

What Happened to My Creativity?

by

Mallikarjun B. Mulimani

***Other Literary Works
by the author***

Mallikarjun B. Mulimani

Abstractions

(A collection of 38 poems and 7 digital artworks – Published by Writers Workshop, Kolkata, India)

Buddha In A Mercedes

(A Novella – Published by S. Chand Publishing, New Delhi, India)

The Holy Plumber and Other Stories

(A collection of 10 stories and 10 poems – Published by Writers Workshop, Kolkata, India)

Operation Epiphany – God’s Journey on Earth

(A Novel –Published by Writers Workshop, Kolkata, India)

Victims Incorporated – Circles of Sub-consciousness

(A Novella – published by Current Publications, Agra, India)

Dedicated to my Guru Prof. K. Raghavendra Rao

Foreword

It is always a pleasure to share with prospective readers one's experience of reading an original creative work. I do so here by way of a Foreword. I have read Mallikarjun B. Mulimani's latest work of fiction, "What Happened To My Creativity?" with excitement. I have no hesitation in recommending it to others. It seems to me that this is, in a sense, the culmination of his fictional journey. In it, the highly original mode of fiction he has been writing for the last several years has crystallised into a minor masterpiece. His highly charged language here finds its artistic intensity, and his metaphysical and psychoanalytical genre of fiction attains a structural equilibrium and thus brings out fully the strength and beauty of his restless self-exploration. What matters in this kind of novel is neither narrative flow nor characterisation. Both are there but in a muted form. What matters ultimately is a kind of revelation of truth that is subjective as well as universal. In this short work, Mallikarjun, I suspect, transforms a personal experience into a universal tale of fall and redemption. The literary market is today highly commercialised and commodified, and I am afraid works such as this cannot compete with commodified fictional brands. Yet I hope that this work will escape the fate of genuine creative work in a world of fakes, which is oblivion. I am sure there will be discerning readers who can recognise it for what it is – a genuinely creative work. Once again I must congratulate the young author for daring to embark on a complex metaphysical and psychoanalytical exploration.

3 July 2013,
Dharwad

(Sd) Prof. K. Raghavendra Rao

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Sometime In The Future

There was a persistent whooshing sound.
It was wet everywhere.

The man on the bed moaned as his sweat drenched body writhed in sleep even though the air-conditioner was on at full blast.

The whooshing sound made by the air-conditioner, and the salty wetness of his body and bed due to his streaming sweat, suddenly jerked him awake into a sitting position.

The pulsating nightmare of a whooshing sea and salty water left him with his long hair dripping salty sweat which jostled with the salty tears that cascaded from his bloodshot eyes in being the first to join the river Styx which flowed from his heart and soul into the dark depths of a hellish ocean in which the ferryman was obsolete.

Life became alive and gruesome.

The drugs and the whiskey had sweated themselves out of his clammy body.

The former poet needed the body heat which had been a fountainhead for him and his poems.

But dead bodies are cold to the touch and he was no necromaniac.

He frenziedly fumbled beside him, got hold of a strip of sleeping tablets on top of his bedside drawer, and using his thick fingers, managed to wrest the last five from the tenfold, in spite of the dosage being only one, once at night, and threw the empty strip away into one of many which were strewn in his plush bedroom.

He then reached down and jerked his hand around near the bottom of his side of the bed for his bottle of liquid grey cell smasher.

His hand struck bottle, and the bottle fell, disgorging all its contents as a friend would do to keep his friend from going insane.

The former poet had lost all his friends long ago.

He got up from his bed, and after managing to stand on his legs free from all kinds of support, staggered towards his cabinet and opened it.

The whiskey bottles within the cabinet firmed up his leg muscles and gave his arms the strength to twist open the entry into another one of their army of heart, mind, and soul soothers for a bankrupt entity.

The former poet swallowed the five sleeping tablets in his hand along with a swig of whiskey. He then took another swig, another, and another, and stumbled backwards to his bed and fell upon it, where he passed out with the spirit mingling with his sorrow.

The Past

Silk, far better than silk, and alive, the softest of skin rubbed against his one day old stubble.

He reached his hand down and up. Warmth superseded silk, but as his hand began to explore, soft love began to breathe its existence.

The poet was mesmerised.

This was the reason he had become famous.

Writing poems which could come only from the most disturbingly provocative feelings arising from actions aroused by God's mischief.

Only one first book of poems penned, and wealth for the middle class man had followed fame just as fervently as he had wooed and won his Muse.

She got up on her knees, and her fragile vanilla sky lips blessed his forehead and withdrew faster than the sun during a winter sunset.

The sheet, unable to cling to her smooth body, slipped down to her waist and the poet was left staring at what the painter prince Raja Ravi Varma would have given his soul to paint allowing Monet to add colour only to the lips and the sheet which still covered part of his pristine love.

She gave a knowing smile, and slipping out of the sheets completely to add to the poet's sweet agony, avoided his grasp with grace and began getting ready to enjoy the day. Raj followed.

The flight over the ocean to the islands had reached its pinnacle as the islands had shyly shot up their glory to the skies in tandem with the plane lowering its altitude and peeking beneath the sea of clouds with an intention to grasp firm ground on one of their more populated and sophisticated.

The pretty little green spots dotting the blue were numerous and they grew in glory as the plane lowered itself from its height in the sky.

But as it prepared itself to embrace the earth more and more, all but one of them were lost to sight.

She had been sitting beside the window and had been exhilarated.

The poet's happiness had grown in leaps and bounds, but it had crossed all boundaries as she had firmly clasped his hand in hers when the plane landed as she had done during takeoff from the mainland.

She was a simple pretty girl and it had been her first flight, and it had been the successful man's pleasure to reach across her svelte waist, and fasten, unfasten, her seatbelt.

They had reached a beautiful resort, and the atmosphere created by the all enveloping ocean flowing through their whole had made love one with their bodies from the moment they had reached their suite till the morning, but which had still left them bereft of satisfaction.

That morning after Raj had preened himself, and she had waited patiently as she knew his ego, they had finally boarded a ship to one of the most secluded and pristine beaches in the world on one of the islands.

The ship had been fast and the ocean tumultuous. The ship bucked and blazed its way through the waves.

Raj, who always confronted his fears in order to subdue them, put his arm around her and impregnated her with his mastery over fear.

She rested comfortably knowing that he would always be there for her.

They reached the beach and ran with cushy footsteps over the warm sand and through exhausted waves slightly wetting their feet at the furthest end from the sea to a secluded place close to the whooshing waves which could not reach them.

They immediately unclasped their hands and trying to hug one another immediately fell down and rolled as one over the sunny sand.

Raj tasted her strawberry lips and was immediately goaded into action by her unresisting body.

Raj was both mad and meditative.

His adrenaline fuelled body left her submissive one and rushed towards the roaring waves which seemed to want to consume everything in their wake.

Raj was of a strong build and his thighs and calf muscles did not tremble in the roaring waves which gushed towards the shore.

His madness made him meditate amongst the vicious waves which assaulted his body over and over again for long, but his lovemaking with a violent entity was finally interrupted when the wily waves subsided slightly enough for him to hear a pitiful cry from her, which had been choked by fear in her throat for long, calling him back to the shore.

Raj's libido had been fuelled by his strong body's fight with the wholesome whooshing waves, and he called out to her to make her way into his gladiators' arena of an ocean.

She had complete faith in him and courageously made her way through salty water which assaulted her fragile frame.

She had a brilliant smile on her face as a huge wave came and took her further than him into the ocean.

She did not have his strength to resist, and Raj's bravado failed him in enabling him to take a few steps further, which would have him completely under the water.

For both did not know how to swim.

Raj's legs stood rooted on the shifting sand beneath his feet as he saw a last glimmer of the sun reflected in the diamond of their engagement ring on the finger of her hand which was not trying to clasp a last straw but which was raised in faith of her love in him to save her.

He let her drown alone instead of following the same path they had vowed to follow.

Raj was never the same again, for she was Brahman, and he yet did not know how to accept Maya.

He could not discriminate between reality and dreams, death and life in that order, for his ego had been smashed against the natural shore and shattered into unnatural pieces which could not be lifted either by the human mind, heart, and soul, leave alone the despicable human hand.

All he would be left with were nightmares which he had turned into a true and terrible reality.

The Pleasure

Raj's name and fame found a broader and firmer ground to place his feet upon, unlike the minute shifting sand underneath the waves, where he had stood like Hector, but had become his weakling brother Paris as he had allowed life to be carried away by the warriors stepping on to the shore of the ocean of love over which a thousand ships had set sail.

Achilles had stepped on the land of love first.

His love knew no bounds. Unfortunately, he was also a just killer, and hence was caught between that love and his might to do right, which involved slaughtering humans.

Raj, like Achilles, became a paradox, owing it all to the paparazzi. His personal tragedy had made him more famous.

He discarded his spectacles and took to wearing Ray-Ban's, which shielded his eyes, and more importantly, hid his eyes, from the glare of the flashlights.

This had but lasted only as long as the previous wave on the shore.

Raj was exhausted to the core of his being and went to both a psychiatrist and a bar.

The psychiatrist's drugs and a few pegs in the blue bar initially gave him a temporary resistance to the pain in his heart, mind, and soul.

But Bacchus was waiting for his beloved.

And there came the mighty Raj wanting to be vanquished like Achilles, who had been warned by his mother that he could never come back home if he chose glory throughout eternity over a plain livelihood.

Raj was as foolish.

Sleeping tablet followed sleeping tablet, but sleep was an exquisite beauty never to be seen again.

In order to right the wrong, wrong sprung up in Raj's life as he increased the number of pegs entering smoothly into his system.

Time crawled, Raj penned.

Then came a time when there was no time, almost pure silence, broken only by the heavenly scratch upon smooth paper by the hellish killer.

Davy Jones' Locker

Raj dived into the ocean of alcohol, and in life tried to enter Davy Jones' Locker to find her and himself.

But he was a miserable outcast from Davy Jones' Locker in the salty sea which could not bear the burden of guilt which he tried to place on it.

Instead, it slyly gave him a morgue disguised as a home.

Raj fell in love with his gifted home which was in fact a disguised dingy tavern for the dead.

Raj's poetic mind disfigured into plain prose, but the fact that he still loved was enough to raise him from a trough and tide him over the ocean to stardom.

He won the Booker for his second book, a novel.

Whatever was left of the poet in him died at that moment, for he had encapsulated his love in a capsule and swallowed it like a drug, which along with lots and lots of alcohol and sleeping pills had allowed him to digress from poetry to prose, when in fact, poetry was in his blood.

He should not have given up so easily on his gift.

He should have tried harder to forgive himself, and carry on without abusing his body, mind, heart, and soul.

He simply did not know what to do further.

He tried to become spiritual with drugs prescribed by his psychiatrist aiding his weakened grey cells, and tried to explore the concept or the reality of "God".

But the only god who sided with him, like Brutus, was Bacchus.

Raj became the Caesar of subjects like Dostoevsky, Sartre, Emile Zola, and the most notable of all, Kafka, and others of their ilk, standing with the help of crutches provided by Bacchus.

He became popular but his liver and pancreas were disfigured.

