

## Breakdown Lane

Nimmy started sponging *Amma*'s body with the softest *Mundu* towel. The checkered one lay on the footstool for soaking up spills. As she gently repositioned and toweled her, she felt she had become efficient with time. She dressed her in an easy *kaftan* and put on Carnatic music. She sprinkled sandalwood scent on her pillow to evoke a whiff of the past for her mother, to give her an illusion of being in a place she grew up in. She played taped conversations to remind her of times when the house had been full of people. It was a chimeric reality, her mother's Disney Land.

Nimmy was not a certified nurse but a skilled caregiver who spared no effort to make the bedridden body the most relaxed. She felt the pride of a professional and the joy of a daughter who understood her mother. Mending her own behavior at *Amma*'s slightest scowl, she often thought: *Caregiving was not just a job it was living in a heightened way.*

Nimmy recalled the evening her family had discussed *Amma*'s care. Her sister had a practical suggestion, "Let's take turns and share the work," but Nimmy, a fresh graduate from the university was so full of energy and emotion that her commitment had come without hesitation. Nimmy had argued: "I would like a little time to sort out what I want to do in life and till I finalize my plans, I would like to be *Amma*'s nurse. I feel she would prefer living in her own home and cared by none other than her own daughter." *Point taken!*

"Yes, cared for by her favorite *kutti*," Pallu, her sister said. Nimmy felt annoyed at being called the *baby of the family* – she was an adult for a long time.

The caring started in earnest and the daily visits from Krishna and Pallavi were rejuvenating and welcome. With time, the siblings started alternating their visits and later still, delegated the get-togethers to weekend affairs. The friends and the outer circle of relatives faded gradually and now Nimmy was in charge, more or less. At times the loneliness felt heavy and Nimmy had to remind herself that this is what she wanted all along. Responsibilities increased gradually and long-term-care became real, with its hidden surcharge of despair. Nimmy felt guilty to acknowledge tiredness. How could a person feel exhausted looking after a beloved mother? Was it not a total defeat if she felt burned-out?

Nursing, which was a cherished dream once now lacked luster. Caregiving, which had once given her a definite place in the family tree – “*You are the only one who selflessly gave up your time – a rarity these days,*” now felt like a black hole soaking motivation and energy. Krishna, symbolically the head of the family made major decisions and Pallavi, a natural “Mistress of Ceremonies,” had become the social liaison. Nimmy had become a caregiver by choice for it had given her a purpose in life and defined her goal at a time when she was vague and fearful about working outside the house. This had become an area of competency – was she good at anything else?

Nimmy’s twenty-fourth birthday rolled around. Krishna and Pallavi came with their spouses and noisily made a big deal. Their gifts were generous – six tickets to the concerts of her choice and then there were season’s ticket to the Cricket games. Nimmy sobbed with overwhelming joy and sadness. *They want me to get out of the house and feel the joy of seeing Virat batting.* Yes, she missed seeing Cricket games and absorbing concerts. Kris was at his super-affectionate best

today – his contemplative facial lines were missing. When Nimmy heard about Krish wanting a few moments with her alone, she felt elated and lucky.

After the celebrations, Kris sat her down alone in the sun room and thanked her profusely for taking such good care of Amma. Nimmy was all smiles and Kris talked about age, responsibilities and *balance in life*. *Oh no, the tide was turning*. Nimmy heard Kris say: “You are a 24 year old university graduate, full of aspirations and hopes. This is not the time to completely immerse yourself in geriatric care when other options are available.” Her sister joined them as if on cue and added: “Frankly, we know you are capable of nursing Amma well, but keeping at this responsibility is craziness. This can suck out your sanity.” *How true!*

Both Kris and Pallu pestered her to take up some activity if not a job. “Living an interesting life is an issue for you as well as mother. You need not kill yourself to give mother a life,” said Krishna, her brother.

Kris, the father-figure was relentless today. One argument after another – it kept coming. Bent upon, drilling some sense into Nimmy, he finally talked about his silent frustration: “*Do you realize I do nothing right for Amma – wrong words and wrong actions. Yours is the only “caring” way of doing things. Either you accept the fact that we all are going to be involved in Amma’s care or Amma is going to be somewhere else – my house, nursing home or...*” Darn, Darn, Darn. Couldn’t they see how thoughtful, sensitive and classy her care was? Suddenly Nimmy realized that no one disputed the quality of her care. Were they suggesting a short break to come back with vigor and care for Amma again?

