

REWRITING FATE

A NOVEL



**REVISED EDITION OF FATE
2006**

RANGANATHAN MAGADI

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By
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Printed in the United States of America

First edition 2004

Revised edition FATE, 2006

Author's note

This novel is purely a work of fiction based on imagination. I have created a few characters to interweave this plot, and the historical events described bear little or no semblance to the historical facts and any semblance is purely coincidental and the author does not claim any knowledge of any event.

The growth of Islamic terrorism has challenged not only the modern civilization but also the growing spirit of internationalism. It has restricted the movement of people from one part of the world to another, and the people living in one part of the world now look upon the people living in different parts of the world with distrust and suspicion. The worst affected people in this changing scenario are the people of India who come to America in search of greener pastures. Here is the story of one such person who becomes a victim of circumstances created by militancy and terrorism.

A middle class, traditional, Indian youth apprehends the dangers to which India is exposed due to growing Islamic militancy and terrorism. He attributes the existing malaise in the country to the defective political system; to the dishonest political leaders and to the corrupt officials and migrates to America, which he considers as a role model for democracy, the rule of law, discipline, honesty and civic sense. but meanwhile, the Islamic terrorists strike against the American landmarks, and that changes his personal life as much as it changes the world situation.

I thank profusely Lulu Enterprises for printing and providing tools in the publication of this novel.

Dedication

This novel is dedicated to Prof. Sree Sreenath, Shobha Sreenath, Ravindranath N, Abhi Kaushik, Apu Kaushik and Jamuna Mysore.

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Chapter 1

A terrorist camp

Somewhere near Khandahar, a small plane touched down the runway and came to a halt in a few minutes. About fifty young men disembarked from the plane under the cover of darkness and went straight to the arrival gate. They were wearing loose kurtas and pajamas, thick turbans and had covered their bodies and faces with thick blankets as it was biting cold outside. The temperature was just above twenty-five degrees on the Fahrenheit scale. A group of middle-aged men received them at the airport and took them to a nearby mountain, and atop the mountain, there was a training camp of the terrorists. The leader of a terrorist organization was sitting on the floor of his camp, surrounded by a group of followers. He was moving his fingers on his long beard now and then. Two men, Asif and Aslam, were assisting him.

Asif was about sixty-four years old. He was looking unperturbed and resolute with his blood-shot eyes. He pointed to one of the young men who arrived there and said to the Chief, "That is my son. I have changed his name as Aman as no one should ever know his real name."

"You are a great leader. God willing you will replace me when I am dead."

By then, all mujahiddeens had entered the room and saluted the leader before they settled down on the floor along with others. "This is Afghan Dada, our supreme commander," introduced Asif to the new mujahiddins. The Dada stopped talking and gave a broad smile as he looked at them affectionately and slowly said,

"I hope you had a comfortable journey."

"We had a very comfortable journey," said Aman.

"Where are you coming from?"

"We are coming from Pakistan. I recruited these people for Jihad in India and sent them to the Pakistan terrorist camp near Lahore for training eight months ago. They trained them for three months and sent them on assorted assignments. I have brought them here for advanced training." Aman replied.

"Good, now listen," the Dada said, "Our mission is universal brotherhood of the Muslims all over the world. We have no national barriers. We belong to one religion and we stand for one religion. Our goal is to give to the world one single religion. That is Islam. We wage a holy war against the kafirs around the world. We have identified three nations for our Jihad, America, Israel and India. Our war continues until we destroy these nations. You must be ready to make sacrifices for the sake of your religion. Religion is supreme, not state or individual. You are the soldiers of our jihad. If you live, you will be honored as leaders and if you die, you

will be honored as martyrs. God is great. If you have questions do not hesitate to ask.” He turned to Aman and asked him,

“Aman, do you have any question?”

“Hazrat, do we have nuclear bombs?”

“My dear brother, if we don’t have one, we will build one.” The Chief said with an air of superiority.

“Do we have enough money to manufacture nuclear bomb?” he persisted in his query earnestly.

“My dear brother, we have our people all over the world to fund our nuclear programs. Some of them are so rich and dedicated that you cannot even imagine how much money they are going to pour into our coffers for jihad.” The Chief held his head high as he said it.

Arif asked, “Why do we need nuclear bombs, Chief?”

“You, young man, don’t know what we are up to. We are waging jihad against the entire world and we shall not rest until we win our holy war!”

The Chief was resolute in his voice.

“Chief, I have a question. Why don’t we send people around the world to preach Islam and convert people to Islam instead of jihad, then?” He suggested.

“We don’t believe in preaching and persuasion. The world will understand only one language- the language of force. We believe in force and we mean to use it.” The Chief replied emphatically.

“Then why don’t we build a huge army and kill all the kafirs on earth?”

Arif suggested and expected the Chief to applaud his intelligence.

“We do not have so many resources as to build such a huge army. Moreover we don’t need a huge army for our purpose. We need a band of dedicated young men to harass and humiliate a mighty nation like America.” The Chief explained,

“It is not wise to lose lot of money and men for this purpose. What we need today is not so much money as intelligence. We spend less money and deploy less number of men but expect amazing results”

“It is Interesting! How is it possible?” The questioner wondered.

“We terrorize the world. Our instruments of foreign policy are clandestine attack, ambush, extortion, kidnapping, looting, arson, destruction of enemy property and causing damage to men and materials. In the end, we seek the end of civilization, and upon the debris of the destroyed civilizations we build the Muslim civilization, the only civilization that will flourish eternally on this planet.”

“Chief, is it our dream!” Arif wondered.

“It is our goal, and we will not rest until we realize it,” The Chief was emphatic.

“Chief, you are talking like Osama bin Laden”

“Of course Osama is our hero. We respect him. We bow to him. We must emulate his spirits and fight for the Islamic glory,” the Chief said in reverence.

“What is his message, Chief?” Aman asked anxiously.

“His message is to keep alive the Islamic movements in India and America. We have secretly established a students’ organization of the mujahiddins in India. They will be sent to Pakistani terrorist’s camps for training and when they go back, they form a great secret army and prepare the extremists to wage a civil war in India. We get lot of help from Pakistan, you know. We wish everyone to become a part of this Movement. We must fight to finish this unfinished war!”

“Chief, what is this unfinished war?” Arif asked uncannily.

“Jihad! Our war is against all kafirs, I told you. Our aim is to usher one religion for the entire world, and that is Islam.”

“Chief, you are great. There can be no better cause than this. We are with you and extend our full support to you,” they declared in unison. They said to themselves “Allah ka lak, lak shukr!”

“I have chosen Ahmed as the chief co-coordinator of Pakistan. Aman will be in charge of Indian affairs and Abdul is in charge of American affairs.” The Chief announced proudly to his audience. Aman was tall but lanky, fierce looking with blood-shot eyes and expressionless face. Abdul was short and burly with gruff voice. Ahmed was of medium build with sharp features with nose and chin protruding. He was more dangerous than he looked.

The Chief asked Aman, Ahmed and Abdul to stay behind when others were gone.

“I will speak to you one by one separately.” He told them and called in Ahmed,

“Follow me.”

Ahmed followed him to the adjoining room. When they were closeted in the adjoining room, he said to Ahmed,

“Listen carefully. We have 5,000 madrasas in Pakistan where our young children are taught religion for several years. When they become 18 years old, they will have only one motive in life: to fight kefirs all over the world. We train some of them here in Afghanistan and in Pakistan, and send them to various countries on assignments.”

“What will be the role of Pakistan in this mission?” asked Ahmed.

“We have held serious discussions with the Sahib and he has agreed to protect our life and facilitate our mission. Most of the Moulvis and Moulanas are with us, but they don’t want us to declare that we have their support. They are more worried about the growing Indian power. They fought three wars against India but could not win. They want to keep up the Kashmir issue to irritate India and to fight out India when they acquire

sufficient power. They spend large amount of their revenue on defense. They will one day excel India and that will be the Doom's Day for India. Now your job is to stay in Pakistan and recruit young people to our Afghan camps for training. These Jihads will enter Indian side of Kashmir through Pakistan with the help of Pakistan's army and ISI and create havoc in Kashmir. When the Indians come to know of this they will enter via Nepal borders and the Nepal's borders will be sealed, they enter via Bangladesh. We will keep Kashmir burning so that the people of Kashmir continue to hate India and regard Pakistan as their savior. When the Jihads grow in number we want them to spread to other parts of India and to keep India burning everyday in some part or the other. The Indians must have sleepless nights until they perish or convert themselves to Islamic faith. The Indian government will be forced to fight Pakistan one day, and Pakistan, on the ground of self-defense will use mercilessly nuclear arsenals in their armory to destroy the whole of India. Till then, preparation goes on in Pakistan to acquire more and more sophisticated weapons from friendly countries of the world. The next war between India and Pakistan will be final, and victory will be ours."

"Chief, I have a question for you. Are you sure that Pakistan has more nuclear weapons than India has? Has Pakistan enough capability to bring India to its knees?"

"I am absolutely positive about it. Pakistan started its nuclear weapons programs a few weeks after it was defeated by India in 1971. It had acquired nuclear weapons by 1983. Their weapons are superior to India's," the Chief assured.

"But India says that it has more nuclear capability than Pakistan has!"

"India thinks so, but we know Pakistan has superior capability."

"I shall wait for the day when India will be destroyed, Chief"

"You can leave for Pakistan tomorrow. Our friends in Pakistan have made all arrangements for your stay. You will be in constant touch with the ISI agents who will provide you all logistics. You will get American money from one Pakistani every 15 days for your expenditure. Okay. I wish you best of luck, my friend, Khuda Hafiz."

"Khuda Hafiz" shouted Ahmed passionately in a raised voice as he walked out to the street.

Then, Aman was called in.

"Look, you are in charge of Indian Affairs," The Chief told him, "Your job is to recruit Jihads in India. You will print counterfeit notes in India and pay for the Jihads. They will circulate counterfeit notes; peddle in drugs, derail trains, burn down the Indian slums and short circuit government buildings. You are at liberty to do any nefarious activity you deem necessary to keep India and its people terror-struck. Finally you will attack and kill key politicians and create political uncertainty. You will

enter India as an Indian. Okay. We have arranged a sham marriage with a girl from Hyderabad that will help you to seek Indian passport and if you don't get it you may acquire a fake passport of India that is sold for a price in Pakistan. You may go now. "Khuda Hafiz."

When Aman was gone, Abdul was called in.

"Abdul, you have been assigned the most important and dangerous mission. You will be in charge of American Affairs. America is the strongest country in the world. It has a huge army and most sophisticated weapons. They think they are very safe because of their military might and economic power. We have to show to the world that America is not safe anymore. The world must know that no place on earth is safe until supremacy of Islam is established! We show them that our intelligence can penetrate deeply into any part of the world. We show them that we can wreak havoc in their country. We can destroy them with their own men, money and equipment without great loss for us. What we need today is not so much the Atom bomb or the Hydrogen bomb as a team of dedicated young men who can use their intelligence for causing death and destruction in America. We will cause death and destruction in America as we have been causing death and destruction in India. You will go to Germany and organize an attack on American landmark. That is your first task. When you have finished your first assignment, you start a secret organization with the help of our brothers. Your third assignment will be to derail trains and destroy buildings. Your passport is ready for proceeding to Germany. We know America is a highly organized country and it is difficult to outsmart them. But I am sure we will achieve our objective. You may go now. Khuda Hafiz."

"But Chief, if America and India fight jointly against Pakistan and Afghanistan what will happen?"

"That day will never come, my brother, that day will never come. American way of thinking is totally different from that of India. America does not believe in the concept of neutrality. They think that you are a foe if you are not a friend. The Indians believe in the concept of neutrality and they don't take sides. John Foster Dulles was very angry at India because of their principle of neutrality. If Indians had sided with America, America would not have befriended Pakistan. As long as America believes that Pakistan is its friend just because Pakistan has outwardly aligned with America, we are safe in Asia. Geographically we are surrounded by Muslim nations. That is an added advantage. A Muslim will never betray another Muslim, a fact that America will never realize. Under the circumstances we can be sure of our success." The Chief assured him.

"Khuda Hafiz" Ahmed said as he left the room. He was highly pleased with Chief's perception and imagined the 'towering inferno' as he walked along the road.

Chapter 2

Yakub's strategy

Yakub, a Pakistani spokesman was sitting in a grand building, surrounded by some military officers and ISI men in plain clothes, near a Jihad camp in Lahore. He was briefing the military and air force officials. Ahmed, Abdul and Aman were present at the meeting.

“Gentlemen, look at the political drama that is being played by the selfish politicians in India. At no point of time in history, Indian government was as weak as it is now. There are too many parties and no party can muster the requisite majority to run the government. The politics of coalition has made the country weak and the political leaders, self-seeking and egoistic. It is the most appropriate time to attack them. Get ready to invade Kashmir” He looked triumphantly at the people around him and gave a sardonic laugh.

“We don't win this battle, Sir. We are afraid that it could escalate into a full scale war.” Anwer, a military officer hinted.

“I don't care. I have only one aim in life. That is to fight India.”

“Shall we declare an open war then?”

“No. We have to wage a covert war and sneak into Kashmir when Indian politicians are fighting among themselves.”

“When shall we attack?”

“Indian leaders are very enthusiastic to extend their hands of friendship with Pakistan. They do not know what we are up to. I will play on their innocence and humiliate India. Attack when I will be shaking hands with them.”

“It is a great idea!”

“An Indian Minister has sought permission to visit Pakistan as a mark of friendship. We will diplomatically extend our invitation but the day he visits Pakistan we push our army to Indian side of Kashmir and he will suffer defeat both diplomatically and militarily. He will never forget the fiasco he suffers now.” He chuckled. His chuckle baffled even the most trustworthy of his military officers.

“In my opinion, we have to give priority to the economic progress of Pakistan. Our country has been fighting both within and without in the name of religion when the people are suffering from hunger and poverty. War is a luxury that Pakistan cannot afford.” Anwer opined

Yakub looked at him grimly which sent chill waves through his spines and he turned away from Yakub in great consternation. Yakub gave a wry smile and said, “Pakistan is a poor country. We will never be able to become rich like America and our children will never have good education

and suitable employment because we don't have enough resources. Whatever resources we have, we have to spend on our army and air force. We have massive nuclear programs, as you all are aware. We are having on our agenda Gawari missiles, Ghazni missiles and Ahmedi missiles that can hit any part of India. Our friends, you know who they are, are providing all help in the manufacture of missiles and we thank them profusely for their help."

"Why do we need missiles when we don't have money for education and employment?" Anwer questioned

"Why do we need missiles? What a question! We need missiles to show to the world that we are a strong nation so that nobody can cast evil eye on our nation," replied Yakub.

"Who on earth can cast evil an eye on us and what enmity they could have against us? We are poor and backward. We have nothing that interests anyone. Then why will anybody cast an evil eye on us?" retorted Anwer.

"You are right. I agree with you. But we have an eye on Kashmir you know." Yakub said slowly shrugging his shoulders.

"Why should we have an eye on Kashmir when we cannot properly feed our own population?"

Yakub was stung. He raised his neck like a hooded snake but he controlled himself with great difficulty and after a moment of silence replied calmly,

"You don't seem to understand the crux of the problem. Kashmir is only a pretext to wage war against India. Our great ancestors who conquered India in the medieval period came from central Asia. Ghazni went to India seventeen times and defeated the Indians and carried away vast wealth from India. Then Mohammad of Ghori went twice and ravaged the remaining wealth of India. He left his slave Qutb Uddin in Delhi to rule India. Then Baber went from Kaiber Pass and established Mughal rule in India. They were great people. They looted the Indians and massacred them, and on their blood and grave, they established the Muslim empire. It is to honor them that we have named our missiles Ghori and Ghazni. We emulate their spirit and fight against the Indians."

"You say Ghori and Ghazni looted and killed people. Why should we name our missiles after plunderers and marauders?" Anwer persisted fearlessly.

"They not only killed and plundered; they destroyed Indian temples and raped India women. They have destroyed kefirs and their civilization. That is why we name our missiles after them." He rose from his seat abruptly. Aman, Abdul and Ahmed gestured to him to play cool.

"You are talking of history, but are we capable of humiliating India militarily now?" Anwer continued to confront him.

“India is stronger militarily, but we can give them crushing defeat because one Pakistan soldier is equal to ten Indian soldiers. We are physically stronger and well motivated.” Yakub said as he sat down.

“Indians say that Pakistan will be wiped out if there is nuclear war between India and Pakistan. What are we going to achieve then?” The officer went on with his question.

“We don’t care whether we gain or lose. Our aim is to harass India constantly. We unleash terror against them, and burn and destroy the people and their property. We will not allow them to sleep peacefully. When the time comes, we will be the first to use nuclear bombs and then we will rest.” He replied in a subdued voice.

“Why should we kill millions of people in the name of religion?” Anwer asked emboldened by Yakub’s predicament.

“Islam is a great religion. The people around the world must accept it or die. They have no choice. We are a great people. When the war will be over we will build a new civilization in South Asia—a great Islamic civilization. India will be wiped out from the world map. Its days are numbered and their Dooms Day is fast approaching. Do you understand what I mean?” replied Yakub in a pitched voice that silenced everyone. After a minute’s silence Yakub said slowly,

“Anwer, you are getting old and you need rest. I recommend for your discharge from the service. You may go now.” Anwer went out in great frustration. When he was gone Yakub said to Ahmed, ‘fix him’ and he nodded. The military officers stood there flabbergasted

“You are great. You are no less than Ghoris or Ghaznis. May your tribe increase,” some religious leaders around him praised him with one voice. The Pakistani spokesman chuckled with great satisfaction.

“Aman,” Yakub called out when the people around him dispersed, and asked, “What is new?”

“Our army has been able to push two hundred mujahiddins to Indian side of Kashmir. They are preparing for an attack on the Indian army. They are also planning to bomb a bus bringing soldiers’ families. Our militants have infiltrated into Nepal on a large scale and they are planning sabotage in India and hijacking of Indian planes. The militants enter India from Nepal side and burn down the slum dwellers. They vow to keep India burning everyday. Our militants have established strong links with ultras in eastern part of India. They are getting lots of encouragement from East Bengal. They are also planning to infiltrate into India from Bangladesh. We have planned to arm the Naxalites within India for an uprising against the lawfully established governments. We will corner India from all directions and keep India burning.”

“Don’t forget to send letters of condolences and condemnation to Indian government as and when the plans are executed.” Yakub chuckled and asked, “What has Indian leadership to say?”

Indian leadership is trying to pacify the people that some misguided elements are causing death and destruction and they will be caught and booked under the penal code. They don’t know that we are waging a proxy war against them. They are too good for us.”

“Yes, they are innocent. We have been able to develop our defense because of their innocence. Let them lie low for some more time and they will never be able to get up. You may go now and send Ahmed”.

“Good Morning, sir” said Ahmed as he came in.

“Very Good Morning, What is new, Ahmed?”

“The news from Afghanistan is very encouraging, sir,” he said and continued

“Al Qaeda is planning attack on American Installations all over the world. They are also attacking American land marks.”

“That is really great. Americans are the real enemies of our people because they have set up Israel against Palestine. They are not helping us to snatch Kashmir from India. They are not allowing Iraq to establish its superiority. We prepare Islamic Bombs. All Muslim nations will form an axis of power and fight other nations. Only Osama can do it. He is a great hero and we honor him. It is our duty to help him militarily, morally and materially. Tell our military staff and our intelligence agencies to provide them all assistance.”

In Washington, an American spokesman was standing at the mike in a press conference and all the journalists were at the edge of their seats, listening attentively as an Indian reporter asked him, “Pakistan has become a nuclear power. Do you think that the world is safe with nuclear weapons in the armory of Pakistan?”

“Pakistan is our great friend,” replied the spokesman proudly. “They have signed our collective defense treaties. We have given them military assistance for forty years and they have played a great role in containing communism.”

“As we know, Pakistan has collected huge sum of money as grants and loans from America, and has developed their defense system to fight India, not communism,” the reporter interposed.

“Now communism is a thing of past. The period of cold war is over. We regard India as a strategic partner of America”

“We have news that Pakistan is giving all support to Taliban and Jihad organizations. Do they not pose danger to American security, then?”

“America is aware of it. Pakistan is not posing any security risk to America. Pakistan is our friend and ally. It is Iraq which is posing problems for America. They have stockpiles of weapons of mass

destruction. America has been warning Iraq to destroy weapons of mass destruction or face war. We are also looking into the possibility of Al Qaeda joining hands with Iraq.”

“The people of Pakistan and Afghanistan have common religion. Do you believe that Pakistan does not betray America to help Afghan Jihads?”

“We give billions and billions of dollars aid to Pakistan. People do anything for the sake of money. We are confident that Pakistan will not betray us.”

The news conference was over and the journalists dispersed.

The next morning, Yakub was sipping morning coffee in the lounge. Abdul came to him.

“What brings you here?”

“Chief, I have come to brief the morning news to you.”

“Go ahead,” he said, with an air of nonchalance.

“An American spokesman declared today that Pakistan is a friend and ally of America,” said Abdul in a gruff, unemotional voice.

“So what?” asked the Chief, as if he actually cared what the young man thought?

“Do we consider America as our friend, Sir?”

“America thinks Pakistan is their friend. So, we get massive aid from America, which we can use to strengthen our defenses against India. America is not working for safeguarding our interests in Kashmir, Palestine and the world over. That explains our position.”

“One day they will allege that we betrayed them, and destroy us.”

“All is fair in International Politics. Don’t you know that International Politics is analogous to a game of chess? We will receive as much grants as they shower on us. When they stop giving aid we can tell them that we are not with them because they stopped aid. We are not in hurry to declare our position on the sensitive issues. We have still Kashmir issue and we believe only America can help us.”

“America did not help us when the erst-while east wing of Pakistan was separated from us. Do you still hope that America will help us in annexing Kashmir?”

“We have successfully sold them the idea that plebiscite is a great answer to the Kashmir question. Though they don’t formally interfere between India and Pakistan they refuse to name Kashmir fighters as terrorists and they refuse to declare Pakistan a terrorist state.”

“So you have a lingering hope.”

“Yes. America will prevent India from launching an all out war against Pakistan as long as America doesn’t destroy the network of Osama. They think that only Pakistan can help them in busting the network of Osama. That is a blessing in disguise.”

“How is it a blessing?”

“We will never help them to reach Osama, and they will never abandon us.”

“Sir, you are not only a great leader, you are equally a great diplomat. I admire you very much, Sir.” “But of course,” said Yakub placidly.

Chapter 3

An innocent and a terrorist

Manav had gone to the public library, being unaware of eruption of communal violence in the city. He left the library by nine at night and walked home. The roads were almost empty. Here and there Manav could see people scurrying for home.

Suddenly he saw a motorbike stopping close to him and recognized the rider. It was Aziz. Aziz turned back, made a stony face, said something in a very low voice and accelerated his motor bike. Manav could not hear what he said due to the sound of the Motorbike. He could not decipher what he might have said. He started thinking how could a dead man come alive. Aziz’s mother had told him that Aziz was dead. He is Aziz hale and healthy. He was confounded. When he approached the main road he saw a number of people running hither and thither in panic. Anxiety and tension were written large on their faces. One of them shouted at the top of his voice. “There is a communal riot! Run for your life!” The people around him ran, creating a state of utter panic. He walked briskly towards home realizing that there was serious trouble. As soon as he turned onto his street he saw a group of people, holding knife and sickles savagely shouting, “God is Great” Manav ran into his house to see if the marauders had caused any harm to his parents and found them safe.

That night he was awake in bed for a very long time brooding over the prevailing condition in the country. “What a sad state of affairs,” he thought, “We have a multiparty system and no party gets majority. The politics of coalition gives rise to weak governments which cannot implement law and order effectively. The government, to safeguard its own existence, will have to appease the opposition parties who put forth very unreasonable demands as otherwise the opposition will malign the ruling party before the electorate. In India the electorate is very emotional and the politicians know how to sway over them. For most of the people, caste is more important than the nation or religion. The politicians of the majority caste play caste card to gain votes. They promise they would help their caste people if he comes to power. The caste Indians, who are divided on the basis of caste, language and domicile, do not constitute a political majority, and they always seek the support of minorities by promising all

sorts of things that run against the national interest. After all nationalism is an abstract feeling! India has too many problems” he thought.

He could not sleep as he wriggled in bed, he suddenly remembered Aziz. His mother was told that Aziz was dead but he is alive. His mother did not know that he was alive. It means that he has left home and living somewhere else but why? He asked himself but he could get no answer.

Manav and Aziz were classmates in their high school days. Aziz was tall, agile and intelligent, but had earned the dubious distinction of being the most notorious in harassing and humiliating both students and teachers. He was older than most of his classmates. He often displayed an unusual temper that would brand him sadistic, cruel and perverse.

Eight years ago, one morning, Manav went to school a little late and saw Aziz his class-mate standing outside his class room in a confused state. His face was red and he was looking disturbed.

“You look very disturbed. What is the matter?” he inquired.

“I have not paid my fees for the entire year.” I owe to school nine hundred rupees. They have removed my name from the Register”

“Why don’t you go home and bring money” Manav asked unable to comprehend the seriousness of the situation.

“My father is out of town. I asked him pay for my fees when he was in town but he refused to pay nine hundred rupees saying he had no sufficient income.”

“How could he do that?”

“Three years ago, he had asked me to quit school and work for a bicycle shop for a paltry pay of two hundred rupees a month. I was determined to continue my studies up to twelfth grade; and so, I continued my studies against his wish. Now I think I should quit.” He looked away wistfully.

“Look. I can help you and I will. Don’t feel disheartened. I will pay for your fees. I will go home and come back to school with money in twenty minutes. Okay. Wait for me,” so saying he ran home. He came back in half an hour with nine hundred Rupees in pocket. They went to the administrative office and Manav paid the fees. Aziz’s joy knew no bounds and he thanked Manav. From then on Manav was helping Aziz in many ways. He would give him money, books and even clothes and Aziz would gladly accept everything.

Once Aziz was absent from school continuously for three weeks. Manav wondered what must have happened to him and went in search for his house. He located his house in an eight feet wide, congested lane and it was a dilapidated one-room house. The lane was full of hens and chickens, wandering freely, and a number of sheep and goats were tied to the window bars of the houses. He called out Aziz by name as he knocked at his door thrice and Aziz’s mother came out in burqa, called him in and

showed him into a hall where Aziz was lying on a carpet. Aziz was lying on a carpet and he was unable to get up.

“Hello Aziz, how are you doing? Why didn’t you come to school all these days?”

“How could I? I have been suffering from typhoid for three weeks.”

“Did you take medicine?”

“No. I have no money for medicine. It costs lot of money- Two hundred Rupees, the doctor says.”

“Wait. I will be back in half an hour.” Manav ran home and brought three hundred Rupees. He gave money to Aziz and took him to go a doctor. Aziz got medicine and became fit to go to school in about twenty days.

“What is your father doing for his living?”

“I don’t know. He never told me and I never asked him.”

One summer morning, Manav went for a stroll as was his wont, and noticed a group of orthodox men moving in the colony where Aziz lived, from house to house, and herded a small group of teenage boys into a truck before they drove away. He watched their movement with great interest from at a distance and wondered what was going on.

A few days later Manav met a woman in burqua who spoke to him.

“How are you doing?” She asked opening up her face, “Didn’t you recognize me? I am Aziz’s mother. You had come home once to meet my son, Aziz.”

“Where is Aziz? What is he doing?” He asked, recognizing her.

“Aziz went to Kashmir along with some people. Kashmiri Uncle who resides near our house sent him on a job. I am told that he works for a transport company. He has assured me that he would return soon to pursue his studies.”

“Good, he was very eager to work, and he got a job,” he said and took leave of her.

When the school opened after the summer vacation he was glad to see Aziz back in school. Aziz was totally a different man then. He was wearing the traditional dress- the long kurta, loose pajama and a heavy turban. He was not talking to anyone. He was looking highly religious. Manav invited him to tea which he accepted rather reluctantly. A day and night cricket match was going on between India and Pakistan when Aziz came in and they sat down to watch the match on TV. Aziz was saying ‘Wow’ whenever Pakistan batsman hit the ball to the boundary and he was saying “Oh no.’ whenever he missed the boundary. He was eulogizing Pakistan’s batsman. When India started playing, He was saying ‘wow to Pakistan’s bowlers whenever they took the Indian wicket and expressed his anguish whenever an Indian batsman sent the ball to the boundary. Manav noticed that he had all praise for Pakistan players and none for

Indian players. India won the match by a big margin but Aziz continued to praise Pakistan players. Manav lost his cool. He told him angrily.

“You are an Indian citizen. You should be praising Indian players!”

“I know your brand. You are one of those who have Shivaji and Vivekananda as role model. I hate you. I hate India. I hate Indians. I will follow you like your shadow and destroy you.” He had no hesitation and minced no words.

“What did I do to you?”

“You did not do anything to me. You can’t do anything to me.”

He got up from his seat and left the place without bidding goodbye as Manav stood surprised at his attitude. That was the last time Manav saw him. A few months later, Manav met his mother again accidentally on the road.

“What is Aziz doing? I don’t see him in college these days.” he asked her.

“He has not returned home since he left home four months ago. I don’t know what happened to him. He has not written any letter either,” she whined.

“What did Kashmir Uncle say?”

“He replies evasively. He just assured me that he will come back. I don’t know. I don’t know.” She was worried and looked uncertain.

A year passed before they met again on the road.

“How is Aziz doing?” he asked casually. She started weeping without answering.

“What is the matter?” Manav asked.

“Aziz, they say, is dead,” she said in a choked voice and went away.

Chapter 4

Complacent India

Next morning the TV channels were breaking the news, “Communal rioting has broken out in the city and a number of people have been injured. At least 20 people have been reported killed so far. The Rapid Action Force has been deployed in the sensitive areas and the police are combing the areas to flush out the rioters. The same evening a Minister addressed the nation and said that an Islamic extremist group was behind the communal clashes in this country and assured the people that the government would deal with the rioters firmly; Further the Prime Minister appealed to the people to remain calm and announced an ex-gratia payment of compensation for the families of the dead.” The Government blamed the extremist organizations for all the malaise in the country.”

Manav was invited to attend an emergency meeting of the cultural organization of which he was a part, which was convened to discuss the

situation. Nearly two hundred people attended the meeting that evening, and the meeting was held in an ancient temple outside the city somewhere near Bangalore. The faces attending the meeting were tense and resolute. They were angry that the terrorists had let loose terror on them.

“We have called this meeting to express sympathies for those who lost their life in the rioting. They were innocent women and children who never hurt a fly but the terrorists have targeted them. It is a heinous act and we shall not let such dastardly attacks take place anymore,” the convener of the meeting said in his prologue.

“What shall we do now? The atrocities against the Indians are increasing and our government is unable to do anything!” One of the speakers interposed.

“I don’t blame the government for it. The terrorists attack clandestinely and it is difficult for the government to prevent such attacks,” said another.

“We cannot suffer any more. We have to find solution to this problem. The successive governments of India dared not curb the anti-social activities of the extremist organizations for fear of losing votes. Now the extremist organizations have grown on the Indian soil like weeds. We are a heterogeneous society and a multiethnic democracy. We cannot expect much from the government. We have to fight it out ourselves”, said the man who spoke next to him.

“We have met here to discuss the future course of action.” Manav reminded the audience.

“We have no other course of action left but to pay the terrorists and saboteurs in their own coins. We will boycott films produced, directed or acted by the extremists, smugglers and dons!” declared another.

“What has films to do with rioting?” asked a young boy of fifteen who was present there.

“Don’t you know that some extremists have accumulated huge wealth by extortion and smuggling? Now they have become underground dons, and direct their stooges in India from the Pakistani soil. Pakistan has set up these dons against India by providing shelter to these men in Pakistan and treats them like heroes. These smugglers have their hired men in India who use their men for antisocial and criminal activities. The film industry is now in the hands Dons. They lend their ill-gotten wealth to the film producers at exorbitant rate of interest and control the producers, directors and even the actors and actresses. They have a say in the selection of actors and actresses, in the story to be shot, the kind of costumes to be worn and music to be scored and the kind of language to be used. They are making sure that our culture is relegated to background. The government and the people are not aware of the imminent danger to which Indians are exposed. Any attempt to explain the evil designs of the dons in the film industry is viewed with skepticism by the government and its people.

Nothing has been done to counter their influence. This is a clandestine attack on our culture.

He continued, "Our political parties have soft corner towards the extremists because they want to garner minority votes. The government has given them many privileges which are not in country's interest. What our government cannot do because of constitutional constraint, we have to do to preserve our culture! We make it very clear that we will not let anybody destroy our culture overtly or covertly. Now I ask you, brothers, to think deeply and take appropriate action in this matter!" Manav was not listening to the subsequent speeches. He was still very emotional and disturbed when the meeting ended. All of them stood up and resolved to fight the menace of growing extremism. Manav noticed an India ascetic in saffron robe moving about in a suspicious manner. He curiously studied his face and the ascetic tried to hide his face by turning away from him. He suddenly identified the man in the yellow robe as Aziz, masqueraded as an India ascetic. Manav's tongue went dry and his voice choked. By the time he regained composure and called out his friends, Aziz had disappeared.

A few days later, one morning Manav got up from his bed and turned on TV as usual. A TV channel was breaking the news. "A bomb was planted in a bus, which was carrying sixty pilgrims to Kailas-Manasarovar. All the sixty pilgrims on board are feared to have been burnt alive," read the announcer grimly. "This dastardly attack is attributed to be the handiwork of an extremist organization. A Pakistan's terrorist organization has claimed responsibility for the carnage. Sixty charred bodies have been recovered from the spot of the accident. The police have taken into custody for questioning the president of an Islamic organization. The opposition parties have blamed the government for its inept handling of the situation. They allege that the government and Police were unable to give protection to the minorities and called a rally at Gandhi Ground to protest against a raw deal given to the minorities and condemn the attack on them. A leading opposition party launched a peace rally which will start from Gandhi square and end at Gandhi Bhavan.

In the evening thousands of people assembled at the Gandhi Park. Manav too attended the meeting out of sheer curiosity. He sat in the front row to listen to the speeches. An opposition party leader addressed the gathering. "Brothers and sisters, Mahatma Gandhi advocated tolerance and communal harmony. Ram and Rahim are one and the same. Krishna and Karim are one and the same. We shall not fight in the name of religion. We have arranged a peace march tomorrow from Gandhi square to Gandhi House, and B.M. Gandhi will address the gathering. A prayer will be held in the evening at Gandhi gram. The party will observe mourning for those who lost their lives in the riots, JAI HIND!"

Next, Kempa, a leader of the opposition party came on to the podium to speak. He was puzzled a bit, and fumbled for words in the beginning, but gathered courage to speak and went on eloquently. “Brothers and Sisters, today is a sad day for us. It is very distressing that instead of fighting for the benefits for our caste, we are fighting in the name of Religion. It is time we shall fight against our government for not giving adequate reservation to backward castes. My community is most backward, but there is no IAS officer from my community. At least 10% of the IAS cadre should be reserved for the people of my caste. The government has to reserve more seats for the benefits of the backward classes. India consists mostly of backward castes. Therefore there should be 80% reservation in the public service. The Minorities are our brothers. They are not adequately represented in Army and Police. They should be given preference for jobs in army and police. I recommend at least 25% reservation for Minorities in public service and military service. The highest government positions like the position of Prime Minister and Chiefs of Army Staff must be given to the minorities. They should be given separate representation in the legislature. They should be given all encouragement.” There was wide applause by a section of the people. Another great leader stood up to speak.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, we shall not fight in the name of religion. Now, the country is in the hands of the Upper Castes. Our priority is to fight for the privileges to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. If we are backward today it is not our making. These upper caste people have made us backward. Manu in his Dharma Shastra, written some 2500 years ago has preached discrimination between different castes. We have already burned thousands of copies of Manu’s Dharma Shastra. We, the members of Scheduled Castes, will not rest until we rule the country. We shall help our Minority brethren to rise to great positions in public service and in the military too.”

Manav stood up and asked the speaker to give him a chance to talk for two minutes.

The speaker obliged, and Manav spoke slowly.

“I want to correct a mistake and that is why I am here. Manu was the first to write a commentary on the existing customary law, and he was considered a great Jurist. Manu codified the existing laws that were then prevailing in India. You cannot blame Manu for the evils of ancient law because he did not make any law. In fact nobody made that law. It was in existence several centuries before the birth of Manu and was accepted and adopted by all sections of the society. There was no opposition to it from any quarter because they all thought that was reasonable at that stage of social life. We are unable to comprehend today the complexities of social life of that era. It is bad by today’s standard of social behavior. That

society is not in existence now. Today we are living in a society where there is equality and liberty. Everyone has opportunity to reach his full stature. In today's society scheduled castes are placed in a privileged position. There is reservation in government jobs. There is reservation in admission to colleges. The so-called upper castes are not getting job in government and they are not getting seats in educational institutions. Why are you beating a dead horse? Why are you maligning upper castes? For fifty years, the government has made everything possible for the development of the backward castes and scheduled castes but nothing has been made for the benefit of the upper castes." He paused for a while noticing that the organizers were growing restive and then he continued again,

"The social harmony was well maintained by all sections of the society until the British administration created vast job opportunities based the educational attainment. To knock of the job opportunities some community leaders started anti-propaganda against the Brahmins and they continue to make anti-propaganda to keep the Brahmins out of the race. Otherwise why are they dissatisfied?" India is a country with 120 0,000,000 people and one third of them are children and another third of them are women. Only 30% of the women work outside their homes. Of 400,000,000 of adult men only a third can get job under the existing situation. There will be widespread unemployment even if all the Brahmins are kept out of jobs as they are only 5% of the entire population. A section of the audience who were applauding Kempa's statements earlier started making 'cat calls'. He continued undaunted,

"There is a conspiracy to malign the upper castes of today for the evils of social systems of yester years so that the backward caste people may perpetually enjoy the benefits for all times to come." Suddenly, someone on the dais signaled to the goons standing around the dais. They started pelting stones at Manav. A stone hit him on his stomach, and immediately a score of people moved to the platform and physically assaulted him as the police looked on. He was pushed around and chased out of the platform.

The Master of Ceremonies announced,

"Now I invite my friend, a great leader, Ashraf, who is an asset to our party and to our country to speak on this occasion. We are very proud to have such a great leader whose contribution to India is invaluable." Kempa announced proudly. Ashraf came to speak. He held his head high and there was contempt in his face and expression. He spoke in a loud and clear voice.

"We fight for our just cause. We will not help make governments. We help break governments. We want to divide politicians and play spoilsports in your Politics. We will exact our pound of flesh whichever party comes to

power. We will remain independent! Our own laws will govern us! We will force government to respect our laws. If the government interferes with our independence we will wage civil war!”

The people silently listened. The whole police force sat mutely and listened to the speech. Many great leaders of a political party congratulated him on his grand speech when he finished his speech. The president of another political party shook hands with him and invited him to join his Party in great appreciation of his ‘grand’ speech... The meeting was over, and the people walked towards home discussing the communal situation in the country. Manav saw Aziz talking to a minister at the gate and wondered how he knew the people in the corridor of power.

Chapter 5

Self-seeking politicians

Immediately after the public rally, the opposition parties held a joint meeting at Gandhi Bhavan to discuss the situation arising out of the communal rioting and blamed the India organizations for the carnage and owed to safeguard the interest of the minorities at any cost. They blamed government’s inability to manage state affairs, sought resignation of the Prime Minister and appealed to the people to help them in toppling the government. A leading opposition party member addressed the gathering. “My dear brothers and sisters, you know why we have assembled here this morning. The government is having a majority of just one single member over the opposition. Last time we lost the opportunity to form a government because a particular party did not support our party to come to power. We were able to dislodge the government but we could not form our own government. This time we are determined to form our government. We need cooperation of all like-minded parties.

Thim, one of the participants said, “We want our leader to become the Prime Minister and we request you to support us.”

“Look Mr. Thim, let us be realistic. Your party came into existence just two years ago and it has only five members in parliament. How can your leader become Prime Minister? Our party is a national party that has made significant contribution to Indian society, government and politics for several decades. You should help our leader to become Prime Minister.”

“I know what your party’s contribution to India is. Your party agreed to the division of the country into India and Pakistan. You gave protection and citizenship to Minorities extremists. You divided the Indian society on caste basis. You gave privileges to certain castes at the cost of our castes. You introduced the policy of reservation in Government service and made it most inefficient. You monopolized political power by mentioning names

of great personalities and introduced corruption, favoritism and nepotism in the government and public life. You did not allow our economy to grow by adopting the policy of protectionism and socialism. You encouraged workers in Industry and business to go on strike and obstruct smooth working of Industries and Business. You allowed the Christian missionaries to convert disgruntled Indians to Christianity by your policy of non-interference in religious affairs. Is it enough or shall I quote more of your deeds” Thim was speaking eloquently and vociferously.

“I object to your accusation. Wasn’t it our party which worked hard to get independence for this country?” retorted Bom defensively.

“Ridiculous!” remarked Muni, a member of another opposition party, and continued, “You talk as if other political parties made no contribution to the struggle for Indian independence. You have not highlighted the contribution of other political parties and freedom fighters. You are trying to sell the idea, and you have succeeded in selling the idea that only the Congress party got freedom to this country which is distortion of history. Gandhi was in South Africa and had not entered the Indian political scene in 1906 when Savarkar dreamt of freeing India from the British rule by creating fear psychosis in the minds of the British. He went to England and planned the shooting of a British officer who had successfully prosecuted many Indian nationalists who had agitated against the partition of Bengal in 1906. He was arrested and deported to India in 1910. He was tried and condemned to prison in Andaman Islands on the charge of shooting down a British officer. You have not highlighted the contributions of Bhaghat Singh, Chandrashekar Azad and Subhas Chandra Bose and Savarkar. Gandhi adopted Satyagraha, Bhagat Singh and others took the path of terrorizing the British to leave the country, Subhas Chandra Bose raised the Indian National Army to defeat the British in the armed conflict during the Second World War, and Savarkar adopted the method of assassination of British officials to force them to vacate India. Their methods and technique were different but their aim was the same- to oust the British from India. The British decided to quit India only when they realized that India was no longer safe for the British officers and their families. The majority of the people went with Gandhi because they were afraid of the impending civil war, dexterously fanned by the British, which had manifested itself in the form of intermittent communal violence, and not because they deprecated the method adopted by Savarkar,” said a member of another political party.

“But you insisted that you should become the Prime Minister. I will never allow anybody to become Prime Minister except our leader, Thim. We will bring down the government and make Thim, our Prime Minister. He has all the qualifications. He has gone to jail twice, he is a backward class member, and he has organized 100 strikes so far to force the government

to list his community as a most backward community, there is no pending criminal case against him although he was charged in a number of murders. He has been recently acquitted in a 300 million rupees fraud case. Okay?” Ratan, a supporter of Thim shouted back.

“We have been called here to discuss the communal rioting in the country. How is it you are talking of bringing down the government into this?” An old man shot back from a corner.

“You are a novice,” Ratan retorted, dismissing him, “The people are senseless to fight in the name of religion. Nobody can help this country as long as the people are indolent, undisciplined, narrow minded, uncivilized and brutish. We politicians are very shrewd. We want to take advantage of their emotional content. We are greedy and selfish but we pose ourselves as saints and saviors of the people. If we are honest and sincere how can we make money and live a grand life for the rest of our life? How can we help our relatives and friends? How can we help our community and caste people? We have our battle to fight. Our arena is parliament. We are moving no confidence motion against government on the issue of law and order situation in the country. The government is sure to fall because it has a wafer thin majority. How do you like our strategy?” Ratan asked him boastfully and all the leaders nodded their heads in appreciation of his intelligence and analysis.

“Then who should be the Prime Minister?” They all shouted.

All the voices were chanting, “Our party leader will be the Prime Minister!”

“Gentleman, have patience! We have to sort out issues one by one. The first issue is whether we should bring down the existing government. The second issue is who should be the Prime Minister. We shall bring down the government first and then meet again to discuss who should be the next Prime Minister. This is my humble suggestion as a servant of the people,” he laughed as if he conquered the world. The other opposition members agreed to bring down the government.

Next morning Manav got up from the bed and turned on the News Channel. The newsreader announced that the opposition parties had served notice of no-confidence motion against the Government. There was festive mood in the opposition camp. They were all very sure they could defeat the government. They just needed one more vote but they did not know where it would come from.

“Don’t worry. We have already made arrangements for that,” said one of the leaders cheering up his party men.

“How did you arrange for that?”

“You know Munia was a member of the Central Parliament. Seven months ago he became a member of the State Legislature.”

“According to the constitution he cannot hold two offices simultaneously. He had to resign to Parliament seat when he accepted the membership of the State Legislature.”

“You are right, but he has not resigned and his name is still on the roll of Parliament members”

“He ceased to be a Parliament member automatically when he accepted the membership of the State Legislature, right?”

“It is open for debate. His name is in the Register. We have called him to attend and vote tomorrow. There is going to be big drama. The ruling party does not know that there is surprise awaiting them to-morrow. This may cost us heavily in terms of money but it is worth it” Munia voted in time for the motion and the learned and impartial speaker ruled that his voting was valid!!!

In a couple of days the government fell and the opposition parties met again

“We are the largest party in the opposition and so we stake our claim to form the government. We seek cooperation of all opposition parties. We have a great leader who can decide the destiny of the nation.” One opposition party claimed.

“Our leader is no less capable,” retorted a member of another opposition party,

“Our leader is a backward class leader. He is well disposed to Minorities extremists. He has recently suggested that Indians should marry people of religions and end the problem of Minorities in India. There cannot be a better leader”

“But our leader is refined and sophisticated. He is very handsome and has married the daughter of a great Indian leader”

“But your leader cannot claim the position of prime minister. He is a foreigner. He is not an Indian citizen by birth though he is married to an Indian. He does not know the local languages and cannot effectively communicate with the people,” said another leader.

“Our leader is best suited for the position though we have only three members in the parliament. If we had not voted against the government, you could not have ousted the government in power. We have people’s mandate to rule. All parties must be grateful to our leader and elect him Prime Minister,” claimed another.

“What do you mean when you say you have the mandate of the people?”

“I don’t know what it means. I have not gone to any college. You say that your party has the mandate of the people. So I say that my party also has the mandate of the people. I am not a lowly politician who speaks in English. I speak my native language as a son of the soil. These English speaking politicians are not natives. They don’t have the support of the people.”¹

The opposition parties could not choose a leader acceptable to all of them. They informed the President that no party can form a government, and the president ordered general election costing millions of rupees to the exchequer and all opposition parties rejoiced at their success of felling the government in power. Manav threw up his hands in exasperation after hearing the news. He hated all those politicians who played dirty games for selfish ends without caring for the sentiments of the people. He was just a silent spectator like millions of people in India.

Chapter 6

A Samaritan

Manav was the only son of Jay. He was fair complexioned, short and lean, but was well motivated, smart and intelligent. He had obtained a Master's degree in Psychology from the Bangalore University but in a country, where equal opportunities in employment is given lip sympathy, and eighty percent of the jobs are reserved only for certain sections of people, he had no chance of getting an employment. He was applying for admission to several American Universities hoping to get admission to Doctorate Degree in Psychology. He was longing to quit India and settle down in America for the rest of his life.

Jay had amassed modest wealth as an executive engineer in the Public Works Department of a country which has earned the dubious distinction of being one of the most corrupt countries of the world. He owned a big mansion, ten million rupees in cash, and stocks and shares worth another ten million rupees. He was the only honest officer in the Department because others had owned a score of houses and over fifty million rupees each! Some of his colleagues and subordinates hated him most because he belonged to an upper caste. While everyone in the department was plundering public money, he was only accepting little tips given by contractors, and that would amount to one million a year. He had everything that one needs for a comfortable living.

One morning Jay was sitting in the verandah of his house in a relaxed mood reading a newspaper. A widowed woman, accompanied by her sixteen year old grandson, Sham, came in. He did not notice them as he had buried his head in the newspaper.

“Good Morning, Sir.” They spoke in a low and soft voice.

“Come on in. How are you doing? You have not shown in for the last three months. What brings you here?” he asked her raising his head.

“My grandson Sham passed twelfth grade, and he has to join college within three days. I have no money to pay up his fees.” She said faltering.

“Where are you working now?” He asked her casually.

“I was cooking food for a family. Recently they moved to another town. I am once again unemployed.”

Jay opened his purse and gave five bills of five hundred Rupees to Sham, which he accepted with thanks and touched his feet.

