

THE ELEVENTH KILOMETER

A Memoir of Inheritance, Endurance,
and Learning to Stay

J. R. S A N D A D I



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In memory of
Sri Sandadi Ranga Reddy
and Smt. Sandadi Kusuma

To my father, my hero, confidant, and closest friend.
To my mother, our Inti Lakshmi, the quiet grace of our home.

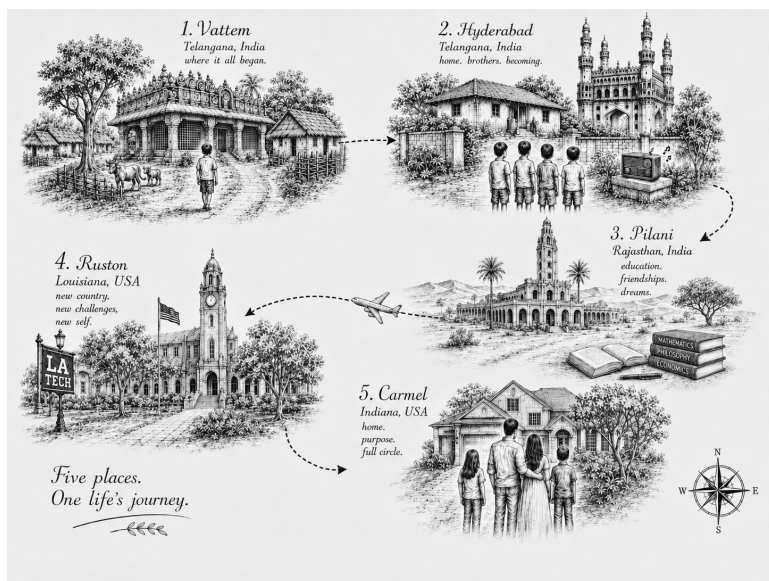
This book moves forward because you taught me how.



चरैवेति चरैवेति ।
Charaiveti, charaiveti.
“Keep moving, keep moving.”
—Aitareya Brahmana, Rigveda

The Journey

Five Places. One Life.



CONTENTS

<i>Prologue</i>	xi
-----------------	----

PART I: FORMATION

Roots, Discipline, and the Quiet Shaping of Identity

1. Eleven Kilometers	17
2. Roots of Fire	25
3. The Hill That Called Him	36
4. Becoming Raja Saheb	47
5. The Fire Finds Direction	58
6. Midnight in Shreveport	67
7. Letters from Home	76

PART II: BECOMING

The Making and Unmaking of a Self

8. Becoming JR	83
9. The Woman Who Stayed	96
10. The First Fracture	107
11. Noor of Our Eyes	114
12. At The Water's Edge	117

13. Illusions of Control	123
14. The Man with the Small Suitcase	127
15. Reclaiming Sundays	132

PART III: MOTION

Running Becomes the Language of Discipline and Healing

16. The Mirror I Never Expected	139
17. The First Twenty-Six	145
18. The Cliffs and the Company	151
19. The Heavy Heart	157
20. The City That Runs with You	164
21. Ashes	168
22. Sixty Years	174
23. Pain Is Inevitable	184
24. My Kohinoor	189
25. History Underfoot	196
26. The Final Star	201

PART IV: A LIFE OF PURPOSE

When Purpose Turns Outward Toward Community

27. What Comes After Ambition	211
28. The Discipline of Showing Up	217
29. Murmuration	225

PART V: PRESENCE

Learning What Truly Remains When the Miles End

30. The Ones Who Stay	241
31. When Presence Becomes Prayer	247
 <i>Epilogue: The River and the Road</i>	 261
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	265
<i>Glossary of Terms</i>	267
<i>A Note on Organizations</i>	279

Prologue

The Moment Before Movement

August 2018

It was still dark when the alarm went off.

5:12 a.m.

The house in Carmel was quiet—the kind of quiet that feels almost sacred. I sat on the edge of the bed for a moment, listening to the hum of the air conditioner and the faint sound of a car passing outside. My running shoes were by the door, laces loosened. My Apple Watch was charging on the counter. Small rituals meant to make the morning easier to obey.

As I tied my shoes, my phone rang.

“Cancer.”

My mother’s voice did not tremble. She spoke the way she spoke about most things—as if this were something to be handled, managed, endured.

Amma. I had called her that, my whole life, the way I had called my father *Nana*. That morning, the word would not come.

I said nothing.

I sat back down, shoes half-tied, and looked around at the life I had spent two decades building. The house. The title. The balance sheet. The careful structure of a family I had tried to protect from the kind of uncertainty my parents had grown up inside.

