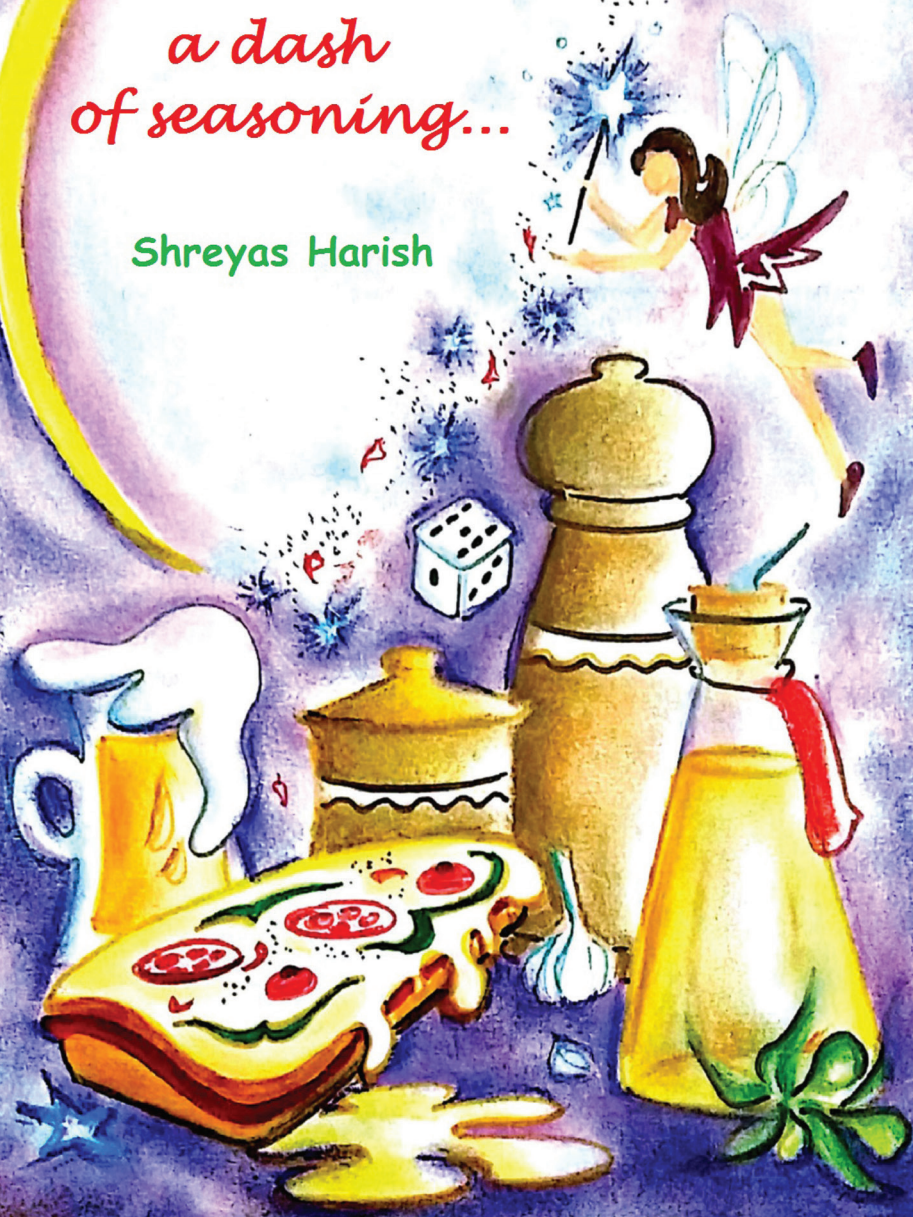


*and
a dash
of seasoning...*

Shreyas Harish



Copyright 2017, Shreyas Harish

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system now known or to be invented, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review written for inclusion in a magazine, newspaper or broadcast.

