

DESTINY

*Anil Menon**

Happy birthday! Happy birthday! Happy birthday, dear you! Happy birthday to you! Welcome to Planet Earth, brand new baby. Welcome to you and the 367,000 other babies born today. O, what wonderful adventures you are going to have. Let's see now. Are you a boy or a girl? Either way, there'll be a 50% chance the rest of this story is true. Let's go with boy. Everything looks good: two legs, one pee-pee, two arms, one head. Oh, you're smiling. So cute. What a smile! You are going to be a lady-killer, oh you are, yes you are.

Everybody is so happy to see you. See, good things must be ahead for you. Nobody's sighing, nobody's turning away disappointed. Nobody is plotting your death because you're a girl. Sweets are being distributed. There's music in the air.

Let's take a look at the other cards you've been dealt. You were born in India; you're a *desi*, bro. Hmm. If you'd been Icelandic, there would have been a 63% chance of losing your virginity by 15.6 years. Never mind, can't have it all. It'll happen soon enough, especially with that smile of yours. You have a father. And a mother too. No real surprise there; there was an 84% chance your mom would survive the pregnancy and not be a single mother. Look, your Indian father is walking around in a daze: oh my god, a son, what do I do next?

'Be a good father!' everyone shouts. We'll all help, don't worry. You're not the first father nor the last.

You've drawn a nice set of cards. This is a good family, it looks like. Those 367,000 brothers and sisters of yours? Not all are so lucky. But hush, hush, not today, no bad news on this day. Your family is fine. It even has a Crazy-uncle. Of course, all good families have a Crazy-uncle so no one will give you odds there.

Crazy-uncle has begun his Michael Faraday and Gladstone and what's-the-use-of-a-new-baby story. Everyone groans. Oh Crazy-uncle, we've heard it all before, Crazy-uncle. Okay, okay. Go ahead Crazy-uncle, tell your story, get it out of your system, Crazy-uncle. So it seems Prime Minister Gladstone

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asked Michael Faraday— who is Michael Faraday, pipes your sister (she was born a few years before you and is still adorable, but she's going to end in a madhouse, that one). Just a famous scientist, everyone groans, go on Crazy-uncle. But of course Crazy-uncle is upset with the word 'just'. Excuse me, excuse me. *Just* a famous scientist? Now Crazy-uncle has to tell the *whole* story of Michael Faraday. Michael Faraday was a super-baby. He makes other babies look like bums. You'll also be a super-baby, oh you will, yes you will.

Hooray! You've survived your fifth birthday. As an Indian, there was a 6.3% chance you wouldn't have, did you know? Whew! You didn't have any birth defects. Your parents weren't forced to finish you off. Your birth weight was normal. You didn't choke to death in your cot. You didn't swallow sharp objects. No virus was able to overcome your immune system. Your little heart could take on a lion. Here, stick your chest out. You deserve a medal, you little fighter, you.

You're going to have to go to school. That's certain. But where? Mother says, well, my son's going to get the best unfair advantage money can buy. Father says, well, he's my son too and if St Joseph High School was good enough for me, it's good enough for him. Mother says, well, your education has taken you far, hasn't it? Father says, mother says. Bow, wow, wow. Bow, wow, wow.

It's scary when your parents argue, isn't it? You sense they are not really arguing about you. Don't worry, the divorce rate is just 1.1% in India. Nothing is significant below 5%. You are a lucky baby, you can survive in-significance. Unhappy marriages are trickier to quantify. If your parents are unhappily married, it can be hell on your prospects. Will your parents drift apart? Let's check the odds.

See, your father's gay, your mother's not. That sort of thing puts an enormous strain on a marriage. Not because they're so different, but because these two poor people don't know the causes and so they look for reasons. Hush hush, it's not your fault. Don't cry, super-boy. It is no one's fault. Ready? Okay, here's the good news. You're parents are only going to end up hating each other.

