

Falling Stars

From where I was sitting, I could clearly see right down the front, where it was written:

Standing – 25

I almost laughed out loud. Yes, in an ideal world. On the bus I was lucky to have got a seat, there were definitely close to fifty people standing. Probably even more, if you were able to count the people hanging from the footboards at both the front and rear doors.

At that moment, I wasn't even sure I was lucky I was travelling seated. First of all, the person standing next was pressing into me, and there was practically no space to move about. Not that I needed much space to sit, but I began to feel increasingly claustrophobic, surrounded by human walls closing in on me from all four sides.

Secondly, the old woman next to me seemed to be quite fond of chewing paan and spitting blood-red betel juice out the window. The first time she did that, I must have given her a look that told her how repulsed I felt by that, for she just smiled, revealed all her stained, brown teeth, and said, "Don't worry, the rain will wash it all away."

It was raining, a steady downpour. No drama for dear Chennai. The city was surprised, caught in a pouring rain. I always thought that as soon as the first drop touched the scorched earth, traffic would just stop everywhere. Somehow, it never seemed like it was really raining, but all hell broke loose, and all the people on the road, drivers and pedestrians and tramps and hawkers – all alike, went mad.

The bus was inching ahead, one step after another. Obviously the frustration was getting to all the people, because I could hear multiple tongue-clicks, people complaining

on the phone, and the driver himself complaining on the phone. There was an assortment of smells hovering around inside the bus, trying to top the fresh smell of rain – food, leather, talcum powder, perfume, jasmine flowers, hair oil, fish...

There was a bit of a shuffle as the old man standing pressed to me finally tore himself apart from me. I heaved a sigh of relief, despite knowing that this relief would only be short-lived. A moment later, a young woman entered my peripheral vision. When I looked up at her face, I saw her shrinking away from everyone around her. She wasn't looking up at anyone, and kept her eyes focused on some point near her feet, on the floor of the bus. Suddenly, as if she knew I was studying her, she looked up at me and smiled apologetically. I knew that she was hardly twenty, give or take a couple of years.

And she was heavily and unmistakably pregnant.

A pang of some strange emotion shot through me. I got up and gave her my seat.

She looked surprised at first. Then she thanked me softly and sat down, her face showing obvious relief.

She was so young. For some reason, she had a tired, weary look about her, but nothing could hide her youth and the clear, sharp lines of her face.

She probably thought I was going to get down at the next stop. But when the next stop came and went, and I was still standing next to her, she looked up at me and said, "Weren't you going to get down?"

"No, I need to get down only at the terminus," I replied. She looked at me with her wide, disbelieving eyes.

“That’s really nice of you, you know,” she said.

I shrugged it off with a smile.

“I need to get down at the terminus as well,” she said. “I’m new here.”

I nodded. I thought she might need help with some address, location, shortcuts – that kind of thing.

“Oh my God,” she whispered.

I closed my eyes for a second. I was used to this reaction from people when they saw me walk with a limp.

“It’s no big deal,” I said, becoming increasingly uncomfortable by the minute.

Her eyes were filled with tears. “You gave me your seat.”

I shook my head. Maybe it was her pregnancy, or the girl had gone through a lot of trouble in her life, that much was clear.

“I’m not an invalid,” I said, more amused than annoyed at her display of emotion.

She struggled a little to control her tears.

“Do you need any help finding where to go?” I asked, surreptitiously checking the time on my watch. I was late, and I knew my husband was at home, probably wondering what I was up to.

“No,” she said. Before I could say anything, though, she added quickly, “Could you please have coffee with me?”

We ended up walking to the nearest coffee shop.

"I'm a psychology professor," I said and named the college I worked at.

"I was studying psychology back home," she said, her face forlorn. Her name was Smriti, and she was just as young as I'd feared – nineteen.

"Why did you drop out?" I asked. "Because of your pregnancy?"

"I had to," she said, a closed expression on her face. She clearly didn't want to discuss it. I was okay with that; it wasn't like she knew me well.

Somehow we'd hit it off, this girl and I. I had a strong feeling she needed someone she could trust. I wondered if she ever spoke to her husband as animatedly as she did to me. Probably if she did, she wouldn't need me.

I couldn't help but steal glances at her tummy. It was high and rounded, and she had to keep shifting in her seat and fanning herself to feel more comfortable. But as restless as she seemed, she made me long to touch my own tummy.



"You're late," my husband said as soon as I entered.

