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Urvashi: A novel

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URVASHI

A Novel

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing
Department of English
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ABSTRACT

Urvashi: A Novel

by

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“Urvashi” is based on the universal theme of an obsessive love of a young man for a young woman. It’s a story that’s repeated in every age and culture, in the lives of countless young men and women. Porus Chaturvedi, a young “upper-caste” corporate executive in India, decides to pursue, as his “perfect match,” a “lower-caste” girl (named Urvashi) not yet out of high school. Complicating this “love affair” are Porus’s endless, bookish attempts to theorize life; his recruitment of a disparate band of sympathizers to act as “go betweens” and to help him “strategize”; his erotic fantasies followed by his torturous self-indictment; his inability to face the girl of his dreams outside of those dreams; and, finally, obstructing Porus at every step, the intractable social milieu whose foundation was laid by Porus’s own ancestors—the Vedic Brahmins.

The story is told in the first person, by Porus himself, recalling events from his life occurring between 1992 and 1997. Eventually, Porus marries a Brahmin girl, the daughter of an ex-soldier and his young second wife.

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CHAPTER 1

Let me begin by stating that I am not particularly inclined to write a novel (which I have just set out to do), about a long-forgotten girl who came into my life, unannounced and unexpected, and vanished from it (equally anonymously), without so much fanfare as adorns even a small ceremony. There's another reason why this novel should not be written, or if written, should not see the light of publication. My wife hates this girl, the one I'm going to write about. She hates even a mention of her name. Yet her name was one of the first things that attracted me to her. Urvashi. When I learned it first, I told myself there could not have been any other name. The name had beauty, sensuality, femininity, and divinity—the last came from its association with a celestial nymph, *Indra's* favorite. I loved its last syllable—the feminine *e*, as in Penelope—and, as though it were predestined, the name started with a sound of moaning, a sound of lovemaking.

We had a chapter on names when I was in the seventh or eighth grade, a satirical essay on how they sometimes mocked the reality of people, as in a beggar whose name meant wealth, or a blind man who was named “beautiful eyes.” I had never thought of names before, and I didn't know the meaning of my own—Porus Chaturvedi. All right, there is this famous story involving my namesake who, upon his defeat and capture by Alexander the Great, demanded that he be treated like a king. That's about the only reference I have of my name. I have never liked it much, except that it's a pretty convenient name for my Western friends. I remember when Jason Marsh, my English friend, came to India on one of his queer, backpack and all trips, I had no difficulty

whatsoever introducing myself to his Australian friends. (There was one New Zealander, too.) Ripping up a page from a letter pad kept in his YMCA room, I wrote on it in capital letters, POROUS. Within seconds, Jeff and Melissa, and Ron and Kimberly, had my name playing on their lips like a never-memorized, never-forgotten nursery rhyme.

I don't bother telling these polar bears my surname, though. The effort is wasted. Once I tried it, and the response I got was so scary, I vowed never to try again. Just to give you a taste of it: "CHATEAU . . . VEDI," said one, "CHATTER . . . VEDI," said another. The third version had me cry out so loudly, I wondered if I had shattered the glass in the windowpanes. It was, believe me, no kidding, "SHATTER . . . VEDI."

"Enough," I said. "Stop raping my family name. Why not call me POROUS for Chrissake?"

Afterward, whenever Jason introduced me to a new *Gora* or a *Gori*, he or she already knew my name. What a relief, boy, do I hate introductions. Going back to the chapter on names I read in high school, I did develop a certain contempt for the system of naming people. Of what use was a nice-sounding name if one's actual life was miserable? Names were facetious, unnecessary appendages—maybe they were needed for identification, that was all. Urvashi sparked in me an interest for names. I started comparing names to their bearers. Sometimes they lived up to their names, but often they did not. Take Urvashi's case. She was the youngest among the five sisters. I liked hers and her oldest sister's names. The names of the other three were common, surprisingly not unlike their appearances. I am forced to remain silent about her oldest sister's name. I do not want to change it and revealing it would not be fair. In any case, our story is about Urvashi, the youngest daughter in this family of five sisters and a brother.

I wonder why her parents, or someone else, named her Urvashi. Was it because she was born a fair, a very fair child, opal-like in her beauty? If so, the name-giver had not erred. A fourth daughter in India is hardly a welcome entity. I know cases where these unfortunate creatures are stuck with corrupted forms of their names that were ordinary to begin with. These girls grow up to be quiet and undernourished women, whose childhood is considered over the moment they become aware to take care of themselves. Nobody asks after their well-being, and they are looked upon with half affection, half anger for their birth. Who the hell wanted you? Parents say this through their eyes and the little girl understands, for she scurries for cover every time she finds her mother or father giving her that stare.

Compared to these pitiful souls, Urvashi not only seemed to have enjoyed a warmly loved, snug childhood, she seemed to have grown in her parents' favor because of the arrival of the prince, the long-awaited boy, in the family after her. Certainly there were proofs of a preferential treatment accorded to her. Her eyes were too bold for a seventeen-year-old. When they turned to look at you in wonder, it was as if a much-protected princess were watching the subjects of her kingdom. But they blazed in scorn if you held her glance. Who do you think you are to look at me like that? they asked. You had to look away. Oh, that disdain in a seventeen-year-old who was still in high school and probably a run of the mill, mediocre student! Yet you could not forget the regality of her form, the majesty of her gait, as she leaned forward, like a rose-laden branch, to talk to a short, commonplace girl, one of her many or few friends. There was no way to know. Urvashi was as quiet as the Pyramid of Giza, as graceful as Nefertiti, as shifty as Cleopatra, and as bewitching as her celestial counterpart.

Looking back, I realize that I had set for myself the most difficult challenge. Here was a girl who knew she was charming, and ripe as a full-bodied flower, and here was I, who could intellectualize about girls all day, but could not help shivering in front of them. Perhaps God Almighty wanted some fun at my expense, with a thought that He would recompense me later in some way, as only He can.

I was freshly come from Calcutta, that most romantic of Indian cities, and probably had something of it in my system, for it wasn't long after my arrival in this western Indian city that I was hopelessly caught in this—I still don't know what to call it—let's say, for the sake of variety, the “web” of Urvashi. When poets and painters go ga-ga over their objects of adulation, I feel like rewarding their worship with all my attention. They seem almost godly to me in their sincerity and aesthetic sense. Yet, come to think of it, the world is full of beauties. I do not mean beauty of any other kind except the feminine beauty, which to me is the greatest of God's creations. My God, what superb beauty does a beautiful woman have! How can the most scenic spots on the earth, or the most beautiful buildings, even compare with this beauty in flesh, alive and ever changing, of different hues, shapes, and clothed in a million different ways! In such a situation as this, a singular obsession with one beautiful girl seems unusual, even unnecessary. Still, Urvashi became one such girl in my life, and when I later married “sensibly,” a part of me knew that Urvashi's memory would never leave me.

Those days, I lived in an industrial city called Baroda in western India, employed in a large, government-owned petrochemicals company. I had done well for myself. A young officer with an MBA degree and a monthly salary of five thousand rupees wasn't a bad deal at all. I was a bachelor and lived like one. Now when I look back to those days, I

hardly remember anything good or pleasant. True, I had a lot of fun, but most of it was a fool's or a drunkard's. I lived in a small, first floor apartment in the company township. I called it "my pigeonhole." It opened to a balcony that could seat two, at the most three people. Through the door at the end of the small corridor-like balcony, you stepped into the squarish living room. If you kept walking straight, you entered the roomy kitchen with a tall closet and a long cooking platform. If you turned to your right, however, there was a mini hallway that housed, in an alcove, the washbasin and opposite it the toilet and the bathroom. At the start of this hallway, to your right, was the smaller of the two bedrooms. The bigger one, where I dumped my empty suitcases, unused clothes, and the like things we carry but have no use for, sprawled out at the end of this hallway. Though the house was sufficiently sized for a bachelor, it had a confining quality to it, as though it were a box that kept me enclosed while the lid was shut.

My spendthrift ways ensured that I was left with no money to spend on furniture or other amenities of a house. I did not know how to cook and was too lazy even to boil a cup of tea. There was a south Indian restaurant in the township where I went to have tea and sometimes a snack. The restaurant had a long porch where, on a makeshift counter, sat the ubiquitous Indian *paanwallah* with his paraphernalia of betel leaves, areca nuts, slaked lime, catechu paste, tobacco, fennel seeds, cardamom, cloves, rose petal spread, cigarettes, and *bidis*. I smoked cigarettes: two packs a day.

I first saw Urvashi on a wintry morning in 1992. I was on my way to this south-Indian restaurant to have my flask filled with tea—I was studying for the civil services examination then—and had turned to the main road of the township, when, suddenly, I saw a thin, whitely girl, who was walking on the opposite side of the road, staring at me,

innocently but steadily, as though she had willed herself to the act. My wife tells me that I have one constant, background expression in my eyes, the expression of arrogance. I don't know what gives me this expression or the arrogance I know I have, for I can tell you many reasons why I should not have any goddam arrogance. (For that matter, I can also tell you many reasons why I should have.) I mention arrogance because it was exactly what I felt when I saw this little bud of a girl staring at me as though I were her suitor. What a temerity! My mind was still rife with the vanity of a serious reader, for the previous night I had read a hundred pages of this tome called *The Glimpses of the World History* by Jawaharlal Nehru. As I looked away and hurried to the restaurant, the flask dangling from my shoulder, I said to myself something about these young kids flirting with grown up, mature men. What an audacity!

Next morning, when I strolled down the same road with the same purpose, I looked around to see if the girl was there, gazing at me. She wasn't. Both relieved and disappointed, I walked to the restaurant. The restaurant—which was beside the road—had large sliding glass windows through which one could see the passers-by. The serving area comprised four rows of benches and tables—both topped with white Formica—and the walking space between them. The restaurant offered south Indian snacks such as *masala dosa*, *idli*, and *vada* made from rice or lentil paste; hot and cold beverages though no alcohol; and traditional Indian whole meal known as a *thali* (a *thali* is a deep-seated circular or rectangular steel dish with different sections in it for vegetable gravy, *dal*, rice, and a stack of chapattis). Young boys and a couple of grey-haired men worked as waiters. Most came from Karnataka, a state in south India, north of Madras, and spoke in broken Hindi, just enough to get by in their jobs. There was in their eyes a patient resignation, a

certain sorrow, a quiet understanding of life. They never asked you for favors. I learned later that they lived in smallish quarters, four or five or six of them in a house. The old ones had wives and children back home, whom they visited once a year. I hated to pity them but could never leave the restaurant without tipping them, one more reason, my friends said, I could not save money.

While I waited for my flask to be filled, I kept staring out the window. As though she knew this, there, walking on the road was Urvashi, visible because of her height and because of her companion's lack of it. I could not help but watch this tall bud of a girl walk past the window, appear briefly, at a slanting angle, in the door, until she was lost somewhere behind the hedge of a small garden facing the restaurant entrance. I noted with discomfort, for I was studying on an unpaid leave, and amusement, for she was a mere schoolgirl, the fact that I had kept watching her. Who was she? I wondered. I had never seen her before, except the previous morning. Suddenly, I wanted to ask the cashier at the counter, the waiter who closed the lid on my flask, the *paanwallah* who gave me my *Wills Navy cut*, anyone, anywhere, the question that was beginning to gnaw at me, and would eventually take me through heaven and hell: Who's this girl?

So far, I have told you how I ran into (literally walked into) this girl whose story I want to tell you in this novel. (A short story would not do.) I have also told you some stuff about myself. But I haven't told you much about the girl, except that she was fair, thin, tall, and beautiful. All these she was but she was a lot more. I remember having told you that God almighty sometimes amuses Himself with our foibles and botherations, so it suited Him to let us—Urvashi and me—run into each other more and more. I don't know how many times it happened, our seeing each other, on the main road of the township, on

the adjoining roads, and sometimes at altogether new places: inside the city-bound company buses, at the temple in the nearby Indian Textiles Township (my township did not have one then), and once, inside the open-air theater in our township, where they showed a film—mostly Bollywood hits but occasionally a dubbed English film—every Thursday evening, and where, sitting on the bare concrete back of a tier of seats amidst other residents of the township, most of whom I did not know or would not have recognized because of the surrounding darkness, I suddenly heard a ringing giggle and, turning around, found Urvashi seated on a tier above mine, huddled between her sisters, her thin white arms clasping her knees; I remember foolishly wishing to be those knees of hers.

Wherever it was that we stumbled upon each other, each knew the other's presence instinctively and responded always in the same fashion: I became the primeval man, Urvashi the goddess of fertility. Looking at her fiercely gazing eyes, her unimpressive clothes—all of which looked good on her—her tall and slender figure (crowned by the most orderly shoulder length hair I had seen) became for me a momentary escape into paradise itself. Sometimes I looked away, driven by self-reproach, but more often I held her gaze for as long as I could, unable to manage even a semblance of a smile.

Urvashi's face was white, oval shaped, and longish. Her elongated chin, coupled with her small, proportionate lips, made it sexy. Her hair, which showed her broad, glistening forehead, was parted perfectly in the middle of her head and fell over to the sides. Sometimes, when she wore a headband, her hair streamed behind, like that of school-going girls in shampoo ads. God, what she does with her hair? I wondered again

and again. It not only protected her face from the darkening sun but wrapped it in a robe of coyness. What was extraordinary was that she mixed this coyness, knowingly or not, I don't know, with that devilish coquetry of hers, challenging you to a primordial duel of the sexes.

By now, I had become thoroughly infected with an obsession for this fair creature. I continued to study but my heart wasn't in it. Soon, the examination came knocking, and I finished writing my papers with a feeling that I had not done badly, under the circumstances, that is. I had decided to do some research on Urvashi once the exam was over, but now that I was done with it, I was surprised to find that I was not interested in this insolent girl who had no shame at all. There were other reasons for my disinterest, as the reader can guess.

Well, I am a little ashamed to say this, but I had done some research through a friend and found that Urvashi belonged to the lowest Hindu caste of *Shudra*, the last of the four *varnas* (the Sanskrit word for *color* that has been translated in modern times as *caste*). Members of this accursed caste were called *Harijan* (the children of God) by Gandhi and grouped under the Indian constitution as "Scheduled Castes." Numerous communities made up this grouping. Urvashi's was one of them. When Bhargav informed me, I couldn't believe my bad luck. Nor could I believe that Urvashi, who looked like an "Aryan" princess, could be from a "lower" caste.

No one knows how the caste system originated. The Indo-Aryans, when they first came to India, used the Sanskrit word *Varna* to differentiate themselves from the dark-skinned natives. As they settled down, they conceived a fourfold social division: Brahmin (priest), Kshatriya (warrior), Vaishya (trader or farmer), and Shudra (conquered

natives)—in that order. The division took roots in the Indian psyche, and not surprisingly, for even the Bhagavad-Gita, the Hindu Bible, called upon Hindus to do their caste-based duties. (Chapter eighteen of the book asks the four *Varnas* to live and work according to their “innate natural constitution”: Brahmin with his serenity and wisdom should teach and judge; Kshatriya with his courage and strength should rule and fight; Vaishya should trade or raise cattle; and Shudra should serve.)

Thanks to Gandhi—whose only predecessor in this respect was Buddha—the modern India belonged to everyone equally, at least in theory. Yet even now newspapers reported occasionally about a certain “lower caste” man, in a faraway unheard of village, who was tied to his bedstead and set on fire, his “crime” being that he kept taking water from the “upper caste” well, or that he dared to reciprocate the love of an “upper caste” woman. Neither were caste-based riots a thing of the past. Only a few years back, when the government had decided to implement the recommendations of the Mandal commission, which had called for including the “other backward classes” in the quotas for government jobs and colleges, the country had witnessed widespread caste-based riots. Gujarat, where I lived, had had many of these. Was I myself free from the influence of the caste?

I had always been proud of my Brahmin ancestry. Though I knew my non-Brahmin friends regarded my attitude with a mix of tolerance and contempt, I never tired of boasting how Brahmins had made India, had given her all that was worthwhile, down the ages: whether it was Kautilya’s *Arthshastra*, one of the earliest texts on the art of kingship and political economy; Panini, the Sanskrit grammarian; Aryabhatta, who calculated the value of pi and explained both solar and lunar eclipses; Varahamihira, the

author of *Pañca-siddhāntikā* (“Five Treatises”), a compilation of Greek, Egyptian, Roman, and Indian astronomy; much of the timeless Sanskrit literature, including the Vedas; medical treatises by Charaka and Sushruta—they all had the stamp of a Brahmin. In modern times, India’s first Nobel Laureate, the poet Rabindranath Tagore, was a Brahmin. So were Sir C.V. Raman, the physicist, who won a Nobel in 1930, and his nephew, Subrahmanyam Chandrasekhar, who won it in 1983.

Though I termed my pride as legitimate respect for my roots—and honestly believed it to be so—did it not indicate a belief on my part, as a member of the “highest” caste, that I was “superior” to my non-Brahmin friends? I remembered how their lips pursed, their facial muscles twitched, when I mentioned the word caste to them. They had their chance now, if I would give it to them—what would they say if they learned that I had decided to marry a scheduled caste girl? I told myself that I could not do this, that I must forget Urvashi.

Fortunately, or so it seemed, during my next visit to my parents (who lived in a city fifty miles from Baroda), my father showed me a postcard sized picture of a girl who was dressed in a yellow cardigan and stood under a willow in her family garden. She was flanked by her parents, and at her foot, on the grass below, sat her younger brother. I stole a glance at the photograph, avoiding closer scrutiny in front of my father, but even that made me like the girl. There was something about her that attracted me: the white complexion, that was there. What was also there was a face that was comely, not sickly, if you know what I mean. Her name was “Shaily,” similar to the English *Shelley*. I liked it, it was different, and what was more was that, like Urvashi, Shaily matched her name in

beauty. It was agreed that I'd give a date when my grandmother and I could go and see Shaily, who lived in a city in Madhya Pradesh, a state that lies in the heart of India.

When I returned to Baroda on Sunday evening, my weekend having come to an end, I was pleased with my life. Throughout the three-hour bus journey, I was lost in the thoughts of Shaily. Her deep eyes and soft features, as captured in the photograph, kept coming back to me. I regretted not having brought the photo along, but I couldn't have done that without being seen as nuts over the girl, an impression I wanted to avoid at all costs. How could I, a Chaturvedi—hadn't my ancestors mastered all the four Vedas?—show that I liked a girl so much I wanted to carry her photograph?

The only disappointment was that, before leaving, I had had my father call Shaily's family up and ask when we could visit, and they had asked for some time. No, there was nothing to be arranged and all. We were to simply visit them. The reason her family wanted us to wait a while was that a certain young aunt of the girl, who was a medical student, had committed suicide. Damn her! —I thought. The fool had to end her life only now! I was also a trifle annoyed. Why should you stall a simple meeting because of something like this? I could understand a ceremony had to wait for the mourning to be over, but our visit did not involve any ceremony. However, Shaily was someone for whom I was willing to wait. Fifteen days were nothing.

The fifteen days passed quickly. I did not see Urvashi even once during them. Had she gone underground? I wondered, not that I was keen to see her. Now I glowed when someone mentioned my marriage. "I might soon," "Yeah, something's on," "Well, I found someone I like at last" flowed from my lips. There was a bounce in my walk. My friends had noticed this. They asked me questions about the time frame. When is the

engagement ceremony? Has the marriage date been tentatively agreed upon? Questions about the girl followed: What does the girl do? How educated is she? I didn't know the answers to most of these questions, but I would soon. Oh, how I waited to board the train to Jabalpur to see this girl!

After two weeks or so, I rang up my father. I had told him that I was free to go anytime, that any date suited me for the trip. I wanted to know if Shaily's family had called and given a date. My father sounded vague on the phone, which disturbed me because he is always clear and firm in his telephone talk. He asked me to come home for the weekend. I went. The house looked as usual. I saw my grandmother knitting a sweater for my brother, sitting her legs up on a divan. After washing and changing when I came into the living room, I saw my father fidgeting in front of a mirror-faced cupboard in the adjoining bedroom. Soon after, I heard my mother's voice, "Just tell him what happened. He's not a child anymore."

My mother hates it when people couch bad news in sweet, sympathetic words. She believes in telling things straight out. My father was still searching for words when I—who in this respect am my mother's son—demanded to know, not without some agitation in my voice, what the matter was. After hearing the account from my father, I was quick to downgrade its importance. "Oh, forget about it, I'll get far better girls. Shaily, who the hell does she think she is," I barked. But for all my bravado, I knew my heart ached as if it were pierced by a rod that had gone right through the chest and come out the back.

The funny thing was that Shaily had nothing to do with what had happened. She hadn't seen my photograph and probably didn't even know I existed. Such are the ways

marriages—lifelong unions they have to be—are arranged in Hindu India. What had happened was that one A, a cousin of mine, had been visiting Jabalpur with his parents. They had gone to Shaily's house, possibly for the same purpose for which I was to go. Both parents had liked one another, and Shaily and A had liked each other, so they had decided to cement their alliance, and the marriage had been announced, the engagement ceremony being given a short shrift, and the date was in December, which was about twenty-five days away.

I burst out in a grotesque laughter even before I started acting this tough guy who didn't give a damn. I laughed because, good boy that A was, I had always considered him a sissy, someone who watched while I scored a goal. Ha-ha! What a bitchy thing life was. Could one be sure of anything? I was to know a lot more. It was only the beginning of this tutorial on life that I was forced to learn. I was yet to know that, as in chess, there were many moves possible in life, and that, unlike chess, the game of life had many players, all affecting the game in some way or other and influencing the outcome.

CHAPTER 2

December 7, 1992:

With due respect to every religion, I have never understood its hypnotic, mass hysteric aspect. For a long time, I was able to claim that my religion—Hinduism—was free from this collective and destructive zealousness, which has always caused bloodshed, but my confidence broke yesterday. A misguided—this is the closest I can come to being non-judgmental—Hindu mob demolished the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, insisting that it stood on the site where Lord Rama was born. All the newspapers have front-paged the same last picture of the intact mosque: a few men standing atop its three blackened domes, poking them with spears—like mahouts restraining their elephants—and posing as heroes. Among the headlines, *The Times of India's* is the best. In big black letters some of which look stiff, some bowed—as if to an imaginary cortege—it reads: “The Republic Besmirched.”

I had always been a believer in predetermination. One day, while reading an old diary of mine, 1987's to be precise, I came across a page titled, “The Rules of Life.” It was filled with quotes from Roland Huntford's *Scott & Amundsen*, and *The Bible*. The first entry read: “(Amundsen) could look back over a string of events from his early childhood and see the protection of some guiding hand. He felt blessed by a good Fate.

He had an almost pagan belief in his destiny, and in that he put his trust.” I liked to read this kind of stuff. It calmed my nerves, which were frequently rattled. It also guarded me from the fear that my life would be wasted, that nothing would come of it, and that I would be forgotten less than a month after my death. The one from the Bible was the famous, “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.”

I sat looking at the page for a long time until the unexpected, shrill sound of my doorbell forced me to get up and open the door. Even before I saw Bhargav, I knew it had to be him. The grinning rascal disturbed me with a predictable regularity. Sometimes it was “nothing in particular,” sometimes he wanted to “talk,” and sometimes the inveterate broke needed “some cash.” “Hullo,” I said gravely. I assumed this gravity of manner whenever I met with someone younger than I. It was a tacit reminder to them to “respect” me, as I was their “senior” in age, knowledge, and experience. It was partly justified and my younger friends acknowledged it. But sometimes it became too much. Then they simply left and did not come back for days together. Although I had become careful with my gravity, Bhargav had never found it to be a problem. He came frequently and was convinced that he was my most trusted confidant out of a small band of young colts with whom I socialized.

“How are you, Mr. Chaturvedi?” Bhargav said with an affected formality, his usual jest with me.

“Coming from the swimming pool?” I asked him, for he was an instructor at the township swimming pool. “Nice T-shirt, how much did you get it for?”

Bhargav wore this black, velvety T-shirt. The bugger always wore T-shirts. He could afford to, not monetarily speaking, though he would have had no complaints on that count, either, if he had set his pecuniary mismanagement right. What I mean is that he had a hell of a physique, a perfect V, or very nearly so. I wasn't a gay or anything, I just envied the bastard for his body. He looked smart in anything he wore, more so in T-shirts.

"Hey, stop looking at me like that. Why don't you come for swimming, too? I guarantee you'll have a good body in six months."

"Stop crapping," I said. "Let's go and have a cigarette."

After covering my lanky frame in a red and blue sports jacket, I jumped down the stairs along with Bhargav onto the lane in front of my house that led to the main road of the township. We were walking to Madras Restaurant. We had just reached the main road when Bhargav screamed, "Hey Porus, look, who goes there?" The bastard had shouted as though we owned the road and everyone passing through it had paid us a toll.

"You bastard," I was going to say—I hated to be made an object of attention—but then my gaze fell on a reed-like girl driving a moped—a heavy monkey of a girl behind her—through the hazy late evening tumult as though she were on a beach. Her hair flew backwards, lifting to the same degree, as though the wind could not make it unruly. Her opalescent, oval face looked calmly proud, as if it knew its worth and needed no attention. "Urvashi," I almost cried out.

Oh, the thoughtlessness of one in love! Now it was Bhargav's turn to give me a stare. "Control yourself," he said.

Ashamed to have been admonished by my deputy, I decided to regain control. “I asked you to recheck on her caste? Did you find out?”

“Yes, there’s no change in the result,” Bhargav said.

“I don’t believe it. How on earth—?” I expected Bhargav to say that he had been wrong about Urvashi’s caste, that there had been a misunderstanding and that his informant had mistaken someone else for her. Instead, what he said proved Murphy’s Law: if something can go wrong, it will. Damn Murphy! I thought. Why didn’t he say the opposite?

We stopped beside a fruit vendor’s cart. The vendor was an unkempt old man who charged murderous prices for overripe bananas, mottled apples, and shriveled *chickoos*. Bhargav philosophized, “Porus, all your Brahminical theories are fine, but you can’t hide from reality.”

“What reality?” I asked.

“That you and Urvashi cannot marry, because you are a Brahmin and she, well, you know what she is.”

I did not like the certitude in his tone. Why the f--, I thought, why she? I felt thirsty, and when I looked about me, I realized that we had walked way past Madras Restaurant and were on the road outside our township’s entrance, the one leading to the Indian Textiles Township. The township where I lived was divided into two sectors. I lived in sector one and Urvashi in sector two. Sector one was bigger and the officers lived there. Sector two was proletarian, its residents being mostly the staff or the non-supervisory—as they were called—employees. The only market in the township, known

simply as the “shopping center,” was in sector one; so was my lifeline those days, the Madras Restaurant.

We continued to walk along the Textiles Township (or the TT) Road. It had become dark. My township’s boundary wall ran parallel to the road. A barbed wire fence on top of the wall acted as a protection against petty thieves, who had robbed some of the residents living in the peripheries of the township. We kept to the edge of the road, avoiding the sandy side, which was anyway partly claimed by the shrubbery that began at the foot of the wall. There was no telling what might be creeping beneath your feet. The whole area was snake infested once, and although most of them had long been captured and those loose were harmless rat snakes, who could tell for sure? Seeing Bhargav all quiet, I tried to cheer him up.

“What’s happening on the Preeti front?”

Bhargav had been after this academic-type, poetry-writing, bespectacled girl. They had flirted for a while until Preeti’s brother-in-law, with whom she lived, got a whiff of it. He lived in a first-floor house behind the swimming pool, and, from a window in his bedroom, kept watch over Bhargav’s movements. He came down to inquire if he did not see Bhargav during his working hours. Understandably, Bhargav swore at the man whenever we met. I always wondered what a brawny guy like Bhargav had seen in a girl like Preeti. Perhaps it was the proverbial attraction of the opposites. Also, Preeti’s father owned a farmhouse. Was that a reason, too, why my friend was after this girl? His father’s premature retirement had caused some financial problems in the family. As a result, he could not go to college, Bhargav told me. Apart from his work at the swimming

pool, Bhargav freelanced, he said, as a contractor, building a compound wall or a water tank under the supervision of the main builder.

I continued to walk, thinking about Bhargav's work, noticing that he hadn't answered my question. Perhaps he had nothing to tell or perhaps he did not want to tell. With Bhargav, you were never sure. In any case, I had my own "affair" to think about. Bhargav was a friend, but he was an aide first, and as long as he gave me information about Urvashi, what he did or did not do mattered little to me. We had reached the front of the Madras Restaurant. Bhargav said that he should be heading back home. He left, waving a bye.

I returned to my house but couldn't decide what to do next. I often faced this question, What to do next? I was fond of reading and liked to buy my own books, but I lost interest after a post-purchase scanning, after which I put the book away in a closet or a trunk and did not look at it again. I had not bought a TV, never talked with my neighbors, and did not own a telephone. It wasn't easy to acquire a telephone in India in those days. You had to wait for years after applying to the government-owned corporation. You could get it faster for an extra price—both legal and under the table—but either of these was beyond me. All told, once inside my house, my isolation was complete. "Why don't you get married?"-- relatives, friends, colleagues, neighbors alike told me. "To whom?"-- I answered with a counter question. They never replied to that, nor did I expect them to.

I used to say that a bachelor who lived among married people was an incongruity. My belief was confirmed one evening when I was passing through one of the many crisscrossing lanes in our township. Although our township was safe with security guards

stationed at both its gates, I walked fast because the street lights on the lane did not work (they turned on or off for some mysterious reasons). Even the surrounding houses had turned off their porch lights. Suddenly, I felt a hand on my back. For a moment, I shivered. The two-wheelers flitted by on that lane all the time, but not many walked through it so late. Turning around I found my neighbor—the crackpot who lived in the house directly below mine—standing, his head thrown back, and grinning at me. I smiled back. I had to. The man leaned forward, as though conveying something in confidence, and said, “I hope you don’t gamble and drink in your house with all those friends of yours.”

He was enough of a yokel to wait for my response, which took some time, so sudden and out of the blue his question had been. But I possessed enough survival instincts to not lose my wits at such slippery moments. I told my neighbor firmly and somewhat self-righteously that he was free to come upstairs at any time to take a look. I added a word about how a Brahmin like me would never stoop to such levels. Though I never gambled and drank only occasionally, after saying my bit to this rustic but simple man, I felt a prick of conscience, but I saw, with satisfaction, that the man had completely believed me and was grinning apologetically now, perhaps thinking of something to say to offset the impact of his rude inquiry.

After returning from my walk with Bhargav, I paced my empty house. Then I took out my small collection of newspaper clippings of this feature called “The Quote of the Day,” which I read the first thing in The Times of India. I pasted some of these on the back of an old calendar. After I finished, I hung the calendar back in its place. There was one quotation by Emerson (had to be), one by Cicero, one by Wordsworth (oh, how I

loved his back-to-the-basics attitude), and one by Shelley. There were a few others, I don't remember by whom. There was one that I pasted on the wall above the divan where I slept. It read: "The day will happen whether or not you get up." Or perhaps it was, "The sun will rise"

When I stood viewing my artwork, created on the yellowing back of this large calendar, I felt as if I had guiding me a team of great minds and that they had come together to lead me to my goals. As I read each quotation, I nodded and said to myself, "Hmmm, that's very true, I know, that's why I have it up there." Then I moved to the next. My mind was full of thoughts of Urvashi, and, unconsciously, as was my wont, I was searching for answers. Suddenly, my eyes lit up. I read a quote by Shelley over and over. It struck me as the answer I had been waiting for. My question was, to formulate it for the reader, Whether or not to go after Urvashi? Now, one could argue that the question itself was ridiculous, because it presupposed Urvashi's amenability or permission, either of which was as yet a question mark. I wouldn't disagree if you thought that way, even I saw things in the same vein at times, only I liked to believe that I could have anything I wanted if I so willed. Naïve, you might say, and you'd be right if you did, but if you had read as many quotations as I had, and believed in them half as much, you'd have your own vignettes of naiveté just the same. Anyway, I am falling prey to my own brand of sophistry here, so let me take you back to the point I was trying to make. The quotation by Shelley that I was considering with such profundity was, "The flower of the sweetest smell is shy and lowly."

Ah, there's my logic, my reason for pursuing Urvashi. To hell with her caste! How did it matter! The flower of the sweetest smell (who was more worthy of the

image?) is shy (isn't she an epitome of this feminine virtue?) and lowly (there's the reference to her "lower" caste). If you think that I am giving you bull and that I reached my decision in some other, saner way, like talking to someone wise and all, you are absolutely wrong. This was how I decided to woo this thin bud of a girl.

True to my education from self-help books, I became happy at having reached a decision. I wanted to masticate it through and through—I am a Taurus, you know, the bull—so I went out again, this time in a direction opposite to where I had gone walking with Bhargav. It was close to midnight and, except for two-wheelers—conveying tired men from the day's work or those going out for a tiring night's work—and dogs (strolling about to digest food or stretching their bodies for a good night's sleep), not a thing stirred on the road. Even the leaves on the trees lining the road were silent, awaiting a long-overdue nuzzle of wind. I walked firmly—hadn't I decided to marry Urvashi and Urvashi alone? Wasn't it good for her, too? I mean, How many girls from her background got to marry an "upper caste" boy? She was luckiest among her sisters. It was good that her parents had decided to bring her into the world despite having four daughters in the family, unlike many who in such a case would doubtlessly have gone for an abortion. Urvashi would now pay them back doubly, ten times, by marrying a Brahmin. How proud she would make her whole family!

My destination was Prabhat's *paan* (betel leaf) shop. Prabhat was a poor man but you could tell from his face that his distant ancestor, in some age, must have been a man of worth. He was from the warrior caste of *Kshatriya*, who were next to Brahmins, yet beyond having a battered face with chiseled features, he wasn't warrior-like at all. He was short and skinny, as any toiling peasant might have been. His shop was close to my

office. I went there during lunch break to smoke a cigarette or eat a *paan*. I had half feared that Prabhat might have closed the shop and gone home, now that the winter chill had set in, but I saw from a distance the yellow light in his wooden cabin. I always thought that Prabhat sat on its elevated floor, but I observed one day that he stood waist-deep inside a hatch—a kind of a trapdoor— cut into the wooden floor. The counter, which further hid him, looked like a horizontally placed box across the edge of the shop. Someone was sitting on it, his legs dangling, a raised hand planted on the cabin wall. As I neared the cabin, I realized it was Chandresh Vanzara, a guy from the gypsy community. In keeping with the spirit of his people, Chandresh talked colorfully and laughed a lot. He listened to what I had to say on a subject carefully. Chandresh warmed when he saw me.

“Hullo Chandresh,” I said in response to his smile.

“So, what do you have to say on what happened today?” he asked, as I lit a cigarette.

“What happened today?” I asked back, watching from a corner of my eye an octopus-shaped cloud I had sent up.

“Don’t tell me you don’t know about the bomb blasts?” he said, his eyes becoming bigger, like a zoomed-in picture.

“What are you talking about? Did we have some problem here? In Baroda?”

“No,” Chandresh said. “There were serial bomb blasts in Bombay today. 400 people were killed.”

I was silent for a moment. Any killing appalls me, and this kind makes me sick, so sick I want to grab the killer by his neck and beat him till he turns blue. But wait, before that I want to do this to his father or mother or son, anyone as long as the bastard

feels for him or her, and I want to do this in front of the killer, so he (or she) sees what it is to have someone you love killed. I know I sound evil, and I know I couldn't do it for all the provocation in the world, but I still feel this.

Apparently, the blasts had been to avenge the demolition of the Babri Mosque and the riots that had followed. We Indians are remarkably "tolerant" of violence. It seldom means to us more than a few numbers, some front-page photos, something to rant about, or worse, a bollywood blockbuster featuring a Hindu hero and a Muslim heroine. Riots are so frequent that, if they are short-lived, we find them "tasteless." Like a good democracy, we appoint commissions to "look into" them, but we lock up the reports in Pandora's boxes. One of my secret desires is to visit Mecca. I lock horns with—even gore them into—those who accuse Mohandas Gandhi of molycoddling the Muslims. India is theirs, too, I say. As a boy scout, I once attended a camp. Two Muslim boys were my companions there. Toward the end of the camp, they did something I remember even now. They said they wanted to spit on the Indian flag. I was hurt. It was as though my own brothers had abused our family. I pleaded with them, smiled ingratiatingly, but they only laughed at me. When the mosque was gone, I felt as though those two campmates of mine had been chastised.

