But I was going to conquer the world, and change it.

I graduated in the summer of 2008 from the University of Manchester, with an MSc in International Relations, or IR as everyone in my programme called it.

IR had that professional ring to it, that globe-trotting sound about it, features and styles that I and my classmates from thirty-eight different countries and six continents tried very hard to live up to.

In the formal clothes that we wore to class, and the books and magazines that we mentioned in every other conversation that we engaged in.

In our struts. Our demeanour.

In the questions we asked in class; in the discussions during lectures by men and women we considered to be important. Leaders of government and captains of industry, folks whose careers we held in awe, whose resumes we wanted to emulate, whose articles in prominent journals we read diligently.

We spoke with regularity and vicarious pride of the students in classes above ours who graduated with job offers from the United Nations, Lehman Brothers, the European Union, FIFA, Goldman Sachs, and the crème dele crème of the world's most prestigious organizations. The Global Fortune 500.

The world was made for the few of us to revel in.

"You have been chosen," read the first sentence of an email welcoming us to the programme, detailing the expectations and the possibilities of our Master's.

"The Chosen Ones," proclaimed the silver and gold banner of the first official Welcome Week party.

And like those in the years above ours, we the chosen ones were going to join these wonderful and global organizations too.

"The UN, sir!" I answered when on our first class was asked by a professor where each of us wanted to work. The path we saw our careers taking.

I really believed that I was going to change the world.

I, a 25-year-old man from a hill station in the Northeast of India, a place that figured very little in the national conversation, let alone the lofty world of global organizations. It was a chip on my shoulder. And I welcomed the added pressure that I placed on my young shoulders.

I was going to change the world, and conquer it.

When the first remnants of the Recession appeared, few of us in class believed that it would affect any of us.

A bunch of us were gathered in a pub in when news of a major American bank filing for bankruptcy broke.

"What does Bear Sterns have to do with what we study?" someone asked, more of a justification than a real question.

"I agree, it's a tiny American problem," another chimed.

"But listen to this," I said, reading from the Financial Times. "This is just the start of a much larger problem; Wall Street is anxious that Lehman Brothers could be the next one on the chopping block."

Silence.

That silence, when I look back was ominous.

While every day before that had been one of confidence and the multitude of possibilities, every new one after that afternoon in the pub reeked of angst and a chipping away at one's sureness.

Then financial institutions started failing everywhere. Jobs disappeared. Trillions of dollars wiped out from stock exchanges all over the world.

I had applied for training schemes with a non-profit organization that was associated with the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, and an environmental protection agency that worked in Argentina. While the former's Job and Internship portal stopped functioning, the latter, I found out after scouring the internet, had been disbanded.

Ours was a selective class of sixty, and fifty-seven graduated without job offers. Even the ones who wanted to rejoin the jobs that they had quit to enroll in the programme couldn't. Out of the three who managed to get jobs, two joined their father's companies, and one the Ministry of Petroleum in her country.

While we eventually found solace and commonality in our shared predicament, in private I wallowed in the unfortunate of my circumstances.

I cursed the awful hand that I had been dealt.

Why did the fucking recession have to happen during my time?

Why do bad things happen to good people?

So it felt right when my parents were one of three who did not attend the graduation ceremony. While the absence of my folks were out of their own

accord, Sahar's from Iran were denied visas, and Marbo's from Ghana had been late in applying for theirs.

7 Years-The time the bank had given us to pay back all of the money borrowed. Also, the number of years my parents had been separated by then. They had been divorced for four. They had not spoken for probably the entirety of that duration and both were happier for it, happy in their own lives.

20 lakhs or 17 thousand Great British Pounds-the amount that the bank meted out, which was enough cover tuition costs.

3 and 4 thousand pounds-what my mother and father lent me for accommodation, and cost of living in a foreign and expensive country.

12 months- A year after my graduation and I still hadn't managed to find a job that I considered was worthy of my degree. My B.A in English and Philosophy from St. Stephen's, India's most well known centre of higher education, and my Master's.

I spent a very harrowing 4 months after my graduation in London with the last of the money that the education loan, and my parents provided trying to research on organizations and firms that were hiring. They weren't.

But I swam against the tide and convinced myself that somehow I would manage to get a foot in the door. Doors that were closing at shocking and unprecedented frequencies.

But alas, my United kingdom visa ran out and I returned to the musky and cramped of India, a jobless and penniless man.

27 years old- yes, a 27-year-old unemployed man with two bank accounts. A Lloyds Bank one that had 12 pounds and 49p, and a State Bank

of India account that had nothing. It was the middle of October but Kolkata was still a hot and sweltering nightmare.

After what was the most turbulent flight I had ever been on, I was greeted by a bald and bespectacled man at Immigration who initiated a trite and quirky conversation.

