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**Crossing the mirage**  
passing through youth

# thee Crossing



BS Murthy

# Crossing the Mirage - Passing through Youth

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(Revised edition)

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**Dedicated to Kanna,**

whom I could help in crossing  
the mirage of her mind.

## [Chapter 1](#)

### ***Shackles on Psyche***

Youth is the mirror that tends us to the reality of our looks. The reflections of our visages that insensibly get implanted in our subconscious lend shape to our psyche to define the course of our life.

This is the saga of Chandra's chequered life that mirrors this phenomenon in myriad ways.

As perceived by the deprived, he had a fortunate birth. Yadagiri, his father, was the prominent pearl merchant in Hyderabad - Deccan, the seat of the Nizam's power in undivided India. The patronage of the royals and the nobles alike, helped add gloss to his pearls making him the nawab of the trade. Besides, Princely Pearls, his outlet near the Charminar, was a draw with the rich, out to humor their wives and adorn the mistresses.

When Anasuya, Yadagiri's wife, was expecting her second issue, trouble brewed in Telangana, the heart of the Nizam's province. While his subjects' surge to free themselves from his yoke clashed with the Nizam's urge to keep his *gaddi*, Sardar Patel's plans for a pan India was at odds with his designs to retain the Deccan belt as his princely pelf.

'With a go by to the nobility,' Yadagiri tried to envision his future, 'it could be shutters down at the Princely Pearls.'

Thus, at the prospect of the momentous merger, even as the populace got excited, he was unnerved perceiving a slowdown in his trade. Confounding him further, as the impending merger was on the cards, Anasuya's delivery time neared

'Should it be a girl again,' he thought, 'it would be only worse. Why, without a boy, what of the surname?'

Soon, as his wife was moved to the hospital, he was rattled by the prospect of her delivering another daughter. But, as it turned out, his fears proved to be liars on both counts.

Anasuya delivered Chandra, the very day the Nizam, courtesy Sardar, capitulated to the Delhi *sarkar*. And soon, the *nouveau riche*, from the business class, began to outshine the old nobility, pearl for pearl. Buoyed by the bottom line, Yadagiri dreamt of building a pearl empire for his son in the Republic of India. While Anasuya lavished upon Chandra the affection due to a son born after one gave up, Vasavi, his sister, running ten then, found in her brother a soul to dote upon. Thus, toasted by his parents and pampered by his sibling, Chandra had a dream childhood.

But, when he entered adolescence, the realities of life began to confound him to his discomfort. Coaxed by his father to excel at studies, he was perplexed for the lack of aptitude. What's worse, the antics of his classmates made him hapless -- they

marginalized him at playtime, for his lack of reflexes, and, for want of grace, targeted him at fun-time. Well, to cap it all, the snide remarks of the have-nots, that he chose his father well, induced in him a vague sense of inadequacy.

As if all this was not enough for his tender psyche to cope up with, he had to contend with the sternness of the paternal strictness. Thus, it was only time before the seeds of alienation towards his father were sown in his impressionable mind. But the support he got from his sister and the solace he felt in his mother's lap helped soothe his ruffled feelings a little. In time, he reached the threshold of youth, but couldn't cross the despair of adolescence.

Oblivious of the possibilities of life, man goes through his journey of disarray, in the itinerary of the past, chasing the mirages of malady even amidst the sands of hope. And that despairs him forever.

Into his puberty, as his biology induced in him sexual curiosity, owing to his ungainliness, his youthful urge for reciprocity remained unfulfilled. Being naive to the feminine nuances, his eyes couldn't comprehend the emanations of their indifference. When in dismay, as he turned to the mirror for a clue, the reflections of his self-doubts stared him in his face. Yet, goaded by desire, he ogled women but to no avail. And as he went back to the mirror to reassess his self-worth, the craft of man wouldn't oblige where nature's device deluded him. Thus, being in a limbo, he came to be haunted for being unwanted.

Besides, as his sexual urge got augmented, his eyes became the instruments of dissection of the maiden form. Though bowled over by females, he was unable to interest them himself. Intrigued by their manner, he turned his focus onto those to whom they were drawn. And soon he realized that though the nominators of female admiration varied, the common denominator of male appeal appeared to be the dashing.

As a corollary to his discovery, he shed his inhibitions and psyched himself to make a pass at a fancied lass. But in a reproach, governed by vanity, she said that she doubted his acquaintance with the looking-glass. Sadly, that fatal tease came to shape his outlook about his own looks to his detriment. Disdained thus, he shunned maidens and mirrors alike.

Once when his father reprimanded him for his unkempt hair, he entrusted its upkeep to his sister's care. And as she said, in jest, that his porcupine hair needed tins of oil to be tamed, as a way out he went for a crew cut. Though it was in the fashion then, he invited ridicule of all for the same reason. Belittled thus, he became a recluse.

Perturbed by his proclivities, Anasuya alerted Yadagiri who dismissed it all as the tentativeness of youth, and advocated patience to let it pass. Unconvinced though, Anasuya suborned her female instinct for 'action' to the 'inaction' of her master's wisdom. But, as Chandra began to even lose his appetite, her motherly love could take it no more. Thus, she took her son to the family physician and, on prescription, put him on Liv-52.

As that too failed to enhance her son's appetite, the mother was at a loss, and it showed. However, the women of the neighborhood read it all wrong and gossiped on that count.