It had been only three months since the demolition, but I had forgotten about it. My mind was on that delicate creature. She was all that mattered. I had no time for bomb blasts, or for bloody Indian politics. First, the bastards would go and break someone's religious structure. Then, the bastards from the opposite camp would break the first bastards' bones and burn their houses and stab their nephews or uncles or cousins or somebody. I was sick of these stories. Every second day, the last page of the local dailies

was crammed with them. Sometimes I felt I read stories about a country I did not live in, and had not even visited. If so many people killed so many others so many times, how was it that I was still alive without so much as a crack? I shuddered at these thoughts and touched the nearest wood for a good omen.

Chandresh had lost interest and left. I was glad to see him go. He wanted to talk but I wasn't willing. I wanted to talk to Prabhat about Urvashi. By now, I trusted the guy enough. I don't know why, but you just trusted Prabhat. The guy wasn't entirely honest. I suspected him of inflating my tobacco account. "You had taken two packs of *Wills* here"; "That's for the *paans*, remember, you had said you were paying for everyone"; "I have everything written down, date wise, you see. I note down as soon as I give something to the customer." You didn't argue with him. The man had this doggedness about him. His unctuous politeness only increased its effectiveness. But the man liked me. Once or twice he had bicycled to my house to give me a steel canister filled with *Kheer* (rice pudding) that his wife had prepared and insisted he come to my house and give it. After Prabhat finished asking his usual questions about my general welfare, I told him about Urvashi. I wanted to see his reaction. He laughed softly, that was all. Of course, he was startled when I mentioned her caste. All that I remember he said was that I shouldn't marry in a "lower" caste. "How could I?" — he said with a chuckle.

Prabhat seldom opened his mouth, but when he did, it was limited to a question or a cryptic smile. Sometimes I had to remind him that I had asked him for a *paan*. He then took out a *Kalkatti* leaf (the leaf from Calcutta, of course); spread a needle-pointful of *Kimam* (a paste made from tobacco) on it; added mint, coriander seeds, and betel nuts; and folded the leaf into a neat triangle. After putting the *paan* inside my mouth, I lit a

cigarette to increase my pleasure. As I chewed the *paan*—its bittersweet juice tingling me with cool, prickly sensations—I hiccupped and felt that multiple water sprinklers had sprung out inside my body all at once. After some deliberation, I concluded that Prabhat willfully delayed handing you your *paan*, so he could hold you for a while. He did this, I was convinced, because he dreaded being alone. Conversely, he gave you your cigarettes immediately. He knew you couldn't go home without smoking at least one.

On my way back, I regretted telling Prabhat about Urvashi. Suppose he talked about it to his other customers, especially those from sector two? I cringed at the thought. Apart from the information about her caste, Bhargav had given me some other details about Urvashi. I had this habit of writing things down. For one, my management degree had taught that to me, and every self-help book I had read had recommended it. I bought a journal with a blue jacket—I was aping the famous blue book of the Royal Army—and wrote in it all that I knew about Urvashi. Although I have told you some of it, let me show you what the first page of the journal—which was destined to be nearly full in the next 18 months or so—looked like:

March 12, 1993

- Name: Urvashi Parmar (looks like upper caste, maybe some “fallen” *Kshatriyas*, my “Hun” princess)
- Age: Looks like 17, could be 18 (age is a problem, as I’m 25, dammit, difference is not large, though)
- Four older sisters, a younger brother, Samar (the thin guy who looks like her, I had suspected it before Bhargav told me.)

- Only the oldest sister married, in her own caste (asked Bhargav for more details.)
- Father, a Bharat Petrochemicals employee, non-supervisory (department?)
- Lives in B102, Sector 2
- Attends Bharat School (Gujarati medium, knows little or no English.)
- Comes to sector 1 around 11 in the morning and 5.30 in the evening, drives a *Luna* (boy, does she look ravishing on it!)

CHAPTER 3

I had always been uncomfortable around girls and run away from them. I remember an incident from my high school days. We have this festival in India called “Rakhi.” There are as many stories about its origins as there are types of *Rakhis* (usually a dyed string with a sponge flower affixed to its center) sold in the market. It’s a pretty noble kind of a festival. I do not know of any other festival anywhere in the world in which sisters tie a string around the wrists of their brothers, who, in turn, pledge to protect the sisters’ honor. Anyway, my point here is not about this festival but about a funny incident (it didn’t seem funny then) in my life associated with it. It so happened that on a certain Rakhi day, a pale and plumpy girl called Nisha came to our house to tie a Rakhi on my wrist. She was my classmate and it was usual for girls in a class to tie Rakhis to boys in their class. I was building my muscles on the terrace of my house through an unusual method of lifting bricks. Holding a brick in both my hands, I stretched them sideways, then brought them back to my chest, as one might do with a pair of dumb bells. I repeated the motion, sweat dripping from my forehead, my hair wet. Just then, my father emerged from the stairwell. I hadn’t seen him so happy in days, not at me at any rate. Beaming, he said, “Look, who’s come for you? A girl. Is she your girlfriend, son?”

Why he himself came to the terrace to convey this inconsequential piece of news to his eldest son, whom he never liked much, has always been a mystery to me. But perhaps there wasn’t much to it. It could simply be that since my father had been a flirt in

his youth—and a good one at that—and I hadn't shown one bit of this talent, the sudden arrival of this girl at our doorstep, asking for me, had stirred his hopes about my amorous career. God knows why he came but as soon as I was finished "facing" Nisha (the calamity), I lashed out at him, and, in the same deranged state, rushed back upstairs. I don't know why I did that: perhaps out of my natural shyness or out of a new "righteous" thought process I'd developed on account of reading Gandhi's autobiography, or it could be that I didn't like Nisha to be looked upon as my "girl." Nisha was good—she wasn't beautiful. I have a feeling that my dad never forgave me for my behavior—silly ass, as I'd certainly behaved. Later, when I needed him to intercede in the matter of Urvashi, he pointedly refused, hinting that I needed to do my own wooing. He wasn't going to help. No help for a timid asshole who had refused all the tuition, but more of that, later.

Days passed as I remained ensconced in the expectation that something wonderful would happen that would bring Urvashi and me closer. It had to—after all I had been praying to that "great string puller" morning-afternoon-night. Something had to happen. My wishes were always granted. (I ignored the instances when they weren't.) Some days I was convinced it was only a matter of time, that Urvashi had to come to me, that it was as much her destiny. Yet on "dark days," the whole idea, everything, myself included, seemed ridiculous to me. "What a fool," my mind said, laughing like a childhood bully. The more I thought like this, the more I turned to quotations: in *The Times of India*, *Reader's Digest*, biographies, Sunday papers, calendars, greeting cards, on the backside of auto-rickshaws, on the pin-ups in the office, even on paper fragments thrown hither thither. "*'Tis not in mortals to command success, but we'll do more. We'll deserve it.*" I read it again and again. It was the motto of my hero, Roald Amundsen. "*Beware of what*

you want, for you will get it.” There, didn’t Emerson say so? I asked myself. Shelley’s “*The flower of the sweetest smell is shy and lowly*” had become a gospel with me. “I’ll deserve her,” I told myself, through my steadfast, patient love. She had to be mine then, just as the South Pole had been Amundsen’s. Emerson’s statement made it clear that if you *really* wanted something, you’d get it. How? I asked myself. Through fate, the divine power, what else? —I answered myself. As to the third quotation, it had begun this endeavor. Wasn’t this proof enough of its greatness? I loved the flower of the sweetest smell, the sweetest flower, I wanted it, and I’d have nothing less.

I had been noting in my blue journal every “sighting” of Urvashi, every tidbit about her that Bhargav told me. Wasn’t information power? It would “show” the way. Just to give you an idea of my “detail-fullness,” here are some entries from a few saved pages of my journal before I consigned most of it to the flames. (This was after my wife discovered it, you see.)

March 14

Saw Urvashi today. After a week or so. Oh what a pleasure it was for eyes. Eyes that had been forced to wait for so long. She wore a purple *churidar* with a yellow *dupatta* thrown around her shoulders. How sexy she looked. How flimsy with her slight shoulders and tiny breasts (I want to kiss them).

March 17

Great day today. At last she smiled (I am sure she recognizes me now). Oh God, how kind you are. I ran into her just near the main gate. I was

dressed to kill, too, in that cream-colored, striped Raymonds shirt of mine, and the black pants, of course. I also wore this red *PlastIndia* tie (whew). She wore a beige-colored frock. How tiny she looked. My lovely almond! The same fat girl accompanied her. Does she deliberately choose such lousy looking friends so that she can look even more fabulous?

March 22

Saw Urvashi, my sweet *Urva*, in Bajwa today (was it her?). I was sitting behind Mr. Phadke on his scooter. Caught only a glimpse. She was in a group, wearing a tomboyish dress, bell-bottom type.

March 31

Wherever I turn, wherever I see, I find you (won't this be an acceptable translation of the first line of "*Jidhar Dekhun. . .*" my favorite song from Amitabh's *Mahaan*?). I mention it because I met Urvashi at the *Holi* fire today. I wasn't prepared for it at all. I stole a few glances at her (her family was around). Once, our eyes met. Oh, how those tender eyes looked amid the orangish glow of the fire. She looked like a sexy vixen in the tight blue jeans and a damask t-shirt. I wanted to lick her all over her long white legs. (I am sure they are not hairy.)

April 2

Saw her again. The same spot where I had seen her the very first time. Why can't she ever walk alone? The fat girl was there. Urvashi turned sideways and glanced at me. I looked at my candy, too. Her face was so soft and beautiful that I could not even smile (when will I improve?). Her

hair continues to confound me. What perfect order and symmetry! I want to hold her face clutching that hair and . . . I can't write more.

Most entries are short. I didn't have the patience to write long. I have a few more pages, but I cannot bear to read them. It hurts, even after so many goddam years.

Basically, what happened was that in the township, being this small place, we often ran into each other. I believe that she desecrated me first, on that wintry morning in '92. That had started everything, as far as I was concerned. Perhaps it is in the nature of things that, if you find someone attractive, the other person finds you attractive, too. It was this or God almighty amusing Himself (or Herself), but we looked at each other whenever we met, on one or the other road. I was of course completely bewitched by her, but I didn't know how she felt. Her eyes were inscrutable. She was a master at controlling her emotions. And her icy face would give away not a whit!

Though Urvashi stuck to the times I had noted in my journal for the most part, I didn't always see her. And I didn't go out walking at those times every day, either. One, I was lazy. Two, I was beginning to get bored. The effort of a walk in the hot sun, or after a boring office day, gave me but a fleeting glance at her face, that only, if I was lucky enough to run into her in the first place. Also, sometimes she completely ignored me. It's crazy on my part, I told myself then, but later, I saw her somewhere, eyeing me with an amused interest, and I was hooked again. Bhargav, I constantly pestered with, "Any new information?" Poor soul, he grunted, shook his head, and sighed.

Out of frustration that I wasn't making any progress came ideas that I'd learned at the management school. One that I used, I guess—the first—was this idea of doing a

SWOT analysis. Basically, what I thought was that I'd conceive of myself as a product to be marketed successfully to this girl called Urvashi. The *SWOT* stood for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Plucking the center pages off a foolscap-sized notebook, I wrote on it my goals for the year, or, more accurately, for that point in my life. Besides the goal of passing the civil services examination, I included a few others, such as building my body, saving money, and so forth. My main goal, of course, was to win Urvashi.

There's a marketing classic written by Al Ries and Jack Trout called *Marketing Warfare*. Naturally, the book's moot point is that marketing is like a war, to be fought as with missile and rocket launcher, reconnaissance missions and combing operations. I like war movies, *The Longest day*, for example. Cigar-smoking Robert Mitchum driving up Omaha beach in a green army jeep at the end of that bloody D-Day battle is forever etched in my mind. That's what I call spirit, and that victory whistle! How I listen to it even now as I type this!

I did the *SWOT* analysis for each of the four goals I had set for myself. In true *war* fashion, I named my pursuit of Urvashi, OPERATION ONE. It wasn't a spectacular name. Besides, I insisted on the element of secrecy: remember OPERATION OVERLORD? I know you'd ask, Why "one?" Well, for one, one is my lucky number—at least I believe it to be. I was born on the first of a certain month, I am the first child of my parents, and the dates that total *one* [you have to add all the digits, reducing the total to a single digit, so 1 could be 10 (1+0) or 19 (1+9, 1+0), and so on] are lucky for me. Of course, I hadn't discovered this. I had only been following a famous German astrologer named Cheiro. He had called this system (well, it's a system of a kind, whether you

believe in it or not) “Numerology.” These, then, were my reasons for the name. Also, wasn’t this goal the first, the number one priority in my life?

So the name OPERATION ONE made sense to me. I wrote it in big, bold capital letters on the top of the sheet. Then I wrote what I thought were my strengths for this goal, my weaknesses, my opportunities, and my threats. I leave it to the reader’s imagination as to the contents of these from whatever account of the episode I have given thus far. I added two more sections to this analysis and called them “strategy” and “team members.” I wasn’t sure about my strategy, so I wrote down a general statement that said that I would try to get to know Urvashi better and all—“explore all opportunities.” Under “team members,” I put the names of Bhargav and Prabhat. On second thought, I had felt that Prabhat could be trusted, too. The man wouldn’t do anything to harm me, so went my reasoning. But before Bhargav and Prabhat, I wrote the name of my most important team member: God.

Around this time came the result of the civil services examination I had taken the previous November. If you recall, it was during its preparation that I had seen Urvashi the first time. I failed the exam. I wasn’t surprised. I had barely studied for a month. It would have been a miracle had I passed. In any case, I had a couple of attempts left (there was a limit on the number of attempts), and I decided to appear again in 1994. Although I knew I might fail and have to take the exam again, I hadn’t applied to take it in 1993. I wanted a break. That way, I’d get the whole of ’93 and three fourths of ’94 before I took the exam again.

On the office front, too, things had begun to improve for me. To begin with, I had got rid of the boss to whom I had first reported upon my arrival at Baroda. The guy used

to make me feel as though I were an attendant to polish his shoes. Maybe it was because I was naïve and expected more attention than I deserved. Nonetheless, my good fate, as I called it, interceded for me in the form of my general manager who, after a brief meeting in which I confessed to sitting idle, shifted me under a guy called AKB. AKB was tough without being dirty and smart without being a show-off. I got along very well with him. On the days when he had to fly to Bombay or Delhi to attend some industry meeting, I'd stay back in the office until late, preparing data and presentation materials for him. After finishing my work when I'd go to his cabin, he'd be sitting holding a telephone receiver or poring over a sheet, his free hand busy twiddling a hair on his bald head. I'd explain the slides to him, one by one. He'd listen, asking questions that lay at the heart of the subject matter. Then, suddenly, without warning, he'd burst into a toothy laughter, poking fun at somebody who had tried to bluff and was caught by him. AKB was as prepared as Napoleon. He had a way to connect with everyone, from a director to an office boy. You don't see the likes of him very often, believe me.

Bharat Petrochemicals, the company I worked for, manufactured polymers, chemicals, and acrylic fiber. The bulk of the company's turnover came from its polymer products, namely, Low Density Polyethylene (LDPE), Linear Low Density Polyethylene (LLDPE), Polypropylene (PP), Poly Vinyl Chloride (PVC), and Poly Butadiene Rubber (PBR). AKB was product manager for PVC, reporting to a general manager for all polymers, who, in turn, reported to a marketing director, who was answerable to a chairman and a managing director. I was at the bottom of this ladder, but I was an officer. I had a typist, a clerk, and an office boy reporting to me.

After the Shaily (remember her? —“The photo girl”) debacle, I had avoided discussing my personal life with my colleagues (working for other products). Most of them were older than I was and understood what I was going through without my saying anything. My new-found enthusiasm for work kept me busy, providing me relief from any gossip about my personal life, which must have gone on behind my back, but I was safe in that I didn’t hear anything.

Bhargav had given me Urvashi’s address. Naturally, I felt like strolling around the house and, if lucky, catching a peek at my girl. But I felt immensely stupid doing it, so awkward, I felt I should go hide myself for a week. I had to choose my time carefully. I wanted to see her but not be seen by anyone. I was afraid that, as soon as she would see me, she would scream at the top of her voice, or, more possibly, whisper into her mother’s or sister’s—her brother, out of an uncommon resemblance to Urvashi, avoided being seen with her—ear: “This guy follows me around,” she’d say, then her family member, whoever she was, would look at me sternly, perhaps warn me, or worse, rush out to me, stomping her feet and mouthing threats. Her brother was an emaciated sort but he moved around with some pretty hefty boys. Doesn’t he know that these langurs hop around him for his sisters? I used to ask Bhargav.

One Sunday afternoon when the sun had hid behind the clouds and the chill in the air and the gray in the atmosphere had kept most people inside, enjoying siestas, I decided to take a walk I had not dared to so far. I lit a cigarette to take on the casual appearance of a bachelor who was just desultorily walking by. When I entered through the open gates of sector 2, fear gripped me like a python squeezing its prey. My mind responded with a rebuke, “You shivering fool. If you can’t even face her, how in the hell

are you going to win her?” My next instinct, which was usual, was to reassure myself.

“Come now, don’t you want to marry her? Even jilts, who know in their hearts they would ditch, do not fear, and you, you’re a nice guy, why, even Gods will help you. Go straight ahead without fear. Victory awaits you at the end of this road.”

My mind was so occupied in thoughts that I did not notice that I had reached the lane that led to Urvashi’s house, which was the second and the last ground-floor house in a small alley perpendicular to that lane. Two girls and a boy stood near the entrance to the alley. The taller girl, somewhat startled, looked at me. Urvashi! My mouth snapped open and my feet froze. My mind was lost for some moments. The boy, who sat astride on a Hero Honda motorcycle, now looked behind him. He gave me that animal stare one male gives another when the other eyes his female. So Bhargav had been right. Urvashi was a flirt, or, at any rate, steady with someone. No, no! My mind protested. This cannot be. God, this isn’t right. Why, this stout fool on the bike isn’t what she deserves. She deserves better, she deserves someone like me.

I couldn’t help stepping forward. They were right in front of me. I couldn’t have turned back because that would have been a sure admission that I had come looking for her, so I forced myself to take those shaking steps—trying to look unruffled all the while—that eventually took me past them. “I’ll think about it all tomorrow—tomorrow when I can think about it,” I told myself, *a la Scarlett O’Hara*, and walked out of sector 2 through another gate that I reached after zigzagging a little from Urvashi’s alley.

Although I had told myself to think about this unpleasant incident later, my mind was not one to listen. “She likes boys who have motorcycles,” Bhargav told me. I not only didn’t have one, I didn’t even know how to drive one. When I imagined going on a

date with Urvashi and thought how I would take her to some place, any place; my mind always answered, by rickshaw, of course. It then got angry with me. How should it matter how we went somewhere? Was love to be subservient to a few material comforts – the noblest, the loftiest, the most beautiful of human emotions? The girl who had stood with Urvashi and the boy was the same short, fat girl I had always seen walking by Urvashi's side. Could it be that the boy had come to see the short, fat girl? My heart tingled with pleasure at this hopeful thought.

I sat at home, thinking hard about what I had seen. Could Urvashi, my sweet Urvashi, just be a misguided flirt? Bhargav had told me that she was, that she had not one but several boyfriends. I had at first told Bhargav that it was all gossip, that people liked to slander a beautiful young girl in this fashion. But later, when I thought it over, I found myself agreeing with Bhargav. For one, Bhargav knew what he was talking about. Wasn't he himself a flirt, too? Hadn't I even caught him red handed once?

I remembered the morning when I suddenly returned from my office on an errand. I had given a spare key of my house to Bhargav. We had had a party and Bhargav had come with some glasses and dishes. He lived nearby and I didn't have sufficient glasses and dishes. After the party, I gave Bhargav my second key so he could come at any time and take his glasses and dishes back. He didn't come the next day and I was a little peeved because the key was with him. When I met him in the evening, I reminded him to come and collect his things. He said fine, he'd come the next day. Next morning, when I suddenly returned from the office, I found my door closed but unlocked. After I rang the doorbell twice, Bhargav opened the door. He looked flustered, and before I could enter, he said, "Porus, there's someone with me. She's inside." I was furious, but I looked for

the file I'd come to fetch, found it, and left the house without looking in Bhargav's direction. That evening, Bhargav came to my house to return my key. He apologized for what had happened in the morning. All I said to him was, "This will harm you alone." Bhargav had become a close friend since, and that is why, when he said that Urvashi wasn't my kind of a girl and that she had boyfriends, I was forced to believe him.

Outside, the gray afternoon had long become a dark evening. The atmosphere matched the feeling within me. Should I forget her? I asked myself. I had come some way with her, in my own manner, of course. It'd been almost a year since I had first seen her. My blue journal was already many pages full with the accounts of my "Urvashi sightings." I had never seen her with any boy before. Was she very good with secrecy then, hiding her affairs from prying eyes, a precocious flirt, maybe? Bhargav had told me about some such reputations for her sisters, too, especially the eldest. Did this run in the family then?

There was something more I had noted in my journal. Urvashi's father drank. On the face of it, I wouldn't have given a damn about it, if only because I myself drank, sometimes, that is. It was a scandal in Gujarat to drink. Prohibition was run in the name of Gandhi but mainly because it filled the coffers of policemen and politicians. The chain, some of my friends told me, went right up to the Chief Minister. I never believed this to be true but I neither disbelieved it. According to my information, Urvashi's father was a regular drinker. That was something. Years ago, when I was still a child and we had newly moved to Gujarat, we had this neighbor who beat his wife every day. Every night we heard the wife's wails. What surprised me was that the man had grown up children, who were older than I was. One day, I heard my mother tell my father at night that the

drunkard's young daughter had eloped with some local bully. I remember our neighbor accusing his wife, loudly, in his drunken state, that their daughter had slipped away from under her nose. The wife shot back equally vehemently—the first time I had heard her shout like that—that it happened because he drank every day without ever stopping to think what the effect might be on their children.

Was it not possible that Urvashi and her sisters were simply the victims of their circumstances? I went out and stood in my balcony. The *neem* trees in front of my house stood still, as if they were dummies for a botanical exhibition. “Such were the trees that grew here,” the curators might say one day, showing them to visitors. Gujarat, except its southern part, was fast becoming a desert. Baroda, which took its name from the banyan tree and had many of these once, had become a concrete jungle. Ungainly structures had sprawled over what had once been a park or a grove or a wetland or a farm. Vacant grounds, where children played and grown-ups loitered, had been gobbled up without any apology. Shopping complexes and multistoried apartments rose faster than people ran out of toothpaste.

I had lit a cigarette when I saw a dark, burly man with whitish long hair emerge from a house below (the man lived in the house diagonally opposite to mine). He began to water his unkempt front yard and the small cement path extending from the middle of our apartment block, which resembled a square with four quadrants—its four houses. If you went clockwise, my house was the second and the watering guy's the fourth. The evening's overcast weather had made the night warm and humid, hence the watering, I concluded. The watering guy was still at work when my other neighbor, the guy in the third house (according to the same clockwise movement), came out, too. I must remind

the reader that he was the same hardy yokel who had once asked me if I drank and gambled in my house. What followed was a shouting match that left me cold in hot enough weather. The hardy yokel's point was that the water spillage of this kind bred mosquitoes, which brought malaria. The watering guy asked the yokel to mind his own business, not the least of which, he said, was medicine. The watering guy, I learned later, considered himself a present day Louis Pasteur, but I cannot write about him in a hurry, as he has to play an important role in this story. Anyway, I did not know him then and watching him take on the yokel did not endear him to me. What sane man would fight with a yokel? But the scene had taken my mind off Urvashi. I had decided to rethink the whole matter. The last thing I wanted was to bring shame to my family by marrying a characterless girl.

CHAPTER 4

September 14, 1993:

I really miss a television set. It's recommended that one watch the daily news on it for the current events section of the civil services. The main exam covers events roughly a year prior to the exam. If that be the case, I must begin now or perhaps after a month or so. I love the international page in The Times of India. This morning, there is in it news that has made me hopeful about everything: Kashmir, for instance. Yesterday, on the lawns of the one and only White House, Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli Prime Minister, and Yasser Arafat—the bearded guy I know from the NAM summit of 1983 when he handed the chairmanship (or should it be chairpersonship?) to Indira Gandhi—signed a peace agreement. Miracle of miracles. Even if I know that it'll start floundering like so many other peace agreements, I still feel hopeful. It must be madness that these people—I mean, Israelis and Palestinians—are so driven to fight each other. What if the peace agreement were to succeed? Wouldn't it be great? America has shown the world that it can bring peace, too, I thought, not only drop atom bombs.

I always ask myself if it would not have been better had I stopped chasing Urvashi at this point. Certainly it would have saved me considerable mental anguish. But

if we had all the foresight in the world, how many things would we attempt at all? I was a starry-eyed young man trying to adjust to a strict regimen of a large governmental organization. I had grown up without having any girl friends, and, by this time, beautiful girls—I liked only beautiful girls—had become demi-goddesses for me, their charms the finest spectacles available to a chosen few. I was surprised I wasn't one of them.

I felt awkward being photographed, although I had, what can be called, a good-looking face. They never capture my handsome features properly, I used to say, denouncing the cameraman. My face was neither long nor round. It looked the face of a man, yet had a feminine comeliness. I wasn't fair, but tended towards it. My nose—of which I was particularly proud—was thin and straight, a truly noble nose. My classmates at the business school had termed me “eagle.” Later, a friend of mine called me “vulture,” too, but time does things to people. The point here is about my nose, which is straight, beak-like, a little aquiline—isn't that a description of a good nose? My forehead was praised by people—it is large, without being overly so. I did not have a firm, broad jaw but a soft, short one that gave my face its nearly oval shape. It was the face of a charming boy in a Tom Cruise kind of way. My father had once said that my face resembled Christopher Reeve's. Fathers have a way of judging their sons, and their compliments are as inscrutable as their criticism is abstruse. Christopher Reeve was unthinkable with my kind of body. Tom Cruise was possible. I didn't wear a moustache or a beard. Both grew lousily on my face—a few stubbles popping up here and there that forced me to shave every day or every second day. Not shaving made me look darker and, I thought, poorer. I had a big complex about it and still have.

An even bigger complex for me came from my utterly lousy physique. I had exercised during my school days and that was all. My long, thin hands looked as if they were tacked onto my bony frame. My legs were worse. They could have been a woman's legs, thin and hairless. My buttocks were no help, either. They weren't much bigger than the large breasts of some handsome woman. To hide the many deficiencies of my body, I dressed well, and wore jackets to look a little filled out. I walked erect because I despised gawky men (women were another matter) who hunched—their heads thrust out like tortoise's neck—as though they regretted “extra” height and wished to occupy “normal” head space. Since a thin, six-feet-three-inches tall, straight walking figure invites stares in a place where six feet is considered too tall, I walked with a cigarette in my hand. This kept my one hand busy and lent me, I believed, a touch of style. Keeping the other, unoccupied hand inside my pants' pocket, I walked as though I were being filmed (I had no objection to being filmed while doing something). Sorry to bore you, my reader, with a detailed explanation about my looks. I just want to give you an image with which to picture Porus Chaturvedi, the lover. Now that you have it, I will return to our story.

I didn't stop thinking of Urvashi or wanting to marry her. Quite the contrary, after I saw her with that boy, my determination to have her only increased. The more I thought about it, the more the whole thing appeared to me to be a small, insignificant problem. I was shocked to find that I was willing to forget about Urvashi's past if she agreed to marry me. I even thought it “normal” for a beautiful girl like Urvashi to have boyfriends. It was her strength, and as someone who loved her, I should be proud, not ashamed. This new line of thought surprised me. I'd always been outraged hearing about someone's infidelity. Love, marriage, and sex were three points in the same line—in that order.

I did not even want to think about Urvashi having sexual contact with one of her boyfriends. She was far too young and innocent for that. Innocent? My mind protested. She most certainly was, I told myself. Her background and society, the influence of her sisters, the general effect of present bad times, bad company, lack of corrective advice, or even a passing phase; there were so many explanations why she did what she did. Was this reason enough to give her up? Didn't beauty have a price?

I talked to Bhargav, to Prabhat, the *paanwallah*, and goodness knows to how many others. Basically, I was talking to myself, trying to convince myself, my different sides, as it were. I was certain that Urvashi was my best match, as I was hers. With Urvashi, my search had ended. My eyes had never alighted on such a lovely face before. She was my kind of woman. Although she was a girl, I saw a woman in her, and she brought out the "man" in me. If you find all this stuff immature, you are probably right. "Unreflecting love," Keats might have called it. Whatever name one gave it, the fact of the matter was that I had to have her.

I felt the time for real action had come, that mere second hand handling of this wouldn't help. I decided to talk to Urvashi myself. The "how?" posed a problem, as I never saw her alone. She was always with the fat girl. Also, I didn't know any of her friends. Asking Bhargav for help seemed like a bad idea. For one, Bhargav took a lot of time. Two, I doubted if Urvashi's friends were sensible enough to understand me or my purpose. I was, after all, an officer, and I couldn't be begging a bunch of high school drop outs to help me. And it might turn out to be easy. Didn't Urvashi look at me, too? Her staring back betrayed her tender if unformed feelings for me. As always, in the true vein

of a fighter, I wanted to have my go at it. There was that final logic of why-not-try-and-see.

I tried my idea soon enough. I had decided that I would look fresher in the morning. Also, that if I missed her during the morning, I still had the evening. Of late, she appeared in the evening, late, or sometimes not at all. I was resigned to the fat girl. The nuisance had to be borne. I wondered how Urvashi, my lovely Urva, put up with her. Perhaps Urvashi was the good, amiable girl I had always thought her to be. How could a person with a face as innocent as hers be anything but good?

On the day I decided to implement my plan, I wore my cream-colored, striped long-sleeved Raymonds shirt. I also wore a tie, my usual red *PlastIndia* one. I have always believed that a tie looks best on people who are thin and good-looking. A stout man who's good-looking would look funny in a tie, as though he had stuffed himself with something and then tied himself with a tie so it wouldn't spill out. I waited for Urvashi in a corner beside the main road of the township, my wristwatch showing a few minutes past eleven. It was bright and sunny but the sun was mild, warm-you-up type. A cigarette dangled between my fingers—a companion I was as used to as I was to the thought of Urvashi. I saw her come at a distance. She had worn a purple *churidar* with a yellow *duppatta*, a kind of a favorite dress with her. Her short, trimmed hair showed off its usual symmetry. I stood, smoking and waiting, resigned to what I was about to do. Suddenly, I was seized by this idea to run away from the scene, or to hide somewhere so Urvashi wouldn't see me. What would she think if she saw me standing here? What the hell are you talking about? my mind retorted, furious.

By now, it was too late. She had seen me, and I didn't think it disturbed her in the least. She walked as though she were walking on water, not on solid ground, so smooth and dainty were her steps. I kept roving my eyes and puffing at my cigarette. This was it, I said to myself, prove it or lose it. She was very near now. I could see the rippling creamy flesh of her cheeks. She couldn't hide her blush. A good actress she might have been, she was also a young maiden. It was when Urvashi had reached exactly opposite me that I took long strides, walked across the road, and stood towering before her. Now what? my mind asked, foolishly. I could have killed it for this. "Can I speak with you for a moment," I blurted out, as a perfect English gentleman would.

Urvashi's cheeks became so red I felt they'd gush out in a red stream. As though she were a spinning top, she seemed pinned down while still whirling. Who knows what thoughts came over her as she froze like a perched butterfly? *He thinks I'm beautiful, he loves me, he's handsome, but I don't know him. What would my parents say? my sisters? I knew, I knew, I knew . . . this was coming. What . . . should . . . I . . . do?* In the minutest of pauses during which she considered my request, I forgot who I was, what I was doing there, and whether I still breathed and lived. When she opened her mouth, it was the tersest denial any language has. "Na," she said, abruptly. The word—more hurled at, like *Indra's Vajra*, than spoken—felt like a death sentence. I remember my eyes opening as if they were learning, after a temporary blackout, how to do their job again. My mind was stunned, as if it had just witnessed something that would never be undone, that was settled not only for the moment but for all time to come.

Urvashi resumed her walk. I watched her turn and smile to the fat girl, as if saying, "Didn't I tell you?" Like an errant subordinate who moves aside to let the boss

whizz by, I stepped aside to give the right of way to our royal highness. It was undeniable, instinctive cowardice on my part—something my father had always feared, thought had gone, when he had come to our terrace all those years ago, excited as a boy, to tell me that a girl, my classmate, had come to see me. My plan had turned out to be a perfect example of the saying, “The mountain was in labor, and it yielded a mouse.” I stared at Urvashi’s back. There went my prize, my sweetheart, and I had lost it because I had no heart.

I fled from the spot, fearing someone might witness my shame. How stupid, callow, that running of Porus seems to the Porus of today. Porus the king fought with Alexander the Great, and Porus Chaturvedi ran like a rat from a girl eight years younger than he was. Could one’s shame be more complete?

I was running in a direction opposite to my house. It took me to a small, winding lane that was flanked by trees on both sides. Many a vine lay twisting and cleaving on the way. There were flower plants, a small garden where children slid down the slides and their mothers gossiped, holding the swings. On my one side was the township’s boundary wall, hidden behind trees and plants, and on the other side were residential quarters having small gardens in the front. I had left the office on some pretext, but returning wasn’t in my remotest thoughts. The moment, what had happened, was so heavy, nothing else mattered. I didn’t even know whom I was running to. Perhaps, unconsciously, I was headed towards a small cluster of residential quarters at the end of the winding lane. Some of my friends, all young bachelors, lived there.

I went into the house of this guy called Ajay. A doughty chap, he was a fire officer. Fortunately, he was at home. He had a second shift or a day off or some such

thing. Without thinking for a second, I poured out to him all that had happened. He was sympathetic in an amused kind of way, but he offered to share his freshly cooked meal. I could have accepted anything, and this was food. I quietly ate, my disbelief increasing with every bite of chapatti I took. I felt as though I were hit by a strong electric current or just released from a solitary confinement. Ah, the torment of that day, even today I can look on it and be silent. Why was love so hard? Was Urvashi a queen of wrath? Was I a nobody despite my looks, caste, education, job, and that erect walk? These and other questions paraded through my mind, demanding immediate attention. I didn't know that my woes had barely begun. Within a year, I would find myself in league with the Shakespearean lovers, a love-struck engineer in Japan, "vain" characters from the Victorian bazaar, and a mythical Indian king—who, incidentally, had hearkened after an Urvashi, too.

CHAPTER 5

I read somewhere that if you love someone or want something badly, you should be willing to be ashamed for it. I did pass this litmus test. We all go through such trials in life, and we willingly embrace them because we all want something that we'd do anything for, or almost. I often thought about my pursuit objectively: was I right in wanting Urvashi without knowing her mind? I know that I am treading on slippery thoughts here. Let me explain. Don't we ask for permission when we want to use someone's stapler or pen, or anything, for that matter? Why, then, do we not do the same when we want someone to be our lover? We begin our wooing right away, as though we already had permission. But how do you get that permission? If you could simply call up, identify yourself, and pop the question, falling in love would be as easy as bidding on a product. If you had a device that revealed—based on analysis of some kind of “chemical waves” between you and your object of love—what he or she thought about you, you would fall in love every day, perhaps every hour. My point is—and here I argue from the other side—that you don't need, in fact, can't get your loved one's permission to love him or her. I got hurt when my friends, those who knew about my Urvashi “affair,” said something to the effect of a “one-sided love.” Isn't every love one-sided, in a way? How often does it happen that two persons fall in love at the same instant? One-sided is how it begins, usually. Then, somewhere along the way, one proposes and the other responds with a “yes” or “no.” But how would you know it's one sided or not until you ask? That

is what I was trying to do. So it really bugged me when people accused me of one-sided love.

I hated the idea of “stalking” someone. That wasn’t done. It’s ridiculous how some people go to the extent of terrorizing someone to get his or her love. I was ready to sell short here. I wanted the beauty but I wouldn’t be the beast, nor would I be a knave. Wasn’t it possible to win the fair lady by being chivalrous, an old-fashioned gentleman? These and other arguments my friends heard endlessly in those days. Face to face with Urvashi, I had run away, like the soldier in Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, but so what? I had even begun to see her monosyllabic refusal as a sort of victory. At least she had opened her mouth. Maybe she was too young to decide on her own. The thought was a relief. There was some merit then even in my shame. At last, I convinced myself that I couldn’t win Urvashi on my own. I had always dreaded meeting her through her friends, as Bhargav had suggested. “No good would come of it,” I used to say. I knew it was my timidity. I was afraid of this girl! The thought shocked me and I rebuked myself for it. What bloody nonsense! I, afraid of a high-school-going girl! Her abrupt “Na” had given me an escape. I tried but it didn’t work out, therefore, it can’t work out this way. The gulf between us was real. I had a graduate degree and she hadn’t entered college yet. I was employed and she, the youngest daughter, was completely dependant on her family. I was 25 and she was 17. I looked at the column titled “Operation One” in the chart I had prepared. My strategy had to change. I scratched the earlier, vague statement and wrote the following in its place: *Approach Urvashi’s parents for her hand. Find a reliable contact person to deliver the proposal.* I had finally put Urvashi’s “Na” behind me. It even gave me an added zeal. I felt like a guy wronged, like someone forced

to “retaliate.” 1993 was on the verge of ending. My last action of the year was to apply for the civil services exam again. I had rested in ’93 to better prepare for the exam, but the year had given itself up to Urvashi.

