

AMIT BANERJEE

A STORY OF LOVE, LOSS, AND LEGACY IN A WORLD SWEEPED BY TIME

BLIZZARD

MY JOURNEY BEGINS



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Dedication

To my dearest Rhythm, My Daughter,

You're one of the most beautiful chapters in the timeless book of my life. And as your name ***Rhythm*** implies - a melody that has enriched every moment and filled my heart with purpose. This book, which has taken more than a few years to frame and write, was born from moments of solitude and ache, but also from love, reflection, and unwavering enthusiasm.

As I near the end of my journey called life, I find comfort in knowing that through you, this story will continue – spanning generations with empathy, insight, and integrity.

May your journey be filled with radiance, strength, and ceaseless potential...? You are not just my daughter; you are the continuation of everything I have hoped for, carrying forward the legacy of devotion, understanding, and righteousness that I've lived.

With all the love a father's heart can hold

Amit Banerjee, Father

Blizzard: My Journey Begins

Acknowledgments

To LIFE – my silent teacher –
with its gentle highs and brutal lows
its whispered lessons
in the quiet and the storm
Why I have been shaped above all
by a deep and enduring love of life
its questions, its colors, its contradictions...?

To the unseen hands across time
who have carved, painted, danced, and dreamed –
whose art, craft, and design
have lit up the world like constellations...
From temples to tools
melodies to motion pictures
thank you for shaping world culture with grace.

To cinema – our shared dreamscape
where stories flicker into being
where shadows dance with light
and the human soul
reveals its truths
through silence, frame and voice...

To songs –
the heartbeat of humanity
carrying love, longing, rebellion
and joy across generations and geographies.

To the wanderers who cross oceans and borders
chasing stories in stone, sand, and soul –
historians, geographers, and
seekers of truth
your journeys
make the world known and alive.

To the thinkers
the dreamers of justice
who dared to imagine a kinder dawn...

To the tireless hearts
lifting the voices of the silenced
and lighting the path for women
and the marginalized

To the lovers of LOVE –
those who defy cold codes
with warm belief in romance
in beauty, in loveliness
in a life awakened
where the human spirit blossoms
unbound, unafraid
undeterred
and utterly free...

With love and gratitude
As **Blizzard: My Journey Begins**

Amit Banerjee

Blizzard: My Journey Begins

- *By Amit Banerjee*

Circa 1864

THE LUMIERE BROTHERS were French manufacturers of photography equipment, best known for their *Cinematrographe* motion picture system and the short films they produced between 1895 and 1905, which places them among the earliest filmmakers.

In 1864, Louis Lumiere was born in Besancon close to the sub-alpine Jura mountain range bordering Switzerland; just 2 years after his brother Auguste Lumiere...

Circa 1896

On 7th July 1896, the agents of Lumiere Brothers of France began showing short cinematographic films at Watson's Esplanade Hotel, Bombay.

L'Arrivee d'un Train en Gare de la Ciotat

This 50-second silent film showed the entry of a train pulled by a steam locomotive into the railway station of *La Ciotat* in Marseille province, by the Mediterranean coast of France.

Arrival of a Train, in English, is associated with an urban legend well known in the world of cinema. The story goes that when the film was first shown, the audience was so overwhelmed by the moving image of a life-sized train coming directly at them that people screamed and ran back to the room...

This film illustrated the use of the long shot to establish the setting of the film, followed by a medium shot, and close-up. As the camera is statue for the entire film, the effect of these various shots is achieved by the movements of the subject alone. The train arrives from a distant point and bears down on the viewer, finally crossing the lower edge of the screen.

The film had a particularly lasting impact, yes; it caused fear, terror, and even panic...like The **Blizzard**...And this is how **My Journey Begins**

~ **Book 1** ~

~ Volume I Begins ~
(1964 – 1984)

Classic Bollywood/ New Hollywood

Prologue 1
(1964)

Naamkaran 1

100 years after Louis Lumiere was born, and he with his brother Auguste invented the *Cinematographie* in Lyon, northwest of the Alps in France, it was Banjo Kumarr who comes into this world, amid changing times

As the present now
will later be past
The Order is
rapidly fadin'...
And the first one now
will later be last
For the times they are a-changin'

- Bob Dylan

Extract from this inspirational and cynical song – giving voice with his poetic lyrics, and timeless message of change, protest and resilience - and sung in his first appearance at America's folk festival, by the seaside city of Newport in Rhode Island, becoming an instant anthem for this generation, and which will never go out of style because

The times will always be changing...!

It was few days ago during the pleasant autumn when the duration of daylight becomes noticeably shorter, temperature cooling considerably, that a young voice sang out across the maternity ward of the Dufferin Hospital, The Mall

Arrey Kumarr Sahib....aapka Beta hua...!

Nameless but rhythmic tone of voice had instantly earned 100-rupees tip from my beaming Dad, Mr. Bharat Kumarr, the upcoming business tycoon of Kanpur, an industrial city, by the west bank of the eternal river Ganga.

Dad had established M/s Bharat Kumarr & Co, handling agencies for various companies from the United Kingdom, the island nation in northwestern Europe.

Sahani uncle, our family attorney had watched in aghast at those 10 tenners that Dad shoved into the palms of that belle. However, in such a delicate and joyous situation, he refrained from offering any advice to Dad, except murmuring beneath his breath

Vadi Sai, Jhuleylal...! Bera- hee-paar...!

In our day, the lady doctor, popularly known as Badi daktarni, a fat gynecologist of repute, attached to Dufferin Hospital, announced Mom's discharge to all those present in the maternity ward

“So now you can take Vivek back home, and yes please makes sure that you carry his pretty mother...”

Badi daktarni named me Vivek, drawn out of inspiration from her idol, the great saint-philosopher icon, Swami Vivekananda. She always carried Swamiji's publication, Lectures from Colombo to Almora in one compartment of her large handbag; assorted emergency medical aids like the belted sanitary napkins, Woodward's gripe water, Dettol antiseptic lotion, and soap, injections, medicines and phials, and the freshly-launched Boroline, into the other.

Whenever she found time out of her gargantuan task of delivering others' follies into the world of illusion or *maya*, she browsed through the 19th century-end lectures for greater inspirations. She wished that one day her Vivek too derives inspiration from the revered spiritual leader and reformer, the *Guru*, Swami Vivekananda.

Badi daktarni remained joyful of her sojourn to Almora in the company of Kumarr family, led by its chief, Dushyant ji. She recollected the highlights of the trip, moreover, plentiful odds and ends surrounding it. How the family teased around amidst the temperate climate of Kumaon hills, located in the upper regions of our state...?

Nevertheless, it was actually the human posterior chamber that was our real family inspiration, and which was much to do with my grandpa with big mustaches. Therefore observing the lard of fat at my posterior end, my British Burma return grandpa with big mustaches, rather walrus mustache, instantly manufactured a roly-poly name for me, Gaplu.

Well, Gaplu sounded good to me, but who would listen...?

His friend Mr. James Allen, recently in the news of Kanpur Times having met Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru before his last days this year, and presenting him for his famous hip-length tailored coat with a mandarin collar, and similar to the *achkan*, the famed Nehru jacket, a quantity of winter textile, Merino tweed, from his mills, M/s Allen Textile Mills Limited, found me quite fair and British.

Probably the textile had somehow got mixed up amongst intense fragrance of white lilies and golden marigolds that was brought in to decorate Nehru's mortal remains. Amidst *kirtans* they were somberly placed upon his listless body, the body of Nehru, the charming and majestic, and also the writer of the historical masterpieces, read by one and all of Kumarr family

The Discovery of India

&

Glimpses of World History

Taking out precious time out of his textile mills and from British films, and holding me carefully into his arms, an art he'd mastered thanks to his brood, counting half-a-dozen, Mr. James Allen remarked with an élan, via his British accent

“Auh Dheee-Kayyy...! Hmm this fellow seems quite British to me. Look he's born in the era of these spectacular films of MI5 British superspy James Bond. This year having launched a blockbuster sequel...Goldfinger...that I prefferr to cooll him Bond...

...Hahaha...!”

Mr. James Allen, his tuft of hair brushed upwards and backwards from his forehead in a quaff hairstyle, sounded more like Goldfinger, the villain, whose appearance and mannerisms well suited the character that he played...

Retrospectively, my *dhuti*-clad grandpa with big mustaches, out of an urge for colonial-style sycophancy for this three-piece suited-booted *Gora Sahib* and not comprehending a word of him, stared at his finger in awe, and then in an oleaginous mode, doubly returned his laughter into the air

“Ha...ha...ha...!”

For a second time, after a brief pause, he released the remaining

“...Ha...ha...ha...!”

I didn’t like ‘em staring and laughing at me, especially that James who was suited-booted, so I, Bond, eased myself upon him that sent him scurrying to his newly acquired silver-colored luxury Grand Tourer, the elite DB5 model of Aston Martin, to drive home at a top speed of 145 mph to change his suit, *a la* James Bond...!

Manorama, the fat aunt of Deoghar, standing beside my grandpa with big mustaches, did not utter even a single word. All that she was doing was eyeing me intently and watching the leakage across the light grey suit of Mr. James Allen, and thinking aloud

“This *Vanshaj* of Bharat da would grow up to be a menace...!”

Doctor Tripathi uncle, who claimed to know nothing of the tinsel town, showered me by an archaic title, Kt. Kirti...! What was that, nobody really apprehended...?

But whenever he explained, he explained by means of great patience and furrowed facial expressions that Kt. Kirti, or Knights Bachelor of the United Kingdom was part of British Honors System and that eminent Indian personalities were honored by it.

Everybody except Mr. James Allen corroborated in unison and jeered, “But Doctor, doesn’t Kt. Kirti sound out of the place...?”

Doctor Tripathi uncle, thin-skinned by nature, never relished being the cynosure of derision. Therefore, after adjusting his pince-nez eyeglasses he quit the ward for some time, muttering

Hey, Bulla Dada...

To tell the truth, *Bulla Dada* was like some secret God to him. Whenever asked about Him, he used to civilly reply: “Don’t worry...! *Bulla Dada* reveals Himself upon every *Bhakta*; only thing, the *Bhakta* must beseech Him sincerely...”

Pundit Sudhanshu, clad in his designer *dhoti-kurta*, the only scented guy in the entire 1,200 square feet maternity ward of sweet-smelling local perfume, *attar*, from nearby Kannauj looked around the unfamiliar place amid great alacrity.

He was about to say something but stopped up midway when a buxom nurse, named Mary, in white fitted midriff scrub dress, nursing cap, entered in mince steps, walking in a pretentious way, short steps, quick and swinging hips, to attend Mom, now half-asleep after painfully being awarded, in 9-doles, her Lifetime-Achievement...

Pundit ji’s eyes popped out like Mary Poppins, his yawn-like gasp getting stuck up into the cleavage of the nurse, just like a 3-feet wooden pole inside the open jaws of a 23-feet Filipino saltwater crocodile, as she bent down to deliver a series of injections to Mom, along with a fixed dialog in her heavy Malayalam accent

“Onnukuti...onnukuti...!”

“Justta one more...justta one more...!”

Mary Poppins...Mary Poppins...Mary Poppins

...echoed in the air, Mary Poppins playing the magical nanny in the company of an umbrella - and out to improve a London’s dysfunctional family’s dynamics, by employing her unique brand of lifestyle

And who can just forget the song of this film

Chim, chimney

Chim, chimney

Chim, chim, cher – oo

Good luck will rub off when

I shake hands with you

or blow me a kiss

and that's lucky too

Chim, chimney

Chim, chimney

Now, it was Dad's turn who requests the chauffeur in zest: "Jagmohan, will you please help us, to pack up the belongings and *Memsahib* and I home, and don't forget the little one, the right one of course, among all those tadpoles...

...Hahaha...the rest can follow us in Sahani's brand new Black Fiat 1100 D, Italian but Indian...!"

Dad was in exuberant mood taking us home, leaving behind Sahani uncle, who was remorsefully calculating the exact change he would now have to fork out, for the long drive back to our villa, especially because his expenses had mounted, thanks to his addiction to Wills Filter, Navy Cut cigarette.

Jagmohan, bearing Buddha-like expression as well as without humor, closely followed Dad's instructions.

Nothing seemed to alter his stoic frame of mind, not even yesterday's hit Bhojpuri film...Lagi Nahin Chhute Ram...which he thought to have a higher attendance than even the blockbuster...Mughal-e-Azam...starring Prithviraj Kapoor-Dilip Kumar-Madhubala, in their leading roles, respectively as Emperor Akbar, his son Jehangir, and his son's beloved, the legendary Anarkali...!

1962 model, royal blue Ambassador Mark II car, famously bearing the number plate UPD 2322, was another key member of Kumarr family, without whom, they found themselves in absolute obscurity. Sans the will, Dad was proud to proclaim the car, based on the Morris Oxford series III, Made in England, as my elder bro, elder to me by 2 years.

For others, however, the spacious Ambassador car was more of a status symbol, a Birla product, the 1st Car having (Made in India) logo, and fittingly proclaimed as the

King of Indian Road

Upon reaching the sprawling Anupriya Villa, named after my Mom, we were greeted by a host of office and domestic staff.

Celebrations by way of lots of delicacies, together with spongy Bengali *rosogullas*, acquired from Ideal Sweets, The Mall, compellingly and scruffily found its way into each other's oral cavities.

“Enough...Enough...not any more please...”

Much like the recent British Invasion of America by the English vocal and instrumental rock n'roll quartet, The Beatles, straddling in their Beatle boots, and blasting through the charts like a tempest...

...Such words invaded the atmosphere of Anupriya Villa, fragranced by tons of garlands comprising 5-petaled *gulabs*, sweet-smelling *mogras* and the golden *gendaa*, weaved dexterously by Madhula, of Kanchipuram fame, from nearby kiosk few blocks away, and artistically suspended all over the place.

It nearly choked me and I started crying much to the chagrin of her long haired, girlish-looking baby daughter, Latha.

“Aaa...le...lee...leee....Aaa...le...lee...leee...”

Giggling, half a dozen of bubbly dames of the neighborhood, most of them dressed in locally weaved *Jamdani* saris, *pallus* decorated amid dangling tassel-like corner motifs, some of them even lactating, broke into the house; quite similar to the Beatle mania in America.

“Let's see *Shona-Raja*, why is he crying, is he hungry...? Anupriya *Bhabi*, your son is a charm, a heartthrob, he's like Raj Kapoor of Sangam, and who will fly high one day, fly high to...”

They then proudly listed the places where for the first time a film-maker had chosen to shoot outside India

London...Paris...Venice

These ladies, more like sisters to Mom, hungrily seized me to their bosom, turn-by-turn. I stopped crying. But the preceding aunt held my face so close to those fetid five-rupee notes held in reserve inside her milk-stained blouse

that I garroted along with the Father of the Nation wearing granny glasses, and undoubtedly visible through one of the currency notes.

I resumed my wailing. I wailed and wailed and wailed to my heart's content, amidst their singing to the song from...Sangam...the song becoming an instant hit, and definitely bearing fingerprints of Raj Kapoor's hand-picked A team in this 1st color film of his.

In the scene, Raj Kapoor, continually sitting upon a branch, woos by way of pipes sounded by wind squeezed from a bag, the Bagpiper, the doe-eyed Vyjayanthimala, who swims in a one-piece red swimsuit, oozing oodles of impish charm

*Merey mann ki Ganga
aur terey mann ki Jamuna...
ka
Bol Radhaa
Bol Sangam hoga ki nahi...*

However, this instance, there was one more addition to this A team: that of Vyjayanthimala. In fact, she was supposedly hooked on to rival Dilip Kumar's camp, his friable heart as well, that she relentlessly declined Raj Kapoor's wishes.

But when, once more Raj Kapoor insisted along these lines

*Merey mann ki Ganga
aur terey mann ki Jamuna...
ka
Bol Radhaa
Bol Sangam hoga ki nahi...*

...she couldn't at all resist, and as a final point, succumbed. Vyjayanthimala in fact succumbed to his incessant requests to enact in his film, by way of the famous line, now chanted out of tune by one of the ladies

*Arrey Baba
Hoga...Hoga...Hoga....!*

At the same time, I knew why I was wailing...? I'd come into this ephemeral world, where joys were momentary, and Blizzard, around the next bend.

~

“They could’ve gulped those *rosogullas* in a more civilized manner...” Draupadi, our *bai*, the oomph dark maid from Bastar, whispered to the chubby and elderly matron-like Karuna di, our head cook from Puri. “It’s me who has to wipe the floors clean and keep off those creepy ants...”

Nonetheless, it was a day of celebration and gaiety at Anupriya Villa, even for those creepy ants

Our Western Electric heavy rotary dial telephone, black in color, placed in the lounge rang with a loud kreeeng-kreeeng. The operator, after conforming it was 34411, linked the urgent trunk call to Mt. Abu, Rajasthan - Arbudgiri in Jain tradition. Because of the hubbub in the house, nothing could be audible from the other end, and Dad literally had to bellow:

“Hello...! Oh is that you Jain...? I’m fine, and how are you...? Yes...yes...yes...both mother and child are fine...Yes...yes...it’s not a girl, it’s a boy, a healthy boy...Hello...hello...And how is your Impala running...?...Hmm and what about your My Fair Lady, Mrs. Jain...? When is the baby due...?”

Telephone, invented some 9-decades ago by Alexander Graham Bell, could respond no longer after 6-minutes, nor could the discussion over Impala or the perfect musical movie...My Fair Lady...by George Cukor.

Impala, drawing its name from the African antelope, had soon become their inspiration to gallivant the heritage city, flaunting the convertible’s signature taillight assembly, at the same time as negotiating the crisscrossing trams and speedy buses along the challenging streets, cutting business deals, and hanging around the prominent theaters.

Ever since those days, Dad had become one of his close business friends, extending financial credits to each other. And now it was hearsay that Mr. P.K. Jain was keenly awaiting the following year’s launch of the 4th generation model of Impala, the Caprice, restyled to more rounded, softer look.

Still, in jest, Dad often compared Mr. Jain to the character of Professor Higgins of the movie, *My Fair Lady*: an arrogant, irascible, misogynistic teacher of elocution, one who believed that the accent and tone of one's voice determined a person's prospects in society.

It was in fact that Mr. P.K. Jain constantly prompted his wife, who although was as beautiful as the character played by Audrey Hepburn, was unfortunately an owner of thick accent, making her unsuitable even for job at a flower-shop.

And imagine, Mr. P.K. Jain wanted to expand his business worldwide, even to

London...Paris...Venice

Therefore, to make it as famous as *My Fair Lady*, he needed the so-called occidental culture at home.

"...P.K. Jain, my longtime business associate from Mt. Abu. These days he remains busy shifting his business to Calcutta, lock stock and barrel..." Dad signaled to Mom. "He is also awaiting the next model of Impala, and he was also inquiring whether it's a girl or boy..."

Mom responded by way of an overtly sweet smile over how men talk about cars and babies in the same breath, even as handing over to Dad, Giribala nani's letter from Benaras, written a fortnight ago but reaching just now.

It appeared more like a verdict, a doctrinaire

"Anupriya, I'm delighted that finally you are being blessed with a child, if a boy, may name him *Dhruva* after the serene Polaris, and if a girl, can call her *Gargi*, after the great intellectual woman of Vedic Age..."

...And I'm not keeping well, consequently cannot come down to Kanpur. For that reason, all of you please try to come over to Benaras. I would love to see the child and at the same time want you to seek blessings from *Shiva Maha-Jyotirlingam*..."

Nonetheless, Vedanta mama, Mom's younger brother from Haridwar, already a victim of a vintage name given by his mother, ridiculed *nani*'s suggestions, "And *Maa* always has something traditional to speak out of Hindu scriptures, why she can't derive something trendy like

8-1/2...?”

Dad was aghast at his plucky brother-in-law christening me 8-1/2, sounding twopenny-halfpenny, out of my 8-1/2 pound weight, created out of his adoration for Federico Fellini, one of his favorite Film Directors of Italian Neo-Realism, *Neorealismo* fame.

Vedanta mama was an aficionado of The Other Hollywood genre of films, and went on to explain how *Otto e mezzo*, in Italian, or 8-1/2 was an avant-garde film released in Italy the previous year, referring to Fellini’s eight-and-a-half films as director

6 Features, 2 short segments, and 1 in collaboration with another director

Vedanta mama always believed that cinema was a Director’s medium. Even though 2nd in line in the hierarchy of film-making, after the Producer, it was he who was solely responsible for making the film.

Why, it was the Director alone, who likes any author of a novel, foresees how the film will progress and culminate as per the storyline...?

The day elapsed, and so did the next few days; single, double, sub-group and group photos clicked by Dad via his Asahi Pentax Spotmatic SLR camera.

Dad even tried calling up his elder brother Grant kaka at Ujjain for advice *vis-à-vis* my Christening, but couldn’t get the line. Therefore, on behalf of Grant kaka, I was akin to

...the Man with no Name

...similar to the exaggerated, and highly-stylized character of Clint Eastwood in Sergio Leone’s film...A Fistful of Dollars...the first among Spaghetti Western genres.

However and eventually, when nothing else surfaced to their brilliant minds, exotic names like Vivek, Gaplu, Bond, Kt. Kirti, Dhruva, and 8-1/2 rejected, the extended Kumarr family consented to a 7th name

Banjo

Yes, Banjo the plucked stringed instrument with a thin membrane stretched over a frame to form a resonator. Having African antecedents, it had a long neck and fingerboard, and 5 metal strings – these passing over a bridge which presses over the membrane stretched over a circular frame...?

I was finally baptized as Banjo Kumarr, having *Kumarr* or the Prince, running as a self acclaimed family title, the heir to a multi-million empire, an empire consisting of a rich and diverse filmography, comprising even of James Bond series.

Well, no more talks

James Bond: “Do you expect me to talk...?”

Goldfinger: “No, Mr. Bond, I expect you to die...!”

I, Banjo was born in between the release of Goldfinger

In the UK on 17-9-1964 and in the US on 22-12-1964

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Part 1
(Circa 1965-1974)

Prologue 2
(1964-1970)

My Infancy...

After legendary Nehru the internationalist, statesman and humanist, and the architect of Indian democracy and modern India, we were fortunate enough to have Lal Bahadur Shastri as our Prime Minister; a Prime Minister inspired and led by great personalities of modern India.

Nehru with his towering intellect, visionary leadership, and unwavering commitment to secularism and democratic ideals, laid the moral and institutional foundations of the Republic, and it was upon these noble traditions that Lal Bahadur Shastri was entrusted to build, guided by the same spirit of service, simplicity, and dedication to the nation.

Dad: “I’m impressed by Shastri ji; you know Sahani my father-in-law knew him as a young boy in Varanasi whilst doing his Graduation in Philosophy and Ethics at Kashi Vidyapith...”

Mom too was impressed by Shastriji and even remembered his 1st broadcast as Prime Minister in 1964, wherein he’d stated

“There comes a time in the life of every nation when it stands at the crossroads of history and must choose which way to go. But for us, there need be no difficulty or hesitation, and no looking right or left. Our way is straight and clear, the building up of a socialist democracy at home with freedom and prosperity for all, and the maintenance of world peace and friendship with all nations...”

However, Grandpa with big mustaches, a man of natural intelligence was quite forthcoming with his views, albeit in his own line of interest.

Shastri ji led the nation well when it was attacked by Pakistan in 1965. Sensing a weakened Indian army, post 1962 War, Pakistan, a close associate of China, began a policy of provocation against India by infiltrating Jammu & Kashmir to precipitate an insurgency against Indian rule.

This action ultimately triggered the 2nd Kashmir War with India in 1965

Pakistan had occupied Indian Territory and sent thousands of trained infiltrators. Shastri ordered the army to cross over, launching counter-attacks. Post ceasefire by the United Nations UN, India could realize that it had a hero in her, and that was our PM Shastri. True, India scored a politico-strategic victory, Shastri hailed as a national hero.

Even his slogan, *Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan*, or, Hail to the soldier, hail to the farmer, had become very popular during the war

In our neighborhood, a pact was signed with Ceylon regarding the status of Tamils residing over there. Another pact with Burma was also signed, what with reparation of Indian families after 1964. Grandpa was pleased that Shastri paid a visit to his favorite Rangoon, even though the leadership over there was a military one.

It was unfortunate that during Indo-Pak talks in Tashkent, under Soviet leadership of Kosygin, Shastri died of heart attack. 19 months of his reign was crucial, under his simple and honest leadership. A tearful India conferred him a posthumous Bharat Ratna.

And one thing more: both India and Pakistan felt betrayed by the perceived lack of support by the western powers viz. America and Britain, and which made DK ponder: “I’m sure one day; India shall walk into the arms of Soviet Union; Pakistan into China’s...!”

~

Nehru’s endearing daughter Indira, who’d become Information and Broadcasting Minister under Shastri now became the PM. Few days later she enumerated her vision for India in her Republic Day speech:

“Today I pledge myself anew to the ideals of the builders of our nation, to democracy and secularism, to planned economic and social advance, to peace and friendship among nations...”

Dad listened to her in rapt attention when she further added, “Citizens of India, let us revive our faith in the future. Let us affirm our ability to shape our future. We are comrades in a mighty adventure...”

Well, her speech was not just words. It clearly indicated her aims, to continue with socialist planning, to improve the welfare of the people

Chapter 01

In a Jugalbandi

Banjo

No guesses why they'd named me so, for I'd inveterate later that none of my family members, or even that of my extended family, Ef, had ever seen one single banjo instrument by way of their two eyes.

Guitar they'd strummed, but only during photo sessions, especially at their favorite hill station, Darjeeling, at about 2,000 meters above the sea level. However, those were dumb guitars, half of the strings missing, much like the teeth of Madhula, Latha's mother.

True that they were somewhat familiar with sitar, for they loved to attend the musical concerts, but once again, they never had even laid a hand on this complicated long-necked stringed instrument, tuned to the notes of the *ragas*, and leading to 2 bridges, the *badaa ghoraa*, and the *chhota ghoraa*, fixed to the funny sounding resonating chamber, the *kaddu*, or the pumpkin.

Translated into the gentleman's language English, *badaa ghoraa* was big horse; *chhota ghoraa* was small horse, and both sounding more like whisky brands.

Same held well for sarod, which contained a metal gourd acting as a resonating chamber, and placed on a small wooden body sheltered with skin, besides a fingerboard covered by steel. String holder was called the *langot*, and certainly not to be befuddled by that *langot*, meaning the loincloth worn by *pahalwans* or wrestlers sparring in *dangal*, the wrestling arena.

1971 witnessed *Garibi Hatao*; eradicate poverty campaign launched by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It was not just a political slogan but a national movement that sought to uplift India's marginalized populations. It surely resonated deeply with the country's sense of cultural renaissance and renewal.

In the midst of this, an unforgettable performance took place at Bithoor – an event that epitomized the convergence of politics and art.

Ravi Shankar, the legendary sitar virtuoso who was one of the most iconic figures in Indian Classical Music, and known for his ability to transcend cultural barriers and bring Indian Classical Music to the global stage was to pair alongside Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, the eminent sarod maestro whose mastery over the musical instrument was unmatched.

The event was organized by Swami Nepalanda - the pairing of Shankar and Khan in a *jugalbandi*, a duet.

...Well, it was spot on that from 1966 to 1971, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had achieved zenith of power, after splitting the Congress Party in 1969. Why, was it not in the All India Congress Committee AICC that almost two-thirds members walked over to Indira Gandhi's camp...?

While the Indian National Congress INC was known as Syndicate led by stalwarts such as K.Kamaraj and Morarji Desai, the Indira faction came to be known as Indicate. The former had certain right-wing agenda, distrusting Soviet assistance.

Again, Dad was gleeful what time Indira Gandhi secured a massive election victory in 1971, "Sahani, pay attention, Indira Gandhi has bagged 352 seats, pitted against Morarji Desai. You know he'd to content with mere 51...

...And I suppose the catchy slogan *Garibi Hatao*, and the proposed anti-poverty programs that came along with it were designed to give her a self-sufficient prop up on pan-India basis, based on the deprived, hailing from villages and cities alike..."

DK believed that would allow her to find a way around the dominant rural castes, besides offering political weight to the marginalized *dalits* and natural inhabitants, the *adivasis*.

Well, as his name reckons, Swami Nepalanda belonged to the foothills of the Himalayan kingdom, our northern neighbor Nepal, and from the town of Janakpur, supposed to be the birthplace of Sita *Mata*, one who was christened as Janaki, the celebrated daughter of King Janaka of Videha.

Being a half Indian half Nepalese, Swamiji bore an accent in which the alphabet S, more or less sounded like Sh

Dumpy, flowing long bearded, this ochre robed Swami had founded an *ashram* at Bithoor, the northern outskirts of the rural side of Kanpur, by the side of River Ganga, and a center of Hindu mythology.

He was emotional and very sentimental about Bithoor: Bithoor, being the place that housed the hoary hermitage Valmiki *Ashram*, Valmiki being the harbinger-poet in Sanskrit literature, better known as *Adi Kavi*, the first poet.

Valmiki was the author of Ramayana, the 1st epic poem of India

In fact, Ramayana consisting of 24,000 *shlokas* bearing 7 *kandas* or cantos was 4-times the length of The Iliad and the Odyssey of Homer in *archaios* or ancient Greece.

...It was the same great sage Valmiki, who'd given refuge to Sita *Mata*; and where Sita *Mata* had given birth to her prodigal twins, Lava and Kusha. Sita *Mata*, you know, raised her sons single-handedly in his hermitage, and they grew to be valiant and intelligent.

And it was as though the Swami was their gynecologist, their Badi daktarni since *Treta-Yuga*, the 2nd of the 4 *Yugas*, or ages of mankind, in the religion of Hinduism...!

The Swami fondly called this *ashram*, Vanaprastha or Vanaprash-thaa, a place for retreat. His paradise, Vanprash-thaa was a sprawling complex of 5 acres or so, the land donated by my real grandpa, Gajanan Damodar.

Enchanting landscape encompassing a guava orchard, a children's park, a natural cowshed, a lotus pond, a square kitchen garden were few of its hallmarks. Concrete structures weren't a lot of, except for a meditation and prayer hall, which led to a shrine. Shrine was pious-looking, *Ram-parivar* seated gloriously as the main deity.

Meditation and prayer hall was frequented by the *swamis*, and *bhaktas*, especially by Badi daktarni; temporary living-quarters by its core inhabitants, comprising mostly of *sadhus*, wandering mendicants, and several *grihastis* who wanted to stay away from their families. These structures were dotted all around the periphery, conspicuously and deliberately away from one another, as if in quarantine.

Quite similar to *The Neighborhood of Jas de Bouffan*, the painting by the famous Post-Impressionist painter of France, Paul Cezanne, and the place

had a large foreground tree at one side and a clump of smaller trees at the other framing a distant view in the center.

The landscape much like the painting, summed up the mood of resignation, or *Vanaprastha*, coupled by a deep immersion in nature, and offering a chance to look with pleasure.

Swami Nepalananda, 70 years of age and about to retire officially, carried a dynamic personality. His zeal however, apart from organizing those dreary *pravachans* and *satsangs*, was to invite famous artistes, strictly of the classical genre. It served him dually, to swim into the ocean of *ragas*, as well as to popularize Vanaprash-thaa.

His enthusiasm attracted audiences from all over Kanpur and even adjoining towns like Lucknow, some 80 kilometers away.

One day, Swami Nepalananda sent a messenger to my grandpa with big mustaches, carrying the following hand-written note

Namashkar Dushyant Kumarr ji...!

I'm sure you are in the best of health and spirits as it finds me here. I wish to announce that I've organized a *jugalbandi* of maestros Ravi Shankar and his *guru-bhai*, Ali Akbar Khan, who do not necessitate any introductions. You well know, they both belong to the famed Maihar *gharana* of Central India, founded by the legendary Ustad Allauddin Khan.

You, along with your family, are cordially invited to grace the occasion at Vanaprastha. Please find the program details as per annexure.

May I add here that the meditation and prayer hall, which had been built by your partner and elder cousin Shree Gajanan Damodar ji, is in an ominous condition, crying for a fresh coat of paint...?

Your subscription towards this noble cause would be highly solicited. I hope to see you all at the jugalbandi.

Sitaram...Sitaram...!

Swami Nepalananda

“It was sometime back that Shankar had become the most famous Indian musician on the planet...”

Grandpa excitedly addressed my Dad upon receiving Swamiji’s invitation, such an invitation none seemed to have received ever since the invention of the modern sitar, supposedly developed out of the *tritantri* veena, created by legendary Amir Khusrau of the 13th century.

Tritantri comprised of 3 strings, while *sehtar* in Persian denoted an instrument having 3 strings, *seh* for 3, and *tar* for strings.

“Well, it’s not a quote of me but of a famous personality from the world of music who had said so...” And it wasn’t the first time that grandpa with big mustaches or Dad were going to observe a live *jugalbandi*, they’d witnessed such iconic duets before as well.

Not to be outdone of his knowledge of music, Dad joined, wiping his mustache by way of sweep of his right hand forefinger, “You know Kaka ji, Ali Akbar Khan was first called to America. And it’s true that by now, Khan *Sahib* has made America his home...”

“Then it’s decided that we all must attend the duet musical concert, *jugalbandi*, at Vanaprastha, such *jugalbandis* riding the wave of popular appeal during current times. As such it’s been quite long that I’ve seen Nepalánanda...” Kaka ji of Dad concluded amid an aura of exuberance.

In those tender years, was I really concerned about who was the greatest musician on planet earth, or who was more rhythmic, or who was more tuned to the art of Gods, music...?

No certainly not

And in those days when I still loitered around in my half shirt half pants, nobody even anticipated me to appreciate the double Dutch *ragas* or *raags* or *ragams* that once caused furors at great Mughal Emperor Akbar’s Court of the 16th century, with the likes of celebrated Mian Tansen occupying exalted position in his ensemble as one of his nine gems

Navratnas

Mom, as a big admirer of Tansen evolved me to the word *Mian*: “You know Banjo; title *Mian* was conferred by Emperor Akbar, *Mian* means the honorific, the learned man...”

...Several of Tansen's *raga* compositions have become mainstay of the Hindustani tradition, and these are often prefixed by means of *Mian ki*...For example, *Mian ki Malhar*, *Mian ki Mand*, *Mian ki Sarang*..."

I smiled to myself: "If in my case, it would've been *Banjo ki Malhar*, *Banjo ki Mand*, *Banjo ki Sarang*....!"

"Banjo, you know, one of the fascinating and unique aspects of Hindustani music is the allocation of definite times of the day or night, and seasons for rendering specific *raga*. We've to reckon that there exists a subtle relationship between *swaras* and specific moods..."

...Set in simple words, some of the *ragas* were played to break the day in the morning, while some different were played to yet break the day in the evening...! Mom went on to dilute the essence in a beginner style, *style debutant* in French.

Yet her additional lessons made me doze off

"In North India, the *ragas* have been categorized into 10 parent scales *thaats*, right from *Bilawal* moving over to *Todi*, by the great innovator of Hindustani Classical Music, Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande, whom your grandpa with big mustaches had a chance to meet at neighboring *Awadhi* city of Lucknow...!"

Leaving aside grandpa with big mustaches along with his hobnobbing skills related to great musicians, what I'd learnt by heart were merely the definite collection and orders of the basic notes in a *raga*, the 7 *swaras*

SaRiGaMaPaDaNi

Mom sustained, "And I must enumerate here about the *rasas* or moods as enunciated by Bharat *muni* in his celebrated treatise written in Sanskrit, *Natyashastra*, wherein he mentions 8 *rasas*

"No more than 8 *rasas*...? I pointed out, marveling at her stream of comprehension *a propos rasas*. "As a matter of fact, there exists a 9th, the prime most, and that is *shanta*, the peaceful *rasa*."

Without peace you know, world ceases to be...!"

"And what to name the 10th *rasa* wove by Mom's affection, and which encompassed entire world to me...?" I contemplated.

Vatsalya

Still, the concert at Vanaprastha was somewhat parallel to the famous rock band revealing a counterculture, The Rolling Stones, with me as a rocker in mirth, rolling at the side of the makeshift stage, and imitating the popping heads of the soloists Ravi and Ali, in playful competition amid an equal footing *Jugalbandi*-style, at times joining, at times disjoining, much like entwined twins banging their heads in the interior of a womb.

Needless to state, their *Jugalbandi* sounded grand and solemn, especially their *Palas Kafi* in *shringar rasa* where Ravi Shankar's coy sitar and Ali Akbar's masculine sarod, together scaled peaks of melody.

Together my Dad and his Kaka ji were ecstatic following their stellar performance; grandpa with big mustaches even offering his humble services to the maestro Ravi Shankar...

"Pundit ji, I'm impressed by your Instrumental style of sitar now been named after you, the Ravi Shankar style of sitar...!"

Being rewarded a glowing expression as a tribute, grandpa with big mustaches sustained, "I had been working in Burma for long and I still have many contacts over there, even though it now has a despotic rule in place.

...Therefore, should you require any seasoned tun wood, *toona ciliata*; I can be of immense help. I know people who are into the construction industry and who can get hold whole columns of trunks from those colonial style villas..."

After that, in a hushed but categorical tone, "I'm sure Pundit ji, to manufacture yet one of your masterpiece sitars, ones with the extra gourd, I can locate a quantity of very old seasoned wood that are still a highly guarded secret in Burma; rather I would say, a mystery..."

Maestro offered him a beaming smile knowing well about popularity of his sitars decorated by means of fine inlay work and wood carvings, along with his postal address of America where he could be contacted.

Grandpa was somewhat in two minds whether the maestro would come back with; he'd tried it once before.

Never mind

Hitherto, grandpa with big mustaches stretched out the conversation: “I’ve heard there is a grand concert at Madison Square Garden in New York, America at some stage in August...!”

“Yes, you’re correct, Dushyant ji, it has been branded as The Concert for Bangladesh, wherein we together would be performing along with Alla Rakha and some eminent musicians from the west such as former Beatles lead guitarist George Harrison, the King of folk music, Bob Dylan, and songwriter Eric Clapton, among others...

...Basically to highlight the plight of East Bengal refugees...” East Bengal born and sympathizer Ali Akbar Khan concluded in a typically utopian spirit.

It was true that Ravi Shankar and George Harrison had become close acquaintances. George, his disciple, added considerably to his glamour and status in the UK and the US. One day, “George, we must help these people. I want to raise money for them by doing a concert, but if I do it alone, I’m afraid I won’t be able to raise a significant amount...

...I need you; will you join me for the concert...?”

“Of course buddy, anything you say. And I am sure others will join you in the noble cause. I’ll start the preparations right away...!” George assured.

And the show was set up, posters announcing

Joy Bangla

Ravi Shankar...Ali Akbar Khan...Alla Rakha...

&

Produced by George Harrison

And, contributions for the benefit of the homeless children of Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan, were sent from all over the world, especially from USA to The George Harrison-Ravi Shankar Special Emergency Relief Fund, UNICEF, United Nations, New York

Providentially, The Concert for Bangladesh at the Madison Square Garden in New York City proved a big hit, all tickets Sold Out.

George sang his self composed Bangladesh, whose track captivatingly ran as

My friend came to me
with sadness in his eyes
He told me that he wanted help
before his country dies
...Although I couldn't feel the pain
I knew I had to try
Now I'm asking all of you
to help us save some lives
...Bangladesh, Bangladesh...!
Where so many people are dying fast
and it sure looks like a mess
I've never seen such distress
Now won't you lend your hand and understand
relieve the people of Bangladesh...?

Later on, the concert was converted into a triple album by Apple Records. A movie was made too. The album went on to win a Grammy and unbelievably a cool 14 million US dollars, duly raised out of the proceeds of the album and the movie.

Ravi Shankar acknowledged that it still gave him unbounded joy to believe that they were able to touch so many lives

Later than successfully breaking the ice among great maestros, grandpa with big mustaches was thrilled to have proved himself the icon of the evening among the lots, and finding himself barely next to Ali Akbar Khan, Ravi Shankar, and Swami Nepalánanda, summoned Dad to foot the entire whitewash bill of the Meditation and Prayer Hall.

“Swamiji, here's a token amount for the *ashram*...” Dad now emerging into the scene as the 5th Star of the Evening, and handing him over a cheque of Rs. 5,000, Sahani uncle's tongue simultaneously pops out like those of *Maa Kali*'s.

“*Vadi Sai, Jhuleylal...! Bera-hee-Paar...!*”

Sahani uncle expressed himself in a state of shock and disbelief as Dad walked back towards the car. A beaming Swami graciously accepted the cheque releasing a silent prayer: “May Sita *Mata* bless these artistes with awards not less than Bharat Ratna...?”

On way back home, Sahani uncle, sitting in the front seat, and whom Dad had teased by way of a wink while handing over the cheque, wanted to break the awkward silence, “I’ve heard that Ravi Shankar has remarried after his divorce with the very talented Annapurna Devi, daughter of his guru, the renowned Baba Allauddin Khan..?”

Grandpa with big mustaches, sharing the rear seat with me and Dad joked, “But if Shankar can play with ease his 7 playable strings, 5 main plus 2 *chikari*, I’m sure he could’ve managed up to 7 wives as well...

...Hahaha...!

...And what an innovator and peerless performer he is...? Why, his latest inventions in the field of *ragas* has become the epitome of all that is enthralling and conscientious, full of meaning, thereby creating waves in the arena of classical music...

...What have you to say Sahani...?”

What else could Sahani uncle, the greatest squirrel on earth, say except for his *Vadi Sai Jhuleylal Bera hee Paar*, and his head already gone for a six amid such bald-faced logic...?

“What, 7 wives...?”

I only have one, and can’t even cope with that, she’s such a big spendthrift...!” He thought aloud while crunching a piece of paper inside his trouser pocket, which carried a lengthy list of household items to be carried home tonight for his wife and 3 kids, a daughter of 4 and two sons of 2 and 1 years of age.

Sahani uncle’s major client was my Dad, and out of him he earned three-quarters of his fee. Therefore, it was my Dad with whom he spent maximum official time, as his lawyer and business advisor, starting his day from 9 o’clock in the morning...

...Yet once it was 9:00 o’clock at night, it had to be with his wife and 3 kids, the favorite being his fair and doe-eyed daughter, Chitra.

Again, not to be outdone of his knowledge of music and musicians, wiping his mustaches by way of sweep of his right hand forefinger, Dad added, “Kaka ji, I think that Ali Akbar Khan, famous for his composition of *Raga Chandranandan*, or moonstruck, based on 4 evening *ragas* is more earnest, and I’ve heard he already married 3-times...

...Ha...ha...ha...!”

Sahani uncle joined him in laughter, also at himself, at the very thought of the listing, which he itemized several times from beginning to end by the use of his Bausch & Lomb soft, flexible contact lenses; the list which was going to eat into a third of his monthly earnings.

“Well, Bharat da, I think the 4th one is overdue, just to justify the quantum of his Moonstruck Evenings as you say...Ha...ha...ha...”

Amidst ha-ha, our chauffeur, Jagmohan, stoically silent, was concentrating on the single road ahead to Kalyanpur on which he sped along. Before long, a milkman handling 4 cans of milk, 2 on either side of his rudimentary bicycle handles, emerged out of nowhere in front of him, quite like *Raga Chandranandan*...

Perhaps it was because of the recent high-profile The Concert for Bangladesh that 16th of December soon heralded, Pakistan surrendering to India, signaling the end of the Bangladesh Liberation War. All the way through its Akashvani, All-India Radio AIR was breaking detailed news about the creation of Bangladesh at our eastern border, ending with a sharp note

“...the creation of a new state of Bangladesh has redrawn the map of South Asia. It has also reordered the relationship between India and Pakistan....”

As if he was a component of the war or its politics, Dad proudly declared, “India having gone to war with Pakistan has played a chivalrous role in the Freedom Movement of Bangladesh...

...Mukti-Bahini of Mujib scoring a victory only because side-by-side of them, we lent support through our similar sounding, Mitro-Bahini...

...And I think, Indira Gandhi, our national icon, must be privileged by the highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna...”

Dad's was perhaps the 2nd accolade after the young opposition parliamentarian, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, about Indira Gandhi becoming a veritable *Maa Durga* astride a tiger, who'd just slain the wicked demon...

Remember, it was Indira Gandhi who received a standing ovation in Lok Sabha following Pakistan's surrender in December 1971. Cutting across party lines, the parliamentarians had thumped tables and threw papers in the air shouting slogans of

Joi Bangla...Joi Indira Gandhi

All that Indira Gandhi acknowledged was, "I express my gratitude for the support of all parties during the difficult period..."

Well, earlier too I'd recurrently heard the name Mujib, or Sheikh Mujibur Rehman taken amid awe, amid admiration in our villa. I'd then believed him to be one of Dad's business colleagues. It was much later I learnt that Mujibur was the Father of Bangladesh Freedom Movement, at what time East Pakistan became Bangladesh, and he, its First President...!

And often I heard accolades being showered over his forceful oratory skills and charismatic personality. Grandpa and dad remained impressed over his historic speech delivered to a gathering of over 2 million people at Dhaka's Ramna Race Course Maidan, calling for a Civil Disobedience Movement against the West Pakistan Government

"The struggle now is the struggle for our emancipation, the struggle now is the struggle for our Independence.

Joy Bangla...!

...And since we've given blood, we will give more blood. God willing, the people of this country will be liberated. Therefore, turn every house into a Fort, and face with whatever you have..."

Kazi Nazrul Islam, known as the Bidrohi Kobi, the rebel poet, was a towering figure in Bengali literature and music. His works filled with themes of resistance and rebellion, made him a symbol of defiance against oppression.

And in spite of his suffering from dementia and asphyxia, Nazrul was invited to settle permanently in the liberated air of Bangladesh, as their national poet. His words had thus become immortal

I am the rebel eternal
I raise my head beyond this world
High, ever erect and alone...!

However, responding to international pressure, mainly that of USA, Pakistan released Mujibur Rehman early next year. Mujib described the fallout of the war against the occupying army of Pakistan as

“...the biggest human disaster in the world, a brutal genocide, arson, and claiming the tragic deaths of as many as 3 million people, the rape of more than 200,000 women...”

Apart from the horrors of the Liberation War, a particular name which was doing the rounds was that of the mastermind of the 1971 War, General Sam Manekshaw of India. Everybody agreed that he must be decorated with the title Field Marshall. I found the name and title quite British, similar to Mr. James Allen of Kanpur.

I was in wonder of the tanks PT-76, the T-55, which were constantly in the newspapers, and especially of the armored column of T-55 Tanks, once it reached Dhaka via each 4 cardinal direction, unleashing shock and awe upon the enemies.

Nonetheless, certain effects perturbed me, the hooting of sirens during nocturnal hours, and subsequent blackouts, within the protracted armed struggle interlude of 9 months.

Such factors acquired greater significance at what time our car was stopped up by orders passed by the Central Command Division of Indian Army, at a spot somewhere midway near Unnao, on way back from Lucknow.

We were directed to half paint the headlights into color black. Jagmohan sulked. “How preposterous...? From where to find black paint at the dead hours of darkness, and switching off car headlights won’t at all be tantamount to safe driving...?”

Well, Black out was declared due to the air strikes of Pak Air Force

My Dad, brilliant as he was by way of his quick presence of mind, dished out carbon paper from one of the wings of his Allen Edmonds double flap leather briefcase. He directed the chauffeur to fetch a little *atta* from nearby hutments, add slight water to it and prepare native glue called *leyee*.

In next to no time, thick layers of carbon paper were pasted over the brilliant headlights of our 1962 model, royal blue Ambassador Mark II Car, famously bearing the number plate UPD 2322. Was I not thrilled to watch all these movements, headlights now slashed into one half, thereby dipping its rank from a full-moon to a half-moon...?

Save for when we heard a quick-fire rapid bullet shot sounds from nearby bushes, followed by an explosion, the terrified chauffeur just about galloping our 4 wheeler like an untamed *cheetah*, 75 miles per hour MPH, till we traversed the short few kilometers via the British-era double storied bridge, over the River Ganga, entering the city limits of Kanpur in one piece.

Exclusive of bothering to stop by all those red signals at The Mall, he sped away unrelentingly, till he reached the safe haven of the inside of our garage gates, placing the car sideways his BSA bicycle.

Dad jested, “Jagmohan, tomorrow the car number UPD 2322 would I think blazon all over the media ...!”

1961 model of BC-505 Transistor Seven Radio of GEC London, the celebrated English Daily Hindustan Times, combined by hours of verbal debates, weren’t doing me any good. I experienced sleepless nights, hallucinations of me being chased by Pakis in uniform.

Had I become victim of schizophrenia, imagining those Pakis carrying machine guns chasing me, and I running in my half shirt half pants, recently bought from Samson’s Garments...?

I managed to locate an old factory shed, hopping into an empty barrel. I softly close its lid, prayers upon my lips. Sensing all persecutors to have departed, I stealthily open the lid of my bolthole. And no sooner I free it, walrus mustaches stare at me.

I shrieked. “What happened, Banjo...?”

It was sunup, and there weren't any Paki men in uniform. Rather I was staring at the walrus mustache of grandpa, who'd invited Mr. James Allen over a pot of Champagne of Teas, the renowned Darjeeling Tea.

He was aware of Mr. James Allen being one of the connoisseurs of this well-known teas produced in Bengal, and which was all the rage in his native place, England.

Tete-a-tete over Darjeeling Tea went nonstop for over an hour, beginning with Kolay thin arrowroot biscuits, leading to the more filling Irish fruit cake, flavored by means of whisky, stout, and rum, and duly ordered from a new patisserie at Pearl Lake.

Mr. Allen: "See, almost immediately after the creation of Pakistan, there was this clamorrr for autonomy by the people of East Pakistan..."

Grandpa: "So true, I found Bengali language and culture duly thwarted; they were even economically exploited...!"

However, at the end of the war, Mr. Allen's logic was unfussy: "These leaders must sit together in search of truce and an amiable resolution, along with cool heads, in the middle of a cool place...!"

Grandpa as usual, seconded a tipsy Mr. James Allen: "I think you must then invite them over to the Himalayan foothills of Shimla, adjacent your breathtaking English cottage house..."

...Say what, the unruffled ambiance propelling them to act in unison for the betterment of South Asia, orchestrating the ultimate *jugalbandi*; in French, a *jugalbandi* in *par excellence*.

...Ha...ha...ha...!"

Chapter 02

It's Wartime

During and subsequent to wartime, my days weren't trouble-free at school either, as I'd not anything life-sized to brag regarding the on-going war. It was Jagan and Farhan and Tejwinder Singh, those who stole the limelight. These guys had their uncles propped up in multiplicity of uniforms and medals all over the land, the sea, and the air.

Jagan started off in exaggeration: "When bombs struck at 3.25 am, the poor villagers were deep asleep. Pak planes having made this sudden attack by a 500-pound bomb, this entire dusty Punjab village near Jalandhar was destroyed, killing even the buffaloes..."

...However, the next one wasn't triumphant enough; my Land uncle stopped it by means of his bare hands..."

Before he could finish his yarn about bombardments, Farhan cut in, "You know, Pak's submarine PNS Hangor sinks the Indian frigate INS Khukri, and also damaged another warship, INS Kirpan..."

...Thereafter, even though India moved the focus of its operations to the spectacular East Pakistan ports like the Queen of the East, Chittagong; and 150 kilometers to its south, Cox's Bazaar, the lengthiest uninterrupted naturally occurring sea beach in the world, my Sea uncle could encounter a 100-foot blue whale, weighing about 180 tonnes..!"

Tejwinder, the most aggressive of all, and not wanting to be left out in this class warfare concluded, nose in the air

"Remember, both the governments protested violations of national airspace along the western border, but aerial conflict between the respective air arms began in earnest end of November..."

...Now, one afternoon, 4 Pakistani Sabres strafed Indian and Mukti Bahini positions, but soon after they were intercepted by 4 Gnats operating out of Dum Dum Airport in Calcutta. During the ensuing melee, 3 of the Sabres were shot down, all Gnats returning to base unscathed. Thereby the first blood of a new Indo-Pak air war had been drawn.

...And out of the 4,000 odd sorties carried out by India, mostly by MiG-21 combat fighter aircrafts, one particular of them flew from a forward base in Kashmir...

...You know, it was from such a forward base that my Air uncle narrowly missed smashing into the 29,000-foot Mount Everest, or the Sagarmatha in Nepal, or the Qomolangma in Tibet...!

I could've shot back at them, but frankly speaking I did not have any martial uncles scattered over the Indian Subcontinent's Land, Sea, and Air. I guessed only the space in Space was spared, but that too so they say was booked by the prime mover of New Hollywood, the Big Bang Director, Stanley Kubrick through his innovative Sci-fi film

2001: A Space Odyssey

Beautiful and mysterious, this film followed a voyage to the Planet Jupiter in the midst of the sentient computer, after the discovery of mysterious black monoliths affecting Human Evolution.

Even if 2001: A Space Odyssey dealt with top of the world themes like existentialism, human evolution, technology, artificial intelligence, and extra-terrestrial life, it had nothing to do with my little problems with Bobby.

True, Existentialism, the philosophical movement which asserts that humans are responsible for creating their own essence through their choices and actions in a world devoid of inherent meaning; it had nothing to do with Bobby as such.

Maybe the process of human evolution went back as much as 7 million years ago MYA – Bobby was a recent phenomenon in my life

I never had any inkling of Artificial Intelligence AI as a learning subject, but Bobby was preferred out of my natural intelligence.

And it wasn't Stanley Kubrick who'd scientifically and accurately depicted Space flight, pioneered special effects, ambiguous imagery, using minimal dialog and sound in place of those customary and established narrative techniques, but it was Dad and Mom who finally came to safeguard my honor. I was thrilled when I got some fuel for war from none other than Dad.

Dad had called up from Delhi where he had gone to develop business linkages with our southern neighbor, Ceylon with the help of his classmate Mr. Venugopal, originally resident of Rameswaram, and presently stationed at the High Commission of Ceylon in Delhi.

Therefore, immediately after, the next day, I broke his firsthand news at the school, “You know my Dad was in Delhi whilst Sheikh Mujibur Rehman had just returned from London on a Royal Air Force RAF plane after having met the British Prime Minister....”

Noticing the keen interest in the eyes of my friends, I continued in an air of vanity, “You know, our President, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the entire Indian cabinet of ministers, chiefs of armed staff had gone to greet Mujibur Rehman at the airport...

...Dad too was witness to a festive Delhi and also to the joint address of Mujibur Rehman and Indira Gandhi to the huge crowd, wherein Mujib publicly expressed his gratitude to Indira Gandhi and the best friends of his Bangladeshi people

The People of India

It was afterward from Delhi that Sheikh Mujib flew back to Dhaka via the same RAF jet where he was duly received by a massive and emotional sea of people and my Dad returning back cheerful to Chakeri Airport of Kanpur...”

My Mom, oblivious of all that had transpired in my school in some airport business, had ensured that I acquire an army uniform and a navy uniform. Maybe she imagined her son to subsist in a life full of valor and spirit. Armed with these dashing uniforms Dad took the pains to drive us all the way to Lucknow.

Steeped into *Nawabi* culture, I was then meticulously posed as a photo shoot boy in my new set of uniforms, contained by the lush and sprawling gardens of the grand Bara Imambara, expensively built by Asaf-ud-Daula, Nawab of Awadh, and couple of centuries ago...!

Mom had made it a point to carry a large towel which she wrapped around my bare body in the course of switching over my uniforms in open air, army to navy. I even donned the respective caps, one in khaki, and the other in white.

Well, it was another bright day at school when I put on an act to reveal those uniformed pictures, painstakingly clicked by Dad by the use of his novo acquisition, the Polaroid Automatic 350. Dad had pulled the film out of the camera, and then peeled apart the positive from the negative at the end of the developing process.

By design and amid gratification I tried to tilt those pictures-in-uniform towards Bobby, who by then already was incensed by Jagan's and Farhan's and Tejwinder's habitual smugness and perchance genuinely sickened by Banjo's self-absorption as well.

Negative contours, diffused evenly across her dazzling face, Bobby exploded

"You little thumbnail of boys, still carrying those deciduous teeth, milk teeth, conceit and vanity so filled to the brim, I can well envision what kind of chaps you gonna grow up to, drunk to the gills, smoking cigar around the clock, emitting odor of pyridines, and boasting off all over the place...!"

Our blameworthy eyes darted here and there dodging her fusillades, "You nincompoops mix up your poppycock in the midst of genuine war stories, thinking I won't have a handle on..."

...You are so oblivious of the existence of the Army, Navy and Air force; you call them Land, Sea and Air...

...I bet my puppies, even my Brussels griffon, *Griffon bruxellois* in French, are more mature than you dimwits. Why, unlike you nuts, he barks only when necessary...?"

Gone her burst of fire, we all kept our big mouths shut for the rest of the day, each and every one mealy-mouthed, especially I, stories of my Dad in the airport not going down well with my Bobby.

After all, Bobby was the gorgeousness of our class, handling an hourglass figure emphasizing a defined waist. Her eyes deep like the ocean looked clear and beautiful upon her fair complexioned face, and crowned by unsullied black hair. She was not only the beauty but also the star of our class.

So, when during a Music and Dance Competition she managed to mount barefoot on stage in a shimmering two-piece green chiffon dancewear, replete with green feathers capped as her headgear, and breaking into a

sizzling number, the entire crowd of youngsters cheered and clapped. She was the showstopper, her performance receiving protracted applause.

In English it was, “Shake a tail feather...” while in Dutch it was

“Schud een staartveer...”

Motionless, inside the dark hall seated next to me, at what time a smart aleck of a different class, hooted and distastefully commented for the *prima donna* meshed among superfluities, “*Bobby kya maal lagti hai, yaar...*” I punched him, that aleck thing, right upon his ears.

In this little commotion that ensued, somebody even switched on the light. I was so livid that I punched him again. However, before he could recover from the shock, my friends intervened and pulled me away.

“I’ll kill him...” I growled. “How dare he...?” Friends calmed me down and at the same time switched off the light fearing the bearded Mr. Lalu would come just about.

Multi-groove ears of that smart aleck turned red. And by the time it cooked red, deepening its hue from light pink, to dark pink, to red, and finally to beetroot red, the entire school walls had turned fried red in the midst of the story that Banjo had duffed up smart aleck, b’coz....becoz....becozzzz smart aleck eve-teased Bobby.

Gosh...! I didn’t believe I delivered such a sensational punch

Nonetheless, classmates, especially that Tejwinder Singh were a perennial nuisance. And poor me, now my cheeks had started flushing, deepening its hue from light pink, to dark pink, to red, and finally to beetroot red...!

I wanted to defuse such juvenile scandal at once; therefore I decided to discontinue assisting Bobby overtly in her studies. Nonetheless, Tejwinder Singh was too clever for me

“You know guys, these days Banjo has conjured an innovative technique of exchanging notes with Bobby, he purposefully drops his notebook to the ground and waits for Boabby to pick it...”

“Ho...ho...ho...Ha...ha...ha...”The boys burst into mirth adding to the sparring.

My *je ne sais quoi* and my solitary retaliation to Tejwinder Singh was my mimicry of his rudimentary Punjabi accent. For example his Bobby sounded like Boabby: instead of awe, it sounded more like the letter o. Besides the alphabet b seemed as if striking twice...!

Alas, my jibe created teensy weensy ripples, indubitably zilch compared to the huge waves of his.

On a different occasion, whilst Bobby forgot to carry her Tiffin to school, it was I who gave my share of chow to her. Again in cut and thrust, that Tejwinder Singh stated publicly to the class

“Pay attention friends, today Banjo fed all his Tiffin to Boabby...!”

Class had taken to my mockery as their most wanted amusement, and I just couldn't help myself, something broke within me whenever I felt Bobby appeared in distress of any sort. Was it some sort of love, *liefde* in Dutch...?

Although not in its adult connotation, perhaps I believed in the slogan of the new hippie generation...Make Love, Not War...and in Dutch

Vrijen, geen oorlog

Likewise, on another occurrence, while noticing Bobby entering school in un-polished shoes, I got panic-stricken with the word on the street that Mr. Lalu would now mete out sentence to her, brandishing his infamous Hammer.

For that reason, just ahead of the assembly, I caught her hand, pulled her aside to the empty gallery housing our bulletin board, bent down, and wiped her shoes on the double by means of my sparkling white kerchief. I was obsequious; going into the minutiae, sprinkling water over it from my water bottle to arrive at that extra gloss, wax like finish...

Once again the inevitable transpired: Jagan, the Telegu class fellow caught I red handed as he came to pick up sundry information from the school bulletin. I ran after him to prevent him from blurting out, but in the present day he ran faster than me, till he reached the leader of the pack of hounds, speedily spilling the beans.

The predictable came to pass; I contracted two nicknames from Tejwinder Singh, a slave, *Ghulam*, Boabby's *Ghulam*, and Cobbler, *Muchi*, one who does Boabby's shoes...!

“Shame, shame, *Ghulam*, you stooped so low in your fawning, you’ve begun to polish girls’ shoes like a *Muchi*....Ha...ha...ha...!” He spiced it up, which let loose such uproar that it even rocked the boundary stockade of our school.

Overriding names such as Vivek, Gaplu, Bond, Kt. Kirti, Dhruva, 8-1/2, I Banjo, finally got *Ghulam* and *Muchi* stuck on my back, much like the recent Sri Lanka over Ceylon.

Well, Sri Lanka had witnessed several changes, their identity ever-changing.

See, after the arrival of the Portuguese in the beginning of 16th century, they sought to control the island’s maritime regions and its lucrative external trade. How they built a fort at the port city of Colombo and gradually extended their control over the coastal areas, and how they called the country, *Ceilao Portugues*...?

In spite of such initiatives, the Portuguese possessions were subsequently taken over by a new European Power, the Dutch, and implemented through the Dutch East India Company, *Vereenigde Oost-indische Compagnie*, commonly called VOC. The king of the island signed a treaty to get rid of the Portuguese who ruled most of the coastal areas. The new European Power, the Dutch, after that continued to rule from mid-17th century to end-18th century.

Surprisingly, the Dutch possessions were in turn taken by one more European Power, the British, who later extended their control over the whole island, colonizing it from early 19th century to mid-20th century. As a final point, in 1948, Ceylon became independent, having D.S.Senanayake at its 1st Prime Minister.

Current year 1972, the Prime Minister, Sirimao Bandaranaike declared the country a republic, and its name was changed from Ceylon to Sri Lanka

Nonetheless, The Beatles song, written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney while on a bus trip from the historic York to the cultural Shrewsbury – both wool regions of England - inadvertently escaped my lovelorn lips, lips of a *ghulam*, a *muchi*, in wax lyrical of Bobby...

Da da da da da...dum dum da

Da da da da da...dum dum da

If there's anything that you want,
if there's anything I can do...

Just call on me and I'll send it along...!

...With love
from Me to You

(Or in Dutch)

*...Met liefde
van mij naar jou*

“Auh Dheee-Kayyy...Happy now that Indirrra and Zulfikarr are sitting together adjacent to my cottage house...!”

“I’m floored Mr. James, I think they must’ve overheard your logic about sitting together in search of truce and an amiable resolution, along with cool heads, in the middle of a cool place like that of Shimla...!”

Tete-a-tete over Darjeeling Tea continued for over an hour, beginning with Kolay thin arrowroot biscuits, leading to the more filling Irish fruit cake, flavored by means of whisky, stout, and rum, and duly ordered from the patisserie at Pearl Lake.

Grandpa as usual was tipsy, and not too pleased of the outcome, “What was the matter with Indira ji, why these entire noble gestures; straight off she should’ve sounded him, look here man: You’ve lost the war, and here are my terms. To top it, I’ve heard, were the niceties extended to the host, the belligerent host...!”

It had begun to rain and Mr. James Allen got up, “I spotted Benazir too at the summit, where she was introduced to Indirrra as Zulfikarr’s daughter, product of a new generation, and the Press going gaga over her charisma. And who knows, one day she becomes the crowd-puller of Pakistan, and subsequently it’s Prime Minister...?”

Chapter 03

Vivacious

Even though musical and celluloid knowledge and gossip gushed within my family circle from a great height, at least like the 3,000 uninterrupted feet of the Angel Falls, *angel cae* in Spanish, in the beautiful country of Venezuela, it still failed to convince me why was I named Banjo...?

For me, music had been a mere source of entertainment, of appreciating the wonderful tunes, tuned since yesteryears. Since the age of 5-6, I'd been a great fan of Sachin Dev Burman and his equally gifted son Rahul Dev Burman, and thus was my entire family.

Grandpa with big mustaches' favorite lines concerning the senior Burman: "Sachin da created a furor having married a non-royal, because his grandfather was after all, His Highness the Maharaja of Tripura, who had ruled at the time of India's 1st War of Independence...."

...Many may consider that Sachin da or Kumar Burman was kept off the Royal family like an odd meat with his inheritance forfeited, but I strongly believe that he himself was frustrated with the unjust and unfair treatment meted out to his father and brothers, by the Royal family..."

Whether someone is shown the door or finds the door being shut upon him, its one and same; he is *extra domum*, and has to remain outside in the cold, in the Blizzard ...!

Senior Burman boasted a voice, thin and powerful, often used as bardic commentary to haunting results, which my Dad often tried to imitate. Entire family hummed, along with Dad in his falsified nasal voice, to senior Burman's title number of...Aradhana

Safal hogi teri Aradhana

kahey ko royeyyyy....

Yet, it was Sachin Dev Burman's music composed for Dev Anand that appealed me the most in those childhood days, especially after watching a particular black-and-white movie; the entire family having traveled carload to Heer Palace, The Mall.

I recalled a scene, in which no sooner the music broke, Dev Anand, the celebrated star, broke into 4-5 parts from different angles and started developing from a stretch of rolling hills, as though a spring roll, flapping his arms. I sat tense watching bated breath for any erring stone any boulder that if accidentally caught by him, would trip, rather ski the poor guy downhill, sans the skis...

Later I wondered what on earth Mrs. Anand, his Mom, savored, apart from sweet tangy pulp tamarinds, *imlis* in Hindi, while pregnant with this prodigal son of hers, because in those days spring rolls never existed on Indian menu, *carte du jour*, in French lingo...?

My family equally appreciated Sachin Dev Burman's son Rahul Dev Burman, Pancham, who too they believed was a genius of sorts. And today it was my Mom's turn, who delivered a googly to rest of the family, sitting at bedrock dining table for supper

"I'll brief you how the name *Pancham* came into being: as a child whenever he cried, it sounded in the fifth note *Pa* of the Indian musical system, supposed to be the sweet call of the *koel*..."

Our dining hall, *sala da cena* in Italian, was the heart of the house, where we gathered every evening for meals. We all had allotted places at the 12-seater dining table. Passionate debates, arguments with friends and family took place here, making it the most vibrant and energetic room in the house.

Flooring was overlaid with original Italian fresco tiles typical of the period. Floors of every room too had tiles with different motifs, giving the house a carpeted feel.

Sahani uncle intercepted, "No *Bhabi*, he was called *Pancham* because he would cry in 5 different notes..."

Dad jocularly pulled his leg, "When did you hear him crying, Sahani, were you his doting pediatrician, his Badi daktarni...?"

And the whole household, including the servants working around burst into laughter, much to Sahani uncle's embarrassment. Finding himself cornered, he articulated

Vadi Sai, Jhuleylal...! Bera-Hee-Paar...!

Pundit Sudhanshu, who had come to meet up grandpa with big mustaches, to dig out full moon date, a *Poornima*, in order to organize a *Satya Narayan Katha* and *Hawan*, incidentally found himself in midst of a serious discussion at Anupriya Villa, it being one of the few selected manors of Kanpur.

For him each and every well-to-do family of Kanpur resembled a marketplace, a *bazaar*, where he ought to have a foot in the door. In consequence, to be in good books of his active clients, or even prospective ones, he adroitly used to engage in small talks.

“Whatever you say Sahani ji, it was my Master, Guru Khambhoj of Badrinath, who had advised Pancham not to count on the number of his recordings, rather to go on and on without ever looking behind...

...My Master wasn't wrong. Make out this lad, this *chhora*, goes on delivering hits after hits records...”

“Absolutely correct Pundit ji your Master was right...” Grandpa with big mustaches concluded on behalf of rest of the family, shifting me onto the lap of the fat aunt of Deoghar. I think grandpa was feeling a bit uneasy in the stomach. Entire household now fell silent; nothing new to add except an additional helping of *arhar dal* and *sabzi* to the boiled rice, *bhaat*.

“Nevertheless, his personal life's big hit was Rita Patel...” Karuna di, the head cook quietly broke in while serving us *payesh*, *kheer* in Hindi, the dessert of rice and milk pudding, and flavored by way of cardamom, dry fruits such as *kaju* and *kishmish*, and sweetened for the front of the tongue by *nolen gur*, the hard brown sugar like date palm jaggery, specifically imported from Bengal through dad's colleague, Mr. P.K.Jain.

Karuna di, an expert in exploring matters of intricate nature, was equally proficient at identifying, grinding and mixing spices. Her statement, approximating the shift of gear from neutral to first of our UPD 2322, resumed the family gossip, this instance more feverishly.

Karuna di was reminiscent of a universal *Didi*, elder sister, much within our family as one of its key constituents, and now proud that she was able to deliver new ammunition to the gossip over someone from the tinsel town, of course, whom none of us were concerned in any manner.

At the same time as minding the quantity of *payesh* to be served to Dad, he being diabetic Mom queried starry-eyed, to which Karuna di confirmed

“Yes *Bowdi*, this story is doing the rounds all over Kanpur. You know, Pancham had bumped into Rita in the romantic hills of Darjeeling, where you know, orchids sway in zephyr, in gentle breeze. And Rita, an ardent fan of his, had laid a bet with her friends that she would be able to get a movie date with him...!”

“...And she must’ve been felicitated with a date from Pancham because eventually they got married...Is that the fairy-tale...? Ha...ha...” Dad guffawed, acknowledging Karuna di by means of a nod, for initiating a fresh round of considerations regarding the Burmans, at the dinner table, *tavolo da pranzo* in Italian, the gossip corner of Anupriya Villa.

“Very funny...! But you know, just within few years they had to seek divorce...How sad, isn’t it...?” Mom intervened in a fresh sprout of comprehension, and apprehension.

“Possibly the Junior Burman had stopped setting movie dates with her...Hahaha...He must’ve been seeing someone else...” Dad whispered in his usual witticism to Sahani uncle, sitting next to him.

Mom overheard: “Listen, I can clearly pick out. I know how you menfolk indulge in such rotten deeds, but it’s not fitting that you make fun of that poor fellow who’s lately been leading a wretched and lonely life...?”

Mom’s irritation was mounting, all together in a resurrected urge to drive home her point. “Have you ever heard of that heartfelt song, *Musafir hoon yaaron...Naa ghar hai naa thikaana*...from the film...Parichay...pictured by Jeetendra, remembers, in such subdued manner...?”

“O yes Anupriya, how can I not remember that song...?...Why, it was just last year that we’d seen that movie on Banjo’s birthday, uff, how he wailed, half the time I was out of the cinema hall holding him near the canteen, this lad made me miss out on all those popular comic scenes...”

Dad avowed, pointing out at me, now resting upon the cushiony lap of my fat aunt of Deoghar, eying the ceramic salt pot, through the corner of my quick eyes.

All those in attendance inside the large dining hall, *sala da cena* in Italian, now turned their heads towards me, making me a star underneath the huge

chandelier, for full 120 seconds, before Dad overtook the crown of stardom, as if in turns.

“Okay, now all of you, please...please...” Dad clapped, garnering attention of the audience. In the present day, he was at his jocund Sunday best.

Rictus imaged upon his face, trying to glance sideways at Mom, he started off with the song *Musafir hoon yaaron*, in his one-of-a-kind style

I’m a lone traveler without any home n hearth

I’ve gotta miles to walk... walk...n...walk....!

Stuffed with lotta fish n bhaat

prepared by mah better half...half...n...half...!

Once again entire Anupriya Villa, including the servants was in splits over Dad’s impeccable comic timing and laugh-out-loud jokes, except for Mom: “Just stop it, will you...? You and your silly mimicries, parodies, at times your sense of humor drives me crazy...!”

In this jollification, Sahani uncle grinned ear to ear. Nonetheless his fee cheque pends, his preferred choice was to remain non-committal, avoiding any eye contact with either Mom or Dad, both seeking him as the go-between.

Dad was chuckling by now, overlooking the wee bit yet mouth-watering *nolen gurer payesh*, and at Mom, a great fan of Rahul Dev Burman, now visibly upset. She got up from her Pimpinella dining chair in a huff, parting leftovers in the plate.

“Mr. Kumarr, the great business tycoon of Kanpur, it might be of great comic relief to you, but you know Pancham lived his moments of anguish, alone in his hotel room after the separation, and that’s when he composed this soulful number...*Musafir hun yaaron*...

...Why, it was his anguished heart that bled out for his wife...?”

Mom was worked up and continued: “I say it was Pancham’s way of crooning The King of Rock ‘n’ Roll, Elvis Presley’s...Heartbreak Hotel. Here, I must add

All men are not same...!”

Whilst delivering the very last of her peerless phrases ‘All men are not same...’ Mom, one-by-one, tore into the eyes of every masculine creature present in the dining hall, *sala da cena* in Italian, including a single-digit aged Banjo, who by now had coolly emptied half the pot of salt into the *payesh*, sweetened for the front of the tongue with *nolen gur*, of a distracted fat aunt of Deoghar.

“Now...now...Why are you quitting the table dear...? Sit...sit...! Don’t you get so upset...? C’mon everybody, let’s be quiet, look somebody’s cross...” Dad sustained his jocose; entire Anupriya Villa once again into splits of hilarity, this time amid subdued tones, knowing it was Mom who managed the Show.

Yet, her Showtime intermittently distorted into bathos, she experiencing bouts of sickness and often getting admitted into the hospital. Regrettably, British built, warm brownish-red Georgina McRobert Hospital in the posh Civil Lines had in fact attained the status as her second dwelling.

A frequent visitor, what's more, she’d become somewhat popular amongst the entire hospital staff, which included helpers and washerwomen, so much so that she instantly could make them out by their first names.

They proved exceedingly friendly, and always at Mom’s beck and call

I never could distinguish between Nandu and Jamuna, the two young and charming washerwomen. Mom in turn was ever ready extending her enigmatic smiles, dollops of cash. She went to the extent of funding somebody’s *Gauna*; *Gauna* the native ceremony associated with the consummation of marriage...!

I never had any idea what exactly went wrong with her, but often I saw Badi daktarni, Doctor Tripathi uncle and Sahani uncle in grave confabulations with Dad in his private study, *studio privato* in Italian, at the western end of our house

“God forbid if Anupriya’s biopsy turns out to be cancerous...!” Badi daktarni accredited by way of apprehension.

“Some papyrus discovered in the deserts of Egypt had described as many as 8 cases of tumors or ulcers of breast that were then treated by cauterization...” Doctor Tripathi uncle endorsed.

It was Dad, who utterly in a state of quail, concluded in a quivering voice, staring at the wall-to-wall bookcase on its eastern side, “I’ve heard the writing sums up

There is no Treatment

...Nevertheless, it is noteworthy how Anupriya is taking it. Her already dominant values of selflessness, cheerfulness, desire for unity within the family and elsewhere, have ever increased. Conversely, I’ve noticed one thing; her optimism towards life has drastically diminished...

Badi daktarni polished off Dad’s words: “Anupriya uses her emotional trauma of being diagnosed, into making herself stronger, happier and more sensitive, more grateful to the society at large...Anupriya remains overwhelmed when she says that there’s so much left to do...!”

Dad almost in whispers: “She has yet more feminized her appearance in order to minimize the disruption that her health issues cause anyone else, whether it is I or Banjo...!”

Soon after, sensing paucity of time behind his covetous mind, one day Sahani uncle persevered for a private audience with Mom, even as she was drawing a floor design, an *alpona*, inside our good old-fashioned shrine, *Puja ghar*, painted in pristine white.

This vital section, *Puja ghar*, was located as per traditional Indian architecture parameters, *Vaastu Kala* as we bracket them, by none other than my grandpa Gajanan Damodar, an eminent architect of his time. It was located on the supposedly divine and auspicious *Ishaan* corner, the northeast of our villa.

“Bhabi ji, I want to have a word with you, it’s regarding Banjo and Chitra...!”

Being a dyed-in-the-wool magpie, Sahani uncle reserved great allure for wealth, and what better proposal could he likely have, than marrying off dear Chitra to Banjo, the sole heir to Anupriya Villa, and much more...? Why, such a matrimonial alliance could be a gateway to instant luxuries and glories for adorable daughter of his...?

Mom in natural representation of her artistic sensibility had, beside a bunch of lotus, the *kamal*, become engrossed in sketching a circular *alpona* as a holy pedestal for worshipping Goddess Lakshmi, the deity of prosperity.

Sahani uncle excitedly differentiated that she made use of colored chalks to draw the elaborate border.

From one of the lower drawers of a cabinet lying at the wall on the south, and which cried for a fresh coat of paint, she took out some used rice powder and some diluted rice parts to give clearer shape to various motifs she had designed, such as the Sun, feet of Goddess Lakshmi, her vehicle owl, a lotus, a fish, a rice stem, betel, a plough, and an open *sindoor-dabbi*.

“Bhabi ji, what are these for....?” Sahani uncle quizzed, deriving immense curiosity, standing barefoot at the threshold of the engraved doorway in teak, the door facing north.

“Well, these motifs are supposed to be holy and auspicious signs, which are to be drawn via unbroken lines sparing no gaps in between. It is said that a broken line gives an opportunity to the evil spirits gain entry inside the home...

...Er Sahani ji, you were going to say something....?” Mom replied absentmindedly whilst anointing diverse powdered colors, which were primed out of dried leaves, besides tropical plants such as indigo; and turmeric, the bright yellow beauty.

“O Bhabi ji, I find you such a great artist, how I wish my little baby Chitra grow up into one...?”

“She sure wills Sahani ji; you may introduce to her the earliest Indian treatise on traditional painting, wherein the 6 canons or *Shadanga* have been interpreted in the light of aesthetics. I know it would be not easy for you to commit to memory; still I would categorically elaborate these as

...*Rupbheda* or variety of form, *Pramanam* or proportion of the object or form, *Sadrisiyam* or similitude via portrayal of likeliness of the subject, *Bhava* the action of feelings on forms, *Lavanya-yoganam* by infusion of grace and emotions, and lastly *Varnikabhanga* which teaches artistic manner of using brush and colors to remind one of the effects of replica...

...And of course my blessings are at all times with her...!”

Mom was now busy using Charcoal, the sophisticated alternative to black, to paint the glinting Black eyes of the Owl, Vermilion, or *Vermiglia*, in Italian tongue, to paint the energetic Red in the inside of the *Sindoor-dabbi*, Mom herself ensconced in the midst of the cheerful, happy and enthusiastic

Yellow light, color of sunlight, glowing out of a chic papier-mâché lamp shade, positioned at the eastern corner of our *Puja ghar*.

“Thanks a lot, Bhabhi ji; she’s all yours and I mean it...!” Sahani uncle’s voice choked.

Mom turned around to face Sahani ji, and smiled while planting finishing touches to further embellish the designs via Umber, the burnt earth, dissimilar flower petals, and not to forget to mention the magic of Greens; Greens as found in the chlorophyll within nature, and speaking of tranquility

“I’ve met Chitra; she is very sweet just like a doll, doe-eyed and fair...!”

Discovering an opening in the dialogs, Sahani uncle swooped to the point amid folded palms, “That’s true Bhabhi ji, if you don’t mind my impudence, and having Goddess Lakshmi as the witness, may I offer her hand to your son, Banjo...?”

Mom, contented with the *alpona*, especially the motif of Lotus feet of *Maa Lakshmi*, was a bit taken aback with what Sahani uncle had just now proposed. Nevertheless, she answered circumspectly, gracefully

“Sahani ji, no doubt I’m extremely fond of your beautiful daughter and would love to see her in this house, but you see realism is poles apart...For the times they are a-changin’...Only God knows what’ll come to pass upon these youngsters when they in reality grow up. And whether they at all keep our word after a passage of 14-15 long years remains a million-dollar question...?”

After a brief pause Sahani uncle pleaded: “But Bhabhi ji, your word is Law. Even Bharat da doesn’t negate you; he says that you are an epitome of *Maa Lakshmi*...

...Since you entered into his life notice how he has flourished, no major business decision he takes without your guidance. You know, he says you possess intuitive abilities as well. And I’m sure Banjo will honor your decision even after a passage of 14-15 years...!”

Mom’s tears started trickling down her cheeks as she helplessly and blankly stared at the deity of the shrine. After a rueful pause, briefly looking skywards towards the pyramid roof, “Only *Maa Lakshmi* knows what’s in

store for this family 14-15 years hence, hitherto, my own future, my very existence, is in dubiety and near impossibility...”

Still, noticing Sahani uncle’s eyes turning moist, she smiled and cheered him up, adding, “Just like the Excise Duty over your Wills Filter Navy Cut cigarettes, Sahani ji...”

Realizing the ineffectuality of the marriage proposal at this solemn hour, Sahani uncle matched by way of a feeble smile and stopped up the topic

“Bhabi ji, nothing will go off to you...”

Eyes perplexed, transfixed eastwards towards the deity of prosperity Maa Lakshmi, subsequently at its symbol the lotus flower, and from then on heading towards the auspicious *alpona*, and last of all at its empathetic initiator, my Mom, Sahani uncle turned around and vanished, forgetting even to put on his shoes.

Once outside the gates of Anupriya Villa, he faced towards the direction of the holy shrine, Sehwan in Sindh, and fervently prayed

Let my Bhabi survive, grant her little more life, please

He then broke down emotively, “How could I be so self-seeking, deliberating only for my off-spring...? Out of my parsimoniousness, how much had I premeditated it...?...Why always wealth, and none of creature considerations, my sole disquiet...?”

Why didn’t I judge Bhabi ji’s precarious health stipulation when I very well discerned that superfluous anger, sadness, or negativity at this stage must be silenced and not induced...? And why did I exacerbate so much strain, stretching her psyche to a vulnerable apex that it brought about tears into her eyes...?”

Sahani uncle’s mindset towards our family, his veiled agenda, suddenly seemed to have undergone a dramatic move back and forth, his consciousness gyrating 180-degree amid an expanse of the frame, and into some unseen space.

He got metamorphosed

He kept on lamenting and at the same time worrying about his Anupriya Bhabhi, the noblest lady he'd ever come across in his life, life mate of his friend, philosopher and guide, Bharat da.

Whilst sobbing childlike, he further convinced himself that it was Chitra, and Chitra alone, his adorable daughter, who must enter his Bhabhi's shoes; at this time, not because of desire for instant luxuries and glories, but for the cause this humble household cried for.

Sans his shoes, at the handsome pillar gate, solemnly touching the slate rock nameplate, its carved letterings raised and in ivory color, titled Anupriya Villa, Sahani uncle vowed to live and die for such hallowed name.

Once again he looked up towards the shrine of Sehwan, prayed, and muttered more confidently this moment in time

“Vadi Sai, Jhuleylal...! Bera-hi-Paar...!”

Chapter 04

Cine Crazy

Whenever Mom was at home in those periods of wellness, away from the warm brownish-red Georgina McRobert, she was constantly by my side, as if every moment was counted: “Banjo, my little Banjo, where are you, I can’t find you, are you hiding beneath the bed...?”

Space under the enormous bed was my world and enough for me to even lay down my own township, Banjo Township, out of my building blocks toys, and then painstakingly arrange my exclusive toy cars in a sequence. Endless number of toys of all shapes and sizes was generally bought from Kohli Retail Merchants of Navin Market.

It was another thing that I also acquired a couple of dolls, curvy body type Barbies: one of Mom’s choices, in an Indian bridal wear and another of my own choice in a red ruffle short dress sporting short hair.

Mom and I often fought over as to which one must occupy the wall space opposite our large Four Poster bed, as there was only a single set of hooks, which could accommodate no more than one of them.

Mom prodded me: “I think Banjo; you should go in for the one who’s decked up in a red bridal wear. See how gorgeous she appears in her 16 adornments, her *solah sringar*, which not only enhances her beauty, but also establishes her in a Goddess-like aura...?”

“No, I’m not fond of this lady, one who’s similar to the village belle of my *Chandamana* comic, always reeking of fish, and having 3 kids, 2 of the older ones doing their homework till the end of time, and the youngest one coaxed to drink his glass of milk till time without end...!”

I vehemently opposed, to which Mom replied, giggling all the time: “But isn’t that native among people residing in coastal India, especially around the eastern terrains, fish-n-rice being their staple diet, and sari, their ethnic costume...?”

“Mom, you know how much fish stinks while prepared, and I don’t like babies, stupid wailing babies...” I replied crossly, to which Mom insisted, “Banjo, but I know, at the same time you like to eat fish, isn’t it...?”

I had no answer to this so diverted her attention to the doll of my choice: “Mom, but what’s wrong with the other one, one with the red ruffle short dress sporting short hair...?”

Mom resumed her giggling: “Nothing wrong I believe, but I’m not sure whether rest of the people in Kumarr family would accept her *avant-garde* style, and remember she might also have babies counting to 3...!”

That abruptly ended the debate

I don’t like babies, that’s for sure

Yet, the entire Navin Market, the fashion district of Kanpur, was familiar to us. We, the Kumarr’s, were one of their favorites. It was not only that my parents patronized them, but also because of the bonhomie they shared.

Dad, pointing towards a new profile at the show window, modeling for a soap advertisement: “Kohli *Sahib*, are you sure any belle would emerge that pretty if she patronizes this new brand...?”

Kohli *Sahib* squirmed, and started staring hither and thither, much to Dad’s amusement.

On another instance, Dad browsed through the bill keeping a straight face, and in the end exclaiming, “Kohli *Sahib*, I think you forgot to add one item...” Poor Kohli *Sahib* removed all the stuff from the 4 cartons, recounted, re-added and declared wiping away perspiration from his face: “I think it is alright Mr. Kumarr...”

To my Mom’s uncontrollable giggles, Dad seconded, “Well, I too think you’re correct, Kohli *Sahib*...!”

Uma Saris & Clothing’s, a niche sari shop run by a man carrying podgy features, shining bald head, spared no efforts to display and give narration about every promising variety obtainable under his humble roof

“Look here *Bowdi*; I’ve arranged for you few of most striking *Baluchari* saris from Bengal, of *jala* tradition since 18th century, which can possibly come across in that 5 yards long, three and a half feet wide fabric...

...Please take a relook at these diminutive marks, *butis*, in its expanse. Furthermore, watch closely these floral designs running across the edges. And now observe the foremost decoration motifs, narrative motifs like the one that of the Bishnupur village couple blowing conch shell over the *pallu*..."

And in the process, after every dozen odd sari, which he unfurled by an air of flamboyance and quirky sales pitch, Mom picked one up, carried it across her left arm and visualized it against a full-length mirror gleaming against bright lights.

"Kindly allow me, *Bowdi*, I'll show you how it would finally appear..." He just about wrapped the sari around his podgy contour and tail ended it in a veil, a *ghoonghat*, over his glossy bald head. Mom as a rule fell off her seat laughing at the comic sight.

"But it suits more on you, *Dada*..." She giggled, causing full throttle laughter among each and every staff, now weary of folding and stacking the leftovers back into the sari boxes.

Happily, and most of the time, after indulging us a grand dinner at Kwaliti's, we returned home, the rear seat of UPD 2322 overflowing with stuff. Needless to say, our evening drives, Dad in the wheel, found Mom and me shifting to the front seat.

And if perchance Mom got aware of the credence of Dad's Pierotucci Italian blue leather wallet, handcrafted by means of luxurious details such as hand-painted terracotta edges and matching lining, being heavier than standard, then certainly he was bound to take her to one of those exotic jewelry shops of Birhana Road.

...And for Dad, Mom was his avowed lucky-charm; the more he pampered and showered her with gifts, the more he was rewarded by way of windfall profits in business.

Mom: "I don't have anything novel to put on for the wedding occasion of Mr. Ganguli's son..."

Dad could comprehend her wishes. Wiping his mustache by way of sweep of his right-hand forefinger, "So you want me to take you to Kashi Jewelers...Er...otherwise I suppose Mr. Ganguli's son may not get hitched with..."

Mom put me aside from her lap for a while towards the window seat and cozened up to Dad.

After that, in her trademark giggle, “Yes, I too believe so, and dear what about a little probing for the ultimate stone, the definite way to a woman’s heart, you know, the name often dropped by your Mr. James Allen from one his favorite 007 James Bond films.

Dad too was aware of Sean Connery in his *tux au courant* black tuxedo, clip-on- bowtie

Diamonds are Forever

Possibly the debonair Sean Connery wouldn’t be the next Bond, but there certainly would be one James Bond in England, and so will diamonds be present, Mr. Bharat Kumarr...”

Anupriya Villa was quite snowed under by the story of Diamonds are Forever that Mr. James Allen used to narrate in the midst of great eloquence

...How Bond impersonates as a diamond smuggler in order to infiltrate a smuggling ring, and soon uncovers a plot by his old nemesis, the archenemy of 007, the Nehru jacket wearing megalomaniac, head of the international criminal organization, Specter, to use the diamonds for building a giant laser...?

...And how Bond has to battle his nemesis for one last time, in order to stop the smuggling and stall the villain’s plan of destroying Washington D.C. and extorting the world with nuclear supremacy...?

What's more, Mr. James Allen used to eulogize the James Bond theme song, which he declared, was played by an electric guitar in the somewhat unusual blued gun barrel progression, and accompanied by prismatic ripples of light, amid a full orchestrated version - all through a hovercraft sequence in Amsterdam....

Diamonds...Laser...Nuclear...Hovercraft...Washington

D.C....Amsterdam...! Wow all this talking sounded so exciting to me...!

Mom also tagged me along wherever she went, rested, cooked, or played. Thus, while she played games with some ladies, inclined upon our large

Four Poster bed, I sat across her lap and watched her keenly, picking up nuances of the royalty's game, chess, or any homely card game.

Twenty-Nine: game of 29 played by 4 persons, 2 on each side fascinated me. Mom always preferred the side by the backrest of the Four Poster bed, using couple of pillows for rest. Aunties too were offered pillows but as a rule they refused.

“Naa...naa...Bhabi it's alright we're fine...”

It was their gesture of paying obeisance to Mom, the great Mrs. Anupriya Kumarr, a vivacious lady whom the world adored. Mom was one of the icons of the town, amongst the sophisticated families, more so, within our own Bengali society.

Out of love and respect, I used to regard them all as my maternal aunts, *masis*

Tea and snacks comprising of crispy French fries, cheese *pakor*as, fried *papads* made of *urad* flour, and *jhaalmuris* made of puffed rice, constantly did the rounds, Draupadi doing the bidding and Karuna di managing the back office, that is, our kitchen.

“Thank you Draupadi, you're wonderful. And where's Karuna di, tell her, today's cheese *pakodas* were perfect, piping hot...!” Mom acknowledged with a beam.

Whether it was the leading names of the society or the most insignificant ones, Mom was gracious and ever courteous to one and all. To her, it was for the most part the inner being which mattered. Consequently, conceit distanced her by an Astronomical Unit of Light Year.

“Tell me Bhabi, how come your son remains so fond of the Queen of Hearts...?” Pushpa masi broke the silence. Even though pregnant, she was particularly in a savvy mood, because her tetchy husband, Vishwa mausa, an archaeologist, was far away on an assignment to Dwarka, the coast of Gujarat, by the Arabian Sea; Arabian Sea historically and geographically referred to as *Sindhu Sagar*, *Arabbi Samudra*, and the Erythraean Sea in ancient times.

“Shut up, Pushpa...! Concentrate, or else you'll lose the game...” Mom presaged in a sisterly tone. They all broke into giggles, put their cards aside, and swooped down to plant me their signature slurps.

Muaaaaaaaaaah...Muaaaaaaah

Why, wasn't it that since the very day that I'd arrived from Dufferin Hospital to Anupriya Villa, these ladies treated me like their cuddle toy, their teddy bear, their bunny rabbit, their *babua*, and meant only for slurps, and which irritated me to death...?

"Leave me alone, Namrata masi..." I grimaced. "Let me go...!" I yelled as they crumpled and crushed me using all their strength, leaving me gasping for breath.

"Leave him alone Namrata, have you forgot what ruckus he'd generated last time...Don't you mess up with him, or this time he'll pack you off to your mother-in-law at Nashik, by the banks of River Godavari...?" Mom reminded her by way of a twinkle.

How could she forget the last time, when in frenzy, I'd mingled up all their cards and walked out of the room, ruining their games and leaving them dumbfounded...? More to the point, and in similar vein, I'd also carried the Queen of Hearts along with me...

In the evening Mom proudly shared the results of 29 with Dad at the dinner table, the *tavolo da pranzo* in Italian: "You know we won today, we scored 4 Reds against their 3 Reds. And can you guess who bolstered our triumph..."

...It was our little Banjo...?"

"What...Banjo...? Unbelievable..! But, tell me how...?" Dad used to encourage Mom's small talks as a rule.

"As a matter of fact, Banjo after picking up my cards hinted that they were more efficacious even to hold out higher bidding. I listened to him and continued to mark up, to finish to the count of 20. Namrata, my opponent got bunged and signed off, hitherto, serving a rider of doubles to the game..."

...And you know what Banjo suggested me: "C'mon Mom redoubles the rider...?"

"And you redoubled, winning eventually...?" Dad came up with an incredulous expression.

“Yes dear, just imagine from a score of nil, straightaway we leaped to 4 Reds and won the game ..! Really, our little Banjo made my day. I say he’s amazing, a whizz-kid. His mind works like clockwork, no wonder he stood first in Class 4...!” Mom concluded her anecdote, feeling elated.

Wiping his mustache by way of sweep of his right-hand forefinger, Dad shared his own viewpoint, “Brilliant...! So, Banjo can afford to take risks in life and likely venture out into uncharted waters...

...Look, after all he’s my son Anupriya...!”

Mom raised her eyebrows in resentfulness, “And what about mine...I do the most...? More than ever, wasn’t it me who painstakingly carried him 8 months and 26 days, later than those fatiguing fasts at Pachmarhi...?”

Dad offered that same ole twisted grin, thus far sensing the atmosphere getting charged up, switched the topic, “Anupriya, you do cook well. You overwhelm even the best of chefs, this singular version of fish curry, *machher jhaal*, which you’ve prepared tonight, is a dish par-excellence...!”

Mom blushed, at the same time politely reminding him, “There’s a new movie of Rajesh Khanna...Roti...which has just hit the screens...!”

I knew this specific name, Rajesh Khanna, would now ruin Dad’s dinner, a feeling shared by all those husbands and fiancés of the Golden Era of Hindi Cinema. The upcoming business tycoon of Kanpur, Mr. Bharat Kumarr, incoherently said to himself even as chewing his 2nd *Roti* in conjunction with *sabzi*:

“Wonder how this fellow, co-producer of the film as well, envisions a mind-boggling 6.00 crore rupees in box office collections....? Six Crore rupees...What good fortune...What unparalleled stardom...?”

I bet it’s because of Dimple, the residence at Carter Road, which he bought from Rajendra Kumar, the Jubilee Hero, for a whopping 31 lakhs...! I think that fellow has taken over his lady luck charm, fittingly renaming the house as his blessings, his everlasting *Aashirwad*....”

Dad’s diction started appeared fuzzy as if pronouncing mouthful of consonants in *Cestina*, Czech, where multiple consonants could be daunting, seemingly more like a tongue twister.

Mom: “You seem distracted dear, *machher jhaal* you said was satisfactory, but tell me, were there anything wide of the mark with the robust 5-spice blend, the *panch phoron* inside the *sabzi*...? Was there something more or less, of the brown seed of mustard, of the yellow-to-amber fenugreek, of the therapeutic cumin, of the digestive aniseed, or of the pungent black caraway...?”

...Tell me, was it in our day, that the sweet and spicy flavors in the *sabzi* were not blended perfectly, coaxed out in their pungent flavors...?”

Thus far, it wasn't the mishmash of those 5 spices, the *panch phoron*, in the slap-up dinner, which bothered Dad

So to speak, in the colloquial speech, it wasn't the *sarson*, *menthee*, *jeera*, *saunf*, or *kalonji* that were in the wrong; it was Rajesh Khanna, the heartthrob of millions, millions which included his own Anupriya...!

And it wasn't likely that in those days, Rajesh Khanna's very name wouldn't flutter the heart of any young female, connubial or not...! Rajesh Khanna's enigmatic smile, trademark expression, enjoyed not only enormous popularity among viewers across the country, but also in Kanpur, Anupriya Villa not spared.

Mom, her female acquaintances, especially the modish Doctor Tripathi aunt, went on for long hours deliberating his 15 consecutive solo hit films, back-to-back from 1969 to 1971.

Even I'd to lock the names of Mughal Emperors, picked up from Mrs. Mehra, my class teacher on one side of my head, and the names of Rajesh Khanna's films onto the other. Much to the amazement of others, I used to rattle the names in perfect sequence, alphabetically, commencing from Aradhana; Aradhana, where his portrayal of a romantic hero captured the hearts of millions, his pairing with Sharmila Tagore becoming one of the most celebrated icons of Bollywood.

Mom, at her poetic best: “Rajesh Khanna is undoubtedly not only the Highest Paid Actor, but also claimed as the First Superstar of Indian and Hindi Cinema. What with his head slightly tilt, nodding on cue, eyes limpid and blinking, smiling or somber, I think he's too much..!”

Simply bringing in the two words Rajesh and Khanna on an audible range, was enough of an incentive for Karuna di to egress the kitchen hastily,

Draupadi in tow, leaving her *bartan* and *jharoo-katka*; both rushing to join the bandwagon of gossip, lest they miss out any trivia.

Karuna di, the specialist at identifying, grinding and mixing spices, on an emotional high while patting her left breast, “I find Rajesh Khanna’s voice a mix of velvet, mint and silver, I bet I can feel it over here...!”

The ladies expressed amusement, resounding with hoots, at her ingredient-stuffed imagination. Namrata *masi* in a friendly air of turpitude: “Any other item or spice which you’ve forgot to mix, Karuna di...? How ‘bout clove from Zanzibar, from near its ridiculously beautiful turquoise seas...?”

“You know *Bowdi*, *Kaka* as I call him, is wildly mobbed during his public appearances. *Dilli* girls seem to be crazier than *Bombai* girls. These hysterical girls kiss his big white car; envelop it with lipstick marks so terribly that he’s unable to make out...” Draupadi whispered in a husky voice, drenched lips.

“And...?” Stylish Doctor Tripathi aunt joined, winking at other ladies.

“Well, Doctor *Sahiba*, I’ve dispatched him an epistle written in my own blood, along with my photograph. And as I did not hold his address, I just scribbled Rajesh Khanna, *Bombai* over the envelope. I’m sure *Kaka* has measured my feelings by now...!” Draupadi continued to whisper in her husky voice, panting in trepidation.

“O My God...! And what to boot, Draupadi...?” Doctor Tripathi aunt inquired dexterously, building up the romantic ambiance for the rest of the pack.

“For me, above is the Lord, the *Aka*, and below is my *Kaka*...

...He means everything to me. Look, I’ve even applied *sindoor* upon my forehead by means of the blood of my cut finger, keeping *Kaka*’s 1971’s calendar poster of...Amar Prem...in front of me...!” Draupadi whispered even softer, her huge breasts heaving up and down like waves of the turbulent facade of the Atlantic Ocean.

The ladies ruptured into one more round of laughter, this point in time ‘quaking’ the entire dining hall, *sala da cena* in Italian, and collectively suggesting that Draupadi be casted opposite him. Oomph *bai*, now covered in sweat, scurried back to the kitchen, *dhutt*, being the only feedback, other than the sound of her usual trinkets upon her wrists and ankles.

Unlike Doctor Tripathi uncle who almost ostracized films, his wife was not only trendy, but also an enthusiast of Hindi movies and a great fan of *Kaka*, whom she idealized as The Original King of Romance, much to the vexation of her husband, for whom the mysterious *Bulla Dada* was the whole thing...!

Doctor Tripathi aunt continued. "It's unbelievable that *Kaka* has delivered 35 Golden Jubilees till now and many more Silver Jubilees. Other actors can't just dream about it.

...International media, the British Broadcasting Corporation BBC, is highly impressed. They've even come to India to shoot a documentary upon him Bombay Superstar..."

...You know, this particular episode follows him on the sets of his films as he navigates stardom at public spaces and private parties. Why, it even covers a lovely moment where the newlyweds are getting ready for the film's premiere, albeit separately.

Mom intervened in a fresh spell of comprehension, "His English is more British than Indian-accented, and very soft-spoken. And yes, this interview is followed by footage to Dimple Kapadia. Look, now that he has got married; he seemed a bit relaxed..."

Piteously, the very utterance of his fairytale marriage to Dimple Kapadia, the heartthrob Bobby of Raj Kapoor's 1973 cult film...Bobby...upset the entire atmosphere, as if her alternative would have been someone from Kanpur, from Anupriya Villa.

To come, it was Namrata masi who managed to cheer up the pitiful atmosphere via her mimicry, enacting *Kaka's* role with exactness, enthralling the audience.

It always began like: first the ladies coaxed her to act out, after that it was she who peddled all sorts of excuses, "I'm getting late, I've gotta prepare meals, my *saaso-maa* is expecting her medicines...Blah...blah..."

And finally what time she yielded, it resulted in a predictable brouhaha from the zealous obsessive onlookers

Even I couldn't help adoring Namrata masi's caricature, applauding her, when she finally emulated his signature tilt, the corner of her *pallu* engaged

within her fingers, exactly the same manner Rajesh Khanna had gripped his *dhuti* in Amar Prem and addressing the gold-hearted Sharmila Tagore

“...*Yeh lo phir tumhari aankho mein paani...! Meine tumse kitni baar kahaa hai... Pushpa mujhse yeh aansu nahin dekhey jaatey...*”

... I hate tears...”

Imperatively, we then all diverted our attention towards Pushpa masi cheering for a theatrical encore but who refused by means of a blush, putting the entire pinkness of Twilight to shame

~

Twilight

It wasn't the current Global Oil Crisis generated in the Middle East; it was Twilight that invariably scared Anupriya Villa out of its wits, the scare let loose from the room upstairs where grandpa with big mustaches resided.

Still, it wasn't the film Amar Prem, but Aradhana, the 2-hour 39-minutes award-winning film, which had overnight labeled Rajesh Khanna into a superstar, and which drew my attention, since when I'd turned 5.

Although I only knew this much that our family favorite Sachin Dev Burman had rendered the most romantic music to this film, and wherein Kishore Kumar, already an actor now established himself as a leading Bollywood playback singer; it was, however, the song *Merey Sapnon ki Rani* that I was captivated with...

Given that in my tender age when I couldn't even apprehend the meaning of its romantic lyrics, I'd taken a caprice to this song, one of the subtle reasons being the vignette, which Dad had once enumerated to Doctor Tripathi uncle, at his private study, *studio privato* in Italian

“Doctor *Sahib*, you know, we'd visited the breathtaking landscape of Darjeeling during summers when Banjo was probably around 2 years. And I think it was near Kurseong that we boarded the same narrowest 2 feet of the narrow gauge toy train of the world...

...On which the charming and coyly smiling, dimple-chinned Sharmila Tagore, dressed up in a sea green sari, a *bindi* upon her forehead, *kajal* extended over her attractive eyes, *chooris* upon her wrist green in color, hair done up in a *chotii* and adorned by red flowers, gold earrings 3-tiered, had

positioned herself by the exposed window seat of the train, appearing busy reading an Alistair MacLean novel.

Doctor Tripathi uncle, “Which novel you said...?”

Dad racked his brains, “I think Sharmila was trying to read...When Eight Bells Toll...!” Further, “Boarding the same train, of Darjeeling Himalayan Railway heritage, and traveling through the steep gradient and amazing loops, I could then visualize that fellow, Rajesh Khanna, yet more angled in his *gorkha* cap, crooning this number *Merey Sapno ki Rani*...

...He was playfully dangling from an open left-hand drive Willy’s jeep, adroitly steered by his friend, moving alongside Hill Cart Road, the train chugging in, and the winter mist cut by belching smoke of the steam locomotive.

Dad was unstoppable, “You know Doctor *Sahib*, Banjo’s Mom used to remain awestruck at how wonderfully this song had being pictured; one final ram of the accelerator, the jeep carrying her Rajesh Khanna, crisscrossing the railway tracks...

...But it was I who reminded Banjo’s Mom that the credit doesn’t go to Her Rajesh Khanna, but to the innovative director of the film, Shakti Samanta...”

“How...?” Doctor Tripathi uncle inquired in a deadpan expression.

“Why, it was said that Sharmila being busy shooting for some other film, Shakti da had to shoot her train scenes separately at a studio in Bombay, which he subsequently coupled...

Really amazing techniques...! What a genius he was, Shakti da...?

...Nevertheless, some credits must pass on to Pancham who was asked by his illustrious father, Sachin da to play the mouth organ, the French harp, for this tune. And you know Doctor Tripathi, it’s rumored that it was he, the son, who actually gave music to this number...!”

Alas, it was on that particular day, I remember, after following Doctor Tripathi uncle’s mute expressions, Dad realized that he was repetitively chatting to a no artistic person, tongue-tied in matters of tinsel town.

Henceforth, Dad addressed him quirkily as

Doctor Zhivago

Now, Dad hoped that if not Aradhana, Doctor Tripathi uncle would perhaps one day identify himself with this romantic war epic...Doctor Zhivago...affecting the story of a physician like him who falls head over heels in love with an unavailable woman, played by Julie Christie, and struggles to be with her amidst the chaos of Russian Revolution, and subsequent Russian Civil War.

To further emphasize his point, Dad remarked: “You know Doctor *Sahib*, the film made by the legendary British Film Director, Sir David Lean, is a story of a Love caught in the Fire of Revolution...”

Finding nix response from the doctor, Dad further queried, “Tell me, do you have any idea about what the word *Zhivago* stands for...?”

“Not ever heard of it...!” Murmured Doctor Tripathi uncle

Dad: “Look, the word is rooted in the Russian word *zhiv*, which means alive; and *zhivago*, which means the living...!”

Entire Dad sought was that his bosom friend Doctor Tripathi uncle draws inspiration from this film, amending his unappealing way of life, because Dad was cent percent convinced that one, who wasn’t being alive to the developments of the tinsel town, or to sensations of love, wasn’t at all living...

Nonetheless, after much prodding, the latter agreed that he shared at least one similarity with Doctor Zhivago, the film whose costumes and hairstyles created a superlative *mise-en-scene*: both their ones promised were fond of one aspect, and that was

Fashion

Somebody rightly said about Indian-born Julie Christie: “What Julie Christie wears today has more real impact on Fashion than all the clothes of the 10 best dressed women combined...?”

It was true that Doctor Tripathi aunt tried to emulate the luminescent and absolutely ageless Julie Christie, the pop icon of the swinging London Era of the 1960’s, especially the bedhead hair

of hers, most often long and layered with volume at the crown and multifunctional bangs.

And Dad, now convinced of his friend and family doctor, Doctor Tripathi uncle, to be unreservedly distanced from art and romance, he couldn't help conjecture as to how he came to be fascinated in regalia, gregariously coining exotic and outmoded titles such as Kt. Kirti for his son Banjo.

Or for that matter, how his mind remained focused at an undisclosed location, where he planned to settle one day with this baffling guy

Bulla Dada

Thereon, latent upon Dad's lap, listening absorbedly to his monologue on the subject of Aradhana, my mind's center of attention passed through the train, the jeep, the cap, the mist, the tracks, the smoke, the novel - towards the tender female face, smiling coyly out of the exposed train window.

My mind, my spirits, now centered upon that imaginary Sharmila-like visage, displaying a dimpled smile, chiseled face, slant eyes.

Indeed, Love Story of me had been set in motion

Plus the song went on to become my second heartbeat, my *idée fixe*, a concerned Mom often talking worrisomely to Dad

"Our little Banjo has incorporated this song into his psyche as a reason for his being, his *raison d'être*, that at times it qualms me...!"

*Merey Sapno ki Rani kab aayigi tu....
aayi rut mastaani kab aaayi tu
beeti jaaye zindagaani kab aayegi tu...
chaleee aaa
.aaaa tu chali aaa*

Chapter 05

My Tehkhana

To me, my Mom was the loveliest, the coziest, the softest, the noblest, the cutest, the purest, the wisest, the jolliest, the prettiest, and not the least, also the angriest....!

At times, she was the angriest, because I was the incorrigible menace of the house. Mobbed by some dozen-odd relatives during summer vacations, no brilliant idea which could lead to a prank ever escaped my notice, my world, and where 2 plus 2 always made 5, or in Hindi colloquial speech

Do aur do Paanch

Summer holidays were the time when I, Banjo, was in his meanest, the crown of the human body being one of my favorite targets.

I seldom tolerated that fancy bow shaped ribbon headbands, structured and neatly tidied upon the skulls of my two cousins, Uma and Kirti, children of my paternal aunt, Ujjala bua of Ayodhya. I therefore made it a point that they do from scratch, 10-times a day.

Hitherto, I became instrumental in pushing back this fashion statement out from Kanpur, the city of Ganga, back to Ayodhya, the town of Saryu. As an alternative to those inane ribbons, they now came out as pigtails, which to me looked yet another dim-witted.

Therefore, whenever I found them sleeping side-by-side, in sublime peace, I coupled those pigtails together and waited patiently for them to get up from their slumber.

How I loved to hear that clobber sound followed by ouch...? In the end, as a third option, they decided to keep their hair loose. No more drawstrings...!

Further pursuing my die-hard habits of teasing them and never allowing my ingenious wits fall out of its precipice, into oblivion, it was now time to locate cockroaches, especially those giant ones, eyes roving at 360-degree, and then dotingly plant those wriggling items by their antennas, on top of their woolly heads.

This time it wouldn't be a nondescript ouch but an Aaaaaaaaauuuuuuuuuuuuch...!

Kirti, the younger cousin in her not so matured accent: "Look, Banjo ijh in the loom, lejh catch him and teach him a good lechun...chhee I've blought theej thics to clobbel im..."

Uma, the elder cousin: "Okay, but it won't be easy catching him, why don't you chase him by the left of the bed and I from the right side...?"

Brandishing their menacing sticks and declaring their intentions, they tried to encircle, *gherao* me from either side. Yet, I was too smart for them, those poor little girls. I simply climbed upon the bed and rushed out of the exit towards the patio in full throttle.

"Hahaha...Catch me if you can...!" I jeered and challenged them.

Deliberate mixing up of stuff was another of my impious ventures, given an opportunity, from which I never ever dithered.

One day I discovered another of my dainty cousins, Ela, even if elder to me by a couple of years and sole daughter of Vedanta mama from Haridwar, being over possessive of her newly acquired toothbrush. Stealthily I took it out and rubbed it onto my waxy black Cherry Blossom shoe polish.

Blurry eyes in the morning at the washroom, teeth blackened, she screamed: "That scalawag Banjo, he did it again, Muuuuummy....My teeth...!"

Thus far, not satisfied with a whimpering Muuuuummy, I then mixed a bit of Unilever's Surf detergent powder in the midst of her face powder. She miserably broke down at some point in someone's Birthday celebrations when she started sweating, bubbles rising all over her face.

Muuuuuuuummmmmmmmmmmmyyyyyyyyyyyy

Aah...! That gladdened me imperishably, along with the earliest Chinchorro mummies, mummified some 8,000 years ago alongside Chinchorro Beach, *Playa Chinchorro* in Spanish lingo, near the Arica Elbow of northern Chile, almost bordering Peru.

I puckishly beamed

On another occasion, I overheard Mom's quibble to Dad: "I just cannot stand when Banjo teases his cousins; they are such sweet little girls. Why,

they've come to spend a little summertime with us, and look at his jape; reprehensible, I must say...?"

"Now, what has he done...?" Dad asked Mom, at the same time as shuffling through a few important documents at his private study, *studio privato* in Italian.

