

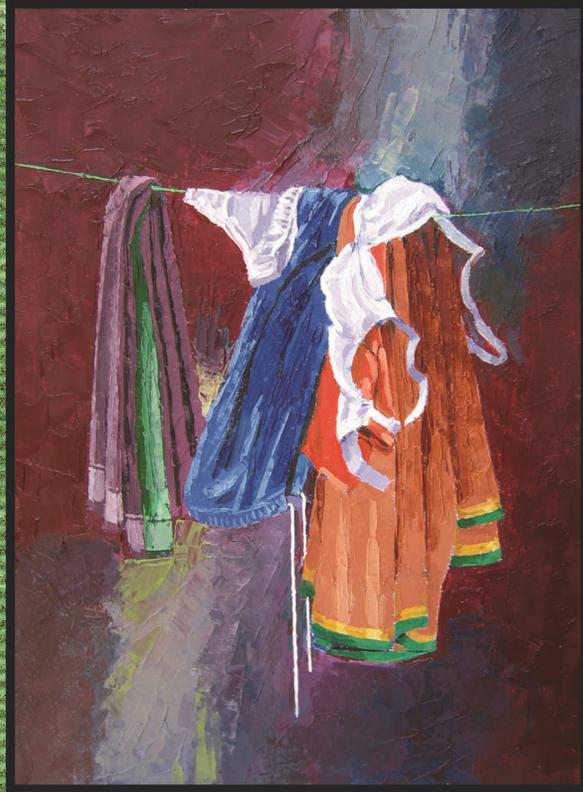


BENIGN FLAME

S A G A O F L O V E

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BS Murthy

Benign Flame: Saga of Love

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Dedicated to **Naagamani, my better half**,
who still leaves no stone unturned for my fulfillment.

[Chapter 1](#) **Ramaiah's Family**

That winter night in the mid-seventies, the Janata Express was racing rhythmically on its tracks towards the coast of Andhra Pradesh. As its headlight pierced the darkness of the fertile plains, the driver honked the horn as though to awake the sleepy environs to the spectacle of the speeding train. On that, in the S-3, were the Ramaiahs with their nine year-old daughter Roopa.

Earlier, from Ramavaram, it was in the nick of time that Ramaiah took Janaki to Vellore for the doctors to extricate her from the jaws of death. Now, having been to Tirupati for thanksgiving, he was returning home with his wife and Roopa they took along for the sojourn. While her parents were fast asleep, Roopa sat still on a side berth, reminiscing her times at the hospital where Janaki took one month to recuperate under Dr. Yasoda's care.

Soon the train stopped at a village station, as though to disrupt Roopa's daydreams of modeling herself on the lady doctor at the Christian Medical College Hospital, and as she peeped out, the ill-lit platform seemed to suggest that the chances of her being

Dr. Roopa could be but dim. Ramaiah too woke up to the commotion caused by the incoming passengers, and was surprised to see his daughter still awake, lost in her thoughts.

"What are you scheming my darling?" he said in jest.

"Naanna, won't you make me a doctor?" she said as though in a trance.

"Haven't the nurses already made you a junior doctor?" he said affectionately, bringing her escapades at the hospital back into her mental focus, and pleased with her idea, he patted her to sleep, even as he recalled his anxieties associated with her birth.

Ramaiah was jolted from his reverie as someone in the compartment switched on the light, to prepare himself to alight at the coming station.

'Surely she would shape up into a dusky beauty. Won't she be bright as well?' he thought, looking at Roopa in her deep sleep, and recalled her escapade when she was hardly three.

"You know how clever our Roopa is?" said Janaki, at bedtime. "She wanted the timepiece to fiddle with and when I refused to give in, she cried no end. When she forgot what she was crying for, she cried to know why she cried at all! What a unique girl our Roopa is!"

As the train moved into a major junction, Ramaiah got down, looking for a coffee vendor. Unable to find even a tea vendor, he lit his Berkeley without a beverage. When the guard whistled the start, a half-naked urchin jostled past Ramaiah into the bogie to crouch in the vestibule. While the train was on the move, Ramaiah wondered whether the urchin had crouched to draw warmth from his heart to ward off the chillness, and pitying him, as he gave him some money the lad took as a matter of right.

'Isn't there something called gratitude?' thought Ramaiah, feeling disregarded. 'Is he so naive that he knows not civility? Or could he be an outcast, unfamiliar with the niceties of society?' Ramaiah looked at him intently as though for a clue.

'Is it possible that his exposure to the elements in his nakedness should've robbed his body of its sense of feeling?' he thought, finding the wretched lad as cool as a cucumber. 'Now, what he needs most is a piece of cloth to cover him with. After all, money wouldn't provide warmth by itself, would it?'

Ramaiah went to his trunk to fetch a vest for the urchin. Seeing him wear it without even looking at him, Ramaiah wondered whether the lad was indifferent to the world in general.

'Could life get worse than that?' Ramaiah wondered, as he tried to go back to sleep on his allotted berth. How was he to know that one day, despairing for love, Roopa would personify the wretched side of life itself.

The outbreak of the day, which brought the sun on to the horizon, woke up Ramaiah. Realizing it would still take an hour to reach Ramavaram, he was inclined to inaction. The chillness of the wintry breeze and the warmth of the sunny dawn struck him for their contrast. Looking yonder, he saw the dew filled fields bejeweled by refraction and thought that they brought luster to the Master's Creation.

When Janaki woke up, as Ramaiah folded up the berth, providing space for those in the aisle to rest their weary legs, there was enough room in the compartment for the assorted characters waiting in the vestibule.

Soon, the newspaper of the day was split into four that preoccupied as many. As its center page landed in the lap of the one opposite, Ramaiah couldn't help but crane his neck to screen the bold print therein. However, all the pages came to him, though in a

crumpled shape, enabling him to go through the copy before the vestiges of the paper were restored to whom it belonged, but not before the scandals in it were savored by those present.

Having finished with the newspaper in that intermittent reading, Ramaiah puffed away at his freshly lit Berkeley, and looking out from the window, he began to admire the scenery filled with greenery. When the landscape around looked familiar, he woke up Roopa and goaded Janaki to move towards the exit. Soon he too joined them with the bag and baggage.

Waiting near the wash-basin, Ramaiah remembered the lad and looked for him, and not finding him, he thought, 'That is life. It has a destination even for the destitute.'

Soon Ramaiah leaned out of the slowing train to ascertain the platform.

When the train screeched to the welcome chores of the waiting staff of the Ramavaram Station, alighting from it with the precaution associated with an occasional traveler, Ramaiah hurried his family towards the exit like a habitual commuter who catches the train on the move.

"The postmaster might've brought bagfuls of news," the ticket collector at the gate greeted Ramaiah, alluding to the village postmasters' penchant to peruse the post before delivery.

"The only news is that the Mails are running late," was the Ramaiah repartee as he handed over the tickets.

Once out, he engaged two cycle rickshaws to take them home.

Ramavaram was a mini town as its residents loved to call it. With just five hundred houses, it was no more than a village in Ramaiah's childhood but grew rapidly to house thirty thousand souls by the time Roopa was born. Well, the explosion in its population owed more to the migration than to procreation, and that represented the trend all over. While the natives lamented that the place was bursting at its seams, the settlers felt it was brimming with activity. However, all were proud to belong to it, not to speak of the Ramaiahs.

Life was running its routine course in Ramaiah's household until fate ordained a tragedy, as though to ensure Roopa's resolve to become a doctor was not dissolved in the myopic dreams of her imminent maidenhood, Rukmini, her elder sister, orphaned her son for want of postnatal care at the government maternity home that came up by then.

"Nature's victim of procreation and man's means of recreation, that's what woman is," bemoaned Janaki.

'Only as a doctor can I help women,' resolved Roopa to herself.

With Rukmini's premature death causing consternation in the concerned households, the elders, in due course, went into a huddle, and decided it would be in the best interests of the motherless child if Suguna, the deceased's sister, married the widower. So after a decent wait, while Suguna replicated her sibling in her brother-in-law's life, Roopa too matured as though nature intended to synchronize her body with her mind.

While Roopa resembled a flower at dawn with its dew on, her complexion of tan was in consonance with the radiance of her velvet skin. Even as her vivacious features acquired softness as though to project the sweetness of her nature, her gaze gave way to glances as if to convey her innate inclinations. While her nascent bust was akin to a curious maiden peeping out from behind the curtain, the *oni* she wore strived to veil her

maiden form. Her emerging figure and her diffident disposition lent tentativeness to her gait that seemed like the calibrated movements of a virtuoso danseuse on the way to the crescendo. Though in her interaction, she was modesty personified that strangely enhanced her sensual appeal, nevertheless, while watching the boys on the sly, she withdrew from them with inhibition. However, embellishing her unique persona, she came to have a mind of her own.

Once when she debunked the *puranic* tales of cock-pecked wives as perverse male stratagems to enslave women, Janaki was truly alarmed.

"These tales of female fidelity have a purpose of their own," said Janaki to Roopa. "Since nature made men promiscuous, it's the female loyalty that holds the marriage in the long run, for the benefit of the family and the society as well. These tales have a moral for men as well for they underscore the fact that it's the wife who sticks through thick and thin with their man and not the lascivious lasses with whom they come to stray."

As Roopa remained unconvinced and minced no words about the fallacy of the proposition, Janaki realized that old wives tales were no longer a currency with the educated girls. So she thought it fit to reason it out with her and Chandrika, her unmarried daughters, about the pitfalls of premarital sex and thus closeted with them one evening.

"I think it's time I talk to you about the proclivities of youth," Janaki began enigmatically. "To be drawn to boys at your age is but natural and desirable even. It helps the healthy development of your sexuality. Infatuation is the narcotic of the nascent youth, and if only the dosage is right, it could bring in small pleasures that delight. On the other hand, a thoughtless overdose could cripple your womanliness forever. While being friendly with the boys, beware of their attitudes and be aware about your vulnerabilities. They pursue for the final favor doggedly until they are dog-tired. Nature made them that way and for a purpose; female fulfillment is the purpose of male desire. It's left for you to draw your own premarital lines. Do not get into those situations that might let you part with that for which they court you so fervently. If only you interact with easy virtue, your date could doubt your ability to resist a future seducer. Thus, if you favor your lover in a hurry, you might end up losing him besides that by which men measure women. And that would be enough to put you in a doghouse for life."

Janaki extracted a promise from Chandrika and Roopa that they wouldn't indulge in premarital sex.

Ramaiah's household was jolted from its routine that April at the news of his impending transfer to Kakinada, though on promotion. And as if to relieve them from the obligation to stay back, Janaki's parents passed away in quick succession even before the transfer order was on hand. Whatever, Ramaiah welcomed the development as it would entail better schooling for the children, especially to Raju his only son, and expose them to a liberal environment as well.

Once the dynamics of change came into play in Ramaiah's household, the inertia of lethargy gave way to the novelty of life. The house with a backyard that they rented in Ramaraopeta made everyone feel at home. While Janaki enjoyed the company of better-educated women from the neighborhood, the children were excited at the prospect of their schooling in the English medium. Exercising his increased power over an enlarged body of subordinates, Ramaiah too felt at home at the Head Post Office.

When he got Chandrika admitted in the PR College in the intermediate, he felt as though he was paying due respects to his Alma Mater. While Roopa enrolled in the Govt. Girls High School for her pre final, Raju joined the McLauren High School in the eighth class.

While Ramavaram became a distant memory for all of them, Roopa came to realize that she became the object of boys' attention and the subject of girls' envy. Nevertheless, she didn't see any contradiction in that, for she had come to appreciate the value of her sexuality. Her teachers' compliments about her cerebral caliber only furthered her sense of confidence.

Mid way into the first-term, when Roopa was on top of the world, Sandhya, the daughter of the new Joint Collector, joined the class. About the same age as she was, Sandhya was shorter by a fraction but rosy in complexion. While she looked cute and lively, in her slim frame, she carried herself with that grace often associated with the children of the well-off from the cities. The sophistication of her manner, and the chastity of her accent, acquired at the Hyderabad Public School, put everyone in awe, the teachers included, but her modesty and friendliness enabled her classmates to flock to her in their numbers.

However, Roopa felt like the spirited person at a dinner party, who would have lost the audience upon the arrival of a celebrity, and acted in a like manner; she didn't join the bandwagon but when Sandhya herself sought her help to catch up with the syllabus, Roopa obliged her, having felt vindicated. While Sandhya was impressed with the keenness of Roopa's intellect, the warmth of Sandhya's persona attracted Roopa. The closer they became, the more they admired each other. Moreover, the more they came to know about one another, the fonder they became of each other. Soon, they were seen only together.

As the final exams neared, they co-studied at Sandhya's place during the preparatory holidays. With Kamalakar and Damayanthi, Sandhya's parents, having readily taken to Roopa, she felt at home at the Joint Collector's Bungalow, where she found a large collection of fiction, which she began to pore over. Ramaiah, recalling his teacher's advice to him that classics would improve one's language, deepen his vision and broaden his horizons, was glad that his daughter was on the right track though he himself had missed the bus.

Soon enough, Ramaiah was forced to take stock of his situation. Agricultural income became meager ever since they left Ramavaram. After all, the lessee of their depleted landholding made it a habit to blame it upon the drought to deny Ramaiah his due. Besides, as all the eligible accounts were discounted, there was no way to have a loan from his office. As for their ancestral dwellings, the modern houses that came up made them antiques already. Thus, Ramaiah began to feel as if he reached the dead end of Ramavaram.

"Why not dispose of all that?" he broached the topic with Janaki. "What with the diminishing returns, they're assets only for the record. But if only the old man were alive it would have been a different story."

"With the 'land for the tiller' thick in the air, better we come out clean," she gave the green signal. "You better sell away whatever little my father left me as well."

When he returned from Ramavaram, after having sold what all they had, he felt as though his umbilical cord with the place was severed. With those proceeds, he proceeded to acquire an old building in Gandhinagar as their 'old age shelter' as he put it. The rest of the fund he deposited in a scheduled bank to take care of future needs.

Chapter 2

Realities of Life

After that summer recess, with the reopening of the PR College, Roopa, and Sandhya joined in the Intermediate, and as though to signal the end of their schooling, they shed their skirts to switch over to saris. Looking all the sweeter in their sweet sixteen's as they entered the campus that day, Roopa in her snuff chiffon sari and Sandhya in her Gadwal cotton one, they created quite a sensation.

The delectable contours of Roopa's well-proportioned body of five feet five appeared accentuated by her narrow waist as her curvy figure in that velvet skin lent form to her sari meant for enhancing her modesty. Her robust breasts that dared the veiling, and the thick seat, which hugged it tight, made it seem that her genes strove hard to enhance her sex appeal. While her tapered arms that abutted on her flowing frame lent poise to her persona, swung by the swing of her seat in her tantalizing gait, her hair in plait pictured a pendulum that caressed her bottom. As the radiance of her face gave an aura to her charming manner, her self-belief was in consonance with her sensuality. Moreover, the imbibed sophistication in Sandhya's company gave style to her substance that made her ravishing.

Sandhya's rosy complexion, in congruence with her angelic soul, imparted pleasantness to her persona. While her slim figure and sharp features defined aesthetics, her sparkling eyes reflected the spirit of her lively nature. Even as the evocative features of her supple frame brought fluidity to her movements, the radiance of her silken skin ennobled her womanly assets. As her smooth brown bobbing hair added style to her demeanor, her sweet manner lent poise to her figure. Enhancing her appeal her gait was such that the fall of her sari acquired the rhythmic grace of the loom on which it was weaved. With her gaiety being in harmony with her youth, the alacrity of her mind conjugated with her sprightly nature making her gorgeous.

Whereas the effervescence of Sandhya's ethereal beauty was apparent at espial, the magnetism of Roopa's charm compelled for its conjuration in interaction. The friends became a great hit with the boys who tried to befriend them. However, whenever accosted by a lad, Roopa tended to turn into a bundle of nerves.

"You make such a heavy weather of the whole thing, the poor things might end up being dumb," Sandhya was wont to tease Roopa.

'When I could get on well with boys at school, why am I ill at ease with them, now? But the way they look at me make me feel different and diffident, won't they?' wondered Roopa.

However, the searching look she espied in the male eyes thrilled her in her vitals. As she tried to visualize herself through their perception, her body, in her own eyes, acquired a new dimension. The more she became mentally closer to the opposite sex; all the more she distanced herself from the boys. Sandhya, on the other hand, proved to be a cool customer known to unnerve the dashers. While her glamour gave her a rare aura that overawed the boys, her father's position only confounded their confidence. Nevertheless, Chandrika, who by then was in B. Com., pre final, helped them in their initiation into the campus life.

When Chandrika got her degree and Roopa was through her Intermediate with flying colors, what with the recalcitrant Raju too seemed to mend his wayward ways, for the Ramaiahs it seemed time flew as if it developed wings. However, proving that good

things won't last forever came the jolt as Roopa revealed the cards that she so closely held to her chest all along.

"Do you know what it takes to be doctor?" said a surprised Ramaiah.

"Know I've topped the class," she said naively.

"But sadly, we're short of means," he said helplessly.

"Naanna, I'm craving to be a doctor," she said.

"Sorry dear, it's impossible," he dismissed her in despair and left in dilemma for the Post Office

'How I took it for granted!' Roopa wondered all day; maybe when one is obsessed with a singular aspect of a situation, the attendant issues fail to get the focus they deserve.'

When a distraught Roopa approached her mother pleading for her support, affected by her daughter's passion, Janaki promised to persuade Ramaiah. While Roopa hoped for a miracle as the condemned would to escape the noose, however, on Ramaiah's return, she avoided him like the one who tends to hide himself from the one commended for the favor. When Ramaiah sent for her, after what appeared to be an eternity for her, she went up to him with her heart in her mouth.

"Now I recall that night on the train when you were just nine," he said, patting her head as she squatted beside his easy chair. "Though I was pleased with your ambition then, I never imagined you could be nursing it so vigorously. If not, I would've cautioned you in time."

"Naanna, it became my obsession, I'll be miserable otherwise," she sank into his lap.

"You know we're lower middle-class now," he seemed to give an account of his helplessness. "The lands are all gone and I'm going to retire soon. Agreed there is some money in the bank but it would barely meet your dowries and your brother's higher studies. This house, of course, is for your brother lest he should curse me for having left him nothing to inherit. As for your mother and I, the pension should see us through."

"Why not pledge the house, I'll redeem it later," she suggested with apparent hope.

"Be realistic dear, once you're married, your earnings would be your husband's. More so to marry you off as Doctor Roopa, I've to cough up much more for your dowry," reasoned Ramaiah.

"Then, I won't marry at all," she said with such a conviction that startled Ramaiah.

"Don't be silly, the essence of life lies in its wholesomeness. You would realize later on, that nothing is worth in life to the exclusion of all the rest that makes it what it is. Above all, marriage is the key that opens life alike for the boys and the girls," he said, showing her the reality of life.

"It's my sole ambition naanna," she persisted, hoping against hope.

"Ambition is a double-edged sword; possessed by the resourceful, it's cut out for success and in the hands of the lesser souls, it hurts their peace of mind," he turned to philosophy to help her depressed soul.

Then he recounted his own disappointment; his inability to become an advocate, and advocated to his daughter to learn to take life as it came, ordained by karma. "If I were an advocate, perhaps, I would have been rich enough to fulfill your ambition. However, it was not to be, and therein lies our fate - yours and mine as well," he concluded.

Roopa, though reconciled to her situation, resented her fate. As if she were revenging on her helplessness, she shunned the sciences and opted for commerce. However, as per her inclination, Sandhya went in for the humanities.

"Are you tired of dissecting frogs and all?" said Sandhya in jest as Roopa filled in the admission form.

"Like to have a closer look at the material side of life," said Roopa mystically.

"Jokes apart, tell me what's wrong. I know you wanted to study medicine," said Sandhya as they got into a rickshaw.

Roopa could only manage a deep sigh for an answer.

"They say a friend is one with whom you can think aloud and you know that's what I do with you, but then it's up to you," said Sandhya empathically.

"Know I love you the most and yet somehow I wasn't frank with you; but from now on, I'll think aloud with you," said Roopa earnestly, and blurted out.

Moved, Sandhya enlaced Roopa, which brought solace to the latter and induced warmth in the former, making both of them feel loved and wanted by the other.

Chandrika, who graduated that year, didn't think in terms of post graduation as la affair Roopa gave the clue to her father's mind and the family's finances, and so, thought of a job for an occupation.

"Sit still till we fix a match as it might improve your complexion a bit, besides, I don't want any complications, that's all," Janaki was dismissive.

When Chandrika persisted, Ramaiah, however, relented, and persuaded his wife,

"You've to change with the changing times. Moreover, some boys have started preferring employed girls for their brides."

After a couple of unsuccessful attempts, Chandrika got an assistant's job in an export firm for a salary of two-fifty. Her first take-home pay, however, enabled her mother to appreciate the virtue of having another earning member in the family.

Hardly a year passed before the 'changing times' stared the Ramaiahs in their faces in their complexity as 'the other earning member' of the family turned out to be an errant soul of the household.

Chandrika declared that she would like to marry her colleague, though of a lower caste, and Janaki threatened to jump into the well to spare herself, the shame of her daughter's alliance. Ramaiah though tried to reason it out with Chandrika by saying that if she married out of caste, none would marry Roopa. Besides, it won't be in her own interest either, to live with someone from a lower caste as adjusting to married life in an alien milieu will be all the more difficult. When the time comes for finding matches for her children, shunned by both the communities, she would realize that she had a cross to bear. Better she gave up the idea, for her own good.

Given her own disappointment, Roopa was empathic to her sister's feelings and felt that she could understand the true import of Chandrika's predicament.

"What to do now?" said Roopa to Chandrika having led her out into the backyard.

"I wish I weren't in love," said Chandrika stoically.

"That's neither here nor there for you've to act one way or the other," Roopa was solicitous.

"I may perish like the Buridan's ass, unable to decide whether to first drink water or eat oats," Chandrika was melancholic.

"Then why not try and forget him?" said Roopa.

"Time would do that for both of us but life without him is not what I want," said Chandrika.

Roopa kept quiet as though inviting her sister to give vent to her feelings.

"I'm being pulled apart by the family sentiment on one side and the lure of love on the other; love seems to be the most compelling of human emotions as it combines in it the craving of the soul and the desires of the body," said Chandrika melancholically.

"Oh, how you're hurt!" said Roopa sympathetically.

"I don't mind hurting myself but I'm worried about him and concerned about our mother. Moreover, how can I compromise your marriage prospects? That's my dilemma," said Chandrika dejectedly.

That her sister should think about her welfare, even in her predicament, melted Roopa's heart.

'If only I could help her love, what if, I marry out of turn to clear the hurdle?' thought Roopa.

She felt she knew her parents well enough. They were conventional more for the society's sake than out of personal conviction. Besides, they loved their children dearly. She was confident that all would welcome her idea. The prospect of her averting an imminent schism in the family appeared heroic to her.

'How nice it can be,' she thought excitedly, 'if my sacrifice serves my sister's cause besides solving my parents' problem.'

Though she was pleased to perceive herself in the role of a martyr for the family cause, however, on second thoughts, she contemplated the implications of her marriage without a degree as she was just through the first year of what appeared to be a three-year ordeal.

'How I nursed the dream of being a doctor,' she thought melancholically. 'Haven't I come to love myself in that role? Now that the bubble has burst, I couldn't care less. Hasn't life become humdrum, anyway?'

As she recalled her own disappointment, she remembered her father's words - your earnings would be your husband's - and saw a ray of hope in the situation.

'What if my husband helps my ambition to further the family income?' she thought hopefully. 'Who knows I may as well get an understanding husband. What a happy life I would lead then! Won't I love him even more for that? Let me take a chance and see what lies in store for me. Anyway, I've nothing to lose, do I?'

It seems the feature of life that while darkness deprives man of his shadow; his hope lingers on in spite of the foreboding.

As Chandrika wept inconsolably, it seemed Roopa's fear of the unknown was washed away in her sister's tears. Thus having made up her mind, Roopa unveiled the contours of her plan of action, however, hiding the hope behind her apparent sacrifice and that about had the same effect on Chandrika, as sighting a boat in the high seas would have on a shipwreck; it raised her spirits. While Chandrika was profuse in articulating her gratitude, and as if to convey her indebtedness bodily as well, she hugged her sister, Roopa felt embarrassed as her own streak of selfish motive jarred with the purity of her sister's outpouring.

It seems the attributes our hypocrisy induces others to adduce to us would bring no value addition to our own conscience.

However, as the sisters were confabulating without, Ramaiah had a tough time with his bitter half within.

“What went wrong with her brought-up? Nothing like this ever happened to anyone, even remotely related to us!” Janaki said puzzled.

“You know, women of the upper castes were insulated from men of the lower classes earlier,” he tried to explain the situation to her. “Social intercourse between caste groups was limited to the persons of the same sex. But all that has changed now. The society is truly open to both sexes from all sections. The pull of man woman attraction being what it is love has long since crossed the caste barrier causing marital trespasses. However, don’t get worried. For all that, her passion could be a passing phase, that can’t get past the first hurdle.”

Janaki prayed fervently for her daughter’s deliverance from that wretched affair. Just the same, when Roopa showed the silver lining, Ramaiah remained unenthusiastic.

“Inter-caste marriages would only lead to divorce as the couples tend to wind up the show at the first hitch; even otherwise, the inferior union would be ruinous in the end as they would be ostracized by the society for sure,” he articulated.

‘Though upper caste men would have no qualms having a fling with low caste women, they seek to shield their women from the men of that very stock,’ thought Chandrika, but said,

“I’m prepared for any eventuality.”

“After all, it’s her life; why not let her decide for herself?” said Raju, who was particularly fond of Chandrika and Roopa.

“Don’t oversimplify matters. What are the parents for if not to prevent their children’s follies?” retorted Ramaiah.

“You say everything in life is ordained by karma, so why not take this as her destiny?” interjected Roopa.

Ramaiah didn’t respond but remained unrelenting.

The sisters pressed the issue, and went on a hunger strike. The mother’s heart melted soon enough, and the father’s resolve dissolved, in due course. It was thus, Ramaiah wanted to have ‘a look at the fellow’ and see for himself, ‘What he’s worth?’

Soon the word went around that Ramaiah was on the lookout for a suitable boy for Roopa.

Chapter 3 **Hapless Hope**

It was a two-storied building in a by-lane of Chikkadapally, a rather congested locality in Hyderabad. Its owner, Padmavathi, was a widow in her early fifties. She let out much of the space to bachelors ‘to augment her pension’ as she was wont to maintain.

“Being elsewhere all the while, bachelors are a better bet for they cause much little wear and tear,” she would aver.

Her tenants, for their part, showed an unmistakable preference for her dwelling. With both her daughters married off, and with no one at home, she rarely left the reclining chair in the portico.

"The rent includes watch and ward for the lady doubles up for a watchdog," the lodgers joked amongst themselves.

And for her part, Padmavathi made it clear to them all that she would suffer none of any nonsense. Though she used to aver that all boys were equally dear to her, she was partial towards Sathyam, her tenant for well over six years. While believing that Sathyam was sincere by nature she felt that others were only behaving not to risk eviction.

Having been held up at his desk in the State Secretariat that evening, Sathyam was late in coming to his lodging. Not finding Padmavathi in the portico, he was a little surprised. As he went up, he found an inland letter in the door latch. Realizing that it was from his father, he hastened into his room, and even as he started reading it again, he heard footsteps on the stairs.

'Oh, she's coming up; how she craves for news and gathers it as a rag picker would collect rubbish from all corners!' he thought indignantly.

"What writes Pathrudugaru?" she said panting slightly.

"Usual stuff; we're Ok, are you Ok?" he replied dryly.

"It's time you got married," she said zeroing on the subject matter of his father's letter, as if on cue.

"He says there's a match," he replied reflexively.

"One should get married when still young," she said, and added as though to justify her plain features. "But do remember the old adage; a lovely wife brings in anxiety for she attracts all and sundry."

Having given him a bit of her mind, as she left abruptly, as though she were already late for airing the news, Sathyam read the appetizing portion of his father's letter once again:

'We all feel there is a suitable match for you. The girl is Ramaiahgaru's youngest daughter. He works at the Head Post Office here, and is my friend's colleague. We are all impressed with their family and our astrologer says both your horoscopes match to the tee. Moreover, the girl is very beautiful. If you like her, I would be done with my duty. After all, it's time you got married. Take leave for a week and come as early as you can. Your mother wants you to spend some time with us.'

"Moreover, the girl is very beautiful," he read aloud; and repeated again, as an encore to his ears.

He was always particular that his wife should be a beauty; and made that clear to his parents.

Instinctively he remembered Vani, his erstwhile colleague, and his thoughts turned to her. He always wondered whether beauty and grace were at competition in her persona. How he used to daydream about marrying her! However, his desire to cut a figure only made him diffident in her presence. Moreover, his anxiety to impress her with his wit made him only dumb in her audience. While nursing his calf love, he used to wonder about her reciprocity. As though appreciating his fear of rejection, his eyes felt shy to convey his desire while his lips failed to address his love.

'An arranged marriage brings the woman into man's life on his terms, which gives a head start to the marital romance, giving a short shrift to the uncertain courtship,' he thought presently.

He wondered whether this girl - he was disappointed that his father failed to mention her name - could be as beautiful as Vani. However, he couldn't help wishing that she might be better looking.

'After all, it's the woman's desirability that makes man covetous, moreover, the allurements of woman's beauty gives meaning to man's life, and provides substance as well. A man's job is half done if he has a cute wife for she doubles up, as a beautiful mother to ensure the children wouldn't be ugly,' he thought.

Propelled by that welcome prospect, Sathyam boarded the train in beatitude the very next day.

Pathrudu's message that they would be coming for the *pellichupulu* that Sunday set the ball rolling at Ramaiah's house. As the day of reckoning dawned with hope in both the households, Roopa became the center of attention in her home, and the subject of discussion at Pathrudu's place. Janaki insisted that Roopa oil-skin before her bath, and left her only after having shampooed her hair with some soapnut water. Sandhya however, descended on the scene when Roopa was still in the bathroom. After her bath, as Roopa wanted to come out, she found herself bolted from without. Readily realizing that Sandhya was playing pranks on her, Roopa began to fret and fume from within. At length, Sandhya removed the latch and rushed into Roopa's room only to leave her mate stranded in her petticoat. However, it was only after Roopa's desperate entreaties that Sandhya let her in, and as though for recompense took her into a palliative embrace.

"Soon your PC would've a feast for his eyes," said Sandhya admiring Roopa's assets.

"That is if you keep me without my sari," said Roopa trying to loosen herself from Sandhya's grip.

Debate ensued, with Janaki too joining in, regarding the 'sari for the occasion' for Roopa, and finally the consensus emerged in favor of the chocolate silk with a snuff border. After the lunch, as the countdown started, Janaki was at preparing a garland of jasmines to adorn Roopa's plait as Sandhya toiled to tame her friend's luxuriant hair. Such was its profusion that Sandhya's delicate fingers seemed overwhelmed.

"A hair like this is sure to ensnare any soul," whispered Sandhya to Roopa.

"If my hair has substance, your bob has style," said Roopa looking back at Sandhya endearingly.

"She would be really lucky if they agree," Janaki interrupted their mirth.

"Doesn't she sound like a stuck up gramophone?" said Roopa in jest.

"Getting a girl married is no joke these days; he's their only son and they're propertied too. His parents are hale and healthy, not needing their daughter-in-law's nursing. Moreover, the boy is in the government service, so he won't be hard up for cash with people lining up to line his pocket; one can be sure about that," Janaki addressed Sandhya.

"Bribe money is bad mummy, know that from me," said Roopa mockingly.

"How can it be so when it's the norm, anyway, as it's a man's affair, why should woman poke her nose into it?" Janaki sounded dismissive.

"If man gets the boot, it pinches his wife's leg, mummy," Roopa protested mimicking.

"Moreover, his father has five years of service left," Janaki resumed the resume, "and the boy is just twenty-eight. From what we've heard, he has no vices, to name any. He's

neither the club going sort, nor the card playing type. He knows how to count his notes and keep them clean. Well, a disciplined bringing up one may say. Any girl should find him a safe bet to say the least. We're lucky to come across such a match these days when everyone is going head over heels to go astray."

Seeing Roopa unmoved, Sandhya thought that the bride was not half as excited as her mother, and felt,

'She has always been like that, would think of crossing the bridge only when she comes to it.'

When Chandrika joined them, after toying with some special preparations in the kitchen, Janaki said,

"Hasn't she brought all this about, though by default? Maybe, everything is for our good only, as the saying goes. I've been praying that she could make the best out of a bad bargain."

"Don't worry about me," said Chandrika dryly, used as she was to her mother's deprecation of her condition.

Everything was in position by the time the guests were expected that evening. Nevertheless, Chandrika and Sandhya were barred from Sathyam's sight lest they should distract his attention from Roopa. However, they might satisfy their curiosity by peeping through the window as and when the party arrived. And Pathrudu did troop in with his party at the appointed time.

After making them seated in the hall, Roopa was ushered in immediately to beat the impending *durmuhurtham*. As she squatted on the mat, Roopa stole a glimpse of Sathyam only to place her eyelids on guard for the rest of the rendezvous. On the other hand, Sathyam couldn't take his eyes off Roopa for he found her out of the world. Besides, the very thought that she could be his wife whetted his appetite. He found her exceedingly charming even with her head dropped and eyelids drooped. Savoring her beauty, he noticed the plain gold stud on her shapely nose. He felt a diamond would make her resplendent and thought of presenting her one during their first night.

"Silence isn't always golden, so you may talk to her," said Ramaiah interrupting Sathyam's daydreaming.

"Why embarrass her," fumbled Sathyam.

Then Ramaiah engaged Sathyam in conversation about his work and times, apparently for Roopa's ears. However, as Sathyam betrayed his uncouthness and paraded his mediocrity as though to supplement his ungainly look, Roopa was truly put off. Meanwhile Durgamma, Sathyam's mother, moved closer to Roopa ostensibly to converse, however with the intent of feeling her legs for possible abnormality.

"What do you do in the spare time?" Ramaiah continued his interview, unmindful of Roopa's apparent disinterest in that.

"I make my meal," Sathyam said and instinctively looked at Roopa.

Noticing that she tried to suppress her smile, he felt embarrassed, and Ramaiah thought if fit to end his ordeal. As Pathrudu and party left after a while, promising to get back soon, Janaki started her monologue again, if anything, with greater conviction. However, the rest mobbed Roopa for her reaction.

"He's not for me," said Roopa shocking her mother.

"Have you gone mad or what! What's wrong with him? He's well-built and is not ill shaped either," Janaki nearly shouted at Roopa.

"Why place the cart before the horse? Even if they like her, it all depends on the dowry they demand," said Ramaiah to preempt frayed tempers.

Stung by her mother's reaction, Roopa retreated into her room as Sandhya followed her to confabulate.

"If you were me, would you marry him?" Roopa asked Sandhya.

"I haven't seen him that way," said Sandhya, a little surprised.

"And that means, you aren't impressed either," said Roopa.

While Sandhya kept mum, Janaki cribbed all along. Roopa for her part prayed that Pathrudu would ask the moon for a dowry, and kept her fingers crossed.

"They Okayed Roopa, without dowry at that," said Ramaiah, as he came home the next evening, as though soliciting a 'yes' from Roopa.

"Roopa, think again, one shouldn't shun fortune when it beckons on its own," pleaded Janaki.

"Why not look for another match?" said Roopa sounding pleading.

"But why reject this one," Ramaiah seemed persuasive.

"I've nothing against him but I'm not enthused either," said Roopa dryly.

"Don't be hasty, think again. We all feel it's a fine match, and you know that we wish you well," pleaded Janaki.

"No, he's not my man," said Roopa wishing that they spared her.

"Maybe, he's a simpleton, but do realize that he's young and has a long way to go," said Ramaiah, who seemed to have read his daughter's mind.

'If something isn't presentable at its ninety per cent, it wouldn't be much different either at cent per cent,' thought Roopa but to buy time she said,

"Give me some time to think."

However, after dinner, Ramaiah went up to a brooding Roopa in the verandah.

"If you're not interested in this match, so be it, but if I don't show you life as I've seen it, I might be failing you," he said in all earnestness. "Matrimony is a vague hope nursed by the young minds. If marriages are made in heaven, I'm sure the gods would take the realities of life into account. In marriage, it's only after consummation that couples come to appreciate the true meaning of married life.

In spite of its infinite possibilities, life has its own limitations. As you would realize, mostly it is situational in its reach and breach. As one incident doesn't encompass life, ardency is not the only opportunity that marriage affords women. As you could guess, maternity is gift-wrapped by heaven for married women. Marriage is so much more than a private affair of the spouses. Know it's an extension of the family that ushers in a new family. Gratification in marriage is multifaceted as well as multi-sourced, like the success of a child can obliterate a lifetime of parental failures. Believe me; a couple could feel that their life was worth living just for the sake of that moment.

In the good old days, alliances were struck based on parental preferences. One might even say prejudices. Inclinations of the children didn't count; when married, they were too young to have a mind of their own anyway. I know times have changed, and I'm not holding a brief for the bygone era any more. However, I guess neither the new waves have washed any wisdom ashore.

The doors of opportunities in today's world have led to the advent of the salaried classes, with the attendant disparity in incomes. Social status seems to have shifted its focus onto the white collared. This insensibly upset the marriage order of yore, amongst the families of the communes. These days every maiden seems to feel that her wedlock is not secure unless engineered by an engineer! Parents too have come to equate their daughters' security with the sons-in-law's bank balances.

Every bachelor, forget about his own eligibility, has come to imagine that the bridal world is at his feet, to be kicked at his will. An Alanaskar Syndrome so to say! Well, in his unceasing search for someone better, even the pretty ones fail to get his nod till the law of diminishing returns catches him up by the scruff. Then with his eligibility on the wane and despondency on the rise, he lands up with a languid dame for all the sprightly in the race would have married by then. Of late, boys and girls are getting married past their prime, they being victims of the compulsions of their own making,' he paused for her reaction.

And finding her attentive, he continued,

"All said and done, nature seems to have loaded the dice against the maidens. One may like it or not, they are the perishable fruits of the marriage market to be disposed off well before they tend to rot. Even otherwise, it does often happen that a maiden would shun a Gog in time, only to opt for a Magog, past her prime, wasting her time in the meantime. In the final analysis, shorn of their shirts, all men are ordinary, save the extraordinary. Moreover, the odds against spotting the right man remain the same even if chance were to bring him to your doorstep as a prospective groom. Ignoring these realities can land one in the deserts of life, chasing the mirages of hope, of course until there is hope. If cultural prejudices produced child widows those days, social aberrations lead to the proliferation of spinsters these days. When maidens cross their mid-twenties, they find to their consternation that men whom nature meant for them by the logic of natural selection, were indeed bending towards the younger ones, tending them to fend for themselves as singles."

Ramaiah paused for Roopa's response and seeing receptivity in her demeanor, he resumed,

"Moreover, there is another angle to marriage; it is fallacious that parents wish idle comfort for their daughters, in their married life," he seemed to philosophize. "I would rather prefer that you lend your husband a helping hand to build the structure of your married home, brick by brick, hand in hand. In that lies a woman's true fulfillment in marriage. The boys have proved to be no wiser either, failing to appreciate the joys of sharing the toils as just married. It's a pity grooms should think in terms of furnishing their bachelor dwellings as if their brides are the paying guests."

Carried away by his own rhetoric, he reached out to her to help her enlarge her vision thus:

"Weddings have come to symbolize the vanity of the society. Designations of the grooms, conveyed in conversation and carried on the wedding cards, have become the new nomenclature of alliances. It's as if business firms get free mileage when bachelors on their rolls get married! Who says there are no free lunches? The status of the fathers-in-law too is brought upfront as though to suggest that no protocol was breached. Alas, marriages are being turned into public *melas* from the family functions they used to be! I know you can appreciate that pomp and pageantry may adorn a wedding but it's the warmth and love that sustain the marriage."

Realizing that he reached the threshold, he paused for a while before he crossed it for her sake by averring,

"As for married love, know it's the man who overwhelms his mate," he forced himself to tell her, "and nature in its wisdom induces woman to get drawn to the man who deflowers her. You couldn't have failed to notice intelligent women adoring their mediocre husbands. You must also realize that happiness is not an accompanying baggage of marriage; couples have to mould it with insight and imagination. If anything, the woman has to put in the greater effort, but the rewards could signify the speciality of her life. Try to understand what I've said so that you can see life in its proper perspective."

When he concluded the brainwash, Roopa was mystified by his rhetoric, but after he had left her, she tried to weigh his words against her own inclinations.

Her innate urge, accentuated by the male attention she received, brought her femininity to the fore. The attractions she experienced and the fantasies she entertained shaped a male imagery that ensconced her subconscious. Her envision of a he-man ennobled her self-perception as a female. Insensibly, confident carriage came to be associated with the image of maleness in her mind-set. Her acute consciousness of masculinity only increased her vulnerability to it, making her womanliness crave for the maleness for its gratification. That persona she envisioned as masculine, she found lacking in Sathyam.

However, though she felt that much of her father's expansive exposition was sensible, as her heart remained steadfast to her dream man, she developed second thoughts. In her predicament, she recalled that Damayanthi had reasoned that marriage would uproot a woman from her dreams to transplant her in her man's life. Thereafter, woman's marital fulfillment could induce a life force in her, enabling her to develop new roots in her in-law's environs. Soon as she would lose mobility, and with it her contacts with the past cease, so, Damayanthi maintained, that friendship between maidens was a mist that marriage would evaporate.

In the end, Roopa thought of seeking Damayanthi's advice but feeling constrained to confide in her, she found herself closeted with Sandhya.

"If I were a man, maybe you wouldn't have had this problem," said Sandhya in jest,

"If you're married, I would've become your co-wife," said Roopa jokingly, even in her state of confusion.

"God save that poor guy," laughed Sandhya.

"Why poor for he would be doubly blessed?" said Roopa in jest, and was enamored by the idea of their love triangle. However, having come to the reality of life readily, she sighed and added,

"Well, it's neither here nor there. Tell me what I am to do now."

"As you know, my mother says that love is a product of the married mind," said Sandhya as though parroting her mother's wisdom, "while romance is the enterprise of the spirited heart. Since we find our mothers in love with our fathers, we may as well follow suit, and end up being fond of our spouses. I know you're romantic by nature, but you should realize that for the best part, life is humdrum by circumstance. Perhaps, it all boils down to this; where your romance with life should end and the appreciation of its reality begin. It's for you to draw your own line."

"Maybe, I am romanticizing life, but he's too insipid to inspire; looks like my expectations from life are out of tune with the realities of my fate," said Roopa feeling helpless.

"Check up if you're holding the mirror of fantasies to the realities of life," said Sandhya, leaning on Roopa affectionately.

"I'm sure you too wouldn't have seen him any differently. But as my well-wishers feel that the match is good, maybe I should match my mood as well," said Roopa resignedly.

"Compromise is the cornerstone of life, isn't it?" said Sandhya in all empathy.

"Looks like it's the millstone of my life, I wish I had your disposition of life, to be happy," muttered Roopa bitterly.

"Don't you worry; I will share every burden of your life to ease your life, all your life. This is a promise I mean to keep, all my life. Why, haven't we vowed to disprove my mother's theory about the brevity of female friendship?" said Sandhya, taking Roopa's hand

"Oh, Sandhya," cried Roopa hugging her friend.

"Believe me Roopa, upon the tears of our friendship," said Sandhya, solacing her soul mate.

"Now I need your friendship more than ever, with an uninspiring husband in the offing, you're the only hope of my life. It seems the first throw of the dice showed up for our vow. I hope our destiny ensures that your man would empathize with our camaraderie," said Roopa contemplatively.

When Sandhya wanted to respond, Roopa closed her lips with her hand as though she wanted to hear nothing to the contrary.

For the impending wedding of Sathyam and Roopa, the concerned clans soon clustered in their respective homes. Her sisters' satisfying remarks about the alliance and her brothers-in-law's flattering compliments about the groom further increased Roopa's self-doubts. 'Am I being overcritical,' she thought. 'After all, everyone feels he's fine.'

On the other hand, Sathyam's relatives, in their hordes, who came to grace the occasion, gossiped in groups.

"Something must be amiss with this miss," guessed a relative whom nature cursed with a cynical mind as well as a caustic tongue. "One could see love is thick in the air these days, as girls are falling head over heels for boys on the campuses. Thanks to the influence of the movies, most of the girls have started saying yes to premarital sex without a care. It's said that doctors are doing a brisk business at the abortion clinics. But, the truly wise catch the gullible guys for sons-in-law before their errant daughters show up the symptoms, and when the chips are down, the past is passed off as a premature issue."

Maybe, he would have continued to enlighten his third cousin about the sleaze in the cities, if not for the summons the latter received from his better half. However, sensing an unintended scandal in the making, Pathrudu's family huddled up to devise a counter before it got out of control. 'We liked the girl, and wanted the marriage hastened. After all, Sathyam's health was suffering thanks to the hotel food and all,' was the news that was put into circulation. As the corrigenda carried conviction, the conjecture collapsed.

A couple of Sathyam's friends and few of his colleagues made it to the marriage, 'in spite of their busy schedules' as Sathyam's mother bragged, and one of his friends who had managed to see Roopa, announced at the stag party that evening,

"Sathyam is going to have a wife of our dreams."

"I wish I had a wit like yours," said Sathyam pleased.

"Why forget Ramu, I've never thought he would fail to turn up," said another.

"How I miss him but as luck would have it, his sister's marriage coincided," said Sathyam.

That summer night, the *kalyana mandapam* was truly lit up. Even as they welcomed the guests, Chandrika and Sandhya, who stood at the entrance, perfused them with rose-water. Women, of all ages and sizes, in their colorful silk saris, dusted for the occasion, were seen fluttering as if to attract attention of those gathered. Some men in the traditional *dhoti*, worn for the occasion, were found rooted to their seats for they were keen not to be seen ungainly for want of habit. Conventional film songs orchestrated for the occasion rent the air, enlivening the gathering. As boys ogled at them, some maidens were seen putting on airs, and let loose by their gossiping parents, all the brats had a feast of a time.

Soon, Chandrika and Sandhya were on the dais behind Roopa in her *madhuparkam*, to raise her plait as Sathyam tied the nuptial knot. When the ordained moment arrived, Roopa bent her head to enable Sathyam do the needful.

"It's the only time when woman bows to her husband to enable him to tie the knot. Afterwards, she would raise her head, only to see that he does not raise his again. She could be counted upon to ensure the hands that tied the nuptial knot are forever tied to her apron strings," surmised Pedda Purnaiahgaru, the octogenarian almanac man.

The marriage hall reverberated to peals of laughter that the statement induced. Soon though, the guests left after congratulating the couple, leaving the relatives to hang around for a little longer, till they could find a corner to lie down. However, the just married were awake a long while to go through the assorted rituals.

Chapter 4

Turn at the Tether

It was the night that Sathyam awaited in elation and Roopa approached with trepidation.

"Guess what I've got for you," he said, reaching his bride reclining on the bedecked bed.

Bogged down with her own agenda, she wasn't enthused to respond even though he repeated himself, and he tried to rationalize her indifference, 'Maybe, she could be bridal-shy.' Nevertheless, pressing closer to her, he persisted,

"I'll grant you three chances."

How many times did he visualize, over the fortnight, the scene of their guessing game - a perplexed Roopa fudging, and he goading her to try again, and again! In his imagination, how charming Roopa was in her exasperation! He seemed disappointed with the reality his bride presented him instead. Unable to break the barrier of her sullenness at the threshold of their nuptial bed, he gave up in the end, and said instead,

"Close your eyes."

Downcast as her eyes were, any way, it took her no effort to oblige her husband. Then with one hand he took her hand and with the other he reached for the packet in his shirt pocket. As his touch sent waves of expectation all over her frame, she seemed to enjoy the resultant sensation. Having failed to respond whenever he laid hands on her during the ceremonies of the previous night, she was surprised at that strange feeling she was experiencing, and as her reservations about him seemed to dissolve in her anticipation, she found herself at ease.

When he withdrew his hand from hers to unpack the diamond nose-stud, he so fondly acquired for her, with eyes still closed, as her body missed his touch, her mind went into conjecture. After what appeared to be an eternity for her, he took her hand again, sharpening the sensation and enhancing her expectation.

"Open your eyes," he said softly.

"Switch off the light," she said coyly.

"How can you see then?" he said perplexed.

"I can still feel it," she said mystically.

As her romantic anticipation made her indulge in blissful guessing about the gift of his love, she felt vulnerable and expected him to overwhelm her.

"I thought of it the moment I'd seen you," he said without stirring from his position,

He sounded joyously triumphant to his indulgently receptive bride. Imagining her instinctive response to his expected outrage, Roopa waited in anticipation. However, as Sathyam made no move in his preoccupation with unscrewing the nose-stud, she seemed puzzled and opened her eyes at length. As she found him fidgeting with the nose-stud, she felt that she was only flattered to be deceived.

"Believe me; I was not sure whether you would marry an office assistant like me when managers would have queued up for your hand. I was a nervous wreck by the time your father came to convey your consent. When he said 'yes', I jumped for joy," he said as if he had yet to reconcile himself to his good fortune

His sincere outpouring, coupled with his meek posturing, only helped dwarf his persona in her esteem shaped by the imagery of male élan. As he looked pygmean in her perception then, she felt as though she was rudely shaken from her daydream. All the reservations her intuition envisaged about him earlier that she recanted in her state of amorous anticipation seemed to return to the fore with renewed vigor. The implied compliment in his confounded state failed to flatter her, for it lacked forthrightness. What was worse, she construed his adoration as an admission of subjugation. All said and done, it was a let-down she wasn't prepared for.

"How do you like it?" he said handing it over to her.

"It's very nice," she said sincerely though unexcited.

Her simple gesture thrilled him no end, as it was his first experience with a woman. As he narrated in detail all the trouble he took to acquire it, being bored, she stopped listening. Preoccupied as he was with his own sentiment, he failed to notice the jadedness his present left on her sensitivity, as twirling the thing, she felt as if she were slighted by it. That it should have obsessed him so much, at a time when she was available for his possession hurt her sensuality.

'If only he's passionate, I wouldn't be holding this cold thing,' she thought dejectedly, and felt as though the diamond edges of that nose-stud cruelly clipped the sprouting romantic wings her heart started airing by then.

"Let me see how it goes with you," he said eagerly as he was impatient to espy her glamour adorned by his present.

"I always knew it would suit you," he said with a relish, as she obliged him becomingly.

"You know, I went from shop to shop for it," he said thrilled.

'What's this god-damn obsession with an inane thing' she felt irritated, and the very thought of life in the offing with him depressed her no end. She even developed second thoughts about broaching her passion to study medicine.

'But won't life be dull idling at home that too being his wife? But who knows, he might as well oblige. And if he does, won't I end up loving him out of gratitude. Anyway, I've nothing more to lose now,' she reasoned in the end.

"I wanted to ask you..." she said.

"I assure you; you're the first woman in my life," he said interrupting her, and felt pleased for assuaging her perceived doubts about his own virginity.

'Hardly surprising,' she thought derisively only to end up feeling it was a sort of consolation. Thereby, without much ado, she revealed her ambition with animation, and appealed enticingly,

"I know you love me enough to help me out," she said in a manner that women can craft to win over men.

Though he sensed her passion, he was taken aback by her proposition.

"It's impossible as well as impractical," he said in all helplessness.

"Where there's a will there's a way," she said coyly.

"But not in this case," he said nonplussed.

"It all depends on how much you love me," she said by way of an emotional blackmail,

"It's not about any lack of love, I love you with all my heart, but I've to contend with my dad, who doesn't believe in woman's graduation. Didn't he make it clear to your father that you shouldn't press with your B. Com any further? And now you want to study medicine! He would shout us down and there's no way we can bring him around," he protested spiritedly.

His revelation completed her humiliation that dragged him along to the depths of degradation in her esteem. She felt deceived by her father as well for not letting her get a wind of the old man's whim.

'But then, how could he have guessed my game plan as I never revealed it to him,' she thought in sympathy.

Thus, the empathy she helped generate in her despondent heart for her father made her view her husband even more unsympathetically, and he felt that she would get over her disappointment by and by. When he took her into his arms to cajole her, her sense of obligation made her surrender to his advances, and soon enough, with the bed-lamp for a witness, nature took over to facilitate their conjugal union. However, while his tenderness in foreplay was perceived as timidity by her passionate heart, his eagerness to possess her in the end seemed bestiality to her uninvolved mind. Sadly for him, she perceived his passion in their coition as force on her form and his fulfillment as a proof of his selfishness.

So with a feeling of being used, lying in her nuptial bed beside him with closed eyes, as though to further filter the dim light, she folded her hand over her forehead, and as it touched his present, she thought it was as cold as her heart.

'It would forever symbolize my nadir,' she thought in despair.

Finding her perturbed, he didn't venture again, and thus left to herself she was struck by the contrast between the hope the wedding night held for her and the reality into

which the nuptial night pushed her before sleep overpowered her weary self as if to save her soul from the exhaustion of thought.

Mid-day the next day, when Sandhya came to see Roopa, she saw her lay morose in her bed. By then, finding her truant to their taunts, her sisters, one by one, took to their heels.

"Got him right?" Sandhya cooed in Roopa's ear.

"Well he's a man," Roopa smiled wryly, holding Sandhya's hand.

"You look fabulous," said Sandhya to cheer her up.

"How I wish you were a man," said Roopa holding Sandhya's hand.

'You would've been my woman then, but what a lovely present from him!" said Sandhya squeezing Roopa's nose.

As Sandhya's compliment symbolized the proverbial rope in the house of the hanged, Roopa could contain herself no more. She was in tears.

"Don't tell me that something is wrong," said Sandhya wiping Roopa's tears.

"Oh, I'm doomed Sandhya, he's a silly guy," said Roopa hugging Sandhya.

"Calm down dear, he might improve," said Sandhya, comfortingly sinking into Roopa's endearing embrace.

While the thrill of her mate's intimacy struck Roopa's flustered mind, as the charm of their proximity captivated Sandhya's empathic heart, she too enlaced her friend, making their embrace all the more intense. When Roopa found herself pressing closer for self-solace, as their bodies lay twined in an emotional deadlock, they felt as though their souls got entwined. What with the experience of the nuptial night having lent a sexual touch to Roopa's flesh, Sandhya's embrace tickled her innate lesbianism at its very core.

Even as the ardency of Roopa's embrace stirred Sandhya's sensuality, the warmth of Sandhya's affection affected Roopa's sexuality making her crave for that in her mate what she missed in her man. Struck by Sandhya's nubility, Roopa, in her erotic mind-set got libidinally aroused, and driven by her lesbian love, Roopa was animated in Sandhya's embrace. With Roopa turning eager to press for her sexual solace in their sensual embrace, Sandhya's fascination for Roopa urged her into a surging closeness for emotional integration. As her own sensuality having been unleashed by her mate's sexual collusion, Roopa turned eager to devour Sandhya's breasts, bringing her lesbian leanings to the fore, and stirred by Roopa's amorous assaults, Sandhya's libido induced reciprocity in her own responses.

While the fascination Sandhya felt for Roopa's frame imparted a sexual color to her friendly feeling as Roopa's lesbian passion reached the threshold, Sandhya's ardor facilitated an erotic connivance to her own sexual siege. Espying the sensual delight Sandhya derived in their sexual excursion, Roopa turned enthusiastic to gratify her mate in their lesbian union with an oral go at the very roots of her mate's femininity. And overwhelmed by Roopa's unruly passion, Sandhya surrendered her soul as well to her mate who came to reign over her frame any way. However, as though to let Roopa have a measure of the joy she gave her mate, Sandhya turned the heat on Roopa's erotic essence. As that furthered her own delight, Roopa's well of womanliness whetted in reciprocity for Sandhya's satiation. It was as if Roopa wished to let Sandhya have a measure of the oral bliss that she herself had bestowed upon her mate before. It was thus; their enticing union infused a sublime emotion in them that only women are

capable of experiencing. That chance encounter, brought about by Roopa's depressed psyche, forever transformed their friendship into bondage of lesbianism.

Sensing Roopa's indifference the following night as well, Sathyam thought of honeymooning at Ooty. 'Besides enlivening her mood, the thrill of the new environs might as well enthrall her mind,' he thought hopefully. However, Pathrudu would have none of that.

"One shouldn't be taking his wife to hotels and all," he said rather dismissively.

Soon as the time to report for work neared, Sathyam was forced to leave Roopa behind.

"I'll be back soon after fixing a sweet home for us," he said at their parting, as though to enthuse her.

After Sathyam's departure to Hyderabad that day, to fix a 'sweet home for us', as he put it, undisturbed that night, Roopa had time to reflect on her life and times.

'My past was steeped in hope but my future could be filled just by despair,' 'Am I destined to partner disappointment? What had gone wrong after all? Though a simpleton, yet he's sincere, and what's more, he seems to love me wholeheartedly,' she thought in disillusionment.

However, the thought that he loved her made her feel sympathetic towards him,

'If only I could get excited about him. Is the excitement I'm craving for a mere illusion that no man could possibly induce in a woman?'

Then she fondly remembered her intimacy with Sandhya in that moment of their weakness and tried to relive the emotions of their romance and attempted to visualize the sensations of their union in all their vividness. While the vague fulfillment she derived from their encounter that came to the fore made her long even more for it, her fondness for her mate only helped increase her craving for the he-man of her daydreams, and in that state, her passion was like a landscape in the sky, ever altered by the passing current

Next morning Roopa reached Sandhya's place with mixed feelings and entering her bedroom dullish, she found her mate draping a Gadwal sari

"Why so late!" Sandhya said dropping her sari.

"Blame my lethargy of anxiety," said Roopa, having outstretched her hands in invitation.

"How I'll miss you from now on," said Sandhya, smug in Roopa's embrace

"I would be the worst hit," Roopa couldn't hold back her tears.

"Our love should give us solace," said Sandhya warmly, as her shoulder was warmed with Roopa's tears.

"The thought of losing you frightens me," said Roopa in between sobs.

"I swear I'll always be yours," said Sandhya as she tightened her hold on Roopa.

"But, it won't be long before you get married," said Roopa.

"As our need is mutual, I won't let my man spoil our party," said Sandhya to assuage Roopa.

"If I've a reason to live, it's for our love," said Roopa trying to wipe her own tears.

"The hope of my life is the product of your love," said Sandhya licking Roopa's tears.

"Let it be our sweet secret," said Roopa mystically, reaching for Sandhya's lips as though to seal them.

"Isn't it the charm of our life?" said Sandhya in surrender.

When finally Roopa got up to leave, Sandhya wouldn't let her get down from the bed.

"Stay for a while," she implored to her mate with a feeling of wanting.

"Given half a chance I would get glued to you but as he rents a house in Hyderabad, I've to move into my sour home then," said Roopa as she reluctantly weaned herself away from Sandhya's vice-like embrace,

Chapter 5

Moorings of Marriage

On a tip-off from a friend, Sathyam contacted Kantha Rao, the owner of a house situated at the dead end of a by-lane in Domalaguda.

"Are you a vegetarian?" enquired Kantha Rao, on the wrong side of the fifties.

As Sathyam answered in the affirmative, the interrogation continued.

"Are you married?" he asked.

As Sathyam certified his marital status, chimed in Lalitha, the childless woman of the house,

"See, we don't let out to bachelors, forced or otherwise."

Thereafter, he was shown the place by the couple, however, only after getting convinced about his other credentials. That first floor penthouse, thought Sathyam, would immensely interest Roopa. Moreover, he didn't find it wanting for privacy either.

"The rent would be a thousand rupees; the electricity is to your account, metered by the sub-meter and the water bill is to be shared pro-rata," Kantha Rao went about acquainting his prospect, as if he were delivering his maiden budget speech in the parliament.

"Sir, it's very much on the higher side for a hall and a room!" protested Sathyam earnestly.

"Boy, you don't seem to count the kitchen and the storeroom with a loft large enough to hide an elephant, if you please. Besides, you can't fail to take into account the excellent amenities, the western toilet, cupboards all over, the wash-basins, and all others that lend comfort. Above all, it's a penthouse that provides privacy as soul would ever get an inkling of the twining inside," smiled Kantha Rao meaningfully.

A bargain ensued, and to the discomfiture of the couple, Sathyam appeared adept at it.

As both didn't want to lose the other, they compromised for a rent of eight-fifty. At the end while Sathyam was excited that he could so easily fix an appropriate accommodation, Kantha Rao was pleased that the couple, without an entourage, wouldn't strain the scarce water-bed during the summers.

So, post-haste, Sathyam reached Kakinada to fetch Roopa, and Pathrudu picked up the Pedda Purnaiah's almanac for the auspicious date for the journey. Meanwhile, arrangements were made on a war footing to transport the household goods through SRMT.

That evening, accompanied by their kith and kin, the newlyweds reached the Town Railway Station to the announcement that the link train to Godavari Express was expected shortly. And as the train did indeed arrive shortly thereafter from the Port Station, there was pell-mell at that Town Platform.

While the Sathyams were taking leave of those present, Pathrudu helped the porter posit the luggage beneath the lower berth in a first class coupe even as Sathyam made it to the bogie, followed by Roopa and Sandhya. Standing by the entrance, as Sandhya and Roopa were seen whispering to each other mirthfully, staring at them, Sathyam thought,

'After all, she doesn't seem to be serious by nature. But why she's always morose with me?'

When its readiness for departure was announced, Roopa got into the train only to grab Sandhya's hand greedily, as if it were a treasure.

Soon the guard gave the green signal that triggered a new phase in Roopa's life, and as if hanging on to her memory, Roopa stood rooted near the gate and waved to Sandhya until she was out of her sight. Meanwhile, the train, for its part, curved to its right, seemingly enabling the driver to greet the guard at the rear.

"Roopa," she heard Sathyam call her, and followed him.

As if to preempt a conversation, Roopa took the window seat and picked up 'The Reader's Digest'. Sitting by her side, Sathyam couldn't help but admire her beauty in her profile.

'What a fascinating beauty!' But why is she so reticent?' he wondered.

'What should've gone wrong!' he went into contemplation. 'Was she forced into the marriage against her will? How it can be. After all, the matchmaker swore they were keen on our match. Oh, didn't he maintain that if it ever came to missing our match they were ready to pull her out of the college and perform her marriage ahead of her elder sister's. How pleased they were all at the gesture of accommodation. Was it no more than a mere white lie to hasten her marriage? But then, why it was so? Was she carrying on with someone? Well, was she pulled out mid-course as it were to thwart her elopement? Or worse still, she might have got pregnant, prompting all that unseemly haste. Oh God, what's all this!'

Whatever it was, he thought he should probe her forthwith. As he was about to open, she closed her eyes as though to stall his attempt.

'How lovely she looks even with closed eyes!' he thought endearingly, and espied her devotedly.

As if compelled by curiosity, the wind surged through the window to have a glimpse of her wondrous demeanor. In turn, her luxuriant hair unsheathed itself from the plait to veil her face as though to foil that bid. Undaunted by the nature of the camouflage, the surging wind tried to disperse the guards on duty to get a proper view for itself, only to find them regroup every time. The unfolding tussle amused Sathyam.

'When she's so enchanting in her reluctance, won't she be as devastating in her eagerness? Is she upset that I didn't accede to her request?' he surmised.

"Roopa," he alerted her tenderly.

"Hahn," she was nearly inaudible.

"Have you married me against your will?" he asked hesitantly.

"Who gave you that impression?" she said in embarrassment, though she didn't appear surprised. Her manner even suggested that she expected him to say that.

"I can see that you're just going through the motions," he said dryly.

"I'm a little moody, that's all," she tried to be evasive, but seemed to be on the defensive.

"But not so with Sandhya, I've seen how lively you're with her," he sounded rather argumentative.

'She's the only joy of my life,' she thought but didn't reply.

"Are you angry with me for refusing?" he said.

"You've your excuses," she said nonchalantly, and opened her eyes as if to grasp his feelings.

"Don't talk like that, it hurts," he said, and went into a winding explanation of his helplessness.

"I swear upon my love that I won't disappoint you again," he tried to make her reconcile to the situation.

He has bared his heart to let her feel the love he bore for her. As she didn't hold him high in her esteem any way, his love too didn't mean much to her. Nevertheless, she was pleased at being adored.

Shortly thereafter, the train reached Samalkot to be shunted to the Godavari Express, expected from Visakhapatnam, and finding her still morose, Sathyam kept wondering what was amiss in their marriage.

"Are you in love with someone?" he asked her as the train moved out of the station at length.

"You should've tried to find out before and better late than never, you can do all your spying on me now," she said nonchalantly.

"Your manner made me say so but I'm sorry for hurting you," he sounded apologetic.

"Thanks," she sounded uncharacteristically sarcastic.

He then withdrew into a shell in the manner of a person who commits an indiscretion. Seeing him sulk, she felt sorry for him.

'Am I not being rude to him?' she thought and as her conscience confirmed in the affirmative, her heart was filled with pity for him.

'After all, it's not his fault that he isn't smart,' she reasoned. 'Didn't I sense his shortcomings in the first meeting itself? Well, I knew from the beginning what was in the offing for me. Yet, I married him out of my own compulsions, didn't I? So why should I be cut up with him for no fault of his?'

'I'm at fault for being cool towards him,' she thought in time. 'Moreover, he might have his own expectations from his wife and married life. Didn't I nurse my own dreams though they turned sour in the end? What right I have to mar his life as his wife? Had I declined, who knows, he would have got a wife who could have adored him and made him happy all his life!'

Even though she realized that she was being unfair to him as his wife, yet she bemoaned,

'But I can't bring myself to love him. Am I not the worse for that?'

Then she thought that if only she could love him, her life would be lively as well, and that very idea for the attendant impracticality made her feel bitter about her fate, 'Oh, loveless life is no better than a lifeless corpse.'

'Yet he loves me,' she contemplated in the same vein. 'Isn't it said that it's better to marry someone who loves you than the one whom you might love. Why, hasn't it turned out to be true in his case? Well, for all his love, an unresponsive body for a mate is what he gets from me. How wasteful is misplaced love, for the one who loves and the loved one as well!'

As she was overcome with pity for him, she looked at him instinctively, and found him staring at her adoringly.

'Am I not being cruel to him, though I'm not enthused about him, I've no right to dampen him. So, I should accommodate him even if I cannot love him. Surely, a sense of fairness demands that,' she thought as she felt guilty.

"I'm sorry for hurting you," she said, extending her hand to him.

Overwhelmed by her gesture, he was at a loss for words. As his eyes welled, he soaked her hand with kisses. Feeling gratified by the gratification she had caused, she found herself seeing life in a new light.

"How long does it take us to reach our home from the railway station?" she asked so as to start a dialogue.

"Just under half an hour; my friend Ramu will receive us at the Secunderabad railway station. I had sent him the Lorry Receipt and he would have shifted the luggage to our house by now," he said as her gesture relaxed his nerves.

"I don't think he attend our wedding," she continued just to keep it going.

"He couldn't make it; it's a different story," he said with apparent disappointment.

"What is it?" she asked more to please him than driven by any curiosity.

"Ramu is in love with Meera, his colleague where he worked earlier. Though she agreed to his proposal, the hitch is, she is a Tamilian and he, an Andhra like us. They got around her parents in due course and anyway his father too is too broad-minded to mind the match. But it was thought ideal to postpone their wedding till his younger sister got married so as not to spoil her chances in our prejudicial times and since her wedding coincided with ours, Ramu couldn't come to our marriage. When the dust settles down, Ramu would marry Meera. But, for the present it's courtship for them," thus he narrated the story.

Roopa was startled, only to be relieved.

"Don't you think they're smart?" he asked her, throwing her into a dilemma whether to sound him about Chandrika or let events unfold for themselves.

"Is anything wrong with that?" he said before she could make up her mind.

"It's not a bad idea," she merely said.

"Sandhya seems to be very close to you," he changed the topic to interest her.

"We're childhood pals turned adult mates," she said mystically, and he didn't fail to notice the glow in her face.

"No friends like childhood friends," he said nostalgically.

"Tell me about your childhood days," she asked.

Then he went on narrating his childhood life and times at Guntur for long, and said,

"If not for my father's transfer to Kakinada last year, maybe, we wouldn't have come across your match at all, and that's destiny."

As he became engrossed with his childhood escapades, she tried to be an enthusiastic listener, and having heard him speak highly of his friend, she asked him,

"Are you in touch with that Prasad now?"

"Sadly we lost touch but I've heard that he's in Delhi, married to a millionaire's daughter. Some industrialist seems to have lured him for his plain daughter by dangling a stake in the business empire. Surely he would have turned into a really handsome man. I have no doubt about that," he said with a sense of loss.

"Was he ambitious?" she enquired as though she were comparing notes.

"Don't you think it's difficult to know one's nature so early on in life? But one of our schoolteachers used to say that the character of a person would be known only after marriage. For all I know, he wasn't good at studies. It's I who used to help him with his lessons, maths in particular. However, he was the handsomest in the class and boisterous as well," he said like someone who didn't apply his mind from that angle.

When she proposed dinner, he changed into his *lungi*.

"I may end up being obese in due course," he said as he helped himself liberally with the food she served him.

"It's my mother's preparation," she said with a morsel in her mouth.

"You would find me doing justice to your recipes too," he said relishing the food.

"Let's see what's in store for you," she said, managing a smile.

'If not suave, he's by no means naive, and what's more, he's deeply in love with me,' she reviewed her situation as she went to wash the plates.

The conviction that he's in love with her gave her some consolation. So, she instinctively knew that life wouldn't be problematic with him, and the thought satisfied her.

