

**word!**

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THE MORNING was hot and sultry like any other December morning in Chennai, unlike December even in the 2090's. It was a quiet funeral with members of the immediate family — *amma*, *appa* and me. Others were simply informed in the family group on Messenger. Unsurprisingly, most didn't seem concerned because visiting a cemetery meant authenticating with your UID number, which automatically meant an additional entry in their permanent records, probably even family tree. Everybody knows that the number of deaths on your record affects your credit score, health insurance — basically everything. Nobody talks about it but thanks to predictive analytics and AI, everybody knows the unsaid rule — deaths are to be acknowledged to the bare minimum even on Messenger, let alone make any effort to attend the funeral, especially the funeral of someone who died under mysterious circumstances, or that's what I felt. Her death certificate displayed the cause of death as "natural," but something didn't feel right to me.

*Paati* wouldn't have cared about anyone's absence! She was the kindest person I had ever known, and with no pretence of politeness for the sake of acceptance. So she wouldn't mind it at all, more so in death. We gave her the kind of rites that she wanted — a burial by the family. We began the process after the cemetery's confirmation of receiving the doctor's certificate that verified her ID and cross-verified her DNA, face and organs against her gender. We did the burial ourselves. Between the three of us, the manual hours spent on digging the pit and the burial; the labour time was enough to cover the crypto-credit required to pay for our lunch for the day. Besides, a burial was more environment-friendly than a cremation. *Paati* was my *amma's amma* so *appa* wasn't too interested in being involved. But if the labour time would cover a meal, sure, why not? Besides, being a woman, the time clocked by *amma* paid lesser. So all three of us had to get to work on it. It made no sense to be paying for the burial, instead of earning from it.

After the burial, we surrendered our manual hours from our smart-watches at the cemetery's front desk, collected our credit and headed back home. On our way back, *appa* received a notification from the government informing him about the procedure to close *paati's* accounts on all government databases. The notification carried a link with a detailed list of steps to be followed to close all her accounts individually. *Appa* was going to dump this work on me — that was a given. I never understood the need to close each account individually in a centralised system. If not done, there could be countless ghost accounts on multiple websites and we'd be fined for it all. So it had to be done. *Paati* was *amma's amma*, yet *appa* received the government notification. *Paati* would have found it all silly —

the burial, *appa* receiving the notification and the lengthy process to close her accounts.

Once back home, I opened my mailbox to send a quick email to my supervisor about compensating for skipping my usual shift at work that morning. I had an unexpected email in my inbox. I couldn't really say that it was unexpected.

It was an email from *paati*. I couldn't help but say to myself, 'I knew it!'

Questions and possibilities flooded my mind. She was 89 years old. It couldn't be a suicide note! Right? I only hoped that it wasn't one. I could never really put my finger on it. I've always suspected that she was holding back something. Yet, I never felt the need to explain myself to her. She simply seemed to understand me, effortlessly — sometimes even more than myself.

Holding onto the last semblance of hope left in me, I opened the email and began reading it.

*Jan 1, 2103*

*Dear Ktien,*

*How are you doing, my love? If you are reading this letter then it is safe to assume that I'm not alive anymore. This letter was programmed to be my last letter to you. I know that you will miss me but I assure you that I'm happy being dead. Be rest assured that I'm at peace now with myself. I know that your love for me will allow you to be happy for me and with yourself in knowing that I finally am at peace with myself.*

Don't tell me that you killed yourself!

Without paying any attention to the tears flowing down my cheeks, I read on.

*Now as part of the ether, I can speak my truth, which is also partly the story behind your name and most importantly, what your name means to me. I'm transgender. I always was. Now that I'm dead, I feel free to speak about myself in the present, for there is no need to hide myself anymore. Now that I'm already dead, I cannot be denied my life or my existence.*

My first response — What are you saying? You killed yourself because you are transgender? Wait! What does transgender mean again? And what does any of this have to do with my name? *Paati* being *paati*, she always had the answers. I'm going to miss my best friend.