Should she surrender her ability, relevance and expertise? Should she accept Kris' solution of rehab for Amma? What Kris said made sense but it was also true that she understood Amma and her needs like no one else. Her pain and the streaming tears were eroding her defensive wall and she yearned to grab the opportunity Kris and Pallu offered. Still hesitant to say "yes" openly, Nimmy acknowledged she wanted "me" time – a carefree nap or impromptu lunch with friends but it seemed an impossibly monumental effort. Something did not fit well. Will she be able to relax after Amma was taken to a nursing home? What if Nimmy lost the meaningful role of a caregiver and became a good-for-nothing person? What if she did not enjoy doing nothing? Her guilt and the sense of appearing weak in front of very successful siblings loomed like a monster. Lately, even in her sleep she was not fully relaxed and had felt the urge to double check details in case she had overlooked something. Would her frustration and anxiety let her be worry-free? *Why was "taking it easy" so hard to do?* Why was it a forgotten art, something so totally irretrievable?

Kris persisted. Everyone agreed that a rehab would be the cure-all. Kris, the decision maker had decided and the rest of the family followed the leader. The Rehabilitation Center experience was suboptimal in Nimmy's view. Initially Amma appeared safe and in a good environment. But Nimmy discerned small things that were wrong: "Did you notice *Ham* in her plate and not vegan choices? We gave them such clear instructions..." or "Her hair was flying everywhere. That would kill her spirit totally." Amma was not a doll to be tossed and played with on whim. This way, Amma would break down before her time. She needed incentive to hang on till the medicines worked. However, the Rehab Center appeared to have different priorities – a cost effective operation that was regimented, clocked and safe; not personalized.

Does life have to be this harsh when the lease was running out? The doctors had given Amma just two months' time. No more. Considering the circumstances, should not she continue the quality care? No, said Maya – Nimmy's niece who was visiting Grandma for the first time after her affliction. Nimmy was shocked. Did she hear correctly? Maya, barely five years younger than Nimmy and low on the pecking order had indeed said "No!" emphatically. Phew! Nimmy fumed – her little adorable niece had become an impudent adult. Kris' influence on her showed now. Her challengers were gluing together and getting stronger. Maya, the new support to the rivals, was the worst – inexperienced, raw and full of youthful idealism. Bitterness spread over Nimmy's body. She thought of the days when Maya was her favorite person in the whole world: Dimpled, smiley and doting, she was all agreement. Now she was like a soapy film – sticky and a factory of annoyance.

Nimmy wanted her away from her mother. Where was she when hard and grinding work was done by Nimmy alone? How dare this bitsy niece appear on the scene at the last minute and takeover? Why did no one else object to the painful unfairness of it all?

Nimmy resorted to useless chores for Maya – could she get a glass of water? – No, not bottled water but lukewarm water in a steel cup. Could they make a visitor booklet together? Could she check if the recreation room was open? Alas, Maya the lazy slob talked and giggled instead, showed photos to Grandma on her phone screen. Whenever Nimmy appeared, the phone either had a screen alteration or went back into the jean pocket. The not- so-adorable niece cuddled Amma. Why was she tormenting the old soul? Did she not understand frailty?

Meanwhile there was the buzz of a brand new car with features to explore. So the Saturday afternoon people bundled in for a short ride. Maya was at the wheel and jumped up startled when

she accidentally pressed the wiper fluid button instead of the GPS. Everyone laughed. Later on, this reenactment would take on embellishment with exaggerated jumping, facial expressions and thigh slapping laughter. To Nimmy all this felt wrong – out of place. The focal point was Amma, not a car or some silly driving mistake.

Nimmy felt Amma's house had become a disaster area during family gatherings – noisy, disorganized and most of all a hub where there was disregard for things that were inviolable. It needed change, it needed calmness and quiet. How did one bring back the peace and calm? Yes, the rules of a breakdown lane needed traffic rerouting and obstacle removal. But how could she remove the *Maya obstacle*? The trouble was Nimmy was always a kid and rarely the boss – she could not issue orders. That was not her domain. It was a miracle that she was given the caregiver duties this long. Kris and Pallu treated her ideas with respect but somehow implemented “practical” thoughts. They appeared to take Amma's condition somewhat nonchalantly – bringing laughter and jokes to a situation which demanded seriousness. They thrived on loud behavior, enjoying supersonic noises more than a healthy tranquility. Nimmy's quiet work felt unappreciated.

A week was all it took. Everyone saw the changes in Amma. There were signs of regrowth – the color and vigor peeked out. Amma had her eyes open longer, sat up and even smiled. Yes, she smiled at Maya not Nimmy.