Published in India by Prowess Publishing
YRK Towers, Thadikara Samy Koil St, Alandur,
Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600016

Book Cover Illustration by Nandini Harish

ISBN-10: 1-5457-0930-0
ISBN-13: 978-1-5457-0930-6

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication



Table of Contents

Dedication	v
About the Author	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
Prologue	xiii
Bob's Cafe	1
The Call	13
The Local	29
Pizza from the Past	43
Takatak Rolls	53
Trouble	69
Ruin the Story	85



Bob's Cafe

March, 2016

“THREE-FOUR-ONE!” chimed the machine at the counter. The food court has got to be the single most subtle scam on campus. It provides one with the illusion of choice. On the face of it, you have as many coupons as one would need for a month, and a much broader variety of dishes than you do in any of the other messes. On the other hand, the decent food is more than you can afford per day, a meal takes twice as long to arrive, and that annoying machine drowns out any table talk or mental thought. “THREE-TWO-NINE!”

“What’s our coupon number?” asked Kamat, finally looking up from his phone.

“This isn’t happening! It’s a Saturday, we’re midway between quizzes, and we’re still eating at the mess for no apparent reason,” Shrey vented, as if triggered by the simple question.

“We could head to Mahabs for lunch.” The absolute lack of emotion in Noor’s suggestion made it impossible to decipher whether or not she was being sarcastic.

Desperate for a plan to save the day, Shrey ventured “We could go to Mahabs for lunch,” as if he had carefully weighed out the pros and cons.

“I mean I’m chill with anything,” blurted Firoz, believing that the whole table was eagerly awaiting his approval. Kamat looked up from his phone once again, blinking, astounded that the Economist didn’t have a comprehensive take on the subject. Kamat wore deep blue, baggy puma shorts and a grey t-shirt with a bunch of marvel superheroes plastered across it. He donned a mildly confused and largely indifferent expression on his face, with an absolute lack of facial hair and social knowledge, which spoke volumes of his disbelief that what was cool had changed since ninth grade. There was something round and slow about the look of Firoz, in his black t-shirt with his bermuda shorts. His eyes dodged around frequently, giving him both a bear like, huggable look and a menacing death stare.

Noor continued to zone in and out from her own world, in her sky blue salwar with a wound up dark red dupatta, her light green eyes stood out, both deep with emotion and then again completely distanced. Shrey didn’t set himself apart with his clothing. He wore a red t-shirt with a witty message on it and loose black shorts. He frequently adjusted his faded, black wrist band, whose cryptic message he refused to explain, as well as his hair which was either too short or too long, but definitely not right.

“Alright then, Mahabs it is,” declared Shrey as he got up to leave the mess all too enthusiastically. The 15 minute bus ride to the main gate is always a moderately awkward one. Any conversation you want to have seems a little too public, with the lone people that you half know, almost definitely listening in. You can’t completely remain mum either, for just those 15 minutes, and so all sorts of small talk becomes unnaturally interesting. Having stepped out of the institute bus, Shrey lead



the charge towards Madhya Kailash. The others followed, evidently less excited, but altogether in high spirits. The green buses that frequented the East Coast Road, kept whizzing by. It was only a matter of 5 minutes before a sufficiently empty bus, heading towards Mahabalipuram stopped by the stand. The four of them crammed into the back end of the bus. Shrey got edged out of the relatively spacious back seat, and ended up a row ahead, between two strangers chewing paan. There's always those two guys in any public bus! They each have a bag that appears to be packed with hay. The bag is never right next to them, but instead carefully placed such that it inconveniences as many other passengers as possible. And in their mouths, a little bit of paan which seems to last no matter how many times they reach over you to spit it out the window.

