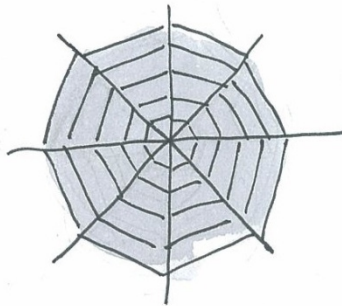




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BS Murthy

 Self
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BS Murthy

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Other books by BS Murthy –

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Jewel-less Crown: Saga of Life

Crossing the Mirage – Passing through youth

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Bhagvad -Gita: Treatise of self –help (A translation in verses)

Sundara Kānda - Hanuman's Odyssey (A translation in verses)

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Dedicated to –

the flawless Bullipapa, my distant cousin,

with whom I had savored the fruits of our platonic love

before she attained moksha at the young age of twenty-six.

[Part 1](#)

ALL MARRIAGES ARE MADE IN HEAVEN BUT SOME ARE DELAYED ON EARTH:

WE ENDEAVOUR TO HASTEN THEM ALL.

So read the billing at Renuka Marriage Bureau.

Rushing to Venu, Priya reread the same.

'Oh, how fortuitous!' she thought excitedly as she walked up to her car. 'So, I could wed him now. Going by his photograph, he looks handsomer than ever; if anything, that streak of grey hair only lends him an aura of its own! It's as well that he doesn't dye his hair as most dandies would, more so while seeking a bride. Isn't it true to his character; being truthful to himself, and to others as well. So, he's divorced, which means that he

was married; what was his wife like; could he have wed on the rebound? How long would've their marriage lasted; what could've gone wrong with their wedlock? By the way, have the roughs and toughs of his marital life affected his amiable disposition? May not have been, given the softness of his visage in that picture; oh, how I was tempted to flick it from that folder! But why did my sense of decency tie my hands when fate itself played foul with me; didn't it make me reject his hand out of hand?'

Having reached her car, and sitting still at the steering, she continued to take the clock back in time, 'How I used to like him in those days, but fate made me blind to his marital charms. But now he's nearing forty-four and I'm touching thirty-nine; so what, as age has seemingly spared us both its ravages of time to afford us a hectic time to make up for our lost time. Maybe that's why he looks at his handsomest best and my allure too is at its peak; won't all those ogling eyes tell that? Now that his picture has brought my loss to the fore, nearly two decades after our parting of ways, is it that fate has come to repent its thoughtless act? But is it going to redress its wrong doing? If so, when he sees me now, won't it induce romantic impulses in him replacing his bitter memories of our parting? And for all that, ours could be one such marriage made in heaven that got delayed on earth. Maybe his divorce portends that. But still, given his past hurt and my present proclivities, would he like to own me? Well, I would know that soon enough, won't I? But come what may, I won't lose him this time for I can't bear his loss anymore.'

Having resolved thus, she started her car to steer it to her newfound destination. In time, as the address led her to a middle-class setting, parking her car by the roadside, she rushed to Venu's first-floor flat only to hold herself at the threshold. Soon though, as the doorbell couldn't clear the hurdle, seeing the irony of it all, she went back to the car to continue her wait.

'Would he be able to recognize me at all?' she thought as his fortuitous absence made her lose the ecstatic momentum his memory had generated. 'Surely, he would've pushed me out of his memory; if not for anything but for peace of mind. Moreover, twenty-years are too many for any to nurse an unrequited love. But once I announce myself, how would he react to my visit? Maybe for old time's sake, he won't turn me away straight away but surely he may not warm up to me, why should he? In that case, what could be the outcome of our cold encounter? Won't he try to get even with me if I were to propose? Won't hurt egos tend to go wayward in weird ways? Haven't I seen that happen with Rekha's hubby? So I should not let his temptation to score over me ruin the opportunity that life has at last presented to us. It makes sense to soften his hurt and win his trust to bring him around. But what if he tries to dismiss me at the doorstep itself? Well, he would know I'm no pushover of a gatecrasher.'

Checking the time, when she looked into the rear mirror, she saw a motorbike zooming near, and as it passed her by, turning her gaze through the windscreen, she saw the helmeted rider steer it through the compound gate. Sensing that it was Venu, she readily got down from the car to catch up with him but as her common sense cautioned her to allow him time to refresh, she got back into her car to wait for a while.

Soon though, as her eagerness got the better of her patience, with her heart in her mouth, she set out for a date with her destiny; but having reached the threshold, unable to decide about the period of a decent wait to cross it, she stood rooted there for long. At last, though driven by an irresistible desire for his espial, yet she knocked at the door tentatively but as Venu opened it immediately, she lost her way with the words that she had been rehearsing relentlessly.

However, seeing his face acquire that look, which the first look at a desirable woman induces in man, she readied her eyes to discern the nuances in his demeanor even as

hers followed suit as an enamored female of a male. Soon, seeing the evolving signals of recall inevitably progress into signs of surprise, she presented him her smile dimples.

“What a surprise,” he said excitedly.

“Your face tells,” she said coyly.

“Come on in,” he said wide opening the door.

“But I seek a customary entry?” she said standing still.

“I don’t get you,” he said confusedly.

“Can’t wait till you get it,” she said flirtingly and stepped in.

“You haven’t changed much,” he said closing the door behind them.

“Your eyes said that much,” she said coquettishly.

“May know I’m wiser to your teases,” he said smilingly.

“I was afraid you might’ve forgotten me,” she said sitting in a sofa.

Then the doorbell rang as if to afford him an interlude to respond to her gambit.

