

Lucky Benjamin K.

By

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Originally appeared in *Crack the Spine* #149 (May 2015)

A quiet and lonely street in Yonkers exhales steam out of its manhole cover during a crisp fall night. I stop and watch a channel where wrestlers in tight trunks smack each other with steel grey chairs. I hold my gut after overeating at an all-you-can-eat Indian buffet. People argue in front of a church on the corner of Hillside and 192nd street. A pop of recollection in memory once faded and I think of you. The lucky one. Growing up, I always believed that. You were the one who got to do things that I only dared to do. The one who made friends with those I was too shy to approach. The one who I looked up to even though we were the same age.

We only got to see each other on the weekends, mostly Sundays. Life in New York City was difficult for our parents. They were strangers in a strange land; like foreigners trying to recreate their homeland in a cold urban city. They didn't fully trust anyone who wasn't from Kerala, let alone India, so they became over-protective parents and we were made to depend on them. Wherever they went, we went too: supermarkets, church, friends' houses, and the occasional restaurant outing. We were always with them. It was a rare sight to see Indian immigrant parents without their children. I had friends in school and on my block, but our parents said we were best friends because we had known each other since age four.

Your house was our church and your father was our pastor. I never really understood how you were able to share your house and your father with everyone else. During Sunday morning church, we would trek from the main sanctuary to our classes on the second floor. That floor was

the space where your family lived and the third floor was where you slept along with your four other brothers. The kitchen, the dining room, the living room, and all the bedrooms became classrooms on Sunday. I don't know how your mother dealt with the constant intrusion into her house. She was always either cleaning or cooking or yelling at you and your brothers. She was a thin little woman who was busy with the burden of caring for her own family and busy with her constant unwavering hospitality toward church people and other visitors.

I could always tell what you had eaten for breakfast on Sunday morning because the aroma would linger around your kitchen. The sweet smell of flat cakes made from milk and coconut intertwining with the strong coriander and garam masala of the egg curry hung heavy in the air. Whenever your mother saw me, no matter how busy she was, she stopped what she was doing and greeted me with her kindness. Her thin soft hands would touch my face while she talked to me. I never understood how a person could give so much of herself and still have so much love. It was not just her. Your whole family showed a kindness that was often taken for granted. Your father was nice to me too. Whenever I saw him, he would ask me about my grades at school. He had a kind face. I remembered stories that my father would tell me about your father back in Kerala and how he had come close to dying at the age of eighteen. My father didn't exactly know what the illness was, but it had seemed that there was no hope for your father. Then your grandmother cried out to God begging to heal her son and promised that he would be dedicated to God's work. God showed kindness and healed your father and from then on he was dedicated to ministry. A life of intentional focus after a glimpse of one's mortality.

During Sunday school class, you spent most of your time staring into space while the teacher talked about how important it was for us to be not only good Christian kids, but good Indian Christian kids. I guess there was a difference. My father, who was one of three deacons in

the church, sometimes complained about the lack of theological education that some of our teachers had. But you didn't care for any of it. You just sat through one lesson after another with a lost expression on your face. Holy words flew above your head and never landed in the spaces of your mind or your heart. Once class was over, we went into the sanctuary for the main service. We were forced to clap our hands to hymns and listen to long sermons in Malayalam, a language we barely understood. I was glad that we at least had Bibles in English. It helped to pass the time. You caught up on your sleep. It didn't matter; we looked forward to when the church service ended and it always ended with your father praying then singing:

Hallelujah! Thine the glory. Hallelujah! Amen. Hallelujah! Thine the glory. Revive us again.

That song would signal the end of the service. That was our time. That was when we got to play.

There was one time when we went to your brother's room after the church service to practice our wrestling moves. It was also the same room where the high schoolers held their classes. You grabbed your brother's mattress and threw it to the floor for our ring. You were Jimmy "The Fly" Snuka and I was WWF champion Bob Backlund. We practiced new moves so we could be ready when we challenged your older brothers. You were fast and graceful, pinning me down then climbing up on the dresser for your signature jump. I was slow and fat. I wasn't ready for your jump and your knee jabbed me in the stomach. It hurt but crying was for sissies. I stood up and your drop kick caught me off guard, sending me right into the wall. Cracked drywall fell all over the floor and a mist of powdered plaster floated in the air. At first, I couldn't believe it. I had never been stuck in a wall before. There was a sense of thrill and dread. I tried to

pull myself out and I looked straight into your brown eyes hoping for you to help, but all I saw was disappointment.

Then you ran.

You left me there sitting in a hole in the wall and I felt stupid for not bracing myself for your kick. I pushed myself out and ran too. I heard that the church elder who had to fix the hole wasn't happy about the incident. Neither was your brother.