"Ask me, what he hasn't done, that ne'er-do-well...? That *chhataank bhar ka chhokara*, that splashy boy, carried your brother's wife Indu's younger child, the 1-year-old baby Jeetu naked, and placed him upon Kirti's dainty frock, which she'd planned to wear at a party...."

Mom's stress was on Your Brother, and who meant my Grant kaka of Ujjain.

Grant kaka: since his college days, subsequent to watching the Master of Suspense, Alfred Hitchcock's...Notorious...starring Cary Grant and one of the greatest and most charming female actresses, Ingrid Bergman, of *Svenska* origin, he'd switched over his name to Grant from Ganesh and that of his wife's Indu, from Bindu...!

"So, what's appalling about it...?" Dad commented in a deadpan expression. "Don't you know how crawling babies, these rugrats, behave...?" Mom raised her voice in exasperation, much to Dad's hilarity. "No, what do they do...?" Dad continued in a straight-faced air.

Mom got up from her seat, and shifted open the Shangri-La door handle in brass and black mother of pearl, walking out in a huff from his private study, *studio privato* in Italian, and announcing that at present it would be the great tycoon of Kanpur, Mr. Bharat Kumarr, who would foot the entire bill of all the damages caused by his spoiled brat, and not-to-mention the soiled frock of Kirti...?

What to say, I did not even spare my aunts, especially that fat aunt of Deoghar, Manorama aunt, who was planning to settle in Kanpur, thanks to my grandpa with big mustaches.

My grandpa too, like my Dad, overlooked all of my shenanigans. In consequence, after committing something unwarranted downstairs and finding Mom frantically hunting for me, instantaneously I used to land upstairs, climbing the designer stairs two at a time, to hide from view under his spacious bed.

“Banjo, where are you, where are you, I want you here at once...? Mom would call out for me. I used to give out signals to grandpa with big mustaches never to reveal my whereabouts and he obeyed by way of chuckles.

Nevertheless, one day I heard the fat aunt of Deoghar, with whom I never shared anything in common, tattletale to Mom

“It’s Kaka ji who shields him, *Bowdi*...”

I overheard her

I knew the soul of the fat aunt of Deoghar remained stuck within the crevices of her makeup kit, containing a number of lipsticks which she’d recently ordered through Mom from Kohli Retail Merchants.

One day I took each one of ’em out of her makeup kit and carried them to the servant’s quarter beyond our exotic garden where our domestic help, Bajrangi resided.

Much to his delight I drew an angry face at a blank wall, a frowning mouth clenched teeth, and eyes and eyebrows scrunched downward in anger. By way of a darker shade of maroon, color oxblood, I painted two teeth jutting out like that of Lady Dracula. On the bottom, I scribbled in mulberry, her favorite color

Fat aunt of Deoghar

It was simply Bajrangi’s slip of the tongue about an angry face at his wall, to the tall and light-auburn haired Indu kaki; it was just bit of revelations about assorted frescos to the fat aunt of Deoghar by Indu kaki: Indu kaki, who over and over again found her ugly little baby Jeetu’s Glaxo Baby Food gone astray, and which in the end led to a bedlam at Anupriya Villa, as the *Akashvani* reached its person in command, *Memsahib*’s ears.

Quixotically, Mom marched towards the servant’s section like a drum majorette, followed by foot soldiers in tow, assembled from our neatly arranged formal guest quarters

...Manorama the fat aunt of Deoghar, Draupadi bai of Bastar, Karuna di of Puri, Ela of Haridwar, Uma and Kirti of Ayodhya, and not to forget Indu kaki of Ujjain, along with that ugly-looking Jeetu

tucked in her arms, his bottoms whitened by means of Johnson's baby powder.

In all, they well-compared to the figure of Federico Fellini's Neorealist film, the favorite of Vedanta mama

8-1/2

In addition, it wasn't George Lucas' film...American Graffiti...either, which well-depicted the eagerness, the sadness, the ambitions and the small failings of a generation of Americans, but somewhat of an Indian Graffiti, having an angry face carrying the slogan, Fat aunt of Deoghar, that greeted them.

Also, never had any painting, not even the 2nd oldest cave paintings known to man, belonging to the Upper Paleolithic Age, discovered with its linear representations in green and dark red, of huge figures of bison, tigers and rhinos in Bhimbhetka near Bhopal, drawn so much attention as Banjo's painting of the fat aunt of Deoghar, on Bajrangi's walls.

Mom, as I remarked earlier, was also the angriest...! After Bajrangi being eased out on a long vacation to Bhaktapur, in his home country Nepal, it was perhaps my turn...

...Counting her patience on me, scaled in multiples of 10, and finally reaching 90 from 50-60-70-80 was acceptable, but no sooner it reached the boiling point of 100, I've had it...!

Invariably, the session originated by a single irregular slap, doubled to a plural, followed by multiples of plural, and finally ending into plural of multiples...! But then she was watchful enough that those slaps got vague, vaguer and vaguest, sounding like the echo tapering high on the hills with cool breeze and misty weather of Darjeeling, amongst its lush tea gardens...

Nonetheless, to her dismay, probably nothing seemed to work; neither the sugar coating, nor the bitter beating, and which prompted her to wonder why I, Banjo, was such a thick-skinned creature...?

Mom knew that what she was trying to say did not reach me. And the comprehension of it maddened her. My very presence began to infuriate her. For sure, I'd become a menace. Beleaguered, she turned towards Dad

“You swear he’s your adorable son, I can’t comprehend why he is such a prankster...? I get to my notice his complaints from each and every family member, day in, day out...

...Just imagine, he did not even spare Vedanta, stealthily he’d entered his room, in our guest quarter annex, and then mixed drachms of superglue into his hair oil...”

“More importantly, even though born in your grand city of Kanpur, in the *Awadhi* soil of Ganga-Yamuna doab, which you claim carries no less than the heritage of *Nawab*-inspired refinement and culture, and so famed for its iconic *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb* - synthesis of Hindu and Muslim elements..

...Tell me, how come Banjo has nurtured a skin as thick as the one-horned rhinoceros, originating in the expanse of about 100,000 acres of wildlife sanctuary of Kaziranga, in the northeast state of Assam...?”

For that matter, even Dad didn’t have any inkling about the pachyderm let loose inside the precincts of Anupriya Villa, or the air of mystery around the words having Greek origin, *pachys* for thick, *derma* for skin...!

Yet, he couldn’t help chortle as he visualized his over smart brother-in-law, Vedanta of Haridwar, getting his cranium oiled by means of superglue, each strand of hair sticking up, approximating the guard hair of a porcupine.

After swearing aloud serves him right, Dad addressed Mom: “Anupriya, I must say your knowledge of geography, *Geographia* in Greek, *Ge* for earth, *graphia* for writing, has become expansive, profound, except, I assume you don’t bequeath Banjo apposite baths, you see, it’s grime and grunge on his hide...!”

Dad was rubbing her the wrong way. Nevertheless, finding Mom in high dudgeon, he bunged up midway his grandiloquence, furthered by his exponential knowledge of the language English, purportedly spoken by half of the human race, and strewn across by a few classical-antiquity vocabulary terms as well.

For Dad it was more of jollification, to measure me up to Kishore Kumar, save for Mom who never appreciated Dad’s sense of assessment, fearing I too would grow up into a maverick and wayward like his pinup.

Dad tried to ward off Mom’s irascibility by way of this facetious anecdote: “Kishore remains incalculably paranoid about not being remunerated in

totality, and thus he prefers to hang back for his secretary's signal before going in for his recordings...

...On one such occurrence, when Kishore discovered that his monies had not been fully paid, he appeared on set having makeup only on one side of his face. Afterward, when the Director questioned him, he drove a sixer, '*Adha paisa toh aadha makeup*'..."

Half Remuneration, Half Makeup

"I've come across this yarn before, its old hat..." Mom curtly replied getting goaded by Dad's rewording proclivity.

Even so, Dad just couldn't afford to bear Mom not relishing, or being amused over his few selective, and at times repetitive, anecdotes and jibes. He followed up his previous narrative with a sequel

"Pay attention Anupriya, it was in 1971 that Kishore was supposed to star in the lead of the film...Anand...your Anand..."

...But when Hrishikesh Mukherjee, the Director went to finalize him at his house, he was driven out by the gatekeeper, the *chowkidaar*; the reason being a mistaken identity...

...In point of fact Kishore had given prior instructions to his *chowkidaar* to not allow a certain Bengali man inside the bungalow, and Hrishi da, incidentally being the first Bengali to turn up that fateful morning, accidentally caught the *chowkidaar's* ire, who mistook him to be that same Bengali man..."

Later than Dad concluded this particular Anand tale which sounded new-fangled, the film which had made her Rajesh Khanna immortal, and the newcomer Amitabh Bachchan making famous the role of the hard-bitten and cynical Doctor Bhaskor Bannerjee, stage name *Babu Moshai*, meaning the great gentleman, did she break into her vivacious laughter, famed all over Kanpur.

Dad could at long last manage to mollify Mom, and in subsequent moments of triumph, gleefully wiped his mustache by way of sweep of his right hand forefinger.

But in next to no time Mom's laughter tapered off and over again she was sober-sided, and phlegmatic, "All said and done, professional idiosyncrasies

set aside, and kindly do not inspire Banjo to emulate that oddball Kishore in the marital domain...

...Can you imagine, having married the Bengali singer and actress Ruma Ghosh, bearing a child called Amit, he'd the audacity of seeing Madhubala, one of his colleagues he'd met in his home production...Chalti ka naam Gaadi...?"

"But I find nothing beside the mark, *nihil ad rem* in Latin...I guess all females are green-eyed over Madhubala. They can't help gaze admiringly at the pulchritudinous star...!" Dad instigated Mom in a laugh at.

"Don't you repeat that again, Mr. Bharat Kumarr...?...Wasn't his family life with Ruma di jeopardized that she had to take extreme step to get divorce from him...?" Mom was cheesed off, conversely, Dad anger less.

"Listen dear, Kishore proposed to Madhubala while she was sick and was planning to go to London for further treatment. Please try to empathize with, it was basically on humanitarian grounds, poor girl she had this hole in the heart, and they say which made Kishore such a wretched hangdog..."

"I don't want to fall out with you any further on this count. By a fluke even if I allow Banjo to marry a Muslim, his *nani* at Benaras won't recommend, to her its sheer blasphemy..." Mom's contentiousness was glaring.

Visualizing his penny-pinching mother-in-law of Benaras being paid by the belief of Banjo's marriage to a Muslim, Dad burst into joviality, "I was just pulling your leg, Anupriya, and by the way, Banjo is not even 10 now, and sees how we are at each other's throat over his marriage, that too er with a Muslim..."

...Ha...ha...ha...!"

Nevertheless, one day while spanking me, as her tender palms was done in, couple of her fragile fancy glass bangles, *chooris*, fondly selected by Dad, in designer combination of 2 Reds, and 4 Yellows from nearby Firozabad, busted into pieces over my pigheaded buttocks, Mom's heart broke finally, Kishore Kumar ceasing to enliven her by any means.

She completely lost patience and in exhaustion, decided to confine me to the basement of our house

Our *Tekhana*

“Now you’ve had it, Banjo...! Wait, you see what I do as I can’t think of anything else...?”

I never imagined this waiting to be that out-of-the-ordinary. Much to the horror of Pushpa masi and Namrata masi, she climbed down those huge stairs of our *tekhana*, each about 15 inch high, tugging me and depositing me inside.

Mom: “That’ll suit you, you deserve this...!”

I then watched her climb back those tortuous stairs, her eye-catching *Shantipuri Tant* sari of Bengal pulled demurely up to her knees. Before the door, countrified in design, was banged shut, I noticed the *rajmahal*, the royal palace motif of her sari, in addition to her eyes, red with anger, blue with tears.

My first morning in the basement, *basamento* in Italian, was so-so. I looked around my new world

Basement’s exposed ventilators, numbering 3 and overlooking the patio, provided it with something called daylight. Walls were somewhat damp but cool, and the large center hall rested upon heavy arches, the structure thus designed by my grandpa, Gajanan Damodar, popularly known as GD, an architect of British Burma fame.

It was said that an emaciated pond subsisted at the particular spot where the basement now existed.

And instead of taking pains of filling, casing and reinforcing it, grandpa used an innovative and ingenious technique to minimally convert the cavity into a basement; a friendly type of basement, which would provide much relief to all occupants against the extreme heat of Kanpur summer, as a place for afternoon siesta.

Little had GD imagined that one day the dark cellar would not only be used for forty winks, but to pack off little vulnerable Banjos into exiles...!

Once I got used to the dim lights, at the corner of the basement, I spotted heavy chests, 3 in number, one of them unbolted.

...Barely 5 minutes elapsed before I could scrutinize more of the basement; I heard the creaking sound of the countrified door, Mom alighting from those 15 inch high stairs, and hastening down to pick me up in her arms.

She then carried me upstairs to the large Four Poster bed, holding me tight and sobbing and sobbing without reflecting any signs of calming down. “Why are you like this, Banjo, so incomprehensible, so inexplicable, why...? Why do you compel me to be unforgiving to you...?”

Pushpa masi and Namrata masi too joined in to offer their signature slurps till I nearly choked out of their fondness. However, I wondered why Mom meted out such odd chastisements; in fact these punished her, the inflictor more than me, the inflicted...? But who would explain logic to her, and how...?

Anyways, when it was brought into being that such genus of castigation would become more of a custom, my pranks not seeing end of the day, I made up my mind to pep it up.

One early morning, in anticipation of my predicament of being dumped into my next living quarters during the course of the day, usually before lunch, I stuffed my pockets with groovy toffees, dainty pink-colored mints, and 5 Star chocolate bars wrapped in golden wrappers and decorated with stars, a new presentation by Cadbury’s...

...Nibble part taken care of, I moved on to next section, the entertainment section, wherein I stuffed a rubber ball scarlet in shade, pastel green-and-blue colored chalks, and last but not least, my favorite comic book Chandamama.

Enter life, New Hollywood stuff...!

From then on, I keenly looked forward to my retributions, which had become quite congenial and colorful by now...

...What with my pink-mints minting, my chocolate-colored 5 Stars starring into my mouth along with its caramel and nougat; the ball scarlet in shade balling in between the arches of the basement; pastel green-and-blue chalks chalking an assortment of not so decorative peacock patterns over its bland and frigid walls...

These harbinger moments hitherto, were to baptize me into that Banjo who was to face Blizzard-after-Blizzard one day

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Upstairs

Uma: “Sometimes I feel sorry for Banjo that he gets it so harsh from Anupriya mami...”

Kirti, the little one: Don’t worry di, I know im, he won’t chicken out cho choon...He’j a bonnn chhurvivor...!”

Ela: Kirti, you’re right, but I wonder what he must be doing...?”

That day I found a couple of treasures inside the basement. One, what time I managed to heave an unbolted chest open. And two, a dead lizard.

No sooner I managed to undo the huge lid of the chest after garnering maximum strength, I was dumbfounded when a dozen or so glass framed pictures of Hindu Gods and Goddesses, neatly stacked one over the other, stared at me.

Right on top was the dustiest of ‘em, so I took off my yellow shirt and wiped it clean.

Wow

Royal Ram *Durbar* beckoned me, the deity Lord Ram, having color of the sky nimbus blue, was majestically seated in the middle, sharing the *singhasana* under a *chhatra*, His divine consort Sita *Maa* by His side.

The Divine couple was flanked by His younger brothers, Laxman on right, Bharat and Shatrughan at the left. My favorite Hanuman was seated at bottom, near His Lotus feet. The brothers were seen carrying mighty bows upon their shoulders, along with celestial arrows pointing out of their unyielding quivers.

Whilst Lord Ram had eyes with ruddy tinge, rubicund canthus, His style and appearance like God, Sita *Maa*’s eyes looked like Lotus petals, Her braid like the wealth in the forests after rainy season, and wearing a chaste smile.

At the center of the back side of Her hair, Sita *Maa* was wearing a circular headdress studded with jewels, called *churaamanii*. The headdress derived its name from *churaa* meaning bundle of hair, and *manii* meaning jewel.

I yanked out the weighty portrait by way of a hayyan sound, and in due course stacked it against a blank wall, tad illuminated via rays of sunlight penetrating all the way through the 3rd ventilator.

Next emerged little Kanha, His face smeared with butter. He gave the impression of being more like my younger bro. I felt joyous and blissful.

“Kanha, better You watch out, You’ve spilled so much of fresh butter infused by means of crystallized sugar, *makhan-mishri*, upon Your cosmic bluish black face, the shades representing infinity...

...And look how they are now trickling down Your chubby paunch, straight-in landing on Your folded thighs...Won’t Your Mom admonish You...?”

However, I appreciated the styling of the peacock feather upon His thick mane. They at once enhanced His divine looks.

At last came into sight the 3rd picture, and one which frightened me a bit. Said picture was that of mighty Shiva, One who sat meditating upon a ferocious-looking tiger skin, reddish-yellow with black stripes, His trident, the *Trishul* with *damru*, dug by His side...

...I couldn’t help staring into the eyes of the venomous black cobra entangled around His neck, its hood rearing upwards towards me.

At this moment, all of a sudden I became aware that I was a sheer lad, confined alone in an out of the ordinary dungeon

“Tiger, serpent, do me have to come across anything more petrifying in this tehkhana...?” My heart cried out for Mom.

Even if this God was having blue hue, I was magnetized by His 3rd eye...!” I checked mine, it had a mere pimple.

Exhausted, I decided to call it a day by shutting the lid of the wooden chest by way of a loud thud, and methodically placing Ram *Durbar*, Kanha, and Shiva all in a row, in such a way that they all could receive direct sunlight through each of the 3 exposed ventilators.

I then engineered appropriate angles for placing the pictures, lest Lord Ram, or someone from His divine *parivar*, or little *makhan-mishri* Kanha, or mighty Shiva having 3rd eye, would topple forward. I inclined them all

towards the wall, which henceforth, would serve as the backrest of their not-so-luxurious couches.

Contented, and visibly pleased at my discoveries of antique and auxiliary pictures of Hindu Gods and Goddesses, other than those spotted in our regular *Puja ghar*, and managing to host them in a dignified manner, I sat relaxed at a corner minting the pink-mint and staring at them awestruck.

Then out of nowhere I noticed something dangling out of Kanha's picture. I crawled forward to probe and much to my dismay, discovered that I'd struck a baby lizard, dead. I felt sorry. Why, it meant no harm to me...?

Further, I was guilty for not being able to conduct its rites, so I hurriedly decided to star my 5 Star, and use its golden wrapper decorated with stars, to safe keep the dead lizard.

Just as I was over and done with the wrapping, flashes of sunlight foretold that Mom was at the threshold. I'd made up my mind that the present day would be the last day of my internment as I would put the kibosh on.

Consequently, swiftly shoving the 5 Star wrappers into my trouser pocket, I scrambled up the stairs bare-bodied, till I touched the *rajmahal*, the royal palace motifs of her *Shantipuri Tant* sari. She lifted and hugged me tightly in the midst of her decorative *pallu*. My plan was a big hit

...*Tekhana* sojourns did put up the shutters down, as my Mom just couldn't stomach the 300-second shriek, in a medley of *Ragas*, emaciating out of the vocal chords of my fat aunt of Deoghar...

...Whilst the latter discovered a lifeless baby lizard, at this instant turned into a beanpole, peeping at her from a 5 Star wrapper, glorified within the confines of her makeup kit, cutting bread in the midst of her black *kajal*, a barrier crème called Snow, Lakme face-powder, Tuhina lotion, rouge...

...Er sans the lipsticks, all of those that were used up at Bajrangi's walls...! After all, how could I've ever pardoned her, that fat aunt of mine, that eavesdropper, one who'd made it her religion to keep tabs upon me...?

All that my Mom expressed in such moments of despair: “You’ll miss me one day, my little son, then who would take care of you. And where’s your yellow shirt I’m asking you for the nth time...?”

Chapter 06

Anand

In order to pacify my rage, Mom used to pour out over my cranium cold water from the newly acquired Kelvinator refrigerator. However, no amount of cooling could help cool my hot head.

Not much of a way out, one day, she escorted me to Kali temple, popularly known as the *Kalibari*, where I encountered the unchanged Shiva, the mighty Shiva who once stopped Kali's destructive rampage by lying down in Her path, and when the Goddess realized just Who She was standing on, She finally calmed down.

Mom explained me that in art, Kali is most often portrayed with blue or black skin, in the nude, and wearing a Bengali-type crown of clay which is gilded. She has multiple arms, Her right arms generally associated with positive gestures, while her left hands brandishing weaponry, famously the scythe...

...Her right hand forms the masculine *abhaya mudra* telling doesn't fear, whilst the left is in the feminine boon offering *varada mudra* mode...

Kali's most common pose in art is in her most fearsome guise as the slayer of demons and holds a severed head. She wears a kilt of severed human hands, a garland of decapitated heads, and above all often has terrifying expression, deep reddish eyes...

...Her hair is shown disheveled, small fangs protruding out of her mouth, and tongue is lolling, dripping blood...

"Mom, isn't She scary...?"

Mom smiled, "No my son, She isn't doing any wrong, she's purely eliminating wrongdoers...You know, Kali Maa is the Destroyer of Illusion...Devourer of Death and Time...!"

I sighed in relief, instantaneously developing a fondness for Kali Maa. Still, the primary rationale of my Mom was to cool my head and bestow it sanctity. The white-bearded Pundit at the temple suggested that I put on a moonstone as well as a locket of Shiva.

He sermonized, addressing Mom perceptively, even as gazing at me: “I need not emphasize further on Shiva’s locket, you sure understand its consecrated distinctiveness...

...However, please allow me to elucidate about moonstone that it represents Moon Goddess. Her lunar energy may bestow this boy emotional balances, soothe him and control his anger, and even turn him meditative...!”

A week later, I was sailing over the Moon, adorning a moonstone, encased in silver ring, in my ring finger.

At what time checked out by my classmates, and before I could put forward any fitting reply, Farhan stated with aplomb, “Look Banjo is sporting a piece of Moon right on his finger...!” He thought it had something to do with a chunk of the Moon.

I didn’t think Armstrong, the American Apollo-11 commander, nor his colleagues, were as thrilled and puffed up in 1969, as and when they undertook that One Small Step onto Moon, the Sea of Tranquility, declaring it in style to the denizens of the Earth down under as a Leap for Mankind, as I was, once Bobby caressed my moonstone, my silver ring, touching the skin of my ring finger, my wedding finger.

Boy, I’d blushed like the proverbial Man on the Moon, my heart hip-hopping all over the lunar surface, dodging every single parameter of gravity, sharing coveted space with the spacemen...!

Supplementary stone, on the contrary, was precisely not a stone, but a locket slung by a black string around my neck, which more than often entangled like a black cobra among the cut of my ganji. It was downright irksome; therefore, I decided to do away with it. But somehow the image of the serpent around Shiva prevented me from doing so.

My brows frowned more than often: “I’m not Shiva, why should I hug these venomous reptilians round my neck...?”

To connect me spiritually to the very idea and God called Shiva, my Mom often journeyed me to Shiva temples. One day: “Banjo, get into the tub quick like a good boy, have a nice bath, and then we’ll visit a Shiva temple...”

Subsequent to brushing teeth with the new gel based Close-Up, luminous red in color, and taking bath, I relaxed bare-chested across the large Four

Poster bed, watching intently, and palms over my chin, Mom getting decked up for the temple.

How beautiful she appeared in that quintessential milk white *Korial* sari, deep red borders, the borders and *pallus* carrying beautiful motifs drawn over it...? While the white symbolized purity, the red symbolized fertility.

“Mom looks divine...!” I concluded, as she flicked open with a click, her tiny silver *tarakashi sindoor dabbi* from Orissa, gifted to her by Karuna di at the time of Mom’s marriage. By means of her thumb and forefinger, she gracefully applied pinch of Red Sindoor across 3-inch parting of her shining black hair, admiring herself in the mirror.

I couldn’t visualize her directly while she was facing the very feminine Queen Anne style, Lorraine Cherry makeup wooden vanity table, *poudreuse* in French. However, the mirror revealed that using the tip of her ring finger, she was pressing a dot of vermilion, a *bindi*, at the center of her forehead, more as a symbol of energy or *Shakti*, and fertility.

“Wow...!” I thought. “This *sindoor* could be a wonderful multiuse art and craft material for Bobby; a *dabbi* of it I think would be sufficient for her...”

Mom, absordedly perched upon the pouf seat, ivory color finish, she at this moment had uncorked a red-colored bottle, taken down from the splendid rose-colored marble top of this antique *poudreuse*.

I asked inquisitively what was in it to which she shyly replied: “*Mahawar*...Rose Bengal or *Alta* as I prefer to call. Er used by us married women...”

Attentively, I watched her foraying to paint the Red *Alta*, made up of lac resin, across the borders of her petite feet, using cotton as a brush. This keyed me up. In a jiffy I parasailed from the bed down to the floor, insisting that I put the final touches to the task.

“*Aamay daayo...aamay daayo...!*” I cajoled her in my colloquial verbal communication, Bengali.

Even if Mom resisted at first, she gave up by way of an affectionate smile. Speedily, I squatted upon the floor, rested my Mom’s Lotus Feet over my chest, and painted Red *Alta* all across borders of her feet, even in between those little fingers; in the course of deed, smearing, and splashing most of it across my barren chest.

Such pernickety Red *Alta*, in the long run, not only soaked the deep roots of my barren chest, but also of my thin-skinned heart, helping to keep it alive and pulsating, all the way through my life, cutting through every Blizzard...

We were all set to leave for the fêted Anandeshwar temple, near Parmat Ghat by the side of River Ganga, now perhaps one more detailing to be taken care of, the pleats of her sari.

No sooner had the *Alta* dried up at her Lotus Feet, Mom taught me how to pleat the sari using the gaps of the fingers. I learnt high-speed

At the same time as Mom gripped by means of her fingers, fingers speaking of opalescent nail polish finish, a bunch of silk fabric tucked at her waist, I pleated them at the bottom by nimbly sliding via my little fingers a silky symphony, *symphonia* in Greek, evolved out of 4 movements

Could it be similar to Linz, Symphony no 36 in C Major of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart signaling its 4 movements: the substantial 1st movement which began by way of a slow introduction, the 2nd a slow one in siciliano rhythm, the 3rd in a standard minuet and trio, and the last, perhaps in a lively finale, giving me intense exultation...?

...To add here, this Symphony was written by Amadeus the genius during a stopover in the incredible classic Austrian town of Linz on his and his wife's way back home to Vienna from Salzburg. The striking voyage was completed about 2 centuries ago and in all probability by vessel over River Danube, from the segment of Linz to Vienna...

Dressing part over at last, proudly I led her wicker basket, stuffed with flowers such as *harsingar*, *jabakusum* and dried lotus, delivered by Latha, who wasn't baby any more, but somewhat long-haired, curvy, and set in her teens

Mom: "Latha, my charming girl, thank you so much, God bless you...!"

Mom bent down, looked into her expressive eyes and sandalwood *bindi* at the center of forehead, and kissed her dusky cheeks.

Out of adoration and empathy for this impecunious girl, Mom had requested Doctor Tripathi uncle to fix up Natarajan Swami from his own locality of Patkapur for her Bharatnatyam lessons. Needless to say, these lessons were to be sponsored by Anupriya Villa...

Mom trailed me carrying a *puja thali* made of copper, in her hand, and filled with assortments. These consisted of *shahad*, the thorn-apple *dhatoora*; *dahi*, and puffy sweets made out of *batasha*, acquired from nearby Lalaji's *dhaba*, besides few fresh fruits on the way.

All bits and pieces were agreeable, I mused, especially the *shahad* and the *dahi* and the *batasha*, but the spiky thing, *dhatoora*...? Why does Shiva like *dhatoora*...?

Nonetheless, Mom and I immersed ourselves in prayers at His celestial feet, together bathing the *Shivalinga* by means of *gangajal*, un-boiled milk, *shahad*, and *dahi*. Mom aesthetically decorated it with *chandan*, both white and red. In addition she applied *kumkum*, *baelpatra*, the long-grained rice *akshat*, and well-chosen grass-blades *dubba*.

In the course of great devotion, she set the exotic flowers of *harsingar*, *jabakusum*, and dried lotus, all delivered by the long-haired and beautiful dusky-complexioned Latha.

Mom after that offered *batasha*, *dhatoora*, and fresh fruits to the Lord, at the same time as I rang the *ghanti* amid great fervor. She lit the fragrant *dhoop*, and ghee *diya*, while I dropped the varied coins and currencies inside the donation box, chanting in conjunction with the influx of other devotees around me

Om Namah Shivai

Furthermore, we tied the red *kalava* around our wrists, before sipping the divine *Charanamrit* offered by the *pujari* by an elfin copper spoon.

I relished the soothing taste of *Charanamrit*; indeed the *Charanon ka Amrit*, the ambrosia of His Lotus feet, prepared as an inimitable concoction of *dahi*, *shahad*, *gulab jal*, *ghee*, and topped by holy basil leaves, the *tulsi*.

During drive back home from Parmat, and reclining at the rear seat, Mom's eyes appeared doleful at the same time as she narrated amid sensitivity how she'd gone through a miscarriage before I'd entered this corporeal world, and how it was her penance sans water, *Nirjal Tapasya*, at the holy Jata Shankar's feet in the ancient stalagmite caves within deep ravines of Pachmarhi, Madhya Pradesh, that soon after, I was blessed out of her divine womb, her sacred vessel.

She further went on to describe the quietude of Pachmarhi, its *sal*, bamboo, and *mahua* thickets, tinkling waterfalls, splash pools tucked into the wilderness, chirruping birds and gauzy butterflies, and how much she wanted to revisit the place.

Hmm...! So that was the *raison d'être* behind Mom being such an ardent *Shiv Bhakt*...?

Sensing her somber mood, I tried to bolster her emotions by cozying up to her quintessential milk white, deep red bordered silk lap. At the moment, it seemed, she was disdained and mislaid in some far-away frame of mind.

For a minute, I was in doubt whether she was at all in attendance of her flesh and bones

I felt somnolent over her lap, close to her bosom, playing with her elephant faced gold bangles, extending my two feet across the expanse of the rear seat. This particular posture was my privileged position inside the car, whenever dozy. Notwithstanding my eyes half-closed, Mom initiated her conversation.

“You know Banjo, apart from foreign jaunts, your Dad being so caring and nice; he had taken me across the country...

...North to South from Kashmir to Kanyakumari; East to West from Tripura to Dwarka. And during driving holidays, 2 to 3 times a year, to exotic and faraway destinations, he was the navigator-in-chief drawing the plans, mapping the routes out of elaborate maps and tourist guide booklets...

And do you remember our topical trip to the pool of nectar, or *Amritsar* ...?”

In reality, Mom was fascinated by every facet of Indian culture and heritage, never missing singing paeans over it...

On one such occasion I'd overheard the fat aunt of Deoghar, lacking in courtesy, talking cantankerously to somebody over the telephone, commenting crabily upon the pointlessness of culture, the various aspects contiguous to it, or else the amount of wear and tear of money, energy, and time one has to incur, peripatetic like nomads all over the land.

And souvenirs...! “Well they were not anything more than trumpery...” she'd remarked in her typical wiseacre conjecture. It was then perchance

that Mom, an enlightened human, a student of Arts and Culture from the famed Benaras Hindu University BHU, and had taken the opportunity to convince her, but in vain.

Stretching out at the rear seat of the car, I half woke up, as Amritsar in the northern state of Punjab, a recent sojourn mentioned by Mom, struck me half-asleep. The trip, I remember, had to some extent been daunting...

...First, at Jallianwala Bagh, an open space having high walls, a Bengali guide narrated those gruesome brutalities heaped by that cruel British military commander, Reginald Dyer, how the General had ordered indiscriminate firing, without warning at a crowd of more than 20,000 unarmed innocent men, women, and children...

...And that too on the festive *Baisakhi* Day, what time people rejoice subsequent to harvesting their crops...!

The guide pointed to us those bloodcurdling bullet marks over the walls caused by continual firing for about 10 minutes from .303 Lee Enfield bolt action rifles, after cold-bloodedly blocking the few narrow exits for getaway.

I couldn't hold myself any longer and began to snivel when he sustained

"In about 1,650 rounds of fire, nearly 400 natives were instantly massacred, and another 1,500 or so injured during that ill-omened day ...

Even though Dad lifted me up in his lap to console me, my blood began to boil. After all, I wasn't of the same kind as the suave Nobel Laureate, Rabindra Nath Tagore of the *Gitanjali* fame, who had in those disquieting days, relinquished his Knighthood, as a symbolic sign of protest vis-à-vis the mighty British Empire...

I was infuriated up to the hilt: "Dad, show me my Bren light machine gun, which you bought me from the toy shop at Pearl Lake...? I want it right away. I'll go and slay that barbarous creature, that demon of a Dyer with this gun you said, designed in Brno, *Ceskoslovensko*...

...Kali Maa is always with me...!"

Mom was excessively disturbed and pain-stricken: “What a pitiless fellow he was...? I just can’t accept as true how he could order the troops to fire, and prolong to do so till every piece of ammunition got exhausted...

...And it’s also hard to see in my mind's eye his audacity and ruthlessness to confess later on, that unquestionably he would’ve prolonged his fire, had he the required gun power...

...Yet so heartening that the Non-Cooperation Movement launched subsequently drew millions of peasants, workers, students, and even women – from among the masses – into the ultimate struggle for India’s freedom - with open defiance of British authority becoming the doctrine of millions of Indians...

...And how at the end of the 1920s decade, aspiration for *Poorna Swaraj*, or Complete Independence, became the objective of the Congress freedom fighters, which led the struggle...?”

However, the next incident of Amritsar was of a different flavor, ensued at the nearby Golden Temple, built by Guru Arjan, the compiler of the holy Adi Granth...

Dad, who’d covered his head with a large white kerchief read aloud from a picture postcard, “...afterward, the making of the temple, a blend of Rajput Hindu and Indo-Islamic Mughal architectural styles but dissimilar to both, and which came to be known as Sikh architecture...

...And as a final point, acquired its golden canopy, gilded by means of pure gold and approximating 750 kilos, by the *Sher-e-Punjab*, Ranjit Singh...”

“Wow Dad...! This Maharaja seems real affluent, I bet richer than you...!” I commented to which Dad guffawed,

“Hahaha...! Why not, the Maharaja owned 4 large provinces, *Subahs*, the word derived from Arabic and Persian...?”

“Which were they...?” I interrupted, to which Dad replied, Punjab and Kashmir, forgetting the other 2.

“And you know Banjo, the Maharaja even managed to acquire the famed and priceless *Koh-i-Noor* diamond, one of the largest cut diamonds in the world, and weighing a mind-blowing 100 carats...?”

I was further awestruck to hear about the Maharaja’s splendor

However, the month June was unmistakably hot that day, my tender feet scalding 10-fold over, the only alternative was to sprint through the causeway, Guru’s bridge, into the sanctum sanctorum.

Mom had covered my head with her own handkerchief: “O Boy...! A ladies handkerchief, what if Tejwinder Singh catches me in this...?”

4 different entrances of Harmandir Sahib, or the Temple of God, and symbolizing every Path leading to Oneness animated me: “Mom, you take the left entrance, Dad you go by the right...” “And, what about you, my little Prince...?” Mom smiled, arching her eyebrows through her gold rimmed glasses

I would follow the Middle Path

Period in-between, I remembered Bobby and sang out, “Bobby, if you were here today, we would’ve shared great stimulation, you approaching me from the side opposite...!”

However, I was asked to observe silence. I marked devotees ceremoniously taking a look at the huge scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, and treating the same as a living person, a Guru out of respect.

The scripture opens by way of *mool mantra*, the succinct doctrinal statement of Sikhism, amid chanting of the holy words

Ek Onkar

...Means one and only one, who cannot be compared or contrasted with any other.

4 priests inside the premises kept up a continuous chant, the *Guru Vaani*, in Gurmukhi, which was in turn broadcast around the Golden Temple compound, through loudspeakers.

Afterward Mom whispered into my ears: “You know, many *Bhagats* like the great *Sant* Kabir, equally revered by Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, have contributed to this *Guru Vaani*...!”

Even as recalling the secular Kabir, whose inspiring life story, Mom had once narrated to me, I spread out my hand over which someone hastily placed a rudimentary leaf cup, *donaa*, containing holy offerings, the *prasad* of *suji ka halwa*, out of which molten clarified butter, *ghee*, drained straight into my acquiescent palms...

...At that very moment, my eyes got transfixed upon those curved daggers, *kirpans*, and those menacing curved swords, *talwars*, hung by the sides of those blue-robed Sikhs, looking fierce as turbaned warriors.

I got terrified, dispatching fervent prayers to the white bearded Guru, the Lotus-eyed gentle Guru, Guru Nanak Dev; the molten salty *ghee*, melting alongside my salty sweat, resulting in my salty tears...

Eyes smoldering, palms and feet blistered, unable to bear this heady salty cocktail, the *prasad* knocked out of my hands onto the floor. Upset, as I bent down to clean up the mess, somebody accidentally pushed me from behind and I toppled over.

I was weepy, the image of the saintly mystic Guru Nanak, his deep meditative eyes, flowing white beard, and who believed in truth and equality, was all that I could call for solace at that moment...

~

Jagmohan glided the car into the porch of Anupriya Villa. As I emerged out of Mom’s cozy lap, rubbing my eyes and looking around, I discovered I wasn’t in the northern town of Amritsar, but in my own hometown, Kanpur, a city by the right bank of eternal River Ganga.

Later, reporting back to school, though I was elated to spot Bobby and her eyes like the ocean, I refrained from discussing my Amritsar trip. For the duration of lunch break, I noticed her chatting animatedly to her girl gang about something similar, her own Amritsar trip.

What a coincidence, I deliberated...? Minding a gap of 20 odd hours, we could've surely bumped into each other, she approaching me from the opposite side of the sanctum sanctorum...!

I then noticed her dishing out carry home snaps of Guru Nanak out of her iridescent pencil case, and presenting one each to those girls.

I wasn't sure, something within her eyes, eyes like the ocean, reminded me of her infuriated flare-up during 1971 war period, and I preferred to keep mum. Nonetheless, right after school hours, as I was about to pack my bags, Bobby sauntered towards me and casually asked, "Banjo, didn't you venture out anywhere during summer hols...?"

Taken aback, I stammered, "Yes, Aaaamritsar...!" Tejwinder Singh overhearing me smirked, to which Bobby intervened: "And how many *aam*, mangoes, did you have over there...?" "Will you shut up, Tejwinder Singh...?"

Tejwinder looked up into her eyes, eyes like the ocean, and provoked: "Oh I see *nain-matakka* over here..." She shot back, "Mind your language you cheapish, like me, aren't you a Sikh yourself...?"

Tejwinder vociferously argued in his Punjabi lingo: "*Tuu ae duss, o Banjo Sardar haigga...Onnu sadde Gurdware vich kii kum si...?*" Bobby's bewildered eyes studied me, and I stammered.

"I'm fond of Gurruru Naaanak..."

"Look, he barely can pronounce Guru Nanak's name by the book...*Tann vee tuu onnu sport kardi ae...*" Tejwinder retorted, teeth clenching, grins sarcastic. But Bobby was adamant. "*Oye chup kar bhootni de...?* Is there any doubt about Banjo not being the most thoughtful and intelligent guy of our class, or not believing in the equanimity of religions...?"

"*Chal kudiye...!* He may be your little finger, your *Ghulam*, your *Muchi*, but not mine...*vaddi aayi...*" Tejwinder sneered. Now I could perceive Bobby almost coming to blows with Tejwinder Singh. Notwithstanding, I eyed her mournfully.

Wasn't it me, Banjo, on whose behalf she took up the cudgels for...? Wasn't it my hypothetical ideology which she was trying to defend...? I wasn't sure whether I believed in equability of all religions. Nonetheless, if my Bobby had articulated this specific philosophy, then so be it.

From this day forever

I shall believe in the equanimity of all religions...

...A philosophy that upholds the equal respect and dignity of every faith, recognizing that truth and moral wisdom can be found across diverse spiritual traditions.

I thought embracing this belief would foster harmony, empathy, and a deeper understanding among diverse communities...!

Back home and seeking confirmation, the first thing I asked over Mom, “Mom, tell me what is religion, and do I really believe, or do I have to believe in every religion...?”

Mom, in a subdued voice, clutching her breast as if in severe pain, and breathing heavily, “I’ll explain you later, Beta, first you tell me what happened in school today, and have you finished your Tiffin...?”

Now, that was a bad question as I was a bad eater, and today was even worse having Bobby dig about Amritsar, and I, the offender, the *prasad* toppling out of my acquiescent palms.

Day after, I sat glum in class, steering clear of any direct eye contact with Bobby

During lunch break, I approached her ruefully, head bowed down, and confessed vide involuntary sound repetitions, my hopeless stammer, “Bobby, Aaayi know how much you’re immersed in the divinity of Aaaamritsar, but youuuu know the *pra...prasaad* fell over...”

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I remorsefully gazed into her eyes, eyes like ocean, fearing that the very next moment Bobby would lash out at me, tick me off her friend’s list *ad infinitum*, and adding to Tejwinder Singh’s respite and delight. Consequently, coming out with the sentence in one single breath, Dev Anand style, I started steering away from her....

“Hey Banjo, listen...” Bobby came scrambling after me. “You know....” Giggles... “The same happened to me too...it was sooo hot and greasy, it scalded my palms...” Continued Bobby, followed by giggles imagining the coincidence. I shared her silly laugh, but without more ado, my eyes softened up, “Dddd...does it still hurt...?”

Bobby taken aback, exclaimed, “Hurt what...?”

“Aaaaayiiii mean yourrr palms...!” I whimpered, gazing limpidly into her eyes, eyes like ocean, and then at her delicate palms.

Bobby’s Hurt What exclamation, seemed to echo from all 4 corners of the cubic classroom, like the 4 eponymous towers of the ornate Charminar of old Hyderabad, when I discovered that we were set alone, rest of the horde gone out to play, or to ease themselves at the loo.

“O my Banjo, you are soooo chweet...!”

Sputtered Bobby spontaneously, blinked thrice her eyes, eyes like ocean, moved forward and kissed me over my left cheek by way of such a smooch that it resonated within the ducts of my Universe, Universe, which the Nobel Laureate Albert Einstein had once described as Finite, but Unbound...

...My friable heart set racing, my eyes pointing downhill, my blush like a newlywed bride, a *dulhan*. As a matter of fact, my doting Mom too used to kiss me, and so did the adoring *masis*, but this particular kiss did blow me apart and quavered me out of my axis, longitudes strewn haywire.

Bobby panting heavily, her heart beat erratic, and distanced millimeters athwart my left cheek, as and when she ploughed her left-hand fingers through her thick, dark head of hair, waiting for me to respond, my eyes out of the blue caught her slim and fancy Swatch wrist watch of Swiss origin screaming 10:30.

No sooner those precise clock arms walloped; my inebriated state sized the frame of Tejwinder and Jagan filing into the classroom, and after that, rest of the pack...

3 hours later, upon returning home to Anupriya Villa, I was exposed to multitude of office staff, few relatives, neighbors, and family friends, which included Namrata masi, one who’d promised to act out the classy final and climax scene from Rajesh Khanna’s 1971 film, Anand, together with its dialogs, penned by the prolific *shayar*, Gulzar.

An instinctive panic struck me as I rushed towards Mom’s side

In the present day, back from her second home, the warm brownish-red Georgina McRobert Hospital, Mom wasn’t inclined upon our large Four Poster bed, but quiescent atop a wooden single cot in the center point of our

large hall, *grande sala* in Italian, where Namrata masi's caricature was supposed to have taken place.

Mom's glassy eyes feebly measured the congregate back and forth, as if she was trying to convey certain last minute message to Dad, mutedly pointing him towards Sahani uncle...

Was it about something else, or was it about his daughter, the doe-eyed Chitra, a topic which she'd overlooked and forgotten to take up with Dad...?

In the end, spotting me in my school uniform, into my eyes filled with alarm and tears to the rim, Mom last uttered, "Banjo you weepin'...?"

Buddha-like Jagmohan, ushered in Dad's closest chum, Doctor Tripathi uncle, aka Doctor Zhivago, along with his medical case, who a few minutes later, adjusting his pince-nez eyeglasses, muttered

Hey, Bulla Dada...

Pundit Sudhanshu too affirmed: "Bring forth *tulsi*, *gangajal*...!"

“Babu Moshai...!

...Zindagi aur maut uparwale ke haath hai Jahanpanah... Ussey naa toh aap badal sakte hain naa mein... Hum sab toh rangmanch ki kath-puthliyon hain... Jinki dorr uparwale ki ungliyon mein bandhi hain... Kab... Kahan... Keise uthegi... Yeh koi nahin bataa sakta hai...

...Ha...ha...ha... ”

Part 2
(Circa 1975-1984)

Prologue 3

Obituary

Sometime back

One hot summer evening, one of those dog days where the heat seemed to hang in the air like a weight, I found Dad sitting in his private study, *studio privato* in Italian, and visibly upset. His brow was furrowed, and his usual calm was replaced with tension. Sahani uncle was sitting across him and they were in the middle of serious political and social deliberations.

“I pinned such high hopes upon our Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. After her exemplary role in the Liberation of Bangladesh, I’d thought that she would excel, and fare better and better. But look what she’s done to the national character. Corruption, already a destructive factor since time immemorial has assumed mammoth proportions. Her henchmen flaunt their loyalty to her, and extract rewards. And she, I think has become supercilious.

Sahani uncle listened carefully as Dad continued: now see, when serious and plausible charges were being made against these people in the Press and even in Parliament, they instigated her by telling that these attacks was not on them but on her in person. To make matters worse, she evidently believed this and started using her brute majority in Parliament to stonewall all allegations...”

This is how the deathless evil of Parliament’s disruption, sometimes for the entire session, would begin

Dad’s lawyer Sahani uncle agreed: “Bharat da, I still remember the year 1973 when unfortunately rains were also scanty and when Indira Gandhi compounded the dreary situation by superseding 3 senior Supreme Court judges who had refused to take sides with her, in her confrontation with the higher Judiciary.

Dad nodded his head that the Legislature mustn’t interfere with the Judiciary. They were distinctly separated as per Indian Constitution. Sahani uncle felt pleased at Dad’s affirmation, and sustained

“...And how that announcement had hit the nation like a thunderbolt and dismayed the middle-class, especially those in my Legal profession...? At this time the most unexpected Allahabad High Court verdict of Raj Narain case, and which has disqualified her as the Member of Parliament and even barred her from contesting elections for 6 long years...”

~

June 26, 1975

Dad in a wound up voice: “Sahani, where are you, do you know what has happened...? Sahani uncle replied as a matter of fact: “Why, what’s the matter, Bharat da...? Dad in a hushed tone

“Yesterday, you know, an Emergency has been imposed...!”

Sahani uncle exclaimed at the top of his voice: “Whaaaaaat...Emergency...?”

Dad, shoving a copy of the Bombay edition of the iconic English Daily, Times of India: “Yes, I too was shocked to read this Obituary...!”

In cooperation Sahani uncle and Dad lapped all of Democracy, Truth and Liberty on the Obituary column of the Black Morning newspaper of June 26, 1975

D.E.M. O’Cracy beloved husband of T.Ruth, father of L.I. Bertie, brother of Faith, Hope and Justica expired on 26 June.

Their political discussions, their worries regarding Indira Gandhi’s invoking Article 352 of the Indian Constitution, granting her extraordinary powers, launching massive crackdown upon civil liberties and political opposition, continued without an end.

~

After 36 hours

Since Emergency has been declared, invaluable Fundamental Rights of the people are suspended, and the Prime Minister has virtually acquired all the powers as the Leader of a Totalitarian State.

Sahani uncle: “Bharat da, do you think this Emergency is a sort of vendetta by Indira Gandhi, since there isn’t a shred of material backing internal threat perception, and which prompted her to dispatch a top secret letter to the President, to impose National Emergency...?”

Dad: “I can’t say Sahani. Nevertheless I’ve heard that it was planned 3 to 4 years ago, since untoward incidents started building up. Remember the Railway Strike, attempts by the opposition to paralyze the government, which culminated in Loknayak Jayaprakash Narayan’s call to the Indian Army and Police not to obey illegal orders...”

Sahani uncle wryly smiled sensing Dad's unseen soft corner for Indira Gandhi, the person instrumental in bringing out his favorite, Bangladesh, on to the International map.

~

Yet, on some other day

“Bharat da, you know, nowadays I'm extra-cautious about our legal and accounts work. Although our business dealings are cent-percent legal and regulated, God knows when some odd decree would be passed out of the blue, and when we would be caught unawares by something awkward, something off-track...” Sahani uncle apprised Dad.

“Yes Sahani, I understand you're doing exemplary work. And since there's chaos everywhere; the moment we complain anything against the Government, or cry in the Press, or go to the Courts for Justice, we would be under the spotlight; the Police, the Bureaucracy after our lives...” Dad seconded.

“Vadi Sai, Jhuleylal Bera-hee-paar...When do we get back our civil liberties...?” Lamented Sahani uncle in despair and itching to light his favorite cigarette.

“Anyways, I'll think of an increment, your kids are growing up...?” Dad promised, much to the delight of Sahani uncle.

“And how’s your doe-eyed daughter Chitra...?”

Chapter 07

Sangam

August 15, 1975

4 important events occurred that day

One: India celebrated its Independence Day, the Prime Minister addressing us from the ramparts of the Red Fort, Delhi. It was special because we were facing an Internal Emergency where Rights were curbed, Duties stretched out.

Two: Iconic Bangladeshi President Sheikh Mujibur Rehman was assassinated in the wee hours at his residence in Dhaka, along with his wife, 3 of his sons, 2 daughter-in-laws, his brother, and 12 other people during *coup d'état* led by his own military officers.

Three: Release of the blockbuster action & adventure movie Sholay regarded as an important milestone in Hindi film industry. It was loosely based upon the Japanese epic film Seven Samurai...*Shichinin no Samurai*...in Japanese, by Akira Kurosawa, in which the common plot element was the recruiting and gathering of heroes into a team to attain a common goal.

The movie made by the exploratory Director Ramesh Sippy, solidified Amitabh Bachchan as a lead actor. Henceforth, Bollywood movies would be determined as Pre-Sholay and Post-Sholay...

Sholay boasted the tagline

The Greatest Star Cast ever assembled

Sholay Poster, from left to right, carried the pictures of the most handsome Dharmendra; the most accomplished Sanjeev Kumar, the *bindass* Hema Malini, the pensive Amitabh Bachchan, the naturalistic Jaya Bhaduri, and the unforgiving Amjad Khan.

Truly

...the Greatest Story ever told...!

Four: My Mom was resting upon Sholay, the embers, her funeral pyre

Jagged logs, to some extent inventively, to some extent indifferently, were piled upon Mom's soft body, draped in that quintessential milk white *Korial* sari, deep red borders, the borders and *pallus* carrying beautiful motifs drawn over it.

I, Banjo, a lad of 10, could hear wailings and howling all around, including those from mine. Some ejaculated in jerks, some in permanence, and some in concurrence.

They surfaced out of people whom I was familiar with, out of people whom I wasn't. Some were seated in close proximity to the funeral pyre, others at the steps of the cremation *ghat*, and again others, closeted inside a Kali temple.

Glockenspiel, in German which meant play of bell, which kept ringing from the nearby temple sounded similar to my school bell signaling that classes were over; for my Mom, her 40-odd years in this humankind...!

All in attendance at the sandy *ghat* were males, including grandpa with big mustaches, Dad, Sahani uncle, Doctor Tripathi uncle, neighbors, family friends, and office staff, the only female, my Mom, silenced and stamped out of the elixir called Life.

Most of them in starched *kurta pyjamas* were clad in white, white symbolizing the Hindu color of mourning. All were barefoot, including my Mom, her Red Alta covered feet peeping out of those jagged logs...

Except for Mom

and me

the entire world seemed to respond in its wholeness

She wasn't inert upon our large Four Poster bed, but at some alien site allocated near the dark night waters of River Ganga, east side of Kanpur.

My gaze transfixed upon her large Red *Bindi* at the center of her forehead and 3-inch of Red *Sindoor* in between her *Maang*, the parting of her shining black hair. My eyes also fell upon her *shakha paulaa* at her wrists, *shakha* being the white bangle made of conch shells and *paulaa*, a red coral one, no longer tinkling amid liveliness.

How I wanted to rush to her cozy bosom, cuddle her, play with her elephant face gold bangles, and receive all those cossets and kisses, but for these jagged logs, piled to some extent inventively, to some extent indifferently...?

Pundit Sudhanshu approached me and briefed me how to perform all sorts of *Pujas* from a *thali* which he was holding. Like him I too was draped in a *dhuti*, the sole difference was that it was my Mom on the pyre, not his...!

I somehow managed to repeat all those *mantras* which he babbled out in the mother of all languages, Sanskrit. However, except for the sporadic *Om Shantih....Shantih...Shantih...* I couldn't apprehend a word of it; therefore I conjured my own *mantras*.

“Maa, I will never let you down ever in my life. As long as I live to tell the tale, I shall remember you and keep the pennon of your name high on the wing. But Mom please comes back to me, don't ever leave me; I cannot survive without you...”

I broke down inconsolably. Despite the fact that tears of agony ripped my heart, virtually blinding me, Pundit Sudhanshu handed me over a log, blazing at one end like a torch.

I was Anupriya Kumarr's solitary son, solely accountable for carrying out such Hindu rituals, *samskaras*, of last rites, *anteyesti*, in which the most crucial facet, the lighting of the pyre, the *mukhagni*, was hammering at my frangible moth-eaten gateway.

He accompanied me around the pyre 7 times. Out of unspeakable grief, my head was spiraling, feet wobbling. I just about swooned. For that reason, he had to summon assistance from none other than Jagmohan, the broad-shouldered chauffeur, to prop me up from behind.

Jagmohan: “Stop lamenting Banjo baba, this is life, we all come into this world to depart one day...!” Me: “But why My Mom out of the 4 billion odd people in the world, one barely who had stepped into her 40s....?”

I then glanced at her one last time, and inhaling a deep gulp of deathly air, started enlisting sure footfalls: “In the name of the 7 worlds...7 continents...7 oceans...7 generation of ancestors...I relieve you, O Mom...I alleviate you of this human bondage...”

By way of this truism, I lit the pyre by means of the flamed torch, Agni; the sweltering Red Agni, ostensibly amid Coal-Black eyes, Coal-Black hair...

I thereby handed over my Mom to the searing Agni, who engulfed her by His perceptible 7 arms, within the ambit of His 7 apparent rays of light.

In no time the sluggish flames hit the starry and silent skies, save for the obdurate Eyes of Gods. Unflinching Agni, *Saptajihva*, licked using His presumably 7 pitiless tongues the kindhearted fluids, *Rasas*, out of Mom's delicate body, but none out of the unwavering Heart of Gods.

Blistering torture annihilated me, even if not the distant nonchalant globe in the expanse around. Unendurable pains vanquished me even though not dent the steadfast Eternal Laws.

Utter loneliness broke me, although not the flight of carefree birds soaring high above Kanpur, nor the swimming of the blithe fish in translucent Ganga waters. No more than guttural sounds, escaping my gullet, corresponded with that of the slit-end of a goat kid, emerging from a close by butcher shop.

At this tender age

I was in the midst of a Blizzard

Blizzard called Life

In next to no time, the inventive but indifferent logs, bit-by-bit, and without any qualms, condensed in size, and minimized Mom's quintessential milk white silk sari, deep red borders, first into a ladies handkerchief, and then, into a fabric named Oblivion...!

All that was noticeable were leaping Red flames of Agni, devouring my Mom by way of its supposedly 7 brutal tongues, and in turns me, in entirety. Ferocious glowing Red logs, hungrily and eagerly, gobbled up the Red Sindoor...the Red Bindi...the Red Alta...by way of its allegedly 7 vicious tongues.

Figuratively speaking, this demon, *rakshasa*, gobbled all of her by means of its 7 sadist tongues, leaving zero trace, except goddamn immobilized witnesses, by the side of River Ganga, on this endless night of long knives.

In no time everything, including my Life, was *Swaha*

Pundit Sudhanshu and some unfamiliar hands dragged me away, even though my fanatical desire was to remain as close to her as feasible, close to her dissolved miscellany. My skin, though unscathed in this ongoing tussle, my scorching heart, bled black-and-blue. I touched my heart, found its regular beat missing.

Yet, regrettably, I was alive

Angst-ridden, grief-stricken, tormented by Laws of Nature, I repeated my own words: “I’ve got to be alive and prove myself a worthy son...!” My Dad, broken heart, disheveled, in a state of despair, was in insufferable pain.

~

He insisted that I accompany him to the *teertha raj*, Triveni Sangam, to immerse Mom’s ashes. Pundit Sudhanshu, having roots in Allahabad, had strong beliefs that by immersing her ashes in *Triveni*, her soul would attain salvation, *Moksha*, and finally cross over the arduous cycle of birth and death, just like an escape from the deadly Jaws

Jaws...of Steven Spielberg, the Movie with the bite

My life was real, unlike the reel unfurled in the prototypical and world’s first ever summer blockbuster releases of this year, which was regarded as the watershed moment in motion picture industry, wherein Steven Spielberg was like the Greek Trojan horse through which the studios began to re-assert their power.

While in my story, it was my Mom sucked in by the Laws of Nature, in this film it was this humungous man eating great white shark, attacking beach-goers at a fictional resort.

While in my life, it was full of little stories of childhood, defined by a real mother and her own flesh and blood, Jaws was without a shark, all it had were 3 full-scale mechanical models of 25 feet, towed by submerged sleds, or, guided by hidden scuba divers.

While there was only the sounds of throbbing which emerged from deep within me, in Jaws, it was the alternating pattern of 2 notes, a classic piece of suspense music, synonymous with danger approaching, the Shark Theme created by John Williams, and which could be described as grinding away at oneself, just as a monstrous shark would do, instinctual, relentless, unstoppable.

While I was a ruined fellow, the Jaws raked in unprecedented US\$ 100 million in rentals in just about 80 days of its release...

In an inebriated state, I hardly remembered the journey by car to Allahabad. The chauffeur drove all through the darkest night of my life, speeding 80 miles per hour, intermittently slowing down at villages, some inconspicuous towns such as Fatehpur.

Dad and I reclined at the rear seat almost like cadavers, ruined, in a state of shock, and as if passing through keelhaul, the medieval punishment in which we were like dragged through the water under a boat.

Tilak-dhari Pundit stoically was seated next to the chauffeur. Glancing at his side face, I mused that if he would not have been a Pundit, he would've surely become a film star...! And beside him sat lonesome the urn containing Mom's charred remains, tied by way of a Red cotton cloth, a sack full of assorted *Puja Samagri* by its side.

My heavy eyelids parted a little as I rearranged my *dhuti*. It was dawn and the Sun had already imposed His presence, trouncing out the Moon. I'd dozed off upon Dad's lap, my 2 feet spread out at the rear seat. His bare chest was moist, not out of sweat, but out of bucketful of tears, tears for his beloved Anupriya.

Upon reaching Triveni, without any postponement we hired a boat and rowed deep into the waters. How shallow, forceful, or clear River Ganga appeared that day, or was it really the River Yamuna, deep and greenish, I couldn't make a stab at...?

I couldn't decipher any 3rd color in this holy confluence, however, unlike Ganga and Yamuna, River Saraswati had vanished underwater. Alas...! For me, everything looked Red, Red of the Bindi...Red of the Sindoor...Red of the Alta...

Away from the banks, locating deep water, Dad and I uncovered the Red cotton cloth from the urn. We couldn't hold back our unplumbed tears, our vulnerable tears of desperation and nakedness. We harrowed at each other's Red eyes, shuddering violently, lamenting wildly.

No one really bore any clue or rejoinder to Destiny, Destiny in black-and-white, whether scribbled on paper or over palm leaves, except for its Creator, the Almighty Himself...!

Pundit ji, once more busy with his *mantras*, sounding illegible to me, finally instructed in pure Hindi, “*Ab aap jal mein phool pravah karein...!*”

Imagine it was so effortless for Pundit Sudhanshu to utter these 7 words, the remains of my Mom mere flowers, *phool*, however, for my Dad, it was his 7 worlds, and for me, my 7...!

Very last, we accomplished the elaborate ceremony by taking a dip into the Sangam, perhaps to wash away our sins, sins of having loved a Beloved, and sins of having loved a Mother respectively. Thoroughly bedraggled after the *asthi visarjan*, Dad decided it was now prudent that we put our feet up.

In actual fact, since last 24 hours, and much like mavericks, we’d been engrossed in packing off Momma into another world, strung by our bejeweled memories, soaked to the skin in our bloody tears. What we had completely overlooked was that the mechanism of our minds and bones had begun creaking loudly, robbed off the balmy oil and grease of respite...?

Hitherto, the parcel now duly labeled, stamped and dispatched, like that of any other consignment of M/s Bharat Kumarr & Co., we somewhat became unfilled, unemployed.

Pundit Sudhanshu recommended that we accompany him to his *ashram* beside River Ganga where he had once carried out some sort of *Shakti Puja*, Sangam in Allahabad being one of the *Maha Shaktipeethas*, where the finger of Maa Sati was supposed to have fallen.

“What...Finger...?” I was dumbfounded.

I found the story of Pundit Sudhanshu quite bizarre, summary wherein Lord Shiva carried upon His shoulders the corpse of Maa Sati, His consort, Her body parts lessening all along the path He wandered. And the spots where Her body parts fell were later revered as *Shaktipeethas*, and which totaled to 51...!

As a matter of fact, I found Dad commonsensical, having concluded Mom’s rites, and simply coming to Sangam to immerse her ashes, nothing more, nothing less.

I insisted that we check in at that same hotel where we’d put up barely a few months ago. Therefore, after cutting through several buildings bearing Indo-

Islamic and Indo-Saracen architectural motifs, we finally reached that unforgettable Hotel.

I requested the manager that could I avail that same room, room number 7...?

“I’m sorry; it’s occupied by a newly-wed couple from Delhi...”

“But please...” My Dad insisted in addition. “You know, it’s for my son, my lone son, see how badly he’s crying for his Mom. He just wants to live and savor some moments of his evocative memory...”

“Sir, it’s beyond my jurisdiction to dislodge our honored guests for such flimsy reasons...”

Noticing the manager’s stance hardening towards my so-called Flimsy Demand, the defenselessness attitude suffusing Dad’s persona, something made me leap, leap up two stairs at a time, sprinting like mad across the corridor, eventually landing at the threshold of room no 7, in 20 seconds flat.

I banged it hard, frenziedly

A fine-looking figure peeped out in panic, decked up in Red blouse and petticoat, sounds of shower spray emerging from the background. “Welllllll, what’s this, who’s this...?”

The lady stared at me amid questioning eyes. By that time, the receptionist and my Dad were by my side, panting, and grabbing my frail arms. “I’m sorry this boy mistook your room for his own, profound apologies Madame...” The manager explained in a taught and practiced manner...

“Excuse we please...!” Dad, now quite embarrassed, expressed to the lady, soothingly tugging at my arms.

“No wait a minute, son, is that the truth...?” She quizzed me, delving straight into my eyes, while hurriedly picking up a *dupatta*, Red in color, from a nearby rack and covering her torso.

Heedlessly draped in that *dhuti*, having born intelligent looks, at this moment intent and tearful, I looked not just someone to be brushed aside lightly, especially whilst my mother’s memories are drawn in...

“No ma’am, this man is mendacious. This happened to be the room in which I’d last resided with my Mom while in Allahabad, one who’s now subterranean into the Sangam waters...

...Please ma’am, I want to make use of this unchanged room if you kindly reallocate elsewhere...” I blurted out feverishly, sobbing at the same time.

My Dad, quite embarrassed at my adamant behavior, tried to whisk me away: “Listen son...!” Nevertheless, I was in no mood to yield, especially after gaining partial success through the sympathetic words and kind looks from this decked up and concerned lady.

“Who’s this...?” Growled a burly young man stepping out of the showers

He appeared drenched, droplets of water shimmering out of his thick mop of chest hair, mutton chops beard. He barked, “What’s this commotion Sonia, what the hell is goin’ on...?”

“Sir, I beg your pardon...!” The receptionist pleaded. Mutton chops’ hirsute and clammy palms shoved me as he roared, reasserting his masculinity.

“Get lost...!”

I was about to topple, just when the receptionist deftly caught me from behind and literally dragged me away. My Dad, sniveling, and too weary to be vexed, followed us nonplused. I was shrieking. The manager conveyed assured glances to my Dad that he was quite capable of handling such awkward situations, these being trifling elements of his professional hazards.

Whilst at the last bend of the corridor, I remember, I couldn’t help myself lispings a curse at that sourpuss Mutton Chops, at the same time as silently showering my heartfelt blessings over to that fine-looking, tear-stained lady in Red *dupatta*...

Much after that, bypassing the aristocratic Anand Bhawan where Mahatma Gandhi once deliberated with other National Leaders over vital patriotic and strategic issues, our car straightaway headed west towards Kanpur.

For me, the journey was an upsetting one wherein we sped along the highway of tears of anguish, pathway of sweat of antagonism. Each mile felt like a silent scream, as if the wheel themselves echoed the turmoil within, rolling relentlessly over the cracks of sorrow and unresolved pain.

Pundit Sudhanshu and Dad were somber, preferring not to rake up the Hotel issue, lest I again become fractious and mislay my brittle bearings. The chauffeur, Jagmohan, as usual, was speeding through the broad Sher Shah Suri built Grand Trunk Road, as though this great medieval ruler and administrator were hounding him with a big stick all through its 200 odd kilometers.

Frazzled, in consequence softening up at the pliable seat, and tilted sideways to steer clear of anybody's uncomfortable gaze, I gaped through the open window.

Further, diving deep into the sponge of the seat as though it was the pliant bosom of Mom, her voice seemed to croon to the tune of famed music composer duo, Laxmikant-Pyarelal, from the movie...Shor...against the swaying trees, the checkered paddy fields, the ill-fed hamlets, the amoebic ponds, the twittering birds, the progressing clouds, the gusty winds...

*Ek pyaar kaa nagma hai maujon ki ravaani hai
zindagi aur kuchh bhi nahin terii meri kahaani hai...*

*Kuchh paakar khona hai kuchh khokar paana hai
jeevan kaa matlab toh aana aur jaana hai*

*Do pal ke jeewan se ek umra churaani hai
zindagi aur kuchh bhi nahin terii meri kahaani hai....*

Chapter 08

The Storm

I, Banjo, half-dead, life in quandary, returned home to Anupriya Villa, all set to prepare series of ceremonies such as *pind daan*, *shraddha* and *tarpan*. Post obsequies, all that was perceptible of that dainty 5 feet 2 inch human configuration was a 75 cm tall, 50 cm broad portrait, hung in our lounge hall where Mom had breathed her last.

I had just experienced the first major Blizzard of my Life

However, I was bowled over to notice that over the surface of the picture frame, dunno which ingenious relative had glued a large Red *Bindi* at the center of her forehead, and applying a 3 inch streak of Red *Sindoor* at her *Maang*, the parting of her hair...?

Sindoor, comprising of turmeric and lime, stared realistically through her portrait, Mom's eyes looking expressive from within her golden rim glasses. *Shantipuri Tant* sari of Bengal was eye-catching too, the *pallu* covering most of her hair, shining black. Her nose

Mom: "Banjo, my little one, you sport such a cute and crooked nose..."

Me: "...And so do you have one, Mom...!"

And we used to cuddle each other in playful humor oblivious of rest of the world

Mom: "You know, with this kind of nose, you won't ever find a fairy in your life...!"

Me: "Fairies...! Uhh...how many kinds of fairies exist, Mom, and from where can they be brought into being...?"

Mom: "Why, there is one Pink fairy, there is one Yellow fairy, there is one White fairy, and there is also a Black..."

Me: "*Achchaa*....Hmm I like 'em all, the ones that are Pink, Yellow and White, but Mom I don't like the Black one...!"

Mom: “Yeah, you’re right, the Black one isn’t with a black skin, or with black eyes, or with black hair, but with a Black heart. If truth be told, she isn’t at all a Fairy; she’s a basilisk, a mythical reptile whose look or breath could kill...!”

Me, after snuggling to her: “A basilisk sounds scary...! But you know Momma, I’m fond of Pink; the Pink in your sari that you wore yesterday evening. And let me tell you, I like your Purple sari the most...”

Mom: “But then Banjo, you know, I don’t like you insist me that I wear that gaudy Purple sari even during broad daylight, it’s so hot and sticky in Kanpur...”

Me: “No, I don’t want to listen to anything; you’ll have to wear that Purple one. You look so gorgeous in Purple and White.”

Mom: “White....?”

Me: “Yeah, that’s the color of your face. But you know I’m also fair, fairer than Kanha...”

Mom: “O sure...! That means you’ll find Radha in your life...!”

Me: “Mom, who was Radha...?”

Mom: “*Beta*, Radha was Kanha’s friend, His Beloved, His Eternal Beloved...!”

Me: “Maa, why is Radha called an Eternal Beloved...?”

Mom: “Now...now...I’ll definitely tell you about Radha-Krishna, and also their depiction in Indian Culture, especially in Painting and Music. However tomorrow begins your Final examinations. C’mon, now give me a tight hug and go off to sleep. Aren’t you my *Raja beta*, my *chaand*, my *suraj*...?”

While chewing the tasty cotton of her *pallu*, I would doze off along with her lullaby

Chandaa re tu meraa Suraj re tu
aaa meri aankhon kaa taara re tu...
Jeeti hun mein bas terey liye

Save for this hour, I blankly stared at the portrait of Mom, appearing much broader in the frame than she really was. Then, gazing absorbedly into her eyes I broke down into inexorable sobs: *“Maa, tu kitni achhi hai, kitni bholi hai, kitni pyaari hai...O meri Maa...O Maa...O Maa...!”*

After the torrential shower of my salted tears, which speckled onto the ground, I normalized, “Maa, I’m really feeling nervy and stressed out, tomorrow commences my final exams of Class 6. I’m so perturbed. See it’s almost midnight now, and I haven’t yet carried out revisions...”

It was always my Mom who meticulously taught my lessons, and was quite zealous that throughout I bag the first position in Class.

For that reason, even as convalescing at the hospital bed of Georgina McRobert, she would ask me to bring along my English and Mathematics books and copies during visit hours. After cuddling me tenderly she would render dictations, explain me chapters and set selected questions on a separate sheet.

During my Class 4 examinations, how amazed was I at her intuition, 90 percent of the questions that she’d set, appeared in the question papers...? And in various subjects like Geography, Grammar and Literature, I’d scored above 90 percent.

Sheer magic, I deliberated. Alas, tonight was different; it was a night of crisis, who would teach me...?

How could I ever come first and fulfill her wishes...? These and several other thorny questions rattled my head. I was thrown off-balance. I’d no clue from where to start, where to finish. Subject matter of Class 6, in its enormity, seemed like diving into deep uncharted waters and then safely swimming back to the shores.

I recalled the bitter incident at school a couple of years ago when Mrs. Mehra, my class teacher, had questioned the class in her nightingale voice as to who would come first

I’d blurted out with utter boastfulness: “Who at all can come first except me...?”

It was then that she’d slapped me hard right across my cheeks in front of the class. Consequently and irately, accompanied by egg headedness, I’d avowed

Come what may, I'll always stand first not only in Class 4 but in lives too

Now, at this hour of litmus test, where did my supreme self-confidence, rather my overconfidence vanish...? And to top it, after my bizarre and intemperate conduct at the Hotel in Allahabad, I'd already busted the vow of keeping the pennon of Mom's name high on the wing.

Ill at ease, I wiped off my tears and sat down to study. But, no matter how hard I tried to concentrate, Mom's face would now and then flash in front of me, her quintessential milk white *Korial* sari, *shakha paulaa* upon her wrists, *shakha* being the white bangle made of conch shells, and *paulaa*, of red coral.

I shut my book, ostensibly weighing a ton now. Flustered, I felt like smashing that dratted book onto the floor. Clueless and disconcerted, I clasped my head by way of both hands and slumped over the natural distressed finished study table.

I must've dozed off, for the clock winked 2 o'clock when I fortuitously woke up. The next day happened to be the most crucial examination, of Mathematics. This year, in Mathematics, apart from Arithmetic, Geometry and Algebra had also been introduced, as if Arithmetic wasn't weighty enough...!

Once again I started concentrating on those complex Mathematical equations, focusing a bit more, and at the same time caressing the Red thread, neatly coiled around my wrist. I smiled indiscernibly, perhaps for the first time after Mom had left for her heavenly abode. It was the same piece of Red thread that I'd brought back from Fatehpur Sikri, Agra....

~

Oh Agra

Well, after I stood First in Class 4, as a reward, my parents had taken me to the wonder Taj Mahal and clicked a few lovely pictures against the backdrop of the illumined tomb, built by an Emperor in memory of his beloved wife.

It was none other than the artistic and spendthrift Mughal *Badshah*, Shah Jahan, who built a mausoleum for his 3rd wife, Mumtaz Mahal, a Persian princess who unfortunately expired after giving birth to their 14th child...! Imagine, 13 children and pregnant again

...Taj Mahal, the magnificent jewel of Islamic Art, aesthetically combined assorted elements from Islamic, Persian, Ottoman, Turkish, and Indian architectural styling...

“This universally admired among masterpieces of the world’s heritage deserves to secure the UNESCO’s tag one day...” Mom and Dad had observed in unison.

It appeared yet more spectacular during that full moon night, my parents holding their hands together, staring at the dark waters of River Yamuna and looking into each other’s eyes at the same time.

In 7th heaven, Dad broke into an Urdu *shayari*, lines rendered by Farhat Ehsas of Bahraich, and Mom hiding her face in bashfulness

Chaand bhi hairaan...

dariyaa bhi pareshani mein hai

Aks kis ka hai ki...

itni roshni paani mein hai

I guessed what paean Dad began to sing for Mom, in praise of her unequalled exquisiteness: “The Moon mystified, the water befuddled too, in wonderment of whose mirror image has set upon the waters, which makes it shimmer in radiance...?”

Afterward, I marveled at the extempore narrative the old skullcap, Islamic-bearded guide, clad in an *achkan*, delivered us

“...Taj created out of the genius of the core team of 37 men, and which included sculptors from Bukhara, calligraphers from Syria and Persia, stonemasons from Baluchistan, inlayers from Deccan India, and not to forget the blood and sweat of around 20,000 workers gathered from all over northern India, and duly set under the hawk eyes of its 3 architects...”

Wow...! I reflected, strolling in the middle of its sprawling Mughal gardens. How they reflected the Mughal love for symmetrical layouts and lush greenery, and done in *Charbagh* style...!

Mislaed in that bygone era, amid utmost devotion, the guide recited a number of Emperor’s favorite verses from the Koran, verses that

were engraved upon its walls by the calligrapher. The spectacular 35 meter onion dome, the 40 meter symmetrical minarets, 4 in number, resonated in its verses.

As a final point, the attention-grabbing guide signed off bobbing his beard by way of a bow, a *salaam*, soon to be acknowledged by Dad by means of handsome smiles, and generous tips, *bakshish*.

In subsequent months, the treasured spectacle of Taj Mahal lingered within my psyche, our group photo clicked by a wandering professional via his Olympus OM-1 camera, and the photo proving to be an incomparable one, a coveted one.

My Dad too clued-up that this wasn't our maiden trip to Agra, we'd visited way back when I was 2 years of age. Mom smiled and added that she would positively show me all those photographs, especially concerning little Banjo in the lap, the chubby-chubby one, after we go back to Kanpur.

But as of now, we'd called it a day, hiring a light horse-drawn carriage, a *Tonga*, to commute us back to our stately guest house. Sounds of its hoofs, clip-clop, and clip-clop were the only sequence of beats at we entered the sprawling bungalow, a British Raj legacy, and nowadays smartly converted into a lodge.

It consisted of rambling flower gardens, a driveway comprising of a gate in and a gate out, and which led to a beautiful raised bungalow, front entrance through a porch, and someplace where our gleaming 1962 model royal blue Ambassador Mark II car, famously bearing the number plate UPD 2322 was parked.

Square and huge, rather cuboids-shaped rooms, they boasted of high ceilings and comprised adjustable ventilators drawn by a sturdy lash.

Windows were French, chandeliers Belgian, and tiling Italian, but the toilet flush was Indian, coarsely resembling the cacophonous clatter of an old diesel-powered road roller.

Presume, all three of us visiting the lavatory an average 5 times a day, therefore each one of us having to bear the brunt of that jarring

road rolling noise 15 times, which then equally followed by gallons of water, torturously outpouring upon our wee bit of wastage...

Me: "O Dad, I think Momma is somewhat embarrassed to use the lavatory, she must be thinking that we've been keeping a tab...!"

Dad: "No *beta*, it's not only us who've been unwearyingly counting, but all of the 20,000 toiling workers of the Taj Mahal, in all 20,002..."

Me: "But Dad, you've coolly omitted those 37 geniuses who mattered the most...!"

Dad impishly glancing at Mom and wiping his mustache by way of sweep of his right hand forefinger: "Right son, so that adds up to 20,039, naa...?"

"Not yet Dad, you've skipped over the *Badshah* himself, total arriving at a portly figure, 20,040...." I concluded.

We thus displayed our know-it-all Mathematical smarts, chuckling to our heart's content, and waiting for Mom to respond. It came sooner than we expected

"Okay guys, now you better sharpen your Mathematical skills further, and count the number of clothing that you've got to wash and iron for tomorrow...!"

Mom's eyebrow curled up, much like waves reaching the crescendo on a high full moon tide. Hitherto, late till midnight, giggling all the way, together Dad and son, we washed our dirty linen, ironed them deftly, with just a solitary casualty, Dad's brand new casual light blue, striped shirt...!

...At 2 o'clock, while recollecting my Agraite Mathematics, I smiled emotively, tears straining down my cheeks.

I touched the Red thread coiled around my wrist and got carried away once more, this time to Buland Darwaza, Fatehpur Sikri, a few kilometers off Agra.

...Buland Darwaza built by Akbar the Great, however frightened me, by its imposing façade, and precipitous flight of steps in red

sandstone. Keeping the fascia of its sheer stairway in my mind, I naively mused,

“Akbar must’ve been a giant of a man...!”

Facing south towards Buland Darwaza, and inside the quadrangle of the mosque, Jama Masjid, was the solemn tomb, the *Dargah*, of the great *Sufi* saint, Salim Chisti.

Dad was keen to visit this particular site after identifying himself with the folklore of Akbar Badshah. It was said that the *Badshah*, as a mark of respect for the *Sufi* saint, had built this hallowed tomb.

Salim Chisti, or Sheikhu Baba, as Akbar reverently addressed him, had foretold the birth of the *Badshah*’s son, who was named Prince Salim after the mystic. I smiled and appreciated Dad’s failing, which was none other than me, his own son, Banjo...!

Marble building delightfully set in a geometric mold, quite appealed to my wits. It assumed an ivory-like appearance, the plinth ornamented in the midst of mosaics, black and yellow.

Door to the main chamber intricately carved with Arabesque patterns, largely bore inscriptions from the Koran. Interior bays were bordered in multipliable layers of brown, while the relief panels emblazoned in Koranic verses, shone in blue...

Keeping our heads covered in reverence, we all entered the carved and printed chamber tomb, white marble floor tiled, and inlaid by way of multicolored stones. The tomb of the mystic, replete with ebony *chhapar khat* enclosure, and surrounded by marble cenotaph and mother of pearl mosaic, was covered by an airy green cloth.

I found the *Maulvis* busy fanning it by way of a bunch of *attar* sprayed full-sized peacock feather. Emerging Blessed, I was animated to thrice circumambulate the environs of the tomb through the roofed passageway.

It was exhilarating too, to discover carved *jalis*, which were nothing but stone pierced screens in intricate geometric style, leading to an entrance to the south.

Devotees, including us, were asked to request for blessings of the mystic and seek fulfillment of our wishes. As it was popularly believed, that tying a Red thread on the marble screen of the main tomb would persistently remind the *Sufi* saint of our wishes, I rushed to tie one, along with Mom.

Mom: “What did you ask for yourself, Banjo...?”

Me: “I want to stand first in Class 4...!”

Mom laughed. “Hmm that’s excellent...! And is there anything that you’ve asked for your Dad and me...?”

I nodded my head longingly, looking up into the eyes of my doting parents, one by one, and wishing that this moment never end. Playfully, I untied a Red thread of an unknown petitioner, tucking it into my trouser pocket.

...And whenever I sat down to study for my exams, I festooned this Red thread as a lucky charm, as a talisman. Tonight I smiled enthusiastically at the same Red thread which was coiled around my wrist.

I touched it. Then I, as if in a spell, sat down to study for full one and a half hours, dividing time equally among Arithmetic, Geometry and Algebra, pushing deep into the early hours of daybreak.

Next day, I was happy and upbeat, due to positive occurrence. Other Papers too came out easier by the day. Finally, it was time for the results to be declared. Confidently I went to school...

My English teacher, Mrs. Silesia, now the Class teacher of 6, announced, “Hmm guess children, who has stood first...?”

“Banjo Kumarr...!” Bobby shouted at the top of her lungs, startling the entire class. Mrs. Silesia nodded her head in the midst of gratification, offering a genuine smile, “Yes, you’re right Bobby, it’s your Banjo Kumarr...!”

Barring the trio of Tejwinder, Jagan and Farhan, total class cheered me up. Yes, I looked-for the approbation very much, so fragile had my psyche turned out to be...! In that moment, their applause felt like a lifeline, a fleeting reassurance that I wasn’t as invisible as I had begun to feel.

Virtually I'd stopped interacting with anybody. Still, Bobby tried to root for me many a times. I even learnt from few reliable friends that she'd even shed tears, blubbered like a child, upon hearing news about my Mom's demise, further leading to my subsequent absence.

One day she out and out rebuked Tejwinder Singh whilst he poked fun of my tonsured head, as per last rites of my Mom

"Tumhaari maa murtii, toh shayad samajh mein aata, jaanwar kahin ke...!"
Bobby was infuriated at him, *"Ab tum zaraa Banjo ko kuchh keh kar dekho, tumhe peet peet ke behaal naa kar diya toh meraa naam Bobby nahi..."*

Never had I witnessed Bobby in such an enraged shape before...! Irony was that, more she tried to shield me from ragging, by means of temper as her bludgeon; the more I grew to be fearful of her. I deliberated that anger was the last thing I sought in my life.

Yet friends, who were common to both of us, somehow relished the idea of Bobby harboring soft spot towards me, out letting the same through sporadic emotional gushes. Ours was perhaps the only big romance in Class.

One day, one of her close girlfriends, Jane Diaz, locked us up inside the classroom during interval, breaking into one of the songs of the season

Hum tum ek kamre mein bund hai

aur chaabi kho jaaye

Embarrassed by this genus of funniness, what time I requested Jane to unlock the latch, she impishly sustained

Terey naino ki bhool bhoolaiyaa mein

...Bobby kho jaaye

This peppy song pictured upon Rishi Kapoor, and the new find Dimple Kapadia, was doing no good to me. Ever since Bobby kissed me upon my left cheek, the kiss which continued to resonate within the ducts of my Universe, I literally had stopped peering into her eyes.

Her eyes like the ocean made me feel nervous, my stammering increasing, whenever confronted

Bobby: "Banjo, have you watched the movie, Bobby, my namesake...?"

Me: “No...nooo...aayi don’t watch films...Still my Mom had seen this fffffilm, saying that Raj Kapoor could manage to shape the ultimate blockbuster of 1973, recouping all his previous losses, she bet it would become a trendsetter in times to come...”

Bobby: “Undeniably a trendsetter, and did your Mom talk about the dress which Bobby wore...?”

Me: “Wwwwhich dressss...?”

Bobby: “Why, that skimpy and brilliant cobalt blue mini skirt, having a hemline several inches above the knee, and duly matched by an alluringly knotted up front blouse, the diminutive polka dot chiffon blouse...”

She then breathlessly finished off the sentence: “You know I’ve purchased a replica of that stuff...!” Clueless, I looked up into her eyes, like the ocean, and noticed few extra waves.

“O.K...!” I remarked.

“Simply okay...? You know, Jane revealed about my aesthetic dress to Tejwinder Singh. Man, he’s dying to see me wearing it, that idiot of a chap. In its place look at you, you don’t...?”

To her chagrin, she walked exclusive of the rest of her string of words, swirling her plaid mini skirt in cadence to her delightful girl necktie of the same tartan as her skirt, and accidentally exposing her black cotton panties...

Wordlessly, recalling the resounding punch that I’d planted upon smart aleck’s ears a couple of years back, I wrathfully contemplated that Tejwinder’s D-Day would shortly arrive: “Before long he too would be duffed up, his ears turning red, starting from light pink, to dark pink, to red, then to beetroot red...”

Notwithstanding the movie character Bobby, who’d captured an entire generation’s heart by her disarming exuberance, cutesy miniskirts and a warm, friendly proposition, we were certainly not the ones to be left out of the fantasy world.

Conversely, at home, the atmosphere remained dissimilar. My Dad kept himself less and less visible, preferring to be busier. The villa, Mom's belongings, her memories, haunted him.

One day, while brushing off his jacket, in continuation of a habit introduced by Mom, I discovered a piece of paper jutting out of the lapel.

Even though my Mom had strictly warned me not to poke my nose upon others or any of others' belongings, conversely, on chancing upon her name, Anupriya, neatly inscribed over it, I couldn't but help delve through its contents.

It was a heartfelt poem, a threnody, titled, The Storm. Truly, Dad had faced The Storm. Poor him...

Chapter 09

Boom

“What are you pilfering from your Dad’s pocket...?” Fat aunt of Deoghar, in her Afro-American hairstyle, startled me by means of her blunted mannerism. Her huge swarthy frame obstructed the sunrays as she engaged the middle of the three and a half feet broad door in akimbo, her hands on her hips, elbows turned outwards.

I jumped out of my pants, the fawn one, and my favorite. I agreed I shouldn’t have examined the threnody, The Storm...

I was guilty of prying upon Dad, rather the depth of his emotions, which I considered was ethically in the wrong, carrying no justification whatsoever...?

In abated breath, I watched the fat aunt of Deoghar in a tardigrade gait waddle the length of the room like a tortoise, and snatching from me the threnody, The Storm. She growled. “Hmm I thought you’d stolen money...!”

Saying so, she hurriedly browsed through every bit of the poem, I watching her terror-stricken. Her watermelon-shaped head swayed from shores of Japan to shores of California. Implications dawned upon me that sooner or later the Ring of Fire across the vulnerable Asia-Pacific region would ring, and surely would ring loud and thunderous...!

She shoved it back into Dad’s lapel pocket, ten-percent troubled emotions in her eyes. However, when she faced me, those were ninety-percent bloodshot. She sneered, “You must be punished for your nasty deed of snooping into others’ belongings, Banjo...”

She once again waddled out of the room like a tortoise, and in next to no time, waddled inside brandishing a nasty stick, not exactly a stick but a rudimentary rod-shaped wood, dumped mistakenly by the carpenter. It bore a bow like string attached to it and was that accessory tool which was used to screw holes...! But as of now, it came in handy as a cane

“C’mon, stretch out your hand...” Perspicacious that I was right handed, I slowly stretched out my opposite hand, my left hand.

One..! Stick made a whoosh sound and knocked down in an arch. “Aagh...!” I screamed.

Two...! Stick screamed. “Aaaaaagh...!” Louder was my whoooooooooosh.

Three...Four...Five...Six...Seven...Eight...Church bells kept ringing. I started crying. In the name of Jesus I plead mercy. “Please aaaaanty...” I whimpered.

“Wait for another two and you’ll be fixed...” She countered sadistically, relentlessly.

My hand began to pain horrendously that I didn’t at all feel the pain of the last two blows. They’d become numb. My eyes were flowing tears of agony as if I was crucified.

Following the ordeal, I kept myself out of sight of this fat lady, who basically was grandpa’s folly. In fact, it was her mother who’d been an expert of a midwife and who had assisted in the delivery of my Dad...

Baby Dad I was informed was an obstinate maternity case and in fact that lady (fat aunt of Deoghar’s mother) attained the title of not only Dad’s wet nurse, but Dad’s life-giver too. Introduction not yet over, that midwife was a product of my real grandpa’s in-laws or in pun, outlaws.

For that reason, grandpa with big mustaches just couldn’t say no to this lady from Deoghar, once she expressed her profound desire to troop to Kanpur, for a Degree in Nursing from Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi University of Medicine.

Rather, he volunteered to sponsor her entire bill, which included her lodging at the hostel, and her tuition fee. And, during weekends, she would drop in at our place for a change and some home-style atmosphere.

At this time, after Mom’s departure from this earthly world, her visits had frequented, as she assumed more import approximating the manageress. And whenever she would drop in, she would greet grandpa agreeably; touch his two feet one by one by way of her bowed watermelon-shaped head, roofed by Afro-American hair.

Perhaps that’s all what grandpa craved from people around him

Once more, this grandpa with big mustaches wasn't my real grandpa, my real grandpa, Gajanan Damodar, abbreviated as GD, was dead long ago.

...This old man with big mustaches, named Dushyant Kumarr, abbreviated as DK was in fact real grandpa's cousin and was his business partner. Together, they used to manage a large architectural and construction firm in Rangoon, British Burma, in the style of M/s G.D. & Co.

Due to political tribulations cropping up in Rangoon, both had to revert to Calcutta in 1937. Specifically speaking, owing to separation of India and Burma, their contract abruptly terminated. However, in Calcutta, GD remained bit bothered...

Sooner or later, identifying a small amount of construction opportunities in the city of Kanpur, a thousand odd kilometers upstream River Ganga, GD decided to relocate along with his two sons, Ganesh Kumarr and Bharat Kumarr, separated by only a year, and his much younger daughter, Ujjala.

Needless to say his cousin DK accompanied him, and for a few years assisted him in architectural and construction activities of M/s G.D. & Co. at Kanpur, then Cawnpore. They managed to cultivate some important clients, including M/s Allen Textile Mills Limited. All the same, after GD expired, DK couldn't carry on the company.

Since then, DK virtually led a retired life. Being a bachelor too helped him stay on his own. DK anxiously expected Ganesh kaka and Dad to grow up and stand on their two feet, grandpa was perhaps analogous to the gardener anticipating the fruits to ripen.

Coincidentally, Ganesh kaka, the elder, proved less enterprising, relocating to Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh, after securing the very first 10 to 5 desk job, at a Public Sector Bank. He had affirmed his aversion to the free spirit of enterprise, and repugnance to riches...

At this instant, it was my Dad's turn, and to DK's glee, Dad, on the lines of GD, set up his own business enterprise, M/s Bharat Kumarr & Co. out of crumbs left over from GD's business.

And since its inception, notwithstanding the initial phase of struggles, of uncertainties, of sweat, of toil, it had been raking in the

moolah. It was his strategy of diversifying from labor-intensive activity to something wholly trading, and that too by handling foreign agencies that really paid off.

And where DK was concerned, yes, Dad reserved reverence towards him; the latter's seniority being one of the criteria, in those typically ethically driven ideologies, set in the past. It was another thing that grandpa with big mustaches, DK, was genuinely fond of me from the genesis.

~

Next day, Jagmohan arrived right on time and I quietly departed for school

Dad was away on a business tour, grandpa was snoozing, half of the time he was snoozing away to glory. The rest of the time he was found tending to the few plants assimilated over the terrace. And now and again during energetic drives, he would bark orders to the *Malis* at our sprawling and landscaped gardens.

Merely using my right hand, and with utmost complicatedness, I slipped into my uniform: buttoning up the light blue shirt was quite straightforward, the tie knot too appeared uncomplicated as I never ever disturbed 'em during the course of the wintry weather.

Once set, it served me through the months of November right up to February, only carrying out minor modifications. Idea was to craft the tie into a scrumptious triangular *samosa* like configuration, the Windsor knot.

Writhing in pain, smiling understatedly, rotating my waist once clockwise, then anticlockwise, again clockwise, over again anticlockwise, I nimbly tucked the shirt into my grey pants. Then I pulled over my knitted V neck school jumper, grey in color.

"Phew...!" Satisfied, I congratulated myself while picking up my comb from nearby slightly distressed dressing table somewhat shabby French style, round edges, sleek curved legs, perching myself upon the stool, which was padded in leather material, crème and beige.

My palms had begun to distort into ghastly intaglio in Technicolor mishmash, confusing me whether it striped like a Tiger, or a Zebra, or an amalgamation of the two, Tigra...!

Setting up the laces of my school boy black lace-up shoes posed a colossal dilemma as I was unable to constitute its bow knot using one odd warped hand. Opportunely, the chauffeur obliged and at last, satisfyingly, I could occupy the rear seat of UPD 2322.

“Banjo baba, why aren’t you sitting in the front today...?” The chauffeur enquired plainly.

While he would without scruple notice grisly Tigra, instantaneously report the advent of this newfangled macabre specie to Dad, and from then on scribes, *presswalas* would for sure be hounding him, I preferred to remain seated at the rear, skirting anomalous comings and goings, following the threnody, The Storm.

By and large I never issued any bogus statements; therefore I just flashed a smile at him. He must’ve pondered that maybe Banjo baba was exhibiting elements of elitism. Thus, matching my beam, he drove on.

At the school gate I alighted, the chauffeur, Jagmohan holding out the door for me. I thanked him, again by way of a well bred smile characteristic of a high social class. I rushed inside. After all it was a new Class, Class 7, and I was quite over the moon.

I looked forward to sync with Bobby too, to gratify her that finally I could spot the stunning snap of Dimple Kapadia right on top of the cover page of a leading film magazine last weekend, when my grandpa had escorted me to a bookstall, overlooking Pearl Lake at Dublin 3, the jetty point.

And how I would then earnestly mollycoddle Bobby that she unquestionably resembled the heart-throb of millions, heart-throb of megastar Rajesh Khanna’s Dimple in “...that skimpy and brilliant cobalt blue mini skirt, having a hemline several inches above the knee, and duly matched by an alluringly knotted up front blouse, the diminutive polka dot chiffon blouse...?”

All through the assembly session and even for the duration of the pledge, India is my Country, was sworn in, my eager eyes checked out for Bobby in the midst of the girls’ row. Even though she was easily identifiable, being the fairest, eyes like ocean, I couldn’t trace her.

Where was she...?

Yet, I did not dare turn my head into any out-of-the-way degree, lest I countered catch-22, this time vis-à-vis school authorities in their said sternness and austerity. After few minutes of the pledge, bewildered, I entered the Class, Class 7.

I looked out for her, but where was she, Bobby, I wondered...?

Walls of this classroom wore a fresh and vibrant shade of light peach, which complimented with the royal blue of its wooden benches and desks.

Still, the new chalkboard, an extra large one, didn't familiarize me. I avidly missed out the graffiti pertaining to my Class 6 chalkboard, what we kids used to draw, at the closing stages of the very last period, after the teacher bade us a solemn goodbye, in Dutch *vaarwel*.

...Those 10 minutes or so were perhaps the wildest in Class, the mind-numbing lock-up hours flattening out, exclusive of any intrusive eyes catching us up. Those odd 10 minutes were a peril we all dared to embark upon, taking into account that our transport waiting outside might wait another minute.

Thank God, in that coon's age, nobody came in asking, "Have you seen him, have you seen her...?"

These guys could scarcely ever envision that it was well within the tenure of this most recent period that we got over the monotonous chore of packing our bags, tidying our desks in a state, not including even the faintest discern of our teachers, so bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

Thus, we considered those 10 minutes as our exclusive domain, our private space. And the most popular graffiti on the chalkboard was that of me, Banjo and his Bobby...!

What's more, the most favorite pastime was deciphering who Loves whom, who Likes whom, who Adores whom, or who Hates whom, arriving consecutively...? Assuming Banjo on top of the frame, divided by Bobby by a line in between, the common alphabets were thus eliminated.

In our case, the letter B and the letter O being common, verily got chopped off, remaining 3 letters construing into an Adore, and

which to my surprise summed up as Banjo adores Bobby, Bobby adores Banjo.

Students especially Jane Diaz heartily enjoyed indulging in such kid stuff. She often used to design an artistic heart in pink chalk, with an arrow going through it, arrow symbolizing Cupid, the God of erotic love in classical mythology: Cupid in Latin known as *Amor* and in Greek as *Eros*, and she supplementary scribbling into the heart, the names Banjo and Bobby...

“Good Morning, children...!” Greeted our new Class Teacher...She looked kind, petite, sporting golden rim glasses, and which reminded me of my Mom.

“I’m your new Class teacher, Mrs. Dass...” She announced in a heavy Bengali accent, where teacher sounded more like tee-chaar.

“I would like to introduce you to 3 new students Aye Aung, who hails from Burma, Varun from Ludhiana and Mihir from Lucknow. And 2 of our old students, Farhan and Bobby have quit...” Would was Wood and Burma was Baaar-maaa...

Last name exploded like a bombshell, reverberating in the air “...and Bobby has quit...and Bobby has quit...and Bobby has quit...”

Shock was unprecedented, unspeakable. I missed my boyish breath. What Mrs. Dass taught in the first 2 periods, I couldn’t recall a single word...? It was as if I was visualizing stars, my world again vanishing beneath my two feet. Exclusive of Bobby’s warmth in class, I trembled

Once again I experienced a Blizzard

Tejwinder Singh was at his gleeful best, “So Banjo, your Bobby deserted you, hmm...?”

...Just look at it guy, while in Bobby movie the hero catches up with the heroine, both breaking out in the teenage bike, the Rajdoot GTS 175, to have fun time, at this juncture, your Bobby has loped away alone, sans the bike, sans you...Hahaha...!”

At this moment, I was too numb to act in response to Tejwinder Singh...Why, wasn’t it true that whiles the youthful and go-ahead Rishi Kapoor could manage to run off in his monkey bike in a hunched seating

position with the equally stunning Dimple Kapadia at the rear...I couldn't make it...?

Back home I managed to slip into my *kurta-pyjama* and after having something called lunch threw me onto my pillow. My lips quivered, and a big tear rolled down, accentuating into piercing sobs, which escaped from deep within the sockets of my soul.

For the first time, I took Bobby's name with great care and love, and that too more than a few times. "Bobby....Bobby...Bobby....! O my Bobby...! Why did you desert me in the barren region of my being...? Please come back...Pleeeez...I miss you a lot..."

I recalled the kiss, which she'd planted over my left cheek, her words echoing: "O my Banjo, you are soooo chweet...!"

I touched the soft and tender space of my left cheek, the Smooch Space, recollecting how the smooch had resonated within the ducts of my Universe. Consequently, sopping wet my entire accumulation of salty emotions over my pillow; God knows when I dozed off. And then

Boooooooooooooooooooooooooooooommm

The blast startled me. It was 6:00 in the evening and I leaped out from my slumber. Nothing atypical, I reassured myself, it was grandpa's fart...!

Well, it was all the time at some point in twilight, and at some stage during dawn, that he set on the loose such upsetting melodies, unimpeded, in the vein of those *ragas*, *ragas*, which were played to break the day while some others played to yet break the day...

Even the topical Smiling Buddha, our country's 1st Atomic Device exploded in Pokhran was cipher in contrast to DK's fart...!

Whereas there was a singular underground explosion in the remote desert village of Rajasthan, making India the 6th Nuclear Power; within the Indo-Gangetic Plains of Kanpur, it reverberated on a daily basis.

Notwithstanding the 4 stretched decades that elapsed since DK came back to India, I couldn't decipher the quantum of intractable Burmese victuals he essentially preserved inside the limits of his esophagus, stomach, two intestines, and which he probably couldn't manage to get rid of without more ado through his bolshie rectum...?

In consequence, instead of one four-square blockbuster, Sholay-type, tensions released from his posterior end were patchy, severest being through daybreaks and twilights.

As you would expect, none of the sundry menservants, especially those functioning in our landscaped gardens, were willing to serve under him. They found him to be a screwball because either DK implored them to prepare Burmese cuisines, or he sought assistance for his colossal leave go offs.

That day happened to be a terrible one, an explosive day for me what with Bobby missing out of my class, my school, albeit my life and past that, ugh DK's 2nd fart...!

Probably DK required discharging one grander one into one of the 2.0 trillion galaxies of the visible Universe, and that's why he beckoned me, "Banjo, where are you, please come to help me out and bring someone with you..."

Not finding anyone else, I called for Jagmohan to be an adjunct to me to DK's room upstairs. Upon reaching, two of us airlifted either of DK's legs, and placed them by way of a *hulka* thud on top of the huge leg rest of his wooden easy chair. The fart far from approaching, we lifted 'em higher and higher.

Evidently, by means of dissimilar might, the chauffeur and I prepositioned those poles away from each other, he going up to the Chromospheres something like 2,100 kilometers, and I barely managing up to the Photosphere, 400 kilometers.

Some minutes following, delimited by the archway of such perilously balanced Solar-layers at the outer edges, the swap gossip finally gave away

Booooooooooooooooooooommmmmmmmm

Mission accomplished, smirk broke upon DK's walrus-mustached maw, "Thank you two. God bless...!"

Along with the discharge, notwithstanding, I'd been out gassed like a Comet, *Cometa* in Latin, crossing the orbit of Mars around 1.5 Astronomical Units from the Sun. "Please grandpa, no more intake of your Burmese chow...!" I declared examining my elbow contusion, leading to temporary pain...

He impishly and smugly smiled at his astounding accomplishment of ousting his stream of energized Solar Wind at a speed as high as 900 kilometers per second, and at a temperature of up to 1 million degrees Celsius.

Me: “Grandpa, you know, there’s a girl of Burmese origin in my Class...!”

He instantaneously got keyed up as if a new Planet had been discovered, orbiting a Star 11 light years away. Burma and anything to do with it invigorated him, like the recent end of its military dictatorship, bringing about a change into a one-party Socialist Republic

“AhHa, what’s the name of this little girl...?”

“Aye Aung...”I replied. “Mrs. Dass informed us that she doesn’t have a father, it’s her mother who brought her up by way of immense dedication...” Grandpa nodded, that impish, smug smile still lingering upon his mug...

I elaborated: “In our free time, Mrs. Dass narrated how Aung’s Mom ventured to India as a child...?”

...You see, Aung’s grandparents perished during World War II, and in order to break away from brutal Japanese occupation, accompanied atrocities, Aung’s Mom fled Burma in the midst of a group, catching up with Burma-Shave’s rhyming poems on small sequential highway roadside signs

Slap the Jap with Iron Scrap

Burma-Shave...Burma-Shave

...Having trekked alternatively through wilderness and hundreds of villages, they survived on the generosity of people, penniless as they were. They were devoid of food and with no more than few clothes...

...Occasionally they met British soldiers who provided them with transport, found them refuge, treated their blistered feet and bruised bodies, and even fed their hungry stomachs...

...Alas...! By the time their group could reach Assam in northeast of India, they’d been reduced to half owing to fatal diseases, and stomachs twisted into knots of starvation...

...Why, Aung’s Mom, then a 7 year old, was virtually reduced to a skeleton and had to be admitted to the Dibrugarh Hospital for treatment...? After

spending about 2 months in the hospital, they were good enough to be released...”

A concerned grandpa with big mustaches was listening intently. I sustained “Soon they moved over to the bustling city of Calcutta, where at some time in the future, she got married to a filmmaker. Sadly, Aung’s Dad passed away early...”

Grandpa with big mustaches lent me his ear with rapt attention, “Oh Banjo, that’s a tragic story of your friend’s Mom. And did you say Aung’s Dad was a filmmaker...?”

...Well, that reminds me of a Burmese film I’d watched in the company of your grandpa at Rangoon. You know it also happened to be the 1st Burmese Sound Film and believe me; it was produced in Bombay...!

...Umm lemme recall its name...”

“That’s quite interesting grandpa, I would positively like to know more about your stay and happenings in Burma, and about the film too...” I assured him, excusing me because I’d to finish off my homework, at the same time as pondering about the grandiloquent sounds served on daily basis.

While I was descending from the Florentine stairs, grandpa with big mustaches suddenly recalled the name, and bellowing through the staircase

Ngwe Pay Lo Ma Ya

Chapter 10

Rogan Josh

Next week in school was dull, hardly by way of any interactions

Varun the new fellow was quite friendly to me. He seemed to be quite rich, somehow matching my standing. However, he boasted of quirky habits and appearances: one he always painted his face with little face powder till it appeared a luminous hue, and two, he had feminine eyes, and three, whenever he shrugged, his shoulders spun like a toy that spun around, a whirligig.

Varun's Dad was a hosiery manufacturer of Ludhiana in Punjab, and recently had inaugurated a big outlet at Pearl Lake in Kanpur. It was heartening when Varun invited me to his showroom, offering me handsome discounts for the oncoming Christmas festival...

...My mind wandered to my exclusive sweaters, arduously hand-knitted by my Mom. Whichever new designs she could lay her hands on, she produced them for me, whether they be a tycoon vest, or with sailboat motifs, or anything else...!

She was somewhat particular about the finishing, taking a little more time to sew the seams by the book, essentially the mattress stitch to invisibly close seams from the outside, or the 3 needle bind-off to attain neat shoulder seams.

Loads of knitting wool, especially the woolliest cashmere of Kashmir, and encompassing unusual green shades such as chartreuse, phthalate or viridian, wound me up. And on one such occasion, I'd even messed up half-dozen balls of yarn, tying them around different pillar posts of the bed, which was frequently used by the fat aunt of Deoghar...

“Who did this, must be Banjo's prank...See how he's tied them up around the pillar posts of my bed...” She had hollered, much to my caprice. “I knew this *vanshaj* of Bharat da would one day grow up to be a menace...!”

...Was it not a few months ago that prior to knitting a sweater, Mom summoned me to take my body measurements, and as I was engrossed in running around, I did not pay heed to her bellows...?

I then remember she made it a point to enter the patio where we were playing, to take down my measurements, in front of my cousins and friends. Starting from my bust, to my neck, when she reached to measure my armhole depth, it tickled, and I let out a boyish laugh, much to the amusement of the mob.

One of my cousins, Dharma, was green-eyed of the wonderful sweaters that my Mom used to knit. “Look at Banjo, he’s not grown up enough, his Mom constantly pampers him and knits sweaters for him...”

Unable to catch attention of others, he repeated this dialog two more times: “Look at Banjo...Look at Banjo...!”

Needless to say, justice or *insaaf* was then methodically meted upon that erring fellow; one punches from the right to his left cheek, the other a left one to his right cheek.

Back from school, I tearfully sported one of those knitted by Mom, a turtleneck sweater in red and black, *rouge et noir* in French, admiring myself in the mirror. About to cry, little by little I put on the matching bobble knit cap, or simply the beanie in American English, and which had a pom-pom on top...

However for Christmas season, I put on one Santa Claus hat. And how much I loved Santa Claus, a love initiated by none other than Jane Diaz...?

All these weeks I found Jane glum in class, what with her best friend Bobby forsaking her. Following school hours, instead of designing assorted heart sign in pink chalks, or scribbling graffiti over the chalkboard about Banjo about Bobby, she used to disappear at once, perched upon a local cycle rickshaw, a tricycle version pulled by a *rickshawala*, and she having both legs pulled up on one particular side.

I observed that this was perhaps how girls used to sit, delicately balancing them upon moving tricycles, and negotiating over potholes, so much so notorious in Kanpur...!

Even during daytimes, Jane hardly ever exchanged glances with me. I too scrupulously avoided the childlike questioning eyes of Jane. It seemed as if we both shared identical pain of not finding vivacious Bobby in our lives.

One day, Mrs. Dass announced that Class 7 would get a private library, equipped by means of a healthy collection of books, encyclopedias, and including the lively comic series, Amar Chitra Katha. And why not, they'd been humbly donated by Mihir's Dad, which she publicly appreciated...?

It happened so that one day, Mihir's dad, who owned a renowned Book Stall at Lucknow, came along to donate a handsome number of books for Class 7, after having exchanges as follows

"Mrs. Dass, I had a deliberation with the Principal and she has directed me to sign you off in this matter. You know Madam; I earnestly want my son to grow up into a literate and well-read personality. Still, noticing his scant interest in Reading, his Mom and I have decided to make it more attention-grabbing...

...We thought that he would surely fall in line when he watches his friends doing so. And in their act of emulation, Mihir would start loving books and even end up experiencing some fun time...

...Hence, my wife and I hit upon the idea of donating some books to your Class. Let all kids including Mihir read books; and Mrs. Dass, please call me up for more supply whenever required, I'll be glad to be at your service..."

"Sir, I very much appreciate your charity, and I promise I won't let you and Hon'ble Principal Mrs. Aryabhata down..." Mrs. Dass had consented in her heavy Bengali accent. Her Sir was Saaaar, very was bheree, won't was ont, and Principal was Principaaaaal...

In following days, Mrs. Dass appointed Jane as the library in-charge, "Jane, here are the cupboard keys. And remember nobody should carry any book home or even outside the Class. Is that clear...?"

Again, remember was remembhaar, book was boooook, and is was ease...

"Yes Ma'am...!" Jane acknowledged cheerfully. After Bobby gone, this was perhaps the first time that a little smile escaped her lips. Unflatteringly, I concluded that Jane possessed an engaging smile.

Having an image of a stern librarian in mind I teased her, mimicking the Bengali accent of Mrs. Dass: “Jane, you maaasht bhaayii a pair of glaashes, it’ll shooot you more een your new job...!”

It was seemingly after many weeks that I’d spoken to Jane. She laughed merrily. “Banjo, enough of it, er unless you don’t want to read those wonderful books...?”

Taken aback by her threatening, I adroitly changed the subject matter, “You know what, and Varun has offered me Christmas discounts on purchase of jumpers and cardigans from his new showroom...”

“Really...!” Jane got excited. “You know I’ve already launched my Christmas shopping, I can now further avail this opportunity to add few cardigans into my shopping carts. And please can you help me in my decorations...?”

“Your decorations...? Jane, are you goanna adorn long tail feathers gracing among myriad colors of the rainbow, of that of a parakeet, *periquito* in Portuguese...?” I remarked by way of a crooked grin, to which she replied in annoyance

“Again you go off Banjo with your wisecracks, okay cut it out, I’ll do ‘em myself...!” “No, no, I was just pulling your leg, look you’ve become taller now, Miss Jane Diaz...” Bell rang and we were off, Jane in a cycle rickshaw and I in my car...

Well, in the present day I was excited that Dad had promised to take me to Kwaliti’s, the ultimate restaurant of Kanpur, and the same eating house we patronized earlier, in the time of Mom. Dad also informed me that one Mr. Venugopal from Delhi, his old friend, would be joining us for dinner.

~

At 6:30 I got ready

Today, for the first time after Mom departed, I had opened my huge wardrobe and examined all my clothing. Thanks to a voguish Mom and an affluent Dad, my wardrobe was always a treat to watch

Section at the top, covering almost half the height, rested the coat hanger quarter. Short in height, I used to align a small tool, mount upon it carefully, and then pick out or put back my suits and jackets. Mom had been particular

that I tag on a trend, *una tendenza* in Italian, adorn the most refined suits and appear a gentleman.

My wardrobe was like entering a wingding. After all I liked to be identified in Fashion, *alla moda* in Italian. Without further ado, let's jump into it...!

First appeared my immaculate light grey suit paired in check patterns along with a pastel shirt, a dark necktie, and dress shoes, next was a classic black suit complimenting with powder blue shirt black necktie, and then a solid navy blue suit, the *de facto* color, with a long necktie in woven silk that I loved to wear in the company of a pink shirt for a touch of element, so on and so forth...

...Next in my mind was to acquire a pallid suit, which could go off with a pallid necktie, a camel silk polka dotted shirt. These suits were arranged in such a way as though they were models walking upon the ramp of a Fashion Show, *sfilata di moda* in Italian...!

My collection of suits included a cerulean color terry wool suiting fabric coming from Gwalior, which I preferred to wear with a waistcoat, to provide both a sense of depth and formality.

Coming to Gwalior reminded me of Gwalior Suiting's. Why, I was always scrupulous about the brand of the textile, no expense spared...? Raymond's was yet another favorite. Again, PPN Market, the men's fashion street, was our favorite haunt to shop for suit textures such as worsted, flannel or barleycorn. I guess it was a scion's liberty, price being Dad's lookout, stuff mine.