‘He hasn’t taken my name as yet,’ she thought following him with her eyes to the front door. ‘Is he buying time with generalities to try to place me? Maybe his desiring look is more to do with my allure than with his recollection of me. But still, isn’t it good enough for my mission?’

Greeted by a salesman of doormats, Venu was not irritated for once, and having seen him off, he tried to come to grips with the sudden development.

‘What a bolt from the blue?’ he tried to figure out his situation. ‘But how on earth she has managed to find me out, and for what purpose? What am I to make out of her peculiar overtures now? Is it her courtesy call after that discourteous send off? Or has she come to take my material stock to revalidate her rebuff then? If so, seeing my setting, won’t she feel vindicated? Why won’t that make a day for me for not giving her a cause for regret? Surely she has realized that I’m bowled by her charms, but how my enamored eyes could’ve hidden the urge her allure surged in me. What a sextraordinary thirty-nine she has turned into now! Whatever, I shouldn’t make a fool of myself yet again; I should see her off before my weakness for her grips me all again.’

“Sorry for coming in the way of your guest,” she said smilingly as he rejoined her.

“Never mind, it’s a trespasser,” he said sitting in the nearby sofa.

“Like me I suppose,” she said feigning to move closer to him.

“What do you mean by that?” he said unable to suppress his mirth.

“You haven’t taken my name as yet,” she said heartily.

“I felt it could embarrass you in my pronunciation,” he said dryly.

“Go ahead, and let me see,” she said coquettishly.

“Priya,” he said in spite of himself.

“I love it, don’t you see that?” she said coyly.

He merely looked at her for a clue to her flirtations.

“Glad you haven’t forgotten me,” she said tentatively.

“I forgot you in the sense that I hardly think about you,” he said unassumingly.

“No faulting you for that,” she said melancholically.

"I'm sure, it wouldn't have been any different with you," he said nonchalantly.

"Are you still bitter with me?" she said taking his hand.

While the sensuality of her touch raised the pitch of his flesh, the sensitivity of it insensibly induced empathy in his despondent heart.

"I'm sorry if I've sounded so," he said pressing her hand.

"I know, you've every right to feel jilted by me," she said still holding his hand.

"I was sad for losing you but never felt ditched by you," he said withdrawing his hand, as if recalling his resolve.

"Don't tell me that?" she said as much in surprise as in relief.

"You should believe me," he said.

"I know you don't lie, so do I," she said taking back his hand.

"I know that but how do you do now?" he said letting her hold his hand.

"You would know that by and by," she said mirthfully.

"There could be many threads for us to pick up," he said in spite of himself.

"But two would do to twain it," she said tantalizingly.

Beset by doubts all again, unable to enthuse himself, he withdrew his hand.

"Since I've taken the lead, I've the first right to gather," she said regardless.

"It's the same one-upmanship," he said resignedly.

"So be it," she said moving closer to him.

"First let me prepare some coffee for us," he said getting up.

"May I steal the pleasure of it," she said following him into the kitchen.

Soon, watching the fumes of the coffee decoction she was preparing, he envisioned the similitude of his evaporated marital dreams with her. But equally, as her loving looks and affectionate manner began dissolving his reservations about her, he found himself genuinely warming up to her.

"I never hoped to see you again," he said taking her hand.

"Sometimes I thought I could," she said pressing his hand as if demonstrate the reality.

"But what for," he said.

"That's for the end," she said smilingly handing him a cup of coffee with a covetous look that surged his urge.

Then, sipping their coffee without a word, they stared at each other in turns, and having drunk to the dregs, they returned into the drawing room to continue their tête-à-tête.

"I'm all ears now," she said as they settled in the sofa together.

"If you recall, we first met when I was a in the engineering final year and you, still in the intermediate," he began his recap, "It didn't take me long to realize that I was madly in love with you and that your feeling was no more than liking for me. So to say, that enabled me to grasp the nuances of liking and loving – to like is to savor someone's presence and love is but misery of someone's absence. Whatever, I nursed our marital hopes as there was no caste hurdle to cross and a status barrier to break for my love. So, wanting to propose to you after your graduation and to be nearer to you till then, after I

got my degree, I took up a job in a small-scale unit in your town. Naturally I didn't have a second thought about giving up some lucrative offers from elsewhere that would've afforded a head start to my career,"

"Sorry for being a spoiler in more ways than one, but why didn't you tell me about it then?" she said grasping his hand as if to convey her pain through her touch as well.

"I didn't want you to see that as my sacrifice," he said reminiscently. "Moreover, seeing that your liking was yet to crystallize itself into love, maybe I was afraid that you may even goad me to go my career way. That way, you can say that it was all owing to the selfishness of my love. Whatever, I took you for granted and waited for your graduation to propose to you; so, when you declined my hand, I was as much shattered as surprised. But in the hindsight, we both were still raw then; you were barely nineteen to my nearly twenty-four."

"So, you felt that I led you up the garden path," she said ruefully.

"To be honest, that thought never crossed my mind," he said pressing her hand. "Even otherwise, I always believed that it's unfair to dub one's genuine change of heart in the course of courting as jilting. I did realize that the closeness of courtship could expose the chinks in the armors of the enamored, giving rise to second thoughts in either, or both about the tenability of their wedlock. So, your reluctance to accept my proposal made me wonder what it was in me that made an unassuming girl like you think that my hand was not made of the right marital material for you to hold onto. Believe me; it's no more and no less."

"Though it's no excuse," she said apologetically, having been affected by his magnanimity. "I was too young to have either the foresight or the hindsight of life. What's worse, I was in an impressionable age then, and as my life would have it, shortly before you proposed, I became friendly with Sudha, who came from an affluent family. As we readily took to each other, I began spending more of my time in their bungalow, which afforded me a first-hand experience of luxurious living. So, enamored of that life-style, I insensibly started craving for the same, and what's worse, I came to see our middle-class life as wasteful existence. That's how I came to raise my marital bar that was beyond even my immense liking for you to clear. Moreover, your contended visage viewed from my ambitious prism seemed too pale for my coveting."

