

THEIR WONDER YEARS: FALL 98

Chapter 2: First Flight Blues

The flight had been... fine.

Actually, good, technically. It was smooth. The takeoff was uneventful. The crew was efficient. The food, surprisingly edible. But still, somewhere deep inside him, Bharath felt an unfamiliar tightness - like he was already being let down by a dream.

He had imagined this flight for months.

The moment he'd gotten his visa stamped, he had spent a week replaying every international-flight scene from every Hollywood movie he could remember. Rich leather seats, flirtatious stewardesses, champagne flutes. One of his friends had even said, "Bro, on Emirates? You're basically royalty in the sky."

And here he was, in row 34, jammed next to a talkative old lady and a deeply opinionated uncle, neither of whom showed the slightest interest in giving him five minutes of peace. Not that they weren't nice. The aunty beside him had smiled at him warmly from the moment she sat down, and hadn't stopped smiling - or talking - since.

"You know, when my nephew went to America, he cried every day for two weeks. Such a soft boy. That's why I told his mother: no need to send. But she didn't listen."

"Uh-huh," Bharath nodded, attempting a smile that looked attentive but was secretly trying to calculate if he could plug in his headphones without looking rude.

"And you're going for computers, no? My niece also is in software. She works in Phoenix. Very big company. They make... something to do with accounting, I think. Always flying around."

"That's great, aunty"

A moment of silence. He reached for the headphones in the seat pocket, but -

“Do you eat meat?”

Bharath froze. “Uh, no. I mean... maybe? I don’t know yet...”

“Hmph,” the uncle grunted from the aisle seat, finally joining the conversation. “Don’t. They put all sorts of hormones in it. That’s why the Americans are like that - big but no stamina. You see, Indians have ancient digestion systems. We are made for ghee, not meat.”

“Right,” Bharath said, forcing a chuckle. “That makes sense.”

He stared longingly at the small screen on the seat-back in front of him. The Emirates entertainment system was slick - movies, TV shows, music, even games. For a brief, glorious moment before takeoff, he’d spotted an episode of FRIENDS listed under comedy.

He had watched a lot of English TV back home - on Star TV, but his friend Sathya insisted that he keep up with the latest in American pop culture and had loaned him pirated VCDs of Seasons 1 to 4 of Friends. He’d fallen in love instantly. Monica, Chandler, the Central Perk sofa - all of it. Watching FRIENDS while flying to America? That was poetic. Symbolic, even. They

made girlfriends so easily on that show. Even nerdy Ross. He wondered what his first girlfriend was going to look like?

But now he didn't dare select it. What if aunty looked over and asked, "What is this? Why are they living together without marriage?" What if there was a kissing scene? Or worse - one of those episodes?

He swallowed and scrolled cautiously through the options. Documentaries. Nature shows. Something safe.

Meanwhile, aunty was back at it.

"My niece told me, in America, you have to cook your own food every day. Can you believe it? In this cold also! I told her to just marry someone and settle down, but these modern girls... what to do? Even worse, you don't even have water to wash yourself after you go potty. They use paper it seems!"

"It's all a CIA conspiracy I tell you." nodded uncle sagely as he seemed to be having a parallel conversation with Bharath without him knowing about it.

Bharath nodded politely, wondering how to steer the conversation without being rude. He couldn't just shut it down. What if she complained about him to Amma through some extended-family grapevine? What if she turned out to be related to someone who knew someone in Atlanta?

And then, to make things worse - he glanced ahead.

Row 31. That girl. The one with the lavender kurti.

She had headphones in earlier, but now she had taken them off. She was talking to someone. Some guy - short hair, glasses, and annoyingly confident body language. They were laughing, leaning slightly toward each other.

Lucky SOB.

Bharath didn't even know who the guy was, but he hated him already. They were sharing a pack of Mentos. She was animated, expressive, brushing her hair behind her ear when she smiled. The kind of smile that wasn't polite - it was real.

He glanced down at his armrest. The uncle's elbow had somehow crept over the shared boundary around aunty and was now fully claiming territory. Aunty,

meanwhile, was adjusting her footrest and had managed to kick Bharath twice by accident.

He was cramped, slightly sweaty despite the air-conditioning, and smelled wildly of Wild Stone, lemon rice, and betrayal. The cologne was making him choke now. He wasn't sure the advertisers were very honest with how it made women feel. Maybe he hadn't used it right.

"Where in America are you going?" aunty asked again, for the third time.

"Atlanta, aunty."

"Oh! That's a southern place, no? My husband's cousin's daughter lives in... California? Very close only."

Bharath was about to correct her geography but stopped himself. What was the point? He was going to be in Atlanta. Alone. Surrounded by strangers. Cooking his own food. Avoiding meat. And apparently never watching FRIENDS again.

He leaned back, closed his eyes for a second. The low hum of the engine filled his ears.

When he opened them again, the cabin lights had dimmed slightly. The stewardesses had just passed by with coffee. He had smiled at the one nearest to him - a beautiful woman with a sharp jawline and perfect makeup - and she had smiled back, professionally. Efficient. Warm, but not interested.