The Haunt

The alcohol inside the writer started to destroy the writer in Raj.

He leaned more heavily on whiskey, and thus by paying his respects to Bacchus, managed to drink and pour more of his mesmerising thoughts out of his system onto paper.

His personal life and body took a battering like the hammering of a sword of God which His personal blacksmith with muscles of iron had tempered and steeled.

But Raj's body was not made out of steel and it was thrust into by the swords of both God and alcohol.

Bacchus had stopped protecting his worshiper now that he knew for sure that he would crawl on dirty ground for him.

But Bacchus had discarded him with a final blessing.

Raj's public life bloomed like a rose as he had gained the power to arouse secret sentiments hidden in the hearts of men and women with the power of his pen despite the thorns piercing him from the inside.

He was the gin in the genius.

His popularity kept on increasing with each book he released, which he had written while under the influence, and while making sure that the public did not get even a whiff of his bar breath.

The Decision

His undying love for her, who was long dead, had brought Raj to his doom.

He was to soon become a malnourished dirty mongrel in the streets.

Raj's insides got punctured after receiving plenty of thrusts by Bacchus' sword and the pink balloons blasted in the fierce sunlight of his impending doom.

But he still continued on this vendetta against himself.

Some of the people closest to his heart who could not bear to see him in this wretched condition in his personal life left him as he started becoming a goon during his day's hustle and bustle with the ink of his pen being replaced by innumerable pegs of whiskey with which he wrote.

A day came when he could not take a step towards his worktable without experiencing severe pain throughout his body.

He could not even sit down.

He lay in bed and decided that it was time to get admitted in a Naturopathy centre.

His decision was proved right as he himself discarded the cloak of absurdity and started to immerse himself in himself albeit without his ego playing even a minute role this time in the drama that had become his life as he spent a month in the Naturopathy centre and came back home a healthy person bursting with ideas for his new book.

The new book was a disaster right from the beginning.

Raj could not decide even how to write the first line.

Bacchus had always been there for him in the past to enlighten him. Moreover, in the naturopathy centre, they had also made him give up his psychiatric drugs.

Now there was nobody and nothing, most of all her nor Bacchus.

But Raj trudged on and completed his book.

The critics called it an insult to the Booker, and demanded that, the Booker, which he had won, be confiscated from such a shabby writer like him.

The Runaway

After reading the critics' criticism, and before the speeding paparazzi had time to find and blind him, Raj immediately packed a few of his belongings and throwing his bags in the backseat of his car, made war with the other vehicles thronging the streets, and rushing out of the city once more found himself making his way on a road paved with failure towards success.

He reached a jungle resort after a day's long hard drive and rented a cottage for a whole year.

He slept like a baby for three hours before the sun began its ascent.

After freshening up, he approached his worktable.

Everything was in order as he himself had prepared it meticulously the previous night even though his muscles and joints had ached from the long drive so that he could get to work immediately at dawn.

Rich white papers, Parker pens, Laptop, and a bottle of Scotch.

Raj's overwhelming passion had been writing, which had earlier been overshadowed by his love for her. But since the day she had been swallowed, it had reached a feverish pitch which he himself could not control. He wanted to pour out the best that he could and was willing to use and abuse whatever means were available to him in order to do so.

He took a swig and began to write.

The Diseased Recluse

Time passed.

Lotuses started to bloom in the dirty pool of Raj's highly creative school of imagination.

While his manuscript flourished on the outside, his body rotted inside.

He barely slept for more than three hours a day, and when he got up, the first thing that he used to do was to grasp the bottle by its throat, open its cap, and putting the bottle's open mouth to his lips, raise both his head and the bottle upwards in order to let the poison it contained flow down with ease into his innards.

His innards started to pain tremendously. He had great difficulty sitting down to write and even sleeping.

Food refused to go into his system.

But he willed himself to eat, sleep, and write.

Every few days his intake of alcohol increased to deal with the pain and grasp at the wisps of creativity around him.

He succeeded in grasping those wisps through his alcohol fuelled mind.

A day came when the manuscript was ready and he sent it to his old highly reputed Publishing House.

It was accepted within fifteen days, published within a month, and became a bestseller within two months by which time Raj's body had become a complete wreck.

Raj was famous again.

Raj's few friends and the doctors he visited, including his psychiatrist, told Raj that he must stop drinking or face an untimely death. Raj was no fool and knew this. But no one could tell him how to stop drinking. All the doctors could do was to prescribe medicines which were again nothing but legal drugs.

Raj did not care about his death. He wanted to be with her once more. But he was not ready to kill his creativity.

He just wanted to write one book while sober which would be as good as the books which had bought him money and fame.

He put on his war paint.

Realizations

During his recuperation from his success, Raj, who had considerably cut down his intake of alcohol as he did not have to be creative at the moment, suddenly had a thought strike him while he was lying on his couch watching 'Dexter's Laboratory'.

He realized that he did not have to be the brightest flame that burnt the quickest. He thought that instead, if he went slow and steady, he would be able to spread a stable aura for a very long time around him.

The thought of writing a few electrifying alcohol fuelled books suddenly paled in comparison with writing many mighty volumes of sublime books while sober.

Moreover, he knew that only a sober author matured and grew wise with age while the one that relied on drink was doomed before reaching his forties.

He went deeper into himself using a top down approach for he had graduated at the top as a Computer Science Engineer from a renowned college.

Raj found 'Death' to be the cause of his travails. But he had been hankering after 'Success' even after 'Death' had made its arrival.

So, he found 'Success' at the top of the pyramid. But when put under the scanner, he could clearly see 'Fear' engulfing it.

Thus, he realized that 'Fear' had to be studied in order to understand 'Success'.

But, he soon understood that it was 'Love' of something or someone which drives a person towards 'Success'.

Therefore, one had to immerse oneself in 'Love' before 'Success'. But Raj's mind went into overdrive and came upon the fact that in order to completely comprehend 'Love' one must encounter 'Hate' as well.

And he finally came to the base of the pyramid upon which these various elements existed. He realized that it was the duo of 'Life' and 'Death' which controlled the various games played in their structure by success, fear, love, and hate.

Raj started by analyzing his fears. He knew that he was deathly afraid of water. Yet he had been foolhardy enough to venture into an unruly sea and kill her by his false bravado.

He had always gone head-to-head with his fears since childhood and had built a strong body and a healthy mind, but both of which had quickly degenerated after her death.

Nowadays, without the help of Bacchus he was afraid of everything.

Writing was the only thing that kept him going.

Success was a bitter draught he had to swallow to keep himself from going insane.

He could not stop writing out of the fear that if he stopped, his mind would conjure up the hellish images he kept hidden in the deepest and darkest recesses of his mind.

Raj realized now that was why he drank and partied beyond incomprehensible limits – to forget.

Raj then climbed down the ladder and came to ‘Love’ and ‘Hate’.

Raj had come from an upper middle class family and she from a lower middle class family.

Raj was afraid of and hated poverty.

She was svelte and beautiful.

Raj was suddenly thunderstruck by a question. When he had proposed to her, was it only love or pity or a combination of both?

Was he in love with her then or was he truly in love now after her death?

He hated himself for his love.

Raj jumped off the ladder and fell down on soft sand.

There was no meaning to life if one did not know death.

But without completely experiencing life, one cannot completely experience death after one has died.

Raj decided to let life and his creativity take their course until his death.

Exhausted over the exertions of his mind analysing itself, Raj fell into a deep sleep.

Raj stayed on the wagon for more than a month repeating these thoughts to himself as a mantra and convincing himself that he was not yet ready to write a book and was not hankering after success.

But Raj was an alpha male, and soon convinced himself that he was ready to continue remaining sober while writing that one cherished book.

Relapse

It was a glorious morning.

Raj quickly freshened up and sat in front of his worktable.

He already had a theme in mind for his new book – his own topsy-turvy life.

Raj decided to begin with his muse, again a top down approach.

He began with a flourish, but his hands started to shake as he started to write about her.

He jumped out of his chair and ran to his liquor cabinet and frenziedly opened it to find it bereft of anything but dust.

He had thrown out all his stuff.

He jumped into his car and rushed to a nearby liquor shop.

It was still early in the morning and the shop was not yet open.

He sat in his car with his sweaty palms holding onto the steering wheel with his fingers beating an uncanny rhythm upon it.

As time passed by and the shop did not open, his feet began to get wet with sweat.

Suddenly a cool wind seemed to blow upon him and take away with it all his woes as the shop opened.

Raj hurriedly bought a bottle of liquor and made haste to get back home.

After his shaky hands had opened the bottle and he had drunk almost half of it, he finally calmed down enough to begin writing about his life until then.

His life had been a tumultuous one and it took him almost three months to complete half of the book. Everyday he made a vow to himself that this would be the last day he would get drunk and write.

But the sad part was, he broke his vow everyday.

But he wrote nevertheless. A haunting life described in enchanting prose.

The moment he got up in the morning, his default action was to go to the liquor store and buy a bottle of liquor.

Even if he was half an hour late in getting his fix, nausea would overwhelm him and his mind would scream aloud at him to run and get the bottle – which he would.

Finally, Raj the alpha male, who had crawled into a bottle had had enough. He tore apart his half finished manuscript, broke out of the bottle, and crawled into bed.

Rejuvenation

This time it was more serious than ever, for not only Raj's body had taken a severe beating, but also his mind had been battered by memories he had dredged up from their dark and filthy receptacles where he had hidden them in order to let go and lead a happy life.

Almost till the end of the first one week he lived solely on water and juice and lay on his bed.

By the end of that week, the bull of a man was back on his feet.

On the eve of the eighth day, Raj asked his trusted chauffeur to get ready for the journey of a lifetime, and himself packed a few of his belongings in a jiffy.

Raj's main baggage was suffocated with the music CDs and DVDs which he had collected over years as a result of his overwhelming love for music. But the music in his life had stopped breathing the moment the whooshing sound had stopped her breath.

But he wanted to live again and make a difference instead of being a nuisance.

The Journey Begins

God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, and Raj was out to create a new world for himself beginning on the eighth.

Raj and his chauffeur left before dawn to escape the hustle and bustle of the metro and reached its outskirts just as dawn was about to break.

Raj took over the steering wheel of his convertible and pressing heavily on the accelerator zoomed into the rising sun which made his ruddy face glow. The wind rushing around the windshield and over the open top of the convertible was not to be left behind as it made the long locks of his hair streak back like the mane of a galloping stud.

For the first time in years, Raj felt a lightness spreading through his body.

He drove in silence until nine A.M. when the sun started to warm the atmosphere a bit, and when he came upon a coffee house, brought his car to a halt.

When Raj and his chauffeur sat at one of the coffee tables on the sidewalk, Raj leaned back and gazing at the sun stretched out his arms and splayed his fingers while drawing his legs inside and closer together thereby tightening his thigh and calf muscles.

He then allowed his body to completely relax, and placing his left elbow on the coffee table ran his right hand through his long hair.

Raj's chauffeur who had seen his young master destroying himself, had been in a daze since the time he had been told to pack his belongings.

Furthermore, he had been shocked out of his wits when his young master instead of opening a bottle of whiskey in the morning had taken over the control of the car from him and drove flawlessly after not handling the car for ages.