Jesus doc, what's the bad news? Relax. You'll be fine. Home life is tough, yah? Bow, wow, wow in the morning, bow wow wow in the evening. So you're going to find reasons to stay outside. What are your options? Sports. The odds are really high you'll like sports. See Spot run. Run Spot run. See, it's working out. Your dad's so proud! Your mom's so relieved! Their boy! Trouble is, though your heart is all lion, your damn dad is a ninety-pound weakling. Genes will tell. They control ligaments, muscle fiber density, thermo-regulation, V02 max, oh never mind, find something where a

lion's heart can make a difference. Look, St Joseph doesn't have a good sports program; the administration is focused on turning out engineers and doctors. Let it go, let it go. Forget sports.

Crazy-uncle gives you an IQ test. It is the usual weekend visit, Crazy-uncle plays peacemaker, Crazy-uncle cracks his jokes, tousles your hair, and asks you this and that. Listen up people, says Crazy-uncle, I was administering an IQ test on sperm-carrier here. Ka-Pow! That stops everyone in their tracks. Well, Crazy-uncle? *Well?* Crazy-uncle says proudly: the kid's got my mind.

Okay doc, what's the good news? Your mother rolls her eyes at your father, he's doing the same, and they both laugh, they connect. He rubs the back of her neck, she leans against him. Watching them, your heart nearly bursting with happiness, you savor the words of your Crazy-uncle, your went-to-MIT uncle, your won-this-and-that-prize uncle: got my mind, got my mind. Your sister will pinch you; the odds are almost hundred to one on that, be prepared.

You score well in tests, but you're not a topper. Year after year, you take your place in the upper middle-class of the bell curve. No problem. You have grit, that's what counts. Remember how even when you were sick, you limped to class and were able to remember everything you'd by-heartened the night before. Not like your sister, the one who never studies, the one who failed a class, the one who fills pages with equations, always fiddling with the telescope Crazy-uncle had bought her when she'd been the new new thing. One night, you are awakened by her cold hands on your face. Wake up, wake up, wake up, she whispers, and you know it's just a dream because she's cold as death. Happy birthday baby brother, I've named a new asteroid after you.

Relax, this is *your* story. You're still special, that's what that story was meant to show. How many people have asteroids named after them? (Hint: less than 0.00004%) You find other ways to make your parents proud. Keep them hopeful. You win the Gita recitation competition! What a waste of terabytes, Crazy-uncle might have grumbled, when he used to still come over.

Listen to me! Don't be worried. The world still branches out in front of you. So what if engineering didn't work out. Only 35% of high school graduates go for engineering these days. The action's in Commerce. 30% of Gujarati grads are commerce majors. Follow the smart money, boss. Start a company, be asked for your opinions, know what phrases like 'global indexed mortgage rates' mean. Can't you see it? You'll go bankrupt three times, start a toilet-paper company for dogs, become a billionaire, end up on CNBC, answer pouty questions from Maria Bartiromo. At least start by going bankrupt. Take a chance!

And there are so many nice things waiting to happen. Girls! Oh my god,

don't go by your sister or your dad, girls are some of the nicest things to happen. Feel that tingle in your stomach? The first night, the first touch of a woman? At the very least, you can be a great husband.

What went wrong? Look champ, nothing went wrong. You know the odds of that? Rather high actually. So chin up, it's not you, the country doesn't allow things to go wrong. There, feel better? You're already a great son. So obedient. A comfort to your parents; they look like worn slippers, don't they? You're such a good child. Unlike some we could mention. Where is she, your sister, the heartless girl?

Returning from work by train one day, you see a kid bouncing on his father's lap. The father's trying to read Steve Jobs' biography. Nostalgia! For your fifteenth birthday, your father had bought you the very same. What a big book. Stay hungry, stay hungry. You're going to do commerce, says your father, you must take chances in life. He's so exhausted, your father. He pays the cashier, heads out, then suddenly sits down on the bench outside. He looks lost, frightened. Poor old slipper. You'd waited, unwilling to grow up. Let's go home dad. Yes, he says. How strange he looks.

You look up at your son's face. He's worried. You know what he's thinking: the old man's gonna croak on the sidewalk. Relax *beta*, you smile. The good news is I'll be around for a while. Life is fucking long, kid. Your son smiles. Such a beautiful smile. He's gonna go far, he is, yes he is. You rise, pat the kid on the cheek. He thinks you've forgotten, but you haven't. It's his birthday and you've planned something special.
