



Ashes and Light

Women Reclaiming Life After
Suicide Loss :
Lived Journeys from Rural
India

September 2025

Ashes and Light: Women Reclaiming Life After Suicide Loss : Lived Journeys from Rural India

Presented by: Mariwala Health Initiative

Author

Nandini Murali

With contributions from

Bhuvaneshwari

Kausalya

Radhika

Tamizh Arasi

Nageshwari

Ponnuthayi

Mariammal

Rajkumari

Sumangali

Radhika

Editor

Rachita Vora

Illustrator and Designer

Ghana NB

Bala Ceani

Type Faces

Bahnschrift

Neue Haas Grotesk

Kiln Sans

Content Warning

Mentions of suicide, self-harm, gender-based violence, depression, and heterosexism. In the case of material being triggering or upsetting, you can reach out to iCALL at (+91) 9152987821 or icall@tiss.edu

CREATIVE COMMONS

Attribution-NonCommercial
ShareAlike 4.0 International
CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Ashes & Light

Women Reclaiming Life After Suicide Loss: Lived Journeys from Rural India

Dedicated to

Bhuvaneshwari, Kausalya, Mariammal, Nageshwari, Ponnuthayi, Radhika (Kottampatti), Radhika (Vadipatti), Sumangali and Tamizh Arasi of Project **SPEAK**, whose courage transforms silence into strength.

And to all who navigate the uncharted depths of disenfranchised grief—
may these stories remind you that even in the shadows,
connection has the power to illuminate the path to healing.

Held in the Telling

Some stories are born because someone stayed long enough to listen. This is for them.

A book, much like life, is a tapestry woven with the warp of vision and the weft of countless contributions. Every thread in its creation carries the texture of shared wisdom, steadfast support, and collective courage. This book, born from the pain and resilience of women left behind by suicide loss, owes its existence to the remarkable people who have shaped it in myriad ways.

Mariwala Health Initiative, particularly **Priti Sridhar, Dr. Mangala Honawar and Anugraha Hadke**: for their tireless advocacy of lived experience and their dedication to highlighting the gendered dimensions of suicide loss. Their support has been a guiding light throughout this journey.

Dr. C. Ramasubramanian, Senior Consultant Psychiatrist and Founder, MS Chellamuthu Trust and Research Foundation (MSCTRF), Madurai: For his unwavering conviction that suicide postvention is no longer an option but an imperative. His deep experience in community mental health has been instrumental in shaping the trajectory of Project SPEAK. His wisdom and steadfast support inspire me.

Mrs. Rajkumari Ramasubramanian, Executive Director, MSCTRF: For her resolute faith, belief, and unyielding support, which have been pivotal in ensuring that we create meaningful and lasting impacts within the community.

Prof. S. Koodalingam: For his pragmatic perspectives in community mental health and for shaping the interventions of Project SPEAK.

K.S.P.J. Janardhan Babu, Programme Director, MSCT&RF, for his steadfast belief in the capacity of this intervention to bring about lasting impact.

M. Anusiya, Coordinator, Project SPEAK: For her profound sensitivity, empathy, and unflinching commitment to suicide postvention. Her painstaking efforts in conducting in-depth interviews have ensured that the voices of the women at the

heart of this book are heard with clarity and dignity.

Rachita Vora: For her brilliant editorial insights, perspectives, sensitivity, and sensibility to lived experience narratives.

My parents, Sudha Raman and C.R. Raman, and my sister-in-law, Bhuvaneshwari Venkatesh: For their infinite love and profound wisdom, offering me far more than strength. They have been a sanctuary of hope, resilience, and values, grounding me with their unwavering presence and unconditional love.

Dr. C.R. Kannan: My uncle, my first reader and the individual who engaged me in the most enriching writerly conversations. His insights and encouragement have always nudged me toward deeper reflection and more meaningful expression.

Dr. R. Raguram, Senior Consultant Psychiatrist, and Former Professor of Psychiatry, NIMHANS: For being a gentle guide and unwavering advocate of lived experience and its narratives, and a quiet force in suicide postvention. He planted the seeds of this book at the launch of my book, *Left Behind: Surviving Suicide Loss*. His enduring belief in the healing power of lived experience narratives has infused this

project with heart and essence.

Mamta Fomra: For her laughter, sunshine, and shared sisterhood.

The incredible women who entrusted me with their stories: For their courage, candour, and clarity, which are the threads that hold this tapestry together. They have illuminated a path through grief that reveals not just loss but also resilience, humanity, and the quiet power of remembrance.

And finally, **Malli, my golden retriever, and Minnal, my Rajapalayam:** For their boundless companionship, warmth, and love. They fill my life with sunshine, mischief, and quiet comfort. With their soulful eyes, muddy paws, and wordless wisdom, they have been my writerly companions and my round-the-clock therapists. In their presence, I have learned the healing power of stillness, play, and unconditional love.

Creating this book has been an intense, transformative journey. It has reshaped me, challenging my understanding of grief, resilience, and healing, while allowing me to weave my own story into the fabric of those I have come to know through the losses they have experienced. It has been a process of unravelling, of confronting my own vulnerabilities, and of finding strength in the shared stories that remind us of our humanity.

Above all,

*To the Divine —
for being my refuge,
for holding me in silence,
for grounding me,
and for enabling me to be a channel of creative energy.
In that sacred quiet, this book was born.*

Dr. Nandini Murali, author

Voices from the Void: Seen and Heard at Last

My name is Kausalya, and I live in a small village near Madurai. Life has not been easy. I am only 26 years old, and I have already lost my husband. He died by suicide, and my world collapsed. Along with him I lost not only the life we had planned, but also my voice, my identity, and in many ways my place in my family and society.

In our villages, people do not talk about things like this. They whisper, judge, and blame. "Why didn't you stop him?" they ask, as if I had the power to do that. A woman is seen as someone's wife, daughter, or mother. When that role is taken away, it is as if we stop being a person in society's eyes.

After my husband's death, I received all kinds of looks and comments. My mother-in-law said terrible things, blaming me for her son's death. Neighbours whispered behind my back, and some even said I brought this upon myself. It was like carrying a weight I couldn't put down.

But then I found Project SPEAK. It's a support group for women like me—women who have lost someone to suicide. The first time I went, I was so scared. What would people think if they saw me? What would I even say? But there, I found something I hadn't felt in a long time: understanding.

Project SPEAK was a space where I could finally speak my truth. I stumbled over my words, and cried through the telling of my story; but I was heard. And seen. I felt valued. I mattered. My experience mattered. There, I realised I was not alone. Support groups are powerful because they hold space for stories like mine. They remind us that our pain does not make us weak and that we are more than our losses.

When I spoke, nobody interrupted or judged. They just listened. It was like someone finally saw the real me, not just the widow everyone pitied or blamed.

There are so many women like me, hidden away, carrying pain we cannot even put into words. But in that group, we are allowed to feel our grief, talk about it, and even start to heal. Slowly, I began to see that my pain does not make me weak—it makes me human.

Still, it is not easy. When I leave my house for the group meetings, people ask, "Where are you going?" How do I tell them? How do I explain that I'm going to meet women like me, women who know what it's like to lose everything? If they knew, they'd only judge me more.

The silence I carry is not just born of stigma—it is laced with the sharp edges of judgment. They often whisper, "Look! She has 'killed' her husband and now wants to attend a meeting to talk about her sorrow!" These words, cruel and untrue, echo the ignorance and misplaced blame that society so often places on women who are left behind after their husbands or children die of suicide.

Once, Anusiya Akka who is a coordinator at Project SPEAK, visited my home. My mother-in-law threw her out, saying, "We don't need your help!" I just stood there, unable to do anything.

Even with all this, I keep going to the meetings. Because inside that room, it is different. We cry, laugh, and share stories. And it is in those moments that we find strength.

This book is full of stories like mine. It is not about being perfect or moving on quickly. It's about showing the truth—the raw, messy truth of living with loss and learning to live again.

I hope this book reaches every woman who has ever felt silenced or shamed. I hope

it shows her that she is not alone. And I hope it teaches the world that our pain doesn't make us weak—it makes us strong.

As you read these stories, I ask you to listen. Not just with your ears but with your heart. Because every story here is proof that even in the hardest times, we can find a way forward together.

S. Kausalya

Kausalya, a member of the Project SPEAK support group for women navigating the aftermath of suicide loss, works as a skilled tailor in a garment manufacturing unit, weaving resilience into both her life and her craft.

Author's Preface

Ripple Effects:

Women reclaiming their lives after suicide loss

In the quiet, unspoken corners of grief lurks a unique kind of pain—one that is disenfranchised, neither understood nor acknowledged in its entirety. For women impacted by suicide loss, this grief is often compounded by layers of stigma, shame, secrecy, and silence, and the relentless questioning of “Why?”.

Grief is a universal experience, yet some grief exists in silence, unseen. Suicide loss falls into this realm of disenfranchised grief, an aching void compounded by societal stigma, whispered judgments, and unanswered questions. For the women left behind, this grief is not just personal—it is a deeply gendered experience that intertwines with the cultural, familial, and emotional frameworks of their lives.

In rural South Tamil Nadu, where Project SPEAK has taken root, the pain of suicide loss is palpable yet rarely voiced. Here, the challenges of suicide grief are magnified by low levels of literacy, lack of awareness, gender dynamics, scarcity of resources, stigma, entrenched cultural taboos, and the unique burdens placed on women in their roles as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, and caregivers.

My journey into suicide prevention and postvention was ignited by my lived experience of suicide loss. Eight years ago I lost my spouse, a well-known urologist, to suicide. It was an event that exposed the glaring gaps and lack of informed conversations around suicide and its devastating aftermath. This profound void inspired the creation of SPEAK, SPEAK 2us, and Project SPEAK—transformative initiatives of the MS Chellamuthu Trust and Research Foundation (MSCT&RF) in Madurai. Project SPEAK, a ground-breaking collaboration with the Mariwala Health Initiative (MHI) in Mumbai, co-creates informed, empathetic, and inclusive

approaches to postvention through the triple lenses of lived experience, trauma-informed practise and gendered dimensions of suicide loss.

My book, *Left Behind: Surviving Suicide Loss* (Westland, 2021), is a counter-narrative to the stigmatised discourse that often surrounds suicide and suicide loss. As a lived experience and trauma-informed suicide prevention and postvention changemaker, I have witnessed the extraordinary power of persons with lived experience when it comes to challenging and changing dominant narratives around suicide and suicide loss, and reshaping conversations so that they are affirmative and humane. These individuals illuminate the path toward spaces that are informed by lived realities, inclusive in their essence, and transformative in their impact.

When we envisioned Project SPEAK—a postvention initiative offering support for women impacted by suicide loss—I knew it had to be more than just a space for conversation. It had to be a sanctuary for healing, a catalyst for empowerment, and a community where disenfranchised grief could find a voice.

The narratives in this book are born in that sanctuary. They are the stories of ten women who, through the collective strength of the Project SPEAK support group, have found ways to navigate the chaos of their loss and begin the arduous journey toward rebuilding their lives. Each story is a mosaic of pain and perseverance, despair and discovery, silence and solidarity.

Postvention—the intentional act of supporting persons left behind after suicide loss—is an essential yet often overlooked pillar of suicide discourse in India. The

spotlight in mental health has long been on suicide prevention and intervention. It's time to expand our understanding of suicide care by embedding postvention as a critical, compassionate response for those left behind.

Postvention bridges the chasm between loss and rebuilding, not by erasing the pain but by validating it, holding space for it, and creating pathways for healing. For the women of Project SPEAK, postvention has meant more than support; it has meant reclaiming their narratives from a world quick to shame and blame them.

The gendered dimensions of suicide loss are inescapable. Across the world, women, particularly, are frequently subjected to a barrage of unspoken expectations and invisible burdens. Grieving a loss to suicide becomes yet another layer in the intricate weave of responsibilities they are expected to carry. These women are often silenced—not by choice, but by the cultural and social frameworks that dictate what grief should look like, how it should be expressed, and when it should end.

Through Project SPEAK, these women have found a space to break that silence. They have shared their stories in a sacred space that values their lived experiences and is free from judgment or societal expectations. This book reflects that process, a window into how shared vulnerability can create strength, and how narratives can transform the irreparable into something meaningful.

As a suicide prevention and mental health advocate, I have long championed the role of lived experience in reframing our understanding of grief, mental health, and resilience. There is no greater teacher than the voices of those who have been there—those who have walked through the darkness and emerged; if not unscathed,

then resilient and resolute. These voices hold truths that no theory or statistic can convey, offering us the gift of understanding and the possibility of hope.

Grief is not linear, nor is it finite. For many of the women whose stories you will encounter in this book, the pain of loss remains a constant companion. But within the safe, inclusive spaces of the support group, they have found a way to carry that pain differently. They are moving from isolation to connection, from despair to tentative hope, and from chaos to clarity. These are stories of transformation, not in the sense of an ending, but in the ongoing process of learning to live with loss.

To those who read this book, may these narratives touch you deeply, offering insights into the often-hidden world of suicide loss and the strength of the human spirit. To those who have experienced such loss themselves, may these pages offer comfort, validation, and the knowledge that you are not alone.

This book is dedicated to the ten women of Project SPEAK who have shared their stories with candour and courage—Bhuvaneshwari, Kausalya, Mariammal, Nagesgwari, Ponnuthayi, Radhika (Kottampatti), Radhika (Vadipatti), Sumangali and Tamizh Arasi—and to all those navigating the complexities of disenfranchised grief. It is a call to recognise the importance of postvention, to honour the gendered nuances of grief, and to create spaces where every story, no matter how painful, can be heard.

Together, we speak. Together, we heal.

Dr. Nandini Murali

Table of Contents

A loss And A Leap Forward	.....	16	Rising From Ashes	.....	42
Threads Of Grief, Fabric Of Strength	.....	21	From Pain To Purpose	.....	46
A Mother's Path To Healing And Hope	.....	26	From Broken Threads To Bold Tapestries	.....	50
Broken Threads, Unbroken Spirit	.....	32	The Moment I Stepped In	.....	55
Even If Struck By Stones	.....	38	Waves Of Grief, Tides Of Hope	.....	60

A Loss And A Leap orward

Bhuvaneshwari

Sorrow is heavy. It cannot be ignored or put in a box, to be dealt with later.

It comes in fragments and waves that drown me without warning.

Even now a year later, I still hear the moment I picked up that call—his voice, cracked and broken, echoing in my mind.

