

ARMAAN

A DREAMING HEART

THE JOURNEY

“Cabin crew prepare for take off, please ” the voice of the pilot echoed in the corridor.

He clutched the armrests as the plane picked up speed on the runway. Not from any fear of flying — quite the opposite. But, this was only the second time he had been on a plane.

It had been a long time since he had last travelled. He still remembered when his parents had taken him to England for the first time... now, he was 25 and it was time for him to travel again.

He dared a glance out of the window to wish a last goodbye to India, and imagined his parents and sister at the viewing area, watching the plane and waving him off. He knew that he wouldn't see them for a while and this made him feel very depressed.

Armaan was a tall boy and felt uncomfortable in the narrow space of the seat; however, he closed his brown eyes and tried to relax.

He knew he was nice and friendly to people, he was also kind and honest, but most of all he thought he was brave. Of course, he couldn't forget what had happened that doomed day. He was aware that he was going to leave his country because he had

behaved wrongly. First of all, he had risked going to jail. Besides, he could not get rid of the terrible thought that he had disappointed and hurt his family, and that was the worst thing. His mother kept on telling him to drop it, but he wasn't able to leave it. The two families had been quarrelling for some economic reasons... Armaan had seen his parents becoming more and more worried, and he wanted to help them. But he didn't know how. Then something went wrong. The quarrel, broken out with Kamal, the eldest son of the other family, had been very fierce outside the pub, that night. After a few days, Armaan couldn't let it be and went to Kamal's house and challenged him and his family. The quarrel had degenerated and had ended in a fight. Armaan had not been able to stop the fight and to avoid stabbing Kamal in the liver. He collapsed and started to bleed. The fight had created great interest in the neighborhood. Everybody was watching and everybody knew who he was. As soon as he realized that the fact was serious, he quickly ran off. When he finally reached home he immediately told his mother what had happened. She immediately started to cry and told him to fly away.

All this had happened and he could not do anything to make it go away.

Armaan tried to relax but every single minute of that unfortunate time came up to his mind, making him feel inadequate, weird. After a while, he started thinking about how his life would be in London, and finally he fell asleep.

He woke up as the same voice of the pilot was announcing:

“Ladies and gentlemen, as we start our descent, please make sure your seat backs and trays are in their full upright position. Make sure your seat belt is securely fastened and all carry-on

luggage is stowed underneath the seat in front of you or in the overhead lockers. Thank you.”

At the airport he was searching for his luggage but he couldn't find it anywhere. It was two hours before they gave him his big suitcase which had travelled on a different plane. Armaan therefore was worried and puzzled when he met his cousin in the hall and Veer, who was his uncle's son, was surprised to see his sad and tired face. Armaan told his cousin that he couldn't find his luggage and his cousin chuckled: "What matters is not losing oneself... and you are here safe and sound with all your 'things' ... one day I'll tell you a story about that".



AT THE AIRPORT

When he landed at Luton airport, he was really surprised. Everything was so big, and it was so cold and rainy. In India, it was hot and damp.

They went towards the parking area to pick up the car. Veer had a Ford Fiesta, one of the most popular cars in London. It was a racy red one, five seats and apparently it seemed very comfortable to sit and relax. So Veer helped Armaan put his suitcases on the luggage rack and they were ready to leave for Veer's. His journey to his new home took almost one hour and a half. His cousin lived in a quiet and peaceful area in West London, Hammersmith, crossed by the River Thames. On the way to Veer's, Armaan observed the landscape out of the car window and noticed how different the new town was. Indian roads were crowded with people. Here they were crowded with cars, instead. As soon as he entered his cousin's house he was astonished.

"Our house in India was different. We had three bedrooms and a kitchen. Here in London, you have only one bedroom and a kitchen" commented Armaan surprisingly.

Veer answered chuckling: "Here, big houses are really expensive. There's no surprise, when you get used to it, this house will seem ordinary to you."

"Okay. Hmm, I'm a bit hungry, shall we have something to eat, please?" he asked "I'm starving. I didn't eat anything on the plane.."

Veer replied: “ Let’s have dinner, then. I’ll cook some English dishes for you”.

“What is typical here?” asked Armaan.

“Jacket potato: have you ever heard about it”? Veer asked, smiling.

“No, never...and it sounds a little bit strange for me... but I’ll definitely try it!” added Armaan curiously.

After having a quick dinner and a shower, Armaan went to bed because he was exhausted from the long journey.

