

THE TSUNAMI



Hema

Copyright © 2019, Hema
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 Swamy Koil St, Alandur, Chennai,
Tamil Nadu 600016

ISBN: 978-93-89097-28-3

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	vii
The Tsunami	1
Victoria	5
Freedom from Paradise.	11
The Friday Matinee show.	18
Wanderlust.	29
Disappeared!	34
The Professor's wife	41
The Prize	48
Where Went my Sapphire?	56
Rhapsody	63
Woman's best friend.	70
<i>Epilogue</i>	77
<i>Directory of Indian terms</i>	78

THE TSUNAMI

I have wanted to visit the Andaman Islands for a very long time. Though I am basically a 'mountain' person as opposed to a 'beach' person, a visit to Port Blair has been on my bucket list for several years. I didn't want to go when it's too hot and accordingly decided that December a good month for such a visit and booked my ticket. I travelled from Bengaluru, where I lived, to Chennai by train and boarded the early morning flight to Port Blair. Many friends and relatives suggested that I make the trip by ship but being susceptible to sea sickness I didn't want to take the risk and decided that though I may miss the grandeur of the roaring ocean waves I had better take the flight. The flight was short but quite an experience. I enjoyed the scene of the vast ocean below me and as we neared the Andaman Islands the endless expanse of small and big islands covered with green vegetation and coral was magnificent. I arrived at Port Blair to a flourish of thick white clouds and tremulous sunshine. It was quite windy at the airport but pleasant anyway.

Being the cautious type I had made my hotel arrangements well in advance and was happy to see cheerful Raju waiting for me with a Maruti van ready to take me there. It was a good start to a short holiday and the Hotel though a little away from the shore was quite comfortable with a view of the sea and a shaded balcony as a bonus! Just as I checked in I saw a group of tourists also from Bengaluru checking in and it gave a sense of 'home' to hear the familiar phrases and language. I unpacked and decided to spend the day walking around the hotel and beach just to absorb the place and its people and asked Raju to come in the evening so that I could visit the cellular jail. After a brief halt at the room I went

out into the streets and tried to soak in the local flavours. All around me I could hear people speaking in Bengali, Tamil and Hindi and this combination of languages brought a smile to my face: no language zealots here. Everyone knew all three languages and shifted from one to the other seamlessly when they met tourists speaking a language. After walking the streets, I settled down for a brief siesta after a light lunch and at four in the evening I received a call from front desk that my car was ready to take me out. I had an awe-inspiring evening going around the cellular jail, reading out the inscriptions and trying to imbibe the spirit of patriotism and sacrifice that the freedom struggle deportees and prisoners left behind. After the sound and light show I got back to the hotel and walked up to the terrace where dinner was to be served. There were several people at the hotel at dinner time: a teacher with a group of students whom she had brought for a biotechnology project, a very distinct mother daughter duo with the daughter having a limp but all blocked out with a beaming smile and many others. As I loved talking to people, by the end of dinner I was quite on friendly terms with many of them.



I went up to bed early and was awakened at about six in the morning with a big commotion. Looking into the corridor I heard people rushing in all directions shouting something quite inaudible but clearly there was fear in their faces. 'What has happened?' I asked a scurrying woman. 'It's a storm,' she cried 'the waters are rising and there is destruction all around.' Its then that it struck me that something was amiss and climbing down a couple of stairs and looking through the windows I looked out into a blanket of water surrounding the hotel. The hotel was not exactly on the beach but a few kilometres away but now it seemed as if it was there right at the waterside! A little distance away were huge waves and foaming waters around the hotel. Right on the horizon I could see a crescent like range of tides rushing towards the shore. I stood nearly hypnotized as I watched, and my feet refused to move. Soon I heard voices of the other occupants who had all come out into the corridors. A calm matronly looking woman was urging all the occupants to walk up to the terrace where the dining room was.

Everyone looked at the other in consternation, a little drowsy and not fully understanding what all this was about. Our monitor

explained that a tsunami like storm had hit the coast and that they would need to move to the upper levels and review the situation. It was quite a stunned group of tourists that slowly gathered their wits and trooped up the stairs, the younger ones helping the elderly until we came to the dining hall, the scene of last night's light-hearted banter and companionship. The room had already been cleared of last night's dinner and was partially laid for breakfast with water, tea, fruits and the like. Looking through the huge glass windows from above all we could see was the froth and the smaller tides dashing against the lower floors.