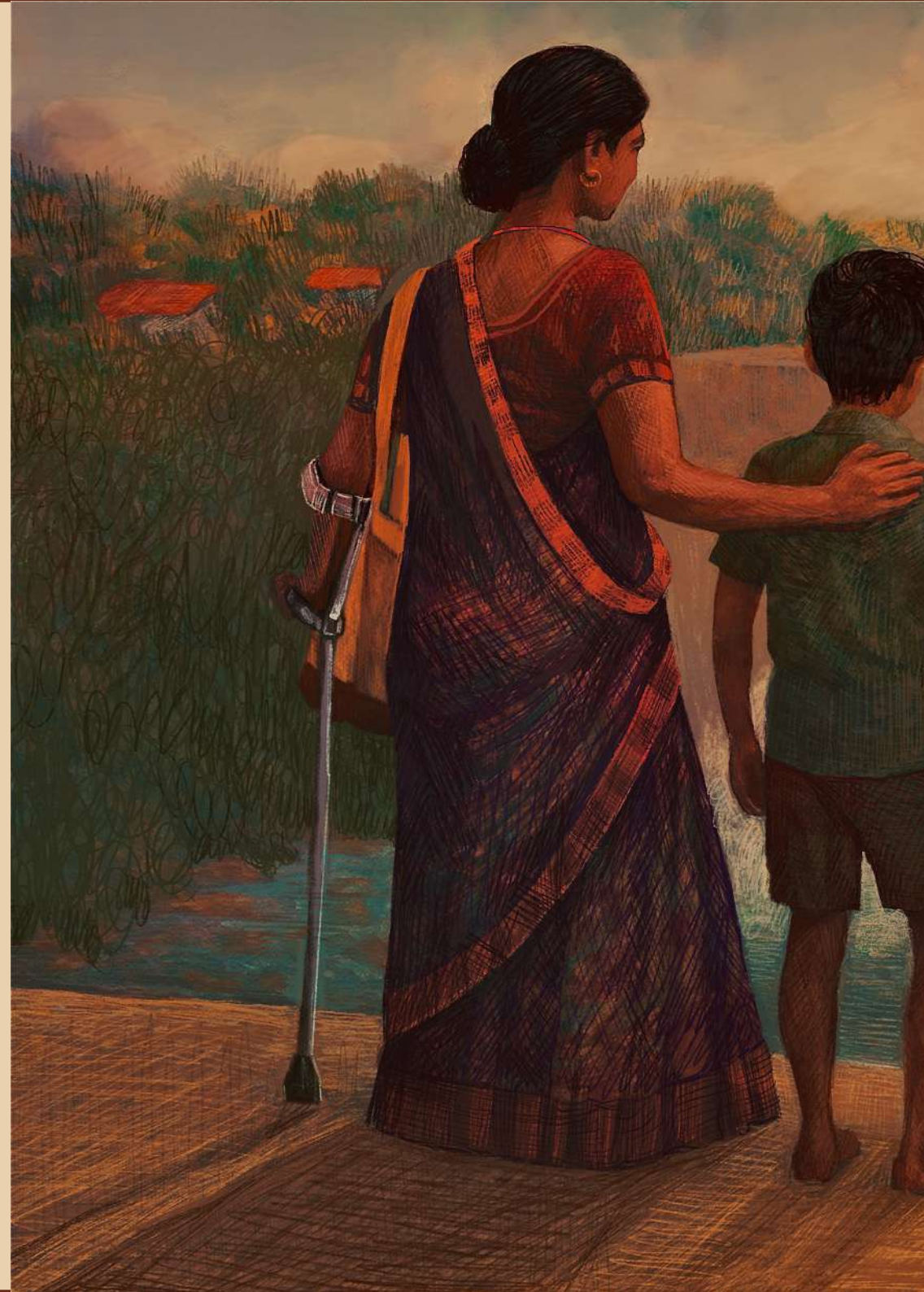
“I have taken poison.”

In those few seconds, what could I have said to stop him from ending his life?

That day had started like any other. I was at my mother’s house, recovering from dengue fever. My body was fragile, my energy low; and I was relying on my mother to care for my son. He had recently had a minor fall that had left a bruise on his leg. But it was nothing to worry about.

I told myself that staying away for a month at my mother’s house was necessary for recovery. For all of us—my husband, my son, and me. My husband had agreed. Or at least he said he did. I did not realise then how alone he must have felt in our absence, or how the growing silence in our home was taking a toll on him.

When the phone rang that afternoon, I thought it was a routine call. We had been talking daily, exchanging updates about our son, my health, and his work.



But this time his voice was different.

--

When I think of my husband, I remember the man who saw me fully—not my disability, not my limp, but me. It is not that I did not carry the weight of society's judgment. I did. Growing up with a disability in one leg affected by polio had not been easy. People stared, whispered, pitied. Even as I pursued my studies, earning an M.Phil. in Tamil, that shadow of inadequacy followed me.

But when my husband came into my life, his acceptance washed away years of self-doubt. He was a lawyer and he was confident, self-assured, and kind. He chose me without hesitation. And with him, I began to believe I was more than my limitations.

Our early years of marriage were full of simple joys: shared meals, long conversations, and dreams of a future we would build together. Our life together was not extraordinary, but it was ours. We laughed often, argued occasionally, and talked about building something lasting.

When our son was born, I felt as though the universe had granted us its greatest gift. I felt complete. And so, whatever dreams I had had for myself—perhaps teaching—took a backseat. I focused on our family and our future.

And in those early years, it was enough.

But then the COVID19 pandemic happened, and it changed everything. Like it did for so many others, it turned our world upside down. At first the changes were small, with a drop in clients, delayed payments, and mounting bills. But



slowly, things started slipping out of our hands. The courts closed. Cases dried up. His work and his identity as a provider began to slip away. My husband, once so steady, began to struggle under the weight of financial instability. I could see his confidence waver, but every time I tried to talk about it, he would brush it off with a smile: "I can handle it."

I believed him.

He told me he was managing, but I see now that he was trying to shield me from his struggles. I should have seen the signs—the forced reassurances, the hollow smiles during our calls. But I was caught up in my own recovery from Dengue and in caring for our son. I was not there to notice.

On our son's birthday, he called, his voice heavy. "I feel terrible I am unable to buy him a gift," he admitted.

"It is alright," I told him. "We will celebrate next year."

I thought I was being practical. Supportive. I thought I was easing his burden. But I see now how hollow those words must have sounded. He was not just grieving the inability to buy a gift. He was mourning the loss of his roles as provider and protector.

But those words must have cut deeper than I understood back then.

--

"I have betrayed you."

Those were his last words to me before he hung up that fateful call. The

confession came out in fragments: from a relationship with a woman I had known nothing about, to guilt and despair that had consumed him. His words felt like blows, each one heavier than the last. I begged him to hold on, to let his family take him to the hospital.

I called him back immediately, frantic and desperate. I begged him to stay alive, to hold on. But by the time his family broke down the door and rushed him to the hospital, it was too late.

When I arrived, they told me he was gone. I did not know which was a greater betrayal—his affair or the way he died.

Grief was not immediate. Shock came first. Then disbelief. How could this be real? How could the man who promised me a lifetime be gone in an instant, I thought.

Then came the blame.

In the days that followed, the weight of his absence felt even more unbearable due to the harshness of those around me.

"It is her fault," they whispered. If only she had not left for her mother's house..."

Some did not bother to whisper. They accused me outright for staying at my mother's house, for not supporting him, and for failing as a wife. Each word felt like a stone added to the crushing weight of my guilt. I began to question everything. Had I failed him as a wife? Should I have stayed even in my weakened state? Could my presence have saved him?

I had thought grief was the heaviest burden I would ever bear. But guilt, guilt was heavier.

I stayed at his family's house after his death, avoiding burdening my parents with moving back into theirs. But their blame did not stop.

"If only she had been a better wife," they said.

In the quiet moments, I turned those accusations inward. Had I failed him? Could I have saved him?

Guilt has a way of turning into anger. I grew furious—at him, at myself, and at the world. How could he leave us like this? How could he abandon his son, his family?

The anger consumed me. It seeped into every corner of my life. I stopped eating and sleeping. My body, already fragile from dengue, began to break down further. I was left hollow and unrecognisable.

It was in this state—broken, exhausted, and desperate—that I attended my first support group meeting being conducted by Project SPEAK, a postvention service for women impacted by suicide loss. I did not expect much, because I did not think that sitting in a room full of strangers would make any difference. But as I listened to the other women share their stories, something shifted.

The meeting was unlike anything I had experienced. A circle of women, each carrying their own grief and stories of loss. I sat quietly at first, hesitant, unsure of what to share. Yet for the first time, I did not feel alone. These women did not judge or blame me. They listened.

One woman shared her story about losing her husband and being ostracised by her family. Another spoke about her struggle to provide for her children after her husband's suicide. Each story was a mirror, reflecting parts of my own pain.

When I finally spoke, it felt like a dam breaking. I told them everything—about my husband, the blame, the guilt, the anger. And for the first time, I felt heard. Truly heard.

By the end of that meeting, I felt a spark of something I had not felt in months—hope.

That meeting was a turning point. I began to remember the woman I was before grief consumed me. I thought about the pride I felt when I completed my M.Phil. in Tamil. I remembered the joy of immersing myself in literature and language. I had set aside my dreams for my family, but now I realised that reclaiming them was not selfish, but necessary. Those dreams had not died; they were just buried under layers of loss.

I started working at a small shop to make ends meet. It was not much, but it was something. And then, with the encouragement of the women in the support group, I applied for a job at a computer centre. When they called to tell me I had been hired, I cried out of relief.

This job feels like the beginning of a new chapter. And for the first time in a long time I feel capable. I feel like I can provide for my son, and that I can stand on my own two feet, even with my limp.

Grief is still with me. It will always be with me.

But it no longer defines me.

Some days I feel okay. Other days I feel like I am drowning all over again. But I have learned to hold on to the good days. I have learned to find strength in my son's laughter, in the love and friendship of the women in my support group, and in the quiet moments when I sit down to write in Tamil—a language that feels like my mother's home.

I have learned that it is okay to feel angry and sad and hopeful all at once. And I have learned that while I may never fully understand why my husband made the choice he did, I can choose to keep living.

My son and I are building a life together one day at a time. I see him growing and thriving, and I know I owe it to him to keep going. I must show him that loss need not mean the end. I want other women to know that it's possible to rebuild even after the most devastating losses. It is possible to find strength in the unlikeliest of places—in the support of strangers, in the quiet beauty of a new job, and in the resilience of a mother's love.

And so, I keep going—not because it is easy, but because it is necessary. For my family and for the life we are still trying to create.

I am Bhuvaneshwari.

I am a mother and a survivor.

And every day, I am learning how to live again.

Threads Of Grief, Fabric Of Strength

Kausalya

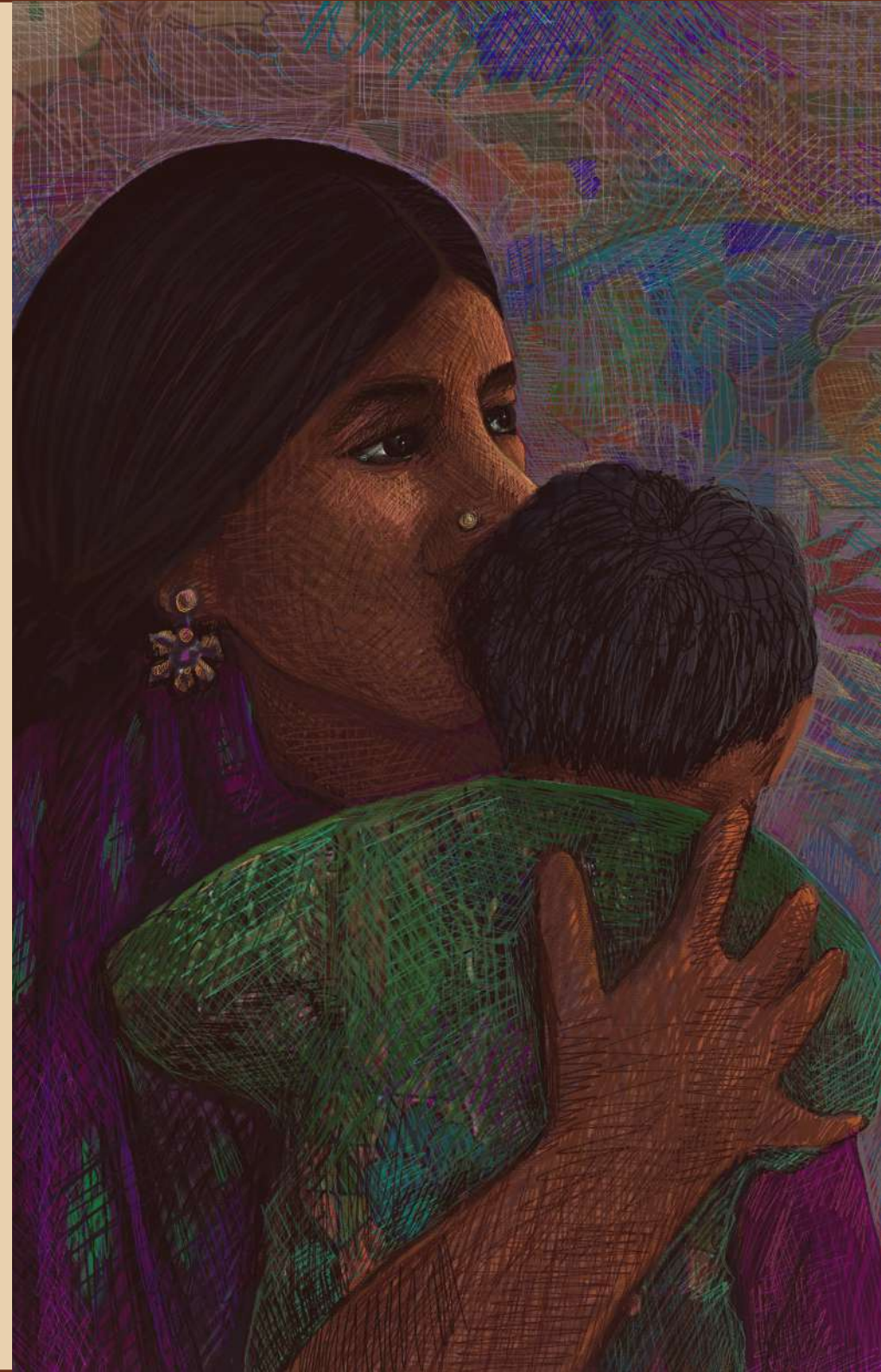
Four years ago, my life turned upside down. Until then, I don't think I truly understood what suicide meant—it was just another piece of news, distant and detached from my world. But after what happened, I would never wish such a tragedy on anyone.

I had been married for five years, and life was good, simple, and uneventful. Or so I thought. Like many other women, I lived happily with my husband. He was deeply attached to me and our children, showering us with love and care.

But five years ago he had an accident, which changed everything. Having fractured his hand and foot, he was immobilised. His body grew weak and he was no longer able to work. The responsibility of caring for him, our home, and our children, fell on me.