Firoz whipped out four Centre shocks from his bermuda shorts, and stretched his arms out just as little as he had to in order to reach the rest of the group. His weed leaf tee and his freshly cut curly hair gave the vibe of a six year old, who had got in with the wrong group. Noor popped her Centre shock into Firoz's mouth, and pinched his chubby cheeks. He squealed with displeasure, as she giggled, proud of her little prank. She stretched her arms and legs, accidentally tapping the old lady standing in front of her. The old woman, thoroughly scandalised, gripped her saree as she looked back with distrust and disgust. Noor tried giving an apologetic look, but simply couldn't find it within herself to do so. Instead, she tied her short hair into a bun, and pretended to brush something off her salwar, in an attempt to come off as a little more 'sanskari'. She then turned her watery eyes to Kamat, to avoid the woman's glazing stare. Kamat, completely unperturbed, was chewing on his Centre shock, trying to get whatever zing was left in it. Catching her gaze, he looked back, caught off guard. Awkwardly, both of them got back to daydreaming.

Distance from his group didn't dampen Shrey's mood. The hour passed, rather unnoticeably. There is no better way of

travelling, than with coldplay music and the breeze in your hair. Having stepped out of the bus, Kamat, Shrey and Firoz just stared into space, waiting for Mahabs to present itself. Noor was in no mood for time-wasting. She walked a couple of metres down the road, and hopped into a stationary auto before the driver understood what was going on. The boys took a little time to locate her, haggling very uninterestedly with the driver. Kamat and Firoz seized the opportunity, and jumped into the backseat with Noor. Having been scammed for the second time today, Shrey slid into the front with the auto driver, who was visibly less than excited.

Even before the auto could come to a complete halt, Firoz jumped out eagerly, as if the restaurant's existence was dependent on him making it on time. A new excitement rushed through him as he began to list out the different types of shrimp that they could try out. Noor dragged them up, floor by floor. There was a very specific table at the Moonrakers restaurant, that made the meal worth the journey, and Noor had her eyes set on it. The top floor had a few surprises in store for everyone. Firoz wasn't allowed to light up his menthol, a lone customer was taking up Noor's favourite table, Kamat was out of network, and no one seemed to have taken notice of Shrey yet. A little bit disgruntled, they settled for the second best table. "What beer do you have?" Firoz challenged the waiter.

"Sir, we have Kingfisher Ultra, Premium, Black Pearl," began the waiter.

"Alright, Kingfisher Ultra, 3? 2," Firoz decided, judging by Noor's barfing expression. He proceeded to reiterate the list of seafood and special rice dishes that he had laid his eyes on over the long climb up.

The order didn't take long to arrive or disappear. Little could come between the appetite built up over a journey and the fresh shrimp in garlic sauce, slapped all over steaming coconut



rice. Audibly satisfied and far slower to move, the group began towards the billing counter, where they grabbed as much somph and sugar as they could, before being evicted. "Alright then, back to campus for efficiency," suggested Shrey, walking back towards the bus stop.

"Or..." Noor interjected. Kamat grabbed Shrey by the shoulder, pulling him back.

"I felt like I should contribute somehow," Kamat responded to Shrey's baffled expression.

"We could go to Bob's Cafe!" completed Noor.

"Ah, Bob's Cafe..." Firoz reminisced.

"Well, that is a better review than I've heard Firoz give. Actually, Firoz has no standards, but I have nothing to do, so may as well," said Kamat.

Sensing that he lost his say in this group shortly after getting alienated in the bus, Shrey followed the group, partially listening in on the conversation, but completely absorbed in the cute street shops selling all sorts of hippie paraphernalia. "You guys are going to love this place, especially you, Shrey. It's right on the beach, and it's basically a house where these travellers just drop by and hang out. It's very chill," Noor went on to justify the decision. A stall, twenty feet off the beach sold necklaces and bangles. Threads, with several pendants as options were available for fifty rupees and a bargain. Yin Yang, Ganeshas, rings, crosses and tusks filled the desk that lay unmonitored. Shrey stared a little too long, fascinated by the town's business. He played catch-up once again, following the others into a yellow house that spanned four storeys, and was built out of everything from wood to cement to tarpaulin and leaves. At the entrance was a little metallic gate which used to have more significance when the joint was a regular house. Above it was hung a slanted sign that read 'Bob's Cafe', with a painting of



Bob Marley blowing smoke out. The whole sign was coloured in red, yellow and green. A similar sign was painted on an adjacent wall, just in case a passerby missed the first sign, but chose to look at the far more concealed wall.