The lady who had been our guide now took charge and said, 'I am Meenakshi from Delhi. I had come for a holiday to Port Blair and this is my husband Rajeev.' He was a grey-haired thin gentleman with a slight stoop and who appeared to take the event in a manner as if the tsunami was a common event. 'I suggest that we use the water and what is there of the provisions very judiciously until there is some rescue attempt.'

'Why don't we switch on the TV and find out the extent of damages,' said a voice from the back. 'There is no communication of any kind nor power as you can see,' said Meenakshi, a tad irritated. It was then that the group slowly realized that they were marooned in this hotel in the middle of a disaster whose magnitude they knew nothing about, and all communication links and power was also off. Some gasped as they sat on the chairs around the dining tables the truth slowly sinking in. A few looked excited, 'here was an adventure with immense possibilities.'

'Do you think the hotel may collapse,' asked a distraught elderly woman.

Immediately there was a cry of fear. One lady was becoming hysterical just thinking of it. The others all looked at each other with fear in their eyes. Fortunately for us, only a couple of people were on the brim of panic.

Meenakshi and a few of the sane heads immediately brought in some order. They sent the members who had some food stuff and water in their rooms to bring it up to the dining hall for use. Those who were afraid to go had other volunteers going with them. We scrimped on the food and water. To many in the group the storm raging around us seemed unreal: was it all a dream? However, cars and port debris being hurled against each other soon brought us back to reality. It was now midday and there were no signs of any contact with the outside world. The group was becoming tired and

fractious on being detained and further we were unwashed, hungry and anxious and everyone was getting irritated with everyone else. Meenakshi with the help of a few volunteers had got the food and water rationed out and kept warning us about the uncertainty of it all. A few members had continuously tried the telephone in the hall but to no avail: there was no communication link.

It was then I decided that we needed to take our minds off the present and engage ourselves in some activity. I went to the centre of the hall and clapped my hands to get everyone's attention.

'Now that we have to be together until help arrives why don't we play some game or maybe talk of our experiences or something interesting.'

It was difficult to get everybody's attention but few members in the group got enthused and arranged the chairs in a semi-circle and were soon seated. A few were still standing anxiously at the windows trying to gauge the situation around, but nothing could be seen but the large ocean before us and the strong winds were bearing heavily against the glass windows. By now most of the viewers had got accustomed to the steady accumulation of debris around us.

An unusually high number of women were part of this group and a lady came up and said 'I vote we tell some true-life stories of heroic women we know.'

'I don't feel particularly brave right now' lamented another.

'Why, the very reason we need to relate to people who have overcome difficult situations. We will be saved and look back on this day with pride in how we handled it' I said.

The youngsters in the group managed to cheer everyone and bring them together.

'Let's start with Meenakshi' I said pointing to our unofficial leader 'why don't you tell us a story of someone who inspired you or made an impression.'

'Well let me recollect the story of our Victoria' she said smilingly.

'Are you referring to Queen Victoria' there was a laugh from a young man who had turned around from near the window 'is she going to help us?'

'No! no! It's a story from the early eighties when I came to Delhi as a young bride. There was,' and Meenakshi narrated:

VICTORIA

I came to Delhi in the early eighties and lived in a joint family in Lajpat Nagar. Coming as I did from a Tamil nuclear family from a small town, it was quite a bit of culture shock to be living in a Punjabi middle-class joint family. It was one big house with three brothers (my husband being the youngest amongst them) and their families, the parents, a grandma and a sister and her family. It took me quite some time to get used to the family, their food habits, customs and culture. Delhi itself was alien: the broad roads, the big clean buses, the chatter in Hindi everywhere which I could hardly grasp, the blistering heat in summer and the bone pinching winters. Most of all was the profusion of vegetables in different seasons: The Saag* of all kinds, large cauliflowers and the peas and 'Delhi' carrots as we say down south, to the tindas* and thoris* that I had never eaten and the system of getting milk from the Mother Dairy booth by putting in a coin in the dispenser. Living in a Punjabi family, I saw it all, the highs and lows of the great 'Indian Joint Family'.

But this story is not about me but that of our maid, Mausi* as we all addressed her when we spoke to her and 'Victoria' when we referred to her amongst ourselves. Why these two names apart from her real name? We will see presently. Mausi did household chores in five houses in our building. They mainly consisted of doing the dishes and sweeping and mopping the floor.

A little bit of history now that we are discussing Mausi. She came as a refugee from western Punjab, now Pakistan, after partition in the winter of 1947. Mausi's realname was Devaki Rani.

