

Keep The Change

Chapter 1

Dear Victoria

This morning, an elephant fell on my head and I had an attack of temporary amnesia for almost two minutes. I was completely disoriented, didn't know who I was and where I was. A whole world of possibilities opened up. In those two dizzying minutes, I thought I could be anybody – a best selling author who had just won the Booker prize, a stunning supermodel with a string of diamonds and boyfriends, a famous talk show hostess who turned ordinary people into instant celebrities. Just as those wonderful possibilities were running through my mind, it all came back. I was still in 32, Amman Koil Street where I was doomed to spend the rest of my life. I came to my senses and picked up poor Plato (who seems to have lost an eye and gained a new coating of dirt) and put him back with the rest of the stuffed menagerie on top of the cupboard. That was the most exciting thing that had happened the whole week.

Vic, is something wrong with my life? I want to be anyone but me and be anywhere but here. I haven't written to you for a long time now but there is no one I can really talk to in this moment of existential angst. This is not the life I dreamt of. This is not the life I was meant to be living.

It is my 26th birthday and here I am sitting on our frayed drawing room sofa at 10.p.m , after another mind numbing day at work eating Chocolate Excess by myself and waiting to watch *Sex and the City* on T.V. My crossing the quarter century mark was not a cause for celebration in our household. It has earned Amma an entry into the Community Hall of Shame. To have an aged unmarried daughter on your hands is enough cause to drown yourself in a vat of idli batter.

There have been no gifts, no laughter and cheer, no ‘Many Happy Returns of the day.’ I ate two spoons of Amma’s reluctant *semia payasam* in the morning and presented myself with the Chocolate Excess. The Iyer family at SSV and Sons anyway suffers from permanent amnesia when it comes to birthdays and will certainly not be nominated for Employer of the Year. They did not even acknowledge the occasion.

Thanks to Mars taking up permanent residency in my seventh house, I continue to be still on the shelf while younger and newer models have been snapped up in the marriage mart. Mars in the seventh (or is it seventeenth?) means that things do not look good for future in-laws. I believe Rahu has also conspired with Ketu to ensure that chances of progeny are difficult. So either I meet someone who doesn’t believe in horoscopes or I have to get a boy whose parents are safely dead and whose horoscope is bursting with the promise of several offspring.

Amma and Appa have done their best. With the tenacity of a pit bull holding on to a hapless ankle, Amma flushes out completely unsuitable boys from the nooks and crannies of the world and throws them in my direction. She and Appa have so far gone through 52 advertisements in The Hindu, exchanged horoscopes with 119 friends and relatives and short of wandering the streets with a loudspeaker shouting “Homely Girl from good family, convent educated, 25 years C.A rank holder seeks well qualified Iyer boy,” done just about everything to get me off their hands.

Short serial break. Sex and the city has started.

To continue. I can't imagine that Carrie Bradshaw and I live on the same planet. Maybe that's why I watch the show. It has a strange surreal, as far away from Amman Koil street as possible feeling about it. I envy the way Carrie and her friends traipse through life trying on shoes and men with equal abandon.

I envy you, Vic. I can see you in your short skirt and long boots, on the arm of your latest Hugh Grant look alike, sashaying into the Ritz Carlton, tossing down a strawberry daiquiri and a snack before heading off to shake your shapely legs at the hottest little club in town. While I was busy trudging through bio textbooks during my adolescence, you were probably conducting real life experiments on the subject. I am so far from finding a man that it looks like I am going to be a frustrated spinster for life. Nephews and nieces will talk about the eccentric Damanyanti Maami who became slightly unhinged after repeated failures in the matrimonial race. Aged female relatives will shake their head and say, "*Paavam* Damayanti," and click their tongues and prayer beads sadly.

I have made no independent progress in my quest. At 26, I can count the close contact I have had with unrelated males on the fingers of one hand.

1. Pinching cheeks of plump Pramod, neighbour's son, aged four years and six months.
2. Shaking hands with Father Macleod, (age 65+) visiting Professor from Madras Christian College, after handing over memento for Guest Lecture.

3. Being pinched on the waist by unknown leech on crowded Ranganathan Street while shopping with Amma. Managed to give a hard push to sweaty back in cheap blue polyester shirt but could not induce permanent damage.

I will never find a man. I will never own a pair of Manolo Blahniks either. I will jump into that vat of idli batter along with Amma.

Goodnight

Damayanti