“So you were in the UK?” he asked me with a grin as he slowly flipped through the pages of my passport.

“Yes, sir,” I replied. Immigration and police officers I am always polite and serious with no matter how knackered or drunk I may be.

“I have never been to the UK but I have always wanted to visit, ” he said.

“OK,” I said wryly.

“Do you know my cousin?” he asked with all the seriousness that he could muster.

“Your cousin?” The flow of the conversation flummoxed me.

What did any of his questions have to do with him stamping my passport and allowing the both of us, and the people waiting in line behind me, from continuing on with our daily and respective lives.

“Yes, my cousin Abhijeet.” He replied in a most matter-of-fact way.

“I’m sorry I don’t, sir.” I couldn’t have been more condescending.

“How do you not know him?” It sounded like he was scolding me.

I remember this exchange vividly years later, and the thing that perplexes me still was how calm and serious the Immigration Officer was, like I were somewhat distant relative or an acquaintance he’d met after a year abroad, and was privy to the workings of his immediate family.

"Am I supposed to know him?" I asked again, still flabbergasted at the conversation I was having with a complete stranger, a conversation that was dragging on for an amount of time that even the most lackadaisical Indian government employees should/would/could consider a wastage of time and tax-payers' money.

"Well, he also lives in the UK."

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What did I do for the 8 months after that?

In a word-Nothing.

The Master's at the University of Manchester was realized only after I had managed to persuade my divorced parents to mortgage our house which they no longer shared to fund my Graduate degree. A degree that I had convinced my mother and father, and two siblings would catapult me to a career in the United Nations, the frustration of not a single job offer anywhere, of countless emails to offices of the United Nations and its various departments without so much as a single confirmation or reply, eventually managed to wear me down.

And disillusioned and uninspired became the themes of my everyday.

Days of being back home and feeling like an out-and-out failure because of the educational loan that I was legally bound to repay back but had neither idea of how to nor the resources to do it with. An educational loan that my mother and father had to share the responsibility of paying on time, because of the 12% rate of interest.

I spent a total of one whole week sending out my Resume to the most well-known, the most sough-after, the most prestigious the most Non-

Governmental Organizations like the Ford Foundation and the World Wild Fund, and a few more that had Indian offices, and getting rejected by each and every single one, I gave up and went back home to the house I grew up in.

It was weird because the man whom my mother shared a room with was no longer my father. And he couldn't have been more different from my father.

He spoke and walked like he was an usher in a crowded movie-hall helping people to their seats. While he never said anything nasty to me, I overheard him raising a concern to my mother about my daily drunkenness.

My father, whom my mother blamed for the breakdown of the marriage and the divorce had moved in with a girl I used to go to school with. My parents had married too young when my mother became pregnant with my sister at 16.

While my two siblings disagreed wholeheartedly with the divorce and my father's choice in a partner, I loved it and was extremely happy that my mother and father found happiness away from one another.

I understood of course that the disapproval of my siblings stemmed from the fact that both of them were older than our father's new partner.

Then one morning, still hung-over from the festivities of the night before, my father barged into my room and puled me out of bed. My parents had taken the joint decision that their expenses had increased a fold and two, and would no longer be able to make the monthly payments to the bank.

In my still-drunken morning stupor I argued that I did not have the money to be able to make the requisite payments on the education loan.

"You spend your days drinking with your friends, and smoking weed," my mother thundered.

"Hold on, what are the both of you doing here?" My mind was still bewildered by my father's presence in a house he swore he'd never come back to. The separation and divorce had been messy, but that's a story for a sunnier day!

"Your mother and I want you to move out of Shillong and get a job somewhere, anywhere," my father added.

I decided to leave a few days after that, and had to decide on the big city in the country that would work the best for me. Mumbai would be a tad too expensive, and I disliked New Delhi after having lived there for my undergrad. Would Bangalore work?-But the thought that I might have to find work in a call-centre made me sick. So I crossed it off my list, and Chennai, too, because every story I had ever heard of the city of Chennai indicated boring as fuck.

So I settled on Kolkata, a city that evoked no emotion in me. I'd been there once and it was as disheveled as one would expect a city run by Communists to be.

In college, I'd work for the student newspaper and the experience wasn't bad. I messaged a former classmate who I was never really friends with in college, but we liked each other's photos on Facebook. He suggested I email the editor of a newspaper he used to report for.

I went to work for a major newspaper and they paid me eighteen thousand rupees to report on legal issues. The editor, a man who wore a Led Zeppelin tee every casual Friday, but tucked in tightly to reveal what people in the office commented was a paunch that stared at you. His initial offer was

fifteen thousand, and the sunken feeling of being offered a salary that I felt was at the very least a sixth too less will stay with me forever.

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“What?” he asked back.

“That’s for a month?”

“Yes, fifteen thousand rupees a month.”