"Are you a voracious reader?" he said as she took the Digest again on her return.

"I do read a little here and there," she said without lifting her head.

"I think you're being modest," he said sitting by her side.

"What about you?" she enquired.

"My reading is more of a time-pass, maybe you can read aloud for me," he said.

When he downed the shutter of that coupe-for-two, and switched on the blue lamp, she found herself culled in his eager embrace, and as the receptivity she inculcated in her mind imparted a sense of reciprocity to her body, her motions in his mount seemed to synchronize with the vibrations of the carriage. While their nocturnal journey progressed, she felt that in due course she could be on course on the beaten track of married bliss.

As day broke out, Roopa awoke to reach for her purse in which she kept the silver anklets that Sathyam goaded her to remove during the night. Not finding the pair therein, she raised an alarm that awoke him.

"See if they fell down by any chance," he said drowsily.

"No, I'm sure I've kept them here, oh, it's Sandhya's present," she said, unfolding her purse anxiously.

They uncovered their air-pillows and upturned the basket of eatables to no avail but in the end, to her immense relief, he found them underneath the berth.

"You could've dropped them without realizing that," he said, handing the pair to her.

"I'm sure; I've put them in my purse. Wonder how they landed on the floor!" she said as she wore them on her wondrous legs.

Looking down again, he found part of the baggage protruding from underneath the berth. Realizing that he pushed back the luggage as he picked up the anklets, he recalled that during the night he pushed in the luggage a couple of times only to find it protrude in time. Preoccupied as he was then, he thought amusedly, 'The jolts and jerks are at work on the luggage as well.'

Now, seized by curiosity, he crouched on the floor and pulled out a suitcase only to be unnerved at finding a grown-up lad lying behind the rest of the baggage. Though he quickly regained his wits, as the import of the trespass on their privacy began to sink into him fully, he remained speechless.

"Hey, come out," he shouted, as he recovered at length.

The sight of a well-built lad of around twenty, crawling out from below the berth stunned Roopa out of her wits even before the echoes of Sathyam's shout could die down in her ears.

"Why are you here?" Sathyam questioned him.

"I'm ticket-less," he replied by way of justification.

"When did you get in?" Roopa asked him in apprehension.

"Before you came in," said the lad embarrassedly.

"So, you're here all night!" Roopa couldn't help but exclaim.

As he bowed his head in confirmation, her embarrassment insensibly turned into an acute awkwardness.

"When did you remove them from her purse?" Sathyam asked in enquiry.

"I found them lying on the floor," he pleaded with folded hands.

"You want us to believe that they dropped down from my purse just like that. You can explain all about that to the police at the next station," said Roopa still feeling embarrassed.

"Spare me ma'am; I took them from your handbag after you slept off. I thought you would look for them only after going home. When I realized that you found them missing, I kept them in your view so that you won't be searching behind the luggage. Please let me go," frightened, the lad begged for mercy.

"Let's leave him; after all, he hasn't harmed us. Moreover, he might fail at the hands of the police. These days, isn't the air thick with the news of lock-up deaths?" she said overwhelmed by pity for him.

As the chap went out of the coupe relieved, the couple looked at each other embarrassed. However, the very thought that they were at lovemaking when that lad lay below embarrassed Roopa no end.

'What would have happened had he strangled Sathyam and raped me as well?' she thought at length and found the very idea spine-chilling. 'The guy is well built and would've got into mood for that, what with our doings around him. Why, he even came out of his hiding to steal the anklets! God knows, in what shape he might've seen me, and for how long!'

She couldn't believe that unknown to her, she passed through that ordeal unscathed, but soon the horror and the embarrassment of the moment have combined to embody her mind with a sense of adventure. And slowly, the queer episode came to appeal to her with an associated aura of romance attached to it.

However, Sathyam was upset about the whole thing,

'Could it be a bad omen for my married life? In a way, hasn't Padmavathi prophesied just that?'

It's thus he was nagged for long by many a doubt about his married life in the offing.

"Let's forget about it," he said at length as though to ward off the impediment by dismissing the incident itself.

"You handled it well," she complimented him.

When the train approached the signal post, off the Secunderabad Railway Station, Roopa seemed to be in the right spirits to head towards his sweet home.

Chapter 6

World within the world

'7Up Godavari Express coming from Visakhapatnam will be arriving in a few minutes on No.2 platform', the Secunderabad Railway Station echoed to the ill-modulated voice of a male announcer.

"Just late by two hours," said Meera sarcastically, after checking with her watch.

"God speed the railways," said Ramu, who by then had finished four cups of coffee.

Relieving them of their weariness, soon the train came into view. When in time, it decelerated into the station; their spirits soared to the skies. Spotting Sathyam standing at the exit, they waved at him furiously to be noticed and when the train came to a halt, they paced up to welcome the Sathyams.

"Couple in the making welcome the 'made for each other' couple," said Ramu as he embraced Sathyam.

Soon, they moved out following the porters carrying the luggage, Sathyam and Ramu hand in hand and Roopa and Meera side by side, and once out of the railway station, they got into the waiting Fiat arranged by Ramu for the occasion.

"Sad we've missed your marriage," Ramu addressed Roopa.

"It's our loss," Roopa replied.

"We'll make up for all that," said Meera chirpily.

"What if she locks Sathyam in their wedlock," said Ramu in jest.

"You've said it," jibed Meera with her beau.

"Let me see if you don't tie him to your *pallu*," retorted Sathyam on Roopa's behalf.

As the Fiat stopped at the wicket-gate, propelled more by womanly instinct than any welcoming intent, Lalitha stepped out from the main one.

"We never had a more beautiful tenant, don't hesitate to ask for anything from me," said Lalitha sounding helpful.

Often, in human relations, one's latent nature to help exudes in the face of a prospective friendship but when the acquaintance fails to cross the threshold of intimacy, inevitably the inclinations too go into hibernation.

Though Roopa stepped into the sparsely furnished penthouse, yet she felt readily at home.

"I can't thank you enough," said Sathyam in gratitude as Ramu and Meera had by then arranged the furniture and positioned the luggage.

"I think, to start with, the bridal couple should handle better things than household articles; moreover, it was not such a hassle thanks to your landlady's prattle, it turned out to be great fun even. I wonder how women won't get tired of talking! Isn't it the irony of man-woman equation that the least exposed to the world should have a better say in life?" said Ramu heartily.

Ramu ran for cover as Meera advanced towards him menacingly and when she caught him by the collar, he said theatrically,

"Excuse me for snatching your privilege."

As Meera cuddled him, pretending as though she were crushing him, Roopa couldn't suppress her smile. The mirth around, though gladdened her heart, nevertheless, cast a shadow on her soul.

"What about lunch?" Sathyam wondered aloud.

"Meera will prepare some *avial* for us, but why we haven't thought of coffee yet?" said Ramu.

"You know Sathyam won't have coffee, and you're busy abusing women," said Meera, still smarting from his tease.

"What a coffee-like coffee!" said Ramu, as Roopa served them filter coffee.

"Where from you got the coffee powder?" said Roopa.

"The Coffee Shoppe is just up your lane; hope Sathyam too falls in line," said Ramu.

"Let me see how marriage changes me," Sathyam looking at Roopa.

"Looks like your fiancé is quite enthusiastic," said Roopa to Meera as they went into the kitchen to prepare lunch.

"He's good at heart but is obstinate like a child," said Meera.

"May I know how it all began?" Roopa tried to sound casual though curious.

"He was my rude boss once, but later I realized he's a committed and hard working disciplinarian. When I realized how soft he's at heart, I developed a soft-centre for him in my heart. In time, he declared his love and I disclosed mine," said Meera smilingly.

"I wish you all the best," said Roopa extending her hand to Meera.

Soon they had a sumptuous lunch after which the betrothed left the newlyweds with a promise to meet at Liberty at 5.30 to watch Ryan's Daughter.

On their way to the movie, after siesta, Sathyam took Roopa on his Lambretta to his old lodging to let her have a feel of his bachelor living, when riding pillion, she turned apprehensive as assorted vehicles whizzed past them. Moreover, she felt swamped in the traffic and worried about being hit from all sides, but soon, seeing those women, riding pillion, clutch at their men in a romantic fold; she ruefully recalled her own daydreams of yore. While Sathyam goaded her to get closer, holding the seat-handle for support, she sat erect, as though to distance herself from the reality.

As anticipated by Sathyam, they found Padmavathi in the verandah.

"Glad you're married, but know I sorely miss you," said the landlady after greeting them warmly.

"I told my wife that I've had a great stay here," said Sathyam like the one freed from a necessary evil.

"Roopa, no woman ever justified her name as you do, and he's the best behaved man I know apart from my poor man," said Padmavathi, bowled over by her beauty.

While Padmavathi pressed them to stay on for dinner, they excused themselves to go to the movie, and she allowed them to leave only after Roopa took the blouse piece given by her to commemorate that first visit. When the Sathyams reached the Liberty Theatre, they found the engaged waiting for them.

Seeing Roopa engrossed in the movie, Sathyam didn't disturb her with his witticisms. However, when it was intermission, he goaded her to go along with them into the lounge for refreshments. Overwhelmed as she was with the mystery of the love story, she preferred to remain in the auditorium as though to savor the setting.

"Have you liked it?" Ramu asked Roopa as they came out in the end.

"It's all so touching," Roopa replied melancholically.

"After all, it's a David Lean movie," said Ramu excitedly.

"All said and done," said Sathyam sounding critical, "for me it appears odd that a married woman should fall in love with a stranger, that too, at the first sight. At that with a man who's not even right in the leg! Maybe, seduction I can understand, but losing one's head straight away and to part with the heart in a flicker is beyond me. Well, it could be the way in the West,"

"East or West human nature is the same," said Ramu, "though it's the cultural ethos that fashions our social mores. Openness could never be the sole cause of promiscuity and thus to picture the Western societies as loose is stupid, to say the least. On the other hand, our culture that frowns at the mixing of the sexes puts paid to the Cupid. If ever love is fuelled by furtive glances, the fear of a scandal straps the enamored to their respective seats. Even if some enterprising were to venture regardless, our way of life foils their bid to find a place for lovemaking. Yet, one hears, even here, of illicit relationships in spite of the hindrances. Of course, it all depends on the condition of one's mind and the attendant circumstances of life."

"You've the knack of winning arguments," conceded Sathyam.

Roopa listened to Ramu with interest while Meera looked at him in adoration.

After dinner in a nearby restaurant, they parted with that exciting feeling associated with the flush of growing camaraderie among couples.

When the Sathyams reached home, they found that the landlord and his lady had already called it a day.

"It portends well for our landlady won't be monitoring our nocturnal moves," said Sathyam to Roopa,

'Maybe, it's a good omen for some eager couple but what value fate could ever add to my life-less life?' thought Roopa.

Next morning, as Sathyam kick-started his Lambretta to make it to the office, Lalitha who waited at the gate to see his back, went up to Roopa.

"I'm sure you like the penthouse?" she said in a tone commonly assumed by all landladies while talking to their tenants.

"It's a nice little one," said Roopa, who took to the penthouse from the beginning.

"For eight-fifty, you can't get anything like this, anywhere in the city," said Lalitha.

"Maybe, but you know I'm a newcomer," said Roopa.

"You can take my word for it," assured Lalitha.

"I hope you don't mind having some tea," said Roopa.

"I don't mind that if you mind my sugar," said Lalitha as if in a repartee.

Over the cup of Lipton tea that Roopa served her, Lalitha enquired,

"How're things otherwise?"

"I've nothing to complain about," said Roopa.

"That's the way it starts for a bride but come middle life and all that changes," said Lalitha getting closer to Roopa as if to whisper in her ear. "Woman needs a large heart to put up with the problems that her mid-life poses. Having mooned away during the honeymoon, she finds her life souring well before she turns forty as by then her man would have developed a roving eye."

"Lalithagaru you seem to generalize too much," protested Roopa as Lalitha paused for her response.

"It's stupid to think 'it's not for me' way, and smartness lies in taking precautions," began Lalitha in an undertone as though she were recanting some *tantric* mantra to Roopa. "Don't fail to keep your man in your grip or else he would slip without your ever knowing it. Strong though he would seem, man has his weak spots and weaker moments besides. Though nature blessed him to make it a man's world, when it comes to the crunch, it endowed women with what that matters most to him. Hold your own when he needs you the most and you'll find him prepared to pay whatever is your due. That's the time to fix him, and in time he won't be bothersome, if only to reach the goal of his passion."

While Roopa sat perplexed as that sounded alien to her ears, after more of the same, Lalitha said,

"Aren't you looking for a maidservant?"

"I'll be glad if you can find a reliable one," said Roopa.

"I'll get you a decent thing," said Lalitha and left as a neighbour called for her.

The next day, true to her word, Lalitha fetched Yamma, who looked twenty-five.

"*Amma*, pay me sixty," the prospect quoted after ascertaining the nature of the chores.

"When can you join?" enquired Roopa as she found Yamma quite decent-looking.

"If you've any work left, I'll attend to it right now, but from tomorrow, it's sharp at seven in the morning," responded Yamma.

"Today being *sapthami*, it makes an auspicious beginning," said Lalitha.

So, as Yamma reappeared with a broom, Lalitha took leave to leave the field wide open for Yamma.

"I also work at *Taraamma's* house, she too is beautiful, but you are better. She works in a star hotel and her husband in some private company; they have a boy and a girl. They live in a well-furnished house in the nearby 7th Lane. Unlike many she doesn't dump work on the maidservants to make hunchbacks out of them," said Yamma volunteering information.

While Yadamma was at work, Roopa realized that she has a chatterbox for company. However, living as she was in an unenthusiastic mode, even the novelty of the city life failed to lift Roopa's quality of life.

"I am getting sick idling all alone," Roopa complained to Sathyam one night.

"I believe bookworms worm their way through life," he said half in jest.

"Good reading helps us visualize the failings of others with a feeling heart but reading alone won't make life," she said a little stung.

"I've seen a lending library come up on our main road, it may keep you going till our offspring arrives," he said in smile.

"I'll find out, any way," she said, and thought, 'How come, I'm not craving to conceive?'

"I only hope your fictional characters won't block your favors to this character," he said as he took her into his arms.

"You won't find me wanting in my duty," she said dryly.

"I value your devotion but crave for your love," he said.

"What else it is being wife?" she said evasively.

"Love of the wifely kind," he said resignedly.

"Maybe, marriage lends scope to love and be loved," she said in spite of herself.

"As the saying goes, an opportunity lost is something lost forever; I hope it won't be the case with us," he said meekly.

"Let's see what opportunities come our way," she said resignedly.

"Let me grab what's on hand," he said taking her into his arms.

It is the characteristic of the life's curve that while hopes soar with its ascent, dreams nosedive in its descent.

The next day, when Roopa went down the steps, Lalitha, at the gate, invited her for a chit-chat. Promising to join her in time, Roopa went in search of the lending library that Sathyam said he had seen in the locality, but as she returned with 'Good Earth', not finding Lalitha at the gate, she felt, 'after all the book might have something better to reveal than the good lady's gossip.' However, on second thoughts, she felt that Lalitha might take it amiss, were she to fail to peep in as promised.

As Roopa stepped in, introducing her warmly to her friend Sangeetha, Lalitha said,

"Didn't I tell you Roopa that if let loose, men lean towards loose women. Get from Kusuma's story how far down life could take us women."

As if on cue, Sangeetha resumed the tale of the out-of-favor-woman from where she had left it:

Kusuma tried every trick that Vastayana postulated in the *Kamasutra* to lure her husband back into her bed but to no avail. However, she didn't think of divorce as it would leave her fending for herself, hounded by men as an easy prey. So preferring the married plough in her mental furrow, she hit upon an idea to pin down the philanderer at home and approached her widowed cousin Purnima, who was above average and below thirty.

"See you've no male to fill the gap," said Kusuma to her cousin without any prevarication, "and my man believes that by filling his belly at home, he's satisfying my appetite as well."

"That's the irony of woman's life," lamented the widow, who was privy to Kusuma's predicament.

"It's the malady of our men that they won't marry widows and spurn divorcees, leaving both to rot in their paternal homes," Kusuma sounded sympathetic.

"That's why it's said, better be none than a woman," Purnima's lament continued.

"But to what avail is all that having been born?" Kusuma said driving home her point. "I've thought about a way out for both of us. With a little bit of give and take between us, we can make the best of it for the rest of our lives."

"What has a poor widow like me got to offer you?" said Purnima.

"It's your vulnerability," said Kusuma, however, losing the irony of it all in her own stance. "When my hubby finds a hapless widow for a guest, why won't he imagine the possibilities?"

"That will further complicate matters for me and you as well," said Purnima unenthusiastically.

"Consider this," Kusuma continued with her enticement, "as he would stay at home trying to seduce you, I would be able to allure him back into my arms. Once he behaves himself, I would let him have your favors for a bonus. I hope you will agree that in our situation, it's better to share something than to have nothing at all."

When Purnima came camping at her cousin's place, though in apprehension, said Sangeetha drawing the tale to a close, the man of the house began to feel more at home. True to her word, Kusuma made it a menage a trois with Purnima, and they, as the story ends, lived happily ever after.

"You are too young to understand the intricacies of women's lives. See how practical this Kusuma is!" said Lalitha to Roopa.

"Looks like anything can happen in life!" said Roopa in wonderment.

"When it comes to love life, nothing worthwhile can happen in a man's life unless woman concedes," said Lalitha as though to make Roopa privy to the ingrained characteristics of the feminine fecundity. "But let woman just wink, and men in scores line up to prostrate at her feet to cater to her every whim and fancy. Well, once she gives in, the man makes her dance to his tunes in turn, so if a woman is careless in choosing her lover, it could as well spell trouble for her."

'How come I've never heard of such things before?' Roopa thought leaving them, as it was time for Sathyam's return, 'Maybe the exposure in the metros makes women more pragmatic. Books might educate, but it's the life that teaches.'

"Sorry, I was held up at the office," Sathyam grumbled as he came home late in the evening. "The minister wanted some statistics, of course the irrelevant sort, and it's enough for the secretary to be after me. Though quick at extracting work, they're slow in rewarding the deserving. Even otherwise, the burden of work is borne by the likes of me, but the loaves of office are reserved for the scheduled castes."

"They too need a place under the sun, unexposed as they were to the light of life for so long," she said as she thought about Anand.

"Not that I don't feel for them but nothing should be done at the cost of merit. Anyway, there's nothing that can be done about it so long as the politicians have an axe to grind with them," he said stoically.

"Why feel frustrated when it's beyond our control?" she said helpfully.

"Whatever, can anyone suppress his aspirations?" he said still smarting.

'It seems life's balancing act lies in reconciling its aspirations and the attendant limitations,' she thought but didn't offer any comment.

"Whatever, we would be having a gala time next Sunday. My colleagues came up with the idea of a picnic at Gandipet to felicitate us. As they insisted, I said yes, hoping you would agree," said Sathyam as though in reconciliation.

"Have I ever spoiled your party?" said Roopa enthused herself, and thought. 'Maybe, it makes sense to go out at times than brooding at home all the time.'

Chapter 7

Roopa's En Passant

That Sunday morning, the picnic spot at Gandipet, on the banks of Osmansagar, was crowded with holidaymakers of all descriptions. When Sathyam and Roopa reached the place on their Lambretta, the gathering found their bearings for reveling.

"Mrs. Sathyam is marvelous," admired a middle-aged man within Roopa's hearing.

Though the compliment pleased her no end, the allusion startled her. Soon she was galled at the inevitability of her social identity as Mrs. Sathyam, and thought in despair,

'Mrs. Sathyam could be the prop of my public stance but who would know about my private reconciliation for accommodation.'

However, the admiring looks of the males around, and the eagerness of the females to befriend her, enlivened her mood, Roopa didn't fail to discern the amorous glances of men who loitered around her, though the not so forthright appeared casual, camouflaging their craving. When someone proposed a round of rummy, and produced three sets of unopened packs, as if to seduce the fence sitters, Sathyam, who was amusing himself with some children nearby, was summoned. Roopa too was roped in for a quorum.

"Five rupees a count," proposed a regular clubman.

"If it were for stakes, I'm not a game for it," Sathyam tended to withdraw

"A card-game without stakes is like an amorous exercise with the incapable; only the hands ache as the libido gets no relief," remarked the regular.

"Why spoil the party; any way, you've the sidekicks at the club for your kicks," said his friend.

Seeing Roopa adept at the game, Sathyam asked,

"How come you play so well?"

"We used to play at Sandhya's place," she said declaring yet another deal.

"Mrs. Sathyam I think you would make a fortune if only you turn into a pro. You've got the skill and luck in the required measures to sweep the stakes," complimented the regular.

"Lucky at cards and unlucky in love, so why bother her with your proposition," said his friend.

After scooting the next deal, Roopa looked up, as if on cue, and found a youth perched on a low branch. Sensing that he was looking down at her, she realized her *pallu* had loosened its guard on her assets making her readjust her apparel to block her enticing valley to his probing glances. Blushing nevertheless, she seemed pleased at his enterprise and experienced a sense of romanticism underlined by his eagerness.

After the brunch, when the group gathered for a round of bingo with gusto, as Sathyam missed the house narrowly, commented a wag amongst them, "With a wife like his in his house, where's the need for another house."

Spending the day in mirth and merriment, and having agreed upon the need for future outings, the gathering dispersed towards the evening.

"I hope you've enjoyed; how everyone sings your praises! I'm really proud of you," said Sathyam as she got onto the pillion.

"It's a nice outing," she said fondly glancing backwards as they proceeded homewards.

While the euphoria of the event cast an infectious spell on Roopa, synchronous with his spirits, Sathyam switched into the top gear.

As though to bring Roopa back to her humdrum routine, the next morning, Yadamma turned up for work past nine.

"Why so late?" said Roopa in irritation

"I was held up at *Taraamma's* house," Yadamma began her harangue by way of an explanation. "I was helping her pack up for her journey. Don't worry *amma*; she won't go out much, may be once or twice in a month, and that too just for two or three days, no more."

As Yadamma got on with her work, satisfied with the explanation, Roopa busied herself with the lunch-box for Sathyam. However, when the buzzer sounded that afternoon, breaking the monotony, Roopa expected the postman, and finding him, she experienced a sense of excitation.

"Have you moved in recently?" asked the postman handing her a couple of envelopes.

"My father is a Post Master at Kakinada," she said, and seeing that the letters were from Sandhya and her father, she felt that it was bonus post for her.

"So we're *baradaris*; I'll treat your mail as our family mail," he said as he left.

Closing the door behind him, she opened Ramaiah's letter first, not wanting to get distracted from the bliss of Sandhya's missive later. As she culled through her father's letter, she gathered that all was well at home, and felt glad about that. But as she fondly gazed at her address in Sandhya's hand, her eyes glistened with fondness. When she pressed the envelope to her bosom, her breasts started heaving as though to synchronize her emotions with Sandhya's anticipated feelings. As she unfolded the letter at length, her eyes became antennas to transmit the spasms of Sandhya's heart to her soul.

'Roopa, my Lovey,

I couldn't think of a better way of addressing you than the one you thought for me, moreover, you are to me what I am to you, aren't you?

In our separation, I feel as though the vitals of my body and the essence of my soul were wrenched out from me. I have come to realize that your body is but an extension

of my soul. I can feel your line like the flow in my veins - I've carried my body leaving behind my soul in your frame. Now I know, more than ever, that we are complete only in our togetherness. I pray that after I get married, we might become neighbors for all our life. Until then, we have to bear our separation and bide for the time.

Sorry for having kept you waiting for so long for my letter. Well, I was at a loss for words when it came to writing to you. Believe me.

Yours all,
Sandhya.'

As Roopa read and reread the letter, her innate longing for Sandhya wrenched her every nerve. Thus at bedtime that night, having shown her father's letter to Sathyam, she said, "I want to go home."

"What's the hurry? We would be going there for the *dasara*," he said softly.

"*Dasara* is far way, then we can go together," she tried to persuade him.

"It's not even a month since we've set up our sweet home and why sour it so soon," he said in smile and tried to take her into his arms, as though to whisper the prescription for her ailment,

"Dear, you've to get over your homesickness."

Dodging him, she turned her back on him.

"Don't behave like a kid," he said affectionately, and tried to turn her to his side.

"What have you got to do with a kid?" she said as she resisted his advances.

"You know that I didn't mean it that way," he said softly, cuddling her.

"Never mind, I prefer being a kid," she said withdrawing from his embrace.

"I am sorry if I've hurt you," he said pleadingly.

"If you are really sorry, let me be alone," she said, and pulled a blanket over her head, signaling curtains for him.

The next day too Sathyam had to contend with a morose Roopa, and during bedtime, as if to preempt his move, she pretended headache. Unable to bear the tension born out of her regimen, that plagued him for a couple of days more, he gave in.

"Look, I've a surprise for you," he said that night.

Though she smelt victory, she feigned indifference.

"You can travel this Saturday," he said showing her the reserved ticket.

"Thank you," she tried to appear casual.

"Now at least you can bring your bewitching smile back onto your fascinating face," he said, taking her into his arms.

Having enfeebled him into setting a precedent, as she was not averse to giving in, she said enticingly,

"Switch off the light."

Roopa's arrival that Sunday morning took her parents, still at ablutions, all by surprise.

"What's the matter?" said Janaki apprehensively.

"Oh, don't imagine things, I've come to have some fun," said Roopa heartily.

"Still Sathyam should've wired about your arrival," said Ramaiah in relief,

"If you're not pleased, I'll go back right now," said Roopa making a mocking move.

"Stop it now, how's your husband?" said Janaki holding Roopa's hand.

"He's fine but where are our devils?" said Roopa looking around.

As though to answer her query, Chandrika emerged from the bathroom and Raju came from the vegetable market.

"So, Raju gives you a helping hand these days," Roopa said aloud before whispering to him. "What's the commission like my boy?"

"How is my poor brother-in-law suffering your nagging?" Raju said in jest.

"What's the news from Suguna?" said Roopa.

"She's doing fine with her family," said Janaki with that sense of satisfaction mothers derive at the well-being of their married daughters. "But she complains that you don't write to her."

"Ask her if she ever wrote to me," said Roopa.

"How parents wish that their children develop a strong family bond that binds the coming generations but sadly these days even the first cousins are not on familiar terms," said Janaki stoically.

As Janaki went back to her kitchen chores, Roopa and Chandrika closeted over coffee to exchange confidences.

"Won't you show me the progress card?" said Roopa eagerly,

"He's on the lookout for a job in Madras. We want to move out of here to save embarrassment to our parents. Hopefully the decks would be cleared by December. You know he's eager to meet you," said Chandrika holding Roopa's hand.

"It should be a pleasure meeting my brother-in-law in the making," said Roopa.

"I hope, your fears are but liars," said Chandrika hoping to hear in the affirmative.

"When hopes are duped what's there to fear? Maybe, it's in the nature of marriage that one learns to fall in line," said Roopa resignedly.

"I'll know that any way but you should know without you Sandhya is like a fish out of water. Oh, how she loves you!" said Chandrika.

"If not for her love, there's no hope left in my life," said Roopa closing her eyes as though to picture her friend.

"How I wish I too had a friend like her," said Chandrika.

"Roopa, why don't you have your bath," yelled Janaki from the kitchen.

"I'll have an early lunch and go to Sandhya's place," said Roopa to Chandrika, picking up her bathrobe.

"I know you would be restless till you meet her but tell me, how you are managing your home?" said Janaki in smile as Roopa went into the kitchen on her way to the bathroom.

"You're welcome for inspection," said Roopa smiling.

"Why won't we come after you settle down," said Janaki

"I hope you're making the best of life," said Ramaiah joining them.

"You should know how your father is worried about you," said Janaki to Roopa.

"No need for that as he looks after me famously," said Roopa thoughtfully.

After bath, in her eagerness to rush to Sandhya, Roopa joined her mother in the kitchen to pressurize her to speed up the cooking. But hardly could Roopa eat what her mother so fondly served her in time, and rushing in a rickshaw, she reached Sandhya's place only to fumble in greeting Damayanthi at tête-à-tête with a guest.

When Roopa began to hop up the steps to Sandhya's room, Damayanthi in concern sounded caution, and told her guest,

"She's Roopa, Sandhya's friend, looks like they are born for friendship."

Storming into Sandhya's bed without a word, Roopa overwhelmed her in a cyclonic embrace and buried her head in her sharp valley and excited by her touch for which she was craving, Sandhya wanted gratification for her soul as well with the timbre of Roopa's tone. However, even as Sandhya parted her sensuous lips to initiate a dialogue, Roopa in all eagerness to savor them, closed in on them for deep kissing, and even when her lips were set free, Sandhya couldn't give vent to her feelings past monosyllables as Roopa went on probing her labia with her craving tongue. But when Roopa's clamor rent the air as Sandhya plunged her tongue into her surging vulva to savor its flavor, they both had gratifying feeling.

"Oh! It's as if it were ages," said Sandhya in embosom with Roopa.

"You make me die for you!" crooned Roopa into Sandhya's ear.

"I'm going crazy craving for you," said Sandhya longingly.

"Sad, we failed to make it before I was trapped in the wedlock," said Roopa fondling Sandhya.

"But still so much life is left for us," said Sandhya fondling Roopa.

"What if your 'would-be' won't turn a blind eye?" said Roopa in apprehension.

"Shall I marry a blind man?" said Sandhya in jest.

"Jokes apart, what if he spoils our party?" said Roopa in speculation.

"If it comes to that I would walk out on him," said Sandhya mirthfully.

"Won't it be far better if I too give myself to him," said Roopa mystically.

"That would herald our fulsome threesome," said Sandhya dreamily.

"Given our love, no doubt about that," said Roopa heartily.

"By the way, how're things with you?" said Sandhya

"There's nothing wrong with him but nothing goes right for me. That's the irony of it all," said Roopa as though grasping the reality.

"Why this emergency landing?" said Sandhya in seeming innocence.

"Haven't you posted the wings for me to fly into your nest," said Roopa looking at Sandhya endearingly.

"Lovey, for our love's sake find a groom for me in your locality," said Sandhya.

"Good idea, but I've come to believe that I'm born unlucky," said Roopa pensively.

"I swear that I'll do everything to make you happy, our ménage a trois included," said Sandhya overwhelmed.

"Know it's your love that keeps my life going," said Roopa, touched by all that.

"We'll keep it that way, come what may," said Sandhya, signing the kiss of contract with her lips.

"I know we would at any cost," said Roopa, grabbing Sandhya's lips to seal the agreement.

Buoyed by Sandhya's commitment to their love and accompanied by Raju, Roopa called on her in-laws that evening.

"We've always felt you would make a good daughter-in-law," said a satisfied Durgamma, after an hour-long enquiry. Taking leave in the end, Roopa promised to stay with them for a couple of days before she left for Hyderabad.

"The waiting is killing, bunk the post-lunch sessions," Roopa said as she nestled into Sandhya the next evening.

"Is it to let all the tongues wag," said Sandhya in jest.

"Thirsting for your wag," said Roopa protruding her tongue.

"See how dry is mine," said Sandhya showing hers.

"I'm all wet for that," said Roopa shedding her sari.

"Your figure dear is flowing to perfection," said Sandhya fondling Roopa in their embrace.

"Thank the change of the climes for that," said Roopa naughtily.

"Don't be mean, give credit to whom it's due," said Sandhya teasingly, squeezing Roopa's breasts.

"Ok, let me debit from your account now," said Roopa reaching for Sandhya's crotch.

"Oh, how I feel wanted!" sputtered Sandhya in time.

"You make me live," continued Roopa.

Next day, when Roopa went to Chandrika's office, she saw her with a man of about thirty, and felt that he could be her beau.

"This is Roopa," Chandrika introduced her to him.

"I am Anand the ever grateful," he said folding his hands.

"Please, don't make much of it," said Roopa in embarrassment.

"Your gesture is love-saving for us," he said nevertheless.

"I'm glad you're happy, but how are you sure that I didn't have an axe to grind?" said Roopa as though to shed part of her guilt.

"Even then, it doesn't lessen our gratitude," he insisted.

'I don't deserve it, though,' she thought, but said, "I wish you all the best."

"Thank you," he said as he left them to exchange notes.

"How do you like him?" enquired Chandrika eagerly.

"He has got good features, you've chosen well," said Roopa shaking Chandrika's hand in congratulation.

"Coming from you, it's a compliment," said Chandrika in elation

When it was time for Roopa's departure, the mates felt wrenched from one another. Neither was Janaki satisfied. 'You were hardly at home,' she complained. Seeing his daughter in a happy frame of mind, Ramaiah, however, thought she got reconciled to her situation at last and felt relieved at that. However, the three days she spent in her

in-laws' house, with the constant reference to Sathyam therein, made her experience the effect of his presence more in his absence, which made her feel that she was in the annex of her own home.

Chapter 8

Threshold of Temptation

Back in Sathyam's arms on her return, Roopa felt as though she landed in the lap of reality after her reign in the realms of fantasy.

'Isn't he lucky in a way?' she thought that night, lying beside Sathyam, fast asleep by then. 'While he airs his dreams freely, I'm forced to bury my fulfillment at the bottom of my heart. Oh, whom can I tell how happy I'm in our lesbian love? What a paradox! Wasn't it he that triggered my libido to explode in Sandhya's embrace. But for that weak moment, could I ever have tasted the sweetness of a woman's love in lovemaking!'

'Is the same-sex syndrome abnormal?' she asked herself. 'What's the yardstick to judge it? Why, both of us have that innate want, and suffer when we can't have it. And when we make it, don't we go to the depths of sexual delight and reach the heights of sensual ecstasy? Won't our souls merge with our bodies to communicate our mutual craving in lovemaking? Love is our life-force, isn't it?'

'That we're able to enjoy sex without guilt makes it normal after all,' she seemed to feel at ease with her libido. 'Maybe, woman could truly experience the beauty of femininity in lesbian lovemaking! Whatever, my same-sex fondness in no way hampers my weakness for the male embrace, does it? It should be no different for Sandhya when she gets her man, so what's the hitch in being bisexual? It's a different matter though that Sathyam fails to inspire love in me. Am I not the loser as my life is devoid of all that goes with loving a he-man?'

The mysterious thought of man's love mystified her soul. Her intimacy with Sandhya and her exposure to Sathyam enabled her to visualize what was lacking in her womanly life. The more she valued her mate's fondness for her, the cure for her melancholy, she was even more dissatisfied with her husband, which insensibly increased her innate craving for an enticing man of her own, and that made her daydream about him.

Roopa didn't wake up until Yamma came at nine and as Sathyam was about to leave by then, she said,

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

"Where was the need? Let's go for a movie in the evening. I will ask Ramu and Meera to join us. Be sure you're ready by the time I come home,' he said affectionately.

"I'm sorry, you've to do without the lunch-box today," she said apologetically.

"Don't be so sentimental," he said as he left.

"How are your people?" enquired Yamma after Sathyam was gone.

"They're fine but what's wrong with you? You bunked yesterday and your sevens have become nines these days. Were you regular when I was away?" said Roopa.

"Ask *ayya*, if you've any doubt; your man is a good man, not like all others who have nothing but lecherous looks for the maidservants," said Yamma.

"How's your *Tara-amma*?" enquired Roopa, and thought. 'Why am I inquisitive about an unknown woman?'

"She's fine but why don't you meet her? I've already told her about you," said Yadamma.

"What did you tell her?" enquired Roopa smilingly as Yadamma didn't blabber on her own, for once.

"I've told her you're good at heart and beautiful to look at," said Yadamma in all innocence.

"What did she say?" Roopa couldn't help but ask.

"I would love to meet her, that's what she said," said Yadamma.

By the time Sathyam returned, Roopa was still lounging in the hall.

"You had all the time in the world to get ready, I'm afraid we would be late. When I rang up Ramu he said he has a surprise for us," he said in some irritation.

"What else it could be but their wedding invitation," she said going to the bathroom.

When they reached the Skyline in time, leaving Roopa at the portico, Sathyam went to park his Lambretta. However, Ramu, who came on his Royal Enfield with Meera, spotted Roopa and dropped his companion for her company.

"How's your trip?" Meera greeted Roopa.

"Ok, but you've become so scarce even before your marriage," said Roopa in smile.

Soon Sathyam and Ramu joined them.

"We heartily welcome you to lend your hand in ringing our wedding bells, the first of next month," Meera and Ramu invited the Sathyams in unison.

"Congrats, we knew it's coming," the Sathyams said in one voice.

As she didn't find the movie engrossing, Roopa got bored. When she chanced to see Ramu and Meera at footsie, and finding Sathyam glued to the screen, she thought, 'romance is all about inclinations' and in the same vein, she took Sathyam's keenness for the formula movie by way of an explanation for his ungainliness. For the rest of the show, however, she found herself following the footsie on the floor more than the happenings on the screen as the betrothed anyway were too engrossed with themselves to be aware of her voyeurism. However, when the screen flashed 'The End', the rendezvous of the engaged had ended to Roopa's peculiar disappointment.

'Life sans romance is like food that is stale and what is left of marriage divorced from love?' she thought, as she got on to Sathyam's Lambretta.

That evening, a week later, the Sathyams were at the much-awaited wedding of Ramu and Meera that was well-attended too. As Roopa looked gorgeous in her grey maroon Kanchi silk sari, finding her cut a figure in the gathering, Sathyam couldn't help but gloat over his fortune. When in the end, after bidding adieu to the newlyweds, as they reached the parking space, Sathyam thought that it's an irony that Roopa who should've adorned a palanquin had to ride the pillion instead. As her supposed deprivation made him feel guilty, he realized how much he loved his wife, and thought that he should acquire a four-wheeler one day.

When they reached home, Roopa could discern a change in his demeanor and attributed it to the satisfaction he might have derived from Ramu's wedding. While she hit the pillow straight away, for long he lay by her side looking at her as it dawned on him that they hover around different emotional planes in spite of their physical proximity.

It seems that it is the weird fate of the unrequited love that even the physical union with the loved one, wouldn't lead to an emotional integration.

Time was on its languid course in Roopa's life until that winter afternoon, when Tara entered into it. Book-marking the *Madame Bovary* that she was engrossed in, an irritated Roopa opened the door to the sound of the buzzer, to be pleasantly surprised at finding a smart and beautiful woman across the threshold.

"I'm Tara," said the visitor extending her hand to Roopa.

"Welcome," said Roopa taking Tara's hand with a strange sense of excitement.

"Hope I'm not disturbing you," said Tara, glancing at the book in Roopa's hand.

"I was just browsing through it," said Roopa placing *Madame Bovary* on the teapoy.

"I've heard it's a classic of infidelity," said Tara picking up the book.

"It depends on how one looks at it," said Roopa without taking a stance.

"I wanted to see you for long but I've got an excuse only now. Yamma suddenly left for her native place and wanted me to be the news-carrier. She may not turn up till the weekend," said Tara with a smile.

"She's a great fan of yours," said Roopa smilingly.

"But I think it's the other way round. She says you're the most charming woman ever. Now I realize she doesn't exaggerate," Tara said with her characteristic ease.

"You've a rare grace," said Roopa earnestly.

"We need a romantic man's judgment for that, don't we? Moreover, to be beautiful is one thing and to beautify is another. Woman's beauty could be a lovers' fortune but more often, I suppose, it's the husband's routine," said Tara positing *Bovary* back on the teapoy.

'If only my dream-man were for the real,' thought Roopa, keeping quiet.

"What's your husband?" asked Tara appearing to sound casual.

"He's a Senior Assistant in the State Secretariat," said Roopa without any remorse.

"I suppose yours is a love marriage," Tara said implying that but for the weakness of love, Roopa must have got a better match.

"It's a regulation match," said Roopa sounding mysterious in her own way.

While Roopa was too young and inexperienced in life to infer Tara's innuendo, the latter for her part was puzzled to understand what was at the back of Roopa's mind.

"When would you grace my place?" said Tara enticingly.

"Soon but without adjectives," said Roopa eager to continue with the *Bovary* story,

"You know, I'm a working woman but now I'm on leave all this week, so don't disappoint me," said Tara and left, without waiting for a reply, in the manner of a person who would leave as though the argument was over with that statement.

After Tara had left, Roopa found herself contemplating,

'What a stylish carriage she has, backed by that confident manner! Won't she make the hallmark of grace itself? Why, there's something casual about her remarkable beauty as well. What an impressive personality she has! Maybe, she symbolizes the modern woman.'

Though Roopa went back to the *Madame*, it didn't take her long to realize that Tara's persona seized her mind, and unable to concentrate on her story, she gave up in the end.

'Is this fascination for Tara owing to my lesbian leanings? By the way, am I bisexual by disposition? No, it can't be, it was only my distress that triggered that union with Sandhya. Looks like Tara is no less enamored of me. Could she be a lesbian by any chance? If ever the push comes to the shove, it won't be an unwelcome development, would it be?' Roopa began contemplating.

After lunch, the next day, Roopa set out to Tara's place, and soon she found herself pressing the door buzzer, though without a response from within. Realizing in time that there was load shedding in their area, she knocked at the door that Tara opened expectantly.

"Hearty welcome," said Tara extending her hand to Roopa.

"This is graceful," said Roopa warmly grabbing Tara's hand.

After Tara took her around her well-appointed home, said Roopa,

"You've a good taste."

"Thanks for your compliment it but it takes more than good taste to adorn a home. One has to make adjustments for that," said Tara taking Roopa's hand.

"I see that working couples have to put up with a lot many inconveniences?" said Roopa pressing Tara's shoulder sympathetically.

"Roopa, enduring inconveniences may lead one up to a point but it's the compromises that count in today's world," said Tara as the power supply was restored.

"I don't quite get you," said Roopa going blank.

Before she got the answer, the buzzer was on.

"What a surprise!" Roopa found Tara welcoming someone at the door.

"Your thought got me into the mood," Roopa heard an ardent male voice and turned her gaze instinctively only to find a handsome man of about thirty-five taking Tara's hand as he came in.

"I've a guest," said Tara withdrawing her hand tentatively as he turned his gaze towards Roopa who kept staring at them wide-eyed.

"Apologies for the trespass," he said as he came up to Roopa.

"Not at all, she is Roopa my neighbor," said Tara in introduction,

"He's Ravi, my cousin."

"What a persona-synchronous name!" he exclaimed as Roopa was flabbergasted.

"How come you didn't tell me that you've such a marvelous friend!" he complained to Tara, while ogling at Roopa.

"I had the pleasure of meeting her only yesterday," said Tara looking at Roopa.

"How lucky it's my turn today!" he said, without taking his eyes off Roopa.

"I think it's reciprocal. What do you say Roopa?" said Tara seemingly prompting Roopa.

Though his forthrightness tickled Roopa's psyche, her modesty reined in her enthusiasm, making her dumb.

"You won't find many like Ravi, I call him a businessman with a romantic touch," said Tara, not hiding her familiarity.

"That's Tara for you, an expert at handing out left-handed compliments," he said turning to Roopa.

"It seems you lost your wits after seeing Roopa," said Tara as if to clarify, "Haven't you heard it said that love is a hackneyed expression unless backed by money? I was implying that you've the means to fan love in any woman's heart. Isn't it a fulsome compliment for a handsome guy?"

As Tara's characterization of Ravi thrilled Roopa's romanticism, she found herself staring at him endearingly.

"It's the case of beauty and brains at work together," he said in mock exasperation, and sank into the sofa between the host and her guest.

"You men always underestimate women, of course, only to go wrong, Roopa has brilliant brains, and is a judicious reader as well," said Tara enlivening the conversation further.

"Don't believe her, she's only exaggerating," Roopa inadvertently addressed him.

"Is it possible to exaggerate your beauty? With no need for makeup, you've all the time for intellectual pursuits. Won't that glow your persona all the more giving that special aura?" Ravi addressed Roopa.

"You're a difficult fellow," Tara patted him in admiration while Roopa couldn't help feel flattered.

"Tell Roopa, is it not another left-handed give," he said, mocking exasperation.

"I better prepare some tea for us," said Tara getting up from the sofa.

"May I see your kitchen," said Roopa, however, without attempting to get up.

"Why leave our guest alone, keep him company," said Tara to Roopa.

"What large heartedness to make the lady guest your co-hostess," said Ravi to Tara, and as she left smiling, turning to Roopa he added,

"Do you think I'm a bore or what?"

"Oh, no," she said eagerly, afraid that her silence would otherwise silence him depriving the excitement she was experiencing.

"I've seen many a beautiful woman before," he moved closer to Roopa as he took out a pearl from his coat pocket. "I always entertained the idea of presenting this to the 'Perfect Ten', if ever I come across one. In terms of money it costs next to nothing, but it symbolizes beauty at its very best, seen through a connoisseur's eyes. Though I've traveled the globe twice over, I didn't find the woman who I thought deserved this. And the moment I've seen you, I felt as though this is yours by right for you're more than perfect."

Having finished mystically, he grabbed her hand and thrust the pearl into it and looking into her enamored eyes, he closed the fist, fearing she might drop it in her overwhelmed state.

Before Roopa could gather her wits, Tara walked in with the Chinaware.

"I haven't realised that you're a southpaw," said Tara to Roopa as they were having their tea,

"Not really," said Roopa, involuntarily looking at her closed fist.

"One doesn't get tea like this served even in Darjeeling, and to have it in such a lovely company, oh, it's divine," said Ravi addressing Roopa.

"My dear man, you're exaggerating really, I mean my part of it," said a pleased Tara.

"Actually I'm unable to express even a fraction of the other part," he said, staring at Roopa,

Though her eyes were downcast, Roopa could envisage the darts of his desire piercing her breasts. Then the clock struck three as though to suggest that Roopa might comprehend the situation better in solitude.

"I'll make a move," said Roopa, rising.

"Can I hope for the pleasure of meeting you again," he said extending his hand.

Though Roopa failed to extend her hand for him, she grasped his stress on 'again', and for an embarrassing look for a reply, she departed in bewilderment.

Having hurried home in time, she leapt over the steps only to realize that she had left her wallet behind. Swirling in confusion, she sank on the steps and dropped her head on her knees. When she recovered a little at length, she realized that her fist was aching and it was only then that she felt the accentuated sensation of the pearl, which she found herself gripping in her fist, and though she loosened her grip, yet she couldn't bring herself to open it as her mind refused to comply.

'Oh, what should I do with this?' she wondered, opening up her palm at length and unable to come to a conclusion in her confusion, she tucked the pearl inside her bra, and thought, 'let me think about it later. Would he be at her place still! Wouldn't he have left by now? Anyway, how long can I hang on here?'

She walked back to Tara's place languidly as if to buy time, and reaching for the buzzer finally, she virtually leaned on it, having got sapped by then. However, it was a while before a surprised Tara opened the door, only after due enquiry from within.

"I've left my wallet here," muttered Roopa apologetically, still leaning on the wall.

"Is it so?" said Tara, and gave way to her, having recovered from her own embarrassment, 'I didn't notice it.'

Roopa sprang into the room and pounced upon her purse lying by the sofa.

"Why, you look so sick," said Tara who was composed by then.

"I don't know," murmured Roopa for an answer.

"I was just laid up in bed," Tara seemed to explain her being in lingerie.

"I am sorry."

"Don't worry, have some water and go," said Tara.

"No thanks."

"Do take care," said Tara herself putting on the nightgown lying nearby.

"It should pass," said Roopa, and began to move out.

"I'll see you later," said Tara accompanying Roopa up to the wicket-gate.

"Thank you," said Roopa crossing the gate.

"Bye for now," said Tara as Roopa hit the road, and thought,

'Could there be a better way for me to seduce her than getting myself caught red-handed at that. Won't Roopa, the platinum premium, go home and wonder about my

double life? Won't that portend well. If only we could hunt as a pair, what game that would fetch!

"Bye," said Roopa looking back at Tara, only to find her furtively glancing at the Impala parked near the gate.

Chapter 9

Sathyam's Surrender

Sinking into the sofa on reaching home, Roopa closed her eyes as if to eliminate the environs, and began to focus her thoughts on the object of her agitation. 'This is yours by right,' she recalled Ravi's words as she felt for the pearl on her breast. Finding it in the left cup, she retrieved it like a treasure and posited it on her palm in adoration. Then gazing at it lovingly, she recalled his complement, 'In terms of money it costs next to nothing, but it symbolizes beauty at its very best, seen through a connoisseur's eyes.'

'Those were the words of a confident man who is handsome as well,' she thought endearingly. 'How his eyes glowed the moment they fell on me! Didn't his demeanor evidence the conviction his compliment carried.' While the alluring praise endeared the pearl to her receptive mind, her innate vanity was catered to by the accomplishments of the man who presented it thus. She bowed her head, as though in reverence to it, and kissing the thing with affection, she held it by her lips while reclining like the reigning queen.

'What he should've thought of me, for accepting it?' as it occurred to her at length, she recoiled at that. 'Haven't I given him scope for hope? Oh yes, I did.' It was only time before she was distressed that she had compromised her honor, and terrified, she dropped the pearl. 'That's why he stressed that we meet again. But, why did I allow him to take me for granted?' She felt ashamed. As she got vexed with herself, she resented the very thought of him.

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

Picking up the pearl from her lap, she flung it through the window as though to sever her humiliation. 'It must be his device to entice women,' she cursed herself for having given a poor account of herself to him. 'Why did I fail to fling the thing at him, then and there? Had I done that, it would have given him the real measure of my true worth. Instead of showing him his place, I gave him cause to think in terms of conquest. What a shame! But why did I allow myself to get carried away? Surely he would have taken me for a flirt or a slut even for all that. Oh, how I compromised myself.'

As she was smarting under her perceived humiliation, it occurred to her shock that Tara was a witness to all that. And that pulled her even more. 'What might she have thought of me? Won't she take me to be a flirt? What a disaster that a fellow woman should be privy to my waywardness. How can I face her ever?'

'For all I know, he could be her convenient cousin,' as her thoughts insensibly turned to Tara's relationship with the visitor, Roopa's bitterness began to wane, 'They seem to be on familiar terms after all. Her disheveled look and the time she took to open the

door, that too in lingerie! Didn't that give her up? It's obvious that they were in the thick of it when I went there. Of course, her furtive glance at that Impala was a kiss and tell, wasn't it? Obviously, he's her paramour, oh, Tara!

As the possibility of Tara's infidelity inexplicably brought tranquility to Roopa's mind, she began to review her own views about Tara. 'It's her affair any way, but what should be my stance? She appears to be good-natured and there is Yamma's word for that. Maybe, she has her own compulsions to take a lover, and why should it bother others, save her husband. Won't he be in the know of it, after all?'

While the idea induced curiosity in her, Roopa tried to apply her mind to it, 'Why, they seem to be making use of his nuptial bed for their illicit sex. Who knows, her man might be ignoring her whoring though privy to her peccadilloes. Maybe, that's the compromise Tara was hinting at.'

'Where would her friendship lead me to?' thought Roopa trying to take stock of the situation. 'Won't Tara try to mould me into her fold, for company? Hasn't she dropped enough hints already at that? Is it possible that I may as well be tempted in her infectious acquaintance? But am I hankering for any thrills by the frills? No, never! Am I not clear about that! Well, I'm not up for grabs for some playboy like this guy. Temptations may come and go but surely I would stick to my goal. Let there be no mistaking that.'

'But how to go about with Tara?' she thought at length. 'Well, she is refreshingly intelligent and ineffably attractive and what's more I have come to enjoy her company, haven't I? Then what sense does it make to forsake the pleasure of her friendship when I'm steadfast in my resolve? But, can I avoid the peril that Tara poses? Why not I take it as a challenge for the true test of fidelity is coming up trumps in the face of temptation by a seducer, as my craving is for romancing with that elusive he-man of my dreams and not to lust as the mistress of some moneyed. That's for sure.'

However, baffled by her own sympathy and understanding for Tara in spite of her questionable character, she thought, 'one is supposed to be critical in these matters, isn't it?'

She was still lost in her reverie when Sathyam came home in the evening. As the sight of him brought back Ravi into her mental focus, her perceived humiliation at the hands of the trespasser made her feel disdainful about her man.

"Are you ill?" enquired Sathyam anxiously, seeing her distraught.

"I've a headache," she said holding her head.

"I'll prepare some coffee for you," he moved into the kitchen.

"Don't bother," she followed him.

Aided by her resolve to bury the past, Roopa soon enough got over that nightmarish experience.

That afternoon, Roopa was daydreaming about Sandhya's amour, when Tara came calling evoking mixed feelings in her - while her presence irked Roopa for its association with her humiliation, her persona tickled her own visualization of lesbianism with her.

"Ravi is all praise for you," said Tara at length, with an eye for Roopa's reaction.

"Well," said Roopa.

Having noticed a subtle change of expression in Roopa's face, the result of her effort to be indifferent, Tara continued,

"He swore that he didn't come across a more charming woman than you."

"Would you mind some tea for us now," Roopa changed the topic.

"Why not we have it a little later, if you please," said Tara not wanting to lose the momentum.

"When are your kids back from school?" said Roopa showing her indifference.

"Around four," said Tara eager to get over the nice talk.

"Yadamma says they're lovely, like you," said Roopa

"Why not you see for yourself, shall I send them to you?" said Tara laying the trap.

"Why trouble them, I'd come sometime," Roopa was forced to say.

"Welcome but just out of curiosity, are you thinking of taking up a job?" said Tara.

"I haven't graduated," said Roopa.

"Never mind that, Ravi is keen having you as his personal secretary and the salary shouldn't be a constraint, that's what he said," Tara began tentatively,

"It's nice of him but I'm not for it," said Roopa.

"I think it's too good an opportunity to let go. I tell you his business is growing by leaps and bounds, so you can take your advancement for granted," said Tara in her attempt to lure Roopa.

"I told you that I'm not qualified," said Roopa to dissuade Tara

"Your assets and abilities are qualifications enough. Frankly, any boss would love to have you under his wings and that makes it a smooth sailing for you all the way up," said Tara not giving up.

"It's true that I'm not experienced in life but I guess his offer won't further my idea of life, and as for us, I'm sure, we can have many meeting points to keep meeting," said Roopa as though to bring that to an end.

"Ok, leave it but do count me as a well-wisher," said Tara resignedly.

Then the conversation turned general, and Tara left after quite a while, leaving Roopa to ponder over her double life. At length, pleased with herself for having resisted the seducer as well as the seductress, Roopa felt vindicated. But she was unmindful of the fact that in overcoming the temptation, she allowed her resolve for fidelity to get dented.

Feeling lazy that spring day, Sathyam bunked office, and as was her wont, Roopa went out to pick up some book from the library to the refrain of the librarian that "Madam does justice to her subscription."

When she came back, she found Sathyam reading a letter that she thought was from her in-laws.

"How's everyone?" enquired Roopa.

"It's from Chandrika," he said, having read it by then.

As he gave it to her, she went through that expectantly.

'My dear Roopa,

I hope this letter finds you and my brother-in-law in fine spirits.

We got married this morning at the Registrar's Office. Only our parents as well as his were present as witnesses. We both missed you to say the least. As you know, if not for your accommodation, we would not have made it at all. However, I did not insist on your presence, as it would be embarrassing to you in your in-laws' house.

The first thing I am doing after reaching home is to pen down my gratitude to you. Whatever happiness life affords me from now on, I know that I owe it to you.

We will be leaving for Madras next week as he got a job there. After going there, I will try to find a placement for me.

Meanwhile with love,

Yours Affectionately,

Chandrika.

PS: Sandhya called on us yesterday and says she misses you as ever.'

"You should've left it for me to read," said Roopa softly, folding the letter.

"I thought there may not be any secrets between spouses," he said, taking offence to her statement, which, given the nature of the news the letter contained, she took it as a taunt.

"It's not about secrets but about courtesies, moreover, it's not my secret either. Whatever, you shouldn't have read my letter," she said coolly.

"Don't teach me manners; I don't see anything wrong with it, as your husband, I've every right to know about your affairs," he tried to defend himself, aggressively though.

"I don't think that by being your wife, I've lost my identity. I hope you would respect my privacy in future," she said firmly.

"Are you suggesting that I am uncouth?" he said volubly.

"I stated a fact, that's all," she said vexed herself.

"Are you afraid that I may catch some more skeletons?" he said provocatively.

It's the behavioral pattern with many, in that having committed an indiscretion in the first place; they tend to assume an aggressive posture to provoke an argument, as though to obliterate the origins of their misdemeanor that led to the ordeal.

"It's not fair at all," she said trying to be composed.

"So, you talk about fairness and all, now I know why you were married off in such haste, dropping you from the college mid-course," he said raising his voice.

'There's Ramu's parallel, isn't it?' she said defiantly.

"His affairs won't affect us as your sister's would," he mouthed words for an argument.

"If that bothers you, you're free to divorce me," she said tersely as she went into the kitchen.

The unexpected turn of events shocked Sathyam, and he realized that it was all of his own making. He thought of apologizing but his pride came in the way of compromising with his wife. As a way out of his predicament, he went out, as though to give her time to cool down.

When he came back, he found food was laid on the table but saw Roopa lying in the bed.

"Oh, come, let's have dinner," he said going her.

"I've no stomach for food now," she said curtly.

"Leaving you starving, do you think I would fill my belly?" he said, sitting beside her.

She got up without a word, and he followed her to the table. After that silent dinner, seeing her make a bed for herself in the hall, he said persuasively,

"Let's forget about it."

As she didn't respond, he repeated himself, if only more earnestly.

"Maybe, it's easy for you," she said as she laid a makeshift bed for her.

"I am sorry," he said sitting beside her.

"By now I know your sorriness is meant only to obtain bedtime favors," she said pushing him away.

"It's not so, I am really sorry," he pleaded holding onto her.

"Every time you say the same thing?" she reminded him.

"Never again," he said submissively.

"Then, swear that you won't misbehave with me," she stretched her hand with the palm outstretched.

"I, Sathyam, the once obedient son of Pathrudugaru, but now the devoted husband of Roopa Devi, solemnly affirm not to hurt my better half in any manner whatsoever, etc., etc.," he said taking her hand.

"If ever you hurt me again, you can write me off forever," she said as though she were cautioning him even as he pulled her into his arms to affect her surrender.

"Could I ever forgo your favors?" he said as she coyly sank into his embrace.

In surrendering herself thus, she ensured his surrender forever. It's the irony of woman's life in that she tends to turn her assets to her own detriment in that while her psyche seeks to see her man strong; her instinct tries to weaken him.

Chapter 10

Sandhya's Sojourn

That December evening, Sandhya came home dancing to the tune,

"Soon I'm going, to see my darling."

"When is she coming?" at length, Damayanthi interrupted Sandhya in her mirth.

"No mummy darling, it's me that's going," said Sandhya still dancing.

"What's the matter?" asked Damayanthi.

"It's the NCC thing, I've made it to the state level, and God willing, from there over to Delhi for the Republic Day parade," said Sandhya excitedly.

"Congrats dear," said Damayanthi hugging her daughter.

"I'm proud of you my darling," said Kamalakara who came by then.

"Oh, if only, I can make it to the contingent," said Sandhya dreamily.

"We're sure you would," said both the parents.

"Surely you could've already posted the news to Roopa," said Damayanthi.

"I thought I would surprise her," said Sandhya rolling her eyes.

Soon, Sandhya landed at Hyderabad's Langar Hauz camp for the girl cadets, and having gone through the rigorous regimen for a week, she made it to the Andhra Pradesh contingent. However, that Saturday evening, before decamping to Delhi, she left the camp to spend the weekend with Roopa.

Though Sandhya was all eager to reach for Roopa's arms, she chose not to hire an auto-rickshaw for she couldn't resist the temptation to relive her childhood days by hopping in and out of the city buses. Alighting at Lakdi-ka-pul from the bus she boarded at the Langar Hauz, she awaited a connecting service to Chikkadapally with the idea of picking up some *bandar laddus* on the way. 'Surely she would have loved those *kotaiah's kaajahs* even more - but then they aren't sold here,' she thought fondly reminiscing in her amour.

However, she became impatient waiting for the right bus that was late in coming. At that, she leaned on the railing of the road bridge as though to relieve her anxiety. And soon, she noticed four youths crossing the road towards her. As they came nearer, she thought one of them was quite handsome. It soon dawned on her that they joined the group of waiting commuters only to ogle her on the sly. When she instinctively glanced at the attractive guy, she found him staring at her unremittingly. As the intensity of his enamoured look tickled her senses, she felt insensibly drawn towards him.

When the city bus barged into the traffic of their admiring looks, languidly boarding it from the front, she gave him a longing look that seemed inviting to him. Pulled by the passion in her stare, he plunged into the bus on the move, leaving his friends gaping behind. Wading his way up the aisle, he reached where she was seated. As though his proximity induced a magnetic force in her body, she rose from her seat impulsively and stood beside him in the packed aisle. Though she made it appear as a courtesy to an old woman, he got the message and so posited himself behind her. While she felt the pressure of his exciting, her inviting manner made him eager. Without much ado, he ardently pressed against her while she found herself enjoying his exertions. Galvanized by her acquiescence, he laced her from behind and caressed her midriff that sent her into a rapturous trance.

When the conductor announced the arrival of the stage, she pulled herself in spite of it all, thus ending their mutual excitation. Alighting from the bus dreamily, she sensed that he too got down behind her. As she walked towards the sweetmeat shop, she noticed he was following her. It was then that she realized the import of her impulsiveness and blamed herself for her indiscretion. Nevertheless, as he kept pace with her, she came to be worried about his intentions, and after picking up some *bandar laddus*, as she hurriedly hired an auto, she heard him hailing another. Feeling nervous and fearing that she might have got herself into a mess, when she got down at the dead end of that side lane in Domalaguda, she saw him staring at her from the thoroughfare. Then, alarmed at his persistence, she ran up to Roopa's penthouse.

When Roopa opened the door, Sandhya swooned into her embrace.

"Oh dear, what a windfall it is!" Roopa kept repeating amidst a shower of kisses.

"Close the door," said Sandhya gasping for breath.

"Where's the rest of your luggage?" said Roopa, taking Sandhya's handbag and lugging at her.

"I'll tell you, first close the door," Sandhya persisted.

With the door closed behind them, Sandhya opened her mind to her friend.

"I just can't believe myself, how did I let all that happen?" concluded Sandhya in confusion.

"It's the malady of maidenhood, and I know its remedy. Shall I post the prescription to your father?" said Roopa in jest.

"Here I'm scared to death and you are joking," said Sandhya in mock anger.

"Let me see, if your charmer is still there," said Roopa, herself turning curious,

"Act at your own peril; if he sees you, he would shift his glare and get glued to your gate," said Sandhya having recovered her wits by then.

Nevertheless, Roopa peeped out of the window and found someone at beat near the gate.

"Is he the one?" Roopa asked Sandhya.

Peeping out from over Roopa's shoulder, Sandhya pressed her head to it.

"He's quite handsome; no wonder you lost yourself. Why not call him and give your dad's address," Roopa half-raised her hand in jest to tease her mate.

"Why are you making it worse for me?" Sandhya said, holding her hand impulsively.

As though to stimulate her friend further, Roopa led Sandhya into the kitchen for coffee, and putting all that behind, the mates focused themselves on the endearments of their meeting. When they returned into the hall, Sandhya peeped through the window and exclaimed, 'He's still there!'

"It looks like you gave him enough scope to hope for a date, and more," said Roopa contemplatively.

"I shouldn't have got into this mess at all," said Sandhya nervous all again.

"Why get upset about it?" said Roopa, and narrated her own encounter with Ravi in Tara's house and said,

"It was one of those small pleasures of life, isn't it? We must learn to enjoy them for what they're worth."

With the sound of the buzzer then, as her heart missed a beat, Sandhya ran inside only to rush back after hearing Sathyam's voice.

"What a pleasant surprise," Sathyam greeted Sandhya.

"I planned it that way," said Sandhya, and explained her position.

"Wish you all the best," said Sathyam as he went in.

"Has he gone?" Sandhya whispered to Roopa.

"Yes, to fetch a stool," Roopa whispered back

"Why not offer him a chair," said Sandhya in jest.

"I envy your friendship," said Sathyam to Sandhya, as he rejoined them, having changed into a *lungi*.

"You're a part of us," said Sandhya affectionately.

"Thanks for saying that, I wish I'm your brother," he said warmly.

"I would have loved that," she said extending her hand.

"Then you be my *raakhi* sister," he said taking her hand.

"Is it a gang-up on me?" said Roopa as she came with some snacks for them.

"Sandhya, I've a complaint against your friend," said Sathyam to Sandhya.

"I will go out then," said Roopa in jest.

"You know that I keep no secrets from you," he said.

"Neither I in what matters to you," said Roopa.

"See Sandhya, she's ever cut up with me," said Sathyam as Sandhya and Roopa looked at each other furtively,

"I'm a little crazy, that's all," said Roopa as though she was clarifying her position all the same.

"Why don't you give her some time as she's slow and steady?" said Sandhya to Sathyam.

"Any way, I couldn't have hoped for a better wife than her," he said affectionately.

"A loving husband too is a rare breed," said Sandhya holding Roopa's hand.

"Thanks for the compliment, why don't we go out for eats?" said Sathyam beamingly.

"You should know that she must be craving for a home meal," said Roopa.

"That's true," said Sathyam.

"We'll play caroms, Roopa says you're an expert at it," suggested Sandhya.

"You may be feeling cramped in our little place," said Sathyam as he arranged the board in the hall.

"Your hearts are big and that's what matters," said Sandhya heartily.

"Glad you think that way," said Sathyam.

"I fail to understand why we should feel apologetic in the first place. We have what we have and live within our means. For those who seek comforts, ours is surely the wrong address. Why embarrass the genuine with these explanations," said Roopa in irritation.

"Your friend has failed to add that she lives on her own terms," said Sathyam to Sandhya half in jest.

While Roopa didn't protest at that, Sandhya complimented him, "you're classy with your scissors," and at length, after conceding the game 29-14, she added, "you're too good a player."

"You're really a tough competitor; why not a revenge game?" said Sathyam appreciatively.

"I'm a game for it," said Sandhya.

"It's long since I've played like this," he said, winning the challenge round 29-22.

"Since when have you become an expert yourself Sandhya!" said a surprised Roopa.

"I took to caroms as a distraction," said Sandhya squeezing Roopa's hand.

After dinner, Sathyam offered to sleep in the hall.

"No,' Guests too have their rights, don't they?" said Sandhya smiling.

"Don't worry, I'll give her company," Roopa told Sathyam

While Sathyam slept, the mates got into the act and were awake well past midnight.

The next morning, having greeted Sandhya, Sathyam said, "I hope you slept well."

"Only after I allowed her to," said Roopa who brought milk for him then, and when Sathyam left to the toilet, Sandhya paid back the innuendo with a smack on Roopa's seat.

"Guests first," Sathyam said as Roopa gave him *pesarattu-upma* for breakfast.

"Women follow suit in our culture, don't they?" said Sandhya.

"Why not invite the Ramus for lunch?" suggested Roopa,

"They would love to meet Sandhya, I'll be back with them in no time," he said excitedly.

By the time Sathyam came back with the Ramus, the mates, as though to make up for the lost time, endeared themselves to each other.

"Looks like you don't have time for us anymore," Roopa warmly greeted the Ramus.

"Of late, he's not even finding time for me and he comes home just to sleep. I told him to send me back to my parents' place and arrange a cot for himself in his factory itself," grumbled Meera.

"Office is the natural refuge for a man from his nagging wife," Ramu said in jest,

After the storm has subsided, Roopa said in introduction,

"This is Sandhya my soulmate."

"Oh, I'm sorry, your name is ever on Roopa's lips," said Meera a little embarrassed.

"As her other half, I second her statement," said Ramu.

"I heard Roopa talk a great deal about you too," Sandhya addressed Ramu holding Meera's hand. "We admire your zeal to become an entrepreneur. We all know how difficult it is for someone to build from the scratch that too with none to back up."

"Well, it's a different matter with families into business for long. In time, a new entity of the old group would come up for the brat to lord it over, isn't it?" interjected Sathyam,

"That's the advantage of birth and it's a fact of life," said Roopa.

"Like it or not that's the way of the world," chimed in Ramu.

After a sumptuous meal that Sandhya savored, they settled for a round of rummy.

"With Roopa around, the winner is declared beforehand," said Meera, shuffling the packs.

"You people make too much out of my little bit of luck," protested Roopa, picking up her cards.

"Looks like we're going to get sandwiched between the friends," said Sathyam as the opener was grabbed by Sandhya.

"It's no more than a beginner's luck," said Sandhya smilingly.

As Ramu scooted the next deal Roopa teased him,

"Why withdraw at the very first reverse."

"Look at your friend's beaming face; one should be blind not to read her hand in that glow, though she holds the cards to her chest," said Ramu to Roopa.

When it was five in the evening, Sandhya was all set to leave for Langar Hauz.

"All the best, to all of you," she said, preparing to leave.

"Wish the same to you, it's nice that we met," said the Ramus.

"I'll long for another visit," Sathyam turned sentimental.

"Me too," said Sandhya taking his hand.

"Let me see her off," Roopa said getting into her *chappals*.

"Why not I go with them," said Meera to Ramu.

"Let's get on with the game, moreover, they may like to be alone," said Ramu.

As Sandhya looked around furtively as they stepped out, said Roopa,

"Are you still expecting him or what?"

"Who knows?" Sandhya said casually.

"In that case, it's only fair to favour him for his perseverance," said Roopa, teasingly.

"So, you've become a devil's advocate lately," said Sandhya in exasperation.

"I'll see what a daredevil you would as Mrs. X," said Roopa, pinching Sandhya.

"That's some way away, but what's on in the New Year?" said Sandhya.

"What difference does a New Year make for me but for the change of the calendar," said Roopa gravely.

