



He Knew a
Firefly

Smita Bhattacharya

Contents

Prologue | 3

Birthing

2002

His Fall | 13

(Her Dream) | 51

2003

From Paris | 55

Sisterhood | 59

From Paris | 71

Her, Him, and Her | 75

(A Dream Slightly Done) | 85

Respite | 87

Inflame

2003

(Her Dream) | 95

New Beginnings | 97

2004-2005

Another Parting | 109

Misgivings | 115

Copyright © 2015 Smita Bhattacharya

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover Illustration Copyright © 2015 Daria Oprea, used with permission
Layout and Cover Design by Pen Oaks Publishing, penoaks.com
Editing by Janet Angelo, www.indiegopublishing.com and Pen Oaks Publishing

The verses on page 13 are from “Drops of Jupiter” by Train
The verses on page 75 are from *King Henry VIII* by William Shakespeare
The verses on page 77 are from *La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge* by Arthur Symons

Burn

2005

The Burden of Memory | 133

Turnult | 141

A Crack and a Split | 155

(A Dream Half Done) | 181

Her Grief | 183

2006

Picking up the Pieces | 203

Finding a Way Home | 223

(A Dream Almost Done) | 241

Glimmer in the Dark | 243

Remains

2006

A Story Complete | 261

A Story Broken | 283

2007

Losing | 291

(A Dream Never Done) | 305

Epilogue | 313

Like a firefly in the dark

Like voices in your heart

Like bonfires on cold nights

Like sense in a fight

Walk with me

I will lead your way

Through smoke and flames

Till the light fades

Prologue

You'll find my story hard to believe. But it's true. This is no ancient myth, no old wives' tale.

This happened to me.

It was March of 1989. I was studying at the Jesus and Mary Convent, and I lived in the orphanage run by the school. We stayed in quarters behind the kindergarten block: two floors of tiny square rooms furnished with steel beds and tables, walls colored in bright blue. The rooms were small but cheerful; the sisters made sure of that. My roommate was Rosalyn, a snooty, reserved *Malayali* girl who slept or studied most of the time. Nobody liked her very much, and she wasn't really an orphan. Her father had abandoned them when she was five, and her mother taught at the school. Nobody else liked Rosalyn, but she and I got along. We studied and played together often, and talked about boys.

There were close to fifty orphan girls in my convent. The orphans studied alongside regular day students. These were the ones who stayed with their parents in town. I didn't envy them, but Rosalyn did. She envied the gold on their delicate lobes, neat socks on waxed legs, pricey shoes polished bright every morning, new books every year, trendy school bags, and water bottles bought from *Fatima*, the store in town with stained glass windows, the one we gazed at wistfully on market day when we cycled past. Orphans got hand-me-downs from older girls. I had a brown and blue school bag, which Rosalyn had patched along the seams, adding my name under the left flap in case someone stole it. I wonder now why anyone would have wanted to steal it.

He Knew a Firefly

I only envied the day girls for the food they brought: the meat sandwich, sweet *dalia*, chicken broth, *dum* biryani. It all looked and tasted delicious. I stole from them, I confess now without any shame. You would've known why if you'd walked into the orphans' eatery at lunch. The stench was enough to make you bolt even before you'd picked up a plate. On occasions, there was just molten spinach floating in a hot water bowl. Yuck.

We fought when I was caught, but not for long. No one minded a great deal, and they liked me, I think, even though I did not talk very much.

I remember it was a hot, sultry day—unbearably humid. Strange waves floated in the air at a far distance, shadows from the sky playing peek-a-boo with the sun. I ran out to the playground shrieking over the singing school bell, running along coarse parapet floors, over spiky grass, hot sparks burning my feet, scorching my skin. I had taken off my shoes because we got one pair every two years, and I did not want to spoil them.

Shirts clung to our backs while we played treasure hunt. Twenty of us played: a mix of orphans and day girls. Two of the girls, both of whom loved puzzles, had prepared a list of clues and tucked them in nooks and bends for the other girls to try and decipher with their teams. Sometimes, squeals could be heard when a clue was discovered through careful guesswork, and other times, shouts of disappointment when one team found what another was looking for.