“Wow!”

“You look dejected, is everything ok?”

“Well, to be completely honest with you, I don’t think I am.”

“Why is that?”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a bit too less.”

“It’s more than what I’ve ever offered a newbie.”

“But I have a master’s from England.”

“So what?”

“Doesn’t that count for anything?”

“Not for the position that you’re apply, young man!”

“My rent alone is seven thousand rupees.”

“You could live in a less expensive place.”

The realization that I was at the bottom of the pool, the depths of the employable, was jarring. That my degrees which should have been my catapult to a more advantageous starting point had neither aura nor effect dented my confidence and self worth.

“These are hard times, young man, very hard times; you know how many people are vying for this same position?”

"I understand that, Sir, it's just that I was hoping it would be a higher figure, at least more than fifteen."

"I can offer you eighteen!"

"Eighteen thousand?"

"I hope you're happy with that because that is as high as I can go."

I had to spend most of my working day at the local courts in Kolkata, which would have been fine other than the fact that all proceedings were in Bengali, and I spoke not a word of it. Also, I neither had a law degree nor was remotely interested in it.

After much huffing and puffing, I did the next best thing and hired for a daily rate of eighty rupees or one British Pound and some change a local gentleman to help me with the translation.

I also paid for his tea and cigarettes which in retrospect wasn't the smartest idea because of the copious smoking and sipping on cups of powdered-milk tea that we engaged in. Tea and cigarettes, cigarettes and tea-while we waited.

We waited everyday. We waited all the time.

For the judge to turn up.

For the lawyers to come back from their lunches.

For files that would go missing for hours and days.

One day in June, in the most humid month of the year, in weather that I would only describe as balls-crushing, we wasted an entire day standing outside the court house because the door had not been opened.

Let me rephrase that, the person who was responsible of opening and closing the court house had forgotten to do the one task his job required of him, and was nowhere to be found.

He lived in a dilapidated house behind the court house with his wife, his mother, and seven children. The mother argued incessantly with her daughter-in-law, and on more than one occasion their argument spilled on to the premises of the court house.

According to three of his eldest children, he had come back home the previous night, drunk beyond his mind, in the middle of another mother and daughter-in-law showdown and hit his wife across her face. She fell backwards and in a single motion managed to pull her mother-in-law to the floor. Amidst the shouting and commotion, he hit his wife two or three more times and a couple of the children in his vicinity. He swung wildly.

The wife got hold of a frying pan and smacked it on his skull. Then his mother grabbed him and they ran out of the house. And he and his mother did not return the next day at all.

But I waited.

So there I stood, and smoked, and sipped on milk-powdered tea. I, sweating profusely, and shifting uncomfortably in black formal pants that were clearly tailored for colder winters in England. And as melodramatic as this may sound, I stared at the distance and I saw a mirage.

A cigarette dangling loosely on my darkening lips, a file full of photo-copied court documents and articles tucked under my left arm, and my right hand holding a plastic cup of tea, I saw in the mirage my past and future converge.

The daughter of a high-ranking member of the Chinese Politburo who broke up with me via text message the day I returned to India, and the United Nations Secretary General Ban-Ki-Moon walking toward me.

Let me rephrase that-I walked out of the airport and put my phone back on, and hers was one of five messages. Three were from the Mobile service provider welcoming me back, and one from Dominos offering me a 'Buy 1 Get 1 Free' offer.

"I dnt thnk I cn do lng dstns n dnt cl me agn" was all she wrote.

But no sooner had their figures appeared more life-like than they vanished into the sizzling air of a busy Kolkata street.

I'd never felt more useless and helpless than I did that day.

I think a part of my soul died that day.

I was surrounded by people whose language and culture I had nothing in common with, people I wouldn't even care to notice given a different set of circumstances, people I knew I was better than by any measurable standard of development. For the love of Jesus and Allah, if it hadn't been for the stupid recession, I would be walking around the offices of the United Nations in New York, working with people who were just like me.

Instead, I was stuck there covering local legal news for a newspaper that paid me just enough to survive. Legal issues that I had to burn the midnight oil to try and understand.

But right there and then, I envied them, because in their humble surroundings, even by the less-than-average standard of the judges, lawyers, and clerks there, they were happy with their respective situations and I wasn't.

I longed to get out of there, to be in air-conditioned and fancily furnished offices. In bespoke suits as I sipped on lattes from Starbucks. After-

work drinks as I discussed Darfur and the Iraqi war, the sexual exploitation of children in Cambodia and Laos; Indo-Pakistan relations.

But it wasn't all comical tragedy, my stint as a legal correspondent.

Let me rephrase that- a correspondent who covered local legal news for a newspaper. Because of the difference in languages, between the English of the newspaper I was writing for, and the Bengali of the affairs of the district court, I tried as hard as I could to ensure that the gap between the two languages, the shortcomings of translator and translation, did not hinder what I wrote for the newspaper.