"Had you opened your mind then, my brain would've been spared of so much racking," he said reminiscently.

"I thought why rub salt into the wound," she said nostalgically.

"Maybe it's a good turn from you as otherwise my monetary outlook could've got bugged in that nascent stage of my life," he said philosophically. "Anyway, I hope you've got what you wanted."

"Yes and no, and we'll come to that later; but tell me what happened with you later," she said exhibiting an uncanny urgency in her tone.

"After having lost you, it made no sense for me to stick around there," he picked up the threads of his life all gain. "So, I readily moved over here but it took me quite a while to put all that behind me. But as that only brought the vexations of my bachelorhood to the fore, I let my parents look for my prospective bride. I told you that I was born very late into their marriage and so ever since I got employed, they were keen to marry me off, more so my father, who, by then, was fast nearing his retirement age. I may say in a lighter vein that besides his paternal concern for me, there was a middleclass mindset at work as well for one's retirement would adversely impact the quantity as well as the quality of the wedding gifts. That is apart from the bargain prices for the related goods

and services one's proportionate position ensues. So, I readied myself to ascend the altar with my dream bride to supplant the desired one but the dynamics of arranged alliances kept me in the limbo for far too long to my material discomfort."

He paused for a while as if to come to grips with the impediments in the way of timely marriages.

"To start with, notwithstanding our social inconsequentiality, my father was proud of his pedigree and so was averse to devaluing its progeny by default of an inferior nuptial," he said nostalgically. "Besides, he was very status conscious, never mind he was but a petty government servant, oh, what vanity! But worst of all, he was a staunch believer in matching the horoscopes of the prospective couple to foresee whether it's going to be a smooth sailing or the rough weather in their marital waters. Why single him out as that has become an article of faith of one and all, and the hitch is that if the groom's astrologer predicts a batting wicket, the bride's *jyotishi* lays a wet pitch for the same match. As if these impediments are not enough, there are peculiar community constraints and pecuniary family restraints to reckon with that is besides the whims of the bachelors and the fancies of the maidens. And the net outcome of all these human fads and foibles is that weddings tend to remain nonstarters for everyone's discomfiture."

"Do you believe in astrological predictions?" she said.

"Least of all matching horoscopes for mismatches," he said. "If not a fraud, certainly it's a farce as my own case proves. If the planetary configuration in the seventh house indicates one's marital course, then astrologically speaking, he or she would only wed the one who would take him or her, on that predetermined path, which means one's fate ensures that one willy-nilly shuns those not conducting one's marital destiny and likewise gets slighted by such for the same reason. So, of what avail are these futile astrological exercises proving to be inimical to timely weddings."

"May I contribute my bit to your philosophical astrology?" she said in all admiration.

"But before that," he said, "I may say that instead, it would make sense if the psychic profiles of the prospective brides and grooms are sought to be matched for mental compatibility. Say, other persona specifics being more or less the same, two misers form a better wedlock than say, a miser and a moderate. So, we need psychoanalysts and not astrologers for matrimonial advice but still even if one believes that his future is cast in his horoscope, then he should be able to see the irrelevance of these misleading matching exercises. This reminds me of a funny remark about our peculiar penchant to simultaneously pray to a variety of gods and goddesses, which only means that we don't believe in the power of any of them to fulfill our desires."

"Some food for thought though," she said smilingly.

"Over to your examined life," he said inquisitively.

"Won't the broken engagements and nays that prelude wedding vows prove that destiny too is prone for second thoughts?" she said meaningfully.

"Maybe that's destiny's own course correction," he said wondering about the import of the moment. "While the combination of idiocies put my wedding on hold, my father's retirement further impaired my aura in the wedding arena. By then, the dwindled number of matchable brides came to see their would-be in-laws as some sort of a marital overburden they would rather do without. No faulting the nucleus family's free stirrings as the trappings of the joint family could indeed be oppressive but at the same time, one shouldn't lose sight of the moral pinning of life itself. If the in-laws were to remain hard nuts to crack, maybe, it's fine for the wife to scoot as the burden shifts to

her man to rein in his folks, but to per se object to their presence in her home itself, never mind their amiable nature, is socially alarming.”

“Sadly, life fails to balance itself, so it seems” she said melancholically.

“Maybe that’s true about individual life,” he said noticing her changed demeanor, “but when it comes to life as a whole, it has a way of balancing itself. Even as my eligibility as a groom was getting degraded by degrees, so as to make her a match for me, life had contrived to keep Chitra’s marital dreams on hold. She was the second girl in the line of marriage in that middle-class household that held her four younger brothers as well. Besides the meager dowries their father could place in their wedding platters, the elder one had only plain-looks to offer to the prospective grooms. So, as the first wedding was not in the offing and as custom too wouldn’t let Chitra’s glamour jump the marriage queue, the second ritual was not even on the family agenda. However, while her sister, lacking an employable qualification to uphold the family dignity in the office corridors, sat at home cursing her fate, Chitra had double graduated to become a lecturer in some women’s college. But still her frustrating wait for her nuptial night seemed unending.”

“That apart, what to say about our family custom of marrying the girl first that puts paid to her elder brother’s marriage?” she said.

