

## The Aching Joy

*Shine & Shadows...*

*What is tougher — the first or the last step? The challenge with the first step is the fear of the “unknown”, the uncharted future that we are walking into. The last step is dreadful because of the fear of the “known”, when we know the best thing that lies ahead is memory. It’s a close call. When our first-born flew the nest three years ago, it took a long time to acclimatize. And now the thought of letting go of our last-born is leading to an unfathomable void. This blog is my attempt to come to terms with the ache.*

**Kindergarten.** Aneesh arrived three years after Misha, missing the millennium generation by six months. He was the baby of the house. His crying was soft. As was his laughter. He had a cuddle-me-face that made him everyone’s stress buster. His undemanding demeanor was endearing. He was content and peaceful — always at terms with self; except for his twin demands. One, he troubled a lot during mealtimes, so his mom always sat next to him, theatrically distracting and feeding him. Two, every night, without fail, he and his sister insisted on an improvised story before the goodnight kiss. So each of us would pick a random animal, and I would ‘construct’ a story weaving in the chosen animals.



**Primary School.** Somewhere between their dad’s storytelling and their mom’s theatrics, the kids took an early fascination for arts. The junior choir at school picked Aneesh. Occasionally his feminine voice resonated at the local fundraisers. He grabbed lead roles with ease in school plays. He even starred in a couple of solo drum concerts. The stage lights didn’t dilute his innocence. Interestingly, he didn’t meet the same success when it came to his social skills. He was a recluse. His reserved mannerism was often mistaken as timidity. But he was not bothered. Being a social favorite was unimportant to him.

**Secondary School.** The boy in Aneesh took over, as his realm widened to the world of sports. With Messi being his icon, he fell in love with soccer. He would practice alone for hours in the garden. Eventually he made it to the school team. The next sport he attempted to excel in was Table Tennis. Then there were roller skates, monkey bars, and flash dances— our house felt like an abode of four boys. He had overcome his socially awkward phase, and was popular amongst his classmates because of his easygoing temperament. The only issue — most of his batch mates were a head taller! But that didn't hassle him. Interestingly, his closest friend was the tallest boy in the class, but he had zero complexes for being uncharacteristically short.

**High School.** As Aneesh entered his teens, his interests turned cerebral. He became a voracious reader. He enrolled in his school's robotics team that went on to compete at a national level. He avidly took to debating, and won prestigious inter school competitions. Riding on an all-rounded personality, he threw his hat in the ring for Head Boy, and triumphed comfortably with support from students and teachers. Yet the badge on his uniform left him unfazed. His height shot up suddenly and he was soon rubbing shoulders with his contemporaries. He doubled up on academics, and consistently ranked in the top four, but was never able to crack the top spot. But that didn't unsettle him either. In fact, his inner circle constituted of his closest rivals. He was happy to watch his buddies in the limelight from the sidelines, each annual day.

**Junior College.** As Aneesh moved school after his tenth grade, he was exposed to a world where freedom came in abundance. There were temptations galore. Drinking, smoking and weed were the norm. And so were the populist statuses that came with branded shopping, luxury cars, and all the glamour money can buy. But his interests resided elsewhere. The first summer he spent interning with [Teach for India](#), the second he spent with the [Research Mentorship Program](#) at UC Santa Barbara. His commitment paid off. He not only passed his junior college with flying colors, standing second in school, he handsomely cracked all the US entrance exams. The moment of reckoning arrived. The day he opened his much-awaited email from [UC Berkeley](#) — his expressions, strangely, were devoid of excitement. There was no jumping around. There were no celebrations.



**THE WAIT.** It has been a spectacular journey. Over the years, we have watched our boy overcome his juvenile challenges in each phase of his life — be it social awkwardness, short stature, or academic misses. And yes, he now relishes every imaginable cuisine, although his spot on the dining table next to his mother has remained the same. Even the storytelling sides have reversed, as he fills me in on the complex twists and turns whenever we both bond over episodes of ‘Game of Thrones’ or ‘Star Trek’. The apple of our eye has ripened, he has grown into a wonderful young man. Except for one thing that had been nagging me for many years, I had always wondered if Aneesh lacked a zest for life. Eventually I asked him, “Why didn’t you show any excitement when you were accepted by your top college choice, UC Berkeley?” “Because, Dad, I would have been equally happy doing my undergrad from any college,” he stated as a matter of fact.

*Aug 10, 2017. His recent answer dispelled a cloud for me, at personal as well as professional level. The reason Aneesh kept his calm through life’s small adversaries is exactly the same reason he maintained his composure during all the positive tidings. He is able to accept success and failure in an equal stride. Hopefully he will exhibit the same grace when life brings him steeper ups and downs, starting with the brand-new world that awaits him tomorrow. For tonight is his last childhood night in the nest. It’s an end of an era. Our last-born is ready. We are not. How we wish we could walk alongside for a little longer with our bundle of joy. But the path has a fork. And the sweetest piece of our heart is on the other side of the fork...*