“My husband is dead, and my son-in-law has gone away to a distant land in search of job. Our family has no means of livelihood but I am determined to bring up my grandson and educate him in a good University,” she said. Her face suddenly became pale and she knew that her pride was hurt.²

“I know you are fighting adversities in life alone. Let God give you enough strength.” Jay consoled her.

“Thank you, Sir,” they said and left. Jay once again was deeply absorbed in reading the newspaper. His chauffeur who was cleaning the car, slowly walked in and stood before Jay. Jay slowly raised his head and asked,

“What is the matter?”

“My sister is going to get married on the 18th.”

“Good” He started reading Newspaper. The driver stood there for a while.

“Come on, what is the matter?” he said without looking at the driver. The driver hesitated a little and said slowly.

“I need ten thousand rupees immediately. The marriage expenses come to 50,000 rupees. I have collected forty thousand rupees by way of donation.”

“Why do you spend 50,000 rupees when you cannot afford”

“What can we do? The parents of the groom are demanding 10,000 rupees as dowry.”³

Jay was in anguish.

“Our society must give up such evil practices” he said to the driver and went in. The driver waited for him. Jay came out with a check book in a few minutes, and gave him a check for 10,000.”

The driver touched his feet. Tears came down from his eyes. He wiped it out and went away saying “Thanks”

A few minutes later Jay was again disturbed by the creaking sound of the gate. He looked out and saw the mailman entering the gate. He got up from his seat and went to the front door.

“Here is a letter for you.” He said as he delivered the letter and went away. Sarah, his childhood friend had written the letter. He hurriedly opened the letter and read.

“My dear Jay, You may be surprised to receive this letter. I got your address from Ved who visited your house fifteen days ago. He told me that you are now a very rich man and very well placed in life. My husband died fighting the enemies on the border several years ago. I have been eking out my living since then. My daughter Meena has become eighteen now, and she is studying in a college. I am living at the address given above and I am longing to meet you. Can you please come to my house next Friday? I

will be waiting for you at five in the evening. We have many things to talk about. Yours sincerely, Sarah” Jay was very happy to receive that letter. He closed his eyes and recollected his childhood days.

Sarah and Jay were friends from their school days. They belonged to Ramnagar, a town near Bangalore. Jay’s father was a poor man with no regular income. He worked as a priest in a temple built by Sarah’s father. Sarah’s father liked Jay, appreciated his shrewdness and intelligence and gave him money to pursue his studies up to twelfth grade and even provided him books and dresses. He even thought that he should propose his daughter to him when he completed his studies and settled down in life. Sarah and Jay grew up together into adolescence, wandering up and down the hills and valleys talking and singing. One day Jay’s father died suddenly and Jay left the town and went to Bangalore to live with his maternal uncle. They had not met each other for nearly thirty years. Jay was very happy that he was going to meet her. His happiness was short-lived and he became sad as she had written that she had lost her husband at a young age, and had been going through a lot of hardship in life. He closed his eyes and thought for a while as to how he could help her in distress. Jay had bought another small house opposite to his very recently, and the house was lying vacant. It occurred to him that he should give that house to Sarah free of rent as a mark of gratitude to the help rendered by her and her father during his school days.

That evening Jay was sitting in the family room. His wife Sushi was sitting on a couch with a prayer book in hand. She was chanting Vedic Hymns. Jay did not want to interrupt her. He patiently waited for her to complete her prayer. She started another prayer without realizing that Jay had been waiting to talk to her. Jay lost his cool and asked impatiently interrupting her. How long will it go on, my dear? I have something important to tell you.”

Sushi stopped chanting and looked at him in askance.

“Look, I have received a letter from my childhood friend, Sarah.”

“Where is she now?”

“Not very far from here. She is living just five miles away.”

“What has she written?”

“Not much. She has invited me to her house next Friday.”

“Next Friday, we are celebrating Rakhsha Bandhan and Upakarma festivals. You can invite her to grace the occasion.”

“I will invite her some other time. Next Friday I will meet her at her house and tie rakhi round her wrist. Don’t forget to send rakhi.”⁴

“That is very nice of you.”

“She is a widow now. Her husband died fighting the enemies on the border” he said wistfully.

“Very unfortunate.” she said. She was really sorry for Sarah.

“I have a proposal but I don’t know if you would agree to it.”

“What is your proposal?”

“We shall ask her to live in our single storied house without paying any rent.” At that point of time Manav came out of his room and sat on the couch and asked

“What is going on?”

Jay repeated his proposal so that he might know what he was talking about.

“You are letting away that house rent-free? But why?” Manav exclaimed.

“She is in great distress. Her husband died several years ago and she is not doing well.” Jay explained.

“Are you crazy? No body will approve your proposal, Papa.”

“Listen, her father helped me to up in life. I am deeply indebted to him and Sarah. Time has come when I shall help her. It is a great opportunity to show my gratitude.” Jay explained. Sushi agreed that he should not miss that opportunity to relieve himself of that indebtedness Manav was not convinced but he said nothing.

Next day Jay wrote to Sarah,

“My dear Sarah, your letter reminded me of our childhood days. I remembered the days when we wandered up and down the hills and valleys amidst verdant green trees hand in hand. I remembered the days when your affectionate father paid money for my fees and clothing. Now it is distressing to hear that Vishnu died in war leaving you and your child to the mercy of this society. You must have undergone terrible times during your lifetime. Now that you have got my address, and I know where you live, I assure you that your bad days are over. I shall take care of you as your father took care of me. I will come to your house next Friday as desired by you. Okay. Bye. Take care.” Sarah was very happy to receive his letter and waited for the appointed day.

Chapter 7

Repaying the debt

Sarah was emaciated at forty-five because her life was always stressful. Her husband was dead, and she had to bring up Meena. Sarah had a job in a school, and her low income did not permit her to live a comfortable life. Her father was a very rich landlord but after his death, the tenants refused to pay rent and subsequently applied to government to transfer that land to them under the Land Tenancy Act, which was granted to them by the seemingly benevolent government, which robbed Peter to pay Paul? She did not get any compensation either.

One day, she was feeling tired and giddy. She applied for leave and went to a physician for medical examination. The doctor after examining her told her that her blood pressure was too high, and blood sugar was alarmingly high, and advised her complete rest. She had to quit the job and rest at home for some time. It was a sheer coincidence that she met Ved who belonged to her hometown and got Jay's address.

On the appointed day, Jay drove his fiat to Sarah's house. She was waiting for him at the door. She gave a warm reception and placed many sweets and savories before him to eat before they settled down to talk.

"Sarah you look so emaciated at this young age. I feel very sorry for you." After my husband died, I had to bring up my daughter with my meager income."

"I understand how hard it is to bring up children without anybody's support. You should look after your health too at least for the sake of your daughter."

"I know, I know. The doctor says that I should take lot of rest but I can't. I am the only bread winner for this house."

"Don't worry. Relax. I have come here with a solution for all your problems."

"What is it?"

"You will stop going to work and take rest."

"Who will look after us? We are not rich enough to sit and eat."

"I will look after you. I own another house opposite to mine, which has been lying vacant for sometime. You can stay there as long as you want."

"Why should you look after me!" she exclaimed.

"Because you and your father looked after me in my younger days." he reminded her

"Thanks for your gesture but I must refuse. I am sorry I cannot accept your help. I will earn and live."

"I am sorry if I have hurt your feelings, but you must accept my offer or else I will have no occasion to lessen the burden of my indebtedness to you." After prolonged argument, she hesitatingly accepted to go to his rent-free house.

"I have no problem in accepting your invitation, but on one condition."

"What is it?"

"You shouldn't ask me to leave my job and be a burden on you. I will go to work as long as I can."

"I will do it to you."

Meena who was sitting on the chair was not comfortable with her mother's decision. She opened her mouth to something several times during the course of their talk but wisdom dawned on her not to interfere in the talk uninvited. When Jay was gone she argued with her mother,

“Mom, it hurts my prestige to live under somebody’s obligation. We shouldn’t go there.”

“Meena, I would not have gone if I could help it. My health is deteriorating. I may die in a year or two. Who will look after you after my death? We don’t have any relative who comes forward to help you in distress. Jay is a very nice man. I know he means to do good to us.”

Meena sensed the gravity of the situation and reluctantly agreed to go with her mother. Next Sunday Jay brought Manav with him to Sarah’s house. Manav and Meena surveyed each other from top to bottom and felt that they were agreeable to one another. Jay brought Sarah and Meena to the house opposite to his. Sushi was pleased to meet both of them and soon they became close friends.

Chapter 8

A marriage proposal

One afternoon Sarah went to meet Sushi in her house. Sushi was sitting on the couch.

“Sushi, you are looking pale. Are you okay?”

“I am okay. To day I am on fast. That is all.”

“But... Why?”

“To day is the eleventh day of the lunar month. Why? Don’t you observe Ekadashi?”

Sarah lowered her head and said,

“I had not seen the calendar otherwise I too would be fasting today.”

“Manav observes fasting. He does not eat or drink.”

“Meena too doesn’t. She worships Goddess Laksmi every evening and invokes Lord Krishna’s blessings every morning.”

“That is really great. Manav gets up at six every morning, takes cold water bath and with wet clothes wrapped around his body, he worships the God for one full hour before he gets ready to go out.”

“Meena likes everything that Manav does and she talks about Manav everyday.”

“Meena is really a very nice girl. Manav appreciates everything in her, her looks, her manners, her attitude and ideas. Not a day passes without Manav enquiring about her.”

“I wish they marry each other. What do you think of their match?”

“Sarah you are speaking my mind. They are made for each other.”

“Why should we delay then Sushi? We will arrange for their marriage.”

“Marriages are made in heaven. If they are destined to be married, nobody can stop them. But we must seek their consent in express terms before we take further steps in this direction.”

“Of course we shall seek their consent. You seek the opinion of Manav and I will seek the opinion of Meena. Okay?”

They parted after talking for another half an hour. That night Sushi discussed that matter with Jay after dinner when they were together.

“Jay, Manav will be attaining 26 next May.”

“So?”

“You were married when you were 24.”

“What do you want to say?”

“You must think of Manav’s marriage now.”

“Why? Did Sarah talk about it?”

“You guessed right. She opened the topic today. She has proposed her daughter to Manav.”

“No wonder. She has been waiting for an occasion to raise that question. I knew that she would come out with that proposal one of these days. When we were young we used to say that our children should get married to each other.”

“That was when you were young. I am eager to know what your opinion is now.”

“You know my answer is always positive if it is concerned with Sarah.”

“I know. I know. It is a formality that I should ask you and you should agree to this proposal.”

“Manav’s consent is material. You should ask him.”

“That is again just a formality. I dare say he will not say no.”

“You can’t be so sure of his intentions.”

“I will prove that I am right shortly.”

“You are welcome.”

One day Manav was standing at his gate waiting for the mail to arrive. The mailman appeared a little late waving a letter from a distance. He waited for the mailman, signed the acknowledgement and collected the letter. Meena, who came to door, beamed a broad smile and called him into her house. Manav went in and stood in the foyer. She called him into the kitchen and asked him to sit there, as she had to fry something. Manav stood for a while and then sat down on a nearby stool.

“I came out running yesterday morning to call you when you came out of your house, but you were in a hurry to go and I didn’t want to disturb you”, she said looking into his face.

“Why? Did you need my help?”

“Oh, no, my mother went out of town, and I had been staying alone in the house since yesterday morning, and I thought you could give me company as I was getting bored.”

“I have enough time to spare. Call me anytime. I will be at your service.”

“Thanks. Do you like fried stuff?” she asked changing the topic.

“I love it. My mother prepares it very often”

She brought two plates full of fried stuff and placed one plate before him.

“Taste it. It must be good.”

Manav ate two and said, “It is great. It tastes good.”

“Thank you. Shall I give you some more?” Manav nodded his head.

She poured some more into his plate. Both of them ate well.

Sarah entered the house and saw Manav and Meena talking together and asked Manav slowly

“When did you come here?”

“Just five minutes ago,” he said and blushed.

His face was red and Sarah observed him closely. She was not pleased to see them together in the house in her absence.

“Please sit down I will be here in a few minutes,” she said and went into her room. Manav looked at Meena perturbed and said, “I shall take leave of you now.” Manav walked out.

Manav and Meena had become very good friends. Meena would meet him in his house on some pretext or the other and he would call on her at least once a day. One day, Manav pulled up his car in front of Meena’s house and honked. In a minute Meena was there. She was well dressed and in high spirits.

“Hey, what brought you here”, she looked surprised.

“I am going to the National Park.”

“Have you come here to seek my permission?”

“Yes, I have come to seek your permission to take you out with me”

“You have my permission but I need to seek my mother’s permission. Can you wait for a while?”⁵ She went in so saying and returned in a couple of minutes with a smile on her face.

“Here I am. I ready to go with you. But mummy says that we shall be back before dark. Okay?”⁶

“Okay, we have still eight hours and it wouldn’t be a problem.” Manav said as he drove towards the main road... They were at the National Park an hour later. They bought tickets and went in. It was a cloudy day and the temperature was around eighty degrees Fahrenheit. They wandered up and down in the park for an hour hand in hand. At last they settled down on a bench and moved closer to each other. Meena laid her hand around his neck and put her face against his and stared into his face. Manav blushed like a teenage girl. She slowly said,

“You are a very handsome young man,” she said giving an amorous glance.

“Thanks for your compliments.” He turned away shyly.

“You blush like a teen age girl. I am serious. I have to tell you something. Yesterday I overheard a conversation between your mom and my mom. My mother was proposing me to you, and your mother assured her that she would put up the matter before you and your father for approval.”

“So you were spying on them. Don’t you know eavesdropping is bad?”

“I overheard them but it was accidental, not intentional.”

“Okay. What is your idea?”

“I welcome their suggestion. And you?”

“I welcome the idea too. You are a paragon of an ideal woman. You have good manners and fine temperament. You are good looking, refined and well accomplished. Nobody can refuse to marry you and much less I can, but you know I have not settled down in life.”

“You are a rich man. You don’t need to earn your daily bread. Your father has a bank balance that will last for another fifty years. He is an executive engineer in a public works department in a country like India. You are the only heir and successor to his estate.”

“Are you cheering up me or jeering at me? I have no employment. I have not finished my studies yet. I intend to go to America for my higher studies. I don’t know when I will return. It could take years before I get ready for marriage. I don’t want you to be waiting for long. I wish you marry someone and settle down in life as early as possible.”

“Manav, I would like to wait for you all my life if you promise to marry me.”

He held her hands tightly in appreciation but said nothing.

“Manav I love you. I love you more than anybody in this world.” she vouched.

He sat tightlipped and looked embarrassed. He opened his mouth to say something but changed his mind and sat there quietly.

“Manav do you love me? Manav, please, say you love me. I am longing to hear it from your mouth.”

He slowly removed her hands from his neck and held it fast in his and said slowly in a soft tone

“I love you, Meena I love you. I love you more than I love any woman in this world but I cannot marry you at this stage of my life. I am sorry.” He stood up and started moving towards the gate. Meena followed him. He went straight to his car and in a few minutes they were returning home silently.

That night Manav was awake for long hours. He felt that he was too rude in his expression, and wanted to apologize to her. Next morning he went to her house to feel her pulse. She did not show that she was feeling bad and

he went back with the impression that she was hiding her feelings from him. He did not want to raise the same issue again and complicate the matter.

Chapter 9

A promise that could not be fulfilled

One day Manav informed his mother of his determination to go to America for higher studies. She hesitated a little and slowly said that he could go, provided he married Meena before he left. “Look, mom, I am not earning yet and I am going to America as a student. How can you expect me to marry now?”

“My dear son,” she answered, “how can I send you to America unless you marry Meena? Sarah told me last week that Meena is ready for marriage. It is your father’s wish that you should marry her.”

“Mom, I should start earning decent salary before I think of marrying. My priority now is to pursue my studies.” Saying this, Manav looked out of the window.

“Manav, think it over. You like her and she likes you. You are made for each other. Your father will be very pleased if you marry her. You can study in America after your marriage also. We will keep Meena with us as long as you are not settled. It is our responsibility to take care of her, and we will.”

“Mom, I like Meena more than any other girl. I will marry her as soon as I settle down. But I cannot marry her before going to America. I am sorry. Please convince Sarah that they should wait. I don’t mind if she marries someone else if she is in a hurry to marry. I have a goal and I will pursue it” He went out.

Fifteen days later one evening he went to see Meena in her house. She was reading a novel.

“What novel are you reading?”

“I’m reading ‘Farewell to Arms.’”

She was very coarse in her voice. Her voice appeared very strange to Manav.

“Ernest Hemingway is a great novelist. I have seen the film of that title. I haven’t read that novel.”

Meena was silent and her eyes were set on the novel.

“Meena, you have changed a lot”

“So have you.”

“I don’t think so. I am as I was always. I like you and I care for you.”

She gave a cryptic smile but said nothing. After a while she asked, “Would you like to have some coffee?”

“Yes, if you can offer some.” He said and held her hands. She released her hands from his hold and briskly went in.” She appeared fifteen minutes later with coffee.

“Are you angry with me “

“No.”

“You are angry with me, I bet.”

“You are wrong. I am not angry with you. I am glad you have a goal and you want to pursue that goal.”

“I would like to marry you. Believe me. I have come here to tell you that I want to marry you but not now. I will have to complete my studies in America. When I am ready for the marriage, I shall come back to you and marry you. Are you happy now?”

“Do you want to marry me out of pity?”

“I don’t like to marry you out of pity. I really feel that I shall marry you. Believe me.”

“I believe you Manav, I believe you.” She gave a broad smile and held his hands tightly. The touch of her soft hands sent shock waves, which he had never experienced before. He did not withdraw his hands and she did not leave his hands. Slowly, he put his hands into loin and hugged her. Someone suddenly knocked at the door. She released her hand and went to the door, as he sat on the couch holding a book in his hand. In a moment Sarah came in and observed that Manav was holding the book upside down and his eyes were fixed on the floor. She looked from Manav to Meena and back but both were absorbed in their own thoughts. Sarah felt uneasy and went upstairs.

Chapter 10

A cloud of suspicion

Next evening, Ved, a boyhood friend of Jay, visited Jay’s house. Jay was not home and the task of entertaining the guest fell on Manav. Ved came in, and Manav engaged him in conversation after serving him a cup of coffee. Manav thought it was right time for him to get information from Ved as he was agitated ever since his father bestowed unusual kindness on Sarah. He was asking himself very often, “Why should he show so much of benevolence to Sarah? What is the secret behind this unusual benevolence?” He wanted to ask his mother but he knew that she would be too evasive in her reply. He was waiting for a chance to know the truth as he dared not ask his father.

“My father told me that you belong to Ramnagar” Manav started the conversation.

“Yes. All of us, your father, Sarah and I, belong to Ramnagar. We know each other from our childhood. We were all going to same school.”

“Sarah is a nice woman. I like her. My father too likes her very much.” He said and looked at Ved slyly.

“I know. I know. I am a witness to their intimate relationship.”

“What kind of relationship? I don’t understand.”

“Didn’t your father tell you anytime what Sarah is to him?”

“No, he did not speak so far about that.”

“Why don’t you ask your mother?”

“No, I won’t. She has never spoken about it.”

“When the marriage was fixed between your father and mother, someone wrote an anonymous letter to your mother accusing your father of being unfaithful to a girl and that girl was no other than Sarah. Your mother refused to marry your father because of that letter just a week before the marriage was to be solemnized. Your father had a very hard time convincing her that he had not jilted Sarah and the letter had been written out of malice.”

Manav sat upright and listened to Ved with interest. Ved now gathered more courage to speak freely to him.

“Your father and Sarah loved each other when they were young. Sarah’s father even wished that Jay should marry her.”

“Why didn’t they marry then?”

“Man proposes, but God disposes. There was sudden turn of events. There was rumor that she was carrying a baby in her womb. Jay went away to Bangalore for Studies and never came back. Her father suddenly died of heart attack. She was in great predicament when Vishnu came forward to marry her out of pity. Meena was born within six months after marriage. The talk of the town was that Jay was her biological father and Vishnu fathered her to save Sarah from infamy.”

Manav felt as though an avalanche fell on his head. He was not ready to hear such mean talks about his father, whom he regarded as noble. Ved observed the color changing on his face and realized that he had talked too much. He suddenly stood up and said that he should go. When he was gone Manav was still brooding over what Ved had said. He did not believe what Ved had said was true. He wanted to know the truth. He felt like asking his father directly but he thought it was wiser to wait for an opportunity to talk on such sensitive issues. He was in love with Meena and if what he heard of his father was true, Meena would be his sister and he would never be able to marry her. He was ashamed, he was enraged and he was disappointed. He was in agony, an inexplicable agony.

Next evening he went to meet Meena at her house and tell her what Ved had told. It was seven in the evening. It was already dark and the wind was heavy. Suddenly the electricity failed and the houses were plunged into

darkness. When he entered the main gate, the main door was ajar and he could hear the voice of his father. It was dark inside and he stood there for a while. He overheard the conversation between his father and Sarah.

“I have brought 5000/- for your expenditure. Don’t feel bad to take it.”

“I really feel very bad to take it. You have already given us rent-free house. Sushi and Manav will never excuse you if you spend money on us.”

“I will never tell them. I will keep it a secret. Nobody should know except you and me”. He gave a wad of notes and she took it. After a while, he heard the footstep of his father as his father approached the main door, and he stood aside behind a tree. Jay came out and Sarah followed him.

“Thank you, Jay.” she said and held Jay’s hand firmly for a few minutes. Jay made no attempt to release his hands. Then she suddenly hugged him and after a minute released him and went into her house leaving him there. Jay looked around to ensure that nobody noticed that Sarah hugged him.⁷ He slowly walked away. Manav was almost certain that Ved was right. But he said to himself, I don’t think I believe what I see. I will have to verify the fact. He went home and decided not to discuss this matter with Meena.

One evening Manav was wandering in a nearby park restlessly. He wandered up and down several times. It was seven, and twilight was yielding place to darkness. He suddenly noticed his father Jay walking with Sarah closely. He was amused at this sudden development. He was so inquisitive that he followed them, but made himself sure that he was not very close to them. They sat under a tree on a bench. It was completely dark. They were sitting pretty close and his father was placing his hands on her back. She was also throwing her hands round his neck. He knew Sarah as just a family friend. Their unusual intimacy turned Manav’s amusement into consternation. He became more apprehensive about his father’s intention in giving rent free house to Sarah. He just could not reconcile to the idea that his father had an illegitimate relationship with Sarah.⁸ Then he thought he had no doubt that Meena was his sister. He left the park in dismay and disgust. Manav was very disturbed. He wandered around the city aimlessly till late in the evening and finally, decided to tell her that he was not marrying her. He met her at her house next evening and found her in a very jovial mood.

“Manav, I was sure that you will come to see me today.” She said with some expectation.

“I have come to tell you something disappointing. You must forgive me.” His voice was low. Meena was surprised to hear the word ‘disappointing’.

“What is it you want to say?” she asked.

“I have come to tell you that you should marry someone as early as you wish and live a happy life. I don’t like that you should wait for me indefinitely.”

“Why is this sudden Volta facie, Manav? What happened?” Her eyes became wet and her face turned pale.

“Nothing happened. I have thought over this matter all these days. This is my decision and it is final. Please don’t ask me why?”

“I respect and honor your decision. Good luck to you.” she said and ran out of his sight, disappointed and humiliated. He slowly got up from the chair and went home.

Two days later Sushi informed Sarah of Manav’s resolve not to marry Meena.

“Sarah, Manav refuses to marry Meena. He says that she should not wait. He looks agitated and annoyed but refuses to talk to anyone on this matter. I don’t know what is worrying him.”

“We respect his decision. We don’t ask him why? We cannot force him. I will find a suitable match to her. In fact I want her to study medicine, and marry when she is well settled in life,” she said hiding her emotion.

“It is a great idea. I welcome it. Sushi said placidly.

Chapter 11

A proposal for dowry

Meena was twenty, and it was her birthday. The womenfolk were sitting in the family room while men were sitting in the hallway. The dinner was just over and nobody was in a mood to sleep although they were all tired. It was a summer night, but suddenly, the rain had started pouring in. The near and dear ones who had come from far off places, decided to stay back in the host’s house overnight. Sarah’s cousin Vyas came in and said, “Sarah, I will take early morning train to my place. So I bid good bye now.”

“When shall we meet again?”

“I will attend Meena’s marriage. When do you propose to celebrate her marriage?” Her cousin Vyas asked her.

“Brother, Meena is just 20 and I am not in a hurry to marry her off. I want her to study medicine and become a physician first. Marriage can wait.”

“Mothers always think that their daughters are still too young to be married, but what they forget is the risk of infamy the family is exposed to, if the daughter does anything foolish ...”⁹

“O’ my dear, you talk too traditionally. The society is changing fast. Gone are the days when the women were married at the age of five. She has to study in the university for another five to six years before she can become a physician or a surgeon. We have to wait till she completes her studies and starts medical practice. I want her to stand on her own legs. Economic

independence will emancipate her from the shackles of her husband” Sarah retorted.

“I wish she will not do anything that will put our family to shame. But you will never know. Suppose she develops love to a boy of another caste and wants to marry him? Love is blind. It is an enigmatic phenomenon. No body knows when who starts loving whom. It has no set bounds or rules or regulations and transgresses all barriers. It is something, which may happen to anybody, but rarely one can recoil from it. That is the reason why girls were married off at the young age in the past. Once they attain eighteen they start thinking independently and start criticizing their own customs and traditions, ideas, ideals and outlook. We have five thousand years old religion and culture. We cannot watch our young girls make fun of their own culture and take independent decisions prejudicial to the interest of our community. We cannot be a part of such things. You have a girl of twenty in the house and it is a dangerous age and you should be aware of the impending infamy.”

“Dear brother, what do you want me to do?

“I wish you find a perfect match to Meena and marry her off. She can pursue her studies even after marriage”¹⁰

“It takes lot of time to find a suitable match. It cannot be done overnight”.

“Vasu is here. He uses his good offices. He must have a big list of suitable boys,” he said, pointing to the pontiff.

“Of course I have. If you want her to be married, I will bring a dozen proposals within a week!” said the pontiff, flattered and elated.¹¹

Within fifteen days, Sarah found a boy whom she thought was suitable for her daughter through Vasu, the pontiff. His name was Nag. He was working as a scientist for Atomic energy commission in Bombay. He had passed Master’s degree from the Indian Institute of Science at Bangalore. On the appointed day, Nag and his parents visited the bride’s house. Meena was shown to them. They were very happy to see that the girl was good-looking and well mannered. Nag and his parents approved the girl and assured Sarah that the pontiff will approach them in a day or two for a talk on their behalf.

The pontiff, Vasu, arrived two days later at their house, and after the customary greetings and exchange of courtesies, they settled down for a serious talk. Vasu had brought a very important message from the parents of Nag

“Nag has agreed to marry Meena. Meena is very lucky.” Vasu said.

“Great, Vasu, Great. I will seek the opinion of Meena. She is grown up and her consent is very material for her marriage.”

“Look madam, it is a very good match. You should not give up this opportunity,”

“We know Vasu, we know. I am sure Meena will not reject this proposal. Don’t worry. We will suitably reward you, if this marriage is fixed.” said Sarah.

“But there are two pre-requisites,’ interrupted Vasu, “They are very traditional people. They want to see the girl’s horoscope. They want to show it to an astrologer for the assessment of influence of star on the life of the couple.”¹²

“We also believe in such astrological calculations”, said Sarah to comfort the Pontiff.

“They expect Varadakshina or dowry from your side,” said Vasu, shrugging his shoulder.¹³

“How much do they expect from us?” asked Sarah in great anxiety. He lowered his head and said in an uncertain voice.

“They are asking for two hundred thousand rupees in cash and a new Marathi Car. They expect you to celebrate marriage on a very grand scale. They have 1000 guests and you should treat them well.”

“It is a rip off. I will never agree to this daylight robbery,” said Meena in protest.

Sarah comforted Meena and took her inside before she could talk rough. She came out after a few minutes alone and spoke to Vasu.

“Dear Vasu, You know that Meena is my only child. We have a house worth ten hundred thousand in Ram Nagar. She inherits it when I am gone. Now, we hardly have any cash. We want them to agree for a simple marriage. Please convince Nag’s parents that they should settle for a simple one day marriage.”

“I will try, but they may not agree” the pontiff said in an uncertain voice.

The pontiff came back two days later

“Dear Ma’am, with great difficulty I have convinced them to agree for a simple marriage, but they say that you should write down a gift deed alienating your house in favor of Nag and hand it over to him before the day of marriage.”

“If that is what they want I will do it. I want my daughter to be happy.”

“Mummy, I will never agree to this marriage. How do you know that they look after me well? They are greedy and unrelenting. Such people do not hesitate to burn the bride soon after the marriage. I feel that my life is insecure in their hands and I beg that you should be wise enough to reject this proposal outright,” she cried.

“No my dear, It is not all that bad. You know that marriage in our society is giving away the girl to the groom as a gift. The gift is not complete unless it is accompanied by ‘dakshina’, the cash payment. So it is all part of our custom. You should not question or get upset over that matter,” her mother consoled her and said,

“We want to see that you are happily married off. The boy is well educated, good looking, and is of good nature. I am sure he will look after you well. Don’t worry. I will see you married off first and then think of myself.” So saying she turned to Vasu and said resolutely

“Vasu, my decision is final and binding. You may tell Nag’s parents that we are ready to give away our house in gift before marriage. We just want an assurance that our daughter will be looked after well and they allow her to study medicine.”

Once the bride’s mother agreed to part with her estate, they agreed to marry, and the date of marriage was fixed. The Nag’s parents told Sarah that the confluence of stars would certainly bring prosperity to the girl according to their astrologer.

One day Meena met Manav in his house. She was looking disturbed and uncertain. She wanted to say something but the presence of his mother forced her to wait for an opportunity to meet him alone. When Sushu went to kitchen to prepare lunch, she seized the opportunity and talked to Manav.

“I have been longing to talk to you. It is very urgent.”

“What is it?”

“We will go to backyard and talk. Nobody should hear us”

“Now tell me, what is it?” He asked when they were in the backyard of the house.

“Yesterday, Vasu brought a proposal to my mother. The bridegroom is from Bombay.”

“That’s great! Congratulations!”

“Don’t act childish. It is a serious matter. I did not come here to seek your compliments. I came to tell you that we should stop this marriage somehow. My mother is firm that I should marry him!”

“How can we stop this marriage when your mother has agreed and you have not said ‘no’ to it?”

“I didn’t dare to say ‘no’, because I did not want to hurt her feelings at once. More over I am very uncertain whether to accept him or reject him”

“Why should you reject him? What is wrong with him?”

“I don’t know. I thought you would be still interested in marrying me. I know you love me. I love you too. So I came to ask you if you want to marry me. If you say yes, I will stall this marriage. If you say no, I go ahead with this marriage. I leave it to you.” She waited anxiously for Manav’s reply. He remembered what Ved had said about the paternity of Meena. He wanted to discourage her once and for all.

“Me? Marry you? I thought you had forgotten all that stuff. Meena, we are not made for each other. The fact is that both of us don’t love each other to the extent of marrying. I don’t think our marriage will be a success. You shall forget whatever happened as a bad dream and marry someone of your

choice and live a happy life. I have to join job. I have to earn a lot of money before I can think of marrying anyone. It is too early to think of my marriage.” Manav did not like to tell her about the relationship that his father had with her mother in the past and all that stuff.¹⁴ He believed that she was his sister and there was no possibility of their marriage

“My mother is in a hurry to marry me off. She will not wait for anyone. The match appears to be good. But I love you. I want to marry you.”

“I am very sorry. I cannot marry you now. You shall not wait for me either. Go ahead and marry that guy. My best wishes will be with you always.”

Meena was disappointed to hear him say that. Tears rolling down her cheeks, she ran into the house and in a minute she was gone. Manav was embarrassed, but he did not show it on his face. Two days later her mother broke the news to Sushi that the marriage of Meena would take place within fifteen days. Manav took a very active role in the celebration and his father bore all expenses, which amounted five hundred thousand rupees. Jay and Sushi acted as the guardians of the bride during the marriage and saw her off to Bombay with her husband.

Chapter 12

A marriage that was not

Nag lived in a single bedroom apartment at Bandra in Bombay.¹⁵ Four people were huddled in that small apartment. His parents had occupied the only room in the apartment and they did not think it necessary to vacate it in favor of their son and daughter-in-law.¹⁶ The newly married couple had to sleep in the open verandah. Nag would go to work in the morning and return at 9 in the evening. On the advice of her mother-in-law, Meena took over the charge of housekeeping and cooking.

Nag always appeared tired and disinterested. He did not suggest that they should go on honeymoon. He showed no interest in Meena. It looked that he was hiding something from her. One night she took the initiative and went over him and started kissing him. He resisted her overture and started leaving the room. She held him fast and angrily asked, “What is wrong with you? Why are you running away from me?”

Nag was shivering and fumbling for words. He slowly came back and rested on the bed and said, “Look Meena, Don’t scream. My parents are sleeping and I don’t want them to be disturbed,”

“How unmerciful you are. You are not worried about your wife. It is fifteen days since we were married and you have not touched me once,” she wept.

“Meena, be calm. I cannot satisfy you. I met with an accident on the motorbike and I lost manhood. I have no erection. I didn’t want to tell you but now I have no alternative,” he pleaded.

“If you are not ‘man’ why did you marry me?” Why did you spoil my life?”

“I did not want my parents to know that I am impotent. They would break down if they come to know.”

“If you had cared for me half of what you care for your parents you would not have deceived me. Hell with you.” She wept the whole night. Nag started snoring in about an hour. Early in the morning, she got up from sleep and waited for Nag to get up. When he got up from the bed she confronted him again

“Nag, why did you demand a gift deed from us?” Why did you cheat us?”

“I did not want to cheat you. My parents were not agreeable for my marriage without dowry.”

“In that case you should have refused to marry.”

“I did not want to hurt their feelings.”

“You will do anything in life except hurting your parents.” She looked at him like a hooded snake.

“I love my parents. I worship them. I do anything for the sake of my parents.” He said as he went out of the room. Meena was weeping the whole day. In the evening she was determined to enter into another bout with Nag. Nag did not come home until 10 that night. At last he came and went straight to bed.

“Why are you avoiding me? I have to talk to you,” she said pulling down his rug.

“Meena, you have married me. You are my wife. It is your duty to obey your husband and comfort him. You have to win his heart by comforting him, not by confronting him. Your happiness lies in keeping yourself cool and serving my parents and me. If you make any attempt to create problems for any of us, you will face dire consequences.”

“Bullshit. Do you think I care for you or your parents? You fool. Get out of my life or I kill you.” She looked at Nag and Nag was furious now. There was malice in his stare. He was looking dangerous and diabolic and he went out in a hurry without saying a word. Meena became pale and terrified.

She was then scared of Nag and thought of escaping from him by leaving the house suddenly but Nag had confiscated all her money and she did not know where he had kept money. His parents were watching her movements step by step. One day, she went to the next door without being noticed by them and knocked at the door; and when the door was opened a middle aged lady came out and recognized her.

“You live next door, right. You are Nag’s wife, I know. I saw you when you came to his house after marriage. I have not seen you coming out anytime. Is everything alright? Meena pushed herself into the house and closed the door before she spoke.

“Nothing is okay. There is something fishy in that house. The people there are queer. They appear to be dangerous.”

“I am sorry for you. We know how dangerous these people are. I have to tell something terrifying to you. I advise you to run away from this house at the earliest. They don’t hesitate to murder you.”

“How do you know?”

“You are not the first one. Last year, he had married and brought home another woman after collecting a huge sum of money as dowry. Within three months, they tried to kill her. She somehow ran away and never came back.”

“What did they do to her?”

They gave keys to her and said, “Go to market and bring milk. When you come back we will not be home. We will be back in two hours. You prepare coffee and breakfast before we come back. Okay” The poor girl brought milk and lit the stove. They had turned on the gas when she was gone. When she lit the stove, her sari caught fire and she suffered burns. Before damage was done, she shouted for help. My husband and I went in and put out the fire. Her burns were not deep. We informed her parents on her request and they were in the house within half an hour as they live close by. They took the girl away in their absence. Nag divorced her on the ground of desertion. Now he has married you.” Meena was shivering now, and she knew she was cheated, and her life was in danger.

Meena had no money or friends to inform her parents. She was a virtual prisoner in the house. Her mother-in-law intercepted her letters. She had no freedom to go to post office. Nag had disconnected the telephone connection. She thought of escaping somehow without rousing suspicion in the minds of the inmates. She started endearing him and his parents. Nag was convinced after a few days that she would not runaway from the home. Gradually the restrictions on her were removed but she was forced to stay home.

One evening Nag took her out to make her to feel better. They were walking around Mahalakshmi temple. Suddenly a friend of Nag appeared from nowhere and started talking to him. Meena walked further a short distance and waited for his arrival. She saw Manav coming to her. Manav had gone to Bombay for an interview and he had gone to Mahalakshmi to invoke the blessings of the Goddess. He noticed Meena standing alone. He accosted her and talked to her. “Hello Meena, I am pleased to meet you. How are you doing?” He asked.

“I am doing fine, Manav,” she said wearily and her voice was so feeble and uncertain that Manav could make out that she was lying. He looked at her with his eyes fixed on her face. “You don’t seem to be happy. Are you in trouble?”

Meena noticed that Nag was approaching them. She didn’t have much time. She came closer to Manav quickly and said in a low voice, “Listen, I have no time to explain. I’m in great difficulty. Our marriage was a farce. We were taken for a ride. I must get back to Bangalore at the earliest. Take me to Bangalore along with you. Can you help me, Manav, please?”

He gave her 500 Rupee bill which she quickly concealed in her bosom and he said hurriedly,

“I will wait for you at the VT Railway Station day after tomorrow at 2 p.m. somehow, you must reach there in time.”

“I will, Manav. Thanks for your help.” Manav and Meena safely arrived at Bangalore four days later. Meena explained to Manav all that happened at her husband’s house in detail while journeying to Bangalore. Sarah received Meena at her house. She could not bear the sight of her, as she had become pale and dispirited. She was feeling very sorry to break the sad news she had brought. Gradually they sat down to talk that night and she told what happened to her at Bombay. They broke down and wept. The next two weeks were nightmare for Meena. She did not lift the phone thinking it could be Nag. She did not open the door as she expected Nag to knock at the door suddenly. Nag did not call nor did he come to ask her why she left home without his permission. She applied for divorce. The divorce was granted after prolonged court hearings, but they lost their only house. Then Meena had to open a new chapter in her life. She became more mature, wily and selfish. Manav was feeling very sorry for Meena now. He did know how to console her. He started to spend a lot of time with her and that gave her a lot of comfort. She joined the degree course to pursue her studies.

Chapter 13

The plane high jacked

One evening his mother spoke to Manav when he was lounging in the verandah.

“Manav, will you take me to Haridwar and Hrishikesh on pilgrimage? I want to have a holy dip in the river Ganga and offer our prayers.”

“Mom, you have already visited those places several times.”

“A dip in the river Ganga will wash off our sins... The rivers are sacred for us and Ganga is the most sacred of all rivers.”

“Mother, you have not committed any sin. I assure you.”

“You are always indifferent to religion. That is why we have been facing so many difficulties. If we go to Tirupathi¹⁷ once in a year, we can invoke the blessings of god. If we have a holy dip in the Ganges we can purify our body and mind. I will not let you neglect religion. It is my belief that we should go on pilgrimage to purify ourselves.”

“I had longed to go to Haridwar,”¹⁸ she continued, “but your father had no time to think of pilgrimage. Now, it is a proper time to go on pilgrimage.”

“Okay mom, as you please. We will combine your pilgrimage with our Nepal tour. After Haridwar and Harikesh, we will go to Nepal. You should not say ‘no’.

“If we don’t feel exhausted after visiting Haridhwar and Rishikesh we may extend the tour to Katmandu,” she suggested.

Jay who was silently listening to the conversation spoke at last.

“I am sorry I can’t make it. I can’t apply for leave at this point of time. I think you should take Meena and Sarah in my place.”

“Papa, it is a great idea. They are so depressed these days and it is proper that we should be a part of our team.”

“It is true that they are depressed and we should take them on tour to lighten their otherwise heavy hearts.

Meena and Sarah agreed to go with them. The tour to Haridwar and Rishikesh were fixed and all arrangements were made for the tour. They traveled to Delhi by Rajdhani express and stayed in a private lodge at Kalkaji. They went round cannought place, Red fort, Qutb Minar, Birla Mandir and other sight seeing places. Next they planned a trip to Agra, Jaipur, Fatahpur Sikri, and Sikandra and returned via Matura. The third trip was to Dehra Dun and Mussorie. Finally they set off to Haridwar. They enjoyed the scenery at the foothills of Himalayas and holy dip in the river Ganges. They visited a number of shrines and Ashrams, and worshipped God at Haridwar and Rishikesh. On their journey back to Delhi, Manav noticed that his mother was enjoying the tour and decided to extend his tour to Katmandu. His mother was in jubilant mood and she readily agreed to visit Katmandu.

He bought tickets to Katmandu and the tour went on well. After a week’s stay in Nepal where they visited the national park, Buddhist stupas and pagodas, they decided to return to India. They boarded a plane that left for Delhi.

The plane was about to close the door when Manav saw six people running hurriedly towards the plane. They came into the plane and the plane started moving on the tarmac for a take-off. They were all tall well-built young men in thirties and were carrying heavy handbags, and Manav wondered how the airport authorities could allow them to carry such heavy baggage. As soon as it zoomed into the air over the airport, two men appeared suddenly from the front and stood facing the passengers. One of them was

addressing the other as 'Aman'. Both of them were masked. One was holding a grenade in one hand and a pistol in the other; and the other held a machine gun. They were pointing gun at anybody who dared to stand up. They looked around with the searching eyes and announced that the plane had been hijacked, and the plane was proceeding to Kanpur. Manav's mother suddenly became sick. She experienced dizziness and sunk into the chair. There was utter silence and the passengers felt they would die soon. They expected a sudden death and prepared themselves to face death. Meanwhile a newly married couple that was on a honeymoon tour was sitting very near to the place where the masked man was standing. The man had to go to toilet but he dared not. He wriggled in his seat and the masked man thought he was up to mischief. The masked man removed him to the main door and shot him dead. His wife became dazed and fell unconscious. Meena clung to Manav in panic. The plane touched down at an undisclosed destination and it was there for five hours and possibly they were trying to negotiate with the government. Finally the plane moved and after traveling an hour or so the plane again touched down. The six men walked away from the plane, and a few hours later, the plane was landing at the Delhi airport. When they got down from the plane they were told that the plane was hijacked by the Pakistani terrorists who had links with ISI and Osama Bin Laden, and was taken to Kandahar in Afghanistan. They negotiated for the release of six terrorists who had been imprisoned by the government of India and the government agreed to release them in exchange for the safe passage of the plane, the crewmembers and passengers. There was a big crowd at the airport as the near and dear ones of the passengers in hijacked airplane waited anxiously for the safe return of the relatives and friends. They were greatly relieved when they saw passengers safely arriving, but they were moved when a young woman with anguished face followed the dead body of her husband who had taken her for the honeymoon. Manav and Meena gave a sigh of relief.

Chapter 14

A proposal to study abroad

The tour was over but the trauma of the incident remained in their memory and they could not sleep well for many nights. Meena became hysterical, and Sarah philosophical. Manav became silent and pensive. He wandered aimlessly seeking a solution to the terrorist menace. One day it dawned on him that there is an established government to deal with such matters, and that he should devote his time to studies and reach America. That night he decided to go to America and settle down there.

Next night, Manav saw his father sitting in the family room after his dinner. He went and sat opposite to him quietly and intently looked at him now and then to draw him into a conversation. Jay noticed his son shrugging his shoulders and realized that he was about to speak something. "What is the matter, Manav? He asked.

"I have been sitting idly for the last six months. I haven't been able to do anything useful. I wish I go to America for higher Studies."

"It is a very costly affair my son. It will drain out our money. I want that you should find a job here and settle down "

"No father, my dream in life is to go America and live a new life over there."

"I understand. When I was young I wanted to go to England and study there but I was so poor that it remained only a dream that never came true. I don't want to disappoint you. If you assure me that you will apply yourself to studies there and get your Ph. D. I shall be the happiest man on earth. You may start correspondence with the American Universities."

"You are really great, Dad. I will be ever grateful to you. Mom, Dad has agreed to send me to America!"

"I don't want you to go America and marry an American lady. I want you to marry a girl from our caste before you go. I will not let you go to America before you marry." Sushi interposed.

"Mom, I am going there to study, not to marry. Why do you think that I will marry an American"?

"Because I have seen many young men like you going to America for studies but returning to India with American girls."

"I will marry an Indian, okay. What have you got to say now?"

"I want you to marry a Madhwa, Brahmin girl. I shall celebrate the marriage in India. She should be from a traditional Brahmin family. You cannot marry a girl of your choice in America in our absence. I am opposed to love marriage. A love marriage in my opinion is not a marriage at all. It is total destruction of your life. I wouldn't let that happen. You marry someone here and take her to America. My decision is final and binding on you. Okay? Go to bed. It is already late in the night."¹⁹

Manav was annoyed at his mother's attitude to life. He got up and went to his bedroom without uttering a word.

Chapter 15

A caste war or corruption

One morning Jay went to his office as usual.

“Sir, the Chief is waiting for you,” the office boy announced. He said ‘Okay’ and went in to meet the chief. Karia, the chief engineer, was talking on phone. He sat in a chair opposite waiting until he replaced the receiver.

“Did you call me, sir?” he asked the Chief.

“Yes, I have something to tell you.”

“What is it? What is it?” He asked a bit worried. Karia hated him and his caste and was always trying to create problems for Jay.

“Shiva is my son-in-law. He works under you. You have written a report that the multi-storied building constructed under his supervision is sub-standard. You have also refused to sanction payment for the contractors. One of the contractors is my brother-in law. Another contractor is the son-in-law of our Honorable Minister. What will he think of us if we don’t sanction payment?”

“Sir, believe me. The quality of construction is bad. The building will not survive for another twenty-five years. A large number of people will be housed in those buildings and there is a possibility of several hundred people losing their lives.”

“In five years you will have retired. Why do you bother what happens to the building in twenty-five years? You better sanction payment and withdraw that report. My son-in-law is due for promotion next year. We want to build a good record for his promotion. I don’t want any adverse report against him. You may go now.”

“But sir, the quality of construction is so bad that we cannot deal with him leniently. I told you that it may fall within twenty-five years, but I mean that it may collapse any day. I cannot lose my job for his sake.”

“Mr. Jay, do you think that I will let you do your job if you don’t withdraw this report? You’re losing your job for sure if you refuse to withdraw your report.”

“Sir, I do not withdraw my report, come what may.” He said emphatically.

“Okay then, get ready to face the consequence.” So saying Karia turned away.

Jay left the room and went straight his chamber. He was not in a mood to work. He sat there and recollected that thirty years ago when he joined the service, his superior officers were so conscientious that they never stooped so low as to ask their subordinates to do anything undesirable or unconscionable. However, over a period of thirty years undesirable people

have usurped the positions in public offices and are endangering life and property of the people for greed and avarice.”

Jay sat there for two hours. Finally he consoled himself that he will remain an honest officer come what may. The door opened and the office boy came in.

“Sir, the Chief wants to see you immediately.”

Jay was afraid that something serious was afoot. His body started trembling. He tried to compose himself and with great difficulty, he put up a brave face and went in to meet the chief.

“Jay, I just now received a call from the Minister. He has asked me to keep you under suspension pending enquiry?”

“What do you mean? I have not done any wrong. What is there to hold any enquiry against me? I have served the government honestly for thirty years.”

“I don’t know. I told you in the morning to alter the report but you refused. Now I am compelled to action against you.”

Jay left the office in a huff and when he was at the doors, he heard his boss muttering with full of hatred, “I hate Brahmins”.²⁰

When he reached home his hands were shaking, and he was shivering in his shoes. What an ignominy! He told himself repeatedly as he went into his room and sunk into his couch. Sushi was praying god when Jay came in and she did not notice Jay entering the house. Manav came home a little later and was anxious to meet his father as he had received admission in the Cleveland State University.

“Papa, I have got admission to a graduate program at CSU. I received a letter this morning. Would you like to go through it?” He gave the letter to his father. Jay could not control his emotion, and started crying like a child. Manav and his mother tried to console him, but he would not be consoled.