I came to know her name, when one day she said ‘Beta* give me my ration card. It’s in the kitchen cupboard where the cups and saucers are kept. I have to buy the rations on my way home.’

She had probably given to my mother-in-law for safekeeping. As I pulled it out, it fell flat with the first page open and I read her name.

‘Why Mausī, you have a lovely name, Devika Rani. Did you know there was a famous actress of that name when you were young? Why haven’t I heard anyone call you by that name?’

She gave me a toothy grin and said, ‘I wouldn’t know it myself Beta, haven’t been called by that name a long time since, as for actresses, didn’t see movies when I was young, those were turbulent times.’

One day, watching her washing the vessels in the yard, I became curious about her and later that evening wriggled out her story from my mother-in-law. Mausī, or Devika Rani came to Delhi with her husband and a baby boy after partition from Lahore and set up home in a settlement colony in West Delhi. Her husband worked at a sari store in Karol Bagh while she setup home for the family. Her brothers, who had migrated along with them, established a sweet shop at Govindpuri (another resettlement colony) and were doing well. Sisters, cousins and other relatives were settled in different parts of Delhi. Mausī was expecting her second child when her husband fell very ill. He was coughing and having bouts of fever and a visit to the Safdarjung hospital confirmed that it was tuberculosis. The husband lost his job at the shop and was too weak to look for another job when Mausī delivered another baby boy. Her brothers helped her out and after the husband recovered from his ailment gave him employment in their shop and the family moved to small accommodation at Govindpuri. But by the time the baby turned two, Mausī’s husband had a relapse and left her with two little boys to take care.

Her brothers wanted to help but in the early days after partition, there was a struggle to make a living for the families who migrated from Pakistan. It was ‘a dog eat dog’ period with everyone trying to make up for their losses and like typical refugees, the wives of the brothers were not so much inclined to help Mausī as they had issues of their own and she had to find ways to fend for herself and her children. A neighbour who was working as a maid at the newly built colonies (as the suburbs were called) introduced her to our locality and after several years of working at different houses she came to

work at our home. By then her elder son was in class ten and the younger one in class eight at the Government school near their home. She was always complaining to my mother-in-law how her elder son was not interested in studies and was whiling away his time. This time if he failed to clear his board exams, she had told him that he would have to get a job and shoulder some responsibility. It was the dark period of the early eighties. Mausī came late for work one day. On enquiry, she said that she and some relations had been searching for her elder son who had not come home for the past several days. A complaint had been lodged at the local police station but there was no news from him. This was the second big tragedy in her life and she never saw her son again. Many an afternoon, when she took out her rotis* from her dabba* and sat down for her frugal meal, she would recall her elder son's love for a dish and wonder where he might be. Thereafter she would give a deep sigh; put all blame at fate's door and sit down to wash the dishes.

Days turned into years but Mausī was a permanent fixture at our home. On many occasions she would threaten to leave if we did not increase her wages but then we would, and she continued as if there had not been a word! Another reason could be my mother-in-law's sympathetic attitude towards her and their shared memories of Lahore. Patience was not a virtue she possessed and many a child had caught the edge of her tongue when they put in an extra dish or vessel at the end of Mausī's washing.

'Am I to sit here and work for your family the whole day? This here (pointing to the sink) is not a factory for cleaning dishes' She would say.

My mother-in-law was very scared of Mausī's tongue and would placate her with some diversions or scold the child in question. It was because of such cantankerous behaviour that Mausī earned the epithet 'Victoria' as in the Queen! She would come rushing through the front door, finish the dishes in a jiffy and sweep and mop the house like a tornado and swing on to the next chore. After one cycle of activities she would have her lunch and rest in the veranda for a while before she started out the afternoon round and leave at four in the evening. On some days she would clean the green vegetables she had bought or cut some vegetables for her evening meal instead of the short break she gave herself. She was a law unto herself and all her employers fell in line because they were sympathetic towards the struggle she led and

were also because she was scrupulously honest. You could give her the keys if you had to leave somewhere and not a pin would be taken. This was guaranteed.

Our children grew up and the elder ones went to college and the younger ones were still at school when Mausī came weeping one morning. On persistent questioning by my sister-in-law she revealed that her son who lived with her had married a girl from the neighbouring slum area and had brought her home. She belonged to a different caste, but he was adamant that his wife would live with them. We consoled her and said that she would have to accept her and that there was not much use in being miserable and making a noise. What worried her was that the younger son had also not studied after class ten. He was employed now and then working as an electrician but because of his irregular hours and dubious work ethics this was not consistent.

