



Stories Varied
A book of short stories

BS Murthy

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Dedicated to readers,
past, present 'n future,
of my body of work,
in full or in part(s)

Other books by BS Murthy

Benign Flame – Saga of Love

Jewel-less Crown - Saga of Life

Crossing the Mirage – Passing through youth

Glaring Shadow – A stream of consciousness novel

Prey on the Prowl - A Crime Novel

Onto the Stage – Slighted Souls and other stage and radio plays

Puppets of Faith: Theory of Communal Strife

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

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

Foreword

With the addition of 'Prey on the Prowl' to my body of work, I thought the accretion was over without short story genre. Not that I didn't try my hand at that, indeed I did, but finding the output wanting, I didn't refill my pen again.

Maybe, literature was keen to have my contribution in this fictional sphere as well, so it seems, as beginning from July 2015, Vinita Dawra Nagia came up with "Write India Campaign of Times of India". Her idea was to let the aspiring writers build their stories on the 'prompts' provided by eleven of India's popular authors starting with Amish Tripathi.

When I penned Ilaa's Ire on Amish's prompt, it felt like I had crossed the unassailable frontier, and thereafter, for the next ten months, thanks to the prompts by Chetan Bhagat, Aswin Sanghi, Ravi Subramanian, Preeti Shenoy, Tuhin A. Sinha, Ravinder Singh, Durjoy Datta, Madhuri Banarjee, Jaisree Misra and Anita Nair, I had experienced the joy of short story writing.

That in the end, I could pen my Twelfth Tale, sans any prompting, perhaps, is a testimony to the success of Vinita's Write India Campaign.

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Story 1

Ilaa's Ire

Close to the city of Paithan, in a small village called Sauviragram, which lay along the banks of the great river Godavari, lived a woman named Ilaa. Being cotton farmers, her family was well to do, but not among the richest in the area. It was the harvest season, and cotton had to be picked from plants. The wholesalers and traders from Paithan would be arriving in just a few weeks, carrying gold and goods for barter. They would exchange what they carried for the cotton that the farmers grew. The bales of cotton had to be ready in time! Work was at its peak!

But Ilaa was not to be found in the fields. She wasn't working. Instead, she was sitting by the banks of the great river Godavari.

'I am sick of this!' she grunted loudly, dangling her weary legs in the languid waters. [*]

'Why not,' she thought, 'am I not a victim of the unmaking of the mores of yore that brought woman's life to this pass?'

Gazing at the Sun, setting by then, she felt it symbolized the loss of sheen, of woman's high noon of life, pictured by her grandmother in bedtime tales.

'If only things remained the same,' she began to speculate about her would-have-been life, 'I would have gone to a *gurukula* to become a *satyavadini* at fifteen, and who knows, I might have blossomed into a Maitreyi of the day, if not a modern day Ghosa. Moreover, I would have been entitled to choose a man I fancied in a *swayamvara*, oh, what an appetizing prospect it is. Won't that prove our ancestors were wise enough to realize that woman's liberation lay in her right over her body to entrust it to the man she coveted? But how ignoramus the progeny of the wise have become to ordain woman to remain illiterate and live in ignorance! How she's given away in marriage, to a man of her father's choosing, lo, when she hasn't even matured! What else is woman nowadays if not man's vassal? How sad that women of Sauviragram, or Paithan for that matter, can't dare dream about things, which their ancestors took for granted. Maybe, same is the case with fair sex everywhere in the once fair land named after my namesake.'

As though to bring to the fore her dreams gone sour, the flow under her feet picked up stream.

Ilaa was born into a family of marginal farmers in Paithan. While mother earth, all along, had seemingly conjured up with the rain gods to make it bountiful in their paddy fields, as though not to deplete their meager landholding, mother nature too had ensured, over the generations, that their home had a single issue, male at that. But much before she was born, as her grandfather died prematurely, though being hale and healthy, her father, bitten by the quick-buck bug, threw caution to the winds and wagered on the cash crops. That was in spite of the protestations of his mother and pleadings by his wife. As though to prove the old adage right that greed brings in grief, coinciding with his decision to harvest cotton, the kapas market went into depression. While prudence suggested course correction, as his gambling instinct got the better of him, raising the stakes at the next outing, he took the neighbours' land on lease for making a killing. What with the pests of Paithan too turning greedy, the failure of two successive crops, besides reducing him into a farmhand in his own land, made his mother a maid in a Brahman household. Though his wife wanted to follow

suit, as his mother was averse to it, she was left at home to fend for herself the meagerness of their means.

It was in those hard times that Ilaa was born to the unenthusiastic welcome of all; though soon enough, enamoured of her charming demeanour, everyone began to hold her dear, her father included. But as gods are prone to forgive their favourites, sooner or later that is, Ilaa had a brother for company when she crossed five. While the fraternal frolics pleased her heart, it was her grandma's tales, picked up from the Brahman woman she served, which stirred her mind, only to depress her soul eventually! The thought that if only her grandmother had her fair share of her ancestral property, as per the Vedic norms, she would not have been constrained to toil as a maid, left Ilaa with a sickening feeling about the injustice of it all. In her grandmother's unjust deprivation of property and in the undue denial of her own education, she began to see how women's legitimate interests have come to be jeopardized by man's spin to the ancient mores.

