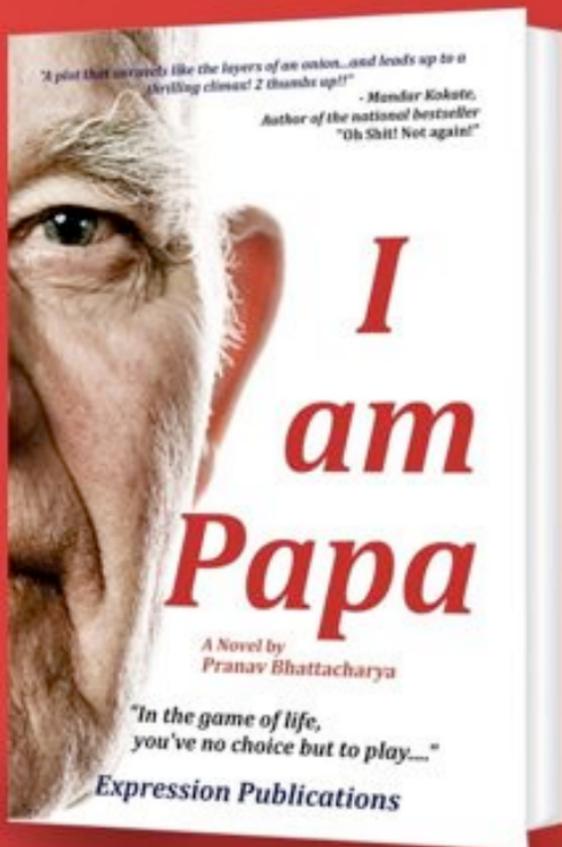


Happy Reading



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Part 1 Retirement

The thunderous applause had died down. The words of eulogy were done with. I was officially proceeding into the 'evening' of my life.

My students had organized a gala function to felicitate me on my retirement. It felt good, being thanked after more than three decades of trying to impart knowledge to bubbling, wide-eyed students. There were emotional speeches, lots of food and a classical music concert. Very good. Very fulfilling.

As I made my way back home, I knew that, after nearly 30 years, this road was now a one way. Come tomorrow morning, I would no longer be riding back. My mind was a haze of mixed emotions. As my scooter snaked through the traffic and the potholes of my small town, I looked around and saw that there was so much to see in this place, that I had not yet made time for. Though I had endearingly come to call this city my own, I had never really gone around and explored it. Well, now was the time. My retirement would open up a vast chasm of free time, which I would need to fill. I began to make my plans. I would delve into what my city had to offer, check out the museums, the palaces, and the old ruins. I would read the newspapers end to end every day, I would watch more TV, and yes, I would spend more time with my family.

My family consisted of my wife, to whom I had been married for 35 years. Then, in order of arrival, was my son Jatin, who had become an engineer and worked for one of the Multinational corporations in Mumbai. Then my daughter, Dipti, who recently got married and moved out of our house, causing me considerable heartache. The third was my youngest son, Sunil. He was considerably younger to his siblings, arriving 9 years after Dipti. He had come as a surprise to us. Whether the surprise was pleasant or unpleasant at that time, I am yet to decide. All I remember is that I had gotten over the travails of child rearing when he arrived, and his sudden screams and incessant need for attention, did not charm me, as it does new parents. Well, that's a thing of the past. Sunil was now 18 years old.

Jatin had added to my family. He had gotten married, and had two beautiful little daughters. Dipti was going to be a mother soon. Everything looked good.

As I thought about Sunil, my eyebrows contorted in worry. He was having difficulty in making through school. He got poor grades, but did not seem to be very bothered about it. His mother tried talking to him, so did his siblings, but he would not share his problems, if at all he had any. At one time, he told his mother that he was undergoing depression. Depression? At age 18? He had no friends. He just

kept to himself. I tried talking to him once, and he stared right through me, my talk obviously falling on deaf ears. I had lost my temper at his seeming stubbornness, and almost slapped him. After that incident, he became even more reclusive. His grades faltered even more. His mother came upon him reading books on soul cleansing and spirituality. That really got her worried, and it got me really angry.

I arrived home and parked the scooter. Well, here I was at last. No more waking up early, no more rushing to get dressed, no more students, no more classes. Just me and my free time. I could kick back, read the newspaper end to end, and indulge in idle gossip. Oh, the pleasures of retirement!