*I'm going to have to begin by explaining who a transgender person is because your generation now does not know about the existence of people like me. People who didn't identify with the gender of their assigned sex at birth were known as transgender. I know that this may be a lot for you to wrap your head around, especially since you don't know that sex and gender are two different concepts.*

*You were only taught about the binary of male and female. But, even today,*

*people like me exist in this world. How is it that you don't know about us? To answer that question, I'm going to take you back to a time that you have never known about in human history; a period before artificial intelligence took over the world — a period when humans had human rights, though power rested in the hands of a privileged few.*

What was she talking about?

Honestly, genders beyond the binary of male and female, did not come as a surprise to me. I always had a feeling about it, or was I hoping for it? My favourite old lady always gave me answers, leading me to more questions. I ached with the pain of her loss. But what was she trying to tell me? Did she kill herself or not? That seemed to be the most important question that I needed an answer for.

*You may not be familiar with many of the words that I will be using in this letter because they don't exist in any search engine's dictionary of your time. So I have linked all these extinct concepts and words for you from the old underground archive that I created over many years, to preserve this information. A fair warning though, my love! This letter could change the way you view the world and understand human and world history.*

I love her very much but sometimes, it is hard to believe some of the things that she speaks of. I trust that she would never lie, especially in her last letter to me. I read on being absolutely clueless about how wrong I was about my reality. Right or wrong didn't really matter to me. I just wanted to know about her death.

*Before I get to anything else, I will first begin with the story behind your name. As you already know — I was born in 2014 in Chennai, in the state of Tamil Nadu. On a more cheerful note, it was also the year that the Supreme Court of India recognised the right of every individual to self-identify their gender as male, female and transgender. The legal recognition wasn't an easy fight. Cisgendered people were not very accepting of transgender persons even with the legal recognition.*

*I grew up in Chennai. I was not from a very well-off family. My father made a living plying an auto-rickshaw, as an auto-rickshaw driver. What I have never mentioned to you before is the story of my life from 2020.*

But that's a story that I know! 2020 was the year of the global pandemic - COVID-19 and the beginning of the post-COVID era. People struggled due to the pandemic. The whole world adopted digital technologies to safely enforce social distancing in order to save humanity from COVID-19.

*Trust me! You don't know what really happened then. You've studied the glorified version: technology bringing the world together in 2020, the year of the global pandemic of COVID-19. Have you ever wondered about the person who wrote that history? I have. I know the answer — the author of that history was definitely not the child of an auto-rickshaw driver who had to watch their parents go hungry for*

*days to keep their brother and them fed. My parents going without a meal — was a normal day in my home in 2020. The national lockdown and social distancing during the pandemic meant no income for my father, whose income depended on the daily commuters in the city. Our school classes were also moved online. My father couldn't afford a smart device for my brother and me when he had to stay hungry to feed us. It was a really tough time for the family.*

It was too much for me to process. I had never questioned the history taught in school. She was talking about a different world. I was finding it all too overwhelming — her death, the loss, the letter. I knew that she was talking about a lot of important things that I had to know about, both for her sake and also mine. But more importantly, I wanted to find the cause of her death so I continued reading without letting another thought interrupt me.

*I know that you must be flustered with all that I told you so far. So let me tell you the story of my first love — with the girl next door (or so I thought). Ktien was not their given name, that is, it was not a name given to them at birth. That was a different name. Ktien was their preferred name. Yes! I named you after my first love.*

*Ktien means 'word' or 'language' in Khasi, a language that used to be spoken in Meghalaya. Ktien found this word in the book, Boats on Land by the Khasi author, Janice Pariat. The Khasi word was ka-ktien: 'ka' is a prefix denoting feminine gender. Ktien being the person they were, they stripped the feminine off the word, making it gender neutral and named themselves Ktien — word or language. Unlike me, Ktien had the strength to come out and be the person they truly were.*