"An unwed daughter of twenty-eight," opined a sympathetic soul, "surely is a sore."

"No less an eyesore," said another.

"What can be done," said a fair-skinned, "when the girl is so dark?"

"Don't tell me," said a know-all. "She got her chances but Yadagiri rode the high horse then."

"That's the trouble with us," philosophized a bluestocking. "We aspire for more than we can hope for. Wanting the very best is a bad idea but failing to see what the best one can get is even worse."

Unmindful of the gossip that reached her in its magnified form, Anasuya broached the subject of Chandra's condition with that lady philosopher who professed herself as an amateur psychologist. Having read the brief, the lady of letters diagnosed the malaise as a case of ennui and as for the remedy, she prescribed a course in fiction for him.

It's thus amidst his class books, the Zolas with the Gogols, that Anasuya slipped in, started gracing Chandra's study. Unable as he was to concentrate on his studies, he began browsing through them as a way of distraction only to end up delving deep into the fictional world pictured in them. Soon, as he was seized with novels in their scores, their fictional aberrations helped him analyze his own shortcomings. But what really hooked him to the novel was the ego gratification it afforded him in judging the characters portrayed in it. What's more, the empathy he felt for the fictional figures brought the latent sympathy he had for his sibling to the fore. This, in turn, abetted self-pity in his consciousness.

Well, Vasavi remained single, not by choice. While nature deprived her of a whetting visage, her upbringing failed her in imbibing aplomb. Besides, Yadagiri's attitude towards matchmaking didn't help her cause either. No sooner would a well-meaning proposal come forth than he would dismiss it on the grounds of status or pedigree and/or both. It was as if he came to see his own elevation in slighting others and as the well-wishers too lost patience with him, the leads to the prospective matches got sapped one by one. All this had dented his own efforts besides drying up the well of his daughter's marital prospects.

On the other hand, Vasavi, having failed to induce a suitable boy on her own and with nothing better to do, went on an acquisition spree of diplomas in assorted faculties. Ironically, that made her progress on the marriage front even worse, as the list of eligible bachelors on academic plane was leaner, what with the penchant of the boys to take up jobs with their basic degrees.

When Anasuya saw the folly of it all, she started pestering Yadagiri to see the writing on the wall. Finding there weren't any bachelors of over thirty left on the roll of honor, he swallowed his pride and opened his doors for all comers. However, having gone past her prime by then, Vasavi came a cropper with every proposal that came by. But, at last, fate seemed to test her character by tempting her into wedlock. And steeled by life, she said 'no' to the guy who said 'yes' for he made his mercenary intent too apparent for her liking.

It appears that nature has double standards when it comes to endowing the sexes. Why, it's as if, it affords the females, the charms of youth, only to attract the males to propagate the species. Uncharitably though, so it seems, it dents the female aura on the way to menopause, leaving her to fend for herself mid-course. On the contrary, and for the same purpose, it vests virility with men well past their prime.

Anasuya, however, thought of a detour as she saw that they had reached a dead end. She said that it would be an idea to let a widower lead her daughter to the altar. But Yadagiri would have none of that for he felt it would devalue the family and demoralize their daughter. Thus, the status quo prevailed and Vasavi, to her discomfort, remained single.

By the time she crossed thirty, Chandra crawled into the final year of his B.Com. With her emaciated frame and pimpled face, Vasavi seemed even more pathetic to his sympathetic eyes. The thought that they shared the ugliness, bequeathed by their father in equal measure, made him empathetic towards her, even as he was embittered towards his parent on that very score.

'Oh if only we had taken after our mother!' he thought endlessly. 'Why, we would've inherited her beauty, wouldn't we have?'

For its very possibility, the thought of deprivation made it all the worse for him. But, in time, the realization that ugliness was a worse curse for women than men, evoked sympathy for the weaker sex in his empathic soul.

Whenever he found himself in his sister's presence, the pity he nursed for her insensibly surfaced in his eyes. The first time she was struck by his manner, finding his stare scaring, she gazed at him to gauge his mind. As their eyes scanned the bounds of mutual sympathy, at length, their souls got bonded in eternal empathy. In their state of fellow-feeling, fearing that speech might impair the purity of their emotion, they preferred to keep mum.

'How wretched it must be for her, in her condition!' he thought then. 'Hasn't she reached the dead end, in the midst of her life? Maybe, a career would've provided some distraction for her. But dad would have none of that. It's as if, the very idea scandalizes him. It is really stupid of him to stick on to the old times!'

Often, as he felt his own life was no less oppressive, he became melancholic to his mother's worry. Whenever she tried to probe his mind, he put it in the wraps, lest its exposure should burden her even more. Despite finding him dismissive of her inquiries, she never ceased pestering him but to no avail. Thus feeling helpless, she kept an eagle eye on him, and whenever she found him depressed, which was often, she sent him on some errand. She had reasoned that an outing, if it did not alleviate his melancholy, would at the least help unstring him a little.

That day, as Chandra was confined to his room for too long, Anasuya went up to him in concern.

"What's wrong?" she said feeling his forehead.

As their eyes met, he savored her affection.

"What a beautiful mother!" he thought. "What a pity she bore us ugly."

Seeing his condition, she sent him on an errand to the Princely Pearls. When he was leaving home, he found his sister playing with the kids of the neighborhood.