Dad could identify sales guys at the multi-brand Rajkamal's by their first names: "*Monu, wo Raymond ka worsted dikhana zaraa, solid navy blue wala...!*"

Maybe traditional tailoring is called bespoke tailoring in the UK or custom tailoring in the US, but my version at Sardar Tailors & Drapers in PPN Market was no less. Soon after the suit length purchase, we used to walk down to this tailor shop, where I carefully listened to the veteran tailor master, furthermore referring to the latest Fashion catalogs of Bombay.

So far, the tailor master was my version of high fashion designer, in Italian, my *stilista di Alta moda*

After all, I loved clothes...I loved style

“Which type of suit would you prefer, Sir...?” He would inquire Dad and me.

Dad preferred the British Cut, wherein front was always adorned by ticket pocket, while the back was distinguished by a double vent. The suit fit, tailored close to the body with a tapered waist, enhanced his masculine look. Pants were slim with a high waist and pleats, and usually worn with a half break. In a nutshell, the look had the ability to project his authority.

On the other hand, I was closer to the Italian Cut, which I found more casual and more suitable for Indian climate. High armholes were designed to make the suit feel like a second skin. Great tux, amazing pocket square, I found Italian styles to be fashion-forward what with their silhouette aesthetics...

...Mom had once sent a picture of mine in an Italian Cut suit to Giribala nani at Benaras, and was surprised to get back her reply, “Anupriya, your son’s dressing is Roman style, wonder what he’ll grow up to...!”

Mom was quick to put in plain words, “True, even though Banjo is still a boy and yet to enter his manhood, I believe he has a penchant for *sprezzatura*...!” In response, Giribala nani, wife of famous Mukherjee Babu of Benaras at once darted a 5-worded telegram from Benaras

Anupriya please explicate *Sprezzatura*. Love

Via a postcard Mom responded, “*Maa*, this word of Italian origin, means to conceal all art and make whatever one does or says appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it; *Sprezzatura* is the art of studied carelessness, nonchalant style...!”

And now arrived the informal wear stacked on another corner of the wardrobe.

Even though I was never fond of the jackets, I found them pretty handy, especially trucker jackets, accommodating plenty of layers when the temperature’s not pleasant. I had some 2-3 of ‘em, mostly in variation of brown such as chestnut, burnt umber or beaver.

Best of all, this neat slice of American work-clothing could easily be worn with a pair of jeans and hiking boots.

True, Jeans were the fashion of the times, even if only limited editions of Levi's were accessible - those heavy close-fitting denim trousers, reinforced at points of strain with copper rivets. Fortuitously, I read somewhere that Pepe Jeans had been launched in London and soon would make inroads into the *galis* and *bazaars* of Kanpur...!

By the same token, similar to other guys of my age, my much loved was of course the bell-bottoms of denim, idiosyncratically flared from the knee down, bottom leg opening up to 24-26 inches.

Stickers too wound me up in this Me Decade of 1970s, characterized by self-indulgence. And one day, pandering to as a hobby, I decided to turn one of my most unfashionable, worn-in-look pair of Jeans into Boho-chic attire

Foremost, I marked the sections to be distressed by means of a pencil, ingenuously placing a block of wood within the pant leg region, rubbing sandpaper in vertical direction.

As a result, a hole was gorged, which I further bleached using the splash of my rejected toothbrush. After washing in cold water, I then amateurishly managed to reinforce the patches and holes by using denim thread in a straight stitch, just to put a stop to further ripping.

Even as excluding certain blank spaces, I got readymade stickers stitched, outlandish fancy signs on others, some even proclaiming

I Love You

or

The Good The Bad and The Ugly

or

Ragazzo & Ragazza

(Italian for a boy and a girl)

Nevertheless, the fat aunt of Deoghar never approved of 'em: "What to say about these uncouth and hippie slogans that you're always putting on, just put 'em off...? And look at the flares; they could sweep up all of the dusty streets of Kanpur...?"

“But Manorama aunt, believe me, this is fashion escapism, these Distressed Jeans...!” I argued vociferously. “And please forget the rules; see if I like it, I wear it...!”

Last heard fat aunt of Deoghar muttering to herself in utter aggravation: “This boy isn’t onto Distressed Jeans, but I accept as true, is a product of Distressed Genes...!”

Even though it was true that Jeans was derived out of the French word Genes for Genoa, the major harbor city of Italy, where the first denim trousers were stitched, I damn cared about her humdrum sermons...? Not I, certainly not in this age of the androgynous hippie counterculture, am symbolizing an anti-conformist and relaxed attitude...!

Needless to say, I never liked my school uniform of grey pants and light blue shirt. For me they were boring fashion, in Italian, *moda noiosa*, and wished God that soon He would put an end to such monotone fashion from planet earth. See

Life is too short to wear boring clothes

Possibly, this soul-destroying uniform was the reason why Bobby had quit school, she sharing designer tastes with me, a kindred spirit...! My eyes became moist, memories of Mom approaching first, then of Bobby...

How I recalled Bobby’s dance performance, and how I’d punched that smart aleck, after that entire school had gone berserk...?

“...the entire school walls had turned red amid the story that Banjo hit smart aleck, b’coz....becoz....becozzzz smart aleck had been eve-teasing Banjo’s Bobby...”

I shyly smiled to myself at the visual reminiscences of Bobby shaking her legs to the latest number of Himesh Reshamaiyya

*Ice cream khayungi
Kashmir jaayungi
sholo mein bhadke jiyaa
jalve karaungi
usko rijhaayungi
jo hoga mera piyaa...*

Even as recalling aforesaid pageantry, I was also worried about Bobby and her whereabouts. I sighed to myself that if at all we meet up, I'll buy her lots of ice cream and also take her to Kashmir, especially to the meadow of flowers, Gulmarg, where tourists flock to see Bobby Hut, which was used to shoot some portion from the film Bobby.

I became glum. No one to share my thoughts, I picked up the Western Electric heavy rotary dial telephone, black in color, "Hello Dad, when are you coming home, we'll be late to go to Kwality's...?"

"O Banjo, I was about to get up from office, I think it would take me another quarter-hour to reach home. Meanwhile, I received a call from Mr. Venugopal, requesting me to postpone dinner till tomorrow. And is there anything that I can fetch for you...?"

Fairly upset at Kwality's program getting deferred, I instantly switched my crestfallen expressions into a smile, "Er Dad, bring me a quantity of ice cream from the chic parlor at Pearl Lake and please return early...!" After that I changed into my night suit, wrapping it by means of my gorgeous *khadi* robe, before Dad arrived.

Dad: "Here's some delicious ice cream for you, your favorite Neapolitan 3-in-1..."

Me: "Wow, I really love these 3 multihued flavors held in reserve side by side..."

In a sec I arranged a pair of cut glass dessert bowls, scooping out ice cream in extra large sizes as compared to those of Kwality's. Gruppo Greggio silver scoops of Italian origin, having square tips resembling a spade, waited for us to be used.

Principally, I laid out our elegant dessert bowls on top of 7 inch Bone China quarter plates, at our Giovanni Visentin coffee table, again with an Italian descent, and having an arresting walnut wood Broadway bookshelf positioned in the background.

Table round in shape, covered by a table cloth, done in checks of spider white and mountain red tones overlooked our aesthetic garden. Two Noriko vases, one small one large, bearing artificial flower of anthuriums and spray peonies occupied the center space.

Good-humoredly, Dad and I scooped the said variety of ice cream, having origins from the Italian city of Naples. From opposite sides, at times it was the white vanilla, at times pink color strawberry. I liked to rotate the plate each time, drawing circles. Chocolate, at the moment cuboids shaped, was in the midpoint, to be savored very last.

After wiping our mouths by means of fresh navy blue napkins, I smiled happily at Dad. “Yummy...”

Though Dad was sentient of his diabetes, he was relaxed, having tasted ice cream after a long interval. Pushing back his chair by way of a click and giving me a love pat on my back

“So Banjo, what’s up these days...? I received a call from your school Principal Mrs. Aryabhata that you are faring well; I’m happy and wish that you keep it up. Your Mom had high dreams about your education even before you’d started venturing to school...”

“Is that so...?” “Even before I started going to school...!” “When was it...?” I enquired, eagerly.

“Oh, that was after we returned from Kashmir, that you were admitted to school...” Dad replied as a matter of fact. The name ‘Kaaaaashmeeer...’ struck me vividly. I insisted, “Dad, shall I fetch our Kashmir album...?”

“O sure, while you dig it out, I’ll take 5 minutes to wash and change, okay...!”

Whilst Mom was alive, I’d noticed that she would often open and shut our Kashmir album by way of great longing and care. It wasn’t like the other albums, housing assortment of photographs, this one was different. The Kashmir album seemed exceptional, solely dedicated to Kashmir, the place which she called the Paradise on Earth.

She’d always handle it gently, as though each photograph held something precious. There were photos of serene lakes, snow-covered mountains, and fields of vibrant flowers. It was a world of stillness and beauty, and I could see how much she used to miss it every time she turned the pages...

Title, engraved by means of Dad’s calligraphic handwriting, which was somewhat neat copperplate style, imitating the heavily slanted scripts of 18th and 19th century, read as

Kashmir, June 1968

A toddler at that time, I didn't remember a thing about this summer jaunt

Nevertheless, I coveted those black and white photographs, considering them as part of my family heirloom. The album bearing golden cover contained floral prints, tacked by an artistic and silky gold twine. Inside, black sheets were interleaved by crunchy tracing papers, the dulcet sound that I lapped.

Barring the preliminary snap of Little Banjo, done in color, yet not a colored snap, the rest appeared in black and white. Gosh...! In this exclusive colored photo I was dressed up as a Kashmiri bride, lots of *kajal* smeared across my eyes, a veil or *ghoonghat* casing my long tresses. A throwback picture indeed...

Dad had meticulously labeled the locations at the constricted bottom space of each snap, the names which were unfamiliar to me.

"Yeah Banjo, C'mon...!" Dad pulled up his chair and adjusted it by way of a rhythmic click, wiping his mustache by way of sweep of his right hand forefinger. His eyes brightened up upon discovering our Kashmir album, which I presumed, carried most cherished memories of his personal life.

Dad: "...We'd embarked upon the trip by car, by this very 1962 model, Ambassador Car Mark II, famously bearing the number plate UPD 2322, and my God, believe me Banjo, it was a pricey spree..."

He grinned, shrugging his shoulders, "...It had cost me a fortune, but you know your Mom was resolute. At any cost she wanted to beat the heat of Kanpur, have some fun time too before the little one that was you are put to school after we returned..."

"But Dad, why did I grow my hair this long as is perceived in these Kashmir pictures...?"

I naively questioned. "Hahaha...Boy, you were scared of those steely menacing scissors of the barber. You know, I myself had once tried taking you to Baba hair salon, but after you brought down the entire *mohalla* by way of your hysteric wails, I quietly retreated..."

As I sheaved through the pages of the album, Dad simultaneously began unfolding about Kashmir, in an air of nostalgia: “We traversed the entire 800 miles to Srinagar via Delhi, cutting through Jalandhar and Pathankot...

...Dickey of our car held a couple of authentic leather suitcases, bulky ones, carrying our essential clothing. Military type canvas holdall containing our bedding occupied the roof space of the car, the carrier. A can of water, a fat thermos of hot tea, and a food hamper was accommodated at the leg space of the front seat...

On front seat rested our favorite transistor radio, bought from GEC showroom, The Mall, way back in 1961, and which kept us entertained all the way.

We silently thanked the Italian inventor of radio, Marconi, before getting enthusiastic to catch up with the concept album, Call of the Valley, rendered by the illustrious trio: santoor *vadak* Pandit Shivkumar Sharma, the flautist Hariprasad Chaurasia, and the guitarist Brij Bhushan Kabra...”

I joined excitedly. “...O yes Dad, I’ve seen that holdall in our store. But where’s the radio...?” “I think I’d presented the radio to your grandpa for safekeeping...” Dad continued his narration, a gleam in his eyes.

“Banjo, you even has a snap carrying that GEC transistor radio by its drop handle at Srinagar....

...O Srinagar was bliss my son, sheer bliss: its great lake, meandering river, its exquisite Mughal gardens, exclusive romantic *shikara* rides, the old world charm of its architecture, the city seemed to me a fitting introduction to the many enchantments of the valley that we were yet to unravel...

...You know, the vast Dal Lake, Srinagar’s emblematic feature, hailed as the Lake of Flowers, Srinagar’s Jewel, and what not - its deep waters carried the most popular of attractions, houseboats and *shikaras*...”

I pointed out to an attention-grabbing structure from the album. “Wow, so this must be the houseboat, a house in a boat, home away from home...!”

“O yes Banjo, we were overjoyed to spend a large section of our holiday, aboard the houseboat, this waterborne hotel made up of cedar wood. And from our cushioned balconies, we used to watch the entire traffic float by. You kept yourself engrossed running around in circles around the vibrant patio umbrellas placed atop the terrace, which doubled up as a sundeck.

And I must say we prized the houseboat's lavishly furnished rooms having walnut wood interiors, and of course, the delectable fragrant Kashmiri cuisine..."

"And which food preparation you savored the most, Dad...?" I interrupted. Dad grinned, "I gotta sweet tooth so I savored *khubani ka halwa* to the full...!"

"And did Mom appreciate the cooking too, and what your fight against diabetes...?" I persisted. Dad sidelined the issue of diabetes.

"Don't ask me, she just went berserk in the midst of palatable taste of Kashmiri food. For the same reason, she befriended the master chef, the *waza*. I particularly remember one evening when I returned to the houseboat from the town and asked your Mom what she'd been doing all afternoon...?

Boy, she was excited and explained how she was busy taking cooking lessons from *waza*, whose ancestors had migrated from Samarkand, one of the greatest and one of the oldest continually inhabited cities inside Central Asia...

...And that a *shahi wazwan* meal awaited us for dinner. And how she'd done her bit to prepare this multi-course meal in Kashmiri cuisine, the benchmark to Kashmiri culture...?"

"Did you finally enjoy the meal, Dad...?" I enquired, my interest growing with each passing anecdote, and still not finding any mention of his diabetic safeguards.

"Oh yes, I found Kashmiri food rich and redolent amid distinct flavors of spices. Apart from *gushtaba*, I developed an appetizing taste for *roganjosh*. Banjo you know, *roganjosh* proved an instant hit to me. Why it was hot, and spiced in the midst of cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, and not forgetting, the famed Kashmiri saffron, *zafraan*...?"

Afterward, when I enquired, I could learn that its unique color was derived from *maval*, the dried flower of the cockscomb plant, which was a treat to my eyes, a treat to my scrumptious taste buds..."

Me: "Dad, *rogan josh* sounds comical I must say...!"

Dad: "Ha ha...Yes, while *rogan* stands for fat in which the meat is cooked in, *josh* means hot and passionate..."

Me: “You know Dad; *rogan josh* enlists in the menu card of Kwality’s to boot...”

Dad: “Is it, and then surely we’re going to try it tomorrow in the company of Mr. Venugopal...?”

Next evening, I decked up myself in that solid navy blue suit, the *de facto* color, with a long necktie in woven silk that I loved to wear in the company of a pink shirt for a touch of element. I assessed the ornate wall mirror and guessed I was looking smart especially slipping on those black shoes, spotless as ever.

On the way to The Mall, we dropped in at Mercury Dye & Cleaning Stores to hand over a few clothes for dry cleaning, and which included Mom’s saris as well. Even though Mom ceased to be component of this corporeal evolution, we’d treasured her belongings, for the most part the saris, amid immense soft spot and think about.

A small number still endeared space in the interior of Dad’s wardrobe along with his outfits. Purple sari, the pink sari, the green sari, the magenta sari, and so many others hung like memorabilia, the colors, and the textures never ever to be cast off.

Nonetheless, one thing that bothered me was Dad’s awful habit of not lugging out the keys from his closets or wardrobes, whether at home or at office...

In any case, at 7:00 p.m. sharp, Mr. Venugopal, a short and stout gentleman, attired in radiant white shirt, radiant white trousers, radiant white shoes, entered Kwality’s, I guess straight from the airport, carrying in his hands a pebble grain leather duffle bag.

Was he a sailor, or was he a politician, I wondered, colored up all in white, outlines of his *ganji* noticeably visible underside his white cotton shirt...?

My much loved table at Kwality’s overlooked the allure of The Mall, the wide street of the town, and visible all the way through a glass pane built into the frame of a large window. Vehicles, mostly opulent, zooming by in the midst of enormous numbers of colors including violet and green and emitted by neon signs from opposite street enthralled me. I could also watch passers-by walking on the sidewalks, chatting with each other...

Dad usually booked this unchanged table and now busy welcoming Mr. Venugopal to his seat, addressing him in his little knowledge of the major Dravidian language Tamil

“*Vanakkam Mr. Venugopal, vanga, vanthu utkarunga...*”

Reserved label was planted at the midpoint of 4 neatly arrayed sections, each boasting of its customized silverware, all oozing out aesthetic, artistic and sensual contours: dinner plates, rimmed salad bowls, quarter plates and glass tumblers.

I started fiddling with the coffee spoons, butter knives, fish knives, and dessert forks, interchanging their places, and much to the vexation of the waiter standing nearby, his eyeballs vigorously corresponding to my jugglery.

Fresh napkins, duly festooned, reminiscent of conical dunce caps were placed on top of the quarter plates. Among the twin set of saucers, one was piled with baby onions dipped in synthetic vinegar, turning it pink and lending it a pungent connotation, while the other was filled with mouth-watering pickles of lime, quite stimulating the ambiance.

No sooner we arrived, complimentary assortment of pastries was served by pastry tongs in a classy manner. In courtesy, I kept waiting for Mr. Venugopal before I picked one up. In those lip-smacking 10 minutes before Mr. Venugopal arrived, I'd checked up the menu card and made up my mind the *a la carte* I must order and relish

...Rich crème tomato soup, topped by crispy fried bread chunks, sprinkled with salt and pepper at the initial course, followed by a helpful of chicken curry, a leg piece jutting out, to be savored by *tandoori naan*, the Arabic bread...

...Subsequent course could be the exotic *Kashmiri pulao*, filled among dry fruits such as *kaaju-kishmish*, along with the new-found delicacy, *rogan josh*...!

Visualizations of such magnitude of gastronomic delights, inclusive of the inventive *rogan josh*, and then by staring at those lovely pastries, I involuntarily began to slaver.

In anticipation of my taste buds due to be gratified from then on, I unfolded the starched dunce cap like napkin and spread it tidily upon my thighs. I felt

thankful to Mom for schooling me these table manners, etiquettes. Previously, when I was a tot, I remember, she used to tie the napkin as a bib around my neck so that I don't mess up my baba suit.

After pleasant handshakes, gestures, courteous exchanges of words, Mr. Venugopal looked up at me and declared somberly

“Naanshaiva Unavu Shaappidupavan...”

Dad hesitantly translated these words, and throwing a gloomy glance towards me:

“I'm indeed sorry son...! Why, it had totally escaped my mind that Mr. Venugopal is a staunch vegetarian and dare not even stand the sight of non vegetarian fare...? After seeing that Mr. Venugopal is our honored guest tonight, I think we must quit this eating place...!”

How my *rogan josh* filled frame of mind desperately Called out for the Valley...?

Call of the Valley

Call of the Valley is to Indian classical music what Mona Lisa is to European painting, a milestone that is to remain the gold standard forever. It was indeed important in introducing Indian music to western audience, and its fans were top musicians of the west.

Shivkumar Sharma was behind the concept of this album, playing by means of a pair of wooden tongs his *santoor* having 100 strings, while Hariprasad Chaurasia played one of the most ancient musical instruments of India, the *bansuri*, the cylindrical piece of bamboo in the midst of 6 finger holes, 1 blowing hole, and maybe 1 extra hole for *teevra ma* in lower octave.

Well, did the instrumental album follow a day in the life of an Indian shepherd from Kashmir...?

...Yes Call of the Valley indeed follows a loosely conceptual narrative that mirrors a day in the life of a Kashmiri shepherd, using the structure of Indian *ragas* associated with different times of day.

And how the album blends classical discipline with a cinematic, almost pastoral sensitivity, weaving together the *santoor*, *bansuri*, and guitar - played by Brij Bhushan Kabra - into a timeless soundscape...? Its evocative melodies and serene mood not only made Indian classical music accessible to Western ears but also redefined how tradition could meet experimentation.

Chapter 11

My Ancestry

“Hi Banjo, how’s life...! Yesterday I spotted you and your Dad zipping through The Mall. You must’ve been dining at your favorite Kwality’s, I suppose...!” Jane popped up this question the very next morning in school. However, I bypassed it. “No...yes....no...yes...er...well, what were you doing over there, Jane...?”

How could I make clear to her that past wandering all the way to Kwality’s, salivating like a pup craving for the mouthwatering *rogan josh*, I was brought home empty-handed, Mr. Venugopal boiling a quantity of rice; rice first grown in 9,000 B.C. around Lahuradewa Lake near Maghar of eastern Uttar Pradesh, where Sant Kabir laid down his last 500 years ago: rice which we hungrily gobbled, accompanied by fresh curd acquired from nearby Lalaji’s *dhaba*, and Mr. Venugopal passably commenting

“*Adhu nalla rushi...!*” That was delicious

...It was only after a short nap that Mr. Venugopal revealed his interests in Tamil films and discussed in the company of Dad in great detail about 1973’s...Gauravam...depicting the struggle between a judge father and a lawyer son.

He went on to explain about the lead character called Rajnikanth, the name later given to a Marathi actor, Sivaji Rao, who’d just come into the movie scene. Since there was already a Sivaji out there, the other Sivaji Rao got the name from Sivaji Ganesan’s titular role, Rajnikanth.

“I beg your pardon; could you please repeat that, Mr. Venugopal...?” Dad exclaimed. At the same length, discussing father-son relationship, he likened his son, Maniraman, to me.

I smiled at his apprehensiveness over Maniraman joining the Army one day. “Look Banjo, I am short, my wife is short too, I fear whether Maniraman at all qualifies the 160 centimeters required as minimum height to join the Indian Army...?”

Anyways, Jane thankfully didn't press for a reply, rather declared by way of a lovely smile: "Banjo, you know Christmas is around the corner in a fortnight, and I've been looking out for interesting bargains along with my family..."

"So, did you buy anything stimulating...?" I enquired. Jane's face became crestfallen and before she could bring forth any reply the bell rang, Mrs. Dass entering the class armed with a roll of posters, sounding us off in her typical heavy Bengali accent

"Good morning children, today I'm happy to announce honorable Mother Teresa's visit to our school a few days from now. I'm sure you all are aware of her, her fantastic work she conducts for the poor and downtrodden, especially in the dingy streets and slums of Calcutta..."

...Our Principal holds the Skopje-born Mother Teresa in high esteem and has got these welcome posters in print. Now can you all please stick them inside the school premises, particularly around the assembly hall...? I can spare one period out of my two..."

Gleeful to find a period off, most of us took upon the target of pasting at least 5 posters each. Allocation of glue into little containers along with the posters was carried out by Jane.

Once she'd been appointed librarian, Jane had become a great organizer. Her dealings were firm yet cordial. "Hey Banjo, please take up the left side of the outer wall of the assembly hall and you have Mihir as your partner. Tejwinder and Aung, you can take up the right side of the inner hall..."

Finally, every single one poster of Mother Teresa's saintly figure, draped in her trademark white sari, blue border was pasted all over the school. Yet, when I saw her next day face-to-face I was awestruck. Something in Mother Teresa mesmerized me. What was it, was it her saintly aura, or as Jane believed, was it kind of halo encircling her...?

It was one of those landmark events of school days, my springtime of life, when I was invited by Mrs. Aryabhata to greet her upon stage. It so happened that I was the shortest guy of class, often standing at the frontage of the assembly row. On that particular day, it was my class, my section which was at the core, Mother Teresa arriving not many feet away.

For that reason, no sooner Mother Teresa arrived, Mrs. Aryabhata summoned me: “Please Banjo, will you climb up the stage and greet Mother Teresa...?”

Wasn’t it my hour, as I smartly climbed up those 3 stairs to greet Mother Teresa with a bouquet of flowers handed over to me by some pretty, very pretty teacher...?

Next thing that the pretty, very pretty teacher consigned me was a sealed packet containing few banknotes, which I promptly passed on to Mother Teresa by way of a slight bow. This was the donation amount, duly collected by all of us, the teachers, and the Principal. My attitude and my humility pleased The Mother so much that she called me and asked my name.

“Banjo Kumarr...” I replied decorously.

“Thank you Banjo and all your friends and teachers. I also thank your Principal Mrs. Aryabhata for her kind gesture. You know I too was attached to a convent school in Calcutta...

Furthermore I remember whilst travelling 600 kilometers up to the verdant hills of Darjeeling for the Annual Retreat of the school, all of a sudden I realized A Call within Call and felt as if Jesus from Bethlehem, the son of God, the Messiah, was coaxing me to come out of the walls of the self, and serve the downtrodden...”

Mother Teresa’s voice quivered, her eyes getting moist. “...And till this date I’ve been blessed by the kindness that you’ve showered upon me. I’m humbled by your love and affection. Each little contribution which I seek serves the interest of kids, little and guiltless kids like you.

...Sole difference is that most of the kids I work with do not have a parent, or a place to live in, or food to eat, or clothes to wear. May Christ bless you all and this school...? Amen...!” Saying so, she hugged me.

Mrs. Aryabhata did the honors: “Thank you Mother, thank you very much for your kind words. Your exemplary life inspires most of us; I’m in no doubt one day your endeavor will do well in 100 odd countries, entire humankind acknowledging you as a saint...” After that nodding to me, she gestured, “Thank you, Banjo...”

Subtly pointing towards me Mrs. Aryabhata whispered into Mother Teresa's ears, which were clearly audible to me as I descended from those 3 stairs, "This poor boy has recently lost his young mother..." Mother Teresa showered me one last look of benevolence and whispered back to Mrs. Aryabhata

Quem di diligunt adulescens moritur

He who the Gods love dies young

...And don't worry, Mother Mary is omnipresent, she'll take care of Banjo...!"

Following this Mother Teresa event, I found a notable change in Aung and Jane: even as Aung was down in the dumps, Jane had become easygoing, and started leaning over me. What to say, they'd become my good friends...?

While Aung appeared chubby, developing feminine contours, Jane was slim and smart. While Aung talked less, Jane was usually chirpy.

What time I asked Jane if something went wrong with Aung, she got mystified, answering me plainly, "No, why Banjo...?...Umm maybe she feels lost after migrating from Calcutta. You know Kanpur is a new place for her and I bet she would take a longer time to acclimatize...!"

One way or another I wasn't convinced with what Jane spelt, for I'd observed that little alteration within Aung's persona, right from the day she began sticking posters. That day, I remember, her natural curls whose texture really popped next to be ironed out, were disheveled. Sweat shined over her deep side part, her healthy strands appeared to some extent damaging.

I smiled..."So what's new Jane...? "Banjo, I've selected a new book for you, it's on world philately..." Jane replied elatedly. "What's philately...?" I asked her.

"Well, this book has everything on postage stamps: how to collect, what to collect, about different countries, etc..."

I couldn't pay much heed to what Jane proposed because the Hindi period was about to commence. And as I was not proficient in this *lingua franca*, I

remained pretty alert whenever Mrs. Rohini tutored. Much to her exasperation, I mixed up genders.

Why, it never seeped into my brains why those burly policemen were addressed in the feminine gender as police *aayi*, or why *maa doodh bharaa gilaas laayi aur taak par rakhhaa....?* I juxtaposed as to why *bharaa* was used for *maa*, a female...?

My sense of vernacular logic gave way yet more once Mrs. Rohini screamed at me: “Banjo, Hindi *rashtra bhasha hai...aap kyun nahin seekhte...aagey kaam mein hi aayega...?*” In the confines of my mind I used to amend her. Why not use *seekhtaa* instead of *seekhte*, and *aayegi* instead of *aayega*...?

As a result, I was handed over this preposterous punishment of composing 50 sentences in Hindi, 50 creative sentences at home.

This talking based upon *khariboli*, and which acquired linguistic prestige since the Mughal era, considerably bogged me down. Did she consider me to be the *avatar* of some great exponent like Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi...?

Back home, sitting at my study table, as I was grappling in the midst of this nightmare called Hindi, derived out of Sanskrit, Persian, and some Arabic vocabulary, and having similarity with Urdu, I happened to spot the coffee table book peeping out of my school bag.

I slowly picked it up. It titled

Philately

Wow, which means Jane had quietly slipped this book into my bag. Keeping aside that tiresome Hindi assignment, I feverishly began flipping through its contents. They were mesmerizing, why apart from earmarked spaces for postage stamps to be pasted; it carried brief details of every recognized country.

Now, let me see, where was India, India my home country...?

India, I found sandwiched in between Iceland and Indonesia, and whose historical details regarding national symbols I finished reading in one single breath.

I was amazed. Never did I ever browse through such a fascinating book, such exhaustive was the diversity of the countries, really incredible...!

Exotic names, colorful flags, imposing emblems, patriotic anthems, so much so, that I drew my comparison among great explorers of the world, such as the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan, who completed the circumnavigation of the world early 16th century.

Delightful...*Encantador*...!

...Whereas he circumnavigated the globe via a Spanish carrack, I, Banjo Kumarr repeated the feat by way of a book on philately.

Under the circumstances, I became so engrossed and engulfed that Hindi, or for that matter Jane, completely obliterated from within my newborn exploratory psyche. In my heady head, the list of 140 odd countries spun into the horizon, starting alphabetically from Afghanistan, so much so, that I just couldn't rise up on time the next day...

"Banjo, get up, the chauffeur is waiting outside..." I heard Dad yelling. Sleepy-eyed, as if drugged, I glanced at the clock and then dozed off again. By the time Dad entered my room, I was again dreaming, this time in reverse order, reaching up to Afghanistan...

Dad tried to convince me in vain that there was still time left for me to get up and pack off to school. Alas, my adamant attitude of sticking to a no persisted. If it were No, then it had to be a No, whether it is my first haircut, or unruly scenes at Allahabad...?

Eventually, I got up at around 11:00 am from my 6 feet wooden Four Poster bed, of Queen Anne style, slender and streamlined slim posts having delicate barley-twist patterned carvings in swirls, wood of deep mahogany.

I found Draupadi doing household chores such as *bartan* and *jharoo-katka*, while grandpa was trying out his Burmese recipes. Karuna di was yet to arrive to do the cooking.

Consequently, a sizable part of the day I utilized to leaf through the volume and take note of certain interesting facts. I was bewildered by the idea that yet newer countries cropped up amid regularity. I dished out a diary from the Fragile drawer of my study table and penned the current ones.

I wondered from where these new countries are born...?

Out of the 10 new countries I selected, I was in fact only aware of Bangladesh. Therefore I decided to approach grandpa; grandpa with big

mustaches. I queried, “Grandpa, you were telling about our family lineage with Bangladesh, what exactly it is...?”

Grandpa with big mustaches graciously beamed at me. Whether it had something to do with my ancestry inquisition, or his maturing a variety of new plant variety upon his terrace, or turning out a Burmese recipe, or not to forget his triumphant morning fart, I couldn’t guess...?

Anyways, he initiated the chronicle of my haloed ancestors at the same time as cooking a Burmese recipe, *mohinga*

“...GD your grandpa, and I, shared great camaraderie in Burma, where we broke bread together. Both our ancestors hailed from Bengal. His father’s name was Ramlal i.e. your great-grandpa, who’d migrated from East Bengal to West Bengal. And, it was my father Praneshwar who married Ramlal’s sister, Hema Devi...”

“As a result, my great-grandpa Ramlal was your *Mama*, am I right...?” I interrupted, to which DK agreed while boiling a quantity of rice vermicelli.

“Oh yes, my boy...”

“And you just said that Ramlal migrated from East Bengal to West Bengal..?” ...a bit puzzled, I again interrupted.

“Yes Banjo, the Imperial British had divided Bengal into two, east and west: the first alienation had been affected during the infamous rule of the quarrelsome, arrogant, and inflexible Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy and Governor-General...

...After which there were loud protests, which included boycott of British goods. Events took a staid turn when communal riots between *Hindoos* and *Musalmans* broke out...

...However, when King George V, who’d crowned himself as the Emperor of India to boot, arrived from England and held Delhi *Durbar*, amidst much trumpet blast, it was decided that partition of Bengal be annulled, and Bengal Presidency created...”

DK, now overtly contented by his comprehension of Bangladesh and completion of rice vermicelli, now heightened the reeking part of the dish, by cooking fish broth in an exposed container, releasing 3-4 chunks of fish into boiling water, and sprinkling paltry spices and salt.

Air of the kitchen turned fetid, causing me grave irritation; my olfactory senses getting too sensitive and susceptible to any kind of malodor, especially emerging out of fleshy stuff, as expected boiled.

Struggling to bear up the putrid onslaught, this miasma, and blocking my nostrils by way of grip of my two fingers, “But grandpa, was my great grandpa a victim of such partitions...?”

My voice emanated nasal overtones: “Nut grand-pan, was my great grand-pan a victim of such panty-sons...?”

“Indeed an intelligent question Banjo, now would you like to taste some *mohinga*...?” DK smiled. “No thanks grandpa, Karuna di must’ve arrived to cook for me the usual *dal-roti-sabzi*...”

Nonetheless, grandpa with big mustaches sustained

“Ramlal had certain family problems, 6 of his brothers, all of whom were elder to him, contested before long for larger bites from the vast ancestral property pie. And what to say, Ramlal, even though being the youngest and indubitably the vulnerable one among the lot, was averse to be a party to such disputes...

...For that reason, one fine morning, Ramlal the renunciate, fed up of daily squabbles, and sibling rivalries over things materialistic, decided to call it quits. Along with Gajanan Damodar in tow, Ramlal traversed westwards covering the 300 odd kilometers from Dhaka to Calcutta...”

“Wow grandpa, that journey must’ve been adventurous...!” I added in a tickled mood.

“Yes Banjo, for sure, and wearisome too, for Ramlal, your great-grandpa could imprint his legacy and footprints behind; of true nobility, of richness within, and not without...” Grandpa with big mustaches was excited to finish off his story...

...However, Ramlal couldn’t live to tell the tale for long, all the same could foray acquaintances among prominent members of the fiercely patriotic underground organization, Anusulan Samiti; *zamindar* of Sodepur being one of them....

I think it was the enlightened *zamindar* Roy Chowdhury who he befriended, the rest, they say, is history...!”

DK's fish broth was now ready to be served as he deftly began to slice a quantity of onions, garlic and ginger. He then proceeded to shred banana stem from its tender core, and which had a crisp texture and a mild flavor.

These procedures were okay for me, except for the onions, and my eyes started smarting as he continued his drawn-out story. "In due course, the influential *zamindar* gave his daughter, Charulata's hand to your grandpa Gajanan. True, she was beautiful and elegant, and I believe your Dad strongly resembled her..."

This part of the story was romantic even as I found grandpa at this instant, boiling a couple of eggs, horrifying my wits once again. How I detested odoriferous of boiling eggs...?

Still, I remarked by way of a smile, "One thing I deduce here grandpa that Ramlal's Dad must've been pretty rich...!"

"Oh yes Banjo, that's what the climax of your long-winded ancestral story is. Ramlal's Dad, Krishna Mohan, was of landed gentry, a big *zamindar* in the region of Dhaka, and is said to be the landlord of a manor, housing 100 rooms...!"

"Did you say 100 rooms...?" I exclaimed, to which he unworriedly nodded his head.

"Yes, as many as 100 rooms. Mansions and palaces in those days were magnificent and stately. You can find some of 'em scattered across the length and breadth of India. You know, some of these opulent structures even contained up to 500 rooms...!"

"Gosh...! But why did he at all require these many rooms, we manage with just 10...?" I asked innocently.

DK beamed, maybe because of my interjections or perhaps the eggs were now geared up. I knew he would soon start chipping off the shell from those eggs, thereby emitting an added odious set of smell. "Krishna Mohan boasted of a large *zamindari* Banjo. Apart from this manor, he owned acres and acres of landed property, besides scores of animals..."

"Real barony, I must say, and animals, was he fond of 'em...?" I questioned. And much to my consternation, grandpa now peeled off the shells of the eggs.

“No, the horses were used to draw his light, four-wheeled carriage called buggy, although he loved to ride the back of elephants, which were duly embellished, beautifully decked out...

...Er...And quite like you Banjo, your great-great grandpa Krishna Mohan was quite fulsome and *haute couture*. He switched attire, comprising of his silk *dhoti kurtas* and shawls more than a few times per day...

...He also shared a penchant for jewelry, titivated by gold rings studded amid precious stones on each and every one of his 10 fingers. This was in addition to bracelets, necklaces, earrings, and what not...!”

I smiled. “Wow, necklaces and earrings. I guess he was a bonafide regal blood...!” From then on my expression gave way at what time DK started off amidst additional fish. I sharply protested. “Again fish, grandpa...?”

“Wait and watch Banjo, at the moment I’m going to prepare *nga hpe*, the dressing of *mohinga*...” DK insisted and began frying supplementary fish, mashing it up in two shakes of a lamb's tail.

By now my nose, in modern English was half-dead, in Middle English *halfdede* and in Old English *healfdead*, rejected the effluvium, propelling it into exosphere. “Okay grandpa, I’m leaving, I’ve got some homework to attend...”

“Okay Banjo, see you then...! Er you know Krishna Mohan maintained 3 wives, all living less than one single roof...!” DK signed off declaring that he was now going to prepare *akyaw*, the fritters of the famed Burmese dish.

After consuming my usual meal of *dal-roti-sabzi*, and attending to homework, which included sentences in Hindi, 50 in number, I dozed off. Instead of 50 sentences, I barely could compose 20, rest of it quite distanced from my head.

All that dawned upon my head was the grandeur of Krishna Mohan and the legend of his manor containing 100 rooms. I wondered whether DK’s story was old wife’s tale. And if not, then what Krishna Mohan would’ve done in those 100 rooms...

Microprocessor of my brain, and not that of Intel’s, started whirring at frenetic pace

Allocating nil space in the manor and in the heart to the forsaken Ramlal, it was Krishna Mohan's 3 wives, together with their other 6 sons and daughter-in-laws, and followed by their assumed litter of 3 children each, that totaled to 33. Say they were allotted 3 rooms each, it multiplied to 99.

100thone, I believed could be that of the master of the house, Raja Krishna Mohan himself...!

Next, I wondered, how would Krishna Mohan have entertained his 3 wives...? Conceivably very like Dev Anand, the poet in the film...Teen Devian...a tremendous star where he romantically plays the piano to this S.D. Burman number.

In the middle of a houseful audience, the 3 smitten ladies hang around him, and listening to him spellbound

*Khwab ho tum ya koi haqeeqat
kaun ho tum batlaao
Derr se kitni dur khadi ho
aur kareeb aa jaao*

Further, paying attention to wife # 1

*...Dhadkano ne suni
ek sadaa paao ki
Har dil pe laharai
aanchal ki chhao si*

And then to wife # 2

*...Mil hi jaati ho tum
mujhko har morr pe
Chal deti ho kitne
afsaane chhod ke*

And finally to wife # 3

*...Phir pukaro mujhe
phir mera naam lo
Girtaa hun phir apni
baahon mein thaam lo...*

Conversely, in the afternoon, I was in no doubt what was in store for me during twilight, the cusp of daylight and moonlight, the time for daily evening prayers, *aarti*: not a thing concerning Krishna Mohan, or Dev Anand or S.D. Burman, but my grandpa with big mustaches, Dushyant Kumarr, and his

Boooooom.....Boooooooooomm.....Boooooooooooooooooommmmm

Literally I jumped out of my midday sleep, hearing DK's fritters-like *akyaw* rushing out, followed by broth-like *nga hpe*, and to end with, *mohinga* in its entirety, bellowing out in staggered succession...

Chapter 12

The Proposal

Over and beyond Dad and Sahani Uncle were bosom friends, of contemporary age, and I often found them converse in hush tones while alone in the private study, *studio privato* in Italian.

Private study incorporated an executive writing desk of traditional grandeur, yet of modern consciousness style reflecting classic American design motifs, constructed of richly grained cobblestone cherry hardwood veneers, and offset by striking bookmarked panels, thereby putting a unique spin to its timeless beauty.

In spite of its large surface area, featuring 4 box drawers, 2 letter file drawers, 1 center writing instruments drawer, pull-out writing slides on each side for that little extra workspace, and even wire management grommets on top surface to keep the desk clutter-free, Dad's desk was by and large full of mix-up.

And more so during these perilous Emergency days, when apart from the usual files and documents, newspapers of all colors and shades, small and large, Hindi and English, evening and morning, littered all over the place...

At the moment, it was trifle more than normal conversation: what with the Supreme Court holding that persons arrested during the Emergency could not move the High Court for a writ of Habeas Corpus; what with its ruling that even Fundamental Right to life and personal liberty should be suspended; what with the various freedoms like Freedom of speech and expression, Freedom to assemble peacefully, Freedom to form association or unions being turned to major casualties...?

Perchance it was tenses; it involved me, Banjo... "Bharat da, I mark certain erratic behavior in your son, Banjo. It seems the poor lad is unable to cope up sans a mother..."

"No doubt about it Om Prakash, I'm quite aware of his appalling woes, but I find me helpless in such despondent situation..."

“But, you can change such situation Bharat da...” Sahani uncle insisted. “Have you ever thought of offering Banjo a new lease of life, a new environment...?”

Dad: “But how’s that possible, Om Prakash...? You very well know that Banjo is the sole heir to my multimillion businesses. As of now, I simply want him to concentrate upon his school, and then venture out to Italy for higher studies. And how I wish he spreads the wings of my business to global horizons...?”

These days, Dad was busy corresponding with one of the leading Italian companies, M/s Zani SpA, who’s President, Dr. Zani, had offered our corporation, M/s Bharat Kumarr & Co., handling agency of his products for entire South Asia, comprising India and few of our neighboring countries...

Dad was especially fond of the Buddhist Sri Lanka in the south of India, the Bengali Bangladesh to its east, and of course the Himalayan Kingdom’s of Nepal and Bhutan – both to its northeast.

Sikkim, another Himalayan Kingdom, and sandwiched between Nepal and Bhutan, he often discussed, was now part of India.

Dad: “It was in 1975 that the then Prime Minister of Sikkim, Lhendup Dorjee appealed to the Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi for Sikkim to become a state in India...”

Anyways, this is how Dad developed his contact in Italy, subsequently picking up its idiom and culture by way of assistance of a smart new recruit at our office, Mr. Kapoor, a man in his 20’s. As a result, the idea of sending me to Italy for higher studies cropped up in his mind.

Sahani uncle: “Bharat da, what you reflect is generally what all fathers’ desire, a desire that sons step into their shoes. However, have you ever thought that Banjo deserves a mother too...?”

Now, Sahani uncle had it. Identified as Dad’s friend, philosopher and guide didn’t mean that he would always get his way. Dad lost his cool, tearfully remembering his Anupriya and suggesting Sahani uncle to pack off.

“Are you trying to save on money, Bharat da...? Sahani uncle quipped without bothering to take into account the moist eyes of Dad. Dad retorted, “No certainly not, I’m not a stasher like you, it’s you whose wife calls, *Makhi Choos...*!”

“Now, don’t you go off again...?” Sahani uncle interrupted amid embarrassment. “Look, Banjo is somewhere around...”

At this juncture, Dad wasn’t one to listen. He had to pay it back to Om Prakash Sahani, his long-time friend and colleague.

By means of a puckish gleam in his eyes: “You know, once a Sindhi went to a Bank for a loan and asked the manager for the documents that were to be signed. The manager answered him back to forget the documents, rather produce him 5 Sindhis on Planet Earth who’d repaid their loans...Hahaha...!”

“Vadi Sai, Jhuleylal...Bera-hee-paar...”

...Murmured Sahani uncle as he left Dad in a huff, lighting one of his Wills Filter Navy Cut cigarettes on his way out. Nevertheless, Sahani uncle, an old-time family friend of ours wasn’t in a mood to let go his brilliant brainwave.

In consequence, one day, he over again decided to set up this marriage angle. He went upstairs, climbing westwards, to DK’s room and sat down facing him upon a classic Chrysalis bench of century-old Burma teak, marine ply and veneer in its frame, an intricate brass inlay creating a playful pattern placed upon a basket zigzag *duurrie*.

Still, he was careful enough not to get into his fart angle lest he found himself being flown in a roundabout way at the other side of the globe perched atop such basket zigzag *duurrie*.

It reminded me of King Solomon’s carpet: once King Solomon sat upon the carpet he was caught up by the wind, and sailed through the air so quickly that he breakfasted at Damascus in Syria and supped at Media in Iran.

“...Kaka ji, I beg your pardon. I think my friend and your nephew, Mr. Bharat Kumarr, is not being realistic. Look what harm he has caused to Banjo’s psyche and perhaps his own...”

...I can understand Anupriya Bhabi was the most pious, the most devoted lady for this house. At the present, when she’s no longer in the vista, in bouts of solitude and anguish, they would wreck themselves. You see, there’s no one to be really bothered of them, actually or expressively...”

Sahani uncle's stance towards Mr. Bharat Kumarr visibly changed into that of exasperation as he absentmindedly stared at the simple and elegant century-old Burma teak table placed against the wall, and often used as a candle stand.

Grandpa's eyes narrowed...“Hmm I agree the situation is getting grim Sahani, and I value your apprehension. I'm thankful that not only you lend a hand in all our legal and financial affairs; you guide us in our family matters as well. Besides, I know that you are a very practical person.

...So, c'mon tell me, what the proposal is...?”

“Bring a new Mother for Banjo...!”

Sahani uncle blurted out, pushing himself forward towards grandpa. Grandpa, startled for a moment, remaining aware of the extent of affection Dad and I harbored for Mom, nodded his head in concurrence

“Okay Sahani, I'll see what best can be done, we've got to salvage these boys...!”

Grandpa with big mustaches, after his concluding remarks, pushed himself back upon his huge easy chair, made out of rosewood, unknowingly angling his posterior towards Mr. Sahani. Alarmed by DK's posture, Sahani uncle hurriedly excused himself from the room, offering a deep bow.

I stared at Sahani uncle as he hurried down our Florentine stairs eastwards, scurrying through the lounge and somber grey stair hall towards the porch, up to his Black Fiat 1100 D, Italian but Indian 4-door saloon, mumbling

Vadi Sai, Jhuleylal...! Bera-hee-paar...

Kaka ji and his obstreperous farts

That particular nighttime, Dad kept mum all through dinner. Subsequent to consuming only one single *chapati*, he got up. Perhaps Sahani uncle's words haunted him and scarred his soul.

“Banjo, excuse me, I've got to dial an urgent telephone call to Dr. Zani. You may please continue with your dinner. And by the way, tomorrow I'll be driving you to your school, so don't forget to get ready on time...” Dad sounded terse. I could gauge that he was bit annoyed of my waking up late habits, skipping my school. No more truants this time, I promised myself.

Furthermore, discipline and a new landscape breezed in the air of Kanpur: the town bearing witness to those huge signboards, publicizing Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's 20-point program, the *Bees Sootri Karyakram*, carrying her photograph, and which we'd to almost memorize in our school as a commitment to the national cause.

Sanjay Gandhi's 5-point program was added to the mix, and one of the points, Grow more Trees, ensured that many afternoons were spent planting saplings, every time a dignitary visited the school.

An ambiance of capitulation looked-for recurrence and monotone, and the Emergency witnessed skillful use of both. Ironically, elimination of trouble-makers, and everyday invocations of the intrinsic worth of silence were carried forward by jingles like, Silence is Golden...

Discipline, in the name of nation-building, spotlighting on specific actions rather than upon abstract thoughts, were all part of the ongoing propaganda blend, yet supported by slogans like

Anushasan hi Parva hai

My Dad explained to me subsequent morning that all these were by the Discipline of the Graveyard, the term which I barely could interpret.

All the same, the following cock-crow was a pleasant one, Dad appearing in an agreeable frame of mind, possibly compensating for his severe tenor preceding night.

Even as maneuvering his gleaming 1962 model, royal blue Ambassador Mark II car, famously bearing the number plate UPD 2322, casually clad in his *kurta pyjama*, replete with square-shaped gold buttons, studded by means of red gemstones, interlinked via a delicate gold chain, and Guru Dutt style, he broke into

Chaudhavin ka Chaand ho

yaa afataab ho...

Jo bhi ho tum

Khuda ki qasam

lajawaab ho...

Out of the blue, a *rickshawala* loomed in front, around the T-bend of Hallet Hospital intersection, Dad adroitly swerving the car, nearly scraping the edges of the footpath. Imperturbably, controlling the wheels, he sustained the award-winning song of Mohammad Rafi in his unmatched voice

Zulfein hain jeise kaandhe pe

baadal jhuke huye...

Aankhen hain jeise meay ke

pyaale bhare hue...

Masti hai jis mein pyaar ki tum

woh sharaab ho...

Dad uttered the word *sharaab* almost in a spell of stillness. He did not consume liquor nor desired his son to ever hit the bottle, let alone whisper this prohibited Sh word.

Out in the open highway near the sprawling Idgah, a white Standard Herald, Mark III car nearly brushed up to our rear bumpers, Dad not yielding passage. That fellow was desperate. Dad sped up, flip-flops hitting hard upon the accelerator. But so did the white Standard Herald.

Dad resumed his nocturne, yet more speedily

Chehra hai jeise jheel mein

khiltaa hua kamal...

Yaa zindagi ke saaj pe

chhedi huyi ghazal...

Jaane bahaar tum kisii

shaayar kaa khwaab ho....

Shaayar kaa khwaab mindset not only cut down our velocity but Dad's flip-flops slipped off a trifle. Till the time of reckoning, and much to my disappointment, I discovered the white Standard Herald catching up on us.

Hey, was it not a lady driving the car...? I somehow couldn't observe her face. Dad too didn't twirl his torso, rather detached his flip-flops, as though

unsheathing his sword from his scabbard, gearing himself for the ensuing battle.

Barefoot, vengeance to the top, he stepped on the gas. Impatience crisscrossed his face at the same time as not allowing right of way. His pitch, at this time sounding harsh, and out of rhythm, he continued all the way through the lyrics

*Honthon pe khelti hai
tabassum ki bijliyaan...
Sajde tumhaari raah mein
karti hain kehkkashaan...*

By then, sorry to say, the white Standard Herald, Mark III car made headway, and right at the ultimate bend towards the highway to school at Lal Imli crossing, Dad was niftily overtaken, and he warped with a shriek

*...Duniya e-husn-o-ishq ke
tum hi shabaab ho...!*

White Standard Herald, Mark III, screeched to a halt and the driver disembarked: out came her embroidered flats, followed by her gorgeous orange color *sharara* flowing behind her, and lastly, her devastatingly long tresses...

She was a most beautiful woman having Waheeda Rehman-like eyes, now seen delivering a coy smile like that found in...Chaudhavin ka Chaand. Her sharp eyes seemed to size us up.

Dad disengaged carelessly, minus his flip-flops, his face turning numb to gaze into her beauty. She too looked at Dad, now a man in a scruffy state. Then turning towards me she sang out, "O is that you Banjo...?"

"Hello Auntie..." I replied, as I instantly recognized her. Aung got down from beside her, I helloed her to boot. "Dad, this is Aye Aung and her Mom..."

"Oh hellos...!" Dad sheepishly smiled at Aung's Mom, and affectionately nodded at Aye. Dad's head, still ringing amid "...Duniya e-husn-o-ishq...Tum hi shabaab ho..." was mighty embarrassed if at all Auntie had

listened in him crooning this romantic *ghazal* number. As a result, he renewed his hellow.

A throat-clear articulated as a double-syllable sound, ahem, was followed by Dad's eyes delving into the expressive eyes of Aung's Mom, after that slowly but surely swimming through the flow of her devastatingly long tresses...

Much to his unease, he found Aunty staring at his foot, at this moment bare and exposed. Embarrassed, he hastily unlatched the driver's door to retrieve his flip-flops from the footrest, but, fatefully, the bows of the flip-flops had become entangled among the clutch and the brake.

Consequently, he'd to strain his left arm in a gesticulation to pull 'em out. He found one of 'em. But where was the other flip-flop he wondered, at the same time as almost squatting over the ground, flowing edges of his gold buttoned *kurta* freely resting upon soft soil...?

Aunty ordered me in a husky giggling tone...“Er Banjo, why don't you help out your Dad...?” Swiftly, I dumped my school bag and swooped to a beleaguered *Shaayar kaa khwaab*'s rescue.

I beckoned him to shift and grant way to me. Dad's manly torso, his *kurta*, now dusty and off my way, I deftly popped in my cranium in between the lower end of the driver seat and the pedal set. Enabling my undersized frame I peeped into this particular cranny of the point of view, cocking my head westwards.

At last, I detected Chaudhavin ka Chaand twittering out

Shortly the non *shayarana* and campanula-shaped school bell rang, sans the rhythm of Rafi. Aye and me hurriedly picked up our bags and rushed towards the assembly hall.

Last item which I saw of Dad was that he gestured Aunty to get into her white Standard Herald, Mark III, while he gently closed the door behind her.

Chivalrously he signaled her to proceed, and that, he would follow. No more drag race. Simply Chaudhavin ka Chaand and now in its anglicized version

Aren't you the glowing moon...

...the radiant sun...?

Whatever you are my dear
the Divine understands deeply,
you are beyond any comparison...!

Your tresses resembles
the soft cloud kissing your shoulders,
your eyes are like two chalices
and you are the *vin du pays* that fills them amid a yearning for love.

Isn't your face like an attractive tarn
on which your beam is blooming lotus flower
or, like a sonnet from the instrument of existence...

Darling, aren't you a poet's dream...?

Your smile is like the bolt of lightning upon your lips.

Why, at your doorsteps
assorted mob will collapse to the ground, beleaguered...!

Of all the beauties in the humankind
you are the quintessence.

Chapter 13

At Pearl Lake

“Listen Jane, today in the evening I’m going to visit Varun’s cardigan showroom at Pearl Lake, and I wish you accompany me for your Christmas shopping...!” My 1975’s love for Jane was spilling over to 1976. And the little affair blossomed since her covertly handing me over the philately book

...Well, the day after that, in school, that grin of mine had converted into horror, then of antagonism, and then of remorse, even as I happened to scrutinize Jane’s palms. Though she wasn’t willing to display her palms, Aye Aung revealed to me that Jane had been censured and beaten in school by the deadly P.T. teacher Mr. Lalu. And the reason, a missing book on philately...!

It so happened that the previous day Mrs. Dass was absent, and as a substitute, the bearded Mr. Lalu was given the charge of taking attendance, as well as to oversee our class.

By the by, our Principal had become a heroine what with the 1st Indian Satellite named after her. We stupid guys got enthused by this verity, especially Aye Aung, “Hey, Mrs. Aryabhata is in primetime news of All India Radio AIR. Look, she’d got her own Satellite, indigenously built; vide which she can now keep watchful eyes on each one of us...!”

Generally speaking, to remain in good books of our Principal, Mrs. Aryabhata, Mr. Lalu had developed a habit of indulging in excesses, much like Sanjay Gandhi, the iron fist, the younger son of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who was in current news for bulldozing the slum and low-income tenements at Old Delhi and shifting them elsewhere.

The reason was preposterous; he couldn’t clearly visualize the grand old mosque, the Jama Masjid...! Alas, for him, Sanjay Gandhi, the tens of thousands displaced inhabitants, or a hundred or so odd demonstrators who got killed by police firing in the outcry, never really mattered.

Likewise, grapevine was that if Mr. Lalu was given the task of calling home his friend, he would strap both his arms and feet and drag him home by his collar. In a way, he was habitual of his excesses, carrying out orders to their extremity.

Having mean-looking thin lips, disapproving male teacher of our school, Mr. Lalu had broad forehead and scanty hair, which was gelled and brushed backwards. Bearded guy with cruel eyes and a prominent limp, Mr. Lalu was a feared and much despised teacher of our school.

No one really dared arrive late in school, or speak in Hindi or any colloquial during the intervals, or wear anything else other than our starched and dreary uniforms.

Even rubbing Pond's talc across our sweaty necks during Kanpur's intense summer was a big no...! As a result, Mr. Lalu had created hell out of Varun's life as he couldn't resist his fetish, applying talcum powder by powder puff, over his feminine face.

Like others, I too was aware of Mr. Lalu's itch. And the itch was to brutally spank by means of his customized wooden ruler, which we'd given a nickname, the Hammer. I couldn't figure out which carpenter designed such *tour de force*, the Hammer...?

Or, was Mr. Lalu an incarnation of Hephaestus, the crippled Greek God of Fire, also of metalworking and crafts, usually depicted by his hammer, tongs and anvil...?

...Nevertheless, Jane proved to be a brave girl, who not only endured such rough treatment, but remained unvoiced about her bruised palms. But why at all did she get that Hammer...? Wasn't Hammer really meant for me...? Soon the facts and figures churned inside my head, and I concluded

Jane must've taken the culpability upon her fragile shoulders

All right, that appeared to be the likely story...! Well, out of a soft corner reserved towards me, Jane had smuggled the prized book to me, and when caught, she must've replied that it was still under her possession. In consequence, she spared me out of this cataclysm.

Mrs. Dass's words flashed in my mind: "...Jane, here are the keys, and remember nobody should carry any book home or even outside the class..." "Is that clear...?" And remember was remembhaar, book was boooooook, and is was ease...!

Tejwinder Singh mocked at me, at my shocked and about to cry state. I could always fathom his negativity: one, because my friend Jane had been hurt, and two, perhaps he was jealous of me, jealous of my bonhomie among female counterparts. To him I was an eyesore, his *bête noire*...

God forbid if I'd ever tutored any girl not to speak to Tejwinder, or gratuitously have grudge at all, or become prejudice towards him...? To a certain extent I believed it was a particular trait in his personality, a deficiency, a folly, which they never admired. Or perhaps it was because of his bullying attitude, his jealousies, his chauvinism...?

Taking away me from Tejwinder's malicious gaze and looking tenderly towards Jane, I wondered who she was. Was she kind of *avatar* of Mother Mary...?

My eyes were brimming amid tears, of biting remorse in support of Jane's plight, and also because I'd coolly forgot to return the philately book subsequent day. It was still resting upon my study table, India sandwiched in between Iceland and Indonesia...!

This episode rattled my core and from there on Jane became the apple of my eye. I repeated, "Hello...Where you lost Jane, listen we're going to Varun's for Christmas shopping, so please be ready in the evening..." Jane was happy and agreed to my date.

Back home, I anxiously broke open the seal of my Donald Duck-shaped piggy bank. This was my personal wealth, my prized assortment of coins. Officials from Chartered Bank had paid a visit to our school and presented each of us this Donald Duck. Further, Mrs. Aryabhata, in one of her regular morning sessions, had impressed upon us the habit of prudence and thrift.

This Duck possessed an outsized paunch into which ceremoniously I dropped the coins. Thus, each morsel of food it chewed, it chimed a new

chord. How much I loved its smooth bright yellow beak, and how often I used to kiss it...?

...Well, quite often Mom would return from her temple sojourns and fling few coins into it toward charity. Dad too encouraged me by handing over coins whenever he squared up the monthly newspaper bill. Resultantly, the paunch of the Duck fattened up, consistently fed with those 5 paisa, 10 paisa, 25 paisa, 50 paisa, and 1 rupee coins.

Our chauffeur, Jagmohan too, contributed thimbleful denominations: 1 paisa, 2 paisa, 3 paisa

Jagmohan also put in the picture that previously the Rupee was divided into 16 annas and that it was only before my birth that One paisa in present design was introduced...

Anxiously, I began counting my coins, my horde. I neatly piled them into stacks of different denominations and assiduously added them up. It came to Rs. 45.90.

Figuring that the sum of Rs. 45.90 wasn't enough, I rummaged through every one of my trouser pockets and jacket pockets. To my sheer joy, I discovered my cerulean suit concealing 6 10-rupee banknotes, tucked inside its inner pocket.

Neat fortune indeed, I conjectured. By now, my cache swelled to a neat Rs. 105.90, which I got converted into 10-tenners, Rs.5.90 remainder kept as change.

...In the evening, I was glad to spot Jane coming up for me in front of the imposing Reserve Bank of India RBI building. I asked her to hop inside my car. She sat beside me looking pretty in her azure dress, hair gripped by means of a lovely headband, slender wrists encased in a pair of bangles, both which had turned tatty.

Tonight, Pearl Lake showed up as being unusually beautiful, its waters shimmering by the side of wrought iron lampposts. The lake found its name either because of its pearl-like shape, or perhaps after an Irish lady, Mrs. Pearl, who'd settled in Kanpur few generations ago.

Its jetty points were named after Dublin, the capital city of Ireland, the isle of fascinating folklore, legends, culture, and masterpiece of nature, strewn

in the midst of Mesolithic Stone Age monuments, and gradually marking transition into the Neolithic.

Interestingly, these jetty points carried different numbers such as Dublin 1, Dublin 2, and Dublin 3...

Entrance to Pearl Lake *bazaar* boasted of an extensive signpost where all business names were listed. Now where was Varun's showroom...? How careless of me not to raise the specifics...?

I then enquired through the burly guard at the entrance: "Excuse me is there any woolens cardigan showroom over here...?"

The guard stared at Jane and then at me. "Well, there are several, some are in Dublin 1, some in Dublin 2, and some are even in Dublin 3, which particular showroom are you looking for...?"

Clueless, Jane and I stared at each other. Noticing Jane's eyes saddening a bit and watching her struggle to adjust her loose-fitting headband, whose elastene was gone, I persisted by way of renewed confidence, "Is there any headband showroom over here...?"

Answer remained the same, "Several..." I held Jane's arm, breaking into a delightful smile, "Let's go shopping...Yahoo...You bet, I'm your guide...!"

Literally, I dragged Jane behind me and excitedly declared that we would first visit Dublin 1 the largest square, boasting of a maze of shops and eateries. After buying 2 tickets 25 paisa each at the entrance gate, we sprinted towards Dublin 1, by following pearl necklace-like promenade of the lake.

Tearing almost quarter-of-a-mile, our throats dried up, "Jane let's cool ourselves with a quantity of Coca-Cola..."

Was my thirst for Coca-Cola a premonition for the times to come...? Yes, maybe...! Thus, Rs.1.80 (90 paisa x 2) went towards my last drops of the American Coca-Cola of Atlanta – the unofficial capital of its New South, the lone Cola in the market, awaiting its exit from Indian shelves...

I could take in that Jane was extra thirsty, because of our hectic marathon and also because she approved the tanginess of the Cola. I requested the Coca-Cola vendor, "Another one, please..."

“This one is for you Jane, you deserve two...” I smiled, to which she gave a very democratic reply. “Why do you think so, Banjo, I think you too deserve some more...” I preferred to move on, deciding it wasn’t prudent to fall out on this chivalry factor, “Okay agreed, then 50-50...!”

At last, we stumbled upon an ostentatious boutique of ladies accessory. It was chic I deliberated. Jane was kind of captivated. Perhaps she’d come to such glitzy showroom for the first time. The area was designed into distinct sections, housing stuff of ladies’ interest such as footwear, clothing, lingerie, and costume jewelry.

I suggested her a bit determinedly, “Jane, I want you to acquire few fancy headbands, bangles, earrings, and a pair of decent sandals. And please don’t argue with me on that count...!”

Jane intently looked into my eyes and after that, childlike, hopped from one counter to another. At the same time as she bargained and shopped a number of exceedingly cute bits and pieces, I watched her conscientiously. She flitted around like an angel. I believed Jane to be God’s chosen one, presuming she possessed a halo of the same kind as Mother Teresa.

Something attracted me, could it be divinity within her...?

I coveted her unfussiness, her bonhomie. For me, these moments were out of the blue, especially past the demise of Mom, and sudden departure of Bobby.

Before long, the skies turned dark when Jane finally exited the boutique carrying two very cute boxes in her hand, and proudly announcing, “Banjo listen, one box holds a pair of sandals, which would go along with this azure dress, the other is stuffed by way of accessories, matching with any of my dresses. And thanks a lot...!”

I was happy to fork out Rs. 59.50 at the counter. More to the point, I avoided tallying in front of Jane, hence did some mental arithmetic and concluded that I was left over with Rs. 43.20. Ah well I thought, Rs. 43.20 could still be spared for Jane.

On way out I bumped into Pundit Sudhanshu whom I found emerging from the lingerie section. He was clad in his designer *dhori kurta* and wearing his trademark sweet-smelling *attar* of Kannauj. Well, what had he been doing

inside...? I greeted him, gesturing by way of folded palms, “*Namaste, Pundit ji...!*”

He too responded by way of a brief *Namaste*, throwing back a petrified glance when a feminine voice admonished him: “Sudhanshu, now where are you, who is going to carry all these stuff...?” Where Sudhanshu sounded like Soo-dheng-chu, Where like We-Are, and Who like Whore...

Pundit Sudhanshu’s voice sputtered into a “I’m Cccccccoming...” above and beyond conveying me an unwelcoming and discomfited stare, and then scurrying inside flapping his crisp *dhoti kurta*, sounds renting the air.

Mary Poppins...Mary Poppins...Mary Poppins...

I speculated that he must’ve secretly married this buxom nurse, Mary, one who was beside me what time I was born. Dad often used to imitate her heavy Malayalam accent: “Justta one more...Justta one more...” while she’d delivered injections to Mom.

Imagine Pundit Sudhanshu claiming him to be a *Yogi*, a celibate, a *Brahmachari*, and publicly denying a marriage all these years...! And what must he have sung out to his Mary, coaxing her to marry him...?

Could it be the Distant Drums of Jim Reeves...?

I hear the sound of distant drums...far away, far away

And if they call for me to come...then I must go and you must stay

So Mary marry me, let’s not wait

Let’s share all the time we can before it’s too late

Love me now for now is all the time there may be

If you love me Mary, Mary marry me

Ah, the irony would not be lost on those who revered Pundit Sudhanshu as a *brahmachari*, untouched by worldly desires. And yet, if behind the veil of renunciation beat the heart of a man secretly devoted to his Mary, what better confession that Jim Reeves’s Distant Drums...?

That tender pleading, Mary marry me, might well have been his quiet rebellion, his soul’s music echoing louder than any *mantra* he ever chanted. Perhaps, it was not a *shloka*, but this ballad he softly hummed to the stars.

...“Jane, while you’d been shopping, I was wondering whether you would invite me over to assist you prepare the Christmas cake, and in the decorations...”

Jane’s eyes turned moist as she sat still in the car. I tenderly repeated my question, the answer to which was drops of tears, trickling down her satin smooth cheeks. She stanchly wiped them off, staring out of the window

“Banjo, we can’t take in the cake, the decorations this Christmas, my Pop has become jobless and impecunious...!” Hmm...So that was the reason behind Jane’s stupefied silence when I’d enquired about her Christmas shopping sometime back...?

All the same, I got the reply and that too on moment in time...! Exclusive of even locking eyes with Jane, I respectfully directed the chauffeur to drive us back to Pearl Lake. This point in time, the burly guard obliged me, “Yes Sir, there is Bob’s Corner at Dublin 2....”

I was pleased, and thanking him, turned to Jane, “C’mon Jane, cheers up and let’s run again. Let’s see who reaches first...”

Jane broke into childish joviality once again, and we both rushed like nuts to Dublin 2 and almost gate crashing inside Bob’s Corner. Bob’s Corner, positioned at the core of Dublin 2 was lighted up for Christmas. Yummy goodies lined up in each of its shelves.

Upon reaching the counter, somewhat far above the ground for my stature, panting hard and pointing towards Jane, I requested, “Sir, could you please arrange us a basket full of goodies, which goes into the making of a Christmas cake, in addition to little decoration items for the Christmas tree...?”

The owner, a rotund man having round face, nodded his head whilst barking specific instructions to one of his assistants. In about quarter-hour, a parcel was set ready, and a bill of Rs. 41.50 presented to me. Wow...! I was well within my budget. Along with the payment, I offered him an affable smile.

I calculated I was still left with an insignificant amount of Rs.1.70. I decided to wring whatever balance I had, in a bid to make Jane happy, as much as it was possible. For that reason, I approached the Coca-Cola vendor for the second time, this time with greater enthusiasm: “Uncle, could you please give us 2 Colas for Rs.1.70 and sorry, I’m short of 10 paisa...?”

Coca-Cola vendor stared at us. At first I thought he would shoo us away, considering those 10 paisa to be his only profit. Hitherto, his fatherly instincts roused, he uncorked 2 Coca-Colas by way of a pop sound, followed by a fizz. Gleeful and thankful we shared the Cola amid great élan.

As we sipped the chilled sweetness under the harsh sun, the vendor's weathered face broke into a smile, as if our joy had briefly become his own.

...Jagmohan sped the car and soon we reached RBI building. Jane got down the car, seeing that, the chauffeur handed her the two boxes.

“Banjo, this is for you, and buh-bye...!” Jane whispered into my ears, at once turned back, walking away shyly without meeting my eyes. In the dark I couldn't make out the gift appropriately, but felt it in my fingers. It was a bracelet. I carefully shoved it into my pocket and hummed yet another song of Jim Reeves.

His mellow baritone, like a lullaby dipped at day's end, had always been my refuge, and tonight, with Jane's parting gift warming my pocket, Jim Reeves felt closer than ever...

I love you because you understand, dear
every single thing I try to do
You're always there to lend a helping hand, dear
I love you most of all because you're you.

No matter what the world may say about me
I know your love will always see me through
I love you for the way you never doubt me
but most of all I love you 'coz you're you...

Chapter 14

Jingle Bells

Back home I speedily switched on the lights of my room and fished out the bracelet. Wow...! It was something of a Friendship Band, made up of lac resin, brightly colored and embroidered by way of lots of glass work. Even though it appeared feminine, I tied it on my right hand. I caressed it; my angel had gifted an uncomplicated Friendship Band to me.

I stared at Mom's portrait 75 cm tall and 50 cm wide: "Mom, I've discovered an angel, and she's Jane...!"

...Next day at school I plugged-in Varun that I was sorry I couldn't locate his showroom. He too was woebegone especially when he heard that Jane had accompanied me. His feminine eye did dip softly and coyly as he shrugged, his shoulders spinning like a toy that spun around, a whirligig. "It's Daisy Woolens, at Dublin 3..."

"Oh shit..." I murmured to myself, recalling the burly guard's words about woolen cardigan shops - being accessible at any probable Dublin. Obviously, after having visited Dublin 1 for the Ladies accessory, Dublin 2 for the Christmas stuff, it had to be Dublin 3...! How come my mental arithmetic botched...?

Jane approached me. "Banjo, remember its Christmas week, and you're invited in the evening, bits and pieces to be taken care of..." I was delighted to receive her invitation although I'd never visited her dwelling before.

She confirmed she would be waiting for me at the same spot; in abut the imposing RBI building, from where she would escort me to her house. As per Jane's version, the approach to her house comprised of confusing alleys.

Dot 5:00 in the evening I found Jane waiting for me at the rendezvous, her eyes searching for my car. She had come by cycle rickshaw all the way to guide me to her house. She was pleasing to the eye in her reddish top and a check flared skirt, apple green and short in length.

Host of effects were tied around her girlish wrist, upon her crown, and across her shapely waistline. Hmm...! To end with, my fat Donald Duck had proved its worth, I smiled.

Sitting in the car, she glanced contentedly at the Friendship Band around my wrist. She then directed the chauffeur quite self-assuredly, "Please reverse the car, and take a U-turn up to the Head Post Office HPO. From the HPO please take a turn to the right. After two rows, you'll come across St. Peter's Nursery School, from where again turn 3 alleys to the left..."

Jagmohan followed her instructions like a robot the next 10 minutes or so. Finally, she requested him to stop the car and park it at the curb. "Thank you, Sir...!" She acknowledged the chauffeur. "Banjo, come along, it's another furlong walk from this place..."

"Walk or...?" I giggled as I broke into a sprint on this deserted boardwalk negotiating an ample headway.

"O that's cheating, you should've stated before..."

Barely did I halt a moment to calibrate a reply she overtook me, her gay abandoned laughter lifting the air around her neighborhood.

"Oh no...! Now, that's called cheating..." I sprinted behind her, behind her flowing hair and check flared skirt, apple green and short in length. I followed her flowing hair and check flared skirt, apple green and short in length into a house, somewhat cramped up...

I discovered 4-5 members in session perched upon assorted chairs in the lounge area

This lounge served multipurpose. It had a space housing this old 173 cc Royal Enfield motorbike. Another corner was the larder having 2-3 sacks, and tidily placed beside a huge cylindrical iron chamber somewhat resembling a silo, derived from the word *Siros* in Greek, and further, which led to the kitchen. Third corner was occluded, giving access to a couple of rooms, probably the bedrooms.

Yet, it was all the way through the ultimate corner of the verandah that we abruptly stormed, creating a rumpus. Noticing the free-for-all, all of them twisted their necks towards us. Jane beamed, proudly announcing: "Folks, this is Banjo, my best friend...!"

“Hello Banjo...!” An elderly man, paunchy, bald patch over his thinning hair, got up strenuously from a single sofa, rickety in nature, and extending his hand. “Welcome to our Pink House, I’m Michael, Jane’s pop...!”

Instantly I took a liking to him, bowed at him, pulling out my boyish hand to boot. So he was Jane’s Pop, now jobless. And this was his Pink House, albeit amid cracked plaster and shocking Pink over its walls.

I glanced at other members. Lady seated next to Mr. Diaz must be his elder daughter, Jane’s elder sister, I presumed. But then, Jane had never disclosed that she also had an elder sis, much more pinkish than her.

“I’m Mrs. Diaz...”

That startled me. So she’s Mrs. Diaz. I quizzically looked up at Jane who hitherto did not offer any indication, rather looked hither and thither.

Two other members who were seated held lemonade glasses in their hands. They were a young couple. While the woman was unattractive, the man was good-looking. No sooner we entered they excused us, but only after hurriedly gulping down the lemonade.

They had brought along an irritating son, as ugly as sin, aged 5 or 6 who sat beside his mother insisting on having yet more lemonade, which made the parents exit in haste in a discomfit note. “I wan dish Mole...I wan Mole...I wan Mole...”

Mr. Diaz bade them goodbye. Jane informed that they were Parkers who lived in the next alley. Mr. Diaz after that cheerfully welcomed us: “Jane, it’s good that you’ve brought your best friend in this crucial point in time. You both can help Pinks fix up everything for Christmas...”

Pinks...?

It might be because of Mrs. Diaz’s pink complexion that her doting husband addressed her as Pinks.

While Mrs. Diaz emerged from one of those assorted seats, I glanced at her once more.

Why, she was wearing a sleeveless satin nightie whose mauve color was faded, yet looked pretty on her, lace appliqué staring at the bust and hem, and the fabric stretched with wear, causing the neckline to drop a full inch...?

The little décolletage bared dainty metallic silver cross pendant and chain necklace which furiously swayed like a pendulum, *pendulo* in Portuguese, all the way through the Pacific coast of America to its Atlantic coast, whilst she bent down to pick up the drained lemonade glasses of Parkers.

I exchanged greetings with Mrs. Diaz, who in a little while excused herself...“Banjo, please make yourself comfortable while I prepare a quantity of lemonade for you and Jane...”

Jane slumped beside me carelessly and started fixing up her hair, which had become scruffy because of the frenzied sprint. She dished out her grey headband, stuck it between her teeth while arranging her hair by means of a cute hairbrush, brunnera blue in color.

We both were ensconced within Parker’s sofa, the sofa which had become hollow and tired. It was sopping wet, perhaps that child, that dunderhead did it...!

“Wet it...? Wet it with what...?” I got jumpy. “If lemonade droppings, then all right; what if it were something else..?” I was fidgety and made a valiant effort to shift, but virtually got stuck up in the company of Jane in the hollow of this sofa...

To reassure myself, I then slowly inserted my right hand fingers, in between my thighs, and figured out the scrim of the sofa, at the same time as Mr. Diaz’ eyes penetrated Mrs. Diaz’s rear, even as she sauntered into the kitchen swaying her curvy hips.

Jane was furthermore engrossed fixing up her hair

Stealthily I squeezed the sofa cover and brought the liquid extract within the triangular grip of my middle finger, ring finger and thumb, further raising it to my Mom-like cute nose.

Oh My God, it did smell foul, I was right...! It was the extract from the fountain of that ugly irritating chap, the extract now engulfing the bottom of my pants as well, as rapidly as ink over blotting paper. How many gallons did he relieve himself after consuming quarts and quarts of that lemonade, I cursed in disgust...?

And just imagine he went on asking for mole and mole..! No wonder his parents had picked him up and dragged him to a different alley. I say, he should’ve been transited to a different continent altogether...! How much I

hated these little boys, these ruffians...? I felt like fixing these bedwetting chaps up, one by one...Grrr...!

In a little while, the lemonade was served. I began to sip. Jane had finished with her hairdo that now looked tidy but not too enchanting. Why, I liked the fashion so casual that it looks slightly messy, *estilo desleixado* in Portuguese...? I mused.

As we sipped, I noticed Mrs. Diaz seated next to her husband, her two feet piled and squeezed up on the sofa. Tardy length of the nightie exposed the curvy portion of her calves. Mr. Diaz's roving eyes kept marveling at her shiny on top membrane, pink in flush.

Mrs. Diaz: "Children, now let us segregate the task. First the making of the Christmas cake, next the decorations. Hope you won't get all-in...!

...Banjo, we'll have to cut through the drill of a dozen steps. Even though I'm not an adept but I prefer homemade stuff, especially on such a joyous occasion as that of Christmas. Jane had informed me that you would be coming so I've already carried out little overnight preparations..."

"That sounds exciting..." I genuinely nodded at Mrs. Diaz. "What all things have you fixed up, Auntie...?"

Leaving behind Mr. Diaz with the cleaning of his old motorbike, Jane and I entered the kitchen. Mrs. Diaz proudly produced a bowl having lots of assorted items inside them and started explaining by way of meticulousness

"Yesterday night, I'd already prepared this mixture containing currants, sultanas and raisins, candied peel, and glaze cherries duly chopped. Considering the fact that you and Jane and other kids would be partying, I mixed it with orange juice instead of the usual brandy..."

She winked and continued: "You know, Michael was bit annoyed for this last moment modify, from brandy to orange juice..." "However, I must say Banjo, your friend Jane is quite proficient at her crafts, look how deftly she has designed the cake container..."

Before she could conclude, Jane interrupted and eagerly escorted me to her room, leaping up to a shelf after arranging a tool, "Hey, better be careful Jane..." I said, holding it steadfastly. She outstretched her hands and brought down a brown paper container, tub-shaped, elucidating that it was erected out of baking parchment, having cuts and folds, here and there.

Well, being a novice I couldn't decipher what all she detailed, albeit gripped it appreciatively in my hands, at the same time looking around the room.

Room appeared frugal, nothing as compared to mine at Anupriya Villa, and barely housing a single bed, a 3-shelved rack, a stool, all of cane, and that's all...! The rack could hardly suffice for all her school books and copies, which of course were quite neatly covered and labeled.

Jane, eyeing my eyes eyeing around, posed: "I don't like to sleep here alone; I'm not fond of this room...!"

"Then why don't you sleep in the company of your parents...?" I questioned naturally. Jane looked at me despondently, her low expressions being the same that I'd noticed before. For that reason, this point in time, not to look for her answer at some probable and future and uncertain date and moment and venue, I insisted, "But why...?"

"I used to sleep over there alongside my previous Momma, Gracie...!" Jane looked down while answering, traces of fretfulness and gloom on the word previous. So that was it...?

As a final point, the Algebra of my mind, functioning smoothly like the Microprocessor, solved that mysterious x: the present Mrs. Diaz was different than the previous Mrs. Diaz. This one is Pinks, the previous one was Gracie. "But Auntie seems nice; she also prepares yummy lemonade...!"

"Yes, you're right, she's fond of me, but you know, it had become uncomfortable in that room..." Jane insisted in the same childlike note..."You know Banjo; I used to slip in, in-between my parents, but time and again at the dead of night I found myself at the end part of the bed..."

...One such night when it was pitching dark, I heard a range of sounds, panting sounds coming out of my Momma, followed by similar sounds out of my Pop. I was frightened and woke up, but I couldn't locate the light switch. Sleepy-eyed, I dozed off again, before snuggling up to Momma, now in the center in place of me, to kiss her, but found that she'd compactly covered herself by a sheet, a *chaddar*...

...Much later, after my visit to the washroom, I discovered her nightie carelessly strewn across the floor. And when all such and similar way out

incidents occurred and frequented at regular intervals, I began to spend longer time in my study...”

I noticed Jane had become quite worked up spilling the beans, which finally ended like this: “This room was actually my study, Banjo...! One night I remember, after finishing off my homework, I fell asleep over my desk. Next morning we, I mean all 3 of us, unanimously decided that a cot should be placed, just in case I again dozed off past studies...”

Mrs. Diaz interrupted our private conversation. Jane and I rushed to the kitchen. “Jane, where are you, I’m waiting for you dear...”

“O wow...! This is, if truth be told, the most exhilarating part, Momma...I’ll do it...I’ll handle it...” Jane was back to work. She measured equal portions of unsalted butter and soft brown sugar into a different bowl, and then started creaming it via a classic fashion. I loved watching her in action and meanly snatched the bowl out of her hands.

“Hello, it’s my turn, *Senhorita*...!”

Hardly a few minutes elapsed later than my Portuguese verbose, ahead of Jane irately snatching away that bowl away from me, as if in alternation. “Enough, *Sr*, now it’s my turn...”

“Now, now Jane, don’t you squabble...!” Mrs. Diaz reprimanded her at the same time as beating a few eggs in a separate bowl. Well, that was it...!

Smell of eggs agitated my senses and I retreated from the kitchen right away. Just then Jane held out the bowl to me amid a sharp bow, placing her right palms over her left chest: “Fine, Momma’s Darling, *querida da mamee*, *Sr*. Banjo Kumarr, take this it’s all yours, Kt. Kirti...!”

Ugh...! Now when did I put in the picture Jane about the title Kt. Kirti given to me by Doctor Tripathi uncle, Doctor Zhivago I mean, as if her Portuguese weren’t as much unavoidable...?

Ungraciously, and grinning crookedly, I lifted the bowl and stirred its contents by way of the spoon till the mixture turned light, pale and fluffy. I then dipped my right hand fingers into the bowl, stirred it slightly, scooping out a quantity to taste. My face smeared in the midst of sugar butter. I appeared Kanha-like, while Jane kept sulking at me.

At this instant, Mrs. Diaz, asking both of us not to spar any more, was adding those smelly beaten eggs into that sugar-fat mixture, a teaspoon at a time, and whisking by means of a hand whisk.

Sensing her ill Jane flustered, Mrs. Diaz cheered her up, offering her credence: “Jane, please pass me the plain flour, a wee bit, which you’ll find in the lower compartment. Also add to it pinch of grated nutmeg and a little ground spice, will you...?”

Jane visibly pleased to secure a role for herself mixed them up as directed. By way of gentle and folding movements she incorporated all of it into the mixture. Once again, it was Mrs. Diaz’s turn, even as she added the overnight-soaked fruits to the cake mixture, in addition chopped almonds and the grated zest of a juicy lemon, folding them carefully.

I watched her admiringly when she smoothly spooned the mixture onto the prepared tin, the handcrafted tin, spritely fetched by none other than Jane from her room, or study, whatever...!

Jane also brought back a double sheet of silicone paper, piercing a 50-p sized hole in it by a pencil. Yes, she really is acquainted with the nuances of craft. After everything else, she proudly sang out, “Momma, it’s now all set for the oven...!”

“Okay kids, now it’s my job or rather the job of the oven, and thanks a lot, Banjo. Er also for the stuff, I mean that tidy amount of stuff you acquired for the cake...!”

I was embarrassed by the expressions of Mrs. Pinks, at the same time as watching her contentedly putting that container into the oven. Thank you Bob’s Corner I said to myself...! Thank you, rotund uncle with round face. And thank you, my Donald Duck. Silently, I broke into a song

Donald Duck...My Donald Duck...My fat and hefty Donald Duck...!

Donald Duck...My Donald Duck...My fat and hefty Donald Duck...!

Confining our collective and concerted labors into the heat test of the Fahrenheit of the oven, we rescinded to our standard games of hopping around in the alley any longer, till the shadow of my chauffeur, Jagmohan loomed. I rushed outside as I observed Mr. Diaz fidgeting with his motorbike and at the same time eyeing his Pinks inside the bedroom...

“Bye...Bye...” I shouted and rushed out with Jagmohan. Jane waved back frantically standing at her doorstep. All over again her grey headband loosened her hair carelessly, and messily, *estilo desleixado* in Portuguese. After we trudged a furlong or so, we got up the car.

I preferred the rear seat as I wished to recline, legs spread out sideways, towards an imaginary lap. Was it that of Jane’s...?

In due course, the chauffeur turned 3 alleys to the right where we spotted St. Peter’s Nursery School, from the school we reached HPO after crossing two rows, then a U-turn from the HPO to the imposing RBI building, and finally a long and familiar drive homewards.

Back home, following more than 4 hours of *masti*, I became forlorn. “What a lovely evening it was...? I tearfully stared at Mom’s portrait, 75 cm tall, 50 cm wide, a large Red *Bindi*, and 3-4 inch Red *Sindoor*...

Wiping tears by my right hand fingers, I discovered them carrying the taste of the cake mixture, and on a double take, realized it was something else...! What was it, was it the releases of that irritating Mole...?”

OMG

Damn, I’d succulently licked those stained fingers; same fingers which had creamed in a classic fashion equal portions of unsalted butter, soft brown sugar.

~

...Finally arrived the gala night of December 24 and I was at Jane’s place assisting with the decorations and arrangements...

Mr. Diaz created fresh space by shifting his old Royal Enfield motorbike and parking it outside in the alley. It was another thing that he had to drag it along, the ignition refusing to spark to life. Hence, Jane and I helped to push it along. It was great fun. Out in the alley Mr. Diaz cajoled me to shove it harder, “Banjo, why can’t you thrust it more like a man...?”

I shoved it harder. The speed caught up and so did his paunch. It waved up and down, high tides Bay of Bengal-type, as he panted ahead of us. Nevertheless, Mr. Diaz seemed to be in pain...! Was it pain around his groin...?

Next was to help him out conceal the kitchen larder, consisting of the 2-3 sacks, and the silo. Unwittingly, I played out a thumping sound over the lid of that huge cylindrical iron chamber; a sound...dhum...dhuuum...dhuuuuuuum...akin to drums of triumph.

“Hey Banjo, you’re good at percussion...!” Remarked a beaming Mr. Diaz, and “One day, you must strike drums in an orchestra. Hitherto, you remind me of the topical movie...Rocky...wherein the theme song, composed by Bill Conti, replete with athleticism and his personal triumph, has become timeless...”

“Oh is it...?” I interrupted in astonishment.

“Yes Banjo, the title, Gonna Fly Now has out-and-out turned out in a big way to be part of today’s pop culture, despite certain out-dated elements. Notably, it features a stirring build up, similar to what you played over this cylindrical iron chamber, notwithstanding among vocals...

...You know it holds a coveted place in the heart of Philadelphians, especially when they’re in a patriotic mood this particular Bi-Centennial Year, 1976...”

“Philadelphians...? Bi-Centennial Year...?” I questioned head-in-the-clouds.

“Yes, people residing in Philadelphia, the city where this big fight takes place, in the great country of America, which declared its Independence precisely, 200-years ago...

I was carefully trying to tag on whatever Mr. Diaz was enlightening about the film Rocky and at this moment about its star cast. “Listen Banjo, before you take up drumming; remember to develop a strong body, a body similar to its male lead, the sporty heartthrob star, and my favorite, Sylvester Stallone...”

“Ah...! Sylvester Stallone I heard of him I think he’s a craze these days...?”

In next to no time, in order to generate macho credentials, similar to his favorite star, Mr. Michael Diaz assumed a snarling look like that of him and went on to replicate his slightly slurred speech

“Yeah, mah boy...Me Rocky Balboa, I’ve grown from rags to riches. In fact I worked as a debt collector for that loan shark in the Italian neighborhood

of Philadelphia. And now look at me. Hey look at me. From a small-time Club Fighter, an underdog boxer, I've got a shot at the World Heavyweight Championship...!"

Mr. Diaz was inexorable. Fingers pointing towards his own face and by way of comparable slurred style of talking, snarling facial expression, he sustained: "You know Banjo; I've fought 15 bloody rounds amid a broken nose, depilating trauma around the eye, yet created the greatest exhibition of guts, stamina in the history of the Ring..."

We all were in splits, holding our stomachs at what time Mr. Diaz attempted to cover one of his eyes as if black-and-blue. Afterward, pointing a threatening finger towards me: "Even if you, my worthy opponent, have won the match by a split decision, I just don't care, I simply care for my love, my love..."

...O where is my Adrian (the name of the heroine in the film)...Sorry, my Pinks...?" Signing off, Mr. Diaz too joined us in our merriment.

Because it was getting late, Mr. Diaz stopped up his act, dramatically climbing 2 vital steps to his living room, very much like the awesome scene in which Rocky runs up those 72 stone steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gonna Fly Now playing in the background...

...True, Rocky had entered my psyche, his poster hanging on one of the walls of my bedroom.

~

To end with, arrived the Christmas night and I, Banjo, suddenly found myself as the guest of honor, an honored guest of the charming Jane Diaz, her cozy family.

Keeping in mind wherewithal constraints, I never expected an authentic Christmas tree of spruce, or fir. For that reason, I was pleasantly surprised to find its artificial version, and set by all sorts of embellishments acquired from Bob's Corner. The tree was perhaps set by goose feathers, and dyed green, one more signal of the ingenuity of Jane Diaz.

Shortly afterwards, Christmas Carol flew in the air the Parkers joining in

Oh, jingle bells, jingle bell

Jingle all the way

Mr. Michael Diaz dressed up in a smart though worn-out suit, russet in color, same colored boa, was constantly fidgeting his groin.

Mrs. Diaz as usual looked striking in a low-cut pink color maxi evening gown of satin, a shade of baby blue light blazer, which was more of a tight blazer having wide lapels. It revealed her contours, gleefully making her husband in awe of her, every now and then.

“Yo, Adrian...! Sorry, yo Pinks...! What would’ve happened to me if you weren’t present in my life...? You’ve completed my life. I cannot believe my fortune to have a pink beauty like you. I deeply thank Christ for that...”

Mrs. Diaz blushed at the compliment, enhancing the Pink of her facial appearance.

Among other guests, counting a dozen or so, the little boy, Parker’s boy, was already in the way of feasting upon the scrumptious Christmas cake. I wondered whether he would leave a quantity of for the rest of us. “Irritating chap...” I decided.

Jane was dressed up elegantly in a cots wool red and white check shirt, looking smart upon a grey skirt, stopping an inch or two short of the knee. Her feet boasted of a new pair of red sandals, acquired from the other day’s shopping at Pearl Lake. Her hair looked gorgeous, even though careless and messy, *estilo desleixado* in Portuguese.

And accessories: they seemed to be piled upon her tonight, a matching headband, lots of bands and bangles around the wrist, and a pair of massive earrings, dangling much to my amusement. “Hey Jane, your massive earrings can surely measure the downwind. I’m sure our science teacher would love to use ‘em as an anemometer in one of our experiments...”

“Again you go off Banjo, wait...*Esperar...*!” Jane was cross with me and within a trice she picked up a slice of the spongy cake, smeared it right across my face, a quantity of which pilfered over to my classy pallid suit. Was I unruffled, on the contrary, rewarding her in the same coin...?

Oh yes, in the scrimmage that ensued, it was now at the interface of her red and white check shirt that bore the tattletale. She got incensed, stomping out of the festive hall to the confines of her study, aka bedroom.

I instantly followed suit. Eyebrows curled up wildly, she swiped a napkin lying at hand, making frenetic efforts to wipe it off, naught extracted.

Quite the messy stains: a heady amalgamation of the sugar and fat mixture, few eggs, unsalted butter, soft brown sugar, grated zest of a juicy lemon, and which got further enmeshed and mislaid into the soft, porous strains of the cots wool fabric.

“Hey, hold it Jane, lemme try...!” I chivalrously volunteered. Administering a brawny reflex, I snatched away the napkin from her bangled hands and started chafing it at the fabric over her soft breast, in a chaotic bid to eliminate those glaring tell-tale stains from her check shirt, my unfathomable transgressions.

Series of measures applied were so much so damn abrupt that my senses failed to register that she was a growing girl, till a tight whack endeared across my face

“Voce idiota, seu idiota...!”

You jerk, you idiot, reverberated inside my brains, and before I could apprehend the technical lapse at my dim-witted end and emerge out of the shock of her knee-jerk reaction, I received another taut one, yet fiercer, yet mightier, however on a different cheek, and by a different hand, and at a different angle.

Heads bent down 130 degrees, I’d no alternative but to hastily retreat, enter the crowded festive hall over again, meekly taking refuge at the rear of Mrs. Pinks Diaz. Perhaps, the Pink of her cheeks resembled that of mine, the difference being that of shade, mine appeared deeper...

O meu parecia mais profundo...!

Chapter 15

Machher Jhaal

Manorama, the fat aunt of Deoghar, blasted off one day: “Why is the chauffeur playing truant these Emergency days when even trains are running on time...? He reports for duty so late that it’s always poor Bharat da who has to bother to get up early to drop Banjo to school...”

More often than not, after dropping me to school, Dad used to look around fervently for someone, but to no avail. And these days you know, it was yet another of Guru Dutt’s songs, this time from Guru Dutt’s own masterpiece film...Pyasa...which escaped Dad’s lips

Hum aapki aankhon mein

iss dil ko basaa de toh...!

Yet on a different morning whilst he drove me to school, it was full blast

Hum aaaaapki aankhon mein

iss dil ko basaaaaaa de toh...!!

Nonetheless, much to his disenchantment, what Dad could generally detect was Aye Aung arriving in her white Standard Herald, Mark III, steered by her thickset chauffeur.

Nowhere were seen the beautiful eyes of her Mom, Yadana Aung aunt evident. Dad’s infatuations *vis-à-vis* Yadana Aung aunt conked out when fat aunt of Deoghar visited DK one late afternoon after her nursing classes, and what time DK discussed Sahani uncle’s proposal of getting Dad remarried.

Fat aunt of Deoghar was to some extent apprehensive: “Yes Kaka ji, I think it’s a great idea, but would Bharat da agree...?”

The fat aunt of Deoghar, having gone through The pathetic Storm, was aware of the immense loss and agony which my Dad bore in his personal life, besides the fact that he loved Mom dearly. Eyeing me playing around, which she thought was sheer wastage of time, she barked: “Banjo, come here...!”

To her, anything other than scoring marks for exams, or toiling hard for spondulicks, was supposed to be worthless and futile. Perceptively, music or movies, arts or crafts, poetry or literature, fashion or style, cooking or gardening, or any new aspect of culture, fancies of life, were nothing but vagaries of one's personality, squandering away time, money, and energy.

She believed that any pursuit not directly contributing to tangible success was little more than a distraction, a fleeting indulgence that served no real purpose. In her world, everything had to be practical, measurable, and efficient – there was no room for the abstract or the ephemeral, no space for passions that didn't come with a return on investment.

And in this context, I remained quite embittered. Despite the fact that Dad had agreed 50:50, this fat aunt of Deoghar was unwavering that I shouldn't get a Bongo, letting loose lengthy sermons in the course

"You know Bharat da, as long as Anupriya *Bowdi* was in the corner to prod him, Banjo studied seriously and secured good marks. But I'm sorry to inform that since she departed, this boy has virtually stopped up studying...

...And mind my words; once you buy him this thing called Bango or Bongo, whateverrr, he'll finally put a full stop to his studies. After that all you shall see would be more of his ruckus and tomfoolery. And then don't tell me that you ever wanted to send your only son to Italy for higher studies...Blah...! Blah...! Blah..."

That fat aunt of Deoghar would go on and on, Dad remaining stoic, continuing with his elaborate shaving and trimming of his mustache, *la* Guru Dutt style. Perhaps he thought his face resembled Guru Dutt's. One day, her voice hit me: "Banjo, come here at once...!"

I decided to cut short my usual games of playing with the ball and came running upstairs, the peppermint flavor chewing gum, the Chiclets from Cadbury, still churning inside the limits of my mouth, waiting for the sugary candy to hang back, till the 6th extinction of human species.

Whenever I wielded the ball, the tennis ball, it was like sheer magic. I loved to hit and catch the ball upon different sections of the house walls. Initial bounces materialized on the space above the wash room adjoining my room, and concluding at the hollow cast iron electric pole opposite our garden.

So as to last little toingg meant that bells were ringing, time up, and I would now have to sit down to study like a good boy

...Once I remember, whilst Mom was alive, the ball had found its mark into the huge buns of the fat aunt of Deoghar. Instead of a rhythmic toingg, it made an unrefined phupp...!

Pitiable tennis ball, after bass beating this persnickety fortification, colossal as the inexhaustible ramparts of Kumbalgarh Fort in Rajasthan, as a final point, oozed out, swirling eccentrically like a dipsomaniac.

Subsequently began the customary rigmarole, my Mom punishing me into the *tekhana*, and me devising yet gutsy customs of monkeyshines.

In the present day, it was past many weeks that this fat aunt waddled to our place. Although my prejudice had somewhat narrowed, it hadn't obliterated from top to bottom.

I hungrily eyed at her Afro-American hairstyle, properly shampooed today, and she in turn, likes a fuddy-duddy, at the patch on my Jeans, screaming

I'm a rebel

"Would you like to have another Mom, Banjo...?" She asked me, almost brusquely. DK stared at both of us one by one, his walrus mustache oscillating from one end to the other. Wasn't it akin to a bolt from the blue, something further than DK's *mohinga* fart...?

That fat aunt of Deoghar posed this question as a matter-of-fact deportment, as though inquiring about another pair of trousers during oncoming Durga Puja festival...!

It was true that Dad and I were subterranean in anguish once Mom had departed. No one could better comprehend than us two, how we managed to swim through her dearth, her stark absence.

Every nook and cranny of Anupriya Villa appeared uncongenial, devoid of her charisma. Its stillness deafening, at times unnerving...! Both of us woke up swollen eyes subsequent sunups. I deliberated that by overtly lamenting for Mom I would be inflicting twinge to Dad, I don't know, vice versa.

Was it not in reality that both of us tried to give the impression of being cheery, and following everyday subsistence...? Even though it was grandpa with big mustaches and I who marked noticeable changes in Dad, he on his part, had become busier than usual, leaner, tanner... For long hours he preferred to stay away from dwelling.

Sahani uncle had been pronouncing that my Dad had suddenly become more ambitious and all ears to work, wanting to spread out his business into whole of South Asia, right from Kabul in the north to Colombo in the South; from Karachi in the West to Rangoon in the East...!

DK: “You know Manorama, Sahani was mentioning something very interesting about his Sindhi community. When Sindhi men venture out to sea, their women pray to Jhuleylal, the *Avatar* of Varuna, Lord of the River and Sea and Sindhu, for their safe return...

...Now if Bharat gets a wife, then she would pray for him on his foreign sojourns, and also prepare the sweet, *akha* after he returns...!”

Akha

“Oh no...!” I contemplated. A kind lady conveying prayers for my Dad’s welfare was good enough, but from where did the idea of *akha* sticks into his head...? Now, if *akha* was on the menu, then DK surely would like to have a lion’s share of this *akha*, and I, poor Banjo, would’ve to bear a sweetened *akha* fart, as if *mohinga* fart wasn’t enough...!

Gauging the instance at the pendulum access door grandfather’s clock, octagon shape, precisely within half hour as soon as it would be twilight, we would be truly doled out an outsized sweetened backfiring. For at present, DK had served us *halawa*, a Burmese version of our very own Indian *halwa*, the difference being, apart from an A inserted in between, this *halawa* had been primed out of sticky rice, butter, and coconut milk.

Plus, to my horror I’d counted him consuming half-dozen generous platefuls. Twilight was approaching, and I deliberated it would be perilous staying back with DK. I was also feeling mortified and astounded by the blunted question posed by the fat aunt of Deoghar...

Before I could answer, or decide what to answer, I became nervy after I saw DK shifting his posture on his armchair.

It predestined trouble, this *halawa* could be outrageous. Startled, I got up from the soda set crafted from wood and woven wicker, and put out of sight behind the fat aunt of Deoghar. Yes, she would be my shield tonight, safeguard from the deadly typhoon, thunderous God, Vayu.

I also affirmed myself as to why grandpa with big mustaches patronized this particular soda set. Probably it was because the wicker weaved into a net, carrying umpteen geometric perforations, thereby enabling free passage to his *vayu* across the Milky Way.

My eyes, in shenanigans, again hungrily fell upon Manorama aunt's properly shampooed Afro-American hairstyle. Saccharine of the Chiclets from Cadbury weaned out, I just couldn't linger any longer for the 6th extinction of human species. Mechanism of my high jinks mind started whirring in an atypical manner, wherein

Do aur do made Paanch

School, I felt was better, because our villa, in particular upstairs division, had become weighty by way of thwarting ponderings wherein Dad had become the credulous target.

Quorum comprising of Grandpa with big mustaches, Sahani uncle, and the fat aunt of Deoghar were often in serious ruminations, as if they planned to dislodge incumbent Government for a new one.

How therefore to convince my Dad, from where to find him a suitable bride, a 2nd one that too, and how to go about the progression, turned out to be a zigzag puzzle for the trio...?

Much like the Pearl Lake circular public walk, they painstakingly used to initiate from the jetty points of Dublin 1 to Dublin 2 to Dublin 3, again to retreat in reverse gear, without any wrapping up.

"Banjo, it's time for dinner...!" Dad in the intervening time beckoned me to the dining hall, *sala da cena* in Italian. "And where had you been...?"

"I'd been to assist a friend of mine; she'd invited me over...!" I replied as a matter of fact, and to which Dad posed a direct question: "Aye Aung invited you...?"

OMG, so Dad even remembered her name...! Although the chauffeur had resumed his morning sessions, Dad couldn't put out of his mind that

Chaudhavin ka Chaand occurrence. Vegetable curry nearly fell off my maw. I managed to gulp it down with water.

“No, Jane Diaz...!”

Afterward I fell silent. Past meals while washing hands out of the bowl and wiping them clean by means of fresh napkins; Dad bade good night, “Er Banjo, why don’t you invite friends to your place...? You may start with Aung...!”

“Aaaanddd my Bongo...?” I reminded him of my *quid pro quo*, noticing Dad offer an impish grin as he sauntered out.

So that was it...? Most convoluted and batty problem in South Asia, which my grandpa with big mustaches, Sahani uncle, and the fat aunt of Deoghar with her Afro-American hairstyle couldn’t get to the bottom of, and whose way out turned round and round like the boardwalks of Pearl Lake, appeared to have been cracked at last...

Like one of those Geometry theorems this too had thus received signals of completion of proof, in Latin, Q.E.D.

Quod erat demonstrandum

Inter alia, two items remained to be taken up next day, one, to invite Aye Aung and her Mom Yadana Aung, and two, to inform parley chamber, 1st floor...

After all, similar to the Constitution of India, radically modified now, the entire opposition languishing in jail, and the Parliament holding unfettered authority, doing little to prevent the Executive from committing excesses; it was now turn for Anupriya Villa to receive Fundamental alterations.

Consequently, it was decided that on coming Sunday, Yadana Aung aunt and her daughter Aye, were to join us for lunch.

Karuna di, our head cook was entrusted with the womanly part of the team game in which Yadana Aung aunt was supposed to prepare and serve a dish. And of course, Karuna di would be assisted by Draupadi, our *bai* from Bastar. Furthermore, Manorama aunt, grandpa with big mustaches, and Sahani uncle would sum up as collocutors...

~

D-Day arrived

Yadana Aung aunt arrived in style set on the wheels of her white Standard Herald, Mark III car, its characteristic tail fins designed by Michelotti, and Aye sitting beside her in a brightly-colored smock frock, lots of Thai floral prints over it.

Dad appeared jaunty at his Sunday best, putting on a refreshing mint shade check shirt of Arrow, teamed by way of a lightweight trouser in ivory, and tightened by an Allen Edmonds belt carved in grey, all American, along with contrasting off-white cuff of the shirt, rolled up sleeves, exposing his Swiss Breguet watch, originated in Paris.

Bata sandals glistened at his feet, the brand, vestiges of the grand Austro-Hungarian Empire, which he hoped won't give away, as had his damn flip-flops the foremost day, the day of his nocturne, Chaudhavin ka Chaand.

Quick on the feet to receive her at the porch, Dad marveled at her exclusive pink party *Dhakai Jamdani* sari, *ad infinitum*, heavy gorgeous hand embroidery work over its body, *paar* and *pallu*, matched via dupion silk blouse, in addition to her flowing tresses, which even if hid her Oriya silver filigree earrings, lent music to his craving ears.

DK, Sahani uncle, and Manorama aunt in her Afro-American hairstyle soon arrived upon the scene one by one, making Dad little conscious, so much so that he excused him to talk to someone over telephone by way of the international parlance, English.

How much the phone call was worth at this crucial hour was anybody's guess, as at the same time he was fretfully glancing at the galloping Breguet arms of his classic line wrist watch...?

Each of us, depending on one's frame and bulk, arbitrarily prized an exact section upon the plush Kalonice couch sofa seat, classic and elegant in its embroidered silk upholstery, woven by means of metallic threads, to him or her in our super sized, well-appointed rectangle shape drawing room, *salotto* in Italian.

Amid capacity for 14 people, encompassing 2 sofa sets for 3 each, 2 loveseats for 2 each, single chairs 4 in number, this double set of furniture held authentic Chinese red phoenix and chrysanthemum brocade upholstery, selected by Mom in one of her shopping sprees of yore.

Likewise, soft cushions in varied sizes and shapes, upholstered in the midst of orient red color and designs, elegantly and randomly graced the backs of the couches.

Ergonomically speaking, each member preferred places adjacent to each other. For instance, Yadana Aung aunt bunched together with her daughter and me in a single couch sofa. All others favored single chairs, barring Manorama aunt, who sought a double-space corner loveseat, unwittingly converting it into a single seat, owing to her sheer bottom surface area.

She also faced complicatedness in concealing from probing eyes, a huge cavity within her Afro-American hair: a holy crater, thanks to the peppermint flavor chewing gum, perhaps Banjo's Chiclets from Cadbury, which lost patience and couldn't wait till the 6th extinction of the human species...

...And to do away with the unmoved sugary candy, she had to part with part of her hair.

Needless to say, Yadana Aung aunt's sofa was the center, rather the epicenter. The rest: that of her interviewers or collocutors flanked her east and west.

Hub of the drawing room, *salotto* in Italian, boasted of a sprawling 100 % pure silk hand knotted Kashmiri carpet, of about 1,600 knots per square inch, celebrating the exotic *chinar* motif of the Tree of Life, and which unfeelingly cloaked the glazed marble tiles, square white, ordered from Rajasthan.

Kashmiri carpet consequently got subdued by a pair of Jacqueline center tables, marble top, which in turn was cowed down by a quantity of customized crystal ware, such as a heart-shaped enclosed box, a turkey bowl, an oxford bowl, and a pair of oxford vases, each shipped from the Bohemian workshops of Czechoslovakia.

In this connection, I recalled a town called Karlovy Vary, often mentioned by Dad *vis-à-vis* Mom's sojourn to Czechoslovakia. But that's a different chronicle.

Further, exclusive Jacqueline end tables occupied their strategic corners in between different couches and chairs.

Probably once again from Karlovy Vary, shimmering golden Bohemia crystal chandelier, bejeweled through several crystal chains, and product of pure Czechoslovakian glass artwork, ceremoniously hung from reinforced ceiling, extra in height, and dimly lighting up this Indian room against its light yellow walls.

Soft yellow lights emitting out of the middling bulbs of the glinting chandelier, 42 in number, luminously reflected upon the array of hand-woven 100% Ojiya tsumugi silk, wall hanging scroll tapestries, famed as Japanese *Kakejiku*, over our Indian walls.

Inside our drawing room, *Salotto* in Italian, *Kakejiku*, an important constituent of Japanese decoration of the interiors, dwelt mainly upon spiritual themes, my favorite being the *Hichifukujin*, depicting 7 Lucky Gods.

...Their joyful expressions and symbolic treasures brought a quiet harmony to the room, as if blessings sailed in gently with the breeze each morning. Framed by minimal walls and the mellow scent of incense, the *Kakejiku* stood not just as art, but as a whispered prayer woven into our everyday life.

A pair of French windows, a pair of glass section doors, the entire draped in silk jacquard curtains, accessed to different quarters.

Through the north, loomed the main entrance via the verandah. West was towards the dining hall, *sala da cena* in Italian, further passing through a corridor to the kitchen at the southeast crook of our villa. Remember, GD, my grandpa was particular in placing the kitchen as per *Vaastu kala*, supposedly in the fire segment of southeast...!

At the present through the west door via the dining hall, *sala da cena* in Italian, Karuna di emerged smiling, wheeling a service cart, comprising glasses of mixed fruit juice, squeezed out of fresh fruits from Maharashtra, such as *santaras* and *mausambis*. Blissful *anaar* or pomegranates too, were added to lend it a reddish hue.

The scene though simple, carried a quiet dignity, each glass of juice shimmering like a small treasure, carefully prepared and humbly offered.

It brought to mind Jean Simeon Chardin's 18th century painting, *Glass of Water and Coffeepot*, where everyday objects were elevated through

tenderness and restraint, capturing not just appearances but the stillness of lived moments. Like the works of this French painter, the Master of Still Life, Karuna di's presence and the care she poured into each detail turned the ordinary into something quite transcendent...

She proceeded to serve each one of us by way of a reminder that an exceptional variety of *masala*, her own innovation, might be added. Followed by Karuna di was Draupadi, carrying heaps of *rosogullas* and *sondesh*, the two out of the ordinary and highly popular Bengali sweetmeats, one succulent, and the other arid.

Yadana Aung aunt graciously got up from her seat to receive those items and thanked them politely, at the same time, appreciating by a smile, the *masala*, which Karuna di ingeniously had organized out of exotic stuff, gathered from the southern state of Kerala.

In the intervening time, rest of them tried to engage in polite conversation, DK ultimately sympathizing with Yadana Aung aunt's tales of her trek from Burma to India. He started off: Banjo had narrated your whole story, of the immense hardships that you bore while migrating across the border from Burma to Dibrugarh, Assam..."

"Oh yes Kaka ji that's true..." Yadana Aung aunt replied. "Other than I think that is bygone era, as most of my memories at this time belong to the heritage city, Calcutta."

"I heard Aye's father was a filmmaker...?" Manorama aunt interrupted explicitly, in her usual shoot from the lip approach. Noticing Yadana Aung aunt far from being comfortable, probes regarding her yonder past and her ex-husband notwithstanding, Sahani uncle switched the topic in his typical *savoir faire*

"Yadana please let me know if you have any problems in Kanpur since this place is somewhat new to you..."

"Oh thank you, Sahani ji..." She replied by means of a tinge of relief, and glancing towards me she continued, "I'm quite fond of Banjo, and so is Aye. She even mentioned that he regularly stands 1st in Class. How I wish my daughter too fares well in her studies...? But you see, being fatherless, she is unable to secure proper guidance..."

Entire lot now focused at a parent, who else but my Dad, who by now had finished his important telephonic conversation and was sauntering towards us *soigné*, playing between his right hand fingers latest Classic high-end Targa model of Sheaffer fountain pen, made in USA...!

Chivalrously he volunteered...“Hello Aye, if you have difficulty in any particular subject, I can fix up tuitions for the same...”

“Thanks Kumarr uncle...” Aye replied, eyes darting at his clockwise and anti-clockwise turns of his Sheaffer pen, his squeaky wheel of anxiety.

Dad: “Please try some more sweets, Aye...” Subsequently gazing at Yadana Aung aunt through limpid eyes, “Aren’t they all right...?”

