

Shehani Gomes

Learning to Fly



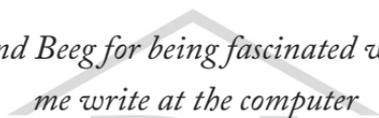
PERERA-HUSSEIN
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Perera Hussein Publishing House

COLOMBO

*To my mother and Beeg for being fascinated while you watched
me write at the computer*



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One day there will be genuine smiles.

For the past.

For dreams to be.

For wonders to come.

One day there will be generosity
that will be enough love without clamour for dues.

One day wings will fly the way humans breathe.

Lost kites will find their way home.

Lost fathers their sons.

Bewildered lovers their deserving.

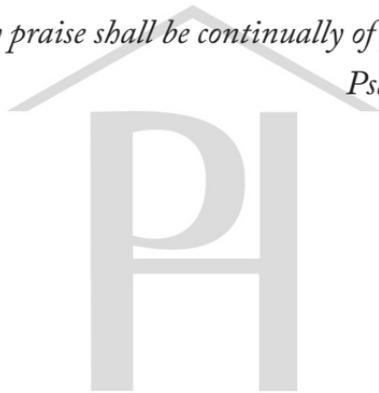
One day hearts will acquire love immune.

Cries only joy.

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My praise shall be continually of you.

Psalm 71.



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1



SHE RAN INSIDE SCREAMING THAT RAIN HAD FINALLY COME and paper boats would be back to play. Kala examined her old books carefully looking for pages to rip out. Sumi came over giggling between large breaths, asking Kala to hurry before the rain stopped.

But the rain didn't stop. The rain boasted all it could. The drains worked quickly. The two friends danced away as each paper boat reached its destination. Kala's mother made pancakes for them with honeyed-coconut inside. K boats were lighter than S boats. And the K-boat maker bragged. The S-boat maker stuck her tongue out and held her breath as her boats hesitated. It was the weight of the paper, not the skill of the boat-maker that really mattered.

The last time she checked there was nobody claiming to be average. Everybody had something to talk about. There was no audience anymore. They were all Performers. Everybody had something different to boast about. So. She sought Averagehood. And reveled in it.



He cared about averagehood too. But more than that he was envious. Because he believed that he was below average. So he decided to believe in logic. Logic meant that he lived the way he knew without moping about the lack of averagehood. Logic meant acceptance. Logic meant there was no cause for morbidity over the below averageness of self.

“Dylan?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Sound respectful child. You shouldn’t question back elders.”

“Sorry.”

“Where is your mother?”

“In the kitchen.”

“Call her please.”

Aunty from the Church had come to collect money for the annual talent show of children below twelve. What was the contribution going to be this time?

“Don’t scream Dylan! People won’t think any good of you!”

Last time it had been hundred. Two hundred this time. “Things are a bit difficult, but you know church things, can’t refuse, no?”

“Dylan’s still very small no?”

Mother laughed.

“Dylan can sing for the talent show,” said Aunty from Church.

Mother laughed again and forgot about it.



Lunch: came in packets at Kala’s place. (Did happiness come in packets?) Lunch was prepared the night before. For convenience. And stored in the fridge. The fridge that presented

the possibility for middle class wives to play the dual role. The fridge that changed the art of cooking. Women who couldn't find jobs claimed that the fridge made the food dry and tasteless. Their husbands had an unusually vehement preference for unfridged food. But working mothers like Kala's defended the fridge and exalted its functionalities. So in the morning, food was served in packets and taken to school or to office.

Or lunch could be an entirely different story. Dylan got lunch from the hotel because he worked there. On normal days lunch was always normal. And nobody made a fuss about lunch or had pre-lunch premonitions of bad tummy upsets. Lunch was not an issue for those who let lunch be.

Dinner: Kala, the sister (who went to a special school) the mother and the father. With the food of course and the table cloth that was bought at the Church Cheap Fair the year Kala split her head after falling off her bicycle. Conversation at dinner was not strained or tense. Not that it was brimming with bubbles. But it was what it was. No conversation. Middle-class families couldn't afford conversation at dinner after a long day.



"Kala."

"*Kala?*"

"Yes."

"That's a weird name."

"No."

"Yes it is."

"What's *your* name?"

"Dylan."

“That’s a dumb name.”

“I thought you might know my name.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Just thought so. How if we meet at McDonalds?”

She shrugged.

“Ten there on Sat?”

“No, ten thirty.”

“Why?”

“I have classes till ten Dylan.”

Shrugged back.



The sister: couldn’t see. Before Kala knew what that meant she made fun of it. And then. She understood. The sister had a name. Nirmaleen. Tall for her age. Sixteen and two years younger than the older sister. She had beautiful eyelashes and those who didn’t believe in creepy coincidences said that maybe the beautiful lashes stole the sight. The sister didn’t believe that. But there were times. When the family went to church or to the Chinese restaurant at the end of the month. She was scared. Because she couldn’t see who watched. And who cared.



The paper shredding ritual was almost therapeutic. So the mother came and participated.

“What happened wasn’t fair. I’m sorry.”

“Oh BLOODY hell!”

“Will you have dinner?”

Paper shredding became important suddenly. And little shreds were slashed until they grew tinier and tinier.