

CHENNAI TO CHICAGO

Memoir of a software engineer

AUTHOR: SRIRAM RAMAKRISHNAN

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Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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Prologue

This book is a memoir from my life, a software engineer born during the early '80s, who spent his teenage in the '90s. We were the generation who weren't too old to talk about those "good old days" when a cup of coffee was available for 10 paise. And not too young a generation either, to take internet and smartphones for granted. Ours was the generation that saw the advent of Doordarshan slowly multiplying into cable channels in the '80s, the boom of the software industry in the '90s, and the internet revolution in the 2k's.

The generation that watched movies like Jurassic Park and Terminator as kids in the early '90s, after a month-long wait in advance bookings, awestruck by what "computer graphics" could do. The generation that spent most of our childhood playing cricket on the roads. The generation that grew up watching "Mile Sur Mera Tumhara" and "Ek chidiya anek chidiya," how many ever times it was aired on Doordarshan. And not to forget, "Malgudi days", "Giant Robot" and, "Mahabharat." The generation that grew up listening to A R Rahman since Roja, watching Sachin Tendulkar's rise in cricket, and Shahrukh Khan's rise from Fauji to King Khan.

The generation that was part of the evolution from floppy-drives to laptops, dial-ups to wi-fi's, from "tring tring" phones to cell phones, black and white Doordarshan to HD home theaters, cassettes to Blu-Rays.

It was like we started off as babies, sitting on our toy trains, moving slowly. The train suddenly evolved into a rocket and zoomed at a lightning speed. It's said the advancement in the '90s was something that people couldn't do in 30 or 40 years. And when we entered the 2000s, the advancement was something people could have only dreamt of in sci-fi movies.

This is a story from that generation. Come, let's travel together.

*"Dare to be free,
Dare to go as far as your thought leads,
And dare to carry that out in your life"
- Swami Vivekananda*

I entered my flat in India to the nostalgic smell of sandalwood incense. And the girls singing in a chorus early in the morning in the Carnatic class next door. "I will make Dosa for your breakfast," my mom said. The smell of Dosa in the kitchen wafted through the air. I instantly was embraced by a warm affectionate "at home" feeling.

Several years in the US, a lot had changed in my life. I showered and stood in the balcony remembering the day when we moved into that flat several years ago. I remembered watching kids playing outside and their moms calling them from the balcony, "Mohannn... it's timeeee" and those kids running back home in the evening. And the North Indian family from the ground floor flat... Whenever I parked my motorbike outside their flat, the baby girl there used to run and hug me, "Papppaaa." Because her dad parked his bike nearby and he wore a similar helmet, she thought I was her dad, and almost every day she hugged me, "Papppaaa." I used to tell my mom about this, and we nicknamed the family, "pappaa family."

I wondered why I couldn't see anyone whom I used to from my flat. I saw a girl 11-12 years of age talking in very fluent Tamil. I asked my mom, "Who's she? Never seen her before? Did they move in recently?" And my mom said, "Remember? She's the pappaa girl." I was shocked! What? She was a baby! There was another girl, Mrinalini, in the next street, whose mom was a friend of my mom. She looked very beautiful. I remembered her mom asking my mom some years back whether I was ready to get married. She said she would be very happy to get me married to Mrinalini. I wasn't ready. My mom asked me anyway, "Do you want to get married? That maami wants to ask you for her daughter. Are you interested in talking to the girl?" I told her, "No. I am not getting married now! I am going for higher studies." I saw a little kid running in the road with a cricket bat almost his size.

"Hello maami," he greeted my mom and kept running.

"Who's that kid?" I asked my mom.

"Oh, you don't know? He's Mrinalini's son."

I realized time was flying by. People are growing up. All those toddlers became teenagers, tall, not those little kids anymore.

And I am growing too.

Lots happened the past several years in my life. I decided to backpack and go around India on a soul-searching journey. Who am I? Why am I doing the things I do? I wanted to reflect on my life. What did I learn?

What is life?

I told my mom I was going to backpack and go around India. That angered her instantly.

"Why can't you be normal like everyone else?" my mom yelled.

"Like who?"

"Like all your friends and relatives, who are married, who have settled in life."

"Who told you getting married is settling in life?"

"You argue all the time. What is so urgent for you to go sightseeing in India?"

"It's not sightseeing. It's soul searching. And why not? I am young. I am healthy."