There was an aura to the place. The temperature dropped as soon as you stepped in. The sea breeze didn't begin at the beach, but at the entrance instead. A toned down, soothing background track of 'No woman no cry' filled the maze of a building. From right outside, one could see the balconies adjoining each floor, but as soon as you stepped in, everything but the sea and a few nearby tables were out of sight. Each landing was arranged so precariously, and connected through the narrowest staircase, it was a wonder that the place hadn't collapsed upon itself. And yet, no architectural flaw could overshadow the charm of this little house on the beach of a quiet town in coastal Tamil Nadu.

Shrey was completely taken up at the first whiff of the place. He seemed to have misplaced his manners, for he couldn't help but stare at the host of guests, lounging around the ground floor. The European visitors didn't seem to notice or care much. They didn't seem to care about very many things, or so was the air of this floor. He found his way up to the first floor, whose two balconies hosted a few college kids. Kamat, Noor and Firoz made up one of those groups, sitting at a table facing seaward, with a few drinks at the table. Shrey joined them, and murmured a word of apology. He picked up the second beer at the table, which was presumably his, and confessed "You're right, Noor, this place is something else".

Nobody seemed much in the mood for words. Firoz and Noor passed a smoke between themselves, and sipped on their respective drinks. Kamat had perched himself upon the edge of the balcony, with his legs hanging down. A chocolate milkshake in his hand, and the sense of the ocean had stolen him away from the rest of the group. Meanwhile, Shrey chose to continue



exploring the cafe, while sitting right there. He looked back to the other balcony on the floor. A couple, engrossed in a making out session, made him feel a little guilty for looking around. Nevertheless, his gaze moved up a storey, where two people sat by themselves, at two tables at the edge of the landing. One was an elderly American man, with his shirt off. He lay back in his chair, taking the breeze in, with his eyes closed. The other was a much younger, attractive looking girl. Her shoulder length, brownish black hair shone in the late afternoon sun, as it flew about her face. Her blue and white summer dress helped her camouflage well with the general tourist, though something about her seemed very out of place. She was at the edge of her seat, looking over the first floor. Her gaze fell upon Shrey. Immediately, sensing that it might be a little odd staring back, Shrey casually shifted his glance up to the top floor, and then back towards his own group that seemed to have been completely stationary in the meanwhile.

“Do you guys want to head to the beach? I want to dip my feet in the water for a bit,” Firoz suggested. Kamat turned in his spot, hopped down from the railing, without verbally confirming that he was in. Noor took her time with a last couple of puffs before she got up to join Firoz and Kamat, who were waiting at the edge of the table. Shrey was a little more lost in the view. Taken a little aback by the rest of the group standing, he finally replied “You guys go ahead. I want to just chill here for a bit. I’ll join you guys when you’re leaving for the bus stand”.

“Are you okay?” Noor asked, putting her hand on his shoulder, with a touch of concern.

“Yeah man, you’ve been a little out of it,” Kamat contributed, far more bluntly.

“Yeah, yeah. Just a bit tired, and this is a great place” Shrey said, trying to divert their attention.

Satisfied, the other three slowly made a move towards the stairs and were on their way out. A little more conscious of his behaviour, Shrey began to take in the scenery once again. The temple at the edge of the horizon became the new captor of his attention. Just as the peace and tranquility of the place was slowly sinking in, the chair beside Shrey scratched against the floor. He lazily scanned his surroundings, to find a familiar face, now seated beside him. It took Shrey a second to register that he didn't really know the girl in the blue and white dress, sitting beside him. He was quite sure that the brief eye contact between them wasn't enough of an invitation for her to make herself this comfortable, much less pick up his beer and take a swig. Shrey smiled and tried to pretend to look back towards the horizon, hiding his surprise and discomfort.