“Oh delicious, I must say...!” She graciously replied.

“Then please have one more...” Dad insisted.

“No, thanks...” Coyly she replied.

Even as everybody marked their sugary conversation, Dad marked her figure, which after all he agreed, couldn’t pay for the risk of added sugars. Manorama aunt again cut in directly: “These were ordered from Ideal Sweets, the Mall, the place from where we usually order them...”

Sahani uncle for a second time effectually took the conversation by way of his diplomatic lexis: “Yadana, please make yourself comfortable...” Next, looking at me, “Banjo, why don’t you take Aye and her Mom around the villa...?”

Yadana Aung aunt shied and excused her, “Aye, why don’t you go out with Banjo and look around the house, I’ll give company to Kaka ji...” Dad was down in the dumps. He reflected aloud, “Why give company to Kaka ji and not him...?”

Well, DK again steered the conversation to his Burma days, Sahani uncle once more interrupting, “Er Yadana, I think you must visit the kitchen, Karuna di needs guidance...”

In conclusion and much to Dad’s dismay, Yadana aunt sprang up after adjusting the *jhalar* festooned *pallu* of her *Dhakai Jamdani* sari across her breasts, and in actual fact advanced towards the kitchen amid a smile; smile which Dad bet was reserved exclusively for him.

...Karuna di duly informed Yadana Aung aunt about menu in the present day, which sounded satisfactory. What's left to be prepared was the exotic Bengali curried fish, *Machher Jhaal*, a favorite of Dad's and which nostalgically, Mom used to cook to exactness.

Was it Adana Aung aunt's fire test, whether she could work up the magic like my Mom, notwithstanding with help from Karuna di of Puri...?

After a brief sizing up of the kitchen, this had the gas burner at its southeast end, sink and water utensils at its northeast, and a broad L-shaped platform, on top of which the raw materials were prearranged by Karuna di and Draupadi

Yadana Aung aunt: "You've quite kept up the kitchen, I must say, its spic and span...!"

Draupadi: "Thank you, ma'am, I make it a point to clean up the muddle before calling it a day..."

Yadana Aung aunt smiled: "That's wonderful Draupadi. And now Karuna di, shall we get on with the paste...? Can you please hand me over the yellow mustard and cumin powder, a quantity of green chilies and ginger...?"

"Sure ma'am...!" She replied.

"Please call me Yadana di...!"

Before Yadana Aung aunt proceeded to grate the spices to a paste upon the mortar and pestle, actually a stone *patta* with a roller, our family heirloom, Karuna di volunteered: "Yadana di, please pass it to me. I'll do the needful..."

In the interim, the fish, a special variety, and known as *bhetki*, somewhat white in color, was lying ready, apportioned into cubes, slightly soaked in salt by Draupadi.

Yadana Aung aunt tackled the cooking by pouring mustard oil onto a *kadai*, and waiting patiently till it was smoking hot. After that, niftily using her hands, looking pretty in light pink bangles, she inserted the fish into batches, and frying till it turned golden. She then carefully drained the oil and soaked them upon blotting paper to get rid of the unwanted grease.

After all, she was conscious of her figure and had to maintain it anyhow

Next, using a separate *kadai*, she over again heated mustard oil and once more waited it to smoke. She then sautéed the paste on low heat sharing an entire lot of spices such as *kalaunji* or nigella seeds, turmeric powder, and red chili powder. Little water was added thereon.

Karuna di volunteered to slit the green chilies which were duly inserted on to the stuff, and eventually brought to a boil. Finally, the waiting fish found its way onto the *jhaal*, consequently getting proclaimed

Machher Jhaal

Said stuff with its ostentatious recipe at this instant enclosed by a lid, all 3 ladies had a little spare time of 5 minutes or so, and bear in mind, 3 ladies having spare time certainly wasn't a commodity to be done in.

Yadana Aung aunt, "I find posters of Rajesh Khanna doing the walls over here...!"

Karuna di and Draupadi both released sheepish smiles, lowering their eyelids, as they'd pasted these posters on the west side of the orange-colored kitchen wall, which was Yadana Aung aunt's back while cooking, thinking they would go unnoticed.

"Hahaha..." Yadana Aung aunt laughed. "I understand...I understand...!"

"And you, Yadana di...?" Queried Draupadi, the oomph *bai*, whose huge breasts already had started heaving like the waves of the turbulent side of the Atlantic Ocean, droplets of sweat shining across her face, like the daybreak sun.

"Oh come on, in Calcutta, we've the *numero uno* heartthrob Uttam Kumar to us...Hahaha...! Why, his off-the-cuff acting in Satyajit Ray's acclaimed film in Bengali...Nayak...had mesmerized me...?"

Nonetheless, before the conversation could proceed further, they judged the consistency of the curry and decided that cooking time was nearing an end.

Karuna di: “And now Yadana di, the final item to be added, the salt to taste...!”

Yadana Aung aunt: “Oh yes, the salt...Umm I think your Sir resembles him...!”

Chapter 16

My Bongos

I was in 7th heaven, *Septimo cielo* in Spanish, for the little thing that rested behind my boyish knees

My Bongo

This Afro-Cuban percussion instrument, consisting of a pair of small open-bottom drums of different sizes, was in reality my dreams come true. I thanked my Dad too who ultimately had kept his promise, despite his loss of composure...

Nonetheless, after all that had come to pass, he couldn't just swallow me playing, Spanish-style: one my Hembra the larger or the female drum, or two my Macho the smaller or the male drum, to the tune of comedian Johnny Walker's song from the same classic film... Pyaasa

Wasn't he aware that I was purposefully getting sassy and audacious to point out his *Schmaltz*, in Yiddish meaning weakness of his mind, his heart...?

Oh, yes...! It was perhaps the foremost time that a son seemed like growing up and prompting his guardian, a propos the pulpiness of the human brain, and why a good massage therapy over the occiput was indispensable

Sarr joh tera chakraaye, yaa dil dooba jaaye

Aaja pyaare, paas hamaare

Kaahe ghabaraaye...Kaahe ghabaraaye...

And this is how, the percussion instrument, Bongo, African in Origin, Cuban in Revolution, had brought together a new chapter around Anupriya Villa, wherein resided the indomitable, Mr. Bharat Kumarr.

Mr. Bharat Kumarr, who at the end of the day was prey to his weakness, my Mom, Mrs. Anupriya Kumarr...Alas...! Never perchance to ever return to his life in flesh and blood.

And the great matter-of-fact gentleman, whom I thought was really fascinated by the beautiful Yadana Aung aunt, for whom the Guru Dutt in him got aroused, for whom Chaudhavin ka Chaand set in *Taal Kaharwa*, was well within reach, and in who's eyes he was dying to cast his heart...*Hum aapki aankhon mein, iss sil ko basaa de toh...* failed miserably at the 11th hour, *la hora 11* in Spanish.

In point of fact, it was set in motion and botched by the out-of-the-ordinary Bengali curried fish, *machher jhaal*

...During that luncheon, Dad was ecstatic to have discovered his preferred dish "...which nostalgically Mom used to cook to its exactness..." and Yadana Aung aunt furthermore preparing it with no flaw, duly assisted by our proficient helps, Karuna di, and Draupadi, our oomph *bai*.

Nonetheless, I remember, he appeared bit startled and taken aback at the duplication of the cuisine. Thought might've struck him that why should Yadana Aung cook the same fare, for which his beloved Anupriya was famed enough...!

Anyways, he fully appreciated the gastronomy, even if in the midst of little uneasiness in his demeanor, and which looked quite apparent to rest of us.

He could've calmed his restiveness, had he with one hand picked up the tender Bhetki fish, somewhat white in color, and by means of the different hand, in restive peace, involuntarily revolved half clockwise half anti-clockwise, his classic high-end Targa model of Sheaffer fountain pen, made in USA...

But then no; he was confounded, the dilemma being that at one moment he visualized his Anupriya serving him *machher jhaal* amid full devotion, the very next moment he watched Yadana serving him the same, and with up-to-the-minute romanticism

Yadana Aung aunt: "Please try some more fish, Banjo..."
Subsequently gazing at Dad through limpid eyes, "Aren't they all right...?"

"Oh delicious, I must say...!" Dad graciously replied.

"Then please have one more..." She insisted.

“No, thanks...” Coyly Dad replied.

However, rather unfortunately, Dad’s coy reply, poorly coordinated by a jumpy and awkward gesticulation of his hand in an arch movement, accidentally was seen batting the saucer containing the *jhaal*, which in the end bespattered outside the playing field in a Six on top of her...

“...exclusive pink party *Dhakai Jamdani* sari, in addition at her flowing tresses, which even if hid her Oriya silver filigree earrings, lent music to his craving ears...”

Almost immediately had raised a near commotion like state of affairs at the dining hall, the *sala da cena* of Anupriya Villa, Yadana Aung aunt shrieking in a high pitch new-invented *raga*, *Dibrugarh Raga*, accompanied by an orchestra of aahs and ohs and Gods, out of some male voices some female voices, perched upon their respective Pimpinella dining chairs.

Every time Sahani uncle’s response was the most prompt. Along with his mutterings, *Vadi Sai Jhuleylal Bera hee Paar*, he nudged the fat aunt of Deoghar to get up and assist her.

At this instant, despondent aunt’s holy crater lodged within the confines of her Afro-American hair emerged as the focus as she got up on the spur of the moment in full 200 seconds, dislodging Aye and me en route, to the rescue of her brother’s prospective bride-to-be...

“Excuse me...” She held with intent, lava brewing up from her holy crater.

I don’t know, for the first time in the history of Anupriya Villa, it wasn’t upon the sweet little vulnerable Banjo’s skull, but over an oversized Mr. Bharat Kumarr’s that the molten hot red lava spewed from Hunga Tonga-Honga Ha’apai underwater volcano of the distant Fonuafo’ou Island in Tonga...!

It’s often said that misfortunes always find its way; if at the school it was flip-flops that botched up, at this moment it was his Swiss Breguet-wrist hands which gave away

Poor Dad, indeed he could never comprehend that his out of the ordinary lunch date would transform into an open globe-trot, spanning 3 continents via the flying Bank, Swissair: embarking from his refreshing mint check shirt, Arrow of America, and retiring to the *Dhakai Jamdani* sari of Bangladesh, via his Breguet-wrist hands of Switzerland.

He also couldn't figure out that it would be the last part of his nascent liaison feminine with Yadana Aung aunt

...And that the culprit could be an obscure *Aari Jaal* sari of Murshidabad, the Silk Mecca of Eastern India, belonging to his Anupriya. To a certain extent, it was Dad's blunder that he did not apprehend the probabilities: one that either Yadana Aung would've to instantly quit for her home, or two, changes into another sari here itself.

...Even though Mom ceased to be component of this corporeal humankind, we'd treasured her belongings, for the most part the saris, amid immense soft spot and think about.

A small number still endeared space in the interior of Dad's wardrobe along with his outfits. The purple sari, the pink sari, the green sari, the magenta sari, and so many others hung like memorabilia, the colors, the textures never ever to be cast off.

However, one thing I always noticed that Dad possessed an awful habit of not lugging out the keys from his closets or wardrobes, whether at home or at office...

And Manorama aunt unerringly did what had to go on one day. In quest of a quick fix solution, she opted for the latter. Coolly she escorted Yadana Aung aunt to Mom's unlocked wardrobe and asked her to select whatever out of those striking saris, tidily lined up.

Innocuously though, Yadana Aung aunt picked up a comparable pink colored sari that matched in the company of her blouse. Divergence was basically its origins and textures.

Whereas her own sari hailed from the East of Bengal, this one came from West part, where weavers from Naagar had nimbly weaved such a handloom silk fabric, going through elaborate steps such as reeling, degumming, twisting, and so on.

Nevertheless, hell broke loose no sooner Dad happened to distinguish this pink hand block printed 5 meters sari, taking cognizance of the fact that it was the unchanged sari, which he'd once lovingly chosen for his dearly loved consort, personally establishing its claims of being feather-light, of 300 grams...!

He might've got hallucinations for his one and only Anupriya, standing in front of him adorned in this Murshidabad silk masterpiece, smiling at him. This must've enabled him to retreat back into his coveted and yonder memory space, notwithstanding the 11th hour, *la hora 11* in Spanish, of his lunch date.

Furthermore, without even making contact with Yadana's limpid eyes, he forebodingly confronted Manorama aunt, throwing the entire charge upon her. "How dare you unlock my wardrobe...? And how dare you tamper amongst your *Bowdi*'s saris...?"

I recollected the aftermath of the threnody, The Storm...

"Stretch out your hand..." One..! Stick made a whoosh sound and fell in an arch. "Aah..." I screamed.

Dad's bad humor was intensifying and so was his baritone say-so. It was quivering amid fury; agonizing insight that it wasn't his Anupriya posturing in frontage.

What's more, it might've been that all of a sudden he'd become guilty conscious, of bypassing his one and only Anupriya, discarding her cherished memories at the first given option...!

Wasn't Mom, Dad's *raison d'être*...?

Reason of his frenzy could also have been string of incidents, leading Yadana Aung masquerade as Anupriya Kumarr, even if inadvertently. Grandpa with big mustaches and Sahani uncle tried to hush him but in vain.

Dad was by then out of kilter, so famous all over Kanpur. Mr. Bharat Kumarr, the great business tycoon, finally unsheathing his velvety gloves, exposing his iron fists: “Manoraaaa, this is too much; today you’ve done what nobody else could even dare...!”

...And once again, the scene of the aftermath of the threnody, The Storm flashed in front of my eyes...

Two...! Stick screamed. “Aaaaaagh...” louder was my whoooooooooosh.

Three...Four...Five...Six...Seven...and Eight...Church Bells kept ringing...!

Manorama aunt was in tears, pleading by means of folded hands. Somehow she resembles Banjo, who’d experienced similar extremities of pain...

I started crying in the name of Jesus and pleaded mercy. “Please aaaaunty...” I whimpered...

But Dad was not the one to calm down...“Kaka ji, please without more ado send Manorama back to her hostel, I don’t want to see her face again...”

Wasn’t this an ultimate blow to the fat aunt of Deoghar, cosmic justice, out of the blue, meted out to her...?

“Wait for another two and you’ll be fixed...” she countered sadistically, relentlessly.

Dad walked away in a huff, tears of angst trickling down his cheeks, leaving the rest of us flabbergasted at the bedrock dining table. I don’t know on whom were the tears of angst directed...? Sure enough, it was upon himself...?

Subsequent to witnessing such bizarre display of rave and rant, my Bongo strokes did not at all zest Dad nor did the tune created by his favorite, the senior Burman, Sachin Dev

Pyaar kaa hovei jhagadaa
yaa biziness kaa ho ragadaa
Sab lafado kaa bojh hatey jab

parey haath ikk tagdaa...

From then on, at school too, life wasn't the same, I'd turned sullen. I simply couldn't face Aye Aung, whether inside the class or outside. And whenever our eyes met, they recalled the ghastly incident at my place, where once her Mom was inches close in becoming my Mom too.

I even had started dreaming of a new family consisting of a father, a mother, a sister, and I. Besides, I couldn't come to terms with the fact that her Mom had been shown up at my place, not including any grievous fault of hers.

It felt as though the fragile blueprint of belonging I'd sketched in my heart had been smudged overnight, leaving me confused and oddly betrayed. Deep down, I knew she hadn't meant any hurt, yet her Mom's sudden appearance unsettled the warm equilibrium I was only beginning to trust.

Wasn't the cuisine, *machher jhaal*, brainwave of Karuna di and Draupadi...? Wasn't the idea of taking her to Mom's cupboard, Manorama aunt's...?

Only visible folly of Yadana Aung aunt was that she shouldn't have resorted to the alternate option of changing into Mom's sari, other than returned to her home a long time ago. Ceaselessly, my brains pondered upon justifications, counter-justifications...

Conceivably, Yadana Aung aunt never intended to make Kumarr household discomfited by quitting the situate straightaway, or for that matter, shatter the heart of her ardent fan that she'd once likened to the *numero uno* Bengali superstar, the heart-throb, Uttam Kumar.

In a nutshell, Yadana Aung aunt couldn't gauge the magnitude of affection, quantum of weakness, which my Dad still harbored towards his long-lost beloved wife, Mrs. Anupriya Kumarr. In fact, nobody else could, not even the said gentleman himself...!

He felt he had committed a folly and now feeling embarrassed and ashamed – thinking that he ought to have loved his Anupriya more when she wasn't in the vista. He wanted to give more points to his Anupriya.

Regret had crept in like an evening mist, soft but inescapable; cloaking Dad's thoughts in a melancholy he hadn't known he carried.

Why, in quiet moments, he found himself replaying old memories like film reels, wishing he could rewind time just enough to whisper one more tender word, or hold her gaze a little longer, giving his Anupriya the reverence she always deserved...?

...And to top it, following the Christmas fiasco at Jane Diaz's place, my *mea culpa*, where "...administering a strong reflex, I snatched away the napkin from her bangled hands and started chafing it at the fabric over her soft breast, in a chaotic bid to eliminate those glaring tell-tale stains from her check shirt, my unfathomable transgressions..." there was absolute breakdown of communication between us.

Regrettably, I was a schlemiel, an awkward, clumsy, and sheer unlucky person who frequently made slip-ups and of course the recipient of dire fortune.

Remember, our communication was working perfectly, and then suddenly it went kaput. Yes, I admit I was guilty, but at the same time wondered by way of remorse that wasn't the "...tight whacks endeared across my face..." enough of a reproof...?

In such unanticipated state of affairs, life undeniably had become forlorn. I became a bundle of nerves and unselfconfident, devoid of a backer among the human race...

At this crucial juncture, I appallingly remembered Bobby, one who'd always been my strongest ally, silencing whosoever pointed a finger at me. Instinctively I happened to fix my empty and forlorn eyes at her vacant chair, much to the glee of my *bête noir* Tejwinder Singh who sized me up through his sadist, unsympathetic gaze.

"Oye...! *Muh latkaye kyun ghoom rahaa hai...Boabby ki yaad aa rahi hai kya...?*" He sarcastically remarked during recess in his typically Punjabi accent, and where Bobby sounded like Boabby. I kept mum. Once more, twitching his lips, he instigated me, "*Abeyy phattu, kuchh bolta kyun nahi, maashuka ko bhool nahi paaya...?*"

My antagonism was intensifying, itching to be bestirred

In the interim, Varun of Ludhiana cardigan's fame as well as Mihir of Lucknow Book Stall background gathered around him. It appeared that Time wasn't in my good turn. As I spared very few moments to these chaps,

they'd probably ganged up against me, politically. Very much like Tejwinder, they couldn't digest the fact that every other eve in class was receptive and caring towards me.

In choked voice, tranquilly I replied, "Tejwinder please bring to a halt all this, now that Bobby isn't around...!"

"O ho, so what Boabby isn't around, you've that sylphlike Christian, Miss Jane Diaz to you, and that silky smooth legged Burmese thing, Aye...

...Okay tell me who you find sexier...?" Tejwinder smacked his immodest lips in a blatant act of vulgarity.

Was that the ultimate I could afford to hear from this foul-mouthed fellow after whom I pounced upon like a hungry *cheetah* "...at 75 miles per hour...a 75 millas por hora...?" Before he could gather his wits, he lost his balance and came crashing down. No sooner had he hit the bare surface, I overpowered him, persistently showering blows at his muck face.

He began yelling

Even though Tejwinder indisputably was physically stronger than me, shock and awe of the abrupt strike caught him off guard, and in no time he was neutralized. Making the first move, I'd gained a strategic advantage over him. He licked dust amid bleeding nose, bleeding proboscis, as I loomed large over him, straddling across his chest.

Meantime, feminine eyed Varun swooped to bail him out by pulling me, at this moment a macho Rocky Balboa, away from him. He tried to pin my arms in order to yank me away. However, I was incensed and had one final mission to accomplish. I swore, clenching my teeth

"Damn you, I'll prove who is sexier, wait...!"

I stood up and aimed my schoolboy black lace up shoes at his groin and then kicked him hard.

"Aaaaaaaaaaagh...Maar daala...!"

Leaving him asunder cup his groin, and wincing, I disengaged, discovering top buttons of my light blue shirt ripped off; left cheek, engraved in the midst of bloody scars. Never mind I consoled me. For the reason that at the end of the day, the cat-and-mouse game over and done with, I eventually am winning, the mouse turning predator, a bravura one...!

Whew...! After all, wasn't it after months, rather years of mortification and loss of face, that I finally avenged this scourge...? He'd always been hitting me below the belt: talking foul of my emerging first in class, sullyng my idealist views a propos religion, desecrating my healthy relationships...

Possibly, it was now time for nemesis, my arch-rival Tejwinder Singh cupping his groin; becoming the sexiest fellow of the school.

Self-assuredly, I retreated back into the class in a swagger, exultantly staring at the seat where once my Bobby used to be seated. Recollecting her words delivered to the bane, "Tejwinder, mind your jargon you cheapish, like me, aren't you a Sikh yourself...?"

I smiled, reminding myself of her prophetic cuss words addressed to Tejwinder, the blight: "*Ab tum zaraa Banjo ko kuchh keh kar dekho, tumhe peet peet ke behaal naa kar diya toh meraa naam Bobby nahi...?*"

From this day forward, Tejwinder put an end to calling me *Ghulam*, a *Muchi*, titles by which he took in hand me *ad infinitum*, even later than Bobby had quit.

Plausibly, at the moment, it was my turn. I'd stumbled upon the most pertinent utterance, the *mot juste*, for one who never valued females, and one who was out-and-out vulgar, a pest, an affliction, quite like the spear thistle, and one of the most noxious weeds of the world

Cirsium Vulgare

Back home, my Bongo strokes, played Open or Mute, Slap or Muff, rolled to a superlative level: one, thinking about Dad or Yadana Aung aunt, and two, about Tejwinder or Bobby...

You can't always get
what you want
But if you try sometimes
you might find
you get what you need

- The Rolling Stones

Chapter 17

Nasbandi

At home, the ambience had become lonesome, overwrought

Only stuff that engaged in a chinwag was grandpa's GEC transistor radio of 1961.

The further he got keyed up by upcoming news, more he augmented its volume by turning the knob, even tho' most of the news bulletin was repetitive. Regrettably, I could pay attention to lot of news broadcast, but almost not any which could bring back Aye or Jane back into my vim and vigor.

Principally, it was during a cold day of the first month of 1977, that the President dissolved the Lok Sabha, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi calling for fresh elections, followed by acquittal of all political prisoners.

I found Sahani uncle getting relatively hassle-free by such and such more reports. Important news doing the rounds in the consequent month was Janata Party's election manifesto, released amid great fanfare, the campaign warning Indians that the elections might be their last chance to choose between

“... Freedom and slavery, between democracy and dictatorship, between abdicating the power of people and arresting it, between the Gandhian path, and the way that has led several nations down the precipice of dictatorship, instability, military adventures and natural ruin...”

Sahani uncle shared his views in the midst of grandpa with big mustaches, “Kaka ji, then are we to support the Janata Party at this moment, but I can't say anything about Bharat da...!”

Grandpa with big mustaches replied as a matter of fact, but evaded offering a direct reply, as possibly he'd become chary of Dad's interests, personal or political: “Om Prakash, see for yourself the results of this Lok Sabha election...”

...Like the present season of spring, what time old leaves drop out, both Indira Gandhi and Sanjay falling like ninepins, and so have all the Congress candidates in the major Hindi belt states, counting our own state, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar, next-door..."

Sahani uncle nodded his head in concurrence, "You know Kaka ji, and people have begun to gossip that although the gaunt tree stands erect, proud but broken, a lot of Congress Party loyalists have already deserted Indira Gandhi..."

"Yeah, that's why I dub that Treachery is the next word for Politics...!" Grandpa with big mustaches completed.

Grandpa furthermore alleged that it were structural factors which enabled voters to be allowable to express their grievances, notably their resentment against the Emergency, followed by its authoritarian and repressive policies.

Even as the middle class emphasized their curbing of Freedom, the opponents highlighted the issues of corruption in Congress and appealed to a deep desire by the voters for fresh leadership.

...In addition to one more of grievances often nattering in the radio news, and to which grandpa until the end of time nodded his head in a vertical, up and down movement, was of Vasectomy, *Purush Nasbandi*, a campaign, for the most part in rural areas.

Nonetheless, following the Emergency which was officially withdrawn, Indira Gandhi resigning, it was jubilation the entire night of 23rd March:

Jagmohan, our chauffeur, originating from Bihar, and now residing at this point in the state of Uttar Pradesh, was among the first ones to indulge in pyrotechnics on the highway opposite our villa, gamely united by nameless populace from the walkways.

"Banjo baba, come out and take pleasure in...!"

I gladly went out to be component of his celebrations and in no time I discovered, the mood on the ground had transformed. Ordinary citizens who previously shied from anything opinionated, engaged enthusiastically in political prattle, and the night election result declarations unforgettable indeed.

Gai aur bachchda dono haar gayey

Cow and calf have both lost was the elated cry from a crowd at Sarvodaya Nagar, close to Dainik Jagran, a Hindi newspaper office building where they'd assembled to watch news flashes being put on the bulletin board outside, facing the street.

Someone from the crowd shouted that such great was the exhilaration that vast majority of populace of Old Town deliberately caught local trains leaving Kanpur Central up to Rawatpur railway station, adjacent to the newspaper office, to catch up among news flashes.

Revels unrelenting even the next morning

Euphoria and a genuine sense of hope abounded subsequent morning: national leaders such as Jayaprakash Narayan JP dramatically leading the newly elected Members of Parliament MPs of Janata Party to Raj Ghat in Delhi, where the ashes of the Father of the Nation, *Pater Patriae* in Latin, Mahatma Gandhi were laid in *pax aeterna*, in eternal peace.

JP administered the MPs a pledge to carry on Gandhi ji's work and preserve honesty in serving the nation. His name was all over. Truly, JP had become the *Loknayak*, the folk hero of the nation...!

Jagmohan, my chauffeur, recalled that how on an earlier occasion, JP attracted a gathering of 100,000 at the Ramlila grounds of Delhi, thunderously reciting Ramdhari Singh Dinkar's, the national poet's, the *Rashtrakavi's* wonderfully evocative poetry

Singhasan khaali karo ke Janata aati hai...?

"That's cool Jagmohan, look how *Rashtrakavi* Dinkar's words in *veer rasa* have proved prophetic, and in veracity *Singhasan khaali ho bhi gayi, aur awam, yeni ki janta* (Janata Party and its allies in this instance) *aaa bhi gayi* after winning a thumping majority..." I thus encouraged Jagmohan, now gung-ho for a change.

This was his 2nd expression, other than presenting his usual Buddha-like disposition

At the moment, it was time for cabinet formation, and we all assembled tensely at DK's parlor, where he even tried to switch over from medium

wave to short wave of his radio, pressing a button switch by means of his blunted forefinger.

Morarji Desai, the man of the hour, hailing from Bombay, becoming the first Non-Congress Prime Minister of India, and who retained the Finance portfolio with him...

...*Chowdhury* Charan Singh becoming the 2nd most important person in the Cabinet and also the Home Minister along with the rank of Deputy Prime Minister. *Babu* Jagjiwan Ram too appointed the Deputy Prime Minister and allotted the Defense portfolio...

Grandpa wasn't at all pleased with the idea of two Deputy Prime Ministers, which he thought had gone overboard, satiating everybody's political hunger.

...Further, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani, representing Bhartiya Jan Sangh, were allotted External Affairs, and, Information & Broadcasting Ministries, respectively

Given their background of Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh RSS, which patronized Hindutva ideology, grandpa doubted their loyalty to this new rag, tag and bobtail permutation.

Above and beyond, the Jurist Shanti Bhushan was offered Law and Justice, the fiery Trade Union leader George Fernandez allotted Ministry of Industries

And it was this last name, George Fernandez, who in the end would become instrumental to bring back the zing to my life

It so happened that on one occasion, in this Hindi vernacular of Kanpur, alongside core piece of writing based on George Fernandez, several other names found mention in a sub article. These did belong to trade unionists of Mill No. 2 of M/s Allen Textile Mills Limited, who were on strike, names which included Mr. Michael Diaz.

Finding the copy of the newspaper neatly folded in the rear seat of the car, I went through this commentary amid great interest. And as already mentioned earlier, no brilliant idea ever escaped my notice, my world, and where 2 plus 2 always made 5. In Hindi colloquial

Do aur do Paanch

So naturally, this piece too was absorbed into my mental vault of curiosities, where logic danced playfully with imagination, and even the absurd found a rightful place in my scheme of things.

Revitalized, I at once called up the Trade Union office, wherein later than 2 minutes I got connected to Mr. Michael Diaz, Pop of Jane Diaz...

...3 days anon, Mr. Michael Diaz shuffled through our stair hall, stepping upon the starting step, the bull nose, up the stair flights of Anupriya Villa, tightly gripping the banister, which held the balusters that resembled the swelling form of a half-open pomegranate flower.

Whilst climbing he made it a point to fondle the contours of the winged Venus finial perched on top of the newel post at the end of the balustrade, before gliding his decadent hand step-by-step through 2 straight clockwise flights, connected at a 90 degree angle leading towards DK's noteworthy parlor.

For him it was sheer ascending, as if climbing a palazzo of Florence designed by Giuliano da Sangallo, belonging to the Italian Renaissance era.

Why not...? His fortune was in the offing at DK's noteworthy parlor, where I'd before now ended the briefings

"Listen grandpa, please stop evaluating national politics for a while and listen carefully. I've invited Jane's Dad who's out of job these days...! And I wish you help him out as he is a factory worker in one of the textile mills of M/s Allen Textile Mills Limited, belonging to your bosom friend..."

Even before I could draw to a close my sentence he nodded in affirmative, given that getting a pat on his back propos social issues, ensuing acclaims attached to it as additional reimbursement, was all which he preferred at the far end of his being.

No sooner Mr. Diaz pulled up a chair across DK, I could distinctly have the sense of hearing the horn of Mr. James Allen's silver-colored luxury grand tourer, the DB5 Aston Martin - sans the ejector seat...machine guns...smoke screen...tire slashers - the mean machine duly projected in one of those slick James Bond movies...

Watching Mr. James Allen enter the room, dressed in an up-to-date 3 piece suit charcoal in shade characterized by wide lapels, wide legged trousers, a

bold and wide necktie yellow in color, hung over an off-white shirt having long and pointed collars, we all got up to greet him.

Throwing us a beaming smile as if he'd a minute ago joined his own family; he hugged me, surfing thro' my tousled hair, "There you arre, my little Bond...!"

..."Auh Dhee-Kayyy nice to see you ole man...!"

Pleasantries over, I introduced Mr. Michael to Mr. James as my friend Jane's Pop. "Hello Michael, how do you do...? Aha I think I've seen you somewhere...!"

Mr. Michael Diaz in his brazen self, dressed up poorly in an old russet suit, matching tie, and before I could intervene, blurted out unselfconsciously in motormouth, "Remember Sir, the strike ever since previous year at your Textile Mill No. 2. Er it's me who's heading it...!"

Emerged now a pin drop and queasy silence in the parlor except for a *koel* singing some stray song *kuoo kuoo*, in some wander off horizon...

Instead of being green around the gills, all of a sudden, Mr. James Allen burst out into a guffaw out of his Cubist Chaise put up from century-old Burma teak, veneer and marine ply, the intricate mirror mosaic detailing the drama, much to the sweep away of others.

"Michael...Michael Diiiiazzzzz...So that's you man...How I can ever put in the wrong place yourrr name...? So it was youuuuu who was instrumental in burning a hole in my pockets at my Textile Mill No. 2...?"

DK got unnerved and resultantly started shifting his posterior from one end to the other. He could never anticipate that thanks to his hyper grandson Banjo, he would become an arbiter hosting adversaries at his parlor and at this time like the panjandrum, lurching ominously

"Yes Sir, it was me..." Mr. Michael replied red-faced.

"Believe me, I wanted to meet you badly, but you were away to England. That General Manager of yours that rogue Mr. M. Sharma was never in a frame of mind to hear me out. Supplementary, I got influenced by the fiery personality of the militant leader George Fernandez, subsequent to his detention preceding year..."

“True, I was away to Manchester fixing up some technical matters. But they did spare you of arrests, Mr. Michael...?” Mr. James continued his guffaw. “Yes Sir, it’s because of people like you that Kanpur is proud to be hailed as the Manchester of India...”

...However, as a final point you know, though they spared me of locking up, different people caught hold and got me sterilized...!” Smoothly answered Mr. Michael in the most tragicomedy expression I’d ever witnessed.

“Whaaaaaat....?” Mr. James and DK shrieked in unison.

Nonetheless, much to my relief, all 3 gentlemen were now laughing weirdly in accord, Mr. James going to the extent of patting Mr. Michael hard over his back. Humor restored within DK’s parlor, Mr. Michael at this instant tuned in his histrionic abilities via specifics

“I was held up at a Muslim colleague’s place in a small village called Pipli in the Jat region of Haryana. This village, mainly dominated by Muslims made one of Indira Gandhi’s inner circle men, think that these people wanted to create another oasis like Pakistan in that area...”

“Interesting...!” DK nodded, while Mr. Michael Diaz continued. “Well, I just can’t forget the horrifying early morning last winter, when thousands of *ghora* police and *dhaal* police, surrounded the village...

...Only those watering the *rabi* crops escaped, rest got stuffed into buses and taken to a number of police stations where they threatened with: its either *nasbandi*, or jail...!”

A shocked Mr. James Allen questioned innocently: “But, why you, Michael. You’re not a *musalmann*...?”

“Oh Sir, Pinks had pre-warned me not to sport a goatee beard. Damn they mistook me to be a Muslim. Even after loud protests they grabbed me and did it...! Incidentally, my colleague was the guy who protested the severest. Dreadfully, he was handcuffed during his Vasectomy...!”

“Ugh that’s insane...!” Mr. James Allen burst out, grins escaping his lips. DK too couldn’t help laughing, and out of this epic Greek tragedy, fresh bouts of laughter filled the air, overlapping the stray song of the *koel* as *kuoo kuoo* in the wander-off horizon...

These men scoffed at the overenthusiastic approach of the Government towards curbing the ever-increasing population, not at all stabilized at 650 million...! And because it was well known fact that the Government used propaganda and monetary incentives, DK blandly asked

“So Mr. Michael, at the end of the day did you receive any compensation, I’ve heard that they offered land, housing, loans, cash...?”

“I ran out of Pipli, Live, and that’s all Mr. Dushyant Kumarr, exclusive of any Cash. But when I reached home, I got this Hash over my head...”

Quickly, he pointed towards a conspicuous scar over his bald scalp. Now this sort of black humor was not frequently witnessed on the top floor of Anupriya Villa, conceivably the last bout of riotous laughter doing its round.

Conversely, Mr. Michael added on a piteous note, positioning me onto his lap, “Sir, I’m devastated; all I wanted was to have another child just like Banjo...”

Listening to such enervated words, the atmosphere turned grim. To finish, Mr. James broke the ice, “But I’ve heard there’s a possibility of a Vasectomy Reversal...!”

Mr. Michael Diaz at once agreed: “Sir, I too have heard about it, it’s called Vasovasostomy, a form of micro-surgery, and is effective at achieving female pregnancy in a variable percentage of cases and that too only in America, at a very steep fee, and whose success rate is just half...!”

“How much does it cooost, Mr. Michael...?” Mr. James asked sincerely, full of concern.

“Oh forget it Sir, even my grandfather has not counted 10,000 US Dollars...!”

DK imploringly stared at his friend Mr. James Allen, the latter’s tuft of hair brushed upwards and backwards from his forehead in a quaff, in turns who looked up at his masterpiece of miniaturization, *chef-d’oeuvre de miniaturization* in French, the pricey Audemars Piguet watch from the heart of the vallee de Joux, Switzerland, and crisply getting up from the meeting, closing by way of these consoling words

“Anytime, you wish to go to America for this opperrration, pleeeez do let me know, and don’t you worrrry, one day you’ll be blessed with a son like Bond...!”

“Er Mr. Allen...! Sir and when do I bring all of us workers back to work at your Textile Mill No. 2...?” Stammered an overwhelmed Mr. Michael Diaz, staring tearfully at this rich upper crust personality

“Go and ask Mrs. Pinks...!” Mr. James Allen winked, as he quit the parlor shaking hands with DK and him, walking towards his grand tourer inching to be set in motion.

Anticipating cheeriness in the setting, the *koel* once again resumed singing the stray song *kuoo kuoo* in the wander-off horizon, only cut in by Mr. Michael, whose joy knew no bounds as he kissed my forehead even as thanking DK in the course of a hug, and then just about galloping down the Florentine stairs, elatedly singing at the acme of his tone of voice, a song recorded by the noted Swedish group ABBA, in the genre of Baroque Pop...

...His jubilant steps echoed through each note of this ABBA’s song, its dramatic flair and theatrical glum oddly fitting, as though Mr. Michael Diaz were both mocking and celebrating the whimsical fortunes that life had unexpectedly flung his way.

Yet over again he made it a point to fondle the contours of the winged Venus finial perched on top of the newel post at the end of the balustrade, before gliding his decadent hand down step by step through 2 straight anti clockwise flights, connected at a 90 degree angle originating through DK’s parlor.

Money, money, money
must be funny
in the rich man's world

Money, money, money
always sunny
in the rich man's world

Chapter 18

Anthony

Lacquer red rotary dial telephone, solid weighty construction, placed upon the plantation cherry telephone table rang loudly. Hearing its authentic bell ringer, I rushed to attend it.

“Hello, is this 40181...?”

“Yes Hello...!”

I was bemused, as I was yet to memorize this new number. I wasn’t at all conversant with this convoluted number as I was of 64411, the previous number. Dad had even informed me that the year I was born, the number was 34411, and prior to that it was mere 4411, so easy to remember all of these, I sighed.

“Oh, is that you Banjo, my boy...?”

“Yes, Mr. Diaz, it’s me...!”

I’d difficulty in recognizing his voice against noises, those of clanging sound of machinery rising from the background. “And what are you doing muh Rocky Balboa...?”

“Hahaha...Nothing much, just practicing the Toe and Heal of my Bongo...”
I replied in good humor.

“Okay, you mean the Finger stroke and the Thumb stroke. Go ahead young man. Practice well and hope you remember to join us on Easter...!”

I’d no idea of such Easter invitation, not being invited by Jane so far. For that reason, I was diffident and tried to bypass the invitation. “Easter...! But Sir, I’m kind of busy with my exam preparations...!”

He insisted, “I won’t listen to a no. Banjo, you’ll positively join us...”

“Okay Sir, I’ll try my best, anything else...?”

Mr. Michael Diaz explained in-depth: “Yeah, please convey my regards and thanks to Mr. Dushyant Kumarr. Inform him I’ve been reinstated at the

Mill. And I'm truly sorry that because I'm calling from the Trade Union office, I cannot hold back this phone for long to personally thank him..."

"Sure, will do, Sir...!" I hung up, blessing my stars, unmindfully staring at the flower vase placed upon the opulent Versailles pedestal plant stand at the corner of the lounge. Was I seeing things, the vase and the plant exactly resembling Jane, that sylphlike Christian...? I chuckled...

Following Tejwinder's sound thrashing, his payback, once he'd become the sexiest fellow of the school, it was the feminine eyed Varun who'd spilled the beans all over the class, especially to the rest of the pack who'd missed the brawl, and which included Aye and Jane.

And Mihir, aha well, he'd quit our school to return back to Lucknow. One day maybe he would be managing his book shop.

Thenceforward, though Aye was quite contented, Jane wasn't. I couldn't guess their individual pickings, their likes and dislikes, but at the corner of my mind something bothered me. I couldn't make out what it was...? Was there any missing link to the whole brawl episode which I was yet to decode...?

If it was US President Jimmy Carter and the First Lady Rosalyn Carter, who hosted local children at the traditional Easter Egg Roll on the White House lawn, it was Kanpur Trade Union leader Michael Diaz and his lady love Pinks who hosted the grand party at the Pink House, albeit amid cracked plaster and shocking pink over its walls...

Whereas the First couple of the United States added a circus and petting zoo to the day's entertainment current year, here it was us, one of kind kids, who were no less than mess about. Moreover, instead of Carter girl Amy of White House, it was Jane of Pink House.

Mr. Michael Diaz briefed us about the significance of Easter, about the resurrection of Jesus Christ, after he was cruelly crucified by the Romans at a site immediately outside Jerusalem's wall, known as the place of a Skull.

Why was it known as the place of a Skull, I wondered...? Still, the most important matter that we kids could relate was that we'd to participate in an Egg Hunt...

But before that I was desperate to talk to Jane. How...? In next to no time I chanced upon her

She appeared well off and healthy in a lemon yellow smock frock, a cute lemon band tied across her careless and messy hair, *estilo desleixado* in Portuguese. No sooner she chanced upon me she avoided a direct eye contact. It was a long time since our longing eyes met...

To my disbelief I discovered Varun emerging from her study, or her bedroom, whatever. “Good, I thought for a sec. Varun helped me to become the only source of love and support for Jane...”

He appeared smart in black tuxedo, white hand gloves, which I felt little odd during the somewhat hot weather of April. I did a mild hello to both, to which they acknowledged jointly, everything appearing hunky-dory.

It was I, the one who was left out, and now the interloper

I then looked for Mrs. Pinks, who seemed busy in the midst of decorations and other tasks, plus preparing lemonade, the taste which I recalled as yummy. Atmosphere was festive and hurly-burly, pastel balloons hanging at the outer walls of the house.

Tables two in number, covered with pastel colored ruffled tablecloths and streamers, along with Egg baskets were geared up in the hall, containing heaps of Easter Eggs in dissimilar colors.

Strident noises outside the house distracted us. True, it was Mr. Diaz parking his 173 cc Royal Enfield motorcycle. I was surprised to note that finally that piece of equipment was functioning and not wanting to be shoved by Jane and me.

The moment he entered, the first person that he noticed in the hall was me: “Hey Banjo, my Rocky Balboa, you’re looking great. Why didn’t you join us earlier in painting the Easter eggs...?”

I wasn’t sure whether I was looking great, because from inside, I was kaput, unreservedly kaput. I could gradually apprehend the missing link to the brawl episode vis-à-vis Tejwinder.

Must be that, past the brawl, no sooner Varun spilled the beans of my machismo to the class, Jane shrunk away, and ever since Varun turned into her confidante. Truly, I had in fact committed grave slip-up

I should’ve kept in mind that Jane was a very thin-skinned girl, of the passive type. And how could I overlook the fact...? Wasn’t it she, who was

impressed by Mother Teresa, or wasn't it she, who silently bore the Hammer of the bearded Mr. Lalu, or wasn't it she who was downright hurt about her ex-Mom Gracie Diaz...?

And I, mindless me, had gone all the way to win her by skirmishing that Tejwinder Singh

In any case I wondered, was it Jane that I was thinking about, and not Bobby, when I initiated the clash...? Nevertheless, I was satisfied by the outcome, bleeding proboscis for Tejwinder Singh, the *Cirsium Vulgare*, and not to mind, few bloody scars engraved over my left cheek.

And now Jane, I don't know, had become fearful of me, petrified of my volatile temper, and since then, had gone incommunicado

All these thoughts crisscrossed till they conked out of my mind after Mr. Michael's pronouncement.

"Attention, all of you, whilst you guys were busy sipping lemonade, I hid all Easter eggs in different corners of the house. Eggs painted by Jane and Varun are of 4-5 colors. For girls, it's mostly yellow, and for boys it's green. There's also one special golden egg which carries a 10-rupee currency note tied to it.

...Whosoever finds it wins that sum. Clear...!

...He shall also find a chit attached..." He continued, "Aha, that's a surprise item. Now, as I'm the referee I won't be the one to hunt any of the eggs..."

Pointing to the little one of Mr. Parker, whom I simply hated for his lemonade droppings, Mr. Michael added, "And there are lots of toffees and coins and miniature toys tied to the eggs..."

The little one returned him the grins and so did the dozen odd kids of the locality, who were called over by Mrs. Pinks. I never anticipated the event to be this life-size. It was likely Mr. Diaz got reinstated in his job, the string of her budget on the loose.

Allowing additional space, the corner which once served as the larder having 2-3 sacks, and tidily placed beside a huge cylindrical iron chamber something resembling a silo, derived from the word *Siros* in Greek had been cleared.

Tally-ho

In next to no time the hunt began amplified by loud yells. Children feverishly ran around the cramped house toppling furniture amid their paths. Then they began to scatter to different rooms. The findings began coming to the fore.

“Hey look what I’ve found, a green one. It was hidden inside Mr. Michael’s Royal Enfield carrier box...?”

“Hurrah, I’ve found this yellow one kept inside the sugar pot in the kitchen...”

So on and so forth. Varun visited Jane’s study, by now his everyday spot. I wanted to enter too but refrained, assuming that Jane would hang around with him.

In consequence, I at once stepped into the Master bedroom. It appeared shadowy. Even as I noticed 2-3 kids poking around through its shelves that were built in, I considered it ingenious to dive under the airy bed to rummage around.

Why, it was dark underneath, and then I sensed something, blindly groping it...? It was soft. It shrieked...

It was Jane. I accidentally had clawed at her breasts over her lemon yellow smock frock. She was alarmed, screaming in a muffled sound

Nooooooooo

“Jane, I’m sorry, I couldn’t gauge you in the dark...!”

Emerging from under the bed from opposite sides, I thought she would wallop me hard, but then she in some way restrained. She was conscious of other kids hovering in this particular room.

In its place, she gazed downwards, her cute lemon headband lost somewhere, unscrambling her careless hair, *estilo desleixado* in Portuguese. I then couldn’t help noticing her lemon yellow smock frock absorbedly, ogling over the same spot where I’d accidentally clawed. They were swelled from both sides in the course of her 3rd stage of puberty...

“Jane, believe me, I didn’t notice you...!”

She held her tongue

“Okay, answer me, did you spot me prior to...?” She stared at me, still unvoiced and bewildered at my quick-witted rejoin. “It proves my point that the space under the bed was a good deal dim and baffling, and therefore as you didn’t spot me; it holds well that I didn’t notice you as well...”

It was since ages I was speaking to Jane, regrettably at a tragic and conflicting juncture. She started galloping away from me towards the exit. Just as she tried to walk past, I caught her hand and beseeched, gazing into her insightful eyes.

“Oh Jaaaane...”

She snappily tried to wrench her hand free, and in impervious undertones

“Leave me...!”

I persisted, holding them tighter and not letting them go limp. She hissed

Let...Go...Of...My...Hand...

...And Begone...

As other kids was active, hunting for the eggs, nobody really bothered about us.

Soon I could perceive Mrs. Pinks approaching the Master bedroom, and I’d to take a softer line, acceding to Jane’s wish and letting her go. An anxious Jane rushed to the main hall, but not including any of the prizes. The same held good for me.

O God, we both were distressed, unable to get hold of any of the Easter eggs.

Counting began, Mr. Michael declaring that each and every of the green eggs and the yellow eggs have been discovered. One of the kids yelled

“Look I’ve found out 3 eggs, and which means 3 rupees plus 3 toffees...

...Yahoo...!”

We all stared at him. He was the little one that belonged to Mr. Parker. I never imagined that One Mole...One Mole fellow to be that sharp. It was now time for the golden one. To put the kibosh on egg hunting, it was Varun who entered the hall carrying the golden egg.

“Hey, look what I’ve found out...!” Everybody seemed to cheer him all at once. Varun brandished the golden egg which he’d discovered from Jane’s Tiffin box. His powdered face appeared a luminous hue while he gazed at Jane through his feminine eyes, and as he shrugged, his shoulders spun like a toy that spun around, a whirligig...

At last, Mr. Michael officially declared him the winner. “Hey boy, now unwrap the chit attached to the egg...” Advised Mr. Michael, quite pleased with himself to host as the anchor, to which warily Varun opened the chit, in which it was clearly written

Perform on a Dance

Entire house cheered him, Varun’s face brightening yet further. It was as if he’d some premonition that he would win the jackpot. That’s why maybe he’d come smartly dressed up in a black tuxedo, white hand gloves...

“Okay then...!” Varun confidently announced after pausing a few minutes. “Can I borrow a pair of spectacles...?” Mr. Parker’s old Mom gleefully offered her own comical glasses. “Take my monocle, my boy...!”

“And an umbrella, a hat...!” Varun started making demands out from the swarm. He was in raptures to be the center of attraction. Elatedly, Mrs. Pinks went inside and fetched her own ladies umbrella. Mr. Michael too managed a queer-looking top hat, which he explained was his Dad’s.

Varun then plucked the lone artificial rose, red in color, from a nearby vase

Ready for the act, in this role, he overdramatically transformed himself into Anthony Gonsalves, a bit zany, clown-like, played by the stylish actor Amitabh Bachchan, in the multi-starrer blockbuster Amar Akbar Anthony.

With exaggerated flair, he adopted every eccentric quirk of the character – his walk, his speech, and even his unpredictable gestures – channeling the essence of the role, as if to embody the very spirit of Amitabh Bachchan’s larger-than-life performance.

By now in black tuxedo, waiting at a distance from the point, which previously did belong to the cylindrical iron chamber, the silo, he unsteadily balanced the top hat over his head. After precariously adjusting the monocle over his nose, he switched open by means of his white-glove fingers, the ladies umbrella.

Whoosh

Varun, geared up in his new *avatar* as Anthony Gonsalves found that in place of the giant Easter egg, which the character was privileged to have wheeled out, the top half of the egg revolving, thereby famously revealing he; Varun just had a high stool to him, over which he awkwardly stumbled inside the crowded hall.

Apparently every inch of the English Gentleman, he marked time on a different stool, and in a mock dignified, stiff manner, quelled the enthusiasm of the gathering crowd, imploring them

“Wait...! Wait...! Wait...!”

Subsequently he rattled off the following gobbledygook dialogues, meant to mystify the audience by way of his borrowed English erudition, yet in *tapori-ishtyle*

You see the whole country of the system

is juxtaposition

by the hemoglobin

in the atmosphere

Because...

you are a sophisticated rhetorician

intoxicated

by the exuberance

of your own publicity

Entire crowd hooted at this claptrap

Whaaaaaat...?

Varun continued to croon

My name is Anthony Gonsalves

Jane loudly cheered and clapped

Woooooow...!

Varun continued, spontaneous in actions, expressions

Mein duniya mein akela hoon...

Dil bhi hai khaali

ghar bhi hai khaali

ismein rahegi

koi kismet wali

Haye jise meri yaad aaye

jab chahe chali aaye

Roopnagar

Premgali

Kholi number

Char sau bees 420

eh

excuse me please...

The character played by Varun, after idealizing his state of availability and that only the love of the poor is genuine, much to the surprise of the mob, concluded his spectacular performance by handing over the artificial rose, red in color, to the person standing next to him, and that was nobody other than Jane...

And Jane, much like the glamorized actress Parveen Babi of the movie, accepted it in the midst of an inhibited and endearing smile...

Approximating others, I too clapped at Varun's baloney, but set in divergence, amid pitiable sounds emerging as my heartbeats and juxtapositioned by the hemoglobin in the atmosphere...

Back home, I stared at my insignificant Bongo placed upon the Matisse 2-drawer bedside chest, its cabinets of charming ivory and gold leaves. Sullenly, I decided that perhaps Jane preferred the effeminate drum, the Hembra, Varun, and not the male drum, the macho, Banjo

Gibberish spoken by the character Anthony Gonsalves in the above song was actually a part extracted from a speech by diverse British politicians of the Victorian Age, Benjamin Disraeli, who delivered it while referring to fellow parliamentarian, W.E. Gladstone.

Chapter 19

Julie

My sense of vernacular logic slipped away once more, Mrs. Rohini blowing her top, “*Banjo, Hindi Rashtra Bhasha hai...aap kyun nahin seekhte...aagey kaam mein hi aayega...?*”

Mrs. Rohini admonished me thus and set the entire class rolling. Such vocabulary *faux pas* had become more of a routine affair, falling upon my deaf ears. Much to her aggravation and displeasure, she couldn’t uncover an iota of step up at my end, and certainly it wasn’t the 1st time she’d punished me for the reason of my appalling Hindi.

However, this time around it was atypical, rather bizarre. She was up in arms

Instead of prodding me to compile 50 creative sentences, and that too in Hindi, she ordered me to kneel down, out of the class premise. To my alarm, there was a rider, even more crushing: she commanded me to push myself towards the fresh lime-washed wall, and keep rubbing my nose over it.

Class mocked at my face, which had turned pale, as I grudgingly got up to conduct the way I was instructed. Once out of their sight, I knelt down obediently. Indeed, this out of this world castigation was backbreaking, and for the reason that she eyed on me all the way through the window, it gave me no opportunity to shift even a wee bit, so to say in her linguistic provisos; from Sanskrit to Hindi, or from, God forbid, and Hindi to English...!

She made me emerge like an ancient Vedic Age statuette: my spinal column, *merudanda*, creaking along with my spinal cord, *merurajju*, and both chattering together in the company of my spinal canal, *merunal*.

Barely did 20 minutes of sticking my nose at the walls elapse, what time I noticed the same “...pretty, very pretty teacher passing by...”

She looked even prettier as I dared to unstuck my nose from the wall, straining my neck 90 degrees to watch her pass by. I found her holding a

book in her hand, which seemed to me a typical music book, its cover painted by way of musical notation indicated by thick horizontal or diagonal ink strokes, and written over a grid of lines, the 4-lined stave.

Twisting my neck was a folly, thereby revealing my face by way of a white-tipped nose....! At the first glance, she broke into an impish grin and walked past emitting strong French perfume fragrance in the air.

All of a sudden and much to my unease, she made a U-turn and sauntered towards me, clicking her 2 tone high heels, “Are you not Banjo Kumarr, one who’d presented the bouquet to Mother Teresa...?”

“Yes...Yesss Ma’am...!” I stammered, in that same awkward kneeling posture in the empty corridor. God surely made me ill at ease these days, I thought. Besides, I never knew I would be remembered over that event and that too at this anomalous hour, in a mighty gauche posture.

“Hello, I’m your Music teacher Miss Wadia, I teach Piano, and if you like you can come over to my Music class tomorrow during interval...” She added.

~

Next morning

During interval, I stealthily slipped away from my class and instead of heading towards the familiar playground to play cricket with other boys; I sneaked out through the left side of the outer wall of the assembly hall, where once I’d pasted Welcome Posters of Mother Teresa...

It was propitious that punctually post interval was 2 periods for sports activities; implicating I’d more than one and a half hours time to spare.

Beyond the assembly hall, I cut through a low-intensity recreation situate, consisting of rustic picnic areas, wooden benches, and mysterious trails. This portion was part of the wilderness and commonly not much in use. Though there was a concrete path past the girl’s restroom, I purposefully avoided it, just in case I bumped into any of my female acquaintances.

Piano Block in sight, I adventurously followed a walking path encountering a pernickety section of cottage garden, appearing more like a puddle. It might be possible that the gardener had future plans to sow perennial herbs, particularly my favorite, lavender.

I was in a fix, either I'd to beat a retreat or stride ahead like in war

Why, in traditional warfare too, one had to bet on odds-on, passing through obstacles such as streams and ravines...? Here, only just I had to negotiate a paltry puddle. Hence, girdling up my loins, I decided to attempt a long jump, as though I was participating in one of those spectacular Olympic pentathlon events of *archaios Ellada*, ancient Greece.

First, I allowed myself a short running start. After that moving backwards I bent, sprinted, and neatly measured over it, though not hitting onto the dug-up area, the skamma, rather onto a potted plant in the thicket.

And to my utter incredulity, it shrank

I discovered it to be the shy, bashful, shrinking Touch-me-not plant, the *Mimosa Pudica*. I said sorry, wickedly grinning and winking at it, comparing it to Jane...

It was not known why *Mimosa Pudica* evolved this trait. It might be that the plant used its ability to shrink as a defense from herbivores, or was it that predating animals might be afraid of a fast-moving plant and would rather gobble a less active one...?

Another possible explanation could be of its sudden movement, dislodging harmful insects; in our case, a live Banjo...!

Anyways, after triumphing over the puddle, and walking few more steps, I tethered to my destination, the Piano Block, which laid daunting in its red-tiled sloping roof, black chimney, and pointing towards the sky.

"...May I come in, Ma'am...?" I panted softly, pushing the enormous glass door open. Miss Wadia couldn't take note of me. Dressed up in Red, the most fugitive of colors, she was balanced upon a wood bench with her back towards the entrance. She was busy playing the piano and oblivious of the world around her.

As soon as I was about to repeat, 'May I...' I stopped midway. I contemplated that it would be bad behavior to bother her while she was playing the piano, which of course sounded haunting. I was mesmerized...

Therefore, I took a vantage spot at the door and continued to be in awe of her. From the point where I stood, she appeared very beautiful draped in a

sari, somewhat Parsi-Irani style. I could also gauge her slender waist, the fair of her skin contrasting well in the midst of the Red of her sari.

I think it must've been another 8-10 minutes before she halted, stood up, and turned around, "Oh, is that you, Banjo, I didn't take notice of you...!"

"Ma'am....Ggggood morning Maaaam..." I stammered.

I was aghast to discover my stammering significantly spiked. Was it because of the stress, I wondered, or was it in actual fact certain glaring physical imparity...?

"Good Morning, please sit down..." She beckoned me. I nervously perched upon a botanical Ottoman crafted from teak and meranti, upholstered in natural linen, beige in color, and which was placed opposite the piano. Its winsome flowers printed over it, giving it a 3-dimensional appearance could not make me less unsettled.

I also happened to watch her absorbedly. She looked pretty, very pretty in her Red sari, corner of her drawn-out *pallu* falling. I took in that to avert the *pallu* sliding off her shoulders; she had fastened a golden broach. This piece of jewelry was aesthetically worn to pin the top of the *pallu* onto her Red blouse at the front of the right shoulder.

I couldn't help glancing at her figure too, confirming that she was quite young, barely few years elder to me

"Okay Banjo...! I'm glad that you're interested to learn Piano and I'm sure that other students would also be forthcoming. You see, Piano being an optional subject; I don't find many students lining up. It was only after Mrs. Mehra persuaded me to join, I agreed..."

Wordlessly thanking Mrs. Mehra, the best singer among school teachers, I nodded my head in concurrence, even as continuing to awe at the classiness of the Piano Chamber

Walls were arresting in pale white color emanating a tinge of violet. Windows painted in white were draped in eye-catching floral print curtains. As a matter-of-fact, this section of the school boasted of interiors, quite similar to Victorian era style, complete with its orderliness and ornamentation.

It housed a fireplace, in which the surround consisted of the mantelpiece and side supports made of wood; while the inert, where the fire was supposed to burn was constructed of cast iron, and backed by decorative tiles, again beige in color.

The fireplace certainly supplemented to the cozy ambiance of the Piano Chamber

Piano, or, Pianoforte, having origins in Italy, was resting in the middle of the hall. Baby Grand Piano of around 5 feet long was looking gorgeous placed upon Italian tiled floor, prominent in square checks of white and beige.

Bartolommeo Cristofori, employed by the Grand Prince of Tuscany, wouldn't ever have imagined that one day his Pianoforte would not only become an ultimate symbol of music, but a harbinger of romantic alliances as well.

The whole thing in the room, counting the educator, fascinated me, especially her sharp Iranian feature, mysterious eyes

Even as she perched upon the bench having carved legs, and slid her artistic fingers over the row of keys, 36 Black ones and 52 Whites, I detected her pointed nails were painted in bright fuchsia almost Red crème polish, gorgeous and so shining, probably a Valentine's manicure...!

Additionally, I judged that White keys of the Piano were spaced out in groups of 2 and 3, over which her Red-tipped fingers appeared even more glamorous.

"C'mon Banjo, let's begin...?"

"I'm rrrready Ma'am..." Once again I stammered, further to my consternation.

"First of all, you've gotta acclimatize you to the Notes. Music notes may seem freaky at this moment, but so did the letters of the alphabet whilst you foremost encountered them as a child, isn't it Banjo...?"

In accord, my eyeballs riveted towards her artistic fingers, and she continuing in her arty voice: "You see, just as your curiosity and the constant use of the written and spoken language around you has furnished

your ability to read and not be scared of written words when you see them, likewise, similar occurs in Music Notes...

...Banjo, they're in fact, its ABC...!" Once more I approved with her, eyeballs transfixed upon her inexplicable eyes.

No sooner that she began to explicate in addition, I heard the distant gong. True, I'd consumed the interval plus one period, almost certainly no time left. For that reason, I excused me, and in consequence ended my opening Piano session in the company of Miss Wadia.

Back to class I observed Jane absorbedly chatting with Varun, who by now had become an overnight star, *ad lib*. She'd fairly publicized his amazing impromptu performance as Anthony Gonsalves to the whole lot. Resultantly, some of 'em started appreciating his dramatics.

And in Jane's life, I, Banjo was conceivably playing the role of a sheer appendage, which Jane only looked askance. That's all...

It was not that I was resentful of his histrionic talents or his queue-jump into our relationship; it was because Jane had yet to absolve me for my series of missteps, and that keeping herself away from me, she'd made me lonely, exceedingly lonely...!

Shortly, my lonely wits toggled off, meandering over to the pretty, very pretty Piano teacher, Miss Wadia, and which was squarely interrupted once the English teacher, Mrs. Silesia arrived. I'd been one of her favorite students since Bobby days and in the present day I tried to listen attentively to the story of Henry Morton Stanley

How the Welsh journalist-turned-explorer was famous for his publicity jaunt to Central Africa and his miles of travels through rapids and falls in search for the Lost Scottish missionary and former explorer, Doctor David Livingstone; further, who was fixated with discovering the source of the longest river of the world, River Nile, the international river snaking through a dozen countries, had ventured deep into the continent of Africa...?

And Mr. Stanley went out looking for him, one who'd not been heard of, since several years

Concentration gone astray, in its place of Henry Morton Stanley, it sounded more like Banjo, and in place of David Livingstone, it sounded Miss Wadia i.e. Banjo went out in search of Miss Wadia...

Mrs. Silesia continued the anecdote...“...And finally, Henry Morton Stanley met David Livingstone at Ujiji, in the vicinity of the world’s longest freshwater lake, Lake Tanganyika...”

On my part, what I could hear was, “...and finally Banjo met Miss Wadia at the Piano Block, near the cottage garden puddle...”

Entire class got stunned to mark me abruptly making a ludicrous effort to carry out a long jump, ramming onto the fluffy bumps of a portly schoolboy sitting ahead of me. He shrieked

Mrs. Silesia, sounding me off: “Banjo, what’s the matter, why are you maneuvering such outlandish moves and bass beat that poor boy...?”

“Nnnno Ma’am...Yyyyes Ma’am...” I stammered...

Damn my irksome stammering. It needs to be fixed. She continued...“Okay, where was I...?”

“Ujiji...” Jane yelled much to the amusement of the Class. Mrs. Silesia too couldn’t help smiling at Jane’s tongue-in-cheek, artlessly quipping, “O Jane, I see you’re not sitting alongside Banjo these days, you’re sitting in the company of Varun...!”

Once again the Class broke into a riotous situation, as if it was now Jane’s turn to get a flippant remark back from Mrs. Silesia, the wittiest teacher of our school. Jane, ‘...the sylphlike Christian...’ became red-faced, unnervingly shifting in her seat.

Mrs. Silesia let out victory laughter at her own rejoinder at the same time as arriving at the most crucial facet of the chronicle

“See, preserving the calmness of exterior which was hard to simulate once he reached the group, and upon chancing Livingstone surrounded by locals, Stanley reportedly queried

“Doctor Livingstone, I presume...?”

Mrs. Silesia's stimulation peaked as she came up to this particular element of the narrative. "You know children; these were to become the golden letters in the annals of English Literature..."

However, my mind was stimulated elsewhere, centered onto the golden broach, which Miss Wadia had used to prevent the *pallu* falling off her shoulders

"...And Stanley, greatly admired by the British Monarchy was knighted at the end of the day, and he became known as Sir Henry Morton Stanley...!" Consequently Mrs. Silesia signed off, and thus ended the yarn and my imaginings...

...One day Banjo would also be awarded the title, Kt. Kirti, by the British Monarchy...

After all, that's what Doctor Tripathi uncle, or Doctor Zhivago coveted for me...

Nevertheless, the story session was not thus far. Jane persisted. "...And what did Doctor Livingstone come back with...?"

Jane's tone was bit insolent, in all probability disconcerted at Mrs. Silesia for having mortified her in front of the whole Class. And why should Mrs. Silesia pass such facetious remark...? Wasn't a choice of the heart at all times been a lady's prerogative...?

Mrs. Silesia realized her slip-up that her banter did not go down well with Jane. She admitted to herself that after all students in her class were budding and soon would attain puberty...

Self-enlightenment dawned upon, and matching up to the expressions and features of the pale man in the midst of the Dark Continent of Africa, she uncomplainingly replied to Jane's query as to what Dr. Livingstone had replied to Stanley

"...Yes, and I feel thankful that I am here to welcome you...!"

My tympanums picked out: "O is that you Banjo, I didn't take notice of you...!"

Sigh, how much I longed for the next Piano session, my Heart set out to beat to the lyrics from Julie, the stupefying Hindi film, the film which

depicts the restrictive social conventions regarding inter-religion marriage and unwed motherhood in India, and probably a film ahead of its times.

I can't say anything about the child but one thing is for sure, certain people in my family surely going to prevent me Banjo, a Bengali Brahmin, marrying a Parsee, Miss Wadia. Later things later, as of now, it was all about music of Rajesh Roshan, lyrics penned by Harindranath Chattopadhyay, and one of the earliest English songs in an Indian film sung by Preeti Sagar.

As I'd placed my fingers gently on the keys, the opening strains of this number played in my mind, its blamelessness and defenselessness rumbling the silent rebellion I carried within. The yielding cadence and polish of Preeti Sagar's voice had once felt like a serenade, but now it stirred deeper, reflecting my own forbidden longing and the quiet ache of being torn between love and legacy.

Rajesh Roshan's melodies wrapped around Harindranath Chattopadhyay's poignant lyrics like a kindhearted plea to the world to kindly soften its edges.

For those few minutes at the piano, I wasn't Banjo Kumarr the Hindu Brahmin, nor was she Miss Wadia the Parsee – we were just 2 notes in the same song, trying to stay in tune against the dissonance around us.

My heart is beating...keeps on repeating
I'm waiting for you

My love encloses...a plot of roses
and when shall be then...our next meeting

Coz' love you know
that time is fleeting, time is fleeting
time is fleeting

Chapter 20

All Of ‘Em Exposed

Big row transpired at Anupriya Villa subsequent to the *machher jhaal* fiasco, at what time “...Dad walked away in a huff, tears of angst trickling down his cheeks, leaving the rest of us flabbergasted at the bedrock dining table...”

Furthermore, Karuna di sparked the same after she announced to Dad that she intended to quit her job: “Bharat da, please relieve me of my job...!”

Said phrase exploded like bombshell upon Dad’s eardrums while he was having his *prasad* on a noteworthy Sunday afternoon. Though unscathed by the verbal onslaught, he continued nibbling afternoon’s platter of simple *khichdi* - a combination of *moong dal* and rice, amid potato, green peas, and cauliflower, sautéed in an assortment of spices.

Dad was accompanied by Grandpa with big mustaches, Pundit Sudhanshu, Sahani uncle, Doctor Tripathi uncle, Doctor Tripathi aunt, Badi daktarni, Pushpa masi, and Namrata masi – all of who had gathered to remember my Mom on her birth anniversary, and now engrossed fiddling for the insignificant green peas within the malleable *khichdi*.

Why, their only respite was the accompaniments to the *khichdi*: the sour *dahi*, the aromatic *ghee*, the tangy *achar* and the crispy *papad*...?

Atmosphere was perplexing indeed. Whilst memories of a vivacious personality, who else but my Mom, were hammering the inside of each member, yet they maintained a stoic calm, drawn from an ancient Hellenistic philosophy, where sages were immune to misfortune

Stoicism: Zeno of Citium from the contemporary city of Larnaca in Cyprus was perhaps duly remembered after 2 millennia for his philosophy based on the idea that anything which causes us to put up with in life is actually a boo-boo in our finding, and that we should always have unqualified power over our sentiments, etc.

Let rage, elation and depression be bygone, because Karuna di persisted by way of her ultimatum, “Bharat da, this is the last meal I’ve prepared for you...”

Dad seemingly was losing his nerves, since Karuna di of Puri was not a mere cook, but the “...Universal Didi, elder sister, very much within our family as one of its key constituents...”

“Well, what’s the matter Karuna di, won’t you let me have my *prasad* in peace. Moreover, can’t you notice that I’ve invited guests...?”

Karuna di persevered unselfconsciously, this time bit louder, over-the top manner...

“Guests...? You say guests...? Remember, that day too you’d invited guests...? That guiltless lasso Yadana Aung, her budding daughter Aye...?”

An unutterable silence shrouded the atmosphere of the dining hall, *sala da cena* in Italian, the discussion chamber of Anupriya Villa. Everybody discontinued in-taking.

Comprehending uneasy and combative frames of mind, Sahani uncle interceded, “Karuna di, I entirely share similar opinion that the said occurrence was extremely regrettable, which couldn’t be retrieved...! However in the present day the state of affairs, when all’s said and done is dissimilar, we all have gathered to pay homage to Anupriya Bhabi...”

Upon hearing Mom’s name, Karuna di, the chubby matron-like lady, broke down albeit continuing her effusion, “Do you think I haven’t adored Anupriya *Bowdi*. Do you sense she was not in my mind in our day...?”

After that, looking at me red-eyed she continued sobbing, “And do you think I don’t have any feelings for this family unit...?”

Pushpa masi and Namrata masi were quick on their feet to mollify Karuna di... “Karuna di calm down and please don’t be so disconcerted...”

Doctor Tripathi aunt too disengaged from her seat, yet fashionably clicking the heels of her Fendi suede pumps and slinging her Fendi baguette handbag, of Italian origins. Exclusive of a single word, she caringly patted her back in order to assuage her flared-up sentiments even though Karuna di’s springy heart was too full to the brim, aching to spill out cantankerously

“You don’t have any inkling how sternly Bharat da conducted himself, he simply chucked off Manorama di without any second thoughts...? I don’t care if my turn is next. Nevertheless before bowing out, I thought it was my duty to put in the picture before all of you, the goings-on in Kumarr household...”

Much to the restiveness of others, Karuna di was far from being pacified of her querulous tone...“You know what, it was Anupriya *Bowdi* who had prearranged me the charge of this house with the teaching that it never disintegrates. In fact that was her way of existing together peacefully, her *modus vivendi*. And look, barely a couple of years have elapsed since she departed for her heavenly abode that one of the members got alienated before now...!”

All over again there ensued a pin-drop silence as most of the members were oblivious of this issue and rather were taken by surprise by not finding the fat aunt of Deoghar among them. They assumed she might’ve been busy at Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi University of Medicine, where she’d been enrolled as a qualified nurse, after finishing her Degree in Nursing.

Badi daktarni disapprovingly turned towards Dad, “Bharat da, what’s all this about Manorama...?”

Dad was wordless, in a bind. He could fathom it was entire Anupriya Villa censuring him. He could also think through that he wasn’t just unassailable, incontrovertible, as this was an Open Legislature, where every single opinion was accounted for, and where correlation was not based around bloodline, riches, or position; save for the extent of camaraderie and conversancy with the Kumarr’s.

Hitherto, this was how his beloved Anupriya had mapped it, and mapped it prolifically and passionately. And in which he too, the macho man, the breadwinner, was a mere factor...

Subsequent to his elder sister-like Karuna di, it was now Badi daktarni who showed displeasure at him: Badi daktarni, one who was respected by one-and-all, and which included the venerated Swami Nepalánanda of Vanaprastha, and one who helped bring his only child Banjo into this world.

Nevertheless, Dad’s mind meandered to that moment when Yadana Aung aunt stood in front of him and “...hell broke loose no sooner when he

happened to distinguish (that) pink Block- printed 5 meters sari, taking cognizance of the fact that it was the unchanged sari, which he'd once lovingly chosen for his dearly loved consort, personally establishing its claims of being feather-light, of 300 grams...!"

Well, the play was still not over, Karuna di as a final point, releasing the dregs of her constrained frustrations..."You know Badi daktarni; it was Manorama di and I who'd stage-managed Bharat da's marriage with Yadana ma'am...!"

Before she could bring to a close her lexis concerning Yadana Aung aunt's tying the nuptial knot with Dad, Doctor Tripathi uncle exclaimed in shock

"Hey, Bulla Dada...!"

"But it was exclusively my blunder; I considered a 2nd marriage would be germane to Bharat..." Grandpa with big mustaches modestly confessed, to which Pundit Sudhanshu inquired shockingly

"What Kaka ji...? *Aap bhi...*?"

"Yes, as per the advice of Om Prakash Sahani..." Grandpa with big mustaches replied nonchalantly, throwing a glance at Sahani uncle, who was now fearfully shifting in his seat, and itching to light one of his Wills Filter Navy Cut cigarettes. What to do, in tenseness he expressed

Vadi Sai, Jhuleylal...! Bera- Hee-Paar...!

At this instant, facing Dad, Pundit Sudhanshu confronted..."Bharat da, you wanted to marry such female, Yadana, whosoever she is, and one aren't of your own caste...?"

Dad's face reddened at the very deliberation of his Love Interest, his...Chaudhavin ka Chaand. Nonetheless, it was I who in the end swooped to Dad's rescue. Amidst the ruckus, I quick-wittedly countered, "Pundit ji, please excuse me if I say so, but I think, Er, you too got married, and to someone not of your own caste...!"

"OMG, Punditji...!" Whole lot now shrieked, turning their woolly heads towards him.

He was as usual attired in his "...designer *dhori-kurta* and the only guy scented in the entire dining hall, *sala da cena* in Italian, of sweet-smelling local perfume, *Attar*, from nearby Kannauj..." Out of discomfiture, his face

reddened, wearing a shade of red that was somewhat deeper than that of Dad's.

Doctor Tripathi aunt, appearing mod in her bed head hair of hers, most often long and layered having volume at the crown and multi-functional bangs, warned me point-blankly: "Banjo, isn't this is a reckless allegation, quite harum-scarum...? Hope you're not up to any of your old tricks, wherein your "...*Do aur do makes Paanch...*?"

"No Doctor Aunt, I'm telling you the truth and you know what were she saying to Pundit ji...? I added fervidly.

"Whaaaat...? It was now Namrata *masi* who exclaimed in scandalous overtones. I then put forth the precise dialogs imitating her heavy Malayalam accent what all she'd grouchy uttered at the lingerie section of the ostentatious boutique at Pearl Lake: "...Sudhanshu, now where are you, who is going to carry all these stuff...?"

Where Sudhanshu sounded like Soo-deng-chu, Where like We-Are and Who like Whore

All ladies, except for Karuna di, burst into a gay abandoned laughter, just like the good-old days. It was now Pushpa masi, who drawled quizzically, "Whaaaaaaaat are you saying Banjo...? Our Pundit Sudhanshu got married, and without even letting us have any notion. And when, and where...?"

"Yes Pushpa masi. And you know his voice sputtered into a...I'm Cccccccoming...!" I continued.

Now it was Sahani uncle's turn, who clicked his fingers much to the amazement of others..."Okay folks, guess who she is...?"

Badi daktarni skeptically stared at him: "Now don't tell me Sahani ji, it's that same buxom nurse, Mary, who was beside Anupriya when Banjo was born, at Dufferin Hospital...?"

Sahani uncle nodded his head in triumph, even as Pundit Sudhanshu blinked his eyes at him, face blotchy: "Oh yes Badi daktarni, I think she's the one.

...No wonder Pundit ji's eyes had popped out like Mary Poppins and his yawn-like gasp had got stuck up into the cleavage of the nurse - like a 3-feet wooden pole inside the open jaws of a 23-feet Filipino saltwater crocodile, as she'd bent down to deliver a series

of injections to Banjo's Mom, along with a fixed dialog in her heavy Malayalam accent...

...Justta one more...justta one more..."

And while she delivered all the injections to Mom, this is what had echoed in the air...

...Mary Poppins...Mary Poppins...Mary Poppins...

Crowd burst into laughter, this time sweeping Karuna di and Dad off their feet as well. Dad beamed at me, grateful on being timely rescued. Atmosphere normalized, becoming tranquil and hassle-free.

Before long, Pundit Sudhanshu rebounded, slightly in a pugnacious mood, "And tells me Banjo, what were you doing over there, at Pearl Lake, around the Ladies section of the store in Dublin 1...?"

I was taken aback at Pundit Sudhanshu's counter question. All of a sudden I recalled having "...literally dragged Jane behind me and declaring excitedly that we would visit Dublin 1, supposedly the largest square, boasting of a maze of shops and eateries..."

I also remembered how "...at first Jane had intently looked into my eyes, and then childlike, she hopped from one counter to another. While she bargained, and shopped some very cute items, I had watched her conscientiously, and she flitted around like an angel. I believed Jane to be God's chosen one..."

Returning to senses later than my flashback, I submissively admitted, "I'd taken Jane for a little Christmas shopping...!"

Dad: "And where did you find the moolah...?"

Me: "I broke open my Donald Duck of Chartered Bank...!"

The 3 lady friends of Mom were enthralled: "Oh my God, look at Banjo, isn't he growing up...? And by the way, who's this Jane...?" They broke into giggles and swooped down to plant me their signature slurps

Muaaaaaaaaaah...Muaaaaaaaaaah

"...Wasn't it that since the very day that I'd arrived from Dufferin Hospital to Anupriya Villa, these ladies treated me as their cuddly

toy, their teddy bear, their bunny rabbit, their *babua*, meant only for slurps, and which irritated me to death...?”

“Leave me alone...!” I grimaced. “Jane is just a friend and we’ve broken-up...!”

Now it was time for the men folk, especially grandpa with big mustaches, to react, “What, broken-up...But just the other day you’d invited her Pop Michael, amid the request that I appeal to Mr. James Allen to reinstate him at M/s Allen Textile Mills Limited...?”

Such and such more surreptitious, clandestine news items from Anupriya Villa hit the ceiling of the dining hall, of the *sala da cena* in Italian, pilfering and filtering out of its ventilators as well. Even Dad stared at me puckishly, and so did the rest.

They were seeing eye-to-eye that I was coming of age. Certainly not laying down my arms at the very first altercation in the midst of the feisty elderly mob, I playfully recounted the minute details along with the challenging lyrics

“But why are you all after my life, it was Dad who initiated his chronicles with Yadana Aung aunt at my school one day when he unknowingly itched for a car race with her...and then, how the “... bows of his slippers got entangled among the clutch and the brake... You know, in the initial stage of the episode he used to hum his nocturne

Chaudhavin ka Chaand ho

yaa afataab ho...

Jo bhi ho tum

Khuda ki qasam

lajawaab ho...

...But eventually it turned into a ring out

Hum aapki aankhon mein

iss dil ko basaa de toh...”

Acting in response to my vivid narration and my singing, the crowd turned hysteric, literally shuddering the thick walls of Anupriya Villa by way of

peals of laughter, emerging even out of the surprise corners: the stoic doctor, Doctor Zhivago, the *dhota-kurta* clad Pundit Sudhanshu, the magpie Sahani uncle, and the British Burma returned Grandpa with big mustaches.

Nonetheless Dad, thoroughly embarrassed, was hunting for an escape route, “Save for Banjo, you got your Bongo, your *quid pro quo*...!”

“Bongo...! Now this is too much, Bharat da, you mean to say you bribed your son...?” Badi daktarni was zapped upon hearing about the fringe benefit that I received.

Nobody knew when Draupadi, our oomph dark *bai* from Bastar, had quietly slipped in leaving her *jhharan* behind, and it was now most likely her turn...”You know Badi daktarni, when Yadana ma’am was slogging in the kitchen and chanced upon Rajesh Khanna’s poster, she’d spontaneously expressed

‘...in Calcutta, we’ve the numero uno heartthrob Uttam Kumar to us...

Er I think your Sir resembles him...!”

All the ladies complimented Dad, “Ooo...la...la...laaa Bharat da...?”

Even though Dad was proud of his comparison with none other than the *numero uno* heartthrob of Bengali Cinema, Uttam Kumar, and that too coming from “...the guiltless lasso Yadana Aung...”, for him the chapter of remarriage was stopped up. He was also bit dazed as “...he thought his face resembled Guru Dutt’s...” instead of Uttam Kumar.

However, much to the amusement of the ladies, he replied in his same inimitable style “...wiping his mustache by way of sweep of his right hand forefinger...”

“Oh really...!”

Somebody in the crowd now imitated the prophetic words of the deceased Anupriya Kumarr, my Mom, when she’d once got keyed up over discussions on Pancham

All men are not same

...And how “...while delivering the last of phrases ‘All men are not same’, Mom, one-by-one, had tore into the eyes of every masculine creature present in the hall, which even included a single-digit aged

Banjo - who by now had coolly emptied half the pot of salt into the *payesh*, sweetened for the front of the tongue with *nolen gur*, of a distracted fat aunt of Deoghar...!”

All said and done, I was perturbed. After all, in this momentous hour, when we all had assembled to pay reverence to Mom, whose spirit was still alive and thriving, my thoughts wandered to the fat aunt of Deoghar.

Wasn't it me who continually had pulled gags upon her...? Wasn't it I who'd recently brought about a "...a huge cavity within her Afro-American hair, a holy crater, thanks to the peppermint flavor chewing gum, perhaps Banjo's Chiclets from Cadbury, which had lost patience and couldn't wait till the 6th Extinction of the Human Species...?"

And in the present day, I realized, it was only she who was missing from the "...gaiety at Anupriya Villa, which held well, even for those creepy ants..."

Where was she...? How was she...?

I sprang up, amid strength of mind that of a moderator, heading towards the lounge, picking up the receiver of the lacquer red rotary dial telephone with solid weighty construction, placed upon the plantation cherry telephone table.

I dialed Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi University of Medicine, and inquired for Ms. Manorama of Deoghar at the Nursing section. Before long the fat aunt of Deoghar was on the line.

After a brief hello, I said that Dad wanted to talk to her. Wasn't she hesitant and nervous at the same time...? Next, cupping the receiver end, I bellowed, "Dad, please come here, Manorama aunt is on the line...!"

Mob hushed up as Dad walked towards the phone, firmly gripping it devoid of any eye contact with me. Few words were audible to the audience, "...I'm sorry Manorama...No worries...It was just a stray occurrence...Yadana...no...Banjo...yes...Kaka ji yes..."

Followed by an undisturbed pause after his *volte-face*, Dad appeared self-assured, returning to his authoritative mode: "Okay Manorama, I'll be dispatching Jagmohan to pick you up from the University of Medicine. Plus before you come over to Anupriya Villa, I'll ask him to take you to Kohli Retail Merchants where you can replenish your cosmetics stock...!"

Later than hanging the phone, Dad was glowing again. He bent down, hugged me and lifted me, “Oh my boy, you’re growing up, and it’s getting more and more difficult to lift you up...!”

Among one last undertaking to be embarked upon, and to convince the Kangaroo Court around, he walked straight up to Karuna di, and by way of folded hands

“Bear in mind Karuna di, before you quit Anupriya Villa, I’ll quit...”

Tears trickled down the eyes of Karuna di, the chubby and elderly matron-like lady of Anupriya Villa, as she excused herself, declaring that she’d also prepared a quantity of *payesh*, sweetened for the front of the tongue with *nolen gur* sent by Mr. P.K. Jain of Mt. Abu via Calcutta...

In the interim, the phone rang piercingly. Hearing its authentic bell ringer, Dad rushed to attend it. Mob guessed it was Manorama aunt again. But it wasn’t...

“Hello...! Oh is that you Jain...? ...What a coincidence...? ...You know, I’m about to savor a quantity of *payesh* prepared out of the *nolen gur* sent by you...!...Hmm...And am thankful that you remember Anupriya’s birth anniversary...I too pray that may her soul rest in peace...”

Mr. P.K. Jain seconded at the same time as reminding him of his diabetes, “Yeah...RIP...*requiescat in pace* in Latin...”

Dad changed the mood, continuing, “....My diabetes is somewhat under control...And bro, what about your Impala car...And your My Fair Lady...?”

Dad began to laugh quietly as Mr. P.K. Jain discussed about switching over his 4th Generation Chevrolet Impala into the current 6th Generation, in addition sharing few wifey jokes, such as the odd characteristics of the accent of his wife

...“...However, in jest, Dad often compared Mr. Jain to the character of Professor Higgins of the movie, My Fair Lady: an arrogant, irascible, misogynistic teacher of elocution, who believed that the accent and tone of one’s voice determined a person’s prospects in society.

It was in fact that Mr. P.K. Jain constantly prompted his wife, who although was as beautiful as the character played by Audrey Hepburn, was unfortunately an owner of thick accent, making her unsuitable even for job at a flower-shop...!”

Sharing few more words in the company of his business associate of Mt. Abu, having operations in Calcutta, Dad suddenly turned towards me and called me, “Banjo, come here, Mr. P.K. Jain’s daughter wants to convey Hello to you...!”

Under watchful eyes, I promenaded towards the receiver, the 26-inch flares of my Distressed Jeans flapping in the course of action and “...the Algebra of my mind trying to function smoothly like the Microprocessor, and solve the mysterious x...” i.e. the daughter of Mr. P.K. Jain, whom I’d neither seen nor talked to.

Ever since the start I shared the notion of Mrs. Jain, characteristically based upon...My Fair Lady...as someone not up to the mark where accent and mannerisms were concerned. Consequently, I decided that her daughter too would possess similar attributes.

By way of an overblown ego, I picked up the telephone. I was startled at what time an articulate and crystal-clear voice knocked my brains off

“Hulloooooow...Sweetu...What’s up...?”

“I’m Banjo...”

“Guys call me Rajshree...!”

“I’m not Sweetu...!”

“Ha...Ha...Ha...But then Dad tells you’ve dipped yourself in Calcutta’s saccharine *nolen gur* since your cradle years...?”

“Yes...you mean the *payesh*...!”

“In that case you must’ve become groovy...Oh c’mon my Sweetu-Cutuu...”

She abruptly hung up blowing me a long kiss as “...I unmindfully stared at the flower vase kept over the opulent Versailles pedestal plant stand at the corner of the lounge...”

In a little while, Pushpa masi and Namrata masi beckoned me to their side and asked me her name. By now monosyllabic, I stammered

“Raaaaj...shreeeeee...”

Chapter 21

Piano Tuning

“Dad, have you ever played the piano, and have you ever heard of Bartolommeo Cristofori...?”

Dad in an effervescent mood, above all whilst the maelstrom had somewhat settled at Anupriya Villa subsequent to the auspicious day of Mom’s Birth Anniversary

“Well, without doubt not Me, nor my father Gajanan Damodar, nor my grandfather Ramlal, nor my great grandfather Krishna Mohan, nor my great-great grandfather Hara Mohan, and nor my great-great-great grandfather Ram Manikya has ever played the piano...!”

I gleefully clapped my hands at his glib respond, thereby putting our conversation *vis-à-vis* Pianoforte to a full stop. I was convinced that Pianoforte was obfuscated and by the by not in my Deoxyribonucleic acid DNA structure. And I was yet to find why such non-musical genetics existed in my kin...?

More to the point, where did the molecule composed of 2 polynucleotide chains that coiled around each other to form a double helix, and carrying genetic instructions for the development, functioning, growth and reproduction of every known organisms and umpteen viruses go wrong...?

Indeed a mystery why these chains weren’t musical enough...?

Nevertheless the puddle, en-route the Piano Block, had dried up, and next to next days was heavy and delicate; heavy like the percussion instrument’s weight, and delicate like Miss Wadia’s artistic fingernails, done up by nail polish whose gel coat offered a diamond-like shine, nonpareil. Not able to progress much, she reprimanded me differently on different occasions

“Banjo, you’re slow on Notes...”

“Banjo...Let me start off again with Doh-Ray-Me-Fah-Soh-Lah-Te-Doh...”

“...You see, Banjo, these music notes are marked by the letters A B C D E F G...”

And on one particular morning, she was quite sedate with her show tune

“I’m using this show tune again and again to help you get the pitch of the notes as well as to learn the keys...And look carefully at music notes on the grand staff below.”

“...See Banjo, see that note in the center of the staff, that’s middle C....

“...Now you may come and position in the middle of the piano and find middle C. This is how you can become skilled at the piano keys....”

Miss Wadia pointed out the middle C, simultaneously shifting to her right, almost perching at edge of the bench, thus abdicating the center spot to me...

I felt mushy even as I sat next to her, the left side of her tresses lolling down upon my right shoulders. Miss Wadia had stylized her light auburn hair from basic braid by simply wrapping it over the top of her head. This braid secured to work as a headband, proving that she had hair long enough to be braided that could easily reach the other side of the head.

“Banjo, please pay attention, I want that at least you can play something this Christmas...!”

Of course I was playing, not upon the staid piano keyboard, but over amorous strands that were falling out from her braids, few which had loosened over long hours at the school. Although my raw fingers were biddable, following the keyboard, my ravenous face flirted in the company of those stray strands, which I assumed were preordained for me.

Only for me

Day-by-day, Miss Wadia and I got tuned to each other and I realized how significant this particular chapter could be

How to tune the piano...?

Same as I’d memorized the names of the 7 continents, and 7 oceans, I tried to learn by heart these 7 cryptic techniques as well...”...Relationship between two pitches, called an interval, is the ratio of their absolute frequencies...!”

Even as tutoring me on that particular day, Miss Wadia’s chiseled face nearly touched mine. I could sense Paco Rabanne’s flamboyant fragrance,

sensual and brimming with energy, ideal for a lady like her who knew her mind.

Red currant and wild strawberry combined amid floral delights offered by jasmine, star anise, and yummy marshmallow made up the delicious top note, while the wood base note of patchouli and crème vanilla, left me craving for more...

Inopportunately, the dratted school bells forever and a day sliced in the way of such floral delights, and I against my better judgment had to excuse myself, scamper to my drab classroom.

Weren't these mystifying intervals and sports periods, turning out to be my lifeline...?

Fair enough, I'd even skipped munching on my sandwiches, stuffed of dreary tomatoes, onions and cucumbers seeing that those precious moments were idealistically stuffed by way of mindset for the pretty, very pretty Miss Wadia.

"...Two different intervals are perceived as the same when the pairs of pitches involved share the same frequency ratio...!"

How true, Miss Wadia and I ideally shared such similarities, first being our love for piano, the next for stuff artistic...?

On one occasion Miss Wadia scolded me shoddily for not picking up the notes quick, the very next calendar day she coaxed me by the brush of her soft palm over my juvenile cheek followed by these inspiring words..."C'mon Banjo, remember you carry a musical name; it would be a shame if you don't pick up the notes...!"

Yes, Banjo the plucked stringed instrument with a thin membrane stretched over a frame to form a resonator. Having African antecedents, it had a Giraffe-like long neck and fingerboard, and 5 metal strings – these passing over a bridge which presses over the membrane stretched over a circular frame...?

Truly, it was an ignominy that in spite of being blessed by way of such a musical name, Banjo, I was inept at gaining knowledge of music. I mused it would have been better and wiser if my folks had instead named me Vivek, Gaplu, Bond, Dhruva, Kt. Kirti, or even that funny-sounding 8-1/2 - forwarded by none other than Vedanta mama of Haridwar.

“Easiest intervals to identify, and the easiest intervals to tune, are those that are just, meaning they have a simple whole-number ratio...!”

One day while I was playing the keys with full concentration, yet not getting ‘em straight; Miss Wadia literally guided my raw fingers over the arcane black-and-white keys.

Weren’t her touch enigmatic as though transmitting the hush-hush inspiration held by the Parsis, the Zoroastrians, originating in Persia since 6th century B.C., that there was one universal, transcendent, and supreme God...?

Ahura Mazda

The human race is the arena for the battle between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman, the spirit of evil – a battle in which Ahura Mazda will finally triumph and become invincible.

It was spot on that I believed that it was no more than spirituality within a person which made one striking. Here, it appeared as the just tenets of Zoroastrianism

Good thoughts, good words, and good deeds. No wonder *ahura* meant light, and *mazda*, similar to its Sanskrit cognate, *medha*, meant intelligence and wisdom.

It was in the course of this esoteric light and wisdom that Miss Wadia was speaking her mind on the 3rd technique, step-by-step moving onto the 4th...“A temperament system is also known as a set of bearings...!”

In no doubt, my puzzled bearings were slowly but surely going away astray, each day passing when together we almost sat on top of the same bench amid even temperament.

And one day, as she played the keys, I marveled at her beauty from close quarters, in particular her lips, created out of crème, nearly-neon fuchsia lipstick, combined with a matt and ultra-natural finish face, out of Max Factor color adapt foundation.

Lipstick and the foundation sculpt, matched her individual skin tone and sharp features, by this means, creating a stunning effect.

“Tempering an interval causes it to beat, which is fluctuation in perceived sound intensity due to interference between close, but unequal pitches...”

My heartbeat and that of Miss Wadia fluctuated between close and unequal pitches. My heart intensely pined for wistful sounds drawn from the song...My Heart is Beating. Though I could guess we'd come close, a lurking fear striking the back of my mind tormented me that we were hugely unequal.

Why, wasn't she was my distinguished teacher, 5 years older, and I, a meager apprentice, set on my teens...?

...In course of polite conversation, Miss Wadia had revealed that it was during her vacation after completing her High School that she thought of teaching piano. An advertisement by our school and her subsequent selection brought her to where she was at present.

When asked about her family, she exposed her sorrow that her parents, somewhat affluent, had recently expired and therefore she decided to fend for herself. After their demise, her younger brother, migrated to Vadodara for studies, and was putting up with her paternal uncle who took care of all his expenses.

Unfortunately, her younger brother, also a musician, possessed hearing disorders. Now only if he would turn out to be Beethoven, who started losing his hearing in the 20s and eventually becoming completely deaf...! One thing more, the irony, Beethoven never married.

She also expressed that she'd picked up the nuances of piano from her deceased mother, a connoisseur, and that this was a temporary job, which she may quit one day and join College, thereby continuing with her regular studies. I had then calculated that she was barely 5 years elder to me...

I choked at the very thought of her quitting my school. I took a deep breath. Sigh...! Well, another major difference was the height. Er she was much taller than me...!

"...The rate of beating is equal to the frequency differences of any harmonics that are present for both pitches and that coincide or nearly coincide...!"

I never could have a handle on what was inside Miss Wadia's untainted mind, covered by those fashionable braided tresses, whether she perceived

me as wholly her student, or was it, to my dream-come-true accepted wisdom, something more harmonic...?

I never could judge in reality what coincided or nearly coincided with her. Nonetheless, from my side, it was an affirmation, a firm yes...

I was ready to marry her

Even though she was a Parsee and not a Hindu like me, it did not matter. This difference was no difference as I firmly believed in the philosophy of equanimity of all religions. After all, it was the frequency which in actual fact counted.

Anyways, apart from the scores of lessons, How to tune the Piano was perhaps the most complicated segment, which she was trying to drill into my nonmusical head. I was, if truth be told, at a loss.

I simply couldn't track as to which terminology she verbalized. Words like pitch, frequency, interval, just, tempering, bearing, beat, harmonics all appeared Greek to me.

Only thing I could follow unerringly was the route, the circuitous route to the Piano Block, my *terra incognita* in Latin

And much to my dismay, in the present day, I discovered the same old puddle, albeit a larger one. And once again, I did those steps approximating Mr. Chionis, who was credited to have jumped more than amazing 23-feet during 656 B.C. Olympics in *archaios Ellada*, or, ancient Greece

"...I allowed myself a short running start. Then I moved backwards, bent, sprinted..." but couldn't "...neatly measure over it..." Instead I crash-landed straight into the puddle, heads on first, feet up in the air.

The out of this world dialog of Amitabh Bachchan, aka Anthony Gonsalves, from the film Amar Akbar Anthony was now ringing in my ears, upside down, *tapori-ishtyle*

"...Aisa toh aadmi life mein doich time bhaagta hai; Olympic ka race ho, yaa police ka case ho. Tum kisliye bhaagta hai bhai...?"

My answer back

"Anthony bhai, naa toh Olympics ke race mein bhaghta hai aur naa toh police aapun ke peechhe lagee le, idhar kuchh teesraaichh lapraah...!"

Wobbly, I tried to stand on my two feet, the usual posture humans were supposed to, and not those who were head over heels over someone: someone pretty, very pretty..." To my absolute shock, once more I slipped and landed upon my bumps, appearing like an upturned *shikara* boat of Dal Lake of Srinagar; my bumps, resembling upturned wood, floating in its freshwater

"Lo kar lo baat...Kya tum khali-peeli kabaddi khelta hai...Man...?"

Oh no...! I discovered I'd soiled my entire school uniform, down to my nondescript socks. In this condition, how could I possibly meet up Miss Wadia...? What would she, Miss Wadia, er, my prospective wife, say...? It would be quite embarrassing, uncouth, and that she would perhaps reject me forever.

As a matter of fact, I had no picking, but to taste the bitter pill. So, I quietly retreated nearby a brook. I yanked off my schoolboy black lace-up shoes, socks, school belt, tie, grey pants, and finally my light blue shirt. I was down to my V-cut VIP underwear, thankfully which wasn't grubby.

Cautiously placing my shoes, belt and tie upon a jagged rock, I carried the remaining stuff, selected a niche at the fresh smell brook, out of harm's way, and began washing 'em underneath gushing waters.

Even as busy attending to the paraphernalia, I watched in horror one of my socks washed away downstream. I shrieked, chased it, but to no avail. A number of noxious weeds, perhaps the *Cirsium Vulgare*, had crossed my path. Helpless, I decided to let go of my prized possession...

Angrily replying to this noxious weed, the *Cirsium Vulgare* "...I did shoot out of my little American Pissing-Mare Falls in half-a-meter or maybe one meter round arch..."

How little it still was, was debatable...?

Next, I rinsed rest of bits and pieces, spreading them across the huge jagged rock. I made it a point to hang my pants in the reverse so that its pockets natter by the heat of Helios, the Sun God, and the air of Aeolus, the Wind God – all Gods of *archaios Ellada*, or, ancient Greece.

Crestfallen, I stared at the lonely sock, quite like me, Banjo, sans a partner.

I then washed and sanitized myself of the grunge, head to toe, minus the V-cut VIP portion. Bare-chested I looked around as though I was the Greek God, Adonis, with whom, as per legend, Aphrodite fell in love.

Beyond this brook and woodland foreground, grass was kept short at the sweeps of gently rolling lawns set against isolated groves of trees, duly selected for their beauty and to provide ample shade.

I'd an extensive view of thick hedges that were made for walls at the end of the landscape. Flower beds filled up spaces in between, ending in a rose-bowered gateway. Traditional florist flowers, such as primroses, violets, along with flowers chosen for household use, such as calendula and various herbs were spread across. Others were old-fashioned roses that bloomed once a year emitting rich scents, besides simple flowers like daisies.

Violets were spread all over the floor, which I admired them for their pleasant scent.

And then there was rosemary, which once more made me think of the pretty, very pretty Miss Wadia. According to legend, rosemary was draped around the Greek Goddess of Love, Beauty, and Desire, the Aphrodite, whilst she arose from the sea, and born of Uranus...

Mislaid in such sensuous ambiance of bygone era, and merely by visualizing Aphrodite-like Miss Wadia, something atypical ensued inside me. It wasn't at all Iliad, the ancient epic poem in Greek traditionally attributed to Homer, but a hard-on. Much to my disbelief, I stared at my VIP, now tent-like.

I then heard the gong

Time was running out. Swiftly I put on each and every item, tucked in my shirt, pulled over my soiled tie and belt, and then darted towards the classroom. On the way, I rudimentarily set my hair, combing out by means of my youthful fingers.

Class was on track, Mrs. Dass giving out the lectures in her heavy Bengali accent, and Jane, sitting at an angle two rows at the back, horrified to see me in a solitary sock, in addition to a protuberance, an erection of my instrument...

She manifestly shrank like *Mimosa Pudica* while I recollected the 7th technique of "How to tune a Piano...?"

“...Piano-tuning is the act of adjusting the tensions of the piano’s strings aligning the intervals among their tones so that the instrument is in tune...!”

Chapter 22

007

Hair was sprouting down under at the dorsal, abdominal base, and which could be counted

Hair down under was perplexing enough, and so was my voice, causing it to drop and deepen, sometimes abruptly, about one octave. I was explained by Jagan, the Telegu guy from Tirumala, the genius at Science subjects that it could be because the longer and thicker vocal folds had a lower fundamental frequency.

What exactly was that I couldn't figure out...?

And what I could figure was that at times my voice sounded like the manly voice of Kishore Kumar, and then all of a sudden, it distorted into the mellow voice of Lata Mangeshkar. For instance, the following song, which I sang while keeping Jane and Varun in mind...

In this song, I enacted Kishore, who prods Lata, and then Lata who responds to his misgivings

Kishore: Hamare siva...Tumhare aur kitne deewane hain

Lata: Kasam se kissi ko...nahin mein jaanti

Kishore: Achchaa...

Lata: Aur kisi ko nahin, pehchaanti

Kishore: Chhodo...chhodo ye toh bahaane hain...

Likewise, in the middle of any conversation, rhythm broke and something else emerged. It appeared as if I was under the influence of androgens, my voice box, and my larynx whatever, developing...!

Puberty was fast catching on me and I had no choice, except to cope up with it. Above and beyond, I was all the same befuddled as girls of my class behaved even more weirdly.

One day, Jane, the shy, bashful, and shrinking Touch-Me-Not plant, Mimosa Pudica, shrieked while Mrs. Dass was teaching. All of us turned

our heads towards her. She was panic-stricken and horrified as if she'd witnessed bloodshed someplace...

"Jane what happened, what is the matter with you...?" Mrs. Dass's What sounded like Bhoat, Is like Ease, and With like Beeth...

Jane rushed to Mrs. Dass, whispering something into her ears. Mrs. Dass couldn't help but speak in fortissimo, much to the unease of Jane, "Jane, come with me, nothing to worry...!"

...where With again sounded like Beeth, Nothing like Naatheeng, and Worry like Bhaari... And then they were gone, God knows Where, or Bhaire...!

Next day, and the next to next days I found Jane missing from class. Aye wasn't talking to me, although I couldn't resist enquiring her about Jane. It was out-and-out awkward when I earned a wide grin as a reply.

OMG...! Now why was Aye Aung smiling at me and that too after the *machher jhaal* fiasco, out of which we both were yet to float up...?

I once again inquired about Jane, and now as a substitute of grinning she started laughing, and that too joined by her other girl friends. Aye Aung, Jane Diaz and others comprised the inseparable girl gang that never missed a chance to hang out together.

I was completely at a loss. What in the wrong did I ask...? Why were they going on laughing at me...? I helplessly stared at Tejwinder, Varun and Jagan for any clues. Jagan wanted to articulate something but then as he peeped into the go-getting eyes of those maidens, he stopped up midway.

Though Jagan had developed strong and rugged features, he was much afraid of these maidens. Disgusted, I walked away. Someone called me from behind. It was Aye. "Hey Banjo, are you missing your Jane...?"

Other girls joined the banter much to my chagrin. I answered back, "Shut up...!"

I was kind of pissed off therefore straightway I headed to the washroom where I released a "...American Pissing-Mare Falls in half-a-meter or maybe one meter round arch...!"

Later than full two-and-a-half days, I was relieved to find Jane back in class. I looked at her through probing eyes. She had nothing to comment except

looking down, adjusting her pleated above-the-knee skirt using both her hands, in a lengthy stroke like gesture. But it already was crease-resistant I guessed, then why was she repeating this odd but wonderful feat again and again...?

I refrained from asking her whatever thing, as she was apathetic and not communicating with me. Nonetheless, it was Aye Aung who finally broke the ice: “Jane, Banjo had been earnestly inquiring about you, tells him where you’d been...?”

Jane curtly replied eyebrows curled up, “Shut up...!”

All the other girls resumed their laughter as if it was a kind of comedy show, where Banjo was the joker. However, this show was different. I, the joker, did not have any allusion what the joke was all about...!

It was both arduous and appalling

Even so, I discovered that the atmosphere of the class had somewhat lighted up and was more on the jokey side. After all, Aye Aung had resumed talking to me after ages, and Jane too did not give the impression of being cross at me. Therefore, I decided that perhaps I wasn’t too much on the wrong foot. However, something was cooking up, and the girls preferred to remain huddled among themselves.

Anyways, I was still simple-minded to figure out why Jane was not in attendance for past 2-3 days, and why not a single soul was prepared to provide me an answer...?

All that I could have the sense of hearing were giggles, giggles of all shapes and sizes...!

After uncomplainingly waiting for an upright respond and getting fed up of their nonstop giggles in exchange, one day, I did the same as I’d done before. I called up the Trade Union office of Mill No. 2 of M/s Allen Textile Mills Limited where after 2 minutes I was connected to Mr. Michael Diaz, Pop of Jane Diaz...

...3 days later, Mr. Michael Diaz shuffled through the stair hall, stepped on the starting step, the bull nose, up the stair flights of the foyer of Regal Talkies, overlooking The Mall, Kanpur, to join me in watching the latest James Bond 007 thriller

The Spy Who Loved Me

I bowed at him as he fondly greeted me, “So there you are Banjo, my dapper Rocky Balboa. C’mon, take this money for the tickets...!”

As he proceeded to delve his hands deep into his pocket for the cash, I quietly countered his offer with a smile, “Sir, I’ve already bought the balcony tickets, er, you may buy us cold drinks during the interval...!”

“Hahaha...You always seem to have an exact reply, Rocky Balboa...” He replied. He’d started addressing me as Rocky Balboa.

3rd bell sounded off as we entered the theatre past heavy maroon curtains, sliding our leather heels over the soft thick carpet, groping our way in the dark.

Scamper ensued at the entrance, especially involving youngsters, someplace a burly man inspecting our tickets. We were relieved when another fellow ushered us to our seats by the aisle, guiding us by the beam of his extra long Eveready battery torch. At last, we sited our plush push-back seats.

Gazing around the hall, I felt the chilling effect of the air conditioners. In due course, we got used to the dimness and could witness only shadowy heads matching neon signs in red, announcing Entry on the right side, Exit on the left.

Usual hullabaloo all through a string of lackluster advertisements, of soaps and toothpaste at the start, changed into a hush what time advertisement of Nirodh was twice-repeated - a couple and their two offspring are ensconced within a red triangle.

I was just about to make inquiries with Mr. Diaz about this triangular insignia, at what time the movie commenced, the music box playing an interesting theme.

Mr. Diaz pointed out that it was Lara’s Theme, this being the generic name given to a leitmotif written for the film...Doctor Zhivago...by composer Maurice Jarre through the song...Somewhere My Love...! He added that Lara’s Theme got its name from the name of the heroine in the film, Lara Antipov

So that meant that he'd also watched the film...Doctor Zhivago. And that kicked off our little conversation in between the major scenes of James Bond, played by the thrice married, Roger Moore. I started off

“Did you mention Doctor Zhivago; you know he is our family doctor...?”

“Doctor Zhivago...?”

“Actually, he is Doctor Tripathi, and you know he addresses me as Kt. Kirti...!”

“Kt. Kirti...?”

Mr. Michael Diaz was bit-by-bit updating himself of perplexing facts from Anupriya Villa while catching up in the midst of globetrotting assignment of James Bond 007, which took the character skiing off the edges of cliffs and even excitingly driving a car deep underwater.

This car, fictionally modified, was first chased on road by a motorcycle, then by another car and then a helicopter, and then like a magic converts into a submarine for an undersea battle.

“Sir, I think the car is the British S1 Lotus Espirit, exclusively designed by Italdesign's Giorgetto Giugiaro...!”

Mr. Diaz winked at me, “Which means that one day we may find our famously own Mr. James Allen parting his DB5 Aston Martin car and hopping onto this whatever Lotus you just mentioned, diving into our own Pearl Lake of Kanpur...

...Ha...ha...ha...”

“Yes Sir, and I've also heard that the designer borrowed his inspiration from a polygonal folded paper, somewhat like what Jane had prepared for the Christmas Cake “...a brown papered container, shaped like a tub, (she) explaining that it was made out of baking parchment, having several cuts and folds, here and there...”

I replied, my mind wandering over to Jane, hitherto falling silent once 007 united with the attractive, smart, sexy and dangerous Russian agent to defeat the reclusive villain, a megalomaniac shipping magnate, one who threatened to annihilate Moscow and New York City all together, evidently triggering a global nuclear war.

Imagine a global nuclear war amongst the world's superpowers, accompanied by its horror and fatalities. And this fellow would then create a novo civilization under the sea...! What a maverick, I must say...?

Interestingly, this megalomaniac villain operated out of a weird and wonderful waterborne craft named Atlantis, quite appearing like a dome, curved surfaces outside, many curved objects in his workplace inside. Thinking about Jane, admiring the heroine at the same time, and marveling at the architecture of Atlantis, my psyche turned curvilinear, till intermission arrived, Mr. Diaz scurrying for the ever-present Coca-Cola.

The youthful guy managing the canteen was a chatty one, much to the annoyance of his clientele. Handling the bulky crates of colas, deftly popping the bottles open one-by-one, with a pop sound, he oft repeated his chat: "Sir, due to that uncanny Minister of Industries, George Fernandez, and Coca-Cola is off the shelves. It's Double-Seven for you at this moment...!"

Mr. Michael gave that fellow an impish all-knowing smile, gladly accepting the 2 bottles of Double Seven, debating, "Hello young man, it is thus far that following the entire quest to promote economic self-reliance and indigenous industries, the Government had thrust multinational corporations to scamper into partnership with Indian Corporations..."

Youthful Guy was quick in his refutation: "I beg your pardon Sir, but this policy has proved controversial, diminishing foreign investment, leading to the high-profile exit of corporations such as Coca-Cola from Indian shelves. The said policy was akin to the economy moving backwards duly encouraged by the newly-formed political group, the Janata Party, who seem to continually drink in their mark of triumph and commemoration...!"

"Well that's exactly what we should do; chuck off these alien Coca-Colas and develop our home-grown brands, such as Double Seven...??..." Mr. Diaz chuckled.

However, Youthful Guy was not the one to give up with no trouble: "Listen in Sir; the Government has not been able to address the key issues of resurging inflation, fuel shortages, unemployment and poverty. And do you think the next government, in first place, would allow Double Seven to subsist in the marketplace...?"

By now, the spat was hottin' up, Mr. Diaz charging, "All the same, by waiting at this humdrum canteen how can you be so unambiguous in your brainpower about Indian Economics, its nitty-gritty...?"

Together Mr. Diaz and I were stumped and bothered to hear his answer back

"Sir, I've just completed my Masters in Economics, and am supposed to be an expert at Finances. Look, it's only the dearth in employment in the marketplace that I'm obliged to sit at this humdrum canteen...!"

Bell rang and once again as we proceeded to venture indoors, I queried Mr. Diaz, "Sir, is it spot on what the Youthful Guy was arguing all about...?"

Mr. Diaz smugly smiled as he was well-acquainted that the legislation of strikes, re-empowerment of Trade Unions had made likes of him dominant; business efficiency, economic production held back. And that was disquietingly bleak...

Even so, all the way through the movie, we closely watched the hard-to-believe shots taken around scorching Saharan deserts of Egypt by the side of the Great Sphinx of Giza, or contrastingly, around the tropical Savannah Caribbean islands of The Bahamas.

Yet, whenever Bond's most deadly adversary, the villain's seemingly indestructible juggernaut of a henchman, Jaws, a 7-foot giant having terrifying steel teeth came around, we perched upon the edges of our plush pushback seats, while Bond's eyebrows crossed once grabbed by him.

I noticed with amusement that Bond, played by Roger Moore, had two more expressions: one was right eyebrow raised, the other was the left eyebrow raised, both which I tried to imitate in the dark precincts of the theatre.

I think Mr. Diaz and I got overwrought once the Log Cabin girl, a Russian KGB Agent; a lover of 007 came around

Whilst James Bond and the girl were curled up under a spread of furs upon the floors of the living room in an isolated Log Cabin, M, the boss of Bond's, sent a message to his wristwatch that he was needed at once at the headquarters.

