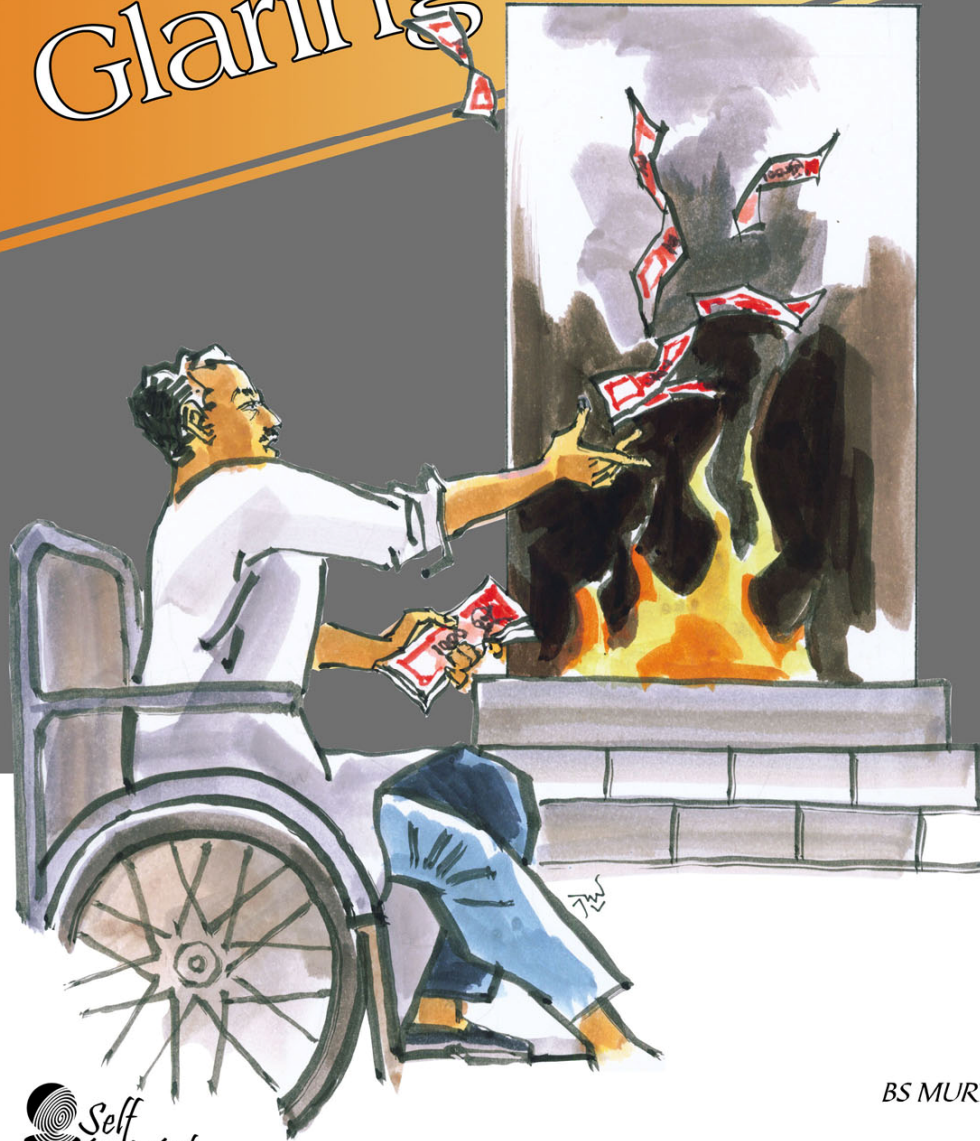


Glaring Shadow



 Self
imprint

BS MURTHY

Glaring Shadow - A stream of consciousness novel

BS Murthy

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F-9, Nandini Mansion,
1-10-234, Ashok Nagar,
Hyderabad – 500 020

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Dedicated to,

Sekhu, my elder boy for his literary course correction of this 'stream of consciousness' work to which I had lent some of my life and times.

Chapter 1

Glaring Shadow

He had the soul of our times, and is the namesake of many. He tamed success by the scruff of its neck, only to fuel envy in our neighborhood. When it seemed there was no stopping him, fate dealt him a deadly blow in his early sixties. Besides losing his wife, son and daughter-in-law with their children in that fatal road mishap, he found his leg mangled in the debris of that Ferrari. The intensity of the pity all felt for him seemed to match the magnitude of his loss, but as he became a recluse, his thought eluded all, and in due course, his tragedy became a thing of the past. But, in time, his intriguing behavior brought him back to the top of the page three in the local media – why he had disposed off his lucrative real estate for a song that left the realtors in the lurch. And as if to create a newsflash in the business world, he had off-loaded his considerable stockholding, which sent the bulls running for cover in the country's bourses. Soon, even as the scrip was still crunching in the bear hug, the closure of his umpteen bank accounts earned him the national headlines, as it heralded a first rate liquidity crisis in the country's banking system. But even in that gloomy setting, it cost me a fortune to acquire his palatial bungalow the outhouse of which he had retained.

When I called on him for chitchat that morning, I was shocked to see him shredding mounds of money lying beside him. Unmindful of my protests, as he picked up another wad of notes, I snatched it from him as if it were the money I paid through my nose. However, getting hold of another set, when he resumed his destructive regimen, I said it was absurd that the toil of a lifetime should be laid waste thus. Maybe, to clear my vision as well as to set his mind at rest, he unwound himself, which I would rewind for man to readjust his clock of life. But then why not reveal his name when he is worth writing about? It's because, the value of this tale lies not in his name, hallowed though, but in the hollowness of life he had led that is even as his name became a synonym for fame. However, if someone were to guess who it is, so be it.

"My tragedy brought to the fore the falsities of life," he began melancholically. "How sickening it was to sense the anxiety of those to step into the shoes of my lost heirs. If only they stopped at that, and not stooped further, wouldn't I have taken them as the necessary evils of my aimless life! But they began to believe that they had a case for cause of action to file a suit in the court for their share in the spoils of my life. Let them go in for a writ if they want to, how I care now. What is the injunction they are going to get from the court but to maintain the status quo. Better still if the court were to grant them this shredded stuff; won't that save me the bother of scavenging it. But then, why blame them? How I failed to see that the self-worthy will not ingratiate themselves, and that it is the self-serving that cater to the egos of the

egotists. Won't the upright seem arrogant to the egotistic, served by the servility of the spongers. Oh, by letting success go to my head, how I began to condescend to descend to the principled folks, who tend to occupy the middle order. Didn't Napoleon say, 'The surest way to remain poor is to be an honest man' and, anyway, they are few and far between as Shakespeare had averred "Ay, sir; to be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand."

"Maybe in our age of the billionaires, the ratio could as well be one in a million."

"You may not be off the mark after all," he said. "Aren't more and more people getting exposed to the temptations of money these days, and don't I know how difficult it is to resist the temptation of the moolah. More so, as it appears, Mammon and Bacchus have pushed Venus to the backbench of life. Well, warming up to the dubious, didn't I make it appear that only those who courted me counted? But why would sane minds court the empty heads any way? But still, I didn't care that my attitude distanced the discerning, even Anand my nephew I was fond of, and he was the last to know of my tragedy. Why not, won't it take time for news to trickle down to the distant relations? When he came to offer his condolences, how my troubled conscience was solaced by the empathy I saw in his eyes! What a contrast it was with the put-ons of others underscored with their eyes-on-my-heirless-wealth! It was as if his ethos had placed my derailed life back on its ethical tracks. How I pleaded with him to become the prince of my domain and the inheritor of my fortune, and it was only when he declined my offer, did I realize what a pauper I was in spite of my riches."

"Don't tell me he's a saint not wanting to be one of the richest on earth. Maybe, it's his weird way of getting even with you."

"You may know that he values love above all else, and that's saintly, isn't it?" he said. "He's skeptical about the senseless wealth for its malefic affects on the ethos of his life, and what's worse, the questionable quality of those that it ushers into one's life. While his modest station in life keeps off the axe-grinders and the gold-diggers from trespassing into his life to his hurt, he's afraid that the halo of my bequeathal would change all that for it might make him a false deity flocked by the dubious gang. That used to be my philosophy of life as well. I always wanted a woman to enter into my life, pulled by my persona and not seduced by my wealth for I know women have a weakness for successful men. Well for my part, I always had a weakness for desirable women. When Ruma wanted me to own her and her riches as well, for good or for bad, it all changed forever, but now, how I wish I had his pragmatism to love and to life. Whatever, that monetary rise was the beginning of my moral fall."

"But money can bring the best out of man and I've a cousin to name for that," I said.

"When he was a man of modest means, he pestered me no end for a paltry sum he lent me but now he's a silent donor of millions. I guess that it was his insecurity then that made him petty in spite of his being large-hearted. Why, it's the hand that holds the money that shapes its character and not the other way round."

"And sadly for my money it fell into my frivolous hands," he said staring at the heap. "When I said at his refusal what I was to do with all the money, Anand said in jest that I might as well hang myself with it. Oh, if only he had told me how to go about it; can one make a rope out of a wad of a trillion? Why money is paper and rope is coir; money can buy rope but can't make one on its own; which is stronger then, money that buys rope or the rope that gets sold for money? Yet all the money in the world cannot tie a monkey? But strangely it can bind man, even the Herculean one! Or is it that man himself submits to money, thinking that he would be weak without it."

Oh, how I acquired wealth to feel strong and appear so to Ruma. But what money did to me than making me a weakling? What of this impulse to destroy that, which I had accumulated all my life. Can I become strong by shredding the stuff? Maybe, am I not rooting out the cause of my bane? How my hands have begun to ache already, and I've so much more to shred still! Wonder why didn't I feel any strain at all accumulating all that wealth; what a heady feeling, the sense of success is! Why did I let the glaring shadow of success eclipse my soul? Maybe I would never know. But now, wiser for the myth of wealth don't I see the falsity of fame in which I had been gloating over."

"You seem to be shaken really."

"I was in a slumber till Anand stirred my soul in showing me the reality of life," he said reflectively. "And what a shock it was."

"Maybe it paves the way to unburden yourself."

"Isn't it strange that unburdening itself is a burden for me," he bemoaned. "How tiring it is to destroy all that I had built, so to say, over my dead soul. Whatever, can one either build much or destroy enough with bare hands. Maybe as business machines generate wealth, we need money munches to devour it. But all I've is a pair of scissors."

"If ever you get to invent one, I don't see any takers for it and that saves the bother of patenting it."

"Surely sense of humor helps," he said trying to get up from his chair to reach the bureau. "How I forgot I needed crutches, don't I have the ghost leg still? Even after exorcizing the devil of wealth, I may have to put up with it for long. And that speaks about the power of habit that is the bane of man. Didn't I develop the habit of making money to impress Ruma, only to go down on the road of doom? Wasn't my sense of insecurity to retain her love that was behind all that? But then, how admirably did Anand lead his wife Anitha through the travails of life."

"If you don't mind my being frank with you," I said involuntarily, "your tone betrays your jealousy couched by the admiration of him. It's also clear that you wished Ruma was cast in Anitha's mold."

"I like your perceptivity, the acme of sensitive writing," he said and added reflectively. "Don't I know you aspire to be a writer? Your muse willing, maybe my life can inspire you to make a memoir of it. If so, pray not give away those who came into my life and I too, but for a slip of the tongue, won't name any save those you are already in the know. Name them as your fancy suggests, and what's in a name as Shakespeare had said."

"Why it's an idea, and as Abhishek Bachchan says, it can change one's life," I said enthusiastically. "Let me take notes,"

"Why not you give it a try as I glean through the glaring show of my life in all its myriad shades," he said handing me a writing pad.

Chapter 2

Pains of Regret

"Not to speak ill of the dead," he began as I readied myself to take notes, and continued after a pause, "what to make out of this social nicety when man is so much prone to speak nothing but ill of his fellow-men. Does it imply that since one should not speak ill of the dead, he should go the whole hog about it when the other is still

alive and kicking! Maybe, that's what man thinks; why he wouldn't let go an opportunity, so to say creates one, to pour out his venom on his fellow beings. If I were to subscribe to the perverse proposition, you would never come to write my memoir for I should keep mum as most of those who came into my life are dead and gone. Whatever, didn't Shakespeare put the final word in Antony's mouth – 'The evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones'. Well, gloating about her 'woman behind the successful man image', it was Ruma, who goaded me all the way to my doom. Now that I'm failing our common cause, won't her soul feel let down over there? What of my mother who kept herself away from my running shadow all along? Won't she welcome the return of her prodigal son to her pragmatic bosom? But even if she does, how am I to bear her kindness having got used to her indifference for so long. Oh, if only my father were alive! What a character he was really; when did I last think of him anyway? Wonder how, shorn of a few bucks, I'm inclined to think about them! When I'm finished with the lot, what if it's a deluge of human compassion? How nice the prospect of its happening feels!"

"I can feel your pain in the pangs of regret."

"I'm glad that your feel of my remorse might help you to capture the pathos of my life," he said stoically. "How my life mirrors the stupidity of man in spite of a wise upbringing. What idiocy it was that I toiled to destroy the toil of my parents in tending my life in a meaningful way. Why not make it easy for myself by making a bonfire if it. (He started throwing those wads of money into the fireplace) What if I choke myself to death and suffocate you as well? It's not the relief by death but the reality of life that I seek to picture for you to hold it as a mirror for man."

"I find your passion infectious and feel your story could be illuminating," I said as his eyes lit up watching his wealth beginning to go up in flames.

"Of what avail is a passionless writing, and the feeling-less reading," he said turning enthusiastic. "Hope your empathy provides the cutting edge to my memoir. Well to give the devil its due, what warmth money used to provide me! But in the hindsight don't I see the falsity of it all; why it was the warmth in the company of the inanimate. Wonder how I had endured it all myself being passionate about love! More so, what a paradox it was as it was love that motivated me to covet money? Is love a false notion then? Isn't love a mental affliction to which sex affords physical gratification without which it becomes a by-gone emotion? But does sex fare any better in fruition? No denying possession tends to dampen passion but won't sex beget love in cohabitation and so while love owes to sex in the beginning, it is the love that serves sex in the long run, and that's the grammar of the sexual relations."

"In the biological tense," I said. "What with one's waning ability to attract a new mate what else can one do than to stick to the spouse for sex? Why make a virtue of a necessity?"

"There you are, but nothing in life is black and white as money too imparts its own hues," he said. "If the rein of passion is on the groin, the lure of money sways the head, and the craze to possess it matches the urge to retain it."

"Why not dole out your moolah instead of destroying it?"

"Not that I haven't thought about it," he said. "It makes news for a day but leaves no lasting message."

"What better message than philanthropy?"

"Man might be rich without wealth and could be poor in spite of it," he said continuing to throw the piles of notes into the fireplace. "It's not the needs of the poor that I want to address but it is man's craze for riches that I wish to dispel. The story behind my insane destruction of my mindless acquisition might picture the character of money in all its ugliness. Don't you see what a sight it makes, the burning money! How its flames seem to clear my view of life from the smokescreen of wealth! Why did I allow my life to be ruined by money and its minions? What else are pride, greed and such but money's minions? If I let the money go, won't it take its minions along with it? By shedding the blinkers of the moolah, won't I be able to pull my life out of the glaring shadow of wealth? It's so long ago but what a life I lived!"

"I'm all eager for its recap."

"I deem it a favor for I need to pour out now," he said. "But should you find it boring, say so by yawning."

"How can the lessons of life ever sound dull that too of one who lived it and suffered through it?" I said having been affected by what I had seen and heard by then.

"If youth is the cream of life childhood is the cake of it," he began rewinding the reel of his life. "But where were the birthday bashes with cakes and all in those days. Still, childhood was no poorer in our times either. What did my son Satish gain out of all that gaiety I afforded him as a child? Won't the kids either sleep or weep as parents grandstand at their birthday bashes? With more money in more hands and fewer children in the parental laps, even the toddlers' cradle ceremonies are being hosted in the five-star settings. What it is but to announce the couples' arrival on the grand social stage. How money aids vanity, which in turn sustains variety. But then sans variety, won't be life ever boring? What a pity, it is man's lot to take his pick, the vanity of imbalance or the boredom of balance. But as life spares the child its choices, the parents seem to impose their ways on the kids. Well what a childhood I have had!"

"But of late the parents are tending to deprive the children of their childhood by mindless discipline or by over indulgence?"

"Sadly so for freedom to act and express is the essence of childhood," he said throwing more of his money into the fireplace. "Nowadays, while some mold their kids in the crucibles of manners to showcase them as 'gentlemen prodigies', most of the rest just give in to every whim and fancy of their kids so as to exhibit them as brilliant models of 'unbridled originality'. What with the world is in the materialistic fetters, love has come to acquire monitory color, and the parents too have come to believe that by pampering children with what money can buy, they are showering the kids with parental love. Haven't you heard them say that they didn't have all those goodies when they were kids, jolly well forgetting that they had childhood for company as they grew up?"

"Sadly for the stupidity of man the kids pay the price of their childhood."

"If the childhood curiosity is the foundation of life, its façade is designed by the youthful exuberance, but sadly as man, he lets his vanity to transform the edifice into an abode of woes," he continued. "I think it's in the village soil that the childhood can be soundly grounded as villages are nearer to nature while the child is a stranger to vanity. But as I left the village at ten into a small town, it was as if I part-distanced myself from nature, and entering adulthood in a big town, I lost the innocence of childhood. Worse still was being wealthy in the middle of my life; why, the later-day success induces man to uproot himself from his past reality and to implant himself in

the make-believe terrain of the surreal. How small doth the sense of outgrowing make man really? Yet, the world is crazy to make it big, larger than life itself. It seems that man tends to downsize the things past to make his current holdings seem bigger. What a fallacy! The beauty of life lies in its fulsomeness, well to illustrate it in a weird way, aren't the skinny things on the ramp an apology to womanliness. And pitiable still are the filthy rich on the corrupt stage of life. What a pity that life robs the rich of its beauty, and what's worse, entices them with its ugliness."

"As one's sense of being can't be stagnant, maybe, man thinks in terms of outgrowing others."

"That is by chanting the 'dream big' mantra, never mind one's lack of abilities for the fulfillment of those dreams, baneful any way," he said, as much of what he had was burnt by then. "But stepping out of my illusion now, as I enter into the realms of reality, don't I see the need for money to see me through the rest of my life. What a paradox that my money turned into ashes should provide a new monetary vision to me! How much money would you take along on a holiday or an errand? Would any carry a suitcase of currency that he wouldn't ever open during the trip and how many make it back with the wallet still bulging. Why not apply the same analogy to life given that it's no more than a sojourn? How nice it feels that I'm left with just enough to start life afresh. Or is it a little too much even for the proverbial rainy day? How my obsession for wealth blinded my vision of happiness, or was it insecurity. Wonder even the moneyed feel insecure on the monetary front! Won't that prove financial insecurity is not an index of the bank balance but is the proclivity of one's mind? Can't I see that it's the small things that make the big picture of life? Whatever, having shed the overburden of wealth, how light do I feel!"

"You should be wary in your situation for the lightness of being could as well suck you into the vortex of regret," I said in spite of myself.

"Thanks for cautioning me," he said sounding formal in his state of ecstasy. "Don't I see the memories of yore surfacing as if out of the wraps? I don't know really where to begin and how to end as my mind is being swarmed with so many episodes."

"Well, you've to begin somewhere and it has got to end sometime," I said prompting him, "Why not pick up the threads from the roots of your life."

Chapter 3

Cradle of Life

While I was still in the cradle life had signaled that it wouldn't be a case of the run-of-the-mill for me," he began delving into his extraordinary life. "You know that kids don't mind the change of guard at their cradle as long as it was kept rocking. But I was insistent that the one who began should hold on to it till I slept off. I was not even two then and I've a vague memory of it. That's not all, in those days, women invariably used to wear silk saris while performing their daily *puja* only to change into cotton saris after it was over, and were I to be hungry during her *puja* time, I was insistent that my mother breastfed me in her auspicious attire without changing into her mundane dress, well I've her word for that. The first time my parents took me to the movies is so vivid in my memory. As I was drawn to the heroine, holding sleep at bay, I glued my eyes on her whenever she appeared in a scene. When she failed to grace the silver screen for long to engage my eyes, I sank into my mother's lap that was after instructing her to wake me up as and when she reappeared. Well, my mother ignored my diktat, and when I woke up on my own, I saw her on the screen. What a fuss I

made that my mother let me miss her earlier appearances! All my mom's assurances that the heroine had reappeared only then and that she was about to wake me up didn't cut ice with me. I was not even five then."

"How remarkable it was all that is apart from your photographic memory!"

"Without a solid memory to back it, wherefrom would a sound memoir emerge?" he said with a glint in his eyes. "Maybe we tend to have a grasp of the sensuality of the opposite sex well before we develop a sense of our own sexuality, and it was a teenage girl's enamored look that ushered me into the turbulence of adolescence. That day, as I was crossing a house in a side-road, it is still vivid in my eyes, as though on cue I turned my head, (he had turned his head sideways as if he was reliving that moment) and found a teenaged beauty with her eyes lost for me. Oh as the fuse of her gaze lighted the bulb of my sexuality, the sensations I had experienced then are beyond my ability to picture in words for you. Though the nascent beats of my infatuated heart made me loiter around her place ever after, I could not see her again. But the memory of the manifestations of the sexual attraction I induced in her never waned, and so, I came to regard that house as a shrine of my life. Maybe, she was a visitor at the house who might have come to wake me up sexually and not to fulfill my life in her possession. Whatever it was, are not small pleasures the lasting ecstasies of life?"

"I'm getting a feeling that your life may not be just sound and fury and certainly not a twice told tale."

"Coming to storytelling," he said, "there is none to better my grandmother at that. It's true, all grannies of yore were storytellers of note, and what cradles of tales they made to stir the curiosity in children! But now, which child has a grandma for company and which mother is fit to play that role when it's her turn? Whenever I said that she was repeating herself, my grandma used to challenge me to recap it; that I remember every tale she told me has as much to do with her narrative ability as my uncanny memory. You know, I didn't read any of our epics in the later days, and yet, I'm a sort of mini authority on those. But the icing on my childhood cake was the absence of school regimen till I was nine. You can gauge my fortune if only you contrast it with the kids these days who are bundled out to nursery schools with donkey loads of books that they could hardly grasp. How sad, times have robbed childhood from kids in other ways too."

"Oh, how I wish I grew up in your times," I said. "Though I'm half your age, still I didn't have a quarter of your leeway when it came to going to school. I was packed off to a nursery school before I could unzip my knickers. Maybe, the rural-urban divide persists in some ways even these days."

"How mirthful that childhood period was though we didn't have a tenth of the exposure the kids these days have to the ways of world," he said with a glow in his visage. "But it was different with girls even in our days, why they tend to get exposed to their sexuality well before boys can grasp a thing about their thing. Wonder how they used to conceive those man-wife and doctor-patient games. Once, when a girl had chosen me as her doctor, and as others wrapped us up in a makeshift tent, she exposed her private parts for my physical examination and it was then that I realized that she was made differently over there. Thanks to the movies and the media, now all know all there is to know about sex, but it was only when I was fifteen or so that I got an idea of it from a married woman. Later with her sister, I had a mini affair; oh how we were always at necking and petting though I didn't press further for fear of making her pregnant. Whoever knew about condom those days and by the time I

came to know of it, my rival for her affection had penetrated into her life without it. Sadly for me, ignorance was no bliss for once.'

"Won't lost opportunities leave haunting memories?"

"But don't they last ever longer to our hurt," he said with apparent disappointment. "Maybe it's my software of love that could have activated her sexual passions to seek the hardcore gratification with my rival. Or who knows, she might've been a flirt to start with, but for me the fact of inactivity was a lost opportunity; well, the ethos of the times and the sensitivity of my soul together contrived to handicap my youth for I won the hearts of women and yet I failed to gain their final favor. Whatever, how frustrating it was failing to have all those fair things that fancied me. But in these sexy times served by pills, isn't it fun all around what with girls willing to open up other ways too for detours. Who had heard of anal sex those days, and if only I had a scent of it, my story of youth would have been composed in stanzas of fulfillment. Well, I could never cease mulling over those missed chances; especially the loss of her favor even though in the later years I had more than made up for all those misses. Why each woman is unique by herself and every encounter is apart in itself."

"That way, youngsters these days have plenty of ways for their sexual fun. But on the flip side, the premarital sex deprives lovers the joy that is the longing of love."

"But then, you can't have the cake and eat it too," he said. "Whatever every fool of an ass has a girlfriend these days while in our time even the smartest had to rest content with the yearning looks of the enamored dames. Why it's the longing for love that shapes the nature of one's love life and in adulthood it's the childhood anecdotes that serve as antidotes to its vagaries. But the beauty of childhood has an ugly facet to it. How many lament that they were not of the Birla household as their later-day Amabani-like riches fail to offset their sense of childhood deprivation! Let us put it differently, being a Rockefeller is not good enough if you are not a Rockefeller's son as well. It was as if my miserly grandfather chose thrift to catapult my father into the zone, but that didn't help my father's vision to expand the fifteen-acre family holding to make the grade. In a way, my grandfather was a colorless man and none seemed to have missed him in his life or death, not even my grandmother. Being a miser to the core, he was not even superficially warm."

"I for one believe that of all the infirmities of man, miserliness is the most debilitating," I said. "Why, don't we have the true life story of the miserly millionaire woman that made it to the Guinness Book of World Records? You might know that she was in search of a public hospital that too in the U.S to cure her son's ailment in a leg, which sadly for him, led to the amputation of his limb. Oh, what would have been his feelings when in the end; her millions fell into half-a-lap of his? That's why I find the regulations of the state like banning smoking for the so-called public good so meaningless."

"The prohibition and other such symbolize the personal proclivities or much worse the political agendas of the powers that be and no more," he said. "Coming back to my miserly grandfather, he bestowed all his affection upon me and used to maintain that he would bequeath that landholding to me and not to my father. While my father's prudent spending was an anathema to him, I didn't show any inclination to spend a farthing then. I was just a kid anyway, and I found nothing around that induced want in me. But as I grew up, I had realized that there was sex for sale but by then my grandfather was dead and gone. Even then, an inexplicable sentiment delayed my tryst with the sex workers for that long; what layers within the layers and circles within the circles that make life, so seemingly seamless from birth to death?"

Won't that make life intriguing to live, engaging to observe and exciting to recall? Looks like I won't be able to make it linear for you."

"I think it is as it should be for life tends to stray laterally on its linear course."

"Well you seem to have a way with words," he said sounding appreciative, "and that would come in handy in your endeavor to be a writer."

Chapter 4

Outlook for Re-look

"If not ingrained in concern, love is a flippant emotion, which is of no avail to the loved ones," he began proroguing as a prelude to his recall of his life and times. "More than the outer manifestations of love, it is one's inner feelings that further the cause of the loved ones. But we tend to take the spendthrift spouse as a personification of love and the prudence of a caring parent as an indication of its absence. Don't we also see families better off for the premature death of their profligate heads? Yet, wonder how man comes to perceive that without him, his family would be vulnerable in the rough and tough of life! It's nothing but man's vanity, which won't allow him to either live or die in peace."

"How unfair it is for the fair sex that man associates vanity with women."