This shift was not easy for either of us. I had no choice but to find whatever job I could to earn the money we so desperately needed. So I began working as an office assistant to bring in some income. Soon, my husband began to feel more and more inadequate. He began doubting himself, feeling shameful that he had to rely on me, his wife, to earn money while he stayed home. This sense of inferiority began to create small cracks in our relationship, which over time steadily widened.

My mother-in-law, seeing those cracks, chose to widen them. She played on my husband's insecurities, feeding his frustrations. What could have been a



period of adjustment for us turned into a time of conflict. We began arguing frequently, and finally, I couldn't take it any longer. So I left. I moved back to my mother's home with my two children, seeking refuge.

Eight months passed. No calls, no letters, no visits—just an emptiness that stretched endlessly. During this time, I heard from neighbours that my husband had turned to alcohol. It seemed that what had begun as an occasional drink had quickly turned into an addiction.

Then, one morning at around 10 a.m. my phone rang. My husband's voice at the other end was soft, and sounded different—almost tender. “How are you?” he asked, a rare trace of concern in his tone.

I hesitated, but then told him the truth. “Darshan has a high fever,” I said, my voice heavy with worry.

“I will come with you,” he said. “Let us take him to the hospital together.”

For a moment, I felt hopeful. Perhaps this was the beginning of something new. Perhaps we could return to the life we once shared, and rebuild what had been broken. I imagined us walking together hand-in-hand to the hospital. In that moment, I dared to dream that maybe we could find our way back to each other.

But life had other plans.

At 3 p.m. that same day, I called my husband's phone. It rang and rang, but there was no answer. I felt a growing unease that something seemed off, but I convinced myself he might be busy or had misplaced his phone.

Then, a call came from an unfamiliar number. “Hello, who is speaking?” I asked, my voice casual, unsuspecting.

The words that followed shattered me. It was not just any call; it was the call that would change everything. “Your husband... he's no more... he killed himself.”

My mind froze, refusing to accept the reality.

“No,” I whispered, then louder, “NO!”

Tears blurred my vision as I began to sob uncontrollably. My mind screamed that it could not be true, yet my feet instinctively carried me to my husband's family home, desperate for answers.

When I reached the house, my hope of finding solace was quickly dashed. The door stood shut, but their words, sharp and cutting, were loud enough. My husband's family would not even let me enter.

“You are not welcome here,” they said.

I begged and pleaded, but they refused to allow me to witness my husband's final rites. Their anger and blame were directed entirely at me, as though I was responsible for the tragedy.

And then came their most cruel demand: “Leave your children here. You have no place here anymore.”

Those words cut deeper than anything else. How could a mother abandon her children? How could they expect me to leave behind the only piece of

him I had left? Trembling with grief and anger, I left their doorstep, but I did not give up. I went to the police and fought tooth and nail to bring my children back to me.

Eventually, I was able to bring my children home. But this victory was not without its own challenges. I had returned to my parents' house, but their meagre income could not support me and my children. I had no savings, and no help from my husband's family. I felt alone in every sense of the word.

Determined to preserve a sense of stability for my boys, I chose to remain in my husband's village, despite the hostility I faced from my in-laws.

It was during this time that I met staff from MS Chellamuthu Trust. They listened to me when no one else would. They saw my grief, my exhaustion, and my determination to provide for my children. MS Chellamuthu Trust became a lifeline I never knew I needed.

For months after my husband's death, I was filled with grief, anger, and loneliness. The trust showed me a way to rebuild myself.

Their support began with the practical. They helped me find small jobs, ensuring I had enough income to feed my children. It was a humble start, but even the smallest steps felt big in those dark days.

The work, though a salve, was not without its own challenges. In a small village, a woman working outside the home, especially without a husband, is always a subject of gossip. At my workplace, colleagues often asked probing questions, sometimes with genuine curiosity, but often with an edge of malice. "Where is your husband now?" they would ask. "Is it hard to

manage without him?"

At first, their questions stung. I would lie, saying he worked in another town and only visited once a month. It felt easier than explaining the truth. But over time, I stopped feeling the need to justify myself. I realised their words reflected their own narrow thinking, not my worth.

It was the Project SPEAK support group that helped me find my strength. At first, I had refused to join. I could not imagine how sitting with strangers and talking about my pain could change anything. But they gently encouraged me, reminding me that I deserved a space to share my story. Eventually, I agreed.

Walking into that room for the first time was overwhelming. But what I saw amazed me—so many women, just like me, carrying invisible wounds but trying to stand tall. For the first time since my husband's death, I felt a strange kind of relief. These were women who understood, not because they sympathised, but because they had lived through it too.

In that circle, I found a sense of belonging that I had not felt anywhere else. As I listened to their stories, I felt as though they were speaking my own unspoken thoughts. And when it was my turn to speak, they listened. Just open ears and kind eyes.

It was in that room and in the company of those women, that a new determination began to grow within me.

--

Attending The Project SPEAK meetings changed me. Through those women's stories, I began to understand my own grief differently. It was not

a single emotion but a tangled web—sorrow mixed with anger, guilt, and even moments of relief. With them, I could cry freely, laugh unexpectedly, and express thoughts I had never dared to say aloud.

They also helped me become strong, encouraging me to attend tailoring classes to make a stable income. While I resisted initially, I eventually started attending the classes, which became my refuge. The rhythmic motion of stitching fabric, the hum of the sewing machine, and the conversation with the other women gave my days meaning. And over time, I became proficient.

I began taking small orders, stitching clothes for women in the village. The money I earned wasn't much, but it was enough to feed my children and keep a roof over our heads. What surprised me most was how the work began to heal me in unexpected ways. With each piece of fabric I shaped, I felt as though I was stitching together pieces of my broken self.

Project SPEAK counsellors also guided me through the emotional storm of losing my husband to suicide. They helped me question my belief that I had somehow failed my husband.

“His choice was not your fault. Grief feels personal, but it does not mean you are to blame.” They reminded me gently.

It was not easy to let go of the anger, particularly at my husband. I had loved him deeply; yet in his despair, he had left me with nothing but questions. The counsellors helped me see his suffering not as a betrayal but as a tragedy that neither of us could control.

Gradually, the rage softened into something resembling understanding. I

began to focus less on the ‘why’ of his death and more on the ‘how’ of my survival.

My children became my anchors. Watching them grow reminded me that life still had moments of beauty. My older son started excelling in school, while my younger one learned to laugh again. Their resilience inspired my own.

Project SPEAK also encouraged me to give back to the community, which I did by speaking at meetings, and sharing my journey with other women who were newly grieving. It was terrifying at first, but with every story I told, I felt lighter.

--

The village that once seemed full of judgment has started to feel like a community again. Neighbours now greet me with kindness. Some even bring their clothes for me to stitch, offering both work and conversation.

There are days when the memories overwhelm me, when I hear my husband's voice in my dreams or recall that last phone call and wonder if I missed something. But there are also days when I wake up with a sense of purpose, ready to face the world for the sake of my children and myself. The grief is still a part of me, but it no longer defines me. I never imagined that I could become the strong, self-reliant, and hopeful woman that I am today.

When I think back to Project SPEAK and their unwavering support, I feel a deep sense of gratitude. They taught me that healing is not about forgetting or erasing pain; it is about carrying it in a way that allows you to keep moving forward.

And so, I move forward—for my children, for the women who hear my story and find strength in it, and for the memory of a man I loved, even in his darkest moments.

The support group continued to be my refuge. Every month, we gather and share updates, celebrate small victories, and hold space for each other's pain. One day, I shared my dream with the group: to one day open my own tailoring shop. I wanted to create something of my own. To my surprise, they cheered me on, offering ideas, resources, and even connections.

Today, my life is far from perfect, but it is mine. I earn enough to send my sons to school and provide for their needs. My tailoring business is still small, but it is growing. Most importantly, I have been able to stand up again, like a tree bent in the storm. But not broken.

When I walk through the village now, I hold my head high. The whispers still follow me, but they no longer define me. I am no longer just a widow or a victim of tragedy. I am a mother, a provider, and a woman who refuses to give up.

Project SPEAK taught me that healing is not about erasing the past but about finding the strength to build a future despite it. They gave me the tools to survive, but more importantly, they gave me the belief that I could thrive.

And for that, I am forever grateful.

A Mother's Path To Healing And Hope

Mariammal

I still remember the last conversation with my daughter Saraswati.

“Amma, please do not ever scold her... my little girl Kavita. Whatever mistakes she makes, look after her well. Promise me.”

Saraswati's voice, heavy, rings in my ears even now, six years later. It was unlike her to speak this way, her words tinged with the sorrow of someone who had seen too much, carried too much. At first, I thought it was just the usual pressures that so many women face—managing the household, raising children, and also dealing with the unrelenting demands of their husbands and in-laws.

But as I look back, I realise that she was asking for help, and I failed to fully understand her needs at the time. In those days it struck me that her words felt unusual, but I brushed them aside. How could I have known she had made up her mind to end her life?

I told her, “How can a child grow up without being scolded? Only a child who is disciplined learns to live well.”

I thought I was teaching her a lesson, passing down the wisdom I had learned from my own life. But now those words weigh on me like a heavy stone. I did not know this was her way of saying that she would soon be leaving, never to return.





Saraswati had come to stay with me that week, as she often did when life became too overwhelming for her. I had reassured her, telling her not to worry about anything and that I would look after her daughter.

What I did not know back then was that she had taken a small loan. The first I heard of it was when the moneylenders started coming to our house while I was away in the fields. They demanded repayment, their voices loud and threatening.

She actively hid her debt from me. "If Amma finds out," she must have thought, "she will be angry." And she was right. I would have scolded her, afraid that this small loan for a seemingly minor problem could grow into something far worse.

There was another place where she had applied for a loan but they rejected her application because she had not repaid ₹400 on a previous loan she had with them. It was a small amount, but being unable to repay made her feel defeated and hopeless.

--

I did not know this back when she came to stay with me, but she had tried to take her life once before.

She had walked to the river, about to jump in, when some passersby noticed her. They pulled her back and brought her home, saving her life. Even then she did not say a word to me about what had happened. She kept everything locked inside, choosing to carry her pain alone.

I didn't know it then, but the morning after she asked me to care for Kavita was the last I would ever share with her. I went about my day as usual, not

knowing what she had planned. After eating, I left for the farm, where I worked as a labourer. My daughter stayed back at home, alone. I thought nothing of it. It was just another day—or so I believed.

When I returned in the evening, I found the house locked. I stood at the door and called out her name but there was no answer. My heart began to race. Something felt wrong, but I did not know what it was. I shouted louder, hoping she would hear me and come to open the door.

When there was still no response, I looked through the window.

That is when I saw her.

That moment of seeing my daughter lifeless will never leave me. My legs refused to move; my hands felt frozen. For a moment, time itself stopped. I could not think, I could not speak.

Finally, I screamed, "Amma! Open the door! What have you done?"

My cries echoed through the village. Neighbours rushed over, and together we broke down the door. I ran to her and gently lowered her body to the floor. But it was too late. She was gone. My daughter, my child, had left me forever.

What followed was unbearable. My son-in-law did not console me. Instead, he hurled words at me that pierced my heart like daggers:

"Why are you still alive?

What is the point of your life now?

You are the reason she is gone.

You killed her!"

Even my husband echoed those cruel words. I could barely endure their blame over and above what I was already going through. It felt like my heart had been ripped apart all over again.

For three days, I could not eat a single bite of food. My body felt as broken as my spirit. I lost a lot of weight. I did not cook during that time; the fire in our kitchen stayed unlit, just like the life that had left our home. I stayed home lost in my grief, unable to focus on anything. Soon the neighbours started coming over, each with their own questions. The police came and interrogated me.

"What did you say to your daughter?"

"Why did she do this?"

"What happened in your home?"

These questions tore through me like knives. Their words were full of blame, suspicion, and judgment, as if I had personally driven her to taking her life.

These accusations from my family, the neighbours, and everyone around me weighed on me more heavily than I can describe. The words felt like stones, thrown at my already shattered heart. The people in the village whispered among themselves, pointing fingers whenever I walked by. They said I must have told her to die, and that I was the reason for her death. My grief, already unbearable, was now mixed with shame and guilt that was not mine to carry.

For a long time, I stopped going outside. I felt exposed, judged, unworthy.

I stopped wearing nice sarees or bangles, and stopped taking care of myself. How could I? My daughter was gone and in the eyes of my family and society I was the reason. I could not even bring myself to attend joyous occasions like weddings and temple festivals. How could I join in when my presence felt like a reminder of what they thought I had done?

When I saw children around the same age as my daughter, my heart ached. I caught fleeting glimpses of her in them—sometimes it was her smile, other times, her laughter. There was no one to comfort me or share my grief. So, I consoled myself alone. Over the years, I have become an expert at this.

Life did not stop, though it often felt like it had. I arranged for my son's marriage, trying to move forward and live as though nothing had changed.

I did not tell my daughter-in-law about my daughter's death. I thought it best to keep the past buried; it would protect her and us from unnecessary judgment.

For a while, things seemed fine. But about a year after the wedding, my daughter-in-law found out. Neighbours, ever eager to gossip, told her what had happened: "This is the house where your naarthanar (husband's sister) hanged herself."

The moment she learned the truth, she said, "I cannot live here. I will not stay in this house," and she left. She was terrified. No amount of reassurance would change her mind. I tried to explain, "My daughter would never have wished harm on anyone. She was kind, loving. Please do not think of her like this." But she would not listen.

She stopped speaking to me altogether. Her silence and rejection felt like another blow. She did not return, and her relationship with me grew more distant. Eventually, I had no choice but to set up a separate house for my son and daughter-in-law. She refused to visit us, and I did not want to force her.

Meanwhile, my grief felt too much to bear. The emptiness in my life grew each day as I wandered through the house my daughter had once filled with life. I could not understand how to live without her. I became disconnected from everything and everyone. In the early days after her death, I moved through the motions of life, but felt as if I was in a fog. I did not want to talk to or interact with anyone. I could not bear the pity or the awkwardness in their eyes. Even well-meaning neighbours would avoid me, not knowing what to say. Their silence was louder than their words. Even though I was surrounded by people, it felt like I was carrying my grief alone.

But over time, I realised I could not carry on like this alone. I had to find a way to survive, to heal and to keep going. My granddaughter Kavita, now 12 years old, still does not know the truth about her mother's death. Sometimes at school the other children talk about it. But she never brings her feelings to me. She confides in her friends instead.

One day, one of Kavita's friends came to me. "Your granddaughter is upset. She misses her mother." I immediately went to my granddaughter and tried to reassure her, "From now on, I am your mother. You do not need to think about your mother anymore. Whatever you need, I will do for you."

I held her close, trying to fill the void in her life.