“Papa, what happened? Why are you crying? Console yourself, Papa, control yourself,” he implored.

“My dear son, we are ruined. Karia has ruined us. He has removed me from Service by leveling false charges against me. You are ruined. Forget going to America,” he wept covering his face with handkerchief to avoid meeting his wife and son’s eyes.

Manav was stunned and sat there petrified as Sushi courageously consoled Jay. In a span of fifteen days an enquiry was held, and several charges were leveled against him, and he was removed from service.

Jay was sitting in the foyer reading the morning newspaper. Manav was sitting opposite in a pensive mood. Sushi was praying god. Suddenly they saw two jeeps pulling in front of their house and a few people came in with an advocate and produced a court order that his properties have been seized and that he should vacate the premises immediately as they wanted

to seal the property. Jay said nothing and Manav stood up in consternation. Sushi stopped praying and looked at the people standing there baffled.

“Do as you please.” Jay told the officials. They started removing furniture and other belongings out of his house as they meekly looked on. Sarah and Meena joined Jay and started packing the goods.

“Sarah, I am sorry I could not offer the protection I had promised you. I have run into bad days.” Jay said with tears in his eyes. She came and hugged him to console and said,

“Jay, you did your best and I thank you for that. We are not lucky enough to live under your noble shelter. God willed otherwise.” She started weeping holding his hands.

“These people will be sealing your house too in a few minutes. Go home and pack your goods and get ready to leave.”

“I do that.” Meena said with tear in her eyes.

“Where will you shift?” Manav asked with great concern.

“I have a co-teacher who is well disposed to me. I rang up a few minutes ago and she has invited me to her house. We are moving to her house temporarily. Where will you go now, Jay?” She asked with great concern.”

“We have an ancient dilapidated house in Ramnagar. We will move to that house temporarily. We have to dance to the tune of God, you know.” He sat closing his eyes.

“Sir, we will lock and seal this house if you and your family stay out,” said Shiva the son in law of Karia with malice in his eyes.

“Get up, Sushi and Manav. We will stay out in the sun.” he said with trembling voice. Manav and Sushi walked out with Jay to the open and gave one long lingering look behind with reminiscences of their good days. Jay was too weak to stand and he sat on a stone outside.

“Manav, can you bring a truck for our transshipment.” Sushi asked

“Mom I have only 500 with me. We need five thousand.”

“Go to the bank and draw the amount.”

“Don’t waste your time sir,” Shiva said intervening, “we have frozen your bank account. You won’t get a penny from the bank.” Jay sunk into the ground.

“Papa don’t worry I have money in my account. I will bring cash. Wait for me. I will be back in half an hour.”

When Manav returned with a truck, both the houses were sealed and Meena and Sarah were waiting with Jay and Sushi for his arrival.

“Load Sarah and Meena’s goods first,” requested Jay with a heavy heart, and Manav obeyed. Manav left them with Sarah’s co-teacher and returned ninety minutes later. He loaded the truck with their goods and set out to Ramnagar. Manav was very sorry to leave Meena to her fate. It was a heart-rending separation for all. Manav did not meet her again.

Manav faced poverty in its worst form: no good house to live, no good meal to eat, no good clothes to wear, no car or Motorbike to travel, and no money in the pocket. He was the poorest of the poor then. He ate one meal and walked long distances to minimize expenditure. Both father and mother were bedridden due to mental agony. There was total silence at home for many months.

A month later, Manav opened his briefcase and his attention was drawn to the heap of share certificates which his father had bought in his name. He carried it to a Stock Broker to sell them. Half an hour passed before his Broker appeared to inform him that the prices of his shares were so low that he could not even recover half the money he had paid if he sold them then. An avalanche of disappointment fell on him but he recovered very soon and started towards home. When he reached home he went straight to bed and lay there for more than six hours. Now everything became very clear. He would not go to America for further studies. He would have to abandon his entire plans meanwhile and join job in India to earn some money to keep oven burning.

Manav dissociated himself from his friends and spent most his time on a tank bund. He sent several applications for teaching jobs. In one of the interviews, the interviewer asked, "Are you a Brahmin?"

"Yes." He answered. It was a non-Brahmin organization.

The interview was over but he did not get the job.

In another interview the interviewer was very happy with Manav and said, "We are pleased to inform you that we have selected you for the job. You may join to duty from tomorrow." Manav profusely thanked the interviewer and stood up to leave the chamber. When he turned back, the interviewer asked in a low voice,

"Do you speak Tamil? Are you from Tamilnadu?" It was a non- Brahmin organization of Tamil speaking people.

His reply was in the negative. Back came the reply, "In that case, you may have to wait for another interview. My Assistant will interview you sometime next week." Manav looked at him in askance but he turned his face away and hung his head down.

He attended another interview in Delhi. He hoped to get selected.

"Do you speak Hindi or Punjabi language?" the interviewer asked. He was a Punjabi.

"My mother- tongue is Kannada," He said.

The interviewer looked at him and remarked, "So, you are from South". Promptly the reply came within a week that 'sorry to inform you that you are not selected'.

"This is a very strange country. The people of one state will not prefer the people of another State. The people speaking one language or one dialect will not prefer people speaking another language or dialect. The Indians

are divided on the basis of caste, language and region and consequently, the millions of people in India are victims of caste hatred and parochialism. Each one thinks in terms of caste, religion or region. They have no national outlook. How long can we boast of unity in Diversity!" he wondered.

He attended another Interview in a matter of fifteen days. This time he had no hope that he would get selected. Anyway he had to try and he did try. "Do you remember me?" the interviewer asked abruptly.

Manav looked into his face and said inquiringly, "No. Do you know me?" he asked the interviewer.

"Of course I know you! We were studying in the same class in the college. It's me, Gopi."

"Oh my god, It is you! I'm sorry I couldn't recognize you. You have grown... robust. Your hair has receded a little bit."

"Oh what a liar you are! Anyway, I am very glad that we have a chance to work together. I am the Principal of this College. You may join duty on 15th of this month."

"Thank you, Gopi, thank you very much," Manav said as he shook his hands.

Chapter 16

Yakub eliminates Indian Culture

Yakub was sitting on the floor of a mosque in Islamabad and many religious leaders were sitting around him. They were very enthusiastic to hear their leader. One of them said to the Chief,

"Chief, there is cultural renaissance taking place in India. One Maruti has been singing Bhajans and attracting crowd. There is another Mukund who is singing and recording devotional songs. Ramayana and Mahabharata are being shown on T V screens. We shall stop this somehow."

"I have discussed this matter with our intelligence agencies. They will take care of it."

"We are anxious to know how you will handle this matter."

"We can turn out wonders. We have a hundred extortionists from India who have taken shelter in Pakistan and they have been financing film producers in India. One cannot produce a big budget film without our help. They are advancing most of the money they have raised by extortion to film producers at 20% interest. They are our men and they are under our thumb. I have told Aman to raise interest rate to 40%. From now on, they will put forth many conditions to them to which they are obliged to agree. They will tell them what the theme of the film should be or should not be. If the theme relates to religion we will not lend money. The producers will

be forced to adopt themes that are totally irreligious. They will be made to wear our costumes and take the name of our god. They will select men of our choice for the important rolls, and the Indians will not see the religious themes on the screen again.” We let only our sympathizers to rule the bollywood.”

“Who are our sympathizers, Chief?”

“We have a number of people who have no religion. You know what I mean. Such people will be encouraged in the film industry and they will be enlisted in our covert War.”

“There are many Indians who are in the film world. They may produce films based on Indian culture. How can we prevent them?”

“Our men will threaten anybody glorifying Indian culture. If he does not heed to their advice, they will kidnap and torture him. If he still persists, our gunmen will silence them. And they cease to exist on this earth sooner or later.”

“But they are all rich people and they are no easily accessible. How can you manage to intimidate or harass or kill them?”

“We have enlisted a number of people for this noble cause and blood is thicker than water. You know what I mean. They work with film personalities for money but they work with our men to kill or extort them. They are first rate double crossers.”

“The Police will catch hold of them and punish if they are caught.”

“Oh! Come on, they are not fools to be caught so easily.”

“Suppose they are caught.”

“If they are caught our men will bribe the police and destroy the evidence.”

“Suppose the police do not accept the bribe? What then?”

“Police stations are dens of corruption. Pay money and they prove that you did not murder.”

“Suppose there is an honest police officer and he does not accept bribe?”

“We will bribe his superior and that works wonders. You know what I mean. In the extreme cases, we always have fake passports ready for them to escape to Europe.”

“Chief, you are genius. We are now convinced that we can easily conquer Indians. India will perish within 50 years at this rate and we win our war against kefir!” They all dispersed, light-hearted.

The Chief called up Aman and conveyed what he told his people. Aman was elated and sought the blessings of the Chief. He said, “I shall intimidate Keshav and Madhav first because they refused to take Asif for their films although I sent my men to plead for his inclusion.”

“Who are they?”

“They are film producers. They are producing films, which glorify the India culture. The Indians are becoming more conscious of their culture

after seeing their previous films. Chief, I will execute this job neatly. I need your blessings. That is all.”

“You have my blessings Aman. Go ahead.”

“Chief, we have slated an operation on Krishna Temple for tomorrow. I have hired three gunmen for the task. We attack the devotees of Krishna and that Pundit who preaches them India Sushi, Manav’s mother, will die and Manav weeps through out his life.” The chief was silent for a while, being amused at his hatred for a family that wished him well. He thought that Aman has true characteristics of a Jihad. He expected Aman to be ruthless and devilish. The Chief slowly said,

“When this assignment is executed you will go to America to assist Abdul in his operation ‘towering inferno’. Okay?”

“Why have you chosen me for this grand task, Chief?”

“Brother, nobody knows that you are from Pakistan. Nobody knows that you have arrived in India on a fake passport. You shall go to Germany immediately to meet the Jihads and from there you will go to Boston. You will stay with Abdul in Boston. God is with you. We will let you know your next assignment when you return from America. Take care.”

Aman targeted Krishna temple where hundreds of devotees meet every evening. A pundit was giving a discourse on Bhagavad Gita and had attracted a large gathering of devotees. When Aman was young, he had visited that temple several times. When he became Jihad, he was planning an attack that shrine some day. Next evening, hundreds of devotees had gathered there and a Pundit was preaching some episodes from Bhagavad Gita.

“God is great, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. He is all-powerful and all pervasive. He is the protector of mankind. Whenever the evil forces on Earth threaten the existence of mankind, God comes down to Earth taking a great human form and destroys the evil forces, and ensures that good prevails over the bad. God took 10 avatars (forms) and the most important avatar is Krishna Avatar. That is why God took the form of Krishna and came down to earth. He destroyed the Kauravas in Kurukshetra war and brought good to the people.” The pundit drank some water and continued his preaching

“Krishna says to Arjun in the Bhagavad Gita, You are only a puppet in the hands of God. Do your duty and leave the rest to God.” The pundit stopped his lecture as he saw a group of Minorities gunmen running towards the temple. He stopped talking and watched them dumbfounded. Panic-struck devotees turned back and saw the Minorities terrorists with weapons in hands. In a moment, a group of armed men surrounded the people and massacred many of them. Sushi saw the murderers killing the pundit with a sickle. Some people escaped with great difficulty, and one among them was Sushi, Manav’s mother. She came home running, gasping for breath.

She just made it and collapsed at the door. Several people were beheaded with sickles and swords. The police arrived and brought the situation under control. Many wounded were admitted to hospital but the terrorists escaped with impunity

Aman met his Chief next morning in an exuberated state and was very glad that he could kill so many people in a day.

“Chief, Indians are really very crazy.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Yesterday I listened to a conversation between two Indians. One was criticizing the role of Hindu Organizations. Many Indians I have heard do not approve the action of their own Organizations. They argue that they want peace and for the sake of peace they are ready to give up anything.”

“Indians can never withstand the strain of violence. They want peace at any cost. But we will never give them peace if that is what they ask.” He said wryly.

“How long will this war go on Chief?”

“As long as there are kefirs and until the whole world has been Islamized.”

“Chief, we don’t worship in places where the temple stood but then why did Muslim invaders build Mosques over the Hindu Shrines?”

”To humble and humiliate them”

“Why should we invite their wrath? Why can’t we give them back their precincts and live in harmony”

“That is not our goal. India must burn eternally.”

”But many Indians do not hate us. They have soft corner towards the Muslims. Believe me Chief.”

“That is because they are innocent. They are not aware what we are up to. They think that the present turmoil is only because of razing to ground of Babri Musjid. They don’t know there is an international movement and we have volunteers from all over the world. They are still in deep slumber and we awaken them with a bomb that kills millions. HA! HA! HA!”

Ahmed picked up a phone and dialed Aman and Aman came on line.

“Ahmed, it is Aman on the line. What is the matter now?”

“I have many things to tell you. I will talk to you at leisure again tomorrow. I called you now to inform you that I have an important assignment in India. I need to come to India within a month.”

“Oh, it is a very difficult proposition. I advise you to come down to India on a fake passport.”

“No, I can’t do that. It is very risky. I don’t take chance and fail in my mission. I want to enter India legally, so that I may stay there as long as is necessary to execute my assignment successfully.”

“What can I do for you?”

“Do you know one by name Alum in your locality?”

“Yes.”

“We have spoken to him. He has arranged a fake marriage between me and Noor, his daughter this afternoon.” Ahmed said in monotone.

“How can you reach here this afternoon – a distance of about 1000 miles and without passport?”

“I am not physically coming over there now. The marriage is on phone. A Qazi will be there near the phone to solemnize the marriage and certify that we are married... You will be a witness. Noor and I will be married over the phone.

“Will the government accept that marriage?”

“When the Qazi says it is a valid marriage, it is a valid marriage and we don’t care for the government made law. The government cannot reject our personal law.”

“Okay, I understand what you say. I will be present for your fake marriage.”

“God is great.” He said as he hung up.

At three in the afternoon a Qazi, Noor and Aman and two witnesses stood around the telephone in India, and in Pakistan, Ahmed, a Qazi and two witnesses stood around a telephone and the marriage was solemnized over the phone, and the Qazi issued the marriage certificate to Ahmed and Noor. In a month Ahmed came to India and stayed in an undisclosed location.

Ahmed called in his co-partner, Aman and asked him to arrange for a meeting with Keshav and Madhav. Aman immediately swung into action. Aman spoke to Keshav and Madhav on phone separately and sought interview with them.

“Keshav, My name is Aman. I have to inform you that my friend Ahmed wants to meet you urgently. When you will be available?”

“Ahmed! I don’t know anybody of that name. I don’t know you either. Who are you?”

“I am Aman. Ahmed is my boss. We are film financiers. I will introduce him to you tomorrow when we meet him, Okay. He wants to meet you.”

“Okay. Why do you people want to meet me so desperately?”

“He wants to discuss with you regarding your new film which you are venturing to shoot.”

“Great. I have no problem. I will be pleased to meet him at three in the afternoon tomorrow. Where shall we meet?”

“He is in a frigate off the Bombay dockyard. He prefers to hold talks in his frigate.”

“That is strange. Why would he want to hold talks in a frigate? Anyway that is okay for me. Who will take me there?”

“I will meet you tomorrow at one O’clock in the afternoon at the Gate way of India. Remember, he wants to meet you alone.”

“Okay,” said Keshav and wondered what that would he want to discuss with him.

Next afternoon Keshav waited for Aman at the gateway of India and Aman arrived promptly. Aman led him to a small boat and they were in waters for half an hour before Keshav sighted a frigate. Keshav was asking many questions but Aman did not answer anyone. He was sitting looking at the sea and whenever he answered, he answered in monosyllable. Keshav observed reluctance writ large on Aman’s face, and stopped talking to him. Aman took him to the frigate and introduced him to a man whom he boded first.

“Here comes Keshav.”

“Thanks for bringing him here.” He said and turning to Keshav he said, “Keshav, sit down. Make yourself comfortable. We have so much to discuss.”

“Okay. I am glad you are interested in my film.”

“I am interested in your new venture-Zindagi ya mouth. The title itself is thrilling”

“Thank you.”

“What do you drink, vodka, gin?”

“I don’t drink at this hour of the day, Thanks.”

“What the story is about?” He asked as two ladies in bikini vied with each other to pour whisky to his glass.

“The story is about a terrorist who crosses over border from Lahore after being trained in a terrorist camp, to India in order to assassinate a key political personality in India. He plans it well but he will not succeed. He will be caught by the police and faces death penalty.”

“That does not impress me at all. It is a usual story. What is so great about it? You must make films more interesting and more thrilling.”

“Like what?”

“I will come to that. You know patriotism, missionary zeal; sacrificing life for one’s own country is all old themes. You have to shoot scenes, which people have not seen hitherto. It must have violent romance, rhythmic tunes and dance to high beats. The people must go crazy after seeing this film. They must come out of their rut.”

“What does that mean?”

“The theme must be such that it must change their ideas and outlook. The hero must not be a meek principled fool. He must be a strong macho-hero who kills people and burn cities. You people create a weak hero who thinks doing well to people or sacrificing for the sake of parents or sister is great. You people think that a hero is an incarnation of all virtues. You people think that songs must express immortal love or melancholy. On the

other hand, your hero must be like a lion, killing his opponents and adversaries. His songs must be an expression of lust, not love. His voice must be hoarse, not soft, and the like. I will give you a very good director who works for you. You will make millions of Rupees.”

“Who is that Director?”

“I will tell you later. We have something else to talk to you. What is the estimated cost of production for your film?”

“About 30 million Rupees”

“Who will lend you that huge amount of money?”

“I have applied for loans to banks and other financial institutions.”

“They don’t give you enough loans. They put too many conditions. I get you loan at moderate rate of interest. Okay. What rate of interest to do you pay for your financial institutions”?

“It will be around 20%.”

“That is too high. With the kind of films you produce and the rate of interest at which you borrow money, I am afraid that you go bankrupt in a year.”

“What is your suggestion?”

“Do you want to make money?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Listen. I finance your project at 10%. All you need to do is to sign up papers and agree to my conditions.”

“You will appoint Munir as the director and leave everything to him. You sit back and collect money when the film is screened”

“Suppose the film flops”

“It will never flop. If it does, you must bear the burnt of it. If it brings hefty profit, keep it.”

“Okay, tell me about the people you intend me to hire.”

“Munir will be the Director. Alam will be the Hero. Alauddin will be music director, Siraj will be the lyricist and Usha will be the heroine.

“Why do you prefer Usha for heroine’s roll? Why should we not have Meharunnisa?”

“No. We want Usha for two reasons. We don’t want people to think that this film is made and distributed by the Dons. We want to give better impression to the people.”

“So you are a Don!”

“Undoubtedly”

“Why do you want to give better impression to the people?”

“So that it may become box office hit. We want all people to see that film”

“Why? Don’t people like Mehar?”

“The people may like but we don’t like our women taking to acting. However if they are already actresses, we help them in case of need, but we are not crazy to put them on the screen.”

“Why don’t you produce a film in your own name? Why do you want to give loan to me and through me and under my name, you want to produce the film”

“Our business is to make fast buck and without risk we are opposed to the idea of paying taxes.”

“How can a government run if people like you don’t pay taxes?”

“We are not here to help run the government. We want to break down the governmental machinery. We want India to become weak. We want to play havoc in India.”

“It is your motherland. You are its citizen”

“That is what you think. For us Minorities brotherhood and Minorities unity is of paramount importance whichever State we are in. “

“Now what do you want me to do.”

“Accept our offer. That is all.”

“You must have some hidden agenda.”

“You guessed right.” Ahmed continued,

“We have a hidden agenda of bringing about a religious and cultural revolution in India. Cinema is the best medium for our revolution. We want people who have not come under the influence of India culture to direct films. They ensure that the India way of life, the India way of dress and India way of art and culture is not depicted in films. The women will appear without bindi on forehead, the dancers will wear scarf on their head and they are shown in places where a traditional India woman loathe going. For music, we give Arabic tunes. If we show such films for a long time and make the heroines appear dazzling, the audience starts appreciating that kind of story, dress and music. We want them to forget India way of dress, living and life styles.”

“What is the purpose of it?”

“The purpose is to erase the deep rooted customs and traditions of the India way of life among the Indians without their knowledge as a first step, and in the second phase, we bring in the glory of Minorities way of life.”

“Suppose I refuse to accept your proposition”

“We will not let you live in peace. We will harass you until you accept our proposals.”

Keshav was dumbstruck and sat there uncomfortably for a few minutes. He considered all aspects and decided to accept their proposals in his own interest and in the interest of his family.

“I accept your offer” His hands were shaking, his face was red and his eyes were wet with tears as he confirmed his acceptance.

“Good. Aman will meet you in your office and we will get things done through him. Okay. Bye” Aman brought Keshav back to the shore. Keshav took leave of him in a friendly way, as he was afraid of being killed if he opposed them.

When Keshav was gone Aman waited for Madhav at the same spot. Madhav appeared there half an hour later. Madhav was very uncomfortable to see Aman. He did not talk much with Aman but he silently followed him. He was brought in a boat to the frigate and Ahmed met him.

“You are welcome, Mr. Madhav.”

“Why have you brought me here?”

“We need to discuss something important with you.”

“We have nothing in common. What is there to discuss about?”

“I have seen some of your films. You are very good at producing films on India Mythology with Devotional songs.”

“Thanks for your compliments”

“We need something more than thanks”

“What do you want from me”?

“An undertaking”

“What kind of undertaking do you want from me?”

“...That you will not produce such films in future.”

“What right do you have to ask for such an undertaking?”

“We don’t dispute your rights to produce such films, but we advise you to stop production of such films in your own good.”

“I know what is good for me and what is not.”

“Frankly, you don’t know. Your good lies in heeding to our advice. We help you in producing glamorous films.”

“I don’t need your help. I don’t want to be pressurized.”

“We don’t pressurize you. It is for you to choose between life and death.”

“What do you mean?”

“We mean that you will die if you produce mythological films and Devotional songs. We will make a great producer out of you if you produce glamorous films with our help. The choice is yours.”

“You want to kill me?”

“We have not decided yet. We have to make a decision depending on your decision.”

“You are beasts. I will never submit to your pressure.”

“Okay then, face the consequence. We are warning you. Okay, bye.”

Madhav hated them from the bottom of his heart. He was very indignant that they had the cheeks to call him to their place and inform him that he would face death if he did not stop producing mythological films.

“I cannot be cowed down by threats. I will do what I want to do,” he said to himself as he returned to the shore in the boat.

Next morning he noticed two persons standing at the corner of the road watching his house intently. He knew they were informers of Ahmed. He did not know what to do. “Shall I call the police”, he asked himself. “But the police would not catch them without evidence. Moreover, I don’t have

faith in the police,” he said to himself and stood behind the window for a long time. He stayed home the whole day and did not move out.

Aman called four of his assistants and told them “Look, Madhav goes to Durga pooja tomorrow morning. He will arrive at the temple sometime in the morning. You will be in the car with your guns ready. As soon as he gets down from the car, shoot at him from the point blank range and drive away. We have your visa and passport ready for going to Europe. You may collect them as soon as the job will be done.”

“We have arranged for your stay. Each one will get 100 000 dollars. You will start a small business and make a living in a western country of your choice. Thanks for your help. Next morning Madhav was shot at and killed. The assassins escaped to a foreign country.

Chapter 17

A rapist and an extortionist

A handsome young man of around twenty-five followed Lily to college for several days before she started paying him attention. He started courting her once he was sure that she could fall for him. It did not take long for him to convince her that he was her friend and gained her confidence. She started moving with him freely after college hours. One day Maya, her mother, was looking out of the window when a car pulled up in front of her house. She peeked out of the window out of sheer curiosity and saw to her dismay a boy of about twenty-eight getting down the car with Lily. They stood there talking for half an hour before she came into the house. Maya was trembling, and her tongue went dry. She did not know what to do. She suddenly felt very nervous, and disappointment and dismay were writ large on her face. She did not know how to tackle her daughter. For a moment she wished that her husband Gopal were alive to handle that situation. After the dinner, she suddenly started questioning her daughter.

“Lily, I saw you getting down from a car in front of our house. A young man brought you home in his car. Who was he?”

“He is my friend. His name is Aman,” she said casually.

“What have you got to do with a Muslim boy?”

“He is a great fun, mom. Last weekend he took me to the Pearl Valley. Prior to that, he took me to Nandi hills. He spent 1200 for the trip, mummy. He’s rich.”

“Lily, you are now eighteen. You must know your responsibilities and concentrate on your studies. I want you to become something big. Your father wished his daughter or son would become a great person. He did not live to see his daughter born to this world. You were still in the womb when he died in a plane crash.”

“I will study medicine and fulfill his desire mom.”

“You will never be able to do if you go behind that stupid playboy.”

“Mummy, you should have better outlook. Aman is a very nice guy. I love him.”

“Nonsense, He will ditch you one day. Lily, beware of such men. You are too young to understand the charming young men who play with girls,” she continued,

“Now Listen. I don’t want to argue with you. We marry within our caste. You will bring infamy to our family by marrying outside our caste. It is unthinkable. Forget him and pursue your studies with great determination,”

“But mummy-” she whined.

“You will not see him from tomorrow!” she said and left the room in a huff.

The advice tendered by Maya made no impact on Lily’s mind.

A month later one day Aman was waiting for Lily in a Mercedes Benz in her college campus. Lily and her friend Asha came out of the college and were pleased to meet Aman who was there to propose a trip to K R S Dam

“We have planned to take you and your friend to the KRS dam next Sunday. Is that okay with you?”

“How many people are going with us?”

“Four boys and two girls,”

“Do you know the boys well?”

“They are my friends”

“I believe you. You always take right decision. I shouldn’t have any problem “

“Good, you and your friend Asha will wait at your house. I will come and pick up you both. Okay?”

“Okay then. See you, bye-bye,”

Next Sunday Lily and Asha were waiting for Aman’s arrival. Maya was so wild that she wanted to lock her up in her room but Asha was there. She could not do anything to stop them. She was weeping helplessly. Soon Aman was at the door. The two girls jumped into his car and they were gone.

Two hours later they were on the highway. Suddenly the car stopped and four of his friends boarded the car. Leena had not seen them with Aman on any previous occasion. They sat in the back seats. One guy, Abdul who was looking wild, was talking from the back seat with Aman who was behind the wheel.

“Aman, how did you manage to catch hold of these girls?”

“I am trained in this art. I can lay hands on any girl I want to”

“You are really great. You have really done a great favor to me.”

Lily and Asha looked at each other. They sensed danger and became alert. They now got ready to give slip to them at the earliest opportunity. The car was going at high speed. Suddenly Aman started talking freely with Abdul. Their initial hesitation was gone. "Abdul, we have planned a communal riot in Bangalore next week. We will kill at least 20 Indians and rape 50 women. We plan to loot and collect at least a hundred thousand rupees."

"Do we make just one hundred thousand rupees?"

"We will get at least 5,000,000 US dollars in the next 15 days. We don't have any dearth for money. We have many charity organizations abroad. We fight jihad on all fronts, you know," Aman added with glee in his squint eyes and asked supportively.

"Aman, I heard that your father was an activist in Razakar movement in Hyderabad in 1942 and he led the movement there,"

"That is very true. My father was very young then and he was fond of women. He went all the way from here to Hyderabad to rape women. He was a great rapist of his times. Great, you know. He is really great. We need such people for our movement."

"You are his son and you must be equally great." They said as they looked at the girls. Lily shuddered and Asha became nervous.

"Where are we taking these girls?"

"We are taking them to the hills."

Suddenly the car became slower and slower. A tractor-trailer blocked the way as it entered the road from the roadside farm. Lily had a great presence of mind. She started running out of the car and Asha followed her. There was no one on the roadside. All four men ran after them and Lily ran back to the road and waved at a passing car. The car stopped and she escaped. She could not see Asha anywhere near. She must have been pinned to the ground by the abductors. Next morning the newspapers reported that a college student was raped and thrown out of the car 50 miles away from Bangalore on a national highway. Lily recovered from her traumatic experience in 15 days but Maya became worried and thoughtful as she was sure that Lily would ruin her life. One day Lily noticed that her mother was grief-stricken and wanted to know what was worrying her. When they were dining she asked her mother,

"Mom, you always put up a woebegone face. What is worrying you so much?"

"Lily, your father died even before you were born. You don't know what paternal love is. God has taken away from you what was most important for your happiness."

"Since I don't know what it is, I don't feel that I have lost something precious."

"I am feeling for it, Lily."

“Mom, we have to thank God for what he has given to us instead of worrying what he has not given to us. Look mom, I am quite contented with having a Mom like you.”

“You don’t know what you have lost in life, Lily. Your father was a great scientist and had he been alive he would have been world famous. We would not be struggling like this for money.”

“Mom, you never told me how he died.”

“Gopal, One day came home in a jolly mood humming a film tune. He was always absorbed in his office work and research, and I observed that his mood on that day was very different. “What is the matter? You appear to be very happy today, any good news?” I asked him. He suddenly held me by my loin and physically lifted me up in his arms in great ecstasy and put me on the couch and said,

“Look, your husband has discovered a new arsenal to the Indian armory. The government is highly pleased with my research and has recommended me for a National award. I am leaving to New York on an official visit on the 19th. Start packing my luggage. Okay?”

I was overjoyed at his success. We arranged a grand party for our well wishers in a five star Hotel to celebrate his success. On the day of departure, our house was full of guests. He bid goodbye to all before leaving for Airport. That appeared to be a great moment. The plane left at midnight and I returned home happily. Next morning I tuned in the television and listened. The Newsreader announced that the plane (in which Gopal was traveling) hit against the mountain ranges and all the passengers aboard were feared killed. I swooned on the couch. When she opened my eyes I was in hospital. I was discharged from the hospital next day and all my relatives gathered at my house in anticipation of the arrival of Gopal’s body. The body did not arrive and the relatives consoled her and left. One day an ambulance arrived before our house at 7 o’ clock in the morning and a stretcher was brought out. A body was laid on the stretcher and brought into the house. I was shocked to see the mutilated and half charred body of Gopal.

I was pregnant at the time of his death. You were born six months later and I joined a bank as a clerk and we have been living a life none too comfortable. Life went on smoothly but sordidly. I would lie in bed for long hours, planning for your future. I had been dreaming of sending my daughter to medical school, and to America for higher studies in Medicine. Eighteen years lapsed in hope and desperation. Now I know that you are a foolish girl who would waste time fooling around with unworthy fellows and you would never get admission to a medical college. That is worrying me, Lily.”

“Mom, don’t worry if I don’t become a Physician. There are thousands of careers to choose from and I assure that whatever career I choose, I come out with flying colors.”

“Future is in your hands. You can make it or mar it.” She went into the room with tears in eyes and closed the door behind her as Lily stood confounded.

Chapter 18

Meeting of two hearts

The University Valuation Hall was full of professors from various constituent colleges. They were there to evaluate the degree examination papers. About twenty professors from different colleges had assembled in room #5 to evaluate Psychology answer scripts. Leena walked into the room and surveyed the people, who had assembled there for a minute, and in one swift move, came and stood before Manav who was absorbed in reading the rules of valuation.

“My name is Lily. I come from St. Mary’s college.” She introduced herself.

“My name is Manav. I am pleased to meet you.” He moved a little away from his seat to make way for her.

“Which college do you come from?” She asked casually.

“I come from V.K College. Won’t you sit down” He showed her the seat next to him and she sat down.

Both were very busy valuating papers for the rest of the day. When the work was over for the day, their eyes met and they exchanged smiles. Lily was slender and agreeable but not attractive. If one looked at her from any angle, save full face, she appeared very attractive indeed: fashionably petite, slim, high waistline, beautiful features, but for her eyes. Her eyes were what killed her beauty, black—black and mirthless, holding no emotion and pitiless. Manav walked out and moved slowly towards his Motor Bike. “Hello Manav. Stop. I am coming with you.” A voice from behind shouted. He turned back and noticed Lily coming towards him.

“Where’re you going?”

“I am going home”

“It is just 6 in the evening. We can have a stroll on the tank bund opposite.”

“I love strolling on the tank bund. Come on. We shall go”.

Both of them walked to the tank bund in ten minutes and strolled for about an hour. It was a summer evening and the weather was hot. The wind was blowing slowly from across the water on the tank bund. The sun was going

down the western sky, turning the sky amber. Now they were tired and they sat on a bench

“Do you belong to Bangalore?”

“Yes, but we are originally from Ramnagar.”

“We are Iyer.”

“We are Madhwa.”

“Manav, are you living with your parents?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have brothers and sisters?”

“None, I am the only child born to my parents”

“Are you married?”

“No. I am a bachelor.”

“Do you like films?”

“Yes, but I like emotional and sentimental films.”

“Do you have any plan to visit America?”

“Yes, it is my ambition that I should visit America and pursue my further studies there.”

“Great. We have something in common. I have been longing to go to America”

They went to a nearby restaurant and ate well.

“You have collected so much of personal information from me without giving away any.” He remarked.

“Go ahead and ask. What information do you need?”

“Are you living with your parents?”

“I am living with my mother. My father died even before I was born. I am born posthumous.”

“Where do you live?”

“We are put up at Jayanagar.”

“Are you married?”

“No. I have not thought of marrying as yet.” They had reached her house. Manav dropped her at her house and took leave of her.

“Who is this boy, Lily?” asked Maya when Lily went in.

“I met him this morning for the first time at the venue of valuation, Mom.”

“I like that boy. He appears to be refined, cultured and respectable.”

“Mom, stop thinking unnecessarily. I know what is going on in your little mind.” She talked into the bath room to wash her face and refresh herself.

Next six days they met daily in the evening and walked long distances talking pleasantly. The valuation work was over on the seventh day. Manav was feeling sorry to separate from Lily.

“The day of departure has come and we must separate.” He said to her wistfully

“We don’t know when we will meet again. I promise that I remember the great days we spent together.” She said.

“Look at the ancient palace opposite, and the beautiful garden on this 60 acre land. Added to this we have the great lake in front of us. With you by my side, these 10 days of our stay out here, I think, are the best moments of my life. I wish we meet again and again.” He said.

“Sure, we will. I will be in touch with you, Good bye.” She started walking slowly towards her scooter.

“Just a moment please,” he called out

“Yes?” She turned to him.

“I miss you a lot.” He said in a low but distinct voice.”

“You should not miss me, Manav. You should not get emotional. Take care. Bye.” She walked away briskly towards her scooter.

“Bye, bye.” He said following her through his eyes.

Chapter 19

A travel to America

Manav worked as a professor for one year. One day his broker called and informed him that the shares he held had risen steeply, and it was time to sell his shares. Manav asked the broker to sell all his shares, and he promptly did and sent a check for half a million rupees. Now the situation changed. He had sufficient money to reach America. He started applying for admission to different universities. Within a matter of four months he got admission to a University in Cleveland with a scholarship of 12000 dollars a year. It was a moment of joy and hope. He started making preparation for his departure. He applied for visa, paid for the ticket and anxiously waited for the day of departure. His relatives and friends felicitated him and wished him good. Many young women eyed him as their prospective bride-groom. Some older people thought that he would be good match for their daughters. But Manav had no such ideas in his mind. He had one and only one idea in his mind- to study in the United States and get his doctorate.

The day of departure was a day of anxiety and tension. There were many guests in the house who were anxious to talk to him but he was not. He needed rest and time to think. He would travel by Lufthansa from Bombay to New York. He would change over to Continental at Newark Airport to travel onward to Cleveland... It was a Sunday night. He left home in a taxi alone. It was raining heavily and ride to Airport was not very pleasant but he was so thoughtful that he did not mind the inclement weather. At airport three of his friends were waiting for him. It was a matter of minutes before he entered the departure lounge and gave baggage for screening. The

friends left him at that point wishing him Bon voyage. He stood in the long queue and when his turn came he handed over the baggage for shipment and collected the boarding pass. After the usual immigration and customs check up he sat in the lounge to wait for check in. He saw a lady entering into the Lounge. He watched her as she moved nearer to him. He could not recognize her at once but she did.

“Hello Manav, What a pleasant surprise. I didn’t expect you here.” Lily said

“Neither did I expect you here. It is really a pleasure to meet you”. Manav was really glad to find someone known to him on the plane.

“Thank you for your compliments. By the way, where are you heading to?”

“My final destination is Cleveland. And where are you heading to?”

“I am also traveling to Cleveland. What a coincidence!”

They sat and talked for a few minutes when the announcement for check in was made, and they started moving with their baggage to the check-in point. By mutual exchange of seat with another passenger they were able to sit together. At midnight the plane took off to Bombay. An hour and a half later the plane was returning to the Bangalore Airport. The passengers were in panic. They were asked to go to departure lane and the plane was thoroughly searched. The bomb squad was searching for bombs that were, reportedly, hidden in the plane to diffuse. After three hours of search it was ascertained that the call received by the airport authorities was hoax, and the plane was allowed to take off. Manav heaved a sigh of relief. Lily held his hands in fear when the plane took off. It was a great experience for Lily because it was the first time Lily sat in a plane.

In Bombay they boarded Lufthansa at 2 a.m. He was tired as he had a hectic activity in the last twenty-four hours and really needed sleep. He was snoring soon. He woke up at three in the morning to answer the call of nature. He found he was leaning against her bosom and she had made no attempt to wake him up. He went towards the toilet and found its door bolted from inside. He waited impatiently outside the toilet. A few minutes later, the toilet door opened and a person came out. He suddenly noticed it was Aziz and stood puzzled for a moment. He then gathered his composure and went to toilet. When he returned to his seat, Lily was in sound sleep. He did not want to disturb her with his obsession. He let her sleep and he himself was fast asleep soon.

It was around 4 o’clock. He was awakened by a jerk. He did not know what was happening for a few moments. Slowly he realized that Lily’s soft hand was on his lap and she pretended to be fast asleep. He slowly put his hands on her hands. She made no attempt to withdraw her hand. That was a wonderful touch he ever had experienced. He wanted to withdraw his hands several times but he could not. He found immense happiness in that

touch that he could not resist. When they got up in the morning, she gave broad smile, a sweet smile that made him go crazy. He moved very close to her and softly pressed his lips against her cheeks when nobody was noticing them. They landed in Frankfurt at around eight in the morning. They came out of the plane and found a place to sit for the next five hours for they had to wait for another plane to New York till one o' clock in the afternoon. They were so elated that they spoke in lighter vein and laughed at each other's joke, however silly they were.

Now it was 11.30 in the morning and the plane had arrived and the passengers were asked to check-in. Manav and Lily checked in and shortly thereafter they boarded the plane to New York. When they settled comfortably in the plane, she leaned against his shoulder and closed her eyes. She was enjoying every touch of his broad shoulders.

"Do you intend to stay in America permanently, or you go back to India after the completion of your studies?" she asked abruptly.

"I don't know. If I get green card I certainly will stay in America. I love to stay in America." He answered.

They had one more hour to go before they reached New York. They were suddenly awakened by the commotion around. Everyone was looking in dismay at the toilet door, talking something.

"What is the matter?" Manav asked the airhostess who was passing by anxiously, "Is everything okay?"

"Two men are in the toilet hiding for the last one hour. They could be terrorists. We have information that terrorists are on the prowl."

Lily shuddered at the very idea that they could be terrorists. Not long ago, the Pakistan terrorists had killed a man who had come to Nepal with his wife while they hijacked an Indian plane because he looked straight at the terrorists. Manav had given a vivid description of what had happened on that occasion when they were sitting by the lake. As minutes passed by there was panic everywhere. The faces of passengers turned vapid and pale. A burly gruff man suddenly came from nowhere and started knocking at the door violently. As the people watched in panic, the door suddenly opened and two large built men came out and vanished into the crowd. What were they doing in the toilet so long? Lily wondered

Manav slowly said "Didn't you hear what the people around are saying? They are gay."

Exactly at 6 o'clock in the evening, the plane touched down. They went out after the immigration and customs formalities were over. Manav's cousin was waiting for him at the gate. Manav introduced his relative to Lily. After exchange of courtesies, they were led into a car in the parking lot. Soon they were at the terminal C. They were so tired that they rarely spoke. Once they were in the plane they fell asleep. It was 11 in the night when the plane touched down. At John Hopkins's International Airport,

Lily's cousin Megha had come to pick her up. Lily introduced her to Manav. When they came out of the airport, Lily asked him,

"Where do you stay this night?"

"I don't know. I really don't know. I think I must stay in a motel tonight and contact the college tomorrow morning." He was very uncertain and little puzzled.

"Why don't you stay with us to night?" Megha suggested.

"It is a very good idea," said Lily. It was nearing mid-night and he had no place to go. He agreed after a little hesitation. An hour later they were at an apartment in the University Heights.

Megha was aged about forty-five. She was very beautiful when she was young but the age had made some impression on her face. The hair had changed its color from black to gray and she was no more a charismatic figure as she was in her twenties. She looked a little too old for her age. She was one of those few women who married a white American in her young age. Joe was a classmate of her, who after vehemently courted her, proposed to marry her, a proposal which made Megha immensely happy. They were married in a temple by exchanging the garlands in the presence of a few friends. It was a Gandharva Vivaha that lasted for five years, and during the subsistence of their marriage, two children were born to them, Jack and Malone. One day Joe told her that the time had come for their departure and bid her goodbye once and for all. She cursed her fate and brought up her children until they joined graduate Schools in different places and left for dormitories. She stayed alone working all day and window shopping in the evenings. She was terribly bored when to her great comfort, Lily informed her of her admission to CSU on phone. The news greatly rejuvenated her and she regained her lost spirits and gladly received her cousin at the airport.

Chapter 20

A conference of the terrorists

It was a Friday night. Hamburg was in deep slumber. In a quiet neighborhood, many cars started arriving at regular intervals without headlights at a parking lot opposite to an old ranch house, which was poorly lit inside and quite dark outside. There were as many as five cars and each car brought with it four passengers. Soon there was an assembly of 20 people. They were looking grave and speaking in a language that no German could understand. The assembly was presided over by Abdul and by his side sat Aman. Abdul started talking. He talked and others listened.

“We have met here to chalk out our plan. It is an important meeting, as you all know. The Muslims are great people but they are suffering in the hands of non-Muslims. The Muslims in Palestine are suffering in the hands of Jews, the Muslims in Kosovo are suffering in the hands of Christians and in Kashmir the Islamic extremists are suffering in the hands of the Indians. The Americans humiliated the extremists in Iraq. But for America, We would have conquered the world by now.”

“How could we conquer the world?” one of them wanted an explanation.

“My dear young man, you know the whole world today runs on one single substance. That is Gas. This is a very rare substance in this world, but God has given us this substance in plenty. When the people of the world have no water to bathe, God has given petrol to us for bathing. God is great.” He gave a sardonic laugh to impress upon his audience. The audience nodded in agreement.

“The whole Arab world is sustaining today on the sale proceeds of this wonderful substance. We are grateful to God.” He continued,

“With this substance in our custody, we can control the entire world.”

“Why do you say so?”

“Cause, the transport of goods from one part of the world to another is possible today because of Arabian Oil.”

“There are many countries producing oil.”

“Not in sufficient quantity to sustain its transportation and communication needs.”

“They import oil from us and we sell oil to them. It is for mutual benefit. Isn’t it Chief?”

“Suppose we don’t supply oil to them. What will happen to the economy of those nations?”

“Their economic activities come to stand still in the absence of our oil. They have to beg before us for every drop of oil.”

“Chief, you are right. You are great.”

“We want to drain their economy by increasing the price of oil tenfold. We become richer ten times and they become poorer ten times. How is the idea?”

“It is a great idea. That was what Iraq wanted to do.”

“Yes. If Iraq had succeeded in its attempt to increase the oil price in Nineteen Nineties, we could have sapped off the energies of all non-Muslim nations of the world.”

“But America humbled and humiliated Iraq. America wants uninterrupted oil supply at a very low price. As long as Arabian oil flows into America, America remains a very strong nation.”

“You are right.”

“We should endeavor to give crushing defeat to America. America is our enemy number one.”

“You mean we should support Iraq.”

“Yes. Minorities extremists all over the world shall rally round Iraq and put up good fight to America.”

“We can never win a war against America, Chief.”

“You are right. That is why America always harbors the idea of defeating Iraq. The Muslim strength lies in the strength of Iraq.”

“What shall we do now?”

“We shall attack America, not with our army but with our intelligence.”

“What purpose does it serve?”

“We want to unnerve them and make them insecure. They have to buy security from us by giving up anti-Muslim policies.”

“We will force them to stop atrocities against Muslims in Kosovo, and in Palestine.”

“How can we?”

“We will export terror to America. We terrorize American people and attack their interest in America and elsewhere in the world.”

“What else?”

“We unite Muslims around the world. We manufacture nuclear weapons and biological weapons of mass destruction. We use them against the Americans. We deprive them of our oil. We cripple their communication system and economy. American economy breaks down. That is what we want. America must shrink into its shell. It shall stop stretching its tentacles into Muslim nations. Then we Muslims rejoice. We subjugate the people of the world with the bait of our oil resources. The whole world will be brought to its knees.” There was great applause and admiration from the audience.

Abdul continued his talk. “Today’s assembly is the first step in the subjugation of America and its people. We have a group of young men here who will sacrifice their lives and become martyrs for the cause of Muslim brotherhood. We have trained you in our Madrasas to impart religious training. We have trained you in Pakistan terrorist camps to impart training in terrorizing people. We have given you advanced training in the rein of terror in Afghanistan. We now give you training in America, a training that will help you to reach enemy easily and strike him in his own country with his own equipment and money.”

“How is it? How is it?”

“We have a plan. Our great hero in Afghanistan has masterminded this plan of attacking America without much loss in terms of men and money.”

“We are impatient to hear from you.”

“Wait. I am here to explain the plot to you. We have selected Aman and Ahmed to arrange special training you in Aviation. Your visa and passport are ready with us. Thursday morning some of you will travel to America.

You will join pilot training in various private training schools and become good pilots”

“But who pays for our expenses?”

“Don’t worry money will reach you from many quarters. You will never be starved of money. We have many jihad organizations. What better cause do they have than this?” They all laughed in satisfaction.

“How many of us will go to America to get pilot training?”

“Say around twenty. Each one of you will have a few assistants to provide you logistics and back up. They will be always with you but only the leaders will undergo pilot’s training.

Some of you will undergo training in the first batch. In the second batch others will get training. All batches will leave separately and will never meet again.”

“Okay.”

“Further instructions will be given individually. You may all go now, Allah Oh Akbar.” They all dispersed and got ready to go on their mission.

Chapter 21

Love and Hatred

Six months lapsed. Manav had settled down in a dormitory and Lily had settled down with her cousin Megha. They were making regular phone calls to each other but they did not meet in person. One day Lily called him on the phone and after the exchange of courtesies, told that her sister had gone to Columbus and she would come two days later and asked him if he could come and meet her at her apartment. He hesitated for a while and finally agreed to meet her. When he knocked at her doors, she called him in, and he sat on a couch

She sat on a chair opposite.

“How do you feel to be in America?” she asked inquisitively.

“I feel great. I am greatly enamored by the life here.” He replied.

“Do you intend to settle down in America?” She inquired.

“I don’t know. I sometimes feel that I should go back. Anyway I am determined to stay here” He said with full confidence.

“You should take lot of courage and stay here. It is not easy to settle down in a foreign country”. She advised him.

“I have not eaten properly for the last two months. I have lost more than five pounds. We can’t relish any food here because we are vegetarians”

“Yes, we have to live on fruits and milk.”

“I need staple food. I need rice and pulses.”

“Manav, you should learn to adjust your food habits. That is important. Look at me. I go to Pizza Hut and I love Pizza. I go to Indian restaurants

sometimes and sometimes I cook at home. But I don't feel out of place at all."

"Anyway I will not go back even if I cannot adjust myself to this weather and food habits."

"Manav, I want you to stay here. Never think of going back. I need your company. I will ask my cousin to let you live here with us so that we can take care of you. You should not say 'no'.

Manav was silent. Then they changed the subject and talked of weather and politics. They dined together and Manav stood up to go at 10 in the night. Lily suggested that they should go out tomorrow to Huntington Beach for a stroll. And he mutely agreed to go with her

Next morning by 11 a.m. they reached Huntington Beach. Lake Erie touching the feet of the high-rise buildings of Cleveland was a very beautiful sight. "Hey, everybody here is in swimming dress except we two. It is appropriate we should also go for a swim. Do you know swimming?" She asked inquisitively there was no hesitation in her talk or looks. She appeared calm and composed as she asked him. Manav had not mixed with ladies in his 25 years of life. He had great respect for women and regarded every woman a paragon of high moral stature. It was unimaginable that a lady could offer to swim with a man whom she hardly knows. He knew how to swim and it would not be appropriate to say that he would not swim with her. He had come to America and he had to act western.

