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I was born into a middle-class Tamil family in the island town of Rameswaram in the erstwhile Madras state. My father, Jainulabdeen, had neither much formal education nor much wealth; despite these disadvantages, he possessed great innate wisdom and a true generosity of spirit. He had an ideal helpmate in my mother, Ashiamma. I do not recall the exact number of people she fed every day, but I am quite certain that far more outsiders ate with us than all the members of our own family put together.

My parents were widely regarded as an ideal couple. My mother's lineage was the more distinguished, one of her forebears having been bestowed the title of 'Bahadur' by the British.

I was one of many children—a short boy with rather undistinguished looks, born to tall and handsome parents. We lived in our ancestral house, which was built in the middle of the 19th century. It was a fairly large pucca house, made of limestone and brick, on the Mosque Street in Rameswaram. My austere father used to avoid all inessential comforts and luxuries. However, all necessities were provided for, in terms of food, medicine or clothes. In fact, I would say mine was a very secure childhood, both materially and emotionally.

I normally ate with my mother, sitting on the floor of the kitchen. She would place a banana leaf before me, on which she then ladled rice and aromatic sambhar, a variety of sharp, home-made pickles and a dollop of fresh coconut chutney.

The famous Shiva temple, which made Rameswaram so sacred to pilgrims, was about a ten-minute walk from our house. Our locality was predominantly Muslim, but there were quite a few Hindu families too, living amicably with their Muslim neighbours. There was a very old mosque in our locality where my father would take me for evening prayers. I had not the faintest idea of the meaning of the Arabic prayers chanted, but I was totally convinced that they reached God. When my father came out of the mosque after the prayers, people of different religions would be sitting outside, waiting for him. Many of them offered bowls of water to my father who would dip his fingertips in them and say a prayer. This water was then carried home for invalids. I also remember people visiting our home to offer thanks after being cured. My father always smiled and asked them to thank Allah, the benevolent and merciful.

The high priest of Rameswaram temple, Pakshi Lakshmana Sastry, was a very close friend of my father's. One of the most vivid memories of my early childhood is of the two men, each in his traditional attire, discussing spiritual matters. When I was old enough to ask questions, I asked my father about the relevance of prayer. My father told me there was nothing mysterious about prayer. Rather, prayer made possible a communion of the spirit between people. "When you pray," he said, "you transcend your body and become a part of the cosmos, which knows no division of wealth, age, caste, or creed."

My father could convey complex spiritual concepts in very simple, down-to-earth Tamil. He once told me, "In his own time, in his own place, in what he really is, and in the stage he has reached—good or bad—every human being is a specific element within the whole of the manifest divine Being. So why be afraid of difficulties, sufferings and problems? When troubles come, try to understand the relevance of your sufferings. Adversity always presents opportunities for introspection."

"Why don't you say this to the people who come to you for help and advice?" I asked my father. He put his hands on my shoulders and looked straight into my eyes. For quite some time he said nothing, as if he was judging my capacity to comprehend his words. Then he answered in a low, deep voice. His answer filled me with a strange energy and enthusiasm:

Whenever human beings find themselves alone, as a natural reaction, they start looking for company. Whenever they are in trouble, they look for someone to help them. Whenever they reach an impasse, they look to someone to show them the way out. Every recurrent anguish, longing, and desire finds its own special helper. For the people who come to me in distress, I am but a go-between in their effort to propitiate demonic forces with prayers and offerings. This is not a correct approach at all and should never be followed. One must understand the difference between a fear-ridden vision of destiny and the vision that enables us to seek the enemy of fulfilment within ourselves.

I remember my father starting his day at 4 a.m. by reading the namaz before dawn. After the namaz, he used to walk down to a small coconut grove we owned, about 4 miles from our home. He would return, with about a dozen coconuts tied together thrown over his shoulder, and only then would he have his breakfast. This remained his routine even when he was in his late sixties.

I have throughout my life tried to emulate my father in my own world of science and technology. I have endeavoured to understand the fundamental truths revealed to me by my father, and feel convinced that there exists a divine power that can lift one up from confusion, misery, melancholy and failure, and guide one to one's true place. And once an individual severs his emotional and physical bondage, he is on the road to freedom, happiness and peace of mind.

I was about six years old when my father embarked on the project of building a wooden sailboat to take pilgrims from Rameswaram to Dhanuskodi, (also called Sethukkarai), and back. He worked at building the boat on the seashore, with the help of a relative, Ahmed Jallaluddin, who later married my sister, Zohara. I watched the boat take shape. The wooden hull and bulkheads were seasoned with the heat from wood fires. My father was doing good business with the boat when, one day, a cyclone bringing winds of over 100 miles per hour carried away our boat, along with some of the landmass of Sethukkarai. The Pamban Bridge collapsed with a train full of passengers on it. Until then, I had only seen the beauty of the sea, now its uncontrollable energy came as a revelation to me.

