



## Long walk to somewhere

G Venkatesh

Our eyes met after all those years. A familiar smile lit up her face. She had not changed a bit. Nor had I.

A long time ago. Boyhood days. Schooldtime rivalry. Two Tambrahm boys. I was one of them, but I never really envied him for his success. He was different. He could not stomach any defeat, especially if I had pipped him to the post by a narrow margin – we are talking of marks in exams here. Amit was his name. Extremely

orthodox in his upbringing. He used to wear the ash-mark<sup>1</sup> on his forehead to school daily. He had donned the sacred thread<sup>2</sup> at a very young age, and used to recite several hymns by-heart. His mother often used to keep telling my mother that it was not right to delay my sacred-thread-donning ceremony (eventually I would don it when I was 24 years old). Amit's mother was a proud woman, to the point of being vain and arrogant. Amit went on to study at the Indian Institute of Technology. I stumbled several times, got up, dusted myself and kept going where fate took me. Our paths diverged majorly, needless to state. Amit did not think much about me, once I was off the radar of competition for him. We lost touch with each other.

I met her when I was 28 years old. Anuradha. A Tambrahm girl with a master's degree in journalism. I had strayed into the print media after obtaining a master's degree in mechanical engineering. Why and how is a different story. That is not important here though.

I used to call her Anuradha for some days, till she asked me to call her Anu, reminding me that that is what everyone called her. I developed a very special friendship with her and we could communicate very freely with each other and share even our innermost fears and anxieties with each other. The '*ladka-aur-ladki-kabhi-dost-nahin-ban-sakte*' (boy and girl cannot merely be good friends) claim was being challenged, I thought then, or was it?

She somehow did not want me to languish in the print media and kept exhorting me to keep trying for a PhD position in the USA and not give up till I had found one. At times, I interpreted that as an underestimation of whatever I had managed to achieve till then; at other times, I convinced myself that this was the delayed incitement which the universe was sending me.

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<sup>1</sup> Hindu devotees apply sacred ash – also called vibhuti in Sanskrit - traditionally as three horizontal lines across the forehead to honour Lord Shiva, the third of the Hindu Trinity.

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upanayana>

‘You deserve the best, Venkat. Please do not stop persevering. I know that you feel that the odds are against you. But I will be the happiest person if you get to where you deserve to be.’ Now, was that what a girl who was just a good friend would normally say? How would it matter to her whether I succeeded or languished? I used to think often without finding an answer ever.

I often had the habit of sitting alone by myself in the canteen and having lunch. I liked being left alone to ruminate, ponder, plan and organise my thoughts. She used to abandon her female colleagues and walk over to occupy a chair in front of me, and insisted that one must not sit forlorn and dejected while eating. ‘It is not good for digestion, you know. Do not worry. I will give you company and make you smile while you eat.’ Everything that she did, made me think harder and longer about whether she really had any feelings beyond mere friendship for me, in her heart. Well, I told myself that sisters also take care of brothers in this manner. I must not overreach, I castigated myself.

There were times when we had to stay back late in the office, to send the pages to the press. Anu’s mother used to get worried.

‘Anu, do you plan to travel back alone so late?’

‘No, Venkat will be travelling with me. Do not worry. He says he will make sure I reach home safely.’

What her mother said next, I never asked. Obviously, she would have wondered who this ‘Venkat’ was, and whether he could be trusted and what did he have to do with her daughter.

One evening, Anu asked me if I would like to come in and greet her parents. I hesitated at first but then, agreed.

Anu made filter coffee for me.

‘Coffee? So late? Why could you not make dark chocolate or something like that? He will find it difficult to sleep!’

‘Amma, I know him better than you do. He drinks a lot of coffee. He is used to it.’

Her mother did not like the ‘I know him better than you do’ sentence. Perhaps, she was suspecting that something was afoot.