We played for a while, happy and free with the unfettered joy of childhood. The sun was harsh on our heads even at four in the afternoon. It had begun to cool down only a bit; drops of water fell on our skin and we thought *maybe it will rain now, just a little*. But it never did. Hot and flushed we ran, conspiring in hushed whispers, thrilled in the discovery of tiny paper chits with scrawled messages.

Until we suddenly heard a cry. It was full of pain, oh so much pain.

We froze in our tracks.

Smita Bhattacharya

“There, see there!” someone screamed, pointing to the far end of the playground at the swing that shuddered aimlessly. We looked beneath the swing's wobbling seat.

It was Rosalyn! It was my dear friend and playmate lying on the grass, her body twitching as if yanked by strings, once, twice, three, four times.

We ran as fast as our legs could carry us over cement parapets, flower hedges, fence, shrub, and bushes, on to the far end of the playground, the spot where I had seen the strange waves. A few from my group broke away and rushed to inform the school watchmen and Mother Agnes.

The others thought it was a seizure of some sort; maybe she had tripped over a stone and fallen. She was clutching her right arm, which was swollen and bore a nasty red blister. She was having trouble breathing. Throat bloated. Pupils dilated. Neatly tied pigtails splayed around her contorted face like gangly tentacles.

But it was a snakebite.

I was only thirteen, but I knew it was a snakebite. How did I know? I'd seen it before.

“Stay away, stay away!” I shouted to my friends. “It's a snakebite. The snake could be around.” But I had little reason to worry. The girls were huddled in a corner, weeping and shivering in fear.

I ran to Rosalyn because I wasn't scared. Nothing could happen to me. I wasn't being bigheaded.

I knew because I'd seen it before.

I had not known how it would happen or when. But I'd seen her on that swing, thin legs ruffling the grass below, unsettling the striped yellow snake that would plant its deadly venom and slither away. It wasn't coming back. But it was leaving behind a misfortune that would need to be undone.

When I'd told Rosalyn, she'd laughed. But I knew; I knew. It was going to happen.

I had to do something.

He Knew a Firefly

I had imagined the alternatives, the many possibilities. I had worked out all possible reactions, remedies, and cures, asked the school doctor with pretended curiosity and looked it up in library books. I was prepared.

I whispered in her ear. "It'll be all right, Rosalyn, I'm here. I'll take care of you."

She continued twitching, white spittle forming at the edges of her mouth, tiny drops dribbling down in shapeless forms to gather in the grass. She was going into shock.

I was nervous but prepared. It came to me, everything I had read or heard in preparation for this moment.

I took out the gray and blue striped tie we wore as part of our uniform, kept her hand as rigid as possible, and quickly tied the cloth around the top of the blister as a tourniquet. I cinched it tight and snug.

The *Young Scientist* article on snakebites said that a tourniquet keeps the snake venom in one place, so although you may lose a limb, your life is saved. But the pressure should be just right, enough to not totally stop the flow of blood to the heart. Sucking out the poison, contrary to popular belief, can actually lead to more harm. I don't remember now why exactly.

I pulled the cloth tighter and tighter to stem the blood flow, to stop the course of the venom. Her body was going limp, her breathing shallow and labored. Black pupils swam in the whites of her eyes for few seconds until they had toiled enough. The lids closed down on them rapidly.

"Only a few more minutes, dear Rosalyn, and you'll be in safe hands," I whispered.

School attendants and watchmen lifted the barely-conscious, battered body onto a stretcher and ran to load her into the tiny four-seat ambulance the school kept for emergencies. Mother Agnes sat beside her bed praying on the rosary, eyes shut tight. We watched as the van disappeared through the school gates, siren blaring.

Smita Bhattacharya

Oh, they called me a hero and congratulated me. They gave me a certificate, a medal, and chocolates. It was quite an honor. And the chocolates were tasty.