He had not spoken for he had seen Raj was in some kind of trance while driving, and anyway, it would have been impossible to have a conversation with the wind screaming around them.

But now that the coffee had arrived, Raj's chauffeur asked:
"Raj, where are we going?"

Raj gave a bright smile and answered:
"Everywhere and nowhere my friend."

The chauffeur who was privy to all of Raj's eccentricities, maintained his composure, and calmly probed further:

"Why?"

Raj's reply was simple and to the point:
"Because."

Both then finished their coffee in silence and resumed the drive.

Raj had bought two chocolate bars at the coffee shop, and both were chomping away as the smooth yet powerful car powered its way through beautiful scenery.

Raj began to think about the base and the apex of the pyramid he had built in his mind.

Is life not worth living without success?

Does success destroy life?

He had been a party to both.

One of the two middle parts of the pyramid – love – had been crushed by the second question, and the other middle part of the pyramid – hate – which was a direct consequence of the answer to the second question had paired the two questions, and owing to his hard-headedness, made ‘Yes’ the default answer to both the questions.

Death was not to be misunderstood. It was a sure thing.

But time and circumstances were the factors which most of the times made death seem unforgivable – both death and timed circumstances being agonised over by him.

Circumstances could have been avoided, but what about time?

Time for love?

Time for Death?

Time in between.

Too short for him.

Time was not chronological for him when he was with her. It was emotional – bursting with silent interludes filled with love songs, tender lovemaking, and smooth whisperings – and hence too short to satiate his feelings for her.

Circumstances were of his own making, and so was time, to both of which he had surrendered meekly.

Time and circumstances had controlled him in the past unconsciously, and now it was time to grasp them in his fist consciously and manipulate them to suit his needs in order to prevent himself from becoming their victim once more.

A slow smile spread across Raj’s face as his countenance brightened along with the noon sun as he drove in between fields of sunflowers all looking up towards the sun.

Raj asked his chauffeur to reach back and pull out one of his music CDs or DVDs from his baggage and insert it into the music system to which his man complied in a jiffy, not wanting his master to lose even a second of his pleasant frame of mind.

As the music boomed across fields of green and aspired to reach the blue sky, Raj's eyes grew red with tears, for Karma still had a strong hold upon him and had made his chauffeur choose the music album which was her favourite.

Raj's throat grew parched and Karma's brother Fate had placed a decent bar at the outskirts of a city they were about to reach.

Raj grinded his car to a halt in front of it.

He hurried towards the bar and approached the counter.

The music was still playing.

Something twisted deep inside Raj. He felt for the first time that she was right behind him, following his every move.

He bought two chilled cans of Pepsi and walked back.

He handed one to his chauffeur, and opening his, soothed his parched throat, while allowing the music to saturate his being.

As he started the car, the smile was back on his face.

As they crossed the city and were passing through golden green paddy fields, his smile grew broader as her favourite track in her favourite album started playing.

Raj let go of the steering wheel and leaned back with his head and hands tilted slightly backwards such that his face faced the blue clouds in the vast blue sky and his arms while praying for more paid gratitude for everything.

A curve in the road ahead made him sit upright and take control of the car once more, but the wide smile upon his face remained fixed.

It was not the smile of a killer but was more of a bulwark.

It was 3 P.M. when they stopped for lunch.

It was ages since Raj had eaten lunch.

He almost emptied the kitchen of the small hotel they were sitting in.

His chauffeur gave a contented smile.

The drive resumed, but at a slower pace, as Raj immersed himself more deeply in his thoughts in rhythm with the increasing beauty of the scenery around.

They had entered the mountains and the roads were steep and curving. Everybody was meant to drive cautiously.

Raj thought about the fear that had numbed him from venturing deeper into the sea to save her.

But he did not know how to swim.

Hence it was not cowardice but an act of self-preservation which is the basis of life.

Was he to blame?

Yes.

For Death was untimely and circumstantial.

That is why, in his pyramid, 'Fear' rested at the apex along with 'Success,' and 'Life' provided the base for them along with 'Death'.

Now that he had touched upon the topic of fear, he pushed himself harder and brought one of the two middle parts of the pyramid, 'Love' to mingle with it.

He had loved and lost the one thing he cherished most, but not because of fear. But fear had entered his system and destroyed his capacity to love, even himself. This had led to his life being chopped into tiny pieces.

He wondered if this was the reason people went in for arranged marriages where love had the choice of blooming or not – sooner, later, or never.

If the answer was never, such people pursued other goals and reached a certain level of success without the fear of failure for they had already failed in the most basic of human emotions.

Even if it bloomed, it would be too late, and they would be caught with one foot on love and the other on their goals.

They would never be great.

Others who were lucky in love were bound to become complacent, and without failure hounding them, their success would also pale in comparison before their eyes which were meant only for one another.

They would never be great.

Others like him where failure was like a mighty anaconda twisting itself slowly around you, shattering your bones and taking your life breath away from you, would either escape the vicelike grip of the anaconda which had swallowed your love and become great or meet the same fate as that of your love.

They stopped at a beautiful resort.

Raj went to the bar, had two pegs of Scotch, and immediately joined his chauffeur for dinner.

When he went to his room, he flushed all his psychiatric drugs down the toilet and went to bed.

He slept like a baby.

Death And Love

The journey resumed at 5 A.M..

The sun was just stepping out of bed, and he had to hurry as a result of the sensuous sound of Raj's car's engine making speed.

The landscape passed by in a blur as the car's engine purred. But suddenly from the other side of the road, a small creature tried to cross the road in front of the speeding car.

Raj hit the brakes hard and the car came to a screeching stop.

Raj didn't want to be a killer anymore.

He jumped out of the car and ran towards its front.

In the parking lights he had switched on in the early dawn, he could see an unhurt kitten trembling from head to toe sitting in the soft glow of the car's parking lights.

Raj gently picked it up after slowly letting out the breath he had rigidly held inside his body, and placed it in the shrubbery by the side of the road.

He could see the twinkling eyes of its mother hidden deeper inside the wild growth of plants by the roadside.

Raj took a deep breath, and realizing that the kitten was safe, relaxed and got back into his car.

But his hands were still shaking as he turned the keys in the ignition.
The car began to roll once more.

He switched off the parking lights as the sun made his complete appearance, and amidst nature's beauty with the warmth of the sun coursing through his veins filling him with the fountain of youth, thought about 'Death,' one of the two parts of the base of his pyramid.

Death should be honourable and not circumstantial.

He had ripped the honour from her young life and orchestrated her death.

Death, if it comes naturally to a person without the person spurring it onto oneself, is an occasion for joy, for death is a major part of our journey, and if a person has led a good life, that part of our journey, even though it leaves voids in the hearts of our nearest and dearest, is the most beautiful, for it complements life.

But if our nearest and dearest fill those voids as he had done with impurity, it would be like not waving goodbye to your loved one who is setting off on a one way flight, and walking away in a huff at the departure terminal of the airport without a

backward glance, and looking only at old memories in your mind debating about which were worth keeping, while a last, fresh, and beautiful memory could have been had at that very moment.

But in his case, death had been circumstantial and he had a last memory. He had not left in a huff. This was his tragedy.

Such memories are sufficient to kill men in their prime.

But he was now trying to survive and give her death the honour it deserved by giving his life a deeper purpose and a meaning.

He did not know where to search for the true purpose and a deeper meaning to his life.

Probably it existed in him.

That was why he was going nowhere.

To all evidences it surrounded him completely.

That was why he was going everywhere.

Because he had come to realize that it was more of his destiny than fate.

He had no control over fate, but he could make his own destiny.

Then he thought about 'Love,' one of the two middle parts of his pyramid.

But suddenly 'Fear,' at the summit of the pyramid made its entrance.

But it could not touch his memories of her when she was alive until the last few moments of her death.

For he had loved without fear, as it should be, but his love and her death, which should also have been free from fear, had been sullied by the circumstances he had created.

He vowed never to fear 'Fear' again by leading a life filled with love – love for both life and death.

They passed many well stocked and well made up soliciting bars along the way.

But Raj's throat nor mind became parched, and his eyes retained their gleam as his pleasure over nature's basket of bounty which was filled with the smells of earth, plants, flowers, trees, leaves, the sounds of birds chirping their way through the sky and the wind whistling through the greenery, the sights of small clear blue pools of water making their home amidst the greenery where the sunrays played hide and seek, shone through them.

As twilight approached, they had reached Raj's ancestral country home which had been maintained by his family's trusted old servants.

Raj freshened up, and going into the cellar, brought out a bottle of excellent vintage wine.

He uncorked it, and enjoyed two glasses of the blood red drink with his chauffeur, sitting on the porch watching the sun sink below the mountains as a zephyr blew over them.

The only dream that dared to knock on his sub-consciousness and which he happily allowed to enter was of him as a child climbing the trees in their orchard when his family used to visit this home during vacations.

He smiled in his sleep for the first time after the incident.

He had come home.

Generations

The next day, when Raj was enjoying the early morning, sipping tea sitting on his porch, a group of elderly people made their way through the gate and approached him with huge smiles upon their faces.

Raj got up from his chair and welcomed them cheerfully even though he had no idea who they were except the obvious fact that they were the elders of the village who had in all probability known his family and him as a teenager.

The news of his arrival had spread like wildfire throughout the village the previous night itself, but the cultured community members of the village had restrained themselves from crowding him all at once at that hour.

Raj helped his servants in bringing chairs out onto the porch for the elders to sit, and asked his servants to make tea for everyone.

By the time tea was served, introductions had been completed, and Raj was in the company of rich politicians of the village, prosperous farmers, poor but highly respected members of the community, middle class and decently educated elders, and curious elders with no qualifications except age.

It was a motley crew which had been enthralled by the fame and disaster which were the ingredients of the life of one of their own, and hence having closely followed it, thanks to the media, was bursting to ask one question and only one question only:

“What was he doing here after so many years?”

But they were a polite bunch and were dignified in their early morning conversation.

They then took leave of their host after blessing him and expressing their wish that he would stay for sometime and get to know their community better.

Raj beamed and replied in the affirmative.

While the goodbyes were being said, and the backs of the elders were facing the gate, Raj had noticed a bunch of youths trying to hide behind the trees near the gate and trying to catch as many glimpses of him as they could.

Raj escorted the elders to the gate by which time the youths had vanished.

But even after the last elder had disappeared from view, Raj quietly stood near the gate with folded arms.

Finally, a youth appeared from behind a tree, and stood gazing at him.

Raj welcomed him inside.

Soon a huge group of young men were sitting on the ground in front of his porch.

Raj followed their example.

Everybody smiled, and for the first time after a long time, the silence was broken by the faint sound of whispers among the youths.

Raj gave a huge laugh and said:

“Come on. You didn’t come all this way to talk amongst yourselves. Ask me something.”

The sound of silence reiterated itself.

Finally the youth who had the courage to approach Raj first, asked:
“Why have you come here?”

It was a mundane question.

Raj nonchalantly replied:
“Because I felt like coming home.”

The answer was profound.

The youth went on innocently.