As Ilaa, at eight, was still smarting from the denial of schooling, her marriage to eleven-year old Ilaiah ensured that she was deprived even of her childhood liberties. As her fate would have it, Ilaiah's father, the owner of a ten-acre farm in Sauvigram, in search of a bride for his heir, happened to hear about her allure, clouded though by the gloom of poverty. But, sensing that a beautiful bahu could accrue a like progeny to the clan, he chose to pursue the match regardless. While her father thought it was a godsend, having espied Ilaiah, and finding him ungainly, Ilaa felt that but for the matching names, it was no match at all. Nevertheless, led by her mother and grandmother on the course of female compromises, Ilaa ascended the altar of a child marriage though to remain with her parents until she matured at ten.

'What would have been my life like had I obeyed my instinct and refused to budge.' she tried to envision her life in a fresh light but as the clouds of despair, cast on her psyche, rendered that impossible, she gave up with a sigh. 'If life were to fail fantasy, how is it better than death?'

But then, at an auspicious moment that noon, Ilaa was led out of Paithan to reach Sauvigram well before dusk, and as if to portend the life in the offing for her, the delayed carriage forced her to set foot in her *sasural* at Sun set. As though the diminishment of her new domicile, ensured by patriarchal expediency, was not tough enough for her to cope up with, nature, in the meantime, turned the Ilaiahs into an odd couple by endowing her to outgrow her husband by a couple of inches. But it was the subjugation of women in Sauvigram, far worse than that in Paithan that she could attribute to the rural urban divide, but was unable to reconcile, which disturbed her the most. It was thus, when she gained in age, and on the ground, she began 'educating' the village girls about the imperatives of equal rights for women, which triggered an exodus of complaints to her doorsteps that her father-in-law, a less conforming conservative as Ilaa saw, had to contend with.

Though Ilaa restrained herself on the social front from then on, lest she should occasion a schism in Sauvigram, in the domestic domain she was constrained to bear the burden of barrenness, notwithstanding thirteen years of cohabitation with her man. While the rest pestered her on that count, her father-in-law, though disappointed at the delay, was optimistic about an eventual fruition. Once when Ilaiah, as if in half jest, broached the topic of a co-wife for her, for him to procreate, she retorted by asking him to restore the ancient norm of *niyoga* for her, wherein a woman was allowed to spend time with her man's brother or a relative for off-spring. And that put an end to the topic but not to his thirst for a fresh nuptial.

As if to break the uneasy impasse, when her father-in-law died of snake bite, Ilaa turned the Vedic heat on Ilaiah's farmland by advocating her sister-in-law's case for a share in it. And that ensured her conjugal relations with him had further soured. But aided by custom, even as Ilaiah retained the reins on the land, to the fair sex of Paithan and yonder, Ilaa's self-less opposition to it made her the reigning queen of Sauviraagram. While that completed the couple's circle of discord, what with his becoming his own man after his father's death, Ilaiah felt bold to steer his life on a bigamous course. As he found the bride, the *purohit* fixed the *muhurat* that was after the harvesting.

'It's not that I have to share his bed with another that hurts.' Ilaa thought in bitterness. 'As woman's charms are prone to wane sooner than later, don't I know it's stupid to imagine that I could hold him till the very end. But isn't it galling that branding me barren, he should sleep with another. What if he is incapable of impregnating woman? Who knows; so why shouldn't *niyoga* be the first option for fruition? Oh, how man had managed to usurp woman's rights to upset her life? Is it left for her to wail her ill-fate until the doom's day? No way. Didn't father-in-law say that reformation is a harbinger of change but revolution is the upheaval of old order? Yes I have to shake Sauviraagram to wake it up to the old order so that it awakens Paithan, and through it the rest of Ilavarta. But how am I to achieve that?'

Ilaa racked her brains till they frayed at their ends.

'Why not I set the crops afire and perish in the fields?' she thought in the end. 'That would singe *dharti maata* for sure but won't she bear the ordeal for the sake of her hapless daughters.'

Springing up from the sands, Ilaa headed towards the fields with a spring in her step.

Amish Tripathi's prompt [*]

Story 2

'201' Qualms

She sat in the Starbucks café, sipping her coffee and staring out of the window. The blood stained knife lay next to her handbag, covered with her blue silk scarf. [*]

Being the lone customer at the half-open café, as she was trying to grapple with the unforeseen development, the creaking sound at the entrance unhinged her train of thought. As she espied a handsome youth ogling her, fervently hoping that he wouldn't settle himself at the adjacent table, she instinctively covered the damning thing with the pallu of her chiffon sari. When a bearer, as though on cue, led him to the other end of the floor, she heaved a sigh of relief.

'Oh, how I've got into this mess?' she thought nervously. 'Where would all this lead me to? Was it fair on her part to involve me in a hazardous activity? Why didn't I drop the damned thing the moment she thrust it upon me, without a warning at that! What did I do instead? I did cover it up along with her hand gloves with my own scarf! What prompted me to connive with her to conceal the murder weapon? Was it her righteous cause or was it our lesbian love? Maybe both, and if not, instead of boarding the train to Lonavala, she would have been behind bars by now. How I allowed myself to be saddled with this incriminating thing that I might be caught along with! Besides, what if the law were to catch up with her, in spite of her ingenuous planning and

meticulous execution? Won't that land me in trouble as well? Better I check up the Indian Penal Code.'