'How she loves children!' he thought with mixed feelings. 'Won't she be distressed for not having one of her own? Is it as an escape from boredom that she gathers them? But would that help her in any way! Maybe, it could be even worse for her. Why, wouldn't the charm of their company sharpen her lacking even more? Isn't all this misery because she is ugly? What an angelic soul, with life so sour! Oh, ugliness is the worst of fates, so it seems.'

While he crossed the Lal Darwaza, he happened to come across two burka-clad women.

'What's this Muslim custom of wrapping up woman in burkas!' he wondered. 'What is it that is sought to be hidden behind the veil? Is it beauty or ugliness? Whatever, the veil seems to be an ingenious leveler of the inequities of genes, at least in the public view! But, on that score, do women really care to hide themselves behind their veils? After all, it can't be, moreover, how can they be mad to endure the ordeal of breathing

and the discomfort of constraint in that? Then, of what avail is it to women than to cater to the male sense of insecurity about them? Oh, how man's falsity of purpose deprives women the joys of being her free selves? Won't the burka symbolize the hold of man over woman's body and soul, not to speak of her psyche? Well, the slaves were better off than these women in their veils, why doubt that.'

As he went along, feeling sad about that, he found two *hamalis* toiling to push a cartload of cloth bundles.

'Why, men like these too have no way to lighten the burden of their birth,' he thought, looking at them. 'To be born poor and ugly is a double jeopardy really. Oh, how the color of the skin came to be the measure of the looks! Well, it could be that the white man owes his dominance of the world more to his fair skin than the grey matter of his brain.'

Inexplicably, he was seized by an impulse to follow the travails of the *hamalis*. So, unmindful of the surrounding traffic, he kept course with the cart. As if to shorten their arduous course, the laborers exerted themselves to accelerate their motion. Lost to them, he came in the way of a speeding car.

Bringing the vehicle to a screeching halt, the woman at the wheel yelled at him in her sarcastic tone, "Hi, you find life burdensome?"

Muttering an apology, as he moved away in confusion, she sped past him in irritation. The poignancy of her insensitivity perturbed him as he lumbered along to the dismal destination.

'Won't it seem the color of the skin is the measure of man's worth as well?' he thought in humiliation. 'Oh, how dark skin devalues man in more ways than one. Would I ever be able to induce a decent dame to become my wife? Why, even Vasavi refused to entertain ungainly men, didn't she? How come, even the ugly seek beauty in their mates? Why not, it's the beauty that triggers the biological impulse.'

At that, inadvertently, his thoughts turned to his mother.

'What should have been her compulsions to marry my father?' he thought. 'Being so beautiful she herself that is! If only she married another, perhaps, Vasavi and I could've been differently made, wouldn't we have been? Won't mother be thinking that way, seeing the plight of her children more so her daughter that is?'

But, on second thoughts, he felt ashamed that he allowed himself to think in those terms.

'The reality of life is unmistakable, isn't it?' he felt dejectedly. 'It's the fact of heredity that shapes one's looks for good or for bad. Unfortunately for us, we took after our father. Had we acquired our mother's features, and even a shade of her complexion, it would've been all too different. Vasavi would have been a mother many times over by now and I could have been the playboy of the college. Wouldn't that have made all those who snub me envious of me?'

The envisaged envy of others in his fantasy made him envious of them in reality.

'Surely, it could be a heady feeling to be admired by women,' he thought. 'How wanted that might make one feel! Won't the glow of the favored shows it could be infinitely fulfilling. But looks like, it's my fate to encounter indifference indefinitely. What a wretched life, I can't even dare to daydream!'

In that state of depression, when he saw his father at the Princely Pearls, his state of mind ensured that he found him more oppressive than ever. The grouse he nursed that

it was his father's genes that were the source of his and his sibling's troubles came to the fore as though to settle scores with his hapless parent.

The psychic mix of hostility towards his father and empathy for his sister catalyzed by self-pity made Yadagiri's welcome words seem absurd to Chandra's pixilated mind. What was worse, the father's show of affection appeared apologetic to his son's afflicted mind. Unfortunately thus, in the son's myopic vision, the paternal love seemed an embodiment of parental guilt. It was as if at that very moment the son's alienation from his father reached a point of no return.

## **Chapter 2**

### ***End of the Tether***

When Chandra had graduated in commerce, Yadagiri wanted him to join him at the Princely Pearls. Though Chandra knew it was coming, yet he felt like it was a bolt from the blue. Having come to mirror his misfortunes in his father's visage, the prospect of the paternal proximity in perpetuity sickened him.

'But how can I possibly object to something that's obvious, natural even!' thought Chandra, and the more he thought about it, all the more he wanted to avoid being drafted into the family business. 'Come what may, I won't have any of it, that's all,' he resolved in the end.

So he began to stall the issue on one pretext or the other, all the while weighing his options, and Yadagiri, who envisioned grandiose plans for the Princely Pearls with Chandra in the saddle, was not amused by his prevarication. The inexplicable conduct of his pride-of-the-future perplexed the father in the beginning only to vex him in time. Chandra, for his part, could not conjure up a credible escape route though he thought long and hard about it. But, in the end, having come to know of an obscure management institute, he tried to sell the idea of MBA to his father through Anasuya's good offices.

"I've more business tricks up my sleeve than the market feel of all the MBAs put together," said Yadagiri dismissively. "They are but snobs in the tweed suits, these MBAs."

