

October 2013

This is a magical story about my lost dog.

I have three mongrel dogs, around 18 months old. Two brothers came straight from their mother to us when they were a month old. As pups, they looked like huskies with their blonde coats. The third, Prince, a month or two older, had survived the harsh street life of Madras. My cook found him and brought him to us. He has a faint resemblance to an Alsatian's colouring but with a very curly tail. A handsome dog wearing a red collar with a nametag attached. He fitted in but his experiences had scarred him and he would not take a daily walk on the road. The gate could remain wide open and he would not put a foot outside. He was frightened of the street.

On September 18th night, my careless watchman left the gate open. Prince and one brother, Apu, chasing a cat, raced up the 50-metre earthen lane that leads to my house. Moments later came thunder, lightning and heavy rains. Apu raced back, Prince vanished into the storm. Dog experts tell us that the first 48 hours are vital in finding a lost dog. It hasn't gone far. After that the odds mount – a month is 100 to 1 you'll ever see it again.

I searched for him, whistling and calling, but he was nowhere in sight. The next day, Maureen, my staff and I walked the streets looking for him. Two days later, my gardener saw him half down my road by a teashop and tried to catch him. Too frightened, Prince ran. It turned out he had been hiding first in a building site and then down a lane. It was raining again but we searched all the roads and lanes. Like every road, we have our share of street dogs, always in the same spot, looking well fed. No Prince. I created a poster with his photograph and offered a generous reward for the finder. These were distributed throughout the neighbourhood and stuck on walls. A woman called, she'd seen him at 4 am nearby. Maureen and I went out at four the next day, walked and called. Then someone said he was seen at night and we walked at nights. He had vanished again. The Hindu newspaper, in its pet's page, had him with his photo as a missing dog. Two weeks later, the paper ran it again. A local paper also ran a story of him, with his photo. He was also on two Face book sites. I must add that people do respond and call in but this time – silence. No one had seen him.

Two good friends, Angelika, a German woman living in the city, and Kiran, whose mother is German, suggested we consult a dog psychic living in Germany. A German dog psychic!! And living 10,000 miles away! As two weeks had passed since his sighting, I would try anything. I knew the odds were stacking up against us finding him. I Googled 'dog psychic' and found a few in America, and very expensive. Germany was closer, for what that

was worth. The psychic needed his photo, our photos, staff photos and shots of our house, the lane. Obediently, we sent them off. Three days later, she emailed in German (translated for us by Angelika). She wrote that he was very frightened and desperate. That stressed us further as we knew he hated the streets. She continued that 'Prince showed me that he was hiding under a blue tarpaulin in a building site.' She added that it was near us. There are seven building sites on my road alone, and we visited every one. In one, there was a blue tarpaulin but he wasn't under it. How on earth, sitting in Germany did she see that through his eyes? How are they 'talking'? She speaks German, possibly English, he has a dog's grasp of English, Tamil and Telugu!

A week later, in the evening, the ironing man (we send our clothes out to be ironed) just down the road, called saying Prince had just run past him very fast. I raced over. He and another man gave chase on their scooters but lost him when he turned a corner. Everyone now searched up and down roads, lane, houses. Again, he had vanished. Kiran sms's to leave our gate wide open 24x7 and at night we placed a couple of his toys, snacks – my chewed Nike tennis shoe, a plastic ball – in the hope that passing by he'd recognise his toys. No further word from the psychic.

It was now four weeks. I escalated and had 15,000 flyers printed up and slipped into two major newspapers distributed in my area. Surely, someone would see him now. I did get a call and went to the place but none had seen him in that area.

It was nearing five weeks and we felt desperate for Prince, frightened, alone, hungry, thirsty. Was he alive? Kiran offered to contact the psychic again who emailed back a day later and thanks to Angelika we got the translation in the evening: he is still alive, lost, frightened, and confused. Searching for food a human had thrown a stone at him. (I felt almost ill). She wrote on: 'He's showing me an arc or arch, a house with outside stairs leading to the roof, a muddy field, a dirt road, a broken wall, an old house, a sloping road. It could be on the edge of town. I told him to stay where he is as Maureen and Tim will find you. Don't move away.' It was confusing.

The nearest arch, the grand kind soldiers march under, is five miles away. Too far. At dawn, we are out on our hunt. Not far is, not an arch, but a pillar, a possibility. We scour the area but there are no old houses or broken walls nor stairs. Later, we cruise and I spot a metal arch over a school entrance and nearby a broken wall, with a muddy area behind it. We walk all around calling and whistling. Not a response. For five weeks, I've been stressed, and cannot work in my worry for him. It sounds hopeless.

In the evening, after our daily walk, we get an SMS on Maureen's dying phone from a friend, Devika. We're in a mobile store trying to revive it. The psychic's mail had been forwarded to Devika, an animal lover. Devika writes that there are some old houses and lanes near the local telephone exchange. That is about a mile away, along a very busy, noisy, chaotic roads. It's a zigzag route too. We drive over, park and see a muddy lane beside the exchange. We walk down it, calling and whistling, the lane curves sharply to a dead end.

But, at the end, is an old house with an outside STAIRCASE leading up to the roof. We hurry into the muddy compound, calling and whistling. No Prince. The watchmen on the lane, shake their heads when I show them his photograph. When we get back to the road, we stop and stare. Right opposite, there is a splendid ARCH spanning the entrance to an apartment block.

We check with that watchman and an autorickshaw driver. They are helpful but, no, they haven't seen the dog.

Next to this grand arch entrance is a dark lane about 100 yards long. We walk down, calling, whistling. At the end is an old house, a half broken wall. The watchman there says he hasn't seen any dog. We walk back up, feeling more depressed, calling and whistling. Parallel to this lane is another dark one, just as long. We turn into it.

I am a few feet ahead, Maureen's behind. She says: 'There's a dog here.'

I turn. There is a bundle of something at her feet. It's silent; its tail flickers. The light is so bad, it's only a shape and I bend down. It's a muddy colour. Prince has a darker coat. But it looks like him. The dog has a collar and hanging from it is a glitter of metal. I scoop him up. It is PRINCE. His tail now a windshield wiper. It is my happiest moment when he rests his tired head against my shoulder and nuzzles my neck, and then nuzzles Maureen as we hug and kiss him. I know he was as happy to have heard our calls and my whistle.

He had come in from behind us, so it meant he was down that first lane and followed my calls. He had been missing 37 days. Though we're holding him, we can't believe we have found him. He looks as dazed, all three thinking we're dreaming.

I carry him to the car and when reach home, the word spreads we've found him. He is heartbreakingly thin, very dirty and has scars on his forehead and cheek that look like dog bites. He had been in a fight. He had lost two kilograms but someone, somewhere, had given him scraps of food to keep him alive. He drinks a large bowl of water as if he had not had a drink for days. He is traumatized, still afraid though in his home. The two brothers sniff him suspiciously, and keep their distance. For the five weeks they had a monopoly of our love and attention and now Prince is back home. Fussed over by us all, fed, washed, brushed.

That psychic is unbelievable. How did she see through his eyes? I cannot explain it or even understand how she does it. I gather she is well known too. She will visit Chennai in January and we will have her over for a grand meal. We have to see how Prince reacts to her in person.