Part 2 Sunil disappears

“I found this note in Sunil’s room. It’s strange, don’t you think?” I looked up from my newspaper to my wife’s pensive tone. “What?” I asked, almost irritated. Honestly, I had started to dislike my youngest boy. It is okay to be rebellious, but to an extent. And rebellion, in my opinion, should be furious, not weepy. This boy seemed to be sulking endlessly, and showed no obvious interest in life. In my inner mind, I told myself that I was done with him. I had brought up two children well, and that should put me in the legion of good fathers. I did

not need to waste any time on this offspring of mine.

"The world is a tragedy to those who feel, but a comedy to those who think," my wife read aloud. "Nice," I said sneeringly, "but borrowed, unfortunately. So is quoting Walpole the extent of his spiritual search?" I laughed out loud, and then wondered at my own brusqueness. "No, this looks serious," said my wife pensively. "Here, read it."

Surprisingly, the note was addressed to me. "Papa, I know you do not understand me, or my problems, and I do not blame you for that. The truth is, I myself do not understand what problem I have. The only thing I know is that I am probably a little too sensitive for this world. It pains me to see that people callously walk past little scenes of immense tragedy that get played out on every nook and corner. Little children in tatters beg on the streets, but people don't give them a second look. A dog limps around and howls in pain, and people shun it, calling it a bad omen."

"I can't believe this," I said, looking at my wife, "why does he have to think of all this?"

"When you take me along to buy fish, the experience is a torture for me. They all lie there dead; their mouths open, their eyes wide open in fear. What must the fish have gone through in its last moments? I tried holding my nose, Papa, for 10 seconds. It was a nauseating feeling. I had to open

my mouth to help myself breathe. I realized that it was precisely that what the fish was trying to do. Trying to breathe. Desperately trying to cling on to life. Why do they have to endure so much torment, what is their fault? Is it just because humans find them edible? Is that fair?"

"The world is a tragedy to those who feel, but a comedy to those who think. Why? Does it imply that a thinking person does not feel the pain of others around him? When people all around are starving, when wars are being fought for political salvation, killing and maiming scores of innocent people, how can a thinking person find comedy in them? What is the humor in this? Does becoming a thinker make you numb? Does it kill your feelings, or does it make you feel ashamed to admit that you feel?"

"I cannot help it. I feel too much. It makes me ashamed to gorge on my dinner every night, knowing that somewhere, a child will be holding his stomach and trying to kill the knotted feeling of hunger. On a cold winter night, I feel guilty lying cozily under the blankets, knowing that somewhere, a poor wiry man would be shivering in the cold. I know that feeling without action is useless. Such pity and empathy have no meaning. They help no one. But what should I do? What can I do?"

I wiped my brow. "I don't know what to do with this boy," I told my wife, shaking my head.

"I know that you do not concur with me. I know that you will never understand me. I know that you have given up on me." Good. At least he understood that.

"I am sorry, Papa, but I cannot live this drama called life in such a surreal manner. There has to be a deeper truth, one that escapes most of us, either because it is extremely hard to find, or because we do not really make an effort to find it. There must be a way, to survive amidst this chaos, to find peace within this pandemonium."

"I am leaving. In quest of a truth that I faintly can perceive, but do not understand. I am sure that if I search in the right places, and search hard enough, I will find it. I will be able to find peace, to come to terms with the imbalance and the injustice in this world."

"You defined it," I thought. "You defined the way to be peaceful. Just come to terms with the imbalance in this world. That's all."

"I thank you for bearing with me till now. As of today, you will never need to worry about me again. I wish you all a very peaceful life. Sunil."

"What is all this?" I asked incredulously, as if my wife would know the answer. "I don't know, but I am worried," she replied, "don't you think you should go look for him?" "Look for him?" I erupted, "NO." "In all probability, he is at school. If not, he is hanging out with some useless tramp who is

infusing these ideas into his head." I went back to my newspaper. "Come evening, when the pangs of hunger strike, see how his feelings and empathy for humanity evaporate. I am not going anywhere right now. I have had enough of that nincompoop." She shook her head and walked away.

Part 3 The Hunt begins

The clock struck 8. 8 pm. Sunil had still not returned home. The October sky was now dark and all the municipality tube-lights had come on. My wife waited outside on the patio, her eyes straining to look through the darkness. I was beginning to worry. We had called his school and learnt that he had not turned up that day. My wife had then called the couple of boys who Sunil usually associated with. I had driven around and checked out a small eating-place that my wife said Sunil frequented. They had not seen him all day. If he was trying to get us worried, he was doing a good job of it.

It was midnight. I had called Jatin and Dipti and informed them that Sunil was missing from home. It was not of much help, but it felt like we were doing something. They seemed more perplexed than worried. "Don't worry.....he's trying to give us some message," said Dipti, "maybe Papa, you need

to be a little less harsh on him. If he's not doing well in school, maybe we should encourage him to pursue some other career options, instead of making him hang on and suffocate himself." Great. That was all I needed at the moment. Lectures on how to be a good father. That too from someone who I helped to rear.