With his hope of good hope too ending up in the deep desert, Chandra feigned sickness by way of finding an oasis. Losing his patience at last, Yadagiri forced the issue and fixed the *muhurtham*. Dreading the diktat and determined to avoid the draft, Chandra became pensive. But, slowly, pondering over his predicament, brought about by his parent, he felt outraged. The perceived dominance of his father, and his own inability to resist him, made him hate his parent and pity himself in the same vein. His sense of inadequacy to oppose his father overtly made him think of revolting against him covertly.

'What if I run away!' spurred on by the stray thought, he felt. 'Won't I be free then? Am I not qualified, after all? Can't I live on my own?'

Plagued by the fear of the unknown and pricked by what was known---apprentice on sufferance---he thought he was caught between the devil and the deep sea. Compounding his misery was the thought of the effect his desertion would have on his hapless mother. Thus, he felt as though he was a bird caged at birth, not acquainted with the faculty of flying.

'What's the way out?' he racked his brain. 'Why not tell mom and seek her support?'

But on second thoughts, he became doubtful about the wisdom of it all. 'She would sympathize with me only to plead that I fall in line,' he figured it out. 'What's worse, she



may even extract a promise from me never to desert her. Moreover, what if she blurts out, it would only make matters worse.'

Puzzled by the predicament, his mind played snakes-and-ladders with his resolve--- even as his enthusiasm for freedom surged him to the threshold of action, the fear of the fallout pulled him back to square one. Unable to take the plunge and yet detesting the status quo, he decided to approach his sister for a solution.

'Being in the same boat,' he sought to pump himself up, 'won't she appreciate my lot? Besides, she won't let me down even if she doesn't help.'

When Chandra revealed, Vasavi was raveled.

'It's okay for women to feel helpless in this man's world,' she contemplated, 'and advantaged that they are, it ought to be different for men, isn't it? But, it doesn't seem to be so with my poor brother. Oh, how miserable he looks! Is he afraid of the devil when there is none? Still, if pushed to the wall, wouldn't he be further embittered? Isn't one hapless soul in the house enough to hurt the family health?'

She couldn't help but smile wryly.

'What about poor mother?' her thoughts continued in the same vein. 'As it is, she's worried to death on my account. If something goes wrong with him as well, her cup of misery would be overflowing indeed. Why, she wouldn't be able to take it at all.'

Unable to bear her silence, Chandra clutched at her hand nervously.

"Help me," he pleaded. "I'm sure you can."

"Let me think it over," she sounded hopeful. "You better go now."

As he left, she began thinking about the plight of their lives aggravated by his predicament.

'At least he has me to turn to for help,' she felt melancholically. 'What about me? I can cry over mother's shoulder and she is sure to wipe out all my tears. Likewise, she would lend her shoulder to him as well. But can she address our worries? How she can, isn't the poor thing half-dead on my account. Well, should he desert us now, she would be shattered and may even become insane. All the same, she would never let him go if she ever gets wind of his mind. That's the problem. But what's the solution?'

'Much of his misery may be imaginary,' she began thinking after a pause, 'but its effect appears real. He's really psyched out. Or so it appears. Maybe, it is better that he goes. Being away for a while may relax his nerves and help him clear his mental blocks. There's no other way over there. Dad is bound to be upset about it all. He may even lose his bearings and disown him forever. It would be a tough ask to assuage father and console mother once he's gone. But the family good lies in his going, so it seems.'

At that, she mapped out a strategy for her brother's deliverance but became doubtful about its fallout. 'Won't they be cross with me for abetting his desertion!' she thought in the end. 'And will that help him in the end after all? What possibly could go wrong with him? Oh, life seems to be partial to the males. Won't it come up with escape routes even when fate corners them? Women, oh, they seem to be forever trapped in the man's world, in every way that is. At least some occupation would've served my cause. It might have proved to be an opportunity even. Who knows, I could've met my man at work to work out the rest. Thanks to father's dogmas, I'm condemned to this vegetable existence. How tiresome life has become for so long now! Those silly old values that make vassals out of women! With its oppressive social lock well in place, it's but a calibrated culture trap to entrap women. There is no breaking the shackles my

father and fate together had put my life in. But Chandra could be a free soul soon. That's the advantage of being born a male.'

As the euphoria of her role in his brother's escape gave her ideas about her own deliverance, she became ecstatic. 'Why not go along with him?' she deliberated at length. 'Maybe, single women are vulnerable if they are on their own. There is no mistaking about that in our society, at least as of now. But with Chandra around, it would be different; there won't be a problem that way. Once I feel secure, the rest should be easy to get a footing. We both can work hard and breathe easy. Can't we? We can, that's for sure. Who knows, I may find my man at last to lead a meaningful life.'

The possibility excited her in the beginning only to dampen her at the end.

'Well, it is one thing for a boy to run away from home and another for a girl to do the same,' she thought dejectedly. 'My rebellion could be labeled loose character and my adventure might be dubbed as elopement. Won't all that shame my parents, and who knows, they may even commit suicide! Oh, how can I bring infamy to my family and ruin my parents in the process? If it comes to that, it's better that I die. It looks as if death is the only escape for me from this life denied.'

In the melancholy of that thought-wave, she found herself in tears, but as her brother came back to her in apprehension, she wiped them away in dejection.

"I'm sorry I've upset you," he was upset himself.

"It's the accident of being born a girl that is upsetting," she said as a fresh bout of tears gushed out of her eyes.