There was the case of the lady whose husband and his family chased her out of their house, and eventually asked for a divorce because she could not get pregnant. They accused her of causing the husband trauma and his family shame because no children had been born out of the marriage.

To my surprise, the court ruled in favour of the husband and his family, because the judges opined that it was the wife's duty to bear her husband children. (*they meant sons).

I interviewed the lady the day after the judgment had been delivered and while she was scared and embarrassed, and afraid that she had to go back to her parents' house in a village on the India-Bangladesh border, a part of her was relieved.

Her parents had gotten her married off, and in the process sold off most of their livestock to pay for the wedding and the dowry. Even though the Indian government had made Dowry an illegal act, it was part and parcel of tradition and culture, and things such as those do not change overnight. Especially in the heartland, in the bosom of the country.

She didn't want to go back and be a burden on her parents who by then had had their own daughters-in-law. Five wives to five sons, all cramped together under a single roof.

What would she do, I asked her. She said that she would try and find work as a live-in maid. Two of her best friends from school, before they were made to drop out at fourteen, were live-in maids in the city.

As a live-in maid, if she were fortunate enough, she'd have her own room, one that was built for the specific purpose of housing a maid, in a household that treated their maids and servants with respect.

The other end of the stick would mean a household that treated their maids like lesser human beings. But she said that although she'd prefer a semblance of the former, being independent and away from a husband and a mother-in-law that abused her mentally would be worth the roll of the dice.

I asked her if she was sad or angry or both that she could never bear children. I'll never forget my translator's laugh as she answered.

"It was never about me, I have a medical certificate from the hospital to prove it; it was my stupid husband, he could never get it up."

Eighteen thousand rupees was an amount too small for me to have any kind of social life. My drinking was restricted to a Saturday evening every fortnight. Accommodation was my biggest expense. At seven thousand rupees, it was way more than I could afford, but anything under would have been too shabby.

I did try to find places that were cheaper, but every time the broker opened the door to a new flat, my heart sunk a new low. The smells of what-the-fuck-is-that?, the ambience of grime and decrepit.

I even tried being a paying guest at a middle-class Bengali household, but that experiment lasted all of four days. A sole window that would not open no matter how hard I tried, two fans that made sounds of death, and a mattress that made my back groan.

The first morning, without so much as a warning, I awoke to the patriarch of the household at the foot of my bed. Strange!

He was wearing my t-shirt, a tee I'd placed on the side table. Stranger.

He was draped in a loin-cloth reciting what I assumed were Hindu prayers. Strangest.

And his daughter was even odder. She stared at me every chance she got. Focused stares and I always had to look away. Being a paying guest meant that the family had to provide breakfast and dinner, and so twice a day for those four days as we sat on the floor cross-legged eating dal, chapatti, vegetables, and fish for both the meals, the daughter would stare at me. She'd maneuver her hands around the big platter of food and transfer the food into her mouth and not break her stare. It was creepy and commendable.

It was the fourth day, and I came back to a room that looked like it had been turned upside down, and the patriarch's daughter napping on my bed, a shirt of mine draped on her chest, and her right hand rummaging underneath her salwar-trousers.

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I ate more servings of cooked Wai-Wai and Maggi noodles than anybody with the slightest concern for a healthy body and diet should. They were easy to prepare and at ten rupees a packet the most affordable food that was decent.

And my body did take a toll. My eyes had dark circles around them, and I saw the first remnants of a paunch developing. I had neither time nor money for a gym membership.

9 months and 23 days- The amount of time I spent as a legal reporter for the newspaper. I filed seventy-two stories out of which fifty-one were published.

The bright spot was, of course, seeing my byline in the newspaper. It made me happy to be able to forward the stories and the clippings to my parents. It sounds infantile but I felt like it was my very tiny way, and first real attempt of repaying back what my folks had invested in me.

72 Thousand Rupees- *"Dear Applicant, you will be glad to know that we have made a decision with regards to the position that you applied for , and are offering you the job as advertised. The monthly salary for the position of Regional Coordination Member is INR 72,000.00/-*

Please get in touch with Mrs. Patnaik of HR, if you wish to join us. On behalf of the entire organization, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate you.

There was some stiff competition and you were chosen after much thought and deliberation by the Selection committee.

We look forward to having you here with us very soon.

Thank you,

Deepika Ghosh,

North India Regional Manager,

New Delhi."

I read and re-read the email. It took a while for it to sink in. The patience paid off. While it wasn't a United Nations gig in either New york or Geneva, a position in the main Indian office of the British Council was a reason to celebrate.

I moved cities, and any dislike for New Delhi was negated by the niceness of the position. A position that would finally let my career take off.

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