

# Fifty-One

*by* Ajay Nair

He would turn fifty-one in ten minutes. He would welcome this milestone at midnight in the Bombay airport, one of the many glass and tile wombs he found comforting during ceaseless business travels. His wife may call him, or may not, he did not know. Theirs was a slow retreat from the careful positions staked out through years of marriage. Birthday and anniversary greetings, surprise gifts, secret pet names, consistent 'I-Love-You's' all abandoned. Good riddance. He strolled to immigration with feigned purpose and flicked the bunch of passport books glued together, a stack four inches thick, towards the official with practised ease. The officer read out the name, Viraj Randhawa. A name with heft—weighty and substantial. A couple of stamps and he was waved through. Viraj felt a slight measure of relief, as if he had expected to be questioned—an unwarranted fear that raised its head every time he passed immigration, even after all these years of travelling.

Fifty-one years old. A nothing age. Past the mildly turbulent years of mid-life, a decade away from becoming old, as he saw it. Not a round-number age that could be properly celebrated. Not a momentous age which inspires introspection such as when he turned thirty, a long time ago now when life tasted different. Appropriate only as another marker for the nothing life he was leading. He was successful, of course; he had been the best among his peers since the age of twenty-five, climbing the ladder with the felicity of a sleek, hungry cat. Easily reaching the next level and the subsequent one—like an expert video game player. But somewhere in his early forties he had started to miss tricks; the final breakthrough that would qualify him as a corporate czar eluded him. Instead he bounced repeatedly against the ceiling of a superior kind of mediocrity. A businessman two levels removed from any real, enduring success. Destined neither to be a statesman nor a captain of industry, just a highly decorated team player. He ran an important office and the young men and women who worked for him

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reminded him of himself. He veered randomly between guiding them benevolently and destroying them on account of an overwhelming envy. They still had so much time left.

Viraj drifted into the airport lounge, the vibratory buzz of his smart-phone on his thigh announcing a call. His wife. This was a surprise—it was two-thirty in the morning Singapore time and she surely didn't set an alarm so that she could wish him on his birthday at midnight here in India. "Have you landed?" she asked, a groggy voice, one that used to sound intimate to him when he first met her, but with age had developed an edginess, as if every word was spoken through gritted teeth.

"No—I am yet to board, it's only midnight here." This was not a birthday call.

"Oh, ok. I thought it was morning already. See you when you are here."

"Yes, good night." He felt acutely vulnerable, afraid of being overheard. An incidental eavesdropper might sense the emptiness. He ordered a glass of beer, even though he knew with experience that this would make the flight uncomfortable as his body no longer responded well to alcohol. This was his birthday treat, however. He slid a glance idly through the other passengers waiting at the lounge. Most of them tired businessmen like himself. One woman, in her forties, in a severe business suit. She looked at him just as he looked at her and their eyes met in brief, instant exploration and appraisal. Even at fifty one, he had a presence about him. He was a big man—neither too tall nor too fat, just big. He had lost most of his hair by the time he was forty-five, but still a thin, well-maintained gray fringe ran around the back of his head. A tired excitement hung in the air between them, but it fizzled out before it could develop into anything stronger. Previously, several times, such looks had developed into conversations, and some times something more. He sipped his drink and relived the memory of his first indiscretion.

A conference in London, four years after his marriage, by which time the initial flush of being married had long been washed under its daily ordinariness. An older woman—he could not remember her

name, only her pronounced Scottish accent and her pretentious wedding ring. The sex was enjoyable enough without any associated intimacy; it was the first brush with infidelity that had made it exciting. There had been no pretense, nothing more than immediate gratification. Pulp sex, he had called it in his mind.