By the time the boat met its untimely end, Ahmed Jallaluddin had become a close friend of mine, despite the difference in our ages. He was about 15 years older than I and used to call me Azad. We used to go for long walks together every evening. As we started from Mosque Street and made our way towards the sandy shores of the island, Jallaluddin and I talked mainly of spiritual matters. The atmosphere of Rameswaram, with its flocking pilgrims, was conducive to such discussion. Our first halt would be at the imposing temple of Lord Shiva. Circling around the temple with the same reverence as any pilgrim from a distant part of the country, we felt a flow of energy pass through us.

Jallaluddin would talk about God as if he had a working partnership with Him. He would present all his doubts to God as if He were standing nearby to dispose of them. I would stare at Jallaluddin and then look towards the large groups of pilgrims around the temple, taking holy dips in the sea, performing rituals and reciting prayers with a sense of respect towards the same Unknown, whom we treat as the formless Almighty. I never doubted that the prayers in the temple reached the same destination as the ones offered in our mosque. I only wondered whether Jallaluddin had any other special connection to God. Jallaluddin's schooling had been limited, principally because of his family's straitened circumstances. This may have been the reason why he always encouraged me to excel in my studies and enjoyed my success vicariously. Never did I find the slightest trace of resentment in Jallaluddin for his deprivation. Rather, he was always full of gratitude for whatever life had chosen to give him.

Incidentally, at the time I speak of, he was the only person on the entire island who could write English. He wrote letters for almost anybody in need, be they letters of application or otherwise. Nobody of my acquaintance, either in my family or in the neighbourhood even had Jallaluddin's level of education or any links of consequence with the outside world. Jallaluddin always spoke to me about educated people, of scientific discoveries, of contemporary literature, and of the achievements of medical science. It was he who made me aware of a "brave, new world" beyond our narrow confines.

In the humble environs of my boyhood, books were a scarce commodity. By local standards, however, the personal library of STR Manickam, a former ‘revolutionary’ or militant nationalist, was sizeable. He encouraged me to read all I could and I often visited his home to borrow books.

Another person who greatly influenced my boyhood was my first cousin, Samsuddin. He was the sole distributor for newspapers in Rameswaram. The newspapers would arrive at Rameswaram station by the morning train from Pamban. Samsuddin’s newspaper agency was a one-man organization catering to the reading demands of the 1,000-strong literate population of Rameswaram town. These newspapers were mainly bought to keep abreast of current developments in the National Independence Movement, for astrological reference or to check the bullion rates prevailing in Madras. A few readers with a more cosmopolitan outlook would discuss Hitler, Mahatma Gandhi and Jinnah; almost all would finally flow into the mighty political current of Periyar EV Ramaswamy’s movement against high caste Hindus. Dinamani was the most sought after newspaper. Since reading the printed matter was beyond my capability, I had to satisfy myself with glancing at the pictures in the newspaper before Samsuddin delivered them to his customers.

The Second World War broke out in 1939, when I was eight years old. For reasons I have never been able to understand, a sudden demand for tamarind seeds erupted in the market. I used to collect the seeds and sell them to a provision shop on Mosque Street. A day’s collection would fetch me the princely sum of one anna. Jallaluddin would tell me stories about the war which I would later attempt to trace in the headlines in Dinamani. Our area, being isolated, was completely unaffected by the war. But soon India was forced to join the Allied Forces and something like a state of emergency was declared. The first casualty came in the form of the suspension of the train halt at Rameswaram station. The newspapers now had to be bundled and thrown out from the moving train on the Rameswaram Road between Rameswaram and Dhanuskodi. That forced Samsuddin to look for a helping hand to catch the bundles and, as if naturally, I filled the slot. Samsuddin helped me earn my first

wages. Half a century later, I can still feel the surge of pride in earning my own money for the first time.

Every child is born, with some inherited characteristics, into a specific socio-economic and emotional environment, and trained in certain ways by figures of authority. I inherited honesty and self-discipline from my father; from my mother, I inherited faith in goodness and deep kindness and so did my three brothers and sister. But it was the time I spent with Jallaluddin and Samsuddin that perhaps contributed most to the uniqueness of my childhood and made all the difference in my later life. The unschooled wisdom of Jallaluddin and Samsuddin was so intuitive and responsive to non-verbal messages, that I can unhesitatingly attribute my subsequently manifested creativity to their company in my childhood.

I had three close friends in my childhood—Ramanadha Sastry, Aravindan, and Sivaprakasan. All these boys were from orthodox Hindu Brahmin families. As children, none of us ever felt any difference amongst ourselves because of our religious differences and upbringing. In fact, Ramanadha Sastry was the son of Pakshi Lakshmana Sastry, the high priest of the Rameswaram temple. Later, he took over the priesthood of the Rameswaram temple from his father; Aravindan went into the business of arranging transport for visiting pilgrims; and Sivaprakasan became a catering contractor for the Southern Railways.