Seeing Chandra perturbed, she patted him for equanimity.

"I'm sorry for both of us," he said, himself in tears.

"It's no use of your living in misery here," she said thoughtfully. "I will help you break free."

"What if they turn sour with you?"

"Don't worry," she said resignedly, "I'll find my own release."

"Thanks to you," he said clasping her hand, "I don't feel helpless anymore. And I owe it to you forever."

"I know life wouldn't be the same for you," she patted his head, "and try to be brave always."

### **Chapter 3**

#### ***Burden of Freedom***

Aboard the Bombay Express, Chandra was impatient for the train to move out of Nampally Station. Sitting by the window, he downed the shutter to escape attention of the passers-by. Doubling his precaution to avoid detection, he covered his flanks as well with the centre spread of the day's *Deccan Chronicle*. Thus, in his quarantine, he failed to notice the arrival into the compartment of a bulky youth with a big suitcase.

Panting for a while, the stranger surveyed the scene within, as one would, to gain a vantage seat. Zeroing on the space aside Chandra's, he began pushing his baggage beneath the seat during which he had inadvertently hurt Chandra's feet. When Chandra reflexively lowered the newspaper, it got punctured as the newcomer got up to apologize. Having sat in embarrassment, yet feeling suffocated, the lad reached for the latch of the shutter over Chandra's head. Lifting the same without bringing to bear his weight on Chandra, the fellow settled in his seat to the latter's chagrin.

Though Chandra stared at him in irritation, the fellow who had by then regained his lost ground ignored him altogether. Experiencing a peculiar sense of satisfaction at the chap's recuperation, Chandra, as though to buttress his own self-worth, patted him heartily. When the driver, as a prelude to the guard's green signal, tooted the horn, Chandra's spirits soared sky-high.

Soon, the Bombay Express set on its routine course that charted Chandra's un-chartered sojourn in the metropolis. When the express train left the platform behind and went into the open, he closed his eyes and breathed deeply as if to signify his own break with the past. As the train picked up speed, even as the gushing winds dispelled his anxieties, the rollicking motion massaged his exhaustion. In time, resting his head on the window frame, Chandra sank into a deep sleep that even the *chaai garam* din of the tea vendors failed to impact him.

By then, everyone in the compartment had settled down as well. While the woman by the window side opposite to Chandra was knitting a sweater for the baby girl in her lap, her husband amused himself with the playful child. While the burly youth was leafing through the *Film Fare*, the lad seated next seemed to savor the pictures of the fair sex therein. Making the quorum, three middle-aged men, all uniformly bald, were mimicking their boss without any fear of being eavesdropped.

Right across the aisle, an eager couple joined their split seats in a bid to come closer to each other. The tentativeness of the man's advances and the coyness of the woman's responses indicated that they were just married. It seemed the radiance on his face stemmed from a sense of possessing her and the aura she developed was owing to the consciousness of his attentions.

When Chandra woke up, his eyes scanned the surroundings, before they rested on the couple lost in their sweet nothings. Struck by their mirth, he even felt mystified. The infectiousness of happiness is such that in the proximity of the fulfilled, the sense of dejection in the suffering would seem to evaporate. Looking at them with amusement, he envisaged the euphoria newness brings to a person's love life and wondered whether the same couple would be half as eager towards each other after a couple of years. Maybe, later on, it could be their vested interests aided by habit and abetted by hope that constrain them to get glued together. That being the reality of marriage, he wondered, how all crave to tie the knot! The thought he was no exception to it also made him see the irony of it all.

As if to show Chandra the reality of life, the babe cried, making him turn to its mother in anticipation. When she pulled her blouse to let the babe suckle, Chandra got a glimpse of her marble breast. Even as the babe firmed up its grip on the daunting nipple, the mother veiled her ampleness with the *pallu*. Nevertheless, the momentary sight of that female form made Chandra reminisce the import of an earlier encounter.

During the summers, he was wont to sleep on the terrace in the open air. That night, as he sauntered there after dinner, what he sighted through the neighbor's window stopped him in his tracks. A young girl in full bloom was undressing herself in front of a full-length mirror. He became breathless when he saw the reflections of her breasts as they were released from the confines of her brassiere. Soon, as he came to view both sides of her delectable frame, he was dumbstruck by the beauty of her nudity. After slipping into her lingerie, though she disappeared from his sight, he held on to his post energized by expectancy. As his legs cried foul in the end, he pulled himself to his bed in disappointment. Even before his hope goaded him back to the post, the light went off in her room as though to end his anxiety. Though the impact of her figure benumbed him for long, the excitement he felt in her imagery lent substance to his self-gratification that night.

'Obviously, she is a guest,' he thought, enamored of her. 'If only she would host my love.'

Waking up early the next day, he became restless to see her and be seen as well. At last, when their eyes met, he found hers opaque though she saw desire in his. Disappointed though, he kept vigil for the rest of the day in the hope of catching a glimpse of her. Frustrated in the end, he waited for the moon to take over.

Much before the sun could oblige him to hand over the night vigil to its celestial cousin, Chandra was on the terrace to sight the moons down the window. When the clock struck seven, to his delight, she appeared in the room. Combing her luxuriant hair, she plaited it with her slender fingers. Then picking up a Turkish towel, she then went out of his sight, leaving him dampened with the thought that she might have gone only to wash her face. When she reappeared with the towel tucked over her breasts, he was expectant all again. As he waited with bated breath, she began applying some talcum on her body; her robust thighs bore the brunt of his darting looks. And when she dropped the towel to powder her breasts, he sighted the hair over her chink. The frontal nudity of the magnificent maiden made him mad with desire for her possession. Oblivious to his voyeurism, she slipped into her lingerie and disappeared from his view. And he, lost to himself, stood rooted.