He was sitting on the sofa and idly switching channels on the remote. I sat beside him and leaned into him. He put his arm around me and kissed me on my forehead. "Rough day?" he asked softly.

"Not really," I said. "I met this girl."

"At the university?"

"No, on the bus." I buried my face in his chest. "She needed someone to talk to."

He didn't say anything, and waited for me to go on.

We had been married fifteen years. I met Naren when I was twenty-five, and he, thirty, both of us part of the teaching faculty at the same college in Delhi. He kept relentlessly asking me out for two years before I finally nodded, thinking, 'Let me get it over with.' But one date led to another, and finally, we married when I was twenty-eight.

"I gave her my seat and then she wanted to have coffee with me," I explained.

"Why did you give her your seat?"

"She was very pregnant," I said.

He hugged me tighter. "How do you feel about that?" he asked gently, after moments of silence.

"I felt okay," I lied.

"Baby," he said, kissing me. "I know you too well to believe you. We could adopt, Shalu."

"But we're in our forties. By the time the child grows up, we'd be too old to be there for him or her, or to even understand their generation. I'm happy as I am, believe me." I reached up to kiss him on his cheek. "I love you," I said; my heart missed a beat – this moment of our tenderness.

Naren had seen me at my worst, at my weakest moments. He was there to see me cry in helplessness, in shame when I couldn't get out of my bed and hobble to the bathroom after the accident that gave me this limp for the rest of my life. He was there to help me through my physiotherapy sessions. He was there to take baby steps with me as I learned to walk all over again. He was there to hold my

hand tighter when the gynecologist told me that I could never be a mother because the accident had seen to that. He was the one who suggested we move out of Delhi after all this, because he didn't want me to be stuck in that life anymore. He was there to watch me step into my new life.

That was why I loved him.

My phone was ringing. I knew it was her right away, without even looking at the number flashing on the screen. I'd recognize that voice anywhere. She had a distinctly sweet voice, and I had a feeling she was a trained singer.

She had taken my number after our little chat at the coffee shop, and had called me many times since; there was no pressing issue to be discussed, and these phone calls were more or less just to have a chat. I encouraged that; I figured she was lonely and felt a strong need to help her. It didn't seem as if she had anyone else to talk to, really; maybe I could be someone of consequence for her.

I smiled into the phone as I looked at the clock. It was six in the evening. She must have gotten off work. I knew she worked for a BPO, but I'd also been very vocal about my thought that she could do so much better. She should be studying, like she wanted to. What stopped her? I wondered. Maybe her husband just didn't want her to study further. She was intelligent, and she would do well if she got the right mentor.

I had been engrossed in grading papers all that while and could gladly use a break, so I agreed when she said she wanted to meet me.

She came to the college. I took her to the college canteen.

We started off with small talk. She seemed to like that.

More so, she needed that. Even when she called me on the phone, it was as if she was trying to fill in for some deficiency of normalcy in her life. We would talk about nothing, essentially, yet she would talk obsessively about the most trivial of things.

“Tell me about your family,” I said.

She smiled wryly. “My parents are orthodox,” she started, and I could already picture them in my head. Maybe her parents were the type that got their daughters married before they could even graduate from college. I had seen many of my students come to classes with their wedding rings or mangalsutra; Smriti, though, was bare-necked and without a ring.

“Father is a bank manager. Mother is a homemaker. They’re both very simple people, and they don’t know much about the world. All they care about is home, and of course, me.” She sighed. “I miss them.”

“Well, I’m sure your husband makes your separation from your parents worth it,” I smiled.

A sudden cloud seemed to pass over Smriti’s luminous eyes.

A hundred million thoughts raced through my mind at the same time. Was she being abused? Was her husband dead? Was her husband abroad, maybe in Dubai or the US? Was her husband a criminal? Was her husband back in Delhi? Was she running away from her husband?

And suddenly, Smriti just hugged me and started crying. I was too shocked to say anything. I just ran my hand on her back, as giant sobs racked her fragile body, and murmured soothing nothings.

I knew it was coming; I'd been waiting for that torrent of emotions since day one. I knew she needed someone to unload to, and for some reason, I was more than ready to be that person for her.

"Care to explain?" I asked, intentionally lightly, once she'd blown her nose in the tissue I handed her.

"I'm unmarried," Smriti said abruptly.

I immediately felt contrite for assuming she was married just because she was pregnant. Maybe she was living with someone she loved. Maybe...