He asked:
“What made you come home?”

The question was nothing if not profound.

Raj beamed and answered:
“You tell me.”

Silence resumed its reign.

Raj dethroned it by his boisterous laugh and everybody joined in.

Another youth asked:
“Is it true what the news channel reporters have been saying about you all these years?”

Raj replied with an exaggerated sigh:
“Well, can’t blame them. It’s their job to make a hullabaloo about everything that can think under the sun.”

Raj then got into conversations with each one of the youths, asking them about their lives, and giving an encouraging ear to everything they had to say, while being subtly discreet about himself.

It was lunchtime by the time the youths, each one pleased to the core of his being, took leave of Raj with huge smiles upon their faces even though they had played truant from working in the fields.

Raj told his servants that he would have a late lunch and sat contemplating upon his porch.

The elders, out of politeness, had indulged in pleasant conversation even though they had been itching with curiosity to know each and every tiny aspect of his life to such an extent that they had come bursting in on him early in the morning.

They had hoped that he would let slip a few details of his personal life which unfortunately for them he had not done so.

But they had not survived for so long without patience, and had expressed their wish that he would stay for sometime in the village, as they knew that a man's actions described both his outer and inner life in full, and were willing to wait for they knew that he could not remain cooped up in his farmhouse forever, and would venture out sometime or the other at which time they would catch him off guard.

They were not evil but only politely curious.

This is probably what happens as people grow old.

Either they have nothing to do, or a lot to, which requires a lot of information. So they become terribly curious, and they know that they have very little time.

These were village people who had no access to books or the internet. So the only thing that remained for them to be curious about was other people's lives.

It was completely understandable.

But the youth were leaves of a totally different tree.

They wanted to be recognised – either in fame or infamy.

And they had the drive for that.

But their potential had to be directed towards fame and away from infamy.

They had courage, courage to ask questions. Personal questions.

It was not that they were being impolite or blunt, but had been driven by the restlessness of chained potential and directionless drive to hunt for answers wherever they could find them.

Death haunted the elders.

Life haunted the youth.

And he had evaded them all.

It was late evening when Raj finally had his meal.
He immediately went to sleep.

Desire

Since he had slept early the previous evening, Raj got up before dawn, and in the pleasant chill, made himself a large hot cup of coffee.

After the coffee had warmed him inside out, Raj freshened up, by which time it was seven thirty.

Raj decided to take a stroll along the village roads. He slipped on his slippers and set out.

As he ventured along many wide and narrow lanes, he saw many school children, all wearing the same school uniform, headed towards their school.

He decided to follow them.

Finally, he reached the highway that ran through the village along which the school children were walking.

His keen eyes noticed that some children were walking on the tar road oblivious of the vehicles rushing on the highway, while others were walking beside the highway in safety.

He did not jump to conclusions, but observed the children who were risking their lives by walking on the highway, and the children who were safely walking by the side of the road in safety.

He himself was walking by the side of the highway.

It did not take long for him to notice that the children who were walking on the highway were wearing threadbare uniforms and were walking barefoot, while the children walking in safety by the side of the highway were wearing good uniforms and shoes or well maintained slippers.

He took off his slippers and tried to walk by the side of the highway.

Before a minute had passed, the soles of his feet grew raw and started hurting badly as the stones by the side of the road did their job and pierced his soles well and proper. He finally gave up when a thorn pierced him and a few drops of his blood reddened the earth.

He put his slippers back on.

The pain in his feet caused him to look inside the eyes of the children who were walking on the highway and were looking at those who were walking by the side of the road.

He saw desire in their eyes.

He started contemplating.

Wasn't desire a part of his pyramid?

Certainly it was, for it was a striving, although maybe pale, substitute for success in its absence.

In this particular case, failure to possess good uniforms and footwear.

And the moment the desired things were possessed, it was success.

Going far deeper into the subject, once footwear was possessed, the children could walk beside the highway in safety, and fear would vanish from their hearts of being run over by a speeding vehicle.

By this time, the children had reached what was to them a school.

But Raj only saw a bunch of ramshackle rooms crowded together and a rusty flagpole erected in front of them. The playground was a barren land without even a tree to hang a swing from.

He entered the "Classrooms" to find them bereft of furniture, even a table and chair for the teacher. The blackboards were cracked in many places, and only bits of chalk and dirty cloths substituting for dusters lay in view in the rooms.

He was sure that this was the only school in the village, for he had not seen any children wearing different uniforms from the children he had followed.

He quickly exited the "School," and slowly made his way back home with his hands clasped behind his back and his head hung low.

He had been analyzing his pyramid singularly with respect to himself until recently.

But the desire in the children's eyes had broadened his analytical vision.

All well and good, but what if they did not recognise failure and fear of the future when blatantly confronted with them?

What if success and love of the beautiful passed by them without grabbing their attention?

What if later down the lane when all hope had been lost, and things were irreversible, hate made its appearance?

Then life would appear to be meaningless and death would seem inviting.

Raj had embraced his village people and incorporated them in his pyramid.

Analysis had incited the desire for action on his part.

The seeds of purpose and meaning sprouted as he walked with a firm gait towards his home.

Research

Raj reached home, and immediately bringing out his electronic paraphernalia from his luggage, connected to the internet, and started research about farming.

He started learning about the various types of soil, what kind of crops could be planted in what kinds of soil, and in which seasons, the quality of seeds, and from where they could be procured at the cheapest prices, what kind of fertilizers should be used, irrigation and harvesting methods, the kind of latest machinery available to enhance the quality of agriculture, the incentives the government provided to all strata of farmers, and so on and so forth.

The theory classes went on for a month.

Raj then went out into the fields, and fortified his knowledge by talking with the farmers each of whom had something or the other to add to his electronic knowledge.

Raj then examined his own fields which had lain untended for ages.

He calculated the cost of the latest gadgetry, manure, seeds, and other things he would have to buy, the cost of the well he would have to get dug, and the pump he would have to put in to water the land, the salary he would have to pay each month to the help he would have to hire, and finally what would be left in his bank account and what kind of livelihood he would expect to make after all the effort had been put in.

With a smile on his face, Raj realised that he would still be able to lead an upper middle class life from the profit his farming activities would bring him, and he would still remain a rich man as far as his bank balance was concerned.

Raj's bare feet hugged the soil.

He began farming.

Hands on.

He learnt how to operate all the latest farming equipments.

Whereas he was once comfortable in a road hugging convertible, he was now at home perched high up in a tractor like a King on his high throne, ploughing his fields.

Raj was not content to be a farmer and became a mentor to all the poor uneducated farmers in his village who used to gather daily around his fields in order to watch him work.

He used to take some time off each day and explain to the farmers how to work the various equipments.

He was neither stingy nor lazy. He used to lend his equipments to farmers who had planted different crops, and in the initial stages used to work his equipments in their fields for them until they grew proficient enough to do it themselves.

Raj became a successful farmer. Far beyond his wildest dreams.

At night he started holding a gathering for farmers, and using his laptop, projector, and a screen, started introducing them to everything new in the farming world, and how they could acquire them easily and cheaply through government schemes meant for them.

It had taken but a year and a half for Raj to attain success which really mattered.

But the pyramid was true to form.

Fear raised its head in the form of confusion in the minds of the villagers who could not comprehend why Raj had left his glorious metro and come to his village and started farming, even allowing for the fact that the village was indeed a charming place.

This time around, fear was right in arousing confusion.

Raj's farming activities were not solely to learn firsthand and then help the poor farmers become prosperous, but to also earn his livelihood.

Now fear raised the question as to why would a rich person like Raj need to earn his livelihood?

Answer: Raj had decided to put all his savings in a Trust and appoint a few respectable elders of the village as its Trustees.

He did it the day he earned a copious profit from his first harvest which would suffice his every need for the following year.

His pyramid which had embraced his village community shone radiantly as he called all the elders of the village to his home and explained what he had done.

Success was calmly present.

Fear was demolished as Raj explained his goal.

Love for him blossomed in the hearts of the elders as confusion vanished and dew drops began to glisten in their eyes.

Hate had hid itself somewhere.

Life had triumphed over the fear of Death for the time being as the elders felt the fountain of youth spring up inside them upon hearing Raj speak about the project and felt enthused to live long enough to see it completed.

After the elders had left, Raj had no time to rest and reflect on his success or rethink about his next move.

The chess game had already been played out in full in his mind, and there was no going back in reality.

He needed an enormous amount of hard cash within a week, for that was when the summer vacation of the school children would begin for a period of three months, and he wanted to score his major goal in that short time frame.

Raj called up one of his friends who was one of the top real estate agents and also one of the biggest builders in his metro.

Without wasting time on preliminaries, he told him that he would make arrangements with his lawyer to hand over the power of attorney over all his property in his metro to him immediately, and he had to sell it within three days and come loaded with the cash to his village within a week. He also had to bring along with him his architects, assistants, skilled workers in every field, and the necessary equipments and material required to complete a medium sized project in his village within three months.

Before his friend, the builder, could voice either an appeal or an objection, Raj offered to pay him such a huge amount as fee for his services, that he heard only the word 'yes' from the other side of the telephone line before the connection was cut.

Raj got his builder friend to fax him a list of all those who would be arriving, and depending upon their seniority, asked accommodations for them from the appropriate villagers whose houses he had mentally correlated the outsiders with.

Each and every villager met Raj's request with a broad smile and a broader heart.

Raj next went to the local telephone office and filled out the forms necessary to establish a telephone connection to the school, and which in the next three months would enable him to set up a broadband internet connection in the school's computer laboratory.

But the toughest part of the expedition had still not begun.

In fact they had not even moved from base camp yet.

The summit was still a dream.

The hardest job was always that of the expedition leader's.

He was the person who had to make the hardest choices.

He was the person who had to time everything to precision.

He was the person who had to keep everyone motivated when things were at their worst.

He was the only person who could not afford to make mistakes.

Raj called up the jobs advertisement section of a prominent newspaper in his metro, and placed advertisements for the posts of teachers for the subjects which he knew the school did not have teachers for, and highlighted the fact that he wanted a computer science engineer to run the computer lab in the school, while stating as a matter of fact that their salaries would be thrice that of what they earned in the metro in their regular jobs.

Raj put up this ad in all the e-job sites as well.

He had also mentioned in his jobs advertisement that the aspirants for the jobs should present themselves before him in the village before two weeks from the date of notice, and their jobs, if they were selected, would begin in three months, during which they would have ample time to find comfortable quarters in his cultured village.

The most important thing, he had left out of the job advertisements.

The builder and his team arrived the night before the deadline and were amply accommodated by happy villagers.

The builder who was Raj's friend, had a suspicion that Raj had gone mad, and after discussing the finer details of the project with him after consuming a large quantity of Raj's fine wine, but out of which Raj had only two glasses, which set in concrete in his mind that Raj had indeed gone mad, he slept and snored like one of his bulldozers which he had brought to the village.

Hope

Everything was yellow.

In fact it was a gigantic yellow line.

When the school bell rang for the last time for three months, and all the kids had been shoed away by men in yellow uniforms wearing yellow helmets, the gigantic yellow machines demolished the derelict school in a jiffy, and rebirth began.