A NEW BEGINNING

The following morning he woke up early, he greeted Veer and told him that he wanted to go to the grocery store. Veer decided that he would go with him since he didn’t know any English shops and the British currency. When they were coming back home, Armaan saw a group of young people playing cricket in the park and he told Veer to stop his car because he wanted to see how they played.

He went to them and asked: “I would like to play cricket with you, guys”

“Who are you and what do you want from us?” said one of them.

“My name is Armaan and I’m from India, I am new in this country” Armaan replied.

“Oh I see, and what do you want from us? asked a boy who seemed to be the leader of the group.

Armaan said “I would like to play cricket with you guys, if it’s not a problem!”

The same boy stated: “Ok, show us what you can do”!!

“Sure, I will!” Armaan replied proudly.

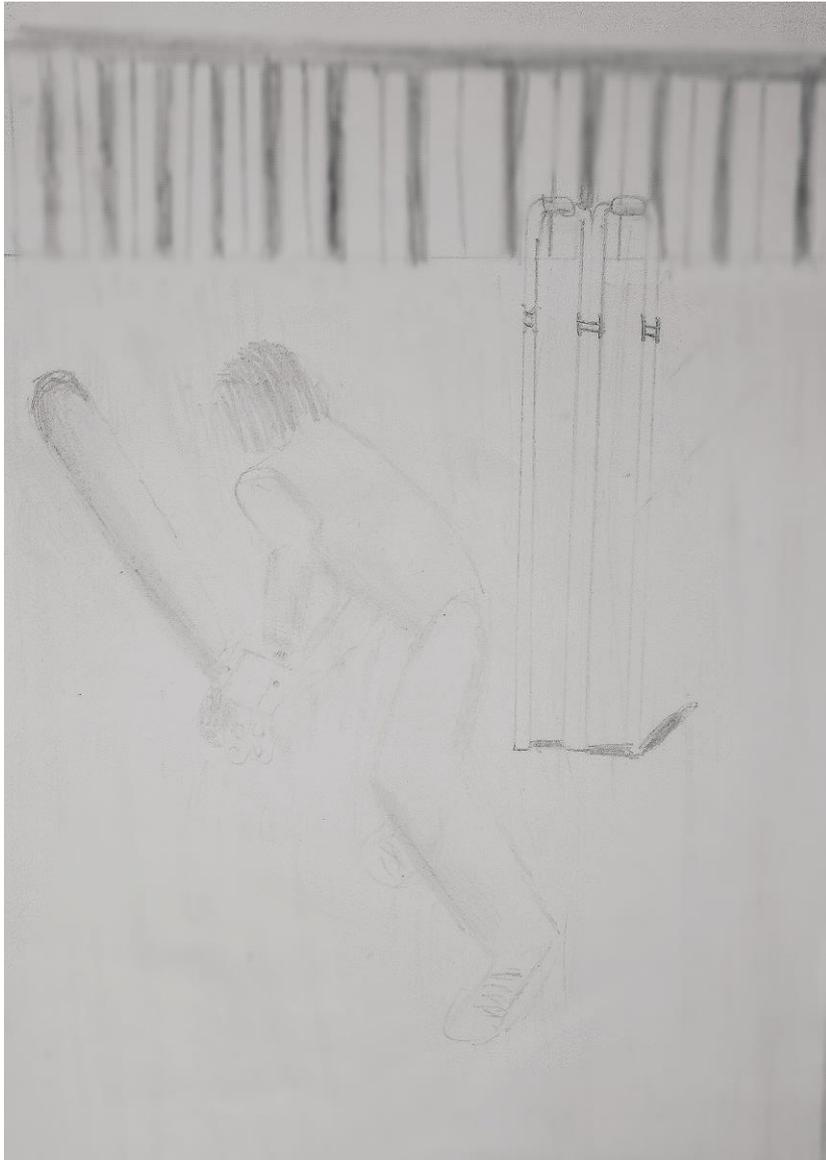
“Where do you want to play”? Asked the rival.

“In India I was a batsman” answered Armaan.

“Uhhh, this boy is going to be stronger than you, Boss” said the youngest player in the group.

“No way... I’m better than him, look at what I’m about to do!”

The group was then divided into two teams. There wasn’t the right number of players as in a standard cricket match, but it did not matter to them. Everything was ready. Armaan won the toss and chose to bat first. The openers played aggressively and in the first fifteen overs, they scored a lot of runs. It was fascinating to see the white ball racing across the green grass or flying in the golden sunlight. Veer was happily watching the game. There were also some other spectators. Armaan felt like Sunil Gavaskar, the God of Indian National Team. Then the rival team created panic in Armaan’s batting line and got three quick wickets. He thought that his team would definitely lose the match but the turning point came when one of the fast bowlers took the wicket of the opener and that was the point they headed towards victory. Armaan was thrilled.