No flirtation. No lingering looks. No "Excuse me sir, would you like to see our sky bed?" Nothing. Nobody even came and knocked into him by mistake giving him a coy smile asking if they could do anything to say they were sorry. Real life documentary it seems. He would take care of Mukund later.

By the time he could think of something to charm the panties off the stewardess she was already two rows ahead, asking someone if they wanted milk with their tea.

This is not how the movie went.

He sighed.

The old uncle had now pulled out a Tamil newspaper from his bag and was reading it out loud, pointing to the headlines and explaining his opinions.

“Look at this. Government wasting money on cricket. All these ODI-type games are spoiling our youth. No one studies properly. Everyone wants to hit a sixer.”

Bharath gave a weak smile.

But he said nothing.

He took a sip of the water bottle handed to him earlier, now lukewarm. The plane shuddered slightly - just turbulence - but aunty clutched her seat and gasped.

“Oh my God! Is it normal?”

“Yes, aunty,” Bharath assured her gently. “Just clouds. Happens all the time.”

“You've done this before?”

“Uhhh... yes. But this is the first time I’ve experienced turbulence. But I read about. Nothing will happen. Don’t worry”

Aunty clutched his arm like he was a seasoned pilot, reassured that his knowledge about turbulence would save her.

Bharath gave up. No FRIENDS. No sex on a sky bed. No conversations with pretty girls. Just lemon rice, unsolicited wisdom, and emergency arm-grabbing.

He glanced at the small flight tracker screen.

1 hour 7 minutes to Dubai.

Almost there.

Just one more hour of being polite, adjusting elbow space, answering questions about whether he ate meat, and resisting the urge to scream into the cushion. This is still just the beginning, he reminded himself. This is the

sacrifice before the glory. This is the montage scene. Every hero suffers a little before greatness.

He looked once more toward Row 31. The girl was leaning back now, eyes closed, her head tilted slightly toward the window. The other guy was watching a movie on his own screen.

Maybe they weren't that close. Maybe on the next flight, she'd notice him. He smiled at that thought. Clung to it like a life raft.

One more hour.

"Careful, aunty," Bharath said, reaching for aunty's oversized handbag before it could knock into the narrow aisle wall.

"Such a sweet boy," she cooed, readjusting the end of her sari as she navigated the final few feet to the jet bridge. "May you get a nice girl and settle down quickly."

"An Indian girl only," the uncle muttered behind her. "Those foreign girls won't do cooking. All fridge food."

Bharath smiled politely, for the thirty-ninth time since boarding in Chennai.

He hadn't slept a wink. Between aunty's stories about her son-in-law's cholesterol levels and uncle's late-night monologue about the dangers of genetically modified corn, Bharath had only managed short bursts of shut-eye - the kind that ends with your neck cricked sideways and mouth slightly open.

Still, as they disembarked into the bright, air-conditioned glass corridors of **Dubai International**, he felt a rush of renewed energy. This wasn't India anymore. This was the glittering halfway point. The stepping stone to America.

The airport was massive. Every surface sparkled - floors, columns, even the decorative water features. People moved briskly in all directions, trolleys loaded with designer bags, duty-free purchases, babies in strollers, the occasional person in a suit looking like they had just stepped out of a stock photo.

And the women. Bharath blinked. *My God.*

Tall women in heels and tailored coats. Arab women in flowing abayas with smoky eyes and red lipstick. European women with legs that didn't seem to

end and cheekbones you could cut glass on. American tourists in athleisure. Indian air hostesses. Filipino ground staff. Japanese stewardesses in silk uniforms. It was like a United Nations modeling pageant.

He adjusted his bag, stood up straighter, and walked a little slower through the terminal.

If I were James Bond, I would have already charmed at least three of them by now. At least one would've asked me to stay in Dubai for the night. Probably the tall Russian-looking one near Gate C18. She looks like she likes tech guys.

But he didn't stop. He had a connecting flight to catch. And so did aunty and uncle, who were now looking hopelessly at the flight display screens.

"Thambi," another aunty said, holding her boarding pass up like a sacred document, "do you know which terminal is for London?"

Bharath took it from her and squinted at the gate number. He checked the nearest display, compared it to the signs, and started gently herding them toward the escalator.

“Come with me. It’s that way.”

They followed like trusting grandparents, uncle still grumbling that Dubai airport was unnecessarily big. “Chennai airport is enough for me,” he sniffed.

Twenty minutes later, after guiding them to their new gate, helping them find seats, and even explaining how to use the water fountain without pressing random buttons, Bharath finally waved goodbye.

“Good boy,” aunty said again, her hands on his cheeks like he was her own grandson. “Very helpful. You’ll do well in life kannu.”

“I hope so,” Bharath said, smiling and touched by her words.

He turned and walked away, his backpack bouncing on his shoulders, exhaustion finally starting to creep in. But somewhere under that tiredness, he felt good. **Solid karma points.** That had to count for something. The gods were surely watching.

And now... Atlanta.

The long leg. The big flight. The beginning of everything.