Entering Pakistan

Kundalakesi

The sun burnt like a flash bulb that had forgotten to turn off and the humidity clung to one's skin like a bad raincoat, but for a good portion of my later life I would gladly have traded in all the air-conditioned offices and meeting rooms of the world for the langour of a well-spent summer vacation. I was in fourth standard then. I had been in third the previous day, but the annual exam was over, and everyone knows they don't fail third students. I went on to not-fail all of my classes all the way till twelfth, except for one quarterly exam in seventh standard for which I refused to study in protest of my father's insistence that I was not studying hard enough. I passed the board exams, studied Chemical Engineering at one of the colleges on the way to Chengalpet, did rather well, found employment at one of the IT companies on the way to Mahabalipuram, did rather well, married the daughter of my father's second cousin from Mangalore, did rather poorly, had two children, stood in approximate queues outside kindergartens and primary schools and secondary schools and textile shops, worked six days a week for thirty years, five days a week for seven years, bought two houses, carried four grandchildren in my arms and on my shoulders, travelled to temples in the South, the West, the East and the North, and died of natural causes at the very reasonable age of eighty-four. But for now, I was lying on a pile of sand at the periphery of the Tambaram railway ground, left there by workers constructing some kind of building nearby. The workers had left the sand, not me. No, I did not mean to clarify that it was not me who had left the
sand there, even though this was true – I meant that what the workers had left there was the sand, and not me. Never mind.

Next to me was Tenali, pushing away some of the scorching top layer to free himself a cooler seat. “I found a large piece of dog shit there last night. Almost exactly in that place. This big,” I told him, indicating how big it was with my hands. This was not true, but Tenali leapt back a good few feet. Tenali was scared of everything, which is why he was called that. No one remembered his actual name, even though the class teacher read it out each morning during attendance. All of us recognised the bent nose and the vanishing brows and the sheepish smile in the picture that appeared on the front page of every newspaper in the country, announcing that Major S. Chandrakanth had been awarded the Param Vir Chakra for daring and pre-eminent acts of valour and self-sacrifice in the presence of the enemy. What they meant was that when his company was ambushed in the foothills of the Karakoram, he swore at them to stand their ground, and when he was shot in the chest in the ensuing bustle, he pulled the rifle out of his attacker’s hands, shot him dead, and spent his last breath shouting orders. His attacker’s name was Iqbal Mansoor; he was nineteen years old, liked ginger in his tea but not cardamom, and always carried a comb in his back pocket. But for now, Tenali was standing scowling at his spot, wondering whether I was bluffing. “So what? Let it be there, I don’t care,” he finally declared and sat down. “Wherever did this Momo go?” he wondered, looking around.

“Momo. He is always late,” I said, and this was true. He was always late to school because his mother worked the evening shift at the tanneries, and he would not eat until she came back home around midnight. He was always late to the ground in the evenings because he had to help his father deliver laundry to apartment buildings much taller than himself. He saw some movie one day, came to school and demanded that everyone call him Remo. Someone recalled that there was a sort of dumpling called Momo that some people in the North ate, and Momo sounded a lot funnier, so everyone called him that. Apart from general good company, his contributions to society include the leadership of our class for sev-
eral years in school, two designs of cost-efficient water purification systems, several small improvements to leather processing technology that were implemented at a few relevant local plants, twenty graduate students mentored in the course of his professorship at the Material Science department of the Madras Institute of Technology, and two very proud and grateful parents. He cycled to his old neighbourhood – right up to the railway ground, in fact – and back every Sunday morning till he was seventy-six. He had to stop then because he had a heart attack, was hospitalised, mocked cardiac problems as being rich men's diseases, and died. But for now, he was walking into the ground through the goal posts at the other end, shivering a little and barely holding back tears.

“There! There he is!”

“Finally!”

“Dei Momo! Are you crying? Where is the plane?” I asked when he was close enough.

“Momo, are you crying? Why are you crying? What happened?”


“It flew into Pakistan!”, and he broke down into a mess of tears and gasps.

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Tenali, who like me had been staring blankly at Momo for the past few seconds, now grabbed him by the shoulders and, his face screwed up in agony, implored, “Why? Why did you fly it into Pakistan? Why there, of all places? There are so many houses in Tambaram. Why did you fly it into Pakistan?”

Momo, still in the grasp of his fit, broke himself free of Tenali’s grasp, screamed back, “I didn’t fly it there! It went by itself!”, sat down on the sand and resumed his weeping.
“We have to get it back,” Momo pronounced solemnly, or at least as solemnly as a guilt-ridden ten-year old could between sniffles. Tenali and I broke our mourning of the plane to face him. His eyes shone with all the fury of a zero-watt bulb and his lip still trembled, but he said again, “We have to get it back. There is no other way.”

“Are you mad?” Tenali shuddered, “Musharraf will kill us! He has atom bombs! No no, we shouldn’t go there. Let’s just go play cricket. I’ll get my ball.”