*I sincerely hope that you are not questioning Ktien's pronoun. Ktien's preferred pronoun was 'they/their/them'. In fact, 'they' is my preferred pronoun too. There were pronouns beyond the binary of 'he' and 'she'. I don't blame you for not knowing it. You live in a world of binaries, which attempts to shrink the world into 0's and 1's.*

*Ktien and I were neighbours. We grew up together. Back in the day, we were inseparable. We lived through everything together — their parents' arrest in 2019 during the protests against NRC and NPR, the pandemic in 2020, both of us slowly figuring out that we both didn't identify as being "girls" in our pre-teens, starting work while still in school to support my family, our first kiss, my coming out, my parents refusing to send me to college, my marriage — we lived through all of it together. When I told my parents about being in love with Ktien, my parents simply concluded that education had perhaps taught me a little too much. So I was never sent to college.*

*Honestly, going to college didn't mean much to me. In 2014, I did not know that I was entering a world that institutionalised manipulation and gaslighting. What else would you call introducing coding as a mandatory subject in school from*

*Class I? I was meticulously taught to build and feed data systems that constantly tracked who we were. We were skilled only to feed the data systems with or without any knowledge about coding. By the time I got to Class XII, I had become a pro, although I was 'a girl'. All of us were taught to code and yet it was still seen as unusual for someone assigned female to become a coder. We never spoke English at home, but when English is the language that you use to codify people into categories — read: feeds you — why learn any other language? Tamil just died a natural death. I kept the last trace of my language alive for myself through you with three words - amma, appa and paati.*

*Ktien and I were both very young during the protests in 2019. That was a time when human beings were considered to be born with inherent rights by virtue of being a human, at least in a democracy like India. These rights were called human rights. Human rights were inherent and not determined by an individual's ability or inability to perfectly codify themselves into different categories of data. It was a time when humans were seen to be more powerful than machines and artificial intelligence. India even had a Constitution that recognised the values of equality and dignity. All human beings were considered to be citizens and were sovereign. Thanks to Ktien and their parents, I learnt about human rights and the Constitution.*

*Though both of us were very young, I still remember Ktien living with us while their parents were in jail. My parents saw Ktien as their own. Since my parents watched us both grow up together, I assumed that they would be okay with me seeing them as my life partner. My parents also witnessed Ktien's coming out and changing their name while we continued to remain in each other's life. The change in name was only a social transition. It was not on their ID documents. The process of changing one's name and gender on ID documents seemed more tedious than even coming out!*

*None of this ever mattered to my parents.*

*"Her parents never had the time for their daughter. Now their girl seems to think that she is not a girl. You think we'd be okay with you being in love with her? You have been influenced by movies but a girl being in love with a girl is not a part of Indian culture or reality. How will you both live without a man? May be she can but I don't want that life for my daughter," were my father's words when I told him about being in love with Ktien. He thought he was saving his daughter. Imagine me telling him that I did not identify myself as a girl! He would have automatically assumed that I was under Ktien's spell because Ktien was the love of my life. In 2034, I was married off to a cisgendered man! It was an arranged marriage to a man from my caste.*

*I wish I had the language to tell my parents that I identified my gender as non-binary. But how was I to explain this to them with no word in Tamil to describe me? I have to also admit that Tamil was one of the few languages in India that had*