"What about your job in the US?"

"I quit."

"WHAT?"

"I gave my resignation."

"People are struggling to find a job, getting a visa to work in the US. And you quit your job? Who will give you another job? Everyone else is doing their job, earning money, getting married..."

"Why should I always be like everyone else? Can't I be different?"

Chapter 1 - America! Here I come!

"All our dreams can come true, if we have the courage to pursue them."

-Walt Disney

June 2006.

I grew up in the '90s hearing people going to "States" as software engineers. "He's in States." With no cellphone or internet or social media or the zillion TV channels that we have today, I had my own fantasies on "States." The United States of America. Rich people, huge buildings, lively, fast cars, a place somewhat close to heaven, not that I knew what heaven would look like. Thanks to a Doordarshan Tamil series in the '90s, "*Washingtonil Thirumanam*" ("Marriage in Washington"). That series was set in Washington DC, and I remember sitting in front of the television religiously every week. I felt a kind of yearning in my throat, "I should go to America someday." "Jeans" movie was released in the late '90s, a romantic movie set in Los Angeles. The "*Ne Sa Re Sa*" title song at the beginning of the movie on a Vegas backdrop gave me the conviction, "America it is!" I didn't know how it would happen, I had not even traveled in an air-conditioned compartment on a train. But I knew someday I would go to America.

And that someday arrived.

I got an admission letter from a US university with a full tuition waiver and a monthly stipend. It gave me goosebumps when I read the letter. Someone was actually paying ME to do Masters. I was working in a multinational software company, but it didn't take much time to decide what I should do.

I gave my resignation.

I researched numerous online forums and all the "stories" people posted regarding US visa interviews, that was enough to give a pit in my stomach. I went to a student Visa Consultancy in Chennai for their guidance. Maybe they would give me some tips.

I sat in front of a lady in the Consultancy and told her, "I got an admit in the US and came here for some guidance on the student visa interview process."

"Sure! Can you tell me more about yourself?"

"I have a computer science engineering degree and worked for 3 years."

"Oh really!?" she exclaimed like I had committed a crime.

"Why?"

"It's very difficult to get a US student visa if you have work experience."

"Why is that?"

"Because the Consulate Officers would think you are going to the US as a potential immigrant, will find a job, and settle there. Remember they will give you a visa only when you convince them that you are only going for studies and not as a potential immigrant."

"Ah... ok... So what should I do?"

"That I will not tell you. You will have to pay 5000 Rupees for our US student visa services."

"What will you do if I pay 5000 Rupees?"

"We will conduct mock interviews."

"And how will that help me?"

"It will help you face the interview confidently."

"Will that guarantee me a visa?"

"Of course not!"

I wondered why someone would pay 5000 rupees for mock interviews when these people had nothing to do with the Consulate. Nice strategy! Evoke a little fear in people and make money out of it.

The US Consulate required one to show a bank balance for an amount equivalent to one whole year of study. Which might come to around 20-25

lakhs for an average university. And a lot more for expensive ones. *Does everyone going to the US have a lot of money?*

I did have an assistantship – a full tuition waiver and a monthly stipend. But the forums and all the interview experiences people posted there made me apprehensive. "What if?" What if I missed some documents? What if the consular officer asks me, "Where's your bank statement?" I did save some money working for 3 years. That was no way close to cover even a 6-month expense there. And my parents didn't have enough savings. I was on the hope that the Consular Officer would not ask for my bank statements because I had an assistantship.

What if my visa gets rejected? I already quit my job. I know the pain of finding a job.

I prepared for a month, browsing several forums online, prepared 15 pages of "scripts" - possible visa interview question-answers.

"Why are you going to the US?"

"What do you want to do there?"

"Why are you interested in this course?"

And yes, the dreaded question pitted in my stomach by the consultancy, "Why are you going for studies after working here for 3 years? You seem to have a good job. Why do you want to lose it?"

I made sure all the answers were honest. My area of study, my degree, my statement of purpose, my salary, my bank statements, everything was truthful. I did not seek anyone's help, I did not go for any shortcuts. I got a wealth of knowledge from the internet. I researched the university's website, had emailed some professors from the university and took print-outs of those communications.