"But then isn't it a man's world?" he said. "Well, my grandfather for all his love for us lacked the wisdom of care to match it. Maybe impelled by his love to make us richer or goaded by his greed to accumulate wealth, he took to the perilous course of usury, unsuited though for the calling he being a weakling. Lo, he sold all the landholding to raise capital for his high interest lending. While he lived chasing the mirages of usurious returns, after he died, my father was left staring at the principal amount as bad debt. Well, it was like he had pulled the rug that carried the weight of his unsettled family from under my father's feet. Perhaps my father would have better reconciled with his ruin had the old man gambled away the money or womanized with it; maybe that would have been a source of perverted pride for us in our diminished position."

"Deprivation for a cause is a gain by itself while purposeless loss is a double jeopardy of life."

"Anyway, my dad didn't give a damn but tried to be on his own as Lipton's salesman," he continued. "How he lifted our family from the ruins makes a saga of its own; well he was a capable man by any measure. When he was all set to start a loose tea business after his retirement from the service, he was undone by the cancer in his food pipe. What with death staring at him in the face and the terminal pains making life unbearable for him, he wailed not over his fate but that his father spoiled it for his progeny. That the future well-being of his family bothered him more than his impending death moved me no end, and I told him it made no sense worrying over something that he did not bother about all along. Oh, how he suffered those terminal pains?"

His eyes turned moist to start with only to turn into a deluge in due course, which prompted me to offer him my handkerchief.

"These days," he continued regaining control over his emotions, "as I see myself in the mirror, I feel I am very much like him, and so he on his deathbed looked like a replica of his father. Why, there was no seeming resemblance between them until then. Maybe, towards the end, man goes back to his roots in other ways too. Well if

only Satish was born by then, maybe my father's love for his grandson would have enabled him to keep death at bay for that much longer. Why it was his love for me that let my grandfather recover from a paralytic stroke to stand erect all again. When he suffered the stroke, I was away studying engineering in B.I.T, Mesra, and by the time I reached home and rushed to him, he had been in the hospital for a week. As I approached the entrance of that general ward, I met his stare from within, and how his eyes glowed as they espied me! Maybe, the glint in my eyes catalyzed the spark in his eyes, ensuring the miracle, whereby he walked out of the hospital in a week! If the miracles of the Christ were to be true, I think that they owed more to his empathy for man than to his being the Son of God. But then his grandson's perceived depravation might've pained my father no end adding to his misery, and besides of what avail enduring those cancerous pains. Well whenever I think of my grandfather, I recall the nurse who never took off her eyes from me."

"What has life come to as kids grow up without grandma's tales and grandpas live without grandchildren's love?"

"The saving grace of our life was that Satish and his family stayed with us," he said. "Maybe it's the birth that shapes life for fate to guide us into the grave, or is it fate that governs the birth for life to follow the set course, we would never know. Whatever the package of life is such that one has fulfillments to cherish and disappointments to live with that is from the childhood itself. But it's the balance of mind that makes it even for man at every stage of life that is hard to achieve any way. Why as a poor man's child, you have nothing, and as a rich man's brat, you have more than plenty, and either way it's no cradle of balance. Maybe middle-class birth is more conducive for equivalence as it enables one to learn the lessons of life early on for one to have a better perspective of it later on. When I was fourteen, 'Liberty' introduced ready-made apparels in India and my father wanted to buy a pair or two for me, though he himself wore that ill-tailored stuff; why, those days, unlike in the North, the tailoring standards were ever so appalling in the South. But my mother thought it was unwise to habituate me to such costly things not knowing what the future held for me. What a pragmatic approach it was! But as I climbed up the ladder of wealth, I lost sight of all the values of life that she imbibed in us all. By the way, as man has come to barter his liberty for servitude for mundane gains, the hallowed brand, like many old values, had lost its appeal to the crassness of the masses, especially the political class. It's high time that we pay heed to the prophetic words of the American Judge Leonard Hand, who said that "Liberty lives in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it."

"Maybe but sadly nowadays parents expose their kids to riches even before they barely open their eyes."

"I say out of misplaced love?" he said, and continued with his recap. "It was seldom that any visited us, as reaching our village involved crossing the Godavari by boat, the prospect of which scared our relatives from the uplands. As if to let me develop some foresight in our remote village, my father bought me binoculars that summer, oh how thrilling it was seeing the far off things so close-by. It was my wont to go to sleep keeping it by my side, but as I woke up that afternoon, I found a stranger of my age fiddling with it, and like a champion long jumper, I leaped up to the trespasser to lap up my treasure. Caught unawares by the assault, he floored the thing in confusion, and aghast at seeing it broken, I went into frenzy even as he fumbled apologies. Catching him by the hair, I made a punch bag out of his lean frame; and having gathered his wits, he returned the compliment with suitable indignation. Our

fight for nothing brought the elders to intervene to affect a cease-fire and to begin the introductions (he was Raju my third cousin). Seeing me unremitting in my lament, his father promised me a replacement, and gave him a befitting thrashing. As I ceased crying at that prospect, he bemoaned in humiliation. But when my father admonished his father and took him into his fold, feeling soothed, he extended his hand to me. Like my father and his cousin before us, we too became great chums, well that was before my false sense of outgrowing made me snub him later on in life. Oh, how callous I became even towards his death."

With his eyes welled up, he paused as though he was observing silence in the memory of the lost one.

Chapter 5 ***Humbling Reality***

"Relatives are a bother any day, more so when they die. Oh how the goddamn sentiment robs man the freedom to abstain from the obsequies," he began having wiped the tears that continued to roll down his cheeks in torrents. "That's how I viewed Raju's death getting into my car, that sultry afternoon. (He paused for a while as if in repentance). What an untimely death it was for him; well, as if there is an agreeable time for it, saving the ripe old age. Once into the thick of life, how we got estranged; did I shun him or did he avoid me, maybe, as I shunned him, he avoided me. It's as if the flood of time contours the banks of life in inscrutable ways. If not for my mother's insistence and Rathi's pestering there was no way I would have bothered to make that condolence trip. Well Rathi had been my wife before Ruma took over her place; and what a fine woman she was."

"Maybe man as a creature is callous at the core."

"Could be," he continued after pausing for a while as if he was ashamed of his then attitude. "Entering the house, I was shocked at seeing Devi as the widow; why she had earlier declined to marry me though I was mad of her. When she introduced her teenage children, I realized how much water had flowed down the bridge that separated Raju and me. When their family friends said that he had shaped up his children admirably, I could sense my own failing on that score. They all said in one voice that he had seen life as a source of fulfillment and an opportunity for enlightenment and the prospect of death never bothered him for he felt that it was but a challenge to the survivors. Well he was wont to say it seems that life sees to it that they address its altered realities rather admirably. Won't the feeling of deprivation give way to the ray of hope in due course? That's how time becomes the great healer, blunting the sorrows of life on the anvil of habit."

"The one who snubbed you came to value the man you shunned, how interesting!"

"Why that made me realize what I lost by keeping away from him," he continued. "As if to stress upon my loss, another said that the beauty of his life was such that he made a huge difference to the lives of others. It was an article of faith with him that service to humanity lies in inculcating self-belief in people. Were Raju to be a celebrity, added another admirer, his biography would've been a Bible for humanity. Moved myself, when I told Devi how sad it was to have lost a soul like that, she said that she was fortunate to be his wife for so long, and would've still felt fulfilled all her life even if their association was far too shorter. What was more, she said that he had given her enough guidance to go about life that she was confident of seeing it through on her own. You may know that she had rejected my hand saying that she could sense that I might get swayed away by women instead of guiding them."

"But then is it true?"

"Before I come to that," he said, "let's see what's this sense of outgrowing is all about. Is it not a false perception of being better placed in life than those we had grown up with? It's as if they are not worth our thought, and should they come across, we would only condescend to descend while dealing with them. Maybe, the inability to jell for the lack of intellectual parity is still understandable, but then, how many strive to grow intellectually any way? Whatever, it was my perceived outgrowing that kept me aloof from Raju when I needed him the most. Had I not shunned him, maybe, he would have probably helped me steer clear of the perilous path that led me to my doom. Don't I see now that by cold-shouldering him, I lost my way in life?"

"I see it differently though," I said. "Your mistake was that you removed yourself from the reality of life. Even if you continued to value his friendship, still you would have dismissed his approach to life as an apology for failure. Maybe there was no way you could have emulated him given your state of mind then."

"Probably true," he continued after a little contemplation, "but still his association could have made some difference to my life if not my way of thinking. Well that's all about ifs and buts of life. Why, it would have been the end of me as a six-year old, had not life preserved me to see more of it. It was one of those auspicious days, and my auntie took me along with her to the temple on the banks of the village tank. Wanting me to stay put at the bathing *ghat*, she herself got into the waters for a bath, but as I followed her on the sly, I was nearly drowned. She thanked god for having kept me alive and thus averting a life-long guilt for her, but I believe that it was my destiny that ensured that I escaped. Maybe, it didn't want to end it so soon without allowing me to enjoy the fruits of love and suffer the pains of loss. It's as if my life has an inextricable link with death, didn't Rajan's end in that road mishap along with my wife pave the way for me to taste the joys of his wife."

"But there was that talk of the 'accident of accommodation'."

"It's the malady of man to see the sinister in all," he said apparently hurt. "Why not give some credit to my grey matter if not to my soul matter? Which fool would think of stage-managing the head-on crash of a vehicle in which he was a co-traveler? What motives can one's malice attribute to me for the recent accident, which besides robbing me off my leg wiped out my entire family?"

"I'm sorry for hurting you with my thoughtless remark."

"Don't worry about that," he said after a pause. "Why, you've only lent your voice to the rumor that's thick in the air. Well to satisfy your curiosity about whether or not I get swayed away by women, you may know that it was my weakness for Ruma that imbalanced my life. When we first met, she was somebody's wife and Rathi was my one-year old spouse, so the seven-year itch was nowhere near. Though I was mad about Rathi, still I had a roving eye to which, thankfully, she paid a blind eye, and that evening I was bowled by Ruma at the *sabzi mandi*. Oh! Ruma had a face to pull and the figure to hold, why, as a beauty she could be a rarity, pleasant to espy and gripping while ogling. Having seen me drawing Rathi's attention to her, Ruma took the initiative to interact with us, and had they not taken to each other readily, well; my passion for the stranger would have taken the path of dissipation. If not for Rathi's premature death, maybe, there might not have been a tale worth telling, surely, her steadying influence on my life would have ensured its smooth sailing in the vortex of time. What a made-for-each-other couple we made! And to be fair to Ruma, it was she who made life exciting for me in so many ways."

"Don't they say that men and women make unique combinations in different permutations?"

"That's the way it is," he continued. "When Rathi invited Ruma for dinner, the very next day she brought some fine Spanish wine along with her, to cut the ice, so she said. She told us that she crossed the caste barriers with Rajan to marry for love; however, stuck up with the old values, their families tried their best to bust their union and so they left for Oman, where he made a name for himself as a civil engineer. When they felt financially secure, as homesickness began to unsettle them on the foreign shores, they made up their minds to windup their show there. So she came ahead of Rajan to put things in order here before he packed up there to join her. What a time we had that evening! I couldn't hide my fascination for Ruma, and she never ceased being coy at my compliments, which prompted Rathi to say that she found our flirting rather thrilling. When Ruma blushed to the roots, Rathi hugged her like an elder sister, and as it occurred to us that it was time to call it a day; we realized that it was too late for Ruma to return home. So as Ruma stayed back for the night, having made her feel at home in the guest room, Rathi teased me no end that I had lost my eyes to the guest. When I said in jest why not I plan a perfect murder for her widowhood to make her my other woman, Rathi said in half-jest that she would join Rajan above for a heavenly time. Won't that leave Ruma and me to have a raging time on earth? How I were to know that my jest and her half-jest were prompted by our fate!" "Call it superstition if you please but they say *tadhaastu devatalu* hover around to vet our ill-utterances." What with the recollections of that love tragedy haunting him, he turned morose for long.

Chapter 6 ***Orgies of Love***

"When Rajan joined Ruma, so to say, we became an extended family," he continued his narrative. "I admired his sense of humor and he my sense of purpose. I always tried to excel at work though my fate laid my career low, and so I became adept at all that I dabbled with. If not, instead of becoming a project consultant, at best I would have been a frustrated worker, or at worst, booted out for being sluggish. I realized that in life, as in Derby, the colt that bolts last need not be the last one at the finish. When Rajan wanted to venture into the real-estate business, he wanted me to become his partner, but by then, I had seen how greed sets to break up such ventures; started in bonhomie to share, once it breaks even, sharing becomes a snare for the better placed partner. Why it's only time before he eases out the other, and pushed into the doghouse what else the loser can do than to cry foul. But then the fact of life is that the winner takes it all."

"Maybe but one cannot really prosper alone in the long run."

"Call it selfish wisdom, but man is seldom wisely selfish," he said managing a chuckle. "Once my father told me that he was ditched by his business partner, I don't know why, for I didn't seek the details from him; maybe I should have. So, I preferred to be Rajan's employee but he offered me a share in the profits as a bonus for my services. Thus was born 'Rajan Builders' that majored into 'Imperial Infrastructures' later on. With both the women putting their heart and soul into it, how exciting were those budding days; operating from Rajan's office-cum-residence, we stuck together, be it for work or for recreation, well; it was only in the act of procreation that we went our separate ways. Matching with her man's business concepts that began to bear fruits, nature enabled Ruma to conceive, which thrilled Rathi no end; it was as if she

felt that she herself was carrying. When I wanted Rathi to consult a gynecologist, she said naughtily that she was sure that sooner than later we would make it happen. When Ruma delivered a girl child how delighted we all were, and as Rathi missed her periods, coinciding with the little girl's false steps, we were thrilled no end. Ruma hoped that it would be a boy in the offing, and said in jest that had she not jumped the gun with a girl, maybe we would have the pleasure of espying the lovers in the making."

"Wonder how could you have managed to hide your enamored eye for Ruma from her man's vision from such a close range?"

"Well I never ceased coveting her and if anything my passion to possess her only grew with each passing moment but then as I developed friendly feelings towards Rajan, I was thrown into a dilemma of dharma. So I kept desisting from my urge to seduce her wondering all the while if I were destined to have her at all. Oh, what a sweet anticipation it was."

"It reminds me of Sathyam's words in *Benign Flame*, 'my dear fellow, money and looks are okay to an extent to lure women, but better realize that it's the luck that enables one to lay them. Why, you can't even screw a whore if you're not destined to have her; your visit to the brothel would have coincided with her periods, and the next time you're eager, she could have shifted out of the town itself'."

"How true it is given my insatiate passions," he said as his demeanor acquired a disappointed look. "Well, as Rathi was in the family way, Ruma proposed a trip to Ooty for all of us; she wanted us to relive our honeymoon with them as witnesses. I told her that she should have known that her friend made our marriage an unceasing honeymoon, and she said that it was plain greedy for in the relay race that is married love, Rathi should have passed on the baton of bliss to the newlyweds, who followed us in the tracks of love. Maybe for that foul, fate had contrived to pull out Rathi from the course of love with a head-on crash, which ripped the right side of the Fiat apart that was as we were returning from Ooty. While Rajan was at the wheel, Rathi, with his girl in her lap, was in the back seat right behind him, and as if to make her jest come true, fate had taken them together for a heavenly time leaving Ruma and me to continue our mundane sojourn."

"Won't her lighthearted remark about your raging time with Ruma make the tragedy all the more poignant?"

"Maybe it was a prophetic jest at its prognostic best to portend the worst for me," he said. "Whatever, I felt that even as Rajan's soul deserved the rituals of death, Ruma too needed the solace of her family but all had ignored my invite. Now I wonder why it does not occur to any that life is too short for one to waste it nursing grudges even against those who might have slighted us. However, Raju had prevailed upon my family to retain a hesitant Ruma to be a part of it all, and as he stood by me, I went through the motions for the salvation of the departed. But after the obsequies, as Ruma had shifted to her place and Raju and the others too had left, fending for myself in the voidness of bereavement, I had realized that women are more complete in themselves than men."

"Maybe their completeness is manifested in their biology itself."

"Could be," he said and continued, "and as if Ruma learned about my predicament telepathically, she came back to my place to light the stove the next morning before sunrise that is. Well in the privacy of our tragedy, we began to console each other as we only could, but finding our outpourings were unequal to our feelings, we came to

cling on to each other to let our mutual empathy seep through our skins. What with that physical proximity in our emotional upsurge infusing a sense of oneness in us, we insensibly felt closer to each other and, maybe, moved by the effusion of affection our minds nurtured for each other, our hearts goaded us to unite our bodies for our mutual solace. So, we came to 'live-in' so soon after losing our spouses."

"That's why it's said that fact is stranger than fiction."

"Why not," he said. "Fiction is but the product of an author's imagination about the possibilities of life, but the course of life is shaped by human proclivities that are beyond anyone's grasp. In her emotional upsurge in our coition, Ruma told me that she always felt attracted to me in spite of herself, and how hard it had been for her to restrain her desire for me to retain her chastity. When I confessed about my own weakness for her, she told me that she could nuance it from my awkwardness in her presence; and about her gripping sex appeal on me, she said coyly that she had a full measure of it in her fantasies. I told her that I had even conceived a perfect murder to make her mine that was before I became friendly with Rajan, and she saw the hand of our love in the *coupe d'etat* of life. While the ecstasy of sex kept our sadness at bay, we clung to one another to be solaced by each other, oh, what an unceasing sexual indulgence it was, nursed by my craze for her body and fuelled by her craving for my lovemaking. Oh, how during our live-in, we became oblivious of everything other than our post-mourning wedding, and in an ironic symbolism of mourning, she handed over Rajan Builders to me as dowry-in-advance."

"It reminds me of Sugreeva's mourning-period orgies with Ruma, his brother Vali's widow in the *Ramayana*? What a coincidence that your mate is a namesake of that woman, and you, like him, sidelined your obligations in the pursuit of carnal pleasures."

"Your analogy is appropriate but you got the name wrong. Sugreeva's wife was Ruma and Vali's widow was Tara."

"Maybe losing our cultural moorings is a side-effect of the westernization of our education,"

"You lose something to gain some other thing don't you?" he said. "But the poetic imagination in the epics is hard to find even in the fictional aspects of the best of novels; maybe the social restraints of our times wrap up novelistic ideas in our cultural folds. When we thought that it was time to get married for form's sake, we broke the news. While her folk felt it was redeeming for her as we happened to be of the same caste, my people had no hesitation in blessing our union for the same reason; seems caste rules our heads and hearts alike. Our well-attended wedding gave her a sense of spiritual union that our liaison failed to afford her, and again, it was Raju who took charge of the arrangements though I failed to attend his marriage that Rathi had insisted we should."

"If I got it right, you made it seem that she had a great influence on you."

"I'm glad you are observant and that portends well for my memoir," he said in some excitement. "You may know that in any relationship, it is the stronger willed that calls the shots. Won't in some ways it explains why some men are henpecked, well, some women too are cock-pecked, a rarer phenomenon at any rate. Whatever, how marriage gives a new dimension to man woman cohabitation; I felt a new sense of belonging for the woman whom I made my own for so long by then. Maybe for want of the cultural connect of marriage our live-in was bereft of a sense of spiritual union, which deprived us of the true sense of belonging in lovemaking without our knowing

it. However, as we made conjugal love in our nuptial bed, from her spasms I could sense that she had experienced a rare kind of orgasm. Why, as I divined her visage in her ecstasy, her spiritual beauty that I espied gave me a premonition of her conception, that of a son. Never before or after that, with her or another, was it a like feeling."

"Don't they say one is happiest in the newest love?"

"No denying that but I loved to retain Rathi's affectionate memories even as I was obsessed at not losing Ruma's passionate love, and that should give you a measure of my weakness for Ruma, and the hold she came to have on my life."

"You loved both of them and it's no dichotomy. Why, a man can love more than one woman at the same time, and it's no less a psychological possibility with women either."

"Is it not against the 'one life one love' poetic grain but life as you know is more prosaic than poetic," he said. "That day, as I returned home chastened from Raju's place, I could clearly discern the falsity of my life! Who outgrew whom, after all? What were the yardsticks by the way, if not material possessions then it must be mundane positions; but could they be life's quality indices in any way? Why without them, didn't Raju outgrow all? More so, he helped others to grow as well, though on a different plane. It was as if we were dwelling on two different planets, he, on the artistic, and I, on the counterfeit. How self-limiting are all the worldly attributes; can one grow, leave alone outgrow, with a narrow vision. Oh, the naivety of my vanity! Damn my inability to see beyond the self-built façade of opacity. Even now I couldn't help but wonder what my life would've been like had Rathi not left me mid-course. It was as if such a thought process, after crossing the Rubicon would be inimical, the exigencies of office then put me on the beaten track of life. And that's life."

Chapter 7

Pangs of Remorse

"Every life is unique but rarely one is exceptional," he continued after a long pause as if he was reminiscing about his own life, "and mine was rather unusual; oh, I had my first brush with intrigue when I was in class seven, then aged ten. Chandu and I were classmates besides being neighbors for our families were co-tenants. All children in our neighborhood used to flock to his place to play caroms on holidays and his mother was wont to serve us some snack or the other. Well I used to avoid those for they were invariably prepared with garlic that I had always found repugnant."

"Isn't it said that one either loves garlic or hates it?"

"There was a king in the Roman era who hated garlic so much so that he had banned it in his land. He could as well be the progenitor of our present-day rulers who ban smoking in all and sundry areas dubbed public places," he said. "Can you imagine us smoking in the cinema halls in our youth, why, the norm in those days was 'smoking is no disrespect', and now the coinage is 'desist passive smoking', my foot, as if the air we breathe is pristine pure. That the addicts no longer smoke in the railway coaches is because of the changed social mores and not owing to a newfound urge to obey the railway rules. Oh, how the poor smokers quarantine themselves in the toilets for a puff or two while the police on scent wait on the sly to harass them for bribe. Before I gave up smoking, what a pain it was in the smokeless pangs on the flights and in the trains alike."

"The fate of a nation is the plight of its politics and the petty politician is the bane of the polity."

"Beautifully put, for the fate of the peoples is governed by the whims of the powerful," he said, and resumed the saga of his childhood. "One Sunday afternoon, as was her wont, Chandu's mother served us all with some *pakodas*, and Shankar, younger brother of my friend Murali, wanted more of them. I felt that it was inappropriate and said so to him; looking back, it was an unsolicited advice, all childish, but then a child would only think like a child."

"Don't we see even the grown-ups rendering unsolicited advice till the end, and more so towards their end? Maybe fate maps the course of life through an intellectual short-route from the cradle to the grave."

"How do you like the Aviva ads of Rahul Dravid receiving cricketing advice from all and sundry," he said heartily. "Well with his captaincy gone, the ads were withdrawn and that's the way with the frills of life with which we tend to shroud its ethical core. But now, shorn of my aura, I see my life in the glaring shadow of its falsehood, and what I see but the derivatives of life within its voidness."

"Won't that better the Shakespearean 'sound and fury, signifying nothing'?"

"It's only proper that we remain humble before the master, who as Alexandre Dumas said, 'after God, he had created the most," he paused as if in reverence to his idol before he continued. "Back to my story, that very night, Chandu called me out and asked me to taste some garlic-less preparation that his mother made for me. As I had my dinner by then, I excused myself, but he virtually forced me to have a bite at least, and even before I had a spoonful of it, Murali and Shankar came out from their hiding to accuse me of double standards. While I protested that there was no parallel, a perplexed Chandu apologized that he was tricked into the act by them; the brothers had induced him to offer me their home-made stuff as if it was prepared by his mother. Well it was the first and the last time that I ever gave an unsolicited advice."

"What cussedness even in childhood?"

"What's so surprising about it; won't the plant of a kind grow into a tree of that kind," he said. "Any way, during the month of *karthik*, our family was privileged to cater to the sky-lamp of Brahmeswara temple of our village; and at dusk, it was my wont to carry from home the needed sesame oil there. How fascinating it was watching the pulley and rope in motion as the *pujari* pulled it down from atop the mast and put the lighted one back in its post. Once, lost in some sport, I didn't reach home in time, so my grandfather had substituted for me and what hell I raised for having been denied my due and how they tried to convince me that there was no way they could've waited for me as the lamp had to be lit up in time? But I had none of that, and insisted that the procedure be repeated, and as I stuck to my guns, my grandfather had to prevail upon the *pujari* to set a new precedent. I was still a kid when this happened."

"Don't worry I am not going to give a superstitious twist to that childhood sacrilege for your latter-day travails."

"It's sad that man has not benefited from the Shakespearean wisdom that superstition is the religion of the weak minds," he said. "Shortly after that episode of an ill-fated advice, I found myself in a much more awkward situation. I was friendly with a neighborhood girl who happened to be my classmate as well. I used to go to her place for the so-called combined studies, but that day, as I returned home, she came running after me to check up if I took her fountain pen, and I let her search my

rack and she left finding none, only to return saying that her parents weren't convinced about that. And it was no Mont Blanc either, for it was a cheap Chinese 'Hero', whatever, is there a kid now, who experiences the joys of refilling a fountain pen. It's another story that when my father-in-law presented me a Mont Blanc, Rathi bugged it fiddling with its complex refilling mechanism. Well I went with that girl to her house to clear my name, and asserting my innocence, I goaded them to search for it in their own place. Oh, how fervently I prayed to Lord Chandramouli to help me locate it, and lo I found it, of all the places, beneath a jar of pickles? Maybe for that childhood devotion during the *karthik* to Him, notwithstanding the sacrilege as you put it that God had saved me from the ignominy through that miracle of miracles. How ecstatically I ran to the temple for thanksgiving.'

"Instead of running to the God had you been right up your street, maybe you would have ended up being a godman."

"Why given the credulity of man, one can't rule out the possibility," he said. "But when I prayed for god's help then, I was blissfully unaware that Brahmeswara of our village and the Chandramouliswara of that town were different deities at all. But when I realized that it's the faith that makes man blind, I began to distance myself from the religion itself; why when one begins to believe that his religion is the best of all, I see the worst of ignorance in man.'

"Some time in future, when science would have scanned the entire universe only to find that there is no abode of the God, much less heaven and hell, maybe then, man might turn his back on his religion."

"I doubt still, for man might believe that God keeps himself away from the intruding man," he said wryly before getting back to his recap, "The obduracy in a child could be the perseverance in its nascence or who knows pigheadedness in the making. Once, a relative, who was a school teacher, came to our place, and as is the wont of those in the teaching line, he tried to gauge my depth in depth. How his verdict that besides native intelligence I was blessed with innate logical abilities gladdened my grandfather I still recall; well I was not even school going then. It was another thing that the distractions of youth ruined my potential to excel at studies, and by the time I had that low-grade engineering degree on hand, my grandfather was no more. But the pain my poor scores caused my father hurts me still; oh how his tone conveyed his agony as he said, 'so with these marks you expect a job'. After all, he had endured so much hardship to make me an engineer as by then my grandfather had turned our lands into promissory notes without any noteworthy promise to note. But later, when my brother passed out with distinction, I felt lighter, and thanked him for reengineering our father's dreams. But still, as his words haunt me, I could never forgive myself for having let him down so badly. How I used to feel that if only I could go back in time and come out with flying colors! It could be this subconscious guilt that was behind that dream that too in my early fifties in which I was at the B.I.T all again. As if to prove that dreams don't reflect the realities of life, how confused I looked in my Alma Mater in that familiar dream setting. Maybe, it was this psyche of failure that subconsciously fuelled my later-day urge for success."

