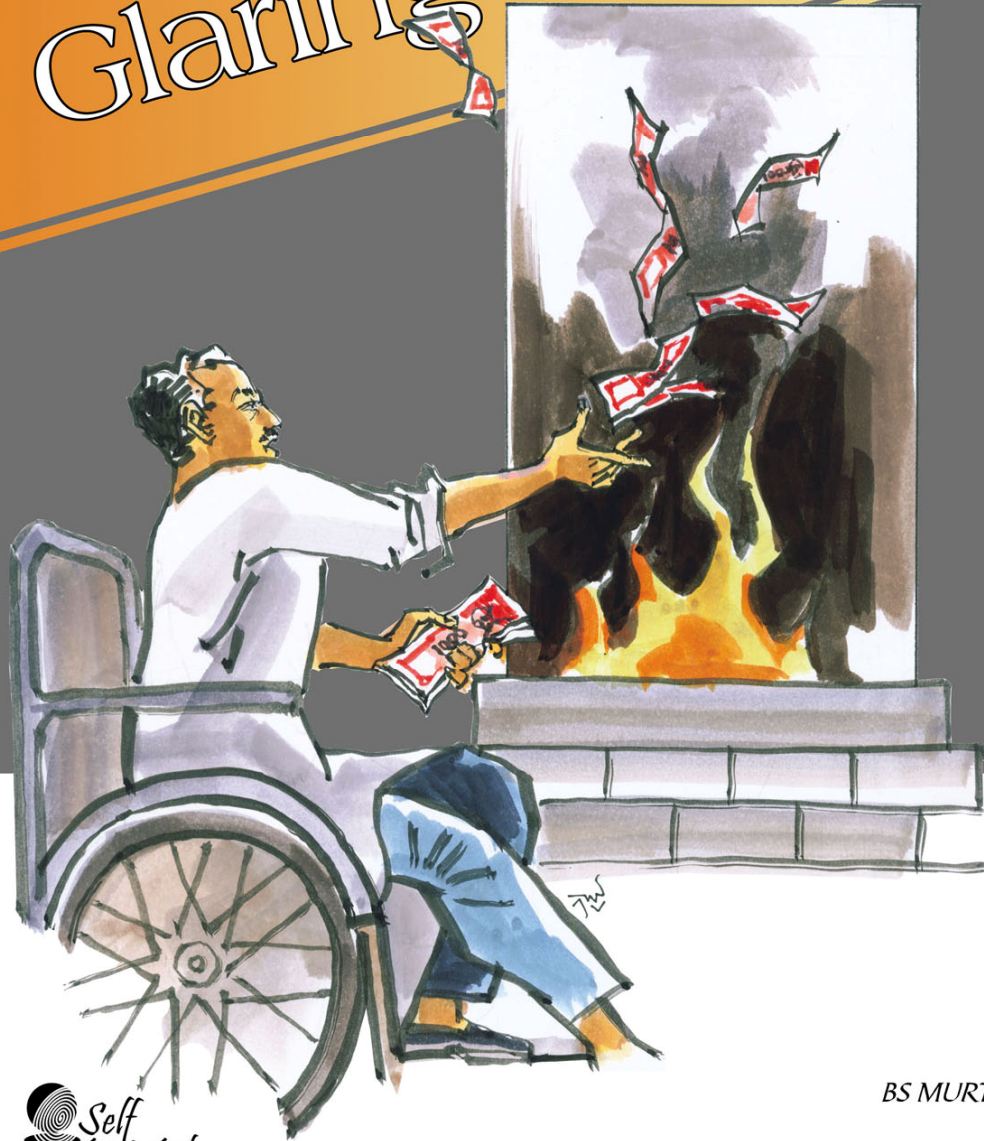


Glaring Shadow



 Self
imprint

BS MURTHY

Glaring Shadow - A stream of consciousness novel

BS Murthy

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

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Dedicated to,

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

Chapter 1

Glaring Shadow

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You seem to be shaken really."

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

"Maybe it paves the way to unburden yourself."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 2

Pains of Regret

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What better message than philanthropy?"

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

"I'm all eager for its recap."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 3

Cradle of Life

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Won't lost opportunities leave haunting memories?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 4

Outlook for Re-look

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 5

Humbling Reality

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

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

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

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

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

"But then is it true?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 6

Orgies of Love

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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