

JEWEL-LESS CROWN

SAGA OF LIFE

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BS Murthy



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ISBN 81-901911-6-0

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Cover design by GDC creative advertising (p) Ltd., Hyderabad –500 080
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F-9, Nandini Mansion,
1-10-234, Ashok Nagar,
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Dedicated to

VV Rao my soul mate, PN Murty the friendly cousin 'n KB Bhaskar,
my computer guru, for their support of my literary cause.

[Book One](#) : *Artha 'n Kama*

[Chapter 1](#) - *Party Gone Sour*

That New Year's Eve, all the *nouveau riche* of New Delhi seemed to have gathered at the Misty Nest in their ubiquitous wear. While women wore designer dresses, men turned up in safari suits. Hosting them at their grand dwelling in the Defense Colony were the Gautams, Prabhu and Sneha. By the time the last guest was hugged in welcome, Gautam's silk *kurta* and Sneha's mink coat were truly crumpled. Augmenting the warmth of their *bonhomie* was the Glenfiddich with soda. In time, while the lure of the Scotch drove many into the lap of Bacchus, the allure of Venus enticed others to ogle at the desirable. But, above all, it was Gautam's good-humored banter and Sneha's sensuous charm that lent aura to that midnight rendezvous.

When the New Year was an hour away in its coming, what with the inebriated becoming tardy in their tangos, the going got really bawdy. As Sneha too got into the act, there was a virtual riot for a round with her. When someone went overboard to bottom pinch her, she paid back with a belly punch that regaled the gathering.

As the gigantic clock was all set to halve the night, the antique chandeliers were put off. When the radium hands went straight up on the dial, the ribaldry reached a new low on the floor. At that, as the Gautams goaded all to raise their hands to fold out the year on hand, the boozers struggled to get on to their feet to welcome the year in the offing. But, for its part, the antique piece welcomed the incoming year with the first of its twelve chimes that reverberated in that sprawling banquet hall.

In the prevailing darkness, the euphoria that followed led to a fresh round of bear-hugs amongst the sexes before the stewards switched on the chandeliers as though to let those bear witness to the goings on. As if that translucence showed the revelers the reality of life, sanity was restored in that exuberant setting, and soon the pangs of hunger made the gathering scamper for the buffet of varied cuisines, brought from the capital's five-star restaurants.

When the hosts went up to the table to pick up their plates, a steward alerted Gautam to an urgent telephone call. Soon, seeing her man turn all pale, Sneha made her way to him in apprehension. When Gautam made her privy to their unfolding tragedy in an undertone, Sneha nearly swooned into his arms. The news of Suresh Prabhu, the heir to their business empire, hauled up in the lock-up was enough to unnerve her. That he was booked for rape and murder as well ravaged her soul no end. In her state of shock, she was unable to comprehend what Gautam mumbled into her ear to lift up her spirits.

Having realized that they were attracting undue attention, Gautam led his wife into the anteroom, leaving the gathering with a free rein on the rumor mill. The breaking news, set in motion by someone who had eavesdropped on the hosts' conversation, gained circulation with understandable exaggeration. And there followed an intense debate about the eventual

outcome of the current indictment that led to the Gautams' predicament. The indignant gathering, in one tone, roundly censured the hosts for the fall of their only offspring. For once, everyone seemed to agree that loose morals would only bring ruin in the end, even for the rich and famous. Of course, even the mighty of the world are bound to fail on the false path, so emerged the consensus. Even those who professed closeness to the Gautams maintained that they knew all along that things would come to this pass with Suresh, sooner than later.

Such are the ways of the world that the lows of life would turn the admirers into critics, and what is worse; make the naive speak as the know-all.

Closeting with Sneha, Gautam assured her that he would pull out all the stops to free Suresh in no time. But Sneha was terrified that the magnitude of the indictment might be beyond the endurance of their son. In spite of her awareness of their political clout and the loopholes of law, her sixth sense gave a dissenting note, making her apprehensive about the possibility of her son coming clean out of this messy case. But as hope coupled with her confidence in her go-getter man calmed her nerves a little, Gautam led her back into the banquet hall.

When the besieged couple resurfaced, what with everyone feigning camaraderie and volunteering help, hypocrisy seemed to rule the roost on the human stage. As if to show up the fallacy of human sympathy, appeared malice to induce innuendoes about the perceived closeness of Sneha with the powers that be.

'Why, in this topsy-turvy,' said a naughty one, 'her leeway is bound to come in handy, won't it?'

Not to be left out, curiosity too entered the arena to tie the crowd to the unfolding drama. When the hosts tried to make light of the incident as but a storm in the teacup, the guests maintained that they would not desert the ship in the storm. With his appeals for a premature adieu falling on deaf ears, Gautam left for South Extension with an entrapped feeling. Thereafter, preyed upon by her guests, Sneha remained a prisoner in her own palace.

When Gautam in a dilemma reached the South Extension police station, as Pramod Rawal, the Station House Officer (SHO), received him reverentially, he was a little relieved. But as the SHO made him privy to the incriminating evidence gathered against his son, Gautam was in a spot all again.

That very night at ten, one Saurav Swaroop came to the police station to lodge a 'missing person' complaint. A worried Swaroop told an impatient Rawal that his daughter Shanti hadn't returned home yet though it was her wont not to stay out after seven. Worried over her life and limb, said Swaroop, he had contacted all those he should including his family friend Sohan Singh, the Circle Inspector (CI). At that, Rawal became alert and almost got into a saluting posture. The CI, Swaroop claimed, had advised him to take the matter to Rawal, the SHO on duty.

But, knowing the proclivities of his flock only too well, Singh left nothing to chance, and thus mobilized a force to search for Shanti. It was past ten, when a patrol party intercepted a speeding Mercedes at Mehrauli. As the teen at the wheel betrayed his unease, the Police saw the need for a thorough search of the limousine. And when they found the body of a woman in the back seat they were truly aghast. But, as the distraught lad revealed his identity, the cops were really dumbfounded. Having led the accused to the police station, they revealed the identity of the arrested to Rawal. Without any coercion, Suresh revealed that he had kidnapped the girl with the idea of raping her. While pleading that he had no intention to harm her, he confessed to having killed her under extreme provocation.

As feared by Rawal, the victim turned out to be Shanti Swaroop. And this unwelcome development irked him for he feared that the vengeful Singh might brutalize the brat, leaving him to fend for himself with a lock-up death. And the rest at the police station felt that in spite of his impeccable pedigree, Suresh was in for an unimaginable trouble.

An uncanny manipulator of the system that he was, Rawal thought it fit to inform Gautam before all else. After all, wouldn't Gautam involve the top brass to deter the CI from laying his hand on the lad? Besides, there is much to gain by helping the rich, isn't it? It was, thus, that Gautam's arrival lightened the cop's burden while raising his hopes as well. But his countenance to Gautam's suggestive glances seemed to convey that the accused might not be able to get

away for once. Given his closeness to the Swaroops, after all, the CI can be expected to be averse to hushing up the murder case. Besides, to splash the scandal in the making, the press-*wallahs* had already rushed back to 'Stop Press'.

"Saab, I've done my best in this ticklish case," said Pramod Rawal. "And the rest is in the CI's hands."

"Thank you Rawalji," said Gautam enticingly, "but don't I know how the system works. Why, you are the king-pin here, aren't you? I know you realize that I will put my wealth on line for my son's release."

"Saab, as I told you, Singhsaab has taken a personal interest in this case," said Rawal feeling sad that he couldn't avail of the chance of his lifetime. "If only it were in my hands, I would've surely given it a different twist."

"But still... "

"Saab, you better pull the strings at the top to see that your boy is not troubled by any," said Rawal trying to ingratiate himself to Gautam. "Well, I'll call up the CI saab only after you fix up things. And you too can speak to him a little later. After all, courtesy wouldn't spoil, will it? Be assured, I'll not let a fly come near your boy. Why, I'll treat him as my own son."

"Thank you, Rawalji," said Gautam as he dialed the Police Commissioner's residential number. "You may know I'm not the one to slight those who help me."

When Rawal in relief led him to Suresh, finding his son shell-shocked in the lock-up, Gautam himself was shaken to the core. When the son broke down seeing his father, the father could not hold back his tears either. But realizing that his nerves would unnerve Suresh even more, Gautam decided to put on a brave face.

To the approving nods of Rawal, Gautam averred that it was no more than a case of juvenile delinquency, and thus the courts were bound to treat it likewise. After all, there was no need for Suresh to worry over much for the sentence was going to be light. And to address his son's troubled psyche as well, the father showed an understanding to his misdemeanor. And to assuage his son's apprehensions on account of Sneha's absence, Gautam said that she was hell-bent on accompanying him and that it was he who dissuaded her from coming. Anyway, it was difficult for any mother to go through all that and in his situation; it would be delicate for Suresh as well to face his mother. Gautam tried to inject a dosage of optimism into his depressed son with the assurance that all would end well as he would line up a battery of ace lawyers to free him from his predicament.

In spite of his own enthusiasm, as Suresh remained gloomy, Gautam feared that his son might sink into depression. And to avert its happening, he thought that he should spring into action without any loss of time. But on second thoughts, he felt it prudent to wait for Sohan Singh's arrival. In time, when the fuming Singh made his appearance, Gautam needed all his suave to plead mercy for his son. However, it was Suresh's countenance that softened Singh's ire and that made Gautam heave a sigh of relief. Thus, leaving Suresh to Rawal's care, Gautam rushed to draft in Vijay Mehrotra, the eminent criminal lawyer.

In that nocturnal briefing, Mehrotra heard Gautam with all the sympathy due to a valued client's predicament. But in the end, he duly showed Gautam the tight spot into which his brat had put himself in. When the desperate father said money shouldn't be a constraint, the wily advocate assured that he would apply his mind to judicially undo his son's wrongdoing, of course, at the first hearing itself. Carried away by his own conviction, Mehrotra even dismissed the whole thing as no big deal at all. Nevertheless, he said that the Gautams would have some bad press to contend with to start with. But then, public memory being proverbially short, he averred, they would be able to put all this behind in no time. In the meantime, said Mehrotra, all that the Gautams needed to do was to remain calm, and loosen their purse strings to buy justice for their son.

And to make a skeptical Gautam feel at ease, Mehrotra sketched the contours of the countervailing defense against the weight of the incontrovertible evidence. At the end of the briefing, impressed with Mehrotra's methods, Gautam was sure that an unconditional acquittal

for Suresh was on hand. Assured of the likely twist of justice in the trial court, Gautam in relief headed home in his Rolls Royce. But soon, his apprehension about the imminent fallout of it all on his life and his wife's times dampened him no end.

'How thin is the line between glory and infamy!' thought Gautam sinking in the back seat. 'Doesn't it seem thinner than the second's hand that splits the time frame at every turn? The shine of the year gone by and the shame of the one on hand, oh, what a contrast they make! How all those guests so welcome at the dusk seem unwelcome even before it is dawn! But, how the course of the discourse at the Misty Nest might have turned after all that! Oh, the ugly turn of events, are they any less embarrassing for the guests? Maybe some of them could be gleeful as well, won't they? Indeed, how life could turn on its head overnight! Would Sneha ever be able to cope up with all this? And don't we need to camouflage the scandal before it ceases to interest? Well, one needs to be thick-skinned to brave it all. Thank God, I'm up to it anyway. It's as if life had prepared me to face this day!'

When Gautam reached Misty Nest, he found it inundated by the neighbors as well. As everyone rushed up to him in the portico itself, he tried to make it up by alleging that his rivals had falsely implicated an innocent Suresh. It was easy to see, he said with his trademark composure, all this was to scandalize his family and ruin his reputation in the same vein. It was like hitting two birds with the same stone. But he assured them nonchalantly that he would come up trumps after all, the indomitable fighter that he was. Apologizing for having spoiled the party, he got rid of them all one by one by bidding goodbye.

Though the Gautams felt relieved for having seen the back of their guests, yet they were overwhelmed by the tragedy that befell on them, and that denied them even a wink all night. If anything, the dawn made it worse for them as the glare of the scandal splashed in the newspapers irrevocably blurred their vision for days to come.

As the reportage of the crime, dubbed as Mehrauli Murder Case, tended to bring the background of the accused into focus, it irked the Gautams no end. What with the condemnation coming thick and fast from all quarters, it soon turned into a nightmare for them. One newspaper went overboard, suggesting that the Gautams too may be tried as the abettors of the crime for a lack of their brat's bringing up. Then and only then, averred the eloquent editorial, that the country's courts would be perceived as concerned with social justice.

But what kept the news alive for weeks on end was its potential to embarrass the ruling party for its patronage of the Gautams. Thus, in time, it all turned out to be a trial by the media, well before the case was committed to the session's court. As the crime caught the public imagination as well, the investigative journalists worked overtime to pull out skeletons from the Misty Nest's closets. The competitive yellow journalism that followed, tarnished the fair name of the Gautams, and shamed them in the process. Such was the media one-upmanship that even a magazine dubbed the decade-old general insurance claim of the Gautams as fraudulent while a tabloid insinuated that Sneha had all along promoted Gautam's business interests by entrusting her charms to the care of men who mattered.

It was only time before the women's groups joined the fray demanding justice to the victim's soul with a rope to the culprit's throat. The religionists, for their part, lamented over the depravity of the youth and attributed the same to the lack of faith in God. Of course, the conformists raised the decibels of the debate by deriding the baneful influence of the alien lifestyle on the age-old culture. The social scientists, as though not to lag behind, attributed the rise and fall of the Gautams to the deteriorating value system in the society of the day. The political pundits, however, attributed the rise of Gautam Prabhu to the position of power and prestige to the perils of the License Permit Raj. That he was on the verge of being nominated by the party in power to the *Rajya Sabha*, they averred, underscored the inimical politico-business nexus that was in place. And what a peril that posed to the nascent Indian democracy was anybody's guess. But, waiting in the wings, the human rights activists made no noise till then. It seemed as if they were hoping that the accused would be sentenced to death to enable them to get on to the centre stage. Whatever, well before the scandal ceased to make news, the remarkable transformation of Gautam Prabhu, a former Engineer of the Public Works Department, into the most influential lobbyist in New Delhi became a matter of common appreciation.

In the mid-fifties, it was said, Gautam, with a ravishing wife and a burning ambition to make it big in life came to New Delhi from Andhra Pradesh. Having mastered Hindi meticulously and cultivating people methodically, he soon came to specialize in wheeling and dealing. Sneha Gautam, who eventually made waves on the cocktail circuit, nevertheless, made her debut with her Sneha Travels. Dazzling her influential clientele, soon enough, she reached far and wide in the travel world. But that was not all. Combining her unquestionable charms and questionable morals, she laid the foundation for the edifice of her husband's global empire. It was like she was the spark that ignited Gautam's ambition to make it to the zenith of wealth.

Having begun life in a by lane of Karol Bagh, the Gautams soon set their eyes on the avenues of Defense Colony, only to dominate its landscape in the end. Their palatial bungalow, evocatively named Misty Nest, became the owner's pride and the neighbors' envy, indeed of Lutyen's Delhi. Sadly for the Gautams though, and deservedly so as many thought, the veil of respectability that shrouded their vulnerability lay tattered. And that unmistakably exposed their shameful visages to the public gaze.

Owing to the fear of compromising their own reputation in their company, their former friends started distancing themselves from the fallen couple. What with the prospect of their only son ending up on the gallows staring in their face, troubled and shamed, the Gautams went into a cocoon in their Misty Nest. Moreover, used as they were to the hustle and bustle of life, the informal boycott in place seemed to weigh down heavily upon their social spirit.

Thus, in time, as the make-believe world they had built around them came crashing down, the Gautams remained in seclusion in their duplex dwelling. But, it was from that very setting, until not so long ago, that the Gautams had mesmerized the socialites of the country's capital, and strolled like colossuses in its portals of power.

Chapter 2

Trauma at Tihar

When Suresh Prabhu was produced before the metropolitan magistrate, he appeared disoriented. That was the day after his arrest, and as he looked traumatized, Vijay Mehrotra sprang up with alacrity. Seizing the chance to corner the prosecution, he accused the police of having tortured Suresh to extort that incriminating admission. And in the end, he dubbed the confessional statement as but a dubious document. Whatever, as the indicted appeared incoherent, and since Rawal too showed no inclination for his continued detention, the magistrate sent Suresh on remand to Tihar.

Though Gautam pulled the strings to ensure his smooth stay at the gaol, Suresh found it hard to face his lot. However, sensing that the accused was insensibly sinking into depression, in time, the jail doctor sent an SOS for psychiatric care. In the specialist counseling of Dr. Prakash Gupta that followed, Suresh unfolded his schizothymic mindset that baffled even the expert. At length, the specialist was able to place the bits and pieces of Suresh's troubled mind in the jigsaw of his psychic frame thus:

From his early childhood, Suresh had craved for his mother's affection but had to settle for ayahs' attentions. Upwardly mobile by the time he turned three, Sneha had no time for the apple of her eye. After all, she was engaged with her business during the day and partying in the evenings. But the veritable toy world that Gautam erected at home for him, gave Suresh a false sense of belonging. Thus, having grown up materially fulfilled but emotionally deprived, he had a bewildered childhood.

Moreover, his insatiate longing for the maternal love insensibly snowballed into an Oedipus complex in his adolescent mind. It was in that psychic state, fond of his mother but deprived of her affection, he was beset with a love-hate feeling for her. Well, this emotional disturbance inexorably sought sexual turbulence for his adolescent company. Gradually, all that afflicted his psyche and that induced aberrations in his libido.

Besides, the emotional void of his upbringing made him vulnerable to the sensual distractions of adolescence. Devoid of the paternal discipline and deprived of the maternal

affection, he lacked the psychic barrier needed to keep the coarseness of the Delhi's abrasive culture at bay. It was, thus, the metro's insensitive ethos insensibly impinged upon his impressionable mind. And that drove him into the company of the spoilt brats at the Don Bosco. The delinquent life he happened to lead thus turned him insensitive to the decencies of life. It was only time before his bitterness with his self reached the pitch and that made him defiant to the discipline at the school. And his wayward ways led to his rustication from the school that even Gautam's pull could not help rescind.

But the slight he felt at the rebuke of his teacher at his own misdemeanor outraged his ego. His hurt psyche that saw the teacher as the cause of his plight sought to get even with him. No less, the derision the incident invited incited him to avenge himself. The scheming for revenge that he indulged in exposed his troubled mind to criminal cunning. After mapping the teacher's movements, he chose the moment to contrive an accident with his motorcycle. The vicarious pleasure he derived in flooring his victim, and then seeing him writhe in pain, surpassed his sense of vengeance but surprised the vestiges of his sensitivities.

Though the teacher narrowly escaped death, the needle of suspicion that tilted towards him under the weight of motive gave him his first brush with the law, and the Gautams their first taste of a scandal. But thanks to the parental clout he narrowly escaped landing up in a Borstal School. But the aggrieved academia's unrelenting opposition to his reprieve closed the doors of the elitist schools on him.

While Gautam was aghast at the setback, Sneha felt distressed about his future. But, preoccupied as they were with their own lives, they failed to summon the required imagination to amend his character. The neighbors who felt outraged at his conduct though barred their kids from mixing with him. But soon, they all mellowed, seemingly disarmed by his handsome looks and affected manner. But it was Gautam's largesse to help some school of lesser eminence build a swanky structure on its campus that helped Suresh avoid the tag of a school dropout. Soon, as the Gautams were back in their make-believe world, there was none to mend the disheveled mind of their son. And that left the troubled boy to fend for himself.

Amidst the middle-class crowd at the unheralded school, he turned supercilious and became a bully in due course. But when he finished his schooling, his mediocre aggregate became a handicap for Gautam to get him inducted into any professional college of some standing. However, owing to Sneha's connections, Suresh managed to find himself on the rolls of the prestigious St. Stephen's. Yet he felt that his parents had gone to lengths to keep him in the college not to cut a sorry figure for themselves on his account. It hurt him even more that they, having ignored his interests all along, should turn desperate to buttress his worth only to shore up their sagging image. All that made him feel that the way to get even with his parents, especially his mother, for his hitherto neglect was to get spoiled even more.

All the same, the accentuation of his sexuality imparted a carnal color to the canvas of his curiosity. It didn't take long for the deep attraction he always felt for his mother to turn into a vague sexual love for her. With each passing day, his Oedipus psyche sought sexual gratification in her possession, which in time became his sole obsession. So he tried to come closer to her on the sly but as he found her ever preoccupied, his frustration inculcated a feeling of vengeance against her. Thereby, he turned roguish at every turn to hurt her in every conceivable way.

When he noticed his mother's uninhibited manner with men, what with the outrage his jealousy induced in him, he began resenting her even more. But, the desire he spotted in the male eyes for her seemed to enhance his own craving for her in weird ways. As he insensibly focused on her, he noticed her flirtations with all and sundry. And that made him envious of them and hurtful of her. Thus, driven by jealousy, and compelled by curiosity, he came to spying on his own mother.

The first time he had seen her leading a stranger into her private room that was next to his own, he feared the worst and wanted to probe further. Using his ingenuity, he stealthily embedded peeping and hearing devices at vantage points in her room. Making sure that he managed to camouflage them from her casual vision, he lay in wait to spy her escapades.

That afternoon, as she moved in with a young guy, he went up to his observatory in anticipation. Oh, what was in the offing for his voyeuristic delight was beyond his adolescent

fantasies! Admiring the youth for his manliness, she enslaved him in her ardent embrace. Gripping him to gauge what was on offer, she was profuse in her praises. Reaching for his lips eagerly, she savored them passionately. As the guy became all eager, she turned a tease to rein him in. When he went on his knees in submission, she pressed him to her crotch as if in triumph. When he shoved in his head between her thighs, she dropped her *pallu* over him as if to secure his ardor. When he pulled out her sari at her naval, she unbuttoned her blouse seductively. As he untied her *lehang*, she removed her brassieres to his delight. Even as he was ogling at her nudity, no less eager to espy his essence, she undressed him with urgency. But as he sought to possess her, she subdued him into cunnilingus. Maybe, embarrassed at her becoming a foul mouth and as if to cease being clamorous, she herself took to fellatio.

Though the mother's wantonness affronted the son, yet her amorousness thrilled his own romanticism. But, the man's surging passion on her urging frame offended the son's sense of possessiveness. And, when the mother let that man penetrate her, the son felt as if she was being pushed out of his own heart. What's worse, her sexual surge leading to her orgasm left the son with a feeling of betrayal by his own beloved. Whatever, as her sexuality excited him sensually, her coital satiation with another male left him sullen. Above all, her moral degradation compounded by her lustful expletives distressed his materialistic sensibilities.

While his sense of parentage was belittled by her immoral ways, his self-righteousness too was troubled by his own sense of guilt. And that left him indignant. All the same, he was puzzled by the fact that his mother could indulge herself with relish with another male, in spite of her apparent affection for his father. Unable as he was to come to terms with the reality of her life, he was left wondering about her motives behind that sexcapade. Whatever, he couldn't help but pity his father for having been cuckolded, and on that score he came to experience a simmering contempt for him. The mixed feelings his voyeurism induced in him had resulted in accentuating his love hate for his mother. While her lovemaking that he watched erased the borders of his own filial sensitivities, his Oedipus desire turned into an incestuous lust to possess his own mother. He found that, the innate shame her conduct infused in him was at odds with his own craving for her curvaceous frame. While the son in him felt ashamed, the man in him was torn between his lust and hurt. As a way of resolution for his conflicting emotions, he thought of humiliating her by surprising her in her indulgence.

As he came to spy on her, soon he saw her spiriting a hunk into the room on the sly. And that distressed him even more for the change of her mate symbolized the debauchery of her soul. He felt as if he had lost his esteem to her as a lover, and wished to leave the slut of a mother alone. But the allure of her frame and his urge to voyeur her fare pulled him to the post. When he had seen her mounting the man, his sense of deprivation goaded him to catch her red-handed. But his desire to see her reach the climax capped his own intent. At the end of her rendezvous, as he found himself drained as well, he resented his own impotence to affront her in her misdeed.

After a couple of aborted moves to shame her in the act and having got addicted to the voyeuristic joy he derived from her indulgences, he gave up the idea altogether. However, he ceased to see her as his mother and came to view her as a beddable woman. In his state of perversion, supplanting his self for her mate in the familiar setting his voyeurism provided, he was wont to daydream for long. Consumed by his own urge to possess her, he was outraged by her sexual transgressions. It was this impotent rage that led him to suffer in eternal shame. The effect of this underlying cynicism affected his subconscious to trouble his conscience.

As neither masturbations nor wet dreams could bring him release, he opted for paid sex for relief. In his union with the harlots, even as he fantasized his mother, he visualized her humiliation in their subjugation. But, whenever a whore turned out to be aggressive, reminiscent of his mother's self-assertion with her mates, he suppressed them no end. It was thus he came to see his exploits in the brothels as his means of revenge on his mother. But, soon, he realized the hollowness of his revenge brought about by his generous doles to the whores for their extra favors. That he had to pay for what his mother offered to her mates on a platter made him feel defeated even more. And that made him dejected no end.

With the passage of time, as his need to vindicate himself by his own machismo became compelling, he contrived to seduce a girl on the campus and coaxed her into sex with the promise of marriage. But, the falsity of his own duplicity denied him the pleasure of the

conquest. Thus, feeling defeated in his bid to humiliate his mother, he came to hating women, painting them all with the brush of her dark character.

Experiencing physical attraction for the fair sex but nursing emotional apathy for them, he thought of rape to enjoy and hurt them at the same time. It was only time before he looked for his prey and realized that housewives would be a better bet. Once, he forced himself upon an unsuspecting woman and that readily catered to the conflicting emotional needs of his schizothymic psyche. While her pleadings to be spared of her humiliation gave him the feeling of an arbiter of her shame, the resistance he encountered in the face of his assault appealed to his sense of combat. But eventually, as he could subdue her, he felt elated by the strength of his own libido. All that made him feel as though he was doubly rewarded for his violation. Also, his perception that the woman coalesced after all, catered to his sense of virility. But, above all, having enjoyed the fare as long as it lasted, her picturing the sex as rape buttressed his cynicism about women. So he ended up where he began.

The feeling that the woman tried to wash her own guilt with a profusion of her crocodile tears seemed to wipe out his own sense of humiliation brought about by his mother's misconduct. Thus, while the subjugation of an unwilling woman satisfied his sense of revenge on his mother, the humiliation he could heap on the hapless dame addressed the hurt of his troubled mind. The warning he delivered in the end to the vanquished 'to keep shut or else' seemed to seal her shame while signaling his own triumph.

Having enjoyed the fruits of his first trespass, he set himself on the hazardous course of violating the fair sex. Nevertheless, owing to his victims' fear of scandal, he came out unscathed in umpteen violations. And, for the lack of repercussions, he came to see the lane of rape as but his thoroughfare of vindication. It was with impunity that he began to satiate his lust, raping the women he fancied. Insensibly thus he turned out to be a habitual rapist ever on the prowl.

That fateful evening, he happened to see Shanti who resembled Sneha in every manner. Taking her as Godsend, he felt excited at the prospect of what was in the offing. Raving about her thus, he lost no time in tricking her into his car. Driving her in the top gear to his father's Mehrauli House, he raped her with all his pent-up fury, as though she were his mother herself. In the end, as was his wont, while he sought to see his ultimate triumph in her humiliation, Shanti, besides calling him SOB, scorned him with all her contempt. As her remark pushed his dichotomic psyche to its edge, he tripped the line. As though to snuff out the very source of his humiliation, he strangled her with all the hate he had been nursing for his mother.

As she lay motionless, he was gripped by a sense of revulsion for having hurt the woman he enjoyed. Confounded by his own hurt, he made love to her body as though to bring her back to life. Yet, as the guilt of his ingratitude gave him no respite, he cursed his mother for the crime he had committed. And having looked at her body for long with self-remorse, so as not to shame her soul further, he wrapped it in her sari. Though he gathered his wits to shift the body into the car, yet he had no idea what to do with it. However, as he started driving slowly, survival instinct made him look out for an ideal locale to dump the corpse. Before he could act, he sighted the police on patrol from some distance and so tried to speed past them.

While the psychiatric care that followed at Tihar enabled Suresh position his past in its proper perspective, the reality of the present psyched his fears about his future.

'Would I be hanged?' he dreaded at the prospect often and prayed in turn. 'Oh God, why not be a lifer?'

Chapter 3

Mind of the Maligned

While Suresh turned to God in the gaol, Mehrotra answered his prayers in his study. As Gautam gave him a blank cheque, Mehrotra began to lay the path for Suresh's acquittal. Having tutored Suresh about the nuances in retracting his statement in the court, the learned lawyer had outlined the line of the defense during the impending trial. The accused was made privy to the fact that with befitting bait, the Swaroops were caught in the defense web to become

hostile witnesses in the court. That would help the defense to portray the trial as an attempt by the Gautams' detractors to malign them and victimize their son. A cricket buff that he was, Mehrotra added that the Swaroop *doosra* would baffle the public prosecutor. Oh, how the fellow was itching to score!

As it's the personal conviction that enables one to come up with a convincing performance in the court, Mehrotra mapped the contours of the escape route to Suresh thus: The Swaroops would testify under oath that the accused and the deceased were steady for long and were to be betrothed soon. That would enable the defense to shift the murder onto some unknown hands and unable to retain the crease of motive, the prosecution would get stumped in the process.

Gautam would stand witness to the 'fact' that the lovebirds went to his Mehrauli House to amuse themselves. They were to return to the Misty Nest in time for the surprise announcement of their engagement on the New Year's Eve. But, as luck would have it, instead of the Gautams announcing their son's engagement to the assemblage, it was Rawal who broke the incredible news to them.

The Swaroops would play ball by pleading that they were forced to complain to the police though they were aware that Shanti went out with Suresh. They would make out that some thugs descended upon their house at around nine that evening. That was, as they were preparing to leave for the Misty Nest for the momentous event. And it was that gang which forced Saurav to prefer that damned 'missing person' complaint at the South Extension police station. With his wife held as hostage, Saurav would aver that he had to fall in line, never mind his qualms. Thus, under the pain of death to his wife, he preferred that missing person complaint, designed by Gautam's detractors to implicate his innocent son. Being aware of his closeness to Sohan Singh, and to keep him off the track, the intruders had forced Saurav to mislead him as well.

Then, it would be left for Suresh to concoct a murder story thus: At around nine, as Shanti and he were getting into his Mercedes at the Mehrauli House they were accosted by five masked men. While three gagged him, the remaining began strangling Shanti. Even as he struggled to free himself to save her, they stuffed out her life before his hapless self. Before they made their escape, they warned him not to leave the farmhouse before ten. In case he ventured out before the deadline, they told him to prepare himself for an ambush.

Stunned out of his wits, Suresh was stay put as ordered. When it was past ten, he headed home with the body of his beloved. Shortly after he hit the road distraught, making it a double jeopardy for him, the patrol police intercepted him. How his misery multiplied and his tragedy compounded! Though he tried to explain to those who detained him, they were in no mood to listen to him. Simply, they hauled him up for rape and murder on conjecture. What is worse, to save themselves the bother of finding the real culprits, the police saw an easy way out to close the case by extracting the confession from his hapless self.

Mehrotra assured Suresh that such a line of defense would make it an open and shut case of his innocence. If anything, the onus of apprehending the 'real' culprits would shift on to the police. Besides, pressured by the women's groups, even if their plea for a payroll were to be rejected, nothing would be left to chance to bring about a speedy trial to get a ready acquittal. Thus, said Mehrotra, he laid a flat wicket for Suresh to bat on blindfolded.

Though hopeful of reprieve, yet Suresh despaired. Living hitherto under the shadows of the gallows, he could not see beyond the noose. However, having been shown the end of the dark tunnel, he began to worry about his dismal future.

Such is the irony of life that man tends to visualize dark clouds even while seeing the silver lining.

'What if I won't be free again?' Suresh began to brood. 'Then, won't I rot in Tihar forever? Why, for all my wayward ways, won't that make it just deserts for me? Were it an acquittal even, Mehrotra's methods notwithstanding, who knows, the trial might drag on for ages. Well, that would only confine me to this hole ruminating over his pep talk. And, what about my life after release, that is, as and when that happens? Haven't the shadows of my past darkened the

prospects of my future? How could I ever survive the stigma of calumny? Why did I allow myself to come to this pass? What a mess I have made of my life!

As he recalled the nightmarish experience, he began to visualize the agony of Shanti. He was shocked to realize that all along he had perceived her as the cause of his downfall.

'Is it not proof enough for my depravity, if ever one were needed?' he thought remorsefully. 'Surely, she would have had her own dreams about life and could have nursed her ambitions with hope. What villainy that I had put an end to her aspirations by stuffing out her life itself! How unfair was life for her!'

As the import of the tragedy from her angle began to sink in his imagination, he lamented even more at the unfortunate end to her life. 'Why had she to pay for my troubled psyche?' he thought in the hell of his cell. 'Was it her fault that she happened to be a look-alike of a sick man's mother? For all I know, her nature could juxtapose mom's character. How ironical life is, in that it makes one pay for the mistakes of others! Why haven't judicial errors sent many an innocent to the gallows? Oh, how many might have ended up in the grave owing to murder by mistaken identity! Well, am I not paying for the sins of my mom?'

'But, how am I to know why she did what she did,' he thought as he began to experience a new empathy for his mother. 'What was worse, she scandalized herself in the process. How naive of me to have condemned her as if I were an infallible judge! Haven't I punished her and myself as well, perhaps, her more than all? If not for me, her dirty linen would never have come for a quick wash in the public. And my poor father has to endure the ignominy and suffer in silence. What a loss of face for both of them! After all that eminence that is. How they would be braving it out!'

'What did I gain by raping all those!' he continued as his focus shifted on to those whom he had wronged. Transient release and enduring revenge, that's what I got, isn't it? But then, the release was sullied by fear, and the revenge remained flawed, after all. As for the sex itself, it was more of a mechanical motion than even a physical union, not to speak of emotional integration. Where was the feeling of sensual intimacy that I had seen those guys experience in mom's lovemaking? Well, my perverse psyche led me astray, only to cause my ruin in the end! And how many women have I traumatized, by the way? Wonder, how did I strangle the very woman whom I used for my sexual gratification? Not even animals are known to kill their mates, do they? Didn't I turn worse than a beast then?'

'Didn't it all begin with my incestuous desire for mom, only to end up with blood on my hands?' he continued his contemplation. 'Won't Shanti's death haunt my soul forever? Would the world ever let me forget my past! What about being normal in the company of women? Is it left in me to fall in love, much less voice it again? Who would wed me after all this? Even otherwise, would I be able to lead a normal married life? Given my troubled psyche, would that be possible even if my wife were to be an understanding woman? Would my burden of guilt let me ever erect for all that? Do I feel gripped of late? Oh no! Would Shanti's curse keep me useless all my life?'

'Why did I abuse my life and theirs as well?' he continued in remorse. 'Now that I see it all in a fresh light, won't the lingering thought of their trauma torment me forever? It seems insensitivity has its own advantages! But it is with the rungs of suffering that the ladder of reform is built, isn't it? How wrong of me that I saw mom from the angle of my own wants! How am I to know if my expectations of her attentions were unsound? How stupid I was to grudge her on that count, and feel avenged by violating others! But, how distressed was she seeing me in distress! How she cried her heart out as though to wash my sin off my soul itself! Surely she loves me more than I ever thought she would.'

As he thought about his mother in a maternal mode, he seemed to experience a change in his understanding of her. 'What's her fault, after all?' he thought melancholically. 'She might have had her own compulsions of life, couldn't she? How am I to know whether dad had measured up to her want or not? Or, who knows, she was probably indulging herself wantonly to satisfy his whim, or even to buttress his business, as the talk goes. Whatever it was, after all, they have a right to lead their life the way they wanted to, don't they? Was it the fault of the parents if their children measure them on the scale of uprightness? Why should the onus be on

the parents to live up to the pious images of them conjured up by the children? How silly that children fashion yardsticks for their parents, especially for the mother, without knowing what it is to be a grown-up! How fair is it for one to expect one's mother to be asexual?'

'Oh God, if only I had the sense to understand then!' he thought in despair. 'Would I have developed all those negative feelings for the fair sex? No way, and surely I wouldn't have inflicted sexual hurt on all those, leave alone killing poor Shanti! How could I ever fault mom for her ways, when I violated women without qualms? If ever she comes to know that my psyche got bugged because of her, would she ever forgive herself? At least, I should spare her that last straw of guilt on her humiliated back. That much I owe to her.'

'Thank God, Dr. Gupta is not a loose talk,' he thought with a sense of relief. 'I have his word that he will keep it all to himself. Surely he wouldn't allow mom to get an inkling of my predicament. Oh, how the press pictures her as a slut as if the rest of her ilk is nunnish! Get caught, you're in the dock, if not, continue under the cloak. What irony scandal is?'

'Why not I turn a new leaf in my life, ironically on lease by Mehrotra's ruse?' he thought at length. 'What of the course correction then? Would I ever imagine hurting any in any manner whatsoever? But would that do to lead a useful life? Well, it's constructive care that might help erase the debilitating effects of my negative past. What about lending a helping hand to the abused of the world? Maybe, eventually that might put me on the path of redemption, won't it? God, give me the chance to live and have the conviction to make that my mission in life. Why let me dangle by the rope that I strangled Shanti in sickness? Why not put my life at stake to save another? Won't Thou grant me this one favor O Lord?'

Suresh's new found faith in the will of God made him take the maneuvers of Mehrotra with a pinch of salt.

'Won't his twisted means justify my upright ends?' he tried to probe the rights and wrongs of the expected verdict. 'Or would it be no more than a hoax? What of justice then? Whose justice is it anyway, but that of the statute? And won't that vary from state to state! Isn't it in itself a travesty of justice in our imperfect world? But then, who said that it is a just world? If not, why should nature condemn one species as food for another species? What justice is all that? Is it not absurd to suggest that man had evolved equitable laws while God failed to do so? No denying that, my violations on them would have traumatized many, but was it not my sick mind that was the cause of it all? What was worse, it was Shanti's ranting that provoked me to resort to the crime. Yet her abuse would have been *passé* for many. But given my psyche, that touched my raw nerve, didn't it? Whatever, how agonized I am that I had unfairly caused her death! It's as if the courts can't account for the penitence of the accused in meting out the punishment. Now that I'm repenting, am I not entitled for a reprieve?'

'After all, what should be an equitable punishment to a given crime?' he thought in the same vein. 'Well, it's the question that confronts societies. Didn't it appear logical for long that the offender is subjected to the same hurt he inflicted upon the victim? But, hasn't a tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye become out of tune with the sensibilities of our times? A lost tooth or a blind eye would still keep life going for the victim and the violator alike. Wouldn't the gallows for the murderer deprive life for them both? How to deal with the crime and punishment within the boundaries of life and death is the moot point. Won't that depend on the proclivities of the one who comes to dispense justice? How lucky, if my case is heard by him who believes that life behind bars would meet the ends of justice. God forbid what if it's the conviction of the one in the chair that the cause of justice demands the throat of the culprit! Won't that make him or her murderer of sorts with the judicial tool of a rope?'

'What could be the rationale behind the capital punishment!' he thought in despair. 'What is it that is sought to be gained by depriving me of my life? Are they not making out that it's the rope to my throat that leads the victim's family to the realms of justice? If only my death could resurrect Shanti, would not I have willingly walked up to the gallows by now? And is it not a specious argument that Shanti's soul would not rest in peace if I am alive? Does it not amount to vilification of her character for it implies the retributive nature of her soul? Well, this public clamor for the capital punishment is nothing but the manifestation of man's own savagery. I

killed her when I lost my cool but in all calmness these seek my death. How would the public ever grasp the nuances of a given violation to air an opinion?

'What could be the fear of the society to leave me alive?' he thought in the end. 'If it seems women wouldn't remain safe with me around, then why not I be jailed for life? Won't that let women see the back of me while I may still look forward to whatever little life has to offer me? If my repentance makes a better soul of me, why should I be prevented from joining the mainstream all again? It's not that the planet is full of nice guys out to reach out to the people at large! That way, how it gets lost on the law that the society has nothing more to lose, and may even gain for my reformist zeal. Why, won't making me dangle by the rope mean denying me the chance to change? More to the point, the society would be deprived of a decent citizen that is after I would be through the jail drill. As I intend to help the outraged, won't that amount to saving a life to serve some others? And that would make my acquittal just in itself, wouldn't it? Thus, my urge to lead a useful life should make Mehrotra's dubious methods for my acquittal upright. Would it not make a case of ends justifying the means?'

'What if I am sent to the gallows after all that?' he couldn't help but think. 'But then, aren't there two sides to the same coin? In a way, is not death preferable to the life of a lifer with all its attendant deprivations? Seen that way, death row is any day a better option for it entails a short stay. What about the dread of climbing up the gallows? After all, it is the love to live that lets man fear the noose. When one is reconciled to death, then it should be much less a bodily pain than one might have endured in life, isn't it?'

Chapter 4

Twist at Tees Hazari

The concerned and the curious alike thronged to the gates of Tees Hazari to witness the trial of the Mehrauli Murder Case. As the doors were thrown open that morning, everyone jostled to reach the designated courtroom for a vantage position. The crowd was seemingly dying to see the accused and his mother.

Partly addressing their curiosity, Gautam walked in with a posse of lawyers led by Mehrotra. As they took much of the front row, the gathering, though felt let down by Sneha's absence, looked forward to Suresh's arrival with bated breath. Thus, calm reigned in the courtroom until the clock struck ten when Suresh was brought in. And agog with excitement, the crowd rose as one man. The commotion continued for long with people falling over each other for a better view of the handsome youth. Used as he was to the trials involving celebrities, the *daftari* felt he had never seen such a disorder in the courtroom before. But as he yelled out for order before ushering in Justice Ms. Sumitra Choudhary, it was pin drop silence.

As the father and the son couldn't take their eyes off each other, the crowd could discern the pathos of the former and the agony of the latter. In vain, Suresh's eyes sought for Sneha, and Gautam's gaze seemed to solicit an understanding on her behalf. Before Gautam could gesticulate to his son to relax, Justice Choudhary entered the arena to take her exalted seat. Even as the assembly rose to a man to fulfill the norm, Suresh bowed to her as though to his destiny. As the Justice took the chair, Pradeep Paranjape, the Public Prosecutor, got up to present the case of the prosecution.

Having received her nod, Paranjape was unequivocal in his eloquent condemnation of the accused.