During the annual Shri Sita Rama Kalyanam ceremony, our family used to arrange boats with a special platform for carrying idols of the Lord from the temple to the marriage site, situated in the middle of the pond called Rama Tirtha which was near our house. Events from the Ramayana and from the life of the Prophet were the bedtime stories my mother and grandmother would tell the children in our family.

One day when I was in the fifth standard at the Rameswaram Elementary School, a new teacher came to our class. I used to wear a cap which marked me as a Muslim, and I always sat in the front row next to Ramanadha Sastry, who wore a sacred thread. The new teacher could not stomach a Hindu priest’s son sitting with a Muslim boy. In accordance with our social ranking as the new teacher saw it, I was asked to go and sit on the back bench. I felt very sad, and so did

Ramanadha Sastry. He looked utterly downcast as I shifted to my seat in the last row. The image of him weeping when I shifted to the last row left a lasting impression on me.

After school, we went home and told our respective parents about the incident. Lakshmana Sastry summoned the teacher, and in our presence, told the teacher that he should not spread the poison of social inequality and communal intolerance in the minds of innocent children. He bluntly asked the teacher to either apologize or quit the school and the island. Not only did the teacher regret his behaviour, but the strong sense of conviction Lakshmana Sastry conveyed ultimately reformed this young teacher.

On the whole, the small society of Rameswaram was highly stratified and very rigid in terms of the segregation of different social groups. However, my science teacher Sivasubramania Iyer, though an orthodox Brahmin with a very conservative wife, was something of a rebel. He did his best to break social barriers so that people from varying backgrounds could mingle easily. He used to spend hours with me and would say, “Kalam, I want you to develop so that you are on par with the highly educated people of the big cities.”

One day, he invited me to his home for a meal. His wife was horrified at the idea of a Muslim boy being invited to dine in her ritually pure kitchen. She refused to serve me in her kitchen. Sivasubramania Iyer was not perturbed, nor did he get angry with his wife, but instead, served me with his own hands and sat down beside me to eat his meal. His wife watched us from behind the kitchen door. I wondered whether she had observed any difference in the way I ate rice, drank water or cleaned the floor after the meal. When I was leaving his house, Sivasubramania Iyer invited me to join him for dinner again the next weekend. Observing my hesitation, he told me not to get upset, saying, “Once you decide to change the system, such problems have to be confronted.” When I visited his house the next week, Sivasubramania Iyer’s wife took me inside her kitchen and served me food with her own hands.

Then the Second World War was over and India’s freedom was imminent. “Indians will build their own India,” declared Gandhiji. The whole country was filled with an unprecedented optimism. I asked my

father’s permission to leave Rameswaram and study at the district headquarters in Ramanathapuram.

He told me as if thinking aloud, “Abul! I know you have to go away to grow. Does the seagull not fly across the Sun, alone and without a nest? You must forego your longing for the land of your memories to move into the dwelling place of your greater desires; our love will not bind you nor will our needs hold you.” He quoted Khalil Gibran to my hesitant mother, “Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself. They come through you but not from you. You may give them your love but not your thoughts. For they have their own thoughts.”

He took me and my three brothers to the mosque and recited the prayer Al Fatiha from the Holy Qur’an. As he put me on the train at Rameswaram station he said, “This island may be housing your body but not your soul. Your soul dwells in the house of tomorrow which none of us at Rameswaram can visit, not even in our dreams. May God bless you, my child!”

Samsuddin and Ahmed Jallaluddin travelled with me to Ramanathapuram to enrol me in Schwartz High School, and to arrange for my boarding there. Somehow, I did not take to the new setting. The town of Ramanathapuram was a thriving, factious town of some fifty thousand people, but the coherence and harmony of Rameswaram was absent. I missed my home and grabbed every opportunity to visit Rameswaram. The pull of educational opportunities at Ramanathapuram was not strong enough to nullify the attraction of poli, a South Indian sweet my mother made. In fact, she used to prepare twelve distinctly different varieties of it, bringing out the flavour of every single ingredient used in the best possible combinations.

Despite my homesickness, I was determined to come to terms with the new environment because I knew my father had invested great hopes in my success. My father visualized me as a Collector in the making and I thought it my duty to realise my father’s dream, although I desperately missed the familiarity, security and comforts of Rameswaram.

## WINGS OF FIRE

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Jallaluddin used to speak to me about the power of positive thinking and I often recalled his words when I felt homesick or dejected. I tried hard to do as he said, which was to strive to control my thoughts and my mind and, through these, to influence my destiny. Ironically, that destiny did not lead me back to Rameswaram, but rather, swept me farther away from the home of my childhood.

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