The New Year then. Our “meetings” continued to be on the roads. I was ashamed of what was happening but couldn’t do anything about it. What was it that kept me so powerfully hooked? It was Urvashi’s beauty more than anything else. My bud-like *Urva* had grown into a rose-like young girl. I was convinced our union was the best thing that could happen to us both. How lovely our progeny would be! A product of eugenics. I called her “my Hun princess.” Any mention of her “lower” caste was “bullshit” to me. How could that be? Look at that face. Wasn’t it the face of an “Aryan” maiden?—long, opalescent, and beautiful. Her slim, graceful body, so woman-like, had to have descended from a superior genetic pool. How would we look together, walking hand in hand? Standing on the stage at our wedding reception? She would obviously be wearing something deadly, like some maroon or purple dress or a sari. And she would be wearing the dangling gold earrings that would fall from her thin long jalapeno ears like a bunch of ripe glistening grapes. Oh, for heaven’s sake! I would be the richest guy on earth, and every man would be, ought to be, jealous of me. We would be a perfect mating pair. We would make love every hour of the day, no, why couldn’t we stick to each other forever? Ecstasy after ecstasy, orgasm after orgasm, she rising and running around the dim-lit—it would be a very pale yellow—house, clutching a pillow, her lingerie tightly wrapping her tiny buttocks. I would catch her in her vulgar, laughter-filled, catch-me-if-you-can and force her on the carpet. I would enter her. We would tumble around, laughing wildly, like shameless lovers. Sated to our last nerve, we would lie soaked in each other’s sweat. We

would spend the breather licking each other. I would move my tongue all over her ears, sucking her earlobes as though they were the universe. Then I would turn her around and lie on her marble-like, slithery back, until I would reenter her this time from her ass, but not before I would lick all around it, biting it ever so softly so she'd shout at me like a queen who shouts at an attendant who's also her lover. Then perhaps she'd ask me to take each of her toes in my mouth and I would obey. I would suck each toe until she'd shout again, "You stupid slave, move on." If I had her, I'd have the world. What more could a man ask?

I didn't see her frequently now. She had stopped coming to sector 1 for those morning and evening walks. Possibly, I was the reason. How sad that a woman sometimes runs away from one who loves her to the point of worship. Was true love just a fantasy then? The sole preserve of half-crazy souls who are fit only to write poetry or novels? What if we researched the lives of poets, writers, or painters, found out what they did in their youth, then took engineers, scientists, and businessmen, did a similar survey about them, would we then come to a conclusion, as I already hypothesize, that the first bunch, conveniently called "artists," loved more often and less sensibly and the second group the opposite? Maybe it's just a make-believe premise, but it does seem plausible.

Urvashi's demeanor hadn't changed much since I had made that on-the-road proposal to her. Her coolness amazed me. So young and so calm, as though what had happened was a part of modern life. Boys did walk across roads to say to beautiful girls, "Hi, will you talk to me?" or "I l—you" or some such crap, what was new in it? It was as though she would have been mad at me if I hadn't done it. Sometimes—though I couldn't face her with my earlier boldness—I stared down into her flickering eyes to see some sort

of emotion. She continued to give me her half-amused, half-cold stare, arousing enough to keep me going but chilling enough to desist my trying the “walk over” again. There were other changes, too. The fat short—or short fat—girl who used to accompany her had never looked at me before. Now she looked at me deliberately and, to my horror, with a look of sympathy bordering upon admiration on her face. I thought I’d rather die than be seen by her like that.

Urvashi’s younger brother, Samar—pronounced as the season, summer—began staring at me, too. At first it was funny, this emaciated, effeminate kind of a guy staring at me. Then I got used to it. The guy hung around near the *paan* shop on the porch of the Madras Restaurant, where I went to smoke. He and his buddies—or shall I call them baddies?—looked at me with an insolence that seemed oxymoronically to say, “Keep off, please.” When I stared back, they remained cool at first, presently breaking into feigned giggles; then, at the first available opportunity that I afforded them by looking away or lecturing to this guy or that, they scooted away. They were boys, Mama’s and Papa’s. Their only jobs were to roam around doing nothing, watch the dirtiest possible movies, fill the last school benches, and fail year after year—their parents, too, probably regretted their births. Riff-raff. Dimes and Nickels. Was it even thinkable to befriend such people to get Urvashi?

If I applied “Numerology” to the title of my Urvashi pursuit, I looked for sun signs and love signs to decipher people’s characteristics. Apart from books by Cheiro—the master—I read Linda Goodman’s books, and though I found her lacking in Cheiro’s objectivity, I still devoured her tome on love signs. Astrology, Western style, became my beacon in a pursuit that increasingly resembled the fate of a lost boat in a vast sea. I fell

in love with Western astrology because Urvashi and I belonged to the so-called “opposite” sun signs. This meant, Cheiro wrote, a strong physical attraction if the persons were from the opposite sexes, too. What more, if their “numbers”—arrived at by adding their dates of birth right up to the last digit—also matched, even the mental attraction was assured. As I was a Taurus and Urvashi a Scorpio, the physical attraction part was there. What was incredible was that even our “numbers” matched, ensuring the mental attraction, too. According to Cheiro, this was an ideal match. I know that astrology is a “pseudo-science” and all, but sometimes it offers pretty fitting descriptions. For instance, both Linda Goodman and Cheiro say about the Taureans that they are amazingly patient, but patience turned around, they go on to say, becomes stubbornness. Wasn’t I simply being stubborn? The more difficult Urvashi got, the more stubborn I became.

I had applied to take the civil services exam again. The first part of the exam was in June. If you passed it, you were admitted to the second part, and if you passed that, you became one of the 900-odd civil servants to work for the Government of India—“the chosen ones” from an initial pool of 200,000 applicants. A line about why I was “stubborn” about this exam, too. It was my history-loving grandfather who had asked me to take it. Why?—I could never know. All I know is that, one lazy afternoon, when I stood on the grilled porch of my house, staring out at something, I don’t remember what, a soft and trembly hand touched my shoulder. Turning around, I found my grandfather, dressed in his trademark white long-sleeved shirt and a white *dhoti*. I smiled at him. I loved him dearly. He said simply, in a tone he’d have used to ask me if I had eaten my lunch, “Puru (my nick-name), you must take the IAS exam.” IAS stood for Indian Administrative Service, the most prized of the thirty-two or so civil services. I could only

nod yes. The scene is etched in my memory because this was his first and last comment about my career. He died three months later. Thus my attempt at the civil services exam wasn't just an ambitious young man trying to climb some sort of a peak—though it was that, too—it was a kind of a personal pledge.

I don't know much about my grandfather. He was way old when I became someone who could think of things outside of his own concerns. He had a fascination for white skin. It wasn't the superficial, momentary type that afflicts more than half of the world's population. He venerated "whiteness." I remember him talking to my grandmother, who herself is white—by Indian standards, that is, which would still make her a white among whites—about a barber's wife at a barbershop he'd been to. He was 79 then, and it was odd that he was conscious of a woman's appearance. The barber's wife was tall, white, and as my grandfather put it, "Aryan looking." I have told you that my grandfather loved history. What he loved most about history was how Indo- Aryans had left their mark on those fair and handsome (or beautiful) Indian men and women. He didn't limit his belief about India's Aryan heritage to the upper castes alone. He wanted proofs in physical features. A tall, fair, and handsome barber's wife had the same claim to the non-native-Indian heritage that the upper castes claimed. My grandfather would've liked Urvashi. He would have approved of my choice. I wasn't so lucky with my grandmother, as the reader will learn.

The reader would remember that I had prepared a chart in which I had written that I would send a marriage proposal directly to Urvashi's parents and that I would find someone reliable to do this. I have told you my reasons for this. It suffices to add here that I thought that Urvashi still needed to "grow up" to make her own decisions and that

this was the reason for her denial. Contacting her parents was difficult. I had not seen them. Also, how could I, the boy himself, have gone and talked to them? Let me clarify this further. Even if I had known Urvashi's parents, my going alone to ask for Urvashi's hand wouldn't have found favor with them. In India, marriages are family affairs. A family friend or a relative starts the process by conveying a proposal to the boy's or the girl's parents. This is followed by some correspondence and a meeting or two between the families. At some stage, the boy and the girl "see" each other. They might even be allowed an outing together—not for more than an hour and a half at the most—under the benign but watchful eyes of an elder, who could be the relative who initiated the process. After accompanying the boy and the girl to a garden or a restaurant, the relative slips away on some suddenly-remembered errand, leaving the now squirming, now throbbing duo to make a pleasant yet awkward attempt at a small talk. If the boy and the girl like each other, a hurried ceremony is performed in which both parents apply the *Tilak* (or the red dot) to the other parent's child. A token amount is then exchanged as a smattering of auspicious cement, as it were. Next on the agenda is the engagement ceremony, an abridged version of marriage itself, which follows after a period ranging from two months to even two years in a few difficult cases.

Days and months passed as I waited for some "breakthrough." My team members for OPERATION ONE still included only Bhargav and Prabhat, the *paanwallah*. Bhargav had been behaving as though his part in this prolonged play was over and that now he would watch with detached curiosity how the other actors performed. That left Prabhat as the only person I could turn to. I told Prabhat to find someone who knew Urvashi's family. I don't know why, but this time, he treated my request with some

seriousness. I had talked to him about Urvashi earlier, as the reader will remember, and he had been noncommittal. I had told him to begin with because a *paan* shop was a place that attracted people, and Prabhat's was close to the township, having customers from sector 2, including perhaps Urvashi's father. Also, Prabhat had always been good to me, so now that I had no one else to turn to, I turned to him again, brushing aside my fears that he might gossip about it. My change of mind was due also to my tendency to mull over my conversations with people, including their reactions to me, and my own decisions long after they occurred. It was then that I contradicted or critiqued myself, and sometimes rejected entirely what I had first thought as true.

I didn't see Urvashi often, but it didn't matter. I was a lover, a missionary, and a warrior. Urvashi was a goal and I was a seeker. She was India and I was Columbus. I had to prove myself worthy of her beauty. Goddesses had to be appeased; princesses had to be won. These and more I never tired of telling myself, and yet her absence or rather non-appearance gnawed at me. I remained depressed for days together without even knowing it. I had lost interest in everything else. It was Urvashi, the first thought in the morning, and Urvashi, the last word before my tired and often starving limbs huddled into sleep. I wanted to show the unmoving Gods. I would not give up, no, never.

Often, in those terrible days when I inflicted upon myself the strictest of discipline and patience, my only soothing balm was music. I did not understand music as an expert would or even someone who was an aficionado. I liked to listen to songs from old Hindi films. Combining classical Indian ragas with some of the finest Hindi-Urdu poetry, they had all the pain in the world. Who'd not become romantic listening to mellifluous (as if the word were coined for him) Mohammed Rafi? Talat was the apogee of self-

effacement, and how regal he sounded doing so. Mukesh was your childhood “Uncle,” who had a sweetmeat shop down the street. He always gave you an extra candy for ten paisa you put in his hand. Asha Bhosale was Urvashi herself. Laughing at you, she took your hand and flew away with you, to Indonesian rainforests, atop Mount Kigali in Rwanda, along the river Congo, over the Arabian Desert and Japanese gardens, to frozen Antarctica amidst King Penguins.

When I got tired of music, I plunged into history. I imagined myself Ajatshatru and Urvashi Amrapali. Or I was Bhimdev and Urvashi Chaula. She was a Hun princess from Central Asia and I was a Brahmin swan. Her thought was enough to arouse me, and sometimes, this drove me to my bedroom, where, lying on a cotton mattress, I imagined fucking Urvashi so hard that in moments I found my thighs a puddle of sticky semen, and my hands, bent at the elbows, stretched upwards, as though I were Spiderman climbing a wall. Ecstasy of the act over, I rebuked and deprecated myself. You stinking fool, despicable coward, Urvashi should die even before thinking of marrying you. I was sure I was the lousiest guy living in the world. Even beggars had self-respect. They didn’t crawl all around your feet. Base creature, it’s better to die—any death is preferable—than to live this way. What if your grandfather saw this? What if your younger sister, no, enough, leave me alone, what do you understand? Who do you think you are? I love her; besides, masturbation isn’t bad, isn’t it better than rape? You and rape! Why, you would do even that if you somehow could. Only you can’t, no, you are too much of a coward for that. Rape needs guts, and you have none. Stop, stop talking like that, you have no right to, God knows I’m trying, I’m doing my best, I can’t change the direction of the winds, the workings of nature. Who asks you to, you fool? Can’t you see you cannot make an

eighteen-year-and-unwilling-dame love you any more than you can change the direction of the winds? I cannot do it alone, God must help me get her, my intentions are honorable, I wish to marry her, not merely “taste” her and, sated, put her aside. In this way, through self-chastisement, I cleansed myself of an “impurity” befitting a lesser mortal. But to my agony and pleasure, I failed again and again. The cycle of guilt then began all over again, too. When I was content with self-flogging, I lit a cigarette as though it were the holy incense that would purify me.

My “breakthrough” came in May, the nineteenth of May, to be specific. When Prabhat told me about it, I couldn’t believe my luck. There was a dark, bearded, thickset man who came to Prabhat’s shop to have a *paan* and smoke a cigarette. Prabhat regarded him with some respect, for he came in a navy blue Maruti car. I had seen the man a few times.

“He is Mr. Chaturvedi, too,” Prabhat said, grinning. I was both surprised and alarmed. Chaturvedi wasn’t a local surname. Chaturvedis were Brahmins from the north, and since there weren’t many in Gujarat, those who were there knew each other. So Mr. Chaturvedi probably knew my father. This wasn’t good news.

“How does he know them?” I asked.

“He was their neighbor.”

“Oh, that’s great. Then he would know them well, and since he’s from my caste and an elderly man, he’s the right person to carry my proposal,” I said. Prabhat kept grinning. The man had not failed me, I thought, simple man but how useful. It was late night and Prabhat was getting ready to close his shop. While his hands worked—wiping

the counter, closing lids on containers, stowing betel nut cutters into a cloth pouch—he answered my questions.

“Did you tell him about Urvashi? Does he know her?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“Did you tell him about me?” I asked, a little apprehensive.

“He knows you.”

“What was his reaction when you told him about Urvashi?” I asked.

“Oh, he said that’s all right.”

“Didn’t he say something about the caste?”

“No, he said Urvashi’s family was good and that they looked like ‘upper castes.’”

“That’s exactly how I look at them, too,” I replied. I was overjoyed. I had finally hit the bull’s eye. I told Prabhat that I’d like to talk to Mr. Chaturvedi. He said that it had been arranged and that I should come at ten the next night and Mr. Chaturvedi would be there, waiting for me. This was godly, I thought. Hey, the thing works! I was proud of my systematic pursuit based on eternal marketing principles. Philip Kotler was a prophet. I was proud of my chart. How useful it had proven. Down with people who scoff at such things and say that they are hocus-pocus. What did they know? They were pessimistic, complaining, cynical, unsmiling people, whose job it was to despair and to discourage all the time. I went home and wrote about the “breakthrough” in my journal. I then spread out my chart before me and kissed it.

OPERATION ONE had begun. All this time, I’d been waiting like those soldiers in the Second World War who waited for the invasion to begin, rain pouring down on their barracks or tents or whatever it was they lived in in that port city of England,

waiting to cross the channel. And then one day (or was it night), General Eisenhower made up his mind. “Let’s go,” he said in that typically American gung-ho spirit.

OPERATION OVERLORD, the most glorious battle in history had begun. Young soldiers landed on Omaha and Juno and Gold and Utah and Sword. They didn’t do it to further their careers or become rich. They were there for an idea, however vague or misapprehended. They hated war but loved a challenge, or else I don’t think they would have been there. You can always run if you want to. On to Normandy then, I told myself. Normandy, Urvashi. They even rhymed.

The next night, I went to Prabhat’s at the agreed hour and the gentleman was there. He looked like a Nabob in a white kurta pajama. His deep black eyes glinted with a smile as I greeted him. To my short commentary about my reasons to pursue Urvashi, he kept nodding. There was no sarcasm in his manner, no hint of malice or disguised disapproval. I relaxed as soon as I was finished. He then told me in his heavy, serious voice that he intended to visit the family soon to apprise them of my proposal. I waited for some words of hope, of reassurance, but none came. It was plain: he would go and talk, the rest would have to be seen. There were no questions about my background. Prabhat seemed to have told him all. Besides, a Chaturvedi didn’t need to know another Chaturvedi. I was brimming with gratefulness for the man but Mr. Chaturvedi—a gentleman that he was—stood apart, detached. He wasn’t condescending, and he didn’t know how to patronize. A true and rare gem, I concluded.

God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform . . . I remembered William Cowper’s lines by which I had sworn all my life. There it was again, I thought, God’s mystery conveyed through his messenger. So the soft white fairy was at hand now.

She was born to be my wife, my beloved, my, my, and I was running wild again. That night, after a long time, I slept as if I were home after a long, arduous journey.

The next morning, I woke up early and decided to take a walk. The sun became strong around eight and the heat did not let up until midnight. The only time one felt cool was during the early mornings. The milk vendor at the end of my lane was about to close. For him, the morning had begun even earlier. A few late customers got off their bicycles in a hurry and scrambled to him to buy the remaining pouches. Madras Restaurant was not open yet, but it would open in a half hour. The fruit seller's and the confectioner's carts stood in their places opposite the Township Medical Unit. In the shopping center, the shops were still closed, their black shutters down and locked. A corner eatery that offered both vegetarian and non-vegetarian meals, along with some cheap snacks, was open. It remained open until late night despite opening so early. In the past, I used to go there to eat a meal of scrambled eggs, chapattis, and sweetened curd. I stopped when I got bored. The township was full of trees. Some of them appeared to be the imported varieties because I never saw them outside the township. The residential quarters in the township all looked the same, though they were obviously of different sizes and meant for different levels of employees. I lived in a B type, so did Urvashi, for her father, though not an officer, was senior enough to qualify for one. The best quarters—they were bungalows actually—were the E type. Only the directors could live there.

When I reached the main gates of the township, I looked at the empty main road of sector two. What if I simply stood and waited here, I thought. Urvashi had to come out of her house sooner or later. I wanted to see if she had changed in some way. Did Mr. Chaturvedi go to her house last night? It was unlikely, but perhaps he did. And if he did, I

thought further, how might Urvashi's family have reacted? They must have been surprised. That much was expected. But they also must have been happy, perhaps very happy. Wasn't that to be expected, too? A young and good-looking Brahmin, with a bright future, had appeared out of nowhere and asked for their daughter's hand. They should be happy and thank God for his kindness.

Wasn't having five daughters a little too much for a man? Marrying them all off broke many a father's back. How can he raise and educate them, build a nice house for himself, shoulder his responsibilities towards his parents—sometimes even towards his brothers and sisters—and still save money for the dowry with which to marry his daughters off? Shouldn't Urvashi's father doubly rejoice? I didn't want a single rupee in the dowry. All I wanted was his daughter, whom I would love, serve, protect, and worship. If she lifted a finger, I'd be on my knees. If she sneezed, I'd be ready with a hot chocolate. If she wanted a diamond necklace or something as expensive, I'd work two jobs for twenty hours a day and buy her that. Urvashi's father mustn't hesitate one bit. If he agreed, I'd marry Urvashi this very month, no, this very week. He should say yes. He should . . . he should . . . he should.

I began to imagine what our—Urvashi's and mine—first morning, after the first night, might be like. It'd have to be my smallish quarter. I hated the thought of spending the first night in some decorated hotel room. There was no naturalness to it. You paid and they gave you the room with all the things in it. Urvashi would open her eyes on our double bed—I'd certainly buy one before she entered the house—and my eyes would meet hers. I'd move my hand to her naked ears—her earrings would be lying on a table in the corner, taken out before last night's lovemaking—touch her earlobes, run my hand

along the shape of her ear, like the map of Portugal, long, thin, and fitting her face so well, I thought God took his time designing that. I'd observed her ears on some of our closer encounters when she had tied her hair tightly in a short braid, exposing all the contours of her face—it was like seeing a full moon. We would both get up and brush our teeth (it was no good being foul-mouthed in the company of the world's most beautiful woman). And then . . . I paused momentarily in my picture of fantasy . . . of course, we would go to the bed again, throw our clothes off, and love each other . . . God, what a heaven would that be! She would be pregnant in nine months. She had to be. Of course, the thought of her carrying a child around (Indian mothers do)—even our own—on her tender and beautiful shoulders was too much. And then she would have to be busy in taking care of the child, maybe even sleep with the child. That would be one big bother. During the day, I'd be in the office, so it would be okay, but nights? I couldn't think of being away from Urvashi at night, not even when she lay nearby, tending the child. No, she had to be naked and we had to have sex. We had to. We were born to. Nothing else mattered, just the two of us, our bodies giving us all the pleasure of the world. Oh Urva, my sweet . . . when would you be mine? When would I kiss your naked ears? When would I . . . I felt my penis harden. What the hell, I said to myself. I walked back as quickly as I could. I jumped on the mattress in my bedroom and ejaculated. Then, deliberately shutting off my mind, I showered and got ready to go to the office.

CHAPTER 6

The first sign that my message had been delivered came from Urvashi herself. She didn't give a broad smile or go about dancing with joy as I had imagined or would have liked. But she didn't have her usual half-amused, half-pleased expression, either. Her gaze seemed to say, "I didn't know you were this serious." She kept at it longer, too. The girl accompanying her was not the short, fat one I knew. After Urvashi and her new companion were behind me, I went to Madras Restaurant and sat. I needed to think. I was certain that Mr. Chaturvedi had gone to Urvashi's house with my proposal. Her look was unlike anything I had seen before. But I also began to be concerned. True, she had kept her gaze on me longer, but her eyes had an odd expression, the kind your best friend's might have if you betrayed him or her. But I hadn't betrayed Urvashi; if anything, I had done her an honor. What had happened then? Did they say no? I rejected the thought before it did any further mischief. No negative thinking, I told myself. The only person who could solve this riddle was Prabhat. Mr. Chaturvedi was to convey the outcome of his visit to him. I finished my tea—half-spilling it on my new shirt—lit a cigarette, and headed towards Prabhat's. Prabhat saw me from afar. At six feet three inches, it would be easy to assassinate me, I used to say, thinking of Charles DeGaulle.

Prabhat welcomed me with his usual grin, which felt sweeter because it meant nothing had gone wrong. I was always afraid of things going wrong. "Even if you find nothing, don't spoil anything," was my constant reminder to Bhargav. Of course, I hadn't

said it to Mr. Chaturvedi, I didn't need to, but I had discretely asked even him if it was all right to send such a proposal. He had simply said yes.

"What happened, Prabhat, did Mr. Chaturvedi go?" I asked.

"Yes," Prabhat said, blushing, as if it were his marriage that was being talked about. Like most Indian men, however well educated, Prabhat, too, was shy.

"What do they say?" I asked.

"They say she's very young and they have two unmarried daughters before her."

"Um, what else?" I asked, beginning to panic but pleased that my proposal hadn't been dismissed outright.

"They say the age difference--"

"What about the age difference?" I asked.

"They say it is more."

"More? It's 7 to 8 years, which is normal. That's the age difference between my parents, too," I argued, as if Prabhat had raised this objection.

"I know, I know, but they say this. What to do about that?" Prabhat reasoned with me and began dabbing slaked lime on betel-leaves. He prepared *paans* in advance for some of his special customers who stopped by en route to, or on return from, the city. While the men got out of their cars, the families sat inside, perhaps too tired to step out, but mostly not wanting to stand in front of a *paan* shop, which was essentially a male abode and not very respectable at that.

"Did they say anything else? Anything positive?" I asked.

"Yes, they would like to meet you," Prabhat said, perfectly composed.

“Why, you rascal, you tell the most important thing last,” I said, brightening up. “This is what I wanted from this whole thing, this conveying of the proposal by Mr. Chaturvedi.” Prabhat kept grinning. His inscrutable grin could so easily be misinterpreted as a sign of happy tidings, but I didn’t understand this then. “When would they like to meet me?” I asked.

“Mr. Chaturvedi hasn’t said anything yet. Why don’t you ask him yourself?” Prabhat said.

“Okay, is he coming tonight?” I asked.

“Likely to,” Prabhat replied.

“I’ll come around eight tonight. If you see him in the meanwhile, tell him I’d like to talk to him,” I said. Prabhat nodded. I didn’t see Mr. Chaturvedi that night but the next day Prabhat told me that Mr. Chaturvedi had left a message that the meeting would be arranged in three or four days, probably in his house, and that Urvashi’s parents would most likely come alone. This was fine, in fact great, as far as I was concerned. This was what I wanted: didn’t my chart say so? Her parents were enough, why, they were best. I’d convince them of my sincerity. After all, I had been a perfect gentleman, in that I had never, after that one incident, tried to talk to their daughter, or harass her in any other way. I had succeeded in pulling off the impossible. It was due to my own efforts, help from friends like Bhargav and Prabhat, and the grace of God. Yes, without the grace of God this could never have happened. Wasn’t it a miracle? I’d meet Urvashi’s parents face to face, and then, God willing, Urvashi herself. It had been more than a year and a half since I had first seen her. I began counting days. Prabhat had said three or four. Couldn’t it be done earlier? Why waste time?

The first part of my civil services exam had been drawing near. I had been studying because I wanted to qualify for the second part. I had again opted for Indian History. The subject fascinated me—to study about a plethora of peoples that had entered India over many hundreds of years. America prided itself on being this melting pot. The title had certainly belonged to India in olden times. Starting from Indo-Aryans, believed to have entered India around 1500 BC, to Greeks, Scythians, Parthians, Huns, Arabs, Turks, Afghans, Central Asians, Europeans—not to mention stray monk-travelers from the Far-East or an occasional African slave—all sought something in India, often losing their original identities to her assimilative genius.

More heterogeneous than Chinese, Egyptian, and Sumerian civilizations—and older than Western civilization—India is more than a chapter in world history. The land of puritans and moralists, India gave to the world the Aryan prince Rama, who abnegated a kingdom to respect his father's wishes; Krishna, who expounded Bhagwad Gita to an astounded Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra; Siddhartha, who left the pleasures of a palace to seek the meaning of life; Akbar, who listened to Jesuit priests and mullahs alike; Gandhi, who won the hearts of his colonial masters. To me, even the map of India—the way the rest of Asia sprawled on its head—resembled the Atlas carrying the globe on his shoulders, or *Krishna* lifting *Mount Govardhana* on his index finger.

I was eager to see Urvashi again. I looked for her at the times when she usually came out for a stroll, but I wasn't successful. She seemed to have vanished. Going to Prabhat had become a daily routine. I went to his shop more than once now, just in case there was a message from Mr. Chaturvedi. Prabhat did not like to disappoint me, and I could see from his face that he was unhappy to say “no” to my queries. Four days passed,

then a week. There was no news from Mr. Chaturvedi. They wouldn't behave this way if they were serious about the meeting, said my mind. My heart as usual would not have this advice. People take time, it told me, marriages aren't decided in a hurry. After a week had passed, I went to Prabhat and asked him for a meeting with Mr. Chaturvedi. "He hasn't come in quite a while. Why don't you go and talk to him in his house. It's not far from your house," Prabhat said.

I took the chit on which Prabhat had written down Mr. Chaturvedi's quarter number and decided that I'd go the next evening. At around six in the evening, I dressed formally and walked to Mr. Chaturvedi's house, which was on an adjoining lane. His house was bigger, a C type quarter, for he was a deputy manager, but it wasn't the kind I'd have wanted to walk into. Dimly lit, it seemed to be an empty nest. (My observation had not been incorrect. I came to know later that Mr. Chaturvedi had a son but that he lived in a boarding school.)

Mrs. Chaturvedi opened the house. I had heard that she was some kind of a beauty. Bhargav had not failed to inform me this bit of detail. I had rebuked him for it, saying that the information did not interest me in the least, which frankly it did not. Mrs. Chaturvedi had the size and build of a middle aged woman. Her skin was smooth, and her hair, which was unbraided, abundant. She welcomed me with a stiff formality I have seen since my childhood in Brahmin households. The drawing room was large, the windows were curtained, and there were a few hangings on the walls: a woven scenery, straw or jute dolls, and calendars. I sat on a couch and waited for Mr. Chaturvedi, who soon emerged, smiling graciously. I stood up to show my respect. He sat across from me on a

sofa, between us a glass-topped coffee table, on which I had placed my half-empty glass of water.

“I have gone there two or three times. I don’t know what they want,” he said.

“But they had agreed to meet me,” I said, unable to keep the dejection out of my voice.

“Yes, they had said so, and I had immediately conveyed the same to Prabhat, knowing that you’d be keen to know, but they seem to be constantly changing their mind.”

“What do they say?” I asked.

“Oh, the same things, age difference, caste difference, the question of other daughters.”

“Why can’t they meet me once? I’ll answer all their questions,” I said.

“They say they are ready if you want to marry the older one, what’s her name, Bhairavi,” Mr. Chaturvedi said, keeping his tone as even as possible. Bhairavi was the second daughter of Mr. S. Parmar, Urvashi’s father. I had never seen her but she was considered a bohemian of sorts who had many boyfriends and who, it was widely believed, had taken Urvashi as her protégé. Thanks to her own reputation, Bhairavi was not getting married.

“What? How can that be? How can I love Urvashi and marry Bhairavi? Are they mad? I haven’t vowed to marry in their family. I only love Urvashi,” I said, my mouth open in horror. Mr. Chaturvedi became silent, thinking of what to say next. Finally, he said to me that he had only been a neighbor of the family, that there were limits to which he could influence their thinking. I, too, had been thinking of what to say next. I felt as if

I had just won a lucky draw and then there was this announcement that said there was an error in the draw and the winning number was so and so.

Mr. Chaturvedi sat still, waiting for me to leave. I realized that my only chance was to request him to further persuade the family. I made that request, which he good-naturedly agreed to. As I walked back to my house, darkness—both inner and outer—surrounded me. I felt like crying out loud. This was unfair. They were unwilling to give me even a fighting chance. Was I so worthless? Wasn't I a good-looking and well-settled Brahmin boy? Where would they find another like me? And the idea of marrying Bhairavi, oh God, how could they even think of that? It was absurd. I had waited for so long, then a flicker, a spark of hope had appeared, only to vanish again. Why, God? Why me? Why this? Why couldn't I have been born a few years late? Why wasn't I from their caste instead of being a Brahmin? What was Urvashi's part in this? Did she or did she not advocate for me? Didn't she think of me at all? Didn't her parents think that I had been such a gentleman throughout? My mind was being crushed by these oppressive questions. The worst part was that there was no one to answer them. Mr. Chaturvedi was a well-meaning sympathizer, but he wasn't my friend. He was much older than I was, and I had to be respectfully formal to him.

I remembered *Junoon* ("passion" would be a poor translation for this Urdu word), my favorite Hindi film. It had turned out just like this in the film. Based on a novella called *The Flight of Pigeons* by Ruskin Bond, *Junoon* is a true story of a Pathan's love for the young daughter of an English Collector. The Pathan, Javed Khan, is already married, but when he sees Ruth Labadoor in a marketplace (or somewhere), he is so enamored that he rides to the Collector's bungalow every day to get a glimpse of the

green-eyed maiden. Ruth is scared but she still peeks out the window curtains to see if “the Pathan is staring at her.” Shortly afterward, the Great Indian Mutiny (of 1857) breaks out. The Collector is murdered by the mutineers. A Hindu moneylender loyal to the Labadoor family saves Ruth, who had accompanied her father to the church on the fateful day. The Collector’s family—Ruth, her mother, and Ruth’s ailing grandmother—hide in the moneylender’s house.

Javed Khan, who is no more interested in mutiny than he is in his wife and who has been searching for the English ladies, finds them and, when the moneylender is out on business, forcibly brings them to his house. When the moneylender confronts Javed, the wily Khan tells him that what has happened is in the best interests of the English ladies themselves. Helpless, the moneylender leaves, assuring Ruth’s mother that he will try to inform her brother, a government official in a nearby city. Javed now demands to marry Ruth, to her mother’s horror and his wife’s angry outburst. He reminds Ruth’s mother that even though he can force himself on Ruth, he isn’t doing so because he wants to marry her. As a way out of the problem, Ruth’s mother asks Javed if he will embrace Christianity, to which Javed replies with a resounding no. She then buys time, asking for her mourning period to be over, as her husband has been killed only a short while ago. The matter is delayed until, one day, the angry Javed gives Ruth’s mother an ultimatum. The Englishwoman, however, is not to be undone. She traps Javed in a condition he agrees to only reluctantly. Delhi, which has been captured by the mutineers, is under the siege of the British. Ruth’s mother wants the battle of Delhi to decide the matter. She tells Javed that if the mutineers succeed in holding Delhi, he is free to marry Ruth. However, if the British forces break through and retake the city, Javed will have to forget Ruth.

Javed is romantic but he's no fool. He knows the mutineers are doomed. He has agreed to the condition only because he saw no other way out. As events unfold, it's clear that Ruth's mother will win. In a last ditch effort of a madman, Javed himself goes out to fight. But the mutineers, driven back by the British, are now fleeing to save their lives. To Javed's cries to stop and fight, the only answer comes from his own rapid breathing. The mutiny is over. Ruth, who has been watching everything through the eyes of her heart, now begins to soften toward her mad pursuer. "Mama, will he be safe?" she asks her frowning mother. At last, Javed Khan returns, haggard but no less passionate. The British army is now advancing and the villagers and the townsfolk alike are on the move, fearing the reprisal. Javed learns that Ruth and her mother (Ruth's grandmother dies during the mutiny) have taken shelter in a church. He knocks on the church door frantically, begging for "one last look" at Ruth, but Ruth's mother asks him to go away. He has to abide by his promise and forget Ruth. As his repeated pleas are ignored, a dejected Javed mounts his horse to leave. And lo, the door flings open, and out comes Ruth. "Javed," she says in a voice that summarizes their fate. Javed looks at her once and rides away. Later, he is captured and killed by the British. Ruth returns to England. She dies in 1902, unmarried.

I had been in love with Javed's character since the day I had first seen the movie. Did I unconsciously follow his example? What about Urvashi? How much did she resemble Ruth? Would she reciprocate my love? Would I die in the pursuit? Strange, that I should've been thinking about an unsuccessful (commercially, I mean) Hindi film, but I had Javed's passion for beauty, and his sense of honor. I had never thought of forcing myself on Urvashi—I was certain of that, no matter what. I also had Javed's bullheadedness, even when my pursuit seemed doomed, as it did now.

I wanted to lie low for the next few days—I had to study for the first part of the civil services exam—but I kept thinking about Urvashi all the time, despite knowing that I had played all my cards and now everything was up to her. I kept writing in my blue journal. It had been a long effort, and though my mind refused to accept the present state as its final outcome, I knew I had to work a miracle to pull this project off. But nothing was possible at present, my spirits were spent. It was as if I had written 25000 words of a novel and then, suddenly, inexplicably, the words had dried up. I shouted hard, looked at the sky, meditated, drank coffee, sat staring at the computer, nothing worked. It felt as though a world had come to a stop, that all my characters were suspended in some kind of time trap. “What in the hell do I write?” I asked myself and the question hit me back like a boomerang, or like a doll in a haunted house that gets up and laughs crookedly every time you fling it. Had I accepted such sane thoughts as my mind offered even now, I would have saved myself a lot of unnecessary trouble that followed.

Here I’d like to mention an isolated incident that’s important to this story. I mention it because it brought out an aspect in me of which I wasn’t aware. A young engineer named Ashraf had recently joined Bharat Petrochemicals. He was a fair-complexioned, clean-shaven, quiet kind of a guy with a longish face like that of Flash Gordon. I liked him and talked to him every time we met, especially because I knew that he was from a minority community and had come from Bihar, a state that was 1500 miles away from Gujarat. One day, I saw him sitting alone on a cement bench in the garden opposite Madras Restaurant. I went and sat beside him and soon we were talking about everything young bachelors talk about.