"Ms. Justice, this is an open and shut case of kidnap, rape and murder, committed by the accused, Mr. Suresh Prabhu, the vagabond son of the formidable Mr. Gautam Prabhu. In this regard, I would like to draw the attention of this court to the F.I.R No. 420/1974 of the South Extension police station, New Delhi. The written complaint of Mr. Saurav Swaroop, the father of Ms. Shanti Swaroop, the murdered woman, is enclosed with the F.I.R.

Ms. Justice might peruse from the Exhibit No. I that at 10 PM on 31 December 1974, Mr. Saurav Swaroop went to the police station to lodge a 'missing person' complaint regarding the disappearance of his nineteen-year-old daughter Ms. Shanti. In the said complaint received by

Mr. Pramod Rawal, the Station House Officer, Mr. Swaroop had clearly stated that his daughter, Ms. Shanti, habitually returns home by seven in the evening. But on that fateful day, she failed to reach home even by nine. When he failed to trace her at any of the likely places, he feared for her life at the worst and harm to her limb at the least. Then, he went to the said police station to lodge a 'missing person' complaint. A worried father that he was, Mr. Swaroop sought the intervention of the police to help trace his daughter. Considering the gravity of the law-and-order problem in our lawless metropolis, the police went on overdrive to find out Shanti's whereabouts.

Past ten that night, a patrol party at Mehrauli noticed a speeding Mercedes, and signaled the driver to stop. When the car came to a screeching halt, they found a dazed youth at the wheel sounding incoherent on questioning. When the police resorted to a routine check, in the back seat they saw a young woman in the sleeping posture. As the lad who identified himself as Suresh Prabhu, s/o. Mr. Gautam Prabhu, failed to explain what was wrong with his companion, the police naturally got suspicious. Upon his questioning, as the matter got curiouser and curiouser, the police tried to wake up the girl to ascertain the situation. It was then that they realized they had to contend with a murder case, and detained the indicted as the prime suspect.

When Pramod Rawal, the SHO of the SE-PS, reached the place, he found that the deceased resembled the girl in the photograph left behind by Mr. Swaroop. Thereafter, the police acted as per the laid down procedures when Mr. Suresh Prabhu was apprehended and the Mercedes with the body was moved to the SE-PS. Losing no time, the SHO sent for Mr. Swaroop for identifying the body. As feared, Mr. Swaroop readily identified the dead girl as his daughter, Ms. Shanti. In the meantime, the indicted too made a clean breast of himself confessing that it was he who had raped and murdered her. He also owned up his culpability in kidnapping her that very evening. The confessional statement of the accused and the related documents form Exhibit No. II.

Ms. Justice may please peruse Exhibit No. III containing the forensic reports that conclusively prove that the accused had assaulted and raped Ms. Shanti. That the semen of the indicted was the same as that which was swabbed from the victim's vagina would prove the incidence of penetration. That it was not a case of voluntary surrender on the part of the deceased to the accused is proved by the fact that the former was badly bruised. All this would establish beyond reasonable doubt that the victim resisted the indicted's molestation bid before she succumbed to him against her will.

And the accused's guilt in the murder of Ms. Shanti is borne out by Exhibit No. IV. The post-mortem report adduces that Ms. Shanti's death was caused by strangulation at around 09 PM on 31 December 1974, i.e. an hour or so before the indicted was apprehended carrying her corpse in his car. Hence, the forensic proof of his raping her and the circumstantial evidence of his murdering her that would incontrovertibly corroborate with the confessional statement made out in his own hand of his own volition.

Thus, Ms. Justice, the detainment of the indicted with the victim's body, the forensic reports confirming his violation of the victim, his confessional statement owing up his guilt in the kidnap, rape and murder of the deceased besides the corroborative evidences of his involvement in these crimes, together establish the culpability of the accused, Mr. Suresh Prabhu in the kidnap, rape and murder of Ms. Shanti Swaroop on 31 December 1974.

It is submitted that it is the case of the prosecution that the guilt of the indicted is proved without an iota of doubt, which is by far a better proposition than the dictum of beyond reasonable doubt. Taking cognizance of these premeditated offences by a spoilt brat, the court may deem it fit to convict the indicted and award him an exemplary punishment. It is only thus the society could be ridden of the menace posed by this habitual offender who is a criminal by his very instincts. If ever set free, given his savage mindset, he's bound to be a scourge to the fair sex. Ms. Justice would agree that it in itself would be a miscarriage of justice, which the court would like to avoid. That's all Ms. Justice."

As tutored, Suresh had pleaded not guilty and accused the police of extracting the confession under the third degree. For better effect, he repeated the concocted story that Mehrotra had

helped him memorize at Tihar. As Shanti's father too went with the indicted, and maintained that his complaint to the police was made under duress, the case of the prosecution seemed to collapse. As though to drive home the last nail in the prosecution coffin, Mehrotra got up triumphantly to sum up the inviolability of the defense's position.

"Ms. Justice, the averment of the victim's father before this honorable court that she was all set to be betrothed to the indicted should be noted. Does it not give lie to the prosecution's accusation of rape in the first place? Besides, it is preposterous for any to suggest that the indicted murdered his own beloved, that too hours before they were to be betrothed! It is submitted to this honorable court that there was no motive whatever for the indicted to murder the deceased.

Though the forensic report confirms the victim's death by strangulation, it is worth noting that it did not indicate any hand of the indicted in it. This aspect of the murder alone would lend credence to the averment of the indicted that it was the handiwork of some unknown miscreants. On the contrary, it exposes the shallowness of the prosecution that seeks to condemn an innocent youth caught in the vortex of business rivalries. When it comes to the bruises on the victim's body, decency demands one wouldn't probe them any further.

As we all know, Mr. Gautam Prabhu, the father of the indicted, is a leading light of New Delhi. It is a common knowledge that he was in line to get the coveted nomination to the *Rajya Sabha*. The sordid episode of Ms. Shanti Swaroop's murder was a product of a diabolical conspiracy of Mr. Gautam Prabhu's detractors out to hurt him politically and otherwise too. In the prevailing cynicism, how does it matter if hitting the opponent below the belt involves the murder of a young girl and foisting the crime on her lover? And the way the yellow journalism targeted the indicted's mother for no fault of hers save her God given charm! Won't that make one wonder whether it's a curse to be born a beautiful woman? Well, who suffers from qualms anymore these days in besmirching the fair name of a spirited woman, if only to make her man bite the political dust?"

Mehrotra paused to let the woman in the judge develop empathy for the indicted's tarnished mother.

"Ms. Justice would appreciate how all this might affect the psyche of the unfortunate son," said Mehrotra resuming his argument. "On top of it was the trial by the media, conducted by the plants of the conspirators in the fourth estate. Hadn't the indicted stood condemned already? And sadly, the reputation of an elite family was callously colored with infamy. It is a travesty of justice that Mr. Gautam Prabhu's adversaries achieved what they wanted. Why, his political career lay shattered and his personal image got tattered. Now it is left to this honorable court at least to salvage the indicted's honor by setting him free forthwith."

As though riding a tide and carried away by his own rhetoric, the redoubtable Mehrotra took on the law enforcing agencies in the same breath.

"The right thinking people ought to condemn the shady role the police played in this sordid episode," thundered Mehrotra. "Their lazy surmises are being thrust upon this honorable court as the results of a painstaking investigation. No civilized society should feel safe under such a bunch of the custodians of law who subserve their conscience to the dictates of the powers that be to implicate the innocent. Having failed to apprehend the culprits who murdered Ms. Shanti Swaroop or out to protect the authors of the heinous crime, the police have given the color of rape to consensual sex between two teenage lovers on the verge marriage.

And the police, to either save their skin or to serve their political masters and/or both, shamelessly made the indicted, the victim of the tragedy, as the villain of the piece in this in this case. Whither went the conscience when he who had the misfortune to witness the murder of his beloved was pictured as the perpetrator of the crime itself? Thus, Ms. Justice, I implore upon this honorable court to dismiss this fabricated case foisted upon the indicted with the contempt that it deserves. Ms. Justice may deem it fit to set Mr. Suresh Prabhu free with due honor so that he could lead as dignified a life as possible under the circumstances."

Bowing to the judge, Mehrotra had a supercilious stare at the dumbfounded Paranjape. And then to the welcome gesture of a grateful Gautam and the muted congratulations of his own

juniors, he strolled like a colossus to take his seat. When Gautam looked at Suresh with relief, the latter was confounded with mixed feelings. Though elated at the prospect of an acquittal, Suresh was uneasy that he and others had to lie under oath for his reprieve. At the same time, Paranjape's shoulders drooped, suggesting that he was out of depth to press for a conviction. As though the despair of the prosecution got spread in the courtroom, it was filled with murmurs of an inevitable acquittal. As the press-wallahs were excited about the twist that the case took for bettering their copy, there came a turn to the proceedings from an unexpected quarter.

In that state of willing suspension of disbelief, no one took note of a burka-clad woman from the back row going near the sulking Paranjape. When she handed over some paper to the public prosecutor, the gathering stood up as one man to see what was on hand. As Paranjape poured over her note, the crowd whispered in wonderment whether it had anything to do with the trial on hand. Noticing the nuances in his demeanor at every turn, the gathering got expectant and waited with bated breath.

When an elated Paranjape jumped up to the judge to confabulate with her, even Gautam felt nervous fearing the import of the intruder on the trial. As Paranjape confabulated with Her Ladyship, from his body language Mehrotra sensed that the stranger could spell trouble to the defense. And, Suresh too had a premonition that the woman could be one of his victims who had come to testify against him.

Justice Ms. Sumitra Choudhary adjourned the hearing to the post-lunch session that flummoxed the defense team and mystified the gathering. When Paranjape led the stranger to the court chamber, Suresh envisioned his being led to the gallows. And it was conjectured all around about the relevance of the intruder to the case on trial that she could be an eyewitness to the crime who waited in the wings till the very end. That the trend of the trial indicated an acquittal, she might have decided to stop the tide for the cause of justice, so felt some. Thus, the expected drama of the post-lunch session whetted the appetite of the public to the hilt. But, as things turned out, the gathering had to leave the courtroom without satiation.

Chapter 5

Trial in Camera

With Paranjape's plea for a trial in camera began the post-lunch proceedings in the Judge's chambers. He averred that the witness was entailed to have her identity as well as her deposition kept by the court away from the public. After all, he said, on her own, the witness had come forward to help the cause of justice and thus serve the public interest. Besides, he alerted the court about the delicate nature of her testimony and the likely embarrassment the cross-examination could cause her. Having considered Paranjape's pleas on merits and as Mehrotra had no precedents to quote against to poke his nose; Justice Sumitra began the hearing in her chambers. Though the trial commenced soon enough, that seemed an eternity to the accused.

When the stage was set for Paranjape to take the floor, he ordained the witness to remove her burka. While Mehrotra tried to size up the young woman who emerged from the veil, Paranjape tried to map the nuances of Suresh's demeanor.

"Don't you know who she is?" Paranjape asked Suresh.

"Objection Ms. Justice," roared Mehrotra from his seat. "If she's to further the prosecution, the indicted has a right to know who she is and not the other way round."

"Ms. Justice," said Paranjape spiritedly, "the interests of justice would suffer if the objection is sustained."

"You may proceed," said Justice Sumitra.

"Have you ever met her before?" Paranjape asked Suresh menacingly.

Having realized the import of her appearance, Suresh was flabbergasted beyond belief. Besides, he had no brief from Mehrotra either to tackle the ticklish tangle.

"Why not recall the road accident," Paranjape seemed to prompt Suresh, "in which you nearly got killed?"

"Oh, God, what a turn," blurted out Suresh in spite of himself.

"Now you may make your statement," Paranjape triumphantly turned to the eager woman.

"I have a few questions for her," said Mehrotra to Justice Sumitra.

"You may proceed."

"What's your name?" asked Mehrotra hoping to catch the witness off guard.

"Don't I have the court's permission to keep it for myself?"

"Well, where do you live?" Mehrotra asked the woman. "I hope you would part with that information at least."

"It's in New Delhi."

"How long have you been living here?"

"Maybe, since I was born."

"When were you born?" asked Mehrotra and added turning to Paranjape. "Excuse me for wanting to know the age of your witness, a woman at that."

"The question is irrelevant, Ms. Justice," said Paranjape in objection.

"Objection sustained," said Ms. Justice.

"How far away is your house from the Defense Colony?" resumed Mehrotra.

"It's as far as from Saket."

"Isn't it possible that the indicted should've seen you in some mall or at the cinema in the recent past?"

"It's quite possible."

"Given your compelling beauty," continued Mehrotra, "couldn't he have retained your visage?"

"Objection, Ms. Justice!" said Paranjape. "She needn't speculate about the proclivities of the accused."

"Objection sustained," ruled Justice Sumitra.

"That's all, Ms. Justice," Mehrotra made his bow.

"Bring the witness under oath," the Judge ordered the *daftari*.

"I would tell the truth and nothing else but truth," said the woman holding the *Bhagvad Gita* in her hand, "an untrammelled truth for an untainted justice."

"You may depose before this court," the Justice gave the green signal to the woman's damaging testimony.

"That evening, on 01 December 1974, I was walking by the pavement at Saket. When I sensed that a car came to a halt behind me, I instinctively turned back. He (she pointed her index finger at Suresh and found him colorless) yelled 'Excuse Me' from the driving seat. When I looked at him questioningly, he got down from a Mercedes and said he wanted my help in locating an address in the locality. Without a word he gave me a slip of paper with an illegibly scribbled address in a tiny handwriting. I stared at it long and hard to figure out the matter only to feel giddy and to be led by him into his car. It's clear that he would have smeared the note with some chloroform and the illegible writing in tiny letters was a ruse to make me take a closer look at it.

As he drove the car into the portico of a bungalow, I regained my consciousness but failed to gather my wits. I was still disoriented when he led me into a room and tried to disrobe me. The shock of it brought me back to my senses, and I resisted him all the way. Oh how, I pleaded with him to spare me since I was already engaged and that my wedding was round the corner. When

he overpowered me at last, I begged him to leave me alone as I was having my periods then. But still he molested me bestially. As he savaged me like a brute, I ravaged him with my nails. When I cried shocked and shamed, he warned me not to report to the police.

“When he was driving me back to the city I realized we were in Mehrauli. As I sobbed all the way inconsolably, he began boasting about his exploits and foulmouthed women no end. Oh, how sickening it was to hear him say that while the poor husbands prop them up domestically, they let their lovers satiate their lust! After all, it was in the dubious nature of women to lead a double life. Being coy with her man, isn't woman eager to be vulgar with her lover? Why, aren't women ever ready for a lay with as many whatever it takes! What hypocrisy, being whorish in their lovers arms, women pretend to be boorish in their nuptial bed? Why, it was a time-tested female tactic to befool husbands by shrouding their *amour* from them.”

As reciting his callous talk left a bad taste in her mouth, she drank some water before recapping his further bluster thus— rape, my foot, isn't it sex by default? What a fuss as man but tends women to get laid! Bet if they are not on the lookout for one-night stands with all and sundry, day and night that is. And yet they feign indifference if courted! Why not, they want to be pushed into the act for them to give in with an air of injured innocence. If only man were to press on, asking him to spare them, won't they crave for him at their core? Oh, how they push for the climax faking resistance! It was in a woman's nature to sham shame, gloating over her good fortune of getting laid. Well, he was no fool to take them at their words. Why does he appear to be one? Privy to their proclivities, won't he brush aside their pro-forma objections? Won't he give them what they crave all the while—sexy fare on the sly. Wiser to their false sense of outrage, he came to favor more of them as a service to the weaker sex.”

Listening to her, even as the judge and the lawyers, not to speak of Gautam, were dumbfounded, Suresh wished that mother earth had caved in underneath his feet.

“Oh how disgusted I was with that fiend then,” she continued after a pause, as though she herself needed time to digest what she herself had to reminisce for her testimony. “Involuntarily hating his very presence, nay existence, unmindful of my own safety, I pounced upon him. As he lost control at the wheel, the Mercedes collided with a roadside tree. When I regained consciousness, finding him unconscious, I got panicky. Slowly as I extricated myself from the wreckage, he began moaning feebly. What a relief it was! Why, his death would've compromised my own position further. Hiding at some distance, I had seen him come out of the car and manage a lift back to the city. Noting the registration number of his car, I too managed to hitchhike back to the city.”

All the while, Suresh could not desist himself from staring at her in admiration as the rest were too bowled over by her spirit to take their eyes off her.

“Reaching home, I tried to figure out my future,” she continued her tale of woes after having some more water. “My first impulse was to put all that behind me and get on with my life. But then, I realized that while I lived in guilt, he would be outraging many more. So, I decided not to push my shame under the carpet, but to make him accountable for his guilt.

I called up my fiancé and told him all. Even as he seethed with rage, I urged him to help me act against the rapist. All the same, as I cried in shame, he thought of advancing our marriage to minimize my trauma but seeing me determined to bring the guy to book, he applied his mind to the situation on hand. He felt it was possible that the culprit might have died of head injuries by then. In that case, had someone seen me with him, the police would be seeking her for questioning. Whatever, it would be an idea to clip my nails and preserve them along with my undergarments. Well, they would come in handy if it got messy on his account and to pin him down later on a different account that is if he were to survive.

Well, I wanted to report to the police forthwith but he counseled caution. He said the defense lawyers invariably give a coat of consensual sex to forcible molestations in their bid to blight the complainants. So he felt that before going to the police, we should make our case watertight against the worst cunning of the best of the defense lawyers even.”

Justice Sumitra couldn't resist herself from looking at Mehrotra whom she found gaping at the witness in all admiration.

"When we checked at the R. T. O's Office, we realized that he survived the accident,' the woman went on about her narration spiritedly, unmindful of the accused's predicament. 'When we were all set to report to the police, the Mehrauli Murder Case hit the headlines. Well, we followed the developments closely, and when it came for the trial, I came veiled to the court.

How it pained me to see what was on offer for the goddess of justice. As it became apparent that the decks are being cleared by the cunning defense for the criminal to walk free, I decided to alert the court about its consequences to the society at large. Ms. Justice, here is the incriminating material I mentioned in my deposition that I wish to submit in support of my averments. I pray to this honorable court to examine the evidentiary value of my deposition against the accused who is a habitual rapist. Ms. Justice may deem it fit that my case be taken up separately and direct the police to probe into my allegation."

When she finished her testimony, Mehrotra, who had regained his wits by then, rose to cross-examine her.

"Who's your fiancé?"

"His identity too is irrelevant to her testimony," Paranjape intervened with renewed vigor. "I submit it may be left as her affair."

"Granted," ruled Justice Sumitra.

"Let me see the relevance of her evidence," said Mehrotra superciliously to Paranjape before he went on pressing deviously on the witness. "You've stated that Mr. Suresh had an intercourse with you, didn't you?"

"I said he raped me," she corrected him.

"What's a rape if it's not an intercourse?"

"It might help," she said nonchalantly, "if you check up with your dictionary. Rape is an intercourse with an unwilling woman qualified by force."

"Oh, I see," said Mehrotra unable to hide his admiration for her meticulous preparation.

"By the way," said Mehrotra hoping to trick her, "are you a virgin?"

"Didn't I state that he raped me?"

"But were you a virgin," said Mehrotra menacingly, "when the accused allegedly raped you?"

"Yes."

"Yet you should've had some idea of lovemaking," said Mehrotra without a let up, "say, from friends or through pornography."

"Well....."

"Can you please tell this honorable court," said Mehrotra unabashedly, "how your sexual union with the indicted did differ from what you had imagined it would be?"

"I was looking forward to the pleasure of penetration," she replied as a matter of fact, "but the rape left me in pain and despair."

"You being a virgin at the time of the alleged rape," said Mehrotra, seeing a chink in her armour at last. "How would this honorable court know whether his force led to rape or your consent led to his force? After all, deflowering involves some force, does it not?"

"Objection," roared Paranjape in disgust, "for this devious question."

"Wish the defense draws its own lines," said the Judge in indignation.

"Ms. Justice may please appreciate the validity of my question in the face of her accusation," said Mehrotra unmoved. "Having alleged that my client had raped her, she spelt out her understanding of rape. Thus, it is imperative for the court to know whether the force allegedly used by Mr. Suresh Prabhu was meant to deflower her willing self."

"You may proceed," said Justice Sumitra helplessly.

"You said you were a virgin at the time of the alleged rape and it is a fact that force is an ingredient of defloration," Mehrotra sounded persuasive. "Now enlighten this honorable court why the force you felt was not the part of a consensual deflowering."

"The differing womanly responses differentiate the willing defloration and forced penetration," she said to the relief of Paranjape who by then felt that his rival was wresting the initiative from him.

"What are those like?" pressed Mehrotra not wanting to give up without a fight.

"I presume the pain of defloration would make woman hug her man for her comfort," she said with all conviction. "But the revulsion of rape would prompt her to hurt the beast to resist."

"If the accused had indeed raped you, as you allege," said Mehrotra, not the one to relent, "could you recall his manly attributes?"

"As I told you," she said dismissively, "I was subjected to the trauma of rape. If it were a case of lovemaking, maybe, I would have satisfied your curiosity."

"I appreciate your boldness," said Mehrotra making ground for a future assault. "But did you experience the nuances of lovemaking later, that is, after the alleged rape?"

"Objection, Ms. Justice!" Paranjape could not control his indignation.

"Objection sustained," ruled Justice Sumitra.

"It's a matter of life and death for the accused, Ms. Justice," said Mehrotra with all his persistence. "It is imperative that she should apply her mind and review whether the intercourse the accused allegedly had had with her was indeed rape or defloration in a moment of her own weakness."

"You might reply," motioned Justice Sumitra to the accuser.

"I didn't have any sex either before or after he raped me," she said animatedly. "And I suppose you cannot ask this honorable court to direct me to have sex now and revert on the matter later."

"What if in repentance the accused had sought your hand in marriage?" said Mehrotra, bowled by her reply, but yet floating a trial balloon. "Were it possible that you would have seen it as an opportunity to redeem your lost honor?"

"I caution the defense not to stray from the path of defense," said Justice Sumitra who was no more amused by Mehrotra's tactics.

"No. Never!" replied the girl, all the same.

"Sorry for the transgression," said Mehrotra in apology to Justice Sumitra, but pursued the matter as menacingly as ever.

"I allege that you had a one-night stand with the accused," said Mehrotra to the woman, to the indignation of all, "that was for reasons best known to you. As your fiancé smelt a rat, you made it up as rape to pull the wool over his eyes. Once this trial commenced, you were constrained to impress him about your averred innocence. That is why you are going to lengths to condemn my client to save your skin."

"I say it's all rubbish!" said the woman losing her cool for once.

"Miss, mind your tongue," said Ms. Justice to the witness.

"I do apologize, Ms. Justice," said the witness.

"Now you may answer my question," said Mehrotra.

"You would know that Dostoyevsky said logic is a double-edged sword that cuts both ways," she said rather aggressively. "By the same logic does it not seem you have been going to lengths to make his rape look like my invitation to mate?"

"Isn't the accused young, handsome and wealthy?" was another Mehrotra poser to the defiant girl. "Won't that make him an eligible bachelor otherwise? I'm sure you cannot dismiss that as rubbish."

"Well, it's possible."

"Were it possible for some scheming girl to induce him into sex to blackmail him into marriage?"

"Speaking for myself," she said, "I had no such idea."

"I allege that you resorted to the very same tactic," said Mehrotra with such finality that would have veered the vacillating towards him. "Since you failed to force him into your wedlock then, now you want to see him led to the gallows."

"That way, you can hypothesize anything and everything, can't you?" she said exposing Mehrotra's faux pas. "But, if it were the case, why could he not even recall who I am?"

"What if he had paid sex with you?" Mehrotra continued recovering from his unusual error. "I allege that you, knowing the value of your client, preserved the proofs of that coitus for future exploitation. As the Mehrauli Murder Case made the headlines, you began boasting to your clientele that the accused slept with you. With the word of mouth, it reached the men behind Shanti's murder and they made a deal with you to implicate my client. I tell you that you are acting at the behest of the real perpetrators of the crime in the guise of aiding justice."

"Didn't we see all this coming?" said the woman spiritedly. "The day after the incident, I moved as a paying guest with an elderly couple whose credentials even you might not question. If summoned, they would testify to the fact that I received none at home, except my fiancé, that too in their presence. They would vouch that I never left home once ever since. For the first time, I came out straight here, that too with that old man in tow."

"Well, that still does not disprove it was not a consensual sex after all," said Mehrotra shifting the burden of proof on the witness.

"You can get a measure of my consent from the entries in the relevant diary," she said, pulling out ten neatly bound diaries from her handbag. "I've been maintaining a dairy for ten years now."

As Mehrotra responded in wonderment, she showed him the blank space against 01 December 1974 and the entry of the next day that she asked him to read aloud.

'Oh, God how could this happen to me?' read Mehrotra hoping to find a loophole still. 'What an accursed day yesterday had been. How can I ever forget my shame in spite of 'his' understanding? How have I been dreaming a love drive on the highway of sensuality? What a cruel fate that ordained a head-on collision with a rapist's lust! How was I fantasizing the ecstasies of lovemaking when the hammer of lust shattered my soul? May God bless me to forget that beastly experience, that's all I ask for in life.'

"No more questions," said Mehrotra seemingly resigning after scanning a few more entries.

"Have you got anything to say?" Justice Sumitra asked Suresh.

"I shamed her then and I feel ashamed now," said Suresh with all remorse. "And it's also true that I kidnapped, raped and killed Shanti."

"I request the learned judge to adjourn the proceedings," submitted Mehrotra, the 'never say die' lawyer. "It is clear that the accused is upset about a past misdemeanor not related to the present accusation. It's his guilt complex in this case, that's conjuring up his guilt in the case on trial as well."

"The trial is adjourned," said Justice Sumitra as Gautam was aghast and Mehrotra remained clueless for once.

Chapter 6

Dilemma of Qualms

On their way back to his place in Gautam's Rolls Royce, Mehrotra was mad with Suresh for undoing his hard work.

"Didn't he handle the ball on 99?" he said with irritation.

"How are we to make the umpire look the other way?" said Gautam feeling helpless.

"Justice Sumitra is known to err on the side of the accused," said Mehrotra pondering over the turn of events. "But what can be done when your son wants to hang himself?"

"Hide the rope," said Gautam characteristically.

"Oh, how I've put my prestige on the line," said the indefatigable lawyer.

"On the line of my son's life, that is," said Gautam. "And I know with you around it's not over as yet."

"Now it's left for Dr. Prakash Gupta to give a psychic turn to it all," said Mehrotra contemplatively. "How that god-dam dame turned the case upside down!"

Soon Dr. Gupta was pressed into service to heal the fresh wounds of the emotionally stressed under-trial. It was not long before the specialist detected the altered undercurrents in the accused's psyche induced by the damning testimony of that woman. It seemed as if his live encounter with his past misdeed induced myriad images of life and death in his afflicted mindset. In his altered perception, the courage to face the calamity showed by her seemed to have put his own cowardice to stand trial in a poor light. Further, compared to her conviction to overcome her trauma, his inability to handle his life shamed him no end. The more he looked for the differences in their personalities, the more he saw the poverty of his own character. Moreover, he could see how her spirit to uphold justice contrasted with his father's cunning to subvert the same for his acquittal. As the conflict got crystallized in his mindset, his outlook towards life underwent a radical change.

'Why am I hankering for life after all?' he thought at length. 'Going by my past, it's worth nothing, isn't it? And what value addition acquittal by trickery would bring in? Why not face a fair trial and take the sentence as it comes? If they spare me the rope, I would rebuild my life; otherwise, it's a journey into the unknown. Let me see what life has in store for me.'

But Dr. Gupta was not the one to buy the argument. He said that one owed to one's life to preserve it at all costs. He took pains to convince the afflicted that it was not he *per se* but his misogynist mindset that was behind his crimes. It was only appropriate that he saw his own commissions and omissions in that light. It was time he desisted from his psychological self-flagellation. Why his true redemption lay in living a life of a reformer. At last, the psychiatrist succeeded in infusing in the afflicted the desire to overcome the present to sort out his life in the future. But, as the good doctor made a compelling case for Sneha to testify in the court so as to earn him a lenient sentence, Suresh was thrown into a dilemma of qualms.

'Maybe, I might escape the noose but would she be able to stand the shame of her owning up all?' he thought reflectively. 'In spite of everything, wouldn't she be clinging to her honor as dearly as I might like to hang on to my life? Anyway, what is so worthy about my life that it should be saved by embarrassing her before the Justice and the others? Why should I let her pay the price for my sins? If her peccadilloes are exposed in my defense, won't she stand naked in the court, though in camera? Won't she then die in disgust in the court itself? Don't I know of her haughty nature? Why should I have more blood on my hands, and for what avail?'

Overwhelmed thus, the accused expressed his aversion to the expert's envisaged line of defense. In turn, that threw Dr. Gupta into a dilemma of qualms.

'Maybe, he's right in not wanting to compromise his mother,' thought the psychiatrist. 'And it is even indicative of his altered sensitivity, isn't it? But is it right for me to keep quiet, for that could signal his death? And then, how ethical is it to damn a woman to save her son? I would be damned if I testify, and no less damned if I don't. What a dilemma of qualms! Acquittal is a long shot but my testimony might save him the rope, wouldn't it? Yet, if I keep off, it looks like the noose for him. Then, will I ever be able to live in peace, having failed to save a life when I could help? But still, how can I flout my professional ethics to go public with a private admission? What if I breach the code of conduct for a perceived good? Would I be able to do that with a fair conscience? Oh no, while the disclosure might help the son, it would devastate the mother, no mistaking that. How are the interests of the duo at loggerheads hindering my vision? Who's there to guide me now?'

As though led by the divine hand, Dr. Gupta went to Sneha to confabulate with her. Apologizing for his intrusion into her private terrain, the good doctor proceeded to psychoanalyze how her adulterous ways led to her son's misogynist mindset. Ashamed as such for having become the talk of the town, she was truly devastated by the doctor's disclosure. Affected as he was by her predicament, yet the doctor in dilemma rooted for her testimony. He averred that it was bound to buttress her son's defense in medico-legal terms and thus earn him a lenient sentence. Sadly, he concluded, the choice boiled down to owning up her shame in camera or seeing her son in the death row.

"Doctor *saab*, what has my life come to now?" she said as she sighed. "Oh, to save my son's life, I must kiss and tell in court! Can it ever get more ironical than that for any woman?"

"I understand," he said holding her hands as though guiding her on the way to her destiny, "what a Hobson's choice it is, and it is the sadness of your life now."

"I don't think you would ever get the full picture," she said, seized by an urge to be understood by him, "till I show you the other side of my demented mind."

"How I wish to be of help," as he said, he attuned himself to hear her.

'Oh, why did it never occur to me before?' she began contemplatively. 'Thanks to you, now I realize that I myself was a victim of parental paranoia. As fate would have it, I was the first-born besides being the closest to my parents. We are five siblings—three brothers and two sisters. When I was born, my father, the youngest amongst his six brothers, was a petty clerk at the municipal office in Guntur. But all his brothers happened to be high ranking government officials. My father never failed to remind us that his father had retired by the time he had completed his schooling, and that came in the way of his higher education. But for that, he felt, like his brothers, he too would have made it good in life. What's worse, as none of his siblings took up his cause; he came to see them as the source of his deprivation! Oh how he came to grudge them all his life. God knows the truth; my grandfather was wont to maintain that my father was no good at studies.'

"Whatever," she paused for a while, as though to get a correct picture in hindsight, "it forced him to settle for a clerk's post and remain in the ancestral home. Maybe, he needed my grandfather's pension to augment his own salary to support the family. Of course, all my uncles left Guntur and were on their own. But my mother was unable to reconcile to the facts of my father's life that denied her a nucleus family of her own. Thus, feeling trapped in the joint family that entailed her taking care of her aged in-laws, and envying the carefree life of her sisters-in-law, my mother came to grouse the crumbs of life that fate had dished out for us all. Well, her sense of frustration helped further my father's own sense of deprivation. All that insensibly cemented their joint sense of helplessness. Whenever my uncles came with their families to see our grandparents, my parents used to feel slighted for they believed that the visits were just for a show off. Now I realize to what lengths the state of imagined deprivation could take one."

She stopped for a while as though in disbelief, over what she had said.

"As if to protect their children from developing the poor cousin complex," she continued in dejection, "my parents built a cocoon of moral superiority around us. Now I realize with hindsight that my father wanted his children to score for him in the game of one-upmanship with his brothers that he had lost by a mile. My mother too felt the same way, vis-à-vis her sisters-in law. As my siblings and I came of age, they made us aware of the status gulf that separated our cousins and us. Besides, our parents were wont to pinpoint to us the nuances of our grandmother's differential treatment of them. How our young hearts used to boil with ambition to redress that parental lacking! Why, we used to assure our parents that we would make it bigger than our cousins one day. Well, that enabled them to derive a peculiar satisfaction, and that used to satisfy me and my siblings no end. Maybe that would've insensibly bound me to lift the stock of our flock subconsciously that is. That could've been the beginning of my undoing."

"But as the dictates of life differ from the desires of man," she continued with a sense of resignation after a long pause that seemed like eternity to Dr. Gupta, "and since ambitions are better realized by the well-heeled, we had to do with clerical education while our uncles' largess

to the respective institutions, enabled our cousins pursue professional courses. Ordained by fate though we became the weak links of the grand family chain, our collective bitterness only got steely by the day. Yet there was a saving grace for the hurt family pride, and that was the perceived beauty of my sister and me. It has ever been the only joy of my parents. But, as I crossed nineteen, the thought of dowry seemed to dampen their spirits all at once."

"When Gautam proposed to me," she said excitedly recalling their nascent romance, "our family jumped for joy. That he was handsome only added value to his being an engineer. All of us perceived the alliance as nothing but an accretion to our family pride. Oh, what a day it was, as everyone says to this day! But Gautam and I had a measure of it only through our wedding album. Well, we didn't have eyes for any but for each other then."

At that, she broke down.

"As I was in the seventh heaven," she began at length, "Gautam showed me visions of far away galaxies. And, finding him burn with ambition to reach the zenith, I goaded him to get there. Why, didn't I have my own poor cousin burden to shed there? For a start it was smooth sailing and then it seemed as if we were scaling the heights only to slip down the slope. Maybe, we grew too big for our shoes or we might have left our business flanks unguarded. Then came the moment of reckoning: to barter my chastity or embrace bankruptcy. Was it a choice any way! Oh, how I was averse to have anything to do with that shameful proposition. But then, how paranoid I had been to see my son's cousins become his poor cousins! So, driven by my over eagerness to score for my family, I scored a self goal and that was the beginning of our fall, mine as well as Gautam's. And from then on, severally as well as collectively, by degrees, we sank into the depths of depravity."

As if their ladder to happiness had broken down at that very juncture, she wept inconsolably but the good doctor was at a loss for words to console her. Moreover, he thought it prudent to let her drain out her agony. In time, wiping her tears, she continued.

"What a shame, I began bartering myself for the permits for petrol bunks for my siblings," she said with certain remorse. "You can figure it out how my moral downturn would have heralded their upward social mobility. Oh, what an irony! Why, is it not the way of life? Well, the crowning glory of our family, as we looked at it, was when I helped my sister get married to an IAS officer. As for the wedding, it is the talk of the town in Guntur even today. That announced to all, including our poor cousins, the arrival of my father's pedigree on the social stage in all style."

She paused and looked at the doctor stoically, and discerning empathy for her in his demeanor, she turned sentimental.

"When the bubble burst, my people stood behind us as one man," she said proudly. "Who said friends are better than relations? Actually, it was our so-called friends who turned their backs on us! And coming to the media, oh, how unfair it had been to us. How it was made out that Gautam turned me into a sort of a sexual ladder to climb up to the top of the business world! Believe me, Doctor *saab* but for that shameful submission, he never used my charms for his business promotion, nor did I do on my own. He is a man of honor ruined by ambition and not the pimp pictured in the press.

'Why blame others when I am to be faulted?' she continued in her choking voice. 'It was I who turned wanton and hurt him to no avail. I failed to realize it then and thus invited ridicule on him. But my poor man is all empathy for me in spite of my lewdness, is he not? Oh, how I wronged my god! But for his understanding and my siblings' support, wouldn't have my shame turned me insane? But as it appears, it's the filial puzzle that forked my destiny.'

"Why regret about the past?" said the doctor impressed with her chequered life. "I know you're capable of living it down."

"Wish I had the strength left for that," she said melancholically. "Now, it's clear that my impressionable mind was influenced by the parental deprivations to fuel that futile chase for wealth. How stupid can one be when it comes to the basics of life! Surely my parents erred in using their children as emotional dustbins to discard their own frustrations and biases. If not,

maybe, I should've restrained Gautam from his overweening ambition and helped bring balance into his way of thinking."

She stopped as though she were at the crossroads of her life all again and turned remorseful.

"Besides, I wouldn't have felt the need to compromise as I did in chasing the twin mirages of wealth and status," she said regretfully. "And what a silly life I had led all these years! But, was I not a victim of the rat race into which my parents had pushed me insensibly? Though I won't like to blame them, yet I wish they had had the wisdom not to bias their children. Had it been the case, I could have been my own person, with my fair share of faults. But by imposing their emotional overburden on me in particular, it seems they complicated my psyche that ultimately led me to my moral nadir. After having lived the best part of my life in pseudo satisfaction thus, I found myself at the cross-roads of confusion when the scandal blew up in my face."

"Though I never applied my mind to it, I am sure the emotional quotient of my siblings could be no better than mine," she resumed after a long pause. "I wonder how they are handling their lives! God forbid, should they have to face the stiffness of adversity, I am afraid they would all crack without a clue. Thanks to Gautam, at least, I am better off that way."

She went into a prayer as though to appeal to God not to test her siblings.

"But for that thoughtless upbringing," she resumed her analysis of her life, "I would have lived in mediocrity as a faceless practitioner of middle-class morality, all the while fantasizing life of high society. Maybe unwittingly, my parents readied me to be the glove on Gautam's ambitious hand to grasp the expediency of life. It was another matter that we lost track of our life itself before we were lost to each other in the end. Maybe I would never know why I became loose for no conceivable reason. Honestly, had I suspected in the least that I was pushing my son into the vortex of crime by my wayward ways; I would have been more circumspect. Who knows, I myself would've got out of the cesspool of promiscuity. Well, that's the regret with which I would've to live and die."

"If not for my disorientation, there was no way I would've gone astray," she said with an apparent regret. "Gautam was no mean a lover for all that. If not a victim of circumstances, I wouldn't have ended up the way I did. Surely, I shouldn't have. True, I am amorous but not amoral at all. Whatever I had undone myself, hurt my man and ruined my son. Now, I think it's time I help my son at least to get a chance to undo his past."

"I know how hard it is for you," said Dr. Gupta as he got up to leave. "May God give you the strength to handle your predicament."

"Let's hope so," she smiled wearily seeing him off. "I can never thank you enough for your concern to my son. Had I shown him a fraction of that, perhaps, things would not have come to this pass. Well, it is time I show him that I care. How I wronged the man I married and the son I bore. Sadly, there is no way I can retrieve the shame I heaped on my man. But it's not the case with my son, let me see. Thanks for coming and goodbye to you."

Chapter 7

Moment of Reckoning

'What a life it has been!' Sneha found herself thinking after Dr. Gupta had left. 'Oh, how it had shadowed my son's life! Can I ever look into his eyes which witnessed all that? Why was I not dead before I came to know of that? It's okay that others might smell rat of my peccadilloes but, oh, to be object of my son's voyeurism, why wasn't I wary when he grew up? How sad my carelessness bugged his psyche and ruined his life as well! Were he to be hanged, won't I be damned? But if I damn myself, he would be saved, how paradoxical!

'Wasn't the rumor mill crunching my reputation for so long?' she thought as she recalled how her own name was besmirched. 'Well, as is with other scandals so is with my story; it would be passé in no time? Why, even when it was the talk of the town, some believed and others gave the benefit of doubt. Wouldn't people's short attention span favor even scandals in the long run? Whatever, as long as they are not aired in my ear, how am I bothered about them?

But to testify to my shame would only amount to baring my body in the court, and soul as well, but would any credit me with that! How would that affect poor Suresh? As it is, my shame is shadowing him! If I were to kiss and tell in court now, that's bound to shatter him beyond doubt. Isn't it a frightful prospect to contend with?

As though her body and mind got synchronized by then, she turned dizzy and felt she could think no more.

'If only he had spilled the beans in the court!' she thought at length, having realized the problem needed a solution. 'Would I have a place to hide my head by now? But with his head on the block he keeps mum about his mom. Oh, how people disown their near and dear if only to save the bother! And what of the betrayal of their benefactors for no more than a few bucks! How shameful, and haven't I seen all that? Yet, the press pictures him as a fiend, and all perceive him as lacking in character! Could there be a better character than his? And for that matter, what's wrong with my character?

'Isn't it clear that it is either his head or my head that should roll now?' she felt at length, having reflected upon her life for long. 'And the choice is clear, isn't it? To what avail should I hang on after all? What would life have to offer me other than ridicule? How Gautam's empathy makes me jittery! Won't I feel that his blame game would've been rather solacing? What if even one of my lickers-in-scores of yore stood by me, it would have softened the blow. But where are they now? What a collective vanishing act that was!'

'Don't I know what men are like!' she tried to sum up male proclivities. 'How paranoid man is for exclusive sexual rights over the frame of his spouse! But which man minds waiting in the brothel for his turn to satiate himself? Wonder where his sensitivity of lone possession goes! And what is the fuss about female chastity if it were not man's insecurity about his own virility? Oh what if his spouse thinks his rival seemed better in bed? But when it comes to a whore, why should man bother even if it were premature ejaculation? How does it matter for he is her faceless customer, and once out, won't he submerge in the crowd? In truth, man gives a damn to savor the so-called tainted wife of his but his only worry is how she might've felt about his performance in comparison. Thus, it's not the moral aversion but the perception of his inadequacy that is behind man's hurt when he hurts his woman who takes on another, so it seems. Besides, what the aggrieved man could do than divorce her under the guise of moral apathy if not kill her out of sexual jealousy? But then won't man learn to live with his wife paying a blind eye to her paramour.'