She reached for her iPhone and browsed for the relevant section of the code that read: "201. Causing disappearance of evidence of offence, or giving false information to screen offender.—Whoever, knowing or having reason to believe that an offence has been committed, causes any evidence of the commission of that offence to disappear, with the intention of screening the offender from legal punishment, or with that intention gives any information respecting the offence which he knows or believes to be false; if a capital offence.—shall, if the offence which he knows or believes to have been committed is punishable with death, be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to seven years, and shall also be liable to fine; if punishable with imprisonment for life.....". Going no farther, she muttered in despair, 'Oh! Goddamn Sudha'.

She hailed the bearer to order another round of coffee, and began recapitulating their fateful association.

'She first met Sudha aboard Sahyadri Express at Lonavala that she herself boarded at Pune. As they exchanged notes, it transpired that they both were on their way to Mumbai; even as she was keen on entering into the arena advertising, Sudha was bent upon exploring the avenues for social activism. By the time they alighted at the Chatrapathi Shivaji Terminus, they were so drawn to each other that they set out to set up together. Soon, she joined a male-dominated advertising agency and Sudha began lending her 'service' hand and 'ideological' head to Trishna, the lady-head of a non-government organization engaged in advocating clean energy. Though she herself was pragmatist to a tee and Sudha was an idealist to the core, their sincere natures wedded them to an unbound friendship.'

As the bearer brought her coffee, savouring the beverage, unmindful of the surroundings, she was immersed in her recap.

'When Sudha was holidaying in Kashmir, struck by Cupid, she fell for one Captain Rawat, a commander of sorts, stationed in the valley to curb the militancy on the raise. Even as her sense of service jelled with Rawat's patriotic fervour, her parents, owing to the risks involved in his calling, were averse to having an army officer for a son-in-law. When Sudha prevailed upon her parents, with no mean help from her, the spirited beau led his euphoric bride to the altar to tie the knot. After a month-long honeymoon down south, Sudha rejoined her in their modest apartment to resume her mundane work at Trishna's outfit. Nevertheless, thanks to the intermittent unions with her man, which followed prolonged separations, Sudha remained in the seventh heaven. When she was all set to join Rawat in Jammu's barracks, tragedy struck in the form of a *fidayeen* attack in which he was martyred, albeit after slaying five of the six intruders, all by himself.'

She recalled the somber ceremony at Rashtrapathi Bhavan, when the President, to posthumously honour Rawat for his exemplary valour, presented an Ashoka Chakra to Sudha. While Sudha adopted that as her new *mangalsutra*, vowing never to yield space to another in its place, thanks to their lesbianism, occasioned by the combination of circumstances, she too came to value it. Soon, wiping her moist eyes and controlling her emotions, she continued with the recapitulation.

'The thought that Rawat had sacrificed his flowery life for his motherland made the nation dearer to Sudha, nourishing which became the mission of her life. So she lent her heart and soul to Trishna's agenda, which made her the latter's trusted lieutenant.

What's more, to the delight of the left-leaning and to the chagrin of the right-tilting, the elegant and articulate Sudha, who came to dominate the electronic media's stilted debates, became, as was said, a thorn in the flesh of the big-buck vultures. While Sudha gloated in the glare of the ensuing publicity, Trishna enlarged her overseas reach to rake in more Euros to expand her operations deep into the hinterland.'

By then, as most of the tables were occupied, thinking it's better she moved out, she signaled the bearer to fetch the bill. As she reached for her handbag, to pull out the wallet, she was shocked to realize that she had been carrying the damned knife as an additional baggage. Having hurriedly stuffed the scarf and all into her handbag, as she waited for the bill, she looked around to see if she was attracting attention. Sensing that the guy had his eyes still fixed on her, she got a little scary; what if, by chance, he had seen us at the CST, and would resort to blackmailing me? Cursing Sudha all again, she wondered how to sneak out of the café without being stalked by him. As luck would have it, soon he made it to the loo, and thanking nature's call that came to her rescue, she rushed out to hire a cab to continue her journey in the tracks of the time passed by.

'As though to prove that 'good things don't last forever', destiny brought Sudha face to face with the ugly face of Trishna's hidden agenda. When she stumbled upon Trishna's secret closet, skeletons in their scores tumbled out to her shock. Sensing that under the guise of environmentalism, Trishna was at undermining the country's economic well-being, she couldn't help but juxtapose Rawat's supreme sacrifice to uphold that. First she thought of turning into a whistleblower but aware of the long list of 'who is who' among Trishna's backers, on second thought, she saw the futility of it all. Besides, she reckoned that Trishna would ensure that she is bumped off without a whimper to put a lid on it. As Sudha revealed no more, she herself thought of it no more.'

Stepping out of the cab en route, to ease her nerves, she shopped for a fag, which she puffed away in Sudha's trail.