"Luckily for you, your guilt didn't bog you down."

"All the same, the glow of youth failed to illuminate the perilous path of my adult life," he said ruefully. "You know, my life began in the dimness of the kerosene lamp by which I lived the first ten years of it till my father's love for me gave him the vision of my education in a town. I can say with hindsight that it was the kerosene lamp that illuminated my path to adulthood, whose fluorescent bulb had cast a shadow on the

way to my manhood when I began lusting for wealth to my hurt. Well that was after the quirk of fate had placed the wheel of fortune in my hands as till then I craved for love to the neglect of my studies and at the cost of my career. While the ennobling love of my youth seemed a hackneyed expression not backed by money, all my mid-life wealth was of no avail for its fulfillment as by then lusting for sex, I lost the capacity to love. Maybe the singular focus on one aspect of life makes man lose sight of the other possibilities of it to his detriment."

"It's the human frailties that make a saga of life and but for them your story would have been a mere statistic of success."

"Why you make me think all again," he said and closed his eyes as if to shut out any present influences from interfering with his contemplation.

Chapter 8

Villainy of Innocence

"Wonder how social mores affect the course of life," he had resumed his discourse at length "Won't the American way of life that lets the teens to be on their own serve as an example? While the economy is structured for their economic independence, the society is not shaped to cope up with their youthful distractions that hamper their academic progress. That's why the U.S has been perennially short of professionals and so looks eastwards to make up for the shortfall; but what if Parkinson's theory about the alternate ascendancy of the East and the West comes true? What charms the sheen-less new world could hold then to the youth of the old world for their immigration? Maybe then as a Confucius and an Aryabhata gave way to a Socrates and a Plato in times of yore, the Newtons and the Edisons of our times might give way to some Mengs and Mathurs in the eras to come. But for that to happen, maybe it's an idea that we have a five year teenage study break for the adolescents to grapple with their youth before they could pursue their studies without distraction, and I can tell you, then the toppers would not be the bookworms. But on the flip side, the U.S practice frees parents from the burden of their children's upbringing allowing them in time to wine and dine; but the Asian penchant for supporting their progeny to the hilt puts paid to the recreational activities of the parents. A via media like requiring the children to work part-time to part-finance their higher studies may be an ideal model for the world at large but man either remains slavish to his habitual ways or disowns them altogether; seldom has he updated them in tune with the changing times."

"Why didn't the hippies of the last sixties give a jolt the cultures of the time?"

"Cultures my foot," he scowled. "At their core all cultures are cultureless and our age-old one bear witness to it. If someone were to breathe his last at home, it's deemed inauspicious to live in there, at least for a year; and what was the norm to avert such a thing from ever happening? The dying was laid by the roadside for him to seek his salvation unmindful of the humiliation, and if the sick were to show signs of recovery, they were taken in only to be dragged out at the slightest hint of a relapse. What can be worse for any to be abandoned by the very family by which he or she might have sworn all life; but the dying were unmindful of the ill-treatment for they were conditioned by the culture into believing it was better that way for their loved ones. Well, it's the altered lifestyle that forced us to abandon that abominable practice but still wasn't Goebbels justified in saying that he would reach for the gun whenever he heard the word culture."

"Whatever, all tend to swear by their respective cultures."

"The notion that culture was shaped by the wisdom of yore is rooted in the cerebral puniness of the day," he said. "It's this self diminution of the men of our clan that proved to be a double jeopardy for the widows for so long; were a woman to lose her man, won't she be needing succor from her kith and kin; but our custom used to quarantine her for full three days, and what's worse, subjected her to many a humiliating ritual thereafter. Well, as I was away when my grandfathers died, I was not aware of what my grandmothers had endured, and so I had no idea of what was in the offing for my mother when my father died; and being unprepared, I failed to prevent all those travails forced upon her in the name of our tradition. Oh, how I wish I had put my foot down on all that humiliating crap, and why this gloating over cultures that are connotations of insensitivities."

"That they've stopped tonsuring widows; won't it show the change in attitudes?"

"That is owing to the vanity of the children, more so sons, than out of any concern for the woman," he said. "Which son would like to flaunt his tonsured mother to his embarrassment; well only when it hurts men collectively that they turn against the self-embarrassing customs. But why anyone should bother about, say, the farce of a *sakunam* as it is inimical to only a few, who are supposed to bring bad omens. There was a guy in our village considered a bad *sakunam* by one and all, and setting out on an errand, all used to pray that the fellow shouldn't cross their paths. If only they happened to come across him, its mission abandoned for the day that is not before venting their ire on the hapless chap with abuses galore. Where in all this was the thought of the hurt to his self-worth; the problem with the half-wits is that they validate from small samples; well, any writing on the absurdities in cultures would make a couple of volumes or more for each of them, and yet all lament about our cultural decline. Is there any custom that is even remotely rational in its conception; it's the small minds that lay great store on these for they can't think out of the box into which their upbringing pushes them."

"But then counter-cultures fared no better and more over won't a culture-less society bring in anarchy?"

"It's a case of switching over from one defective gear to another," he said. "Why life is bound to be imperfect in any conceivable social arrangement but the peril lies in abandoning what is natural to the upbringing. It's sad to see urban parents putting the fear of a cat or a mouse into their kids' impressionable heads in our land named after Bharat, who as toddler, touted to have tamed lions in their dens. But in our days there was no escaping from scorpions, so children were taught how to handle them; and caught by us unawares, even as they tried to escape, we used to shout *kodi, kodi* and wonder why they stayed put at that. Well, the rest was child's play with a *chappal* found nearby; but then, whoever escaped a scorpion sting or two in any village, one fell straight on my thigh from the high ceiling when I was fast asleep, and what a hell it was with my fingers swollen like cucumbers. But how many of them I had battered to death later I lost count, and there is no way I can comprehend if it was out of vengeance. Whatever, it's also a common knowledge to the village kids that leeches were better dealt with by salt water; how we used to play with their lives with fistfuls of salt smuggled out of the kitchens; wonder why we didn't suffer any qualms seeing them disintegrate to death. Maybe because we were hateful of them, or was it a case of villainy of innocence, I would never know, but my playful hurting of a green hopper was on a different footing altogether; while it was seized by pangs of death, I put some sugar on it like our elders did when we hurt ourselves. But then I was too tender to know about life and death and all that I was capable of experiencing were the emotions of pleasures and pains."

"Wonder how cruelty and care form the obverse and the reverse of the human instinct."

"That may remain in the realms of mystery but how are we to explain man's propensity to self-destruct," he said. "Really it's not the hurt that others cause to us that counts, but our response to it that matters; if a positive outlook helps us gloss over the mishaps of life, the negative feelings harm our psyche to hurt our lives. We have had a botany lecturer for a neighbor, who nurtured a grand garden in his backyard, and as Chandu and I helped him tend his crotons, coleuses and others, he encouraged us to nurse our own little gardens. What a joy it was to have a garden of my own; so to say, every morning, still in half-sleep, I used to rush to the stretch of green in the side yard. Oh, how the sight of the blooming buds and the sprouting leaves used to thrill me; why, of all the joys of life, espying the garden that you nurse has no parallel to it. Maybe the nearest I can think of is the fun of flicking fruits and eating them sitting on the tree branches."

"More so if you manage to do so from the neighbor's groove."

"That's not true, for all kids love to flick a fruit or two but not every parent owns plantations, and so it's a necessary evil for children to trespass on the sly," he said before he picked up the threads of his tale. "But, for want of care, Chandu's garden, spread over a larger area, didn't measure up to mine in a tiny space, and I suspect that he turned green seeing my garden ever so green. That's what might've driven him to ravage my prized plot when our family was away for a day; how shocking was that sight, like seeing my near and dear ones perish on the road, not once but twice. But unlike life and death that lie in the hands of fate, to relay the garden or not was in the realms of my choice, and I decided to forego the pleasure of gardening not wanting to undergo the possible trauma of Chandu's future mischief. So I took to collecting the cinema handbills heralding the release of new movies, how the distributor used to shoo us away as we ran after the *jatka* for more of the same, and the way that hobby too ended would only illustrate how fate can deny one even the innocent pleasures of life. Before I tell you about it, I better talk about my parents, why for you to have a better feel of my fate, you need to have an idea about their life as well. Better I show you their photograph to let you correlate their persona with their philosophy."

Chapter 9

Couple of a Kind

"Don't they look made for each other," he said handing me a framed photograph of a handsome pair. "When Nehru was preparing the draft of his 'tryst with destiny', my father would've been penning his odes to my mother, whom he was courting then; and well before Nehru came to deliver his famous lines; my dad led his lady love to the altar. Yet it was no less a struggle for him to wed her as it was for Gandhi to wrest our country from the British yoke; while his dad had fixed a match for him with much dowry, the father of the bride didn't think too much of the suitor any way. Why not, he was only nineteen and was some way into becoming a Fellow of Arts, F.A in short; but the way the 'man in the teen' could cross all the hurdles in his way was the first sign of his 'gung ho' nature and 'go-getter' guts. While still in school, he led his classmates in the Quit India movement in disrupting the telephone network by cutting its cabling, and that a benign policeman of the British Raj did not execute the arrest warrant against my father was another story. Well, in the independent India, though he was eligible for freedom fighter's pension, he did not opt for it believing that the state remuneration might sullen his sense of achievement."

"What a fall that the well-off of the day subterfuge for the doles meant for the have-nots?"

"While self-sacrifice ruled the yearning hearts of a generation of our freedom fighters, self-interest came to govern the greedy minds of the powers that be in our free country," he said. "As for my father, proving it right that *vivahe vidya naasaaya*, his marriage brought his studies to a premature end as he took his bride to his village to live with his parents and that put paid to whatever his career ambitions were.'

"You did better than your dad on either count didn't you?"

"We were poles apart in every way and so our lives won't lend themselves for comparison," he said. "A year after the colonial air was cleared over our subcontinent, I was born, and I have my mother's word that he loved me the most of all his children; but, sadly as life has it, our adult faculties fail to recall the pristine parental affection in its nascency. And why doubt that for he died worrying more about my future than any other sibling of mine though the last two were yet to settle down in life. Maybe, soon after I was born that he entered into that aborted business partnership whereby he swore never to believe anyone save my mother and his brother-in-law, whose wife saved me from drowning into the tank. True to his character, he kept his word till the very end, and sadly so, for he lived and died without a friend. Well, I fared no better as in later years I distanced myself from all my childhood buddies including Raju."

"The impulse of love could be the embodiment of nature but its sustenance is conditioned by the ways of life. Maybe as a recompense for that we tend to love our children,"

"So it seems," he said and continued with his tale. "As I grew up, I turned into a rebel; can you imagine my smoking at home at fifteen? Why, my father too was a smoker, and strangely, it was my grandfather who had sustained his habit; when he got wind of my dad's smoking ways, he had loosened his purse strings for once, to enable him to smoke Berkeley instead of the cheap Charminar. They say the common refrain in our village then about my grandfather was, 'the miser is wiser too'. Much later, my dad was forced to give up smoking on doctor's advice, but before he could get the better of his urge, my mother was wont to confiscate the contraband, which she used to pass on to me in place of pocket money; some repeat of history. But down the times, compared to the Berkley of yore, the India Kings of the day are no more than nothing or is it that my taste buds were blunted by years of smoking, I don't know."

"Blame the hybrids of the day, high on yield and low on quality."

"Maybe hybrids are the necessary evils of our populous times; but for their bounteousness, can our teeming billions ever have a mouthful. That's the price man pays for the population growth," he said. "Any way, following in my father's footsteps, I too gave up the habit not long ago, so to say on doctor's advice; but when an old flame pleaded with me to stop smoking for her sake, it was the self same me that told her, 'I'll give up the world for you, but not my smoking'."

"The scare of a doctor is more potent than the concern of a loved one and that's the reality of life."

"True," he said and continued from where he had left, "My dad and I had never seen eye to eye, but we came to respect each others' abilities; he used to take my advice and often acted upon it. Being in a dilemma whether or not to bring upfront a minor health problem of one of my sisters to the prospective groom, he wanted to have my take on that; well, I told him that it would be a fair disclosure only after she

had her way with the boy with her persona. As a man he was brash to begin with, but as he mellowed down in time and as I matured at length, we became friends towards the end of his innings that was after being at loggerheads for the best part of our lives. Whatever, how sweet it felt in those last years of his life and how empathic we felt for each other, what an enduring satisfaction we both derived in our closeness! I'll cherish that till the end, as he did until he died.'

"I'm sure his soul in heaven grasps your pathos on earth?"

"If anything, I'm proud to be his son and blessed to be born to my mother," he said as his eyes moistened and his voice choked, "I tell you, he lived only for his wife and children and if there ever was a homebody it was he; not the kind of homebody once pictured in the Reader's Digest; when a philanderer boasted himself as a homebody, his wife punned humorously, 'any home anybody'. Well my father was so possessive of my mother that he wouldn't let her go out even with her own cousin sisters, but to be fair to him, he gave her his undivided love, and my mother too didn't seem to mind about her loss of freedom. Moreover, he never ignored her word because of her selfless disposition towards worldly affairs; but for all his love for her, sadly, he was a wife-beater until he softened in his forties. If anything can be said in his favor in this regard, that it was more of a norm than an exception with our men in those days; don't we hear that there is no stopping it in the advanced West even these days? Whatever, after his death, my mother never uttered a word without reference to him and that was for over four years, at least I had never known about a widow who was so devoted to her man's memory. But my father being a family man proved to be a boon as well as the bane for us his children, he was wont to ration our playtime, which was at odds with my sense of freedom from the beginning; though he didn't have his way with me, he prevailed over my siblings all the while."

"Well, disciplining children is a necessary evil but nowadays parents don't seem to lay store in 'spare the rod and spoil the child' upbringing."

"Sadly so for the going-to-be-adult kids that is and if anything the failure, like in the U.S, to distinguish 'child discipline' from 'child abuse' has come to breed retrograde children in its advanced midst," he said and continued. "When I was six, supervising some furniture being made at home, my dad was not to move out for days on, and that curtailed my freedom more than ever. As I was not even going to school then, it was like being jailed at home and soon, I asked the carpenter how long it would take for him to complete the assignment. When he said that it would take a fortnight more, I told him that I would give him an *ana* if he completed the work in a week; amused, he asked me what the urgency was, and I told him that once the work was over, my father would go out as usual and that would let me be on my own. When he told my people about it, all had a hearty laugh, and years later, when my father chanced to meet him in another town, well he became a prosperous hotelier there, recalling that incident, he expressed his keenness to see me; and when we met, serving me personally in his restaurant, he narrated the incident to the amusement of all those present. Well, as I fondly relived that moment, my father was joyously embarrassed about it."

"Moments like those bring charm to one's life but I don't have any to recall; maybe current day life doesn't lend scope for any."

"Why doubt that," he said, "but there are moments in life that are bitter to experience and sweeter to recall. While the first of my sisters obediently sat at home, the second one always joined me at playtime. I wonder how in the thick of things her sixth sense would warn her about our father's impending home-coming; well she used

to alert me before leaving the field, but lost in the game, I was always caught on the wrong foot and faced his ire for late-coming. Oh how his intemperance turned demonic once; why he nearly split my head with a pounding staff. It happened in the small hours of that *atlataddi* when I pestered him to let me join my friends at the annual fete; even my grandmother's pleadings didn't deter him from bashing me up for my insistence. I shudder to think how a mishap then would've affected him forever; maybe, my skull is made of sterner stuff for I can take any beating at the *champi* that I came to love in later years."

"It was child abuse and no less."

"Being human, parents too can lose their temper on occasion and a little bashing that ensues can't be deemed as child abuse," he said. "Once when my son disturbed my sleep, having bashed him up in indignation, I realized that my nagging that *atlataddi* night would've been no less irritating to my father. But think of *tel-maalish*, and I recall a *naayi* of my hostel days; he was barely sixteen, and like most Biharis in those days, he was married for a year or more by then. Goading the students to get married early, he used to assert that the real ecstasy of *tel-maalish* lies in the crackling sound of the bangles as one's woman was at it. How he used to pity us, the prospective engineers, for we would have a bride in her early twenties that is in our late twenties; of what avail are the girls out of their teens for they would have past their prime by then. But then, Gen. Yahya Khan of Pakistan never had anything to do with women below forty for he felt such wouldn't be randy enough in bed; how perceptions about sexual pleasures vary really! Doesn't that remind us of what Shakespeare said of Cleopatra – "Age cannot wither her / nor custom stale / her infinite variety. Other women cloy / the appetites they feed / but she makes hungry / where most she satisfies."

"How intriguing sexual preferences are? I've read about a survey that revealed the inexplicable preference some of the beautiful women have for ugly looking males!"

"Isn't it appetizing news for the ungainly men? But the problem is that a hopeful wrong pass could invite a 'beauteous' ridicule," he said mirthfully. "Why all is not lost for ugly women either for there are men who get attracted only by such, why there was a king or was it a sultan, I don't recall, who had in his harem only mustachioed women rotund to boot. As for me, Yahya like, I find the thirty-ish randiness swaying as by then they would've gained much in bed without losing too much of their figure. Noticing my roving eye, once when Rathi wondered what if all men were to be covetous of women, I told her that in its balancing act nature makes men covet different things – money, power, position, fame etc. apart from fair sex that is. You know at the end of the World War II, when the Russian army entered Berlin, while most soldiers raped every female in sight, a few of them spared their honor but not their bicycles. Why Khushwant Singh's *sardarji* joke underscores this; a pretty thing offers lift to a *sardar* in her limousine and drives him deep into the woods, and after taking off her clothes, when she asks him to take whatever he wanted, he drives away in her car. Jokes apart, sex is not all that fair to the female if her mate were to be a 'premature' kind; and won't that validate the woman's right to 'mate and marry' and not the other way round."

"I think we've strayed away enough, now we may as well be back onto the track."

Chapter 10

A Character of Sorts

“Now back to my dad,” he continued his extraordinary reminiscences. “When he made me board a train to Ranchi, what a pleasant surprise it was to discover the softer side of his! Why his tears of farewell that brought to the fore the love he bore for me readily washed off my bitterness for him. Moreover, as I exchanged the domestic notes with my hostel mates, I realized that no dad did spare the rod to spoil the child, and that made me see childhood in a joint family in a fresh light; the grandparental indulgence countervails the inhibiting parental discipline to condition children to the ayes and nays of life from its very nascence. But as life would have it, the joint family makes everyone, save the head, irrelevant in its setting when it came to the household affairs, and on the other hand, the nuclear family that affords self-realization for the couples, fails to cater to the children’s need for a disciplined upbringing. What a sad spectacle it is these days seeing the single-child parents vying with each other in pampering their kids or treating them as their ‘toys of joy’, but tell them that is not the way of rearing kids if only you are prepared to put your relationship with them on the line. Well time only would tell what affect this mindless upbringing brings to bear upon the adulthood of these unfortunate kids.”

“That is in spite of the advanced human psychology on hand!”

“Who’s making use of it anyway?” he said in consternation. “All seem to hustle themselves with their kids into the blissful Shakespearean mould of, ‘he that is robbed, not wanting what is stolen, let him not know it, and he’s not robbed at all’. So be it, but who said one cannot have the cake and eat it too for my dad managed to do so all his life. Level headed though, he tended to be reckless at times; that *diwali*, when I turned five, he didn’t have a second thought about teaching me how to handle the fire-crackers in the *mandua*, which opened to the sky in the middle of our house. But how my father failed to foresee the possibility of an odd cracker setting our dwelling on fire I would never know. Why as if guided by the Murphy’s Law, a cracker of a missile made its way to the attic full of dry coconuts and how that made all miss a heartbeat or two. Well chastised by my grandfather as my dad sheepishly went up the attic with a bucketful of water, driven by curiosity I too had ascended the ladder behind him. Possibly the missile had expended itself before its landing in the midst of the coconuts but keeping an eye on the attic to nip the possible flare-up in the bud, none had a wink that night, why the excitement of it kept me too awake for long.”

“What a change! Those days, if parents threw caution to the winds to expose their children to the ways of the world, parents these days are proving to be more timid than their kids.”

“How true, when I was eleven year-old, my mother had been to her parental home for her fourth confinement,” he continued. “Even as she delivered my third sister, the Godavari was in spate like never before, and the steamer service too was put on hold for want of safety. But underscoring the fact of life that someone would be around always to aid and abet the lawbreaking, there were boats in wait to ferry the willing on the sly, of course, for a premium. Though my father was law abiding otherwise, maybe driven by the impulse of spying the new arrival, risking our lives he ventured across the unruly river with me; why we were not even some way into that hazardous voyage, giving me scares the boat began to rock but my father’s imposing presence and his assurance that there were expert swimmers on board, just in case, turned my sense of scariness into a feeling of daring. But later in life, I always felt that he shouldn’t have ventured on that voyage putting our lives at risk; after all, he could’ve

waited to espy the new arrival, but then that's what he was, a fearless man till the very end. Well the way he faced premature death was bravado no less."

"Isn't it illustrative that the dividing line between daring and risking is wafer-thin?"

"Well, my father was innately bold," he continued. "Oh, the way he ventured out whenever there was a burglary alert in the neighborhood! Why with a stick in my hand, I too wasn't afraid to follow suit; it was his daring that might've percolated down into my childhood subconscious, enabling me to imbibe his credo in good measure. Although, he softened with age, he remained bold, and how tough he was with the in-laws of one of my sisters when they came up with their ludicrous post-wedding demands. As a matter of principle he didn't want to yield and when they hinted at abandoning the bride then and there, he told them that he would ensure they took her along with them, and after that, it was left for them to harm her at their own peril. If anything, his stance then summed up the man in him, *a la* Alec Guinness in the Bridge on the River Kwai, and that called their bluff, and all was well in the end. If only the fathers of the afflicted brides can muster half of my dad's courage, I'm sure dowry-deaths, like sati, would be a thing of the past."

"If only the media has a way of knowing such incidents."

"Don't you think the media is manned by morons?" he said. "Oh, how they carpet-covered the newlywed Bachchans' temple trysts to save their marriage from the *mangalik* affect! What message did the media carry to our folks, bogged down by superstitions? Maybe, man was better off without the media and now worse off for the 24 x 7 non-stop humbugs; and what an opportunity the senior Bachchan lost to make a difference to the prejudiced heads by making a statement against the nonsense. Oh how small really the Big B is, and how big the media made Diana the small. It's incredible how her quest for lust was portrayed as her search for love! No faulting her taking a lover on the rebound as her man thrust a rival into her marital life but for the media to picture her bed hopping as her craving for love is galling indeed. Why in picturing Diana as the icon of love the media made lust a synonym of love and what's worse, it made a villain out of her man who embodies the best of love that is constancy."

"Why hadn't anyone seen it that way?"

"Can one grasp the realities of life in the glare of glamour?" he said. "What is media if it doesn't feed itself on sleaze and scandal with trivia thrown in between; why blame those who man it as all crave for such to gloss over the humdrum that is life of most. Even if you ever make the media privy to what all transpired between us, the meaningful part of it is bound to be blue-penciled. Whatever that's the enigma of the media, like it or not, there is no escaping from it but were you to novelize it, maybe, there could be a few takers for your endeavor."

"Maybe so but as Hitler had discovered, most of us take the media's word as a Gospel truth."

"Wasn't it the basis for Goebbels concept of propaganda?" he interjected. "Back to my dad; he was more like a *mullah* when it came to the segregation of sexes though it had nothing to do with his upbringing either for my grandfather didn't have a jaundiced eye on that count. I heard that my dad was opposed to his mother and sister resting for a while on the roadside verandah even when he was just twelve or so and that speaks for it. That's why it was no wonder that he turned out to be a possessive husband and a guard of a father, especially of his daughters. How I wish he

had read a book or two on the psychology of sex, especially that of Havelock Ellis, well that could have spared me of that shock and one of my sisters of her bitterness."

He paused for a while as though to recover from the shock of his recollection.

"I told you that after the grief of the garden, for a hobby, I turned to the collection of cinema handbills distributed to announce new releases," he continued. "What a pleasure it was to gather more of the same on the sly and how we used to prize the booty though it was of poor quality with an occasional color pamphlet being a bonus; but that *Bhookailash* one on a craft paper was a dream come true. That Sunday, as my father was in siesta, I was at rejoicing my collection before I lost myself to the *Bhookailash* thing. Can you imagine what followed? I was rudely jolted when my father snatched it from me accusing me of a premature interest in the female form for he mistook that I was fantasizing about the heroine. Sharing his discovery with my mother, he tore it into pieces and began thrashing me as if to drive the devil of sex out of my head; well I was not even twelve then and apparently he had seen it all through his adult eyes. Whatever, I cried more for the pain of its ruin than the plight of my back that bore the brunt of his beatings; and with that loss, I lost interest in the rest, and gave up the hobby itself."

"Some psychology of sex should help today's boys who become tomorrow's fathers."

"You have a point there," he said. "Maybe sensing the propensity of my destiny, disappointment chose me to be its abiding partner. As life would have it, in time, one of my uncles came close to marrying the *Bhookailash* heroine, whom my dad thought I had been ogling that noon; could he have ever imagined such a turn of events then? It's another matter that my maternal grandfather's view that 'once an actress always an actress' made my uncle give up on her. Maybe, he was right that with an actress wife, as he felt, one would never know when she was genuinely affectionate or righteously indignant for she can affect either emotion with consummate ease. Better it's left for men who marry actresses, nay actors as is the norm, though without casting aspersions on their sexual straightness, to say whether life for them becomes make-believe or not."

"If all carry their character to the office, may be the actors bring home their professional skills."

"I would've known about it had not my uncle backtracked but to my dad's jaundiced eye, the genuineness of one my sisters seemed to him as a put on one occasion."

Chapter 11

Moments of Poignance

"Oh, how it hurts to think that my dad could've behaved so badly with my sister I was rather fond of!" he resumed after a long pause. "I was away in Ranchi then and what I had heard of it hurts me to this day. One late evening she was lost in her thoughts, whatever they were, on the verandah, oblivious of the ogling ways of a roadside Romeo. My dad who happened to return home then got it all wrong, and paying a deaf ear to her professed innocence, like a man possessed he had beaten her black and blue, the poor thing. Well, she never forgave him for that, even after his death, and I don't fault her for that. But what an irony that it was on her account he once ventured across the Godavari in spate risking his and my life as well. Sure he came to soften up his stance on other issues but somehow he failed to shed his

blinkers in sexual matters; and he was lucky that the inclinations of my sisters and the impediments of the times gave him no hiccups on their pre-marital front."

"What a tragedy it is to hurt the loved ones owing to the debility of belief."

"Well said, more so the religious belief; maybe towards the end one might be able to shelve self-indulgent biases but the faith-induced bigotry tends to grip one all the more." he said thoughtfully. "Saying 'sorry' would've helped, but he believed what he wanted to believe, and her denials seemed but self-serving arguments to his closed mind-set. Well he was rude with me too in my childhood that is; but in his deathbed gesture I came to see his way of saying sorry for his intemperate past. He gave me, and not my brother, his wrist-watch with his name embossed on it, which was a long service award from Lipton. It was another matter that my brother loved him more than I ever did, and it appeared as if he bestowed it upon his first born, but I suppose it was not as simple as that. When I was ten, toying with his wrist-watch, I dropped it down to its doom inviting his wrath. Frustrated with the loss of his first acquisition, he roundly thrashed me even as my mother tried her best to put sense into his agitated head that it was after all an accident. Though resentful then, it was much later that I could understand his sense of loss; money being scarce, it was no easy task to replace it. Maybe laying on his deathbed, he recalled the episode while he recapped his life; he surely would've, for one of my uncles once told me that he would project the celluloid of his life on his mind-screen thrice a day. Why not, if youth is daydreaming about the future and the middle age the dilemma of the present, then old age makes a memoir of the past. Well, it could have been my father's sense of remorse that might've prompted him to make a present of that wrist-watch to me by way of his redemption. But by the time the possibility of that occurred to me, he was no more. If only I could've told him that I understood his constraints and never bore a grudge against him on that or any other count; oh, how that would've helped ease our consciences!"