--

After my daughter's death, I carried a deep anger toward her for a long time. I could not understand why she would leave me and her little daughter to suffer this way. The thought of her abandoning us like this filled me with resentment. Every time I looked at my granddaughter, that anger only seemed to grow. I would ask myself, "Why did this innocent child have to lose her mother at such a young age? Why did my daughter choose to leave her behind?"

That anger swallowed me whole. It began to take a toll on my body, bringing on new health problems. Feeling trapped in my pain and exhaustion, I could not take care of myself. It was a dark time during which I struggled to make sense of anything.

I needed help. This was when I met a team member of Project SPEAK who encouraged me to attend the support group meetings.

"You do not have to carry this burden alone," she said gently, as I poured out my pain to them one evening. "There are others who understand. Maybe it will help to share with them."

I did not understand what a support group could do for me. How could talking to strangers make any difference? But I agreed to go, driven by the idea that there was a chance for relief.

The first meeting felt strange. I did not know anyone there, and I was not sure what I expected. I sat in a circle of faces, some older, some younger, all of them marked by grief in one form or another. Some were quiet, while others spoke openly about the loved ones they had lost. Their pain mirrored mine, but it also provided a strange comfort.

For the first time in weeks, I did not feel so alone.

Each woman spoke about her journey with grief—the weight of loss, the feelings of guilt and helplessness, the endless what-ifs. At first, I listened, too afraid to speak. But as I heard the pain in their voices, I began to feel that I could share too. In doing so, I might start to understand my grief better, and start to find a way through it.

The group became my lifeline. We met each month, and over time I began to feel more comfortable. Every group member had lost a loved one to suicide. It became a space for healing, a place to confront the rawness of our loss and slowly learn how to rebuild ourselves. Each of us was on our own journey, but together, we shared a bond of shared pain and hope.

As time passed, I realised how important it was to be in the presence of others who understood what I was going through. The world outside expected me to return to life as usual, but inside I felt as if I had lost the core of who I was. The support group allowed me to grieve, to feel, to be broken, and to take my time. These women gave me words for the emotions I could not express myself—anger, confusion, fear, and guilt. They showed me that it was okay to feel all these things.

At one of the meetings, a woman named Priya shared her story. "I used to think that I had to be strong," she said, "but I realised that being strong does not mean holding everything inside. It means being able to ask for help, to let others in, and to allow myself to feel. I (have) learned that grief is something you learn to live with."

Her words comforted me. I had spent so many days trying to be strong for everyone else, especially for my granddaughter. But I had neglected

my own healing. I had thought that by holding it all in, I was protecting my family. But in truth, I was only hurting myself more.

--

With the encouragement of the group, I started to talk about my daughter's life, not just her death. I shared memories of her laughter, her love for cooking, and how she cared for her family. This was important for me. Focusing on the good memories allowed me to see my daughter not just as someone who had died by suicide, but as someone who had also lived, loved, and given so much of herself.

As I connected with other group members, I began to feel strong. No longer was I defined solely by my loss. I was still a mother, a grandmother, and importantly, a woman with her own dreams. I realised that my daughter's life, as short as it was, had left me with a legacy of memories. I began to focus more on my granddaughter, ensuring that she was growing up surrounded by love and understanding. I wanted to pass down the strength I had found in the group to her, and to teach her that grief does not need to define us. It is okay to feel sadness and still find joy in life.

The Project SPEAK support group taught me another important lesson: healing does not happen in isolation. We need others to help us bear our burdens, share our pain, and provide the strength that we may not have within ourselves in the darkest moments. Being part of the group allowed me to see that I was not weak for needing help, that I was not failing by not having all the answers.

I still attend the support group occasionally. The members are now like family, and I try to offer them the same support they gave me. Grief is a

long road. It lingers, but it also changes. It becomes part of who we are, not something we can ever fully escape but something we learn to carry. I still miss my daughter every day.

But also, I see how far I have come.

If you've lost someone to suicide and your days feel dark and heavy, I just want to say: you're not alone. There are others like you, who know this pain, and will stand with you. You don't have to hold all that sorrow by yourself. When you speak, when you share even a little, your heart will feel lighter. Slowly, you'll find strength. Hope will come back. And one day, you'll be the one giving that hope to someone else.

Broken Threads, Unbroken Spirit

Nageshwari

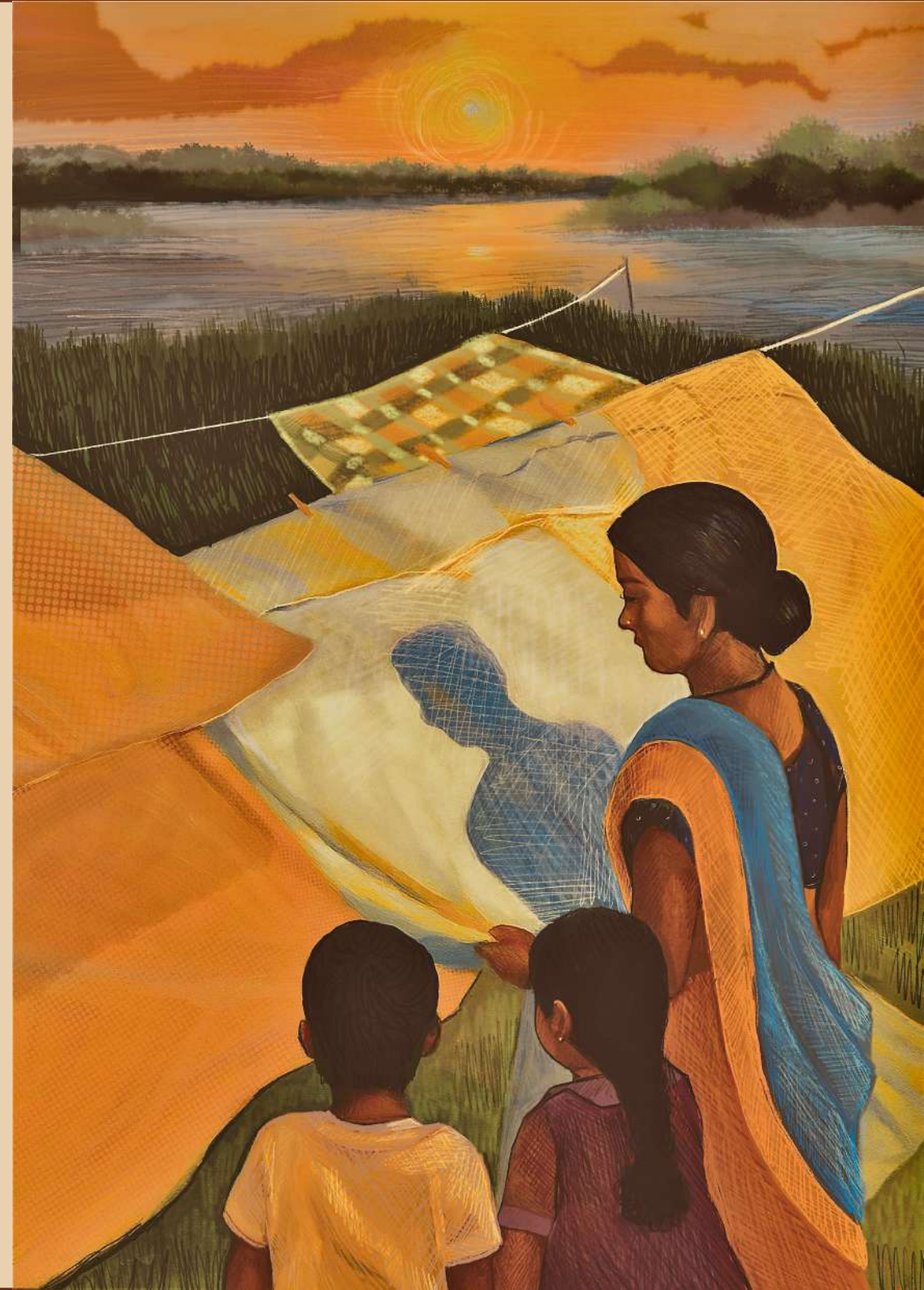
I have spent most of my life with the smell of soap, detergent, and the hot sun clinging to my skin. My hands have been weathered by years of work alongside my husband in the sweltering heat of our village.

Laundry. It is a humble, steady existence—rough hands and aching bones. But it is the only life I know.

We have been washing clothes for as long as I can remember. We earn our livelihood through sweat and toil. My husband and I working side by side day in and day out, doing the same thing over and over. Yet, it has always felt like we are doing something worthwhile.

But we had other dreams too. We dreamt that our sons could receive the kind of education that would one day open doors to a future far beyond the confines of this village. We dreamt that they would not have to carry heavy bundles of laundry on their shoulders, like their parents did. My husband and I never had the chance to study, but we always knew that the greatest gift we could offer our children was the gift of knowledge. We believed that education could break the cycle of poverty that had gripped our family for generations.

On many evenings when the work was done and the sun would begin to dip below the horizon, we would sit together—my husband, my sons, and I. We would talk about the future, about their dreams. Sometimes our conversation would also drift to our past, to our childhood struggles and the things we could not have. Yet we spoke to our boys with hope in our hearts.



Then, in 2011, time fractured. My sister died of suicide.

I can still feel the shock and weight of that moment, as though the earth had split open beneath me. It was a loss that left a void I did not know how to fill. She did not leave behind any explanation—no note, no reasons—only an awful silence that seemed to stretch on forever. Back then my mind raced, trying to understand what had happened, but I could not grasp the reality of it.

Then one day, soon after my sister's death, a new presence entered our lives: my sister's four-year-old daughter. It was an unexpected arrival; a child I never imagined I would care for. She was so small and frail when I first saw her, and her wide, frightened eyes haunted me in those early days. Her father had disappeared long ago, and there was no one left to care for her.

In that moment, how could I explain to her that her mother, the woman who had brought her into the world, would never return? And what about her father, who had abandoned them both so many years ago? How could I fill those spaces for her? What do you say to a child who has already lost so much?

I remember walking back to the village holding her in my arms. She was so small, and yet the weight of her grief felt so heavy. But we took her in. It was not even a question of whether we should—my heart knew it would have been impossible to do anything else. As I cradled her against me, I knew that she was meant to be with us. In many ways, she became the daughter I never had. She filled the empty spaces left behind by my own unfulfilled dreams.

And when she called me “Amma,” a rush of love filled the empty spaces of my heart. It was a strange feeling, both painful and beautiful all at once. I was not her biological mother, but she needed me, and in that need, I found something I did not even know I was missing. We became a family again. Slowly, surely, we healed together, though the scars of the past never fully disappeared.

But life, with all its harshness, had not spared us yet.

--

It was a morning like any other—the aroma of dosa in the air, my son's voice filling the room as he spoke casually, his words full of promise and hope. “I will do well in life, Amma,” he told me, just before leaving the house. “I will do so well that you never have to worry again.” That was the last time I would see his smile or hear his voice.

And then, later that day, just like that, he was gone.

I will never forget the moment I walked into his room and found him. My knees buckled. I could not breathe. It did not make sense. I could not understand. The image of him—hanging, still, lifeless—clings to me like a poison.

Grief consumed me instantly. A scream tore from my throat—raw, involuntary—a surge of pain I couldn't contain. The grief of losing him crashed into me, tangled with the unbearable question: Why did he leave?

“Why? Why did you leave me?” I cried, but the silence only echoed back. My niece, whom I had raised as my daughter, became my pillar of strength

during those initial harrowing hours. She tried her best to console me, even though I could see that she was struggling herself. She had adored her elder brother, and his sudden loss was unbearable for her. Tears streamed down her face as she clung to me, sobbing, “Amma, why did this happen? Why did he leave us like this?”

I could see her pain reflected in her eyes, and I tried to comfort her even though I was breaking inside. We took turns consoling each other, trying to make sense of the senseless. Grief bound us tightly, yet it also left us both feeling utterly alone.

The news of my son’s passing spread like a forest fire. His college teachers, classmates, and friends rushed to our home. Many of them spoke about how wonderful my son was, how disciplined and hardworking he had always been.

“He was a gem of a boy,” one of his professors said, shaking his head in disbelief. “Why would someone like him make such a decision?”

The police arrived as well, asking questions and making notes. I felt numb, barely registering their words. All I could think of was my son—how I would never hear his laughter again, how his dreams were now lost forever.

The silence after his death was so suffocating. But what cut the deepest were the whispers and rumours from neighbours and friends. People who had not known my son began to make assumptions.

“Perhaps he had bad habits,” they said. “Maybe it was the family’s fault.” Each word felt like a fresh wound. Each rumour dug deeper into the scar in my heart. My son, my Naveen—the kindest, most respectful boy I had ever

known—was reduced to nothing more than a set of rumours.

--

Since the day my son passed away, my health has never been the same. My husband tells me that for an entire year after his death, I did not even understand what was happening around me. I was consumed by grief, lost in a haze of sorrow. My body bore the brunt of my pain—my blood pressure shot up, I developed diabetes, and my mind fell into darkness.

I could not understand where I was, who I was, or why I was still alive. I felt like I was living in a fog. I was stuck between two worlds—the one I had known, and the one I now found myself in.

But there was one constant: my husband. He was the quiet strength I never knew I needed. While my heart shattered into a thousand pieces, he held us together. He worked tirelessly, never complaining, never wavering in his support. He kept us alive physically and emotionally. He did not have the words to ease my pain, but his presence was enough.

There were moments when I felt I could not go on anymore. The pain of losing my son and the cruelty of others became too much to bear. One day, I decided I did not want to live any longer. I thought of ending my life, just as my son had done. I swallowed some pills, hoping to escape the weight of it all.

But my husband found me in time. He pulled me back both physically and emotionally. “I am here for you,” he said, his voice firm yet filled with love. “You cannot leave. We still have our younger son. We must live for him.”

His words saved me that day. They reminded me that I was not alone in my pain, and that my family needed me to be strong. But even now, there are days when I cry for my son, when the grief feels as fresh as it did on that fateful day.

And then one day, the Project SPEAK support group for women impacted by suicide loss was visiting our village. The team was there to talk to families who had lost a loved one to suicide. I was torn between fear and curiosity. What could I possibly say in a room full of strangers? How could I speak to the pain that had consumed me?

But something deep inside me, the smallest spark of hope, urged me to go. And so, I did.

The room was full of people I had never met. They carried their own grief. But there was something different about them—they spoke openly about things I had never dared to say aloud. “I am angry,” one woman said, her voice breaking. “I want to scream at him for leaving me.” And in that moment, I realised it was okay to feel angry. I could be angry at Naveen for leaving me, at myself for not seeing his pain, at the world for being so cruel.

With each session, the walls inside me began to crumble. Slowly, I started speaking. I talked about Naveen, about my niece, and about the silence that followed his death. It was terrifying, but it was also freeing. The weight of my grief, which had felt so heavy for so long, began to lift just a little.