I booked an appointment in Mumbai Consulate for the visa interview. I booked a hotel room closer to the consulate. A day before the interview, I "rehearsed" walking to the consulate back and forth from the hotel. It was a 10-

minute walk; I timed it with a watch, making sure it didn't cross the 10 minutes. I just didn't want to get lost. That evening, I stood in front of the mirror in the hotel room for 6 hours rehearsing my 15-page "script."

The next day I dressed up in formals, carried all the documents in my neatly labeled file, and started walking to the consulate.

I reached the consulate and stood in line waiting for my appointment slot. Little did I know, there was a forecast for heavy rain. It would just have been five minutes standing in the queue, the clouds grew darker and it started pouring. Everyone who waited outside the consulate was drenched. The security guards did not let anyone in before the allotted timeslot. Some had brought their umbrellas, but most covered the files and folders, tucking it under their shirts. Luckily, my plastic bag made sure my files didn't get wet.

Slowly, people started moving in, "8:30 AM appointments only!" Yeah! Mine was 8:30. Good! I felt bad for those people with 9-9:30 appointments who were still being soaked in rain. I gave the required documents, the I-90, passport, and went to the fingerprint counter.

"Your finger is wet. Please wipe it."

My whole body was drenched, and I had nothing to wipe it with. They had kept some napkins nearby. I wiped my fingers and had my fingerprints taken.

I was given a token number and was let inside the "visa interview" room. The same feeling I had during my first job interview, waiting outside to be called in by the HR, anxious about whether I would make it. Couldn't let the fear creep in too much, it would spoil the whole thing.

Keep the fear in check. Take deep breaths.

I sat there waiting for my token to get called, watching people's dreams being "evaluated" in 40-50 seconds by the Consular Officers. A bunch of numbers was called. I listened carefully. Yes! My number was one of them. I checked it once again with my token.

I went ahead and stood last in a queue of 5-6 people. One by one, they moved forward to attend the interview.

"Why are you going to this university?"

"Who is going to pay for you?"

I felt a pit in my stomach for that question. "Who's going to pay for you?" *No one!* I just had my salary savings account for financial proof. Other than that, I was counting on the university financial assistantship.

The guy in front of me had his interview, he turned back, and his face lit like a 1000-watts bulb. He looked joyous, gave me a big smile, and left. His visa got approved. One dream, cleared.

Next.

The Consular Officer signaled me to come forward. She looked like a nice, kind middle-aged lady. She made me comfortable with a kind smile. I stood in front of her, wet disheveled hair, water still dripping from my hair.

"How are you doing today?"

"Very good! How are you?"

"Doing good. Which university are you applying for?"

"Johns University."

"Why that university? Why not some other university?"

"I contacted some professors at that university. They have research projects matching my area of interest. And moreover, I have a full tuition waiver and a monthly stipend."

She looked into her computer for a couple of minutes. Every minute felt like a ticking time-bomb.

She looked at me again, "What area of interest?"

"Computer networks."

"What are you planning to learn in computer networks?"

I had prepared a few areas from the university website and told her about those.

"You worked here for 3 years?"

"Yes."

My heart started pounding. She took out the documents I had submitted and started going over them. Another couple of minutes. I wondered if she took that much time for the previous guy. He seemed to have been cleared in less than a minute.

She asked, this time with a firm tone, "Why do you want to leave your job?"

I gave her an answer that I had prepared earlier, explaining about my work experience and how that would help me in my Masters.

She wrote something on one of the papers I had submitted.

She looked at me, a stern look.

Again, she typed something on the computer.

I read in the online forums that if the visa was rejected they gave the passports back. I could almost hear my heart beating.

Please... don't give my passport back... please...

She took all the documents, including my passport, and kept them aside in a tray.

"Alright, sir. Your student visa is approved. You will get your passport in three days. Enjoy your stay in the US!"

It was my biggest relief in a long time. Those intense GRE days, preparing the statement of purpose, applying to the universities, corresponding with students and professors, those months of sacrificing movie-weekends, everything paid off. I gave a *biggg* smile to everyone in the interview room looking at no one in particular. I was very anxious and wanted to collect my visa on the same day and not wait for the postman to deliver my passport in the courier. I checked out of the hotel in the morning, roamed around Mumbai until evening. I stood in line at the VFS office and collected my passport at five in the evening. Checked the spelling in my name, university name, and everything else in the stamped visa. "Just in case." Everything looked good!

America! Here I come!