"What a poignant moment it could have been?"

"Sadly it was not to be," he said. "I believe the hallmark of his life was his boldness in the face of death."

The moment we stepped into that cancer hospital, seeing some patients carrying their urine bags, he said he would rather die than live with one such. Seeing scores of patients there prolonging their senseless life in a pitiable manner, I realized that there was also this greed to be alive that my father was not afflicted with. But awaiting his inevitable death in his home that he made the centre of his life, when he sent word for me, all knew that he believed his end was at hand. As I reached him, he lost no time in wanting a private chat with my mother and me; he took both our hands into his, and asked me to take care of her, adding, 'I scolded her, I did even beat her up but I always respected her'. We his children always knew how much he loved our mother but at that juncture I realized that he chose to be a one-woman man all his life out of respect for her. I always wondered why he wanted to confess to my mother in my presence; maybe, he might've felt that being the firstborn, I was the first witness of his love for her in all its intimacy. But sadly for me, I failed to keep the word I gave him to take care of her; it's true she is not in want of any, thanks to my brother, and no less to my sister-in-law, who doesn't grumble on that score. How I hope that life gives me the chance to redeem myself!"

"Your brother seems to be your conscience saver."

"In a way he is," he said. "But I don't know why it didn't occur to me to thank my dad for what all he had done for me for all my infirmities that bothered him no end. If

only I had said sorry, wouldn't have the troubles he had taken for me seem pastime for him then? But it was not to be as I left him after the memorable meeting to fend for myself in the city I lived. But even when his final call came, I was nowhere near him; oh, had I reached him in time as he breathed his last, maybe I would've been inspired to make a clean breast of myself. But as luck would have it, some jamboree came to a close the previous day in the city and the revelers blocked all entrances of the trains that day, making it no entry for others. Oh how I begged to be let in, but none had obliged."

"What to make out of the muteness of the masses?"

"As individuals most of them would have obliged but collectively all became callous," he said. "Even sensible people lose their sensitivity in collectivity, which I call the camaraderie syndrome; won't a group of six, in a train compartment of eight, collude to shoo away whoever nears them. Showcasing the insensitivity of another kind are those who never let others occupy the next seat in the long-distance buses, supposedly reserved by their never-to-arrive friends. See how their attitude unfairly affects the fellow travelers; while the early birds bear the back seats, the latecomers become the frontbenchers. Well, when I finally reached home, I was late by an hour to have a word with him; maybe he breathed his last lighter for his confessions but I'm left to live carrying the cross of my omissions."

As his demeanor suggested that burdened by his guilt he was sinking into a state of depression; alarmed, I goaded him to tell more about his father.

"What a connoisseur of food he was!" he began enthusiastically. "Be it grains, cereals or vegetables, he bought the choicest, which were transformed into the best of meals by my mother's recipes. When it came to fruits, he was a man of all seasons, and I wonder if there ever was a more ardent lover of mangos than him. Why he was wont to partake three apiece with each meal and that counted up to six a day in summer days, and what were they, not the grossly overrated alphonso but the peerless kothapalli kobbari besides panchdara kalisa, peddarasam, chinnarasam, cherukuram, juice fruits all available only in the coastal Andhra. I can't help but pity those who pay a ridiculously high price for alphonsons, just a notch up the much cheaper banganapallis. Whatever, it was as if the flavors of 'fruits of the season' vied with the aroma of my mother's exquisite preparations to satiate our palates but then don't mistake us for a family of gluttons for we were frugal eaters all. But as people are taking to junk food these days it won't be long before we may lose the cooking skills developed over generations; sadly that takes man back to his roots literally that is."

"By the way, what were his last words for you?"

"Be careful with your money for none would spare you a penny in your hour of need, that's what he said," he said and then added, "and I may say, why should any for all that; should you become the subject of charity would you remain an object of equality?"

Chapter 12

Enigma of Being

"What would've been my life like had my dad succumbed to that heart attack when he was barely forty-two," he resumed his tale. "My third-rate degree was just on hand then and there was nothing else for us to fall back upon in such an eventuality; maybe, it was his will-power to avert our downslide that kept him alive."

Or it could be the destiny of my own siblings that intervened with his fate to keep him going as their interests wouldn't have been as well served by my life, and I too couldn't have been as carefree as I was in my youth, which had been the crux of my life. But before that when my grandfather passed away, given our attachment, my father was worried to death that it would upset me no end, and so he asked his cousin to break the news only after preparing me for that. Oh, how my poor grandfather used to insist on knowing my exam schedule for him to do the *Sundara Kānda parayanam* for good tidings at my exam time, and it takes some eight hours or more to recite the epic even for a regular that he was; if only I had put in my studies half of his efforts to invoke the divine grace upon me; how some of the experiences of life seem sweeter in recollection!"

"Don't they say man loves his grandchildren more than he ever loved his own offspring?"

"Surely, you would have a grasp of it when you reach that station of life," he said as his eyes turned moist. "How I regret that I'd never paid heed to his letters for they were all carbon copies; what was worse, I never wrote home, aware though I was how eagerly my grandfather - not to speak of my father - looked forward to my missives; the errand boy at my father's office once told me that it was his daily chore to check up for my letters at the head post office. Well that was the eagerness with which my father awaited my letters that shamefully I never wrote; but still, I didn't mend my ways for I was lost in my own wayward ways. It was another story that my grandmother's villainy saw my father's hand behind my indifference to my grandpa's missives to grind her inheritance axe, whatever, as and when I was short of money, the requisition and the compliance were both telegraphed. I learnt from my mother much later, how anxious my dad was to see that I was not inconvenienced even for a day, and if only I knew what a hassle it was for him to arrange the money for me, I wouldn't have been the spendthrift I turned out to be. Oh, why didn't he tell me how hard up he was; would I have been so insensitive as not to have tightened my belt? When my father wrote to me that his errand boy died in a road mishap not on his routine postal trip but on some official duty, as if to spare him the pangs of guilt, I could picture the sentimental side of him that I had never seen till then; but as my eyes welled up with tears, it struck me that I wasn't in tears when I learnt about my grandfather's death in spite of our attachment. Maybe it had all to do with the fact that he died at a ripe old age or it could be that I was subconsciously reconciled to his end."

"However close you might be to one, you'll never really know about one."

"That's true but still we appraise others without getting into their shoes that we won't be able to do any way," he said. "God knows why, but my grandmother became inimical to my father, not to speak of my mother. When she couldn't bear it any longer, my mother told my father that she would have no more of the old tyrant and he might set her up separately for she knew he owed it to his mother to take care of her and that she was prepared to manage the house with the rest of his salary; well fairness to all has been the hallmark of my mother's character. But my grandmother any way preferred to stay with her daughter."

"Isn't it strange that women tend to be partial towards their daughters all the while craving for a son, while men, who seem to think that daughters don't confer parentage, and yet cling on to them?"

"Looks like women always feel vulnerable in this man's world," he said. "Didn't the psychologists theorize that woman sees her son as her proxy to get even with it, but

when he gets married, she perceives his wife as the usurper of her assumed power to dare the world? Maybe the feeling of being back to square one tends her closer to her daughters with the accompanying sense of alienation towards her daughter-in-law; but for man, while his proclivity is to beget a female, his craving for a male in the lineage could be owing to our culture conditioned by religion, and that's the irony of the sexes. Shortly before my grandmother was gravely ill, I gave her a piece of my mind as to how inimical she had been towards her own son and his family, and when her health deteriorated, she insisted on living her last days at her son's place; maybe in the course of life our sensibilities are blunted while the scent of death stirs our sensitivities to its subtleties. Well, she did breathe her last in my father's arms and who said death separates; but sadly as if history tends to repeat itself, even in the family setting, my mother, when widowed, became inimical to the idea of my brother's marriage so as to sponge on his bachelorhood earnings till her end. It's the tragedy of my life that I had to be equally harsh with her, and I only know how painful it was; ironically it was no less satisfying for me that my grandmother's change of heart let her die in peace and my mother's change of mind enabled her to rein in her vested interest before it was too late for my brother; oh, gripped by the devil of insecurity how wretched she used to be, and when exorcized of it, how joyous she became after my brother's marriage."

"It's not mere conviction but the courage to act upon it that characterizes men."

"But it requires the strength of character for that," he said, and began recapping his childhood. "There was hardly any schooling worth naming in the village setting in those days but one could still get into the first-form in a nearby high school through a written test. When I was nine, my father made me seem ten the cut-off age for admission, and took me to a nearby town for the test; even as I sat nervously in the exam hall, the invigilator, who was brash, made it worse for me and so I refused to take the test; but the offender's apology that my father extracted as a sop made me relent in the end, and lo I was into the first-form that you call class six now. We were no more than a handful that made it to that school from our village then and my seniors used to vie with each other to take charge of me, each claiming that my grandfather had entrusted me to his care. But as it all tended to turn farcical, I asked them to let me be on my own; what a joy it was walking all those five miles both ways, well, sans the backbreaking schoolbags of these days. But, when my grandfather took me back to school to retrieve the umbrella I forgot there, it was no fun to my weary legs, more so as he lectured about the pitfalls of forgetfulness all the way; maybe my subconscious absorbed it all for I consciously avoid being forgetful."

"Did you find it?" I asked rather instinctively.

"The odds were one to ten as you know and it was no odd case any way," he said. "But the thought of umbrella brings my grandfather's fondness for rainy season that I share. It was his wont to have his siesta lying in the easy chair in the verandah, and in the monsoon time, whenever he woke up to a deafening thunder, he would declare that 'it portends downpour,' of course gluing his eyes to the pitch-dark clouds in the sky. Like all landlords, he too used to rivet his eyes onto the sky, worried about the *kharif* crop, and how as children we loved when it rained and used to dance in the downpour wetting ourselves to the roots. But for my mother it was always 'oh, enough is enough' but my grandfather would say, 'why not let them enjoy now for they might give up all this as grownups'. How true, but then the phases of life are varied, each with different possibilities of fulfillment; when it ceased raining all kids used to place indents on the elders for paper boats for playing with them in the roadside water pools or backyard water bodies. Why the rainy season afforded the

elders their small pleasures as well; as I see in hindsight, all used to ogle at women's legs as they hitched up their saris as though to save their hems from getting soiled on the muddy roads. I wish I lived a little longer in my village to cherish more of my life but then maybe I shouldn't be greedy for I had enough and more of the village life."

Chapter 13

Vignettes of a Village

"If city life is characterized by chaos, village life was all about orderliness," he continued. "Unlike the present-day multi-class urban societies, in the villages of yore, while the Brahmins held the high ground in *agraharams* and the intermediate castes occupied the middle ground, the peasants, and the artisans lived on the peripheries. So there was hardly any intra-class social interaction to speak about and that's why I had no idea about the lives of the marginalized, but from the way they dressed and behaved, it was clear that their life was sustained on the economic crumbs thrown at them by the landed classes. The well-heeled among the privileged classes were wont to play rummy if not *baestu*, also a card game in which the loser becomes a lose-all *kudael*; oh, how women dreaded at the prospect of their men taking to cards, more so *baestu*, lest they should become *kudael*. That my mother prevailed upon my dad to give up cards he was fond of, I came to know much later; as she was wont to play a round or two of rummy with me and my friends, my dad used to grudgingly remind her how she had coerced him to give up his favorite pastime."

"Well, but what puzzles me is the attitude of a friend's wife, who having had drinks in her college days was averse to her newlywed husband having a drink or two."

"That's the illogic of women's logic," he said with a wink, and continued "Those were the prohibition times, so, sans the so-called Indian Made Foreign Liquors and with toddy being a taboo for the gentry, the potion of the peasants, the well-heeled went without a drink. Thus, blessed with one of the three W's but self-denying the other, the ardent were wont to womanize; well the nature's calls in the open opened up the opportunities alike for the promiscuous and the sex-starved men and women to indulge on the sly what with the bushes yonder providing secretive cover for illicit sex. By the way what's this pride in one's caste and the prejudice against the others' after all that covert sexual inter-mingling for generations; and what about the bane of the home toilets that give with one hand and take away with the other; why while affording privacy to the personas, don't they deprive safe ways for the straying folks; well, man seems to rob himself of the freedoms that nature granted him."

"It may be the case with the middle-classes, but don't celebrity affairs give a fillip to promiscuity?"

"The current page three liaisons seem a passing show while the liaisons of the wealthy with the nautch girls remained enduring news for a couple of generations," he said. "Maybe being few and far between, the affairs of yore had a charm of their own but in their current day profusion, they seem to have taken away much of the naughty sheen out of them; whether in life or in sport, rarer the fare, all the more it's memorable; oh what aura cricket's '3Ws' - the West Indies' Weeks, Worrell and Walcott - had, and all of them put together didn't play in as many test matches as the Tendulkars of these days.'

"Maybe Bradman, Dhyan Chand, Pele, and even Laver, in spite of Federer, prove your theory of aura."

"Well, the lesser gentry were left content to gossip about the card-playing and the cunt-craving sort, pardon the turn of phrase," he said. "Once a troupe of nautch-girls performed at our village temple, and as the show was on, our neighbor's servant went up to the lead dancer, and having drawn her attention to his master, he handed her a hundred Rupee note that she took nodding her head; though I couldn't grasp the import of it all then, her naughty smile as she coyly tilted head is still fresh in my mind. Soon after, when I happened to witness a *Bharatanatyam* performance by our neighbor's granddaughter from Bombay, the sensuous nuances in her classical movements insensibly shaped my sense of the feminine sensuality; how I find repellent the bawdy gestures of those gaudy women-in-trade. Well, whatever be the proclivities of the folks, the kids were left alone for the most part as the rat race for private schools had not yet begun then; and to be fair to my father, he was never behind us to come out with flying colors at school; but these days how parents have come to push their kids to excel at studies. It's as if kids have become the parental means of fulfilling their unfulfilled dreams; what funny times we've come to live in; how sad that parents are averse to accept less than A+ grade for their kids; if only the progeny starts demanding to know about the parental scores!"

"Who knows, that day may not be far off."

"Maybe that's the only cure for this parental paranoia, why I know a mother, who forced her second daughter to study medicine simply because the elder one was already pursuing a course in engineering," he said, and continued with his childhood saga. "Summer times were made memorable by the annual visits of my paternal aunt, the one who saved me from drowning in our village tank, and her husband, who was a lecturer in a college of physical education, and so he had a long summer vacation. Being childless, they used to love me and my siblings like their own children; how all of us used to cling to him all day; he being a jovial person, it was a great fun to be with him. And where do you think we used to spend the summer times, well, on foldable cots right under the neem tree shade in the side yard. That was the only time when I used to leave my grandma's bedside, why, I never heeded my mother's call to sleep in their bedroom, not that I loved my mother any less but my affinity with my grandma was compelling, maybe it was in part due to her story telling. One of my uncle's favorite taunts was that, being the namesake grandson, he hoped that at my marriage, I would present him the wedding suit promised by my granddad. When I was five, he taught me how to make the opening moves on the chessboard but in spite of my later-day penchant for the middle game, I'm clueless about the endgame till today; well, neither could he master the art of partaking the palm fruit directly from its socket that I tried to teach him; how our *kapu*, who plucked the fruits from the tree, used to tease him saying that the village kids were smarter than the townsmen."

He paused as if to relive his childhood in the nostalgia of his old times.

"But the icing on the cake of their long stays was provided by the snacks that my grandma was wont to serve in the afternoons, which she never prepared in the normal course; wasn't her son-in-law a privileged person being her daughter's husband?" he said on resumption. "Well it was my dad who introduced me to carom in later days and I followed him with the so-called scissors strike, which might puzzle your opponent when you are in form but could frustrate your partner when you are off color. When I took to cricket in my school final and bowled for the first time, the batsman realized I was a born leg spinner and that the googly could be a few false steps away. Didn't Bradman opine that leg spin is the most difficult to master for any bowler, and when done, it would turn out to be the most difficult ball for any batsman

to handle? Whatever, thanks to my youthful distractions, I didn't work to build on my natural ability to make a mark in the cricket world, and if not, who knows my name would've been taken in the same breath as Warne and Chandrasekhar; but being born in the latter's era, when cricket was not a fetching proposition, it could have been a hand-to-mouth existence for me as well. But Muralitharan the smiling off spin assassin has been my eternal favorite, how anxiously I got glued to the TV set for his 800th wicket; it was another matter that a wicket more or a wicket less wouldn't have made any difference to his stature, but then on the badge of honor, statistics have their own corner."

"Isn't it silly that cricket has become a religion with Sachin as its Godhead?"

"Maybe for those 'score *kya hai*' guys, whose knowledge of the game borders on zero while their interest in the game is limited to India's win, and that reminds me of a cricketing joke of our days," he said turning mirthful. "The naughty answer to a novice enquiry about the field position in a cricket match was that there was 'no cover, no extra cover, there is just a deep gully between two fine legs', and my uncle couldn't call it foul when I told him about it. Why, in later years, I used to drag him to our stag parties though he was a teetotaler, and whenever the party jokes turned bawdy he was wont to cry foul; how charming he was in that 'naughty umpire' role. But he was not all that charming when it came to my auntie's socializing, why he had indeed confined her all through to the four walls of their house. But when he began grumbling in the later years that she was good for nothing, I told him he was committing a foul; not having let her out in her prime time lest someone should ogle at her, that he felt secure for her lost appeal, how could he expect her to change the tack; well he allowed me to take such liberties with him."

"Maybe donning all the roles of life perfectly is possible for none."

"Don't they say perfection is in the realms of heaven, a myth any way, and not to be found on earth," he continued. "Well, those joys ended as my dad shifted to a small town, where I joined Chandu in the second form, and when he suggested that being co-tenants, we better be in the same section, I sought the help of my father's uncle, who was a teacher in the same school. I don't know why, but he didn't favor the move and to discourage me, he told me that with girls around, it would be embarrassing if I were to be unequal to the teachers' queries in the co-ed section. So I had to wait till I got into a college to have a girl for a classmate, and as if to make good the school-time loss, I promptly fell in love with her; that's another story any way. But what an irony it was that while the father denied me an administrative favor, his son granted me an astrological boon; I was too raw to appreciate the variety that is bigamy, and what a fuss I made at that like prediction! Maybe it was more a reflection of the times than my own naivety at that age; earlier, whenever the topic turned to her marriage, mockingly holding my hand, our village postmaster's over-the-hill daughter used to say that she was waiting for me to attain the marriageable age; well there was no adolescent twist to it for, as you know, our family moved out of the village when I crossed ten."

"Maybe I need a break before you move on," I said lighting a Gold Flake King.

Chapter 14

A Teacher of Note

"Landing in that town was no earthshaking moment for me as the urban life then retained its rural character though not its ethos," he began as I was ready with my pen and papers. "But still I missed my time in the green fields where I used to pluck the

tender cereals from plants and pick up the ripened palm nuts from the ground. Moreover, as my grandparents stayed back in the village, my grandma's tales were a thing of the past, literally that was, for I had no more of her clock sense; oh, how many times in the daytime she used to ask me to go out to note the position of the shadow in the side yard by which she reckoned the hour to the quarter. Well, we had a wall clock that got stuck at 4 shortly after my grandfather tried to teach me how to read the time, and maybe her foresight made her develop a mind clock driven by those shadow lines."

"Don't you think there is a mental drag to our scientific advancement; while researchers strive to expand the frontiers of human faculties, the products of their endeavors tend to dull the creative urge of mankind at large?"

"Good observation; getting glued to Pogo and playing video games these days, wonder how that helps the kids to explore and experiment, but without any gadgets to name, we used to make playthings on our own, well with the parental know-how; didn't I tell you about paper boats, but there were a host of others, whistles from coconut leaves, blowers from jute stems, telephone handsets out of matchboxes with sewing thread for a cable, just to name a few. Moreover, how fascinating it was for the kids to watch the womenfolk at play in assorted games, especially the skill on exhibition in *chintapikkalu* played with tamarind seeds spread on the floor. Whatever, the cinema was a sort of consolation in the town; oh how tempting it was for the kids, which remained a taboo with the parents? I suspect that as most could ill-afford the movie going, maybe it was an excuse for them to sneer at the stuff that the silver screen presented. But aided by the tax sops when theatres arranged special shows of *Navrang* and *Do Ankhein Baara Haath* for school going kids at confessional fare, it was a bonus for us to watch them from the chair-class; I still remember the festive atmosphere when we went to see those Shantaram's movies, and since Hindi was as alien as Latin in the South those days, there used to be a translator, who gave a running commentary in our mother tongue. But for such a fare that was rare, parents kept the curtains down on the movies, but the allure of the forbidden stuff, made some of us to cheat them for an *ana* to make it to the matinee to watch the fare squatting on the floor right in front of the screen."

"What a transformation with kids having pocket monies these days!"

"Well before that, when my brother, hardly ten then, gave up the movie for the day for want of a seat in the balcony, I realized how times change even in the family setting," he said. "But in contrast, in the excitement of it all, we never bothered about how uncomfortable it was to watch from such a close range, though it was not the case for once as I was caught in the act when I took an *ana* from my mother on the pretext of buying a notebook to make it to the matinee show. Before I could reach home after the movie, my mother smelled a rat as she had come to know that I had bunked the post-lunch session; and so she wanted me to show the notebook that I bought. Well, I had the presence of mind to show her a fresh-looking one for the rest were anyway worn and torn, but she proved to be more than a match for me by catching me on the wrong foot; why she pointed out our teacher's remarks of the day before, and I owned up my backdated bluff at the very first blow on my back; and wiser for that slip, I coached my classmates to portray my future absences as playground holdups."

"It makes me recall how a classmate of mine got away for claiming that the Chambers Dictionary cost five times its price as his illiterate parents were taken in by its bulkiness."

"That's about the blissful ignorance," he said, and continued. "Right outside our school gate there used to be two ice lolly vendors, Janakiramaiah the old man and Ratnam the young guy, who somehow liked me; once he took me to a matinee when I was nearly crushed in a stampede at the ticket counter, maybe, fate had preserved me, for the second time that is, to inflict bigger blows later; I've told you how I'd escaped from being drowned in our village tank before that. You may know what his gesture might've meant for me but you can't guess what a burden it was for him to spend that extra *ana* on me; not that every one of us bought ice lolly to improve the duos' bottom lines. Why, many parents were unable to spare one Rupee for the section-wise group photograph at the end of the academic year, and you can figure out the disappointment of those who lost out and the haplessness of their parents on that count. But thankfully, there is more money in more hands these days, and I can tell you that today's poor have more to spare than the middleclass of yore. When the high-end express buses were first introduced, I knew how scary were the village folks to travel in those, why even in the ordinary buses, they could pay the fare only by digging deep into their pockets."

"Wonder how the rural Indian poverty line came to be drawn at thirty-five rupees when these days the village folk flaunt five-hundred notes for a bus fare of fifty?"

"Well aren't statistics the damned lies," he said. "Instead of gloating over the blessings of life, man these days laments about the vicissitudes of fate, but in the days of yore thanks to the karma *siddhanta*, even the have-nots were happy for they didn't suffer from the pangs of jealousy; what an idea karma is, attribute others' fortune to their goodness in the previous birth and try being more humane in this one for a better time in the next round. But the 'dream big', 'why not me' and the 'me too' ethos of the day has become man's bane as his insane pursuit of the moolah makes his life inane, and who can vouch for that better than me? Given my innate nature coupled with the ethos of the times and the philosophy of my upbringing, I shouldn't have been left holding the wrong end of the get-rich stick."

"It is the mistakes that give substance to life, don't they?"

"It looks like the beauty of life lies more in its memory than in its living," he said. "While the cow dung cakes were used for cooking food, *kachika*, its ash served as the family tooth powder; it was left for one to pick up the smoothest portion of it from the hearth, and all you needed for a clean tongue was a piece of palm leaf; why, they were as good for a head start for the day as the present day toothpaste and the metallic tongue-cleaner, but in recall, they acquire a beauty of their own. And in our town days, when tooth powder was all that my dad could afford for us, I didn't feel wanting to have the merit-cum-means scholarship that was up for grabs; well I was only eleven then, but I could see that many of my classmates needed the dole more than I did though my miserly grandfather thought otherwise, but my dad, who, as I told you, didn't deem it fit to claim the freedom fighter's pension, was proud of my decision."

"How contrasting it was, pardon my saying, from your latter-day 'grab by all means' credo."

"Why didn't that occur to me all these days?" he said and paused for long before he resumed. "In the hindsight I may say it was all owing to the gradual dissipation of the patriotic fervor in our free India, sadly, as Kamaraj put it, none thinks as an Indian but as an Andhraite, a Bengali, and a Bihari et al. And going back to the pre-independence days, it was my dad's rashness that might've prompted his father to hasten his marriage; it was another matter that his one-upmanship in finalizing a

match behind his son's back left him with the egg on his face. But as if life has its own way of compensating, the beauty of the bride and the aura associated with the love-match made our surname a household name in the whole *Taluka*. Whatever, my grandfather was adept at the soft-sell of the irrelevant while missing out on the big picture of opportunities; how his double-speak used to amuse me in the matters of matchmaking. If his protagonist were to be the groom, he used to proclaim that dowries were on the raise, and should it be the other way round, then dowries had no other go than to nosedive; and how eager he was to know the 'income' as well as the 'other income' of whomever he met! Nothing odd about his enquiries as everyone was at it in those days, but then he tended to be more than just curious that was in spite of the rebuff he got from the first dalit government official from our village, who said that he was paid enough to live well-enough. Why when it came to job choices for boys and groom preferences for girls, the under-the-table-earning came into in the reckoning; well where were the taxmen peeping over your shoulder those days? Don't ever buy the argument that old is gold for Kautilya wrote about bribery in his *Arthashastra* of yore; but it's one thing to satiate the corrupt and another to entice the decent; oh how we businessmen came to corrupt our country's ethical core by inducing one and all onto the corrupt path of easy money! "

"Regretting might increase one's guilt but it won't undo the wrong anyway."

"Maybe life was not designed to be that way and even otherwise, how many come to reflect upon their lives before their end?" he said. "The fact of life is that you're the only constant of your life and all those who enter into it through its revolving door are its uncertain variables. While the warmth of a given relationship could be cherished as a lived-feeling even after the relationship itself ends; how stupid it is to expect eternal love, eternal friendship et al and feel bitter when confronted by the reality of life, sadly we tend to defuse the past feelings with the change of personal equations thereby making our life a zero-sum game. So as our false sense of superiority brings our trust with warmth to an avoidable end, still we wouldn't be able to feel our loss in the euphoria of success and if ever, one realizes the folly, as I do now, one feels lost."

"Either way, it amounts to the same thing, isn't it?"