The women in the group embraced me with their words and their presence. They did not try to erase my grief or offer empty words of consolation. Instead they listened, and held space for my sorrow. They reminded me that I was not alone, and that my pain was valid. And that healing, even if slow,

was possible.

In those moments, I felt a sense of relief I had not experienced in years. Sharing my burden, even just a little, lightened the load on my heart. The support and empathy of these women became a lifeline, helping me take the first tentative steps toward rebuilding myself.

We made a promise together: “Thani maram thoppu agathu” (A solitary tree does not make a forest. We will fight together in unity).

With those words, we committed to each other that we would continue to live, to work hard, and to show that we could endure despite the overwhelming pain. Ever since I began attending the monthly meetings, my husband has said that there has been a positive change in me. He says I seem calmer and more at peace with myself. The transformation, though gradual, is obvious.

I have promised myself that just like the women who shared their stories with me, I will wipe away the tears of those who are walking a similar path. I will stand strong for them, just as they stood strong for me. I will continue to fight, not just for my own healing but for the healing of others, so that no one feels alone in their grief.

--

As the years passed, my younger son completed his engineering degree, just as Naveen had always dreamt of doing. “Amma, once I get a job, I’ll take care of everything,” he promised. And those words, though they never really came true, soothed me in ways I could not explain. Though Naveen is gone, his friends would come to visit us every year, sitting around the table and

sharing stories of his kindness. “Do not worry, Amma,” they would say. “We are here for you.”

I still carry the weight of it all. My son’s laughter, his dreams—they haunt me in the quietest of moments. And yet, I move forward. I keep living because that is what Naveen would have wanted.

Some days, the grief is so sharp that I wonder how it is possible to continue. But then I remember the community, the people who saw me for what I was and did not judge. They allowed me to feel anger, sadness, and confusion, without trying to erase it. They let me be human and feel broken, and in doing so, helped me heal.

Through them, I found a new understanding of myself. I understood that grief is not a straight line. Some days, it feels as though I have taken a few steps forward, and other days, I stumble back into the darkness. But it’s okay to have days where I cannot even bring myself to get out of the house. The important thing is that I keep going.

I have learned to hold my grief gently, not as a weight, but as a part of me that has shaped who I am today. It does not define me, but it is a part of my story. And it will always be there, like the scar that never fades but that eventually stops hurting.

I often find myself wondering what could have been if Naveen had lived. What kind of man would he have become? What would his dreams have looked like when they were no longer confined to the walls of our humble home? He was so full of promise. I remember his determination, and the fire in his eyes when he told me he would make a life better than ours. I wanted to believe in the future he promised.

I will always miss him. There will never be a day when I do not wish he was here, when I do not long to hear his voice or see him walk through the door. But life has shown me that even in the darkest moments, there is a way forward. And somehow, amid the pain, I have learned that I can find joy again. I can laugh. I can love. I can live.

As I sit here now, I can still hear Naveen’s voice in my mind, telling me, “I will do well in life Amma, so you never have to worry again.” And even though he did not get to fulfil that promise, I know that the promise was never just his to keep. It was mine too. Despite all that I have been through, I still believe in hope. It is the hope that I can still make a difference in the lives of others. That somehow, I can carry Naveen’s spirit forward in the work I do for my family and my community.

In the end, the greatest gift we can give is not just knowledge, not just love, but the ability to keep moving forward. To face each day, no matter how painful, with the strength to continue. That is what I have learned. And that is what I will continue to teach, as long as I am able.

Even If Struck By Stones

Ponnuthayi

The sun had barely risen, and I was already at my stall, arranging bundles of greens, each knot tied with care. The market was still waking up, much like I was. It's been nearly thirty years since I began selling here. Most people just see an older woman going about her routine. Some know my daughters, but almost no one knows what brought me to this stall in the first place.

There are days when I stand in the quiet and still hear his voice, as he bid me goodbye. Except I did not know it then.

Even after all these years, that moment sits in my chest, sharp and unfinished.

It was a Saturday afternoon—ordinary and uneventful, until it wasn't. The scent of sambhar and poriyal filled the house as I served lunch to my husband and children. The kitchen, the courtyard, the familiar sounds gave me a sense of order and safety. I had done this routine countless times.

But that day, he seemed off. I remember it vividly—the way his voice quivered slightly, the way he avoided my eyes.

“Ponnu,” he said, calling me with the affectionate name I'd grown used to. But something felt different.

“Look after the children well; do not hit them. I will not argue with you

anymore. I will not drink again.”

There was a finality in his tone that unsettled me. I tried to dismiss it.

“Why are you talking like this?” I snapped, partly annoyed, partly confused.

“What is happening to you now?”

He didn't answer right away. Instead, tears welled up in his eyes.

Then came another strange sentence:

“I am going to Cuddalore. It will be six months before I return. Protect my name, always.”

I didn't know what to make of that. The man I knew was full of contradictions—affectionate yet withdrawn, warm then cold, loving yet troubled by his addiction to alcohol. I chalked it up to his drinking again, and turned my focus back to lunch.

That evening after cleaning up, I lay down to rest. Exhaustion wrapped around me like a heavy shawl. I didn't realise that my world was already unraveling.

It was Meena's voice that jolted me awake.

“Amma! Amma!”

Her tone was shrill, full of panic.

“What happened, kannu?” I rushed to her side, heart racing.

“Appa has died! They have laid him down on the ground!”

I froze.

“What do you mean? Where is Appa?” My voice barely left my lips.

“He is lying at Kuppamma’s house,” she said.

My feet took off before my brain caught up. I ran—barefoot, breathless. The world spun as dread settled in my stomach like a stone.

When I reached the shed behind Kuppamma’s house, I saw him. The man I had shared my days and nights with for over a decade. He lay still, his body stretched out on the floor. His eyes were closed. His face eerily peaceful.

I dropped to my knees. Shook him. Screamed his name.

“Get up! Get up! What are you doing lying like this? Don’t play games!”

But he didn’t stir. The light in his eyes was gone.

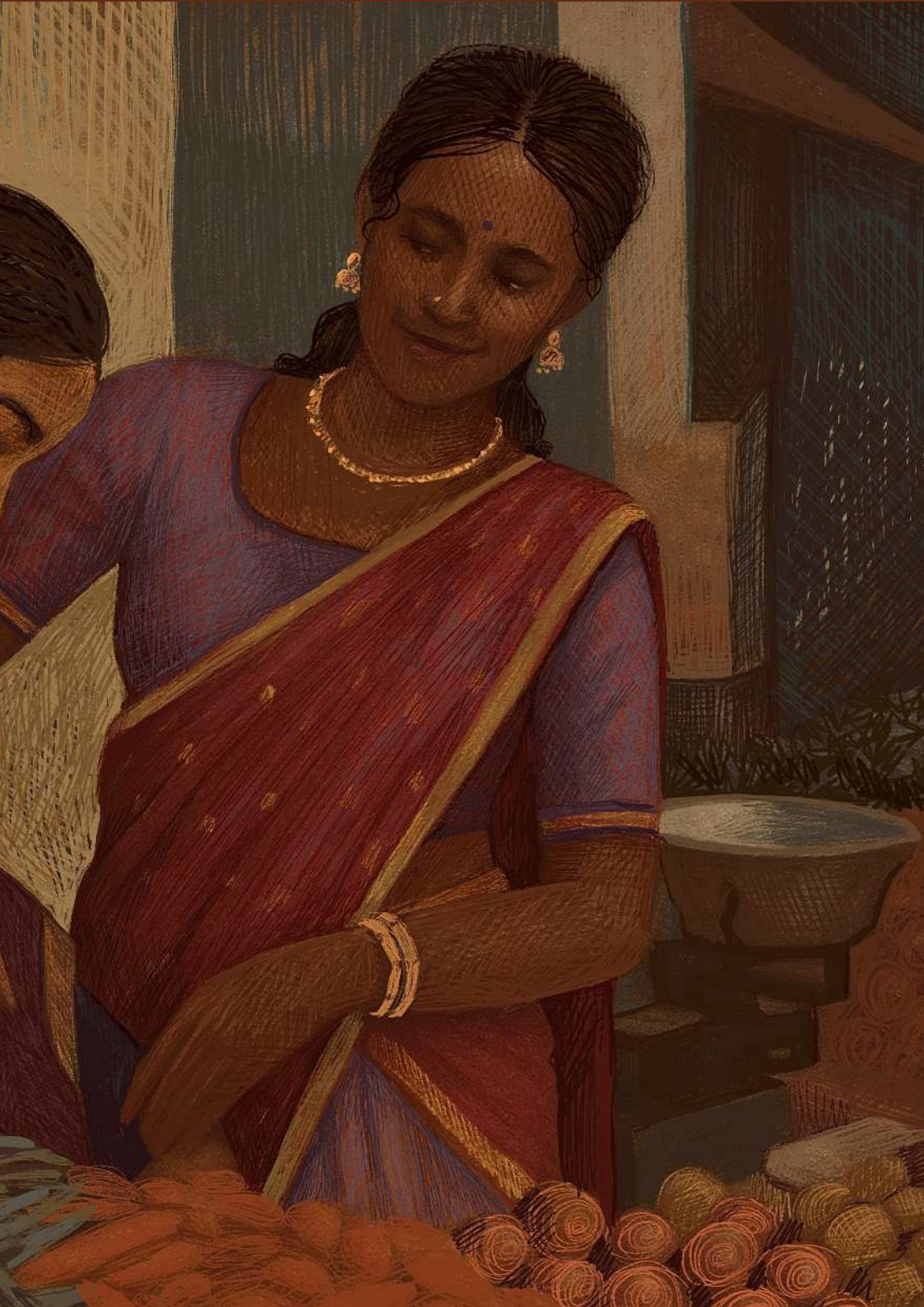
Time stopped.

I don’t know how long I sat there. Hours maybe. Everything around me blurred—voices, faces, the sound of footsteps.

The next days passed in a haze. Rituals were performed. People came and went. But nothing could touch the quiet storm inside me.

Then came the guilt. It crept into my heart like a thief. Was I to blame? Did I





.....

push him too far? Should I have listened more carefully? Did I miss the signs?
Could I have saved him?

I replayed every detail—his words, tears, and his goodbye—over and over.
Like a punishment I had sentenced myself to serve.

And if that wasn't enough, there were the whispers. They came quietly but
pierced sharply.

"I heard she drove him to it. Too much pressure at home."

"He drank because she never stopped nagging."

"They say it was poison. He couldn't take it anymore."

Even women I thought were friends now avoided my eyes. The men who had
laughed with him crossed the road when they saw me. His relatives turned
their backs.

"She has lost her dignity," they said.

They didn't see my grief. They only saw the scandal. The suspicion.

Even the house changed. It became a place of silence. My children, confused
and hurting, cried quietly. The air was thick with absence. The man who had
once filled it with his moods and music and smell of sweat and smoke was
gone.

And then came the worst moment of all.

Meena came home from school one day, angry and trembling.

“Amma,” she said, “the girls said Appa was weak. They said he was a coward who ran away from problems.”

Her words landed like slaps.

“What do you mean?” I asked, holding her face in my hands.

“They said he took the easy way out. That only cowards die like that.”

I hugged her tight. “Don’t listen to them, Meena,” I whispered. “Your Appa was not weak. He just didn’t know how to carry his pain.”

But even as I said it, I wasn’t sure I believed it.

I realised then that I had been so lost in my own sorrow, that I had forgotten my children’s pain. They were grieving too.

It was my mother who pulled me back to my senses.

One evening, she came, saw the state I was in, and said firmly:

“You cannot afford to break down, Ponnu. The children need you. You must raise them well. They should not go astray in their father’s absence.”

Her words felt like both comfort and command. I listened.

I got up the next morning and began my new life.

I started selling greens at the market. It was hard, back-breaking work. I’d wake before dawn, walk to the wholesale mandi, carry bundles back, and sit in the sun for hours. My hands developed calluses and my feet ached, but every rupee I earned was a step away from dependence.

The customers were not always kind. Some haggled mercilessly. Some refused to meet my eye. I endured it all. I poured my heart into raising my children. I made sure they ate, studied, slept, laughed. Slowly, we found a new rhythm. It was different and broken, but still ours.

My daughters became my reason to live. The eldest pursued nursing. The second, engineering. The youngest chose computer science. Each one carried their father’s absence like a folded letter in their pocket. It didn’t show, but I knew it was always there.

Still, I was angry.

“He left us,” I’d think. “And we’re the ones left to carry everything.”

Then one day, someone told me about a support group—a gathering of women who had also lost someone to suicide.

I was hesitant. What could talking to strangers achieve?

But something inside me was curious. Or desperate.

I went.

That first meeting changed everything.

I saw women like me—tired and bruised, but standing. They shared their stories. Some cried. Some had never spoken about it before.

I shared my story too. Slowly at first, then all at once. For the first time, I wasn't judged. I was heard.

Project SPEAK became my refuge. We met once a month. Sometimes we just sat together. Sometimes we laughed. Often, we cried.

Through them, I began to see that my husband's death wasn't my fault. That I wasn't the only one living with questions that had no answers. That my grief didn't need to be hidden.

I also began to share what I learned with my children. We talked about Appa—not just how he died, but how he lived. We began to heal together.

With time, I started mentoring newer women in the group. I helped them tell their stories. I became a voice of strength for others, even when I still had moments of breaking.

“Even if I am struck by stones,” I told myself, “I will stand firm.”

And I did.

Today, when I sit in the market under the same harsh sun, I think not of what I lost, but what I reclaimed.

My daughters are thriving. Our home is full again.

I still remember him. Not just how he died, but everything he was, including

his laughter, tears, and darkness. I have learned to forgive him, and myself.

I am not just a widow. I am Ponnuthayi. A mother. A worker. A survivor. A woman who walks beside others in grief so they may find their way back to life.



Rising From The Ashes

Radhika

The night his life ended, the world around me also seemed to erupt in flames. Kerosene fumes lingered in the air, mingling with the cries of neighbours and the crackling fire that consumed his body.

I stood rooted to the spot, my heart pounding in disbelief. I had only wanted safety, a brief respite from the blows and the accusations. But his final act left me drowning in a sea of guilt and shame.

“Mama, I am scared. Please do not hit me anymore,” I had said to my husband, pleading from a neighbour’s doorstep. His words, chilling and final, still ring in my ears: “Let us see how I make you come home.”

The charred remains of that night became a wound that burned deeply inside me. His relatives wasted no time turning their grief into rage, hurling accusations that pierced through my already fragile spirit. “It is your fault,” they said. “You drove him to this.”

But had I? Or had he been consumed by something darker than I could understand? These unanswered questions clung to me as I began the impossible task of piecing my life back together.