Anu did not let me say anything. She praised me to the skies and told her mother that she was so fortunate to have a good friend and a trustworthy colleague like me. I felt a bit embarrassed. I could see that her mother did not really like the fact that her daughter was praising me. But what was wrong in that, I thought? We were both Tamil Brahmins. Both Mumbai-bred. Both with master’s degrees. At least that evening, I would not know the answer.

‘Venkat, how do you manage to stay so slim, despite being a rice-eater? Is it the coffee?’

‘I guess it is because I walk a lot every day and calories, if in excess, get burnt thereby. I play cricket on weekends. Coffee could also be a contributing factor.’

‘I would like to lose a little weight, and improve my BMI. I am so lazy. I cannot bring myself up to doing anything strenuous.’

‘Well, how about trying to walk 2 kilometres daily? Maybe we could do that in the lunch-break at work? It takes about 12 minutes to walk a kilometre. We can walk 2 kilometres in under 25 minutes. We make up for whatever minutes we lose, by staying back at work for a while.’ I was increasingly feeling closer and closer to her and wanted to spend as much time as I could, with her, daily.

‘Let us see. It will be difficult for you to motivate me to do this.’

‘Well, whatever you do or don’t do, please, for heaven’s sake, do not get anorexic like those stupid models. You look good the way you are.’

She was looking askance at me for a while, and I could see that from the corner of my eye. She was smiling to herself.’

‘Thanks, Venkat,’ she said and bowed her head and was silent for a while.

A few weeks passed. Our friendship grew thicker. The trust which developed between us was indescribable. A reticent boy till a few months ago, I had changed after having met and befriended her. Is not that what happens usually, when one meets one's soulmate? Of course, they also say that a soulmate need not necessarily end up as one's spouse. Maybe we knew each other from some previous birth, and this was unfinished business for her – to motivate me and make me feel worthy. Whatever it was, it all seemed like a godsend.

Then the fateful day dawned. She asked me out for coffee and ice-cream. It was her birthday. I think I had got her some gift, though now, I do not recall what it was.

While we were seated, she reached out for my hand and held it gently. I was startled. 'I want to tell you something, Venkat.' She had tears in her eyes.

Was she going to tell me that she was in love with me? I prepared myself to reciprocate likewise, if she did.

'I should have told you long back, but I am engaged to be married. It has been 7 months now.'

Now, I thought to myself. Why must she weep? Why must she tell me that she should have told me long back? Was she so intuitive that she could figure out that I had developed feelings for her? Women are able to do that, I have heard.

I quickly regained my mental and emotional balance and smiled and congratulated her.

'Great news, Anu. I am so happy to hear that. Who is the lucky bastard?' I winked while pronouncing the expletive.

'He is based in New York. An IIT-ian. Went on to study at MIT. From your batch, incidentally.'

'This is wonderful, Anu. When is the marriage?'

'Not decided as yet. I have been dilly-dallying.'

I spent the next 15 minutes advising her and telling her how lucky she was and how patient the to-be-hubby was, that he understood her well and was willing to wait. I told her that he was one-in-a-million and she must consider herself fortunate.

She looked at me, eyes still moist. ‘If I go away, will you stay in touch with me?’

I smiled. I opted to remain silent. I think I managed a little nod.

‘Venkat, will you let me find a good girl for you to get married to?’

I looked into her eyes. Mine were moist now. ‘Anu, it is okay. Compose yourself. I have a steep mountain to climb after having lost out earlier in life. I have been spending time helping others wear their oxygen masks when the cabin pressure kept dropping without having mine on. I need to get mine on now and protect myself from acute hypoxia. Hope it is not too late for me. Well, analogies apart, I need to prove a lot to myself, if not to the world. Come, let us go back to the office. Today in the evening, I will buy you coffee and cake to celebrate, okay?’

A few days later, I was at Anu’s place, as she wanted me to meet her father. Now, after having told me about her beau in the USA, I wondered why she was doing this.

‘Appa, you must help Venkatesh to get a good job in the engineering industry and also talk about him to your friends...you have so many with daughters of marriageable age.’