She didn't volunteer to explain, and I bit my tongue, not wanting to ask her any more questions.

"I didn't mean to pry," I said softly.

Smriti shook her head quickly. "Please don't say that! It's just... I'm not very comfortable talking about it yet."

"I understand," I said, even though I really didn't. Not then.



We got onto the same bus. We were standing for a while, when a man stood up to give Smriti his seat.

She immediately shrunk into me, away from him.

The man looked confused, and when he wanted to move past her, I saw her – she was tense, sweating profusely, her eyes closed, breathing heavily.

Oh God. Please don't let it be what I think it is.

Another month passed, and she was still hanging on to small talk with her dear life. I figured she was hesitant to make friends, and for some reason, she could talk to me.

Smriti still didn't trust me enough to tell me everything, it seemed.

I saw the innocent lines of her face lost in deep thought as she stared at nothing, the sunset softening her face, making it look even younger, and I wondered how anyone could have done anything at all to hurt her. She was intelligent, well-read, and one of the most broad-minded women I'd ever met. She was opinionated and never shied away from telling me what she really thought about anything topical. She had, perhaps, been a student of psychology but her own mind was the most fascinating to understand and uncover.

Yet she flinched even if she was in the vicinity of a man.

For a nineteen-year-old, her emotional maturity was spellbinding.

But what if she'd been forced to grow up at nineteen?

That day, I was in the middle of a class when she called me.

I didn't like being disturbed when I was teaching, so I ignored her call, and continued talking to my students.

Later, I called Smriti with the intention of letting her know that she was not to call during class. She picked up the phone and said my name, and I realized something had changed. Her voice was drowned in urgency, the unmistakable urgency to lay herself bare to me; she could trust me.

"I was raped," Smriti said matter-of-factly.

I had absolutely no response to that, even though I'd anticipated it.

“Who?” I choked out, after a good ten seconds.

“My professor,” she answered.

That explained why she had dropped out.

I felt disgusted that one of my own ilk would do such a thing. It broke my heart to see that people who were supposed to be respected and worshipped for being in the teaching profession would bring this kind of disgrace upon all of us.

But Smriti could’ve continued somewhere else...

“No,” she said firmly. “I’m never studying ever again. I just want to work and support myself and my baby. By the time I discovered I was pregnant, the doctor said that an abortion was impossible. My parents were aghast. They didn’t want me to have the child. I believe they even regretted having me when they heard about it.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” I said mildly, feeling the girl’s pain, yet knowing that whatever I felt was definitely less than a fraction of what she went through.

“I had to leave Delhi. I couldn’t stay there after that. I couldn’t wait till my parents finally disowned me. I couldn’t bear that!”

I hugged her close. She cried once more, one heart-wrenching sob after another, her fingernails digging into my back, but I didn’t complain. What was this compared to her pain?

And then I knew what to do. She should move on. She shouldn’t dwell on what that moron had done to her; she had to see that life had bigger, better things in store for her. She needed to have faith that things were not going to be dark and terrible for the rest of her life. She needed a mentor, a friend, someone she could trust.

I was going to be all of that.

Smriti was staring at the speaking woman with rapt attention.

“My mother died when I was three. My father was unemployed, and he was a drunkard.

“I was fifteen. That day, when I got back home from school, there was a strange man lurking around. I looked for my father, but couldn’t find him. The stranger was looking at me weirdly. ‘Who are you?’ I asked him. ‘What’re you doing here?’ He didn’t say anything. He just walked towards me and...”

There was a collective gasp from everyone in the room.

“Later, when everything was over, it didn’t hurt me that I was raped. It hurt me that he gave my father enough money to buy himself drinks for that evening. That hurt me the most.”

I closed my eyes. It was hard to imagine. Fifteen! Wasn’t that the age when she was supposed to have a good time? Make happy memories? What kind of twisted man sold his daughter so that he could float in an alcoholic haze for a single evening?

Then another girl stood up, microphone in hand.

“I fell in love when I was twenty. He was a senior in college. He asked me out and I accepted. We were in love for all of three months, and he kissed me. I kissed him back. He wanted to make love with me. But I wasn’t ready for that, and I told him so. He became angry, and he pushed me forcefully. I hit my head on the wall and fell down. When I regained consciousness, he was zipping his pants,

and I was lying there, feeling sore all over and sick to my stomach...”

There were more such stories.

I turned to look at Smriti. Her face had become darker and darker with each story. I could see the rage building up inside her. I wondered if she would have the courage to stand up and tell her story to the world. To make her life a lesson, an example for other women similarly afflicted.