"Needn't be, as your genuine repentance helps you to discover the limitations of life," he said. "But before I lost out on life in the middle, I had so much of it in youth; it was as if to provide me a larger canvas to picture my adolescence that my father moved to a bigger town, where my cousin Raju's parents lived. How elated were our elders at the prospect of a prospering friendship between us; Raju's father pulled all the stops to see that I was admitted into that school Raju was in but to no avail as by then there was no scope for further admissions. But still, Raju took me to the headmaster who said that though he had earlier turned away the parents, he had no heart to refuse his pupil's plea to further his cousin's education. Why not put down his name to posterity as Devanandam."

"By what you said of Raju, it's possible that his persona was at work as much as Devanandam's love for his pupils."

"Why it didn't occur to me, surely it could've been the case," he said a little embarrassed. "But then, to start with, I was not interested in joining that school for its regimen began with the Christian prayers and the very thought of participation in those made me uncomfortable; why I was equally averse to the idea of joining any RSS *sakha* in the town that I just then left; maybe I was born with a secular mind; it was only after Raju assured me that the prayer was a voluntary affair that I had relented and if not, I wouldn't have had such an Alma Matter headed by Devanandam, a

venerable product of the times when teaching was a noble profession and not the commercial proposition that it had become; why won't this apply to the medical practitioners in equal measure."

Chapter 15 ***Brink of Incest***

"Once Raju and I had become classmates, what a lovely time we have had!" he continued the recap of his times with his cousin. "His boisterousness proved to be the perfect foil for my adventurism, he had his finger in every pie and I too poked my nose everywhere. Though we got into trouble often in and out of school, if not his bluster, it was my wits that used to save the day for us. Whatever, to the delight of all, we were on target when it came to studies; but once we made it to the college, we began to drift apart; he focused to excel at studies and I meandered on the path of adolescence, I say the defining phase of life; while the hard-nosed and the dull-headed escape its snares, the romantics sucked in by its charms make the bottom rungs of the merit ladders. Didn't I say, if only there were to be a five year adolescent recess between the high school and the college, the toppers' list in higher studies would be topsy-turvy. Still to begin with, like me, Raju too struggled to get a breakthrough but unlike me, his career graph had plateaued well below the half-way mark, maybe for want of the proverbial ounce of luck. But, as I came to realize later, life made it even for him all through before death snatched him away in his mid-course, and on the contrary, fate led me to the highs of life before pushing me into its lows; well making it meaningless in the end. Maybe it's the way of life that the flood of it gets balanced by the ebb of fate; wonder what's the so-called 'gaining the upper hand mean?'"

"That reminds me of Raja Rao's observation in *Benign Flame* - it's a peculiar feature of human nature in that we love to see those close to us climb up the staircase of success, but, behind us; if they happen to catch up with us, needing to share the space with them, we feel choked, and were they to overtake us, we feel morose, though they might remain friendly. It is because, used as we were to condescend to descend in our affections, we lose countenance, not counting our jealousy, that they too might seem patronizing from the altered stations."

"How can I differ with that after what life had taught me," he said, and continued after a long pause. "There are things in life that are better pictured through symbolisms; in those days of thrift, it was a case of loose dresses for the kids to serve them well into adolescence. The college going boys though were allowed to kick the bulky knickers to wear narrow-cut pants that were in vogue then, but for the girls, their 'menstruation to nuptial' long skirts had longevity of their own, shortened though by early marriage. However, in time, the so-called bell-bottoms came to shape man's trouser; it's as if all vied with each other to ever widen its bottoms; but then, after those stints with the narrow-cuts and the bell-bottoms, as if men realized the futility of triviality in their own world, they had been sticking to the formal wear of the normal trouser. When it was time for me to make it to college, it was time to learn cycling, which is like learning to walk, and both involve false steps but with a difference; while a kid's missteps won't break its bones, a cyclist's learning curve is generally drawn in his own and others' blood as well. Whatever, soon I began pedaling my Raleigh into the arena of youth only to break my heart."

"Isn't it said devoid of calf love, of what avail is youth."

"Maybe all are not made for romance, and youth was still some way from me then," he said and continued. "Before I could acquire my sense of adolescence, I

would've probably begun my sex life in incest; some six months shy of being fifteen, I became friendly with a newly married cousin on a family visit, who made me privy to her dull married life, and one evening, tired for her window-shopping, she asked me to massage her legs to relieve her fatigue, and when I expressed my surprise at the softness of her being, she told me that is the way women are made. After a couple of days, she moved to an old couple's house to be with them for a week or more, and that evening when I went to see her, she asked me to stay back for the night as she was bored to death with the oldies. After dinner, when we were alone, complaining of shoulder pain, she asked me to massage her nape; as I was tentative in my reach, she slid the *pallu* off her low-neck blouse to unveil her fabulous boobs and the fascinating valley as if to afford me the first flesh feast of my life, oh how tempted I was to lay my hands on her heaving bosom! Well, I was too young and inexperienced to advance farther down and she too might've felt it delicate to goad me to be geared up for her final favor. Maybe to pick up the sexual threads that we both had half-heartedly left that night, she sought my company the next night as well but my father didn't approve of that for he could've smelled incest in the air from her demeanor; if not, who knows, the next time, I would've dared to advance deep into her valley or she might've been forthright with her eagerness for sex. Then I was too raw to know what I had lost but when I came of age, I was wont to wonder whether that bout of massage would've led us to the bed of incest that is had I crossed the threshold of her bulging boobs. Whatever, I could never figure out whether I should thank my father for saving me from committing a possible incest, or curse him for having robbed me of sex with a voluptuous woman at her youthful best."

"Oh, it was your dad again."

"But then he was wont to make life sweeter for all of us individually that was; there might be many who would fetch sweets for the family but I would be surprised if you ever heard of a man who brought home each one's favorite pudding?" he said in an apparent admiration for his dad. "And yet how he made it sour for me as I was on the verge of sharing the forbidden fruit of sex with that cousin; but why blaming him for that as shortly thereafter I failed on my own to build upon the affections of another just wed relative, a couple of years older to me; oh, how inviting she was and how hesitant I had been, well, she was one of her kind, beautiful and vivacious. While I clung to her fascinated by her poise, she was drawn to me charmed by my youth, and in no time we became soul mates. Maybe in time I would have roped her into my embrace but well before that she left the town with her husband, who was on transfer; how excited I was when I received her letter, which heralded an unceasing correspondence between us in which we poured out our affections to each other. Oh how she used to remonstrate if an odd reply of mine was not on the dot!"

"How we both came to cherish that indescribable relationship we only knew," he said after pausing for a while, "of course, apart from her husband, who too was friendly with me. Later, when I was still in college, I failed yet again to savor what was on offer from that woman; she wrote to me that she was devastated to know that her husband was cheating on her and that she was desperate for my company; oh, how she had couched her invitation for a liaison by stating that while I uplift her sagging morale, she won't withhold anything from me. Why it was clear that she was on the rebound but I was not my own man then to rush to her to catch her on it; well, as the crisis blew over in her life, she turned cold towards me, may she was hurt that I didn't turn up when she need me the most or it could be because she was wary of what all she wrote to me in her moment of weakness. Whatever, I am never tired of fantasizing about our possible mating in her the then disturbed bed."

“What a painfully sweet fantasy it is?”

“And it was no different with another cousin of my age when we met at sweet sixteen that is before it turned into a platonic love. She was all eyes and ears for me, but, so to say, still I didn’t make the grade by then,” he continued. “But first things first, and that’s about my first love, whom Raju named No.1; it started with my fascination for her mesmeric gait only to end up in the memory of her misstep; am I being poetic, why not, after all, it’s about my first love. When the admission list was out, I was thrilled that at last I would have a girl for a classmate; I told you how my co-ed idea was put paid at school. Well, at the time of admission, what an anticipation it was awaiting the arrival of an unknown dame; when I sighted a dusky lass in a light brown long skirt with a black blouse, I wished she were the one that I was waiting for; and as she neared in a swing-and-roll gait that was exciting as well as enticing, her dark brown *oni* fluttered in the gushing air as if to herald her arrival. When she stepped into the corridor, it seemed as if her gait carried the core of her femininity even as her glance aroused the essence of my masculinity. Why as her bewildered eyes imparted innocence to her face, her inquisitive look greeted my impulsive stare; how charming was her manner and how tantalizing were her movements to my enamored eyes. So to say, her expressive eyes seized my heart!”

“Often it’s the first look that paves the path of love, isn’t it?”

“How nicely put,” he said. “What with her persona planting the seeds of love in my expectant heart, the wait for the college reopening seemed a semester away; so on the D-day, making it early to the class, I sat in the front row, and waited for her to take her place across the aisle. When she entered in time and posited herself as expected, I didn’t take my eyes off her engaging face; well, I started as a face man before I became a figure man and you would agree, women don’t mind my being a turncoat on that count. Her mirthful laughter at some funny remark of the lecturer revealed the dimple in the very middle of her left cheek that lent charm to her face; wonder how a biological imperfection came to personify woman’s beauty in man’s perception. Soon enough when she caught me at my ogling ways, she seemed to have been pleased at being the object of my fascination, and the lecturer too didn’t fail to notice my distraction, so he thought it fit to draw my attention to his exhortation. Tackling him appropriately, as I turned to her triumphantly, I could discern her look of admiration.”

“How vividly you remember it all!”

“Who said that first love is neither fully remembered nor completely forgotten?” he said apparently relishing the quote. “As that look fuelled my infatuation, my manner seemed to have enticed the woman in her, and our eyes began to caress each other; while her gaze nourished love in my heart, my stare seemed to have seized her mind. When she smiled at me as if to take my heart into the depths of her dimple for safekeeping and then closed her eyes as though to lock my persona in her retina, I was benumbed with ecstasy. Soon as if enthused by her own eagerness as she opened her eyes to espy me endearingly for affording me an ennobling feeling, my fond eyes began to caress her unceasingly. But then, maybe prompted by her coyness, though she turned her attention away from me and tried to focus on the topic of discussion, yet I continued to savor her sweet demeanor, the object of my surging affection. But soon, as she glanced at me, maybe to gauge the impact of her responsiveness from my response, her face had acquired an aura of love, and thus enamored of each other, we found ourselves spying one another, at every turn that is.’

“What a poetic reminiscence of a first love!”

Chapter 16
Love-less Love

"My life, so to say, became a stanza of the poem of first love, it's not that my other affections were any prosaic for they were all penned in passion," he continued. "Won't the manifestations of first love and the embodiments of first sex stand apart from the pulsations of heart and the spasms of the body that one might experience in later affairs? And that's why one should be choosy about the body for the first lay as anyway the reins of love are in the hands of heart. Whatever, with the newfound vision to envision women, I got bogged down by the second sex; the more femininity fascinated me for the contours of womanish curves seemed to outclass the symmetry of geometry, all the more I had a measure of my masculinity. My infatuation for women was such that the inflections of their nuances came to be worth pondering over than the intriguing riders of mathematical theorems. When compared to the feminist ways, which seemed puzzling to my inquisitive mind, the laws of physics appeared commonplace; and so, as I began to grapple with the dynamics of man-women chemistry, the inorganic reactions in the college lab seemed boring. Either compelled by my ardent manner or affected by my sex appeal and/or both, I'm not sure, women tended to respond to my eagerness in their sensual ways, and insensibly, the coyness of feminine demeanor seemed to shape the manliness of my persona. While the desire I discerned in the female espials made me feel desired as a male, their diffident demeanor in my presence afforded me a sense of conquest. Soon women made me realize that I am a ladies' man."

"Self-actualization in the arena of attraction, surely it was."

"Writer-like again," he said, and continued, "but as luck would've it, for all its promise, my first love ended up as a damp squib; it's another matter that even as duds have girlfriends these days, in our time, the dashing too had to be content with daydreams. Though No.1 and I didn't take our eyes off each other for the rest of the year, there was no way I could've made advances on her without causing a scandal in the college. Moreover, I loved her enough not to have caused any hurt to her orderly life; maybe had not I left for Ranchi to pursue that futile course in engineering, we would've come closer the next year. Whatever, the day before I left the town, I waited for her in the college corridor, hoping to bid her adieu; as she neared me, she stopped instinctively and I paced up to her intuitively. How disappointed she seemed at my impending departure and how elated I was when she Okayed my idea that we stayed in touch through correspondence. But in that moment of ecstasy, I failed to shake her hand, and maybe that lack of courtesy to love didn't go down well with it, and so it seems, it never gave me another chance to embellish my first love with the touch of my beloved. Yet oblivious of my fate but with the accrued empathy of my father's farewell tears I told you about, the next morning, I boarded the Howrah Mail with bountiful hope. Though she failed to keep her promise to correspond, yet I wrote to her unceasingly, picturing the love my heart bore for her but to no avail; but her indifference to my missives made no difference to my longing for her that began to wane my interest in studies."

"And that fetched you a scrape through degree."

"It feels nice that you have a feel for my plight," he said reaching out for my hand. "When I returned home for summer recess, there was no way of seeing her as she was wont to homebound, and so dying for a glimpse of her, I spent the best part of my holidays in the mango grove opposite her house; towns were yet to turn into concrete jungles by then, and needless to say, Raju kept me company in my wild goose chase."

Next year though, I fared better “not at studies but at her hands’ for she wrote a couple of noncommittal letters, one of which was virtually a thesis on spirituality. Whatever, the following summer, I barged into her house and forced the issue by proposing to her; don’t imagine that I tried to emulate my father, for I didn’t hear about his exploits by then; but how my failure to win her over contrasts with his teenage ability to wed his beloved is another matter. When she said that we could think about crossing the bridge when we come to it, her eavesdropping mother, who was averse to me, I know not why, asked her to clarify her stance, and at that she said that she was confused about the whole thing. Why, it was apparent that while her enamored heart pushed her towards me, her constrained mind tended her to hold on to her widowed mother; and if anything, the tragic death of both her younger brothers later in a road mishap made her more incapable than ever to displease her parent. Oh, how the deaths on the road came to shape the course of my life; when I called on her to console her, as she seemed solaced by the empathy of my soul, I knew that she needed me more than anyone else, and hoped she would realize that in time. That was why, without ever having touched her little finger, I was lovelorn for long; but, when I went to see her as she was moving out of the town to take up a job, she wanted me to return the letters she wrote, of course, at her mother’s bidding. How silly of her for I loved her in spite of her indifference, and how sheepish she looked as I assured her that I was going to shred them anyway; I kept my word but failed to forget her. Of what avail was my unrequited love that only earned me a scrape through degree, I would never know”

“Didn’t Ghalib say, if not undone by love, I would’ve been second to none.”

“What a heady mix *sher-shairi* and unrequited love make,” he said. “I’ve had its brew to the brim to savor to its dregs but in the end it was this celebration of self-deprecation that had put me off from that. But by then much water had flowed to waste under the bridge of my love-less love and my career course too had headed towards the deserts of failure; so sometime later I sent her, so to say, my letter of resignation, in which I wrote that when I sought her hand, I hoped to be her lover at home and a peer at the workplace, but with my fledgling career leading me nowhere, there was no way I could aspire to lead her to the altar. How I beseeched her to hold my hand of friendship as I had burnt the desires of love in the groins of failures; why not she let my boundless affection for her be the balm of her life.”

“Isn’t it an idealistic proposition impracticable in practice?”

“You would know when I tell you about my platonic relationship with that sweet sixteen cousin of mine,” he continued. “But sadly, my first love’s reply was a backdated letter she herself penned in her mother’s name, warning me to leave her daughter alone; what a merciless blow upon a hapless surrender that I couldn’t even gasp ‘Et tu, Brute’; how could I have for she never showed any signs of like devotion towards me to warrant such a lament. But whither went her innocence; or was it merely a figment of mine own imagination; how I came to value her with a skimpy acquaintance; what was left of it, after all that; didn’t someone say that women’s looks were his only books, and what pretty follies they taught him; why it was her loaded looks that goaded me to plunge into the voidness of love-less love. As I turned despondent, I felt that I might forget her in time but I would never forgive her meanness, and that’s what I wrote to her; well, in remorse, she asked our common friend to tell me that some devil might’ve possessed her when she penned that impersonated letter, that she was at a loss as to why she failed to tell me that she felt one of her colleagues was better suited than me to be her man, and that she would pray for a better spouse for me.”

“What to make out of her character?”

“I didn’t know about it then and it doesn’t matter now,” he continued. “Some time later, our common friend telephoned me to inform that she was on an official visit to his branch, and that I may like to see her for the old times’ sake that is one last time before her impending marriage. How I vacillated before boarding the train, and when he told at the railway station that she came with her fiancé, I asked him what was his idea in inviting me to see the one to whom I’ve lost in the battle of affection, and he said that one’s balance sheet of life is prepared only near one’s end. Next day, as I crossed her walking in step with her beau, having sighted me from a distance even as her eyes caressed me in wonderment, her feet induced her to fall behind the man she had preferred over me; I thought her misstep had conveyed to me what I wanted her to admit all along. Yet, the irony of the encounter was that, absorbed as I was in espying her, I had no eyes for my rival, and so, I have no idea of the persona of the man who won her favor; whatever, the memory of that misstep lingered on in my mind until that mishap of a recent meeting with her.”

“It’s as well that she didn’t make a misogynist out of you.”

“Thank god for that,” he said and continued with the intriguing character of his No.1. “I heard that all along she and her man were spiritually inclined, and midway their career, they even gave up their jobs and joined some institution devoted to social service. When I came to know that sometime back she was widowed as I called on her, what a cold reception she gave me; how stony she seemed when I announced myself and how that left me clueless about the soul of the woman who made a name as a savior for the needy. Maybe she’s a complex character without a basic character; how else can one explain her behavior towards a man whom she had confused if not wronged; whatever, the moral of the lesson is that it’s futile seeking an update on the past memories for the fear of fouling with them.”

“If you think it’s not inappropriate, why not we review the reality of life over a couple of drinks.”

“Inappropriate my foot,” he said, “it’s just a matter of culture and convention, and they differ; who could decide which culture is right and which convention is wrong? If something is okay with you, it should be appropriate for you, provided you won’t tread on others sensibilities. I too need some drink for I wish to kiss and tell; well, the less inhibited one is, the more forthcoming he would be. Don’t mind picking up that Laphroaic for us.”

Chapter 17 ***Flights of Heart***

“Though I was pained by her indifference, my psyche didn’t suffer for her rejection, and I owe that to the girls who buttressed my self-worth with their sensual attentions,” he began reviewing his life and times over our drinks. “Back home during holidays, I used to hang around a lot at a friend’s place; though I didn’t develop any romantic designs on his sisters, I was a hit with his cousins who were wont to visit them often; one girl was so enamored of me that she rarely let me be alone; her praises of me still hum in my ears after all these years and after what had happened. When it was time for me to go back to college, the Vizag Steel agitation took an ugly turn disrupting the train services, but my dad wanted to dispatch me to Berhampur in a goods lorry for my onward train journey to Ranchi. Oh how she begged me to stay back till the train services were resumed and I also wanted to enjoy her attentions

that much longer but there was no way I could've negated my dad's idea though it was 'neither here nor there' for me, as my heart was not in studies anyway; and it turned out to be a double jeopardy for me as she came to shun me whenever we met later. Wonder how she could feel so slighted!"

"Maybe that's why it's called calf-love."

"But I was the object of a durable calf love as well," he continued. "I happened to meet a charming visitor to another friend's place, who was no less charmed by my charms; but the thrill of it was when we met again as she revisited them after three years; the first thing that she did after she landed there was to ask my friend to fetch me forthwith, but then maybe as she was older than me, she didn't deem it fit to build upon our mutual attraction, well that was the last time we ever met. Barring a couple of more adolescent infatuations, what Cheiro said about No. 9 people, didn't he aver that they tend to love the wrong ones and end up without the final favor, sadly for me proved right, oh, how stars foretell?"

He paused for a while, apparently lost in the loss of his lost loves, and then had a couple of sips of his drink as if to uplift his spirits.

"While the flood of my obsession for my first love began to ebb, the tide of my fascination for my cousin turned into a hurricane," he resumed his narrative. "When we first met, she fell head over heels for my boyish looks, and the next time, it was my turn to lose my heart in her womanish curves. What with my accentuated feelings for her, her attentions made me feel a special being; but then leaving me alone, as she went to a movie with another relative, I couldn't bear her neglect; but when she returned home at the interval as my sulking face haunted her, as she put it, and seeing me delighted at her return, she told me that as she left the theatre, she knew that seeing me happy would be far more satisfying to her than watching the rest of the movie. Well, that set the emotional bond of our unbound affection, cemented by the small pleasures we began to steal; but the improbability of our marriage made her resist my desperate attempts for our sexual closeness; but once in frustration, as I tried to break up with her, she cajoled me back into her loving fold without conceding the favors of sex. When I was still in college, she got married and since I came to respect her sensitivity to her chastity, I gave a platonic turn to my passionate love; and as she became a proud mother, believe me, she swore, by placing her hand on her boy's head, that she loves me more than she loves her son, and as if to prove the sincerity of her love, she was wont to grant me the motherly warmth of it."

He stopped for a while savoring some more of Laphroaic seemingly cherishing the recollections of those past moments.

"What a solace it was for me to sink into her lap to feel the depth of her love for me," he said on resumption, "how fulfilling those small pleasures had been for both of us, it's as if the mother in her that granted me what the lover in her had denied me. Oh, in those moments of pure love, how we used to feel the fusion of our souls; who knows an illicit affair would have fouled our platonic union; anyway true to the oneness of our being, while on her deathbed she had communicated her longing for our togetherness, and given that she had conveyed it telepathically, you could imagine the intensity of her feeling; she fell ill suddenly and being in Cal at that time, I wasn't in the know of it, but that midnight I woke up to her thoughts from my deep sleep, and stayed awake disturbed for long; the next day when the telegram carried the news of her midnight end, I knew that she lived her last moments thinking about me; oh how she kept her vow even as death snatched her away from my thoughts."

"What a poignant end to a platonic love; maybe had your No.1 remained in touch, surely your first love wouldn't have seen such a cold end."

"It's one of those ifs and buts of life," he said. "But when alive, how my soul-mate looked forward for my marriage; why she wanted to stay with me for a couple of months as and when I settled down with my wife; how she developed ideas of her own about my wife; well, for her I was the perfect man there ever was, and no prospective match ever satisfied her. Sadly she was not around when Rama came into my life, but surely they would've loved each other for their natures matched; what an unusual love triangle it would've been; maybe, we can divine the limitations of relationships through unfulfilled expectations but it's the incompleteness of life that gives us the complete understanding of it."

"What a poetic idea it is."

"But as the women I loved afforded me only emotional satisfaction, the physical fulfillment of love was still a far cry," he continued. "It was then that a girl in her pre-puberty was enamored of me, and I used her body as it could afford, to satiate my newfound urges; you can't brand me a pedophile for both of us were juveniles then; well it was possible that the innocence of her infatuation combined with the curiosity of her sexuality made her a willing mate in our incomplete unions. But when she matured, I took stock of our affair; even as I visualized the hazards of our continued escapades, it was clear that I had no emotional urge to make her my woman; so I told her not to give in, even if I persisted because our marriage was not on the cards. Oh, how shocked she was at that the poor thing; she was too young to accuse me of betrayal and I was not old enough to grasp my folly; whatever, there was no bad blood between us. Why, she continued to adore me but I kept a healthy distance from her, and even after marrying a worthy though she remained fond of me; I never thought of exploiting her weakness for me to curry her favors with sentimental trespasses. Maybe, I loved her more than I had lusted for her."

"Sorry to say, your saga seems to blur the line between love and philandering. Surely I need an explanation for the sake of the prospective readers of your memoir."

"I see that 'one life, one love' is a canard spread by the lunatic poets," he said a little hurt. "Haven't psychologists testified to the fact that one can love more than one at the same time, and that applies no less to the second sex; well, love, like friendship, is a feeling and to say 'one love only' is like averring 'one friend only'. If any of your readers feels that all his friends save the first one are mere acquaintances, then I have no problem even if he takes me as a philanderer. Moreover, an eternal love is an absurd proposition that is if you mean sexual love, for it's in the nature of desire that it wanes with continued fulfillment and dissipates through prolonged longing."

"Be assured that I would solicit my readers' understanding on your behalf."

'Thanks for that,' he said and continued with the remarkable saga of his life. "But as her man's career graph rose and mine never took-off, her interest in me began to wane; why not, as the promise of my life that induced love in her was belied, her love for me would have lost its force; but then, why blame her for that's the reality of love in the realms of life; and falling in and out of love, I too had learned not to let my unrequited loves affect my life. But whenever I recall my journey through the deserts of disappointment, my tryst with a rare stunner in the oasis of sex stands apart; while I was cooling my heels with that scrape-through degree as you called it, I saw her in a mall; I was so overawed by her womanliness that I lost my eyes to her, and as if she appreciated my eye for feminine charms, she conveyed her compliments through her body language. But even before I had a full grasp of her enticing poise as she left the

place in her majestic gait, I followed her in a trance, but even after she left in a rickshaw, I stood transfixed as if she fixed me in a state of pure joy that was until a friend woke me up to the reality of her, Sumitra the common girl; but then the devastating revelation didn't dampen the pristine feelings her angelic persona induced in my enamored heart."

"Love seems to be obstinate in holding on to the first impression, won't Napoleon's love for the unfaithful Joséphine illustrate that."

"But then his divorcing her to sire an heir of royal blood to usher in his dynasty underscores the power of the ambitions of life over the fulfillments of love, well it all depends as Edward VIII renounced his throne to wed the woman he loved," he said (though he didn't name the beloved, his infectious memoir of love and loss impelled me to record her here as Wallis Simpson). "Marking her movements from then on, I began shadowing her during the day, and for my apparent adoration for her, she was wont to bestow me with her coy smiles as and when we crossed our paths. Once, when I followed her right up to her gate to mark her place, her young sibling told me that her sister was expecting me, but then while Cheiro's theory of numbers denied me the favors of those who fancied me; it was my principle not to buy sex with the paternal bucks that distanced me from her sensuous embrace. But in hindsight, I feel that it was nothing but sentimental nonsense for, all along, I wasted my dad's money like nobody's business; any way, my dilemma ended as I left home on a six-month assignment as a graduate trainee, and though I was a spendthrift, I had strived to save enough to savor her in a couple of flings or more. But when I returned home, I learned that she was out of bounds as she became someone's keep; oh what a KLPD it was as they say in the North, and how the development depressed me for days on."

"How life changeth one; the one who was averse to buying sex with his dad's bucks came to build his business empire with his wife's doles! Be gone all principles."

"Why fault life for our own lack of comprehension," he said seemingly taken back. "Try seeing it through the prism of pragmatism and you will find its fault lines blurring in your vision, any way, what about having one large for both of us."

Chapter 18

Gaffes of Youth

"Perhaps principles are the variable features of life," he continued reflectively as we began sipping the drink. "Back to Sumitra, as she rarely stepped out, I had no means of wooing her, but as hope didn't desert me, it was my wont to obtain an update on her whenever I was in town. The fact that I have had a couple of women by then only increased my desire to possess her; though she continued to deny her body for all and sundry; but taking my fate into my hands, once I trespassed into her domain and found her alone with her mom. The oldie tried to pimp for her younger one, the same girl I told you about, well, she matured in the meantime; but I insisted at having none other than my old flame; maybe divining my want from a close range, she seemed to have recalled my enamor of yore; and as I reminded her about my futile courtship, her face was aglow with the joys reminiscence. When I told her that I was still burning in my ardor, she turned coy and yet demurred at my advances for she wasn't inclined to betray the man who kept her; but with my passion gripping my soul, I told her how desperate I had been for her possession and said that her denial would be a travesty of love itself. What with our interaction enhancing my passion for her possession, possibly affected by my body language, she began to waver in her manner

all the while pleading for my understanding of her position; oh how pitiable she looked in her pleading. Well, not wanting her to suffer any qualms even for love's sake, I felt like withdrawing, but as my urge dulled my conscience, I remained adamant to have her regardless; when she softened her stance for a one-night stand; oh how I jumped for joy, but as she sought my word that I would not press for an encore, I was constrained to assure her that I wouldn't turn up again, and then she fixed the *muhurat* for the tryst of my life. Whether it was the charm of my persona or the intensity of my longing for her that swayed her mind in the end I don't know; maybe she too might've nursed a liking for me in the recess of her heart that came to the fore at the threshold of my fate."