'Now that my life became an open book,' she thought, applying her theory of sexual desertion, 'what a letdown it could be for all of them to learn that they were not sharing me just with my husband but with all and sundry as well! But how would they ever know that I enjoyed every one of them for what they were worth? Well, they should've known that I didn't hold any scale of virility as they laid me. Had I done that really, how many of them would have measured up to Gautam? Let them go to hell and how does that matter to me now?'

However, she could not help feel bitter about the fact of her desertion by all those who crooned eternal love into her exultant ears.

'Gautam, how considerate he is as a man and loving as a husband, in spite of it all,' she continued to review her life and times. 'But, the inconsiderate world sees him as immoral! What is that society, which denies the genuine their fair share and yet damns the deviants as immoral? If only there were fair avenues for the upright! Well, being on the brink why think about the Utopia? Yet, it all feels like betrayal, but then I have had enough of it. And having savored the scandal for so long now, it's as if the world too is tired of me. Maybe my death might stir up the hornet's nest all again, to excite the people for a while. Won't time bury my memory in a hurry?'

'How all crave to be remembered after they are dead and gone!' she thought. 'And what could suit me better than being forgotten, the sooner, that is? At least, that would take some shine out of the stigma sticking onto Gautam. Suresh, after all, is young enough to pick up the threads of life after a stint at the Tihar. After all, that's what the good doctor assured me. As and when he comes out a free man, surely, he would still be an eligible bachelor. At least, our wealth would ensure that.'

'Why, am I not old enough to die, though young enough to live otherwise?' she began thinking, seized by a death-wish. 'I had everything going my way; both ways, always, and suddenly I find myself at a dead end! What an irony that is! Why not bring the curtains down before the scene turns too bawdy to stage? Well, it would have been a different story, had fate allowed me to age without bringing my past to the fore!'

That night, soon after Gautam had hit the pillow, Sneha, with the denouement in mind, went to the writing table in the ante-room.

My soulmate:

Whoever thought of such a fall for us from the dizzy heights you took us to! Why, even my worst fears failed to push me to such a precipice. I'm sure neither yours would have. After all, you were sure that by the time the dust settled down, we would have ridden the storm. And my blind faith in your abilities failed me to see what was coming. Well, it appears that fate is averse to taking your dictation, at least in this case. Instead, it chose the well-meaning Dr. Prakash Gupta as the messenger to deliver the script it had fashioned to end our trauma.

How could I've known that I was the cyclonic eye of the stormy life of our son! It appears that he was privy to my double life ever since he could understand what it was. I know that it would shock and shame you no less. What a payback for the freedom you granted me! Pardon me if you can. Maybe, it's better that you fail to forgive me for that lessens my burden a little.

How I wronged Suresh the apple of our eyes! What a hurt to know his mother is a slut! How cruel of me to let him bear the cross of my debauchery! As for me, it's just unpalatable even to think he had seen it all. Now, having known that I was his voyeuristic target all the while, I cannot imagine facing him ever again. It seems it was my amorality that induced the misogynist mindset in him. And we have the word of the well-meaning expert for that.

Maybe unwittingly, but inexorably, I had set our son on a ruinous course. That puts me in the dock, doesn't it? Let me plead guilty in your court that I buggered our son's life. God forbid, if the apple of our eye were to die on the gallows, I would go insane. And I dare not see him even if he's set free. What sense does it make for me to hang around here any longer?

What a congenial couple we had been! But, how stealthily had fate tampered with our wedlock! Don't I know the pain you felt in having to forsake my womanly honor? But to what avail did I give in to my latter-day temptations? Why did I take undue advantage of your goodness to abuse my life that would have hurt you so much?

Now, more than ever, I can visualize what a pain it was for you seeing me turning into a bitch as it were. Oh, if only it had dawned on me then! Yet, it's not with the intent to hurt you that I say this, but how would it have been had you put your foot down on my waywardness? But then, you are a gentleman, and I didn't prove to be your worthy ladyship. And still, thanks to your large heart, I was cozy as your wife.

How the scandal changed all that! I am aware that the altered realities of our life would ensure that it could never be the same again for me and you as well. In a way, hasn't our relationship become untenable, if not tenuous? Maybe, that is what life is all about. That things have turned sour now, it's not fair to say that I regret my life, having led it consciously, rightly or wrongly. But if I were to do that, it might have some sympathetic accretion on the sentimental front, which I don't want in my account anyway.

Well, I don't intend to transfer my burden onto your conscience, as my hypocrisy would make you suffer even more in guilt. It's you who strengthened my character and now I know its value as never before. Moreover, I have no taste to live like a curio for the rest of my life. You know, we always lived life the practical way and I want to end mine that way.

I've come to believe that you may be better off without me. As I have lost my shine, and I know it's my own fault, it's but proper that I don't let my shadow cast on your life. Besides, haven't I become a jewel-less crown on your troubled head? With the aura of

the jewel gone, what for thou bear its weight, my dear? No, I won't let you suffer for I love you more than I thought I ever did. With the dead-weight of me gone, I am sure it would make a little easier for you. I know I owe that to you.

Believe me; it's not out of any pique that I want to end my life. What have I against you, my darling, that I should psyche you into guilt? If anything, I had wronged you though I loved you. Now, it is my genuine desire to make it as easy as I can that is prompting me to call it quits. If you ever feel guilty on my account, then my end would not have served the intended purpose.

But, it's sad that I've to end it all with a troubled soul. I know that in a weird way, I was responsible for the misery of those, whom our son had violated, not to speak of poor Shanti who paid with her life as my unintended dupe. I wish I had helped Suresh grow up to make a difference to his self as well as to the society around him. But how I came to ignore him? While I showed the woman in me to many, yet I failed to let him see the mother in me. Why, it was all owing to my preoccupation with my physicality as woman.

I'm going to die with the hope what my life failed to do for him, my death would. It's so sad, that my lifestyle led him astray by inducing misgivings about me as woman. It's my last and the only wish that you make him understand me as woman. Maybe then, he might understand the mother in me as well. Know that I would be dying knowing that you can.

Hopefully, that might bring equanimity to his troubled soul, and were that to happen even my soul would rest in peace well above. Reminiscing about the joy of your love and care, I am going to have my last prayer for you as well as our son's fruitful future.

In all our future lives, I hope to be your wife to give you what all I failed to in this one. I am ending this life with the conviction that you wish to have me in the coming lives as well. Let me tell you with all honesty that I see my exit merely as a practical way out for the three of us.

Forgive me for deserting you, midway.

Yours eternally,

Sneha.

Having finished the letter, she tiptoed into their bedroom and towards their framed wedding photograph on the dressing table. As she sat on the stool, she couldn't take her eyes off the picture. In time, dropping the letter in her lap, she took the frame into her hands. But, soon finding the light too dim to hold the picture, she took the frame closer to her. At that, as the memories of their honeymoon came in torrents, her eyes turned into waterfalls. When she realized that the farewell letter in her lap was getting wet, she placed it on the table along with the photograph. If not for her wish to let her man know her mind at the parting, perhaps, she would have wept herself to death and thus allowed her missive to smudge in the pool of her tears.

Wiping her tears, she stood near Gautam as he slept in exhaustion. As she looked at him lovingly, she was seized with remorse. But as her love for him came to the fore, she experienced a rare fondness for him. Sensing that her new found love for him would tempt her to develop a weakness for life all again, she went back into the ante-room wondering how a man could change woman for good or bad.

When she began popping up the pills, she wondered how each of them would be taking her that much closer to death. At that, as the ironical analogy of her lovers weaning her away from her man dawned on her, she wondered why she was unable to recall even one of them at the time of her departure. Sensing that she had a revelation of her life she rushed to Gautam to wake him up, but on second thoughts, she took her missive and penned the postscript thus:

As I am half way through, I realize that in the last hours of my existence I don't recall any of those whom I let into my life. More than ever I am convinced now that even as I let many touch me, I etched none of them in my memory insensibly filled entirely by your loving persona. Oh, this late realization that I might have loved you and you only, heart and soul, makes it so easy for me to die. And I hope that it would make your future life less bitter after all. Goodbye, my love.

Feeling light, she went back into the ante-room and picked up the bottle all again. But, as she was about to empty the bottle, she thought about the emptiness beyond life, and felt frightened. Unable to come to grips with her fears, she struggled to reach for her man. At last, she managed to lay beside Gautam with that empty bottle as though he would fill it with fortitude. As she realized that at the core of it, her life was as empty as the bottle in her hand, she tried to speculate what her life would have been like, had she married someone who wouldn't have thought of crossing the Rubicon when it came to it. But, as if not to hurt her sensibilities at that point of no return, her faculties failed her. In time, her body too began losing its vitality to hold her restless soul any longer.

Chapter 8

End within the End

When Gautam woke up to Sneha's death in dismay, impelled by their paradoxical togetherness, he felt like following suit. But as the love of life infused hope in him, the pity he felt for her made him guilty, letting him wonder whether he deserved to live at all. And that made him feel remorseful no end.

'Having pulled her into my life, oh, how did I push her towards her death?' he cried in pain. 'Why did I seduce her soul with the lure of the lucre? Didn't she pay the price for my ambition with her body and soul as well, in life and death? Why didn't she make her intent to die privy to me? Had she lost faith in me, after all? How else could she believe I would be better off without her? If only she knew how I feel for her! But then, where was the time for our togetherness, busy as we were chasing the mirage of wealth? What trophy had we won in the rat race of life?

'What else to expect after that fatal decision?' he went into a reminiscent mode. 'Why did the devil prompt me to make that deal with that son of a bitch? How did fate trick us into our own undoing? Or was it a test of my character? What a shame that I prompted her to prostitute herself! It was as if I had turned her into a sex ladder to reach the nadir. How naïve I was to believe that we would be able to put all that behind us, and that life would be a sonorous song of married bliss. But then, how could I blame her if she lost her sexual balance in the process. Why, had it not affected my own sensitivity? Oh, how we lost out together! Didn't we realize soon enough that at its core, our make-believe world was hollow? How stupidly we tried to fill our emptiness with sexual newness! Wonder how we went about it as though by an agreement though we never discussed it? At least, we clung to each other mechanically, but now it's as if the coupling to the driving end itself got severed. Well, owing to the fatigue of our life, isn't it?'

'But could it have been any different?' he tried to analyze their life in the rewind. 'What was the starting point anyway? Was it not the moment I sent her to that brat? Didn't I feel then as if she took away my soul with her? Didn't I deserve it? Or did I really care for all that? But, didn't she herself have an axe to grind with for her family? Whatever it was, oh, how confused she looked as she came back! And how empty I felt receiving her! What an empathy I felt for her as I took her into my arms. How I wanted to assure her of my eternal love. But, lo, having hugged her tight, didn't I gauge the gulf between us? When my remorse made me crunch her closer, didn't I feel the rough of the invisible between us?'

'What about her?' he continued recalling that fateful event with a sinking heart. 'Instead of sinking deep into me, didn't she slip out on the sly? Didn't it seem an end within the end to me? How hurt I was for forcing that one-night stand on her! What a pain it was later to realize that she was going strong with that chap! And how she began distancing herself from me! Didn't that force me to seek refuge in my business? But, what a narcotic success is! How it helped dully the pain of her peccadilloes! If not for it, wouldn't I have put my foot down on her? What a longing I had for her then! And by the time she rediscovered her love for me; didn't I myself develop a roving eye? That was that. And after that, was she not one of many, sexually, that was?'

Lest he should have been unfair to her in his reminisces, he began reading her letter all again.

Yet, it's not with the intent to hurt you that I say this; but how would it have been had you put your foot down on my waywardness! But then, you are a gentleman, and I didn't

prove to be your worthy ladyship. And still, thanks to your large heart, I was cozy as your wife.

'Why didn't I reprimand her?' he cried inconsolably. 'Any man would've done just that with a wayward wife, wouldn't he? But then, was it not my misplaced sense of honor that made me ignore her waywardness? Oh, if only I had realized that it made no sense to keep my word in the face of her abusive ways. How did I fail my woman all the while believing I was more than fair to her? What if I end my life for having undone hers? But, is not life itself an end within the end? Why, won't youth bring an end to the childhood to start with? And how successively life ends its own phases till death ends it once and for all? Why not I let my old age end the waywardness of my middle age?'

All the same, as he came alive to the rituals of her death, he thought about their son.

'If anything he's the worst sufferer for my foolhardiness!' he began to think. 'At least, Sneha and I had a wild go at life but what about him? What if his life gets snuffed out before it blossoms? What a pity it is to die in the flower of youth. How I failed her as husband and him as father. Damn my success when I failed my family! What an irony, though we wronged him, he needs to perform her last rites now, and God willing mine in time to come!'

When Suresh was brought home on bail midday that day, Gautam felt as though he was himself on trial. Seeing him enter with a sense of shame, immobilized as he was by guilt, Gautam could make no move himself. With his troubled conscience, as Suresh dragged his feet to his mother's body confusedly, overwhelmed by remorse, Gautam looked at him endearingly. But, Suresh stared at Sneha's body vacantly and felt she had closed her eyes as though to save them both the embarrassment of reunion. While the son found himself staring at his mother's body thus, the father was too embarrassed to even look at him.

Nevertheless, the irony of the moment opened Gautam's eyes to the collapse of his ivory tower. As though he had a revelation all of a sudden, shedding all his inhibitions, he went up to his son and showed him the damning letter. When tears blurred Suresh's vision, Gautam wiped them for him to see his mother in the dead woman.

When Suresh fell at his mother's feet in penitence, Gautam stared at his dead wife in repentance. While the son in Suresh wept silently, to solace his own embittered soul, the father in Gautam embraced him to console himself. In a way, their tragedy seemed to have induced a mutual empathy for each other that transcended the barriers of their grief. In their state of mutual reconciliation, insensibly they both felt sympathy for the departed soul.

When came time for Sneha's last journey, as though to stress that they shared the blame for her fall, Suresh insisted on being a pallbearer aside his father. But seeing his mother in all her nakedness on the funeral pyre, he saw the paradox of their relationship.

'What an irony that all along I was coveting the very body that I was destined to consign to the ritualistic fire!' thought the son melancholically. 'It's as though in death she assigned it to me, as it was unthinkable for her to entrust it to me when alive.'

As the *purohit* nudged him to do the needful, Suresh performed his duty in a caressing way as though to save her of pain to the extent possible. When her body was engulfed in flames, he prayed for her soul and vowed to fulfill her last wish were he to live. At that, he was surprised to realize that he neither feared death nor coveted life anymore. Though, the *purohit* signaled the end of the rituals for the day and that the ashes could be gathered on the morrow, the father and son were averse to leaving the place till the very end of Sneha's earthly existence. And, in time, as the sun sank into the horizon, the embers of the funeral pyre began to subside, bringing her ashes to the fore. As though to atone for their role in her death by ordeal of fire, they both braved the heat to gather her ashes from the remnants of the funeral pyre to the last molecule.

When they reached home, they reverentially placed the urn of her ashes before her life-size painting and knelt before it for long. As they could hold no longer, they squatted on the floor there. At that, with his wife's ashes for witness, Gautam talked to his son, man to man.

"Though her body is no more to bear her grief," he said choking, "I'm sure her soul would be restless till you realize what she really was. You know it was her last wish, and I want to fulfill that by revealing the saga of our life. Let her soul vouch for the truth about the narrative."

Chapter 9

Vestiges of Prestige

Once upon a time, the hollowed stock of the Prabhus was an envied lot in Amalapuram. While their palatial bungalow seemed unending, their landholding once covered the *tehasil* itself. It was into that ancient clan with the renowned surname that Gautam was born. At the time of his birth, his great-grandfather happened to be the head of that undivided family of six siblings. As was the wont of the gentry of his generation, he was a man of leisure and his brothers too were equally unoccupied.

However, unlike their ancestors, the siblings had to contend with the depleted landholding and the reduced stature that it afforded. It was all owing to the propensity of the men of the clan to cut a figure for themselves and the proclivity of their women to set their image in the jewels. Besides, the males were wont not to lose any bid for deflowering *bogum* girls of the hallowed brothels. In due course, their profligacy besides making the women shorn of their jewels in numbers dented their resources by degrees. And, the dowries for the daughters of the family too contributed to the downturn in no small measure.

By the time Gautam's grandfather, a namesake, was born, the resource crunch forced the elders to send their children in search of greener pastures. Of course, the clan had always been well educated, including the women. But, custom prevented Gautam the senior to desert the hearth and home. It was thus he came to reign in the ancestral house though not leading a leisurely life. Anyway, wiser to the strides made by those of that ilk in Madras by then, he did not come in the way of his three sons settling down there.

When he died at sixty, he could leave no family silver worth its weight for the extended clan to adorn their hallowed surname. With none of the clan members around in Amalapuram, his widow opted to stay with Suresh Prabhu, her first born and junior Gautam's father. At that time, he was a maths tutor in Pachaipah's College. And to supplement his income to ensure the latter-day professional education to his promising son, Suresh used to double up as tutor for the evening courses. His drudgery contrasted with his brothers in the departments who made good of their positions to line their pockets. And his cousins whose fathers had provided them the head start in the metropolis were all well-heeled by then. It was thus that the once eminent joint family gave way to nucleus families of uneven incomes.

Gautam being his only child, in spite of his modest means, Suresh Prabhu brought him up without any feeling of wanting. It was when Gautam was five that his grandmother came to stay with them. And that pepped up his life to make his childhood a memorable one. As she began to bestow such love upon him that only grandmothers' can, he was insensibly drawn towards her. Being a gifted storyteller, she unraveled the heroics of the epics to his inquisitive mind.

But, what thrilled him the most was the hearsay of their family glory that she reveled in revealing. As she always turned nostalgic in her narration, Gautam was wont to boast that one day he would restore the past glory to the family name. Pleased to the core, the old woman used to assure him that she would be watching his success from heaven to rejoice at it. But all this did not amuse Gautam's mother for she felt it might put an undue pressure on his eventual psyche. Whenever she took up the issue with Suresh Prabhu, he dismissed her dubbing them as undue fears.

If not his ambition, the environment at home that emphasized on education enabled the young Gautam to excel at studies. That he was adept at outdoor sports too made him a hero in his school. After schooling, when he kicked the knickers and cycled his way to Pachaipah's College in trousers, he experienced a feeling of being big. As his handsome looks were a big draw at the campus, his sexuality too was cast in a self-assured mould.

Eventually, when he topped the class, he felt at the top of the world. As opportunities abounded for the civil engineers then, what with umpteen dams over the major rivers in the pipeline, he joined the course in Guindy Engineering College. When he came out with flying colors after five years, he was in a position to choose his employer. As he chose to join the

Central Public Works Department, he was posted at the construction site of Nagarjunasagar as a Junior Engineer.

Soon Gautam set out to the nearby Guntur to call on his father's cousin sister whose husband was a lawyer of note there. As he approached their bungalow on Ring Road, he realized they were richer than what his father had pictured them to be. All the same, his aunt and her husband welcomed him warmly. And Mallika, their daughter, seemed to have loved him at first sight. Himself drawn to her, he began to imagine the possibility of marrying her. Guntur being near enough to his workplace for a weekend outing, he lost no opportunity to visit their place to be with her. While her reciprocity fuelled his love, her parents' reception nursed his hope.

But, when he proposed to her, she wanted him to come through the proper channel. So he approached his father to broach the issue with her parents, but his mother was apprehensive about the outcome. Though she pictured the status gulf that separated their families, Gautam's enamored eyes failed to fathom the same. When the father too felt that the proposal was a non-starter, the son assured him that Mallika would find the way for them to the altar.

Thus, pestered by Gautam, his father was forced, against his better judgment, to call on his cousin. Slighted by the rebuff that followed, Gautam pressured Mallika to defy her parents. But her refusal to go by his dictat left him brokenhearted. Unable to reconcile himself to a life without her, he confronted her parents with the picture of his future in the making. When they were blunt that matches get fixed on the current rating and not on future holding, he grudged his fate, in spite of the promise it held.

Later, hoping that time would have softened their stand, he called on them again to renew his request. But, as they asked him not to make a nuisance of himself by calling on them, he felt humiliated. Smarting from the insult, he shot from the hip that he would soon take a wife to whom their daughter would not hold a candle and that one day he would make it bigger than all of them put together.

His resolve to strive to make that a reality seemed to define his destiny even as the recollection of his childhood boasts of restoring the family aura gave him a sense of purpose. And his grandmother's words of rejoicing at his success from heaven seemed prognostic to his perturbed mind.

Chapter 10

High on Rebound

In his search for someone better than the one who had spurned him, Gautam rejected match after match. Well, as his eyes were in search of Mallika's replica in the prospective bride, no match matched the lost one. But as it dawned on him soon enough that it was far easier to boast than to bring it about, he felt doubly shattered. And yet, as he kept nursing the slight he felt, his hurt ego ensured that he sustained his resolve to get even with those who humiliated him.

When Sneha brought some schoolchildren for a picnic to Nagarjunasagar, Dame Luck smiled on him as though to tempt his destiny. Assigned by his boss to guide the party, as he entered the guest-house that morning, he saw her in the sofa waiting for the unknown him. Bewildered by her beauty and bowled by her charm, he stopped in his tracks. When she got up to greet him, the flow of her frame stunned him even more. As she went about assembling her flock, struck by her poise, he didn't take his eyes off her. Further, enthralled by her bewitching smile and enchanting tone, he felt as if he had retrieved his lost hope. While he stood rooted lost in her charms, sensing that she had stolen his heart, she bowed her head as though in guilt.

Taking them around, he felt that his sprouting love was ever on the rise as a dam in the making. Instinctively, he felt that as his wife, Sneha could wipe out his hurt and make him forget his past. Thus, guided by his conviction, he tried to charm his way into her heart. When he perceived reciprocity in her coyness, he felt ecstatic about his future.

When it was time for her to take the kids back to Guntur, for fear of losing her hand, he contrived to accompany her. Spurred on by her fondness for him during that journey, he lost no time in proposing. And she joyously responded by inviting him home.

When they were engaged shortly thereafter, not only he was thrilled but also felt avenged. The chance happenstance made him believe that the hand of providence was at work in his life. When Sneha told him that their engagement was a remedial measure to her family as well, his sense of destiny reached the core of his hope. Having got a wife who was better than the one who had spurned him, he felt hopeful that the other vow he took would as well come true. And that became Gautam's abiding faith.

The wedding that followed became the talk of the town as the love marriage of the time. Besides, his handsome persona and her divine figure made them look like they were made for each other. In that romantic backdrop, the praises showered by their cousins, and others made them value each other even more. As they divined the just married, even as the eyes of her parents were welled up with joy, the hearts of his parents emptied their anxieties.

The nuptial night however ushered in new hopes for the vindicated groom and the blissful bride. While Gautam's passion took her to the frontiers of her dreamland, her amorous eagerness drove out his sense of rejection from his subconscious. It was as though the force of her physical charms dented his desire for material possessions. The fulfillment of their consummation buttressed his self-worth and furthered her hopes for the future. But, his feeling of being avenged that her charms buttressed blocked his vision to the beauty of her inner self. Likewise, having been swirled by his manly passion, she found herself gloating over her womanly fortune. It was in that sensual setting they were to begin their married life at Nagarjunasagar even as the euphoria of their fortuitous union restored equanimity to Gautam's hurt ego and brought balance to Sneha's twisted psyche.

When she first set her foot in the township, Sneha became a big draw with one and all. While her charms whetted men's appetites, her simplicity endeared her to the womenfolk. Even as her unassuming manner drew the youth to her home, her dignified demeanor kept the lechers at bay. But, destiny didn't seem to have tranquility in store for them as they soon found themselves heading towards New Delhi.

As Sneha frequented the Officers Club with Gautam, his boss didn't lose much time to develop a crush on her. While Gautam was engaged in one sport or the other, his boss turned solicitous about her affairs. Mistaking her respect towards his elderliness as her admiration for his youthful heart, he soon started imagining the possibilities. So he began scheming about the ways of seducing her and saw Gautam's absence-at-home as the means into her enticing arms. Thus, assigning outstation duties to Gautam, he began calling on her on the sly.

Though she guessed his motives soon enough, she was out of depth to handle his trespasses. That only emboldened the boss and thus he began to court her in earnest. As his ardency increased, Sneha was seized by her impulse to show him the door. But on second thoughts it occurred to her that if snubbed, he might take it out upon Gautam. And were she to take her man into confidence, he might take his boss to task. Either way, she feared that it would hurt Gautam's career and her own future not to speak of shattering her parental hopes. It was not lost on her either that his visits might send wrong signals to the neighbors making their way to Gautam's ears in the end. Confounded thus, she was immobilized by her predicament.

But the seducer, mistaking her stance as a veil of soft resistance, waited for an appropriate moment to unmask her charms. When he ambushed her in the end, she raised an alarm that ensured his retreat. Fearing his misadventure was sure to hurt his promising career and so as to long distance himself from the scandal, the boss pulled all strings to get Gautam transferred to New Delhi. Outraged though at his boss's perfidy, Gautam felt the development could be a blessing in disguise for Delhi would provide better opportunities for his development. Above all, he was gratified by his wife's chastity and felt he was doubly blessed for that.

Chapter 11

Bellows of Delhi

But, once in Delhi, the Gautams felt like fish out of water. The smell of the place, full of airs put on by all and sundry put them off. While the superciliousness of the educated irked them, the arrogant ignorance of the rest puzzled them. The intellectual apathy of the Delhi-*wallahs* that tended to collage all the South Indians as *Madrases* irritated them. The bigotry of the cow belt characters in equating the Indianness with Hindi-speaking hurt their own sense of belonging. They were nonplussed at the naivety of the North Indian milieu that assumed, south of the Vindhyas it was dark skin all the way.

The North Indian disbelief that Sneha could be a *Madrasesee* for her rosy skin, nevertheless, catered to their vanity. But, the prevailing impression created by the Northern tourists that the *Madraseses* go about barefoot scandalized them no end. Ironically, the left-handed compliment that *Madraseses* were a religious lot made the Gautams feel apologetic about the lack of their religiousness.

In due course, the flip side of New Delhi greatly impressed as well as influenced them. While Gautam was bowled over by Delhi's tailors, seeing women in sleeveless blouses, Sneha felt as though she wore a veil. Thus, they both lost no time in adapting themselves, he by acquiring a new wardrobe and she by shedding the sleeves.

Yet their stammering Hindi remained a handicap to feel at home in the city that their destiny brought them to. So as to overcome the handicap, they set out to master Hindi, underscored with an impeccable accent. And in time, they began to articulate themselves in Hindi with certain finesse even. It was only time before they even began to thump the Hindi chauvinists in their own tongue with the quip that the books that really mattered in their language were Tulasidas' *Ramayana* and the Railway Guide.

But, it was Delhi's cultural ethos that troubled them to start with. Accustomed as they were to subtle shades, the so-called show that ruled Delhi's ethos appeared gaudy to their eyes. The excessive formality of the Northern culture that contrasted with their own informal South Indian manners perplexed them. And the elaborate hospitality of the Delhi folks made them feel foreign in their own capital. Besides, the artificial endearment in Delhi's social interaction embarrassed them for their inability to imbibe the same. What was worse, the chitchat that invariably centered on the absentees offended their sensibility nurtured by the concept of confidentiality. On the other hand, the social nicety of reciprocity hampered them for want of paraphernalia to entertain in return.

Above all, it was the Delhi-*wallahs*' compulsive need for competitive exhibitionism that confounded them the most. Insensibly, they began feeling small in the drawing rooms of others as well as in their own. As guests, they were wont to be on guard sipping tea in the carpeted drawing rooms lest they should spoil the sofas. But, whenever someone dropped in, they squirmed in their steel foldable chairs, all the while apologizing for the discomfiture caused for want of appropriate furniture. Thus, to begin with, in New Delhi's social setting, the Gautams remained out of depth. And insensibly, the consciousness of their material lacking sunk into their psyche to distort their material orientation.

Even as the attractions of Delhi seduced them, the possibilities of success fired their imagination. As they saw the glamour that status gave to the couples and the aura riches provided to the families, their own deprivation for the lack of both became all the more acute. Thus, in time, their post-marital equanimity gave way to materialistic fatigue that opened up their old wounds besides causing some new sores.

As Sneha's suppressed desires began to seek outlets in none too subtle ways, Gautam could see the unsavory direction in which their life might head. When he pictured the pitfalls in the path of a desirable woman with a frustrated mind-set, he was alarmed at the prospect of being cuckolded. And to avert such a disaster, he contemplated upon course correction. It was in that process he came to dust his old agenda of revenge through riches.

When he applied his mind to the task on hand, he saw some scope to squeeze the contractors who were known to cut corners. But, he reckoned that after a lifelong haul, bribe money might take him some middle class distance and no farther. And what if a disgruntled contractor got him trapped with the grease and all on his palms? Well, that would only jeopardize his job besides blackening his face. Even to get out of the mess, one needed big money, and small bribes wouldn't get that. Oh, what dichotomy money is! How stupid it was to risk his career for such low stakes. If he were honest at least, he would still have a badge of honor to wear, however dull it might be. After all, he thought, it's some identity for all that.

But, where else could the righteous path lead one but towards an anonymous end, that too after a lifelong trudge? And status was not about collecting peanuts until one retired into the oblivion. As for status, it was not an incremental accretion to the bank account brought about by thrift. Well, it was a short cut that could catapult man into the status zone. If one were incapable of tricking the riches his way, he concluded, it would be better to stay the honest course. At least, that wouldn't entail one to cheapen himself. Besides won't that help one retain his peace of mind? Otherwise, it could be a case of falling between two stools. So, he saw the need of pulling a rabbit out of a hat, as it were.

Thus, for clues of success he focused himself on the ways of life. Soon, he realized that the Delhi-wallahs loved themselves and more so their possessions. In Delhi, for man, and none the less for woman, self-interest seemed to manifest itself in acquisition without satiation. He felt material narcissism was a human aberration occasioned by a craving for identity. It was his compelling need to cut a figure for himself that drove one to provide for his family and cater to his friends.

The aberration of self-love was but his accentuated sense of self-identity. Oh, how self-love becomes man's second nature that gives him the false sense of self-sacrifice? Nothing illustrated this phenomenon more than man's propensity to turn patriotic in times of war. It's another matter that his corrupt ways were but inimical to his country's interests, all the while.

Hence, man's inherent greed and imbibed altruism were but the crude and polished sides of the coin of his self-love. But he would be accommodative only when his greed became counterproductive. Thus, the so-called reasonable man was but a product of human cunning than any Samaritan feeling. Oh, what a misnomer the reasonable man is!

Given the human nature, Gautam reckoned, man was wont to cultivate those relationships that were perceived as beneficial to him. What's more, he would nurture them, even in the absence of reciprocity! Why not, as it could be a paying proposition in times to come. And the successful would suffer the climbers for they needed people to hear their exploits and sing their praises! Well, would they be naive not to know that they needed to help a little to retain the retinue?

It was imperative for him to appropriately position himself to get into the inner circles of the potential benefactors. If only man were to maneuver his way into high circles, it was only time before his acquaintances brought in value addition on the social plane. It was only time before his contacts would have laid the stepping-stones of success for one to touch the sky of opportunities. Why, was it not said that a man was as good as his contacts?

When Gautam turned his mental microscope on the system at work in the corridors of power, it didn't take him long to realize that it's the bureaucratic tail all the way to the ministerial chambers. But still, the politicians and the bureaucrats alike feared the loss of power and pelf, the former owing to the vicissitudes of politics and the latter for the proclivities of the politicians. So the existing tended to remain cohorts in self-aggrandizement as long as it lasted. But, the petty jealousies and the little frustrations that lurk beneath the surface of the successful made them wary of each other's motives.

Moreover, as slander became the below-the-belt weapon to hurt the opponents, everyone turned as obsessive with the rumor mills as Don Quixote was of the windmills. As all came to develop a fear for scandal, so it dawned on Gautam that in the insecurities of the powerful lay the bellows of Delhi to fan his success.

Chapter 12

Dicing with Life

It was the fears of the powers that be that gave Gautam the idea of manipulating them for furthering his personal growth and to develop the mechanism of success he resorted to the SWOT analysis.

Didn't he have a dashing demeanor with a handsome look and a progressive outlook? His pushy nature and easy manner would come in handy too. Moreover, didn't he imbibe the drive to succeed? Wouldn't his capacity for hard work sustain his drive? Why, they were all his unquestionable strengths, which form the core values to make it big in the make-believe world. Convinced about the ammunition he had to back his ambition, he tried to picture his weaknesses.

Where was the awe-inspiring drawing room to dazzle the guests? Wouldn't his two-wheeler prove to be a handicap to handle the prospects? How was he to entertain the officials in posh hotels and star resorts to announce his arrival? Even if he were to brazen that out, why should anyone take him seriously? Well, can there ever be a take off without a start-up fund? But, isn't it equally true that the first million one made would make other millions for him? As one would lead to the other, he thought he should work on the drawing room first.

The promising could be wine and dine at home itself with Sneha providing the fillip with her sex appeal and all. Surely, her strengths should open up the windows of opportunity. After all, men loved the company of desirable women! What with her allure wouldn't she mesmerize any? Besides, what a delightful conversationalist she was! Why, she could interest even the indifferent and outsmart the smartest? And wouldn't the male proclivity to go to any lengths to help beautiful women help? In aiding women how men felt they were favored indeed! If only Sneha could handle men with care, they would have many an influential hand at hand. Well, she could be the passport to success what with the ingratiating stamping our visa to wealth.

But before laying his hands on the levers of success, he wanted to check with the operational manual. And as he foresaw the features of the breakdowns, he realized it could be a hazardous venture after all. Wouldn't Sneha's self-induced proximity with men pose a peril? What if she was pushed into the vortex of promiscuity? And wouldn't she develop her own agenda then! What could stop her from ditching him to hitch to a successful man? If that were to happen, where that would lead him to? Instead of coming up trumps, he would only find himself in the dumps. And in the high stakes game of life that would leave him at the bottom of the pack, wouldn't it?

Thus, he thought it was like tempting the devil itself, with dreadful consequences to boot. Dampened by his self-doubts, when he was inclined for the status quo, he realized it couldn't be smooth sailing that way either. Well, having himself sowed the seeds of ambition in her, didn't he make her vulnerable, after all? Were he to stay put playing safe, wouldn't the mobility of life stir up her frustrations? Why, that would surely magnify the lacking of the creature comforts in her mindset. And wouldn't her hurt pave the way for his ruinous end? With him in no position to fulfill her fancies, wouldn't she turn to someone who had the means to jaunt with her in the make-believe world? Wouldn't her infidelity drift them apart inexorably? Thus, for Gautam, the probable outcome seemed no different, either way. Why didn't he envisage all this when he preached her the sermons of success all along?

As he felt distressed about the realities of his life, he turned to philosophy for solace. He thought it was the soulless heart and not the ambitious mind that was the bane of the world. Why, blame the achievers who suborn their personal good to further a social purpose. If not for such, would have life crossed the stone age though need might have brought man to that stage!

On the contrary, what was corruption but the manifestation of human meanness? If only the mean were made to pay the price, man would have fallen in line well before bribe became the creed. Well, the world was too meek to fight the mean to usher in equitable opportunities. But, would that be a solace for his failure? At that, he felt that the choice for him was to either fight for his place or to perish in frustration. Prepared to perish, he resolved to fight.

'How am I to fight?' he thought endlessly. 'And where am I to begin?'

He realized that one could cut a diamond only with a diamond, and that implied his taking to corrupt ways. But, as his conscience questioned him, he cajoled it with the proposition of ends justifying the means. At last, he made up his mind to try to checkmate success on the chessboard of life. When Sneha went to her parents for her confinement, he planned his gambit in the corridors of power.

Chapter 13

Spidering Spadework

In his quest for success, Gautam had realized that one needs either to be a pioneer or propped up by a godfather to make it big in life. And in the democratic India who would be better godfather than a senior minister? Thus, Gautam thought of pioneering means to win over a minister.

Realizing that Mohan Kumar Mishra's relatives were a favored lot at the department, Gautam lost no time in cracking the whip on them. When they tried to bribe their way out, he trumped them with the honesty card. Finding him a hindrance, the irked approached their benefactor for relief. When Mishra's P.A telephoned him, Gautam made a tactical retreat even as he intensified his search for the tell-tale evidences of the ministerial misdeeds, old and new, in the departmental files.

Having come across many a ministerial omission and secretarial commission, he made a dossier of them all, and waited for the opportune moment. When the news of the cabinet reshuffle was thick in the air, Gautam thought his time had come. It's the irony of a democracy in that though the politicians strive to avoid scandals; those in power often get embroiled in them, that too at inopportune moments. It is thus, on the eve of the cabinet reshuffle, the politician is known to fear his own shadow.

Using Mishra's men whom he had soft-pedaled all along, Gautam managed a one-to-one meeting at the ministerial bungalow. Ingratiating himself with Mishra, he said he felt it was his duty not to let the communists spoil the developmental works that were after the minister's heart. Placing the dossier before the minister, he said he had gathered the information at the behest of his boss who was a known Commie. He made out as if his boss was pressing him to fish out the ministerial wrongdoings. He said he suspected that the dossier was meant for the Marxists to raise hell in the well of the house. Instead of passing on that damning information to his boss, he said, he thought it fit to appraise the minister about the goings on in his own department. Alarmed at what he saw in the dossier, Mishra ordered the immediate transfer of the hapless boss to the Andamans.

On the other hand, privy as he was to Gautam's honesty, he was impressed with his political proclivities as well. And a gratified Mishra promised Gautam to take him on his personal staff on deputation. Besides, having taken a liking for him, and with Gautam having won his trust, Mishra felt like opening up to him. So he hinted to Gautam in a confidential tone that he was tipped to take over the prized commerce ministry. So, said the aspirant that Gautam could look forward to a promising career in bureaucracy.

Though Gautam was elated at the opening up of the window to his success, soon enough, he began to writhe with the pangs of guilt for having implicated his innocent boss who was nice to him. However, he reconciled himself to the cynical adage, that in life one could rise only by stepping on others' backs.

As Sneha's delivery time neared, Gautam was seized by affection and craved to be with her. Thus, keeping his own expectations of the 'breakthrough' on hold, he rushed to her with the premonition that he would father a son after all. Seeing her serene in spite of her excitement, he could recognize the difference between the prospects of fulfillment and the anxieties of ambition. And when she delivered their son on the dot, she experienced a maternal joy and he rejoiced in paternal pride. In his state of excitement, he felt as though he were immobile and thus found himself rooted to his wife and son. Insensibly, he felt satiated with the feeling of

having reached his destination. In spite of the promise Mishra's word held, Gautam thought he had no more to wish for in life.

He felt that he would be better off as a salaried engineer with a steady income than venturing into the unknown arena that might jeopardize his son's future. It was in that frame of mind that he shared his sense of contentment with her. But, obsessed as she was with the poor cousin complex, she was not psychologically shaped to share his philosophy. She felt that parenthood placed an onus on them to ensure that their son would not suffer the indignities of life because of their lacking. And her conviction to succeed overwhelmed his rationale of contentment. And so, he found himself back in the mental overdrive to excel in life.

After Suresh's *barasala* that coincided with Mishra's elevation as the Minister of Commerce, Gautam reached the capital with great expectations. When he called on Mishra to congratulate him, the latter reiterated his promise but counseled patience for the promised posting. But the hoped for call from Mishra never came, making Gautam realize that he was flattered only to be deceived. Curbing his instinct to create a scandal with the dossier, he analyzed the alternative routes to reach the cherished post.

He could remind Mishra about his promise but that might only set him on the garden path of procrastination. And the tactic of blackmail might as well boomerang if Mishra were to choose to bump him off with some hired hand. Thus, having realized that neither pleas nor threats would help, he thought the only way to bring Mishra around was to make him insecure afresh. So, he decided to manipulate the fourth estate to maneuver his way onto the ministerial bandwagon.

Having hit upon the strategy, Gautam thought about the logistics. He began to scan all the dailies at the Delhi Public Library to fathom their editorial proclivities. Feeling the zeal of *The Indian Express* to expose the ministerial misdeeds than any other, he turned the searchlight on its investigative journalists. After being acquainted with some of them, he chose Bibhas Sen to play his game. Interesting Sen with his table talk and cultivating him in bars and restaurants, Gautam made himself much sought after by him.

Choosing the moment, Gautam dropped enough hints to Sen that he knew Mishra had a great deal to hide from public view. Sensing a scoop, the journalist in Sen was eager for the script to further his clout. But Gautam insisted that he would confide in Sen only after the minister got a hint about the impending disclosure. And to win over the wary journalist, Gautam maintained that only from the minister's reaction could Sen calibrate the scandal to the hilt. Though not convinced with Gautam's argument, for the lack of any alternative, Sen went along to hint to Mishra's media mole about the impending disaster.

The ministerial response to the 'exposé on the verge' was on the expected lines. It awoke him from his memory lapse and he remembered about Gautam and the dossier. Fearing the hand of the exiled official behind the impending damnation he thought of Gautam to try to avert the same. Mishra reckoned that if he failed to bring Gautam around, it might signal the end of his own political career. Besides, with his unquestionable intelligence and for the lack of political ambition, he felt that Gautam could prove to be an asset to him in the long run.

Thus, having decided to take Gautam under his wings to cover his flanks, Mishra sent for him and saw to it that he joined his staff forthwith. Gautam, for his part, lifted the incriminating documents as a parting kick to his humdrum living. While the investigative journalist rued his premature disclosure, the grateful politician saw the genre of loyalty in Gautam. Finding Gautam hard pressed for money, Mishra took it upon himself to enhance his status with the slush funds at his disposal. Beholden as he was to Mishra, Gautam called the ministerial bidding and soon became his trusted lieutenant.

When Sneha returned with the three-month-old Suresh, Gautam was on hand to receive them at the New Delhi Railway Station. What with her fullness accentuating her curviness more than ever, he was moved like an adolescent who spies a desirable woman. Oh, how the fulfilled feeling of motherhood flower woman's body blossoming the essence of womanliness? Finding her at her seductive best, Gautam couldn't take his eyes off her for long.

When he led her to their brand new Fiat, it was her turn to stare at him in wonderment. As he opened the front door for her, she stepped into the car as if she were crossing the threshold of deprivation. And to commemorate the gratuitous moment, even as she hugged him in exhilaration, he clasped her endearingly. Soon, a gratified Gautam pressed the pedal as though to take her on the fast track of life. Even as her thoughts went back to Karol Bagh, he drove her towards South Extension. It was a dream ride that she dared not even desire.