We were the oldest among our church friends except for three of your brothers. They beat us up whenever they got the chance. We did get a good beating for the hole in your brother's room. Even though we lost the fight, it was good to fight alongside you.

For years, our friendship existed in the bubble of Saturdays and Sundays when church was held. Over time, our interests changed from wrestling, to comics, to video games, back to wrestling, to basketball, then to girls. The last one was hard. Our parents were strict about girls and watched our interactions at church just to make sure nothing funny happened. I mean, what could happen in church? I wasn't really any good at it. You were a natural and had an innate charm. You were tall and slim and your clothes hung from your body as if they were meant to be there, like an extension of yourself. You ate twice as much as I did but only looked half the size. I had a gut so my shirt would sit loose on the top but snug near the midsection where I tucked them into my husky jeans. The girls really liked you.

We had heard it again and again in Sunday school, how important it was to take water baptism as the next step in being good Christian Indian boys and when we turned ten, we decided to get baptized together. Your father conducted the baptism and I remembered his wide eyes and bright smile when he submerged you underwater and brought you back up. It was the same wide eyes and bright smile he gave me as if he was baptizing one of his own. I felt the cold water and

when he pushed me under, it was like I was drowning. The old boy dying, his old ways dying, and I let him drown so that when your father pulled me back up, I was someone else, someone new, someone reborn through the water. We were both new and we did it together and like an initiation into a special club, we now had a bond that was not physical but spiritual and would never be broken. We were brothers in a way that was more than what you had with your siblings. Afterward and during the lunch, we didn't talk much. I felt you were busy with your thoughts as a new person, wondering what would come next. Maybe wondering if your brothers would treat you differently. I just hoped you felt the same way I felt about us.

As you got older, you became more to your bigger brothers than a punching bag. You stayed out later, went with them wherever they went, and if anything happened, you were never blamed. Your parents faulted your brothers for not keeping an eye on you. I was the oldest in my family and I wasn't allowed such freedoms. When I saw you in church, I got to relive each story and each adventure you went on. It was as if I was there with you and your brothers.

Then it happened. Something that none of us could have seen coming. Something that went against all that we were taught and expected to live up to. Something that seemed impossible in a place like this. The church service started the same way as on any Sunday morning, but I could not shake the feeling that something was going to happen and nothing would ever be the same again. I guess we were not adults yet and could still sense shifts in the world much like how animals can sense shifts in the weather to know when a storm approaches. After all, these same adults who taught us that we were separate from the world also worked to sever our connection to something that we were born a part of.

I don't know how it started or maybe I couldn't believe it. From comments during sermons, to passive refusals to participate in the progression of the service, to heated words until finally, it happened with the pastor on one side and the deacons on the other and nothing could be done to stop it. Words of anger and hate in a place of love and fellowship seemed sacrilegious to us. It didn't belong and we sat there listening to it all, wondering what to make of the collision that was both outside and inside of us. I looked over and saw you watching them. I wondered how you felt about our fathers being on opposite sides. You seemed as lost as I was.

After things settled, the church split with your side leaving and my side staying. You and your family left the church, your home, your way of living, and I could not separate the two in my mind. Even when the new pastor took over, it still didn't feel like church to me.

After many months, I finally saw you at a convention, when all the Malayalee churches in the New York area got together. We talked and chilled outside during the service but I had to share your attention with your new friends. You talked about skipping the service and getting something to drink. I told you I wasn't thirsty. I must have looked naïve in front of your friends. I watched you walk away and I knew our friendship would not be the same. Were you still angry for what our fathers did? I was just glad to see you.

We saw less and less of each other and the term friendship felt inappropriate to use for what was now a mere acknowledgement of our nearness. I had more pressing things on my mind like finishing up high school and getting ready for college. Maybe it was better this way.

A year goes by and then I got a phone call. It was from your girlfriend.

Girlfriend.

That word stuck in my head and I wondered how it was possible to have a girlfriend with parents like ours. How did you even ask her out? I didn't have a job or my own car or any means to go on a date. After all this time, you still amazed me.

She wanted to know if I was able to come to your surprise birthday party. Her voice was soft and like nothing I had ever heard. I felt nervous. I didn't know whether it was from being remembered as someone important in your life or because I was talking to a girl on the phone. It was the first time a girl called my house. She must be beautiful I thought. She had to be. She told me that you talked about me. Talked about your best friend.

Yonkers at night wasn't a safe place to be for someone who lived on Long Island for the past few years. The streets were dark and my heart pounded to the feeling that someone could be lurking just beyond the shadows. I knew it was cool outside but I didn't feel it that way. It was quiet as if sound couldn't escape the grasp of the black void which sat in the alleys and clung to the sides of the apartment complexes. I had borrowed my mother's car and she would have killed me if she knew that I drove it all the way to Yonkers. They knew I was going but I didn't tell them where the party was. I couldn't understand why your party was so far away from your home in Queens.