'Obsessed with the idea of seeing Trishna's end, without anyone getting wise to it, she began plotting a perfect murder, the fad of many a murderer, made more difficult by cell-phone towers and CCTV cameras. However, equal to the challenge, she planned to the tee and killed Trishna with an antique knife with which Rawat, after exhausting his ammunition, slew the fifth *fidayeen*, for she felt that would be symbolic of his act. Though it was prudent to destroy the murder weapon, she wanted to hold onto it as long as she lived; but what if, by any outside chance, the police were to question her and search her premises as well? So, wanting her to whisk it away to safety, using someone's cell-phone, she made that call asking her to make it to the CST with a spare handbag.'

How shocked she was hearing the chilling account of the killing and how scary it felt holding that blood-stained knife, held in those hand gloves, which, somehow, she managed to wrap in the scarf that she wore then.

'Coinciding with her parents' planned pilgrimage to Badrinath, Sudha wanted to pay her homage to Rawat's soul with Trishna's blood. Having obtained a week's leave of absence to rest and recreate at Lonavala, two days back, she contrived to ensure one of her colleagues had seen her off at the CST. But for this cell-age that should have been a good enough alibi, and so, reaching Lonavala in three hours, she dropped her smart-phone at a street corner, and alerted Airtel to make it inoperative.

At the dead of night, last night, she sneaked out of her home with a pair of hand gloves and that knife, tucked under her reversible burka. Alighting at the CST before dawn, she walked her way to 'Trishna's Abode'; she avoided hiring a cab so as not to leave any trail for the police to track her down. Upon reaching the destination, she pressed the buzzer with glows on, and as the intended victim opened the door wide-eyed, she lost no time in slaying her with that knife. As Trishna lay dead, she left the place without raising an alarm, and wearing the burka by its reverse side on the way, she walked back to the CST, and having called her, waited there to entrust the incriminating stuff to her.'

Oh, how serene Sudha looked when they met and how animated she was in recounting the incident!

'Handling the handbag that she gave her, Sudha said that after alighting the train at Lonavala, she could take a detour to exit the station before which she would transfer the burka into it for its suitable disposal thereafter, and that should bring the perfect murder to its legal closure.'

'It could as well have been,' she thought, and after reflecting for a while, she picked up her iPhone, to compose a message to Sudha for record, as anyway, her smart-phone was inoperative still.

'Won't my action amount to betrayal of trust?' she thought pausing to press the 'send' button. 'Could be, but law doesn't have riders to it when it comes to complying with it. But had Sudha kept it all to herself, maybe for all that, she could have got away with it? Well, that is life in spite of law, and law regardless of love. But is it not ironical that she had accentuated mine own sense of duteousness, which would eventually undo her and me too thereby.'

Sending the message, 'We both lose as law overwhelmed my love - Ramya', she headed for Fort House Police Station.

Chetan Bhagat's prompt [*]

Story 3

"?"

I observed him carefully as he walked to the door. I knew that time was running out but suppressed the urge to check my watch. I took a deep breath and started counting in reverse under my breath. "Ten, nine, eight, seven..." [*]

When he slammed the door, wasn't it like I came out of trance, stuck at 'four'? I might've paused, lost to his mesmeric gait; how else he could've slipped out in three secs. Don't I love his gait more than his manner, captivating though it is; he knows that as well, and yet he walked out on me. Isn't it like deserting a companion amidst a desert? Worse it is, ditching the mate in the heat of the act?

How I rushed out craving to catch a glimpse of him, maybe for the last time, and how distressed I was at not finding him? Maybe, his eagerness to exit from my life outstripped my urge to espy his gait. Standing at the gate, didn't I feel like I was stranded in life? Oh, how things had come to this pass with him? Slowly, how the irony of my situation began to dawn upon me? That's even in my state of dejection! Didn't I feel amused that the effect of my fascination should've become the cause of my disappointment? If only I was not lost to myself admiring his gait, wouldn't I have prevailed upon him not to desert me? Could I have? Maybe, but it was philosophy that had offered its hand to me. If not, how I would've been able to drag myself into the

emptiness of my home for introspection. That I was drained out to sink into the sofa was another matter.

Whoever thought that our love match could become a mismatch? Is it really so? Am I not embracing hypocrisy to camouflage my idiocies? What am I to gain by a false sense of sympathy? It's time I learnt a few lessons in psychology as well. Won't that help me in understanding the realities of life? No denying but where am I to begin with? Am I to first climb the heady highs of romance or descend the marital slopes of discord? What if I swallow the sour before savoring the sweet? That's fine if the show is on; now that its curtains down, better I alter the menu. Better still, why not I am a little ingenious to alternate; won't that help me keep the focus even.

As Shruti was wont to sing paeans about Rahul, how I used to mock her that by showering praises on her cousin, she was bound to bankrupt her beau! Jokes apart, while his persona in her album enamored my heart, hadn't her ballads on him become music to my ears? What about her dramatic announced of his impending migration to the U.S., didn't I sense my heart skipping a beat as if to begin my life afresh? Unable to hold the burden of excitement, couldn't it have spilled some of it onto my face for her to grasp. Was it not her turn to tease me by saying sorry for making me lose my heart to an exaggeration? What a heady feeling before an impending rendezvous.