Raj had no time for happy tears or even a smile, for he was busy interviewing a candidate for the post of a teacher in his dream school.

He had welcomed the candidate with a cup of tea, and asked him why he wanted to work in a village, teaching pre-university students, when he had done so well in his Masters degree in science by securing the first rank with a very high percentage?

Before the candidate had a chance to answer, Raj continued:

“I know the pay is high, the village is charming, but you are from the metro, are you not? Don’t you find it more alluring or have you given up on life altogether?”

The candidate asked:

“Sir, may I see the school please?”

Raj asked back in return:

“Why? Have you seen your job confirmation letter or your paycheque yet?”

The candidate answered:

“None sir, yet I would like to join, for I want to make a difference in this world, and want to be recognised as an individual.”

Raj said:

“You’re hired. Keep your mindset intact.”

This was Raj’s way of hiring staff for his school which would take in students from kindergarten to pre-university second year.

A Twist In The Tale

Everything was going according to plan and the timetable set by the computer science engineer turned farmer turned entrepreneur Raj.

He was happy as he had recruited an excellent staff who had all happily signed an agreement with him in which it was stated that if they left the school before twelve years, they would have to pay him a sum totalling their salary over the number of years they had failed to serve over the period of twelve years.

But something was niggling him in the night, and it was the fact that tomorrow would be the last day for the job applicants to appear before him, and until now, not even a single computer science engineer had applied for the position he had advertised for, and his ego would not tolerate anybody appearing late.

He could barely sleep that night. The next day he got up quite early and had a cold water bath to soothe himself. He then sat on his porch smoking a rare cigarette.

He heard the gate squeak in delight.

He looked towards it to see an exquisite creature clad in white jeans and a blue top coming towards him.

As soon as she was close enough to make her beauty suffocate him, he took a deep drag of his cigarette, threw it away, and asked:

“And who might you be?”

Sleepless late night ego and a single cigarette are more than sufficient to make people rude.

She answered:

“You are polluting the pristine atmosphere of your orchard and polluting the green grass of your property. I’m Selene, thank you.”

Competent women are capable of making rude men soft.

Raj got up and asked her to have a seat.

She thanked him and sat in a respectable posture which belied her earlier words.

Raj asked her whether she would like to have tea or coffee.

She replied that a prospective employee does not have that pleasure.

Raj laughed and said that he was not that kind of an employer.

She said that if so, sugarless coffee would be fine.

Raj called his servant and asked for two sugarless coffees.

He then asked:

“What are you here for?”

She replied with a question of her own:

“What are you here for?”

He simply answered:

“But I’m a farmer now.”

She negated his answer by saying:

“No, you are an entrepreneur now.”

He sighed:

“Women!”

She surrendered:

“Sorry.”

Coffee arrived.

It was not a coffee table conversation.

He asked:

“Why so late? On the brink!”

She answered:

“Research. I like to know who I work for.”

Raj said:

“You haven’t got your papers yet.”

And the rest of the conversation went Raj’s way and he got himself an excellent computer science engineer who had scored almost the same marks as him and had graduated from as prestigious a college as his.

Progress

Raj's days of sitting on his porch in the morning and enjoying his cup of tea or coffee were over.

The builder's men worked 24/7 in shifts, and there were always queries to be answered, instructions to be given, and regular inspections to be made of the work in progress to ensure everything was going according to plan. It was.

It was now exactly forty five days since the construction had begun, and Raj already had had a well dug and a pump installed for present construction needs and future clean drinking water facility for the students.

Raj learnt that the librarian he had hired for the school and Selene had settled in the village.

He called them home and asked the librarian to buy every book necessary for the school library, and told Selene to buy everything that was required for the computer laboratory. He then gave them blank cheques and bid them goodbye.

Raj kept the village elders up to date about everything that was going on, but something seemed to be bothering them and he knew precisely what.

One day after all the elders had tea at his place, Raj said:

“Respected elders, do not worry about how to maintain the school over the forthcoming years and how to pay the high salaries to the staff. The interest from the Trust fund I have created is more than sufficient to take care of it. In fact, the leftover money can be used to gradually improve the school with the changing times.”

All the elders left Raj's house with huge smiles upon their faces.

Satisfaction

The builder had kept his word.

One week before the end of summer vacation, a school which was on par with the best schools in myriad metros stood ready for all the students of the village who could study there from kindergarten to pre-university second year.

The school was inaugurated by the builder who had tears in his eyes.

There was a huge festival in the village that day where everybody feasted and danced.

There was a huge smile upon Raj's face as he danced, but he felt hollow inside.

For he was back to square one.

The poor farmers' income had increased considerably under the guidance of Raj, and from this point onwards no student in the village had to wear worn out uniforms or go to school barefoot.

Raj knew the school would be a resounding success.

But he would remain just another farmer among masses of farmers.

He tried to analyse the fear that came with his resounding success in his pyramid.

But the fear was so clever that it managed to successfully hide one of its most notorious troublemaking weapons – loneliness.

Trauma

Raj tossed and turned on his bed that night till midnight with the sound of drums that had been played as loud as possible with the utmost enthusiasm during that day's festivities still echoing in his ears.

But he knew that it was not that which was tormenting and depriving him of sleep.

He gave up on his bed and sleep, and went and sat on his porch, allowing the natural symphony of the night creatures to replace the banging in his head.

After fifteen to twenty minutes, the thudding in his head was gone, and he ran his hands through his hair, ruffled it, and stretched out on his recliner.

He began analysing his present state of affairs.

Now that he had achieved something substantial, had success, which was driven by desire, which itself was powered by motivation, lost its charm?

Was he no longer motivated?

He, who had risen like a Phoenix from the ashes, had he caught fire and was on the verge of being burnt down to ashes once more so soon?

The loneliness of the night made him realize the enormous fear he was experiencing.

Was the fear of loneliness, with him not being the centre of attraction anymore, playing its cruel game with him?

His work in the village had been finished. Had his love been finished too?

Did he hate himself for it?

Where was his life headed now?

Towards a purposeless death?

He had trained his helpers in the field so well that they were competent enough to take care of his fields without any help from him.

He had made the school highly efficient and completely independent.

Where was he in the scheme of anything now?

Slowly sleep overcame the exhausted Raj.

Unfinished Business

The warm golden rays of the sun and the happy songs of birds woke Raj up to a glorious morning.

He smiled in spite of the previous night's analysis of his pyramid which had been traumatic.

He got up, quickly freshened up, and came back to have tea on his porch.

They say that even a few hours of sound sleep completely refreshes a person's mind, and that the morning is wiser than the evening.

Raj started thinking afresh.

What was he?

A computer science engineer?

No. That had only been to gain formal recognition in the eyes of the society.

A farmer?

No. That had only been to educate and improve the lifestyle of farmers in his village by learning firsthand everything there was to know about farming, and earning a monthly income for himself, after giving away all his wealth and selling all his property in his metro in order to complete a cherished project of his for the village children.

An entrepreneur?

In one sense of the word, yes, and in another sense, no. He had built the village school out of a sense of duty, and was not making any profit from it.

A writer?

Definitely not. For all his books had been written while he was intoxicated.

His first book of poems had been written when he had been smitten by a love so unreasonable that it had made him famous instantly.

All his other famous books stank of liquor, not to the unknowing reading public, but to his loved ones.

This made Raj brood for just a nanosecond before his countenance beamed.

He had again found purpose and meaning in life, a goal, for he had unfinished business.

The First Day

Raj got up at four A.M. the next day and took a cold shower.

He dressed himself in comfortable worn out blue jeans and a white tee shirt which he had asked his servants the previous day to keep washed and ironed for the present day.

He then seated himself on his plush red revolving chair in front of the rosewood table both of which had been wiped clean of even the tiniest speck of dirt by his servants.

The table and the chair had been placed in front of an east facing window in his large and luxurious study as per his orders, and his laptop was placed smack in the middle of the table with a cup of hot coffee in front of it.

While leisurely finishing his coffee, Raj gave a slow smile as he thought about what he would write.

Raj had decided to write an antiparallel fictional autobiography about his own life, his tragic loss, his battle with alcoholism, his victory over it, his adventures, misadventures, hopes, and fears.

But this time, it would be a sublime book filled with philosophy, psychology, and everything would be bursting with positivity, no matter in which frame of mind he was, and how hard pressed he would be to set the right mood in the book.

Raj asked his servant to take away the coffee cup, and drawing the laptop closer to him powered it on.

He began writing with the onset of dawn.

But, after the most important lines, the first few lines, of his brand new baby had been written, he, who had never lied to himself, could tell that the spark was missing.

In fact, amongst all these highly important lines which he had taken five hours to write, the Emperor of these lines, the very first line of the book which he had taken three hours to birth, disgusted him.

He felt like running to his cellar for bottles of wine which he could pour down his gullet.

He could see failure looming in front of him, and fear began to make him think that he didn't have a teeny-weeny bit of sober creativity within him.

He felt that he couldn't love himself anymore and hated himself for it.

He felt that he was persona non grata in life's house, and that death too wanted to avoid him for as long as possible.

But suddenly a bird chirruped in his orchard and distracted him from his ugly thoughts.

His tired mind started wandering, and a pleasant smile spread across his face as he thought about the difference he had made in the life of his fellow villagers by dint of his hard work and sacrifice.

He realised that he had not needed the blessings of Bacchus for that.

Sometimes, all it takes to realise is the song of a tiny bird.

He no longer had any cravings, and the thoughts about liquor took to their heels.

With determination he sat till sundown and managed to write a page.

Even an ignoramus could tell with conviction that the first page did not contain even an ounce of creativity, and was as dull as a well used worn out doorknob, and Raj knew it.

But he was tired, and slept with nary a dream haunting him.

The Second Day

The second day, Raj was as meticulous in his preparations as he had been on the first day to resume his unfinished business.

His enthusiasm was not anything if not greater.

That day, no filthy dog of a stray thought wandered into the premises of his mind.

But neither did creativity make its appearance.

Raj slaved at his passion the whole day and completed the second page of his book.

The result was no different from that of the first day.

The second page was not anything if not more drabber than the first page.

Raj gave a wan smile and went to bed.

The Third Day

As Raj was slogging away on the third day, something happened.

He wrote a sentence and was surprised.

He made out a hint of creativity in it.

His joy knew no bounds and he tried to maintain the flow with a quick typing of a series of sentences.

But they did not shine with the same faint glow.

Without losing his glow, Raj kept typing.

There it was again, another faintly glowing sentence.

Raj did not press it this time.

He ran out of his study and into his orchard and let nature embrace him.

He felt whole.

The birds seemed to sing a different song.

He calmly walked back into his study and put his favourite music CD in the music system.

As soon as the music started vibrating within his body, he started writing once more.

This time a rush of adrenaline coursed through his body.

He was exhilarated to find that everything that he was typing was creative beyond his wildest dreams.

By midnight that night, he had rewritten the first two pages and the beginning part of the third page where his incredible creativity had not yet made its appearance.

Raj was not back.

He had just made his first appearance.

Joy

The following days were almost like the days when he had been with her and writing poetry.

Creativity gushed out of him as he typed with his cherished music vibrating throughout his body.