The next day came up and passed slowly. Sunil did not appear. My wife was now in tears. It was evening. Sunil had now been missing almost 2 days. "Go to the police station, please," she pleaded, "something is wrong with my little boy." I kept quiet. I knew I would have to do it. If Sunil did not turn up till next morning, then I would have to go to a police station. Unless, of course, Sunil showed up suddenly. I allowed hope a strong chance that night.

The disinterested policeman sprawled on a creaking wooden chair near the entry. "What do you want?" he asked coarsely. "My son is missing, I need to file a missing person's report." He pointed at a desk on the right hand corner. I followed his finger and just stood there, unsure. "Go on," he said gruffly, and I walked over to the desk.

The policeman behind the desk was surprisingly soft spoken. "Don't be worried," he said, "young men run away from home all the time. They eventually come back." He smiled. "Did you talk to the parents of the girl yet?" "What girl?" I asked,

taken aback. "Oh, the girl he eloped with," came the nonchalant reply. "Oh no, no," I said emphatically, "there is no girl involved. He left a note saying he was going in search of some spiritual truth." "Spiritual truth, ha," he sneered, "today's youth have a fancy name for everything. Prostitutes are sex workers, pimps are managers.....and plain old lust is now spiritual truth." Though I missed the humor, his statement obviously was funny, since it elicited laughter from all the men around. "So do you have a picture of this young man?" I handed over my son's picture. He scribbled something into a big handbook. He had a carbon paper stuck underneath, which he removed after he was done writing. He tore off a page and handed it to me. "Ok, the complaint is registered and this is your copy." I took the document and tried to read the scribbles. "Now what?" I asked dryly. "Well, we're going to be on the lookout for him. We'll let you know as soon as we find something." Seeing my disappointed look, he said again, "don't worry Sir. He will be back. I have been in the police service for 20 years now. I have seen tons of these cases. Tons of them. They always come back." He smiled, and I smiled back hesitatingly. I thanked him and left the station with slow steps and a heavy heart.

Jatin and his family had come in from Mumbai. Dipti had arrived too. It had been 9 days now that Sunil had been missing. Jatin had put Sunil's picture

in 4 different newspapers. Below the picture, it told Sunil that his mother was sick and he should return home immediately.

He also organized a few of his friends. Carrying pictures of Sunil, they went to the local bus depot and the railway station. They talked to the cops on duty. They talked to the bus drivers and conductors. They talked to the ticket collectors, coolies, hawkers, vendors, and rickshaw drivers ...anyone and everyone who they thought might be able to give them any information. But all efforts were in vain. Sunil was untraceable.

These exercises continued for a couple of weeks. Everyday, Sunil's picture stared at us from the newspapers. But he never called. He never appeared. I sat there wringing my hands in despair. His brother ran all over the city, desperately looking for clues to his whereabouts. His mother was the most distraught. She had given up on food and sleep. It had been more than 3 weeks since he had been gone. And we had no idea where he was.

Part 4 The first clue

One month had passed. We were still running pictures of him everyday. I was visiting the police station every other day. They had nothing to inform me about. I knew that they found my repeated visits frustrating, but they were patient. They told me that

they would let me know.....as soon as they found something.

“God,” I prayed, “give me one lead, one clue, that could lead me to my boy. I’ll take care of the rest.” Even if God heard me, he did not make it obvious then.

Suddenly, one morning, at 9 a.m, the phone rang.

“I would like to speak with Professor Arya,” said the voice on the other end. “Yes, I am Arya,” I said. “Good morning, Sir, my name is Ramesh Gupta, and I work at the airport. I saw your son’s picture in the newspaper today morning.” I sat up straight. My son! He was calling with regards to my son. “Yes,” I said expectantly. “Sir, I don’t usually read the paper in the morning.....you know, I have to start work very early, so I don’t get time.” Ok, ok.....I held my breath. “Sir, I think I saw your son at the airport a few weeks back.” I was almost sure that I had heard him wrong. “At the airport?” I asked, “Are you sure?” “I know it has been some time, Sir, but strangely, I am sure. Actually, he was with a group of skinheads....oops, pardon the expression....shaven headed men. About 5 of them. He stood out like a sore thumb.....because he was young, clad in jeans and looking very unsure.” He took a deep breath. “This guy was fidgeting so much, and looked so totally uncomfortable, that my co-worker suggested that we call the police. I told him to just mind his own business. I am sorry.” “Do

you know what flight they were on?" I asked with bated breath. "Not right now, Sir," he replied, "I'm at home. But I'll be at the airport around 11 am. Can you meet me there? I could try sifting through the records and might be able to give you some information." "That will be so good," I said, "thank you for your help, Rameshji."

