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Reader's Digest

New Roles—For Me

By Gitanjali Prasad



"I am afraid he is no more," the doctor announced. It was a Saturday evening in March 2007. Your brain doesn't easily process a statement like that. How could this be? I wondered. Only 45 minutes earlier, my husband Alok and I were about to leave our flat in Delhi for a party, when all of a sudden he just keeled over. It was a fatal cerebral stroke, instantaneous and without warning.

Alok, my soulmate of 28 years, was of an athletic build and looked much younger than his 55 years. A lifestyle that had a healthful diet, regular swimming and golf, yoga and reiki, was punctuated with rather more festive weekends. We sometimes went to parties, but most special were the quiet evenings at home: two small martinis and precious time alone, privately celebrating every small event. Just the day before he passed away, Alok's routine medical test results had come in and they looked good. "My blood pressure and cholesterol levels are down," he'd said. "Let's celebrate."

When Alok and I met in 1978, he was attracted by my passionate love of children, dogs, poetry, and my blissful ignorance of life's many nitty-gritties. I was drawn by his intelligence and quiet depth, his pragmatism and his broad, comforting shoulders. As a marketing executive with a leading steel company, Alok's corporate world was different from my hectic life as a journalist. But I found the stodgy corporate world rather restful.

I moved each time Alok got a transfer, because I could not bear to be apart. I freelanced for publications across the country and my nomadic existence resulted in an enviable network of contacts.

Meanwhile, I also got a deeper insight into family life, which led to a series of articles on the subject, and a unique understanding on what was important to homemakers. This led to a job as the Kolkata-based bureau chief of a leading magazine group. In 1999, I won a press fellowship to the University of Cambridge to study the family. I continued with the research when I returned to India and my book, *The Great Indian Family: New Roles, Old Responsibilities*, was published by Penguin in 2006. It got good reviews and media coverage.

Our marriage was exceedingly happy and our sons, Viraj, a chartered accountant, and Anurag, a lawyer, were warm, loving, and blessed with both a high level of integrity and a wicked sense of humour. It was as if everything I wished for was mine. When people said, "Life is not perfect," I used to think, Oh, but it very nearly is.

That Saturday night changed everything. You've been a couple for close to 28 years. There's no major decision you take alone. Every piece of news is shared. Alone now, you feel like half a person. How does one function as a single entity?

I was traumatized and terrified, but felt I owed it to myself, to Alok, and to the boys to rise above the loss and use the strength our love had given me to go forward.

I also had to deal with some pressing issues. Where would I live?

Ours was a company-owned flat and most of the facilities we'd enjoyed, like the club, medical coverage, even the phone, came with his job.

I took a decision: I would try and do as much as I could on my own, without asking for, or expecting, other people to chip in. As a journalist, I had been privileged to share some truly exceptional life stories. I now had to handle my own life story and accept change with as much grace and courage as I could muster.

The journey ahead needed new skills. My husband's paperwork was good indeed, but I had never handled finances. I didn't even know where our bank was! As there was no "handing over," I did not know anything about the payments due for any services we used. I did not know where many important documents were. My sons, Viraj and Anurag stepped in like pillars of support and together we dealt with tough decisions, such as selling the home we had in Jamshedpur to buy a flat in Gurgaon, outside of Delhi.

Moving to a new home was painful because, emotionally, it signalled a clear break from the past and a final acceptance of a new life alone. To locate and buy the flat that was right for me, I saw innumerable properties and studiously followed

property issues in the media. I was in touch with every property broker in Gurgaon, meeting them with newspaper clippings that tracked price movements. Invariably, they were dismissive of my research. Recently, however, when Anurag, who was visiting from Singapore, where he works, was talking to a real estate agent, he gave my name and number. "Oh, that lady," the agent exclaimed. "Nobody knows more about property in Gurgaon than she does!"

With a new home in hand, there was one load off. But a change of ownership was required for a whole host of things. For instance, even to move my gas connection from one home to another, or transfer the car to my name, I had to go back and forth with forms filled, the death certificate, affidavits. Such incidents were painful at first—yet they helped make me stronger.

After Alok passed away, I felt the need for a workplace—to get up and go to everyday. But the job interviews were very different from any I had had in the past, because now, it was not just my competence or skills that were in question.

"Here is a woman, who has literally followed her husband for close to 28 years," one interviewer said to his colleague in my presence. "And now that he's dead, how stable do you think she is?" I finally found the right job. Today, I work in corporate communications.

My life now is very different from what it was earlier. I understand that we are all given an inner strength, and that we truly grow up, regardless of age, when we learn to stand alone. I hope to start writing again. I would also like to give back to society, to work at a cause that I care deeply about—the family—the focus of my book: to help others achieve better work–life options so that a new generation of young people, and indeed a new generation of old people, can receive the support they need.

I look to the future with much optimism. Viraj, my elder son, is getting married soon, and while we will miss Alok's presence, we know he will be there in spirit, at the wedding—and always.