Tenali’s immediate refusal only led Momo to strengthen his own resolve by contradicting him. “He can’t kill us. That is against the law,” he said, rising and wiping his cheeks dry, “Besides, I am wearing my Hanuman bracelet and I went to the temple yesterday evening. If you come with me we will all be protected. Even Musharraf cannot beat Hanuman,” and he held up his right hand with the copper bracelet around the wrist.

“Muthu told me Musharraf once tied his brother upside-down to a neem tree and beat him so hard he couldn’t sit down for a whole year,” Tenali was unwavering in his dread.

“Muthu tells lies all the time,” Momo responded, already composed and reassuming his class leader self, “He told me last week that they were selling blue watermelons on Mudali Street, but then I went there and all the watermelons were red. He probably doesn’t even have a brother.”

“He has a brother. He lives in my street,” Tenali had more facts to present, “Besides, Gokul told me several months ago that his tennis ball had fallen there. I haven’t seen him since. I think Musharraf killed him.”

“Gokul’s father was transferred to Delhi. Alright, leave it,” Momo gave up on Tenali and turned to me, “Are you coming with me or are you also a coward like Tenali?”

I did not like being called a coward, because I believed I was not one. “Whom are you calling a coward? Of course I will come. Let us go get the plane, come.” I was terrified of Pakistan and Musharraf, but I could
not let Momo know that. Besides, he had his Hanuman bracelet, and I believed that would keep us safe even if the worst were to happen.

Tenali did not like being called a coward either, because he had an inkling that he might be one. “I’m not a coward. Whom are you calling a coward? How many times have I told you not to call me Tenali? I will beat you up if you say that again. It is much more fun to play cricket. My house is right there, I can get the ball. That is what I was saying. But if you really want the plane that much, then come. We will go get it. Come. Who is scared of Musharraf?”

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Pakistan lay beyond a six-foot white wall with black iron gates. Mango trees, weighed down by ripening fruits that no one had dared stone down, overhung the wall and provided the only glimpse into the feared territory that most of us had been afforded. The legends that were passed down through the generations said that Second Cross Street, which the compound stood on, had once been a favoured cricketing spot among the third and fourth standards because it was a dead end with a convenient wall to draw stumps on and few vehicles in the way. But this changed in late 1999, when Musharraf initiated a unilateral policy of intolerance towards balls landing in his grounds. At first they were returned with grunts and warnings, but soon an embargo seemed to have been put in place and when balls went in, only curses and threats came out. So many groups had independently discovered the perils of Pakistan that all of us knew to stay clear of it. It was said that beyond the walls the yards were a parched desert populated solely by thorn bushes. Ganapati from 3A, who lived on the same street, claimed that he had once peeked inside when the gate had been left open and found that the house was completely black and fifty feet tall and a huge fire had been built in front of it, which he said was part of some arcane black magic ritual. This last part was nonsense, of course – everyone knew that black magic involved animal sacrifices, not fire sacrifices.
Musharraf himself was variously described as tall and lean or short and extremely muscular, but one feature that all parties agreed on him possessing was a moustache that rivalled even those of Iyanar and Veerappan. He was said to have a voice that reached exactly as far as he wanted it to, and a long stick with which he would hunt down any that dared enter Pakistan. And somewhere in his realm, it was said, there was a pit that contained all the cricket balls that had strayed into his domain, and this pit would only be closed the day the last cricket match in the world was played.

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Our entry into Pakistan was assisted by a pile of gravel that a different set of workers constructing a different building had deposited along the tall white wall. We stood at the top, peering cautiously over into the compound, mustering all the courage we could. After several minutes of mustering, Momo finally decided it was time. He climbed onto the wall, hung down the other side and dropped out of sight. “Come on, there is no one here.”

I took another look at Momo’s bracelet, which Tenali had convinced him to lend, and climbed onto the wall. The drop seemed rather steep, at least twice my own height. I held onto the wall, hung down and dropped cautiously, not wanting to break my legs. I found immediately that the yard was not quite the desert I had come to expect, and was lush with flowering plants whose names I did not know. There was shade almost everywhere from the mango trees and some citrus trees further inwards. The house itself seemed disproportionately small given the wall and the gate and the trees, and it was not black at all and there were no fires. It was white and a swing was suspended in the verandah near the front door. “Come quick Tenali, we are here, come.”

Tenali dropped next to me and buckled to the ground. It was only as he was standing up and dusting his elbows that a rather disturbing thought occurred to us. As one, we turned around to look at the wall we
had just scaled. The best way to describe what the wall did is to say that it loomed. And the best way to describe what we did is to say that we appraised the situation and arrived at the conclusion that we were stuck in Pakistan for eternity.

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“Why? Why did you bring us here?” Tenali whispered at Momo, too cautious to adequately voice the anguish that showed on his face. “We will never be able to get out now!”

“What else could we do?” Momo was louder, but still whispering, “My father will kill me if I lose the plane!”

