientific research's course and that she was happy to return back to the U.S., to which Andrew responded that he was glad that she was back. He welcomed her back and they got an opportunity to take a photograph together. Then Asha and Elle hit the spots to see in New York including the Empire State Building and Serendipity III.

However, when she returned back to Trichy and then not having a job for months – her mental breakdown resurfaced. She faced hospitalization once again. Once again after that she was able to forget Andrew Hayes this time and get a job in Cleveland at one of the best hospitals in the United States. It was the kind of research that propelled her work on a progressive arc in the field that continued in line with her life's work in research. It was like she had attained research nirvana! Now all she needed was not a rebound's rebound from Andrew Hayes but literally a muse to help navigate the depth of research she would get into. She couldn't possibly go through another break down just because she thought someone particularly was in love with her. 'Cause when that happened, she would sacrifice everything that she had worked for simply to be in the comforting arms of Prince Charming!

Would that happen again?

EPILOGUE

Was Asha a victim of love or of humanity itself? Why had love always eluded her?

If love is pure, extolled in scriptures of all religions-then why does it kill?

Or is it just a potent drug produced by one's own body that fails to recognize it in reality as a toxin?

To weed out the weak, evolution at its best? Or is it for some infinitesimal small percentage of people-a potion which holds back humanity from self-destruction?

And so, it goes on. They kill every dream that crosses their path like clockwork..every family...in each country-survival of the fittest? Lest they forget that without those few who dare to dream-the human race would annihilate itself.

Asha knew that either professionally or personally, her life had to get back on track. Which is why she had to make it and erase the last ten years of her life somehow. And then, she would...miles ahead still...be flying in the clouds...again.