At first these changes appeared to be unreal. There were weird explanations – this was an energy moment before death. Yes, people smiled when they saw heaven. Miracles happened. Doctors asked more questions and gave no answers. The profound changes were defying medical data and explanation. The medical staff just shrugged shoulders and spread their palms in

dismay. The nurses narrated similar but rare experiences and the family members – surprised as they were – did not want to question the beautiful awakening of the senses – *let us enjoy them*. The medicines and the doctors were the same but Amma was different. She had come out of her death bed, from a shadowy existence to pulsing whole. Nimmy quietly wondered if Maya's presence had indeed triggered a flow of life in the practically atrophied veins.

Maya had been pensive and exuberant in spurts. During one of her sprightly moments, she held Nimmy's hands and said, "All your hard work and caring has paid off. Don't you feel this is your best reward? It is you who has given her a second life."

Nimmy felt a rush of emotion – tenderness towards Maya and an unparalleled elation that wiped the weight she was carrying in her throat. How very generous of Maya to recognize the sole cause of rebirth. Then, it came back – a stab of jealousy at the thought of Amma smiling at Maya. The shock to Nimmy was Amma's persona too. Amma knew in the deepest layers who nurtured her day in and day out and yet she opened out to Maya as though she was the rain to the water deprived roots. Mother was a homegrown Brutus, a big part of the betrayal. Nimmy felt Amma needed to declare to the world her desire to be in her care not some rehab but the scenario was different: Amma seemed to enjoy the substandard milieu of the rehab and the excitement as much as the laughter junkies around. It appeared that they believed in it and loved a continuum of flutter.

A month later Amma started playing online games. *Angry Birds*, it was called, some senseless shooting game. Nimmy meanwhile had searched laboriously for games that were more her mother's style: calmer, interesting and engaging. Amma acknowledged Nimmy's thoughtful

search for games and tried them but the spark that came on with the ridiculous and adolescent Tupperware games was powerful. Amma had changed.

Amma's body was getting the elastic bounce again but Nimmy felt stiff. Amma seemed light as though she could rise up to the heavens all by an invisible energy but Nimmy felt heaviness in her throat and chest. Nimmy was happy for her mother – very, very happy. However, there was a feeling of intense loneliness too. Would Amma not need her anymore? Her aspiration vanished, the energy dissipated and her essence leached out. She felt absolutely coreless. She couldn't move a muscle nor call for help. Relevancy was gone and life was over. Who was she without her responsibilities and her mother?

The real trouble was people thought Nimmy needed help! Had they forgotten that she had stood by Amma in hour of need and given her sustenance single handedly? They included her in every decision but the important ruling always had Maya's signature on it, not hers. Maya appeared to make her an integral part of the group and ask her preference for *when to go to beach and what to make for the get-together* but when it came to Amma's living arrangements, Maya was the decision maker.

*When to go to the beach* Nimmy muttered to herself. Was it relevant? The things her siblings and their families thought of doing were ridiculously frivolous. But Maya thought they were important so everyone went with the flow. Maya persuaded everyone that Amma staying with them for a while would be a good choice. She had convinced even Amma: "It will be so much fun. You will meet..." Why did Amma need a new city and new people?



Amma's care plans after the rehab did not include Nimmy. Maya had stolen that lifeline. Of course she was invited along. Why did relatives think Nimmy needed some time alone with friends, laughter, and fun? Amma was her fun. Why did people think Nimmy needed change? Did she not have enough change already?

Previously, she had taken trips in her mind ceaselessly. It was a rich world of color, wings, freedom and joy. Now that mind seemed to be a ghost town – numb, sodden with dry clumps, eerie, scary and neglected. Losing that beautiful imagination and sensations was devastating. She had dealt with frustrations and monotony but not with emptiness. Currently, the void seemed to be getting powerful and metastasizing. She felt paralyzed and scared.

Everyone was out to ruin a system of caring she had created. No, it was Nimmy who was not needed. Everyone was out to halt *her* as though her strength had diminished. She felt worthless with shriveled vocal chords. In a fit of rebellion, she gathered the last strand of energy and screamed *voicelessly*: “No, I have not given up and I am not weak. I have brought about a miracle – I have infused life in a scaffolding. Don't erase me now.” Alas, the sound vibrations did not travel well.

The sinister void had become formidable. Unlike her vocal chords, it wasn't going to remain still and mute. Menacingly, it kept whispering to her. “You have become an invalid, a failure. *You need a caregiver, NOW*” - And then an epiphany hit her. She was in a breakdown lane. Traffic was removed from her surroundings and perceived obstacles were taken out and her distractions were substantially lessened.

She began her wait. In a breakdown lane you hung on till help arrived.

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