"Okay, I am ready" He said hesitatingly.

"Me too." she said as she removed her outer clothes. She was in a bikini. She appeared very beautiful in the sunshine in that outrageous dress. As he stood in his swimming dress he impulsively held her fast and hugged her for which she reciprocated with her body pressing hard against his. She brought her lips closer and pressed her lips against his very hard. They stood there under the naked sky on a sunny day their body touching each other and their mind fully united in their action. As they realized that the people around them were closely but clandestinely watching their emotion and impulse they withdrew a little and started running towards the water. They were in water for nearly an hour hugging and kissing at times. After all, they were in a free country and in an alien country where no one is bothered what they do.

They came to the beach and lay there one over the other as they talked.

"Where shall we meet tomorrow" Manav took courage to ask her.

"We will meet in our apartment. My cousin is expected to arrive tomorrow evening. We can spend the whole day together. Next morning he was there at her apartment at the right time. Lily was waiting for his arrival for breakfast they ate poori-palya, and sat on a couch talking of their experiences in the last fifteen days. Suddenly she drew herself closer and hugged him. He gently kissed her.

“I need to relax. We shall go to bedroom,” she said as she got up and started moving towards her bedroom. He impulsively followed her to her room opposite and stood there for sometime. He saw her standing amorously looking at him and signaling him to come into her room. He had never seen her so excited. Her face was red and was asking for something. Suddenly he realized that he was there with a lady and did not know what he should do. That was the first time in his life a lady was making advances to him. He went very close to her and held her hands in one swift move. She hugged him and laid her head on his chest. It was one of the happiest moments of his life. There was something ecstatic about that touch and hug. He drew her closer and kissed her several times on her cheeks and lips. She started to drag him to bed. He was panting as she zipped off his pants and moved her palms trying to reach central part of his body. He could not resist the temptation of laying her. He pushed her into the bed and fell on her trying to reach her breast. At that moment the doorbell rang and Manav stood up and hurriedly zipped up his pant and Lily dressed up in a hurry as she went towards the door to see who the caller was. Her cousin stood at the door and waited for Lily to open the door. When she came in, she saw from Lily to Manav twice and asked him slowly

“When did you come here?”

“Just five minutes ago,” he said and blushed as he was not in the habit of telling lies.

“You want me to believe it?”

His face was pale and Megha observed him closely. Please sit down I will be here in a few minutes, she said and left to her room. He looked at Lily perturbed and said; “I shall take leave of you now.” He went away without waiting for her reply. When he was gone, Megha asked her “Okay, what happened while I was gone?”

“We were having a little fun” she said slyly and started to leave the place.

“That guy appears to be good. I like him. I suggest that he should also stay with us. If he stays alone, I am afraid that he will become home-sick soon and may leave this country.” She looked at Lily intently. Lily blushed for the first time in her lifetime.

“Shall I ask him to come and stay with us then?” She asked her cousin to make sure that she really meant it.

“Sure, you can. I mean it.”

“You are so good, Megha,” she said and held her hands in gratitude, “it is very kind of you. He shall really thank you. It is a great country but the people cannot live here without meat. In India, even the non-vegetarians are ninety percent vegetarians. They rarely eat meat. It is very difficult for vegetarians to live here without family and homemade food. He will ever be grateful to you. I assure you.”

“Lily, if we don’t help our people who will help them? What is the use of our owning a house here.”

“I will inform him at the right time. Okay?”

“Good.”

Next few days witnessed vehement courtship and great romance. They met daily and wandered around the lagoon behind the museum, Six Flags, the Metropolitan zoo, and in the shopping malls. One day, Lily and Megha came to the dormitory where Manav was staying. Manav was still in bed. He was disgusted with eating what he did not like to eat- bread and jam in the morning, bread and jams in the evening and bread and milk at night. He was lying in bed still remembering the good morning coffee his mother used to give him in India, when Lily and Megha knocked at the door. He opened the door and apologized for appearing in the nightdress.

“We have come to give you a great surprise.”

“What is it? What is it?” he was eager to know.

“Take shower and get dressed up immediately.”

“Are we going out?”

“Do as we say. We are taking you home.”

“What home? Which home do you mean? I don’t have any home in America. I don’t understand!”

“They did not answer. He looked at them and decided to do as they say. Within fifteen minutes he had shower and he dressed up sprucely and appeared before the ladies.

“Now you appear very handsome.” Megha said.

“You are teasing him too much.” Lily said jocularly.

Manav settled down in a hurry and asked what they were up to.

“We have come to invite you to stay with us for the rest of your stay in America or until you are settled in life.”

“Thanks for your generosity and magnanimity. I am afraid that I cannot do that.”

“You must do that. If you stay here without good food you will fall ill and you cannot complete your study. In your interest we have decided to take you home.”

“Why do you take trouble for my sake?”

“We are honored if you accept our invitation. Don’t say, “No”

Manav thought over the matter for five minutes and decided to accept their invitation. That afternoon they shifted him to their University Heights Apartment. In the evening, Manav and Lily were wandering at Metropolitan Zoo. It was Halloween and there was a good crowd around. There were many people around in fancy dresses. Children around were having great fun. After a while they went to a dark place and sat on a bench to rest. He suddenly said,

“Lily, I love you and I want to marry you. We will settle down and earn lot of money in America. We will purchase a big house and settle down in Johnson Heights in New York.”

“And,”

“And we will have a son and daughter.”

“I didn’t know that you were such a great dreamer.”

“It is not dreaming, my dear. We can achieve it if we have will power.

“Where there is will there is way.”

“Manav, I am really looking for that day. I am afraid that something may go awry and it will remain only our dream.”

“Nobody can stop us Lily. We will achieve our goal, I assure you.” He held her hands firmly and she held his under the starry sky.

That night he was awake for a very long time. Suddenly he remembered what his mother had said. She had told him that he should marry within his caste. He wanted to seek her permission because Lily was a Tamil girl. He wrote to his parents next morning.

“My dear Mom/Dad,

“I cannot express how much I love you both. I have great news to give you. A wonderful girl has come into my life. Her name is Lily and she is from India. She is good looking, and well educated. She is getting her Master’s degree in Business Administration shortly. But she is not a Kannada-speaking Brahmin. It takes two more years before we get Green Card, and we cannot wait till then. I trust you understand our situation and grant us permission to marry in your absence. I know your blessings will be with us always.

Your dearest son,

Manav”

Ten days later, the letter reached Jay and he read the letter for his wife over and over again in disbelief. Tears came bursting from her eyes. She never thought that her son would marry without her consent and in her absence. She knew that Manav had made up his mind and he would marry Lily whether or not she consents to that marriage.

“We are 10,000 miles away, and we cannot reach there to advise him personally. Nobody had married outside our caste in our family until now. Our relatives laugh at us. We are put to shame.” She wept like a child. Jay consoled her.

“Don’t worry Sushu. Let him marry a girl of his choice. We will face the ignominy of this unacceptable marriage. There is nothing that we can do to stop him.”

Jay wrote back:

“My Dear Manav,

“Your letter reached us yesterday. You are determined to marry a girl of your choice. You have sought our permission only as a formality. We don’t approve this marriage but we know you don’t care for our feelings. We hope good sense will prevail on you and God will give you right direction. We have nothing to say on this marriage. Your mother is very upset with your decision and she is rudely shaken. It will take a very long time for her to recover from this shock. If you marry that girl against our wish, we will disown you and forget that we ever had a son.

Jay”

Manav was visibly upset. He was sorry that he had upset his parents who loved him so much. But he loved Lily more and so, he decided not to tell Lily what transpired between him and his parents; and to marry her against the wishes of his parents. ‘I will give up my parents but not Lily’ he said to himself.

One day Manav and Lily walked down the E 9th street towards the Lake. It was seven in the evening and there were not many people around.

“Lily, I wish that India would be as peaceful and as orderly as America!”

“It is a wishful thinking, Manav. India can never become America.”

“Don’t you like India and Indians?”

“I don’t know, perhaps not, unless they change.”

“Why? What is wrong with them?”

“Everything is wrong with them. They are poor. They live in less sanitary conditions. They have no proper education. They have no employment. They are narrow-minded, bigoted and superstitious. They are mostly hypocrites.”

“Don’t you like to stay with them and improve their lot instead of running away from them”?

“We can definitely improve them if they know what they are. They think they are as great as anyone in the world. It is very difficult to mend people who have such a complex. Look at our social system. It is a male dominated society in which women have been treated as their toys. The male member is the head of the family. All female members should subject themselves to the authority of the male members. Her father controls a woman in her young age. When she is married, her husband controls her life. In her old age, her own children, rule her! She does not have independence. She has only duty and sacrifice. She has no right or liberty. The woman in India is respected only as long as she submits to the authority of the male. If she disobeys male she will have no respect in the society. Women must be pure but men can be adulterous. Women must maintain all virtues to get the respect in the society. It is a society where women are subservient to men and her role is only to act as supplementary to man but not live as an independent member of the society. I hate to live in such a society. I want to get out of such a society as early as possible”

“Do you mean to say that men should be subservient to women in the society”?

“I didn’t say that. I stand for perfect equality between man and woman.”

“If both are independent and act independently, do you think that the institution of marriage will flourish?”

“I don’t care whether the institution of marriage will flourish or perish. I want complete independence for women.”

“In that case, every married woman will divorce her husband shortly after marriage, and in course of time the institution of marriage becomes farce. The marriages will be broken and children will be left uncared by parents, and women will become destitute. Do you like such a battered society?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about. I want to live in a society where there is equality between man and woman. I am not worried about the consequences. Society is a means to an end, not an end in itself. It exists for the benefit of its members.”

“I see. What do you think of American society?”

“I love American society because they are the most disciplined people in the world. Whether it is a public place or a public road they observe high degree of discipline. It is a pleasure to watch American traffic. Look at Indian traffic. They drive so dangerously and haphazardly. They have no respect for the human lives. It is a very sad state of affairs,” she continued, “An American will never break queue. In India the people jostle indecently against each other and jump queue. Nobody taught Americans Ramayana or Mahabharata or the Indian Neeti sutras, but their moral standard is quite high albeit for fear of punishment. In India morality is equated only with sex and revolves round the sex. In reality, morality embraces all aspects of human life... They work more honestly in their work place. They don’t need constant supervision. They don’t crowd themselves in public places. They do not form mobs. Theft is negligible, calling names; street fighting, assault and mayhem are rare. I am told very few people resort to defraud in America but in India, so many people defraud so often that rarely people seek the assistance of police, and if they seek the assistance, they rarely get relief. The Indian courts are so slow in disposing of cases that hardly one can get justice in time. Justice delayed is justice denied. House-breaking and robbery is so common in India but not so in America. In India, so many thieves snatch gold ornaments on public roads and run away and they are rarely caught. In America everything is well organized. The Americans are hard working and highly productive unlike Indians. I love America.” She was excited.

“It is all very true. They are great people. I agree.” He nodded his head.

“Anyway, we are going to stay in America and settle down here. Why should we bother about the Indian society?” she said scornfully.

“I will stay here if possible; otherwise I will go back to India and serve the people of India in whatever capacity possible. I learn everything that is good in America, and try to impart them to the people of India.”

“It is easy to talk of principles and philosophies. I am sure you will not go back. You will not be pleased to see India again.”

“We will wait and see”. He was not interested in talking on the subject further.

He was not happy with her outburst and wondered at her disparaging remarks against her own people. She was not pleased with his soft and biased attitude towards Indians. Both of them walked silently till they reached the parking Lot.

Two days later, after dinner, the conversation ensued outside an ice-cream parlor.

“Do you remember the night you visited our house in India for dinner?”

She asked him.

“Vividly”

“You really scared me that day. You were so upset I don’t know why”.

“Upset? No certainly not.”

“You are hiding something from me. You were terribly upset that day. If you don’t want to tell me I would not force you to.” Suddenly Manav became serious. He spoke to her with charged emotion. “You were talking that day that the minorities should be shown leniency and they should be treated as a privileged class. I don’t agree with you. They have as much of equality and liberty as we have but they cannot claim privileges over the majority. I have seen Minorities (he remembered Aziz) who eulogize Pakistan cricketers and raise slogans in support of Pakistan players while witnessing a match between India and Pakistan. If they want to stay in India they should show respect to India and respect the sentiment of the Indians. They cannot live in India if they fly Pakistan’s flag or if they refuse to fly Indian flag. It clearly betrays where their loyalty lies. To woo them for the sake of votes by the so-called secular parties is something that I cannot reconcile. They are in a minority but no body dares to antagonize them because the Indians are mild, timid and peace loving. They want separate representatives; they want separate law. If the secular political parties do not realize their mistake the nation is in for a serious trouble. The Islamic extremism is on the rise. Some extremists are preparing to die for the sake of Islam. They are waging jihad, but political parties are pleading for special privileges to the minorities to gain political mileage by conferring more and more privileges on them. This is exactly what I am against. But an educated person like you talking leniency to the minorities at this point of time, an idea that no Minority has thought even in his dreams, drives me crazy.”

“Dear Manav cool down. We need peace, amity and friendship with minorities. We cannot antagonize them and live in peace. They are a militant race and we are peace loving. We can never encounter them although they are in minority In the name of religion we have already antagonized the extremists by razing to the ground their Mosque. In my opinion, the extremists must be allowed to live by themselves peacefully.”

“Lily, don’t you understand that the Islamic invaders demolished the Ram temple in Ayodhya and built on it the Musjid centuries ago.”

“I am sure they did. But it is history and we cannot reverse it. We have to get on with the extremists in peace and harmony. We don’t want bloodshed in the name of religion.” Manav was a little irritated. His eyes shone and his face became red with rage.

“What do you mean? If invaders of yester years have wronged by constructing a mosque by demolishing the Ram temple, the extremists of today have to see reason and voluntarily relinquish their right to the disputed land and enable the Indians to construct the temple on the disputed land at least in the interest of peace and harmony.”

“The extremists will never agree to that. They are very religious. Instead of fighting with them we have to give back their land and live in peace with them. Mahatma Gandhi worked throughout his life for the cause of Hindu-Muslim unity. We must turn his dream into a reality.”

“Don’t you know that they have only one goal and that is jihad? There are many Islamic organizations all over the world that teach that jihad is the sacred duty of every Muslims. Many misguided youth have already joined the extremist organizations and are planning to foment trouble in India.”

“I don’t believe it is true”

“Don’t you know that recently a Minorities Students organization has been banned because of its nefarious activities?”

“I think just as we have bad elements among Indians, there are bad elements among Minorities also.”

“My dear young lady, please try to understand. Some people who do not owe allegiance to this state may align with our enemy across the border and they could be as dangerous as the enemy himself. You don’t seem to understand the underlying problems of our country. True we want peace. We want to be secular in our attitude, but we don’t want to encourage pseudo-secularism, which is suicidal to the very existence of India. Peace is a two way process. If both communities want peace, peace can be established but if only Indians want peace and Minorities want confrontation, there is no way that peace can be established in India.”

“I am really sorry if I have hurt your feelings Manav, I didn’t mean to. I was just saying what the ordinary people feel about the Issue. Manav, I am an internationalist. I have no religion. I have no barriers. I make no discrimination.”

“My dear lady, I am as much an internationalist as anyone. I have no religion and barrier if all people in this world think so. But the world does not think as you think. When the whole world is nationalistic, you cannot be an internationalist. When the whole world is discriminating against each other on the ground of religion, race caste color or creed, you cannot say that you have no barriers. You may believe in the equality of man but world does not believe so.”

Manav abruptly stood up but said politely that it was late and that he should go to bed. He thought on his way that she was made up of a different mould altogether. He concluded that Lily was childish and not well informed and fancied that some day she would fall in line with him. Lily thought that he was too naïve and his ideas were too reactionary and decided to disentangle herself from him. Manav continued to stay with Lily but Lily avoided him as much as she could. She would come home late at night and would go to bed after dinner. She did not invite him for walks or talks and did not like his company as much as she did earlier.

Chapter 22

Blossoming of a new friendship

Another six months lapsed and Lily applied herself to studies. Meanwhile, she was feeling lonely and needed a friend. She came across a tall lean young man by name Bill in the library who spoke to her frequently.

“Where are you from,” he asked one day

“I am from India?” Lily replied.

“Good, I like India,”

“Have you seen India?”

“Yes, I was born there, at New Delhi when my father was working at the American embassy in New Delhi. I spent the first eight years of my life there.”

“Do you remember your days at Delhi?”

“I remember faintly places like Taj Mahal and Qutb Minor.

They became good friends over a period of time.

One day Bill asked her abruptly,

“How do you propose to spend your time for the long week end?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it. I am feeling so lonely and bored.”

“Why don’t you tour with me? I love touring. We can have great fun going places.”

“I am planning to go to Niagara. Would you like to accompany me?”

She considered for a moment and slowly she said,

“I don’t mind going with you.”

“You are a wonderful girl. I like you a lot.”

“I like you a lot. You are so soft and caring.”

That weekend they went to Niagara. They climbed the Cave of the Winds; they sailed in the ‘Maid of the Mist’, quite close to the falls. They had many happy moments but they maintained distance. They sat on the lawn of the Niagara and started talking.

“My memories of New Delhi are very hazy. I was too young to understand the cultural aspects of life. I am interested to know more of your country.” He said calmly but earnestly. Lily was immensely happy to explain the cultural aspects of India.

“India is a strange country. It is strange not only to the outsiders but equally to the people living within.”

“Can you explain?”

“India is country of many religions. We have eighty-two percent Hindus and fourteen percent Muslims, 2% Christians and 2% others like Sikhs, Zoroastrians and Jews.”

“Your statistics shows that predominantly it is a state of Hindus. Others are in minority. What problems could there be in such a state?”

“The Hindus suspect the loyalty of the Muslims because many Muslims do not fly the Indian flag and they don’t sing the national anthem. Do you get it?”

“Yeah, it means they are not sentimentally a part of India.”

“Right, they are physically staying in India but their sympathy is with Pakistan?”

“Why?”

“Pakistan is a Muslim country. They marry people from Pakistan. They have close links with Pakistan in different spheres of life. They are one race and one religion. She continued,

“Pakistan is an avowed enemy of India. It is doing everything within its means to destabilize and disintegrate India just because it is a state dominated by the Hindus. They are getting lot of co-operation from misguided Islamic extremists in India. India is a fertile ground for Pakistan to set up the extremists against the government and the people of India. They appeal to their religious fervor and incite them against India from across the border. They supply arms and ammunitions to those who want to fight. They supply RDX to those who want to destroy public property or public utility. They encourage the extremists to spy for Pakistan. They encourage them to carry on fifth columnist activities in India. Emboldened by this support some Muslim organizations threaten that they would wage civil war if they or their interests were harmed. They encourage smuggling, drugs peddling, extortion, looting, and arson, everything forbidden by law and civilization.”

“Why should they resort to such tactics?”

“It is because they cannot win a war against India. They waged three wars and lost. They have resorted to political warfare and fifth columnist activities.”

“Aren’t they afraid to die?”

“They are indoctrinated to believe that jihad is the ultimate.”

“Why can’t the Government arrest and punish them.”

“Many Muslims of divided loyalty give them protection and logistics to carry out the assault against India. They have organization and money. They bribe the corrupt officials and escape punishment. They want to create fear psychosis in the people.” Both of them got up from their seat and gradually moved towards their Motel. They sat in the foyer and continued their talk.

“War is the only solution in such an event, I believe.”

“Both are nuclear powers. Both countries heed to America’s advice. And America advises them against war.”

“So there is stalemate?”

“Exactly,” Now Lily was getting sleep.

Bill it is time I go to bed. I am tired.” Both of them walked into the Motel

Next morning they met in the foyer. Bill was already there when she went down to the foyer.

“Last night, you gave me a very illuminating lecture. I want to know more about India.” Billy said.

“India is always an interesting subject for those who want to know about it”

“Very true.” he agreed with her. “But I don’t understand. I see some missing link in your argument. You say The Hindus are in overwhelming majority in India”

“Yeah”

“So the politicians in the Legislature and the Executive branches must be mostly Hindus.”

“Right, they are mostly Hindus except for a few Minorities”

“Can’t the Indians unite together and make and enforce necessary laws to restrain the unlawful activities you allege that some extremists are engaged in?”

“It’s a very interesting question. India has a parliamentary system of government. We have adopted the parliamentary system of England with certain modifications. We have thirty to forty political parties in India. They all vie for political power, right? Their primary aim is to come to power and to retain power if they get power at all cost. Therefore every political party wants to grab as many votes as possible. Since the Minorities form a sizeable minority and they vote en bloc they can swing the fortune of the party and the candidates. The extremists take full

advantage of this situation. No political party dares to criticize the extremists openly because they fear they lose election and if they are in power, they lose power. So the eighteen percent minority decides the fate of major political parties in India. It is a peculiar situation.”

“Very interesting”

“The situation is further complicated by sociological factors.”

“Like what?”

“There was no Islamic faith in existence up to seventh century A D. There were no Muslims until then The Muslim invaders like Ghori, Ghazni and Baber gave the word ‘Hindustan’ to India in the medieval period and the people who lived in that part of the globe were called Hindus because the area was situated along the river ‘Sindhu’. The word Hindu is more a racial connotation than a religious one. Their religion came to be called Hindu only at a later stage when the Islam was born. Each community has a distinct God. Each community believes that their god is the supreme. Many new religions have come into existence at various stages of civilization. The Buddhist, the Sikhs and the Jains claim they are not Hindus.”

“Okay...”

“Now there is another trend.”

“What is it?”

“The Indian society is divided on caste lines. Each caste thinks it is a distinct group and it thinks more in terms of protecting, preserving and developing themselves at the cost of the Indian society. Nobody seems to be interested in the development of India as a nation. The various caste and religious groups demand all benefits for their communities at the cost of our nation. They fight in the name of caste, language, religion and region. They promote the interest of their group, not of our nation.”

“How come India is still surviving as a nation when they don’t have anything in common?”

“They have common spirit, common interest and common history. They know they have no choice. They have to stand as one or perish. With many Minority leaders intending to disintegrate India, the average Indian realizes that he cannot face the faceless enemy if they stand divided. But Disunity has sapped off the energy of this nation. Many shortsighted politicians are ignorant of lurking danger from within and from across the Indian borders. God alone can save India.”

It was then mid day and they were hungry. They came out of the motel. The sun was shining directly over their head.” We shall have our lunch now. Shall we go to Pizza Hut or MacDonald’s or what?”

“I’m a vegetarian. I can’t eat anything there.”

“Why? I couldn’t live a day without meat.”

“It is my religion. I don’t believe in killing animals that are harmless. We have great pity for living things like ourselves. We believe they have right to exist as much as we have on this earth.”

“Won’t you kill wild animals?”

“Yeah, those animals haven’t learnt to coexist. We don’t keep their interest above ours. But the cows, the sheep and goats, the hens and cocks, the pigs and thousands of other harmless creatures are a part of our life and we spare them. We eat only what is grown on the soil and of course, we drink Cow’s milk”.

“Milk is not vegetarian; it comes out of a cow!”

“When I say vegetarianism, I mean that we don’t eat animals’ flesh.”

“Okay. I get it. Where shall we go for lunch?”

“I prefer a vegetarian Indian restaurant.”

After lunch they proceeded towards Cleveland. It was six to seven hours of journey. It was 9 pm when they reached Cleveland.

“Where shall we sojourn next week end?” Lily asked.

“We have another long week end by the end of the month. Let’s go to Washington”. She was silent.

“Where do you want to go?”

“Wherever you take me,” she said as she left him.

When Lily unlocked the door and went in, Manav was sitting on the couch. He stared at her and opened his mouth to say something but hesitated and turned away.

Fifteen days later, on a Friday evening, Bill and Lily were wandering around Capital Hill, White House, and the Smithsonian Museum and at last they went up the Washington Monument. When the elevator came down they went to the lawn nearby and sat on the grass. It was a long weekend, and the people from different places, belonging to different nationalities were enjoying the exotic scene around. Billy was not enjoying the trip as much as he enjoyed the Niagara Falls. He was thoughtful and was answering in monosyllables to Lily. She was little bored that he became reticent.

“Why are you sitting like a rock? Is anything bothering you?”

“Well Lily, yes, I have been thinking for a long time why shouldn’t I marry you. If you don’t have any objection, I propose to marry you.”

Lily was startled.

“Billy, we belong to two different worlds. I am from the East and you are from the West. You are white; I am not. You are a Christian and I am a Hindu. There is nothing in common between us. How can you think of marrying me?” She was impatient when she spoke to him. All those goodwill he had earned was lost. She did not like to sit with him anymore. She got up abruptly. He held her fast and tried to hug her. She released from his clutches and started running towards her car. He followed.

“Did I say anything wrong? I just proposed to you? Why are you worked up?” He asked innocently.

“Billy, you just don’t know what you are talking about. It takes a very long time to tell you the implication of your proposal. You have no patience to listen and it makes no sense to you.”

“I’m not a little kid. I can understand. Tell me what you want to say!” he implored.

“Now listen. I’m a Hindu woman. A Hindu woman is a part of Hindu society, and India culture runs through her blood. My ideas, my attitude, my outlook, my values, my moral stature and physical appearance and dress everything reflects my culture. That is so alien to you and it makes no sense to you.

“All of us are born under the sun. Everyone’s equal. All of us eat and sleep. Work and live. Beyond this, everything is stupid. It is just a matter of adjustment.”

“It is not as simple as you think. I have a few questions for you.”

“I will answer all your questions.”

“Would you give up eating meat?”

“I’ll die of hunger”

“Do you wear dhoti and walk around people during festivities.”

“I’ll look like a clown.”

“Can you pray Shiva and Vishnu, sitting on a carpet in a temple?”

“I think Church is the right place to worship”

“Can you mix with my people and chat long hours”

“It could be boring. I cannot assure you”

“Can you swear by God that you will not abandon me for the rest of life?”

“I cannot swear. What shall I do if I get bored with you?”

“We believe that marriages are made in heaven. Do you believe?”

“Bullshit. Marriages are made in churches.”

“My mother is old. I would like to bring her and keep her in my house for the rest of her life. Do you like it?”

“You’re crazy! How can we keep her in our house? We can visit her for a week or so every year if she stays in America. I don’t earn to support your mother.”

“My Indian friends and relatives may visit us and stay in our house for weeks. How do you feel?”

“You’re joking!”

“Now listen,” she went on, “we are very different. We believe in the arranged marriage. The marriage is not only the union of two bodies and soul, but also bondage between two families. Our parents will decide whom we shall marry, but our consent is necessary. Or if we decide to marry, the consent of our parents is necessary. Once you are married you are married for the rest of your life. You can divorce only for a few

reasons enumerated in law. An Indian woman is supposed to be devoted to her husband not only during his lifetime but also even after his death. If the husband dies she is not supposed to remarry. Law does not bar her from re-marriage but society will. Even if the society tolerates, she cannot forget her husband and marry someone else.

“Again, we have greater affinity towards our family. It is the responsibility of a son to look after his parents, brothers and sisters. If the parents have no son or the son does not discharge his duty and if the daughter is capable of maintaining them she will not hesitate to keep parents with her and look after them. You don’t understand this complex life and sentimental attachments. You may disapprove them or deride them but that is the way we are. Do you now understand why we cannot marry?” she was more eloquent and emotional now.

“I don’t understand a bit of what you say. Forget it. We can be just friends.”

“I appreciate your gesture,” she held his hands with the warmth of friendship.

A few days later Lily and Bill met again and drove towards the Museum. It was evening and there was nobody around. They sat under a tree and there was silence. Both of them wanted to talk but they could not. Something prevented them from having the usual conversation. At last Lily broke the silence.

“Did I hurt your feeling the other day?”

“Of course, you were so blunt and uncharitable.”

“What could I do? There was no other way that I could bring you under control. You were so emotional.”

“Even today I am as emotional as I was. I still feel that I love you and I want to marry you. “

“Don’t talk nonsense. It is not love. It is infatuation. You have so many girls of your ethnicity. There is no reason that you should fall for an Indian girl.”

“Okay, I don’t pester you. Stop it. We are friends and we remain friends okay.”

“That is great. I appreciate it”

“Day by day I am developing more interest in your religion. Tell me about your religion and belief.”

“It is very difficult to define ‘Hinduism’. It is not a religion that was preached by any single man. It has evolved over a period of 7000 years. Who started it or how it started nobody knows.”

“What is the essence of your religion?”

“Listen, originally we worshipped nature. We worshipped Sun, Moon, Wind, Rain, Earth and fire. We worshipped animals like cows and elephants that did not eat other animals. We worshipped at the same time

those animals like snakes that harmed people. In course of time, Ramayana and Mahabharata were written and these epics brought into existence two great gods, namely Ram and Krishna as it came to be believed that God takes human form and come to live on earth whenever the evil forces take upper hand and destroy them. It is further believed that What Krishna said in the Bhagadgita is the essence of the Hinduism. I advise you to read the Bhagavadgita to know more about the Hindu Religion.”

“What’s special about your religion?”

“Hinduism is not only a religion but also a way of life. It is all - comprehensive and embraces every aspect of man’s life. It is a religion that regulates every aspect of our life. It is blended with social norms and behavior.

“A Hindu believes that he is born into his family as its member. He owes many rights and obligation to his family. His first duty is to his mother who gives birth to him. Mother is the most venerable human on earth. Everyone is supposed to respect and protect her throughout life. Father comes next. Father is highly revered in the family. The most fundamental duty of man is to respect and obey the parents unto death. He has to take care of his brothers and sisters if they are not earning or in distress. He has to look after the parents if they are old and infirm or if they are not earning. Marriage will not discharge him of his obligation to family.

“A Hindu will marry a girl who is acceptable to his parents. He won’t normally marry a girl against the wishes of his parents. An India woman will not marry a man against the will of her parents. The marriages are arranged by the parents with the consent of the boy and girl to be married. There is no dating or cohabitation between the boy and the girl before marriage. They just look at each other and marry. If they want to talk, they may talk for half an hour or one hour to exchange their views and ideas. If they agree to marry, they may meet again and talk. Once they are married they are married forever. Law allows divorce for the last 50 years but they cannot be easily divorced. Marriage is not a social contract. It is deemed to be quasi-religious function and it is believed that marriages are made in heaven and are ordained by god. An Indian male will not usually agree to marry a divorced woman. Formerly a man could marry for the second time while the first wife was living, but now the government by law has imposed monogamy. The Law has banned bigamy and polyandry. Divorce is granted only on grounds of impotency or contracting venereal diseases or leprosy or desertion. In other circumstances the wife is generally not granted divorce.

A Hindu will undergo four stages of life, namely, bachelorhood, married life, detached life and sanyas. In the first stage of life, a Hindu will devote himself to education. During this period, he practices abstinence, celibacy and frugal life. When he attains adulthood, he enters the second stage of

life in which he marries and begets children. In the third stage of life he distances himself from the family life and devotes himself to god. In the fourth stage, He renounces the world and worldly pleasure. He becomes an ascetic. He dies at the feet of god. An ideal Hindu is a man who is practicing all virtues and discarding all vices. He must be nice to people and help the needy. He respects parents and elders. He will not indulge in adultery or consumption of alcohol. He will not indulge in any criminal activity. He will not act violently or cruelly. He will make his presence pleasant and comfortable to others. He prays for the good and prosperity of all people on earth irrespective of their religion. He practices religious tolerance. He fights a war only to eradicate evil and evil forces that cause violence and destruction. A Hindu remains true to freedom of his conscience. He is not forced to do anything against his will. He will practice religion as much as his conscience permits and not more. There is no force in practicing religion.”

“Your religion is really great. I have great respect for your religion. I would like to go to India and see for myself Hinduism in different forms and manifestations.”

“I welcome you to India on behalf of my country. When I go to India next time I will take you with me.” They got up and walked towards the Euclid Avenue.”

That night Lily was really fascinated by the goodness of Billy. She had all praise for him. When she came home, Manav was waiting for her. It was ten in the night.

“What a pleasant surprise. I did not expect you to be waiting for me. Why didn’t go to bed?” She asked mockingly.

“Lily where had you been late in the night?” he asked without answering her.

“I know I am late. It was a lot of fun to spend time with Billy, you know.” she laughed heartily.

“Billy? I thought you must have been wandering with a man”

“My dear, I am referring to my American friend.”

“Oh! I see. Who is it?”

“He is my classmate. He was in India when young. His father was working in American embassy at New Delhi when he was a boy.”

“Does he like you a lot?” Manav asked her anxiously

He was a little uncomfortable to ask that awkward question.

“Oh! He is pestering me to marry. He is such a nice guy!”

“Lily, don’t be silly. In America you may come across several persons who may lead you to believe that they want to marry you. Be careful.”

“Manav, I know America as much as you do. You are jealous of Billy. Billy is a nice man. I told him that we belong to two different worlds and our ethnicity is different. I told him that we are very different from him, in

ideas, ideals, outlook, attitude and aspirations. He understood what I said and appreciated my analysis.”

“Thank God. I was under the impression that you had fallen in love with that guy.”

“No chance Manav.”

“Lily, you have not answered my question. Are you interested in marrying me? I want to know.” He was more assertive that day.

“Manav, this is not the proper time to discuss our marriage. We are here together. We are having lot of fun. That is enough for me. So far as marriage is concerned it depends on several factors and I don’t want to discuss them with you, now.” He was surprised at her elusive reply. He thought she was right because he knew that it was not a proper time to discuss their marriage. Lily was not so enthusiastic to marry him. She thought that she appreciated his virtues but that was not enough to marry him. She needed a companion and she found it in Manav. She thought his ideas were too conservative and outdated to live happily with him on permanent basis.

Chapter 23

An acquaintance that rocked the friendship

The sky was gray and trees were bare. It was about to rain shortly. Manav was having breakfast in the morning alone. He remembered the sweet scents of first monsoon rain after the hot summer in India. He recollected the good days he had with Meena. He remembered how mirthless she was when he met her at Mahalakhmi temple in Bombay and how she wept when he bid goodbye for the last time. The telephone bell rang. He lifted the phone and spoke. The voice said, “Hey Manav! Waz up? It’s me, Courtney.”

“Hi, Courtney, How are you?”

“I’m fine. Um, Manav, can I come see you at your place?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Okay!” she said happily. “Can I come today?”

“Yeah, sounds good. Talk to you when you are here. Bye, Bye.”

Courtney was his classmate. He had hardly spoken to her for the last six months. He always said ‘hi’ and ‘bye’ and nothing more. She wanted to meet him personally and in his apartment? It was a little strange but he did not mind. He didn’t care. She was there in half an hour. Manav always had problem in talking to people with whom he was not very familiar. He was trying to speak and make her comfortable but he knew he was not doing enough to please her.

“How are you getting on?”

“Okay, but not real good.”

“Why do you say so?”

“I ain’t as lucky as you are. I have no scholarship .I have to work four hours a day to pay my bills. I got no time for school, and I do want to go.”

“Is there nobody to support you?”

“No one gonna support me. My dad works in a factory and he makes 300 a week. He drinks too much. He goes home drunk almost everyday. My mom earns the same amount. She has to run the house with three hundred dollars. She can’t afford my college education. One day she called me to McDonald’s and while we were eating, she explained that she couldn’t support me anymore.

“I started searching for a job. I got a job to do laundry at a cheap motel. I had two more workers with me to do laundry. One woman was like Islamic or something and the other guy was black. The black guy—James, he talked to me. He took me on long walks. We enjoyed life to the max, until one day the management fired him and he went away. I waited for his call but he never answered. I don’t know where he went or what he is doing now.

“He left me when I needed him most. I was pregnant then. It was very hard for me to face people and bear the child. My parents sympathized with me but did nothing beyond that. It was a very hard life and I was emotionally disturbed. I worked eight hours a day with a baby in my womb. Suddenly the pain started and it was midnight. My parents took me the hospital and the baby did not come out as expected. The doctors tried their best but could not save the child. I was discharged after a week from the hospital. I hate men now.

“I have been seeing you for the last six months and I feel you are very different from others. You have helped me in regaining confidence in men. You’re really great.”

“Is it? Thanks for your compliments. I am honored.”

“I came to see you and spend sometime with you. Do you mind if I stay longer?”

“No, not at all, it is my pleasure. Stay on as long as you like.”

“Are you married?” she asked abruptly.

“No. I am a bachelor.”

“Do you have a girl friend?”

“No we generally do not have girl friends. Even if we have one, we don’t call them girl friend.”

“Really, are you dating someone?”

“No. I am not dating anyone. We don’t have dating in our culture.

“You don’t have dating in your culture! How do you find a girl?”

“In India we marry on the advice of the parents. Normally we don’t find a bride for ourselves. In a few cases, man and woman find a suitable match

in each other but they generally refer the matter to the parents or the elders. If they approve the match, they will make arrangement for marriage. Only one in thousand marry against the wishes of the parents and without their consent.”

“You are going to marry a total stranger then!”

“Yes. The lady I marry may be a total stranger to me. I may just see her for an hour or two or in some cases; I may meet her twice or thrice if both of us live in the same town. In cases where both of us know each other very well, they may have wandered together and exchanged lot of ideas. But still they will not have discovered each other.”

“Y’all is weird, man. What will you do if your parents don’t agree?”

“We will not marry. We make sacrifices for the happiness of the parents. Our happiness lies in their happiness.”

“India is a strange country. I’d like to visit India once.”

“Of course I will extend invitation to visit India when I go to India next time. You may come with me.”

“That’s sweet! Thanks. I guess I will come to India once.”

“You can stay in India if you want to. But you may not like it”

“Is it real expensive?”

“No. It is ten times cheaper.”

“How is it cheaper?”

“India is one third of America in size but the population is three times that of America. Therefore Americans have lands ten times more than the people of India. If the urban land in India is 1200sq.ft for each person. It is 10,000 sq ft here in America. If a person needs 3000 dollars to meet both ends in America, an Indian needs 300 dollars a month to meet bare minimum. So India is ten times cheaper and quality of life is ten times low. You may have to forego many comforts”

“Do y’all have air-conditioners and cars and stuff there?”

“In India except in few places we don’t have air conditioners. Air conditioners are necessary only for three months in a year. Every home will have ceiling fans and that should be sufficient to beat the summer heat. But we don’t have the luxury of the air conditioners in our houses.”

“What do you do in winter?”

“In winter we don’t need heater in many parts of India. The Indian houses will not have heating elements. Warm clothing should be sufficient for winter.”

“Does everybody have car in India?”

“No, only very rich people own cars. But everybody has scooter and motorcycle for going round the city. Cars are a luxury in India. We don’t feel its absence because the motor bikes serve the purpose.”

“I love motorbike.”

“How much money do I require to make descent living in India in American money?”

“You need only 200,000 dollars to live fairly good life without earning all your life”

“If I earn 200,000 here and bring it there, I need not earn further there to make my living, Right?”

“You need not take up employment. On the other hand you may give some employment to others.”

“Then it is a great idea to live in India after 10 years of earning in America.”

“You are right”

“In that case I start saving from tomorrow. I wanna go to India.”

“It is a great idea!” he said. After talking for another fifteen minutes, she took leave of him.

Another month passed by and one day Courtney called Manav on phone and asked permission to meet him. He invited her to his apartment and she was there in an hour.

“You look vapid and pale. What is the matter?” He asked her gently

“I found my boyfriend.” She was not happy to announce.

“Then you should be very happy. Why are you so sad?”

“My man was with another woman. He was holding her hands and was making love to her.”

“Did he see you?”

“Yeah, he did. He pretended that he did not see. I was totally surprised to see him. I didn’t talk to him”

“You did right. It is no use confronting people. He is gone forever. Forget him.”

“You’re right. I must forget him and I will.” She held his hand firmly shaking it.

She was about to take leave of him when suddenly the door clicked and Lily walked in. She was confused for a while when she saw Courtney in the room.

“Hello, Lily, come on in. This is Courtney. Meet Ms. Lily”

“Hello.” she said to Courtney rather dryly but she did not sit down.

“Won’t you sit down?” Manav asked, bewildered

“I am in a hurry I must go now” she said and stormed out of room closing the door behind. When she was gone Courtney asked astonishingly

“Who is she?”

“She is a friend of mine. She is from India”

“So you lied to me the other day that you got no girlfriend.”

“Please try to understand. In India we call them friends, not girlfriend or boyfriend. The friendship in India is not sex related. We are just friends.”

“I just don’t believe you anymore. All men are the same.” she said it in monotone and moved out.

Next morning, Manav spoke to Lily to convince her that nothing was amiss. He knew that Lily was under the mistaken notion that he had found a new girlfriend.

“Yesterday you came in and went away abruptly. It pained me a lot. You should have acted more composedly and displayed cool temper.”

“Do you want me to say sorry?”

“No, certainly not, I apologize to you if I have hurt your feelings”

“I don’t need any apology. I care a dime for anybody’s apology. I judge people not by their words, but by their action.”

“Lily, you have mistaken me. I want to explain. When shall we meet?”

“I have no time to meet you. I ‘m very busy studying for my examination.”

“Lily, you have mistaken. I have not done anything wrong. Give me a chance to explain”

“I don’t need your explanation. I want peace of mind. Will you please leave me alone? She slammed the door against him.

These women are very jealous. “Jealousy thy name is woman” he said to himself and went down.

For the next two months, neither did he talk to her nor did she speak to him. They did not dine together.

There was a festival of India in Cleveland. Both were present at the auditorium where the celebration was going on. They went and sat several rows apart and avoided meeting each other. By chance they came face to face. It was so unexpected that they could not help saying ‘Hello’ to each other.

“Hello, Manav? How are you doing?” She uttered rather reluctantly.

“I am fine. How are you doing?” he enquired dryly.

“Good. It is long time since we spoke.”

“That is true. How are you spending your vacation?”

“I read novels and do window shopping. How about you? Having great fun with your friend?” she taunted him.

“I have no friends. She is not my friend. She is just an acquaintance. I have not met her since you saw her last.”

“You want me to believe it?”

“Believe it or not, it is true.”

“What was she doing there holding your hand that day?”

“She was bidding good bye.”

“You seem to enjoy such farewells, uh?”

Manav could not take any more taunting from her. He started moving into the auditorium from the foyer without bidding her farewell. They encountered each other several times during the course of the day but they avoided talking to each other.

Six months lapsed. He pursued his studies well. One day she came in. "Hey! What is up?"

These days I have been remembering you too often. I thought I should talk to you. How are you?"

"I am doing well. I am having a wonderful time."

"...With that woman?"

"Which woman do you mean? Who? Courtney? You are incorrigible. I told you that Courtney is just an acquaintance"

"Okay, okay, I believe you. Excuse me for hurting your feelings. I assure you that I don't do it again."

"Your promise will do a lot of good to our friendship."

"Now Listen. I have to go to New York as a relative of mine has arranged a grand festival, and has invited me. I want to take vacation and go around east coast. I have been bored sitting in Cleveland for over a year."

"It is a good idea. Wish you happy journey."

"You have to do more than wishing me."

"Like what."

"You have to accompany me. I am bored staying alone." Manav was surprised. He did not expect that she would be mollified so soon. He hesitated for a moment.

"Can't you make a trip without me?" he asked.

"I can't think of a trip without you. You should come with me. You know I don't have anybody to depend upon except you."

"Okay. What is your itinerary?"

"We will leave Cleveland day after to-morrow. We have to go to New York straight. We will attend the festival at Manhattan. Next day we will visit world Trade Center. We will go to the top of the building and behold the panoramic view of New York. Then we take ferry to the Statue of Liberty. We spend the whole evening walking on the island. Next day we will visit the United Nations building. I have plans to go to Philadelphia and Niagara Falls. From there, we go to the Thousand Islands, Nashua White Mountains, and Boston and from there we move to Providence city and Cape Cod. How do you like it?"

"It is going to be a very fascinating trip I know and such a trip I don't mind undertaking even with my sworn enemy."

"I am not your enemy. I am your friend", She was very sad that he taunted her.

"I don't mean to hurt your feelings. I was so exuberant. Forgive me if you can."

"I will never forgive you if you taunt me again. Okay get ready at 6 in the morning, day after tomorrow. I shall bring my new car. You will drive. Okay/"

“Done” He said mechanically.

The day of departure came and things went well as planned. They left Cleveland and traveled east. Two hours later they were at Pittsburgh Temple. They went to sanctum sanctorum of Lord Venkateshwara and had his darshan. The pontiff asked in whose name the worshipping has to be performed. He mentioned the name of Lily and Lily mentioned his name.” Why did you worship in my name?” he asked.

“I have not forgotten that you had told me that Aug 16th is your birthday.”

“Great. You remember my birthday. I want to hug you for that.”

“It is temple and you cannot do that.” She reminded him.

“I will find a suitable place shortly.”

“I wouldn’t let you do that.” She said, jokingly.

They were at the food counter and bought laddus and puli bath. They sat on a bench eating the ‘Prasad’. They sat there for two hours and talked of their experiences in the last six months. It was noon and the sun was getting severe. They decided to start the second leg of their tour. They drove as fast as they could, as they were already late. They passed through the mountains of Pennsylvania and New Jersey but they made only brief stops in two rest areas.

They crossed over the Brooklyn Bridge. It was nine in the evening and it was already dark, but the streetlights adorned the streets. They passed through the streets of New York until they reached Manhattan. They were very tired and badly needed rest.

The following day, they attended the festival and ate sumptuous meal with gusto before going to Central Park and from there to the Ferry. They enjoyed ferrying and it was a great excitement to see the Statue of Liberty approaching. Once they were on the Island, they went round hand in hand, talking in lighter vein. They settled down on grass when they were hungry and tired and ate yogurt, rice and laddus and some other items they still had in their bag. Next morning they went round the city and visited Empire State building and the UN building. They were warned that the city was not safe but they did not take the warning seriously. They went to parking lot to pick up their car. It was 12 noon and they could see many people walking 200 yards away. Suddenly a man aged about twenty came from nowhere and brandished a small revolver at them. Manav was shivering in his shoes and fumbling for words. He gathered courage and took out a ten-dollar bill and gave it to the man. He snatched the bill and started running amidst parked cars. Lily was standing there speechless. Manav slowly said, “It is over. Gather courage.” Lily wanted to talk but her lips were dry. They opened the car doors and sank into it.

Next evening they were at Niagara. They went to ferrying down the river to the foot of the Niagara Falls in the Maid of the mist. They were enjoying every moment of the sail. When cruising was over they came to

the Cave of the Winds. They went down the lift and enjoyed the sight. It was almost dark when they sat in the park opposite. Suddenly, Manav moved swiftly close to Lily and embraced her tightly.

“Lily, I cannot live without you. We must marry and now.” he said with her head buried in his bosom.” Lily recoiled from him and withdrew to a distance and said slowly,

“Manav, it is a romantic place and it is a wonderful evening. The breeze is pleasant and the colorful Lights around are really enthralling, but we are not ready for marriage.”

“I am ready for marriage.”

“You better marry someone well settled here and live happily. But I cannot marry you. I advise you that you should marry someone else.”

“I don’t need your advice or permission to do that. I will marry anybody I want. I am asking you if you will marry me,” he withdrew to a distance in anger and frustration.

“I have carefully thought over the matter. In my opinion we are not made for each other. We have great differences in ideas, ideals, outlook and taste. Even if we marry it wouldn’t be romantic.” Lily said placidly.

“Do you think so, really? Don’t tell me that it is your final decision. Think over deeply. Remember the days we spent together. If you still feel that you should not marry me, I respect your feeling. We will sit coolly and discuss it some other time, okay?” Lily said nothing. She got up and moved in the direction of the parking lot. Manav meekly followed her. Manav drove the car. Neither of them was inclined to speak for the rest of the night.

Manav and Lily continued their vacation. They went to ‘Thousand Islands’. They were impressed by the waterfront. They ferried around beautiful small islands. They stayed in a hotel for a day and left for Nashua, a small town in New Hampshire, stayed there with a friend and went to White Mountains, situated about 100 miles away. They saw White Hat Mountain on the way. The White Mountains had panoramic scenes all around. They went up the mountain in the Ropeway car and wandered on the mountains. They came back before it was dark and made their way home. Next day they went to Boston downtown, went round Boston Tea Party, walked on the pavements of Boston and then drove to the Harvard University campus before calling it a day. Next morning they went to Cape Cod. The beautiful beach and big ferries attracted them. They went deep into the sea some forty miles from the shore, and watched the whales dancing in the deep seas. It was a great sight. On the ferry they saw an Indian. He came and introduced himself.