When he led her into a well-furnished apartment, she had a feeling of straying into the suite of a star hotel. But, as he opened his arms in all eagerness, she sank into his chest in ecstasy. While their long separation pushed his ardor to the frontier, her receptivity led his eroticism to the horizon. As the sensuous setting induced romanticism in their union, her euphoric feeling provided the cutting edge to his lovemaking. Lying fulfilled in his arms, she felt gratified for being in her Sweet Home, and felt sweet about him. Content though she was at having got a foothold on the dreamland, yet he seemed to visualize an expedition to the zenith itself.

Thus, in his quest to cross the borders of mediocrity and push for the frontiers of eminence, he induced her to set up Sneha Travels. He reckoned that her considerable attributes and the emerging tourism would chart the venture on a smooth course. Encouraged thus, she set out to take the travel agency on the fast track, and was on the target straight away. As the commissions from the Airlines came in handy, she opened up her vistas to conducted tours for foreign tourists. Managing her work ably and motivating the staff admirably, she was truly on the Maslow's ladder of self-actualization.

As she ensconced herself firmly in the world of travel, Gautam was busy networking in the corridors of power. He poured over various Acts that were in force for grasping the loopholes in the import and export laws. Besides, he strived to grope his way into the *jantar mantar* of officialdom. Moreover, his proximity to Mishra helped him cultivate the bureaucrats and attract the businessmen alike. Having raised his bar of ambition high, he took care not to lower his stature by falling for any graft. But availing his services to assorted characters to facilitate their self-aggrandizement, he managed to worm his way into the influential circles. So, his growing contacts helped increase the clout of Sneha Travels, and that fuelled their engine of ambition. But, in their scheme of things, their son's growing up period didn't find a place on board. It was thus that, Suresh was left behind at ground zero to be groomed by ayahs in shifts.

Chapter 14

Loss to Order

Though the Gautams managed to cross the threshold of middle-class meagerness, their top-drawer lifestyle began to tell upon them. By then, Sneha too had a Fiat of her own to have the thrill of being at the steering. But, as she had to crisscross the city to help Sneha Travels, soon she developed weariness for driving. Insensibly, Gautam too was himself caught in the web of the spidering spadework that he came to build. Thus, he could hardly make it home before midnight. What with Sneha too keeping late hours at her office, their home that came to be admired for its interior decor was reduced as their rest house. Before long, the physical tiredness and their mental fatigue took a collective toll of their sex life. And added to that, their filial fulfillment had to go begging for want of time for their offspring.

Often at bedtime, all this made them wonder whether they had got on to the wrong track of life. As that invariably led them to reminisce over their Sagar days, they were wont to think what a happy couple they were then. It was thus, they were at a loss to realize how their ambition had undone them after all! And that made them view their materialistic abundance with a sense of vacuity for want of emotional fulfillment. They were certain their true happiness lay in savoring their mutual admiration and not in gloating over the public adulation. Overwhelmed, they were wont to feel it was time they quit the rat race and settle down for a bout of domestic bliss. But their euphoric resolve of love invariably lost out to the materialistic allure of the world. Thus, bogged down by their rigmarole, they failed to imagine life in any other way than the way they were used to by then and thus they kept the course to acquire wealth. And so they began to lead their life robot-like to scale ever new social heights.

It seems contentment is a state of mind and ambition the urge to succeed. If not, why should the feeling of contentment insulate man from being ambitious? After all, isn't the sense of contentment all about the realization of materialistic insignificance? Why, it signifies the irrelevance of the self itself? On the contrary, won't ambition exemplify man's craving for his social relevance through every conceivable means? Given the collective irrelevance of man in the universality of being, what is the individual significance existentialism advocates?

But the Gautams were all too psyched up by the past of their social plight to come out of the glamorous ditch they had got into. And yet, realizing that the drudgery of the toil was self-defeating, they delved into easy ways for a cozy life. Sneha felt it was time that Gautam began to snare fortune into the spidering network he had so painstakingly woven. And by then, Gautam came to realize that the real bucks lay in lobbying for the defense deals. But, he was aware that the hurdle to cross to set up shop was higher by a mile. All the same, egged on by Sneha, he reviewed the feasibility report prepared way back, which he had tucked away in a corner of his mind.

It was to turn a lobbyist for some armament giant of the West, and to put in place a facilitating firm for that. Why, it had to be a sleek office in a posh locality. How else could one exhibit his credentials and which firm worth its bullet would deal with an entity in some backstreet? Well, the show had to be manned by ex-bureaucrats for it to be taken seriously in the South Block. And all this entailed a great deal of investment, and raising funds was not an easy proposition. Besides, the repayment schedules could choke the supply lines to the existing comfort levels.

Above all, what if the speculative venture wouldn't take off after all! What's the guarantee that an ex-secretary could be a talisman for his success? It's not the same thing as being in the seat of power, isn't it? Were he to fail, filing the I.P. would be the only recourse left for him. Wouldn't that make him a parasite on Sneha's earning? An unwelcome development, anyway one looked at it, wasn't it? Wouldn't that signal the end of the road, besides blackening the face?

But, yet, how could he call it quits well before venturing into any? Wouldn't that lead to a life of frustration? Better to have tried and failed than not to have tried at all, after all that was the conventional wisdom. What if he failed leading to his fall? But what were the alternatives? Anyway, a thrifty life of penny saving wouldn't do either, as it would only turn pound foolish in the end, wouldn't it? The big buck was the key but where would that come from? How was he to surmount the odds and cross the hurdles to pull it off in a big way?

Gautam began weighing the available options all again. For a start, he thought he could manage the manufacturing license for some promising product. After all, Mishra should not be averse to helping him as a one-time favor, and the bureaucracy too could be expected to pitch in for him. In turn he could transfer the license for a gain. Well, in the permit regimen there was a hefty premium on juicy projects. Enthused thus, he scanned the industrial arena for potential products begging for import substitution.

After short listing a few, he set his heart on sulubuloxine that needed only a modest investment. And when he figured out the return on investment, he was dumbfounded at the astronomical figures. In due course, having the license on Sneha's hand, he paraded it in the marketplace. Even as the solicitations became overwhelming, the demand for the product began soaring to the skies. That left him wondering whether it was a good idea to give away a golden goose for whatever price. Besides, he had seen to it that sulubuloxine would be out of bounds for any till he had enough of it.

Computing the long-term benefits of the license, Gautam thought of a tie-up with a business house with the license as his share of the capital. But then, Global Facilitators, the grandiose lobbying firm of his dreams, would be a non-starter, after all. So he racked his brains as to how to retain his lien on the license and yet make his 'deals facilitating' dream a reality.

It was at that juncture at a stag party, that he met Ranjit Palit, the Branch Manager of the Oriental Fire and General Insurance Company. When he was reasonably high, Palit came to articulate the genesis of the arson that plagued the general insurance business. With the common denominator being utmost good faith, he articulated that insuring others' properties

was like entrusting one's wife to another's safe keeping. While misplaced trust in the former could occasion a fraudulent claim, in case of the latter, it might lead to an alien paternity. Thus, the breach of warranty in both would leave behind the unwanted in the end.

Blaming it all upon the Loss Assessors, Palit reserved his choicest expletives for them all. He thought they were but a bunch of self-serving nincompoops with weak moral fibers. They were all superficial to the core sorely lacking the needed skills to separate the wheat from the chaff. Wouldn't that let the bluffing claimants to take this mindless lot for a smooth ride of exaggeration? And lazy as they were with their assignments, they were all alacrity when it came to criticizing their colleagues' work.

What was worse, he averred, with right inducements, they could be easily made to look the other way, even in the case of apparently untenable claims. With such Loss Assessors around, it was little wonder that the insurers might go under one day. As though to appear balanced, even after consuming a pint, Palit conceded to the presence of black sheep on the underwriting side of the fence as well. It was such who form a 'nexus of loot' with the insured and the Loss Assessors, he concluded.

As Palit's lament opened up new vistas to his goal, Gautam saw a chance opening. What with the industrial license already in hand, he wondered whether he could manage a 'loss to order' for Palit's Company. With the hope of redressing his economic distress with the insurer's largesse, Gautam began befriending the by then inebriated Palit. And slowly but surely, Gautam ingratiated himself with Palit with an eye on arson monies. The feedback he got about the Loss Assessors confirmed Palit's poor opinion about them. And that seemed a good omen to him.

Conditioned as he was for not jumping at conclusions, Gautam wondered what, if by the law of averages, an oddball of a Loss Assessor turned up to call his bluff? Were that to happen, the tongues of fire the arson occasioned would all but consume his grand passion. And the money spent to stage-manage the show would go up in smoke, without a trace at that. Well, if he were to take the plunge, his claim should seem genuine even to the eyes of the most suspicious character.

Having prepared the road map to arson with ingenuity, Gautam surveyed it to see for possible pitfalls on the way. Though it seemed *pucca* all the way, just the same, he blueprinted the layout to detect design defects, if any. Finding none and noting that all macro and micro factors were featured into the coupe de fraud, he felt cocky and took the plunge.

It was thus, Ocean Organics, the proprietary firm floated by Sneha, soon came into being. Losing no time, Gautam took a sick chemicals unit at Faridabad on lease. The contract to modify the plant to produce sulubuloxine was awarded to Chemind Builders, the *benami* firm that Gautam himself floated. And that included raising the compound wall to eight feet height. So as to put the Ocean on the right side of the insurance claim, Chemind would exorbitantly bill the 250 TPY amalgamated unit.

Gautam went on a shopping spree for the scrapped chemical equipment and accessories in the junk markets of Ahmedabad and Bombay. In time, he managed to transfer them in their truckloads to the Ocean's Faridabad site. As a decoy for the falsity, and to cover up the tracks, Chemind arranged accommodative bills for steel plates and pipes from Agarwala Traders, New Delhi. With the connivance of a transport operator, Consignment Notes were put in place for the fictitious transfer of Agarwala's steel materials. As a foolproof measure, the MB of Chemind at the Ocean's plant carried those quantities to the last kilogram. In a similar way all other plant accessories made their fictitious entry into the Ocean's Assets Register.

As the local fitters were bound to raise their eyebrows, Gautam took no chances when it came to the wagging of tongues. So, he brought a gang of loyal Keralites from the backyards of Nagarjunasagar. At length, 'the scrap equipment' was transformed into 'a junk plant' of the Ocean Organics. All it took then to provide a facade to the 'state of the art' chemical plant was a generous coat of blue enamel that smelled fresh as well. When, in the end, as he looked at the completed unit, unable to believe his own eyes, Gautam was greatly pleased with himself. However, he sent away the Kerala gang and hired some semi-literates from Madurai to man the Ocean's idle unit.

While the work was in progress at Faridabad, Gautam struck a secret deal with Atlantic Chemicals, the major import-export dealer in Bombay, for turning Ocean Organics into a joint venture company by the next financial year. As a favor to the future partner, Atlantic Chemicals signed an accommodative buy back agreement with Ocean Organics. The deal entailed Ocean Organics to receive raw materials from Atlantic Chemicals for producing sulubuloxine exclusively for the latter. And to raise the worth of the finished goods in Ocean's Stock Register, an exorbitant buy back price was 'mutually agreed'. It was also agreed that Ocean Organics would arrange, at their own cost and risk, for the fire insurance on the material 'held in trust' by them. Thus, when all was in place, Gautam sought and obtained the Fire Policy certificate from Palit's Branch Office to cover allied risks at Ocean Organics.

Then he bided his time to cross the sphere of the proximate loss to avoid the insurer's stricter scrutiny and the consequent delay in the claim settlement. In the meantime, he contrived the material transfer between Ocean and Atlantic 'on paper' backed by dubious C.Ns of the co-opted goods carrier. Moreover, in order to accord legitimacy to the receivables and the dispatches, he obtained, again from Palit's office, a marine cover for those fictitious transactions. All said and done, the 'loss to order' needed fodder to sustain fire. So at throw-away prices he acquired considerable quantities of contaminated chemicals from the salvage buyers in Bombay and Ahmedabad for use at Faridabad.

Further, to legitimize Ocean's production records, Atlantic issued 'cheques of trust' for the job work charges that Ocean encashed in Punjab National Bank. And a proxy muster was too put in place at Ocean Organics. Just in case, the Loss Assessor, likely to come from Bombay, chose to interact at the lower levels, Gautam reckoned that the men from Madurai would erect the language barrier. When all seemed well, he found a hitch. The crucial excise record that the Loss Assessor was bound to scrutinize was nowhere in the picture. But given his clout in the government, it was no big deal for him to cook up one, and what was more, get it authenticated by the Inspector.

In the end, as Gautam saw it, there was still a big hurdle to cross for his leap into the big league. Oh, the success of the enterprise hinged upon the late arrival of Fire Tenders, wasn't it? After all, all those truckloads of contaminated chemicals would surely need time to destruct the unit beyond recognition. What if the Fire Brigade arrived on call? Wouldn't that lead to a premature dousing, exposing the dubious nature of the claim?

No way should the Fire Service make its way till all was burnt to the bone. But, the Oriental wouldn't take the Ocean's delayed call to the Fire Station kindly either. Besides, wouldn't it open the Pandora's Box? So, Gautam reckoned that the *muhurat* for the engagement should coincide with the preoccupation of the Fire Brigade with some major fire elsewhere. And with discreet networking, Gautam planted a mole in the Faridabad Fire Station to get wind of the opportune moment.

After what looked like an eternity for Gautam, the mole soon enough showed him the green light. Losing no time, Gautam pressed the button for the trusted aides to set the Ocean ablaze. While Sneha was dialing to Palit to prefer a two million-rupees fire claim on the Oriental Fire and General Insurance Company, Gautam rushed to the site of arson to have a clear picture of the destruction. As expected, the factory was gutted by the time he reached the site, and the Fire Tender came much later. At the end of it all when Gautam returned home a pleased man, Sneha welcomed him with all conspiratorial camaraderie..

At the receiving end though, the Oriental went into a huddle to select a surveyor-cum-loss assessor for the claim on hand. As the needle of the managerial favor tilted towards Suman Salgaokar, the senior from Bombay, he was asked to rush to New Delhi by the first available flight to handle the large loss.

The next morning, Gautam, with Palit in tow, was on hand at the Palam to receive Suman Salgaokar, the assigned loss assessor. On their way to Faridabad in Gautam's Fiat, Salgaokar boasted about his exploits in the arena of large losses. Having got carried away in the end, he behaved as if the insurers should be beholden to him for his having accepted the assignment. Watching the surveyor all through, Gautam, who saw his hollowness, felt nervous just the same.

Gracing the charred remains of Ocean Organics that presented the sight of a total loss, the surveyor in Salgaokar fell at ease for that involved not much of an effort for the fat remuneration in waiting. Perambulating the premises with an air of self-importance, he stopped intermittently giving his views about the loss with the air of a know-all.

Thus, as Salgaokar's big survey, hastened by his need to catch the return flight, ended soon enough, Gautam was afloat in his own daydreams. Palit, for his part, didn't open his mouth as if it were a sacrilege to air an opinion before the omnipotent surveyor. Besides, he was afraid that any utterance from him other than a sympathetic word could be misconstrued as callousness by the valued client. Driving them back to the city, Gautam got the impression that Salgaokar was more concerned about his survey fee in the offing than at applying his mind to the claim on hand.

As the flight was overly delayed, Palit excused himself, leaving Salgaokar with the Gautams, as by then Sneha had joined them at the Palam. Gautam lost no time in inducing the Surveyor to shop around a little at Connaught Circus. Strolling in the mall, Salgaokar was truly mesmerized by Sneha's graciousness and promised to accord top priority to her claim. What's more, to impress her further, he goaded Gautam to forward the papers and the 'photographs of waste' post-haste.

Shortly thereafter, though Gautam felt happy seeing Salgaokar's back, all the same, he was disappointed at the paradox of the anticlimax. Oh, how he had all along wished that the loss assessor had quizzed his mastermind! However, his ingenuity got him a pat from Palit for the excellent documentation he provided for the smooth claim processing at their end. Thus, the claim docket went butter smooth from one stiff hand to the other all the way to the Board Room.

All said and done, Gautam couldn't believe his eyes when the CMD of the Oriental Fire and General Insurance Company personally handed over that hefty cheque to Sneha as the full and final settlement of Ocean Organics' claim preferred on them. To cap it all, the insurers photographed the occasion as publicity material to buttress their marketing effort. And that sent Sneha to the top of the world.

As the magnitude of their fortune began to sink in, the Gautams could not have a wink of a sleep that night. When in the end, Sneha thought aloud about the righteousness of their actions, Gautam philosophized that the ends often justified the means. Besides, where was the scope for qualms when the money in question was public money? After all, everyone was having a dig in at it, depending on their access to it.

Though Sneha all along shared his dreams to use the anticipated windfall to provide wings to his wheeling dealing, having had the money on hand, she had second thoughts. She felt it wise to rest on the laurels instead of hoping for miracles every time. As a way of sustained growth and as a means of making big in the end, she advocated branching out Sneha Travels to all the major cities. But, having set his heart on broking billion dollar deals, Gautam would have none of that. Failing to wean him away from the idea of Global Facilitators, hoping for the best, she gave in finally.

Gautam toyed with the idea to cede the license of Ocean Organics for a price as Agarwala Chemicals had rescinded on the MOU in the meantime. He made it clear to them by then that they had to run the show all by themselves for he saw his hands would be full with Global Facilitators. Given their trading background, Agarwala Chemicals had developed cold feet to run an industrial unit, that too in far off Faridabad. Besides, the superstitious inhibition about the fire mishap got the better of their commercial judgment. But, Sneha had other ideas. She wanted it to be leased out to someone who was prepared to build and operate the unit. For that, Gautam, though reluctantly, facilitated a long-term lease agreement with the Dalmias whereby Sneha retained her interest in the firm.

It was as though the ambitious couple accommodated each other's interests for marital amity but the way they gave allowances to each other's obsessions finally led their union into a state of materialistic coma.

Chapter 15

Daring the Fate

Having catered to Sneha's whims on Ocean Organics, Gautam began to address his fancies about Global Facilitators. Losing no time, he looked around for a couple of soon-to-retire bureaucrats likely to retain their post-retirement influence. And in Mahendra Khanna, the dashing Foreign Secretary, and Sundar Manian, a veteran at the PMO, Gautam found the men who could add value to his venture. Hijacking them as they stepped out of the portals of power, Gautam had put in his papers. Leasing a cozy space at the Connaught Place, he got an exotic touch to its interiors. As though to make his prospective clients feel at home, he hired the pretty Naina Sinha as the receptionist.

With everything in place for the inauguration of Global Facilitators, he sent the designer cards to 'Who is who' in New Delhi. Though Mishra had lost his clout by then, he coaxed him to be the guest of honor, reckoning that the gesture would signal his sense of loyalty for all to see. While Sneha colored the occasion with her charms, Naina added ambiance with her carriage. But it was the grey hairs of Khanna and Manian that gave substance to the aspiring lobbyists.

True to their potential, the ex-bureaucrats began breaking the barriers to facilitate the way for the Global into the arena of lobbying. And to Gautam's gratification, what with the Green Revolution on the cards, dozens of licenses for fertilizer plants were in the offing. While Manian sprang into the South Block for liaising with the concerned ministries, Khanna leveraged the embassy channels to profile the lobbying power of Global Facilitators. Yet in spite of the high caliber canvassing and the focused presentation, Global had no takers from among the front-runners. It was some no-hopers that showed interest for they had nothing to lose, and everything to gain should the new broom sweep well. At that, the grey hair duo ruled that it would be futile to play with a weak suit in a high-stake game. But Gautam saw a rare opportunity on hand. He reckoned that if only they could pull it off for a nonentity against all odds, then that would take Global to the top of the lobbying world.

While Manian felt that betting on an also-ran was not the way to hit the jackpot, Gautam thought the real lobbying was all about making a winner out of the ordinary. Khanna, for his part, said he was curious to see whether fortune favors the brave against all odds. But, when Gautam tended to lean towards the Dutch Kassenbouw, he was quick to point out that as the Dutch had no diplomatic clout worth the name in New Delhi, Global would be left with the Kassenbouw cross to carry all by itself. Manian, on the other hand, felt any 'me too' player from the US might stand a better chance for all their effort.

However, backed by his conviction and seemingly prompted by destiny, Gautam went ahead and signed the deal with Kassenbouw for its perceived technical strengths. But, Khanna and Manian felt it was but a desperate gamble by someone who was in a hurry to make a killing. Yet, in Gautam's enthusiasm to try to make the impossible possible, they could see a long innings for them both. So to keep Global afloat, they began pumping through their every vein to push a couple of contracts into Kassenbouw's lap.

When it was time for the submission of the technical bids, Gautam persuaded Kassenbouw to insert a novel counter-wailing guarantee for the production delays due to technical snags from design defects. The Dutch went with Gautam for the potential 'value addition' of the guarantee clause to their tender knowing that it was a risk-free proposition. After all, theirs was a time-tested process. So Kassenbouw offered to undertake to make good any loss of production in quantitative terms for such period of the downtime.

Armed with this safety net, Gautam goaded his aides to push Global up the rarefied zones of decision making for bringing the Dutch Kassenbouw upfront. But, the triumvirate faced encounters of unexpected kind in the very corridors of power they once straddled like colossuses. Notwithstanding their earlier bonhomie, the labyrinthine bureaucracy was eager to be greased at every turn to smoothen the Kassenbouw passage. Moreover, the Dutch didn't venture out of their shores for sharing the promotional burden to push their own case. Thus it fell upon Gautam to meet the ever-increasing expenditure from his own resources.

Whatever, at the end of the red tape, Global could find a place for the Dutch in the short list of three approved technologies for the projects on the anvil. But, Gautam's euphoria was tampered by the fact that it took two long years, and more than half his capital, to reach that tentative stage. Yet, the realization in the right quarters that he had cut his teeth in the world of lobbying gave him immeasurable satisfaction. And it was with great expectations that Global Facilitators began to nurse the price bid submitted by the Dutch Kassenbouw.

Little did Gautam realize that the game would only become fouler near the goal post. Ever since the contenders were identified, the competition got focused what with the authorities raising their demands for tilting the scales one way or the other. Gautam was truly at his wits' end when the joint-secretary who came to Global's office to bargain for his share of the booty wanted Naina in addition. Though Khanna had all along put a couple of pimps on call to clear the bumps on the way to the short list that the facilitation should be through their doorsteps didn't appeal to Gautam's sensitivities.

But, as Global's life was on the line, Gautam took it upon himself to bring Naina around to remove the impediment. While her anticipated rejection only deepened his dilemma, the reminder from the enamored had put him at odds with himself. As a way out of his predicament, Gautam toyed with the idea of firing Naina and to gratify the craving with a willing replacement. But, though he saw that as a practical way out, the unethical underpinning troubled his conscience.

That night when Sneha wanted to know the cause of his disarray, he took her into confidence about the expediency of dismissing Naina to extricate himself from a tight corner. At that, her assurance that she could accommodate Naina at the Sneha Travels and find a willing receptionist for the Global addressed his anxiety. While he felt troubled still about the ethics of it all, she said she suspected some of the girls working for her were on call though. So, he allowed himself to lull his conscience when she made the arrangements. Thanks to the replacement's voluptuous figure, Gautam could cross the hurdle to push Kassenbouw one notch higher.

As the tenders were pushed up the ladder, so the demand for the classy stuff increased. And that made Sneha an unwitting procuress. Coming to grips with her qualms in time, she developed the knack to induce beauties to keep Global's supply lines fresh and spicy to cater to the high and mighty. Not discounting the efforts of Sneha's girls, Gautam ingratiated himself to the concerned authorities with befitting inducements. Besides, as he took care to cultivate the media as well, Global could manage a favorable press all the while. And that made it easy for the willing in the power corridors to put their weight behind Gautam. Thus, in time, Global Facilitators' prospects inched forward slowly but steadily.

Impressed with the progress he was making on their behalf, the Dutch too started throwing in their weight behind Global to up the ante for Kassenbouw. Lobbying no holds barred, Global Facilitators could soon make their client the front-runner for a couple of contracts. And at the penultimate stage of finalization, Gautam came face to face with the dog-eat-dog syndrome of the wheeling dealing.

Chapter 16

Victims of Deceit

Gautam's gambit sent shock waves across the Atlantic. The US fertilizers major, Continental Chemicals Inc., became jittery over the Dutch breakthrough. They saw in Kassenbouw's entry into the captive Indian market the beginning of the end of their global monopoly. And it seemed ironical to them that an unheard of Global Facilitators should bring about that! So to safeguard their interests, Continental sought to turn the tables on the Dutch. Thus, the US leader abetted their Indian agent to rope in someone from Global to sabotage the Dutch.

Meanwhile, Manian's envious nature ensured that he wouldn't stomach the idea of Gautam being in the 'Who's who' of New Delhi. More so, that it should be a fellow South Indian made it all the more galling to his frustrated mindset. All the same, he was at a loss as how to spoil

Gautam's party by double-crossing Global. It was thus, when approached, he needed no persuasion to play ball with the Continental to stop the upstart of a Gautam in the tracks. Yet, the wily Tamilian did extract his price to turn into a quisling.

Aware that Global was on the verge of clinching the deals for the Dutch, Manian knew it was an uphill task though. After all, with the backing of Raghukul Yadav, the minister who held the key to the party's safe as well, Gautam seemed invincible. So, he realized that to play a spoilsport, he needed to look for the chinks in Gautam's armour. And so to spot Gautam's soft spots, Manian found applying his mind with all its malice. Thus, as jealousy kept his sleep at bay, his cunning had a chance to work overtime.

When Manian saw in Vivek, the son of Raghukul Yadav, the only means block Gautam's race to fortune, he lost no time in plotting Sneha's fall. He knew that though Gautam ingratiated himself with the senior Yadav, he overlooked the junior who came to wield some power in the party as its youth leader. Besides, with the indulgence of his father, he came to wield extra constitutional power as well. With the matter already on the agenda of the Cabinet Committee headed by the senior Yadav, Manian realized he had no time to lose.

So, Manian began turning Vivek against Gautam by first appealing to the brat's vanity by insinuating that Gautam had all along been slighting him being heady with his father's patronage. Seeing the vainglorious youth veering round, Manian worked on his fears as well. He could readily convince Vivek that if Gautam could snatch the Dutch deals behind his back, his own image as a power broker was bound to take a beating.

What with his ego having been hurt and boggled by his future irrelevance, Vivek vowed to stop Gautam in his tracks. Yet, Manian did not want to leave things to the vacillations of Vivek's youth. He knew only too well that hurt egos could be massaged after all. Besides, couldn't the worst of fears be readily addressed to win over the recalcitrant? Committed as he was to Gautam's cause and sensing his son's apathy, the minister would advise Gautam to assuage his brat to ease his way. If humored, so reasoned Manian, Vivek would join the chorus to sing Gautam's tune.

To avert that from ever happening, Manian saw the need to add fuel to the fire to sustain Vivek's heat of an anti-Global campaign. And he knew that nothing hurts any like the sexual hurt to sustain personal animosity. After all, it's the sexual apathy that would build a barrier against rapprochement. Based on the premise, the strategy thought out by Manian was to make Vivek get interested in Gautam's wife, and then to further his craving for her. And Gautam was bound to pour water over the brat's passion for his wife's possession. Manian knew only too well how Gautam adored Sneha. Spurned thus, reckoned Manian, Vivek could be expected to fight until the very end to see Gautam's end.

Convincing Vivek, that in spite of his opposition, his father might still go along with the Global, Manian opened his gambit. Even if Vivek were to block Global that might only hurt Gautam's businesses interests and not redress his slight as such. Would it not be in order for Vivek to extract his pound of Gautam's dear flesh and make him pay for his daring? As pride comes before a fall would not Gautam's pride portend his fall? Was not his wife the source of his pride after all? Why, was there ever a more desirable woman in all of Delhi?

As envisaged by the rogue, the brat fell for the bait and wanted to have a look at the beauty. Gleeful about the development, Manian led an eager Vivek to Sneha Travels as the penultimate act of his crooked plot. Even as Vivek was lost to Sneha's charms, Manian whetted his appetite by stating that she could be had after all. Why, wasn't Gautam known to lease her body whenever it was warranted? As the possibility of her availability enabled Vivek visualize the prospect of her possession, he saw her favors as a quid pro quo for the Kassenbouw contracts.

When Manian conveyed Vivek's demand, Gautam was aghast as expected. Having recovered his wits soon enough, Gautam went to Vivek to sort out the issue. Though Gautam explained the absurdity of the proposition and offered to line up dames by the dozen to choose from, Vivek remained steadfast in his passion for the fancied woman. When Gautam, in exasperation, blamed Vivek for trying to hit below the belt, the latter put it across to him by wanting to know how it was different when he had spared his wife for others before. When Gautam protested

and demanded to know who had spread that canard, Vivek suffered no qualms in naming Manian.

Shocked by his lieutenant's deceit, Gautam explained his position and begged Vivek not to ruin his married life. Hell-bent as he was by then to have Sneha, Vivek sensed his chance and decided to press on regardless. Just the same, considering the nature of the conflict, he thought it fit to hit Gautam with a velvet glove. So he said he was not indecent to covet married women but he was misled into believing that Sneha was available after all. With the possibility of her possession having whetted his appetite, he allowed his fascination for her to develop into a grand passion. He was dying to possess her and came to love her even. Though he understood how hard it was for man to spare his wife, Gautam should also realize that a lover would be no less miserable pining for his beloved's bed.

When in desperation, Gautam tried to divert Vivek's desire to the glamour girls of the tinsel world, the latter made it clear that the barter was for the woman he fancied. Even as Gautam said, what if Sneha would have none of that, Vivek retorted that it was his business to get her around. And to let Gautam know the magnitude of his own misery, Vivek said that he would block Global unless he facilitated his wife's favors. And, as though to drive the final nail into Gautam's married coffin, Vivek said if he failed to have Sneha, courtesy her man, he knew how to have her on his own.

Stung to the quick by Vivek's audacity, while the man in Gautam felt like retorting, the businessman in him sought to humor him even more. And to prevent his wife's fall, Gautam offered to fly down a couple of blondes from Paris for Vivek or the other way round. But, the higher the price Gautam was prepared to pay to keep his wife's chastity intact; all the more it furthered Vivek's resolve to rob her of the same. While Gautam realized that he was up against a brat who would not give up until he had had his way with his wife, seeing him cornered, Vivek sensed he had his prey. All the same, he was apprehensive whether Sneha would play ball, and that dampened him a little. As Gautam rose to leave, Vivek assured him, as though to pin him down, that he would not rest until he had Sneha by hook or by crook.

Once out of his tormentor's sight, Gautam felt an irresistible urge to finish off Manian to avenge himself. Why not he gets that bastard killed? But, on second thoughts, he felt it wise not to make matters worse at that juncture. Well, that would only snowball into a scandal hurting his image and damaging his business. Oh, what hurdle Manian had placed in the way, the son of a bitch! Briefing Raghukul wouldn't help either, as Vivek would prevail upon him in the end. After all, blood was thicker than water, wasn't it? What's worse, the old fox might like to fish further in the troubled waters. It was wise to sort out the issue with Vivek when his passion for Sneha had cooled down.

In that state of hope and despair, Gautam reviewed his position with premonition. With the disbursement of the final installment to the minister, Global's bank balance was on the verge. Were he to stumble at the threshold, Global would go bust making him bankrupt. The air would turn thick with ridicule with 'I told you so' tongues wagging all over. Where would he hide his head then? Wouldn't Sneha too blame him for blowing away that insurance largesse in an irrational enterprise? How could she be faulted for that as she had tried her best to desist him from venturing from the beginning? Wouldn't she then end up disregarding him even? After all, whoever bothered about the failed?

But, the moot point was, would it rest at that? Would it take long for her to be disenchanted with him? And what would follow in its wake? Would a disgruntled woman make a faithful wife? Were she to cuckold him, wouldn't that be a double jeopardy for him? What would be left for him to live after that? If she were to start serving her paramours, what else he would have for the menu than the bullet to swallow? What to do than to hope that Vivek on second thoughts would opt for a white whore or two in Sneha's place?

Shortly thereafter, when Raghukul Yadav advised Gautam to contact his son to clear the decks for the contracts, he knew who held all the aces. When his last ditch attempt failed to persuade Vivek to leave his wife alone, Gautam was left stranded in the fast track of his racing ambition. Plagued by the reality of the present, he pictured the possibilities of the future. Given

his ardency for Sneha, the brat was bound to court her till he succeeded. Of course, he had said the same in so many words, hadn't he?

What about Sneha then? Oh, how she had raised the bar of her ambition? And he had abetted her no less. Were he to fail to lay his hand on the Dutch deals then Global would sink without a trace. Where that would leave him to! Sure, she might give him a role in her office, but what a climb down that would be for him! Wouldn't that make her devalue him sooner than later? Why that would only make her dissatisfied to begin with ending up frustrated in time. Were Vivek to persist, wouldn't she give in then to him? Wouldn't his youthful exuberance attract her in her state of dejection? More so, how long could she resist his overriding passion?

Well, even if she were to resist him, wouldn't the desperate Vivek think in terms of bumping him off to make his way clear to her? Wouldn't his death remove the hurdle of her fidelity? How could he rule out the possibility, after all? Would it be wise to hang on in a crumbling edifice only to perish in the debris? In the end, as resistance seemed foolhardy, Gautam decided to salvage his position by sacrificing his wife's fidelity, all the while cursing Manian's perfidy.

That night, when he placed all the cards before her, Sneha was too confounded to comprehend whether to scoot or carry on. Goaded by Gautam to apply her mind, she thought for long and was candid in her response. She said that while Vivek's proposal was devoid of morality, Gautam's proposition was an affront to her dignity. After all, it was one thing for a woman to take a lover and another for her man to act as a pimp for her. And with her husband turning a pimp, wouldn't she be reduced to a prostitute? So, for her to bed with an unknown character even at his behest would be demeaning. What was the guarantee that her debauchery could be confined to a one-night stand to be put behind in due course? What if Vivek were to insist on an encore every time? Would Gautam be able to put his foot down, at least till the contracts were signed? By then, wouldn't she have crossed the *lakshman rekha* of her fidelity? Who knew, she might find it difficult to imbibe Sita's psyche after all that.

Answering his fears about their future relationship, she said she believed in being faithful to him because she loved him and that he was considerate to her. So, she was sure that his failure by itself wouldn't drive her into another's arms as she valued him as a man and lover as well. At any rate, she wouldn't like to prostitute herself even for his sake. But, should he let his deprivation affect him and thus turn into an awkward individual, then she wouldn't know what the future held in store for her chastity.

Admiring her sense of loyalty, Gautam gnashed his teeth at Manian's deceit. While the prospect of their ruin frightened him, her refusal to fall raised her in his esteem. Thus, having seen the beauty of her soul, he set out to savor the body that held it to the hilt. In his emotivity, he perceived her frame as the temple of his love and paid his obeisance to it through prolonged lovemaking. But, as his new admiration for her came in conflict with his old ambition, he tossed in bed all night. Thus, trying to find a solution to the vexed problem, he veered from one end to another. In the end, having visualized the true magnitude of his loss in either eventuality, he was urged to go after Manian's neck to direct the fatality on his own.

But, soon his sense of history gave him solace as he recalled those who had lost their lives owing to the treachery of the trusted. When it dawned on him that Manian's deceit did not put his head on the block and instead placed the chastity of his wife on the line, he wondered whether fate was considerate or cruel towards him. At length, when he saw the virtue of sailing with the wind than swimming against the current, he felt that his fate had inexorably placed his wife's fidelity on a sticky wicket. Well, for her favor to favor Vivek, he had a premonition that eventually her fate too would extract its price from him. So be it.

Amidst her disturbed sleep, Sneha too applied her mind to his predicament.

'By the way, am I reading too much into the script?' she thought at length. 'Wouldn't a chance rape rob me of my chastity any way? Then, how could a one-night stand with his consent dent my fidelity! Besides, won't it be stupid for us to go back to square one to uphold a questionable virtue nurtured by notion? Anyway, it's up to him to decide. Is that so? No, it's the sanctity of our marriage that's at stake. Once the marital thread that binds woman to her nuptial bed is sapped, won't that tend her to turn loose? If it comes that, won't that damn my character? Moreover, what's the guarantee that my rendezvous with Vivek wouldn't affect my

future relationship with Gautam? After all, all men are possessive about their women. The nagging thought that I enjoyed another man might leave Gautam cold in our marital bed. Who knows, branding me loose, he might even show me the door. Oh, it's too great a risk for me to run for any money.'

Having resolved thus, she sank into a tired sleep only to be confronted by her man at dawn. While Gautam took over from where he had left, she showed him how his proposition would jeopardize her future. When he sought to assuage her fears, she clung on to her apprehensions. Cornered thus, he thought of Houdini. Why not open up her old family wounds to enable him to take her to Vivek for dressing them. Thus he reminded her about her obsession to see her people prosper and make Suresh's cousins his poor cousins. When life brought them to the verge of victory, how stupid it would be to throw in the Kassenbouw towel?

At that, she seemed to need no more persuasion, save her apprehensions about the after affects

"How can I be certain that you won't put me in others' beds as well," she said as though seeking his assurance. "What if I seek more of the one-night stands on my own? Who knows, I might fancy this very guy. Won't that usher in our liaison? With no burden of guilt, what if I turn loose in time?"

When he granted her freedom of sexual conduct, they both felt as if their marital good faith gave way to unfettered infidelity.

Shortly thereafter, even as the Business Monitor anointed him as the king of lobbyists, Gautam felt as though fate ordained a jewel-less crown for his coronation. Whatever, the media made him the most talked about man in New Delhi and as the word about his Dutch success spread across the business world, Global Facilitators became the most sought after lobbyists in India.

Though Gautam knew that he had an unfinished business with Manian, he felt that firing him would send the wrong signals in the bureaucratic circles about his own cussedness. Besides, he reckoned that it would provoke Manian to bad mouth him. Deciding to sidetrack him, Gautam dispatched him post-haste to Madras as the In-charge of Global's southern operations in the offing. And to add insult to injury, he was asked to report to a fresh recruit at Global's Corporate Office. Thereafter, when he was eased out for non-performance, Manian, as the saying goes, became history.

As Global's lobbying in the industrial arena seemed to run at breakneck speed on the Dutch steam, Gautam desisted from using Sneha's charms to clinch arms deals. And in spite of the appetite for her, no one dared to think in terms of a quid pro quo for facilitating multi-million contracts. Anyway, backed by the sexual thrust that Sneha's girls provided to the fire-power of its clientele's armaments, Global Facilitators spread its wings into the murky world of lucrative defense deals.

As Gautam paid a blind eye to her escapades, Sneha became the fair sex guru of free sex. And Gautam too could not resist for long the allure of the women who came into his life drawn by his looks peppered by his power and pelf. Thus, in a remarkable adjustment of emotional togetherness, the Gautams did not allow their moral transgressions to affect their marital equation.

Chapter 17

Baring the Soul

When Gautam was done with his painful confession, time seemed to have come to a standstill to witness the interactive silence of the tormented father and his penitent son. Soon, as if pushed by a synchronous urge for solitude, they both rose to their feet. And avoiding eye contact, they moved to their own portions in Misty Nest. Lightened by his confession as Gautam reached his room to pray for Sneha's soul, an insatiate Suresh made a U-turn to her quarter to know more about his mother.

As Suresh reached the threshold tentatively, her life-size painting appeared to greet him affectionately. Yet, as he stood rooted benumbed, her welcome smile seemed to beckon him. Thus, aided by the radiance of her persona that emanated from every square inch of its frame, he found himself moving closer to her. Having seen her in an angelic light, he was seized by an urge to touch her feet. Then, as he looked into the full-length mirror that was witness to her charms, he thought he could discern the true image of his mother.

Experiencing an unusual fondness for his mother, he was seized by a compelling urge to caress every object of hers. Oh, how he scanned her cupboard as if to seek every nook and corner of her heart. At last finding a secret shelf beneath a false bottom, he thought it could be a treasure trove of her memory. Spotting a bunch of diaries therein, he wondered whether they would lead him to the essence of her self. Yet, he picked them up with a premonition that they might bare her torturous soul as a woman. As his urge to gauge her mind goaded him to read them, his sense of decency to preserve her privacy tied his hands. But, his hope that they would put the aberrations of her life in proper perspective gave a go-by to his qualms.

He was struck by the very first entry he encountered!

'G is my God, oh, God don't mind that.'

Overawed, as he went through the dairies one by one, he found in them many a facet of her extraordinary life and times. It became clear to him that she was a sensitive woman who loved her man from the depths of her heart. She was caring and considerate to one and all, what a fine soul she had! Wasn't her ambition to make a prince out of her son the recurring theme of her scheme of life? How pleased he was that his mother had cared for him though she had failed to let him perceive her feelings for him. But, he was perturbed by that phase of her life that heralded their eventual ruin.

'Isn't it God's own blasphemy against his devotee? What else is it that G wants me to pander to some minister's son! Seems G's cornered by M's deceit, but what a way it is to wriggle out of it! Didn't my sixth sense tell me that M is not to be trusted? Warn I did but G paid no heed. Of what avail is it now that G realizes that doomed are men who make light of the feminine sixth sense? Poor G, how I pity him! Didn't the old jackal reduce G to sparing his wife as a sex bowl for someone's cum! Not even Eskimo like, is it? Where is the reciprocity, leave alone any cultural constraint? Wonder, how life can make pimps out of husbands! Well, out of fathers for that matter. Why blame them when it's the arrogance of the powerful that seeks satiation through others' women!'

'So, to save our business skin I've to turn Global's whore! Why not turn a global whore with a wider exposure? Oh, man has to be brave or crass to send his wife across. How brave was G though he looked dazed! And who is this V who seems to have seen me? Whoever grants a whore the right to know whom she is to satiate? Would I have agreed to play G's bed ball with sound sexual ethics? Isn't my moral fiber weak for my consent'

'No mistaking, it's my obsession to be wealthy made me concede. Was my initial objection a sham then! Why G too had no other option. Oh, how our greed for wealth makes us stoop to V's power and lust! Not even his, but his pop's, that is! If not for our fear of losing what pressure would V have come to exert on us? It would be but a zero with capital Z. After all, power feeds on fear, doesn't it?'

'V is out of town, so G hasn't set up the stage. Is it any respite? What a cold comedy it's going to be on my hot sexual stage! Why can't it be fun, the one-night stand? Isn't variety is the spice of life. That is, if I shed a little of my shame. But, poor G would've nothing by way of compensation, otherwise that is. It's no wife-swapping either.'