"You're not a very easy man to find, you know. Well, that's not exactly true. It's very easy to find you. I've been doing that for a while now. You don't get away on your own very often do you? Incredibly dependent," opened the stranger.

"I happen to have people around me. I uh.." Shrey began defensively. "I'm sorry, do I know you? I'm having trouble placing you," he quickly gathered himself. Pretending to try to place her, he made eye contact. Immediately overcome by the awkwardness of the situation, his eyes shifted to a hippie necklace that she wore. The pendant was rather unremarkable and looked like it doubled as a wooden ring.

"I should hope not. Anyway, I suppose we won't have the luxury of elaborate introductions. Your friends don't look like the kind to hang around for high tide. You can call me Niki. I have a story that I think you might be very interested in listening to," she said. Niki was exuding a confidence that seemed almost rehearsed. It was as if she knew that he would have to hear her story. A little uninitiated with this specific social circumstance, Shrey was visibly intrigued.

"Alright then, let's hear the story," Shrey prodded.



“Well, it’s not free. You’re going to have to buy me a couple of beers. Don’t worry, they’re far cheaper here than they are in Chennai,” she added reassuringly. Lacking a good enough excuse, Shrey signalled the waiter, who very conveniently had his hands full of cold Heinekens that he had just plucked from the fridge.

“Is this your regular routine with all of the unsuspecting visitors, or did you figure I was a special kind of idiot?”

“So, it all started a while back. Actually, I’m not sure how long it’s been going on for, but hundreds of years at least. You see, there’s a bunch of people, let’s call them ‘influencers’, who have a tendency of changing the world. Sometimes it’s calculated. Sometimes it’s intended, but they don’t really control the extent to which they make a difference. I’m sure a few famous personalities come to mind. But, for the most part they have no idea what they’re doing. They just end up at these pivotal moments in history, and give the situation a little nudge in some chaotic direction. And then, there’s us. Uhm, let’s call the others ‘spotters’. They’re a blessing, really. Someone’s got to keep the world in balance. The spotters have a talent for sensing little changes and anything that’s a bit off. They have a feel for what the natural balance ought to be, and they scope out deviations from it. Of course, the ‘influencers’ mean well, or don’t mean anything at all, and don’t really cause too much damage anymore. Because of who they are and their inherent abilities, the uninitiated person is likely to be naturally drawn to an ‘influencer’, and so they’re very easily portrayed as angels. ‘Spotters’ usually get the rotten end of the deal, in that they continue to live in the shadows, cleaning up the mess. They do however have a strong network amongst themselves, how else could one be at the right place at the right time?”

Shrey gave way to a judgemental smile, as it began to dawn upon him that this woman was likely to be so out of her senses

that she had developed a strong bias within her own cooked up crazy story.

Picking up on the hint of judgement, Niki consciously moved on, “Our story is about this one ‘influencer’ and ‘spotter’ pair in particular. Not that they come in pairs or anything,” she blushed a bit. “Throughout his childhood, our ‘influencer’ was oblivious to his uncanny abilities. Actually *position*, more than *ability*. Of course, growing up, he was far more protected from his own influence than he would suddenly become, one day. But even through his adolescence, a series of unnatural events did set him apart from the other kids. Everything from getting out of a punishment at school far too easily to building a most unexpected network of friends, made for stories most children his age didn’t have. Of course, all of it would just be passed off as a chance happening, a good story and nothing more. But there are times when the stars align. At such times, his influence may take him to unprecedented places, giving way to a series of intertwined incidents which may be nothing at all, but could cascade out of control without due care. Believe me, we can’t afford anymore of that, not with the year we are about to have. And so, as the rules dictated, his ‘spotter’ decided to move to the foreground to keep things a little in check. Oh, it looks like your friends are heading back from the beach. I ought to leave,” she mumbled with a clear air of disappointment, and scuttled away.