When he waved his arrival to her O'Hare, didn't he love-gait straight into my heart! As if guided by my enamored eyes, as he advanced towards me like a robot, was it not like a dream coming true? Oh, how I was impelled to grab his hand with both hands even as he was tentative in extending it to me! Was it not love at first sight? Did he lose any time to propose dating? Did I miss a date ever? Is there anything to better that in all fiction? They are not my words but of Shruti's! Wonder how nascent love can make life so exciting! Won't it in return seek copulation for its own fulfillment? Alas, why on its path of fruition, love has to contend with cultural hindrances? Won't our culture hamper lovers' route to the altar with caste hurdles besides status barriers. But then, living in the West, we could go west, and that's what we did, didn't we?

How adamant were our parents to tie us in a nuptial knot. Didn't his mom say she would rather starve but not break bread with low caste lass? How did my dad dismiss my choice of a high-caste lowness; didn't I tell him not to be mean being rich. But how naïve was Rahul about his mom's turnaround? That's in spite of my telling him that the waiting game suited her and not us. Didn't we waste one youthful year for nothing! Wasn't that enough for us to go west, but how ill at ease he was when I moved into his flat. Wasn't he shocked as I broke the news back home? Well, it worked with my dad but Rahul's mom was made of a sterner stuff, and that called for one-upmanship, didn't it? What was my threat to display-ad our live-in in the Indian press but just that? Yet credit the scandal in the offing for turning that bully into a *billie*. Was it really so, as she had the last laugh, won't it seem in hindsight that it's a tactical retreat on her part.

What a wedding it was though? A designer wedding it was, all said so, didn't they? Wouldn't have dad splashed half his black money on it, but did I suffer from any qualms about it then? Having been a beneficiary all along, what's the point in my becoming a moralist now? Maybe, the wounds of life open our minds to its profligacy; could be, but does a grand wedding guarantee a lasting marriage? No way, as it appears. Of what avail was that fanfare of a marriage for Rahul's mom could readily fray at its rough edges? Why blame her when my own attitude, or lack of it, was the

cause of my undoing? Oh, how I took Rahul for granted? Well, I was even callous to his needs? Wasn't that enough to let her take the wind out of our marital sails?

How she began scripting the plot of my downfall even before we settled down in Seattle. What for her unending tele-talks with him, feigning depression, that too at our bedtime. Wouldn't have that whore known that sex is ninety-percent mental? How the devil planned to fail our sex-life as a prelude to wrecking our marriage! Weren't her life-long sacrifices for him and his disregard for her undivided attention the recurring themes of her emotional blackmail? What cunning to pepper her talks with how she loved me being his beloved? Oh, how all that infused a guilt feeling in him leading to a sense of alienation from me?

What about dad, didn't he willy-nilly strain our tenuous union; how he used to pester Rahul to invest in India's booming real estate? Wasn't his offer to advance monies meant to preempt any excuses? How Rahul could've refused that without raising my hackles? What an irony that the acceptance entailed a price to be paid! Won't decency demand that I should own what was bought, at least till he repaid the loan. What else he could've done than to let dad have his way? Why did dad go on an acquisition spree that tended to squeeze our resources? Was he eager to uplift his son-in-law's status in his own circles or did he intend to secure my financial future post-divorce, or worse, was it him aim to preempt Rahul from providing to his parents? Isn't it stupid in every way, well, but he did dig the grave for that bitch to bury our marriage, so it seems.

If only Rahul hadn't asked the devil to come and sup with us in the U.S. Being a mom-boy how could he have negated her request to rest and recreate in his shade? Though my sixth sense warned me of the impending trouble, could I have put my foot down without looking cussed? How fatal it proved to be as the whore poisoned his mind and undermined my love! How she took him under her spell to sound the death knell for our marriage! Oh, the way she weaned him away from me, lo, did the bitch master black magic to become a witch as well! Why didn't Shruti tell me about his mom-sickness, shouldn't she have, being frank and forthright althrough? Maybe, it was my fate that faltered her at full disclosure, where it really mattered.

Am I not into a blaming game? How does it help me in anyway? Why not I better self-introspect? It's as if I perched my life on a hollow branch, didn't I? Weren't my spending sprees getting on his strain nerves? How can I put it on papa for letting me become a spendthrift? Shouldn't I have adapted myself to my new situation, and even behaved better. But what about dad's indents for settling the outstanding, wonder how Rahul didn't call it quits much before! Why did I limit my alacrity only to the bedroom? When it came to the kitchen, wasn't I plain lazy? How does it help blaming mom for pampering me? Didn't I know Rahul loves all those spicy Andhra recipes? Yet I left him to fend for himself with his self-prepared stuff or McDonald's hamburgers! Didn't I know he cooks for nuts? Was it any justification that I wasn't particular about the food I eat? What else it was but sheer callousness? That too, when he was so caring to cater to all my needs, why not I admit my fancies? Why did I let my lethargy become the Achilles heel of our marriage for that witch to push through 'doubts of duty' into Rahul's mind? How she took over the kitchen as a prelude to leading him out of my home, and life as well!

Would it have been any different had we been living in India? Without any dollars to exchange, how could have dad pestered Rahul to invest? Given the taboo, where was the question of my man getting into the kitchen for it would have shamed us both? Wouldn't I have taken to the Indian ways of a working wife? Probably, besides,

isn't the air over there more conducive for couples to cling on to each other regardless, though I hear it's steadily getting worse on that count? Whatever, with our flanks covered somehow, wouldn't have that devil stayed put in her place? Surely she would have, and it could've been a different story to write home about; well, it's neither here or there.