“I am Hari. I hail originally from Bangalore.”

Lily was delighted to see a man so cute and handsome from India. She extended her hands. He was no less enthusiastic to see her. He shook her

hands warmly and held it a little longer than is necessary and Lily did not withdraw her hand either. Manav observed Hari from head to toe as he went on talking to Lily totally neglecting Manav. He was tall and handsome. He had very fair complexion and an attractive smile on his face. He had a physique, which would captivate any woman, and his mental abilities were no inferior. Lily was so much attracted by that man that she was absorbed in long conversation with him and totally neglected Manav. Manav stood on ferry alone watching the Whale while Hari engaged Lily in a very interesting conversation. The whale watching was over but mesmerized Lily would not abandon Hari. She called him wherever they went from window-shopping to restaurants.

“How did you manage to stay in America after your studies?” She asked him. They were eating in a small restaurant

“That is a story to tell,” he said taking a sip of wine. “I came to Cleveland for studying in the CSU. I had to return home after my studies but I wanted to stay on. One day, I sought the advice of a friend of mine. He thought for a while and came up with a brilliant idea.

“You marry a woman of Indian origin who has US citizenship. You will definitely get US citizenship.”

“You are really brilliant; I told him and asked for his help in finding a girl for me.

“Within three weeks he came up with a marriage proposal. The girl was working as a registered nurse. She was good-looking; fair complexioned and earning well but I agreed to marry her because that would give me a chance to stay in America. I was not enamored by her looks or money. I wanted to be a free bird and live a glamorous life. Her father had made lot of money. They hired a separate apartment for me, supplied furniture and looked after me as their son. Sometimes I felt very bad to accept favors from them because I did not really deserve them. I knew within myself that I was deceiving them. They were so innocent that they never doubted my intentions. They looked after me until I got a job and settled down. I also got permanent resident card.”

“How many children do you have now?” She asked inquisitively.

“I have one child-a boy. He lives in South woodland with his grand mother.”

“Doesn't he live with you?”

“I divorced my wife. I married her for a purpose and that purpose was served. I did not want to go on with her for long. I wanted to get out of her life from day one. When I got green card I decided to move away from her. It was not so easy because she loved me too much and she was not prepared to lose me under any circumstance. I tried many means to displease her but she would not let me go away from her. One morning I

took my car and went away from her life leaving a note by her bedside. I wrote to her:

‘Dear, I tried to adjust and live with you but I could not. It is too much to keep a free bird like me in your little cage. I am going away from you forever. Don’t make any attempt to search for me. You may divorce me, and marry again and start a new life all over again.’ I went away to New York leaving her forever. He stopped talking for a while and he was looking at the sea. He was not watching the whales. He seemed to recollect something. Again he continued, “Two months ago I saw her in a mall. She had a child with her. He was three years old and was calling her Mummy. She was calling him Nikhil. I am pretty sure that it must be my son.” He became silent for a while. He was recollecting his past life perhaps.

“Did you talk to her when you met her?”

“No. I did not want to rake her memories up. I was out of her life and she was out of my life. There was no point in talking with her anymore. So I walked away from her.”

Manav was not impressed, and he was growing impatient. He called out. “Lily, we have a long travel ahead. We have to leave this place immediately.”

“Just a moment,” she said and gave Hari her address and phone number and took from him his address and phone number. They warmly shook hands before departing. Manav was really angry now. He had only one way to control his anger—to remain silent. He became silent. Lily made several attempts to draw him to conversation but he would not oblige.

“Poor man, He has suffered too much in life.” She said looking at Manav.

“You are very strange, Lily. You are very strange. He has not suffered in life. He has made people suffer for achieving his goal.”

“Don’t be discourteous to him Manav. How do you expect him to stay with a lousy creature? He is so handsome and accomplished!”

“He did not say that she was a lousy creature. He should not have married if he thought that she was lousy. He should not have played with her life.”

He controlled his anger.

“He didn’t want to. Look at the situation he was in. Anybody in his position would have done the same.”

“You are right. Anybody in his situation would have married her but nobody would have deserted her after his or her purpose was served. Not me anyway.”

“You are too soft. Not everyone’s like you, Manav. They are not idealists. They do what is in their interest. His wife should not feel bad. She too should marry again and live her life.”

Manav loathed her. He was disgusted with her attitude and utterances. He wished he had run away from her. He drove silently until they reached home.

Chapter 24

Days of uncertainty and frustration

Manav submitted his thesis and was waiting for his doctorate. Lily wrote her examination for Master's degree and awaited result. They still lived together though they were very cold to each other. One morning, Manav was sipping coffee. Lily brought her cup of coffee and sat down on the chair opposite.

"Lily, I have been trying for a job for the last three months but I couldn't get one. I am tired of this life. I really feel like going back to India."

"You want to get back to India? What is so interesting for you in India, Manav?"

"It is my place. I feel more comfortable there. I came here to pursue my studies. I did it. I must get back because it is not possible to settle down in America under the present circumstances."

"What are you talking Manav? Our people crave to come to the States and strangely enough you are talking of going back to India. I cannot imagine " "Yes Lily I am too tired. I need lot of rest. I need lot of change too I left India long ago."

"You can go to India and come back. You can stay there for a few months. You should be all right then."

"Perhaps, yes. But I am not sure if I can build my career here. I wish both of us will go back to India."

"Manav, from my childhood I had a great desire to study and settle down in America. The time has come that I should settle down here, in America. I don't give up this opportunity. Not for anybody's sake, and certainly not for your sake. I have no plan to return to India. I stay here come what may."

"Lily, I know that you don't care for me. I know you are capable of building your career in America and live without me. I am just expressing my wish. That is all."

"Manav, I advise you to give up the idea of going back and think of finding a job here. I don't like to discuss this matter anymore. Okay." She went away to kitchen.

Summer came. Manav completed his Doctorate and she completed Master's degree in Business administration. They moved to Iselin in New Jersey and started applying for employment. One morning the phone rang. He didn't know how it would change his life. "Hello?" Manav spoke into the phone.

"Hello, may I speak with Mr. Rao?" It was a pleasant voice, fatherly and kind.

“Speaking,” Manav said with bated breath.

“Mr. Rao, this is Thomas Crowe. We have received your application and we would like to consider you for a job at our office in the World Trade Center. Is next Tuesday fine for you- Tuesday, at eight o’clock, ninetieth floor?”

“It sounds good,” said he happily.

“Good! I’ll see you there,”

He was very happy, and hoped that he would get that job. Very soon he would be earning handsome salary. –\$180,000 per year! He thought that soon Lily also would get a job and she too would earn a handsome salary. ‘I only wish that Lily would change her attitude towards him and start loving him as before. Happy days are here again,’ he told himself. He suddenly felt that he should forget the misdemeanors of Lily and forgive her and seek her consent for their marriage. He wanted to convey his intention to her at once. He did not sleep for a long time that night.

Next morning Manav proposed to Lily that they should have a picnic to the Statue of Liberty. Lily agreed readily and she was ready by ten O’clock in the morning. They traveled to New York by train. They visited Central Park, Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty. They were resting on the lawn at the statue of Liberty Island when Manav said abruptly, “Happy days are here again.”

“How do you know,” She demanded to know.

“Next Monday I start earning. By next year, I will have as much as \$50,000 in savings.”

“That is great!” Lily exclaimed and asked him,

“What do you do with that lot of money?”

“We will buy a house in New Jersey and pay mortgage’

“That is a great idea.”

“In two years we will have house and we will have a child. We will have good job and good bank balance too.”

“Do you think so? But I never told you that I will marry you.” she reminded him amusedly.

“I hope so.” He said emphatically and continued,” But I have question for you. Be honest and forthright in your answer”

“Go on. Don’t hesitate. I will answer all your questions”

“Good. Are you really interested in marrying me?”

She did not answer immediately. She was pre-occupied with some thoughts. She raised her head slowly and asked slyly,

“Why are you asking this question now?”

“I want to ensure myself that you still love me as much as you did once.”

She wanted to say ‘no’, but she controlled herself and said politely,

“Manav, it is late in the night now. We shall discuss this matter tomorrow.”

“Of course, I am not in a hurry. I know your answer is yes. But still....” He stopped because Lily was gone. He was surprised at her odd behavior. He expected her to hug him and say ‘I love you Manav and I will marry you.’ He was annoyed at her indecision and evasive answer but he still hoped that she would agree to marry him. He could not sleep that night. He stayed awake for long hours wondering at her lukewarm response to his earnest proposal.

The week went by rather quickly. “Lily I have an interview today at World Trade Center. It will be over by ten in the morning. I expect you to meet me in the subway station at noon,” he spoke in a loud voice so that she could hear him.

“Okay, I’ll see you at noon,” she said and bid him goodbye from where she was.

Manav was sitting in the subway train. It was so overcrowded with people getting ready to go to work that a mother, who had gotten in with her baby, couldn’t sit because there were no vacant seats, and couldn’t stand for fear of dropping her baby. Kindly, Manav stood up and let her sit down, before the subway began to move. His stop was next. Manav was full of mirth in great anticipation. He was happy, so happy he felt like singing for the joy of being alive. He knew he would get the job, he would. In his bliss, he didn’t see the doors open and a number of people surged in. He had to get out or he’d be late to the interview! He pushed his way through, despite cries of “Watch it!” and “Hey! Who the hell do you think you are?” but push he did.

Manav reached the world trade center by 7.45 a.m. He went up to 90th floor and entered the company office where he has to be interviewed. He sat on a chair and started reading a magazine in anticipation of his being called in. “Come on in,” said the pleasant voice of an elderly man. He introduced himself as Thomas Crowe. “Call me Tom,” he said amiably.

Manav and his employer began to chat. The conversation was nearing its end and Manav was about to get the job. As they were shaking hands, a plane appeared, flying unusually low. Manav thought that it was out of gas and looking for a place to land. But instead, it flew in at full speed and hit the first World Trade Center. The collision of the plane and the building was so hard that when the plane hit, the top floors gave in and fell. It happened so fast that no one had time to think. He could hear the hue and cry of the people afar. “My God!” shouted Manav.

“Jesus Christ! A plane hit the first tower!” His to-be employer screamed.

People began to scream, and hue and cry filled the air. People shouted in fear and started running down the stairs. A woman shrieked, “Oh God! My husband works in the 100th floor of the first tower! Oh God!” and screamed with tears running down her face.

“What’s going on?” A man shouted over the hullabaloo.

“Didn’t you hear? A plane crashed into the first tower!” Some one told him amidst commotion.

Manav was bewildered. In a moment he realized something had gone wrong and started running with the people. The people around jostled with each other and there was near stampede in the flight of stairs. Hundreds of people were running with him.

He reached the 30th floor where was nothing else happening. The people there said the building was cleared and it was safe to return. Tom told him that he was going to call his wife so she wouldn’t worry. He ran up the stairs and into lair of danger. Manav kept going down. When he reached the entrance he looked up and another plane rammed into the tower in where Tom was calling his wife. “Oh, my God! Tom!” He shouted, tears streaming down his face. He ran towards the water to leave by ferry as an avalanche of ash and debris rained down. Concrete chunks tumbled down and the place was caked with dust. He couldn’t see, he couldn’t breathe. Cement blocks rained everywhere. There was a haze of gray. The air was ash, so thick it was tangible. He was lucky not to be pinned down by a stray block. A fire fighter pushed Manav against the wall of a brick building. The man protected Manav with his own body. Manav began to hyperventilate. “Stay here. Breathe. Be calm. Good, good,” said a deep soothing voice.

Manav’s breath was cut in jerky sobs. He struggled for air. “Shhhh, don’t breathe fast. Take it easy. That’s good.”

Manav looked at the windows on the building he was pinned against. He could see reflections from the towers; tiny figures jumping from high floors. People jumped from the smoking towers, to their deaths! Screams of men and women could be heard.

The debris had created a cloud of dust and ash so thick that the sun was powerless to permeate for many minutes. When the dust cleared enough to see, the firefighter went inside the inferno that was once the second Tower. It was burning. In the reflection of windows in lesser buildings, he could see the tower crumbling like a house of cards. Then Manav ran, ran as if hell were a step away. He finally reached the water. As he stood by the waterside he could see the two world-renowned gigantic towers exploding. He was now at a safe distance and watched with agony and distress, the symbols of Western Civilization burn to ashes. The building collapsed on itself, and brought its twin with it to eternity. Hapless people were trapped under, a tomb for all. For all he knew, the man whom he owed his life to lay under the wreckage, trapped or dead.

Tears streamed down his face. An icy claw gripped his heart, a heartless claw, tighter and tighter, enclosing his entire chest in one frozen claw. He passed out and escaped death by only a few seconds. It was the ghastliest scene he had ever seen. He shook with fear and righteous anger at the

person who would take lives by doing such a disgrace to their bodies, burning them. Who? Who is evil enough to do... that? It was no accident—one maybe but two? Never! Such mass murder was never seen. The faraway screams of anguish pierced his soul.

Aman was talking to the terrorist leader on a public phone a few minutes before from a place near Brooklyn. He was in high spirits and triumphant.

“To-day is doomsday, Chief”, Aman informed the chief,

“Watch TV now. You will be wonderstruck.”

“I would love to see their precious land mark now, its top blown off. The enemies of Islam are our enemies. The friends of kefir are our enemies. Therefore, Americans are our enemies. We teach Americans a lesson that they would never forget.”

“Now you see the American landmark going down” said Aman as he watched the tiny plane over the sky. A plane hit one of the two towers and the tower started collapsing

“Chief did you see the land mark—the American glory going down. It is so wonderful isn’t it Chief? It is a thrill to watch! Do you hear me?”

“Aman, it is just a beginning. You work for God and watch the result. I expect you to be here within a week. Okay?”

“Khuda Hafiz!” Aman kept the phone down and watched the fall of tower. His normally solemn face was gone and in its place was the face of a sadist, watching its prey suffer and with a quiet, sadistic—almost pleasurable—expression. Aman’s somber mannerism had almost vanished and that was the first time that he was seen in such an animated ecstasy.

“What a towering inferno it is!” He said aloud and vanished from the spot in a moment.

Manav was very anxious to get home and ring up to his parents that he was safe. He somehow got home that day. It was a rebirth for him; he ought to have been burned and charred in the conflagration, or perhaps crushed under the debris. One thing was for certain: he had escaped sudden death. He suddenly began to appreciate the little things in life. When he got home, he collapsed on the couch, playing the scenes like a broken movie reel. Lily was waiting for him two miles away in a restaurant at 9 in the morning. She witnessed the hue and cry on the road and came out when the first plane hit the Tower. She was one of those thousands who stood and watched anxiously and helplessly the great towers going down. She knew he was in the tower. Lily became hysterical for a while but gathered courage very fast and controlled her emotions hopefully. She stood there for several hours. There was nothing anyone could do about it. She hoped that he would have escaped death miraculously and darted towards home. The traffic was jammed and there was utter confusion all the way. It took her three hours to reach Iselin.

She prayed god several times on the way to her house. When she reached the doors, she inserted and turned on the keys but the doors would not open. It was bolted from inside. Suddenly it struck her that he was in. She rang the doorbell continuously until he opened the door. She hugged him and tears of joy dilated her eyes in ecstasy.

“I am so happy that you have returned home safely Manav. I didn’t want to lose you. I was so worried. I just can’t explain to you.”

“Lily I saw the terrorist who brought down the towers.”

“Are you kidding? Are you in sound mind? The attackers were in plane and they died. They were suicide bombers.”

“You are right. But it is true I saw Aman. Aman was creating numerous problems for India. He was heading the terrorist organization in India, I guess.”

“How could he reach America?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what role he played in bombing Towers. I saw here near the towers. He was not there by chance. He had come to watch that towering inferno.”

“How did you know him?”

“He was my classmate in my high school days.”

“That tall handsome guy, you mean?”

“How did you know him?”

“He tried to rape me once and I luckily escaped but I heard that he and his friends raped and killed my friend, Asha.”

“It could be the same person but you wouldn’t know until you see him personally.” He said as he was not in a mood to discuss the matter further.

A few days later, when both of them had recovered from shock, he started searching for a job. The World Trade Center crash had changed the entire situation. America was preparing for a war against Taliban, Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden. The people were cautioned that there could be more attacks on New York and Washington D.C. The people became more confused. Till then they thought that they were living in an invulnerable land for any kind of attack. The sudden attack on the Twin Towers unnerved them. They started suspecting Asian-Minorities extremists. They could not distinguish between a friend and foe. For an average American all people from Iraq to Bangladesh looked alike. The people from Asia were target of racial assault. The Indians thought in the beginning that that the world had come to know of betrayal of Pakistan and Afghanistan and the extremists would suffer for their jihad. Gradually Indians realized that it was very hard to get job in America. There was job cut everywhere. Many Indians lost their job and returned home. Overnight the prospect of getting good job in America appeared very dim for Manav.

Reports of assault on Indians started pouring in; somebody pressed the burning cigarette butts into the wrist of a woman standing at the door of a

running train and the woman fell off the running train and died; a woman who was driving her car was shot at the stop signal; a Sikh was brutally murdered by three men in his convenience stores; the New York Police pulled up a Keralite who went to a music concert on suspicion of his being a terrorist. The unsavory incidents were numerous and depressing.

Raj's story on a plane flying from Atlanta to Philadelphia was bizarre. A news agency reported that he was a physician in the army who was without proper reason, detained for three hours by a Marshall. "A cine-actor was denied admission to enter America," he read in the Internet news. The cine-star was an India from India, but his name when written in English, could be misconstrued as of a Minorities terrorist. To cap it all, he had grown beard possibly for a roll in a film. He also read in a newspaper that a Kerala couple that spoke English with a peculiar accent was suspected wrongly as terrorists when they asked for tickets for a music concert over the phone, and the police under the mistaken notion, treated them like criminals and harassed when they made their appearance next day for the music concert. Such instances were numerous and sickening.

Such stories were coming in the newspapers day after day, and Manav wanted to get out of America. He blamed Islamic militants for the Malaise that Indians were going through in America.

Chapter 25

Yakub betrays

A spokesman of the American Government appeared on the TV. He was looking angry. He told the nation that Osama bin Laden is the mastermind behind the attack on America and Taliban is supporting and sheltering him. He said the terrorists who brought down the towers were the faceless enemies and declared war against terrorism. American government asked its people to be vigilant and apprehend anyone moving in a suspicious manner. The American people suddenly became wary of foreigners. They started raising alarm at the slightest unusual behavior of the foreigners. The whole nation stood up as one behind the Government. The government representatives called on world leaders and sought their cooperation against the war of terror. The world leaders minced no words in supporting the President in his war against terror. He prepared for a war against Afghanistan and gave ultimatum to Taliban to hand over the terrorist mastermind Osama to America. The Taliban challenged America to provide evidence that Osama was the mastermind behind the attack and refused to hand over Osama and glorified him as the Hero even as the Minorities world rejoiced at the heroism of Osama.

India, having been a victim of terrorism for the last 12 years and having lost 36,000 men and women in the terror unleashed by Pakistan readily supported the Americans in their war against terror. They thought that America has come to know the true color of Pakistan and it will punish Pakistan. The situation appeared favorable for India to join war against terror and help America to fight terrorism unleashed by Pakistan. The frantic efforts were made by Indian leaders to get near to American leadership and impress upon them the need to finish terrorism emanating from Pakistan. America's declaration that they would fight war against terrorism all over the world encouraged India to come close to America and join hands with them.

"We know that Osama is the culprit. We want Osama... alive. Can you do that for us" A voice from America was asking Yakub, the Pakistan spokesman.

"I don't know if Osama is the mastermind. There is no proof to accuse him," replied Yakub sternly.

"I ask you, once more. Can you help us in our war against terrorism or not!"

"I don't know if I can help you. You know we are a Minorities nation. Our People regard Osama as hero and Savior. I will become unpopular. I can't face people if I do that. The people will revolt against our government."

"I don't care. I want 'yes or 'no' from you."

"Please try to understand. We are the most liberal minded persons in Pakistan. If our government goes out of power, the succeeding government will consist of Jihads who would do more harm. They don't hesitate to use Nuclear weapons."

The American voice became silent for a while, and came on the air again, all things considered,

"Tell me in clear terms that you can't help me. If you can't, India can. I will take help from India. I am not alone in this war." The voice shouted in anger.

"Did you say that India would help you?"

"Yes. I did say so."

"Then we can help you in your war, but on one condition."

"What is your condition?"

"You should not invite India for help. We will give you our full support."

"Thank you."

"But I have to ask you something"

"Go ahead"

"What will Pakistan get in return?"

"What do you mean?"

“Pakistan’s economy is very bad. If we join war on terror we will be worst hit. We need massive financial aid. Surely you do not expect us to fight your war for free.”

“I can assure you, you will be handsomely rewarded. We pour millions of dollar aid into your coffer.”

“Done, Pakistan is behind you, one hundred percent.” He paused. “Oh, by the way, we need arms and equipments too to fight your enemy.”

“Done, that is negotiable.”

“Good. Then we have a deal?”

“That is certain. Good day to you.”

Yakub put the phone down with a cruel, calculating smile on his face.

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The telephone was ringing. The Afghan leader lifted the phone with impatience.

“Hello, it is Dada here. Who is speaking?”

“It is Yakub speaking. The situation is serious. I just now received a call from the American representative. It is important”

“I was expecting that you would receive that call. What did you tell him?”

“I told him that Osama is regarded as hero, and he could not have masterminded assault on twin towers.”

“Good. You are great”

“But he was very angry, and when I told him that you are not the mastermind, he became furious and asked me if I was ready to help him in the war against Osama”

“What did you say? I am sure you have refused outright.”

“Sorry, I could not refuse. Had I refused, Pakistan would have become a nuclear wasteland.”

“Yakub, I believed that you would support us. You supported us for twelve years and now you are running away from us when we need your help all the more!” The terrorist leader was scared, but expertly kept the fear from his voice.

“I am very sorry, chief. Try to understand the situation. You should not have antagonized America. Now they are after you. It is not good for us.” Yakub had no emotion, but only some persuasiveness in his voice and made his words honeyed.

“You are a Muslim! America is our enemy! Why should you help them? Say ‘no’ to them!” The Chief didn’t disguise the terror in his voice.

“They say they’ll seek Indian’s help if we refuse.”

“What does it matter to us, we are not afraid of India! You are not afraid of India! You have nuclear weapons and they dare not attack Pakistan!” The Chief was now screaming.

“Chief, try to understand. We have tricked Americans to our fold all these years by our diplomatic dexterity. Can Pakistan face India without the support of America? It is because of America that we are what we are to day. During the Cold War we supported them vocally and they poured money and weapons into Pakistan. Did we fight communism? No. We told them that we will use them against communism but we used them against India. We fought three wars against India with the help of American weapons.”

“So you want to take their side now and ditch your friend.”

“A Muslim will never betray another Muslim. You know that and I know that but Americans don’t know that. They think money will fetch everything in life. They don’t know that Minorities brotherhood is universal. They don’t know that they can’t buy Minorities loyalty by pouring money to our bags.”

“What do you want to do then? Double-cross them? You fool, they will kill you!”

“I have no alternative but to double-cross them. They are forcing me to double -cross them. Pakistan needs money for its survival. Our economy is very bad. India should never be allowed to get importance in the American agenda of war against global terror. At the same time the Muslim unity should not become tainted with betrayal. So I have decided to help Americans and keep India out of this. But I will be the first to help you to escape from Americans. You are always in the heart of Pakistanis and every Pakistani will protect you in the name of our religion. You have our full support, chief, count on me.”

“I will watch and wait. If you betray us you know the consequence.”

“Betray you! That day will never come. Watch and see how I will play my political game against America.”

“I believe you,” said the terrorist leader grudgingly. The connection was cut off and the terrorist leader mused, while many miles away, Pakistan spokesman smiled villainously.

The telephone rang and Pakistan spokesman lifted the phone. “Is it Yakub?” The American voice asked.

“Yes it is me. What is the matter?”

“We have decided to dismantle the terrorist cells in Afghanistan. We gave ultimatum to Taliban to hand over the Al Qaeda members but got a negative reply. We are going to wage war against Taliban in Afghanistan. Can you send Pakistan army to Afghanistan to fight out Taliban?”

“Both Afghanistan and Pakistan are Muslim countries. The people of both countries have common religion and similar sentiments. We have been helping them all these days and now suddenly we cannot send our army there.”

“Until September 11th the situation was different. Now the situation demands immediate action against Al Qaeda and Taliban.”

“Pakistan people don’t like America using force in Afghanistan. How can you expect us to send Pakistan army to Afghanistan?”

“Okay, I understand your concern. Can we station our army in your country?”

“It is not safe to send your army to Pakistan. There are many Muslim organizations favorable to Osama and Taliban. I can’t guarantee their safety.”

“Tell me if you are ready to keep our army in Pakistan—yes or no.”

“No. It is not in American interest. It is also not in Pak interest.”

“Can you keep your army in Pakistan- Afghan borders and stop Taliban and Al Qaeda escape to Pak.?”

“Pakistani government will never allow them to come to Pakistan.”

“Thanks for your assurance. We believe you.”

“But the vast tribal areas bordering Afghanistan are not under our control. There are many local Lords who are friendly to Taliban.

“I understand your concern. It is a very difficult situation for you. Anyway put army on alert in the border with Afghanistan.”

“How much do we get in return?”

“As much money as you want. We will fill your coffers if you help us. Be assured.”

Pakistan spokesman spoke to the terrorist leader over the phone thirty minutes later.

“Chief, I have refused to let American army stationing in Pakistan. I have refused to send forces to Afghanistan. I have refused refueling facility to American air force.”

“What help have you agreed to render to them?”

“I have agreed to allow them to fly over our air space. That is all. In return, I have sought help from them in terms of money and weapons. It is another opportunity to fight India at the cost of America. I have told them not to include India in its war against terror. I am getting huge sums of money. How do you like it?”

“You are doing great service to mankind. God will be with you”

“I have a suggestion to offer. Soon the American army will attack Afghanistan. It is time that all members of Al Qaeda and Taliban take safe refuge in Pakistan. Tonight, Pakistani aircrafts will fly to Afghanistan and all important personalities fly in it to Pakistan before Americans enter Afghanistan.”

“We will all be ready, Chief. Americans are seeking help from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. They are encouraging our rival army to move against us and they are backing the rival army.”

“What is our strategy now?”

“Americans are unnerved by the fall of twin towers. Now they are over estimating our strength. We will play on their psychology, not with their armies. We pose that we are very strong and put up great resistance. We give wide publicity that we put up maximum resistance. They will make elaborate arrangements to attack us and spend huge sum of money and their economy will be in doldrums.”

“Not only that they hysterically step up their security thinking that we may strike anywhere and anytime that will make the whole country panic stricken.”

But we know we cannot fight them now. We withdraw as they advance and give them the greatest surprise. They find to their surprise no resistance at all. They bomb Kabul but Taliban and Al Qaeda members will be safe, Okay, bye.”

At one o'clock in the morning, a few small passenger planes landed at an undisclosed location and about 200 men from Afghanistan walked out of the plane, and they were taken to a secret destination where Chief Yakub met them.

“Good morning to our Afghan brothers. You are very safe here. You can carry on all your activities from our soil. There is no difference between us. We have the same goal and the same ideology. We give you full protection.”

“We want you to provide information on what is going on in Afghanistan.”

“You will have the latest information on your table, hour by hour. Okay. Good bye and good luck in your Jihad.” Pakistan spokesman left.

For two months, Americans bombarded Afghanistan, and the Northern Alliance invaded without any resistance and reached Kabul. The Americans used the latest weapons and experimented their intensity and efficacy in Afghanistan but the enemy army was in hiding and rarely surfaced to fight. Americans searched every cave in Afghanistan. India warned the world that the enemies were sheltered in Pakistan, and Pakistan spokesman said that nobody from Afghanistan has entered Pak and declared all Al Qaeda men and Taliban must be dead. Meanwhile, the Americans dug up every grave to make sure that Osama and Omar were dead and were convinced that that there was no proof that they were dead.

Now America was worried that Al Qaeda was in Pakistan. The attack on American embassy provided ample evidence that Al Qaeda was operating in Pakistan and they were afraid that Pakistani nuclear weapons might go into unwanted and dangerous hands. They tried to sell the idea of moving the weapons to safe places but Pak declined. Meanwhile the terrorists with the help of Pakistani army entered India. They wanted to punish India for siding America. They mercilessly butchered Indians and Indian army in Kashmir in suicide attacks.

The day was bright and hot. Yakub was sipping a cup of coffee. He was immersed in deep thinking. Aman was standing in front of him.

“What are you thinking, Chief?” Aman asked.

“India is a democracy. The president is only a nominal head. The Prime Minister is the real head. He issues all directions in the name of the President. We are on to kill the President, the Vice President and the Prime Minister and all his men. Suppose we kill all of them in one single day, what will happen to India?”

“They appoint someone else to be the Prime Minister and the Government goes on.”

“You are wrong. There will be chaos in India. The Indian government will fall like a withered leaf and its Army becomes directionless. We will push our armed forces into India and invade Kashmir and liberate it.”

“Suppose the Indian army resists?”

“We won’t hesitate to use nuclear weapons. We will use all nuclear weapons in our possession and bring India to its knees. There will be no one to give direction to the use of nuclear weapon against Pakistan as all men connected with issuing direction will be dead at one stretch. It is doom’s day for India.”

“That is great, chief. You are the fittest person to rule Pakistan. Pakistan needs leaders like you. You are genius. But I have a doubt, Chief.”

“What is it?”

“How can we kill all of them in one stroke? It is beyond my comprehension that such a thing is ever possible.”

“I assure you that it is possible. Attack the parliament when the President and Prime Ministers are all in Parliament. If the President is not there, it does not matter. We can still achieve our objectives. Get all those men dead. Go, get started. I have made all arrangements with the help of the ISI. Contact Ahmed, the Muslim cleric. Here is his address and contact number. Kill the members of Parliament in one stroke and Kashmir is ours, and India will perish and Pakistan will flourish. Go, what are you waiting for.”

“Chief, it is an excellent idea. I will execute it in a matter of fifteen days. God is great.” Aman was so excited that he could not waste his time any longer. He wanted action. Aman left in a hurry and Yakub gave a sardonic laugh.

Next morning, Aman was in New Delhi with four of his suicide bombers. He contacted the cleric, stayed in his house planning an attack on Parliament. It was last week of November. Aman was still in bed when the telephone bell rang. “It is me, Yakub. What is new?”

“Everything is going according to our plan. We are staying with one Muslim cleric. He is providing all logistics. He is an educated man with no criminal background. He is above suspicion. He has bought two vehicles

for our use. We will enter the Parliament House from the back entrance disguising ourselves as journalists. We will rush into the compound at a slack moment when the parliament is in session and the security staffs are in relaxed state. We are four and we are carrying enough arms and ammunitions. We will come out triumphant to-morrow god willing. If we die you pay 1,000,000 rupees to each of our family. Wish me good luck.

It was December 13th. The parliament consisting of 540 members with thousands of secretarial staffs were present at the Parliament House in New Delhi. Suddenly, the terrorists entered the parliament premises with a press label pasted to their windshield. For a moment the security personnel at the gate were taken aback. The next moment they became alert and started covering up positions against the terrorists. The terrorists started indiscriminate firing against the security personnel and killed some of them. They even reached the main door of the parliament house and entered the building. The alert security shot them down and saved the Government and the people of India. Had they all been killed, the greatest tragedy would have struck the nation.

Yakub was sitting with a military commander next morning with ‘the Dawn’ newspaper in hand. He was unusually sad.

“I told you Chief, that we would do wonderful job! Our boys have shown lot of courage.” An ISI agent was talking elated.

“No officer, I am not happy. I did not expect the men in Parliament to survive. I did not expect India to survive. The operation was a failure. We could not achieve our mission. Now we have to face the world. We have to convince the world that we had no hand in that mission. Who on earth will believe? We shall never fail in such missions. I will send condolences to the Prime Minister with a note that Pakistan deeply regrets the attack on Parliament. We will disown responsibility for the attack on Parliament.”

“I am sorry, chief. I hope this misadventure will not backfire.”

“I don’t know, I don’t know”, Yakub hung his head down.

“What do you think? How will India reciprocate to this adventure of our people?”

“We have killed 36,000 people in Kashmir and India is mutely watching. What can they do? Their leaders have always preached Peace and Non-violence. They will seek the help of America and America is on our side. We are allies ‘against terrorism’. America will pacify India and there ends the matter. We will continue our Jihad.” Yakub continued,

“Yes, they are kefirs. They can never face the fury of Pakistani jihad.”

“That is very true.” The officer agreed and asked

“So, shall I order more and more such attacks?”

“Yes, yes, you shall... you shall...” Yakub replied.

“We will carry out such attacks until we kill all parliamentarians and blast all the land marks of India. Be assured.”

“Allah is great!” Yakub said as he got up, and they dispersed. The Indian prime minister was very angry. The mood in Delhi was one of immediate revenge. They wanted to prove that India is strong enough to take care of herself. A meeting of very important leaders was in progress to discuss the situation arising out of attempt to wipe out the parliamentarians. They all agreed that they should forget their differences and work for the security of the nation. They agreed to support and rally behind the Prime Minister. India prepared herself for war. Pakistan was very happy that it could finish India by striking India with the nuclear weapons. The calculations were made in India that Pakistan couldn't use nuclear bombs because the second strike by India will destroy Pakistan completely. But Pakistan believed that she was capable of destroying India and Indians once and for all. America was more worried about capturing Osama. They wanted India and Pak to assist them in their war against terror. The turn of events causing tension between India and Pakistan was against the American interest. They told both nations to exercise restraint and avoid war. They convinced India that they would not win a war against Pakistan and convinced Pakistan that India has ample weaponry to destroy entire Pakistan. The Indian and Pakistani armies remained face to face for six months but they could not decide whether they should fight a war. The world community expressed unanimously that the war would not benefit either of them and would not solve the basic question of Kashmir. Both nations gradually recoiled themselves from war-like situation.

Chapter 26

Lily runs behind a mirage

Manav was not happy but did not know why. Something was gnawing him. He had a feeling that marrying Lily would be a great mistake but he could not conceive how he could live without Lily. She had become a part of his life by virtue of her long-standing association with him in America. But Lily was very enthusiastic not about Manav but about Hari. She started calling him often on the phone and he was calling her twice a week. It appeared that they liked each other and they had a kind of relationship, perhaps unity of mind. She always thought of him and talked of him. She would enjoy his conversation. She would remember the conversation and quote it in her conversation with Manav. She would be angry whenever Manav made disparaging remarks against Hari. She would shield him whenever Manav criticized him. The more she talked of Hari, the more Manav moved away from her and summed up her behavior as crazy. There was another problem that made Manav worry. Hari didn't live far away from Lily and Manav. He had lived in Pittsburgh for the last two years. He

was in a good position, earning handsome salary. One day he called Lily up and told Lily he had plans to visit Lily and Manav at their Iselin home. Manav was not enthusiastic to meet him but Lily was. The weekend came and on a Saturday morning, Hari knocked at the door. Manav opened the door as Lily was taking shower. They shook hands and Hari sat down.

“Is Lily home?” he asked. There was anxiety in his voice. Before Manav answered Lily came out and said Hello to him. Hari looked more relieved and sat relaxed. She greeted him and sat on the couch. Manav went to take shower leaving them. When Manav went in, Hari felt at ease and started talking.

“It is already three months since we met at Cape Cod.” He reminded her.

“It was a great place. We enjoyed the tour,” she said to him.

Lily paused and as an afterthought she added demurely, “Would you like to have coffee? It’s good in winter.”

“Sure.” He said.

“Do you want Mocha or Hazelnut?”

“I prefer Hazelnut.”

She went in, prepared coffee and brought to him hot steaming coffee. Meanwhile Manav dressed up and came out.

“Where’re you going?” Lily asked. There was a bit of surprise in her voice.

“I have an appointment. I shall be back by noon for lunch,” he said to her and turned to Hari and told him, “you yourself feel comfortable. Lily will give you company” He hurriedly walked towards his car.

“Manav is queer,” commented Hari.

“These days he is jealous. He is a little disturbed. “I don’t know why,” she continued,

“He looks worried. Sometimes he will be lost in his thoughts. He does not eat well. He does not talk to anybody. He wants to be left alone.”

“Perhaps he is home sick. He may become alright if he visits India once,” Hari said casually.

They talked on several subjects and they liked each other. They had unity of mind and mutual respect. There was oneness in ideas and ideals. They made good friends. They went round the city till evening and had a great day. Hari sought her permission to leave in the evening. She wished he had stayed longer but she could not ask him to stay longer for she was afraid that Manav might offend Hari out of jealousy. So she preferred to let him go. He was gone giving one long lingering look behind.

Manav returned late at eight in the evening. He was calm and composed but one could feel the storm inside. He went to bed straight. Lily was taken aback. She went to and asked if he was okay. He did not answer. After a while he asked her

“Where is Hari?”

“He went away in the evening. He waited for you. But he had to leave because he had some urgent work tomorrow.”

“You must have had good company and good day too.”

“Manav, you are jealous. You are suspicious. You will never be happy in life.”

“When are you expecting Hari again?” He taunted her. She did not reply. She walked out of his room.

One day Hari knocked at the door. Lily opened the door. She was very glad to see Hari. She was alone in the house. The previous night she was awake till dawn thinking and admiring Hari. Hari came in and closed the door behind him. He moved in swiftly, hugged her and kissed her all over her body. She clung to him like a magnet and enjoyed every bit of his action.

“I love you Lily. I love you more than any woman in this world.” He said as he moved his hands all over her body.

“I love you too, Hari. You are wonderful” She reciprocated his gesture. She led him to her room and in a minute they were in bed, one over the other and a rug pulled over them.

Lily got up from the bed an hour later and took shower when Hari was in the bed still. Lily looked happy and satisfied. Manav had never given her that kind of satisfaction and she had never admired him as she did Hari.

She set the table ready for lunch, and Hari came out dressed up and ready to eat.

“How long have you been acquainted with Manav?” He asked her inquiringly.

“Two years” She replied dryly.

“Do you want to marry him?”

“No. Once I thought that I loved him and decided to stay with him. Not anymore. I don’t like him now.”

“Why?”

“We came to America together and became friends even before reaching America. Manav likes me and I like him too. I have a feeling that he is a good company but he cannot make a good husband. He is not a good match for me. He has been putting up the marriage proposals for the last two years but I am puzzled. I couldn’t tell him that I would not marry him. I wanted to put off that idea until I was sure that I must marry him. He thinks that I was always in love with him. He presumes that I will marry him. I will tell him my decision at the right time.”

“No my dear, you should not put off such decisions. In that case, you must inform him at once that you are not willing to marry him, and you should ask him to live separately.”

“I will. Certainly I will.” She said mechanically.

Lily entered the house one evening in an upbeat mood humming an Indian song. Manav observed her with great surprise as Lily was not in jolly mood during those days and so, he wanted to know what brought her happiness. A few minutes later, she came of kitchen with a cup of coffee and sat opposite to him sipping coffee. Manav slowly raised his head and asked why she was so happy that evening. She said slowly,

“Manav I met Hari this morning near my office.”

“Why didn’t he come home to meet you?”

“How could he come home if you act so funny? He prefers to meet me in restaurants and coffee houses hereafter.”

“Good, He will soon take you places without me and you will be glad to go with him.”

“Manav, don’t be jealous of Hari. He is made up of a different substance. He is so good, so jovial and so naughty, anybody will admire him.”

“Do you love him?”

“Yes I do love him”

“Do you marry him?”

“I must be very lucky if he marries me. But he has not asked me and I have not asked him.”

“Okay. Did you take him to the Starbucks or to McDonalds?”

“Oh, you want to know where we had been and what we had been doing the whole day. You want entire day’s account. I don’t mind giving you. Listen, I applied for leave and went with him to the beach. He is a very good swimmer. We were swimming for two hours. When we were bored of swimming we went to the nearby Pizza-hut and ate well. Then we went to Metropolitan Park off the Highway. We wandered in the park like free birds.”

“Perhaps you wandered hand in hand.”

“Yes, how do you know? Did you follow us there? I know you are so mean”

“Why should I take the trouble of following you where ever you went? I can guess as well sitting here what you kind of girls do in parks with men like Hari.”

“You can keep on guessing whenever I go out. I don’t care. I really don’t care for you anymore. I am fed up with you and your meanness.”

“Fine, it is a great display of your love to me!”

“No it is a display of my hatred. I hate you more than anybody in my life.” She went to her room and slammed the door behind her. Manav was very furious, fuming within. He wanted to throw her out or wanted to quit the house permanently. Wisdom prevailed on him and he consoled himself. He did not talk to her for about fifteen days.

“One day Lily was in a jubilant mood.” You seem to be very happy today.” Manav asked in a lighter vein.

“I should be jubilant. Manav, I got a very good job!”

“Did you? Congratulations.” He said but he was not overjoyed. He looked very uncertain and disturbed.

“Why Manav, you don’t seem to be happy,” she asked with some concern

“Lily, I have decided to go back to India.” His voice was firm.

“What do you mean...?”

“I mean what I say. I want to get back to India. I feel that is where my future lies”

“Even if you repeat the same thing hundred times, I will not change my decision, okay. If you want to go, you go but don’t call me to that dirty place.”

“Did you call India a dirty place? Why, you were born there and brought up there. You must be ashamed to call your country a dirty place.”

“I am not. I have no fascination for dirty faces, religious bigots and cow dung. Will any man in his senses leave a country where there is wealth and comfort and go to a country that provides no hope for better living. That is the last thing I would do. Don’t you read samachar.com everyday, Manav?”

“Yes, I read everyday.”

“You read today’s news. Three old women above sixty were assaulted, tonsured and paraded, naked. A militant landlord outfit’s chief has killed 500 people, and he is now arrested. I am sure he will be released soon to commit few more murders. There were fisticuffs and assault between workers of the ruling party and workers of the opposition party in front of a national leader’s house. What is more? India is placed one among thirty most corrupt countries of the world. Your Indian parliament consists of members who run to the well of the house everyday to disrupt the proceedings of the house and they are much undisciplined lot in the society. They have no inhibition that millions are watching their unruly behavior. They must be shown on screen how American Congressmen and British parliamentarians behave during the proceedings of their respective Houses. You still want to live in India.”

Manav hung his head in shame for a few minutes and started defending India.

“It is true that the political and economic life of the country is deplorable mainly because of indiscipline and dishonesty. India is much more than you imagine. All are not so poor, illiterate and bigoted. There are rich and modern people too, and their life is for more comfortable than ours in America. If we live in India, We have family bondage, which I value most. We will have all our friends and relatives around us. We are lonely here. We forget our culture and social values. We will be lost here. We may earn good money but not happiness.”

“Manav, I am very happy wherever I am. I don’t want to go back to India.”

“I leave that decision to you. But don’t stop me. I am going to India”. Manav left the room as he said and went to his study to work. Lily went straight to her bed. Manav was looking uncertain.

Manav did not want to leave Lily and go back to India, but he did not get a job as the people had started looking at Asians with great suspicion and the government was taking on foreigners relentlessly. Next few days passed off without any conversation between them. She started going to work. She would come back in the evening tired. She would eat whatever was available in the fridge and go to bed. Manav would sit and muse throughout the day. He did not know how to convince her. He did not know if she wants to be convinced at all. He was waiting for another opportunity to talk to her on this matter. Day by day Lily became more independent and rarely spoke to Manav. She answered in monosyllable whenever he tried to drag her into conversation. One evening she came home late in the evening. Manav wondered where she had been. She went to her bedroom and closed the door behind her. Next morning Manav wanted an explanation from her

“Where had you been yesterday?”

“You are not my husband. Are you? You have no right to ask me that question. Isn’t it?”

“But I want to know where you had been yesterday. It is material to our relationship. I want an answer from you.”

“I give you answer if you want one. Make sure you have nerves to withstand the agony. I went to Hari’s place. I spent the whole day with him. He is such a wonderful person, unlike you. He is not a male chauvinist like you. He is so smooth, so refined.”

Manav was totally disappointed with her. He went to his room and closed the doors behind him. A few minutes later Lily knocked at the door, entered his room and sat on a sofa opposite to him like a hooded snake.

“Manav, I have decided to marry, Hari.” Her voice was steady and she knew what she was talking.”

“Oh, Lily, believe me. Hari is not a marrying man. He has too many women in his life. He will ditch you.”

“I don’t need your advice. I can take care of myself. You know what, Manav; I am carrying his baby in my womb.”

Manav stopped talking. His hands began to shake and he fumbled for words. The tongue went dry, and he felt very weak. He slowly walked past her towards the door and soon he was walking briskly on the pavement, raving mad.

Next morning Lily got up late because it was a Sunday. She did not see the sign of Manav. She searched the entire house but she could not find him. At last she went to see if his car was in the garage. The car was gone and so was Manav.

Chapter 27

The pride that had a fall

Lily was talking to her friend Sheila. She was in high spirits while narrating how she got rid of him. “You know my nature very well. I was very upset with that simpleton.”

“What makes you think he is a simpleton? He looks to be quite bright and smart.”

“At times he is bright and smart, I agree, and at times he is not. There are many things I hate in him. He thinks ‘Indian ness’ is the end of the world. He thinks India is the best in the world. He is like a fish in the pond which thinks the entire world is in the pond.”

“That is human nature. Everyone thinks that his religion is best. Everyone thinks that his country is great. I think the same way he thinks. I have hardly come across people who have no love or respect for one’s country. If at all there is anyone who is so unpatriotic, I think it is you.”

“Why do you hesitate to say that I am not patriotic? I declare that I am not. I don’t like the country of my origin. You can punish me if you want. I hold on to that opinion. I just can’t change my opinion and I don’t.” She was emotionally at the top of her voice.”

“So you expect him to be as unpatriotic as you are.”

“No. I want him to be as cosmopolitan as I am and I want him to be an internationalist. We, educated, should have no barriers. I hate any discrimination on the basis of race, language, religion, caste, color or creed. We must rise above the barrier of nationalism and strive for internationalism. Is there any country in the world that is as broad-minded as America? You see people of all nations, all languages and religions here. That is the kind of spirit I want to emulate.”

“Great. Your spirit is laudable. I agree with you that other nations are not as broad-minded as America is. But we are talking of Manav. Manav is a great guy as far as I know.”

“But I did not love Manav to the extent of marrying him. I was always half hearted. He was not the kind of man with whom I would like to spend all my life. He was my last choice. Whenever he said that he wanted to go back to India, I thought he was only expressing his wish. I never thought he was so serious about going back to India.”

“Say you did not love him. You pretended that you loved him so that he may marry you if you chose to marry him.”

“Exactly, you would not get a more educated, intelligent and good person like him. I appreciated and recognized these qualities in him. But that is not enough to marry and spend my whole life with him. But still I would

have compromised with him but not at the cost of leaving America. I had only one dream in my life and that was to come to America and that dream is now fulfilled. He wants me to quit this heaven and go that hell.”

“Why, you could have convinced him to stay!”

“I have no patience with him. He has typical Indian mindset,”

“You are also an Indian,” she retorted.

“Yes, I am, but I don’t want to be a part of that system anymore. I hate male domination. I am no less than any male. I can take care of myself. I don’t need men like Manav to protect me anymore.”

“Then why did you think of marrying an Indian like Manav?”

“Because I thought and believed like many Indian, he would love to stay in America.”

“You should have requested him to stay back and marry you.”

“He was distressed that he was not getting job in the aftermath of September 11th attack on twin towers. He was upset that the terrorists had created insecurity in America. He was upset that the Americans were incapable of distinguishing between peace-loving Indians and the Muslim terrorists, between the friends and the foes.”

“Why did you lie to him that you were carrying a baby of Hari? Who on earth would withstand such a shock?

“I misled him deliberately. I wanted that he should forget me once and for all. If I had not said that he would be still hanging around pestering me”

“Why did you want him to quit?”

“It is because I am in love with Hari. I want to marry him. He is so cute, so handsome and so interesting”. Sheila was shocked to hear that shameless deposition.”

“Lily, time is up and I must go now.” She stood up to leave.

“Sheila, stay for few minutes. Let me complete what I have to say. I did not really like Manav I hated his attitude, ideas and ideals. I did not like his male chauvinism. He has a superiority complex about his caste, his people and his country. It is all unfounded rubbish. I cannot take them anymore.”