He started to jump up and down and ran towards his cousin, but the opponent batsman tripped him up and Armaan fell.

“Who has made me fall?” shouted Armaan. Nobody answered and everybody was laughing at him. He felt a bit embarrassed and annoyed. He also started to feel that his ankle was beginning to swell.

”Nobody has ever treated me like this. When I was in India I had lots of friends and my parents loved me, they sent me to London to forget what happened that day. I remember how we

played cricket with no worries and how beautiful it was when we all played with crackers and fireworks on Diwali” Armaan said crying.

Veer had been following everything and realized that Armaan had been injured. He walked towards him and asked him what had happened. He quickly helped him to stand up and took him home. Veer put some ice on Armaan’s leg and took care of him.

Fortunately it was nothing serious. Armaan recovered quickly from the injury.

THE TURNING POINT

A few days passed. Armaan spent this time watching tv, listening to the radio to improve his vocabulary, going shopping: basically, he was trying to get used to his new life. However, he was still feeling incomplete, empty. A sense of “loneliness” began to move inside him. Life in the capital was so different. He missed the crowds and cultural comforts of his home country. There, he was surrounded by people — the cook, the cleaning lady, the vendors who come to the door selling eggs, fish, vegetables or milk. There were uncles, aunts, cousins, second- and third-cousins of his extended family. He started to think to himself:

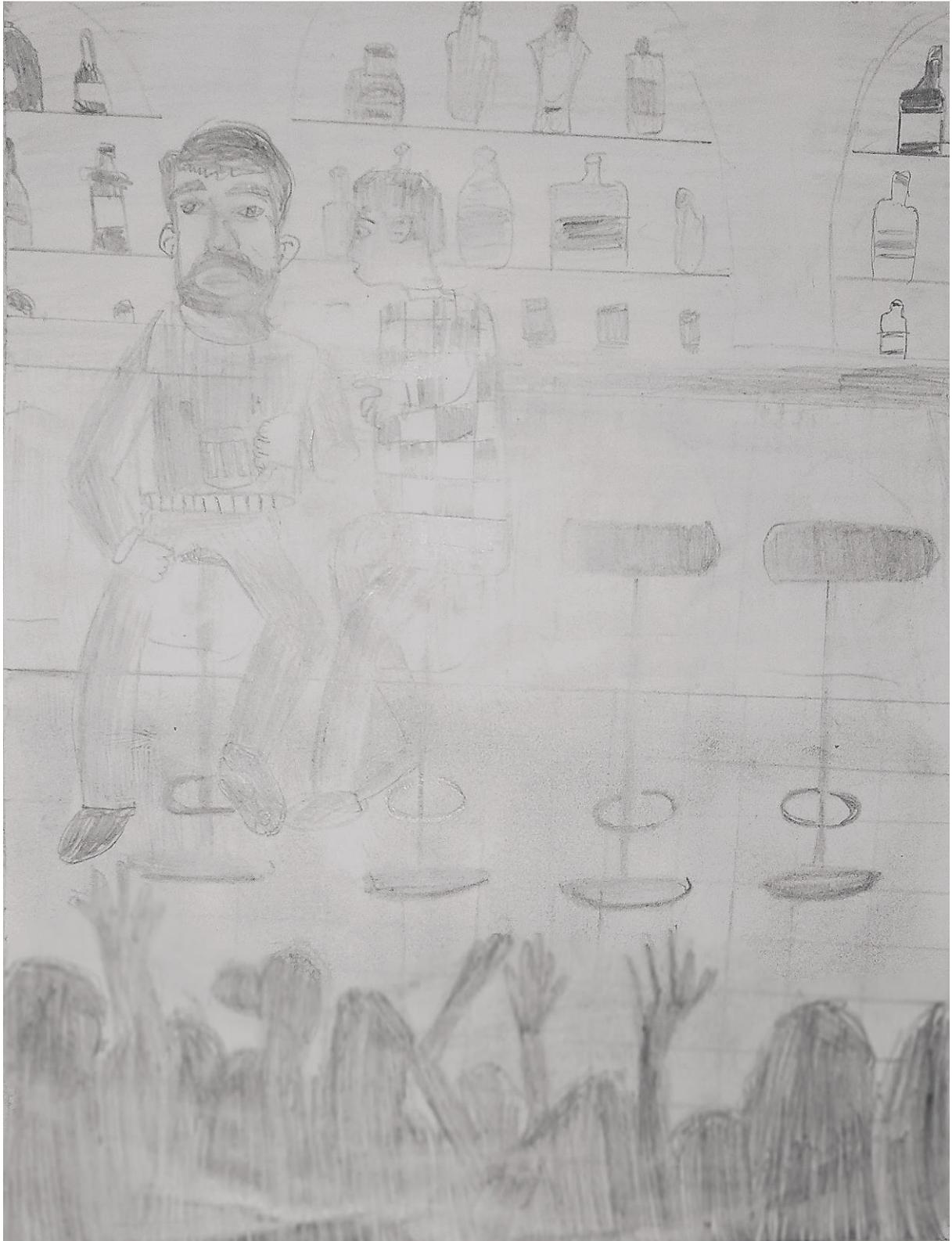
“If you are a friend of a friend you instantly become a friend, and that means you are invited for a meal even if you are a