Why suddenly this nauseating feeling? Why couldn't it be morning sickness? When did I last have my periods? Whatever was the turmoil, how could I've missed the count? Oh, how he loves children; surely more than any man I've ever known. How thrilled he would have been at the prospect of my carrying. With the sprouting of his seed right within me, wouldn't have his love for me had had a rebirth? How eager was he initially to tend me when I'm in the family way. Haven't I overheard the bitch branding me barren to her son that was as she gave me enough hints that she was glad I didn't bear to pollute her high clan with my low blood? Wouldn't she have played upon his craving for an offspring to nudge him into a fresh nuptial? Surely she would have for that could be her game plan.

Now that so much psychic muck had flowed under our marital bridge, could his child in me make him change his mind? But then, who knows what fate has in the offing, and a trial too costs nothing. Why not I ring him up, no, I'll personally tell him so that I could sink into his arms.

Sprung from the sofa, I dashed to the door, counting aloud, "One, two, three, four."

Aswin Sanghi's prompt [*]

Story 4

Cupid's Clue

What the hell is going on between my husband and that bitch?' Maya's patience was at its lowest ebb and she was ready to burst.

Sanjay knew that she was serious.

'Look, Maya. There is nothing going on between the two of them. Just a little bit of healthy flirting, I'd say.'

"Flirting? Healthy flirting? Really Sanjay . . ." she rolled her eyes in disgust.

"That's what you men call it? There is nothing healthy about flirting, Sanjay, not for a married man. Healthy flirting is a term introduced by perverted men who want to lend legitimacy to their extramarital dalliances. Flirting invariably has a sexual connotation to it."

She got up from her seat and walked around the room gesticulating and muttering something to herself. Suddenly she stopped, turned back, looked at Sanjay and asked, "Did my husband sleep with her? You are his friend. Did he ever tell you anything about it?" [*]

"What if Chaya lets Suresh sleep with her and if she does not?" he said tentatively.

"Won't it make a fucking difference for me," she said unequivocally.

"Would it be possible for Suresh to sleep with her unless she grants him the final favour?"

"What makes you think that the bitch won't let him screw her?"

"Why not recall what Sathyam told his seducer friend Prasad in Benign Flame that you only gave me to read, sorry I haven't returned it as I want to read it all again, 'money and looks are okay to an extent to lure women, but better realize it's the luck that enables one to lay them. Why, you can't screw even a whore if you're not destined to have her, your visit to the brothel would have coincided with her periods, and the next time you're eager, she could have shifted out of the town itself'."

"Could be, but you know that bitch was ever after him."

"I also know Suresh always preferred you over her."

"Gone are those days my dear, these days he is over the seven-year itch and that bitch could be taking advantage of that. In spite of your friendly blinkers, you couldn't have failed to see their wayward ways."

"Look Maya, I was only trying to play it down to cool things for you."

"Thanks for not wanting to fish in the troubled waters of an old flame."

"That makes me recall Chaya's words at your wedding."

"I know that bitch has a gift of gab, what did she say?"

"Bereft of money love is but a hackneyed expression."

"Maybe Cupid is a lesser god than Mammon."

"Yet they collude to consign some to the doghouse of life."

"As Astraea the goddess of innocence connives," she said nostalgically.

"What else can the star-crossed lovers do than blame the conspiring deities?"

"Not holding it against the jilter is gentlemanly isn't it?" she said taking his hand.

"Thanks for the compliment," he said pressing her hand.

"But what about that bitch?" she said withdrawing her hand.

"Maybe she is merrily leading Suresh up the garden path?"

"Don't you know how desperate she was to hook him then?"

"That was when he was an eligible bachelor."

"You think she could be flirting now to hurt him."

"Who knows if she at killing two birds with one stone?"

"What if I expose her to her man to give her a taste of her own medicine?"

"That's a suicidal prescription."

"Why do you think so?"

"What if her man deserts her?"

"She gets her just deserts, won't she?"

"Were he to murder her or get her killed?"

"Won't that leave the world one bitch less, why won't it?"

"But life's mistakes come with collateral damages, won't they?"

"And what's life without risks?"

"What's this hatred in the bosom of a loving character?" he said taking her hand.

"Maybe I'm burning with jealousy."

"Born out of mere suspicion, isn't it?"

"How distressing it is to imagine their togetherness," she said squeezing his hand.

"Ouch," he yelled retrieving his hand.

"Sorry, my distress acquired a physical force," she said breathing out into his palm.

"Depression I can understand but not this desperation," he said fondling her shoulder.

"Only a woman in my situation can grasp that."

"Could be," he said withdrawing his hand.

"Did he lead me to the altar to bring me to the crossroads of life?" she said taking his hand.

"So be it, take a look at the signboards of redressal on the other three roads."

"Maybe that's the way to approach life," she said resignedly.

"Don't be pulled down," he said pressing her hand.

"Won't you help me in taking my pick?" she said looking into his eyes.

"If only you pull your socks up."

"How can I as my soul is seized at its core by sexual jealousy?" she said in tears.

"Get freed and it would lead to orgasmic nirvana," he said wiping her tears.

"Am I to languish as *sanyasin* as they indulge in lust? No way." she said determinedly.

"I only want you not to jump the signal and upset the applecart that's all."