Though he tried his best to attract her attention from dawn to dusk the next day, she took no note of him. That made him think of giving up on his vigil, but came evening, he found himself on the terrace and awaited her arrival. All the same, while his desire urged him to stay on, his decency counseled him to retreat. Though he felt it was demeaning to pry upon a disinterested dame, yet he reached the coign of vantage to ogle her compelling nudity. As if she got wind of his suffering from his qualms, and to put an end his moral dilemma, she left to her native, the next day. Nevertheless, her thoughts tickled as well as troubled him for long, well before her curvy figure all but became a contour in his memory.

When the *chaai-wala* came along chanting his mantra, Chandra came out of his reverie. Alive to the environs all again, he felt like having some *chaai*, even as the bulky chap ordered for both of them. Sipping from his cup, Chandra saw the woman opposite bring her other breast into play but that made no impact on him. In that lactation, the absence of eroticism was a revelation to him. Then, as the woman cuddled her kid, he sensed the essence of maternity.

'By now mother would know,' he contemplated. 'She would be taken aback and feel cheated for sure. But then, won't Vasavi make her see the reality? And it would all be different with father. He would be hurt and unforgiving too. Why he may even disown me. So be it. I am a free bird and that's what matters to me now.'

When the vendors started distributing dinner *thalis*, the lower berths were converted into dining tables. As the bulky guy found it difficult to arrange himself, Chandra made room for him by squeezing himself.

"Thank you," the guy said heartily.

"It's okay."

"Are you going up to Bombay?"

"Yes," said Chandra and added, "what about you?"

"Wherever we go," said the other in reply, "we, the Bombayites go back to Bombay."

"Maybe that's how everyone feels about his native place," said Chandra, however, feeling that Hyderabad had nothing to offer him.

As they ate in silence, Chandra wondered whether befriending the guy would be of any help. When they finished their meal, Chandra tried to prolong the talk.

"It is shame we haven't introduced ourselves," said Chandra stretching his hand, "I'm Chandra."

"I'm Ashok," said the other, taking Chandra's hand, "Ashok Agrawal."

"What do you do?"

"Day after tomorrow by this time," said Ashok heartily, "I would be well on my way to the US for MS."

"Perhaps, then," said Chandra in smile, "Bombay might lose its hold on you."

"Our garment industry is sure to pull me back," said Ashok. "What about you?"

"My father is into pearls," said Chandra resignedly, "but I don't want to join him."

"How strange," said Ashok as he yawned, "the famed pearls of Hyderabad failed to entice you?"

"Oh, there is more to it," said Chandra a little embarrassed. "Looks like you're sleepy."

"Anyway, we've a lot of talking to do tomorrow."

"Why not take my lower berth?"

"Are you afraid," said Ashok heartily, "the middle one would come down crashing on you?"

"Oh, no," Chandra felt a little embarrassed.

"I'm only joking," said Ashok, "Thank you. Good night."

Ashok soon started snoring on the lower berth but Chandra lay crouched on the middle one. By then, though most have slept, the newlyweds were still lost in themselves. Seeing they were immersed in their sweet nothings, Chandra couldn't take his eyes off them.

'They are really made for each other, aren't they?' He began to focus on them. 'Surely she's a rare beauty and he's no less handsome. Why shouldn't they be enamored of each other? And truly they cling to one another, don't they? Seems happiness courts the beautiful couple for its own fulfillment. And for the average looking, marriage could be a matter of going through the motions, couldn't it? Oh, for the ugly, well, it might be wifeless at the worst or an indifferent mate at the best. What a curse it is to lack looks!'

Seeing the bride doing most of the talking, Chandra wondered about the feminine propensity to blabber.

'What a wonder woman is!' he thought at length. 'How they never cease talking! In spite of their limited awareness why are women ever eager to express their opinions? Maybe, it's all hormonal. But then, why should men, for all their exposure, lend women their willing ears? Ever! Is it the sweetness of their tone or the charm of their manner that appeals? But then, why should men submit to horrid wives? How am I to know the mystery that is man-woman chemistry?'

One by one, as the main lights were switched off, the blue ones came to hold their own. In the dimness of the blueness, savoring the bride on the sly, Chandra felt she looked divine. And sensing the opportunity for privacy, the man reconnoitered the adjoining area only to find Chandra hold the solitary post. Getting wind of their heat, Chandra, hoping to voyeur their romance, feigned asleep to snare them into the act.

When he opened his eyes tentatively to spy the ecstasy of their togetherness, he got a mocking stare from the man who seemingly read him well. Ashamed, Chandra desisted from venturing again. Soon enough, his resolve not to open his eyes for the rest of the night, insensibly sent him into a deep sleep.

Chandra woke up in the morning to find Ashok in slumber and their baggage in place. By then, most of the passengers had had their breakfast at the previous stop itself. The babe, still half asleep, was at her mother's breast while its father was immersed in *The Times of India*. However, as the honeymooners were 'as is where is', he wondered whether they had had a wink at all the night.

