

A little logic, a little magic

** By Ramsubramaniam Suraj*

I am going to see him after thirty years. We were best friends in college but after those four magical years, we went our separate ways. His phone call a week ago, came as a bolt from the blue. We decided to meet in the college which gave us so many memories.

Oh! I am so sorry. I have not introduced myself. My name is Karuppazhagan, which in Tamil means black and handsome. My name is a total misnomer. I have a sandy brown complexion and I am completely devoid of hair on my scalp. In spite of my best efforts and years of basketball I could not cross 5 feet 2 inches. So I am not exactly handsome.

The guy I am waiting for was a total contrast. He was a dude in college. Spiked hair, French beard, well chiseled body of an athlete, you couldn't ask for more (I wonder what he looks like now). His name is Rajesh, but he insists that you call him 'Josh'.

I am waiting outside the railway gate. This railway crossing is the entrance to my college. It is an hour past our appointed time. But knowing Josh, it was expected.

It is ironical that I met Josh for the first in the same place thirty four years ago. The year was 1971. I was a complete stranger to the hustle and bustle of the big city. Chennai, even in the 1970s was a city on the move. It was a great achievement for a guy from Perumuthampatti, a village you might not find even on Google Earth, to get into Madras Engineering Institute. It was the premier technological institute in Tamil Nadu at that point of time.

I don't want to paint the picture of a poor, innocent village boy in a wicked big city. We were rich people and had ruled over the village for three generations. I was revered in my village and when I left the place I was extremely confident about my abilities. But, it was also true that I was the first guy from my village to get into Engineering.

Years back I was waiting outside the same railway crossing for someone to guide me when I saw a guy with spiked hair and a French beard walking in the distance. His T-shirt was perfectly tucked into his faded jeans. I looked at myself - New brown pant and bright green shirt. I thought these city guys don't even have proper clothes- old and faded pants, indeed!

The guy walked towards me.

"Are you a fresher?" he asked. I couldn't understand what he meant. 'Fresh+her' – her referred to females, my English master had taught me. I nodded my head.

"That's great. I am a fresher too. So dude, wassup?" he asked.

His language sounded alien to me. Wassup = what+is+up. I rolled up my eyes, pointed my index finger upwards and said, "sky"

"What?" he sounded perplexed.

"The sky is up," I repeated.

"That's a good one," he said and burst into laughter. I couldn't understand why he was laughing. So, I laughed along with him. That was how we got introduced.

You must have got a brief idea about me. I knew very little English when I joined college. An S-Class Mercedes came into view. Undoubtedly, Josh was inside. He was a third generation businessman, and had expanded the garment factory beyond his father's wildest dreams. Breakfast in London, Dinner in New York, S-Class Mercedes, first class travel by air...that was

his lifestyle. My body contorted with excitement at the thought of seeing him after a thirty year hiatus.

The doors of the S-Class opened. I saw the spiked hair, then the French beard. It was the same Rajesh, the guy who had been a mentor, a friend, a big brother to me.

"Hey, dude, wassup?" he shouted, a beaming smile splashed across his face. rolled up my eyes, pointed my index finger upwards.

"Dumbo! After all these years you still haven't forgotten."

"How are you doing?"

"Chilling, man. Just chilling. So you've put on weight. Pot-belly and all. Can't resist your wife's cooking, eh?"

"Signs of prosperity, I guess"

"Ya, right. So, you are a big shot now. Saw you on the cover of Outlook. The man who is re-defining education in rural India. Project 'Education 2020'."

"Doing my little bit for this country."

"Great, great. So, where shall we start?"

"Your choice."

"I suggest, Ali's Punjabi Dhaba. Remember, those days. It was the source of all the college gossip.

And, he asked. How is Padma?"

"Which Padma?"

"You, idiot. The girl you went around with."

"Oh! Padma Shekar. No idea. I guess she must have married. Must be having grand children. I only hope that she found the rich husband she always wanted."

"I don't think she would have settled for anything less."