"Who's applecart, theirs or mine?"

"Do you take me for a double agent or what?"

"Sorry for spoiling," she said sounding apologetic.

"If it's your marital right to retain Suresh isn't it her womanly right to covet him?"

"Well, her man too has a right over her fidelity, doesn't he have?"

"Of course, but that's not the issue, is it?"

"Why not, as I have a right to alert him about her infidelity."

"That would boomerang on your marriage, and rightly so?"

"Why do you sound so scary?"

"Am I not concerned about you?"

"Don't I know that more than ever?"

"So better give up that idea."

"It would be no more than a subsiding storm."

"What if that derails her marriage?"

"Didn't she ask for it by trespassing into my marital space? Let her go to hell, how do I care."

"If her man starts harassing her, why won't Suresh offer her his shoulder to cry on?"

"Oh, that's bound to exacerbate my predicament, why didn't I think about it?"

"Worse, if her man were to divorce her, won't your man feel obliged to man her show?"

"Oh God, that would be like jumping out of the frying pan into the fire itself."

"That's all about the dilemmas of life."

"Take me to the signboards of other three routes at the crossroads."

"Before that know man always comes back to his wife in the end?"

"Well."

"So take the languid route to reclamation," he said sounding persuasive.

"You know that I'm not a laidback type."

"Being a firebrand take the proactive path then?"

"What is that?" she said taking his hand.

"Welcome her into a threesome sexual fold."

"What an idea *sirji*," she said withdrawing her hand.

"Deadly idea so to say; if she were a flirt, she would flee from the field, won't she?"

"What if she jumps into our bed?"

"Won't that take you to the frontiers of lesbianism for achieving orgasmic nirvana?"

"Are you serious?"

"If you haven't fantasized about it, ask your woman friends who could have."

"All said and done, how I could sleep with my enemy, make no mistake about it."

"Didn't Byron say that there is a pleasure in passing through the pathless woods, and that was in the context of incest, and it could hold good for threesome sex as well."

"By the way, what's the orgasmic nirvana you were hinting at?"

"It's the mental empathy of a couple as one of them indulges with a third character."

"As a theory it is okay, I suppose."

"If alive to your spouse's innate promiscuity, it's practicable as well."

"Maybe but it's not for me."

"Better I leave you to your own counsel," he said getting up to leave.

"With either way leading me nowhere, how can you leave me stranded as is where?" she said holding him back.

"Am I forcing you to stay that way?" he said and moved towards the main door.

"Wait Sanjay," she said aloud as he was about to open the door.

"What's new?" he said turning around.

"Well Cupid has given me the clue," she said pacing up to him.

"What is that?"

"Why not I become naughty and start an affair?"

"On the rebound, that is?"

"So be it," she said holding his hand.

"So, the stupid Cupid wants you to set rebounds in motion."

"Not so if it's with a single man," she said caressing his hand.

"What are you aiming at?"

"Wonder why it never occurred to me to ask you why you didn't marry any?"

"Neither did I complain about it, did I?"

"You are my good boy, aren't you?" she said hugging him.

"Be a good girl and control yourself," he said enlacing her nevertheless.

"Did you ever fantasize it with me?" she crooned into his ears.

"Look Maya..." he began, and as if not wanting to hear anything to the contrary, tightening their embrace, she sealed his lips with hers.

Ravi Subramanian's prompt [*]

[Story 5](#)

Autumn Love

She willed herself to not to check her phone to see if he had replied. It had been about three days now. She hated that she was constantly checking his 'last seen at' status and yes, he had logged in just five minutes ago. Yet she couldn't stop herself. This sinking feeling to find absolutely no communication from him was becoming unbearable, almost tortuous.

And then, just as she sat down in her chair, her phone vibrated. With her heart thudding in her ear, she unlocked her phone and stared at the screen. Finally! It was his message.

But when she opened it and read it, she nearly stopped breathing. She didn't know if he was joking or not. What was this? [*]

'Is it a point of no return?' she thought involuntarily moving to the edge of the chair.

Reading his 'have you forgotten about the castration?' message, she sank into the chair thinking, 'is it a lighthearted joke or as a loaded message?', and for a clue, began to recall the events of the year passed by.

'Oh, how my life had turned on its head when I turned fifty?' she thought in wonderment. 'That's when I immunized my heart against attractions and insulated my life from vacillations! So I believed, didn't I? But when he enamored my heart to give a flirty spin to my life, didn't it dawn upon me that I had only sterilized it for a ritual regimen, and no more. Oh, how his first glance pierced my heart to stir my life that very instant!'

Returning from a temple when she found him alone in the drawing room, she felt as if god had sent his angel to receive her in her own abode. The moment their eyes met, it was as if they began their joint search for a love ground to share, which they had to abandon as her husband entered the scene from behind the curtain.

He was a friend of her husband's childhood pal settled in the States. Having spent the best part of his life there, he came back with his wife for good, leaving their two children, who were US citizens. That was six months back and they had since settled in Hyderabad, where, incidentally, both her married daughters stayed. As he happened to be in their town alone, to explore some business opportunities there, that evening, he came to call on her husband at their common-friend's behest. Introductions over, as her husband wanted her to prepare some coffee for them; she went into the kitchen with a heavy heart.

