

THEIR WONDER YEARS: FALL 98

Chapter 1: The Departure

August 1998 – Chennai International Airport

The blast of cool, processed air hit Bharath's face as he stepped onto the jet bridge. It felt like he had already left India behind. His sneakers squeaked a little on the polished floor, his shoulder bag was a bit heavier than it should have been - stuffed with snacks from Amma and a last-minute gift from his cousin: a deodorant called *Wild Stone*. He had emptied half of it onto himself in the airport bathroom.

"Makes you irresistible to women macha," his cousin swore. "You'll be fighting them off with a stick."

He was going to the US. The land of Pamela Anderson of Baywatch and Denise Richards of Wild Things!

Well, first to Dubai. Then to Atlanta. But still. He was *on his way*. The butterflies in his stomach weren't fear - no way - this was *excitement*. He tried to walk like he'd done this a hundred times, casually glancing at the overhead compartments, nodding at strangers like a seasoned traveler. Like someone who belonged.

When he spotted the Emirates air stewardesses, his heart actually skipped a beat. Tall. Graceful. Impossibly poised in their deep red hats and flowing beige scarves. One of them gave him a polite smile as he passed, and he swore it lingered for an extra half-second. That was it. This was *exactly* like that movie he and his friends had watched at the shady theater in Royapettah. The one where the handsome guy flies first class, gets invited to a hidden bedroom in the plane, and somehow ends up making love to multiple air hostesses somewhere between Mumbai and Frankfurt. Somehow their lack of service to their customers never bothered anyone.

His friend Mukund had leaned over halfway through the movie and whispered, "*This is real, da. This is basically a documentary.*"

Bharath had believed him. With all that Wildstone on as insurance - he had no reason to doubt the inevitable. It was all just a function of time before he was bedding someone. He wasn't sure about taking on multiple women - but he was sure he could handle at least one. Maybe the air hostess that he could swear had eyed him and licked her lips as he passed by. Just like the ad for Wild Stone.

He scanned the cabin discreetly - no sign of a hidden bedroom yet, but this was just the first leg. Maybe the bigger plane from Dubai had the special bedroom. If he remembered right, the sex in the movie did start only when the plane was over Europe. Maybe it was something in the ozone layer that made women lower their inhibitions.

He ran a hand through his hair, double-checked his parting, and adjusted his blue-tinted sunglasses on his forehead. They didn't serve any real function indoors, but they *looked* good.

He stashed his backpack in the overhead bin and sank into his economy seat with what he imagined was the grace of a panther. Row 34C. Almost his favourite size on women as well. He did prefer the Ds, but C was acceptable. Regardless, aisle seat. Perfect for gazing around the cabin as his cologne announced him to the world.

As he buckled in, he let himself grin. He was *the* Bharath - computer science prodigy, unofficial cricket captain of his colony's team, two-time inter school quiz champion, and according to his mother and three aunts, "the best boy in all of Tamil Nadu." Sure, he'd never had a girlfriend - but not for lack of offers. Just... bad timing he supposed. Girls liked him. Apparently, he had a private fan club that had never announced itself. Everyone said so.

At customs, even the officer had been impressed. *“US-aa? For studies? Computer science? Ah, super, super.”* His mom had nearly cried. His dad wasn't so pleased.

“US? For what? I am building a damn IT empire here and it's not for the neighbours' children. What will you get there that you won't get here?”

Bharath had smiled then, respectful, even as his stomach twisted. He didn't have the heart to tell his father the truth - that it wasn't just about the degree. It wasn't even about the prestige of studying abroad.

It was about escape.

He stared out the window now, watching as the engines roared to life and the baggage handlers threw their luggage onto the belt that led into the aircraft.

He loved Chennai. He really did. It had given him everything - a supportive family, recognition, comfort, a future. But it had also boxed him in with those very same things. Expectations. Eyes everywhere. Aunties who asked too many questions. Friends who only saw one version of him. Teachers who had decided what kind of man he would become before he even got the chance to find out for himself.

He wasn't running away from home. He was running *towards* something.

A blank slate. A place where he wasn't "Mr. Computer Science." Or "that Murali sir's son." Or "the boy who topped state maths." A place where no one would whisper about who saw him with which girl on Anna Salai, or raise eyebrows because he was with the wrong crowd. A place where he could fail, or flirt, or fall - and no one would write it into his permanent character record.

Maybe it was naive. Maybe the US wouldn't be what he thought it was. But the truth was, he needed to try. He needed to *breathe*.

There were parts of himself he hadn't even met yet. He wasn't going to find them while trapped in the role of "good boy."

His full scholarship had made it impossible for his father to say no.