But Rosalyn did not live.

She died.

I knew this was to be the end, because I'd seen her die. I'd seen her die before. I'd tried to save her from the end I'd seen, to change her fate so that she might live, but it was not to be.

Do you know why?

Because this was to be her fate.

And fate you cannot change no matter how hard you try.

I am Akshara.

This is my story.



Birthing

(Where we meet each one)

2002

His Fall: Vedant

That's my name.

Welcome to Praxine's annual party.

Right now, I am standing by the makeshift bar, thumping on it with all my energy, last drops of beer spilling out of my almost empty mug, demanding another with my arms raised high. No one pays me any attention because there are at least twenty of us reaching over one another, pushing, prodding, and shouting to catch the bartender's attention. But I am twenty-five, and I want a drink. I want my drink, and I want it now.

I am arguing with the massive bartender, who has been fielding me with a patient "coming right up, sir" periodically for the past half an hour, when I see her. Perhaps I know she is going to arrive, because I have my eyes on the door before she enters. My eyes are seeking even before she arrives.

As if on cue, the screen behind the bar lights up with visions of a starry night, a green ethereal being, and a song I could make no sense of until yesterday, which now seems to have been created for this very moment. The words swim in my ears, morphing, adjusting.

...she sailed across the sun...

...she made it to the Milky Way...

Because what is she, if not the most out of this world creature I have ever seen?

She walks in gold, sparkling gold, and stars fall from her with every shimmering step she takes. Her eyes are dark, kohl-rimmed pools of ink that flash and laugh at everyone she knows, perfectly set in dusky skin that reflects the neon around her. Limbs that swim rather than move, folds of gold wrapped around a small petite frame, a dense mass of twisted, curly hair that tangles from the tiara perched oddly on her head.

He Knew a Firefly

"Who wears a tiara like that?" whispers my date.

"Only a queen," I say softly.

Only a queen.

Only when he could no longer see her did Vedant snap out of his reverie. He looked around, afraid he might discover that he had been dreaming. He could swear he had woken from a deep sleep, but the world remained as before. His team sat in a circle by the pool, laughing and jostling; his date had moved away in a huff and was complaining to a girlfriend, who was gesturing at him; and more loud people had joined the boisterous group that leaned across an increasingly noisy bar, demanding their drinks.

He stirred himself conscious and reached for the beer the bartender had left on the counter for him. Elbowing the group around him, he stroked the chilly walls of his mug and held it to his cheeks, the cold nudging him awake. He turned to leave.

He was probably hallucinating.

"You were staring."

He realized it was not an accusation but a statement, playful in its suggestion.

"You were," she repeated, leaving the sentence hanging, lips turned in half a smile. He hoped she thought it was the beer that had caused the sudden flush of color to his cheeks.

She was short and very petite: tiny, like an elf. Well, with his frame, he thought everyone was tiny, but she really was. And fragile, so fragile he feared that if he barely held her shoulders she might shatter like a brittle snowflake into many tiny snowflakes, tiny but perfect.

"I was," he admitted.

"So?" It wasn't a full smile yet.

"So?" He repeated, feeling foolish.

"You like what you see?"

Smita Bhattacharya

And when she finally smiled, he felt as if the sun had come out of the clouds on a dark, wet day, and the world around him had visibly moved.

"What's your name?" he asked with forced lightness. "You are new, aren't you?"

Workmates returning from the bar shoved past them, but he stood looking at her, oblivious to the racket around him. The screen was now featuring Nelly Furtado's "I'm Like a Bird," and shrill voices started to sing along in an assortment of scales, an apparent outcome of a well-stocked and busy bar.

"Yes," she replied. "Get me a drink?"

"What's your name?" he repeated, nervous that he may have pushed his luck too much. What if she walked away and he never knew her name?

"Get me a drink, Vedant Dhawan, and I'll tell you."

He gave a start. "You know my name! How?"

"Get my drink and I'll tell you." She winked. Her eyes were peculiar—thick lashes framing tiny almond shapes that seemed like they were pulled down at the corners—peculiar and unique.