I had recently been introduced to Mr. Chaturvedi. As a result, I felt generous enough to discuss others' problems. You help others when you receive help, was what I must have been thinking. So I asked Ashraf what, if anything, was troubling him. When he said "nothing"—blushing like a young daughter-in-law who was just asked by her father-in-law if his smoking at the dinner table bothered her, and who repeated her "no" so many times that the elderly man, ashamed, put out the cigar he was puffing at—I felt compelled, like the father-in-law, to ask some gratuitous questions. Thinking it would please him the most, I asked him about his "dream girl." Ashraf blushed more. "She looks like Raveena Tandon," he said. "I don't know where she lives, but she comes walking to sector 1 with another girl." I was alarmed. Raveena Tandon? Yes, indeed, Urvashi looked like her, how I never noticed! Maybe because I hardly ever saw new Hindi films. But that aside, how come Ashraf knew her, or was it my misunderstanding?

"You mean the tall, thin girl with the shoulder-length hair? One who walks with a short, fat girl?" I asked, furiously wishing Ashraf wasn't talking about Urvashi.

"Yes, yes," Ashraf answered, his face reddening.

"Is she fair and wears her hair so well that it looks as if she were walking with a lampshade on her head?" I continued.

"Yes, that is she," Ashraf said. "My, what a beauty—"

"Stop it," I said. "You know who she is? She is my future wife. Do you know that we have already met? I will be meeting with her parents soon. She is my girl, do you understand? Keep your eyes off her." I was livid, truly. My outburst benumbed Ashraf. He hadn't expected it—as they say in a Gujarati proverb—in "ten lives." He looked like a fallen warrior who gazes up at the victorious guy holding a sword, unable to even beg for

his life, confounded by the course of events, utterly worsted. As I walked away from Ashraf, who sat like a frightened mouse, I had a feeling of having punched someone in the gut, something I had done only once, long ago in my adolescent years, when I was similarly driven to the wall.

I met Ashraf a few times after that, around the same spot where we had sat together. I gave him a cold stare. He was an enemy, that was all. Poor Ashraf, he did try to talk once, but I snubbed him and he backed off. Our friendship, whatever little of it had existed, never recovered from this incident. I was happy that Ashraf was a Muslim. Urvashi would never fall for him. Her family would never approve. Although I satisfied myself that Ashraf was no competition at all, I watched his movements carefully, lest the “enemy” spring a surprise on me.

Raveena Tandon, hah! The “enemy” was right. The bugger had observed well. It wasn’t as though I hadn’t compared Urvashi to anyone. She looked quite Western—whatever that might mean—but I didn’t know too many Western actresses with whom to compare her. The ones I knew had beautiful faces and figures but there wasn’t in them Urvashi’s innocence or her coquetry, or her face or her ears. They were beautiful but they weren’t Urvashi. She was the woman! There was one actress who was close, though. Around this time, a young Nepali lass had entered the Hindi film industry: Manisha Koirala. She looked as if she were washed ashore by some pure Himalayan river or stream. I had watched her *1942: A Love Story*. The shy, quiet, bud-like Manisha looked very much like Urvashi. I even bought an issue of *Filmfare* that showed some breezy pictures of her. It was Urvashi, my Urva, in a bikini, for me.

I analyzed this new, Raveena Tandon's comparison to Urvashi. Both had long faces, but Raveena's was a longer. Both had eyes that shot you down. Later, a popular Hindi song featuring Raveena Tandon actually compared her eyes to a shooting pistol. Coming further down the face, Raveena had an elongated chin, just like Urvashi. And both had small, somewhat rounded lips, like garlic cloves. Like my Urva, Raveena had long ears, too, but I preferred my Urva's any day—remember, they were my universe. Both were tall but Urvashi, being younger, looked smaller. I was never the breast-loving type, and Urvashi's were just the right size for me, and growing.

The incident with Ashraf took place before I went to Mr. Chaturvedi's house and learned that my Urvashi pursuit had reached a dead end. I now felt the burden of failed expectations, of hopes gone awry. I felt bitter, as though someone had flogged me as one might a slave, or that God had punished me for all my previous misdeeds. Why was I singled out? What wrong had I done? Was it wrong to love? Why didn't they understand that I loved her like no one ever would? Why didn't Urvashi put her foot down? What did she mean when she flung those glances at me? If she really loved me, why was she silent now? Why couldn't she meet me secretly? She had seen my house. She had even passed by it once. Did she not love me then? Was it possible that someone loved you so much and you didn't love back, just didn't? Hadn't Ruth, overpowering her mother, run out to see Javed? Urvashi and I belonged to the same country, we worshipped the same Gods, only our castes were different, but how did it matter when I—who was from the superior caste—had no problems? Perhaps she suffered as much as I did. Being the youngest daughter, she was dependant on her family. Maybe she was browbeaten into submission. She loved me but was helpless. But couldn't she meet me even once? Couldn't she try?

She could certainly come to sector 1 on some pretext, like shopping, or going to the tailor's shop. All this thinking combined with caffeine, tobacco, and lack of sleep. The result didn't take long to show.

One night, I went to Prabhat's at about 11.30. After buying my usual supply of cigarettes and *paan*, I started to go when Prabhat offered me a greenish, unripe banana. I was in no mood to eat anything, but Prabhat forced, so I half ate, half swallowed it. Then I unwrapped my *paan* and began to chew it. After lighting—god knows what number it was that day?—a cigarette, I trod back to my house. I had gone only a few steps when I felt cramps in my stomach. I clutched at my stomach as though I were having a heart attack, the heart having slid down to the stomach. I looked back and saw Prabhat closing the shop. I didn't want to delay him. He had two small kids. Besides, what would he do? He wasn't a doctor. I tried to walk briskly but my stomach felt as though it would burst from inside. It heaved like an awakened dragon.

I had had stomach problems before. Once, three years back, when I was in Delhi, someone, actually a devil himself, had forced me to eat something against my wish. That night, as soon as I was in bed, my stomach began to ache. It was as if somebody were wringing it. Next day, a doctor said it was "severe gastroenteritis." I had taken good care of myself then, taking leaves from the office and generally bearing the pain stoically, even cheerfully at times. I did not feel as brave now.

I tried to sleep, but my stomach was on a rampage. The poor thing had suffered for too long. I had never had much of an appetite, and, of late, not only had I been missing my dinner every now and then, I'd been indulging in cigarettes, *paans*, caffeine,

and my latest deadly attraction, *gutkha* (the chewable mixture of tobacco and betel nuts), all at once. Of course, the main culprit was the Urvashi affair.

After my visit to his house, I'd met Mr. Chaturvedi only once, at Prabhat's. He looked dour. Starting with a little talk on weather and all, I brought up the point. "It seems they are not interested," Mr. Chaturvedi said. I had little hopes myself, but I wasn't prepared for such finality. I thought about what to say to him next, but my mind had come to a standstill on the matter, which told me it was time I stopped. I'd been waylaid. It was time I made efforts to be on the right track. Mr. Chaturvedi was smoking a cigarette. This was the first time I'd seen him smoke. Prabhat was busy in his little cluster of activities: preparing *paans*, refilling jars, totaling accounts. Mr. Chaturvedi stood quietly, as if waiting for my response. That's it then, I thought. I'd have to forget Urvashi. Enough was enough. Things had not gone the way I'd expected them to. I had no right to subject myself and my friends to further humiliation. If they were not interested, that was the end of the matter.

"All right, let us drop the issue. I better forget Urvashi and look for someone else," I said, with a forced cheerfulness.

"Yes, I think we shouldn't pursue this more," Mr. Chaturvedi said, in a low, unemphatic tone in which likable elders deliver practical advice. I then talked about this and that, finding reasons to laugh, and, of course, to smoke. Mr. Chaturvedi lingered for some time, then left, saying "goodbye."

Early in the morning, it must have been around four, I went to the toilet. I had suspected it all along. It was diarrhea. Suddenly, I had a crazy thought: What if it didn't stop and all my body fluids came down in a stream, then in a trickle, then in splats? What

if the matter didn't stop there and all my entrails came down, too, my liver, my pancreas, my intestines—coming down with a thud and sliding down the hole—my stomach or abdomen emptied out? Oh God, why did the ass have a hole? Couldn't there be some other mechanism for waste disposal, like standing inside a chamber that converted the garbage in the tummy into an odorless gas, no embarrassing farting, no sitting with one's elbows on one's thighs?

My insane thinking had mirrored—not in all its grotesqueness but in severity of the symptoms—that which followed. My stomach continued to puff and hiss. It had swollen up like a balloon. I felt as though a whole chemical laboratory functioned inside: the boiling liquids, their gurgling sound, the formation of bubbles, their leaping in the air, then destructing, all resembling a pool of lava. I went to the toilet again and again. It wasn't that I was afraid of diarrhea. What was happening to me was something new. It was like an involuntarily whirring fan of a ghost house, or like an automatically running toy-monkey on a bicycle, continuously ringing the bell . . . trin . . . trin . . . trin . . . The more I fretted about what was happening to me, the worse and more chaotic my stomach became. I lay on the bed and tried to sleep, got up and paced the rooms, drank water and went to bed again, but the laboratory didn't stop.

At last, dawn broke. I went to my balcony and saw the yokel (one who lived in a house directly below my own and who had asked me if I gambled and drank in the house, remember?). He sat in his front yard on a folding chair. The bastard woke up early. I smiled at him. He asked me to come down and have a cup of tea with him. After a nightmarish night, anything was welcome, and this was an invitation for a fresh, steaming cup of tea. I liked the yokel's tall and quiet wife. What a waste! I used to think, whenever

I saw her. She was sharp-featured, her body slim and lithe. It was remarkable, because she was a mother of two children. I was delighted when she appeared shortly, and, with a brief but a charming smile, extended to me a cup of tea.

CHAPTER 7

At this point in our story, dear reader, I had forced Urvashi out of my mind. Thank God, you might say, and if you do, you'd be wholly justified. Almost a year and a half had been spent and there was nothing to show for it. As if the whole thing were a bad omen, my stomach growled and purred, refusing to go on, crumbling under the pressure. I doubted medical talk about psychosomatic ailments—I had nothing to do with medicine but my father worked for a pharmaceutical company, and I'd grown up seeing beautifully printed and smartly-bound manuals and reports on cardiovascular this and angina pectoris that—and always thought docs say stuff like that when they don't get the hang of something. But I had already begun to change. When I asked myself now if my stomach problem had something to do with my pursuit of Urvashi, I found myself nodding yes.

After that morning tea at the yokel's, I'd gone back up to my house, to my studies. I was on leave. The first part of the civil services exam was days away, but my stomach kept behaving unpredictably: silent for some time then suddenly throwing up. I thought the Liliputians had all crawled into my stomach out of *Gulliver's Travels* I'd brought from the library. They were poking pikes and spears into my entrails.

One night, I lay on a divan in my small, austere drawing room, reading elementary biology. I needed to read this stuff because there was a section on it in the exam. I was reading about the symptoms of diphtheria: breathlessness, inability to swallow, fever. Suddenly, I felt that I'd been experiencing all these symptoms since the evening. Hadn't I complained about breathing difficulties to Bhargav when we had taken

our walk together? I detected a congealing sensation in my throat. Then, as though my fears were dead right, my breathing became labored and I felt as if I were being choked to death in a chamber where killer-gas had replaced oxygen. I put a hand on my forehead. It was sweating even though it was 3 a.m. and the outside air was cool. I touched my tummy. It felt warm, too. What was happening to me? The image of Javed Khan, worsted by love, rushing to his death on horseback, flickered in my mind. Would I, too--?

The township medical unit remained open twenty-four hours and there used to be a doc on night duty. When I entered the smallish hospital, there wasn't a waking soul there. Two men—workers at the place—slept on the wooden benches meant for waiting patients. All the rooms were closed, their white doors tightly shut. Since I had to see the doc, I woke one of the men up. He awoke gruffly and indicated with a sleepy hand that the doc was upstairs. On the upper floor were the pharmacy, the labs, and a few rooms that had no name plates. I figured the doc would be in a room whose door was slightly ajar. The doc slept lightly and was soon up, and, no, he wasn't grumpy or anything.

"I can't breathe. I'm having breathing problems since evening," I said.

"You are? How are you alive then?" the doc asked in a groggy but clear voice.

I am dying, I thought, and the bloody fellow is showing his sense of humor.

"Doctor, it's serious. I'm also running a fever. There is irritation in my throat. I think I have diphtheria. Aren't these the symptoms?" I asked.

"Mr.—what's your name —Porus Chaturvedi—the very fact you could come all the way here and are talking to me fluently indicates there's no breathing problem with you."

"But the symptoms—"

“YOU DO NOT HAVE DIPHTHERIA.” The doc shouted. “And the night hours are for emergencies only.”

“But who’s to decide what an emergency is?” I protested. “How do I know as a patient? Don’t I have a right to come here if I think, really think, something is seriously wrong with me?” The doctor heard me out and stood statue-like, his jaw firm and set. He wasn’t going to waste any more words on this half-crazy young man who, in the middle of the night, thought he was dying of diphtheria. He gave me a look that said, “You fool, what are you standing here for? Go and sleep. That’ll bring you some sanity.”

I came out feeling dejected. Partly, I was happy. I didn’t have the D-disease, but what about the symptoms? This medical world was funny. If you read about the symptoms carefully, you began to think you had many of those goddam diseases. Who hasn’t had anorexia once in a while? or weight-loss? or pale skin? a slight temperature? Common cough and cold could dress up as diphtheria or pneumonia and scare you. A viral fever may look like malaria and send you reeling to Quinine, which sometimes reacted and undid your kidneys.

It was four in the morning and all around me was the darkness of not-yet-dawn. I also felt the doc should’ve been more courteous. I was an officer, after all. I believed in the *Bridge on the River Kwai* definition of an officer. The British colonel was my hero. My officers will not do manual work, he’d said to the Japanese general—and stuck to it.

Anyway, those days, my body felt hot and bruised, and my stomach continually chanted some abracadabra. Days I spent studying for the exam, but nights were scary. I’d noted that my stomach went awry the moment I’d prepare to go to bed, after a late dinner, which used to be mostly a harmless fare of curd and rice or some such thing designed to

appease my stomach. But come bedtime, the stomach ghost reappeared, making strange noises and sounds. There was that “boiling lava” sensation I mentioned earlier. I had to go to Ahmedabad to take the exam. My parents lived there and I was glad to be home. My stomach needed homemade food so it could be a “good boy” again. I also wanted to talk to my “half-doc” father about my “boiling lava.”

“Oh, it’s nothing, just an upset stomach. Take a *Dispepright*,” he said when I told him. My father’s prescription worked. My stomach ghost was gone. The next day—since my exam was over, too—I took an early morning bus back. I wanted to reach home while it was still cool. Traveling by bus in summer afternoons in India is an experience worthy of soldiers, commandos, actually. I’d just settled into my small, Rexene-upholstered seat when the bus started and the stuffiness inside was replaced by a fresh whiff of air coming through the open window. And lo! As soon as the bus started, the stomach ghost reappeared. He had struck as ghosts do, most unexpectedly. I cursed myself for not bringing *Dispepright* with me. I could have eaten some cookies on the way and swallowed a capsule. I never took medicine until I ate something first. I was mortally afraid of reactions.

After reaching Baroda, I went to our township medical unit. The doc gave me a common antacid and an antibiotic. I took the medicines for a couple of days, but the stomach ghost remained, entrenched. What the hell was happening? I thought. Docs here were no good. They were either cruel as the night duty guy was, or they were dead wrong. *Dispepright*, only *that* would work.

So I ran off to Ahmedabad again. This time, I really had a fever. Our family doc winked at me and wrote a small prescription. I was startled by the man’s levity,

especially considering that I had dilated upon my stomach ghost at some length. I was running out of casual leaves, so I returned as soon as I sensed some relief in my stomach. But mysteriously, on my way back in the bus, I again felt as though something like boiling lava throbbed in my stomach. Not again, I thought, recognizing the old enemy-friend.

It might be exasperating to read this description of never-ending to-and-fro journeys. Imagine then what must I have felt actually undertaking them? If the present chapter seems to you totally cut off from the book, from the story of my pursuit of Urvashi, you're probably right. My only explanation for it is that, at this point in my life, I was so completely dominated by my stomach that I'd become oblivious to everything else. I know that sounds crazy, but that's how things were. Sometimes, life presents you with a wild card. It changes everything. Besides, who could blame me for forgetting a girl who had not deigned to respond to my most slavish entreaties? I also faced a deadline of a sort, the second part of the civil services exam. I expected to pass the first part despite all the troubles I had had preparing for it. And as the reader will remember, there was nothing I could do when Mr. Chaturvedi's repeated efforts to get Urvashi's parents to meet me had failed.

My Ahmedabad trips were not only tiring and expensive—I had no savings and my monthly salary then was four thousand rupees, which wasn't much, say, eighty dollars; it was a few years later that the salaries were raised on the recommendation of a certain government commission—they also got me into trouble with my family, especially my father, who had never been very fond of me. My father had always criticized my chicken-heartedness. He had also accused me of selfishness. During my

initial working years, he used to write me long letters full of affection and advice. I rarely replied to them. When I did, I philosophized or poeticized. My father wasn't a Babbitt, but he was passing through difficult times then. He had never been a great saving-money type, either, so when he lost his job of twenty-five years, he was worried like hell. I wrote him a few letters of encouragement but did not send him any money. He was not greedy. He just needed money badly then, if only as a reassurance that his son would take care of him if nothing else worked out.

To my Indian (selfish?) son's mind, however, what he had done was his duty, something I would do for my son, but my father couldn't expect returns on that. At any rate, I felt I could help him out only when I was fully established myself—that is, when I got into the civil service, which meant better income, more power, and a bigger house. Perhaps I was ambitious, like a businessman who prefers reinvesting his profits over repayment of “easy” debts—isn't the debt to parents easy to forget? We clashed, sometimes violently. I won't go into the details. Who doesn't know of father-son fights that end in blows? My going home and acting “invalid” only worsened our relationship. This would provide an important twist to my story.

I reached Baroda in the volatile company of my stomach ghost. It had returned with all vengeance. Opening the door of my stale smelling apartment, I felt miserable. It seemed that everyone except me was in this well-provided-for caravan, singing and dancing, marching along on his or her way to Cinderella-land. I was left alone in this ramshackle quarter, mocked by old newspapers and the dirt on them, unwashed clothes heaped in a corner, rooms that did not care whether anyone lived in them or not, a dirty bedsheet covering a cotton mattress that had long lost its original shape and was torn in

places, cotton matting inside showing like soft pink flesh on cut skin. God, was I born to be miserable? I thought. I got fed up in less than five minutes after entering my house. My stomach puffed up again. This bloody thing, couldn't I cut it out and throw it away? Why weren't stomachs disposable? The bloody thing was old enough. Twenty-five years. Even tires needed replacements every year or two. There's something called a life span.

My office started work at 8.30 in the morning. It was near that time. AKB had been replaced by a balding weasel of a man. I had met him before, when I was in Delhi, and it wasn't a good meeting, though it was a kind one didn't forget easily. It was funny the way we had met, and yet, he had pissed me off. I lived in the company guesthouse, a bungalow in the posh Greater Kailash area of south Delhi. One evening, I sat at the communal dining table, waiting for dinner. I hated the place. It was stiff and formal, filled with the second-rate British officialdom, independent India's very English *babus*. A balding man dressed in spotless white *Kurta Pajama* sat on my right. His round face and large, restless eyes, coupled with his prim manners, made him look like a cross between an actor and a bureaucrat. I was still a management trainee and quite polite, as trainees should be. Judging the man to be some senior guy, I greeted him courteously, briefly introducing myself.

When I said "management trainee," the man's response was, "I can tell by the way you speak." He was dead right there, and yet I was angry at the way he responded.

"How else should I speak?" I blurted out. What did this man think of himself? I thought. Cynical even to courtesy? I remember he said nothing to my angry retort and began eating. Needless to say, there was no further conversation between us. This is how we were introduced to each other, and now he was my boss. The man had a terrific

memory, though. I remembered the way he had rattled off one statistic after another about how our new plant was coming up: Where were the pipelines? The tankers? What were their capacities? What did they contain right now? What was the temperature at which it was kept? What were the safety precautions taken? When would the plant begin production? What did the process licensor's team say? How was the jetty coming up? When might we receive ships? What about the dredging that's needed? —the man spoke about all this without even batting an eyelid, literally. If he was carrying any notes, he hid them well, for I could just see his poker face, looking funnier because it was intense in an actor kind of way. He was leaning forward, his hands clutching at the lectern, as though he feared a strong wind would lift him up and fly him away. I forgot to tell you he was of a thin build.

As had become usual since the departure of AKB, I was late to the office. To my mortification, my new boss—let's call him Mr. Goodmemory—stood resting his hands and jaw on the partition of a cubicle, talking to a young female co-worker of mine, who was a sweet-talking but a tough-acting lady. Seeing me, the lady brightened up and asked me to join her for a cup of tea. The tea came from a canteen on the ground floor of the building, every half hour, and on specific orders. Flashing a smile at my boss, I sat opposite the lady. What then took place was a normal goody-goody exchange that happens everywhere in the world between co-workers. Suddenly, to a certain comment made by the lady about hard work, Mr. Goodmemory punned, "Oh, Porus hard/ly works." Then the devil laughed out loud. Mr. Goodmemory further said that I lived on antibiotics. This more scared than angered me. My stomach ghost was still there. I was convinced

that there was some serious problem with my stomach. Why didn't the factory inside stop its operations, which were surely going on, resembling boiling lava or melting glass?

Another problem I faced those days was Samar, Urvashi's brother, and his gang. Since Mr. Chaturvedi's failed attempt, the gang had started to stare and laugh—the buggers had the cheek to—at me whenever they saw me. There was a cricket stadium adjoining the township, green with grass and surrounded by trees. Sometimes my lonely walks took me there. Joggers and sportsmen frequented the place. Most of them worked for Bharat Petrochemicals so I knew many of them. One day, I found Samar's gang sitting atop a grassy embankment on the stadium's periphery. When they saw me coming, they began giggling and whispering among themselves. I stopped, looking straight at them, my anger building. After a few moments, their faces tightened again. I looked away and walked past them.

The worthless fools! It was all very funny, womanish, I said to myself. Most of them did not have a hair on their faces, had never had one, I could say. Like young chickens or monkeys, they did their little acts of mischief to irritate a big animal like me. One boy in the gang was a fatso. He wore tiny rings in his horribly fat ears. He looked as though he had become inflated with compressed air. I was convinced there was a filling valve somewhere in his body. Often, I was seized by this uncontrollable urge to force him on the ground, look for the valve, then—finding it—open the flap and let the air out. The boy would then flatten, like soft PVC toys. He'd eventually become a mat—human shaped.

I had faced childhood bullies, had been ragged at college, but this was new. I had not expected to be laughed at by a pedestrian bunch of school kids when I was an officer

in a prestigious company. Why, I could have been the boss of any of their fathers. Did Urvashi know about their behavior? Possibly or maybe not. If she knew it, why didn't she stop it? Could she be asking these guys to do it? No, she won't go to that level. After all, I had proposed to marry her. Were they, then, doing this on their own? Yes, it seemed more likely. Such thoughts milled in my head all the time during that period. I could have asked my friends to straighten out Samar and his gang, but I did not want to do anything that might harm my "cause," as I always called my pursuit of Urvashi. All in all, then, I was suffering from health problems, Urvashi was farther away than ever, my family was angry with me, and, thanks to Mr. Goodmemory the office was a nightmare. And these young, foolish kiddos laughed at me as though I were some kind of joker who went on rounds in the way of a mobile library or a blood donation van. God, could things get worse?

I kept visiting the medical unit every second or third day. By now, I had seen most of the docs attached to the hospital. One doc, the most popular one at the hospital (there was always a long line of patients waiting outside his room), told me that, probably, I had cancer. He said it so coolly, like telling me I would get an auto rickshaw just outside the township gate. This settled it for me. I was going to Ahmedabad (the last time) and not coming back until I knew exactly what was wrong with my stomach. Ignoring my father's repeated pronouncements that I had nothing, nothing at all, I set out to prove to him, to others, and to myself, that I did have something diabolical going on inside my stomach. My father suggested a gastroenterologist, an M.D., D.M., the only guy in the whole state with a doctorate in gastroenterology, he said. I underwent a few investigations, the usual blood-urine-stool type. Additionally, there were sonography and

endoscopy. Everything was normal. My stomach was in no need for repair, much less preparing to shut down. The tall balding doc moved his hand on my stomach, looking for the “inflammation” I obsessively pointed out.

“Are you a tense person?” he asked me.

“Yeah, very,” I said, relieved at the man’s question.

This was a sure sign that my stomach was all right, because the tests had shown nothing and docs said something like this when they didn’t understand what was going on. But the balding doc surprised me by saying: “What’s happening to you is that your intestines complete digesting food fast. They are overworking in a way, and it’s due to stress and anxiety.” So my rectum got its garbage fast and . . . I understood.

“Thank you so much, doctor,” I said. I could have kissed his face. He prescribed a small green pill that I took daily. My stomach ghost decamped in the course of time.

There’s a twist to my medical tale here, which is too important to ignore. Do you remember my neighbor from chapter 3? The dark, big, burly guy who was watering his front yard when my other neighbor, the yokel, accused him of breeding mosquitoes? I had also told you that this watering guy considered himself some kind of Louis Pasteur. Well, I didn’t know the man that evening when these neighbors of mine were so outlandishly quarreling. I came to know him when I mentioned to him my stomach ghost—I had spoken about it to so many people that, sometimes, I forgot and told the same person again, as if I were telling him the first time.

Stomach ghost? Hmmm . . . Mr. Pasteur considered it. “Don’t worry, we’ll banish him,” he declared.

The man had punk, I thought. To say so boldly that he would oust the poltergeist inside my stomach was something. He went inside his house, indicating to me that I could sit in his drawing room, indeed, inviting me in a warm manner. If there ever was a drawing room that inspired you to withdraw, it was his. Notebooks—for he was a teacher with school-going children—books and pages lay strewn everywhere, including on the floor. The word chaos seemed insufficient to describe the room. The bedsheet on a divan in a corner was in need of multiple laundering. The room had a strange odor. It seemed to be emanating from several sources, including from the un-bathed bodies of its occupants. I had never seen a room so dirty before, but the man talked to you in a manner so polished, he could have been *Rochester* of Jane Eyre (whom he resembled in looks, too, and for this reason I'll take the venial liberty of calling him Rochester from now on). Anyway, we are not concerned here with that drawing room, a rarity, though it was. Rochester emerged after a long time with small plastic bags containing brown powders of some kind.

“Here,” he said, handing them to me. “Take these *churnas*. I have written the dosage on a chit inside each bag.”

“What are these?” I asked.

“They are *Triphala and Rasayana churnas*. They are better than Western medicines that do more harm. These *churnas* will remove your problems from the root.”

“But what if they trigger some reaction?” I was afraid they might cause the ghost to flare up.

“They are harmless herbal powders. If they don't improve your condition, they certainly wouldn't harm,” he said.

I took these *churnas* twice or thrice daily, with water. I'd gulp the powder and drink water after it. I continued taking them even after I was told by that M.D., D.M. gastroenterologist that there was nothing wrong with my stomach. I asked Rochester if I should continue, and he said a loud yes. Also, over time, a few pills were added to it. These, too, were herbal and needed to be taken after breakfast in the morning or on an empty stomach or with honey. I still remember the windowsill of my bedroom and, later, the closet in the kitchen where I'd arrayed these small plastic bottles—my “health” army. I don't know how much they helped in my eventual “recovery,” which didn't come until September of 1994.

It was monsoon, and the world seemed all green. In India, rain is looked upon as season of love. There is nothing more pathetic than to be separated from your beloved during monsoon. It's a season of colors. The sky is dark, very dark grey. The air is cool. People everywhere loosen up, showing their natural gaiety and color. Birds, too, rejoice: sparrows mostly, crows, doves—they are the most subdued, and sit on ledges looking at the rain with the cool detachment of a Westerner—and mynahs, not to forget green parrots. I know the monsoon thing about India is so much written about that some people might even think there's only one season in India. The truth is that monsoon in India is as unpredictable as it is in many other places in the world. It's just that the tropical vegetation of India makes it look wilder—the lush green cover all around. (Haven't you heard or read this many times?)

Anyway, my heart in this monsoon was as dry as any desert is, and so, while I eagerly drank in the increasing natural beauty around me, my melancholia deepened. The reader, I'm sure, can detect why. I still remember that monsoon. I saw Urvashi a few

times when the rain had paused. She looked as bud-like as ever. Walking alongside her sister—I still didn't know them but I guessed as much judging from Urvashi's demeanor—her head hung, walking like a docile younger sibling, dressed like a school-girl in frocks. Was she this young? I couldn't believe my eyes. She constantly reminded me of Ruth Labadoor. There is a beautiful rain song in the movie. It shows Ruth swinging wildly (on long saris tied strongly to a bough) with young girls—Hindu and Muslim—of Rohilkhand. She's at a point when a teenage girl becomes a young woman, a time of wild expectations, when life is all joy and the future all heart's desire. Who can't remember such a time from one's life? —The time when life seems an adventure, a song, or a nice story with colorful illustrations. Oh, couldn't Urvashi and I be transported to that tree somewhere in the rugged terrain of north India in 1857? For that matter, Baroda, too, had banyan trees—in fact, the city was named after banyan trees! But my flights of imagination, intense and poignant as they were, were no match for ruthless objectivity. The result could only have been disappointment, and disappointed I was throughout that monsoon, which, before it finally ended, brought me face to face with my Ruth.

Around this time, the result of my civil services exam came. I passed. The second part was in December. I decided to apply for a long leave (unfortunately without pay). I took four months' extraordinary—that's what it was called—leave. I felt happy and triumphant. Only I fully knew the odds I'd fought to achieve this result. The reader knows them, too. The moment of reckoning had come. I wrote a lofty letter to a cousin who had also passed. I got it electronically typed. It cost me ten rupees per page, which is how long it was. The overworked typist missed an exclamation mark, which bugged me quite a lot. Nevertheless, I sent it. My cousin was three years younger than I, but we were

more friends than relatives. She wrote back, begging me to give the exam my all. I was equally determined to get into the civil services—that's where the power was, the power to "do something" for the country. So far as the Urvashi matter was concerned, it could wait, if it had to. She wasn't going to get married anytime soon, after all. She had three older sisters who'd have to get married first. In any case, I was at my tether's end. Maybe some lapse of time would sort things out. I decided to go to Ahmedabad to study, away from distractions, I told myself. My leave having been granted, after saying goodbyes to my friends, I left for Ahmedabad.

But wait, I cannot end this chapter without taking a detour. It must come at this stage, as a tribute to a man who had stood behind me when all my friends—Bhargav included—had left me. (Who'd have liked to be around a man who was obsessed with his stomach!) This man was Rochester. The man was all sympathy and welcome, always. I gradually came to know a few things about him. Like me, he was a Brahmin. His wife was a real shrew if there ever was one. She constantly and publicly criticized Rochester for everything right from unavailability of milk to all-pervading untidiness in their house. In this respect, our Rochester was different from the one in *Jane Eyre*. The novelistic Rochester had locked up his mad wife in an attic in his castle, but our Rochester was such that he would have willingly agreed to lock himself up in some room—for there was no attic, our Rochester being a poor school teacher and the quarter he had been allotted being a pigeonhole, like my own—albeit with his books, for he was a voracious reader. The cantankerous Mrs. Rochester stuck to him like a crab, only reluctantly permitting him to go out on walks with me—"You'd return after two hours, and there's no milk in

the house,” she said. To this, I replied—stubborn to have my way—“OK, we’ll bring the milk first and then go.”

I had not, up to this point, talked about Urvashi to Rochester. I was not willing to do anything that might spoil my immaculate impression on him. The chief reason for this was that I spoke in fluent English, using words that he said belonged to one’s “passive vocabulary.” This wasn’t surprising to me, considering that Rochester taught English to high school kids. He was fond of William Shakespeare, of course, but he also liked Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, William Blake, and, I think, Christopher Marlowe. I remember how he said that the last was a serious competitor to Shakespeare and that had he lived long enough—I later learned Marlowe was murdered—he might have surpassed the bard. I wasn’t a bad reader but these names were alien to me then—much of my vocabulary came from sources too diffused and varied to mention.

Rochester was also as different a man from others as a spaceship is from other modes of transportation. He never borrowed money from anyone. There were times when he was short of cash, his salary being low, as teachers were considered non-supervisory employees in the company. There were also a number of deductions from his salary: housing loan deduction (he had built a small house where his old mother and a mad, invalid brother lived, for Mrs. Rochester wouldn’t have them in their township quarter), scooter loan installment, voluntary provident fund (forced by his wife) cut, and the like. As Mrs. Rochester—big and sprawling that she was—usually was too lazy to cook, Rochester either prepared his meals himself or went out and ate in Madras Restaurant. I had seen him eat raw vegetables at times, and hungry frequently. Rochester just didn’t get angry—not that he was incapable of it. Mrs. Rochester frequently recounted to me an

instance involving a bus journey they had undertaken together after their marriage. A crude flirt, who was sitting beside Mrs. Rochester in a seat for two, wasn't behaving himself. When Rochester learned about this, he politely asked the man to sit properly. But the man ignored Rochester's request. It was then that Rochester began spanking him. The bus simply stopped until the bashing got over.

Rochester also did some crazy things. I remember sometimes when we walked together, he'd suddenly start walking fast for no reason whatever. Startled, when I'd ask him for the reason, he'd look at me, smile, and return to his earlier pace like an obedient dog—I don't mean to be insulting to him here, God knows, I can't, it's just a simile that struck me as apt—and he's too much of a dog-lover to mind it. Later, when I read Kafka's *Castle*—I had put it away, scared, after the first 50 pages or so; it was disorienting—I saw many similarities between K. and our Rochester. Mentally, he was like K. I don't know if he'd become like that after reading the novel, but he'd probably read it many years ago and one cannot imitate anyone for so long, so probably, he really was like K. I'm spending so many lines on Rochester because he will now become an important character in our story. He would be my friend and guide, he would lead me to Urvashi, and he would walk by my side when she'd slip out of my hands again—that slithery character!—comforting me with what he knew best (at least as well as he knew Ayurveda)—literature.

CHAPTER 8

I began my preparations for the second part of the exam even before I knew the result. Call it my cocksureness or a glimmer of sanity in my mad world, but I actually asked a colleague of my father's, who was going to Delhi, to bring me some books on history and political science (I gave him a list), from a famous bookstore everyone who takes the exam knows. The books came shortly after my arrival in Ahmedabad. Everything seemed to be going well. The only problem was my troubled, festering relationship with my father. We did not talk but there was no escaping his stern face.

We had a small apartment and there wasn't much room for five people, including my grandmother, who was visiting. My father had his set ways—whose doesn't? He would shave leisurely, standing in front of the mirror over the washbasin, which was outside the toilet and was so small that I cursed the midget-like builder every time I went to it. When you wanted to enter the toilet or when you came out of it, anyone standing in front of the washbasin was an irritating barrier. Unfortunately, my father was frequently there. The same thing applied when either of us, my brother or I, stood at that isthmus, brushing our teeth, and neither of us was an early riser. It was my father's turn to get peeved then, watching us standing there and blocking his entry to the toilet.

There were little things like this. One who has not faced such spatial scarcity might probably laugh at it, but those who have would know exactly what I'm talking about. Tolerance is easy when your pocket is full and your house is large and you are content and happy. It is when these conditions are absent that tolerance is difficult. This

is probably one reason why poor countries have so much unrest and feuding. I don't hate the poor, but I hate poverty. It's degrading. It makes a base animal out of you. This is not to say that the rich and well provided for are repositories of virtue. They have their own vices, too, but poverty cripples you so badly it breaks your back, and your will to improve.

My father had found a job again—selling some kind of discount card—but it paid him only half of his previous salary. He was brave, and went to the job dressed in the same immaculate way we'd grown up seeing him go out. He'd wanted to be an actor, my handsome dad. But in those days, actors and actresses were not considered what society calls "good people." It was the sixties, and the whole world was astir, but old traditions still held sway in India. My grandfather put his foot down. Grandmother, I was told, even threatened to commit suicide. The stillborn actor died, never to be born again. As if an ill fate chased him from dream to dream, my father was cheated out of the only business he ever got involved in. He wiped out all my grandfather's retirement money from the Indian Railways. Good looks, a glib tongue, and a science degree got him a job as a medical representative. At first, he rose quickly, earning his first major promotion as a regional manager in just six years—in those days, six years was fast enough. However, his "ill fate" dealt him a wild card now. He developed a phobia for travel, any kind of travel. He called it claustrophobia. He'd enter a bus to go on a scheduled tour and get out of it before the city limit was crossed. How long could it have lasted? He was done in by his own favorite subordinates. When his boss read the charge sheet, my father asked with dignity, Did he want him to continue? No, the boss replied. That was it. My father resigned, came home, and cried. He was distraught for a few days. Then, the "actor" in

him took over. He'd pray for as long as an hour, smile at everyone, and scour the newspapers for job ads. This is how he landed the discount card job. It didn't pay him much but he was working again, for not working meant starvation, literally. My mother couldn't help with any earnings. She was not much educated. My brother, after getting a degree in microbiology, was preparing to follow in my footsteps. In such an ordinary and even weebegone house, I stepped in with all my determination to make it to the civil services.