We went to Ali's Dhaba. It used to be a small shack, with dry coconut leaves patched together as its roof. Any rumour in college, HODs firing lecturers, girl-guy affair, this gang thrashing that gang, all of it originated here. The Dhaba had changed with the times. It had transformed into a fast food restaurant with a concrete roof and granite tiled floor. The management had changed but the old chef, Nimond Singh, remained.

"Do you remember me?" I asked Nimond. He scratched his red turban.

"Wait let me think ... Ah! I got it. Padma's boyfriend."

"The same guy," I said. We embraced each other.

"What would you like to eat?" he asked. There was a glint in his eyes.

"The usual," I answered.

He dexterously went about the task of preparing rotis and chicken gravy. Josh grabbed a packet of Malabar Beedi from the shelf just like the old times.

"Wanna smoke?" Josh asked sarcastically.

"No, stopped."

"When did u start?"

"Stopped before I started."

There was broad smile on our faces. This was the place where I had my first and last drag. It was forced on me by Josh. I slapped him for what he did. We didn't speak for a week as a result.

Josh lit his beedi. "Long time since I had this brand. So, tell me something about what you are doing. What is 'Education 2020'?"

"According to the 2001 Census, the urban literacy rate in this country is 80%. The rural literacy rate stands at 59%. A difference of 21%. Only 46% of girls in rural areas go to school. And India lives in her villages. As much as 72% of India's population is rural. This difference in literacy must be addressed and this trend must be reversed.

Education '2020' is a step in this direction. It is an initiative to have a school in every village in India. These schools will have state-of-the-art infrastructure, trained teachers and an efficient management. It will be comparable with any school in the city.

We are working on the logistics. We are generating funds through state and national grants, corporate sponsorships, NGOs and the like."

"Very interesting. I would like to do my bit."

Josh signed a check for two crores and handed it over to me.

"Wish you all the best." he said earnestly.

"Will it bounce?" I asked, jocularly.

"You dumb!" Josh brought the wrath of his two hands upon my back.

"Hey, just kidding. Thanks a lot for the dough."

The rotis and chicken tasted the same as it did during my college days. Some things in life never change. Thankfully...

We crossed the railways tracks and entered the college campus. We were stopped by a heavily built, curly mustached man called Veeraswamy. He was the Security Guard of our college. Veeraswamy had a huge reputation during my time. He was always inquisitive about the integrity of people. Everyone in college feared and hated him at the same time.

I remember a day when Josh and I returned to college at 9 in the night. It was the day after the 3rd semester exams. Josh was totally drunk and we were stopped at the gate by Veeraswamy.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To college," I replied. As though there was any other place I could go.

"Do you know what time it is?"

"Seven o'clock," I said.

"It is 9 o'clock," he said looking at his watch.

"Oh! God. I thought it was seven," I pretended. I showed him my watch. It pointed at seven o'clock. Only I knew that it showed the same time for the past three days.

I wanted to get through Veeraswamy as soon as I could. Josh was resting on my shoulder. He was only half conscious. I didn't want Josh to blurt out something stupid. It could land both of us in trouble.

But Veeraswamy wasn't making it easy.

"Where have you been?"

"We went to the doctor. My friend is not well. The doctor has given him medicines. He needs to take rest. It isn't good for him to stand for too long. Can we go in?"

"Won't your friend talk? And why is he resting on your shoulder?"

"I told you he is not well. He is too weak to talk."

"Veeraswamy! Dude, will you let us in or not?" Josh blurted out.

"How dare you say my name!" said Veeraswamy and stepped forward.

Josh vomited on Veeraswamy's face. An undigested mixture of Whisky, eggs, chips and chicken. I experienced a sadistic pleasure in seeing Veeraswamy's vomit strewn face.

"Serves him right," I thought.

Veeraswamy ensured that the two of us got suspended from college for a week. At that time, we thought that it was a well deserved break after exams.

On this occasion, we had no trouble getting past him. He remembered the vomiting incident and we laughed about it. We even took a photo with him. A photo with Veeraswamy – Unthinkable during our college days.

"So, how is Padma?" asked Veeraswamy.

"But, how did you know about me and her?" I asked.

"Nothing happens here without my knowledge."