“Like most things in life that too has two sides to it,” he began reasoning the age-old customs. “The wed girl first idea is a relic of the joint family system that’s on a different footing but the sisterly seniority level-fields the matrimonial ground for the not so well endowed elder ones; just the same, it’s unfair to the juniors as it tends to deny them what life has granted them. This reminds me of the lines in *Benign Flame* – ‘when maidens cross their mid-twenties, they find to their consternation that men whom nature meant for them by the logic of natural selection, were indeed bending towards the younger ones, tending them to fend for themselves as singles’. That apart, can parents ever ensure equal quality of life to all their children? Well they may enable them all obtain the same degree but would that ensure them the same career station in life? It’s no different on the matrimonial front. As all have to be on their own at some point of time, I think it’s better for the parents to let their children run their individual courses driven by their destinies.”

“Have you become a Socrates of sorts or what?” she said in all admiration.

“It’s not like that,” he said in all humility, “and simply put, life teaches us all through though we refuse to learn, but in my case, maybe, fate forced me to grasp its hardest lessons. So to say, nature devised food and sex not only to sustain life but also to make it joyous to the living and towards that end it endows the earth to cater to the former and contrives the sex ratio to ensure the latter. However, in nature’s scheme of things, and by the very character of their functions, food furnishes life from birth to death while sex, as it is a latecomer, makes an early exit albeit after an exhilarating run. So instead of lamenting on the lackings of life, prudence lies in making the best possible use of its limited sexual span, of course buttressed by one’s libido. Surely the elders, privy to this aspect of life, should advise the youths to pick up the low hanging sexual fruits to satiate themselves, as other wants of life can wait for their eventual fruition.”

“Oh, what lessons of life!” she said admiringly.

“Now I want to hear about your learnings,” he said.

“But our agreement is different, isn’t it?” she said smilingly.

“Why are you so adamant?” he said exhibiting his curiosity.

“Why read the last page of a mystery beforehand?” she said turning coquettish as if alluding to her intended ending of their current encounter.

“You always have a way to stump me,” he said reminiscently.

“But now the ball is in your hand, isn’t it?” she said half in jest.

“So to continue my tiresome tale,” he said in resumption, “at last, as if Chitra’s fate was fed up of the tortuous wait, it induced a widower to own her sister’s older hand. So with the decks to her marriage thus cleared, and the astrologers having concurred, soon she entered into my life to celebrate her thirtieth birthday as my wife, and that was ten years back. I plead guilty for revealing a woman’s age.”

“Pardoned, because it’s not mine,” she said smilingly and added endearingly. “You’re lighter than your forty-four.”

However, noticing that he checked his instinct to lend his voice for the admiration for her gorgeous looks that his face has been conveying to her, she presented him her guilt-filled visage, which only stirred his innate feelings for her.

“Priya,” he said, “let me picture the material arena into which I ushered her in from the altar so that you can have a true perspective of our marital life. You know neither money enamored me nor ambition courted me, but strangely my professional qualification became the bane of my career. My search for a proper job landed me in a state government undertaking that has since gone under; so no use taking its name now. Since I loved that job as a purchase officer, I exerted myself to excel at it, and my boss, for his part, was keen to see me making great strides on the career ladder. However, when he had all but set the stage for my crucial promotion, unfortunately for both of us, he was sidelined by the minister to bring in the sibling of a political bigwig as the departmental head. Somehow, the new arrival was averse to engineers in what he perceived as a commerce domain, and so he sat on my promotion as if he was on an indefinite sit in. The fact that I made a late start in the corporate world too didn’t help me to make it to the greener pastures that anyway my love for this place further restricted. So, with no progress on the marital as well as the career fronts, it may not be hard for you to picture my plight then.”

“What an irony that a superior education should yield inferior career returns and no wonder that company had gone under,” she said equally affected.

“Whatever, when my father came to know that my salary was no better than that of a bank clerk then, he wondered of what avail was his ordeal in financing my technical education, with hostel bills and all,” he said feeling sad for his disappointed dad. “Likewise, after an agonizing wait, marriage led an unwary Chitra into a failed career setting, and it showed, readily at that. Yet I couldn’t fault her as it was I who failed to deliver what my qualification had promised in her dream marital home. So, soon after she came into my life, she entreated me to refurbish this flat and refurnish it, and held that her earnings would lighten the debt burden. Though it was against my nature to live beyond our means, but still, against my better judgment, I went along with her to try to set the right marital tune in our home. Yet, setting her sights much beyond the monitory reach of our home, and thereby lamenting over its material lackings, she made us miss most of its marital offerings at that vantage station of our life. Oh, what a hell of a companion a sulking spouse doth make!”

“I can see it from your face,” she said pressing his hand.

“That being the case, what else I could do then than sharing my philosophy of life with her,” he said holding her hand. “But while the averments of the have-nots on the irrelevance of wealth lack credence, the hypocrisy of the well heeled on that count carries conviction in public perception, and that’s the irony. Yet, I tried to make her see

that everyone's life is a unique package of creature comforts and emotive kicks; the former displaying the standard of living and the latter defining the quality of life. If only the ethereal facets of the packages that have a bearing on the quality of life were also to be visible for public view, then possibly people would suffer less in material comparison for it would be apparent then that life gives with one hand and takes away with the other; what's more, adverse times dent its bigger packages more than the smaller ones. So to say, I tried to make her see reason to make our life as amiable as was possible but to no avail."

"Had I married you then, I'm sure my wooly head wouldn't have let me fare any better than her," she said and thought 'so whatever happens happens for good.'

"Maybe, you know that better," he said and paused as if to come to grips with the pain his recollections caused him, and she was gripped by guilt for being the cause of it all.