"You can't," my father told me at our dining table. We were having our dinner, and I had begun my usual topic of how, after becoming a civil servant, I'd take the family out of this vicious cycle of never-enough-money.

For some moments, I was stunned. His voice was cool and clear and it had a tone of finality.

"Why can't I? You have always discouraged me. I have proved myself again and again but nothing convinces you," I said.

"Prove it. Don't talk about it," he said.

"I'll prove it, too. You'll see," I said.

"Prove it first. Now, if I hear one more word about your career, I'll throw you out of the house. Why should I hear about your career? It concerns you and you alone. Have you ever contributed one single rupee to this house?"

"So it's all about the money. Don't you think it's your duty as a father--?"

"Don't tell me what my duty is or ought to be. I am your father, you aren't mine."

"You say all this because you hate me. You always have." I was beginning to cry. I remembered all my years. My father had always hated me—hadn't he? He had given

me over to my grandparents after my sister was born, because he figured that two small children would be too much for my mother. He criticized my dressing style right down to how I rolled up my sleeves, my choice of friends, my methods of exercising—"You must not exercise in closed rooms"; "look at your slender, girl-like legs, why don't you exercise them, too?"—in fact, just about anything he saw concerning me. Once, when he was in a jovial mood, I'd dared to ask him why he criticized me so much.

"Because you remind me so much of myself, my youth, that is. I don't want you to repeat the same mistakes," he said.

He sounded very reasonable to me then, but he was like that only once in a blue moon. For the most part, he was a tyrant, though he saw himself as this great fighter who was doing so much for his children, and it was true—he was.

Anyway, in our present clash, my father started fuming with anger the moment he saw me crying (he hated crying of any kind, especially the crying of a young man, which he absolutely loathed with all intensity). The whole thing had started because I'd mentioned the civil services. I'd brought up the topic to seek my father's permission to stay in the house for the next four months. Normally, a son in India inherits the family house and assumes a kind of part-ownership, even while the father is alive and kicking. My house was American or perhaps British in this respect. We had to "apply" for the king's (our father's) permission. And I wasn't his favorite child. Besides, the king's coffers were empty, his kingdom in the doldrums. It is with all these factors in mind that I was cautiously moving toward asking his permission, but, as always, my father's keen mind had perceived the oncoming request, which he then smothered by saying, "You can't," which had started the present feud.

I got up midway through the dinner, in tears, as has been said. My father continued eating his meal, darting angry glances at me. When he washed his hands and was ready to go out for his nightly walk, I popped out the question I'd been kept from asking.

"All right. Stay," he said, smiling.

I could not believe my luck. I have this lousy habit of feeling overly gratified whenever someone who hates me at first "deigns" to accept me later. At such times, I become all sugar and honey and cotton candy and watermelon and know at heart that I am one hell of a spineless lousy bastard. Before he actually went out the front door, I also told him that I'd applied for the provident fund loan and that I would be contributing one thousand rupees a month toward the house expenses. He gave me a blank look, as if unsure what to say. My father was unique in this respect. He was a king who had a merchant's mind, but the king controlled the merchant.

At last, I thought, I was free to concentrate on my exam. This house, small and congested as it might be, is what I really needed to prepare, to give my best, blah blah blah. The next day, my books came. I loved books. I loved to feel their pages. Such powerful creatures! So much knowledge! Each book had a life of its own. A writer might begin with a few words, maybe just four to five, and then he (or she) finishes a paragraph, then another, then another, and then another . . . until, finally, he completes a chapter. Then he begins again at the same, going through the whole process, sentence by sentence, pausing to think or drink coffee or go out or smoke a cigarette, rushing back and typing (or writing), looking pleasantly at the screen or a page, filled with black letters, so many of them, one following the other, as though they were all singing in a band, smartly

dressed, matching footsteps to the beats of drums and blares of cornets, one man's creation all. I leafed through Abraham Basham's *The Wonder That Was India*, Romilla Thapar's *Asoka and the Mauryan Age*, a Penguin translation of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy*, and D. D. Basu's *Introduction to the Constitution of India*. I had opted for history and political science. Everything about Basham's book fascinated me, beginning with the title that reminded you of another famous title, which looked at the India of centuries later, *The Jewel in the Crown*. Thapar's was an authoritative text on the rule of Asoka, the most famous of the Mauryan emperors. The original manuscript of Arthashastra has never been found. What has survived are its extracts quoted by various commentators, including a Greek ambassador in the court of Mauryan kings. Encapsulating the thoughts of the greatest philosophers in the world, Durant's book appealed to me for its size. D.D. Basu's book was so clear, I wondered how a lawyer could write it. I sat crowded in by my books when I heard my father's voice distinctly, even though it sounded like a low-enough voice.

"Puru's lying. I don't think he has applied for any PF loan. He is simply trying to live off me." He was talking to my grandmother, who was slightly hard of hearing. This had perhaps forced him to raise his voice that extra bit which made it audible to me.

I was dumbfounded. We had our differences and our rages all right, but I could never believe he would doubt my integrity. I was sure he wasn't a fool to do this. I couldn't stop myself from confronting him.

"I can show you the papers. They are in my briefcase," I told him.

"There is no need for you to do that. I will not allow you to stay here and spoil your younger brother's studies."

"I will spoil Vicky's studies!" I said, stupefied. "No, I won't."

"Yes, you will. I have seen how you take him out on your long walks. Don't you understand your studies are over but he still has to do his MBA?" my father asked.

"I know. I perfectly understand. I promise you I won't disturb him, I promise," I said, putting all sincerity in my voice to convince my father, who I knew had made up his mind. Here I must also admit that his charge wasn't wrong at all. I did take my younger brother out on the walks my father mentioned. It was in that period—hardly a month or two before the present time—when I was harassed by my stomach ghost and I still nursed the wounds of the abortive Urvashi affair. Not that my brother was much help. He wasn't. Even after buying him a coffee or tea, he would stubbornly refuse to "see" my point.

"You don't know what you're talking about"; "you are a spent force"; "stop whining and be sensible."

My younger brother frequently came out with such opinions about my "struggles," but clinging fool that I was, I coaxed and flattered him into those walks, and, partly out of my persuasion, partly because he was an obedient younger brother after all, he came along on those long walks with me.

"But it's so important I stay here and study," (I was thinking of Urvashi here). "In Baroda, there's no one to take care of me, no one to cook meals, prepare tea, or wash clothes. I'll end up wasting a lot of time just going to restaurants and coming back." I pleaded, to a judge who never granted me a case. His "no" was immutable.

"You will return to Baroda. I will send *Dadi* with you. She'll be there until your exam is over. This is the best I can do," my father said, impressed with his solution.

Dadi was my grandma. I knew then that I wouldn't study for the exam, and that I wouldn't be in the civil services, at least not through this year's attempt (I had one more attempt left). It was like the condition Javed Khan had accepted, willy-nilly. If your people (the mutineers) successfully defend Delhi, Ruth will be yours, but if the British forces win it back, you'll have to forget her. Javed Khan knew he would lose but he still accepted the condition. Why did he do it? The answer is simple. There was no other choice. Ruth's mother did not offer any other way. Javed Khan knew this and accepted the challenge, hoping against hope, as the phrase goes, that the mutineers might just win. I, too, accepted my father's verdict. I knew he meant it when he said, "This is the best I can do."

After Shaily's debacle, I had thrown myself with complete intensity into the pursuit of Urvashi. My monomania had made me turn down many a marriage proposal that came my way, to my father's outrage. I compared all those girls to Urvashi and found them nowhere near her. If I couldn't find a fault with a girl, I found it with her parents. "They are haughty, they didn't even talk to me," I said, or, "The father is very dominating. He asked me so many questions." It was easy, taking offence at these people. It's easy when you don't care. I knew that it was useless to see other girls when I wanted to marry Urvashi only, but the proposals came on their own, through family connections and people in the office. Prabhat, too, brought a couple of these. Once, I literally saw a girl at his *paan* shop. An aggressive and wealthy farmer from a village near Prabhat's promised to send me to America if I married his niece. He often tried luring me at Prabhat's, his betel-stained teeth flashing in wide, sly smiles. I had a feeling Prabhat actually encouraged such proposals after Mr. Chaturvedi's efforts had failed.

Some matter about my “pursuit de inamorata,” which I had foolishly divulged to my younger brother, had reached my father’s ears. He had not asked me about it since I had not told him first. This was part of his imperiousness. If the “subject” did not make an appeal, his “lordship” took no heed of the matter. My father didn’t much care about the caste and all but he was prudish—for all his outward show of being avant-garde in the family—and feared the adverse impact of my doings for my brother, whose inconstancy he dreaded as much as my tomfoolery. Perhaps this, too, had made him deaf to my appeals for staying.

I have often thought how my father’s stance forced me to return to Baroda and live out a self-fulfilling prophecy. Are men always doomed like this when they forget their Creator and the rest of the world and want some one thing very badly, the way I wanted Urvashi? I was also at least half as serious about the civil services. I was sandwiched between these two major goals of my life. I often told Bhargav a tidbit out of *The Rise and Fall of The Third Reich*. It was about Hitler’s conviction that he should never create a situation where Germany had to fight a war on two fronts, eastern as well as western. Germany would then be sandwiched in between. Yet Hitler did precisely what he himself said he would never do (and the world is better off for that). I wanted to avoid taking the civil services and pursuing Urvashi together. That was why I had rested in 1993 (remember?). However, my “war wisdom” wouldn’t prevent me from making the same mistake that Hitler had made. But we’ll have to leave it to the subsequent chapters.

I had no choice, my father had pronounced his verdict, and he didn’t change his mind once he said something so decisively. There was another thing. Although I was given over to my grandparents as a baby, I had lived with my parents all my adult life. I

had always had a reverential affection for my grandmother, but I wasn't comfortable with the idea of living with her, even for a few months. It was some hard-to-pin-down kind of awkwardness. Perhaps I was too much of a sexist. I wasn't comfortable with the idea of living with my grandmother, or, for that matter, with my mother. This kept me away from their love and warmth, and I am sure they, too, realized that I'd become alienated. It was her age and wisdom and her doubtless affection for me that had persuaded my grandmother to accept my father's plan. There were other problems with my father's plan. My grandmother had low blood pressure. I didn't want to endanger her health in any way. Also, I felt uncomfortable with this whole idea of "using" my old grandmother as a cook and a housekeeper while I studied for a brighter career.

I did not have any utensils in my house, or a cooking gas connection, a precious possession those days, something you could actually boast about. The gas connection wasn't very costly—you just didn't get it quickly. There was too much red tape, too many years to wait, too many forms to fill out, too many hands to grease. I was never a "practical" kind, and I simply had not bothered about it. With a pinch of regret, I now wished I had done something about it. Would my old grandmother, with her shriveled hands, cook on the kerosene stove? I felt ashamed. My grandmother was the youngest daughter of a diamond merchant. Her father was six feet four inches tall, had a strong, wide chest, and was white as a European. My father once narrated a story about him. It happened when my grandmother was pregnant and on her way to Benares by train. When the train was about to leave, a group of military guys entered the car and demanded my grandparents get off, because it was an army car or something. My grandparents had a confirmed reservation. My grandfather sought to explain the matter, but the soldiers

started misbehaving. This was enough for my grandmother's father, who then swooped on them—there were a few of them—and gave them such a solid spanking they beat a humiliating retreat. I quite believe the story. I have seen the man's picture and he does look like a guy who could take on a few guys alone. My grandmother had married my grandfather out of necessity. Her older sister was married to my grandfather first, but the young lady died of Cholera, in 1944, leaving behind three young children, my father one of them. In keeping with the custom of the times, my present grandmother was then married to my grandfather. There was an 18-year age difference between them, but the two of them belonged to a generation that valued loyalty and togetherness over individual differences. They got along fabulously.

I accompanied my grandmother and mother to a shopping area in Ahmedabad called *Tran Darwaja* (literally, three gates, a 15th century monument). We bought a brass kerosene stove, a skillet, a rolling pin with a stand, a pair of tongs, a strainer, a pressure cooker, saucepans and bowls, a spatula, a knife, and a few jars. This was about the minimum we'd need to run a kitchen. We could have done all this purchasing in Baroda, but I had to bow to my mother's enthusiasm for such things. I still remember that hot afternoon. The rain had stopped and the heat and the humidity were making me mad. The market was crowded, as usual. There were shops lining both sides of the road: hardware stores, bookshops, drug stores, cloth merchants, footwear shops, restaurants, ice cream parlors. The sidewalks were full of vendors. They had a blue or a green or a yellow plastic sheet tied to the railing to keep the sun away. They sold combs, mirrors, purses, bags, stickers, toys, and timepieces; also children's garments and ladies' nightgowns, and raincoats and PVC sandals. The road was narrow enough, and the hawkers' carts added to

the congestion. It was from one or two such carts that we bought most of our kitchenware. All the time we were there, people were swarming, the two-wheelers and auto-rickshaws honking, snaking their way across. The clouds had begun to gather again. We hurried back to the house.

This monsoon was proving to be a strong one—it hadn't ceased raining since June—and I'd begun to be irritated by its continued stay. Little pools of rainwater had formed on roads and lanes. Our auto rickshaw had stopped twice while negotiating such waterlogged tracts. More irritating were the tons and tons of mud that had formed on the roadsides, the putrefying garbage adding color and variety to it, the dirty stray dogs roaming about, and the feces of cows, camels, and donkeys greeting one's feet. In the house, the bees reigned supreme, on the dining table, over and around the food, on the tiled floor, on the bed even; and at night, the mosquitoes. In India, the monsoon results in the growth of lush green vegetation along with the growth of filth. They always go hand in hand. It seems that not only do the rains make the trees go wild, they also make humans go wild. All this filth grows right under the noses of the municipal bodies, but they do nothing about it. We'd already heard of the bubonic plague in Maharashtra. In the next few days, this rat fever would come right up to my doorstep.

We boarded a local train, my grandmother and I. The two-hour journey took twice that time because the train halted at every little station. Normally, I'd have enjoyed this forced viewing of idyllic life, but my mind was still reeling from my father's verdict. Couldn't he have . . . just for once? We got down at a suburb from where the township was only a few minutes away. I called an auto-rickshaw and, after loading the luggage, we were on our way to the township. My grandmother sat in the back with the luggage

while I joined the driver on the front seat, the driver having shifted to a corner, barely sitting but not a trace of complaint on his face. The township always looked the same—neat and clean—whenever I returned to it. What a relief it was to come back to it after the madness outside. A certain amount of madness once in a while is good for our mental health, but the tonic over, we need to return to order and all that it means. There was rainwater on the township roads, but no mud. Whatever might be the other ills of the socialistic, government-owned corporations, it must be said that their residential colonies impress you with their order and peacefulness. If I didn't need to prepare for the exam, I'd never have left it.

When we entered the township, I lifted the side flaps and looked out for Urvashi, but she wasn't there. The main road and the area surrounding Madras Restaurant didn't look crowded, but people kept coming in and out of the main gates. Small, Japanese-style Maruti cars, motorcycles, scooters, and mopeds passed by quietly, as if the coolness in the atmosphere had affected them, too. There was nothing to hurry about when nature was so bountiful. I have often heard Westerners speak pejoratively of rain, especially lots and lots of it. What they don't understand is that, in a climate where it's punitively hot and humid for a greater part of the year, it's the rains that provide reason to believe in hope and regeneration.

At last, the auto-rickshaw reached my quarter. We had come only a small distance but the journey seemed longer, as the driver, constrained by my invasion of his space, had driven far more slowly. Also, sometimes, one's thoughts increased the distance—figuratively speaking, of course—or the duration of an experience. I embarrassedly peered out to see if someone known was around, but both Rochester's and the Yokel's

doors were closed. With an ability that only age and experience can bestow, my grandmother made herself comfortable in a very short time. She got the kitchen running in less than an hour, not uttering a single word of disapproval upon seeing my pathetic house. Here was an old lady whose husband had died five years ago. She had no income of her own—save a meager pension of five hundred rupees—and lived alternately at my father's and uncle's houses. She was diabetic, prone to allergies, and didn't know a soul in Baroda. Yet she had come with her grandson, who was young and foolish and unpredictable. She had come to be his cook and housekeeper, after seventy years of life in which she'd served her father, husband, children, and grandchildren. I could only be grateful to her for being with me, but I was also worried about her health. I'd told myself that if there was even the slightest health problem, I'd take her back to Ahmedabad, even if it meant I had to be alone. As it turned out, eventually, I had to take her back to Ahmedabad, but it wasn't because she was sick or anything. If I tell you why that happened, I'd have to fast forward this story, and what story worth its salt merits that?

CHAPTER 9

September 15, 1994:

Went for a walk with Rochester in the evening. We discussed, of all things, Rwanda. I couldn't believe what he told me, that more than half a million Tutsis were killed there by majority Hutus. I had not looked at a newspaper in such a long time that I just drew a blank. My immediate thought was, What if this were to happen between Hindus and Muslims? I know things can never become so bad in India, but what if they did? I remembered Alan Goodall's book *The Wandering Gorillas*, which I read five or six years ago, borrowing it from the British Library. I remember liking the name of the Rwandan capital, Kigali. I wanted to visit it. I don't recollect much of its description, except that it's surrounded by mountains, has narrow, winding lanes, and an interesting marketplace. I would never have imagined its name would one day be associated with genocide.

To my growing irritation, the rain continued to pour down as if it'd stay for another two months. I hated to study when it rained. It was so romantic outside, and here I was, buried in books, studying the constitution of India; the local self-government of the *Cholas (the 10th century A.D. south Indian dynasty)*; the *Mauryan* rock inscriptions (also those on pillars, a statuette on one of which became the national emblem of independent India, the Lion Capital of Sarnath); the *Mughal* paintings; *Sher Shah's* agrarian reforms (in just six years of the reign of this Afghan noble); the Reformation; the attack on Pearl

Harbour; Machiavelli's advice to princes; Charlemagne's glorious reign; John Locke's theory of government; the fall of Constantinople; the spice trade; the treaty of Versailles; the thirty years' war; the Battle of *Plassey* (the founding of the "Raj"); the French and the Dutch; Garibaldi and General Franco; political essays by David Hume; the *Kalinga* war (the war that changed the victor's heart); *Buddha*, *Mahavira*, *Ajita Kesakambalin*, *Gosala* (the "heterodox" prophets of the 6th century B.C.); the *Bhakti* movement (the "devotional" school of Hinduism in medieval times); the *Khalsa Panth* (the Sikh movement); the *Barabar* cave temples (pre-Christian era caves, the location of a scene in *A Passage to India*); the *Chola* architecture (created the finest south Indian temples); the *Rashtrakutas*; *Pushyamitra Shunga* (the Brahmin general who killed Brihadratha, the last Mauryan king, in 185 B.C.); *Kalidasa* (the Sanskrit Shakespeare who wrote *Sakuntala*); *Shudraka*; *Bana*; the *Sangam* literature (the early-Christian-century Tamil literature of south India); Chiang Kai-shek; Ho Chi Minh Only there was no Urvashi.

The more I read history, the more miserable I became. I'd take Urvashi to the Taj Mahal. We'd sit on that marble bench in front, when it was a full-moon-night, holding hands. Aha! That'd be the place for our honeymoon. Wasn't she herself like the Taj? A thing of beauty, its loveliness increasing the longer you beheld it, just as Keats had said.

I had forgotten that Urvashi's family had refused even to meet me. Her brother made fun of me openly. It was difficult to believe that Urvashi didn't know anything about it. Surely, the brats would talk to her. Why didn't she do anything then? If the family was serious about me, how did they tolerate such behavior on the part of Samar? The whole thing had continued for over a year and a half, yet I had not even once talked to Urvashi. I thought of this more and more. Perhaps I was wrong, completely wrong

about this affair. It was nothing more than madness on my part. The girl didn't care whether or not I loved her more than anything in the world, more than anyone in any time could have loved anyone else. I had taped a poem of Keats in my cubicle in the office.

Fame, like a wayward girl, will still be coy
To those who woo her with too slavish knees,
But makes surrender to some thoughtless boy,
And dotes the more upon a heart at ease;
She is a Gypsy,—will not speak to those
Who have not learnt to be content without her;
A Jilt, whose ear was never whispered close,
Who thinks they scandal her who talk about her;
A very Gypsy is she, Nilus-born,
Sister-in-law to jealous Potiphar;
Ye love-sick Bards! repay her scorn for scorn;
Ye Artists lovelorn! madmen that ye are!
Make your best bow to her and bid adieu,
Then, if she likes it, she will follow you.

I had copied the poem from some anthology of Keats' poems long back. I typed it up one day using the Harvard Graphics. There were many things in the poem that I liked: girls, fame, also "bows." I had this whole chivalrous concept of romance, where you held the hand of a girl a certain way, kissed her gently and never on the lips until the right moment (perhaps marriage), remained a quiet, stolid presence when you escorted her to a

party and she swirled and smiled as any lady would. I used to hate it that Ashley Wilkes lost Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind*. How could Ashley, the aristocratic, genial Ashley lose to that overfed, uncouth Rhett Butler? In my novel, Ashley would have won Scarlett even if he stubbornly refused to acknowledge her overtures at first. How can an aristocratic man show his affections easily? If the fair ladies had beauty, the gentlemen had dignity. Wasn't I dignified in not approaching Urvashi on my own again? I couldn't beg for her affections. I would certainly never be cheap and make obscene passes at her, or plot to arrange a secret rendezvous with her. I could only choose, and let her family know about it, and this, I had already done. An honorable man would do it no differently.

Here, my mind paused for a while on what I truly wanted. Wouldn't I have cried with joy if Urvashi were waiting for me somewhere? What if we were in an elevator and the thing got stuck, somewhere between the two floors, where there was no outside but a concrete slab? What if she came on her own to my house? Would I be the gentleman I think I am if she said to me, Come, let's do it? Oh, you pathetic hypocrite. The world would be better without gentlemen like you. My mind frequently disobeyed me, bluntly telling what it thought of me. The bloody thing was not under my control. It helped me devise a plan and still laughed at me the whole time.

Looking back, I'm surprised how little I remembered my promise to my grandfather that I'd be a civil servant. Here was a chance to fulfill his wish. I had everything, all the books, all the time, since I had taken a four-month sabbatical. But all this seemed insignificant before an eighteen-year-old girl. I had not spoken a word about Urvashi to my grandmother. I knew it wouldn't help, and I didn't want her to feel that I was wasting her kind services. The poor lady was there only so I could study. Since I

didn't have a TV, all she did was to read this Gujarati newspaper that came in the morning. I think she also knitted a sweater for my father.

Thanks to my stomach ghost and the health roller coaster ride I'd been on, I had well nigh stopped smoking. My health mania had subsided but I still asked my grandmother to place her palm on my throat and feel my temperature. I also asked her if I should go to the medical unit and report to the doctor such and such symptom. She patiently bore all my madness, but even she became a bit curt when she saw me swallowing *Dispepright* after meals.

"You shouldn't take that every day," she said, letting out a sigh when I nodded, downing the capsule all the same.

We were approaching the last week of September when, one day early in the morning, I read in the Times of India about the outbreak of the pneumonic plague in Surat, which was two hours by train from Baroda. Many died within hours. People decamped in whatever they got—train, bus, even a truck. Many came to Baroda, a few to the township. Some had to return, the doors closed on them. Those who'd come to the township crowded the medical unit. They were checked and given Tetracycline. Anyone who wanted the drug could have it. Drugstores ran out of Tetracycline. People who hadn't been anywhere near Surat in the last six months bought a week's quota. The plague was airborne. The symptoms: coughing, bleeding nose, fever. I was coughing, too, and had a runny nose. My fears heightened. But my contracting the infection was highly improbable. This thought alone kept me from running to the medical unit for a check up. I did consider the idea, though. The plague disappeared as mysteriously as it had come. There was a massive clean up in Surat after that. Garbage heaps on the roadsides were

removed, sewers and drains fixed, a cleanliness committee set up and got going, roads widened and encroachments removed, rats captured and killed. "Surat's changed," said anyone who went there later. Even today, the city remembers the plague. The evening after the plague's appearance, I went out to call my father to inform him that we were safe. It was always I who called. I sometimes felt that I was the father and he was my indulgent, egotistical son.

Urvashi dominated my thoughts as completely as American warplanes dominated the Iraqi skies, if that metaphor works. I could bear it no longer. Urvashi, she was the world! The only thing that mattered to me! God, what was civil service before her! What if I became a civil servant but lost her in the process? What if her parents got her married elsewhere or, worse, if she fell in love and decided to marry someone else? Urvashi, Urva, Urva, Urva, Urva, Urva . . . suddenly, I knew I would not be able to study for the civil services, that my leave and the money I'd spent on books would all go waste, that I'd never become a civil servant, that Urvashi was my destiny every living hour from now on, and that I should move heaven and hell to get her. I had become like a point in a story where unexpected things happen and the reader wants to read and read until he discovers how it all ends. It was in the introduction to Kafka's *Castle* that I had read that Kafka did not believe in accidents, that he believed everything had causes, also that if we probed enough, if we "accepted" life without talking back, everything would be plain to us in the course of time. I had entered this mode of "acceptance." My "best bow" was still ahead.

The nearest telephone booth was at a shop that sold bread, milk, fruits, toothpastes, shaving creams, packaged snacks, ice cream, soda, cookies, and

confectionaries. The owner was the rudest shopkeeper I had seen. He talked to you as if he was doing you a favor by selling to you. His shop enjoyed a monopoly in the township. As a result, he got away with such lousy behavior. He “managed” the big bosses by promptly delivering their orders, also by sweet-talking to their family members. Although I was a junior officer, he called me a “Sahib,” his tongue just a little careless while speaking with me. With officers of higher rank, however, his tongue became a lot more controlled. I wanted to be one up on this guy, so, one day, when he was particularly blunt, I called him Sahib, too. This titillated his whole face, whose large part turned pink for a while, until his cussedness ordered it back to its original color, which was dark brown. Anyway, I was walking up to the shop when I saw Rochester coming toward me. He had come to fetch milk or something. I stopped him on the road, and the next moment—as if the moment had finally come for which I had returned to Baroda—I began to tell him about Urvashi. The more rational explanation was that, since I could not talk to my grandmother about Urvashi, I talked to Rochester about her. I was to the point. Rochester listened without interrupting me. After I’d finished, he asked me to follow him. K.’s work had started.

We walked to the house of someone who was from Urvashi’s caste. The man worked as a librarian in the township school and his father-in-law was a Gujarati film actor—the famous Naresh Gujju. The man lived in sector 2. This was good news to my ears. Perhaps he might know Urvashi’s family, and since he was from the same caste, he might succeed where Mr. Chaturvedi had failed. As it turned out, this man, Naresh Gujju’s son-in-law, lived very close to Urvashi’s house. He respected Rochester because Rochester had once cured his wife of some chronic ailment. We stood in the small garden

he'd cultivated in his front yard. Rochester talked to him while I stood at a distance. The man cast a few furtive glances at me. This made me more uncomfortable. Though I had come for an honorable thing—for marriage—I felt as if I were a criminal, a rich brat who had run over some poor beggars sleeping on the sidewalk, or a city-dweller who had impregnated the daughter of the village chief. Rochester introduced me to the man and I mumbled a few details advertising myself. My premonition about the man was not wrong. He started listing the “insurmountable difficulties” that lay in my way, how it was more difficult than anything else he had ever faced or seen others face. It wasn't possible, that's all. We returned as quickly as we had started. Although my excitement had nosedived, it made me think in some incomprehensible way that it was still possible to reach Urvashi. I asked Rochester to think of some way, any way. Rochester nodded, bouncing off the road as if he were a magical ball on the roll. He actually was!

There was nothing else to do, my mind wasn't there in the studies, and my OPERATION ONE was stalled. I did not talk to Rochester again. The man was working on it, he'd told me. There was no need to hammer on the same thing again and again. The rain kept pouring and pouring. The rain god was compensating Gujarat for all the previous droughts, and there'd been a few in my memory.

One afternoon, I was just lazing around, my grandmother beside me, chopping vegetables for the evening meal, which I'd asked her to prepare early, so that I could give my stomach longer time to digest it. The front balcony door was open for some reason. Suddenly, Rochester entered followed by a tall guy who had slung a blue denim bag around his shoulder. I caught the profile of the man and was impressed with the same. It resembled the profile of John Keats, of all people, though the man was a lot taller than

the illustrious poet. The guy was built well for his height but drooped a little while walking, which, though, unlike the drooping of some skinny guy, made him look dignified and stately even. My first impression of the guy was that I had seen him before, only I couldn't remember where.

I had told Rochester not to talk about Urvashi in my house. I did not want my grandmother to know. She was a conservative type and had practically made me a boy from a baby. She was also somehow not much taken in by Rochester. Perhaps it was the lady's pride. Rochester was dark and my grandmother, white. Perhaps that wasn't the case, for my grandfather was dark, too. Whatever the reason for her dislike, my grandmother didn't like my going out with Rochester. She did not say anything but I saw her disapproval simmering behind those steely grey eyes that directly looked at me when I returned from our walks. They seemed to say, Why did you bring me here if all you wanted was to go out and go out and then go out again? She'd been critical of me in recent years. Sometimes, I wondered if she was the same best granny in the world who had brought me up and nursed me to safety and vigor when I was struck by polio.

My drawing room was a complete shame, due to its puny size, so when Rochester entered with this guest it seemed as if too many people had suddenly descended upon the room. I wasn't very happy seeing Rochester. I knew my grandmother didn't like him, but more importantly, I did not trust his memory. He remained in his own world most of the time, and I seriously doubted if he had remembered my injunction not to mention Urvashi in the presence of my grandmother. I was scared he might. All other things aside, I was still a boy in my grandmother's eyes, and a boy, a good boy at that, which I certainly was, didn't do such things. Of course, one big advantage was that my grandmother did not

understand English, so we could talk in English with some relief, but she was no fool for all her seventy years, and I was sure if we talked long enough, she'd get suspicious, so I suggested to Rochester and his friend that we might just walk down to Madras Restaurant and talk everything over a cup of tea. Rochester did not drink tea for some reason. He drank coffee, which was fine, too. The guy who'd accompanied Rochester was Dushyanta. He taught in the Bharat Petrochemicals School, and like Rochester and me, he, too, was a Brahmin. It was strange: three Brahmins joining hands to accomplish a union between the "highest" and the "lowest" caste. India, indeed, was changing!

What had happened was that, after I'd spoken to Rochester, he'd gone to a teacher who used to tutor Urvashi for accounting. The accounting teacher came from the warrior caste—*Kshatriya*. After he heard everything, he expressed his strong disapproval of my pursuit. He did not much care if I married Urvashi or not but he would not sully his ancestors' record of preserving the dignity of a Brahmin. The web of caste was so strong, everything was caught in it. When Rochester insisted, the teacher suggested the name of Dushyanta.

Why Dushyanta agreed to help me is a little complex to explain. Here was a guy who was about 36 and unmarried. He liked to mentor his students and volunteer help for just about anything. If you went to him with a class assignment that required you to write a five-page essay on the dangers of nuclear arms, the guy would dig into books and write the essay the whole evening, working late into the night. I later saw him extemporaneously dictating speeches and essays to students when he didn't have time. The guy was a one-man NGO. His work also included conveying proposals for marriage, and he had paired up a few happy couples who visited him regularly. Thus, when

Rochester told him about my Urvashi pursuit, he did not require convincing. Dushyanta was different from anyone I had ever known. Even Rochester looked pedestrian by comparison. Dushyanta looked like a guy possessed. His face was long and handsome. His eyes shone with compassion. They looked at you as though they were genuinely interested in you. He wore long-sleeved shirts and his hair was oiled and neatly combed. This was a guy who cared for the way he looked, one could tell that in one glance.

The tea came soon enough, coffee for Rochester, who started sipping it gratefully. Madras Restaurant was less crowded today. There was a cricket match or something and most people were home, glued to their places before the TV sets. There was a time I wouldn't have missed a cricket match for anything, its telecast, I mean. That was when Sunil Gavaskar, my favorite Cricketer, played. The highest maker of centuries in test cricket in the whole world, he had an elegant stance at the crease, straight from the copybook, and his shots, especially his straight drive and flick, were pictures of perfection. I had learned the necessity to create a good first impression on people—especially those whose help you wanted—in my MBA program. I always thought it was only fair that you minded what you said in front of people who really mattered to you. I gave Dushyanta a brief but powerful account of my pursuit, with its low and high points thus far. This was one more lesson from my MBA—clear communication; I considered it as important as, say, taking aim when you shoot. Dushyanta listened to everything, quietly. When he spoke, his words were clear and confident. To my ears, they sounded musical, too.

“From here, I'm going straight to Urvashi's house. I'll talk to her father if he is there, else I'll leave word. I know the whole family very well. I have taught all the sisters,

including Urvashi. I am sure they would agree to meet you. In fact, I see you marrying Urvashi. Believe me, it can happen.”

I was overjoyed. After Mr. Chaturvedi’s failed attempt, I had been gradually losing all hope of being able to contact Urvashi’s family again. Rochester had taken me to Naresh Gujju’s son-in-law, too, but we had returned, disappointed. Was this finally it? Or would this, too, go the way my earlier proposal went, when I’d waited and waited for that promised meeting with Urvashi’s family that never took place? I thanked Dushyanta most warmly but he refused to accept the thanks, saying all the time how he must do what he could for a good cause. The man was modest, for all his powers. On our way back, Rochester told me he hoped something would come out of this.

That was Rochester. He never got excited, except when I drafted something for him—for all his good English, the man was lazy. “This is great,” he’d say. “The most wonderful draft anyone could have prepared.” The man had recently been served with suspension orders by the company. Rochester’s fault was that he’d slapped a student when he disturbed the class—Rochester had been teaching Andrew Marvel’s “To his Coy Mistress”—and wouldn’t stop even after a warning. The student wasn’t hurt much. His parents said that he had to have a few stitches below one of his eyes. That was about it, his eyes were safe, but the father of the student lodged a complaint against Rochester. When the principal asked Rochester for an explanation, he said that the student had disturbed the class when he was teaching his favorite poem that he’d spent long hours translating into Gujarati and that had been sent for publication in the next issue of the company newsletter. The principal asked Rochester to write a letter of apology to the boy’s parents, who were justifiably angry their son was slapped so hard. Rochester flatly

refused to write the letter. The principal then said to Rochester that he did not deserve to be a teacher. Rochester told the man he did not deserve to be a principal, either. “What do you know about schools?” Rochester asked him. The principal had been a warehouse in-charge who had recently been made a principal. Although Rochester was suspended pending an inquiry, he was cheerful as a bird. I drafted a reply to his suspension order. The man actually believed he’d be reinstated the moment the “authorities” read the reply.

Dushyanta did not take long to get back. The man had worked! At long last, I was to meet Urvashi’s parents. But wait, don’t write it yet, unless you mean it, I hear you, the reader, scream, didn’t you give us this expectation earlier, too, only to tell us later nothing happened? My answer is—that’s right, but that’s because Mr. Chaturvedi had just left a vague answer from Urvashi’s family that they’d like to meet me. Dushyanta had come with the date, time, and place of our meeting. I remember it was twenty-four September when I got the news. The meeting had been arranged for the twenty-sixth, at eight in the evening. The venue was Dushyanta’s house in sector 2.

I was excited as hell. They had said that first, the parents would meet me, then if they approved, they’d have others in the family, including Urvashi, see me. I was displeased momentarily but told myself this is how things happened. You didn’t always see the girl first. My greatest moment had finally come and I was being lousily picky. I don’t know how many times I thanked God that day. I was unable to sleep that night, for a long time. If the reader remembers the chart I prepared, I’d written in the strategy section of it that I would try and get someone reliable to approach Urvashi’s parents for a meeting. My strategy had taken time but it had worked at last. My only thought at this time was not what I should be doing in the meeting—perhaps a serious error on my part

but I always liked spontaneity and had nothing to hide—but how much more time would lapse before I would marry Urvashi. With her three older sisters around to be wed, there was little chance it would be any time soon. Damn them, I thought. I was willing to marry all three if necessary, if possible, if only I could marry my sweetheart soon.