I am sure that you want to know about Padma. The time has come for me to introduce her. I met her for the first time in the college canteen. It is called 'Canopy'. The real charm of the place is not its size but its location. It directly faces the rear of the main college building. And the best part is, it is en route to the Girls Hostel.

Josh and I had entered our second year. The new batch had been sworn in. We were seated in the Canopy and rating girls on a scale of one to ten. We were being extremely stringent with marks and nobody had crossed six on either of our scorecards. Until Padma arrived.

"Five," said Josh when he saw her.

I didn't answer. I was too engrossed in her.

"Hey, tell me her score. We got to move on. There are many more to come. Can't keep them waiting," said an impatient Josh being completely professional in his work.

"Can I give a twelve?" I asked.

Josh turned around to stare at me. I smiled sheepishly at him.

"Have your tea," shouted Josh into my ear. I was jerked out of my nostalgic past.

"Thinking about Padma?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Even today, I am telling you, man. You overrated her."

"I am repeating, not everything is based on fact. As Padma always said, sometimes there is a little logic but most times there is a little magic."

"Shut up and have your tea."

The canteen tea was one of our favorites. Somehow it always used to taste better during class hours.

We went to S-103, our first year classroom. Josh and I were together from the first day of class. The third hour was Physics. Our Physics class started without the professor asking for any formal introductions.

"What is the fundamental principle behind $E=MC^2$?" he asked.

No one in class volunteered to answer the question. So he pointed at me. I couldn't understand a word of his English.

"I, no English," I stood up and said.

"You know English. Go on," said the professor.

"I, no English," I reiterated, desperate to make him understand my problem with communication.

"Tell me something about E, M and C. Anything that you know."

"E for elephant, M for monkey, C for cat." I thought that I went back to the basics. My answer didn't impress my physics professor.

"Reservation and more reservation. It is killing this country. Some idiot from some god forsaken village arrives, and I have to teach him physics. The bloody government should be blamed. Students who don't know English, don't know what is $E=MC^2$, but want to be Engineers. You should do what you know best. Go work in the farms. Why do you come and eat my head?" he shouted, indignant.

I was fortunate that I could not follow his every word. I could fathom that he had scorned me, the government and worst of all, my village. It made me feel terrible. I cried in front of the entire class.

"Your tears don't melt me," he said and carried on.

I slept through the other sessions in the day. I had decided to quit the college. I couldn't take the abuse. The confidence that existed when I came into Madras vanished into ashes within the blink of an eye.

Josh and I went then went to the Boys Hostel. A massive structure, which has not changed with the course of time. Our Hostel warden was a young innocent man called Palaniappan. To our surprise, he was still in college. He had gone through life as our Hostel warden. No small achievement!

"Sir, how are you?" enquired Josh, when he entered his office.

He didn't recognize us, initially.

"Sir, don't you remember us. We even banged you up one day," I said.

Josh made out a cheque for a lakh of rupees for him. The warden refused to accept the money.

"This is not for you. This is for your daughter," said Josh.

He was flattered that Josh remembered his daughter. She was a small kid during our college days and Josh was extremely fond of her. The warden had tears of happiness in his eyes. "It is students like you who make this job special," he said. We hugged him whole-heartedly.

Memories of Josh and me thrashing Palaniappan are fresh in my mind. It happened on my first day in college. I had decided to quit college. I had booked a ticket to my village by the night bus. I wanted to return to what my family did best. Farming.

"What do you think you are doing?" Josh asked.

I wanted to answer but I didn't understand the question. He recognized my problem.

"I know Tamil. You can talk to me in Tamil. What are you doing?" he asked in Tamil.

"Going home," I replied in Tamil.

"After going home?"

"Get into agriculture. This city life is not for me. I am a stupid villager. My school was eight kilometers from my house. In my school even English was taught in Tamil. My English master didn't know English. I was the class topper. I used to teach my master English. I come to Madras. Suddenly, my English is poor. Masters are insulting my village. I am leaving this place." I was sobbing when I said these words. I experienced a sharp pain in my heart, like a bullet ripping apart my emotions.