And just as Bond got up to leave, the girl insisted

"But James, I need you..." to which Bond replied, "So does England...!"

...Immediately after he quit the cabin, the girl radioed to Russian KGB henchman foe that Bond had gone. Mr. Diaz couldn't help comment that Mr. James Allen, an Englishman by nativity, would be impressed by this dialogue. I agreed.

In addition, at the end of the movie we also got hyper by another dialogue, and imitated

Banjo: "The name's Bond, James Bond..."

Michael Diaz: "What of it...?"

Sharing a hearty laughter at the dialogs, Mr. Diaz now started explaining the particulars about the popular song in this film, Nobody does it better..."Banjo, did you notice the supplementary disco orientation and use of new disco rendition to the original James Bond Theme Song...?"

"Yes Sir, I've heard somewhere that it bears the title Bond 1977 and somewhat dissimilar ever since the first Bond film belonging to the year 1962, Dr.No..." I promptly replied.

Anyways, the movie 007 over, I found Jagmohan waiting for me at the parking slot. Mr. Michael was about to excuse himself to hire a cycle rickshaw when I offered him a lift.

"Alright my Rocky Balboa, you may please drop me at RBI building on your way..."

While conveying necessary instructions to Jagmohan, I turned to Mr. Diaz, "Sir, I was concerned about Jane, I mean of her absence from school a few days ago..."

Mr. Michael Diaz fell silent for some time, and then whispered in a measured tone..."Oh, she encountered some feminine hassles, I guess...!"

Before long we reached the destined spot where the imposing RBI building loomed in front of us. Jagmohan offered to open the door for Mr. Diaz, who disembarked, thanked me a lot, smiled at me, and then shuffled to hire a cycle rickshaw, the pain in his groin clearly identifiable.

On my part "...I preferred the rear seat as I wanted to recline, legs spread out sideways towards an imaginary lap, that of Jane's..." whistling to the song of this sexy and impressive film; smartly-cast, lavishly produced and powerfully-directed

Nobody does it better
makes me feel sad for the rest
Nobody does it half as well as you
Baby, you're the best...!

I wasn't lookin' but somehow you found me
it tried to hide your love light.
But like heaven above me
The Spy who Loved me
It keepin' all my secrets safe tonight
Baby, you're the best...!

~

Why, at night too while in sleep, the 007 movie haunted me in my dreams as I found myself in a cozy low allergen environment of a ski-haven resort somewhere in the alpine region of Switzerland, where startling sunshine layered across white snow, where adventurous and sometimes heart-pounding slopes among offbeat courses were there to explore, and where every morning was different...

...and so was every night

I found myself in a Log Cabin, erected out of best logs, lengthy, and cherry-picked from old-growth forest. This one-and-a-half storey cabin, set on large stones, was constructed by round rather hewn or hand worked logs, having cathedral ceiling, and boasted of a breathtaking view of the lakes from the deck.

The roundhouse with a seemingly fantastic open floor plan I remember consisted of one main living area amid a kitchen, comfortable dining area, and a Great Room. Ah the Great Room.

Great Room, I witnessed in my dreams, housed luxurious mountain style furniture, a stone fireplace containing logs, and which had vaulted ceilings tongue-in-groove, featuring a wall of windows to enjoy the mountain

surroundings and views even while indoors, the doors open to the main deck of exposed wood and master craftsmanship.

There was yet another spacious deck off the main living area accommodating designer table and chairs from where I seemed to overlook the ski slopes as well as miles and miles of deer infested mountain ranges beyond, breathing its fresh air, peeping into the well-marked trails.

Just then I presumed I caught some sexy feminine splashing sounds escaping the outdoor hot tub, climbing through unruffled stairs, crossing the unflustered threshold into the classic queen bedroom to get geared up and perfumed.

I sighed for quarter-hour of stimulating my libido, and then ventured inside to come across in astonishment the same Log Cabin Girl as sighted in the 007 movie "...curled up under a spread of furs upon the floors of the living room..."

I distinctly remembered having reached out for her yielding skin, obligated by my hormonal signals, right from the brain, up to the gonads...

And in the break of day, I discovered in incredulity something clammy contained by my VIP - my first ejaculation...!

Trying to come to terms with the glop, I unclearly smiled to myself

Baby, you're the best...

School next day was a measured one, reminiscent of the tone of Mr. Michael Diaz. As an alternative to a direct exchange vis-à-vis Jane, I tackled Aye Aung and her girl gang in a riposte: "I know what occurred to Jane..."

"Whaaat...?" The girl gang exclaimed.

"Oh, she encountered some feminine hassles, I guess...!"

“Loneliness becomes a lover, solitude a darling sin...”

- Ian Fleming

In his novel, *The Spy Who Loved Me*

Chapter 23

Raleigh

For the next one week I remembered from the time when I “...peeped into the go-getting eyes of those maidens...” there weren’t any giggles, of any shape, any size. And as a final point, we closed down on account of our winter vacations

Nonetheless, it wasn’t giggles at my end too. Giribala nani from Benaras had dispatched an implicit time bomb in inland letter; postage paid 20 paisa, scrawled in Bengali vernacular to Dad, and which he translated into English for me.

Dear Bharat (*Priyo Bhorot*),

Hope you’re doing fine along with your son...*tomar chhele*...!

How I’d desired that you and all at Anupriya Villa would be blessing him by way of a Vedic age name after the serene Polaris Dhruva, *Dhruvo taara*, and therefore, I don’t understand what made you call him something as weird *jaachhetai* as Banjo, which in point of fact sounds debris to me.

You see, here, we’re to bring about in our children and grandchildren a qualitative change, and awareness of our hoary past and heritage, *pracheen shobhotaa*.

And it is since when your son had turned 8, I’d been advising you and Anupriya again and again to initiate him to his second birth *dwija*, the *Upanayan Samskara*...

Listen Bharat, days are passing and the lad is getting older and older. He won’t remain unsullied for long and soon would be taking to vices, or *onchaamee*. Before he becomes victim to fallacies, and flippancies of the mind and body - *shob deek diye bigre jaaye*, please see through these rites of passage so that he adheres to *niyamas* and *karmas* as per our Hindu tradition, our *riti*.

Now that Anupriya is not in the scene, he may get jeffed or spoiled ruthlessly, the responsibility, the *daayitvo* lies upon your shoulders

as a father and also one belonging to a noteworthy *Bengali Brahmin Parivar* to obtain him the sacred thread, the *poite*.

Blessings to you, my *Shubechha* and regards to Dushyant *moshay*

Maa

It wasn't the first time that Giribala nani had admonished my parents (and currently my lone parent) for committing the sin of blessing me by way of a trash name, Banjo

However, on this case in point, after coming across such doctrinaire googlies in Bengali argot like "...*tomar chhele – jaachhetai - pracheen shobhotaa – dwija – riti - daayityo...*" Dad turned out to be grim and called in an emergency meeting of all those concerned.

Needless to say, our *tilak-dhari* Pundit Sudhanshu was the happiest among all as he would be getting a big charge for successfully conducting this Hindu ceremony in a wealthy family at Anupriya Villa.

He at once dished out his *panchang*, the astrological logbook, and in a distinguished aura of trepidation and animation, deliberated upon the date whilst discussing with DK, who in turns was more than pleased to find himself seated upon a high pedestal as the patriarch of the

"...noteworthy *Bengali Brahmin Parivar*" upholding its pious traditions.

"Kaka ji, my advice would be to hold the *Upanayan* during *magha*, the springtime. However, if you insist that it takes place during winters, I suggest the 8th day of *shukla paksha* to go in for the ceremony seeing that it happens to be the pious day of *Durga ashtami...*"

Grandpa with big mustaches agreed

"Very right Pundit ji, then it also must be the brightest fortnight of the *chandrama*, or the moon in this lunar month. And by the way, what is the date as per the Gregorian calendar...?"

"December 17, 1977"

Pundit ji replied. Soon thereafter, an invitation card, carrying the date and time, was printed at a printing press near Chunniganj and posted to all relatives and friends from the Head Post Office HPO, and which read as under

Shri Bharat Kumarr
requests the pleasure of your company
on the auspicious occasion of the Shubha Upanayan Ceremony of his son
Banjo
at Anupriya Villa, Kanpur
as per program given below

R.S.V.P.

M/s Bharat Kumarr & Co.

Kanpur

Phone: 40181

~

Sacred thread ceremony was to take place during daytime and the subsequent At Home, or the dinner party was to be hosted next evening. Dad was obliged that Pundit Sudhanshu could manage to stumble upon an auspicious *mahurat* during the course of my winter vacations so that outstation invitees could expediently unite.

I was at a dilemma as an informal Christmas party was also being organized by Miss Wadia at the Piano Block and I happened to be one of her few selected invitees. Anyways, promise of a wrist watch from Dad solved this predicament...

Invitation cards must've reached the hands of relatives and friends through the postman singing the latest song of Rajesh Khanna, "*Daakiya dak laaya...Dak laaya...*" because a stream of phone calls rushed in, the integer 40181 becoming high up.

Dad informed that among others, more or less all close relatives would assemble. For that reason, he implored me to conduct myself agreeably as it would be the foremost auspicious event following Mom's demise, and that her honor would surely be at stake.

Now, certain imperative odd jobs were to be taken care of. First the *puja samagri*...Dad to Pundit Sudhanshu, "Pundit ji, you know, in absence of your Anupriya Bhabi, I'm at a loss how to handle such an important

ceremony. I shall therefore request you to kindly take care of the rituals element...”

Pundit Sudhanshu reassured Dad by means of his expressions, “Bharat da, please don’t lose sleep over the *puja*. Just put down its fundamentals on me, I shall take care of them by means of the best of my propensity, and if vital, seek due counsel from Swami Nepalanda of Vanaprastha, Bithoor...

...And now please take a look at this list of *puja* and *hawan samagri*...”

Dad rolled his eyes disbelievingly staring at the list of never-ending materials itemized upon a coiled strip of paper, about a meter long once uncoiled. Reading aloud

“*Haldi...chandan...paan supari...chawal...dhoti...navadhyansm* items...What...? *Ganga balu...Ganga jal...aam ki lakdi...!* Gosh Pundit ji...?”

Pundit ji grinned, “Bharat da, you know, I’ve curtailed them a bit, and otherwise the list would’ve been lengthier. However I’ve found a way out of this hitch, er, if you may empower me...?”

Even though Dad was aware that getting lethargic would cost him dearly, he hardly was left with any other option, as he had diverse household tasks to attend to. “No Pundit ji, I don’t think I can procure these exclusive of troubles. So here is the fund with which you may please attend to this task at your end...”

Pundit ji was all too gleeful no sooner he was bestowed by bundle of cash from Dad in full view of Sahani uncle, who had no words to express, with the exception of

Vadi Sai, Jhuleylal...! Bera-hee-paar...!

However, Pundit ji was not yet over...“Bharat da, have you firmed up the *acharya*, the Guru who’s going to initiate Banjo by way of *Mantras*...?”

And before Dad could ponder upon the possibilities, grandpa with big mustaches suggested, “I think it has to be the paternal uncle of Banjo...!”

Dad unquestioningly sprang up and picked up the lacquer red rotary dial telephone, solid weighty construction, placed upon the plantation cherry telephone table to call up Grant kaka of Ujjain amid the appeal. Even as

watching him nodding his head two times, we all assumed that it was in the affirmative....!

And now turning towards Pundit ji, Dad handed him over the invitation card, subsequent to calligraphic writing down by means of his classic high-end Targa model of Sheaffer fountain pen, made in USA

Pundit Sudhanshu & family

“Pundit Sudhanshu’s family indeed...!” I muttered to myself.

Dad after that turned towards Sahani uncle and officially handed him over the card, for a second time calligraphically writing in his own inimitable and neat copperplate style, which perhaps he’d inherited from Gajanan Damodar, my grandpa

Mr. Om Prakash Sahani & family

“Sahani uncle’s family...?” I deliberated that wasn’t it bit odd that I’d never ever met his family, except once while Mom was alive. “I think he had several kids...!” I tried hard to remember as Dad initiated Sahani uncle

“Om Prakash, can I trust that you receive the guests at Kanpur Central Railway station, Ghantaghar *bus adda*...? You may hire as many cabs and book as many rooms at Meghdoot Hotel, from where they can even enjoy a morning walk in fresh air at nearby Phool Bagh... “

He added, “Above and beyond, wherever and whenever required, press the services of the smart young lad from our office, Mr. Kapoor, especially in installation of intercom all over Anupriya Villa. Till then, I’ll spare him from our newly-formed Italian Technology Division...”

In next to no time this motley group of advisers was joined in by Karuna di, Draupadi and the fat aunt of Deoghar, who were all excited after inspection of the invitation card, Karuna di animatedly suggesting, “Bharat da, it’s so gratifying that you’ve got it printed in the Bengali patois as well...

...And one more thing is that we’ve got to upgrade our kitchen larder with more and more groceries for average week-long stay of our invitees...? And not to forget the regular fresh stock of milk, vegetables, fish etc..!”

Dad agreed more than ever, “No problem Karuna di, I think you all ladies decide upon this factor and the corresponding daily menu. And just let me know the expenses...”

Hardly did Dad utter this terminology that his hand delved into his pocket. Once again his Pierotucci Italian blue leather wallet coolly emerged. And much to Sahani uncle's dreadfulness, all over again a stream of notes in high denominations of 100 poured amid following instructions.

"You know, Anupriya isn't around therefore the food department is entirely your call. And I'm in no doubt that it wouldn't be anything schematic, but superlative...!"

...Above and beyond, as far as clean-up and management of our formal guest quarter annex is concerned, I shall request Swami Nepalanda to get in touch with our old help Bajrangi, so that as per our usual practice, close relatives put up over there..."

For a change, Manorama aunt of Deoghar agreed in a soft tone, "Bharat da, calling Bajrangi back from Bhaktapur would be a great idea. And don't you worry about the food department; we'll administer it to the best of our capability, the menu consisting of items close to Anupriya *Bowdi's* heart..."

Draupadi, in all exhilaration, "Then let's begin with our regular breakfast. *Bowdi* was very fond of *begun bhaja*, the pan-seared brinjal, served alongside homemade tomato *chutney* and raw brinjal *mélange*..."

Karuna di, equally wound up, "And for sure accompanied by the puffy *luchi*...! *Bowdi* was so particular about the ratio of refined flour to the whole-wheat part. For sure she used to exclaim aloud if they happened to be perfectly golden deep-fried..."

Dad, overwhelmed and poignant to get to hear these rambling imagery, and before they could further detail upon the lunch and dinner menus as well, once more he delved his hands into his pocket. After unfolding his thick wallet he emptied every single currency into the hands of Manorama aunt.

"Enough, enough Bharat da, you may leave some for flowers, decorations, and cutlery and of course for the ultimate event, At Home...!"

"Oh don't you worry on that count, take the cheques whenever required..." Dad, indicating towards Sahani uncle, who was aghast at his friend's spendthriftness...

Manorama aunt then brazenly queried, "And who'll carry out Banjo's greeting ceremony, *boron* in Bengali lingo, by and large I believe, it's the role of the mother...?"

Motley crowd powerlessly stared at each other. Once again grandpa with big mustaches intervened, “Bharat, I think you can trust Indu, Grant’s wife, to see through this formal procedure...!”

Thus ended the deliberations, the informal assembly hereby getting adjourned, assort dispersing, profound agenda set upon their cranium. Once they quit I could clearly sight Dad retreat to his bedroom, heavy heart, and breaking down for his beloved wife

Anupriya

I too was quite startled having found Dad in distress

Reclining upon his large Four Poster antique-themed Elizabethan-styled bed, featuring thick posts, desolately staring at its intricately molded carved themes around its footboard, and at its varnishes, waxes done in dark rich coffee color, he must’ve become despondent not to have her valued presence at this crucial hour.

I too contemplated what at all I could do...? One, Mom couldn’t be brought back into this corporeal world. And Two, His Eternal Laws were unswerving...

Unmindfully, I picked up an invitation card, the very last one lying spare as I believed, by way of my adolescent fingers and stared at its contents. Had Mom been alive, the invitation would’ve read something like “Shri Bharat Kumarr and Shrimati Anupriya Kumarr requests the pleasure...”

Circumspectly I then inserted the card back into the envelope, and silently picking up Dad’s classic high-end Targa model of Sheaffer fountain pen, made in USA, which he’d by slip-up left at our antique escritorio in the lounge, began putting the words, imitating his calligraphic handwriting in neat copperplate style, which he in turns had inherited from Gajanan Damodar, my grandpa

Yadana Aung & family

All right, my idea was to invite Yadana Aung aunt and try to patch up her differences with Dad, so that in future both looked after each other.

In a state of stupefaction I ventured out of the house onto the curb, and dropped the card deep into the red letter box. Happy by the flapping sound the iron box made, I quite elatedly returned after what I’d done just now.

Alas, no sooner did I step into the house did I realize my gaffe: the envelope neither carried her full address nor even a postage stamp...!

“O God...! Am I that dim-witted...? In this big world how is the Post Office going to decipher her whereabouts...? I did not even mention the city, Kanpur, gosh...”

Upset and helpless, I retreated back to my bedroom and called it a day. The weight of everything seemed to be heavy

To continue, the next and next to next days were hectic around Anupriya Villa, loads of stuff inflowing, particularly into the kitchen larder. Jagmohan was assigned the charge of delivering goods and he made good influence of his contacts among pickup vans and haulers. As he was the lone chauffeur whom we counted, it was Dad himself who was driving the Ambassador car UPD 2322 to his office.

Karuna di, a specialist at identifying, grinding and mixing of spices was almost working overtime, giving instructions to Draupadi, our oomph dark *bai* from Bastar amid annoyance: “Draupadi, I think you better not turn over in your mind the Rajesh Khanna poster, otherwise I’ll get it off from the west side of this kitchen wall and tag it somewhere else, off your sight...!”

Draupadi mischievously giggled, bursting into a song in *Raag Manj Khamaj*, derived from his immortal film, Amar Prem

Kuchh toh log kahenge

logon ka kaam hai kehna

Pundit Sudhanshu too delivered a couple of parcels, enormous in manifestation, labeled as *puja samagri* and *hawan samagri* respectively, and instead of instructing anybody else, he himself took the pains to place them carefully in the interior of our *Puja ghar*, located at the supposedly divine and auspicious *ishaan* corner, the northeast of our villa.

Mom’s portrait “...75 cm tall, 50 cm broad, a large Red *Bindi*, and 3-4 inch Red *Sindoor*...” was also taken down by Pundit Sudhanshu from the hall and placed indoors the *Puja ghar*. In fact, my deceased Mom was to develop into a silent witness to this sacred ceremony.

~

First of the guests to arrive was Giribala nani herself, the initiator of this whole narrative called *Upanayan Samskara*. In fact she was quite pleased to visit Anupriya Villa after so many years. Owing to ill health she couldn't make it to the major preceding event, which happened to be my birth during 1964

Giribala nani hugged me tightly, kissed my forehead. Barefooted, she then gracefully entered the *Puja ghar* to bow before our patron deity, *Lakshmi-Narayana* and to place a lotus flower, the *kamal*, at Their kindly feet.

Yet no sooner her eyes caught the portrait of Mom, her beloved daughter Anupriya, glowing beneath yellow lights emitting from the nearby papier-mâché lamp shade, she broke down, dolefully.

Inside the shrine, she took off her golden spectacles and wept and wept till I stepped in the interior to console her. She stopped up for few moments, but once she saw me crying too, she over again broke down in a fresh round of grief.

“Oh God, it should've been me, the biddy, to be taken away from this world, and not my youthful daughter who still had many more years and dreams set before her...”

Much time elapsed till we normalized and she lovingly led me to the dining hall, *sala da cena* in Italian...“Hey boy, my Dhruva, see what I've brought for you from Benaras. You would love these orange-flavored *chamcham* prepared out of freshly prepared cheese...C'mon open your mouth, big and wide...”

Without demur, I, Dhruva at this instance, opened my mouth at its widest and fullest, savoring them slowly and slowly much to her grandmotherly affection

By then, grandpa with big mustaches too joined us, and when I chanced upon these two oldie-goldies start on their polite conversations, in particular a propos the travel, I tried to sneak out.

Giribala nani, “As I was telling you Dushyant ji, it wasn't uncomfortable at all although I did not catch a direct train this point in time. What I did was to travel 125 kilometers or so by G.T. Road up to Allahabad, spent one day with my neighbor's son's family and see today early morning, caught a

different bus via the same National Highway # 2 to your city. And lo and behold, here I am...!

And how are you...?"

Grandpa with big mustaches, "Hahaha... Well, well, certainly not as smart and agile as you...!"

Both laughed uproariously much to the amusement of others. "...Save for looking after my garden, cooking my usual Burmese fare, and of course, keeping an eye on these two lads, especially after (Anupriya) *Bowma* is no longer in the picture...

...Save for I must value your inland letter, in an instant, Bharat got down to action...!" Once again they laughed to their hearts content feeling on-top-of-the-world that they could still influence Dad, the upcoming business tycoon of Kanpur.

Whilst we were just going to sit down for lunch there ensued a huge bedlam. I sprang up. I knew it had to be Kirti and Uma. They got down excited from the trademark black and yellow cab. Notwithstanding Ujjala bua standing beside her conventional leather suitcases, we three youngsters started screaming at the top of our voices and exclaiming each other's presence.

"Kirti...! Uma...! At last you are here. How impatient was I getting, waiting to see your stupid faces...?"

"O Banjo, we're thrilled too to be together once again. And this time I'm sure you won't pull our legs as you are goanna be declared the *badey chotiwalla Brahmin* of Kanpur...

...Hahaha...!"

Though bit crestfallen by the intimidating word *chotiwalla*, I hurriedly touched the feet of Ujjala bua, who in turns hugged me. She flashed a smile as I offered to assist carrying her conventional leather suitcases to one of our formal guest quarters in the annex.

"Oh Banjo my boy, it's so nice to see you again. You've grown up so much. You know your two sisters abraded my skull and that of the cab driver's again and again as to how long will it take to journey from Lucknow to Kanpur...!"

“...But Lucknow is not very far from this place...” Grandpa with big mustaches broke in while promptly getting up and making necessary payments to the cab fellow.

“Kaka ji thank you so much for footing the bill. Remember, I don’t hang about in Lucknow; I live in Ayodhya, 135 kilometers far afield. And don’t you know how kids behave impatiently...?”

We all were amused at Ujjala bua’s mounting frustration; grandpa with big mustaches too sharing the laughter although he knew it was a telling off by his endearing niece, and not much of a shaggy-dog story. Drolly, DK’s *faux pas* were at times absurdly inconsequential, futile...

Nevertheless, in such extraordinary setting where everybody was in competing humors, perhaps it was the slight chitchat, the little nuances which built around the magic. To finish up, nothing better could turn out, whilst Bajrangi, our old help, came around, out of the blue.

Our amusing tales stopped as we chanced upon a beaming Bajrangi, taller and stronger - unperturbedly cycling into the lounge a stunning red-colored bicycle having bobbed mudguards

“Hey Bajrangi is that you and what are you doing...?” Fat aunt of Deoghar barked, to which Bajrangi replied...“It’s Banjo baba’s gift from Mr. James Allen that I’ve brought along...!”

“Banjo’s gift...?” Everybody exclaimed in a chorus.

“O... Yessss...”

Classy yes was from none other than Dad who dramatically had sauntered in after inaudibly parking his pal, the Ambassador car UPD 2322 at the porch, entering through our somber grey stair hall, and appearing dapper in an olive suit, complete with a matching loosened tie.

Wiping his mustache by way of brush of his right hand forefinger, he clarified, “I received Mr. James Allen’s phone call that Banjo’s gift had arrived from England and was lying ready at his Textile Mill to be delivered. And at the same time I received another call. It was from Swami Nepalanda who informed that Bajrangi was right here in Bithoor and soon would be heading towards Anupriya Villa...

...Therefore, I decided that why not combine these two comings and goings and spring a surprise for my lad...?"

Giribala nani wryly: "No wonder this man, Bharat, stole my poor daughter's heart...!"

Hearing her acknowledgement, yet more laughter ricocheted in the lounge. I silently thanked Swami Nepalananda, with whom I was quite close, visiting him at least during festive seasons. I then hugged Bajrangi, my old chum, while at the same time plunging for the bicycle.

Kirti and Uma also rushed in and we all decided to pedal it to the square patio, lest the killjoy, the fat aunt of Deoghar, disapprovingly spewed molten hot red lava from Hunga Tonga-Honga Ha'apai underwater volcano of the distant Fonuafo'ou Island in Tonga...!

I joyously touched the sensation, the Raleigh Chopper bicycle of England, based on the look of dragsters from the 1960's, and now in the hands of me, Banjo. And super cool, the Mark 2 five-speed derailleur geared, T-bar styled

Kirti: "Banjo, I would ride first..."

Uma: "No, I...I'm your elder...!"

Kirti: "No, the little one's first, the bigger one's last..."

Bajrangi: "Okay...Okay...Don't fight...! You may sit on its wheels; they're even of different sizes..."

"Shut up..."

"If not then let's toss..." he suggested.

"Agreed..."

Bajrangi dished a 50-paisa coin, an *athanni*, out from his newly stitched white trousers and tossed it high up in the blue; so far above the ground that it got stuck on the sill of one of our formal guest quarter windows.

Ruefully he complained, "There goes my hard-earned *athanni*. Sorry, no heads no tails; means that it's I who'll place me on this very comfortable long-padded high back seat. Besides, seeing that it's me who has brought it along all the way, hence, I must get the first opening...!"

Both sisters pounced upon him like incensed felines and clobbered him till he had to run for his life... Next, they scrimmaged to snatch the bicycle from me with their full strength, till the bicycle was in Uma's hand, its cute sounding bell in little Kirti's.

Pin drop silence ensued, broken only by little Kirti's mewls, "I have brokell the bell...I've brokell the bell...Evlybody will scold me now...!"

Uma and I rushed to comfort her. "No, no one will scold you. You just watch how we repair it..." At once I rushed to my room from where I picked up the cello tape from the Fragile drawer of my study table.

At the same time as I positioned the bicycle steadfastly, Uma wound the tape round and round once placing the bell on the left side of the high-rise ape-hangar handlebar. No sooner the repairs got over we were called in to have lunch, beginning with *shukto*, the first course of the meal.

Now, this particular item was my afflict because it contained bitter gourd, *uchche*, too, along with an array of vegetables like soft brinjals, sweet potatoes, crunchy drumsticks; and of course the feather-light *bori* brought along by Giribala nani all the way from Benaras. I vehemently declared: "No, I won't eat this *shukto*..."

"Kii...? Bolchhi khey naao...!"

She further insisted, "Boy, what are you talking; you see this is the healthiest and most authentic of all Bengali dishes..." She opposed, but I stuck to my point. "Let it be the healthiest and most authentic, in any case I won't eat it...!"

"Listen boy, *shukto* is a mandatory item as the 1st course of any apodictic Bengali meal, and its prime constituent *uchhe*, likened to the antidote for scores of dreadful virus..."

Argument got fiercer as I started losing my temper upon hearing her above words

"Let it be an antidote, or what on earth, still I won't even touch it with a bargepole..."

"See Dhruva my good boy, *bhalo chhele*, I've even brought the *bori* all the way from Benaras..." Giribala nani too did not tire out pleading with me...

"I'm thankful that you've brought *bori* all the way from Benaras; I'll preserve it till my end...!" My bad humor was getting bigger, and I defiantly sustained, "I'm absolutely sure I won't agitate the back of my tongue with this bitter vegetable, *uchche*, whatever...? And, I'll consume whatever that I like. Didn't you see that I willingly ate those *chamchams* which you brought...?"

Dad had to intervene: "*Maa* listen, it's a perennial problem with Banjo, your Dhruva; if he says no, it has to be a no..."

Nevertheless, by now the females of the house were up in arms in the palaver over *shukto*, aiming their fusillade at me, in white noise, "I won't tolerate your effrontery and the way you've just spoken to your *nani*..." Warned a stern Ujjala bua, only to be reproached by Giribala nani: "I'd been reminding you Bhorat to get over with his *Upanayan Samskara* earlier; can't you see he has already turned into a spoiled brat...?"

"No it seems Banjo has gone to dogs..." Joined in a teed off fat aunt of Deoghar. DK and Dad were sitting quiet. Without any notice they got up from middle of their lunch

Now I knew I had it. A tight whack came across my cheeks. It was from a fuming Ujjala bua. Somebody then twisted both my pinna hard. I howled. Needless to say it was courtesy, the fat aunt of Deoghar. "I'll teach you a lesson for your dreadful manners; let me fetch the cane..."

Dad cut a U-turn and returned, and rebuffs her, "Enough...Enough...Manorama..." Then turning towards me, he blew his top, "Banjo, how many times need I prompt you to behave yourself, but you just won't listen...? You may leave this place right now..."

By now I'd transformed into the most obstinate lad of the world

I ran to my room and shut the door tight from inside. I threw myself over my bed and started sniveling. I clutched my pliable pillow, burying my dolorous face into it. I started remembering, in progression, all those who were close to my heart; my Mom, Bobby and then Jane...

I kept remembering them all the more since they'd one way or another neglected me: Mom leaving for her heavenly abode, Bobby I don't know where, and Jane what to say...! I questioned God that doesn't me have even a single soul to shore me up...? So what if I'm not fond of something,

especially something that tastes bitter...? Moreover, why do people always force me to do things that I don't appreciate...?

Why...?

Other than sorrowfulness, my antagonism too became high-ceilinged

One day, for sure, I'm going to slay this fat aunt of Deoghar; she has tormented me lots since my infancy. And Ujjala bua, what business has she in Anupriya Villa...? And what about Giribala nani...How does she expect me to tag along her moth-eaten way of life and out-of-date views...? And grandpa with big mustaches, why didn't he prop me up...? Did he get fearful of these vicious females...? And Dad too in some way gave me the slip...!

Reprimanded by the entire Kumarr family, I experienced a Blizzard

Following an hour or so of my wrath, I could hear fervent knocks at the door. I bellowed that whosoever it was I won't open the door and that he or she must get lost. Hitherto, a soft voice passed through the gaps of the door into my twisted ears. "8-1/2, my bro, opens the door, it's me Ela...?"

No sooner I heard her fail-safe voice I jumped out of the bed and opened the door. Ela, looking svelte, nose held up in the air, hugged me tight and gazed keenly at my tear-stained face. "Hello, what's this, I thought you'd grown up...?"

Hugging her tight, I broke into childlike sobs, "You know Ela, nobody supports me in this house, they just scold me, beat me...!"

"But I never scold you nor beat you, hmm, do I...?" She soothed me. I could hear another voice. "Mamuuu...! Vedanta mama...!" I ran up to him and hugged him no sooner I spotted him. Wonderfully smiling, his kind eyes glinting, he tried to lift me to his lap, then up his shoulders.

Trying to pacify and console me, he frowned at Ela and remarked, "No you're mistaken Ela, see our 8-1/2 has really grown up. Earlier I used to toss him in the air, and now I find it difficult even to lift him up to my shoulders...!"

All worries behind, in raptures to find my quintessential cool *mama* and Ela; I dragged both of them to the patio, at the same time as mocking at Giribala nani, Ujjala bua and Manorama aunt on the way.

“Watch my bicycle...! O where’s it...?” Kirti shouted back, “Banjo, Uma is teaching me how to llide a bichycle; doo youuu minnd...?”

“Nope, carry on...!” I generously smiled, finding me back to my poise. Yet, much to my exasperation and disinclination, Vedanta mama then carried and brought me back to the dining hall, *sala da cena* in Italian, heaving me upon his shoulders, to the bedrock dining table, placing me upon it

“Hey look at him, don’t you think 8-1/2 has become smarter and more fine-looking...?”

...This moment in time we’ve all assembled for his *Upanayan Samskara*, maybe next time, it’ll be for his Wedding Ceremony; after all, it’s just a matter of finding a decent bride for him...!”

I blushed, my blush being the second best face past my sit-in, and much to the relief of others, which included my so-called critics, who resumed chewing the fat.

Dad too joined in, eyes red, smile faded, still hugging me, patting me on my shoulder, and announcing to all those pulled together, “You know, I keep receiving calls from Mrs. Aryabhata, Banjo’s Principal, who vouches for Banjo being one of the brightest kids and pride of the entire school...!”

Giribala nani’s deportment too softened up and she called for my favorite dish, the *payesh*, “...the dessert of rice and milk pudding, flavored with cardamom, dry fruits like *kaju* and *kishmish*, and sweetened for the front of the tongue with date palm, jaggery, or *nolen gur*, specifically imported from Bengal through Dad’s colleague, Mr. P.K. Jain of Mt. Abu, via Calcutta...”

Ujjala bua appreciated the fact that Mr. P.K. Jain, apart from regularly transferring *nolen gur*, was still abiding by the tradition of arranging best quality silk, crème in color, for my collarless Bengali-style *kurtas* having buttoned-up sleeves...the pricey proposition set by striking gold buttons, studded with brilliant gemstones, interlinked by a delicate gold chain...

Thus far, interrupting their conversation, Ela whispered into my ears...“Listen Banjo, there’s a greeting card envelope I discovered secreted in between the folds of the silk fabric. Is it from the prospective decent bride that we’re talking about...?”

By now monosyllabic, I was embarrassed, knowing the *objet d’art* had likely to be from

Raaaaj...shreeeeee...

Chapter 24

Hawan

December 17, 1977

The big day was knocking at my sturdy door, and along with the commemoration, swept in commotion

Preceding couple of days were frenzied enough by way of *matri bhojans*, the ultimate formal feed from the house of the mother; and *vratas*, the obligatory fasts. The very last formal feed at home indicated that before long I would be forsaking parental benefits, hereinafter getting transported to some faraway *Gurukul*, the secluded house of the *Guru*, for higher learning of scriptures, the *shastras*.

But those were binders of yonder days, I presumed

In this contemporary eon, *Upanayan Samskara* was more like a sacrament, despite the fact that it fashioned out a path of spirituality and higher understanding.

...And the venue selected happened to be the open patio of Anupriya Villa, where I found myself seated upon a *kusha* mat, the ethnic mat, in half-lotus posture, or *padmasana*, and one being the cynosure of all eyes. It was only behind a protracted period, that Anupriya Villa was witness to some contentment, some immoderation; nears and dears flocking in.

...Ahead of that, the nippy morning was hectic as I splattered in a warm bath, cleansing myself at length for the observance. While I was rolling my medium round hair brush over my extensive luxuriant hippy-style hairdo, carefully lodging tufts over my Indian ears, the classy up-to-the-minute Italian intercom, fluorescent in color, buzzed.

It was Dad, checking out the latest doodad, installed by the dude, Mr. Kapoor.

Dad summoned me to his room and indicated me to hop upon his antique themed Elizabethan-styled Four Poster bed. It wasn't the first time I'd to undergo this out of the usual run of things course of action. I also came to understand he was overwrought therefore did

not create any to-do as I earlier used to. I came down to my white shorts.

Dad picked up the unstitched 5-yard long white cotton *dhuti*, rectangle in shape, first measuring the quantity of fabric considered vital either side. Once having divided, his deft fingers tied a knot close to my navel, following it by a series of pleats on the right side. I giggled by the tickle it caused as he tucked the folded part over my tummy. Similarly, a series of pleats were through on the left side too, to which I assisted.

I was then asked to ease so that he could take the folded part of fabric from between my legs and pop it from behind in a trapeze-like act. Not toppling over the elevated bed was in fact, the fine art...!

Afterward, I wrapped my torso with another of seemingly never-ending fabric, apprehensively checking myself at the mirror of Mom's "...very feminine Queen Anne style, Lorraine cherry makeup wooden vanity table, *poudreuse* in French..."

"And his *ganji*...?" The ladies exclaimed as I emerged from his room.

"Forget it...!" Dad responded tad bluntly and edgily as he knew these ladies would now create a new-fangled ruckus over this subject. Or maybe he was aware of my historic allergy of not wearing one, since my Shiva locket days "...whence the black string carrying the locket more than often entangled like a black cobra with the cut of my *ganji*..."

However, he handed me over to the household ladies, as though it was a Relay Race, who in turn, walked me to the pyramid-roofed *Puja ghar* where I bowed sincerely before our patron deity, *Lakshmi-Narayana*, and then at the portrait of Mom.

"Hey, what's this...?" I was once again bowled over to notice upon the surface of the glass-frame, a fresh large Red *Bindi* at the center of her forehead, a 3-4 inch streak of Red *Sindoor* at her *Maang*, the parting of her hair. "...Dunno by which ingenious relative...!"

Subsequently, I was escorted by them to the open patio where actually the rituals were to take place, along with the customary *Ulu Dhwani*, the shrill vocal sound, played by rolling their tongue over

their lips, and which supposedly was meant to usher in auspiciousness and drive out negative vibes.

I seemed to appear like a *Raja* of medieval times, coming home victorious, booty-laden from my expedition. I grinned to myself.

Ulu Dhwani was accompanied by blowing of our rare white *Shankh*, the sacred conch shell, gifted by Vishwa mausa, Pushpa masi's tetchy husband, from distant Dwarka, on the coast of Gujarat, by the Arabian Sea.

Shankh, open on the right side, sounding more like a trumpet of the soprano member of the brass clan, requiring tremendous respiratory power for any lone user, was being passed from one person to another, as though they were playing the game, passing-the-parcel. Again, this item too was supposed to be an integral part of any ceremony, banishing evil omens. No wonder, people believed

Shankh bajey toh bhoot bhagey

No sooner I traversed the patio door, stepping into the patio; I was zapped to pore over its ambiance and elaborate preparations. When was it all through...? Was it early morning during the seemingly auspicious *Brahma Mahurta*, at about 4.30 a.m. or so, when Venus could be sighted....?

Midpoint of the square patio displayed scores of assorted *puja samagri*, much more than I could ever visualize in my mind's eye. It was crystal-clear that Pundit ji had spared no efforts in turning upside down the rustic stalls of the ethnic Sisamau Bazaar, rummaging through the wares.

Kusha mats, the ethnic mats, 3 in number, were positioned for the key people: Pundit Sudhanshu as the priest, Grant kaka as the *Acharya*, and me as the *Vatu*. But where was he, Grant kaka...? Has he not yet arrived from Ujjain...?

"Hey Banjo...!" Someone shouted. I turned back.

It was a beaming Grant kaka, ambling Cary Grant mode, contrastingly dressed up in Bengali-style *dhuti*, full-sleeved *ganji*. And trailing behind him, tall, wearing light-auburn hair and a warm straight quick smile, Ingrid Bergman-style, was Indu kaki.

“*Charan Sparsh...!*” As I touched the toes of their feet in humility, receiving the time-honored blessings, *bhalo thako* by way of the stroke of their palms over my forehead, I heard them loud and clear: shrieks of Dharma and Jeetu, followed by the entire bunch of hooligans...

Dharma, typically The Good having curly hair, appeared passive even after more than a few years that I, Banjo, The Bad met him; whereas the impish and The Ugly Jeetu having thin hair, lapped all proceedings around, akin to Angel Eyes’ of the Spaghetti Western, The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly...till he sighted the corner of the patio where my Raleigh Chopper bicycle of England was set aside in a slapdash fashion.

I could guess Angel Eyes had discovered his treasure, his plaything

A different patio corner was traditionally set up by 4 large and flexible banana leaves erected as masts, making it look like a 4-sided subdivision. Over the rigid granite parquet of the patio, these appeared cleverly grouted in chunks of sludge. “No, was it sludge or something else...?”

Hope it was not *gobar*, cow dung, the holy excreta of the cow used in Hindu rituals...?

Elders beckoned me to take a seat upon the *kusha* mat, its rudimentary *kusha* grass stinging right through my metatarsus up to my ankles.

Just as I charily sat, conscious that my 5-yard long *dhuti* doesn’t derisively tiptoe away from its tenable knots done by Dad’s deft fingers, I saw others caving in at the rear, stepping upon the 3 cozy *Panja durries*, which were tidily positioned in a half moon.

Vedanta mama suggested allowing one of these warm floorings from Punjab, unfilled, especially the one closer to the lounge gateway, from where latecomers could easily become one with the throng.

Meanwhile, grandpa with big mustaches was getting impatient: “Where is Pundit Sudhanshu...? Why is he so behind schedule...?” “And please place few chairs behind Pundit ji’s *asana* so that we elders can sit at easiness...

...How many times have I told you that I cannot squat upon the floorboards, howsoever balmy it appears in this chilly season...?”

By now, the venue had taken the alluring contour of a circle, its two asymmetrical arcs as you would’ve thought, separating the gentlemen from the ladies; appearing more like the Theater of Dionysus, sited on the south slope of the Acropolis in Athens, and about 2,400-years old, open-to-the-sky Greek theater, minus it’s rows of stone seats...!

Even as 3 sides were propped by our welcoming purple-hued *Panja durries*, the one side opposite me got crammed in the midst of Pimpinella seats maladroitly dragged from our dining hall, our *sala da cena*, and also by our Giovanni Visentin coffee table seats, of Italian descent.

“Thank God, they past the worst our antique escritoire...!” And grandpa...!

Ah well, he was seated in the Dress Circle as Master of Ceremonies belonging to the “...noteworthy *Bengali Brahmin Parivar*” - stalwartly upholding its pious traditions, and literally too; Jagmohan and Bajrangi setting up his regular Soda set crafted from wood and woven wicker, weaved into a net, carrying umpteen geometric perforations.

I got alarmed, “Geometric perforations...Was he making proviso for free passage to his *Vayu* across the Milky Way...?” But then it was midday and not the perilous twilights, I assured myself.

Before long, the sweet-smelling local perfume, *attar*, from nearby Kannauj, filled the air as the handsome Pundit Sudhanshu, clad in designer *dhoti-kurta*, made his impressive ingress into the patio, spectacularly holding a hand-beaten copper water vessel, the sacred *kalash*, a keepsake he had received from none other than his Great Master of Badrinath, Guru Khambhøj.

Entire crowd, ever-burgeoning, consisting of my *masis*, their families, office staff, and neighbors stood up in reverence

Pundit ji, an authority of such ceremonies, directed us to cover our exposed feet, while he vociferously chanted Sanskrit verses to purify the atmosphere,

sprinkling *tulsi-mixed gangajal* by *aam patti* upon me and over all those seated around

Om apavitraha pavitro va sarva-vastham gatoyapi vaa

Yah smaretu pundari-kaksham sa vahyam-bhayantaraha shuchiha

It was quite of an amusement to watch the ladies speedily conceal their bare feet inside the folds of their saris, its *pallus*, and gentlemen in between their *dhutis*. Only handful of men likes Mr. Kapoor, attired in normal trousers, pullovers, used their kerchiefs to abide by the instruction.

As a matter of fact, since the moment he'd arrived, perching himself cross-legged in style, over one of Giovanni Visentin coffee table seats opposite me, Mr. Kapoor of our Italian Technology Division, had only one and only one assignment in his young hand, and that was to gawk barefacedly at Ela sitting in the spectator area, and who was looking more svelte than usual.

And it was only when Pundit ji, during his *Shanti Mantras*, sprinkled some *tulsi-mixed gangajal* upon his woolly head that his gaping eyes blinked just the once....!

Grant kaka, the linkage between Pundit ji and me, explained that the *Udaka Shanti Suktas*, beginning by invoking Lord *Vishnu*, was in progress.

At the same time as performing *aachman*, pouring very little water from the spout of a copper pot in the hollow of his right palm, 3-times at a stretch, and sipping, accompanied by an amusing slurp sound before rubbing the remnant moisture over his neatly coiffure hair, he got distracted by Jeetu, who was trying learning bicycle at the corner of the patio.

He pointed out to Indu kaki to fix up this problem. But was Jeetu going to listen...? I smiled to myself, first at the amusing slurp sound that emerged out of Grant kaka's lips, going-to-smooch-like, and next at his frowning expression.

Nevertheless, Grant kaka fell back upon the day's subject matter no sooner his original forename, Ganesh, was pronounced: *Ganesh*, the expanded-bellied elephant God; *Ganesh, the Vighnaharta*, one who removes all obstacles

Vakratunda mahakaay koti surya samaprabhaha

Nirvighnam kurumei deva sarva karyeshu sarvada

I felt pleased as a plateful of delicious sweetmeats, *besan ke ladoo*, made of gram flour, was offered to the idol of Ganesh ji amidst ringing in a high-pitched sound, the handbell, *ghanti*.

On the other hand, my eyes turned moist as I happened to spot the same *tamba puja thali*, not getting any younger, which Mom used to carry in her hand, accompanied by me to the mighty Shiva temple...!

However, abut so many spectators, who were firmly resolved to conduct this ceremony successfully, I stoically restricted my emotions.

Pundit ji, the emeritus, had already made everybody part and parcel of this event by applying Red *tilak* on foreheads by his ring finger, and tying Red *kalava* upon their wrists; men on their right wrists, and women on their left, amidst *Shanti mantras*

Om sarve bhavanti sukhinah

Sarve santu niraamayah

Sarve bhadrani pashyantu

Maa kashachid-dukha-bhaag-bhavat

Om shantih shaantih shantih...!

After lighting the weighty 5-sided *panchbati diya*, besides *dhoop* sticks and jasmine *agarbatti* for greater effect, Pundit ji proceeded to prepare a benedictory symbol, the *swastika*. *Swastika* he prepared using *lal chandan* in geometric form, its 4 arms twisted at right angles over the surface of the *kalash*, then filled it with *tulsi-mixed gangajal*.

Next, he placed a *shriphal*, the coconut - along with *aam patti*, *kumkum*, an *atthanni*, and *akshat*, and *durva* grass of 3 to 5 nodes, and a few undersized marigold flowers. *Shriphal*, pious symbol of the self; stanch from exterior, yielding from within, was marked by 5 *tikas*, Red in color, and tied in a cotton cloth, again Red in color.

Consecrated *tulsi-mixed gangajal-filled kalash* was then witness to host of *Vedic suktas* invoking protective Godly forces, finally ending by way of *ashirwad*, or blessings to all spectators. But it was not over as yet

Intricate paraphernalia through, what else was outstanding, I tried to speculate...? Yet more items were in the offing as the crowd sat spellbound all through the proceedings.

Inventively, out from his treasure-filled cotton carry bag, the humble *jhola*, Pundit ji dished out the *prêt-à-porter navagraha yantra*, a square plate illustrating each of the 9 planets that were supposed to influence our destiny, and in obeisance, offering flowers to them all

...the fiery *Surya* charioted by 7 galloping horses...the pearl necklaced and subtle *Chandrama*...the red-clothed and valiant *Mangal*...the bright kaner-flowered *Budh*...the serene rosary-beaded Guru of Gods *Brihaspati*...the white lotus throned *Shukra*...the stern steel-charioted *Shani*...and interestingly, the demons *Rahu*, the dreadful...and *Ketu*, the smoke-complexioned...

In next to no time after venerating this significant *Navagraha*, Pundit ji, as an expositor, began explicating the solemn *suktas*, which went far afield my comprehension. Even Grant kaka, the well-appointed *acharya*, tried to construe them via affable words like *atman*... Evolution... Intelligence...

But to no avail, to me, it was simply *Graecum est, non legitur*

Vacuously, I stared at these 2 *dhoti*-clad seniors, since nothing could bradawl my pubescent head, which was wanting and raring to go at the colorful wintry fruits, 5 of its kind: the grapes, oranges and bananas from Maharashtra, apples from Himachal, and guavas, picked locally.

And what time I was greedily eying the fruit-laden basket, especially at the fresh mouth-watering guavas plucked from the sprawling orchards of Swami Nepalananda's Vanaprastha, Bithoor, Pundit ji, whilst making preparations for the long-winded *hawan*, the *yagya*, formally posed me the question

“What's your *gotra*...?”

Coming across this utterance first time in life, I stared at him uncomprehendingly. In the end Grant kaka, the midfielder, salvaged me with the declaration

“*Sandilya*...”

Pundit ji's next formal query, popped up whereupon offering *ahuti*, the oblations into the blaze, enabled by *aam ki lakdi* as kindling; and *hawan samagri* - comprising of a host of bits and pieces like exotic herbs and rose petals

“Name your *pitras*...!”

“*Pitras*, now, who were they...? They haven't studied with me in school either. However, by the time Grant kaka started rattling names of our by-the-by common ancestors, I knew what *pitras* was all about...!

Therefore, without a care in the world, I joined the sound out, whilst pouring *lobaan* and *ghee* via a lengthened copper spoon into the blazing copper vessel, the *hawan kund*, which was in turn fittingly positioned upon a mound of *ganga balu*, the sand collected from *Brahmavarta ghat* of *Bithoor* - and as a come again getting back billows, smarting eyes, and bouncy repetition of the word

Swaha

Amidst rapt attention held by spectators around this crucial *hawan*, once Pundit ji had engrossed himself in the midst of the gush of bubbly *Sanskrit Mantras* in his peerless and melodramatic style, the inevitable occurred:

Latecomer, Mary Poppins his buxom wife, womanly draping a scarf over a taut mushroom gown in monochrome shade, emerged out of nowhere into sight, in mince steps, walking in an affected way: short steps, quick and swinging hips

“Ka...ka...ka...ka...”

Pundit ji's abrupt and jumpy reactions, followed by hum and haw, were similar to what came to pass when I was born and

“...he was about to say something but stopped up midway when a buxom nurse, named Mary, in white fitted midriff scrub dress, nursing cap, entered in mince steps, walking in an affected way: short steps, quick and swinging hips, to attend Mom, then half-asleep after painfully being awarded, in 9-doles, her Lifetime-Achievement...”

And then how

“...Pundit ji’s eyes had popped out like Mary Poppins, his yawn-like gasp getting stuck up into the cleavage of the nurse, like a 3-foot wooden pole, inside the open jaws of a 23-foot Filipino saltwater crocodile, as she’d bent down to deliver a series of injections to Mom, along with a fixed dialog in her heavy *Malayalam* accent

“*Onnukuti...onnukuti...!*”

Still, the ultimate was yet to come up to, whilst Mr. Kapoor of our Italian Technology Division, promptly stood up, thinking in Italian it was his surname Kapoor that Pundit ji was addressing

“*Si...Pon...dee...teh...jee...!*”

Now the entire crowd, especially the svelte Ela, burst into splits, much to the discomfiture of Pundit ji, who finally could complete his sentence, which was addressed to Grant kaka, exhorting him to deposit few more camphor crystals, *Kapoor* in the idiomatic, into the fire.

Poor Pundit ji, all he wanted to say was

“Kapoor aur daaliye...”

Chapter 25

La Notte

Much to my exasperation, Mr. Kapoor was busy moseying around our round table covered by mint green fabric striped with silver runner, where I was in session with my cousins, and which included Ela, who was dressed to kill in her sensational floor-length black illusion lace-formed gown, hair done up in a messy Monica Vitti-style.

...And the night, it appeared like little scenes prepared by the famous Italian Director, Michelangelo Antonioni's, for his film of 1961, *The Night*, or

La Notte

The evening subsequent to the sacred thread ceremony, Ela, along with other cousins had walked over from our guest quarter annex to make the most of my distressed dressing table, somewhat shabby French style, round edges, sleek curved legs - to ensure finishing touches to her makeup for the dinner party, or, as mentioned in the invitation card

At Home

"8-1/2, I fancy this dressing table to the one at the guest quarter..." She broadcasted, perching upon the stool padded in leather material, crème and beige. My head tonsured, and having left with just an extended tuft, the *shikha*, at the back of my shaven head, it was torment to watch Ela gently back count the front section off her hair by means of my curved double-row detangling comb.

At the same time as I was tying the knot of my *shikha* while offering my new-taught *sandhya* prayers, the sacred *Gayatri Mantra*, supposedly originated from Goddess *Savitri*, Ela's finger smoothed it back for some texture.

And, whilst I was chanting the *mantras*, keeping tab by rolling the beads of the holy *rudraksha mala* 108-times, Ela moved on to the next step by sectioning back pieces of her hair into 4 bunches, then

twisting each section, rolling up by way of my medium round hairbrush, and gently securing them by pins.

By the time I was over and done with my *sandhya* prayers, she'd ended doing the Gillette hairspray. Rest of the bunch never showed keen interest in checking out their outfits as much as in the décor of my room, its ambiance.

No sooner Jeetu and Kirti entered my room their ocular senses had caught fancy of the Afro-Cuban percussion instrument, my Bongo, placed upon the Matisse 2-drawer bedside chest, its cabinets of charming ivory color and gold leaves.

Brawling over the same and to finish, Kirti took over playing the effeminate drum, the Hembra while Jeetu went for the male drum, the Macho - more like the poster of Sylvester Stallone stuck on one of the walls.

It was in the milieu of those hooley beats played by these virtuoso performers that I had to conclude my dressing by putting over my silk kurta, fixing those striking gold buttons, studded with brilliant gemstones, interlinked by a delicate gold chain. Carelessly, then I flung around my neck in *dupatta*-style an *angavastram*, sort of a lengthy silk scarf, and having thin pastel green borders...

And Dharma...Well, he was quite engrossed rummaging through my sundry reading materials haphazardly piled over my natural distressed finished study table. God knows what time his prying hands opened one of its Fragile drawers...?

Firstly, out came the simple Friendship Band, made up of lac resin, brightly colored and gifted to me by none other than Jane, in one of our unparalleled moments. He straightforwardly asked while stroking its glass work embroidery, "Hey Banjo, what's this...?"

"Nothing just put it back...!" I replied hastily. Ela and Uma too disbelievingly eyed the feminine article embroidered by way of lots of glass work, but did not speak up.

However, I did yell at him when next his fingers caught the Greeting Card, clandestinely sent by Rajshree, and was about to flip it out of its square envelope.

My heart was palpitating in alarm as I clutched it to my chest. In a nondescript manner, then I shoved it little-by-little back into the Fragile drawer, matching it with the seconds' arm of my HMT ultramarine blue dial wrist watch, quartz automatic 17- jewels, presented by Dad. "I think we're getting late for the dinner party, let's move...!"

Ela stared wide-eyed at my surreptitious hands whilst I shoved the card stealthily back into the Fragile drawer, more so because she was in dark over its contents. But before she could broach upon the topic, I for a second time insisted, this time in funniness

"So, finally we're ready, and Twilight moved out, I think we can now go into the venue, DK's terrace...!"

Twice they nodded, first in incongruity at my anomalous behavior over the Friendship Band and the Greeting Card, and then in consensus over the story of DK's galactic releases into one of the 2.0 trillion galaxies of the visible universe.

Ela blocked me: "Wait 8-1/2...Mom had phoned me from Haridwar reminding me to festoon you. Uma, will you just run and fetch the *chandan* bowls from the *Puja ghar*...?"

Before long, Ela and Uma turned into veritable makeup artists and started bedecking my forehead in fussiness, dipping the wood part of match sticks simultaneously into the bowls of *safed chandan* and *lal chandan*, and dotting a parallel row of arches in white and red.

Ela: "You appear more like a groom now...One endearing bride is all you have need of...!" My face turned cherry much to her glee. "Notice Uma, 8-1/2 is flushing...!"

Deck outs over, Ela was the first to traverse the stair hall, stepping in her patent leather peep toe on the starting step, the bull nose, up the stair flights of Anupriya Villa, gripping tightly the banister, which held the balusters resembling the swelling form of a half-open pomegranate flower, to DK's terrace.

Exploding into conviviality we watched Uma theatrically hold out the tail of her 'sensational floor-length black illusion lace-

formed...’ gown from behind while Ela began ascending the Florentine stairs.

Dharma too matched the mood by more than usually protecting my typically fragile white *sholapith topor*, the eastern conical headgear, shaped like a dunce cap, from getting toppled over my downy tonsured head.

Emulating her elder sisters, little Kirti too had to do something spectacular therefore she began initiating the customary *ulu dhvani*, agonizingly rolling her childish tongue over her lips. We all laughed at her ingenuity and the muffled sounds that materialized.

Not to be outdone, Jeetu, astonishingly alike Mr. Michael Diaz, made it a point to fondle the contours of the winged Venus finial perched on top of the newel post at the end of the balustrade - before gliding his decadent hand step-by-step through 2 straight clockwise flights, connected at a 90 degree angle leading past DK’s parlor onto the terrace.

“Is Jeetu growing up on similar self-indulgent ranks as Mr. Diaz, as besotted as ever...?”

Thus I mused while grasping the one-side open edges of my *dhuti* by means of my bejeweled right hand, till my curled footwear, the *Vidyasagari*, only one of its kind, sentimentally ordered by Badi daktarni from Kolkata, reached the terrace foyer, and coming across the first sign of razzle-dazzle

Countryside Reception arrow marks, pointing towards a focus bulb, aslant a chalkboard hanging sign, scalloped edges, and reading

Banjo Kumarr’s

Upanayan Ceremony

Aside, a large reception table filled by way of striking moss and wicker mini planters, romantic colored floating candles, bunch of dried lavender, was fussily extending due companionship to a crème wood perpetual calendar, proclaiming

18 December 1977

It was a pleasant surprise to be greeted by our traditional conch shell, open on the right side, sounding more like a trumpet, by the familiar Pushpa masi, beautifully dressed in a double *Ikat* woven silk *Patola* sari, bearing motifs of flowers, elephants and dancing figures all over.

Why, wasn't it the same Pushpa masi who'd also arranged me a gift comprising of a set of 3 show tables: square, low in height, but of unlike sizes, by way of drawn-out *meenakari* work, via her tetchy husband, who was yet absorbed with his ancient archaeological findings in coastal Gujarat...?

Everybody started talking about her sari, its exclusivity

"You know, there had been a link between *Ikat* production in India and Indonesia, Gujarati merchants were supposed to have taken *Ikat* over there, the activity subsequently taken over by the Dutch colonizers..." She proudly answered, beforehand having read about its details from the box.

Besides her waiting was her self-conscious son, Shivhari, who extended me an odd grin. Something was amiss, I observed, he wasn't as sharp as a boy of his age should be.

Nonetheless, Raju, Namrata masi's sole son, at this time in Nashik with her old mother-in-law, could not join us on this occasion and for which he apologized for. It was just days gone by that she broke the news of his taking part in an up-and-coming travel guide activity around the famed 3 *Jyotirlingas* of Maharashtra

"Banjo, I'm blessed that dear Raju facilitates such sanctified venture of escorting pilgrims around the sacred *Jyotirlingas*...What's more, he has promised to visit Kanpur whenever he gets a break from his hectic schedule..."

She'd proudly confessed while delivering me a variety of authentic souvenirs from her son's home state - a plate, 2 bowls and a traditional spoon, all intricately handcrafted in copper.

Anyways, about 100-120 people were positioned past the *masis*, which included Dad, Giribala nani, DK, Manorama aunt, Vedanta mama, Grant kaka, Indu kaki, Badi daktarni, Doctor Tripathi uncle, Doctor Tripathi aunt, and the current darling of all, the buxom

Mary Poppins

Mary Poppins, clad in a blue knitted dress was certainly not left unaccompanied. The ladies made it their blessed assignment of squeezing ins and outs of her hush-hush marriage to Pundit Sudhanshu.

“Where did you get married...? Who all attended your marriage...? What did you wear in your marriage...? Under which customs you got married, Hindu or Christian...?” So on and so forth...

Not too much fascinated in their tittle-tattle, all that I could chronicle was her gift of a peacock feather-crowned doll from Kerala, costumed in almost a floor-length gathered skirt having red border, a long-sleeved blouse, complete with arm ornaments and string of bells around the ankle, the *chilanka*, striking a traditional *Krishnattam* dance pose; and of course, the story of the temple town of Lord Krishna, where she got married

Guruvayur

...As I randomly sized the crowd, I somehow failed to spot Sahani uncle. Where was he tonight...? Why, he was just there yesterday...? And wasn't his family too officially invited through the card, written in Dad's own inimitable calligraphic style...?

Mr. Om Prakash Sahani & family

Well, little to my expectations, rose petals were showered upon me by bystanders as I was ushered past the Welcome insignia, meticulously carved upon an ornate vintage-framed chalkboard to my prearranged seat, covered in similar mint green fabric as that of the table.

In this glare of hype I looked around for my cousins, and to my shocker discovered Ela busy grabbing attention of all young males around, more than ever Mr. Kapoor, who'd turned out in an impeccable double-breasted black suit over a white shirt in Herringbone pattern, and black woolen tie, tied in a Four-in-Hand knot.

I beckoned my cousins to assume seats in the region of me. Tonight Ela would be my chaperon, I declared to myself. But where was she...? Wasn't she lost...?

Yes, Ela was without doubt, lost and mesmerized over Mr. Kapoor's classiness and couldn't help pressing into my ears her palpable sensations: “Banjo, I think Mr. Kapoor is the Ladies Man tonight...

...Clean shaven; he resembles the helplessly cool and eminent Italian Filmstar of the 1960's, Marcello Mastroianni..."

"Who, Marcello Mastroianni...?" I repeated thereon she corrected me. "Banjo, it's pronounced as Mar tello Mastro janni...*Signor Mar tello Mastro janni...*"

"Good enough, now I comprehend, Italian accent is relatively similar to that of little Kirti's..." I thus finished the topic on tone of voice, to which Ela couldn't help appreciating my uncomplicated evaluation amid a silly laugh save for stopping up as the man himself, Mr. Kapoor, tonight's floor coordinator, arrived carrying a 3-light candelabrum, articulately placing it upon our table, next to a wicker basket containing double-violet pansy, duly selected from DK's terrace garden.

He then followed it by way of hardly any words in somewhat a distanced, expressionless demeanor. "Hello Banjo...Hello Miss...!"

"...Ela...And these are my cousins Uma, Kirti, Dharma, and Jeetu..." She introduced, freely extending her hand.

Even as Uma and Kirti, our sisters, went starry-eyed continually gaping at the royal cord cufflink-ed hand of this young man, at this instant tenderly shaking her nubile hand, we all gentlemen aged between 10 to 13 weren't excessively blissful of the going-ons vis-à-vis our own adorable High School sis.

"I'm charmed..." Mr. Kapoor expressed holding her hand spun-out couple of minutes, and eyeing at her pretty stone and metal hand harness.

Noticing Mr. Kapoor lastingly settled after pulling a chair next to Ela to engage in well-mannered *tête-à-tête*, we all gentlemen aged between 10 to 13, inanely looked around the incredible venue: sometimes up at the elegantly-draped champagne fabric ceiling, on a different occasion in a straight line into the fairy lights around the bamboo pillars, and every so often sideways towards each other's vacant faces, until we got a huge let-up, Dad calling him gallingly

"Mr. Kapoor...He's so irresponsible...! Where has he gone...? I can't spot him, guests are kept waiting. Doesn't he count Mr. Sahani's absence, one who's running high fever, convalescing at home...?"

By now the number of guests had swelled to more than 200 and so had Dad's displeasure.

Without delay, Dad engaged one of the waiting staffs in black half-jacket, black bow uniform, to locate him. As a consequence we were clear of Mr. Kapoor, aka Marcello Mastroianni, who finally forsook his *Signorina*, our adorable High School sis, otherwise known as Monica Vitti.

Ela finally took in our vacant faces and to amend the despondency, proposed some coffee and pastry. Espresso coffee that arrived in its wood and earth aroma was piping hot, therefore she advised us to sip slowly, more gentlemanly.

In consequence, our gentlemanly slurp set in motion, in-taking the Wood and Earth fluid into our mouths, thinning it out evenly over the entire surface of our tongues till it got in touch among our taste buds; in so doing, generating a gauche din, much to the vexation of Ela.

Sluuuuurp...sluuuuurp...sluuuuurp

Yet beneath her mock frown, Ela couldn't hide a smile – as if even the uncouth symphony of slurps couldn't eclipse the rich, comforting warmth of the express, now weaving its way into our veins like a dark, familiar refrain.

Pastries, ordered from an up-to-the-minute patisserie of Pearl Lake, arrived neatly arranged upon a China cake stand, which was 3-tiered. These pastries reminded me of the Christmas cake elaborately prepared at the humble and down at heel Jane's Pink Palace.

All of a sudden I seemed to have missed a heartbeat. A strange hush fell over my thoughts, as if time had briefly forgotten to move.

... "O Jane...My Jane...!" I whispered, the words escaping before I could contain them, trembling with a mixture of longing, and something unspoken that had been buried too long. Her name lingered in the air like the final note of a forgotten tune, stirring a thousand memories in the quiet space between us.

I selected 2 pieces of the light-leavened Puff pastry containing several layers of fat, repeatedly folded and rolled out, and with the aid of pastry tongs, placed them neatly over my 7-inch Bone China quarter plate.

Whereas one pastry I took in my name, the other, self-effacingly, I took in Jane's remembrance...!

On the contrary, Jeetu and Dharma preferred the multihued Flaky pastry, having large lumps of shortening mixed into the dough, as opposed to a large rectangle of shortening found in my Puff pastry. Unneeded to state, Ela, in her yen, enchantingly selected its Italian version

Rustico

And when I was about to draw on my dessert fork to pick up the Puff pastries, streams of invitees led by Mr. Kapoor arrived at my table.

Bearing in mind the recent receipt of a reproof by Dad, his chief; this point in time Mr. Kapoor acted extra-professional, scarcely ever seizing any opening to be pleased about Ela's stone and metal hoops, and just about introducing the motley crowd to me

"Ladies, Gentlemen, meet Mr. Banjo Kumarr...!"

I promptly emerged from my seat leaving aside the Wood and Earth aroma of Espresso Coffee, Jane-filled Puff pastries

Delivering a series of mild bows, gestures, smiles and handshakes, in well brought-up style, I began accepting their tokens of love: horde of presents, cash or otherwise, from persons whom I was familiar with and also from unfamiliar callers.

One-by-one I started collecting the gifts, colorfully wrapped and labeled, placing them over the coir mattress below. I don't remember the number of times I must've offered my Thanks.

In a little while I could sense a nice load up alongside me; this included a very large box from Kohli Sahib of Kohli Retail Merchants, Navin Market. He hugged and blessed me and reminded me that I must visit him often, even though my Mom was not in the vista.

He made me recollect all those yonder moments of cruising and shopping, when

"...happily, and most of the time, after indulging ourselves in a grand dinner at Kquality's, we returned home, the rear seat of UPD 2322 overflowing with stuff..."

However, this particular packet in question was without doubt attention-grabbing for the reason being its ultra huge size.

Sensing something exhilarating, Jeetu tugged at my arm that I unwrap it instantaneously. Yet, by the time I could convince him that he shouldn't indulge in uncultured behavior publicly, he was on track, ripping the wrapper. Dharma too supported him, even as the female cousins agreed to him 50:50. And in no time, emerged a gleaming toy automobile, a sports car based upon the Italian classic luxury

Maserati

To talk about the envelopes that I received, well, they were of diverse colors, assorted sizes, and inside them were contained Indian currency of varied denominations. For safekeeping, I passed them all to Ela. Though she wasn't carrying her purse, she hit a brainwave: she quickly got up and fetched an oval-shaped wicker bread basket to safe keep the treasure.

But I must say there was one particular envelope that really caught her attention, the offering from her own helplessly cool, Marcello Mastroianni

“8-1/2, please...please can I open it...!”

I smiled at her, well knowing that it wasn't a mere envelope for her, it meant something further, his idea of mode, vogue.

It was his way of reaching her once more – through careful folds and chosen paper, and through me, a silent signature of affection wrapped in elegance and intent.

Chapter 26

The Wheels

Woolen driving cap carelessly tossed over my tonsured head, I was attired in a denim Levi's jacket falling slightly below my waist, and buttoned band cuffs like a shirt, on top of a pair of train-track faded jeans, trendily formed by 2 parallel line of fades resembling train tracks.

Even though the shirt was of trite manila color, the jeans pattern was idiosyncratic, flared from the knees down, bottom leg opening up to 24-26 inches, and amid a patch declaring

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Sitting happily next to Sahani uncle in his Black Fiat 1100 D, Italian but Indian car, debuted in 1964, the year I was born, I was joined in by Dharma and Jeetu at the rear, similarly attired in Bohemian chic, the only difference being their headgear, that of tuque woolen caps.

Full of ardor, they animatedly began counting the mercury vapor street lights, emitting white light by way of a bluish-green tint, passing the avenues of the industrial city of Kanpur, a city by the west bank of the eternal river Ganga.

Whosoever counted more on his side would win

After all, for us youngsters emulating the Spaghetti Western genus...The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly...at the same time as chewing the gum, the newest offering from Cadbury, the bubblicious, lightning lemonade-flavored; sure, it was time for midnight revels...!

Thus far, it was perhaps even more thrilling to find Jagmohan, our stoic chauffeur, following us in our 1962 model, royal blue Ambassador car Mark II, famously bearing the number plate UPD 2322, and carrying neatly coiffure-haired Grant kaka and the tall, wearing light-auburn hair, Ingrid Bergman-style Indu kaki, along with the baggage in its spacious dickey.

Observing the cars speeding along the way, I guessed it was true that till this year, our Ambassador Mark II faced no competition other than the Fiat 1100 D, owned by Sahani uncle, or even its latest version, the Premier

Padmini, quite often seen on the roads), and maybe it's smaller rival Standard Herald Mark III owned by Yadana Aung aunt.

All said and done, I shared no doubts about the mannish Ambassador still acclaimed as the

King of Indian Road

Nonetheless, because I was sitting inside the Fiat, I wanted the Fiat to be the champ. For that reason, I insisted, "Sahani uncle, faster, if not, Jagmohan will catch up on us...!"

Poor Sahani uncle, hot and bothered in his charcoal twill car coat ending around mid-thigh and getting uptight at his bottom, pushed further the accelerator, letting go his much loved lexis, *Vadi Sai, Jhuleylal...! Bera-hee-Paar...* subsequent to manually shifting his hand gear to the 4th...

"Well, Sahani uncle, I missed you at the dinner party..." I expressed, rolling up the windows to ward off the 8 degree Celsius chilliness of December, to which he replied in adjunct to his intervallic wheezing cough. "True Banjo, I'm really very sorry, I just couldn't get up from my bed, and I became quite sick..."

"You must take few drops of Glycodin cough syrup, Sahani uncle. And I also feel it's because of the pressure you'd to handle during my sacred thread ceremony, especially while making hotel arrangement, or, now and then escorting invitees' to-and-fro the station, and that too at typically odd hours..." I thus showed my concern.

"Thank you Banjo, I'm in fact in-taking the same cough syrup you just mentioned. And one thing more; anything pertaining to you or your wellbeing continues to be my foremost priority. In point of fact, I owe a sense of conscientiousness, your Mom, which had entrusted me...!" He replied in almost a choked voice, eyes moist.

Happy-turned-solemn air inside the car got intercepted only by Dharma's yell as we rushed past a maze of glittering neon signage. "Hey look that's Navin Market...!" Jeetu too clapped his hands in ecstasy.

And why not, after all, Jeetu possessed the present given to me by Kohli *sahib* of Kohli Retail Merchants, Navin Market: the gleaming toy automobile, the sports car based upon the Italian classic luxury, *Maserati*...?

Wasn't it my damn last-minute hurting decision to forego and pass him my prized gift, the automobile bearing the trident logo, once he broke into agonizing wails shortly before stepping out of Anupriya Villa...?

I'd volunteered, "Jeetu, don't cry, she's all yours...!"

And it was the first time I noticed something else to boot; a tinge of gloominess in Dharma's eyes. I stanchly assured him, "Bro, I'll surely fetch something for you when I happen to visit Ujjain..."

I could sense that even though elders had historically lent support to the curly-haired Dharma, who forever and a day appeared The Good, perpetually being on the acceptable side of any matter; it was The Ugly Jeetu having thin hair, who perhaps being the youngest, was palpably gaining importance by the day.

...Why, wasn't it just the other day some years ago whilst Mom was alive, that whenever there were struggles over seat of power; in this case the driving seat of my baby car, duly painted by means of a lot of indicators and morning lamps in its instrument console, a replica of the Italian masterpiece, the *Lamborghini*, it was Dharma's wish which ultimately prevailed...?

And how by way of his trademark politeness, unassuming nature, he for all time, was the victimized, one who constantly was hard done by...? And how he used to get hold of tremendous support from all quarters, out-maneuvering me on a regular basis...?

And how I, The Bad, found this conspicuous bias, to some extent, jarring...?

But now, it wasn't Dharma, it wasn't me either; it was the impish Jeetu who could garner all favoritism, especially from Indu kaki. More often than not, she went out of the way to support him by her warm straight quick smiles, even if he was unduly demanding or behaving shoddily.

It seemed she turned a blind eye to the follies of Jeetu, the Angel Eyes

...For case in point, at the dinner party, At Home, by the time every person was circumspectly going through the separate list of veg and non-veg menu, scribbled over a blackboard sign notice board, Indu kaki had whisked away Jeetu by his hand towards the fruit and

salad podium to dotingly serve him by the salad server fork, the freshest of fruits and green salads.

And by the time we all went through the rigmarole of picking fresh fruits and green salads, Indu kaki went on to the next level, over to the roll-top brass chaffing bowls set on top of gas and electric heaters at the non-veg section.

In the practice that followed, she piled a blowout over his 12-inch Bone China plate: a couple of puffed *luchis*, and ladles of *kosha mangsho*, the famous Bengali mutton curry dish, cooked in yogurt, hot spices.

Jeetu began to Bogart, to consume all the *luchis*, not sharing with the rest of us

And then before we could set our sights on the above first course of meal, Indu kaki had affectionately selected for him by the help of a carving fork chunkiest prawns of *chingri malai curry*, sautéed in spices and coconut milk, and evenly spreading it over a heap of long and slender *basmati*, the Champagne of Rice...!

She did not even bother to give the impression of being with Dharma or me probing for subsequent fare, though Jeetu's 12-inch Bone China plate was overfed by *rohu* fish, courtesy the exotic cuisine of *machher dompokht*, prepared in gravy of yogurt, poppy seeds and almonds, again as auxiliary to the aromatic peas *pulao* served from the salver.

Such unrestrained was her clemency towards her younger son that she randomly went on to fill a nosh-up over his 12-inch Bone China plate: the sugary pineapple *raita*, the piquant papaya *chutney*, the crispy *papad* of Lijjat - and stuffing much beyond his capacity, so much so, that it soon appeared hodgepodge of unappetizing dish, a gallimaufry...

Amusingly, it wasn't only me who witnessed her easygoingness spilling over her younger son, it was Dad too, and who audaciously captured the moment vide his novo 50 mm (f 12.0) lens SLR digital camera, the classic Pentax K-1000.

~

...At last Sahani uncle's Fiat car negotiated through disarrayed rows of distinct black taxicabs having bright yellow hardtops, to enter the spacious porch of Kanpur Central railway station, housed in half-a-century old brick-red building, the grandiose structure filled by means of pale-colored domes and minars of Saracenic design.

We all got down, waiting for Jagmohan to arrive, and to let out a victory cry, lightning lemonade-flavored, bubblicious, having won the race between our Fiat and his Ambassador.

Railway station appeared to me more like a panorama of kerfuffle, a veritable Human Museum, chock-full of rushing passengers, some of them jostling at the queues of the booking counters, some at the enquiry office, while some, the railway staff, was found engaged in assorted commercial and official activities.

Sahani uncle hired a *coolie*, the utterance, a thwarting legacy of British Raj, a porter clad in his distinctive white *dhoti* red bush shirt and brass badge, the *billa*, stating an unexciting number, requesting him to pick up the luggage and take us to the point where the first class coach of the train was likely to halt.

However, it was fun, matching the spry footsteps of the porter, up the few stairs of the raised plinth that led to a square verandah, and then walking straight into the platform through the Entry sign, via one of its majestic Mughal arches, in an air of condescension.

I volunteered to bear the fat thermos of hot tea while Dharma aped me by carrying the food hamper, bulky in outer shell. Jeetu set aside his hands inside his pockets, an ebullient song escaping his lips *Hum kissi se kum nahi*, to which we echoed, *Kum nahi...kum nahi...* episodic only by effervescence of the loudspeaker's Attention Please - instantaneously followed by its Hindi rendition

Kripaya dhyan de...

Lady at the enquiry counter announced in her practiced inflection that Sabarmati Express would arrive at 12:40 a.m. on platform # 1.

I promptly looked up and checked at the 1930 French-polished clock, double-sided mahogany of about 16-inches or so, unworriedly suspended

from heart of the platform. I became aware of its weighty brass pendulum, excellent vintage, and which chimed a dozen times.

And along with those lyrical chimes, 2 arms united at the black Roman numeral XII, declaring it was precise midnight...! Extra 40-minutes in this wintry chill, though wearisome to the seniors, meant added extras for us, to our revelry...

Announcement also thankfully projected that we needn't bother ourselves climb over the over bridge, as most other passengers had to. Grant kaka and Indu kaki, as an alternative to check in at the cozy waiting hall to avail fortification from the fault-finding weather, decided to locate a vacant bench at the platform. After all, it was just a matter of an added half-an-hour...

In a little while, they could spot a 2-ends cast iron bench and positioned upon this 3-seater having finest seasoned redwood, keeping a hawk's eye over their luggage, whereas Jagmohan formally bade them goodbye along with a *namaskar*, receiving a puny *bakshish* from Grant kaka.

By the way, Jagmohan had taken up the onus to safely steer both our cars, Fiat 1100D and Ambassador Mark II out of the porch, and buying the parking tickets.

In next to no time, Sahani uncle too excused himself from the scene to light his Wills Filter, Navy Cut cigarette, the cigarettes sitting lonely and gloomy since long. What is more, he appeared bit scratchy sitting next to Grant kaka, the atmosphere seemingly uncongenial to good conversation...?

Meanwhile, Indu kaki fiddled with her gorgeous lightweight crushed stole, borders highlighted by fringes, snugly draping it over her multicolored batik pen-printed *Maheshwari* sari having reversible borders known as *bugdi*. She smiled pleausurably at Grant kaka for reasons best known to her.

Amid satisfaction she observed that Karuna di had arranged for them tidy foods hamper of *luchi* and a *sookhi sabzi* of *aloo-gobhi-matar* - apart from *dorbesh*, the gratifying *boondi laddoo*, all which dear Jeetu was fond of...!

Grant kaka, well turned-out in his grey double-breasted trench coat, excused him at this instant, leaving Indu kaki on her own to reverie about the filling of the food hamper, and to compare the colors of gratifying *boondies* of *dorbesh*, like those of the robes of a *dervish*...

He scampered over to A.H. Wheelers Book Stall, belonging to a century-old company, distributing books and magazines across leading railway stations.

Maybe, he was twice as sure that he would have need of some good amount of reading material to break away from Indu kaki's gargantuan accretion of idle talks, both respect to Dad's riches, or else their current stay at Anupriya Villa.

In open, even if Grant kaka proudly ascribed Dad's spunk and his consequential undertakings, behind closed doors, he was overcome by a certain convolution, for the most part arising out of monetary disparity.

What of Bharat Kumarr, the rich upcoming business tycoon of Kanpur, and he, though being his elder brother, Grant Kumarr, a scrivener, a pencil pusher, a mere member of staff at a nationalized Public Sector bank, in the drudgery of a 9 to 5 desk job...?

As a consequence, whenever he got an opening to give vent to, he never failed mincing words, branding Dad's riches to be his ill-gotten wealth, his Black money, his

Do numbari maal

In the eyes of Grant kaka, every plausible businessman on planet earth, supposedly an arriviste, was a Black *moneywala*, for that reason a pariah. Further, he notioned it was due to these Black *moneywalas* that plutocracy expediently thrived...

Therefore, even as Dad courteously suggested that he should possibly switch his dated Innocenti Lambretta 125 scooter having as a feature D'Ascanio handlebar gear design, fit only for the passé Mod culture of the 1950's - into a latest model available in the market, he took it as an affront, brusquely scorning him

"Bharat, I'm not as loaded as you, floating in a millpond of Black money...!"

It was of no good Dad convincing, or retorting to his elder brother, primarily for two reasons: first that Dad self-assuredly was into lawful and fair business practices, adhering to every possible regulation, which included Tax Laws, and second, he respected elders, whether it was Grant kaka or grandpa with big mustaches.

...It reminded me of Mom, once thrown off-balance over Grant kaka's off-putting mindset. Again, Dad's construal, in his customary chaste English, was clear-cut

"...Listen Anupriya; you're an erudite lady in possession of a sagacious mind. I hope you surmise that subsistence of a family of 4 out of meager bank salary could be quite exasperating, and it is out of that wariness skulking in Grant da's psyche, that he at times speaks acerbically..."

...I'm sure, the day Government and Bank salaries get enhanced; his bourgeois point of view would cease to exist; or else, I reckon, he reserves a soft corner towards me..."

And that was presumably Mom's first and last venture in trying to sort this prickly issue.

One day, however, Dad called Sahani uncle aside to his private study, *studio privato* in Italian, at the western end of our villa, and directed him to dispatch Grant kaka a brand new scooter, the Vijay Deluxe, badged the Lambretta GP 150 in export markets, as well as a fictional letter, duly typed-out, detailing that the shipment was towards value of settlement arising out of residual Capital, belonging to the Late Gajanan Damodar, my grandpa.

It was in point of fact Dad's warmth towards his elder brother, which made him seize such off-the-wall initiative, the pretext being settlement of grandpa's dues, non-existent. All that Dad favored was his brother give up his beat-up Lambretta 125 scooter having as a feature D'Ascanio handlebar gear design, and scale up to an updated Lambretta GP 150.

Alas, Dad's naivety piteously backfired. In its place of a graceful acknowledgment, matters boomeranged, in so doing stirring a hornet's nest. Grant kaka started day-dreaming that he perchance was legatee to a larger pie.

Consequently, it was during my sacred thread ceremony that finding Dad alone in his private study, *studio privato* in Italian, he confronted him. A getting-on banker that he was, Grant kaka raised

the issue of Interest accumulated over grandpa's Capital; it's carve up, which was not yet credited to his account

"Bharat, I'm sure you'll appreciate the fact that I've mislaid an adequate amount of Interest towards Dad's Capital, the new scooter plausibly not being passable recompense...

...Why, the rate of interest used to be a measly 4 percent in and around 1957...Whereas, as you know in past 2 decades, it has surged to 9 percent, forecast to escalate yet further...?"

Dad, nonplussed at his brother's mordant Interest computation, was found searching words, "Grant da, please don't worry, I'll direct our trusted attorney, Om Prakash Sahani, to once again delve into this part of bookkeeping and tackle the issue at the earliest..."

However, Grant kaka was not too confident of Sahani uncle resolving his Interest claims, as he alleged the latter to be canny, and at the same time being Dad's right hand man in his homegrown enterprise

M/s Bharat Kumarr & Co

Grant kaka's doubts were not in fact unfounded given that he shared against Sahani uncle, a previous chip on his shoulder. He suspected him to be the one who once sabotaged a prized deal, a deal which prevented Dad from passing him over the sub-agency of M/s Bharat Kumarr and Co's territory of Western India...

...Even if it was spot on that Grant kaka was never inclined to enter any cutthroat Business, and as an alternative had opted for a relaxed 9 to 5 job, however, to watch his sons grow up, and Dad's business flourish; the initial phase of struggle, of uncertainties, of sweat, of toil, ended, possibly he yearned for an instant makeover.

Consequently, it was some time back at what time Dad proposed the stratagem to outwit his business opponents by splitting his business, and in so doing focus his markets into 4 main competing geographic zones, reserving the Western Zone, comprising of 4 major states for Grant kaka, Sahani uncle vehemently objected.

"Bharat da, please excuse my insolence, but I think this move about wouldn't prove an astute maneuver. Rather I would caution you

from diluting your stake or clout from the marketplace. Business is in the red for past few years, and your name sells like hot cake among your discerning clients. So, please allowing the Company to remain centralized, in *status quo*...!”

All which Dad wished was his business opponents remain disarmed and at the same time, his hard-pressed brother opts for pre-matured retirement from the Bank, take up this sub-agency, a clear-cut highway to privileged status.

Nonetheless, Dad had to yield to Sahani uncle’s importunate and irrefutable urgings, supported by pertinent papers

“Bharat da, if you don’t want to accept as true my annotations, then sees for yourself these latest Market Survey reports published by this particular Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and also these Press clippings from Business Standard...”

...As a result, subsequent to this disagreeable occurrence, in consequence, wordless daggers were drawn by sides, Grant kaka as well as Sahani uncle, the former in the making of an opportunity to strike back...!

Whilst seniors were engaged in their respective activities, we youngsters hopped around different booths of the railway station, which had put up for sale travel utilities like battery torches, toothpaste, air pillows, soap papers, toilet papers, etc.

Jeetu disdainfully looked at me once I remarked, “I mean Jeetu, hope you don’t require plethora of soap papers and toilet papers...?”

Actually, I had in mind the nosh-up over his 12-inch Bone China plate at the dinner party, a hodgepodge of unappetizing dish, a gallimaufry, and possibly it’s messed-up after effects...

Anyways, we made a beeline to the soft drink vendor; the fellow, who created an inimitable *treeeng* sound by means of rolling the bottle opener over a row of bottles, as though he was playing the Xylophone, striking a row of tuned wooden bars, using beaters tipped with metal.

I excitedly proposed, “Dharma, let’s have Gold Spot, it’ll be fun...!”

“No Banjo, Mom will tell off. She has expressly warned us not to ask for Cold Drinks during winter. She believes Cold Drinks are preordained no more than for summer...”

Dharma was kind of anxious, however I insisted, “Grow up man, Gold Spot won’t impair you. And I assure you the taste is quite zingy...” I broke into its familiar jingle

Gold Spot...the Zing Thing

On my insistence, we quenched our thirst, smacking our lips by way of the orange flavor and chanting all at once Gold Spot...the Zing Thing, Gold Spot...the Zing Thing...before moving on to the next stimulating item, and which manifestly was, emptying our bladders, or, in plain terms

Pissing

We all sprinted in our black leather doc martens, the fashion item by the punk sub-culture, dodging our way through the chaotic throng, strewn across baggage, passing in the course of the hectic Railway Mail Service RMS, till we hit the last part of platform # 1, the bay, where the track terminated in a dead-end, and where it was pitch dark, save the moonlight manifesting itself now and then like a poltergeist, out of peripatetic clouds.

Not a human soul within our periphery, barring some make-believe apparition, Jeetu started feeling scared, and sniveling, “Let’s go back, I don’t feel like pissing...”

Though Dharma was frightened as well, at this case in point, his symptoms were bang opposite...“I’m scared too, but I do feel like pissing...”

Sensing both their moods upset over the eerie silence at our outside edge, I cut an asinine joke, “Hey let’s see who can piss first and whose piss arches the widest...?”

Both brothers earnestly got ready to participate in the aquatic contest, and all 3 of us, footing in a line up, unzipped our jeans to ease out our bladders upon the cold steel rails. I lost out to them on the Fast factor, thanks to the time taken by my *poite*, the sacred *yajnopavitam*, which I had to wear as a *nivit*, a *mantra*, continually around my neck and laboriously coil it over the right ear ahead of pissing

...Well, I'd picked up this practice from my *acharya*, Grant kaka, in order to prevent it touching excretory organs. This habit of pressing the ear by the *poite* also eased out the anal sphincter due to acupressure, making urination or defecation easier, I was told.

And now the Furious factor: even as mine was the usual American Pissing-Mare Falls in half-a-meter or maybe one meter round arch, Dharma's was even nearer. Upon stocktaking, I was befuddled to find Jeetu's astoundingly rip-roaring, convincing me that if mine be the American, Jeetu's was Arabesque, an authentic, Ancient Wonder of the World, the

Hanging Gardens of Babylon

Leaving aside the insight of our piss whether American or Arabesque in character, very soon as our ears caught the slight cackle of the loudspeaker and subsequent announcements in both English and Hindi that Sabarmati Express was about to arrive, we rushed back in our doc martens, zippers of our jeans half-closed half-open, dodging our way through the chaotic throng, strewn across baggage, to where our folks were waiting.

Diesel locomotive of Sabarmati Express chugged in sharp at 12:40 a.m. amidst noise and hoo-ha all over. I found a minuscule rush at the entrance to this 1st class compartment, not anything as compared to the jostling at 2nd class or 3rd class. Lots of passengers got down and made way for our *coolie* to climb up with the baggage.

We all followed him in the interior one by one

Jeetu clung to Indu kaki in this mad rush whereas Dharma was behind me. Belatedly, Sahani uncle appeared, most likely after sipping a quantity of hot tea in this inclement weather, and smoking more than one of his Wills Filter cigarettes, Navy Cut. He paid off the *coolie* by way of a nod.

Grant kaka was the very last one to arrive, flaunting the latest Filmfare magazine, special issue costing Rs. 150/-. Unnervingly, Indu kaki glanced at the chiseled look of the hot starlet Parveen Babi on its cover, and read aloud about her exclusive chat, in which the actress had lambasted her critics, declaring

“My affairs are open...”

Indu kaki's frame of mind was as you would expect, distraught, what with her husband hell-bent upon carrying Parveen Babi in his gray matter all

through the onerous journey to Ujjain, especially when likes of Parveen Babi had replaced the image of sari-clad conventional Indian lead actresses by way of a glamorous woman look.

And not only the looks, had she never shied away from portraying roles of women having contemporary set of habits and talking, which generally were a taboo...?

Teed off in the midst of aggravation, still ham-fisted to lambast Grant kaka in public, it was poor me, against whom she voiced her ire, “Banjo, where did you vanish, is your extreme habit of coming into sight just before the train arrives, hereditary...?”

“...Inherited from whom I wondered...?”

“...In all probability she meant Dad, fabled for his tendency to hang around the length and breadth of a railway platform like an itinerant, away from anybody’s spectacle, restlessly in anticipation for his train to arrive; and then at the last moment, materializing out of the blue...”

She was quite lost in her unconstructive outlook when someone shoved her to get inside the compartment. Grant kaka hollered, “Hey young man, learn to be reverential to females...”

But by then, an up-to-date lady in creamy white tights and black patent shoes elbowed his grey trench double-breasted coat later than disembarking from the compartment.

At this moment, it was Indu kaki’s turn to lisp a curse, “Look, these days’ ladies too have become to some extent uncouth...!”

I supposed that her indication was veiled towards glamorous film actresses, by whom gullible men like her husband got easily enthralled.

Sudden stillness greeted us inside the plush compartment among only a handful amount of passengers traversing the narrow but lengthy corridor. After sliding open the door of the spacious and exclusive coupe of 4, we stepped in. It was quite of a room on wheels I thought.

...How pleasant it must be of 4 in a family to travel together, eat together, and play together - an experience which perhaps had become unattainable in my current life, a pipe dream...?

Poignant, I hugged Dharma and Jeetu, at the same time as Grant kaka and Indu kaki stroked their palms over my forehead along with the time-honored blessings *bhalo thako*, when I touched the toes of their feet in humility.

It was now time for me and Sahani uncle to get down from the compartment seeing that the guard had already blown the shrill whistle, waving the ubiquitous flag, green.

Grant kaka dearly wanted to remind Sahani uncle of his bookkeeping task pertaining to his Interest backlogs, but eyeing the commotion around, he preferred to stay quiet, save for a faint smile of departure.

No sooner we disembarked, the train started moving

Without delay, Dharma and Jeetu occupied the window seats to wave me their frenetic goodbyes. I also waved back cheerfully despite having a sinking feeling of again being somewhat lonesome. Train caught speed and within few seconds vanished out from the platform, leaving behind a parallel set of cold steel rails.

Sahani uncle could without doubt gauge my mood that I was upset. He threw a smile and tried to engage me in an anomalous converse: “Thank God Banjo, nowadays we don’t find those steam locomotives shunting in and out of platforms creating mayhem by means of their noise and air pollution...”

“Still Sahani uncle, I think they were much more fun to watch, especially its huge amount of black soot belching out of its chimneys, and accompanied by the mind-numbing timbre

...*Jhick...Jhick...Jhick...!*”

I persisted. He laughed: “Ha...ha...ha...Then you must visit the Rail Museum in Delhi, where you can still get to see those relics, perhaps even the last one, the *Antim Sitara*, which got retired in 1970...”

“I surely would like to visit this museum. You know I’m quite fond of assets on wheels, whether a train or a car...” I agreed gleefully. “Okay Banjo, for now, you may rush to my Fiat car, where you’ll find your sacred thread ceremony gift in its glove compartment. And let me see how fast you can run...”

No sooner I heard Sahani uncle's words, I was gone from the platform, passing through the Exit sign, past the ticket checker in black coat black cap, via one of the majestic Mughal arches to the square verandah, and then scrambling down the few steps of the plinth onto the porch.

From the porch I dashed straight to the parking lot, where finding Jagmohan, I requested him to unlock Sahani uncle's car. "Banjo baba, is everything fine...?" Jagmohan showed his concern.

"Yes, absolutely, I just wanted to check inside Sahani uncle's car..."

To my utter surprise, I found a sachet containing a Fixed Deposit Receipt FDR for Rs. 10,000/- of Allahabad Bank, drawn in my favor.

"Hmm so this was his gift, neither one in kind or cash, but one which would mature only after 8 years or so, and which meant I would be collecting Rs. 20,000/- in 1985...!"

What more could I expect out of our stasher attorney, scrimp-like, perpetually apprehensive about the upcoming, the future, more than ever as regards to its make-believe rainy days...?"

Nevertheless, amid diffuse lights in the interior of the Black Fiat 1100 D, Italian but Indian 4-door saloon, I was gob smacked to discover a maiden's nail polish, Canadian in origin, quite unwonted, complete with drawn out minutiae

La couleur couture

Beauty Blue

10-free vegan, healthy, no chemicals, with protective UV inhibitor

CA\$ 6.99

Chapter 27

Stayin' Alive

It was later half of 1970s

Even while America was firmly disillusioned with both their Government, countering the period of Cold War, and the idealistic counterculture of the previous decade, the era of New Hollywood was seen flourishing, bringing forth yet more electrifying films.

These days, more frivolous activities, like dancing in platform shoes and dusty suits under flashing lights, a phenomenon known as Disco, was soon becoming the mark of our generation just wanting to have excitement.

And no mention of the present disco era could be complete without any of the songs of The Bee Gees, brought about by Gibb brothers, the Australian answer to The Beatles, with their run of delicate and romantic hits during this psychedelic era.

To be sure, the Bee Gees had successfully accomplished their transition from 1960's British invasion balladeers to 1970's Rhythm & Blues (R&B) funk band; my hormones kicking off at a feverish pitch once I'd gone to watch Saturday Night Fever on a cold Saturday, the festive night of Christmas Eve.

...Young and lean Hollywood actor, John Travolta, mesmerized me by his crazy-like struts on the dance-floor in a characteristic white suit black polyester shirt. Dark and cool interiors of Regal Talkies had virtually transformed into a discotheque, letting out uproarious noises, as I sat to watch this film with Bajrangi.

No doubt Bajrangi was euphoric and beaming: "OMG...! I say, what an evening Banjo bhaiyya, implausible, I feel I'm in 7th heaven. And I also think the hairstyle of the hero was matchless...*Aur ye saari gori mem, ekdum phuntaashtik...?*"

Entire crowd who'd come to attend my sacred thread ceremony had departed from Anupriya Villa, except for Bajrangi. In a couple of

days, he too would be leaving for Bhaktapur, Nepal, hence, the modest excursion along with him to Regal Talkies.

I once again observed the coiffed hair of John Travolta, and then willy-nilly at my own; shaven, a *shikha* on top. I debated, “Bajrangi, I think you’re right, John Travolta hairstyle would indubitably suit me. But for that, at least I must’ve pretty amount of fur on top of my skull...”

“Don’t worry Banjo bhaiyya, your hair would grow even better, I tell you I’ve heard that once the *khopri* is done *safaa chutt*, *jhaari* that comes out then is *phuntaashtik*...!” Bajrangi thus insisted by means of a comic vocabulary.

On returning home, we discussed more about mane, and Bajrangi getting a slap on the wrist from me for showering coins, *chillar*, beyond the carpeted floorings, creating a jingling noise inside the plush dark hall, especially during its opening signature song, Stayin’ alive, which I believed introduced a novo genre of dance music, containing elements of R&B, funk, soul, pop, and Salsa, or in other words

Disco

In the dark interiors of the hall, I could make out girls let down their hair what time the opening credits flashed in the midst of Stayin’ alive, Travolta jauntily walking down 86th Street of NYC wearing his bright red shoes, chasing skirts, a can of paint held in each hand.

Bajrangi was animated and unashamed and did not seem to mind my telling off, and in its place grinned and kicked off a conversation: “*Bhaiyya ji*, I couldn’t understand any of this *umrikan boli*, American accent, nor about the locations...”

I started explaining, “Look Bajrangi, the film was shot in America, and the bridge that you saw was the famous Brooklyn Bridge of New York. This suspension bridge is hailed as one of the masterpieces of 19th century engineering; its beauty, especially the broad promenade above the roadway, inspiring poets and writers...”

“*Bhaiyya ji*, I’ve come across a bridge in Nepal, but not as wonderful, but you know its chocolate box...!” He replied confidently. I

appreciated Bajrangi and his comparison of America's bridge with Nepal's. "And what else, Bajrangi...?"

"Well, the *kanchis* of Nepal are also *sundar-sundar*, of Mongoloid features...!"

"Hmm that's inviting, some day you'll find me in Nepal..." I couldn't help guffawing.

~

I reached the Piano Block through the front entrance of the school and not via the circuitous route beyond the assembly hall, cutting through a low intensity recreation situate, consisting of rustic picnic areas, wooden benches, and mysterious trails, a portion which was part of the wilderness and commonly not much in use.

Tonight, I was positioned at the unchanged spot, the glass doorway now decorated by way of a wreath of lemon feather rope and a lilac bow, where the first time I'd found Miss Wadia dressed up in Red, the most fugitive of colors, sitting on a wood bench with her back towards the entrance and busy playing the piano.

...I remembered how I'd taken a vantage spot at the door and had continued to marvel her. From the point where I'd stood, she'd looked very beautiful draped in a sari, somewhat *Parsi-Irani* style. I'd also gauged her slender waist, the fair of her skin contrasting well with the Red of her sari.

Finally I stepped in and was surprised to find a whole lot of people which included select school kids and teachers.

"Merry Christmas...!"

I bowed, getting a cheery response from one and all, at the same time staring at the beautiful Christmas tree. Afterward I looked around inside the profoundly decorated hall...

At first sight I chanced upon 8-9 girls, the girl gang which included Jane Diaz and Aye Aung, in glad rags, though not in punk, which was I thought no longer considered risqué.

I was surprised to find them tamer than what they used to appear in our former school events, and less-threatening too, in latest version of the punk

style called New Wave, featuring jagged hems on clothing, and sensationally studded belts, decorated by way of metal studs.

However, these wannabe dancers wore glitter make-up

Among the boys, counting roughly a dozen, Varun, our current celebrity who'd played Anthony Gonsalves at Jane Diaz' Easter event, was the most in plain sight, clothed more like the music genre of punk rock, well-matching to his musical and theatrical carriage.

His style resembled one which had emerged in London and spread all over America; everybody gawking at his forest green ripped leather jacket, luridly embellished in the midst of chains, spikes, studs, and an odd coat of pink paint in close proximity to the left shoulder. And it was worn over a shirt having taboo images and dog collars, on top of leather pants, tight and sexy.

On the contrary, my outfit, even if poles apart to that of Varun, was equally smart: beige suit, color of old money, and resembling the slimmer European suit, the quasi-European suit. It featured padded shoulders, higher arm holes, a smaller waist, open patch pockets, and a small flare to the pants and jacket.

Lastly, my most up-to-date Cuban heels, 2-inches in elevation, acquired from Kundan Shoes of Navin Market, astonishingly matched with that of John Travolta striking a pose on a disco dance floor, the very scene which appeared on the soundtrack album of...Saturday Night Fever...! I felt good about it...

Amongst the male teachers, I found our deadly P.T. teacher Mr. Lalu, startlingly dressed in *de rigueur* wine-colored satin tuxedo jacket, drainpipe jeans. A rock medallion daringly used as the pendant to a carelessly flung necklace was found over a qiana faux-silk shirt of DuPont.

The shirt boasted of colorful patterns having extra-wide collars cut tight, and outrageously opens at his tanned chest.

Petulantly I found him dawdle in a blatant manner around the most elegant Miss Wadia, who in turns looked ravishing in a floor-length seductive formal dress. Her dress was in the company of incredibly fine-looking lace from the sensational neckline, having chic sheer illusion mesh...

My heart skipped a beat; automatically tuning itself to My Heart is Beating's next stanza

Oh when I look at you
the blue of heaven seems to be deeper blue
and I can swear that

God himself seems to be looking through

Really the blue of heavens seemed to be deeper blue. Why, in this cold winter night, even though the hall housed a fireplace, I began sweating...?

I was perspiring at the same time as staring at the vase containing a bouquet of flowers; flowers along with foliage, accompanied by dainty Christmas ornaments in a little accent of red, placed upon the mantelpiece. Mantelpiece was where the fire was burning, supplementing to the cozy ambiance of the Victorian era styled Piano Chamber.

Don't know why I was profusely sweating, sensing something amiss in tonight's soiree...?

Panting hard, I hunted for one of the chairs, whose back was fixed by way of colorful ribbons, but there wasn't any space left, I was late. Truly, those who're late, get bones

Sero venientibus ossa

I remembered when foremost time, I'd nervously perched upon a Botanical Ottoman crafted from teak and meranti, upholstered in natural linen, beige in color and which was placed opposite the piano. And how its winsome flowers printed over it, gave it a 3-dimensional appearance, and which could not make me less unsettled...?

...And how I'd studied her absorbedly: she'd looked pretty, very pretty in her Red sari, corner of her *pallu* falling...? I'd also noticed that to prevent the *pallu* sliding off her shoulders, she'd fixed up a golden broach; this piece of jewelry aesthetically worn to pin the top of the *pallu* to her Red blouse at the front of the right shoulder.

I was weepy as I kept glancing at her figure, re-confirming that she was quite young, barely few years elder to me; my roving thoughts abruptly cut

in by Jagan, the Telegu fellow, who'd taken over as the Disc Jockey (DJ). He was sharp enough to feel the mood of the Piano Chamber now converted into a veritable dance floor.

He in a little while started in concert a variety of latest disco numbers by adjusting the music of the Pioneer stereo amplifier, speaker system cassette tape deck. Since it was aligned to a precise variable pitch control device, it helped him to develop better beat matching, and create a seamless transition from one song to another.

It was acceptable after he began by way of Biddu's number...Kung Fu fighting. But little by little, as he switched on to...Love to Love You Baby...one of Donna Summer's diva-esque classics, troubles set in.

Through this genre-defining, ironically a little Rock getting injected into the genre as well, the entire crowd of youngsters got enthused, shaking to the singer's simulated orgasms to their heart's content.

At once, Jagan was prompted to alter to something else, admonished by none other than Mrs. Mehra: "Jagan isn't this too explicit...? Can't you play something upright...? You know this is a school, not a bonafide discotheque...?"

Nevertheless, the Queen of Disco, Donna Summer's hormonal urges had by now infected the youthful crowd, natives scouting for their nearest or palpable dance partners.

Groove on gorgeous

At the same time as Jane started twirling her hips on the disco floor seemingly nibbling at Varun's neck, Mr. Lalu, in his satin tuxedo jacket that was reflecting the disco lights, was taking hold of the slender waist of the stunning Miss Wadia, tonight's dancing diva, the Greek Goddess of Love, Beauty, and Desire, and the Aphrodite...!

Miss Wadia appeared taller than usual, matching steps in her quarter-strap sandal on a beige suede-wrapped cork wedge-heel platform sole, the Kork Ease; no more than Zoccoli of Venice, its Renaissance predecessor...

However, as and when she raised her ankles, there seemed an increased risk of injury in the event of being bent over.

I became concerned of her as I found Mr. Lalu looking indomitable, stopping at his cruel eyes, upbeat through his thin lips, furthermore hurting the fair skin of Miss Wadia's exposed back, even as painstakingly taking the dance steps over the blinking tiles, taking into consideration his prominent limp.

...Same old thought crossed my mind. Was Mr. Lalu an incarnation of Hephaestus, the crippled Greek God of Fire, also of metalworking and crafts, usually depicted by his hammer, tongs and anvil...?

My eyes then turned to find Varun, who was shrugging his shoulders and spinning like a toy that spun around, a whirligig, his arms curled around the sylphlike Jane.

What's more, a twee feeling of elation crossed my mind. Wasn't it the same Jane who'd suffered at the hands of Mr. Lalu, by his customized wooden ruler, the Hammer; and now dancing away to glory with the same Varun who wasn't spared either for his fetish of applying talcum powder by powder puff, over his feminine face...?

Yet, when I watched the bop of these two pairs, of the ladies who affected me, Jane Diaz and Miss Wadia.

I tried to smooth down my nervous tension...Why should I act as the interloper, the person interfering in someone else's affairs; wasn't I too full of self-worth and self-assurance, more than ever when fully clad in my beige suit, color of old money...?

Still, tonight wasn't mine I alleged; I was off-peak, pallid, and couldn't hold back my tears in the beam of light passing through the air produced by a nearby smoke machine.

Smoke that emanated 3D effects through strobe lights was akin to my triple forebodings

...Mr. Lalu unpredictably emerging as the proverbial dance partner to Miss Wadia; Jane Diaz entrenched in Varun's camp or arms, whatever; and lastly as a result, I Banjo, left out in the cold

...in the Blizzard...!

As a final point, Jagan began playing Stayin' Alive, yesterday's number from Saturday Night Fever: the British mods subculture, the source of its characters' fondness for extravagant, custom-made clothing, and complex dance moves, especially the already-famous thustle *a la* John Travolta, duly enacted by Varun and Mr. Lalu in toto

You're Stayin alive...stayin' alive

Feel the city breakin' and everybody shakin'

and we're stayin' alive, stayin' alive

Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin' alive, stayin' alive

Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin' alive

Beyond doubt I believed that in the course of Saturday Night Fever...John Travolta brought about Disco to the masses, and thus created a worldwide phenomenon.

What to say, even though I'd found the movie full of decadence in the form of big bell-bottoms and ever bigger diva egos, John Travolta stood out on his mod dance skills alone, becoming a household name, the movie which could wonderfully showcase aspects of the symphony orchestrated melodies.

No time to cry save for weakened nerves, I withered over the hearthrug beside the fireplace, wherein the surround consisted of the mantelpiece and side supports made of wood; the inert constructed of cast iron now smoldering with logs, and reminiscent of the lode of my heart.

Contrasting me who valued relationships and deeper feelings, Tejwinder Singh eyed every other schoolgirl from among the pack. For him any girl in those sensationally studded belts, decorated by way of metal studs, would do.

No doubt, I'd named him *Cirsium Vulgare*, after the spear thistle, one of the most noxious weeds of the world

However, I became mistrustful as his lecherous eyes settled for Aye Aung. He started ogling at her; one, who was in her effloresce. I wanted to save from harm Aye Aung, so they say my sister, but how...?

Just then I heard someone at the door. With every person busy except for me, I got up to be there. No sooner I'd got up, I reflected, I saw Tejwinder Singh inching closer to Aye Aung more in a hurry.

It was a parcel grasped by a young boy who didn't look like an Indian. I cleared my throat, announcing, "Well guys, it seems the Christmas cake and cookies have arrived...!"

Without more ado, the music closed and Jagan cast off his DJ section comprising elaborate equipments. Lights too altered into something brighter, the smoke machine emanating 3D effects, bunged. I was once again awed at the classiness of the Piano Chamber.

...Wherein the walls were arresting in pale white color with a tinge of violet. The windows painted in white were draped in eye-catching flower-print curtains.

However, the Piano or, Pianoforte, having its origins in Italy, was not found resting in the middle of the hall, but shifted toward one of the French windows. Baby Grand Piano of around 5 feet long was looking gorgeous placed upon Italian tiled floor, prominent in square checks of white and beige...

And at this time, Mr. Lalu, akin to an incarnation of Hephaestus, the crippled Greek God of Fire, continued taking hold of the slender waist of the stunning Miss Wadia, tonight's dancing diva, the Greek Goddess of Love, Beauty, and Desire, and the Aphrodite; indefatigably hurting the fair skin of her exposed back, till he got nudged by her.

I also felt that her left ankle was slightly injured in the event of her bending over to the tune of Stayin' alive... as she certainly wasn't comfortable dancing in her cork wedge-heel platform sole, the Kork Ease.

Deferentially looking at her as if I was on a sort of sedative drug, on barbiturate, My Heart wasn't Beating...it was aching, aching to bend down at her feet and offer her an empathetic reflexology...!

My angel too, Jane Diaz, one who'd presented me with a simple Friendship Band, made up of lac resin, brightly colored and embroidered with lots of glass work, stopped twirling her hips, and disentangled her sensationally studded belt, decorated by means of metal studs from her partner, her beau

Varun's forest green ripped leather jacket, luridly embellished in the company of chains, spikes, studs.

She discontinued nibbling at his neck and scratching the odd coat of pink paint in close proximity to his left shoulder using her extended fingernails, the romanticism which in turns drew signs of perspiration over her glittered makeup, causing her face to burnish even more.

Lovelorn, I inched toward the glass doorway. That boy extended his hand and a warm smile, "*Frohe Weinachten...!*"

"Pardon...!" I couldn't apprehend anything what he was saying.

"*Frohes Fest...Kann ich Fraulein Wadia sprechen...?*" Could I speak to Miss Wadia...?

I stared blankly at him knowing that he was speaking an alien tongue. I turned my back to Miss Wadia. Piano Chamber became quiet as she came forward, slightly limping in her Kork Ease, and the epitome of tonight's spirit. And thus began their uncomplicated conversation

"*Deutsch...?*"

"*Ja...!*"

"*Frohe Weinachten...Treten Sie naher...Bitte nehmen Sie platz...?*" Merry Christmas...Come right in...Please have a seat.

"*Woher kommen Sie...?*" Where are you from...? She tried to confirm as there were other bakeries too, some of them not too authentic.

"Frankfurt Bakery, Pearl Lake..."

"Hmm Frankfurt...!" I could then understand that this boy was a German, Frankfurt on

River Main: a rich metropolis in Hesse, the greenest Federal state, Lander

Miss Wadia, now definite that the boy was from the same place from where she'd ordered the cakes, spoke a little more of German, or *Deutsch*, beckoning him to hang about. However, the boy seemed to be in a hurry; probably he had more deliveries to make, tonight being the gala Christmas night.

As a result she closed the conversation by way of a smile, “*Was kostet das...?*” How much does that cost...?

The boy acquainted her with a sum which I couldn’t comprehend. She took out her purse and made the payment on behalf of the school.

“*Zweihundert...!*” The boy exclaimed big-eyed. Miss Wadia once again smiled at him

“*Er...Der rest ist fur Sie...*”

The boy grinned at the tips, and then bowed to Miss Wadia, “*Interj danke schon, Fraulein Wadia...!*”

Hmm...I liked his address to Miss Wadia, sounding even more romantic in German

Fraulein Wadia

I was stunned that Miss Wadia, sorry *Fraulein* Wadia, could speak such fluent German

But she’d never expressed me of her ability in any of our Piano sessions. And why did she learn German at all, our school was English-medium, similar to several other schools of Kanpur...? O yes, now I remember, she once mentioned me of great German and Austrian musicians, and I guess she wanted to find out more about them.

Anyways, my attention was back to the Christmas party, tonight’s principal theme, especially to the Christmas tree, which once had stood in the guild halls as a repository of gifts, then to the Court of European Princes, then to public places like hospitals and shelters, and then at last celebrated at home; at the moment inside our Piano Chamber...

I admiringly observed the Christmas tree, ensconced in a corner, done with green and rich berry lights, and also at the stunning hand painted Christmas tree balls, reindeers, figurines and miniature dolls, all fairylike. Christmas tree was surrounded by twinkling yellow lights, and I couldn’t help appreciating the many gifts covered in gold wrapper, blue ribbon.

More to the point, Christmas meant overeating, and I too started off with traditional cookies, such as Christmas stars and cinnamon stars, pleasingly served in a tray by Aye Aung.