If I am not beside her now, none of this will matter. That evening, I booked a flight to India.

Over the next few years, I made that journey ten times. Each time I arrived, I found her a little smaller, her eyes a little more translucent. And each time, I found my father sitting beside her, saying less than he used to, because sixty years of marriage had moved past the reach of language.

Presence cannot be retroactively purchased.

For most of my adult life, I had lived in preparation.

Later, I told myself. Later, when the structure is complete.

Later, when the numbers are enough.

Later, when there is more time.

That call rearranged the calendar.

I have been many things: an angry boy, an immigrant learning to belong, a father shaped by loss, a runner who learned that finishing is a choice, and a volunteer who discovered that showing up is the only useful thing left to do.

But my story did not begin with me.

Long before I ran my first marathon—long before I understood what endurance required—my father had already lived by a single principle. Before sunrise. On a dusty village road in Telangana. My father walked eleven kilometers to school, because education was the only path that led away from the life he had been born into.

For him it was not discipline. It was simply what the road required.

My mother's discipline was quieter, and harder to see from a distance. She held our home together across three generations and two continents without ever seeming to strain against the weight of it. When I sat beside her during chemotherapy years later, watching her ask about my children while the treatment drained her, I understood what I had missed as a boy: the endurance I had inherited was not only his.

In Sanskrit there is a phrase that captures the thread running through all of it.

*Charaiveti. Charaiveti.*¹

Keep moving. Keep moving.

Not toward applause. Not toward arrival. Toward whatever the next step required—a village road, an ocean crossing, a hospital room, mile twenty-two of a marathon, a friend's living room heavy with grief.

This book is about that inheritance.

About the father who taught me how to move, and the mother who taught me how to stay. About the son I lost, the country I chose, the miles I ran to find my way back to a body I had neglected, and the slow discovery that presence—real presence—is the only offering worth making.

To understand how I arrived here, I have to begin where the walking began.

Eleven kilometers.

Before sunrise.

And a boy who believed that education could change everything.

¹ *Charaiveti: Keep moving; keep walking. An ancient Vedic injunction from the Aitareya Brahmana urging perpetual forward movement in action, thought, and spirit. Often repeated for emphasis: Charaiveti, Charaiveti.*

PART I

Formation

Roots, Discipline, and the Quiet Shaping of Identity



CHAPTER 1

Eleven Kilometers

Vattem, 1940–1960s

Vattem was a small village in the southern Indian state of Telangana, where the day began before the sun. The smell of woodsmoke drifted from kitchen fires, cattle bells sounded softly in the distance, and the earth still held the coolness of night.

Beyond the fields lay a dusty road that connected the village to Gopalapet, the nearest town, a road people rarely traveled. For most people, the village contained their entire lives.

My father remembered that road.

He spoke often of those eleven kilometers.

Before dawn, the air carried a chill that did not last long after sunrise. In winter, it bit into the skin, especially the hands and feet, waking the body before the mind was ready. In summer, the ground held the night's coolness only briefly, a small mercy before the heat rose and settled over everything.

Vattem's red soil defined that road. In the dry months, it hardened under a relentless sun, the surface cracking into uneven plates that shifted underfoot. Dust lifted with each step and clung to the boy's ankles, settling into the lines of his skin. By midday, the land turned harsh and unyielding, each kilometer asking a little more from his body.

When the monsoon came, that same road changed its terms. The earth softened into a thick red mud that pulled at his feet, each step resisted as if the land itself were asking him to slow

down. Sandals slipped. Bare feet sank. The journey took longer, but it did not stop.

The path was never smooth. Loose stones rolled without warning, ruts from bullock carts cut across the ground, and certain stretches climbed enough to be felt in the legs. None of it was dramatic. It was just a long dirt road. But all of it accumulated.

In his own written account, my father remembered the practical truth of that time: there were no buses then, and travel meant bullock cart when one was available. But in the stories he told us, what endured was the walking. Eleven kilometers from Vattem to Gopalapet. Not merely a distance on a map, but the measure of what stood between a village boy and the education that might carry him beyond the life he had inherited.

He carried his books in a jute sack, slung across his body. By midmorning, hunger would arrive, not sharp, but steady, a low companion through the day.

Some mornings, the sky would begin to change as he walked, a faint line of orange at the horizon widening slowly into light. Birds crossing low over the fields. Smoke rising in thin columns from distant homes.

As men and women stepped into the fields, tools in hand, the day was already underway.

The village behind him was still asleep, the town ahead not yet awake.

He walked in that in-between.