“But now we are all going to die! Look how tall the wall is, we will never be able to get out of here! I don’t even know how to climb trees!”

I was about to add in comments registering my own despair, but before I could we were frozen by an exclamation from behind. “Who is that?!” Hearts in mouths, we turned around slowly to see a white figure making its way towards us from the front door, asking us questions we were too terrified to register. It was only a little after it had stopped a few feet in front of us that we realised we were looking at a man in a veshti and white undershirt with graying hair, square-frame glasses, several moles around his eyes, and no moustache at all. This man was Pasupathy, commonly known as Musharraf because he lived in Pakistan. He had graduated a very long time ago from the Presidency College, worked really hard and gone on to head the sales department of a well-known furniture company. He used to have a wife and a daughter not very long ago, and he loved both of them very much. His wife died of Tuberculosis back when a lot more people used to die of it, when his daughter was about six years old. He sent his daughter to the best schools and the best colleges he could afford and encouraged her to join the air force when she said she would like to. Two weeks after his retirement, on her second training flight, one of her engines caught fire several thousand feet in the air and she and her instructor were killed a few kilometres north of Hyderabad. A few
months later, he discarded most of his possessions and moved into the house he owned on Second Cross Street, hoping that at least a change in environment and routine would let him sleep at night. He lived there for too many solitary years, tending his plants and watering his trees, until he died in his sleep at the age of eighty-seven. But for now, he was a mythical presence towering over us, demanding to know what we wanted and why we had jumped over his wall.

I had no responses that I was willing to offer. Nor did the others, for a while. We stood there bewildered and petrified, not thinking even to flee, for we had nowhere to run to. After a very long time, Momo hesitantly pointed to Musharraf’s left hand and said, “Plane.” It was only then that I noticed that he held there the object of our doomed expedition – the bright green fighter plane that Momo’s grandfather had given him for his birthday, the plane that we had eagerly planned to fly that afternoon at the railway ground, the plane that Momo had condemably lost in Pakistan.

“Is this yours?” Musharraf squinted at Momo.

“Yes, sir.”

He looked at each of us and back at the plane. “Come,” he ordered, and turned around and walked briskly back towards the house. We exchanged empty glances and, there being nothing else we could do, resigned ourselves to whatever fate awaited us and followed him inside. Past the front door was the hall, or at least what would normally be the hall in a house like this. In one corner was a single bed with a blackened pillow. In another were several stack of books sorted by size. Two doors led to other rooms and light flowed in through these in addition to the barred window next to the bed. Against the wall opposite the window was a table that Musharraf now sat at, and which seemed to tip over and rest on a different set of legs each time he leant on it.

“Where did you get this?” he demanded of Momo, turning the plane around in his hands and holding it to the light.

“My grandfather gave it for my birthday,” the words came a little more freely now that we felt we need not fear for our lives at least.

“Do you know what this is?” he asked, holding it by the fuselage and
pointing the nose at Momo. Behind us, on the wall that we could not see, was a display case reaching up to the ceiling. And on each shelf of the case were a dozen miniature scale models of military aircraft from across the world, all carved out of wood and painted the right colours and with the right flags at the right places, with all the wing flaps and everything, each labelled with a tiny card that listed the name of the plane and when and where it was first made. Next to the case was a small photograph of a simple young woman posing in a saree in a studio in 1965. Next to that was a large photograph of a similar woman posing in uniform in front of a dull green MiG-29 in 1998.

“It is a plane.”
“What kind?”
“A jet plane, sir. Fighter plane.”
“It is a Sukhoi Su-30,” he said, still frowning at Momo, who was staring at his own feet. “Russian design. Built for the Indian Air Force by Hindustan Aeronautics. This is a good model. Where did your grandfather get it?”
“I don’t know, sir.”
“Tell him it was made by someone who knew what they were doing. You, on the other hand, look at me . . . ”, and Momo looked at him, “You are not treating this properly. One of its wings was broken. I had to stick it back on. What was it doing in my garden?”
“I was flying it and it accidentally entered here . . . ”
“Flying it?” somehow he managed to frown even more, “How can you fly this? This is just a model.”
“But it flew yesterday. I threw it and it flew.”
“Of course. Anything would fly if you threw it.” We were all beginning to feel a little stupid now.
“Do you want it back?”
“Yes, sir.”
“Then you have to promise to take good care of it.”
“Yes I will, sir. God promise.”
Musharraf surveyed us one last time and held the plane out to Momo. “Here. Take it and go. And don’t throw it around.”

Momo picked it up gingerly and held on to it with both hands. We turned to leave, but an earlier thought came back to us and we turned again to Musharraf.

“But how do we leave, sir? The walls are too tall.”

“Walls? You can just walk out the front gate. It is only bolted on the inside.”

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All that happened and a lot of things were to happen still, but for now we had entered Pakistan and left alive, and we looked forward in earnest to recounting to friends and family the tales of our wondrous adventures within.