Whenever he got tired, he used to get up from his desk and take a walk in the orchard, or went to his fields and interacted with his men who were tending them. Their joy at seeing their master at rare intervals used to give him a good boost.

Sometimes, he used to visit the fields of the men he had helped, and the huge smiles upon their faces on seeing and talking to him used to give him further impetus to write.

Thus the days passed by for Raj.

Some passed by in a flash as the material for that day's writing shone in his mind like the powerful beam of a lighthouse illuminating a dark ocean.

Some dragged by like a kid dragging his legs to his school which appeared like a gigantic slimy creature to him.

There were the good days and the bad days, but mostly good days for Raj and his writing.

Raj was never disheartened by the bad ones and made the most of the good ones.

This positive attitude in him surprised Raj himself.

For in the past, he had been given to drink himself into a crazy mood during the bad days, and drink himself into a tremendously happy state during the good days, that after not being able to write during the bad days, or writing fabulously what he had to write during the good days, he used to pass out wherever he was, in his chair, on the floor of his study, in the bathroom, and rarely on his bed.

Raj had regained his dignity.

He had attained sober creativity.

A deep calm filled his life.

School

It was a rainy day.

The sound of the rain mingled freely with his music and a soulful symphony was orchestrated.

The atmosphere seemed ethereal to Raj.

It was a perfect day for writing.

As Raj was immersed in his work with his thoughts in full flow and he was enjoying himself immensely, he was interrupted by one of his servants, who said:
“Sir there is someone to see you.”

Raj replied:

“Please ask him if his work can’t wait until tomorrow.”

The servant said:

“It is a woman sir.”

It was a rainy day and it was a woman.

Raj gave a huge sigh and got up from his chair with his mind still filled with thoughts about his precious writing.

He went outside and was completely woken up from his reverie.

Selene was standing there with a wet umbrella and muddy sneakers.

Raj immediately asked her to take a seat, and told his servant who had followed him, to bring two cups of sugarless coffee.

Selene gave a shy smile and said:

“You remember.”

Raj smiled.

After the coffee had arrived and each had taken a few sips, Raj said:

“So.”

Selene replied:

“I’m so sorry to be disturbing you. But I had no other recourse but to come to you. I have a problem in the computer laboratory and there is no one else I can turn to for help.”

Raj said:

“Please give me five minutes,” and without finishing his coffee, went inside to get into some formal wear.

They reached the school while discussing about the problem at hand, and once they were in the computer laboratory, Raj fixed the problem in a jiffy, and explained to Selene about what to do if the same problem cropped up again, although he added that he was pretty darn sure that it wouldn't.

Raj then interacted with all the students in the computer laboratory, all of whom had huge smiles on their faces as they recognised him as their benefactor, and were loathe to let him go.

At their insistence, Raj stayed for quite a while in the computer laboratory, and even took a class for the students, for which he received a standing ovation with huge smiles adding their sweet flavour to it.

This was Raj's first visit to the school after it had begun, and going by the huge smile on his face, and the joy filling his heart and mind as he walked back home, it certainly would not be his last.

He wrote some really great stuff that day.

Solitude

After her death, Raj had been engulfed by a terrible loneliness.

He had tried to overcome it by immersing himself in booze, writing, and the fame that followed each one of his books.

It had only turned worse.

But once he had left the metro and come to his village, loneliness had somehow disappeared.

It was true that he was alone in his life now, but he was living in solitude out of his own free will, and loneliness was a long forgotten nightmare.

His writing had gained great momentum and spirit, which always kept him in a state of contentment.

As far as women were concerned, Raj had not given the matter a single thought after he had lost her, and had become almost immune to the charms of even the most beautiful among them.

But destiny had no say in this matter, as fate had laid out quite an intricate pattern of bridges for Raj to cross the gentle winding streams in an enchanting garden which he had visited in order to refresh his mind and obtain sparkling material for his writings.

But gardens can also be visited by others, and bridges across pretty streams can also be walked upon by others.

Fate intended to destroy Raj's solitude.

It was one terrible day when Raj was feeling completely drained out and could not type a single sentence.

He went for a walk in his orchard.

He felt more depressed.

He went to his fields and talked with his men.

He came back a morose man.

He went to the fields of others and interacted with them.

He returned a haunted man.

He decided to go to the school.

This thought cheered him up to no end.

He knew with certainty that interacting with the children would make his day.

He hurriedly started walking towards the school, and was just on the verge of reaching it, when he saw Selene coming out of the school, and walking towards the village.

He suddenly stopped in his tracks and waited until she reached him.

Selene gave a laugh and asked:

“Hello, are we going to the school on a Sunday?”

Solitude does that to you.

You stop looking at time and date.

Raj gave a boisterous laugh and answered:

“If teachers can, then others can too.”

Selene said humorously:

“So this is what famous writers are like.”

Raj asked:

“What makes you think I’m famous?”

Selene replied:

“Oh, I don’t go by the media. I go through the books myself.”

Raj replied:

“Thank you.”

He then walked with her discussing about school affairs until the time came to say goodbye and part ways.

When he went home and sat in front of his laptop, he realized to his great joy that his creativity had reached great heights, and he went on to write until two A.M..

After that, he relaxed with a glass of wine on his porch.

A few sips later, he sat bolt upright, as a thunderbolt seemed to strike him.

There had been no children at school to cheer him up at school that day.

Then where did the tremendous creativity come from that had turned his worst day into his best day?

He asked himself a poignant question:

“Oh my dear lord, could it be Selene who had turned his day around?”

He analysed further.

It had to be.

For he was in a blue funk until he had seen her, and which had vanished the second he had met her.

Furthermore, his creativity had increased by leaps and bounds, and he had written with a song in his heart which had overshadowed the music blasting from his music system.

He realised that there was only one sure-fire way to find out.

Raj had never looked at even a single photograph of hers since the day she had gone in the fear that he would go insane with self-pity and rage against himself.

He now got up from his recliner with trembling legs, walked shakily into his bedroom, and with shaking hands opening his closet, brought out a photo album.

It took him 'almost forever' to gather the courage necessary to open it.

He finally did.

He did not go insane.

Only a single tear flowed down his cheek.

He kissed the photograph, and replacing the album back in the closet, went back to his porch.

He reclined on his recliner, took a sip of the wine, and thought.

I'm relieved that I have finally forgiven myself to a large extent.

But I don't want to digress from my long cherished dream.

I will not allow anything or anybody, however exquisite, to become a hindrance to my unfinished business.

Raj then retired for the night.

But new kinds of sweet dreams haunted him.

Revaluation

Fate can be terribly cruel sometimes.

The magic lasted for a week, even though Selene did not appear in Raj's thoughts even once.

Even then, he felt guilty.

Some of his best work was written during that week.

After that, Raj was overjoyed as he suddenly realized that his natural creativity had disentangled itself from that influence.

He now realised how a single half an hour of his interaction with a beautiful woman had taken him a week to escape from the magical spell that had been cast over him.

And that too only at the fourth meeting.

During the first three meetings, the matters of the school had clouded him, but during the fourth, there had been time for a few light words here and there between them.

And those had been enough to affect his mind, body, heart, and soul, in a manner so as to bring out the spontaneous writer he had been when he had been drinking.

Was life toying with him?

Or was he gambling with life?

Had he become so emotionally weak?

No, this would simply not do.

He would steel himself inside out only with regard to this matter, and complete his unfinished business.

Raj began to write with a song in his heart once more, now that he had cleared out the cobwebs from within him.

Days passed by, and Raj had completed almost three fourths of his book.

He had been sober while writing it, and the manuscript was highly creative as well.

Raj was contented.

Games

Raj was contented, but not for long.

One morning, the motley crew of elders once more came bustling to his home.

They told Raj that they had heard that there was something called a personality development course, and they wished that their school should also have such a program for their children.

Raj replied:

“Please do not worry. I had thought about it before the school began. Hence I have hired teachers of the highest calibre. They themselves through their actions and admonitions will shape your children into fine young men and women with impeccable personalities.”

But the elders were adamant and wanted him to bring in people from his metro for a personality development course.

Raj sighed as he replied:

“These people from the metro charge heavily for their programs, and we cannot afford them.”

Immediately, the rich farmers and politicians stood up, and said that they were willing to bear all the expenses, but a personality development course should be held at the earliest, for they wanted their children to be benefitted as soon as possible while they were still young and most impressionable.

Raj had to say yes.

But with dread.

For, he knew that he too would have to be present in the school along with the personality development team to act as an intermediary between them and the children, and to ensure that the villagers got their money's worth.

Raj got into action right away, and arranged a three day personality development course for the children of the school.

He pledged to himself that he would not be affected by Selene in any manner whatsoever when in school, and also when out of it.

He had steeled himself inside out on that matter, but had yet to put it to the test.

He worked hard and was as creative as ever.

But his dreams were confusing even to himself.

The Program

The personality development program ran for three days without a single hitch.

For, when one of the members of the personality development team used to make a mistake, and the others did not have even a single clue as to what to do, Raj used to step in, and not only rectify the mistake, but extrapolate intelligently and wind it up by making the children laugh in his own unique manner.

Three wonderful days were soon over, and everybody was happy, especially Raj, for he had not had to interact with Selene in any manner whatsoever.

So, when the school ended on the third day, and the personality development program was completed and goodbyes said, the happy Raj started on his walk back home.

He didn't know at that moment whether he ought to feel happy or disturbed as he heard Selene's voice asking him to wait up.

He could feel happy for it gave him a chance to test his resolutions.

He could feel disturbed for it gave him a chance to test his resolutions.

Anyway, he was there and she was there.

Selene reached where Raj was standing waiting for her, and extending her hand said:

"Congratulations. Without you this program would have been a disaster."

Raj shook hands with her and said with a polite smile:

"Thank you very much. But you are exaggerating. Everybody is expendable."

They began walking towards their homes.

Selene asked him:

"Oh, modesty is one of your strong characters, is it?"

Raj answered:

"How I wish!"

Selene was not one to be left behind:

"So, you writers talk less, and that too in riddles, is it?"

Raj replied:

"Sorry. I wouldn't know. I do not interact with other writers."

Selene would not give up:

“May I know the reason why?”

Raj replied with a smile:

“Because all writers are insufferable, that’s why.”

As both arrived at the junction in the road where they would have to part, Raj asked Selene:

“You called me a writer this time. Why?”

Selene replied with a laugh:

“The word in the village is that you are slogging away at a great new book of yours, you poor wounded chameleon. That’s why. Goodbye.”

Raj bade her goodbye and made his way back home with a spring in his steps and the words ‘poor wounded chameleon’ resounding in his ears.

This woman had understood him.

She had looked into the darkest recesses of his soul.

But this time he promised himself that he would not allow anything but friendship to bloom between them.

His resolutions had slipped down a notch.

Fate’s machinery had been greased, and was running smoothly.

The Undoing

The following days were fun filled, which boosted Raj's creativity, and gently gave him both a pat and a push on his back, such that he would be able to complete his book sooner than later, and once more emerge completely into the outside world.

The days were fun filled, because Raj had imposed upon himself a strict rule that, no matter what, he would spend one day in the school, and take one class a week in the computer laboratory for students of all classes.