person they have just met, and of course you are gladly offered a helping hand. Over here, things seem completely different”.

Veer noticed that his cousin was a little bit down and so he suggested going out for a drink.

" I will take you tonight to a pub where you can let off steam, my dear cousin" promised Veer. Armaan was not so convinced but in the end he accepted. Both dressed smartly and got ready to go to the pub where Veer always went to in Ealing. Veer called a friend of his who worked for a mini cab service and at around eight he arrived to pick them up and take them to Ealing. The journey took about ten minutes and they were at THE KINGS ARMS.

The pub wasn't really big inside, but it was very welcoming and it had a rustic look. There were about thirty comfortable seats where you could eat and chat. There were a lot of people drinking gallons and gallons of beer, in all about thirty of them. The people looked friendly and happy and a lot of them went back and forth to get beer.



As soon as they entered the pub Armaan got close to the counter to ask for two pints and timidly asked:

“Can I have two pints of Fuller’s please?” A group of English lads were staring at him and as soon as he had finished ordering, they started making fun of his strong accent and offending him. Armaan felt that he was getting really upset. He would have liked to have walked up to those boys and firmly state:

“Excuse me, it’s not fair to make fun of a person in such a way!”

However, he restrained himself and thought twice. He paid for the two beers and went to the table where his cousin was waiting for him. Veer saw the whole scene and as he joined the table he tried to calm him down, starting to tell him about his first experience.

“You know Armaan, when I first came here, London seemed like a thick, tangled jungle to me. I was disoriented, isolated: I didn’t know anyone, and guess what? When I arrived, spending all the money my parents had saved in their lives, my luggage got lost and I was alone, with nothing. I started to cry and felt desperate, but a lady at baggage reclaim said ‘losing things is not so important. What matters is not losing relationships and believing in oneself’.

Armaan listened carefully to what his cousin was narrating.

“I didn’t know where to go, I didn’t know where to start going but then, I went on my way,” continued Veer, moving on remembering all the past events.

“As I was walking along the streets alone and with only my papers and very little money, maybe only enough to live there for a week or two, I looked at the British people and sometimes they stopped and stared at me. I wanted to ask them something but I couldn’t speak English very well, and my strong Indian accent made them laugh”.

While Veer was narrating, Armaan seemed to be relaxed so dewy-eyed Veer carried on talking.

“The same situation kept happening several times. This is a great country, don't get me wrong. But when I first arrived here, I was almost rejected. I had people walk up to me and say things like, “**** *you stinky Indian, why don't you go back to where you come from?*” I felt miserable. They always laughed at me, or better they insulted me. I was often embarrassed too. Later I grew annoyed because no one liked to talk to me, to stay close to me. But then I said to myself: “*they don't know anything about me!*” I felt it wasn't fair and I decided I wouldn't let anyone step on me. I refused to be a doormat, and this determination helped me to strive on. As time went by, London Transport needed workers to rebuild the trains and so they began recruiting new people. I applied for that job by mistake and I was not convinced at all about it. But then I thought: “*Why not?*” Eventually, I got it and soon I was made a porter and then I was moved to the railway station platform as an assistant. Fate wanted me to like this work and I am still doing it with great passion. Being adopted by a new community takes time and effort: it depends mainly on you but also on the people you meet. Sometimes one single meeting can make the difference.

As the final bell rang in the pub, they both had the last sip and they went out where there was the cab which had just arrived to drive them home.

