

# PERSONAL HISTORIES

A Series On True Experiences



LIFE

## ‘Only after the award did I decide to take up writing full-time’

**RAISED IN** an academic family where science was revered, I grew up with a passion to study physics. I set out to do just that when I left New Delhi for Chicago. By 1994, I had a PhD from the University of Paris and began a decade-long career in scientific research. Today I’m pitching my first novel. This transformation though, was very gradual.

I was immediately attracted by the unique clique of the physicists. A young physicist gets a solid training in analytical thinking and problem solving. One learns the value of working hard and long enough if a solution is to be arrived at. There is glamour too; this world has its own share of heroes and hero-worshippers. Way before the political term was properly coined, this community was a truly ‘globalised’ one. People clicked depending on how they got along with each other, not on the basis of where they come from, how they look or what language they speak. Indeed, they all speak the common language of science. All good physicists take pride in

their ‘no shortcuts allowed’ mindset. After all, the very reason they choose such a path is to get to the truth of things.

So when I started a post-doctoral stint in Berlin, I had no idea where all my labour was going to lead me. My husband, also a physicist, worked in Copenhagen and I’d make long train trips to spend weekends with him. Seeing a shy girl from another part of the world, fellow passengers invariably opened their hearts to me. I remember meeting a Zambian young man and a Czech woman — both medical students in Prague — escaping to Copenhagen to get married, a man from the faraway Feroe Islands who was a guest carpenter in Berlin that was then being rebuilt, a young German student lecturing me on just why the Indian state had failed.

Once, in my rush to be the first to get on the train, I almost walked into a group of neo-Nazis standing on the platform. As I passed by those young men I thought they seemed more like they were just ‘hanging-out’, simply dressed in a style that inspired fear. Another time I met a scruffy looking young man telling me that he had come to join his ‘brothers’ to liberate Kosovo, gesturing furiously all the time! I marveled at how every single person in the world seemed to have a fascinating story to tell. Perhaps it was then that the seeds of storytelling were sowed in me?

Two productive years in Berlin, followed by a three-year stint in Copenhagen, and only then did I settle down in Los Angeles. Living as a non-tourist provided me with a refreshing perspective of places and people. Moreover, wherever I resided, I discovered amazing libraries. I read accounts of ancient India through the eyes of foreign travelers, I found beautiful mathematical treatises from ancient India, read the details of the innumerable times the Indian public was brought to its knees due to the slothfulness of its rulers in the past. At this point I also learnt for the first time about thugs. These were “normal”, mainstream people who pursued their profession as a religious calling. It left a deep mark on me and thugs are now the subject of my upcoming novel.

It was my career in physics which essentially trained me to become a writer. My experiences primed me to become one. I was ready and raring to tell my stories and took to writing on the side. Soon I started sending my short stories out to literary magazines. Scores of them, indiscriminately, never waiting for the editor’s response. When I first got shortlisted in a contest, I was shocked. But then along came my first award, and that was when I decided to turn pro in the art of weaving stories. That was when I finally decided to write my first novel.

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