"If you have decided to quit, then I can't stop you. It is your decision. But if you are quitting because you don't know English then it is stupid. English is just a language of communication, like Tamil. I will teach the language to you. In a year you can speak like me. And I don't think you want to do farming. If you did, why come to Madras?"

What he said got me thinking. He seemed to make sense.

"I will not force you. I don't like advice. I don't like giving advice. But ..."

"When do we start?"

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"Start what?"

"English."

"That's the spirit. We must celebrate this occasion."

Josh bought a Black Forest cake from the Canopy. He switched off the lights. He lit the solitary candle on the top of the icing. He asked me to blow the candle. I blew the candle. I had never seen a Black Forest cake in my life. I was desperate to taste the cake. Sadly, I wasn't allowed to. Josh smeared the cake throughout my body. I did the same for him. We looked like two comedians trapped in a cake commercial. The noise we made alerted Palaniappan. He knocked on our door. Josh thought that it was a student trying to play a prank on us. So, we took a blanket in our hands and opened the door. The moment the person entered, we covered him with the blanket. We didn't give him any time to talk. We punched him with our knuckles; slapped his back with our palms; we kicked his butt. We banged him till our appetites were satisfied. We removed the blanket and switched on the lights. It was Palaniappan, the hostel warden. We got the shock of our life.

"Why are you students doing like this? You are still in the first year. I think you are rowdies. Very sorry for knocking at the door." He apologized because he was terrified of us. "Please, don't tell anyone about what happened now. Prestige problem," he said. He went out of the room with a bent back and with his left hand caressing his lower back.

Josh stayed true to his word. He was a wonderful teacher. In a year's time, I was speaking English on par with him. I was in the third year. I had followed Padma's every move like a stalker. She continued to be single and to my knowledge had rejected at least twenty proposals in the first year. I could not summon the courage to talk to her. I could not approach Josh for advice on this matter. He hated girls. It was a Sunday evening. I saw a familiar figure in the distance. It was Padma. My heart pumped blood twice as fast as normal. I turned to the opposite side. I started walking towards the hostel. "Excuse me, please wait," Padma shouted. I wasn't sure if it was for me. I didn't turn to confirm. I continued walking in the direction of the hostel.

"Karuppazahangan, I want to talk to you," she knew my name I thought. I experienced a wave of ecstasy.

"Finally, the two of us are alone. I have always wanted to ask you this question. Why are you following me?"

"I am not following you," I said without conviction.

"Don't lie. For six months you have followed my every move. Do you want something from me?"

"I want you," I thought.

"No," I said with a greater degree of conviction.

"Then why are you stalking me?"

"You look beautiful." I blushed.

"So, you love me?"

She was being brutally honest in her assessment. I wasn't accustomed to girls like this.

"I am not that kind of person," I told Padma.

"Mr.Karuppazhagan! You are a bloody nobody. What qualification do you have to love me! Do you think I will live in a stupid village and serve you dosas for the rest of my life! Look at your dress - Yellow shirt, brown pant. What will my friends think if I go around with you! She had insulted me and she wanted answers to obvious questions.

"I am the daughter of an ordinary middle class family. Beauty is my only trump card. I want someone who is rich and famous. I want to live in a big house. I want to wear designer clothes. I want to go to the most happening parties in the city. This is me and this is what I want. Can u you give me this lifestyle?"

The maximum that I could give her was a free bath in the Cauvery river that flowed through my village. Perumuthampatti didn't have a garment shop and she wanted designer clothing. I felt so lousy for having come from a backward village. I was so insignificant amongst the hustle and bustle of the big city. What was worse, I couldn't give Padma the life she wanted.

I cried in front of Padma. I surrendered my manliness. I sobbed whole heartedly, like a baby would. Padma turned and walked away. She was disgusted with my lack of pride. .

Later Padma called for me to meet outside the principal's room. She had sent word for me to go there. I thought that she had complained about me to the principal.

"Scared that I had complained to the principal?" she said, judging by my body language.

"Why did you cry the other day?"

I did not answer.

"I have never seen a crybaby like you."