"That way, we never know what surprises life has in store for us," said Sandhya squeezing Roopa's hand.

"Any way, I'm tired of hoping," said Roopa resignedly.

"Hope for the best, and prepare for the worst, that's wisely said," said Sandhya.

"Come the Republic Day, I'll be there to spot you in the live telecast," said Roopa, as they reached the bus stop.

"That is if the *video-wallahs* happen to focus on me," said Sandhya.

"Why, you have the gait to parade men behind you, and your face, can anyone miss it, even in a crowd!" said Roopa adoringly.

"Romantic as ever," said Sandhya pressing Roopa's hand endearingly.

At length, as the city bus was spotted, Roopa pressed Sandhya's hand and said,

"Remember that I remember you."

"My longing for you reminds me of your craving for me," Sandhya whispered endearingly into Roopa's ear,

"Bye, lovey," said Roopa as Sandhya boarded the bus.

Waving at Roopa, as the bus moved, thought Sandhya,

'How lucky to have a friend and a lover rolled into one in Roopa. Oh, isn't it clear that Sathyam is not a match for her, even though he loves her. It looks like she has adjusted to her life with him. What else could the poor thing do?'

Chapter 11

Match in the Making

Once in Delhi, Sandhya found the winter harsh and the rehearsals taxing. Nevertheless, the prospect of participating in the prestigious parade excited her no end. And to uplift her spirits further, her parents wired their coming to the capital to watch the grand spectacle.

Then came the Republic Day the nation is wont to celebrate with gusto. Marching on the Rajpath that 26th January morning, Sandhya envisioned Roopa glued to her TV set. Besides, she was conscious about the presence of her parents, somewhere in the crowd, waiting to see her march past them. The thought that her dear ones were savouring her every step enhanced her grace and enlivened her vigor in her smart gait.

Soon, a thrilled Sandhya, made it back to the camp, and waited for her parents in all eagerness.

When the delighted Kalmalakars came to pick her up, she was overcome with emotion in that joyful reunion.

"We're proud of you, dear," said her parents patting her.

"I'm glad you've come," she nestled to her mother.

"Are you put up with Rao uncle?" Sandhya said getting into the Ambassador.

"Of course," said Kamalakar.

"Oh, how he used to tease me in those days that if he had a son, he would've made me his daughter-in-law," said Sandhya, as the Ambassador headed towards Chanakyapuri.

"He still remembers that," said Damayanthi.

When the car came to a halt in the portico of the Madhava Raos' bungalow, the hosts came out in welcome Sandhya.

"What a smarty!" exclaimed Madhava Rao.

"Charming too," said Chitra Rao in all admiration.

"Oh, how I regret that we haven't adopted a boy," said Madhava Rao half in jest.

"We can still have her in our family if she's married to Raja Rao," said Chitra, who got a brainwave.

"It's an idea dear, they would make a fine pair," seconded Madhava Rao.

"Is the search on for a suitable boy?" enquired Chitra

"Now that she's in the final year, I think it's time we began the hunt," said Damayanthi in contemplation.

"What's the hurry?" questioned Sandhya coyly.

"Bet you won't say that after meeting my nephew," said Chitra as though to put ideas into Sandhya's head.

"It looks like you're rooting for him," said Kamalakar thoughtfully.

"That's true, and his resume speaks for itself," said Madhava Rao. "He's a Civil Engineer from IIT, Powai, and did his MS in Architecture at Brooklyn. Now he is a Senior Architect at Pioneer Architects, the market leaders. It's rare to come across someone with his talents. Above all, he has the ability to think. And that should make him a good captain to steer ashore the marital ship through troubled waters. However, he's twenty-eight, if that's an objection, as Sandhya could be barely twenty."

"I would say he's handsome to the bone and romantic to the core," said Chitra seemingly to tempt Sandhya.

"What about his family background?" said Kamalakar.

"Govinda Rao, his father is a GM in Larsen & Toubro's Bombay Plant," said Madhava Rao. "His mother Visala is a fine woman. His sister Hyma and her husband Ranga Rao are both doctors, and they run their Nursing Home in Bombay."

"Are they propertied?" asked Damayanthi.

"Like us, they too hail from Konaseema. They have an old house and some coconut plantations still at Kothalanka, looked after by our uncle Thimmaiah. If not well heeled, they are more than middle-class. What's more, they're quite cultured and good-natured," said Chitra.

"Your satisfaction is our satisfaction, what do you say Sandhya?" said Kamalakar.

"I still say what the hurry is unless you want to drive me away," she said shyly.

"He usually drops in on holidays but still I'll ring him up," said Chitra, pleased at the welcome development

As Chitra was dialing his number, as though the aunt and the nephew were on telepathic terms, Raja Rao came in.

"Auntie is sambar on the menu?" he said, unlacing his shoes in the ante-room.

"Oh, think about the devil," said Chitra.

"Raja, we've a welcome guest for you," said a delighted Madhava Rao,

When Raja Rao entered the drawing room, Sandhya's inquisitive gaze greeted his eager look. She could discern his piercing eyes acquire a lively look in interaction, which she later realized was frozen in her mind's eye. She found his masculinity, enhanced with that romantic face of his, irresistibly evocative. She felt that as his tall frame and broad shoulders made him look athletically handsome, his medium dark complexion imparted a rare virility to his persona.

The customary round of introductions over, Kamalakar asked Raja Rao,

"Why is architecture for an IITan?"

"As a child I had been to many temples in the South with my parents," The temple architecture seems to have left a lasting impression upon me. Though, it's much later that I realized the possibility architecture offers as a profession. As you know a well-designed dwelling contributes to the quality of living," explained Raja Rao.

"He has an intellectual bent of mind," thought Sandhya, while her parents seemed visibly impressed with his eloquence.

"What are your hobbies like?" Damayanthi took over as the interviewer.

"He's a jack-of-all-trades, including human psychology," Madhava Rao complimented,

"By inference, a master of none," was the Raja Rao addendum.

"Given your ability to think that's no handicap," said Chitra as though to stress upon the obvious.

"What about your chess?" enquired Kamalakar, an ardent chess player.

"Before I got into bridge, I used to concentrate on chess. These days, whenever I find myself at the chessboard, I play more with my hand than head," said Raja Rao.

"Interesting, but how," wondered Kamalakar.

"Like chess, bridge too is a scientific game. While chess is all about cold logic, in bridge, in spite of your grasp of the game, the element of uncertainty lends charm to it," theorized Raja Rao.

Finding that Sandhya wasn't taking her eyes off him, Raja Rao said,
"You seem to be a keen observer," and added after a pause,
"How do you find Delhi?"

Seeing the smile in his eyes, she felt shy, but said nevertheless,
"It's Capital."

"Your economy of expression is admirable," he said smilingly.

"You must be a well-read person," said Sandhya in admiration.

"Whatever little I read, I read well," said Raja Rao.

"His reading includes hand-reading," said Madhava Rao, as if for Sandhya's ears.

"Would you let me read your hand?" Raja Rao asked Sandhya.

"I don't know if it interests you," she said trying to gauge his feelings.

"That we'll find that out after dinner," he said with a smile.

While all moved into the drawing hall after dinner, Raja Rao stayed back in the dining room as though to remind Sandhya about her engagement. Getting the cue, she rejoined him and without a word stretched out her left hand for his take.

"May I have your right hand," he suggested as if to get her onto the right track.

"When did you take to palmistry?" she asked him, as he was feeling her palm all over.

"When I could imagine the possibilities," he said, looking into her eyes.

"What do you mean?" she sounded suspicious.

"The possibility of holding hands to read in between the lines," he said tantalizingly.

"So, you're cleverer by half," she withdrew her hand

"Never mind, you've a fine hand that's promising," he said.

"This could be your stock prediction," she said teasing him.

"Never before with the same conviction and feeling," he said not to be outdone.

"You're truly impossible," she said in that mock frustration in which women look beautifully helpless.

"Honestly, let me see what it holds," he said, reaching for her hand.

"Why are you so curious?" she said withholding her hand.

"Just to ascertain your marital prospects," he said looking into her eyes.

"But how does that concern you?" she said as though under the spell of his charm.

"Don't you think I'm an eligible bachelor?" he said, ardently looking into her eyes.

Dropping her eyes involuntarily, she let him take her hand consciously.

"Lucky is the guy who weds you," he said tentatively.

"You're supposed to predict my future, but you're speculating someone's fortune," she said to point out the faux pas.

"Hi, Sandhya, the newscast is on. See if you figure in the visuals," yelled Damayanthi.

'Oh, she's there, graceful really," said Raja Rao spotting Sandhya in time.

'Thanks for your compliment," she said joyously, turning her head towards him.

"I think, it's time I get going," said Raja Rao as he got up after the newscast.

As he exited from the scene, he wished them all good night.

"Good night," said Sandhya, inviting his attention.

At that, their eyes met to convey their disappointment at the impending separation.

"Make it for dinner tomorrow," said Madhava Rao who had by then sensed the infatuation that gripped his nephew and the guest.

"I would love to," said Raja Rao, looking at Sandhya, as her eyes seemed all of adoration for him.

"Don't you Ok him?" Madhava Rao asked Kamalakar after Raja Rao had left.

"I feel he's a capital fellow, what do you think?" Kamalakar pushed the ball into Damayanthi's court.

"I put the 'c' in the upper case for Sandhya," Damayanthi kept the ball rolling.

"We'll know that from the horse's mouth, right now," said Madhava Rao with the exaggerated manner of a compère.

"If you all feel that he's right for me, he's fine for me," said Sandhya coyly, sinking her head into *The Illustrated Weekly of India* that she was holding.

'Leave the rest to me and contact your *purohit* for the *sumuhurtham*," said Madhava Rao in all excitement.

As the elders began recounting the like incidents of matchmaking they had heard of, none took note of Sandhya slipping into the guest room to be on her own.

Lay up in the bed, Sandhya tried to fathom the persona of the man that induced love in her heart.

'But what about him?' she thought at length. 'Isn't he's enamored of me.'

She fondly recalled his disappointed look when he got up to leave, and the way his eyes glowed with life when Madhava Rao asked him to come the next day. 'Was it not owing to the prospect of meeting me again,' she thought endearingly. 'Why, it's clear that he's fascinated by me.'

'But would he like to marry me? Were it possible, for him it's no more than a calf-love in the euphoria of our youthful interaction?' she became doubtful and dispirited at that. 'After all, he's smart and is pretty sure of himself, isn't he? For all that, he could be a ladies' man and not the marrying type, who knows?'

'Am I already in love with him? Of course, isn't there something in him that is fascinating,' she tried to fathom his persona. 'Is it his face? Never have I seen a romantic face like that before. Won't it compel women to admire him even as it evokes pity in their souls! Maybe, it's that unique feature of his face that imparts a rare appeal to his persona.'

'Well, there's much more to his personality than his physicality,' she contemplated. 'There's a flowing ease about his manner as well. Though he appears casual, he doesn't look indifferent. With all his accomplishments, he doesn't put on any airs. I wonder how he manages to look so confident without a semblance of arrogance! Wonder how can he sound so firm without appearing adamant? Above all, his persona personifies

romanticism abetted by his maleness, doesn't it? Why, he's a real he-man if there was ever one.'

'Haven't I become a romantic in his thoughts! If only I become his wife, won't I turn passionate as well?' she thought coyly.

As her imagination surged into romanticism, her thoughts turned to Roopa. 'Oh, I'm doomed. He's a silly guy' - she recalled Roopa's words. Having met the man who excited the dormant romantic in her, Sandhya understood the true import of Roopa's predicament. The exciting prospect of her marrying Raja Rao enabled her imagine the disillusionment of Roopa's life as Sathyam's wife.

'Though I could always feel the state of her mind then, it's only now that I'm able to visualize the pathos of her heart.' she thought melancholically.

Caught in the conflict of hope for herself and despair of her mate, her heart seemed to have turned to love for solace much before sleep could provide it for her.

Chapter 12

Poignant Moment

'What a lovely girl she is!' thought Raja Rao, for the umpteenth time. 'May not be the ravishing type, but surely she's the charming kind. Above all, she's a wifely stuff. Won't I be able to mould her into a matchless mate? What if I propose to her? It looks like we are of the same caste and that should make matters easy. But then, what of our sub-sects? Don't they seem progressive to mind all that. But who knows? Appearances can be deceptive, can't they? Well, even then, one has still to reckon with the *gothrams* that are to be different for a match to materialize. What an irony, the custom that prescribes alliances between blood relations proscribes *sagothra* marriages! What's a *gothram*, after all? If anything, isn't it a vague concept at its very best, based as it were on the precept of lineage of one and all; that too attributed to the obscure origins of just a score of *rishis*. What a fanciful notion it is! Don't all peoples have their own idiosyncrasies? And yet, all are prone to ridicule others for their peculiar beliefs. After all, what is a custom but the prejudice of a polity or a corollary of a religious ethos?'

'Whatever, she's sweet and smart,' he continued turning his thoughts towards her, 'An ideal girl to take for a wife. Having taken to me in her own sweet way, would she be averse to the idea of marrying me? Why not seek auntie's good offices as the matchmaker? Even if she succeeds in brainwashing them all, that still leaves a question mark in matching our horoscopes. Some half-wit of an astrologer could make it naught with his crude calculations. How this new-found obsession is ruining many a match in the offing? Well, it's only love that has the power to maneuver through these encumbrances.'

The thought of the power of love brought back the memories of the year-old romance in a train journey. 'Oh! What a lovely lass she was!' he thought, and reflected upon that incredible encounter.

During that early winter, he went to Khajuraho to study the erotic architecture of its sandstone temples. After a weeklong stay there, that evening he boarded the Ganga-Kaveri Express at Satna to reach Madras to present his seminar paper. After exchanging pleasantries with a Father on the side and the trade unionist opposite in that four-berth coupe, he went about polishing his seminar paper well into the night.

Next morning, he was lazing by the window enjoying the refreshing landscape of the wilderness. At around eight, two girls came to greet the Father who was engrossed with the Bible. The one, who was almost in, was rather plain but the other behind her

seemed tantalizing in her grey sari. With a black shawl draped around, she was a shade darker and an inch taller than her companion. Directing his gaze upon the charmer, he found her graceful though tentative in her flowing frame. As she surveyed the scene, she found him intently staring at her in wonderment. It appeared to him from her demeanor that the craving she espied in his gaze synchronized with the longing his persona insensibly induced in her mind.

While her companion was conversing with the Father, the young thing was spying him compellingly at every turn. He saw her enamoured eyes enlarge as though to accommodate his admiring stare fixed on her. On occasion, when she intruded into the ongoing conversation, his ears danced to the tune of her soothing tone in Malayalam that was alien to him.

When the train halted at some station requiring the unionist to alight, the girls grabbed the space thus created with great relish. But having lost her senses in the ecstasy of their mutual attraction, she kept mum while her friend blabbered. After a while, as her friend got up to leave, the charmer too stood up as if in a reflex action. However, having come back to her senses, she let her friend go out of the setting while she stayed back as if to prolong the event to savour more of it.

Having taken her seat opposite, she readily got up and sat in the space between him and the Father to continue her tête-à-tête with the latter. The proximity of her person and the proclivity of her posture triggered an emotional upsurge in his soul that occasioned a craving to caress her frame. Goaded by his desire to feel his love on her body, he gained her midriff left uncovered by her sari. The response of her flesh to the sense of his touch seemed to have induced warmth in her frame that provided solace to her soul. Imperceptibly she readjusted her posture as though to help him explore her state to the core. Enthused by her accommodation that enabled him access her recess, he surged on eagerly bustling about her buttocks as if they were the mounds of her essence. However, at length, as though to address her heart, when he reached for her bosom from underneath the shawl, even as he felt her pulsations, she gave a turn and dropped the book in hand. And that invited the attention of the Father.

To forestall an inquisition, he then initiated a discussion on Gibbon's thesis on the growth of the Christianity. What with the Father finding that enthralling, she was spared of an explanation! Having diverted the Father's mind to his favorite subject, he tried to take stock of the state of her mind. He found her blue in the face as she sweated in her palms. Seeing her thus, he cursed himself for being the cause of her fright. So as to alleviate her plight, he reached for his notebook and scribbled his sorriest, and gestured for her forgiveness, and seemingly feeling his impulse, even in her nonplussed state, she glanced at his message only to ignore him thereafter.

Soon she left, still dazed, and he remained remorseful and too perplexed to follow her to apologize for his rashness but when he recovered from the shock of her hurt, he ventured through the vestibules to locate her on the moving train. As he sighted her, at long last, still in a state of shock, his heart sank into the depths of agony. He got vexed even more as he found her pixilated in spite of all those apologetic gestures he came up with to soothe her soul. Her indifference made him feel worse for her sake. Feeling wretched himself, he thought only his love could address her hurt and their souls would be solaced but in their embrace. But how were he to convince her about that? Where was the privacy to pressure her into a love saving embrace?

Not to embarrass her further with his forthrightness, he sauntered in the aisle to attract her attention. As she failed to yield, he riveted near her to make her relent. At length, as though responding to his body language, she looked at him with a vacant look

that suggested all was over between them. So as not to compound her misery with his embarrassing presence, he left her with a heavy heart.

Back in the coupe, he sat distraught in her thought. As he cursed himself for his misdemeanor, his craving for her pardon got accentuated. While his remorse helped nourish his love for her, nevertheless, he suffered on that score. Just the same, he didn't dare venture to see her again, fearing he might make her suffer even more. And it's thus; he never knew where her journey had ended and when her ordeal was over. But that incident, however, haunted him for weeks on end.

'Wasn't it a case of love at first sight that induced a sense of mutual belonging in us,' he reminisced presently. 'No denying it, though. I should've befriended her before proposing, and she couldn't have refused for sure. Maybe by now, we could have been expecting our first-born. Who knows?'

'But, why did it all go haywire?' he thought in regret all again. 'I lost my head and went wayward on her body, didn't I? What led me to mislay my hand on her? Was it owing to the craving of my flesh or the urge of my love? Possibly it was the passion of my soul to possess her that triggered it all. Until it all ended in a huff, didn't we enjoy a smooth ride on the silken path of love? Wasn't my urgency to close in on her breasts that alienated her heart, once and for all? Maybe, I was compelled to feel the rhythm of her heart beats rhymed by the emotions of her love for me. What a fall it was, after a dream start! Oh, what an ignominious end it was after that ecstatic beginning.'

'When she was as receptive to my caress at her seat,' he always thought in puzzlement, 'why was it that she found my hand on her breast so offensive? But how could she have expected me to envisage the borders of her sensitivity in my state of excitation? True, she would have felt that I transgressed; yet she couldn't have failed to feel the pulse of my love in the nuances of my touch. Didn't my heart descend on my hand to vent its love on her frame! And how it rushed to my mouth seeing her disjointed! Why did she choose to punish me with banishment for the failings of my love inspired by her own persona? How she thought I deserved the deserts! Why didn't she pardon me, finding me repentant?'

He racked his brains for an answer that he never got but was sunken whenever he recalled that episode, 'Had she pardoned me, how rejoicing it would have been for both of us! Seeing me ecstatic, she should've been deliriously joyous, and what a triumph of love that could have been! But that wasn't to be. What should've been a fairy tale romance ended as an unmitigated disaster for both of us.'

'What could be her name? What a pity that the most ardent love I'd ever experienced should remain a nameless memory!' he often thought in despair.

That nameless memory presently took his thoughts to an earlier encounter with Jaya, again in a train journey.

He was going to Guntur, by the Circar Express, after holidaying with his grandfather at Kothalanka. Seeing him reading *Walden*, a young girl borrowed the book from him to have a look at it. However, after leafing through a few pages, she said that the stuff was too stiff for her head. At the next halt, she welcomed her friend, whom she was obviously expecting. Her friend had memorable eyes that moved him. He always knew the eyes that speak insensibly drew him to the endowed woman. If the woman were to be dusky as well, with a tinge of sadness in her demeanor, well, he would find her all the more bewitching.

"May I know your name?" he asked the newcomer, who seemed to find him equally attractive.

"What for?" she questioned him spiritedly.

"To pin your thoughts on to it," he said memorably.

"Jaya," she said coyly.

Though they exchanged many an ardent glance during that long journey besides their addresses, their inclinations went the way all acquaintances made in the travel times go - into memory banks.

Even though their mutual liking during a journey might enthuse the hearts of infatuated co-travelers, once it's over, unsupported by the habit that sustains a relationship, their enthusiasm for each other insensibly wanes, pushing the nascent ardour on to the back burner.

'Well, even that minor attraction has a name to rivet upon, but this unique happening would remain a nameless memory,' he was wont to wonder. 'Why not give her a name? Why not I christen her Swapna, the dream one?' Once he pondered over the proposition and gave up in the end realizing that even the most evocative name wouldn't move him since she didn't lend her voice to it.

While he reached his flat with that reflection, once he hit the pillow, Sandhya reoccupied his mind, 'Surely there's something in her that induces a serene desire that's conducive to peaceable love life. If only she were to be my wife, how blessed I would be.'

Hoping to make Sandhya his wife and envisaging the charms of a life with her, in time, Raja Rao slept expectantly.

Chapter 13

Wedding Season

When the postman came to deliver Sandhya's letter that March end, Roopa nearly grabbed it from him to his amusement.

'My Lovey,

Pardon me for my negligence in spite of a couple from you. With my exams nearing, I wasn't in the right mood to write to you. But now, there's great news to convey to you.

I was engaged only this evening to Raja Rao. Yes, I'm not able to believe it myself! We happened to meet in Delhi when I went there. Why imagine, it's an arranged match, with a little bit of love thrown in by us to spice it up.

He is an architect in Delhi, and my father thought it fit to entrust me to his constructive care even as my heart is enthused by his romantic designs. There's only one jarring note, though, as you know. I have to move over to Delhi, far away from you. I'm hopeful of coaxing him in time to shift our base to Hyderabad. The wedding is slated for 7th June and needless to say, I need you here before the countdown commences.

Convey my regards to my brother contained in this, need I say, the letter of my life. However, I shall send the customary invitation card to Mr. & Mrs. Sathyam in due course.

My love to all of you®

Ever yours® in waiting,

Sandhya.'

Roopa reread Sandhya's letter that induced myriad feelings in her – while gloating over her mate's fortune in finding the right man, she was depressed visualizing the effect Sandhya's marriage might have on her own life.

However, struck by the sentence in Sandhya's hand,

'Why imagine things, it's an arranged match, with a little bit of love thrown in by us to spice it up', Roopa began thinking,

'Can there be a sweeter way to state one's love. Isn't everything about Sandhya sweet for that matter? Sweet too must be the beau she has chosen. Why, Raja Rao could be smarter than the guy who attracted her here. Intelligent he must be for Sandhya wouldn't suffer fools. Surely he must be a dynamic character, as she doesn't fancy sluggards. Somehow his name too sounds nice though old fashioned. But Sandhya could have made 'Raja' his pet name that is for sure. Oh, how am I to address him! Raja might sound too familiar, isn't it? All the same, Rao would seem too formal, won't it? But how does he look after all?'

Then she tried to visualize Raja Rao's persona as per her own proclivities but soon enough gave up in despair for want of any picture of her own dream man.

'Why didn't it occur to her to post his photo? Or at least, she should've written a line or two about him as her love captured him,' she thought at length. 'She surely would have a joyous married life. Isn't it reason enough for my rejoicing? But then, they would be far away in Delhi. So I won't be able to share her blissful moments. How can it be helped, after all?'

However, as the thought of the distance depressed her all the more after her visualization of their joy, she felt,

'Moreover, won't Sandhya's ardour for her man insensibly dampen her ardency towards me, sooner than later?'

As she was startled at that, the fear of an erotic gulf between her and her mate froze her

'No, it won't be the case,' she tried to revive her spirits as she recalled Sandhya's words. "I love you enough to need you too," that's what she promised, didn't she?'

'What if the aura of Raja's virility casts a shadow on her lesbian leanings,' it dawned on her to her despair. 'Oh, if I were to lose her, what would I be left with to live for? How cruel that would be for me. But what else could I do than keep my fingers crossed.'

The melancholy of the moment brought the memories of her family, and she found herself reminiscing,

'Could there have been a better couple than them that ever parented? But how do we, their children fare? Suguna and her husband are a contented lot, living within their limitations, one might call them colorless, but of what avail is all the color in life, if it can't provide a shade of happiness to it! Well.'

As though to contrast her own life, she thought about Chandrika,

'Didn't she dare to be different and staked everything for love. What love should've given her in return?'

Compelled by curiosity, she thought of writing to her to attend Sandhya's wedding, even as her thoughts turned to her brother,

'Well, he wants to become an engineer, good luck to him, oh, how I craved to be a doctor.'

Recalling Rukmini's fondness for her as her childhood memories came in torrents, she thought,

'Perhaps, she's the luckiest of us all, well, the dead have no problems to contend with.'

However, her reverie was broken when Ramu arrived towards the evening.

"I thought Sathyam would've come back by now," he said.

"It's time for him to come," as she said, they heard Sathyam's Lambretta.

"I've some mixed news for you; sadly, my plans to acquire a unit here fell flat in the end, but thanks to the second string of my bow, I could take over one in Madras. We would have loved to be here but well, the opportunity lies elsewhere," said Ramu.

"Wish you all the best, but we'll miss you," said the Sathyams after congratulating Ramu heartily,

"You know, that our feelings are no different," said Ramu, embracing Sathyam.

"I know what a tight schedule it could be. Still I hope you would spend some time with us before you leave," said Roopa to Ramu, and turning to Sathyam, she added,

"Sandhya's marriage is slated for 7th June."

"Good news galore, who's the lucky groom?" said Sathyam.

"An architect in New Delhi," she said.

"So, she needn't pay for the design of her sweet home," Ramu said heartily.

"We can ask him for a decent discount for yours," said Roopa in jest.

"That would be a favour; for reference and record, what's his name?" said Ramu amusedly.

"Raja Rao," said Roopa, inexplicably thrilled in pronouncing his name, and seeing the satisfaction in Ramu, she began envisioning the measure of Sandhya's happiness, only to end up thinking about her own unfulfilled life,

'Why did life fail me, after all? Why has it denied me that life-filled moment to let me feel fulfilled?'

That midsummer though Roopa was in heat to meet Sandhya, as her apprehensions about losing her mate after her marriage bogged her, she felt like postponing the trip to Kakinada until the very end. However, as her love for Sandhya prevailed over her fear of herself, she set out on her journey as scheduled.

"I'll be reaching there on the 5th," said Sathyam, as he waved her off at the Secunderabad Railway Station that mid May.

On reaching home the next morning as Roopa hit the pillow, her parents thought that she might have had a sleepless journey. However, finding her languid even by noon, said Janaki,

'I'm surprised you didn't rush to Sandhya. Are you ill or what?'

"I'm a bit lazy but it's time I left," she said, and wondered,

'What is bothering me after all?'

Before she could get a clue to her lethargy, Sandhya came in like a hurricane.

"I couldn't wait any longer," said Sandhya enticingly.

"I've never seen her so dull," said Janaki as she left them on their own.

"Congrats," said Roopa extending her hand, though besieged as she was by a strange transformation brought about by Sandhya's sight.

"I won't have it that way," said Sandhya mischievously folding her hands at her back.

"Don't you know I'm cut up with you for not describing the valorous man who conquered your heart," said Roopa feigning anger.

"I want your second opinion, so wait to see him," said Sandhya mirthfully.

"How unfair are you! I'll warn him that you are clever like when even pinned down on the back, yet you would claim a win by crossing your legs over the victor's back," said Roopa.

"He's too smart to outsmart both of us put together," said Sandhya smiling in reminiscence.

"So, it would be interesting," said Roopa enthusiastically.

"What's lacking now?" crooned Sandhya, pushing Roopa's head into her valley.

"Why are you dull, my lovey?" said Sandhya finding Roopa numb in her embrace.

"I don't know but I'm out of sorts really," said Roopa melancholically.

"I can understand what's bothering you; I can visualize what his love might mean to me but I know I need you as much as I would need him," said Sandhya with conviction.

"Thank you lovey, I love you all the more for our love," said Roopa in gratification.

With the fears thus dispelled from her mind, Roopa went on devouring the lips that uttered those reassuring words. Then the rosy lien on their love seemed to have lent a new vigor to their libido as they indulged to the hilt.

When Chandrika landed a week later, Janaki turned sentimental all again, "She brought it upon herself, this ostracized existence. We can neither invite them to our house nor can we go to their place."

"Don't worry, world is changing," said Chandrika, assuring her mother.

"I don't see any but how I wish it does," said Janaki going into the kitchen sobbing.

"I love to hear about your love life," said Roopa unable to hide her eagerness.

"We'll come to that later but tell me how your married life is," said Chandrika.

"It's routine with the capital R," said Roopa.

And suddenly Janaki rejoined her daughters with a rejoinder,

"One shouldn't forget the fuss Roopa made about the match. And you didn't heed our advice."

"Why do you rake up the past?" Ramaiah, who was within an earshot, reprimanded his wife.

"One must know that the path of the future is laid on the tracks of the past," retorted Janaki.

"Let's go to Sandhya's place," Roopa proposed to her sister after a while.

The moment they stepped out, Roopa was impatient.

"Tell me now," she said in all urgency.

"Life in a nutshell is challenging as well as charming. It's as though the complexities of life are compounded in exogamous marriages. At times, it feels that the risk was worth

taking, and on occasion, it seems it's all a bad bargain. There would be depressing moments to go through as well as exciting events to gloat over," said Chandrika.

"But for mine, I suppose, that's the way with most marriages," said Roopa a little disappointed.

"No way," said Chandrika in explanation, "inter-caste marriages would throw up myriad problems. We encounter sensitive situations and face peculiar pressures alien to the arranged unions. To make it worse, there are external factors that could upset our apple-carts. All of us have personal preferences steeped in our upbringing that are shaped by our respective communal ethos. In endogamous marriages, the commonality of cultural attitudes could limit the deviations in personal proclivities. But the exogamous marriages won't have the in-built limit switches to keep the couple on course. We have to fend for ourselves in the pathless woods of personal prejudices. The spouses should be on guard always, lest some casual remark of one should hurt the communal sensitivities of the other. All this would only mean that one couldn't be his or her natural self in a given situation. On the positive side, however, it makes us more responsive to others' sensibilities."

"Now I can understand," said Roopa who was all ears for Chandrika.

"Once we opt for an inter-caste marriage," Chandrika continued, "it's as if we have burnt our bridges and cold-shouldered all shoulders to cry over. Unable to relieve ourselves from our pressures, we only help them build up to the breaking point. We cry in the privacy of our dwelling, afraid that the world would laugh at us if found wanting. Though it might provide a vent to the woman, it would invariably vex the man for that tends to suggest to him that it's all his making. We develop a siege mentality and imagine everyone wants to see us fail. We feel as though the world doesn't want us to succeed so as to make an example out of us for others to desist from venturing. All this puts pressure on us to make it right as though marriage is a task to be fulfilled. Forced to restrain ourselves, we interact selectively stalling our social integration."

"Don't his people support you?" Roopa asked with concern.

"In a way yes," said Chandrika nostalgically, "but those who happen to come close to us tend to be a hindrance than of any help. If the wife were to be from an upper caste, then the man is congratulated, making her feel humiliated as a symbol of the caste conquest. Well, one should understand their psyche burdened by their collective humiliation caused by the age-old exploitation of their women by the men of the upper castes. Seen from their perspective, it's as if one of their clan has in some way avenged for all of them by roping in an upper caste female for his cohabitation. If on the other hand, the marriage were to be morganatic, then they condescend to descend as though showing the wife's place in the privileged setting. In subtle ways, the society, by and large, would ensure that we carry the cross with the odd-couple complex all along."

"So, what's your balance sheet like?" said Roopa in apprehension.

"On the whole, it does seem a profitable account, though it needs quite a lot of reconciliation," said Chandrika.

"I hope you aren't regretting," said Roopa.

"Oh, no; but if I've to decide all again, I might think twice over, and yet go the same way. The thrill of being different gives a halo to our marriage in spite of everything, though the pressures constantly lead us on a razor's edge," said Chandrika sincerely.

"What is he like?" asked Roopa.

"He is quite mature; it's his maturity and my motivation that's carrying the day for us. Otherwise, we would have called it quits a long while back," said Chandrika as her affection for him filled her voice.

By the time they reached Sandhya's place, Roopa was excited about the challenges that her sister's life posed. However, in time, seeing her sister's adventurous life against the backdrop of her dull marital existence, she felt depressed all again. That they didn't find Sandhya at home only further spoiled her mood, and as they walked back home, Roopa kept mum all along.

"I'll take you to the doctor, don't go anywhere in the evening," Janaki told Roopa as they had their lunch.

"Why, what for?" Roopa feigned innocence.

"Don't you realize it's nearing two years now but there are no signs of it yet," scowled Janaki at Roopa.

"What's the hurry?" said Roopa unable to share her mother's anxiety.

"Maybe, they're having an extended honeymoon," said Chandrika in jest.

"When would your tummy show up?" said Roopa to Chandrika.

"Bear with us, we are at it," said Chandrika, laughing.

Many a time, it did cross Roopa's mind that a child should have filled her emotional void. However, Sathyam, in spite of his disappointment, felt that a trip to the doctor was premature.

Chapter 14

Veil of Fate

The countdown to Sandhya's wedding commenced with the arrival of the marriage party on that 6th June. The groom's entourage felt the official clout of Kamalakar, who by then became the District Collector. Officials worked overtime to spruce up the government guest-houses for the occasion. Fleets of department vehicles were lined up at a hailing distance from the guests. The *kalyana mandapam* was so made up as to resemble the durbar hall of a maharajah's palace. Attendants in their scores swarmed the place to be on hand for assorted errands.

Sandhya was wondering how to introduce Roopa to her fiancé. She couldn't take her to him, as custom ordained that a bride shouldn't move out of the house on the eve of her marriage. She wished that he would come home to see her but the norms left no scope for that either.

"What about going to the guest-house on the sly," said Sandhya to Roopa.

"Why not, if you don't mind me being labeled a groom-chaser," said Roopa in jest.

As they were wondering what to be done, Sandhya's mother called her,

"O, Sandhya, come down."

"She won't let me be on my own even today," grumbled Sandhya as she went down.

Springing down the stairs in irritation, Sandhya saw her fiancé following her movements from the drawing room. Even as her daydreaming brought him closer to her in her consciousness, she was still shy in his presence for the lack of intimacy. Thus, stopping in her tracks, she blushed to her roots.

"You look sweeter than ever," he complimented, going up to her.

"Thanks," she said coyly.

"It's I who should thank you for accepting my hand," he said taking her hand.

"It's you who started it all, by taking my hand to read in between the lines," she turned coquettish.

"What of your inviting gestures then," he said looking into her eyes.

"Don't tell me, you're blindfolded otherwise," she said all smiles.

"Won't your beauty impart vision even to the blind?" he said squeezing her hand.

"Oh, come on, I've a treasure to show you," she said enthusiastically.

"I thought you've more than one but why a premature display?" he said mischievously.

"Behave like a bridegroom, don't act like a playboy," she scolded him in mock anger.

"Hope you won't frame rules for our nuptial night and thereafter," he said, and as she turned coy, picking up from where she had left, he added,

"Tell me, what's that you want to show me?"

"Simply follow me," she led him sprightly to her room.

"Won't that be my lifelong occupation?" he followed her smilingly.

When Roopa heard their steps, rather instinctively, she kept her inquisitive gaze door-wards. In time, when their eyes met, her gaze was frozen and he stopped in his tracks. As Sandhya was about to initiate introductions, her mother called her again and hurried by her from downstairs, she left her fiancé and her mate to fend for themselves.

As though guided by her charms, Raja Rao found himself walking up to Roopa without taking his eyes off her even as she stood rooted and fixed her gaze at him as though the slightest tilt on her part might distract his path of attraction. However, as he neared her, she insensibly extended her hand as though to ensure he wouldn't trip in his trance. While he took her hand, as if to hold on to the summit of his life, energized by her dormant desire, she found herself pressing it in all eagerness. As they held their hands thus, their eyes were locked, conveying to each other the convulsions of their hearts. Lost as they were in their enamored state, they had no words for each other but heaving a sigh on hearing Sandhya's approaching steps, as though to alert him, she pulled out her hand and wrenched her look. At that, as if cut off from the life force itself, his heart was seized and his hand dropped.

"This is Roopa, my treasure," said Sandhya to him, patting her friend while she herself panted,

"He's Raja my beau."

"Anyway you look at it, it's a privilege to possess," he said to Sandhya extending his hand to Roopa.

"What's that?" said a perplexed Roopa.

"That I'll tell you later but now take his hand to cement our friendship," said Sandhya.

Roopa didn't need any further persuasion to recapture the thrill of the past moment.

"If you feel I'm your better half, I may say she is my other half," said Sandhya to her beau, lacing Roopa.

"What a value addition that's going to be?" he said meaningfully.

"No less for us, you being our friend, philosopher, and guide," said Sandhya taking Roopa's other hand.

"What a pleasurable role to play," he said to Sandhya even as he tightened his grip on Roopa's right hand.

"I'm fortunate to be part of both of you," said Roopa dreamily.

In time, called by Kamalakar, all three went down, the sprightly bride leading and the enamored souls falling behind.

"I suppose you're finding it tough grappling with our coastal humidity," Kamalakar greeted Raja Rao.

"Short of altering the climate, sir, you've done everything for us. Thanks a lot," said Raja Rao warmly.

"What do you say about your honeymoon at Kodaikanal?" said Kamalakar to Raja Rao.

"I've my Kothalanka in mind, that is if you agree," said Raja Rao looking at Sandhya. "You could enjoy the scenic beauty of Konaseema, and for me it would be like starting our life where I came into being."

"I love that for I've heard that Konaseema rivals Kerala for its landscape," said Sandhya, seemingly excited.

"If it suits you both, it's Ok with us," concurred in Kamalakar.

"Looks like our *purohit* is missing me, I better get going," said Raja Rao as someone came to fetch him

While Sandhya saw him off with an endearing look, Roopa seemed lost with a forlorn feeling, and after he went out of sight, Sandhya led Roopa to her room for exchanging notes.

"Won't you find him handsome?" said Sandhya excitedly.

"He's better than my dream man," said Roopa inciting Sandhya to kiss her in response.

"Now I've to leave as Chandrika wants me for some purchases," so bluffed Roopa gripped by an urge for solitude.

However, Sandhya, who wanted to share more about her beau with her mate, tried to hold her longer, and Roopa, after spending some time with her mate in her absent-minded state, could eventually persuade her to let her go.

"Go now but tomorrow I won't stir from my bed till you come," said Sandhya, reluctantly setting her free.

'Don't worry, if you don't show up in time, he would come to drag you all the way to the altar,' said Roopa as though attuning her mind to Raja Rao's proclivities.

'Isn't he the one?' thought Roopa, closing her eyes as if to hold him in her mind's eye. She felt as though the man she vaguely craved all along came in his form and as though infatuation itself was enamored to feel the pulse of their love in tandem, it induced Raja Rao into reverie to review his feelings.

'Oh, what a face and the figure to match it, as well!' he thought excitedly, 'a woman with a woman's body, as Dostoyevsky put it, is she not? And what about that bewitching smile, well, what a fascinating woman she is!'

'It's as though he came straight out of my heart to delight my eyes,' Roopa thought in amazement. 'New, yet so familiar, unknown, but doesn't it feel as if he is my own! Oh, how it tickles, as though his gaze gauges me nude! Yet, I felt protected in his presence! Well, he's the Raja of my heart and soul, there's no mistaking that.'

'It feels as though we're born for each other,' he felt hopeful. 'It's clear that she's attracted to me. Won't her eyes carry the poetry of her passion for me? To get infatuated, or to love even, is one thing, and an affair is altogether different. But mercifully, I wouldn't be losing track of Roopa, unlike that Ganga-Kaveri girl. What an incredible fortune to meet this one so soon after losing that one! There could be a chance to make her my own someday, who knows?'

'Wasn't my hand languid in his clasp as if to feel the pulse of his love,' Roopa sighed as she recalled the sensation of that incredible moment. 'Didn't his touch, touch the woman in me? And when he pressed my hand with passion, wasn't I possessed for his possession. If only I weren't married and he hadn't been betrothed, oh, what should've come in the way of our wedding? But well, I have to suppress my love, if not for fidelity, at least for friendship.'

'Even if I can't live with her, I would be able to love her still,' he felt peaceful in the end. 'If I weren't destined to have her, well, my passion in time could transform into a sublime affection for her. Being privy to our mutual affection, won't we nurse a fond feeling for each other? But then, would my distraction for Roopa affect my attraction for Sandhya? No; don't I know that my love for Sandhya springs from the depths of my soul. Surely, Roopa seems to rein in my heart, but won't Sandhya remain its queen?'

'Thank God,' she consoled herself. 'We would have enough opportunities to meet. Won't I see him and be seen by him? So, I would be able to adore him while he admires me. All said and done, isn't he mine, being Sandhya's man? Won't I get a feel of him while I make love to her?'

As day broke that 7th June, the chain of ceremonies leading to the momentous wedding commenced in right earnest that is even as Sandhya clung to Roopa all the while.

"I'm too excited to be on my own," Sandhya repeated all along.

"Your marriage gives me an idea of Rathi – Manmath's mythical wedding," said Roopa heartily.

"You being the attendant angel," said Sandhya.

"Of an enamored kind," said Roopa alluringly as Sandhya laced her endearingly.

By dusk, it was din at the *kalyana mandapam*. Clad in a white silk *dhothi*, Raja Rao obeyed the unceasing commands of the *purohit*, uttered in sonorous Vedic chants, but even as his hands were handling the marital rituals to the rhythmic renditions, robot-like, his *angavastram* had a tough time balancing itself on his bare shoulders. At length, as Sandhya, seated in a bamboo basket, was brought near him on the decorated dais, by four of her uncles, all the way from the anteroom, and well before they could unload the pretty load opposite him, a makeshift curtain was raised in between them to preclude their ogling before the auspicious moment.

When Kamalakar's watch, set to the AIR time, indicated 08.26, the chosen *sumhurtham* from the Pedda Purnaiah's almanac, Raja Rao was given the green signal by the *purohit*. Governed by his destiny and guided by the *purohit*, Raja Rao's hand, carrying the sacred paste, prepared for the occasion as per the custom, reached out to Sandhya, from underneath the curtain. Goaded by Roopa, the bride bowed her head to

enable the groom to affix that mass on her scalp to initiate their union and in turn, Sandhya was directed to follow suit, as though to cement their marital bondage. Then doing away with the curtain, the *purohit* ordained the just married to stay put in that posture as though to allow them time to grasp the import of the moment to their eventual life.

Amateur photographers, from among the relatives, vied for vantage positions with the professional ones engaged for the occasion, and in their eagerness to capture the moment for the family albums, they tended to block the view of the vintage event to the curious audience. When the couple was allowed to free their hands, they raised their heads to espy each other as man and wife. After having been satiated with Sandhya's demeanor, when Raja Rao's eyes met Roopa's stare, they seemed to acquire a longing look, and sensing his ardor for her in her enamored state, Roopa felt as though the moment belonged to her as well.

Meanwhile, the *mangalasutrams*, symbolizing the nuptial knot, were taken around by the *chota purohit* to enable the married women to bless them. In time, as the junior brought the blessed things back to his senior, Raja Rao was ready to usher Sandhya into the dream of her life. While Roopa maneuvered the flower-decked plait of the bride, Raja Rao stood up to tie the *blessed things* round Sandhya's shapely nape, and before he proceeded, Roopa heard him whisper to his bride, '*With your permission.*' As Roopa looked at him in admiration for his ingenuity, he raised his head and gazed at her in fascination. Puzzled by his manner, as Roopa wondered whether he had her too in mind when he sought that '*permission*', Sandhya bent her head even more, as though to salute him for his thoughtful gesture.

While the rituals lasted a little longer, fuelling the longing of the newly-weds for each other, as they were given the green signal to shower the *talambraalu* over each other's heads, the respective camp followers egged them on for one-upmanship. Finding Roopa helping his bride to gain the upper hand, as Raja Rao cried foul, Sandhya retorted, 'didn't I tell you that she's my other half' and increased the tempo, unmindful of his further protests. What with the euphoria that followed amused the gathering no end, and as a fistful of the *sacred rice*, let loose from Raja Rao's hand, landed on Roopa's head as well, she wondered whether it was merely accidental! Reflexively looking for Sathyam, she found him engrossed in a conversation with someone in the gathering.

When it was time for the gathered to greet the newly married, Roopa joined her husband.

"This is Sathyam, Roopa's husband and my *raakhi* brother," Sandhya joyously introduced him to Raja Rao.

"Thanks for coming," said Raja Rao, while he shook hands with Sathyam, and as Roopa scrutinized his demeanor to discern the nuances, he added,

"It's a pleasure meeting you two."

'Didn't it sound like '*you too?*' thought Roopa staring at Raja Rao, 'It's as if he won't miss an opportunity for a double entendre! Isn't he at it ever since we met? Maybe, that could be part of his charm.' What's more, she thought Raja Rao's eyes were smiling as though to confirm that she got it right.

"We wish you spend some time with us on your way to Delhi," invited Sathyam, as Roopa's face lighted up.

"Thanks, we'll try, but," said Raja Rao

"Why don't you recommend," said Roopa to Sandhya imploringly as Raja Rao read the disappointment written all over her face.

"I'd love nothing more than spending some with them," said Sandhya entreatingly to her husband.

"As you please, so it's done," Raja Rao seemed to address Roopa's ears.

"That is sisterly affection," said Sathyam warmly.

"We'll be waiting," Roopa said camouflaging her longing.

"Can I detain Roopa for tonight?" said Sandhya to Sathyam.

"Do you need my permission for that," said Sathyam and added,

"I don't come in her way either."

"Is there any alternative path of salvation for a married man," said Raja Rao heartily, and turned to Roopa,

"You take care of her till I take her over."

Past midnight that night, the physically fatigued bride fell into the arms of her mentally exhausted mate.

"Lovey, it's all like a dream come true," said Sandhya resting her head on Roopa's ample breasts.

"Anyway, it's all real now," said Roopa pressing Sandhya's head deep into her valley.

"Tell me, how it would be like with a man," Sandhya asked thoughtfully.

"As mating itself is so exciting, lovemaking must be a lot more fulfilling," said Roopa in all contemplation,

"I'll be in your arms anyway, narrating what it was like in Raja's coition," said Sandhya mystically.

"Promise me then," said Roopa.

"Promise what, to land up in your arms in Hyderabad, or to kiss and tell about our honeymoon," said Sandhya with a smile.

"Of course both, you know how I miss male sexual romance but from now on I'll have proxy experience," said Roopa taking Sandhya into her embrace.

"How sweet, but it all depends on how you make me want to come to you," said Sandhya, in all eagerness.

"Come, I'll make you feel doubly wanting by the time your man comes mounting," said Roopa pressing closer to Sandhya,

Soon, Sandhya realized to her gratification that Roopa's love meant business.

The next day, after seeing off the newlyweds on their honeymoon trail, Roopa set out on the homeward stretch with Sathyam towards the evening.

"While Sandhya's love would find fulfillment in Raja's passion, am I not left to pine for his possession," she felt as she struggled to find solace in sleep in that sleeper coach of the Godavari Express.

Chapter 15

Naughty Nuptials

As the chauffeur-driven Ambassador crossed Kakinada, greenery greeted the honeymooners. 'I never knew that we're so close to nature,' exclaimed Sandhya leaning on her man.

"Once we're in Konaseema, you won't have eyes even for me," said Raja Rao feeling refreshed.

"How I wish that Roopa were with us," said Sandhya, lost in her excitement.

"I'm beginning to get envious of your Roopa," he said in jest, taking her hand.

"Why so, she only complements my love for you," she said lovingly.

"What's so special about her by the way?" he tried to appear casual.

"Simply put, she's unique, though it feels nice being your wife, her separation hurts me no end. We've grown up dreaming living as neighbours," she said emotively.

"It's still possible," he said tentatively,

"Can we move over to Hyderabad!" she said excitedly.

"I love that place like no other, let's see how soon we can make it," he said as he made up his mind by then to try to win Roopa's favour.

"Till then, be prepared for my nagging on that score," she said, looking into his eyes.

"Won't I love that," he said kissing her hand.

"Roopa would be thrilled to hear about that," she said excitedly.

"Don't tell her till we're close to that," he cautioned her.

"How I wish it were now," she said, closing her eyes as if in prayer.

"But for now, we're in Draksharama," he said.

"So it portends well, let's seek Lord Bhemeswara's blessings," she said

"Why not, I've to thank Him a lot and pray for more," he said.

Seeing her in reverence before the deity, he could discern the serenity of her beauty and felt beholden for the blessedness that life had bestowed upon him.

"What have you sought from Him?" he asked her as they got back into the car.

"I think, you can guess," she said dreamily.

"Why can't I?" he said lovingly.

"What about your prayer?" she asked him.

"Let it be my secret," he said smilingly.

"Then keep it under lock and key," she said feigning anger.

"It's all about love," he said effulgently.

"I love you," she jibed with him joyously.

Soon they reached the shores of Kotipally to cross the Godavari. Sandhya's fear of water shored up by his assurances en route, sunk her heart as she saw the mighty river in its lean summer course. While the prospect of boating across it shocked her water-phobic psyche, Raja Rao's coaxing of her, which bordered on pecking, amused the travelers and the boatmen alike. Caught between the onshore embarrassment and the offshore predicament, as Sandhya stepped into the boat as though she were slipping into the river itself, Raja Rao, having jumped into it earlier like a habitual, tended his perplexed bride tenderly into it, and once in, she reached for a cross plank seemingly considering the center of gravity of that which was afloat. Seeing her predicament then, those who sat on it moved away to enable the newly-weds ensconced in the middle. In time, having adjusted herself in trepidation, Sandhya clasped her man as though he were the mast of the boat itself.

During the voyage, when he ventured to toy with the waters, she pulled him in fear and reprimanded him for his daring. Whenever the boat was rocked in motion, she enlaced him in confusion, inducing him to cuddle her for her comfort. As her primordial beauty pixilated by panic evoked pity in him, he was empathic in addressing her apprehensions. However, having got over her fears in his protective embrace, in time, while she felt that she has grasped the meaning of marriage, seeing her at ease thus, he could visualize the power of love over the fear of the unknown.

After turning her attention to the horizon, lined with coconut trees, and watching it for long in fascination, she interested herself in the vastness of the Godavari, and felt that the wavy currents of its bluish green waters synchronized with the romantic beats of her expectant heart. Then, looking lovingly at her man, she experienced rare warmth in her soul, which made her feel that the sheen of their love matched with the glint of the river.

After voyaging for well over an hour, they reached the banks of Mukteswaram, the gateway of Konaseema, where, courtesy Kamalakar's clout, an Ambassador awaited them. Looking back at the river they just crossed, she felt relaxed and thought, 'Haven't my fears got dissolved mid-course making way for hopes!' At that, as she got into the car, it crossed her mind that by the next day around, she would be on the other bank of her virginal canal. Amused at the thought, she looked at her man in amorous anticipation.

Soon, entering the hinterland, they found the roadside canal on course, seemingly guiding the visitors to their respective destinations. While the unending rows of coconut trees resembled sentries on duty for the visiting dignitaries, the lush green carpets of paddy seedlings went into ripples, as though stirred by their welcoming instinct. Lending variety to the landscape was many a mango grove apart from the fully-grown banana gardens and as if to avoid the monotony of the greenery, habitats abounded all along with cattle sheds as annexes.

"It looks like life is closer to nature in these tiled houses and thatched huts, with cattle for company!" Sandhya wondered aloud.

"It's an irony that we fail to fuse the new technology with the old environs in fashioning our modern way of living. It's sad we've to choose between nature's bounty in the rural settings and the make-believe of our urban environs," he said ruefully.

As if to demonstrate the difference, the driver brought them to Amalapuram, the commercial hub of Konaseema. After some snacks and coffee in a bustling hotel, they resumed their journey to their destination that was far from Hardy's madding crowds, and as they saw the back of Amalapuram, they came to face to face with the nature all again.

By the time they approached Bhatnavalli, the sun began to set, and the villagers were seen resting in their courtyards. While some men were seen rolling their cigars with *lanka pogaku*, others were puffing away at theirs. Women there were found gossiping with their neighbors across the fences as if they were mending fences over past quarrels. As the landlords rode home in their bullock carts, farmhands too started trekking back from the fields with their head loads. Giving a picture of the carefree life to the visitors, the youths were engaged in *kabaddi* and the children were lost in their marbles. As though symbolizing the surging spirit of the fair sex all over, village belles vied with each other to come up trumps in competitive hops in those eight square courts that were marked in the courtyards. However, the hen in helter-skelter disturbed them in between, making them cautious not to step on them.

"This is the famed pilgrimage of Balayogi," said Raja Rao as they reached Mummidivaram, "the saint who's said to have been holed up in penance round the year. He was wont to come out of his hibernation only on *maha sivarathri* for his devotees to have his *darshan*. It's believed that he had the power to survive without food or water and lived long for all that."

"Is it possible!" she asked in surprise.

"Well it's a matter of faith, while his devotees deify him, his detractors deride him," he said.

As it was dusk by the time they reached Kothalanka, the Ambassador had a herd of cattle on the homeward stretch to accompany. It seemed the dust raised by the vehicle on the *kachcha* road matched with the mood of the setting sun. While children ceased playing, watching the spectacle of the four-wheeler in motion, the elders craned their necks to second-guess the destination of the visitors.

When their journey ended at his uncle's courtyard, said Raja Rao to Sandhya, 'There's Thimmaiahgaru for you.'

As they stepped out of the car, the old man came out of the courtyard to receive them, all along blaming the transplanted time for his failure to attend their wedding.

'The farmhands have become a big nuisance these days,' grumbled Thimmaiah unceasingly. 'You've to be behind them always or else they would give the slip at every turn. Anyway, I'm glad you've come with your wife to your native. I've got your house spruced up; let's see how your wife likes it.'

As he continued to engage them at the gate itself, Narasamma came out of the house, and reprimanded her old man, 'Why, do you want to send them back from the gate itself?'

Then turning to Sandhya, she said affectionately, 'I haven't seen a more beautiful bride in all my life. Our Raja is very lucky. We've got excited when we received his letter that you're coming here. It's a very sensible thing to do. One shouldn't forget his roots. We would've loved your stay in our home, but it is only proper that you spend some time in his ancestral house. So, you lodge there board here.'

"Thanks for your kindness," said Sandhya heartily.

"Why haven't you asked them to come in yet?" said Thimmaiah to his haranguing wife.

"How are Krishna and Krishnaveni?" enquired Raja Rao as he led Sandhya into the verandah.

"They keep writing, asking us to join them, but how could we leave our home and stay with them, that too in the U.S. Though our thoughts are with our children, our desire remains to breathe our last here," said Thimmaiah stating their position.

"Now that you've got married, would you go back to the States?" said Narasamma to Raja Rao.

"Actually, I'm planning to shift to Hyderabad," said Raja Rao playing music to Sandhya's ears,

"Let me show you your place, there won't be any end to her enquiries," said Thimmaiah leading the newlywed to their honeymoon house.

"Don't hang around there for long," said Narasamma as though to get even with her old man.

Led by his uncle, Raja Rao crossed the road with his bride to enter his ancestral house as a prelude.

"I let it be used as our village club for if locked up, it would only dilapidate," said Thimmaiah justifying his decision.

When Thimmaiah took them to the backyard, with a compound wall, finding a flower-bedecked bed on a high-rise double cot, Sandhya felt embarrassed and looked the other way.

"I appreciate your sentiment in having the family cot here. I thought you would need a table fan as well," said Thimmaiah to Raja Rao, as though to let Sandhya grasp the significance of it all.

Then he switched it on, as a demonstrator would do in the laboratory.

"Sorry for the bother but I couldn't help it, knowing that we would land up late in the evening," said Raja Rao.

"We're glad you chose our place for your honeymoon," said Thimmaiah before he left them all for themselves.

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Being all alone for the first time with her man, Sandhya was overwhelmed by the privacy the moment had afforded them. However, as Raja Rao cuddled her in ecstasy, she cajoled him with love.

"How long I've been longing for this moment!" he said, caressing her back as she moulded into his embrace for a response.

Then, he raised her head as though to see the essence of her soul but saw her droop her eyelids in anticipation. He showered kisses on them, seemingly to cajole them to sight to make them witness his passion. As the ardour of the moment quivered her lips, he joined his to those for support. Gratified by his gesture, so it seemed, her lips played host to their labial guests. The reciprocity of their explorations that followed enabled them to experience the fondness of their love that permeated their souls. In time, he loosened himself from her enticing grip so as not to cross the threshold before the momentous event.

As they reentered the backyard, as the softness of the bed, lay amidst a bed of roses, has blossomed their anticipation, they reached the nearby well to see their reflections in the moon-lit waters. Having savoured their shadow of closeness, he proposed that they bathe in the open for a real feel of it, and as she protested in shyness, he said in mock innocence,

"Why fear, I'll keep guard."

"That's the threat," she said, turning coy.

"Let's find a romantic balance then," he said persuasively and went up to the cot in measured steps.

He then gestured her to join him and having been amused, she obliged him demurely.

"Its half moon now and I would be twenty steps away; let me gloat over your contours that would shape the course of our love life?" he crooned into her ears endearingly.

"Gents first, in these things," she suggested.

'Agreed, if it means courtship manners," he caught her by her waist and led her to the well.

As he handled the bucket over the overhead pulley, finding some coconuts afloat, she said in wonderment, 'rural refrigeration!'

Soon, when he was down to his underwear, she thought he resembled a well-chiseled sculpture of a Greek warrior, and as he went on drawing water from the well in bucketfuls, she was charmed watching the contractions of his shapely biceps.

"Would you please soap my back," he said invitingly.

"All through you behaved like a gentleman I thought, but now you're showing your naughty side," she said mischievously.

'In other words, you were afraid all along that the burden of initiative should've landed in your lap. But with the driver around, I had no way but to steer clear of your captivating curves," he said pulling her nearer to him.

'I never thought that you're such a shameless character," she said turning coy.

"Should a groom turn shy at the threshold, then his bride would've to bear the burden of shame" he said in all smiles, "I'm privy to the fact that a cousin of mine didn't stir in the nuptial bed as though he was in meditation. Finding him tepid to her eager charms, crossing her fingers, his bride felt him at the right place! As you could guess, that did the trick for the rest of the night and ever after."

Without further fuss, hitching her sari and tucking it, she obliged him.

"I love a little more pressure later," he said as he winked at her, enjoying the sense of her touch in the slippery medium.

"You seem to be quite experienced at that," she said tauntingly.

"Can't that be imaged even without going through that?" he said tentatively.

After his bath, having filled the well-side tub for her use, he retreated to the bed as agreed and waited in anticipation, but she started her bath with her clothes on. Crying foul, he rushed to the well and pulled at her sari, leaving her in her blouse and the petticoat. When his attack was directed at her midriff to untie the ribbon, she agreed to obey and sent him away.

As she began bathing with her back to him, he goaded her to be more open, and as she relented, seeing her myriad movements in nude, he felt as though some romantic poetry acquired her form. When she stepped out wrapped in her bathrobe, he nestled her from behind eagerly and whispered in her ears endearingly, "you look sex fresh," and as she blushed to her roots, he went on showering her shoulders with warm kisses.

By the time they arrived for dinner, he in his white pajamas and *karat* and she in her light green cotton sari and a black blouse, the hostess was all set to serve them some spicy dishes. Being hungry, and egged on by the aroma of the preparations, the eager couple ate well to Narasamma's visceral satisfaction.

After dinner, Narasamma adorned Sandhya's forehead with *kokum* and gave her a white voile sari with gold border and said,

"Wives should wear a white sari for the nights as there is none like it to lend appeal to the feminine frame for the male eye as in it lies how much to reveal and what to veil off a woman's bearing. So, it's sari that symbolizes the seductive dressing and not that tent called the nighttime for it fails to move their men."

When the fresh pair left, soon after, the old couple began to reminisce their own sweet times, and as it dawned on them that they forgot to place 'milk and sweets' near

the nuptial bed for rejuvenation of the just weds, they sent them post-haste with a farmhand.

Soon, laid on the high-rise cot in the courtyard, Raja Rao was impatient for his bride's arrival and as Sandhya, clad in that white sari, stepped out into the moonlight, he felt as though she were an angel that had descended from the heavens. However, as she neared him, even as his pulse increased, her pace slowed down, and finding her coy to climb up the bed, he clenched her waist to catapult her onto the cot. While she landed herself in his ardent embrace, even as her sari went askance, exposing her shapely legs and baring her alluring blouse, anticipating an ambush, her heartbeat has galloped. What with her breasts heaving heavily, as if to invite him to steady her impulse, when she felt the pressure of his hands on them, she realized that she was in the realms of masculinity. When he began feeling the softness of her belly, she felt fascinated by the firmness of his touch, and as his hands probed the contours of her bottom, she found herself rollicking in anticipation.

In time, as he turned her naked, she dropped her eyes, for she felt shy to espy herself in his presence but when she sensed that he was nude as well, she stole a glance to gauge the measure of his manhood. When he held her firmly against his hairy chest, her breasts had their first brush with maleness, and as he sought for her lips eagerly, she provided them readily for their mutual satiation. Soon, having conquered her heart with his love, he stooped to her feet in passion only to find his way back in time to it on her silken slopes with the labial support. However, having reached her midriff, he rested his head for a while on its slab, but signaled by its spasms, as he changed the direction of his ardour and lent his lips to her labium, she moaned at his labial nuances though as a prelude to guiding him to enter into her well of love. And as his manhood reached the threshold of her maidenhood, her womanhood connived with him to contrive its crossing. Thus, on their way to orgasm, they experienced the ecstasy of their nuptial union brought about by the feeling of lovemaking.

Then fondling his back, as he lay on her in exhaustion, she felt life was worth living if only for that one moment. Seeing he was fulfilled as well, she felt gratified for being the source of his fulfillment, and her own satiation, occasioned by his passion, made him even more endearing to her loving heart. Holding hands in unison, wondering about nature's ingenuity in conceiving sexual gratification as a means of human fulfillment, they gazed towards the skies, as though to thank the stars for their union. Soon, however, Sandhya couldn't help but think about her intimacy with Roopa and felt, 'true our lesbianism entwines our bodies and delights our minds, but in his coition it's as if his body got fused with mine to our heart's content.'

Before exhaustion overpowered their youthful exuberance in their nuptial bed and as sleep overtook their adoring gaze, the moon was on its westward descent, but as though it got inkling from its fairer partner on the horizon, the sun lay in wait to catch a glimpse of the nuptial bride in her exhausted sleep. However, as though influenced by his possessive instinct, Raja Rao woke up at dawn to catch the peeping tom in its act, and then turning to Sandhya, who slept spread-eagled, he felt that she looked incredibly splendid. After being deflowered, it seemed as if she flowered overnight to resemble the bedside roses, and seeing her thus in the nascent sunlight, he surged to have more of her fresh youth; and as he pressed against her ardently, she woke up to his ardour to match him amorously.

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When it was time for breakfast, Raja Rao and Sandhya went hand in hand to Thimmaiah's place to be greeted by Narasamma's steamy *idlis* and spicy *chutneys*, and having savored those, they set out for sight-seeing.

Thy sauntered in the paddy fields and roamed about the mango groves until Sandhya became sore footed to go any farther, and ignoring her coy protests, he carried her in his arms, inducing her to cling on to him cosily. But once they reached their coconut plantation, she jumped to the ground as though to view the setting in its proper form. Their *kapu*, so as to sweeten their palates and fill their bellies, fetched a couple of *ganga bondālu*, and a rejuvenated Sandhya then accompanied Raja Rao to pray at the nearby *darga* of the legendary Vali Baba, who, it was said, walked on the rivers and wasn't wetted by the rainwater.

Returning to the Thimmaiahs for lunch, they stayed back for gossip lest their hosts should feel that they were treated as mere innkeepers. Thimmaiah poured out the problems agriculture posed, and was pleased at having a person for an audience who didn't have ideas to differ with his own. Narasamma, however, tried to interest Sandhya with a game of dice and shells. After drubbing the bride half a dozen times, Narasamma switched over to the sport of tamarind seeds. She spread a few score of them at random on the floor at arm length. Then she tossed one up and picked up another from the spread before catching the former mid air. As the play progressed, she increased the number of pickings from the spread and yet didn't let the freshly tossed-up one slip through her guard. Sandhya, who watched in wonderment, made a mess of it when it was her turn to try her hand.

When it was time for tea, Sandhya offered to serve them, and savoring her sweetened preparation, Thimmaiah complimented her,

"You seem to be one up on my old woman."

"Honestly, I want to be her apprentice," said Sandhya earnestly.

"I'm glad you realize that cooking is an art though these days it's being treated as a machine craft," Narasamma said. "Pressures of the times have brought in pressure cookers, and it's lost on the housewife that as nature takes its own time to deliver, cooking too needs time to impart taste to the food. And if you pressure it to deliver, either way, it's going to be a premature issue. Now it has become fashionable to talk in terms of the recipes though they're no more than the same *garam masala* with different brand names. Won't one lose the unique taste of the vegetables, the gravy being the same in every curry? Cooking seems to have fallen into the hands of the barbarians, and the family members too don't seem to mind any more. So be it but I'll give you some useful tips before you leave."

"I would grab them with both hands," said Sandhya earnestly.

"Then would be able to serve your man better," said Narasamma and added as an afterthought,

"Are you planning to visit some temples?"

"Know they're not on a pilgrimage," said the old man jokingly.

"Jokes apart, I'm keen on praying at a couple of temples," said Sandhya.

"Raja, better you spend a night or two in a houseboat on Vasishta and that would be like icing on your honey," suggested Thimmaiah.

"That's only when Sandhya gets over her water phobia," said Raja Rao.

"Then take her to Vodalarevu where the Gowthami makes a 'T' with the Bay of Bengal, it's a sight to see," said Thimmaiah.

"I love to witness that, who knows, in time I might be a game even for a houseboat," said Sandhya in excitement.

"I feel Ryali is a must visit, if only to envision the sculptured fusion of Vishnu's front with Mohini's back in that *saligrama*," said Raja Rao to Narasamma's delight

"God bless you people," said Narasamma, seemingly blessing them herself. 'It helps to place trust in God.'

"Times have changed," said Thimmaiah. "Nowadays, it's as though men are guided merely by religiosity and not by any religiousness. *Naro narayana*, man is God, that's what our *sastras* preach, implying that you only reach Him through the service to humanity. But, today man seems to believe he no longer needs to serve man to please the Gods. In this jet age of non-stop flights, man seems to think he can hop to heaven with a few trips to the hallowed shrines on earth. These days no one prays to God for peace of mind; it's his prosperity that's at the back of his mind. Boon seeking has become the bane of the religious spirit. The more one is moved by his motive, all the more the fervency in his prayer increases. It's as if the fellow-beings count for nothing."

"In my opinion," commented Raja Rao, "there is more to religion than meets the eye. It is the most effective means devised by man to hold human beings from cracking at the threshold of their anxieties. If you see, when a man is gravely ill, his wife fears that she's on the verge of widowhood and all that goes with it. Unable to bear the anxiety about her future without him, won't she turn to God via her religion to transfer her burden? 'God, please save him', she would pray for His mercy while waiting for his recovery in hopeful anticipation. Thus in the mean time, making it easy on her mind, her own anxiety lies in suspension of belief, and in the end, if he comes out true and kicking, it's God's grace, but were he to kick the bucket, then it's God's will. However, life takes over where her man would have left it, and soon she gets adjusted in the altered situation. The feature of faith is that it rescues us from going insane by helping us to face the vicissitudes of life with the religious hope."

Thimmaiah nodded in approval as Narasamma scowled her disagreement,

"What you say might be true but it could be too sensitive for your wife."

"I would like to see life with maturity and not approach it with sentimentality, I'm glad that I've found the right guide in my husband," said Sandhya.

"That's the benefit of woman's education," said Thimmaiah greatly impressed.

"But the real tragedy of man lies not in death but in life itself," said Raja Rao characteristically. "Man tends to nurse animosity lacking perceptivity, burdens himself with sentimentality, courts trouble thoughtlessly and then turns to god-men for deliverance. It's a pity that man meditates for peace of mind having purchased headaches at a discount."

Seeing the nuptial couple yawn at length, Narasamma suggested that it was time they caught up with lost sleep under the mango tree in the backyard. After siesta, however, at Sandhya's behest, the aged couple accompanied the newly-weds in the evening to the Sathyanarayana Swamy temple on the banks of the village tank.

After the *parikrama*, they had the Lord's *darshan* and sitting by the lake, Narasamma narrated the temple's legend thus:

When Lega Sathyanarayana of the village went to Annavaram, the Lord visited him in his dream and directed him to begin building a temple for Him at this very spot. Once Lega returned, everything fell into place by the blessings of the Lord and the benevolence of the villagers and the others. It was thus at Godspeed this temple for the Lord was built.

On their return though, as the nuptial-couple headed home to have their way, the elderly, while preparing to receive them for dinner, reminisced about the finest day they have had in years.

"Let me repay my debt," said Raja Rao picking the soap, as they went into the backyard for bath.

"Wait for my call," she said smiling.

"Don't keep me waiting," he said ardently.

When they reached the Thimmaiahs place for dinner, seeing Sandhya in an off-white voile sari with maroon border, Narasamma was truly impressed. Though Sandhya returned upbeat after dinner, nevertheless, Raja Rao found her morose in his embrace.

"Why darling, has the honey turned bitter just after seven takings?" he said in jest.

"Don't be cruel, somehow, I'm missing Roopa, that's all," she said.