Having finally got a little involved in the story, Shrey yelled after her fleeting figure, “What about the story? You can’t just end it like that. The plot is lousy as it is.”

Having made her way to the entrance of the cafe, she looked up gently, now wearing a sun hat that he distinctly remembered seeing on a table downstairs. “Answers and stories are very easy to come by if you just ask around a little bit,” she giggled and left.

Confused about what was going on, but still unusually calm, Shrey looked towards his friends at the edge of the beach.



Noticing that they hadn't yet made a move back towards the cafe, he couldn't help but feel like he might have been conned. The sky had turned a few shades darker, and the sun was no longer casting light directly on his neck. Kamat looked back at him, lazing around in the same position they had left him in, and ventured a wave. Feeling a little bit awkward about waving back for no apparent reason, Shrey smiled back, knowing fully well that Kamat wouldn't have been able to see it. Noor and Firoz followed Kamat out of the water, and the three of them made their way back to the cafe.

While leaving the cafe, the group chose to try out the small side roads, instead of going down along the beach and the main road. This time, Noor insisted that the boys stop at one of the cute little shops along the road. While Firoz pretended to take an active interest in the handicrafts on offer, both Kamat and Shrey looked around the street, hoping to find something a little more their style. A chicken that had broken free from a nearby shop, was strutting around, checking out the shops almost as intently as some of the tourists. It finally settled beside an aged woman who was sitting at the edge of the street, leaning against the wall of a clothes shop. In front of her was a cardboard sign that read 'Future Read', below it were listed prices for different options. A little embarrassed at what he was doing, Shrey carefully looked around to check whether the others were watching. Satisfied that each of them was engrossed in something else, he kneeled beside the woman, and said as clearly and quietly as he could, "I have questions. Can you give me answers?"

With no regard for his personal agenda to keep this a secret, the woman yelled back in broken English "One answer, 10 rupees. Big answer, 20 rupees, Ok?"

Eager to get this foolish thing over with quickly and subtly, Shrey gave her a 20 and asked "Who was that girl?"

“Ah, interesting!” she blurted one of her standard lines. The woman rearranged a few sticks, shiny objects and cards that lay on the cloth in front of her. She opened a small box with a few sea shells in them. She closed it again and shook it around. The chicken, evidently startled, made a run for it again. “Now, close eyes, and place hand on box when I tell you to. Ok now,” she instructed Shrey, who followed obediently. He opened his eyes to see his hand on a rather unremarkable shell. “Ah, very good, very good,” the woman started. She was a lot more excited about his choice of shell than he was. “She has purpose! You will find her again. But you must look for her. She may take a different form. But, she will be a part of your life. You will find that there is always something special that lies ahead. That is all that the future says,” she said in her most enchanting, croaking voice, and shut the box loudly.

Quite disenchanted with the experience, Shrey got up and left without so much as a thank you. He was convinced that he had just got one of the standard responses that she gives people who go and ask her about ‘love’! There was little point in explaining to her that that’s not what this was about.

He rejoined his group, to find Noor all smiles, and Firoz and Kamat wearing disturbed expressions. “Ah, good,” Noor said, as she threw a necklace around Shrey’s head.

“You got scammed, man. I got yin-yang and even Firoz got Ganesha. The ring is as lame as it gets,” Kamat taunted. Firoz held up his Ganesha pendant, as if he had a point to prove. Shrey, having zoned out for the last thirty seconds, looked down at the pendant and saw an out of shape wooden ring. Much to Kamat’s surprise, but Noor’s delight, a smile broke upon his face.

You've Just Finished your Free Sample

Enjoyed the preview?

Buy: <https://store.prowesspub.com>