

The Optimist

In Paris, on my way to the hotel, I catch glimpses of all the historic places I have read about. The iconic Eiffel Tower, the most monumental boulevard, Avenue des Champs-Élysées, and the triumph of Gothic architecture; Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris still standing tall despite the recent fire. It is my fifth visit for work, a life's journey that has brought me to this charming enchanting city.

I was born in a middle class family; my father was a civil engineer. My mother trained as a lawyer who stayed at home to raise my two brothers and me. Growing up we all aspired to be engineers, doctors or lawyers; these were the only three professions that were known to us and acceptable. Of course, we had an uncle who lived in the USA who came and visited us every three years. Chandresan Kaka or Chad Uncle told us stories about his life in Florida. The beautiful beaches in Florida; his houses with swimming pools; and the opportunities that America presented.

Although after studying very hard and coming first in my high school, I did not get into any of the medical colleges or engineering schools. I started doing my bachelors in Mathematics at Hindu college.

I had applied to B.Sc (Hons) in Human Biology course in All India Medical Institute, Delhi and quite forgotten about my application. My father approached me when I got back from my first day in college and said that I had been accepted. I did not know whether I should continue to pursue the trodden path or try something new. This course was started by the Dean to encourage bright Indian students to pursue research. It involved spending the first year with the medical students and then pursuing research courses. I was in the first batch of this course. The first year was interesting. I learnt anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry with the medical students and met my future husband. The second and third year curriculum was completely unplanned. I ended up taking eighteen courses in our second year and biochemistry in my third year. It did teach me that life is unplanned and there is a lot to be learned. After completing my Master's in Biochemistry, I began my PhD in Biochemistry.

Once again, my life took a surprising turn and I received a full scholarship to pursue a PhD in University of Tennessee, USA. I arrived in USA the land of my dreams, with my luggage

lost in transit. I just had a shoulder bag with no clothing other than a winter coat that my father thought would be most essential for me in USA. Nobody could quite understand what I was saying, it was 10 pm and the taxi dropped me at my school where all the doors were locked for night security. I managed to show my acceptance letter to the personnel in the hospital and was taken to my dormitory by the campus security.

After finishing my PhD, I did a post-doctoral fellowship to get my green card, and started pursuing a career in academics. My husband decided that city living and academics was not the right choice for his family. He wanted to practice as a medical cardiologist. I tried to continue my academic career driving through two states everyday, while being there for my young children. In the winter, the 4-hour daily commute became unsustainable and I started looking for opportunities closer to home.

I received a phone call from a recruiter who asked me if I would

like to interview for a medical writing position. I started as a medical writer in a pharmaceutical company, a profession that is not taught in school but is very interesting. I could use my scientific and research training to write about the safety and effectiveness of therapeutic agents and get them approved by health authorities. More than 20 years later, after being through many ups and downs, working in small biotechs, mid size and large pharmaceutical companies and long hours, I now Head the Department of Medical Writing (US) at the largest French pharmaceutical company.

I would like to end with a poem from The Optimist:

"Life handed him a lemon,
As Life sometimes will do.
His friends looked on in pity,
Assuming he was through.
They came upon him later,
Reclining in the shade
In calm contentment, drinking
A glass of lemonade."

-Clarence Edwin Flynn, 1940

Dr. Madhavi Gidh Jain
Pennsylvania, USA