"So we dragged our marriage into the second year thus," he resumed his woeful tale. "But even as our life became a farce, fate imparted an inimical twist to it. Latching onto my colleague's jesting about the under-the-table worth of my purchase desk and my naivety in not realizing that, she began pressing me to become worldly-wise. Oh, the tricks she played to seduce me to graft our way to happiness would surely make a treatise on the subject. Yet, finding me unyielding, she first took to moral blackmail – though in a position to take her on joyrides in sedans, how unfair I was in reducing her into a pillion rider etc., etc. Since I remained stubborn even then, she took to sexual blackmail to heighten my frustration, but as that too didn't bring about my surrender, she became unimaginably cantankerous that is to put it mildly."

"In spite of it all, what gave you the strength to stick to your moral ground?" she said as much in surprise as in admiration.

"Like with nature so is the case with human nature, it has some invariable dimensions to it," he philosophized. "It's possible that my innate disregard for money enabled me to withstand that irresistible feminine pressure of an amorous woman that too in the prime of our life. But still, as captured in *Jewel-less Crown*, it's the character of money to corrupt the ardent, tease the vacillating, and curse the indifferent, and curse it did."

"Oh, how true it is," she said in the flashback her own life.

"Finally, on the third wedding anniversary that symbolizes the flexibility of marital durability, she chose to roll the dice on its longevity. That day when she said that she would quit her job, her idea of idleness was a ruse to make me fall in line for shorn of her salary my budget would be in the topsy-turvy. She knew that deprived of her contribution, I would be really hard up to repay the loans I took to cater to her whims and fancies, and so she reckoned that I would fall in line as I won't be able to make both ends meet with my income alone. Well, she thought that she called it right but still as I hedged my bets, she quit her job and what's worse resorted to wasteful practices to further strain my finances."

"Wonder how you could endure all that," she said taking his arm and holding it endearingly.

"While my patience wore thinner, the threshold of her impatience too became lower," he continued to recap his matrimonial predicaments, "and in the end, she threatened to sue me for divorce and her maintenance to boot. So to say, her threat of divorce made me only feel relieved for I always believed that it's unfair for man to ditch a woman at any time, more so past her prime, when she would be most vulnerable to attract another mate. Maybe she wanted to make me realize that my uprightness at office wouldn't let me square it up at home, and surely the prospect of providing for her

maintenance out of my overstressed financial position unnerved me. But still I thought I've had enough of her and so didn't yield to her, maybe making it untenable for her to hold onto our marital ground. So, ending our over two year marital ordeal, she walked out on me to sue me for divorce with maintenance."

"Since she had nothing against you, wonder why she brought things to such a pass?" she said.

"I think it all started with her obsession to lead the so-called good life and a burning desire to have the goodies of life never mind they were beyond our material means," he said ruefully. "So, when she came to know that my bribe money could be the source of her material fulfillment, it became a 'so near and yet so far' situation that insensibly made her insane. Then, as they say, one thing led to the other in the vicious marital cycle of our life. But to give devil its due, she was kind and considerate to my parents who came to stay with us right after our marriage."

"Pursue if thou wants with zeal / Instincts then would spin thy mind," cautioned us Krishna in the Gita but seemingly to no avail," she said ruefully.

"Sadly so but equally true are William Congreve's words," he said in all vexation, "that heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned. Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned. Given my horrid life at that torrid juncture, while seconding the second line, I would paraphrase the first as; court has no rage like marriage to divorce turned. Oh, how she tried to picture me in the hall of justice as a suspicious character! Besides, she suffered no qualms in lying on oath that I abetted my parents, dead and gone by then, to routinely ill-treat and humiliate her at every turn. Worst of all, in a et tu, Brute moment, she sought to justify her case for divorce as well as maintenance by stating that I forced her to give up her job suspecting her fidelity. What's worse, as her lawyer was wont to drag the case, of course aided, in no small measure, by his lordship, who prided himself as a master of reconciliations, it became apparent that neither she was in a hurry for divorce nor the judge to grant it to me. While the lordship's intention seemed altruistic, hers was to keep me in the limbo so as to bar a fresh nuptial for me as she knew how miserable I could be without a woman in my life. Besides, as the Damocles' Sword of maintenance hung over my head, I never felt as hapless in my life of adversities."

"Isn't it sad and strange in the same vein?" she said affected no end.

"Maybe that's life," he said in all vexation, "and if anything, the unending hearings at the court hall seemed to testify to that. However, sensing her mischief, and seeing that she wasn't put up with her parents, I smelt a rat at last. Well, she was wont to tell me that though a rich and handsome man used to pester her to marry him, owing to her inhibition of wedding out of caste; she had forgone that God-given opportunity. I used to think that she could have made up that story to highlight my material mediocrity as a way to humiliate me but given the turn of events, I started wondering whether it was all true and that he got hold of her in the meantime; and for all that, she might have sought him on her own to fulfill her unfulfilled dreams. What an irony it would have been had she cast me away to make it with him by shedding her caste inhibitions; so I was constrained to engage a private detective to find that out to counter her strategy in the court."

He stopped at that as if the findings were distasteful for their recollection leave alone narration.

"Skip that if it's hurting," she said pressing his hand.

"It really hurts but so be it," he continued uninhibited. "When it came to light that she was living with that man after ruining my life, I was devastated to say the least though her unseemly conduct would make her case for maintenance collapse like a

house of cards in the court hall. Yet it didn't appeal to my sense of decency to go to town with her dubious character to score over her; so I sought her in the court premises and told her that her only saving grace lies in setting me free without any strings attached to our separation. Luckily for me, she saw the writing on the wall and saved me the shame of shaming my wife to save my skin."

"Are you bitter feeling betrayed?" she said.