Sheila did not like to stay there even for a moment. She insisted that she should go but Lily would not let her go. Lily noticed her discomfiture but would not change the subject. Suddenly, she realized that Sheila was loathing her and wanted to tell her that she was no better. She continued, “Sheila, we all do mistake sometimes. We shall have to correct ourselves as soon as we realize. I made a mistake in courting Manav but when I realized that he was not the kind of guy I would want to live with for the rest of my life, I walked over him. That is what any sensible woman would do. You hate your husband too. I have seen you loathing your husband many a time. You can deceive the world but you cannot deceive yourself for too long.”

And she continued, “Sheila, I just don’t understand how you can live with an execrable creature like Muruli. He dominates you in all walks of life. He has enslaved you and you dance to his tunes. You have no individuality.”

Sheila was upset. She said angrily “That is your opinion. I don’t agree. To me Muruli is a well-bred, fine gentleman and I have no complaints against him. It’s getting late. I must go now”, she rose as she said and got ready to go.

“When shall I see you?” Lily asked

“May be after a month or two. I am not sure,” she murmured as she left the place.

When Sheila was gone, she suddenly remembered Hari. She picked up her phone, threw herself to bed and rang up. The phone rang several times before someone lifted the phone and she heard a feeble voice.

“Hello”

“Could I speak to Hari please?”

“Speaking”

“Hari, it is me, Lily.”

“What is up Lily?”

“Hari, Manav left for India.”

“Why”

“He was home sick. I got rid of him”

“Got rid of him? Why?”

“I have something to tell you. Can we meet to-morrow?”

“I am sorry I am too busy. I cannot make it this week”

“Can you make it next week at least?”

“I can’t promise” Lily was thoroughly disappointed

“Can I see you in your house tomorrow?”

“I have no time this week. We will meet some other time”

“Now listen, Manav left for India. He is not coming back.”

“So, what?”

“He wanted me to accompany him. I was wild and refused to go with him.”

“Did he agree to leave you here?”

“I told him that I was carrying your baby and that I was determined to marry you.”

“Manav is a very nice person. I still like him. You should not have disappointed him. Moreover you should not have used my name. You know we are just acquainted and don’t know each other.”

“You don’t know me! How could you say that? You are my dream man. I am longing to meet you and I want to marry you.”

“Marriage and me, I am not a marrying man. I have too many women in my life. I cannot marry them all. Even now there is a woman in my bed.”

“You are lying! I cannot be wrong.”

“You are wrong. I have a woman in my bed right now. Not convinced? You can talk to her “

A woman came on the phone and said,

“You bitch, keep the phone down?”

Lily kept the phone down, threw herself on the bed and wept for an hour.

Chapter 28

A pain that overtook the pleasure

Jag came home romping one evening as Janaki looked at him in surprise.

“You seem to be in a happy mood today.”

“I received a phone call from my brother.”

“Great, what did he say?”

“He said that we have to go for interview to American consulate at Madras on twenty-first of this month. We will be in America in two months. I will book my ticket the day I get visa.”

“Good days are ahead Jag,” she said hugging him.

Wait I will get you coffee. We will talk it over a cup of coffee...”

She to kitchen and returned in about ten minutes with two cups of hot coffee.

“So you are quitting your job here from the 20th.”

”Yes, of course, we have to make lot of preparations for our journey.”

“Can we take Anita with us?”

“Certainly, she is unmarried and less than 21 years of age. She can accompany us.” Janaki became pale and her lips started trembling.

“What is the matter? Why did you turn pale?” Janaki did not answer. She lowered her head.

“Janaki, something serious must be afoot or else you would be sorry on this happy occasion. Come on Janaki, speak. I guess you are not happy to settle down in America.”

“Jag I have been hiding from you some information which will upset you. Excuse me.”

“Come on Janaki, to day no information will upset.”

“Anita...Anita she said but her tongue went dry and she stopped.”

“Don’t worry about Anita. I asked my brother if she too could accompany us as she is still less than 21 and she is not married. Don’t worry. We will admit Anita to a good college and she will get a good job in a span of five years. I am sure. She will marry a nice guy and she will live a wonderful life.”

“Jag, I am afraid that Anita may do something foolish.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have a feeling that she is in love with a boy of 18. He lives a few blocks away from ours. I have seen them talking frequently at the corner of the road.”

“You may have mistaken. Anita is a very nice girl. She cannot do anything foolish. She knows how much we care for her. She knows that we have to leave India shortly. We have told her that she should marry an American Indian in America. She will never shatter our dreams. I am sure she is responsible.”

“It is time we discuss the matter with her and advise her to keep off that guy now. We hope everything goes well.”

“Don’t worry dear. Everything goes well.”

Janaki and Jag were sitting in the verandah of the house planning their travel in the evening. They noticed Anita going out of the house. They followed her through their eyes. She was standing at the gate making signs and signals. Janaki quietly went out and peeked in the direction in which Anita was signaling. She saw Govius standing at his gate signaling something to her. Janaki came in and told Jag what she saw. Both of them went out to observe her movements but Anita was gone. When she returned home two hours later, Janaki demanded to know where she had gone.”

“I went to see Govius”

“Who is Govius?”

“Maria’s brother. “

“What is he to you? Why should you meet him so often? What will people think of you? You should be more responsible than you are. You know we are going to a new world-to another part of the world. We will have a new and wonderful life over there. You have to forget everything about India now.”

“Papa I will forget everything about India but not Govius. Govius is seated deeply in my heart. It is impossible to eradicate him from my heart.”

“Forget Govius. You know you have to choose between Govius and America.”

“I can forget America but not Govius. I want to marry him”

“Impossible! That will never happen. I will never agree to this marriage.”

“I will marry him nevertheless”

“I will throw you out of my house if you take his name again”

“I will not hesitate to quit this house if you don’t agree to my marriage with him’

“You foolish girl, I will kill you if you dare to encounter me”

Anita went into her room defiantly.

One day Janaki saw Govius passing by her house. She called him by name and he stopped.

“Govius, you know we are all going away to America in a few days. We want to take Anita with us. She will join a college in New Jersey. She has a bright future. But she wants to marry you and stay back in India. If she marries now she can’t go to America with us. Will you advise her to go with us?”

Govius stood silently for a while and considered his response.

“Aunty, don’t worry. I will convince her. But I want to tell you that Anita and I have been dreaming of marrying each other. We need your blessings.”

“Govius try to understand me. If Anita marries you she cannot reach America. She must be unmarried until she reaches America. It is the law. She cannot marry you now at this stage.”

Govius walked away without bidding goodbye. Janaki walked in slowly. She was terribly annoyed at his unhelpful attitude.

A few days later, one night Janaki and Jag went to Govius’s house and knocked at his doors. His father George opened the door and called them in. After the usual courtesies, George asked them,

“What brought you here?”

“We are in great difficulty and hope you will help solve our problem.”

“I will do everything within my means to help you if I can.”

“Your son Govius is after our daughter, Anita. We are going away to America in a few days, for good. Anita does not realize what is good to her. She wants to stay back and marry Govius. But we want her to come with us to America. Please advise your son to forget her.”

“We don’t want you to be put to difficulty. You can take away your daughter. We have no objection.”

“But Govius will not let her go. He advises her to stay behind and marry him.”

“You advise your daughter to come with you. If you cannot control your daughter you cannot blame my son, can you?”

“Please don’t encourage them. Tell your son to forget her.”

“I cannot ask him to forget her. He loves her and she loves him. We have already told him to forget her but he cannot. We don’t like that they should be married. But the way it is going on, it will end in their marriage. Nobody can prevent it.”

“We came to you with the hope that you will do something but you are turning us away without any assurance.”

“We are sorry we can’t help you.”

Janaki and Jag returned home disappointed. Anita had not returned home. They made frantic calls to relatives and friends if Anita was with any of them. Nobody had seen her in the last forty-eight hours. Jag realized that she had eloped with Govius. They called George to find out if Govius was with them. They were told that Govius had not returned home. Their

anxiety gave way to fear of some kind now. They inferred that Govius and Anita had run away.

‘Anita is disgraced and nobody will marry her now.’ Janaki wept. Janaki was weeping the whole day.

The phone was ringing intermittently as their relatives and friends were making frantic calls. Jag stopped lifting phone and ignored the calls. They had no opinion regarding Govius as he was a high school drop out. He was betting illegally at the age of twelve and had once run away from home after stealing his mother’s jewelry. Now he had eloped Anita. Jag and Janaki sat bewildered and anticipated the return of Anita. Fifteen days lapsed and there was no information

Jag said to Janaki, “Look Janaki we have no alternative but to give police complaint.

“No Jag, please don’t do that. Her life will be permanently ruined. We have to safeguard her interest now by hushing up this, her misadventure.”

They did not lodge a complaint with the police and waited for her return.

One morning the telephone rang and Jag lifted the phone expecting some news.

“Papa it is me, Anita” there was anxiety in her voice.

“Anita, we have presumed you are dead. Keep the phone down. We don’t want to talk to you.”

“Daddy I am in great predicament.”

“Where are you now Anita?” Anita gave an address in Bombay.

“Dad, I am in great difficulty. These people are forcing me to prostitution.”

“Don’t worry Anita; we will be there in five hours.”

The phone went off the air. Jag rang up the Director General of Police and the action was set in motion. Jag and Janaki darted off to Bombay by the next flight and arrived at Bombay in a few hours. They reported the matter to the Bombay police. The police raided the house and rescued Anita. A gang of twenty men and women were arrested and brought to police station. Govius was not there.

“Where is Govius?” The Police Officer asked Anita.

“Govius sold me for 10,000 Rupees and left. These people locked me up in a room. One of the girls who had access to outside world helped me to the telephone.”

“Come on, Anita, what happened?” The police officer asked impatiently.

“Govius took me to Bombay. We stayed in a hotel for a week. One morning he got up from his bed and went out. After two hours he returned with a ruffian and asked me to pack up. I just did what he said. I was led down stairs and a taxi was waiting there. We sat in the taxi and the ruffian brought us to a strange place. As soon as we went in, we saw several girls around. I knew something was seriously wrong. I asked Govius why he

had brought me there. He said nothing. He collected 10,000 from the Lady of the house and went out. He never returned. The lady of the house told me in a low but clear voice, “You have reached a house of disrepute. You cannot get back. Forget your home and go on with our business. There is money in it. If you try to escape our men will hunt you down and you will be condemned to a black cell in the basement and you will never see the light of the day again...”

“Console yourself Anita. Still you have time to mend. We will go to America. Nobody knows your antecedents... Somebody will marry you.” Janaki consoled her.

J, Janaki and Anita traveled to America two months later. Anita joined a University and completed her Nursing degree. Within a span five years Anita Janaki and Jag had amassed considerable wealth.

Chapter 29

An ungrateful husband

Hari, a tall, well-built man with fair complexion loathed to go back to India after finishing his studies in America and decided to stay back. Vikram and Hari were great friends and Hari called him Vicky. Vicky knew Anita and J well. One day Hari spoke his mind to Vicky.

“Vicky I want to stay back in America and start my career in Cleveland. Will you suggest some plan?” he asked.

“I have a suggestion. Marry a girl who has citizenship of this country.”

“The idea is good. But will I get a girl who is ready to marry me in a month or two? My visa is expiring shortly.”

“I think I can help you. I know a family that is searching for a suitable match for their only daughter. I will take you to their house and recommend you if you want.”

“I will be really very grateful to you if you can help me,” he said as he held his hands.

One evening Vicky and Hari came home in search of Jag when Jag was away and met Janaki...

“This is my friend Hari. We are searching a suitable match for him,” Vicky introduced Hari to Janaki. Anita observed Hari curiously and decided that Hari was a good match for her. When they were talking Anita’s father Jag came home and he was overjoyed to hear that Hari was searching for a suitable match as he thought that Anita and Hari were made for each other. Jag and Janaki thought that Hari would not know the antecedents of Anita and so they hastened to celebrate their marriage in short period of 14 days. The marriage was sudden and simple and it took place in the presence of Lord Venkateshwara at Pittsburgh. Hari was

feeling good and Anita was feeling great. Jag and Janaki's joy knew no bounds. After the marriage Vicky asked Hari,

"So you must be happy now."

"I am happy because I can stay in America."

"You have a beautiful girl too."

"I have slept with far more beautiful girls than this one. Girls don't mean anything to me except that they are objects of sex games."

"Be discreet my friend. If she comes to know that you are a playboy with no respect for her she may desert you at this moment."

"I know I must play safe with her until I get citizenship. Once I get citizenship, she will be history."

"I thought you were joking. If I had known that you are son of a bitch I would not have negotiated on your behalf. Please don't ditch her as otherwise I will hunt you down and send you to jail."

"I don't care what you think. My job is done." Hari walked away without waiting for Vicky's reply.

Three years passed by, and he obtained his permanent resident status. One night when Hari came home Anita told him that she was a pregnant.

"Are you happy now?"

"I don't need any child. We have not yet settled in life."

"I am glad to become a mother." She shot back.

"Anita, do you love me?"

"Of course, I do. What doubt do you have?"

"I have a request to make."

"Like what?"

"I want you to release me."

"Release you from what?"

"From your bondage..."

"I never do that. I go to court of law."

"I am not afraid of you. I know you are a bad character."

"You fool what are you talking?"

"You had a paramour I know before coming to America and you eloped with him to Bombay."

"Who told you all this?"

If you go to court this will be my defense and I can prove it." He walked out. A few days later he suddenly vanished from Cleveland leaving a message:

"Dear Anita, I married because of the circumstances. Forgive me if you can. I tried to adjust and live with you but I could not. I am going away from you forever. Don't make any attempt to search for me. You are free to marry again and start a new life all over again. You may apply for divorce."

Anita gave birth to a male child and named it as Nikhil. She had no time to look after the child. She had a friend called Mary who was married to one Williams. They were a middle aged couple with no children and they were longing to adopt a child. They agreed to look after Nikhil for sometime as Anita did not agree to give away Nikhil for adoption. They were living in New York. She used to go to New York every three months to spend sometime with the child.

Two years later someone brought the news that he was hobnobbing in Pittsburg with another woman. However, the Divorce petition filed by Anita was not opposed, and they were divorced. Anita was once again dejected and disappointed. She did not expect that such a thing could happen to her. She had read in magazines that some young men have started marrying Indian Americans with a view to get citizenship and ditch them later when they get citizenship. She herself became a victim to such a fraud, and cursed her fate.

Jag was very sorry to see his daughter in distress again. He wanted to cheer her up and so he arranged a party and sent invitation to friends. Anita and Janaki prepared delicious cuisines and readied themselves to greet the guests at 5 O'clock in the evening. The guest started coming one by one and in about half an hour there were as many as 20 guests in the house but J. had not come back from the office. It was six in the evening Janaki became worried. Anita too felt bad but consoled herself that he could arrive any moment. The clock rang 7, but there was no sight of J. The guests too became anxious. J would never stray away from home without leaving information. He knew that guests would arrive at 5, and it was highly improbable that he would stay away without informing anybody. Everybody waited for one more hour, and looked out of the window every minute to see if he had reached the driveway. Someone informed the police and everybody anxiously waited to hear from the police. At midnight the police informed them that they had found a body in the trunk of a green BMW. This scared Anita and Janaki, for that was J's car. Inside the car was the corpse of an older Indian male whose hair had receded and just had begun to gray. The man had been shot in the head and his wallet was stolen. The only thing left on the body was the driver's license, which helped the police to identify the body as that of Jag. The police requested the wife and daughter to go over to the morgue to identify the body. Everybody in the house drove to the morgue and found to their dismay that it was indeed the body of Jag. He had been murdered.

Anita's maternal uncle came to America to console his sister and made arrangements to take Janaki and Anita back to India for a few months so that they could recover from the shock. Anita was not in a position to leave immediately. She stayed back promising her uncle that she would go to India as soon as possible. Anita proceeded to India a few months later.

Chapter 30

A new friendship

It was January 12th and it was biting cold out there, but luckily there was no snow that day. The airplanes were zooming over the sky at O' Hare International Airport in Chicago. Manav was checking in at terminal 4 to board a plane to India. He had just collected his boarding pass when a lady accosted him and asked if she was in the right place to collect boarding pass.

"Yes, you can collect your boarding pass over there at the counter." He pointed towards the counter. As she moved towards the window he stood watching her. She was looking beautiful. Her hair was soft and well done. Her complexion was fair and her gait, elegant. She was about 5'3" and lean. When she returned from the counter, he noticed that she was looking very pale, and her eyes slightly puffy. She must have had serious domestic problems, he thought.

A few moments later the passengers moved into the plane and he found her seated in his place. "I think you are in my seat, he said.

"Sorry," she said as she stood up and got ready to exchange the seat.

"Please sit down. I don't mind sitting down in your seat," He condescended. The plane started leaving the O'Hare Airport and in a few minutes it was flying high over Chicago. He saw the plane passing over the Sears Tower and the next moment he saw the waterfront below and soon the plane was flying over Lake Michigan. When passengers settled down and the plane flew over Ottawa, Manav turned the lady next to him and gave friendly smile. She returned the smile as graciously as he did. She did not show any interest in talking to him. He somehow managed to spend time until a day later when the plane touched down at Bombay airport. The passengers walked out of the plane. When Manav was moving in the direction of terminal two, He noticed that the girl who had talked to him at Chicago was briskly walking behind him, and she was beside him in a few seconds.

"Can I accompany you to the terminal two? I don't want to miss my way," she asked him softly.

"Of course, you can. Don't be too formal." Manav replied.

"Do you live in America?" he asked her when they were seated in the lounge awaiting the call for check in.

"Yes, I do. I am here to visit my mother." she said in monotone.

"If you don't think I am too inquisitive, may I ask you where do you stay during your visit?"

“I’ll be staying with my mother in JP Nagar.” There was impatience in her voice now and Manav realized that he was crossing the limit of decency. He stopped asking questions and reclined against his seat. Forty-five minutes later, they entered the plane. Manav sat observing her throughout his 90 minutes journey. There was no mirth on her face. Airhostess brought breakfast, which the girl refused. In the night she had refused dinner. She was virtually starving. She had no interest in what was going on around. She did not show any interest in talking to Manav either. Manav was bored. He looked at the people who were sitting in pensive mood and relapsed into reverie.

Then, the plane was approaching Bangalore Airport. The passengers were preparing to get down.

“Are you staying in Bangalore?” she asked.

“Yes, I am” he replied.

“I need your help at the airport?”

“Of course I will. Come with me when we land.” He said with a grin but she was grim.

They got down from the plane and walked towards the immigration counters.

“What is your name?” Manav asked her.

“My name is Anita. What is your name?”

“I am Manav. I live in J P Nagar.” There was a pause.

“How long do you stay in India?” she asked casually.

“I have no idea of going back. Perhaps, I will settle down in Bangalore.”

“When are you leaving for America?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I may stay here for pretty long” She looked away from him as she said it.

“Hope to see you again. Thanks for your company.” Manav said and helped her into a taxi and when they had collected their baggage.

Manav was very anxious to meet his parents. He wanted to see them and tell them that he did not marry anybody against their will, and that he was still the same old dutiful son. “I will find a job and put an end to their poverty. I will not displease them by marrying outside my caste. They have taken lot of pains to bring me up and it is my turn to keep them happy in their old age. They are angry with me, I know. Once I am there they cool down and our life will be the same again.” He was talking to himself when the taxi was moving slowly along the congested roads. Suddenly he felt uneasy as he remembered that they did not care to reply to his several letters including the last one in which he had given the news of his sudden return to India. Next moment, he was afraid that some unfortunate thing might have happened to them for he had not heard from there for the last one year. The taxi turned to his street and he saw the old dilapidated house from where he had left for America three years ago. He asked the driver to

stop in front of the house pointing to an old house. He removed the baggage from the taxi and looked towards the house expecting his parents to come out to see him but nobody came out. He entered the house. Sushu was sitting on a rickety chair chanting Vedic hymns. Jay was reclining in an armchair. He went and touched their feet. They were pleased to see him again. They forgot that they were angry with him and hugged him again and again. He was glad to be home.

One day Manav was coming out of a bank when he saw Anita entering in. He was not sure that she would be pleased to meet him, and so he pretended that he did not notice her and walked down the steps rather hurriedly. She ran behind him a few steps calling him by name, and when he turned back, she said "Hello! How are you doing?"

"I am doing well. And you?" he asked courteously.

"It sounds like you are not pleased to meet me," she said looking into his face rather anxiously.

"I'm pleased to meet you. By the way when are you leaving for America?"

"I have decided to stay here for a long time. I am not in a hurry to get back"

"Why?"

"I have no one there. Here I have my mother to take care of."

"Do you intend to return to India permanently?"

"Of course not, But I intend to stay in India until I am bored."

"Are you married?" He asked her abruptly, but hesitatingly.

"I am divorced," she said without raising her head²¹

"I am sorry to ask you such embarrassing questions. Forgive me."

"That's okay."

"You must be having many friends here."

"I have no friends here. I am bored of staying in Bangalore. I am planning a long tour..."

"Wish you good time and great fun on your tour." Manav said and started to leave.

"Manav, are you in a hurry?"

"No. I am not in a hurry. I have all the time in the world. I thought you must be in a hurry."

"No. I am not. I need to talk to you."

"O' yes, you can."

"I have a question. Can you arrange for our tour?"

"How many of you are going on tour?" he looked at her little perplexed.

"I mean you and me." She was looking straight into his face.

"I'll arrange for your tour if you want," he assured her with his head bowed and blushing like a teenage girl.

"I want you to accompany me. Can you." She asked without hesitation.

“I don’t know if I can.” There was uncertainty in his voice but he managed to sound earnest.

“I request you. You must come with me or I will cancel the tour.”

“Done,” he said as he gave a broad smile. He was elated because he got a friend. He liked her the moment he saw her at Chicago and he wished that she too liked him. Manav was busy scheduling the itinerary for the tour for the next three days. He was contacting tour operators and hotel management for overnight stays at different places. There was unusual buoyancy in his movement, which did not escape the notice of his mother.

“Manav, you are very active these days. You have in fact become over-active. I had never seen you before as enthusiastic as you are today. What is the matter?”

“Nothing, Mom, nothing.” He said lowering his head as she looked at him slyly.

“I feel that there is something going on. Wouldn’t you tell your Mom?”

“Mom, we are going on a tour to North India, me and my friend.”

“Good, who is accompanying you?”

“You don’t know her.”

“You are going on a tour with a woman? Who is that shameless woman that accompanies you on a tour? Has she no one to advise her? Why did you agree to go with her? What will people say if they see you with her in a distant place?”

“Mom, you are trying my patience. I wish to go with her and I am going. I don’t care what your people say. You must understand that I have grown up and I can take care of myself.” He left the house in rage and did not return until mid night. Sushi informed her husband about the conversation she had with her son. He tried to console her that nothing was amiss and everything was fine and advised her not to get hypersensitive to such issues but she was not consoled.

Next morning she got up as usual and there was subdued silence at home as everybody had something to say but nobody wished to rake up the issue again. She said to herself that she would find a girl for him and marry him off before he leaves India. Manav came out of the room with luggage and after placing the baggage at the threshold he out to hire an auto as Sushi stood dumbfound at his audacity.

Manav and Anita entered the Rajdhani express at six in the morning and settled down in their seats when the train slowly started to leave the station at the scheduled time. They talked continuously for three hours while on journey and enjoyed each other’s talk. They felt suddenly very close and started expressing their views without any reservation. A few hours later Anita felt sleepy and gradually leaned against Manav’s shoulder. He gave good support to her sagging head.

“Your wife must be very tired. She needs rest,” advised a middle-aged woman opposite. Manav did not wish to correct and let her believe that Anita was his wife. When Anita woke up he told her what the woman sitting opposite to them said, and Anita instinctively drew herself closer to him as the woman adoringly said to herself that they were made for each other.

They arrived at Delhi next evening at seven. They alighted from the train, reached a good Hotel at Cannought place and rested the whole night before they prepared themselves for journey next morning. Next morning they set off on a Delhi tour. They reached Red Fort and surveyed the entire area with their eyes and imagined the Mughal Durbar and grandeur. They imagined the love life of Jahangir and Noor Jahan, the melodious music of Tansen and the iron Hand of Aurangzeb. They were very tired walking around long distances within the Red Fort.

Next they went to Rajghat to pay tribute to M.K.Gandhi, who led the Indian Independence Movement. From there they went to visit the cemetery of Indira Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Their next place of visit was Jamuna River. Back in the route they went to see the Supreme Court of India, Parliament House and Rashtrapathi Bhavan. They went round India gate and paid tribute to the soldiers killed in the First World War. Next morning they went to Qutb Minar, a monument of 1200 feet of the eleventh century, which was built by Qutb din, the slave of Mohammad Ghori in memory of his victory. Mohammad Ghori came to India twice in 1091 and 1092 A.D with his men, plundered Delhi and other places, killed thousands of people, raped thousands of women and carried away huge wealth of India. Earlier, Mohammad of Ghazni came to India seventeen times, raped women and killed men, and carried away vast wealth of India. To the Indians it was a monument of savagery and to the extremists it was a monument of glory, for Indians it marked the beginning of barbarism and for Minorities extremists it was a beginning of a glorifying era. The Minorities rule in India started from the days of Qutb din and brought to the people the untold misery. Dynasties after dynasties ruled Delhi—the Khiljis, the Tughlaks and the Lodis. Baber came through Afghanistan and established Mughal dynasty in India and he was succeeded by Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb. The British defeated the successors of Aurangzeb and established their rule in India.

Manav was very unhappy after he remembered how the glory of Indians went down after the Mohammedans ravaged them. He remembered the days when heaps of gold were being sold in the village flea markets. He remembered the days when the people were going out of their houses without locking them because there was no fear of thieves or robbers. He remembered the period of Chandragupta Mourya, the period of great glory of the Indians, before the bandits of Central Asia ravished India. He was so

sorry to see on his way back the statues of British officers of East India Company, and finally the queen Victoria and her successors who took away the remaining wealth of India and left India a poor, morally depraved and materially empty. India of 1947 was a testimony of a country that was plundered and ravaged for ages. He was enraged when he remembered that Pakistan had named the missiles in the name of Ghorri and Ghazni. If they are the paragon of Minorities how can there be peace in the Indian sub-continent, he wondered. He did not want to see any more places in Delhi.

Next morning they set out for Jaipur and saw Jaipur palace. They were told the glory of Jaipur kings. They went to Amber Palace; a palace on the hill situated a few miles away from Jaipur and sauntered round the fort. They visited the temples and saw Shishmahal, the India grandeur. He was elated that Indians too had their day. They stayed at Ram Narayan nivas Hotel and next morning they were on their way to Agra. On their way they halted at Sikandra and enjoyed the antics of langooors²². They visited the Bharatpur Bird sanctuary and Safari and reached Fatahpur Sikri in the afternoon. They remembered the bad days of Humayun, the Mughal emperor there and how Humayun was running in the forest with his family when he was dethroned, and how he took shelter in Fatahpur Sikri. He was narrating his knowledge of history all through to Anita, and Anita wondered at his profound knowledge of Indian history.

That night they stayed at Modern Hindu Hotel in Agra. Next morning they went to see Taj Mahal, the seventh wonder of the world standing on the bank of the river Jamuna. It is said that Shah Jahan loved his wife Mumtaz and in her memory, after her death, he built a great monument called Taj Mahal. He was also buried there after his death. It is said that it took seventeen years to build and it was built at the cost of millions of rupees raised from the people in the form of tax. Though it was a good sightseeing place, Manav hardly appreciated the way the Mughals squandered the people's money for their personal use. 'But that is History,' he consoled himself and moved towards Mathura.

Manav broke down after seeing Matura, the most sacred place of the Indians. The birthplace of Lord Krishna was dug up and in its place a mosque was built. He was dejected that the Indians should have been insulted and humiliated in the hands of invaders. However the modern Birla Mandir by its side gave some relief to his otherwise agitated mind. They were traveling to Bombay from Delhi next morning. They were engaged in conversation.

"Anita," said Manav, "I am very pleased to have such nice wonderful person by my side."

"Thank you. You are no less wonderful than I am."

"Thanks for your compliments. I am very glad of it."

"Me too," she said

“Why don’t you marry again?”

“Marry again? Who will marry me, a divorcee?”

“Why anybody will marry you. You are good looking and educated. You have very agreeable disposition.”

“But Indian men wouldn’t like to marry a divorcee. It is very hard to find a suitable person for my second marriage,”

“Suppose you come across a person who is willing to marry you, would you like to marry.”

“I don’t think I will.”

“But, why?”

“It is difficult to answer your question. I had enough trouble in my married life. They are still haunting me. I don’t want to jump into a well in the morning that I had seen at night. I have inbred hatred to all men”

“Do you hate me?”

She held his hands and pressed it softly. After a minute, she slowly raised her eyes to meet his eyes and said, “You are a great man. I admire you.”

“But do you love me?” He asked.

“I love you, Manav. I have loved you since the day we met in the plane but I felt it is childish to express my love to you. You are a bachelor with dreams of your own and in your world; I think I have no place. I think you have a girl of your choice in your mind or you may be searching for the most accomplished girl. Who would marry a divorcee?”

Manav became silent. He was thinking of something. After a while, He said slowly but clearly, “I am putting up this proposal after much thinking. Don’t worry Anita. It is not the impulsive talk of a teenager. It is the considered opinion of a matured man. We will live together under one roof and start a new life.”

“What do you mean?”

“We will marry and stay back in India.” Manav knew what he was talking.

“How can you marry a woman you hardly know? You must know her antecedents before making such a proposal.”

“I don’t want to know your past. Don’t tell me about your antecedents which will prejudice my opinion towards you. I don’t want to know whom you married and why he divorced you. I will never ask you. Okay?”

“But it is my duty to inform you of my past before you marry me. You have right to know and decide whether you should marry me or not.”

“I don’t want to listen and get sick of it. I want to regard you as a personification of all virtues and no vice. If I know the truth, I might be disappointed. Please keep it a secret.”

“Manav, you need to inform your parents that you are marrying a divorced woman otherwise they will be hard on you.”

“Anita I have come a long way in life. I don’t want to marry to satisfy my parents. I am marrying you for my good. They have to accept anybody whom I marry, as their daughter in law.”

“No Manav, You can neither revolt against the society nor can you revolutionize it. You will be happier without challenging the social norms. I am sure your parents will object to this marriage. They don’t let you live happily if you marry a divorcee. You better convince them before marriage.”

“Convince them? That is impossible. They will never be convinced. I will marry you even if they oppose.”

“Then, we will marry and start a new life in America.” she said firmly and they both laughed. After a while, she held his hands and kissed them softly. There was a storm in the mind of Anita. She had the guilt that she had not informed him that she had a son by name Nikhil. She opened her mouth to speak out but she became tight-lipped again because she was sure that Manav would not marry her if she comes to know of Nikhil. She decided to keep the existence of Nikhil a secret as long as possible.

“I love you Manav “she said and hugged him with full force.

“I love you too” said Manav solemnly.

They held each other’s hand very tightly and placed their head against each other unmindful of the people around watching them clandestinely.

“How many children shall we have?” Manav asked Anita looking into her face.

“You are very naughty,” she beamed as she hit him softly at the back of his head with love.

The lunch was served on train. They ate well and settled down to take a small nap. Manav was awakened by the loud noises on the platform. When he woke up he saw a mob of Minorities extremists on the platform howling and shouting “Allah O Akbar and attacking the next carriage. The forerunner in the mob was Aman. He was hurling petrol bombs at the carriage. Manav sensed serious trouble and shouted, Anita wake up. Anita who was napping for a while suddenly woke up and stared moving towards the door. He also moved towards the door and jumped out, and expected Anita to do the same but Anita could not.

Immediately he saw petrol bombs being hurled into the carriage which set the entire carriage into flames. There was thick smoke and scores of people were shouting and screaming. They were all burned down to ashes in an hour and Manav stood petrified unable to help Anita. There was huge crowd around, and the people were growing restless. He waited on the platform for four hours and gave complaint to the railway authorities and to the police. They were too busy to help him. He thought he should stay there for a day or two until he will find out what happened to Anita. He saw people putting out the fire and the entire area cordoned off. They were

busy removing charred bodies from the burnt carriage. Suddenly he noticed Anita in the crowd. He ran to her and instinctively hugged her. Manav was very angry that the terrorists had set fire to the carriage carrying the pilgrims returning from Ayodhya after doing voluntary work there. The people were talking that Aman, the Chief operative of a Pakistan based terrorist organization was behind the attack. He would have smashed the head of Aman had he caught him there but Aman had disappeared from the scene. Manav and Anita waited for the relief train and left for Bangalore next day.

Chapter 31

A confrontation with the parents

Manav sat one morning looking out of the window. He was thinking of informing his parents of his decision to marry Anita. But he shuddered for a moment imagining their negative reaction. ‘Will my parents agree to the marriage of their son to a divorcee?’ he asked himself and he knew the answer was an emphatic ‘no’. He shook his head and said to himself that they would never agree to that marriage and he would not give Anita for their sake. He bemoaned for several days for he knew that the time has come to separate himself from the parents for ever. He finally decided to inform the parents whether they approve the marriage or not. He took courage to inform them that night after dinner.

“Dad, I have decided to get married soon.” He announced coyly.

“Good. It is a wise decision. We were about to inform you that we have seen a beautiful girl for your marriage. You will not reject her, we are sure.” Jay spoke in a loud voice elated.

“I will marry a girl of my choice.” He said in unambiguous terms.

“We have no objection,” Jay said enthusiastically. “We show you 10 girls from whom you will choose one, Okay?”

“It is not okay, Dad. It is not at all okay. I have a girl in mind whom I will marry.”

“Not a bad idea, Manav. Tell us who that fortunate one is. We welcome her.”

“No, you will not. Even if you welcome her, Mom will not. I know for sure.”

“Why? What is wrong with her? Why do you think so?”

“She is a divorcee.”

“Divorcee...? Are you going to marry a divorcee? Are you in your senses? What are you talking?”

“I know what I am talking. I have met a girl by name Anita. She is my dream girl. I have decided to marry her. I have promised that I would

marry her. She appears to have suffered too much in life. I wish to marry her and give her comfort.”

Jay and Sushi sat like statue for a few minutes wondering at his naïve talk. “We are traditional people. We have not heard of marriage with a divorcee. Nobody in our community has come forward to marry a divorced woman. We have thousands of unmarried girls, and why will anybody opt for marrying a divorcee. If she were a normal woman, she would not have divorced her husband. I will never let this marriage take place. If you marry her we disown you forever.” Sushi told him in no uncertain terms.

“Dad, what do you say? Why don’t you convince mom?”

“Manav, we never expected that you would hurt us so much. You have hit us where it hurts us most. We will never approve of this marriage. We disown you.” Jay warned his son.

“I have decided to marry Anita in the office of the Sub-Registrar on the 19th of this month. I expect both of you to be present to bless the couple. If you don’t come to my marriage, I will never come back to this house again.”

“We don’t expect you to come back if you marry her. The door of this house will be closed to you for the rest of your life. Think before you act.”

“I don’t care. I just don’t care. I will marry her.”

“Leave this house immediately or else I will have to ask you to get out of my house. I give you 30 minutes.” Jay was panting in rage.

Manav came out in half an hour from his room with his baggage in hand, having been infuriated at the attitude of his parents. He went out to the street and hired an auto to reach a Hotel near Majestic. Jay and Sushi went into their room and closed the door in a huff.

Manav explained to Anita that evening how he tried to convince his parents and how they responded to him; and declared that he would never go into that house again. He shifted his baggage to Anita’s house at her insistence. Manav and Anita registered their marriage at Sub-Registrar’s office within a month. Jay and Sushi did not attend the marriage ceremony. Manav did not go home to meet his parents after their marriage. Both of them decided to go back to America to try their luck again. They booked tickets to Cleveland through Air India.

Chapter 32

Bad days are here again

One morning Lily got up from her bed and found that she was too weak to go to work. She approached a Physician known to her. The doctor examined her thoroughly and shook her head.

“Is there anything wrong?” Lily asked anxiously.

The doctor replied in a monotone. “You seem to have lump in your breast. I recommend you to an oncologist. You need to undergo biopsy urgently. Do you have medical insurance?”

“I am still on student’s visa and I don’t have medical insurance.”

“You seem to have serious problem. I advice you to get back to India and undergo detailed test for cancer.” She was feeling sorry for Lily.

She felt that an avalanche had fallen on her. She went to her apartment weeping. Next morning, she skipped work and stayed home brooding what was going to happen. She contacted many Indian doctors to know if she could undergo operation in America without medical insurance. They all advised her to go back to India. She decided to leave job and go back to India. Perhaps I may come back after a few days if the lump in the lymph node proves to be benign, she consoled herself. She was packing her luggage in fifteen days to return to India. Lily was thoroughly disappointed at the turn of events as she feared that her dream would remain a dream.

Lily approached Dr.Vivek, an oncologist, in a private hospital who examined her thoroughly and asked

“Where do you live?”

“...In J P Nagar.”

“I see. I also live in J P Nagar. I have my own medical facility where I conduct all tests and operate cancer patients. I charge you nominally. Why don’t you come there for tests tomorrow?”

“Okay, doctor. I will meet you tomorrow in your medical facility. I desire to undergo thorough check up.”

He slowly raised his head and asked,

“Where do you work?”

“I was working in America. If the lump is benign, I will go back to America.”

“I was in Washington D C for two years. That is a great country.”

“That is very true, doctor, I did not want to come back. This lump ruined my life. Otherwise I would not have come back.”

“Have you brought your parents with you?”

“My father died even before I was born. My mother brought me up. Now she is lying in bed after a paralytic stroke. She needs my help. I have to face this world alone.”

“Don’t worry. I will help you. Come tomorrow for a check up.”

Next morning she went in search of Vivek’s hospital. When she entered his medical facility, he was there. She waited outside his chamber for his call as he was busy talking to another doctor, Sajjan.

“Vivek, I am amazed that you were able to establish such a big medical facility in a span of five years. I think I will not be able to establish such a facility in all my life.” Sajjan was flattering Vivek

“It needs lot of skill. You know what I mean.”

“I guess but I want to do honest practice. For me, the popularity of the hospital is more important, and I strive to build the best one in this neighborhood.”

“Honesty, popularity and stuff like that are all old ideas. They will not take you anywhere. You have to adopt better techniques now to make quick bucks.”

“How?”

“I leave it to your imagination. You are too innocent. I pity you.”

“Vikram, I need your advice.”

“Look Sajjan, There is a patient sitting outside. She has come for tests. She needs to undergo biopsy. You stay with me and see how I will take her for a ride.”

“Take her for a ride? What do you mean?”

“If you are honest, you cannot make money. I have built these assets in a span of five years what an honest doctor cannot do in fifty years. I don’t wait all my life to become rich.”

Sajjan stood up and said,

“I thought you were a great surgeon. I now know that you are a cheat. I am sure you will be in Jail.”

“I have so much of influence in the corridors of power that nobody can touch me.

“I must go now. Bye.” Sajjan left the place.

Vikram walked out to meet Lily.

“How are you doing?”

“I am fine, doctor. I am ready to take test.”

“Come in.” He called her in and took her to the operation theater. In an hour she was sent back. He performed biopsy on her and carried out test to diagnose whether the lump was benign or malignant. The tests revealed that it was malignant and she was in an advanced stage of cancer. Vikram found out that she could live for another two years. She came back next day for his diagnostic report.

“Doctor, am I suffering from Cancer?” She was anxious to know.

“I wish you were not, but I must say that you have cancer. You are in advanced stage of cancer. It has spread to kidney and liver. We will have to conduct a major operation immediately.”

“How much do you charge for the operation?”

“I normally charge 50,000 Rupees but in your case I will charge only 40,000 Okay?”

“When will you operate me, doctor?”

“You must be here next Monday morning, at nine. Bring someone with you who will sign the papers along with you.”

“Okay doctor. I will come for operation next Monday.” She went out of the hospital, her head reeling and her body trembling.

Sunday morning, she was walking on the pavement of Jayanagar when someone suddenly accosted her. She turned around to catch the glimpse of the man who was calling her by name. It was Manav.

“When did you come back?” There was surprise in his voice.

“A month ago” she said, lowering her head. She could not face him. She felt she should leave the place instantly.

“Where is your friend Hari now?”

“I never met him after you left” she said sadly.

“You said you were going to marry him,”

Tears rolled down her cheeks. She controlled herself and went away. Manav stood there for some time and walked away slowly. Two days later, he was reading a novel in his study. The phone rang and he lifted the phone.

“Do you recognize my voice?” Lily was talking at the other end.

“For a moment I could not recognize it, but now I do. What is the matter?”

“I have to talk to you urgently. May I come to you now?”

Manav was uncertain when he said, “You may if you please,”

Lily was at his door in about 45 minutes. She came in and settled down in a chair. She was meek and humble, and spoke in a low voice that startled Manav. He was surprised that she had changed completely in a matter of few months. He raised his eyebrow, and looked at her enquiringly. Lily was sitting like a statue. She was not inclined to start any conversation. Finally he broke silence and asked “Anything serious?” She remained silent for a few more minutes and said slowly.

“Manav, I apologize to you for my misbehavior while in America. Can we forget everything and make a new beginning?”

“Forget everything? That is impossible. Not in my lifetime. Do you have anything else to tell me? He asked gruffly.

“Yes. My mother suffered paralytic stroke very recently and she is bed-ridden. I have to face the world alone from now on.”

“You have Hari with you.”

“Don’t taunt me like this.” She said irritably, “Hari is a debauch. I hate to take his name.”

“So you lied to me that you carried his baby in your womb.”

“Yes, you were so crazy that you would not have left me to myself, had I not dissuaded you like that.”

“What do you want from me now?”

“I need some money.”

“Why do you need money?”

“I need 100,000 immediately. Don’t ask me why.”

“When will you return it?”

“I don’t know if I will be able to return it.”

“In that case I must refuse. I don’t have that much money to pay you.”

“I came here with some hope. It doesn’t matter. I will make some other arrangement,” she said and walked away like a whirlwind. Manav sat there undisturbed. He was not sorry for his blunt refusal. For a moment, he was rather glad that he got an opportunity to show his wrath and he did not care for her. But he became pale the very next moment when he realized that that he talked so rudely to a person who gave him shelter in America for so long.

“You gave me support for two years in a foreign country but I refused to pay her 2200 dollars. I am no better human than she is.” He bemoaned for the whole day. She had not left her address or phone number. He wished to contact her but he could not. He became angry at his own insolence and went berserk. He threw his book down and walked hither and thither around his room. Unable to stay calm, he went out of the house and was roaming around the nearby shopping complex raving mad. He was muttering now and then ‘shame on me.’ He was roaming over the shopping area for about a week in the hope of meeting her again.

Lily sat looking blankly out of the window when she reached home. She was recollecting her days with Manav. “Manav was so effeminate, lovable and honest. He loved her so much and so sincerely. I was so crazy to put him away and run behind that dude, Hari. I insulted Manav so much that I cannot show my face to him now. He will never excuse me. I deserve his wrath” She thought and her eyes became wet.

Next Monday she underwent a four hour operation. She was kept on ICU for two days. Immediately after her operation, Dr. Vikram rang up to one Vijay,

“Vijay, you are lucky. Your father will surely survive. Bring him to the hospital immediately. We have a kidney ready for transplantation.

“How did you get it?”

“A girl has arrived in India from America. She is no one to support her. She is all alone in this world. She is the kind of victim I want. I removed kidney from her. Make haste.”

In an hour, a car arrived with a patient of seventy years old. The patient was taken to the operation theater and kidney was transplanted. Vikram collected 500,000 Rupees for transplanting the kidney.

Manav and Anita were scheduled to leave Bangalore on the 14th and they were making preparations for travel when one day Anita returned home with her mother from the hospital a bit agitated and anxious. Manav asked her if everything was okay.

“I have something to tell you. It is important.”

“What is it?”

“Today I had taken my mother for a check up. She was complaining of severe headache. The doctor advised her to undergo detailed test, after testing her asked me to admit her to the hospital for immediate operation.

He has diagnosed that she is suffering from brain tumor. She has to undergo operation next Monday. They say it is a very risky operation and the patient might die. I am terribly afraid, Manav. I want you to be with me when they operate her.”

“Sure. I will be with you. Don’t worry, Anita. Don’t worry.”

“I cannot leave my mother alone at this stage and go away to America.” It may take three to four months before I reach America. Please cancel my ticket. Will you?”

“Okay, it is an emergency. It is very sad. It is sad because your mummy has to undergo operation. It is equally sad that you cannot come with me. I don’t know. I don’t know. I may have to postpone my journey too.”

“Manav, I hope to join you soon.”

“Take care of your mother and pray God. Everything will be all right. I shall be with you in the hospital next Monday morning.” He went out as he could not see agony on Anita’s face.

It was Monday morning. Manav joined Anita at the hospital as Janaki was undergoing surgery in the same facility where Lily was undergoing surgery. She survived surgery and was moved to the ICU. The ICU had two beds. In the other bed was lying a young woman of twenty-five. Manav was trying to see her face, as the face appeared to be familiar to him, when he suddenly identified her. It was Lily. There was nobody around her. She was lying alone in the ICU breathing heavily.

“Manav, nobody is allowed to stay here. We must wait outside”. Anita reminded him as she went out. Manav sat there staring at Lily’s face. He heard her groaning. He went to her, and she slowly opened her eyes and asked for water. No nurse was around. Manav acted at once and poured water to her mouth. She gulped three times and opened her eyes searching for someone.

“Lily, it is Manav. Don’t feel you are lonely in this hour of crisis. I am sitting by your bedside.”

“Oh, it is Manav! I wanted to meet you but then I thought you would be angry with me. I am dying Manav. I am dying of cancer.”

“Why did not you tell me earlier?”

“I behaved so badly with you. I thought that you would never excuse me. Excuse me Manav if you can. I am the meanest woman, and I hate myself. You should not care for me. Please go away.”

The nurse suddenly appeared and asked Manav to go out. “Nobody is allowed to stay in the ICU. You must wait outside”, the nurse ordered.

Manav and Anita sat outside on a bench.

“Who is she?”

“An acquaintance...”

“You are lying. She is more than that. She was repeating your name so often. There was contrition in her voice and talk. It appears that she had wronged you.”

Manav did not like to discuss Lily with Anita. Lily was a closed chapter and it was not a proper time to delve on their relationship.

“I will talk to you about her sometime. I must go now. Take care. I shall be back in the evening.”

He came back in the evening, not to see Anita’s mother but to see Lily. Lily was not there. He asked the nurse where she was shifted. She was discharged from the hospital in the afternoon, she replied and went away. He sat on a bench and wept. Later on he consoled himself and went to see Anita and her mother.

The same afternoon Lily came home in an auto. She lay in her bed helpless, mirthless and hapless for about a month until her wounds healed and she was fit to walk around. She would get up in the morning and wander around the Jayanagar Shopping Complex until she was too tired to walk. She would go home and rest. For hours together she would look out of the window or stare at the roof. The disease and subsequent operation had sapped of her energy and spirits.

Chapter 33

A saga of prosperity

Manav’s date of departure to America was fast approaching. He could not reconcile to the idea of going back alone. He decided to postpone his journey to coincide with Anita’s and informed her of his decision, which she appreciated. The operation was over as scheduled, but her mother died. Days passed by. A month later Anita and Manav went back to America. They moved to Anita’s house in Cleveland and Anita got the job of a Nurse in a health facility. She started earning decent salary. Then life became smooth but Manav was not happy because he had no job. He was spending most of his time thinking of his past. One day he decided not to brood over the past, but to find a job for his living. Manav searched for job in vain and became more and more frustrated with the passage of time and lost hope of finding one. No one came forward to sponsor him He got a house-keeping job in a motel, which he accepted and started working on a salary of 250/- a week, hoping for better days. He had to sweep floor, supply towels to rooms and make beds. It was such a disgusting job to a man with good education, but fate willed that way.

Joseph, the head of the motel, was an Indian. He was living alone in an apartment opposite to Anita’s house. He was doing some shady business. He would come home at 2 a.m. in the morning. On many occasions he

would bring home a woman at that odd hour. He would not be seen in the morning. He would be sleeping till midday. His nocturnal activities raised suspicion in the minds of Manav and Anita. Six months passed by. One morning, the owner of the Motel knocked at the door and Manav opened the door. He rushed in with a big baggage and sat on the couch, trembling. He was in a hurry.