"You should've opted to be co-wives then," he said sharing her mood.

"To tell you the truth, we too thought so," said Sandhya smilingly.

"If it were so, how I wish I met you both as misses," he said as if to put ideas into her head.

"Well, but I'm in no mood to miss you now," she said eagerly.

"Wonder how Roopa excites you as well as depresses you!" he said taking her into his arms.

"You got it my dear," she said before he sealed her lips.

Over their weeklong stay at Kothalanka, having gauged Sandhya's ability to take things objectively, Raja Rao thought it fit to lead her on the realistic path of life.

"Sandhya," she heard him croon, as she lay exhausted in his arms that night, their last night of their honeymoon.

"Hahn."

"I must confess to you that I fancied many women and even enjoyed a few of them, I even imagined that a wife could be just another woman in my life. However, you've made me realize that wife is man's very own woman, different from all other women," he said.

"Are you upset that you didn't get a virgin man," he enquired, as she didn't respond

"Not at all, I was just thinking about something else," said Sandhya.

"Normally it is better that woman keeps her past from her man but as I appreciate the proclivities of youth, you can be open with me without any hesitation," he said setting the standard for their relationship.

Then she readily narrated her experience in the city bus, and said, sinking into his chest,

"Now all that would seem so funny,"

"So, he stirred the nest, and the cuckoo flew to my chest," he said, making light of it all.

"Now I'm relieved; it has been bothering me ever since," she said fondling his chest.

"Treat that as one of those small pleasures in life, and no more, but they too have a place of their own in one's life," he said smilingly.

"Maybe, it's my love for you that induced that guilt in me," she said reaching for his lips.

"While nature has conceived man-woman attraction for the furtherance of procreation, it is man that invented the institution of marriage for orderly living," he said, after she released his lips, to let her grasp the import of it all. "However, nature didn't oblige us by altering the catalysis of man-woman chemistry to suit the structured need of marital fidelity. Thus, the human proclivity to get attracted to the opposite sex comes into conflict with the concept of adultery. That's why it's not fair to judge the sexual ethics of others."

"You're an intellectual, I am proud of you really," she said in all admiration to him.

"You are my angel, I adore you," he said, as he became eager all again.

When the time came for them to leave, the old man hoped there would be similar summers to come.

"But with the newborn next time," said Narasamma, making Sandhya blush to the roots.

After being in the seventh heaven for over a week, the honeymooners left Konaseema for their new sojourn.

## **Chapter 16**

### **Tidings of Love**

Roopa was languid in her bed that morning when she received Sandhya's telegram - ARRIVING TWENTIETH GODAVARI RECEIVE US STATION.

Overwhelmed, she threw her hands up in excitement. However, she picked up 'The Hindu' lying in the door latch as though to confirm the date. Thrilled at the prospect of meeting Raja Rao, she looked at the clock, and was shocked at what she saw.

'Oh God, the train would arrive in half an hour, the time that takes me to reach the station. Can't the department show some consideration for such messages,' she thought in irritation. 'But why did Sandhya have to wait until the eleventh hour to wire?'

While cursing her friend impulsively, she reached for the mirror instinctively.

'I've to appear before Raja unkempt or keep them waiting to freshen up,' she thought, apprising herself of her appearance. 'But I've been craving to see him for the past eleven days, am I not? When the longed-for moment is on hand, why am I bothering about my looks? If I don't show up in time, they may try to make it on their own. Won't that further delay his *darshan*? Moreover, a mix-up would leave them stranded at the doorsteps, and that would surely present me in a poor light. Oh, no, I will change the sari and mend my hair on the way.'

As soon as she got into an auto-rickshaw, she began goading the driver to go in top gear, all the while blaming herself for her predicament,

'Oh, how stupid I was! It's my idea to receive them at the station that has landed me in this mess? Didn't they say they would make it on their own even then? But, I insisted on receiving them, didn't I? But how could I've anticipated all this then? Was it my fault wanting to see him as he got down from the train? For all my longing, don't I deserve to see him as he alights? But as luck would have it, I might as well miss the bus.'

"What's wrong with you? Where have you parked your driving skills?" she berated the driver in annoyance.

"Madam, what can be done when the roads are as bad and the tyres so dear," the driver said in apparent helplessness.

'Well, the roads too are as wretched as my life,' she felt dejectedly while her thoughts instinctively turned to Sathyam, 'of all days, why had he to go today on that god-damn tour? Had he not woke me up at four; I wouldn't have had a disturbed sleep later, and so should've got up as usual. It's as though ill-luck would shadow me in his shape.'

Having reached the Secunderabad Railway Station with such wayward thoughts, Roopa all but fumbled at the Enquiry Counter but on learning that the Godavari was expected shortly, such was her relief that she didn't bother to check up whether she was early in coming or the train was late in arriving.

Pregnant with expectations all again, she rushed to the designated platform and awaited their arrival with all her heart. Having instinctively recalled the glow on Sathyam's face in the wake of their first night, she thought, 'post-nuptials, how would Raja look?', and tried to envision him with a peculiar sense of thrill. 'Raja must be looking at his handsomest best given his unique looks,' she resolved in the end, and recalling his enamored demeanor and his longing touch, she craved even more for him.

'It feels as though we met only the other day,' she thought in all fondness. 'How two weeks have passed since! When weeks could roll by in his thoughts, then years could be but fleeting moments in his company, won't they be? Oh, why does he never leave my thoughts? It's as if I'm incapable of holding any picture other than his persona now! It's as though he has become an immutable essence of my consciousness.'

'Would he have given me a damn all these days?' it crossed her mind to her consternation. 'Were it possible that he wouldn't have thought about me at all? Why, hasn't the love bug bitten us in the same vein? But still, wasn't it just a brief encounter? Is it possible that it was just an agreeable distraction for him? Moreover, hasn't he been with his beautiful bride all the while? What a stupid I'm to expect that he would long for me!'

Though startled by that thought, she nevertheless conjectured in hope,

'He loves Sandhya for sure, and don't I rejoice at her fortune for that. Still can't he feel some fondness for me as well? In spite of his preoccupation with Sandhya, shouldn't he be thinking about me in blissful anticipation? Maybe the same way I think of him while in Sathyam's arms.'

'What if the glow of my attraction had paled by Sandhya's effervescence in his eyes?' she thought in fright, as her doubts resurfaced. 'Sandhya's ardency should've nipped his passion for me in the bud. Don't I know how ardent she is? Besides, her ethereal beauty should've bewitched him, blinding his eyes to my charms forever. The softness of her manner should've seeped into the soft centre he could have nursed for me in his heart. Her love by now could have satiated his lust, obliterating the traces of his infatuation for me.'

As she turned gloomy thus, she thought melancholically,

'I should've known that it wouldn't lead me anywhere. Yet, how did I fail to rein in my enamored heart! Why this fruitless feeling for my friend's man? Won't this fatal attraction for him engulf my life in passionate misery? Well, the dead weight of my hopes used to be a drag on my life but hasn't this throbbing pain of love activated my heart. When it is so pleasurable pining for him, how thrilling it would be to possess him? Won't all this amount to consciously coveting Sandhya's man?'

Shocked by that thought, she questioned herself in disbelief,

'Why didn't my conscience caution me when my infatuation began coveting her man? Is it because it's love that's at the root of my passion? Moreover, I'm not out to snatch him from her, am I? Why, I want to bestow my affection on the man whom she seems to adore. Given our lesbianism, what's wrong if I want to augment her man's happiness with my body and soul as well? How thrilling it could be for the three of us in a grand liaison!'

Having rationalized her proclivity thus, she began visualizing the ecstasies of their threesome orgies to her peculiar excitement.

Soon, the train halted on platform number two to unload its load of weary passengers, and when she saw him alighting from a first class coach at some distance, she stopped in her tracks.

'Didn't I guess it right? He looks so divine,' she thought endearingly, espying him longingly. 'It's worth pining for him even though it's paining. Isn't pain better than the lack of any feeling?'

Though, in time, as Roopa spotted Sandhya descending from the train, her look acquired a new-found love, goading her to rush towards them even as she recalled the incident in that train journey.

'If that weird episode could romanticize my gloom, wouldn't his vivacity have overwhelmed her in a romantic whirlwind?' she felt reaching them with arms outstretched.

When Roopa was at an arm's length, Sandhya leapt towards her, losing her balance in the bargain, and as Raja Rao instinctively tried to prevent her from tumbling, his hands clasped Roopa's arms calling the same bidding. Holding Sandhya in between them, as they looked at each other, his gaze portrayed longing and her look acquired the feeling of belonging.

Later, as he was arranging for a coolie, the friends were boggled with tears of joy.

"How's my *raakhi* brother?" enquired Sandhya at length.

"He's Ok but away, been to Warangal before your wire arrived," replied Roopa.

"How disappointing, will he be back before we leave tomorrow?" said Sandhya.

"I thought you would be staying a little longer," said Roopa in all disillusionment.

"Honestly, we're hard pressed for time, but still wanted to see you two," said Raja Rao, who joined them by then.

"Can't you imagine what your gesture means to me?" said Roopa softly, after having thought amusedly,

'He's again at it with that 'too'.'

"Given your hearty welcome where's the need for imagination," he said seductively.

'He's simply impossible, not even worried that Sandhya might guess,' Roopa thought, thrilled by his audacity.

Securing the rest of their luggage in the cloakroom, they exited with a suitcase that Raja Rao carried. Walking along with them, Roopa thought,

'Surely, he heard about Sathyam's absence but failed to voice the customary disappointment. Why, won't he know it's a godsend for him to make advances at me? It's clear that he knows that I've fallen head over heels for him, with all my heart and soul as well. The fact that he kept mum shows he's not a hypocrite, and how I abhor hypocrisy, though I was guilty of it with Chandrika then. Anyway, won't Sathyam's

absence suit me as well, for the same reason? Well, it could be providential, couldn't it be? Besides, Sathyam's presence could have devalued me in Raja's esteem.'

Gladdened by Roopa's warmth, Raja Rao toyed with the idea of extending their stay but gave up in the end, fearing that it might give him away. Nevertheless, he made up his mind to delve deeper into her heart while further revealing his feelings to her mind.

## **Chapter 17**

### **Tentative Moves**

By the time they came out of the Railway Station, the auto-stand wore a deserted look. So, moving away from them to locate an auto, Roopa hailed a passing driver, who drove the vehicle between her and the couple. It was as if he wanted to form a wedge between them to show her, her place in the love triangle. However, as Roopa got in from the right side, Raja Rao stepped in from the left to place the luggage in the space behind, and even as he was about to step out to let Sandhya get in, he found himself pushed in by her, unmindful of the protocol. Soon, as Sandhya nudged him for more space for herself, he was pushed closer to Roopa that filled her heart and thrilled his senses.

Having thus posited between his wife he loved and the woman he enamored, as Raja Rao realized that his sex life would be dull without bedding the latter as well, the jerks of the journey thereon that jostled him closer to them only sharpened Sandhya's sensuality and deepened Roopa's desire. It's thus, when the auto finally reached her place, reluctantly getting down from it; Roopa thought endearingly, 'If a mere thirty-minute ride with him could be so exciting how exhilarating a lifelong journey could be?'

However, once they got into her penthouse, as Raja Rao went straight into the toilet, she pulled Sandhya into her embrace and crooned in her ears, 'how's that?' Saying, 'wait until dark', as Sandhya reached for her lips, Roopa engaged them in a prolonged kiss that was before the new bride rose to show her marriage album to her old mate.

"I may be mistaken as photo-crazy," said Roopa finding herself in every other picture therein.

"We thought you're a value addition," said Sandhya, affectionately leaning on Roopa's shoulder.

"Who else?" said Roopa, sensing Raja Rao's coming.

"Can't you guess?" said Sandhya pointing to her man with her gaze.

"It appears that ma'am kept watch on me," he said, making Roopa blush to the roots.

"I was measuring my mate's fortune in the making," said Roopa, composing herself readily.

"What a compliment!" he said, thrilled at that.

"Your gesture truly complements," said Roopa.

"Wonder why it's said that beauty and brains won't coexist in the feminine frames for you both seem to have appropriated the most of both," said a pleased Raja Rao.

"Thank you, but stop this ma'am thing, you know she has a beautiful name," said Sandhya thrilled to the core.

"She may feel that sounds familiar," he said, looking at Roopa.

"Roopa," said Roopa, matching his gaze.

"Roopa," he repeated, thrilling her senses.

"I'll have a bath," said Sandhya, and left.

"Roopa," he said as she was savouring his picture in that album.

However, as the ardency in his tone signaled a note of urgency, she shifted her loving gaze from the groom in the pictures onto him in her very presence.

"Roopa," he repeated

"Hahn."

"We'll be leaving tomorrow," he said with a feeling of disappointment that she grasped in the tenor of his tone.

"I know," she murmured, constrained to express the desire of her heart, 'how I wish you would take me too.'

Thereafter, she kept quiet, and staring at her in disappointment, he thought,

'She could've easily said, 'you could've stayed for a day or more', without compromising herself that is and that would've enabled me to open my heart to her, inducing her to pour out in reciprocity. Isn't it apparent that she's attracted to me, there is no mistaking that. Won't her heavy manner belie the burden of her love for me?'

The feeling that she loved him pleased him even more for her very presence.

However, finding him truant, she realized that she goofed up her chance, and thought,

'Any commonplace comment could've kept the dialogue going, and who knows, what it would have unraveled. But why won't he realise that it's a mere slip between my cup of emotion and the lip of my expression?'

However, as blaming him didn't appeal to her mind, she tried to rationalize his lack of forthrightness,

'In his position, he can't but be tentative, for the fear of offending my sensitivity.'

Thus, even though their lips were sealed in apprehension, their eyes continued their conversation without any inhibition.

Sandhya, meanwhile, felt refreshed while freshening herself in her bath thinking excitedly,

'She likes my man. But then, won't women find him fascinating if they happen to get acquainted with him? That way, he too turned fond of her, why not; can any man ever ignore her either? How lucky I'm to have a friend like her and a man like him!'

Soon, sailing to them on cloud nine and finding them both immersed in their own thoughts, she said in jest,

"Being sworn friends, why you are sitting like strangers?"

"Being a gentleman, your hubby believes in ladies being first," said Roopa smilingly, as she left for her bath.

While Sandhya laughed at the remark, Raja Rao was pleased with her innuendo.

When Roopa entered the bathroom, the very thought that he had his bath there earlier thrilled her sensuality, and as she undressed herself, she recalled his searching gaze that insensibly made her imagine him in that setting, which in turn, has induced pulsations in her frame that furthered her craving for his possession. So, showering herself leisurely and sighing for him longingly, at length, she reached for her soap, but seeing theirs, she was drawn to it impulsively. Thereafter, in her bath of fantasy, the soap became a fetish that freshened as well as excited her in equal measure.

Later, as they gossiped after breakfast, the topic of children cropped up in time.

"What's your reading on her children?" said Sandhya placing Roopa's hand in his.

"It would be a pleasure to speculate about the prospect," he said, grabbing what was on offer.

"Mind you, don't turn it into a farce," said Sandhya reminiscently, pulling Roopa's hand from his in jest.

'What a lovely hand!' he thought as he took it back, 'Isn't it a classic psychic hand with those shapely fingers in their full flow? How have I failed to notice the beauty of her hands all this while?'

Thus, espying her hand in wonderment, he found himself fondling it, more to communicate his love to her than to envision her future, seemingly in a trance. However, as the spasms of her frame woke him up to the realities of her allure, he felt,

'Apparently enamored of the character of her main attributes, I became oblivious to the charms of her remaining features.'

Then, driven by the desire to espy her features, he mapped her feet with his caressing looks.

'Oh, what an attractive lass she is! What a female form in such a fascinating frame? Won't that make her deadly in lovemaking? What a woman she is really; could there be a better one than her to have?' as he thought, so he gripped her hand ardently, further fuelling her passion.

"What are the indications?" said Sandhya, growing in impatience.

"It's not clear as yet; as I told you, the lines are alterable," he said, still holding Roopa's hand.

"I've heard the lines here indicate offspring," said Sandhya pointing at a sideline below Roopa's little finger.

"They indicative of one's affections for the opposite sex, as Roopa has only one line, she's likely to have one deep affection in her life," he predicted with hope.

"What about her?" asked Roopa, reluctantly withdrawing her hand.

"Do you mean affections or children?" he said naughtily.

"I know from her nature as well as her hand that she would've only one such affection in her life, I want to know about her children," said Roopa indulgently.

"She could have two children," he said.

"You mean, you would've two kids," Roopa suggested correction.

"You see her hand indicates the prospects of her maternity and not the source of its paternity," he said smilingly.

"Now I know how devilishly mischievous you could be," said Roopa coyly.

"So, you can figure out my lot with him," said Sandhya joining in the mirth.

Soon after lunch, as Sandhya proposed a game of caroms, and even as he offered to sit out to watch the friends at play, Tara came around.

"Here's the godsend," said Roopa enthusiastically.

Introductions over, Roopa asked Tara to join them to complete the quorum for a carom.

"It's my pleasure, but someone is going to be sore," said Tara.

"Who shall partner whom?" Sandhya thought aloud.

"Let it be the couple versus the neighbors," suggested Tara.

"Ma'am, you seem to be a sound strategist; knowing that a man and his wife won't see eye to eye, you want to pair us for your easy pickings," retorted Raja Rao.

"Roopa, you better partner him, if I say that we might pair, his tongue would wag yet another way," said Sandhya amusedly even as Roopa and Tara laughed heartily.

As Roopa turned out to be a novice and Tara being quite adept at the game, not to speak of Sandhya, Raja Rao sensed that there was a drubbing in the offing, and as feared, he and Roopa fared poorly in the first board.

"We've lost because of me," said Roopa apologetically.

"Surely, we'll make it in the end," he seemed to assure her in more ways than one.

"I suppose playing caroms is not as easy as wagging the tongue," Sandhya teased him.

"The proof of the pudding is in the eating, what do you say Roopa?" he said heartily.

"How I wish I had a better hand to lend you but I know that you'll make them run for their money all on your own," said Roopa.

While the game progressed, as he began to regain his touch, he was seized by a desire to let Roopa savor the thrill of winning, and in the euphoria of her praises, he played like a man possessed.

"I haven't seen you play half as well at Kothalanka," said Sandhya, watching him in wonderment as he went on a pocketing spree.

"It's all about inspiration," he said and added, "moreover, can I let Roopa down."

Roopa got scared for once and looked at her mate in apprehension.

"Man, I don't fault you on both the counts," said Sandhya to Roopa's immense relief

Wrapping up the game in time, when he involuntarily extended his hand to Roopa that she shook in excitement, feeling sorry for Tara, Sandhya shook his hand in admiration. However, when Tara too shook hands with him in congratulation, Roopa watched his demeanor in contemplation. 'Is he enjoying her touch?' she looked for signs of his crush on Tara, and seeing none, she felt relieved, but thought nevertheless, 'Why this possessiveness for a man who's not mine even! But how could it ever be love unless it is accompanied by jealousy?'

When Sandhya wanted a challenger, Roopa was not a game for it as she preferred to preserve the memory of that triumph lest they should lose the challenger, and instead proposed a round of rummy, Tara talked about the stakes.

"You spell it," said Raja Rao.

"Ten a count," stated Tara.

"I feel it's high," said Sandhya.

"Not for an architect's wife," Tara brushed aside the objection.

As dame luck teamed up with the members of her gender, as if to show where her sympathies lie, Tara said to Raja Rao,

"It seems you've no way with the dame luck today."

"I'm hopeful that she might favour me in time," he said, steadily picking up his cards and stealthily looking at Roopa.

Finding Roopa gazing at him, as though expecting some such comment, he knew that she was playing the ball with him, and even as she admired his audacity, nevertheless, she was troubled lest Sandhya should take note of their flirtations, but at the same time, she was thrilled that Raja Rao's fascination for her was unfolding before Tara's eyes.

'She seems to be in love with him to a fault, though she can't be faulted for that,' Roopa thought as she scooted the next deal. 'It's as though some magnetic force would draw women to him! Isn't Tara, the veteran of many a fill, coy to him as if she were a virgin? It looks like he appreciates Tara's undeniable charms but he doesn't seem to be enamoured of her. Without a roving eye, won't he make a steady lover? Maybe, had I not stopped him in his tracks, daredevil that he is, he could've declared his love for me then and there, oh, how stupid of me. Surely, I won't miss the next chance as and when it presents itself. What a lover to have, if ever I could have him.'

"Sorry for robbing the hosts," said Tara, taking leave of them after tea.

"We'll make it even next time," said Roopa smilingly.

"I wish you get even," said Tara to Roopa in undertone.

After Tara had left, fearing a possible misunderstanding, innovated Roopa,

"She wants me to take up a job."

"It's not a bad idea," said Sandhya.

"What's the hesitation?" said Raja Rao to Roopa, finding her unresponsive.

"Don't you know that I'm not even a graduate? I wonder who would employ me, and for what," said Roopa

"As I told you, Roopa was our topper before she dropped out," said Sandhya to Raja Rao.

'How does that help me now for its all bygones,' said Roopa.

"Roopa, nothing is really over till the very end," he said persuasively. "Even after death, there would still be that last journey to the cemetery. I know that you craved to become a doctor to serve the sick but there are other ways for you to do the same. You know besides doctors and the ayahs, health-care needs administrators as well and if only you work for it, who knows, you might run your own clinic one day."

"Honestly, I haven't thought on those lines. Thanks for opening up my mind," said Roopa visibly impressed.

"Who knows, one day you might as well design her clinic," said Sandhya joyously.

"Won't I put all my heart into that to make it soulful for her," he said heartily.

"It's like you're rekindling my ambition," said Roopa extending her hands to them.

"Meanwhile improve your academics through some correspondence course and enlarge your vision by observation. Thus when the opportunity knocks, you would've been equipped to acquit yourself well," he said holding on to her hand.

"I shall," Roopa said as though in a trance.

"I know you would," he said animatedly, and she pressed his hand warmly.

"You can always count on us," said Sandhya, embracing a visibly moved Roopa.

At that, infected more by their euphoric love than his carnal desire, Raja Rao was impelled to fold them together in his arms for a fleeting moment that seemed eternity to Roopa.

## Chapter 18

### Fetishes of Fantasy

After siesta that evening, Sandhya proposed a stroll on the nearby Tank Bund and as they came out, Roopa suggested that they might as well walk all the way. Soon, when they ascended the adjacent staircase of *Kattamaisamma* temple and reached the top of the age-old structure, Raja Rao's eyes caught the line of new age statues on granite pedestals. Wanting to see them all at close quarters, they walked past the row of life-size bronzes of renowned Andhras, and having read the inspiring inscriptions in gold on them, he marveled, 'A great idea'.

"It's NTR's," said Sandhya.

"That became controversial" said Roopa

"How come?" he said seemingly surprised.

"There was a minor row raked up in the local press about the advisability of spending millions on them, bringing the schemes for the needy to a grinding halt," explained Roopa.

"It could be the mischief of the out-of-power politicians itching for political spoils. Even if one kid, who sees them, were to be inspired by the deeds of any one of these greats, then the value of that life for the humanity would countervail the cost of all these statues put together. But whither gone Srinatha," articulated Raja Rao.

"It's odd that *kavisarvabhowma* is absent," said Roopa.

"When Thyagaiah is rightly accorded the pride of place, ignoring the most romantic Telugu poet is indeed puzzling," said Sandhya in agreement.

However, in time, as they reached the statue of Sir Arthur Cotton, Raja Rao commented,

"It's very thoughtful to treat this Englishman as our own."

After a go around, as they relaxed on the lawns near the Nannaya's, the topic turned to culture and literature.

"The hallmark of greatness is the ability to appreciate the virtues of other peoples and their cultures. You may know that Appaiah Dikshitar, the Tamil poet-saint said that to be born an Andhra and to be able to speak Telugu is a boon, which cannot be achieved without much penance. But normally bigotry makes people imagine that they are superior to the rest of the peoples put together," articulated Raja Rao.

As it started drizzling by then, they thought of leaving.

"I love getting drenched," said Roopa

"Me too," said Sandhya.

"I'll fall in line," said Raja Rao, looking at Roopa.

Halfway through, having got caught in the pouring rain, in no time, they got wet to their roots, and falling behind them on purpose, Raja Rao went on devouring Roopa's flowing figure at its back.

In her wet sari that tightly hugged her body, as though to squeeze itself dry, her provocative frame evoked passion in his groins. Her splendid back of tan exposed by the seeming dissolution of her brownish blouse induced in him a craving for showering it with his kisses. Her narrow waist, left part-bare by her sari, enabled him to envision the carnal character of her luscious form. The slit of her seat, discernible at every step,

stepped up his urge for a 'novel' possession of her exquisite body. As if to feast his eyes with her wondrous legs, when she artfully hitched her sari to bare them, their enticing shape enveloped his vision. In that rainy setting, whenever she turned at street corners, the sight of her heavy boobs wetted by the Act of God whetted his appetite.

At length, as he instinctively turned his gaze towards his wife for an unintended comparison, he found her talking animatedly to her mate. Her exquisite demeanour made him envision the evocative charm of a bunch of grapes in the midst of the season. He felt that the smooth contours of her delectable form imparted waviness to the sari she wore. Then, as the skies were brightened by lightning, he visualised that his wife's rosy face glowed even more by the radiance of her amiable nature.

'Individually they picture contrasting charms but together they symbolize beauty itself,' he thought as he went on analyzing his state of mind stormed by Roopa. 'What a marvel of a woman! Imagine she's infatuated with me! How sweet love is in its tentativeness! That's the charm of it, isn't it? But as the urge surges, so would the pain for possession in the pangs of passion. Only her soothing embrace can bring solace to my perturbed soul. Surely she's enamoured of me but would she be inclined to bestow her final favor upon me? Regardless of her proclivities, still a liaison with her friend's husband remains a big hurdle for her to cross, isn't it? Whatever it is, my cup of life would be half empty till I have her as well.'

'Why am I allowing myself to be distracted by her charms when my bride herself is so fresh?' he thought in wonderment. 'Why to start with its love at first sight, for both of us and then hadn't Zola averred that love increases in proportion to the possibility of possession. That way, Tara is no mean a charmer either; any man would gladly put his soul on the line to win her favours. Yet, there's no way I can possess her, but for which who knows, I might have been eying her as well. Thankfully, it's all different with Roopa for her friendship with Sandhya might usher in our liaison, sooner or later.'

Even as he felt hopeful of having Roopa someday, her enamored eyes and suggestive glances that he reminisced, had only fuelled his passion for her possession.

'Possession, to be meaningful, should be timely,' he reasoned, as he increased his pace to come closer to the women. 'When we would meet next time, who knows, she could be carrying, and shortly thereafter, holding her child in my lap, won't I be left wondering as to what it would have been like had I possessed her before? Then, won't it turn out to be a life-long regimen of seeing a bloated Roopa belatedly? Thus, with nothing left to inspire possession, and having gained to make it difficult, won't she leave me pondering over her past contours in her rotund presence? And in time, won't the hoped-for possession on a grand scale passion end up being a damp squib in a platonic fashion? It would be for sure and sadly at that.'

'Won't it be sexy having her now when her figure is at its curvy best,' it crossed him as they turned the corner to reach home. 'Besides, going by her hungry looks, she seems to be ready for it. What if I go to her on the sly after Sandhya falls asleep? Surely, she wouldn't push me away even if she won't pull me into her arms. But won't that be the cue for me to press ahead over her sexy frame to usher in our liaison?'

'But that would make sense if I were put up here,' he thought dejectedly. 'In a one-night stand, I might barely taste her flavor to savor which takes the possession of a lifetime. Maybe the romance of a night might meet the demands of our urges but only a continuing union could fulfill the craving of our souls. Thus, even if I were to coax her into bed now, my prolonged absence thereafter might lead her astray in due course. Why having lost her inhibitions in crossing the marital line to have a fling with me; won't she in time become vulnerable to the advances of some seducer or the other? God

forbid, should that happen, instead of giving her the solace of love, won't I become the root cause of her depravity?'

As he shuddered to imagine her moral fall, he resolved, 'It's as well that we moved in here before I begin wooing her.'

Soon as they reached home in that wet setting, Roopa goaded Sandhya to go in for a shower.

"Have you seen *Pakeezah*?" Roopa said with a sense of urgency.

"I liked it, what about you?" he said sensing some inference from her in that love story.

"I found the movie moving and the songs meaningful," she said, giving an impression that she left something unsaid.

"Especially, '*yuhi koyi*, about a chancy meeting and thereafter," he said, as though he understood what was unsaid,

"True, do you believe that marriages are made in heaven?" she said as though to convey more than she has enquired.

"Maybe, but why on earth one shouldn't fall in love?" he said, as if he was clarifying their position.

"Why not one?" she echoed after a pause, during which she conveyed her approval with her gaze.

When Sandhya came out from the bathroom, Roopa tried to goad him into it, but as he insisted that he would shower later, she went in there disappointed. Nevertheless, after her fetish-less bath, about to clear the clothesline, she changed her mind and chose to leave her dirty linen behind.

'Surely, he would scan my innerwear,' she thought thrilled about the possibility. 'That could be the reason why he insisted that I have my bath before him. What a clever lover! Won't he size my brassiere for his grasp and smell it as well for my body odour? When it comes to my panty, well.'

At that, the thought of his fetishism involving her bra and drawer created a sensation in her body, which made her shiver expectantly. 'Why not I confirm his doings by noting the arrangement,' she thought mischievously and arranged her lingerie meticulously.

Thereafter, as he went for bath, she kept time. While she visualized him handling her brassiere, she felt as though he were squeezing her breasts, and when she anticipated him to smell the thing, she felt as though his breath had warmed her breasts but above all, the idea that he would be toying with her panty pulsed her frame.

As he came out of it, lying in wait, she rushed into the bathroom, only to return from there in a fulfilled manner much later.

When it was time to call it a day, Roopa addressed Raja Rao,

"I hope you don't mind using the bedroom."

"Why bother, the hall should do for us," he said embarrassedly.

"I would rather insist that you use the bedroom. Though we're fine otherwise, it takes us a little to accommodate our guests," said Roopa.

"The need of any family could be a couple of chairs besides a cot or two as the occasional visitors can be accommodated on some spare bed or the other,' he said as if to make them grasp the underlying irony of the so-called status. "So, a house is where we take shelter as we live and vacate as we die, but the paraphernalia we tend to

acquire is meant more to announce our arrival on the social stage than to cater to our homely requirements. Thus, having put them in place at great cost, and with much compromise even, we won't rest till we show them off to our acquaintances."

"You make me feel at home in my house," said Roopa in response.

"It's the best compliment I've ever received from any hostess," he said.

"You do feel at home," she said in an undertone to him as Sandhya went in to have some water.

"When I'm welcomed," he whispered to her.

Soon, Sandhya followed her husband, however after winking at her friend.

"Isn't it embarrassing?" said Raja Rao as Sandhya bolted the door.

"Never mind, I'll join her later," said Sandhya reaching him.

Readily sinking into her husband's embrace, while she felt that he seemed fonder than ever before for her friend too was fond of him, pressing her closer, he found himself fantasizing her friend's presence, and as he made love to his wife, he began craving his lover's embrace as well. So, even as he got ecstatic in their climax, yet he felt wanting in his fulfillment.

'Won't I need them both for my fulfillment?' he contemplated after his wife left him to reach her mate. 'Though my emotions for each are discernible, my love for them seems indivisible, and yet how well they fit in our love triangle? Oh, how they adore each other? Won't that ensure they could be receptive to the threesome idea? But still, I need to prod them a little to help them overcome their inhibitions. But once drawn into the love triangle, won't they find it fascinating to envision each other making love to me? Sandhya might feel fulfilled seeing the woman she adores gratifying the man they love. In turn, finding the man she admires at coitus with the woman she loves, Roopa could indeed feel fulfilled. Thus feeling beholden, won't Roopa enlase Sandhya in all empathy as if to share her joy? If only Freud got it right, won't their latent leanings lead them to the lesbian frontiers to feast my eyes?'

Soon in her daydream, Raja Rao sank into a deep sleep.

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Roopa was in luscious wait as an ardent Sandhya reached her. Even as she was shedding her sari to merge herself with her mate's nudeness, Roopa pulled her into her makeshift bed. After having yielded to her man's passion, as Sandhya felt ecstatic fondling her mate's frame, she could discern the duality of her desire on a differing plane. She felt that while the coition with her man affords her the womanly worth, her lesbianism with her mate ennobles her innate femininity. So, having comprehended the true value of the emollient variation of her sexuality to her life, she began to engage her mate with all lesbian with gusto. Moreover, the realization that she felt fulfilled by the male passion only sharpened her ardour to satiate her mate's lesbian urge. As for Roopa, the very thought that her lover just coited with her mate sharpened her sensuality, and that made her feel as though she smelled him through his wife's medium. Thus, as Roopa cuddled Sandhya, she could yet feel his masculinity in his wife's body; and deep kissing her, she felt as though she tasted his saliva in her palate. Soon, so as to satiate herself, Roopa reached in her mate where her lover had mounted for his fulfillment, and then visualizing his manhood in motion, when she turned oral at the source of its lubrication, as if to savour the taste of his cum, Sandhya went into raptures craving for her man's presence in her mate's company.

With the mutual solace their lovemaking afforded them, as they lay languid in their arms, said Roopa,

“Now kiss and tell what’s like it with him?”

Whispering her reminiscences of her honeymoon for Roopa’s ears, Sandhya said,

“Somehow, even the vigour of his virility can’t subdue my urge for our mating. How I wished you came along with us.”

“I think my luck and love, are poles apart, if only I were single, maybe I would’ve begged you to take me along with you as your co-wife. What’s worse for me, you would be so far away, increasing my misery even more,” said Roopa melancholically.

“Now I too feel that we would’ve been better off living together as co-wives,” said Sandhya moved herself.

“I could divorce Sathyam for Act - 1 but having a wife like you, would your man be ready for Act - 2?” said Roopa half in jest.

“I’ll ask him,” Sandhya half-rose in mock seriousness.

“Leave that to me,” said Roopa, as she pulled Sandhya back into her bare arms, “but have you told him about us?”

“Not yet, though I was thinking about it all the while,” said Sandhya dreamily. “Anyway, our love doesn’t take anything away from him as our amour is not hampering my ardour for him. Though I find the associated emotions are so different, yet I see neither a conflict nor a contradiction in them. I’ve come to realise that my emotions for you and affection for him are nursed in separate corners of my heart. But how come you never talked about it to Sathyam?”

“As I don’t feel for him much, there’s no emotional hitch as such,” said Roopa dryly.

“But now it looks like you’re Ok with him,” said Sandhya.

“Don’t I’ve duties as his wife? I thought I’ve no right to make him feel wanting due to my disillusionment. Maybe, it could be risky to reveal it even to your husband, as he might not like it. It would be the death of me if he weans you away from me,” said Roopa looking vacantly.

“I love you for the way you feel for us but even if I tell him, I know he’ll understand. Yet I would wait though I told him about that city bus escapade,” said Sandhya, kissing Roopa.

“What’s his reaction?” Roopa sat up, as if to watch his feelings in Sandhya’s face.

“He made light of it all as no more than a small pleasure,” said Sandhya.

“I’m happy that you’ve got a confident man,” Roopa kissed her as if the gesture was meant for him.

“Good night, let me see if he gets up, you’ve made me need him all again,” Sandhya whispered.

“Good night and good luck,” said Roopa winking at Sandhya.

‘Why is life hard on some while being soft on others?’ Roopa contemplated after Sandhya had left. ‘The *sastras* would have us believe that it’s all owing to *karma*, while the philosophers stress that life is conditioned by a combination of circumstances. It could be true either way, but how does that help me in anyway. For all that, does life play favorites? But that’s unlikely, isn’t it? After all, why should it be partial to some when all bear its patent? Yet, some like me get condemned, all the time. But why is that so?’

'It's as though life has an obligation for itself as a whole and not to the individuals that make up the whole,' she tried to probe into the proclivities of life as though to solve the puzzle of her predicament. 'It would appear as if life feels a monotonous regimen would bore people to death, thereby bringing the creation to an unintended end. So, for the larger good of mankind, it could be constrained to contrive individual inequities to keep alive the general interest in it. Wonder how it prepares the black list for the fate to act upon! As all are dear to it were it not possible that blindfolded, it would go in for random selection with a sinking heart! And once fate gets hold of life's blacklist, won't weddings come in handy for it to impart misery in many wrong permutations and provide bliss in a few right combinations! Then is there nothing left for me to do than to regret my fate, all my life?'

As though her pain moved nature itself, it opened the skies to shed its tears, and closing the windows to avoid the spatter, she felt melancholic, 'So that's how I've got the rough end of the marital stick then. But why not grab the silken glove of liaison that is dangling before me now? Won't that meet life's innate need for variety as well? When it could impose a husband of its choice on me, why not I choose a paramour of my own liking?'

As it stopped raining as though on cue, opening the windows, Roopa felt nature too has seemingly desired her turbulence to end in Raja Rao's arms.

'Would it be fair to Sathyam?' she tried to analyze as she was consumed by self-doubts all again. 'But then, what could be done when fidelity imposes a loveless life on me? By the way, what's this fidelity all about? Isn't it man's means to rein in woman's proclivities? Though male-female attraction is the cornerstone of creation, yet man seeks to blindfold woman with the band of marital loyalty, never mind his own roving eye. Leaving that aside, what does a wife ought to give her man? Well, she should keep an amiable home for him to recreate and procreate, and as for love, she needs it as much as he, doesn't she? But is love something of a recipe that a woman could prepare at her husband's bidding?'

'How can I help as he doesn't inspire love in my heart,' she wailed at her plight. 'Is it not said that love is but a part of man's life while it is a woman's whole existence? Why, it's every bit true! Sathyam is merry in marriage, enjoying all that goes with it, while I'm miserable, despairing for love. I can't be happy without Raja, that's clear by now, isn't it? Then, don't I owe something to my life as well? What's the contradiction in leading my love life with Raja even as I cater to Sathyam's marital needs? It seems to be the only sensible way to go about my life than to feel deprived all the while.'

Thus, having resolved to have Raja Rao for a paramour, she was at peace with herself, 'But it would be unfair for woman to let the paramour father her child. Maybe, it's the only thing unethical about adultery, isn't it? A woman ought to take care that things don't be mixed up in the process. Surely I would need Raja for my fulfillment and Sathyam can have his child if he could.'

Having resolved on a liaison with her lover, Roopa slumbered in expectation.

## **Chapter 19**

### **Curtain of Courtesy**

At the break of dawn, Roopa awoke to the sound of the doorbell, and was surprised to find Sathyam at the threshold. Seeing the makeshift bed in the hall, he was surprised in turn, but before he could enquire from Roopa, he got the reply from Sandhya,

"I'm happy you've come."

While Roopa took the briefcase from Sathyam's hand, Raja Rao, who had joined them by then, observed her demeanor to discern her emotions, and having noticed a perceptible disappointment in her, he felt vindicated.

"Glad I've come back," said a visibly delighted Sathyam.

"But what of your work?" said Roopa.

"I didn't want to waste my time over there, as they weren't ready with their paperwork. Had I got even a wink of your visit, I wouldn't have gone at all," said Sathyam.

Somehow Sathyam always felt that whereas Sandhya's genuine warmth elevated his self-worth, Roopa's constrained affection tended to undermine his self-esteem.

"We reached as you left and would be leaving as you came," said Raja Rao in greeting, extending his hand to Sathyam.

"When is that?" said Sathyam

"By today's Minar," said Raja Rao.

'Wish you've stayed a while,' said Sathyam.

"I would've loved that," said Raja Rao, more for Roopa's ears.

"I've asked him to extend his leave but," said Sandhya.

"I know it's not easy," said Sathyam.

"I'd half a mind to skip Bombay but Sandhya was insistent," said Raja Rao.

"If not, your parents could think she has already weaned you away from them," said Roopa in jest.

"You double up for her advocate, don't you?" said Raja Rao to Roopa

"Be our first guests in Delhi," said Sandhya to Sathyam, leaning on Roopa's shoulder.

"Let Roopa fix the *muhurtham*," said Sathyam as he went to freshen himself.

"I'll wait for the call," said Roopa dreamily.

"Don't keep us waiting," said Raja Rao smilingly.

"You're a master at pushing the ball into others' court," said Roopa to Sandhya's mirth.

Sometime later, as Sathyam and Raja Rao began chit-chatting, Sandhya assisted Roopa in preparing *dosas* and *sambar* for breakfast.

"With all that clout, it must be a heady feeling working in the department," said Raja Rao to pep up Sathyam.

"True, it's glamorous at the top, but it's drudgery all the way down, more so for honest folks like us. The conscientious carry the burden, and the unscrupulous walk away with the spoils," grumbled Sathyam.

"I always felt that there's a similarity between a middle-class home and a government office; one earns for half-a-dozen, and a score gossip as one works," said Raja Rao,

"If anything, the reservations ruined the work culture further; seeing the way the scheduled casts and scheduled tribes are promoted out of turn, in double-quick time, others have come to doubt the virtue of hard work. The net result is that hardly anyone works in the departments these days," lamented Sathyam.

"It's the way he cribs to whoever listens; either he makes you mad by narrating how he's being ignored in spite of his worth, or bores you to death by enlightening how the reservations are ruining the nation," said Roopa to Sandhya in consternation.

"Why don't you see that as his criticism of the system?" said Sandhya.

"Could be but there must be a limit to one's lament," said Roopa, and added as though on a second thought, "more so in matters like these."

"I can understand your feelings but I think that it's a subject that needs to be viewed with a broader perspective," they heard Raja Rao tell Sathyam.

"I'm sorry if I've given you the impression that I'm unsympathetic towards them," Sathyam said in clarification. "No, that's not the case. What I feel is, and let me tell you, it's the general perception, that the government could support them by extending all possible help to pursue their education. But let the job market be truly open for competition."

"I don't think that's how we should approach this issue," said Raja Rao. "Let me explain by way of an example. Would any father leave his plain daughter remain a spinster simply because none comes forward to marry her? You know that he would go round the globe to find her a match. When it comes to that, he would cough up the extra buck for her dowry. If her better endowed sisters were to grouse for that concern, won't he say that he owed it to her to see her married as well?"

Raja Rao paused to see how Sathyam reacted, and finding no bad blood, he continued,

"In case a son doesn't shine as well as his siblings, would the father bask in the glory of his glorious sons, leaving the sluggard to his fate? Why, he would certainly support him all through besides bequeathing a little more to him in his will. If his other sons were to cry foul, the father's soul might as well wonder in the heaven, 'Why do these guys, enjoying the fortunes of a bright birth, envy the props I provided for their poor brother?'"

"It's a peculiar feature of human nature that we love to see those close to us, climb up the staircase of success, but, behind us. If they happen to catch up with us, needing to share the space with them, we feel choked, and were they to overtake us, we feel morose, though they might remain friendly. It is because, used as we were to condescend to descend in our affections to them, we lose countenance, not counting our jealousy, that they too might seem patronizing from their altered stations," articulated Raja Rao even as Sandhya brought for them some crispy *dosas* with spicy *sambar* to savour.

"By the same logic, is it unfair to expect the qualified from the scheduled casts to fend for themselves?" questioned Sathyam spiritedly.

"That's comparing apples with oranges," retorted Raja Rao. "After doling out some sops here and providing a few props there, were the government to wash off its hands, won't that amount to a half measure? It has to support them at every stage until their faculties are developed, needing no more concessional crutches. If others feel aggrieved about that, it only amounts to grieving over the recompense to the unfortunates while themselves enjoying the benefits of a more fortunate birth. Not that I can't understand the individual inequities these reservations bring about, but for the greater social good, we've got to put up with these aberrations. After all, it's these reserved positions that enable them to hold their head high in the social milieu, which had spurned them all along."

"But for how long and that too when they tend to misuse the sops?" said Sathyam

"Maybe, you've answered that yourself," said Raja Rao. "Hasn't the society, all along, ostracized them physically and suppressed them morally, thereby sinking their collective consciousness into a morass. Knowing well what it takes to regain one's self-confidence after a reverse or two, would it be difficult to imagine what it takes for the so-called SCs and STs to start believing in themselves? Do you honestly believe that the climate today is conducive to their emotional integration with the social mainstream? It's surprising that we fail to put ourselves in their sectarian shoes, knowing full well that birth, after all, is a chancy proposition."

"But of what avail are the second-generation reservations?" questioned Sathyam.

"For that, let's consider the affects of the withdrawal syndrome," explained Raja Rao. "As can be expected, some among the newly-arrived won't make the grade and go back to square one. If not propped up in their altered stations, won't their fall from grace, besides demoralizing the affected individuals, dent the community confidence? So the key to their ennoblement lies in their caste confidence brought about by the individual advancement. It should be realized that those mandatory ministerial berths and the quota of secretaries would only help buttress their communal self-worth. More so, to better their lot, their general welfare is to be addressed while their community should be helped to build its economic base through tiny enterprises."

"In spite of being the most favoured lot, won't they still desert our religion?" said Sathyam.

"That's the irony of the Hindu society," said Raja Rao sadly. "So long as they're in our fold, we don't feel that they are our own, but when they leave us in frustration, we blame it upon them! What's the use of gloating over our great religion, when we bar them into our gods' abodes? So, we never give them cause to believe that Hinduism is their religion, do we?"

"Maybe, that's the way to look at these issues," said Sathyam resignedly.

"So the moral of the story is to view the other side of the fence with sensitive eyes," said Roopa, who brought some coffee for Raja Rao and milk for Sathyam.

The rest of the day turned out to be uneventful for Roopa and Raja Rao though it enabled Sathyam and Sandhya get closer to each other.

When they reached the Secunderabad Railway Station that late noon, as Raja Rao retrieved the luggage from the cloakroom, Sathyam volunteered to keep pace with the coolie ahead of them. Noticing that Raja Rao stopped at the Higginbothams, as Roopa slowed down, pretending to mend her *chappal*, Sandhya proceeded to catch up with Sathyam. Sensing Roopa's gesture, Raja Rao quickly picked up the current 'Sunday' and reached her hurriedly.

"So," he said.

She gave him a longing look.

"I miss you," he said.

"I'm lost," she said, without raising her head.

"Can I hope?" he said ardently.

Having kept quiet for long, as if lost for words, as she was about to respond, realizing that they neared Sathyam by then, as though to forewarn her, he called out to him.

In time, with the luggage secured in the coupe, as Sathyam and Sandhya were lost in their conversation, Raja Rao and Roopa lent their eyes to their love for its soulful

expression. Thus, when the guard whistled, Roopa felt as though Raja Rao's eyes whispered, 'I love you.'

'As his presence has set the narrative of my life in poetic prose, won't his absence make it prosaic all again?' Roopa thought as the Minar Express was about to move, and waving to them as the train chugged out of the station, she wondered, 'Will I be able to make my life poetic in his passion? Am I destined for him?'

## **Chapter 20**

### **Blueprint in the Offing**

Unmindful of the sentimental ways of its passengers, as the Minar Express kept its westward course, reclining in a first class coupe, Raja Rao reminisced over that incomplete encounter with Roopa.

'Had I not withdrawn from her what would she have said at our parting?' he began to speculate, 'Could she have said 'yes'? Well, she might not have been so forthright, but surely she would've said something to break the ice. But then, haven't we already conveyed our mutual craving in revealing ways? What remained was just affixing the 'I Love You' stamp to the cover of our mutual attraction. Maybe we would've done that if only we were slower by a step or two, but still, isn't it clear to both of us that we love each other? No denying that and my life may not be worth living without possessing Roopa, in spite of having Sandhya.'

Then turning his attention to Sandhya, he found her lost in her own thoughts.

'Immersed in her own emotions, she failed to see my flirtations with her friend, so it seems,' he thought to his relief. 'In the euphoria of her excitement, our unmistakable attraction seems to have appealed to her as an extension of her own affection for both of us. What a happy nature it is, a blessed soul, really.'

"Are you upset?" he said at length.

"You know how I miss her," she said, resting her head on his shoulder.

"Maybe, you needn't for long," he said taking her hand.

"I hope so," she said looking at him as though for a reassurance.

"You may begin the countdown," he said pressing her hand.

"Why not reduce the count to five?" she said kissing his hand.

"Maybe with Roopa's impetus," he said smilingly.

"That's lovely put," she said.

"By the way, is Sathyam her relative of sorts before their marriage?" he said.

"No, but why that question?" she said, even though she understood his intent.

"Frankly speaking, she deserves a better match than that. So I felt she could've been married off to him to keep her within the family. It's a pity that many tend to slight a bright match for an ungainly family alliance," he said ruefully.

"Generally I don't blah-blah others' affairs but as I feel you're as much my friend as husband, I think you should know about her affairs as she is one of us," she said moved by the moment.

"You can trust me as a friend more than as a husband for as a friend, you would find me frank in discussion, but as husband, I might be selective in disclosing. I believe

thoughtless openness hurts more than it helps relationships," he said with an eye on a probable future scenario.

"I appreciate that," she said, turning thoughtful herself.

"It's not frankness alone that brings a couple closer but its mutual respect that gives rise to their togetherness," he said fondling her hand.

"With Roopa and me, the feelings of friendship fuse with the emotions of affection," she said, as her face brightened.

"I suppose, that's possible only in friendship between women. Though I am happy for you, I am worried about her," he said gravely.

"Why it is so?" she said, puzzled.

"It's apparent that theirs is an intellectual mismatch, and given her faculties, she could be a mightily bored housewife by now," he began assessing Roopa's marital condition. "So to say, she could be on the thin edge of married ice, a fall from which would be hurtful, though life itself could be laborious. Sooner or later, it's possible that her life may lead her into a liaison for it's the first resort of a distraught woman."

"You're only half-right," she said. "Whatever it was, she wasn't enthused about him from the very beginning, though later on, she moulded herself into a dutiful wife. But about the temptations and all, though it may be true otherwise, she is no run-of-the-mill for that."

"Left to her, what you say may be true," he said concernedly. "But do realize that she doesn't live in an ivory tower anyway. Any novice can sense the void in her wedded life, which would make him think in terms of conquest and his attempts to woo her insensibly disturb her moral equilibrium to push her into his arms for solace. What's worse, his desertion that is a corollary to seduction could dent her self-worth to her detriment. It's not the moral aspect liaison that bothers me for it's her private affair, but it's the possible fallout of that which should alarm us."

"Oh, you scare me really," she said clutching at his hand.

"By their very nature, affairs tend to be short-lived, often brought to a premature end by the paramours, and strangely though, yet it won't be the case of 'once bitten twice shy' with the deprived women. Bitten by the novelty bug, the ditched one could itch for a new one to supplant the lost one. Thus, having got addicted to the illicit thrills, on the sly, she could jump from one bed to another with gay abandon, and God forbid, if her life were to follow this pattern, then she could end up depraved in the end," he said sounding pensive,

"Worried though, I don't think she would ever come to that," she said, and tried to believe what she said.

"It's a pity that she has to suffer all the more for her sense of decency," he said himself feeling the pain. "A life of despair, in spite of her disposition, would expose her to the seducers, and the strain of resisting their advances could sap her resolve at some stage. Added to that is the burden of having had to remain a dutiful wife, and you could figure out the stresses and strains on her sensitive soul, all of which might combine to make her vulnerable to the male advances. It's thus; the boasts of men about their conquests would seem hollow for it's the vulnerability of women that fetches them their favours. That way, if she were to succumb in her moment of weakness, then she would suffer even more for having failed to desist from it."

"Oh, God, but what can be done?" she sounded helpless.

"I don't think her problem lends itself to a clear-cut solution, but surely, her destiny would have its own agenda for her life that we will see as it unfolds," he said thoughtfully.

Seeing her readily lost in contemplation, he thought over the matter,

'Why my speculation has upset her. But isn't the possibility of Roopa's failing for real? Surely somebody is bound to lurk in the street corner to barge into her home to bring about that. But won't I like to be proved wrong?'

'Why didn't it occur to me when I was with her?' he thought as such a prospect pained him no end. 'How my fascination for her overshadowed my faculties! Oh, how she could drive men into distraction! Isn't she likely to attract many? If only her favoured man happens to be a genuine lover, then that liaison would be a blessing in disguise for her. I could be the one, but would her fate make her wait for me? What with the passage of time, won't her enamour for me wane paling her passion? Why wouldn't someone with the right opportunity replace me in her heart? That too as her affection for me hasn't crossed the threshold of infatuation, had it?'

As the possibility of losing Roopa unnerved him, he began to think,

'Were she to come across the right man, she's likely to be steady with him. Left in the lurch then, won't I languish for her all my life? As for her, for physicality tends to shape the course of affairs, won't she miss the essence of love in the dictates of passion? Even if she comes into my life eventually, wouldn't have the purity of our love got polluted by then?'

'What about my own love for her?' he began to question himself. 'No denying, it's lustful to the core. Am I not dying to possess her? But then, my all-consuming passion stems from a deep-rooted affection for her, isn't it? Can't I perceive the purity of my feelings in the depths of my soul? Surely, my craving for her is not merely confined to possessing her, fabulous though she is. Why, am I not aiming to bring about the fusion of our souls through our emotional integration? How fulfilled would I be, if only I could fill the void in her heart, once and for all. For all I know, her feelings for me are no different. Haven't I seen the longing of her soul in her gaze, even as I felt the craving of her love in her touch? What else I can do than pray that she develops the patience to wait for the fruition of our love without becoming a prey of seduction.'

'Why did I fail to declare my love to her?' he thought as he went on recalling their nascent romance. 'But then, haven't my eyes spoken volumes about my craving for her, so have hers, haven't they? Couldn't she have grasped my emotions from my innuendoes? True, she can't be expected to take all that as the testimony of my devotion to her. Had I been forthright in declaring my love to her, possibly that would have helped her persevere with her fascination for me. But then, by being rash, I could've offended her sensitivity in the formative state of her affection for me.'

'Why not I write to her,' he thought, as a way out of the predicament. 'But then, isn't it risky without knowing her sensibilities? Besides compromising myself, I might create misgivings in her mind as well. What if she shows it to Sathyam, and worse, to Sandhya? Why court disaster?'

Dampened by that thought, as his spirit changed tack, he began to reason,

'Is all this merely a flight of my hyper imagination? Who knows, being overstrung myself, I'm going crazy in my head? Clearly she has a crush on me but is that enough for her to plunge into my arms? Whatever, I should try my luck with this remarkable woman.'

In spite of Roopa's possible indifference towards him, the feeling that, after all, she may not be in danger, as feared, eased his mind. But seeing Sandhya still uneasy, he thought, 'Haven't I scared her unwittingly? The poor thing loves that lovely one so dearly. Won't that make it easier for her to reconcile to our affair, if it ever comes to that?'

Sandhya, meanwhile, tried to comprehend the situation with apprehension. 'When it's so distressing imagining her fall, if ever it comes to that, how horrible that could be?' she began to think. 'Could Roopa ever go astray? Generally speaking, what he said could be true, but isn't she all too different? Why doubt that at all. She isn't going to be the one to lose her head to some silly seducer. After all, won't she keep vanity at bay? Surely, she would.'

Before she could put her doubts at rest, she remembered Roopa's tryst with Ravi at Tara's place that brought her fears about her mate's fate to the fore.

'Maybe that confirms his apprehension about her situation,' she became doubtful. 'As she lost her head like it happened with me in the city bus, can she keep her cool when someone comes wooing her the next time? What if he is proved right?'

Convinced about her man's reading of her mate's situation, she sought to analyze the latter's mind-set,

'It's clear that Sathyam's love is of no avail to her for it lacks the vigour to dispel the euphoric clouds from her lovesick eyes. Won't his wit fail to cater to her innate intellect and his demeanour her romantic vision? And that makes her vulnerable to the misty looks of the fast guys for sure. Why, hasn't she taken to my man though she tried to hide her feelings from me? Haven't I sensed her romantic overtures to Raja, in spite of my own excitement? Surely, he wouldn't have lost sight of her apparent infatuation for him. How couldn't he have when he was the object of her adoration? Maybe, that was at the back of his mind when he voiced his fears about her possible fall.'

'Would Roopa then become a target practice for assorted seducers?' she thought in worry. 'Is she willy-nilly sauntering on the volcano of temptation to be swept away by the lava of illicit passion?'

As she shuddered to think further, she tried to push that thought away, only to get bogged down all the same.

'But, how can I remain indifferent to her predicament given our own intimacy?' she thought, overcome with empathy for her friend. 'Could I ever let my treasure slip into the garbage of vice? Shouldn't I go to lengths to see that she wouldn't fall into alien hands? Won't her indulgence with assorted characters sour our own amour? Having tasted the sweetness of her ardour, how could I forego the ecstasy of our intimacy? Can I let things foul-up at her end, no way.'

'Maybe, I could've averted all this had I been genuine when she wanted my opinion about Sathyam,' she thought, going to the roots of her friend's distress. 'What a shame that I was evasive in my reply, though I myself wasn't impressed with him. How cruel that I placed the proverbial last straw on her emotionally unstable back then, though unwittingly. If only I had been frank with her then, her scales of doubt wouldn't have got tilted the wrong way. Didn't I insensibly impose this marital burden on her, forever? But the poor thing never blamed me for that, and instead bore it all resignedly! What's more, when I got the man of men as my man, she rejoices at my fortune without a tinge of jealousy? But myself being on the cloud nine how mean of me to let the poor thing pine for love. Didn't Raja sum it up it all so well, when he said that she would suffer even more for the nobility of her soul? Oh, God, how can I alleviate her suffering?'

Overwhelmed by pity for her mate, she pictured her future,

'If we move over to Hyderabad, I can be near her, but how that would help her? Finding me joyous, won't she suffer even more for her deprivation in comparison, unintended though? Caught between the kick of my life and the burden of her own, won't she be worse off then? But if we stay put in Delhi, she would have to fend for herself when she needs me the most. What a classic catch-22 to contend with!'

In the eventuality of their moving over to Hyderabad, as the prospect of Roopa falling in love with Raja Rao dawned on her, she tried to envision its affect on their lives.

'Instead of bringing succor to her, won't we compound her misery?' surmised Sandhya. 'If Raja too falls for her, barring a eunuch, which man can remain indifferent to her charms? Romantic that he is, he is bound to rave about her. Isn't his concern for her already a pointer to that? But as they both love me they may keep their infatuation under the wraps? Won't that make them suffer for my sake, becoming morose in turn? That would surely sour my own mood even as she is caught in a cleft of love and loyalty, leave lone fidelity.'

'Then, what's the way out?' she raked her brains. 'Were I to leave her to her fate, and God forbid, she goes astray, would I ever be able to forgive myself? My guilt-filled conscience would ensure that I'm haunted all my life, won't it? Besides, I'm bound to feel miserable seeing her in the dumps. Simply put, I can never ever let her down, whatever it might take. So, we must move near her to let life take its own course thereafter.'

'Which course could it take then?' she turned inquisitive to gaze at the crystal ball. 'All said and done, Roopa may not cross the threshold of her romantic leanings, and might remain within the bounds of marital fidelity. In that case, our coming together will restore to us what we've been missing in our separation. Even if Raja gets attracted to her, unable to cross the hurdle of her fidelity, he would confine himself in his platonic plane.'

However, wondering whether sentimentality alone formulates man-woman chemistry, she tried to grasp the applied physics of adultery,

'Should Roopa itch for an adulterous hitch, given his personality, as well as his proximity, Raja could easily outsmart her every other suitor. So be it, if that's the way it turns out to be. Though I might have liked to keep my man all for myself, by the way, which woman doesn't want it that way; dispensation seems to be the only means of my atonement, isn't it? If I share my man with her, that would bring cheer into her life unburdening my guilt as well. Even otherwise, isn't it a logical progression for our lesbianism? More so, it would ensure that her amours are kept in-house, isn't it? Is it that the ménage a trois we were jesting about all along seems to be on hand? If so, what amours we three could bring into our orgies. As for Raja, it amounts to having his better half with her other half, as much for his satiation as for my salvation.'

Having fantasized about their threesome sex, she turned her focus on Sathyam's fate.

'Wouldn't it be unfair to him?' she thought as her sympathy for him affected her. 'But, how could it be helped? Maybe, it doesn't help man taking a lively wife if he's not up to the mark. What a fine soul he otherwise is! What a pity love doesn't reckon one's goodness in its yearning. Well, if Sathyam were destined to be cuckolded, wouldn't it be in order that Roopa is cajoled in Raja's arms. Queer though, it ensures that she remains in the family fold.'

As she couldn't help but envision the scale of their love triangle, she thought, 'Once we shift there, they wouldn't be able to hide their craving from me for long. It could be

a great fun intercepting their signals and decoding their innuendos. I could even scare them occasionally by dropping hints that I am at spying. Won't that pep up their sense of adventure before I bind them in our amorous fold? Isn't it maddening imagining the sexual union with the man and the woman I love!

The thrill she felt in fantasizing their threesome in that fresh light, further fuelled her love for her man and her mate, fusing them all into one erotic whole in her consciousness.

"Don't get upset dear, your love will save the day for her," he said, as she looked at him after that long reverie.

"I count on your support," she said.

"It's a given from me," he said taking her hand.

"Can I take it on her behalf?" she smiled mirthfully.

"If you can keep it with you," he said smilingly.

"Along with what she has for you," she said opening the food packets.

"What is that?" he said.

"Wait for that," she said smilingly.

Sometime after they had their meals, coyly looking at the window, she said,

'Pull down the shutter.'

"If you excuse me," he said, kissing her forehead.

"If you please I'll make you moody," she said amorously.

"Your mere thought is enough for that, but somehow," he said patting her head.

"I understand, good night," she said kissing his hand.

'Clearly he's disturbed, so he's in love with my lovey,' she thought endearingly.

Envisioning a love-filled future for three of them, soon Sandhya slumbered on the lower berth in that coupe for two.

## **Chapter 21**

### **Enduring Longing**

That morning as the Minar reached Dadar, Raja Rao and Sandhya were all set to alight, and exiting from the railway station, with a couple of porters, who carried their luggage, they hired a cab to Chembur. And in time, Sandhya stepped into a spacious flat to the warmth of her in-laws' greetings.

"Any complaints about my son?" said Gopala Rao in jest, taking himself away from *The Times of India*.

As Sandhya smiled coyly, enquired Visala,

"How're your parents?"

"I brought their *pranaams* to all of you," said Sandhya.

"How're the Thimmaiahs?" enquired Gopala Rao.

"They're evergreen as ever," said Raja Rao.

"How's our house by the way?" asked Visala.

"Sandhya may tell you," said Raja Rao.

"Was it all funny Sandhya?" Visala smiled.

"Oh, no, it's vintage" said Sandhya reminiscently.

"How's Roopa?" asked Visala.

"She's fine," said Sandhya.

"We all took to her a lot, more so Hyma," said Visala.

"She too holds you all very highly," said Sandhya, and felt, 'it's good that his family has taken to her, and that helps, just in case.'

"How's Hyma and my B-I-L?" enquired Raja Rao.

"They're all so eager to spend some time with Sandhya," said Visala.

After having a good time at her father-in-law's house, towards the evening, Sandhya accompanied Raja Rao to his sister's place at Andheri.

"We should've received you at the railway station but my brother was not for it," said Hyma apologetically to Sandhya.

"Obviously Raja wanted to go the extra mile alone with his bride," said Ranga Rao making Sandhya blush to the roots.

"You look exquisite," said Hyma hugging Sandhya.

"It's all your affection," said Sandhya clasping Hyma.

"How's Roopa?" asked Hyma still holding Sandhya.

"She is fine and is all praise for you," said Sandhya withdrawing herself.

"She's quite impressive," said Ranga Rao.

"Had she had her way, she would've been well on her way to join your profession," said Sandhya reminiscently.

"So the medical fraternity is deprived of a charming lady doctor," said Ranga Rao mimicking sadness.

"This is MCP syndrome, the inability to value women other than for their beauty," said Hyma in mock anger.

"Raja, sorry I couldn't make it to your marriage but am glad that you got a nice wife," said Perindevi, Ranga Rao's mother, after taking a close look at Sandhya.

"You look fifty at your seventy," Raja Rao greeted her while Sandhya bowed at the old woman's feet.

"Thank my grand children for that," said the old woman affectionately as Prem and Preeti, aged five and three, flocked to her.

"Don't you remember me?" asked Sandhya, inviting them into her arms.

"You're our beautiful Sandhya auntie," said Preeti while Prem remained shy.

"Raja, I've heard that your father-in-law performed your wedding in grandeur; by the way, how much dowry did your wife fetch?" said Perindevi.

"It's a case of Archimedes Principle applied to matrimony, the more a groom is taken to the bride all the more he loses on the dowry. So my father-in-law weighed me light on that count," said Raja Rao in jest.

After a mirthful time, followed by dinner, as they stepped out of the house, said Raja Rao to Sandhya,

"It's great fun with relatives if wife is around."

"More so, if her father is made fun of," she said trying to be sarcastic.

"You know all that was in jest," he said cajoling her.

"Have I asked for your clarification?" she said rather curtly.

"So you want to hang me without a hearing," he said tying his handkerchief to his neck.

"I only thought you've the gift of the gab, now I see that you've theatrics to boot," she said in the same vein.

"Even in your *kaali* avatar, you look angelic," he said endearingly.

For once, she seemed not pleased, and, in time, they boarded the city bus that barged in to the bus stop. After that long ride of silence, when they reached home, Sandhya headed to the bed straight, though after greeting her in-laws.

"Why this fuss over some lighthearted banter?" said Raja Rao, who followed suit.

"Who prevented you from finding a father-in-law who could've weighed you in gold?" she said turning her back on him.

"You're God's own gift to me, let's forget about it," he said taking her into his arms.

"Let's forget about it, good night," she said nudging him away.

"Sandhya, do realise that sex is the nature's gift for both the sexes. If you mistake that you've more to give than receive in it, then the woman in you would lose as wife for you won't be able to experience the joy of being a female. So don't ever demean lovemaking as an instrument of sexual blackmail. It pays you to know that sex is not about male satiation alone but it is as much a womanly fulfillment," he said persuasively.

"I'm really sorry, I'll never make that mistake again," she said, and moved into his outstretched arms.

"It's not entirely your fault though; I should've known that any bride would be sensitive when it comes to her parents. You may know that I value your parents as much as I do mine," he said, as he reached for her lips to savour the flavour of their first reconciliation.

"Now I love your mind too, I'm proud of you, really," she said, and initiated their deep kissing.

It's in the realms of man's vision to ennoble his woman by enabling her to taste the fruits of femininity rather than know towing to her fallacies to possess her womanliness for the satiation of his carnal cravings.

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After grappling with Bombay's gripping humidity for a week, the Raja Raos had to encounter New Delhi's sweltering heat that June-end.

When Sandhya stepped into the drawing room of modest two-bedroom apartment in Karol Bagh, she experienced a rare sense of belonging though she knew that it was a rented one, and as if to cement her sentiment, Raja Rao lost no time to take her into his arms.

"Sorry, I've been a spendthrift," he said, in explanation of lack paraphernalia therein.

"Surely it's a bachelor's prerogative," she said smilingly.

"I'm sure you would induce in me a married man's responsibilities," he said.

'Why not I take up a job,' she said enthusiastically.

"A thousand or more that you could earn may not be needed now, but won't be sufficient later if need be. So better you improve your qualification and acquire skills for a paying career," he said.

"I've an aptitude for interior design; I like to take a diploma course in that," she said excitedly.

"When we go on our own, you can complement my architectural pursuits," he said shaking her hand.

"I love to contribute in all your endeavours," she said kissing his hand.

Then following him into other portions, she felt the place was her very own, and as though to express her gratitude to him for having given her that feeling, she enlaced him from behind, and said fondling him,

"As I've a home to call mine, I feel I've an identity of my own," she said feeling fulfilled.

"So, I'm left out?" he said in jest.

"Even if I want to, I know you won't let me," she said clinging to him closely.

"Though it's a bit premature, a little lecture may not be out of place," he said as they began having *samosas* they picked up on the way.

"I'm sure you would've shined as a lecturer as well," she said admiringly.

"It's as well that we all need some space on which we've the lien; while man protects his workplace, woman clings on to the kitchen. Try asking a clerk to move his table to an obscure corner, though he might not oppose, but yet he would be resentful. The mother-in-law syndrome, to some extent, is rooted in woman's compulsive need to reign in her home. When she is forced to share it with her daughter-in-law, she shows it in not-so-subtle ways, and when it comes to a woman's equation with her man, it's said that she might even suffer a rival in his bed but wouldn't like share her kitchen with any, strange though it may seem!" he said meaningfully.

"I hope to mature by then," she said.

"Given your sweet nature, I'm sure you would," he said affectionately.

'Smart that he is, he's preparing me for sharing him with Roopa, as if I need any preparation for that, and when it comes to sharing the kitchen, it's altogether different with the lesbians,' she thought.

Shortly before noon, they went to the Machala Rao's place, where it all began, for lunch, and stayed there till the evening, from where; they reached the Malhotras, members of Raja Rao's bridge circle.

"So, you've a dealt yourself a GS of a wife," said Malhotra, obviously impressed with Sandhya.

"Welcome to the new member," said Mrs. Malhotra.

"But I say, we sorely missed you at Panaji," said Malhotra.

"How did it all go?" asked Raja Rao.

"It's more memorable off-the-table than on-the-table," said Malhotra. "In the Swiss League, we failed to make it to the final round by just three VPs. I'm sure your presence would've seen us through."

"What's with the progressive four?" Raja Rao enquired.