Guilt inevitably followed but was short-lived, dying easily in the soft light of poorly argued, delusional denials and rationalizations. He flicked through a mental deck of cards imprinted with the usual excuses—alcohol, immaturity, youth, even inevitability. And now that he had gone through the tawdry experience, he had resolved not to repeat it, ever. But from this one betrayal evolved a habit. And not just fumbling, drunken encounters, but trysts practised in the cold gaze of reality, with the purely functional objective of achieving a temporary release from routine, no longer inspired or condoned by alcohol. In hotel rooms, in cars; he had little anxiety about them, he was not worried by the popular legend hinting ominously that it was only a matter of time before he was found out. Because the ones who aren't caught keep silent, he thought, and don't tell their stories to contradict this myth.

Once, however, there had been a close shave. A few weeks after he had begun text messaging, an impetuous message sent in the illicit blush of lust and misaddressed to his wife. The message was sufficiently amorous to arouse suspicion but thankfully hadn't included a name. His wife never even mentioned it. But there may have been a shift in the air between them since that incident; maybe that had been the trigger for the unspoken rift that had deepened and widened in the following years. Maybe he was too tired and reading too much into nothing.

He wondered idly if his wife had ever been unfaithful to him. She certainly had opportunities. Several friends—hers and his—hung around the edges of their marriage, and it would be naive to rule out the possibility of a few stray affairs. The thought didn't anger him; on the contrary it amused him as if it were some trivia question, the answer to which was not important but he would like to know anyway.

It was a strange marriage that had faded but never died. They had been happy enough when they started out. She had the right level of ambition and talent—not enough to threaten his ego and calibrated to complement him. Her job as a curator for a prestigious museum held the right amount of cultural clout that he could show off to others with justified pride. They had twin kids and in a way, that was something to be grateful for. Two kids three years apart, as had been the plan, would have meant two separate phases of parenting, and raising the twins had convinced him that one such phase was all he could or cared to handle. After the kids were born, making love was replaced by having sex which was replaced with nothing. They constructed a social life that was busy enough to hide the fact that they couldn't bear spending time in each other's company. In these circumstances, all the travelling he had to undertake as part of work was a blessing. The kids were good kids, though. Smart, beautiful, well-behaved. Yet they grew up too fast and no longer needed him. They were attending graduate schools in the US now and were rapidly developing identities disconnected from his own.

He had by now finished two glasses of beer and felt considerably light-headed. His flight was announced, yet he delayed boarding till the last possible moment, as if daring the airplane to leave without him. He had been allotted a seat in first class, a private cocoon with all the accouterments of luxury travel. There were a few familiar faces around him, people he knew socially and business acquaintances, acknowledged with just a quick nod of the head. Across the aisle was a famous actor, much smaller than he had pictured him to be. Standard-issue wraparound sunglasses and music-player; standard-issue expression of self-righteous entitlement. Viraj asked for a glass of wine as the plane took off. He had developed into a wine enthusiast if not a connoisseur, chiefly because it was one of the ingredients of corporate success, just as he had acquired an adequate golf handicap and a bevy of the latest electronic gadgets. He did not remember whether he had ever enjoyed any of these things in and of themselves.

The airhostess was a natural beauty, with minimal make-up. He liked that about her until her excessive solicitousness began to seem artificial. He scrolled through the various movies on offer but decided to nap instead—it was a four and a half hour flight and the airplane would eat into time as it flew east. Maybe just a quick snack before he turned in—he asked for the menu, a strip of cardstock printed with lavish script, and from it ordered the prawn sandwich. The food was instant and underwhelming, stale bread and a spongy, uncooked quality about the filling. He finished it simply because it was there, then settled back into his seat.

The mild buzzing in his head from the beer and the spiky aftertaste of the sandwich kept him half-awake in the darkness of the cabin. In this twilight state his eyes were drawn to the few passengers left illuminated by their personal lights overhead. The actor, especially; Viraj watched him shamelessly flirt with the airhostess, or maybe it was the other way around? She stayed in the aisle beside him a ridiculous amount of time, sometimes couched down at the actor's armrest, other times bending down to speak into his ear, and slowly these semi-accidental brushes of different parts of their bodies began to graduate into intentional couplings.

A tendril of envy gripped Viraj. He broke into a violent coughing fit, brought on by sub-conscious pique. The startled air-hostess turned around, her earlier friendliness now replaced with an air of peevish annoyance.