When he tried to reach the toilet, he found the vestibule swarmed with beggars and other ticket-less lot. However, with the agility of an acrobat, he entered the toilet only to find it dirty. Recoiling, he came out to gain access into the one opposite. And finding it occupied, he waited in irritation.

"Oh, what characters!" he thought nauseatingly. 'Don't know how to shit even!'

With his own urgency increasing, and as the occupant of the other one taking his own time, Chandra thought it fit to do the flushing himself in the unoccupied one.

When he returned after going through his ablutions, Ashok was lowering the middle berth with bleary eyes. Offering him the seat by the window, Chandra called for coffee.

"Oh, shit," Chandra complained, having sipped the lukewarm beverage that the vendor advertised as steaming hot.

"Well, the railway fare could become a farce at times," said Ashok. "Better we gulp it before it gets worse."

As the vendor came to collect the fare, the friends indulged in one-upmanship for footing the bill. In the jostling that followed, the dregs of Chandra's cup fell on Ashok's trousers.

"It's time I washed myself," Ashok pre-empted an apology from Chandra. "Let's treat it as a reminder."

As the friends resumed their tête-à-tête, the topic turned to Chandra's upkeep in Bombay.

"Do you have someone in Bombay?" Ashok said.

"Not anyone remotely related even."

"Where are you planning to put up then?"

"I've no idea whatsoever," said Chandra seizing the opening. "Can you suggest a place for me?"

"Don't worry, I'll show you a way," said Ashok assuredly. "Once you get a foothold, the rest is up to Bombay."

"How can I thank you?" said Chandra clasping Ashok's hand.

Being assured thus, Chandra began to relax.

When the man opposite had finished with *The Times of India*, Ashok borrowed it. As his newfound friend got immersed in the metro news, Chandra began contemplating about him.

'What a helping nature he has,' he thought, looking at Ashok. 'How lucky, I've met him. And doesn't he appear handsome in spite of his bulk! Looks like, it's when we see the soul of a man that we discern the man in him. Oh, how even our outlook changes

then towards him! It's as if his inner beauty acquires a bodily charm before our very eyes.'

Struck by his discovery, Chandra saw a ray of hope for himself.

'Am I not getting bogged down with my physicality?' he thought. 'Can one improve his looks anyway? And how silly it is to go to lengths to seem better cosmetically! Why not I strive to excel at something to seem handsome? Then, who knows, I might find a dame who would see me for what I am worth.'

When the train halted at Kalyan, the honeymooners alighted to an overwhelming welcome of their relatives.

'How mystifying is marriage, even to the family!' felt Chandra, seeing the way the couple was fussed about by their folk. 'If only Vasavi got married! Oh, what all we miss for her being still a miss.'

'Has he chickened out after all?' Ashok thought, misreading the change in Chandra's demeanor. 'Why, it's tough venturing out alone into the unknown. It's as if freedom places burden on the soul. But once he gets his moorings in Bombay, he will find life exhilarating. Doesn't it seem he has some inner force? And Rashid would be the right foil for him.'

#### Chapter 4

#### ***Onto the Turf***

As if to afford Chandra time for reflection at the threshold, the train was held up at Kalyan for long. And to his irritation, Ashok found out it was owing to some technical snag. Thus, the train could reach Dadar only towards the evening. By then, Chandra was physically fatigued and mentally worn out. When the cab they hired halted in a by-lane in Sion, the weary friends uttered a sigh of relief. But as luck would have it, as they went up to Rashid's room, a *Godrej* padlock greeted them. Nevertheless, Ashok thought the key to Rashid's whereabouts would lie in the *addas* that they were wont to frequent. Securing their luggage with the housekeeper, they went in search of Rashid but not finding him anywhere there, Ashok thought better of it.

"It's like we're on a wild goose chase now," said Ashok, characteristically throwing up his arms in the air. "Let's go back and wait for him."

"What if he's out of town?" said Chandra as they sauntered their way back to Rashid's place.

"If so, wouldn't have the housekeeper told us?" said Ashok assuredly. "Don't worry; you won't be left in the lurch."

"Oh, I'm relieved," said Chandra, taking Ashok's hand. "Wonder why I don't feel tired! What's there in Bombay's air?"

"Well, its Vitamin M," said Ashok patting Chandra's back, "and that helps keep mind and body hale and healthy? Boy, Bombay is a goldmine that lets even the poor to exploit it. Wonder if there is another place like this anywhere else."

"Whatever it is," said Chandra, "I think Hyderabad is an over-grown village in comparison."

Not finding Rashid even on their return, they waited for him impatiently. When he didn't turn up even by seven, Ashok felt it was time he left, for his mother might have become anxious by then.

"I'll leave a note for him," said Ashok. "I'm sure he'll help you, at least for the night."

"I know it's not fair to expect more from you" said Chandra. "But, what if...?"

"Don't worry," said Ashok, "he won't let you down."

"Thank you."

"It's all right," said Ashok penning a missive.

"I won't forget this day all my life," said Chandra taking the note from Ashok.

"Why make much of it," said Ashok holding Chandra's hand.

"If only you are in my shoes," said Chandra, "you would understand what your gesture means to me."

"Thank you," said Ashok warmly, "my mother says good wishes do help. I wish you all the best in Bombay."

"Thank you, I'll never forget you, may God bless you," said Chandra with moist eyes.

"Who knows, we may meet again," said Ashok. "Don't they say it's a small world?"