"I'm only coming to that, it's better forgotten but for MV Rao's classic comment," laughed Malhotra boisterously, and continued mirthfully. "Surely you remember the 'Queens of Trumps', the ladies team from Bombay. As it happened, they overbid LS against Sinha and Uday and went three shy. Yet, as they eventually won the event, Sinha got ecstatic, as you know he would often, and for no good reason. So, he went on praising them, though reminding them that he give them a zero on his table. Amused by Sinha's raving, MV Rao pulled him aside and said,

"Sinha *saab* what's so exciting in giving a zero to women; had you taken 'zeros' from them and given them a 'one', it would've been the time to gloat over."

As Malhotra joined Raja Rao afresh to laugh their hearts out, their women looked at each other in embarrassment.

"You men and your party jokes," snarled Mrs. Malhotra.

"Sexual colour provides fillip to good humour like nothing else," retorted Malhotra.

"What else?" said Raja Rao.

"Mrs. Rajan was enquiring about you. She still remembers the way you squeezed her hand at Madras last year," said Malhotra.

"Mrs. Rao may wonder what this squeezing is all about," said Mrs. Malhotra in all smiles.

"That's why I say, let's initiate the bride into bridge right away," said Malhotra, reaching for a couple of new packs.

As the novice partnered the expert then, they had a long session at the table, followed by the North Indian culinary that satiated their palates as well.

"With Mrs. Rajan, it should've been a pleasant experience for the ladies' man, even in bridge terms," said Sandhya admiringly, as they left the Malhotras only to reach a nearby Ice-cream Parlour.

"It's more interesting if seen from the angle of human proclivities," said Raja Rao. "In Madras, last year, Malhotra and I chanced to play against a team from the Gymkhana Club. In the open room, we had for our opponents Mrs. Rajan and her partner. Introductions over, I asked her whether she knew Hema, my cousin, a regular at their club. Though she acknowledged their acquaintance, yet she didn't enquire further, apparently treating me as a poor cousin of her club mate," he said.

"Really!" said Sandhya.

"But during the course of play, I chanced to execute a squeeze on her hand that changed her attitude towards me; for the rest of the tournament she sought my company at every turn, enquiring about my further exploits in the meantime," he said reminiscently.

"It's obvious that she valued the player in you," said Sandhya, and added, "but still I wonder why she wasn't impressed with you to start with!"

"Because she didn't have your eyes," he smiled.

"Enough is enough, if only I've the power, won't I blind all your women prospects?" she said heartily.

"You may know that it's not uncommon for people to lack equanimity in their interactions - either they turn obedient to those they imagine as superior to them in their station or remain indifferent to those they perceive as inferior to them, of course, going by mere appearances. But if circumstances were to remove their mental blocks, then some of them may warm up to the deserving. You know the one thing that

appealed to me in Roopa's persona is her sense of equanimity; not that you lack any, but it's remarkable with her, given her background," he said.

"You've read her well; wonder how the poor thing is; she promised that her letter would receive us in Delhi, but," she said in vexation.

"Won't she have her own things to attend? You can't afford to let such things upset you. I wish you develop a hobby, as your involvement with it provides you the necessary diversion from the disappointments of life. The wider your interests are, the lesser would be the time left for worrying," he said persuasively.

"But still, hope you would stick to your promise to shift," she said stretching her hand.

"How do you expect me to forget that when it promises so much to us, let me see how to go about it, and sooner at that," he said taking her hand.

As Roopa's aura came into his focus at that, Raja Rao too turned melancholic as he kick started his Bullet.

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Try as she did, Sandhya couldn't feel at home in the country's capital as its social ethos, dominated by ostentation offended her sensitivity, nursed in refinement. Added to that, her longing for Roopa and her brooding over their reunion mostly confined her to home, precluding any possibility of socializing, save her regular interactions with the Madhava Raos and the Malhotras. It was in that state of mind that she felt the place a transit camp, and failed to get involved with the life and times of New Delhi.

When the Institute of Interior Design, as though to drag her out of her hibernation, had granted her admission, Raja Rao, who came home early that day, excitedly told her,

"I've great news for you."

"So do I," she smiled.

"Let me guess," he felt her belly.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" she caressed his head.

"You know I've a double stake in that, as man and as a palmist. What's the news you've for me?" he said, continuing to caress her.

"You tell me yours," she said.

"Ladies first, if you please," he said.

"Yes, to listen," she said, smilingly.

"How smart of you, congrats, you've got the admission," he said visibly pleased.

"Thank you but what a coincidence it is that Roopa too has taken up the correspondence course, in Personnel Management, of Annamalai University. She wrote that she started learning typing and shorthand as well," she said kissing him.

"It's nice to hear all that," he said, wondering whether it was a sign of his continued influence on Roopa.

"Don't you want to know how you figure in her mind?" she said as though to tease him.

"Isn't it full of regards and all that?" he said pretentiously.

"She wrote that as her friendly half, you've immensely influenced her; I too believe you deserve all her praises," she said heartily.

"It's really a relief that she's on the right track; but why such a long hiatus?" he said.

"She wanted to write to us only after making some progress, why not you read it yourself," she said handing him the letter.

"A beautiful hand," he said, as he gave the letter back to her.

A few days later, said Raja Rao to Sandhya,

"Someone sounded me out about an assignment in the U.S., and I told him that I will get back after talking to you."

"Is that good for your career?" she said with mixed feelings.

"You know I had been there before. Now I've to look at that more as an opportunity for your exposure," he said casually.

"You know the direction of my destiny," she said coyly.

"Don't I know," he said as he felt relieved himself.

"What's this Western lifestyle all about?" she asked.

"In the West, they've a deep-rooted work culture, while the philosophy of life is better evolved here. For all their application of mind over things material, in matters of emotion, resilience seems to be conspicuous by its absence in their lives. While psychic care is the order of the day for every disorder of life, it may not take more than getting the boot at the office for one to start fearing about losing his woman as well!" he said as if he were summarizing the essence of his observations.

"Sadly for us," he resumed with a tinge of distress, "our ineptitude at work tells upon our standard of living as well as the quality of life that is appalling in comparison. But our culture enables us to take the vagaries of life in our strides; why, a novice of a friend could double up for a psychiatrist to set things right for a jilted lover. So also, even a man in the thick of adversity often comes unscathed to look forward with fortitude."

"The fundamental features of the two cultures, as I see them are - while the Western thought probes the nature of man, Indian philosophy delves deep into his soul," he said in conclusion. "It's the tragedy of our society that an evolved culture coexists with the worst of prejudices, hindering the outlook of our people. If only we could temper our social rigidity with the western individualism, it would do us a world of good, but sadly, in the West too, over time, the individualism insensibly degenerated into rank selfishness."

As shortly thereafter, to the delight of all, as Sandhya found herself in the family way, to her amusement, Raja Rao got into the habit of fussing about her diet and all. When they were in the seventh heaven of marital bliss, as he was required to go to Hyderabad, disturbing his equanimity, his dormant desire for Roopa came to the fore.

"Take me along," said Sandhya excitedly as he broke the news.

"You know that it's still the initial stages?" he said, feeling her tummy.

"I know, but still," she couldn't hide her disappointment.

"On your way for delivery, you can be with her till she drives you away," he said to cheer her up.

"Won't she play midwife to me if needed," she said, and added mischievously. 'Don't fail to meet her, but before you start looking at her, see her with my eyes."

"Send me blindfolded then," he said, amused.

"Never mind, she would bare your eyes to see my reflections in them,' she said, and thought, 'and hers as well.'

"Shall I bring her to you as the captive of my eyes," he said, striking a chivalrous pose.

"How I wish you could do that," she said closing her eyes.

"What a friendship!" he said taking her into his arms.

"It's more of love," said Sandhya dreamily.

"The true test of love lies in its ability to endure the longing," he said, and wondered about the longevity of Roopa's infatuation for him.

Sinking into Raja Rao's embrace, Sandhya could sense the feeling behind his comment, and hoped that Roopa's love for him would endure in spite of everything.

## **Chapter 22** **Villainy of Life**

Alighting from the Dakshin Express that morning, Raja Rao headed towards the Ritz Hotel in Hyderabad. Though the anxiety he felt all through the journey for Roopa wore him out, on his way to the hotel, he felt rejuvenated with the thought that he was breathing the very air scented by her breath.

'If only I could stay with her,' he thought dreamily in the auto he hired. 'How surprised she would be if only I could knock at her door right away? And seeing my luggage, how excited she would be at the prospect of hosting me for woman loves nothing more than tending the man she loves. Besides, won't she know that my staying there would afford opportunities for our flirtation, and even more, who knows? But then without Sandhya around, it would be highly embarrassing for me with Sathyam. Also, how could I entertain my clients in their house?'

However, having checked into the hotel, he was engrossed in adjusting his plan to meet the client's last minute changes, but, once in the café for breakfast, he started picturing his prospective encounter with Roopa later, 'What would be her emotions in our interactions? It has been five months since we've last met but still it feels as though I've seen her only the other day! Hasn't her persona got etched in my memory to the last nuance? How excited she would be upon learning that I'm planning to be on my own here, to be near her. Why can't I suggest that she might assist me as my secretary? Looks like, it's now or never for our affair. If I fail to declare my love now, it might be too late later, if it's not already so. Well, let me see what fate has in store for us, but for now, I've to meet her before Sathyam returns home from his office.'

While he went on visualizing the possibilities of their future liaison, as if to bring him back into the present reality, the bearer brought the bill for his signature.

By calling it a day early at Subba Reddy's 'Sai Constructions', Raja Rao reached Roopa's place in high spirits, by three-thirty, but as he began ascending the steps to her penthouse, as though his hopes got into a descending mode, he was beset with doubts, 'How can I assume that she still loves me?'

Though greeted by the door lock that only lent substance to his surmise, nevertheless, he decided to knock at the landlady's door to ascertain the situation.

'What if she's already into some affair?' he wondered as he went down the steps to enquire about her. 'Has she gone for a rendezvous with her lover?'

However, Lalitha, the landlady, after ascertaining his credentials, told him,

"Only last night Sathyam underwent appendectomy. It was all so sudden, and there was no time for her even to inform his parents. It was only this morning that my old man sent them a telegram. Poor Roopa is managing it all, on her own; but she's really amazing! You can meet them in the Gaganmahal Nursing Home, it's just nearby."

"How sad," he said, striving not to show his relief on Roopa's account, and thought on his way to the nursing home, 'the poor fellow, but how untimely it is.'

When he pushed aside the curtain of that cabin, he saw Roopa administering some medicines to Sathyam, and as his eyes met Sathyam's, she turned around to find him to her perplexing delight.

"How do you feel now?" Raja Rao asked Sathyam.

"I'm much better but what a surprise," said Sathyam feebly.

"When have you come?" Roopa asked Raja Rao at length.

"Only in the morning," he replied, looking at her intently to probe his standing in her affection.

"Where're you put up?" she asked him.

"At the Ritz Hotel," he said, echoing her disappointment.

"You should've stayed with us," she said not hiding her vexation.

"I would've but I came on some official work," he said sounding apologetic.

"So what, we wouldn't have disturbed your work," she persisted.

"I agree; I shall take note of it for the future," he said.

"You better do that," she said without taking her eyes off him. "What about Sandhya?"

"She's fine, but misses you as ever," he said, and added as he handed her an envelope, "she doesn't trust my communication skills."

"She's right," she commented meaningfully as she opened the envelope, and having savoured the letter, informed Sathyam, "she sent her love and regards for you."

"It's very nice of her, don't forget to convey my affection for her," said Sathyam to Raja Rao.

"No way, you would be the second person she enquires about," said Raja Rao and turning to Roopa added smilingly, "Need I tell who the first one is."

"Tell her that I'm unhappy with her for allowing you check into a hotel," she said.

"Won't that add to my woes?" smiled Raja Rao forcing a smile on her lips.

Thereby, sitting by the bedside, Raja Rao entered into a conversation with Sathyam befitting the occasion.

"How long are you here?" she asked Raja Rao interrupting them at length.

"I'll be leaving the day after tomorrow morning by the A P Express," he said, and having noticed a disappointed look on her face, he added, "If you find time to scribble something, I'll pick it up tomorrow evening."

After spending some uneasy time with them, in time, he departed in disillusionment.

'What an inopportune time to meet her when the opportunity itself came after such a long time,' he felt as he came out of the room. Feeling let down by the dame luck thus, it didn't even occur to him to turn back to see if Roopa came after him.

'Oh, doesn't his mere presence vibrate my soul,' thought Roopa as if in a trance. 'Surely, he's my man, if there's ever one. But where have all his searching glances gone? Why has he failed to bestow at least one amorous gaze to add to my memory bank? Instead, he was absorbed with Sathyam nearly neglecting me, didn't he? Well, what else could he have done in Sathyam's presence than keep a poker face for me? Yet, how handsome did he seem even in his morose look. But what a queer rendezvous has fate chosen for me with my beloved!'

Soon, as she began realising her failure in finding an avenue to lead him to her love, she couldn't help but think dejectedly, 'Why didn't I take him out on some pretext; at least I should've accompanied him till the gate; surely that wouldn't have seemed odd to Sathyam or even compromised me with the hospital staff. But then, wasn't it all so sudden and unexpected, and lo, before I could gather my wits, he was gone!'

'But when he comes tomorrow, I shouldn't slip up at any cost,' she resolved. 'Hasn't he suggested that I could scribble something, for him to pick up? Given the constraints for a dialogue of love, isn't it his innovation to let me bare my heart in writing. Won't I make it a memorable one for him, nay for us? Surely, he would exchange his own note of ardour to be on par after all.'

'But can I ever express my love to him in writing as I experience it?' she thought as she began figuring out how to pen her maiden love letter. 'Can a ream of paper carry the craving of my soul to him? Besides, won't borrowed phrases mar love letters, robbing them off originality? How else can a woman let her man see her soul than in lovemaking? Why not I simply write, Raja, just take me into your arms to know how you're loved. Yes, those dozen words will convey more than a million can carry.'

At that, while she felt excited, back in the Ritz, he remained pensive.

'What rotten luck! I couldn't even take a proper look at her. But how could I have, given the circumstances. Oh, but even in her glimpses, she looks as ravishing as ever, doesn't she? If anything, in her pensive mood, she's more bewitching, and ardent than ever before. Yet can I ever make her mine?' thought Raja Rao, all again.

As if to reassure himself, of her possible possession, he recalled her longing look and furtive glances, 'It looks like she still loves me. Isn't that clear from her amorous gaze? Why, it's her craving for me that sustains my longing for her, isn't it? If ever we could make it, then our unfolding passion could lead us into a whirlpool of eroticism, won't it?'

What with his spirits revived thus, as the room bell rang, he thought, 'Well, there's always a tomorrow, but for now, it must be Subba Reddy.'

"I've dragged Ranga Reddy along for the pleasure of your acquaintance," stormed in Subba Reddy with his friend.

"I believe in reciprocity," said Raja Rao in welcome.

"Ranga Reddy owns half of Rayalaseema," said Subba Reddy, patting him.

"You can safely reckon a trillionth of it for a realistic figure. But I'm sure he couldn't be off the mark when he says that you're an architect to watch," said Ranga Reddy to Raja Rao.

"Let a peg or two make way into his system and then we can savour Raja Rao's unfolding versatility," said Subba Reddy, pulling a 'Black Knight' from his briefcase.

"Our friend is all praise for your ideas about the way dwellings are to be built," said Ranga Reddy, sipping the whisky.

"It's only a better talent that can spot some talent in others," said Raja Rao heartily.

"Let's divert the topic to the fair sex for any way it's all bricks and cement all day long. If Ranga Reddy too wants to turn into a realtor, so be it," said Subba Reddy, pouring another for him.

"You seem to be putting ideas into my head," said Ranga Reddy.

"It's not a bad idea at all, but let's first finish with women as Subba Reddy won't get started otherwise," said Raja Rao mirthfully.

"What's the latest in the capital's grapevine?" asked Subba Reddy.

"A man could have murdered his wife for gain, or else a bored housewife could've taken a paramour. That way, what's there to the scandals but for the change of characters, the plot being the same? As for the grapevine, isn't it all that is there to it?" said Ranga Reddy dismissively.

"But the thrill of it never wanes, does it?" said Subba Reddy.

"That's true, whether we admit to it or not, all of us eye the scandals involving illicit sex. At the back of it could be our innate urge to be the lover of every desirable dame that is there, and so it's as if we supplant those paramours in our daydreams. So as to savour the sleaze, we convert private affairs into public scandals and if the involved were to be rich and famous, then we publicize their liaisons in the tabloids," said Raja Rao.

"Whatever, it's well settled by now that all men are promiscuous though some claim to be romantic, whatever that may mean," said Subba Reddy.

"Promiscuity is man's nature while romanticism is one's culture," said Raja Rao.

"Isn't it mere semantics?" said Subba Reddy dismissively.

"I think unrestrained urge is promiscuity while passion refined is romanticism," averred Raja Rao nevertheless.

"That sounds very much true," said Ranga Reddy glancing at his watch. "Now, I've something up my sleeve. Raja Rao *garu*, I'm doing nothing worthwhile at present, though I've the means to take up almost anything. Why not we join hands to rebuild Hyderabad, or rather more of it?"

"I'm planning to shift here soon though not to turn into a realtor, and in case you take the plunge into the real estate, I would love to be your consultant," said Raja Rao.

"Done, let's schedule it for this *vijayadasami*. Meanwhile, I would tie up the loose ends," said Ranga Reddy.

"Three cheers, as and when you set up shop here, you can count on my account too," said Subba Reddy.

The next afternoon, when Raja Rao was all set to leave for the Gaganmahal Nursing Home to meet Roopa, he got a call from his boss, asking him to join him for a crucial meeting next day at Bangalore. As he had not much time left to catch the Bangalore Express, he rushed to the reception to checkout.

'Roopa would be terribly upset, but how can I meet her now. What if I wire my resignation and sort out things with her. No, that's not fair even for love's sake though it's said that everything is fair in it, is it? It's a matter of my professional credibility that I can ill-afford to lose, even for her sake. So, I shall talk to her on phone and hint my love and devotion,' he thought dejectedly.

Soon, as the telephone operator at the Nursing Home told him that Roopa was not to be found there, Raja Rao left the message of his departure for her, and half-heartedly headed towards the Nampally Railway Station.

Thereafter, when Roopa reached the hospital in anticipation, as the unexpected development devastated her, she sank on her knees, alarming receptionist to summon the doctor on duty. At length, having been recuperated by the timely care, a distraught Roopa began to lament, 'I shouldn't have gone home at all, but then, how my mother-in-law insisted that I rest for a while. Oh, how I wanted to hang on here till he came; it's as if I had a premonition! What's the sense in living if hard luck were to trick me at every turn in my life? Had I been around when he rang up, wouldn't I have blurted out about my love for him? Why doubt, haven't I prepared myself for every eventuality? Even if I were to develop cold feet in the end, I could've still cried over the line to convey my love. But then, why didn't he just peep in, before leaving? Shouldn't he have, if he really cared; why did he leave me in the lurch? How could he be so cruel to me?'

'Surely he could've come, if only he cared,' she continued in her depression. 'Has he, as feared, lost interest in me? Did he call on us yesterday only at Sandhya's behest? Was all his courtesy only for the old times' sake? Hadn't I noticed that his looks lacked passion? How I deluded myself then, thinking that he could've been inhibited in Sathyam's presence? Has his passion dissipated in our separation? Do I count for him anymore?'

Feeling miserable, and unable to steady her thoughts, she went home, as though to remove herself from that unlucky setting.

'Is it possible that his passion was no more than a passing interest in me?' she felt nervous as she lay in her bed. 'Am I destined to be disappointed in love as well? If only he cared to tell me about it, I would've reconciled to my fate, but can I really? No, I can't live without him; don't I want him at any cost? But what am I to do now to make him mine? What if I beg him for love, but, did ever begging begot love? It's cold end that's in store for an unrequited love, if not, Sathyam would've been enjoying its warmth in his hearth for so long now. So be it but my destiny is linked to his passion for me; I'll be blessed if he takes me, and if not, I would be doomed forever. Will he or won't he, oh, how this suspense is killing me?'

'Surely, I was cheated by fate to air my love for him, but won't my destiny let me have the last laugh in our liaison,' she thought as she pulled her missive for him and the letter she wrote to Sandhya from her blouse.

Stirred by what she had written to him, she began reviewing her situation, all again, 'won't anxiety consume me before all else? It might as well, so, why not I post it to him forcing fate to reveal its hand? But what if Sandhya reads it by mistake; in her longing for my letter, surely, she might not notice its belonging, and won't that seal my fate. If only I knew his office address! But how am I to procure it now without giving rise to unwarranted suspicions? So, is it that I've reached the dead end of love; well time only would tell if my life keeps me alive for him to rescue me.'

Roopa reached that stage in love when a woman feels obliged to keep her love alive so as to sustain her belief in her ability to love and be loved.

## **Chapter 23**

### **Playboy at Play**

In the mid-January that *sankranti*, the exhibition ground in Hyderabad came alive as the fair curious of all ages swamped the premises. While some sauntered in and out of the assorted pavilions, others flocked to the eateries, but, it's the garment shops that took the cake at the annual fare. All the same, the really curious, so it seemed, stood rooted at the vantage points to ogle the bevy of beauties that made it to the annual fair.

In the pavilion of the Austral Industries, its young executive director, ostensibly reviewing the sales figures, was figuring out the vital statistics of the female visitors. What was of particular interest to him was the impression the air-conditioners, their new product, made on the potential buyers. Satisfied with the bottom line, he came out into the open to ascertain the proclivities of the passing women, abounded by then.

'Almost every dame in her youth is beddable,' he thought, lighting his India King. 'While some may be repeatable, rarely are they keepable. But, each of them is obtainable, though with some of them; it may take some time, and even a little effort. Yet, it's the quick-fire affair that affords man ego satisfaction as well as ready gratification; besides, won't that make it easy for him to bring the curtains down, when it suits him, though women tend to hang on to the illicit stage that much longer.'

'But should any lass resist long enough, then it would be a different ball game for the adventurer,' he continued with his soliloquy. 'Her reluctance to give in would only enhance her appeal by the day, deepening his desire by the night, which makes it difficult for him to rescind, and what's worse, he might need the nuptial knots to loosen her shackles of passion. And when it comes to the married man, courting maidens could be a hindrance, for they harp on his divorcing the spouse as a prerequisite for their favours. But luckily for men, the hard nuts to crack are few and far between, and strangely, the harder the struggle to win women over, the sweeter would be the pleasure in having them, isn't it?'

'But with their ripen wares, aren't married women truly mouthwatering?' he continued to delve into the proclivities of the fair sex. 'Thankfully, they are ready-made for liaisons, though some of them may need a man's helping hand to cross the threshold of fidelity for them to indulge in their raunchy beds. By the way, what else draws man to a woman than his desire to access her persona specifics; and once drawn, won't she bare her veiled assets for her fancied man to dabble with her private accounts? But then, after a few of his jaunts to her favoured joint, what else would be left in her for her lover to explore and for her to offer? Thus, thereafter, how could she cater to his need for variety and what else she could conjure up to sustain her enticement? Oh, the poor thing, seeing his interest in her wane, won't she turn more so eager to keep him in good humor? But then, the more she gives him; even more she satiates him, and its only time before she finds her paramour bypass her favours for lesser flavours. That's the woman's bother, anyway, why should I bother?'

Noticing a pretty lass of twenty pass him by, he thought, 'Doesn't she swing her seat as though to suggest that there's a way right up there? Why, won't the heaving boobs and a bulging bottom with something passable for a waist in between sum up woman for man? Didn't La Rochefoucauld say that man is the sum total of all the women he had ever loved; probably what he meant was that the measure of a man's worth is the aggregate sum of the vital statistics of the women he laid. Why not I maintain a record of them all, at least from now on, to know my net worth at the time of my death, why shouldn't I?'

'Not a bad idea,' he felt amused, and pursued his course in the applied sex. 'Nature made me a ladies' man and fortune gave me the means to lure them. Oh, how the cupid fellow thought it fit to endow women with an ear for flattery as if to help his own ilk worm their way into their arms. Why wouldn't a push with praise and a prod with gift make the babes bare their boobs? Besides, aren't women blessed with a weakness for the successful men? How money bestows status upon men that entails power over women, enabling the well-heeled to pick up their fancied dames, so to say, at the drop of a hat at that! Didn't I taste the amorous flavours of countless randies in assorted ways; it's as if every dame is ready for a lay, well, but on the sly. Isn't snaring women into bed as easy as luring the greedy into a bad bargain, with the right tactics? But when

it comes to women, man also needs the requisite tools to handle those fleshy wares in their horny frames. Then, won't it be a case of quick fixing them in wanton liaisons?'

'But access makes all the difference between the conquest and failure, isn't it?' he felt as he thought about his insatiate passions. 'If not for the lack of it, wouldn't I've laid every woman I'd ever fancied? Given half a chance, won't women want to explore their passions in their paramours' private parts, but it's their men, who invariably turn out to be the spoilers by throwing a spanner in the cupid's works-in-progress. Why, one needs only to show a passing interest in the wife, and the husband can be expected to do the rest to put paid to it; not content with shrouding his wife, he cold-shoulders the trespasser as if to nip his passion in the bud. It's as though men are prone to policing their wives than husbanding them; so, as though to celebrate the poetic justice to their predicament, won't women turn gleeful whenever they cuckold their caretakers?'

'But working women come on a different platter altogether, don't they?' he seemed to sum up the essence of philandering. 'Courtied by the flirting colleagues, aren't they clearly cut out for liaisons what with the alibis their workplaces provide them to cover up their flings? And luckily for the resourceful, it's their fancy to dress well that makes the vain among them to seek paramours to fill their bare wardrobes. How many of them undress in the adulterous arena to cut a figure for themselves in the public view; haven't I come across many such. It's their short-term needs that make those jaunts so lively with them, and the welcome thing about them is that, when the time comes to hang up the boots, there won't be any hangovers. Oh, it's as if all the pleasures of life are packed in the female frames for the favored to savour them!'

Seeing a shapely woman get into his pavilion, he followed her instinctively and approached her readily.

"Have you tried our kitchen items, designed for women like you," he said enticingly.

"I find your mixer-grinder quite handy," she said, looking flattered.

"Part of the credit goes to you for its intelligent use," he said looking into her eyes.

"Thank you," she said, and tickled by her vanity, she blushed to the roots.

"Why not try our air-conditioner, I mean in the guest room," he said enticingly.

"We don't need one, at least, for now," she said in embarrassment.

"If you please, I'll get one installed free of charge," he said tantalizingly.

"But why?" she said, looking puzzled.

"I'm looking for a testimonial from a pretty woman like you," he said suggestively.

"Let me think it over," she said, as she couldn't refuse being unequal to his flattery.

"Your address for my reminders," he pushed a pad and a pen into her hand

"I appreciate your customer care," she said as she scribbled.

"What are your convenient timings to receive," he said.

"I'm a housewife," she said overwhelmed by his advances.

"It's a pleasure meeting you Mrs. Vanaja," he said extending his hand.

"Good night, Mr...'

Having tentatively withdrawn her hand from his, and amusedly confused, she left him to his thoughts.

'Isn't she a pretty prospect, won't some follow-up help? Let her in the meantime ponder over the tempting proposal besides playing a guessing game with my name.

Having been sourced in her anatomy itself isn't mystery the key to open woman's heart to man's thought?' he surmised, pleased with himself.

As he came out to watch her figure from behind, lighting his cigarette, he felt, 'Why not I go to The Nizam Club for a change? Who knows, I may come across a new prospect there.'

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When the playboy executive was about to move out of the ground, seeing a woman of about twenty come nearby, he stopped in his tracks.

'Oh God, a real stunner here!' he ogled at her greedily. 'What a flowing figure! Had my roving eye ever caught hold of a more desirable dame than this? Dream stuff she is, dreamier than any in my wildest of dreams! It's as if she's shaped for sex, isn't she? She's the dame to be laid, and there's no mistaking it. How surprising that she carries a divine visage and a voluptuous form on the same frame? Won't that make her the Goddess of Sex in the pantheon, if there's one? But is she a resident or here on an outing? Whatever, she is too good to be lost. If only she goes into our pavilion, and even otherwise, I shall follow her to her doorstep, be it at the other end of the world. I must ensure that I do not lose sight of her in this god-damn rush, and when I get her that would be the jackpot of my life. And I shall get her, whatever it might take.'

While he went towards her, as if in a trance, what with the fag burning his fingers, he came to his senses and saw a man joining her with two cones of popcorn. As the incomer bore a familiar look - won't his nose give him away in a million - he readily realized that it was Sathyam, his long lost friend, and rushed to him excitedly.

"Hi buddy, do you get me?" he asked Sathyam tentatively.

"Oh, Prasad!" said Sathyam.

"Glad we've met at last," said Prasad extending his hand to him.

"Heard you're a bigwig now," said Sathyam taking the hand after handing one cone to Roopa.

"Don't go by hearsays but tell me about you," said Prasad.

"She's my better half," said Sathyam and extended the other cone towards Prasad. "This is our half."

"You've become witty but lost your wits," said Prasad picking up some popcorn.

"What do you mean by that?" protested Sathyam in jest.

"You haven't introduced the newcomer to the old-timer," said Prasad smilingly.

"Oh, sorry, she's my Roopa," said Sathyam.

"How do you do ma'am," Prasad greeted Roopa.

"Fine sir, thank you," said Roopa.

"Now, tell me all about you," said Sathyam to Prasad.

'I've to play my cards carefully,' thought Prasad, affecting hiccups. 'It's all so sudden, isn't it? It pays to play down my success before I get into the winning position, and till then I should mildly impress Roopa without unduly alarming Sathyam. Unless he sees the present to be an extension of our modest past, he may not be too keen to renew our old friendship, and that would be that.'

"Do you want to call it quits here itself? I thought we've met not to part again," said Prasad at length.

"Won't I drag you all the way to my place," said Sathyam taking Prasad's hand.

"Then, allow me to wind up," Prasad pulled Sathyam into the pavilion as Roopa followed them.

"You don't know how I used to wish that we met," said Sathyam in continuation.

"Same is the case with me, and thank Roopa Devi for our reunion," said Prasad.

"Roopa would do sir; but how am I responsible for your chance meeting?" she said embarrassedly.

"But for women, would men ever venture out on their own?" said Prasad half in jest.

"I agree, we owe all this to her," said Sathyam.

"Just give me a few minutes as our manager takes you around," said Prasad.

'Good that she turned out to be Sathyam's wife!' thought Prasad in excitement as he went into his makeshift cabin. 'What a welcome development it is! But how on earth did he land up with such a lass; maybe, owing to my destiny to have her, who knows? Whatever, won't his friendship prove to be a thoroughfare for her favours? Yet, won't she need some wooing as well? I might as well dazzle her by flaunting my credentials, but that would only push Sathyam into a shell straight away. Won't that hinder my endeavour, and what's worse, sensing trouble, he might erect checkpoints all the way to her bedchamber. Even if I were to muster Senna's skills and Sorkar's stealth, looks like the Formula One won't do for her final favour as Sathyam would ensure that I end up in the pit on my way to the putt, why won't he? Given that an overt courting would be unyielding, I better sneak into her bed under the cover of his camaraderie. Going by his confidence quotient, he shouldn't have made much in his career; so, the winning formula is to downplay my success to develop a sustainable equation with him. Then, won't his goodwill issue me the visa to land in his wife's lap, and that should be fine with me.'

'But what about Roopa?' he tried to analyze her proclivities. 'Doesn't she wear that disinterested look I'm so familiar with in women; maidens embrace it when they are lovesick, and in the married, it's proof enough that their pudding has turned stale. Isn't it clear that she's unexcited about her marital state? Won't that make her a candidate for conquest? But yet that subtle awkwardness discernible in women, when attracted to men, is missing in her, isn't it? Making it worse, she doesn't seem to be vainglorious to flatter my way to her favours. Won't that call for a change of tactics? As it appears, it needs some sustained effort, and a lot many seductive tactics to trick her into an affair. But for all that, it appears to be a conditional access, after all. Thou art so near and yet so far, oh, Roopa dear!'

'But, how to go about it?' he tried to analyze his moves to checkmate Roopa in her own den. 'What could be the path of least resistance to possess her voluptuous frame? Won't the first few steps decide the outcome of this ticklish tangle? While cultivating her man's confidence, I must undermine her own defenses as well. But with a stunning wife like that, any man would be on guard to see through the motives of all comers. Why not I vouch a sisterly feeling for her to keep him off guard? Won't that cut both ways in our triangle for I can get closer to her as brother and then worm my way into her bed as paramour. What a great idea to get closer to a woman without alerting her man, indeed it is.'

Carried by his brainwave, a hearty Prasad reached the Sathyams with great expectations.

"I'm at your service now," said Prasad.

"Let's go to our place," said Sathyam.

"If you haven't brought your car, I'll hire an auto," said Prasad

"Good that I've left my Lambretta at home but I thought you must be moving around in limousines," said Sathyam unable to hide his surprise.

"I use the office Ambassador that's in the garage now," said Prasad, who by then had instructed his chauffeur to report for duty the next day.

"You haven't changed a wee bit Prasad; Roopa, he's always been an adjusting type," said Sathyam in apparent admiration for his friend.

"Now tell me," said Sathyam as they walked towards an exit gate.

"Since I've spotted you, I'll have the first ear too," said Prasad in jest.

"After graduation, I joined the State Government, and have been working ever since at the Secretariat. Now I'm a Senior Assistant, waiting to become a Section Officer. In a nutshell, that's all there is to my life," said Sathyam.

"But you've missed the essence of it all; when did you get married?" said Prasad.

"We're two years old," said Sathyam smilingly.

"So, your wit is unceasing, love marriage, I suppose," said Prasad.

"It's love at first sight, but in *pellichupulu* but I've heard yours is a love match," said Sathyam.

"Yes and no," said Prasad as they got into an auto.

Soon reaching Domalaguda, they got into the Sathyams' penthouse.

"If I won't inconvenience my sister, I would like to have my dinner here; ever since Rani has been to Delhi, I've been eating junk, and it's been a week now," said Prasad as they settled.

"You're welcome sir," Roopa smiled her invitation.

"It's sisterly," said Prasad heartily.

"Now tell me all," said Sathyam.

"Let my sister serve some water first to quench my thirst," said Prasad.

"Won't you like to hear his story?" said Sathyam, as Roopa turned back after giving them some water.

"Buddy, I'm afraid you're giving an impression to my sister that there is a great deal of interest attached to my life," said Prasad, "but for matrimony, my life is as ordinary as any. Rani was my classmate in Delhi and we happened to like each other though I didn't dare daydream our marriage for her dad is quite a big shot there. But without my knowledge, as she pressured him for my hand, his fondness for her and my eligibility, otherwise, made us man and wife in the end. Now I'm here tending a sick unit that he took over only last year, and at home, we've Gaurav and Omathi to engage my family time. That's about it all."

"Surely your wife is a remarkable person," said Sathyam.

"No denying that but you're better off for my sister," said Prasad, patting Sathyam while looking at Roopa.

"I've to see Rani to concur with you," said Sathyam.

"Rani is dear to me as wife and Roopa endears me as sister, so you can rely upon my judgment, can't you?" said Prasad.

"I'm lucky that way," said Sathyam looking at Roopa in admiration.

While the friends continued to reminisce about their childhood days, Roopa was engaged in preparing the dinner.

'How lucky is Rani to have married a handsome man like him whom she loves as well,' Roopa contemplated. 'But why does he refer to me as sister at every turn? How odd that a handsome young man should keep calling me sister. Why, even Ramu, being so close, doesn't address me that way. It's as if the sisterly reference takes something away from my persona, or to be honest, it hurts my vanity. To tell the truth, maybe it's a bit of both; what if I too start addressing him as brother to make him feel sissy? It's no more than a mere form and any way; this guy is my husband's friend and just another interesting character, no more and no less. That's all there's to it, isn't it?'

However, at the dining table, Prasad was even more effusive in his praises, and as if icing his seductive cake, he said in the end, 'it's like an *annaprasana* for me, tasting food for the first time in my life.'

"You exaggerate a great deal sir," said a visibly embarrassed Roopa.

"You'll know how I feel if only you could taste your preparations with my palate. How I wish Sathyam will invent an empirical formula of relativity of palates to prove me right. Don't you know how good he is at maths?" said Prasad in pursuit of his game-plan.

"Why don't you stay back tonight," suggested an apparently flattered Sathyam.

"I would have loved to, but I've got to go now," said Prasad, wanting to create the impression that he was not the one to take undue advantage of his friend's generosity.

"Till Rani's return, do join us at our dining table," said Sathyam.

"It's worth going miles to savour her preparations and enjoy your company; but why trouble my sister," said Prasad.

"You're always welcome," said Roopa in spite of herself.

"I'm no fool to miss out on the fare; thank you and good night to both of you," said Prasad heartily.

Though Prasad said that he would go on his own, Sathyam insisted on seeing him off at the street corner; and returning home, he said to Roopa,

"Thanks to the small world, we've met again. I hope you liked your new brother."

"Looks like he's an interesting fellow," said Roopa.

"It goes to his credit that there's no change in his attitude, in spite of his elevation. Don't we see people putting on airs though they wouldn't get to spell the 'S' of success? But how it's rumoured that a businessman roped him in for his plain daughter! What a pity their love match is dubbed as a mercenary marriage; well if seen with jealous eyes, all that is seen is green, isn't it? I'm sure we'll pick up the threads from where we had left them," said Sathyam in an apparent satisfaction that only childhood friends could afford one.

However, Roopa, struggling to catch up with the elusive sleep that night, took to contemplation, 'If only Raja were to be in this man's place, what a different time it would have been! What would he be doing now? Does he recall me at all, leave alone craving for me. But what separates these two remarkably handsome men? Whereas Prasad's demeanor is demanding, Raja's persona is compelling, isn't it? True, Prasad exudes self-confidence but Raja personifies self-worth itself. No denying that Prasad is handsome, but oh, Raja has that exquisite sex appeal, rare in men. No doubt, Prasad is an interesting person, but is not Raja a lovable persona. Prasad could be a ladies' man

but Raja is a romantic hero, a rare breed at that. And above all, Raja is the he-man, and more so my dream man, there's no mistaking that.'

It's as though it is in the nature of woman to value herself by the worth of her man more than her own self-worth.

## **Chapter 24**

### **Scheming the Theme**

'Satisfactory, isn't it?' thought Prasad on his way back to his home. 'Haven't I played my cards with finesse? Surely, Sathyam's dinner gesture could be a pointer to what might portend. Yet the proof of the pudding is only in the eating, isn't it? Anyway, it's still a long way to get there. But then, the goddess willing, won't I have it someday? Well, a good start could ensure the lead all the way.'

'Sathyam is a simpleton as ever,' he thought, trying to analyze his friend and his wife. 'If a man of thirty were to remain that way, he must either be kind-hearted or dung-headed and / or both. It looks like Sathyam is a bit of both. However, Roopa - what an appropriate name she has - remains a puzzle, and I must ensure that she's dazzled enough not to begin quizzing me. What's it that makes this fabulous woman so irresistible? Surely, there's much more to her persona than her oozing sex appeal. Well, the more one spies her; all the more he gets obsessed with her. It's as if her whole body is endued with a magnetic layer to keep the male gaze glued to her, isn't it? If not, how can one explain her dusky complexion? Oh, some god could have turned horny while making her! Why else is she the femme fatale of the first order?'

So it occurred to him, 'Unless I'm on guard, I might as well trip on the path of attraction and even fall in love with her to my hurt. Surely that would be an unwelcome development, wouldn't it be? By the way, would sex become any more pleasurable if penetrated with love? Why at all this doubt, as if love would take that any deeper into her. Hah, hah! But, it's the lust that vests the thrusts with power and any woman would know that for sure. Whatever, Roopa should be had before I develop any emotional hiccups for her. Only by taking her to bed early could I feel at ease, and remain safe in her enchanting company for which I must patiently hasten her into my grip. It doesn't seem easy though, and I should be prepared even for a long haul, but once in bed, she would be worth her weight in gold, nay platinum, to be precise.'

Following his time-tested tactic of making women ponder a little over his absence, with Roopa in mind, he made it late to Sathyam's place.

"What happened, we've been waiting so long for you," greeted Sathyam.

"Wait, I'll explain; first let me apologize to my sister," said Prasad dramatically.

"Oh, it's all right," said Roopa visibly embarrassed.

"I won't take anything less than your forgiveness," said Prasad looking into her eyes.

"What's wrong with you?" said Roopa all perplexed as Sathyam looked on amused.

"I know how vexatious it is to wait," said Prasad to her.

"Okay my friend, you're forgiven," said Sathyam smilingly.

"You should know that I've skipped lunch to savor my sister's preparations," said Prasad, soaping his hands at the wash basin.

"I too have a *raakhi* sister in her friend Sandhya. What a sweet soul she is," said Sathyam reminiscently.

"Who can better my sister in any way?" said Prasad looking into Roopa's eyes, and turning to Sathyam, he added, "When is the next *rakshaabandhan* coming up?"

"That I'll let you know," said Sathyam. "Though I regard Roopa no less, know that Sandhya is all too different."

"Maybe, but Roopa is Roopa," said Prasad with apparent conviction.

Struck by his direct manner, Roopa looked at him in awe, and thought in puzzlement, 'Isn't he showing an uncommon interest in me. What is he up to? Though he calls me 'sister', his manner doesn't bear any brotherly mien, does it really? Why, won't his demeanour betray lust? Oh, what a hypocrite he is to get into this sisterly mess. Isn't it proving to be awkward for him and embarrassing for me as well? Anyway, for me, he's just a handsome man and an interesting company. All the same, he's like any other man in my life that's all, is he not?'

After a couple of visits, Prasad failed to turn up for a week, leaving Sathyam in jitters, even as Roopa felt that she was missing him as well.

'Haven't I got used to his company,' she thought many a time, during that time. 'Or am I craving for his flattery? Hasn't he developed the knack of praising me without alarming Sathyam? And, it's not at all brotherly really for when Sathyam is not around, how he intonates my name in passionate tunes! How longingly he espies me, all the while holding his gaze at my bosom. Isn't his carnal bother troubling his alleged brotherly candour? What hypocrisy, worse still, is it his strategy to hide his designs on me from Sathyaam? Is it that I'm indulging in his character assassination by merely surmising? But then, isn't his want for me crystal clear to me. Whatever it is, it's his problem, and I've nothing to do with him that way anyway.'

'But is it as simple as that?' she felt as she developed second thoughts. 'Am I not missing him, and willy-nilly, getting attracted to him? But, how's that possible when I'm head and heels in love with my Raja darling. Then, am I flirting with him? Oh, no, I just happen to enjoy his company, bored that I am. That's all there is to it.'

When Prasad finally arrived, Roopa was all alone in her home.

"What's this vanishing act, mister?" Roopa found herself asking him.

"You know I had no way to tell you," he said staring into her eyes.

"Sathyam became a fish out of water all the while," she said avoiding his gaze.

"I felt miserable throughout, need I tell you why?" he said, unmasking his desire for her.

'So, he wants me. Does he not look lustful to the bones? But then, how Raja's romantic eyes caress my frame conveying his craving for my soul. Won't their eyes portray the contrast between lust and love? Surely they do. But am I not imagining things, strung by my craving for Raja? How does it matter anyway, when I'm clear whom I want to have? To be clear is to be real, isn't it? Well, how could one grasp the reality of life without clarity of thought?' she thought looking away from him.

"Where are your thoughts taking you to?" he said smilingly.

"Oh nothing of that sort," she said embarrassedly.

"Haven't you heard it said that the attributes of woman's utterances have reverse inferences?" he said mischievously, and dwelled upon the proverb to probe the proclivities of the fair sex.

The male perception that women are ambiguous by nature is not unfounded for they tend to dissemble. But then, why shouldn't they, anyway? Won't men role model

women to self-serve their vested interests, and judge them on the scale of conformity? Since the male tenets are at variance with the feminine instincts, won't women come to pretend? So, unable to comprehend women, won't the confounded men end up according the benefit of doubt to them, at every turn that is. It's thus, men come to hoist themselves on their own petard, and deservedly at that, so it seems.

However, before Prasad could get Roopa's reply, he felt Sathyam's smack on his back.

"You know, a businessman's time is not his time," said Prasad.

"Had you sounded us, we would've given you Sandhya's address," said Sathyam.

"That's next time but right now it's to my place," said Prasad.

"What's the hurry, can't we make it leisurely?" said Sathyam.

"Rani won't let me be in unless you both come along with me," said Prasad smilingly.

"You know how I value women's sentiments," said Sathyam goading Roopa to get ready.

"I say sentiment is the embodiment of love, what do you say sister?" said Prasad affecting a sneeze

As Roopa gave him a searching look, Prasad smiled in all conceit.

Though they readily headed towards Prasad's bungalow in the Banjara Hills, however, it was well past eleven when the host dropped his guests back at their home.

"What a time it was!" said Sathyam in ecstasy as Prasad left.

"It's plain boring, to say the least," said Roopa unlocking the door.

"Rani is so courteous and the kids too courted us, what else. You're impossible at times," he protested.

"She just condescended to descend to us, no more about it," said Roopa.

"I think its other way round, I felt that she's so affectionate," said Sathyam.

"I bet, stop courting her and you count for nothing to her," she said indignantly.

"At least concede that she's a fine conversationalist," said Sathyam in all eagerness, as if to make Roopa see some merit in Rani.

"If enlightening others about her dad's greatness, her man's smartness, and her kids' brightness, surely she's a great conversationalist. And the advantage of her company is that you might rest your vocal cords while she goes on with her monologues," said Roopa, and added, "but on the flip side, your tired ears lead to a headache."

"That's women's natural trait but you hardly have a good word for me," he said half in jest.

"It's as if you let go an opportunity to have a dig at my people," said Roopa showing Sathyam his place.

"Neither would you miss a chance at nitpicking," he said in disappointment.

Bothered by her bickering, Sathyam couldn't sleep for a while, and disturbed by Prasad's forthrightness, Roopa stayed awake for long.

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'Isn't it a fortnight since I laid the trap for Roopa?' Prasad tried to envisage his station in his adopted route of seduction. 'Though the prey is nowhere in the coming, yet my ardour is despairing for her possession, isn't it? What progress is that anyway? While

jolly well enjoying my attentions, she shows no particular interest in me. But then, hasn't she come to love my company? Maybe, that's the only thing to write home about. Could that be a cause for hope by the way? Though found wanting it's as if she doesn't abhor her married life altogether and that makes her a bed-hedger in the arena of adultery. Courtesy the darling, haven't I coined a new phrase for her flirting ilk. Well, even as a few of them are beddable; all married women are bed-hedgers anyway, are they not?'

'Never mind his dull demeanor, Sathyam must be good in bed,' he contemplated in wonderment. 'Come to think of it, given a good time in bed, women turn blind to the faults of their men, how strange! But then, it's all so different with Rani. Though she loves me, doesn't she think it's her good turn in bed for me? Why, she couldn't get rid of her Electra complex even after six years of sex life with me that made her mother twice over! Before her giant of a father, isn't every man a contemptible midget for her? Short of being explicit, doesn't she tend to imply that I owe my status and all that goes with it to her redoubtable father?'

'No denying it, though,' he went about drawing up the balance sheet of his marital life. 'Of course, it's our marriage that shifted my gear to the fast track of life from the middle-class morass that it was in. If not, I wouldn't have been better placed than Sathyam; maybe, I would've been worse off for all I know. How would've I got a wife like his! Instead of eyeing Roopa, I would have been envying Sathyam now. Supposing I got a winner for a wife, won't it have been a tough ask to keep her wooers at bay, that too with limited resources?'

Then he recalled an incident that his wife had made him privy to. When someone made a pass at her, she told the bewildered dasher that he might hope for her affection after acquiring her father's stature and her husband's looks!

'Looks like man's status provides his woman the fidelity amour against her possible seduction,' he began to think. 'Isn't it better than the chastity belts of yore that would have still left room enough for the deviancies of the enterprising dames? Fidelity apart, won't women of means, being sure about themselves, lose their innate womanliness? Isn't it sad for the fair sex as such, but none seem to care, even men at that! Is it not their vulnerability that makes women charming to men and sans a semblance of timidity, won't femininity suffer? But for all her perfect features, doesn't Rani lack that feminine grace which abounds in Roopa.'

'Am I in love with Roopa then?' he wondered. 'What nonsense, leave alone the patience, do I have the inclination to love? I'm just impatient to take her to bed, at the earliest that is. No more and no less that is.'

He tried to believe that he has assumed.

Shortly thereafter, in the wake of the Prasads' return visit, Sathyam was disappointed.

"How I wish they stayed back for dinner, but then, she has a prior commitment," said Sathyam to Roopa.

"By now you should've known that it's just an excuse. But I won't blame her for she got used to the posh living, it's not fair to expect her to feel at home in our middle-class mess. And to make matters worse for the visitors, you harp on your childhood as if you've stopped living thereafter. I feel these days even Prasad is getting tired of your flogging the dead horse of your childhood," said Roopa indignantly.

"Maybe you've read her right, but I'm sure you're off the mark with him. For that matter, you and Sandhya are no different," he said turning defensive.

"By now you should've known that we don't harp on our past, memorable though it was. Well, we feel the present and dream about our future," she said turning nostalgic.

"How I wish Sandhya visits us on her way to Kakinada. It's a shame that we couldn't make it to Delhi in all these days," he said, sounding apologetic.

Recalling how their plans to go to Delhi went awry at every turn, Roopa thought dejectedly,

'Leave alone letting me gatecrash into Raja's life, fate even keeps me out of Sandhya's embrace.'

As if to place Rani's unease in their place in its contrast, that Sunday afternoon, Tara visited the Sathyams as they were having their tea after siesta. Meanwhile, Sathyam had developed a taste for tea, fed up with giving an explanation to all and sundry about his abstinence.

Strange, indeed, is the way one tends to react to the differing peculiarities in others. None reminds the rotund about the obesity, for the fear of offending them, but when it comes to the lean, unmindful of embarrassing them, all tend to voice their anxiety about his health.

"Got scarce these days, why so?" Roopa welcomed Tara.

"It's all about kids' studies as their exam time is a testing time for the parents. But what's happening to you?" said Tara as Roopa led her into the bedroom.

"If it's typing and shorthand in the mornings, then, it's the course material in the afternoons. The days are passing by," said Roopa

"What about the nights?" said Tara tentatively.

"Nights follow days, don't they?" said Roopa dryly.

"Why not let days lead into nights," said Tara holding Roopa's hand.

"That way, my dreams roll my days and nights all into one," said Roopa dreamily.

"Roopa, some tea for Prasad please," said Sathyam in high pitch.

"Prasad is his childhood friend, see if he interests you," said Roopa to Tara.

"Do you think he's a prospect then?" whispered Tara.

"Why don't you find it out?" said Roopa.

"But you spoil my chances with the prized one," crooned Tara.

"I don't get you," said Roopa a little puzzled.

"Am I not constrained to hook up your fancied man?" said Tara winking at Roopa.

"Stay off from him or else," Roopa said mockingly threatening Tara.

"All right, till you get him," said Tara smilingly.

"Still it's a threat as your timepiece could be turning anticlockwise to make you ever younger," said Roopa, in all admiration for Tara's charms.

"After I'm done with it, I would present that to you," said Tara winking at Roopa,

"But for now, what if he..." winked Roopa back at Tara.

"I'll see," said Tara.

"Good luck," said Roopa and led Tara into the hall with tea for all.

"She's Tara, my friend," said Roopa to Prasad serving him some steaming tea.

"He is my bosom pal and a leading industrialist," said Sathyam to Tara with a sense of pride attached to that.

It is a peculiar characteristic of people that for some inexplicable reason they feel nice about themselves when they cite their acquaintance with the successful.

"How do you do," said Prasad.

"Fine, thank you," said Tara.

"I've just dropped in on my way to attend some business, I'll be back soon," said Prasad as he got up to leave.

"We'll wait for you," said Sathyam a little puzzled, and thought aloud after Prasad had left, "doesn't he look a little confused?"

After a short while thereafter, Tara too left, leaving Sathyam pondering over Prasad's predicament. But, Roopa felt that Prasad had left fearing Tara might smell the rat from his manner, and resort to innuendoes that could alert Sathyam over time. And she knew he would come again to follow his seductive course.

The longing she felt for her lover and the resistance she had to offer to her seducer seemed to push Roopa to the brink of her chastity.

## **Chapter 25**

### **Device of Deceit**

Getting into his Chevrolet, Prasad drove straight to the 7th Street in Domalaguda. Having parked his car near a pan shop, he began chain smoking India Kings in all excitement. Soon, as Tara entered the lane, he waited impatiently for her to reach her house, and as she took note of him, once in, she left the door ajar, in all expectation.

"Who's that?" she said nevertheless at the sound of the door buzzer.

"Your prodigal soul," said Prasad pushing open the door.

"My body welcome," said Tara baring her blouse.

"I'm glad that I've found you at last," said Prasad taking her at her waist.

"Why not say, by default," she said removing his hand.

"Maybe, but still I'm glad," he said, pinching her bottom.

"Are you sure?" she said winking at him.

"Do you need any proof?" he said taking her into his arms.

"Getting scarce is proof enough," she said sarcastically.

"I was busy in the beginning and lost track in the end," he said resting his head on her breasts

"What are you up to now?" she said pressing his head onto her bosom.

"Thanks for not embarrassing me there," he said, said kissing her hand.

"You know I don't compromise my clients?" she said.

"It adds to your value, won't it?" he said.

"Say, you want to come onto my tracks or wish to put me off yours?" she said smilingly.

"Oh you're impossible darling," he said affecting exasperation.

"Tell me, what's cooking up over there?" she said looking into his eyes.

"Nothing of that sort but what about your concern for Roopa?" he said.

"Love thy neighbor, say the scriptures, won't they?" she said smilingly.

"Is it as simple as that?" he said.

"Isn't she too sexy for your comfort?" she retorted.

"To be honest, I've no such ideas unless you want to put some into my head," he said, assuming a grave tone.

"Hard to believe you but you stand no chance anyway," she said.

"Leave her aside, how are things with you?" he said reaching for her lips.

"You're the better judge," she said unveiling her valley.

"It's juicier than ever," he said digging into her bra.

"I trust you're no less spicy now," she felt him where it mattered to her.

"You're welcome to confirm," he said pushing her into her bedroom.

"You're more amorous than ever," he complimented her aggressiveness.

"Competition has become the bottom line in every calling now, isn't it?" she said jokingly.

"So it portends a frenzied time," he said mouthing her assets.

"Can I hope to see you more often now?" she said as he repaired to leave after a while.

"Am I a moron to miss these golden apples," he said, fondling her breasts

"With the pathway to your passion so nearby, maybe you need a passage for your relief close by," she said squeezing him meaningfully.

"Oh, Tara, you could even corrupt the saints!" he said in all admiration.

"Is it so? But let me see if you could seduce her. Meanwhile, you could count on my services," she said nearly emptying his purse.

'How on earth have these two got acquainted?' thought Prasad on his way back to Sathyam's house. 'Is it possible that Roopa doesn't know about Tara's double life? How it could be, given that Roopa is no fool. Hasn't Tara implied that Roopa is a tough nut to crack? Wouldn't she have unsuccessfully tried to rope in Roopa into her fold? It could as well be. But the real thrill of coition lies in seduction, though paying for sex could be paying when the wares are Tara brand. Isn't she as good as ever? She hasn't lost a wee bit, has she? But my appetite for women would have a true satiation only in Roopa's embrace, and that's it. What about seeking Tara's help to entrap Roopa? Surely, she could cooperate, but that might as well backfire. Oh, no, when it comes to seducing women, it's better to keep one's own counsel.'

When he reached Roopa's place eagerly, he found it filled with Sathyam's colleagues, who came to canvass for their candidate for the presidency of their association. So, when Sathyam suggested that Roopa might engage Prasad inside, she excused herself on the pretext of her going to help Lalitha with a new recipe.

'Oh, this god-damn dame,' thought Prasad as he left in irritation at missing the opportunity. 'She won't even let me make a pass at her. Looks like she's lending me all her eyes and ears with her heart tucked away in her attic. So, as it's clear that I can't seduce her by appealing to her mind, I should find a soft spot in her heart to gatecrash into her bed. But how am I to touch her Achilles heel, if there's one? She seems to be

good hearted, so, that could as well be the chink in her chastity. Why not I invoke her pity by declaring my love to her? But what if she cuts me short and shows the door? So, what about writing to her? Why not, as it could be the right move as a love letter could be the best bet for a tentative lover. Won't that afford a lover the required space to modulate his passion even as it gives enough time for his beloved to crystallize her inclinations? But, what if she shows it to Sathyam, won't that put paid to my passion. Besides, won't that show me in a poor light to him?'

'Then what about playing patience with her?' he thought as he began to explore the alternatives. 'Where would all that lead me to? Isn't she coy to my advances without herself giving anything away? Oh, how my wooing is warming her like a winter glove in her icy setting. Won't she like to have it that way as long as she could? When I can't seduce her in the euphoric beginning, how can I win her over later, when familiarity would have bred contempt? So, patience cannot be the right tactic to checkmate women into resigning, so it seems. Well, time is the essence of an affair, to get into, as well as to get out of it, isn't it?'

'So, nothing could be gained by playing the waiting game with her,' he resolved at length. 'I've got to take chances to improve the odds. Let me draft a smart letter and hand it over to her. If she complains to Sathyam, so be it. What more have I got to lose if she is not inclined, after all that?'

After penning the missive that night, he thought about its delivery mode, 'If I try to give it in her house, she might as well refuse to take it. And even if I force it on her, she could tear it in my face. So, I've to confound her in a way that she won't have the wits to refuse it, and having taken it, she won't be able to resist the temptation of reading it, will she? Once she goes through it, she can't keep me in the cold for long, can she? So, if only I could thrust my love letter into her hand, won't she wide open her golden gate of lust for me? And then, the rest would be our erotic history.'

Having hit upon the winning move at length, though he couldn't sleep for long in anticipation, he woke up early to take on Roopa as she came out of the Vinayaka Typewriting Institute, near her place. Accosting her at a street corner, he took her hand and thrust his letter.

"What's all this?" she protested in confusion.

"I'm dying, save me with your medicine," he said with apparent passion.

Before she could recover her wits, he drove away out of her sight. Stunned though at the development, she looked around instinctively, and finding none in the vicinity, she composed herself readily. Heaving a sigh of relief then, she paced up to her home with her contemplation for company.

'What else is it, if not his love letter,' she thought in bewilderment. 'How dare he force the letter on me? What made him think that he could have his way with me? Did I give him any cause for hope? But obsessed as I'm with my Raja, how could I have coalesced with him? It looks like there was a mix-up between my love for Raja and liking for him in my interaction with him. Still, how could have I expected something like this from him? Oh, why didn't I fling the thing at his face? If only I had done that, wouldn't that have served him right? But it was not to be. What should I do with it now?'

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Reaching home, Roopa pondered over Prasad's missive further, 'Why not I tear it and be done with it? But then, won't he assume that I've read it. Better I return it to him as is where is. Yes, that would give him a clear picture of how my mind is closed to him, having been locked by Raja's thoughts.'

Soon, having decided upon the mode of its disposal, she has hidden the letter behind the bookshelf, and tried to forget about it. However, as the incident haunted her no end, she tried to divert her mind, and to rid herself of the embarrassing trespass, she took a romantic ride on the thoroughfare of her heart.

'Had it been from my Raja, I might still be kissing the cover, unable to gather my wits to part my quivering lips from it,' she thought endearingly. 'While my eyes would have been kept in anxious waiting to read his outpouring, wouldn't have my heart missed its beat in anticipation.'

However, as the reality of it all dawned on her, she thought melancholically, 'What a tragedy that the first love letter I've received should've caused fright instead!'

Fed by her anxiety, she had a meager meal, and as though to push the issue into her subconscious self, she settled for siesta. But as if to spare her subconscious-self from the dilemma, her conscious mind kept sleep at bay by keeping the issue alive in her thought.

'What made him think I would accept it?' she contemplated in all humiliation. 'And I did take it, didn't I? Didn't I know it was a cat and mouse between us all along; why was I not enjoying it in good measure? Couldn't he be expected to strike at some point, and strike he did, so what's surprising about it? Now that he has thrown down the gauntlet, won't I have to ready myself for the battle of wits?'

'If not for anything else,' she thought at length, 'I need to read it to avert the threat he might be posing to undo me, so that I've an idea of his line of attack to strategize my defence? So, it makes sense to read his mind through his letter.'

It's thus Roopa retrieved the letter from behind the bookshelf and began reading it with apprehension.

'Roopa, my hope,

I'm aware that my move would agitate you. But how am I to portray the thousand deaths I died wanting to avoid distressing you.

All these days, I've chosen to suffer silently without making you privy to my predicament. Then, it dawned on me that I owe it to you to let you know that a poor soul is bathing in the warmth of love that is inspired by you. That apart, do I have any right to deny my love its legitimate expression no matter even if it's unrequited?

On that fateful evening, when I'd first seen you, I felt as if the flood of love that spurted out of my heart would drown me to death. Unable to hold on my own, I ventured to seek your hand for support. Thus, as I was nearing you, I'd seen someone coming to you with those popcorn cones. Oh, how my heart froze, fearing that you're married to him. But when I realized that you're my friend's wife, I rejoiced at his fortune, and chose to bury my love for you in the depths of my heart. Since I am not supposed to love you as woman and as I couldn't live without loving you, I forced myself to adore you as a sister instead.

But, it didn't take me long to realize that the brotherly affection is too limited to reflect the manly love I feel for you. Possessed as I am by carnal passion for you, my suffocation in the fraternal garb has been demeaning my soul ever since. Don't I know that you too haven't failed to notice the pain I experienced in those ungainly brotherly shoes? Now that you're privy to my predicament, my only hope is that you would be sensitive to my sentiment. You know that I'm only nursing the love you've given birth to in my hapless heart. Aren't you aware that I love you as a woman and adore you as a person?

I believe that my sense of dignity demands of me to disclose my love to you. What do I seek in return from you for my devotion to your person? I only beg for your indulgence

in letting me love you till my last breath. Since it's in your knowing now, how I see my love acquiring a new meaning. If only you let me love you, I'll feel rewarded no end for that. Were you to pity my wretched soul, I would feel vindicated as well? Either way, now I am at your mercy, and I know your nobility wouldn't belittle my love and betray my secret. But were you to give away my sentiment to any to make a mockery of it, my blood would be on your hands. Why, cursing your insensitivity, my restless soul would suffer eternally in the heaven living like in the hell.

Dying for your understanding,  
ever yours in devotion, I remain,  
Yours aspiringly,  
Prasad, the hopeful.'

'Haven't I known that he's lusting for me? Isn't he trying to win my heart now by couching his lust with the sentiment of love?' thought Roopa, as though in hindsight.

However, on second thoughts, as his passion for her seemed to reinforce her own draw, she wasn't displeased with his disclosure. Besides, the feeling of being loved by him seemed to please her vanity as well.

'Why, won't it feel nice to be loved, to be wanted,' she thought with a feeling of satisfaction. 'In a way, I too like him, don't I? But it's not the way for him to have his way. Don't I understand how miserable it could be for him? Can't I see his plight in the light of my own pain? Oh, it must be really hard on him, the poor fellow. But how can it be helped?'

'But, I can't be expected to soothe every man who craves for my body, could I?' she analyzed her predicament. 'Maybe, I should've welcomed him, if only I'm not myself in love. Seems misplaced love is wasteful for it serves no purpose, save massaging the ego of the one who is loved. Perhaps, it's another dirty trick of fate on my life - to keep the love I need hanging in the fire, and throwing in my lap the passion that doesn't help.'

Perceiving herself in the same boat with Prasad, she was overcome with pity for him.

'Am I not guilty in abetting his love with my flirtation, maybe unwittingly?' she thought about her own contribution to his woes. 'Could be, but how have I failed to notice his suffering, when he's supposed to be in such a turmoil. Is he not play-acting love to worm his way into my heart? Isn't it strange that the emotions of love and the afflictions of lust are look-alike, bewildering women from discerning the lover from a seducer; and unfortunately for them the language of love and the dialect of lust have a common alphabet causing this confusion.'

'Why not I test him to know his true character?' it occurred to her at length. 'If he were trying to pull a fast one on me, won't he get his just deserts then? But what if he were genuinely in love with me? That would only compound his misery without me rewarding him in the end. Won't that make it all so unfair for him? It is as well that he unfolds himself by and by. If his feelings are genuine, won't I serve him the affection of my love on a platonic platter?'

'Why all that, why not I nip it in the bud, and be done with him,' she began to think on second thoughts. 'Then won't I need to take Sathyam into confidence for that? Besides embarrassing Prasad, that would hurt Sathyam as well. Moreover, who knows, both of them may put part of the blame on me, and shame me in the process. It's better that I handle him myself.'

'Given my own agenda, am I all that innocent?' it occurred to her in time. 'Am I not scheming to draw Raja into my life? For all that, I could have been flirting with Prasad as

well, by way of a distraction. Whatever, now I've to ease out Prasad without alerting Sathyam. Moreover, I must ensure that all this doesn't scandalize me with Raja. Won't he shun me forever should he get the wrong message? Oh, why didn't it occur to me all the while, what a risk I was running without my realizing it?

It is one of the ironies of woman's life in that she tends to tango her reflexes with the nuances of male proclivities. It is thus, woman's true feelings get camouflaged in her lullabies of compliance to let her man sink into the slumber of complacency.

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'Is Roopa leading me up the garden path without so much as letting me hold her little finger?' thought Prasad in bewilderment that day. 'Why, its two months since I wrote that letter with great expectations, didn't I? Maybe she's coy, but of what avail is that? Well, she shows a little more interest in me than before, but where is the hint of her intent to grant? Is she a flirt for all that? How am I to know? Oh, women's god-damn coyness makes it difficult for men to probe their minds; it could be either a shield for their modesty or a shroud of their coquetry. But then, how can any man get to know what it is beforehand? Leaving all that aside, I would have the last laugh only in her conquest, that is all. Sure, I failed to seduce an odd dame on occasion, but didn't I come out unscathed for the loss of it. Now, as it looks, it's all so different with Roopa. In trying to seduce her, it's as if I'm getting seduced, isn't it? What a role reversal! It looks like that I might fall in love with her, that is, if I'm not in the thick of it already. Well, I should have her before she gets used to the status quo, shouldn't I?'

'But what more could be done to lure her into bed?' he thought in exasperation. 'Why not I make a decisive pass at her, in a passionate way? But that won't help as she's bound to give me the boot. Instead, I should contrive to make her vulnerable to my amorous assaults. But how am I going to bring that about?'

So he took stock of the situation, 'Roopa has an orderly life with a mediocre husband in constant company. Isn't that an infallible situation for a philanderer to pull off an amorous coup? I better destabilize her by hitting at her strength. Didn't the bard aver that women will fall when men are weak? Why doubt the master? So, I'll try to weaken Sathyam to bring about her fall. Won't that be a new lesson in the art of seduction? But then, who knows, it could as well drag on to boredom. So be it, if that ensures her eventual fall. Well, even if her figure were to be dented in time, won't she be worth possessing even well past her prime. Oh, she could be still deadly to have even if she's left with no more than the remnants of her charms. Why given her sex appeal, won't she be maddening in bed, at any time in her life? The long and short of Roopa is that she's an excellent short-term prospect and an enduring long-term asset, the endearing one, is she not?'

'What about Sathyam?' thought Prasad, looking for ways to bring about Roopa's fall? 'He's one of those colourless characters, without a conviction to name, and lo, the society labels such as good-natured! While their manner derives its means from the lack of exposure, their signature is not sourced either in a strong character. But it's these teetotalers that take the cake of goodness in our hypocritical society, don't they! How stupid is our society that it lives in the shadows of the old values of an ignorant past! Well, it's another matter that these nice guys, when exposed to the niceties of life would end up chasing the goodies of the world. If only I could let Sathyam have a feel of the marketplace, won't that make him crave for the good things of life? Then, life willing, would it take long for him to lose his bearings. If only I could induce him to have a drink or two now, won't Roopa, in time, find him swimming in the ponds of liquor. But to start with, what with his drunken endurance as bonus won't Roopa the amorous, look the other way at the Bacchus? As and when his fondness for the drink increases, won't

his ardency for her be a thing of the past to her pined self. That's when Sathyam would be leaving her craving for an extramarital fling, wouldn't he? Won't that be the time for me to get into his shoes to reach her sexless bed? After all, is there any surer way than that to lay her?'

'It's still better that I have a second string to my seductive bow, to be doubly sure,' he thought enthusiastically. 'Why, can't I try to wean away Sathyam from Roopa's charms with whorish support that is? Hadn't the same master given his ruling that beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold? Who could seduce Sathyam better than the suave call-girls that abound these days? But Tara, the ace of the pack, is not quite the trump card in this deal. Taken by their seductive ways, won't Sathyam find Roopa a routine fare, and abstain from her altogether in time? Won't that make her think in terms of entrusting her fleshy wares to my amorous care? Does she care that's an illicit fare?'

'But I must ensure that she won't get wind of my scheming ways,' he thought consciously as his excitement began to gallop, 'and, were she to spot the foul, she's bound to blow the whistle. As the idea is to give her my shoulder for her to cry over, in no way should she be able to see me with soiled hands and all. Don't I need a helping hand to carry out my plans? Well, it shouldn't be difficult, as money these days would fetch hands for any errand. But then, who would foot the bill for all that?'

When Prasad had visualized the magnitude of the money needed for his grandiose project involving wine and women, his spirit was insensibly dampened.

'Will I be able to siphon off that kind of money without Rani knowing it?' he thought dispiritedly. 'And even if I could, it might turn out to be worse, if she gets wind of my spending spree for she might get it all wrong and curtail my freedom in the bargain. Is my plan then a non-starter, after all? Haven't I reached the dead end even before I have begun? Isn't there a way out?'