Life was not supposed to be this way. I was the tenth child in a family that had little to give, except for the strength we drew from each other. Life in our village was simple but challenging, and

dreams were often weighed down by the realities of survival. My own life was no different, and the events that unfolded shaped me in ways I could never have imagined.

I got married when I was eighteen, as was customary in our village. I entered the marriage hopeful, believing that a new chapter awaited me. But my husband did not like me—he made that clear in his words and actions. Eventually one day, he announced to the panchayat (village council) that he no longer wanted to live with me. That day, our marriage ended, and with it, a part of me broke. Divorce in our community is a scandal. I was overwhelmed with shame.

In my despair, I tried to end my life. I drank poison, hoping to escape the crushing pain. But fate had other plans. My family rushed me to the government hospital in Vellore, where the doctors saved my life. Physically, I recovered, but my mind remained burdened with grief and hopelessness. My family, desperate to distract me, sent me to work in a mill. Labour filled my days, but the emptiness remained.

Despite my resistance, my father urged me to remarry. He believed that only by settling me into another marriage could my younger sister’s prospects for marriage improve. His words and societal pressure left me with no choice, and I reluctantly agreed out of

obligation.

My new husband was unlike the first. He was a man of strong principles. He defended me against his relatives, who questioned his choice to marry a woman with 'a past'. "If I marry, it will be to her, or I will become a sanyasi," he declared. His words kept their protests at bay, but their absence at our wedding was a silence that echoed through our lives. No one from his family attended our wedding. I was twenty-two when we married, and he, thirty-one. For a brief time, it seemed as if we might build a life together.

Soon, I became pregnant, and returned to my mother's home to give birth. It was during this time that he went to Erode for work. There, he began drinking, and everything soon changed. The man I had married began to slip away.

He returned home a shadow of himself. His drinking made him violent, and I became his punching bag. Each blow carried accusations against which I could not defend myself. "Who are you meeting at work?" he would spit, his jealousy a fire that consumed both of us.

My two children were my solace. I endured my husband's anger and violence, clinging to the hope that my children might have a better future if I stayed. I continued to work as a labourer, my hands blistered from long days under the sun. I did it to ensure they had enough to eat. But every day brought new bruises, both on my body and on my spirit. Each time he raised his hand, I told myself to hold on for my children, and for my family's honour.

Then came the night of the flames, the night his addiction and despair culminated in a tragedy that would haunt me forever.

--

After my husband's death, his relatives turned their anger toward me. They blamed me for what happened, accusing me of driving him to his death. Their words cut deep, but they could not compare to the weight of my own guilt. Had I done something wrong? Could I have saved him? These questions tormented me day and night.

I could not speak without crying. Sometimes, I cried so hard that I lost my voice. Doctors told me my body was fine, but my mind was not. They gave me medicines and advised me to find ways to calm myself.

I clung to small comforts, like listening to soothing songs on my phone, allowing the melodies to wash over me when the pain became unbearable. The music became a lifeline, a thread pulling me back from the abyss. My children did not understand what I was going through. They were too young to grasp the depth of my sorrow. I had to hide my tears and be strong for them even when I felt like I was breaking. My children became my anchor. But hiding my brokenness only added to my loneliness.

It was not until I joined the Project SPEAK support group that I began to see hope. For the first time, I met others who had faced similar losses, women who had endured the pain of losing a loved one to suicide. In their stories, I found reflections of my own. When I shared my struggles with them, I felt a sense of comfort I had not known before. They listened without judgment, their strength and resilience inspiring me to find my own.

One woman spoke of her anger, another of her guilt. Their words gave shape to emotions I had not been able to articulate. In their company, I found the courage to speak, to share my pain and, in doing so, lighten

its load. The group became a sanctuary, a space where we could grieve without judgment. Together, we learned to find strength and comfort from each other.

For a long time, I held onto my anger—anger at him for leaving us the way he did, and for the scars he left on my body and my heart. But as time passed, that anger began to soften. In the group, I learned to see him not just as the man who hurt me, but as a man who was hurting. His drinking and his rage were his ways of coping with a world that had been unkind to both of us. Forgiving him did not mean excusing his actions, but it allowed me to start forgiving myself.

Now, I wake up each morning with purpose. My children, growing and thriving, are a reminder of the strength I never knew I had. I work to support them, ensuring they have the education and opportunities I was denied.

The Project SPEAK support group is my lifeline of hope and healing. Together, we have built a community where hope thrives. We remind each other that life, even after profound loss, can still hold meaning. There are days when the memories creep back, uninvited and sharp. But those moments are no longer as consuming as they once were. I have learned to carry my grief, to weave it into the fabric of my life rather than letting it unravel me.

My story is not just one of loss, but of survival, and of finding strength amid despair. If sharing it can offer even a flicker of hope to another, then it has served its purpose. Grief has changed me completely. It has not left me untouched, but it has also not left me broken. From the ashes of that night, I have rebuilt a life that, while imperfect, is undeniably mine.

As I look to the future, I am no longer the broken woman I once was. I am a survivor, a mother, and a woman determined to make the most of the life I have. My journey has not been easy, but it has made me who I am today. If my story can give even one woman the strength to keep going, then all the pain I have endured will have been worth it. Life does not end with the loss of a loved one. It continues, and in its continuation, we find ways to rebuild, grow, and heal.

Today, I support my family through my work. My children are my pride, and I am determined to give them the education and opportunities I never had. The scars of the past remain, but they no longer define me. I have found strength in my pain, and with each passing day, I grow a little stronger.

For anyone walking this path, know this: It is okay to grieve. It is okay to feel anger, sadness, and everything in between. But know, too, that there is hope. There is life beyond the pain, a life worth living. Healing takes time. It is not an easy journey. And on that journey, there is light to be found—even in the darkest of places.

From Pain To Purpose

Radhika

It began with an invitation.

A woman from Project SPEAK came to my doorstep with calm eyes and gentle words. She told me about a support meeting for women who, like me, had lost their husbands to suicide. I didn't respond to her right away. I was holding my barely four month old baby, and my body was heavy with grief. I didn't want to leave the house. I didn't want to speak. I didn't know if I could even survive the day.

She waited. She didn't push. She stood there and said, "You don't have to talk. Just come. Just be with us."

And so I went.

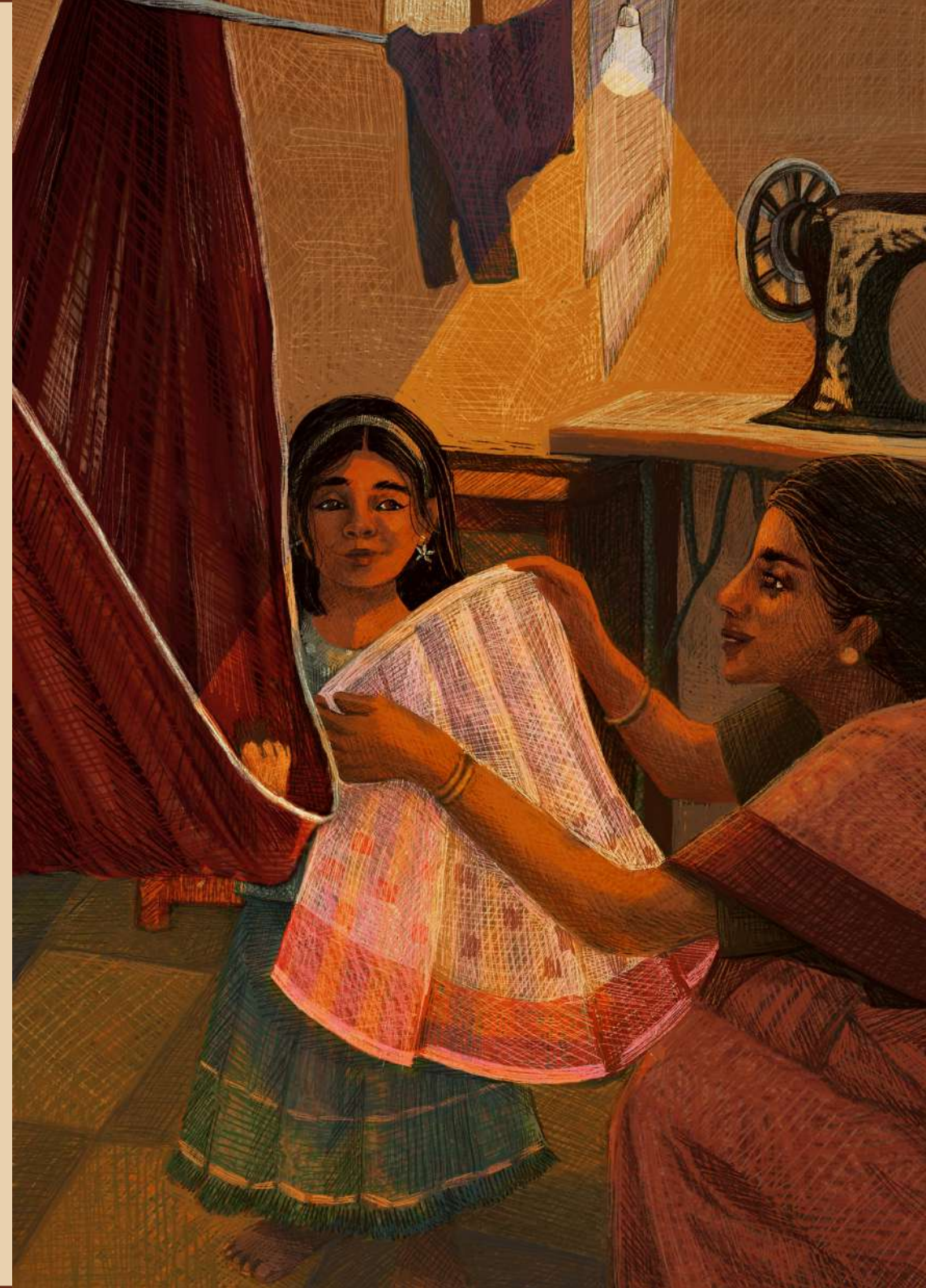
I sat in a circle of women. They didn't ask for explanations or offer pity. Their eyes met mine with quiet recognition. And in that silence, I finally exhaled.

That's when I realised that I had been holding my breath all along.

But to understand how I arrived at that room, you need to know the story that led me there.

--

I live in Vadipatti, a quiet village nestled in the heart of Tamil Nadu. Life



here is simple, yet the challenges I have faced over the years have taught me that sometimes, the simplest of lives can be the most complicated to navigate.

There are days when I look back and wonder how I survived. There are other days when I see my daughters playing, and I realise that it was for them that I found the strength to go on. The story I am about to share is not just about a woman from a small village in South India but one of resilience in the face of torment, despair, and hope.

I often think about the moment I decided to keep fighting. One evening after a particularly violent argument with my husband, I found myself sitting alone in the corner of our small home. My heart felt heavy, and my thoughts raced as if trapped in a never ending loop of pain.

My husband, drunk again, had hurled accusations at me, words sharper than any physical blow he had inflicted. I was used to it by now. The fighting, the drinking, the hopelessness. But that night as I looked at my two daughters sleeping soundly, I knew that I could not let their lives be defined by his actions. I could not let my children grow up in the same cycle of distress.

I myself had fallen so deep into despair that the thought of ending it all had crossed my mind. But then I looked at my children that night, and made a choice: I would live for them.

--

It was not always like this. I did not grow up expecting pain to be my constant companion. My parents, though not wealthy, provided me with

a simple and happy childhood. I married young, as was customary in my village.

But nothing had prepared me for the reality of marriage. My husband did not turn out to be the person I thought he was. His drinking began soon after marriage when we shifted to Tirupur. It started slowly, with seemingly unimportant things. He would come home late from work, smelling of alcohol, stumbling and angry. He'd often pick fights with me. At first I thought it was just a phase that would pass. But it did not. And as the days turned into months, I began to fear him more than I loved him. The man I had thought would be my partner in life became a stranger to me.

I wanted to talk to his family about his drinking, but I feared they would blame me. The first time I tried to speak to my in-laws about his drinking, I was filled with shame. It felt like a betrayal to talk about my husband in such a way. But they were surprisingly supportive, kind, and understanding. They even sent money for household expenses when he refused to cover them.

"He comes home drunk, starts fights, and does not help me with anything. I do not know how much longer I can take it." They told me I should try to stay patient, that it would pass. It did not.

The atmosphere in our home became increasingly unbearable. A few months later, I gave birth to my first child. It was extremely difficult to take care of my baby alone, in that house. My mother-in-law asked me to move into their home, so she could help me.

This was around the same time that my husband—hoping for a fresh start—left for Kodaikanal for a tailoring job. His drinking worsened, and when

he returned, it was as if nothing had changed. It was the same cycle of disappointment, the same cycle of pain.

In an attempt to help her son, my mother-in-law brought him back to our village. She thought that if he was close to us, he might reduce his drinking and take better care of the family. So, they set up a tailoring shop for him, hoping that the familiar environment would encourage him to change. However, his drinking increased. He started neglecting his work and as a result, the business began to suffer. Losses piled up.

It was a particularly difficult time for the family.

There are moments in life that feel so unreal that I often wonder if they really happened. One evening, when I was busy with the children, my husband came home more agitated than usual. He was angry at his own failures and at the family's struggles. He also resented the fact that my brothers-in-law lived better lives than we did. His frustration made him angrier and angrier; he would come home and pick fights with me, sometimes physically hurting me.

He would yell at me for things I did not do, as though everything was my fault. I could not escape it. I had two young children by this point, and they too had become terrified of him. They would get scared just by looking at him, afraid to even sit near him. And his resentment towards everything, even his daughters, made matters worse.

--

One evening, the anger seemed different. After he shouted at me, he went into the bedroom. We thought he was just going to sleep it off, but after

half an hour, I walked in. What I saw in that room still haunts me. The sight of him hanging there filled me with horror. My whole body went numb. I could not speak. My mind raced, but there was no clarity. How could this be happening? How had it come to this?

I screamed, and my in-laws rushed to his side. That moment my life changed forever. It was the moment when everything in my life was swept away. What had I done to deserve this? What had I done to deserve a life filled with this kind of torment?

I wanted to scream. I wanted to run away, but where would I go? Who would help me? The entire village was talking behind my back. They gossiped about me, questioning my marriage, questioning my decisions. But what hurt the most was the feeling of abandonment. I was left alone with this burden. Everyone watched, and no one stepped forward to help me.

Hearing them speak ill of me made me angry at him and at myself. What did I do to deserve this? Why is he doing this to me, even after death? In my grief, I began to question my existence. Why should I continue living? Why should I keep fighting when everything seemed so hopeless? I found myself lost, thinking that the world would be better off without me.

The only comfort I found was in my in-laws' words and support. My mother-in-law, seeing my distress, said, "You have a four-month-old baby. We are old, and we cannot take care of both your children. Do not let what others say influence your decisions. You must live for your children. No one else can do this for them."