"Only round one to you." He winked back, but it was a clumsy attempt. He turned to walk away quickly. He could have kicked himself.

He barely heard her shout, "Whiskey on the rocks, please."

He staggered to the bar, aghast at what was happening. He, Vedant Dhawan, who had to make no effort to impress girls, whose rugged Punjabi good looks and sweet tongue dazzled them with little work on his part, was finding it difficult to think straight. He prayed none of his friends were around to witness the very wretched spectacle that he was making of himself.

She had a glass in her hand when he returned a few minutes later: whiskey on ice, russet lips sipping and alternately laughing with her companion.

"You know Andy?" Her eyes indicated the tall, blond man by her side, wearing an immaculately tailored blue suit with a yellow silk tie.

He Knew a Firefly

Who dresses up like that for a party? Vedant thought, feeling some resentment.

Yes, of course he knew him. The man was none other than André (Andy) Dupont, Praxine's vice president and current creative director, who had started the company ten years ago with three others, growing it to a billion-dollar, six-hundred-employee establishment split almost equally between Delhi and Paris. He lived in Paris half the year and in Delhi during the winter months.

Bloody skirt chaser.

"I've never formally met him," he muttered. They shook hands.

"And this is Vedant," she said to Andy, "the expert games designer." She paused a beat and added, "Tallest guy on the floor." She laughed.

"I'm tall, but I'm no expert," Vedant said, observing his shoes with interest.

It was while they stood and he watched her, sipping her drink, twirling her hair, gesturing and laughing, that he realized, for the first time and to recur many times later, how out of this world she seemed. She was like an origami cutout juxtaposed in a world that lay flat behind.

Akshara. That was her name.

Imperishable... everlasting... that which cannot be destroyed.

It was still a pleasant month in Delhi, and Praxine had chosen the fifteenth of October to announce the launch of a new filmmaking division in its Delhi office. The night outside was mild and pleasant, a mantle of calm until raucous laughter pierced through, boring holes into it with alcohol-induced sourness. Flowers were in full bloom, a cool breeze softened smiles, and after nine months of relentless work, moods were buoyant in anticipation of the festivals and holidays that were to follow.

Andy had left them to greet others.

"I did my homework," Vedant said.

"Eh?"

He waited for her to prod. When she said nothing, he relented.

Smita Bhattacharya

"You are part of the new team—the film division."

"Animated features." She smiled. "Good work."

"Where were you before this?"

"I guess you have more homework to do." She smiled wider and tilted her head slightly to the right, hair bobbing beneath. She seemed to do that often. Vedant chuckled, embarrassed at being played, but enjoying it all the same.

It was ten at night; time for dance and dinner.

A short, stout man with streaked hair and a ponytail scrambled atop a table, fell over the edge, and laughed out loud in drunken stupor. Balancing himself again, he stood on shaky legs and announced that he wanted to dance with everyone in the garden, *boy or girl*. His proclamation was drowned by the gusty cheers of his amused colleagues, who no longer veiled their dirty jokes in respectful whispers.

The first rumble of music sounded from the DJ's console. It was going to be Nelly Furtado's night, Vedant realized with some degree of pain. He wished they would play Pink Floyd or Coldplay so that he could show off his newly acquired knowledge of rock, sufficiently impressing the girl next to him with his lofty taste. No one else seemed to share his view or care what the DJ played. Feet danced, heads bopped, and dance partners formed on the fly.

Akshara tapped him lightly on the shoulder.

"Time to go find our partners." She walked away before he could ask her if she would be his.

He saw his date sulking in a corner, inebriated and tearful. Her dress sagged at the sides and her face was ashen. There may have been spilled drink on her bodice. He walked to her shamefacedly.

"I saw you flirting with her." She pouted, spittle forming on her lips. She wiped it away with the back of her hand.

"She's new. I was just curious." He could not have rationally explained his urgent need to know everything about her—everything.

"*Itni excited math ho*. In any case, she is older than you."

"Really?"