"Of all the joys of life, there's nothing like possessing the coveted one, isn't it?"

"Say fulfillment," he said in apparent delight, "and it was dream come true when I took her into my arms, and it was as if we both indulged in the coitals of our lives all through that night, and each time, lying in her satiated embrace, I felt that I wouldn't mind dropping dead in her lap. But still, I kept away from her, and a year later, as my passion for her began to sway my mind, I went to see her regardless; but sadly I was late by six months, how distressed I was on learning that she died depressed, deserted by the man she had come to repose her trust in. If only I broke my word in time, maybe, I could've mended her broken heart with my affectionate manoeuvres, but wouldn't have my adoration for her acted as an antidote for her depression; well, whether I could've given her hope to live I would never know.'

"Possibly, buttressed with self-worth, distress makes way to hope; but what an irony your noble sentiment worked against a sensitive soul."

"It was one of many in a seamless chain of my disjointed love life," he said seemingly depressed. "When I realized that the charm of life lies in the company of women, I could visualize that the medical profession facilitated it the most, in those days at least. But as the sight of blood always made me giddy, I had to give up my idea of being a doctor, but lo, I had to endure the trauma of, not one, but two, head-on crashes on the highways, and you know how they had changed my life in turns. And ironically I had the first taste of romance in a hospital that was after having desisted from being a doctor, in spite of the romantic possibilities the medical profession held for the enterprising! As I told you, once my paternal grandfather lay paralyzed in the hospital, and by then I began to focus on the female form as my eyes came to grasp the nuances of its sexual appeals. But as my sensuality began to visualize the imagery of the erotic best in women, it was the dusky dames with accentuated curves that began swaying my head; oh how my eyes started scanning their sensuous forms for sexual programming. While I spent the days with my grandfather, the nurse on duty happened to be Deenamani, who I thought was the personification of femininity; how we used to dote upon each other even as my grandfather remained skeptical about our closeness. When it was time for him to be discharged, she was downcast at the prospect of our separation, and as if to tie our relationship beforehand, she invited me to her hostel; but sadly for both of us, I failed to oblige her as I was still a novice for an affair, and going by the saying that any fool can start an affair but it takes a wise man to get out of it, who knows, maybe I would've stuck to her and possibly without any regrets at that; why the sweetness of her affection and the poise of her persona, ever made me rue that missed opportunity."

"If only the clock could be turned back at every turn in life."

"If it were the case, would man ever move forward in life?" he said before taking his memoir forward. "While I was single-minded in pursuing the passions of my heart,

so to say, I was wont to let bygones be bygones, and all my life that helped me to pursue my attractions with gusto regardless of the debilitating heartburns. When I was laid low by my first love, I met a lovely girl, who set upon her heart on a fictional hero of the time; I told her that as men in flesh and blood bear warts and all, maybe she was destined to be a spinster, and how perplexed she looked at that. But as I began to address her innate romanticism with *sher shairies*, she insensibly fell in love with me, making me the object of her sensual adoration, well, but for the sectarian difference, our caste being the same, we would have become man and wife; and when she became a mother, she hoped the sectarian bar that barred our wedding wouldn't be a hurdle for the marriage of her son and my yet-to-arrive daughter. But sadly, like my soul mate of a cousin, she too died rather very early in life."

"Wonder whether their spouses would have nursed fond memories of these as you did?"

"Won't the fresh nuptial require the surviving spouse to dissipate the affections of the departed soul, and sadly for the toddlers, it brings about their emotional disconnect with the deceased parent," he said and continued with his saga of life. "While in my childhood, I was close to my paternal grandfather for his affection, in my youth, I was drawn more to my intellectually endowed maternal grandfather, who, as I told you, was reluctant to have my dad as his son-in-law; it was another matter though that he came to realize later what a capable man and devoted husband my dad was. Well as his fancied first son-in-law was found wanting in ways many, his esteem for the slighted groom only grew; he even came to depend on my father whom he began treating like a son, and my dad too started looking up to him as a father figure; what an amiable relationship they had developed and how that sustained till the very end!"

"Maybe, liking is a product of presumptions and respect an outcome of analysis; that's why, liking wanes when perceptions are belied but respect grows when the character shows.'

"Good observation," he said and continued, "Once, citing Kalidasa's astrological averments, my maternal grandfather predicted that I would be a rich man but cautioned me not to be complacent, how I rue failing to follow his warning! Whatever, sadly, when ripe old, he broke his hip, necessitating his hospitalization; he was put in a special ward at the government hospital, now a taboo even for the lower middle classes. 'S' the nurse on the night duty was wont to be playful with me but being fair and plump, she failed to enter into my zone of sexual attraction; but I was taken to 'V' her younger sibling who kept her company in the staffroom; though raw she was nearer to my ideal female. What a time we have had in the staffroom late into the nights as 'V' too unwound herself in S's infectious company; the euphoria of their animation seemed to draw me closer to both of them; oh, how they vied with each other to shower praises upon me, all the while caressing me with their enamored looks! Though the vivacity of 'S' began to dent my entrenched sense of beauty; it was V's romanticism that catalyzed the chemistry of our attraction; how lovingly she symbolized the imagery of our attraction in that sketch of two flowers, marked 'S' and 'V' with the leaf 'M' in between them! Soon 'S' proposed that we three should celebrate her birthday, a week away, at a nearby tourist resort, and to my delight 'V' seconded the proposed outing."

"It's as if your maternal grandfather took over where your paternal one left to facilitate another hospital romance in your life."

"Maybe unwittingly," he continued, "but the next night, carried away by my sense of conquest, I jumped the gun; well, I had grabbed 'S', coyly watched by 'V' from whom I had stolen a few kisses by then. When I began deep kissing 'S', hugging me though, as she was in tears, I withdrew from her nonplussed, and seeing her cry in silence I was dismayed at the turn of events; I couldn't figure out how it might've been a transgression when we were anyway leading ourselves to get drawn into an threesome orgy. So, having apologized to the sulking 'S' watched by a perplexed 'V', disarrayed myself I left them for the night, but as 'S' remained indifferent to my attempts at reconciliation, my sense of decency precluded my courting 'V' though she was all eager. Well as if to remove us from the untenable situation, the attending doctor discharged my grandfather soon enough but it took me time to realize that for any it was one thing to fantasize about an orgy and another to indulge in it; if only I was privy to this feature of human nature, I would've as well had each of them behind the curtain, but in turns; and who knew, in due course, even we would've had our envisaged threesome; but as life would have it, my son did better on that count, but we will come to that later."

Chapter 19 ***Pats and Sights***

"If love denied me the ecstasies of sex, it was sex that gave me the joys of love," he continued the intriguing account of his life. "Maybe vexed with the propensity of love to fail me at the threshold of possession, sex might've thought 'enough is enough'; so, it seems to have induced fate to let Raju play his part in bestowing its final favor on me; we were in the same place then and didn't drift fully apart still. There lived a desirable girl, a block away from his; when I told him that I would like to try my luck with her, he felt that it would be a wild goose chase as she was already betrothed. Yet, as I pressed my suit, she resigned into agreeing; is it not said that there is no woman chaste enough to resist man's seductive talk; that night, my long awaited first night in which baring our bodies and souls to each other when we sought to discover each other in the candlelight; she surrendered in ardor as I possessed her with passion; urged by her surge, as I entered into her with all my longing for a female, she took me in with all her wanting for a male; in that lovemaking, so to say, as she had a measure of her femininity, I had the grasp of my manhood; while the ecstasy of sex gripped us all night, the fulfillment of it eased my body for days; well, reminiscing about the nuances of our coition, I realized that the essence of sex lies, not in the physical release it affords the mates, but in the gratification of their union that it entails them. But it was my contentment—I wonder how I became insatiable in later years—coupled with the dangers of our liaison that kept me away from her until she turned into a gatecrasher. When she said that she desperately wanted to have me again, I felt that I owed it to her to satiate her urge, never mind the risk I might be running in obliging her for I came to know that her father was a ferocious character. When I made it to the rendezvous, she said that she wanted more of me before her beau got the better of her; about her liaison on the verge of her nuptial, she said that she was only following the dictates of her heart amidst the realities of life. Maybe, you may say that she was romanticizing her lust, but I believe she had only rationalized the leanings of her heart."

"Maybe lust features on the reverse side of love's coin."

"Beautifully put, but I may add that lust is the abettor of love for without it, there can be no lovemaking," he said. "Well, I imbibed her philosophy of love, and all was okay till I wavered from it to impress Ruma, which was much later. As if sex gave me

my due, it forthwith put a price for its favors, and I too was willing to pay for it as I had been on my own by then; and maybe, it was prognostic of my sex life that the first buy in a way was a rare buy; it's a *rickshaw-wallah* doubling up as a pimp, who took me into a dimly lit middle-class brothel; how odd I felt as I came face to face with the madam! Though the way she received me was promising, to my disappointment the girls she fetched were no seductresses; so as I tried to excuse myself, a stunning dame stepped out of the shadow near the entrance; well, I failed to notice her as I made it there in the fashion of those who enter brothels, focused on avoiding the focus of the passerby. When she wondered how none of the girls impressed me, I told her it was possible that none of them might've liked me; saying she was bowled, she led me into her chamber."

"Looks like you're lucky with those."

"Maybe, my innate love for women tended them to be affectionate towards me," he said. "From then on, I sought her at every turn and she gave me the time of my life for long; but as she began to bloat, she said she was sad that her body could no more provide what her love craved to give me; how moved I was for her sensual concern for me, but when she offered to turn into a procuress for me, I told her that I wanted to remember her as a mate and not as a madam. How sad that the charms of these women are so short-lived; it's as if by giving in to all, they lose all they have. Whatever, I always cherished the romantic times we have had."

"Won't it make an interesting contrast, your romantic negation of favors on offer with that of Devdas's sexual abnegation of an alluring Chandramukhi?"

"More so to the sophists, who celebrate sentimentality," he said. "Well, as in all walks of life, these women too present a mixed bag, and it's not that brothels are the only slime-spots of society as there is a moral decay in every walk of life; if anything the world is in need of a moral revolution than ever before. So, before casting the proverbial first stone at them, it's as well that we may count our own warts; whatever, after failing me in love and fulfilling me through sex, maybe life wanted to show me more of its variety in some of its mundane dimensions that was shortly after that rendezvous with Raju's neighbor."

"More conquests to follow, I suppose."

"Oh, no, but there were encounters of another kind to recount," he said, "Landing in a metropolis, I joined a small subsidiary of a big company, supervised by diploma holders and bossed over by a graduate engineer. It was as if to prevent any possible threat to his engineering preeminence, the boss dumped me in the inspection department, where I languished till I left the firm; oh, how smaller can small men in big chairs become! I might as well have died of ennui but for the hope induced in me by a cousin's husband; he was wont to say that there was bound to be light at the end of the tunnel for a graduate engineer. I don't know why, but he took a liking for me from the beginning, and when he asked me for a game of chess, I saw in it the chance of my life to prove that my scrape through degree was not the denominator of my gray matter. So, even before we began, I wanted to win, let Fischer be the opponent, but I found out soon enough that he was no mean a player either; from the see-saw struggle in that five-hour long tussle, it was apparent that he didn't want to lose and I was determined to win; and at last, as he resigned, I felt vindicated. It was a different matter though that being an engineer in top gear, he was unable to tow my career wheel spiked by my pitiable score-card."

"After all, it's one's limitations that set one's course of life."

"But life can be cruel even in our moments of triumph," he continued. "As I won his admiration in addition to his affection, it was galling to my cousin who wasn't enthused about me from the beginning; and to be fair to her, she made her position clear; it was an article of faith with her that relatives were suckers to be banished and friends were sweeteners to be added, and needless to say, she misconstrued my bonhomie with her man as my endeavor to buttress my hopeless position. Caught thus between her apathy and his empathy, how I had to put up with all those embarrassing moments in their scores! And it was their conflicting outlook about me, which led to that humiliating experience."

"Aren't likes and dislikes the nuances of our nature?"

"Maybe so, but surely they are the lamp posts of life that either aid or hinder your journey through it," he said. "It was a five-day week for us at the workplace and on Saturdays it was my wont to go to their place for his sake; well at lunch time, as my cousin's invitation to join them at the dining table used to personify formality, though inevitably famished by then, I invariably excused myself. On a weekend, he wanted me to accompany their daughter to a sporting event that evening; but my cousin, in an apparent abhorrence towards its possibility, began scouting for an appropriate candidate for the occasion; oh how frantic she had been in ringing up their friends and acquaintances in her frenetic search for the eluding character! Possibly in her view, apart from her weird perception of relatives, it was the lack of social status coupled with a bleak future that rendered me unfit for their daughter's company. Sadly as both didn't renege on their respective positions, it was indeed a double squeeze for me in that embarrassing position, and I only knew how I had endured that humiliation until I was relieved by another cousin, who rang up for me to run an urgent errand for her. So, I left my tormentors taking my humiliation stoically and I'm sure that the ceasefire my exit would've occasioned could've relieved them as well; and thanks to my obsession with the charms of the fair sex, I was not on the rebound to settle scores over that slight. Whatever, I told her later that what matters is personal character and it's unwise to discount relatives as if friends are infallible, after all, one's friends are someone's relatives; didn't Raju proved it in my case; in the end though, I derived a sense of satisfaction as she began to see the value in my averment, and she was all the happier for her altered mind-set. Why her calls for lunch began to spell affection, and what sumptuous meals I have had with them."

"It's the proclivity of bigotry to be insensitive to others' sensibilities."

"But with her, it was not the falsity of the person as it was of perception," he said having asked for one more drink, "nevertheless, much before she had a change of heart, her stilted attitude had induced a false sense of superiority in her daughter, who didn't deem it fit to introduce me to her husband though I took the trouble of attending their wedding as I was a small fry then with no promise either."

When I handed over his drink to him, as if still rankled by her slight, he raised his glass and said in pique, "Cheers to her falsity."

Chapter 20 ***An Emotional Affair***

"If that cousin of mine exemplified the falsity of perception, the one who used to ingratiate himself with her spouse was the personification of falsity itself," he began the remarkable recap of his life. "But as the world reckons, he was an eligible bachelor as far as eligibility could take a middleclass guy; well he was an I.I.Tan with a MNC

career and a four-wheeler to convey his corporate eminence-in-the-making. As my position, rather lack of it, failed to impress him, he was won't not to reciprocate my greetings, and soon to avoid being slighted by him I was not taking cognizance of his presence, in other words I used to ignore the would-be ignorer. Surely, it is stupid to expect hosannas from any, leave alone all, and so I would've still respected him had he remained indifferent to me as ever for all have their own likes and dislikes. But when he sensed that his own mentor, husband of my indifferent cousin, held me dear, he tried to warm up to me, but by then I had learned how to judge people and so I wasn't moved by his attempts to befriend me. Another relative though, impressed by his status and all made up her mind to marry her daughter to him and that put paid to our voicing the objections we all have had about him. It's another matter that I had a crush on the girl."

"Well I too see the big picture of man's character in his small gestures; but you and your crushes, don't they seem unceasing?"

"Didn't Stendhal opine that for a woman to love a man at first sight, he should have at the same time something to respect and something to pity in his face," he continued. "Maybe in my youth, my visage had that dual character, which, as I told you, endeared me to many a woman, and that was why without the fear of rejection, I could make a pass at every woman I had ever fancied; well, my weakness had always been the lightly darkish women with a tinge of sadness on their faces, and I was all too brotherly to those who failed to connect with my roving eye. Once, such a one told me that she was enamored of me for my romanticism and as her persona didn't trigger my passion, I realized that its woman's sex appeal that brings man's innate romanticism into play to provide the cutting edge for lovemaking, and unless combined by male passion and female amorousness, coition is mere sexual motion."

He had yet another sip of Laphroaic from his glass before he continued.

"Coming back to the ill-fated girl, the cousin who rescued me from the embarrassment of my life I told you about, abhorred the eligible bachelor in equal measure for his conceited ways, was not prepared to voice her apprehension lest her dissent should be construed as an envy for the girl's glorious fortune-in-the-making; well I too kept mum for I knew that I wouldn't have been deemed as a viable alternative by the mother of the bride and so, sadly for others' decency of silence and her mother's blinkers of falsity, the daughter had to suffer him as her man to her lifelong dismay. But when it came to my relationship with Raju, my faculty of judgment deserted me; it was like the accursed Karna losing his fighting prowess in the combat with Arjuna that had cost his life; but though I lost my soul, my fate had to wait to undo me as my destiny had other ideas for my life. At that time, I lived in a rented portion of a house owned by an eminent family that fell afoul of fate; while the girl was reduced as a makeup woman of a B - grade film heroine; her brothers were compelled to run odd errands to sustain the joint family. As love would have it, she had taken to a man who was not of her ilk and as his parents were not so helpless or as progressive as these days, their inter-caste affair was a non-starter in every way; the social space too was constricted for them to find a place for indulging in premarital sex; if only Cupid had reckoned with that when he kindled love in their hearts; whatever, they remained lovelorn till she prevailed upon him to marry a girl from his caste. But the rumor of her liaison that never was, put paid to her parental quest to find a suitable boy for her from their own caste and it was at that juncture that I entered into her life."

"If only Cupid were not blind, love may have a better vision."

"Well, I was sure at the very first sight that she was not my kind of girl," he said seemingly contemplating what I had said before he continued his story. "So with no romantic leanings on her, I was free in my manner, and she too was open with me without being flirty. Slowly but steadily, we had struck a beautiful relationship, and, so to say, she took charge of my life; by the time I returned from work, she used to wash and press my clothes besides setting my bed right; how her brothers used to protest in jest that she washed my undergarments even as she refused to touch theirs; well she was wont to aver that I was her very special one, and once, when I was down with typhoid, my benevolent cousin came to take me along with her, but as my caretaker would have none of that, I had no heart to go against her wish; oh, how she rolled the roles of a mother, sister and wife into that womanly care! But later, when I decided to leave the place in search of better pastures, how upset she was; she seemed as if she were bereaved but she was reconciled to the dictates of fate as she put it. You may know that she didn't let me carry much of my meager possessions as she wanted to have them as keepsakes! When her promised memento was not forthcoming even as I was all set to go, I went on reminding her about it and she kept on telling me that I hadn't gone still; and as I was about to board the city-bus at their gate to reach the railway station, she took my hand and planted a kiss on it; as our moist eyes blurred our vision, I waved at her as much in sorrow as in joy but she was seemingly immobilized for any reciprocation."

"I know how uplifting affection could be, won't that kiss last a lifetime?"

"And possibly into the eternity for platonic love, unlike its sexual cousin, could never wane," he said as his eyes turned moist. "Maybe, that's the character of motherly love and sisterly affection; yet it would seem that it's in the lovemaking that the divinity of love manifests itself in its truest mode. But then sexual liking, with or without love, too could hold on its own; I used to see a ravishing woman in the bus stop, and once we chanced to stand together in a jam-packed city bus; as I tentatively pressed myself against her back, she deliberately pushed herself closer to me; and seemingly unconcerned of each other, we let our declivities rub against each other until male biology brought our delight to a close. Maybe, attractive women tend to celebrate their femininity in the small pleasures that male eagerness ensures, but what a scene the plain things create from a shake-hand distance in crowded places; why, it's as if they want to attract attention to themselves by insinuating that man's forced proximity to her was but his indecent approach. Whatever, if not for the love of that girl and the warmth of my cousin, there was no way I could've continued with the drudgery of my job, and years later, when all were critical of my brother for having given up a job that didn't suit his aptitude, I wanted to know how many had had to endure the like hardships at the start of their careers; the problem with us is that we tend to judge others without an iota of an idea of their compelling circumstances; well, my brother made the grade in a job that went well with his genius. But given the changeability of man, my once inimical cousin's spouse, who had professed his support for me, failed to further my career when he was in a position to do so. But as I see it now, his relevance to my life was his support for me when I was laid low by fate but not in his disregard for me when I learned to be on my own; that's why; I made it a point to pay my last respects to him, though by then I was out of his mind for long."

"How contrasting it is compared to your reaction to Raju's death?"

"Don't you see that it symbolizes the contrasting phases of my life?" he said in remorse. "Maybe, adoration is borne out one's perception of his being the object of appreciation, which the sense of deprivation of the same results in a state of disaffection, but censure is an inimical product of one's sense of superiority over the

other that is afflicting, oh how these things come to shape the fates of men; though I let censure steel my nerve, I let applause weaken my will, but that was much later."

He paused as if to pick up the reins of his scattered thoughts.

Chapter 21

The Harlot Zone

"As if to show me the darker side of the flesh-trade, life took me into a harlot zone of the city I had reached," he said as I refilled our glasses with the drink. "It was so unlike the pleasure streets of our town dotted with decent joints that I frequented; the crowded lanes of that red-light district, lined with girls in garish make-up and the dungeon of a brothel that I landed in were clear put-offs; so when the madam wanted to know about my kind of *maal*, I was all set to take to my heels, but as the girls trooped into the parade hall, as if on cue, I was tempted to opt for one. When she had led me into in a dungeon of a cubicle to my dismay, a brawl in the corridor made it worse for my mood but she insisted that I should have her for it was seldom that a decent man came her way; even as my empathy for her threw me into a dilemma, she had oralled my passion for her ready possession."

"Who said they are all suckers, in the negative sense."

"Your interjections do inspire," he said. "It's the paradox of prostitution that man lets some women have a free reign on sex so as to rein in the promiscuity in the rest of them. So, won't the least sought-after of the whores outscore all the Casanovas of the world put together; well, that's in the lighter vein, but it was that experience which made me realize that it was stupid to generalize the sex-workers; the harlots in the hell-holes of cities' red-light districts are a pitiable lot of gullible girls and hapless women forced to cater to the ever growing demand for paid sex there. But thanks to the limited clientele in towns, the whores there can stave off the debilitating sexual burden their ilk in the cities have to bear, yet it's the so-called call-girls that call the shots, more so, in metros; so all of them, being in the same calling are not on the same footing. If the vicissitudes of life push women into the vice-like grip of madam-pimp-police nexus of the flesh trade, then it's the outcries of the moralists against legalizing prostitution that ensure their sexual slavery in abominable conditions; maybe, if only paid sex were to have a legal tag, then surely it would entail as fair deal as possible for these hapless women."

"I hear it's much worse in the U.S, where the pimps treat the prostitutes as vassals and abuse them in unimaginable ways."

"Won't that prove the more materialistic a society is, the less sensitive it is to the plight of the deprived?" he said, "What does one say about the out-dated ideas of the so-called idealists; it seems in matters moral, insensitivity is well ingrained in its sensitivity. Save a Gandhi, even the best of the rest of yore were not averse to their fellow-beings scavenging their latrines; now I wonder why I never thought of it before, maybe, we put up with what we come to grow up with; if not, why don't the Sikh males find the turban burdensome and the Muslim dames put up with the inhibiting burka? Whatever, the world seems to care two hoots for the plight of the sex-workers as it had been to that of the scavengers, and God knows when it would be wiser to the ills of the unlicensed prostitution, if not AIDS, it's the VD that's the return on investment for these pleasure-givers; why, the malady of the flesh-trade is the bane of those who bring in the wares. How sad it is!"

"What an irony that they are undone being the sexual scavengers of the male world?"

"Isn't it a novel lament," he said. "But, let the willing sell sex on their own, and see how it works for the sellers and the buyers alike, why it's bound to benefit all, like in the *rythubazars* sans middlemen. But the farmers' suicides make another story; it's the marginal guys, who gamble on the cash crops that come a cropper; why not, lurking behind the probable windfall is the possible failure to devour; have you heard of a paddy farmer or a wheat grower committing suicide as the cash crop losers do? Yet with their eye on the rural vote-bank, how the parties in opposition tirade against the government of the day over these avoidable calamities; maybe the political power changes hands over their dead bodies but the destitute continue to consume pesticides as a way out of their debt traps. Won't the callous politicians know that it's in chasing the quick buck that these greedy guys bungle with their lives; why don't they exhort farmers to part-opt for the cash crops to meet both ends? Moreover, it's not as if the bankrupt traders and the insolvent others are not known to commit suicide but then, there is no political axe to grind over their deaths; it all boils down to lobbying, in the open as in the U.S or behind the closed doors in our country; but can sex workers ever muster the sort of clout that the farmers' lobby has?"

"Are they not making the right noises these days?"

"God bless them," he continued. "What a good turn one of them gave to my life; I was so put off with that metro jaunt that it was quite a while before I ventured into a brothel, where I chanced upon an angelic whore, who later became my Good Samaritan. Since she struck my romantic chord straight away, I stuck to her for it's not the sexual variety that I sought even in the paid sex. After a hiatus, when I returned into her ardent arms, she told me that in the meantime she had conceived my child but was constrained to get it aborted. While I felt that something in me snapped, she said it was time that I got married and became a father, when she told me to court a suitable dame, I said that I was unlucky in love; she said that she knew a girl, who would be an ideal wife for me, and as if to goad me to her candidate, she said the dame had a rare sex appeal to eroticize the romantic in me; she said that the girl was not privy to her double life and even if she came to know about it, she was sure she would be sympathetic towards her. It was all too tempting not to follow the lead, more so as I was just then shunned by Devi, who opted to marry Raju, a bank clerk then; now I realize in hindsight that if only his father was half as resourceful as my dad had been, he might've been no less an engineer than me."

"Isn't it interesting that one woman should lead you to another woman?"

"Didn't I tell you that my life is rather unusually unusual," he said joyously. "Her lead led me to Rathi and I fell for her, so to say, head-over-heels, and her parents too were for hastening our wedding. With the wedding a week away, I went to thank her, you can guess who, and she offered herself as her wedding present; well I couldn't say no to her and she dragged me into her bed, as she put it, to refresh my memory of an amorous woman's lovemaking. Oh, what a time she gave me for one last time, but the day before the marriage party was to board the Circar Express to reach Rathi's place, it occurred to me to take a VDRL test, just in case; and to my dismay, I tested positive. Nonplussed though, I rushed to a specialist, who said the tests could go awry at times, and how I wished that was the case in my case; anyway, putting my fears at rest, he said that even otherwise, he would treat me in time to make it harmless for my bride. What a nervous time it was waiting for the fresh report, oh, it was the anxiety of a lifetime; but how relieved I was as the second test negated the first result is beyond words."

"It's as if your life never ceases to surprise."