At that, as Prasad racked his brains for a solution, in time, he got a brainwave, as though to fashion her future, Roopa's destiny made a common cause with him.

'Why not enable Sathyam to take care of his needs all by himself?' he thought joyously, 'Why not I use my contacts to move him into the contracts section on promotion for the contractors to take care of the rest of it? At best, Sathyam may need a little bit of prodding from me and some pushing from some contractor. Well, that can be taken care of by me, to set the ball rolling. Haven't I myself brought many a reluctant folk onto the convenient track of compromise? And once they get over their inhibitions, these scoundrels become past-masters at extortion, don't they? But then, they're inconveniently called corrupt by the left-outs, sour grapes. How the illicit side of the behavioral pattern seems to be common for both sexes. Women too hesitate to step out of the threshold of fidelity, but once they cross it, they hit the fast track of debauchery, don't they?'

'Naive that he is, would Sathyam fall prey for all these?' he thought as he developed second thoughts. 'But don't I know that only a handful of men are incorruptible, either by nature or by conviction. Thus, leaving those oddballs, as with bed-hedgers among women, the bulk of them, watch which way the wind blows. When they see their colleagues and neighbours prosper through bribe monies, their jealousy makes them anticipate a tax raid. But when none of that happens, and if they happen to sit at the right desks in their offices, sooner than later, they too join the bandwagon. Doesn't that explain the ever-growing corruption in all societies? But the vast majority, without access to that extra pie, is the most vocal against corruption in society! Give them half a chance to line their pockets, and they're sure to quieten down like kitten. Anyway, Sathyam won't have to complain anymore on that score.'

'But is all this trouble worth taking when I could get half a dozen randies for a song, that Vanaja included?' he was left wondering. 'If not for Roopa's distraction, was it not possible that I would have been carrying on with her by now? How disappointed she would have been that she was only flattered to be deceived. Well, many a Vanaja like might come and go but isn't it worth covering the earth to lay Roopa. If things work out as they should, won't I have her soon enough?'

'But what if Sathyam gets wind of our affair?' he tried to foresee loopholes in his plan. 'What would he possibly do than become accommodative? That's what all cuckolds do, don't they? But then, what else can a decent man do when he comes to know that his wife has taken to a paramour. Well, divorce won't do as that deprives him of a home with the bed and all that goes with it. Should he shop around for a younger one, wouldn't it be a matter of time before she follows the example set by the first one. If on the other hand, her were to settle for a middle aged, it might as well amount to inviting her lover into the marital fold. Thus substitution, though difficult, might ensure an encore, doubling the ridicule. So, anyway one might look at it; status quo would seem the better course for a cuckold to stay on course.'

'What if out of spite, Sathyam were to sue her for divorce,' he tried to visualize in the end. 'Won't that be a blessing in disguise for me as I can make her my mistress then? Though I'm going back to Delhi by the year-end, won't my work bring me here often enough? Oh, how well, she, as my keep, would keep me in comfort in my home, away from home. Moreover, can't I fix her at the office to keep an eye on the guys over there? What a loyal spy she would make. Whichever way it might turn out to be, all the same, it should go easy on me. In fact, it would be better that Sathyam leaves her for my safekeeping. Isn't Roopa an eminently keepable woman? Well, she would learn what it's like flirting with me, sooner or later, one way or the other, wouldn't she?'

## **Chapter 26**

### **Software of Detour**

That April evening, Roopa impatiently waited for Sathyam's return from the office. As though to keep irritation at bay, she was rereading Sandhya's letter delivered that day.

'When it's time for their coming, what do I get to hear from her? It's about the postponement of her exams! Why not rename India as Postponeland? How something or the other comes in my way to Delhi. Come what may, I should go now to know where I stand on the ladder of Raja's love,' she thought at length, folding her mate's missive.

Having realized that it was already ten, she felt worried and thought, 'What could have held him up? Why, the homebody that he is, he comes home straight, doesn't he? Is it possible that he's in some trouble? Or, is he gossiping with Prasad? Why don't I find out from Prasad? Anyway, let me wait for a while.'

When Sathyam didn't turn up even by eleven, she called Prasad, from a nearby P.C.O.

"It's Prasad here."

"I'm Roopa."

"Say, your darling."

"You shut up."

"Oh, don't joke."

"Is Sathyam there?"

"Has he gone missing or what?"

"Don't be silly, I was just checking up," she said.

"Okay, let's be serious, can I check-in dear?" he said.

"Don't bother, mister," she hung up amidst his loud laughter.

'Some welcome development at last,' 'Well, she would never ever get wind of my game plan,' thought Prasad, still holding onto the receiver.

On her return, however, finding Sathyam sitting drowsily on the staircase, Roopa said in vexation,

"I had to ring up Prasad for you," she said by way of an explanation.

"I think it's time, I apply for a telephone connection," he said giving way to Roopa.

As she opened the door morosely, he followed her drowsily. However once they went in, trying to take her into his arms, he said,

"I couldn't say no at the party. After all, the leading contractor arranged it. Now, isn't it your turn to say yes."

"Oh, how you stink in your mouth," she reproached him.

'How does that matter, as you don't kiss anyway," he said trying to grab her.

"Know that I was scared to death," she said pushing him away, still cut up with him.

"Though I'm sorry for you, I'm happy that you care for me," he said taking her hand all the same.

'So, this is the reward, let's have dinner," she said as she pulled her hand from him.

"I'm full any way, let me serve you for a change," he said fondling his belly.

"Go have bath and have some buttermilk at least," she said.

"Ok, I'll be pole-ready by then," he said winking at her.

"What happened to you all of a sudden!" she said a little surprised.

"Have a peg or two and see how you get lifted all ends up," he said merrily.

As Roopa gave him a sharp look, pleased with himself, Sathyam slipped into the bathroom, but before Roopa could figure out what was happening to him, he came storming into the bedroom.

"Oh, how nice it felt," he said, as he got up from the bed.

"Don't make it a habit for that," she said coyly.

"Won't I make you habituated for that," he winked.

Surprised at his unusual gusto in bed, she wondered,

'When a man on high has it so different for women, how come then that drinking became a taboo with them?'

"So," he said as they refreshed.

"Why don't we go to Delhi now? Sandhya wrote again wanting us to make it soon," she said coyly.

"You know it's not even a month since I took over the Section, I can only think about it a little later," he said putting on airs.

'At this rate we'll never make it, I better go on my own now," she said.

"Don't worry; we'll make it very soon, if ever Raja Rao sets up shop here, I think I can be of help to him. You know, now I am getting to know some very well placed people," he said cajoling her.

However, as the idea of her mediocre husband helping her marvelous lover didn't appeal to her sensitivity, she thought,

'My Raja is too smart to need his help.'

She began to wonder at the new sense of confidence in her husband,

'What a difference has a little recognition made to his self-confidence! Why not? When a peg or more betters man in bed, won't a step or two up at the workplace, buttress the feel good of his?'

But in time, as he got hardened at drink, she found him a hard nut to crack in bed. This new feature in her marital life depressed Roopa as her husband's nocturnal abstinence made her daydream ever more passionately about her lover, the excitement of which brought her deprivation to the fore, making her craving to possess her Raja. So, insensibly the mission to possess him more and more became the obsession of her life.

Heady with his newfound power, Sathyam, however, had no thought for his wife's predicament. As if to add insult to injury, he thought it fit to bring the bottle home so as to give a face-lift to their middle-class home. Thus that late summer evening, he asked Prasad to feel at home over a bottle of Glenfiddich.

"You know its Scotch whisky, I invited Prasad to celebrate," said Sathyam to Roopa.

"Celebrate what?" she said in surprise.

"What else it is but my progress," he said shrugging his shoulders.

At that, before a nonplussed Roopa could respond to Sathyam, Prasad had stormed in.

"But why at home?" exclaimed Prasad as if to ingratiate himself with Roopa.

"Isn't it better than coming home dead drunk?" she said to Prasad's disappointment.

"How I wish you're more sensitive to her feelings," Prasad admonished Sathyam as though to put a wedge between them, all by himself.

"I too wish she shares my excitement a little, I feel I was a mere file pusher earlier. Now I see the faces of those whose cases I handle. And it's quite satisfying that way," said Sathyam filling the glasses.

"I hear there's money to make over there, I mean, under the table," said Prasad in undertone.

As she happened to come with some roasted *papads* for them then, Roopa overheard him, and said,

"I've warned him about that. Leave alone morals, who knows about its fallout?"

"Sitting at home, it's easy to sit in judgment over others. It's not as if I'm dying for the bribe money though I know the project costs are jacked up to accommodate one and all. So, even if I were to decline my share of the mark-up, still that won't bring any discount to the government table. The choice thus boils down to picking up your portion of it or gaping at those pocketing it all for themselves. That being the reality, by taking my cut, I would be only robbing the robbers a little," said Sathyam.

"Why hanker after what's not due, never mind what others do," she said spiritedly.

"Isn't coveting the part of being," said Prasad, imagining an innuendo.

"It's about one's orientation towards the value system," said Roopa seemingly answering him.

"Of what avail are the old world values anymore, by the way, tell me who cares for them these days. Now, it's the money that measures man's worth never mind how one acquires it, what matters is how much moolah one has. One could choose values for company but prosperity seeks the pliable," said Sathyam in exasperation.

"So what, of what worth is money without virtue?" she said indignantly.

"Don't I know money is no guarantor of happiness," said Prasad looking ardently at Roopa.

"That's what all the moneyed say, while making more of it all the time; the only attribute of man is his wealth and you very well know about that," said Sathyam in irritation.

"No faulting you but only the affected knows about the affliction," said Prasad solicitously.

"Yet I'm sure you won't part with a paisa ever more than needed, that is even for curing your ailment, whatever it is," said Sathyam, serving himself another large.

"But for a late starter, you seem to have covered a lot of ground," said Prasad playing up to Sathyam's ego,

"It all boils down to capacity, my old boy, well, I can stand even on a bottle," said Sathyam proudly.

"Because my sister is able to put up with you, what do you say, Roopa?" said Prasad.

"If only I lose my patience, then you would know," she said half in jest.

By then, as he felt that it was wiser for him to leave the scene before he was forced to take sides, said Prasad jokingly,

"I better leave before that happens."

When Prasad was all set to leave, Sathyam insisted that he stayed on for dinner. However, the guest excused himself to review the situation as he drove home.

'Oh how does one go astray when exposed to things that he was deprived of for long!' thought Prasad getting into his Benz. 'Sathyam is eyeing money as much as I ogle his wife. Sure he won't let go an opportunity to grease his palms to the hilt and left to himself, he might soon acquire the vice for making money, maybe ending up being a hoarder as well. Well, that might suit his progeny, if they ever arrive, but what of me; won't that jeopardize my idea of having his wife?'

'It's about time that I activate the second string of my bow,' he resolved, answering his question all by himself. 'As Sathyam makes those extra bucks, I should enable him to part with some of them to the sex workers, and as they give and take as well, are there any that deserve money better than them. Besides, even if the last vestiges of hesitancy were to prevent him from going the whole hog at extortion, then the need to foot the bed bills and all would ensure a vice like grip on his corrupted psyche. So, it's time that Sathyam got hooked onto the whores. All said and done, only the charms of the call-girls could wean him away from his wife, to make way for me as her paramour. And the craftier they are, the better it is for me, isn't it?'

'But then, is this gambit worth the gain?' he wondered at length. 'Wouldn't I have laid a couple of randies in their couches by now, that too with much less bother? Whatever, Sathyam is bound to have a time of his life, what with wine, women and all

coming his way. If not for my obsession for his wife, he would have remained a frog in the marital well after all. It looks like it pays to have a smart wife, in more ways than one! That is because, I love Roopa as much as I could and crave for her more than I should.'

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'What a fool I was, being a one-woman man all these years,' thought Sathyam, as he headed home in pouring rain that June night. 'Does it augur well that the monsoon too has set in today? Won't that portend women pouring in into my bed as it were? True, this Kantha cannot hold a candle to Roopa, but didn't she set the whole bed on fire, many times over. How promising it is that the pimp told me to expect better fare in future. Didn't he say his top drawer was empty by the time he had my requisition on hand. How nicely he had put it, in his own pimpish manner. Isn't it time that I had my fill, having missed the fare all along? It would cost money for sure though it shouldn't be a problem managing the moolah. Well, if only I sit a little tight on their files, won't the contractors cough up enough for me to maintain a harem? As Appa Rao has his guest-house all for me, can't I look forward to having horny time with whorish frames? That is for sure.'

'Having heard about the flesh trade all along, how I have failed to venture into it so far,' lamented Sathyam, imagining what he might have missed all through. 'In Kakinada, the famed Mirror House was just a stone's throw away from my place, yet it remained too far for me. Won't all swear that the *bogamollu* of Peddapuram are apart, with the required skills to please, acquired from the past masters of the flesh trade? Isn't a visit there overdue after all? Why don't I go there in August when the climate too would be cozy? And for home consumption, can't I give an official colour to my sexventure?'

Thus, whetted by the anticipated escapades, Sathyam made light of the accompanying impediments,

'What if Roopa gets wind of my doings? After all, she might cry in the beginning, only to quieten down in the end, won't she? What else could she do, as it's the way with all women, moreover, what she could complain as she herself is half-hearted in bed? All said and done, don't I owe something to myself as well?'

All along, though his libido craved for sex, he was shy at courting women but with no need to be dashing with the whores, and having found them willing on their own, he felt vindicated in the brothels he came to frequent. So, as he became closer to them, he moved away from his wife, and the more he felt comfortable with the Kanthas, his discomfort with Roopa increased even more. Well, it had as much to do with the psyche of the sex workers as with the state of his mind.

Women in prostitution tend to perceive the male as the root cause of their fall, and if anything the rudeness of those who frequent them further deepens their antipathy towards men. Besides, having lost their inhibitions through constant exposure to assorted males, the whores become coarse to settle scores even with those they solicit. Yet with a considerate man, the innate woman in them comes alive, inducing them to shower themselves on him and it is thus they make such feel at home even in their brothels.

When, Roopa had reasons to suspect Sathyam's sexual forays, she was more surprised than shocked. In time, however, as his brothel mania became a menace, she felt humiliated that he should prefer harlots to her, and at length, having been disgusted with him, she thought of confronting him.

'He would only confirm it, demeaning me all the more, wouldn't he?' she felt on second thoughts. 'Maybe, it's my fault for having driven him into alien arms. Haven't I

offered him a cold bed, in spite of his passion for me? So, having been uncaring all along, why am I cut up with him now? Is it a case of wounded vanity then? No, it's not so, it's the very thought that he sleeps with all and sundry that's bothersome. Now I'm simply unable to bring myself to take him. That's all there's to it.'

'But what could I possibly do now?' she began to deliberate coolly. 'Precious little, but in a way, it's a welcome development, isn't it? I needn't feel guilty when I make it with Raja in the end. It's as though the last vein of his moral rein on my heart got sapped. Haven't I always seen love as the only justification for infidelity? But now, if required, even that qualification could be waived now adultery. Why am I not a free bird now, though caged in marriage?'

Thus experiencing an indescribable relief at that thought, she felt that she couldn't care less, but her philosophic indifference couldn't come in handy in her daily regimen. Moreover, finding her situation humiliating, she continued to be confounded no end.

'Hasn't Prasad started pressing his suit further?' Roopa reviewed her position that evening. 'Why should not he? After all, finding me all alone, all the time, wouldn't he have guessed that something is amiss in my life? Who knows, for all that Sathyam could have bragged about his lustful conquests. Whatever, aware that Sathyam is ignoring me; he could be licking his lips in anticipation, wouldn't he be? Why can't he be hoping that I might as well warm up to him, sooner than later? For all that, what's my complaint against him? If not for his attentions, wouldn't have Sathyam's neglect been even more humiliating. Don't I owe him on that count at least? Why not I let him have me? By that, won't I be rewarding him for his perseverance while paying Sathyam back in the same coin? As and when Sathyam discovers our affair, won't he get the taste of his own medicine?'

As though the crassness of the proposition didn't appeal to her sensitivity, she reviewed her position all again,

'But then, how does all that help me. All my longing for belonging would have no meaning if I were to bed with Prasad out of spite for Sathyam. When it comes to Raja, it's not any pique but my innate love that drives me towards him, isn't it? Besides, having stirred my heart, hasn't he earned the right of possession over my body? So, I would give myself to him and him alone, body, and soul. Next time around, won't I gatecrash into his life; whatever it takes me to do.'

In time, unmindful of the risk she ran on account of Prasad's fixation for her possession, Roopa went on daydreaming about Raja Rao.

## **Chapter 27**

### **Tara's Theory**

On his way to Roopa's place that evening, Prasad began to review his position in the waiting game he was forced to play with her.

'Left to herself, she would let my passion remain in hibernation, wouldn't she?' he deliberated in desperation. 'Oh me, it's six months since I've been wooing her, and isn't that a record of failure for me? All the same, being coy to my attentions, she makes it appear as if it's only time, before she grants it to me. It seems she's retaining her option for a liaison without taking my tearing passion into account. It's as if she had put my lust in her mental loft, to retrieve it for use, just in case. But why so in spite of it all?'

'What is it that could be holding her up even now, even in her low?' he racked his brains as he raced to her place, 'To start with, it could be the fear of desertion that is common to all women. But haven't I promised to make her my second wife, as and

when she chooses to divorce Sathyam. It looks like her mental apathy lies in the fear of the unknown, which is common to all humans. But what is there for her to lose any more? Thanks to Sathyam's peccadilloes, isn't her married life already in a shambles? Perceiving herself a martyr, were it possible she's deriving some pleasure in her suffering?'

'Since the mental siege didn't help to break her resolve, is not the physical ambush the only recourse left for me,' he concluded as he crossed the Secretariat. "By overwhelming her in my embrace, I should use subtle force to drag her to her bed and pin her into submission. Won't my passion then ensure that she's excited in her very vitals to open up her golden gate for my grand entry? Won't then she explode on her own in time. What a rape by consent it makes, that too in her own den! It looks like there's no other way to gain her final favor. Why delay, let me have her right away.'

Buoyed by his resolve, he leaped up the steps, and as expected, he found Roopa alone in the sofa. As she got up to greet him when he neared her, he went down on his knees, as if in supplication, and before she could come to gather her wits, he enlaced her bottom with passion and buried his head there in hope. But as she tried to withdraw in panic, he tightened his grip with urge. While she turned dumb in fright, he declared his love with emotion,

'I'm dying for you. If you can't have me, kill me at least.'

"Oh, get up, Tara would come," Roopa said confusedly.

"I don't care for once," he said, and buried his head back into her crotch.

"Don't be mad," she pushed him with all her strength while pulling herself in consternation.

While he landed on all fours, Tara came out of the toilet.

"I'm sorry," he said embarrassed repairing from his awkward posture.

"I better leave," said Tara, herself overwhelmed at the development.

'Oh, no, don't go now," Roopa clasped Tara's hand in desperation.

"Let me not be the odd man out," he grinned, having meanwhile composed himself, and left.

"I hope you haven't got it wrong," said Roopa, still in shock.

"It's your private affair, anyway," said Tara thoughtfully.

'Believe me, there's nothing of that sort between us," said Roopa pleadingly.

'Now I believe you, but what comes later," said Tara smiling mysteriously.

"What do you mean?" said Roopa in all nervousness.

"Don't try to tell me that he just walked in and took you by your seat, I'm sure he came for a fling on an invitation drafted by your flirting mind. Though he retreated for now, in time, he's bound to come to do your bidding. Take my word for that," said Tara in all concern for Roopa.

"Oh, God," Roopa nearly swooned into Tara's arms.

'It's time you know some home truths about us women; the radars of male eyes are sure to pick up the unmistakable signals emanating from unhappy women. In her married life, a woman is either satisfied or dissatisfied, that's all there is to it, and if someone persists with a married woman for some time, it's a sure sign of her own vacillation," said Tara making Roopa sit in the sofa.

'Maybe, you're right,' Roopa said, in spite of herself.

"But every situation portends an opportunity as well," said Tara with seeming conviction. "The art of living lies in capping opportunities and not whining over problems. It's only a matter of time before you find yourself in the arms of a paramour, be it Prasad or some other, as your lover is nowhere near. Either way, you better be prepared to be trapped in a man's seductive web sooner than later. You may know that the novelty of male libido manifests itself in sexual conquests and that ensures someone is not going to rest until he beds with you. But when the novelty wears off, he's prone to cross over to fresher pastures, leaving you languishing for sexual love. Do you know what's going to be your likely response then? As if to prove to yourself that your sex appeal hasn't lost its sheen, you'll take another lover to sing the same praises of you."

"All I crave now is for my soulmate," said Roopa, beside herself.

"Who doesn't despair for one, but there's no way of getting to know the man before giving in to him, even the one you're coveting. And that means starting an affair, with all the attendant risks," said Tara affectionately.

"Isn't it the bane of being a woman then?" sighed Roopa.

"Can you alter the fact, having been born so," said Tara spiritedly. "Thus it's sensible to accept the handicap to start with. Man loves his time with woman more than her as a person. And for all I know, females of the animal world are worse off for that as the male would walk away, having had his fill and the female waits for the next mate for a like treatment. That's about the qualms of the male of the species, and the lot of the females to satiate them, never mind her self-gratification."

"Is it then a man's world of female malady?" said Roopa in exasperation.

"Yet, all is not lost for us women as our cultures highlight male egos with vitality markers, our grumbling on that score is sure to pull men down. Try dropping a hint or two that he's found wanting, and he's bound to submit to you in shame," continued Tara after having some water.

"That's Tara's Theory of henpeckedness," said Roopa laughing in spite of herself.

"It's no laughing matter though, be it her man or her paramour, woman either remains vulnerable to him to her hurt, or enslaves him to her benefit. It's for woman to choose," said Tara assuming a serious tone.

"And end up being empty either way," said Roopa sighing.

'Maybe, but still its thrilling exploiting the exploiter,' said Tara mirthfully.

"Is there no middle-way for woman for a meaningful life?" said Roopa.

"It's the way of the nature that it hadn't laid any mid-path on the earth," said Tara to a baffled Roopa. "While on the subject, it pays to know the proclivities of the sexes. Never count out a man as aged, since man never turns weary of woman's charms. It's stupid of woman not to realise that past her prime, she's no game for any man. Thus, woman has a limited time for men to dote upon, and what a time they give us women in our time! If a woman chooses to remain a marital frog in her dried up well, she would wither away anyway. Even if a woman ventures out of her cold marital home for warming up in her lover's hearth, still she would gain nothing in the end. Well, having had his fill, it's only time before her favored man leaves her in the lurch. So it pays for a woman to barter her favours to stay even."

"Isn't it an unethical outlook," said Roopa, for once, upset with Tara.

"Ethics, my foot," Tara became animated. "Don't we women have an innate weakness for successful men? If merit alone were to bring success in this world, that might still justify our preference. But don't you know the mettle of many of these successful men? What all it takes to succeed is a mediocre mind to serve the system and a slavish tongue to praise the powerful. Isn't it a sad commentary of our times that mediocrity is eulogized as dependability and buttering is sanctified as good PR?"

"How true, but what can be done?" said Roopa.

"Devise means to live in it without getting hurt," said Tara, as Roopa was all ears. "It's high time that women realized that they run behind these mediocre minds, masquerading as successful men. As for their wealth, the less said the better, for it's mostly ill-gotten. However, as the social dice is loaded against the straightforward, it's seldom that you see an honest man prosper. So, sadly, the righteous cut a sorry figure for us to fancy them."

"But why this feminine weakness for the wealthy?" exclaimed Roopa.

"What can be done when we are made that way?" continued Tara. "It's as well that these rouses hoard the gold, leaving us to live with the coppers. But if they eye our assets, why shower our favours on these with bloated egos, acquired on their shameless climb up on the social ladder? Ironically, it's to these pseudo successful that we give in to, and won't that give away our poor IQ. That being the case, what's wrong if we put a price tag on our sexual wares?"

"So, is sex toll the crux of your feminism?" said Roopa disquieted further.

"What's wrong with that anyway?" said Tara not giving up. "One needn't be an Amartya Sen to grasp that it's their black-money that skyrockets the real estate beyond our middle-class reach. Those positions, to which they butter their way through, might have gone to our men by merit. Think of the gadgets they bestow upon their kids, forcing us to match those with our limited resources, lest our children should suffer from an inferiority complex. As the unscrupulous enrich themselves without a hitch, how is it immoral for us to filch them a bit, if they seek our carnal company?"

"No denying your argument is compelling but I'm sure it's not your prescription for woman's liberation," said Roopa as though pleading for a review.

"There's a great deal that's funny about advice, though the halfwits too feel they have a great deal of advice to offer," said Tara reminiscently. "But on occasion, a naive suggestion might turn out to be the shrewdest of advices. When I lost my father, we were penniless, and my mother had no clue as to how to arrange for my dowry. Then someone came up with the suggestion that I could use my body to raise my dowry. Though my mother cried foul, finding it sensible under the circumstances, I went along with it. As you can see, I haven't lost a wee bit for that weird advice."

"It reminds me of that Shakespearean quote, virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied, and vice sometimes by action dignified," said Roopa in apparent awe.

"It's for you to decide what to do with your virtue under siege now," said Tara gravely.

"Let me see what fate has in store for me," said Roopa melancholically.

"But the irony is that others believe you've already compromised your position, once I overheard Lalitha's sleazy remark that you could be barren, as your ovum is in a dilemma over choosing Master X and Mister Y," said Tara to Roopa's discomfiture.

'Oh God, but to tell you the truth, I'm hopelessly in love, you know with whom," said Roopa in exasperation.

'I wish your liaison becomes virtuous in action,' said Tara, extending her hand to Roopa.

'I can tell you he has all the intellect to bring that about,' said Roopa.

'How far is Delhi now?' said Tara.

'It's dream distance away,' said Roopa.

'I wish it gets love-close' said Tara smilingly.

'I hope so but you've saved the day for me,' said Roopa turning all the coy.

'That too to my client's hurt,' said Tara with a smile.

'Oh, really, don't I owe you even more for that?' said Roopa, taking Tara's hand.

'Your lover's fling with me is the right compensation,' said Tara winking at Roopa, 'but I won't insist though I've a crush on him.'

'Thank you dear enticer,' said Roopa smilingly.

'I don't know why, but I love you,' said Tara kissing Roopa's cheek.

'I love you more than ever,' said Roopa, and hugging Tara, she showered kisses all over her face.

'Better save your ardour for him,' said Tara affectionately.

The fact that she made Tara privy to her innermost feelings enabled Roopa feel as though she had shared the secret of her life with the world itself. The feeling that Tara knew the identity of the man of her dreams made her even more ecstatic. It was in that state of mind Roopa bade good-bye to Tara at the wicket-gate.

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As Tara walked up the lane, Roopa found herself staring at her all the way. While taking a turn at the main road as Tara looked back, Roopa waved at her as if propelled by a sense of gratitude for that love-saving gesture of hers. Well after Tara went out of her sight, Roopa stayed put at the wicket-gate, reminiscing about the fascinating closeness that developed between them.

When Roopa was closing the wicket-gate, as Lalitha had opened the main door, recalling her sleazy comment, Roopa felt embarrassed in her presence and extricated from the tête-à-tête that Lalitha began. Once in her home, however, as if to fully grasp the import of the incident, Roopa sank in the sofa, and reliving the moment, she began to see Tara's character in a fresh light.

'Wasn't she in a position to abet Prasad's cause and then blackmail me into her calling,' thought Roopa in all admiration for Tara, 'what a noble woman she is, in spite of everything?'

And in contrast, as the brotherly mask worn by Prasad to hoodwink Sathyam to seduce her appeared ever more mean to her, she despaired,

'But in the man's world, Tara is a loose woman and Prasad a gentleman. That's the paradox of perceptions, isn't it?'

She tried to figure out Prasad's future moves to enable her to come up with appropriate responses, but as she failed to come up with a game plan, the postman came up with Sandhya's letter as though to show her the way.

All along, Roopa had hoped that on their way to Kakinada, Sandhya and Raja Rao would come to Hyderabad. That letter of Sandhya's helplessness conveyed that her father hijacked her when some work took him to Delhi the week before. The

unexpected development depressed Roopa for it meant she wouldn't meet Raja Rao in the immediate future.

'Fate seems to be playing hide and seek with my love,' she thought at length. 'Now the least I can do is to go to his wife to hear her talk about him. Besides, that would keep me away from Prasad's designs in the offing. More so, I could consult Sandhya for a way out of this mess, couldn't I?'

'Oh, how she got away, the slippery slut,' Prasad thought in irritation, as he recovered from the embarrassment. 'If not for Tara's unexpected presence, it should've been a different story to tell, well, instead of biting the dust myself, I should've made her eat the humble pie, wouldn't I have? Oh, if only I withdrew when she cautioned me. Wouldn't have that saved the embarrassment for both of us? Surely, she would be damn cut up with me for having compromised her before Tara. Besides, haven't I lost my face as well? It is better that I lie low for a while so that Roopa might feel pity for me in time. Why, isn't pity a surer way to a woman's heart than man's chivalry? What's the doubt about it? Well, I should wait for the right moment to strike back.'

But how were he to know that soon Raja Rao's love would seal the oyster of Roopa's heart to his lust for ever.

## **Chapter 28**

### **Night of the Mates**

At the Premier Architects' office that August afternoon, holding Sandhya's letter, Raja Rao was immersed in Roopa's thoughts,

'How miserable she could be, the poor thing,' he sighed for the umpteenth time.

As though to get a measure of his beloved's misery all again, he read from his wife's letter once again.

'After a fortnight's stay here, Roopa left for Hyderabad this evening. Bugged down with her affairs all these days, I couldn't write to you. Roopa is distraught, to say the least. She says that Sathyam has gone astray, unbelievable though it is. And to add to her misery, his friend Prasad has been pestering her for quite some time now. As I recall your reading of her situation, I am worried to death about what might lie in store for her. Though she feels she can handle her affairs on her own, I know she needs our support now more than ever. Any delay in our being near her might prove costly for all of us. I'm sure you would ensure that we forthwith move over to Hyderabad.'

As he read the letter once again as though to find a clue to Roopa's predicament, he became nervous, and felt something within him was about to snap.

'Oh, how my fears have come true but why have I fail to act? Shouldn't I rush now and see if there's something left for me to salvage?' he thought in desperation.

Aboard the Indian Airlines flight that very evening, Raja Rao's thoughts hovered around what Roopa's present portends for his future.

'What I am rushing now for? Does she want me anymore?' he began to crystallize his situation at length. 'Had I missed the bus or did that Prasad jump the queue? How does that matter if I lost her? Is it not possible that she would've given in to Prasad by now? Maybe, she couldn't bring herself to confide in Sandhya that she was in the thick of it with him. It appears that her part-confession was but a sounding-board to prepare her pal to her affair with him. Oh, why have I delayed declaring my love to her? How costly would that prove for me?'

As the thought of life without Roopa depressed him, even the attentions paid by the pretty air hostess failed to impress him.

'Am I destined to suffer in regret for letting her slip into Prasad's embrace?' he felt gloomy at the thought. 'If she's already carrying on with him, what sense does it make for me to shift over there now? Won't that be a suicidal move for me? What an irony it would be, had she transferred her affections to another, even as I'm on the verge putting in my papers for her! Anyway, the moment of truth seems to be on hand for me. Let me see what her life would reveal to me.'

When the plane landed at Begumpet, he left the airport with alacrity and with his heart in his mouth; he rushed to Roopa's place in a taxi.

Pacing up the steps, as he pressed the doorbell, he felt as though his heart was short-circuited, and when Roopa opened the door tentatively, as her heart missed its beat at his sight, she was breathless. Unable to comprehend their respective positions, staring at each other, they stood rooted at the threshold, he with his briefcase in hand and she with her bathing towel over her shoulders.

"Won't you let me come in?" he said, at last.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she gave him way, and bolted the door after him as though to secure him once and for all.

"How do you do?" he said looking at her longingly.

"Pulling on," she mumbled, unable to come to terms with his unexpected arrival.

"It's been so long since we last met," he said as he sat down.

"It's over seven months, I thought you'd forgotten me," she sighed as she said.

"How can you say that?" he said in protest.

"You would know if only you're a woman," she said in despair.

"Being a man, it's none the better for me," he said dejectedly.

"You should blame yourself for that," she sounded critical in spite herself.

"But how's that?" he exclaimed in pain.

"Haven't you prefixed forgetfulness to your maleness," she said in vexation.

"What do you mean?" he protested haplessly.

"Haven't you failed to turn up as promised?" she said as the bitterness his earlier failure to meet her overtook the sweetness his presence occasioned.

"You would never know how desperate I was to meet you then," he said as his tone got the measure of his frustration, as he recalled his state of mind in which he had to leave for Bangalore that day.

"Where there is a will there is a way, isn't it?" she said still smarting under the hurt of the perceived let down.

"Believe me Roopa, there was no way I could've come to see you. I had to catch the train on the move as it were," he said and added after a pause,

"I even thought of writing to you, but I couldn't bring myself to do that."

"You should've written, that would've made so much difference to me," she said in the same vein.

"Roopa, why don't you try to understand me?" he said with a loving tone.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said as her love, aided by the presence of her lover, abetted her mind to overpower the bitterness it bore.

"Let bygones be bygones," he said smilingly.

"I only felt like pouring out my pain to you, go have your bath," she said placing his briefcase on the teapoy.

When he made it to the bathroom, she began setting the dinner ready for them.

"We'll wait for Sathyam," he said as he came out of the bathroom.

"I don't intend to starve you till he returns from his four-day tour; think of it, what a coincidence that he was away when you first came with Sandhya!" she said smiling.

But then, how were she to know about Sathyam's peccadilloes at Peddapuram on that supposedly official trip. Besides, at the threshold of the golden moment of her life, even if she were aware of it then, maybe, she couldn't have cared less.

"Oh, I see, I thought I could stay here for a couple of days," he said tentatively.

"Do you think I would show you the door after dinner?" she said smilingly.

"I didn't mean it that way," he said a little confounded.

"But I mean to tell you everything, wait, I'll have my bath and come," she said getting up from the dining chair.

'Probably, it's all over between us bar sighing,' he thought pensively, sinking into a dining chair. 'Hasn't she said that my letter would've made so much difference to her? Oh, does that not imply that I have lost out to Prasad? Is it any consolation that I was her first choice? What if her current concern is the courtesy of her past feelings? Or is her friendliness owing to my being Sandhya's husband? What sense does the relocation to Hyderabad make for me? Won't I feel miserable seeing her carrying on with someone else? What sort of a reward it would be for my unrequited love for her if Prasad were to turn up now. Won't that embarrass us all, and what's worse, my presence might lead to a misunderstanding between them. I better pack up after dinner for it's not fair to spoil her party with her paramour. How stupid I am to lose a woman like her when she could have been mine for the asking!'

'Isn't it Godsend,' thought Roopa in relief, making use of the soap he used, even as she recalled the bath of fetish that she had had with his soap during his first visit to her place. 'Have I not been waiting for this day all my life? Oh, finally my destiny seems to have kept its date with him! I'll make him mine even if it comes to raping him, won't I? How we could indulge in lovemaking day and night for three days at a stretch. Well, without a care in the world. How fortuitous that he came at a time when Prasad too went on a foreign jaunt! Why can't I expect him to take the initiative now? It's clear that his passion for me is kicking and alive though shrouded in hesitancy. Won't his manner reveal that? If only I signal my urge for him, won't he engulf me with his innate passion for me?'

'But to be more woman like, what if I wait for his advances,' she thought having developed second thoughts about her own abashment. 'Surely he has come in the hope of possessing me. But still he may be constrained to overtly seek me for fear of scandalizing me. Oh no, now if I fail to be explicit in my invitation, won't he take me to be a flirt and dismiss me forever? If I don't let him have me now, I might as well forget about him in this life, maybe in the lives that follow. Well, come what may, I shall grab this opportunity of a lifetime, now and here, with both hands at that. Once he has me, won't he keep me in his embrace forever as I lay there in coyness? Haven't I suffered enough to deserve the solace of his love? Have I any stomach left for misery, anymore?'

Soon, as they sat for dinner, she served him silently as if the distraction of their conversation would hamper his partaking. However, construing her contemplative mood as a proof of her embarrassment, he felt depressed at the tragedy of his own making.

At length, when they rose from the table, sensing his predicament, giving him pan, she opened up,

"I'm glad you haven't gone to the Ritz now, did Sandhya prevail upon you?"

"You know Sandhya is at Kakinada now," he said.

"I'm sorry," she said extending her hand.

"I've come to see you on my own," he said taking it heartily.

"That makes it doubly welcome, won't it?" she said bringing her other hand into the equation.

"I'm doubly grateful," he said pressing her hand with his.

"Now that you've expressed your gratitude, shall I bid you goodnight?" she said coyly.

"No, tell me about you," finding her gesture inviting, he played his move, to probe her position.

"Don't you know that face is the index of mind," she said bowing her head.

"You look a little pulled down," he said lovingly.

"Didn't I tell you that I'm just pulling on?" she said looking into his eyes ardently.

"Sandhya wrote to me that you're having a hard time," he said hesitantly

"Do you think Sathyam's neglect and Prasad's pestering could bother me really, they are just allergies, but my ailment is different," she said as though showing her cards.

"May I know what it is, if it's not personal," he said sensing her mood.

"I always thought that you knew that," she said coyly.

"But then how can I conclude from my own diagnosis?" he said with rising hope.

"Why not take a second opinion?" she said as if she were begging to be asked by him.

"Tell me then," he said to reach out for the approaching moment.

"Haven't you heard my body language!" she said.

"But still." he was at a loss how to respond.

"Maybe you need more privacy than here to express yourself," she said as she went into the bedroom in an apparent invitation for him to cross the threshold.

'Thank God, my fears seem to be liars,' he felt ecstatic. 'Is she not expecting me to break the ice and thaw it out? Why, hasn't she left enough hints already about that? After all her advances, does it make any sense for me to hold back now? Oh, in the entire path of love, the steps that lead up to sex are the most slippery, one false step and it could make man slip out of woman's favor, forever. All the same, if he were not to venture, how could it ever result in an adventure? What else a lover should do than to enter into his beloved's orbit of familiarity? Then, won't she suck him into her arena of lovemaking? Where else one can find a better jaunt for that than the precincts of her bedroom?'

Even as Raja Rao began to stir in hope, leaving the door ajar, Roopa started shedding her sari.

'Why cover myself when he's coveting me,' she felt amused as she undressed languidly as if to allow him time to catch her in the act.

Soon, in nude, she turned towards the door, and not finding her lover though it was ajar, she reached her wardrobe. Then, she pulled out the nylon lingerie that she earmarked for the occasion, and fondling it lovingly, she wore it leisurely. Slowly, she stepped in front of the mirror and thought amusedly,

'Won't it reveal my mind to him besides my body? It's time I find out.'

When Roopa was about to pull open the door, Raja Rao pushed it open to get in.

"I love you," he took her into his arms ardently.

"I'm lovesick," she said pressing against him, "I need your treatment."

"Oh, how I've been dying for you," he said, lifting her head and looking into her eyes with all his longing.

"I wonder why I didn't turn mad craving for you," she said holding him deliriously.

"I felt wretched fearing that I might've lost you," he said tightening his hold on her.

"Raja, I was worried to death that I may not have you," she said as she began to sob.

"Roopa, don't cry, now I am yours forever," he said as he kissed her tears.

"Darling, longing for you, I became an urchin of love," she said cuddling him.

"Roopa, I always felt your love in the pulsations of my heart," he caressed her head even as she wetted his shoulder.

But when he felt her heavy, realizing that she has fainted, he glided her tenderly to her bed, and rushed for some water.

"Are you Ok, darling?" he asked her, as she opened her eyes.

"I never felt better dear," she stretched her hands, inviting him into her embrace.

"I always felt you are mine," he rested his head on her ample breasts, turned heady by her heaving.

"You'll never know how I craved to be yours," she said, running her fingers through his curly hair.

"It didn't take me long to realise that my life would be half empty without you," he said pushing his head into her enticing valley.

"I was scared of leading a loveless life," she pressed him into her, further.

"I'll give you so much love that you can spare as much as you want to Sathyam," he said enigmatically.

"Honestly, I cannot love anyone but you and moreover he doesn't need my love anymore," she said dismissively.

"Roopa, you know I love you, but still it's only a part of our life – yours as well as mine - and that is the reality of our life, and of what avail is all our love if it won't bring happiness to our lives. If not for his sake, at least for our accord, love your husband and make him happy so that we can be happier ourselves. Moreover if you are morose in your house, there is no way I can be lively in my home, in spite of Sandhya," he said endearingly.

She sat up electrified, and smothered him with kisses.

"Oh my Raja, I've always felt that I loved the right man, but now I know that I've a noble soul for a mate. I promise you dear that for your sake, I shall love him as much as I possibly could," she cried in ecstasy.

"I'm glad really," he kissed her hand.

"Know I love you more than I love myself," she cried, rubbing her face against his.

"Roopa, I can never picture to you my pleasure in loving you and the pain I felt wanting you," he said gripping her all the more.

"I'll give you every joy that a woman could give her man," she said, reaching for his lips.

"You would find me more than reciprocating," he said, after a kiss that both felt had lasted a lifetime,

While he was fondling her adoringly, suddenly, she jumped up onto the bed, and as she dropped her lingerie languidly, he watched her mesmerically.

"I so much fantasized about our lovemaking that I don't feel shy about it anymore," she cried joyously.

"I'd never imagined that a five meter sari would've hidden so much of a beauty! What a fabulous figure you have, my darling!" he said sizing her up in nude.

"Oh, how your gaze makes me feel nude in your looks as well as in my thoughts! I dreamt a thousand dreams in which every inch of me gave you joy," she said ecstatically, as he kneeled up to her in embrace.

"What a beautiful bush Roopa," he said, caressing her crotch in delight.

"Isn't it on fire to warm my Raja," she said joyously.

"Oh, what a scent," he said euphoniously.

"You may find it's tasty too," she said coyly, ruffling his hair.

"Why, haven't you been told?" he said raising his head.

"Orals my dear, I've reserved for us," she said pressing him to her declivity all again.

"What a honeycomb it is!" he said in delight, pausing.

"Drain it to the dregs dear," she cried rapturously.

"What a love it is Roopa," he said to her at length.

"It's my life Raja," she said pressing his head into her once again.

"You're my wife no less," he sputtered.

"Hubby dear husband your ardour," she said pulling him away.

"I'm nursing it for you," he said ecstatically as she herself fell on him libidiously.

"Let me have my mouthful too," she took him greedily.

"Roopa, all my fantasies pale before your fare!" he said dreamily.

"Oh, how I practiced with dummies for this day?" she muttered.

"You know how to love a man," he said affectionately, caressing her back.

"Thank your maleness for that," she said, reaching for his hairy chest.

"Roopa how fortunate we both are," he said caressing her head.

"But darling I felt wretched all these days," she said, unable to get over her bitterness of her past suffering.

"We'll make it all the sweeter for that," he said reaching up to her lips.

As though to draw the nectar of love to sustain her nascent life, grabbing his eager lips with her throbbing ones, she deep-kissed him for long.

"I'll ensure that you'll lead a fulfilled life," he said as she freed his lips.

"Know that I've only lived wanting to be yours," she said kissing his hand.

"I've never seen any so sumptuous, how they've been haunting me ever since I saw you last June," he said, fondling her breasts.

"How my hands ached squeezing them for you," she joined him in the act.

"Don't I owe it to them then," he kissed her palms.

"Take it," she pushed her breast into his eager mouth.

"Splendid," he sputtered.

"Bite it," she crooned in his ear.

"Maddening," he said, as he took the other one.

"Pocking," she crooned, licking his ear.

"Roopa," he said in pleasure.

"Raja, make me yours," she said in want.

"Have me then," he said with urge.

"Inaugurate," she said, as she pushed up her bottom to him.

"So, it's our nuptials!" he said kneeling behind her.

"That makes me your wife," she helped him penetrate her.

"How it came true!" he thrust with pleasure.

"Courtesy Sandhya!" she moaned in pain.

"Never better," he was ecstatic.

"Go to the roots," she said, pushing herself all the closer to him.

"Well, I'm there," he said joyously.

"Make it count," she said with passion.

"Roopa, I'm fulfilled!" he moaned at length.

"Raja, you've injected life!" she cried in relief

"Oh God, how good," he said lying motionless on her back.

"I don't mind dropping dead now," she clasped him as they came to rest.

"But I want more of you," he crooned into her ears.

"How I wish Sandhya sees us mate," she exclaimed.

"wonder how my queen mates think about each other even as they mate their man!" he said, patting her feelingly, and narrated to Roopa's joyous ears how Sandhya never ceased thinking about her all through their honeymoon.

"Lesbians like," she said mirthfully.

"Keep it up," he said admiringly.

She got up to switch on the geyser and when she returned, they went about scanning each other, admiring the charms of their frames that occasioned their emotional integration. In their bath that followed, he soaped her breasts admiringly, and said,

"What a size!"

"It's the same," she said as she pointed at the clothesline.

"So you spied," he said smiling, squeezing them both.

"You should've had me then?" she sighed, resting on him.

"I thought for long but gave up in the end," he said, and explained what all he had contemplated then.

"Oh, how I waited for you that whole night? Later, after you left, unsure of your love, how I was torn apart by the hope of love and the despair of passion, only I know. But as if to compound the miseries of my life and the dilemmas of my love, came in Prasad to push me into a liaison. Even as I was attracted to him, being in love with you, I felt ashamed of myself, and the more I was flattered by his attentions, the more I suffered in guilt. But as he began to charm me with his passion, in despair, I clung on to my love for you. Well, I always wanted to give myself heart and soul to you and you alone. How I used to wish every night that you would come storming into my life," she cried in his arms.

"Roopa, forget about all that, I'll ensure your happiness," he kissed her to assure her.

"Though I shudder to think about the past, the pain I've had made this pleasure even more pleasurable. Don't ever leave me darling; now I'm sure that I'll die without you," she said clinging onto him.

"So I," he said, lifting her head.

"I'll live by your word," she said taking his hand.

"Hold your breath, I'm coming here for good," he said fondling her hand.

Like a child in disbelief, she asked him to repeat himself and sank back into his embrace seeking solace.

"I'll be here soon, never to part again," he crooned into her ear, as if to cajole her subconsciousness.

"Oh, I may die of happiness, when is that?" she hugged him tightly, and said coyly,

"Next month itself," he whispered, as if it were a secret for her ears only.

"So, the Don would be on double duty," she said, cupping him at the source of her joy.

"Say, doubly blessed; what a rare fortune Roopa?" he said joyously.

"What if Sandhya finds out?" she said nervously.

"She loves us enough to rejoice at our love," he said dreamily.

"Then why not put her into the loop straightaway?" she said looking at him expectantly.

"Wait for a while for it's no good jolting her now," he said contemplatively.

"Do you feel guilty since you love her?" she asked in apprehension.

"I always knew that I wanted both of you," he said with conviction. "What about you?"

"I want to be a share-farmer and not a prick-robber, and that's how I've always placed myself in our love triangle, as anyway, Sathyam never meant much for me. Now that you've come up with that loving proposition, I shall reorient my affection for him," she said thoughtfully.

"I love it," he said taking her hand.

"I can feel that," she said overwhelmed with admiration for him.

"Let's say three cheers," he said raising her hand.

"I'll prepare some coffee to pep up," she said, as they toweled each other.

"If it's in your birthday suit," he said winking at her.

"Why so?" she asked coyly.

"I love to watch your tan vie with the coffee steam," he said in a romantic stream.

"I too love seeing our skins merge on the canvas of coition," she winked at him.

Soon they were back in bed after romancing in the kitchen for long.

"Roopa, this is as flat as a slate," he said caressing her belly, resting his head on her thighs, "let me scribble the poetry of our love here."

"Raja, you make me feel like a special woman!" she said in delight.

"You're truly special," he said in all admiration, as he turned his forefinger into a slate-pencil to scribble - goddess of coition.

"Now I feel fine being barren that keep my figure intact for your delight," she said joyously.

"But I would love to father your child," he said, looking into her eyes.

"I love nothing more than mothering your child but I feel it won't be fair to him," she said, disappointed herself.

"I value your sensitivity and am proud of your love," he said, as his face lighted.

"But still, having pined for each other for so long now, tonight is an exception to the rule. So, catch my egg on the sly and I'll look the other way, but from tomorrow I'll condom the little fellow," she said on second thoughts, toying with her love-toy.

"I have the full measure of your love now," he said kissing her delightedly.

"Take a shot and get it right," she spread herself, as though to keep her word.

"I would be disappointed if I fail," he said as he engaged her.

"In a way, I'm caught in a cleft as you know," said Roopa.

"Anyway, let that not bother us," he said.

"It looks like life draws the limits even for its own fulfillment," she said.

"Well, it makes sense to live within those limits," he said seemingly reconciled to the limitations of their love life.

"I think it's time we rest," he said, at length, yawning,

"Mate, mate with me once more to make it par," she said going all over him.

"Par with what?" he said drowsily.

"The day we met the 6<sup>th</sup> of June," she said with gusto.

"Oh Roopa!" he said electrified by her love.

Before exhaustion pushed them into a fulfilled sleep, the light was on until it was about to dawn.

It's a unique feature of life in that, in surmounting a mountain of miseries, a fulfilling moment obliterates the nightmares of the past.

## Chapter 29

### **A Brimming Romance**

The next morning Roopa woke up at nine as if from a dream, and found Raja Rao still asleep, looking at him fondly, thought ecstatically,

'Wasn't it better than all my dreams put together!'

Though she touched him impulsively, as if to confirm that her fulfillment was in the realms of possibility, for once, as the softness of her touch failed to excite him in his slumber, he continued to sleep like a log.

'Oh, what a night it has been!' she thought, withdrawing her hand though without taking her eyes off him. 'Didn't I know that it would be marvelous with him? What a lover to have. Can't he be the one in a billion or maybe even in a trillion? Wasn't all that longing worth for this sense of belonging? It's as if he has pushed out all my frustration with his very first thrust itself! Haven't I experienced the feeling of lovemaking in his passion? How fulfilling it feels! What a joy being a woman! I wish to be a woman in every birth if only for being his woman. Well, but for Sandhya, I wouldn't have met him at all.'

'Don't I owe Sandhya in other ways too,' she fondly recalled about her friend, looking at their man. 'Some associations bring in happiness, and some, nothing but misery, so it seems! To start with, how I hesitated to befriend her! Can I imagine life without her now! Won't he cement that bond even more? But, in spite of our euphoric threesome talk, how would Sandhya take to our affair? Will she feel betrayed at my seducing her man? One cold look from her, and won't I die of shame then and there. But she knows how I've been suffering for want of love, what if I beg her for his love? Won't she push me into his arms without second thoughts? Then, as I cuddle in his embrace, won't she as well caress me for my comfort?'

'Until the other day, all I craved was for a corner in his heart, and no more,' she thought amusedly. 'But now, am I not yearning for orgies with him and his wife. That's what human nature is all about, isn't it? The more one gets, all the more one wants, doesn't one? Strange that my life is, who knows, that too might come true. Why won't he like to bring that about himself? Surely he would love to see his women crawling all over him and on each other as well, it's maddening even to imagine our orgies. How lucky I'm that I haven't give in to Prasad to spite Sathyam. Why, I could have avenged myself on Sathyam all right, but how could all this bliss have been mine. Well, negative emotions could be tools of revenge, but it's the positive feelings that aid one's fulfillment, don't they?'

"Won't you get up my love?" she crooned in his ears, as he stirred.

"What's the time like, darling?" he asked drowsily.

"It's nine, want some bed-coffee?" she caressed his back, as he laid his head in her lap.

'What a time we've had Roopa!' he said, enlacing her at her waist.

"I'm unable even to recollect my yesterday's agony, how well you've driven out my suffering past with your magic wand!" she whispered into his ears, as if to keep her feelings out of the earshot of her past.

"Promise you won't desert me; having got you, I'll die if I were to lose you. Now I love to savor life with Sandhya and you," he said earnestly.

"After all that waiting, do you think I'm mad to spoil my party? I would be your Roopa Rao for the rest of my life. Oh, how our names score in the symphony of love!" she said in all fulfillment.

"So to enthrall our life," he pressed himself closer to her.

Having gone into the kitchen thereafter, she woke up to the surroundings.

'What if Yamma had come and gone, having got no response!' she began to think. 'Maybe, there was a load shedding before I got up and her door knocks too might've failed to resonate with my ears that got used to our love-talk. But what would she infer finding him here tomorrow? I'll tell her not to turn up for the next three days. But how am I to keep away Lalitha from peeping in? I couldn't care less about her as anyway she thinks I'm lost. But isn't discretion the better part of valour? So, on and off, I should go to her myself to ensure that she wouldn't come up calling on me. With that trespasser of a Prasad having gone abroad, only Tara would be among the likely callers. And given our background, anyway, she would be a welcome visitor; what if I invite her myself to let her see it all for herself?'

"How we can carry on in the long run," she said, serving him some coffee

"Why worry, trust our passion for that," he said nonchalantly.

"But others would raise their eyebrows," she said in disappointed tone.

"None, if you're my personal secretary," he said winking at her.

"But Sathyam is averse to my working," she said in disillusionment.

"Won't Sandhya bring him around?" he said taking her hand.

"Oh, you my little schemer," she said in all admiration.

"Why not we eat out and make it to a matinee too," he proposed.

"How sexy, we do owe ourselves a party," she said excitedly.

"I deserve to show my fortune to the world, don't I?" he smiled taking her into his arms.

"What a man you are, how you excite me with your looks, touch and talk," she said joyously.

"Won't your seat, skin, and smell make you a XXX randy," he said pinching her bottom.

"Do you drink rum?" she asked him.

"We do have at times," he said winking at her.

"How I love to join you," she said dreamily.

"Wait for her call," he said smilingly.

When they had their bath together, she led him to her wardrobe and said coyly,

"You choose for me."

"You fascinate in any sari, but seem ravish in brown, and grey," he said, picking up light brown chiffon.

"So our tastes too match our minds," she said taking the sari from him.

"Only to fuse in our loving hearts," he said enlacing her

"By the fortuitous hand of Sandhya's angelic soul," she said smug in his embrace.

"You said it darling," he said looking at her lovingly.

While mesmerically watching her wearing the sari, he said,

"What reciprocity between your body and your sari! Can't I see it gracing your persona while acquiring an alluring shape all for itself? Oh, Roopa, how you are bodily fashioned for lovemaking! To think that you're mine is gratifying really."

"How your passion solaces my soul?" she embraced him.

"Even though your hair is fabulous in its plait, I feel you turn a charmer in chignon," he said coiling her hair.

"Won't I look an aunty, yet I'll be what you want me to be," she said aiding him.

"Aunty, what with your nape too showing its teeth, you make a deadly randy. How fascinating you are, my darling!" he said kissing her bare back that her blouse exposed.

"So, from now on, this is the hairdo of Roopa Rao," she said kissing him.

"There's no way I can describe the spell of your charm," he laced her ardently.

"Can't I discern that from your demeanor," she said joyously.

"You glow even more in a pearls chain as it glistens on you velvet skin," he said endearingly,

"What in your eyes would glamorize Sandhya even more?" she asked him.

"Imagine corals on her rosy bosom; I'll love to adorn you together," he said dreamily.

"As I see the measure of man is his ability to envision the nuances of his woman, you measure up as the man of men. I'm sure Sandhya too would love that day when you have us both," she said in all admiration.

"You know how to flatter your man," he patted her, obviously pleased with her outpouring.

"Let me see if Lalitha is around; lock the door and join me at my signal," she said, as they were ready to leave.

"What a strange honeymoon it is, we couple at home only to decouple at its steps," she said, as he reached her on the main road.

"Being confined to its sheath, the cutting edge of love remains sharp, maybe that's the charm of liaisons," he said taking her hand.

"But still I want to be known as your woman not the other woman," she said pressing his hand.

"Let's not be too greedy, why uproot Sathyam's life? Remember your promise," he said cajolingly.

"Sorry, I was carried away, I shall keep my word, and love you ever more for that," she said apologetically.

When they sat at a table for two at Blue Fox, she said,

"How I wish it were for the three of us. You don't know how I love Sandhya."

"You can't make me jealous on that count, can you?" he said in smile,

"Why you should for all our love is all yours?" she said winking at him.

"How she has become a part of me; her confinement is telling upon me," he said reminiscently,

"I know but are you going to tell her about our meeting?" she said taking his hand.

"Let's mention it in the passing, to both of them that is," he said as he started footsie.

"I thought as much when you got into your *chappals*," she said joining him in the footsie and enjoying the sensual pulsations his touch has induced in her.

"Roopa, had you modeled, Marlene Dietrich's legs would have been cut down to size," he said in all admiration.

"I'm glad I've got a leg man for my man," she said joyously.

"Now, I'll give you some legwork," he said, as he took his leg up above her calf. "You've to locate an office space that caters to the needs of our passion and a flat that goes with the taste of your friend. You know it covers the distance if you find them both near your house."

"I'll get into the mission mode," she winked at him.

Having had a sumptuous meal, they hired an auto-rickshaw to go to Deepak for the matinee show. However, seeing some sari shops on the way, Raja Rao asked the driver to stop nearby.

"Let's get a sari for you," he got down.

"Won't I treasure it as the commemorative one," she said coyly.

"Won't it remind me every time I disrobe it," he crooned into her ears as she stepped out of the auto.

As both of them were scanning the saris in those rows of shelves, she picked up a brown *venkatagiri* and began feeling it on herself.

"Won't it go well with me?" she said excitedly.

"And this as well," he handed her a grey *pochampally*.

"I'll have that then," she dropped the *venkatagiri*.

"You have them both," he said handing her the *venkatagiri*.

"If only you promise me that you would have us together," she said to him in undertone.

"Would I love that any less?" he murmured in her ears.

After she had selected matching blouse pieces for those saris, they came out of the shop.

"How else I can thank you twice than by wearing them both together?" she said coyly, as they walked towards the auto-rickshaw, kept in wait for them,

"That would be an overburden to my eager hands, and to tell you the truth, you look the best with none on you," he whispered into her joyous ears.

"Let me also reveal my mind; you're alike handsome, with and without your jeans," she said turning coy.

"Thank you, I'll join you in a minute," he said, as she got into the auto.

"What's that?" she asked him when he returned with a packet.

"It's personal," he winked at her.

"Is that so?" she said reaching for it.

"I feel so," he smiled holding it back.

"Then lock it in your briefcase," she said feigning anger.

"Anything to do with you is personal to me, isn't it?" he said, cajoling her.

"Mere words aren't they?" she said looking the other way.

"Some colorful thirty-sixes for you," he crooned into her ears.

"Good memory," she smiled, thrilled to the core.

"The haunting one of our love spheres," he whispered,

While she rested her head on his shoulder, as though made heady by his love, the auto took them to the Deepak Theatre.

However, by the time they got into cinema hall, the matinee was already under way but no sooner they settled in their seats than their legs sought partners for footsie. Thus by the interval time, even as their legs got weary, their souls craved for fusion. So, as their looks conveyed longing, their legs signaled the exit.

"Get a few," she whispered as they came out of the theatre.

"How many?" he said heartily.

"As many as you could wet," she said coyly.

While she waited at the gate, he went out on her errand, and soon, as she saw him returning with a Vanilla large picked up at the nearby Kwality, she guessed his intentions and followed his coming in all eagerness.

"So, you're fond of ice cream?" she said all the same, feeling his pocket.

"I thought you could blow hot and cold," he whispered leaning onto her.

"What an imagination," she ruffled his hair in admiration.

"Owing to your inspiration," he squeezed her waist.

Soon they reached Domalaguda by an auto-rickshaw, and as though to shed part of her fear, she asked the driver to take them right up to the street corner.

"I'm sorry, but you've to come behind me," she said as she went ahead of him.

"Why the precedent was set last night itself," he said making her shy.

When she gave him the green signal, propelled by his passion, he increased his pace to reach her place. Then, closing the door behind, he overwhelmed her in no time.

"Roopa, in spite of her love, life without you would've been empty, how lucky we made it," he said, as they lay satiated in each other's arms.

"Give me the credit for enticing you in the end, oh, how desperate I was for your fill," she said in a fulfilled tone.

"That's why, I owe you even more," he clasped her hand.

"Raja, the more you explore my body, even more I'm coming to know about my soul. I never knew love would mean so much in spite of my craving for you," she said, kissing his chest.

"Even if I spend a lifetime on your frame, I'm sure it would still have nuances left to enthrall my senses," he said, fondling her.

Soon they had their nap as though to refresh themselves for the time ahead and as they woke up she said,

"I'll make some coffee for us."

"Make it a little hotter for better effect," he said winking at her.

"Why not," she winked back at him, as she went into the kitchen.

"See how it differs from those ice-cream jerks," he said even as she returned with two cups of steaming coffee for them.

"With you I'm a game for anything," she said enthusiastically.

"Oh, you are a marvelous woman," he shrieked in time.

"For the marvel of a man," she sputtered.

"Brought by the hand of love" he said in ecstasy.

"I'm afraid the latex would lacerate," she said, condoming him at length.

"Oh! Roopa what a dame are you?" he said in happiness.

"I'll let you know now," she said, as she mounted.

"Oh, my love" he cried in ecstasy.

"Hold my boobs," she moaned in joy.

"What a randy," he said, as he took his turn in their lovemaking.

"Horny honey," she said, satiated at length.

"Roopa, I'm coming to see the commonality between sex and sport, basics being the same, it's the players who raise the bar," he said resting on her belly in fulfillment.

"How true," she said caressing his chest.

When they bathed together in the evening, wanting to have him there too, she made him want her even more.

After bath, as she began wearing the new *pochampally*, he ogled at her, as if she were new to him.

"I'm sorry that you're caged here," she said apologetically.

"No sorries in cupid's nest," he said taking her into his arms.

"So so sexy," she said sinking into him.

When she got into the kitchen to prepare dinner for them, he started helping her in the kitchen chores.

"Why get tired here when you've got to exert elsewhere," she said taking away the kitchen knife from him.

"Will this do?" he said in smile, as he squatted on the floor, leaning to the wall.

"That's fine, but don't dare stir out from there," she said, assuming the posture of a monitor with a ladle for the stick.

"May I know what went wrong with you and him," he said hesitantly.

"My life an open book for you, but why spoil our party with my problems," she said.

"You know I want you to be happily wed-locked, let's see how we can fix it," he said concernedly.

"I'm happy you care," as she said, she went up to him to kiss.

While she prepared their meal, she narrated her life and times, and said in the end,

"I've only to blame myself, for I never made him feel wanted."

"I'm sure, he would return to a sweeter home," he said, caressing her affectionately.

"To be honest with you, I could never love him the way I dreamt of loving a man," she said, cuddling herself in his embrace. "I shouldn't have married him at all and that was the biggest blunder of my life. So it's in a void that I lived till you swept me off my feet on that fateful 6th of June (she looked up and winked at him). Having got you after all that craving, I should've cared two hoots for him, but as you've opened my eyes to the real meaning of our love life, I shall open my heart to him as well. Now, I'm full of hope as your love has given me zest for life."

"I would love to see that dawn in his life," he said reaching for her lips.

"Raja, I'm really proud of you," she said hugging him tightly as he released her lips. "I'll bring that about, if only to prove the power of our love. I thought about what you've said and realized that it makes much sense. As you've pictured the sentimental aspects so clearly, I could see the practical utility of it all. After all, adultery could be a double jeopardy for women, as affairs can't cater to the marital irritants that push women into alien arms; and making it worse for them, liaisons induce a feeling of guilt, pricking their conscience all the time. So, while still having to endure that which made them adulterous, women in liaison find themselves carrying the cross of infidelity as well. Besides, in time, the fear of exposure, imparts dullness to their sense of excitement, and that robs them of the thrills on the frills. When in the end, the inevitable desertion is on hand; won't women wonder about the futility of it all, so your idea could be a viable via media for such. Oh, how I feel enslaved by your intellectual love."

"I'm proud of you Roopa for expanding it so well," he kissed her ardently.

"With all that rubbing we've been having, a little of your intellect could have seeped into me," she said with a sense of satisfaction.

"Add that to your love and charms, won't you enslave me," he said in admiration, and added in jest. "But do spare me for I've to serve her as well."

"Why won't I lend my helping hand to help you serve her better," she said as she winked at him, and thought,

'How unique my life is! Isn't it thrilling to have a man and his wife for lovers without the other being wiser to it? Oh, how exciting it is, being in the eye of the love storm.'

"May I see your course material," he said, as they came out of the kitchen.

She readily placed all the course material before him and looked at him eagerly.

"I know from your letters to Sandhya that your pen carries the beauty of your hand," he said perusing her notebooks.

"But how I wish I can show you the *Rama Kotis* in my heart bearing your name," she said leaning on him.

"Roopa, I love your letter greeting me when I get back to Delhi," he said, kissing her writing hand.

"What else to write than seeking sex dates from my horny man, so that is that," she said coyly.

"Surely you can picture your reflections of our union for one," he said.

"As if you haven't seen them all," she sank into his lap.

"Being unlucky in love," he said reflectively, "I never had any love letter to read. Seeing Sandhya, my mind wanted her as wife before love entered my heart. But as you know ours is love at first sight. That way, you're the first woman I loved and had. If you feel it's not risky, we could correspond till we come here."

"I'm happy being special to you but I feel sad that you had to wait for so long to love-mate," she said cajolingly, and added in disappointment, "Yet, I don't want some postal mishap ruining our love."

"You can safely write, if not receive," he said, and added in jest, "If you fail to write, I'll send you a reminder."

"Blackmail," she smiled.

"Love mail," he laughed.

"Ok boss, but tell me how I can assist you at work," she said in all seriousness.

"So to say with your presence itself; Moreover, your general abilities and her creative capabilities should do wonders for us, I'm really hopeful that we three could make it work." he said thoughtfully.

"With two women backing your genius, I'm sure we would succeed," she said in all admiration.

"Don't be lavish in your praises; only when something goes on smoothly for some length of time, can one say that some genius is at work there. But we haven't even started," he said unpretentiously.

"I've a hunch that our sufferings are behind us and a rosy future awaits us," she said exuding optimism.

"But what of the present," he said ardently.

"It's in our mating, isn't it?" she said amorously.

In the ecstasy of their lovemaking quite a lot of midnight oil was burnt that night as well.

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Waking up at his honeymoon time of nine, Raja Rao tiptoed into the kitchen to surprise Roopa, and as he laced her at her back, she lay smug in his embrace for long.

"What's for the day darling?" he crooned into her ears at length.

"Why not a Lambretta ride, all the way into the wilderness," she said as she had an agenda on hand.

"No doubt it would be an exciting ride but what if Lalitha derails it by alerting Sathyam about it?" he said.

"I couldn't care less for once, but even if it comes to that, won't I make up something for an explanation?" she said nonchalantly.

"Roopa, what a perfect ten you are!" he said, watching her wear the brown Venkatagiri sari.

"But Sandhya is ten plus one, and I mean it," she said.

"While your passion supplies me the life-force, she sustains that with her love, that's how you both bring substance to my life," he said contemplatively.

"Why not a ménage a trois then," she said enticingly.

"Not that I want it any less to happen but what I seek more is that you succeed with Sathyam," he said taking her hand.

"As much as I want to live with you, still I would try to be more eager for him, if only as a salutation to our love," she said, moved no end.

When they stepped out of the house and got onto Sathyam's Lambretta for a ride into the wilderness, riding the pillion, as they crossed the city limits, she enlaced him amorously.

"How pleasantly hard it is Roopa," he said, without turning back.

"It's my dream ride Raja, take me to some no man's land," she hugged him closer.

When he finally stopped the scooter near Shamirpet, she spotted a place yonder for their rendezvous.

Spreading a bedsheet under a banyan tree, they sat for a session of sweet nothings, and having eaten some *rotis* with *dalfry* bought at a *dhaba* on their way, they settled for siesta.

But no sooner they woke up than she goaded him to move around the place 'like grazing cows'.

"You're crazy really," he said.

"Am I not in love?" she walked spiritedly ahead of him.

Soon spotting a mango grove, she ran towards it, dragging him all the way, and as they got therein, leaving him perplexed on the ground, she climbed up a well-grown tree. When she perched herself on a low branch, and invited him to join her there, he obliged her saying,

"How you amaze me Roopa!"

"Raja you gave me the real me," she said cuddling him in delight.

"Roopa, even in my wildest dreams, I haven't imagined anything near this," he said holding her dearly.

"Now I'm being gripped by the animal in me," she jumped down, pulling him along.

"Be my bull," she said having bent on the ground and lifting her sari to bare her arse for him.

"How you've become insane!" he said amazedly.

"True, but then, you should know how I've been craving for you? I want you to lay me at wherever I'd pined for you. Maybe, it's the only way I might be able to erase those painful moments of my craving for you. How I wish you could stay put in me. Why has not nature made it that way?" she said excitedly in her provocative posture.

"Oh, to be wanted like this is divine indeed," he said, as he followed her bidding.

In the end, as the sun was all set to cross the horizon, they headed back to the city, as if to beat it at its own game. But once they reached Paradise, they stopped for a cup of *Irani chai* that they shared by the roadside. Thereafter, having loitered on the Tank Bund for a while, on their way back home, he picked up four bottles of King Fisher.

"Are you going to gobble up all that beer?" she said second guessing his intentions.

"I thought you would share," he said tantalizingly.

"Does it help me too?" she winked at him.

"Yes, to take the stuffing out of me," he said in smile.