The airport. We had missed the airport. We had looked at the bus depot and the railway stations. We had checked the octroi booths for roads leading out of the city. But we had not checked the airport. Air travel was expensive. It was not a luxury that my son could afford. Where did he get the money for the plane fare? Who were the shaven headed men with him? What had he gotten himself into? A shiver ran up my spine and exploded into a shrill headache. I cradled my head in my arms and slumped onto the chair. I took a couple of deep breaths before I looked up to meet the frightened and questioning glares of my family members.

Part 5 Unbelievable!

My city has a small airport, with very little flight activity all day. But still, it is welcomed by travelers who don't want to use trains. Though a modern construction, the airport boasts of the quiet elegance of royalty, with its massive Victorian domes and a red brick façade. Small yet dignified, it stands just

on the outskirts of the city, far enough so as not to disturb the peace, yet close enough to be convenient.

We rode on my scooter to the airport. I drove, because sitting on the back seat with my legs on both sides was increasingly becoming difficult. Old age has its own ways of telling you that it has arrived. Your mind and body might tussle over it for a while, but the body always has the last say. Jatin leaned over on my shoulder and spoke loudly in my ear. "What was the name? Mr. Gupta?" I nodded. "What does he do there?" he asked again. I shook my head. "Don't know," I replied, "we'll find out."

Mr. Gupta was probably in his mid forties, lanky, with streaks of white hair. He had already done his groundwork and was ready with an answer. "It was about 7:30 in the morning," he said, "I was on the night shift then and was preparing to go home. I double checked with my colleague here," he said, nodding to another gentleman standing beside him. He nodded back. I assumed that this was the co-worker he had referred to during our phone conversation. "So it had to be a plane to Mumbai. Your son flew with his companions to Mumbai." "Oh," Jatin muttered, wiping his forehead, "so close, yet so far.....how are we going to track him in Mumbai now?" A look of hopelessness clouded his face.

We all sat in silence for a few minutes, busy with our thoughts. Then the other gentleman spoke up. "How about we call Anupam Tiwari and see if he can help us?" he said, looking at Gupta. "It's a shot in the dark, friend," Gupta said, not showing much enthusiasm. "Who's Anupam Tiwari?" Jatin inquired. "Well, he works at the Santa Cruz airport, and is an employee of Indian airlines. I am not sure if he was on duty at the airport on that day, at that time...." the other gentleman spoke. "Even if he was, there is hardly a chance that he would remember anything," continued Gupta, picking up where his colleague had stopped. He shook his head. "Nope, not worth it."

I leaned forward. "Please Guptaji, let's call him and try our luck, please," I said imploringly. "I know you have already gone out of your way to help us, and we really are grateful for that. But please call Mr. Tiwari. He just might remember something." "Come on Papa," said Jatin, "I agree that it is not worth it. Thousands of people pass through Santa Cruz every day. How much chance do we have of Tiwari remembering a group of bald monks?" I did not listen to him. "Please," I begged, suddenly very adamant. "Ok Sir," said Gupta, raising his hands, "if it makes you happy, let's do it."

"Hello, Kumar, this is Ramesh Gupta speaking. How are you, man?" He listened for a while, and laughed. "I was looking for Anupam Tiwari. Is he in

today?" A short wait. "Yes, hello, Anupam? Ramesh Gupta this side. How're you?" A couple of pleasantries were exchanged, while we all sat staring at Mr. Gupta. "Anupam, don't call me silly.....I am going to ask you a question, ok? I am trying to help a gentleman locate his son. His son boarded an Indian Airlines flight to Mumbai about a month back. What? The exact date? No man, I don't know the exact date. Maybe 21st October. Yes, yes. I know that buddy. I know. But the gentleman is desperate, so I am calling you just to satisfy him, that's all." He gave a short laugh. "No, I have not become a social worker." He leaned back. "Now listen, he was this thin young guy with a group of 7 or 8 skinheads."

The smile had suddenly left Gupta's face. "Yes, yes, maybe 5 skinheads. Oh really?" Everyone in the room leaned forward. Gupta kept nodding furiously. His eyebrows danced. He breathed heavily. He fumbled for a pen. Jatin quickly fished out one from his chest pocket and handed it to him. He jotted a number on the newspaper lying on his table. "Thank you *yaar*," he said, "I can't believe this. Thanks a lot." He put the phone down.