"It looks like that as I review it," he said. "How my Rathi gloated over me for being better than the he-man of her dreams; as she lived by her devotion for me, I was lost in my adoration for her. How I used to savor every nuance of her enchanting persona to her heart's content; as she made me feel wanted like never before, what a wondrous feeling it was, but still, in those fulfilling moments of our life, I opened the book of my unrequited love that she read with empathetic feeling. Yet, I know not why, I wanted to check up whether or not I would feel guilty being unfaithful to her, and seized by an urge to experiment, I took the test through paid sex, the result of which was neither 'positive' on the VDRL count nor 'negative' on my love count. So shorn of its moral shackles to confine it, my love soared to new highs, taking Rathi's soul along to the zenith of our emotional union; oh what a life it was and how we both wished it lasted a lifetime; well, it had ended all too soon, but it was a lived life as long as it lasted."

"Won't it remind one of Gandhi's experiments with truth?"

"I have no quarrel with Gandhi the man but I have problem with the Mahatma of his," he said and as if to remonstrate his apathy for the Gandhian values, he had an extended sip of that Laphroaic.

Chapter 22

A Lingering Longing

"I'm no Gandhian and I don't intend to be one," he continued from where he had left. "But as is being done, I see it's a disservice to his legacy to deify him; it's when I approach him as man that I value him as a human being, but in his picture of *mahatma*, I see many a wart in his *atma*. Credit him for cleaning up the public toilets but why not condemn him for having forced his spouse to do the same; why laud him for his quixotic abstinence unmindful of his wife's conjugal plight; was he not an inveterate autocrat in the democratic garb; what about his falling afoul of Prakasam, and how he played favorites with Nehru. Why bother about him as he'd been reduced for long as a political mascot of the slavish-minded of the self-serving Nehru family that hijacked his name to grind its dynastic axe! What an irony it is that his party that sundered the British yoke should have rendered the political reins into Italian hands? Bemoan the congress party."

"I'm no apologist of the dynastic congress but what about the duplicity of N.T.R on the political stage," I had interjected. "When he needed to fill A.P's coffers, he advocated drink all over; prompting the IT tycoons and the corporate honchos to shun his dry land at the time of our early reform. But when voters pulled him out of the *kursi* for his eccentric governance, he made prohibition his political plank to regain power; that's about the immorality of our politicians as the public memory being short; that's how A.P missed out the early openings even as P.V's vision helped shore up the country's economy."

"What to say when Rajiv Gandhi's ignoble reign is celebrated and Narasimha Rao's path-breaking role is sought to be sidelined," he said "We are a naïve people to figure out our country's heroes, say Nehru vs. Patel or Rajiv vs. Rao and zeroing on our national interests; maybe owing to our feudal roots and slavish moorings, we suffer from the approval syndrome, which is a compulsive need of one to be seen by the others as an egalitarian to a fault. But then, the world doesn't seem to appreciate our quixotic mindset as the foreign press tends to picture Sonia Gandhi as the most successful Italian politician."

He paused as if he was unable to digest the indignity of it all.

"While Ruma ruled my heart, Rathi became the heart of our family," he resumed his tale. "The inclusive camaraderie that extended to third cousins in our family appealed to her friendly nature, and so she took to my people as duck would to water; well what a knack she had in letting all feel at home in our 2BHK flat. But when a well-heeled visitor said if only we had a more spacious dwelling, he would've loved to put up with us whenever he was in town, she told him that we don't bite more than we could chew; but how my poor dad used to go out of his way to please all and sundry; it's as if man massages his own ego by playing host to those who profess closeness."

"It's stupid, really."

"What else it is, but when the chips were down after he was stricken with cancer, none came forward to stand by him," he continued. "My brother told me that once in need of a paltry sum, my dad sought it from an ex-colleague whom he had helped all along; but that man excused himself, prompting my father to give me that parting advice to be careful with my money. But by not parting a farthing with a dying friend, how that man had denied himself the satisfaction of discharging a bit of his debt of gratitude; while I felt sorry for him, it pained me that my father had to die after losing the little faith he had had in the virtue of friendship."

"More than the lack of concern for the dying, it could be the fear of foregoing the money that was behind his insensitivity. Why, I know of an incident when the bride was pestered by her in-laws to fetch her jewels even though her father was battling for his life that was the day after her marriage."

"I suppose your reading is right," he said and continued. "But much before my dad's heart was broken for a few bucks; he dropped in at our place and wanted to know whether I could spare him hundred rupees. How dumbstruck I was that he should've been as hard up as that; why even after I had started earning, he used to book my return tickets on my home visits and had declined my offer of twenty-thousand to facilitate my brother's engineering education. While I was trying to figure out the import of his financial downturn on his psyche, Rathi fetched him five-hundred rupees that touched his heart no end; oh, even as I gloated over my fortune for having been blessed with such a wife, how his eyes glistened grasping the sense of her concern for him. While I owe it to Rathi for letting my dad feel wanted when he was down, it was his dismissive smile at my twenty-thousand-offer and the cared-for feeling these five-hundred gave him made me realize that it's the small things that make the big moments of life."

As those poignant memories seemingly impinged upon his heart, his eyes began to swell with tears in profusion.

"What was more, Rathi was the neighbor's neighbor," he continued after composing himself. "How she was at ease with her life and made it easy for others; it was like seeing the simple living and high thinking in action. Wonder why life had let fate withdraw its model brand well before its expiry time; but the lament in the obituaries about the loss to the society on account of those, who had long ceased to contribute amuses me; would the lack of meaningless hyperboles in them mean any disrespect to the departed? What about the living legends; the psyche of these spent forces makes an interesting reading; used as they were to adulations in their heydays, they tend to bemuse themselves at sundry events as the organizers eulogize them to add value to their own endeavors, and as if they came out of their oblivion, they head home to savor a peg or two to buttress their fantasy of falsity."

"Sorry for the digression," he continued as we savored the Laphroaic that I replenished meanwhile. "the spiritual beauty of Rathi's love lay in ignoring my roving eyes; it was not that she was any less sexy or I loved her any less, but I was too romantic to remain unmoved by the desirable women though she was more ardent than the best I'd ever laid. Soon after our marriage, we had set up in the first floor of a house. As the widowed house owner lived in the ground floor, her daughter came to spend the summer holidays with her two kids; about Rathi's age, she was her namesake as well. Oh, what a sexy dame she was, possibly the sexiest I had ever seen and the one I most wanted to have in all my life; as my passion for her namesake was ever on the raise, my Rathi said she wasn't losing sleep as her rival's hairy legs were sure to leave me cold that was if push comes to shove; but as I chanced to divine the dame's satin legs, Rathi said she was only jesting to pour water over my raging ardency in those summer times."

"Oh, how unlike your Rathi, women clip the romantic wings of their men and still blame them for being cold to them."

"Women tend to imagine man's romanticism as an on-off switch within their reach," he said. "Didn't I tell you about a plain girl, who was enamored of me; much later, another I knew nursed the idea of marrying a romantic guy but was aghast as her father intended to get her married to a dull character; when she told me about her predicament, I said that though she was beautiful, yet she was not vivacious, and that it's sex appeal that triggers romantics; I told her in half-jest that if she were sexy, I would've seduced her; that made her comprehend the sexual realities of her life."

"Are you a lover or a seducer? I'm unable to figure that out."

"What is a lover if he is not a seducer?" he said and continued. "Coming back to our sexy neighbor, as I told you, I had lost my eyes to her and she too didn't seem to mind that; Rathi and I used to sleep on the terrace while that dame slept in the open compound with her mother and the kids; she could soon sense that standing by the parapet wall, I was forever ogling at her. That full moon night, I found her with her sari askance as she lay on her belly dangling her bare legs up in the air; oh how voluptuous she was in that moonlight then; sensing my anticipated presence, as she turned all the more inviting, so I got down and sauntered nearby to let her make the next move but she stayed put in her bed though I could discern her desire in her manner. Why she had failed to cross the threshold of our adulterous zone to address our wants I would never know; in spite of my surging urge, with her mother nearby, I too didn't dare to press farther. So our passions were locked in a painful stalemate that night; her man's arrival the next day barred my further moves to checkmate her on our love-board of attrition. I always had the feeling that she was craving to be grabbed by me that night and had I dared to hustle her into agreeing, she would've been mine that night, and possibly that would've ushered us into a liaison of our lifetime; but destiny packed me off to this place shortly thereafter; oh how she remains the most insatiate passion of my life with a lingering longing; and had I not made it with that remarkable Sumitra, what a memorable contest it would've been between them for the 'most wanted' woman that I didn't have?"

As he closed his eyes seemingly savoring the persona of the woman he had failed to possess as well as to reminisce about the flavors of the one he was able to savor, I went out into the open to have a smoke in the fresh air.

Chapter 23

Smallness of Bigness

"But as my child grew in Ruma's womb, the devil gained ground in my head for the second time; earlier to possess her I even thought of killing Rajan," he continued as I returned. "Maybe I wouldn't have brought myself to that, but the fact that I went to lengths to perfect the plan means Devi was right about my getting swayed by women. Had not death pulled him out of the scene, my ever-on-the-raise passion for Ruma might have tripped me at the threshold; let me tell you my plan for that perfect murder."

"I suppose it takes moral courage to own up our degradations."

"The idea was to sow the seed of doubt in Ruma's mind about a Rajan-Rathi affair and to let that grow into a tree of misgivings," he began to unravel the murder plan. "You know in the human mind, doubt has a faster rate of growth than even hope, and we know what that meant for poor Desdemona. Even if Ruma were not to fall into my arms on the rebound, she was bound to offer her shoulder to me to cry over, come to think of it, how cuckolding could facilitate seduction by way of compensation. So, by worming my way into her heart by egging on her fears that Rajan was about to desert her, I would be able to unravel my plan for a perfect murder; at a time when Rathi goes to her parents' place, we would drive Rajan to a less-frequented lake to drug him before I push him into it; as I jump after him to pin him down, she would yell for help, well at the top of her tone, and by the time someone would have come to bear witness to my fake rescue act, Rajan would have been dead and gone. Rathi could be told that Rajan, suspecting that I was carrying on with Ruma, had died in the process of drowning me; in the traumatic aftermath, we were bound to find solace in each other's arms, and given her nature, Rathi was sure to sympathize with Ruma to bring about our *ménage a trois*."

"Maybe you could've made a name for yourself in crime fiction."

"How I craved to hear that from Ruma but fearing that she might take me as a callous character, I didn't disclose my diabolical plan to her though she pestered me no end," he said remorsefully. "Wonder how I could think in terms of snuffing out a life, more so of someone with full of life; by the way, what about soldiering, apart from the sense of valor, don't the poor youth opt for it for a livelihood. But who cares for their lives bar in the West, more so in the U.S; ironically, in long drawn-out ground wars, it's this sensitivity to life that's the Achilles' heel of the American military might. Why not, as is the case with the possibilities of life, so is with the power of the nations, it's all about limitations."

"When it's about not wanting to die young, how poor Desdemona pleaded with the Moor to let her live for at least that night."

"More than life's beauty, it's the lure of it that's at work," he continued. "Under the shadows of the past mishaps, as the fear of the unknown had a domino effect in my mind, I turned gloomy when Ruma's delivery neared; I don't know why, I started worrying about our own offspring not measuring up to Rajan's lost one; if it were to fail me, won't she cherish her lost kid, relishing Rajan's memory being my wife. Moreover as 'Rajan Builders' was in doldrums by then; won't a dull child pull my stock further down; worse still, what if she were to suspect that I let it sink out of jealousy because it was Rajan's venture; but then was it not my obsession with her mind, body and soul that made me forget about my own self; well, of what avail was my love for her if it were to lead her into a rough weather? Even if our child was to be better than

her lost one, won't that still leave it poor and deprived; why blame her if were she to wish that Rajan was alive; but what a calamity it would be for both of us then."

"Is it not said that love is a hackneyed expression unless it's backed by money."

"True but it's the tragedy of life that it seldom finds the right mix for man in love; if love belittles man for lack of money, it lets gold-diggers fool the wealthy," he continued. "It was to avert the fate of losing Ruma's love that I had taken moneymaking; but sadly for me, she mistook my long hours at work as my waning interest in her, and even as she started wooing me back, I stood wedded to my newfound obsession, ironically, not wanting to lose her love. But she mistook that as the shadow of Rathi on the horizon of our love and maybe to dispel that she became more devoted to me than ever, making me work harder than ever to retain her adoration. With the birth of Satish, as her devotion to me deepened, I began to see the futility of a rat race for I realized that hard work alone wouldn't take one onto the business heights, and that gave us time to gloat over each other and over Satish as well; when she joined me at the workplace leaving Satish to an ayah's care, well, we had the best of both the worlds."

He closed his eyes as if to reminisce those times in his mind's eye.

"Then Anand's arrival for higher studies enlivened our lives even more," he continued. "As he reminded me of my own youth, I became attached to him, and perceiving that he would grow up to be my replica, Ruma too had developed affection for him; so as he began to stay more with us than in the hostel, I began to confide my inner-most thoughts to him, and so did she, maintaining that she loved him most, of course, next to me, her man. Won't that remind you of the woman on rebound whom I might have had in my youth. Well, while the infectiousness of his youthful zest lifted our spirits, his affectionate manner buoyed our self-worth that freed our union from the self-imposed strain of yore. That Satish and he took to each other had only enhanced our fulfillment."

"Isn't it interesting that a happy story needn't be an interesting copy?"

"I appreciate that you care for your prospective readers and they too need not turn the pages," he said smiling wryly. "After Anand's graduation, though Ruma wanted him to join our firm, I didn't want to stifle his career in our small outfit; so he moved out to begin his career in some other place. I knew all good times would come to an end, but how were I to know that they would lead me up to one bad phase after another; why can't life make it neutral in between its highs and lows?"

"Given its penchant for variety, isn't it a boring proposition?"

"How nicely you've put it; I'm glad you have it in you to make my memoir as memorable as possible," he said, and continued with his tale. "Soon, we started missing Anand, and once when I said that if only 'Rajan Builders' were to be some 'Imperial Infrastructures', it would have been a fitting launch pad for his career, her repartee was that it was ironical that what served the uncle's mid-career should be unworthy of his nephew's apprenticeship; maybe what she said in jest was about the changed times, but I felt she was reviewing my progress card, and that brought the limitations of love not backed by money back to the fore. But the next day, when she said in earnest how 'Rajan Builders' would stunt Satish's future, my apprehensions of yore came to the fore making me worry about my smallness in her vision; so when she began a correspondence with Anand, which she came to relish, I started suspecting that she had transferred her affections to his personal account; oh, how miserable was the thought of having lost her love and esteem. Maybe, her affection for him was

innocent and my worries about her state of mind were misplaced, but as I came to be obsessed with success all again to regain my supposedly lost position in her heart, the devil took hold of me in its second attempt, so to say, squarely and firmly.”

Chapter 24

Disown to Own

“How the glaring shadow of my life came to distort my vision!” he continued in lament. “The grandiose ‘Imperial Infrastructures’ was the stilted idea of my fucked-up psyche, and as if man’s fate factors the times he lives in to shape his life, Harshad Mehta came onto the scene; can one ever fail to recall the euphoria he had helped generate in the bourses? Hadn’t business magazines, all and sundry that is, goaded the public to sell the family silver to invest in stocks? Oh, how the public issues of never-heard-of-entities without a factory shed to name came to be oversubscribed many times over; and when the bubble has burst as Mehta was caught stealing, how many became broke no one knows. Why, I too was guilty of laying the superstructure of ‘Imperial Infrastructures’ over the tenuous foundations of Rajan Builders; wonder how I suffered no qualms in gambling with the public monies to raise my domestic stock; but my love for my woman and the luck of the investors might have helped me succeed in my unethical venture; whatever, it was then that I lost my soul and became a devil’s slave, though I didn’t realize it then.’

“Once man crosses the moral threshold, he’s likely to lose the reins of his life.”

“True, but I met a woman who had been astray for a while and yet regained her moral ground just in time,” he said with apparent admiration. “She was the wife of a man of meager means who had big dreams for their twins, a boy and a girl; so he strived to improve his net worth through hard work to uplift their future. But when he realized that his hard work alone was not enough to ensure their rosy future, he had pleaded with her to prostitute herself to fashion their future. Well, like any other woman, she was averse to the idea, but in time, as his obsession for her kids’ future dented her resolve to remain chaste, she started making other men feel at home when her man and her kids were away from it. What with the referrals from those philanderers helped her to develop a fetching clientele, her earnings far exceeded her man’s expectations, but as he worked harder than ever to augment their fund, she moved ever emotionally closer to him, and ironically, as if to lighten his burden, she endeared herself more than ever to other men. When I came to know of her, I approached her with great expectations but how disappointed I was is still fresh in my memory; as I knocked at her door that morning, I found her readying her kids to school; fascinated by her beauty, I was all eager to have her but she told me that she had drawn the curtains down as she didn’t want her growing up kids to smell the rat. Bowled by her sensitivity (I hadn’t become insensitive yet), I pressed my suit to the hilt but finding her unyielding, I even begged her not to disappoint me, but with a charming firmness, she asked me to update my informer about the change in her posture. So, I left her as much in disappointment as in admiration, only to meet her on a different footing later on; how small the world can become.”

“It calls for a rare character in them both.”

“That’s true as I found it out later and about it later,” he continued. “You know my firm became a force to reckon with and that took me back to square one to win over Ruma’s mind to retain her love. But soon, I had realized that it was success that began to rule our heads; hers to begin with, inducing us to acquire the trappings of wealth for the sake of those who looked up to us, so we thought. How man tends to imagine

himself as the tracking object on others' radars to justify his extravagance as but the dictates of his life's circumstances! But then man fails to realize that but for a sleaze or a scandal, the world at large never bothers about him, whatever be his station, and so fails to fashion a purse-supportive lifestyle and allows himself to dabble with the delusions of grandeur. Adding to that, success distances man from the genuine, and what's worse, it brings the shady and the shallow closer to him; it was this script of fate that had moved us into this posh place, far from the simple folks.'

"Maybe it's the spiritual price life has to pay for its material success."

"Well said," he said with apparent sadness. "As if life doesn't believe in half-measures, to make it worse for both of us, the devil possessed Ruma no less; bitten by the status bug, as her mind began to foul her soul, she turned cozy to the rich that she wouldn't have otherwise touched with a barge pole; what was worse, she began to condescend to descend to the genuine, making them feel constrained in our palatial bungalow that is yours now. But obsessed as I was to keep Rajan's memory out of her mind, I kept her in good humor regardless; and having brought her to that pass, I too fell into the trap of conceit. Why, I began to feel embarrassed to have Raju any more around my circle of the wealthy, and entrapped in that snobbish trap, there was no way I could've pulled Ruma out of its inimical grip."

"What a Catch 22 it is, don't mind it's a catch-phrase."

"Why not give Joseph Heller his due for the catchy title," he said. "Well, Raju was not dumb to read my mind and so he steered clear of my course; but what if he had chosen to embarrass me by sticking to me on purpose? Won't it make a strategy to hurt the jealous and the conceited by imposing ourselves upon them, never mind they cold-shoulder us? Well, he was too good a soul to resort to such a foul; but shortly after Anand came back on transfer, when Ruma advised him to keep away from his poor friend with no future to name, I had a full grasp of the complexities of the trap into which I willy-nilly pushed her into; and so I began to worry about the possible fallout of her changed ethos on my life as well."

"Wonder how success eclipses one's innate goodness?"

"What if she weighed me light in comparison with someone more successful?" he continued. "As I was bogged down with that thought, the negativity of it began to bother me; I was alive to the fact that the seeds of liaisons sprout in the stilted minds of the disaffected spouses, and if Ruma were to take a lover, the slight apart, won't the scandal be scary. What if she chose to seduce Anand to score over me and still keep it in the family; but soon as if to relieve me of my worry, like I distanced myself from Raju before, she came to cold-shoulder Anand, but for a different reason; while I avoided Raju imagining that I had outgrown him, I suspect that she began to shun Anand to disown her humble past. How ironical it was that her moral decline should've assuaged my fears about her feared sexual fall; whatever, as if they served their purpose, my unfounded fears about her affection for him were put to rest in my mind."

"Wasn't it rank depravity that you should have felt relieved even though your wife had lost her soul? What a fall though it's a folly to judge others."

"Whatever, I toyed with the idea of roping him into my venture for I began to feel the need for someone capable that I could trust as well," he continued. "What a value addition he had been at the office, and ironically that hastened my moral decline even more; as he refused to soil his hands with our murky deals, I had to handle the underbelly of business that heralded my nose-dive into a moral abyss; and equally

worse, Imperial's vertical take-off into the galaxy of infrastructure only pushed Ruma's moral ethos further down the ladder of materialistic callousness. So, in the process of his growing up, Satish's psyche had to bear the brunt of our moral fall; well, who to blame but me for denying him what was left of the childhood for the kids of his generation?"

"Why blame yourself when it was and is the order of the day?"

"Do you think so?" he said looking at me vacantly.

Chapter 25

Sentiment of Ruin

"It was my wining and dining with the rich and the powerful that had hastened my moral fall," he said wryly after a while. "Didn't Rousseau observe that ruthlessness is the common characteristic of the successful; maybe I insensibly turned insensitive in their infectious company. Whatever may be the rationale for my twisted vision of love, the reality of my life was that I allowed myself to slide into the abyss of immorality. What with the materialistic veil shrouding our love life, I tried to fill my emotional void in an extramarital affair without knowing that I became incapable of inspiring love. How shameful, but I'm not going to hide my ugly side to let you have a true picture of me and of those who came into my life."

"Vices are the price that one pays for his virtues."

"But it was as if I had sacrificed my virtues to propitiate the goddess of vices," he continued. "I used to know an upright officer and that amounts to much in today's world; maybe honesty had never been the dominant character of man, didn't Shakespeare aver that to be honest is to be counted among one in a thousand; but these days the odds seem to be one in a hundred thousand. The good fellow had always been helpful to me within the rules that is but without any favors to return; once I told him to count on me just in case and he said that he hoped it would never be the case. When I came to know that he was caught red-handed, I knew it could be the handiwork of those who were irked by his honesty, and yet I was glad that the one who replaced him was corrupt to the core."

"Often, it's the marginal operators and not the hardcore corrupt that get caught and the big fish, if ever trapped, find their way out as they would've made enough dough to feed the small fish who net them."

"It's ironical but real, and that's sad," he said. "To go back to the tale of that small fish, given his thin resume and modest means, he had a windfall of a wife, who came to me to picture her helplessness. Qualified though and talented as well, she opted to remain a housewife to take care of his home, where his mother too felt at home; as that earned her his gratitude, she remained a fulfilled spouse. I think it was Bernard Shaw who said that any good natured fool would make a better husband than a Caesar, Shakespeare and Napoleon for great men are ill-equipped for domestic purposes, and as for me, I fell between two stools ending up an intellectual fool. As they were gloating over the flowering of their toddler son, throwing them into dilemma, the old woman's kidneys had failed. While common sense suggested it was as well to let her ripe-old life end its course in the crematorium, the son's sense of filial duty was for keeping his mother on dialysis as long as he could afford. But his wife thought it was an absurd proposition as she believed that the idea of medical science was to cure the curable, and not to cater to a gone case; remember that my father too saw it that way."

"Maybe those who love the spirit of life than life *per se* perceive it that way."

'Looks like that," he continued after a pause. "She tried to impress upon him that it was wise to spare the meager monies for the survival of the survivors but just the same he put the old woman on a ruinous dialysis course, making his young wife bear the brunt of his sentimental treatment. When the inevitable end came that ended his moral predicament, seeing his wife's plight in the debt trap, he was caught in the pangs of guilt; so to pull her out of the financial mess he had pushed her into, he took to bribe-taking; well, she was quick to caution him about the pitfalls on the road ahead, but he continued with the practice regardless that was till he was caught in the act and brought to book to account for a three-year jail term."

"Maybe a course correction in sentimental ruin would have been in order for those who cannot afford to buy justice."

"Hope it won't make a case for contempt of court," he said in jest. "Her life seemed to be a drama enacted in the theatre of the absurd wherein the plot of fate pushed her onto the stage of climactic tragedy. Her nine year son had to undergo an open-heart surgery but there was none in the family she could turn to for succor and support; she knew that though helpless as mother, being desirable, she could be resourceful as woman, but there was no way she would prostitute herself even to save her only child. She said that as she kept her fingers crossed, and prayed for a miracle, her husband suggested that she might seek my help for he thought I had a helping hand, and she was prepared to work for me for half of her take home pay till the loan amount was adjusted."

"I've read in *Benign Flame* that the boasts of men about their conquests would sound hollow for it's the vulnerability of women that fetches them their favors."

"Oh, how true it is," he said. "I had seen it as godsend and offered to take care of her son if she was prepared to be my mistress, but as she protested saying that she was a married woman, I reminded her that he was jailed and promised to let her go as and when he would come out of it. She said that's not what her husband would've bargained for when he sent her to seek my help, and I told her that I couldn't help as her charms corrupted my soul; when she retorted that she was not obliged to cater to my craving for her, I asked her, what if I helped her out only to woo her later? Won't her sense of gratitude tend her emotionally towards me? As she would be my P.A anyway, she being sex-starved and I being lovelorn, won't our physical proximity threaten her chastity; some catalyst can be expected to bring about our union, sooner than later that is. Calling me callous, she caved in nevertheless."

"Why, it's a refinement of the Casanova logic you had talked about; how sad it was given that you were such a sensitive lover."

"I really don't know if callousness was a streak of my character shrouded by my capacity to love," he said remorsefully. "Whatever, I kept my word and let her join her man on his release, but in the meantime to my dismay, being physically close, yet she was emotionally distanced from me; but it was her parting words – 'glad you've given up your reign on my body' - that wounded my pride of being a ladies' man. It was from then on that I took to one-night stands as a guarantee against emotional failures; what an end it was to the lover in me."

"It's the tragedy of my life so to say," he continued pausing as if to mourn the death of the lover in him. "If in spite of my means, I failed to inspire her, then for the lack of youth, I lost a woman on the verge of conquest. I met Mallika on the train, and it was a case of mutual attraction with the momentum to fast track affection. When

she was all eager for a date, it was either my naivety for being truthful or vanity of not looking my age, damn them both, that put paid to it; unasked, as I revealed my age, she exclaimed, 'oh, you're my dad's age', and that was that. A la Ghalib, 'of what avail is my beckoning her / wish she gives up self-restraint', I hoped for long that the force of attraction would prevail upon her forcing her to seek me; well, she took my phone number before the fiasco of that seduction. When hope tired me, her enchanting persona was blurred in my mind but the beauty of that brief encounter ever remains fresh in my memory; even now, as I ponder over her inexplicable behavior, I wonder whether it was her vanity to desist from an affair with an older man that blinded her attraction; would've my disclosure in the midst of our lovemaking made her recoil from my arms? What if she were to know about my age after we were true and thick into an affair, wouldn't she have still carried on with me? I know that I would never know."

"Maybe she would have carried on for it is said that any fool can get into an affair but it takes a wise head to get out of it."

While he laughed heartily, I felt heartened for having lightened him, be it for a while.

Chapter 26

Enigma of Attraction

"The beginning of my end was when Anand parted ways with me," he said resuming his remarkable tale. "But much before that, his destiny brought Anitha, a peach of a woman into his life. When he wanted to marry her, he made me privy to her poignant past that she had revealed to him, that is to let him decide whether it mattered to him; here's her tale of betrayal and retrieval."

He paused for a while as if he needed time to retrieve himself from the sense of her betrayal.