*made the effort to coin words to describe a trans woman — Thirunangai and a trans man — Thirunambi. I was very young when I realised that I wasn't a girl, nor was I a boy. I was assigned female sex at birth but I did not identify myself to be a woman or a man. I was certain. But without a word to understand myself, I did not know who I was. Neither did my parents have an understanding, language or vocabulary to look at a transgender person as someone 'normal'. Besides, we were never taught anything beyond male and female even at school. Thanks to Ktien's real exposure to the English language, I learnt the word non-binary to understand myself and who I was. They had a better education than I did. However, the situation seemed to get worse with the introduction of facial recognition and voice biometrics. As non-binary people with no word to understand or express ourselves, our guilty pleasure was often our gender expression. With facial recognition and voice biometrics, we had to look and sound like our gender on paper. With a masculine gender expression and effeminate voice, Ktien confused the artificial intelligence of a 'man'-made system one too many times, to eventually be written off it. Not that they cared! I don't know if I really got lucky because my gender expression has always been feminine. Sure, the system recognised me correctly but did it really?*

*Ktien made me very proud. They later went onto become a research scholar. They were an activist — a proud advocate of equal rights for all gender minorities. Vicariously, I lived through them — my dream of breaking the system down and fighting for my rights.*

*After my marriage, life took us both down different roads. But the news kept me updated about Ktien's life. I would also get an occasional phone call from them. I last heard from them in October of 2050. I then read about their arrest. 2050 finally saw the complete erasure of the words — human rights and human rights defenders. Any dissent against the State was seen as terrorism. It was further intensified using AI to target people who they suspected to be a human rights defender. It was a witch hunt. When people got arrested, we never heard from them again.*

*Anyone who typed the words — human rights, activist, rights on any platform were immediately traced, tracked and questioned. Fear erased the existence of these words from our psyche. Besides, we didn't have any human rights or the Constitution left to protect us anymore. So if queer people disclosed their own identities, it meant inviting discrimination.*

*How then were people like me supposed to understand ourselves to become a part of this system? Mind you, this system does not recognise my existence because my now-extinct language, Tamil did not, originally, have a word to describe a person like me. So the usual lazy excuse — English doesn't have the word since the vernacular language never had one. This means that identity did not exist among their people. It didn't get any easier with introduction and linking of facial recognition, voice biometrics, DNA and the worst — abdominal scans — algorithms in*

*our pants!*

*It was Ktien's disappearance that gave me the strength and the courage to start coding again. I was angry, frustrated and filled with rage. It was my last gift and promise to Ktien — to keep the truth about the existence of people like us alive even with erasure of language and the emphasis on numbers to prove our existence. But fearing incarceration, I spent my whole life in the closet. I don't know if it was any life at all.*

*Don't let anyone tell you that you are unworthy of your existence. Don't let anyone tell you that you cannot take the space that you take in this world because of who you are. You are absolutely worthy of not just existing but living a full life. You are not just worthy of your every dream, but also of living them. The purpose of a written Constitution and law was in this spirit of existence for all — exactly why the technocrats decided to dismantle it. Don't let them break you too.*

*One last thing to you! Careful with the links that I have shared in this letter. I carefully preserved them to keep some part of the truth of people like me alive. History may be written by those in power but we always have a choice. We can choose to take back our power, even if only in small ways. So I hope that you will preserve this part of me for others like me; for there may be someone out there, someone like me, wondering how to understand themselves because they do not fit into the gender binary of this new age digital world.*

*Though dead, I still hope that my death would do to you what my Ktien's disappearance did to me.*

*Sending you my all love for all of eternity,*

*Paati.*

*P.S: I apologise if all the jargon I've used, intimidated you. I'm hoping that you'll understand them with all the links that I have shared and be a part of the process of coining simpler words, or even better, just make the world equal. It is not greed. It is really only faith!*

*P.P.S: I know that you probably were waiting for me to tell you that I killed myself. No! I did not.*

The letter left me feeling numb. I got my answer — Paati didn't kill themselves. But they were dead already. Like they said at the beginning of their letter, I was happy for them being dead. Beyond that one realisation, I simply couldn't think. I definitely had a lot of questions with absolutely no clue about where to start finding the answers. I had a hunch about the links in the letter. I decided to start with the links and then just journey down the rabbit's hole into another time! And who knows, maybe I'll find a way to turn back time — it might just be a matter of another line of code!