"Not after I could view the web of our wedlock through her marital prism," he said. "She believed that the material fringes make value additions to life without which she saw it merely as a wasteful living. Maybe, one can fault her outlook of life that too at the cost of being judgmental but can't really blame her for wanting to lead a life she wanted to live. But the moot point is the way she went about it which of course depends on one's nature and character in the given circumstances, and that's in the realms of morality which is a different subject altogether. Anyway, all that helped me to see life in more ways than one."

"Now it helps me too?" she said.

"Anyway, after that four-year court ordeal my lawyer managed to get the court's nod to untie our nuptial knot, and that tells a different story about the judicial apathy," he continued. "You would've read a lot about our country's judicial jigsaw but I'll tell you something about its innate stupidity. On any given day, the so-called cause list, containing more cases than a Bakasur of a judge can bite, consumes much of, if not all, his pre-lunch session in routinely granting adjournments on one ground or the other. That only leaves the post lunch session for him to masticate a couple of cases at best with witnesses, arguments, and such. What a colossal waste of scarce court, nay public, time and yet wonder why it won't occur to the wisemen in the black robes to take only that much in their judicial plates at a time as they can bite and chew as well."

"Why, the insiders seldom have an outside view," she said.

"That apart, the very idea of change is an anathema to the status quo," he said. "It didn't take me long to realize that our Byzantine system suits the culprits in the criminal cases, vexes the righteous in the civil suits and hurts the hurt in the divorce matters. That's how I felt that I should try to contribute my little bit to hasten the justice delivery; moreover as our company was in doldrums by then, I saw the legal profession as a long-term career option for me. So, I opted to study law in an evening college to eventually enroll myself at the bar."

"I do remember that your grandfather was a lawyer," she said.

"A law author at that but wonder why he didn't advise me to step into his shoes then," he said.

"Better late than never and I'm sure his genes are serving you well at the bar," she said.

"Maybe my impulse to serve at the bar itself owes to them," he said with a sense of satisfaction. "You may know he was known to fight on the right side of justice so much so that the judges tend to pre-judge the cases that he had advocated, but on the flipside, it didn't yield him the monetary returns the profession is known to yield to its protagonists. Possibly, my career graph too could follow his curve, and I won't grumble about that but anyway that's in the realms of the future."

"I hope ethics and wealth would blend in your career," she said.

"That is practice willing," he said smilingly.

"By the way, have you ever tried to find me out all these years?" she said.

“Frankly, no for I always felt that while gentlemen remain cold to their old flames, blaggards inflame them,” he said with conviction.

“It’s gentlemanly, really,” she said taking his hand.

“Glad you appreciate,” he said pressing her hand.

“Be good to show me her picture,” she said smilingly.

Having handed over his marriage album to her, he went into the kitchen as it occurred to him that he missed his smoke all along.

‘Won’t her manner suggest that she is thinking in terms of picking up the threads?’ he began to contemplate as he prepared some coffee for them. ‘What could be her marital status? Given her rich manner, she could’ve married a well-heeled man. What if she’s either divorced, or god forbid, widowed? But seeing my net worth won’t add up to much why would she marry me now? By any chance, is the idea of an affair with an old flame moving her? If so, what a bonanza it would be with her enhanced allure. Or has she simply come to see me driven out of mere curiosity? Whatever, I shouldn’t be too eager as it’s wise to be once bitter twice shy.’

“Oh, thanks,” she said as he handed her a cup of coffee, “but surely she’s a good looker.”

“It’s no use crying over spilt milk,” he said. “The irony of it all is, having lost your hand; I had to wait so long for a like hand. Maybe, a lesser hand would’ve served me well but that’s about ifs and buts of life. Well, what about showing me the picture of the man you gave your hand to?”

“Why jump the gun, first let’s go to my place,” she said.

“Let me have a shower then,” he said heading for the bath.

While he had his bath, speculating about the possibilities of her current station in life, she leafed through his marriage album all again.

“What about hiring a cab for us,” he said all ready to go.

“I’ve come in my car,” she said.

“Then I’ll follow you on my motorbike,” he said tentatively.

“What if you lose me in the traffic; I’ll be back to square one,” she said smilingly, and added. “So, I’ll take you in my car tied with the seat belt.”

“You can take me blindfolded if you wish,” he said as he led her out of his apartment.

“If you come with an open-mind that would do,” she said overtaking him to reach her car.

[Part 2](#)

As Priya drove him into the sprawling compound of an elite complex, Venu began to see the futility of his daydreams entertained in his modest dwelling.

‘Is not our status gap too wide to fill?’ he thought as she drove the car to her duplex villa. ‘Surely she would’ve known that the moment she stepped into my apartment. What for then has she brought me to her arena than to show me my place? Didn’t she hint that I’m better open-minded? What a tease it is? Oh, how I brought it upon myself; instead of being formal, I got warmer to her. Why the women in my life are so cruel to me. What if I deny her the vicarious pleasure by bidding her adieu at her doorstep itself? Won’t it serve her right?’

Parking the car in her portico when Priya nudged him towards the main door; he looked at her as if to read her mind for a clue to her intentions.

‘Am I seeing the devil in a Devi,’ he began to rethink on his vacillating ground. ‘Why am I not being able to give allowance to her genuine change of heart? Willy-nilly, have I become a misogynist without my knowing about that? Maybe that’s the damage my aborted marriage caused to my psyche, but I should not allow that to ruin my life. Why place the cart before the horse, let her show her hand now.’

Thus as he stood at the doorstep, she stepped in to usher him in.

“Oh my man, tell my name,” she said in all smiles.

