

Seven Conversations

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About the Author



Nistha Tripathi likes to write books and software. Her wandering spirit enjoys blogging, traveling, photography and Yoga.

She followed her scholarly pursuits in the United States where she studied MS in Computer Science and dropped out of an MBA program. She worked in Wall Street and New York startups before returning to India to follow her creative passions.

She penned down *Seven Conversations* when she felt that life had given her a story to tell and it was her duty to tell it out loud.

<http://www.nisthaonweb.com/blog>

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PART ONE

Chapter ONE
When I nearly shot the albatross

Exchange Place waterfront, a place that buzzed with busy footsteps on weekdays, was a land as deserted as the North Pole on that Sunday night. It stood conveniently across a mile wide Hudson River from Manhattan's downtown area. The damp smell of algae from the river, the cucumbery cool breeze and solitude of the starless night was overwhelmed by only one thing - the hefty, sparkling Manhattan skyline. And awe-inspiring it was, subduing the distracting chug of a far-away ferry, the drone of the security helicopters and the whistle of the light-rail.

For a few moments, the sad but steady eyes of the girl standing alone behind the rails sized up those magnificent concrete blocks across the river, decorated with perennial lights that shut out the mighty stars. In her busy but lifeless routine, this act of standing on the boardwalk, leaning against the rails, pausing and looking, held a special meaning - it gave her sanity and strength to live another day.

But tonight, the sight was not enough to heal. She tried to stare harder behind the wisps of her thin brown hair. The buildings faded against her memory of the day. Her marriage and as an extension her life was crumbling apart just as the vision was blurring and breaking down under her silent tears.

Each day had given her one more reason to hate herself and life. *This was not supposed to happen.* Her mind had screamed again and again, day after day and night after night.

The night was grey and the water of the Hudson greyer. It was riding a high tide tonight and the angry droplets of water splashing

against the boardwalk sprinkled all over her. Her eyes lowered to the water and the dancing waves that mirrored her own torment. As she stared, the waves reached higher and higher - inviting her for an embrace. It seemed ages since she had been held in an embrace. She did not know how to swim and she wasn't thinking of swimming out anyway.

Her feet started dragging her to the pier that led to the ferry gate. The moss green cardigan fluttered wildly in the wind, against her frail skeleton. She soon stood on the edge of the pier with a gap wide enough for her to slip away and down. This could be her rescue from the insane pain and hurt. She threw aside her flip flops and looked back at the black waters. The flexible pier swayed with the waves under her naked feet.

The dark water billowed and its splashing sound penetrated deep into the girl's heart. It sounded like a hiss of the serpent of fate closing its grip around her. Her eyes no longer blinked. She wouldn't even need to jump since the water touched the pier; all she had to do was step forward. She started to lean in, lifting her foot. Just as she was about to transfer her weight on to the foot reaching out to the water, she was pulled back with a mighty force that made her fall back with a thud.

Her tears had dried away and the midtown skyline with a beaming red Empire State Building dazzled her as soon as her eyes looked up. She was almost blinded - not only by the light but the realisation of the monster that lurked within her. She looked back in alarm at her savior only to find empty space staring back. She circled around in uneasiness but found no one. If it was physically possible, her thumping heart might have exploded out of her tiny chest.

She took a couple of steps back towards the boardwalk and the next moment, her bare feet had started running for her life. She would never forget that night.

Chapter TWO

Leap of Faith

[Two months later]

43m separated Meera from her destiny. It wasn't a race though, it was a fall, a free fall. She was no lover of heights and could not swim, so this was the worst combination of her material fears that she could face in one go. They call it adventure sports but as with most things in life, it was more of a mental battle. Just like the feet don't run the marathon, the arm doesn't throw the shot-put and the fingers don't send the arrow to the bull's eye, the bungee is not performed by anything else but the mind and its determination. To have enough will to come to the jumping platform is half the battle won. But the other half still remains.