There were close to ten girls in the room, all of them victims of rape. Some of them had even been raped more than once. Ms. Naidu, my colleague, studied rape as part of her thesis for her post-doctorate, but soon, she began to organize counseling sessions and became a volunteer to help out such victims.

I felt I'd lived a cocooned life, as if I had been protected against everything horrible.

Later, I spoke to Ms. Naidu privately.

“Police never take rape cases seriously,” she said. “They condemn the woman for being alone, for being out at night, for dressing as she’s dressed, for being a woman.” She sighed. “Most policemen actually believe that there are ways a woman could prevent from being raped – and that’s not even something logical, like self-defense. They think that most of these rape cases are, in fact, instances of consensual sex.”

It tore my heart to think that some of these women could've tried to find some support, and might have been turned away, because some chauvinistic pigs actually thought rape wasn't 'legitimate'.

“These sessions happen regularly, so do bring Smriti

whenever you like. Someday, if she could feel free to talk about it and seek help, then there's nothing like it. I believe she's already on her way to moving on, since she's taken an active step forward by finding a confidante in you. The biggest mistake these girls commit is not reaching out to someone."

I nodded. I was glad Smriti had found me.

We were at our third session with Ms. Naidu. That day, she had invited a reputed journalist and lecturer who frequently wrote and protested against rape.

"When I went to the doctor two years later, I discovered I had gonorrhoea, PID and salpingitis. My reproductive system was inflamed. I had very high chances of a liver failure. I can never have children."

Smriti's grip on my hand tightened.

"I grew up then and there. As soon as it happened, I went into a shell. I couldn't talk to anyone about it. I refused to open up. No one knew. But now, I have learned to stand up and look at life in the eye. I will fight for justice till my last breath. I wish I had the power to stop men from saying stupid things without having the faintest idea of what they were talking about. Some men spout nonsense on what a woman should do. No, no one has any right to dictate to you all what you can do. The only person who has a say in anything at all is you, and you alone."

When the speaker was done talking, I turned to look at Smriti. Tears were flowing down her cheeks, and she closed her eyes.

She didn't say a single word on the way back.

On the fourth session, she talked.

“This happened when I was a psychology student. I liked my professor, he was interesting, he knew his subject really well, and he was our favorite. One day, he told me to meet him in his room. He told me what an excellent student I was and how well I was doing. I was happy. And then, he stood up, came towards me, and suddenly started touching me.”

She took in a deep breath, and continued, “What’s wrong with you?” I asked, terrified. But he began to treat me roughly. I knew I had to do something, but all I could do as he began to tear at my clothes was stare at the monster that my favorite professor was. I knew I had to fight him, and his hands were all over me, and I knew I had to push them away, but my world was blacking out, and all these walls were closing in on me, and I could hardly breathe. When I woke up, I knew it was over.

“He told me no one would believe me if I told anyone. Sadly, that turned out to be true. No one believed me. Not even my classmates. I dropped out of college. Too many weeks later, I discovered I was pregnant. The doctor told me I couldn’t do anything about it.”

She gulped.

I couldn’t even imagine how much courage that must have taken.

When she was done, she looked at me like she needed my approval. I nodded, my eyes brimming with tears.

I was proud of her.

That day, on the way back, I needed to know one thing.

“Would you mind if I ask you something, something a bit intrusive, perhaps?”

She didn't say anything for a minute. I wondered if she had heard my question, when she suddenly smiled. She looked light, free. “I know I've never told you this, but I really appreciate your being there for me. Even when you didn't know what had happened, you had always been there, just listening to me drone on and on about nothing, just because I needed someone. You sensed that I was alone, and I needed to talk. You've been more than a friend to me; you've been a mother. Yes, you've been my mother.”

I was too shocked to say anything for a few moments. I knew she had no idea what that meant to me. I had to look down to shield my eyes from her, to not show the depth of emotion that was threatening to swallow me. I only wanted to be a friend, and I never even thought I had it in me, but I was a mother to her.

“I owe you so much more than an answer to a personal question. Ask away,” she said.

“If you had a choice between punishing the man that did this to you and never seeing him again, which one would you choose?”

She didn't need even a second to think about it. “Never seeing him again.”



I was there outside the maternity ward when she gave birth to her child.

She had a girl. She didn't want to give her up for adoption. She named her Aisha.