Reaching home, they were relieved at finding a padlock on the landlord's door.

"Looks like my bad-luck is a spent force now, touch wood," she said, touching the door before she opened it.

"That's good for our love," he said repeating the ritual.

Having stuffed the beer bottles in the fridge, they went together into the bathroom for a shower. Though they went in together as if to save time, yet they took a long time coming out of it, only to settle down on the bed for 'cheers'.

"Isn't it bitter," she said after the first sip.

"You will feel better after a gulp or more," he said in encouragement.

"I know it would be better for me, even without me drinking it," she smiled.

"You are a pet dear," he said.

"Like her, you mean," she said, smiling.

"Did she tell you that she likes her peg having my peg?" he said with a glint in his eye.

"I won't betray her secrets, even to her man," she said in mirth lying in his lap.

"So you would gang up in our ménage a trios, better I have second thoughts," he said in jest

About to respond, she retched, and his hands got outstretched.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said in embarrassment as he wiped her mouth clean, he having cleaned his own hands before.

"Why, won't you take my cum?" he said, cuddling her in his embrace.

"If not for that what for a woman is made?" she said smiling, looking into his eyes as he sought her lips eagerly.

While he made love to her, she readily surrendered her soul to him as her body sought him even more eagerly.

When she was at preparing meals for them, enjoying his drink, he kept her company in the kitchen, and as if the beer tasted better from his bottle, she began to share it with him at every turn. Having been rejuvenated after dinner, they indulged themselves, as if there would be no sex life left after that night for them.

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When Roopa got up the next day, finding Raja Rao staring at her longingly, she felt as if she woke up from a dream.

"Why stare at me as if I'm new to you?" she said, getting closer to him,

"I'm not able to believe that all your beauty is mine," he said, blowing into her navel.

"Worried about the void, I couldn't sleep for long," she said pensively

"I'll be back in your arms before your love bites lose their traces," he said baring his shoulders.

"Wish I were a vampire to live on your blood till then," she said biting him to the bones.

"Ooh, my bitch," he said in pain

"I itch for such," she said in want.

"What shall I tell Sandhya's about these," he said still in pain.

"Tell her to ask me," she said coyly, and added, "You want her to deliver a boy or a girl?"

"Baby girl," he said.

"If I could, I would like to bear your son," she said.

"Why is that?" he said inquisitively.

"I want a future Roopa to have a man like you," she said admiringly.

"Roopa, oh, how you love me!" he said hugging her.

"When would be the *barasala*?" she said.

"Once you hear from her don't fail to book your tickets," he said.

"I've an idea, we shall make it in a 1st Class coupe for two; as I make some coffee for us, think how to bring it about," she said excitedly, and he too followed her into the kitchen.

While preparing the coffee and picturing their togetherness on the train, she recalled her weird experience in the coupe, and as if the milk on the burner too shared her urge to narrate the episode to her lover, it boiled itself in double quick time.

Having heard her recap, he tried to figure out the embarrassment she might have felt then, and said,

"That's what life is all about, stranger than fiction, as they say, but do check below the berths before all else,"

"No worry as it's once bitten twice shy, now tell me how we get in there in the first place," she said eagerly.

"Book a coupe for us in the Godavari, party joining at Kazipet. You ring me up so that I too can book my ticket to kazipet. As he would be with you till the train moves out, you book another ticket for you as usual. Then at Kazipet, we would check into the cupid's corner," he explained as they had coffee.

"What a 'love on wheels' that would be reminding me, *jab miya bibi raaji to kya karega kazi*," she hugged him, spilling the dregs on him.

When the clock struck eleven though, it occurred to her that in its forward march, time would abet her lover to leave her for his wife's place that evening, and that made her feel morose.

"Cheer up Roopa, If you sulk, that would only make it worse for me," he said at last.

"Maybe you can measure my love on the scale of your misery," she sighed.

'How true,' he said, hugging her.

"You can't separate love and anxiety in a woman's heart," she said, tightening her grip on him.

"That's why love is so painfully sweet," he kissed her tears, 'and salty too.'

By the time they reached the Secunderabad Railway Station in the evening, Roopa began to see Raja Rao's impending departure as a necessary evil for their forthcoming togetherness.

"As you make love to her, give my love to her," she whispered to him in the din of the arriving train.

When the Godavari Express languidly pulled out of that railway platform, gazing at him lovingly, she waved at him furiously.

If only her sense of longing for her lover had acquired a physical dimension, probably the train, in spite of its diesel power, wouldn't have moved an inch forward.

## Chapter 30

### Euphoric Forays

The Godavari Express, which Roopa boarded at Secunderabad that September evening, raced on the railway track as if powered by the pull of her passion even as the sound of its vibrations synchronized with the pounding of her heart beats. But, when the train came to a screeching halt at Kazipet, ending her two-hour long anxiety, it didn't take long for her to jump into the waiting arms of Raja Rao.

"I was worried about your train making it in time," she said after deep kissing him for long, unmindful of the surroundings.

"Why would I take chances? I was ahead by a day," he said holding her.

"Oh, sorry for your lovely wait," she said, not hiding her happiness.

"What is it before our year-long longing," he crooned into her ear.

Then as they reached the first class bogie, pulling him towards the farthest entrance, she said,

"I've something to show you."

"Can't you wait till we get in?" he winked at her.

"It's a special from the Indian Railways for us," she said, and read aloud from the passenger chart pasted over there.

MR. RAJA RAO

MRS. ROOPA RAO

"You know how to feel love, and express it as well," he said pressing her shoulder.

"Isn't it a bold statement in bold letters?" she said clinging to him lovingly.

"Even small print suits our lovesick eyes," he said lovingly.

"Of brave souls, that is," she said looking at him admiringly.

"True," he said looking at her lovingly.

"How are you dear?" she asked him, at last, when they settled down in the coupe.

"Yours eagerly," he said winking at her.

"Let me see," she felt him at the sores of her fulfillment.

"How are things?" he said holding her breasts.

"Am I not happy?" she said joyously.

"Say radiate but what about him?" he said taking her hand.

"He became homebody all again, well with the bottle for company; at last, I could make him feel at home in his home. Shall I tell him to thank you for that," she said in all smiles.

"Never mind, I would befriend him," he said with an apparent satisfaction.

"Why buy a headache?" she smiled.

"What could be worse than the heartache we've had, oh, how I shudder to think of those days," he said squeezing her hand.

"What about these days?" resting on his shoulder she caressed his chest.

"Don't you see that my cup of joy is overflowing?" he said reaching for her lips.

"When I heard about the new arrival, I felt as if I were her mother," she said.

"So, she'll have a double protection against my pampering," he said smilingly.

"Before I forget, these days all say that I've become forgetful," she began.

"Lost in love!" he said, interrupting her.

"But to regain myself I've paid an advance for your office as well as Sandhya's Sweet Home, both in Himayatnagar," she said enthusiastically.

"So, you've got the sets ready for my shooting," he said pinching her crotch.

Shortly thereafter, the TTE had come and gone, leaving them on their own, and having bolted the door, Raja Rao opened his suitcase, and pulled out an 'Intimate'.

"When you're around, why do I need this?" she said, smelling it.

"Nothing is better scented than your body, it's just to make it a witness to our intimacy," he said, rubbing his nose all over her.

"You're such a pet," she said, running her fingers through his curly hair.

"I read your letter a hundred times for its romantic quality," he said as he pulled it from his pocket.

"Thanks for your compliment, for my maiden attempt," she sank into him coyly.

"Why don't you read it for me?" he gave her the letter.

"Why do you want to embarrass me?" she said gazing at it lovingly.

"Having seen your love in the print of your hand, now I want to savour it in the tenor of your tone," he coaxed her.

She smiled with satisfaction, but read with inhibition.

"Raja dear,

Believe me, for more than an hour now, I've been toying with my pen to picture the feelings of my heart so that you could feel them in my missive. If only you've been around, by now, we would've made love twice over. Is there any human expression other than lovemaking that is so full in its intent and content!

I wonder why I feel so diffident to find words to express that by which I breathe life, is it not our love that helps me live. Maybe, a woman prefers to preserve her love in the recess of her heart, as if its exposure, even to her lover, deprives it of its pristine purity. You know, I didn't have any inhibitions turning nude that night, before your very eyes, that too on my own. So, isn't it strange that I should struggle now to bare my heart, in spite of your command! It looks like the emotions of my love are closer to my heart than the feelings of my frame, if not, how could have I steered clear of all those temptations for the appointment with our fulfillment? Oh what a destiny!

Why, I'm annoyed with you still, for having insisted on my penning down my inner feelings, although I made you privy to every nuance of my emotion. Haven't I conveyed my craving for you through my body, every time it was entwined with yours? But, as you know, I only live to fulfill every whim and fancy of yours.

All the same, I can feel your desire to behold our love in my hand, having seen it through my eyes. But be certain that whichever way you look at it, you will still find me fulfilled. If I could make you feel likewise, I would have a purpose to live, and a cause to die for. Don't you pull faces (she paused to see his face and found it aglow) I know what our love means to you too.

Thanks to our union, I have a revelation, as I find it hard to relive the sexual ecstasy I've experienced with you; the sensual pleasure of your touch has come to stay in my consciousness. It is as though the softness of your skin has seeped through my flesh.

I'm in wait - to meet and mate.

Yours ever, by heart and soul,

Roopa Rao."

"I'm eager," he said.

"I'll ablute," she went about it.

"I'm thirsty," he said in time.

"Let's turn 69."

"Oh, my Roopa," he sputtered at length.

"Let's roll over."

"Don wants it," he said pushing her away in time.

"Dame too craves."

"Juicy welcome," he said as she took him in.

"I'm going mad," she groaned.

"Your spasms tell," he crooned.

"I'm dying," she cried.

"How thrilling," he moaned.

"Your motions tell," she was ecstatic.

"I'm coming!" he exclaimed.

"My orgasm tells," she cooed in the end.

As they lay in embrace, she said,

"Lay me in the bed that I grew up daydreaming."

"What a love rash you've?" he said in all admiration.

"If it's a new coinage, you must attribute it to me," she said happily.

"Done darling," he said kissing her.

"Won't laying the hen in its den be a big game?" she said lovingly.

"What next, my den," he said, in jest.

"Imagine the possibilities, with the other one around," she winked at him.

"How devilishly you love Roopa!" he exclaimed.

"A devil in the bed and an angel otherwise, haven't you heard it said," she said joyously.

"I'm coming to know about it," he said smilingly, and added after a pause, "What of Prasad?"

"Are you jealous of him?" she said coquettishly.

"Has one loved without being jealous? Do you know of any?" he said holding her.

"I feel sorry for him that I made him waste his time in his fruitless chase," she said.

"How generous you are, even to your adversary," he said.

"But still, won't he have a cause of action to claim opportunity costs from me," she said in jest, only to continue reflectively, "Shortly after you left, he came to force me into surrender and I could clearly see that he came determined to drag me into bed. How intense was he in his intent then, and what a storm he created at that is beyond description. Oh, how he tried every tool in his lusty kit to wrench my resolve, why he even threatened to kill himself with my kitchen knife. Since I didn't yield even then, he injured himself on his chest as if carrying out his threat to kill himself. As I remained unmoved after all that, he called me a frigid flirt, and angered by my stony silence, he left in a huff, never to return.'

"Maybe he too loves you," said Raja Rao.

"Though he lusted after me like nobody else, he never came to love me; why, at the very outset my sixth sense forewarned me about it. If not, he could've had me much before you made me yours. Oh, you can only see to believe the intensity of his passion that day! Thank God, your August visit saved the day for our love and me as well; otherwise, I don't think I could've mustered the required strength to resist him then," she said reminiscently,

Then, as she hugged him with the relief associated with having escaped some danger, he held her with the feeling associated in retrieving a valued object before its accidental fall, and said,

"But would he leave it at that. What if he begins spying upon you?"

"I told Sathyam about it all, to take the wind out of his sails of mischief. Even otherwise, I don't think we need to worry about him anymore. After all, the vanity of man makes him believe that if a woman shuns him, she would snub others as well, but, should man suspect that one is carrying on with someone, he would imagine that she could be an easy lay for him as well. It's all because man tends to picture woman's preferences through the prism of his fallacies, and not in the mirror of her proclivities," she said coolly.

"Whatever, it's the woman's whim that prevails in the end, isn't it?" he said

"You shouldn't grudge us our only advantage, otherwise, are we not at the receiving end, in every way?" she said, picking up some bananas from her basket.

"I haven't seen you reading this before," he said, finding an *Andhra Pathrika* therein.

"I picked it up at the Higginbotham's to keep my anxiety at bay," she said, giving him a banana.

"Don't I understand," he said patting her on his head.

"I read a couple of stories, but I felt the characterization was poor," she said in disappointment.

"Characters of fiction are authors' children and critics' neighbors, even if we perceive them as inadequate, nevertheless, we should appreciate the fact that they are the products of someone's imagination, however limited that might be. It's not often that you come across a book from which you could quote much," he said enigmatically.

"I agree, but in these writings, I only find the phantoms of wishful thinking but not any products of imagination."

"Do you have some more?" he asked her, having helped himself to a couple of them by then.

"It's the last one," she offered him the one she was about to have.

"Never mind, you have it," he persisted.

"You know my preference for the one with the skin," she pushed the banana into his mouth as a prelude.

Later, after they savored the meal that she brought along with the *saada paan* for them, which rejuvenated them for their nocturnal exercise so much that when the train approached Eluru at three, unable to part from one another, the lovers were still at caressing each other.

"At this rate you may be sending me to Sandhya's bed just to rest," he smiled in the end.

"She has one year lead over me that is after discounting the off days, so let me get even before you can be even handed," she said winking at him.

After that journey of ecstasy, they reached the Kakinada Town Station in the morning that is after changing the trains at the Samalkot Junction, and for appearances sake, they went their separate ways - he in his in-laws' car and she in a cycle rickshaw.

While a hiatus after lover's union is welcome for sweet reflections, what is unwelcome is the painful separation that entails it.

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While the rickshaw-puller was peddling her home, Roopa tried to speculate about his wife and their life.

'Would their married chores be any different from the middle-class mores? Maybe, for want of privacy in the slum life, affairs could be but a handshake away. But then, won't that dampen the pining of love and hamper the exhilaration in the union? How am I to know?' she wondered.

"Welcome Roopa, how are you doing?" Ramaiah greeted her warmly.

"Naannaa, you know the face the index of mind," she said joyously.

"Yes, you look happy," said Ramaiah in apparent relief, as though her joy has reduced his guilt.

"Glad you're relaxed," she said noticing his mood, and headed towards the kitchen, shouting, "O, Janakammagaru. "

"You have it now, ever since Sandhya's conceived, we had it from her on your account," Ramaiah said to her in all smiles

"You can't go back without a medical checkup; be sure about it," said Janaki, as Roopa joined her.

"You better sort it out with your son-in-law when he comes," Roopa enlaced her.

"Does he count at all, my poor brother-in-law," said Raju teasingly.

"When you're married, you would know about that," said Roopa smilingly,

"But you look exhausted?" observed Janaki.

"Is it so?" she said smiling.

"Ask Sandhya, if you don't believe me, I know that her words are the gospel truth for you," said Janaki.

At the thought of her impending meeting with Sandhya, what with her guilt feelings coming to the fore, Roopa was tied her to bed all morning, rationalizing her affair with her husband. Scared though she was at the prospect of facing her friend with her lover around, however in the end, as her love for the former got the better of her guilt, she sprang up from her bed.

However, on her way to Sandhya's place, she recalled her state of mind when Sathyam returned after Raja Rao had left,

'How is it that I didn't feel guilty then, but felt it odd to think in terms of loving him, though I gave my word to Raja? But with Sandhya it's all so different, isn't it? It's her love that sustained my interest in life until her man turned me on. Won't seducing her man amount to betrayal? Well, if I develop qualms on that count, won't I end up in the doghouse of guilt? After all, I'm not for robbing her joy by grabbing him all for me, isn't it? What's wrong then, if I share his affection with her? Isn't it fine, given our lesbian connection, won't extraordinary situations call for extraordinary solutions? Why not we three engage our love in a round robin of ardour?'

Helped by that euphoric feeling, Roopa felt relieved by the time she reached the District Collector's bungalow.

"What's your secret Roopa that you look prettier than ever?" said Damayanthi in welcome.

"Surely you radiate! Sandhya is impatient for you; what a friendship yours is! Touch wood, may God keep it that way," said Kamalakar.

As she began to climb up the staircase, Roopa saw it all in a new light.

"Sandhya might misread the cause of my joy, what if she suspects that I'm carrying on with Prasad? What a pity that I can't clarify," she thought.

When Roopa reached the threshold, she found Raja Rao cuddling his kid, even as Sandhya was hugging him from behind. As Roopa coughed to announce her arrival, Sandhya jumped for joy.

"Oh, Roopa," Sandhya reached out to her with her outstretched arms.

"How's our little darling?" said Roopa, fondly looking at the baby over her mate's shoulders, in their smug embrace.

"Here she is," said Raja Rao coming near.

Still enlacing Sandhya, Roopa pinched the baby, and said,

"So cute, she's like her mother."

"Seems she too welcomes you," said Raja Rao, alluding to the cries of his baby.

'Isn't it my coercion that led to the outcome?' Roopa said to him in all smiles.

"Oh, how ravishing you look! You've never been better," said Sandhya.

"I don't know, but that's what everyone says," said Roopa, and taking a hard look at Sandhya, she said in undertone, "Why, you too look fuller in your fulfillment. Won't those extra pounds come in handy to him and to me as well?"

"Won't I love that," Sandhya cooed back.

"What's the secret Roopa?" said Raja Rao with the intent of making Sandhya get used to his closeness with her friend.

"I'll tell you," said Roopa winking at him, and then turning to Sandhya, she apologized, "I'm sorry for being so late."

"Who's she after?" Raja Rao sought Roopa's opinion about the newborn.

"She has her father's features and her mother's charms," said Roopa, looking fondly at the baby.

"Hope she picks up your diplomacy, as she grows up," said Raja Rao in jest.

"So, our dream is coming true, how did it feel when he broke the news to you?" said Sandhya taking Roopa's hand.

"Can't you guess? I nearly swooned," said Roopa reenacting the act.

"Thank God, she didn't collapse then," said Raja Rao.

"Well, to spare you the trouble,' Roopa told Raja Rao, and turning to Sandhya, she said dreamily. "It's dream-like lovey."

"Lovey sounds nice, can I borrow that," he said.

"Ask Sandhya for she has its patent," said Roopa mirthfully.

"Have you made it easy or difficult for me?" he said smilingly.

"Know from her," said Roopa.

"I thought of joining you by the month end but mummy won't have it; she feels I won't be able to manage the baby so early," said Sandhya in all disappointment.

"Am I not on hand to lend my helping hand?" said Roopa.

"Who's for wasting your talents at baby-sitting, can't we together contribute at his office?" said Sandhya,

"I love that but you know how touchy Sathyam is about my working," said Roopa in vexation.

"Leave that to me," said Sandhya.

"Let's see," said Roopa.

"He wants to make us both his business partners," said Sandhya.

As Roopa started sobbing, for want of a better response, Sandhya couldn't hold her tears of joy either. The euphoria of their love insensibly impelled in Raja Rao the urge to merge with his women.

"It's fortune to partner your beautiful souls," he said as they clung on to him as one, as he held them both in his arms.

"How concerned you both are, now, I can live in joy and die fulfilled," said Roopa bogged down by tears of joy,

"Roopa, don't get emotional," said Raja Rao patting her head, fearing she might bare her soul, overcome by remorse.

"What would be my share of the investment?" said Roopa, recovering herself at length.

"Don't bother about that; it won't take much to get started," he said.

"But still I would like to contribute. I can sell some of my jewels," said Roopa.

"Do you need to go to that length?" said Sandhya.

"I don't want Sathyam's favour and don't like to be a drag on you," said Roopa.

"We better respect her feelings," said Raja Rao to Sandhya.

"So, as I hold your jewels in trust, we use mine as our common wear. Is that okay?" said Sandhya.

"Sandhya you're a wonder," said Raja Rao.

"She's the fortune, of yours and mine as well," said Roopa to Raja Rao, enlacing Sandhya.

"Being your beloved, is no less a fortune," said Sandhya, taking Raja Rao's hand.

"What a fortunate circle it is," said Raja Rao holding Roopa's hand.

"I want to keep her for us," said Sandhya holding their hands together.

"I'll be your love slave," said Roopa, coy in the circle of affection.

"Haven't you enslaved us yourself," said Sandhya affectionately to Roopa.

"What about the little darling's name?" said Roopa.

"Let him apply his mind," said Sandhya.

"I welcome your suggestion," he said to Roopa.

"I'll second her stand," said Roopa, leaning on Sandhya, as though in solidarity.

"As you've passed the buck to me, you both are equally accountable, and as the ball is in my court, I can't avoid taking a shot at it. Thus the name derives by itself - Sa - Ro - (Ra) Ja, - Ra being silent, Saroja," he said mirthfully.

"Lovely!" Sandhya exclaimed.

"Creative!" Roopa admired.

"Inspired by love," he said, taking both their hands.

"I've to leave now," said Roopa reluctantly, and withdrawing herself from them, she went up to kiss Saroja.

"Come for lunch tomorrow," said Sandhya kissing Roopa in turn.

"We'll come to pick you up uninvited," said Raja Rao in jest.

"Are you the one to wait for an invitation, so don't keep me waiting," Roopa smiled.

Seeing Roopa so joyous, Sandhya couldn't contain her joy, and thanked Raja Rao for enlivening her friend's mood with his charm and wit.

On her way home though, Roopa wondered as to how to bring about a homely union with her lover. However, as she reached home there was a godsend for her in the form of a wedding invitation to the Ramaiah's.

## **Chapter 31**

### **Living the Dream**

The next morning as Raja Rao and Sandhya went to see Roopa, it was Janaki who received them as Roopa was having her bath then.

"Your in-laws speak well of you, and that goes in favor of any man. Not to speak of your wife, my daughter Roopa too sings praises of you, and that speaks for itself. Now that you're moving over to Hyderabad, we can relax about our Roopa," said Janaki to Raja Rao in welcome.

"I'm glad they would be together again; my wife has led only half a life in Delhi," he said smiling.

"Roopa says that you're going to stay nearby," said Janaki.

"I wonder why Roopa didn't look for a house of two portions," said Sandhya.

"They grew up glued together from their schooldays; may God bless them," said Janaki to him.

"Surely your blessings would stand them in good stead," said Raja Rao to Janaki.

"As the saying goes, you would live for hundred years," sighting Roopa coming out of her bath, exclaimed Sandhya.

"That interests me if you too live along with me," said Roopa, slyly looking at Raja Rao, as she proceeded into her room.

'Sandhya, let's show him the place," said Roopa, as she joining them soon.

"Why do you need me for that?" said Sandhya, engaged as she was with Janaki.

"Grace me in my parental home," said Roopa, leading him inside.

Once they entered her bedroom, she embraced him ardently, and he kissed her passionately.

"Luckily, tomorrow, morning, my parents would be attending some wedding for me to entertain their newest son-in-law, so come by ten," she whispered to him, as he released her lips.

"I'll come with loads of that," he crooned into her ear.

"Let's get going," said Sandhya, as the lovers reappeared in the main hall.

Soon the three of them got into the waiting Ambassador to make it to the Collector's bungalow. After a sumptuous lunch, that followed a lot of merriment, Sandhya closeted herself with Roopa, leaving Saroja to Raja Rao's care.

"You never looked sexier," said Roopa, having ardently kissed Sandhya.

"I'm glad both of you feel the same way about me," said Sandhya.

'Your generosity makes me more indebted than ever," said Roopa hugging Sandhya.

"I've an axe to grind and you know that," said Sandhya taking Roopa's hand.

"Oh, my lovey," Roopa kissed Sandhya affectionately.

"How I wish we get fused into one," said Sandhya lovingly.

"How are we to see each other and gloat about us then?" said Roopa in jest.

"By making him a witness to our closeness, can't we gauge how it feels from his eyes," said Sandhya coyly to Roopa

"I'm afraid our joy is too good to last, just one misunderstanding would be the end of me," said Roopa thoughtfully.

"Given our bondage where's the scope for that?" said Sandhya making light of it all.

"Don't forget that you're married now," said Roopa.

"I don't see Raja as a bother," said Sandhya assuredly

"But I'm no *rakhi* sister of him," Roopa said tentatively.

"But you're his friendly half," said Sandhya, cajoling Roopa in her arms.

"And that's my worry," said Sandhya cuddling Sandhya.

"Why, it should be a cause of hope," said Sandhya caressing Roopa.

"If I remember correctly, Napoleon said that man woman friendship leads to love," said Roopa tentatively.

"I've not only thought all about that but also noticed how you gloat over each other," said Sandhya, kissing Roopa. "I know women tend to be touchy when it comes to the other woman. But as ours is a lesbian case, the prospective other woman happens to be my own woman."

"Oh, lovey,' Roopa began crying.

"Why cry at the threshold of happiness?" said Sandhya, wiping Roopa's tears, "If you're unhappy, how can I be happy? It's for both of you to decide whether you would like to sail on a platonic boat or swim in the erotic current. Who knows, our constant jesting about sharing a man could have been the prompting of the premonition."

Roopa's eyes glistened, even as her lips reached for their counterparts that uttered those loving words.

"Wonder how you both bracket my life," said Sandhya kissing Roopa affectionately.

"Oh, lovey, you're angelic really!" said Roopa, sinking to Sandhya's feet.

"Aren't you my Venus," said Sandhya lifting Roopa into her embrace.

"What about our Raja?" said Roopa, carried away by that euphoric moment.

"Our Knight of Vigour, if you like," said Sandhya in all love for her man and mate.

"Oh how I've suffered craving for one, cried Roopa.

"You find out if he's the one," crooned Sandhya into Roopa's ear.

"Oh honey!" said Roopa, joining their lips.

"What happened with Prasad?" asked Sandhya at length.

"It's all over now, I've just escaped by the skin of my teeth," said Roopa, experiencing the sense of relief all again.

"I was worried to death as the idea of your affair with him scared me," said Sandhya reminiscently.

"I realized it's really my fault, so I can't blame him for signing it off calling me a frigid flirt," said Roopa reflectively.

"Well, my lovey is not for everyone's having," said Sandhya winking at Roopa.

"It feels nice that you've a lover for me in your mind," said Roopa winking back at Sandhya.

"It's up to you to woo him as I stand performance guarantee," said Sandhya pushing Roopa in the right direction.

"Oh, lovey, how sexy," said Roopa.

"You're welcome to voyeur to have the true picture," said Sandhya heartily.

"It's some way away anyway, but isn't the way he derived Saroja's name thrilling?" said Roopa, winking at Sandhya.

"Don't you think he's creative?" said Sandhya.

"Hope Saroja imbibes some of it," said Roopa reminiscently.

"How I wish she shapes up well," said Sandhya, as they went back to Saroja.

"Why not, with a craftsman of a man as father," said Roopa in admiration.

"Is it about me?" said Raja Rao, who overheard Roopa, as they reached him by then.

"Who else we talk about?" smiled Roopa.

"I feel flattered to interest the loveys," he said with a smile.

"Roopa he stole it," said Sandhya in jest.

"I better leave before you wish I had left, but isn't it too early to wish you good night," said Roopa in jest to him.

"You naughty," said Sandhya smacking Roopa's bottom.

Feeling elated, Roopa left the sprawling compound to get into a cycle rickshaw.

'She showed me the green light, the dear thing,' she thought in excitement. 'But won't she be hurt if she comes to know that we already jumped the signal? Oh, why didn't I wait a little longer? But then, didn't we make it rather providentially; could I've conceived a better way of bringing about that? What an exceptional time we have had! If I were in Sandhya's shoes, would I be as generous; surely, not as much as she is.'

That night, the thought that Sandhya more than reciprocates her love pleased Roopa no end, and as she dwelled upon their love triangle, she had a sneaking feeling that her lover could be craving her even more than his better half.

What with her self-worth enhanced by her own feelings, Roopa sank into deep sleep, such as which only a true fulfillment would occasion.

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Next morning, as Ramaiah goaded Janaki to get ready to attend the wedding of his colleague's daughter, pretending a headache, Roopa stayed put in bed.

"Why not I stay back," said Janaki in all concern.

"Don't make me feel guilty; I might even come for lunch. Who wants to miss a *pellibhojanam*?" said Roopa goading her parents to go.

Having seen her parents' back, Roopa waited for her paramour in contemplation,

'Surely it's the weird fate of illicit love to cohabit with lies. But what a paradox it is that a noble sentiment like love needs the prop of a base instinct for its survival! And it's as if the pleasures of a liaison act as intoxicants to help dampen the sense of guilt in a woman's heart!'

The thought of guilt made her feel odd about the rendezvous she had chosen for her sexcapade.

'Am I not violating the sanctity of my parental place?' she began to think. 'How would my father react if ever he comes to know of it? But then, isn't he guilty of brainwashing me into an untenable marriage? Given that, I'm more of Sathyam's wife than his daughter, am I not? Oh, how marriage alters even the fundamentals of a woman's life! Whatever, whether he likes it or not, he's bound to shroud my secret; who wants a scandal on his hands? So be it but I won't let these silly sentiments spoil my party with Raja dear.'

Though she breathed easier on the fatherly front, she continued to feel choked in the friendly arena. As her guilt of seducing her mate's man lingered on, in spite of the nobility of Raja's love, she was insensibly gripped by an urge to confess to Sandhya and seek her consent to carry on with their man.

'Why get bogged down by guilt when I can soar with the threesome wings that Sandhya provided? But I need his nod for that, don't I? Well, I'll make him understand that we've no right to wrong her anymore,' she resolved at length.

Thus, Roopa waited for her lover, more for the sake of his wife than for her own self. At length, when she spotted him at some distance, she felt at ease, as though he were coming for her deliverance, so when he took her into his arms, she sank in his embrace as if to deliver her soul to him. As he lifted her head to envisage her visage, he felt that it looked aesthetically beautiful, and thrilled by the charms of her frame; he wondered whether the purity of emotions rarefies one's soul to surface onto the face to enable

the fusion of the inner beauty with the outer grace. Won't such demeanor get imprinted in the minds of those who espy that visage then?

"She's all set to form our love triangle," said Roopa in all eagerness.

"Tell me what happened," he was taken aback by her manner, but as she pictured the magnanimity of Sandhya's soul, he felt immensely relieved.

"Roopa, I can understand your feelings and I love you even more for your sensitivity. Baring your heart might lighten your burden, but have you ever thought how that would affect her mind," he said, hugging her.

"You know how Sandhya loves me," she said ecstatically.

"It's stupid to destabilize it before she sets it, isn't it?" he said.

"I agree," said Roopa.

"If we get caught in the act now, though shocked, she would be happy for you, but then, won't she suffer for her own sake?" he said persuasively.

"Sorry, I've got carried away! Why I didn't I think from her angle?" said Roopa apologetically.

'Roopa, have patience for happier times. Let her slowly get used to our closeness, and prepare herself for our intimacy. As we three go along together, let things lead from one to another. Only that would be smooth on her, and not your dramatic confession. Don't we love her enough to care for her feelings?' he said assuredly.

"Then, in the meantime, let me bear my own guilt," she said overcome by emotion.

'What guilt when she gave the go ahead? Be assured, sooner than later, we would suck her into our embrace for our threesome romance,' he said, after kissing her, as though to suck out her guilt.

'Won't that strengthen our love?' she said dreamily.

"In three fold ways," he said as he motioned her.

Then, Roopa in tranquility led her Raja to her bed, to let him solace her body and soul.

"I'm glad our love isn't a spoiler either way," she said fondling his back after he satiated her urge to be mated by him in her parental home.

"It's precisely because of that our unique relationship cannot be branded as a liaison with the tag of an infidelity attached to it," he said thoughtfully.

"Oh thank you, by the way don't you find her sexier, being a little plumpy?" she said.

'Now she's handier to fondle, and with both of you carrying equal weight, won't that make it more of a balancing act?' he winked at her, fondling her.

'Won't her figure auger well for me too?' she thought of her lesbian libido.

"Whom do you love more?" he asked her, finding her lost in her thoughts.

"But for her, I wouldn't have my savior in you," she said in all earnestness.

"But you waste the output of our ardour," he said a little disappointed.

"I'll be on pills before you're there but for now, so be it," she said, ardently going over him once again.

"Roopa to be honest with you, often I delve into my heart, to gauge if the levels of my love for you both are any different. As I realize to my relief that they are even, I probe my mind to monitor your emotional currents that stir my soul, and how

synchronous they both seem. Then, I check my conscience for dichotomy, if any, only to find it is filled with equanimity. So it feels soothing that as my heart scores equal music, you both sing the song of love in tandem," he said, holding her in his arms, as they felt satiated at length.

"Raja, give her more of your love for she is the better one," she cried in joy.

"Roopa, now I realise why she loves you as she does and I shall love her all the more for that," he kissed away her tears.

"I'm dying for our orgies dear," she said ecstatically.

"Come they will be darling," he said in all assurance.

Long after Raja Rao had left, Roopa kept wondering whether her urge for orgies could be the manifestation of her need to expiate her guilt in a sex triangle with her mates.

## **Chapter 32**

### **Chat at the Bar**

On the eve of Saroja's *barasala*, Raja Rao's clan, including the Thimmaiahs, made it to Kakinada in a drive that is not to speak of Sandhya's relatives. However, as Sathyam arrived only on the appointed day, thanking him for coming, Sandhya said that he and Roopa would soon give her an opportunity for reciprocity. What with his dormant desire coming to the fore as he took Saroja, Sathyam looked at Roopa in hope.

At length, the elaborate ceremony got underway in the sprawling hall.

"Christen her with your ring," said the *purohit* to Raja Rao at length, handing him a silver plate in which he fashioned a rice-slate.

As that raised the curtains for the naming ceremony, Raja Rao went through the exercise with Sandhya by his side with their baby in her lap, and even as the *purohit* announced that Saroja was the chosen name, Sathyam said in excitement,

"What a lovely name."

"Thank you, please do stay, I want to talk to you," said Sandhya affectionately.

After the function, even as Roopa was cloistered by Hyma and family, closeted with Sathyam, Sandhya briefed him about the idea to rope in Roopa in Integral Architects, the name Raja Rao has chosen for their enterprise.

"I take it as a brotherly duty to concede to you?" said Sathyam genuinely.

"I'm glad but Roopa was doubtful," she said taking his hand.

"I've learned from my mistake. Had I obliged her then, perhaps, we wouldn't have missed what we had missed all along," he said ruefully.

"Why rue over the past, let's hope for happier times," she said, pressing his hand.

"Now I'm happy as she's warming up to me," he said seemingly happy.

"I heard you've been drinking like a fish," she sounded dissuading.

"But I'm trying to cut down now," he said.

"Nice to hear that, let's congratulate her," she said leading him to Roopa.

As Roopa was visibly happy at the development, Sathyam felt as though he could shed part of his burden of guilt, and later when Raja Rao said he would like to spend some time with him, he proposed a discourse over drinks.

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At the gates of the Eagle Bar that evening, Sathyam was impatient for Raja Rao's arrival. When he spotted him at last, he went halfway in welcome, and as Raja Rao apologized for making him wait, Sathyam turned boisterous.

"You're not late but I was early for Bacchus tends to beckon his devotees ahead of others?" said Sathyam, taking Raja Rao's hand that was extended to him.

"I won't I grudge his partiality?" said Raja Rao smiling.

"I'm glad you're soon joining us, Roopa is delighted to say the least," said Sathyam, having in the meanwhile ordered one large Bag Piper each with soda for them.

"Generally speaking, marriage constrains girls' friendship, but they make it an exception," said Raja Rao.

"Let's toast their camaraderie?" said Sathyam, raising a glass, as by then the bearer brought then the drinks.

"Three cheers for them," said Raja Rao, raising his glass.

"To be honest, I used to be jealous of their closeness but now it feels divine watching them together. But I feel bad that I didn't have a like childhood," said Sathyam.

"Thankfully, I've had a great childhood though the memory of it is hazy," said Raja Rao dreamily.

"It seems happiness loses its focus in memory, even as unhappiness remains vivid in our minds," said Sathyam in all bitterness. "Unfortunately for me, I was handed out a bad childhood, what with my father believing in placing it in the attic of his experience. What's worse, he didn't grant me the freedom of adulthood either. Left to myself, I would have been a better child and a less bitter man."

"But as it appears, there is no right kind of bringing up children, though there are many wrong ways of spoiling them," philosophized Raja Rao, as was his wont. "Having said that, I might add, the mediocrity of man gets reflected in the bringing up of children. You may know, Jean Paul Satre feels that but for a few, men are mere fools, and it's not hard to imagine how such shape up their progeny. The problem with most parents is that they turn their children into their joyous toys. It's sad they forget that their kids would be better off, if only they're groomed to face the roughs and toughs of life."

"It's every bit true; my father all but treated me as his favoured possession. When I wanted to study engineering at Manipal, he said I was too young to fend for myself. Oh how he ruined my career and all! Mind you, I wasn't a bad student at all," said Sathyam, animated by the discourse.

"I can understand your feelings, but we can't grudge our parents for having failed to come up to our expectations. The very fact that they hadn't reduced us to child labor was in itself a favor. If they chose so, being hapless at that age, there was no way we could have resisted them in anyway," continued Raja Rao.

"Whatever, my life would've been vastly different being an engineer, I'm certain about it," said Sathyam, gulping his drink in all bitterness.

"That's all about life, full of ifs and buts, isn't it?" said Raja Rao, sipping the dregs.

"The irony of it all is that parents tend to blame their children for the perceived neglect of them? Sulking in unwarranted bitterness, they push their children into the vortex of guilt," said Sathyam.

"If only we had discussed this aspect of life before Saroja's birth," said Raja Rao, even as Sathyam saw his face lighting up, "I'm sure, I wouldn't have had anything meaningful to say. But now I can tell you, it's we who owe our children for having made us parents, and the fulfillment that goes with it. Maybe, it's this subconscious sense of gratitude that tends parents to fend their children into adulthood, and beyond and once done, it amounts to the full and final settlement of the filial account. That being the case, the question of parents' further withdrawals from their children's account does not arise. Thus, it would be injurious for parents to presume that their children owe it to them for having been tended into their adulthood, as that entails untenable expectations that presumption occasions."

"No doubt, it's a sound premise," said Sathyam.

Then, having hailed for the bearer, Sathyam, said to Raja Rao mysteriously,

"Are you a moralist by any chance?"

"It's the context that holds, isn't it?" said Raja Rao tentatively, a little taken aback though.

"Say, about the so-called kickbacks," said Sathyam in an undertone as though the under-table thing owes that from the world.

"I was never exposed to its temptation, so I can't pass any judgment," said Raja Rao in relief.

"Oh, come on, don't be diplomatic," smiled Sathyam.

"Well, if I've to take a philosophical view of it, the insidious corruption harms the economy while the incentive bribing bedevils the society. While the kickbacks bankrupt the nation, the bribe mongers pester its people," said Raja Rao, applying his mind.

"Why don't you see the positive side of it," said Sathyam with apparent conviction. "Get it right, it's only in the Utopian Republic of Uprightness that the nice guys remain straight and yet strike it rich. But, left to it, the world we live in warms up to the unscrupulous, all the while leaving the decent in the cold. But in the Commonwealth of Corruption, the resourceful are forced to part with part of their booty to bribe seekers. So, corruption places more money in many more hands, right,"

"What I can say?" said Raja Rao perplexed by the proposition.

"Won't bribe money honey society as well?" said Sathyam, pleased with his rhetoric. "One has only to remove his hypocritical blinkers and view the social scenario to see that. Don't you find the bribe money coming in handy for the multitudes for bettering their lives and improving their children's qualifications? But, if India were to be a Republic of Fairness, then we may have a few accumulating wealth 'disproportionate to the calling of luxuries', even as the rest struggle to make both ends meet. Well that would have ensured that we had more coolies in our country than we have professionals today."

"What you say makes food for thought, not to justify corruption but to evolve a system of equitable growth," said Raja Rao apparently impressed.

"Does that mean you have contempt for the corrupt?" said Sathyam, and inexplicably feared Raja Rao's response.

"What right I have to judge others since I haven't gone through it myself? Maybe, one should try to desist from it as far as one could earnestly avoid it. However, it's the truly ambitious that won't compromise, for they think in terms of greater glories," said Raja Rao to Sathyam's relief.

‘Well said, but what if I confess that I’m a corrupt guy?’ said Sathyam tentatively.

‘Set aside my views, but what’s the matter with you?’ asked Raja Rao a little surprised.

“My friend, sincerity could occasionally fetch an accolade or two at the office that anyway won’t accrue to the pay cheque. It’s the fast buck that counts these days, and without being down to earth, you can’t make any. Six years of honesty left me hand-to-mouth, but three months of worldliness, call it dishonesty if you must, got me all those goodies you might have noticed in my place. That was during your last visit, when I was out of town,” said Sathyam spiritedly.

“All said and done how your wife takes it?” asked Raja Rao.

“In many ways, Roopa is very unfeminine,” began Sathyam, and finding Raja Rao looking at him in surprise, he added. “Let me explain. Haven’t you found her lacking in vanity, jealousy, and curiosity in true feminine measures? That being the case, can’t you guess what might be her philosophy of life about bribe monies? She’s dead against this greasing of the palms mess, or lining the pocket chore, as some would call it. Anyway, it’s all one and the same, isn’t it? However, as she won’t poke her nose into my finances, I’m not hard pressed to explain the source of my new life-style to her. Haven’t you heard the jargon of the income tax *wallahs*, assets disproportionate to the known sources of income? Let them catch me if they can. By the way, your wife whom I made my *rakhi* sister is also unfeminine that way, though she’s more pragmatic than my wife. Above all, Sandhya is an angel really.”

“I’m glad you value my wife as well,” said Raja Rao extending his hand to Sathyam, “Honestly, I think very highly of your wife also.”

“I see that my wife idolizes you but I’m not jealous as I too have come to admire you,” said Sathyam a little high by then.

“Thank you for your goodness, but as Roopa is a contented character, why do you want to acquire what she doesn’t value?” said Raja Rao as if he was imploring Sathyam to change tack.

“That’s a good question and I’ll answer you frankly, anyway, keeping secrets is not the right way to promote friendship. Though you haven’t met Prasad, surely you could have heard about him, haven’t you?” said Sathyam

“Sandhya told me about him,” said Raja Rao, thinking about how he almost lost Roopa to him.

“I don’t know what Roopa told Sandhya about him, but that’s beside the point,” said Sathyam, gulping all that there was in his glass, as a prelude to emptying his heart. “We were quite thick during our childhood days. When I met him this January, that too after fifteen years, I believed we could pick up the threads of our friendship all again. But, as I came to know later, in the guise of our friendship, he wanted to get closer to my wife. You may know that while I was a first ranker at school, he used to just scrape through, that too with my help. Well, when the topic was about studies, he never looked at me straight. Imagine such a fellow eyeing my wife!”

Finding Raja Rao’s demeanor empathic, Sathyam continued after he ordered a fresh round of drinks for them,

“Do you know what brought about this change in him? What else man, money, plenty of it? Why, he was lucky to marry a rich dame, and so he thought it fit to lure the wives of the have-nots into his grip perceiving them as a sort of whores in their own homes. All the same, gullible that they are, how these silly women lose their heads if

wooded by the moneyed. But I'm proud of Roopa, for she proved her worth, though that rascal tried his best."

"I'm happy for both of you," said Raja Rao, hiding his mixed feelings.

"Earlier a man's worth went by his talent," Sathyam continued spiritedly. "That was all there was to it. Take a potter, if he made a pot right, he got the price, and if it were misshapen, then it's a discount sale. Were it to leak altogether, well that was that. But these days, even a bad potter with money can make money by hiring some good potters. So never mind, your own capacity may be of questionable quality yet, if you have money, you can hire the best of talent, and as they pool their skills you can fill your kitty. That is besides basking in false glory as a whiz kid of sorts, isn't it? It's thus, now money is the only resource needed to make more of it and no one is going to ask you how you got it and where from. That's the reality."

"I can understand your hurt, but then, more or less, it had always been like that. Didn't Shakespeare aver that reputation is the most idle and false imposition, often got without merit, and lost without deserving?" said Raja Rao, moved by Sathyam's intensity.

"But how sad it is, isn't it galling that these guys go about seducing the women of the honest, flaunting the money so made. Coming to this scoundrel of a friend, having vouched for a brotherly affection towards Roopa, he eyed her in a mean manner. Can it get any worse, morally speaking that is? As you know, even Ravan didn't stoop so low in snaring Seetha," said Sathyam, drinking to the dregs.

"I fully agree with you, seducing a woman is one thing and deceiving the friend is another. Are we through now?" said Raja Rao, driven by his own conviction.

"Let's have one more round," proposed Sathyam, as the waiter came around, and as Raja Rao excused himself, he ordered one large for himself.

"But you know, thanks to my wife I've had the last laugh at him," said Sathyam with an air of satisfaction. "When in the end, she exposed him to me; I took him to task really. This is what I told him - my dear fellow, money and looks are Ok to an extent to lure women, but better realise that it's the luck that enables one to lay them. Why, you can't even screw a whore if you're not destined to have her for your visit to the brothel would've coincided with her periods, and the next time you're eager, she could've shifted out of the town itself. That's what I told him."

"Oh, how true," said Raja Rao, even as he recalled that Ganga-Kaveri girl.

"Now I'll tell you why I want to get rich, in double quick time that is," said Sathyam, gulping from his glass. "I don't want someone like Prasad ever ogle Roopa in the hope of winning her, simply because she's a poor man's wife. I want to make her rich so that she can keep the lechers all at bay. You don't know how I love her. How can you, when she herself fails to delve into my heart."

"Honestly, one can't hope to be fully understood, even by the spouse," said Raja Rao enigmatically.

"Maybe, but I adore her and crave for her love," said Sathyam, as he lost all his inhibitions by then. "To be frank with you, our marriage was stymied from the beginning as she was unenthusiastic about me. Maybe, she could have felt she deserved someone better than me, and how can I blame her for that, as she certainly deserves a superman, if there's one. If you don't mind my being boastful, I was a philanderer myself but that is beside the point and coming back to my wife, she's a fantastic dame. But all said and done, I'm sure no one can ever love her more than I do. Well, the song from the film

Ghazal captures the poignancy of my situation - Naively thought I've the right to love, the one you love, hath right on you."

"But you haven't completed the stanza - Why not tell whom you love, so that I can fetch him now," said Raja Rao.

"It's in the realms of poetic imagination but how it can be a practical proposition, and to be fair to my wife, she is a faithful one," said Sathyam.

'In some hearts like Sandhya's, love would reach such poetic proportions,' thought Raja Rao, and at that, he was gripped by an urge to be with her.

'They may be expecting us; better we get moving,' said Raja Rao, goading Sathyam to rise.

"Tell me frankly, what you make of me?" said Sathyam, as they came out.

'Honestly, I wish I had your capacity to love,' said Raja Rao, hugging Sathyam.

"I'll cherish your words all my life," said Sathyam, as Raja Rao released him.

'How come Roopa inspires so much love and passion in men and devotion in women as well. Isn't Tara too fond of her?' wondered Raja Rao as he headed home.

Buoyed by that sentiment, Sathyam reached home excited, and in all pride, made Roopa privy to Raja Rao's praises. At that, she reflected upon how her lover's empathy for her gave rise to his sympathy for her husband without realizing that the glare of her paramour's goodwill blinded her man's vision to gaze at her liaison.

### **Chapter 33**

#### **Amour on Rein**

On that *vijayadasami*, during October, the lane leading to the office of the Integral Architects Pvt. Ltd., in Himayatnagar, was lined up with assorted vehicles of those who came to grace the inaugural function.

While Roopa, in her grey Binny silk sari, was at the entrance welcoming the invitees with her bewitching smile, Raja Rao in brown corduroys and white T-shirt was ensuring that all were seated, as they entered. Handling the refreshments were Aslam, the drafter and Narasaiah, the *daftari*. As if to capture the moment for the posterity, Sathyam was busy clicking away with his new Canon, but suckling Saroja, Sandhya in her Gadwal sari was bogged down in the anteroom for long.

In that setting, as the *muhurtham* for the inauguration approached, Raja Rao went up to Sandhya to fetch her for the vighneswara *pooja*, but seeing her putting the baby to sleep on the divan, he signaled her to hurry-up. Soon, as Sandhya came out, the couple went through the rituals with Roopa in attendance, and after the *prasadam* was distributed among the gathering, Raja Rao took the floor.

Having thanked those present for gracing the occasion, he wished those haven't turned up till then would be joining soon. Reading out their resume, he introduced his partners in turn, and said in jest that he was sandwiched between Sandhya, the *malikin* at the house and Roopa, the boss at the office. That is why, he claimed, Integral Architects could be expected to be equally competent in handling homes as well as offices. In Aslam, he said, he found a competent drafter and that Narasaiah was duty personified. It's thus; he hoped that their young team would come up to the expectations of their esteemed clientele.

At the auspicious time, Ranga Reddy was accorded the honour to unveil the name-plate, symbolizing the inauguration of the enterprise. When requested, Subba Reddy

gladly put the drafting table to use, as a mark of commencement of the operations. Ranga Reddy, in his address, recalled how he was impressed with Raja Rao when they first met, and said it was his confidence in his competence that turned him into a realtor. So, he hoped that his Build Well Ltd. and Integral Architects would combine to contribute to the larger growth of Hyderabad. Subba Reddy, who followed him, said that he was a man of few words, and the two words he has for Raja Rao are - Account Transferred.

At length, leaving the staff and Sathyam behind with the core group, everyone, one by one, had left after refreshments. Thereafter, Roopa assisted Aslam to move the drafting table by the window, even as Narasaiah began to clear the rubbish. However, Sandhya tried to pacify Saroja, who had woken up by then and Sathyam went to Mahaveer Studio with the exposed film rolls.

Shortly, to Roopa's delight, Tara showed up.

"Lusty congrats," whispered Tara into Roopa's ears, handing her a large bouquet.

"I owe it to her," said Roopa passing it on to Sandhya.

"And I do to him!" Sandhya, holding Saroja, gave it to Raja Rao.

"How handsome," said Tara.

"Thanks for coming," said Raja Rao.

"I'm happy that Roopa is in the deserving company," said Tara.

"Aided by your goodwill that is," he said as Roopa told him about Tara's rescue act.

"Is there any vacancy for me?" said Tara smilingly, looking around.

"We've to grow manifold to absorb you," he said smilingly.

"I wish you Godspeed for that," said Tara, extending her hand to him.

"Thank you," he said taking it.

"Let me show you the place," said Roopa whisking Tara away.

"Why are you so insecure?" whispered Tara, following Roopa.

"Aren't you a femme fatale," said Roopa in jest.

"Not of your grade though," said Tara, taking Roopa's hand. "I'm glad your patience has paid off."

"Thanks to your timely help," said Roopa reminiscently.

When Tara entered the anteroom, Roopa stood embarrassed at the threshold.

"It's suitable," winked Tara, lying on the divan.

"You're impossible," smiled Roopa.

"When's the lunch break?" Tara winked at Roopa.

"Oh, you," said Roopa in all coyness.

"Where's the 'Don't Disturb' board?" said Tara, mock-searching underneath the divan.

"It's on the way," said Roopa in jest, and put Tara back into circulation.

As Tara got up to leave in time, said Sandhya to her,

"Do drop in whenever you're free," said Sandhya.

'With Roopa's permission,' said Tara, squeezing Roopa's hand.

"Not for forcing your way," said Roopa half in jest.

The next day, during the lunch hour, with Alsam having gone to his nearby home, and Narasaiah out on an errand, as Raja Rao led Roopa into the ante-room, she turned apprehensive, though she looked forward to the opportunity with all her craving.

"It could be risky," she said.

"Still it's worth at any cost," he said, pulling her into his lap.

"Why no bolster?" she said stretching herself on the divan.

"With your chignon, I thought you won't need any," he said lying by her side.

"Sandhya too says it suits me fine," she said, eagerly pushing his head on to her breast.

'Glad we've a place for us," he said, unbuttoning her blouse.

'A homely office but what if Sandhya scents our hominess?" she said naughtily.

"That's what we want," he said smiling, leading her on the amorous path of their fulfillment.

'A married woman might enjoy her domineering role over her man but it's her submissiveness to her paramour that affords her the joy of surrender. So, won't that make a liaison a singular affair?' thought Roopa, as they came out of the ante-room at length.

In time, everything fell into a groove at the office and in their homes as well. As Sandhya hired an ayah to assist her in coping up with Saroja, Raja Rao would ride to the office on his Bullet with Sandhya at nine, leaving behind Saroja at home. Roopa, after seeing off Sathyam with the lunch-box, would walk down to the office in time. Aslam and Narasaiah would report for duty on time, for Raja Rao was a stickler for time. While Aslam was always found rooted to his drafting table, Narasaiah, for the most part, was out on errands.

So to feed Saroja, Sandhya would head home at sharp eleven, and at the stroke of one, she reaches the office with lunch-box for the three of them. Aslam, however, was wont to leave a little early for his *namaz*, on his way home for lunch. Having savoured the meal with her man and her mate, Sandhya would leave the office by one-thirty, to be at home to suckle Saroja. Raja Rao would schedule his meetings to ensure his lunchtime presence for lovemaking in the office. While it was back to work for the rest of them by two-thirty, Sandhya, after siesta, would come back at three-thirty.

The synchronous harmony of their lifestyle enabled the couple and their lover live in ecstatic fulfillment.

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While the work at the office gripped Roopa, the weight she came to wield there buttressed her self-worth. After all, Raja Rao came to depend on her for she readily picked up the work with her quick grasp. Besides attending to the office accounts, she helped him at structural calculations as well. As though to prove that she shared his passion for construction, she traced the building plans that he had conceived. Indeed, she was heady with life.

It was in the midst of such a time, which Raja Rao called honey time that he had to go to Madras for a week. At that, missing Raja Rao's passion, Roopa felt as if she were left in the cold, in spite of her physical intimacy with Sathyam, not to speak of her lesbian

time with Sandhya. So, it didn't take long for her to realize how her own fulfillment came to be pinned upon Raja Rao, and by the time he returned, she was mad and eager.

But as luck would have it, the day he returned, Sandhya, to the lovers' consternation, brought them lunch in tow with Saroja. When Sandhya revealed that the ayah had gone to the matinee with a friend of hers who came from Khammam, they felt let down and in time, with Sandhya around, the dismay of the vexed lovers began to vent itself in varied ways. So it didn't take long for Sandhya to notice that Raja Rao turned irritable while Roopa remained morose.

"What's wrong lovey?" she asked Roopa.

"Why, nothing," replied Roopa.

Seeing Raja Rao berate Aslam on a trivial issue, Sandhya tried to calm him down.

"What's troubling you after having bagged such a prestigious contract?" Sandhya said.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said.

'Is it a mere coincidence that both of them are off color at the same time?' contemplated Sandhya. 'Isn't it clear that something is troubling them both? What it could be? Are they in love and in heat as well? Surely they're having sex during lunchtime but my untimely presence, on top of a week's abstinence, is weighing on them. So, they've made it to the post sooner than I expected; why not I have a dig at them then?'

"Lovey, have you encashed it?" Sandhya whispered in her mate's ears.

"What?" said Roopa.

"The blank cheque I gave you," said Sandhya, teasingly.

"I don't get you dear," said Roopa confusedly.

"Wait for his next withdrawal," said Sandhya smilingly, and went up to Raja Rao, leaving a perplexed Roopa behind.

"I know why you're out of sorts," she said leaning on him.

"Don't be silly," he said in irritation.

"Sorry for your miss," said Sandhya.

"What do you mean?" he said getting subdued.

"Out of the right slot one goes out of sorts, right," said Sandhya mysteriously.

"Oh, my lovely little genius, why don't you write a thesis on that?" he said managing a smile,

"Why not if Roopa is its co-author?" she said smilingly.

While Roopa's wanting remained unfulfilled for the day, Sandhya's romanticism ensured Raja Rao's fulfillment that night; and the next day, as the eager lovers came out of the ante-room, they felt as if they had sex for the first time in their life.

However, a few days later, at the sound of the buzzer, fearing exposure, they were benumbed in their lovemaking.

"What to do?" Roopa whispered, instinctively covering herself.

"Let's not respond," he said in undertone.

"What if it's Sandhya?" she said, worried.

"I'll see," he said getting dressed hurriedly.

When he returned relieved, she was partially dressed.

"Thank God, I escaped the quarantine," she said in relief but added in apprehension, "I'm afraid we may not be lucky next time."

"And there's the Murphy's Law to back your fears," he smiled.

"It's no laughing matter; if it is Sathyam, it's death, and if it were Sandhya, it's shame though she seems to have guessed it," she said nervously.

"So, it's time we seduce her into a threesome," he said thoughtfully.

"How I would love that day, nay, that night," she said, as she hugged him in hope.

However, as the buzzer never sounded again during their escapades, their fear of exposure was evaporated in the heat of their passion and so the urgency to rope in Sandhya into their orgies receded.

Soon, as the business improved, Raja Rao was getting bogged down at the office until seven, however, freeing his women by five. Back at Sandhya's place, the mates were wont to melt in each other's arms.

In their lesbianism, even as the feeling that her man was also enjoying her lover gave the cutting edge to Sandhya's amour, Roopa was eager with her ardour to augment her lover's pleasure with her mate later. Thus as their fondness for their man grew, they were ever closer with each other in their lesbian domain and since Sathyam too was keeping late hours at the Secretariat, the mates began to keep themselves in their arms for longer hours.

"My lovey, what a life!" resting in Roopa's lap, said Sandhya that evening.

"A love filled one," said Roopa, fondling Sandhya's breasts.

"Yet with yearning," said Sandhya, winking at Roopa.

At that, having looked into Sandhya's eyes intently, Roopa buried her head into her mate's bosom endearingly.

"Take it easy," said Sandhya in all smiles, moving her finger meaningfully in Roopa's erotic essence.

"Make it hard now," said Roopa in ecstasy.

Also, the affection Roopa felt for Saroja catered to her innate sense of womanly want and fondling the baby, she experienced a motherly fulfillment as well. Whenever Saroja smiled in her lap, wanting to mother her sibling subconsciously, Roopa felt spasms in her womb. The mood at the office too was upbeat for them all. Even as Ranga Reddy's ambitious ventures were rising to the skies one by one, Subba Reddy's new contracts were wearing the drafting table a little bit more. New clients too were trooping in, making Raja Rao think in terms of expansion. Thanks to the word of mouth, Sandhya too was busy with the decor of the posh bungalows of Banjara Hills. And all that made it a dance and dinner in Roopa's life.

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That evening, as they were calling it day at Integral Architects, Narasaiah brought the disturbing news of a communal commotion in the old city.

The walled city of Hyderabad, on the banks of the Musi, built in the 16th Century by Quli Qutub Shah around the Charminar, is a predominantly Muslim populated part of the modern metropolis. As the legend has it, Shah built the place to commemorate his love for Bhagmathi, his Hindu beloved, and named it Bhagyanagar. Manned for most

part by the Muslims, His Court felt that a Hindu name for a Muslim capital would be a misnomer, and thus proclaimed it as Hyderabad for the posterity. Ironically, as history witnessed, the Hindu mind and the Muslim psyche failed to fuse with the spirit of love that brought the place into being. Instead, they preferred to imbibe the theory of the Court that the Hindu character and the Muslim identity are things apart.

"They say some pork was thrown into the Mecca Masjid, and the Muslims suspect a Hindu hand behind the defilement," reported Narasaiah.

"That might spell trouble after all but why do they provoke the Muslim sentiment at all?" said a worried Aslam. '

"The fact, that the mere presence of pork in a mosque or beef in a temple could trigger a communal riot in our country speaks for itself," articulated Raja Rao. "There's no denying that it hurts the hyper-religious both ways, and it's precisely for that reason that the mischief mongers from both the communities resort to such acts. If we allow such symbolic hurt to trigger a communal riot, it's like walking into the trap laid by the cunning con men or the religious zealots. Everyone knows that the silent majority is peace loving and law abiding; not that they are spiritually enlightened or religiously tolerant. It's just that all realize that orderliness serves their self-interest the best. But, thanks to the machinations of the mischievous few, all get engulfed in the communal frenzy. Regrettably, the politicians too developed a proclivity to fan religious passions to create vote banks for themselves."

"What's the way out then?" asked Sandhya.

"Oh, there seems to be none really," articulated Raja Rao. "But common sense might help one to reach out to others across the boundaries of religious biases. Let's take the present incident. Even assuming that it's the handiwork of a couple of Hindus, can one say that all the Hindus of the city are behind it? But for all that, it could as well be the handiwork of a demented Muslim. The Muslims might rightly be outraged by the sacrilege, but won't the Hindus themselves be wary about the tasteless deed? Instead of getting at each other's throats, won't it make sense for all, to collectively voice their common consternation? If only we could do that, the miscreants from both the communities would realize that there's no mischievous ground left for them to foment trouble."

"But who's to take the lead?" asked Aslam.

"Who else but the middle-class as the pigheaded religious heads have failed the masses? Partly, the problem lies in the tendency of those that tend to give a public face to their private faith, and that makes the others suspicious about their religious intentions and personal inclinations," said Raja Rao.

"Is it to suggest that the Muslims should desert their mosques?" asked Aslam.

"Who says that, but all should downplay the manifestations of their faith in the public arena at least. Maybe, more than the others, the Muslims need to do a lot more social re-engineering for their own good," said Raja Rao.

"We, Muslims believe that there is but one God, so we can't religiously relate to the Hindus who worship at the altars of so many gods, and that's the source of the discord to begin with, something like an ideological dispute," said Aslam.

"If that's the case, the Christians too believe that one God, yet there were those crusades against the Muslims," said Raja Rao. "But then, how can God be one, when all religions have their own ones! As for the Gods in our religion, I would say without meaning any offence to other faiths, there's no contradiction in that. As the modern organization has evolved round department heads, it seems to me that our *sanatana*

*dharma* conceptualized various gods and goddesses for specific functions governing the Hindu destiny.”

“But it’s the Hindu idolatry that is at odds with Islam,” commented Aslam.

“Well, religion is an emotion peculiar to the humans, the sensitivity of which increases in the face of criticism from those of the other faiths,” said Raja Rao. “We, Hindus, feel incensed when others tend to reduce us to idol worshippers even as the essence of our Hindu dharma is *aham brahmasmi brahma* - God is but the self of man. Where is the question of idol worship when our bowing before our deities is only a symbolism of our submission to the *paramatma*, that is, Him? However, being ignorant of this Hindu nuance of our devotional ethos, those professing the Semitic faiths naively take it as idol worship.”

“Moreover, our deities impart form to the god we seek solace from, and thus help us stay focused in our prayer to Him,” continued Raja Rao. “By way of an example, we can all recall the features of our beloved ones in their absence, yet it’s only when we look at their pictures that our emotions for them get focused in our minds. It’s time others realise that what they misconstrue as idol worship is but a Hindu way of concentrating on God in their worship as well as in their prayers. Besides, we Hindus need distinctive images to envision our concept of God’s avatars but all the same, hasn’t the so called idolatry insensibly seeped into the religious ethos of the Christianity and Islam as well? Won’t that prove, if proof were ever needed, that when it comes to spirituality, imagery comes naturally to man, and anything contrary, be it religious or be it ideological, is the pretence of the protagonists.”

“Given the reality of human emotions, religious tolerance seems a mirage after all,” opined Roopa.

“Misplaced zeal for one’s faith and uncalled for bias against the other religions has been the bane of the humans,” said Raja Rao. “It should be understood that no one can emotionally feel about a religion other than his own, and only in the realization this truth lies the mantra of religious tolerance. Having said that, my intellectual perception of Hinduism and Islam is this: Hinduism is the most abstract of all religions, to comprehend which one needs a certain level of intellect, not common to the masses, which, at once proved to be its strength as well as its weakness. It’s the very character of their philosophy that enables the Hindus to try to understand the *atma*, that is, the self. And this Hindu endeavor to understand the self brought about the evolution of a thought process of the highest order ever achieved by the humanity at large. On the other hand, the Aryan intellectual apartheid pushed the Hindu masses into abject ignorance, not to speak of poverty.”

“Islam, on the other hand, is supposed to be a concise creed without any scope for ambiguity,” continued Raja Rao, “It’s as though the faith was fashioned keeping in mind the intellectual limitations of the mass of its adherents. Maybe, this clarity coupled with the egalitarian, though sectarian, concept of its teachings could have led to the conversion of those Indian masses who were either unable to comprehend the precepts of the Hindu dharma or those oppressed by the social prejudices of the caste order. But at the same time, this very virtue of definitiveness of Islam precludes any philosophical discourse about life, making it fundamentalist in its precept as well as its practice.”

“What do you think of Christianity?” Narasaiah, a Christian convert, asked Raja Rao.

“To my mind, going by the progress made by its followers in shedding its dogmatic shackles, it’s the most dynamic of all dispensations, though its core remains fundamentalist. But its undue emphasis on sin as the fulcrum of the faith is indeed intriguing,” said Raja Rao.

"All religionists claim their religions preach peace, yet what governs the world is strife," said Sandhya.

"That's the paradox of the faiths," said Raja Rao in exasperation. "While one wails over the death of a co-religionist in a riot, the same person is indifferent to the slaughter of scores from the other community! But will it be a consolation for a woman who lost her man that a dozen from the other faith were widowed as well, in the same commotion? Why would ever wounds differentiate human bodies on religious lines to heal themselves? What else is religious strife but human stupidity?"

"*Inshah Allah*, let it subside without further trouble," said Aslam.

What an irony that modern man, engaged as he is in the pursuit of knowledge, allows himself to be stymied by the dogmas of the Dark Ages, perpetrated as religious tenets.

## **Chapter 34**

### **Surge of a Merge**

When the curfew was lifted in the walled city across the Musi, it did seem that sanity was restored in the excited souls. However, even as the Hyderabadis began to venture tentatively to get back to their routine, the city was still tense in the emotional sense.

By two that afternoon, Raja Rao left for the Wahab Builders, in the bazaar near the Charminar, synonymous with the country's pearl trade. As Aslam availed a casual leave that day, and since one of the clients was pressing for the blue print, Roopa substituted as the drafter. As usual, Narasaiah was yet to return from an errand.

"Integral Architects," Roopa answered the telephone call at three.

"It is Wahab calling tell Rao *Saab* not to venture here."

"But he already left at two," said Roopa trembling.

"*Inshah Allah*, he didn't cross the Musi," said Wahab.

"What's the matter?" she said.

"Its communal riots all over," said Wahab.

"Oh God, call us after he reaches," said Roopa almost inaudibly.

"Surely ma'am," Wahab hung up hurriedly.

Returning to work then and finding Roopa pixilated, Sandhya became perplexed.

"What's the matter lovey?" Sandhya asked Roopa concernedly.

"Wahab rang up, saying the old city is in turmoil," Roopa muttered incoherently

"Oh, Raja was supposed to go Wahab's office," said Sandhya concernedly.

"He hasn't reached there yet," said Roopa, with tears flowing down her cheeks.

"Oh, God, If he's harmed, I would die," Sandhya swooned into Roopa's arms.

"So would I, that's for sure," blurted out Roopa, as they wetted each other's shoulders.

"Don't I know that, lovey, hope God saves him for both of us," said Sandhya wiping Roopa's tears.

Unable to bear her anxiety as Sandhya sank into a chair, Roopa rushed to the phone to ring up Ranga Reddy, and relieved a little after talking to him, she told her that he promised to find out their man's whereabouts. However, seeing Sandhya in shock,

Roopa cuddled her in silence, but driven by her own anxiety, every now and then, she got up to ring up someone or the other, seeking their help to locate Raja Rao. But Roopa's updates such as, 'Subba Reddy has gone to Bangalore', 'Ranga Reddy went to the Police Control Room' seemed to fall on Sandhya's deaf ears.

In time, exhausted by anxiety, and worn by despair, when Roopa herself dragged another chair to be near Sandhya, they found themselves locking their arms and staring at each other, drawing comfort from one another though without a word. At last when the telephone rang at four-thirty, Sandhya sprang up to her feet, but panicked to pick up the call,

"Sandhya here," she said nervously, having lifted the receiver on the third ring.

"Rao *garu* is injured but is quite safe," said Ranga Reddy.

"Thank God, where is he now?" said Sandhya with relief, as Roopa rushed to her in delight.

As Roopa shoved her ear to the receiver, symbolizing the harmony of their love for their man, Sandhya shared it with her.

"He's at the OGH, I'll pick you up from your house around six after arranging curfew passes for you," Ranga Reddy.

"Please arrange one for Roopa as well," said Sandhya.

At that, after she hung up his phone, as Roopa fell at her feet, Sandhya took her to into her embrace and said,

"Don't you know that your place is in our hearts?"

"Oh lovey, but didn't I tell you that he would be fine?" said Roopa overwhelmed.

"Why did you worry then?" said a relieved Sandhya in smile.

Roopa rested her relieved head on Sandhya's heaving bosom for an answer.

"So," Sandhya patted Roopa's head.

"Can't you forgive me," said Roopa, wetting Sandhya's blouse.

"Don't try to be smart; tell me the whole story, and then I'll see," said Sandhya teasing Roopa, while fondling her lovingly.

"I'm sorry," said Roopa, almost inaudibly. "I just couldn't help it. I loved him the moment I saw him, and tried my best to restrain myself. But the more I tried to suppress my fascination for him, the more I was drawn to him. I felt so miserable loving him that I wished I were dead. I became so insane in my longing for him that I lost all my sense of belonging to you. Blinded by my love, my conscience too failed me, and I didn't feel guilty, though you've trusted me."