Her strange welcome made him co-relate it with her ‘customary entry’ statement at his place, and that brought to the fore the fuss his folks made to force him and Chitra to tell each other’s names to grant visa to enter his apartment. So it dawned on him that she could be alluding to the just weds’ entry into their marital home, and that raised his hopes all again.

“Oh, Priya,” he said tentatively as she took his hand.

“Welcome, though belated,” she said pressing his hand.

While she led him round her luxurious villa, to his dismay, he saw their economic disparity in full view.

“It’s frightfully rich,” he said as they returned to the drawing hall.

“Don’t frighten me like that,” she said as if pleadingly.

“Again I’m sorry, if I’ve sounded so,” he said taking her hand.

“Do you know what it cost me?” she said leading him to a sofa.

“I’m not yet into the real estate business,” he said in jest taking his seat.

“The price I paid for it is the self-imposed tax on my life,” she began by taking his hand, “After you stopped seeing me, as I started missing you, I developed second thoughts, and even as I was slowly veering towards you, as luck would have it, Veda my cousin visited us after a long gap. After her graduation, even as she wanted to marry her classmate for love, her father forced her to tie her life with a better qualified though oldish looking man, twelve years her senior. Though I was five years her junior, she treated me as a friend and used to confide in me a lot, so she was wont to lament then that as her uninspiring man fails to excite her, she lies as cold fish in her nuptial bed; that was shortly after her marriage but as if fate didn’t intend our union yet, she changed tack during that fateful visit. She said that it’s as well that her father derailed her love for she came to realize that there are other womanly wants that only a man of means can meet; so she maintained that in the long run love alone is of no avail to woman’s life. And that was that.”

“Won’t my story vindicate that, so no faulting that,” he said melancholically.

“Never mind women’s outcry about their lot in the man’s world,” she said after pressing his hand with empathy, “with a little bit of looks and a fair amount of luck, marriage tends them into exalted settings. However, save a slave of Razia Sultana, that could seldom be the case with men for woman tends to look up her station for her mate. Thus, banking on my good looks, even as I raised my matrimonial bar beyond the reach of the suitable boys of the middle class but the upper class parents either cold-shouldered my father’s overtures or pegged the dowry over the moon. Yet it took me quite a while to realize that the marital bar I set was beyond me to cross over onto the higher material zone. So, when my hopes became dupes, giving go ahead to my sister’s

out of turn wedding, I came here to increase my social height by becoming a chartered accountant.”

“Wonder how you grew so much in a short time!” he said admiringly.

“But it took twenty years for the world to become small for us,” she said wryly. “So, I plunged myself headlong into the accounting field with a single-mindedness that even surprised me. Goaded by my aptitude and guided by my guru, I reached my chartered goal in the top gear that is even as I pursued the company secretary course to its fruition. Soon, I began my journey in the corporate world to improve my clout on the marital front that too with great expectations. But lo, as I upped the ante, my aura upended my marital equation; so with no right man in sight, I became an old maid in the end. See the irony of worldly success as it affects the sexes; it helps man make a cut with women, the higher his status all the more he attracts women, but it fails the fair sex by constraining men from courting them, and what’s worse, the lower a female on the social ladder, even more she’s a game for all and sundry.”

“Don’t tell me that you couldn’t find your right man in the right time,” he said.

“Maybe I might’ve but I couldn’t recognize him even if I had chanced to meet him that is after losing you,” she said melancholically. “It’s not just the case with me alone nor is it peculiar only to women. It’s natural for both sexes to eye a dream match but the hazard lies in their inability to picture it on the canvas of reality with the colors of probability. If done, that would enable them to have an idea of the vaunted one for face recognition as and when that one turns up to ring the wedding bells; if not, it would be a case of passing over an optimal match in time in one’s vague lookout for something better that is till the law of diminishing returns catches up. More than boys, girls seem to be losers in their search for a better match, and it is equally lost on both the sexes that their best probable mates appear in first batches.”

“Why this feature of life is memorably captured in *Benign Flame*,” he quoted from his memory. “In case of man, ‘with his eligibility on the wane and despondency on the raise, he lands up with a languid dame for all the sprightly in the race would have married by then’ and with regard to woman, ‘it does often happen that a maiden would shun a Gog in time, only to opt for a Magog, past her prime, wasting her time in the meantime’, and that’s sad indeed.”

“What about opting for the Gog past her prime?” she said affecting to be jovial.

“That could be an interesting story, if there’s any,” he said half in jest.

“Isn’t that possible to make it interesting?” she said smilingly, “but getting back to my past; after we parted, my daydreams made me chase the mirage of a better match for over three years and then my dream career that followed only raised the bar of attrition for my bridal hand even more. Maybe, my manner too conveyed my contempt for the ‘not so well to do’ to act as a barrier to keep the unsuitable boys at bay, so none bothered me with their advances. It’s thus, catapulted into the material zone, as I looked down upon the also-rans in the rat race of life, I lost my way to the altar even when it was high time to ascend it. Yet, as the goodies of life that I was able to acquire and enjoy afforded me a sense of material fulfillment, I got used to live in a make-believe world blissfully unaware of what I’ve been missing.”

She paused as if to regrasp what she had been losing.

“But the hour of reckoning came at the dawn of my thirtieth birthday,” she resumed her recap of the way she had waded through the web of wedlock. “That’s nearly ten years after life first took me to the crossroads of marriage, and some parallel here with Chitra for it’s at that age she entered your life. By then, winning the trust and

confidence of one of the bigwigs of the business world in town, I became the company secretary of his corporation of amalgamations. Early that morning, the old man came to our ladies' hostel with a greeting card and a birthday cake to grant me the leave of absence for the day. After he left, being on cloud nine, as I read a letter tucked in the greeting card, I was nonplussed."