I dressed for the evening carefully, wearing a light blue shirt with navy blue pants and no tie this time. Yet I was also a little nonchalant about the whole thing. I had told my grandmother at last and was relieved to see she did not hate the idea, as I had earlier thought. In fact, she asked me to polish my black leather shoes and clip my nails. She even wished me a kind of All the Best when I was leaving. As I walked along the main road of the township, where I had first seen Urvashi nearly two years ago, I felt a surge of satisfaction at my tenacity and at the strength of my convictions. I looked around to see if Bhargav was there or any of my other friends. I wanted to tell them all that I had won in spite of their spewing ridicule on me. These thoughts, and a growing sense that Urvashi was destined to be mine—didn't this, my going to meet the family, prove it?—took me soon to Dushyanta's house. The front door was open and a scooter (it must be Urvashi's father's, for it wasn't Dushyanta's green *Bajaj Priya*) was parked in the front yard. As I mounted the two little steps to the porch, my heartbeats quickened. I was finally tense.

Dushyanta's drawing-room was large and spacious. That's one thing I liked about that room that I visited again and again over the next year or two. I met my wife's parents in the same room. In this sense, I often think that the room cared for me like a guardian and wanted me to get married and settle down. Don't be shocked at my previous sentence. I think in this way about rooms, houses, shirts, dates, even fonts sometimes. Urvashi's father sat, sprawled on a sofa. For some reason—maybe she didn't expect the

meeting to be long—her mother stood leaning against a wall. The two couldn't have looked more apart. Urvashi's father looked ruddy and stout, like one of those mountainous people. Her mother was thin, her face gaunt and dark. Urvashi's face was a combination of her mother's sharp features and her father's complexion. I was an "English" boy after all, and a good handshake mattered a great deal to me, so I extended my hand to her father and the man stood up straight and shook hands with me, but perhaps it'd been a mistake because the man was barely five feet tall and looked at me literally from the neck up. Gosh, that was bad, I thought. It's not that I dislike short people or anything. I know by experience that there are two kinds of short people. One, the kind that is so impressed by height they'd always give you admiring looks and even compliments; the other kind is more complex. This kind looks at you with reluctant admiration but instantly considers you their competitor whom they have to "stand" up to in some way. Urvashi's father, I instinctively knew, belonged to the second kind.

"Why do you like Urvashi?" Urvashi's father asked me. The question was expected, yet I had to think of a cogent, specific answer. The man looked at me sternly as I began to explain how and why I was after his daughter.

"I liked her at first sight. When I saw her, I knew this girl could be my wife. Perhaps you, too, recall such an instance from your youth or that of your friends," I said, keeping the trembling in my voice barely under control. Probably, it was my honesty that appealed to this doughty man, for his face shone with the smile of someone who lives to fight another day, resourceful for all his dwarfish stature.

"What about the difference in our castes? You're a Brahmin," he said, serious now.

“I don’t believe in these things. It’s not an issue with my family, either. In fact, my father once said to me that I could marry a Brazilian if I wanted to,” I said. Seeing that Urvashi’s father’s facial expressions remained unchanged, I decided to hammer my point further. “And even if somebody in my family has any objections, I have nothing to worry about, as I’m independent. In fact, my grandmother has blessed this. As you probably know, she’s here to help me with my civil services preparations,” (at this Urvashi’s father nodded). “She wished me good luck as I was coming for the meeting,” I said.

“Why didn’t she accompany you?” Urvashi’s father asked. I regretted mentioning my grandmother immediately after I did so. Even more, I reproached myself for not preparing for such an obvious rejoinder and was literally thrown off balance by the question. Urvashi’s father now looked at me with a penetrating gaze.

“Oh, it’s because I didn’t want to involve her at this stage when nothing has materialized. Once I have your consent, I can ask her to conduct the negotiations. After all, she is older than all of us,” I said. Urvashi’s father nodded at my last sentence. I felt that, even though my explanation didn’t seem entirely satisfactory, I had managed to ward the question off well.

Urvashi’s father bobbed his head in agreement. I was happy, as I was succeeding with each passing minute. I wasn’t wrong in my perception as the next thing that Urvashi’s father said sent me reeling on waves of ecstasy.

“We believe in Arya Samaj—an organization founded by a Brahmin from Gujarat named Dayanand Saraswati in 1875 that believed in Rigvedic social equality—and would like the marriage to be as per their rites,” he said.

“My father respects Arya Samaj, too,” (this wasn’t a lie). “It’d be perfect,” I said.

Urvashi’s father, however, didn’t acknowledge what I said beyond a half smile.

Urvashi’s mother stood leaning against a wall, her hands folded behind her. I didn’t recall having seen her sit at all. She didn’t ask me anything. The only remark she made was that it was important to take into account Urvashi’s wishes in the matter. The way she said that sounded ominous to me, for it was a tone that conveyed negativity. It said that Urvashi did not want this to happen. Of course, I read it as yet another sign of anxiety on the part of Urvashi’s mother because of the difference in our castes. She looked serious throughout, as though she’d been forced to come to the meeting. I noted this with unhappiness but there was nothing I could do. Nevertheless, I kept looking in her direction from time to time, trying to give an impression that I respected and liked her presence.

If I didn’t tell you what Dushyanta was doing all this while, it would be both unjust and selfish of me. Dushyanta sat on a chair opposite Urvashi’s father, his arms locked in front of his chest, his head nodding all the time, and his face beaming at every remark Urvashi’s father made. The man could be called Mr. Sincerity. Urvashi’s father now turned to Dushyanta, asking him about plans for his own marriage. To Dushyanta’s stories about how his married friends suffered because of losing all independence after marriage, Urvashi’s father laughed heartily, slapping knees repeatedly. Soon, they began to talk about all kinds of things: the rains, the plague, Arya Samaj, the inauspicious period beginning September the 30th (Urvashi’s father said the period was bad for marriage negotiations and the like). I refrained from speaking anything after this. I was scared I might spoil a good impression I’d created on Urvashi’s father by shooting off my

mouth more than was necessary, so I watched him talk on these and other issues to Dushyanta, who was tirelessly mannered and consciously respectful.

The meeting lasted about an hour. Urvashi's parents appeared to be strong individuals, with their own minds, and when I reflected about them later, I could not help liking them for the utterly dignified way in which they had conducted themselves that day. Urvashi's parents could be no different. It was agreed that we would meet again the next day, at the same time and place. Urvashi's father said that his oldest daughter and her husband would be there, too, and, of course, so would Urvashi herself. When I walked back to my house around 9.30 that night, I was a contented man, a man who was responsible. I had come a long way, following Urvashi's trail, and, at last, my destination was in sight. I had risked so much on this pursuit, my whole career, and the dream of my beloved late grandfather. After all this, if someone deserved to marry Urvashi, it was I, and things were shaping up accordingly.

The next day was September 27, 1994. It was the day I'd meet Urvashi face to face. Probably, we'd also talk. I'd tell her about my love for her. I talked about the meeting with my grandmother, but it was clear she wasn't interested. I understood her attitude, which was the direct result of Urvashi's caste, but what could I do about that? I tried to tell her how Urvashi was different, that her parents looked like people of "upper castes," but my grandmother did not change her dour expression. Although I knew she'd refuse, I still asked her if she would accompany me the next day. Her refusal was quick and sharp. "Keep me out of all this," she said, as if I were asking her to do some immoral thing. I was hurt by her ruthlessness. Wasn't I the same Puru she had prepared *Horlicks* for? Didn't she massage my skinny legs that would have crumbled but for her care? My

grandfather used to say that I was her third son. Why couldn't she understand my feelings for this girl? How could I not love a girl just because she was from some other, supposedly lower caste? Wasn't the caste system a later imposition?

The Rigvedic society did not have castes, certainly not the rigid caste hierarchy that'd develop in the later times. And Urvashi looked every inch, every ounce, a girl of a noble ancestry. I'd read in the history books how the caste system assimilated every foreign tribe that came to India in ancient times, from Greeks to Scythians to Huns to Parthians. Often, the poor among these took to the "lowly" occupations, such as weaving, tanning, shoemaking, blacksmithing, agricultural labor, etc. These people were herded into the "lower" castes. Urvashi's was a case like this. I had given this explanation to many. They neither agreed nor disagreed. I didn't want to spoil my mood by dwelling more on my grandmother's attitude, so I retired to my bed. Soon, I was sound asleep.

CHAPTER 10

27 September 1994 wasn't different from countless other days to which I had awakened. In fact, shocking though it might sound, after my morning tea, I decided to go to the medical unit for a cough and cold. I had become so sensitive to any physical change that, when I experienced even a small boil, it sent me running to the medical unit. Later, one day, long after the events mentioned here had ended, I went to the medical unit and was waiting on a bench outside for my turn. Since I had nothing to do, I began leafing through my brown-jacketed casebook. I opened the very first page and saw that the first entry was for March of 1994. As I flipped a page or two (for 1994 always excited me), I came across a few entries for September, 1994. There it was, the 27th of September. I was prescribed an expectorant, an antibiotic, and a caffeine drug. It was strange to think of Urvashi's suitor as someone sickly, but I had been down temporarily and had returned to my strong and healthy self before the meeting.

Rochester had stopped coming to my house. The reason was my grandmother's silent but intense disapproval of him. She knew it was Rochester who had brought Dushyanta to my house, and he was, consequently, the originator of the meeting with Urvashi's parents. Rochester's idiosyncrasies were no less to blame. He lost interest once he'd started something, and he became enthusiastic again only when there was a problem. I missed his cool counsel that had always shown me the way. When I went to his house after my meeting with Urvashi's parents, he was asleep without having his dinner (his wife had again developed some swelling in her legs and consequently no dinner was

cooked). He awoke instantly and accompanied me to Madras Restaurant for a quick discussion over a cup of tea (in his case, coffee). To my fast (you had to be fast with him, for he didn't have much patience) and detailed account of the meeting, all he said was a "good." To my queries intended to elicit some kind of a predictive response, he said over and over that he couldn't say which way the whole thing would go.

My grandmother had been all right before my meeting with Urvashi's parents. She was guarded but she'd wished me good luck when I was leaving. What had changed her mind was unknown to me. It baffled me, but I attributed it to her deep-seated upper caste prejudices. Or maybe it was that she disapproved of the second meeting—she belonged to the old order and wasn't averse to thinking that such things were best handled slowly and discreetly and that things here were going too fast. In a "good" marriage the two families' heads—the parents—met first. A young man meeting with the girl's family on his own wasn't respectable, could even be termed "vulgar." She also felt, I sensed, that I was going way too far to please Urvashi's family, that, in the process, I was compromising my own and my family's self-respect. I understood her stance, even appreciated it, given the past ambivalence of Urvashi's family, but I was willing to forget it all if Urvashi could still be mine.

How did it matter that her brother, along with his callow friends, had laughed at me in broad daylight or that I had seen Urvashi sometimes talking to other boys or that her family had promised to Mr. Chaturvedi that they would meet me and then backed off? I hadn't told all this to my grandmother, but she had pieced together much of this through information from different sources. And the sources were plenty. There was my younger brother, who thought I was being unreasonable, stubborn, and foolish in the matter. There

was Rochester's cantankerous wife (the word cantankerous never suited anyone so accurately). She was always willing to criticize her husband, more so to his face. Weirdly, the woman liked me. Maybe it was because I was sweet-talking, and she found this endearing, her constant complaint being that nobody cared for her. But I knew she was perfectly capable of criticizing me behind my back, especially to my grandmother, who occasionally went downstairs to spend some time with this "iron" lady.

Finally, the moment came. I dressed and left for Dushyanta's house. Maybe it was my grandmother's silent disapproval that made me serious and silent. It was a very unromantic way to approach the most romantic moment of my life. I remembered Urvashi's mother's words: "She should like the (alliance), too." Was it that Urvashi didn't like this whole drama I had staged? If she didn't like it, why had she agreed to meet me? She could have told her parents, "No way, I don't like the boy. Period." But she probably did something of the kind when Mr. Chaturvedi's proposal surfaced, and what about her own blunt "na" to me? What about those reports that I kept getting from Bhargav that she was involved with this boy or that? There was doubtless some truth to them. I had myself seen her with a boy. Urvashi had always looked at me—in a dumb, cosmic sort of way, as if she were watching a natural phenomenon—but she had never given a sign I could bet my life on and say she loved me. She was always an enigma, a beautiful mask I'd been rendered utterly incapable to see through. She had dominated me as though she were the prince and I the princess. These were my thoughts as I walked to meet my love, my life, my challenge, and, eventually, my nemesis, for the first time.

Dushyanta's drawing room was the same, only much more fully occupied tonight. A sweeping glance at the gathering gave me a glimpse of what I desired. There she was,

shyly ensconced between her two older sisters (the third had not come), hardly looking up, although her fiery eyes shone with blinding brilliance upon my entry for just a moment. I observed her tenuous form, her twitching chin, her quivering lips, and her—hallelujah—sexy ears. I was crazy about them (I still am). She had worn a long, loose purplish nightgown. When I sat down and stole a few glances at her, I was somewhat disappointed she had come to meet me in such homely, casual attire. I loved her naked ears, fine, but where were her beautiful, dangling gold earrings? Her hair was loose and looked unkempt. Her dress was a kind I disliked. I had seen many Gujarati middle class women sauntering around at night after dinner dressed in such loose nightgowns, their ugliness compounded four hundred times by such a lousy garment. Couldn't she have worn one of her *churidars* or the t-shirt and jeans that looked so attractive on her?

I looked at Urvashi's older sisters for the first time. Someone, I think it was Dushyanta, introduced them to me. Sitting to Urvashi's right was tomboyish Bhairavi (whom Urvashi's parents had "offered" to me through Mr. Chaturvedi). She seemed excited enough, as if I were there to see her and not her younger sister. What a perfect contrast she made to her younger sister, who cowered beside her like a fairy, respectful of her ill-formed and thorny sibling. I did not dare imagine my plight if I were married to the boisterous—even though she was silent, her manner said as much—Bhairavi. God was kind, was my only thought. Another sister of Urvashi who sat to her left on the sofa was Jasmine. She looked calm and sober, though she was the plainest-looking of all, her face having that unique quality of being forgotten the next moment. Next, Dushyanta turned to a fair complexioned, dour-faced, stout young man sitting on a folding chair in a corner and looking at me more like a police inspector than someone who'd accompanied

a family that had come to see a prospective groom. He was the son-in-law of the family, Urvashi's oldest sister's husband. His wife sat next to him and looked at me with similar expressions, though they were mixed, with some degree of kindness and affection even. She was the fairest of them all, and her features—especially her pointed nose that looked as though it were chiseled and carved—were sharper than even Urvashi's. Samar, of course, had not come—had not been brought—I was told later.

Since all these people were either silent or reserved, I took it upon myself to introduce myself, which I proceeded to do in my fluent English, conscious all the while of my fascinated audience. Dushyanta, too, chipped in, but in his enthusiasm, he said something I wished he hadn't. He declared rather impressively that I was preparing for the civil services and could be a future district collector. This was embarrassing (it sounded like boasting about an uncertain future, besides, I had a good career in the present, too), a faux pas because I knew with certainty that I wouldn't pass the exam, notwithstanding the fact that I kept convincing myself and others to the contrary, which is perhaps why Dushyanta had mentioned it.

I sat, crossing my legs, on an easy chair. Dushyanta blabbered on about my civil services attempt. Partly because he was praising me and partly out of my mortification at the mention of the civil services, I avoided meeting the gazes of Urvashi's family members. It thus startled me when someone lightly tapped my shoulder. It was Bhairavi who had sneaked up to occupy a vacant chair placed next to me. Actually, the chair had been vacated by Urvashi's mother, who had stood up and gone inside, perhaps to the bathroom. As though it were all right that Bhairavi, who was to be my future sister-in-law, showed her camaraderie by sitting next to me, I turned to her and said hello.

“You look cute,” Bhairavi told me, smiling widely.

She had said it loudly enough, for I felt everyone in the room looking in our direction. Urvashi sat hanging her head, her locked palms resting on her lap. Making it clear to all that I was Urvashi’s no matter what, I returned a loud thank you.

“You know, Urvashi’s still young for you,” Bhairavi said, not loudly this time.

I was annoyed. What were her intentions? Still, not willing to appear ill-mannered, I said, “I disagree, respectfully.”

Urvashi continued to stare at the ground, as if she saw everything through a crystal ball kept there.

“She’s not your match. I’m warning you,” Bhairavi said in a whisper. Then she returned to her place next to Urvashi. I was surprised. What kind of a sister was Bhairavi, spoiling her own sister’s chances? Poor devil, I thought, she resented the fact that someone so eligible should want to marry her four years’ younger sister and not her.

The son-in-law continued to look at me fiercely, as if he were an offended party in a trial I was undergoing. I kept evading his glance, deliberately forcing my mind to forgive him this insolence in hopes that my magnanimity would reach the man somehow, through thought-waves or something like that, and force him to look at me with different eyes. The son-in-law taught Hindi in a high school (I switched to my equally fluent Hindi upon learning this, talking about the importance of learning our national language and about how Hindi faced resistance in south Indian states, notably Tamilnadu; but even this linguistic shift failed to soften the young man, who still looked at me as though I were responsible for his death in a previous life).

Why had not my grandmother come? This came from Urvashi's father. The question hit me like an arrow, right on target. I was foolish enough to have been unprepared again with an appropriate and convincing answer. I remember something that Sherlock Holmes says to Dr. Watson in one of those Holmes' films, "My Dear Watson, the smallest things in life are infinitely more important." Then and now, whenever I remember that night and Urvashi's father's straight arrow-like question, I also remember what Holmes says to Watson.

I answered, "Oh, she hesitates a little bit even though she approves of my choice. She just doesn't think this is the right stage to get involved. Once we agree, she'll come forward. I'm sure she'll get along with all of you very well, and Urvashi, she'll love. My grandfather died five years ago. Had he been alive, he would have certainly come. My grandmother loves me, too, only in her own way."

Naturally, unrehearsed as I was, my answer to the question was not convincing in the least, and even I felt that I was trying to evade the whole issue. Had I outright lied, it would have been better. I could have said that she had low blood pressure and complained of dizziness, for example, or I could have said that the eczema in her leg was bothering her. But I didn't want to lie even though I didn't dare to and had not spoken the truth. Urvashi's father was both shrewd and kind, and did not repeat his question. I often look back on this moment as one of the few that settled the whole affair so firmly against me that I could never recover.

The meeting did not last very long. One reason for this was that, while from Urvashi's side a good many people had come, I was all by myself. I had asked my grandmother but she had refused to join me. This was a unique situation in the first place:

a boy seeing a girl on the road, falling in love, proposing and being denied, choosing to reach her parents instead, mustering the contacts quite fortuitously, and one day facing the girl and her family in someone else's house. This strangeness would have been reduced had some of my family members accompanied me to the meeting. Even my grandmother's presence would have sufficed, but my coming alone was too conspicuous to ignore. I was forcing them to trust me, only me. They knew nothing about my family save what I had told them. In India (as elsewhere), the girl's parents are anxious to check all possible details about the boy she is to marry. It's not only a union of two individuals but also of two families. I knew all this but had overestimated my own impact. I had thought when they would see me, all their anxieties would go away. Didn't I look like a noble young man, with a straight nose, comely features, high forehead, and large, ingenuous eyes? Also, there was nothing I could do in the matter. I didn't enjoy my parents' confidence or affections and had failed in converting my grandmother to my cause.

The moment I'd awaited so eagerly came before we all left that night. I had reminded Dushyanta before the meeting had begun. After I told Urvashi's father why my grandmother had not come and a few other things were said back and forth, Dushyanta discreetly asked Urvashi's father if I could talk to Urvashi in private for a few minutes. A Western reader might laugh hysterically at this but in the arranged marriages of India, often the only time the boy and the girl spend together before they decide to marry is ten minutes or so, which pass under a constant, embarrassing pressure on the young couple, who can hear the loud talk and laughter issuing from outside.

As soon as Dushyanta had finished his question and Urvashi's father had signaled his permission, I headed toward Dushyanta's bedroom, which was behind the drawing room. Through a corner of my eye, I saw Urvashi following me. The room was small enough. Besides Dushyanta's bed, a few plastic chairs, a writing desk, a steel cupboard and the portraits of Mother Pondicherry and Aurobindo filled the room. Urvashi sat on the bed, I on a plastic chair close to her. She was quiet, her head hanging in what I imagine now must have been a moment of both extreme pleasure and acute embarrassment. For a few moments, I, too, sat dumbfounded, unable to think of anything save that lovely form sitting before me. Oh, how much I wished to love her! She looked up, showing the face that had made me mad. It was as beautiful as I had thought, only a little plain. Her white cheeks looked almost pink. Her lips twitched as though they were about to utter their first words after a long struggle. I was stiff, as if I were some medieval knight, stern-faced and hiding my emotions because that's how real "men" behaved. The poor girl, I can think of her plight now—now that it doesn't matter—how perplexing my "manly" behavior must have seemed to her. Then again, maybe I'm still fooling myself, attributing my failure to marry Urvashi to an insufficient display of emotions on my part. Who knows what really went wrong? Anyway, let me not spoil the moment with an untimely autopsy of the story here. It was I who spoke first.

"I cannot believe this," I said.

"Neither can I," said Urvashi. Her sweet voice rankled, as though she had worn an anklet on her tongue.

"Did you know it was me when the proposal came?"

Urvashi nodded, her slender white neck swiveling like the long neck of a swan.

"I don't know English that well," she said quickly, faintly apologetically.

"Oh, it doesn't matter. There was a time when I didn't know it, either. I'll teach you. Don't worry. I'm there with you. I'll always be there with you," I said.

Urvashi smiled. It was her sweetest smile of the evening.

"Do you remember how I used to chase you, pillion-riding on a scooter?" I asked, in an attempt to remember a "shared" past.

"Yes," she answered, smiling.

"Did you know who I was, then? What my name was?" I asked.

"Someone said 'Nikhil.'"

"Nikhil?" I asked, surprised.

Urvashi nodded.

The name sounded nice, even though strange. I'd not heard it in a long time. I certainly didn't know anyone by this name. But it was a name uttered by Urvashi. That was enough. Maybe I'd rechristen myself as "Nikhil." I'd have to prepare an affidavit, etc.

"You know, you're the most beautiful girl I have ever seen," I said, a little awkwardly. At this, Urvashi looked at me for the first time in our tête-à-tête with that fiercely penetrating gaze that always blinded me. We were quiet for some time. Urvashi was very quiet. Perhaps she was shy or she was overawed by me (I still had the narcissistic mind to think so). Her family was waiting outside, and I wanted to be "respectable" in their eyes. Things had gone well for me so far and I didn't want to do anything that might spoil the impression I had created. I decided to be "serious" and do some "business" talk.

“So what do you say?” I asked her, as if inviting her to join me in a business proposition.

She didn’t fail to detect the peremptoriness in my voice, for she answered equally peremptorily, “I haven’t decided anything.”

I was alarmed, even angered by her tone. It sounded calculated and premeditated. It was in such complete contrast to her innocent, beautiful face that I could not believe it had come from her. I had spent nearly two years reaching this moment, and all she had to say was she had not made up her mind.

“When would you decide?” I asked.

“I can’t say,” was her terse answer.

The disappointment in me shot up. I hadn’t anticipated this. This girl did not love me. The conclusion was inescapable. How could she be so blunt in her answers if she cared for my feelings even a little? Negative feelings came over me and I felt helpless before this eighteen-year-old who hadn’t stepped into college yet. But I still loved her with all my heart. Even if she had ordered me to get out of the room, I would have forgiven her the insult and entreated her for another meeting. Nothing else mattered to me. All would be well and great if she became mine.

We must have looked tense when we came out. During our meeting, she had not even acknowledged a hurriedly written love letter I had delivered to her through Dushyanta. I had written it in blue ink, on a bluish pad, hiding it from the eyes of my grandmother who was in the kitchen or in the drawing room. I would have liked to show it to you, my reader, if it had not been for the fact that, it, too, along with my blue journal, was reduced to ashes, so strong was my future wife’s fury upon chancing on these

“terribly offensive” pieces of writing. Besides, I hadn’t written the letter that well, either, since I’d written it in her language, Gujarati. I’d sprinkled it with English here and there—the simplest avowals of love you read on walls and inside cheap greeting cards—which I knew would impress her and more than compensate for my lack of command over Gujarati. When we came out, I saw a sense of relief on the faces of her family members. As if anyone needed to be sure, Dushyanta asked me—to my surprise and evidently on their behalf—if I still wished to marry Urvashi. “Of course,” I said. “My mind was made up the day I first saw her.”

At this, the family members did not evince any surprise. They seemed to have anticipated this. I feel today that they might even have been a little disappointed by my answer, seeing it as my intractable obduracy. Anyway, they all rose while I sat quietly on a chair, trying to make sense of this hurricane-like meeting. Within a moment, however, I rose, too, and followed them to the porch to see them off. My mind was still baffled by the conflicting thoughts: Will she? Won’t she? My anguish over Urvashi’s quiet ambivalence was somewhat mitigated by her family’s apologies for Samar’s behavior. “He’s foolish. Please ignore his stupidity,” Urvashi’s mother said.

This pleased me, for it was the first positive statement she had made concerning me. The statement also seemed to indicate that they—the family—wanted this alliance. If that was the case, why had Urvashi remained so non-committal? Why had she hesitated? There was no one else in the room and she could have told me everything frankly if she wanted to. Here I must say that I spoke fairly good Gujarati and had spoken to her in Gujarati throughout, so the difference in our languages had nothing to do with her taciturnity. Perhaps she had been “tutored” to give only evasive answers and not to reveal

anything. This seemed plausible, given that her twitching lips did indicate that, probably, she was undergoing some kind of mental struggle. Nothing had been agreed as to the future course of action. This caused me a great deal of anxiety. I knew the harmful effect of an indeterminate mind, but I still had Dushyanta as an able go-between, and having come this far, I was bound to get the matter moving forward one way or the other. When the characteristically beaming Dushyanta asked me how my encounter with Urvashi went, I answered cryptically, "She's a tough nut to crack."

"They all like you very much," Dushyanta said.

I wondered at this for a while. I hadn't got any such impression, except that they had all been very polite, even respectful of me, but that was to be expected.

I waited for Dushyanta the whole next day. There was no sight of him. He had promised that he would get in touch with the family and arrange for Urvashi to meet me again, one more time. I don't know why I wanted the meeting. Perhaps it was because I had begun to realize that I needed to "convince" her. It was a painful experience for me, because I thought that everything I had done thus far should have convinced her beyond any doubts that I truly loved her. But I still needed to get her firmly on my side, if only because Urvashi's mother had hinted that Urvashi's wishes were to be the decisive factor. Why would Urvashi not agree? I thought about the question for the first time since the beginning of the present meetings. I couldn't think of a plausible reason, except that if she loved some other boy, she should surely refuse my offer. This was unthinkable even as a thought. How could this be? God, not after all I had done. If this were indeed the case, mine would be an ending like the ending of Scott's expedition to Antarctica. He had

reached there, fighting for his life, only to see the Norwegian flag fluttering, stuck to a pole. His first words, "Oh God, what a horrible place is this!"

Was I to be so ill fated, too? There was no answer, however hard I thought. I went to see Rochester, who came out smiling but would not say much. He couldn't, was his short explanation. At night, I went to Dushyanta's house at last. Dushyanta told me that I was to meet Urvashi again the next day at eleven in the morning. He also informed me that Urvashi had come to his house in the evening just to check if I was there. At the end of a long, mentally agonizing day, these words were nectar to me. How I drank it, its effect reinvigorating my whole being. What had brought Urvashi looking for me? I couldn't sleep, pondering this. Did she love me then? Had she made up her mind? Had the family been convinced Urvashi was to be mine? What about the son-in-law who'd stared at me with a stern expression? Perhaps he was just posing as a toughie and had a soft heart within. Perhaps he was my strongest advocate. Or could it be Urvashi's oldest sister who had looked at me with unmistakable affection? There were no answers. Perhaps I would get the answers tomorrow, I thought. I did not want to look sick at our next meeting, so I forced myself to sleep.

The next morning, I reached Dushyanta's house a little before the appointed hour. The wall clock rang eleven bells. Still, there was no sign of Urvashi. Well, no one in India ever came on time; I knew that, and kept flipping the pages of a magazine disinterestedly. It could have been written in Polynesian and it wouldn't have mattered. Urvashi came at around 11.15. There was no warning of her arrival. Her Luna didn't make any whirring sound, so I was startled when I saw her at the door, dressed in a pink t-shirt and blue jeans. She looked more beautiful than I had ever seen her. She was

followed into the room by her older sister, Jasmine, whom I liked, for she was calm and sober, though I couldn't help wishing she weren't here. What the hell was she doing here? Jasmine was quick to tell me that both Urvashi and her family approved of me and that they were sorry they could not come the day before. But, I thought, Dushyanta had told me they had come. Did he lie to me, then, just to keep me happy? I was angry at Dushyanta for a moment, but I had no time for anger or for anything else, for Urvashi had already seated herself on a sofa at my right.

I had decided I would "sell" myself to Urvashi today, one way or another. Gosh, marketing had stuck to me even here. I began by talking about my life so far, about my career, my preparation for the civil services exam (that too!), my family, our home town in Uttar Pradesh, my smoking cigarettes (which she seemed to like), my poem about her (unfortunately this best piece of writing on Urvashi, too, has been lost. It was lost long before I got married, though, through what should be called sheer negligence on my part, for a page is never known to have vanished out of its own volition). Urvashi kept nodding throughout (it was as though she had taken a vow of silence), with a constant smile playing on her lips. I didn't make much sense of that quiet, acquiescing, and smiling countenance then. Years later, when I taught English 101 to American freshmen as a graduate student, I saw sometimes the same benign smile on the faces of my students. They seemed to indicate by it that that they understood that you did not understand everything and that it was all right, they liked you in spite of it. As for Urvashi, it was her mere liking for me then, not love, and certainly not the readiness to marry me. However, I had already assumed the outcome: V for victory. Dushyanta, too, had repeatedly told me

that it was “yes” from their side. It was Urvashi who was the stumbling block, and, come what might, I would “melt” her heart into accepting me, her hopeless lover.

I must also make a shameful admission here. Ever since the meetings began, a few trusted friends of mine, including Bhargav and even Rochester, had been advising me to leave some kind of “mark” on Urvashi. It was nothing very villainous—a simple “kiss” was what my friends expected. “Kiss her on the lips,” Rochester said with shameless precision. I’d never kissed a girl in my life, and, although I fantasized about a lot more serious things, when it came to kissing Urvashi, I began to get nervous. “You are untutored in the art of romance,” was how Rochester put it.

The thought of kissing Urvashi was running in my mind as the clock ticked by, filling our silence. I didn’t know what was going on in Urvashi’s mind, and, even now, I can only guess. She was perfectly poised, as though she had come for the first day of a class, all excited to discover a new world. During the meeting, I had kept looking at Jasmine, too. I’d developed a genuine admiration for her kind thoughtfulness. Besides, I wanted her to talk to Urvashi in my favour. I was ready to approach anyone in the world to get Urvashi except Urvashi herself. Suddenly, the thoughts milling in my head forced me into action.

“Urvashi, could I speak with you alone for a moment?” I blurted out.

Urvashi rose with a swiftness that sent my head spinning. She was already behaving as though she were my wife. This was a crucial moment, and here, I blundered. Although there would be different opinions about my conduct in the next few moments, most would agree with me when I say that it was another moment that really harmed my cause. I had asked her to follow me to try to do what my friends had suggested, kiss her,

but I had absolutely no idea how I was going to do it, what I would tell her, or what I would do if she took offence. Such a nincompoop I was! We went to the same room where we had talked for the first time. I gripped Urvashi's shoulder as if I were a blind man. I kept my hands on her shoulders for a moment, not knowing what to do next. She stood firmly, not attempting to move away or resist. Then, I forced myself into the act. "Could I kiss you?" I whispered, and before she gave her reply, I kissed her on the cheek.

This was all that happened, but I felt transformed into a man. I'd touched her slight yet firm shoulders. Her cheek had felt soft, like the skin of a baby, and it was the lightest pink I had ever seen. My body was still hot and tense. My penis had become hard when I got near her, and, in that moment, I wanted to lift her and throw her onto the bed and love her until the bed broke. I'd get to do it anyway, I thought, pushing the feeling away. My kiss had had a good effect on Urvashi, too. When I asked her if she had received my second letter (I'd scribbled a few lines on plain white paper this time), she said to me with a wifely authority, "Don't write any more letters now."

I took it as advice for discretion that's always necessary in such matters. Before we came out of the room, I asked her to come to my house to visit my grandmother in a tone that became a husband. She simply nodded. Immediately afterward, Urvashi and her sister left. I saw that Urvashi's face was dead serious as she went out. I was too euphoric to notice that she hadn't even said goodbye.

Dushyanta had been in the house when I had kissed Urvashi. After she'd left, Dushyanta asked me how everything went in our talks. Naturally, I was too ecstatic to talk anything else before telling him first about my "great feat." He seemed not to believe it. "Did you?" he asked again and again. "Of course, I did," I said, still in my euphoric

trance. Later, when I told Rochester about it, he maintained I should've kissed her on the lips. "What difference would that make?" I said, getting irritated, but Rochester wouldn't change his mind. "You should have kissed on her lips," he said. Bhargav, to my surprise, said, "You shouldn't have done this. Why did you lower your respect in this way?" "But why shouldn't I kiss her? What's wrong with that, since I want to marry her?" I protested, but Bhargav, like Rochester, had spoken. Such was my self-esteem in these matters that I talked about it to practically all my friends. I can now look back and only imagine how some of them must have laughed at me.

My maiden kiss worked in exactly the opposite way I had expected it to work. When Dushyanta went to Urvashi's house at my insistence later that evening to know from them a future course, he was told bluntly that the family was not interested in this alliance and that this was their final answer. My first reaction at this was hysterical vituperation. I was mad at Urvashi and her family. What in hell did they think of themselves? They would reject me! The very cheek! Next morning, Dushyanta came to my house to inform me that Urvashi was sick and was sitting at the medical unit. He said I must go and talk to her. I was momentarily happy at this new opening, but soon, I was overcome with hesitation at the thought of approaching her unsolicited. It would be shameful, I thought. It was strange how my thoughts shaped and reshaped themselves. There was a time I was ready to lick her white, soft feet, but at present, I was not ready to be so "generous." She hadn't been generous to me, either. But my mind hadn't accepted even now that it was Urvashi who had refused me. How could she? I was convinced it was her family, maybe her mother or maybe the son-in-law, who had instigated, perhaps even threatened Urvashi, and therefore the denial, for the denial had come with the reason

that Urvashi herself wasn't interested. But such was my entrapment in the web of this girl that after dithering a while, I got dressed and went to the medical unit.

Dushyanta was right. Urvashi sat on a bench with Jasmine. When I went up to them, Jasmine explained with her characteristic calm—she alone of all in her family was completely “at ease” with me—that Urvashi had some fever since yesterday and that there was nothing to worry about. The whole pneumonic plague thing was still in the news and I was concerned about Urvashi's health. Urvashi sat with her head hung low (as always). When she looked up, her eyes were moist. Her lips twitched jerkily as if she wanted to say something drastic, then they closed, and she took her eyes off me, hanging her head down again. I was flabbergasted. Was she angry with me? For what? Did she think that I was responsible for all her hurt? Did her family torment her? Force her into submission? Why would they do that to their youngest daughter? The questions, only the questions, my mind began to reel. All I could think of was to “live to fight another day.”

“Let her get well again. Tell your father I'll come to your house after a month to discuss the matter further,” I told Jasmine then dashed out of the medical unit. I was too bitter to look back.

CHAPTER 11

So I was back to square one. The cup that had come right up to my lips had been snatched away. I was left alone to nurse my wounds. There was no mercy in either Urvashi or in her family. It had all started around the 24th of September, and on the morning of the 30th, I emerged from the medical unit, having lost Urvashi again, only this time, the losing margin had been the size of a hair's breadth. Dushyanta had no solutions left. Even normally confident Rochester had begun to have second thoughts about the whole affair.

My grandmother had watched everything with a quiet detachment. She was experienced enough to understand the course of events without being told anything. It had become difficult for me to talk to her. She remained dour-faced, and I was too miserable to break through that barrier. After the end of the latest round of OPERATION ONE, I asked her one day if she wanted to visit Ahmedabad for a day or two. She readily agreed. Perhaps it came as a relief to her. She had spent a roller coaster two weeks with me in Baroda. I knew it had tried all her capacity. To see a boy you raised with motherly affection and care reduced to an obsessive servitude to a girl must have broken her spirits. It wasn't as though she had not spoken about it to me at all. Both after my meeting with the parents of Urvashi and later with her family, my grandmother had sensed the futility of my pursuit through my brief, evasive answers to her questioning looks. "Drop her," she had said with complete contempt, but I shut my ears.