Not toward a dream or applause. Not toward any promise the world had made to him. He walked because the road was the only path that led away from the life he was born into.

He passed fields that belonged, in name, to his father, my grandfather, a landlord by title but not by temperament. They were rich on paper, but cash was always scarce.

The family had land, at least at first. What they lacked was prudence.

By the time my father could count, he had already learned a harsh arithmetic: Land can vanish. Money can vanish. Reputation can vanish.

That lesson was not abstract. It was shaped by the world he was born into.

A Region Unraveling

My father was born on June 26, 1940, in a country still under British rule, a country whose wealth had been siphoned away and whose systems of learning had been hollowed out. Education, once closer to village life through gurukulams, pathshalas, and local teachers, had become uneven and fragile.²

Then the ground shifted under the region itself. In 1947, India gained independence from the British, but the princely state of Hyderabad where my father was born did not immediately join it. The *Nizam*, the ruler of that state, refused to join the Union. The Razakars, the Nizam's paramilitary force, swept through the region with brutality. Landlords were hunted. Families were uprooted in the dark.^{3, 4}

His childhood was shaped not only by family uncertainty, but by a region caught in its own unraveling.

Only long afterward did my grandmother tell us what those nights were like. When word spread that *Razakars* were moving through nearby villages, doors were barred and lamps extinguished.

² *Gurukulams: The ancient Indian educational tradition in which students lived with their guru, learning through proximity and daily practice; education as immersion, not instruction.*

³ *The Nizam: The hereditary Muslim ruler of Hyderabad State, one of the largest princely states under British India. When India gained independence in 1947, Nizam Mir Osman Ali Khan refused to accede to the Indian Union. Indian military action (Operation Polo, September 1948) ended his rule and integrated Hyderabad into India.*

⁴ *Razakars: A paramilitary militia loyal to the Nizam of Hyderabad, active in 1947–1948. As tensions escalated, the Razakars conducted widespread violence against Hindu villagers: looting, assault, and terror. Their atrocities remain among the less-documented episodes of the Partition era.*

Children were hidden in attics or inside grain bins. Everyone had to remain completely silent.

Before nightfall, valuables were buried, small pits dug quickly into the earth where gold and diamonds could disappear beneath loose soil. My grandfather gathered his children and fled. They left behind land, belongings, and the illusion of safety. Only after the Indian Army intervened and the violence subsided did they return.

In a world where even governments could collapse overnight, the boy held on to the one thing that felt steady: education.

So, he moved.

Eleven kilometers. Again and again.

He was the eldest son of eleven children, three of them sisters who did not live to adulthood, lost to illnesses the family could neither name nor afford to treat. Seven siblings grew up alongside him. Along that long road, he made a quiet vow: He would not inherit uncertainty. He would outgrow it.

Those kilometers became his rebellion: unhurried, deliberate, unannounced. In a family that had always measured destiny in acres, he began measuring life in textbooks.

His own father had little use for books. Farming was the world he understood, and he didn't push his children toward more. The push came from his grandfather, Narasimha Reddy, who looked at what the village could offer a boy who wanted more than the fields and decided it wasn't enough.

Narasimha Reddy had reason to believe the family could rise again. Three generations earlier, the family patriarch had been summoned by the rulers of the Gopalapet samsthanam, a small princely estate, and appointed Pradhan Mantri, the chief minister of the estate. By the time my father was born, that old standing had been reduced to farming and modest inherited land.

My father was given the name Ranga Reddy, after that ancestor of consequence. Narasimha Reddy had watched the family descend from administering an estate to working its own

small fields in two generations, and he wanted his grandson to find some other way back up.

Education was not easily available in Vатtem.

The village had no proper schooling beyond the earliest years. My father and his older sister studied first under a man named Nambi, who taught privately, lessons held wherever there was room, chalkboard slates standing in for notebooks.

When my father reached the third standard, roughly third grade, that decision meant leaving home. He was sent to relatives in Gopalapet, traveling the only way available then: by bullock cart, the wheels finding every pothole on the way.

The arrangement was far from comfortable. He and his cousins shared work as much as space. Before lessons and after them, they cut fodder for the buffaloes and lowered a rope into the village well, hand over hand, until there was enough water for the day. Even as a child, hard labor was part of daily life. He pursued education in the hours that remained.

In 1952, before he could see any of it pay off, his grandfather died. My father left his lessons and walked the same road home, this time carrying grief instead of books. He never called it a turning point. But the person most certain of his promise was gone, and there was nothing yet to show for it.