The slender figure of Meera Sachdev stood on the Kawarau Bridge in Queenstown, New Zealand. A pleasant breeze blew over the sparkling, turquoise blue water of the Gorge, a color that she had only seen so far in Photoshop. She wore a fitting t-shirt and jeans, and had pinned up her curls in a knot. Her feet were tied together in a leg harness over a layer of towel and a webbing sling backed up by another body harness around the tiny waist. Multiple velcro straps and a daunting cord held her fate. The spectators rustled on her left from the viewing platform at ninety degrees to the bridge she was standing on. The bungee guide started his pep talk and nudged her towards the edge slowly and steadily.

Don't worry, you'll love it. Not a single person has ever regretted doing this. I have done it a hundred times and there's nothing else I still like to do more than this.'

She was not the extreme sports, adventure seeking girl and the reason behind her standing there could be attributed more to a tortured life than to a thirst for thrill. She was called right away for her jump without getting any time to watch the others, and pump herself up. Everything was happening too fast. Before she knew it, she was on the edge standing with tied feet and free hands that were told not to hold on to anything. The climax was approaching and she made that one fatal mistake you are not allowed on that platform - her eyes happened to look down at the gushing water. *Oh, no!* was all that was needed to paralyse her mind into backing out. Her heart was beating faster than that of a mouse.

'Please don't push me, I'm not ready!' she pleaded, holding tightly on to the rail.

'No one will push you, do you want to do it?'

'I want to, but I can't.'

'Yes you can, if you really want it.'

'No, no I can't. I can't even swim,' she said, turning back without giving the guide a chance to respond.

She was moved aside to give the chance to another person behind her. She watched with disappointed eyes as her mind darted back to every single moment that had precipitated her decision to come here and jump off this bridge. Why was she doing it? Because this symbolised conquering her biggest mental block - her fear of free fall and drowning. She had so much going on in life right now that she thought if she could just take this leap of faith, she would be able to defeat everything else too and get over any hurdle in life.

Right from the moment her New Zealand trip got finalised, she had dreamed of this one thing. She stood there thinking about what scared her anyway - death? What could death take away from her at this juncture in life? Yes, she had accomplished nothing of what she thought or wanted, she had not lived enough, not loved enough, not laughed enough - but to preserve her life at the cost of this dream and all future dreams could not be a worthy choice.

Even if something happened to her while jumping, she would have died trying to live her dream. But if she left with this fear unconquered, she would never have the conviction to take any courageous decision ever again. *And she knew what that meant.* Too much was at stake here. So, she made up her mind - she would close this gap of 43m. At any cost.

For the second and last time, she stood at the iconic spot. The tall, big crew leader came behind her and made her stretch her hands out wide and look straight ahead at the gorgeous scenery. Perhaps the Titanic music would have played in the background but she was too focused on accomplishing her goal to notice how beautiful the sky and mountains looked or how loud the spectators were cheering.

‘Sweetheart, you can do it and you will remember it forever. Believe me. Just tell me when you are ready,’ he whispered in her ears having inched her on to the edge.

‘Let go,’ echoed her inner voice next.

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and leaned forward. In two seconds, she was wobbling disoriented in mid-air. As the rope slackened and straightened again and again, she opened her eyes and flashed the most accomplished smile of her life so far.

Our failures damage the temple of our soul by watering the seeds of self-doubt that when germinate around its walls, shake its whole foundation. The overgrowth of weeds had debilitated the temple’s existence so much in Meera’s case that nothing short of a plunge into the unknown could sever the weed at its roots. The leap had to be taken, the faith had to be reinforced.

Losing the momentum after a few rebounds that seemed like an eternity, she hung upside down like a bat. She could now acknowledge the warmth of the sun, the loveliness of the breeze and awesomeness of the view. She was still smiling when she was pulled down on the boat by the bungee crew. Her heart kept beating. *I did it, I did it.*

The walk up the stairs from the river to the cliff top was the culmination of the celebration, giving her a feeling of having arrived somewhere. Before leaving, she sprang back to the bridge to hug the crew leader who was taken a bit aback at first. But then he hugged her heartily, engulfing her petite frame in his magnificent one.

‘Thanks, you pushed me, didn’t you?’ she asked with a smile.

He winked, ‘No push can make you do that if you don’t want to. You conquered it! Always remember that.’

She walked off with a newly instilled faith but she knew it was only the beginning of an arduous voyage.