We took a bus to go to Ahmedabad. The day was pleasant, as it was raining outside and the continuous rain had made the vegetation so green, it seemed green was the only color nature had. We talked about my childhood and, after a long time, I felt as though I were sitting with the kindly old woman who was my beloved grandmother. Perhaps it was this regaining of her affection that encouraged me to confide in her my festering Urvashi dilemma.

“Won’t you forget that lowly whore?” she said with such vehemence that I was rendered speechless for a while.

“No, I won’t. I would never forget her, and don’t call her ‘whore.’ As for lowly, she is a thousand times better looking than any of our Brahmin girls. Don’t you dare talk like this again about her,” I said.

I was furious. This woman did not help me when she could. She wouldn’t even come for a meeting with the family. So much difference that one act would have made. I had not forced her then, not said a single word to her, but this was too much. What right did she have to insult Urvashi like this? What wrong did Urvashi do her? This happened right in our drawing room in Ahmedabad. She sat on a divan while I paced the room. Fortunately, my father wasn’t at home. I regretted my outburst almost immediately and literally fell at her feet begging forgiveness, but she had had enough of me and dismissed me with a brush of her hand. Such was the impact of my rude behavior with this kind old lady who had literally given me another life by saving me from the clutches of polio that, even today, my head hangs in shame in her presence, although she has long since magnanimously forgiven me.

I had expected that my grandmother would not want to accompany me back to Baroda, and I wasn't surprised when she said she wouldn't. I took a nightly bus back, as perhaps became the present moment in my life. As the bus sped toward Baroda, lacerating the surrounding darkness, I relived all my encounters with Urvashi, especially my recent meetings with her, her smiles at me, and her "sexy" gaze when I had praised her beauty. I remembered how I had walked like a conquering hero in the township after my first meeting with her. This was in spite of the fact that she had given all evasive answers and not exactly wrapped me tightly in her arms as I had expected. But I was a patient young man. I was willing to wait as long as things remained positive. My ambivalence about the outcome of the meetings had almost vanished after I had kissed her famously on her cheek and she had "ordered" me not to write more letters to her, just like any other wife. But what had emerged, after all, was a complete anticlimax.

It was as though I had seriously botched up somewhere. True, there was always a possibility that things could take a turn toward a negative outcome, but this had happened suddenly. It felt like a stab in the back. My heart's darkness far exceeded the one outside. Outside, there passed a lit shack or a factory or a distant farmhouse with yellow lights, but my heart did not have even a tiny spark of joy, or hope. Why, I might as well have been a dead man. My career was in a trough, I had lost the sympathy of my family, I was a fool in the eyes of many, both inside and outside the township, and my personal life was in shambles even before it could begin. It seemed like I was finished, my life's story over. I remembered Kira's end in Ayn Rand's *We the Living*, her crawling body bleeding from a bullet wound, and her last thoughts, what could her life have been Kira had

tried. But could one try so hard and still fail? My mind had ceased to answer such questions. It could not think anything, anything at all; it could only endure.

My worst humiliation was yet to come. The festival of nine nights or *Navaratri* had begun. Indians went from one festival to another: *Makarsankranti* or the kite festival in January, *Holi* or the festival of color in March, *Rakhi* or the sister-tying-a-string-on-the-wrist-of-the-brother festival in August, *Navaratri* in September or October sometimes, and *Deepawali* or the festival of lights in November. *Navaratri* was Gujarat's favorite festival. Practically the whole city took to the roads during the nine nights. Traffic congestion, deafening honking, yelling, smoke from the polluting vehicles, harassing cops, nothing stopped this madness. Lights were hung on wooden poles erected alongside roads. Platforms were put together in the center of open grounds. The singers and the accompanying musicians sat atop these while young boys and girls, dressed colorfully, danced in circles around them. The township, too, organized its own *Garbas*, as the dance was called, on a large, vacant ground, not far from the main gates. I had always detested this festival for its crowds and the "loose" morals among the dancing boys and girls. It was said that the festival triggered a barrage of abortions afterward. Part my dislike had to do with my own cowardice and sheer inability to make any sense of the fair sex.

Anyway, one night—I think it was the second or the third—I was roaming in the peripheries of the dancing circle in our township when I saw the scene that freezes me with its memory even now. It was Urvashi, dressed in the most gorgeous sky-blue dress, a matching *dupatta* resting on her slender shoulders, those dangling gold earrings I had so longed to see hanging from her ears, and her thin, white arm—how I hate to say this—

gripping the flabby hand of the same fat boy I had seen her talking to a long time back. The boy was square-faced and ox-like. Though he was tall enough, his width overshadowed his height. He wore a pair of silk *kurta-pajama*, and he walked as if he weren't even conscious of Urvashi by his side. So this was why Urvashi had rejected me. The proof was as clear as the lit atmosphere of this festive night. I thank God even now that Rochester was with me, or else I don't know what my wounded heart would have led me to do. I do not know whether Urvashi saw me in the crowd. Perhaps she didn't, for she was at some distance, but overawed as I still am of her almost magical powers, I think she knew that I was there, that that is what made her perform all those things that girls in love do, like sneaking up close to her beloved, whispering something in his ear, then ending it all with a giggle, which was simultaneously sought to be muffled by a quick hand going to her lips. When I showed the boy to Rochester, all he said was, "He's a boor." As for Urvashi, even Rochester, who was her father's age, said simply, "She's very beautiful." Rochester's remark about Urvashi pierced my heart. After all, this "very beautiful" girl had been mine very nearly.

October had come. I was left with barely two months to take the second part of the civil services exam. It was a hopelessly insufficient period, with history, political science, and eclectic general studies, all requiring preparation. I began studying half-heartedly, but I knew I was trying somehow to justify all my investment in the exam. I'd study erratically and not for long. My mind still wondered about what had gone wrong with the whole Urvashi affair (even after everything I'd seen so far!) I thought about it constantly and read and reread my blue journal to draw some lessons from the course events had taken—my historicocritical technique.

I had recorded the events meticulously but my reading of them only reinforced the questions that troubled my mind. Dushyanta's version that the family liked me but refused the alliance because Urvashi didn't want it seemed plausible in the light of her evasive answers during our meeting and her flagrant dalliance with that other boy. Why then had she come to meet me twice? If she didn't wish to marry me, she could have, at the outset, refused to see me. She had herself said that she knew it was me when the proposal had come to the family. The young son-in-law's role, too, was shrouded in mystery. Had he influenced the outcome in any way? He certainly could have, for he was the sole son-in-law in the family and wielded a great deal of influence. He was also from Urvashi's own caste and could have opined against me since I was from the "upper" caste. I not only came from the highest Hindu caste, I was better educated and employed than he was. All these might have aroused his jealousy. It was certainly likely that, after my marrying Urvashi, his influence in the family would have waned. Or perhaps it was Bhairavi's doing. The girl had openly tried to seduce me, and as I had not given in, she must have ensured Urvashi didn't get me, either.

The son-in-law's wife, Urvashi's oldest sister, had been Dushyanta's student. Dushyanta had told me that she had always wanted him to visit their house. I thought of a plan. I would visit their house with Dushyanta and request them to persuade Urvashi's family. If the son-in-law had indeed spoken against me, my visit might soften his stance. It would also tell Urvashi's family that I was "very" serious about the matter. Dushyanta's role in the whole thing had been more than one of an impartial mediator. He genuinely liked me and had done his best for me. Maybe our caste kinship had something

to do with it. He, too, was not satisfied with the way things had turned out, so when I talked about my plan to him, he instantly agreed.

We did not call the family to inform them of our visit. It would have been preferable, but we were afraid they might refuse to meet us. Relying on Dushyanta's public relations skills and almighty God, I sat behind Dushyanta on his scooter, one sunny winter morning, to go to the son-in-law's house. The family lived on the outskirts of Baroda. Dushyanta had the address but we still had to ask a few people for directions before we found the house. The house, part of a housing colony, was small and congested. Besides the drawing room, it barely had a bedroom and a kitchen. The son-in-law was not at home. He was in the school where he taught, probably busy teaching Hindi to his students. Urvashi's sister bowed to Dushyanta. Her head was covered by a fold of her sari, a mark of respect to her father-in-law, who sat on a chair talking to a small group of men. It wasn't as if I were ignored. A folding chair was hastily brought for me. I was not expected to sit on the cot as Dushyanta had done.

This is typical of how a son-in-law is treated in India, with extra courtesy and deference. I naturally brightened up at this unexpected show of respect. Dushyanta was very well versed in social manners. He courteously bowed to Urvashi's sister's father-in-law. The old man had retired from a high-enough post in the government. The few men who sat surrounding the old man had been listening to him, drinking in every spoken word as though it were some magical mantra. After the introductions, Dushyanta once again brought up my civil services attempt (he again forgot that I had asked him not to mention this).

“It’s a tough exam to get through. Not everyone who tries succeeds,” the old man said.

“Yes, I know. I’m trying for it. But even if I don’t get through, it doesn’t matter much because my present job is good, too,” I said.

“That’s true,” the man replied.

“Why are you after Urvashi?” the old man asked directly.

“Because I like her. There’s nothing more to it,” I replied, matching the old man in straightforwardness.

“Hmmm . . . You see, in the past, good boys in our caste were hard to find, but nowadays the situation is different. Our boys are engineers, doctors, even civil servants, so why should we marry our girls in other castes?” the man said.

I nodded at the old man’s point that the boys from “lower castes” had been making considerable progress. But I had nothing against their progress or the lack of it. That wasn’t the point. I was concerned with Urvashi, only that. “Caste is not the consideration here at all. I want to marry Urvashi in spite of her and my castes,” I said.

“No, it’s not possible. We don’t give our girls in marriage to the “higher” castes. Our boys are free to marry an “upper caste” girl, though. Suppose we married Urvashi to you but your family refused to accept her or humiliated her later on, then what will we do?” the man said.

“My family is broadminded. They will accept Urvashi, but even if they didn’t, it doesn’t matter because I’m independent,” I said.

The old man was quiet for a moment. "You are a gentleman, but this cannot happen," he said. I saw that he meant the compliment. I wanted to turn this sympathy into getting him to back my proposal.

"A man like you should lead your caste in such matters," I said, half fearing that my autosuggestion would be taken as gratuitous advice, which, in fact, it was.

"You cannot force that on me, young man. Forget her. You are wasting your time. I don't know about Urvashi's family, but if she were my daughter, I wouldn't have given her in marriage to you, though you are a good boy," the old man said.

"Well, if that's the way you think, what else can I say?" I said.

Thus ended our brief conversation. After a while, Dushyanta and I left. The meeting had accomplished nothing. It was another strong stamp of rejection from Urvashi's family. I wasn't so naïve as not to understand the importance of the wily old man in the running of Urvashi's family's affairs. The man was the father-in-law of their oldest daughter. The rest was self-explanatory. Why the old man and his son didn't want Urvashi's marriage to me was easy to understand, too. If Urvashi married me, a Brahmin, my family and I would be the leading influence in Urvashi's family. How could this be acceptable to this old man who wielded such considerable prestige among his caste brethren? And how could he yield his influence in Urvashi's family to those who were "superior" to him in caste and social status?

Nearly a month had passed since I had seen Urvashi in the medical unit. I remembered my words to Jasmine then, that I would come to their house after a month, but after my visit to Urvashi's oldest sister's house, not to mention Urvashi's open flirting with that fat boy, I had lost all courage even to think of going to Urvashi's house.

Often, since the conclusion of this whole protracted episode in my life, I have looked back at this time and wondered if it would have made any difference had I boldly gone to Urvashi's house. It's difficult even now to answer this, though I believe it would not have made any difference, or perhaps it might have, who knows? Perhaps Urvashi was being flirtatious for the time being. Maybe it was all in defiance to her own family's rigid stand against me as her husband.

One would think that, after all that had happened, I would be left in no doubt of the outcome of my pursuit and end it while there was still some hope for my sanity, but my Urvashi mania wasn't over yet. It used to leave me for a while, only to return with an overwhelming force later. It had become a part of me, her pursuit. No amount of evidence pointing to its utter futility was enough to convince me. I couldn't just stop thinking about her. I was a man possessed. Haven't you seen one in those ghost movies? After creating some trouble, the ghosts go away for some time, only to strike again as soon as the affected person begins to behave normally.

At last, I realized that I had frittered away two precious months in which I could have prepared for the civil services exam. "You can still pursue Urvashi. She won't be married anytime soon," someone had suggested. I began to see the tremendous sense implicit in that statement. I had been a fool all the while, I thought. Couldn't I have waited for the exam to be over? But Dushyanta's success had been so sudden and unexpected. I hadn't foreseen it in the slightest. And it was too tempting to pass up. I remembered my cousin's letter. She had warned me early on. "Stay focused on the exam. Other things can wait." She was right. I decided now to turn all my energies to the exam. I knew I had to get away from Baroda if I wanted to study. I could not be in the same

township, where Urvashi, too, lived, and concentrate on the exam. It didn't take great intelligence to see that. Didn't I tell my father the same thing two months back? Alas! If only he had consented, everything would have been different now, but he had refused and driven me back to Urvashi.

It was reasonable to assume that if I couldn't persuade my father earlier, there was no sense in turning to him now. I therefore appealed to my brother-in-law for help. He was a doctor in a government hospital in Ahmedabad. My sister and he, along with their two kids, lived in a large government quarter. I got along well with both my brother-in-law and my sister, who were more sympathetic and less critical of me. Rochester was happy to know my plans and accompanied me to my sister's house. The spacious, extra bedroom in the house was given to me. It had a bed, a closet, a table, and a chair. All this was a godsend. If only I had approached these gentle souls earlier? The house was dank and dark for the most part, and deathly quiet. My brother-in-law went to the hospital during the day and saw a few private patients in the evening. My sister, too, tutored high school kids. She had always had the best money sense among the three of us, and I wasn't surprised in the least to see her earn a few hundred rupees in this way. My sister's two young children were so quiet that I never realized their presence while I stayed in the house. I began to study the stuff on political science since I had barely touched it before: Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Bentham, Hobbes, J.S. Mill, Marx, Hegel, Lenin. After studying for every hour or so, I went out of the house and took a small stroll in the wooded, sandy compound. The place had a strong odor of a disinfectant, the result of many doctors living there.

A little before I came to my sister's house, an event occurred in Manila, Philippines. A young, svelte Indian girl named Sushmita Sen became Miss Universe. When I saw Miss Universe, I was startled by her similarities with Urvashi. She had the same bony shoulders and sharp, penetrating eyes. Her face, like Urvashi's, was oval, with long ears. Her smile, as captured in the photograph of her historic moment, was like Urvashi's, too, wide and exaggeratedly affected. Both were Scorpions. Urvashi's DOB was 1st November, Sushmita's was the 19th. I pasted a picture of the smiling Sushmita Sen on the bedroom wall, even showed it to my brother-in-law and sister, telling them how much she resembled Urvashi, upon which all they did was to smile, too kind to say anything. My euphoria over the September meetings with Urvashi had ended when I had seen her locked in that fat boy's arms, but a month and a half later, during which I had been away from her in Ahmedabad, I had begun to forget my rejection. The smiling Sushmita on the wall in my room in my sister's house became Urvashi, and behind the closed doors when my sister thought I was studying hard, I masturbated furiously, looking at the picture on the wall, especially at the exposed, naked, long ears of Miss Universe.

1st November was approaching fast. I had decided to meet Urvashi somehow and give her a purple-faced watch I'd bought for her. Meeting her was a big problem. Dushyanta said he could not go to her house and expect to be welcomed any more. Rochester did not know the family. Bhargav did not know Urvashi personally. Finally, I took the help of a boisterous young man I used to know, who was on talking terms with both Urvashi and Bhairavi. Even if the guy had not known them, he had the necessary punk to accost them somewhere and talk to them. On this young man, therefore, I pinned

my hopes and left Ahmedabad for Baroda on the morning of the 1st. I reached Baroda in the afternoon and went straight to the young man's house. We decided to go to the township in the evening when, the guy was informed, Urvashi would visit a friend's house in sector 1. I knew who this "friend" was. They were two sisters in a family that belonged to Urvashi's caste. The sisters were considered characterless and a bad influence. One of these "characterless" sisters would help me understand later, at least partly, what Urvashi felt about me. Since we had to pass some time before evening, I told this young man about all the sacrifices I had made in my pursuit of Urvashi. We had shared many convivial moments earlier and the young man knew something about my nature. He listened to my tale without sarcasm or pity and seemed genuinely willing to do his bit for my cause as we rose to leave for the township.

I waited in front of Madras Restaurant while this young man, who was probably eager to finish this clumsy matter fast and go home—who wouldn't be?—began scouting around for Urvashi. He'd enlisted a few boys who were to tell him as soon as they spotted Urvashi. It seems so funny today, the whole thing, yet when it was happening, I was so tense, it was as though my whole life depended on it. It was already dark when the "news of her sighting" came. Urvashi and one other girl were standing somewhere in one of those dark-and-quiet-at-night lanes in the township, talking to a boy. We walked to the designated place with perfect calm. I was good at dissimulation of this kind. I hated to "show" my vulnerability, so, to hide it, I acted extra cocky. I don't know if it worked that night, but I did pass by Urvashi and that boy with such complete equanimity, as though I were seeing them for the first time. The boy was the same fat boy whom Rochester had called a "boor."

We came back to where I'd been standing earlier. This was my last chance. Urvashi would have to pass through where I'd been standing to go to her house. Of course, she'd seen me when I had passed by her, and her expressions, not surprisingly, were those of an extreme amazement and embarrassment. I'd caught her "red handed" before, but this was the closest view I had had of her with another boy. She seemed furious when she came down the main road on the way to her house. She kept walking, looking straight ahead, her body tense and her face lifted, ignoring my presence completely. Her two sisters, Jasmine and Bhairavi, flanked her on two sides like little bodyguards. When the sisters had reached right in front of us, my helping young man scrambled to them, stopping them on the road. I had asked him to request of Urvashi an audience of five minutes. All I wanted was to say a few words and give her the watch I'd bought for her. But Urvashi refused to give any quarter. My young friend's haggling in my favor lasted a few minutes, during which I died quite a few deaths from shame but still stuck to my ground. My friend returned as the girls walked off. I was partly glad the thing was over one way or the other.

"They say, Ask him to come and give the gift in our house, in front of our father," the young friend of mine told me as "nicely" as possible.

I thanked him, posing unruffled and all-in-the-spirit-of-the-game type. For all this outward show of bravery, however, I knew my heart was bleeding. I had actually been struck on that ground and possibly it still contained traces of my blood. It was already dark and, for some reason—perhaps it was Sunday evening when the township dwellers retired early—there wasn't a soul around me, a circumstance for which I thanked God. I left the place quickly. A momentary thought came, that of rushing to Rochester, but I

rejected it. With what face could I go to him? He had come along with me to Ahmedabad just so I could put everything behind me and study, and now I had come running back to Baroda for the same thing Rochester had asked me temporarily to forget, until my exam got over. I couldn't go to anyone else, either. I could not allow anyone to see this spectacle of my complete humiliation. I was furious and distraught. This was the limit. I loathed myself more than I had ever before or would ever again. I was also convinced—as if I needed to be—that Urvashi herself was behind the sudden reversal of my success in September.

Two or three weeks before the exam was to start, my father sent word to me, asking me to come over and stay in his house. What caused this change of heart was not clear. It was my younger brother who explained it to me.

“He isn't happy that you are in the same city but in somebody else's house,” he said.

I was too tired to respond. “Oh, it's okay. Tell him that not much time is left, and I cannot at this stage change houses with all my books.”

That was the end of the matter.

I wrote the eight papers for my civil services exam in December. At its conclusion, although I felt an aftertaste of a worthy struggle, I knew I would not pass the exam. Four months later, in April 1995, my expectations would come true. I would not only fail, my performance would be lower than even my 1992 attempt, for which I had studied just a month. Five months later, I'd be out of the reckoning for these prestigious services completely, having failed to clear the first part of the exam itself. Thus would end the pursuit of my grandfather's dream. I had always thought I loved him the most,

but Urvashi had supplanted him. It was time for Rochester to be active again, and active he became, walking by my side, discussing literature and life, listening quietly to my long harangues of self-pity, and preparing tea for me in the middle of the night when thoughts of Urvashi tormented me.

CHAPTER 12

I am sure the reader will have begun to sense the complete chaos my life had become at this point. I was like a storm tossed boat hitting any rock that had Urvashi's name on it. The chart that I had prepared, with a clear-cut strategy, lay somewhere, gathering dust.

I had started going to the office again. Mr. Goodmemory was still my boss and the PVC chief. During my absence, most of my work had been handled by an ageing ex-serviceman, who had been transferred to the PVC group as my replacement a little while before I had left on leave. Naturally, before leaving, I had handed over all my files and databases to this new guy. I had explained to him the pricing, the month to month product movement, and the top customers. AKB had taught me the meaning of words like integrity and sincerity—never through lecturing but by example—and although Mr. Goodmemory couldn't excite in me the same fervor, I had not forgotten the earlier lessons.

My first day in the office, after a gap of four months, went by easily enough. I hopped from desk to desk repeating the same brief account of my holidays, the sum total of which was that I had been ill for most of it and that this had impeded my studies. Most of my colleagues sympathized with me while those who knew about the "Urvashi" affair kept quiet, brushing me off with a quick greeting. However, soon, I was to become a victim of another "betrayal," this time in the office. My ex-serviceman colleague, to whom I had given all my papers and who had now developed an excellent command at

the job, began to resent my reentry. Initially, he laughed off my questions about recent circulars and policies. When I volunteered to help in preparing some statistics or sorting out an issue, he “magnanimously” refused my help, asking me to “leave” such things to “workers” like him. I trusted this ex-army chap, glad to be given an extended vacation.

After a week had gone by, Mr. Goodmemory called me to his office. The ex-army guy sat on a chair facing my boss. Thinking that I had been called in for some policy discussion and eager to get back into the work—for it meant sanity and freedom from thoughts of Urvashi—I greeted my senior colleagues with a pleasure akin to a cub that is reuniting with the herd. Mr. Goodmemory did not return my smile. He gave me a cold, cutting look, his round face seeming like a little ball. After cracking a joke on my name—he was rhyming Porus with bogus—he joined his palms together, resting them on the glass-topped table. Then he began to speak, “Mr. B here says you’ve been avoiding work since you have rejoined. You might think that no one is noticing you, but people at the highest level are not happy with your performance. I have called you today to warn you. You must earn your salary, Mr. Porus Chaturvedi.”

I was livid. “It’s Mr. B who has not been co-operating. I gave him everything before I left, but what do I get in return? Not a single answer to any of my questions about the last four months. He didn’t even allow me to use the STD. How can I call the regional offices if he doesn’t give me the key to the STD lock?”

“Oh that? You could have asked me.” Mr. Goodmemory said. He turned his revolving chair to his right and picked a pen stand kept on his side cabinet. “Here, see, I keep the key inside this pen stand. Come and take it any time you want to call.”

“Okay, I’ll remember, but why can’t Mr. B give his key?” I said.

“That’s because I have asked him not to give it to any one,” Mr. Goodmemory replied.

“That’s all right for others. But why should he not give it to someone in the same group,” I said.

“See, Porus, Mr. B is your senior. In fact, he’s your boss now. You must talk about him with respect,” Mr. Goodmemory said.

“Mr. B is my boss? I didn’t know that. I was reporting to AKB earlier. He, like you, was a senior manager, and now you say that I have to report to a senior officer, when I’m an officer myself,” I said.

“Mr. B is now a deputy manager, Porus.” Mr. Goodmemory said.

“Oh,” I said and shook Mr. B’s hand. But I hated to be “demoted” thus. Why? People advanced as they aged in life. All of my classmates from the MBA program were climbing the corporate ladder. Shashank had gone off to the U.S. as a programmer. Rashmin was selling bulk drugs in Brazil. Harpreet was an assistant vice president, the last I’d heard. Even the biggest procrastinator of all, Ajay, had gone to the U.S. to sell computers. Only I, who had landed the maximum number of job offers in the campus placement, was languishing in my career. And now I had been asked to report to a mere deputy manager. What was happening to my life? I closed my eyes, nodded absently to something Mr. B said about an urgent assignment, and left Mr. Goodmemory’s cabin.

The office took care of my day, but the evenings and nights brought emptiness and melancholy, which induced restlessness and myriad thoughts about Urvashi and my life, my life and Urvashi. It was amazing to see how rubbery my morals had become, how pliable my so-called principles. Whenever I thought of the boy Urvashi was

involved with, I told myself that all they had was a casual friendship, that this was nothing new at Urvashi's age or in her times. My mind then stopped at a certain inevitable-seeming thought: What if she had sex with him? Within moments, my mind came up with arguments: So what? Didn't people have premarital sex? How did it matter if the bastard did it to her first when it's I who would eventually have her? In a fleeting moment of objectivity, these thoughts seemed so alien to me that I felt dizzy and unreal, as though I were on some other planet, and it was all because of a faulty judgment of mine—I should never have agreed to accompany those darned techy friends of mine to come on a study trip to Neptune.

Bhargav had once told me that Urvashi liked boys who had motorcycles. I had never imagined myself driving a motorcycle. Years ago, I had once tried to drive a scooter. My cousin and his family had come to our house, and one day, my cousin tempted me into learning how to drive a scooter. He explained to me how the clutch, the accelerator, the gears, and the brake worked. It seemed worth trying and I hopped onto the seat, but in spite of my cousin's warning, I released my grip on the clutch, increasing acceleration with the other hand. The result was that the scooter lurched hysterically forward, running into a herd of cattle. I frantically steered it this way and that to stop it from banging into a cow or a buffalo. I was scared like hell until my cousin, who was sitting behind me, extended his arms and took over the "reins." I never tried driving a scooter or any other two-wheeler again. I was convinced I was never going to learn it. How could one control these vehicles when there were so many of them around you? Rochester and Dushyanta pressed me to buy a motorcycle now.

“It would increase your mobility tremendously.” Rochester was utilitarian, as usual. To my anxieties about learning it, all he said was, you’d learn it, there was nothing to it. I bought a motorcycle called “Sleek.” It was shiny black—I hate white vehicles—and tall and thin, my favorite shape. The pillion rider’s seat curved upwards, like a check mark or the tail of a comet or the thorn of a blackbuck. It was titillating to imagine Urvashi sliding forward and pressing into my back every time I applied the brakes. Rochester wasn’t wrong. I learned to drive it in less than a week.

I rarely saw Urvashi in those initial months of 1995. There was bad news concerning her. It wasn’t her getting married or something, just her changing her house. They were to move to their own house in an industrial suburb, not very far from the township. She had stopped coming to sector 1 for walks almost entirely and always rode her Luna. I hadn’t tried to meet her or her family since that humiliating November evening. Perhaps this or something else—maybe plain sympathy—made her gaze at me in her earlier way. I couldn’t help looking back. It was like the Cubans watching the lights of America or a family of modest means gazing at a rich man’s mansion, closed gates and all. I had ceased to be surprised by my forbearance—if that’s the term for it—or pure shamelessness. She could have spat in my face and I would still have gone after her.

Bhargav, Prabhat, Mr. Chaturvedi, Rochester, and Dushyanta all aided me. One new name was to join the list, another rock with Urvashi’s name on it. As chance would have it, it was at the same *paan* shop of Prabhat where I met this man. He was formally dressed, in a tailored long-sleeved shirt and matching pants, a rather stout dark complexioned young man whom I could have mistaken for a cop, one of those bribe-

taking types. I had come to Prabhat's after a long time. Perhaps I wanted to revive the old magic (the reader would remember that I had met Mr. Chaturvedi at Prabhat's). As I stood there talking about this and that, Prabhat doing his chores in the meanwhile as he was used to, this young man kept observing me. I had no energy or inclination to make any new acquaintance and so went on talking to Prabhat.

I had forgotten this bribe-taking cop-like man entirely until I met him again at the *paan* shop on the porch of Madras Restaurant. The man looked at me so directly I had to acknowledge him. The man—I had thought him to be a rough type—turned out to be a gentle soul and, when I asked him in passing where he lived, he gave me a certain sector and a house number, which to my unbelieving delight turned out to be a house close to Urvashi's, either the house upstairs or the one opposite hers. This was a mighty good reason to befriend the man and this I did with all the alacrity I could summon. It was a new godsend. The man's name was Rajoo. He had come from a village to live with his brother-in-law, who worked in Bharat Petrochemicals. Rajoo had found work in some sharebroker's office. He was glad to find a friend and soon began spending hours with me, coming to my house and lazing around. I, of course, indulged him as much as I could, but I did not tell him anything about my pursuit of Urvashi. I was afraid he might—and he would have, he was sharp for all his village background—see through my reason for befriending him. I didn't want to botch up this new contact.

One day, he took me to his house in spite of my protestations. It was evening and I was both excited and worried that I might encounter—who else? —Urvashi herself. This happened as I had thought it might. As we reached the alley where Urvashi lived, Rajoo pointed to his brother-in-law's house. It was exactly above Urvashi's house.

Urvashi and Jasmine paced the front yard of their house. If she was surprised to see me, she was a deft enough actress not to show it. After all that had happened between us and all that I had seen of her, neither of us could smile at each other, though I was not correct about her capacity or inclination to smile at me, for she would, and soon. If you, my reader, are feeling irritated about my mention of something as insignificant as a pittance of a smile, please don't forget that, sometimes, this is all one gets in refusal for the thing called "love," which is one hell of a waste of time, not to mention its other kinds of wastes. My point here is that you don't ignore even a smile when you are really in love. It's incentive enough to go on plodding, and therein lies its significance. Since I had acted before Rajoo as if I did not know Urvashi, I had to act it all the way through, and that meant that I couldn't have gone to his brother-in-law's house, for they would soon have found out and it wasn't difficult to link my befriending of Rajoo to my pursuit of Urvashi—perhaps it was my guilty conscience—so I went right up to the stairs then turned back, offering an excuse. Rajoo looked disappointed but not at all stunned. Later, he told me that he had met too many crazy men in his life. He said he was particularly good with them and could control their mad rages. He hastened to add that he wasn't of course talking about me in this sense and that he found me as uncrazy a man as one could be.

As for Urvashi, after a quick look in my direction, she continued her pacing of the front yard, as though she had just seen a lost stranger asking for an address. If I wasn't ready or spunky enough to acknowledge her presence, she did not have any use for me to begin with. Perhaps she was told about my increasing association with Rajoo by her brother, Samar, who to his jaw-dropping surprise found me in Rajoo's company regularly

(Rajoo once unwittingly embarrassed him (and me) to death when he began to introduce us to each other). Poor Rajoo, the fault wasn't his. He didn't know anything. Whatever might have been the reason why Urvashi seemed unperturbed about my friendship with Rajoo, I added Rajoo to my chart as a potential team member. Months later, Rajoo's brother-in-law and sister would finally know about my Urvashi affair and try to help me open another dialogue with her, but that would be a case of "too little too late." But before this would happen, Rajoo himself would take off one day with the express intent of meeting Urvashi in her house and telling her how much I was suffering without her and come back none the wiser.

It happened one Sunday afternoon. Urvashi's family, Rajoo told me, were preparing to move to their new house in a day or two. We were simply lazing around in my house. Rajoo was lying on a spare mattress of mine on his stomach, his arms propped up on a cylindrical pillow. I was looking at some of the office papers that I had brought home to work on a report.

"Did you propose marriage to Urvashi?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes, I did," I said. Then I told him my long story. I told him I had not told him before because I feared he might think I had befriended him for his possible "usefulness" in the Urvashi matter.

"No," he said. "You should have told me earlier. We could have done something. Now they are on the verge of leaving."

"Why can't you go and talk to her about me," I said.

Rajoo prepared to go immediately. He was like Rochester in action. He hated waiting. He returned in about an hour and gave me the following account of his chance meeting with Urvashi.

Urvashi was at home. She had been reading a book, sitting on a chair in their drawing-room. She smiled at Rajoo when he entered and asked him to sit down since Samar was gone out and expected soon.

I reproduce from memory, dear reader, all bits and pieces of Rajoo's actual conversation with Urvashi and her sister, the tomboyish Bhairavi.

"Porus remembers you all the time," Rajoo said to Urvashi.

"Why does he remember me? He should get married to someone from his own caste," Urvashi said.

"How can he marry someone else when he loves you," Rajoo said.

"I don't love him," Urvashi said.

"What's wrong with him?" Rajoo asked.

"Nothing. I don't like boys like him," Urvashi said.

"What is it that you don't like about him?" Rajoo asked.

"He's too tall," Urvashi said.

"Isn't that good, he's like Amitabh Bachchan?" Rajoo said.

"I like Aamir Khan," Urvashi said.

Aamir Khan is a popular, smooth-faced hero in Bollywood who isn't blessed with height.

"Are you rejecting him because of pressure from your family?" Rajoo asked.

“No. They have nothing against him. They are, in fact, ready, but I don’t want to marry him,” Urvashi said.

(Enter Bhairavi, Urvashi’s sister)

“Oh, Rajoo, how’s everything? I hear you are someone special’s fast friend these days. How is your friend doing?” Bhairavi said.

“You mean Porus. He’s fine,” Rajoo said.

“Is he getting married?” Bhairavi asked.

“You know he wouldn’t marry anyone except Urvashi,” Rajoo said.

Urvashi looked up at her sister sharply then hung her head.

“Why can’t he marry in his own community? He would get many good girls,” Bhairavi said.

“But he wants to marry Urvashi only,” Rajoo said.

“Urvashi’s no match for him. Can *Raja Bhoja* and *Gangu Teli* be compared?”

Bhairavi had quoted a famous Hindi proverb, which means that there is no comparison between a king (King Bhoja, in the proverb, who reigned over the central parts of India at the times of the crusades in Europe) and an oil maker (in the proverb a man named *Gangu Teli*).

After this brief and unproductive exchange, Rajoo left Urvashi’s house. When he returned, his expression resembled that on the faces of those who hide their disappointment beneath a cheery nonchalance. The Urvashi conundrum looked as abstruse as ever. It was true that she had flatly said, No, she did not love me, but her answers in light of all that had happened between us seemed as ephemeral and undependable as everything else about her. At worst, it was a repetition of that November

evening. I was disappointed by her response to Rajoo, but it did not dissuade me from my pursuit. There were always quotations to help me make up my mind. I read my diary, full of quotations, regularly and especially at such times. There was always something that related to my situation, like:

“If a woman says, Ah, I could love you if . . . don’t worry, she already loves you.”

Or:

“Love is faith and faith is forever.”

I refused to take Urvashi’s answers at face value, attributing them instead to some helplessness of hers that forced her to reject me. Even today, as far as the Urvashi matter is concerned, I cannot, with complete confidence, put my finger on something and say that this was it. Ask this of all who have been victims of unrequited love and the one question they would all want to ask their object of love would be: “What was I to you?” This is a question I wish to ask Urvashi, too, but I can’t, and hence this novel, for writing often lifts the gossamer opacity around something and brings light and clarity to it.

Finally, one day, I learned that Urvashi’s family had moved to their new house. I had long wanted to breathe the air Urvashi had breathed and exhaled, so I went to see Urvashi’s vacated house. I stood in the front yard for some time, looking at the locked quarter. The closed windows seemed like the flaps of a shut box. It was a small quarter, exactly the size I lived in. Already it had acquired a deserted look. To its left was a boundary wall, a barbed wire fence on its top, which separated the township from a wasteland. I sat, shoes on, on the dusty porch. I’d have come here as a matter of right, and now I was sniffing around like a thief. I got up and tiptoed my way around. This was probably the room where Urvashi slept. Or was it this? For a moment, I imagined what it

might have been to sneak up here and take a peek when she was still here. It was a scary thought, even the thought.

I enjoyed my motorcycle driving. It was good to be able to do something after a long time. One afternoon, I was lazily driving back to the office when, suddenly, a scooter overtook me. It hadn't bothered me at all but I was startled because Urvashi sat on it, compressed on the pillion seat, one girl in front of her, and a boy I knew driving. I wouldn't have noticed her but she turned 360 degrees and smiled at me widely. It felt as though she were trying to make up for all the days we hadn't seen each other, for her refusal to see me that November evening, and for everything else, generally. But it happened so quickly that my reflexes were slow, and I could not smile back. The incident made me euphoric about my chances again (believe me! It seriously did. One obvious simile is, when you are drowning, even a floating straw looks important). She certainly loved me if she smiled like that. Maybe her family forced her. Perhaps they told her concocted stories about what happened when one married outside one's caste, especially in a "higher" caste. Or perhaps she smiled deliberately, knowing full well that I was hopelessly hers if she only conceded a little, that no matter what happened I would return to her web, willingly, happily, picking up any morsel she threw my way and touching it to my heart.

