

My sister Viji

Prabha Jagannathan

*Special Correspondent, The Economic Times (II Floor),
TOI Bldg, Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi 110002*
prabha_j@yahoo.com

When Viji's remains were found in the summer of 1987, life turned to a sepia-toned freeze frame for us, her family. For years, my sister and I shared an intense relationship, so intense that I felt all her pain within my flesh and blood, but was helpless to change anything for the better. She was three years older than me and I loved her beyond measure and was even in awe of her. Months after she died, I would hold the locks of her curly mop in my hand and feel the body warmth emanate. If I could have died instead, I would gladly have in a nanosecond. Years after she was gone, she communicated with me through amazingly surreal 3D dreams. As in life, she seemed intense, committed, exceptional and magnetic.

Ironically, as much as she crafted a facade of immense strength against the vicissitudes she faced in life, I was caught completely off guard at times by how vulnerable she really was. As a result, I grew to be secretly very protective of her; she would have rejected any overt display of this. Nature was her real family. A special family where she belonged intrinsically, it was her special, secret retreat. When she transformed this passionate calling into her profession later in life, I think she invested all her energy and emotion into this family and expected a reciprocal investment. But when she went, she perceived herself quite alone and lost; the ground beneath her feet had caved in. Unfortunately, my family and I could help little, as she was already lost in the labyrinths of that world.

What made Viji special was her deep rooted commitment to the things she believed in, coupled with a strong sense of social justice. When she was a mere child in Bangalore in the early 1970s, we watched our perfectly 'normal' mother succumb to schizophrenia. Viji, then seven or eight, must have been terrified and helpless. But she transformed herself into a bulwark of strength that protected our

mother from our grandmother's taunts, shepherded her sisters together and defended our family, with clenched little fists, against assaults from the outside world (our father was usually posted out of town on work). She became extremely sensitive to the underdogs of the world, unmindful of the cost. How much of a toll it took on that little girl I cannot even begin to fathom.

When she was only about eight, she taught us social justice by making us experience the life of the underprivileged. She made us cook rice in earthenware pots in the open and eat it with salt and green chilli pepper like the domestic help did at home. She taught me why not to use the word 'negro', after hearing a story from a granduncle in the army, which made a deep impression on her. To date, she is the only eight year old I know who invented three different class versions (super rich, middle class and dirt poor) of the same game.

Viji could identify planes high up in the sky by their tail lights, and converse with cats and dogs; she crafted 'expeditions' where the two of us would troop off to trace the mouth of the Cooum River (and I didn't know how to swim and both of us nearly drowned in the sea when we got there). When she was 12 she shinned up vertical pipes three floors high and scared away two cooks from our house by waving at them from the window while we anxiously watched from below with a prayer for a trampoline. For me, she was George in the *Famous Five* series, Jo in *Little Women* and Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind*. Like little Nan, she taught me how to strengthen myself emotionally by ramming my head at top speed into a wall!

As a child, she was enthralled by tales of Africa narrated by our granduncle, an army doctor who invented Bridge cards in Braille. She wrote a beautiful poem as a tribute to Africa, titled that. It

featured the Serengeti and Victoria Falls and all the fauna she longed to see. She wanted to grow up in a hurry and work there. When we were in school, she collected old copies of National Geographic and made the likes of Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, Birute Galdikas, Jacques Cousteau and Reinhold Messner her special heroes.

She used her pocket money to become a proud member of the Jersey Wildlife Trust when Gerald Durrell first launched it, and cried copiously when the Durrells broke up. When she was a schoolgirl, she befriended homeless animals of all sorts and brought them home to love. Our pets included monkeys, white mice, a chameleon, sand boas, and once, even a little fox. There was Massey, the bonnet monkey (she was banished from the main house for almost three days by my father for keeping it, but Viji finally won), Melvin (the flat nosed, pink cane turtle), Emma (the plain Tranvancore turtle she brought back also from the Silent Valley) and Millicent, the giant spider who birthed several hundred hairy children all over our bedroom. The plant she planted at my father's place is now a 22 year old giant, and shades the entire width of the road.

When we were kids in Bangalore, she would lead her sisters, Vid and I, into the real school of the world, through fields, rivulets. She taught us about birds and and sounds, that baleen was the hair in the mouth of the whale to trap plankton, and that you used salt to ease leeches off your legs in the jungle. She taught us to handle a gecko's eggs carefully while cleaning the house so that they hatched. She taught us an alternate reality where eternal values like Truth and Beauty merged into a seamless spiritual whole.

Viji's choice of a vocation was a natural progression. The day Rom Whitaker agreed to accept her as an assistant at the Snake Park, she was elated and took to her work like fish to water. That was in junior college. But as graduation drew near, she had to battle acute criticism, as with other decisions in her life. Even our rather progressive father suddenly had his doubts when he realised that Viji intended to become a 'glorified snake charmer'. Years of field trips, projects and research followed. These were really Viji's happiest, most fulfilling years, with Rom as her

mentor. When she returned from the Chambal ravines, the Sunderbans or Silent Valley (both us attended protest lectures against the proposed dam), she had exciting and scary stories to tell of dacoits, crocodiles, tiger pug marks and pachyderms almost mauling her in her little tent at night. Absorbing her tales while massaging her tired feet, I would forget my bottled-up anger over her 'borrowing' my favourite jeans for her trip! She loved the Wynad district and urged, in right earnest, my father to buy some land in the forest.

Viji was a fiery, attractive young woman in her twenties when she had to sort out her inner devils. She sought to throw herself deeper into her work as many of us do. But on the work-front she suffered a crisis of confidence when she felt that others were staking claim to her life's work. She was devastated when she perceived the failure of friends and colleagues to place confidence in her abilities .

All this was just before she left for the US. She wrote several pained and confused letters then and I gleaned that her personal crisis was only worsening there. After one particularly disturbing letter, I made her come home immediately because we wanted her to sort herself out at home first. When I later visited my father's home on holiday, the immensity of Viji's breakdown hit me. I watched my strong and beautiful sister unravelling into a mass of nerves, virtually turning into a little child. All attempts to comfort her and absorb her pain did not help to exorcise her personal demons. To make matters worse, she perceived rejection from the very people she considered her real family. Sadly, many of them could not comprehend the contours of schizophrenia.

When she described the experience of an ECT prescribed by the rather conservative psychiatrist I could have ripped the man apart, limb to limb. We thanked the powers that be that cerebral lobotomy was an outdated psychiatric practise to treat mental illness by then. Despite taunts, we took the informed decision of getting her out of hospital treatment and involving ourselves actively in her therapy. My father scouted for a progressive psychiatrist and found Dr. Rudran at Schizophrenia Research Foundation. In those terrifying days, if there was an ephemeral glimpse of the Viji of old,

it was when she returned from visits to the Crocodile Bank. Strangely enough, just before she was found dead after several weeks of disappearance from home, she seemed to be regaining an iota of her former confidence. She smiled more often. And then she was gone and there were only bones.

Some of her favourite songs were *Yellow Brick Road* by Elton John, *The Logical Song* by Super

Tramp and *Vincent* by Don McLean. Her favourite poem was *The Road Less Travelled* by Robert Frost. For us, the news that the forest cane turtle was named after her is a 19 year catharsis, a long frozen denouement, a vindication of a faith kept in Viji's worldview. For Viji, who loved to quote from Frost's '*Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening*', the honour bestowed on her would be a soul-warming homecoming and the final sleep resting on the benediction of promises finally kept.