What kept the promise alive was a headmaster, Koppolu Srinivasa Rao, who brought real discipline into a school that had offered little of it before him. Under his guidance, my father completed seventh grade with the highest distinction the school awarded, as far as Gopalapet's school could take him.

The Road to Work

For high school, my father moved to Mahbubnagar, a town about thirty kilometers from Vатtem. He rented a small room with a few classmates and learned a lesson no textbook could teach: how to survive on his own. They cooked their own meals and stretched every rupee as far as it would go.

The first few days after receiving money from home were manageable. By the middle of the month, the rice and provisions often ran low. On those days, they made do with a simple chutney of green chilies and tamarind, pounded together by hand, a meal that offered little nourishment but was enough to quiet the hunger.

More than once, lack of money nearly ended his dream of education. In 1956, the fee for his higher secondary exam was fifty rupees, a sum his family did not have. He walked to his aunt Radhamma's village near Kalwakurthy and asked her for it. She gave it without hesitation. He never forgot it.

After finishing high school, he was admitted to the Intermediate program at Saifabad College, the more conventional path toward a degree. Two months in, a new private polytechnic opened in Mahbubnagar, offering a three-year diploma in civil engineering, and word spread that diploma holders found work faster than degree graduates did. He weighed the two paths and chose the practical one, leaving behind the more prestigious credential for the faster route to a paycheck.

The three years that followed, from 1956 to 1959, tested that bet. His family's income came from the harvest, money that did not arrive until March or April, leaving him with little to live on through the long months before it came. He worked up the nerve to ask his math teacher, Srinivasa Rao—not the headmaster, but another man who shared his name—for monthly help, promising to repay him each spring once the crops sold. Srinivasa Rao agreed.

The clearest measure of what people did for him came during his diploma years, a three-year professional course, when his class planned a trip across the state line to see the steelworks in Karnataka. He couldn't afford to go, and said so plainly. His math teacher wouldn't accept that answer. He found his way to the railway platform himself, in the dead of January, and pressed the fare into my father's hands before the train left.

Fifty years later, my father still remembered the cold of that morning, and a debt that had nothing to do with money.

That was the shape of his education: not one walk to glory, but a long accumulation of people who refused to let a capable boy slip through the cracks of a farming family's circumstances.

He became the first in the family to pursue higher technical education in civil engineering.

The Life He Built

He was barely twenty when he began working, first as an overseer in the Irrigation Department's Survey Division in Nizamabad. Within a year, a promotion to supervisor carried him to the Pochampad Project.

His salary did not lift him alone. It also lifted the seven siblings behind him. School fees, uniforms, books: he carried them all, the way he had once carried his own books down that long road.

He never called it a sacrifice.

He called it responsibility.

Over the next two decades, that responsibility widened. He helped educate his brothers, arranged his sisters' marriages, contributed to cousins' weddings, and stepped in wherever the family needed him. None of it was announced as generosity. It was what the eldest son did.

It moved all of us forward, even before we knew we were moving.

My father shifted the family's center of gravity, from farming to salaried professions, from inheritance to income, from the uncertainties of the harvest to a more durable form of stability.

He never framed it as ambition. He refused to be confined by the world he had been born into. That refusal did not stop with his own advancement. Even as a young man in Vattam, he challenged the assumption that devotion belonged only to those who had always controlled it, insisting that the temple procession pass through a ward long kept at the margins of village life. Years

later, he quietly used his position in the Irrigation Department to help village boys from disadvantaged families find employment. He had walked out of uncertainty, but he did not believe the road should belong only to him. He became, instead, the architect of a future none of us had yet imagined.

In 1960, the same year he began his first job, he married my mother, Kusuma.

He had first seen her two years earlier, in the summer of 1958, during one of the long visits he made each year to his aunt's village near Achampet. It was the kind of unhurried family stay that filled the open space between college semesters. He never wrote down what struck him about her that day, only that an impression had been made, and that it never faded.

When his family later sat down to discuss marriage proposals, he did not deliberate. He told them plainly that he would marry no one else.

For an arranged-marriage culture, it was an unusually decided kind of certainty: less a match made for him than one he simply claimed.

By the time I was born, much of that struggle had already borne fruit. My brothers and I, four sons and no daughters, grew up in a house filled with books, newspapers, arguments, laughter, and expectations. In that house, the future could be planned; it did not have to be outrun. My mother moved through it as its quiet center.

At the time, I thought he was building a life.

I understand it differently now.

He was building a discipline. He had not taught it to us directly. He had simply lived it.

And I had been watching.

Comfort can be a kind of amnesia. When you grow up inside stability, you can mistake it for entitlement. I did.