



*Losing Amma, Finding Home: A Memoir About Love,  
Loss and Life's Detours*

*By*  
*Uma Girish*

## **PROLOGUE**

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As I walk out fresh from a shower following a sweaty session with a Jane Fonda DVD, I don't have the faintest inkling that eight thousand five hundred miles away, on the other side of the world, my mother is breathing her last.

It is a raw January morning in a Chicago suburb. My fourteen-year-old daughter, Ruki, a high school sophomore, is away at school. My husband, Girish, is in Indianapolis on a business trip, and expected home in a few hours.

My brother, Mahesh, called last night, expressed a dilemma familiar to immigrants with an ailing parent overseas. Should he book his ticket, get on a plane to Chennai, so our youngest sister, Maya, who is holding the fort will feel supported? Or should he wait a couple more days? Something nagged at him, he said, a strange, unnamable feeling urging him to go. And yet, there are practical considerations. He has a wife who doesn't drive, a toddler, and a twenty-two hour journey across the oceans. Like any responsible husband/father/employee, he

needs to consolidate: balance affairs at home and the workplace and apply for a leave of absence before he books his ticket.

‘Sleep on it. Sometimes, things look clearer by the cold light of day,’ I’d offered, unsure of myself.

Now, my landline is ringing. I grab it, fully expecting to hear his voice.

‘Mahesh,’ I say.

Nothing else about that call is expected – not my brother’s tone, nor his words, or the meaning they convey. Nothing. It is the wrong phone call on the wrong day at the wrong time.

‘Uma,’ he starts gingerly. After a long pause, he speaks the words that break me; tear me limb from limb; splinter my soul. ‘Amma’s...left us.’

‘What?’

It is a combination of stunned disbelief and certain knowing coalescing into that single-syllable word. It is all I can muster during such a momentous occasion, as my world tilts on its axis. It will be a long time before it rights itself, if ever.

I hear him, his words rushing past my bewildered brain, like the landscape outside a train window. ‘Brace yourself...calm down...take it easy.’

I had spoken to Amma just three days ago. The tired drawl in her voice was a red flag of sorts, but when I mentioned it to Maya (whom my parents lived with), she’d attributed it to the meds; said they made Amma woozy. I bought into it readily, shrugged off the concern, comfortably slid to the corner called ‘denial’, preferring to hide there, far away from the light.

My cell phone rings; it is my brother-in-law from Chennai.

I can barely remember how the phone conversation with Mahesh ends.

I feel heavy, weighed down by raw emotion. As my brother-in-law starts to speak, I say to him, 'Yeah, I know. Mahesh just called me,' flinching from yet another repetition.

'How did this happen?' I wonder aloud, knowing he cannot possibly have the cosmic consolation I seek. I ask to talk to Maya who is falling apart in a friend's arms at Santhosh Hospital where Amma's cold, lifeless body lies.

Thousands of miles away from each other, connected by a fragile transatlantic connection, we cry together.

I hang up and sink down to the carpeted floor of the living room numbed, shaken, terrified. When I manage to pick myself up, I rush to the altar and rage at God. 'How can I go on without her?' I ask a mute Higher Power. I'd never imagined a world without her. Who do I call when I need a home remedy for a tummy ache? Or a recipe when friends are coming for dinner? I switch on my laptop. Her gentle smiling face is my screensaver. I weep like a child.

Through the fog clouding my brain, I know I have to call Girish. I try his cell phone thrice. Each time I hear his voicemail say he can't take my call. What kind of a message do you leave in these circumstances? *Hi, I'm calling to say Amma passed away at half-past nine in the night India time. Please call me back when you have a moment.*

Outside the window, piles of snow border the curb. A white blanket smothers the life of the grassy slope, shrouds the picnic table and benches. Stark-

limbed trees stand bereft, mirroring my mood. All alone in my apartment, I alternate between heaving sobs and a strange, frightening calm when I can't feel my own heartbeat.

My mind rewinds to that beautiful bright summer day only eight months ago – 25 May, 2008 – when the email arrived. It came from Maya, hurling through cyberspace at the gentle click of a mouse button, dropped into my inbox without as much as a whisper. But the power it had, to turn my new life one hundred and eighty degrees is not something I'm likely to forget for a long, long time.

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