'It's as if man is most vulnerable in his own backyard! For a sexually satisfied woman like me, fantasizing an odd man on occasion could be okay to spice up life a little. But, won't sex with an unknown be too much to stomach even for an adulteress? By the way, why does this V fellow want to have me and only me? Am I supposed to feel flattered that my charms are put on the line of million dollar contracts?'

'G said V would be back by the weekend. How would that ONS with V affect our life? What if some of V's cum gets to my heart? What about G? Would his libido dip for my taking V's cum?'

Won't then my need for variety get a boost from G's neglect of me? Never mind his word; won't G use more of my sexual services to buttress his business? Won't that in a way suit me as well? Surely, once bitten twice shy won't make the right adage for promiscuity, would it? Won't that shatter our emotional bond forever?

'How crass it's to jump into someone's bed blindfolded? It's different if someone were to sweep me off my feet to tumble into his arms. Why, sexual freedom is all about sexual choice and not enforced mating isn't it? Wasn't I got stuck to G body and soul tucking in my mind as well! It's no more the same, so it seems. But, why did G agree to toss me into another's bed? Could he have done that when I was still his blue-eyed bride? Worn out by time, have I lost my value as a mate to him? Or worse, has he come to value wealth more than his wife?'

'Why have I been impatient for V ever since I was marked for his bed? Is it because he's mad to have me that I want to give in? Why not I inject a little romance into the ONS to make the mating all the more exciting? What if I let V date me a little? Won't that help me to dote upon him too? Oh, the prospect of illicit sex seduces more than what the fare might corrupt! So it seems, doesn't it?'

'When V came in the evening to pick me up, how tentative I was! Wonder why, since I had waited for him all day long! How I was thrilled that V looked all manly, though in his teens! It felt as if the one I was fantasizing about just walked in. Why, he seemed all too familiar, and surely, I was immodest in staring at him. It's as if I began coveting him. Why not, didn't I allow myself to get excited at the idea of sex with a teenager?

What need there was for dating when he came darting into my heart! Hit the iron when it's hot, it's wisely said. Well, as hard as one can for better effect. Wouldn't my wet C know how to heat-treat V's R? What an irony, I owe V to M, the hateful quisling! How funny V developed cold feet after that hot pursuit! He cowered, the bully that he was, and I should've played the elder sister to him. Maybe, that would have put paid to V's passion and thereby saved G's honor. Don't know why, I drove him myself to the KM for a date! Well, what for have I fantasized so much? Just to throw away my chance when it came? What would G think if ever he came to know it was I who had seduced V?

I drove horny V to his farmhouse, oh with what mixed feelings. How romanticism ruled my head even as sympathy for G gripped my heart. But guilt was nowhere in sight. Why should it be peeping even, wasn't it all at G's behest? Yet, I slowed down as if to know which way to turn. How I wished V developed second thoughts all again. Didn't I look at V to see the signs if any? Oh, how adoringly he was staring at me.

Stopped the car gripped by V's ogling, lo, he stole a kiss. V's daring cleared my conscience; passion gripped me, well for his possession. V dear hugged me as I raced the car to his place. Oh, how exciting it felt handling the steering as he fondled my breasts. But, how would it have ended had there been a road accident? When fate had willed delight for us in bed, how could it have meted out dog's death on the road? Oh, how he deep kissed me as I drove the car to the gates! How nice it felt being carried by him all the way to his room. Didn't I see in his passion a consideration for my delicate frame! Why not I enjoy recalling now and keep the recording for tomorrow.'

'How I yelled then when he threw me into his bed! Wasn't it a sexual shock to get dropped into an alien bed? And yet, he was my fancied paramour! Where went his shyness! Oh, he tore my dress into pieces as would a beast its prey! Wasn't he at me like a stinging bee before ending up oozing honey all over me! How sweet it felt being so savored! Wonder how he stole the script of my fantasies! Oh, how he let me have a measure of his eagerness by unleashing his tongue on my P! Why, didn't I shave though it was not my wont? What anticipation really, isn't it MILF like?

Oh how eager I was to turn him nude! Oh, how his R made me gasp before I grasped its girth. Didn't I know it was perilous not to take it in forthwith for his sake? How would I know I was in for a surprise! Didn't V pulverize my P for multiple Os? Maybe, I should've been more eager myself than I thought. But did I ever imagine savoring the dregs of our satiation? Why never cleaned up G's? Oh how does fantasy turn on the fair sex? Wouldn't it couple her sexual drive to

her mate's intimate gear? If not, how do so many Os come at one go! Sadly the first night regimen keeps woman rooted to her husband's expected course.

Satiated but no stopping our mutual caressing! Wonder how in lovemaking, our bodies gave each other so much! Why didn't receive as much both of us. I love V, that's for sure. Nice it felt to be part of him. Feeling my love for him, didn't he make love to me all night? Reaching home, could I help but compare the two who had intruded into my life? G enjoys woman all right, but V seems to live only for them. Didn't I find myself craving for V's touch the moment he touched me?'

'Am I not dying to have more of V's? If only we have a couple or more eats (what better way to describe a mating), wouldn't that set us on course of an affair? Didn't he say he would love to lay me till I turn sixty? Why am I still nervous after his word? What if he ever deserts me? Oh, that would kill me for sure.'

'V rang up for a repeat, nay eat. How I sprang up in ecstasy, and cried in relief! But, given my charms, why am I not sure of myself? How can any not want an amorous woman like me? Can V ever miss what I've to offer him? Where would he get to lay a luscious P like mine? I know I have my man now.'

Don't we love each other to distraction, V and I? Well, reverse and see! It's intravenous, really! Oh, isn't our love flowing in our veins? Aren't we thick into a passionate liaison? How great it feels to be adored by him! Oh the way I goad him to climax! No doubt we turned into lovebirds, do we cease our necking and pecking ever! What a time we have, each time we have! Oh, how I love V while he devastates my P!'

'Making it to his farmhouse is a hassle really. What an exciting feeling it was to have V in my own den. Won't V love to lay G's lioness in her lair? What a rhythm like in mating! Well, what it would be like mating with V in G's bed? But, how can I do that? Why, isn't it all so silly? A lay is a lay wherever you lay, isn't it? When it's okay to mate her lover elsewhere, what's wrong in sleeping with him at home? Didn't I make it bold to invite him home at noon? True to his word, G looked the other way.'

'What a night it was with V at home as G was away from home! Was it not sexier than that noon fare? That way, nights are for sex, what with the darkness abetting secrecy. But V made me feel at home in my own home, didn't he? But then, G ensured that I felt at home with V at our home. Didn't that made me recall our own first night? But still, I can't possibly live without V. Isn't life exiting with him like never before!'

'Oh, how nearly a year passed without an entry! Unbelievable and unfair as well, isn't it? How I failed to use the ink filler for once, all the while letting V fill my P to the brim! Well, haven't I lost the count of my trips to his filling station! Why am I turning naughty? Or is it bawdy! Isn't the line thin anyway? Would life let me cross that to turn coarse! But who knows?'

'Wonder how G's want for me didn't dip down! How my madness for V fails me to tap more of G's ardor. Anyway, don't I know G is not starving either? Isn't he having the time of his life what with his affairs with blonds on his foreign jaunts? Well, as Hollywood says, gentlemen prefer blonds, don't they?'

'Isn't G having his own fill, well not on the sly? What an army of pimps-on-the-prowl to catch fresh chicks for him? Why, he owes all that to me! Same way as I owe V to G. What a quid pro quo that is. Don't I see a little slow down in V of late? Is he having fun elsewhere as well! That's what life is all about—it makes you share. 'It's me only' is not the feature of life, at least for long, so it seems.'

'Oh, what a day it had been, the anniversary day! How the unthinkable happened! How thoughtful I thought when V wanted us to celebrate in his farmhouse, where it all began. Hardly had we reached when K barged in. When V told me K came to congratulate him, was I amused? While I expected V to send K away, he asked him to join us for a drink. How I sulked at that. Didn't V say that he was tempted to exhibit more of his good fortune to his friend? How flattered I was! And K too tried to impress me, how odd was that!

Signaled V for sex and he asked K to undress me! Imagine the boy I loved saying that! How I flared up in disgust. How the SOB asked me to shut up and give in! Didn't they bare me to bar my escape? Oh! How they overpowered me. Didn't V remind me the saying—when rape is inevitable relax and enjoy? Oh, the way V pinned me down to let K f.. me! How I hated V as K had pushed in his MC! How wretched I felt as V took his turn.

How I sulked after that. As K praised my figure, the beast urged for an orgy. Really, it's better to enjoy than being raped. As they shared the spoils, had they not put me into a fantastic situation! Whoever envisioned a DP even in her fantasy? Sandwiched, didn't I lose my orientation to stray into the climax? But when V said I could leave, didn't I spite him by asking K to give me more! Seeing V sulk, how I enjoyed K's lusty thrusts!

As that SOB followed suit, how abhorring it felt having him! And how surprised I was when soon I turned horny for an encore! While I was still wondering about the dichotomy between the mind and the body to sexual stimuli, how K ploughed into my P to further my joy! Why do women succumb to men so easily in bed? Well, won't man's magic wand herald woman's golden moment? Anyway, by the time they got the full measure of me, I was sapped totally.'

'Oh, what has my life come to? How men take women in love for granted! What's worse, abuse them as well. Shame they toss their mates into others' arms, that is, after having had their fill. Isn't desertion a better proposition? Or is it really! Won't the outcome be the same for the hapless woman? How unbecoming life can become to a woman in this man's world. How I dreamt of loving V all my life! And he thought it fit to share me with K. Sadly, he ruined the sanctity of our union!'

'It's as if I've got out twice at the same score! At least G leased me to V for gain. What for did V let K have me? I felt as if K's MC was stabbing my love. Well, the lover in me had dropped dead before V's own eyes! And lust was born right from my womb, so it seems. How the newborn made me wiser to what spoils woman's fun really! How strongly would man come on a new woman! But, being coy, woman, lo, she would be at her low! If only the female matches the male at their first mate, won't that be the sexual zenith on earth? It makes sense for woman to invite the willing to make it to heaven straight away that is.'

'I've come to hate V. Glad there's no word from him. Won't he know he has lost me forever? Let me bury my past now that my love for V is dead. Better still, I'll try to rediscover my love for G. I will put all my heart and soul into it. All's well that ends well; is it not well said? How G and I used to dote upon each other in days of yore! Would G feel the same anymore, after so much of V's cum had fouled my P? K's as well, for that matter! But wasn't G horny even as I was ardent to V? When he sees I left V, won't he come back to me heart and soul? Of course, he would.'

'V called up for sex! What cheek the bastard has! I refused to see him again. How I wanted to see the hurt on his face then when he heard that! I bared it all to G and he understands as ever. The old way G made love shows he's glad that V was out of the way. Oh, how I love my G, my old God, thank God for giving back my true love!'

'How short-lived was my joy that V had stopped calling! Oh, how his call disturbed me! Shameless he was to suggest a patch up! What for? Is it for more orgies with others? As I snubbed him roundly, he threatened to expose me. Wasn't it like adding insult to injury? Oh, how mean he really is! If he were to blackmail me, it would be no fun. Well I'll talk to G.'

'G said better I manage V as he could damage our prestige. But he did assure me that he would handle him in time. How can I let G get hurt? My name too is on the line? I cannot let V ruin our reputation but I don't want to touch him with a long pole either. Why not I use K as the pawn to checkmate V? But, K is not my kind, so be it.'

The SOB rang up. Wasn't he surprised as I insisted that he bring K along? Dismiss he did it as a one-time affair. I would receive either both of them or none of them.'

'They came. I courted K ignoring V. Oh how he protested the bastard. Why, I went oral over K's C. What a way to snub the SOB? Oh, how sheepish V looked as I slurped sucking K's. Would I ever forget the look on the bastard's face? How I enjoyed V's predicament and how stupid K looked at the prospect of the windfall! Real silly V looked when he asked K to leave me for the sake of their friendship. How sarcastic I turned at the sentimental shit of the SOB!

K hesitated when I invited him for a joy ride. Looks like, K has better morals than V. Or simply, was it the fear of power that was at work in his mind? V tried to detain me and I told him to hang himself. Pushing V aside, I managed to pull K into my car and drove away.

What it took me to address K's fears to make him take on V! How he melted when I feigned fear and how determined he looked even as he promised to stake his life for me! Wasn't I obliged to tell him he could have my body as my bodyguard? Grateful as well as excited he looked at the prospect of being my slave lover. Maybe, slave love makes fantasy for both the sexes, doesn't it? As K turned horny, I took him to no man's land.

Oh, how I shed my shame to have sex as sex. What a new experience it had been! How did it matter that K was not of my class! What sexual power he packs in his wild thrusts. How nice, it rained cats and dogs to pep up my adventure in the car proper. What a fantastic 'eat' it was in that crouching way! Wonder how I could enjoy sex with the guy who raped me before! Seems my urge to avenge myself on V abets my lust for K. Now I need to keep K around to thwart V, at least for a while.'

'V came on the line, and I hung up. Oh, what a way it was to snub him without a word. It went on for half an hour? Oh, how K fondled me all the while in delight. I told K that I feared V's blackmail. K said he would take care. Did I kiss him in gratitude, or was I trying to seal his promise? Soon V came falling on his knees. Oh, how sad that we realize the value of something only when on the verge of losing, having abused it all along! Well, that's V's problem and I told him so. When V pressed for me desperately, how confidently K folded me into his arms. How nice it felt that it announced the altered position.

It sounded so funny when K asked V to keep off his girl. But it thrilled me when K swore to kill V, if ever he uttered a word about me to anyone! When K threw him out with a warning to keep his eyes off me, I felt the SOB had got his just deserts. When V left realizing K had cooked his goose, I felt obliged to sexebate with K. Well, he helped me have the last laugh. I know I need K's passion to ward off V and satiate my lust as well, till things cool down, both ways.'

'Oh, K's urge is like a deluge! It's becoming awful, his lustful regimen. The ruffian that he is, what else can he offer for a company than his prick? Am I not finding his mating exhausting? Oh, how did I let my P be his freebie? Well, one thing led to another. Why leave things half done? When I lent my P for G's uplift, why not I let it help my sibling's growth? Why blame poor G, when it's I who seduced V when he tucked in his tail. Whatever it is, when life could bring K into my bed, what if I slip into those where the powerful sleep. Okay done, baby. Is it not logical to let my folks have some petrol bunks, *naami* and *benaami* as well, to start with? What if I let some pump a little of their cum into my horny C for that.'

'Have I become a nymphomaniac as feared? So be it, how does that really bother me? Haven't I developed the ability to enjoy sex without emotion for the mate? Isn't that the characteristic of a whore? Well, affair with V made me randy and sleeping with K turned me into a whore. Oh, how that bastard made me bitchy in return for my love? It's a fact that a woman needs a man for good or bad.'

'The oldie said he would help if I could come to the hotel. Would my going to him be any different from whoring? Wasn't I prepared for that when I went to seek his favor? Why, I never thought about those girls who did the bidding at my calling! Did I ever feel guilty for being insensitive to their souls while making use of their services? Maybe, that's how man uses the whores to get his release, unmindful of their bodily feelings leave aside their frame of mind. Why blame men when madams are no better? Men at least have a natural urge that only a woman's frame can address, but what could be said of the madams? Once being a procuress, now it seems I myself have become a prostitute. Oh, what a route reversal that is! How would my girls react if they come to know about it?'

'I reached the hotel rather awkwardly, in spite of my preparation. How I passed through the lobby, I would never know. How nervous I felt knocking at the door though I went willingly! Wasn't it worse when I went in, though I was eager in a way? Why my rehearsals led me nowhere! I was attracted to G and V and so it was easy. And I was cursing V more than I was concerned about K's forced entry. But, this was all different; I was just a prostitute for him and to myself even.

The oldie apologized for his weakness for women and thanked me for consenting. Didn't he tend me so nicely into his embrace? Oh, how his touch convey compassion that made me hug him for warmth. How I felt him agreeable and how I was amused at the prospect of sex with him! What a naughty boy he turned out to be as we drank together! After that prolonged foreplay, wonder how he took me to my O! It seems as if he opened the gates for older lovers to inundate my C.'

'I managed to get rid of K. After that eat with the elderly one, K's coarseness became too much to bear anyway. Better I hook some oldies for their matured ways. V is no more a threat as he was sidelined in the party even as his dad kicked the bucket. It serves him right the son of a bitch. Well, I bluffed to K that I had to mend my ways as my son had grown up. K didn't protest too much either, and I know he wouldn't. Maybe, he too felt satiated with me, who knows?'

'Oh, how the menu of my sex eats has changed. Won't I man my sex kitchen with older men? Isn't it an idea to put 'Entry free for older guys' billboard on the MN gate? Ok baby but what's sex life without hunky youth, the ginger chicken. Don't I need them both for the variety they bring into my bed! Aren't beautiful people supposed to have multiple partners and better sex as well? Why not, it's a fact of life, whether one likes it or not. And won't sex bring spin-offs if one goes for choice sleeps? I'm at networking with men willing to call my shots. I wonder whether it's sex for service or service for sex! When it's a case of making both ends meet, what difference does that make either way?'

'What else but ONS that holds sway on my P the most? Why it's just physical, no emotional baggage *baba*? And that makes sex the pure sex with a sense of adventure? Oh, how did I come up with a new theory as a corollary? This is the theory for the posterity—one need carry nothing going into sexual encounters. What a discovery! Won't that make me the Buddhini of sexual enlightenment? Wonder how I missed the point, being in the thick of it all along, day in and day out! And for the record, all alone I was sipping beer in the CB this afternoon! Oh, how seized I was with an irresistible temptation to prove my theory right then and there! I feigned to be drunk and asked that waiter to guide me to the loo only to let him glide his sex tool into me, doggy style! While he f'ed me, didn't I realize another truth? Woman could be amorous, but sexual vigor vests with man and that matters. Well, that's how nature shaped the sexes. It pleased me when he said it was an unexpected tip. Oh, how sexy. I told him he could have a proper dip if he were to follow me. But for sake of appearances I had to follow him after he managed to excuse himself from duty and oh, what a time we had.'

'Felt like reading what I've been writing. How have I been baring my soul as if for my inner soul! How does it feel like reading these when my sexual fire would have been singed? What if my sexy past excites me in my old age? What a funny idea! But, who would like to have anything to do with an old hag? Oh, how poor would be the youth then if they wouldn't let me give them what I only can give. Or would these shame me in my old age?'

'What if the diaries were to fall into some burglar's hands? He might come back for barter and I would have another fucker to humor. Jokes apart, won't one think I'm a slut and insult as a woman? What do men know about women in spite of it all? When it comes to that what do women know about themselves? Better I shred these in time.'

'What a day it has been! S turned ten and the whole of Delhi was at MN. Is it not time I brought order into my wayward bed? G reached where he wanted to and S too is no more a poor cousin. And I've had my riotous time, as riotous as it could take. Don't I see a risk tag attached to my sexcapades now? Haven't they started recognizing my page three face? What if someone chose to kiss and tell some tabloid about the ONS I might've had with him? It's sensible to make my peccadilloes a history before S comes of age.'

'Once again I'm happy with myself in a wifely way. As I gave up on others, I'm devoted to G. We find our life rejuvenated. G says he finds me fuller than ever before. And I too feel I was never so eager, ever. More eager than the eagerness with which I took on all those hunks. S too is shaping into such a charming boy. Had I ever seen any better! How sad, by the time I think of him he would be fast asleep. It feels nice seeing him, and how long I find myself staring at him! Won't he grow into a handsome lad in time? And who knows end up a playboy even.'

'Seems G's ardor is on the wane for me. How can a man make love to the same woman all his life? Yet men have to get glued to their wives for want of alternatives. But what compulsions there could be for G? Can't his status bring half of Delhi to his bed? But why should women want to be laid by the rich and famous? Maybe, by sleeping with such, women perceive their self-worth soaring up! If not for his fame (or was it notoriety) as a lover, would have Casanova had half as many affairs? Seems G too is using his position to sexual use, or is it abuse? Oh, how women feel constrained on that score! What a vigorous playboy he turned out to be! But, he deserves all that.'

'Oh, how fascinated was M! It felt nice that he's bold. He is manly and handsome! Why, didn't he charm me with his nice talk as well? I hadn't met any like him before and told him so. How ardently he said that he loved to befriend me! He wanted me to ring him up and if I didn't, he wouldn't bother me. Smart that he has left the ball in my court. Is he the classic gentleman lover? Why not I call him up and find out?'

'True M is a gentleman lover if there ever was one. What an erotic time he gave me! How it lingers on in my memory! I'm not the one to let go this man. And as it turned out neither would he let me go. We agreed to operate a joint account in his private jaunt.'

'Well, I'm back on my beaten track. Oh, how horny I felt seeing P in the party at the MN. Oh God, how dare I snare him into my room! What followed was the sexy best, wasn't it? I let go P after a couple! Then, what a surprise lay in store for me! As I came out of my room, how R ambushed me! From where did he surface? He said he saw what was happening and led me back into my bed without a word. Oh, how fascinating was his daring and the way I oralled him for his bravado! With what gusto he thrashed me in return! What sense does it make to give up on men? Who knows who carries a Rasputin's Prick (demands a capital letter, wouldn't it?) with him! How am I to know unless I unzip them all? Won't a RP bring in bursting ecstasy? What a time that would be for my LP!'

'There seems to be no stopping men from eating me! Don't they all vouch that no woman ever loved the prick as I do? How exciting it feels hearing men exclaim at my oral prowess! Am I not craving to hear the same from as many? Won't I like to improve myself with each outing? Why not, when I'm at it, won't it make sense to have it to the hilt? And having lost my chastity isn't sex the only reward left? Why half measures, let me go the whole hog to grab all that hard meat my softy. No more and no less, that's the way with sex as nature willed it.'

Pausing in awe, Suresh empathized with her soul sympathizing with her faults.

'How worrying S has gone astray! Why has he fallen into bad ways? Oh, if only I knew in time, I should've fared much better as a mother. But, hardly have I ever devoted any time for him. Haven't I let him grow as if he was an orphan? Even they have a home in an orphanage. It's as if S was homeless in his home! How could I've helped it anyway? How busy was I ever! Oh, if it was the struggle for betterment in the beginning, later it was the effort to keep that going. And as he grew up, it was my pleasure seeking that denied him my motherly love.'

Oh, how I turned insensitive to his growing-up needs. What an irony it is that I started neglecting him striving for his own good! Now the gulf seems to be too wide to attempt to even bridge it. And won't it feel odd to befriend an adolescent son in a U-turn? Hope his JDs would come to pass as he comes of age. How I wish he gets the right wife to rectify my motherly wrong.

Won't I give my life for S if that were needed? He may never know how I love him, but how does that matter if he's contented and happy, unlike us, his parents? How I love to see him happily married. Having no emotional dependence on him as a mother, I might make a marvelous mother-in-law to his wife. Well, everything in life seems to have a flip side to it, doesn't it?'

'What a shock on the New Year's Eve! Whoever expected it? How sad that some girl paid with her life for the ruffled psyche of my son! Am I not the real culprit behind it? Oh, how can I atone for all this! I am not able to think, let alone write, anymore now.'

As his eyes welled up with tears and his heart filled with love for her by then, Suresh couldn't go through the rest of Sneha's outpour. Slowly he began shredding her diaries as he didn't like

them to see the light at dawn. And putting the shreds in a bucket of water to turn them into pulp, he vowed to carry her secrets to his grave. When he left the room having bowed before her portrait, he felt that neither his mother could be blamed nor his father be faulted for whatever happened.

Chapter 18

Garland of Guilt

Soon, under the shadows of Sneha's death, Suresh's trial was on course at the Tees-Hazari. At the behest of the defense, the hearing recommenced in camera to avoid further damage to the dead woman's image. Sneha's suicide note and Dr. Gupta's testimony insensibly tilted the needle of sympathy in Suresh's favor. Paranjape too felt it would be heartless to press for the exemplary punishment. Arguments over, Justice Sumitra reserved her judgment and adjourned the court.

'What was the trial all about?' Sumitra found herself contemplating that night. 'Are rapes and murder the only issues on trial in this singular case? Was not Suresh the violator as well as a victim at the same time? What about those who blackened their faces in this sordid drama of human depravity? Are they any innocent? Well, it was as if the parents insensibly combined to collectively jeopardize their son's life. Gautam surely was guilty of prostituting his wife. Was it not the beginning of the end of them all? How it would have pained as well as shamed him! Is not Vivek free though it was he who sowed the seeds of this crime? Could the law have reprimanded Sneha, the eye of the storm? How she affected her son's psyche! Through the impediment of her past, didn't she clear the way to his fall! But, didn't Manian, the villain of the piece go scot-free?'

'Oh how callously Shanti's parents colluded with the defense!' she thought, turning her searchlight on the darker side of the prosecution. 'And the way they tried to bail out their daughter's murderer at that! If the rope were to answer Suresh's crime, what should be done to book Shanti's people for their calumny? Well, to appease his lust for fame, how routinely Mehrotra subjects justice to multiple rapes! Why, won't the police deliberately fail the prosecution for a price? How the politicians are wont to pull the strings to extricate the culprits of their class? Whither the public morality! The society seems hooked to Mammon, doesn't it? How life itself has become a punishment to the decent! Oh, what life has come to be, but yet it goes on and that's life.'

'What justice, or whatever is left of it, would serve the ends of justice in this multifaceted crime,' she thought as she reached for the pad to write the judgment. 'After all, wasn't Suresh's criminality more a product of his perverse psyche than that of his innate nature? If he were to be given the rope, how would he ever have the chance to discover his true self? Is it the spirit of life that one should die in a state that is not his true self! If, the meaning of life is fruition of the soul, the ultimate penalty seems contrary to the rationale of life and the wisdom of the Creator. How am I to know what role God had ordained for Suresh in his latter-day life? After all, he is so young and thus changeable. So, it seems fair that he survives the noose and serves out the sentence.'

When Gautam heard the judgment, he heaved a sigh of relief, and thanked God for saving his son's life. Reconciled as Suresh was to the noose, the reprieve seemed to have infused in him a sense of purpose of its own. Seeing the impact of her verdict on the father and the son, Justice Sumitra felt vindicated about her belief in the glory of life. But, Mehrotra took it as another feather in his cap.

The judgment day of his son turned out to be a day of reckoning for Gautam.

'Oh God, what a hell it has been!' he thought in perplexity. 'How scared I was for Suresh's life! Now that he will live, what can life mean to me anymore! It means precious little, so it seems. Why, hasn't it become burdensome already? Though vacuous, life was still a make-believe in the past. How the aura of success camouflaged my jewel-less crown from public view! Who knew what a burden that was on my guilty head? And Sneha chose to damn me further

with a garland of guilt. At least, Justice Sumitra spared my conscience from further burden. That's the only saving grace of my sordid life. May God bless her for that! Wouldn't have I dropped dead much before Suresh was put on the death row? And what's the point in my living anymore? Why not I join Sneha in death, to make a fresh beginning?

'But, who had seen life after death?' he thought as he turned skeptic. 'What's heaven but hearsay? Won't the benedictions therein seem make-believe? The Hindu *swarga*, the Christian *salvation* and the Islamic *hereafter*, are they really real? Had anyone called back to earth from those summits of faith? And without a body how does the soul enjoy the earthly pleasures of the religious heavens? How naive is man in envisioning heaven! If the *swarga* is not make-believe, won't Sneha join the company of the *pativratas*, in wait for their husbands they had left behind? But, having sinned so much here, would I gain admission there? Well, if hell were to be my destiny, why not make the best of the rest of my life here itself? It looks sensible.'

The thought of hell made him wonder about the reality of the religions.

'The theme of faith is the hope of man, and its hold on him is the fear of his,' he began dwelling into the working of the religions. 'Is there no God then? Oh, for all that, there could be One, but may not be as the faiths portray Him. What are the religions, if not the perceptions of their founders preached in divine terms? Did God ever introduce someone as His son and another as His messenger to His people? Won't some of the religious precepts sound so absurd! Oh, how religions deprive man of his reason and make fools out of the followers!'

'Am I not better off, not being a believer, after all?' he seemed to even feel relieved. 'If not, I would have been a fool twice over, bending before Mammon and God as well. Now, wisdom lies in starting life afresh. Why not I give up all and embrace *sanyas*? Maybe that would bring solace to my soul. Won't I need the guidance of a guru and the precincts of an ashram for that? What about setting aside something sufficient for Suresh and donate the rest to that ashram? It's well that I go back to my roots. And sooner than later, someone would take my role on the grand stage of Delhi. Hopefully, my garland of guilt too might wither away in the warmer climes of the South.'

Book Two: Dharma 'n Moksha

Episode 1 - Bliss of Being

Gautam's search for a guru ended in Annavaram. When he reached Vanaprastham there, he was disappointed to learn that Sripada Swami, the seer of the ashram, was in *mauna vratam*. And the *ashramites* advised Gautam to make good the time at Satyanarayana Swami's temple. Thus, climbing up the steps to the hilltop temple of the Lord of Annavaram, he felt he visualized the aura of *bhakti* before swamiji showed him the light of knowledge.

The next day, Gautam got the audience of the swamiji. Baring his troubled soul to the revered seer, Gautam beseeched him to take him under his wings. Moved by Gautam's tragic tale, the swamiji agreed to make him his *shishya* and nurse him to *moksha*.

"But, swamiji," said Gautam in apprehension, "given my past can I ever seek *moksha*?"

"It's all about directing one's passion," said Sripada Swami. "If you probe the divine as passionately as you pursued the mundane then you won't be far off *moksha* in this life itself."

When a gratified Gautam wanted to donate his immense wealth to the ashram, the swamiji saw his disciple's destiny differently.

"It's one thing to chase the mirage of moolah and another to desert the oasis of wealth," said the seer in compassion. "In either case, it betrays the lack of a balanced mind."

"But then, swamiji," said Gautam, "how can it be imbalance if after leaving my son self-sufficient I renounce the rest for the public good?"

"Won't your largess to this ashram," said the swamiji in smile, "dispossess your son to that extent?"

"Why, swamiji," said a perplexed Gautam, "won't my son be relieved of that much overburden?"

"Why do you see wealth as a bane when in reality it is a boon?" said the swamiji. "Why deny him of what is his by right and thereby induce in him a sense of deprivation? What if he covets wealth later with a vengeance? Won't history repeat itself?"

"Swamiji, I'm confused really," said Gautam in despair. "Pray show me the way."

"Your confusion is the confusion of mankind," said the seer, stroking his flowing beard. "Ironically, man's existential confusion is caused by the two life-supporting elements—*kama*, the biological need, and *artha*, the mundane means. *Kama* is the innate urge for a mate accentuated as passion. And passion is but a manifestation of physical attraction between the sexes. When gratified by lovemaking, it occasions a fulfilled feeling for man and woman alike. But, sex sans love, *kama* is soulless mating."

"How true it is swamiji," said Gautam with hindsight.

"As for *artha*," resumed the seer, "it helps nourish the body to sustain life. If *kama* is the heart of our body, *artha* forms the veins of our life. So, *artha* and *kama* in conjunction make an integrated life-support system."

"Is man's life, say, a twin-engine drone," said Gautam, "propelled by *kama* and *artha*?"

"True," said the seer, "and maneuvered by mind."

"What if one of the engines develops a snag," said Gautam, "leading to a crash? Is there no way to avert that swamiji?"

"Why not, if only one trains his mind."

"How that can be done?" asked Gautam.

"By studying art of being in the school of *dharma*," said the seer, "to gain *moksha*, the bliss of being."

"But then," said a nonplussed Gautam, "*moksha* is getting rid of rebirths, isn't it?"

"The concept of *moksha* as it has evolved is that the ultimate bliss lies not in being but in non-being," said the swamiji. "As the state of *paramatma* is of pure bliss, it is reckoned that the merger of man's *atma* with it is *moksha*. And so it is averred that it should be the goal of life."

"Swamiji, but what's the contradiction in that?"

"Why don't you see this concept deprecate the value of life itself?" said the swamiji, as a prelude to expostulate his theory of *moksha*. "Won't that amount to the celebration of the cessation of life? Why not we regard life as a benign happening and not a baneful existence? If only you value life then won't the classical theory of *moksha* be an anathema? Why fail to celebrate the beauty of life, of self-fulfillment and social enrichment? So *moksha* for me is all about leading a fulfilled life while hoping for the same in the births to come. It is the inability of man to appreciate the potentialities of life that makes him seek a refuge in the heaven."

"Oh swamiji, wonder why man fails to appreciate this?" exclaimed Gautam.

"Why, simply put, it's owing to man's lacking of common sense," said the swamiji, impressed with Gautam's keenness. "If we allegorize life as a twin-engine drone as you said, the pulls of *kama* impede the right take-off and the pressures of *artha* hamper its safe landing. Thus, with an uninitiated mind, it could be a false take-off on the runway of lust or a crash landing on the roughs of greed. And with the vacillating mind, it might be a case of midair crash. Thus, it's the ability to take precautions to avert these mishaps that makes one a competent operator. But, the hallmark of a veteran is the ability to cruise life on the course of *moksha*, the state of blissful living."

"What's that *dharma* which makes life in itself a *moksha*?"

"Sadly for man," said the seer, "the diversity of life won't lend to encapsulate *dharma* into a vaunted mantra to grant him *moksha*. Given the divisiveness of color, creed and culture, how can there ever be one universal *dharma*? Won't the able-bodied, the handicapped, the haves, and the have-nots with differing abilities come to live together? Wouldn't that by itself result in an unequal quality of life on earth? Why, even in heaven there are gods and demigods, going by our *puranas* that is. And one needs to reckon with the divergent male female psyches and the differing individual natures of men, women as well as children. Besides, the libido of the folks, the embodiment of *kama*, invariably varies to complicate life further. Won't the unique climatic conditions vary the way of living? More so, how could one ever reconcile the dogmatism of the religions?"

"How true swamiji," said Gautam with a sense of learning, "God Himself, if there is One, couldn't envisage one *dharma*! Won't the alleged revelations of His to His prophets testify to that?"

"Let's not digress into the perilous paths the religions had laid for man to his bane," said the seer. "Why, won't social conditions and political arrangements affect the human condition? Well, the list of human dichotomies leads us to infinity? Thus, even among the people of a race or a nation, life is not a homogeneous proposition amenable for a common *dharma*. That's why it's absurd to suggest that there could be a monolithic *moksha*-enabling-*dharma* for the humanity at large."

"That's true swamiji," said Gautam, "but how is one to know what is his *dharma*?"

"Since *dharma* is a self-evolved *moksha*-enabling way of life," said the seer, "it is for the individual to evolve his or her own *dharma*."

"Won't it be like groping in the dark?" asked Gautam. "After all, one needs to know what to aim at for him to get focused on it."

"Grasping the facets of life governed by *kama* and *artha* enables man to come to grips with its delusions," said the seer. "And that would lead him to visualize his own *dharma*. As *kama* is integral to the being, *artha* is essential for the living. While the impulse of *kama* is common to all beings, the inducement of *artha* is peculiar to the humans. Though the bestial pursuit of *kama* might occasion physical gratification for man and woman alike, it won't accord them the emotional fulfillment of lovemaking. Likewise, mindless preoccupation with *artha* might help

man accumulate wealth but it would hardly impart richness to his life. Thus, neither is *kama* nor is *artha* capable of occasioning that quality of life, which makes it joyous."

"What's the right mix then of *kama* and *artha*," said Gautam, "for a *moksha*-enabling-*dharma*?"

"*Dharma* is not some physical compound that lends itself for the chemical formulation," said the seer smilingly. "Why don't you realize that we are dealing with the complexities of life? When it comes to the basics of living, even the wretched of the earth have their way. The handouts of charity would ensure their survival and the ratio of the sexes provides them their fair share of sex. Then, won't the 'eat and procreate' regimen amount to an animal life in the human form? What are the human faculties for, if not for the enrichment of the quality of life? Thus, the evolution of *dharma* is seeded in the application of the mind, while the characteristics of our genes define the scope of our *kama*, the circumstances of birth shape our spheres of *artha*."

"So swamiji," said Gautam, "it all amounts to man cutting the coat of *dharma* according to the cloth of his life, isn't it?"

"Won't that amount to defeatism?" said the seer. "While giving up on hope is despair, not striving for betterment is self-denial. The dynamics of living lay in the limitations birth imposes and the possibilities the circumstances of life entails. Thus, lamenting over the limitations of birth and missing on the opportunities of life would only lead one to a state of frustration. And frustration paralyses the self and punctures the buoy of joy. What is worse, it breeds tendencies that are inimical to the social good. On the contrary, the precept of *dharma* is about trying to limit the limitations of birth and further the possibilities of life, all the while enjoying that engagement. This philosophy of living enriches the self and uplifts the soul, leading to a life of harmony, regardless of the restrictions one's environment imposes."

"What stunts one's *dharmic* path swamiji?"

"It is *artha*, the alter ego," said the seer. "Is it not the propensity of man to compare himself in *arthic* terms with others for his self-worthiness or otherwise? That is since the social niceties preclude one from making *kama* the measure of him or her? Well, culture would have us confine the nuances of romance to the precincts of the bedrooms. Leave aside *kama*, can there be a hallmark of comparison, of attributes of the creation, unique to the individuals. That's how *artha* came to dominate the human domain as a common denominator for universal comparison."

"How disastrous that is proving to our life swamiji?"

"Well, with *artha* having become the visible measure of human worth," continued the swamiji with a sense of sadness, "man began to exert himself at acquiring wealth. It's as if he doesn't want to lose in comparison! If anything, the opportunities of our times opened the doors to all comers. So, the wayward crowd swelled up to trample upon the values of life leading to a cultural chaos of material acquisitions. It is as if the talent in all other spheres of human endeavor ceased to count. In this mad rush for moolah people fail to realize that it requires a great strength of character to give up what's not one's due than to accumulate through questionable means."

"Swamiji, do you mean materialism is a poison?"

"On the contrary," said the seer as his face lighted up, "it turned out to be the narcotic of the downtrodden. Never in the annals of mankind did the meek have as good as in our materialistic times. Lacking in intellect and devoid of wealth, the multitude of humanity existed subhuman all along. Mercifully now, materialism enables them access to the goodies of life to fill up their alter egos. In that way, the majority of the populace has hit the highway of betterment."

"Swamiji, it's a new perception really!"

"But, the intellectual and the talented that are capable of experiencing the richness of life without wealth have come to naught," the seer said, pained at that thought. "With their hurt egos at being slighted by the material minded, they tend to join the *arthic* bandwagon. The fall of these is the bane of today's world. What is worse, their *arthic* greed has come to goad them

to abuse their positions for self-aggrandizement. The corrupt tune they set for the materialistic culture became the hymn of humanity. It's the tragedy of our times that the endowed get condemned in the new order."

"What's the *dharma* for their *moksha* swamiji?"

"What with the advancement of science and the availability of knowledge," said the swamiji, "they are in a vantage position to shape their *dharma* to journey their lives in the carriage of cushions. But unfortunately most let jealousy hurt their joy ride. And that hurts their sense of bliss."

"Can one ever overcome jealousy," said Gautam, "when it's man's second nature?"

"On the contrary, I see jealousy as something alien to human nature," said the swamiji to Gautam's utter surprise. "Jealousy is but a manifestation of *artha*'s corruptive influence on man which in due course became the insurmountable hurdle for him on the path of *moksha*. It is in man's power to curtail it to manage his passage to *moksha*. One needs only to understand the physics of jealousy to appreciate the chemistry of its affects on human nature."

"Swamiji, with due regards to your profound wisdom," said Gautam, "*artha* might be the abettor of jealousy but how could it be its source?"

"It is so simple dear," said the seer with all affection. "Isn't our persona fundamental to our identity? Don't we come to accept the way we look? A Narcissus amongst us might even end up being in love with the way he was made. Would her handsome cousin give the plain lass any sleepless nights on that score? Won't thus our self-love shield us from the perils of jealousy when it comes to how we are shaped? Why is that the neighbor's delectable spouse is not so much a source of envy as it is an object of desire? Does that not prove that jealousy is not inherent to human nature?"

"Oh, swamiji," said Gautam in excitement, "I'm seeing my past in a new prism now."

"But, when it comes to things material, man is found wanting in maintaining his equanimity," continued the seer. "Lacking in comparison, materialistically that is, man turns obsessive to better his lot or burns in jealousy, either way, upsetting the tranquility of his life! Is it not man's stupidity that makes him a victim of jealousy? If only man could detour the mirages of jealousy in the sands of materialism, he could lay his own path of *dharma* that takes him to the oasis of *moksha*. And the *karmic* theory—to each one accordingly to his deeds in the previous birth—could come in handy for man to avoid the mishap of unhappiness."

"But swamiji, won't such a philosophy of contentment block mankind's progress?"

"Well, the *karmic* theory has a unique bipolarity about it," said the swamiji. "While imploring upon man to reconcile to his situation in life it exhorts him to excel at the station of his life for a better one in his rebirth. Thus, the *karmic* approach to life enables man to remain mentally tranquil even as he climbs up the material heights within his reach."

"But swamiji," said Gautam, "all that is fine for an unmarried, but, won't the dynamics of marriage tend to upset the apple-cart of life?"

"A spouse could be an enlightened aide or a troublesome companion on the *moksha*-enabling path of life," said the seer. "The *dharma* of compromise hauls the coupe of matrimony on the parallel track of contrasts. Well, marriage is all about striking a balance between the dreams of the spouses and the realities of their lives. Sans this balance, the carriage of marriage is destined for derailment on the parallel tracks of *artha* and *kama*. But, route deviations notwithstanding, compromises maneuver marriages on the course of *moksha*. In your case, but for your *arthic* overdrive, the *dharmic* course of your marital union would have taken the *karmic* turn towards *moksha*."

"Oh swamiji," said Gautam prostrating before the seer, "how your words give me solace!"

"That would help you serve your cause," blessed the swamiji.

"I need your blessings."

"Is it barter?" the swamiji asked mysteriously.

"Oh, no, swamiji," said a grateful Gautam, "let Suresh keep it all, save for the *nityaannadaanam* at Vanaprastham."

"God bless you."

Guided by the seer, Gautam could put his past behind to be at peace with himself. Moreover, before setting out to Vanaprastham, vowing never to return to Delhi, he had entrusted his assets with trusted men in New Delhi for their proper upkeep.