'While my missing his sight had understandably irked me, didn't the thought that he too would miss my sight inexplicably hurt me?' she began reminiscing about that dream encounter. 'But then, how the smell of the boiling decoction lifted my spirits for it portended serving him some steamy coffee with my own hands. When he said he never tasted anything better, how I hoped he would leave some dregs for my palate to share his satisfaction. What a disappointment it was seeing him empty the cup and how exhilarated I was when he said he had broken his life-long habit of leaving the dregs. Then, as he was preparing to leave, how depressed I was, but how relieved I was when my husband invited him to visit us again!'

She got up from the chair and as if to walk down the memory lane, she walked up to the compound gate.

'Oh, how that fateful evening changed the autumn tenor of my life!' she went on reminiscing. 'Were it the deities I pray that chose to pave a pathway of love for me? Or was it a case of my prayers gone awry? Before he stirred my heart, how sedate was my life, sterile though? After all, there was no material change after he had entered into it. Neither I did I venture onto his love ground nor did I let him into my sexual sphere. Why should life seem drab now as he cold shouldered me? Why not, won't the change of heart alter the tenor of life? Even the one as dull as mine, well, but it did start on an exciting note for a provincial girl like me.'

She was born to humble parents, who felt increasingly proud of her as she grew up. After all, she turned out to be the small town's beauty and the brains of its academics. When she was eighteen, calf love turned a new leaf in her life. The object of her adoration happened to be the stopgap lecturer from a nearby town. He taught maths alright but the equation was wrong for their marriage as he was doubly aged and twice married. Yet, amidst the protestations from her parents, with her tenacity of love, augmented by obduracy of adventure, she ascended the altar to be led by him to his native town. Her marital life, underscored by her zest for it, though clouded by his thrift, was exemplified by her two cute daughters born in quick succession.

'Didn't his thrift drift towards miserliness soon pushing my life into nothingness.' she began to recollect that phase of her life when her children were growing up. 'Why, as his passion for lovemaking too lost traction, how my life entered into the arena of frustration? Yet I shut my mind to adulterous thoughts, didn't I? But did he stop at that? Why, he did acquire a sense of insecurity as well and how insensibly I imbibed both his vices! Maybe that's why I learnt short-hand as a long handle for my secretarial security. Was it really so? Wouldn't have my own fear of the future bred an urge for self-preservation in my subconscious mind? Who knows, I might've been

seeking to secure my own future independent of him, but at what cost really. I was undone then, not known to me then.'

As a way out of her drab life, she shifted her focus away from her husband to center it on her daughters. How she wanted to keep them all for herself! But, as they grew up, seeing them getting closer to their father, all the more she tried to retain her mental hold on them. When she realized at length that she had ceded much of her daughters' emotional ground to her husband, as if to offset that loss on a spiritual plane, she infused religiousness into her consciousness. Besides, by then, as the age gap began the spouses began to take its toll on their connubiality, her newfound spirituality became a tool to soothe her suppressed sexuality. Thus in time, she got habituated to lead her life in a semi-spiritual mode that was before the daughters were married off.

'How their marriages threw my life out of gear.' she continued with the recollection of her life and times. 'With much of his life-long savings turning into their dowries and what with his retirement too round the corner, didn't he become a pathetic picture of insecurity? And when it was my turn to foot the bill, didn't I become even more insecure about my own future? That's in spite of my handsome savings and the remaining length of service life! Maybe, insecurity lies in one's mind and not in the investment portfolios.'

So, reinvigorating herself on the religious ground, she began perambulating around the deities in assorted temples, praying them for reciprocity in acting as her security guards against life's vicissitudes. Not content with insuring her life for material impediments, she added numerous goddesses to guard her against feminine turpitudes. Living thus in a man's world, she managed to keep the womanizers at bay from her exceptional 'past the prime' charms.

'How did the goddesses down their guard that day?' she thought amusedly as she walked back into her house. 'Didn't they also leave me vulnerable to his charms when he came the very next day?'

That morning, when her husband went out to fetch some vegetables, he knocked at the door saying he wanted to peep into their place passing by it. Enjoying his expected lie, she involuntarily said that he could feel at home till her husband came. But when it occurred to her that he could've been lying in the wait to meet her alone, she felt like soothing his weary legs by exposing her shapely ones to his thirsty eyes. So, before her husband's arrival, she conceived umpteen ways by which she slyly revealed many of her sari-clad charms to his feasting eyes. When he asked her cell-phone number to 'soothe his ears' as well, she gave it along with a safety manual.

Sometime after her husband's return, when he left with a heavy heart, while feeling palpably excited, she felt vaguely miserable. That night as she relived those enlivening moments, brought about by her uncharacteristic behaviour, she realized that she was in love with him. Though she was amused at that, yet she suffered from chasm of qualms over her conduct as a married woman. Shocked at the prospect of a liaison, she resolved to use all her moral strength not to let her love sway over her fidelity.

'Didn't I want to nip his infatuation in the bud by warning him that it would be inimical to his marriage as well?' she began to reconstruct that night's chain of thoughts. 'Why, I was certain that he would tuck his tail and run, leaving me alone to overcome my vacillation. How eagerly I waited for his call to unburden his burdensome love, but then, how cleverly he foiled my plan! Didn't he say that his wife

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