As the years passed Mausī became a grandmother to two little boys and lived next door to her son and his family because there were constant quarrels between mother and son mainly because of his idling and lack of support to his family. The daughter-in-law and Mausī worked as maids and managed the household.

One cold December morning, waiting for Mausī to come, we got the news that the evening before while she was waiting for the bus to go home, a parked bus had suddenly started rolling down the slope and Mausī's two legs were crushed between the bus shelter and the bus. She was taken to Safdarjung hospital by the driver and conductor of the bus. The news spread to all the households where she worked and all of them were busy trying to get maids to replace her. My mother-in-law, the Good Samaritan that she is, called a conference of us women of the house and took our various suggestions of what to do for Mausī. The next day, Bhabhī* and I were dispatched to Safdarjung Hospital to see Mausī. We found her in a bad state with her daughter-in-law by her side. Her legs were to be operated with a rod in each thigh and the doctors were looking for blood donors. Bhabhī donated one unit and arranged for some of our healthy cousins from Patel Nagar and Model Town to come and do so as well. The operation was scheduled for the next day and that whole week one or other of us was at the hospital to see Mausī. In ten days she was released and sent home. But it would be some time before she would be able to walk let alone squat and wash vessels. The DTC bus driver was reprimanded but there was no

compensation awarded to her as at the time of accident there was no driver in the bus, and it had no hand brakes and had just rolled over; she was asked why she did not see the approaching bus and move!

Though our family tried to provide some rations, blankets and money we soon got busy in our homes and went to see her quite rarely. The first few months she crawled around her tiny home and depended on her daughter-in-law to cook and do all tasks for her. Her son was in no way more concerned now that a major bread winner was not there to provide for them. Mausi spent those difficult months with help from her grandsons whom she had reared through the years. After six months, when we went to visit her, she was able to walk round the house with a walker that we had got her and there she was doing things for herself. This brave spirit was up and going in eighteen months and was back to work doing dishes at the sink now and using a mop for the floor! She completely recovered in a year and back to her sharp tongue and dominating ways. We had been irritated in the past with these traits but now indulged her and her temper always remembering the fight that 'Victoria' had put up, to get up and be going.

Many years later when an aunt had a fall and a similar operation in one leg, she didn't get out of bed for a year and had a couple of nurses attending to her as the members of her family all left each morning for work or college. She was often given the example of 'Victoria's recovery and strength of will but she would not take the challenge. When praised, Mausi would sigh and say the equivalent of 'God helps those who help themselves' and continue with her tirade against that naughty child or lazy elder who rushed with vessels when she was nearly done!



Meenakshi's husband gave her a surprised look of approval. Maybe story telling was not a quality he had associated with his efficient practical wife. Only few members of the group had been attentive during the narrative. Many were looking scared and anxious. A few took up vantage points near the big windows watching the rain pounding against them. A few others were quite dispiritedly sitting on the chairs strewn here and there. To encourage the storyteller and take our minds away from the immediate, I tried to bring in others into the conversation.

‘Well! We surely have made a beginning! Is there anyone else that has a tale to relate?’

‘Are you looking for stories of heroic deeds?’ asked an interested onlooker.

‘If by that you mean stories of people being rescued during a terrorist attack or high mountains being conquered, well not really. But if there is a true-life story of that genre, then why not?’

It was nearly three in the afternoon. We were quite exhausted and anxious: when was all this going to end. There did not seem to be any recession of waters that surrounded the hotel. For all we knew, we were marooned and maybe all others were saved! This thought along with how our near and dear ones must be crazed for some information of our whereabouts made it more tension ridden. The teacher who had brought the school kids for the project now took hold of the situation and opening a large tin of biscuits passed it out saying, ‘Here please help yourself. I am glad the children who accompanied me for the bio project left safely on the 24.’

‘Why didn’t you go too’ I asked.

‘We really had a busy time collecting our specimens and I wanted to spend a couple of days exploring more of the Andamans. After being with twenty enthusiastic students, I really needed a break’ she said with a wan smile.

‘Do you have some story to tell’ I asked, sure that a teacher would have something to cheer us up with her varied experiences dealing with children.

‘I shall tell a simple tale; I don’t know what you would classify it as: heroism or fool hardiness. I leave it to you.’ And so, saying she narrated this story.

You've Just Finished your Free Sample

Enjoyed the preview?

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