Having waved off Ashok, Chandra resumed his wait for Rashid.

"Wonder how he got that worldly outlook," Chandra thought about Ashok, as he waited for Rashid, 'at such a young age at that! Maybe, it's the upbringing in Bombay. But for him, I would've remained clueless about it all. So far, so good, now it all depends on Rashid.'

When Rashid came, past ten, Chandra was half-dead by then. While Rashid was going through Ashok's missive, Chandra scanned the nuances of his facial features. Reading between the lines of the imagined frown on Rashid's forehead, Chandra felt he failed to impress. Thus, as Rashid extended his hand in the end, Chandra grabbed that, as would the sinking a straw.

"What a coincidence!" said Rashid prognostically, "I rented this place to share it with a friend. But that bugger ditched me and you're here like a bolt from the blue. Now understand how welcome you are."

"Oh, I'm really lucky," said Chandra, with apparent relief.

"Looks like I'm only half-lucky," said Rashid feeling lost.

"Why, what's the matter?"

"I was all set to start a petty business here," said Rashid dejectedly. "Now I'm back to square one."

"What a coincidence," exclaimed Chandra. "I've come here just for that."

"Oh, it's capital!"

"I've enough of it for both of us," said Chandra clasping Rashid's hands.

"*Inshah Allah*," said Rashid and insensibly bent on his knees in prayer, and rising, he embraced Chandra thrice over, as if he was out to guard the deal from both the sides.

"So it's on?" said Chandra, as he extricated himself from Rashid's embrace as though to pay obeisance to his face.

When he spread his holdall, Chandra couldn't hold himself any longer. Thanking his stars and recalling Ashok's helping hand, he hit the pillow in relief. But with the exciting turn of events, an overwhelmed Rashid stayed awake for long. Attributing it all to the will of Allah, he, at last, succumbed to the need of nature.

Rashid, as Chandra would learn later, was the progeny of a petty mason in Alleppy. He was the eldest of his father's five children from his *begum*. Of course, his father,



rather habitually, sired four more from the second *biwi*. Barely fourteen, he dropped out of school to lend his earning hand to his *abbu*. That was to make both ends meet for the unwieldy dozen living in the outskirts of the town. Starting as a cleaner in a motel nearby the highway, he climbed the ladder of 'labor of drudgery' with an uncanny ease. Before he turned twenty, he could help his father set up a *dhaba* of their own. But with a couple of his siblings coming to assist his father, he ventured into retailing of assorted goods. Blessed by nature with enterprise and steeled by poverty to persevere, he found his moorings in the nitty-gritty of petty trade.

But then, realizing that his home soil was too limited to nourish his growing plant-of-ambition, two years back, he moved over to Bombay to become someone-in-the-street. Though he came to sniff the commercial scent of the metropolis-of-opportunities, soon enough, the lack of any capital confined him to life's square one. However, he saw that while Bombay's rich ruled the business world from the mansions, the pavements nursed the ambitions of the poor. Well, they tended to help the enterprising to make it good in double quick time.

When he saw his path to riches through the pavement, he prowled the sprawling metropolis to locate a foothold on a business-*layak* one. And in the suburb of Sion, he did discover, what he thought was a vantage point. Soon enough, he made the square his own by selling hosiery by the day and sleeping there by the night. As his perseverance paid off, he soon started to eke out an income enough to sustain his dreams all the while envisioning the horizons to which hosiery might take him.

Sex, realized Rashid, sold in more ways than one, and in lingerie he saw the ladder of his success. Well, but it was the position that fetched a price for the *maal*, be it a sexy stuff or the fleshy kind. And selling lingerie on a pavement amounts to streetwalking for soliciting, and to the same affect, isn't it? Well, it has to be a mall to lend class to the *maal*. But, in Bombay, as he could see, there was a via media in the kiosk, which had an aura of its own to entice the classes when it came to the *phoren maal*. Thinking that he zeroed in on the USP for success, he searched for access to the recess of the charmed wares.

When he broached the topic with Ashok, in whose father's garment factory he once worked as a salesman, the latter thought it was an idea. Ashok contended that the homespun hosiery was devoid of design to impart class to attract the classes. Thanks to the Nehruvian legacy of the socialistic pattern of growth, the society was bred on 'equality of inequality' and the *bazaar* became bereft of quality. All those imposts on imports meant to protect the *swadeshi stuff* gave cause for the callous industrial culture. All this induced mediocrity in the market and that deprived goodies of quality to the doomed citizens of our socialist state. However, in time, as human proclivity tends to gravitate towards the good things of life, market forces opened up smuggled routes to provide the alluring to the affording.

Soon enough, Rashid found the ropes to the supply lines to the designer lingerie. But, to get started, he needed a kiosk on the vaunted pavements near Flora Fountain. At length, his wanting led him to Abdul, the *maalik* of a kiosk at a vantage junction. As Abdul had developed visions of greener pastures in the sands of Arabia, he set his heart on a visa to Mecca. Sensing the opportunity in the making, Rashid laid seize on Abdul's kiosk. What with the deal struck, thanks to his friend's last-minute slip, Rashid got stuck.

Thus for the fortuitous turn Chandra's coming gave his life, Rashid was never tired of recounting how he filled the void to get the business started.

With the change of inventory, what with the zooming sales, the spirits of the desperate duo soared. While the sense of achievement infused confidence in them both, the exposure to the alluring trade helped Chandra cross the threshold of

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