“Look, I have no time to explain. I’m living alone in the apartment opposite to your house. I have apprehension that I will be arrested because I’ve been dealing in narcotic drugs, and yesterday, by accident I solicited a policewoman in disguise. The police may be here any moment. Here is my treasure.” He handed over the baggage containing hundreds of wads of notes of 100-dollar bills and said, “This baggage contains three million dollars. Keep it safely until I return from jail if I am arrested otherwise I will come and collect after a week. If I die, this money will be yours.”

He walked away in haste without waiting for a reply. As soon as he entered his apartment the police swung into action and arrested him. Manav stood motionless. He did not know what to do with the money. They kept the money in a safe place and guarded the baggage day and night.

Three months later, Manav was reading a newspaper. He read a news item that Joseph who was arrested on drug peddling charges was indicted, and the case would go for trial. It was not easy to safeguard his money for Manav and Anita. But they decided to safeguard his money as theirs. Another six months passed by when they read in the newspaper that the man was sentenced to life imprisonment. Another three months passed. A newspaper carried the news that a man of that name died in prison. Now they possessed three million dollars!

Manav suddenly became rich. Anita was overjoyed that luck was in their favor. They bought a house, a new car and good furniture. They had \$2,000,000 in cash. It was a grand take off to their otherwise dull life. With millions of dollars with them, Anita changed and Manav too. She became arrogant, saucy and impudent. Manav was no longer a meek, hapless person. They worshipped only one thing on earth, and that was money. Their lives centered round their investments and interests.

“Manav, we could not go on a honeymoon in India because my mother was ill. I am longing to go on a long tour, if you can arrange one.” She suggested.

“I have been always your tour organizer. I shall arrange a grand tour to the west coast.”

Manav arranged for the tour. On the day of departure, they boarded the plane at Cleveland and went to Denver en route to Las Vegas. They stayed at the Venetian. It was a wonderful experience. They visited as many as 13 Casinos including Mandalay Bay, Barry’s, New York, New York, and

MGM and so on. They went to Aladdin and experienced the artificial rain, artificial sky and such other amazing creations. Two days later they hired a car on rental and went to Hoover Dam. From there they went to Williams. There they stayed in a motel for two days and went to Grand Canyon. They enjoyed the bird's eye view of Grand Canyon on a Helicopter. Then they went to Grand Canyon in their rented car. They enjoyed the formation of Rocks and nature's bounty. They went to Meteor Crater next day and saw the impact of falling Meteor on Earth's surface. They also went round the Planetarium. Third day they left for Montezuma's Castle. From there they went Sedona viewing numerous canyon rocks all along the route. It was a wonderful experience, which Manav and Anita would never forget in their lifetime.

Next morning they returned to Las Vegas to board a flight to Los Angeles. They were waiting for check in at the airport when it was announced that the plane had been cancelled and they were put in a hotel. Next morning they went to board the plane. Manav got up from his seat to take out cookies from his bag and searched for his hand baggage in the trunk above. Little later Manav could not control the nature's call. He went towards toilet. The airhostess got afraid and told him that he should not get up from seat for half an hour after the take off. He came back and stood near his seat. He stood until the stipulated time was over and when the half an hour passed he went to toilet again. An airhostess followed him through her eyes and kept watch on him. It took twenty minutes by the time he finished. The airhostess meanwhile informed the pilot that a man was hiding in the toilet for twenty minutes and that roused suspicion in the mind of the crew staff. They waited for him and when he came out they held him and questioned. Manav was trying his best to convince that they were from India, and they were not terrorists. He told them that there are no terrorists in India. But the plane landed in the nearest airport where the police, fire-trucks and bomb-sniffing dogs were lined up in the runway. Manav had read such stories in the newspapers but did not expect that would happen to him. He was disenchanted with America. Wandering in America was no more pleasant. It could be dangerous too. After a lot of enquiry the officials condescended and let Manav go

Manav said 'enough is enough.' We will cancel the tour and get back", but Anita calmed him down. When they were in Los Angeles they stayed at Disney Hotel for three days. They toured Hollywood and Beverly Hills. Next day they went to Universal Studios and spent the entire day there. They saw Terminator Two, Anaconda, and Jurassic Park and went round Universal studios. That was a great day of their life and Anita was thanking Manav throughout their journey. They stayed in the Disney land next day and experienced the Lincoln's sound track and award for Whyne. The marvelous progress in 3 D films enthralled them and the Disney

Hotel's workers' Grand procession at 7 p m reminded them of the great processions they had ever seen in many gala films.

Next morning they set out by road from Los Angeles to San Francisco along the coast. It was another great experience to view the greatest ocean in the world by their side so calm that deserves the name Pacific. They went round Morro Bay and Cambria Bay at sunset. The amber color falling on the pacific waters was a wonderful sight. They stopped for a night at Monterey Bay and saw the world famous Aquarium. Next evening they were at San Francisco, a world apart from New York. The roads of San Francisco were as crooked as human mind and the ups and downs of San Francisco's road were unique in the whole world. It was the coldest city they had seen after New York. They went to Golden Gate Bridge and enjoyed the scenic view of the Bay. They went to NAPA Valley and other interesting places. It was a great tour and very few can afford to go on such a tour. They flew back to Cleveland next day with great satisfaction. The great moment of their life yielded place to worst moments of their life, at a time they never anticipated.

A few months later Manav brought a guest to the house, a tall young black girl and introduced her to Anita.

"Anita, it is Courtney. She was my classmate at the University."

"I am pleased to meet you. Come on in. Sit down." Anita said but she was not really pleased. She stood up from her seat, went in, dressed herself up as quickly as she could and appeared in the hallway. Anita told her as she picked up the car key,

"Well. I am in a hurry. I must be going. We will talk some other time, okay?"

"Meet you soon, Anita."

Courtney said casually as she was engaged in a conversation with Manav. After talking of weather and Politics and renewing her acquaintance with Manav, she left for home promising to meet again. Anita was worried now. Anita decided to warn Manav to be careful with that woman.

A few days later Courtney was sitting in Manav's house when Anita returned home. Courtney and Manav were in a jolly mood, and they did not even care that Anita was there. Anita was very upset. When Courtney was gone, she spoke to Manav.

"Manav, these days you don't seem to care for me."

"What makes you think like that? I know you are jealous of Courtney. Courtney is a finely-bread nice girl. I know her for the last three years. You shouldn't be mean."

"Say whatever you want but I don't like her. I don't like her coming to our house as often as she does."

“Anita, you are no better than other women. You have a typical Indian mindset. You are suspicious and narrow-minded. I am disgusted with your behavior. I am sorry. I cannot take it”.

“Manav, try to understand. We are in America but we are not Americans. We don’t become westerners by living in the west. The westerners have a culture of their own. We cannot copy it.”

“I don’t care for the Indian society. I can do anything I feel like. I am not under anybody’s control. I am a freeman.”

“Then why did you ask me to live with you? You could have remained single. Nobody would have questioned you. If I had known that you are what you are, I would not have married you.” she walked away into her room closing the door behind.

Manav was angry but controlled his anger. They did not speak for several days. One day he spoke to her softly. “Anita, do you remember there was a lady patient in the ICU when your mother was operated upon.”

“Yes. I remember. Who was she?”

“She was my lady love once. I intended to marry her. But a man by name Hari came from nowhere into her life and she went crazy. She left me and tried to marry him.”

“Did she marry him”? Anita was flabbergasted to hear that news and asked rather hurriedly.

“No. She was hobnobbing with him for a few months and she asked him to marry her it seems. Do you know what he told her? He told her that he couldn’t marry every woman he sleeps with. She was thoroughly disappointed. She was more disappointed a few days later when she came to know that she had breast cancer.” Manav became silent for a while and recollected Lily lying in ICU uncared. Anita turned purple. She did not want Manav to know that Hari was her ex-husband. She knew that Manav hated Hari, and if he comes to know that she was his ex-wife, he will be disgusted with her too. She wanted to change the topic of conversation. She said, “Manav, I am now afraid that Courtney will snatch you from me,” and she continued,

“I am really afraid of losing you, Manav. She is a very dangerous woman. You should avoid her”

“Don’t worry. I can take care of myself.” He said carelessly.

Anita was not happy with his reply she thought that he did not understand the gravity of the situation.

“Manav, you say that you know her for three years. What kind of a person you think she is?”

“She is the nicest person that I have ever come across. I never had any problem with her.”

Now Anita was seriously cross with him.

Chapter 34

One day, Jay was sitting in the family room talking to his wife.

“Sushi, Manav went back to America and abandoned us. We wish he would be by our side during our old age.”

“He has never been with us in the last five years. He has changed a lot. He was so humble and caring. I thought at least he would send us some money. He knows that we are in old age without any pension. We have spent all the money we had. Now it is time he should help us.” Sushi said in anguish and suggested,

“Why don’t you write to him explaining our position?”

“I don’t like to beg before him. He is old enough to understand our difficulties.”

“He may be thinking we are having enough money to live comfortably.”

“Or he may not be thinking at all about us.”

“Either way we are losers. We shall write to him and find out what he can do for us.”

“I have no hope. I will write for your sake.”

A few days later, they mailed a letter to Manav. Manav went through the letter and became restless. That evening he spoke to Anita. Anita was in a good mood and that facilitated great deal of conversation between them.

“I have received mail from my father.”

“What has he written? Is everything Okay there.”

“Listen, I read out the letter for you.” He started reading.

“My dear Manav, you left home deserting your parents in their old age. You should be feeling bad for having done it. We have excused you. We have not disowned you. You are still our beloved son. We can imagine how difficult it is for you to go to a foreign country and make a living. You must be living a hard life. Our situation is worse. We have no pension. I am too weak to work at this age. We spent 1,000,000 on your education when days were good. Now we are broke. We don’t have money. Your mother is growing weaker and weaker, day after day. We have to spend a lot on her medicine. If you think that we have helped you anytime please help us now. We expect you to send regularly at least 200 dollars a month. I am awaiting your letter. Affectionately,”

“Our people will never improve. They always think that the money they spend on their children is a sort of investment for secured returns at a later stage in life. They don’t realize that it is their duty to bring up their children. They expect a reward for bringing them up. Mean creatures”, Anita blurted out.

“Don’t be rude on them. They are having hard days in life. They need help now because they are old.”

“We don’t raise charities here to pay them. We don’t have money to pay them every month. How can we pay them 200 dollars every month? We have to pay mortgage for the house, we have to pay mortgage for your car and my car, and we have to pay water bill, electricity bill, and gas bill. We have to pay association fees. We have huge expenditure. We don’t have money to pay them pension. Do they know the value of 200 dollars? They think it is two hundred rupees. Mean people.”

“What shall we do now?”

“Send them 100 dollars and write to them that we are in great difficulty and we cannot pay every month”

“I can’t do that.”

“You can’t do more than that. Did they care for your feelings? Did they attend your marriage and bless you? They asked you to quit the house. How could they do it to their only son?”

Manav was silent. He considered her line of thinking and felt that they did not deserve any sympathy. Next day he wrote back to his father.

“My dear father, I have sent 100 dollars for your use. I regret to inform you that I am unable to help you more. It may not be possible to send money every month. I suggest that you should join job and earn. In America not many fathers depend on their son for living. We must emulate their spirit and mend our ways. I wish all success in your search for employment. Tell mother not to waste money on medicines. She has to do lot of exercise to keep her body fit. Tell her that we Indians eat too much. She needs to eat only 100 gm everyday. She shall not eat oily stuff. She shall not eat Ghee and sugar. We shall eat only once a day to keep the body trim. Tell mom not to put on weight. She should improve her shape and size. I will send a diet control booklet for her use. You should not worry about money. Money comes, and money goes. Money is not everything in life. You should learn to live a frugal life in old age. You must become independent and loath to beg anybody for money. You learn to live on what you earn. Give less importance to worldly life and concentrate more on spiritual life. Do Bhajans everyday. That brings you solace. Take care of your health. Yours affectionately, Manav

“Post” said the postman as he threw a letter into the hallway. Jay picked it and went through the letter. He became thoroughly disappointed. He called his wife Sushu and read out the letter to her. When he finished reading, they remained silent for a while. Slowly spoke Jay. “I was a fool to write to him.”

Three months passed by. They had to live on a monthly income of 5000. It was just enough for paying bills they lived on one meal a day and gave up coffee. Jay walked long distances to save money. They were in dire strait. One day they saw an advertisement that retired persons needed for marketing credit cards. Jay went to the advertiser and sought employment.

The advertiser was a - Aman. He had floated a new finance company. Jay was told to wait for the CEO. After waiting for thirty minutes, he was called in and when he went in, he saw Aman sitting in the chair. Are you Mr. Jay?" he asked.

"Yes, my name is Jay." Aman had seen his father several times when young. He concealed his identity from Jay. Putting up a professional look on his face, he continued,

"Do you have children"?

"I have a son. He is working in America."

"What is his name?"

"His Manav is Manav."

"Why do you want to work in this old age?"

"Manav is not well settled there. He is not in a position to help me."

"I know your son, Manav. You can start working for us from tomorrow."

"Thank you so much" Jay said in great gratitude.

"But you have to deposit Rupees 200,000/- before you join us. Of course, we pay 20% interest every month on your deposit. Is it acceptable to you?"

"Of course it is acceptable to me," said Jay. He was left only with last 500,000 Rupees, and he agreed to deposit 200,000 Rupees with the new company.

Aman advertised in newspapers that he would pay 20% interest and invited deposit from the public. The general public poured money into his coffers. His company offered to pay a brokerage of 13% for those who canvassed for the company's deposits. Soon the company was buzzing with nearly 100 agents working for the company. The company collected huge some of money. Jay was happy that the company gave him 20,000 Rupees by way of interest, another 10,000 by way of brokerage, and he got a handsome pay of 6,000 Rupees a month. He made 36,000 each month. Then he thought that he does not need anybody's help. He can tell his son that he does not need his help. He wanted to write to his son about his growing fortune but he was too angry to write to him.

He canvassed for his company among his relatives and friends. They all invested money. He started earning huge amount by way of brokerage. His bank balance increased from three hundred thousand to four hundred thousand. "I will be getting back my 200,000 Rupees to make up the total sum to 600,000 Rupees. In a span of 10 years I will have made one hundred million rupees. God is great!" He thought. One day his boss called him to his chamber and spoke to him gently.

"You are collecting your brokerage by way of check. Where do you invest it?"

"I always invest my money in fixed Deposits in banks."

“Why do you lose money?” In bank you get only eight percent interests. We pay 20 percent. You are losing 12 percent. It is up to you to invest in our company or in the bank.”

“I will think it over. Thank you,” he said as he came out. He really started thinking over. When so many people are investing there and getting huge sum of money by way of interest, why shall I invest in a bank for eight percent,’ he asked himself, ‘we retired people cannot make a living with bank interest. The retirement community is surviving today because the financial institutions are still paying high rate of interest.’ He thanked Government for not preventing the finance companies from paying high rate of interest. And next day he withdrew all money in his fixed deposits and brought cash to his boss. The boss was immensely pleased with him and his intelligence.

He took the bundle of notes and kept it in his table drawers. He wrote a deposit certificate with his own hand and sent it for the signature of the vice president. Jay was the happiest person that day. He would get 12 percent more now. He started investing all his salary and brokerage in the company deposit. More and more fixed deposit receipts he collected as months rolled by.

Ahmed called Aman one fine morning to his chamber. “How much have we collected by way of deposit?”

“...500 millions.”

“Is it lying in our account?”

“No. We have lent it to twenty companies.”

“You mean...On paper?”

“Yes”

“Where is money now?”

“I have sent to your house 400 million.”

“Good.” How much have you retained?”

“Not much. I have retained only 100 millions”

“Keep it. You need it.”

“Ahmed you are generous. God bless you.” he said as he hung up.

One morning Jay went to office a little early. The doors were not open. The office was locked. He waited for the office to open. It was 11 in the morning and the office was not opened. A number of employees and investors waited outside but the door was locked. They became panic and marched to police station. The Police officer asked them to give their complaint in writing and assured them that he would find out the owner and see he paid back all the money they had lent to him.

But Jay knew that he lost his money. Now it was impossible to make a living. He came home and wept. Sushi consoled him and cursed her fate.

“We are not without support. We will seek the support of Manav once again, and he will not refuse to help us. He must be told in a nice way. That is all.” Sushi said emphatically.

“Now we have no option but to seek his help,” moaned Jay.

Next morning Jay wrote to Manav

“My dear son, we have now lost the little money we had. We are now broke. When we were rich we helped you to come up in life. Now the table has turned and we are in dire strait and we think that you are doing well. It is your duty to help your parents in need. Don’t think that we are a burden to you. You have a duty to look after us. We are ready to come and stay with you in America. Please, my son, don’t say “No”.

Ten days later, the letter had reached Manav. He read the letter with great interest and was amused. That night he drew Anita to conversation.

“Anita, my father has written a letter. Shall I read out for you?”

“You may if you want to.”

“There is something interesting”

“Go ahead then”

He read out the letter. When he had finished he looked at her intently for her reaction.

The letter had raised great storm in her. Her face was red with anger.

“What have you decided?”

“I don’t take unilateral decision. We have to take decision together”

“I have made my decision. I don’t want anybody in the house.”

“But they are my parents. They have a right to live here.”

“This is not India to exercise that right. I don’t want them in my house. Is it clear?”

“How can I refuse to take them in? It is the duty of every son to look after his parents especially in their old age. What will they think of me? What will the society think of me? I can’t say no to them! Anita, please cooperate.”

“Listen, you may call them to America if you please but I will be independent. I will not let them stay for more than three months. Okay?” She warned him. Manav thought that she was talking in a fit of rage.

Manav wrote to his father.

“Dear father, it is not easy to spend time in America. You will be bored. But don’t complain later that I did not warn you. I am warning you again that you cannot stay here for more than three months.” Jay and Sushi thought that it was a welcome note and they prepared themselves to travel to America.

A month later Jay and Sushi arrived at the John Hopkins’s International Airport, and Manav brought them home. On the way, Sushi asked Manav,

“We were anxious to meet Anita. We expected her at the airport”

She had an urgent work. So she stayed back”

They talked of India, of friends and relatives on the way. After 45 minutes, they reached home.

“Your house is big” Jay observed from the road.

“Papa, this is a very small house in America.”

“By Indian standard, it is really a big house.”

“India is different. It is one third of America but its population is three times the American population. It means the ratio is one is to ten. In America each one has ten times the land an average Indian has. In India, an average Indian holds 30 by 40 ft. land. Here each American hold’s a quarter of an acre of land on the average. Americans are 10 times richer. An average American leads as luxurious a life as a rich Indian. In India, only one percent of the population can afford to hold fifteen hundred square feet house and a car. Here the poor live in houses bigger than that and possess cars which are much costlier.

“Great. We will stay here permanently. Sushi and I will apply for green card.”

“Provided you stay in America for six months” He said cryptically and with some curiosity he asked his father,

“Papa, how did you manage to get 100,000 Rupees to purchase tickets to America?”

“Your mother sold all her jewelry. I had not let her sell them even under most adverse circumstances, but that was the only way we could reach America. Anyway we are not going back without earning enough money. We know that you will give us permanent shelter here so that we may not have to go back.”

Now they had entered the house. Anita was sitting in the family room. She did not care to get up and greet Jay and his wife. Sushi came to Anita smiling and enquired her health with the usual courtesies. Her reply was short and curt. Then Jay came in. Anita was overbearing and behaved like an impertinent saucy fool. Manav was upset at her behavior but he could do nothing. The next day, when Anita was not home, Sushi started talking to her son. “My son, I am afraid that Anita would not like our staying here. We have come here spending our last 100,000 and we are left with nothing. We have closed our establishment there. We are now in a great predicament. Neither can we stay here nor can we go there. I don’t know what will become of your parents now.”

“Don’t worry mom, everything will be all right. Anita will learn to live with you.”

He left the place as he said it because he knew that Anita would never reconcile to their stay. Jay and Sushi sat there, gaping.

“Sushi, we did wrong in coming here. We should not have ventured to come here” Jay spoke in agony. Tear fell down Sushi’s eyes.

“It is too late to think of it now. We have no choice but to stay. If we go back, our people will mock at our stupidity and we will have to hang our head in shame. We will not be fit to show our face to our friends and relatives in India. Having come here, we will stay here permanently.” Sushi said resolutely.

Jay did not want to discourage his wife. Her attitude is positive and she is fully determined to face the difficulties and she will face it, he thought and kept quiet.

“Sushi, Manav has changed thoroughly. He is not that Manav we brought up. He is very different now. We wanted to make God out of him but he turned out to be devil.” he rued.

“Money corrupts man. As long as he had no money, he was god and when he got money he turned devil.” Sushi said in disenchantment.

“I think that that woman has changed him to devil.”

“Don’t think your Manav is not all that innocent.”

“Time will unveil the truth.” Sushi said placidly.

They heard the garage door open and after a minute, they heard the unlocking of the side door and found Manav and Anita entering into the house.

Chapter 35

An affront that they could not bear

Manav struck a deal to buy a Motel of 50 beds in the suburb of Cleveland, and came home in a hurry to break the news to Anita and his parents. Anita was not home. Manav became very pale but in a moment he regained his composure. He boasted of how he managed to convince the seller to sell the property to him at a low price. He was talking of how much money he would make out of his new motel and so on. Jay wanted to see America but so far he dared not ask his son because of his indifference towards them. That night, Manav was very well disposed towards them and Jay asked Manav with some hesitation.

“Manav, how far is Los Angeles from Cleveland.”

“It is very far. A trip to west coast and back would involve a travel of over 6000 miles and would cost 5000 dollars for two.”

“We cannot make it. Forget it.”

“I can take you if you want to visit. I will arrange a package tour to Las Vegas, Grand Canyon, San Diego, Los Angeles and San Francisco. It is a most sought after tour in America especially for people living in east side.”

“We don’t want you to spend so much money on us.”

“Don’t worry. Your son is now very rich. He can afford it.”

“We don’t know if we can accept his proposal. What will Anita think of us?”

Manav was very angry that she was not home since morning.

“Papa, don’t worry about Anita. It is my money. I will take you both. You will see those places in eight days, I assure you”, he said as he got up from his chair and went to his room.

Anita came home at mid-night and went straight to bed. When she came to know of Manav’s plan to take his parents to west coast, she vehemently opposed the idea.

“Manav, Just now you have bought a motel. You don’t have money to go on a tour. You have got to postpone this tour.” She said persuasively.

“Don’t worry about it. Tell me if you are interested to join the tour.”

“I am not interested in any tour. We get lot of fun if we go with people of our age. I don’t like going with old hags.”

“Anita, mind your tongue. You are not supposed to call my parents old hags.”

“They are old hags. I will tell them in their face. Nobody can stop me.” She went into her room.

Jay and Sushi heard the entire conversation but said nothing.

One evening all were talking in the family room. Anita was sitting quietly without participating.

“Manav, we have been here for the last three months. We feel so bad to give you both trouble by staying here,” Sushi said turning to Anita.

Suddenly Anita lifted her head like snake would raise its hood, looked at Sushi viciously and said, “Look ever since you came here there is no peace in the family. You know that you are giving us trouble. Why don’t you go away leaving us to ourselves?”

Sushi and Jay were trembling in anger. They really hated Anita now.

“We have not come to your house. We have come to our son’s house. We can stay as long as we like. This house is as much ours as it is yours.” Sushi was vociferous.

“This is not India. This is my house and I may refuse to accommodate you here.” She said laughing sardonically.

“Peace, Peace, I don’t want arguments here. Both of you will have to co-exist in this house.” Manav interposed.

“Manav, you keep quiet. I will speak today and I won’t stop for your sake. Either your parents stay in this house or I will. You have to choose between us.”

“I don’t want you both. You are really spoiling my mood. Both of you get lost.”

Manav walked into his room annoyed by Anita’s petulance. Anita went to her room and closed the doors behind her. Jay and Sushi sat there petrified.

Anita opened the doors in a few minutes, went straight into her car and drove away. Within three hours, she brought tickets and threw them into their face. Manav could not encounter her. He meekly submitted to her wish and expressed his inability to chastise her. In two weeks, they boarded a plane to India. Sushi recollected the affront she went through from time to time and wept throughout the journey but Jay consoled her and he himself broke down at times.

Manav was deeply disturbed by this episode. He was very sad that he could not satisfy his parents' aspirations. He knew that his parents would definitely disown him this time. He could not antagonize Anita and live peacefully. He gradually stopped brooding over the matter and forgot the incident. Jay and Sushi never forgot that incident. They did not write to him any letter after their return to India. Manav wrote several letters but they were not acknowledged or replied. He finally decided to stop writing to them. But he became restless day by day and started hating Anita. He would not reply her if she talked. He would give evasive and curt reply if he has to reply her. He stopped moving with her and started moving alone although he felt lonely. He would leave early in the morning and came to house late at night. Anita consoled him, begged pardon and even threatened him that she would quit him but that did not make any impact on Manav.

Chapter 36

Manav meets Meena in America

Once, Manav was returning to Cleveland from New York in a plane, more resigned than ever, pale, mirthless and uncertain as he had a feeling that fate was playing too much with him and he was just a pawn in its game. As he took the boarding pass and entered the lounge adjoining the gate he noticed an Indian girl entering the lounge with a small child in her arms. She resembled someone he knew and so he browsed through the database in his memory to recollect who it was until it struck his mind it was Meena and followed through his eyes until she settled down in a chair. His face became radiant all of a sudden.

“Hello, I am delighted to see you again.” He said as he sat down in the chair next to hers. He was really delighted to see her, the girl he liked and loved once.

She looked into his face and recognized him but she was feeling a little uncomfortable to see him there.

“It is a very pleasant surprise in deed!” She exclaimed as a formality but she was neither surprised nor did she think that the meeting was pleasant.

She was not enthusiastic to meet him there and she would have avoided him if she could.

“I am Manav, your friend. Did you recognize me?” He asked her.

“I saw you half an hour ago.” She replied giving him a cold stare; and Manav was not comfortable with her weird look.

“Then why didn’t you talk to me?”

“We have nothing to talk. My life is different now. I have come here as a domestic servant. Destiny is playing a cruel game with me.” She said, pointing towards a couple with a three year old child, “I have come here to work for them, as a nanny. Do you understand?”

He suddenly became serious. His grinning face transformed itself into a grimace.

“How long do you know them?”

“I hardly know them. I saw an advertisement in a newspaper and approached them. They agreed to take me with them. So, I am here.”

“How long do you intend to stay in America?”

“I have no intention of going back,” she replied, “I have no one back home in India. My mother died six months ago. I am left alone in this world now.”

Manav observed the couple that had brought her from a distance and remarked. “I don’t like them. They don’t appear to be refined. They could be cruel and nasty.”

“I have no one in America who could be of help to me in case of distress. I am very afraid what will become of me in a foreign country. I don’t know how they would behave with me.” She was uncertain in her voice.”

“But in spite of being in a precarious situation you were not happy to see the only contact here, why?”

“I did not want to show my face to you in such a sorrowful state. Most of the Indians come here for great jobs but I have come here for none too great a job. I am not proud of what I am doing here.”

“What you are doing is not shameful. You work for your living and that is what everybody does. It is a question of time. You too will get a job equal to your skill and ability.”

“Anyway, I have come to America to try my luck. Wish me well.”

“I wish you best of luck, it is a big gamble though,” he observed.

“It is the circumstance that forced me to take this bold decision. I lived alone after my mother died and got bored with the lonely life. I had nothing to look forward to in life. I saw an advertisement and met these guys. I hope this decision would change my life.”

“Do you have a passport with you?”

“They have taken away all my papers.”

“Do you have their address?”

“No, I am just sheepishly following them.”

“Do you have their telephone number, at least?”

“Yes. I have their telephone number.” She gave him an address book containing the telephone number. He entered the number in his diary and returned it, advising her to memorize that number. He also wrote his number in her address book. In a minute, she had both telephone numbers on her lips. During the flight they sat together and talked of their past. Manav narrated all that happened after he came to America. She narrated how her mother died, how she wandered in the city in search of a job, and how the cruel world treated her. The plane landed at New York. The couple gave a stare that terrified her and asked her to follow them. She followed the couple sheepishly. Manav noted the frightened expression on her face and signaled her to calm down as he proceeded towards the exit.

“You seem to be a fast girl. You endeared a stranger in a matter of minutes,” taunted Nataraj the employer.

“I know him for several years. He is like my brother and a well wisher too.”

“We don’t like your hobnobbing with anyone, got it?”

She walked with them silently.

Two months elapsed. One evening Manav entered the house and found telephone ringing. He picked up the phone and said “Hello”

“It is Meena speaking,” It was the voice of a scared young woman.

“Meena, I had been expecting your call for the last two months. How are you doing?” He spoke earnestly...

“Not all is well here, Manav. Once again I am in deep distress.”

She started weeping

“What happened?”

“They are very cruel to me. They don’t let me live in peace. I want to go back to India but they are not sending me away either. I am in great difficulty.”

“Can I take down your address”, he asked.

She gave him her address.

“Have you got your papers with you?”

“No. They refuse to give back my papers.”

“How could they?” He asked a little upset.

“The man is trying to sexually assault me and his wife is supporting him.”

“They can’t do that to you. I will help you out. Don’t do anything foolish in a hurry. Wait till next Saturday afternoon. I will see you in your house.”

“Thank you so much,” she said as she hung up the phone.

Next Saturday, Manav went to New York, searched and found out her address. He rang the doorbell. Anita opened the door.

Manav sat on the couch and she stood nearby.

“Now, we don’t have much time. We must make a snap decision. What do you want me to do?” he said

“Please take me away from here and arrange to send me to India. Once you helped me to escape from that hell in Bombay and again asking you for a help.” She said respectfully with folded hands.

“Do you have enough money to reach India?”

“No. They have not paid me a single penny since I came here.”

The doorbell rang and Meena opened the door. Mrs. Nataraj came in.

“She is the Lady of the house,” She announced.

“Hello, I am Manav, from Cleveland. I have come here to take Meena with me. She told me that she couldn’t work here anymore. If you can settle her dues, I will take her to Cleveland,” he announced resolutely.

“We don’t know who you are. We cannot send her with you.”

“Meena has told me what is happening here. If you refuse, we will call the police. Look, you cannot forcefully keep her. It is against the law. You must comply with her request or face consequence.”

“Do you want to go with this man?” the lady asked her disdainfully.

“I want to quit this job and go with him this very minute. I have already packed my luggage and I am ready to leave.”

Mrs. Natraj went in and talked to Mr. Natraj on phone for five minutes. She came out briskly and threw the passport and other papers along with twenty bills of 100 dollars. She shouted at Meena,

“Get out of here. Never come back here again!”

Chapter 37

A cohabitation that was mistaken

Anita was out of town when Manav brought Meena home. He became peevish and looked around the house. She was no where in or around the house. He saw a book and a billet on the dining table. He picked up the billet and read

“Dear, I am going to New York on vacation. I will return two weeks later. Take care, bye. Meena” He stood there with letter in hand, a little baffled. Meena called out from the foyer,

“Do you live alone here?”

“No, I am married at last,” he sighed.

“Where is she now?”

“She had gone to New York on vacation. That is what she has written in this billet, and I believe her.”

“When will she return?”

“She may return two weeks later.”

“How is she to look at-beautiful?”

“You are more beautiful.”

“Don’t taunt me like this I don’t like it.”

“I am sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you. You are really more beautiful than she is. I am not kidding.”

“What will she say to you when she sees me here, with you?”

“I don’t care what she thinks or what she says. I am disgusted her behavior. I really don’t care.” His face was red with anger when he remembered her.

“I hope I am not causing you any embarrassment.”

“O! Certainly not, I can stay without any inhibition.”

“You don’t seem to be happy with her. What is wrong with her?”

“Everything,” he said. Meena became quiet and changed the topic.

Meena had gone to New York to stay with her son Nikhil who was looked after by a childless Christian couple in New York. She had not told him that he had a son by her first husband for fear of losing him. Meena cooked food for Manav and kept him engaged all the time by her garrulity. Gradually she started going out to the nearby Supermarket to buy essential food and other stuff. Manav taught her car driving. She gradually forgot her dreadful days at New York, and got accustomed to a new life.

One day Manav entered home in an unusual mood. He was restive and his voice was not steady. Meena was a little amused at his unusual disposition. She watched him intently.

“Meena, I want to tell something to you”

“You are welcome”

He came and held her hands firmly and blurted, “I love you.” Before she talked, he hugged and kissed her again and again

“This is strange. This is really strange,” She exclaimed, as she released herself from his clutches.

“I love you and I know you love me. Why should we suffer like this just for our pride?”

“I loved you once, not anymore. I have respect for you. I honor you. I know you are great and you are the nicest man that I have ever met but I have no sentimental attachment to you. If you importunate like this I will have to leave this house.” She was in rage.

“I am sorry. I thought you still craved for me.” He withdrew from her to a distance.

“Sorry. I have come too far in my life. Many strange incidents have happened in my life. I am living the life of detachment and recluse”.

“You are not that Meena I know of. You have changed a lot.” Manav was gaping at her. He had seen Meena dying for his love. He wondered how she could change so much.

“Do you really love me, Manav?” There was something in her tone and expression that he did not like.

“No doubt about it”. He said but now he really did not love her.

“Then don’t pester me like this.” She left the room.

Manav was raving mad when she left the room. He was now sure that she no more loved him. He chilled down after a few minutes and relapsed into sobriety. Manav became ashamed of his misbehavior and went to his room and closed the door behind him and wept throwing himself on his bed.

“She came to my house for protection, but I tried to misuse her. I am the meanest person on earth.” He repeated several times as he shook his head in dismay and retribution.

Manav decided to behave with her decently and came out an hour later. Manav hardly spoke to her. Whenever she talked to him he answered her in monosyllable. She made many attempts to draw him into conversation but in vain. A few days passed by. One day she gave him a cup of coffee in the morning and when he was sipping coffee in a relaxed mood; she drew him into conversation,

“Manav, you are not happy with me these days. I don’t want to stay here longer and bother you more.”

“You have mistaken me. I want you to stay as long as you want. I am ashamed of myself. That is all. I will be all right in a few days. Bear with me and don’t do anything in haste.”

“I don’t do anything in haste. I know what I am doing. The time has come when we shall part with each other. I have a desire to go to Boston and Harvard. Can you take me there before I go away from here?”

“... Boston and Harvard! Why Boston and Harvard of all places. Do you have any special reason for that?”

“I desire to go to Boston and Harvard. That is all I can say.”

He promised that he would take her some day. The long weekend came and he planned a trip to Boston and Harvard. When they were in Harvard she gave an address to him and asked if he could take her to that address. After searching for half an hour they reached a residence at Harvard.

Meena ran out of the car and reached the door. The door opened and a handsome young man came out. It was Hari. As soon as he saw her he was petrified and stood motionless. Meena went and slapped him hard. She started sobbing like a child and tears rolled down her eyes. “Meena,” He said at last, “you shouldn’t have come here.”

“I wrote you several letters but you did not care to answer. All my attempts to reach you and your parents failed.”

“Meena, you just go away from here or else.”

“What will you do? I have come here to stay. I will stay here.”

“I may have to use force on you.” He said.

“You may kill me but I am not leaving this house.”

Hari pushed her away and she came staggering and Manav held her fast.

“Meena, what is all this? I do not understand what is going on.” Manav asked bewildered

“Manav, this man standing before you is my husband. He is Amar. I have come all the way from India in search of this unfaithful husband. At last I have tracked him down. He wants me to go away. I want to know where I can go leaving him.”

“Go where you came from. Why did you come to America?”

“You think that I would let you play mischief with me. You will see what I will do now!” she was in rage now.

Suddenly a woman appeared from the study and stood at the door.

“What is going on?” A woman came out and asked

“Nothing, Kel, Don’t worry. I’ll deal with her.”

“You bet I’m worried. What the hell is going on that I don’t know about?”

She was looking puzzled.

Before her husband could speak, Meena said, “My name is Meena. I have come from India. This man is my husband. He came to America five years ago but did not return. I have come here in search of him.”

The woman looked at the man accusingly and said heatedly, “You said you were not married! You bastard! How could you do that to me?” She started sobbing.

“Kelly, you control yourself!” Hari said sharply. “I’m not leaving you, Honey. Believe me.”

“No, you’re not because I am leaving you, this very moment.” She walked into her room when Meena requested her to stop.

“Please, listen to my story, and then decide if you want to leave,” he implored.

Kelly was very angry. “You cheated me,” she shouted. She collected her belongings and got ready to go.

“Where the hell are you going?” Hari asked angrily.

“To hell!” she said and grabbed the keys. She opened the door of the Benz and drove up the driveway.

When she was gone Manav said patiently to Hari. “Hari, I didn’t expect this from you. I knew you had spoiled Lily’s life. I did not know that you play with the life of scores of girls and ditch them.”

“That is my life. Don’t interfere with my life or else....”

Manav lost control for once in his lifetime. He remembered how he played on the life of Meena and Lily and his blood started boiling. He pounced on him and his fist landed on his nose. The impact was so heavy that it sent him staggering and he hit the wall. Hari managed to stand up and looked viciously at Manav. Manav was not afraid. He spoke in controlled voice. “Meena is my guest. She will be with me in Cleveland. You can come and take her at the earliest”. He turned to Meena and said “Come on, we shall go now.”

Manav and Meena reached the hotel half an hour later.

“Meena, why didn’t you say that you were married to Hari all these days?”

“I wanted it to be a secret. Now that you have come to know of it, I speak to you on this. His name is Amar. He has changed his name as Hari after coming to America. He was a professor in Chemistry. He was teaching us at degree level. He was paying lot of attention to me in the class. I used to sit in the front desk and was happy to receive all his attention. I was proud to be his dearest student in the eye of other girls who were also dying to get his attention. One day, he called me to the Laboratory. When I went there, he was alone. He was restless.

“I said ‘you seem to be worried. Is there anything wrong?’

“I’m okay, Meena, I want to tell you something.” He said

“He was worked up. He was fumbling for words. I- I love you, Meena. I want to spend more time with you in a lonely place. Don’t say ‘no’.

“I was searching for a man for my second marriage. I was greatly impressed by him. I wanted to go with him and impress him more so that he could marry me in spite of my being a divorcee. So I agreed to go with him. I was no more a virgin and so I did not care.”

“He took me to Ooty in Tamil Nadu. We walked around Coffee plantations. We went to great heights in the mountains. There was sky above and mud below. We were there free and undisturbed. I danced to his tune and was very reluctant to say ‘no’ to his propositions. I simply did what he said. That night he brought a pint of whisky and poured it into two glasses. I was disturbed that he was drinking. I was more disturbed when I realized that he was pouring whisky to the second glass because I knew that was for me. As I guessed he gave me a glass of whisky and asked me to taste it. I first refused but I could not resist because I wanted to please him. I drank it in gulps. I felt I would vomit but I did not. In about forty-five minutes, I was flying above the ground. It was my first experience with alcohol and I felt that it was a wonderful experience. He gave me another glass of whisky and I emptied it in another forty-five minutes. Now he drew close to me and started playing on my body. I wanted him to do that. But I only gave mild resistance and gave in. I enjoyed the man I wanted most. I had full satisfaction that night. He came upon me twice and we had fun.

“Now I was not so sure that he would marry me but I did not mind. I went with him wherever he called. It was a life of love and lust. I really needed it. One day I heard girls talking that he was going away shortly to America. It was a bolt from the blue to me. I was not ready to lose him. I wanted to marry him now. In the evening, I met him in a lonely place and asked him if what she heard was true.”

“It is true that I am going away to America but I am not going out of your life. As soon as I settle down there I shall come back and marry you. ‘You are a wonderful woman,’ he said, ‘you shall be my wife.’

“But I wanted more than that kind of assurance from him. I lied to him that I was carrying his child in the womb and I will not be fit to show my face to anybody if he did not marry me.

“He was really worried now. He went up and down several times and finally said, ‘Meena, I will marry you in a temple. Don’t worry. I will arrange for it, okay?’

“When will you arrange, I want to know” I said. He said he would arrange within a week. He dodged me and went away on leave. I followed him wherever he went. He did not want that his relatives should know our relationship. One evening, he arranged for a simple marriage ceremony in a temple outside Bangalore. It was attended by two of his friends. There was none from my side because he said he does not want any lady to participate in that marriage. I did not ask him why but implicitly obeyed him. It was a secret marriage and I was not supposed to reveal it to anybody.”

“Three days later, He met me and told me that he was going to his native place and that he will be back in a week’s time. I waited for him but he never came. One day, I saw an insertion of his photo in a newspaper with the caption that he went to America for higher studies. I waited for months for his letter. I slowly realized that he had cheated me. I decided to take on him at any cost. I had only one motive in my life. I wanted to accost him and punish him.” She finished unfalteringly, her head held high. “I was doing my master’s degree for three years and finished the course in first class. I started applying for Courses in the US universities. But I could not make it because my mother was against my going out of the country. She expressed her inability to finance my studies. I became really mad. I decided to reach America somehow. I had only one aim in life—to reach America and meet him and to see for myself what he was doing there. So I was waiting for an opportunity. One day I was told a couple from America wanted a live-in nanny for their child. I told them that I was ready to go with them to America to look after the child. I did not tell them that I had Master’s degree. I told them that I was a matriculate. Ever since I came here I had been searching for him.”

“One day I came across a personal friend of my husband at a grocery store and casually asked for his address. He gave the address and since then I had been looking for an opportunity to reach him. You were very generous and kind and I thought I could make use of you to reach him. Forgive me. I did not cheat you. I did not disclose my intentions only to reach my husband. I beg your pardon.” She broke down. Manav consoled her. He brought her back to Cleveland and helped her to gain balance of mind.

Chapter 38

Anita confronts Meena

One evening Meena was sitting home alone expecting the arrival of Manav. The doorbell rang and Meena opened the door. To her surprise, it was Anita, not Manav. Meena had seen the photographs of Anita in the house but it was their first meeting. Anita had no inkling as to who the intruder into her house was.

“Who are you, lady and what are you doing here?” she asked her in great surprise.

Meena had no answer. She wished Manav were home at that moment.

“I am Meena.”

“Okay, what are you doing here?”

“I know Manav. He is our family friend. He brought me here because I had no other place to go.”

Meena looked at Anita, who was fuming in rage and trembled,

“So Manav brought you here in my absence. You came to live with him. That explains your relationship to Manav.” She was silent for a while and before Meena gathered courage to answer, she asked,

“How long do you know him?”

“We know each other for six years.”

“He never mentioned to me about you. It is intriguing. I will talk to him when he comes home,” so saying Anita went into her room. Meena sank into the couch.

Manav came home at eight in the evening. As he rang the doorbell, Anita opened the door. He saw her in rage and looked beyond her where Meena was sitting with her head hung down motionless. Manav realized something serious was afoot.

“Where did you pick up this woman? I am sure you have picked her up from the stinking drain on the roadside.” She looked at him in disdain.

“She is our family friend. Meena is her name.” He tried to look composed.

“Manav, you are causing nuisance these days. I tolerated your parents for three long months. Now you have brought a whore into my house. How dare you do such things in my house?”

“Anita, don’t be uncharitable. Hold your tongue. She is like my sister. She is my family friend. I don’t want you to use such epithets.” He protested.

“Manav, for the kind of people like you, a woman could be sister in the morning and a whore at night. I don’t believe you anymore. You cannot fool me all the time. Now I give you three days to quit my house with that woman. If I see you anywhere near my house, I will make your life miserable, Okay. Get out of my house in three days.”

Anita went to her room and slammed the door behind. Meena looked at him bewildered.

“Meena, don’t be upset. I am very sorry for her misbehavior and beg your pardon. Don’t worry. I will not forsake you for her sake. You will stay here with me as long as you like. I take the responsibility of looking after you whatever may come.”

“No Manav I don’t stay in this house any longer. Please let me go. Leave me to my fate.”

“I would not leave you to your fate. If she does not allow you to live here, you will live in my motel. But I don’t let you go to street.” Meena became silent, as she had no other place to go. She went to her room and fell on the bed and wept all through the night.

Next evening Manav came home early. Anita was not home. He waited for her till midnight but she did not come home. He rang up her friends and relatives but he got no clue about her whereabouts. Manav thought it was a good riddance to bad rubbish and kept quiet. Next morning, Manav found on his writing table a note left by Anita.

“Manav, I am leaving you. I know you don’t love me. You are more worried about that woman than me. Your world consists of that woman and your mean parents. You devote yourself to the service of your parents like Shравan Kumar²³. In my opinion, the people like you should not marry. Don’t make any attempt to search for me. I know how to take care of myself. Thanks for few years of companionship. I am capable of earning my living, and take care of myself. I am sick of your dastardly nature and I bid goodbye to you. Anita.” Manav sat on the couch motionless. He was sitting there thinking for more than an hour and slowly got up. He went to his room and lay there on his sofa.

Chapter 39

In despair and disappointment

Jay and Sushi opened the door and entered their house in despair. They were so thoroughly disappointed with their son’s attitude that they decided to disown and forget him. Sushi said, “I don’t ever remember that I have a son.”

“Sushi, you are right. I gave him all help and comfort for 25 years and now that he has money, he does not care for us. He has thoroughly changed. We will forget that we ever had a son.”

Manav was thoroughly disillusioned with Anita, and he started rethinking about his parents and felt ashamed of his misbehavior when they were with him. He decided to apologize for his bad behavior. He lifted the phone and waited for their voice.

Jay came on phone, "Hello."

"Dad, it is Manav from America." Manav expected them to be pleased with his call.

"Manav, will you please leave us alone."

"Dad, I apologize for my bad behavior. Don't keep the phone down. Listen..."

He stopped talking because he realized that Jay had replaced the receiver. He made several attempts to contact them. Nobody was lifting the phone at the other end. Jay and Sushi were sitting next to phone and they guessed that it was his phone and decided not to respond. They waited until the ringing stopped and said, "God, How sad that the only son should have been so unsympathetic to his parents when they needed his help most!" Sushi sighed and went into kitchen to prepare breakfast.

A month elapsed and the newspaper vender submitted his bill. They had to pay electricity bill, water bill, cable bill, telephone bill and above all house rent. They had no bank balance. They had spent whatever money they had towards tickets to America and the gifts they carried to son and daughter in law. They stood empty-handed, facing the hard realities of life. They thought for days but they had no solution. Jay went round the city in search of job but returned empty-handed. The creditors started calling on them and they had to do something for their living.

Jay was reading the morning newspaper one day when Sushi walked out of the house with a hand bag.

"Where are you going?"

"I will bring some vegetables. You must be bored eating pulses without vegetables."

He started reading again and she went away. She returned an hour later with some vegetables.

"You seem to have bought good many vegetables."

"Yes, you will have very good meal, I assure you."

"But where did you get money?"

She did not answer. He repeated the question, got up from his seat and went to her. She gave her valet to him which he checked and found ten thousand Rupees. He looked her questioningly.

"I sold a few small silver articles," she said with tears in eyes. What else have you sold?"

"Open the locker and see for yourself." He opened that all silver articles had disappeared.

"What happened to silver articles worth fifty pounds?"

"For three months I paid the bills by selling them." He stood there stunned."

A month passed by and one day he observed that Mangal Sutra was missing from her neck. She was wearing a thread with a turmeric cone.

“Did you sell that too?” He asked with a heavy heart expecting a positive reply.

“Yes, that was the only thing left for this month.” She said with tears.

“I will meet a friend of mine. He had amassed huge wealth while in service. Take care I shall be back in about three days. I am going to Mysore.”

When he was away, Sushi thought for a while and came to a conclusion. She decided to sell her kidney for one hundred thousand rupees to avert hunger and starvation. She wanted to keep it a secret from everybody including her husband. She went round the city and contacted Nursing Homes if any patient was in need of kidney and offered to sell her kidney. She knew it was unlawful to donate kidney to a stranger for money. She had to do it ‘hush hush’ and many doctors refused to take the risk.

Three weeks later, she received a call from a nursing home requesting her to meet the management of the nursing facility immediately. Jay was not in station. She went there and found that a man was in need of a kidney and he was ready to pay 100,000 Rupees. She called her husband and informed that everything was all right and there was no cause for worry. She asked his permission to go to Mysore and stay with her cousin for a week in his absence. He readily agreed to her suggestion. She went straight to the nursing facility and opted for donating a kidney. A burly gruff doctor called her into the operation theatre and after hours of operation, her kidney was removed and transplanted to another patient. She was removed to ICU where she was lying for twenty-four hours. She was looked after well for three days and she was discharged from the hospital.