"Yesterday, I was just a professor and a wife. Today, I have a daughter, and a granddaughter to boot," I said to Naren that night.

He chuckled softly. "I'm not sure I'm ready to become a grandfather just yet."

A second or two later, he said, "You should bring her home sometime. How is she planning to stay at that hostel with a baby?"

I thought about it. I hadn't told Naren everything about her; she would probably not appreciate the breach of confidentiality. I just said, "She isn't very comfortable with strangers," and kissed him lightly on his lips.

Smriti joined a part-time psychology course where I was teaching, and on my insistence, she called her parents. They cried, she cried, and finally they said they would visit her and her child right away.

At first, she grimaced when I mentioned that it was a co-ed class, but she was holding her own, and she was even beginning to make friends.

She was moving on.

"I'm grading some tests. You want to help?" I asked her.

She helped me by making note of the score on another sheet against the students' names.

Just then, a student from her class came by.

He stood right next to her, and yet she didn't flinch. She didn't greet him, but I knew that she wasn't as focused on her work as she pretended to be; her eyes were casting him casual glances.

He talked to me for a while, and right before walking away, he said, "Hi, Smriti!" She jumped and looked at me sheepishly.

I bit back a smile. I knew my girl well.

"Hi... Nakul," she finished lamely, after he'd walked away.

"That girl you told me about... how is she? And her baby?" Naren asked me one night.

My lips curved into a smile over his chest. "They're both doing well. She's amazing."

My husband buried his lips in my head. "You're amazing."

"You have the perfect marriage," Smriti smiled, as she held Aisha gently in her arms and rocked her.

"Of course," I laughed.

"Why don't you have any children?" she asked with her characteristic straightforwardness.

For a minute, the shock of that question coming from a woman holding a tiny angel in her arms threw me, and I drew a blank.

"I'm sorry if that disturbed you in some way," Smriti apologized quickly.

"No, no," I said. "I can't have children. The accident..."

"I'm sorry about that," she said, immediately contrite.

"No, it's okay," I said.

"Your husband sounds like a wonderful person."

"Yes, he is." I smiled, thinking of Naren. "Eight months I was in bed. I couldn't move. I couldn't do anything. He was the one who was right beside me, who never left me. When we found out I couldn't have children, I was lost. I cried, I raged in anger, I kept questioning, 'Why me?' It all seemed unfair. That phase would've put a lot of pressure on our relationship, had it not been for his patience and his unstinting love."

Smriti smiled wistfully.

"Someday you'll find love too," I said, holding her hands. "You deserve it."

She nodded.

"Now that your course is about to get over, do you have any idea what you want to do with your life?" I asked her. I'd wanted to talk about this with her for a long time.

"I've been working with Ms. Naidu for a while. She has asked me if I could help her with more projects. I want to help rape victims, start a trust fund or something that gives them scholarships, counsel them... I'm on the right track, thanks to you."

I smiled. I had been more involved in Ms. Naidu's awareness drives myself. I had started to help her organize some sessions across the country, doing as much as I could.

"I've never told you this... but you have changed me too."

"Me?" she laughed.

I didn't elaborate. I couldn't. There are people through whom you are able to find yourself; they pull you out of your little world and change the way you had lived till now.

"Speaking of long-term plans... what do you think about Nakul?" I asked with a wink.

She blushed prettily. "I wanted to tell you about that. He has... we meet now and then. Yesterday, he asked me to marry him."

I gasped in surprise. "By the look on your face, I already know what you said, but tell me, what did you say?"

"I accepted, of course!"

"I'm so happy for you! That's just wonderful." I hugged her. "Does he - ?"

"He knows," she said, and added, "All I want is a good life for Aisha. And Nakul loves her. He talks to her all the time; she giggles listening to him. He has these long, full-blown conversations with her which I doubt any human being can understand. Everything is perfect. I really hope I get at least a little bit of what you have."

"You will. You will get much, much more."



Smriti came to my house to invite Naren and me to her wedding. I left her alone in the living room for a minute and went in to find my husband. He said he would come out in a couple of minutes, and I should go ahead and give

her something to eat.

When I came out, she wasn't anywhere to be seen. I called out for her, and looked for her around our house.

Then I saw the little framed picture of me and my husband together on the side table rested face down.

"Never seeing him again."

I froze.

His panicked suggestion that we leave Delhi. His frustration when I continued to stay in bed. All that which I thought was love.

I heard the sound of my husband come out of the room. "Where's she?" he asked.

I slowly turned to confront him.