

# Once upon a Friend

*A chai break...*

**Oct 8, 2018, 10:30 am, New Delhi.** *It was suffocating, courtesy an inefficient AC. The traffic was crawling. But, I didn't care. Sometimes, a delay is good. It gives you the time to prepare. "How will we greet each other? What will we talk about? How much does he remember? How do I pack my wonder years in a tea hour?"*

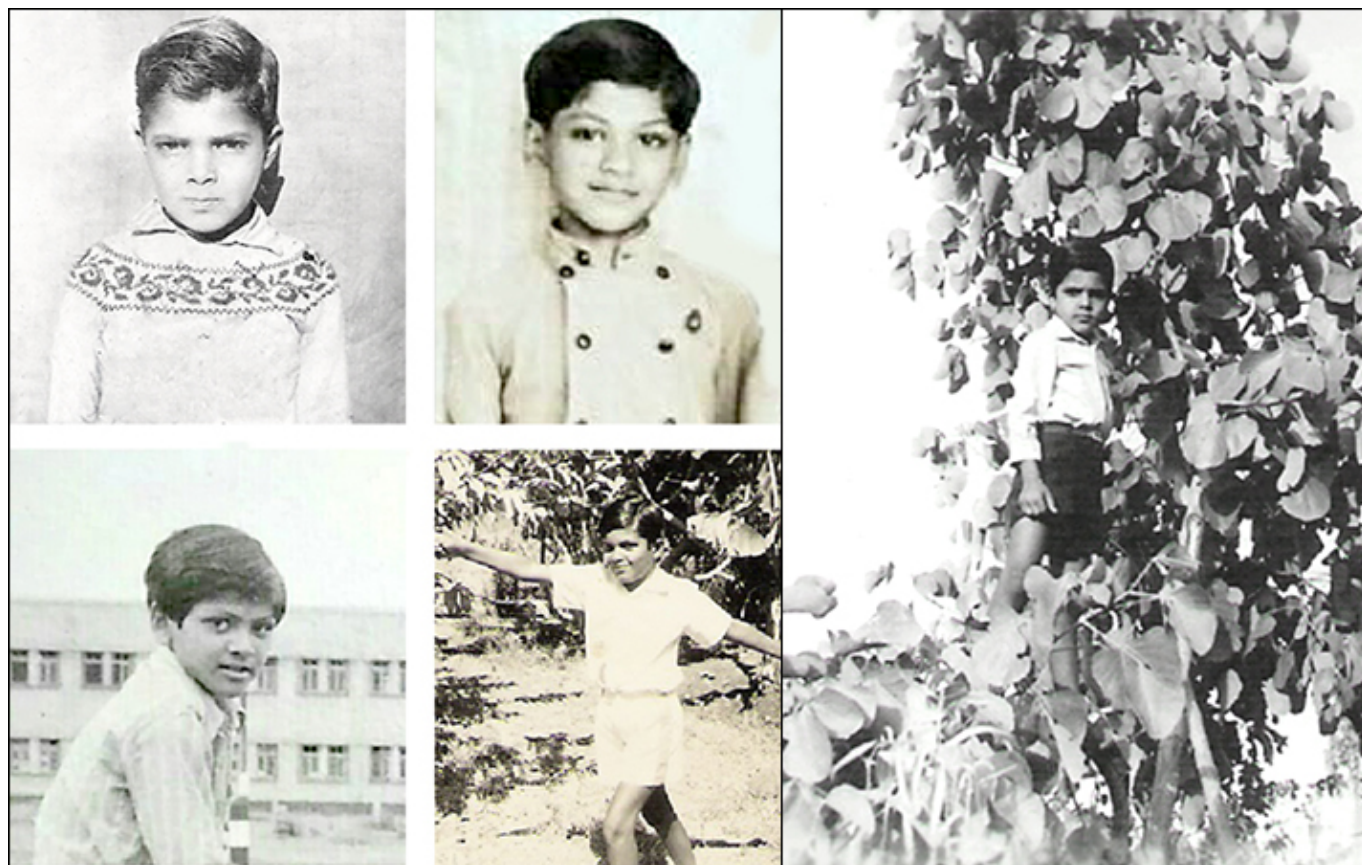
A voyage back to childhood is special. Especially if we learnt to walk in the 1960s or 70s. Maybe I am a bit biased here. Perhaps, every generation feels the same way about their wonder years. But the planet then was very different. We were the last ones to freely roam the urban landscape before the invasion of televisions and telephones. Our closest friends were people, not gadgets. And we didn't shop for the best model. Besides our siblings, the kid next door would become the closest buddy by default. My neighbor's name was Ravi Agarwal.