“I want my money.” She asked the receptionist.

“Which money you mean?” She looked surprised.

“I was offered 100000 Rupees for donating kidney”

“I don’t know anything about it.”

“Whom shall I contact?”

“You may contact the doctor who operated”

“Where can I see him?”

“I don’t know. He comes here once a week.”

Sushi went to the office and met the man in charge.

“What brings you here” he asked without turning to her.

I was offered 100,000 for donating kidney. The doctor had said that I would get it as soon as the operation was over.”

“I am not aware of any such deal. It is illegal to sell or buy kidneys. I will have to call the police.”

Sushi knew that she was cheated and she lost her kidney for nothing. She knew that they would make living difficult for her if she demanded money. She came out and waited for an Auto. She noticed two men, who were

present when the kidney was transplanted, approaching her. They were looking dangerous. One of them told her, “Look, we give you Rs.10000. Accept it or reject it. If you make any attempt to contact police, we will kill you before you reach home.” They gave her a bundle of 100 Rupee bills and asked her to sit in their car. She was terribly afraid of those men and meekly submitted to their orders. She sat in the car silently. They brought her to a shopping complex near her house, left her there and drove away. The two men were Aman and Abdul. Sushu narrated her sad story to Jay when he returned home. She developed complication and became unfit to live a normal life. Jay became more worried and helpless.

Jay and Sushu paid bills amounting to Rupees 5000 and they were left with just 10,000, which was enough to live for one month. Jay was sitting in the verandah next morning. “Sushu, we cannot live in Bangalore without income. We will shift our residence to Ramnagar where we have an ancestral home which has been locked for years. We can eat one meal a day for a year with this 10,000/-“

“I have nothing to say. I will do as you say.” She went in as her eyes became wet with tears. They vacated the house as the neighbors watched helplessly and grieved at their misfortune. They went to live in their ancestral home, a dilapidated house not inhabited by any, for years. It took fifteen days for them to make it habitable. There was nothing in the house except two photos and a few utensils. Their health began to deteriorate day by day.

Chapter 40

A patch up rehearsal

One evening Manav called Hari on phone and asked him if he was ready to take Meena home. He sounded humble and asked Manav to bring her to Harvard and assured him that he would accept her. Manav conveyed the good news to her but she refused to live with him.

“I refuse to live with a man like Hari. I was cheated once. I don’t want to be cheated again,” she argued.

A month later one day, Hari arrived at her doors abruptly. He came in. Manav called Meena out,

“Hari has come to meet you.” Manav announced.

Meena came out and saw Hari. She could not believe that Hari would come down to meet her. Hari came in and sat down. He was once again very humble. He spoke to Meena and Manav in a low voice. “I was struggling to settle down in America when I met Kelly. She was a very rich woman. I thought that all my problems would be solved if I married

her. I dated her for a while and told her that I was not married and married her. Kelly was such a wonderful woman and I totally forgot my previous life and lived with her. When she came to know that I am married she left me and applied for divorce. Now I realize that I have done injustice to you. I want you to come back and live with me,” He begged Meena. She heard him patiently but she did not believe him. She did not want to believe him. She got up and went in.

“Meena, I want an answer”

“I don’t want to live with you. I once yearned for your company and love. I am no more interested in you”

“I know I have done wrong. Please excuse me!”

“Yes. I have excused you. You may go now”

She was in a fit of rage. She went into the study and closed the doors behind her.

Manav confronted Hari,

“Hari, first you played with Meena’s life and then you played with Lily’s and then, with Kelly’s. You are not a human being. You must be a monster.”

“Manav, believe me. I have decided to live with Meena and I assure you that I wouldn’t give her a chance again to complain against me.”

Manav believed that he had changed and assured him that he would inform him when she gets ready to go with him.

One day Meena was serving dinner to Manav. She set one plate on the table. “Why don’t you join me for the dinner?” Manav asked.

“I am too excited to eat.”

“Excited? Why?”

“I got a job in a jewelry stores in New Jersey. I have decided to go away to New Jersey.”

“Why? Are you not happy here?”

“I was very happy here. Not anymore. I have bumped into my husband and he is after me now. I must go away. He will pester me if I stay here. I want to go away without leaving my address.”

“Think of it Meena, that you have come all the way to America to find him and you have found him here. He is ready to accept you now but you are running away from him.” He cautioned her but she did not speak. Next morning she booked a ticket to New Jersey and she was at the Downtown Bus stand to board Greyhound to Edison. When the greyhound left the central bus station Manav was the most miserable man on earth because he was not accustomed to lonely life.

Manav was wandering in E 9th street that morning raving like a mad man. He suddenly noticed an old man of Indian origin coming towards him smiling from across the road. He stopped there, watching him as he crossed the road and recognized him when he approached him. It was

Vyas, a friend of his father. Manav was surprised that he was there. After exchange of pleasantries, he invited Vyas home and Vyas was pleased with his invitation and agreed to go with him. When they were resting after the lunch, Manav started talking about Sarah and his father. He had heard that Vyas was always honest, and the people appreciated his honesty. Manav knew that he would speak the truth.

“Vyas, I have been longing to seek information from you. I never had an occasion. Now that we have met I expect you to throw light on a matter which I think I have been misinformed.”

“What is the matter Manav? I shall be glad to explain.”

“What is the relationship between my father and Sarah, I want to know. Be bold and honest.”

“Nothing more than there could be between a brother and a sister. Why are you asking this question now?”

“You are lying. I want the truth,” Manav spoke curtly.

“I am telling you the truth. Your father and Sarah were childhood friends. They used to move together until they were fourteen. When Sarah was fourteen, she stopped wandering with Jay because she started loving Vishnu whom she finally married.”

“Vishnu was very brave from childhood and wished to become a soldier. He was two to four years older than Jay. Jay noticed from childhood that Sarah always had soft corner for Vishnu. When they grew older, Sarah and Vishnu’s friendship blossomed into love and romance. Jay had noticed them hugging and kissing. He was afraid that Sarah would do something foolish. He advised her to be careful but she took it as offensive and left his company. Sarah became pregnant, and she feared that her father might break down if he came to know of it. Manav advised both of them to get married. Meanwhile, her father died of heart attack. Sarah married Vishnu. Vishnu had joined Army as a commissioned officer. Jay left the town a few days before Sarah’s marriage, and had not met her since then. Sarah delivered the baby six months after the marriage. The people around had seen her with Jay and her love affair with Vishnu was a secret. Many people were gossiping that Sarah’s child was born to Jay but Jay did not know about it as he had left the town forever. Jay went to Bangalore, studied for Engineering and settled down as an engineer in Bangalore.

“Some people say that Sarah was carrying my father’s child in her womb at the time of her marriage to Vishnu. Is it true?”

“No. It is not true. Jay never looked at her amorously. They were just friends until they attained teenage. Sarah always loved Vishnu but her father did not like Vishnu’s overture because he was in the army. He wished Jay should marry her. But Sarah and Vishnu secretly met at the other side of the hill and spent long hours together whenever Vishnu was

in town. Suddenly one day Vishnu came to town and announced his marriage with Sarah.”

“Did he know that Sarah was pregnant at the time of her marriage?”

“Certainly, He knew that he himself was the father of the child in her womb. He wanted to save her from infamy and so he decided to marry her urgently.”

“There is a talk in the town that Jay is the biological father of Meena

“There is no truth in it. Most of the people know that Jay is innocent. It was a malicious propaganda. Who told you that?”

“Ved”

“Ved was very mischievous when he was young. He was spreading several rumors like that. In fact, he once tried to rape Sarah in the paddy field but she escaped somehow. Sarah never liked him thereafter. He wanted to malign her and so he spread false rumor that she was in love with Jay. Sarah is a great woman. She loved Vishnu and married him. After his death she decided not to remarry and had lived a virtuous life.”

Manav was relieved. He was feeling very good now.

“Why did Jay give shelter to Sarah then?”

“Sarah and Jay were great friends. They liked each other. Sarah used to carry meals from her house to Jay. She used to buy him books. It was platonic love. When Jay got a chance to help her, he went ahead and did his best. There was no ego in that.”

A little later Vyas took leave of Manav and Manav gave a very cordial farewell.

Chapter 41

A new friendship in the evening of life

One evening Lily was walking along the pavement on M G Road. It was a very pleasant evening, and hundreds of men and women were leisurely walking along the pavement neatly dressed. She stood before Symphony Theater to see the billboard and hoarding. The theater was showing for the whole week Agatha Christie’s novel based films of various titles. She stood there to find what film was running there for that evening’s show. It was the murder on the Orient Express. There was a long queue and she joined the queue to buy a ticket. When she turned back after a few minutes, she was surprised to see her classmate Monica and her husband Stanley behind her. Lily was very glad to meet her friend and Monica introduced her to her husband.

They all met again during the interval and Monica invited Lily to accompany her home as there was a grand party awaiting them at home. Lily was so bored that she readily agreed to go with her when the film

ended. They had a grand party and sumptuous dinner before they sat aside and started recollecting their college life. Suddenly a young man of 23 appeared and spoke to Monica who introduced him to Lily.

“This is my cousin. John is his name. He is leaving for America next month.”

“I am pleased to meet you. Are you going there for Studies?” Lily asked taking interest in him.

“No. I am an American citizen. I am working for a software company there.”

“This is Lily, my classmate. We had lot of fun in our college days.” Monica introduced Lily to John formally.

“What are you doing for your living here?”

“I was working for a firm in America. I came back to India on vacation three months ago. I am thinking of going back shortly,” Lily sounded uncertain.

“I have no friends and I am bored. Now that we know each other, I will be meeting you whenever I get bored. Would it be okay with you?”

“It is my pleasure to have your company. I am no less bored than you are.” She gave her address and telephone number. He bade goodbye and left. Lily thought of him the whole night appreciating his dress and manners.

A few days later, John called her on phone and enquired about her plans for the day. She told him that she had no plans and was sitting home idly.

“Could I come now to meet you?”

“Okay, I will wait for you.”

“We will go out for lunch,” he proposed

“It is my pleasure to have lunch with you,” she said gracefully as she hung up the phone.

John was there in about thirty minutes. He pulled up his car in front of her house. She opened the door and called him in. He sat on the sofa reading a newspaper that was lying there, and she went in to dress up. In about fifteen minutes she came out nicely dressed in Indian silk sari.

“Shall I get you coffee or tea?”

“No, thanks, I had coffee just a few minutes ago.”

“Shall we go out then?”

They left home and sat in the car. John drove straight to a restaurant on M G Road. They went in and ate lunch. They went round Brigade Road and M G Road before John brought her back to her home. Lily was immensely pleased with John and invited him to come again in a day or two. Their friendship grew faster than anticipated. In about fifteen days, they were meeting everyday.

One morning John went to meet her. He saw fire burning in a pot in front of her house. Some people were moving in and out of the house. He rushed

in and found Lily's mother dead. The funeral was over by evening and Lily sat in front of him and wept when her relatives were gone.

"They all hate me," she cried.

"Why do they hate you?"

"They are all religious bigots. They don't like me because I am cosmopolitan in my outlook."

"When will they come back for rites and rituals?"

"They don't come back. They have ostracized me for my liberal outlook."

"I will accompany you for all rites and rituals if you don't mind."

"I need your help, John. A friend in need is a friend in deed. You are my real friend. We will carry urn to Patna and immerse it in the river Kaveri. Meet me here at home day after tomorrow at eight in the morning. It is a day's job."

John came on time and they carried the ashes to Patna. They hired a Pandit to perform the rites and rituals and immersed the ashes in the river Kaveri. It was eight in the evening when they returned home. Lily was continuously sobbing the whole day and her eyes were swollen. John consoled her from time to time.

It was ten at night when he stood up to leave.

"John, how could you leave me in a situation like this and go away. I need you today all the more. Please stay back for heaven's sake." She begged him.

"Lily, try to understand. What will your people say if they find me here at this hour?"

"I don't care. I just don't care John what they think of me or you or both."

"This is not America, Lily. It is India."

"I will answer them. Don't worry." She pulled him to sit on a couch, put her head on his chest and sat there for a long time. Soon she fell into deep slumber. John slowly laid her head on the couch.

When she woke up, it was nine in the morning. John was mutely sitting waiting for her to get up. John brought some bread and milk. She went to take shower and returned to kitchen half an hour later. She heated the milk and prepared coffee. They ate bread and drank coffee before John took leave of her after promising that he will be soon back.

John returned in the evening. No relative came to see her and she did not care.

"John I have decided to go back to America. Will you book a ticket for me along with you?"

"What prompted you to take this decision?"

"These nasty people around me are sickening. I hate them all. There is death in the family. No relative has come to see me. They are not human beings?" She said disdainfully.

"We can't antagonize society in India. They react sharply."

“Anyway, I have decided to bid goodbye to India.”

“Okay. I will book a ticket for you on the condition that you will stay with me in America. We will travel back next month together. Okay?”

“I assure you that I will.”

A month later both of them arrived at Cleveland.

Lily got a job within a month and John already had a job. John loved and respected Lily and Lily was bestowing all affection on John. One day she asked him,

“John, you have not told me a word regarding your past. Why don’t you tell me of your past?”

“There is nothing to boast. Nothing is known about my parentage. I was abandoned by my mother immediately after I was born in a bush. Someone brought the deserted child to a Church and a Christian missionary adopted me. I am what I am today because of the encouragement and help extended by the missionary.” He hung his head down as he narrated his life history.

“There is nothing to be ashamed of. It was not your making. It was all God’s will. You have faced so many adversities in life that you need to be given special award for your courage.”

“But I am an abandoned child at birth and that bothers me. I have no respect in society. They all look down upon me.” His eyes became wet.

“If you are a desert’ ling I am posthumous. It is all God’s will.” She was glum for a few minutes and then spoke slowly, “how long will you stay a bachelor? Do you have any girl-friend, fiancée or someone like that?”

“I have none. So far I have not come across a girl who would want to spend the whole life with me. The girls become closer, and once they come to know of my stigma, they leave my friendship for ever.

“Don’t worry. I will stay with you. I have no one in this world to bank on. From now on we are best friends.”

“Thank you. Your words have brought lot of consolation to my otherwise disturbed mind.”

One night, Lily was awake for a long time in bed. She was recollecting and reviewing her past life. John knocked at the door. Lily became apprehensive and was terribly afraid.

“What do you want at this hour? Why are you knocking at the door?”

“I have to tell you something. Will you please open the door?”

“I am sorry. This is not the time to talk. You can say whatever you want tomorrow morning.”

“Lily, please open the door.”

“I won’t. Go to bed.” Knocking stopped and she sighed in great relief.

Next morning, she was sitting on the couch sipping coffee. John came in coyly and stood apologetically.

“Yesterday night, I behaved strangely with you. Excuse me,” he said looking at the floor.

“Don’t do that mistake again. I will walk out if you repeat it,” she said firmly.

“I don’t do it again. Forgive me. We are friends again. Say we are friends again.”

“Yes, we are friends.” She said grudgingly.

Several days passed by. They became very good friends again. On a Sunday morning they were sitting on the coach chatting.

“Were you married anytime?” He asked abruptly.

“No. I was not. Why are you asking all of a sudden?”

“I am inquisitive to know.”

“Do you have any special reason?”

“Yes,” he shrugged his shoulder and asked, “Will you marry me?”

“Why do you think that I should marry you?”

“Lily, I am asking you a straight question and I want a direct answer.” He was unusually assertive that day.

“My answer is simple no.”

He went away. He did not come home for three days. Lily got worried. She hoped that he would return soon. One evening he came back and went upstairs without talking to her.

“Hello, where had you gone all these days?”

He did not reply. He went to his room and closed the door behind him. Lily thought she should not speak until he cools down. She felt very sorry for him and decided to tell him that she had cancer.

A month passed by. John was calm and composed. Once again they became very good friends. Autumn passed and winter set in. They were staying longer hours in the house. They had more time to talk.

“I think it is time for you to marry someone and settle down in life.” She looked at him intently as she spoke.

“Marry someone? No. If at all I marry I will marry you.” He said firmly.

“I can’t marry you.”

“But why?”

“I am suffering from cancer. You know it is a terminal disease.”

“I don’t believe it. You are avoiding me. That is all.”

“Believe me I have cancer. I don’t live for more than a year or two. My days are numbered.” Her eyes became wet and looked at John conjuring for sympathy. John was confounded by her unexpected revelation, gasped for breath and then sat like a stone for a few minutes before he spoke composedly.

“We will go to a doctor. I know an oncologist. He will help us.”

“I am ready to go to a doctor. But you must agree to marry someone else and live happily.”

“What will happen to you if I forsake you?”

“Nothing will happen to me. God helps those who help themselves.”

Next morning they approached a doctor known to him personally. After examining carefully the doctor said that the cancerous cells were spreading fast.

“How long will she live doctor?”

“In my estimate, she may live for another twelve months.”

Lily overheard their conversation. On their way home both remained glum. When they settled down on a couch, she said,

“Now you have to think seriously of your future. My fate is sealed.”

“I have already taken a decision.”

“What is your decision?”

“I have deferred the idea of marrying by two years.”

“Why do you want to sacrifice for my sake?”

“Whatever I am doing, I am doing for my own good.”

Six more months elapsed. The sign of weakness started showing on her face and looked sickly now. There was no mirth on her face. She was fast losing interest in life. John used to sit and chat long hours but she was asking for rest. She wanted to be left alone. One day, he brought a girl home. She was around twenty. She was a nun.”

“Lily, this is Mary. I met her yesterday in a church. She has come to America for three months. She is an orphan and she too like me was brought up in a missionary”

“O I see, glad to meet you” Lily said astonished at this sudden development. Mary and John started talking about missionaries and Lily did not want to interfere. She was more interested in listening to her talk. After an hour they bid her good-bye and went out for dinner as Lily sat on the couch mutely. Mary became a regular visitor to the house. Lily watched their intimacy grow and felt relieved. A few days later, John announced that Mary gave up the religious order and they would get married next week. Lily attended their marriage at a church and the next day John announced that he was going to Barea where Mary lived.

Lily was once again left alone. Her health was deteriorating rapidly, her bowl movement became tardy and the body temperature increased day by day. A neighbor admitted her to a nearby medical facility. She was waiting for the doctor’ call when a nurse on duty came to her asked her to accompany her.

“What is your name” she asked Lily”

“My name is Lily.”

“I have heard that name before” she exclaimed.

“Where did you hear? Do you know me?”

“I don’t recollect having seen you but I heard that name sometime back.” She tried to recollect and suddenly said,

“By chance, do you know Manav?”

“Yes, I know him. How do you know him?”

Manav and I were at Bangalore recently and you were in the ICU after an operation. He went off his moods after seeing you in ICU.”

“What did he say?”

“He was thoughtful that was all. He didn’t say anything. I asked him if he knows you,” He said yes but changed the topic. I want to hear from you about Manav.”

“I can’t tell you unless I know what Manav is to you.”

“He is my husband.”

“Oh, he has married you. It is good to know.”

“But you did not say what he is to you?”

“He wanted to marry me but God willed otherwise.”

“I am sorry for you ...Lily.”

“Don’t worry. Whatever happened was for his good.”

“Why do you think so?”

Take me to the doctor. She will tell you why>” she said cryptically and Anita did not press her to talk more.

The doctor examined her and said

“You have to pray god and try to live the rest of your time as happily as you can.”

“I am pained to know your circumstance, Lily. Good Bye.”

“Anita can I see Manav once? Will you take me to him this evening?”

“Sorry I can’t do that.”

“But ...why?”

“I left him two years ago. I have not seen him since.”

You left him? Anita, you don’t know what you lost in your life.”

“I know I know.” Anita said with tears in her eyes. Then they reached the front room where the patients wait to be called. A patient who was too weak was waiting there to be called. Both of them saw the person at the same time and stopped there with their mouth wide open.

“It is Hari,” exclaimed Anita.

“Yes, it is Hari,” said Lily

Hari refused to recognize them and was still speechless with a stony face. Both of them accompanied him to the doctor. The doctor examined him and said it is a case of emergency. Admit him as an inpatient.”

“Hari, how are you?” Anita asked.

He was silent and refused to speak.

“Hari it is me.” Lily drew his attention but he did not answer. They met the doctor and asked what the matter was after leaving him in his bed.

“That patient would die any moment. He has been suffering from AIDS.” The doctor told them.

“Anita do you know this man?”

“Yes, he was my husband but he divorced me. Hari is his name. How do you know him?”

“He was the man I loved and in his pursuit I lost Manav,” Lily confessed.

“I knew he would meet this fate one day,” Anita remarked.

“Me too, we have nothing to do with him. He is nothing to us. Come on we shall go.” They walked away

When Anita enquired of him next day, the nurse on duty said that the patient died last night and she did not know what happened later. Anita wept concealing herself behind the closed doors not because he was her husband but because her son Nikhil was bereft of his father.

Chapter 42

An unexpected encounter

Manav started searching for Meena but he could not find her. Two years later, he was walking along the pavement in Wall Street at New York when he suddenly noticed Meena walking along the opposite pavement. He ran across the street crazily and called her by name. She turned back and recognized him.

“Manav how is it you are here?”

“Meena, I have been searching for you for the last three years,” he said, “I was craving to meet you and at last, I have found you. Now I am very happy. I have lot of things to tell you. We will sit in the Central Park and talk.”

“I have also many things to tell you. Come on.” She said elated.

When they were sitting in the park, they proceeded with their conversation.

“Meena you are looking so different now. You are looking great in this attire.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“Meena, I always wanted to tell you why I did not marry you but I did not know how to tell you.”

“But why do you want to tell me now?”

“Now I have found out the truth.”

“Regarding what?”

“Meena, you are so innocent. My father and your mother were great friends in their young age and Ved once told me that my father was your father too. If that were true, we would be brother and sister.”

“That’s bullshit! Why did Ved talk like that?”

“Ved was very mischievous. He had spread false rumor in the town that your mother had carried in her womb Jay’s child before marriage and Vishnu married her to save her from infamy, which was not true.”

“Ved must be a very dangerous man.”

“Yes, he was really very dangerous. Once, I met Vyas at Cleveland. He told me that Ved was lying and there is no truth in what he said. He told me that Ved once tried to molest Sarah when she was walking in the fields alone and she raised her voice for help and since then, he had been blackmailing her. I’ve been searching for you for the last three years to tell this.”

“Thank God. We are saved from disgrace.

“What are you doing for your living now?”

“I am working with a stock broker near Wall Street.”

“Now I think you have to leave your job and come with me to Cleveland or I will shift my place of residence to New York.”

“What are you talking? I don’t understand you?”

“Meena, I really love you and love you more than anybody in this world. I want to marry you and keep you very happy. I am ready to marry you at this moment.”

“Manav, you are not in your senses. You shouldn’t be talking like this. You are a married man.”

“Married man, No, Anita divorced me two years ago.” He continued,

“Meena, you were with me that day when Anita walked away from my house and did not come back. Forget her. I am now divorced and single. I can marry you. Will you marry me, Meena? I know you will not refuse.” There was hope and earnestness in his voice but Meena was taken aback. There was dismay in her look.

“Manav, what are you talking? I am married.” She said softly, as if the softer she said it, the less he would be hurt. Manav’s mouth opened widely. He was gaping at her.

“Sorry Manav. It is too late. I was married just two months ago. I told you that I was working with a Stock Broker. Yes, he is my husband. He loves me so much.”

Manav gathered composure in a few minutes and asked slowly

“How did it happen?”

“I was working for Billy for the last two years. Six months ago, his wife died in a freak accident. Billy held my hands two months ago and said, ‘I love you Meena’ and asked, ‘will you marry me?’ He loves India and Indians. I love him too. His name is Billy Johnson. He was also a student at Cleveland. He said he had heard about you. He is so cute and endearing.”

Manav was really angry then, not at Meena, but at his own self. If he had said ‘yes’ when his parents wanted him to marry her, Meena would have been his. Now it was too late. He abruptly said good-bye to her and started walking towards subway station. She called him to stop several times. He went away as if he did not hear her. He went straight towards airport on his way back to Cleveland.

Manav came home, tired and exhausted, and went to bed. Next morning he was going through the mails received in his absence. There was a letter from a publisher who had accepted his novel for publication. He had also enclosed a check for 5000. Manav read the letter again and again. His joy knew no bounds. Then he was an author. He always wanted to be called an author and that was a great moment in his life. He applied himself for writing novels and as the days passed by, he wrote another novel in a short period of time. That was also accepted for publication. He started receiving letters of appreciation.

Six months lapsed. Manav reached home a little early one evening. He opened the mailbox and found a letter there. He was surprised that Anita should have written a letter to him. He read the letter rather hurriedly.

“Manav, you may be surprised to receive this letter. I am not very far from you. I am admitted to the hospital as I suffered an accident and my condition is very serious. I may die any moment. I want to reveal a secret before I die. I was married to Hari before I married you. Nikhil was born during the sustenance of my first marriage. After I divorced Hari, I left Nikhil with a childless Christian couple because I had been running around and working. I was bringing him home three days ago from New York when the accident occurred. The couple that was looking after him went back to India. Hari died a few days ago out of sudden illness. He was brought to the hospital where I was working in coma and died within a day. The doctor attending on him said that he was suffering from AIDS. I did not inform you that I had a son from my first marriage and that first husband was Hari because I was afraid of losing you by revealing my antecedent. You were not interested in knowing my antecedents because of fear of losing me. I trust you won't forsake Nikhil because he is born to Hari who played spoilsport in our life. Remember Nikhil is innocent and has no one to look after him except you. I want you to bring him up because he is my son. Nikhil is a true believer of Christianity because he was looked after by the Christian couple. Do not forsake him. I trust you will not disappoint me. Please come and pick him up. I don't know if I will be alive to see you. Forgive me. Good Bye. Anita.” Some one had written it at her behest. Manav drove to the hospital and went straight to the ward. The doctor was examining her and two nurses were assisting him. He removed the stethoscope from his ears, shook his head sideways, looked blankly for a moment and covered the face with a white bed sheet. Manav knew that he was too late. He claimed the body and took charge of Nikhil who was sobbing behind the door. The funeral was over and he came back home with Nikhil. When Nikhil was calm, Manav asked him,

“Dear, have you seen your father? How does he look like?”

“I have not seen my father. My mom used to say that my father's name was Hari,” replied Nikhil.

Manav stood there for a few minutes looking at Nikhil and held his hands out of compassion and said, ‘come on, we shall go now.’

Chapter 43

Fate willed otherwise

Manav was still in bed when someone knocked at his door. He could not guess who it was. He opened the door and could not believe his eyes when he saw Joseph, the Hotel owner. He fumbled for words for a few seconds and recollected his composure and called him in.

“Surprise?”

“Yes. I thought you were...”

“Dead, oh, no, it was not me. I am still alive and finished my term in prison.”

“I am very happy to see you back.” Manav said but he was not sure.

“It was very nice of you to have taken care of my baggage in my absence. I have come to collect my baggage.”

Manav explained to him that he had invested his money in various projects believing that he was dead and gave away all the papers pertaining to his assets, his Motels, his bonds and his money in banks. Joseph collected everything, went through the papers and the accounts briefly, and satisfied himself that all his money was intact. He profusely thanked Manav, flattered his honesty and gave him 20,000 dollars for his services before taking leave of him.

Manav cursed his destiny and became dejected in life. The teachings of Lord Krishna to Arjuna in Bhagavadgita reverberated in his mind and consoled him. He had 33000 dollars, which would be equal to approximately Rs.15, 00,000 in Indian currency. He decided to give all he had to his parents to make them happy in the evening of their life. He packed off his luggage and left for India with Nikhil. He was seen off at the airport by a couple of friends.

The plane touched down at Bangalore. Everything was looking new to him as it was long ago that he had visited India. As soon as he came out of the HAL airport at Bangalore, he sat in a car with Nikhil and asked the chauffeur to drive to J P Nagar. . He had not met his parents since they left America. Once or twice he had tried to contact them but they had refused to speak to him. When they reached the house where his parents were supposed to be living, he went into the house calling ‘Mom, how are you doing’. An aged man and his wife came out and stood before them. He did not recognize them, as they were strangers. They too stood wondering who it was.

“I am Manav. I have come in search of Jay, my father.”

“Oh! You are Jay’s son!” the old man exclaimed, and said, “They are living in Ramnagar, I am told.”

“Since when?”

“They left this place three years ago. We have been living in this house after they left.” Manav was thoroughly disappointed.

Ramnagar was a small town near Bangalore. That was the place where Jay had a small, dilapidated ancestral home. He took a taxi and went straight to Ramnagar. It was a mid-summer afternoon. He was sweating from head to toe. He was anxious to know what happened to his parents. When he was there he recognized the house but found the door locked. He asked a neighbor where Jay and Sushi lived. He looked at them and said, “They died eight days ago.”

“Died? How did it happen?”

“They were starving for the last two years. They became very weak, and Jay died a week ago. The very day Sushi consumed poison and died. The villagers gave them a decent cremation. Yesterday, Vyas came here and gave their son’s address. They are trying to contact their son who is in America. They are not getting him. By the By, Who are you? Are you any friend, relative or well-wisher?”

“I am Manav and this is Nikhil. I am the son of Jay and Sushi whom the people are trying to contact.” Manav introduced himself.

In a few minutes the news of Manav’s appearance was spread like wild fire and he became an object of observation. The people of the town gathered there to see him. Some looked at him with admiration because he lived in a foreign country and others looked at him disdainfully because he being the only son did not help his father in his old age and let his parents die out of hunger and starvation. Somebody brought the keys and unlocked the door of the house. Manav went in and searched if he could find any keepsake in their memory. There was nothing in the house. They had hung an old photograph of Manav on the wall. At another corner he found marriage photo of Jay and Sushi. He collected their photograph and started off to Ban galore, after bidding the people around good-bye. The taxi was moving towards Bangalore and Manav sat there silently. Nikhil was chattering happily and asking questions but Manav was not replying to him. After a while, Nikhil refrained himself from speaking and the return journey was marked in subdued silence. Two hours later, they were back in Bangalore, and stayed in a hotel near Majestic.

Chapter 44

The terrorists caught

A Western Agency received an intelligence report that the Afghan Dada must be hiding in Pakistan, and sought the help of Pakistan and ISI in tracing him. Immediately, Pakistan spokesman spoke to the Afghan leader on mobile phone.

“Hazrath, the west has an inkling that you must be hiding in Pakistan. It is not safer to stay here.”

I know Yakub; I have made arrangements for my next sojourn. I am leaving to an unknown destination. Keep it a top secret.”

“When I am gone you must tell the world that I must be dead so that they should not make any effort to search for me.”

It was mid-night twelve o’ clock. Somewhere in Pakistan some fifty men were standing with machineguns in hand. A motorcade of about ten cars arrived. About twenty-five men, robust and healthy, got down from the cars. The armed men touched the feet of the Afghan leader. A small plane landed and twenty-five men mounted the plane.

The Afghan leader embraced Yakub and quietly boarded the plane.

“Have you loaded all our gold and money which we had brought from Kabul Bank?”

“Chief, we have shipped into the plane all your gold and valuables. Take care.”

“Thanks for your help, Yakub.” The door of the plane was closed and the plane took off for an undisclosed destination.

Pakistan spokesman appeared very happy in the morning. He was happy he had successfully double-crossed. He informed the journalists

“In my opinion, the terrorist leader is dead,” he declared. The journalists smiled mockingly. Next day, a TV channel released some tapes and claimed that the terrorist leader was safe and healthy, and he was preparing for an attack on Americans and American interests. An American radio was announcing that America has raised the alarm level from orange to red. America intensified its search to find Al Qaeda members in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and in many other countries. Abdul had managed to escape from America after September 11th to Pakistan.

Aman went to Pakistan occupied Kashmir and sneaked into the Indian side of Kashmir. Ahmed had returned to Pakistan to receive further instruction from Pakistan’s ISI to carry out more destruction and death. Abdul and Ahmed arrived at an unidentified airport somewhere in the middle of Pakistan, aboard a private helicopter after a series of escapade. He cut a tired figure and slumped in fatigue, as he descended the plane, accompanied by Abdul and a few men. Abdul and Ahmed were driven

away to a flat in a busy locality in Karachi. They stayed in and did not venture to stray out for fear of being caught by American intelligence. American intelligence had swung into action in Pakistan and was hunting for Al Qaeda men.

Some Western intelligence officials were meeting in a secret place in London.

“I have an idea,” said one officer.

“What is it?” Another officer asked while two others fixed their eyes on him.

“We have to catch hold of that Arabian News Agent who has been contacting the Al Qaeda.”

“How do we identify him?”

“Our intelligent agencies have all information ready including his place of worship and mode of operation. Okay, we will try. We will get into action immediately.

They all got into a car and drove away. The car stood before a Musjid. They had news that a particular person was an Arabian agent and he frequented that mosque. They had information that a secret meeting was going on there at that hour. It was past midnight. Three men emerged from the mosque and cautiously walked on to the parking lot. Suddenly the intelligence officer turned on the headlight and two officers ran to catch them with revolvers in their hands. Two of them ran away and escaped but incidentally they caught the right man. It was in deed the news agent. He was taken to an undisclosed location and the questioning began. The Agent was so much afraid that he could not speak. They asked him to relax, and when he was ready, they questioned him

“We know from our record that you are Wagid. You work for an Arabian paper.”

“Yes I do.”

“We need some information.”

“I don’t have any information.”

“Please co-operate. It is urgent and it is important. We are searching for a terrorist who escaped from America. Who was it and where is he now?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have any information. I am not aware of that whole plot.”

“Look. We will not let you go until we get information. We will never reveal your identity. There is lot of money in it.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“You contact him and tell him now that you have to meet him in Karachi at his hide out. We need the information on his hide out. Okay? That is all you have to do. Remember you did not meet us,” said the chief operative.

“Okay. What do I get in return?”

“I assure you that you would get one hundred thousand dollars.”

“For one hundred thousand dollars, I will do as you say. When will I get my money?”

“Your money will be deposited to your account. You may leave the account number.”

“Really,”

“We are honest in our dealings and expect you to be honest. No tricks, Okay? We will kill you if you double-cross.” He understood the gravity of the situation.

Next day, the plane landed in Karachi Airport. Wagid walked down the plane and went straight to arrival gate where hundreds of people had gathered to receive their relatives. He came out of the airport and sat in a cab and told the driver where he had to go. After an hour, the cab stopped in front of a multi-storied building. Two operatives, who were waiting there to follow him, followed him. Wagid went to a particular apartment and knocked at the door and uttered a code word. The door opened and the two operatives pushed out Wagid and entered into the apartment. There was a woman in burqa at the house. The soldiers asked her to go out of the house, which she did. They caught and handcuffed the man inside. It was Ahmed. They searched for the other man who was his accomplice but they did not find him there. They ran out to capture the person in burqua. The person in burqua had vanished before they realized that it was Abdul. As Abdul threw up his burqa and descended the first step, blaring lights caught him. “Keep your hands above your head!” a voice blared on the micro-phone.

“You don’t understand! I came by Yakub’s orders! We are friends!”

“Liar, Catch him! Make no false moves and step away from the stairs.”

Abdul made no attempt to escape, but he was so dumbfounded that he had been caught, and neither could Ahmed and his men do anything. They quietly got into the van. The sleuths moved them to an undisclosed location for further action.

Yakub was addressing a press conference that morning.

“Look gentlemen, India says we are harboring terrorists. See for yourself how much we are cooperating in apprehending the terrorists in Pakistan. We have extended unstinting support to America in its war against terror. It proves that what is happening in Kashmir is not terrorism; it is freedom struggle of the people of Kashmir against India. That is all!” said Yakub as he addressed the media men.

A press conference was in progress at the same time in America and an American spokesperson was addressing the journalists. A reporter asked her.

“Now, Taliban and Al Qaeda fugitives are in Pakistan. Do you think Pakistan is supporting their activities clandestinely? What action will America take against Pakistan?”

“Pakistan is our friend but Iraq is our enemy. We will send our armed forces to Iraq. Iraq has weapons of mass destruction. We will mobilize world opinion in favor of waging war against Iraq. Saddam must quit or we wage war against Iraq.”

“Don’t you think that, if the terrorists are hiding in Pakistan, Pakistan is supporting them? After all, just two nights ago the infamous terrorists Abdul and Ahmed were caught in Karachi.”

“We give more military aid to Pakistan to wage war against international terrorism. Pakistan is our true ally in our war against terrorism.” The news conference was over. Rajesh and Girish, the Indian reporters, were talking sometime afterwards. “What did America gain from this war against terror?”

“They took revenge against Taliban for sheltering Osama.”

“At what cost?”

“Only American exchequer knows it. I put the loss at 300 billion.”

“What did Pakistan gain?”

“They gained money, friendship and commendation.”

“What did Pakistan lose?”

“Pakistan lost nothing, nothing at all.”

“What did India gain?”

“Nothing”.

“What did India lose?”

“Millions and millions of Rupees”

“What happens next?”

“The wild goose chase goes on.”

“Who suffered most in the war against terror?”

“Guess.”

“What is the chance of Osama being caught in Pakistan?”

“Zero percent.”

“When will America gets disillusioned with Pakistan?”

“When they trust India...”

Chapter 45

Manav becomes a victim of terror

An ascetic in saffron robe was delivering a discourse to a group of about a hundred disciples in an ashram. Lily was regularly visiting the Ashram for she had devoted the remaining few days of her life to spiritual life. Bill Johnson and Meena had come down to India on a long tour and they were recommended to visit the Ashram by their guide. The ascetic said during his discourse,

“Look at this Universe. It is such a wonderful creation. Who created this wonder? God created this. God is omniscient, omnipotent, omni competent and all pervasive. We see God in several forms such as Rama, Krishna, Narayana and Shiva. You can visualize god in any form you want. God has no form, shape or size. Why do people worship God in different forms? It is because a common man cannot visualize God in abstraction. He can identify himself with the God only if he sees god in a definite form. This is the philosophy behind polytheism.

“God is the supreme being. He is above all. He is the Lord of the Universe. Nothing moves in this Universe without his commands. We are all puppets in his hands. You cannot challenge his ordainment. Krishna says in his advice to Arjuna

‘Do your duty and leave the consequence to me.’

“Man is mortal. This body dies and decays. Man is more than the body he is made up of. He has a soul that never dies. Soul is immortal and immutable. Soul will not die with the body. The soul leaves the dead body and enters another body. Just as the snake sheds its cover when a new cover is grown around its body, man leaves the old and worn out body and enters a new one.”

“You will be born and reborn until you find Moksha, the salvation. God takes you back into his fold when you shed all your sins and become pure. Until then, you will be born and reborn again and again. You have a choice to purify yourself or to commit more and more sins. Everyone must purify one’s body and mind and strive to attain salvation, because this world is full of miseries. It is not a paradise to live eternally. You seem to be happy at times, but this happiness is momentary. The permanent happiness is found in the feet of God.

God takes form and comes to earth to preserve ‘good’ and destroy ‘evil’. He preserves and protects his creations. Give up selfishness and work for the happiness of mankind. You will become a part of him, and finally unify yourself with the Supreme Master of the Universe.”

Manav went of the hall and sat under a mango tree of the ashram in Bangalore one winter afternoon after giving a discourse on the Indianness to many foreign disciplines who had been staying in the ashram for the last one week. As he let his mind go nostalgic, he remembered Aziz who he was obsessed with all through his life. He remembered how different he was from others and how his friendship grew with Aziz.

He wondered how an innocent teenager could grow so mysterious! His mind went back to his high school days to recollect his conversation he had with Aziz. Manav was suddenly roused by the presence of another man in the saffron robe who was quietly observing Manav. He turned away from him when Manav made an attempt to fix his eye on him and briskly walked away in the opposite direction.

“Who is it? He resembles Aziz in stature.” He said to himself as he got up from his seat and walked towards the prayer hall. He saw Meena coming towards him with Bill. Bill recognized that the ascetic was Manav, and was astonished to see Manav altogether in a different form. He shook hands with Manav admiringly.

“Meena, it is Manav. I know him.”

Meena intently studied the ascetic’s face and recognized him. She was so moved to see him in that attire that she started weeping, and when she was able to control her emotion she spoke to him

“Manav, I don’t want to see you in this dress.” There were still tears in her eyes as she spoke.

“I am destined to become a sanyasi. How can anyone prevent me from becoming what I am destined to?” he asked looking at the sky. He was firm and unmoved. He looked at his watch and said, the time is up and I must go. The next batch is waiting for me.” He said and walked away leaving Meena and Bill as they stood speechless.

Lily was observing the body movement of the sanyasi and identified him as Manav. She did not want to show her face to him because she knew that would raise storm in his otherwise peaceful mind and so she walked away covering her sari pallu over her head.

Three months later Manav received a message that Lily was dying in the hospital. He hurriedly went to see her. While passing through different wards, he suddenly noticed ward boys bringing a patient on a stretcher. He saw the patient’s face. It was Lily and she was in coma. He followed her to the ward and sat there. He was sitting there the whole night. Nobody came to enquire about her. Next morning he went home to bathe and change his dress. He came back at four in the evening. Lily was not on her bed. He asked a nurse where Lily was. She raised her hand towards the sky and said,

“She died this afternoon and her body is lying in the morgue”

“Have you informed her relatives?”

“Yes, we did. We informed a distant relative who had signed the papers before the operation by voice mail. He is not responding. Nobody has come forward to claim the body. We cannot keep the body for more than three days. If nobody claims the body in a day or two we are handing the body to medical college for educational purpose.” The nurse went out. Manav sat down on the bench and sobbed. He sat there for nearly an hour recollecting the days he spent with her in America. At last he went to medical superintendent and claimed the body. He called the municipal van and alone he lifted the body and placed gently on the Stretcher. Two hospital staff carried it to the van. The van moved in the direction of Crematorium opposite to the Lalbagh. When the formalities were completed with the cremation staff, the body was sent to incendiary, He

came out sobbing and walked on the footpath for nearly two miles unmindful of the sweat emanating from the body. It was nearing six in the evening and the street lights were turned on the K H Road nearby. The third day after her cremation, he claimed the ashes and carried the pot with the remains to Sreerangapatna near Mysore. He called a Brahmin Acharya who completed the rituals and immersed the ashes in the river Kaveri. He was sitting like thunder-struck for fifteen days and gradually regained his composure.

Manav left the Ashram and wandered around aimlessly, depressed and guilty. He decided to go on pilgrimage with Nikhil to the north to overcome his grief and they visited Jagannath temple at Puri, Confluence of Ganga, Jamuna and Saraswati at Prayag, Gaya and Budh Gaya, Haridhwar, Hrishikesh and Badrinath. At last they crossed Srinagar and went up high on the verdant mountains towards Amarnath. They had to go beyond that point on the mules. There were scores of pilgrims traveling with them. It was getting dark. There were many tents on a small plain land surrounded by high mountain ranges on all sides. Manav and Nikhil occupied a tent and rested there. They had no light other than a torch. They kept the torch by their side and slept. There were about fifty pilgrims with them who had also occupied the tents around them.

It was only two in the morning when suddenly they were woken up by the gunfire. A band of terrorists started firing indiscriminately at the camp. The scared people in the tents started running helter-skelter. The smart ones stayed in their cottages, huddled on the ground, to escape bullets. After fifteen minutes of gunfire, guns became silent and Manav moved to safer place with Nikhil. Suddenly someone appeared from behind the bush and started spraying bullets. Manav lay flat for a few minutes under the starry sky. Four men came and surrounded Manav. Two of them held Manav and forced him to kneel. They looked at him, and then at each other. One said something to others in Urdu, while another nodded consent. Manav looked at the silhouettes of his assailants in the semi-darkness under the starry sky in disbelief. Manav vaguely wondered what they were going to do when Aziz appeared before him.

Suddenly the searchlights blared and Manav could see Aziz clearly in his face. Aziz's tall, agile and intelligent personality stood before him with a disdainful smile in the corner of his mouth as if to mock at Manav, and he shuddered at the cruelty imprinted on that disdainful face.

"Aziz, it is me, your old friend, Manav. What are you doing?" Manav appealed to Aziz's good sense as Aziz aimed gun at Manav. "No, Aziz! Don't do it! No!" implored Manav.

"Aman, the police have taken up position. We have to move," called out another mujahiddins. Manav was petrified when he heard Aziz being called Aman".

“Are you Aziz or Aman?” Manav asked rather puzzled raising his hand in despair.

“I am Aziz to you and Aman to this world. Aziz is Aman,” replied Aziz.

“Aman is a notorious terrorist!” exclaimed Manav.

“That notorious terrorist is before you,” said Aziz.

“Aman, we must leave this place at once. What are you waiting for? Kill him.”

“O God! Jesus! Save my Uncle.” Nikhil shouted and ran into Manav.

Aman looked at Manav, waited for a moment and suddenly fired at him.

Manav fell to the ground.

“Uncle, are you hurt?” shouted Nikhil.

“O Nikhil, when a monster writes my fate, death is inevitable.” He said and closed his eyes. In a moment Aziz triggered his aim at Nikhil.

“Manav and Nikhil lay there dead in the lap of the Himalayas. In the next moment, the security guards fired at Aman and Aman too lay there dead. In the morning the security guards found the bodies lying there with the Bhagavad-Gita in the hands of Manav, and a holy book of the Muslims in the hands of Aman and the Bible in the hands of Nikhil.

THE END

Chapter 46

End notes

¹ The uneducated backward class leaders try to give an impression to the people that the upper caste people are outsiders and they have nothing to commend except the knowledge of English.

² In India the people in distress will approach the people with money, power and influence for help, and though the people express their inability to help them, they are not looked down upon. The people generally show compassion for unfortunate ones.

³ The practice of paying money to the bridegroom at the time of marriage has been widely prevalent in India.

⁴ It is a knot tied by a brother to a sister to assure protection and affection.

⁵ In the traditional Indian families, women will not leave home without elder's permission.

⁶ In India, women must reach home before it is dark otherwise the people think that she has gone out with a man. Going out with a man other than one's husband in the evening, is deemed as a disgraceful act. Any act with sexual overture is deemed as disgraceful.

⁷ Man and woman won't hug each other in India unless they are in deep love. Man and woman will greet orally and they won't touch each other when they meet. The people will brand them as flirts and distance themselves from such people if they hug each other.

⁸ Illegitimate relationship is considered despicable in India.

⁹ In India marrying outside one's caste or being intimate with a man before marriage is deemed foolish act and is against the social norms. If anyone does it, his or her family is exposed to infamy

¹⁰ In India it is very common that relatives and friends advise without being asked. And the people advised take such advices in good spirit.

¹¹ The parents mostly arrange marriages in India. The sons and daughters are not free to marry anyone of their choice. If the son or daughter makes the choice the parents must approve it. If the parents make the choice for their sons and daughters, the sons and daughters must approve it. Father's decision is final in this matter.

¹² In India, it is customary to show the horoscope for astronomical calculations. They believe that conjugation of planets has something to do with the life of the bride and groom. If the horoscope tallies, they proceed to marry otherwise, the marriage proposal falls through.

¹³ There is an evil practice in India that girl's parents should give huge some of money or assets as gift to groom at the time of marriage. It is declared illegal by law but in practice it exists.

¹⁴ In India it is disgrace to be born outside the wedlock and nobody will come forward to marry such girls.

¹⁵ In India, the houses are abominably small and the cost of construction is prohibitive.

¹⁶ In India, Parents and children live together under one roof even after the children come of age and marry. The newly married girl enters into the house of the bridegrooms' family. The married couple cannot live separately if the parents live in the same city without inviting the wrath of the society. The father is the head of the family.

¹⁷ It is a place of pilgrimage for the Hindus.

¹⁸ It is also a place of pilgrimage.

¹⁹ It is customary in India to obey the dictates of the parents irrespective of your age and education unless you feel that their dictates are totally unreasonable or unacceptable.

²⁰ The people of India are divided on the basis of castes. There are hundreds of castes and sub castes and each caste comprises of a group of tribes who worship a common god and have common customs and traditions. The Brahmins had occupied the vortex of caste hierarchy in the past but the non Brahmins hate Brahmins to day. They want to keep Brahmins out of corridors of power and influence. Many Brahmins are leaving India to countries like America and Canada in search of greener pasture. They are now the suppressed lot.

²¹ The people of India do not take kindly to a divorcee. They look down upon and hate her. She will be socially ostracized and isolated.

²² The black monkeys that attack the people from behind like guerillas.

²³ He was a great sage in Indian Mythology who devoted his life to the well being of his parents and took them to places of pilgrimage on his back.





The end