"But that is what makes you special. You have a sensitivity that no other guy has. All the guys I have seen are trapped in their ego. You are a free bird. And that will take you far."

"Does that mean that you like me?" I seized the opportunity.

"No! But I could. The day you become rich."

"My family is rich."

"Not your family, stupid. You! I hope you understand that I cannot live in your village. I want you to become rich and famous in the big city. We will live together as king and queen. The day you become rich and famous is the day when I will like you."

"Dude, interrupted Josh , " I forgot to tell you. We got an appointment with the principal at 3 o'clock. He wanted to see us

"I am so happy to see both of you," beamed the principal when we entered the room. It was a privilege for us to meet him. He was an inaccessible man during our college days..

"I hope you are enjoying coming back to college," he asked.

"Definitely, sir." I answered.

"Where are you going next?" asked the principal.

"To the guest house," said Josh.

"Mind if I accompany you guys."

"Our pleasure," I answered.

The guest house was a special place in a student's heart because the placement interviews are always held here. Ultimately that is why one does engineering. To get a job in a big company.

When I was in my final year the talk of placements was in full swing. Digital Systems was the first company to come to our college. It was a company with tremendous potential. It specialized in Digital Electronics, an emerging area at that time. The eligibility criterion was above 65 %. Josh and I satisfied the criteria.

The aptitude test was held in the morning. Josh and I cleared the test. The interview was scheduled for the next day.

Padma and I met many times in the coconut farm. At no point did we behave like lovers. Padma stuck to her ideology. She would like me on the day I became rich. She wanted me to meet her the evening before the interview. She had a peculiar request. To bring a sharp kitchen knife along with me.

"Tomorrow is a big day," said Padma. No "hi" or "hello". Down to business straightway. Typical Padma.

"What are you thinking about? You can do it!" said Padma.

"I am scared."

"Sometimes it takes a little logic to succeed. Most times all it takes is a little magic. You have the magic."

"I will give it my best."

"Good! Did you bring the knife?"

I gave the knife to her. She inscribed a cross mark on the trunk of the tree. I couldn't understand why she was doing this.

"After you get the job, after you become rich, we will come to this tree. This cross mark will help us identify it. We shall decorate it and officially declare it the tree of love."

Though Padma didn't say it, I realized what she meant. If I got the job, she would love me. Because I would grow with the job and she would grow with me. Tomorrow was a big day.

Josh was waiting for me in the hostel room.

"Prepared for the interview?"

"Josh, I am scared. I have never spoken in front of a crowd or on a formal occasion."

"How many times have I told you to speak out in front of class? You never listened."

I, too, wanted to speak out in class. But a stigma always held me back

"Dude, I need a favour," said Josh.

"What is it?"

"I want to know more about my area of specialization."

"What is your area of specialization?"

"What do you think it should be?"

"Great! Well, take Digital Electronics as the area of specialization."

"Tell me more about it."

"It is an emerging field. The world today runs on analog systems but if we could quantize and digitize these systems, we could define levels for the signal. We can eliminate noise, ensure better clarity..."

"Dude that is enough knowledge. I can get through my interview with this. Don't saturate my brains."

The guest room had undergone many changes since our day. The old teak sofa which greeted visitors had been replaced. A modern, leather sofa took its place. New curtains, vases, flowers, a new look. The interview room which stood in the first floor of the guest house was locked.

"Can we have a look at the interview room?" I asked the principal.

"Sure."

He opened the room for us. The sunlight filtered through the windows in the room. We had to sway our hands to prevent the dust in the room from striking our eyes. The room needed some cleaning.

"Placement season is three months away," said the principal apologetically.

Josh went before me for the interview. I anxiously waited for him to return. His interview took twenty minutes. He returned pleased with himself.

"The guy is totally cool. Just relax, dude and chill. All the best," he said.

I was next.

I entered the interview room. I was greeted by a smiling face.

"Hi! My name is Sanjay. What is your name?"

"I am Karuppazhagan," I said, looking at the roof. We shook hands and I handed over my certificates.

"Your area of specialization?"

"Digital electronics," I said looking at the ground.