"Did he propose to you or what?" he said in jest.

"Well, his thirty-five year-old heir to his business empire lost his wife after she delivered a still born boy, and simply put, he wanted me to fill the void in his son's life," she said. "But knowing that I thought of his son, our director without a portfolio, as a good for nothing, he penned a rosy picture of mine wielding the real power as the future empress of his vast enterprise and all that goes with it. Not failing to address the maternal weakness of the feminine gender, he made me envision the scepter being passed on to the one borne out of my womb. In short, that long letter carried everything to seduce any woman, more so an ambitious one, into that corporate wedlock."

"So, you became Mrs. Somebody," he said withdrawing his hand that she was holding all along.

"You can relax for now," she said in all smiles taking his hand all again. "Somehow, wedding the widower didn't appeal to me, in spite of his wealth and status not discounting his good looks. Though I was old enough to be objective in these matters, yet I allowed myself to be swayed by this girlish whim on that count. That apart, as I started delving into the matter, so to say, I began to rediscover myself; true, to begin with, I craved for a rich lifestyle and hoped to facilitate it through matrimony, and when I realized its improbability, at least in my case, I strived to improve it on my own accord, and succeeded too, to the extent possible. After all that which made me an old maid, my fate seemed to beckon a life of unimagined riches and high social profile but with a rider, as would often be the case, that is to wed someone whom I didn't admire. So, realizing that even as I made money the crux of my life, the core of it was the quality of my mate, I declined the proposal."

"How strange, after ignoring my hand devoid of means, you gave up his in spite of its plentiful wealth! Surely it requires a rare strength of character that I never credited you with," he said in all admiration.

"Thanks for your appreciation," she said pressing his hand. "Then as it occurred to me that we could've as well built a material edifice on our marital ground, I realized my stupidity in nixing you. Hoping against hope, even as I made up my mind to try to reach you, slighted by my snub, the old man made it untenable for me to continue in his employment; so I had to resign to retain my self-esteem. So, even as I looked around for my proper relocation, my father had finally managed to fix my sister's marital destination; well, unlike me, she remained rooted to the ground and was no mean a looker either but yet for long she too couldn't wade through the complex web of wedlock that you so well described. Whatever, that led me to the station of our separation to try my luck to ascertain your location, but I came a cropper at the factory you worked and the room you tenanted not to speak of the college you attended."

"It's all the more painful that I wasn't married as yet then," he said in vexation, "So as to put my disappointing past behind me, I distanced myself from my acquaintances there. But for that, maybe it would've been a different story and that brings home the truism that our nature is our fate."

Wanting to smoke, he withdrew his hand that she still held, and added, "If you don't mind, I would like to smoke."

"Surely I would, if you smoke alone," she said mischievously.

She picked a Gold Flake King on offer and he lighted it for her before lighting his.

“What about some whisky as a return of favor?” she said taking a puff.

“Why not if it adds flavour to your narrative,” he said smilingly.

“Soon after my sister packed off to her marital home, my father bestowed a like amount on me that he spent on her wedding,” she resumed as they started their drink. “With my staying power thus enhanced, I set up my private practice, and what’s more, dabbled in the stock market to augment my income in the meantime. Soon I happened to run with the bulls at the bourses before catching the scrips at their tails in their bear hugs only to triple my stock holdings before the former ran amuck all again. Maybe, I owe that as much to my luck as my nature for I always believed in a definitive today rather than an unknown tomorrow. Whatever, with part of that windfall, I booked this villa still on the drawing board then.”

“I’m sure you’ve added your touch to its interior décor,” he said admiringly.

“Without realizing that possibly it could please you,” she said looking at him endearingly and continued to recap her past, holding her glass. “Soon, as my practice picked up, so to say, I had no time to breathe. But as I made my small bucks, my profession enabled me to have a closer look at the big bucks, and that changed my outlook of the moneyed. I could see that manipulation is the underpinning of undue wealth and fraud is the architect of the filthy riches. What is galling is that when it comes to the entrepreneurs, the system succors the fraudulent among them on the specious ground that if they were to be squeezed hard then their enterprises go bust leaving the employees high and dry. That way, the bigger the business entity, the greater would be the leeway for its promoters to loot the banks and scoot with the public wealth with impunity that is. So, is the case with the unscrupulous officials, the higher their position in the system all the better protection from prosecution! Thus it dawned upon me that I wasted my youth wanting to wed someone with a potential to game the system with utter disregard for the public good not to speak of the national interest.”

She emptied her glass as though to exhibit her state of emptiness she experienced then and refilled it as if to show him the urge she has developed to redress the situation.

“How I cursed myself then for losing you I only knew,” she said wiping her wetted eyes. “I was about to touch thirty-five then, and realizing that crying over spilt milk would only make it worse, so as to get the best out of a bad bargain, I looked around for a decent man never mind his financial position. But it didn’t take me long to realize that the phenomenon you quoted from *Benign Flame* is not peculiar to men alone as most of them nature intended for me had already tied the knot by then. However, as someone suggested one who seemed right for me; he not only looked decent but also carried himself well, so thinking that I could at least be lucky the second time, I began dating him. But soon I could see through him, credit woman’s sixth sense, that as much as he liked me, he had an eye on my money as well. Yet, as I didn’t want to let my surmises spoil my second chance, I got his background checked, which revealed that he was neck deep in debts being an inveterate spendthrift ever fond of an easy life. So that was that.”

Mixing another drink for them and discerning a sense of ease in him, she was amused at the value men attach to the virginity of their brides never mind their own nocturnal forays into women’s sexual fortresses.

“What next in your marital suspense,” he said as she remained silent for long.

“Not the climax,” she said smilingly.

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