It was then that I realised I could not go down the same path as my husband. He had chosen to give up on life, but I could not do that to my

children. They needed me.

I struggled with figuring out what to do next. My husband had taken away my peace, my hope, and my sense of security. I stayed home with my children, unsure of how to rebuild my life. I could not leave them to go to work; they were still very young. I found myself stuck in a cycle of despair, wondering how I could change things for us.

Then one day, I met staff from Project SPEAK. They invited me to a monthly support meeting for women who had experienced similar loss. I did not know what to expect. I had so many questions in my mind. I thought about not going, about staying at home and shutting myself off from the world. But something inside me told me to go. Maybe it was the fear of being alone, or maybe it was a tiny flicker of hope that I could find answers.

When I walked into the room, I felt overwhelmed. The faces of the women mirrored my own pain. They were all grieving just like me. The feeling of knowing that I was not the only one suffering, brought me a strange sense of relief. For the first time in months, I felt like someone understood. I did not speak at first. I just listened, absorbing their words and their stories.

After a while, I gathered the strength to share my own. And as I did, I felt a weight lift off my shoulders. These women had gone through their own losses, and they were there to support me and give me the strength I could not find on my own. They told me that I had to keep going, for my children. They encouraged me to find something to live for, something that would give my life meaning again.

One of the women took my child in her arms and said, "You must live for this child. You owe it to them to be strong." Her words were simple, but they

made sense to me.

The support group not only helped me heal emotionally but also gave me the practical tools I needed to rebuild my life. They provided tailoring training, which gave me the opportunity to earn a livelihood. Slowly, I began to regain control of my life. I was able to provide for my children, give them the things they needed, and, most importantly, show them that life could go on even after tragedy.

I still carry the pain of my husband's loss. It is part of my story, but it no longer controls me. I have learned that it is okay to grieve, but it is also important to live. Life is not just about surviving; it is about finding purpose, even in the darkest times.

I realised that many women like me, after losing their husbands to suicide, end up hiding in a corner of their homes overwhelmed by grief and despair. But now I have found a way to stand up for myself and live with purpose. To women like me, I would say that we must always be brave and have confidence in ourselves. We need to live for ourselves, not just for our children. If we live for ourselves first, we can ensure that our families also live well. This understanding became clear to me only after attending the Project SPEAK support group meetings.

No matter who is with us or who leaves us, we must live our own lives. We are here in this world for a purpose, and we should never leave this world without fulfilling that purpose. Now, when I see women facing similar struggles, I will be there for them as a source of comfort, just as others have done for me.

From Broken Threads To Bold Tapestries

Rajakumari

It has been four years since I got married. Though I do not have children yet, I tell myself it is only a matter of time. My husband often says, “We will have children when the time is right.” He says this with a calmness that sometimes reassures me, and sometimes frustrates me.

There is a quietness in our home that feels comforting and stifling at the same time. My mother-in-law passed away before our wedding, and the house carries the weight of her absence in its walls. My three sisters-in-law, all married and settled elsewhere, visit now and then. Their presence brings temporary joy—laughter and the aroma of shared meals filling the air. But when they leave, the silence feels even heavier.

It is mostly just my husband, my father-in-law, and me, who are around. My husband is a hardworking electrician. He spends most of his day away from home, leaving before dawn and returning well after sunset. He is kind and steady, and doesn't speak much or make a show of grand gestures. But he's dependable in the quiet, reassuring way of a man who takes his responsibilities seriously.

My father-in-law was the first to make me feel at home in this house. When I arrived as a new bride, nervous and unsure of my place, he was welcoming and warm. “Think of this as your home,” he said, showing me the kitchen, the storeroom, and the rhythm of their daily lives. At the time, I felt grateful for his guidance.



But over the years, his behaviour began to change. It was not sudden, like a storm sweeping through. There were small shifts over time that were hard to pinpoint. Sometimes, I would catch him staring at me for too long, or I would hear a sharpness in his tone that had not been there before. I told myself it was nothing, that I was imagining things. After all, respect for elders was ingrained in me, and the idea of questioning his behaviour felt like crossing a line I did not dare approach.

As time passed, those moments of unease became harder to ignore. He began to scrutinise everything I did. If I made a phone call, he would ask, "Who were you talking to?" with a suspicion that hung in the air like smoke. If a neighbour visited me, his questions afterward felt more like interrogations: "What did they want? Why were they here?"

It was as though he did not trust me to exist freely in this house, as though my every action needed justification. His judgment felt exhausting, and I found myself retreating into silence, afraid to do or say anything that might provoke him. I told myself this was the price of family life, that every household had its tensions, and this was mine to bear.

But the accusations began to cut deeper. One day, after my husband left for work, my father-in-law cornered me in the kitchen. His voice was sharp, his words deliberate. "You are hiding something," he said. "You are talking to someone behind my son's back."

I froze. His words felt like a slap, and left me momentarily speechless. When I finally found my voice, it was trembling. "I am not that kind of woman," I said, my hands gripping the edge of the counter for support. "You have no right to say such things."

That evening, when my husband returned, I told him everything. His face darkened with a mix of anger and concern. "Why did you not you tell me sooner?" he asked. I looked at him, feeling a lump rise in my throat. "What could I say? If I told you, it would have only caused fights between you and your father."

--

One evening, everything came to a head. It seemed like an ordinary day. My father-in-law had been drinking more than usual—a habit that had become a troubling routine over the past year. His mood would shift with every glass, growing darker and more erratic.

After dinner, he disappeared into his room. None of us thought much of it. But a few hours later, we found him in a state that sent chills through me. He had consumed rat poison.

The realisation hit us like a sharp blow. We were scrambling to act. My husband and I tried to get him to the hospital, but he resisted with a ferocity that shocked me. "Let me die!" he shouted, his voice breaking with despair. His words hung in the air, heavy and unrelenting.

Our neighbours came running because of the commotion. Together, we managed to get him into an ambulance. But even then he fought us, his voice cutting through the chaos: "She is the reason for all of this. She is the one who has destroyed me."

His words pierced through me like a knife. In that moment, it felt as though the world had turned against me. The neighbours stared, their expressions a mix of shock and judgment. I wanted to scream, to defend myself, to say

this is not true! But the words would not come.

At the hospital, the doctors did everything they could, but it was too late. He passed away that night, leaving behind a void that was quickly filled with accusations and blame.

In the days that followed, the whispers began. The neighbours talked in hushed tones, their words carrying through the stillness of the village. “What could she have done to him?” they wondered aloud. “Poor man, driven to such despair.”

Their judgment felt like a noose tightening around my neck. Everywhere I went, I could feel their eyes on me, their stares heavy with suspicion. Groups of women gathered outside my house, their conversations pausing when I passed.

I stopped leaving the house altogether. Even the simplest errands felt impossible. My world, already small, shrank further until it was confined to the four walls of my home. But even there, I could not escape the silence—it pressed down on me, reminding me of everything I had lost.

I had also been undergoing treatment for infertility at the time. The doctors had told me to stay stress-free and to focus on my well-being. But how could I? The grief, guilt, and isolation felt insurmountable. My dreams of becoming a mother seemed more distant than ever.

One day, two staff members from Project SPEAK knocked on my door. They sat with me, their presence quiet and unassuming. Their words were gentle, and offered me a glimmer of hope.

At first I resisted their help. Talking about my pain felt like reopening wounds that had not yet begun to heal. But they listened with a patience that touched me. Slowly, their questions began to draw out the emotions I had buried deep inside.

They invited me to join the Project SPEAK support group. The idea terrified me. The thought of facing others, even those who might understand, felt overwhelming. But something in their words stayed with me, a small seed of hope taking root in the barren landscape of my mind.

The support group became a lifeline. At first I sat quietly, afraid to speak or be seen. But as I listened to the other women share their stories of losing a family member to suicide, something shifted. Their pain mirrored my own, their resilience igniting a spark of strength within me. Their stories were raw and heartbreaking. Yet, in their voices, I found a sense of solidarity—a reminder that I was not alone in my struggles.

As weeks turned into months, I began to share my own story. Speaking aloud the pain I had carried for so long felt both terrifying and liberating. The group became a space where I could lay down my burdens, even if only for a while.

Inspired by the women in the group, I decided to learn tailoring. It was something I had always wanted to do but had never found the time or the courage to pursue. The act of stitching together fragments of fabric became part of my own healing. With every stitch, I felt a sense of control returning to my life. The hum of the sewing machine, the rhythm of the needle and thread—it was a way to quiet the noise in my mind.

Through the group, I also began to confront the anger and sadness that had

consumed me since my father-in-law's death. I learned to forgive—not just him, but myself. I let go of the questions that had haunted me: Why did he say those things? Why did he leave us like this?

One year later, I am still healing. My days are quieter now, filled with the sound of the sewing machine and the occasional laughter of my husband when he returns home. I have learned to find joy in small moments and to take each day as it comes.

The judgment of others no longer defines me. Their whispers may linger, but they are just that—whispers, carried away by the wind. I carry my pain, my silence, and my courage as part of who I am.

I have also found ways to reclaim my sense of belonging in the village. The SPEAK counsellor encouraged me to step outside again and reconnect with the world. I started small, with a trip to the market or a visit to the temple. At first, the stares and murmurs of the neighbours felt unbearable. But over time, I realised that their opinions no longer held the power they once did.

My husband has been my constant, though I often wonder how he truly feels about everything that has happened. He does not speak much about his father's death or the accusations that followed. Sometimes I catch him staring into the distance, a shadow of pain crossing his face.

One evening as we sat together in the fading light, I decided to break the silence. "Do you think I was to blame?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

He turned to me, his eyes filled with a mixture of sorrow and resolve. "No," he said firmly. "What happened was not your fault. My father... he was struggling in ways we may never fully understand."

His words brought a sense of relief I had not realised I needed. For so long I had carried my guilt, even as I knew deep down that it was not mine to bear. Hearing him absolve me felt like a release, a small but significant step toward letting go.

Though the journey has been full of challenges, I have not given up on the dream of becoming a mother. The infertility treatments continue, and while each appointment with the doctor brings a mix of hope and anxiety, I have learned to approach the process with patience and resilience.

Tailoring has become more than just a skill—it is a livelihood and a source of pride. With the encouragement of the Project SPEAK support group, I have started taking orders from neighbours and friends. At first I was hesitant, unsure if anyone would trust me with their garments. But word of mouth spread, and soon my small venture began to grow.

The act of creating something with my hands—whether it is a blouse, falls for a sari, or a nightie—brings me immense satisfaction. Each finished piece reflects my ability to rebuild, to create beauty out of chaos.

Forgiving my father-in-law is one of the hardest parts of my journey. For so long, his words and actions haunted me, their weight pressing down on my spirit. But I have now come to understand that I was in no way responsible for his pain.

I have started to see him as a man who was deeply troubled, caught in a web of his own fears and insecurities. While his behaviour caused me tremendous pain, I choose to remember the moments of kindness he showed me when I first came into the family.

Forgiveness does not mean forgetting. It means releasing the hold that anger and resentment have on your heart. In forgiving him, I am at peace with myself and that allows me to move forward with grace and dignity.

I have walked a long distance on this unfamiliar road. The road ahead is still uncertain, but I am no longer afraid. I have learned to embrace the quiet strength within me to find joy in the small victories, and to trust that the future holds promise.

Raja Kumari's story is not just mine—it belongs to anyone who has faced adversity and found the strength to rise again. Through this journey, I have learned that healing is like weaving a tapestry—sometimes the threads break, sometimes they get tangled, but if you persist, if you keep adding new threads, the picture will emerge. The pieces of my life, though frayed and torn, are woven together into something that is uniquely mine. And for the first time in a long time I am proud of the tapestry I have created.

I am still healing and still finding my place in this world, but I know that I am strong and will rise, every time I fall.

The Moment I Stepped In

Sumangali

When I first joined Project SPEAK as a community volunteer, I hoped of doing something good. I thought that by helping others, I might find some peace for myself. My role was clear: identify women impacted by suicide loss and connect them with support. That was the plan at least. I would go to meetings, observe, and if needed, direct them to the resources they needed.

But I was not sure if I was ready for the depth of what I was about to experience. For the first few months, I stayed in the background, keeping my distance. Every woman I met had a story. I heard their pain, and felt their anguish and vulnerability. But I did not speak up. I told myself that my grief did not belong in the same space as theirs. Plus, I was not even sure if I was allowed to share my relationship with suicide with these women. I had lost not one, but two loved ones to suicide: my father and my father-in-law. The guilt, unresolved anger, and despair from those losses echoed inside me. I soon realised that I was fooling myself into thinking that I could heal others without confronting my own pain.

--

Grief is unpredictable. One moment it is not there, and then suddenly it strikes with the force of a storm, leaving you breathless. That is how it happened when my father died. One minute I was living my life, and the next, everything was undone. Two years ago, my father fell gravely ill. I used to be the apple of his eye.

The doctors had diagnosed him as being HIV positive. When I found out, I could not comprehend it. Thinking about the ways in which the virus is typically contracted, not to mention all the stigma and assumptions around people who are infected, I was consumed by anger toward him. And that anger led me to lash out and fight with him constantly.

On the day before his passing, roughly two years after his diagnosis, he asked my mother to bring his 'pappa's children' to see him one last time. He never called me by my name. To him, I was always 'pappa'—his little one.

My mother came to me, passing on my father's wishes, "Can you take the children and visit your father?"

I replied bitterly, "If I go, he will only scold me. I will not go."

My husband however, insisted to my mother that she "at least take the children to see him."

So my mother acquiesced.

When they were there, my father, smiling faintly, said to my youngest daughter "Thatha (grandfather) will die tomorrow."

My mother brushed it off, thinking it was one of those casual remarks he often made. She did not think much of it—after all, he had been unwell for some time, and such words seemed like a passing expression of his



condition.

The next day, we were to attend a condolence ceremony at my sister's house. My father was lying on his bed at home. It was as though he knew his time had come, as though he had already prepared himself to leave. He quietly told those around him, "Everyone, go ahead. After you come back, I can leave in peace."

My elder brother's wife was the only family member present at home that day. And barely an hour after we had left, we received a phone call from her: "Your father has passed away!"

The news did not land on me in the way I expected. There was no scream, no collapsing onto the floor. Instead I felt numb. I did not know what to do. My body went cold, as though time had frozen. How could this be real? I thought. I had talked to him just the day before. We had spoken about everyday things—nothing that should have tipped me off.

But I realised that deep down, I had known. I had known for months, perhaps even longer, that something was wrong. My father, who had always been so strong and full of life, had begun to change. The HIV diagnosis and the associated shame and stigma that came along with it, weighed heavily on him. For this reason he concealed it from everyone except his immediate family.