The children brought joy and laughter into his life, along with the eyes of Selene which looked on at him, as he took one class after another for students of various classes.

One day, after school was over, and he was walking cheerfully with Selene back towards their respective homes, he saw a large farmhouse, as big as his, being restored frenziedly by a large number of labourers.

Something about the owner returning back to their village did not feel right to Raj's intuition.

He grew morose and silent, and at the junction where he and Selene parted, he said a silent goodbye, and left with his head hanging low.

Selene had been surprised, but had maintained her silence.

Raj's intuition proved right sooner than later.

One day, a man came to his home, and told him that the owner of the house he had observed being restored had asked him to come there immediately.

When asked why, the man simply said that he did not know, but that all the village elders were also present at his master's house.

Raj hurriedly made his way to that house.

As soon as he stepped inside the hall, he could smell the odor of foreboding in the atmosphere.

He looked around and saw the elders looking as if they were ready to lie upon their deathbeds, and a man in a suit and tie sitting on a plush armchair.

The house owner's first words were:
"So you are the thief."

Raj asked:
"In whose eyes?"

The house owner angrily said:

“You have grabbed my property by building a school upon it.”

Raj calmly replied:

“There already was a shoddy school upon it. I just added a little bit of flavour to it.”

The house owner gave a guffaw and said spitefully:

“I couldn’t care less even if you had built the Black Taj Mahal upon it and filled it with red roses. I just called you here to politely inform you that your school will be demolished within a week, and I will have my land back. I hope you are not a hot headed troublemaker, for I have the means to deal with it as well.”

Raj had not even been offered a seat.

Raj turned to the elders in exasperation and said:

“Where are the papers for the land? Show them to him, will you?”

None of the elders spoke.

The house owner gave a smirk and said:

“No papers were signed for the exchange of that land between my grandfather and these people. It was just a word of mouth promise. Legally the land belongs to me.”

Raj quietly asked:

“May I please know what you will be doing with that land after depriving the children of this village of their only school and hope for a brighter future?”

The owner of the house suddenly got up from his plush armchair, and said in rage:

“Don’t act smart with me boy. I know you have sacrificed almost all of your wealth in a nonsensical manner. Don’t you dare impose your puerile ideals on me. And if you must know, I will be selling that land to a builder who wants to build an eco-resort on that land for people from urban areas to come and relax in this beautiful village of ours.”

Beauty can sometimes turn out to be a disadvantage.

Raj stood with his hands in the pockets of his jeans with a lowered head, while the house owner plunked back into cushiony luxury.

Raj then slowly raised his head and said:

“Can you please give me two months time? I will pay you double of what that land is worth to you right now.

“And if I cannot, I will sign over all my property in the village to you, which you can sell to your builder. And I promise you that my property is worth at least three times that of the school property.”

The house owner without thinking for a second, said yes to Raj’s offer.

The house owner had brought with him a lawyer.

Everything that Raj had promised, was recorded and signed by both parties with the elders as witnesses.

The house owner's attitude by now had become jovial, and he was still getting up from his plush armchair – his hand extended with the intention of shaking Raj's hand, and sealing the deal on a happy note – when he became aware of Raj's absence. For, Raj had immediately vanished after signing all the necessary papers.

Time was short and the task was herculean.

Nick Of Time

Raj closeted himself in his study for one whole month, without proper nourishment or rest.

And when he finally came out after one month, he looked like a worn out ghost.

Without first eating a hearty meal and resting for a few hours at least, he called up his favourite famous Publishing House, and told them that he had a manuscript ready.

He further put a condition that he needed a yes or no reply from them within a week, and that he had already e-mailed them the manuscript.

Raj then tried to eat, but his last month's follies made his stomach cringe in pain.

Raj drank two litres of chilled water, and slept continuously for two days.

He woke up only when one of his servants shook him vigorously and handed him his cell phone.

Raj had no idea about the date or time.

He was informed about it cheerfully by the editor of his manuscript on the other end of the phone.

The editor told him that the manuscript was so wonderful and so perfect, that they had decided in two days flat to publish it.

Raj's head cleared up completely and he thanked the editor.

Raj also said that he had a request.

The editor asked him to go on.

Raj said that instead of royalties being paid to him for copies of his books sold, he would like a lump sum of money to be paid to him at once, and that they would be having the full copyright of the book.

The editor asked:
"How much?"

Raj quoted the figure which he had to pay to the owner of the school land in order to save the school from being demolished.

The editor said:
"You could have asked for more."

Raj answered:

“Yes, But I need the money tomorrow.”

The editor said:

“Oh. That’s that then. But I tell you, this book is going to be the biggest success of your life.”

Raj said:

“It’s ok. I’m a farmer and a teacher now.”

Both then said their goodbyes.

After a day had passed, Raj invited all the elders for lunch at his place.

As everybody sat down, Raj took out a cheque and handed it to the nearest elder, who handed it to his neighbour, and so on.

It was like watching lamps light up on festival nights, one after another in succession.

Some cried with joy.

Some laughed with joy.

Raj beamed as his unfinished business was no longer a business or unfinished.

Fate Pulls The Trigger At Long Last

Raj had managed to look unruffled on the outside during this harrowing episode, when he rarely, if ever, left his study to meet one or some of the elders, who came at discrete intervals to his home to assuage themselves that all would be as before, and that happy days would be upon them in a short period of time.

But, inwardly he had been in a state of shock, not knowing whether he would be able to complete two unfinished businesses, which relied upon one another for success, during the short period which had been awarded him.

He had won with plenty of time to spare.

He decided to get back into a good physical shape.

He started running on the highway.

The school was situated on the highway.

He had completely stopped thinking about date and time.

One fine evening he chanced upon Selene heading back from work.

He wiped off the perspiration from his face and neck with the cloth meant for just that purpose, and smilingly said hello.

Selene's reply was not the one he expected:
"So the big rich man with the biggest ego is still here."

Raj, who was usually not given to long speeches, was game for it this time:
"Nobody had done it in the past, the future cannot be foretold, I simply looked at the present and did what needed to be done.

"As for ego, nobody exists without one, and when the ego starts bloating, consciousness starts decaying.

"You don't see mine decaying, do you?"

"This is all I know and it is pure and simple, and therefore I adhere to this path."

Raj took a deep breath and continued:

"It is not a sacrifice I'm making. I'm just giving away money. I do it for the children and for those who cannot understand.

"It makes me feel that life is worth living after all."

Raj was left breathless and Selene was left misty eyed after this effort on the part of Raj.

Raj noticed her glazed eyes, but kept it to himself.

She immediately apologised to Raj for her brash behaviour which Raj immediately forgave.

It was not because meeting her filled him with joy, but he was always a positive person who forgave others their faults if they accepted them as such.

As both of them began their customary walk, Selene asked:

“This is a prosperous village with a few very wealthy villagers and politicians. Why didn’t they help out in the least bit this time, and why haven’t they done so in the past? And why didn’t they tell you that the school was built on somebody else’s property?”

Raj laughed and answered:

“Mea Culpa, as far as your last question is concerned my friend, it is I who should have been more careful. And as for your earlier questions, some of the poor villagers became more rich than they should have, and some others more powerful than they should have.

“Both of them are playing their friendly card with the other villagers in order to maintain their glory, and hence cannot afford to lose large amounts of money, or exercise the power in their hands which may make them unpopular with either the ruling political party or the opposition, depending upon whose side they are on. These rich and powerful people want to maintain the status quo in the village.

“The only time these high and mighty people have spent some money together for the sake of the village children was when we had the personality development program and I refused to pay for it out of my pocket. But the amount each chipped in was so little that it barely covered the expenses of the program.

“Other than these idiosyncrasies of this collective whole of the high and mighty, they are really good hearted people, who open the doors of their homes to total strangers, and make them feel at home.”

Both then walked in silence till the junction, said their goodbyes, and went back to their respective homes.

Raj took a cold shower, and reflected upon this odd person whose name was Selene.

Now that his cherished dream had been accomplished, he decided to spend more time at the school teaching English and Geography as well, so that he could get to know Selene better.

Teacher

Raj proved himself as expert a teacher in English and Geography classes as he had done in the Computer Laboratory.

Raj's immaculate logic had done the trick in transferring it bit by bit to the children in the computer laboratory, while his travels across the world, and the research he had done to begin his farming, long ago, now helped him in teaching geography to the students with the unique flavour of different countries spicing his lessons.

But his real forte was English, where he went to the depth of a lesson in prose or a poem, until he unearthed its creativity, and explained it in simple sentences, so that the students could understand what the author wanted to convey, and the manner in which he did, and could further understand creativity and be creative themselves.

Not only did he explain creativity that was in the school books, but explained it from the viewpoint of daily life, so that they could be creative and hence joyful in whatever they did.

Raj had started coming to the school three days a week now.

The very next time he and Selene were walking back to their respective homes, Selene told him that she had read his latest book which had saved the school, and said that it was a great novel, the best novel of his that she had read.

She admitted that she was a great fan of his, and if asked to rate his books, his book of poems would come first, and this latest one, second, in her humble opinion.

She asked him as to why he had given up writing poems.

Raj sighed and said:
"The poet is dead"

Selene quickly changed the subject, and began to ask him various questions about his new novel which Raj answered cautiously.

From then on, for a few days, whenever they walked back to their homes from school, the only topic of discussion was about Raj's books.

She asked.

He answered.

She was very smart, and probed into every tiny detail.

Raj was smarter, and answered in a manner which left her thinking, until she came upon an answer by herself which suited her.

Thus a month flew by without both of them noticing it.

Dangerous Thoughts

It was festival time and the school was closed for a period of ten days.

It was the last day of the holidays.

Raj lay on the couch in his living room and wondered about what he was up to.

He had found success at the top of the pyramid.

Fear and failure could not touch him, now that he had accomplished his goal of writing a successful book while sober, and was living a meaningful life which was also cozy. He was more famous than he had ever been in the past, but he did not give a hoot, for he was no longer an author, but a teacher and a farmer. Nobody could take that away from him as he was not teaching for a salary, nor farming to get rich, but only to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

But when he thought about the two middle parts of the pyramid, love and hate, a chill ran down his spine.

What did Selene mean to him?

Had he liked her before his cherished book had been completed?

Had he loved her before he saved the school, and started visiting it three times a week, taking classes for the students?

Or had he used her only as a sensuous inspiration to complete his unfinished business?

Did he like her now because she had told him that she was a huge fan of his and had read and reread his books many times?

Did he love her now that during their conversations about his books, she had proved herself to be an intellectual match?

Or did he hate her for asking questions about the poems from his first book whenever she could?

He hated himself for setting up the routine.

He could not tell the difference between like and love as far as she was concerned.

And as far as he was concerned, their relationship was like both a gentle brook burbling amidst green grass and daisies, and life shrouded in the cloak of death.

At that very moment, the doorbell rang.

Raj shouted lazily:
“Come in, the door is open.”

It was Selene.

Raj got up from the couch, shook his head, rubbed his eyes, and asked Selene to take a seat.