"All right," Appa had finally said. "Go there. And come back fast."

But Bharath knew he wasn't going to come back the same.

The last few passengers were still trickling in when it happened.

A soft whiff of something floral and faintly citrusy floated past his nose.

He turned slightly - and saw her.

She was walking slowly up the aisle, scanning seat numbers with the kind of effortless grace that could make a Bollywood director weep. Slim jeans. Lavender kurta top. A loose bun of silky black hair that looked like it had been twisted up in a hurry but still managed to look like it belonged on the cover of *Femina*. A dusty-blue Jansport slung over one shoulder. A Sony Walkman clipped casually to her waistband like it had been born there.

Bharath froze.

Abort eye contact. Retreat, retreat!

He snapped his head toward the window, suddenly fascinated by the infinite magic of the tarmac.

Don't look. Don't be obvious. Act natural. What does natural look like? Am I breathing weird? Why are my hands sweaty? I haven't even done anything yet.

Inside, his brain was spiraling into a desperate backroom negotiation with the universe.

Please. Please let it be 34B. Just this once. I'll start going to the temple regularly. I'll stop skipping shlokas during sandhyavandanam prayers. I'll even apologize to that dog I accidentally kicked when I was seven. Just... please, let this angel descend into the seat beside me.

He casually adjusted his collar, then realized it was a T-shirt. He had no collar. No problem. He pushed his sunglasses slightly higher up on his head - no sun inside the plane, but surely it added mystery. Then, leaning back in what he imagined was his best "brooding intellectual" posture, he turned his head *just enough* to track her progress with his peripheral vision.

She was slowing down. She was checking row numbers. This could be it. This could be his boy-meets-girl moment. The one they would talk about fondly in future dinners with friends and relatives as they held hands.

She slowed near his row. His pulse quickened. He clenched and unclenched his hands beneath the tray table. She was close. So close now.

She paused.

His breath hitched. His heart held a pose like a Bharatanatyam dancer mid-step.

And then... she turned casually into Row 31 without so much as a sideways glance and disappeared behind a curtain of other heads.

Bharath sagged into his seat like a punctured balloon. So much for fate. So much for cosmic signs. He sighed. Then he built his hopes up again. Surely he had seen another good looking girl before he had boarded the plane. He still had his chances to charm a beautiful lady. And after all there were still the stewardesses on the plane. He couldn't explore the skies the way they were meant to be if he had a girl next to him. Just when his spirits had lifted sufficiently someone shuffled next to him.

“Excuse me, thambi?”

The voice was warm, slightly nasal, and came with the distinct scent of coconut oil and mothballs. Bharath turned to find a sweet-looking older woman in a maroon sari smiling down at him, clutching a handbag that looked like it might contain exactly three hundred peppermints and a live pressure cooker.

Her husband was already peering suspiciously at the overhead bin like it owed him money.

“Is this 34A and 34B?” she asked, already nudging past him.

“Yes, aunty,” Bharath said, standing up as gallantly as the cramped aisle would allow.

The old man grunted and squeezed into 34A with the grace of a sandbag being loaded onto a truck. Bharath moved aside to let the woman into the middle seat. She settled in with a satisfied sigh, patting her bun into submission and giving Bharath a kindly smile that radiated pure, unsolicited moral judgment.

“First time abroad?”

He nodded. "Yes, aunty."

"Ah, I could tell," she said, patting his arm. "Don't worry, you'll be fine. You have such a good face. Honest face."

He gave her a polite smile and leaned toward the window again, this time with a touch more resignation than anticipation. So much for the sky-bedroom fantasy.

In the row ahead, he caught a glimpse of the girl's bun bobbing slightly to music. The headphones had gone on. She was gone to the world now.

Just as the last of the cabin bags were tucked away and the safety demo began, the old couple beside him pulled out tiffin boxes wrapped in layers of foil and cling film. The unmistakable scent of lemon rice, pickle, and fried appalam wafted into the air.

"Sir. You are not allowed to pull out the tray tables before liftoff sir." said one of those elegant stewardesses to the uncle.

He huffed as he put the food away and stowed the tables back.

The old man looked at Bharath sideways and grunted. “Plane food is rubbish. I am a diabetic you know.”

His wife smiled. “Have a murukku?” she offered, holding out a tissue with two perfectly spiral pieces.

Bharath took one, unsure whether to laugh or sigh. The murukku was delicious.

Well, he thought as the plane began to taxi and the engines roared to life, *this is just the first leg*.

The runway blurred outside. The wings tilted upward.

As the wheels lifted off the ground, so did he.

Into the clouds. Into his new life.