Episode 2

Collage of Crime

Lodged at the Tihar as a lifer, Suresh had realized that the reprieve he got would come to naught if he were to carry the baggage of guilt well into his life. Thus, he resolved to put the sins of his past and the psyche of the noose behind him. But, he never forgot Sneha's last wish that he should make a difference to himself and to the society around him. Having owed his life to her death, he felt he owed it to her to fulfill her wish. As he understood the enormity of her sacrifice, he realized the significance of his future to her memory. And so he vowed to make the fulfillment of her wish the goal of his life.

So, he tried to focus on a fruitful future to imbibe a positive psyche while still in gaol and in the process he began daydreaming to turn into a Good Samaritan. But, as he realized the limitations of his intellect to fit in that role, he turned to Rakesh Tiwari, the jail warden, for advice. Impressed with Suresh's ardor to serve society, the warden thought it fit to put him into the world of the fiction. Tiwari told Suresh that nothing like a novel exposes man to the nuances of life through the thought process of its protagonists. The warden believed novels form the foundation for the understanding of life and thus are the best self-help books there were ever.

As Suresh was always found with a book in hand, his mates named him a bookworm. As he graduated with the novel in time, the warden introduced him to psychology in turn. And that helped Suresh no end to gain an insight into human nature, which improved his perceptivity of life itself. Confounded by the complexity of the theories he read, he was compelled to contemplate about the profoundness of the same. But, as his perception grew, so was his urge for knowing more. Soon he began to familiarize himself with history and found himself seeing the reflections of the same in the fiction itself.

The offshoot of these intellectual pursuits was the empathy he came to develop for the unfortunate. As his mother's last wish ever remained fresh in his mind, this new-found understanding of human nature made him take an interest in the affairs of the prisoners. As his capacity to grasp the complexities of life improved thus, he began to collage the crimes that brought people to Tihar.

The first to befriend Suresh were the brothers, Sunil and Deepak. In the same age group as his, they were hauled up for having murdered their father and the stepbrother, besides raping and killing their stepmother. It all started with their father's affair with his younger brother's wife. Unable to stomach the indignity, their hapless uncle committed suicide. With the path to his illicit passion wide open, their father brought home the widow. And that forced their mother to have her as co-wife.

Though their mother resented the development, yet she fell in line in time. Even that accommodative gesture was of no avail when it came to earning her husband's gratitude. Instead, she had to put up with the blatant partiality showed by her man towards her rival. As though the unease at home was not good enough for a bad living, in time, their stepmother delivered a baby boy. The obsession their father developed for the newborn made him lose whatever sense of proportion he was left with. Thus, in time, he reduced his first wife and her three children that included a girl to third-rate living. Having taken advantage of their father's weakness for her and her son, their stepmother stepped up her tirade against their mother and began to boss over them as well. But their mother bore all the indignities for the sake of her children though they boiled with rage.

However, their stepmother induced their father to step out to set up a home of her own. Of course, to have her way with their father, she alleged that all were hell-bent on making a hell out of her life. So their father moved away with her and her son, leaving his old house to their mother and them. But, by then, their father pulled them out of the college and made them salesmen in his garment shop. Anyway, after their father's desertion, the brothers were at rebuilding their life with their mother and sister. And all that changed when came a realtor, like a bolt from the blue, to acquaint himself with the property, as their father, unknown to them, had put it up for sale.

That, after all, was more than the brothers could take, as without the house, their mother and sister might have to live on the pavements with them. Thereby, without a second thought, that very night, the brothers descended upon their father and his favorite family. Having slain their father, who opened the door for them, they battered their stepbrother who came behind him. When they went inside to finish off their stepmother, they saw her coming out of the bath having had a bath. As they tried to strangle her, she struggled to survive, and in that process she dropped the towel she draped.

Left to hold her in the nude, the brothers came in direct touch with their stepmother's frame that had snared their father and brought them misery. Driven by an urge to hurt that in her, which had hurt their interests, they fell like wolves on her body. As their hatred for her readily acquired a sexual thrust, they raped her by turns till she lay exhausted. And having had their unintentional revenge on her body, they snuffed out her vengeful soul in the end. Thus securing the house for their mother and sister besides their father's garment shop, without a trace of regret or remorse they surrendered to the police.

Finding the brothers unafraid of death on the gallows that they expected, Suresh was tempted to probe their mind. They said, had their father had his way, their mother would have been reduced to beggary and their sister might have turned into a street walker. After all, how could they have averted that from happening for they were far too young and unskilled to support them? Now with the house for a roof and the shop for succor, they would be able to get on with their lives without any hassles. Thus, having averted a disaster to their mother and sister, they felt they had fulfilled their filial duty after all. Why wouldn't they walk up to the gallows with the satisfaction of being saviors?

Their poignant story that pictured the vicissitudes of life affected Suresh for days on end.

Duggar, the dour banker, who happened to be his cellmate, was the odd man out in the gallery of rouges. Lodged at Tihar for defrauding the bank at which he worked, he was ill at ease amidst the common crowd in the sprawling prison. The Tiharians, for their part, snubbed him roundly for his snobbery and nicknamed him the Rough White-collar, alluding to his character and his crime in the same vein. In that life of unease, the arrival of Suresh was a Godsend for him as it afforded him the company from one of his own class. Besides, his own grey hair and the youth's abominable crime provided the right mix for him to condescend to descend.

Duggar lost no time in telling Suresh in jest the story of how Kubera of heaven turned into Mammon of earth.

In the beginning, ensconced in *swarga*, the Hindu heaven, gods used to govern man's destiny on earth. Taken by the rumors about the comforts of *swarga*, the Hindus of Aryavarta began to aspire to reach there after death. What with the word of mouth playing mischief, the urge for *swarga* surged amongst the people from our neighboring lands as well. Sensing that the collective human impulse could inspire an exodus to their fiefdom ending their domination, the gods went into a huddle to help avert that from happening. Well, the emerged consensus was to accord some sops for man to divert his mind from the godly abode.

So they deputed Kubera, the Marshal of Monies, to rein in the situation starting with Bharat, where the Brahmins made a business of issuing visas to *swarga*. Demigod he may be but Kubera knew the power of his portfolio only too well. Seeking to wean the fickle minded folks away from the Brahmanic influence, he laid the money trap with a view to stop the Hindus in their tracks. It was only time before all saw the essence of *swarga* in the riches of Aryavarta and that made them chase wealth on earth in right earnest. But, the gods, not wanting to take chances with human frivolity, ordained Kubera to rein them forever from the Indraprastha.

Thus, having come to stay for good on the globe, Kubera began to fine-tune the power of wealth to make the earth rival the heaven itself. And the Hindus who wanted the best of both worlds began to divide their loyalties between him they adored and the gods they feared. The by-then bloated ego of the demigod wouldn't suffer the divided loyalty, and so he looked elsewhere for the potential loyalists.

So, he shifted his base to the Occident, and at length, he inculcated the spirit of capitalism in the Western souls. And that did the trick for all time to come as they went about cultivating materialism in the fertile minds of the white man. In due course, under his benign influence, the West became wealthy and prosperous to overshadow the *swarga* itself. When the opulence of the Occident caught their eyes, the gods themselves thought it fit to desert their abode and descend on the West.

It's time one realized that as gods too turned materialistic, the worship of wealth was the worship of the gods. And it would remain so forever. The humiliations on the road to wealth were but the hurdles man had to cross to reach the godhood. But, the poor Hindus still feared the non-existing gods while being half-hearted at the materialism that the gods themselves endorsed.

As Suresh recalled the saga of his parents, he felt sad as well as puzzled about the power of wealth over the mind of man. But, as Duggar felt scandalized at finding Suresh mix with the common criminals, he averred that it was demeaning to say the least. When Suresh said he was looking for an alternate idea of life, the banker chastised him that in that process he could lose the reality of the world. Besides, with an all knowing air, the banker was wont to aver that mistaking ripples for the waves would only lead to the lowering of the standards. Yet, to appreciate the ways of the world, Suresh went about acquainting himself with the lows and highs of crime.

There was the young Salim the *supari*, the hired killer from Bombay, who was lodged a block away. He was under trial for six years then for his alleged hand in a hired killing. Being a school dropout from Dharavi, he started leading a wayward life as he came of age. When his father began to curtail his freedom, he left the slum and shifted to the pavements of the metropolis. In the beginning, pimping came in handy to him to make both ends meet, but soon enough, he had his first peep into the underworld. Never the less, he wanted to stick to crime for a living. Having realized that there was an aura attached to the hired killers in the dark alleys, he opted to become one himself. Though he went scot-free after bumping several heads in Bombay, the assignment that brought him to Delhi led him to the Tihar.

Finding Salim nonchalant, Suresh tried to probe his mind to understand how one could turn a professional killer in the first place. While Salim cursed his ill luck for landing at the Tihar, he had no thought for those whom he had bumped off. It was as though they were no more for him than targets to be hit to the jackpot. What was so unfair in snuffing out someone's life, as life itself had no sense of fairness about it? Those whom he had killed had died as they were destined to die. Why, had he missed his mark, wouldn't have a speeding truck mowed them down in time?

And what was all the fuss about the fate of the deceased's kith and kin? How can one be sure that they wouldn't have welcomed the development? If a drunkard was bumped off, wouldn't that have stopped his draining the family money any-more? Ha, what if an impotent was the assignment? Wouldn't that have helped his wife's sex life with her paramour sans qualms? What would even a well married woman have got to lose if the *supari* widowed her? If young, some man would be too eager to enter into her life and were she old enough, she wouldn't be missing her man anyway.

If the assignment was to bump off a woman, wouldn't the widower be free to have a younger mate? The death of a parent should not make much of a difference to the children either, as anyway; they had to fend for themselves sooner than later. And that being the reality of the relationships, what was the hitch if some lost their lives at his hands? Besides, had it not been said that the dead have no problems? What mattered was to lead a carefree life as long as it took to live. But, the goddamn Tihar had robbed the charms of life from him.

'Oh, isn't crassness a part of life?' thought Suresh. 'Though lacking in morality, it seems, Salim's crimes had a logic attached to them! Maybe, that is what crime is all about. Looks like it has a rationale of its own to evolve the dynamics of man's undoing. But is it so with the so-called honor-killings of the unfortunate females whom the Cupid tends into the arms of lesser males across the caste barriers? What an irony is that men invest their honor in their women all the while treating them as vassals! What idiocy the honor-killing is - would it ever restore to the family the lost honor? Why, with the infamy of murder tagged to it, it only ensures a double jeopardy for the family, won't it?'

A sense of ridicule seemed to haunt Wadhwa in spite of his tough image at the Tihar. The innate doubt that he could be the object of ridicule as a cuckold always haunted him. What did he achieve by eliminating his wife's paramour in a fit of rage, the result of his sense of outrage? True, he had his rival to her favors die while he was still alive and kicking. Thank God, he would not be dying on the gallows either! After all, given the provocation, didn't the courts hold that a life sentence would meet the ends of justice? With a little bit of luck, he might even get remission sooner than later. But, what might release mean to him then, when the best part of his life would have been spent behind the bars?

Even when freed, won't it be his lot to wear the cuckold badge? What a shame he had advertised that his wife was loose? Oh, she did visit him often enough, but who knew she hadn't replaced her dead lover? After all, wasn't she as attractive as ever? And thanks to his rashness, she became a free bird without an encumbrance to name. Being young and amorous, she might be having the time of her life, even as he was languishing for a mate in the hell of a cell.

How stupid of him to have killed that fellow! It's as if the dead soul had left his share of problems to his upkeep as it were! And having earned a sentence for himself, hadn't he granted her unfettered freedom to have her way, anyway she liked? If anything, the news of her looseness would have whetted the appetites of many in the neighborhood. Wouldn't that enable her to satiate her lust even more? Oh, how had he got into the no-win situation, making it all win-win for her?

Why, he had ended up facilitating for her what he wanted to prevent her from doing. The irony of his crime saddened Wadhwa no end. Oh, given his own need for her favors, he should've turned a blind eye to her infidelity or made her pay for it through a divorce. Either way, he would have got along with his own life. But oh, he had allowed himself to be condemned when he had other ways to settle scores. Given the unfortunate repetition, would he have dared touch her lover with a long pole?

As and when he would rejoin his wife, she might even remain faithful to him, having had her fun all the while. Well, even if she were to be chaste, wouldn't both of them have been past their prime by then? Won't that leave them cold on the sex front then? Above all, it would only be a life of unease at home and ridicule in the lane.

While Wadhwa lamented thus, Suresh couldn't help but recall the parallels in his parental story.

Parikshit Agarawal, nicknamed 'the parasite' by the prisoners, was literally a lost soul. The posthumous child of a poor widow, he graduated by the sweat of his mother's brow. Fascinated by what he was deprived of, he dreamt of owning a Vespa. But his mother had designs of her own—she wanted to renovate their old home. When he became a babu in the government, his daydreams acquired a new dimension: he wished for joy rides with his wife. And the mother-son duo saw an opportunity to realize their goals with the dowry in the offing.

But, as the needs of life prevailed over the wants of his dreams, the dowry that Ruma fetched was consumed by their decrepit dwelling. Thus, his outings with his wife were reduced to mere bus rides. But, sharing his disappointment, his mother thought it fit to goad him to turn to Ruma's father for additional doles. When he sold Ruma the idea of their joy rides, she didn't fall for it fearing that would break her father's back further. It didn't take long for her parents to sense that she had a rough ride in her home street. Pestered by her mother, when she spilled the beans, her father tried to appease his son-in-law by agreeing to part with his old Lambretta.

But as Parikshit was hell-bent upon a brand new Vespa the stalemate continued. And to win the next round, he came to increase the pressure on his spouse. But, as she remained steadfast bearing the brunt of his frustration, he took to wife beating. Besides, to browbeat her through sentiment, he accused her of bothering more about her paternal interests than that of her own husband's. Unable to bear his daily regimen and to blackmail him back into his senses, she threatened to commit suicide. As it did the trick, he retreated for a while.

Soon, seeing him morose, his mother suggested that if only they could get rid of his wife, she would find him another bride with a Vespa in tow. Seeing a silver lining in his wife's death, Parikshit dared to dream all again and that sapped the last thread of emotional bondage in his heart for her. Seeing her as the roadblock to his dream ride on his Vespa, he insensibly turned insensitive to her fate. Becoming obsessive to get rid of her, he turned cruel to her.

Once, when he pushed her up to the hilt, she talked about suicide and he abetted her up to the brink. When in desperation, she doused herself with kerosene; he incited her by thrusting a matchbox into her hand. As she took out a stick in pique, he provoked her to ignite herself. Having pushed herself into a corner and as if to uphold her honor, Ruma did his bidding. While she was engulfed in flames, he feigned panic feeling glad at heart.

Though he tried to picture her death as an accident, her father's complaint to the police opened up the Pandora's Box to earn him a ten-year term even as his mother got a couple of years to cool her heels. But, at Tihar, started repenting for the loss of his wife and feared the prospect of spending the best part of his youth without a woman. Thus ruining his fate shaped by his obsession to live beyond his means, he turned morose. And the buzz of the jailbirds that he was a parasite only made life even more miserable for him.

'Wonder how greed makes man mad indeed,' contemplated Suresh, 'and how he turns blind to the consequences of crime! After all, Parikshit had time to understand where all that would lead him to. Leave alone the cruelty of the crime, didn't it reflect the stupidity of man! And what do those murders of sexual jealousy tell but the tale of man's idiocy? Oh, on the pretext of patching up, how easily the husband or the paramour would lure the other into a death trap! What a wonder is it that one comes to trust someone with a motive to harm one! Oh, if only the intended victim had known an iota of the human psychology! Would then there be the death of one and the jailing of the other?'

There were those rustic folks from Rohilkhand, who always huddled together. The Tiharians promptly named them the Dirty Dozen. They were under trial for taking the law into their own hands for dispensing their own brand of caste justice. The trigger was the inter-caste marriage amidst the separatist mindset of the village folks. When the couple was caught red-handed, amidst sweet nothings, all hell broke loose in the village. Apprehended on the spot, the couple was dragged all the way to the village square to face a kangaroo trial at the caste *panchayat*.

Even as the *panchayat* began the session, the errant couple turned out to be the red herring for those gathered there. As if to incense all further with a sense of outrage, and not to let any lose the focus on the social trespass, the conjugated were tied together to demonstrate the magnitude of their crime. As the guardians of the caste chastity brayed for the polluted blood, the transgressors' parents were pushed into a corner to extricate from which they unequivocally condemned the crime. However, they pleaded for mercy and averred that their separation followed by a few lashes would drive home the point.

Though living on either side of the caste divide, the gathering ironically got united to uphold the separation of the deviants. Wanting a deterrent punishment to guard against future transgressions, they all pressed the *panchayat* to make an example of the errant couple. As the condemned were too terrified to speak, someone who came on a visit from the nearby town raised the lone voice of objection to the manner of their detention. Having condemned him roundly for his corrupt thinking, the *panchayat* pitched in for a harsh sentence for the violators of the caste boundaries. And sensing the public mood, the detractors demanded punishment to the fathers as well for their failure to rein in their children.

In that senseless tension brought about by the anger of the ignorant mob and the temptation of some amongst them to settle old scores, the *panchayat* decreed that their respective fathers hang the culprits at that very moment. In a cynical exhibition of human meekness, the hapless

were executed with the very hands that had tended them to their youth. What was shocking more than their heinous deed was their collective belief of its righteousness, that was, in spite of the subsequent public outcry.

Yet, the redeeming feature of that sordid episode was that the fathers of the victims felt emboldened to defy the Dirty Dozen at the Tihar. Ironically thus, they experienced a sense of freedom in their confinement. For once, Suresh felt that his crimes, though abominable, paled into insignificance compared to the *panchayat*'s collective cruelty.

A corner in the cemetery was all that man needed in the end but could he do without some land of his own before that? The compulsion of Hussain and the dilemma of Ram Dev illustrated the reality of land in the impoverished rural north that led them both to the Tihar. While cooling their heels as lifers there, both of them took it all stoically, perceiving themselves as the martyrs of a cause.

Hussain staked his life to protect his land and ended up killing Rashid, his cousin. He told Suresh that those in the towns failed to appreciate the factors that shape the rural life. The social reality in the village centered on land, and land alone. Thus, life in the countryside could be worse than death without some land to till on. As the head of his family, didn't he owe it to his posterity to preserve the property? Why should one blame him, when it was Rashid's avarice that took him to his grave?

Whichever way the law might look at it, Rashid asked for it. Had Rashid had his way, what would have happened to his own family? The hardships of life for his kith and kin would have far outweighed his plight in the prison. Didn't he derive the satisfaction that he had averted a mishap to his family? Why, life seemed to have unique ways to link the fates of the mortals and to de-link their destinies at its whims and fancies!

While his cousin's greed for his land led to Hussain's crime, his own sibling's intent to have his share of the property prompted Ram Dev to kill! Well, he was born into that community, which, over the time, had evolved the custom that would ensure that the family land was not split up amongst its heirs. What if the males of the clan were to partition the family land from generation to generation? In time, no one would be able to inherit any more than bits and pieces. And wouldn't that make the holding unviable for agriculture, so reckoned the clansmen of yore. Were it to happen, their seers had foreseen, its members would dispose their paltry share and all turn into landless laborers.

Sensing how that would impoverish the community further, and to forestall that fate, they evolved a bizarre custom but of practical wisdom. It was ruled that only the eldest son would marry for his wife to be of service to him and his brothers as well in the bed and all. So, the land needed no partition to set up nucleus families which effectually denied the right of the brothers to have a wife of their own. But, Nam Dev, the youngest brother of Ram Dev, failed to develop neither a taste for the custom nor an appetite for the elderly sister-in-law on offer. Thus, when the junior Dev wanted to break from the tradition and itched for his wedding, the senior Dev made way for his funeral.

'How man resorts to murder to protect his interest or avenge an insult!' contemplated Suresh. 'Well, power too augments man's caprice to kill. But man seems to be innately cruel. What a shame the rule of yore winked at the rich abusing the poor. Well, now even the high and mighty men are made to pay for their crimes. Are we not living in the best of just times? Yet, the ignorant eulogize the times gone by.'

Passion of the heart and the greed of the mind make the theme of crime. And on occasion, a black comedy even. He understood that while the crimes of passion were hard to avert, the misdeeds of ignorance could be greatly reduced. He realized that the criminals and their victims suffered alike by the after-effects of the crime. Feeling sad, he vowed to make it his mission to help the victims of crime, nay ignorance. Seeing the families of the Tiharians suffer in myriad ways, he made his first moves in the philanthropic direction at the Tihar itself.

But he thought that the remarkable feature about the petty thieves was that they were all unremarkable. Within or without Tihar, they seemed an unobtrusive lot to him. The jail food seemed to address the very need that drove them into thieving. It was as though the

consequential loss of freedom was indeed a temporary relief from their existential anxiety. Besides, the triviality of their offence made them feel nonchalant about the outcome of the trial and the sentence as well. Indeed for them, the stint at the gaol appeared a welcome change from their wretched routine.

Impressed with his zeal to examine life, Tiwari granted Suresh a free rein at Tihar except for interaction with the Punjabi terrorists rotting in their solitary confinement. All the same, Suresh had avoided Charles Sobhraj, the notorious prisoner of the bikini murders. When he saw that Sobhraj's jailors were at his disposal, he thought he was his own man in incarceration. Seeing the way he lorded over the warders, he could see the abuse of money to defeat the purpose of the sentence. And that made Suresh think Sobhraj was the Beelzebub of Tihar. But, when it came to the terrorists, he felt that having been indoctrinated by others for a cause there never was, they were not their own men even when they were free.

Exposed as he was to the life and times of the convicted, Suresh, in time, firmed up his mind about what he should do and what he should not, as and when he would be free again.

Episode 3

Domain of the Devil

When at length, Suresh was finding his moorings at Tihar; Subba Rau was brought in to a near stampede there. Why not, the whole nation knew him by then as the man who had pricked at the Premier's face. When Suresh enquired what the fuss was all about, Rau said it was but a 'literary coup'. Probed by Suresh for an account, Rau unfolded the story of his life and times as an unpublished writer.

In his mid-forties, Rau was seized with an urge to bring himself onto the fictional stage. So to lend scope for his boundless creativity, he chose the vastness of the 'novel' as the setting. And for the medium of expression, he bypassed his mother tongue, Telugu, the Italian of the East. Instead, he chose English not only for its ability to nuance the complexities of life but also for the flair of expression he had in it. Drawing from his examined life, he set out to portray a young woman's life on the male canvas of India.

Ironically, it was his love for language that impeded the start, but soon enough he got his poetic prose right for the narrative in mind. With his creativity in command over the unique plot he conceived, he wrote with gusto and had his dream novel for his debut in nine months flat. After toiling for a while, for that 'apart title', he pitched in for 'Tangent of Fate'. Then, with a top-of-the-world feeling, he dispatched the manuscript to a leading publisher in New Delhi. While he took the publisher for granted, he received his manuscript post-haste. And that made him see the irony of the title he had chosen for his novel!

This bolt from the blue shook Rau to the core, and he came to doubt his abilities as a novelist. Thus, holding the manuscript, as one would his dead child, he had a last look at it, as the father would, before the burial. But seeing it as crisp on its return as it was when he had posted it, he felt cheated. As he realized that none at the publisher's end had an open mind, he saw the rejection letter all again. He felt sad at the ungracious averment of unsuitability on the designer letterhead.

Impulsively, he felt like resubmitting the manuscript with a rejoinder that the concerned editor could take her own time to read and reject it, if it were a must. But, on second thoughts, he realized that it would be treated as sour grapes, and thus kept his own counsel. Anyway, he tried his luck with other Delhi publishers, this time, all at a time. To his distress, it was like the quote of a cartel: Read your manuscript with interest but found it unsuitable for our publication.

As a last resort, in what was a reverse phenomenon, he looked Westward for salvation, only to be informed that unsolicited souls wouldn't be baptized there. Though he felt it was cruel, he thought it was an honest averment nevertheless. Could it be the unstated policy of the Delhi operatives as well, he suspected, but, couched by the pretentious unsuitability labels!

To get a feel of the publishing scene back home, he pored over the periodicals and the newspaper supplements in right earnest. What amused as well as frustrated him was that while some publicized the published titles to the hilt, the others debunked them as junk in the reviews. Taking the reviewers seriously, he forwarded his manuscript to them, indicating that it had all the ingredients they believed a novel should have in it. And as none of them responded, he wondered whether the critics were more interested in condemning a work than commending any.

And, to find the pulse of the Indian writing in English, he picked up some of the well-hyped novels. As he scanned through them one by one, he was amused to find the two basic features of the published kind: if it was not a case of the Western characters on the Indian stage, then it must be the Indian Diaspora in the Western setting. It appeared to him as though writing about the Indians in India was *passé* for the publishing world.

In that he saw a literary conspiracy — inducing Indian writers in English into churning out self-deprecating stuff to cater to the prejudices of the Western readers. Well, the aspiring authors too went along to provide vicarious pleasure to the Western readers by negating India. That was why, realized Rau, the tent of the Indian novel in English laid with the worn-out Western pegs in the loose native soil came flat at the whimper of a scrutiny. When it came to the Diaspora produce, it was the wont of the Western media to launch it in India in the haze of publicity to dazzle one and all. Well, but, for a novel to impact its readers, it must be the soulful tale of a people steeped in their native soil, isn't it?

But then, why the guys should go to such lengths after all? Well, wouldn't have they sensed the potential of the myriad hues of Indian life to shape fascinating pictures of fictional world? What if, in time, some Mahabharata-like creativity resurged in Indian writing in English? Would not the emerging Indian enterprise commercialize it by inundating Western markets? If that were to happen, wouldn't the public there lap up the same and give up on the Western pulp fiction?

So, reckoned Rau, the Western publishers had set up shop here to avert that eventuality. And the tactic employed by them was to encourage hybrid fiction through publication and dissuade the genuine novel by its rejection. Understandably, Indian writers fell into the trap and began inking hotchpotch on the Western dotted lines. Moreover, to ensure that none deviated from the set course, the publishers had seen to it that the shape they gave it became the norm of the Indian novel. This they could achieve by picturing in the local media that the Indian writing in English was making waves everywhere in the West. Yet, taking no chances, they would keep the bait dangling by doling out hefty advance, on and off, to an odd insider to keep up the farce. It was thus that, the vested interests of the West managed to nip in the bud the genuine Indian novel in English, and averted its challenge to their commercial writing.

However, raising Rau's hopes, as some literary luminaries projected themselves as Man Fridays of the budding authors; he became expectant and felt the world of writing was not all that rough. But when they too cold-shouldered him, he realized that they were only at self-image building, knowing fully well that someone calling their bluff was remote enough. Thus, he realized that the media was but a manifestation of the make-believe at its best. Nevertheless, he philosophized that all could be expected to be busy, getting on with their lives, besides pursuing their own interests. He felt at length that it would be a futile exercise on his part to seek help from any quarter.

Just the same, the irony of the writers' plight pained him. While the 'hard to please' editors reduced the aspirants to the ranks of unpublished writers, the 'harder to amuse' reviewers seemed to wait in the wings to turn the published ones into failed authors! Anyway, while tending to debunk the book on hand, Rau had observed that most of the reviewers aired their grandiose views on the book's topic or tried to exhibit their profound scholarship and/or both. It was as if the book under review provided a stage for their literary exhibitionism!

What distressed Rau most about the reviewers though was the tendency of some to wonder why the book was written at all! And it was in the advice of the reviewers that the author should cease writing that he saw the hand of cruelty in the world of letters. He wondered why they wouldn't realize that their advice was inimical to their own interests, for without books, where

would be the need for reviewers? Wasn't there a felt need for the prevention of cruelty towards the writers? Above all, the publishers and the reviewers alike appeared unconcerned about the hapless readers for whose sake the show was supposedly run.

It was then that he turned to God in desperation. As though addressing his prayers, He appeared in his dream and expressed His helplessness. God said that as publishing was in the devil's domain, there was nothing that He could do to help his cause. Thus, abandoning his further forays into the publishing world, he decided that if he were ever to write again, it would only be for the pleasure of writing, never mind the publishing.

When he could put his bitterness behind, his muse moved him all again. Weaving a story in an intricate plot, he completed his second novel in double quick time. It was as if his bottled up creativity was too eager to find its way out. Naming it as the 'Consigned Conscience', he nevertheless sent the manuscript to all the Delhi-wallahs at one go, though with a sense of resignation. And as another subject with a new dimension infused his urge to write, he plunged himself into his third novel.

As he was in the thick of action by the time the expected rejections arrived, they failed to dampen his spirit. And, one publisher's missive that the theme was interesting but they wouldn't be interested in publishing the same amused him as well. And that made him wonder as to how to write a theme-less wonder for their approval, that was, if they were serious!

When in time, he completed his third novel; he realized that he was back to the reality of life. By then, however, he realized that to be published, one needed either a reference or a recognizable name. As he knew none who ever stepped into the corridors of a publishing house, he thought, before submitting his fresh manuscript, it was an idea to make a name for himself.

Realizing that in the media world, the divider between notoriety and fame was rather thin, he wanted to turn notorious to help the cause of his writing. So he came to New Delhi, to be a part of the crowd that greeted the Prime Minister on his birthday. With a rose with thorns in his hand, he had no problem with the security personnel there. It was thus, he found himself in the queue and waited for his moment. And when the Prime Minister came near him, he pricked at his face with that rose of thorns. When the security detained him for wrongful assault, the media picked up the story to splash it on the front pages.

And that gave him the much-wanted name, didn't it? Even before he could grasp the import of his notoriety, every publisher in Delhi approached him to commission him into writing 'Why I pricked at the PM's face!' Though vindicated, he experienced the problems of plenty as all pressurized him to sign for them. But, for sentimental reasons, he opted to write for that book house, reading whose publications helped him mature into a writer. Though he wrote his three novels at breakneck speed for they carried conviction, he found himself struggling to put a sentence in place for the commissioned work.

When in the end, Suresh wanted to know how he believed his rejected works were worth their effort, Rau said that it was a good question, and mulled over for an answer.

"If only you know," said Rau, "why a hand-to-mouth someone, neglecting his means of survival, wrote ten hours a day for years on, that would answer your question. But as that is too abstract to carry conviction, let me draw your focus on my body of work. Well, all my novels were products of original ideas from the plot downwards. Good or bad that makes them works of art. After all, what is a novel but a creative idea that ever holds in the context? Besides, the beauty of fiction in part is that it tends to lead towards the fact."

"Why did you write the second and third novels when there were no takers for the first one?"

"In its essence, writing is primarily an art of self-expression," said Rau. "And about novel writing, didn't Jane Austin say that 'in a novel the greatest faculties of human mind are on display.' Only after handling a couple or more themes would a novelist come to know about the true capacity of his creative mind. Besides, of what worth is a novelist if he fails to make each of his work unique in itself. But, the bane of the modern world of letters is that many are writing though they have no business to write. But with so many imitating the existing, or writing out of the libraries, there is a surfeit of pseudo fiction. But, a novel is the brainchild of imagination and

not a hotchpotch of all that's known. And it is this narrative routine that makes the genuine readers skeptical about the novels in general. And that's how the classic novel and the genuine novelists have come to grief alike."

Finally, Suresh wanted to know how Rau handled the failures.

"The beauty of the endeavor obliterates the ugliness of the rejection," said Rau. "As I was ever engaged in trying, I had no time to masticate my failures."

"All said and done," said Suresh, "what sense does it made of being a writer?"

"If anything," said Rau, "writing a book is like planting a seed. And if it gets published, it's like the sprouting of a plant. If not, it's a lonely furrow in a no-man's land. Like the gardener tends the plant into a tree, it's the readers who help the book grow in stature. Blessed are the authors who would be able to live long enough to smell that their readers savored the fruits of their creativity. Oh, how that affords such the emotional fulfillment associated with original writing and the ego gratification that applause accords! And in spite of the media hype to the hilt, I'm not sure if all the writer-celebrities derive the emotional fulfillment associated with creative writing. Whatever, in my case, the pain of rejection made me immune to frustration."

After having heard Rau, Suresh felt that in the world of letters, the published and the unpublished writers, being free, were alike condemned.

Episode 4

Renaissance of Life

Stirred by Subba Rau's intellectualism, Suresh pondered over his right to live after having snuffed out Shanti's life.

'What does my killing her really mean?' he thought. 'By ending her life what I deprived her were the possibilities of life. Oh, the poor thing, what dreams she might have had and what life would have offered her! How happy she would have made her man and their children! Who knows what difference she would have made to the people around her? Why wouldn't she have enriched the society at large and contributed to the world even? But my senseless act ruined all that, didn't it? And being featured here what does life hold for me either? If only I were hanged, I wouldn't have to endure all these despairs of denial. She is dead and gone, and as they say, the dead have no problems, but my crime has made me a lifeless corpse! Wouldn't it be burdensome living in the denial mode? It serves me right for depriving the possibilities of her life!'

'What about all these who are locked up here?' he began to wonder. 'What possibilities of life do they really have behind the bars? Don't they realize that by slaying whom they hated, they compromised their own life forever? But, isn't revenge a mad emotion, and murder its negative outcome? How naïve it is to imagine that the threat of the gallows would deter one to resort to murdering! It is man's negative mindset that makes him go after someone's throat. In his mad rage, would man ever envision the noose around his own neck? Having avenged himself, possibly, he wouldn't even care if he were hanged then and there. If only one realizes that by killing the other, he was burying the possibilities of his own life, won't the sense of self-preservation obliterate the urge for revenge? And the law, instead of stressing upon the dangling by the rope, would serve well by highlighting the despairing aspects of life behind bars. Then, wouldn't it be a case of saving a life to save lives?'

It too dawned on him that since the possibilities of his life were within Tihar, he should be alive to the reality of it all. With the appreciation of the situation of his life thus, he began to see what possibilities it held for him. And as the empathy he developed for the fellow prisoners gave him a new insight about himself, he found solace in helping the troubled. Thus, as he tried to make life easy for others, he was relieved of his own pain as well.

Soon it occurred to him that it took more than sympathy to solace the troubled when the anxieties were monitory. Ironically, it was the immense wealth that the father accumulated to his own grief that came in handy in his son's endeavor to help the hapless. Realizing that the

kith of the violators were as much the victims as the kin of their victims, he began to assist the needy from the crime divide. Espying the signs of relief in the visages of the beneficiaries, he felt that their easy breaths might soothe his mother's troubled soul. What's more, the progress reports he regularly sent to Vanaprastham about his own crusade at Tihar insensibly lightened Gautam's burden of guilt by degrees. And the messages of peace he received from his father, in turn, gladdened Suresh's ethos no end.

But, the thought of atrocities against women continued to weigh upon his consciousness. Privy to the pains of rape, women became the Achilles' heel of his tranquility. Applying his mind he reckoned that women were more susceptible to molestation within her home than to her rape without. And he racked his brains to help those thus threatened in precincts of their own dwellings. Besides psychological guidance and emotional support, he realized that these hapless women needed legal help to fight for justice. Thus, he thought of a home for women in distress and wrote to his father to build one under the auspices of Vanaprastham.

As Sripada Swami gave his blessings to the novel venture, Gautam took it upon himself to fulfill his son's wish. In time, the progress of the works at Annavaram became the focus of Suresh's attention in Tihar. Having been enthused by his son's obsession to his project, Gautam doubled up his effort to hasten its completion. Besides, he posted the pictures of the work-in-progress to his son to enable him to visualize his dream in the making. Soon, Suresh began craving to meet his father to express his gratitude in person, but Gautam didn't relent from his vow never to set foot in Delhi again.

When Suresh received the news clippings from the regional press about the inauguration of Shanti Sadan by Sripada Swami, he had a feeling of reprieve from his sense of guilt. Meanwhile, his zest for life and zeal to be of help to the needy was not lost on Rakesh Tiwari and the other warders. Convinced about his boundless potential to contribute to the society as a free man, they made it their mission to earn him an early remission. Thus, it was only time before they succeeded and Suresh was all set to leave Tihar.

That noon when the sun on Lutyen's Delhi's skies was at its zenith, Suresh was led out of Tihar that destiny had made it his home for seven youthful years. And he stepped out of the imposing gates to explore life as a free soul in the same world where he had failed before. But he couldn't help staring at Tihar's facade as though to grasp the reality of his release. As he set out to walk into the waiting Ambassador, he felt as though the burden of freedom bogged him down. When he got into the back seat, he felt as if he were sinking into the upholstery. When the car moved towards Misty Nest, he lowered the panes as though to remove the barrier. And inclined as he was to savor the sight of freedom, he asked the chauffeur to slow down. In time, the change in Delhi's skyline made him feel alien in the city of his origin.

The sight of pretty women on the way troubled him all the way. It dawned upon him that the prospect of not finding a bride would confound him no end. Why should any girl, privy to his past, ever consent to marry him? What if some parents with an eye on his wealth were to brainwash their daughter into marrying him? Won't that lead to an uneasy embrace to her and a cold kind of nuptial for him? How constricted could be life inhibited by his past? Would he ever come across a dame who would accept him for what he was? Oh, how his life seemed to hinge upon this chance occurrence! What else could he do than daydream of his dame! Of what avail would his freedom be without a loving wife in life? But would he be able to engage a woman with his benumbed mind? Oh, why didn't he think about it before?

Before he got an answer, he was at the gates of the Misty Nest. As the thoughts of the past returned to the fore, he could think no more of his future. Thus, he got out of the Ambassador as though to cross the threshold. To the silent welcome of his father's trusted men and his mother's clan who came to see him, he responded with wetted his eyes. But, his gesture of bowing before the bungalow, treating it as his mother's *mandir*, brought tears to the indulgent gathering. When he perambulated the dwelling taking her room as *sanctum sanctorum*, all followed him in equal reverence. But as he ventured into his mother's hallowed quarters, others held back to afford him the privacy of the momentous occasion.

Entering Sneha's room languidly, he prostrated before her revered painting as he would before a deity and, with damp eyes, he was lost in prayer for her troubled soul. And, touching

the frame at her feet, he vowed to fulfill her last wish to uphold the cause of her sacrifice. Even as the maternal memory triggered his filial impulses, he was impelled to reach his father forthwith. But on second thoughts, he felt it was easier to feel easy before his mother's portrait than in his father's presence. So he decided to go by train than catch the flight to reach his father.

After informing his father by wire about his changed itinerary, with a sling bag for his baggage, he got into a packed unreserved bogie of Dakshin Express that day. Finding the place brimming with life, in spite of the inconveniences, he saw the power of hope when man was free. Noticing that a young woman on the platform glanced endearingly at him, he thought she might scorn him if she came to know of his crime.

After two days of arduous journey, made light by the thrill of newfound freedom, he reached Annavam by bus but not before changing trains en route. As he neared the town he sighted the hilltop temple of Satyanarayana Swami and felt as if his weariness was on the wane. Alighting from the bus at the temple steps, he hired a rickshaw to take him to Vanaprastham all the way eyeing the temple. But, once he reached the ashram, dotted with the thatched huts, his eyes longed to espy his father. When he revealed his identity to the first comer, he was led to his father, whom all revered there as guruji.

Entering that *parnasala*, Suresh saw his father in his resplendent beard. Gazing at him with a sense of affection, he felt that his father looked every inch a venerable guruji. Thus overawed by his father's aura and pushed by his own emotion, Suresh fell at Gautam's feet. And a gratified Gautam found himself crying over his son's head even as Suresh began washing his father's feet with his tears. But the father, wanting to size up his son as a man, readily helped him to his feet. Soon, propelled by his admiration for his son's persona, Gautam took Suresh into his arms, but finding his eyes welled up with tears still, he stroked his lad's head for mutual solace and as if to celebrate their reunion in unison, he too began shedding tears of joy in profusion. Thus, as they both felt their emotions were at conversation, they did not attempt to utter a word for fear of distraction.

When they were lost still in satiating their emotional appetite, Sripada Swami walked in, and in a gesture that none had visualized, he hugged Gautam's prodigal son. What was more, the swamiji kissed Suresh's forehead and that surprised the onlookers even more. Beholden, father and son prostrated at the swamiji's feet and washed them afresh with the tears of their souls. Urging them to their feet, the swamiji said that Vanaprastham was blessed by the presence of two blessed souls in them.

By the time the call came for the community lunch, the swamiji was closeted with Gautam and Suresh for long. Thereafter, in an unprecedented gesture, holding them both, the swamiji led them into the dining hall creating a sensation in the ashram. Before the ashramites could gather their wits, the swamiji stupefied them all by asking Suresh to sit beside him. Sizing the import of the moment, Gautam took to serving the swamiji and his blessed son. It was a moment that feasted the eyes of the ashramites and the visitors alike. When Suresh took his turn to serve his father, the swamiji invoked that his hands be forever blessed to serve humanity at large. That poignant moment, all agreed, would be etched in their memory for posterity. And that cherished day at the ashram became folklore in time.

Later, serene with a sense of spirituality that he never before experienced, Suresh went into a siesta. When he woke up, eager to go to Shanti Sadan he reached his father's *parnasala* to take leave of him. Finding him engaged in conversation with a young woman, a hesitant Suresh stood at the entrance. When Gautam gestured him to enter, the woman instinctively turned her gaze towards Suresh at the entrance. As their eyes met, they instantly sparkled with mutual attraction.

When Gautam introduced her as Vidya Rao, the woman in-charge of Shanti Sadan, Suresh was overwhelmed with a sense of gratitude as well. As he thanked her for her dedication to his cause, she told him that she owed him more for being a beneficiary of his vision. In time, seeing Suresh's impatience, the guruji asked Vidya to show his son how his dream had turned into reality in Shanti Sadan. But Vidya suggested to Suresh that they might stay on to hear the guruji's discourse that swamiji himself was wont to attend. She further said to a proud Suresh

that people flocked to Vanaprastham to hear guruji's talks that the swamiji hailed as the gems of Hindutva.

At that, an overwhelmed Suresh touched his father's feet impulsively, and said he was blessed to be his son. In time, having heard his father with rapt attention, the son realized why so many thought hearing his discourse was like awaking into the dawn of enlightenment. At the end of the discourse, as Suresh went to fetch his handbag, Vidya waited for him in contemplation. By then, Annavam's horizon had turned orange.

Episode 5

Sprouts of Love

Following Suresh with her eyes, Vidya thought about swamiji's benign gesture to him that she had heard about. She felt that swamiji's regard for guruji's prodigal son vindicated her own position. She recalled that day when swamiji briefed her about the life and times of Suresh. How even before she could recover from the shock of what she had heard, swamiji placed Suresh's photograph before her! And didn't he ask her to make Suresh's story privy to every inmate of the Shanti Sadan!