All the same, the main draw from Frankfurt Bakery was the *Bethmannchen*, the typical Frankfurter cookies, sweet through marzipan, having almonds, powdered sugar, rosewater, flour and eggs.

Interestingly, Jane, the sole Christian scholar among the crowd was overexcited looking at the contents placed over her elegant black and gold cutlery: “Wow, what a piece of art, but in our Goa Catholic dish, we offer something similar: Marzipan replaces almonds with cashew nuts, so famous in our territory. And I think they’ve supplemented some liquor too, maybe orange liquor...”

“But what’s marzipan...?” Varun inquired unknowingly, followed by others. We all started laughing at his greenness and also at ours for we were examining this item for the first time.

Nevertheless, Jane was forthright, “Mom had only informed me this much that in Goa, you see, the coastal territory by the side of Arabian Sea, and formerly a Portuguese Colony, marzipan replaces almonds with cashew nuts...”

...And that’s all, anythin’ else, guysss...?”

We again shared a hearty laugh, almost frenziedly, at her animated detailing, till Fraulein Wadia announced that the entire she knew was that once she’d chanced upon a packet of the *Niederegger* marzipan of Lubeck on a grocery shelf at Pearl Lake. We all became serious as she was one of our teachers who’d entered the solemn discussion on marzipan.

At this instant it was Mrs. Silesia’s turn who asked as to how many kinds of marzipan one could possibly unearth...? Upon hearing Mrs. Silesia, we got edgy, as we all knew how she usually got Lost into the intricacies of any subject matter

...How once she’d got Lost searching for Henry Morton Stanley, the Welsh journalist-turned-explorer, who in turns turned to Central Africa, travelling miles and miles through rapids and falls in search for the Lost Scottish missionary and former explorer, Doctor David Livingstone, who in turns was Lost in searching for the source of the longest river of the world, River Nile, the international river snaking through a dozen countries, which was Lost deep into the continent of Africa...

Thank God, it was Mrs. Mehra who came as an angel to set us free. “Anybody who can sing a solo...?” Now, there ensued a pin drop silence, we all staring at each other’s faces. Those who looked self-assured attracted further glances.

But no one really came forward. However, by way of the intimate boogie getting over for Jane Diaz and *Fraulein* Wadia, I was hassle-free, appearing upbeat. For that reason, it was me who was asked to sing a song. I backed out cleverly stating that who can better Mrs. Mehra, one with a nightingale voice...?

In next to no time the entire crowd began cheering for her, and finally she yielded in her mellifluous voice, microphone in hand

Yeh raatein nayee puranee

aatey...aatey jaatey

kehtee hain koi kahaani

Aa rahaa hai dekho koi

jaa rahaa hai dekho koi

Sabkey dil hain jaagey jaagey

sabkii aankhein khoyee khoyee

Khaamoshi kartee hai baatein

Much to my incredulity, this club song, again from the film...Julie brought the twosomes together, as though in a rewind

...Even as Jane re-started twirling her hips on the Disco floor seemingly nibbling at Varun’s neck, Mr. Lalu, in his satin tuxedo jacket that was reflecting the disco lights, was once again taking hold of the slender waist of the stunning Miss Wadia, tonight’s dancing diva, the Greek Goddess of Love, Beauty, and Desire, and the Aphrodite...!

Despite the overwhelming wave of emotions, I knew there was no time to indulge in self pity or tears. My nerves were fragile, and everything felt like it was crumbling around me, but at that moment, I made a quiet, yet firm decision: I would not allow myself to simply collapse, to fall upon the hearthrug and give up.

Instead of succumbing to the weight of my doubts, I resolved that the only thing I would quit was the Piano Chamber, where I had felt the sting of disappointments.

I wasn't ready to give up on myself completely; I just needed a change of pace, a way to reclaim some semblance of control over the situation. I can heal, I assured me. While painful temporarily, it was the only way to stop the hurt.

Alas...My *Dil was not jaagey jaagey*, but unquestionably, my *aankhein was khoyii khoyii*...

...and without informing anybody, I the pipsqueak, quietly slipped out into the fresh air, picking up my Raleigh Chopper bicycle of England; Raleigh Chopper bicycle of England, based on the look of dragsters from the 1960s.

Yes I thought, perhaps Stayin' alone could enable me Stayin' alive

Chapter 28

Alpona

Cold War had begun

Cold War had categorically broken up between Grant kaka and Dad, the reason of course being the asinine Interest issue, which was believed to have accumulated over grandpa's Capital, the carve up which was again not supposed to have been credited by Dad into Grant kaka's account.

Grant kaka, sticking to his hypothetical theory, had become wry in answering to Dad's habitual phone calls and letters

...Why, the rate of interest used to be a measly 4 percent in and around 1957...Whereas, as you know in past 2 decades, it has surged to 9 percent, forecast to escalate even further...?"

And Sahani uncle, the point-man in resolving his Interest claims was not to be bested. He was quick with his negation.

He'd cannily sent Grant kaka a letter demolishing above facts, elucidating that interest rates had not directly leaped from 4 percent to 9 percent, rather amplified by time. For example, the Interest rates were 4.5 percent in 1963, 5 percent in 1964, and 6 percent in 1965, so on and so forth.

I knew that similar to the Cold War between Union of Soviet Socialist Republics USSR and United States of America USA ever since the end of World War II, it would be countries like India who would be sufferers.

And I wasn't the suave Prime Minister Morarji Desai or the original thinker Atal Bihari Vajpayee, our External Affairs Minister, who could manage to host Jimmy Carter in Delhi, making him the 1st US President to make an official visit to our country, convincing him of our genuine Non-Aligned stance.

It was noteworthy that this was despite the fact that USA had strongly opposed our nation, when we had propped up the cause of East Pakistan and its subsequent liberation into Bangladesh, in 1971. And Dad, sitting in his study, notwithstanding his Cold War with Grant kaka, was surely upbeat over this international development.

Wiping his mustache by way of sweep of his right hand forefinger, “Om Prakash, now that the deal has been struck with USA to expand cooperation in science and technology, I think very soon, I would be taking up agencies of American companies as well...”

“And then this would be the 3rd country after UK and Italy with whom our enterprise would be conducting business...” Sahani uncle loyally seconded. “Besides, you know, we’ve enough cash in our way...!”

Dad got genuinely pleased by Sahani uncle’s heartening words and pronounced that his bonus was due; not only his, but that of the entire staff’s. After that he smiled at him thus engaging in an affable discussion: “Now, if you sanction me, can I get Anupriya Villa re-painted; can you produce substantial drawings from my account...?”

“Oh sure, Bharat da, you can even host a small gathering on the auspicious *Akshaya Tritiya* day, declaring the new appearance...”

“Okay done, but this time remember you are to bring your entire family and not fall sick the pen-ultimate day...Hahaha...”

“Certainly and one more thing, if you could allow us Sindhis to set up a little stall outside the gate across the curb to serve refreshments to passer-by’s. As you know it’s our festival *Akhan Teej* as well...”

“Oh yes, why not Sahani, it would be my pleasures...!”

“*Vadi Sai, Jhuleylal...! Bera - hee Paar...!*” Sahani uncle thus signed off by way of his regular idiolect.

However, in the middle of such regular political, business or cultural developments, my life had become more of drudgery, devoid of any genuine friendship, or love. Mandatory fasts, *vratas*, during the days of *ekadasi*, for full one year after my *Upanayan* Ceremony, had also made me somewhat grave. And now, yet another couple of ceremonies...!

Post Christmas party at the Piano Chamber, I’d suddenly matured a bit, and a period of more than a year hence, life had somewhat even out. I’d taken for granted that Bobby Mohan having eyes like the ocean was nowhere in my life; the sylphlike Jane Diaz and the Aphrodite-like *Fraulein* Wadia too, unshakable in the hearts, and in the arms of Varun and Mr. Lalu in that order. I became wistful, thinking of them...

My eyes turned moist at the thought of Bobby Mohan, recalling one of the earliest shocks of my life, duly delivered by Mrs. Dass, on the first day of Class 7

“I’m your new Class teacher, Mrs. Dass...” she’d declared in a heavy Bengali accent, where Teacher sounded more like Tee-chaar...2 of our old students...Farhan and Bobby have quit...”

I remembered how much the shock was unprecedented, unbearable. I’d missed my boyish breath. It was as if I was visualizing stars, my world vanishing beneath my two feet. With no Bobby’s warmth in class, I’d trembled...

And Jane: the leftovers of our relationship steadfastly remaining a Friendship Band, made up of lac resin, brightly colored and embroidered by way of lots of glass work, which I often took out of the Fragile drawer of my study table to fondle it amid lots of adoration, gripe...!

All those unpleasant incidents flashed in front of my eyes, behind which Jane distanced from me

...First, I’d snatched away the napkin from her bangled hands and had started chafing it at the fabric over her soft breast, in a chaotic bid to eliminate those glaring tell-tale stains of the Christmas cake from her checkered shirt, my unfathomable transgressions.

Next, after the brawl episode vis-à-vis Tejwinder, it was Varun who’d spilled the beans of my machismo to the class, and it was Jane who did not appreciate, and since then Varun had become her confidante.

Again, while searching for Easter Eggs at Jane’s place, underneath her parent’s bed, how in the dark I’d accidentally groped something which was soft and which shrieked. I never knew it was Jane, who must’ve entered her 3rd stage of puberty.

And last, how Varun had artistically concluded his spectacular performance of Anthony Gonsalves by handing over the artificial Rose to Jane, and who, like the glamorized actress Parveen Babi of the film, had accepted it with a shy and sweet smile.

I became quite disconcerted by Jane's rebuffs which had turned me into a thingummy, a thingamajig, a thingamabob, as at this moment my nomadic mind and heart wandered over to *Fraulein* Wadia, and our first meeting.

"Hello, I'm your Music teacher Miss Wadia, I teach Piano. And if you like you can come over to my Music class tomorrow during interval..." she'd added.

And then how true, Miss Wadia and I ideally shared so many similarities, first being our love for piano, the next for things artistic...? And how one day Miss Wadia had scolded me shoddily for not picking up the Notes quick, the very next day she coaxed me with the brush of her soft palm over my juvenile cheek, followed by these inspiring words...

"C'mon Banjo, remember you've got a musical name. It would be a shame if you don't pick up the Notes...!"

But then no, I was born thick I guessed; rather a non-artiste who neither could dance nor could play the piano, and the desirability of these two young ladies was for guys possessing artistic aptitudes.

Then, what about Bobby Mohan...? Would she have rejected me too...?

I pondered, and then decided, no, she wouldn't have cast me off, for she'd kissed me once

"O my Banjo, you are soooo chweet...!"

...How Bobby had sputtered spontaneously, blinked thrice her eyes, eyes like the ocean, bent forward and kissed me over my left cheek with such a smooch that it'd resonated within the ducts of my Universe; Universe, which the Nobel Laureate Albert Einstein had once described as Finite, but Unbound...

Ah kisses

Well, how much I longed for an endearing kiss...?

During utter lonesomeness, all I was bestowed was a palliative, and one that easily came into sight was Rajshree's Greeting Card in handmade paper of Sanganer, the suburban craft hub of Jaipur.

Objet d'art carried on its inside page at the midpoint her bold lipstick stain in red, the panegyric Sweetu-Cutuu scribbled in a camber, in addition to a trendy Rajshree signed in Lucida handwriting at the base.

Imagining them to be her bonafide playful pout, luscious all over, I quite often smooched directly onto her supposedly Coco rouge red lipstick stain of Chanel, mark by mark. Thus by now, probably sucked all the sundry ingredients of the lipstick, cocoa butter included...!

In my relationships, it was as though I was lamely sitting upon a ducking stool, a chair on the end of a pole, in which I was the reprobate, the no-good; systematically getting plunged into deep waters of chastisement.

Were they chastisement that I really deserved, a comeuppance...?

Nonetheless, after such feral wrapping up, I couldn't help returning back to my restrained spirits, my authentic disposition. I was somehow developing nimbleness to come back to self, without which not a thing was absolutely necessary, a *sine qua non*.

However reaching its fruition, I'd to brave Blizzards unlimited

~

Akshay Tritiya / Akhan Teej day

I was ready early morning when Dad greeted me through the classy up-to-the-minute Italian intercom, fluorescent in color, and asked whether I was acquainted with any visual artist who could mark *alpona* inside our shrine:

"Banjo, on every auspicious occasion, your Mom used to draw a beauteous floor design, an *alpona*, but now I find nobody doing the needful, the *Puja ghar* looking somewhat barren. Er do you know someone...?"

I was concerned upon hearing Dad's woes, sensing the quiet emptiness in his voice that reflected more than just the absence of an *alpona*

True that quite often he missed Mom, especially during vital events, festivals. And *Akshay Tritiya* was one of the imperative ones for which he'd employed host of natives to declutter Anupriya Villa, get it cleaned and painted.

...All old magazines, useless knick-knacks were off, even some of reading materials from his private study, *studio privato* in Italian. After the dusting and painting, the entire house was mopped by damp rags and then wiped with soft cloth.

What's more, Draupadi showed her ingenuity when she advised the cleaners to use old newspapers to clean all window panes, mirrors and glass articles. Thus they did not leave any messy streaks, she validated.

“Wow, that’s bright of Draupadi...!” We all remarked in appreciation.

It was Dad who was in two minds getting the varnish done, but grandpa with big mustaches insisted, as he was quite possessive of the antique Burma teak woodwork.

And when it came to the electrical, Draupadi candidly suggested that they should be meticulously washed by way of buckets full of water and then scrubbed clean with Surf detergent powder, especially the ceiling fans, chandeliers and air-conditioners.

We all yelped at the same time

Dad: “Draupadi are you crazy...?”

DK: “Have you gone nuts, Draupadi...?”

Karuna di: “Draupadi, your Rajesh Khanna obsession would one day not only put this house out of gear, but land you up in some big trouble...”

Grinning, I was the last one to comment, “Draupadi, I think Rajesh Khanna would love to engage you as his domestic help...!” This made the whole house laugh, and once again we got busy amid our different departments, leaving Draupadi peevisish as to what off-beam she’d recommended...?

Close guests including Doctor Tripathi uncle, Doctor Tripathi aunt, Pushpa masi and her same self-conscious son Shivhari came along. While Doctor Tripathi uncle greeted me, addressing me as Kt. Kirti, and then closing himself with Dad in his study, Doctor Tripathi aunt and Pushpa masi started their usual *tête-à-tête*, and discussing Mom as well.

Pushpa masi: “Whenever I come to this abode, I start missing Anupriya Bhabi so badly...!”

Pushpa masi agreed. “Well, how can I ever forget her art, especially now that Bharat da has so elaborately got Anupriya Villa re-painted...? Believe me, but my Doctor husband tells me time and again that one day his *Bulla Dada* is going to consecrate this abode...!” Doctor Tripathi aunt thus concluded.

It was said that *Bulla Dada*, with His cryptic ways and enigmatic blessings, would one day sanctify Anupriya Villa, transforming it into something beyond mere bricks and mortar, but into a sacred space of eternal peace, harmony, and shelter.

Their mournful conversation, bits and pieces which I could have the sense of hearing, followed by Doctor Tripathi uncle’s prediction, moved me. I got carried away to some faraway horizon, and wondered who this *Bulla Dada* was, till I heard the distinct horn of Sahani uncle’s car.

I rushed outside to the porch, Shivhari trailing behind me. As I opened the rear door a boy hopped out. Imitating me, Shivhari scrambled to open the rear door, the opposite side. I found him helping a young woman whose long black hair was observable from my end. Another boy hastily got down from the front door and last of all Sahani uncle, from the wheels.

I promptly shook hands with Mika and Honey, and as I walked over to Chitra who was thanking Shivhari for the courtesies, she gently looked up at me and articulated a too quiet Hello.

However when she’d looked up at me, my world quavered

Chitra was a doe-eyed beauty dressed up in a pristine white *salwar suit* and a fuzzy sky blue *dupatta* gracefully done up over her top. As her father and brothers noticeably spread around her, I decided not to look intently at her, although my heart pranced a million beats...

Nonetheless, the gawking part, I think I’d left over for Shivhari, who thought a Goddess had just thanked him for opening the rear door of the car, the Black Fiat 1100 D, Italian but Indian, debuted in 1964.

More to the point, I wanted to express my heartfelt feelings to Chitra for her natural beauty, her loveliness. My lips sealed, it was Shivhari who promptly did the honors...“Youuu aal chho beautifuuuul...”

...*Atii chhundar...!*"

Chitra blushed, a tinge of cherry appearing upon her fair and bubbly cheeks. I noticed that she was of shorter height too, harmonizing with mine. Another time, when Chitra adjusted her fuzzy *dupatta* over her girlish curves, I deliberated that one day I surely would like to make her my consort.

She was quite a wife material, I decided

Once again, it was Shivhari who did the proposing: "Cheethra, will youuu maally mee...?"

Hearing out Shivhari, plus getting a prompt indication from Sahani uncle that there was something wide off the mark, Chitra broke into giggles. "Er yes...!"

I sensed it was time for little breather as I could as a final point figure out that Shivhari was bit less developed mentally than was usual for his age, and that she was just trying to be genial to him.

Despite the fact that it was cent percent true that I was rueful for Shivhari, he being Pushpa masi's lone son, I felt a bit weedy at the same time: Chitra's yes to him reverberating within my wishy-washy psyche, a psyche vilely distorted by a feeling of abandonment in matters of the heart...

While I led them through the somber grey stair hall into the lounge, Mika blurted out, "Wow, what a massive mansion...?"

Honey: "Sure it is - how many people stay in it...?"

Only after Chitra disapprovingly stared at them that they fell silent for few moments. Very soon Dad emerged from his private study, *studio privato* in Italian, along with Doctor Tripathi uncle, finishing off his usual anecdotes, by and large, of his joyful days in the company of Mom.

Dad straight off came to the brood and looked at each one of them. Sahani uncle for a second time did the introductions. While Mika and Honey, ceremoniously dressed up in garish jeans-*kurta*, went ahead to shake hands with Dad, Chitra articulated a mild curtsy.

"Oh my...! Om Prakash, you've such lovely kids, I think I'm seeing them after ages. Hmm, please children make you at ease..."

Ladies too rapidly emerged from the kitchen one by one. Pushpa masi, at last taking off her two-tone Fendi sunglasses, hugged Chitra. “What a beauty you’ve in this lass, Sahani ji, and where’s her Mom...?”

Everybody echoed her sentiments: “Where’s her Mom...Where’s her Mom...?”

“Well, today being *Akhan Teej*, she’s having some guests from the neighborhood, Sindhi Enclave...” Sahani uncle replied as a matter of fact, to which Mika intercepted, and Honey seconded

“And that’s why she’d gone to visit Lily, the Chinese Beauty Parlor the first thing in the morning. She’s got to remove her excess hair, especially from the follicle of her eyebrows, and that’s what she explained Dad while taking a lot of money from him...”

Entire pack burst into a rip-roaring laughter, making Sahani uncle squirm, and grumble

“Vadi Sai, Jhuleylal...! Bera - hee Paar...!”

In a bid to disperse his outspoken sons from the vista, before they caused him further discomfiture, he suggested, “Mika...Honey...Listen why don’t you go out to attend the stall that has been set outside, I’ll follow you sometime later...”

“I’ll alchho leave for the ichhtoll...” Shivhari sounded excited.

Karuna di shouted after them, “Hold on guys, have a little food and drinks first...” However, by now those three boys were ready to run off.

In the wake of it, Mika shouted that earthen pots for water, and canisters, were by now set up to serve *sherbats* of Rooh Afza to the passer-by’s. They too would be savoring the *unani* cooling drink of Hamdard’s, richly filled with what not...Herbs, fruits, vegetables, flowers, and even roots, including vetiver, or *khus*.

Watching their exhilaration, Dad asked over Karuna di not to restrain them. In next to no time he was in for a surprise when Honey broke into a *Sufi* number, accompanied by Mika, and that too in full throttle.

I vaguely glanced at Chitra, who even though was amused by her kid brothers’ enthusiasm, was in no frame of mind going out into the sunlight. In consequence, as she proceeded towards our dining hall, our *sala da cena*

in Italian, I hurriedly pulled out a Pimpinella chair for her. She vaguely smiled.

...And before anybody else could've found a place beside her, I swiftly occupied the next seat

Above and beyond, I observed that since she'd arrived, she hadn't voiced a single word to me...! Perhaps she'd sensed that I was trying to grab her attention. Whilst elders began initiating their mix of familial and festive chitchat, I turned towards Chitra, and, expressively looking into her doe-like eyes, broke the hush, "Hi, I'm Banjo...!"

"Banjo, a droll name indeed...!"

I flushed at her repartee. "Then I must say, my folks had thought of funnier names...?"

"And what are those, Baaanjooo...?" She queried resting her fingers over her chin, and still smiling, however, providentially looking at me with attentiveness, in all probability for the foremost time. I paused for quite some time, abstracted by her eye-catching fingernails, articulating

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After that, coming back to right mind, I broke into a rapid-fire

"Why, Vivek, Gaplu, Bond, Kt. Kirti, Dhruva, and 8-1/2...!"

"What, 8-1/2...?"

She got startled at the same time as savoring a variety of juiciest *dasheri* mangoes, the King of Mangoes, from Malihabad near Lucknow.

I grinned and explained that 8-1/2 was endowed by Vedanta mama, my plucky maternal uncle, and "...sounding twopenny-halfpenny, out of my 8-1/2 pound weight, was created out of his adoration for Federico Fellini, one of his favorite Film Directors of Italian Neo-Realism fame..."

"Italian Neo-Realism...?"

Later than that, I took as much as necessary time to elaborate how Vedanta mama was an aficionado of Italian Neo-Realism, *neorealismo* in Italian, belonging to The Other Hollywood genre of films, and during my birth, how he'd explained about *Otto e mezzo* in Italian, or simply 8-1/2, an *avant-garde* film, released in Italy the previous year...!

Chitra nodded satisfactorily to my detailing, at the same time as taking pleasure in sipping by the use of a tall glass, *meethi lassi*, the sweetened and diluted yogurt drink, sprinkled by means of authentic *gulab jal*, rosewater of nearby Kannauj...

...And maybe from the same perfumer where Pundit Sudhanshu acquired his endless collection of the sweet-smelling *attar*. "Okay, finally got it, it sounds interesting, and you know, I love Italy, its art and architecture...!"

"Me too...!" I agreed. "Dad wants me to go to Italy for higher studies..."

"Wow 8-1/2...!" She smiled good-naturedly while engaging herself aromatically to the garnishing of the exclusive saffron in the *meethi lassi*; the saffron-colored saffron imported all the way from Kashmir.

Now it was her turn to giggle, but she all of a sudden became somber upon hearing my Dad

"Folks, I'm honored that you all have appreciated the makeover of Anupriya Villa. Everybody worked hard, but one thing I surely miss is the stunning *alpona* that Banjo's Mom made it a point to draw on *Akshay Tritiya*. And how she resolutely used to reckon in its auspiciousness...?"

Chitra at once looked up to Dad, and then at Sahani uncle who likes a flash seemed to fix his eyes to another place. Again she tried to draw Sahani uncle's attention, but he continued to sit soundless displaying some faraway look. I intervened as I saw him covered with sweat, "Sahani uncle, are you okay...?"

"Why thanks Banjo, I'm good...?" I sensed something amiss. But by then Chitra had spoken up understandingly, "Kumarr uncle, if you kindly allow me, can I give it a try...?"

Nattering inside the dining hall, *sala da cena* in Italian, ceased, Dad addressing Sahani uncle almost exasperatingly, and "Om Prakash, my friend, you never told your pretty daughter is a visual artist too, and I've been inquiring for one since days...?"

Turning towards Chitra, he just about implored her by way of pleading eyes, now moist, “Yes my child, you may please go ahead...”

Subsequently looking at each one of us, Dad: “Will someone direct her to our *Puja ghar*...?”

I could watch that both Dad and Sahani uncle were experiencing emotional surges over Chitra’s volunteering. It seemed she’d unburdened bottomless feelings from the alcove of their hearts. Even if I could unmistakably draw inference Dad’s oft-repeated sentiments, I still couldn’t have a handle on why Chitra’s making an *alpona* could stir Sahani uncle...?

Sure it was indubitably a cause for celebration and there certainly wasn’t one single lady alone to direct Chitra to our *Puja ghar*, located as per traditional Indian architecture parameters, *Vaastu kala*, by my grandpa Gajanan Damodar, an expert architect, on the supposedly divine and auspicious *ishaan* corner, the northeast of our villa; but each and every one...

...Every one single lady including Pushpa masi, Doctor Tripathi aunt, Karuna di, and Draupadi accompanied the adolescent Chitra, who looked divine dressed up in a pristine white *salwar suit*, inside our good old-fashioned *Puja ghar*, painted in matching pristine white.

I curiously followed them and all at once became cognizant that Chitra’s very stepping inside the *Puja ghar* emitted a sort of a current, making the place alive and breathing all over again. Wasn’t it akin to forsaken temple bells once again finding its right to be heard...?

Chitra put down the lid of her doe-like eyes and lowered herself briefly by bending her one knee to the ground in an act of genuflection before our patron deity *Lakshmi-Narayana*. Pin drop silence ensued till she turned back and asked for the art materials.

Clueless, we all stared at each other. As a final point, Karuna di recommended: “Chitra, dear you may please open the lower drawers of the cabinet lying at the wall on the south, and find for you the materials...”

Chitra rummaged through the drawers and discovered some used rice-powder, some diluted rice-parts, and different powdered colors, all prepared out of dried leaves, indigo, and turmeric, besides charcoal and vermilion.

Inoffensively, she inquired, “Vermilion, who’s is it...?”

“Oh it belonged to Banjo’s Mom...” Karuna di replied almost inaudibly.

Chitra was bit poignant as she carefully opened the *sindoor dabbi* to check the measure. She then asked for some more rice-powder. However upon chancing sawdust lying in a corner, she got contented. This sawdust must’ve been forgotten by the cleaners in the recent house cleaning.

Almost immediately she turned towards us and supplicated, “I’m just a wannabe artist therefore I’ll call for chalks to prepare the outline...”

With a determined glint in her eye, she added, “But rest assured, I’ll give it my best, channeling all the grace I can muster, even if I’m still learning the ropes of this art...”

“Wait, just a moment...!” I rushed to my room and fetched her chalks of different colors.

“Thank you Banjo. Er do you want me to draw a peacock...?”

One and all gave a big nod of approval; including me, save for Karuna di and Draupadi who excused themselves to disappear into the kitchen to tend to household chores, preparing meals, etc.

Bending frontward, aided by the cheerful, happy and enthusiastic yellow light glowing from a papier-mâché lamp shade placed at the eastern corner of the shrine, she in a little while imaginatively drew a peacock on the floor space, in between the patron deity and the doorway.

Chitra then used the rice-powder and some diluted rice-parts to give clearer shape to various motifs she’d designed, especially the fan-like crest of feathers. I quizzed, deriving curiosity. “Chitra, what are these for...?”

“Well, these motifs are supposed to be holy and auspicious signs, which are to be drawn in unbroken lines sparing no gaps in between. It is said that a broken line gives an opportunity to the evil spirits gain entry inside the home...”

“Is it...?”

“True...”

Response was from none other than Sahani uncle who I saw was standing barefoot at the threshold of the engraved teak doorway facing north. His mind, spellbound by Chitra’s elucidation, was in a whirr

“Oh Bhabi, I find you such a great artist; how I wish my little baby Chitra grow up into one...?”

“She sure wills Sahani ji; you may introduce to her the earliest Indian treatise on traditional painting, wherein the 6 canons or *Shadanga* have been interpreted in the light of aesthetics. I would like to elaborate them as

Rupbheda or variety of form, *Pramanam* or proportion of the object or form, *Sadrisiyam* or similitude via portrayal of likeliness of the subject, *Bhava* the action of feelings on forms, *Lavanya-yoganam* by infusion of grace and emotions, and lastly *Varnikabhanga* which teaches artistic manner of using brush and colors to remind one of the effects of replica...

...And of course my blessings are at all times with her...!”

“Thanks a lot, Bhabi ji, she’s all yours and I mean it....!”

Sahani uncle silently thanked Mom to have once blessed Chitra, who in turns proceeded to fill powdered blue to the fan-shaped crest over the head of the peacock, and charcoal for its feathers, tipping it with bluish-green webbing.

Afterward, even as Chitra delicately prepared a white stripe above the eye and a crescent shaped white patch below it, Sahani uncle recalled his early on dialogue with Mom

“Bhabi ji, I want to have a word with you, it’s regarding Banjo and Chitra...!”

In due course the peacock started taking shape; sides of the head now in iridescent greenish-blue feathers, the scapular in buff, and primaries in vermilion. I inquisitively edged forward to take a better look at the artist, the fair and doe-eyed Chitra, at the same time as Mom’s encouraging words resonated inside Sahani uncle’s brains

“I’ve met Chitra; she is very sweet just like a doll, doe-eyed and fair...!”

Peacock’s tail, best known for its long train of elongated feathers, counting a score or so, bearing colorful and elaborate eyespots, was now marked in tanned by the handy sawdust.

I wondered that weren't these the very same stiff feathers which when raised into a fan, quiver in a display during courtship...? Subsequently, I remembered that wasn't it breathtaking enough to watch such dancing peacocks at *Vanaprastha*, Swami Nepalanda's *ashram* at Bithoor...?

I went into a sort of stupor, though Sahani uncle's feelings remained standstill *vis-à-vis* conversation with Mom in yonder past

“...If you don't mind my impudence, and with Goddess Lakshmi as the witness, may I offer her hand for your son, Banjo...?”

“Sahani ji, I'm very fond of your beautiful daughter and would love to see her in this house, but you see reality is different...For the times they are a-changin'...Only God knows what'll come to pass to these youngsters when they grow up. And whether they at all keep our word after a period of 14-15 long years is a million-dollar question...”

Finishing touches stay put

Very soon Dad ventured in and was zapped visualizing Chitra's art. Like me, he too went into raptures, and further requesting, “Chitra, I want that you put forward your ideas about what to do next in Anupriya Villa, I mean the quarters, the basement...!”

Her reply was in affirmative whilst Sahani uncle became nostalgic, yet recalling his words of yore

“...But Bhabi ji, your word is Law. Even Bharat da doesn't negate you; he says that you are an epitome of *Maa Lakshmi*. And I'm sure Banjo will honor your decision after 14-15 years...!”

Sahani uncle couldn't stretch out any longer in the shrine as Mom's words together by her tears trickling down her cheeks flashed into his consciousness.

“Only *Maa Lakshmi* knows what's in destiny of this family 14-15 years hence, hitherto, my own future, my very existence, is in dubiety and near impossibility...”

At the moment too, on the doubly propitious occurrence of *Akshay Tritiya* and *Akhan Teej*, Sahani uncle's movements were to some extent similar to yon...

...Eyes transfixed eastwards towards the Deity of Prosperity *Maa Lakshmi*, its symbol the Lotus flower, then moving towards the auspicious *alpona* of the peacock, and finally upon Chitra, its creator, he turned around and vanished, forgetting even to put on his shoes.

As soon as outside the gate of Anupriya Villa, far afield from where his sons had set up the stall to provide refreshments to passer-by's, he faced towards the direction of the holy shrine of Sehwan in Sindh, and solemnly remembered how once he'd feverishly prayed

"Let my Bhabi survive, grant her little more life, please...!"

Regrettably, the obdurate Laws of Nature were hard of hearing to his fervent pleas

Yet again, stirred, he started sobbing child-like, further convincing himself that it was Chitra his adorable daughter, who must enter his Bhabi's shoes...

Sans his shoes, at the handsome pillar-gate, solemnly touching the slate rock name plate, its carved letterings raised and in ivory color, titled Anupriya Villa, Sahani uncle vowed to live and die for such hallowed name; the *Sufi* song mystically entering his ear holes, through the amp...

Ho laal meri pat rakhiyo belaa jhule lalan

Sindhri da sewarr da

Sakhi shabaaz kalandar

Dama dam mast kalandar

Ali da pehla number...

Chapter 29

Gondola

Chitra, sitting by the aisle, appeared chic in a mid-length ruby pink sleeveless tunic over a *churidaar*, gaping at Amitabh Bachchan in the film...The Great Gambler

I was perhaps the most bothered fellow in the entire hall seated next to Mika, who was dressed up in his usual attire of garish jeans-*kurta*. On my right sat a fat fellow actively munching his popcorn. I think God tried to put in the picture, tonight, “These far only, not any further, please Banjo...!”

On the eventful day of *Akshay Tritiya* and *Akhan Teej*, I thought I’d won the fixture by getting Chitra’s acceptance for a movie date. Dad and Sahani uncle bore no objections imagining it was mere kids’ affair.

And literally it was

I’d to tag along authentic kids, Honey and Mika, the two younger brothers of Chitra. But then, how could I ever think that Chitra would go out all alone with me...? After all, we lived in the orient and not in the occident, and where prior to marriage, girls seldom went out with boys. Even so it might ensue once the relationship was getting-on or they were officially declared, engaged.

Poor me

All that was left as a movie date was sitting next to Honey and that popcorn-munching fat man, abominable, who all of a sudden became abhorrent to me. No matter how hard I tried to glance sideways at the beauty of Chitra during the first half of the film, it was easier said than done, owing to 2 persons sitting in between us, Mika and Honey.

As a result, I was hardly watching this action thriller, a story based on international gangster, spies and secret agents of different countries’ intelligence agencies and their undercover operations.

But then, I had to pay attention as a bewildered Mika went on tossing questions at me as regards the mix-up created by Amitabh Bachchan, in his

double role, one playing an expert gambler and the other a police inspector, Jai and Vijay in that order.

Though I intended to lose myself into the eyes of the doe-eyed Chitra, I was in fact lost into the exotic locales of the Mediterranean. While Mika continued to throw question after question, believing I've visited these places, Honey, sitting next to him got worked up. "Mika this is not fair, you're effortlessly getting all facts and figures from Banjo, while here, and Chitra is not even chatting to me..."

...I can't comprehend whatever thing on this silver screen...I wanna go home..."

I thought this could be a break for me, but by then it was intermission. We all got up from our seats and sauntered to the canteen fellow. But where was Chitra, I wondered...? I asked Honey, to which he replied. "I think she's gone to the powder room..." He added, "I also want to go..."

Mika cut in, "Where, the powder room...?" To which Honey replied, "Shut up...!"

While Mika went ahead to order for the snacks, including vegetable patties; Honey and I went to the gents' restroom. Opening our zips and easing ourselves at the urinals, which were separated by a thick marble plate, I coaxed Honey. "Listen Honey, can you identify with this film...?"

"No Banjo..." He straightforwardly answered.

Out popped my next question. "Is Chitra able to follow this movie...?"

"Banjo, I'm not sure..." He replied. I then tried to pursue him to allow me to sit in his place so that I could explain him the film. Gladly he Okayed.

Therefore, post intermission, I coolly sauntered in and sat beside Chitra, who was quite bemused to see me next to her. Yet, before she could utter anything, the movie began, screening few overwrought scenes on the cosmopolitan journey over the celluloid, the audience watching amid bated breath.

In a trice, I heard Honey complaining, "Banjo, isn't this unfair, you asked me to switch over seats so that you could explain facts to me, but look, I'm not sitting next to you, am I...?"

Chitra broke into compulsive giggles at Honey's harried response, questioningly staring at me. Face flushed and finding no words in between, I helplessly looked into this doe-eyed beauty. Alas, no sooner had I begun to feel her intimacy did this disruption arise.

And did I have any choice...?

Certainly not

Consequently, I'd to now request Mika to switch places with the belligerent Honey, but he did not relent. He insisted that I continue to sit next to him, whether to his left or to his right.

Sulkily looking at Chitra, who was almost in splits watching this Greek tragedy unfold, I most reluctantly got up and suggested Mika to shift to my seat. In the end, I was found sitting sandwiched in between the two brothers, Mika and Honey, much to their contentment.

Out of the blue Honey and Mika barked, "Look what a wonderful boat...!"

Disconsolate by now, bit by bit, I went on to explain that it wasn't an ordinary boat, it was a Gondola. The utterance sounded so comical to them that they started chanting Gondola...Gondola...

... And much to the nuisance of the audience sitting behind... I asked them to shut up and allow me to concentrate upon the song...*Amore mio*...pictured upon the suave Amitabh Bachchan, and voguish Zeenat Aman in a flowery off-shoulder dress.

Finally and much to my breather, Chitra softly spoke up, "Banjo isn't this Venice, located in northeastern part of Italy...?"

I craned my neck towards her, requesting Mika to bend his head bit lower so that I answer his sister. In some way he approved. In consequence, his head bent down, I started talking about the Grand Canal of Venice and how it was supposed to be a Renaissance period architecture.

In this instance, Chitra corrected me and engaged me by means of its precise attributes: "Banjo, during 13th to 18th centuries, the Noble Venetian families wanted to show off their richness in suitable palazzos, and hence, such massive constructions along the Canal..."

Frankly speaking, I'd no idea about such phenomenal ins and outs. As a result, without any interruptions from my side, she without a flaw,

sustained, “At the start, the styles were primarily Venetian Byzantine, later altering into typical Venetian Gothic, something which was yet more flamboyant by way of open marble fascias, often referred to as laces; it was only after subsequent years that Renaissance came around...”

“Oh my God, Chitra, you happen to be acquainted with so much, and I kept thinking that whatever thing connected to Italian architecture had to be Renaissance...?”

Impassive by my accolade, though letting out a silly laugh, in addition Mika still obediently bending his head down, she continued her civilizing explications

“Renaissance architecture by the start of the 15th century paved way to Venetian Baroque styles, as you can well spot in few of these buildings, in its fashioned cornices, broken pediments, and ornamental motifs...”

Mika, straining his head for a sustained period, in so doing breaching his endurance as well as his charity edge, got aggravated, and insisted that we cut off our artsy talks. “Have we come to watch a film or thrash out art and architecture...?”

Chitra grinned and logged off.

No sooner she’d logged off, Mika straightened himself by way of a “Whew...!” And I was back to my usual role as an interpreter to both Mika and Honey. I sighed, recalling the display of the purple *dupatta* over Chitra’s pink tunic. How stunning she appeared...?

I think I must marry her one day

After the movie got over, I found Sahani uncle waiting at the exit to pick us up. “So children, did you take pleasure in the film...?”

We all nodded our heads. Almost immediately, Honey, who went on to hug his Dad, grumbled, “But Dad, Banjo wanted to keep away from us and sit only next to Chitra...!”

Chitra and I were highly discomfited, and she tried to cover up: “True Dad, Banjo wanted to be familiar with Venice and its architecture; I was elucidating him about its steady development...”

“That’s appreciable Chitra; and if Banjo pays attention, you must provide him all fine points that you’re acquainted with...! What’s more, his Dad wants to send him to Italy for higher studies...”

Chitra was rueful at her Dad’s remarks

“Dad, I also want to go to Italy and research all about Italian art and architecture, especially Renaissance, and how it led to the revival of classical art, literature, and intellectual thought in Western Civilization...!”

Sahani uncle’s auditory senses heard a line that was a bomb blast, and nearly missed hitting a poor *rickshawala* at Company Bagh *chauraha*. “I and sending my daughter to Italy, that’ll sure cost me a fortune...”

Still, he laughed when I assured Chitra, craning my neck at the back. “Don’t you worry Chitra; I’ve got a sufficient amount, including an FDR of Rs. 10,000/- gifted by your Dad. I think it’ll be as much as necessary to fly you to Italy...!”

Sahani uncle laughed, and laughed quite optimistically, watching our early bonhomie. By then, Mika and Honey also insisted that they too would like to accompany us to Italy for higher studies. I now felt like boxing their ears, one by one.

How much they were becoming too much of pain in the neck, I contemplated...? I’ve got to get rid of these two if ever I wanted to spend some time with Chitra; Chitra and no-one else...!

Before long, Sahani uncle reached Anupriya Villa, and I got down without delay. “Thank you Sahani uncle, bye Mika, bye Honey, bye Chitra, and er, please let me know when you’re coming to advise us upon our room décor, Chitra...”

In view of that, I gently reminded Chitra of her promise made to Dad, asking her to provide inputs regarding interior designing. She smiled as a response and minimally expressed, “I’ll let you know, Banjo...!”

And then they were gone.

Nonetheless, just within few days I received a message from Sahani uncle that he would probably bring Chitra this weekend

~

The weekend

On Saturday I looked forward to meet her, the doe-eyed beauty, and one for whom I'd developed a deep enthrallment. What's more, I naively began wondering whether she would bestow me a kiss or not, complexities in abundance...!

For that reason, I checked up myself at the mirror and decided that I must've a close shave; newly-found whiskers looking in a state upon my face, and not at all giving a first-rate impression, what to talk about a kiss.

A kiss I conjectured

Why would a young lassie want to kiss me...?

Has she yet expressed her love for me, love of mine, *Amore mio* in Italian...?

No never, I thought, approving my newborn facial masculinity at the mirror, and applying shaving cream comprising of natural oils, by means of a shaving brush; using circular motion to further help soften the beard, exfoliate the skin.

In no doubt, then why have I started taking her say-so for granted, in so doing pulling my skin tight, and gently using downward strokes, holding the long and textured handle of the chrome-plated safety razor over my cheeks, drolly puffed-up in the midst of lather...?

Was watching a movie together enough of validation; and that too accompanied by her siblings, the safety razor now approaching the nasolabial folds, in between my mouth and my cute nose...?

Or was designing an *alpona*, or coming over to lend advice on interiors, *raison d'être*, I deliberated, further rinsing my face with cool water and running my fingers to find any rough areas that might've missed...?

Perhaps she was plainly being courteous to Dad, or to her own father, Sahani uncle; one who'd been working alongside Dad since so many years. And even if she liked going out on a movie, or engaging in stuff, artistic, did she ever give any hint that she was doting of me...?

Patting dry my face by means of a clean towel, I enlightened myself that one aspect was assured, that at least she didn't find me objectionable, or tried to pass me up.

Oh my, I'd cut my right cheek, it'd started bleeding.

Perhaps my cheeks were still too soft and yielding to defend against the strike of the platinum-coated, double-edged blade, living up to its valorous label, Wilkinson Sword. Without delay I held moisturized toilet roll to the cut, and then applied witch hazel to soothe.

Skin was sore, much like my nascent feelings

I thought, more to the point, she wasn't similar to Bobby Mohan, who was neither nowhere in sight, or not unlike Jane Diaz who'd started admiring Varun's dramatics, or for that matter akin to *Fraulein* Wadia who hoedown away to glory, in the arms of Mr. Lalu.

Chitra Sahani, I understood, existed in flesh and blood, and finally was coming over to Anupriya Villa. Contrasting others who hadn't or couldn't visit me ever, Chitra was coming over and that too for the 2nd time. And this time she would be all alone with me.

All alone

Other than the case of Jane Diaz with whom even though I'd spent quality time with her unaccompanied at her house, tragically fizzling out the relationship due to my incalculable stupidities, I decided to be heedful.

Nonetheless, I wanted to check out whether she really possessed a little feeling towards me - furthermore applying a non-alcohol shaving balm based in aloe vera and tea tree oil to help prevent dry skin and razor burn.

And after I'd rinsed and dried my shaving paraphernalia, particularly placing the porcelain-handled brush by way of a click over the waterless glass shelf, and safekeeping the German-make Merkur razor, I couldn't but help apply the famed Old Spice aftershave lotion, bearing the nautical theme of sailing ships of 3 masts, having square sails on each.

"Agh...!" Gosh, it stung.

In a minute, Draupadi knocked at my door. My guess was correct. Hurriedly pulling a towel across my chest, I rushed to open the door. Chitra was standing in the wake of her. "Banjo baba, you're not ready as yet, see Chitra di has already arrived..."

Despite the fact that I was gleeful to find Chitra next to my doorway, I was bit self-conscious at the same time, finding myself not dressed-up

appropriately. “You’re right Draupadi and ugh I’m sorry Chitra...” I grinned at them. “Sit Chitra...” I beckoned her to my bed. “And please allow me five minutes, not more...”

Unquestioningly, she nodded her head, and taking off her sandals she perched at the corner of my 5 feet wooden Four Poster bed of Queen Anne style. Draupadi decided to sit across a stool across the bed to offer her companionship till I geared something up.

Hastily, I unfastened the wardrobe of my dressing room, and making an effort to decide on the outfit that would be most to the point. I was tad bewildered whether I should wear something gaudy or not...

Still, watching Chitra looking beautiful in her powder blue *salwar suit* and diaphanous *dupatta*, I thought I must match her colors and wear clothing in passive tones.

I therefore picked out a pair of light russet trousers and light blue shirt, all in wholesome cotton. And wearing a pair of authentic and dark leather slippers bought from Meston Road, the retail market for leather items, I stepped into my room to find Chitra reclining at one of the Posters of the bed, flowing hair dangling by her side.

“Chitra, please make yourself more comfy...”

I arranged a couple of soft pillows at her backside. She acknowledged my gestures by means of a slight nod and not speaking a word till now. Draupadi kept offering me naughty smiles at my conspicuous good manners and gentlemanliness.

I pulled out a chair across the bed, and facing her, initiated the *tête-à-tête*. “Chitra, it’s damn good that you’ve come, we all need your help in making over our house...!”

Afterward gazing at Draupadi who was still letting out those inane smiles, I asked her to pick a parcel lying nearby. It contained the very gift which Draupadi had brought for me on the occasion of my sacred thread ceremony. I took out the article carefully and proudly showed it to Chitra, knowing she would be blasted by its creative value.

I was correct, damn correct

“Oh this is something unique Banjo, earlier I’d just seen them in pictures, and now unbelievably I’m holding them with my own hands...!” Chitra exclaimed, opening wide her doe eyes. I too was quite at ease thinking my opening move had hit the bull’s eye.

Keeping in mind Draupadi’s continual smiles and Chitra’s imaginative brains, all I wanted to share was a common subject matter. And upon recognizing that these originated from the tribal-rich areas of Bastar in Central India, she got all the more animated.

Admiring the traditional statue of a woman in the midst of several children tugging alongside her: one nibbling her lop ears perching upon her frail shoulders, the second clinging to one of her asymmetric breasts, another to her empire waist, the last one at her high arch feet holding her anklet, Chitra offered us interesting in sequence

“Banjo, this is *Dhokra* or bell craft; one of the earliest known methods of metal casting. Do you remember the dancing bronze figurate discovered from the ruins of Mohenjo-Daro, belonging to Indus Valley Civilization...?”

“Chitra, don’t tell me this is as old as that...?” I exclaimed, eyes wide.

“Yes exactly Banjo, this is a primitive art, on track around 4,000 B.C., wherein the artists proffered the methods of lost wax or *Cire Perdue* by the help of tools prepared by local blacksmiths and carpenters...”

Breathlessly, Draupadi, originating from *Ghadwa* tribe, interrupted: “You know Chitra di, our primeval King of Bastar had assigned a *dhokra* art necklace for his beloved wife. He was to a certain extent charmed chancing upon the necklace. For that reason, witnessing the exquisiteness of the necklace, he honored the craftsmen with the designate, *Ghadwa*...!”

We both appreciated Draupadi’s folklore who then excused herself from the scene, and shutting the door after her.

Chitra then promptly got down from the bed and dotingly placed this age-old piece of art, transmitted from era to era, on top of one of the show tables; square, low in height, by way of drawn-out *meenakari* work. This time, I silently thanked Pushpa masi for her gift from Gujarat, at this instant so of use in ever-increasing my idealistic moments.

I mused, “Surely I’m going to gift a similar necklace to Chitra, when she would become my wife, and same way as the King of Bastar had presented it to his beloved wife, the Queen...!”

“Hello Banjo, where are you lost...?” I heard Chitra calling me by way of slight clicks of her fingers, as I was nowhere to be found. I got up from my day dreams.

“No nowhere Chitra, rather it’s exceedingly pleasant to see you over again, and if you can pardon me, then I say something...?”

She coyly moved her head up and down, to some extent perceptive what I was about to say. “You know Chitra; I’d been waiting for this minute since long...”

She still did not utter a word. I sustained, without demur, “You’re the first girl to enter this chamber...!”

However this moment in time, Chitra was nippy by way of her wisecrack, or perhaps interrogating me about my behavior in a disapproving tone: “Now don’t tell me Banjo that you not at all tagged any girlfriend. Dad was mentioning once that you’re quite affable to one Jane Diaz, whose Pop you helped gets reinstate in his Factory...!”

My face flushed, but dared not put in the picture any falsehood. Simpering, she sustained her tattle, nonstop. “Dad was also telling me something to boot that you once got worked up upon hearing someone’s phone call, belonging to one mysterious lasso named Rajshree...!”

I was now getting discolored, discolored at the thought of Sahani uncle spilling the beans to his credulous progeny, Chitra. I never anticipated that he would be giving out my ins and outs. Ears turning crimson, I turned to face Chitra. “Take note, didn’t Sahani uncle ever mention about one Bobby Mohan who once planted a kiss upon my cheeks, anon to quit my school...?”

Chitra grinned in facetiousness. “But why at all did your Bobby Mohan go away from your school after planting a kiss upon your cheeks...?” Chitra continued the funny side.

Now, I just couldn’t hold back myself. I broke down. I covered my face by way of my palms whilst I sniveled. My body was quaking. As my stress level augmented, sweat gathered around the armpits of my light blue shirt.

Regrettably, I was on pins and needles remembering the angelic Jane Diaz, the unseen Rajshree, and the full of life Bobby Mohan...!

As my muffled cries distorted into wails, countenance still buried, I felt a soft touch tugging at my palms. It was none other than Chitra, who stood having a frontage on me. Dead-ended, I continued to be seated upon my chair, unknowing that my palms had let go my tear-stained face, and after that, thinning out...

With no much thought left in me I inadvertently had closed upon the outside edge

Chitra got surrounded by my grasp, my face just millimeters away from her bosom. Tears pouring forth knocked out my mindset, and in those milliseconds, I found myself bridging the gap, snuggling nearer to her...

During the development, my lips duly drenched a dissection of her diaphanous *dupatta*.

So far she'd not acted in response, except for standing stock-still. All the same, as tear-jerking moments over and done, her palms clutched at the back of my mane and drew me closer...

Dupatta was coming in between my accessible lips and the skin above her neckline. Raising my head little by little, I gazed deeply into the doe-eyed Chitra. I got lost in a far-off fairy tale. Despite the fact that I could distinguish a sparkle of love in her beautiful eyes, there wasn't any signal of her letting go the *dupatta*, her line of defense.

Wordlessly, as I thanked her for going along with me, alongside my waterworks, in conjunction with my repudiation by my female acquaintances, I again got affecting. In the let-up, I began to cry all over again, and caught a hiatus only when I took in her gratifying lexis

"Banjo, I'm sorry I hurt you and made you cry..."

Desperately I stared at her, too withered even to get up from my empty chair. All I could declare was, "It's not your flaw, and at times I just feel forlorn, fraught. Further, and you know what, Chitra..." I then became quiet. She inquiringly looked into my distended eyes.

Not finding any react she at last detached herself from my hold and went for a glass of water set aside next to the Bongo, at the Matisse 2-drawer bedside chest, its cabinets of charming synthetic ivory and gold leaves.

Approaching nearer to me and lightly gripping my right cheek, she positioned the glass unto my orifice. Tamely and thirstily I drank three-quarters of it, creating a gurgling sound. She contentedly smiled at me, and then watchfully looking into my tear-stained visage, “Banjo, you don’t appear nice-looking when you cry...”

Additionally, she remarked in a consoling pitch. “Oh my, you’ve cut your face, and you’re bleeding...!”

“Plainly a razor cut...!” I replied intrepidly. In fact the razor cut, which was duly patched up by the tannins of witch hazel, was open once again, maybe due to the compress and scrape by way of Chitra’s diaphanous *dupatta*. Instantaneously, she took pains to dab the affected spot via the edge of her *dupatta*. “Oh Chitra, why did you tarnish your *dupatta*...?”

Chitra was aghast once she became aware of blood stains and realizes that she’ll soon have to step out of this room into a milieu, which consisted of seniors, counting her father as well. For that reason, she hurried to the restroom.

I followed her

Positioned at the doorway I could fairly assesses her arresting reflection upon the mirror, her taking off her see-through *dupatta* and rinsing the mottled part under cold running water of my washbasin. I couldn’t help but marvel at her uncovered cleavage - an image, surreptitiously epitomized by the mirror at this instance.

Still, as she happened to catch my gaze, which was somewhat unabashed, I lowered my eyes in utmost klutziness. She didn’t utter a single word but in next to no time emerged out of the restroom brushing past me, *dupatta* clutched in her naive hands, inquiring in extreme embarrassment, “Do you have an ironing press...?”

Even though I’d kept one in one of my cupboards, I nodded my head in negation.

Helplessly, she slumped upon the bed holding her sodden *dupatta*. I stared at her ravishing comeliness, even as she hung her eyes in modesty. All over

again I looked at her expression, and not finding her natural doe-like eyes replying back at me, I felt insignificant, inconsequential...

I got irate at myself, at my untruth, at my unabashedness

Like a rubber band I sprung back to my natural self. Staunchly I got up, opened the concerned cupboard, took out the ironing press, plugged it and kept it warm upon my corner table. After that, chivalrously walking up to Chitra, who was still sitting quiet, eyes lowered, I firmly drew the slippery *dupatta* out of her mute hands.

On getting just a few swipes of the hot iron, moisture almost immediately evaporated creating a whizzing sound. Switching off the plug, and satisfied by the upshot, I sauntered up to Chitra in my dark leather slippers. And then, genuinely not staring at her uncovered cleavage, I gently bowed down and draped the *dupatta* from her front, reclining them upon her adolescent shoulders.

At this time, whilst she looked up at me, there were palpable tears jerking out of her doe-like eyes, rewarding me up to the nadir of my quintessence. I found a sweeping reaction within her eyes: little feelings, little coyness, little shame, little love, and little feedback; feedback which was even nameless to her.

Very soon, to change the topic, all she replied was: "I'm pleased about the fragrance of your aftershave lotion, Banjo...!"

~

Tonight, my dreams carried me to 7th heaven, discovering that I wasn't sailing in a ship of 3 masts, having square sails on each, the insignia which had appeared upon the small packet of Old Spice aftershave lotion, rather inside a handmade Gondola, made out of 8 different kinds of wood.

Nevertheless, I found myself blissfully getting carried to a different world, sitting at ease atop the plush seat of this traditional Gondola, Chitra romantically leaning upon my shoulders, the flat-bottomed boat propelled by a smart-looking gondolier facing the bow, and rowing by way of a forward stroke, followed by a compensating backward stroke.

Don't know how, but I'd transformed into the handsome Amitabh Bachchan ferrying upon this banana-shaped Gondola through the waters of the enchanting Grand Canal of Venice, the *Ka'nal grande* in Italian,

Canalassoin Venetian, whilst Chitra had become the striking Zeenat Aman, his lady love...

And thus, I was upon cloud nine as well as into the most romantic element of the movie...The Great Gambler...only to be cut in by the gondolier, appearing well turned-out in a hat and cherry shoes, and serenading in chaste Italian

Laa, laa, laa...

“Amoro mio, Dove sei tu...?”

Ti sto cercando, Teroso mio...!”

And I, as Amitabh Bachchan, go over

“Amoro mio Dove sei tu...”

Aye kya gaa rahaa hai...?

To which Chitra, as Zeenat Aman replies

Apne pyaar ko yaad kar rahaa hai

aur keh rahaa hai ki...

Once more I interrupt

Na, naa, naa aise nahii...naa...

gaa ke sunaao naa...?

Nevertheless, as I possibly turn sideways onto my bed by way of a twitch, striking frame of Zeenat Aman within Chitra disappears, transforming her into a woman in the midst of several children tugging alongside her: one nibbling her lop ears perching upon her frail shoulders, the second clinging to one of her asymmetric breasts, another to her empire waist, the last one at her high arch feet holding her anklet...

Bell craft figurate-like lady, after that, resumes her singing

Do lafzon kii hai dil kii kahaani...
Yaa hai muhabbat, yaa hai jawaani

Chapter 30

Ecclesiastical

Political discussions were rife at Anupriya Villa, and grandpa with big mustaches was in a confabulation along with Dad and Sahani uncle in an ‘I told you so’ tone: “I was sure this Janata Party, born out of hatred for Indira Gandhi, and owing to hardliners like Vajpayee and Advani belonging to the Hindu Right wing, would collapse sooner or later...!”

Dad and Sahani uncle somberly agreed to what further he’d to say, as though the syndrome were a comeuppance: “And I also had this intuition that the ambitious Charan Singh would one day like to pull the carpet under Morarji Desai’s feet and become the next Prime Minister...!”

I wasn’t paying attention to National Politics at all, my focus being Chitra and Chitra alone. And I cared the least at what time Charan Singh too was stumped out of power by Congress, led by Indira Gandhi, early 1980. Sure the fight among political bigwigs was akin to the blockbuster Star Wars V movie title, especially the way she returned to supremacy

The Empire Strikes Back

But no sooner did this Empire strike back, its prince, Sanjay Gandhi died in an air crash

However, within our lives, Mr. Lalu, whom students of our school used to dread, comparing him to the fanatic Sanjay Gandhi was at his Sunday best. He apparently survived every impediment forthcoming from the management, as well as from some censorious colleagues, in inching closer and closer to Miss Wadia.

Much to my heartburn, these days during late hours of Kanpur summers, she was seen zooming around in his large-displacement V-twin Ducati motorcycle, one hand poised upon his right shoulder, much as an arm candy, primarily to impress others.

In turn, I was sure that more than Mr. Lalu, Miss Wadia was impressed by this Italian masterpiece, in gleaming red.

In the meantime, Jane Diaz too had alienated herself from me. Her only friends were Varun and Aye Aung. One morning, however, on finding both Jane and Varun absent, I came to know through Aye Aung that Mrs. Pinks had met with a severe accident just ahead of school-hours.

Without more ado, I excused myself from the class, hired an *auto rickshaw* to visit her at the said hospital. There was no time to be wasted I thought, to call in for my car, famously bearing the number plate UPD 2322.

Mr. Diaz, typically full of beans, looked incredibly sadden sitting at her staid bedside, unsightly green curtains all around, and indubitably glad to see me. “Oh Banjo, is that you, and how’s your grandpa...?”

I too was extremely disconcerted to perceive Mrs. Pinks lying unconscious upon the barren hospital bed, nurses checking her up now and again. I learnt that whilst crossing the path at a remote section of the Kanpur-Unnao highway near Jajmau, a red-colored lorry had knocked her from the side.

Only to passer-by’s who’d later gathered around her, all that she could utter was Allen Textiles. Red lorry had by then vanished, and to which direction nobody could discern...!

Passer-by’s then took initiative to summon the Police who ineffectually cast her off at this scruffy hospital, and then trailed her whereabouts from the office of the renowned M/s Allen Textiles Mills Limited, unto the Trade Union leader Mr. Michael Diaz.

And worrisomely, since last one hour or so, she was out cold

A bulky doctor rushed in and declared that by now this medical case had been deferred a lot and that Mr. Diaz had got to immediately sign certain declaration papers, in addition, depositing a substantial amount at the cash counter before she could be considered for a major operation. Bulky doctor solemnly added that the Electroencephalogram EEG report was not at all satisfactory.

Mr. Diaz grabbed the papers. His body was shuddering, hands shaking while putting the signature. I consoled him. Jane too was waiting upon a far-off bench, sobbing *ad infinitum*. Varun was trying his level best to soothe her, but to no avail...

I looked up at Mr. Diaz, who was aghast to comprehend the hefty sum required for the operation. There appeared indescribable panic inside his eyes, at the moment, hollow.

By now Mrs. Pinks had already been shifted upon a wheeled stretcher and Jane rushed near, to hold her flaccid hands. Jane's eyes were brimming in the midst of tears; whereas Varun's reassuring hands were upon Jane's fragile shoulders, his talcum-powdered face brushing her careless hair.

"Don't worry, Mr. Diaz, I'll talk to the cashier..." Walking up to the cashier, I asked him whether I could use the telephone. I immediately called up Dad at his office and requested him to send the required sum through Jagmohan at once. "Sir, believe me, the money is forthcoming, kindly makes no delay for the operation..."

At the same time as Mr. Diaz came, hugged me, planted a kiss upon my forehead, I saw a couple of ward boys wheeling Mrs. Pinks into the somber operation theater. One last time I managed to glance at the pink cheeks of the beautiful Mrs. Pinks, and her crimson blood clots upon her bandaged head...

Jane, on her part, was not willing to let her go inside the operation theater, and started howling and tugging by their arms

Bulky doctor firmly advised that nobody except the medical staff were allowed inside. Varun and I both tried to convince her but she was turning hysteric. Mr. Diaz also came to her to comfort, but instead of calming down, she went ahead and started banging the gate.

She stopped short only when a security guard admonished her coarsely and asked us to take her away. Noticing Varun and Mr. Diaz unable to control her, I stepped in and yelled at her

"Jane, behave you and allow the doctors to do their job..."

This point in time, upon hearing my harsh tone, she fell silent and cozied up to me, much to the discomfiture of Varun. By now, I was in control of the state of affairs, more so when I found Jagmohan arriving and rushing past me, making necessary payments at the cash counter. I asked Varun to arrange a little water for Jane, whilst I beckoned her to take a seat at the comfy visitor's hallway.

Mr. Diaz was also finding it hard to hold back his tears so he went out to the quad to pray at the feet of the Blessed Virgin Mary's statue by way of outstretched hands. I asked Jagmohan to look after him and fetch him a cup of hot tea from the canteen.

In the interim, Jane had resumed her sobbing, snuggling close to me. I too found hard to put a stop to my tears and hugged her tightly, one arm at her back and the other at her hips over her pleated above-the-knee school skirt. "Jane, don't worry, everything will be alright..."

Saying so, I kissed her cheeks. Just then I found Varun waiting with a glass of water in hand, eyes lowered, the same time as I heard the gate of the operation theater being opened and burly doctor emerging in a grave demeanor. "Where's Mr. Diaz...?"

Panic-stricken, Jane, Varun and I rushed towards the doctor. The doctor was unmoving.

"Where's Mr. Diaz...? I'm sorry we tried our best, but couldn't save the patient...!"

Upon hearing him, his stark terminology, Jane swooned into my arms

Burly doctor, upon seeing her condition, ordered the nearest available nurses to check up her pulse and blood pressure, and if required, put her under saline water

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It was much later in the evening that tens of people were assembled at the Anglo-Indian cemetery, wherein Mrs. Pinks was laid to rest in an ornamental casket crafted out of beautiful logs of wood. At present, oak didn't seem to have high standing, cherry too wasn't appearing rich in color, and what to talk about mahogany, it wasn't evergreen.

Yet, in the start, at the hospital, I'd broken down. Initially, I'd tried to control the state of affairs, but upon finding Mrs. Pinks no longer in this corporeal world, her comely family in tatters, I was unable to handle it any longer.

In the intervening time, Jane had opened her eyes after being administered one bottle of saline and a fair few injections. Out of shock, at this moment,

she wasn't vocalizing. Her hysteria was nowhere demonstrable; in its place, loomed a blank and hollow stare.

After much time, only after Mrs. Pinks was transported in a hearse that she broke down. I held her tight at the wide steps of this scruffy hospital, Varun by our side. Jane was persistently sobbing, my shirt-collar soaked in her agonizing tears. I couldn't find words of solace. And instead of consoling her, I'd broken down too.

"I lost a mother, Jane...!"

Varun patted my back and held both of us together. Then he too broke down repeating the same line. Now it was my turn to pat his back. All of us were wildly shuddering, helpless and tormented.

Mr. Diaz approached us, his condition equally piteous, and mutterings hardly audible, "Kids, I've lost Pinks...!"

Then he too broke down, howling wildly. Jane was locked into my arms and not letting me go, therefore I asked Varun to calm him and accompany him to the office of the hospital to take care of necessary formalities. Meantime, I requested Jagmohan to put together more vehicles from our office, besides appropriate floral tributes.

By the time Jagmohan had arranged the vehicles, Mr. Diaz had also called in his colleagues from his Mill No. 2. They were the same people who'd called in for the strike few months earlier. All of us, around 25-30 people, stepped into different vehicles.

Jane whispered into my ears that she wanted to visit home and change before going to the cemetery. Right away I suggested her to sit in our car, asking Jagmohan to be in motion. "Jagmohan, do you remember her house...?"

"Yes, Banjo baba, it's near St. Peter's Nursery School, 3 alleys to its left..."

I continued holding Jane in my arms at the rear seat, tears running out of our eyes in cohesion. I remembered the cheerfulness, first time when I'd visited her place, and when Jane was in such high emotional state: "Thank you, Sir...!" she'd acknowledged the chauffeur. "Banjo, come along, it's another furlong walk from this place..."

“Walk, or...?” I’d giggled as I’d broken into a sprint over this deserted boardwalk and negotiated a clear headway.

“O that’s cheating, you should’ve declared before...” Barely had I halted a moment to calibrate a reply, she’d overtaken me, her gay abandoned laughter lifting the air around her neighborhood.

Vehicles, I knew, were moving at snail’s speed, one of the large ones, the vehicle carrying the coffin, the hearse, acting as an escort. Hence, Jane had ample time to change.

Nevertheless, upon entering the house, she rushed to her parent’s room, and clutching an engaging family picture she resumed her sobbing. “Jane, please Jane, doesn’t cry so much, you’ll again fall down for the count...!”

Even so, she continued howling. “Jane, please stop crying and get ready to go, they’re before you...”

I almost dragged her to her private room and asked her what she would like to wear. She was unable to think something up, and so, I proceeded to select apparel suitable for her.

I went ahead to unbolt her stolid wooden cupboard, which was getting on, creating a creaking sound, and took out a traditional black skirt and a white high collar blouse having a large bow at the neck. On the sides I found a special black hat along with a veil, and a pair of black knee-high socks.

Jane had become too feeble to get up from her bed where she’d wilted. Lifting her from under her arms, I raised her 40-kilo or so torso. Top button of her light blue shirt, short-sleeved, which she’d incidentally worn for her school since this fateful morning, had it. Her prominent breasts were heaving up-and-down, in intonation alongside her whimpers.

Caringly, I kissed both her muddled cheeks, muddled out of tears for her departed mother. “Jane, are you alright, do you want to visit the washroom...?”

She nodded in affirmative while still clinging to my arms. I carried her to the washroom and beckoned her to make use of it while civilly shutting the door after her. Without more ado, she came into sight wearing a much perturbed look across her face. “Banjo, now this unexpected mmm...menses...oh...!”

She stammered while rushing towards her cupboard, finding the sanitary napkin from some specified nook, along with a pair of fresh undergarments. “Jane, don’t worry, relaxes...”

I casted her reassuring glances, wondering how a young person of her age could handle these entire ordeals just in a span of single day...!

She rushed back to the washroom. Following 5-minutes or so, she emerged in mere undergarments, a trim camisole in color black, snug, and fit smoothly and evenly around her slim body, half-concealing her matching cotton panties, revealing her fair legs.

Want of proper food since morning, excepting the saline water, had made her horrifically puny. To double her agony was her untimely periods, perhaps out of unanticipated stress, and next, it’s accompanied cramp. Thereupon, she again drooped across the bed, clasping her tummy, her camisole rising up to her hips, fully exposing her panties, engorged at this moment.

Not to speak how vulnerable she appeared, more so because of her napkin tucked inside her panties, I was in a fix, getting late for the burial rites

I balanced myself upon my toes and helped her to put on her black knee-high socks and matching pumps. After that, I heaved her so that she could pull up her skirt. As I helped her with the side hook of this skirt of appropriate length, she endearingly looked into my eyes.

Caressing my cheeks, she whispered, “Oh Banjo, my dearest Banjo...!”

At this moment, I tried hard not to get carried away by her innocent virtuousness, avoiding looking into her mournful and eager eyes: “C’mom Jane, now get dressed up in this elegant blouse, I’ll just fix a kind of fare...”

I went to explore the kitchen and managed to put together a couple of sandwiches, applying butter, and spread out tomato sauce over 4 slices of white bread. Quickly, I sliced two tomatoes and two small onions to complete it. I came to her room finding she’d gone to wash her face at the washbasin. She gave the impression of being fresher once she wiped her face clean.

At this time, hungrily she grabbed the sandwiches and started munching, much to my contentment. I looked at my HMT ultramarine blue dial wrist

watch, quartz automatic 17-jewels, which reflected that we hardly were left with 15-minutes to join the procession to the cemetery.

After that, I opened the refrigerator and discovered a single glass of lemonade. While taking it out, my hands were trembling, recalling how Mrs. Pinks had prepared one for me during my first visit. “Here Jane, simply toss down...”

At the same time as she unquestioningly gulped it down, I placed her black hat, complete with a veil, upon her careless hair, *estilo desleixado* in Portuguese, and which she’d perhaps not brushed as it should be. But that was her charm, I thought, while taking hold of the glass from her hands, and in-taking its remnants.

She looked up at me, quizzically, through her veil

I didn’t find it necessary to offer her any explanation. For sure, it helped me a lot. One, it wet my parched lips and two, it carried the aftertaste of my pretty Jane, and three, the sip was truly the last remembrance of Mrs. Pinks, her adorable mother.

Mrs. Pinks

Thinking about Mrs. Pinks, my demeanor gave way once more and I broke into sobs. I cried quietly at first, and after that it was strident, quite strident.

Jane: “Banjo, don’t cry, look I’ve stopped crying, now do you want me to be tearful again...?”

Me: “Okay, I won’t cry, because now if you cry, you’ll again have to go to the washbasin...!”

Halfheartedly Jane smiled at my anomalous sense of humor at this odd hour, and catching hold of my arms, she asked me to wait. It was now my turn to visit the washroom and the washbasin. No sooner I emerged, I found Jane holding a scrapbook in her hand.

She tried to put up a brave expression upon her face: “It’s something concerning dear Mom...”

...In next to no time our vehicle, the 1962 model, royal blue Ambassador Mark II car, famously bearing the number plate UPD 2322 became the last car in the procession.

Funeral flag was set up on top of our car to establish right of way, as well as to signal other motorists along the thoroughfare. This helped them to determine at each intersection that the procession had terminated and that traffic might recommence. Jagmohan drove slowly, staying close to the car in front and not allowing room for a vehicle not in the procession to cut in.

In another 20-minute drive we reached the cemetery. An attitude of somberness, lament and shilly-shallying prevailed, as the casket was carried by the pallbearers, comprising Mr. Diaz's colleagues and neighbors, from the hearse to the grave. Many of them were in formal clothes like a suit, and normally in a black tie and belt.

It was time for grief, a time to bid final goodbye to Mrs. Pinks. After all, saying a goodbye to her helped us all acknowledge that she whom we loved so much had departed, never to return...

We all walked through the landscaped burial ground which featured well-planned walkways; this gave extensive access to graves and planned plantings of trees, bushes and flowers. Tombs that were scattered were an admixture of the Gothic having a rich flavor of the Indo-Saracen style.

Citizens believed that it was more than 2 centuries ago that several European traders had settled in Kanpur, and that included a good few Portuguese. True, the Portuguese had a trading post in Kanpur, in the hinterland of India, quite away from their usual Malabar coastal settlements, and it might be that Jane was having her ancestors buried somewhere around...!

...Jane had also revealed something earth-shattering about her Pop and Goa Period in-between, equally Mr. Diaz and Jane were bereaved, touching Mrs. Pinks one last time. Whereas Mr. Diaz was finding it hard to control his tears, clutching his collared button-down shirt at the place where his heart was, Jane broke down. This moment in time, I didn't intervene, nor did Varun...

She, in a kneeling posture, head bowed, hands folded, cried and cried and cried underneath her veil, and fondly placing her favorite memory, the scrapbook, into the casket. After all, the scrapbook shared between mother-daughter little quotations, even Ecclesiastical, along with an assortment of cute pictures, a bunch of flowers, dried and duly taped.

Once Jane got up after lighting a candle and adjusting her traditional black skirt of appropriate length, I adjusted her special hat, which had almost toppled, and held her hand. It was moist, moist out of nervous tension, out of trauma for someone very close leaving her forever.

Mrs. Pinks, as a final point, was interred into the grave, and everybody present placed flowers, including the priest who placed a paschal candle, burning near the coffin, as a hope of eternal life and salvation.

I summoned for the special tribute from Jagmohan and handed it over to Jane, who placed this beautiful white floral standing spray created by seasoned white flowers, which included roses, snapdragons, carnations, and of course football mums, the queen of the fall flowers...

...Snapdragons I hope didn't resemble to the face of a dragon, opening and closing its mouth once laterally squeezed...

...But certainly, carnations, as believed, could be incarnation, incarnation of Jesus in flesh...

This sympathy bunch of cut flowers, set in an attractive way in standing arrangement, seemed to me the perfect gift to Jane, who was standing barren, hereby losing her dear one. She fondly positioned them upon her mother's grave. It also helped her to deliver a eulogy, to the mass present, even though extempore

“My Mom was the bright and beautiful young woman who married my Pop after a lengthy and stretched courtship. She was the resolute young bride who taught herself to cook and clean, mend and sew...

...As a Mom, she was smart at finding games and activities I enjoyed, and would teach me valuable lessons and imperative skills. My Mom was there at every step along the way to make sure I was coping with the various emotional phases I went through the process...

...She endeared to all, including my dear friends, Banjo, Varun, and ever ready to treat them with glasses of lemonades and cookies. And then, she prepared those mouth-watering Christmas cakes...”

Closing facet of this eulogy once again invited tears into my eyes, fond remembrances of my Christmas celebrations with her family, elaborate

preparation of the cake included. I recalled how Mrs. Pinks had ended its making by means of thanks, after Jane proudly sang out

“Momma, it’s now ready for the oven...!”

“Okay kids, now it’s my job or rather the job of the oven, and thanks a lot, Banjo. Er also for the stuff, that tidy amount of stuff that you acquired for the cake...!” I also remembered my embarrassment, watching contentedly Mrs. Diaz going on to put that container into the oven.

Thank you Bob’s Corner I’d said to myself...! Thank you, rotund uncle with round face. And thank you, my Donald Duck. And how silently, I’d broken into a song

Donald Duck...My Donald Duck...My fat and heavy Donald Duck...!

Donald Duck...My Donald Duck...My fat and heavy Donald Duck...!

Even as dropping Jane and Mr. Diaz to their house, I bade them a solemn goodbye. I also bade goodbye to the small gathering that had assembled at their place, discussing the future of this dumbfounded family. Jane had dragged me to her familiar private room where I stood still.

Since morning, I too was famished, dog-tired, urgently feeling the need to get back home for a shower and then rest. But then, Jane too needed my attention as there weren’t many people who could take care of her.

“Banjo, stay back, please doesn’t leave me, I’m petrified...”

“O my dearest Jane...!”

I then paused as she all over again started weeping, sitting at the corner of her bed. I wiped her tears by means of my bare hand and once again squatted upon the floor, warmly taking her hands in mine. They were so cold and numb. After chafing her palms for some time, and soothing her raw nerves

“Listen Jane, from now on you’ll have to grow up. Please try to understand the state of affairs. Your Pop is really without help out. And I don’t think you ever want to put him ill at ease worrying about you. Therefore, you must step in to take care of this house...”

Jane looked up at me, listening carefully, and still puling. I continued. “Jane, I know your mother won’t leave your heart, your mind, but I think she would feel blissful from the heavens if she’s convinced that you, the apple of her eye, is well enough...”

“Banjo, but how, I’m frightened...?” She cut in, while I continued my homily: “I can make out Jane; I too was frightened after my Mom had expired. Remember those days when I used to come to school, my head shaven...? But whence I understood that there was no other option but to stand upon my two feet, I decided to shed off entire Achilles’ heels, demonstrating courage...”

...More so, I never wanted my Pop to feel awful that I’m despondent...”

Jane started agreeing a bit to what I was saying, in between quivering lips and snivels. She was looking angelic, though weak, in her black skirt and white high collar blouse. Little by little I tried to withdraw from her, even as for the last time she held my hands securely, bemoaning

“Banjo, you might be strong, but I’m not. And one more thing, I don’t have a strong backing as that of your family, the family of Kumarr’s...”

...It’s also true that on one side my Pop is wimpy, weak and ineffectual, on the other side gets into trouble often, in particular for his activities at the factory, and for which Mom too used to remain perturbed...”

Reassuringly, I smiled at her, losing my eyes into the elegant large bow at the neck of her blouse, “Don’t you worry on that count Jane; Kumarr’s; represented by me, shall always be with you, and that’s a gentleman’s promise...”

“Umm Banjo, my dear, if truth be told I’m taken aback the way you’re chatting not long. May I ask you; don’t you ever think I’ve wound you, uncared for you...? Weren’t you ever affected by my carry out...?”

Tearfully, I gazed into her penitent eyes, not uttering anything. I rapidly remembered all those times when she’d unnoticed me, or favored me to Varun. I prayed to God to give me strength so that such and such more thoughts did not get revealed. I never wanted to sway her heart, utterly fragile during this hour of crisis.

Furthermore, it was below my dignity

“No, not at all, Jane, rather it was you who’d lent me the book on philately and did not own up to Mr. Lalu. Perhaps you don’t know how much admiration I’d developed for you, for your friendship, for your realness, for your nerve...”

All of a sudden, I opened both palms of Jane. “And how I wanted to kiss your hands, the same hands which bore the brunt of Mr. Lalu’s severities, meted out to you by his customized wooden ruler, the Hammer...?”

Saying so, I buried my weepy face into the angelic palms of Jane and kissed them many a times

Smooch...Smoooch...Smoooooch

She was snowed under and weighed down by my unexpected response, uninterrupted tears trickling down her smooth cheeks, and finally letting me go home, tranquilly.

As I pulled away, I could see her trying to hold back her own emotions. The soft tremor in her lips betraying a serene understanding that neither of us had words for, yet both of us felt deeply

To everything there is a season
A time for every matter under heaven
A time to be born and a time to die
A time to plant, and a time to pluck what is planted
A time to weep, and a time to laugh
A time to mourn and a time to dance
A time to keep, and a time to cast away

- Ecclesiastes

Chapter 31

Khoobsurat

Vis-à-vis Miss Wadia, aka *Fraulein* Wadia, my heartburn sustained a year more, woefully watching her zooming around the expansive Parwati Bagla Road, perched upon the large-displacement V-twin Ducati motorcycle of Mr. Lalu, one hand poised upon his shoulder, display of affection in public.

My life had turned gloomy, Cimmerian, in a blizzard

Sitting in my 1962 model, royal blue Ambassador Mark II car, famously bearing the number plate UPD 2322, based on the Morris Oxford series III (Made in England), and at its 18-years certainly not getting any younger, I surely was developing an inferiority complex.

But then how to convince Dad to acquire a new car for our family unit posed a million-dollar question. Cars at our organization were of official entity and were put only to certified use. Countless efforts had thus botched, Dad still regarding his Ambassador as

King of Indian Road

And why not...!

After all, this car was like another key member of Kumarr family, without whom, he found himself in sheer darkness. Sans the will, he was proud to declare the car as my elder bro, elder to me by 2 years.

All the same, one day when his car broke down in front of Yadana Aung at my school while Dad had come to attend parents-teacher's meeting, did he realize that his Ambassador days were numbered.

He grumbled at the car, "Look at the way you behaved, you failed to budge. Was it because of your battery, your self-start, and your electric point; or are you just getting on...?"

Field staff present in my school watched him in amazement chatting to the immobile car. Yadana Aung aunt, who by the by was passing by, couldn't help comment, "Mr. Kumarr, do you need help out, my chauffeur is with me...!"

And much to his awkwardness, her chauffeur flipped opens the bonnet. Adjusting few nuts and bolts here and there, at last coughed up the adamant vehicle.

“Thank you, Yadana...!”

And now muttering to himself, “It’s always over here, at this damned spot, that I’m discomfited: in front of this lady; foremost it was my flip-flops getting entangled, and at this time, this unanticipated goof-up...”

“O ho...!” I reflected. “Dad calling her by her first name, Yadana...!”

“I think Mr. Kumarr; you’ve got to go in for a brand new car...!”

For the first time in being, Dad became conscious of the fact that he’d ever been clinging to outmoded gear, and er, even natives...? Why, even Yadana Aung was cast off *vis-à-vis* Anupriya Kumarr, his beloved consort...? Believably that was sanctioned and quite logical, but a car...!

Why should a car, an inanimate object carry so much significance...?

Consequently and much to my astonishment, one day, Dad broke the news, in a mood, half-sad, half-glad: “Banjo, my son, I’ve handed over my Ambassador to my old confidante, Jagmohan; he’ll take it to his hometown, Bodhgaya in Bihar, and am sure will take its good care.

In the same breath, albeit among a decent pause, he sustained, “I’ve bought a new car, it’s waiting outside...”

For a few lasting and poignant moments, missing my grand old Ambassador, which occupied a prime spot in my heart as well as at the porch of our villa, I chanced upon a flat-fronted grille featuring 4 separate headlamp lenses, perhaps one for each of the low and high beam units. “Hey Dad, it looks like an Audi...!”

“Yes Banjo it sure is, it’s Audi Quattro...”

“*Quattro*...?” I quizzically asked him.

“Yeah, I’d spot its review at the recent Geneva Motor Show and well-liked it, the word *Quattro* was derived from the Italian words Four, which refers to its 4-wheel-drive system, and which can even be used in competition racing...”

Competition racing indeed, Geneva, Italy or wherever...! I reflected. For Dad, competition would simply mean competing with Yadana Aung's Standard Herald, Mark III car, and around the T-bend of Harsh Nagar intersection, somewhere beyond the sprawling Idgah, nothing more... "Dad, can I drive your car...?"

Hollering out a Big No, Dad aggressively drove away this mid-size performance car, this turbo-charged German-make coupe, leaving me to fret and mourn and long-sufferingly wait for another couple of years before I became an adult and secure a valid driving license.

Even though I adored my Raleigh Chopper bicycle of England, based on the look of dragsters from the 1960's, right now I was left asking for more. Nixed, I decided not even to use my bicycle now, I would venture out on foot...!

I began walking through the large rockery behind the main structure of our villa, and which had a moat, waterfalls and even a walk-through cave. Couple of dwarf palm trees seemed to be afloat in the moat garlanded by concentric rings of bright golden fern and croton.

Now who would require these crotons, the oil of which used as a violent purgative, quite unsafe, so to say...?

Though in a bit wrathful frame of mind, it was after several days that I was again on an exploratory tour and could not help marveling at the water cascades emerging from 3 points in the rock scape, or appreciating at the ingenuity of grandpa with big mustaches.

I'd been told that after GD completed the construction of the main building of the villa, it was DK, grandpa with big mustaches, who carried forward his lineage, and which included innovative landscaping and great outdoors.

I couldn't help be pleased about how the pools led to the moat, which then flew under a drain via a pebbled watercourse, finally to end in a basin where it again captivated.

My sullen mood, without doubt, transformed into something engaging to find the lawns beyond the drain quite preserved by way of luxuriant bermuda grass, which led to 5-feet wide brick pathway through the out of the ordinary grassy mounds.

And this surely invited me to jogging

Before long, the multipurpose floor girded by rosy columns and deep red acahypha bushes was looking dramatic against the backdrop of the plush green lawn. But hey, what's this, dictamnus...?

I now really laughed at DK's ingenuity for having planted dictamnus, or Gas plant as commonly have known. Thankfully this Gas plant bore aromatic leaves.

Yet no, it was inflammable: its flowering spikes, covered by tiny glands, exuded a volatile oil in this scorching weather. And if truth be told, even a lighted match placed at the base of the flower spike would surely ignite the oil and send a flame shooting through the spike, thereby exposing its presence.

I hoped this flame did not harm these little white flowers having 5 petals and showy stems double its number as did DK's galactic releases during the much elongated twilights.

My own mind's eye, followed by jollity, augmented my jogging speed, and short of breath, I somehow got misbalanced at a curve. I narrowly missed hitting the thorny cacti. Instead, right ahead the bend I happened to chance upon one of the most charming maidens attending to a flower bed comprising sword-shaped gladioli, gerbera bearing large capitulum, etc.

Whilst panting and gazing at those attractive flowers, and towards the pergola, I chanced upon Latha in a bent-down position.

Yes, I made no mistake

Sure enough, it was the flower-girl Latha, dressed up in *pavada davani*, a half-sari. I stopped dead upon my tracks and admired her from a distance. She was artistically plucking these flowers in probably *bhramara mudra*, in which I found that the tips of her thumb and her middle finger were almost touching, the second finger bent and the other two, raised.

"Hmm, which means she's grown up into a full-fledged artiste...!" I guessed.

Unmindful of me, the moment she stood up, I could now visualize her more clearly. Her thighs and cheeks were plump, and her breasts, hard and full.

I assumed she'd just returned from her dance classes, and still adorned in her 3-piece clothing - a long lower garment resembling a petticoat or a long

skirt, a *choli blouse*, and a long *dupatta*-like strip of cloth, about as long as a half-sari.

Even though she was a couple of years elder to me, her apparel also meant that she was still in the final outskirts of her teens while marking her transition to womanhood.

“Hello Latha...!”

Out of the blue she got frightened upon hearing a strange mannish tone of voice calling her name in these boondocks. Yet, when she discovered it was me and only me, she offered a sunny smile along with something like a salutation, by stretching all her fingers and then bringing them close but not touching each other.

Was it another artistic hand gesture, I gleefully mulled over...? “It’s good to see you after such a protracted point in time, and how are you...?”

“Banjo, I’m doing fine, it’s only you whom I don’t see much these days. In fact, you didn’t even care to notice me during your sacred thread ceremony...” She complained, bit crestfallen.

She was upset and wanted understanding: “Latha, I’m sorry, in all probability because of the hullabaloo I might’ve overlooked you, but you know, the jiffy I chanced upon those wonderful assortment of flowers, I knew it had to be you...”

“It’s part of my occupation Sir...” She sustained her resentment. I was quite taken aback by her bewailing.

“Latha, why at all are you talking this manner, you know I’ve always remembered you since my very childhood, the day Mom had kissed you while going to Shiva temple...?”

...How could I ever forget that eventful day, when the dressing part over at last, proudly I’d led Mom’s wicker basket, stuffed with flowers, of *harsingar*, *jabakusum* and dried lotus, delivered by Latha, who wasn’t baby any more, rather long-haired, curvy, set in her teens...

Mom: “Latha, my charming girl, thank you so much. God bless you...!”

Mom had bent down, looked into her expressive eyes, sandalwood *bindi* in the center of her forehead, and kissed her dusky cheeks. Out of adoration and sympathy for this poor girl, Mom had requested Doctor Tripathi uncle to fix up Natarajan Swami from his own locality of Patkapur for her *Bharatnatyam* lessons.

Latha kept quiet

I could now notice that her cotton *pavada davani* was quite similar to our *Ghaghra choli*, so common in the north. I took in that both costumes consisted of a blouse, which was separate from the skirt. I couldn't help glancing into the beautiful patterns of traditional paisley and then into her glassy eyes, which revealed an innate scar within her psyche.

"Latha, what happened, tell me. And please don't call me Sir, will you...?"

Latha was by now picking up the basket of flowers to her waist, where I happened to spot a beautiful girdle, single-stringed. Exclusive of even looking at me, she was now walking away through the exciting wooden bridge across the pond, accessing the gazebo.

I ran up to her, to the raised gazebo having balconies, an idyllic spot replete with its panoramic view of the surroundings to tell her what I felt. "Latha, pay attention, I'm hearing about your name, about you, since my early childhood. Although it's true that we've never really conversed, but then I hardly could apprehend that you ever wanted to talk to me..."

...Forthrightly speaking, I couldn't reflect upon the profundity of your feelings. Okay now tells me clearly, did you ever have any soft corner towards me...?"

Latha got subdued by my drawn-out articulation, and after few pensive moments..."Banjo, it's not that I ever missed you in person, it was your Mom's aura within you which I all the time hankered for. Perhaps you don't know how much my mother and I were indebted to her.

My mother, if you care to remember, is in Kanchipuram now, the temple town of Tamil Nadu, and the only thing which she keeps reminding is how much your family had done for us. You know, not including your backing, we wouldn't have survived a lone day in this weird and wonderful conurbation, up north...!"

Flabbergasted, I drew closer to Latha, even as she persisted: “My modest memories go to the day you were born and how my Mom Madhula, dexterously weaved heaps of garlands of rose, jasmine and marigold, and artistically hung them all over Anupriya Villa. Since then, please accept as true, I’ve worshipped you and your noble family...!”

My eyes were brimming with tears upon hearing out Latha, her woes, her admirations. I just couldn’t find fitting words. “O Latha...!”

I then entered into silence

Standing still, I was overcome by remembrance of dear Mom, the famed Mrs. Anupriya Kumarr, and how much she meant to the community around her. For her it didn’t really matter whether someone belonged to the north or to the south, to the palace or to the hutment...!

Tearfully, I continued to stare at Latha, at her charming lotus-face, neither very stout nor very thin, and then at her, not very tall or very short...

Finding just the bees and the birds flit around me, my feet, all by itself, drew closer to her till my heaving chest was matching hers. I was speechless, my palms caressing her plump and dusky cheeks, till she looked at me straight into my eyes, not uttering a single word.

Tenderly I held both her cheeks into my palms and raised them a little, while she was still holding the basket of flowers to her waist. I once again peeped into her eyes; did she resemble the famed heroine Rekha...?

Surely, if Latha would’ve been wearing *Ghaghra choli*, similar to what Rekha wore in the blockbuster, Mr. Natwarlal, in the quintessential *gaon ki gori* image, she would’ve surely resembled her.

Why, I could well imagine if after wearing a yellow-red *Ghaghra choli*, covering her head in a green *dupatta*, Latha would break into the vivacious song sung by Lata, *O pardesiya...Pardesiya yey sach hai piya...Sab kehtey hain meine tujhko dil de diya...?*

“Latha, tum bahut Khoobsurat aur bholi ho...!” I complimented her point blank.

“Latha, tum bahut hii Khoobsurat aur bholi ho...!” I repeated earnestly.

Latha’s tears started disgorging. And I kept wiping them off by means of my bare thumbs. It seemed I’d unplugged her emotions which were closeted

within the deep confines of her heart, I don't know since when. It was as though she wanted to express a lot more things, which she couldn't, human constraints of limited glossary coming in the way.

In the meantime, her hard and full breasts were almost tearing into the fabric of my tee. I could now feel the smoldering heat all over: of the atmosphere, of our emotions, of our passions. Something gushed inside me, and which was getting out of control...

Keeping in mind the fact that this was my very first get-together, I became tad self-conscious. Amid utmost exertion and sweat, I brought the situation into a level of esteem and gentlemanliness.

I gradually withdrew my palms away from her cheeks. "Latha, you owe respect from my side, especially in contemporary times when people hardly remember anything. You and your Mom are rare specimens of humankind, considerateness...!"

Offering her a beaming smile, I continued: "No wonder, my Mom had kissed you, blessed you. I vividly remember she was a good reader of men and women. Look, just observing you since your babyhood, how she could read into your potential...?"

Latha closed her eyes for a while in her solemn remembrance. "You know what Banjo, my Guru, Natarajan Swami, speaks highly of your Mom, and how she used to regularly make telephonic inquiries about my progress *vis-à-vis* my *Bharatnatyam* classes, above and beyond verification through Doctor Tripathi uncle whether he'd timely received his remunerations...

...I promise, if ever in my life, I happen to earn a name in this classical genre, I shall owe it to your Mom, the great Mrs. Anupriya Kumarr...!"

I was so moved now, that I couldn't help hugging her and crushing her breasts onto me. I then held her hands and kissed them. "Latha, you're blessed, the most gracious, and utterly *Khoobsurat* all over...!"

Bharatnatyam is one of India's oldest classical dance forms, with its roots in the temples of Thanjuvar district (known as Tanjore until the Indian Independence in 1947) of the central Chola Naadu region of Tamil Nadu. It was systematized by the sage Bharata Muni in *Natyashastra*, an ancient treatise on performing arts written in Sanskrit 2 millennia ago.

Originally performed by *devadasis* as an offering to the gods, Bharatnatyam blends precise footwork, expressive hand gestures *mudras*, and facial expressions to depict stories from Hindu mythology.

The dance includes elements of pure movement *nritta*, expressive storytelling *nritya*, and dramatic performance *natya*.

Accompanied by Carnatic music of South India, performances feature instruments like the mridangam nattuvangam, violin, flute, and tanpura, along with vocal narration.

Dancers wear colorful silk costumes, traditional jewelry, and bold makeup to highlight their expressions.

Chapter 32

Antakshari

A day after, I was hitherto staring at the single gladioli stems in tall glasses, sword-shaped, placed in niches that had been specially created for them in our huge dining hall, *sala da cena* in Italian.

And no-one else in the house, I stepped inside the *Puja ghar*, and could feel its liveliness, taking my breath away as and when I unmistakably spotted a couple of sleek vases, each one showing off a single white gerbera, from our perfectly manicured garden, tenderly tended by no other than the *Khoobsurat* Latha.

At the same time, my eyes fell upon the *alpona*, carrying the peacock motif, which Chitra Sahani had volunteered to craft upon the floor, during *Akshay Tritiya*, *Akhan Teej*...

Though the design had faded quite a lot, my memories hadn't

...I remembered how on that festive day, Chitra used rice-powder and some diluted rice-parts to give clearer shape to various motifs she'd designed, especially the fan-like crest of feathers, and how she'd filled them with different colors.

Ah colors

I blushed remembering the first time I'd seen her as a doe-eyed beauty dressed up in a pristine white *salwar suit* and a fuzzy sky blue *dupatta* gracefully done up over her top...! And as her father and brothers were noticeably spread around her, how I'd decided not to look intently at her, although my heart had pranced a million beats...?

I now stared at the powdered blue color, which she'd used upon the fan-shaped crest over the head of the peacock...

I concluded that this powdered blue somehow matched her attire that she was wearing on that particular day.

Anyways, after a short prayer, as I emerged out of the *Puja ghar*, I heard the phone ring. I went to pick it up. Surprisingly, it was Raju. “Hello bro, I’m Raju...” I instantaneously could make out who he was.

His voice sounded somewhat poetic, and I listened carefully even as he informed me of his visit in the evening. When I made inquiries about his business and about Namrata masi, he told that he was doing well, and that his Mom would be joining us.

I was quite joyful, and my brains started whirring in *Do aur do Paanch* mode: Why not invite Chitra too...? One, I haven’t seen her lovely face since long, and two, knowing that she was keen upon traveling to different places, maybe she could fix up an interesting itinerary with Raju, he being engaged as a travel guide.

In the intervening time, I decided to sit down to study for a couple of hours. It was true that I didn’t fare well in science and therefore I’d to switch over to commerce. All the subjects in commerce came quite easy, particularly following those tough and grueling subjects in science, except for accountancy.

And here I started grappling with the minutiae of double entry book-keeping, by J.R. Batliboi. Generally being a good student since my early days, my plea was well attended by Mrs. Aryabhata, my Principal.

I’d even carried an application, in black and white by Dad. His calligraphic handwriting, which was somewhat neat copperplate style, imitating the heavily slanted scripts of 18th and 19th century, duly read as under

Respected Mrs. Aryabhata,

Hope this letter finds you in the best of health and spirits as it finds me here.

I would like to draw your kind attention to the meager marks that my son, Mr. Banjo Kumarr had scored in his February 1980 Indian School Certificate Examinations ICSE, New Delhi, for Class 10 that I feel there’s a painful necessity to kindly allow him to switch over to Commerce.

To validate my point, I enumerate his marks and grade as obtained in the 6 subjects, as under

Subject	Percentage	Marks	Grade
English	62 Six Two	4	Four
Hindi	60 Six Zero	5	Five
History	58 Five Eight	5	Five
Geography	58 Five Eight	5	Five
Modern Mathematics	70 Seven Zero	3	Three
Science	54 Five Four	5	Five

Even if I'm bit unhappy that Banjo couldn't even touch 60 even in his favorite subjects, History and Geography, I was yet more shocked to observe his score in Science. I don't think this sort of mark can impel him towards any scientific or medical career.

Therefore, academically I think the best for him would be to pursue Accountancy, Law, or Management. And to enable him to do so, I shall request you once again to kindly allow him to switch over to Commerce stream in your esteemed Institution.

Thanking you in the meantime. Kind regards.

Sincerely Yours
Bharat Kumarr

Needless to say, Dad's candid viewpoints did not go unheeded, and before long, I was granted the Commerce stream. And now, even after more than a year, I was struggling in the midst of construction of journals, cash books, and ledgers.

A new-found problem indeed

Nonetheless, I won't say that I'd found myself from devil to the deep sea; for science, I remember, had become too taxing w.e.f. Class 11, what with 5 books in mathematics, 3 in chemistry, 3 in biology, and 3 in physics.

Whew...! Just thinking of those hard-hitting books, which friends like Jagan still endured with, I was quite spared, I must say. And thank you Dad once again. And thank you, Mrs. Aryabhata.

However, to formulate Accountancy into something more palpable and appealing, I'd started preparing personal and household accounts. For, e.g.

the number of liters of petrol and Mobil oil which were consumed by Dad's Audi *Quattro* got enlisted

Rupees 6.20 per liter x 300 liters per month, or whatever

I cared even to list the minute items like a hair cut for Rupees 7.00, or a *dosa* for Rupee 1.00, or a movie ticket for Rupees 5.50.

Much of accounting whirring into my head, those few hours flew away and soon I was face-to-face with Namrata masi and Raju. While Namrata masi excused her to go to the kitchen to have a word with Karuna di and Draupadi, Raju politely shook hands with me.

His hands were soft, like an artiste

“Hey Banjo, you’ve grown a lot, and my Mom keeps telling me about you. Here’s a little gift for you. Sorry I couldn’t make it to your *Upanayan* Ceremony...”

I acknowledged his compliments, and opened the gift wrap, at the same time staring at his impeccable sense of dressing, which bespoke of one particular 1970s film star...

Umm...let me guess, who was it, who was it...?

Oh yes, for sure, someone resembling the first superstar of Hindi cinema, Rajesh Khanna, as I cautiously stared at the title of the novel written by Robert Ludlum

The Bourne Identity

I heard it was a fast paced spy fiction thriller that follows Jason Bourne, a man suffering from amnesia as he attempts to uncover his true identity...

In a little while Chitra arrived upon the scene. She was dropped at our place by her Dad, Sahani uncle.

Needless to say, she was followed by one *enfant terrible* Mika and another *enfant terrible*, his younger brother, Honey. To be honest, I never expected them. These rascally characters had completely obliterated from my wits.

And more than ever after Chitra had come unaccompanied the other day, the day I almost cried in her arms...

...I remembered how much I'd cried, her *dupatta* coming in between my accessible lips and the skin above her neckline.

And how I'd raised my head little by little, gazing deeply into the doe-eyed Chitra and getting lost in a far-off fairy tale. It was true that despite the fact that I could distinguish a sparkle of love in her beautiful eyes, there wasn't any signal of her letting go the *dupatta*, her line of defense.

I also recalled her words when she'd discovered that I'd cut my cheeks..."Banjo, you don't appear nice-looking when you cry. Oh my, you've cut your cheeks, and you're bleeding...!"

For now Raju was ogling at Chitra from top to bottom, at her untainted beauty...

...And her reactions. Ah well, certainly not at all like something "...when she'd looked up at me, palpable tears flowing out of her doe-like eyes, rewarding me up to the nadir of my quintessence..."

I can't say what her reaction was towards Raju's repulsive behavior, but on that previous day

"...I'd surely found a sweeping reaction within her eyes (towards me): little feelings, little coyness, little shame, little love, and little feedback; feedback which was even nameless to her..."

To tell the truth, I wasn't at all pleased by the way Raju continued to ogle at her. Therefore, I got up from my Pimpinella chair and beckoned Chitra aside.

Knowing fully that I was trying to shield her from invasive eyes, to change the theme, all she replied was: "I'm pleased about the fragrance of your aftershave lotion, Banjo..."

Wasn't this the same words which she repeated today...?

Anyways, it was only after this utterance that it dawned upon the mesmerized Raju that Chitra could possibly be my special friend and that he'd somehow dialed the wrong number. He got uneasy. I also tried my best to salvage the situation. "Raju, this is Chitra, Chitra Sahani my friend..."

Again a bolt shot for Raju

And by this time Raju certainly was mortified, finally altering his stance, his tone: “Hello Chitra, are you Sahani uncle’s daughter...?”

Chitra nodded in her usual minimalist mode, and especially after when he posed the next question, an obvious one. “Are these your brothers...?”

I thought that it was now high time to get over with this awkwardness in our dining hall, sala *da cena* in Italian. I juxtaposed, “Chitra, you know, Raju is a travel guide from Maharashtra...”

Sure enough, I’d offered Raju a second chance, and a fresh opening; apprehensions, by and large, somewhat evaporating. Almost immediately, he verbosely took over the conversation.

“Chitra, I’m looking into tourist activities around the *Jyotirlingas* of Maharashtra, you know, Triambakeshwar near Nashik, Bhimashankar north of Pune and...”

“...Grishneshwar close to Aurangabad...” Chitra completed the sentence. I felt relieved that finally the ice was broken. She repeated, “...Grishneshwar close to Aurangabad, alongside the great heritage sites of Ajanta-Ellora...”

Despite the fact that the names Ajanta-Ellora resonated in my mind as ancient architectural masterpieces of cave art; owing to my inadequate comprehension regarding this matter, I preferred not to intercept.

Nonetheless, it was Raju who clarified. “Chitra, my focus is upon the 3 *Jyotirlingas*, especially Trimbakeshwar, which embodies the Trinity of our Hindu Gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, besides the city of Nashik, which I suppose you know, hosts the famed *Kumbha Mela* every 12-years...”

“Means you only specialize upon the religious and ritualistic element of Maharashtra...?” Chitra questioned warily, only just figuring out his interest in females.

However she was taken aback by his reply. And so was I.

“In point of fact, my taking around pilgrims for *darshan* greatly pleases my Mom, and as such I avoid tourists who solely are interested upon aesthetic sojourns, er especially to somewhat erotic places such as Ajanta-Ellora. You know she insists that I just uphold and propagate extramundane and religious values...”

...I think therefore, you'll have to manage sightseeing of Ajanta-Ellora on your own. Chitra I'm extremely sorry...!"

Chitra disbelievingly stared at Raju, especially whilst he expressed the word erotic and then became unvoiced. What to talk of Chitra, even I couldn't believe that Raju was such a thorough gentleman. Why, at the very onset of today's meeting, didn't he expose himself...?

It was just then that Draupadi entered wheeling a trolley, containing *poha*, prepared out of flaked rice. And once again Raju's eyes gave away, not with reference to the *poha*, but *vis-à-vis* Draupadi. He began to ogle her in his inimitable manner, from top to bottom.

Equally Chitra and I began to squirm within our respective seats, at the same time as Raju's roving eyes made its way towards Draupadi's full hair, drifting to her prominent *bindi*, her oversized nose-rings, *nathunis*, pouting expression; and then meticulously trickling down to her dusky bangle-laden arms, and reaching the enchanting toe-rings, *bichhiyas* of her feet.

Again, his eyes, for a few moments paused upon the velvety navel of her waist, and finally settling upon her heaving breasts, damningly covered by a tight cotton blouse, passionately red, and sensually wrapped by way of a translucent cotton sari, harlequin green in color...

For the moment, chewing the delectable *poha*, sprinkled by way of lime juice, Raju's penetrating eyes measured every scale of Draupadi's heaving breasts, and from every plausible point of view. Gone was his lecture about adhering to Hindu religious beliefs, or steady devotion to his guardian.

And Draupadi, well unbelievable

She liked him right away, more so when she approved of "...his head slightly tilted, and nodding on cue, eyes blinking..." It might be possible that she'd unambiguously discovered her celebrated star, Rajesh Khanna in him.

Raju was also sharp enough to notice inquisitiveness in her eyes. He threw a card on the table: "I'm quite fond of *poha*, usually served as popular servings in my home state of Maharashtra, especially in and around Nashik and Bombay..."

Bombay

Last name struck a lightning within the corners of Draupadi's irreproachable heart. Wasn't it the same place where she'd dispatched a letter long back, and written in her own blood, along with her photograph...?

...And as she didn't possess his address, she'd simply scribbled Rajesh Khanna, *Bombai* on the envelope...

And oh, what a long wait it was, but to no avail, *Kaka* not measuring her feelings till now...And wasn't she adamant when she'd declared

"For me, above is the Lord, the *Aka*, and below is my *Kaka*...?"

Above and beyond, Draupadi had also applied *sindoor* on her forehead with the blood of her cut finger, having kept *Kaka's* 1971's calendar poster of Amar Prem in front of her...

And now, at this subtle hour, recalling all that drama, Draupadi's huge breasts were again seen heaving up and down like waves of the turbulent facade of the Atlantic Ocean, of course much to Raju's gratification.

...Then, Anupriya Villa and its ladies had burst into subsequent rounds of laughter, shaking the entire dining hall, *sala da cena* in Italian, and collectively suggesting that Draupadi be casted opposite him.

...And how the oomph *bai*, then perspiring profusely had scurried back to the kitchen, *dhutt*, being the only feedback, apart from the sound of her usual baubles upon her wrists and ankles.

Draupadi, as of now, stared at Raju by means of wanting eyes for any clue leading to her bonafide Rajesh Khanna, her feedback quite similar to a slave gazing at her master. And Raju calmly began munching the glossy green curry leaves, garnished in the *poha*, and enjoying its warm fragrance, a subtle hint of sweet and tangy.

Even as the curry leaves released their full flavor once bruised, Draupadi too was eying him, her heart fiercely and ferociously bruised. Chitra and I were nonplussed witnessing all these, and more...!

Meanwhile, Mika and Honey started getting edgy

True

Their Dad, Sahani uncle had gone out somewhere, while their elder sister, Chitra, wasn't doing anything of their picking as well. Chitra also knew that just the once they got bored stiff, they would launch their usual shenanigans and revels, and in next to no time, would become disorderly, horrendous...

For that reason she proposed, "Guys, let's play *Antakshari*...!"

Now this wound up everybody present in the dining hall, *sala da cena* in Italian, including me. I replied in jest, "Chitra, you won't be able to better me...!"

Upon hearing my face up to, crowd got turned on and it was decided that we would take converse sides. Everybody hooted in glee. Contest began, Draupadi initiating the chores by starting to point her finger towards Chitra and me, turn-by-turn

"Samay bitaney ke liye, karna hai kuchh kaam..."

And the line, Raju which concluded, *"...Shuro karo Antakshari, lekey Hari kaa naam..."*

Raju's finger finally pointed at Chitra. Everybody looked at her as she'd won the toss and it was she who'd to kick off singing with the letter M, the last letter of the word, *naam*.

I never knew that Chitra could also sing well. And why not, she didn't have a bad voice...?

In order to achieve the right amount of concentration, I don't know why, but then she decided to set her eyes upon the single gladioli stems in tall glasses, placed in niches. Maybe she was interpreting them as essential tools of décor, or, maybe she got lost into the light purple with white contrasting markings of these wonderful flowers.

I laughed to myself in embarrassment as I started thinking about Latha

"Meine kahaa phoolon se, hason toh who khilkhilakar hans diye..."

Though Chitra sang these 2 complete lines, she stopped at the above phrase. We all knew that it was a song from the film...Mili, and pictured upon Jaya Bhaduri, presently Jaya Bachchan.

"Now sing with the vowel Ye or even Ya...the last sound of this song..." Draupadi instructed. It seemed she'd taken up the responsibility to act as the

honest referee. At this time it was my turn. Borrowing from the same movie of 1975, I broke into one of its different songs, albeit a pensive one

“Aaye tum yaad mujhe...gaane lagee harr dhadkan...”

I don’t know why, but Chitra wasn’t somehow convinced that this song was meant for her, despite the fact that I sang the whole of it in quite a melodramatic tone. I was in point of fact singing the song pictured upon Amitabh Bachchan, and now, the husband of Jaya.

Nevertheless, Chitra wasn’t one to lie low. She now had to sing with the letter N, arising out of the sound of the very last word, *dhadkan*, meaning heartbeat. And this time, she again selected one of Jaya’s songs, and now, from the famous film...Abhimaan.

“Nadiya kinare...herai...aayi kangnaa...”

“Oh shit...” I mused; I’ll also have to sing with the letter N, songs which I thought was always hard to come by.

I stared at Mika who was on my side. I wanted him to lend a hand badly, and the aid which most unexpectedly came too in the form of this funny song, sung and enacted by the renowned comedian, Mehmood

“...Naa biwi naa bachha...naa baap badaa naa maiya...the whole thing is that...ki Sabse bada Rupaiya...”

Entire crowd, including Raju, burst into peals of laughter, to hear Mika sing this comical song, and that too imitating the foghorn voice of Mehmood. Above and beyond, it was satire, the truth of the moment of present times, which the whole world ran after money: money that had taken precedence over anything else, even one’s own kith and kin.

Nonetheless, it was Chitra who ultimately brought the open house into its senses by singing a thoughtful song, from beginning to end. Coincidentally, it was pictured upon the demure Jaya, and once again from the film...Abhimaan.

“Ab toh hai tumse, harr khushi apni...tum pe marnaa hai, zindagi apni...”

True, matters were really getting serious, I pondered, because this point in time, I was sure that the lyrics were intended for me, English translations running as follows

Gratification of mine, I now am obligated to you; my life is preordained, only to head off loving you...

Wow...! I smiled, and decided to call it quits. After all, one, I got filled with love for the doe-eyed Chitra, and two, I was again handed over the letter N, a seemingly thorny alphabet, to hit upon a proper song. I gave up, declaring, *“Haari...!”*

All around, there was applause and clapping for Chitra; boo and hooting for me. At the time I was vanquished, I became blissful, especially to find the doe-eyed Chitra’s countenance, shimmering in exuberance.

Chapter 33

Ek Duje Ke Liye

I was in the interior of an electric elevator, accompanied by none other than the *Khoobsurat* flower-girl, Latha. I caught her carrying money plant in a marmalade glass bottle. It concerned us, I guessed. And I bet I looked modish in a pair of titanium white trousers, sap green tee, alienated by a belt, again white in dye.

And her archetypal glances, her *drishtis*...O my...!

Staring into her large and expressive eyes, I couldn't help but admire her *pavada davani* adorned by way of beautiful floral patterns. Upper eyelids of her kept plummeting, her pupils lowered bashfully too, at the same time as her lashes congregating in a *lajjita drishti*.

My eyes met hers, out of the blue, I don't know when, resting upon her breasts, hard and full

She at the moment singed in *anuvritta drishti*, sizing me up and down, irately, but at the same time, time after time, glancing at me. In the course of action she repeatedly took a note of me, my intentions. Obligated to take my intrusive eyes off her, in sheer gentlemanliness, I then placed them upon her dangler earrings, floral in nature.

Thank goodness at this moment in time, her reaction of resentment altered into something apprehensive. Despite the fact that there was sort of a friendly invitation in her glance, she was still full of hesitation, as if in *sankita drishti*. Her expressions were in a transitory state; her concealed glances once moved, and once at rest.

Smiling at her obliquely open eyes, her timid eyeballs, I was getting somewhat exasperated that I wasn't even allowed to gaze at her earrings.

"Uff, these females...!" I exclaimed to myself. "I'm not even allowed to think a lot of her earrings, and then what else do I do in this little space of the elevator, almost not having a depth of 8 feet...?"

No sooner did I take my eyes off her floral dangler earrings, the lights went off. I heard a shriek. It was a feminine shriek. It was Latha's.

Famed Otis elevator of Connecticut, USA stood at a standstill, no more than a strong beam of light appearing from side to side the glass ventilator of the elevator door. I adjusted my eyes, groggy, finally visualizing Latha's ravishing silhouette.

Starting the corner where I was standing, I ambled up to her in baby steps, just stopping short where my breathing matched hers. Somewhat dead on my tracks as a result of her mixed bag of glances: *lajjita*, *anuvritta*, *sankita*, or whatever, I just wanted to touch her, feel her femininity, and not being encountered by her bashfulness, anger, or apprehension...