Selene politely declined saying that she was in a hurry, as she had brought sweets made for the festival from her home in her metro for everybody, and she had to visit the other teachers’ homes as well, and handed Raj his share of the sweets.

Raj thanked her with something gnawing deep inside of him.

He did not know it yet, but it was jealousy.

Selene was about to leave, when she suddenly turned and said:
“I hope you don’t misunderstand, but today being the last day of the festival, I was wondering if you would come to my home for dinner.”

Raj instantly cheered up and asked:
“I hope you don’t misunderstand, but wouldn’t you like to taste the local cuisine on this last festive day?”

Selene smiled and said that she would be delighted to.

Raj said with unbridled enthusiasm:
“All right then. My door is always open. And I’m always ready. Walk right into my home as soon as possible in the evening. We will have an exciting evening together.”

Selene smiled coyly and left.

Raj called all his servants and told them to spare no effort in cooking all manner of dishes for the night, and also told them to spruce up the place.

It was one P.M..

The wait of an eternity lay ahead of Raj.

An Enchanting Evening

Raj groomed himself carefully, and dressing himself in his comfortable and old faded pair of blue jeans and white tee shirt, in which he had begun to write his most famous work of all, sat on his porch waiting for Selene.

He had nothing to lose and no idea about what he would gain.

He was at ease with himself.

Just as the sun decided that it was time to sink, Raj saw Selene at the gate.

She looked exactly as she had when she had appeared for the interview, an exquisite creature dressed in white jeans and a blue top.

This time however, she took Raj's breath away.

Raj stood up, and was left speechless, as she approached him and laughingly said:

“Hey, it's me Selene. You had invited me for dinner, and asked me to come as soon as possible in the evening. Remember?”

Raj jerked himself out of his reverie, and welcomed Selene with a beaming countenance.

Both then sat on the porch for sometime quietly enjoying the orange halo of the setting sun in the autumn leaves of the orchard.

Raj finally broke the silence by asking:
“Care for some wine?”

Selene smiled charmingly and replied:
“I would love to. I hear you have some excellent vintage wine in your cellar.”

Raj gracefully replied:
“Then why don't we both go down to my cellar so that you can get to choose?”

Selene stood up with a smile and said:
“It would be a pleasure. Thank you.”

It did not take Selene too long to select the best bottle of wine in Raj's cellar.

Soon the bottle was uncorked, and two wine glasses were filled on the porch, where they gleamed with a reddish hue in the final rays of the setting sun.

Both lifted their glasses to each other and took a sip.

After silently enjoying each others company and the wine until it became completely dark outside with only the magnificent stars in the sky looking at them, Selene broke the silence.

She asked:
“Why?”

He questioned her question:
“A wounded chameleon?”

She simply said:
“Yes.”

He replied with a sigh:
“I was, and maybe still am, trying to escape from myself.”

She said softly:
“The media covered the tragic event in your life from every angle. Going by them, it was not your fault.”

He replied bitterly:
“Truth is the harshest burden to bear of all. A silly folly can lead to inconsolable consequences.”

He further added:
“That is why ‘I can’t’ and not ‘do not’ write poems anymore.”

She was surprised:
“But, all those great novels, except one, they were all written after her tragic demise, weren’t they?”

He sighed:
“Yes, alcohol has the power to make you forget and get on with your creativity, but only for a certain period of time – and that too not considering its other horrifying side effects.”

He then laughed and asked:
“I was a closet alcoholic. Are you still my fan? Do you still like my books?”

She replied:
“Yes, more than before, for great suffering only brings out great creativity. But your last book...”

Raj beamed as he said:
“That was the reason I fled my metro and came to my village. After I had done some good to the people here, goodness itself started to seep inside me. I had one unfinished business in life. It was to write a successful book while being sober. Now my task is completed. I’m a wounded chameleon once again.”

She asked him:

“So, was your unfinished business worth turning a very wealthy man into a teacher without pay and a farmer?”

Raj replied without hesitating for a second:

“I would have given my life for it, but here I am, enjoying life after completing it.”

Selene said:

“Your ‘Unfinished Business’ book is earning more than what any other author’s entire life’s work would earn him. The critics are calling you a fool for accepting a lump sum of money in the beginning, and thereby waiving away your right to royalties. And that too for these villagers who do not want to help themselves.”

Raj answered calmly:

“I helped these villagers precisely because of that Selene. But the major benefactors were the children and the youth of this village who did not have a say in the matters of the village controlled by a group of obsolete elders. Now do you understand?”

Selene beamed and said yes.

Raj ventured further:

“I asked this question to you during the interview, and you told me about your ideals which incorporated helping village children to learn and progress. Now I ask as a friend. Why?”

Selene shifted in her chair, and took a moment before she replied:

“Well, I needed the money. And when I came here after living in the metro since I was born, I was held spellbound by its beauty. But I was still not sure. But what clinched the deal was...”

Raj waited silently.

Selene finally went ahead:

“But what clinched the deal was you.”

Raj said with a smile:

“Go ahead.”

Selene went ahead:

“Being a hardcore fan of yours, I had followed your every move, and when I found myself being interviewed by you, and then being given the job, I decided to stay.”

Selene asked Raj:

“So what plans do you have for the future? Or have you become complacent?”

Raj said:

“Time will tell. Time may be chronological or emotional. In chronological time, I will wait. In emotional time, I do think I have something in my mind. It is a little fuzzy right now, but as I go closer and closer towards it, it too seems to come closer and closer to me.”

Selene asked smoothly:

“Why wait? Why not act in chronological time?”

Raj replied as a matter of fact:

“Because, some things cannot be pushed. They mature better on their own.”

Raj added:

“I’m also tired with so many things having happened so fast. I will take a vacation from myself for a few months now. And what have you thought about your future?”

Selene replied with a coy smile:

“I don’t take time to think much. I just listen to my heart and act fast. Chronological, emotional, spatial, etc. times for me are nothing but toys hidden in my heart, which I call upon depending upon the action to be taken by me in the outside world. And I don’t hesitate on taking any action that comes from the depths of the heart, for it is bound to be pure and true.”

Raj applauded and said:

“Bravo!”

He then looked at his watch and exclaimed:

“Oh dear! Talking about chronological time, it is already nine fifteen. The food must be getting cold. Shall we...”

Both of them enjoyed their dinner, especially Selene who was tasting the local home made cuisine for the first time.

Raj then drove her home in his convertible.

Both wished each other goodnight, but Selene added a parting sentence before she entered her home, and Raj drove back home with it resounding in his mind.

Selene had said:

“The time we spent together was emotional. Never knew when it began and how soon it ended.”

That night he slept a different man.

Turbulence

The next day, Raj got up at three A.M., and took an hour long cold shower in order to awaken and invigorate his senses.

It was because he needed to clearly analyse some issues which were desperately clinging onto him for dear life at present.

He then wore his red bathrobe, went to his study, locked the doors behind him, and sat on the chair which was situated in front of the east facing window and the rosewood table where he had completed his unfinished business.

Just as the sun began to rise, so did his introspections.

What had Selene meant by her parting words the previous night?

If he thought that they were what they were, would he be right in taking the matter to a higher level?

It was true that she was educated and was entitled to her own choices in life.

But it was also true that he was older than her, and she was fascinated by his books, his teaching, his generosity, and his entrepreneurship.

But he wanted to put his writing days behind him for quite a long time, didn't want to earn a salary as a teacher, and was no longer wealthy enough to be an entrepreneur.

Maybe she was just a fan obsessed with him.

He couldn't take advantage of her in this matter.

He had come to the village trying to run away from himself, but had found the true him in himself.

His heart had pitied the youths and children of the village, and in trying to do good to them, he had had goodness erupt within himself.

This goodness had increased by leaps and bounds when the push came to the shove, and he had triumphantly completed his unfinished business while helping the villagers to save their only school.

And since he had met Selene, his solitude which he loved, sometimes turned into loneliness.

He wondered whether this was love.

The first time had been different.

Both had been young and naïve.

Love was just around the corner for them then.

But it had been powerful and cared not a single hoot for the society at large.

But this time both were older, and he was again a famous writer, and she had a reputation to maintain as a teacher.

Success and fear at the top of the pyramid, and life and death, at the bottom of the pyramid, would crush love with hate escaping as a result of the pyramid leaning on the side of love, leaving hate alone to survive his folly if he went ahead with his madness.

But what was 'Love' when stripped of its fancy clothes, costly makeup, red roses, and chocolate?

It was simply a bridge that bridged the loneliness of people.

And all that one needed to get love was to give love.

Everything was so simple.

Everything was so simple and he had built a pyramid.

Sweet Nothings

Raj brought out his suit and tie from his closet, and dressed himself impeccably.

He then packed some of his clothes and other belongings in a small bag for an uncertain trip.

His servants were astonished to see him in this form of formal attire, and burst out laughing.

But Raj was in a different world of his own, and was oblivious to their merriment and its cause.

He put his bag in the boot of his convertible, jumped into the driver's seat with verve, and sped to Selene's home.

Raj knew that it would be another half an hour at least before she reached home.

While he waited, something which he had thought was an impossibility happened.

A lovely poem suddenly erupted out of the blue within him.

Immediately, it dawned upon him that he had finally forgiven himself completely, and he felt as light as air.

He then waited with a broad smile on his face until he saw her gracefully making her way towards her home.

Adrenaline rushed through his body when she reached him, and asked him without even greeting him first with a hello:

“Wanted to taste my cooking, didn't you?”

Raj answered with a beatific smile:

“Yes.”

Selene gave an enchanting smile and said:

“Well, I won't disappoint you. Come in.”

He followed her into her home.

She asked him to make himself comfortable while she freshened up.

After a little while, which seemed like an eternity to Raj, she came back with two glasses of orange juice and said sweetly:

“Sorry, I don’t have a wine cellar like that of yours. We will have to make do with fresh orange juice.”

Raj laughingly replied:

“Well, it is the drink of champions. I’m more than happy with it. Thank you.”

He then asked her:

“Can I have a sheet of white paper and a pen please?”

Selene said, “Why not,” and brought him what he had asked for.

Raj immediately put pen to paper, and in a short time, finished writing his latest poem.

Selene laughingly asked:

“What is it? A grocery list?”

Raj simply handed over the paper saying:

“Thanks to you.”

Selene read it.

The piece of paper read:

For you

It took a long time
but time stood still
when the once discarded and dispersed remnants of a long lost skill
came back together to be joined again in time

To hold him mesmerized
by her who emerged from the sea
like a mermaid
leading him back into his world where he could once again see

He saw himself forgiven and in the pure
not a killer for sure
but only as a lover
who could love perpetually in the future

He thanked her who had been his
whose he had been
and gracefully accepted the bliss
which had he been gifted by her even after she had his been

Her eyes grew misty.

She then looked right into his eyes and said:

“You could simply have asked me to marry you instead of wearing a suit and tie in a village, and coming to my home to taste my cooking.”

Raj loosened his tie and said:

“You are right. So?”

Tears flowed down Selene’s cheeks as she asked him:

“Are you willing to come to my metro right now so that we can get our marriage registered?”

Raj immediately replied:

“Pack a bag.”

Selene did.

The convertible zoomed off into the twilight.