Inside the apartment complex, the air was hot and stale. I knocked on the door and I was greeted by someone who I had never seen in my life. I wondered if I was at the right place. But then I leaned in and I saw your brothers. They waved at me and I walked in. I didn't realize you had made so many new friends. There was a haze of smoke that filled the air and the smell of cigarettes mingled with a distinct odor of burnt grass. A couple of guys were bringing in foot long sandwiches, bags of chips, and plates of cookies. Someone rolled in a large silver cylinder while some girls brought in a cake. I had never seen a keg of beer before.

Then I saw her.

I was right about your girl. A small wisp of blond flowed along her dark brown hair all the way down to her waist. She was thin like you and her light-brown eyes were large and inviting. When she saw me, her smile made me smile too. She was happy that I was able to make the party and she introduced me to everyone. Then you came in through the front door with another set of your friends and we surprised you. You kissed your girl and you were happy to see everyone. You were shocked to see me. We talked but I could tell from your voice that I was a part of an old life of yours; a life of restrictions and rules without mercy. All we had was a good memory of a friendship that now didn't mix well into the booze, smoke, and freedom. I saw in your eyes that I reminded you of something unhappy, of something you could not live up to. You shouldn't have thought that way. I couldn't live up to it either.

I got home late that night and my parents were very upset not only because I had decided to go to the party in the first place but that I didn't call and let them know when I would be home. I reassured them it would be the last time.

Many years later, after I moved to Tampa and after I got married, I attended a church convention in Orlando. I was surprised to see your father and mother there. Your mother said they had come for the convention and were staying with family. She was even thinner than I remembered and now age had caught up to her in the lines of her face and in the grey strands of her hair. She was happy to see me. She gave me a big hug and then placed her frail right hand on my face. For an instance, it seemed like I was that young boy again back in her kitchen. Back to a time that was simpler where nothing mattered excepting having fun. The smell of fried plantain

chips and crunchy lentil fritters saturated every breath. I inhaled slower to allow the aroma to fill my lungs. I saw you out of the corner of my eye and ran toward you while your mother yelled for us not to run in the house. We ran upstairs where we were ready to fight your brothers. We pushed the door open together and you drop kicked your brother in the chest and he fell to the floor. He tried to get up but I jumped on him and you tagged me and climbed on the dresser. You were ready for your signature jump on your brother and I knew it because I saw it in your eyes. I moved out of the way and held back your other brother who came crashing through the door. You jumped and you flew with your arms extended like wings, like an eagle, you flew, and nothing could stop you, nothing, no rules, no parents, no people, no church, no society, no culture, no system, you flew, and you were free like the way God created you.

But that was years ago and your mother still held my face while she talked. She couldn't believe how old I had gotten. She was happy to see my wife. Your father was a lot older now and I'm not certain if he remembered me. Maybe he had trouble seeing me. Your father still looked kind but it seemed lost in his aged face. Your mother had to explain who I was to him. She told me that your father was doing better especially after his dialysis. She held my hand tight and she asked me if I could find some good girl for you to marry. She said that you had not married yet and that she was praying for you. I looked at her eyes and I felt she asked out of a desperate hope. I smiled and said I would try. I never saw her again after that day. At the same convention, I found out that your girl left you and you lost your job. I didn't know how to help, so I didn't.

A few years later, I heard that your father passed away. My mother told me about it, but I felt we became too distant for me to make a trip to New York for the funeral. I felt sorry and I wanted to give my condolences. But I didn't know who to call. I didn't have your number or

your brothers' numbers or your mother's number. I didn't bother searching for information that could have easily been found. I should have made an effort.

I wrestle with my two kids in our living room and watch one of them jump onto the couch to get high enough to jump on me. A pop of recollection in memory hits me. I feel I've been here before and think of you. And then I wonder how they will turn out. I have fears of their future choices. I have fears of them getting involved with things they shouldn't be involved with or with things that might consume their souls. I have fears of becoming like your mother grasping onto others for a desperate hope for my children. I can't control their choices nor do I want to. I just want them to do the right thing at the right time. I have come to accept that we were just kids trying to live in two worlds. One where our fathers gave us unbending rules to live as perfect Christian Indian boys and one where that ideology was crushed under the feet of our boyhood desires; the longing to fit in and be accepted by the new world around us. One of culture and conformity while the other of acceptance and identity. Our fathers were immigrants in a foreign land and they tried in their best efforts to help us with the knowledge they had. But when these two worlds collided, we lived in the void. We lived in the destruction and aftermath. Our perceptions were altered and our lives forever changed by the choices we made. Some of us survived to have normal lives and some still roam within its wastelands scarred and confused. And I wonder if you were one of the lucky ones. Were you lucky, Benjamin K.?