He smiled and looked at me. ‘Anu has told me a lot about you. She cares for you, Venkat. You must send me your CV and I shall try my best. And I think you must think of getting married so that you will have a companion in life to plan your journey towards a common goal.’

I looked at Anu and wondered what she would have told her father about me. Did she tell him that she loved me but sadly, could not break her engagement now?

‘Yes, Uncle. I shall do that as soon as I reach home.’

Anu's mother called from the living room. 'Anu, Amit for you, on the phone. Come quickly. Do not keep him waiting.'

I was taken aback when I heard the name being uttered. Possible? Yes, of course. Maybe it was someone else? That too was possible.

Her father put a hand on my shoulder, 'Venkat, do not underestimate yourself. Anu thinks the world of you and believes strongly that someday you will prove all your detractors wrong.'

I was choked. I thought for a moment that this gentleman would have been such a wonderful father-in-law to me, if Anu had not been engaged to anyone, and if she would have consented to being my life-partner.

Anu's wedding day dawned. I was there with colleagues to wish her well. My hunch was right. It was the same Amit.

'Hey Amit, long time, man! What an occasion to bump into you again!' I recalled the song filmed on Kamal Hasan in the movie Sagar – *Sach mere yaar hai, bas wohi pyaar hai.....koi sab jeete, sab koi haar de, apni toh haar hain, yaar mere.* (It is true my friend, only that is labelled as love.....some win all, some lose all...I end up on the losing side.) If they had known that I could sing very well, and had handed me a mike, I would have. It would have been apt too. Amit and I had been school-time rivals. He had excelled and won...handsomely.

Amit's mother recognised me. 'Venkatesh, how are you, my son?'

Amit quipped, 'Amma, we did not have Venkatesh's address. Else, we could have invited him.'

Anu interrupted, 'He is my guest. He was destined to come and wish us well. Her eyes were moist ever since she had seen me arrive with our friends.'

Amit's mother looked at her daughter-in-law, 'How do you know him, Anu?'

‘We were colleagues for over 6 months. Without him, I would not have been able to make up my mind. You know I was dilly-dallying. I have the healthiest respect for him.’

Amit’s mother did not seem to like what Anu had said. But what is the big deal, she thought? Her son had now made her his own. ‘Venkatesh, you are getting old, you know. You must get married before it is too late,’ and she chuckled.

No one liked it, most of all, Anu. I smiled at her, ‘Mami, everything is in God’s hands. That is what you always used to say, when Amit and I were in school. God willed that Anu and I must be colleagues for six months, and he also willed that she should get married to Amit today.’

‘Yes, yes, that is right. That is how my Amit has been able to do everything so well, and get married to such a lovely girl at the right time in his life.’

I waved at Anu. I shook Amit’s hand. ‘God bless you both.’

I stepped down from the stage and hastened out. I overheard Anu asking Manisha, our colleague, ‘Manisha, did he eat enough ice-cream? I had ordered his favourite one.’ Mango ice-cream. That was the one she had treated me to, when she had held my hand and wept on her birthday.

It rained that day. Unseasonal. Still cannot say what that meant. I cried a lot that day. Like a little boy whose favourite cricket bat was stolen from him.

Years passed by. I struggled, took risks, and tried moving up in life. Every attempt to rise up was challenged by a shove down, and I needed to keep striving. It had somehow become my lot in life. Some past karma, perhaps. I had just returned from Germany after completing the formalities of a master’s degree course (my second), and was awaiting positive responses from universities to which I had applied for a PhD position.

I bumped into Amit's mother at a temple one evening. 'Venkatesh! How are you? Where are you these days? Married or still single?' She let out the same irritating chuckle.

'I am still single, Mami. Just returned from Germany. Deciding my next move.'

'My dear boy. How old are you? 34, right? What are you doing with your life? Look at Amit. He already has a six-year old son. Look at your other classmates from school. You must be serious about your future.'

I wanted to say something nasty but controlled myself. She was Anu's mother-in-law after all and I needed to show some respect, at least for Anu's sake.