"Prof. Arya, I cannot believe this. But he remembers. It seems that one of the passengers on that flight was drunk. Throughout the flight, he kept teasing the skinheads. He tried cursing at one of the monks near the baggage claim carousel, and,

unable to take it any more, the infuriated monk slapped him. The man informed his relatives, who had come to the airport to receive him, and, no sooner had the monks stepped out, they attacked them. But the monks also had people waiting to receive them, and they joined the fracas. The fight escalated to a point where airport security moved in and arrested all of them. Eventually, all of them were let off, but.....Tiwari thinks that the security guards might have noted their names and contact information before letting them off." "This is the number of the chief of security," he said, pushing the piece of paper on which he had scribbled a few minutes back, "you could try going to Mumbai and talking to him."

We could not thank Gupta and his co-worker enough. After handshakes and profuse thanks, we walked back to the parking area, holding in my palms the first light of hope. The first clue that might lead us to my son.

Very soon, Jatin and I were on our way to Mumbai by train. We were going to meet a senior officer in the security department at Mumbai domestic airport.

Part 6 Meeting Mr. Gilroy

Mr. Gilroy was a big man. He was easily over 6 ft. tall, with a booming voice, bulging arms and rotund

belly. His countenance was perfectly tailored for the profession that he was in. "Good morning," he said in a voice that betrayed no pleasantness, "how may I help you?" "Good morning," I returned his greeting, and cleared my throat. "We were referred to you by Mr. Anupam Tiwari, who works at this airport." The name did not appear to ring a bell. But he decided to listen to me anyway. "Ok, so what do you want?" he boomed. I went on to recount the series of incidents that had led us to him.

"Hmmm," he said, languidly stroking his moustache, "I remember that incident pretty well. Unruly group of fellows they were. Lowlife rowdies, I would say. But what surprised me most, was how strong those monks were." He stroked his moustache again. "I mean, you are a monk, a saint, sadhu.....are you not supposed to be meditating all the time, living on water, feeding only once in a while on boiled food? How come these guys have lean muscles and are flying around the country by air?"

"Ok, let's see." One hand was turning the pages and the other hand was stroking the moustache. "Let's see." There was a long silence. I could feel Jatin breathing heavily. The poor boy was tired. I felt sorry for him. He was putting in all possible effort to trace his brother. He had taken vacation time off from his workplace. He had to get back to work. He

had a family to care for. I understood that he was feeling hesitant to mention that. It would make him look selfish. But it had to be done. Tonight I would ask him to join back at work. I would carry on this search by myself.

“Can’t help you,” said Mr. Gilroy in a resigned voice. “Those fools claimed that they did not have an Indian address. They were planning to take a bus to the international terminal and fly out of the country the very same day. So we don’t have anything on them.” “Nothing?” asked Jatin unbelievably. “Nope, nothing,” Gilroy replied, “see, it’s very difficult for us to handle these vagrant sadhus. Only God knows what they are upto.” “But they did provide an address for the jeans clad boy. That’s the guy you’re looking for, right?” “Yes,” both of us exclaimed, “yes, please....what is the address?” I asked, my heart palpitating at a furious rate, “What is the address?” “Wait bhai,” he looked at me with some annoyance, “here it is.” I got ready to note it.

Jatin pored through the writing. He shook his head “This is not a Mumbai address. It is supposed to be Sunil’s home address.....and it is totally concocted. There is no such place in our home town.” “What?” said the burly man, “No?” He looked terribly irked. “Are you sure?” he asked. “Quite sure,” Jatin said assertively. “Damn,” he muttered, “damn. These guys fooled us.” “You did

not verify the address?" Jatin exploded. "How do you suppose we would do that?" he retorted, "send an officer to your brother's home town?" His tone was getting increasingly sardonic. His temper was rising, more from the insult of being fooled by the monks, than from Jatin's outburst. I felt a lump in my throat. We had lost Sunil again. I leaned back in my chair and looked up at the roof.

"Don't worry," said Gilroy, after a moment of silence. His tone had softened. "We work with limited resources, so it becomes easy for some people to give us the slip. But we are a very efficient force, and we are very sensitive to being fooled." I stared blankly at him. "Give me a phone number I can reach you at. If your son stayed in Mumbai after landing here, I will get that information for you within 2 days. That much I can promise. From there on, you will pick up the lead and carry on the search. I can do nothing further for you."

There was nothing else to be done. I noted Jatin's number and postal address on a piece of paper and handed it to him. As we walked out into the hot sun, I felt a churning feeling in my stomach, and threw up on the roadside before we had reached the car.

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