How impressed she was with what she saw of him in that picture! How puzzled she was when swamiji ordained that Suresh's pictures be displayed all over Shanti Sadan! Didn't he theorize that the picture of his youth and the plight of his soul would enable the inmates to reflect upon their hurt from the angle of the culprit's suffering? It was swamiji's belief that the very fact that the inmates owed their succor to a reformed sinner might help them overcome some of their own bitterness. Besides, as Suresh happened to be guruji's son it would have value addition as well, would it not?

How swamiji's disclosure and his diktat affected her! Why she found herself staring at the photograph all the way to Shanti Sadan! How handsome he looked in that picture and what mischievous smile he had! Didn't she feel as though he was smiling at her? What a pair of magnetic eyes he had! How they had kept her glued to the frame for hours on end all these years! How long did she search for the clues to his criminality in his serene demeanor! But did she find any? And having found none, didn't she fall in love with his attractive face? All the same, how shocked she was when she realized that!

How troubled she was that he was serving time at Tihar for rape and murder! How the mixed feelings of awe and pity perturbed her! Didn't she in the end pardon him for his crime as he showed the strength to reform himself? How glad she was that he was a sensitive soul! Didn't she feel proud of him that he turned out to be a Good Samaritan? Did she ever think about anyone other than him from then on? How often did she wish he had not done what he did so that he wouldn't be languishing in the jail? What a wonder that she began to see his crime itself as misdirected masculinity! How she waited for him in the hope that he too would fall in love with her! Did she have a wink ever since guruji told her about his impending release? Now that he had come, could her eyes keep sleep away for her to cherish his visage all the night? If he looked handsome in those pictures, oh, how divine he appeared in his person!

Why, was he not swept away by her as well? Was he not all the while looking at her on the sly! Well, he was unable to take his eyes off her! No doubt, he was fascinated by her. Was it love at first sight for him too! Wouldn't it crystallize in his heart as it happened with her? After all, fate was kind to him in the end. Having spoiled part of his youth, it's as if it developed second thoughts about the fairness of it all. And in regret it granted him love as he came out of the jail! Why make him lose time on dates and all to spot his mate! Hadn't he lost so much time already? And she too! Thank God they could meet at last. Would fate unite them without losing further time?

As she was lost thus, he walked up to her as one would to a girl next door. But, as he neared her, his sprouting love, abetted by the radiance of her soul, swayed him. Mystified as she was by swamiji's affection for him, she stared at him as though in a trance. And when he came near her, it seemed to her as if the magnetic force in him brought her back to her senses to make her feel

shy even more. And as he too failed to be bold with her, she suggested a shortcut as if she was impatient to lead him to the altar. As he followed her, they took to the fields in the twilight.

In that short stroll made longer by their languidness, as each wanted to be nearer to the other, they found themselves nursing their togetherness. Thus, their proximity in the wilderness infused a sense of romanticism in their enamored hearts. As he turned his gaze skyward, as if to find out what the stars might foretell, he saw the moon peeping from the horizon. As though on cue he looked at her, and found her staring at him. When she lowered her gaze, he wondered whether she would be willing to wed him. As if stirred by his apprehension, she raised her head to share his sense of uncertainty. Goaded by her impulse, though she found herself showing him her willingness, the gauziness of reciprocity in his eyes made her lower her own gaze in all shyness. As if to aid them find their moorings, chance placed some farm-hands on the way to greet them for a wedded pair. And thus, their sense of togetherness was buttressed by the thrill of romanticism. When she alerted him at the gates of Shanti Sadan, he realized he had walked somnambulant a long way.

Entering the compound tentatively, he discerned some bronze bust on granite in the midst. When he turned to Vidya in surprise, she said it was guruji's homage to Shanti's memory. But, sensing his embarrassment, she told him that the story of his life, beginning with Shanti, became the leitmotif of the Sadan. Without a word, he walked up to the bronze and found himself staring at the figure. And in time, he ended up embracing it in penitence. Overwhelmed by regret, as he washed the bronze in tears, she was beside herself and consoled him with caress. Composing himself, he thanked her for her concern for him.

When she suggested that he could go around the place after dinner, he insisted on seeing the fruits of her effort forthwith. As she introduced him to the animated inmates, he was gratified to note that they didn't make him feel embarrassed. Smelling the professional air therein, he looked at Vidya in appreciation. In the end, he said he could have fallen behind by a mile or more if he were to manage the show on his own. At length, she led him to her office room, which she had turned into his makeshift bedroom.

Apologizing for having driven her out of her workplace, he said in jest, that he would skip dinner in penitence. At that, he wondered what gave him the courage to think in terms of courting her. As she smiled her pardon, he said he would join her after a shower. Finding his picture staring at him at the entrance, as he looked at her in surprise, she turned coy in her response. Though he persisted with his query, she left him in a quandary.

In time, having freshened herself, when she rejoined him, he found it hard to desist from desiring her. Seeing his predicament and surmising the reason for it, she enjoyed their engagement of hopeful anticipation. When they sat for dinner along with the rest, the aroma of the preparations tempted his taste buds to their roots. Thus, he felt glad that the girls were well cared for and thanked Vidya for all that.

After dinner, he proposed they walk a mile and she said she wouldn't mind even if it were a score. Thus, they had a stroll of nearness in that vast compound before the contour of the place brought them back to where they started. When she said it was time she left, he extended his hand as though to retain her. As she grabbed it readily and shook it warmly, he looked at her as though pleading with her not to desert him. Though she released his hand and bade him goodnight, unable to leave her, he accompanied her up to the wicket- gate. Even after she disappeared into her nearby quarters, he stayed there hoping for her reappearance. But, soon it dawned on him that he had to be wary of his conduct so as not to jeopardize her fair name. So, he turned back to be welcomed by his smiling photograph.

Episode 6

Despair of Hope

Pushed by the import of his own photograph, Suresh landed in the right bed in seven years. But, before his body could grasp the creature comforts, his mind was gripped by despair. So sleep deserted him for the first time in many years.

It didn't take long for him to realize that the fondness he felt for Vidya was the sign of his love for her. Notwithstanding the concern she showed for him, he couldn't bring himself to think she could be in love with him. The thought that she knew about his past embarrassed him for the very fact of her knowing it. In spite of his past, that she was sympathetic towards him infused a hope in him. As he recalled her empathy for the inmates, he was convinced that she shared his sense of the mission. What an ideal wife she would be! And given his background, he wondered whether it would be becoming of him to hope for her hand. As his sense of decency restrained him from daydreaming about her, he tried to desist from thinking about her altogether.

But as her magnetic persona and his nascent love made a common cause, he was constrained to contemplate on the consequences of his attraction for her. He was certain that every passing moment would deepen his desire for her. And that surely would make him miserable all the while. Should he dare to propose to her as a way out, would she hesitate to repudiate, never mind her gratitude for his father? But, that way, wouldn't his fear of rejection stop him in his tracks forever? After all, why should any girl like her ever consent to become his wife? Why, she would surely be averse to the idea itself! Looks like she was enamored of him, but was that enough to induce her to wed him? Couldn't she picture the perils as his wife? Why not, given her high IQ? So it seemed to him that the choice for him boiled down to the rock and the hard surface.

'Damned if I do and damned too if I do not,' he felt at length. 'Whether or not I express my love, won't my status remain the same, that of an unrequited lover. What an unpalatable dish that life had served me at Vanaprastham! Seems I was better off at Tihar for all that. Devoid of expectations, didn't I exist in peace? What did freedom bring me in its wake? How I am exposed to the temptations of life without any hope of fulfillment! But, why did fate bring me out of my cell? How have the limitations of my life come to taunt my love? Looks like my past will hinder my future forever. Oh, that's the real tragedy of my life.'

As he saw the futility of his love, he cursed his past and wished he were dead on the gallows. Feeling helpless about the dichotomy of his past, he despaired at the idea of seeing her again. Why, he even felt like leaving her for good. But, his weakness for her came in the garb of wisdom to sound what was in store for him in the future. What if he were to find himself in a similar situation later? Would he forever be on the run, avoiding women who attracted him? Caught between the futility of his present love and the possibility of a future attraction, he was awake for long in despair.

Reaching her quarters, Vidya tried to envision her place in his life. As if to grasp the source of his love for her, she went up to the mirror to scan herself. Sensing that she never looked better, she tried to visualize herself through his eyes. Recalling his visage, she turned ecstatic, but soon realizing that her own reflection was distracting her from focusing on him, she moved away from the mirror. And not to lose the chain of her thoughts, she got into her bed without changing her dress. As she fell flat on her cot, she mirrored her lover in her mind's eye. And as she pictured his enamored face, she began surmising how she might have appeared to his eyes.

'What a feeling it is to love and be loved!' she thought joyously. 'How unique was our meeting! Oh, what a way it was to meet the man I waited for so long! Why, my imagination failed me to picture the way we actually met! How my longing failed to envision the ardency of my response! What a wonder all the encounters of my daydreams pale! Well, it was better that way as that gave me the thrill of the newness! Given even the marvelous looks of his teens, how unimaginably handsome he became! Wouldn't he have noticed the animated face I presented him! Maybe, the glow in his eyes would have enhanced my own charm then. And how fascinated he seemed? Wouldn't I have looked divine going by his sparkling eyes? Why, didn't I wish that I had a way to look at myself to see that myself then? If only I could've borrowed his eyes to find out how I appeared to him!'

Dwelling on the imagery of their mutual attraction for long, she turned her focus onto his person. 'But then, didn't he turn tentative in time?' she continued in her enamored state. 'But, then can't I understand? Well, what a sensitive soul he turned out to be! How he hugged Shanti's statue as though to solace her soul! What a way to pay homage to the memory of the woman he had wronged! Won't I know what it took me to control my impulse to take him into

my arms, more so, when he was in tears? If only I could have embraced him endearingly then, what a solace I would have given him! And what a nice feeling it was to caress his back! Bugged down by his sentiment of guilt, maybe, he would have missed the warmth of my affection for him. But then, he shouldn't have failed to grasp the force of my love in the grip of our handshake. Why all this speculation, when it is obvious that he is in love with me? What could be his next move? Is he likely to propose by tomorrow?

The thought of his love for her made her seek the cause of her own *amour* for him. So, she began to dig into her own heart to see how her love had got crystallized at the bottom of it. Why did guruji treat her like a daughter and guide her like a son all these years! Oh, how everyone revered him at the ashram. And he was known to be in line to succeed the swamiji when the time came. It was said that only the swamiji was privy to guruji's past life, whatever it was. Indeed, no one even knew wherefrom he came to Vanaprastham. Even though guruji allowed her to take liberties with him, she never dared broach the topic of his *grihashthram*.

How eager she was to see more of Suresh when guruji showed her his family album. Didn't she by then frame in her mindset his picture that swamiji gave? Why, she held the album like a holy book for a while. But then, she turned coy as she began with the pictures at the end. Wouldn't have guruji guessed her fascination for his son? Lost as she was to Suresh's pictures, how would she have known about it? And, as she saw picture after picture of the handsome guruji and his beautiful wife, how fascinating she felt! When she came to the mid folios, didn't she find a cute and naughty toddler in their laps? Didn't she think he bore his mother's features? How dignified the couple looked in their middle age! Besides, didn't they look rich and suave? As every picture tied her down, competing for her attention, how long it took her to reach the bottom all again! Didn't Suresh look handsomer than his father ever seemed?

When she was through, guruji left her alone, as though to let her have a second look at his son. So, staring at Suresh's pictures all over again, she did try to picture guruji's life. Why a wealthy man with such a wonderful wife should've renounced his family life and embraced *sanyas*, never mind, his son landing up in gaol! Was it possible that his wife died in some road accident? And did that break his heart to renounce the world? What could have made Suresh a spoilt brat?

While Vidya groped in the dark for the right answers, guruji who returned by then, threw light on the tragedy of his family. She heard it all in awe and remained stunned for long. As though to extricate her from her shock, guruji came up with the breaking news that Suresh was expected there anytime. Oh, how the development made her expectant! When guruji wanted her to tie the loose ends at breakneck speed, didn't she fly to the Sadan with the wings of love?

How, for long, did she struggle to comprehend what she had heard! But why did guruji think it fit to reveal all that to her? When she tried to grapple with the reality of guruji's life, she realized the potential of his past to damage his current rating. How flattered she felt that he chose to confide in her at the risk of even compromising himself at the ashram. She discerned the shades of guruji's conflicting interests present in the predicament of her own father. Without being judgmental about either of them, she tried to analyze the way each of them responded to the temptations of life. And when she realized that one could never really place oneself in others' shoes, she saw the virtue of giving allowances for the actions of others.

It took her a while to feel comfortable with the reality of guruji's past. When it came to Sneha, she felt that it was a case of double jeopardy for her. Why, didn't she feel that being a woman, Sneha had to bear the brunt of the exposé and the worst of fates, though she and guruji were in the same boat? Somehow, she came to love Sneha and pity her at the same time. She thought that Sneha lived with a dead soul, but in trying to save her son, she died a blessed soul!

Soon Vidya's thoughts began to hover around Suresh's chequered life. She felt the juvenile part of his life was as pitiable as it was contemptible. But the substantive part of his life fascinated her in the beginning and endeared him to her in the end. Oh, his was an extraordinary life given the magnitude of his crimes and the strength of his resolve to reform himself, and she felt excited at the prospect of sharing life with such a man. Why she came to see so many similarities in nature and attitudes between them!

As though to match his sense of purpose, she spruced up Shanti Sadan even more. And, by the time it was all spick and span there, she realized she had already warmed up her heart for him. How nice it felt that she would make him feel wanted when he came. When guruji sent word to her about his arrival, oh, how she felt! Why, was not all set to let Suresh into her life? But yet, she wondered whether he would like to take her as his wife. That made her nervous all the way to Vanaprastham and as she approached guruji's *parnasala*, inexplicably, she recalled his past propensities! And that made her have second thoughts about him. So, in time, she developed apprehensions about her own future with him. Oh, that was before they met.

'We are bound to develop intimacy, given our mutual liking,' she couldn't help but think about her future afresh. 'Then, won't I turn vulnerable in time? Would it take much for him to pull me into his embrace? What if, after having had his fun with me, he goes back to Delhi for further merriment? All said and done, won't it be risky courting him?'

But, as the prospect of losing him didn't appeal to her, she took him on a ride to her soft spot. 'Would it be fair to put him on a perpetual trial?' she thought, feeling guilty for having doubted his integrity. 'Hasn't he proved that he's a changed man? What has his past got to do with our future life? Didn't he pay the price for it in full measure? After all that suffering would he ever cause suffering to others? And hasn't he proved his mettle by funding the very roof that shelters me? Isn't that enough to be indebted to him all my life? What is it if not a paranoia to focus on his past, ignoring his current credentials? How unkind of me to think he would take advantage of women, given his zeal to help them! What if he really proposes?'

The possibility of her marrying him made her speculate her life as his wife.

'Would he make a normal husband with that troubled background?' she found herself thinking. 'Oh, what would happen, should his misogynist tendencies resurface in due course? And won't his past haunt me in his intimacy? Would I be able to lead a normal life with him? Won't that affect his psyche in turn? We may then end up in the *adalat* midway during the honeymoon itself! Is it not the time to pause and grasp?'

So, she tried to analyze the impact of his crime and punishment on their married life. Getting no clear picture herself, she thought he should've done his homework to handle his inhibitions. She would be on hand as well to help him in the course correction in case of deviation. After all, they were in love and that would ensure a head start, sexually and otherwise too. Hadn't she come to admire his nature and character as well? What could be a better recipe for a spicy married life than passionate love? But, as she remembered the love her father once showed her, she turned skeptical about love itself.'

'Human proclivity is a tenuous thing, isn't it?' she contemplated, bogged down by self-doubt. 'It could be possible that the force of circumstances and the burden of guilt have brought about the apparent change in him! And when his past wounds would have healed, what's the guarantee that he won't sink into depravity all again? Given his good looks, he's bound to enamor women, and then his status would only add to his attraction? Why, his wealth is bound to provide him the means to turn into a playboy in spite of me. In that case, as his neglected wife, it would make my life miserable. Would I then go his mother's way? Oh, what a dreadful prospect that would be! And that might rake up the past wounds to compound guruji's pain!'

As the picture presented by her rationale as his neglected wife did not appeal to her, her love sought to envisage her life as his fulfilled woman. 'Well, that way, could anything be guaranteed in life?' she contemplated. 'If he were to get worse, for the old times' sake, wouldn't he be considerate to me? I'm sure he would.'

When it occurred to her that she was building castles in the air she thought, depressed with that idea, 'In my flight of fancy, am I am placing the cart before the horse, so it seems. Why should he want to marry me at all? Won't his social status erect a barrier between our love and our marriage? Why, his attraction for me could be but a transient distraction for him. Who knows, he might like to opt for one from his own class! Would there be any dearth of brides for him? If not out of love, at least for his wealth, won't women line up to tie the knot with him?'

However, unable to reconcile to the thought of losing him, she turned again to hope for her solace.

'But, guruji could be thinking in terms of making me his daughter-in-law,' she thought. 'Looks like, he feels I would be the right wife for his son. If not, what was the need for him to expose his embarrassing life to me! Besides, wasn't he treating me like his own daughter all these years? Well, he would get us married, that is for sure. But, why am I desperate to marry him? Am I coveting his wealth in the guise of love?'

As the thought made her disconcerted, she probed her mind to find the truth.

'Oh, won't I know coveting wealth is neither the grain of my nature nor a streak of my character?' she began the self-analysis. 'What is wealth for, if it is not to idle away? And can I ever imagine a moment without being active, to be happy? Oh me, would I ever want to live in idle luxury? No, never. I love him and value him, and that could be behind my craving for sharing life with him. If I were destined to marry him, I would strive to keep him on the philanthropic course he has set for himself. Well, I too would be able to contribute a bit with my dance performances. Life with him should be fulfilling as well as purposeful, not to speak of the excitement our lovemaking would ensure. Above all else, I love to be with the man I have come to adore.'

Having resolved her dilemma thus, she felt she owed him to tell all about her at the next round. She realized that given his state of mind, it might need her prompting to make him open his heart to her. So, she felt she needed to take the lead, even if it was a little immodest on her part. Well, given his tentativeness, it would be in order if she made him feel wanted. If not, how was she to guide their love to its destination? Resolving thus, she went to sleep with her love for company but not before recalling the turn at the bend that led her to Vanaprastham.

Episode 7

Turn at the Bend

Rama Rao came from a respected family that lived by the imagery of its past glory. By the time he got his Fellowship of Arts, his father had thrown in the towel over his ambitions for a degree in the same. Courtesy his surname, which was still a currency then, he became a clerk in the Registrar's Office at the Andhra University. The parental pressure to marry his maternal cousin was mounted soon enough to push in Rama Devi into his disappointed life.

Much before he could reconcile to his fate that robbed him of his graduation, the idea of an early offspring captured his imagination. After all, he wanted to see his children settle down well before he retired. Thus, Vidya found her way into this world to be a part of her parents' first wedding day. By the same token, Mohan and Raghav followed her in quick succession. And that enabled Rama Rao to opt for vasectomy at the height of his virility.

As his daydreams about his children's future began to overshadow his past disappointments, he could see the short-term advantages of early parentage. Thus, in the euphoria of his hope, Vidya and her brothers had a dream childhood. As his wife too shared his optimism, their house became a Place of Good Hope. In time, when it was time for his kids' school time, he enforced a regimen of their study time. Though Vidya fell in line readily, her brothers' sluggishness became the source of his nervousness.

The boys showed an aversion for studies what with Mohan passionate about sports and Raghav inclined to loaf around. Disturbed by their proclivities, Rama Rao breathed down their necks to goad them to their B grades. But, Vidya, besides excelling at her studies became adept at *kuchipudi*. Even as he watched his daughter's progress at the dance academy with a hawk eye, he kept a tight leash on his sons at home. And all that changed as his children became adolescents.

Soon, he realized that while his daughter became sensitive, his sons turned insensitive to his sensibilities. When his sons managed to crawl to college, he doubled his vigil over their activities. But, as he saw them going astray, he was truly a worried man. Observing the campus scene as it evolved, he was aghast at the children of the moneyed receiving pocket money the size of his pay-packet. With their fathers' ill-gotten wealth, he reasoned, these youth pandered to their egos by inducing the have-nots to be their hangers on. When the circus came to a close

at the campus, he envisaged, the rich and the privileged would accommodate these ringleaders among their ranks. As for the have-nots, having come cropper at their studies, they would be left with their hard grind for the rest of their lives.

In spite of his discourses, as the waywardness of his sons grew out of bounds, his hard feelings for the wealthy reached obsessive proportions. What was worse, he came to equate riches with corrupt practices. And he came to believe that the rotten campus culture was the outcome of a conspiracy by the corrupt to stall the progress of the upright. He theorized that the corrupt, by waylaying the children of the poor at school, contrived to nip in the bud the challenge of the have-nots. It was thus, he concluded, they came to have hegemony over money for successive generations. Thus, he came to see the corrupt as the scourge of the society for they devour at its very vitals. Why, he even declared that they usurp the fruits of development without any contribution to the growth of the economy. He was particularly unpardonable of them for they caused the high cost of economy that made it worse for the common man. The most condemnable aspect was that they occasioned the moral degradation in society with their corrupting influence.

As his belief grew in what he surmised, so was his penchant to equate the rich with the corrupt and castigate them alike. He soon became a crusader against corruption and advocated the boycott of the corrupt to make easy money an unattractive proposition. The below par scores his boys managed at the exams seemed to underscore the veracity of the theories he propounded making him paranoid. In his perversity, he even came to welcome their failure as it vindicated his own stated position. At the same time, the progress Vidya made both at the fine arts and the sciences revived his visions of the revival of his family to rival its past glories.

His moment of glory came when, in her final year, Vidya went public with her dancing skills on college annual day. In the accolades she received, he envisaged the crowning glory of his surname. Midway during the program, impressed with her beauty and grace, the chief guest approached him for Vidya's hand to his engineer son. Seizing the chance, he ascended the stage and announced that his daughter's hand was sought just then by a highly placed official for his well qualified son. After a dramatic pause, he declared famously, that he was rejecting the proposal as the father was a known grafter. To the dismay of the unfortunate man, he said that the honest public should deem that the campaign to boycott the corrupt had begun.

The echo in the gallery that followed seemed to have led him to the crescendo of his crusade. But, back home, the reactions varied. While his wife thought he was foolhardy, Vidya felt he had the guts to live up to his principles. Mohan and Raghav, who had held by then that their father was cranky, were not surprised by his bravado. And as the incident was widely reported in the press, he thought he had become a celebrity after all.

Shortly thereafter, as Vidya got her degree, she seemed to have reached the crossroads of her destiny. As she began to receive offers to perform in the wake of that publicity, there ensued a debate at home about her future. While her father itched for dancing career, her mother pitched in for marriage. But her father ruled that at nineteen, Vidya was too young to wed and had enough time to dance her way into the wedlock. He added that in due course, she could make a name for herself and that would fetch her some fine match in the end. As Vidya too felt the stage would enable her to fulfill her urge for self-expression, the stage was set for her to turn into a professional.

Thus, she became a performing artist and started getting a good press to boot. Widely acclaimed by connoisseurs and laymen alike, she turned out to be a much sought after *kuchipudi* dancer. It was then that her father sensed the chance to calibrate her appearance fees. Initially, though her family felt the moolah she brought in came in handy, they, in time, ended up developing a vested interest in her earnings. Vidya, however, was too tender and trusting to understand her position until her parents showed their crassness too coarsely for her comfort in that precipitous move.

It so happened that a middle-aged landlord with no occupation to steady his nerves happened to see Vidya on stage. Impressed with her voluptuousness, he developed visions of his becoming a movie mogul with her as the banner heroine. Bitten by the vanity bug and fired by his desire for her, he approached her father to spare her for his endeavors. Promising to

make a series of movies with her as the heroine, the imposter tempted the willing with an open offer. Sensing a kill, her father raised the bar higher which the enamored managed to clear. Thus, taking for granted, her father cemented the deal, however, after grabbing a hefty advance.

When her father goaded her to go to the movie land, she wondered what a hypocrite he turned out to be. And making her contempt clear for a career on the silver screen, she poured water over his dreams. Besides, she said, she never fancied herself as an actress, and if pushed into the act, she would only make a fool of herself. Unmindful of her reservations, he tried to brainwash her about the glories of heroine. Vexed with his arguments, she wanted to know whether he was aware of the casting couch. Blinded by greed, he saw no value in chastity in today's world and for all he knew, he said, it was never the case. He said it was time she realized that the *pativratas* of yore were all cock and bull stories. And that left her aghast.

As she remained steadfast in her refusal, exhibiting more of his insensitivity, he gave her a rosy picture of the film world. As though to address her vanity, he added that it was the best career option for a spirited girl like her. And the benefits of a film career that he tried to show her made her realize that he was out to make money out of her. So, she pointed out, that a career in the movies was like a rainbow in the sky that fades out in time. At that, he said that, in the end, she would land up with some bigwig. Oh, how disgusted she was that her own father was so insensitive to her character! Thus, as he spelled his stake, she sought for time, to find a way out to scoot.

When she approached her mother, she expressed her helplessness saying that it was his will that always prevailed in the end. Besides, she too felt a short stint in the movies wouldn't be a bad idea after all. That might also help her brothers settle down in life in some way or the other. Finding their interests at loggerheads with hers, she realized her continued stay with them was an untenable proposition. So she resolved not to dance to their tune for once.

But, as she began to recce the course for her escape route, she saw the minefields of exploitation all around a single woman. While she thought she had reached the dead end, the movie-mogul-in-the-making began pressing her for the call sheets. At her wits end by then, she chanced to see the coverage about the proposed Shanti Sadan in *Andhra Prabha*. Seeing the silver lining, she enquired about Vanaprastham only to hear the swamiji-guruji duo extolled by one and all. Buoyed by the reports, she wrote to swamiji requesting the reply be mailed to her friend's address. When she received an invitation from guruji by return post, she heaved a sigh of relief.

Excited at the Godsend, she became restive to walk out on her parents straight away. But, thinking better of her impulse, she reckoned that if only she escaped after compromising her father, he would have no face to show her in the future. So she felt it would be an idea to give the slip at the appropriate moment. Thus, contriving her plan of escape, she gave her consent to call their shots. While her people went agog at the green light, the aspiring heroines from her neighborhood were down with envy. But, as her kith and kin drew up plans for their future over her predicament, she could see the ugliness of greed from close quarters. Unmindful, otherwise too, her parents made her ready to accompany the dream merchant to Madras.

At last, as her family bade her farewell when she boarded the Madras Mail at Waltair, she felt something vital had sapped within her. But, as the Mail raced towards her destination, in what seemed to her as an irony of her life, she affected interest in her companion. That afternoon, when the train halted at Annavaram, feigning hungry, she wanted him to fetch her something to eat. As he raced towards an eatery on the platform, she slipped onto the sidetrack to make her escape. Soon, she reached Vanaprastham and even as she was being ushered into his *parnasala*, guruji received her with all warmth. Readily recognizing her potential, he assigned the idea of Shanti Sadan to her constructive care for its early fruition.

However, following in her tracks, her father reached Vanaprastham to cajole her back into his fold. But, guruji backed her to the hilt and stressed that her interests were better served at the Vanaprastham than in the movies. Yet, he tried to coerce her into submission but seeing her unrelenting, he lost his cool and threatened to drag guruji to court for abetment. Shown the door, her father in frustration took the matter to the police station. The S.H.O, a disciple of

swamiji, soundly rebuked the complainant and warned him not to trouble her anymore. And to let her father have a foretaste of future transgression, the inspector put him in the lock-up for that night for trespass.

That night she wondered why her father went to such lengths. Was he a mere hypocrite as she thought he was? Was it only the vested interest in her earnings that was behind his ruckus or was there more than met the eye? Or was his hatred for the moneyed for lack of monitory means? Why, could not his craving for the moolah be owing to his staring at it from the grey side of the monitory fence? Maybe, secretly craving for money, he was publicly castigating the rich. Well, when he had his chance, what greed he showed to grab it with both hands! Whatever it was, she concluded, her family was history for her, not the repeating type though.

Undisturbed by her family and guided by guruji, she put her heart and soul to build Shanti Sadan from its very foundations. Given a free rein by guruji, in due course, she shaped the *sadan*, as a resource to the hapless, not as a resort to the parasites, where she broke away from her past and concentrated on the present until the thought of Suresh stirred the tidings of future in her. All the while, she didn't give up on her passion for *kuchpudi* and honed her skills during her spare time. Besides regaling those at the Sadan, in time, she started teaching dance to the interested at Annavaram.

Episode 8

Amity of Empathy

Next morning, when the creeping hot rays woke up Suresh, he opened the door to thank the sun for the wake-up call. But, finding Vidya loitering in the lawn, he felt embarrassed. When he apologized profusely, she smiled her pardon in all sweetness. Ascertaining his preference for tea over coffee, she went to fetch him some steaming Laoji carrying the picture of him in his *kurta* and pajamas. And he couldn't but help glue his eyes on her leggy frame accentuated by its shapely bottom.

When she went out of his view, supplanting his admiration, the scenario of Shanti Sadan invited his attention. Getting a full measure of the sprawling facility in that golden backdrop, he thought that the ashram-like architecture gave it the look of a model village.

"You seem mesmerized," she said as she reappeared with a thermos flask.

"It's amazing," as he said, so he conveyed the feeling with his eyes as well.

"I'm gratified," she said with a feeling that suggested that she understood his feeling, conveyed through his body language

"I'm indebted."

"Why burden me further?" she said going into his room.

"Do you think I would ever do that?" he said following her into the room. "I was just off-loading a little of mine."

"Let's go to the Lord for mutual relief," she said serving him some tea.

"Give me half an hour."

"What I grant," she said smilingly, "is but twenty-nine."

"Thank you," he said, "it makes it easier by a minute."

"I didn't get you."

"Why," he said sounding casual, "won't that make us meet one minute early?"

"You are interesting really," she smiled as she left with the Thermos.

Returning in a maroon *Kanchi* silk sari, she found him rearing to go. As she apologized for failing to meet the deadline, for a penalty, he suggested a round around the compound.

"Why not suspend the sentence till you get a like punishment from me?" she said with a smile. "Then we can make the round together."

"Well, in that case," he said smiling. "I won't mind annoying you."

"So, here we go," she said leading the way.

When they reached Shanti's bronze, he gazed at it and thanked her for her empathy for him. As they went round the premises, he complimented her for her professionalism and congratulated her for the upkeep of the place.

As they headed towards the Satyanarayana Swami's temple, they soon found themselves on the main road. Noticing that they were attracting the attention of all, he tried to distance himself to spare her the embarrassment. At that, she increased her pace to make a statement. But, when they reached the rocky staircase to the Lord's abode, he fell behind on purpose, and she too didn't seem to mind.

When in the end, they joined the queue to the sanctum sanctorum, the devotees around mistook them for newlyweds. When they reached the deity for *darshan*, the *pujari* too invoked the blessings of the Lord as he would for a married couple. Pleased by the faux pas, they both prayed to the Lord for vetting the *pujari's* invocation. Later, they picked up the *prasadam* and had it for their breakfast in seclusion.

"I've never tasted anything better before," he said, savoring the sweetish wheat preparation.

"It's believed that the life of those who have it would be uniquely sweet," she invented a legend as an expedient.

"I shall have more of it then," he mocked greediness.

"I don't think," she said mischievously, "it's the partnership spirit."

"You're an interesting company."

"It all depends," she said coyly, "on the company."

He wondered whether her allusion was about the Lord or him, and dared not hope in spite of her apparent courting.

"You made me realize," he said, "I need a friend like you."

"Why, haven't you got one?"

"You know how hard life has been on me," he said, "and now hope itself is beyond hope for me."

"Why live in the past when the present is inviting," she said alluding to the *pujari's* faux pas. "Didn't the Lord bless you to rebuild your life?"

"Tell me honestly," he said pointedly, as he could hold no more. "Can you forget my past?"

"Well, didn't I forget mine?" she said, as she felt hesitant to be forthright in her reply.

"What is your story," he said tentatively, "if you can tell me?"

"If I won't tell you, to who else will I?" she said having developed second thoughts about the deviousness of her evasive talk.

"I would like to hear," he said with a strange sense of relief, "now and here."

Making him feel at ease with her empathic gaze, she proceeded to narrate her tale of predicament and its aftermath.

"That's the spirit really," he said in admiration.

"What is it compared to yours?" she said augmenting her statement with facial expression. "Isn't your life remarkable in every way?"

"Thanks for your high opinion on my low life," he blurted out in spite of himself.

"Oh, don't say that," she took his hand instinctively.

"Thank you," he said in gratitude, and added in hope, "but, why haven't you made good of your great escape!"

"By marrying, you mean," she said coyly.

He nodded his head as much to convey his agreement as to indicate his own mind.

"I lost myself in work," she said in all earnestness, and added after a pause, "Who can understand that better than you?"

"I know," he said reminiscently.

"Besides," she said as though to tempt him, "I hadn't met a tempting one."

"Is it my gain?" he felt like saying, but thought it would be too forthright for her comfort. And for want of a better response, he just looked at her in adoration.

"How am I to know, guruji too never broached the topic," she said in a way that sounded he might as well take up the issue with his father.

"Whatever, you're wonderful," he said unable to hide his admiration for her.

"Do you know," she said as her gaze matched the ambience of his mood, "I've been your fan for long?"

In that euphoria of their emotion, as mere words would be superfluous, he impulsively extended his hand to her. Seemingly holding the same view, she grabbed it and pressed it as though to put all her love into it and as his gratitude got the upper hand, he cupped hers in all tenderness. At that, she made it square inducing tears of oneness in their eyes. Even as their tears trickled down to their clasp to cement their fellow feeling, they shed more of them for the same reason.

When they realized that they were attracting undue attention, they were constrained to release their hands while still holding each other's eyes. And as the *prasadam* they partook expended itself to energize their interaction, they got up to go to Shanti Sadan for rejuvenation. On the way back, goading her to keep pace with him, he raced down the steps as though to announce his new-found joy to the world at large.

After their meal, while she left to attend to her pending work, feeling idyllic, he idled in bed until his tiredness invited sleep for relief. Waking up fresh after a while, he freshened himself and reached the mess for some refreshments. Sipping some tea, he chatted with the chef who gave a great account of Vidya. As her praises of his beloved boosted his own ego, he was pleased with the state of affairs so soon after his release.

'Oh, how Vidya makes it easy for me by dispelling my fears,' he went into contemplation. 'She's all empathy for me, but is she in love with me? But what of her body language, won't it convey her longing for me? And isn't the ardor of her love so transparent in her eyes? Would she accept, if I propose?'

As the question of his proposing to her raised doubts afresh in his mind, he went back to square one in the tantalizing game of 'hide and seek' of love.

'Am I mistaking her pity for empathy?' he began wondering. 'Am I misreading her admiration for my dourness as an admission of her weakness for me? Am I not taking her for granted?'

Thus feeling low, he was feeling sad when Vidya came greeting him spiritedly.

"I thought you won't be up so soon," she said.

"The aroma of the tea woke me up," he said pointing at the teacup.

"I was a little tired," she said though joyously. "After all, I had kept pace with you."

As her infectious vivacity made him hopeful in spite of his melancholy, he said, alluding to the *saptapadi*, 'Don't they say walking a few steps together would demonstrate solidarity?'

"Seven to be precise, isn't it?" she said as she sat opposite. "What about some coffee with me?"

"I find tea here like they serve in the North," he said. "I will have more of it."

'The sooner you love coffee, the better it is for us,' she said, alluding to the prospect of her setting up an Andhra kitchen in his Delhi home.

"Why not, if only you serve me?" he said picturing their future.

"Won't I deem it my duty?"

"That's appetizing!" having said in hope, he soon sank into doubt.

"What happened to you?" she enquired concernedly.

"Don't worry, it will come to pass," he said melancholically, helping himself with some tea that was served in the meantime.

"Come, I'll show you my place," she said wanting to divert him from his gloom.

"I would love to," he said as he got up, "knowing that it would be elegant."

"Thanks for the advance compliment!" she extended her hand.

"Guide me then," he said, grabbing it.

As she showed her modest tenement, she reminded him that she owed it to him in every way.

"Don't you know that gratitude is burdensome?" he said, as if cracked by the last straw on his burdensome back.

"I'm sorry," she said taking his hand. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I'm sorry," he said, pressing her hand warmly, "I made you feel sorry."

"I would like to dance for us," she said to help relieve his bitterness.

"I thought of asking you myself."

"What stopped you then?"

"I thought it might sound familiar," he said tentatively.

"You've hurt me really," she said mockingly.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you," he said, as if to underscore that their predicament was the same.

"I'm sorry I made you feel sorry," she said as though to show how they spoke the same language.

"Why not we erase sorry from our mental dictionaries?" he said in hope

"Don't we have to put our minds together for that?" she said, smiling.

While she was readying herself to get into the arena, he goaded her with his admiring gaze. When she pulled the fall of her sari to accommodate her *payals*, he fell for her lovely feet that came into his view. Admiring their taper, as he felt like showering them with kisses, she part-pulled her sari to tuck it at her waist, inviting his eyes to rivet on her exposed legs. Enthused by his enamor as she tightened the *pallu* over her chest, her breasts made their presence felt in their robust form to distract his attention. But to rein in her bosom, as if it turned wild by his ogling, when she tucked the *pallu* too, at her navel, her lissome frame showed its hourglass shape.

Sensing that he was charmed by her charms, as she prolonged his pleasure by toying with herself a little longer, he found himself savoring her every nuance in his mesmeric stare, prompting her to dance at her artistic best to the delight of them both. While the sensuous *mudras* appealed to his romanticism, her sensual movements sharpened his passion to possess her voluptuous frame. As his desire galloped, she reached the crescendo.

"It's transporting," he said, as she was untying the *payals*.

"Thanks, but it would be better on stage with the accompaniments." she sounded apologetic as though she couldn't give him her best.

"How I wish I'm a part of that."

"Why not you sing and see me dancing to your tune," she said turning naughty.

"What if I induce missteps?" he said probingly.

"What makes you think so?"

"If we get into that discussion," he said resignedly, suddenly seized by despair, "it may lead us nowhere."

"Surely guruji would show us the way," she more than suggested the solution to his predicament.

"Whoever said man shouldn't go by woman's words is a moron," he got up in excitement. "Let me go to him right now."

"I'll follow in your footsteps," she said, all pleased.

When Suresh raced to Vanaprastham, he found his father waiting for him.

"How do you like your Shanti Sadan?" guruji greeted him warmly. "Hope we've come up to your expectations."

"It's out of the world to say the least," said Suresh excitedly. "I wouldn't have thought of any better."

"It's Vidya's show all the way."

"She's great really," said Suresh. "We can leave all to her."

"That's true," said guruji, "but what about you?"

"I know," said Suresh, "you know the best."

"If you haven't given your word to any," said guruji heartily, "I've someone in my mind for you."

"If it's Vidya," said Suresh as if he was pleading that she be made his wife, "it would be a windfall for me."

"I was rather keen on her from the beginning."

"But will she agree?" said Suresh, but his eagerness was not lost on the guruji.

"I will find out readily," said guruji with an air of expectation. "I better send for her."

"She's expected here anyway," said Suresh and instinctively looked out and said. "Here she is!"

"Wait in the library," said Gautam having welcomed Vidya.

Sitting restlessly in that seat of learning, Suresh was nervous with expectation. Soon, unable to bear the suspense, he felt like eavesdropping on their conversation. But, as his sense of decency resisted his instinct from venturing, he was gripped with expectation. But when he sighted her stepping out of his father's *parnasala*, as his fears resurfaced, his heart sank. Seeing her advance towards him, beset by doubts, he looked the other way. However, as she came up to him, he lowered his head as though it got heavier by his fears.

"Guruji wants us both," she said, putting it all succinctly.

"Thank you," he sighed in relief.

"Yours truly," she said coyly, signing off his letter of anxiety.

"Why not a pinch for a proof?" he sought her hand.

"Mind we're at Vanaprastham," she said moving away.

"Tell me how my fate was decided at my back," he said, as they walked towards guruji's *parnasala*. "I love to hear that."

"I wish you put your love for better use."

"What a romantic chiding?" he said moving closer to her.

"Let me concede being flattered," she said smilingly. "Guruji told me that he always felt we were made for each other. Seems he was bogged down by the uncertainty of the situation. Had your release been delayed, he feared my youth would be wasted. So, he thought of balancing our interests and hoped for your remission before I turned twenty-four. Thanks to Satyanarayana Swami, we met well before the deadline, and the rest is history in the making."

"Why are you shy," he said heartily finding her coy as she finished, "having turned the leaf?"

"Guruji feels," she said lowering her head, "our nuptial night should be sanctified in Misty Nest."

"Oh, I understand his pain," he said with moist eyes, "and his pleasure that lies in the hope of your beautifying my life."

"I'll take it as my mission," she said wiping his tears.

"If I'm not greedy," he said, "would you make it so in all births to come?"

"Well," she said mischievously, "tell me that after the seven-year itch."

"I can't believe my fortune really," he said taking her hand. "Oh, what a woman I'm going to have for a life partner!"

As he tried to fold her into his arms, she reminded him that they were not yet out of the ashram but, just the same, she increased the pace as though she was in a hurry to reach her destination. Once they reached the *parnasala*, she dragged her feet, but nudged by him at the threshold, she stepped in joyously. And welcomed by guruji, together they bowed at his feet.

"God bless you with a blissful life!" caressing their heads, the guruji said in a choking voice. Moved by the tenor of his tone, as they lifted their heads, their tear-filled eyes came into his dim view as his own eyes were welled with tears of joy. Overwhelmed by that momentous moment, none of them could utter a word for long.

When guruji led them to swamiji, as the seer took the betrothed in his arms to bless them with a blissful life of hundred summers, Gautam prayed to the Lord to grant that to them. After dinner, the seer asked them to be on call for an early wedding. Bidding the venerated heads goodnight, the excited couple headed to their sojourn as though towards heaven itself. When they crossed the ashram gates, Suresh grabbed Vidya's waist.

"It's like you're in the wait," she said turning coy.

"I love you," he said, choked with emotion.

"I always loved the thought of loving you," she said coyly.

"I'll respect your seniority."