“Can I get you something? Sir?”

A couple of words broke through his relentless coughing. “Some water.”

The actor removed his sun-glasses, a look of smirking annoyance plain to see. His Adam's apple was bobbing up and down in his throat in irritation; his fingers drummed impatiently against the arm-rest. Viraj's coughing subsided, just as the air-hostess returned with a glass of water.

“Anything else I can assist you with?” Not even a trace of genuine concern in this, Viraj thought. A stiff banality that meant he should now leave her alone.

“No,” he said, “I am fine now. You can go back to your canoodling. The poor guy can hardly wait.” His voice was raised and the petulance in it escaped into the cool confines of the aircraft. The air-hostess flushed, either angered or embarrassed, and retreated back up the aisle towards the cockpit. A few murmurs crawled up behind her. The actor, perhaps mistaking real life for a movie, stood up and confronted Viraj, rounded on him as best he could in the narrow aisle, insulting him with a litany of school-boy phrases. Each word registered on Viraj's sobering mind more than he expected; a melancholy discomfort crept up behind his eyes and burned there as he focused on the seat-back in front of him.

So it had come to this now. His fifty-first birthday—booze-addled, berated by a celluloid brat in front of strangers and acquaintances alike. Viraj felt a sudden exhaustion and turned away to the window ignoring the actor who persisted in his faux chivalrous performance, and had now shifted his tirade to a defense of the stewardess. Viraj felt the silliness of all this—the utter lack of dignity—and a shamefulness attached itself tightly to his skin, a realization that for all his successes and failures, he was still a cowardly boy, provoked unnecessarily by stupid envy.

Once the actor slouched back into his seat a collective embarrassment had spread thickly among the passengers. He felt sorry for them, that his shame must be shared by all of them. All his cockiness, his years of smug confidence were erased by this fact of being bullied, beaten up with words. An envious old fool, he'd been called, a lecherous, nosy bastard.

When he disembarked, his mind continued replaying the episode—a quick snapshot of humiliation framed against his fifty-one years. He realized that this was only a tiny incident in what was evidently a largely meaningless life. Why had it ever come to this? He wondered idly what else might have been. It was not that he had some unfulfilled dream—to travel, to be a writer, to learn the guitar—all the standard clichés that adorn the regrets of the intellectually dissatisfied. There had been no great love he had sacrificed. The life he had led was exactly the life he had wanted. He

had no excuses, no cause for his frustrations. He had not wanted to shake life up and life in turn had let him be.

At baggage claim Viraj stood apart from the other passengers waiting around the chute; he found a far reach of the conveyor belt where he would be assured of no conversation or sidelong glances. He looked for the actor but figured a valet would doubtless have been hired to do such a public task. Upon the wall where he waited there was a poster advertising tourism in Brazil. In it, a dark-complexioned woman was smiling, not the artificial smile of an anorexic model, but a real smile that ended in fine, beautiful wrinkles. This smile seemed to speak to him personally, to call him out, inviting him to leave. He felt an adolescent urge to be held by this woman, her brown arms wrapped around him, nursing his bruised pride and tired life.

He could just turn around and leave. His suitcase was headed slowly toward him, packed with all that he needed, and he wouldn't really be missed, would he? His family was provided for; they would worry for a few weeks but go on with their lives. There would be a minor stir, some gossip, maybe even a few words in one or two newspapers. Yet suddenly he felt old—as his baggage passed he struggled to free it over the lip of the conveyor, struggled with raising the handle to its full extension, and finally, luggage beside him, he walked out of the airport.

Outside the dawn was breaking. An efficient sunrise befitting an efficient city. This was home, Singapore—an antiseptic city, a city that was a hospital without the chaos and disease, but with the typical sterile hospital smell of disinfectant. There was still time, he thought, to salvage something from his remaining years, but then he thought again. A taxi stopped in front of him and the driver took his bag and loaded it into the trunk while Viraj looked back into the building's window for that poster, but he couldn't see it. He stepped into the taxi and was driven back into his life.