I inched closer to her, but then she distanced her countenance, almost hitting the sign No Smoking on the wooden panel board of the elevator.

What to boot for me except than to break into a playful grin, and drone this current song of Kamalhaasan's film...Ek Duj ke Liye...having Latha to shore me up...?

Merey Jeevan Saathi

Pyaar Kiye Jaa...

To finish, she broke into a beam by way of appreciative glances and hooted, "Wah...! Wah...!"

Unquestionably I became excited, "Haan...! Haan...!" Repeatedly I put forth yet more notable film titles

Merey Jeevan Saathi

Pyaar Kiye Jaa...

Jawaani Deewani

At this instant she retorted by uttering, "O ho...!" taking cognizance of the fact that my youthfulness was getting crazy about her. I offered broad grins imitating last Friday's film's ticklish lyrics, in the midst of hitherto added titles of noteworthy films packed into it

Khoobsurat

Ziddi

Padosan...

Satyam Shivam Sundaram

I repeated by way of flamboyance the last one, spiritual yet sensual film of Raj Kapoor, wherein appeared ample body exposure

Satyam Shivam Sundaram

Satyam Shivam Sundaram...

Latha grimaced, and she tried to flit across from one corner to another behaving like an incarcerated rabbit. I blocked her way, my Elvace brown desert boot balanced tightly against the paneled walls. Her enagement was mounting, and so was her introversion.

She'd become as vulnerable as one of the mistresses of *Louis le bein aime*, Louis XV, Louis the Beloved, Monarch from the House of Bourbon of France, who commissioned a so-called similar Flying chair at the *Chateau de Versailles*.

...It was alleged that Madame de Pompadour who had met Louis XV in mid-18th century at a masked ball, was the one who largely guided the King in his unsurpassed architectural and interior designing forays.

A striking woman, famed for her hairstyle where the hair at the front was brushed up into a mound or a roll above the forehead, she was also considered erudite, gifted, and attached to the king from the bottom of heart.

Nonetheless, she possessed one major shortcoming in everyone's eyes: she was a commoner, of the bourgeois society, and even worse, one who meddled in royal affairs.

More than her hairstyle which later came to be known as pompadour, I wondered whether this development was something similar to what was happening in the interior of this elevator, a guy from the upper class wooing somebody living rough, I wondered in consternation.

But why would Latha like to meddle into my business affairs, of which she knew not anything. She'd no inclination how loaded was I and how much wealth would be supplementary in future.

My song in progress, borrowed from the soloist S.P. Balasubrahmanyam, continued in the midst of film titles thus far, my eager face reflecting all the

way through an unpretentious mirror, my private version of Venetian mirror fixed in my own opulent Versailles Palace.

At this juncture, there wasn't any silver furniture, elevator being barren, except for a young hot twosome out to outdo each other; one in his vociferous aggression, and the second in her hushed rebuff.

Yet I thought we were, if truth be told

Made For Each Other

So what we didn't speak similar languages, she spoke Tamil and me Bengali...!

My stray thoughts stopped up along with Latha's peals of laughter as suddenly the elevator started moving. Yes, lights had resumed, probably much to Latha's respite and my disquiet.

All of a sudden, the door of the lift opened into a lobby of the 3rd floor, and which also served as a connecting link to the various spaces of our office. Much to my embarrassment, I found Jagmohan and Mr. Kapoor waiting alongside several staff members and surprised to see me and the flower-girl emerging by way of diverse feedback.

Jagmohan looked down in reticence while Mr. Kapoor passed on a roguish grin. "Banjo, how long was you inside the elevator with er...?"

He stopped short staring at the floral patterns of her *pavada damani* and then at the marmalade glass bottle. "O Latha please comes inside...!"

On the right of the lobby was a glass door that opened into the visitor's lounge of the office. This could be well defined as a space having minimal design and straight line furniture. Quite a bit of get-up-and-go came out from this area.

Why not...? Loaded leather couches were set in the midst of interesting artifacts, wall pieces and lighting fixtures, which lent an aura of their own to this lounge. Usage of glass flooring, interesting effects of lighting added a rich feel to the space.

After all this was a part of famed Kumarr House of Kanpur

Mr. Kapoor ushered in Latha and offered her couch space while at the same time asking me to enter his uncovered cubicle. These cubicles had been so

arranged as to make the most of the natural light from the windows along the long side of the hall. There were built-in wall cupboards at the top, in the spaces over windows, and below also. Each of these cubicles contained a set of table and chairs, depending on their use, as expected.

He beckoned me to take a seat.

In the interim, Latha enquired about the women's washroom and he directed one of our female staffs to guide her. I was sitting across Mr. Kapoor's desk and he began to ask me how I was and whether I was enjoying life. "Enjoying life, aha...!"

I could well understand that his question was in fact directed towards Latha who everybody could agree was looking ravishing. I stammered a bit, "I'm fine, thank you..."

"Okay Banjo, you know our firm M/s Bharat Kumarr & Co. has so far taken up a dozen agencies from Italy and this division is principally under me. These agencies are apart what we offer out of British and American companies, which mostly your Dad controls...!"

I could apprehend that owing to fluency in Italian Mr. Kapoor was hired by our company. Exclusively, he had to confer with *Signor Zani* of M/s Zani SpA, among others. And English, being our familiar language since colonial era, Dad didn't find it complex to deal with companies that spoke this universal language, Italian was singular.

Save for this passionate tongue, Italian was an atypical language in India and only selected few were sentient of it. On my part, I always imagined that this rare language was fashioned by the populace who needed it to articulate them ingeniously.

"Was Mr. Kapoor one of them...?"

No wonder writers and poets shaped its style and vocabulary over centuries, through beauty and sound as some of its key reflections as found in the era poems of Dante, enigmatic poems of Petrarch, or distinctive writings of Boccaccio.

Right now, my eyes wandered to the delightful spine of a book set aside in the orderly library ledge at the rear of Mr. Kapoor, and which titled

Origine Della danza classica

Among a great range of books on Italy, my eyes had spotted this particular one: “Mr. Kapoor, may I borrow this captivating book, *Origine...*!”

“O sure, my pleasure Banjo, but how come you’re interested in Ballet dance...?”

I blushed at his banter remembering the grounds of my coming here. True, it was Dad who wanted me to join his office, time and again to pick up nuances of the trade. Therefore, Dad had requested Mr. Sahani, Mr. Kapoor and other officials to provide me ample apprenticeship.

Commit to memory, my learning of Commerce in school too were a move towards my grounding. I was here to come to grips amid sedate topics such as Product Sourcing, Exports and Imports, Sales and Marketing, apart from Accountancy, Taxation and Law, and here see, I was asking for a book on Ballet.

Astonishing

I’d no clue as to why I was interested in Ballet and that too Ballet dance in Italy...? Was it because of doe-eyed Chitra Sahani’s interest in Italian Art and Culture, or the *Khoobsurat* Latha’s interest in dances, I wasn’t clear in my mind...?

At the same time as thinking of Latha, I found her approaching me and indistinctly rubbing her palms over a dainty kerchief, which she then tucked inside her *lehenga*. I greeted her by means of a smile, staring wide-eyed at the tucking of her kerchief and speaking almost inaudibly

“Don’t know why females like to tuck each and everything to their waist, are they that possessive, right from kerchiefs to keys to their men...

...Ha...ha...mmm...?”

“Yes Banjo, I guess you’ve certain noiseless questions in your psyche regarding tucking my kerchief...? Well, in Tamil this syndrome is known as *talapula mudichikarudu*, any dilemma...?”

I went red in the face to hear out such protracted jargon and therefore broke into a grin on the double. Mr. Kapoor also shared my smirk. Discreetly, he asked for the money plant that Latha had brought along. He quickly grabbed it from where she’d kept back and safely transferred it to a classy American Corning glass jar.

“Mr. Kapoor, don’t forget it to place where you’ve indirect sunlight and please change water every 2-3 days, no more, remember its monsoon time...?”

Mr. Kapoor responded, “Sure, Latha. You may also please collect your monthly dues from our cashier, Adhit ji...?”

Now, what to speak about Adhit ji...?

Adhit ji was our new cashier who’d migrated from Visakhapatnam, who I found entering into a frisky conversation with juvenile Latha. “Latha dear, I heard that Banjo baba was in a musical mood in the present day. Loud and clear I could have the sense of hearing...*Satyam Shivam Sundaram*...!”

Latha grimaced throwing momentary glance at me and then at Mr. Kapoor, at the same time as asking Adith ji to continue by way of his assigned task and not put up thwarting inquiries. Nevertheless, that fellow sustained: “Sorry, tell me dear...! But you know I’d seen you at the cinema hall in the company of lot of friends...”

Latha lost her cool and somewhat in a raised voice: “Yes, I’d gone there on a Wednesday, 5th of August in the current year of 1981...Umm...to be precise, on the *Panchami* day of bright fortnight of the Lunar month of *Shravan*, of *Vikram Samvat* 2038...

...Why, wasn’t it the same day as that of *Nag Panchami* when it was pitilessly problematical to negotiate the number of snake charmers displaying noxious crawling creatures on way to a Shiva temple..?

...Any other queries Adhit ji...?”

Entire staff members nested in the contemporary hall amidst cubicles burst into hilarity at Latha’s exhaustive riposte. I could sense that she’d started feeling mighty irritated at Adhit ji’s nosey incursions. But then I’d quite heard of Adhit ji, the middle-aged guy’s comic sense of timing.

In response to Latha’s snub, he convoluted his countenance much like a contortionist, pulling down his russet bifocal eyeglasses, and a great deal auxiliary amusement to all. Latha was aghast to catch me grinning...!

Next, Adhit ji re-adjusted his bifocal lenses, and twitching his nostrils started looking up her accounts detail. He, I think, as a final point, started

calculating all supplies of flower arrangements to our office as well as to our residence in right earnest.

Yet, halfway through his adding up, most of it doing aloud chronicles of roses...chrysanthemums...gerberas...he broke into further conversations: “Ek Duje Ke Liye is a remake of...Maro Charita...made in Telegu by the same director of repute, K. Balachandar...”

Later than these goings-on, Latha was taken aback to take in his loquaciousness. I excused myself away from Mr. Kapoor’s desk, Product Sourcing, Export and Import data *etc.*, walking over to where she was perched. Nonetheless, Adith ji was in no mood to pull out of his conversation.

Staring at me he continued, “The film was shot in the port city of southeast where I lived, Visakhapatnam...”

Adith ji was almost over and done with squaring up Latha’s accounts, the sum total which contented me. Appreciating his competence, I smiled. “And what else, Adith ji...?”

“Well, in my state of Andhra, the film ran for as much as 450 days; in Bangalore 10 months...” Latha had at last started taking pleasure in his *tête-à-tête* while signing out a receipt.

“And in my home state of Tamil Nadu, Adith ji...?”

Adith ji was now more than happy to hand her over the cheque and at the same time relishing the notion that couple of youngsters were charily taking note of his tales. “Double, yes double the numbers that of Bangalore, my dear...!” He replied in hushed tones, Dear being his irksome catchphrase...!

I could feel that Adith ji had become rapturous, recounting such minute marketable minutiae about Maro Charita. I could also feel that he’d taken a fondness for Latha and her comeliness. More so, she hailed from the South, a pronounced weakness of his...!

Latha had over again turned tad antagonistic, “Adith ji, very much likes expert accountant you’ve enumerated full data of box-office collections, but have coolly forgotten to impress upon the core subject, unfruitful love...!”

My head turned towards her, my eyes turning moist. Spot on, weren’t these stories agonizing, based upon cross-cultural differences across

India...?How young couples madly in love with each other face opposition coming from their own guardians whom they bestow trust upon...? And how undying love even defies death, turning it immortal...?

These and many such doubts hit my adolescent mind as I shakily got up. Latha also pulled out her chair, bit uneasy. Briefly we looked into each other's eyes. She got quite anxious to find my eyes damp.

She hesitated for a moment, her hand hovering near mine as if unsure whether to offer comfort or keep her distance. But then, with a soft, almost imperceptible sigh, she gently reached out, her touch grounding me in the overwhelming silence between us.

Wander off feelings hot and bothered us as we proceeded to take leave

I wasn't in mood to continue my lessons in the company of Mr. Kapoor, Kamalhaasan's emotive films pouring into my brain. What if something analogous came to pass...? What if instead of those guardians, it was my own Dad...?

But then, is Dad that hardhearted...?

No, I didn't think so, but then what if the entrant was someone like Latha...? Would Dad ever accept her as his daughter-in-law...? But first let me check whether at all Latha was in love with me, residual issues afterward...

As we stepped towards the door, a wave of uncertainty crashed over me – what if the bonds that held me together, the trust I had in my Dad, were really as fragile as the stories I had seen unfold in such movies...? I tried to shake off the thoughts, but they clung to me, wondering if Latha even shared the same feelings, or if I was merely crafting fantasies in my restless mind, the weight of unspoken questions heavy on my heart.

Since Dad was away on a business tour, I didn't feel the need to climb to the topmost 6th floor where he held his office. Hence, I bade Mr. Kapoor, my host, goodbye. I also nodded my head towards Adith ji, who signaled me to sit for some more time. “Banjo baba, you know, I've been asked by Mr. Sahani to look into the accounts of your Grant kaka...!”

I did not utter a single word as I never wanted to get in midst of any argument *vis-à-vis* Grant kaka and Dad. By the way, I recalled what his point was...?

“Bharat, I’m sure you’ll appreciate the fact that I’ve mislaid an adequate amount of Interest towards Dad’s Capital, the new scooter plausibly not being passable recompense...

Why, the rate of interest used to be a measly 4 percent in and around 1957...Whereas, as you know in past 2 decades, it has surged to 9 percent, forecast to escalate yet further...?”

Dad, nonplussed at his brother’s mordant Interest computation, had searched for words, “Grant da, please don’t worry, I’ll direct our trusted attorney, Om Prakash Sahani, to once again delve into this part of bookkeeping and tackle the issue at the earliest...”

On his part, Sahani uncle had subsequently delegated the task to Adith ji, who’d found the pecuniary claims as ridiculous. Right in front of me he talked to his senior over telephone and squashed such absurdities, “Sir, I confirm there aren’t any remaining dues...”

Restless at night, remembering my ambling up to Latha in baby steps, just stopping short where my breathing matched hers, I opened the book on Ballet dance

Ballet originated as a formalized Italian Renaissance Court dance that originated in the 15th century. Noblemen and women were treated by way of lavish events, especially wedding celebrations, where dancing and music created an elaborate spectacle. Inter-marriages of Italians and French helped ballet to spread to France. Dancing masters taught the steps to the nobility, and the Court participated in the performances.

Further, in the 16th century, Catherine de' Medici, an Italian noblewoman, wife of King Henry II of France and a great patron of the arts, began to fund ballet in the French Court. Her highly structured festivals encouraged the growth of *ballet de cour*, a program that included dance, décor, costume, song, music and poetry.

Chapter 34

Silsila

Most of the night I was thinking about Latha and her exquisiteness

In the morning I began walking through our large rockery behind the main structure of the villa, and which boasted of a moat, waterfalls and even a walk-through cave. Whilst walking through the cave I began chanting her name Latha, and which further echoed into

Latha...Lathaa...Lathaaa...

I could effortlessly detect the couple of dwarf palm trees that seemed to be afloat in the moat. Whenever I watched them they seem to grow by few millimeters, or, were they sheer figments of imagination...? From where the hell concentric rings of bright golden fern and croton vanish...? Must be that DK had done away with them.

Continuously intoning Latha...Lathaa... I couldn't help be pleased about how the pools led to the moat, flowing under a drain via a pebbled watercourse, finally to end in a basin where it again captivated. In the present day I found the watercourse bit turbulent, thanks to August rains, analogous to my sensations...

My animated frame of mind, without doubt, transformed into something engaging to find the lawns beyond the drain relatively preserved by way of luxuriant bermuda grass, but which were bit intense, and dying for a slice.

I slowed down at the 5-feet wide brick pathway through the out of the ordinary grassy mounds, again which appeared puffed-up. And this doubtlessly invited me to jog over this cushiony terrazzo...

In a little while, the floor girded by rosy columns and deep red acalypha bushes was looking dramatic against the backdrop of the green lawn. But hey, what's this, garlic...? I now really laughed at DK's ingenuity for having planted garlic. So instead of Gas plant, it was now time for garlic...!

I prayed and hoped this garlic would lessen impairment to the environment as a result of DK's galactic releases, during the much-elongated twilights.

My own mind's eye, followed by jolliness and feelings for Latha, augmented my jogging speed, till I happened to chance once again one of the most charming maidens attending to a flower bed. Precisely it was Latha, in a crouch.

Yes, I made no oversight. Unmindful of me she stood up. I could now see her more clearly; her thighs and cheeks appeared plump.

“Lathaaaaaaa...!”

I couldn't help run up to her and hugging her tightly. Looking cautiously here and there out of the blue I kissed her upon her cheeks. She went red in the face. “Banjo, go away...”

I too blushed. Was this my first kiss, I wondered...? I was ecstatic...! I found her cheeks so soft and full of meaning. I looked at her intently, unearthing her as a bonanza in this wilderness.

“Who has given you permission to kiss me...?”

“Well no one, I wanted to touch you, Latha please...”

Exclusive of any warning I happened to lay a hand upon her breasts, which I found so hard and full. Yet again, for the first time I'd touched somebody's breasts, albeit impulsively. Truth be told, they were so inviting...!

Long time ago I remembered I'd accidentally groped Jane Diaz's soft breasts under the bed and how she'd shrieked.

...I accidentally had clawed at her breasts over her lemon-colored sleeveless smock frock. She was alarmed and had screamed in a muffled sound

Noooooooo

...I then couldn't help noticing her lemon-colored sleeveless smock frock absorbedly, ogling over the same spot where I'd accidentally clawed, they were swelled from both sides amid her 3rd stage of puberty...

Latha covered her face in coyness looking the other way till she heard a discrete voice calling out my name

“Banjo, Banjo, where are you...?”

All of a sudden Latha and I were stunned to find a young girl amble towards us. I could now distinctly recognize her, she was Chitra...!

I was at a loss of words. One moment I wanted to feel Latha for a second time, but on seeing Chitra, the very next moment, I'd shriveled. Out of breath, I looked at the doe-eyed Chitra and couldn't help but marvel at her uncovered cleavage peeping through her see-through *dupatta*.

Staring ruefully at Latha and then her hand clutching gladioli and gerbera, Chitra broke

"Buongiorno, signor Banjo, Como stai...? Sei occupato...?"

"Yesssss...Nnnnoooo...!" I stammered, unable to decipher her Italian turn of phrase.

I beckoned my charming guest to the wisteria-festooned pergola. She perched upon one of the wrought iron chairs, green in color, brushing off her blue crepe *salwar suit* from the underside, and carelessly placing a novel over the wrought iron table.

Latha tried to excuse herself eyeing the title on the cover page

The Heart of a Woman

Umm...what was it all about I started guessing...? Likely, it was exploring about the complexities of a woman's emotional landscape, or delving into themes such as love, identity, resilience, and the struggles she faces in balancing personal desires with societal expectations.

I intervened, "Latha hang around she's Chitra Sahani, daughter of Sahani uncle, my Dad's colleague. And what's more she's a versatile artist...!"

"Nice to meet, I've chores to attend. Why don't you both carry on...?" I was at a loss by Latha's evident disgruntlement to go on with a lady friend of mine.

Chitra looked into my bewildered eyes and offered a sassy smile, "You didn't introduce her...*lei e molto bella...*!"

I finished in one single breath my introductions that she was Latha and since beginning she'd been part of Kumarr family. And that it was my Mom who'd picked her up and sent her to dance classes.

It was now time for Latha to grin at my bewilderment. Self-assuredly she pulled a chair facing us. “Banjo, by now you must’ve finished reading the book on Ballet dance, *Origine Della danza classica*, which you borrowed from Mr. Kapoor at the office...?”

I was at this moment flabbergasted at Latha’s forthrightness and Italianness

I wanted to blurt out something but then stopped short once I heard sounds of grandpa with big mustaches approaching us and entering all the way through our aesthetic garden. “Is that you Latha...O Chitra...Banjo...?”

Latha and Chitra promptly got up to touch the feet of grandpa. He graciously accepted their wishes endorsing cheeky smiles towards me: “Latha, I just overheard something in Italian, something relating to dance...?”

“Yes grandpa, Banjo is reading a book on dance Ballet...!”

“I see it must be that Banjo has lately developed interest in dances. Chitra my dear, are you aware that this attractive flower-seller girl Latha is an accomplished dancer to boot. It was Banjo’s mom who’d got her initiated in *Bharatnatyam* classes...”

“That’s fantastic grandpa, Banjo just now mentioned...!” Chitra replied courteously, nodding her cranium in concurrence and thinking out loud the *raison d’être* for my taking interest in Ballet dance not long.

“And yes, make out those wonderful flowers in our garden, well, Latha is a big contributor to these...!” Latha extended a sugary smile thanking DK for his positive handling.

Chitra on the other hand deprecatingly cornered me, my random infatuations

One time I was found staring at her doe-like eyes and the next moment I was admiring her familiar Beauty Blue nail polish. Absent-mindedly I tried to touch her finger tips, withdrawing instantaneously. Was I inadvertently pulling away from her...?

I repeated this feat much to Chitra’s exasperation, bafflement of Latha... “Banjo, what all things you gathered from your new-found interest...?” Chitra asked over civilly.

I fumbled for sentences, stammering startlingly, “Well Chitra, Bbballet originated as a formalized Itt...Italian Renaissance Cccourt dance in the 15th century...Inter-marriages of Italians and French helped ballet to spread to France. Further, in the 16th century, Cath...Catherine de’ Medici, wife of King Henry II of Fffrance began to fund ballet in the Frrrench Cccourt...”

I tried to summarize whatever little I’d deliberated last night. I waited for the grouping surrounding me to act in response. I was glad to come across contended looks, especially from Chitra, a connoisseur in Italian arts and culture. In all probability, I knew she would barge in by way of her add-ons, keeping my hottest find Latha in mind

“...And then a century afterward, King Louis XIV of France helped to popularize and homogenize the art form...

I was happy when she sustained, “A passionate dancer, he performed many roles himself, including that of the Sun King in *Ballet de la nuit*. His love for ballet fostered its elevation from a pastime for amateurs to an undertaking requiring professional schooling...

...Further validating his underlying principle, in time, the monarch founded a couple of grand institutions, which proved to be driving events in the evolution of Ballet dance. I’m sure Banjo would gear up, doing stuff comparable...!”

We all were dumbfounded to hear Chitra speak out. I was certain she must’ve understood writing of this particular hardback, or else, how on earth did she spell out exact lines pertaining to Ballet, Art being her picking, not Ballet...?

Her unremitting taunts a propos my posturing as a benefactor of Ballet dance to please Latha astounded me as well

When I asked her to clear my doubts, she confirmed that she’d never gone through any book on Ballet or the monarch, but hit upon tidbit regarding his Italian-born godfather, his chief minister too, and one who’d taught the young king about everything from statesmanship and power to history and the arts...?

So that’s it. I sustained, “Chitra, I recall what you’d mentioned about architecture of Venice, located in northeastern part of Italy, and as to how at the start the styles were primarily Venetian Byzantine, later was altering

into typical Venetian Gothic. And that it was only after successive years that Renaissance came around...”

Latha offered a startled look, DK nodding at hindsight, and reflecting: “O my goodness, Chitra, you happen to be acquainted by way of tremendous knowledge, and I kept wondering that anything connected to Italian architecture had to be Renaissance...?”

“True grandpa, this was exactly what on one occasion I’d asked Chitra...”
I agreed.

Latha looked at me appallingly, casting an objectionable glance towards Chitra: “And when was that occasion you got interested in Italian architecture...?”

Latha’s eyes popped out what time Chitra unequivocally replied that the occurrence was in the interior of a dark cinema hall. Antagonistically, she even disclosed the Amitabh starrer film to be

The Great Gambler

Finding me sandwiched in between two belligerent females DK snorted, staring at me pokerfaced. Quick on my foot I confirmed that though I’d gone to watch the movie in the company of Chitra, her younger brothers had tagged along.

Putting forward as substantiation, I turned towards Chitra amid acquiescent looks, inquiring about them. I was quite taken aback at what time she made a face and banged her palms upon the novel by Mary Angelou.

I guessed, in the present day she must’ve been at odds with ‘em, for their nonstop effrontery, their disruptive deeds... “*Non ho nessun fratello...!*”

Everybody exclaimed pardon...! Chitra was all too pleased to translate this disagreeable phrase into English

I do not have any brother

Noticing fireworks, DK lighted up the conversation: “You know guys why at all have I sown garlic all over...?”

At this instant it was time for me to pull out a wry expression. DK would in a little while start off by means of his typical *tête-à-tête*, furthermore leading to what not, that too I could envisage...

“Looking at you guys, whenever I think about my interlude in Rangoon, I vividly remember my snack time to be at 4 pm or so. And the most I would look forward to was slurping of *See-chat-Khawt*...”

On my part, I couldn’t comprehend as to why these girls, especially Chitra, were acting so mannerly as a result that DK could stumble upon an opening to prop up his gastronomic yarn

“...It was all about slippery strands of noodles tossed in heady garlic oil with a touch of white pepper apart from salt to taste. Take note Chitra, *See-chat-Khawt* may be compared to the Italian spaghetti *Aglio e Olio*, the pasta dish hailing from Naples, but I think this is much more aromatic, what with anise and mushroom powder as supplements, and cooked in varied soy sauce flavors, deep salty and sticky sweet dark, in cooperation...”

“O wow grandpa, you’re an authentic chef I must say...!” Chitra complimented him, much to his back-up. I mutely shared with Latha the verity that the moment twilight struck, sirens stirring the peaceful neighborhood would get underway.

How, we both knew well that Chitra was unaware of DK’s bass sound bites, at times sounding like a sousaphone, the large brass wind instrument, similar in range to the tuba...?

I had to cut in asking why it was necessary to plant garlic instead of Gas plant. DK had a ready answer

“All right Banjo, now that you’re taking interest in my pastime of gardening, I would like to speak out that the garlic oil that I draw on this Burmese fare is home cooked. All the time, my endeavor is to guarantee exact flavor and texture so that the upshot of the snack remains all-time lip-smacking...!”

I thought I would at this instant pale at DK’s narrative as regards garlic oil. Latha was also found fidgeting edges of her *pavada damini*. Yet, Chitra was resplendently engrossed in DK’s talk as she further probed: “Grandpa, I’m sure there must be definite hush-hush to the garlic oil...”

Now this was getting too much and I had to intervene. Just imagine ballet to garlic oil...! I told I think we must get inside as Chitra intended to offer certain ideas on interior designing. Latha was also getting behind schedule

and remarked: “Nice meeting you Chitra take care, hope we meet sometime again...”

“It all depends upon Banjo as he remains quite in a world of his own. More to the point I’m sure you must’ve become aware of Jane Diaz, Rajshree, Bobby Mohan, and the rest by now...!”

Beyond doubt I was caught unawares at Chitra’s diatribe. What was she up to...? Was she trying to take out every damn skeleton out of my cupboard or was she simply putting Latha off the race...?

DK too confirmed that he was acquainted with one Jane Diaz, and in particular her Dad, Michael Diaz, whom he’d, got reinstated at Mill No. 2 of M/s Allen Textile Mills Limited.

Shortly after he excused himself by way of these concluding clarifications: “Chitra, true there’s a secret to my recipe of garlic oil: in the extra virgin olive oil, duly heated up, after I crash those whole garlic heads, I add a quantity of fresh rosemary...”

Straightaway that reminded me of Miss Wadia, assuming her to have been draped in rosemary, much like the Greek goddess Aphrodite, whilst she rose from the sea. “O Chitra, then you has missed out on Miss Wadia, school’s flight of my imagination...!” I replied in a state of insurgence.

Here, I was cornered by two females and I’d no other option but to battle it out. Latha was taken aback. And so was Chitra, at my brazenness. Yet she was the one quick to respond, “Now who is this Miss Wadia...?...

...You know I’m sentient of the piece of information that in all Banjos prefers 8-1/2 maidens...*otto e mezza fanciulle*...quite inspired by Vedanta mama’s favorite Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini, are I right...?”

This point in time I cared not to come back with. Let them wrack their brains, find about Miss Wadia, and the way I am

Yet, past postmortem of my love life at hand, I was convinced I’d nothing further to put in the wrong place. All I’d to proffer was a sporty smirk. I was in no doubt that in all probability it would be the closing stages of relationship with not only Latha but also Chitra.

How could any level-headed Sheila stomach a guy who wished-for a dozen loves within the confines of his so-called extra-large spirit...? More to the point, who in the world can put up with such shenanigans of the heart...?

Anyways, I wondered what must be Latha going through...? Why, few moments ago it was just her and me...? Truly, as good as the punch line of the movie...Ek Duje Ke Liye...

Made For Each Other

...After that came along Chitra Sahani. Chitra too wasn't and no-one else. Along with her trotted in Jane Diaz, Rajshree, and Bobby Mohan...!

Furthermore DK...ugh...! Just look at his impudence so as to corroborate Jane Diaz affair end to end. Who'd endorsed him to spill the beans...? Wasn't it to a certain extent unmerited and unpalatable...? Except it was my entire slipup, I should've permitted him to go on with his *See-chat-Khawt...etc.*

Above and beyond, wasn't it me who unnecessarily reacted upon the word rosemary...? Why couldn't I keep my trap shut and not bring in one more damsels, Miss Wadia...?

All these and many more viewpoints crossed my psyche, which in all likelihood mirrored upon my furrowed countenance. To tell the truth, this modest catfight had jolted me inside out. Perhaps the gals must've felt the same and wanting to stop their punishment.

Yes, I had been put in the doghouse, punished mentally, by these female friends. They were wounded and had to justify their inconsiderateness. At the same time I wanted their approval for my behavior, from my point of view so natural and so full of empathy and love towards each and every girl I knew. I was hurt that they didn't approve of my multiple relationships.

But before long, they became tad amenable and resolute in grabbing hold a softer line. For the reason that, the moment I started off on foot, I found Latha quietly brushing off her hard breasts against my shoulders, Chitra entangling her Beauty Blue fingers within mine for few heavenly moments...

~

Chitra was thinking aloud her own dreams of re-doing Anupriya Villa. She was also aware that grandpa with big mustaches desired the *tehkhana* to be re-done. “How I wished that somebody helped me to get over the eerie feeling of the *tehkhana* into something more practical, more aesthetic...?”

“Certainly Banjo I would think of something vivid for the *tehkhana* as desired by your grandpa but right now something is cropping up inside my head regarding your garden, which I visited just now; it could be a replica of a famous fountain of Rome...!”

“Why, in your beautiful landscaped garden, you can recreate something as out of this world as Bernini’s creations, hailing on or after Baroque era, something like *Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi*, located inside the historic Rome. And where gardens were concerned, Latha could be of immense assistance...?” Chitra suggested understatedly.

Questioningly I stared at Chitra, getting to feel her up-and-coming rancor towards Latha

Silsilas galore

Faintly grinning, I gripped her fingers tighter, while she continued to elaborate

“Well, the pedestal of this fountain in Rome is a basis from the center of which travertine rocks rise up in opulence to prop up 4 river gods belonging to their respective continents. These display animals and plants that carry forth further identification, as well as bear certain number of allegories and metaphors to it...”

I was impressed by the allegories and metaphors attached to these

“Nile’s extended head is draped by way of a slack piece of cloth, the close at hand Danube touches the Pope’s personal coat of arms, Rio de la Plata perches upon a pile of silvery coins while the Ganges carry a long oar, and which represents the river’s navigability...!”

However, feeling let down and accused for having more than a few relationships at the same points in time, entirely different sets of images and metaphors knocked my juvenile head

...Probing Nile in the waterfalls within the expansive gardens of Anupriya Villa could be similar when I found Latha near to our moat, which flows

under a drain via a pebbled watercourse, finally to end in a basin where it again captivates.

...Dancing away to glory along with *Fraulein Wadia* in...*An der schonen blauen Donau*, or, By The Beautiful Blue Danube, a waltz composed by the Austrian composer Johann Strauss II inside our wisteria-festooned pergola, the piece picked up by none other than Stanley Kubrick in his 1968 movie

2001: A Space Odyssey

...Rio de la Plata, reminding me of charming Jane Diaz and her identifiable Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan who'd briefly explored the estuary in South America before his expedition sustained its circumnavigation. Further, wasn't it Magellan who'd stepped into the shores of Goa, Konkani roots of my dear friend Jane Diaz...?

...And Ganges, ah, pristine and pure, much like walking through the walk-through caves, the eyes of fair and doe-eyed Chitra, and one who woke me up from my mind's eye. "Hello, where are you lost Banjo, into the charms of Latha...?"

"Umm maybe yes...!"

I couldn't help but keep in mind the character Amit, the emerging writer and playwright in Yash Chopra's latest film, *Silsila*, enacted by none other than the current heart-throb Amitabh Bachchan – who marries Jaya but secretly rekindle romance in the company of his old flame, *Khoobsurat* Rekha - strolling hand-in-hand not in the gardens of Anupriya Villa, but in the middle of stunning Keukenhof gardens of The Netherlands, millions of tulips showy and brightly-colored as onlookers, and crooning

*Meraa dil hai terii panaahon mein...
aa chhupa luun tujhe mein baahon mein
...Teri tasveer hai nigaahon mein
duur tak roshni hai raahon mein...
Kal agar naa roshni ke kaafiley huye
pyaar ke hazaar deepp hain jaley huye
...Dekha ek khwaab toh yeh Silsile huye...*

Chapter 35

Angoor Ki Tasiir

Background narration by me, Banjo

“It is a story of Jane, my classmate and dearest friend...” I spoke as if I was reading aloud *The Prodigal Daughter*, written by Jeffrey Archer. It was a tale of return and redemption, where a young woman seeks to reconcile with her past, confronting personal choices, family dynamics, and the journey toward forgiveness and self-discovery.

“...Well in Jane’s life matters didn’t materialize the manner I’d imagined. Even though couple of years had elapsed since her Mom Mrs. Pinks expired, things weren’t very normal at her end. She just couldn’t concentrate upon her studies...”

In fact, during these 2 years, her Pop Mr. Michael Diaz had hit the bottle; half the time he couldn’t attend work at the factory. It was Jane who felt the pressure, pressure of household chores, which incorporated cleaning, washing, cooking.

Cleaning even included the vomit of her Pop whenever he had surfeit of his pet whisky, the Bagpiper, nowadays his Water of Life...!

I couldn’t even place blame squarely upon the shoulders of Mr. Diaz, as he on the whole was mere simpleton; his imperfection being an uxorious of a man, incredibly fond of his wife. With no Mrs. Pinks around, he’d broken down.

Distinct from my Dad who basically was businesslike and one who’d also lost his wife, my Mom, slowly but surely he’d learnt how to cope up with the hammering...! Mr. Diaz on the other hand was by far a high-spirited, an over-emotional person. He just couldn’t handle his lonesomeness...”

End of my narration and beginning of the Play

~

Act 1

Jane, one day at the school...“Banjo, yesterday pop slapped me hard for not allowing him his never-ending pegs of whisky; he just can’t do without that spirit, distilled from malted grain. What’s more, he’s ruining his finances, his health. I think I’ll soon have to quit school...!”

Now this was something grave as we were preparing hard for our forthcoming Board examinations of Intermediate. Whichever category of catastrophe could cost her studies, her career. Unlike me who’d taken a liking to Commerce, Jane wasn’t faring well. Her Accountancy, her Economics, among other subjects was below the qualification mark.

Accordingly, that evening I rushed to her house and tried to convince Mr. Diaz. But he was in a different world, in a stupor, muttering same ole things again and again. “You know my Rocky Balboa, I’m just unable to do exclusive of Pinks, and the solitude hangs around in me and all over the house. I’ll too depart this life soon...”

...I couldn’t do a thing about that thug in his red-colored lorry that knocked my Pinks out of her life...

...And the general manager, damn him; I simply can’t cope up in the midst of his vindictiveness that ensured after I’d called the strike few years back...”

“Mr. Diaz, please be in charge of you. You know you’re in a way hurting Jane, one who’s at a standstill, badly shaken by her Mom’s demise...” I tried to put in plain words, but the state of affairs was not as good as...

He sustained: “I can make out Banjo I’m not a good one, I’m doing no favor to her by letting out my aggravation by way of binging. And am sorry that I slapped the poor girl hard the recent past for not allowing me to drink, and snatching the bottle away from my grasp...”

His confession reassured me that at least he was sentient of his responsibilities and that I needn’t dig upon this particular angle.

Same evening I decided to call upon the Parkers by myself to discuss the thorny issue. Yes, even though time and again they entered Diaz household to affirm whether father-daughter duo were all right or not, yet owing to time constraint, it wasn’t possible for them to maintain a 24-hour vigil.

No sooner I could identify with their limitations I tried to seek out an alternative. I even asked someone to hire a lady who could visit on a daily basis to assist Jane in her household chores, more so that her exams were fast approaching, but no demure female was available.

I could only find leads to boy-servants who were willing to manual labor, but then I decided against this proposal seeing that Jane happened to be a not fully-formed girl. And what to say of Mr. Diaz: most of the time his psyche was indecipherable and unable to comprehend the intricacies of worldly life...!

And then again one day at school I heard from Aye Aung that Jane had been stalked while returning home from school. Varun and I were caught gnashing our teeth in rage. "Who were they...?"

At once we barked at Jane, who'd begun to sob. She explained how she was followed at the walkway once while she was returning home in the evening, vegetable basket in hand. "Banjo...Varun...These 2 guys do not seem to belong to my own locality. I haven't observed them before save for hearing 'em referring an odd-sounding Kallu Pahalwan..."

Taken aback, Varun and I both stared at each other not knowing what to articulate, since this odd-sounding Kallu Pahalwan happened to be one of the most notorious hoodlums of Kanpur, a menace for the police force as well.

Thus far, under what pretext should we complain at the Bajaria *Thana*, under whose jurisdiction he belonged to...? Till now he wasn't even in the picture, only his odd-sounding name was being circulated by these guys. And surely, that was enough of a terror...!

While I couldn't find any way out, Aye Aung emerged by way of a feminine solution

"Jane, you must resort to shopping during daytime and avoid going out after sundown. Furthermore if you insist, then do remember to tag Mrs. Parker along with you..."

Varun and I nodded in conformity. Nevertheless, one thing was constantly pinching me, and that was Jane's greater-than-ever bodily appeal. Jane had now grown into a beauteous girl, and in all likelihood many eyes apart from

these two stalkers were upon her, and ready to take advantage of the gullible state of affairs at her dwelling.

What to do...?

Why, my house was quite far from her place and so was Varun's...? Moreover, on the account of convincing Mr. Diaz to mend his ways and not to consume alcohol, we'd miserably failed. Many a colleagues too, who tried to convince him to emerge stronger *vis-à-vis* thorny issues such as demise of Mrs. Pinks, and the hard-heartedness of Mr. M. Sharma at the workplace, failed too.

And domestic help...? Well, I'd failed on that count too. To top it, owing to slackness at his factory, Mr. Diaz faced pay cuts now and again, leading to financial uncertainties, Jane finding it difficult even to shell out her school fee, her examination fee.

These incidents were getting on excessively and giving me sleepless nights, nights mainly reserved for preparing dummy balance sheets and matrixes. Therefore, I decided opting for a hard-hitting exploit before anything untoward ensued, affecting Jane.

~

Act 2

A day after, I found myself at the swanky premises of M/s Allen Textile Mills Limited, and seeking an appointment with his Private Secretary. "Please Sir, I wish to meet Mr. James Allen, the Chairperson...!"

The Private Secretary, a middle-aged fellow at the desk oddly looked up at me, sizing me up and down, possibly not finding a lot many visitors of my age calling upon his chief. "Why, is it anything to do about collecting money for a Charity Show...?"

He asked wryly, to which I gave a confutation, "For a Charity Show I shall come later on, right now it's regarding the interests of my friend, and daughter of your Trade Union leader, Mr. Michael Diaz..."

Private Secretary was taken aback hearing the name of one of the most contentious characters of this factory. "Listen man, my chief is away to Shimla on his summer vacation, if you so wish you can have a word with our General Manager, Mr. M. Sharma..."

Mr. M. Sharma...! The name struck me

Well, wasn't it the same given name that was first taken by Mr. Diaz at DK's parlor, and of late repeated at his own house...?

Wasn't he the same officeholder who'd never bothered to hear him out during the strike whilst Mr. James Allen was away to England, and sorry to say, one who'd sustained his confrontational stance with Mr. Diaz till the present...? And therefore quite possibly, this man won't hear me out too...

Nonetheless, I thought it was perhaps the best opening to tackle him, and tackle him headlong. Though it was true that I could've approached Mr. Allen in a straight line through my grandpa with big mustaches, as I'd done in what went before, I was keen upon seeking the exactness regarding Mr. Diaz's equations at his factory, right from the horse's mouth.

At the present, observing the blasé attitude of the Private Secretary and the weight that the General Manager carried in the affairs of things, I somehow began to feel that the air inside the factory did not bode well for Mr. Michael Diaz, who was in the main bucolic in his approach, and Mr. Allen remaining out of reach, quiescent at his stratospheric levels.

For that reason, I agreed. "Okay then, you may issue me the visitor's pass..."

In a little while, I was knocking at the door of Mr. M. Sharma. "May I come in Sir...?"

"Come in..." In a weighty voice I was beckoned to sit. I stared at this neatly brushed man having white whiskers.

"Sir, it's regarding Mr. Michael Diaz..."

"Mr. Michael Diaz...!" This very name made him squirm as if he'd been injected upon one of his buttocks a medication wished-for a mare, by the unsparing use of an outsized syringe, via a corpulent veterinary surgeon...

However, upon earshot of this name, a name which he never ever wanted to have the sense of hearing, he lent chock-a-block mind to what I'd to articulate:

"Sir, as you may be acquainted with the fact that only just he has lost his wife and is still in traumatized and bereaved state, therefore on humanitarian grounds, I shall request you to kindly release all his arrears..."

...Here, I beg to state that owing to financial constraints, he's not capable even to pay up his daughter's school fee, examination fee...

...Er, she's Jane and my friend..."

Mr. M. Sharma appeared pitiless and unmoving, finding it hard to conceal his glee at his *bête noire's* series of debacles. Thereupon, dismissing me by means of one single diktat, he picked something like a blueprint and started pouring through it

"I'm sorry, but I've received complaints against him regarding his irregular attendance, binging, and even belligerence, leading to strikes and loss of man hours uncalled for. Consequently, I cannot help out..."

Upon hearing him, I got up from my seat, and giving him a cheeky smile, I shot back

"Okay Sir, as you wish. And by the way I've noticed a similar blueprint lying at our house..."

Mr. M. Sharma stared dumb-struck at me, eyes questioning, while I continued..."I've hit upon this blueprint somewhere at my grandpa's desk. You know Sir he was part of a prime part of your previous premises..."

Mr. M. Sharma was by now wiping away beads of perspiration from his forehead, understanding quite well that I'd trapped him, and that I'd trapped him to learn further about his stance towards Mr. Michael Diaz. He glanced at me once again, and then at the names trimly signed at the corner of the blueprint

Gajanan Damodar, Dushyant Kumarr

M/s G.D. & Co.

Cawnpore

It became immaterial as to when Cawnpore, named by the British early 19th century, had become Kanpur, but by now Mr. M. Sharma had ordered tea for me, along with plateful of biscuits, his perspiration not stopping the least especially in this warm weather, and his anxious mind not wanting to get into the minutiae a propos my grandfathers.

Uneasily he sipped water from a glass kept at the corner of his desk. By now, I'd started deriving pleasure out of his predicament, and feeling bit

pleased at me. My brains were screaming, thanks to my age-old inclination, wherein 2 plus 2 always made 5, and in the Hindi colloquial

Do aur do Paanch

To my sheer delight, whilst I was sipping my portion of tea, served quite elegantly in gold rimmed cup and saucer, by a peon, Mr. M. Sharma had pushed the button of the intercom and instructed somebody, probably the accountant, to look into the accounts of Mr. Michael Diaz.

I got up delivering my thankfulness, and handing him over yet another fright of his life

“Mr. Sharma, has Mr. James Allen taken a flight to Shimla, or rather drove his silver-colored luxury Grand Tourer, the DB5 Aston Martin - sans the ejector seat...machine guns...smoke screen...and tire slashers – the mean machine duly projected in one of those slick James Bond movies...?”

Mr. M. Sharma was by now stunned at my revelations and parallels about Mr. Allen’s sedan, and the astonishing fact that I was acquainted with this picky verity regarding his chief, and probably many such more.

Consequently, he tried to choose his words: “Mr. Michael Diaz shall receive all his arrears within 24-hours by a special messenger at his house, and he’s now free to take a sick leave, I’ll grant it. And please convey greetings to his daughter Janet...

...And may I have your name, young man...?”

“Oh she’s not Janet, Sir she’s Jane, and my name’s Bond, that’s what Mr. James usually addresses me...!” I smartly replied.

Sure, I was in splits once I got out of his office; office of the hardnosed Mr. M. Sharma, who once cared not to extend Mr. Michael Diaz, my friend Jane’s Pop, an audience, which further led to a major strike at this mill, thereby telling upon the financial health of Mr. James Allen, who happened to be a bosom friend of my grandpa with big mustaches, and one who was the most famous visitor at Dufferin Hospital, at the time when I was born...

Passing through a portion of the old section comprising of an impressive 7-storey block facing River Ganga, I couldn’t help reminding me what DK had narrated previously that this was the spot where preparation for spinning was done on the 2nd floor, and where the self-acting mules having

400 spindles were arranged transversal on the floors above, and where the Wings contained the blowing rooms, few spinning too, besides ancillary processes like winding...

And was my parting not similar to one of the scenes in the movie of James Bond 007, *The Spy Who Loved Me*, seen together with Mr. Michael Diaz, in those days when the latter used to remain in the best of health and spirits...?

...Immediately after he quit the cabin, the girl radioed to Russian KGB henchman foe that Bond had left. And how at the end of the movie we'd also got hyper by another dialogue, and had imitated

Banjo: "The name's Bond, James Bond..."

Michael Diaz: "What of it...?"

~

Act 3

I was quite happy when after couple of days, I found Jane somewhat relaxed at school. I was informed that all her pending fee, including the examination fee, had been paid, and that her Pop had himself gone out to fetch groceries, and that her larder had now been adequately stocked for the next 1 month or so.

She continued excitedly..."And you know, unexpectedly, the guy who comes with the payments from the factory had also presented me with a white flower tribute of sympathy standing in a cross, for my deceased Mom. Quite thoughtful, I must say...!"

"Unbelievable Jane, notwithstanding the hostilities at the factory..." Varun remarked wide-eyed via his feminine eyes, to which Jane remarked tearfully, "Yes incredible, and I don't know how this changeover...? But you know guys; I miss my Mom so much...!"

Aye Aung hugged her while Varun and I closed in and patted her back. "Don't cry Jane...!"

From school, I decided to watch the film *Angoor*, in English, Grapes, film by Gulzar, along with Varun. That was part of celebrations.

During the interval, a thoughtful Varun, face painted with face-powder till it appeared a luminous hue, looked into my eyes inquiringly, “Banjo was it you who carried out this phenomenon for Jane...?”

Even amid the clatter of the cinema hall, I fell silent, remembering the day when her beloved Mom, Mrs. Pinks had expired.

She was looking angelic, though frail, in her black skirt and white high collar blouse. Little by little I tried to withdraw off from her, even as for the last time she held my hands securely, bemoaning, “Banjo, you might be strong, but I’m not...”

...And one more thing, I don’t have a strong backing as that of your family, the family of Kumarr’s. It’s also true that my Pop gets into trouble often, in particular for his activities at the factory, and for which Mom too used to remain perturbed...”

Reassuringly, I’d smiled at her, losing my eyes into the elegant large bow at the neck of her blouse, “Don’t you worry on that count Jane. Kumarr’s, as represented by me, shall always be with you, and that’s a gentleman’s promise...”

Once the film got over, Varun and I couldn’t just laugh our way out. Really it was one of the best comic films we’d ever watched. And what to speak of the brilliant performances by the gifted duo Sanjeev Kumar and Deven Verma, in double roles.

After collecting our bicycles from the cycle stand, we pedaled out when all of a sudden we decided we must pay a visit to Aye Aung who happened to stay close by this cinema hall at Chunniganj.

Evening had set in and it was getting dark. Out of nowhere a tall van crept in between us, and we couldn’t sight each other at this crucial tri-section. Yet, no sooner signals turned green, I pushed hard my Raleigh Chopper bicycle of England, based on the look of dragsters from the 1960s...

...But hey, where was Varun...? He was not anywhere to be seen. I guessed he might’ve made headway.

All at sea, I arrived at the doorstep of Aye Aung and was pleased to find her white Standard Herald Mark III car parked at the porch. I rang the bell on the left side of the high-rise ape-hangar handlebar of my bicycle. Aye came

out. She was looking cute in her skirt-blouse and held a skipping rope in her hand.

“Had you been skipping...?”

She replied in affirmative wiping off perspiration from her forehead by means of the back of her palms.

“Is Varun inside...?”

“Varun...!” Exclaimed she...! Befuddled, she looked into my eyes.

“Yeah Varun, we’d gone to watch Angoor in your neighborhood and decided to come together to meet you. I’m surprised not to find him here...”

Perplexed, Aye Aung ushered me to her drawing room. It was very well decorated. I’d been to her place one time, but that time was wintertime, and I’d preferred to wait at her sunny lawns.

Whilst Aye vanished into the kitchen, I admired the done-up walls, pastel yellow in color. I couldn’t resist sauntering up to the showcase where I noticed a getting on picture of Yadana Aung aunt clutching a lovely baby and a man standing by. That must be her husband and he looked fine.

Aye returned amid a plateful of cookies. “Umm that’s delicious. Has aunty prepared all these...?”

“O yes, this is an Assamese rice delicacy called *til pitha* which my Mom prepares especially during our spring festival of *Bihu*, you like it...?”

I nodded my head, one more time picking up this sweet and savory pancake, sweet of jaggery. Combination of soft chewy outer shell and the sweet sticky sesame filling made it a perfect relish, I deliberated. “Where’s aunt...?”

“Oh, she must be coming back soon from the vegetable *bazaar*...”

I wished I could be of some assistance to aunty. At what time I was thinking about her, the doorbell rang, and we rushed to open the gate.

“Oh, is that you Banjo...?” Yadana Aung aunt looked striking in a simple cotton sari, red and white in color. I felt like hugging her but restrained myself. To tell the truth, I wanted to hold close both the lovely females and feel at home. I suffered a pang wherein I recalled my sprawling estate, Anupriya Villa, now cold and barren, post Mom’s demise.

Here, I found ample warmth and love, feminine scent and coziness all around. That pang at home bore resemblance to great vacuum, parchedness, and shallowness within

A Veritable Blizzard

Yet again I slumped down, clutching a soft cushion to my chest. Aunt benignly smiled at me. “Tell me how you are Banjo and what about your studies...?”

I explained her how hard I was slogging for my forthcoming exams. She cut in by saying that Aye finds it easier said than done. Aye glanced at her bit exasperatingly. I smiled and assured her Mom that at least she won’t flunk.

Aye made a face, “Mom, you know Banjo thinks himself exceedingly intelligent, and me and Jane as out-and-out fools...?”

Yadana Aung aunt couldn’t help getting bemused. I grinned. Last was Aye who couldn’t help joining too, at her own harangue. She was cantankerous that it was only boys who ventured out to watch movies by themselves...Angoor or whatever...!

Upon hearing the name Angoor, aunt explained that this movie was in fact a remake of...Do Dooni Char, a film of 1960s. Literally speaking...*Do Dooni Char*... meant 2×2 , unlike my favorite out-and-out axiom...*Do aur do Paanch*...which in chutzpah led to $2 \times 2 = 5$. Why, in veracity, it should’ve been $2 \times 2 = 4$...?

Lead character was the famed comedian Kishore Kumar. No sooner this name hit me I started laughing. Perhaps I must’ve overheard some odd conversation in between Mom and Dad, some odd narrative regarding his personal idiosyncrasies.

It was getting late and I bade them a goodbye. Both Aye and her Mom hugged me and invited me over again. Yadana Aung aunt handed me a nondescript packet containing Tiffin to be opened at the 12-seater dining table, and meant for Elders.

Just before leaving I happened to chance upon a poster of Uttam Kumar hung on the wall at the rear of the sofa on which I was reclining. Was the pose in dark sunglasses from Satyajit Ray’s acclaimed film in Bengali...Nayak...? I pondered.

Act 4

At our bedrock dining table, Dad was mighty keyed up that I'd watched the movie...Angoor. He said he was sorry that these days he couldn't find time to watch movies. I was sure that he would've relished this film by Gulzar, more so when it included a Bong Beauty Moushumi to talk about...!

Dad started narrating how Angoor was a remake of an old Hindi film of Kishore Kumar. I fed him the name...Do Dooni Char. Unmindfully; he continued his tale that this old Hindi film was in turn a remake of...Bhranti Bilas...a Bengali-language comedy film, released fairly at the time I was born.

"So this must've been an evergreen theme so as to get incorporated into 3 different films...?"

"True Banjo...! Later than the foremost one...Bhranti Bilas...was based upon the novel carrying the same name, written by the haloed Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar more than a century ago...!"

I was awestruck to learn that he was the same renowned Bengali polymath who happened to get interested in this topic of light comedy. Dad went on excitedly, "Banjo, I'm sure Angoor carried the same story line..."

...You see, even though the original play by Vidyasagar was set in an unspecified, but distant past, the film in Bengali relocated to present times: telling the story of a Bengali merchant from Calcutta and his servant who visit a small town for a business appointment, but, whilst there, are erroneously taken for a pair of locals, leading to much bewilderment...!"

I was now keyed up catching up with such similitude. "And who was the Bengali actor...?"

I was stunned to have the sense of hearing that he was the one and only Uttam Kumar

All the same, I was fully aware of Dad's affinity towards Bongs, at times he seemed to miss his Bengali roots. I then revealed that I'd bumped into a portrait of the unchanged Uttam Kumar at Yadana Aung Aunt's place.

Now it was poor Dad's turn to be taken aback, his multihued morsel of victuals more or less perched like a micro parakeet in between his elongated fingers, unbolted jaws... "You went to her place...?"

"Yes, Dad...!" I confirmed adroitly.

I made it a point to call attention to the fact that I'd to labor tremendously hard to arrive at her dwelling, on my bicycle, so farther than our house. Looking at me intently, a gleam in his eyes, he promised me a Moped if I scored well in my Board exams...

All this and many more such exchanges got overheard by both Karuna di, the specialist at identifying, grinding and mixing spices; and the oomph *bai*, Draupadi, who'd abandoned her *bartan* and *jharoo-katka*.

In no time they reminded us that the chronicle sounded familiar when she'd visited us for lunch. They recalled happenings inside our kitchen whilst preparing *machher jhaal*, *ad verbum*

Yadana Aung aunt, "I find so many posters of Rajesh Khanna doing the walls over here...!"

Karuna di and Draupadi both released sheepish smiles, lowering their eyelids, as they'd pasted them on the west side of the orange-colored kitchen wall, which was Yadana Aung aunt's back while cooking, and hoped they would go unnoticed.

"Ha...ha...ha..." laughed Yadana Aung aunt. "I understand...I understand...!"

"And you, Yadana di...?" Queried Draupadi, the oomph *bai*, whose huge breasts already had started heaving like the waves of the turbulent side of the Atlantic Ocean, droplets of sweat shining across her face like the daybreak sun.

"Oh come on, in Calcutta, we have the *numero uno* heart-throb Uttam Kumar to us...Hahaha...!"

Nonetheless, before the conversation could proceed further, they judged the consistency of the curry and decided that cooking time was nearing an end:

Karuna di: "Now Yadana di, the final item to be added, the salt to taste...!"

Yadana Aung aunt: “Oh yes, the salt. Umm I think your Sir resembles him...!”

Sir, my Dad, in a moment of triumph, could at last gleefully wipe his mustache by way of sweep of his right hand forefinger.

After that, Karuna di and Draupadi shrieked loud enough so as to shake the window panes of Anupriya Villa, as and when little by little I took out the Tiffin meant for Elders from the nondescript packet, and flicked it open creating a sound

Thungg...Tungg

Dad’s inquisitive eyes awaited a platter of delicious cookies, in lovingly wrapped-up shape, prepared by none other than Yadana Aung aunt, these willowy *til pithas* paving my way to a brand new Moped.

~

Act 5

The Comedy of Errors was William Shakespeare’s most preposterous comedies, major part of the humor coming from jesting and erroneous identity. The Play, out of his 37 Plays, adhered to the Aristotelian principle of unity of time, which meant that the events of the Play occurred over 24 hours.

Next morning, I was going through the nuances of this Play from a textbook and comparing it with Angoor in company of my classmates

...Set in the Greek city of Ephesus, The Comedy of Errors tells the story of 2 sets of identical twins who were accidentally separated at birth. Antipholus of Syracuse and his servant, Dromio of Syracuse, arrive in Ephesus, which turns out to be the home of their twin brothers, Antipholus of Ephesus and his servant, Dromio of Ephesus.

What time the Syracusans encounter the friends and families of their twins, a series of wild mishaps based on mistaken identities lead to wrongful beatings, a near-seduction, the arrest of Antipholus of Ephesus, and false accusations of infidelity, theft, madness, and demonic possession...!

Interrupting my readings, Varun charged me, “Banjo, why didn’t you wait for me yesterday...?”

“Amaa, rukey kyun nahin...?”

I tried to defend myself by saying that I thought he must’ve reached Aye Aung’s house earlier than me. Aye Aung too looked quizzically at him and was in splits when he replied that he’d crossed the threshold into a mistaken lane away from the tri-section.

“Then what happened, Varun...? Jagan cut in.

In fact, we were having Jagan among us after many days because he had opted for Science, studying in a different campus. And so was my *bête noire* Tejwinder, the out-and-out vulgar, a pest, and an affliction, very much like the spear thistle, one of the most noxious weeds of the world

Cirsium Vulgare

“Oh, I’d taken a wrong lane and pedaled in high-speed, thinking that I, Banjo would be just around the corner at Aye Aung’s house...

...Er and this lane happened to be a roundabout, bringing me back over again to the same spot following 15-minutes of rigorous cycling...!” Varun narrated pokerfaced.

Jagan and I went overboard and started laughing and rolling upon the ground, much to the glee of Aye Aung and Jane Diaz. “Anyways, Varun could at least prove that the Earth was round as explicated by the astronomer of the Renaissance-era, Nicolaus Copernicus; in Polish, *Mikolaj Kopernik...*” Was Jagan’s wry comment...!

Each and every one agreed to Jagan’s scientific temperament. No wonder this boy was the most brilliant one in Science, both in theory and practice. We both got up hurriedly as we could find Miss Wadia approaching us.

All of a sudden I became conscious of my uniform that just now emerged along with me after the roll on the ground. Miss Wadia could now distinctly witness rust-colored brick-marks all over my light shirt. “Why do you always have to look so outlandish, Banjo, you resemble a gladiator in this armor...?”

Every one of my friends started laughing at Miss Wadia’s remarks. This point in time she was in no hurry as was usual with her, most of the time to

meet Mr. Lalu, an incarnation of Hephaestus, the crippled Greek God of Fire, also of metalworking and crafts, usually depicted by his hammer, tongs and anvil...?

Still holding the Textbook in my hand, I continued reading about yet another link in The Comedy of Errors: Shakespeare was influenced by Menaechmi, a Latin language Play, often considered Plautus' greatest Play.

The title is sometimes translated as The Brothers Menaechmus or The Two Menaechmuses.

...Again, this Play was a comedy about mistaken identity, involving a set of twins, Menaechmus of Epidamnus and Menaechmus of Syracuse.

...It incorporates various Roman stock characters including the parasite, the comic courtesan, the comic servant, the domineering wife, the doddering father-in-law and the quack doctor. As with most of Plautus' Plays, much of the dialog was sung.

It was now getting exhausting to learn how Angoor led backwards to Do Dooni Char, which in turn led to Bhranti Bilas, the movie and then the novel; and at this time The Comedy of Errors which led to Menaechmi of the renowned Roman playwright, belonging to the Old Latin period.

It was now turn of Miss Wadia. She cut in, "Guys, do you know that Plautus is said to have studied Greek drama, particularly the New Comedy of Menander, in his leisure...?"

Now, who's this Menander, yet in further twist to the tale of Angoor...?

"...Menander was credited with helping to create a different version of comedy Plays known as New Comedy. He introduced a young romantic lead to Plays, which became, along with several other stock types such as a cook and a cunning slave, a popular staple character...

...New Comedy witnessed further plot twists, suspense, and treatment of common people and their day-to-day problems. Menander often poked fun at politicians, philosophers, and fellow artists, some of them were sometimes even in the audience", thus Miss Wadia concluded.

At last we sighed in relief to catch up with its precise history. In a nutshell, Menander had given rise to New Comedy of *archaios Ellada*, or, ancient

Greece, and which influenced Plautus, the renowned Roman Playwright. And remarkably, it was Shakespeare of England who brought forward such Roman jewels.

...Further, it traveled to India via the famed Bengali writer Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, a Bengali director making the movie, and taken forward by another Bengali filmmaker in Bombay for its Hindi remake. At this time, Gulzar presented it as Angoor.

Miss Wadia was the Director of the Play, *Angoor Ki Tasiir*, or Effect of Grapes, displayed as a Charity Show, sponsored by Mr. James Allen of M/s Allen Textile Mills Limited.

The Play was set up at our school premises near the Piano Block, wherein Varun played the role of Deven Verma and won the Best Comedian of the Year.

...Likewise the Comedy of Errors, this Play was in 5 Acts as per the narrative given above, and was well-attended and appreciated by all our respectable guardians, and that included my Dad and Yadana Aung aunt, watching the Play, sitting side-by-side.

And Dad finally gifting me a Moped, complimenting I'd fared well in my Intermediate exams

Chapter 36

Cold December Diary

It was a lovely weekend of Friday and we were keenly watching the opening ceremony of Asiad at Yadana Aung aunt's place. To my surprise, Dad for the first time had accompanied me to her house and we got engrossed in watching Television, introduced on a large scale by the incumbent government of Indira Gandhi.

Yadana Aung aunt too seemed a fan of Indira Gandhi, our Prime Minister, whom we spotted among the VVIP rows of the newly-built Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in New Delhi. She was facing the torch and not the camera, during the torch bearing ceremony, wherein the huge cemented torch formation was lit up by a couple of leading Indian sportspersons, and which soon got engulfed in the midst of leaping flames.

"Indira ji looks so cool in her sleeveless blouse, simple cotton sari, pair of dark sun glasses beneath her mane..." Yadana Aung aunt remarked casually, forgetting to take in Indiraji's much talked-about *rudraksha mala*.

Dad nodded his head. He always used to point out that Indira ji, heir to an illustrious family experienced a difficult childhood, when as a child she witnessed her parents frequently going to jail during the difficult years of our freedom movement.

Except for the brief Emergency stint, Dad was still enamored the way she'd handled our Foreign Policy. "She was farsighted and knew how to handle USA, USSR, China, Pakistan, whichever. O yes, to her foes she appeared an epitome of *Maa Durga*..."

Thus, I looked at Indira ji with high opinion over again, at her stylized hair, graying, albeit bearing selective white streaks, so evident, eventually that became her trademark style.

"Hey, let's celebrate her birthday, its 19th of November..."

Aye Aung was sweet enough to serve the pastries which Dad had ordered from a novo bakery of Pearl Lake, and which got primed via Chinese bakers. Driving my teeth onto the *Fengli Sus* having crumbly short crust

and filled by means of pineapple jam, this delicacy originating in China, and invigorating my senses, I drolly offered a plate to the Television, latest merchandise launched this year.

Everybody laughed at my funny side

We all were wondering at this wonder gadget in black and white wherein we could now watch Live the Asian Games of 1982, merely sitting in our lounges. All of a sudden Aye Aung yelled, “Hey look isn’t that Amitabh Bachchan...?”

We all leaned forward to catch a glimpse of him, almost falling out of the cushiony sofa set. True, here he was sitting among the populace, a tranquil man, tanned looks, shampooed hair - wearing a light suit over a jet black shirt, collars open...

We recalled by way of remorse how in the recent past, even as shooting for a film called Coolie, he’d a near-fatal accident...?How in a fight sequence at the Bangalore University campus, even though he was supposed to land on a table, he mistimed, abruptly landing and hurting his abdomen, further leading to massive internal hemorrhage, internal bleeding.

“Oh don’t remind me, it was chilling. For a week or so, he wasn’t even responding to any kind of treatment. What must’ve his kids Shweta and Abhishek gone through...?” It was worth reminding how the entire country rallied around this megastar, flooding him with messages, walking barefoot to temples and pilgrimage sites and praying for his well-being...”

~

Wednesday, December 1, 1982

Dad along with Yadana Aung aunt, Aye and me were sitting at Indraprastha Stadium in the midst of a cheering crowd of just about 25,000. As good as an owl, I twirled my head 270 degrees to marvel at the circular structure and its span of mindboggling proportions...!

Located in the east of Delhi, I remembered an article in mythology that *Indraprastha* was the legendary capital of the *Pandavas* in the Indian epic, *Mahabharata*. According to the epic, this terrain was hypothetical to be an enormous mass of forests called *Khandavprastha*, which was burnt down to built the conurbation of *Indraprastha*.

At present, this spanking new stadium was surrounded by the Indraprastha Estate, spanning over a massive area of 100 acres or so, dressed in the midst of lush green environs and well-trimmed lawns, which I commended.

Players belonging to different countries across the vast continent of Asia, and representing about a third of Earth's total landmass and more than half of its population, were akin to modern *Pandavas* and *Kauravas*, out to outdo one another, sans any acrimony, from top to bottom peaceful, harmonious and sporting.

Appu, the cute elephant mascot was all over delivering a pious slogan in Hindi

Sadaa Maitri Bandhuta

I was thrilled to be entrenched in this stadium, which I found divided into 2 equal halves by a rectangle sound-proof, fire-proof synthetics wall, and which delightfully enabled conduct 2 different sport competitions almost simultaneously. Fascinatingly, I also noticed that each half comprised of changing rooms, media room, medical room...

Finally we all were here, 4 of us together like a family, witnessing the Badminton quarter finals in this plush and colorful centrally air-conditioned indoor stadium. "Incredible, instead of the Television screen, it was now real Live...!" I reminded myself.

Badminton was a game that always captivated me. In this game I discovered participants from East Asian nations such as China, South Korea and Japan to be first-rate; Indonesia from Southeast Asia all right.

Some of them were fairly good at deceptions, what to say. One of the players was amazing. Whilst the opponent tried to anticipate his stroke, he moved in the wrong direction and suddenly changed his body momentum...

It was Syed Modi who was playing from the Indian side...! Astounding was Han Jian of China, who was nicknamed Sticky Candy. He was known for his cool and steady play using his much-used tactic of using long rallies to pressurize his opponent into committing slip-ups.

Examining attentively the racquet sport, and shifting his neck in accordance to the shuttlecock across the net, Dad's prediction at the same time as gazing at the metal-halide lamps was that China would take the Golds, Indonesia the Silvers, leaving India contended with Bronze.

In his typical stride, observing minutely the high-drag feather projectile having an open cone shape, he remarked that perhaps in future he would take up a small number of new and attention-grabbing electrical agencies, this instance, from the Lower Countries, Netherlands.

Nonetheless, the language Dutch, colloquially in between German and English, originated in the Netherlands could pose a problem. Anyways, this could be sorted out later.

Yadana Aung aunt eyed Dad in a fleeting moment of admiration resulting in Dad wiping his mustache by way of sweep of his right hand forefinger.

I guessed the powerful metal-halide lamps in the course of the lighting of endless figure of luxlumes illuminating the gigantic wooden playing area of more than half-a-hectare must've impressed him and prompted him to devise such policy impromptu.

I blankly stared at the childlike Aye Aung who was impressed by the backhand strokes of the players, and kept wondering how much serious Dad was in his new-found aspiration, for at the moment his hands were full, overloaded by way of numerous agencies, from countries such as the UK, the US, and Italy.

~

Thursday, December 2, 1982

Since morning, Dad and I were out on a tour, visiting business firms. First it was Vega Overseas and then Daljin Refrigeration at Daryaganj. Owing to paucity of time, Dad just called up Century Steel and his old business friend at Ojas Electricals, over phone.

I wasn't on the alert, yet I was listening to Dad attentively talking to bosses and negotiating business deals. Most of time he sported a smile, cracking jokes in between, *"Arrey Gupta ji, app kitna kaam karenge, beton ko choose karne dijiye naa Models ko apney new launches ke liye...!"*

While the grownup *betas* went uneasy in their seats, the roly-poly owner broke into a hearty laugh. *"Kumarr Saab, aapke liye toh mein kuchh bhi kar sakta hun, boliye naa...!"* What else would Dad require other than such compliments and commitments...? For him, to expand his market was the whole thing.

Since I turned 18 this year, Dad wanted me to be an aide to him to all business enterprises. Even though he was aware of the burden of my studies in my forthcoming University, he insisted that I start paying attention to his business.

Gifting me a multicolored moped he'd instructed me: "Listen Banjo you've turned 18 now, you better grow up. Being my lone son, one day you shall inherit my entire business empire. And to learn its fundamentals and intricacies you need to start early. C'mon start taking interest in M/s Bharat Kumarr & Co...!"

I'd noticed that Dad's tone turned somber, undeniably stern, his tone making me grimace.

Here, I was trying to experience elixir in my lovely girlfriends and there uff, Dad was trying to make me focus on something which was dull, dowdy, dated, drab, dreary...

Pondering about such goings-on, my mood altered only when the familiar yellow and black cab drove us yet to another stadium, this time the gigantic and exposed-to-air Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium. I was keyed up because it was the same place where I'd spotted Indira ji and Amitabh Bachchan few days back on TV screen...

And here we arrived, finally to witness the Finals in Athletics

Sorry to say, in the present day no more than 3 tickets were obtainable in one single row. Perceptibly, a youthful male that I was, it was me who stood out as the 4th ticket-holder, thereby taking a seat further up, precisely 3 rows above the grouping.

Pointing towards the mammoth crowd of about 85,000, my fellow citizen, an adorable girl of East Asian origin remarked aloud that about 4,500 athletes had participated in these Asian games.

"OMG, is it...?" I remarked.

"O yeah, these athletes have been competing in about 200 events in about 20 sports and equal number of disciplines..." She absent-mindedly replied, her head turning towards me at last.

“Marvelous...!” I remarked, glancing her dolly eyes, windows to her soul. Even as she was busy cheering, I couldn’t help but notice her beautiful flawless skin, porcelain-like.

It was perhaps her deafening cheering along with her compatriots in the same row that her country won the Men’s 400 meters race defeating ours by measly 0.62 seconds...! Soon after, announcement reached my ears that it was her country once again that got through the Men’s 3000 meters steeplechase in a grueling session, defeating us by sheer 2.92 seconds...!

“*Yatta...!*” Yes, she was cheering for Japan, and her name was Michi Abe.

“Hi...! I’m Banjo, Banjo Kumarr...” I quietly slipped my business card into her yielding palms. Even if she wasn’t too fascinated by my name she got hooked on to my chat.

“*Michi*, what does that mean, I mean your name...?”

Pointing her dainty pointy chin, like a doll, she replied, “Peerless...!”

You mean, “Unblemished...!”

She blushed, her eyes angling downwards. Was it my folly of bringing in this particular word, or was it because of the subsequent *shiai*, in the Women’s category of 400 meters hurdles, the track and field hurdling event that she once again looked into the game as the crow flies, straight ahead, *massugu...?*

Her dolly eyes away from me, I too started finding something novo in the competition even as the women runners tried to stay confined in their lanes the entire way after starting out of the blocks.

Together Michi and I got hawk-eyed whilst the lithe athletes cleared as many as 10 hurdles that were evenly spaced around the track. They were positioned and weighted in a smart manner so that whenever a player toppled forward, or another one bumped into with sufficient might, there wasn’t any injury.

Few rows ahead, Dad and the rest were too engrossed in the game finding that the runners preferred to clear the hurdles cleanly, as touching them during the race slowed them down. I could clearly perceive sound of Aye Aung’s hurray when our own M.D Valsamma defeated the Japanese player Yumiko Hoi by meager 21 seconds...!

I glanced sideways at Michi Abe, who was to some extent discontented, yet full of sportsmanship. Perhaps like her fellow compatriots, she believed in perfection or flawlessness, cent percent *kanpeki*.

She readjusted her doily, her small ornamental mat made of paper, as though it was she who was one of the 4 runners in the subsequent game of Relay Race, Women's 4 x 400 meters...! It seemed as if it was she who'd to total the arduous 400 meters, one lap. So much stressed out she was...?

I too adjusted my large white handkerchief to my bottom, an Indian bottom, this exciting game being unfolded ahead of us, in which 4 players in each team were sweating it out carrying relay batons which they'd to transfer between teammates.

When the first transfer was conducted within the staggered lane lines, I juxtaposed that India would win, but then the Japanese created an edge. Sole consolation was that when I discovered, we'd relegated China to 3rd position...

Offering a grin, "Watch out Michi, if we gotta stick together, we can overcome China...!"

~

Friday, December 3, 1982

Dad had instructed me to follow up documentation at Vega Overseas. While I was talking to Gupta ji and discussing what best could be done that our stock be lifted, the telephone bell rang. Gupta ji became solemn, cutting off the business talk, "Mr. Banjo Kumarr, I'm sorry, but your Dad has encountered an accident...!"

I couldn't believe what he just mentioned. Why, it was just today morning when I took leave of him. In one gloomy minute, entire world vanished beneath my feet.

I was caught in a Blizzard

And it was terrible...! Gupta ji ordered for a plain glass of water. I sipped little by little, sinking in the appalling news. "Where's he...?"

"Oh, the Police have admitted him to a Government Hospital, Bara Hindu Rao...!"

I sprang up in action. “Where are you going *beta*, wait, I shall arrange the car for you...!”

I was quite aware that Gupta ji’s car was generally parked at an alley which wasn’t so near the office. His chauffeur too most of the time was not available alongside the car but waiting at a roadside tea-stall. Catching up with him, taking out the car among the stable of cars, and negotiating all through the narrow alley would consume considerable time.

No time to waste, I excused me, rushing out through the glass door outside amid the bleak afternoon sun. Locating an auto rickshaw, I quickly hopped in, “Quick takes me to Bara Hindu Rao Hospital...”

...*Jaldi...!*”

At first, the fellow in starched *khaki* uniform was not willing to traverse that division of the metropolis, but then, paying heed to my request, he demanded tad harshly, a sum which seemed quite above normal. I Okayed, rather offered to pay him extra tenners if he just started off not wasting a minute further.

He heaved the ignition handle, and by means of a roar we set off. I never knew that the route would be crammed full. And it sure was rush hours. Negotiating through one of the busiest streets of Old Delhi, we traversed Red Fort and followed by Jama Masjid, laying either side. Moreover, as an alternative to crossing of the River Yamuna via St. James Church, we turned left towards Tis Hazari Court. Every minute stretched to an hour, wretched...

Despite the fact that distance-wise it wasn’t a great deal, owing to heavy traffic it took us longer than anticipated. To every sundry vehicle that blocked our way, to every daunting red light signal, to every odd pedestrian that crisscrossed our path, I let out a silent plea, “Please give access to us quick, I’ve got to see Dad without more ado...!”

My heart leapt both positively and negatively the moment I chanced upon the pale yellow-colored building of the hospital. Positively because I’d reached my said destination, negatively because I just couldn’t envision how Dad’s condition was...

Cash was all set in my breast pocket and which I handed over to the auto driver. Noticing my adolescent age and the trepidation that was discernible

across my countenance, he was reluctant to grab those extra tenners. To a certain extent, he was repentant that he'd overcharged.

Offering him a faded smile indicative of "*Koi baat nahi, rakh lijiye...*" I started sprinting towards the reception counter where I was asked to wait for my turn, stand in queue. But did I have time for such procedural formalities...?

Finding the assorted security guards caught up among themselves, I slipped inside the counter via the side way in. The receptionist was visibly annoyed, and she objected, "It's not allowed, you just can't barge in like that, and we've our set regulations...!"

"I know Ma'am, but look I'm desperate and fraught. Please for God's sake tell me where my Dad is, I've nobody in this world except him...!"

Watching tears rolling down my immature cheeks, she yielded, "His name...?"

"Mr. Bharat Kumarr...!"

~

Saturday, December 4, 1982

I'd to make use of the packed out public toilet of the hospital at the sunup, frenetic users going in and out of the loo, almost not allowing time in between to let the foul-smelling air break away through its ventilators.

I felt ill at ease. The night before I fed myself omelet-bread at a roadside *dhaba*, and which was telling upon my stomach in form of pain and cramps. After all, it was a night of long knives

I was overwhelmed. "So it was you who'd called up Vega Overseas...?"

"O yes, that was the name I remember, and the caller from the other side was the owner..." I just couldn't thank her enough for being so kind to me. Without her initiative, I thought, it wouldn't have been possible to locate Dad.

...And Delhi Police wow...! Thanks a lot...!

Very thing that it had picked up Dad from the accident spot near Chandni Chowk, where he'd gone to scout yet more dealers for our upcoming Electronics range from UK, moved me.

I did not mind them depositing him at this Government hospital, which without doubt wasn't up to the mark. But what else could they do...?

It would have been most excellent if they'd admitted him to a more sophisticated place at higher fee...? But then, I believed, they must've had several restrictions. Most important that they picked him up and cared to bring him to a hospital was more than what I could wish for.

For a second time, I let out my silent prayers to all those who'd brought him over here

Dad was lying unconscious the moment I'd spotted him at a corner of a General Ward, blood stains appearing all over. Nurses and doctors had gathered around him and he was taken to the Emergency Ward. I had to give my identity and put to signature certain documents.

"As a matter of fact, Police informed that a local bus had hit him while he was about to cross a busy intersection. Thank God the bus wasn't in great speed. Furthermore, he'd fallen on the ground unconscious..."

Upon hearing the sordid story, my heart had begun to sink. I'd started wondering what would happen to him. Will he be able to live to tell the tale...? Only respite was when the doctor remarked that because of external bleeding from the ear, he could be out of harm's way.

I'd no words to express before I could find Dad being led into the Emergency Ward. No place to sit, I'd slumped onto the cold floor at a corner, my palms covering my face, pulse racing hard.

I don't know how much time elapsed when I'd woken up dizzy. I believed I'd passed out.

Half-awake, I looked around this General Ward, few screens in hospital green color was all that was to demarcate from each other.

Underneath fans suspended from high ceilings, I'd chanced upon many patients, most of them not quiet rather making shrill noises, nurses in turn coaxing or cursing them to remain quiet.

To an old lady, "*Arrey mai, shant raho, shor naa machao...*" Old Lady, not willing to let down her screams was roughly tempered, "*Ward boy, inkaa haath kas ke pakadna zaraa, dressing karni hai...*" And her screams continued...

After coming to senses in this disconcerting tumult, I'd got up and felt like urinating. I'd rushed to discover the urinal. It was grubby, corners stacked by way of dustbins bearing medical wastes.

I felt like regurgitating. I looked at me in the mirror, a dark and tear-stained face, and soiled clothes. "But where on earth was Dad, I wondered...?"

At last, I found him. He was lying neglected at a corner of the Ward, his coat by his side, legs crumpled. I gently touched his feet. I stared at his face, his eyes that were shut, not putting a stop to my tears gorging out of my muzzy eyes. I just couldn't find any expression or words. I softly touched his hands, his palms, which were connected to the drip bottle.

"Move away, young man..." An indecorous nurse pushed me out of her way and quickly inserted few injections upon Dad's hips. "Don't wait here dumbly, run and pay the bills at the counter...!"

However, I hung around till Dad was administered those injections in most coarse of mode, making lines of his forehead twitch. I rushed out to pay bills, and to my dismay discovered my cash getting exhausted bit by bit.

Straightaway I approached the samaritan among the lot, the receptionist. "Ma'am, could I please use your telephone...!"

I fished out my telephone diary from my pocket and in quick succession, I dialed few significant names. Respectfully, I placed a little currency over her table. All that she said was

"Le jaao isse...!"

No sooner I caught the silhouette of Mr. Venugopal in his trademark radiant white shirt, radiant white trousers, white shoes, I rushed to him. I hugged him feeling outlines of his *ganji*. I broke down.

~

Sunday, December 5, 1982

I tagged along Aye Aung to the hospital in the evening. Imagine a Sunday evening in a metropolis like Delhi, as a replacement for taking her to some happening situate, I was bringing her to a sickbay...! But then she'd insisted she would like to see her dear Kumarr uncle without any further delay...!

I was comparatively relieved as I was now in the interior of a superior hospital, St. Stephen's. I briefed Aye that it was the oldest and one of the largest private hospitals of Delhi. "I think it is a century-old hospital...!" And I instantly became fond of its motto

In Love Serve One Another

No wonder their conduct and mindset were poles apart from the previous one, sticking to their motto in toto. In every little sphere of activity I found them providing healthcare by way of Christ-like compassion. Premises were clean and tidy.

...I recalled that the day before, it didn't take Mr. Venugopal long enough to pull certain strings to relocate Dad to St. Stephen's hospital, couple of kilometers further. I was in awe that just few minutes' away and such distinct differentiation in work ethos...!

Nevertheless, I shouldn't forget that the former was a hospital for the needy - where incidentally Dad too shared *coolies*, *mazdoors* and *bais* as his neighbors.

Yet, a hospital for the poor in India meant improper medical care too. Would that be because of negligible fee, or lack of medical facilities, or lack of qualified staff, or most of them overburdened, or in a state of sheer callousness, was debatable...!

Categorically, I wished it was for the authorities' in-charge of health to improve condition of government healthcare.

At this hour I was contemplating about the plight of the great Mr. Bharat Kumarr, the business tycoon of Kanpur, and now in such dire straits. If truth

be told, in matters of health and happiness, God made us all equal, anybody can fall a victim to His whims, His fancies.

No one is spared; each one of us is vulnerable, like a fragile note in a melody that could falter at any moment. Just as in a song where every chord carries its weight; our lives too are bound by moments of tension and relief.

Politely we were left to twiddle our thumbs as Dad had gone for Electroencephalogram EEG. Scramble ensued in the Laboratories for EEG and other Tests; hence we'd to wait for about 2 hours. I was getting tense and lost, Aye Aung offering me solace. As a final point, I saw him getting wheeled on a stretcher to his Private Chamber.

Aye Aung looked visibly upset to find Dad in such sorry state. Why, it was barely 3 days ago when she was cozily seated beside him watching athletics at Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium...?

She rushed up to him to hold his near lifeless hands. Dad was almost in a cataleptic state. Matters appeared grim as I could make out from conversation of the doctors that Dad perhaps had developed problems related to the electrical control of the brain.

It was only post EEG via small metal drives having electrodes placed upon the scalp, wherein brain nerve patterns had been tracked and these not-so-good results obtained.

No sooner Dad was placed upon his bed, tidy by means of white bed sheet, immediate series of drips and injections were initiated. Nurses and doctors swarmed. I just couldn't put up with Dad getting pricked, and searched for his veins. Needles one after the other appeared so overpowering, merciless, that Aye Aung let out piercing screams, "Ahh, please spare him...!"

Soon after, Mr. Venugopal turned towards us. In this looming crisis, he'd become my local guardian. "Banjo, hope you've informed your folks at Kanpur and elsewhere, your Dad's condition is not at all stable...!"

My heart leapt. Aye Aung held my palms securely, fright all-around. Mr. Venugopal coaxed us to leave early on as Aye Aung had to be dropped to her guest house, and it was getting late. Heavy in heart, looking one last time at Dad, his eyes still remaining closed, we departed, praying to God for his recovery, and to St. Stephen's hospital for their compassion.

Monday, December 6, 1982

Monday morning, I wasn't too much in-form

...Previous night, throughout the drive to House of Assam located around the charming Rose Garden, I'd been sobbing continually. When I stopped up, it was then Aye Aung's turn. Cab driver cared not to intrude into our feelings. Only phrase that emerged out of him at the time we disembarked: "Is somebody seriously ill...?"

The moment Yadana Aung aunt had opened the door, she hugged both of us. Her tears became unplumbed after hearing about the pathetic condition of Dad. Wiping her tears she hugged me once again. "Banjo it's behind schedule, you'll stay with us tonight, and you needn't return to Mr. Venugopal's place. I've ordered a simple fare of *dal-chawal-raita*...

...After that you can sleep comfortably upon that stretchable sofa...!"

"Aunty, I'm not starving, something still off beam with my stomach," I begged. "Okay, then try and sip little barley water..." Amid difficulty then I'd to consume barley, barley first discovered during the epoch of the 1st Mehrgarh civilization, in Baluchistan of Pakistan, in and around 7,000 B.C...!

Anyways, I drew some vigor from inside and dashed to Vega Overseas to obtain suggested documents. For the first time, I was carrying Dad's own Allen Edmond's double-flap leather briefcase, appearing dashing.

Gupta ji and his sons were quite openhanded towards me and enquired after my Dad. They offered whatever assistance I could ask for. I just requested them to treat me the same way that they'd been treating Dad past few years.

Senior Gupta ji offered me a strong handshake. I asked him whether I can use the telephone. "Yes, why not, sit comfortably in our visitor's lounge, it's all yours...!"

First I called up Daljin Refrigeration. The boss wasn't available so I left the message. I then called up Century Steel who were as cold as steel. Nothing seemed to bother them, not even my Dad's pitiable condition. For them it was business, sheer business.

I was upset

“I know Sir; you aren’t too moved about my predicament, rather trying to take advantage of my hapless circumstances. Remember, your officer trooped down to Kanpur in person making commitments, and to which I was a witness. Therefore, do remember that if you willfully avoid our payments, then we shall be compelled to take recourse to legal action...”

However, immediately after, phone call to Ojas Electricals was fruitful. He being Dad’s old friend, assured to visit him at the hospital in addition.

Later than emerging from Vega Overseas, I turned towards the main crossing where I discovered a Photostat machine shop. I intently watched the entire process of how a Photostat copy of the stamped paper was constructed, so many processes involved – turning – filling with sand – intense lighting – and what not...?

Otherwise, just imagine it was carbon paper prior to this. What technological advancements I must admit...?

Upon reaching the hospital, I did not find Dad or Mr. Venugopal. Concerned doctor informed me that he’d been taken for Computed Tomography CT scan.

True, it meant that EEG report not being passable, further tests had to be conducted. To satisfy me, he delved further that Dad was taken for this CT scan wherein computer-processed combination of several X-ray measurements would be taken from different angles so as to produce cross-sectional images of specific areas, thereby allowing specialists to see inside without cutting.

“Without cutting...!”

My heart skipped hearing those chilling words, my briefcase almost dropping out of my moist grip. How time elapsed strolling up and down the forlorn corridor, I never could make sure...? I was anxiously peeping through the glass panes of the lobby from where Dad would be wheeled in.

At last I chanced upon him along with Mr. Venugopal. And before I could measure what was happening, I was asked to put in signatures of consent in the Operation slip. Mr. Venugopal volunteered without blink in his eye, so strong was his bond with Dad, his schoolmate of yonder years.

I'd to hang around for another round wherein Dad was taken for Craniotomy, in which a bone flap would be removed from the skull to access the brain. Internal bleeding would be checked and clots removed, wherever found.

Waiting at a corner of the lounge, I was getting scared at the moment and taking God's name. I remembered our good old *Puja ghar* at Anupriya Villa, colored in pristine white, *Maa Lakshmi* seated in glory.

My mind, deep into contemplation now shifted to the portrait of Mom, her large Red *Bindi* at the center of her forehead, her 3-inch streak of Red *Sindoor* at her *Maang*, the parting of her hair.

Sindoor, comprising of turmeric and lime, stared realistically through her portrait, Mom's eyes looking expressive from within her golden rim glasses. "Maa, why don't you continue to be full of color, married to your beloved hubby as ever. I don't want to become an orphan, please *Maa*...!"

Tears rolled down my cheeks. Young nurses looked up at me in commiseration. One of them consoled me by patting my shoulders.

"Where's your Mom...?"

I know I'm praying for much too much.
but could you send her back
the only man she loved...?
I know You don't do it usually
but dear Lord
she's dying to dance with my father again

- Luther Vandross

Chapter 37

Parting Kiss

Fortnight elapsed after we finally arrived at Kanpur one early morning by 12 Down Delhi-Howrah Express. The train gradually slowed down, halted by way of a screech and I disembarked. At the platform, Sahani uncle was eagerly waiting in a smart jacket and a pair of trousers, in contrast shades.

He hugged me, his eyes dying to catch a glimpse of Dad. I did not come in between at the same time as they exchanged good-natured remarks. After all, he wasn't merely Dad's attorney; he was his friend, philosopher and guide.

"Bharat da, oh how much I missed you...?"

Eyes moist, he assisted Dad get into a wheelchair. *Coolie*, amidst announcements, smartly wheeled him out of the Exit sign, past the ticket checker in black coat black cap, via one of the majestic *Mughal* arches to the square verandah, and then scrambling down the few steps of the plinth onto the porch.

Together we aided the *coolie* as there wasn't any ramp. Dad had to slightly balance between his ailing torso and his *Chaksheshang* shawl, duly gifted by Yadana Aung aunt.

Not finding it corrects to bring a patient back home in a small car like that of his, Fiat 1100 D, he had brought along our gleaming Audi *Quattro*. It seemed ages later than I'd touched the soil of Kanpur, my birthplace, so drawn out were the recent trauma.

Yet I was sure Sahani uncle wouldn't be very confident driving this car. Who could it be...? Much to my disbelief, it was Adhit ji, our new cashier who's migrated from Visakhapatnam. I smiled at him while he offered a big *namaskar* to Dad. I felt as if Dad was trying to recollect who he was...!

Without any further delay, Adith ji smartly drove away this mid-size performance car, this turbo-charged German-make coupe, passing through the streets, intersections, and then few more streets till I happened to chance

upon our handsome pillar-gate, the slate rock nameplate, and its carved lettering raised and in ivory color, titled

Anupriya Villa

Our car zoomed around the driveway. At the porch Karuna di, our head cook from Puri was seemingly anxious. Rearranging Dad's red and black shawl, appreciating its unique design motifs, she too was tearful and unable to find fitting words

"O Bharat da, you look better now, and lookin' so good in this shawl. Where you found this...?"

Stepping forward, she wheeled him through the ramp till we heard grandpa with big mustaches, hurrying down our Florentine stairs eastwards, scurrying through the lounge and somber grey stair hall towards the porch.

"Bharat my lad, how many times have I asked God not to play with your life, save for mine...?"

Alas inside, perceptible of that dainty 5 feet 2 inch human configuration called Mom was still positioned a 75 cm tall, 50 cm broad portrait in our lounge hall where she'd breathed her last.

I was yet bowled over to notice, rather thrilled, that over the surface of the glass-frame, dunno by which ingenious relative, who'd glued a large Red *Bindi* at the center of her forehead and had applied a 3-inch streak of Red *Sindoor* at her *Maang*, the parting of her hair, still survived, tall and proud.

Why not, *Sindoor*, comprising of turmeric and lime, stared realistically through her portrait, Mom's eyes looking quite expressive from within her golden rim glasses...? According to Luther Vandross, the American singer and songwriter, was she willing to dance with my father all over again...?

Tears dribbled down my cheeks one after the other staring at Mom's portrait and recalling moments when I was informed by the same nurses that Dad's operation had been successful and he'd been admitted to the pristine Intensive Care Unit ICU – in order to make easy closer observations.

...How Venugopal uncle had broken the heartening news the succeeding day that Dad was able to utter few words inside the ICU, though indistinct, not many...?

...How a day later despite the fact that I found Dad in his Private Chamber at the hospital, he was in a pitiable condition. He was groaning painfully, face contorted, eyes upwards. Imagine Dad in uninterrupted pain after the major surgical procedure. I stood beside him nonplussed, unable to bear his agony.

It was as if it was my own pain, my own suffering. I cried out from deep within, oh God; can there be a way out...?

The question hung the air, desperate and raw as if I were reaching for something, anything, that could pull me from this darkness. The silence that followed only deepened the feeling of isolation, and I wondered if I would ever find peace in the chaos.

God

...Now can this God be *Bulla Dada*, notion held by Doctor Tripathi uncle...?"

Remember, *Bulla Dada* was like some secret God to him. Whenever asked about Him, he used to civilly reply: "Don't worry...! *Bulla Dada* reveals Himself upon every *Bhakta*; only thing, the *Bhakta* must beseech Him sincerely..."

"I need Your help, *Bulla Dada*...!"

At this point of intense suffering, affliction, this was all that I could ask for. That night I slept as an attendant in the room, and Dad's appalling cry outs whirling inside my head, it was well past midnight that I could catch a wink...

...It was not until next morning that I returned to Venugopal uncle's dwelling where I took a quick shower, and then slept like a log. It was just about evening that I could revisit the hospital. This point in time, both Yadana Aung aunt and Aye tagged along with me.

I excused me for a brief while to arrange fruit juice for all of us from a Juice Corner adjacent to Tis Hazari Court. After I came back, I found Dad relaxed to some extent, and besides him laid this colorful shawl from Nagaland, going along with following words

“I’m sorry I won’t be leaving for Kanpur at the moment, Aye fancies admission to St. Stephen’s College. Please get well soon, we shall meet sometime later...!”

Turning towards me, she’d commanded, “Banjo, you must book appropriate tickets, if at all possible by First Class coupe, and which I think would be safe and sound. Furthermore I would like to pay for this fruit juice...!”

I was taken aback that Aye wasn’t interested in studying at Kanpur. St. Stephen’s College...? Now, when did this idea slide into her psyche...? Perhaps she’d spotted the campus the same evening I’d brought her to the hospital. It was adjacent to its north. As I cared to remember, it appeared splendid...!

Needless to say, I’d followed Yadana aunt’s instructions word-by-word. To my pleasant surprise, the coupe was cozy, akin to a room for 2 having an attached washroom.

~

Once again in life I was quite disturbed, having found Dad in distress

Reclining upon his large Four Poster antique-themed Elizabethan-styled bed, featuring thick posts, desolately staring at its intricately molded carved themes around its footboard, and at its varnishes, waxes done in dark rich coffee color, he must’ve become despondent not to have Mom’s cherished presence at this crucial juncture.

I contemplated what at all I could do. One, Mom couldn’t be brought back into this corporeal world. And Two, His Eternal Laws were unswerving

Same evening I heard footsteps of Doctor Tripathi aunt and uncle entering Dad’s sleeping chamber. Doctor Tripathi aunt had entered *à la mode* clicking the heels of her Fendi suede pumps and slinging her Fendi baguette handbag of Italian origins, whereas her husband had come in, exclusive of a single resonance.

Eyeing me, Doctor Tripathi uncle asked me to go and fetch the entire medical reports of Dad, and which I promptly adhered to. He observed Dad’s pulse, his eyes, and his tongue in addition to his white bandage upon his cranium.

Subsequent to examining each and every segment of the thick medical file as well as the folder carrying miscellaneous reports in conjunction to it, he at last emerged from the side of Dad's bed. While taking me aside he suggested, placing his somber hands upon my shoulders

“...Perchance your Dad acquired a 2nd life. What's more, the report states that he underwent transfusion of 2 bottles of blood. And as it gives the impression of a grave health issue concerning the head, rather brainpower, he shouldn't be at the receiving end of any kind of mental shock...”

Sure enough, I got alarmed. He further emphasized, “O yes Kt. Kirti, remember shock of any sort at this instant could prove damaging, fatal...”

...*Hey Bulla Dada...!*”

Hearing out his stern warnings, my legs, legs of Kt. Kirti, part of British Honors System, Knights Bachelor of United Kingdom, had started shaking like 9-pins, till the stylish Doctor Tripathi aunt intervened, consoling me

...It was true that Doctor Tripathi aunt tried to emulate the luminescent and absolutely ageless Julie Christie, the pop icon of the swinging London Era of the 1960's, especially the bed head hair of hers, most often long and layered with volume at the crown and multi-functional bangs.

“O dear, can't you talk bit lightheartedly to my *babua*, my darling Banjo...!”

~

Saddened, I hit the bed early. In my dreams, I vividly heard Dad, but in a different state of mind

“Doctor *Sahib*, you know, we'd visited the breathtaking landscape of Darjeeling during summers when Banjo was probably around 2 years. And I think it was near Kurseong that we boarded the same narrowest 2-feet of the narrow gauge toy-train of the world...

...On which the charming and coyly smiling, dimple-chinned Sharmila Tagore, dressed up in a sea-green sari, a *bindi* upon her forehead, extended *kajal* over her attractive eyes, green *chooris* upon her wrist, hair done in a *choti* and adorned by red color

flowers, 3-tiered gold earrings, had positioned herself by the window seat, appearing busy reading an Alistair MacLean novel...

In my dream, my mind, my spirits, now centered upon That imaginary Sharmila-like face, displaying a dimpled smile, chiseled face, slant eyes

Merey sapno ki rani kab aayigi tu....

aayi rut mastaani kab aaayi tu...

Beeti jaaye zindagaani kab aayegi tu...

chaleee aaa

....aaaa tu chali aaa

~

Dad was eager that I seek admission in the same institution where he had studied. Certain nostalgia churning inside, I guessed. “Banjo, why don’t you try my college, maybe I can provide you certain leads...?”

I wasn’t too fastidious in selecting my college. Any college would be fine enough because having an ailing Dad to look after, and his business affairs, my hands were chock-full.

At the same time, I was visibly upset that my old friend Jagan was going back to his home state, and from where he would be pursuing his Graduation in Electrical Engineering. I sulked at his decision, “Man, you couldn’t find any Science College in our state of Uttar Pradesh; must you go back so far to your Andhra Pradesh, you stupid...?”

He’d hugged me tight promising to visit me and rest of us whenever possible. “Hey Banjo, do you know where your *bête noire* Tejwinder Singh is heading to...? C’mon put down your animosity, meet him before he leaves for Amritsar...?”

How could I care for one who never valued females and one who was out-and-out vulgar, a pest, and an affliction, much like the spear thistle, one of the most noxious weeds of the world...? Truly a

Cirsium Vulgare

Why Amritsar I began to wonder...? Was his decision anything to do with Bobby Mohan...? Alas, my Bobby Mohan, God know where she was...?

Didn't she at all believe in friendship with us, especially me...? Didn't she have any feelings towards me...?

I remember it was the same day when Mrs. Dass had sauntered into our classroom and declared straight off

"I'm your new Class teacher, Mrs. Dass..." she'd declared in a heavy Bengali accent, where teacher sounded more like tee-chaar...I would like to introduce you to 3 new students – Aye Aung, who hails from Burma, Varun from Ludhiana and Mihir from Lucknow...2 of our old students...Farhan and Bobby have quit..." Would was Wood and Burma was Baaar-maaa...

...How the last name had exploded like a bombshell, reverberating in the air "...and Bobby has quit...and Bobby has quit...and Bobby has quit..."

True, the shock was unprecedented, unspeakable. I'd missed my boyish breath. What Mrs. Dass had taught in the first 2 periods, I couldn't recall a single word...? It was as if I was visualizing stars, my world again vanishing beneath my two feet. Exclusive of Bobby's warmth in class, I'd trembled

I'd experienced a Blizzard

Next, I recalled that Tejwinder Singh was at his gleeful best, "So Banjo, your Bobby deserted you, isn't it...? See, while in Bobby film the hero catches up with the heroine, both breaking out in a Rajdoot GTS teenage bike to have fun-time; here, your Bobby has loped away alone, sans the bike, sans you...Hahaha...!"

Nonetheless that was bygone, bygone memories of separation from Bobby Mohan. Right now I was worried more about Jane Diaz since she wanted to pursue her Graduation in Music elsewhere. Finding no way out of her predicament, I consulted grandpa with big mustaches. He was gleeful that I'd come to him for advice on Popular and Folk Music.

And why not, didn't he believe him to be a connoisseur of music, an expert judge in matters of Music

But Popular and Folk Music, no...! DK claimed him to be conversant with Hindustani Classical Music, not Popular (Pop) Music. "Hey Banjo, so why don't we talk to my friend, Mr. James Allen...?"

Soon, DK was over the phone with him. Instantaneously the British gentleman responded, “To starrrrt with, Bond’s girlfriend can categorically dig up an admission in an rreputed Institution at Shimla, nearrrrby my summer cottage. I guess I’m familiar with the authorities and can afford to put a kind word across...”

...But auh Dhee-Kayyy, what does gonna happen to her Pop, our own irrepressible Mr. Michael Diiiaz...? Won’t he be left all alone to further fret and to mourn...?”

Sensitive point worth pondering, yet both elders couldn’t help sharing a hearty laugh remembering the day when Mr. Diaz had kept them in splits narrating his anecdote on *Nasbandi*, how he mistakenly had to undergo a forced sterilization.

Contended by way of assurances from elders, I took out my colorful moped and straightaway trooped to Jane’s place. It was evening time, quite cold, and I found Mr. Diaz groggy and slumped upon the sofa.

“Hello Sir, how are you...?”

“O who is it...? Ah is it my Rocky Balboa, after long time, eh...?” Why, he was tipsy, his pet whisky, the Bagpiper, and his Water of Life, by his side...?

He started off: “Banjo, you were of great service to me, and I’ve come to understand that it was you who’d confronted that rascal M. Sharma. However you know, my tribulations are inexhaustible, can’t do much as regards my child Jane...”

I comforted him. Hearing my voice Jane came running barefoot from her room. She was looking so cute in a mid length nightdress and a plain front open cardigan. Thank God that the Earl of Cardigan patronized this easy to wear and pretty to look winter wear.

I nodded faintly

“Wait, I’ll prepare a mug of cappuccino, amateur of course...!”

I was joyful to sip steaming layering espresso, steamed milk and milk foam – all in homemade method. I badly needed this particular beverage named after the long, pointed cowls worn by an order of friars in Reformation Europe in the 16th century.

She dropped in next to me on the sofa and pulled up her knees. Piling her long hair she lovingly glanced at me. I don't know why but I was feeling somewhat shy. I took away my eyes from her and her exposed calves.

"How are the Parkers...?" Jane made a face knowing well I wasn't noticing her, or getting intimate...

Even Mr. Diaz couldn't help staring up all the way through his second round of whisky. Again I looked up at Jane. Pile of her hair was distressed and dropping down like cascade of waterfall. Her careless beauty, affected me and I'd started stammering,

"Nno, are the Parrker's okay...?"

"Damn Parkers, Banjo...!"

She slapped me flippantly over my cheeks. It brought me to my senses. After everything else I stared closely at her, at her careless hair, *estilo desleixado* in Portuguese; at her cardigan, at her nightdress. I was embarrassed what time my eyes, higher than the curly steam of my coffee, drifted to the curvy place upon her nightdress, resting briefly in between the folds of her front open cardigan.

Now it was turn of Jane to feel embarrassed. Putting the coffee mug down on a small center table, I cleared my throat, "You never revealed that you were interested to pursue a career in Popular and Folk music from some good institution, Jane...?"

She started putting similar expressions that of a stupefied stillness, when long ago; conceivably a decade ago, I'd asked her about her Christmas shopping, about Christmas cake...

Mr. Diaz another time looked up at me as I happened to raise my voice a bit, "Whatever is your dilemma you guys must put in the picture...? Thank god Varun spilled the beans. And Jane, look at your reticence, you tutored Varun not to convey me your academic preferences as I would get worked up...!"

I was almost trembling in a flight of emotions. After that my eyes softened a bit, a couple of massive tear droplets tiptoeing away. Jane moved to hold my hands, squeezing them tenderly, and then, she began to snivel.

“Banjo, then tell me what to do, you know you’ve already done so much for us. Plus, I don’t want to leave pop alone...!”

Mr. Michael arose amid a holler. As a parent, for a moment he seemed colossal: “O don’t you worry for me, a man getting on; you go and explore your destiny Jane...!”

I intervened: “Jane, now listen carefully, I’ve made arrangements for your Pop, and a boy-servant would be attending him. I’ve also instructed that boy to take him out for walks, for shopping, so nothing to lose sleep...!”

Jane was stunned to hear me. Instantly she got up and hugged me, sobbing bitterly.

“Banjo, my adorable Banjo...!”

I lovingly patted her back and whispered into her ears, “And Jane, you’re departing to Shimla subsequent week, all preparations for your admission have been fulfilled by Mr. James Allen. So, venture out and complete your graduation in Popular and Folk music adequately...

...It does gonna be a 3-year course...!”

Jane hugged me tightly. At this instant I could see Mr. Michael Diaz excusing himself to the toilet, declaring he would take some time. We got up on the double, Jane almost dragging me to her room, self-effacing...

Pushing me to a wall she pouted her lips and closed in over the coffee stains of my orifice. I was taken aback, knowing not what to do. Except she was adamant, stimulating my endorphin release, reducing my acute stress levels.

I now madly began hunting for her tongue, holding tightly her slender waist. I was aroused. Our dripping oral zones soon were to become the principal erogenous zones of our bodies...

~

Varun was crestfallen to boot whilst he accompanied Jane and I to the railway station. It was time for Kalka Mail to arrive. Unremittingly, we cracked up. I casually remarked, “Jane’s gonna board the oldest train of India, she would find Train attendants as old as 117...!”

Varun was not far behind, “Upon spotting our attractive Jane, I don’t know how much longer they would live to tell the tale. They would surely go meet their maker in exhilaration...!”

Jane and I were in splits as Varun tried to emulate an imaginary shuffle of a very aged man, crooning in a trembling tone of voice the electrifying music of Bappi Lahiri

Bitiya suno...

Then after a pause

I am a Disco Dancer

zindagi mera gaana

mein kissi ka deewana

Our hilarity hastily distorted into soundless sobs once the train arrived and Jane boarded

We too hopped in and were appreciative of the fact that she’d been allotted a seat by the window. Lights weren’t switched on as yet; little that was visible was through illumination out of the platform. We arranged her tidy amount of luggage, which I think included few lovely cardigans acquired from Daisy Woolens of Dublin 3 at Pearl Lake, and presented by none other than Varun.

Another pack was filled with foodstuff, a third her reading matter. “Hey, let’s strap her bags together to ensure safety...”

Varun got active, hauling a fetter and then fastening and locking all her bags in an assemblage. After he was through placing those neatly underneath the seat, he disembarked to procure a *kullad* of tea. No sooner he got down, I don’t know why, but I felt like squeezing up to Jane.

She’d started sobbing bitterly. I kneeled upon the floor and held each of her hands.

“O Jane, don’t cry, you’re a spirited girl, Mother Mary shall always remain with you...!”

But what to say, her sobs turned inexorable...“You’ve done more than enough for me, Banjo, I shall ever remain indebted...!”

Steadfastly, I rubbed her palms, which were getting moist and cold. In order to sidetrack her from her tear-jerking sobs, I kept talking claptrap. Other than at one point, looking up at the pretty Jane, I too broke down: “You guys have left me and no-one else in this shithole called subsistence, you’re onwards to Shimla, Varun heading to Shillong...!”

In the middle of her snivels, in the middle of shadows of nighttime, Jane hugged me as if there was no tomorrow...

At the same time as the train heaved, accompanied by a jolt, I snuggled up to her soft and supple breasts and then pressed ahead towards her inviting lips, and kissed. The train kicked off and at the start at snail’s speed. Now where was Varun, I peeped out...? In next to no time I found him speeding up towards the coach, precariously handling a *kullad* of steaming *chai*.

In the intervening moment in time, in anticipation of the train gather momentum, for the very last time, I passionately kissed her, becoming vulnerable and frail to put up in the midst of her heartache

I tried to escape a Blizzard

She was not allowing me to be off. She’d sealed her moist tongue within mine in a fervent lip lock. It was tear-jerking, heartrending. I just about yanked myself out of her exquisite and endless embrace and started hurrying out of the coach.

Train had started picking up velocity slowly but surely. I rushed towards the exit and vigilantly eased me out. Surprisingly, passengers were up till now pushing in, finding their way.

Standing erect at the platform, I was contended that Varun could somehow muddle through to hand her over the prized *kullad* of *chai*. I waved her one last goodbye, at the same time as she was seen holding the pliable hands of Varun, all the way through the window slits.

...To end with, Kalka Mail chugged out of our sight, Jane’s angelic face pressed hard against the window slits, and longing to see in her mind’s eye our silhouettes fades away.

On way home, Varun shrugging his shoulders, spinning like a toy that spun around, like a whirligig, “*Amaa Banjo, Train conductor ko dekha...Abey woh 27 ka tha, 117 ka nahii...?*”

Chapter 38

Bazaar Mei Ghoomna

Monochrome screen of my Personal Computer PC of IBM make stared at me. A moment ago as I'd inserted the floppy into the drive via a click, I could detect that lots of payments were outstanding. Dues of our subagents were woefully mounting up. Dad not in good health, M/s Kumarr & Co. could well be into doldrums, I could unambiguously envision.

Churning a print out from the Dot Matrix Printer DMP, I was at this time browsing through the listing.

At the same time, I flipped open Time Magazine, which had declared previous year of 1982 as The Year of the Computer. More to the point, as claimed by various sources, I was sure USA would cross over 10-million PC units the current year...!

Mind-boggling I must say

Yet, resentment had set in at our office premises by way of modern designing of cubicles, courtesy me, smaller, leaner and meaner, having high walls hard edges...! In fact, I'd displayed annoyance that nobody seemed to bother about our debtors, sundry or otherwise.

Consequently, my focus was on extracting every ounce of productivity out of every employee every minute every day

In a way, did I turn into a capitalist, I never could accept as true...?

After sometime, I came to loosen up in the reception area, which I'd ordered a makeover. Equally, Sahani uncle and Adith ji weren't too pleased by means of its brash, hard edged looks incorporating lots of chrome, glass, and bold graphics.

But did I lighten up amid bright colors such as red and blue was a million dollar question...?

I was in two minds whether such modernist, futuristic aesthetic lines bearing a strong focus upon accents and a graphical sensibility could soothe my nerves or not, because prior to this, ergonomic designs, and

environmental sustainability abounded. Truly then, even if hi-tech designs were experimental.

In any case, I started issuing circular to our subagents who had defaulted on payments. I called in for assistance at the fax machine, patience to get connected via this modern means of telecommunicating, the prime factor.

In next to no time, my original document got scanned by the machine, processing its contents as a single fixed graphic image, converting it into a bitmap, and then transmitting it through the telephone system in the form of audio-frequency tones.

Receiving fax machine at the other end must've interpreted the tones and reconstructed the image, printing a paper copy, for the reason that our dealer from Bhopal confirmed at once via return fax that he would be sending existing payments within the current week. I was contented.

Save for the dealer of Hyderabad, M/s DTM Electricals

As a matter of fact, the firm was holding lots of our payments running into rupees million-and-a-half, and which bothered me a lot. One of our principal dealers, this year probably they were encountering a number of hardships. Being Dad's established business colleagues, I wasn't in a mood to be discourteous and stir up business relationship.

Referring to Adith ji whether his comprehension of Telegu could be of some help was of no use, as he informed that they were a Muslim group and were possibly more conversant with Urdu.

At this point in time, from where to find a Muslim, well versed in Urdu. In the course, I remembered Farhan of my school days who'd out of the blue quit the school, along with Bobby Mohan. Amid such engaging thoughts I returned home only to be confronted by Dad once again in Bengali lingo

"Draupadi kothay...?"

~

Even though we had experts in our office, something was mislaid. What was that...? Yes, that was Dad's killer instinct.

Something else was amiss. Times were shifting, and we were always found wanting - calibrating as per ever-changing government policies and

mechanisms. Our key personnel such as Sahani uncle, Mr. Kapoor, or for that matter Adith ji were full of goings-on in their own areas.

I needed someone who could be sharp in his head, quick on his feet. Who could it be, even as I stared into the flower vase placed in a corner...?

It carried a money plant, of course planted by Latha

Money plant as well was climbing, trying to reach the ceiling, but something else had altered: from the humble marmalade glass bottle brought by her, it was now set into a classy American Corning glass jar...!