"Thank you boss," she said smilingly.

"But am I permitted to say so?"

"I don't think it's any playboy joke," she said winking at him.

"Well, I want to be a homebody."

"Any body in any home, that's the playboy joke for you," she said smiling.

"You're impossible really!" he said in all admiration.

On their short walk, made longer by their desire to hang on together, they discussed their plans that stretched well up to the bringing up of their children.

"Why not we should build a 'Sneha Gruha' or two," she said impulsively, "as an orphanage."

"How I wish I had thought of it myself," he said kissing her hand that he still held.

"Won't it come naturally for a woman, her being an orphan?"

"It's my promise," he said squeezing her hand. "I shall forever make you feel that you're my equal."

"That I know you would," she said kissing his hand. "I'm lucky really!"

"I want a favor from you."

"Be a man," she said smilingly, "my he-man."

"But, it's the woman who seems to wield the real power in this man's world," he said in half jest.

"Don't worry; I'm no power hungry," she said winking at him, "though I'm hungry otherwise."

"Won't that suit me?" he said while returning her gesture.

"You know, I've kept my *kuchipudi* on hold all these years," she said. "I want to be a performing artist now. That way, my small change should supplement your big purpose as well."

"That's the favor I wanted," he said enthusiastically. "You can count me as your lifelong fan."

"Thank you," she said and kissed his hand, "I take it as your favor."

"Oh, how excited I felt when we met!" he said reflectively. "And then how the anxiety began to kill!"

"It's no different with me," she said, leaning her head on him, "the despair of hope."

When, they reached the room, he tried to lock her in his embrace.

"Wait till the wedding," she said, giving him the slip.

But seeing him sulking, she moved closer to him and crooned into his ears. "You're welcome to have me in your dreams in the meantime. Goodnight!"

"I need a base for that!" he said as he whacked her seat.

Thrilled, as she ran all the way to her tenement, he stood rooted in wonderment.

Episode 9

A Day to Remember

The wedding that the whole of Annavaram talked about for long took place at sunrise that day in the precincts of the hilltop temple. In their numbers, the ashramites of Vanaprastham and the inmates of Shanti Sadan gathered there to grace the occasion. The beauty of the pair at the *mandap* ensured that the devotees present watched the proceedings from the sidelines. Above all, the rare presence of the seer Sripada Swami at the wedding caused a near stampede.

Under the guruji's benevolent gaze and amidst the Vedic chants of the temple priests invoking the Lord's blessings, Suresh embellished Vidya's bosom with two *mangalasutrams*. And that signaled the spiritual conjugation of their conjugal union. Moreover, as the swamiji lent his resonant voice to the *veda sadassu* that followed, all reckoned that it was a good omen to the blessed couple.

Then the newlyweds in their *madhuparkams* went round bowing before the elderly couples to seek their blessings for a long conjugal life like theirs. Having gone through the remaining rituals, the just married were led by the *purohit* to the presiding deity for their thanksgiving. Praying fervently, they thanked Satyanarayana Swami for having brought about their union. Then, they were led back to the *mandap* to perform the *satyanarayana-vratam* for a prosperous life to themselves and to those around.

After bidding farewell to everyone present, the newlyweds were raring to go to Vizag to catch the Delhi flight. While the eager lovers thought they were inching towards the dream start they were aching for, Vidya's wards, however, had other ideas. They came prepared to take the favored couple right up to the airport to put them on the flight. Though Vidya tried to dissuade them, they were hell-bent on their memorable mission. While Suresh in frustration got into the van, leaving the cab behind, Vidya followed him with mixed feelings. Even as she resented her wards' intrusion into her nascent marital space, all the same, she was pleased that they cared

for her. Never the less, she felt sorry for her man for the frustration it caused him. And, finding him sulking, she tried to cheer him up in undertone that their dream-time was but a road jaunt away.

During the two-hour journey by road, the girls vied with one another to engage and disengage Vidya. Thus, feeling forlorn in the company of his bride, the groom felt he might end up being a Rip Van Winkle. But, when they reached Vizag, he thought it fit to suggest that they might call on her family for whatever it was worth. But she made it clear that she had no wish to complicate her present by mixing it up with her irrelevant past. When he added that there was always scope for forgiveness in life, she maintained that she had no reason to believe there was a change of heart in her kith and kin to warrant any rapprochement. Moreover, she said, she would like to nurse her life with new friendships rather than risking her future with past relationships.

When they arrived at the airport, they were welcomed by the check-in call. At that as Vidya's girls waved them goodbye, he heaved a sigh of relief, though he knew it was unbecoming on his part. Anyway as they boarded the plane, he tried to make up for the lost time by reaching for his bride's lips.

"Wait till the landing," she said raising her hand to fending off his advance.

"You mean in your lap," he said sinking into her.

"I mean in our Misty Nest," she said pulling him by the hair.

"I'll make you pay for it," he feigned anger.

"I'm prepared for that," she said winking at him.

"Let me see how," he said as he mock scanned her.

"Am I not well armored?" she dropped the *pallu*.

"Are there any chinks?" he raised his head to assess her assets.

"Recced enough," she said bringing her *pallu* back into position.

"Seems handful either way," he said without taking his eyes off her bosom.

"Oh," she said feigning disappointment, "I thought you could be a legman."

"Believe me," he said winking at her, "I love all of you."

"But beware of my waist," she said smiling, "when you have a roll."

While she cooed coyly, as if on cue, he fondled her at her midriff.

"Any chick on the chink?" he crooned in her ear, reaching for her crotch.

"Trespassers are prosecuted," she said locking her thighs.

"What if I gatecrash?" he said ardently.

"I'll make you labor all your life," she said naughtily.

As he sank into her lap in mock exhaustion, she caressed his hair with innate affection. As if the air hostess got wind of his condition, she came up with some refreshments.

"What a pretty air hostess you would have made," he said biting the cutlet.

"Why not ask the passengers?"

"Why wake up the sleeping dogs?"

"Be sure, I'll keep you awake."

"What's the menu for the night?" he winked as he wiped his mouth.

"That which keeps you awake all night," she said winking back at him, "served on a virgin platter."

He leaned over her to look down the window to see whether they had reached New Delhi.

Episode 10

Spirituality of Materialism

As if in appreciation of Suresh's anticipation, the Captain soon released the landing gear over Palam. Once out, they got into the waiting Ambassador. On the way to Defense Colony, Vidya was dazzled by the glitter of New Delhi in the neon lighting. In time, they reached their Misty Nest with their dreams of making it their sweet home. And as the guard on duty threw the gates wide open in warm welcome, she readily stepped out into the portico, only to be mystified by the sight of her home in the making.

"Isn't it too big for two of us?" she said in awe.

"Are we not young enough to add on more?" he said leading her in.

"Jokes apart, why not we live in a smaller place?" she said as though she were pleading to be saved. "Looks like I might feel out of place here."

"I think no place is big enough to hold your large heart," he said adoringly.

"Your love gives me a sense of purpose," she said feeling grateful. "I'll try to live up to your esteem."

"You know it's not the size of the house but the sense of the residents that ensures the quality of life," he said to address her apprehensions. "The art of living is about making the house brim with fulfilled feeling. It's in the largeness of this place that we must see an opportunity to enlarge the scope of our activities. Why not seek a higher fulfillment in this huge setting?"

"Oh, how true," she said excitedly. "I would love to house a *kuchipudi* academy here."

"Why not," he said with a smile, "but charity begins at home, doesn't it?"

"Oh, show me the kitchen."

"I thought you would keep your promise," he said winking at her.

"Name the dish," she said seeking the kitchen, "and it would be served as promised."

"We've a cook anyway for that," he said pushing her into his room.

"Isn't it said that the path to man's heart is through his palate?"

"Well, but why make her unemployed?"

"Give me a handful then," she said winking at him.

When he kicked the door behind, she entered the arena of his desire. As he hugged her ardently, she felt the power of his protection and pressed closer to augment her own sense of security. Sensing her need for redressal from the shivering of her frame, he covered her flanks to address her fears. Gratified by his gesture, she joined her hands to ensconce their embrace. As she raised her head to reassure herself, meeting his eyes, she could gauge the hugeness of his want. The desire for her she discerned in his manner aggravated her own want for him. Feeling joyous in his rapturous embrace, she pressed closer to him to address their want. Appeased by her acquiescence thus, he yearned for fulfillment. And while his lips parted parched by desire, affected by passion, hers began to quiver. As he readily closed in on them to steady them, she energized hers to draw succor from his strength. In time, having savored the taste of her love, he deep kissed her to grasp her soul as well. Pressured thus by his ardency, she too turned keen to end his one-upmanship.

When the heat of their passion made them to shed their clothing, the force of attraction braced them back into embrace. While he pleased over her frame, sharpening his joy, she swirled in his arms in rapture. Even as her pulsations accentuated her curves, his passion found its expression in them. Rolling over her rollicking legs, he made his way to her chink to probe its depth through his protruding tongue. When, to let her have a measure of his manhood, he pushed her down to his declivity, her innate love prompted her lust into reciprocation. At that, as she reached the threshold of urge, she let him free her virginity on lease with the force of his

virility. Enjoying the fulfilling feeling of that emotional conjugation, he strived to make her experience the joy of being loved by man. As she began to share with him the ecstasy of the lovemaking she was experiencing, he got the feeling that she loved him sexually as well. Soon, the orgasmic stage they reached brought the euphoria of their conjugation to a languid end ushering in a life of emotional integration.

As Suresh found her pensive at the dining table, he was beset with anxiety and enquired with concern.

"Honestly," she said singing her song of anxiety, "your riches frighten me."

"That's a measure of your simplicity," he said, as he offered her a morsel from his own plate.

Gladdened by his gesture, she reciprocated in full measure enabling them to have a sumptuous dinner fed from the hands of each other.

"You know the role money played in the downfall of our family," he began as they went back into their room. "While I served the sentence, I thought long and hard about it and realized that it's the character of money to corrupt the ardent, tease the vacillating and curse the indifferent. That way, there seems to be no escape for man from money. You're damned if you have it and accursed for the lack of it."

"Money is best in its moderation, isn't it?" she said as though to convert him to her point of view.

"Make money the measure and you are in for trouble dear," he said taking her into his arms, "for that would keep you in its grip forever."

"What to do then?" she asked seemingly puzzled.

"One should try to demystify money to see what really it is worth," he continued. "After all, the accumulated millions with a miser add up to zero, and likewise, the moolah with a spendthrift comes to naught in the end. So, money has no value of its own, in spite of the awe in which man holds it. As for the power of wealth, it's only in the mind of the haves and the have-nots alike."

"How true!" she said reminiscently.

"You know how amazed I was when I realized that," he said showing his amazement all again. "After the dust settled down, I began to analyze the import of the events of my tumultuous life. When I recalled that girl who came to nail me in court, the spirit of her character struck me no end. Just imagine the possibilities that held out for her then. When the scandal broke out, had she wanted, she could have sold her silence at her own price. Instead, she was prepared to stake her honor in the interests of justice, that too at the risk of being shamed by Mehrotra, though in camera."

He paused for a while, recalling her in adoration.

"Oh, how she demonstrated the powerlessness of wealth against her sense of purpose!" he said on resumption. "Well, my father's wealth and Mehrotra's wife added up to nothing before the resolve of that have-not. In the end, it was her sense of spirit that inspired me to live down my past to live for another day. In a way I owe everything to her!"

Affected by his sense of emotion, she sank into his arms to share his feeling, and said, "No less do I."

"She has proved that the clout of the rich owes itself to the coveting of the poor," he said, caressing her head.

"Oh, how true!" she said reflectively. "It's their own craving for money that makes men and women alike court the moneyed, and that gives the rich a false sense of power over the poor. Why blame the rich for their conceit when it is the making of the poor?"

"True, the desire for power could be behind man's craving for wealth," he said reminiscently. "But it doesn't help to cut corners in pursuit of wealth for any. Don't you have our family history to prove that?"

"I don't agree as it's not the rule and, if anything, it's an exception," she said disentangling herself from him, as though to physically demonstrate her dissent. "Why, won't the corrupt prosper in general?"

"Well it may appear so," he said. "But scratch the surface a little and you will have a better view of its irony. Why should one want to be wealthy when life needs no props of riches for its enrichment? That's why chasing money is but a human fallacy. Yet, the middle-class mentality makes man seek monies to enjoy the false sense of security. And by cutting corners what do they get but bits and pieces of accretion? Oh, how they have to take care to remain faceless while still active in their occupation! And in time, they insensibly melt into the multitude of the retired to continue their humdrum existence but not before contributing their mite to corrupt the system. In the end, unnoticed, they leave the stage, bequeathing their ill-gotten wealth to their kith and kin. That's all there is to their life and death. Once in a way, however, the law of averages catches up with some with the accompanying loss of face."

"But it's their ambition that makes some covet riches to enrich their status," she said.

"And it's the way some of them conjure up wealth to earn infamy that makes for the great human tragedy," he said with apathy. "Endowed with enterprise and blessed with opportunities, these fortunate few get on to the social stage to stroll as colossuses. While some keep their course to fulfill their destiny, the unfortunate lose direction on their way to make a farce of their lives. Instead of working for the success of their ventures, the promoters siphon off funds to fail their firms

But that only makes it a double jeopardy for them. Why, for all their luxury living, won't they get branded as failures? As for their name recognition, ironically, they figure high in the list of crooks and cheats. For sure, they would not have bargained for ignominy while they first set themselves on the course of riches. In the end though, they would realize that their stolen wealth was but a jewel-less crown."

"How sad!" she said in apparent agreement.

"It's only half the story," he said feeling sad himself. "Imagine what they could have done to society had they utilized their opportunities meaningfully. Maybe, they would have contributed to the country's economy besides ensuring their own well-being. Instead, they help sink scarce resources into their sick units.

"Well, the same malady afflicts the politicians as well," he continued in the same vein. "Sadly, political power is reduced to self-aggrandizement. It's how the politicians miss the opportunity to achieve greater glory and instead earn the collective infamy. Oh, what difference they could make to the country with proper policy and direction! But, invariably they fail to see the obvious and miss the bus of public service!"

"That's my worry with money," she said as her apprehensions resurfaced, "for its corruptive influence."

"Why blame money when it's man's attitude to it that is at the back of his misery?" he elucidated in hindsight. "If coveting wealth makes man go wayward, its disregard might push him into penury. Thus, the way to go about money is to seek opportunities, direct our efforts to achieve and take the monies that come with it. I feel this ethos would lead to man's personal growth and help bring about the social good as well. Moreover, the infirm and the incapacitated still need a helping hand to survive, and naturally, it's the rich that could come to their rescue. Here is our unique opportunity as the circumstances of life have induced an inclination for social service in us. And we have the backing of wealth to indulge in that pursuit."

"How do you think we should balance our life and our wealth?"

"Isn't it said that charity begins at home?" he said. "I see that I can play a positive role in industry by taking back the Ocean Organics. And as opportunity would have it, the lease is to end soon enough. Besides, I would like to expand Sneha Travels. That way, I can strive to realize my self-worth. You too can work at your *kuchipudi* for your own fulfillment. In due course, who knows, we may even attract donations to build many Shanti Sadans and Sneha Gruhas."

"Yet I'm afraid lest wealth should rob me of my innate sensitivity," she said hugging him. "I have a reason to fear for that as well. I have an aunty like there was none before that is until they turned well-heeled. I had seen the wrinkles of conceit affect the beauty of her soul and in the end she turned blind to the values that made her what she was. Now that she has lost her simplicity of purpose, she no longer values the company of the genuine. Instead, she surrounds herself with the so-called successful for whom once she had nothing but contempt. Oh, how her riches made her poor indeed! And seeing the ugliness of her soul, I used to gloat that my fate didn't condemn me to riches. But now, my life threatens to bring about the worst of fates on that score for me."

"I'll tell you how your fears could be but liars," he said cajoling her. "I too have a cousin from a humble background who made it really big in life. And the money drove away whatever insecurities he might have nursed for his lack of means till then. Now, sitting on the mountain of a moolah, he's humility personified, and what is more, he sees the true potential of his wealth to bring smiles to his associates and others. I'm sure our wealth would enrich your soul and not the other way round."

"I see in that the spirituality of materialism," she said as though she got the revelation.

"Let it rule our hearts," he said, "and souls as well."

"Enough with the lessons of life," she winked at him. "I need some lessons of love as well."

Episode 11

Sense of Reincarnation

Letting Vidya have a view of the classrooms of love, Suresh took her round Misty Nest.

"How I wish guruji joins us," she said as they entered Gautam's room.

"I did talk to him about it, but he wants to be left alone," he said, and added mysteriously, "but I see a way to entice him back into our midst."

"How?" she asked playing the innocent.

"I know you're no babe," he said smiling, "at least after that."

"Why lose time?" she pushed him towards his room.

"Who would like to," he pulled her ardently, "with a willing mate?"

In their unity of purpose, they were united once again.

"Show me your mother's room before you take me again," she said, as she came out of the bath in her lingerie.

"What a way it is to indicate one's want!" he said smiling. Holding her hand, he led her towards Senha's quarters.

"Though I have seen that album," she said, as they were on their way, "never did I imagine a house could be as fabulous!"

"Seeing you in your sari," he said admiringly, "neither I did imagine you've such a curvaceous a figure!"

As they entered Sneha's room, they kneeled in reverence before her painting.

"Do you know why I am so confident that riches cannot corrupt me?" he said, with a choking voice. "It's my mother's last wish that I make a difference to my life and to the others as well. As you know, if not for her sacrifice, I would have been dead and gone long back. So I feel it's my sacred duty to fulfill her last wish till the very end."

"I respect your feelings," she said, moved by their mutual feeling, "and make your cause mine own."

"I'll cherish you all the more for that," he said taking her into his arms.

"I hope I'll be able to give you a beautiful daughter like her," she said prognostically, "so that we can name her Sneha."

"Can there be a better inducement for my father to join us?" he said, hoping for the eventuality.

'Could there be a better place to conceive?' she said pushing him on to the bed.

So he pulled her into his embrace as though in agreement. At length, her orgasmic convulsions occasioned his ejaculation amidst their prognostic feeling of conception. Moved by their sentiment, they made it the master bedroom for all time to come.

When her pregnancy was confirmed shortly thereafter, to greet the new arrival, she plunged herself to ground a Sneha Gruha by acquiring a plot for the proposed orphanage near their Mehrauli House.

When Gautam heard about the developments at the home he had abandoned, he couldn't remain indifferent for long. While he was thrilled about his daughter-in-law's confinement, he felt grateful to her for her keenness in commemorating Sneha's memory.

As Vidya's delivery time neared, Gautam developed a premonition that Sneha would reincarnate herself, and thus awaited the arrival of his granddaughter. And a week ahead of the child's expected arrival, he felt out of sorts during his discourse that forced him to end it midway. Feeling uneasy all through the evening, he skipped his meal and retired early to bed. Failing to manage a wink past midnight, he impulsively reached for his trunk and picked up the album. Staring at Sneha's pictures adoringly for long, he was overcome with love and sorrow. At length, feeling at ease, he believed his unease should've been induced by the birth pangs of Sneha's reincarnation as Vidya's daughter. Closing his eyes with a rare sense of inner peace he had never experienced before, he let sleep overwhelm him in time.

Waking up cheerfully, he awaited the news of the new arrival. But, it was only towards the evening that the confirmation came by telegram—the birth of a girl midnight the previous night. Elated at the development, he was convinced that Sneha had indeed signaled her arrival telepathically to him. In time, he turned sentimental on that count and came to believe that she had forgiven him after all. As that thought gave him an immense relief, he was seized with the desire to spy his wife in her reincarnated shape. However, he tried to control his emotions and sent a message of congratulations to the happy couple suggesting the baby's *barasala* be performed at Vanaprastham.

When Gautam's telegram was delivered to them at the Nithya Nursing Home, the happy parents were in seventh heaven.

"How she resembles my mother!" Suresh said for the nth time.

"We can expect guruji to get glued to her," Vidya repeated parrot-like.

"I hope after her *barasala* at Annavaram, Delhi would be on his radar," he wanted to believe what he said.

"Now I can see the change in him," she said fuelling his hopes further. "How he used to detach himself over the years!"

"Let's hope it's that way," he sighed in hope. "How I wish he lives with us."

Spending five more days in the nursing home with his wife and the newborn, Suresh drove them home that evening. Seeing the Gautam waiting in the portico for them, the couple couldn't comprehend their position. But, recovering their wits quickly, they jumped out of the car ecstatically. Even as Suresh bowed at his father's feet instantly, Vidya put the baby in the right hands, and followed suit.

"I had a premonition about Sneha's reincarnation," said Gautam without taking his eyes off the child.

"It could be so for all the resemblances," said the gratified parents.

"Now I'm sure it's she," said Gautam with finality.

"Glad you've come to share our joy," said Vidya.

"Let's go in," said Gautam, still looking at the child. "I've come to stay for good as it's my *dharma* to guide her to *moksha*."

The joyous yells of Suresh and Vidya that greeted his statement made Gautam realize he had come back to where he really belonged. And little Sneha opened her misty eyes as though impelled by an urge to see for herself the joyous welcome her reincarnation occasioned at Misty Nest.

Epilogue

Over time, with the assorted pursuits of the Prabhu clan, as they came to be known in time, Misty Nest became a beehive of activity.

Gautam, in his new avatar in New Delhi, came to be revered as Gautam guru for his erudition and piety. And to attune the old to the new world, he conceived a home for the aged. And to obliterate its past stigma, he chose their Mehrauli House, renamed Gautam Home, for its premises. While conducting *dharmic* discourse at Misty Nest, he tended the aged at 'Gautam Home' with equal felicity. Feeling equally at home in the opulent bungalow and the austere old-age home, he purveyed the activities of various charitable trusts set up by Suresh.

Suresh, in time, developed a passion for the educational reforms—he felt the need to help equip children to chart their future course on an even keel. He came to believe that the basic knowledge of psychology would help avoid human follies. So he began a crusade with the government to include human psychology in the school curriculum. And to demonstrate his commitment and prove his point, he pioneered the cause by starting a couple of schools all by himself. And to get into the position of strength to influence the system, in time, he enlarged his industrial base as well. And not to lose sight of his past, he ordained that their establishments observed his mother's birthday as the Rededication Day.

Vidya Suresh, who soared to the *kuchipudi* heights with her graceful steps, in time, came to confine herself to tend fresh crops of talented dancers. With a sense of purpose, she ensures that Misty Nest remained a fulfilled home for her family and the students of her academy alike.

Sneha Prabhu, and Sripada Prabhu, her brother who followed her, got a proper passage into adolescence. After all, their childhood was a mixture of their grandfather's approbation and the reproaches of their parents. In time, they came to polish themselves as the jewels of the home, resplendent in their appeal and aptitude.

Gautam never ceased to believe that his granddaughter was the reincarnation of his wife and so did Suresh and Vidya. Just the same, they took care neither to burden the young soul with that revelation nor by being differential to her on that account. But, as she grew up, when Sneha began to exhibit the mannerisms of her grandmother, for Gautam and Suresh it was the vindication of their belief.

When all observed at length that she got morose on Sneha's birthdays and remained reflective on her death anniversaries, Vidya thought it was foolproof. And as the young child remained tranquil on her own birthdays, they came to believe that Sneha, during her sojourn in heaven, might have realized the futility of vanity in life. After her maturation, when the young Sneha desisted from entering the master bedroom, the elder's knew the relevance of the same to their reverence of the dead woman.

As if to spare Gautam the dilemma of interacting with a womanly Sneha, fate took him away from his earthly abode on her eighteenth birthday, but not before he contributed the "Addendum to Evolution: Origins of the World" to the world of thought that Suresh recovered from his personal affects. And it read thus:

Creation vs. Evolution

One might approach this postulation as an addendum to evolution for it comes in the wake of the great works of the past. It would seem logical that any proposition about evolution cannot bypass the idea of creation, buttressed with a religious belief by those closer to the

beginnings of life. Just the same, though all religions propagate the word that God created the world, nevertheless their scriptures differ about the way he went about it. Given the religious assertion that God is the personification of perfection, one needs to reckon whether he would have created an imperfect world such as ours! Besides, how come his intellect that placed planets in the orbits failed to visualise a quake-free earth that is volcano-prone as well! The scriptures that picture him as the All-Merciful, however, prevaricate when it comes to the unjust 'species feeding upon species' way of his creation. Nothing would it not then make a case for viewing with suspicion the religious assertion that the world was his creation? That was what many Hindu seers of yore were obviously at, going by their advocacy that the species of the world was the result of an evolutionary process.

Upanishadic Theory of Evolution

One such theory of evolution in the *Nothing Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* reads thus—'He had no pleasure either: so when alone one has no pleasure. He desired a companion. He became as large as a woman and man embracing. He made that self split (pat-) into two: from that husband ('*pati*') and wife ('*patni*') came to be. 'She realised: 'How can he couple with me when he begot me from himself? Ah, I must hide!' She became a cow, the other a bull, and so he coupled with her. From that cattle were born. She became a mare, the other a stallion; she became a she-donkey, the other a he-donkey: and so he coupled with her. From that solid-hoofed animals were born...' (Excerpted from, *The Upanishads*, by Valerie J. Roebuck published by Penguin Books India). This could as well be man's first thesis on evolution.

Western Theory of Evolution

Well, Spencer, Lamarck, Darwin and others of our times could have breached the religious idea of creation with the collective force of pure reasoning. But would their standard of evolution thus erected on the land of religion stand up to logic? After all, the three millennia or more of anthropological data that modern man is in possession fails to indicate an iota of variation in the existing species not to speak of the evolution of the new! That being the case, could it be then the world came into being on its own, as it were! Well if it were so, the question that arises is, wouldn't have the first men made their progeny privy to that story? But that didn't happen either, as we don't even have hearsay to go by about our origins. Besides, the religious routes of creation shown by the later generations all led us into blind alleys. Thus, far removed from our beginnings, we had to figure it out ourselves as to how we came into being. After all, it's that quest for his origins that lead men to the theories of evolution. Nevertheless, won't that be like putting the cart before the horse, for the earth is the only planet known to nourish life? Would it not be imperative to try to assess whether the way the earth itself came into being would have had a bearing on the evolution of its species?

Addendum to Evolution

It would seem there could be but mere space in the beginning—infinite and empty. At some stage, its gathering cosmic charge, having become boundless, would have disintegrated into an infinite number of nebulous stars of vast proportions. Needless to say, these stars, in spite of being nebulous, would have acquired a definitive magnetic moment of immense intensity of their own. And the attendant magnetic field could have kept the residual cosmic charge around them at bay. In time, the interplay of magnetic moments would have fragmented the residual nebulous energy around these stars into their planets. In the end, it could be the powerful magnetic thrust the stars would have exerted on each other, that caused their cosmic drift along with their planetary formations in tow.

It was in that altered station, far removed from the cosmic bosom that an intense centripetal force would have come to exert on the sun and its planets in their nebulous state. Over the years, this phenomenon would have tended to compact their nebulous energy into spherical formations. This, in turn, would have brought to bear the centrifugal forces on the sun and its planets that tended them to shed some of their heat energy. That, in turn, would have occasioned the peripheral cooling of the planets. In time, all the expelled nebulous heat would have galvanized itself as the moon to turn into the satellite of the earth. It would appear that the concept of astrology could be but the appreciation of this cosmic phenomenon.

Be that as it may, where to begin to find out what could have helped the mother earth to bring beings into being? Well, wouldn't it be in order to assume that the spread-split-steady syndrome that was behind the formation of the solar system would have been at work in the evolution of the species as well? Would not the procreative process, the feature of the perpetuation of the species subscribe to this? Of course, since neither custom stales nor age alters the procreative process of the species, we might reckon that it is in that process must lay the clues to the origins of beings.

Well, the world in its beginnings would have been but a wilderness of earth, water and air—the gross elements of nature—that would have been evolved owing to the altered cosmic equations. The day and night phenomenon on the earth would have perpetually subjected these elements to some annealing stress—while days would have warmed them by the sunrays, nights could have gripped them in their cold embrace. However, the landmass, once it got solidified to some depth, would have rested on its laurels but for the jerk of an earthquake or a jolt by a volcano. On the other hand, air and water, given their volatile state, would have been perpetually stressed and strained by the day-night syndrome. Thus, the constant impingement of heat and cold on air and water, both containing oxygen and hydrogen, would have come to impact upon the chemistry of them both in the climatic laboratory. In the end, it would have been the atmospheric disturbances like cyclones and hurricanes that would have brought about the fusion between the much-strained water molecules and the turbulent atoms of the air.

Onamic Formation

The outcome of this fusion could have altered the molecular structure of countless water particles in a way to originate the organisms – O, that we might call onams. As the seas played the mother to this earthly union, onams could have embraced their waters, though in time many might have made their way into the sister rivers as well. But the cyclonic and such atmospheric convulsions that fathered them would have been ever tending many of them into the atmosphere. Likewise, the ocean tides and the flooding rivers would have displaced many an onam onto the ground around. Anyway, it did not hurt them. Being fundamental organisms, the onams would have been unicellular in construct and microscopic in size, without a digestive mechanism of note. Besides, their micro construct would have only needed a minuscule diet for self-sustenance. Thus irrespective of their station they would have come to survive on their self-secretions in a unitary and conflict-free environment. That was how the onams would have come into being and came to exist as such. Thus, we might reckon that the instinct of the species to prey upon their fellow species would have certainly been a non-onamic character.

Having thus emerged from the nebulous state of non-being, the onamic state of being would have been one of stagnant being. However, as nature could have caused more and more of them to come into being, in time, there could have been the onamic clusters in their trillions all over. At some stage, nature itself might have come to grips with its own waywardness, exemplified by the regulation of the seasons. And all that would have changed the character of the prevailing environment itself, affecting the climatic conditions conducive for furthering the onamic generation. As nature would have ceased to occasion their propagation, the onams could have been compelled to self-generate so as to remain in being. This could as well be the harbinger of the evolutionary process that could have led to the emergence of the species.

But how come the unicellular onams could have multiplied into a wide variety of multicellular species? And then, wherefrom did the plant life emerge? Well, the ebbs would have retrieved into the high seas some onams that the tides could have washed ashore. Likewise, the receding river waters would have salvaged some of its onams from the riverbanks that the floods inundated. This great escape would have exposed such of those water onams to an amphibious experience of being. Nonetheless, owing to this recurring phenomenon, many in their millions would have been periodically left stranded in the unfamiliar environs of the beachheads and riverbanks. In time, the stimuli of their clustered existence would have induced in the onams of the world the instinct to spread. This, in turn, would have imbibed in them the urge to split. The very instinct for the individual spread would have insensibly led to the collective onamic surge. Needless to stress, this could have been achieved with each yielding space to the other in order to gain the same for the stability of the self. This could well be the harbinger of life on earth, though in its rudimentary form. What is more, this characteristic of

yielding to gain seems to have shaped the nature of beings during their evolutionary period and beyond. However, with their imbibed instinct to stay in the air, the atmospheric onams would have had free access to the world at large and thus would have been less urged to spread. Thus, the atmospheric onams would not have come to feel the need to split at that stage.

As the earthly onams began to gain in size, they would have needed extra secretions for sustenance that the system was unaccustomed to generate. Besides, their state of growth would have undermined the onamic sense of safety their unicellular compactness provided. Understandably, all this would have ensured that the systemic pulls and pressures came to bear upon the onamic growth. This, in turn, could have forced their survival instinct to cap further growth. Thus, at that state of growth, there could have been a duality of purpose in the enlarged onamic organisms—the acquired habit to grow in order to gain and the innate need to remain small so as to survive.

Plunamic Progression

Naturally, this clash of interests would have induced fission in the system that could have lead to the eventual rupture of the mechanism itself. It was thus, the onams could have split into two and that would have ushered in the second stage of evolution. Understandably, the coming into being of two organisms—plunams—in place of one, would have enabled the agenda of unrestrained onamic growth. Dictated by the inherited urge, the plunams would have pursued the old onamic agenda of growth till the need arose for yet another plunamic parting of ways. This phenomenon of onamic split would have in time led to the plunamic proliferation of exponential proportions on the ground as well as in waters. In the process, though being unicellular, the plunams would have begun to experience a vague sense of biological difference amongst them. However, the atmospheric onams would have been some way away from the plunamic state of evolution on the earth.

Nonetheless, it appears, in spite of the plunamic evolution, the onamic urge for surge remained unsullied. And abetted by habit, it would have indeed turned into a plunamic obsession. In turn, all this might have enabled the plunamic organisms to gain some sense of memory. It is but natural that the urge to grow and the need to split would have impacted on the plunamic memory to impart a sense of separation to it. Thus, it could have been only time before the plunams would have seen the means to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable—that was by splitting within their body itself so as to augment their individual growth!

The Qunamic State

Thus, the plunams would have started splitting within themselves into two organisms—qunams. Thus, in a continuing process, the emerging qunams in the individual plunamic bosoms would have split in turn, to cause the cellular multiplication within the plunamic bodies. Hence, the evolution of the qunams in the plunamic frames at once would have enabled the overall organic growth of the latter. This qunamic state of being could be called the third stage of evolution of beings that was probably the first triumph of something of a mind over matter.

In time, the lack of cohesion amongst the individual qunams of the enlarged plunams would have ruined the plan in the making. Obviously, at some point of time in the growing process, the organic self-secretions would not have sufficed to sustain the overall plunamic health, not to speak of the qunamic growth. Driven by the imbibed onamic urge to survive, the individual qunams in the plunamic bosoms could have begun to feed on their weaker cousins. Incidentally, this altered nature of intake would have occasioned the need for the plunams to develop some digestive system of their own. However, this unexpected turn of events would have pitted the stronger qunams against the not so strong of a given plunam. To begin with, the lesser breed would have made a common cause to ward off the stronger elements amongst them. The emergence thus of qunamic sub-groups within the plunamic frames would have caused the functional imbalance in their body organisms. This, in turn, would have led to the schism in the plunamic systems that would have caused the eventual split, though of a different kind.

Whereas the original onamic split that brought about the plunams into being was for the functional growth, the plunamic split that followed, on the relative qunamic strength, was for the systemic survival. This would have come into being plunams stratified by their relative strengths. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of the relatively stronger qunams in a given plunamic

organism feeding on their weaker cousins would have continued thus occasioning the perennial parting of ways. And this, in turn, would have in a time ushered in countless plunamic cousins of varied strengths. What was more, the compulsion of the weaker qunams to separate from the stronger would have at length led to the reverse phenomenon whereby many plunams found themselves reduced to the original onamic unicellular and microscopic state of amoebae!

Constraints of Survival

This split syndrome would not have helped ease the plunamic condition in any way for their qunams could have tended to negate each other, though in the end, the stronger overpowered the not so strong amongst them. Needless to say, with the relatively weak qunams having been consumed in time, the resistance against mutual qunamic poaching in the individual plunamic bosoms could have resulted in an eventual stalemate. Besides, the qunamic need to prey upon the weak and escape being one for the strong would have tended to weaken the plunamic strength at all levels. Inevitably this would have hindered their collective survival not speak of growth. Thus this qunamic fight for survival within the system would have brought the plunamic structures to the brink of extinction. However, in the end, the survival instinct that would have become the second nature with all plunams by then could have averted the collective calamity for all of them.

After all, it was this plunamic urge for survival that would have induced in them the urge to devour others without as a way out. And that could have given the struggle for survival amongst the world of plunams an altogether different dimension. Obviously, to avert the threat the stronger plunams posed, the lesser kind would have tried to escape into the anonymity of the hinterland or plunged deeper down into the safety of the seas. But as the plunams got scattered in their bid to survive, their very survival would have been threatened just the same what with the scarcity of the relatively weaker around to feed upon. Thus would have developed the need for the plunams for extra reach for preying upon the weaker while themselves keeping away from the stronger. When at some stage, the plunams of the world could have acquired near parity of mobility, it would have been back to the square one for all of them. This, in turn, would have forced all of them to find ways and means to ensure their individual survival.

All this would have made it imperative for the plunams to imbibe new attributes, the forerunners of the characteristic survival instincts of the individual species. Thus, the survival instinct would have impelled the plunams to grow big or turn bizarre besides acquiring the requisite speed to survive in a given environment. The developments on the ground would have invariably hurt the atmospheric organisms still in the onamic state for they would have made ready pickings for the plunams of the world as and when the winds could have brought them down. Well in time, their own survival instinct would have enabled them to reinvent the wheel to cope up with the hazards on the earth. However, when evolved as the atmospheric plunams, ironically, their ability to be airborne would have limited their size as well.

This brings to the fore the question whether the plant life preceded, succeeded or contemporary to the plunamic evolution. Had there been plant life existing in the plunamic world, would there have been the need for the plunams to prey upon each other in their struggle for survival? Wouldn't have all those plants come in handy for the plunams to feed upon? Thus, it could be inferred that as there were no plants in place at the plunamic state of evolution, the plunams, in their bid to survive, would have been forced to feed upon each other. For that reason, the eventual evolution of the species that came to depend on the plant produce as their means of survival could be but of post plunamic evolution. Be that as it may, for the plunams it would have been a period of growth as their bigger bellies would have occasioned greater appetites and their improved reach could have enabled them greater catch. In time all those dinner parties would have pushed the plunams to the brink again what with the stronger and the weaker alike facing extinction. Well, the need of the strong for more prey would have tended to deplete the ranks of the weak, in turn tending the former to famish and the latter to extinct. It was thus all plunams, more so the weaker ones would have felt the need for procreating their own ilk for their prey!

This could have been brought about by the more vulnerable weaker qunams in the plunamic bosoms by tending to acquire female attributes that in turn would have galvanized the stronger ones towards the male tendencies. In the end, the plunamic splits would have come to assume

male-female dimension with the stronger qunams tending to be male plunams and the weaker, their female counterparts. With the qunamic evolution having acquired biological differentiation, there would have come into being male and female plunams that got together to procreate the preys for themselves. This at once could have brought an end to the qunamic schisms within the organism that would have helped the plunams recoup themselves to resume poaching the weaker lot that too would have been multiplied through procreative means. In time, this would have removed the plunamic need to feed upon what was self-procreated, and thus the progeny would have been left to grow up and in turn further the flock. After all, what was needed was a single male in their midst for the females to keep procreating in their numbers. In spite of the new procreative multiplication, the plunams would have been still pressured for their survival for the demand for prey would have not matched with the supply of the same. Owing to this or out of sheer force of habit some plunams might have continued with the practice of eating their own produce.

Formation of Vegetation

However, the seeds of solace for some in the plunamic world would have been laid in an unexpected way. It could be expected that the downpour of the monsoons would have embedded some of the male and female plunams of all dispensations in the soil. At length, the minerals of the soil wealth would have altered the biological characteristics of those entrapped plunams. Brought together by the sub-soil conditions, the males and females of a given creed, and or hybrids of sorts, in due course would have evolved themselves into seeds that the soil conditions would have fertilized as plants in time. And of course, the seeds of a given category would have imbibed the respective or mixed qunamic features and the plunamic attributes would have given raise to the individual plant characteristics. In time, as some plunams would have found it expedient to feed on the sprouting vegetation, in turn their survival instinct coupled with their organic habit of growth would have shaped the latter into the varied vegetation on the earth. Likewise, as the atmospheric plunams would have been hard pressed for prey, what with their earthly counterparts on the growth path, they would have evolved as birds with the ability to swoop down on their pray and spirit away when threatened.

In time, in spite of it all, it would have dawned on all the plunams that being on the run alone was no guarantee for their survival, and thus they would have been ever at augmenting their attributes to acquire prey and escape from being one. Eventually, it was this process that would have enabled the plunams to evolve into various species of the world with individual survival instincts and preying abilities. The loose cannon that the evolution of species was, it was but natural that dinosaurs with their insatiable appetites appeared in time. With their reach and approach, they would have played havoc in the animal kingdom as it got evolved. But as their prey would have run for cover in the wide world, at some stage, the dinosaurs could have found their prey so scarce as to survive. And in time, they would have become extinct for the same reason.

Human Evolution

What about man, the acme of evolution? It would seem that with the weaker ones amongst them having gone into the hinterland, to escape being their prey, the plunams of the stronger onams, would have monopolized the seashores and the riverbanks. Feeding on their cousins that were washed ashore or grounded by the winds these privileged plunams would have had it easy and it could be this lack of threat from the others and the ready availability of prey that would have made the evolutionary process of these apart and unique. While the survival and sustenance syndrome alone could have governed the evolution of the rest of the onams into various species, these strong with no such constraints, by and large, would have evolved into the thinking animal that is a man. If the evolution of the animal kingdom was marked by the relative strength and speed so as to survive, the hallmark of human evolution was the furtherance of strength through cerebral power to enable domination. Thus while survival instinct would govern the animal behaviour, self-interest could rule the human conduct.

While the evolution of the animal kingdom itself framed the laws of the jungle, man had to evolve his own framework of rules so as to coexist. And the subconscious of the procreative process, symbolized by gives and takes, would have shaped his initial conduct. But at some stage, some sense of insecurity would have come to dominate his conscious mind that insensibly

altered the boundaries of his subconscious comfort zone of give and take. Wanting to gain more to secure against imaginary threats and concede less and less as if to avoid the feared erosion and/or both became the credo of man that narrowed the give and take zone of human harmony. In time, in man, the urge to gain became bereft of the purpose to gain and the need to retain lost the sense of the need itself. Inevitably, in the end, man came to bring misery upon him and inflict injury on the world of the species.

Puranic Speculation

However, it is worth noting that the Hindu Puranas would have it rather differently with regard to the evolution of human nature as pictured in the Dasavatars—the ten incarnations in this world of Lord Vishnu, the Supreme Hindu Deity. The first of His incarnations was as the fish, Matsya, in water, then the amphibious tortoise, Koorma, followed by the pig, Varaaha, on the land. Then it was the half man-half lion, Narasimha, the pygmean man, Vamana, the intemperate man, Parasurama, the principled man, Sri Rama, the pragmatic man, Sri Krishna, the enlightened man, The Buddha, and finally the yet to come destroyer of a man, Kalki. Going by the said progression of the Lord's incarnations, one might infer what was hinted in the Dasavatars was indeed the process of evolution on the earth. Given that the concept of Vishnu's Avatars, propagated by the *Nothing Puranas*, came to be a feature of the Hindu belief well before the advent of The Buddha, one might agree that the theory of evolution was not all that modern after all."

JEWEL-LESS CROWN

SAGA OF LIFE



 Self
imprint