"I want you to look at me when you answer. What do you know about Digital Electronics?"

I looked into his eyes but I couldn't concentrate on his question. I had never participated in a formal discussion. My mindset wasn't tuned to this situation. The lack of exposure showed. I tried to look at the ground and answer.

"Digital Electronics..."

"Look at me."

I made a last gasp effort to look at Sanjay. My mind blanked. I could remember nothing.

"How is digital different from analog?"

I did not make an effort to answer. My mind was like an empty page waiting for a new chapter to be scripted. I started crying.

"Tell me something about your favorite topic. It can be anything you like."

I cried even louder. I wanted the torture to end. He looked at my certificates.

"Aggregate of 72%. Coming from Perumuttampatti. Did you enter through reservation?"

I nodded too ashamed to look at Sanjay.

"I suggest you go back to your village. Think about farming as an occupation. Thanks for your time."

I did not get up. I did not follow his words. My mind was some where else. "Mr. Karuppazahagan, the interview is over. Please, get out." I went out of the room. I did not recognize Josh enquiring about how the interview went.

At that point I made a resolution. I did not want to work in the corporate world. I wanted to sacrifice my life for other people like me who had the intelligence but lacked the exposure. I was going back to my village. I would build an efficient primary education system comparable to the cities. The next generation would not suffer like I did. I would become an example. Of how not to be.

I met Padma in the coconut farm that evening. She was not happy with me.

"How stupid could you be? You messed up a golden opportunity," she shouted at me.

"It was nice knowing you," I said softly but firmly.

"What do you mean?"

"I am going back to my village."

"Are you stupid? What is there in Perumuthampatti. I cannot come with you there. There are other companies coming. You should get into one of them. You can still become rich."

"Padma, I have my own dreams to chase. I cannot live your life. There is a lot I can do in Perumuthampatti. Sometimes, I will need a little logic. Most times a little magic will do."

I stretched out my hand. She shook it. It was the first time I had touched her. I walked towards my hostel. I turned around to look at Padma, again. There was a tiny tear in her eyes. It made me happy. In that stone heart of hers, a small corner was reserved for me.

So many events had occurred since then and now. One interview room was the source of it all. On this day it looked completely innocent. But it would return to grace, haunt the memories and change the lives of many more.

"Sir, I want to see our physics teacher," I requested.

"Mr. Mathews. Sure, I will take you to his house."

We went to the staff quarters. It made up the rightmost boundary of the hostel. The physics professor's house was on the ground floor.

"Why did you want to visit Mathews' house?" asked Josh.

"Years after he said that I will be a total failure in life. It will be nice to see him."

My physics professor was surprised to see us. He was holding a copy of the Outlook where I was on the cover page. He was uncertain how to react to our sudden presence.

"Sir, can we come in?" I asked.

"Sure. I am shocked to see you guys. I am not sure what to say."

"Sir, how are you?" I enquired.

"Fine, Karuppazhagan. I am so sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

Guilt was written on his face

"For saying that you would become a nobody. I should never have insulted you when you were a student. I was so foolish. I couldn't have been more wrong."

"Sir, it is okay. May be if you hadn't said that I would have ended up a nobody."

"Josh, how are you doing?"

"Fine, sir."

"How is Padma, Karuppazhagan?"

"No idea, sir. Lost touch after college."

"Sir, is that your grandson?" asked Josh. He pointed to the four year old boy hiding behind the curtain.

"Yes. Ashok, come here. Say hello to these uncles."

Ashok shook hands with us. He kissed us on our cheeks and recited a couple of rhymes for us.

"Karuppazhagan, the success you have achieved is phenomenal. How did you do it?"

"Very simple, thatha. A little logic, a little magic," said the little boy reading from my quote on the cover page.

We laughed out aloud.

About the author:

Ramsubramaniam Suraj is currently working as a Project Engineer in the Nortel Optical project. He loves writing fiction and has written a novel called Revolution and also a book of short stories called S1 - A train journey. Suraj is currently working on his next book called You and Me. Apart from writing, he is also passionate about debating and has won numerous accolades at the school level.