[One month later]

The cabin lights were dimmed as the 747 started wheeling slowly for departure. Meera had been on so many of these long flights to India that her body or mind did not register any particular reaction. Besides, she had other things on her mind. She had been silently crying, if there is such a thing, for past few hours. So she was only too happy to be camouflaged in the darkness from her window seat to let some of those tears find a way out. If the Indian monsoon was as perennial as the tears in her eyes these days, India would never have another drought. An accomplished academic and successful professional life had made her think at one point that life is a breeze.

Having come from modest origins, she had risen to good corporate titles and had married at the ideal Indian marriageable age of 26 to a guy with modern outlook. The recipe was set to produce a successful marriage and family. But as some wise person has said, fate is not an eagle, it creeps like a rat. Fate had crept and decided its own course. Meera was leaving behind the life she had carefully sculpted.

The aircraft began to gradually accelerate as the engine’s whirring sound kidnapped Meera away from her past for a second. As the wheels finally relinquished the ground, the reality struck Meera - her so-called home for the last eight years was no longer

her home. Through her moist eyes, she beheld the colorful bokeh of city lights below. The magnificence of Manhattan had always enraptured her. The city of the rich and powerful. The capitalist capital of the world that was home to some of the world's greatest men and women. The city that rewarded talent and genius.

Meera had always felt privileged to be a part of the concrete jungle that never slept. As the lights of Manhattan's towering skyline receded, her association with anything that could be called her own was vanishing too. Eight years is a long time to make one forget older associations but it is not long enough to form everlasting bonds with a new land. She was too *desi* to ever be happy in a foreign land and she had now become too *firangi* to settle back happily at home.

Leaving unceremoniously like this was no less painful than how she had felt when she left India eight years ago for a foreign land, but this pain was different and scary - it was like a black hole and not a tunnel of darkness that would, at some point, end. When she had left for the unknown earlier, it was a natural unknown course that she had taken up to conquer. But this time, the unknown was not the natural or socially acceptable course. She was going against the tide. The higher the flight was elevating, the deeper her heart was sinking. Literally and metaphorically, she was neither here nor there - she was like a particle floating in space with no gravity to claim it. She could puke but she was too empty inside.

Her tired eyelids tried to find some rest but the tears wouldn't let them close. So she kept staring at the vast expanse of maroon-grey sky outside. It seemed as barren as her own life. The weather outside gradually became rougher and the aircraft was left rocking off and on. The opportunity was well captured by the infants to send out shrill wails that made her realise that it was going to be a long flight. She finally took out her allergy pill to help her fall asleep.

After fourteen long hours, the Delhi city lights had begun to appear below the clouds as Meera glanced from the window. Previously this sight would give her tremendous joy but tonight

she was listless if not morbid. Deliberately, she waited till the other passengers cleared out, before leaving the aircraft.

A splash of water can only do so much to bring back some decency to any sad and tired face but she tried before mechanically proceeding through the immigration and baggage collection. There was a time when she had waited hours in the embassy to get the coveted US visa and squealed with joy on seeing that big colorful stamp on her passport. Now, it was no longer valid. No, she could never have imagined that she would be giving it up voluntarily under such circumstances.

Lately, she had developed strong aversion to any company and was eager to get out of the swarming airport. She hadn't brought any gifts for anyone, so the last thing she expected was to be stopped at the customs.

*'Madam, ye aapka hai?'*¹ said the police woman who was inspecting her hand luggage at the customs check.

'Yes, what is it?' Meera curtly responded.

*'Kitni jewellery le ja rahi hain aap?'*²

It dawned on Meera that she was carrying significant amount of gold and diamond wedding jewellery with her.

'But these were all purchased in India.'

The woman shook her head and called out to one of the older officers on the other side,

*'Arre Pandey ji, dekhiye to idhar.'*³

Pandey ji knew what that meant and beamed with happiness. As he ambled towards her, Meera's heart sank upon realising that she had given the authority a solid chance to extort something out of her. Meera remembered the times she had refused to bring laptops for her cousins because she was against paying bribes to the custom officers. Acquiescing and playing along might have been a wise

¹ Madam, is this yours?

² How much jewellery are you carrying?

³ Mr. Pandey, please see this.

thing to do but practicality was never her forte. Instead of letting her better senses prevail, she started grimacing and countering.