Ravi and I were born a week and a few yards apart. But that didn't deter us from maintaining our distinct identities. We had a separate set of favorites—be it in kites, marbles, stamps, feathers, coins, comics, trees, or stars, even festivals. I was his deputy during Holi, from stealing logs for the Holika Dahan, to slyly attacking the house elders with our pichkaris. Diwali was my thing, I would go slow on my firecrackers, save them for the last blast, and then go scavenging the day after for the unburnt ones. Both of us loved the magical 10 days of Ramlila, it didn't matter if the same mythological tale was reenacted by the same actors year after year. Raksha Bandhan gave Ravi the edge, somehow his *rakhi* was always bigger than mine.

Summer vacations were incredible. The days were packed. The morning would start before the fading of the last star. An adventure stroll on the outskirts of the town, a whole mango for breakfast, late morning swings on our favorite tree, butterfly chasing in the afternoon, a zillion indigenous games in the evening, and then sleeping outdoors—ears tuned to Hawa Mahal and eyes fixated on the Milky Way.

And then there were the fantasies. High up in the sky. Or deep underground. I would often run flapping my arms, believing, maybe, I will just take off like those eagles. That didn't work. I switched to chasing flying eagles, capturing their

shadow to dig for hidden treasures. That didn't work either. So, the fantasies kept changing. But my accomplice, Ravi, stayed constant. Till one fine day, before I hit my teens, my kaagaz ki kashti capsized. Daddy got transferred to Haridwar. I grew up suddenly. And things were never the same again.



**15 years ago.** I made my first trip back to Bhopal to attend a wedding. I strolled down my wonder lane. A public sector colony sees a continual churn. The old timers had exited generations ago. The empty fields in front of the colony had big beautiful trees. But where does one fly kites? I opened the gate of my birthplace. The garden was gorgeous, the tenant was gracious. But where was the tree with my Tarzan branch? And why did everything look so tiny—the colony road and my house? Is it because the eyes of an adult see the world differently than those of a child? Thousand thoughts, one realization:

*Sometimes, it's the people who make a place special. When people leave, the place loses its preciousness.*

Ravi and I became Facebook friends a few years after my Bhopal trip. Our interaction was limited to a few festive forwards on our cell phones. My infrequent visits to Delhi didn't lead to our reunion, thanks to my general lack of

initiative to stay connected. In Delhi, the distances are vast, I had convinced myself. Then, about three months ago, I was to speak at a conference in Delhi, and that's when I decided it was time.

My idea was to arrive a night earlier and have Ravi come over to my hotel. Just he, me, drinks, and time travel till the wee hours. But it was not meant to be. Ravi was keen to have me visit his home. The format changed. Instead of two childhood friends meeting over drinks, it was a family interaction over chai. I changed my flight to the next morning, and then took a cab to his place, wondering, *"How do I pack my wonder years in a tea hour?"*

**Back to Oct 8, 2018.** We hugged. Ravi, uncle, auntie, and I. It was the most endearing hug. We spoke about the years gone by—our personal, professional, and family journeys, the whereabouts of old neighbors, and a lot of Indian politics. Only one thing was amiss. There were no flashback images, no nostalgic trips, no mentions of specific incidents. The tea hour was over. Did the hour fly by too fast or too slow? For there was so much left to listen, but so little left to say. A sinking feeling seeped in as I sat back in the cab. I didn't get to tell Ravi how much he had meant to me. The surroundings were not conducive. We were sitting across the sofas of a Delhi house, and not across the tree branches of our childhood backyard. My eyes welled up on my way to the conference.

*Sometimes, it's the place that makes people special. When the place changes, the relationship loses its preciousness.*

**Afterword:** With the *people vs. places* twist established, it has been a few days since I wrote this blog. I have been trying to muster the courage to post it. I am not feeling good reading it. Neither will Ravi. How is it possible to accept that our existence in each other's lives is inconsequential today? That our present-day friends and family hold far more relevance? That the dusk of our friendship, perhaps, occurred a long time back? What is the need for the display of this blatant truth then?

Ironically, my underlying hesitation has become the compelling reason for me to go live. Why? If our bond is indeed that inconsequential, then why have I been hesitating for the last few days? Why should I care about how Ravi feels after reading my blog? Clearly, even after a hiatus of 40 years, the moments that I spent with him are priceless to me. The above twist in my blog stands corrected.

*At all times, people and places change. The preciousness resides in the timeless moments that we spend together.*

*Many who surround us today will be history tomorrow. Time flows fast—one that has passed, one that is here, one that is coming. Therefore, the value of a moment doesn't exist in 'when' it passes, but 'how' it passes. I know I lived my wonder years to the fullest. I had the time of my life, and I owe a great deal of that to my first friend!*