'Germany, you said? They are known for their beer, right? I heard that they have a beer called Ayinger. Have you started drinking then?' She, being an Iyer, was poking fun at me, an Iyengar.

'No, Mami, I do not drink.'

'You must change with the times. Do in Rome what the Romans do. By the way, Amit loves his beer and whisky. His wife, too!'

I could not help thinking about all that pseudo-orthodoxy that she used to flaunt years ago. But when she said, 'His wife, too,' I felt sad. But then I told myself who was I to feel sad when a wife toes the husband's line. Yet, I could not help asking, 'Anuradha drinks these days?'

'Not Anuradha. Anne,' she said.

'Oh, so her name has been Americanised to Anne now?'

'No, no. Anne is an American girl. My daughter-in-law.'

Then, it struck me. She had said, 'Six-year-old son'. Anu and Amit had got married only 5 years ago. How could there be a six-year-old son? Well, well....it all became crystal clear now.

'So, how about Anuradha?'

‘There were some problems, you see...and now I do not know where she is. Maybe she has come back to India. But we obviously are not on talking terms with her or her family.’

I wanted to abuse the woman, for no longer was she Anu’s mother-in-law. But we were standing in front of the sanctum sanctorum of a Saibaba temple. I looked at Saibaba. He was smiling as always. ‘*Sab moh-maya hai*’. (Everything is an illusion).

I could have rushed that same evening to Anu’s parents’ home in Mumbai, could have rung the doorbell and found out for myself. I could also have proposed to Anu and asked her if she would marry me, if she had not already found someone else. I assumed that she would not have had a child with Amit, but I could not be sure. Even if she had, I could take care of that child as his/her stepfather. I should have done that. I did not. The reason being that I was targeting a PhD position, and did not have a job then. I wished that I had been gainfully employed at that time. I regretted not being so.

I got married a year later to a wonderful woman. But life kept hurling its lemons at me. I lost her to cancer after 12 years of marriage.

While I was in Mumbai on a break from work in Sweden – trying to get acclimatised to life as a lonely widower - a senior friend of mine – Dr Rajgopal Dravid - invited me to a book launch. I was not so keen, but obliged him.

‘Venky...nice to see you. Let me introduce you to some people from this publishing firm. Who knows – you may be working with them some day to get your books published. This is Subhash and that is Soumya. That is Aniruddha, the baby of the team, and here is your namesake, Venkatesh.’

I shook hands with all four of them.

‘Soumya. Aniruddha *se tho mila diya* (I have introduced him to Aniruddha). Where is Anuradha, the boss?’ Dr Dravid had a terrific sense of humour. He was a crafty wordsmith after all.

It took a few seconds for me to register that he had said ‘Anuradha’. Another evening from way back in time came to mind. The evening when Anu’s mother had pronounced the word ‘Amit’.

She came in through a side-door.

‘I see he has got his coffee already,’ said she and laughed. Soumya, Subhash, Aniruddha, Dr David and the other Venkatesh would not know why she laughed after mentioning ‘coffee’. It was our secret – mine and my dear Anu’s.

Our eyes met after all those years. A familiar smile lit up her face. She had not changed a bit. Nor had I.

I wept openly. None would know why, except Anu and I.

## **G Venkatesh**

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G Venkatesh , born in Chennai on 13-1-72, is currently Associate Professor at Karlstad University in Sweden. He has two Master’s degrees (Mechanical Engineering from India, and Industrial Ecology from Germany) and a PhD in Industrial Ecology (from Norway). He speaks, reads and writes English, Norwegian, Swedish, Hindi, Marathi and Tamil. Venkatesh has published four volumes of poetry<sup>1</sup>, four e-books<sup>1</sup> , and over 100 scientific journal publications ; crosswords, and articles of various genres in magazines around the world. He sketches in his spare time, likes singing, and is a cricket aficionado/connoisseur. Venkatesh lost his wife, Varshita, to cancer in early 2020, and has been devoting himself to charitable causes in her honour since then.

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