On their way back home, Armaan was meditating on his cousin's words. He thought about his parents, especially his mother. He decided he would put such an effort to have her forgive him and to make her proud of him again. He would look for a good job, get his own place: in other words, he would become a man of respect.

THE INTERVIEW

The next morning Veer went to work and when he came back home he found a marvellous dinner. Armaan had prepared everything as gratitude for what his cousin was doing for him. Armaan had cooked it, following a recipe by his mother. He remembered when she prepared it when he was a child, and he tried to put as much heart as he could into it.

Veer appreciated the meal and he was really surprised by Armaan's culinary qualities. After dinner Veer exclaimed with surprise:

"I didn't know that you were such a good chef, my dear cousin!"

"Why don't you try to find a job as a cook? There are plenty of Indian restaurants over here!" he suggested in a convincing manner.

"You're joking, I suppose" said Armaan smiling. "I'm not that good!" he continued.

"Yes, you are. Believe me and do believe in yourself!" his cousin answered back "You're really skilled"!What do you think?"

"I have to think about it ... Arman repeated decisively.

They had a mug of tea, watched a comedy show on tv and then they went to sleep.

At seven the following morning Armaan suddenly woke up. His cousin had just gone downstairs to have breakfast before going to work, but the alarm was still ringing.

"Please Armaan, switch it off for me" said Veer from downstairs.

“Breakfast is ready, I’m off...I’m in a hurry. See you this evening” he said as he rushed out.

After a quick shower Armaan had breakfast. Veer’s words were still on his mind: “In my opinion, you are very good at cooking... I think you should look for a job in a restaurant...I’m sure you love cooking... everyone will admire your talent and no one will make fun of you...”

He had some toast and a hot cup of coffee, then he got dressed and went out.

Armaan stopped in front of a newsagent’s, walked in and started leafing through some magazines. He found a page in which the PST Perfect Chicken restaurant was looking for a new chef. He bought the paper and went straight back home. Armaan looked for the telephone number and called the restaurant.

“Good morning this is PST Perfect Chicken, how can I help?”

"Good morning, my name’s Armaan Charan and I’m calling for your advert for a chef” he announced with a trembling voice.

“I see, can you repeat your name, please?” asked a female voice kindly.

"I’m Armaan Charan. Would like me to spell it”?

“No, thank you. Would you like to come here tomorrow morning for an interview? The owner should be here early, so you can come at nine. Would that be alright or right for you”? she asked.

“That’s perfect, I’ll see you tomorrow, then” answered Armaan, feeling more comfortable.

The next day Armaan was very nervous but he arrived at the appointment on time. He got smartly dressed. He wanted to impress the restaurant manager, because he really cared about that job.

The same girl, who had spoken with on the phone the previous day, walked towards him and greeted him politely.

“Good morning, you should be Mr Charan.”

“Good morning...Yes, it’s me”! replied Armaan, a bit worried.

“I’ll take you upstairs to the manager office”.

The boss’s office was big: it had one big chair for the boss, one big table with some documents on top of it and two chairs for clients; the walls were white and it had five big windows, from where you could admire the city landscape.

After being introduced, Armaan entered the room.

“Good morning, I’m Armaan Charan. Nice to meet you.

“ Good morning, I’m Akshay Kumar. It’s my pleasure to meet you too.

Mr Kumar questioned Armaan for a few personal details. They were both of Indian origin, even though the chief was born in England. They had a chat to break the ice then moved on to ask him about his work experience.

“So, what kind of work experience have you gained”?

“To be honest, I haven’t got any, but I’m a very good cook and when I cook I feel happy and I am passionate about it. I have just come here from India and I need to have a proper job, a job to survive but first of all, a job that I like”! explained Armaan.

“That sounds good, Mr Charan! I really need a suitable cook for this restaurant. The job will consist of three weeks of trial. At the end of that period, if you are as skilled as you say, if you respect our law, if you get on well with your colleagues, the job will be yours, permanently. But let me tell you one thing: at first sight, you seem a person of trust and I am convinced you will climb the ladder” the manager concluded.

“Thank you so much. I really appreciate it”! Armaan stated.

“Well, will you start your trial tomorrow”? asked the boss.

“Definitely, I will, I can’t wait”!! Armaan agreed.

Armaan took leave and set off towards home.

Armaan was so happy that he had finally got the job.

“To be a chef in an Indian restaurant” he thought . He was so excited that he felt on top of the world. He looked forward to telling Veer about the good news and his hope for the future.

He didn’t take the bus to return home. He felt like walking. He breathed deeply as he realized his life was taking a huge turn.