Ingenuousness ended, in its place something non-natural had crept in.

~

“*Mehr-hah-bah, nasilsin...!*” Soft voice, in a West Asian language purred beside me in the flight from Delhi to Hyderabad.

I twisted my neck almost touching her long golden blond hair. I couldn’t decipher what she just uttered but somehow it seemed a greeting to me.

“*Selam...!*” I responded by way of a curtsy at the same time as sipping Darjeeling *chai* served by the petite air hostess in sari.

My co-passenger preferred tea, but black

“I’m Banjo, Banjo Kumarr...!”

“I’m Nuray, Nuray Sultana...!”

She responded in comparable tone. I smiled. “I’ve got supplementary names.” She replied in a low voice enjoying the thin-bodied, light-colored infusion, “I’ve got titles too, some of ‘em royal...!”

Unbelievable, was I talking to someone of royal blood...? I glanced at her once again; at what time my eyes caught the gleam of her stunning ring over which a cocktail-colored gem was mounted in original claw setting that used the parenthesis sign as an integral part of the design.

“Did it belong to the colorful soiree of Bvlgari...?” I wondered in disbelief at the stylistic evolution, and my own dry, puckering mouthful of *chai*.

I learnt she was on a trip to Hyderabad, and similar to me, enjoying the flight. I thanked Indian Airlines for being the world’s first domestic airline to acquire the wide-bodied Airbus A-300, and having appointed a Business

Class. Owing to these up-and-coming facilities in the sky that probably I was sharing seat with royalty.

Her English was fair enough, breaking into bits of Turkish, the agglutinative language, where she used a series of suffixes to the stem word. It was delightful hearing her how she ensured the least amount of oral movement possible.

‘Was it surreal...?’ I wondered, pondering into the ins and outs what Nuray Sultana was enumerating, experiencing the musky spiciness of the *chai*. I couldn’t accept as true, whilst she narrated how she was in some way related to the Nizams of Hyderabad through Turkish connection.

Turkey, the transcontinental country located in the Anatolian peninsula...! And of course all the rage for its Rumi *topi*...!!

Why, wasn’t Rumi *topi* festooned by few sections of the Muslim aristocracy of South Asia, especially appearing as a symbol for the support of the Ottoman Caliphate against the British Indian Empire, all through the *Khilafat* Movement...?

On the other hand, why at all I was pondering over *Khilafat* Movement of yonder time, and not over the honey-eyed damsel seated next to me in all her resplendence...? Why wasn’t I looking at her gorgeous Turkish *salwar suit*, fabulously designed and in pure cotton...?

Tea over along with its floral aroma, we started gorging upon the non-veg platter of chicken curry and rice. Conversation had become soundless. Was it bit spicier than she’d imagined...? Past gulping every single drop of water that she could set her eyes upon, she excused herself, hastening to the washroom. I don’t know she wanted to get rid of the chicken’s smell...!

Out of the blue she tripped over me, every part of her cascading tresses knocking out my upsetting and heartbreaking visage. On or after an Indian whitish, my face had turned Turkish...!

I expressed amusement at my own frivolous quip. Gorgeous females made me turn into out of the ordinary

Nizam re-entered our conversation after her brief time away. No wonder I’d read about the Nizam someplace, at this instant getting established by Nuray Sultana

7th Nizam, Osman Ali Khan, of Asaf Jah dynasty, happened to be world's richest ruler having untold monies, jewels and properties

Tales plentifully abounded how his ancestor had bribed a night watchman to unbolt the gates to the greatest prize in southern India, the massive fortress of the nearby Golconda, allowing the Mughals to storm the citadel, tow away camel-loads of gold, jewelry and diamonds, and conclude their conquests of the Deccan.

Hitherto, I failed to comprehend the Turkish connection of Nuray Sultana, and bags of its tricky situations. She sustained: "We'd been successors to both Asaf Jahi dynasties of Hyderabad as well as the Ottoman Empire of Turkey...!"

"...And what about your wealth, where's it secreted, Her Excellency...?"

She laughed at my impudent query, looking yet more fine-looking as she ran her artistic fingers all the way through her cascading hair. "Listen, you needn't address me in that mode...

...I too heard about what our 7 generations and 3 centuries could accumulate: 25,000 diamonds of Golconda weighing an embarrassing 12,000 carats, 2,000 emeralds primarily from Columbia, and 40,000 chow of pearls – together with Basra pearls the size of quail eggs...?"

Pearls, yes...! I'd heard that pearls were considered as important financial assets, comparable to price to real estate, as thousands of vulnerable oysters were searched to obtain a single pearl. "OMG...Well then, I think you missed out the Stone of Royalty, the Burmese rubies, Her Excellency...!"

I laughed, recalling how salient properties of ruby symbolized love, warmth and a strong sense of life...? Were these properties equally shared by her...? But then, I shouldn't forget that I was talking to an heiress, a billionaire...! However, was she...?

She went on effortlessly. "You know, Mr. Banjo Kumarr, the single most valuable piece was the 184-carat Jacob diamond, the 5th largest in the world...!"

At this time, I wasn't sure whether I'd heard of Mr. Jacob or whatever, in its perfect-10 *avatar*...! Why, when well cut, it was diamond and diamond alone that shone by means of the greatest sparkle...? Since she was

elucidating with such amount of confidence, it was hard as diamond not to believe her.

I pushed her further. “You’ve not yet mentioned about necklaces, Her Excellency...?”

“Yeah, one did comprise no fewer than 226 diamonds weighing more than 150 carats...!” She affirmed.

Oh...! I almost scalded my lips, soiling my cerulean shirt in the process, as I thumped the saucer by way of a loud resonance. It wasn’t fine etiquette. But then it wasn’t my *faux pas*, it was the weigh down of the entire story which she offered, and that too at such a breakneck speed.

I excused me to visit the loo. Once at the loo, I sat down thinking about the mesmerizing newcomer in life, midair. Following return to my seat, I was surprised to find Nuray fidget for something.

“Are you okay, Her Excellency...?”

She got exasperated since I’d preferred to continue addressing her formally. Without more ado I switched my address, “Are you okay, Miss Nuray Sultana...?”

Thus far, she wasn’t satisfied. Her expressions said so. “You okay, Nuray...?”

She smiled broadly asking me to relax. “It’s alright Mr. Kumarr; you’re not the first one to get overwhelmed. But then nobody spills tea like you did...!”

It was now time for me to express amusement. She joined me, saying she was sorry if she’d offended me. I patted her palms, soft and delicate. Once again, I stared at her Bvlgari masterpiece, and then posing a comical face, “Nuray, if your ancestors were to auction your family jewels, I could’ve bid...!”

“Er Banjo, you weren’t at the time when few years ago, about 37 pieces were up for sale. I couldn’t discover you amongst Harry Winston of New York, Jean Rosenthal of Paris, or Bvlgari of Rome...!”

I guessed they weren’t 37, rather 38, one remaining in the company of Nuray, over which Bvlgari of Rome couldn’t get their hands upon.

No wonder, she was nippy by way of the names of the unsurpassed jewelers of the world. At the same time, I was happy that she'd addressed me informally as Banjo, perchance the quirkiest name on planet earth.

"Listen Nuray, I'm not too doting about gems and jewelry; other items of value I do admire...!"

"You mean rare books and manuscripts, Mughal miniatures and old bronzes, collection of jade...!"

I was really flabbergasted how by now she'd portrayed end-to-end of luxury collections a person can ever see in his mind's eye. Truly epicurean I must say, completely devoted to luxury. "No thanks, I'm contented in my own lounge and dining room where I take the weight off my feet in company with my Dad...?"

"It is true Banjo, royalty is of no use if there isn't contentment; my ancestors even boasted of a solid gold table-setting for 100 guests...!"

100 guests at one go

~

Hey, now this was getting too much even as we touched the runaway of Begumpet airport of Hyderabad. I helped her out when she suddenly turned around and offered to give me a lift wherever I wanted to set off.

I put in plain words even as sitting inside the plush interiors of her gleaming Rolls Royce, probably among the first Silver Spur limousines, that it was the arrears of my family business that brought me to Hyderabad, and that it was my foremost visit.

"Listen Banjo, any help you require in Hyderabad, please let me know. I'm forwarding you the number of my secretary...!"

Ensnared upon the backseat of the luxurious light ocean blue car, having Nuray by my side, was dreams come true as we entered the Tank Bund Road by the side of the colossus Husain Sagar Lake. I could make out that shortly I would be dislodging myself at one of the hotels off Hyderabad Museum, the oldest museum in Hyderabad.

Amid the blues, I bade Nuray goodbye by way of a *selam* promising to act as an unequaled host whenever she would embark on a trip to the north-central of India.

Nonetheless, one thing had lifted my spirits. And that was when I learnt that she was interested in Hindustani Classical Music.

I'd said aloud: "O Hindustani Classical Music, that's the genre my grandpa with big mustaches, was good at...!"

"Yani buyukbabin sohret muzisyeniydi...?"

"I mean, so your grandpa was a musician of repute...?" She translated from Turkish to English. I became quiet recalling his singular variety of music, bombardments at some stage in twilights...!

Nuray was quick to respond that she loved *Raga Bhimpalasi* as rendered on *bansuri* by the maestro Hari Prasad Chaurasia. Well said Nuray, super, fantastic...! As per *kaal chakra*, or cycle of time, it was *Raga Bhimpalasi* that could be played during the evening, at the time of twilight...

~

"Miru eppudu ikkadaku vachcharu...?"

Jagan embraced me ecstatically asking me when I arrived. He'd grown into a rugged chap, emitting a strong cigarette odor around him. I too was joyful to find him at the precincts of the distinguished Osmania University.

I promptly replied, *"Nenu ikkadaku ninna vachchithini..."*

I added to Jagan to give me a break in the local colloquial of Telugu after replying that I arrived yesterday. I pointed out to him that it was Bengali which was my mother tongue, not anything else...!

Together, we then shared a hearty laugh

Perfect example of Indo-Saracen architecture by means of massive Moorish arches, the main block of the University was hard to believe. Established more than 6 decades ago by the 7th Nizam, it was the first to be established in the erstwhile kingdom of Hyderabad.

"You know Banjo; it was the first Indian University to have students clothed up in *Shervanis*, and Urdu acting a medium of instruction..."

“Urdu...!” I cut him short. “Hey Jagan that reminds me, can you assist me to extract a payment from a particular Electrical Engineering company of Hyderabad...?”

Jagan was impressed that I’d entered business at a tender age. He couldn’t help exclaiming, “Amazing Banjo, you’re not even 20, and full-fledged into business...!”

I explained him unwearingly how my Dad’s illness brought me unexpectedly into world of business. Furthermore, he shared my sadness that most of present classmates had quit Kanpur; Varun, Jane, Aye, and even he, Jagan...!

He tried to change my mood by escorting me to the amazing library of the University, which housed few hundred thousand books and journals, few thousand manuscripts. Students had lined up, reading silently...

Hyderabad being one of the cultural capitals of India, even in cuisine, I found students hailing from all over the world, especially from West Asia.

In addition, Hyderabadi cuisine, or *Deccani* cuisine, cuisine of the south was eminently known as *Hyderabadi Ghizaayat* in native tongue. Why, wasn’t it supposed to be without equal, in an amalgamation of Mughal, Turkish and Arabic plus an influence of local Telegu...? Indeed this cuisine elevated to an unmatched gastronomic heritage.

And why not, it was our cultural pluralism that had sustained our great civilization, making it only one of its kinds...? It was perhaps this distinctiveness that was woven among all people, irrespective of color, race and other physical assortments.

Jagan also agreed that it was this celebration of diversity and multiculturalism that had sustained this country as a great democratic experiment. True, this University heralded for all such values that this realm was famed far and wide.

Not together from regular Indian and European languages, I found Islamic Studies, Arabic, Persian, and Urdu rather fascinating in the Faculty of Arts.

Urdu

Urdu, though largely mutually intelligible with colloquial Hindi, was a literary language, taking shape in courtly, elite settings. Yet, the lingo once again reminded me of my task that had brought me to Hyderabad.

Jagan asked me to kill time while he emerged from one of the airy classrooms with a young woman, in *salwar suit*. Her name was Mahira. I bowed and performed a *selam*.

Her face appeared pretty underneath a soft *dupatta*. I felt that she was close to Jagan so I decided to be discreet and not my flamboyant self. Jagan introduced her as one of the brightest pupils in Urdu. I felt like spelling out a *shayari*, an Urdu poetry in praise of her, but restrained. After all, she was my friend's friend.

However, Jagan did not appear over-possessive, or insecure. In fact, he was unperturbed. He was well aware that I was dissimilar to Tejwinder Singh, one who smacked his immodest lips as a blatant act of immodesty.

Not like me, who valued relationships and deeper feelings, Tejwinder Singh eyed every other schoolgirl from among the pack. No doubt, I'd named him *Cirsium Vulgare*, after the spear thistle, one of the most noxious weeds of the world.

Later than hiring an *auto rickshaw*, we almost immediately reached M/s DTM Electricals at a business locality called Troop Bazaar. It was around 11.30 a.m., supposed to be a busy hour for business. I greeted the owner Anwar Shah by way of a *selam*.

"Oh, so you are Mr. Banjo Kumarr, son of the great Mr. Bharat Kumarr...How's your *Walid Saab*...?"

In good spirits, I offered well-mannered renderings regarding Dad's health, financial qualms. I was grinning too because of his *khalis* Urdu dialect, which sounded unadulterated. At the same time I introduced my friends, Jagan and Mahira.

Before I could speak, Mahira broke in, somewhat in chaste Urdu, translated as: "Sir, I'm here as an interpreter, hopes you don't mind..."

"*Bilakul nahi, bilakul nahi*..." He smiled, ordering *meethi lassi* for all of us, and served in tall glass tumblers. He then went on to offer his side of story that he'd to put up with financial constraints during the recent miscarriage of his wife, er, his 3rd wife.

Mahira translated it for me. I was wordless and compassionate at the same time. I looked up to this handsome bearded man; his beard dyed in henna the colorant, and hence after contemplated upon the woes of his 3rd wife.

Were such family issues common, I wondered in squirminess...?

Just then, his manager, an elderly person, pointed out few discrepancies in a particular lot of electrical equipments, lately supplied by us, originating from USA. At this time it was Jagan who rushed to my salvage.

I was amazed at his scientific comprehension. Jagan discussed the discrepancies and asked to bring out the goods. Upon finding the goods, he asked me to wait while he went inside a small workshop at the backside of the main office.

I could hear him demanding a number of measuring instruments such as voltmeter, ammeter, ohmmeter, and wattmeter among others and sat down to demonstrate and explicate how much better our equipments could perform.

What followed was wingding of electrical forces of volts, amps of current, ohms of resistance, watts of power, etc.

Consequently, our equipments became free of any incongruity. I deliberated that these guys weren't conversant with compatibility issue amongst age-old British measurement scales versus the contemporary American, pertaining to voltage, frequency, wattage, and the plug.

Elderly manager started behaving bit awkward. I could apprehend that probably one of the subtle reasons for not remitting payments was want of technical clarifications. Means, that's why it was prudent that I'd, decided to venture into Hyderabad.

And it was past an hour or so, that dear Jagan was running the extra mile, checking and verifying each and every piece of equipment. In between, all that he could afford for recess was to come into view and taste *lassi*, casting *meethi* glances in the direction of Mahira...

Out of the blue Anwar Shah asked me whether I was authorized to collect payments, which Mahira instantaneously translated for me. At once, I smartly fished out the Authority Letter in original, duly signed on my 18th birthday, and which read as under:

To Whomsoever It May Concern

This is to appoint Mr. Banjo Kumarr as the representative of M/s Bharat Kumarr & Co., Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh...He is hereby authorized to deal and negotiate, and to collect payments on our behalf anywhere in India. His signature is attested hereunder

Signature of Mr. Banjo Kumarr

(Attested by Mr. Bharat Kumarr)

M/s Bharat Kumarr & Co.

Kumarr House

22.10.1982

Kanpur

~

After going through the aforesaid document, and instantaneously recognizing Dad's calligraphy signatures; without much ado, Anwar Shah handed me a cheque of Rupees Five lakhs, duly crossed. Indeed, the figure was motivating, a 5 followed by 5 zeros

5,00,000

Though he cut a sorry figure that as he was short of sales, he couldn't hand me over the balance payments. So at last, I could manage to receive one-third of the amount that was outstanding. I was euphoric. I thanked him and expressed Dad would be at ease.

In a hassle-free frame of mind, Anwar Shah now started talking about expanding market share of our equipments in and around Hyderabad, mentioning few forthcoming contracts at the famed Falaknuma Palace.

Mahira translated it for me: "Mr. Banjo Kumarr, I would love to get hold of any new contract floating at Falaknuma Palace, the iconic structure would go in for a revamp..."

"Falaknuma Palace...!"

The name struck me. It was the unchanged situate where Nuray Sultana was putting up. I asked for the telephone, which Anwar Shah gladly swung

towards me. Without delay I dialed the secretary of Nuray Sultana and clued-up him *a propos* the subject matter, and if possible connect me to her.

He informed that regrettably she was not available. I told it's all right and shared my hotel number.

Further, on my behalf, Mahira once again appealed Anwar Shah to remit me the balance dues. Jagan too supplemented to the situation, telling it was my *Walid Saab* who remained unwell, hence payments required urgently. On my part, not once did I behave insensitively with Anwar Shah, not once reminding him of our stringent payment stipulations...!

After all, he was my Dad's man since long

To end with, we bade him farewell, wishing him and his family sound health and prosperity. On my behalf, wishes for his 3rd wife were soundless, though thoughtful...!

And now wasn't it time to articulate goodbye to Jagan and Mahira...? Yet again, I hugged Jagan, at the same time as tossing a googly in chaste Urdu to Mahira, much to her shocker and hilarity. Jagan, to my disbelief, nearly blacked out.

"Main jaanta hun Mahira, ki yeh mansooba bahut mushkil tha, lekin tumhari karkerdaagi meri tawaqqaat se burh ke thi...!"

"I know that it was a tough project Mahira, but your performance exceeded my expectations..."

...Most recent that I chanced Jagan was he drawing out a golden pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket, featuring Hyderabad's iconic Charminar, which was good deal, popular by the same 7th Nizam long ago.

Whilst it was well-known that the Nizam got 'em specially rolled in roasted tobacco, Jagan lit it up in style, walking out in toxic masculinity, Mahira hand-in-hand, all the way through the magnificent *Bazaars* of Hyderabad...

...Milieu reminded me of the freedom fighter and feminist, Sarojini Naidu, the Philomela, the Nightingale of India's well-known poem - In the Bazaar of Hyderabad, which she'd composed during the time of *Swadeshi* Movement, wherein she intended to convey the message that "Listen, India was, and still remains pretty rich in tradition and crafts....!"

Given that the poetess hailed from Hyderabad, she was full of praise for this city, its beauty, its richness. Jagan and Mahira too must be prodding the merchants about their advertisements, their calls

Would Jagan like to procure a silver and crimson-colored turban, going alongside a purple brocade tunic...? Would he solicit a singular dagger composed of green-colored jade...? Would he prefer to maintain a golden sheath fitting for his gleaming sword...?

And how would he save from harm his lady-love, approaching him guilelessly, decked up in bridal garlands of azure and red, skin aesthetically done up in *chandan* and *henna*...?

...Likewise, would Mahira like to adorn herself in gold wristlets, anklets and rings, painstakingly crafted by skilled goldsmiths...? I'm sure; she must've admired herself in frontage of a sparkling mirror, mirror duly concealed by a frame made of amber...

...Next, what would they order for feast - rice cooked in the midst of lentils, sautéed in exotic spices and saffron...? At all, which fruits would be served to the guests - citron, pomegranate, plums...?

Further, I wonder how they would like to entertain guests: arrange games of chess, pigeon flying, magic shows, or simply all the way through dances - having charming dancers adorning golden girdles....

And wouldn't the dancers like to be supplemented by musicians - busy playing *sitar*, *sarangi*, the drum...?

Without a doubt, after a stretched but triumphant day, sounds of drums reverberated in my dreams, wherein I discovered Jagan in a dazzling bridegroom's crown, albeit a Charminar cigarette hanging out of his blistered lips, and proclaiming

Nothing else satisfies

Chapter 39

Neorealismo

“God has given you your country as cradle, and humanity as mother; you cannot rightly love your brethren of the cradle if you love not the common mother...”

- Mazzini

Chitra Sahani was adamant that Gandhi ji was influenced by Mazzini

“So be it, Chitra...!” I declared, not being fully convinced, but admiring her self-belief at the same time. She was unwavering, confirming that Mazzini helped define the modern European movement for popular democracy in a Republican State. How well her comprehension about Europe, its history and culture was beyond any imagination...?

I stared at the doe-eyed beauty as she went little further back as to how the *le petit caporal*, the little corporal in French, Napoleon Bonaparte, and one of the most celebrated personages in the history of the west, had invaded Italy just before 18th century came to an end, later which followed by wars, known as Napoleonic wars.

Mika, in an air of pre-eminence, reminded Honey of the Emperor of the French, *Empereur des Francais*, Napoleon; one having a straight nose with a hardly noticeable bend, and reddish brown hair topped by a large bicorn. Bicorn he pronounced slowly but surely as if he was going to try one...

More to the point, Mika lost no opportunity to imitate Napoleon’s hand-in-waistcoat gesture, by way of inserting his right hand deep inside his loose-fitting *kurta*. Was posing the hand inside the waistcoat indicative of calm and stable leadership, I wondered...?

...And how after the fall of *Emepereur des Francais*, in concert with his French-style culottes and white stockings, leading to Vienna Peace Settlement in 1815 during the Congress of Vienna, *Wiener Kongress* in German, by first-rate diplomats of Europe, duly hosted and typified by Prince Metternich, the Austrian Chancellor, all efforts made for the

Unification of Italy, also known as Resurgence, *Risorgimento* in Italian, till 1830 proved a total fiasco...?

...And how Italian patriots had to succumb to defeat against Austria's invincible potency, against all changes...?

...And how at such a crucial hour, a paradigmatic personality appeared on the scene and ignited new awakening among Italians. That glorious person was none but Mazzini. How he dreamt of Italy's independence and hoped that he would emancipate and lead Italy...?

"Remember 8-1/2, Italy around mid-19th century was broken up into a patchwork of small Kingdoms and States, counting the Papal State...!"

"O hello, why was Chitra addressing me as 8-1/2...? Or was it because she discussed Italy, and which also meant that any and sundry conversation about this historic country would make me Vedanta mama's archetypal 8-1/2...? Furthermore what about Papal State, which I rightly guessed it to be in some way connected to the Pope...?"

My mind wandered over to Vedanta mama and his appealing words enclosed in an Inland letter bearing a stamp value of 35 paisa. It contained concern regarding Dad's health and my steps forward. And of course, an invitation to his hometown, Haridwar

Nevertheless I was bemused at Chitra's subsequent observation that similar to the story of Ballet dance getting entwined between the bordering states of Italy and France along the coast of the Mediterranean was one more story, the motivating story of Mazzini...

...How he'd entered France in 1830 and founded a society under the name of Young Italy, *La Giovine Italia*, which aimed at infusing the spirit of fraternity among Italians...?

"Hmm Young Italy sounds interesting, without a doubt Metternich could be ill at ease watching rise of Mazzini...!" I mused aloud. Chitra confirmed my observations that Metternich had even described Mazzini as the most dangerous enemy of his social order.

She went on to narrate how another two great figures, Cavour and Garibaldi helped Mazzini to unify Italy...? And how significant words such as Unity and Independence got printed on one side of its flag and on the other side it

contained sacred principles of French Revolution: Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity; the triple motto in French

“Liberte, egalite, fraternite...!”

In fact, French Revolution had led to the transfer of sovereignty from the monarchy to a body of French citizens. More to the point, the idea of *le citoyen*, or the citizen in French, emphasized the notion of a united community under a proper Constitution.

“Chitra, I heard Mazzini of the mid-19th century was influenced by none other than the philosopher-writer born in Geneva, Rousseau of the 18th century, who continued the great tradition in the mainstream of intellectual development since the Renaissance...

...Why, in turn Rousseau opens his treatise, *The Social Contract*, *Du contrat social*, in French, by way of a famous sentence, and which er, I’ve completely forgot...!”

Chitra now burst into laughter, instantaneously waning off my stress; stress initiated by volleys of modern European history, since the Renaissance. Why, after witnessing the historical epic film...Gandhi; Gandhi, who occupied an analogous position in the country’s history, we’d gone bonkers, totally unhinged...?

Beyond doubt, we’d gone crazy after watching the film...Gandhi brilliantly crafted by the British-born Richard Attenborough. Why, did he not labor for 18 long years to bring about this masterpiece on Gandhi; Gandhi, a man side by side with Buddha and Jesus...?

Imagine, 18 long years of meticulous research

Why, wasn’t this film which tried its best to depict the venerated life and trying times of Gandhi ji...? Was it not the movie over which we gushed at her house along with her family, after hearing that it bagged 8 Oscars...?

In the present day in the year of 1983, 12th of April over here, and a preceding day, 11th at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles, on the occasion of the 55th Academy Awards, we’d just heard that the movie won an astonishing 8 Oscars

Imagine 11 nominations, 8 won...!

Our joy knew no boundaries. Honey and Mika exclusive of understanding its subtleties had let out a yowl and burst into *Balle...Balle...*

Balle Balle by Honey followed by *Shava Shava* by Mika

Staring into the 14-inches TV, supposedly bearing the Lucky Goldstar circuitry from Republic of Korea, I was trying to decipher the speech, just delivered by the bottleglass-spectacled director of British origin

“...He (Gandhi ji) was an inspiration to millions and millions of people, and the extraordinary thing always seems to me, that he is currently still an inspiration...”

Your (Americans’) great folk hero Martin Luther King Jr. was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi...”

True, it was Martin Luther King Jr. who once said, “Hate begets violence; violence begets violence; toughness begets a greater toughness...!”

However, equally Mika and Honey seemed to appear clueless about the great pacifist and political philosopher Martin Luther King Jr. – who fought against the oppression of African American people in 1950s via a powerful Civil Rights Movement in USA, and which included the Right to Vote and ending of segregation and discrimination.

Absurdly, these brothers assumed him to be 4 dissimilar personalities: Martin, Luther, King, and Junior. Further, it baffled them that in spite being a King, he still remained a junior...!

Richard ji, as they addressed him, somberly continued, “...Lech Walesa, that noble Polish patriot, came out of prison the other day saying that what he’d been attempting to do in the past was not going to work...The only way in which we could reclaim human dignity and peace was through the philosophies and teachings of Gandhi...”

At the moment, I too was bowled. I’d not heard of Lech Walesa ahead of

In fact, I’d heard not anything of Poland except of the celebrated *astronom*, the astronomer of the Renaissance-era, Nicolaus Copernicus; in Polish, *Mikolaj Kopernik* by Jagan on one occasion; Copernicus who’d established his *Heliocentryzm* theory in his

volume, *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, and which had brought about a revolution in contemporary astronomy.

...Copernicus could *obserwowac*, observe that the *Slonce*, the Sun, is near the center of our galaxy, and that the planets *obracac sie wokół*, or rotate around the *Slonce* in circular paths. Analogous to the depiction of God: God in the center of the *Wszechswiat*, the Universe, galaxies in *Rewolucja*, in Revolution, and reminiscent of respectful pup.

...And of course I heard jokes belonging to Poland. Was this fart joke Polish, I wondered...? A guy was invited to a party. Suddenly, he farted when an angry man shouted: “Why do you fart in presence of my wife...?” That guy simply gazed him for few moments and calmly told him, “Sorry, I didn’t know it was her turn...!”

I laughed at my ingenuity at the same time as I sauntered home. Remembering my old guy who was notorious for his nonstop and booming farts I scrambled upstairs to his room, “Grandpa, who on earth is Lech Walesa, *Lekh vawesa* in Polish, Richard Attenborough, the maker of Gandhi movie, was talking about him...?”

No more than after a quiet dinner in the company of Dad did I realize how eventful the day was...! Chitra appeared so pretty today in her off-white *salwar suit* tagged by a floral *dupatta*. However, instead of introducing me to her private bedroom, she’d escorted me to that of her younger brothers.

Typical of Sahani uncle’s way of thinking, it was space saver in actuality, what with bunk beds having storage in the bottom as an added bonus

One item was mesmerizing and that was a cute wooden ladder. I wasted no time in climbing up the ladder and then inviting Chitra on the upper bed. However, she was inhibited. In its place, much to my annoyance it was Honey who climbed up next to me, announcing it was his reserved space.

Chitra started giggling, much to my exasperation. In Sindhi colloquial speech, I shared in vexation, silent cuss words bounded for Honey

“*Gadha...Kara bhaisa...Akul ya andha...!*”

Shortly, Sahani aunt appeared, serving us glasses of *khirni*, hot drink made of milk. I was at first hesitant to accept the novo drink, a Sindhi drink offered by this fashionable lady dressed in Sindhi *kurti* and *pyjamas*.

By the way, I was impressed by the local art of *bandhani* upon her *kurti*, out of patterned textiles by way of tying knots on it before being dyed. “Banjo, don’t refuse, please gulp it down, it’s an energetic drink good for health, containing flavors of cardamom and saffron...”

Upon being coaxed, I accepted the tall glass by way of thanks and gulped it down, rather relished it. I’d never imagined that it would be that appetizing. In addition, the drink proved a breather from European history - various names hovering having frontage on me: Rousseau of Geneva who inspired the French; Napoleon born in Italy who became Emperor of France; alternatively, Mazzini of Italy who thrived in France.

Such numerous names did baffle me, but then I theorized international relations at all times do cut through provinces, nationalities. And not to forget the story of Mazzini of Italy versus Metternich of Austria....!

And finally story of Gandhi from India getting inspired by Mazzini of Italy and France, in turns Rousseau of Switzerland and France, O, Gandhi in turns inspiring Martin of the US and Walesa of Poland. Quite incredible

Have I missed out any link in internationalism, *internazionalismo* in Italian...? I grinned.

~

In no doubt, sitting in the lounge of Vedanta mama’s quaint dwelling at Haridwar, by the side of Ganges, it was Ela who prompted me that I’d missed out Leo Tolstoy of the Russian Empire.

OMG...! It is said that his book, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, *Tsarstvo Bozhiye vnutri vas*, made a profound impact on Gandhi, the pivotal figure of the 20th century...!

“8-1/2, this book is a philosophical treatise, laying out a new mechanism for society based on universal love, *vselenskaya lyubov’* in Russian ...”

Taking cue from Vedanta mama, Ela also addressed me as 8-1/2. She continued, “Why, I remember this book was a key text for Tolstoyan proponents of nonviolence, of nonviolent, *nenasil’svenny*, resistance...?”

True, I’d rightly heard that Ela was into Russian literature, having read works of greats such as Leo Tolstoy, among others. Finding time, I would learn more about them from her, in detail if possible...

Vedanta mama cut in: “True Ela, when Christ says to turn the other cheek, Tolstoy asserts that Christ means to abolish violence, even the defensive kind, and to give up revenge...”

Staring at the rushing Ganges flow past us in this serene town, I was amazed whence Ela revealed that Tolstoy had written letters to Gandhi as well, at the beginning of 20th century; outlining the notion that only by using Love as a weapon through passive resistance could the native Indian people overthrow the colonial British Empire.

...I could fairly figure a product of Russian Empire, Leo Tolstoy, trying to outdo British Empire via a one-man army, Gandhiji, from India; Russian Empire boasting of around 23 million square kilometers of area under its control in its zenith at the end of 19th century versus around a far-fetched 35 million square kilometers that of the British, sometime later...?

This time I marveled at my geography, further emphasizing that in those days, British Empire contained more than 10-times of surface area that of India, and which meant, area-wise India comprised of hardly one-tenth of land under its (British) control...

Uff, world statistics unbounded

Hitherto, apart from vast stretches of land, it was on the whole, human relationships and psychologies that were most of the essence in international relations.

And in the gambit of International Relations, largely in terms of War and Peace, *Vojna i mir*, similar sounding to an added of Tolstoy's Classics in realistic fiction, Gandhi ji was indubitably a realist, wherein he looked upon War as the chief dilemma of the contemporary world, Peace hard done by.

Contrary to the fact of various political philosophers that power must rest upon violence, Gandhi ji's beliefs pertained to *Ahimsa*, or compassion, the principle of nonviolence – the key virtue propagated in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism – the 3 ancient religions, originating in our country.

Ahimsa parmo Dharma

In so doing, instead of war, it has to be *Satyagraha*, in Sanskrit *sandhi vichheid* - *Satya* for Truth, and *Agraha* for Avowal; in plain words, resistance against totalitarianism. Umpteen scenes from the life of Gandhi as depicted in the movie inspired the audience world over.

At the moment coming back to the topic, what kind of Love did Gandhi ji stand for...? I wickedly grinned at Ela, slipping a letter into her palms. It was written by Mr. Kapoor.

The letter though tightly sealed, appeared weighty, amid the guarantee that I won't undo the same *en route* to Haridwar. In point of fact, Mr. Kapoor was kind enough to escort us to Lucknow Airport from where we'd smoothly caught Vayudoot flight up to Dehradun airport.

Couple of Campa in orange flavor was presented to me by Mr. Kapoor not only for the fun of it as advertised, but as a backhander, a carrot. True, the advertisement well-matched the current frame of mind – a boy kissing a girl's cheeks – both in shorts - black and green respectively – cheered by friends alike.

The boy appearing frisky, girl coy

Nonetheless, Vedanta mama was smart enough to arrange for a cab from the airport located in the neighborhood called Jolly Grant. The 40-km drive was to some extent picturesque, cutting through oak and rhododendron forests and narrow roads, and passing through sleepy settlements such as Rishikesh and Raiwala.

Much to my hilarity, whereas Rishikesh was tranquil in nature, Raiwala was poles apart, stocking piles of meat and liquor right upon the highway...

Dad suggested that first we should check in at Haridwar and if his health permits, we could visit the verdant landscape of Rishikesh as well. I was elated to hear him. Dad's sabbatical and pilgrimage would take place in chorus.

Mami, whom I saw I don't know after how many years, I found was endearing, I touched her feet upon arrival. She blessed me with a *bhalo thako* reminding me that regrettably she was few among those who couldn't make it to my *poite* few years back.

I could sense she was a great cook whilst she offered us home-cooked meals. She informed that non-vegetarian was prohibited around the twin pilgrim centers of Haridwar-Rishikesh; it was solely in midway at Raiwala that acted as the oasis, where meat could be availed for sure.

Dad laughed and said never mind, it wasn't that big an issue; he'd got quite used to vegetarian fare. O Gandhian indeed...!

Why, numerous times in business and in personal tours he declared that he did turn into strict vegetarian keeping in view not only of its ready availability, but also for its health benefits, its soothing characteristics...?

Yet, Mami couldn't take Dad's no for an answer. She became cheerless that she couldn't serve non-veg on the plate. Hapless, she turned towards Vedanta mama, and in straightforward Bengali argot, "*Ogo Shunchho, jodii maach-mangsho naa paao, tahole paashe Ranipurer kutirar bhitare jaao, aar shaada begun i niye esho...!*"

"Listen darling, if you can't locate fish or meat, you can at least visit that shack at nearby Ranipur and ask for *safed baigan*...?"

Now what the hell was that...?

Both to my amazement and amusement I discerned that *safed baigan*, or white brinjal, happened to be the open sesame, the hush-hush for eggs; eggs white and oval in shape, looking like an ellipse that had been slightly squished at one end...

"O Mami, *thakte daao naa...!*" I suggested.

Nonetheless, being an ardent homemaker she was adamant. Vedanta mama asked me to pillion ride his Bajaj *Chetak* scooter, based on the Italian scooter company Vespa's Sprint model, and we went off to buy eggs. Despite the fact that he was wearing worn-out slippers, he did not find it difficult to manage the two-wheeler.

Perhaps after wearing these for a long time, the soles had become smooth and slippery, because of its continuous rubbing with the floor. How they'd become thin and reduced the necessary force of friction with the floor...?

Chetak was powerful, much like the legendary horse of Maharana Pratap, *Chetak*. It was breezy and I took pleasure in the ride, almost flying like the Whistling Cisticola.

Once entering a constricted path, almost deserted, we discovered a shack inside, wherein a very easy on the eye woman was seen embroidering a *kantha* fabric, and feeding her baby at the same time. She was indeed an underprivileged woman and in no urgency to envelop her breasts, opens to the elements, and which the baby was clawing at.

Almost a pocket-sized window was observable at her backside through which I could visualize a quantity of worn tires that hung. Why tires...? Perhaps they were used as counterweights to her emaciated and perilous tin-roof, which could fly off at some stage during thunderstorms.

Vedanta mama dished out a couple of tenners and asked for the quantity of eggs. She pulled down her soiled blouse, covering her squelchy breasts, delicately placing her baby over the half-stitched *kantha* fabric. She looked out for the eggs behind a sooty curtain, and which I helped count, finally packing them precariously inside a newspaper bag.

As if not wasting time, very next moment she took her baby to her breasts from where milk were oozing out, at the same time as she held the discarded cloth scrap and began a small, straight running stitch.

On way back passing in the course of a gurgling canal, Vedanta mama was lost in thoughts. He began pondering about life of the impecunious woman and her daily grind: protecting her progeny, shielding her own shamefulness, and eking out a living, all at one time.

True as he said, her fingers possessed the skill to keep her baby warm, the way she was stitching the *kantha* fabric, her breasts ready to feed the baby even though she herself remained famished. Vedanta mama reminded that all these and much more made him a fan of the Italian neorealism movement duly characterized by stories set amongst the impoverished and the working class.

At last the dinner

Even as ingesting the sumptuous egg-curry and rice prepared by mami, Vedanta mama reminded that in fact, Italian neorealism, *Neorealismo* in Italian, films mostly contend with the hard economic and moral conditions of past Italy, a shattered nation post World War II, representing changes in the Italian psyche and conditions of daily life, including dearth, domination, discrimination, and desperation.

Definitely, the 4 dreadful dimensions, the 4d's

So that was the top secret behind Vedanta mama likes for *Neorealismo*, one of World Cinema's most influential movements: he preferred to explore the conditions of the poor, the lower working class, and whose characters often times exist within uncomplicated social order, and where continued existence and endurance could be the principal objective.

“You may or may not like ‘em 8-1/2, for these films often feature in major roles, children, even if their characters are recurrently more observational than participatory...!”

Later than relishing the meal and profusely thanking mami, I was offered to share Ela's room while Dad was allotted the guest room, containing a single cot, quite basic. Clean *surahi* of cool water along with its pouring lip was that entire he had besides the familiar mosquito net, or *moshari* in Bengali.

Ubiquitous *moshari* was conceivably the funniest, *piudivertente* in Italian, identification of a traditional Bong having possession of a weird room, a room-within-a-room...!

Vedanta mama, Dad and I then struggled to fasten ropes, rather *pyjama naada*, Vedanta mama's spare *pyjama naada* so to say, extending from the *moshari* onwards to hinges at 4 corners of this large room. Dad was fluky to find a hook on the west side and he quickly looped it whereas I, on his opposite side, couldn't locate any.

At last I discovered it had to be the window grills itself. How innovative of Vedanta mama, I chuckled as I proceeded to prepare a knot...?

Vedanta mama on his turn located a nail at the north even if it popped out of the blue. Must be either the *pyjama naada* was short in length, or, he'd exerted pressure more than ever

“Oh no...! Please 8-1/2, will you bring the *haathuri*, hammer kept on the 2nd rung of the terrace, quick...!”

As a final point this 3rd one was set after one big hammering and the *moshari* end duly attached. What time, turn for the last one arrived, Vedanta mama became self-conscious

“Er Bharat, once we get out of the room, you may then please close the door behind us. And once we step out, you may then fasten this end of the *moshari* through the *chhitkini*, the door fastener...”

When out of Dad’s space, Vedanta mama retired to his room along with a tired mami, perhaps her doing repetitive chores since daybreak. Imagine these to be part of itinerary of a middle class Bong family...!

When it came to our part, Ela and I simply refused to undergo these bizarre paraphernalia of installing a *moshari*. Owing to subsequent generation, it was natural that we detest these *mosharis*, and instead preferring Odomos, the mosquito repellent cream.

“I tell you 8-1/2; I just detest its odor. And for mosquitoes, it could be forbidding...”

I laughed at her minute observation. Until midnight, Ela sat facing me on her single cot across me and gossiped. Her back had a writing desk and a bookshelf, mainly containing books on Russian literature.

“8-1/2, I’m so sorry that I couldn’t be with you in your time of distress when Bharat Pisho met with an accident and was hospitalized in Delhi...!”

“Oh Ela, please don’t even make me remind of that ordeal...” I sniveled. Immediately after, Ela changed my mood, “Is Pisho re-marrying...?”

“Who told you, Ela...?”

“Maa was saying...!”

I let out a wide grin and of course my impish answer back, “I think the said idea has taken a back seat in Dad’s mind...” And then I narrated out the entire episode of his car racing, misplaced slippers inside the car, and invite of Yadana Aung aunt, her preparation of *machcher jhaal*, and the *Dhakai Jamdani* vs Murshidabad Silk sari, Asian Games, *et al*.

“However Dad won’t let go of his present present, the shawl that he wraps close to his heart...” I brazenly concluded.

Ela couldn’t resist letting out a cackle after hearing the story in one piece. Her cackle was so shrill that we could hear mami’s footsteps approaching forebodingly and scolding us for not going off to sleep.

...I did go off to sleep, but had to wake up hearing sound of claps past midnight, probably Dad as a clapper boy of a neorealist film, switching on his hand torch, and hunting down mosquitoes that had tiptoed inside his room-within-a-room, the clapperboard combined with a chalkboard slate, film sticks, and clapping

Roll 6...Scene 3...Take 5

Director: Vedanta mama

Camera: the hand torch

What's more, I noticed Ela clutching a piece of paper. It was the same letter that I'd handed over to her, a letter from the man whom she'd met at my *poite* some 6-years ago, her version of *Signor Mar tello Mastro janni*

Early morning was fresh as dew as we planned a visit to the river bank called Har-ki-Pauri. Why not temples...?

It was said that Haridwar was remarkably free of old antique temples mainly because the River Ganga had been the main object of worship since times immemorial. In point of fact, the river bank was well-located, an idyllic place for meditation and worship instead of the customary altar of a temple.

Longstanding ritual of taking a bath in the holy river, uttering the celebratory exhortation of *Har-Har Gange*, took precedence over everything else for pilgrims like us, as we took sacred dips at Har-ki-Pauri.

Vedanta mama was cautious enough to guide both of us on either side. Sturdy iron chains were deployed by the authorities and we gripped them tight while taking a dip.

The moment my head headed headlong the fast-flowing water of Ganges, I vanished, finding myself transported to a different realm. In an instant, I was far away from reality, from Dad, from relatives, my schoolmates and even my girlfriends. Nobody was detectable, and sorry to say, not even my mom, the legendary Mrs. Anupriya Kumarr...

All that was able to be seen to my outer as well as inner eyes were my being. And the mystery behind it...! Who was I...? Was I really Banjo Kumarr, or for that matter 8-1/2...? Underside the water, I'd gone beyond

my consciousness. I wasn't even aware that I was at Har-ki-Pauri, at Haridwar, the *Kumbha* town.

Vast space of my perception was indeed invigorating. I wasn't conscious, or semi-conscious; for those few seconds, I was beyond my consciousness. I don't know I'd lost the sensation of I ness in those moments...?

Finally, I emerged from that spot where the River Ganga was supposed to have left the mountains and enter the plains and flow towards Gangasagar in West Bengal. I began to share the feeling of gratitude towards Raja Vikramaditya, the legendary emperor of ancient India, the ideal king, who was supposed to have carved up Har-ki-Pauri about 2 millennia ago, in honor of his brother, the saintly poet Bhartrihari of Ujjain.

As per folklore, Bhartrihari was the ruler of Ujjain, before renouncing the world and abdicating in favor of his younger brother, Vikramaditya.

More so, Vedanta mama was a native of Haridwar, Grant kaka was inhabitant to Ujjain; by the same token mystical spots pertaining to *Kumbha*.

Before long we boarded *cycle rickshaws* cutting through the narrow alleys, the *rickshawalas* fervently ringing the bell to warn innocuous bystanders in the course of regular potholes, Vedanta mama coming into a touristic frame of mind

"Haridwar, being at the foothills of the mighty Himalayas, is the gateway to the Himalayan shrines of Kedarnath and Badrinath; the former presided over by Lord Shiva and the latter by Lord Vishnu. That is why this conurbation has rightly been christened equally as Hardwar and as Haridwar..."

I was astonished to observe the upcoming business tycoon of Kanpur, nay tycoon perched comfortably upon the humble *cycle rickshaw*, his colorful hand-woven *Chakhesang* shawl of Nagaland, motifs machine-embroidered, neatly piled across his shoulders.

Past Dad got down vigilantly, one hand at the back of the seat and the other at its festooned hood, I found him heavily tipping the *rickshawala*, but hey, what did I notice...?

The *rickshawala* politely refused the tip, saying he would be contented to accept minimally his pre-decided remuneration.

“*Saheb, sirf mehentana hii lengey...!*”

I marveled at the unambiguousness of his approach to living, his sense of worth. His conviction was just about Gandhian. “Splendid...!” I applauded.

“...Why Dad, didn’t Gandhi ji espouse an economic theory of simple living and self-sufficiency...?” I questioned.

Dad agreed every bit of it as we entered the nearest *Khadi Gramodyog Bhandar*. I remembered Gandhi ji, who’d promoted *khadi* as a direct boycott of the Lancashire cotton industry, linking British imperialism to Indian poverty.

Elderly salesman at the huge store was relatively vocal. Dad asked him from where the cloths hailed from...?

The salesman could not disclose the exact location, but went on to describe how at the time Gandhi ji had taken up the reins of the Indian National Congress in his hands, it was an organization of Indian aristocrats educated in the west. It had no concern with Indian villages and peasants.

...And how Gandhi ji insisted that before attempting reforms in national life, the leaders ought to learn how to lead a life of let go and moderation, order and hard work, and dedicate them to productive work...?

...And then how Gandhi ji wished every villager to rise and develop self-confidence and discipline, and a self-regulating personality so that reforms could be brought about in all aspects of national life through a peaceful democratic revolution...?

And that revolution or that freedom struggle somewhat revolved around the use of *khadi* fabrics and the dumping of foreign-made clothes.

I continued to admire as to how well Gandhi ji strived for a model social order, the moment I entered home, accompanied by lots of souvenirs meant for nears and dears. Dad was in high state of mind acquiring his indigo half-jacket created out of *Bhagalpuri* silk, and so was Vedanta mama because of his *kurta churidar-pyjama* set, his kurta having off-center placket openings along *Lucknowi chikan* embroidery.

I bought a handcrafted wooden walking stick of Saharanpur origin, for grandpa with big mustaches, a sari for dear mami, probably of *Chanderi* pure silk, distinguished by its unique motifs and delicate sheer texture.

Ela was keyed up, “What have you brought for me, 8-1/2...?” Brandishing my right hand thumb, I closed and opened one eye very quickly, in an act of wink, “*Thenga...!*”

~

I had checked up the paltry bill comprising diverse items from dissimilar states – ranging from Bhagalpur in Bihar, to Lucknow and Saharanpur in Uttar Pradesh, and finally to Chanderi in Madhya Pradesh. I couldn’t help marvel at the range of our handlooms and handicrafts, pride of *Bharat* I must say...!

Away from Dad’s notice, I also sneaked in a set of organic soap for my dear flower-girl Latha, paying surreptitiously at the bill counter.

These were enchanting, in a spectrum of colors, the vibgyor, albeit minus the indigo; indigo probably contained by Dad’s jacket.

On a second thought, did Latha at all could do by means of such handcrafted soaps made out of nourishing oils beyond compare, and prepared out of handpicked Himalayan flowers and herbs...?

Did the *Khoobsurat* Latha at all have need of these soap bars, hand cut, painstakingly cured for over 3 months in the pure mountain air of upper Uttar Pradesh...? Her natural beauty was more than as much as necessary...!

Silsila, or happenings, from the movie *Silsila* galore, and what to buy for the doe-eyed Chitra...?

Not to waste time on a second thought, I got my hands on a face pack for her, the emblematic *Multani Mitti ubtan*, and a concept belonging to Multan of Punjab in Pakistan.

Why, I could see in my mind's eye her face deep-cleansed by means of *neem*, *nimba* in Sanskrit, *haldi*, the bright yellow beauty, and *menthee* from Rajasthan, all bunched together revitalizing and refining Chitra’s skin texture.

And what else do I think of her, in my imagination, in my *Khayal*; *Khayal* introduced around 2 centuries ago, by Naimat Khan, *nom de plume Sadarang*, in the Mughal Court of Muhammad Shah, pseudonym *Rangeela*...?

Say, later in the afternoon, around the 4th *prahara*, even as Chitra refreshes her skin by way of *Multani mitti ubtan*, I break into *Sadarang's Bandish* from *Raag Multani*; depicting Krishna's coquetry in *Brijbhoomi*, Radha responding in Her coquettish shyness

Gokul gaon kaa chhuraa re...

Barsaane kii...naara re

ine douna manaa mohaa liyo ha

rahey sadaa...rang nihaare re...

After that, in 7th heaven via *Todi Thaat*, do I stroke her, caress her, amid the ardent agitation and restlessness, when light fades out by the lowering of the Sun...?

Chapter 40

Handel

Back to Kanpur, I became engrossed in matters commercial at my college. To focus more in Accounts, I'd opened a log book in which was scribbled my future plans: debit was money to be earned; credit was money to be spent upon social services.

Social services, why...? Was I interested in social services...? Had Gandhi ji something to do with this newfound awareness...? Had Gandhi ji begun to inspire me, wean me out of matters economic to matters social...? Had empathy taken precedence over riches...?

Empathy

Now to boot, did it imply that I was supposed to be friendly to my *bête noire* Tejwinder Singh...? Thumbs down, this was indeed a tall order, not practicable for me...! Save for, why upon earth Richard ji talked about Peace towards the end of his Oscar speech...?

He implored audience listening to him around the world

“...Gandhi (ji) simply asked that we should examine the criteria by which we adjudge the manner of solving our problems. Then the route would be quite different to the one that we accept now in the acceptance of ultimate confrontation. He (Gandhi ji) begged us to reexamine that criterion. I believe he had something to say to all of us everywhere in the world...”

Seeping in Gandhian philosophy encountered a rupture by way of my qualms ever since I brought the examination form from my college. At home I filled it and next day went to submit the same. I don't know, but studying commerce was hurting my sensitivities in some way or the other. All it taught was about money and money matters.

Why, on one hand it was about love and love alone, the other hand, it was hardcore, business ambitions to the top...? No wonder I enjoyed going through the mesmerizing book of Napoleon Hill

Think and Grow Rich

Exclusive of even reading it, Manorama aunt had brusquely remarked, “How come you’ve become so slothful Banjo that you want to just think and grow rich. No work, only fooling around...?”

For the first time I was in consonance with Manorama aunt, the fat aunt of Deoghar, and not willing to fall out. I was swayed what she was trying to blow me, which was that no one could become well-to-do by sheer beliefs. Except the point was, was I not earnest in my studies, or for that matter business...? Did I not go to the extent of visiting Hyderabad on an impulse, extracting lots of payments...?

But then, Napoleon Hill marvelously begins, Thoughts are Things, and the stratagem may well be considered spot on. Other than reading sum total of the tome, it would be difficult to propound that if truth be told, one really can think and grow rich.

But here a man who lived in flesh and blood, till 35-years ago, who cared not for riches, but for piety and justice. And that was Mahatma Gandhi. To tell the truth, he’d started to influence me out and out.

Accordingly, I started taking baby steps; the first step was that to donate the entire stock of my old books apart from spare furnishings comprising of bed sheets, tablecloths, and curtains, towels, washing and cleaning items to Vanaprastha Bithoor.

Swami Nepalananda was more than contented, commenting upon my newfound gesture: “Banjo, you belong to an illustrious family of Kanpur and are sure you would continue with your family tradition of piety and charity...”

...Being a half Indian and a half Nepalese, Swamiji had an accent in which the alphabet S, more or less sounded like Sh. Dumpy, flowing-bearded, this ochre-robed Swami had founded an *ashram* at Bithoor, the northern outskirts of the rural side of Kanpur, by the side of River Ganga.

Only one difference now was that his beard had turned into white

I was acquainted with the fact that it was unquestionably my grandpa Gajanan Damodar or GD, who had initiated the process of benevolence long back, only to be taken forward by grandpa with big mustaches or DK, and which was earnestly pursued by Dad.

Dad, even if a fascinating personality was the whole time a man of main beliefs, large hearted. And I was presently trying to emulate him in office chores that I'd set upon myself. I was intently taking training from Sahani uncle, Mr. Kapoor, Adithji among others.

What's more, subsequent to returning from Haridwar, straightway I'd met Mr. Kapoor to hand him over a letter penned by Ela...! I remember Ela, though annoyed at me for not buying her a present, had dished out a dainty writing pad out of nowhere and drawn out a life-size heart in various shades of red, using Luxor sketch pens.

Was that red taken out from the brilliant yellow-tinged scarlet and vermilion, or bluish-red crimson, I couldn't fathom...? Was it the color emerging out of ripe strawberries or red apples, I couldn't really think through...?

I knew only this much that it was some sort of love, *amore* in Italian, dispatched by *Signorina* Monica Vitti to her man Mr. Kapoor, *nom de plume* Marcello Mastroianni.

~

Sorry to say, Dad's health never picked up even after his recuperation at Haridwar. And it was early June that Doctor Tripathi uncle somberly declared that Dad had encountered a severe Jaundice attack.

True, Dad's skin and eyes had turn into yellow. He declared it was because of ascending of bilirubin levels. In no doubt, it was to a certain extent perilous he added. In the midst of the Jaundice, his diabetic control ran haywire, Blood glucose shooting up to nearly 400 mg/dl American units or 22.2 mmol/L Canadian units.

Now what the hell was this outlandish pigment called bilirubin...?

I was informed that this yellow pigment thus fashioned, once Red Blood Cells RBCs break down, was in fact the nasty piece of work that had originated his Jaundice. "But Doctor Tripathi uncle, from where on earth did Dad grab hold of this menace...? I'd argued.

As usual he was unruffled whilst he revealed that it must've been because of blood transfusion during Delhi operation. He was cocksure that in the process of transferring blood intravenously, infections had crept in a taciturn

deportment. It was quite possible that there wasn't any screening for Hepatitis B prior to transfusion.

Jaundice was undeniably a serious liver infection caused by the Hepatitis B, the virus passed from person to person through blood. And Dad developed an acute Hepatitis B condition.

Doctor Tripathi uncle was even more worried because Dad already had a past history of Type 2 Diabetes, wherein his pancreas either produced insufficient amounts of insulin, or his body was not capable to use the accessible insulin as it should be.

How much Mom used to remain worried, cautioning Dad in his diet, coaxing him to exercise, to go in for long walks, intake medicines on time, to remain stress-free...?

On all counts, I was not prepared to alter my opinion towards St. Stephen's Hospital of Delhi where perhaps Dad got a new lease of life. Nonetheless, Jaundice was now noticeable in the sclera of his eyes. It was all because of this dratted bilirubin, solely to blame for the yellow discoloration.

Uggh the infamous bil-ih-ROO-bin

Very next morning Dad was admitted to the same old British built, warm brownish-red Georgina McRobert Hospital, in the posh Civil Lines. I was edgy as it was the unchanged hospital which Mom used to visit frequently, and had in fact attained the status as her second home.

First night I stayed in the hospital. I was traumatized as repeated needles were ineffectively inserted into the veins of Dad, disappearing more than ever. Along with his screams, I too was screaming, albeit from inside. My nightmare had been set in motion...

I began to stay back in the hospital most of the time as Dad's attendant. Similar to my Mom I too was friendly with the hospital staff. I recalled her story

...A frequent visitor, what's more, she'd become somewhat popular amidst the entire hospital staff, which included helpers and washerwomen, so much so that she instantly could make them out by their first names.

They were extremely friendly and always were at her beck and call. I never could distinguish between Nandu and Jamuna, the two young and charming washerwomen.

...One evening I began searching for Nandu and Jamuna but could trace lone Jamuna. I was delighted.

“Beta, Nandu ab iss dunya mein nahii ho...You know, she’d gone to her village. There she caught a dreaded disease and could not be brought back to life...!”

I felt sorry for Nandu, who for her entire life served in this celebrated hospital, but when her turn came up to, she was found residing where medical facilities were almost nonexistent...

Night was unsettling and I went to take a stroll in its isolated sod. It was dark, my heart gloomy, tears trickling down my cheeks. Surely, I couldn’t help experience a

Blizzard

...where for the first time I found everything appearing at sixes and sevens....!

Dad’s blood report was horrifying. He was aggrieved, showing no signs of progress. Drinking-water situation too was grim in this cruel summer. Jamuna helped me to procure the same. Weekly bill of the hospital amounting to Indian Rupees 2,533 was handed over to me. Sahani uncle paid it off.

Meanwhile at nighttime, I perceived sounds of soft western classical music emerging from the chamber contiguous to ours. The tune mesmerized me. I knocked. Nobody emerged. I pushed open the door. I was startled to find the familiar Miss Wadia lying still, and all and no-one else: “Ma’am, it’s you...?”

She glanced towards me and could recognize me at once. She offered a genuine smile. “Yeah Banjo, I got hurt in my foot, I fractured it...”

Was it not such a huge coincidence that I happened to chance upon Miss Wadia next door...? And was it not my fondness for music that I got engrossed...? To my surprise, except for the nurses, there wasn’t anybody beside her.

I called in Jamuna in the midst of the request to assist her. “Please Jamuna; I would be so much obliged if you care to attend to Miss Wadia as a special case, and please arrange drinking-water for her as well...”

“Banjo baba, chinta mat kar, mein sambhali lungi, kaun hai ye apke...?”

In front of Miss Wadia, I sort of couldn’t gather guts to reveal my crush. I preferred to remain unvoiced. At the same time I wondered, “Where on earth was Mr. Lalu...?”

...All over again the same old thought crossed my mind: was Mr. Lalu an incarnation of Hephaestus, the crippled Greek God of Fire, also of metalworking and crafts, usually depicted by his hammer, tongs and anvil...?

At this juncture and much to my despair, as an alternative to rosemary draped around the Greek Goddess of Love, Beauty, and Desire, the Aphrodite, whilst she arose from the sea; starched cotton bed sheets was wrapped around her.

Just between her and me I whispered that whenever she wants my ministering, she could just switch on some music, on louder side, and I would turn up without more ado, bells and devices, especially an intercom hard to come by.

She nodded in affirmation.

Same night after I fell asleep, I reflected I again perceived the sound of western music. Dad was encountering forty winks after his routine round of pitiless injections. I got up, tiptoeing over to the flanking room. I switched on the lights. A red color Sony Walkman, the personal stereo tape deck from Japan, peeped out of the white starched cotton bed sheets of Miss Wadia.

Music was being played via compact cassette. It was invigorating. Was it from the Baroque period...? Now, who happened to be the composer...? Umm lemme remember...

“Banjo, am I to believe that you’re stumped, kept guessing about its composer...? I’d already educated you on his music, narrating the anecdote related to it...? And you’ve completely failed to keep in mind...?”

I’d anticipated she wouldn’t like to tick me off at this anomalous hour

Alas, when at all would she be little yielding towards me...? Like as was the case, was it because of my unrequited love towards her, my love not reciprocated. Or what Nietzsche, the philosopher of German origin, had well thought-out

“Indispensable...to the lover is his unrequited love, which he would at no price relinquish for a state of indifference...!”

I inquired whether she required my rally round. At first, she was shy to spell it out. But then she'd no other option as at this hour, everyone had fallen asleep barring a nurse or two, and they were in the subsequent block.

And Jamuna...All right, she too must've become dead beat...

I was getting the feel that Miss Wadia was hesitant to take my assist. Yet at the same time she looked at me by way of agonizing eyes. True, her pain was greater than before, the moment she'd twisted her full-size plastered foot.

Quite fracture she got on her right foot

She was supposed to remain motionless, in doing so, allowing her broken foot to heal in about a month or so. At last she gave up, “Banjo, I want to urinate. Er please can you pass me that bedpan set aside in the corner...”

No sooner she'd uttered her words; as if I was awaiting her instructions, I came back with that odd-looking portable apparatus. Her signal was that I should now look the other way round. In that case, while looking the other way round, and minding her full-size plaster at the same time, I inserted the bedpan inside her bed sheet.

Now the million-dollar question, how to go about it...?

Eyes shut; she was groaning with pain as I lifted her gown, maybe mid-calf length or lower, and freed her left leg. Texture of the gown was soft as I moved my hands under her left hip, which I found was bare.

The moment I touched her, she let out a gasp that wasn't that of pain. I too controlled my sensations, merely treating her as a case of injury, of infirmity.

Amid composure, I slowly but surely raised her left thigh and placed the urinal pan under her urethra, her own vessel for urinating. I knew it was

awkward for her to allow me to position the bedpan. But then she cooperated.

She was comfortable at this instant because she could at long last now pass urine; uncomfortable because she carried the risk of messing up the starched cotton bed sheet or, finding attendance that of a male, her own *bechara shagird*.

I thought aloud that amid an unlike shape designed as a Handle, it was males who found it much easier to urinate under such untypical circumstances.

“Handle...!”

“Eureka...Eureka...!”

“I have found...I have found...!”

Nothing like Archimedes, the maverick scholar from *archaios Ellada*, or, ancient Greece - wherein he’d discovered his principle dealing with an Up thrust experienced by a body immersed in a fluid. Consequently, I needn’t leap out of any bathtub, running naked in the streets of Syracuse, on the island of Sicily located beside the Ionian Sea, *Ionio Pelagos* in Greek.

I was cool. Damn cool

It just hit my head that it was the famous German composer of the Late Baroque period, Handel, whose music was now being played

Same time during the urination of respected *Fraulein* Wadia, whilst the smooth muscle lining of her urethra relaxed in concert with the contractions of her bladder, Handel was heard playing his legendary Water Music.

...Time when the pretty, very pretty Miss Wadia somewhat forcefully expelled her liquid by-product by way of a pressurized stream, Handel was opening it through a French overture that included the graceful Minuets, the vivacious Bourrees, and the lively Hornpipes.

...Greek Aphrodite re-established her muscle tone by constricting her smooth muscle layer 3-times or so - the same time as had been taken by Handel to orchestrate his Water Music into 3 suites - F major, D major and G major.

To conclude, Water Music of Handel came to its closing stages in the course of her elastic bladder returning to its relaxed, quiescent state.

Mesmerizing concert culminated at Isis, better known as River Thames of England, whereupon Handel had famously played for King George I from the House of Hanover in 1717, I chose to Handle the bedpan, neatly pouring its contents into the commode, and flushing it down.

Caring for hygiene and to ward off resulting pungent odor of urine, I then used Dettol antiseptic lotion to wash the bedpan under running water, situated at an exacting low down height.

“Banjo, thank you, I find you exceptionally sensitive emotionally, physically gentle, unlike...?” She then stopped up looking at me through her aching eyes. It was as if she was trying to convey me her explicit sentiments...

Speeding up to Dad’s chamber, I was one more time anxious about him, about the yellowish-greenish pigmentation of his skin and whites of the eyes, thanks to high bilirubin levels. In the morning he was complaining of his feces turning pale, urine dark...!

Currently it was up to Dr. Bhatnagar who’d declared about a blockage in his bile duct, and that surgery was typically required. Dr. Bhatnagar was a recognized doctor belonging to Kanpur, and well-known to all patients of Kumarr House.

One more surgery, I lamented for Dad...

Surrounded by such medical contradictions...! See, on one side he shouldn’t lay a hand on anything sweet, and on the other side, sweet, especially sugarcane juice was imperative for him to control Jaundice.

Choice was between the devil and the deep sea

~

Wasn’t it similar to today’s predicament, June the 25th of 1983 as Kapil Dev, the Haryana Hurricane, and a great all-rounder, and now our cricket captain was facing in the World Cup being played in England...?

India had met West Indies, nicknamed The Windies – a group of mainly English-speaking countries and territories in the Caribbean region, for the final in cricket at Lord’s of London in England.

West Indies team captain Clive Lloyd, born in the Amazonian Guyana was lucky to win the toss and he had invited Kapil Dev to bat first. Much to my dismay, India was bundled out for a mere 183 runs - in just 54 something plus over.

Doordarshan channel of TV blared at the hospital canteen announcing that the West Indian great Vivian Richards VIV was slaying Indian bowlers and it seemed just like his side would canter to a victory. He was the same brawny player who was part of the squads of The Windies that won the previous Cricket World Cups of 1975, of 1979.

But then as you know, we Indians are strong in our nerves, Madan Lal approaching Kapil Dev

“Give me the ball...!”

“You give me the ball, I have earlier dismissed VIV, I can do it once more,” argued Madan. Seeing that the other bowlers were going for runs, Kapil had no choice but to accept the request. The rest, as we witnessed, would be history, Kapil Dev running 20 yards backwards to catch a straying shot.

Entire staff and visitors waiting at the canteen amid *chai-paani* were over the moon. So much so that the director of the hospital appealed to us to maintain silence. In fact, Madan had already picked up the wicket of VIV to all but seal The Windies’ hopes - at the same time as we Indians celebrated a stupendous victory, irrespective of the hospital director’s plead.

Yahoo

Rosogulla, this time from Ghosh’ and combined with drugs for diabetes finally reduced the serum bilirubin count as of 10 to 6.6 mg/dl. Following a week Dad was finally released from the hospital.

I heavily tipped Jamuna along with my good wishes. She was all pathos wishing my Dad in good health. In addition, tears gathered in her forlorn eyes whilst remembering Mom, and her joviality, her generosity...

Her voice trembled slightly as she spoke of my mother, her words heavy with the weight of memories, as though every mention of her brought both sorrow and a tender longing for the days of laughter and warmth they’d shared.

~

In all, Dad underwent an astounding 19-day ordeal. To follow up, in another 10 days, the test was re-done, and this time, at home. Manorama aunt, the fat aunt of Deoghar was present too. The lab technician had arrived.

This point in time, I was watching tense as blood was drawn via a small needle inserted into a vein in the bend of Dad's arm. The needle was attached to a small tube, in which the blood was collected. Dad felt a quick twinge as the needle was inserted into his arm. He must've experienced short-term soreness at the site after the needle was removed.

Blood sample was dispatched to Dr. Sur's pathology lab for analysis. After a day holding our breath, the report came along duly signed by the eminent Dr. Sur. He'd even called up Dad to wish him speedy recovery. Even if normal count was supposed to be less than 1.2, Dad's serum bilirubin count seemed to stabilize at 2.5.

I was contended that fat aunt of Deoghar, now a qualified nurse of Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi University of Medicine, was somewhat satisfied. "Banjo, I've come to be with your Dad, you can go on with your examinations...!"

"Thanks for coming...!" I uttered softly. It seemed I'd softened up with her. Why not...? She was found whenever Dad was in trouble. Last prank I wanted to carry out was to pull out her Pimpinella dining chair before she could manage to place her expansive bottom...

~

5th of July, and it was Dad's birthday. I'd arranged a nice get-together where everyone was invited.

The house was filled with laughter and the hum of familiar voices, a comforting reminder of the warmth we often took for granted. Dad, surrounded by friends and family, seemed to radiate joy, his smile a rare but heartfelt reflection of the love that enveloped him on this special day.

Our extended family, Ef, once again was ensconced in our large dining hall, *sala da cena* in Italian. One person who wasn't present was Draupadi.

We had no choice but to spill our beans letting Dad know that Draupadi had skedaddled whilst we were away to Delhi to watch Asian Games. He was in for a shock and began to recollect how she'd entered as a youngster into our household at the time when Mom was still alive...? And how she went on to become part of our Ef, famed all over...?

Aunts too started recalling what transpired once Rajesh Khanna was being discussed over this dinner table, the *tavolo da pranzo* in Italian

“You know *Bowdi*, *Kaka* as I call him, is wildly mobbed during his public appearances. *Dilli* girls seem to be crazier than *Bombai* girls. These hysterical girls kiss his big white car; envelop it with lipstick marks so terribly that he’s unable to make out...” Draupadi had whispered in a husky voice, drenched lips.

“And...?” Stylish Doctor Tripathi aunt had joined, winking at other ladies.

“Well, Doctor *Sahiba*, I’ve dispatched him an epistle written in my own blood, along with my photograph. And as I did not hold his address, I just scribbled Rajesh Khanna, *Bombai* over the envelope. I’m sure *Kaka* has measured my feelings by now...!” Draupadi had continued to whisper in her husky voice, panting in trepidation.

“O My God...! And what to boot, Draupadi...?” Doctor Tripathi aunt had inquired dexterously, building up the romantic ambiance for the rest of the pack.

“For me, above is the Lord, the *Aka*, and below is my *Kaka*...

...He means everything to me. Look, I’ve even applied *sindoor* upon my forehead by means of the blood of my cut finger, keeping *Kaka’s* 1971’s calendar poster of Amar Prem in front of me...!” Draupadi had whispered even softer, her huge breasts heaving up and down like waves of the turbulent facade of the Atlantic Ocean.

The ladies had ruptured into one more round of laughter, this point in time ‘quaking’ the entire dining hall, the *sala da cena* in Italian, and collectively suggesting that Draupadi be casted opposite him.

Oomph *bai*, now covered in sweat, had scurried back to the kitchen, *dhutt*, being the only feedback, other than the sound of her usual trinkets upon her wrists and ankles.

My dear Aunts were quite unhappy not to find her here. Doctor Tripathi aunt even offered a clue, “Hey, I don’t think she’s gone back to her village in Bastar, she must be in Bombay...!”

...How the glimmering lights and relentless hustle of Bombay, with its superficial charm, could easily swallow someone whole, leaving little room for simplicity or peace...Peace amply found in Bastar's untouched beauty, where time flowed gently and the soul met solace in its calm, unhurried rhythm...?

Entire lot got startled.

Dad too got distraught. Seeing him under duress, Karunadi tried to change the topic: "Let's cut the cake, Bharatda has turned 56...!"

Right through the cake-cutting ceremony, Dad was looking smart in his indigo half jacket, created out of Bhagalpuri silk, buttoned over his spotless *kurta-pyjama*. Remember, it was the same new jacket that he'd acquired from Haridwar.

"I must make him feel happy after all these turmoil, these pains, these screams..." I got lost into my thoughts, caught in a Dad Moment and when the world came to a standstill.

A noble father, always for me, all the time

I couldn't help but click a button over a dainty-looking Sony Walkman, the WM-2, red in color, clutched into my palms.

Handel's Semele instantaneously released into the air via the compact cassette of Philips, and I lip-syncing in consonance with the magnetic tape, praying for Dad's cheeriness, prolonged existence...

Where're you walk
cool gates shall fan the glade
...Trees where you sit
shall crowd into a shade

...Trees where you sit
shall crowd into shade

Chapter 41

Ritu

Winter had set in, Dad's health limping back to normalcy

Yet, Grandpa with big mustaches was getting on. One day on a cold winter night, I found him sniveling, "Listen Banjo, when I'm no more, you'll get access to my sundry belongings, sure enough, you'll love rummaging the lot from beginning to end...!"

"Grandpa, don't speak this way, it perturbs me, and remember you'll survive till 100-years...!" I felt cold and uneasy. Room heater, working on the principle of Joule heating, couldn't even warm me.

Another day at the far end of the year, later than I returned from college, I found a letter from one and only Nuray Sultana. I was delighted that she still remembered me even though several months had since elapsed. She too was pleased that she was a draw on in referring fresh contract to our sub-agent at Hyderabad, M/s DTM Electricals.

True, Anwar Shah had in fact secured the prize catch at the Falaknuma Palace, Hyderabad. His kitty must've swollen. True to his words, he had not only remitted us the balance payment of Rs.10 lakhs but also placed us supplementary orders, and that too pretty substantial...?

Dad was ecstatic. He was ecstatic more because he believed his son was picking up the nuances of business. On my part, I was content to find Dad's positive reactions. Why, I was always proud as a son, now he'd probably begun to reciprocate my feelings...?

Still, it took me 2 long days to thank for her courteousness and at the same time inviting her over

For the period of these 2 days I was full of activity, preparing for my Paper, Transport. 4 out of 5 questions I could attempt well-enough during the preliminary exams. Perhaps I did not study thoroughly even though the chapters were absorbing. I could learn so much about various means of transport, its origins, its present and future.

I'd even called up Aye Aung who'd quite settled in Delhi, and discussed the Paper.

She too admitted that she found the Paper absorbing, especially the novo concepts related to Multi-Modal Transportation MMT, wherein it was delivery of goods, site to site.

Defining the same, "MMT was the Transportation of Goods under a single contract, though performed by means of at least 2 different modes of transport..."

In her exams, she was fed this question, "Musical Instruments from Delhi need to go to Mantua per MMT, explain...!"

By the by, she'd written an incorrect answer, supposing Mantua to be Managua, a similar-sounding city, the capital of Nicaragua in Central America, sorry to say, a nightmare for seismologists.

And that reminded me of grandpa with big mustaches who was a nightmare during midnights as well; nightmare reflected by his twilight farts and it's scary side-effects, resulting in seismic sources such as volcanic, tectonic, oceanic, atmospheric, or whatever...!

...Brave midnights striking a melodic composition akin to *Raga Malkauns* in *Veer Rasa*, and as explained ever so to Nuray Sultana by DK in his parlor upstairs, "Nuray, you can initiate by means of the *sthayi* of

"Koyaliya boley ambuva ke daal para...Biraha se...!"

Amid pleasure, I translated the initial phrase of this *bandish* in *vilambit ek-tal*: the *koel* sings upon the branch of the mango tree, in the midst of the grief of being parted from the beloved. At the same time I appreciated her knee-length skirt, and a blouse by way of sleeves to the mid-upper arm.

"What's a *koel*...?"

She giggled when I offered a reply to her question that *koel* was a cuckoo, hitherto feeling shy when I added that the female cuckoo's plumage was usually marked by a stripe banded and speckled in shades of brown.

I really couldn't concentrate upon this octave as she continually distracted me by way of her brownish skirt, appearing on top form as a Beloved, what with the hem of her skirt hitting the smallest point at her mid leg, providing a very slimming and flattering appeal.

Grandpa with big mustaches, “I cannot help recall the legendary *thumri* vocalist from the Patiala *gharana*, Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali’s unfoldment of *Koyalīa boleī*, symptomatic of the torpor of waking eroticism as well as the pathetic pensiveness of parting...”

“Ah separation and the pangs attached to it...”

One of the most widespread epithets used to portray Bade Ghulam Ali was - Tansen of the 20th century. His delicate strokes in *Raag Malkauns* continued amidst diverse lessons by grandpa with big mustaches, and which soon eased out cold winter, heralding the pleasant spring.

~

At this moment amid a spanking new sitting at DK’s parlor, as and when he proceeded by way of the *antara*, “*Ritu basant ke deit sandesava*,” I noticed the sweet spot of Nuray’s knee-length hemline perfectly matching alongside the length of her skirt.

By this time, I could well agree that meeting in the company of elders, or for that matter hailing from West Asia; it was bound to be a high-waist skirt.

Song’s lexis delightfully presented the message of oncoming of spring

Spring tiptoeing in, I found gardens of Anupriya Villa spiraling into something spectacular, arresting flowers in bloom. Damp soil getting fragrant enough, entwined in the midst of the blooming flowers. Spring of 1984 seemed joyous in the company of the easygoing sun glistening upon this earth.

How jewel-like crocus, my favorite, looked sensational enough, bordered by alliums, bright yellow in color and similar to the color of her blouse...?

Conceivably, kids playing around in my neighborhood, clamoring for *jhulas*, or swings of different shapes and sizes, at what time DK initiated the *antara*

Nayo kaliyan para gunjat bhanwara

unkey sang karat rang raliyaan

Ritu basant ko det sandesva...

Once again, I volunteered to translate for Nuray as precisely as possible, at what time my eyes caught the gleam of her stunning ring over which a cocktail-colored gem was mounted in original claw setting that used the parenthesis sign as an integral part of the design.

Bee hums over the new buds
as He frolics with them
signaling oncoming of spring...

Nuray was once enjoying this stuff not bothering to leave for her temporary lodge in Civil Lines.

Why, she was the honored guest putting up with the Akhtar's, the money-bags of Kanpur dealing in leather...? They owned a big business including a tannery and exported leather products all over Europe, especially to West Germany.

Nuray had expressed earlier that Akhtars were amazed to learn about her interest in *Hindustani* Classical music. Not having great many *ustads* in Kanpur they'd cut a sorry figure.

But when Nuray had confided about me and my grandpa, they got convinced and allowed her to visit us, even providing her with their latest sedan from Bremen in West Germany, the compact class Mercedes-Benz W201.

On the way, she never forgot to switch on the Blaupunkt Verona CR43 Radio/Cassette player and searching for *Hindustani* Classical music, if any.

Nuray started staring at the pendulum access-door Grandfather's clock, octagonal-shaped. I knew, precisely in half-an-hour, the moment it would be twilight, we would be truly doled out a Brobdingnagian backfiring.

After that, over again my dreams would play *Raga Malkauns*, albeit in a different format. Startled, I got up from the sofa set crafted from wood and woven wicker, and literally started pushing out my gullible friend, "Nuray, why don't we meet again for another session, remembers the Akhtars had allotted time limit for you to catch up with them for dinner...!"

Nuray was relieved that I reminded her on time. In a jiffy, she put on her slip-on and vanished in her stunning azure blue, a breathtaking mixture of

blue and purple, Mercedes, thanking me copiously. In turn, I plentifully thanked grandpa with big mustaches. Over the past few weeks, he'd come to delight in his assembly with Nuray and me, and dipping into Hindustani Classical music.

~

Nonetheless, in the present day, DK was in an effervescent frame of mind: "Answer me, where on earth you discovered such heiress...*Aj usse kuchh khilaaya-pilaaya bhi nahii...chai-samosa vegeiraah...?*

"Well er...!" I tried to say something about her and not producing *samosas* as well. He further continued, "What about your friend Jane and her Dad, Michael, any news...?"

"Well they...!" Again DK cut it, "Furthermore you know, couple of days ago, both Latha and Chitra enquired about your welfare, your Dad's health - inadvertently both of 'em simultaneously...!"

DK wasn't yet over with his volley of questions, "One thing more, Mr. Jain's daughter from Mt. Abu had called up, she's about to join a Course in Film Studies in the US..."

I was blown over by the rapid fire round of DK. What was wrong with him today...? Even though it was true that grandpa with big mustaches was the only confidante who knew about the womanly characters connected in my life, I was flabbergasted when he fired yet another salvo

"Banjo, who was that lady at Bharat's hospital where you tarried...? Did she have anything to do with the western classical music that you'd been playing during his birthday...?"

Umm DK truly possessed sharp ears for music, even western classical music: "Grandpa, it was Handel's *Semele* that I was playing, and you've guessed right, she's my favorite guide in music at school, and she's Miss Wadia..."

Indeed, a special thanks to all my GFs – past, present and future...!

Future: I guessed it remained a canvas yet to be painted, full of possibilities, where the lessons of the past and the clarity of the present would guide each bold stroke.

...A big applause to each of these exceptional females in their own way, shaping the person, I was today- continually teaching me lessons in love and adoration, endurance and staying power, augmentation and intensification...

Whether fleeting or lasting, every connection had left its irrefutable mark, and for that, I Banjo Kumarr was truly grateful

Grandpa with big mustaches smiled puckishly at my soreness

“Which means my lad that you’ve gathered quite a few musical friends belonging to different genres: Jane, daughter of Michael Diaz who’s into Popular and Folk Music...Turkish heiress who I think is keen in learning whatever thing about *Hindustani* Classical Music...And before I finish, your music teacher who plays Western Classical Music...?”

He further added to emphasize his point, “Seems you’ll grow up like Kishore Kumar where matters of the heart are concerned...”

Kishore Kumar, the name striking at Anupriya Villa after many years, what with heated discussions at our dining hall, *sala da cena* in Italian, my parents impressing each other

...For Dad it was more of cool, to see me grow up to some extent like his idol Kishore Kumar, save for Mom who never appreciated Dad’s sense of assessment, fearing I too would grow up into a maverick and wayward like his pinup.

Once caught in a different situation, Dad had it. Mom was mistrustful

...In next to no time her laughter weaned off and again she sounded grave

“What do you mean by that...? All said and done, professional idiosyncrasies set aside; kindly do not inspire Banjo to emulate that oddball Kishore in the marital domain. Just imagine, having married the Bengali singer and actress Ruma Ghosh, bearing a child called Amit, he had the chutzpah of seeing Madhubala, one of his colleagues he’d met in his Home Production...Chalti ka naam Gaadi...!”

“But I don’t find anything wide of the mark with that, I guess all females are green-eyed over Madhubala’s legendary beauty...!” Dad instigated Mom in a laugh at.

...And the squabble went on...

More than anything else, I started smiling at DK’s detailed analysis. Nevertheless, twilight was approaching at the double, and so, I’d to rush downstairs. Thank god DK didn’t find any *chai-samosa* on today’s plate...!

Even while rushing down the Florentine stairs, I was in high spirits that at least my girlfriends cared to remember me during my nonattendance. Still, Latha and Chitra remembering I in chorus did not bode well. I began to comprehend that they'd developed difference of opinion, and skirmishing for me, *Silsila-ishtyle...*!

Can't they ever be true acquaintances...? Said in a lighter vein, can Ballet dance in Italy, in its grounded and intricate style, be somewhere found in the company of Baroque architecture of Italy, in its bold, vigorous, and exuberant artistic style...? I wasn't sure whether I was playing with fire.

Sounds like rough patch ahead. "I must try and douse such fires..." I convinced me.

And say, what about the enigmatic Rajshree Jain whom I'd never ever met. I could imagine that while she harbored a warm feeling towards me, I hadn't, if truth be told, reciprocated.

All that I bore was a feeling of twinge. Why at all she'd sent me a card carrying her lipstick marks...?

...In utter lonesomeness, all I was bestowed was a palliative, and one that easily came into sight was Rajshree's greeting card in handmade paper of Sangner, the suburban craft hub of Jaipur.

Objet d'art carried on its inside page at the midpoint, her bold lipstick stain in red, the panegyric Sweetu-Cutuu scribbled in a camber, in addition to a trendy Rajshree signed in Lucida handwriting at the base.

Imagining them to be her bonafide playful pout, luscious all over, I quite often smooched directly onto her supposedly Coco rouge red lipstick stain of Chanel, mark by mark. Thus by now, probably sucked all the sundry ingredients of the lipstick, cocoa butter included...!

Therefore, no sooner I entered my room I opened one of the Fragile drawers of my natural distressed finished study table

...Firstly, out came the simple Friendship Band, made up of lac resin, brightly colored and gifted to me by none other than Jane, in one of our unparalleled moments.

How is she now...? After seeing her off at the railway station I missed her so badly. In actuality, I used to miss her a lot, given the fact we did not meet ever since.

...In the intervening moment in time, in anticipation of the train gather momentum, for the very last time, I passionately kissed her, becoming vulnerable and frail to put up in the midst of her heartache...

I tried to escape a Blizzard

She was not allowing me to be off. She'd sealed her moist tongue within mine in a fervent lip lock. It was tear-jerking, heartrending. I just about yanked myself out of her exquisite and endless embrace and started hurrying out of the coach.

Once out of the coach of her train, and no meeting with her since then, was the bitter truth. All the same, I'd often gone to meet Mr. Michael Diaz.

Sorry to say, he'd become lonely, very lonely, though I found it miraculous the way he was living cool, keeping himself away from his pet whisky, the Bagpiper, his so-called Water of Life, and aided by the boy-servant whom I had employed for his assistance.

Best thing of course, was that Jane Diaz, daughter of Mr. Michael Diaz, was pursing her Graduation in Popular and Folk Music, in right earnest...!

Thank God DK had no inkling about Michi Abe and Bobby Mohan. Very name of Bobby Mohan up till now caused an ache in my heart. I used to feel so helpless remembering her.

"Helpless...!"

Word Helpless caught me by my horns. I immediately called up Miss Wadia to enquire about her health. Fortunately, over these months she'd recovered, and unfortunately, she'd quit my school for a new job at a college.

Lo and behold

It was none other than my own college. Once more, fate perceptibly was on my side. What a happenstance...? First it was my school, and now it was my college. Was I following her, or *vice versa*...?

Joys untold, once I again found her in the music room of my college...! Never mind the college did not possess the immaculate décor that boasted of my school – where

It housed a fireplace, in which the surround consisted of the mantelpiece and side supports, made of wood; while the inert, where the fire was supposed to burn was constructed of cast iron, and backed by decorative tiles, again beige in color.

The fireplace certainly supplemented to the cozy ambiance of the Piano Chamber

Piano, or, Pianoforte, having origins in Italy, was resting in the middle of the hall. Baby Grand Piano of around 5 feet long was looking gorgeous placed upon Italian tiled floor, prominent in square checks of white and beige.

Everything in the room, including the teacher, fascinated me, especially her sharp Iranian feature, mysterious eyes...

As she perched upon the bench having carved legs, and slid her artistic fingers on the row of 36 Black and 52 White keys, I detected her pointed nails were painted in bright Fuchsia almost Red crème polish, gorgeous and so shining, probably a Valentine's manicure...!

I also judged that White keys of the Piano were spaced out in groups of 2 and 3 on which her Red-tipped fingers looked even more glamorous.

“Well Banjo shall we begin...?”

“I’m rrrready Ma’am...”

I wasn’t daydreaming. Even though settings altered, it was equivalent all over.

Repeat:

“Well Banjo shall we begin...?”

“I’m rrrready Ma’am...”

Once again, I happened to study her absorbedly: she looked pretty, very pretty in her Red sari, corner of her drawn-out *pallu* falling. I took in that to

prevent the *pallu* sliding off her shoulders; she'd fixed up a golden broach. This piece of jewelry was aesthetically worn to pin the top of the *pallu* to her Red blouse at the front of the right shoulder.

I couldn't help glancing at her figure all over again, confirming that she was quite young, and barely few years elder to me. For the time being, just forget Mr. Lalu, an incarnation of Hephaestus, the crippled Greek God of Fire, also of metalworking and crafts, usually depicted by his hammer, tongs and anvil...?

I was fascinated by her, by her classic charm, and that's all

I was fortunate enough to have my classes with her in continuity, from school over to college. Lone amend was a violinist perched at the end of the music chamber. He was an expert in violin; violin which played the highest notes among string instruments and the primary source of melody.

His eyesight was weak. He had put on a thick pair of blue light glasses. I said hello to him. His name was Mr. Murthy and he was a Kannada by origin.

Other change was around a dozen students sharing class with me, and nobody recognizable. One of the girls, very beautiful having big brown eyes, one who'd applied *kajal* on the lash line rather than the lower waterline, and which made her beautiful eyes look bigger and brighter, spoke French in addition.

Miss Wadia began her classes by talking about the premier violinist Vivaldi, a master of the concerto, and a key transitional figure between the Baroque and Early Classical eras, and his best-known work which was a series of 4 Violin Concertos known as the The Four Seasons.

Four Seasons struck me as something familiar that I'd heard during my childhood amid the lap of Mom, my dearest Mom...!

It was all about seasons

Didn't Mom explain about the importance of various seasons' *vis-à-vis* poetry and music and paintings by way of Indian cultural context...?

On the contrary, didn't the fat aunt of Deoghar in the companionship of her Afro-American hairstyle come in the way to relegate the central topic of discussion as something unworkable and unusable and unrealistic...? Didn't

she tell me later it was certainly better to study hard for exams than to dabble in such baloney talks...?

Didn't she condemn talks on Ritu as something gobbledygook, something mumbo jumbo, which would lead not anywhere...?

I vaguely remembered to what my Mom had to articulate: "Banjo, the earliest reference in literature to the word *Ritu*, or the changing seasons is found in *Rigveda*...*Ritu* can mean any established point in time leading to a portion of a particular time of the year. True, it refers to an epoch, especially one of the 6 seasons...!"

"Mom, do we have 6 seasons, how do we distinguish 'em...?" I'd questioned.

Mom: "You know I'd studied about all these variations at BHU in Benaras. Bengali lingo can summarize them as *grishmo*, *borsha*, *shorot*, *hemonto*, *sheeta*, and *boshonto*...!"

Me: "Let me guess, summer, monsoon, autumn, pre-winter, winter, and umm...!"

I'd forgotten the last one. I'd even forget which *Puraana* Mom had mentioned wherein an entire chapter was dedicated to the month of spring...?

At the present, herein music chamber of my college, we weren't discussing about those 6 seasons prevalent in India, rather 4 as popular in the West, and stopping at the early 18th century composition of Vivaldi, the Italian Baroque musical composer, a virtuoso violinist.

Really, Indians believe in 6 seasons while Italians 4, quite perplexing, I must say

Vivaldi again came into talk, and how he begins with a poem which he himself composed, and which aesthetically portrayed that particular season of the year.

Miss Wadia further added that The Four Seasons were a revolution in musical conception, wherein Vivaldi composed lines on each of the 4 seasons; the spring accompanied by this text, and which she wrote on the blackboard and asked us to copy down in our notebooks

“Spring is here and the birds salute it festively with their joyous song...Meanwhile the streams and springs at the breath of gentle breezes, run their course with a sweet murmur...Thunder and lightning come to announce the season, covering the air with a black mantle...When things have quieted down, the little birds return to their melodious warbling...”

I was impressed, “Wow, birds calling out in different sounds, must include in addition our own *koel*...!”

She sustained, “Of course Banjo, and why not your *koel* as well...? Moreover, Vivaldi introduced music of barking dogs, buzzing mosquitoes, crying shepherds, storms, drunken dancers, silent nights, hunting parties, and what not...!”

Miss Wadia took a pause to sip water. I could clearly detect her pointed nails were painted in bright Fuchsia almost Red crème polish, gorgeous and so shining, probably a Valentine’s manicure...!

In the opening that followed, Mr. Murthy the violinist took over. Placing his brown wood violin case, and adjusting his thick pair of glasses, he continued in his typical South Indian accent. First he introduced himself in *Kannada* and next talked about hunting parties

“*Halo vidyarthigalu nanu Karnatakadindamurti*...Hunting parties were from both the hunters’ and the preys’ point of view...”

Miss Wadia was over again on board about Vivaldi’s description of frozen landscapes, ice-skating children, and warming winter fires. Just then the bell rang. In speed up, she added, “Vivaldi was believed to have been inspired by the countryside and enchanting water bodies all around the town of Mantua in Italy...”

Mantua

Bell over, I was back to my classes, and again Transport. Now, I knew where Mantua was...? I grinned at the thought when I would be going back home and talking to Aye Aung, tackling her distinctive query, “Musical Instruments from Delhi need to go to Mantua via MMT, explain...!”

In the evening I called up Aye Aung. She was connected to her hostel. After familiar greetings, I asked about Yadana Aung aunt. I was happy that she was doing fine, but away to Assam to celebrate the festival of *Bohaag*.

“But Aye, I’ve only heard of *Bihu*...!” I insisted.

Aye laughed and went on to explain that *Bihu*, marked for prosperity and harmony, were celebrated thrice.

“Thrice...?”

“O yes Banjo, after *Kaati Bihu* around your birthday time, it had been *Maagh Bihu* during the month of *Maagh*. Now we’re waiting mid-April, the most important *Bihu*, *Rongali Bihu*...!”

At the bedrock dining table for supper, I clued-up Dad in the same breath, “Dad, Yadana Aung aunt is going to celebrate *Rongali Bihu* in Assam. Er can I drive your Audi Quattro...?” At the same time as Dad’s mood brightened up, I remembered our conversation about the car:

“Yes Banjo it sure is, it’s Audi Quattro...”

“*Quattro*...?” I’d quizzically asked him.

“Yeah, I’d spot its review at the recent Geneva Motor Show and well-liked it; the word *Quattro* was derived from the Italian words Four, which refers to its four-wheel-drive system...”

And right now, more than the Four Seasons, I was interested in Audi Quattro, *Quattro* the Italian for Four.

Aye Aung responded in a side-splitting way when I'd presented the answer regarding MMT: "Train from Delhi to Mumbai seaport and then loading onto the vessel. Thereafter, shipping to Genoa seaport in Italy, from there by road to the inland town of Mantua..."

Chapter 42

Amadeus

April 3, 1984

Walrus mustache of grandpa stared at me enervated, in stupor

Dushyant Kumarr of British-Burma fame, brother of Gajanan Damodar (my grandpa) and also partner of M/s G.D. & Co., Cawnpore; uncle of Ganesh Kumarr (Grant kaka), Bharat Kumarr (my Dad), Ujjala (my bua); and grandfather of Banjo Kumarr (that's me) was no more.

He was restful upon his bed, everyone surrounding him. Dad was devastated. All that he managed to utter in the midst of his wail was, "Kaka ji, you've left me orphan..."

"Aamake, aapni onaath korey gaalen...!"

Grant kaka too shared Dad's mindset. Over telephone, that entire he could put into words was that he was away at nearby *Jyotirlinga* shrine of Omkareshwar along with his family. And as a substitute of coming to Kanpur, located by the right bank of the eternal River Ganga, he would take the opportunity to conduct DK's *Samskaras* there itself, by the side of holy River Narmada.

Dad, though reassured that his bro would do the needful, hung down the phone in a smidgen of despondency, not finding him by his side in such bottomless predicament.

Manorama aunt of Deoghar was trying to pacify Dad but she too broke down, her Afro-American hair, severely bobbing up and down. She thought DK would just wake up to offer his blessings. After all, grandpa was her revered guardian.

...Why, Baby Dad I was informed was an obstinate maternity case and in fact that lady (fat aunt of Deoghar's mother) attained the title of not only Dad's wet nurse, but Dad's life-giver too...

...Introduction not yet over, that midwife was a product of my real grandpa's in-laws or rather Outlaws.

For that reason, grandpa with big mustaches just couldn't say No to this lady from Deoghar, when she expressed her profound desire to troop to Kanpur, for a Degree in Nursing from Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi University of Medicine.

Rather, he volunteered to sponsor her entire bill, which included her lodging at the hostel, and her tuition fee.

And by God's grace, she was now a bonafide nurse

Badi daktarni was consoling her, and in turns, remembering her own way back sojourn to Almora in the company of Kumarr family, led by its chief, Dushyant ji. She recollected the highlights of the trip, moreover, plentiful odds and ends surrounding it. How the family teased around amidst the temperate climate of Kumaon hills, located in the upper regions of our huge state...?

...And when I was born, it was actually the human posterior chamber that was our real family inspiration, and which was much to do with my grandpa with big mustaches. Therefore observing the lard of fat at my posterior end, my British Burma return grandpa with big mustaches, rather walrus mustache, instantly had manufactured a roly-poly name for me...

Gaplu

Well, Gaplu had sounded good to me, but who would listen...?

Karuna di of Puri was confounded too. It was she who'd come to offer a quantity of Halwa to him late night and found him amid deep slumber. Actually, he'd died in catnap...!

It was true that during his last days, DK had virtually stopped up cooking, even his *Halawa*: a Burmese version of our very own Indian *Halwa*, the difference being, apart from an A inserted in between, this *Halawa* had been primed out of sticky rice, butter, and coconut milk. I couldn't help but recall grandpa with big mustache polishing off his Burmese *Halawa*

...to my horror I'd counted him consuming half-a-dozen generous platefuls. Twilight was approaching, and I deliberated it would be perilous staying back with DK. I was also feeling mortified and astounded by the blunted question posed by the fat aunt of Deoghar.

Before I could answer, or decide what to answer I became nervy after I saw DK shifting his posture on his arm-chair.

It predestined trouble; this *Halawa* could be outrageous. Startled, I got up from the soda set crafted from wood and woven wicker, and put out of sight behind the fat aunt of Deoghar. Yes, she would be my shield tonight, safeguard from the deadly typhoon, thunderous God, *Vayu*.

I also affirmed myself as to why grandpa with big mustaches patronized this particular soda set. Probably it was because the wicker weaved into a net, carrying umpteen geometric perforations, thereby enabling free passage to his *Vayu* across the Milky Way...!

Last days Karuna di served him regular meals, which he consumed next to nothing. The night before, he confessed, “O don’t you compel me Karuna with your matronly love. I’ve gobbled enough in life, especially Burmese cuisine...

...Only thing that I remain deprived is sound digestion. I’ve tried many a *churans* out of spices and many a *totkas*, diableries; and much to my dismay, nothing seemed to click. Likewise, not even enemas, those saline solutions thrust into my bolshie rectum via the nozzle.

And adamantly, not even sound sleep, I guess I’ll have to be contented in my eternal slumber...!”

Hearing him, Karuna di had become panicky and had even reported said matter to Dad. Dad in turns had referred to Doctor Tripathi uncle, aka Doctor Zhivago, who’d replied nonchalantly, “Kaka ji’s touching 85, let him survive peacefully the way he wants, let’s avoid going in for massive medical tests, operations...!”

In the present night, on finding nil response, she’d called up Doctor Tripathi uncle, who’d rushed from his clinic only to find DKs eyes shut forever, never to open another time. At midnight, under his breath, he released his preferred prayers

“*Hey Bulla Dada...!*”

Thankfully, next day, Namrata masi was in town and she rushed as well. Before coming, she’d called up to coordinate with Pushpa masi, “Listen Pushpa, there’s awful news at Anupriya Villa

Kaka ji nahi rahey...!”

Still waiting for her train ticket to Nashik, where her ailing mother-in-law had expired of late, Namrata masi was privileged to be positioned in Kanpur.

“Look, in just a gap of 2 days, both elders have departed...!” Crestfallenly she conveyed to Pushpa masi.

Pushpa masi in turn consoled her, “*Afsos, Bhagwan ke ghar dono ka ek hi saath bulawa aa gaya...*”

Sahani uncle was saddened to a great extent. He rushed in. It was mid-afternoon. Stepping inside, he remembered when some time ago, he’d come to this same room to plead for Dad’s 2nd marriage

...He had gone upstairs, climbing westwards, to DK’s room and sat facing him upon a classic Chrysalis bench of century-old Burma teak, marine ply and veneer in its frame, an intricate brass inlay creating a playful pattern placed upon a basket zigzag *duurrie*.

...Still, he was careful enough not to get into his Fart Angle lest he found himself being flown in a roundabout way at the other side of the globe perched atop such basket zigzag *duurrie*.

“...Kaka ji, I beg your pardon, I think my friend and your nephew, Mr. Bharat Kumarr, is not being very realistic. Look what harm he has caused to Banjo’s psyche and perhaps his own...”

...I well understand Anupriya Bhabi was the most pious, the most devoted lady of this house. But now, when she’s no longer in the vista, in bouts of solitude and anguish, they would wreck themselves. You see, there’s no one to be really bothered of them, actually or expressively...”

...Sahani uncle’s stance towards Mr. Bharat Kumarr visibly changed into that of exasperation as he absent-mindedly stared at the corner-placed simple and elegant century-old Burma teak table, used as a candle stand.

...Grandpa’s eyes narrowed...“Hmm I agree the situation is getting grim Sahani, and I appreciate your apprehension. I’m glad that not only you lend a hand in all our legal and financial matters; you

guide us in our family matters as well. Besides, I know that you are a very practical person...

...So, c'mon tell me, what the proposal...is...?"

"Bring a new Mother for Banjo...!"

...Sahani uncle had blurted out, pushing himself forward towards grandpa. Grandpa, startled for a moment, as he was quite aware of the extent of attachment Dad and I harbored for Mom, nodded his head in concurrence,

"Okay Sahani, I'll see what best can be done. We've got to salvage these boys...!"

...Grandpa with big mustaches, after his concluding remarks, had pushed himself back upon his huge easy chair, made out of rosewood, unknowingly angling his posterior towards Mr. Sahani. Alarmed by DK's posture, Sahani uncle hurriedly excused himself from the room, offering a deep bow.

...I'd stared at Sahani uncle as he hurried down our Florentine stairs eastwards, scurrying through the lounge and somber grey stair hall towards the porch up to his Black Fiat 1100 D, Italian but Indian 4-door saloon, mumbling

"Vadi Sai, Jhuleylal...! Bera-hee-paar..."

Kaka ji and his obstreperous farts...!"

Similarly, Dad's 2nd marriage...? I recalled how Yadana Aung aunt was invited over for lunch, preceded by a conversation leading nowhere

...Sahani uncle for a second time had to right-mindedly take over the conversation by way of his diplomatic lexis: "Yadana, please make yourself comfortable..." Next looking at me, "Banjo, why don't you take Aye and her Mom around the villa...?"

...Yadana Aung aunt shied and excused her, "Aye, why don't you go out with Banjo and look around the house, I'll give company to Kaka ji..." Dad was down in the dumps. He reflected aloud, "Why give company to Kaka ji and not him...?"

It was one more topic that Yadana Aung aunt and Dad were fine acquaintances as of now and seemed to care for each other, sans any matrimonial bonds. Even though she lived in Delhi, at least she was a phone call away. And that was quite of a solace.

Pundit Sudhanshu, clad in his designer *dhoti-kurta*, the only scented guy in the entire room, of sweet-smelling local perfume, *attar*, from nearby Kannauj, was getting impatient, “Aren’t we getting late, can’t we enter the *Ghat* by Twilight...!”

Over again Twilight...!

For reasons well-known, Twilight still scared me out of my wits

Nonetheless, Dad wasn’t willing to let go the cadaver of DK, the man he knew for as long as anyone can remember.

He was keenly waiting for Jagmohan, our trusted chauffeur of yesteryears. Wasn’t it just a coincidence that Jagmohan was coming to Kanpur to renew the documents of our car from the Government Authorities...?

Or was it because of a certain innate bonding...?

In next to no time, I heard the familiar sound of the horn of 1962 model, royal blue Ambassador Mark II car, famously bearing the number plate UPD 2322. I glanced out of DK’s window to find the car in our porch.

Jagmohan rushed in same way as he used to when DK wanted to release from his posterior end Sholay-type blockbusters, severest being through daybreaks and twilights.

...As you would expect, none of the sundry man-servants, especially those functioning in our gardens, were willing to serve under him. They found him to be a screwball because either DK implored them to prepare Burmese cuisines, or sought assistance for his colossal leave go offs...

...That day happened to be a terrible explosive day for me what with Bobby missing out of my class, my school, albeit my life and after that, ugh DK’s 2nd fart...!

...Probably DK required discharging another great one into one of the 2.0 trillion galaxies of the visible Universe, and that’s why he

...Not finding anyone else, I'd requested Jagmohan to accompany me to DK's room upstairs. Upon reaching, both of us then airlifted either of DK's legs, and placed them by way of a mild thud on top of the huge wooden arms of his vintage easy chair. The fart, far from approaching, we heaved them yet high, and higher, aaa-nnn-ddd higher.

Boooooooooooooooooooooooooooooommmmmmmmm

...Along with the discharge, notwithstanding, I'd been torpedoed like a Comet, to an Astronomical Unit of Light Year. "Please grandpa, no more intake of your Burmese food...!" I'd declared examining my bruises...

In our day, matters were dissimilar; what with Rakesh Sharma becoming the 1st Indian to enter Space aboard the Soviet rocket Soyuz T-11, launched from Baikonur Cosmodrome, *Kosmodrom Baykonur* in Russian, in the massive Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic.

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Quoted from Iqbal's tome *Tarana-e-Hind*, "The best in the world, our *Hindustan...!*"

~

I mulled over DK's passing away as something quite similar to the composing of Mozart's Requiem, wherein everything seemed to be calculated, so that the work resembled death itself: it was pathetic and terrifying, calm and terrible at the same time.

Requiem, written by 4 soloists (soprano, contralto, tenor, and bass), besides the choir and symphonic orchestra resembled us, the 4 pallbearers: Dad, Sahani uncle, Jagmohan and me; accompanied by the *sadhus* and inmates of Vanaprastha, singing together amid instrumental ensemble of *dhol-manjira*.

Wasn't celebration continuity of life itself, we 4 leading the chant...?

Ram naam Sat hai

And rest of the crowd responding amid zeal

Satya bolo gata hai

In death as much as in life, doesn't music unite humankind...? I thought while missing my grandpa badly and of course his detonations

...Why, even the topical Smiling Buddha, our country's first Atomic Device exploded in Pokhran was cipher in contrast to DK's fart...!

...Whereas there was a singular underground explosion in the remote desert village of Rajasthan, making India the 6th Nuclear Power; in the Indo-Gangetic Plains of Kanpur, it reverberated on a daily basis.

However, there wouldn't be any reverberation, any resonance, DK laid at rest

Mozart's Requiem to boot was subdued, wherein he'd excluded every single one wind instrument, and which included the penetrating and shrill flute, the nasal and piercing oboe that sounded pathos, both considered excessively carefree for this solemn occasion. Played softly, the flute predominated in the lower, while the oboe in the upper.

What remained in order was Mozart's legendary basset-horn, probably crafted by Anton Stadler, a Vienna citizen, *Wiener Burger* in German. Basset-horn, ancestor of the eloquent clarinet, explored its spiritual sounds,

sounds of lamenting adults at the *ghat*, harmonizing to its muted sound, its sobriety.

At the burning *ghat* beside the River Ganges, it was Swami Nepalanda, who sat pensive at one corner. He was chanting solemn *mantras* like...*Sitaram...Sitaram...* Swami Ji had become old, observing, “Probably, it would be my turn next...!”

When Dad lit the pyre, flames and fumes hitting me, I was lost in the Requiem of Mozart, especially as explained by Miss Wadia in our recent music class

“Girls and boys, even though the story depicted in the film *Amadeus* wasn’t true, Mozart’s Requiem was still one of the most moving pieces in all of Western Classical music. The fact that he wrote on his deathbed and it had to be completed after he died only made it that much more intriguing...”

Murthy, her assistant was quick to add, “Think about that for a minute, the guy was so good, he was able to write his own Requiem...” Somebody among us asked, “Then, who else was he going to get to do it...? Antonio Salieri...?”

It was, however, certain that Mozart the musical genius, was genuinely haunted by premonitions of death as he composed it, and that it was used at least in part as his own requiem.

DK: “I guess I’ll be contented in my eternal slumber...!”

Interestingly, in *Amadeus*, Milos Forman, the director hailing from Czechoslovakia, *Ceskoslovensko* in *Cestina* lingo, shows Salieri, Mozart’s mortal enemy in the film, offering his assistance to write the Requiem as the dying composer dictates.

In reality, there was no masked Machiavellic Salieri who paid a visit to Mozart, several weeks earlier, to commission a Requiem Mass, *Missa pro defunctis* in Latin, and announces his imminent death.

Rather the day before his death, in the end of 18th century, a first performance was presented at Mozart’s bedside in Vienna, south of the meandering Danube, and having 3 singers - accompanied by the composer himself playing the melancholy viola.

Wherein in Kanpur, by the west bank of the eternal river Ganga, it was only the *koel* singing some stray song in some wander-off horizon, accompanied by the wails of Manorama aunt, Badi daktarni and Karuna di.

Too under the weather to go on with, Mozart interrupted the performance and called his former pupil, Sussmayr, to show him how to complete his work. At midnight, the great Mozart passed away. Here, Doctor Zhivago

“*Hey Bulla Dada...!*”

On the day of Mozart’s death, only 2 parts were almost complete the *Introitus* and the *Kyrie*. The rest remained only as drafts, with only the voice and few indications. The famous *Lacrimosa*, was actually incomplete, and stopped only after 8 bars.

Further, during the performance that took place the day before he died, Mozart, at the 8th bar of *Lacrimosa*, burst into tears believing they were the last words he set to music.

DK was subdued: “Banjo, when I’m no more, you’ll have access to my sundry belongings, sure enough, and you’ll love rummaging the lot from beginning to end...!”

Miss Wadia continued in her class: “Sussmayr had to draw inspiration largely from the fragments left by Mozart, as well as many of his earlier works. And, for the ending, Sussmayr chose to use the beginning of the Requiem, probably hoping to raise the dead by completing the mass in his name...”

“Won’t anybody ask why the Requiem was a game-changer, *ata badalisuvava* in Kannada...?” Murthy questioned our class before putting forth

“As per a famous musicologist, Alice Boccara of France, the Requiem Mass, *Missa pro defunctis* in Latin, is hitherto one of the oldest musical genres, whose origins date back to the 1st millennium, with the spread of Christianity and the dawn of Gregorian chants in churches...

...When Mozart began writing his Requiem, he was therefore supported by a long tradition. In addition to Gregorian chants, one of his greatest sources of inspiration was the Requiem by Michael Haydn, younger brother of Joseph, from whom he borrowed the overall structure...

...Let it be known to all that from their mutual sojourn around Salzburg in Austria, Joseph Haydn was acquainted with Mozart, who held his work in high esteem...”

Intervening time, whilst we were away at the *ghat*, Ujjala bua turned up from Ayodhya, and frantically searched for her adorable Kaka ji. She burst into tears bearing in mind an empty house, the usual bonhomie missing. DK wasn't there in flesh and blood to welcome her as he did during my *poite*, when she'd brought along her daughters, Uma and Kirti.

I remember, even as she began to describe her strenuous cab journey from Lucknow to Kanpur, just then, grandpa with big mustaches broke in while promptly getting up and making necessary payments to the cab fellow.

“...But Lucknow is not very far from this place...”

“Kaka ji...Thank you so much for footing the bill. Remember, I don't hang about in Lucknow; I live in Ayodhya, one hundred and thirty five kilometers far afield. And don't you know how kids behave impatiently...?”

...We all were amused at Ujjala bua's mounting frustration; grandpa with big mustaches too sharing the laughter although he knew it was a telling off by his endearing niece, and not much of a shaggy-dog story. Drolly, DK's *faux pas* were at times absurdly inconsequential, futile...

And then, there wasn't any hold back to Ujjala bua's unplumbed tears, praying for DK's peaceful departure, afterlife...

Miss Wadia: “Following a long tradition of Requiems, the key of D minor had become the symbol of the afterlife in music...”

Amid sadness and melancholy, Ujjala bua's weeping in D minor scale continued, the *Lacrimosa*, Latin for weeping, running as follows

Lacrimosa dies illa
Qua resurget ex favilla
Judicandus homo Reus...
Huic ergo parce, Deus
Pie Jesu Domine
Dona eis requiem...
Amen

Full of tears will be that day
when from the ashes shall arise
the guilty man to be judged
Therefore spare him, O God
Merciful Lord Jesus
grant them eternal rest.
Amen.

Our Music class over, one of the girls, very beautiful having big brown eyes, one who'd applied *kajal* on the lash line rather than the lower waterline, and which made her beautiful eyes look bigger and brighter, thanked in French

“Magnifique...! Merci beaucoup...”

~ End of Volume I of Book I ~

Epilogue

Isn't life a journey of constant evolution...?

Or a dance of light and shadow
of fleeting moments
that stay forever etched in memory...?

As I, *Amit Banerjee*
aka Banjo Kumarr
in
Blizzard: My Journey Begins
reflect on this path I've walked
these 20 years,
I witness a story getting unfolded
not of struggles alone
but of a deep and abiding
love for life itself.

Why, hasn't love for life
been my greatest teacher
my harshest critic
and my most patient guide...?

Through the highs and the lows
haven't I learned that to truly live
is to embrace the whole thing –
the joy and the pain
the beauty
and the brokenness
the questions that stir the soul
and the answers that follow...?

It's true that
in every corner and crevice of existence
life has whispered its myriad secrets to me
and I have listened with open ears
each step taking me closer to the heart
towards humanness

Blizzard: My Journey Begins
is a reflection of this deep love for life –
a love that continues to evolve
to teach
and to awaken me
to the endless possibilities of being...!

As I take this journey
I invite you
dear reader
to walk alongside me
in **Volume I** of the story
to discover your own love of life
through its challenges and triumphs,
and then like a dream move on to

Volume II.

~ Volume II ~

in

Book 1

(To be continued)