We hadn't talked about it much at all either. He did not want to acknowledge it, and neither did I. Instead, we continued with life as though everything was 'normal'. And when the diagnosis was revealed, it felt like a door had been slammed shut in my face, a door

that I had no idea how to open again.

I do not think I ever understood what being HIV positive signified, but I knew that it was something to be ashamed about. The acronym 'HIV' was difficult to say out loud. My father, a proud man, hid his fear and shame. He functioned as if it was just another illness to be fought, as if there was a clear path ahead. But there was no path.

For months, we pretended. We smiled when we saw him, gave him his medication, and stayed strong. But inside, I could feel the distance growing between us. The more he withdrew, the more I withdrew too.

His shame affected all of us in the family. I could feel it in every conversation, every missed visit, every silence that fell between us. My heart broke for him, but there was nothing I or any of us could do to save him.

And so when he finally took that last step, choosing to end his life, I was left with a sense of unspoken responsibility. Did I miss something? Could I have done more? The guilt gnawed at me.

Months before my father's death, I had already endured the crushing loss of my father-in-law's suicide. His death had come as a shock to all of us. He had been ill for some time, but nothing prepared me for the finality of it. He had suffered in silence for years, and I was too close to see the signs. He had been like a father to me, and I felt like I had failed him, just like I had failed my own father.

Following my father-in-law's death, I could feel everyone's eyes on



me. “You should have known, you should have seen it coming”, they said. The accusations felt unbearable, and yet I said nothing. I carried the guilt believing that somehow, if I had done something differently, I could have saved him

--

In the initial stages of my involvement with the Project SPEAK support group, I did not speak much. It was powerful, watching these women speak so openly about their suffering. But it also scared me, as I was not yet ready to step into that space myself.

But little by little, the group became more than just a space to listen. It became a space to heal. Women spoke of feeling responsible, of questioning their own worth, of wondering if there was something they could have done differently. And in their words I recognised my own voice.

At one meeting, Nandini madam—the founder of Project SPEAK—asked, “Who here feels responsible for their loved one’s death?” I looked around, and every woman in the room raised her hand.

I do not know what happened to me in that moment, but something shifted. I realised that I was not alone in my guilt. That for all these months of hiding in the shadows, I had never truly shared my story.

With a shaking voice, I said, “I have. My father and father-in-law both died by suicide. I thought that if I had done more, if I had been there for them, they would still be alive. But I do not know if that is true. I do not know if there is anything I could have done.”

As the words left my mouth, I felt the weight of my grief—my guilt—begin

to lift. For the first time in years, I was not just a bystander. I was part of something bigger than myself. The other women in the room nodded, their eyes filled with understanding.

Over time, I began to understand that the guilt was not mine to carry. That it was not my fault that my father or father-in-law had chosen to end their lives. They had made their choices, and while I could not understand them, I had to learn to let go of the responsibility I had taken on.

The support group became my refuge. Each meeting and each conversation allowed me to feel my pain and slowly release it. There were days when I felt like I had taken one step forward only to fall two steps back. But with each passing day, the weight grew lighter. And I began to understand something profound: grief is something you learn to carry with you.

Today I am no longer just a volunteer in the group. I am a survivor who has learned that healing does not happen overnight. It is a process—slow and painful, but very important.

One thing I have come to appreciate is how similar our grief was. Each of us had lost someone to suicide in a different way, but in the shared experience of loss, we were one. Each tear shed in that room was a thread in a larger tapestry of healing, and I realised that we need people around us to help us heal.

The more I engaged with these women, the more I started to uncover pieces of myself I had buried for too long. My grief was not just about my father and father-in-law’s deaths; it was about the unspoken regrets, the missed opportunities, and the moments of unacknowledged sorrow. I began to face the fact that I had never truly allowed myself to grieve. In trying to

protect everyone around me, I had neglected my own pain.

One of the most difficult things for me to accept was the way I had allowed myself to be defined by tragedy. In my mind, I was the daughter of a man who had chosen death. I was the daughter-in-law who could not save her father-in-law. I believed these tragedies defined my worth, and by doing so, I had let them hold me captive for far too long. It was not until I started sharing my truth with the group that I realised I was not alone in this struggle. Many of the women had similarly been shaped by their grief, not always in healthy ways.

The more I embraced my own pain, the more I was able to walk alongside others in theirs. I realised that healing was more than just moving on from grief; it was about learning to accept it and making room for joy alongside the sorrow.

And so, I continue to volunteer, but now I do so as someone who has truly experienced the weight of loss and the beauty of healing. I no longer sit quietly in the background, afraid of my own feelings. As I look toward the future, I know that grief will always be a part of my story. But it no longer defines me.

My father and father-in-law are no longer here, but their stories continue to shape me. Through their loss, I have found a deeper understanding of what it means to heal—not just for myself, but for others. That is the gift I carry forward. And in sharing, we find the strength to move forward together.



Waves Of Grief, Tides Of Hope

Tamizh Arasi

My son was laughing when I got the call.
He was standing in the kitchen, holding a spoon like a microphone,
singing some film song. I was smiling when I picked up the phone.
It was an unknown number.
What followed—those few words—ripped everything away.

--

“Hello?”

A woman’s voice came through, trembling, laced with urgency.
“Tamizh arasi?”

“Yes. Who is this?” My voice was shaky.

“I am calling from the hospital... Your husband... he has been
admitted. He is... He is ...”

Her words trailed off as if she were struggling to form them.

No, I thought. Not now. Not like this.

“Please,” I said, trying to steady my breath. “What happened? What
do you mean he has been admitted?”

“He is no more,” the voice whispered. “We could not save him. Your
husband... he took his life.”

I felt the ground slip from beneath me, my entire world crumbling.
My stomach twisted into knots. I could not breathe nor think. For
a moment, I just stood there, frozen, the phone still pressed to my
ear, the woman’s words echoing in the distance. Gone? What did
she mean? Gone?

I dropped the phone. It slipped from my hand like it weighed a
thousand kilos, and crashed onto the floor. My heart raced, a
pounding drum in my ears. My son’s innocent laughter from the
kitchen felt like it was coming from some faraway place. How could
this happen? How could it have happened so suddenly?

I ran out of the house, breathless. My heart was pounding so loudly,
I thought everyone could hear it. I did not even tell my son. How
could I? I just had to get there. I had to see him. I had to see my
husband one last time.

When I reached the hospital I was in a daze, my mind unable to
fully understand what was happening. When I saw my husband’s
lifeless body, I knew it was all over.

The days following the phone call were a blur. Everything felt

disconnected, as though I was trapped inside a dream floating from one place to the next, unable to feel anything except an unusual sense of numbness. The funeral arrangements happened quickly, almost too quickly. Family members arrived, as did friends, but nothing felt real.

At the funeral, the condolences felt more like accusations. “Why did you not see it coming?” they would ask, as if I had missed some glaring sign.

“This is your fault. Why would a man drink poison unless he was driven to it?”

How could I have known? How could I have seen the cracks in him when he hid them so well? When he closed off every part of himself and refused to share his pain?

My in-laws arrived, and they too looked at me with judgment. The whispers were louder than anything else. “If only you had paid more attention. If only you had done something.”

They did not understand. No one understood.

They did not know how I had tried to reach him. They had not seen me the nights I stayed awake, waiting for him to come home, begging him to talk to me. Nor had they seen the desperation in my eyes when I would ask him, “What is wrong?” only to be met with silence or a shrug.

The day my husband died, I did not cry. Not when they carried his body away; not when they performed the last rites. My tears froze inside me, replaced by something sharp and unrelenting—rage. Rage at him for leaving me like this. Rage at his family for turning their backs on me. Rage

at myself for not saving him.

Weeks later, I learned to cry again. Alone, in the dark, when my son was asleep. I cried for what we had lost and for how our love had soured in the last years of his drinking. I cried for the moments I wished I could undo. The tears came in torrents, flooding me with guilt, then anger, then guilt again. Why had he not thought of the children? Why hadn't he told me he was drowning?

--

In the weeks after the funeral, I found myself all alone. My son's questions—“Amma, where is appa?”—became harder to answer. I could not lie to him with some story that his father had gone on a trip or was away for work. And so, I said nothing.

I woke up every day, my body moving mechanically. I fed and bathed my son, and tried to play with him. But the joy that once filled our home had disappeared. I felt the weight of the unbearable silence that remained. The world around me seemed to move forward, but I was stuck in the same place, unable to breathe or move.

And then the guilt came; it was relentless and unforgiving. If only I had noticed earlier. If only I had seen the signs. If only I had not let him slip through my fingers. I began to feel the weight of the blame settling on my shoulders. I felt that I had failed him and my family.

One day Project SPEAK volunteers visited our village and invited me to attend the support group meetings for women who had lost a family member to suicide. I did not know it at the time, but that simple offer to talk would change everything. I had no idea what to expect. The idea of sharing

my grief with strangers felt uncomfortable, even shameful. But when I walked into that room and saw the faces of other women—women who had lost their husbands, fathers, parents, or children to suicide—I realised something important: I was not alone.

They did not judge me. They did not tell me what I should have done differently. They listened and shared their stories. I heard stories of loss, pain, and guilt, but also of strength. These women were not just surviving; they were living their lives even though they had been through the worst tragedies.

“I did not know he was struggling so much,” I said to the group one day, my voice breaking. “He left without giving me a chance to help.” Upon hearing this an older woman reached for my hand and said to me, “We cannot always see the storm inside someone else”. Her words comforted me like my mother’s embrace.

In that group, I found a kind of solace. The world outside still blamed me—neighbours, relatives, even his family. But here, I was not alone. Here, my grief was not a burden I had to carry in silence.

After attending the meetings regularly every month, I began to understand that healing was not about forgetting or erasing the pain. It was about learning to live with it, to accept that the journey forward was uncertain and difficult.

I started to talk about my husband and the kind of man he was before the darkness had taken over. I talked about his positive qualities, the love we had shared, and the family we had built. Slowly, I began to see that he had not left me because of anything I had done. He had left because he was lost,

and sometimes, even love was not enough.

Now, I stitch clothes to feed my son. The sewing machine hums a rhythm that fills the silence in our home. It is not the life I dreamed of, but it is a life I have chosen to build.

I still visit the spot where my husband used to sit in the evenings, watching the sun dip behind the fields. I speak to him there sometimes, letting the wind carry my words. “Why did you leave us?” I ask, though I know no answer will come.

Grief comes in waves, sometimes gentle, sometimes fierce enough to drag me away. But each day, I rise. Not because the pain has lessened, but because I have learned to carry it.

In my small house, there are days when I laugh with my son, his innocent laughter filling the air with a lightness I thought I had lost. And there are days when I sit in the corner and let the tears come. Both are part of my journey.

My name is Tamizh Arasi. I am a mother, and a survivor of a grief that threatened to destroy me. I tell my story not for pity but to remind others that even in the darkest storms, we can find our way to the light.

About the Author

Dr Nandini Murali is a gender-responsive, lived experience, and trauma-informed changemaker in mental health, committed to dismantling stigma and reimagining suicide prevention and postvention.

Following the suicide of her husband, a respected urologist, Nandini experienced a profound personal awakening that reshaped her life's purpose. She transformed her grief into advocacy by founding SPEAK, an initiative of the MS Chellamuthu Trust and Research Foundation (MSCT&RF), Madurai, which nurtures safe, stigma-free conversations on suicide. She also launched SPEAK2US (93754 93754), a culturally sensitive mental health helpline; and Project SPEAK, a pioneering rural postvention model which is an initiative of MSCT&RF and Mariwala Health Initiative (MHI), Mumbai, and has supported around six hundred women bereaved by suicide.

A certified life coach specialising in loss and transition, Nandini has more than two decades of experience across mental health, gender, and organisational culture. She holds a PhD in Gender Studies and a postgraduate diploma in Gender and Development from the Royal Tropical Institute (Netherlands) and the UN Women Training Centre.

She has authored several books, including *Left Behind: Surviving Suicide loss*, and the forthcoming *Homecoming: Mental Health Journeys of Resilience, Healing and Hope* (co-authored with Neha Kirpal, Westland 2025). She integrates storytelling, coaching, and advocacy to amplify lived experience, normalise conversations on suicide and suicide loss, and drive systemic change.

Afterword by Mariwala Health Initiative

The inability to talk about suicide loss—a silence that is enforced by both external conventions and internal grief—becomes a shared language for persons impacted by suicide loss. Every woman's account in this important book is testimony to the power of mutually witnessing and holding space for this pain that is so often not allowed articulation.

When we limit the conversation on suicidality to simply prevention, we fail the people impacted by suicide deaths. Navigating one's identity and relationships in the wake of such immense loss can be incredibly difficult, especially when supportive measures are few and far between. The complicated feelings of sadness, anger and guilt require a space for slow, empathetic resolution. Furthermore, bereaved individuals require long-term intersectoral support that can be protective in the face of emotional, financial, and other problems that oftentimes precipitate and are exacerbated by suicide.

Unfortunately, our society too eagerly seeks a culprit to blame, even in the case of suicides. This makes the experience of the bereaved people, especially women, complicated as their own feelings of guilt are echoed and magnified by those around them. All narratives in this collection testify to how the isolation borne out of the tragedy gets intensified by others' critical gaze.

The support group convened by SPEAK offered women a space where this critical gaze could be replaced by an understanding shared and affirmed by others who had gone through a similar experience. It was in this space that they were able to recognise, accept, and voice their complicated feelings—ambivalence towards partners who had died, leaving them to grapple with mixed feelings of loss and hurt; anger at in-laws who held them unjustifiably responsible for deaths; fear of others' judgements; and fear for the future of their children.

All the contributors felt the impact of such mutual affirmation, and they credited

the support group for allowing them to carry the grief slightly more easily, while also empowering them to take charge of their day-to-day lives through vocational training and psychosocial support.

This should be the goal of postvention strategies—to create environments conducive to healing and empowering people. Lived experience advocates globally, and in this collection, speak to the importance of bottom-up, survivor-led, and survivor-focused approaches to mitigation and harm reduction. Suicides create vicious cycles of trauma and traumatisation, and interventions are needed to make people feel heard and cared for in the long-term. This includes intersectoral support for those surviving suicide that would involve active involvement and collaboration of local stakeholders, as well as facilitation of safe spaces like the one created by Project SPEAK.

These narratives are a chance for us to extend our understanding to people who have experienced a loss that does not lend itself easily to verbalisation. Through their personal and collective efforts, they have taken the initiative to make their experiences comprehensible to people who can and cannot relate to them. The prerogative is now on us to counter any easy impulses towards romanticisation, simplification, or valorisation of their suffering, in order to be perceptive listeners of their stories. Programmes and policies on suicide prevention and postvention must take heed and examine the congruence between dominant strategies, such as gatekeeper trainings and the needs and experiences of suicide loss survivors outlined here, and incorporate learnings to actually reflect the needs of those bereaved.