"Oh, lovey, why did you suffer at all, you should've told me?" said Sandhya, moved herself.

"I just couldn't bring myself to it," said Roopa, hugging Sandhya endearingly. "Tell me; how am I to tell you that I was coveting your man? I always knew he too was attracted by me, but then, love is a different thing. Just the same, I was living in the hope of being loved by him. Then came a time, when I felt that I was doomed by my unrequited love for him. But then, destiny seemingly dragged him into my longing arms. As you know, triggered by your letter of concern for me, he came to see me this August. Then, as Sathyam too was away, I could hold no more, and overwhelmed him with all my love and longing. Being his very own woman, you would understand what he could have given me in return for my overriding passion for him. Oh, how nice it feels that I

too have some place in his heart, occupied for the most part by you. But, if at any time, should my presence in our love triangle irk you, I would withdraw from it without a murmur for even then, I can live on, masticating the memories of his love and passion for me. Oh, won't all that last for a life time and more."

"My lovey, how lovely, how I wish I were in your place. But it didn't take me long to realize that you loved each other, and won't be able to resist your urge for long. When I sensed that you're getting closer, I looked the other way, to let you experience the thrills of love in the making. Sadly, somehow, it never occurred to me that you were suffering so much pining for him, and if only I knew, I would've myself facilitated your union so long back," said Sandhya endearingly.

"Oh, you're an angel, really," said Roopa kissing her.

"But having made it, why haven't you told me, even though I prompted you often enough? Don't you recall the 'blank cheque' episode and that 'take it easy' tease?" said Sandhya patting Roopa's head.

"How could I've missed those and more," said Roopa scratching her head mischievously, and added on a serious note. "I wanted to tell you as he was making love to me for the first time, but he feared that a premature disclosure would hurt you no end. Then as you were forthright at the time of Saroja's *barasala*, as I wanted to confess to you, but he restrained me saying that we should wait till you get adapted to the idea of our threesome to make it easy for you."

"Handsome," said Sandhya pleased that both of them care for her sensitivities.

"Reward him in our threesome," said Roopa, winking at Sandhya.

Reaching home and fantasizing the presence of their man, the mates took their lesbian love to the frontiers of ecstatic bliss, before Ranga Reddy came to pick them up as promised.

"How I totally forgot about him!" said Roopa, when Sandhya remembered Sathyam after she entrusted Saroja to the ayah's care.

"In the triangular moment of our life, where's a corner left for any?" Sandhya whispered into Roopa's ear mirthfully.

"But our man wants me to accommodate my man in my corner," said Roopa.

"Really, what a man we have for us, lovey, how different he is from all other men. Won't a paramour tend to wean the wife away from her man? Now, I see why Sathyam is so happy," said Sandhya in delight.

"That's why lovey I don't suffer any qualms on Sathyam's account," said Roopa.

"Oh, how strange is your love twain? While our affair lifts my soul, your liaison with my man, enables your man breathe easy," said Sandhya in contemplation.

When Ranga Reddy arrived at length, not finding Sathyam at home, they left a message for him with Lalitha, and set out to see their man in the new dawn of their love life. In time, when they reached the Osmania General Hospital, they found Raja Rao, still unconscious.

"You're lucky really, though the injury was minor, it was still critical," said Dr. Wazir Ahmed to them.

"Doctor *Saab*, we're indebted to you," said Sandhya, taking Dr. Wazir Ahmed's hand.

"Thank you, but we only did our duty," said the doctor graciously.

"Can we shift him to the Gaganmahal Nursing Home, near their home?" enquired Ranga Reddy.

"Maybe tomorrow, let's see," said the good doctor.

"You know I need Roopa now, please ask Sathyam to take care of Saroja though the ayah is a reliable one," said Sandhya to Ranga Reddy.

"Don't worry about Saroja," said Ranga Reddy.

"Please seek Sathyam's ex post facto sanction for my absence," said Roopa to Ranga Reddy, as an afterthought.

After his system had shed the anesthetic effect towards eleven that night, Raja Rao regained his consciousness. Seeing both his women, on either side, he involuntarily stretched his hands towards them, which seemed to them as if to bring about a rapprochement between them. Grabbing his hands in unison as they warmed them with their tears, he felt gratified as both of them showered kisses as well on them.

"Don't you forgive us," he muttered to Sandhya, having savored them for long in silence.

"How can I forgive you for the long delay?" Sandhya smiled taking Roopa's hand as well.

"You are an angel," he pressed her hand feebly.

"How dare you slight her?" smiled Sandhya.

"Oh God, I've got to be on guard or what! Well, I asked for it," he said in jest.

"Don't worry, as a loyal wife, I'll stand guard at the ante-room," said Sandhya to him, as she took Roopa's hand.

"How cute, but won't we drag you in," he said in all happiness. "But why are you mum, Roopa?"

"I'm benumbed with joy," said Roopa.

"Wither gone your guilt?" he smiled.

"It got dissolved in our tears of joy," said Roopa fondling Sandhya's hand.

"I equally love her romanticism and ardency," he said, turning to Sandhya.

"We've been having each other much before you started having us," whispered Sandhya into his ears.

"So, my lesbo dears, no need for rehearsals," he pulled them towards himself.

"So, our macho master would find it thrilling," whispered Sandhya into his ears.

"Hope, it won't be a ringside view," he smiled.

"Before your virility enters into our arenas," said Roopa coyly.

"I'm all eager for our orgies dears," said Sandhya mirthfully.

"So I've been for so long, but lying in a pool of blood, how my heart bled for both of you in turns? How lucky I am to survive that ordeal. Had I died how am I to taste all that's in store for us? What a frightening experience it was, really!" he said reminiscently.

"Why think about all that now?" said Sandhya persuasively.

"It's a miracle to be alive, where's Saroja?" he said with an apparent relief.

"I've asked our ayah to stay back," said Sandhya.

That night, keeping vigil over their man that united them in their love for him, the mates didn't wink even for a moment. However, by the time Ranga Reddy came along with Subba Reddy towards mid-day, what with Raja Rao, raring to go, they were as fresh as the flowers at dawn.

"Raogaru what a fright you gave us all," said Subba Reddy

'If not for Ranga Reddygaru, we could've become mad by now," said Sandhya.

"Ma'am, it's a minimum human courtesy," said Ranga Reddy.

"Don't tell me about human courtesies as I had seen the visage of inhumanity at close quarters," said Raja Rao, brushing aside Sandhya's protests. "When I was a few meters away from Wahab's office, some Hindu hooligans seeking out the Muslims for slaughter, accosted me. Oh, I was so dazed by the frenzy of those hate-merchants that some of them felt I could be a Muslim in fright. After stripping me naked, to confirm my religion via circumcision, they advised me to run for safety. I was too shaken to comprehend whether I should thank the foreskin for having saved my skin, or feel ashamed of the crassness of my co-religionists. Then, hardly could I cross the street, when I ran into a Muslim mob that was braying for the Hindu blood. Before I could utter a word, someone stabbed me in my back, and as I ran for life, they chased me like a stray dog with 'death for the kafir' shouts. When they were about to close in on me, I slumped to the ground, and maybe taking me for dead, they left for good. As I lay there, I craved for life, cursing the religions. Now, I vaguely remember to have been picked up by a police patrol, and as you know, Dr. Wazir Ahmed, and others here, retrieved me from the jaws of death."

"You can talk all about that when it would have become a distant memory," said Roopa, trying to restrain him," said Roopa.

"The wound I received at the Muslim hand is bound to heal in time, but the humiliation I felt amidst the Hindu mob would be hard to obliterate from my memory," said Raja Rao regardless.

"This is the ugly face of these two great religions," said Dr. Wazir Ahmed stoically.

"My good doctor, to say that all religions are great is a quid pro quo," said Raja Rao excitedly. "Well, the followers of all religions feel great about their faith. If not, how would they become believers in the first place? But, if we were to go by the static inscriptions of their scriptures, then, the one common drawback with all the religions is the diktat to conform to their unique dogmas. In the guise of preaching goodwill, all faiths effectually divide humanity on religious lines. Isn't it the villainy of religion? If the behavioral pattern of the followers be the criterion to judge the greatness of a religion, don't we find that all faiths to be equally wanting? How can any religion claim to be great when it fails to inculcate human values in its own followers? So, it's the poverty of thought that veils us from the fallacy of the faiths."

"But then, are there not good people in all faiths," said the doctor.

"That's due to the diversity of human nature and not because of religious conditioning of human character," said Raja Rao

"The trauma of the event could be but a passing sentence in the history of man, and life, but for the dead, would go on, on the familiar course," said Ranga Reddy.

Shortly thereafter, Dr. Wazir Ahmed fetched RajaRao's case history, and having checking up his condition all again said,

"You can take him now."

Having thanked the doctors and the staff profusely, Raja Rao left the Osmania General Hospital with his family and friends for recuperation at the Gaganmahal Nursing Home.

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Once admitted in the GNH, he was gripped by an urge to see Saroja, and as Sathyam fetched her soon enough, he held her, as if he were clasping to his life itself.

"How pleasurable it is to live?" Raja Rao seemed to tell his daughter.

Then, turning to Sathyam and seeing him visibly moved, he thanked him for his concern and expressed his regret for having detained his wife.

Towards the evening that day, Aslam came with tears in his eyes and a bouquet in his hand. Narasaiah, on hand then, narrated the tale, as if he were the eyewitness to the happenings.

"Inshah Allah, you will live long sir," ' said Aslam holding Raja Rao's hand.

"I heard there was some problem at Musheerabad as well," said Raja Rao.

"There were a couple of stabbings here and there," said Aslam in all emotion. "The saddest part of it all is that people go by rumors. It was said that the Musi turned red with the Muslim blood and that was enough to spur some of us in of our locality to goad others to join the jihad, for Islam was in danger. I wonder why the faithful fail to realize that Allah is all-powerful to protect Islam on His own. And being merciful, He wouldn't approve killing people in the name of the faith. It's sad that the thoughtless outrage of a few brings a bad name to our religion as a whole. If only the Muslim who stabbed you knows what a good human being you are, he wouldn't have lifted his little finger against you."

"The communal jaundice colours our vision with the bigotry of our faith to project hateful images of the people of other religions; it pays to be more humane and less religious, as, the more religious one is, the more biased one would be," said Raja Rao.

When Roopa was alone with Raja Rao that night, she told him that Sathyam was accommodated in that very room after his appendicitis operation, and at that, they reminisced how wretched they felt, unable to have a longing look at each other, owing to the patient's presence. Thus having recounted the tale of her anxiety after his sudden departure, she told him about the 'one line love letter' of hers that she kept ready for him then, and a visibly moved Raja Rao vouched his eternal love for her.

However, as his recuperation at the GNH took longer than expected, Raja Rao turned apprehensive about the possible fallout from Roopa's long hours at the hospital.

"If you hang around here this long, Sathyam could become suspicious," he said to her.

"Don't worry about that, he asked me to assist you, as long as it takes. Why, when push comes to shove, won't I walk over him to walk into your home? You know that Sandhya has kept the door open for me," she said coolly.

"What courage!" he was amazed.

"What's love without that?" she cooed in his ear.

"How true, but sadly it's jealousy that spoils love," ' he said.

'Jealousy is the device that denies man the divinity of love; I wonder how our Sandhya is an exception! An angel, indeed she is," she said contemplatively

'How well you've put it about our dear," he said, pressing her hand.

'And love can be the failing of the divine even," she said looking at him fondly.

'Only those in love would realize that,' he said patting her affectionately.

"It's not that I'm being good and all, but I realized that, on our D-Day, that August day," she said, reminiscing about their first night's togetherness.

## **Chapter 35**

### **Date with Destiny**

For the first anniversary of her D-Day that August, Roopa was dead set to be in Tirupati with her mates. However, as she was clueless about keeping her man away from their love triangle, she got reconciled to Sathyam's ironical presence at her thanksgiving.

That afternoon, as Sathyam was helping Roopa pack their luggage, Rami Reddy, his department head, sent for him.

"Yes sir," said Sathyam to Rami Reddy, having cursed him all the way to the Secretariat.

"I'm sorry Sathyam but I've to cancel your leave," Rami Reddy sounded apologetic.

"Sir, you know, I'm going to Tirupati with my family and friends," said Sathyam dumbfounded.

"But Nagaraju wants to discuss those World Bank Tenders with us," said Rami Reddy sympathetically.

"But sir, I'll be back before they're due for opening," said Sathyam pleadingly.

"You know Nagaraju speaks for the Finance Minister, so there's no way I can let you go now," said Rami Reddy.

"Yes, sir," said Sathyam helplessly.

"Six sharp at 206, Royal Hotel, Nampally," said Rami Reddy.

'Oh, these are the 'service' inconveniences of life,' Sathyam thought, on his way back home. 'Had I been into some business, wouldn't I have been my own boss, as Raja Rao is? I should make a fast buck and start on my own soon. Surely, Nagaraju would like the World Bank Works awarded to the Finance Minister's *benami* firms, but eyed by scores of leading contractors. But, how can there be any hanky-panky in the open tenders? Well, the meeting won't serve any purpose save for the record, the boss knows that as well. All the same, Nagaraju is bound to pressurize the boss, and he wants to use me as just a cushion, that's all. Besides, won't he want to be seen as trying his best, to be in the good books of the powers that be? And that's why all this useless *tamaasha*, but surely Roopa won't like it. Won't she be dejected at yet another cancellation? Surely she would curse me, and may drop out herself in frustration. What about Sandhya? Well, she was no less excited about the trip. Better I let Roopa go along with them, at least, let them all have some good time.'

When at five in the evening, as the Sathyams and the Raja Raos reached Nampally Station, said Sathyam to Roopa,

"I'll go and cancel my ticket."

"It might take you a long time for you in the gents' queue," said Roopa to Sathyam as she took the ticket from Raja Rao.

'Perhaps it's God's way of blessing our threesome,' Roopa thought joyously, joining the queue for appearances sake. 'Let this be the ticket for our orgies, in the coupe to begin with. Can't we hoodwink the TTE to keep that extra berth of privacy for us? Why,

we can tell him that Sathyam has gone to meet someone on the train. Once he's through with his checking business and all, we could lock the cabin for our night-long orgies. Oh, though I wanted thanksgiving at Tirupati for that night of my life, the Lord seems to grant us orgies in His Holy Abode as well. Maybe our threesome love has the divine sanction too?'

'Oh, how people wear moral blinkers, of the well-worn kind,' she felt, as her thought-process had brought her face-to-face with the reality of life. 'The irony of it all is that, in spite of censure by the moralists, life tends to evolve in tandem with the ever changing human condition. Of course, they all start on the sly only to set the trend in the end. Once it comes into vogue, the new pattern becomes the value system of the time to be picked up by the world as the moral mantra of the era. That's all about the across the board morals, which fail to take into account the individual compulsions in the changing times. Thus, it makes sense for one to draw one's own boundary of ethics, of course, aided by a compass of reason, with the needle of equity that is.'

Buoyed by that newfound sense, Roopa left the booking counter and rejoined Sathyam chatting with her mates. Soon, they moved their luggage into the first class coupe for four and as though the driver was pushed by their urge for orgies, he blew the horn unceasingly, forcing the guard to show the green light. Thus, as that Rayalaseema Express began to chug out, waving off his wife and friends, Sathyam stepped out of the railway station only to step into the Royal Hotel across the road.

"Sorry Sathyam<sup>garu</sup> you've to put up with this mediocrity as the star hotels may give us up," Nagaraju greeted Sathyam apologetically.

'That's fine but why my boss hasn't turned up yet; well old habits die hard, don't they,'" said Sathyam putting on airs.

At that, as the buzzer sounded, Nagaraju reached for the latch.

"You'll live for hundred years see, we're talking about you only," Nagaraju welcomed Rami Reddy.

"Sorry Sathyam for spoiling your party," said Rami Reddy.

"That's Ok sir but what am I to do now?" said Sathyam.

'Don't you know that all eyes are on the three WBTs?' Nagaraju said dreamily.

"How I wish your bids turn out to be L-1s in those Open Tenders," said Rami Reddy resignedly.

"But the Boss has very high hopes on you," said Nagaraju to set the ball rolling. "He believes you could find some ways and means to put them into his pocket, not as favour but for barter."

"How kind of him but you know the procedures are all so *pucca*," said Rami Reddy, and added by throwing up his arms resignedly.

"The Boss wants you to devise the tactics and leave the logistics to him," said Nagaraju as though to lighten Rami Reddy's burden.

"To my mind at least, the procedures are foolproof, not amenable to twists and turns," said Rami Reddy, and turned to Sathyam as though wanting him to second his opinion. "What do you say Sathyam?"

"You're absolutely right sir," said Sathyam, without a second thought.

"Accommodations in the Limited Tenders and passing the bills out of turn are different anyway and we managing them for you all through," said Rami Reddy.

"That's why you've been getting peanuts all the while, now get us these mega projects, and have a million each," said Nagaraju enticingly.

"Even if we click, it might lead us into the remand in the end," said Rami Reddy, as though to raise the stakes.

'Well, to cover all risks, you both can have an extra million each," said Nagaraju falling for the bite.

'Don't mistake my saying so but when it comes to settling the accounts, invariably it all boils down to one excuse or the other. I know people shying away from parting with farthings that is having pocketed undue pounds," said Sathyam to Nagaraju.

"I appreciate that," said Nagaraju as though the deal was about to be signed and sealed. "Show us a foolproof plan and take fifty percent in advance, and the balance will be yours after the tenders are opened, but before you leave the office. That should satisfy you."

"Tempting as it is, I don't see how we can pull it off," Rami Reddy thought aloud.

'As you're involved with the tender openings for more than a year now, given your acumen, I'm sure you can spot a loophole or two," said Nagaraju to Sathyam.

"I didn't apply my mind to that but on the face of it, given the stringent procedures, it looks a tough ask though," said Sathyam thoughtfully.

"When the drink gets into the system, it might throw up an idea or two, wouldn't it?" said Nagaraju opening the Johnny Walker with the black label.

'Anyway, it's stupid not to give it a try, Sathyam, let's review the whole process, and see if we can find a way," said Rami Reddy.

"As you know, sir, at the scheduled time, the sealed tenders are opened in the bidders' presence," Sathyam began recounting the tender procedure in place. "Even as all watch with their eagle eyes, of course from some distance, I sort out the documents, and encircle the bid figures of each of them. Then I place them all before the members of the tender opening committee for the authentication of the respective bids with their signatures. Once that done, as the gathered take note of them, I read out all the bids, one by one, and thus, by the time I announce the last bid, the L-1 would be an open secret. However, if we try to favor a higher bid, then, as you know, all hell would break loose."

"Why not we change the topic, you can report the matter to the Boss, appended with my apologies. He might as well try his luck with the Tender Evaluation Committee if he could," said Rami Reddy, as if in conclusion.

"Why give up, when half the bottle is still for the taking," said Nagaraju, more out of hope than any expectation.

But at length, when they all came down to the dregs, Sathyam said dreamily,

"If only the Tender Committee chooses to look the other way, take it from me that the projects are already in the FM's pocket."

"Really!" exclaimed Nagaraju, as his eyeballs almost came out of their sockets, as if to probe Sathyam's mind. "Oh, come on, reveal the plot, and leave the rest to me. If only you need, we can even put the blind in the committee."

While Nagaraju laughed heartily at his own joke, Rami Reddy was piqued by his subordinate's one-upmanship.

"Let me see if it's workable," said Rami Reddy, bogged down by his failure to come up with something on his own, but not with any idea to examine what Sathyam might bring

on to the table for he was far too inebriated by then to comprehend much of what was happening then.

'To start with, FM's benami tenders would have blank bids,' announced Sathyam.

"What!" Nagaraju exclaimed in surprise.

"Only to turn into L-1s in the end," said Sathyam with a triumphant look.

"Nonsense," said Rami Reddy dismissively.

'Why this cynicism Reddygaru, let Sathyam *Saab* explain,' said Nagaraju, seemingly hopeful.

"If only the committee members authenticate your tenders without figures, then we can turn them into legal L-1s in the end," Sathyam said with an air of certainty.

"But how?" said Nagaraju in disbelief.

"This s how; once the committee turns blind to the blank spaces, and signs on the dotted lines," said Sathyam, assuming a measured tone, "I would place each of your tenders at the bottom of the respective piles. Then, for a given project, as I read out the bid figures of all the tenders from top to bottom, at every stage, I would make a mental note of the prevailing L-1. Thus, in the end, as I pick up your empty tender lying at the bottom, I would state some amount, lower than the lowest. So, Nagarajugaru should be alert to note the figure I blurt out for all the three works. Once we're done with the crowd, we'll have all the time in the world to insert the lowest bids in those pre-authenticated blanks in your tenders? Now tell me, what do you think of the coup in the making?"

"Brilliant *Saab*," exclaimed Nagaraju hugging Sathyam.

"Seems workable," said Rami Reddy shaking Sathyam's hand.

"There would be a few loose ends to tie up though,' said Sathyam, with a top-of-the-world feeling. "For matching the typeface on the tenders on the whole, we need to use the same typewriter all through. We should buy a machine for our section, but before we take it in, we'll use it for typing the bid-less tenders at my place. Thus, after the tender opening, as we fill in the blanks on that machine in our office, the typeface would come clean, even under the microscope. As a way of extreme precaution, on both the occasions, we might use the same typewriter ribbon. That would ensure that even God wouldn't get a wind of our manipulation."

"This to say the least it's a Sherlock Holmes' stuff," said Nagaraju missing the point in his excitement.

"You can take care of the typewriter and all, put up a note tomorrow itself for my approval," said Rami Reddy enthusiastically to Sathyam.

"Oh, it's unbelievable!" exclaimed Nagaraju confidently, "So, the three biggest ever civil works in the country fall in our lap, isn't it as good as that? All we've got to do now is to put in place a pliable committee to do our bidding, but won't that be a child's play for the Boss. You will get your million each by tomorrow evening, sealed, and delivered at home."

"It's time we left," suggested Rami Reddy.

As he headed home in ecstasy, Sathyam was jubilant in his exuberance.

'Rupees two million for my billion dollar idea, isn't it brilliant?' he thought excitedly, 'Oh, it's nothing short of genius, really. Why, it's almost a revelation! A couple of blank bids to follow, and won't I show the Prasads of the world their rightful place? If only I could tell all this to Roopa, she would've an idea about her husband's grey matter. How

sad it is that neither I can share my triumph with her nor present the booty to her, to show her that I care. Besides, I can't better our lifestyle either to make it lavish for her. How am I to explain my spending spree to her? But why does she have such an aversion towards cutting corners? Well, after touching five or more, I should resign and venture into some business or the other. Won't I be able to pass off all this as business profits then, even from the beginning? And that would be the time to flaunt my wealth and make her move in a limousine of her own. Meanwhile, I've to lay low, tucking the money tight in the attic.'

'Would one ever come to suspect the secret show?' he thought, after reaching home. 'No way, isn't it all so foolproof. But what if it were to leak out later? If it ever comes to that, leave alone her, can I ever face my dad? Won't the old man scowl that the fair family name is soiled. What an idiosyncrasy! Of what worth is a family name, when no one had heard of it? Mummy, though, might understand. Whatever, the die is cast, isn't it? Now even if I won't play ball, the play will go on, that is for sure. Why should I be the loser, after all? Besides, won't I have to make her rich, at all costs that is? What a lovely wife to have, how will she be feeling on the train now?'

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Aboard that Rayalaseema Express, entwined with her man and her mate in that four-berth coupe, Roopa in the seventh heaven raved,

"Oh, how I've been dreaming for our threesome in a coupe on the move."

"Count on me to make those come true now," said Sandhya amorously to Roopa.

"With both of us lending him our helping hands, isn't it strange that he needs to double his effort," said Roopa enlacing Sandhya.

Thus in their uninhibited lovemaking that went on well into the night, even as the lesbianism of the women charmed their man's eroticism, his libido, exhilarated by their eagerness, occasioned their gratification. While the lovers felt equally blessed, as if the bliss of their love triangle had been seeping into her cradle as well, Saroja didn't stir from her sleep all the time.

By the time they reached Tirupati in the morning, it was well past ten, and hiring a cab, they soon set on their journey to Tirumala, the abode of Sri Venkateswara, the Lord of the Seven Hills.

"How is it that the Lord is also called Balaji?" Sandhya asked Raja Rao.

"Maybe to make it easy for the North Indian tongues that find it hard to pronounce our South Indian names," he said, fondling Saroja in his lap.

Reaching Tirumala in time, they checked into a cottage reserved beforehand, and having rested after lunch, they visited Papanasam and other places of pilgrimage on the seven hills. In the end, spurred on by the spiritual stimuli, they spent the night in ecstatic union before going to the temple at dawn for the *thomala seva* of the Lord. While Roopa thanked Him for her fulfilled life, Sandhya prayed in gratitude for His saving her man's life besides blessing her mate's love. As for Raja Rao, he wished that the Lord would nourish their love for one another, forever.

After the Lord's seva, Raja Rao took out a coral necklace and a pearl chain from his wallet, along with a plain gold chain, and gave them to the *poojari* to perfuse them with the Holy water, and even as he was chanting appropriate mantras, he whispered to his women,

"Hear him sanctify our union."

When the *poojari* handed him the ornaments, Raja Rao adorned Sandhya with the coral necklace and enlaced Roopa's nape with that pearl chain, all with a feeling of blessedness. As though to demonstrate the weakness for his women did not overshadow his paternal feeling, he adorned his daughter with the blessed gold chain.

"I'll revere it like my *mangalasutram*, blessed by love, and sanctified by god," said Roopa reverentially placing the pearl chain on her eyelids.

"It feels like He's blessing us," said Sandhya mystically, and while fondling her pearls, Roopa fondly looked at the deity.

"Even if we discount the belief of the devout that the Lord manifests here, one may still explain the aura of the deity; the faith and reverence of His devotees in His omnipotence could've imparted that perceivable power to His Idol," said Raja Rao,

In time, as they went round the market place, Sandhya picked up a Nirmal painting, depicting the Lord and His two Consorts, Aivelu Manga and Padmavathi, all dressed up in the nuptial white.

"Oh darling, it's divine," said Raja Rao.

"Dears, it's for guidance," said Sandhya taking both their hands.

When they reached their cottage, promising to be back in no time, Raja Rao went out again.

"You look marvelous in the corals," Roopa kissed Sandhya.

"The pearls come alive on you lovey!" Sandhya followed suit.

"How he divines our variety," said Roopa.

"And awe us with his virility," said Sandhya, hugging Roopa.

When Raja Rao returned tonsured, Sandhya said teasingly,

"May we know to what avail the vow?"

"Nothing of that sort, the custom could be to enable one to experience humility since hair in so many ways symbolizes human vanity," he said, fondling his scalp.

After a week's romance in their amorous triangle, strengthened by the divine sentiment, the threesome, along with their little darling, left Tirupati for Hyderabad that evening.

## **Chapter 36**

### **Threesome Sail**

Waiting for the arrival of the Rayalaseema Express at Nampally that morning, Sathyam felt that only on Roopa's return would the hidden treasure acquire its true value for its possession. As the train chugged into the railway station, he sighted Roopa, leaning out to wave at him, and seeing her alight, radiating in that pearl chain, his own mood was further buoyed.

"You look great," said Sathyam to Roopa, having greeted them all.

"It's a surprise from Sandhya," said Roopa fondling her pearls chain.

"How this goes with me?" said Sandhya showing him her coral necklace.

"Anything suits you," said Sathyam, helping them in moving the luggage.

"Thank you," said Sandhya.

"How's the trip?" said Sathyam to Raja Rao.

"Had you come, it would've been different," said Raja Rao.

"But the Lord had other ideas for me," said Sathyam.

Once out of the station, they hired a cab to reach their homes.

As he took Roopa into his arms that night, Sathyam couldn't take his eyes off her pearl chain.

"Why it didn't strike me that pearls go so well with you," he said a little disappointed.

"Being a face-man, you thought about the nose-stud," she said alluringly, and thought adoringly, 'But Raja, oh! Won't he turn my face and frame into one? What a time we've had!'

'Soon I'll make you a queen with the crown and all," said Sathyam, fondling her affectionately,

"I'll await the coronation," she said in smile, but felt at the same time, 'Am I not already an empress of love on a double throne.'

On the other hand, in that middle-class home with millions in the loft, Sathyam felt that he was in a *trisanckhu swargam*. Though his net worth was enough to make people line up at his doorstep, he felt that he had to run the errands for the IAS cadre. He was disgusted that though he had the means to let Roopa go around in a chauffeur driven Chevrolet, he was unable to offer her any more than a pillion ride on his Lambretta. In his frustration, he often thought of quitting the service, but the temptation to keep it going for some more time, ensured that it was status quo at his office, and home as well.

Then came Saroja's first birthday, and Roopa's proposal to add Tara to their family guest list, seconded by Sandhya, was welcomed by Raja Rao.

"I feel flattered to be favoured," said Tara to Roopa.

"It's no favour and you're not invited alone," said Roopa.

"I'll surely come and you understand the rest," said Tara

"Is it not some price to pay my friend," said Roopa taking Tara's hand.

"As I keep telling you, life is like that my dear," said Tara hugging Roopa.

"I love you for that," said Roopa enlacing Tara.

Sathyam for his part couldn't resist the temptation to present her a gold necklace befitting his intrinsic worth and his innate affection for Sandhya, and on the way to the birthday party at her place, he found himself in contemplation,

'Sandhya would surely like my present for her daughter. What a sweet nature she has. Oh, how she understands people and empathizes with them. And what warmth she has for people in general. What a rare woman, indeed. Wouldn't I've been better off had she been my wife, instead of a *rakhi* sister? But then, Raja Rao would've been a better husband for Roopa. How she admires him? He's nothing short of an idol for her, is he not? And it's quite possible that she's enamored of him, and oh, how she clings to him. But how can I fault her, even if she were in love with him? Isn't he a better man than me in every way? Why, it's so apparent. But would her infatuation push her into a liaison with him? Oh, no, after all that, how unfair of me to even to entertain such a thought? Why, didn't she shun Prasad, that too when she was indifferent to me? By snubbing Prasad, hadn't she showed her character, once and for all? What's more, she

even says that she loves me, and I too can feel her newfound affection, don't I? Maybe, she even fantasizes about Raja Rao, but that's a different matter altogether."

When he reached their place, it was Roopa who received him, and he lost no time in placing the necklace on Saroja's person.

"I envy my daughter's luck at having an uncle who treats her like a daughter," said Sandhya, thrilled at his gesture.

"I've always thought that we're all but one family," said Sathyam, feeling pleased.

As Roopa began to dress Saroja in a plain cotton frock though, Sathyam said it may not be right for the big occasion.

"Though kids are better off in cottons, sadly for them, parents tend to exhibit them in suffocating synthetics," she said.

"It's a fine drawing-room talk but the world regards one for his dress," said Sathyam.

"Dress may add but it's the poise that pleases," said Roopa.

"Left to you, you would make a *sanyasin* out of Saroja," said Sathyam unable to reconcile to her philosophy of life. "Anyway, I'll show Saroja the other side of the coin?"

"Sathyamgaru, I'll assist you in your endeavour," said Tara who by then joined them.

"You both are welcome to do that," said Raja Rao who joined them by then. "But personally, I like to be guided by the twin quotes that our family physician Dr. Ramachandra Rao, religiously transfers to his new diary. Somehow that slipped from my mind when we were on the subject at the Eagle Bar that day. Let me quote them - In bringing up children, parents should remember that not wealth, but education conduces most to their happiness, and the other is - The best inheritance that a father can provide to his son is an education that will fit him to take an honorable place among the cultured men."

"I appreciate your intellect, though I differ with some of your ideas, but I do envy your experience without any reservation whatever," said Sathyam extending his hand to Raja Rao.

"Thank you for your compliment," said Raja Rao. "Intellect is the ability to analyse human condition and experience is the outcome of self-introspection. But people tend to attribute their failures to outside factors without reflecting upon their own contributions to the setbacks. That's why we find many inexperienced oldies and a few experienced youths. All said and done, I feel you've an intellectual heart."

"Oh, you've touched my heart," said Sathyam patting Raja Rao.

"Congratulations for forming a new Mutual Admiration Club," said Roopa.

"You're welcome to join if you please," said Raja Rao.

"Why do you leave me out," said Tara smilingly.

"How can I, you're doubly welcome," said Raja Rao.

"Shall I thank him on your behalf Tara," said Roopa smilingly.

"You make me dumb," said Tara taking Roopa's hand.

Soon, the other invitees began to arrive with their kids, and in time, the place was all agog with excitement. At length, as it was time for high tea, announced Sandhya,

"Pray it's palatable and pick up your plates."

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For the first anniversary of Integral Architects, that came close on the heels of Saroja's birthday, Raja Rao thought of making it low key at his office and an extended affair at the Blue Fox in the evening.

Thus, after performing the customary *vighneswara puja* that morning, and having handed over the mandatory mementoes to Aslam and Narasaiah, Raja Rao called it a day at the office, wanting them to join for the dinner party at the Blue Fox in the evening with their families.

Soon they reached home, and Sandhya, as was her wont, sent Saroja with the ayah to Lalitha's place, so finding themselves all alone with their man, as the mates looked at him admiringly, he folded them together with his 'I love you' and asked them to pick up their diamond ear-studs from his hands.

"Fascinating," said Sandhya excitedly.

"Radiant," reflected Roopa reflexively.

"Like you two," he said as they went about unscrewing their gold studs.

"Oh, how he used to pronounce 'two' as 'too' to seduce me!" said Roopa to Sandhya.

"Had I got a wink of it, my honeymoon would've been our orgymoon," said Sandhya.

"That would've saved me all that misery," said Roopa reminiscently, as she tried to position the diamond ear-studs all by herself.

"But it made that night so poignant," said Raja Rao, stopping her from changing the ear studs.

"Ordeals do throw up rewards in the end," said Roopa.

"Oh, how I wish I'd seen that scene," said Sandhya.

"Now for a romantic touch to our dalliance, let's adorn the First Lady," he said, and took the pair from Sandhya's hand, and gave one to Roopa.

"It's just love," said Sandhya, as her man and her mate were at work on her ears.

"Are you not our love," they said, biting the respective ear.

"Oh, you look wonderful, look into the mirror," said Roopa to Sandhya.

"I grasp that from the glow of your faces," said Sandhya, embracing them both.

When he invited Sandhya for a repeat performance on their lover, Roopa said mischievously to Raja Rao,

"You leave the right one to her, as she has the first right on me."

"Roopa, how your face glows in the diamond triangle," said Raja Rao seeing her adorned.

"Can't I grasp that from the glint in your eyes," said Roopa.

"You are a rare gem," said Sandhya, kissing Roopa.

"Cut by your love, polished by his passion and embodied in our threesome," said Roopa, even as Sandhya sucked Raja Rao into their embrace.

"I too love to wear a nose-stud," said Sandhya, twirling Roopa's.

"Don't we think alike, darling?" he said, pulling one from his pocket.

"But then, won't she need a poke, on her nose that is," said Roopa, laughing.

"I don't mind sending her to any doctor for that," smiled Raja Rao.

"And for that why would I need any other needle?" said Sandhya naughtily.

"It's time we chained him," Roopa winked at Sandhya.

"A lovely punishment," said Raja Rao, all eager.

Pressing herself to him at his back, as Roopa blindfolded Raja Rao with her palms, having removed his shirt thereafter, Sandhya slipped a gold chain onto his chest, and as her grateful man opened his arms, Sandhya sank into his embrace in mirth. But when she moved her hands to his navel, Roopa shifted her hands onto the chain, as though to rein him in.

"Won't our womanly togetherness adorn your manly chest?" Roopa whispered to him, showing him the locket.

"It's amazing in its alphabetical reversal," he said, hugely pleased.

"Let's go by the precedent," said Sandhya stripping him naked.

"First lovers first, that's the right order," he said, holding them together.

"Won't we take that as your order," said the mates, and began to show an unusual zeal in their lesbian togetherness.

Watching them in wonderment, he took out two waist-chains to adorn their nudity but as they reached for them randomly, he suggested they guess the respective destination of the gold and the platinum ornaments.

"Who knows, you might bluff, even if we guess it right," said Sandhya, seconded by Roopa.

"No way, as each has a name inscribed on it," he said in all smiles.

As they guessed theirs' right, he began with Sandhya, and exclaimed,

"Oh, how it vanished!"

When it came to Roopa, he wondered,

"How well it matches!"

In that euphoric moment, as his women lost no time to go to each other's erotic roots, seeing their waist-chains sink into each other's breasts, he said ecstatically,

"What a lesbo love!"

"Voyeured enough, have us now," sputtered Roopa..

"I don't see any entrance," he said, feigning helplessness.

"Get in here," said Roopa, raising her head and pushing him into Sandhya's.

"Deep throat it," he said to Roopa after a while.

"Lovey, give mine your hand," said Sandhya in spurting ecstasy.

"What love!" exclaimed Raja Rao in joy.

"Fill her thing," said Sandhya at length without letting go Roopa.

At length, when nature brought their uninhibited orgy to its fulfilling end, said Sandhya dreamily,

"What a life!"

"What a love?" said Roopa.

But when Roopa returned from her bath, finding her waist bereft of the chain he gave her, said a disappointed Raja Rao,

"I thought you liked it."

"I make it a witness only to our lovemaking," she said, embracing her mates with a feeling of emotional commitment to him.

Having slept for a while, Roopa returned home by the time Sathyam came from the Secretariat, and sometime thereafter she went with to the Raja Raos' place to proceed to Blue Fox at seven. Among those who made it to the party in the evening were the two Reddys, Wahab, Dr. Wazir Ahmed, and Tara, who held all eyes.

Sitting beside Sathyam, Sandhya said,

"Haven't you noticed our ear-studs?"

"They suit you both equally well," he said.

"We wanted to surprise you, as ever," said Sandhya.

"I'm glad you care for her, she's very happy these days," he said.

"Why don't you stop with that?" said Roopa to Sathyam in between her conversation with Tara.

"These mixed dinners are for novices, aren't stags the answer for the regulars? What do you say Sathyam *Saab*?" said Wahab.

"Three cheers," laughed Sathyam, lifting his glass

"I understand the architects are having a pretty good time these days," said Dr. Wazir Ahmed to Raja Rao at the other end of the table.

"Can't you see, doctor *sahib*, with two pretty directors on board, how could it be otherwise for our romantic architect?" said Subba Reddy in undertone, before Raja Rao could reply.

"Thank God, you've stopped at that," muttered Raja Rao.

"It's I who has stopped at that, isn't it?" laughed Subba Reddy, who was high by then.

Sensing trouble, Ranga Reddy, who was sitting beside his inebriated friend, thought it fit to preempt a scandal in the offing, and announced thereby,

"I request Dr. Wazir Ahmed to present this miniature Charminar to Raja Rao *garu* on our behalf with the fond hope that one day; Integral Architects would conceive a modern day symbol of Hyderabad."

"Thank you all for a wonderful evening," said Raja Rao, sounding closure after they had dinner.

"It's our pleasure no less," echoed the guests.

Back home, in time, Raja Rao told Sandhya,

"Can't we look back with satisfaction?"

"I've never been happier all my life," she said, making herself smug in his embrace.

"Thanks to the favors of fortune," he said fondling her lovingly.

"But, I'm worried at times, whether our bliss too good to last for long," she said in apprehension.

"Maybe, by the law of averages, Roopa's unfortunate past may ensure the future stability of our love triangle," said Raja Rao.

"How I wish it's true," said Sandhya sharing her thoughts with him. "But, what can be said about the strangeness of life and the singularity of the relationships? To start with, it was the mutual admiration that ushered in my friendship with Roopa. Then, our growing affection found its true expression in our lesbianism, triggered by, of all the

things, by her post-nuptial depression! And our chance meeting in New Delhi brought you into my life to provide substance, as well as sustenance to it. Later, your mutual attraction resulted in your passionate liaison that catered to Roopa's craving for the male élan, and yours, for your dusky dame. In the end, it was the reality of the relationships that you presented me, helped me colour our love triangle on the canvas of our sexuality. And then providentially at Tirupati, spirituality too insensibly seeped into our threesome affection, enabling us to experience divinity in our lovemaking. And above all, thanks to the innate empathy you have for the fair sex, the idea of woman in liaison loving her husband made you Roopa's benign flame, to light Sathyam's life. Oh, that's life."

'What more can we ask?' said Raja Rao contemplatively.

'A menage a trois with her, oh how we used to jest about it!' Sandhya said dreamily.

'Find a wife for Sathyam before she divorces him,' he said in jest. "But then, one shouldn't be too greedy even in daydreaming."

"So, contentment is the finest quality even in love seeking?" she said, sinking into him.

'But it goes against the other saying that variety is the spice of life,' he said, winking at her.

'The beauty of our life is that it covers both the grounds,' she said radiantly.

"Affording us contented variety," he said reaching for her lips.

"Have your wifely spice," she said, turning amorous.

The blessed couple, at length, sank into a blissful sleep.

## **Chapter 37**

### **End of an Innings**

Some six months later, the trio's destiny made a course correction in Roopa's life.

After Sathyam had his breakfast that Sunday morning, she herself feeling lazy, Roopa sent him to fetch some vegetables. On his way back from the nearby *sabzi mandi*, remembering her indent for matchboxes as well, he stopped at a pan shop and chanced to read the headline of the *Eenadu* on sale there. Though he couldn't believe his eyes, the caption there shook him to the core. Jeopardized by the news, he picked up a paper in anxiety, and rushed home in fright. Racing up the steps, he sank into the sofa to go through the item with premonition.

'SCANDALOUS WORLD BANK TENDERS' the headline stared him in the face all again, making him numb. However, goaded by the fear of his future, he started reading the copy – In a late night press note, Divakar Reddy, the leader of the opposition, alleged that the contracts of the World Bank Projects were fraudulently awarded to the *benami* firms of the Andhra Pradesh Finance Minister, Rajanna Choudhary, and demanded that the matter be probed by the Central Bureau of Investigation.....'

What with his eyes welled up by then, Sathyam could go no farther.

Meanwhile having goaded herself into the kitchen, Roopa wondered why he was taking so long to come to her, and so, in time, she herself went into the hall.

Seeing him as white as a sheet in the sofa, she asked him anxiously,

"What's wrong with you?"

Still in a trance, he looked at her vacuously.

"Tell me, what happened?" she shook him.

He gave her the newspaper for a reply.

"Tell me, please," she said, flinging the paper on the teapoy.

"Read the headline," he mumbled.

"I can't make head or tail of it," she said, having read it.

"That headline might cost me my head," he said nervously.

"What!" she said in shock.

"I'm involved in all that," he said with mixed feelings.

"I just can't believe it!" she said, and read the news in detail.

"I was the mastermind of that scam," he said, looking at her confounded.

"Maybe you're imagining things," she said, as she gathered her wits.

"Believe it or not, I scripted that plot to the last detail," he said seemingly lost.

"Oh, really, but why didn't you tell me before?" she said in exasperation.

Then he narrated the contours of the conspiracy and the details of its execution with a sense of excitement, and added,

"I wonder how anyone could've smelled a rat as that was foolproof," he said ruefully.

"No denying that it's brilliant though wicked. If only you had put your brains for better use," she said, making no effort to hide her admiration for his brainchild.

"Do you know what my idea is worth?" he said mysteriously.

"The crumbs of the corrupt cake," she said feeling sad.

"Hold your breath; now you're a millionairess without your knowing it. I've made two millions from that single deal and another half a million for the assorted favours done over the time. All the money is there for you, safely tucked away in the attic," he said proudly.

"Who cares for your millions, I'm worried about this mess," she said, unmoved.

"More than the loss of my face, I'm worried about its confiscation, making you poor all over again," he said dejectedly.

"You know that I don't care even if it were a billion. I'm only worried about you," she said, trying to calm him.

"I never imagined things would come to this pass, I only thought that money might make you feel secure, and would earn me your love. It looks like, now I'm ruined in every way," he said morosely.

"It's my fault for being cold to you then but now you know I love you," she said with a sense of remorse.

"I know that but do you still love me?" he said with his heart in his mouth.

"Now I love you even more for the way you feel for me," she said, taking his hand.

"Roopa, you don't seem to understand the value of money and the humiliation the lack of it could cause," he said, pushing the import of the calamity onto the back burner, as the sentiment of his love came to the fore. "Though it hurt me deeply, it was Prasad's ogling of you that had opened my eyes. If only I were a man of status, he wouldn't have

dared even to daydream about you, leave alone wooing you. From then on, I strived to prepare a sheath of wealth for you to ward off the lecherous folks."

"Oh, how you love me!" she embraced him.

"More than you could ever imagine," he said holding her.

"I feel blessed; but why this mess?" she said, overwhelmed by love for him.

"It's a consolation that you love me still, but how can I show my face to my father?" he said ashamedly.

"Don't worry, he would understand," she said trying to cheer him up.

"You don't know him, for him, our surname is paramount; he would die of shame for my misdeed," he said in all remorse.

"Why not plead guilty and be done with it?" she thought it was a way out.

"Maybe, the court could be considerate but Choudhary's mafia won't take kindly to that, oh, how hopelessly I've compromised myself!" he lamented.

"We all make mistakes, yet, we deserve to be sympathized for the motive behind our moves. After all, it's for love that we both erred on the sly," she said to him as much to herself.

Having said that, she realized that she got carried away to blurt out her secret and looked at him horrified. But overwhelmed by his own predicament, Sathyam failed to note the oddity of her averment, and so didn't press her for any clarification on that count, and merely said,

"Your sentiment gives me hope."

"We better talk to Raja Rao," she suggested in relief, having recovered in the meantime.

"We'll think about it later, but I want to be alone now. Now, solitude seems to be my best company," he said, as he got up to go into the bedroom.

"I understand," she said.

"Why not I have a little drink to lighten my burden?" he thought aloud.

"As you please," she said going to fetch him some ice and water.

Drinking out of a bottle of Chivas Regal, of the three sent by Nagaraju the other day, thought Sathyam,

"What a paradox it is that the grief and the relief should come from the same source!"

'Am I not responsible for all this?' felt Roopa, all alone in the hall. 'Of course, having made him feel insecure all through, haven't I caused his eventual fall? If only I had made him feel wanted from the beginning, would things have come to such a pass? Well, wittingly or unwittingly, I brought him to this ugly stage but he won't even have one harsh word for me! Why have I devalued him and his love all along? Oh God, how I have come to wrong him!'

Overwhelmed by his new found virtues, and ashamed of her own insensitivity, Roopa resolved to stand by him through thick and through thin.

'Even if the world belittles him, I'll value him more than anything else,' she resolved.

As Sathyam went on drinking, she reproached him at lunchtime,

"You better stop it now for your own good."

'I can't stand it in my right senses," he said pleadingly.

"You're making me helpless," she said.

"Am I not helpless myself?" he said.

"At least, do have a bite," she said persuasively.

"Ok, I shall join you," he said, emptying the glass.

After lunch, exhausted by fear, he slept for long and as he got up at five, he asked her to go to Sandhya's place lest they should come visiting them.

"How am I to leave you now?" she protested.

"Honestly, now I'm uncomfortable even with you," he said embarrassedly.

"I'll stay in the hall, call me if you need anything," she said.

'At least, he drinks to lighten his burden, and he deserves it as well. But what about me?' she felt, reclining in the sofa, and began to picture her future. 'What could be the possible outcome of the scandal? He's sure to lose his job, and may even find himself behind the bars. Oh, how that would ruin him and ridicule me. What have I done to deserve all this? Oh God, what's wrong with my life? How long I have lived in a void for want of love, and then, that yearlong pining in passion. At long last, when I'm happy, here's this tragic turn.'

'Won't high connections help?' she thought at length. 'Can Ranga Reddy come to our rescue? Isn't he known to be close to the Home Minister? Even otherwise, won't the case be hushed up, as the bigwigs are involved, no less than the Finance Minister? Perhaps our fears could turn out to be liars.'

At that, she went up to Sathyam to show him the silver lining, and found him still at drink.

"How I wish it comes to that," he said, even a little relieved.

"I'm sure all this is bound to fizzle out in the end. Don't we see, the reports of enquiry commissions whitewashing the scandals involving politicians. I'm sure this won't be any different," she said, sounding music to his ears.

'God willing, if we get out of this hell, we'll go to Tirupati, and I get tonsured," he said feeling a little easy.

'Whatever may be the itch, never ever grease your palms," she ruled for the future.

'I'll resign my job and get into some business with that money," he said taking her hand.

'Leave aside morals, I think you deserve to keep the booty, if only for your motive behind grabbing it. And no less, for the way you're suffering. Now let me call them so that you too can divert your mind," she said, thoughtfully.

'As you've given me hope, let me relax over a large. Why not you spend some time with them," he said.

"I better do that, but do mind about your drink," she said, getting up to change her sari.

In time, as he drank out that large, it dawned on Sathyam that the calamity of the moment had brought Roopa emotionally closer to him than ever before. With his spirits having soured thus, as if to steady himself, he made one more 'large'.

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Having dragged her feet all the way to Sandhya's house, finding it locked, a disappointed Roopa, nursing hopes of their early return, clung on to the gate for long. However, at length, caught between hope and despair, she felt as if her head was splitting into half and in the end as her weary legs took the homeward path, she thought,

'What a miserable day.'

Thus reaching home in disappointment, she sank into the sofa in exhaustion. However, in time, gripped by an impulsive need for company, to shed her melancholic overburden, she went up to Sathyam, and found him emptying the bottle into his glass.

"Why don't you stop that god-damn drink and start showing some concern for me?" she said in irritation in spite of herself.

"There's no way I can help you now, why don't you too help yourself with a drink or two?" he said invitingly.

"Why not, if that makes it a little better?" she said without second thoughts.

When she returned with a glass, he looked at her amusedly, and as she poured for herself from the fresh bottle, he stared at her wide-eyed.

"Haven't I failed you all these years!" he said.

"Better late than never, isn't it well said?" she smiled, as she sipped that Scotch.

"You're a sport really and I love you for that. I knew that, the moment I saw you," he said in all admiration.

"Don't I know that?" she said, turning coy.

"How did you turn into a hot chick from a cold fish?" he said, at length.

"Why rake up the past now?" she smiled.

"Tell me what has caused it," he said, suddenly seized with curiosity.

"As one can't drink from an empty glass, one can't love with a lifeless heart," she said.

"Show me the other half of your glassful life," he said.

"Know that it's for my eyes only?" she said, rolling her eyes.

"As that spices up my life tell me about its recipe," he persisted nevertheless.

"Take it, the essence of my love is flavoured by cupid's passion," she said, as she winked at him.

"You're a hard nut to crack anyway," he said, giving up his probing.

"What about your dinner" she said, extending her hand to him.

"I haven't space even for a morsel," he said, feeling his tummy.

"I'm too tipsy to even eat; I wonder how you can drink like a fish, and yet remain steady!" she said drinking to the dregs.

"Isn't it the best compliment ever from you," he smiled heartily.

"Then pay back with a peg," she held her glass.

"You're game, really," he said, obliging her.

"Only to those who raise the bar," she said in a drawling way, remembering her lover's averment.

"Soon, you may beat me at my own game," he said in awe; as she gulped half from the glass at one go.

"Wait and see," she winked at him.

"I've always felt that I could've won your love had I obliged you then," he said holding her hand.

"Why rake up the past; as we're happy anyway," she smiled.

"But still, we wouldn't have lost what we've lost in those three years," he said melancholically.

"Let bygones be bygones," she said dreamily.

"You don't know how I crave for your love; sadly you've never really known me," he said ruefully.

"I was beside myself then but I value your love now," she said taking his hand.

"Why not you study medicine now," he suggested in hope.

"It's too late, anyway, but your consent that night could've made all the difference," she said resignedly.

"I'm sorry, what else I can say now," he said feeling bad.

"Any way, that's life, full of ifs and buts," she said.

"Can you ever pardon me?" he said taking her hand.

"I think all of us, in spite of our faults, are pardonable," she said, pressing his hand.

"I always felt guilty on that score and that inhibited me with you," he said withdrawing his hand, overcome by remorse all again.

"I was aware of that, but I couldn't help it, anyway it's all different now, right," she said reaching for his hand again.

"You're the life of my life," he said, pressing her hand.

"Thank you, but stop it now, at least for my sake," she tried to dissuade him, as he was mixing some more for him.

"Why don't you sleep in the hall tonight, I like to drink a little longer," he said pleadingly.

"Ok, good night then, but if you feel hungry wake me up," she said yawning, and picking up her pillow, she went into the hall.

Having had some curd rice with a mango pickle, she took to the makeshift bed, and as soon as she hit the pillow, she fell asleep.

Soon however, Sathyam in excitement woke her up saying,

"I've a brainwave Roopa; with that booty, you can open a nursing home and serve the sick. That way the bad money would serve a good cause, and above all, it will help me get rid of my guilt. Please don't say no."

"Oh, what a love, I'll do anything for you now," she said, hugging him tightly.

"Let's move away the money to safety tomorrow itself; who knows, there could be a raid soon," he said excitedly.

"Lie down here," she moved away to accommodate him.

"Let me celebrate my Eureka moment, three cheers," he kissed her good night.

Having bid him good night all again, an intoxicated Roopa fell into an exciting slumber.

## Chapter 38

### **Subdued Beginning**

At seven the next morning, Roopa woke up to Yadamma's buzzer, with a hangover, only to realize that Sathyam was still in bed. At that, as she began to brush her teeth, Yadamma set out to sweep the staircase. Soon, as Roopa was at preparing coffee decoction for them and Sathyam, for he started having bed coffee for sometime then, Yadamma began sweeping the hall. At length, while Roopa in the kitchen was keeping watch over the boiling milk, Yadamma went into the bedroom to sweep it as well. Shortly thereafter as Yadamma, taking *ayya* to be dead, raised an alarm, Roopa rushed to him in panic and felt his pulse in vain, and at that, as she fell unconscious over him, fearing the worst, Yadamma rushed with the news to the Raja Raos still in bed.

Reaching post-haste, the nonplussed couple found their benumbed lover lay on her husband's body. However, readily realizing that Roopa was breathing still, Raja Rao hurried Sandhya to fetch some water to splash her into her senses. Thus in time, as Roopa opened her eyes, Sandhya took her mate endearingly into her lap, even as Raja Rao caressed the bereaved in assurance. Even in her state of shock, Roopa found their touch reassuring and began to feel solaced by that.

There could be moments in life when one can feel empathy in a feeling touch of the concerned than a score of sympathetic words from them.

"What's this tragedy?" sobbed Sandhya, inducing a flood of tears from Roopa's eyes.

"Yesterday he was upset and went on drinking till midnight, oh, I can't believe he is no more in the morning," cried Roopa inconsolably.

Looking at the two empty bottles of Chivas Regal lying near the bed, said Raja Rao gravely,

"Maybe, he died of excessive drinking; perhaps you could've stopped him at some point."

"What do you mean? Can one really die of drink?" Roopa said, perplexed.

"As it appears, sadly, he drank himself to death," said Raja Rao, staring at Sathyam's body gravely.

"But why didn't you send for us all day?" said Sandhya.

"You were not at home when I came in the evening, and unable to bear the tension, I myself had a couple of drinks, and slept off. Oh, if only I knew," said Roopa ruefully.

"That might've saved a fine soul for us. But as they say, God won't keep Himself away from good souls for long. Wonder why it doesn't occur to Him that the world needs such, even more!" said Sandhya bogged down with tears.

"What else we can do now than braving the cruelty of fate?" said Raja Rao, consoling them.

"Oh, how fate has chosen me as the villain in his life. What an irony our life has turned out to be! While I slighted him all through, he died burdening me with his magnanimity," said Roopa melancholically.

"Stop feeling guilty dear, after all, he died with a feeling of being loved by you. That's what matters to his soul and to your conscience as well," said Sandhya cajolingly.

"Maybe that's the saving grace of my life with him," said Roopa, staring at Sathyam's corpse.

"It's time we call the police," said Raja Rao to Tara who came by then.

'Leave all that to me, and take care of her,' said Tara, though beside herself.

At that, as Roopa realised that the police would come to take away the body for post-mortem, the irony of the tragedy dawned on her.

'How he feared he would be arrested, but they would be here soon, to take away his body. What if they revisit to confiscate his booty as well?' she thought feeling sad about it all.

Then, having recalled how relieved Sathyam was at his brainwave, she resolved,

'No, I can't let that happen, if only to see his soul rest in the Sathyam Memorial Clinic.'

Thus, closeting with Raja Rao and Sandhya, she narrated all that happened, and concluded,

"He told me that he kept that money in the attic. We shall remove that before they start looking for it."

As Raja Rao and Sandhya shared her sentiment and volunteered to shoulder her burden, the prospect of her immortalizing Sathyam's name through a clinic enabled her to face the calamity with equanimity.

Shortly thereafter, Tara came back, and Sandhya went home to tend to Saroja. Soon as the Police began investigating into Sathyam's death, so as to assist them, Raja Rao left Roopa to Tara's care.

"You know that I look life straight in its face," said Tara in undertone to Roopa. "You should welcome his death though in a weird way. Understand that he lived believing that you've been faithful to him and died before realising that he was cuckolded that too by Sandhya's husband. Don't fool yourself; it would be only a matter of time before he would've got wind of your peccadillo and how that, coming after Prasad's hurt could've shattered him you can well imagine. No less, can't you visualize the shame of it would've made you three insane; so take it that death saved him that fate and served your love. And that's life!"

"Then you saved my love and now it's my soul, oh, how I owe you Tara," said Roopa sinking into her lap.

Soon, as Roopa comprehend the import of Tara's second theory, she readily rose from her lap and impulsively kissed her in her mouth as if to savour the tongue that uttered those words. Though taken aback at that but having got the taste of Roopa's love, Tara herself was impelled to give her the measure of her own affection to her.

Soon, as Tara's outlook of it all insensibly gave her a new perspective of Sathyam's death, Roopa began to see her life in a fresh light. And late that night, to retrieve the treasure that Sathyam had left behind, Raja Rao, looked by his women, had crouched into the loft and thought disconcertingly,

'But for the sentiment attached to it, how disheartening all this could be!'

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The mourners' number had swelled by the next day, what with the arrival of the relatives and friends from far and wide. While Ramu helped Raja Rao to keep things moving, Raju ran errands for his brothers-in-law and others.

When the body was brought back from the mortuary, while a shocked Pathrudu tried to console Durgamma, she went delirious over it.

"Why instead of him, didn't God take me away? How could He be so cruel to my son in the midst of his life? Did he ever harm even a flea, all his life?" she cried inconsolably.

But while Janaki cried herself hoarse that her daughter got widowed so young, Ramaiah found himself burdened by guilt,

'Had I not then brainwashed her into marrying him, I might be busy now searching matches for her. Oh, what a fate it is.'

Thus, it was left to the Kamalakars, together with Sandhya, to condole Roopa, as Chandrika was yet to arrive.

'No doubt it's sad, but you need to be brave,' said Kamalakar, patting Roopa.

"Sadly, it's all over for Sathyam but as we're all with you, you shouldn't lose heart" said Damayanthi, taking Roopa into her lap.

"That's true, we would treat you like our second daughter," said Kamalakar, overwhelmed by Roopa's plight at such a young age.

"I love you all the more for your love and understanding for her," said Sandhya moved by her parents' empathy for her friend.

"We're proud of you darling for your commitment to her," said Kamalakar, patting Sandhya,

"Not to speak of yours as well," said Damayanthi to Roopa.

"I never experienced a like moment, your love lightens as well as burdens me," said Roopa, shedding tears of sorrow and joy in equal measure.

"That's what makes your life so unique," said Sandhya.

"And your friendship so singular," said Damayanthi.

By the mid-day, when everything was in place for Sathyam's last rites, Roopa's eyes were left with no tears to shed and when Sathyam's body was lifted on a bamboo stretcher, Pathrudu, with a pot of embers, led the funeral procession. As the corpse was thus taken away, leaving the females behind, Sandhya held a benumbed Roopa from collapsing.

Consigning his son's body to the flames on the funeral pyre, Pathrudu felt the quirk of destiny,

'How our roles have got reversed by fate!'

As Raja Rao saw Sathyam's body engulfed in flames, he thought,

'How tragic it is that the triumph of love was snatched away by the hand of death!'

One by one, the kith and kin, with heavy heart, took leave of the bereaved, leaving Roopa, her family and her in-laws to fend for themselves. Came the twelfth day, the penultimate day of the rituals, and Ramaiah took it upon himself to sort out the matters concerning Roopa's future.

"Sad though it is for the departed," Ramaiah addressed the assemblage, "life must go on for the living, and we all know about life's plight without means. Though it may seem inappropriate, as our minds now are governed by magnanimity and our hearts overflow with sympathy to the survivor, it is the right moment to sort out the mundane issues."

"I couldn't have said better, as we've lost our son, we would look after her as our daughter," said Pathrudu approvingly.

"I've no doubt about that, but you may agree that she could be more at home in her parental house?" said Ramaiah to Pathrudu.

"It's up to her but wherever she stays, she inherits our property," said Pathrudu thoughtfully.

"I can never thank you enough for your affection, normally I would've loved to serve you both, but I've a mission for his memory and that keeps me here," Roopa tentatively said to Pathrudu.

"What do you mean? How can we leave you alone?" said Janaki, taken aback.

"When I'm around, how can she be alone? Moreover, it's far easier for her to recover from her tragedy staying with me, and she needs our support to accomplish her mission," said Sandhya spiritedly.

"We all know how you love her but still, it won't be appropriate that she stays with you," said Janaki.

"Whatever it is, I need them to fulfill his last wish," said Roopa as though pleading for their understanding.

Fearing that the discussion might take an ugly turn, not wanting to embarrass themselves and the others as well, Raja Rao and Sandhya slipped out, fully aware that, in spite of all the persuasions and dissuasions of others, Roopa would remain steadfast to fulfill the dictates of her life which fate had fused with theirs.

"No cause is a right cause for a widow to stay away from her family, moreover, it would scandalize all of us," said Durgamma indignantly.

"What she says is true," said Janaki.

"What serves her interests is what matters to her life and not what goes with your prejudices," said Chandrika spiritedly.

"Why do you want to rub your quirky ideas on her?" said Janaki frowning upon her rebellious daughter.

"It's her life so let her decide about it herself," said Raju.

"You're too young to air your views," said Janaki dismissively.

"Why, he represents the future while you're all but the past and only his views are going to count in the days to come," said Chandrika in support of her sister's cause.

"Know we're dealing with the present," said an exasperated Janaki.

"But her life is about her future and none could cater to it better than Sandhya-*akka*," said Raju, taking up the cudgels for Roopa.

"What is to be done when children pay no heed to our word anymore, what else we can do than to come here to stay with her," said Janaki, as though relenting.

"Is that to jail her? What's her crime, other than being born a woman whom fate widowed when young? It's time you give up your jailer mind-set when it comes to your daughters' lives," said Chandrika.

"Oh, now the children don't want to stay with their own parents!" said Janaki, playing her trump card. "In that case, let Raju stay with her, it may help him in his studies as well."

"Why didn't you think of it when my brother-in-law was alive?" countered Raju spiritedly.

"Enough of it now, for she heard us all and she's old enough to understand what's best for her. Let's leave it to her, for she's the worst affected of us all," said Ramaiah, signaling the end fearing the discussion might turn acrimonious in the end.

"I'll stay with them," said Roopa with a sense of conviction that surprised all, and at that, as Durgamma wanted to protest, Pathrudu signaled her into silence.

“So be it,” said Ramaiah in a way that drew no further comment from those present, in spite of their reservations about her scandalizing proposition.

‘What is happiness and unhappiness all about?’ Roopa began reminiscing, struggling to sleep that night. ‘Haven’t I experienced them both in equal measure? After all, everything in life has to do with one’s state of mind, isn’t it? But then, won’t social constraints dictate one’s proclivities to fashion individual attitudes? Oh, poor Sathyam, what a victim he was, of his psyche, shaped by the circumstances of his life. Why, to begin with, his parents stunted his growth, and with me too denying him the wifely hype, he went wayward in the end and then, how the vicissitudes of life victimized him.’

‘That’s the guilt with which I’ve to learn to live,’ she thought, as she recalled her role in his fall. ‘Was he not a victim of human dishonesty as well, including mine and the inequity of life in general? Are not the Prasads of the world having the cake of life and eating it too? Do they really, in a way? Why, for all that, I’m no less a beneficiary of deceit, although by default, is it not so? Is it possible that Tara’s life is the radical example to make it equitable to one and all? But is it really? Whatever, I owe her my ease of conscience to her way of looking at my life, don’t I? By the way am I in love with her too even as she has a crush on our man. God knows what comes out of that. Well, it appears that life tends to manifest itself mostly in ironies, won’t it? While I married him in the hope of becoming a doctor, didn’t he bequeath me a fortune to build a clinic! How fate has taken off at a tangent in my life!’

As if to ease herself from the burden of guilt, she turned her thoughts to the gift of her life - love,

‘Won’t I be shifting to their place tomorrow, to start life afresh as their woman in a live-in? Well, it’s only a matter of time before the world gets used to our arrangement, isn’t it? But would I be content with the menage a trois forever, won’t I want to be Mrs. Roopa Rao at some way in life? Would Sandhya then object to his bigamy? Oh no, never, life in the offing would be thrilling and vibrant, with Saroja too propping it up. God willing, won’t I beget her sibling? How I’ve been craving to have a boy from him. Soon, my degree too would be on hand as if to underscore my changed status. Oh, so much pain and as much pleasure, even before I turn twenty-three! But then, that’s life as Tara often puts it.’

‘Am I not being mean to envision bliss in my condition?’ she felt as her line of thinking perturbed her. ‘Won’t all this amount to coveting life when my man is just dead? Does it mean that I should renounce the world and turn into a *sanyasin*, but of what avail is life in a vegetable existence? That besides, won’t my move keep alive the age-old prejudices against young widows that much longer? Above all, what about them, without me, can life ever be the same for them? Haven’t I led them into believing that I would never desert them, whatever it takes for that?’

Then guided by her innate instincts, she tried to reason her situation all over again.

‘Is it fair to expect the living to lead a life of gloom in the shadows of the dead? Doesn’t life impose its own compulsions on the living, regardless of the sentiment to the departed? But then, how can I ever reconcile my own craving for life with the memory of him? Well, by keeping his love alive in the Sathyam Memorial Clinic.’

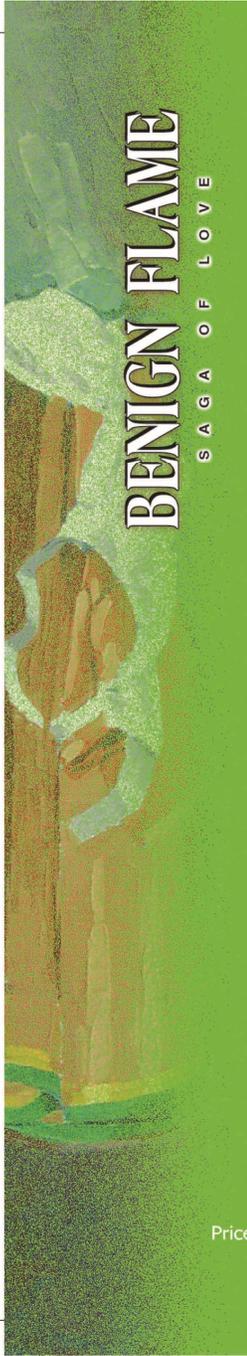
As she began feeling easy with her line of thinking, on second thoughts she felt that she was being hypocritical but yet she resolved her position in the end,

‘Whatever it may be, after all, I’m a human and a woman at that, with all that goes with it. Well, let me live normally and lead life like a woman. That’s all, no more, and no less to it.’

While she sank into a reconciled sleep at that, all that night, her parents and the in-laws had a troubled time on her account.

The next day, after everyone had left, some upset by her conduct, and others apprehensive about her future, Sandhya and Raja Rao led Roopa to the assigned place of her destiny.

Leaving this narrative behind, in time, Roopa's mourning would have ended, enabling her to begin a life of subdued bliss.



# BENIGN FLAME

SAGA OF LOVE

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*The plot is quite effective, and it's a refreshing surprise to discover that the story will not trace a fall into disaster for Roopa, given that many writers might have habitually followed that course with a wife who strays into extramarital affairs.*

- Spencer Critchley,  
Literary Critic, USA.

*The author has convinced the readers that love is something far beyond marriage tie and fulfillment of love can be attained without marriage bondage. The author has achieved a minor revolution without any paraphernalia of revolution in the fourth part of the novel.*

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Price : RS. 150

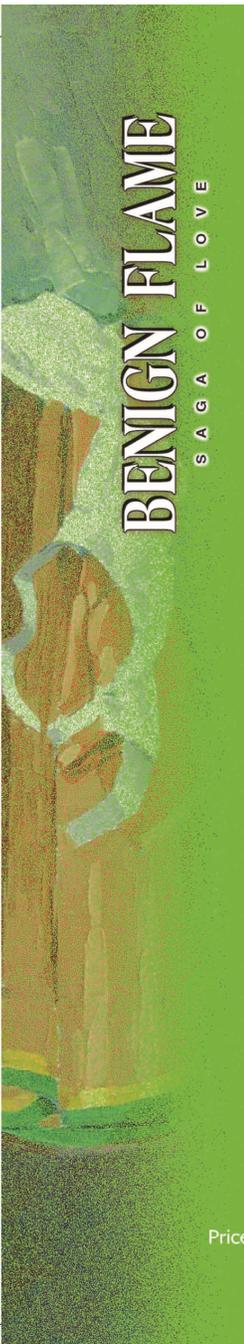
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SAGA OF LOVE

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