This only made Pandey ji more obnoxious.

*'Itna gold to Madam allowed nahi hai, ispe to duty lagegi.'*⁴

*'Haan but duty tab lagti agar wo maine US se purchase kiya hota but ye saara India me liya hua hai. Ye meri shaadi ki jewellery hai.'*⁵ And now I am returning to India, so bringing everything back. Why will I pay anything on the jewellery bought in India?'

Pandey ji was neither interested in her marital status nor used to hearing such tones, so he just leaned back on his chair and said casually,

*'Theek hai to receipt dikha do.'*⁶

Meera replied in a low tone that belied utter rage,

'Sir, ab receipt abhi to hai nahi mere paas', it's been three years.'

Pandey ji was of course waiting for such lack of preparation,

*'Koi baat nahi, hum bag yahan pe rakh lete hain, jab aap receipt le aaoge tab le jaana.'*⁸

Yeah right, I am leaving all that with an asshole like you here, thought Meera.

Thereupon, Pandey ji went on a stroll and the lady police officer came closer to Meera. Looking at her doubtfully and then double checking that she was traveling alone, she asked,

*'Aap married ho?'*⁹

Meera was flabbergasted and wanted to scream, *What the fuck, none of your business!* but uttered a quiet '*Haan*'. She knew

⁴ Madam, so much gold is not allowed, you'll need to pay the duty on this.

⁵ Yeah but that would be so if I had purchased this jewellery in US but I have bought this in India. It is my wedding jewellery.

⁶ Ok then show us the purchase receipt.

⁷ I don't have the receipt.

⁸ Not a problem, leave the jewelry and we will release it when you show us the receipt.

⁹ Are you married?

she was going to have to answer that question a lot of times in the future.

*'To pehen ke aana chahiye tha na Madam, itni jewellery aise kyon carry kar rahe ho?'*¹⁰

Meera was about to reply, *Yeah, of course, I should be wearing this three tier gold necklace with my jeans*, but refrained.

*'Aap log please mujhe pareshan mat kijiye'*¹¹, just look at this jewellery, you can tell from the design that it is made in India', she tried to appeal to an invisible sense of righteousness among the officers.

She waited twenty minutes with no response. Her puckered eyebrows and creased temple gave the only human touch to an otherwise lackadaisical face.

Afterwards, out of the blue, an officer came towards her who had been watching the whole scene.

*'Itna gold leke nahi ghoomna chahiye na aapko,*¹² he said in a stern but polite tone.

*'I know, I'm sorry but mere circumstances hi kuch aise the!'*¹³ she almost choked up.

The officer looked at her penetratingly and asked the lady police to let her go. Meera took her bag gracefully and looked at the eyes of the officer who had just let her off the hook and said, *'Thanks, I really appreciate it.'* She gathered her luggage and strolled slowly to the gate.

She had finally arrived in India.

Dread would be an understated expression for Meera's state of mind as she anticipated the look on the faces of her parents

¹⁰ Why are you carrying so much jewellery in the bag? You should have worn it instead.

¹¹ Please don't harass me.

¹² You shouldn't be carrying so much gold.

¹³ My circumstances were so.

who must have been waiting to receive her. The humid gust of wind kissed her as she stepped out. The hustling bodies, wheat complexions and commotion on the porch were all too familiar and dear to her - anything that she associated with India was all too dear for her. In between the heads in the crowd, she spotted her father - as composed and serene as ever. There was no jumping or waving, just an acknowledgment and relief.

But she couldn't help cringing when her mother embraced her without saying a single word. She hugged her for more than 5-6 seconds that seemed like an eternity in heaven. As she pulled back to face her mother, she had fortunately managed to find her long lost smile but something else had accompanied it - few tears in her eyes. Her mother kissed her on the forehead and said, '*Aa gayi beta*¹⁴' so gently that for a moment, the order of whole universe seemed restored to Meera.

She wondered how there could be anything wrong as long as one had their mother to come back to. As this emotional reunion overwhelmed her vulnerable state of mind, her consciousness found a way out of her hold just as a dying person's last breath tries to escape their ailing body - she fainted. The last sound in her ears was a suppressed scream from her mother.

¹⁴ You have come, my dear.