"As is the case with all love, the source of hers too was physical attraction," he said on resumption. "After her graduation, she dated with a man, who pressed her for sex that she had reserved for her nuptial bed; betraying her trust, as he tried to molest her, she broke with him, and treating it as a bad dream, she had opted for an arranged match. But when the just-weds returned home from their honeymoon, the lost suitor chose to prejudice her man's mind through an anonymous letter. The rouge wrote that she wants a lover to satiate her lust, the wherewithal of whom she had ditched could be heard from the horse's mouth, besides a husband to cater to her monetary greed. As her man was distraught at the development, she tried to assure him about her innocence, but sadly, he couldn't digest the fact that if not by body, at least in her mind, she was one with another man before him. So, even as his heart responded to her love, as his mind remained cold to her ardency, he failed to warm up to her; how the inhibitions of cultures come to influence our lives, and what a double jeopardy it was for her as she had to contend with her wretched fate as well as her man's predicament for which she was the unwitting cause. Seeing the futility of their purposeless cohabitation, she had set him free through divorce, and maybe to atone for its mistake, her fate led her to Anand, the man made for her."

"What villainy it was!"

"Villainy of a spoiler," he said. "Anand dismissed her past with the sympathy it evoked and vowed to give her due as his better half; and to seek her hand in marriage, he took me along to her parents. And lo, who was her mother? I told about the

woman who once prostituted herself for her children's betterment; what a piquant situation it was for both of us as we recognized each other, maybe owing to her conviction of her compulsion, she didn't lose her poise, and my appreciation of her character enabled me to retain my composure. When I instinctively turned my attention on her man, I could discern in his demeanor, the anxiety of parental love and the strength born out of a sense of purpose. What was more, in his interaction with his wife, I could see his adoration for her, though my presence seemingly stifled her effusiveness; but as my own behavior towards her didn't show any hangovers of our past encounter, soon she had shed her inhibitions and turned lively towards the end. Later, when Anand told me that her son married a girl from an orphanage, it was clear to me that the ethos of the couple could have shaped the spirit of their children."

"Maybe it is such who mitigate some of the vileness of the world."

"But we need battalions of them," he continued, "As proclaimed in the banner at the function hall, Anitha wed Anand; it was a simple ceremony though I wished it were a grand show. While I was impressed with her sensibility, Ruma was wary about her simplicity; by then, busy with a dotting circle of lazy women, she started living in a make-believe world. It didn't take long for Anitha to realize that Ruma only condescended to descend to her, and so she chose to keep her dignity from a healthy distance. That puzzled my queen who deemed it was her royal right to be courted by her; how delusions of grandeur makes one weary at the thought of being ignored by others. So, Ruma set out to snare the prey into her web of adoration but to no avail, and slighted, she began to pass snide remarks about her to Anand. Maybe, I too had taken Anand for granted as I didn't think overmuch about an equitable raise for his value addition to my ever expanding business; but it was Anitha's equanimity in dealing with Ruma that showed me the reality of life; it's one that lowers oneself but not others."

"When Anand wanted to quit," he continued, having seemingly reflected over his averment, "I apologized on Ruma's behalf and offered to give him his due, but he would have none of it; however, as Anitha impressed upon him not to mix up the professional with the personal, he came to stay. Soon there was an income tax raid tumbling the skeletons from our cupboards, and it was more than Anand could bear; so he called it quits and moved out of town. I didn't miss him for long as I could hire someone no less talented but with fewer business scruples and he too set up a small-scale industry as if to show me that business can be clean as well. I didn't know how he fared as we lost touch that was till he came along with his wife and children to condole with me for the loss of my family. While their weeklong stay brought to the fore the memories of my life and times with Rathi, I realized that the equilibrium of life hinges upon the spouse's sensibility."

"No less on sensitivity."

"That makes me recall this embarrassing episode," he resumed after a pause. "As I touched sixty, I happened to meet a childhood mate and his attractive second wife, who was on the wrong side of forties; when she turned flirtatious to my excitement, to her delight, I made a few passes at her, but when I became a little forthright, she turned cranky and showed me in poor light to my friend, and that was that. Leave aside my loss of face, what about the hurt she would've caused to her husband when a 'shut up' or 'no thanks' would've kept things clean for the three of us. Well, I've no clue why she tripped on the line of sensitivity!"

"Maybe, we have it in *Benign Flame*," I said, and quoted from it. "It's the character of man woman chemistry in that feminine tendencies catalyze male proclivities. Carried away by the euphoria of her coquetry, man begins to woo woman with hope. With her vanity thus addressed by his advances, she turns flirtatious, furthering his passion for her possession. In the excitement of the moment, should he transgress the threshold of her sensitivity, fearing she had compromised her honor, she sinks in shame. Thereafter, she withdraws from him to brood over her infirmity, and in the end, as though to atone for her moment of weakness, she cold-shoulders him altogether, making him wonder what went wrong in the midst of his conquest."

"If only I had heard about it," he said seemingly convinced, "maybe I would have handled our mutual attraction more languidly saving my friend from such a predicament. But all said and done, his hurt owed to his wife's lack of sensibility; maybe it's the maturity of a spouse that shapes the course of the other's life where it really matters."

Chapter 27

Veneer of the Vile

"Don't we find women carrying their paternal baggage into their married life!" he continued. "By and large, they tend to stick to their parental roots than sowing fresh family seeds in their matrimonial soil; it could be the natural weakness for one's kith and kin or it may be individual inhibitions for integration; whether or not the environment at the in-laws' place is conducive for camaraderie. Ruma opened her heart and home to her people who had shunned her when she needed them the most and as they wormed their way into her affections, she lost her sense of proportion; given her snobbishness as my people paid no more than courtesy calls, I too developed a distorted vision of relationships in the ingratiating company of her relatives. So, as her flock became hangers on, my folks ceased visiting us altogether; why should they for we seldom reciprocated their visits, and even when we went to them on occasion, we never gave them the feeling of our being at home in their homes. What with a false sense of being apart from them, we came to live in our ivory tower, flocked by those who came to grind their axes."

"How did all that affect your son?"

"As I see it in hindsight, Satish was born to a right couple gripped by a wrong psyche," he said with apparent sadness. "Having survived that road accident, Ruma and I live in guilt, I for the death of her daughter in Rathi's lap, and she for the demise of her friend with my child in her womb. So, we began pampering Satish as if the atonement of our sin lay in catering to his every whim and fulfilling his every fancy; even when our purse was lean and our mind subdued, we spent a fortune on his birthday bash; how silly that we come to celebrate our kids' birthdays as if they have become national heroes. If not for 02 October being the national holiday, would any notice Gandhi's birthday coming and going; I bet none remembers in which year he was born, save those readying themselves for the quiz competitions; yet, we come to lay store on our children's birthdays when they wouldn't be knowing what was going on around them."

"Showiness has become the malady of our times; haven't wedding cards come to resemble wall posters. None seems to mind that the card and the copy don't jell at all; maybe, it's all prognostic, who knows?"

"If one has money to spare, maybe it's an excuse to spend," he continued. "But thanks to the peer pressure, even with a shoestring budget, it has become the in thing for all. Maybe, one cannot expect forbearance from our people in the face of the newfound prosperity that too as our nation remained poor for centuries on. But still, how the poor were to tackle this financial burden imposed upon them by the profligacy of the rich is anybody's guess; perhaps the ever growing size of the bribable provides the clue. Why blame the lesser mortals for their corrupt ways; if they were to remain upright and teach philosophy at home, won't the children of the nouveau-riche teach their kids some lesson in inferiority complex; so the rich man's vulgarity has become the poor man's alibi to be corrupt. Somehow, we have contrived to pervert our thought process even; take the case of the school curriculum; the grind is the same regardless of the mind involved. What the sluggard could do than to mug-up, ending up as an also ran. Why not make the courses for the horses instead of flogging the lagging but to no avail; it's only in the sports that the differing capabilities are appreciated to devise ways and means for all to have their place under the sun; won't the bantam and heavy weight classification in boxing, wrestling and weightlifting suggest that; the perils of pitting a lightweight champion even against a heavyweight trainee are not beyond anybody's imagination."

'The dilemma is real and when synthesized, maybe your saga could help.'

"So I take it that you're inclined to pen it," he said in excitement. "Spoiled though my son was in every way, yet he was no snob. But the aberration in his character was his inability to take 'no' for an answer, and that was bad enough; so to say, it became a case of, 'as is father so is son', but with a difference. Like me, he too managed a scrape-through degree, but unlike me, the girl he loved was all eager to become his better half. When he introduced Uma to us as his future wife, Ruma and I were dumbfounded; I couldn't figure out my son's poor taste to fall for a plain girl and Ruma felt her upbringing of him had no meaning if he were to choose someone so plebeian for a wife. When we tried to make him understand about her unsuitability, he said we wouldn't be saying so if only we could've divined her inner beauty; as we gave in, despite our better judgment, he led his first love to the altar of marriage amidst great fanfare."

"It was as well; otherwise it would've been a shame to have induced him to desert her."

"Oh, won't that prove there's always a need to look at things from the others' perspective as well," he continued. "But as it happened, she turned out to be a gold-digger; what was worse, she was immoral to the core of her heart; as she gave him hell from the day one, he realized what a third-rate bitch his wife was. Maybe man can understand another man if he were to be his boss and a woman when he takes her as his wife. With the imagined inner beauty becoming the mirage of his married life, as Satish became an emotional wreck, I felt guilty for not having taught him the virtue of judging people for their small gestures; if only I had parented him properly, maybe he wouldn't have had to undergo that trauma. Oh, what it had taken us to rescue the poor fellow from her clutches only we knew; ultimately it was my threat to get her killed by hired hands, even at the risk of myself ending up on the gallows that made her agree to divorce him for a royal sum."

'Don't I see your son has complexity for heredity?'

"Not only that," he continued, "as if history repeats itself, it was a whore who played a part in his second marriage, that I came to know that from the man who had lost his wife to him."

“Strange it is!”

“Better save your double exclamation mark to do justice to that mother of all tales, a verbatim account of the whore who had played a part in it.”

Chapter 28

Swap for Nope

“Here is that fact beyond fiction,” he began to narrate with a parental pride that didn’t escape my attention. “What a handicap it was to be divorced, thought my son; self-service at home and harlot-solace in a brothel; what service and how much solace! Women were ever scary of even wealthy divorcees as if divorce underscores one’s incompatibility once and for all, and a whore was no answer for a wife. Surely some featureless young thing could be willing and that’s no choice of a wife any way; but a lucky guy could bump into a desirable dame in the blind alleys of the Cupid and that’s a rarity anyway; as for affairs, they were seldom, even for the well-heeled in their prime, but as life is meant to be lived, he resolved, one had to go about it regardless and how to make the best of time was the essence of existence.”

“Envisioning liaisons through friendship magazines seemed to him no more than chasing the mirages of lust,” he continued with the account of his son’s life. “But for an ad here and there from a genuine dame, the rest were all from the cravers of female flesh, and given the lack of proper response, one might wonder whether the ‘willing women’ were indeed real beings or merely fictitious characters meant to buttress the publishers’ bottom lines; even otherwise, with the exhibitionist tone of the machismo ads, going through the pages left one with a sickening feeling; pity the dames who fell for such guys. Maybe the saving grace was the insertions for wife-swapping that seemed genuine for they were all about give and take; but then, wasn’t he rendered a *hors de combat* for he lacked the means for a quid pro quo? What about Vimala, he thought as he recalled that evening when he was led into a lounge of a mansion where he found a score of whores in awkward postures, and as he turned his back on the gaudy dames in disgust, one lissome lass in a Turkish towel walked in. Enticed, as he followed her in a trance, she sauntered along endearingly in her semi-nude, and that ushered in an unusual romance between them.”

“It’s as if your son had stolen your address-book of those places.”

“Well,” he said after a hearty laugh, “it occurred to him that Vimala could carry herself to pass off for his wife; what’s more she was bound to tempt any hesitant husband to jump into the swap trap. What an idea to pay her for the favors of a MILF or two in the wife swaps though not all of them were honeys? So roping in Vimala, he went on a hunt for the promising, and soon succeeded in roping in the willing – an educated and sophisticated couple in their mid-twenties, who were married for some years by then; he was handsome and successful, and she was sexy and charming. While they led an active sexy life, their family cradle remained empty, and that let the ennui set into their otherwise wondrous life. So, they tried to enliven their life by seeking pleasures as their fancies suggested, but as the novelty of those diversions wore off, their cumulative exasperation increased reducing the span of their thrill; and back to square one, they realized that they had lost the capacity to enthuse each other, so bored to death but committed to each other, they dragged their feet on their drab marital course. But when their love for adventure made them think in terms of venturing into the forbidden avenues of human joys, they began searching for a suitable couple to make it a foursome for a fulsome life.”

"Cynically brilliant, and surely it's a notch above your threesome idea in the hospital."

"Didn't I tell you that my son did far better than that," he continued. "The orgies that followed brought them all closer and that made them feel blessed in their blissful state. Soon the lover in my son cherished the woman of that wife and began to wish that she were his spouse, and she, used to sex as a marital obligation, found his lovemaking emotionally fulfilling. When she was in the family way, she instinctively knew that Satish was the father of the child; and as the issue in the offspring began to draw her towards him, she thought about the ethics of its upbringing in the existing setting; as her maternal instinct got the better of her feminine infirmities, her husband's position in her life seemed untenable in her perception, and it took little time for her to resolve that my son was the man of her destiny. Much before the expected delivery, she deserted her man to begin her life afresh with Satish; and to avoid a first rate scandal, we got them married in secrecy. Didn't you hear the talk on the grapevine about the simple wedding of Satish and Sarala?"

"Yes, but..."

"It was not the end of it," he continued. "Let down and lonely for his misadventure, the lost soul was left to rue his folly; but as time started clearing the debris of his fate, he began to pick up the threads of life. As woman could only heal the wounds caused by woman, he went to a brothel for solace, only to be doubly wounded; he found Vimala among the girls and was dumbfounded to learn that she was picked up by Satish to act as a dupe to deceive him. When he threatened to sue Satish for the breach of trust and other criminal offenses, I had to cough up much to keep him off; legal case or not, surely he had a damaging story to sell to our hurt."

"Isn't it like making the best of a bad bargain? But not everyone would resort to that I suppose."

"That's about the inscrutability of human behavior," he said. "So, hardly had we come to terms with the fiasco of Satish's divorce than we had to contend with his scandalous alliance with Sarala. It was one thing to avert a scandal and another to reconcile to the oddity; while it brought to the fore our own liaison in the wake of our spouses' demise, yet their offence offended even our blunted sense of righteousness. As we sought to punish them through our indifference, we all became strangers in our own house; and it pained me to realize that I had failed as a father to weave a right moral fabric for my son; well what can a fallen father do than to see the fall of his son? In those stressful times, I thought of Anand, and regardless of my past indifference, he came to see me; when I began my lament, he cut me short to aver that parents want their children to be happy the way they want them to be happy and not happy *per se*; and if their complying children were to be unhappy, they only turn philosophical to unburden themselves. It was this eye-opener that set our family ball rolling all again."

Chapter 29

Goring Syndrome

"Once we could remove our indignant blinkers," he continued, "we had seen what a wonderful woman Sarala was. As our son and his spouse doted upon each other, Ruma and I reminisced over our own times, and soon as Sarala delivered Ramesh, we gloated over our grandson, and well before his second birthday as he had Ramya for his sibling, our cup of joy was seemingly filled to the brim; as if to meet the future needs of the growing family, our ventures too began yielding in their bountiful. After

all those inimical twists and ironical turns as life went on for long without any hiccups, it appeared as if life had left with nothing up its sleeve to surprise us; so it never occurred to me that it could be a lull before the storm that was about to be unleashed on us by the inimical fate; like all of Gen-Next, Satish too was fond of fast cars; how often I used to tell him, 'go west my boy for the roads here are deathtraps', but he would rather prefer the comforts of the eastern life to the mundane luxuries of the west. Maybe at the dictates of fate, as he began pushing us to make it to the Mount Abu in his Ferrari, I relented only when he promised never to cross eighty; well, he kept his word but that truck driver was too drunk to have kept his course. What an irony of life is that it often tends one to be the victim of others' follies.'

"Sad though, it's the reality of life."

"Man's folly at times might give a weird twist to the history of his land," he said. "You might have seen the movie Dunkirk; in the World War II, the Wehrmacht cornered the British in and around the port town of Dunkirk, and all that was left for it was to push and prod the enemy into the sea. But Goring, the head of Luftwaffe in the Third Reich put it into Hitler's head that Wehrmacht's victory would be perceived by the Germans as the victory of their armed forces, but if Luftwaffe were to annihilate the entrapped that would be to the Fuehrer's account as the air force was his creation whereas the army was as old as the nation. Luckily for British forces, the Fuehrer fell for it, and as Goring bit more than he could chew, Churchill had enough time to affect their rescue across the English Channel. But sadly for Germany and arguably for the good of the world, while it was his grandeur of delusion and not the well-being of his country that made Goring envisage that absurdity, it was Fuehrer's false sense of invincibility that made him overlook the danger the move had portended. If not for Goring's self-serving advice the flower of the British youth might've perished on the sands of Dunkirk and the Nazis would have been the masters of the World sans the Goring Syndrome – the self-serving ways of one that imperil others' course would serve the unintended in unexpected ways."

"I've never heard of this Goring Syndrome."

"It did occur to me only now," he said, "and you might as well give me the credit for that, unless, unknown to us, someone, somewhere, had already come up with it; you know such are known to happen more often than one might think it could be the case."

"That's true."

"Maybe the corporate health sector symbolizes the Goring Syndrome like nothing else; the assorted diagnostic reports sought by the self-serving doctors that rob their patients' savings would only serve the auxiliary health services; even conceding that the capital involved in setting up a corporate hospital is mind-boggling, begging for returns on investment, that the doctors there allow themselves to turn into con men to trick the sick is indeed sickening; I wonder how these are better than the pimps fleecing the whores; in spite of their daytime black deeds, the fact that they are able to sleep at nights shows that they have self-anesthetized their collective consciences; even as Hippocrates could be turning in his grave, wonder how these fare in hell as and when they reach there. Maybe death is no better than these supposed to be life-saving guys for while devouring your near and dear; it lets you go as if to derive a vicarious pleasure in seeing you thanking life in spite of it all. It was in that confused state of mind that I dusted the much vaunted *Bhagvad-Gita* for an understanding of life and death in philosophical terms."

"I began to see death in its true perspective through verses such as these," he began reading from the Gita that lay beside him. "You and Me / As well these / Have had past / Future as well; Clear are learned in their minds / Embodies selfsame spirit all one / From birth to death, in every birth; Spirit as entity hath no birth / How can thou kill what's not born; What's not real, it's never been / And that's true, it's ever there / That's how wise all came to see; Prima facie if thou feel / Subject Spirit is to rebirths / Why grieve over end of frame; Dies as one / For like rebirth / Why feel sad / Of what's cyclic; Isn't thy lament over that / Un-manifested to start with / Gets manifested just as guest / And bids adieu in due course, and, Dies not Spirit as die beings / What for then man tends to grieve. And that helped. Even otherwise maybe time would have healed the wounds of my grief but where else I would've acquired the depth for contemplation."

"How mean is man that he turns to the scriptures only when he's down and out."

"Yet they are magnanimous to him," he said. "It's not their fault that we don't derive benefit from them. But what eye-openers the end chapters of the Gita were to me; what a vile creature I was, I came to realize from these verses - Make all vile, rude guys all / Vainglorious 'n haughty too / Besides being indignant / No less are they indulgent; Gives as virtue man freedom / Keeps him vileness in bondage; Pride 'n lust, long wish list / Vile in conceit live impure; Seeing life as one to gloat / Vile by impulse go to lengths; Seek vile creatures ever shortcuts / On way to wants, they ill-get wealth; Think all vile, in like terms- / This is mine so let me keep / Why not have I more of it, Foe this mine I've truly floored / Won't I tackle the rest of them / Sure I'm Lord of mine own world; Note all vile, gloat as such - / Besides wealthy, I'm well-born / Won't I give and enjoy too, To their hurt in illusion vile / End up slaves of joys of flesh."

"Why I never heard that before though I did attend some discourses on the Gita here and there."

"Sadly, the stress is on the beginning and the middle chapters and even if you were to read some commentary on your own, you always tend to begin afresh, never to reach these gems of the last three chapters," he lamented. " But, it is from these that I came to see the affects of unruly passion on man - Ensures nature gets one tied / By Virtue, passion, or by delusion; It's in pretension passionate live / Eye they have on name 'n fame; Deed passionate is quid pro quo/ Ever done with some end in mind; In want passionate come to live / Bugged down by, what they eye; Mind as covetous 'n thought impure / Crave passionate all things mundane/ Which them excite as well pull down; Perspective lack passionate right/ In weird ways they tend their lives; Things that seem to bring joys/ Ever passionate with zeal pursue, and, It's the way with thy passion / To jump at all that what might tempt / That which turns sour in due course.'

"Oh, how true it is."

"And what symbolizes virtue in man is made amply clear in the masterpiece," he continued quoting from the Gita. "Indulge virtuous in their work / With no relevance to outlook; With no illusion but diligence / Carries renunciant his duties / Agreeable or otherwise too; Needs one work to sustain life / Relinquents avoid, overloads all; Virtuous ever in self-control / Steady they wavering mind of theirs; What fail sprint 'n serve long run / Virtuous know keep woes at bay; Taking well and ill at ease / Senses honed 'n ego evened / Detached virtuous ever engage; Deal virtuous in measures equal / Weigh they fine all deeds their fair. But what bowled me in the end are these from the *Bhakti Yoga* - Scores thought over mere rotting / Betters meditation awareness too / What helps man to find moorings / Are acts his with no axe to grind; Kind-hearted 'n considerate / Friendly natured, forgiving too / Lays no store on highs

and lows / Suffers no pride 'n possessive not; Who's patient 'n cheerful / Self-willed as well persevering / Who's hearty ever at work / Makes he devout My beloved; Who's simple, never in want / Covets he not in vantage post / Shakes him none, he keeps his nerve / It's such who Me please the most; He's My darling who craves not / Yet won't shun the pleasures of life / Takes but things all as they come; Treats he equal friends 'n foes / Scorn or honour minds he not / Keeps he cool in grief and joy / Nurses for none soft centre, and above all, Pats 'n slights all in the score / Treats as equal score My man / Takes he lot of his in stride/ But won't put the blame on Me."

"Oh, if only we can imbibe that philosophy."

"Well, when I was trying to grasp the import of the Gita to retrieve my lost soul and repair my ruined life," he said stoically "Ruma's relatives turned out to be the impediments; if not, you would have a different story to tell or maybe there would have been no memoir to write after all."

Chapter 30

Back to the Basics

"When Anand came to console me, Ruma's relatives had a scare," he continued with apparent sadness. "Afraid of my passing on the Imperial crown to him, they even moved the courts, but when he turned down my offer, and even as they withdrew their plaint, I began to brood over their greed; and as a couple of Rajan's relatives too called on me with their lawyers, I felt as if I was face to face with the ugliness of wealth. Ruma's people at least had the good sense to take her back into their fold, rather made their way into hers, but none of Rajan's relatives had the grace to pay their last respects to him; well it was then that I made up my mind to deny them all."

He paused for a while with a smirk on his face apparently relishing his idea.

"But still I had no idea as to what to do with all that liquid cash and for a cue, I began mingling with the common folk," he said on resumption. "Once in a city bus, the man in the front seat gave me his place, and inexplicably it occurred to me that given a chance, the same man may be no less greedy to grab all my money. As I began brooding over my supposition, I could divine that innate goodness and inherent greed are the obverse and reverse of the human nature and that wealth tends to abet the latter at least in the weak minds. Why for that matter, poverty, the product of social debilities and human constraints, is no less an evil that affects man's ethos as money does; and as for nouveau riche, they tend to imagine that since they have the reins of wealth, they have a reign over the world of wisdom. Now as I speak to you, my irrationality, first in the accumulation of wealth and then in the destruction of it is seemingly coming to the fore; if only I had not lost my sense of balance in either case."

"What to make out of your state of mind."

"If only man has the hindsight of a Spanish bull, his life would've been a lot better," he said. "You know, after its tussle with the matador, if let out, the mauled beast becomes wiser to his ways with the green herring, should they find themselves in the ring again, they wouldn't be fooled any longer, and so as to avert the threat these creatures pose to the matadors they are slaughtered after the spectacle is over. Life is not as unkind to the self-introspecting man as it is to a self-reflecting bull for it lends him the scope to contain the damages the vagaries of his habit occasions; but still, save a Gary Sobers, who said he never committed the same mistake twice, man fails to benefit from the let-offs of fate, and that only proves that man is more adept at thwarting the perils without but not at averting the banes within."

"Now that you've the makings of a *swami*..."

"You want me to acquire the trappings of an *asharam* to make it big in the global business of pseudo spiritualism," he interjected with a smile. "Well I'll be going to the village where *swamis* of the day wouldn't ever venture though the *yogis* of yore all lived in the jungles. I shall try to help the peasants to educate their kids; by the way what else serves the mankind better than educating the children of the underprivileged? It's the educated children that make aware fathers to perpetuate cultured generations, and the more they are, the better it is for the world. Oh, why it didn't occur to me before I destroyed all that money? If only we learn from nature; won't all trees brave the vagaries of weather to bear their fruits to serve the species? But ravaged by the vicissitudes of life, how I had lost the opportunity to bestow the bounty to the needy; even otherwise, man is inexorably distancing himself more and more from the nature by dwelling in excuse me for the well-worn phrase, the concrete jungles."

"I too have to share the blame for I only talked about charity and not empowerment."

"Why worry over the spilt milk any way," he said. "I'll play my part in my village with what is left of my money; besides as life there is vitiated by caste prejudices and beset by religious superstitions, I shall try to open the village minds to rational thinking. But as a novelist, I see a bigger role for you on the rural stage for I feel there is a need for novels that enable the villagers to contemplate about their human condition. While the current fiction in the urban setting would seem another world for them to identify with, the novels set in the rural background don't help them either for they are meant to showcase the village life for the urban world. If only you come and stay in my village for a while, you might conceive a novel or two that might make a difference to scores of village folks."

"Why not, won't I have your insights for inputs?"

"Before that, if you think it's worth the trouble and helps the urban public, you may as well write about my life and times," he said. "If what I hear about the publishing world is true, then all your effort might come to naught, but still, if you're passionate about it, and are prepared to face the ordeal that getting published is, then go ahead forthwith for why deny the benefits of contemplating over my misled life for those who might die before I cease? If ever my memoir makes a difference to one person, then I can see some purpose in my meaningless life and should it find a place in the best-seller charts, well, who knows which books get there, all the better it is for you. But were you to fail to find a backer, let not frustration rule your head for strange are the ways of the publishing world, indeed the course of life in the world at large. That there could be many facets of life which defy its normality of character I had only realized from that Satish-Sarala episode; how strange that men and women should visualize a comfort zone for the fulfillment of their sexual fantasies with total strangers rather than with their intimate friends, and that's one of the many imponderables of life. Maybe, had the poor guy swapped his spouse with one of his friend's wife, it wouldn't have been a swap for nope as it turned out to be for him, but then its nature that prevails. Well, now that I have left my past to you for its future care, let me nurse what is left of its future as best as I can."

When I began to pen his plight in the plot of his life, he went with his mother to live in the village where it all began, and as I scripted his tale, having read it, he expressed the hope that in the glaring shadow of his life others would have a proper perspective of theirs.