Rochester sensed the emptiness in my life. He tried to fill it by what he called "my right profession." "You should teach English Literature," he said. Literature was one of the few things Rochester liked. I say this because he never went out with his family for either the social functions or for the purposes of what is known as entertainment, such as watching a movie, going to a garden, and so forth. Once, when we

discussed his temperament (it was I who brought it up), I told him that I found him to be more of a scientist versus, say, an artist. I thought this would please him, given his incredible claims about his herbal concoctions. I was wrong. He defended the title of artist for himself with a passion I had not seen in him. "I'll show you," he went to the extent of saying. I had termed him a scientist because Rochester liked to write poems based on things like meters. To me, that was proof enough of a scientific mind. An artist-poet wrote lyrical poems, like Keats, for example, or Kalapi if one talked of Gujarati poetry. I showed Rochester some poems in English written by me. Though he exaggerated my command over the English language, he never said a word about my poems. I understood this as his strong bias in favor of rules, technicalities, a carry over from his M.A. in English Literature degree

I was proud of my vocabulary and letter-drafting skills, but the idea of teaching English Literature was scary. I had not read a word of Shakespeare, I did not understand much of English poetry, and I only knew names of great writers such as Tolstoy and Twain and Dickens and Graham Greene. How on earth could I teach English Literature? So whenever Rochester mentioned English Literature, I merely nodded and changed the subject, but one evening, when he uttered the words, "Love's Labour's Lost," I interrupted him, telling him I'd heard the name somewhere. We sat in his cluttered drawing room. The door was open, and I could see the swaying branches and leaves of the trees that surrounded our apartment block. It was close to evening. Whether it was because of the emptiness I felt or because I had returned early from the office, the atmosphere seemed sad to me, not dull but sad.

"It's a play by William Shakespeare. Would you like to read it?" he said.

That's why I never said anything when he talked about literature. He always asked next, "Would you like to read it?" I did not like to read fiction, I had no time for it, so involved was I in my real life. No, it wasn't even that. I had plenty of time but no patience to read anything serious. I was fond of reading magazines. I liked to know what was really happening, but books—they only contained writers' make-believe. "I don't want fiction. I want reality," I used to say, justifying myself characteristically, understanding little of either. Talk about the unrest in East Timor or the Gorillas of Rwanda, and I'd talk for two hours, but literature—it was all fine and respectable but it was boring. These thoughts came over me again as he asked his usual question.

"I don't think I could read that kind of thing right now," I said.

"That's precisely what you should read," Rochester said.

"Why? Because of the title? You seem to think that my love is lost, don't you?" I said.

I was so touchy-feely those days, ready to flare up at those who were not with me, and even more so at those who were.

"No, it's not that. I simply want to show you that what you are passing through is not unusual or unique. There have always been dramas like this in which characters have faced dilemmas you face today," Rochester said.

"That's an interesting thought, but will it help me in any way?" I said.

"Yes. It will help you in your Urvashi problem," he said.

Rochester hated ambiguity. His answers were clear and prefaced with a "yes" or "no."

"Okay, I'll take it from you sometime and read it," I said.

“No, you’d never read it that way, not until I force you to. You must read it now,” he said.

There was something peremptory in his tone; there always was when he meant something with all his heart. He was deeply sensitive, though he never showed his emotions. Often, when I described some particularly moving scene from one of my favorite Hindi films, I saw tears in his eyes. He made no attempt to hide them, nor did they ever make him cry. He gave me a new, hardbound copy of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, obtained from M. S. University library. There was this former student of his who was now in college and had access to the library. Rochester felt grateful to me (though he shouldn’t have, for he had done no less for me) for drafting the reply to his suspension notice. The draft, he said, along with his defense of the case (which he conducted himself as deftly as he played chess), had helped him get reinstated. I was delighted to hear this. I hated to see a man like him reduced to suffering. He also gave me a deadline to finish the book.

“You have one week,” he said.

He did not mind my having it longer, but the library lent the book for a week only. I agreed. Rochester wanted a discussion of the book at a place of my choice, including his house. His house was the last place I wanted to choose. His egotistical wife was one big problem, but I also thought (and often said to his face) that it was the most slovenly place in the whole world. Whenever I said this, he laughed and said that his house was open to all: cockroaches, gophers, cats, stray dogs, besides, of course, people (some of whom came from far-flung villages with complaints of psoriasis, anemia, diabetes, external tumors, etc). If a patient came when I was sitting, I moved away and sat

at a distance, refusing even accidentally to touch the person, fearing that the slightest touch might somehow transmit the affliction to me. This was yet another “gift” from Urvashi: my hypochondria. I quote psychologists to say that severe emotional trauma can lead to hypochondria. Confidence is a funny thing. It makes you act like Napoleon one day, and then a day comes when it walks out on you as completely as the fortune of a rich man who is reduced to paupery, walking out of his own mansion after seeing it auctioned off, in a frayed jacket, with a suitcase in hand.

Rochester and I met at Madras Restaurant a week later to discuss *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. We had selected Madras Restaurant for its convenience and quiet, for although it was like any other commonplace restaurant, it was spacious enough to provide you with your own corner, and though it attracted mainly a frolicsome young crowd, they had the sense not to disturb the “serious, educated, English-speaking” types. After ordering coffee for Rochester and tea for myself, I spread my arms on the smooth, off-white Formica of the table.

“So how did you find the play, useful eh?” Rochester asked, looking at me with his wide, ingenuous eyes, puffed up above the large dark crescents beneath them.

“I liked certain aspects, but not the way it ends. For example, my pursuing Urvashi midway through the preparations for the civil services was like the King and his men’s turning back on their pledge to study for three years to follow the Princess and the ladies. I also enjoyed the play’s defense of love, which matches with my own views on the subject. Finally, I loved Rosaline, who reminded me of Urvashi with every line she spoke. All these said, I felt that all four men, except the presumptuous Armado, deserved their loves and should have got them.”

We faced each other at the last table in the second row. We deliberately chose these last benches because of the distance they provided us from our nearest neighbors, a group of six boys, all students in the Bharat School, for they had all greeted Rochester when we entered.

“Did you really feel it defended love? I thought it was a warning beacon of light against love’s excesses,” Rochester said.

“No, the play extols love. Listen to what Biron says to the King, Longueville, and Dumaine,” I opened the book and read the lines I’d underlined with a pencil:

But love, first learned in a lady’s eyes,
Lives not alone immured in the brain,
But with the motion of all elements
Courses as swift as thought in every power,
And gives to every power a double power,
Above their functions and their offices.
It adds a precious seeing to the eye:
A lover’s eye will gaze an eagle blind.
A lover’s ear will hear the lowest sound . . .
And when the love speaks, the voice of all the gods
Make heaven drowsy with the harmony.

I finished by reading the next few lines that said that all knowledge and happiness flowed from women’s eyes and that to shun them was to shun life.

“See, even the great Shakespeare approves of what I did. After all, what can one do before a beautiful woman?” I said.

“If that is so, why does the play end this way?” Rochester asked.

“It shows what happens if you deceive in love. The King and his men fail because of their ridiculous Russian masquerade. Why deceive the ladies like that?” I said.

“Was that the only reason why they failed?”

“Sure. The ladies had no objections. After all, the king and his men weren’t worthless suitors.”

“You ignore what the Princess said,” Rochester said. He flipped through the pages of the book, pausing before a page or two, until he found what he was looking for. He read it out loud:

This field shall hold me, and so hold your vow.

Nor God nor I delights in perjured men.

“What do you say to that? What were Urvashi’s views about your civil services preparations?” he said.

“I, like the king and his men, discarded my preparations because of love. I don’t know what Urvashi felt about it. All I remember is that in our second meeting in September when I mentioned the civil services she did seem really interested, but if that were so, why did she not aid in my preparations by accepting my proposal quickly and sparing me further pursuit? Besides, doesn’t real love overpower all else?” I said. “Here, listen to Longueville’s argument.” I was interrupted by the arrival of coffee and tea. What

had taken so long? I asked the tall, grey-haired, reed-like waiter. He explained that they did have old coffee and tea in the pots but that he wanted to serve us freshly made ones. He asked if we wanted something else. I looked at Rochester but he declined with a vigorous nod of his football-sized (as in soccer) head. I continued:

My vow was earthly, thou a heavenly love;
Thy grace, being gained, cures all disgrace in me.
Vows are but breath, and a breath a vapour is.
Then thou, fair sun, which on my earth dost shine,
Exhal'st this vapour vow, in thee it is.
If broken then, it is no fault of mine:
If by me broke, what fool is not so wise
To lose an oath to win a paradise?

“Nothing counts as much as love, provided it exists or is perceived as real,” Rochester said, taking a swig of his coffee, then wiping his mouth with the back of his right hand (for all his medical insights, he was one of the most unhygienic men I had come across). “Listen to what the Princess, the Queen after her father's death, says to the king”:

We have received your letters, full of love;
Your favours, the ambassadors of love;
And in our maiden counsel rated them

At courtship, pleasant jest, and courtesy,
As bombast and as lining to the time
But more devout than this in our respects
Have we not been, and therefore met your loves
In their own fashion, like a merriment.

“Didn’t Urvashi respond to you quite like this?” Rochester asked.

“Who knows for sure whether it was Urvashi’s or her family’s response?” I said, instinctively looking out the glass window on my right to see if Urvashi—who no longer lived in the township—was walking down the main road. I looked for her (or her moped) not only on the township roads but also on those surrounding the township; and sometimes right up to Bajwa, a nearby village that was a gateway to the area where she now lived.

“Yes, it could be that her family pressurized her, but who stopped her from sending a letter to you through Dushyanta or asking him for a secret meeting with you? Why did she say the things she said to Rajoo? Why did she openly flaunt her relationship with that boor?” Rochester said.

I had finished my tea and wanted one more. I asked the waiter, a young boy this time, who went up to the kitchen counter to a freshly filled pot kept on it, held a steel glass under its faucet, and came rushing back with my tea.

All this—what Rochester had said—was true, but why had she smiled at me so expansively that day from that speeding scooter? Even now she gazed at me as if she

knew that I was hers for keeps. Why, she had even come to the *Holi* pyre, remembering that I always went there looking for her.

“You mentioned that Rosaline reminded you of Urvashi. On what basis do you say that?” Rochester asked.

“Rosaline is called in the play ‘a light wench.’” Doesn’t the description fit Urvashi as well? They both have sharp, penetrating eyes and shiny, black hair. They both are hard to get and surprise you at every turn by some or other trick,” I said.

“What do you make of these verses?” Rochester asked.

How I would make him fawn, and beg, and seek,
And wait the season, and observe the times,
And spend his prodigal wits in bootless rhymes,
And shape his service wholly to my hests,
And make him proud to make me proud that jests!
So fortune-like would I o’ersway his state
That he should be my fool, and I his fate.

He had begun to smile so that I didn’t take any umbrage.

“Rosaline or Urvashi, what do they want?” I asked.

“Who could tell? Men’s fortunes and women’s characters are not known even to God,” Rochester said, quoting a Sanskrit proverb.

The night draped its cloak over the township. There was no one in Madras Restaurant except the two of us. The boys had long left. Probably they still stood at the

paan shop outside on the porch, where I had seen many familiar figures come and go. I was sitting far too back in the restaurant to be noticed by them, but had they looked a moment longer, they wouldn't have failed to recognize me in my trademark red and blue jacket. It was time for the diners to arrive. They should have been here by now, I wondered, the true miscellany of life, people who visited Bharat Petrochemicals on business or men working for the contractors who did odd jobs in the company's plants.

"There must be something I failed in," I asked.

"Go back to your favorite poem by Keats. They like 'thoughtless boys whose hearts are at ease,' Urvashi or Rosaline." Rochester said. "The play says the same thing, too."

He was flipping the pages again. I was thinking about that fat boy with whom Urvashi flirted. For all his "boorishness," he did seem utterly oblivious to Urvashi's presence that *Navaratri* night. Gosh, how could indifference be a virtue? Aren't women supposed to be fawned over?

The place found, Rochester read out loud:

That sport best pleases that doth least know how:

Where zeal strives to content, and the contents

Dies in the zeal of that which it presents,

There form confounded makes most form in mirth,

When great things labouring perish in their birth.

"What now? Will I never get her?" I asked.

“You might, but first you’ll have to forget her for some time,” Rochester said.

“Why?” I asked.

“So that she trusts your love,” Rochester said. “Doesn’t the Queen ask the King to spend a year in a hermitage?”

“Trust my love? I have been pursuing her for three years!”

“She came to know of it only last May, when Mr. Chaturvedi went with the proposal,” Rochester said.

Rochester made his moves deftly even in conversation.

“What after a year?” I asked.

“Talk to her,” he said.

I had expected from Rochester something brilliant, but his response disappointed me. Talk to her? Did I have to read a book to know these three words? But Rochester was my best friend. Dushyanta was busy in helping too many people (he was like the legendary *Hatimtai*), and I felt bad in asking him to devote any more of his precious time to my concerns. Rajoo, too, was of no use to me. He wanted me to forget Urvashi.

“I initiated talks with her family only so I wouldn’t have to talk to her. I have always felt awkward in that sort of thing. Besides, I don’t know any of her friends. There is no way I could do that,” I said.

“You have to talk to her. Faint-hearted men do not win a fair lady,” Rochester said, quoting the bard.

At this, we rose to leave.

CHAPTER 13

Since it was Rochester who introduced me to Dushyanta, and together the two made it possible for me to meet Urvashi, I began leaning on Rochester again. I wanted him to recreate that week of September.

Around April, the results of my civil services exam came. I failed. Although it confirmed what I knew all along, it increased my determination to marry Urvashi. I couldn't lose on both fronts. I could not allow some deformed fat boy, whose face showed all the corruption of his ancestry, to walk away with this most beautiful girl I had seen. I felt entitled to claim her. I had given up a lot for her. I had thrown away my career. I had never been satisfied serving as a grade two officer in a government company whose chairman was a civil servant who lived in a sprawling bungalow with a plush garden surrounding it. If I was waylaid from the track of civil services, it was for a reason. My destiny was inextricably linked with Urvashi's. I decided to pursue her no matter where or how long it might take me. After Mr. Chaturvedi and Dushyanta, would another man finish the race for me?

Rajoo was the most probable person, yet he was unlikely to be of much help. He was convinced that I was wasting my time. He even laughed about it. I once met his sister and brother-in-law. His sister struck me as a kind lady. Maybe she might help me. With this thought, I tolerated Rajoo's crude humour. Something needed to happen. I couldn't just stand and watch. It's curious how at first you plan everything systematically, and then suddenly you find yourself in a whirlpool of chaos, like those *Rajput* warriors who

were pitted against a far-outnumbering enemy. They fought until they died, sensing all the time their inevitable defeat. I had tried every trick in my bag—the ones I knew anyway—but with each of these, Urvashi had only grown more difficult to get. Still, like that *Rajput* fighting a losing battle, I did not think about the inevitable, even when a part of me had begun to accept that I might never see Urvashi again.

Rochester was a man of many parts. He could be ruthlessly rational, but he also told you things you did not believe. One of these was telepathy. I am sure you've heard of it somewhere. It's a part of that fantastic (some would say crazy) world called the psychic world. One evening, when my Urvashi talk went on and on, Rochester disappeared into his bedroom—which was slatternly with hundreds of used books that he had bought from the book peddlers, stuffed into a cupboard, crowding the sewing machine cabinet, and piled up on the headboard of a double bed—and emerged with an old, brown-covered book in his hand. He wrote my name inside and gave the book to me. It had five or six chapters, one each on things such as telepathy, intuition, hypnotism, and so forth.

At night, I read the chapter on telepathy. It was interesting, the very idea that you could “think” your way into influencing someone else's thoughts. Wasn't it too good to be true? Rochester wrote a small message on a piece of paper. He asked me to recite it as many times as I could. I was to sit in some quiet corner of my house (in my case the whole house was quiet), the usual meditation prescription. If I did this at a particular time, it was even better. The message was simple:

Urvashi, my heart's queen,

I crave you day and night.

Come fast, running into my arms,

Let us, in heavenly embrace, unite.

Rochester asked me to note down everything that happened after I started reciting my message. I went on reciting it day after day, noting the tiniest development in my blue journal. I saw Urvashi a few times, always driving her *Luna*, always gazing at me with her inscrutable but beautiful face. Why she came to the township from her new house five miles away (or was it three?) was not known to me. She came to visit the “immoral” sisters. Was it their friendship that brought her to the township? Or was it nostalgia of her long stay in the township? Did I figure anywhere in her reasons? I wrote down all these encounters in my journal. I began to feel that my exercise was having some impact.

Sometimes, I woke up in the middle of the night, stumbling across things in a perfectly lit room—I never turned off the lights for fear that ghosts, including that of my gentle grandpa, might come to punish me—to go find my cotton mat. Spreading the mat, I sat on it to speak my message, my voice droning like a man possessed, my mind traveling through a railway gate and a national highway into a poorly lit road frequented by trucks and tankers, and thence to a low-lying housing society in which the second house from the gate was where Urvashi slept in a small bedroom, which she undoubtedly shared with her sisters. What was she doing now? Was she asleep or changing sides? Was she thinking about me? Did she just wake up, feeling thirsty, or from a dream in which we had sex on a beach under a full moon, having been left behind by our picnic party? I wanted to fly invisibly into her bedroom and take her out someplace, or perhaps it was

better to be there itself. Nobody would suspect. Who did not see a person twisting and tossing in sleep? It could be a bad dream or plain insomnia. Who would know she had let out a soft shriek because I had just bitten her ear? There, she rolled over, because her back was probably aching, the result of long, straight-backed driving on a bony Luna. Who would know she had turned to let me in from behind? Soon, she would turn her face to me and we would bite into each other's flesh like hungry wolves. Our tongues would survey our bodies until our lower parts were ready for their work again. We were animals, animals in love. Then, one day, she would walk up to her father or mother or whoever was present and show them her tummy.

"I am sorry but he's done this to me. I am his woman. Marry us off before it's too late," she'd say.

What could Urvashi's family do when faced with a circumstance like this? Not a whit. They'd have to consent, of course.

I folded the mat with these thoughts clouding my mind. Then I flung myself on the floor to create my sexual encounter with Urvashi, who lay below me invisibly. I furiously kissed her left and right ears, naked with a small crevice-like hole for earrings that made them far more sexy than they would be with earrings on. The act over, I rushed to the washbasin and gargled, to ensure I hadn't swallowed any dirt.

"Don't masturbate," Rochester told me once. "It makes you weak before women."

Rochester never agreed with my self-justificatory and "modern" ideas about the act. Masturbation did bother me once, but I had long forgotten those times. These days, I did not even think about it. It was like sex, only Urvashi wasn't there, but she would be, some day. But perhaps Rochester was right about it. Maybe, if I had taken his advice

seriously, I would have been able to muster courage to approach Urvashi on many of our chance, on-the-road encounters, when she always gave me a long and expectant look while I just stared at her, unable to open my lips.

I was patient in my pursuit, all right, but I wasn't so patient from one day to the next. I was fast getting disillusioned with my telepathic recitation. It was all in the air. How was I to believe it worked? I only had Rochester's word for it and, every time I went to him, he repeated the same thing: "Keep sending the message." I had accepted telepathy as a last resort, but I was never fully sold on the idea. How could your reciting a message, which probably the person in the next room would not hear, affect somebody miles away from you? I remembered Dushyanta again (who else could I go to?) The man had dynamism. He could stir up some action. Unlike Rochester, who was a man of ideas, Dushyanta tried everything. He did not waste much time thinking, he jumped right into action.

When I spoke to Dushyanta about my plight, he came up with a new plan. "Let us meet people from Urvashi's caste. Let us get them to apply pressure on the family," he said. It was a plan I could work with. It was rational, and I could see things happening. I jumped right into it and, in the course of a few months, met so many different people as I hadn't in years, but it publicized my pursuit in a way that made it impossible for me ever to marry Urvashi. To say that it was a case of overkill would be to understate it. Already, the whole township knew about us. I was told that this had been one of the reasons why Urvashi's family had left the township immediately. They could have stayed in the company quarter for more time, but they had felt compelled to leave because it was impossible for Urvashi to come out and not be stared at by fifty different people, each

passing a remark or whispering into someone's ear something about her. I had never intended to do this. I would never have done this to my enemy, no question of my doing it to one I loved, but I still ended up doing it to Urvashi. I scandalized her. It was exactly what my favorite poem by Keats proscribed lovers to do. *To talk about the wayward girl was to scandalize her.* Every time I talked about Urvashi to a stranger, I chided myself and vowed not to mention her in the future, then Dushyanta introduced me to this man or that woman from Urvashi's caste and like a persistent beggar my eyes lit up and my tongue vomited out everything again. For heaven's sake! My brain cried in protest. Come to think of it, the whole thing was like writing. If you controlled your indulgent urge to talk about it, you wrote more and better, but if you let your ideas out to any receptacle on your way, the ideas lost their sheen mysteriously. For the sake of simile, you could also think of a burnt dish, a bad haircut, a cracked glass, or a spoiled date.

The first house we went to was that of a lady officer working in Bharat Petrochemicals, in some kind of welfare department. Owned by Government of India, Bharat Petrochemicals was among the few profitable public sector companies, but it still had the socialistic trappings of government-run companies. There were departments for promotion of local arts and handicrafts (it had helped put up a few stone sculptures in Baroda, the chief of which was a pair of banyan tree trunks, encircled by a railing), rural welfare (built roads or wells in nearby villages), a Credit co-operative society for employees (it did everything from selling blankets to collecting ten rupees from every employee's salary toward a fund for families of deceased employees), as well as a body to protect the Scheduled Castes from any "atrocities" heaped on them by employees belonging to the "upper castes." As is common with any large organization, Bharat

Petrochemicals too had numerous departments, peopled by fifteen thousand employees. Frequently, one did not know people working in the other departments.

I did not know the lady officer. She looked prim and smart in her starched cotton sari, but I could tell she belonged to the Scheduled Castes. She patiently heard Dushyanta's narration of my story, not saying anything except "ums" and "ahs." I had a feeling that she hated my origins more than any of Urvashi's relatives did. The feeling wasn't something I hadn't encountered before. The "achievers" from the "lower castes" loathed people from the "upper castes," because, however high the former rose, the latter still looked down upon them. I myself was not free from this bias. As soon as I came to know that a person was from one such caste, I mentally processed several reasons for his lower caste status, all the while feeling guilty and chiding myself for my pettiness.

It was during the working of our "new" plan that I accidentally landed in a house which had the type of marriage I had been seeking. The master of the house had the strangest surname I had ever known. It was obviously a made up surname, for it was a mythological name. *Achyuta* was Lord Krishna's name, one of the many. Mr. Achyuta had married a Brahmin woman. They had two young daughters, both of marriageable age. The man had adopted this surname to disguise his caste (he was from a very "low" caste, that of the cobblers). He argued incessantly, trying to sound educated and well read and cultured, like a Brahmin, in short. I liked the man despite this. If I had not, I'd have called him a phony. His Brahmin wife was typical of her caste. She did not speak much and went about her business, offering us only smiles and tea and snacks. It seemed to me that she had submerged her identity for the sake of her husband who, for all his outward

aplomb and photogenically-right smiling face, looked frightening in some unnamable way.

He invited Dushyanta and me to a village ashram where he went for some kind of “spiritual” experience. One evening, we drove to the place, a tiny hamlet on the outskirts of Baroda. The ashram was a walled-in establishment with trees everywhere and unpainted buildings made with bricks. I remember his older daughter took me out for a little stroll in the lit compound. It was quite a setting. A starry night; grass under our feet; huge, empty cooking vessels and clay kilns lying around; dark, still trees; and the complete quiet of a village at night. I liked the girl, who was affable and intelligent and sexy, but she was no Urvashi and that was that.

After a visit or two, I refused to go to Mr. Achyuta’s house. I sensed that the man had ideas with me in mind, and I did not want to encourage those. I did not want to break a young girl’s heart after mine had been broken repeatedly. I guess being kicked hard in life makes you humble if not anything else, and people in general like humility, though some hate it so much that you want to be arrogant to them, but, believe me, once you embrace humility or it does you, there’s no escaping it, it keeps a firm check on you all the time, like a conscientious matron. For all the unease that I felt in Mr. Achyuta’s presence (he must be the only one with that surname in the whole of India), I liked the experience of meeting him. If he acted in an affected, erudite manner, it did not mean he had no sense. The man openly told me about the difficulties he was facing in marrying off his two daughters.

“I cannot go to my community because they haven’t forgiven me for marrying a Brahmin, and I cannot get a Brahmin boy for my daughters because I am not a Brahmin,” he said.

I could have kissed his hands and taken him proudly to my family functions—my Brahmin relatives’ snootiness be damned—but he had to be Urvashi’s father, who he wasn’t, and so I was helpless. But the man’s dilemmas did open my eyes to the difficulties of inter-caste marriages in India, on the verge of the 21st century. India still lived in castes, after all these thousands of years. On the outside, the caste system had become a relic in cities. In my own township, for example, it was perfectly normal for Brahmins and Scheduled Castes to be living as next door neighbors. There was no segregation, or name-calling. Still, inter-caste marriages were looked upon with disfavor, and often such couples ignored by their own relatives. Years after the end of the Urvashi episode, I once lived as a neighbor with a couple where the husband was a Brahmin and wife was from a Scheduled Caste. In the six months of our neighborly association (they moved out after that), I did not see a single visitor to the couple’s house. It was all man’s fault. God gave him a brain, and with that he thought of many things: farming, building, rowing, catching fish, cooking, also living in castes or races. Gosh, when would all this end? It was like the food chain: the whites in the West looking down upon the “upper castes” in India (as the British had done), the “upper castes” looking down upon the “lower castes,” and even among the “lower castes” there was some kind of stratification. In all this, I had lost Urvashi, perhaps forever.

I had trained myself to be an optimist. Not only did I read self-help books and inspirational quotations, I read biographies of great people, drawing inferences from their

lives to apply to my own life. But, for all my optimism, I could not push back the growing sense of disenchantment I felt for the whole Urvashi affair. It had started toward the end of 1992, and I was in the middle of 1995. A lot had happened in the intervening period that had the potential to change my life. It's difficult for me to even write about this period. Besides Urvashi, the period had also been connected with my "civil services" venture, in which I had failed more completely than I had ever done in anything else in my life. Even now, I remember the Porus Chaturvedi of 1995, dressed in a loose long-sleeved shirt and a faded pair of jeans, slightly bowed as if under the strain of living, long hands slipped inside the tight pockets of his pants, smiling a sad smile of a boy who was learning to be a man, looking up at the sky, sighing, and walking through the vacant township roads with Rochester.

It wasn't that Rochester and I talked about Urvashi alone. We discussed (threw at each other recently learned facts and half-formed opinions, really) the Ebola outbreak in Zaire, the fighting in Bosnia, the China-Taiwan problem, Morarji Desai (the first non-Congress Prime Minister of India who died at 99), Dilip Kumar (the Hindi Films' thespian who won the prestigious Dadasaheb Phalke Award that year), the Komodo dragons, the LTTE in Sri Lanka, India's Nuclear ambitions, Nelson Mandela, Harshad Mehta (or the "Big Bull," the Bombay stock broker, who had swindled the banks and financial institutions of hundreds of millions of dollars, and who now publicly accused the Indian Prime Minister of having accepted from him a bribe of one crore rupees or about a quarter of a million dollars), GATT, disinvestment of the public sector companies, and other things with which television (which Rochester had recently bought) bombarded us. Everywhere in India the watch-word was "economy." Even those who had

never used this word before used it frequently—you heard it at *paan* shops and barbershops, in buses and trains and government offices.

As if the word were a panacea, newspaper editorials commented on everything “economic,” however esoteric and “not-everyone’s-cup-of-teaish”: the full rupee convertibility, the anti-dumping duty, the Modified Value Added Tax (or MODVAT), disinvestment versus privatization, the Companies’ Act, the Foreign Exchange Management Act, the infrastructure bonds. The socio-political rhetoric did not lag behind. We heard about the Panchayati Raj system (or the village self-governance), reservation for women in legislatures, INDIRA housing schemes for the poorest, RAJIV model schools.

To me, all this sounded foolish when I saw poverty and illiteracy outside the “economy-driven” cities. In thousands of villages, women and girls walked to waterholes miles away with a stack of pots on their heads. Millions of children did not go to school and faced the same bleak future their forefathers had lived. There was corruption and lethargy all around, in eight out of ten government offices. Neither did the private manufacturers fare any better. They lobbied with the government to block competition in the form of foreign manufacturers or local enterprises. They sold the same product year after year without an iota of improvement. If they “innovated,” it was because they were successful in tying up with a Japanese or a Korean company and shamelessly borrowing their technology. How, then, could India be a “superpower”? Take on America? On the basis of a few hundreds of software engineers? Government-Industry meets in five-star hotels? Ad-libbing by smooth-faced politicians on the national television? A passing “encouraging” remark of the U.S. Assistant Associate Joint Sub Secretary for South

Asian affairs? But giving opinions that ran contrary to what everyone believed meant being considered a dopehead or a “radical.” Everywhere people talked about the same things, and everyone agreed with everyone else. It’s always been a mystery to me why India hasn’t embraced communism. My suspicion is that rich Indian industrialists, who finance all elections, have kept the wolf from the door.

I still wanted to pursue Urvashi, but part of my heart was up in mutiny. We won’t allow any more affront to this individual called Porus Chaturvedi, it said. We know Porus is lousy, “untutored” as Rochester said, in this kind of thing, but he isn’t someone Urvashi can trample upon and forget to say sorry to. It was Porus Chaturvedi 2, split from the other part which still worshipped her. At the office, my boss changed once again. A tall, fair, and hawk-like fellow replaced Mr. Goodmemory. Mr. Hawk was another man who wasn’t particularly fond of me. To make a long story short, let me briefly explain what I mean. Mr. Hawk was my boss when I first arrived in Baroda. I worked (actually, sat at my desk and yawned, drank tea, then yawned again) under him for a couple of months during which our meetings were tense for both of us. Mr. Hawk felt that I was a presumptuous young man who ought to be taught a lesson on how to “obediently (read slavishly)” work in a large, governmental organization. I, on the other hand, felt Mr. Hawk was phony and mean. I was too young to be afraid of him and couldn’t get along with him at all.

The general manager of the Polymer Business Group (Mr. Hawk’s boss) was a certain large-hearted man known as “Colonel.” One day, Colonel called me to his plush cabin and enquired about my “work.” I told him the truth. He promptly freed me from the clutches of Mr. Hawk and put me in the able hands of AKB, whom I have already told

you about. This Mr. Hawk reappeared as my boss around mid-1995. As expected, he hadn't changed much, but I had changed a lot, and more than both of us, the product that we handled had changed.

Our company had recently expanded its production capacity of PVC. Unfortunately, this increased the total PVC supply in the country far in excess of the demand. The result was glut and competition, price wars and our working late hours. I felt like a taller (not physically) officer. I was used to preparing a monthly product movement plan of about 5000 metric tons. Now I prepared two such plans, for a total of 13000 metric tons. The International Business Group helped out with more exports, although they exported PVC from our Baroda plant only, as the quality of PVC at the new plant wasn't export-worthy yet. Along with the increase in product came the demand for a greater amount of information. The word "data" haunted me constantly. Price comparison among PVC manufacturers (the "landed" price, the net of "MODVAT" price); top customers' information (who buys how much from whom?); our monthly sales, with respect to regions (there were five geographic regions), customers (they numbered about 800 all over India, though the "top" ones were only about 30), grades (there was one main grade, 67 K-value; however, we'd begun looking for 57-K customers, as this grade was to be produced at the new plant); world and Asia-Pacific PVC demand-supply trends; the imported PVC CIF prices (base for our own price); the feedstocks' CIF prices, including that of Naphtha, EDC, and VCM; the discounts offered by the competitors (based on quantity slabs); the state sales tax details (for more than 25 states and Union territories); PVC applications: old ones like pipes, films, and cables and new ones like doors and partitions. My professional growth—not in terms of promotion,

time-bound in a government company—followed. This meant my having to move away from Urvashi, whom I had come to see as the number one enemy of my self-respect. But all this was still at the cerebral level. My heart still hankered after her.

Rochester gave me a book called “Naomi” by a Japanese writer named Junichiro Tanizaki. It was a work translated into English. I read the book quickly, in two days. I liked it from its cover itself, which showed a picture of a young Japanese woman with the comeliest features. The name “Naomi,” which undoubtedly became this woman, sounded like “Urvashi.” For once, Rochester didn’t have to press the book upon me, I was willing to read it. We met to discuss the book at Madras Restaurant again.

It was a Sunday morning, around 10 a.m. The restaurant looked deserted. It was always like this on Sunday mornings. Perhaps people liked to sleep until late or to go out on social visits. In any case, most of the people who came to Madras Restaurant were not township inhabitants. For one, it wasn’t considered a “respectable” eatery where families could dine. Young men from various backgrounds flocked to it, as did schoolboys and girls, visitors to Bharat Petrochemicals, and small time businessmen. There was also the psychology of why-go-to-the-next door-Madras Restaurant-when-we can-drive-in-our-Maruti-to-a- fancy-restaurant-in-the-city.

“You seem to have liked it a lot. I can tell from your face,” Rochester remarked.

We sat facing each other at a table at the far end of the restaurant, as usual. I took a sip from a glass of water the young waiter had brought with a certain haste (the result of my tipping). I told the gaping boy to bring the usual tea and coffee. He seemed to have expected this and turned to go even before I finished.

"Yes. It's a great book. What a story! Mr. Kawai appears to be consanguineous to me," I said.

"Oh, you mean in the sense of his obsession with Naomi?" Rochester asked.

"Yes. That's the starting point of our similarities," I said.

"Okay. What did you like most about the book?" Rochester asked.

"Naomi, of course," I replied.

"After all that she did to Mr. Kawai?" Rochester asked.

"Oh, she is too beautiful to be faulted. Beautiful women have their own laws," I said.

"Now I believe you when you say that you feel as though Mr. Kawai were related to you," Rochester said.

"Oh, yes. Throughout the book, I only loved Naomi, even when she was cheating on Kawai, who was as devoted to her as Greeks were to the Goddess Athena," I said.

Our coffee and tea arrived. I had a sudden urge for a cigarette. I excused myself and went out to the porch of the restaurant. At the *paan* shop, I asked Vitthal, the curly-haired co-owner, for one stick of Gold Flake. He looked surprised. I hadn't asked for a cigarette in a long time. I put a rupee and a fifty paisa in his hand, lit the cigarette with the burning end of a hanging jute thread, and returned to Rochester.

"What else?" Rochester asked.

"When Kawai first sees Naomi, she was about Urvashi's age when I saw her first. Kawai sees her as a waitress in the restaurant, and I saw Urvashi near Madras Restaurant. Aren't these remarkable coincidences?" I asked.

"You are crazy, in love, that is. You read meanings in ordinary things," Rochester said. "Don't people meet somewhere?"

"That's what I don't like about you. You throw your reason everywhere. There are things you believe because you believe them. Period," I said. I turned my head to puff the smoke away from Rochester, but it still reached him. He did not mind it, however.

"All right. Tell me why you think a man like Mr. Kawai, an engineer, went on desiring Naomi even when he came to know about her affairs with spoiled young brats like Kumagai and Hamada," Rochester said.

"The simple answer to that is because he loved her," I said.

"Is love all-forgiving then?" Rochester asked.

"Yes," I said.

"What about infidelity?" Rochester asked.

"Even that," I said.

"I don't understand. You love someone so dearly you give up everything else to have this person, and then one day you discover that the person you love does not love you, does not even care about you and has liaisons with others. How can you continue to love this person then? Won't it arouse in you immitigable hatred for him or her?"

Rochester asked.

I thought about Rochester's questions for some time (Rochester hated to walk, but he could sit silently for a long time). What he said could not be brushed off easily. I had myself put the book down whenever I had finished reading a scene in which Naomi cheated on Kawai; for example, when Naomi disappears from the house in Kamakura where she has persuaded Kawai to take her. How could anyone be so cruel? I had thought

again and again. Didn't she know how much Kawai loved her? What was so great in Kumagai that she ran off to him, throwing Kawai's love aside?

The book's drama freshened in my mind Urvashi's "heartless" rejection of my love and her running into the arms of that fat boy, the boor. My mind went back to that week in September when I had met Urvashi. After her evasive replies at the first meeting, I had kissed her on the cheek at the next meeting. She had talked to me in the same wifely tone in which Naomi sometimes spoke to Kawai. If Urvashi really cared for me, judging from that personal tenor in her voice, why did she have to break my heart and cling to that boor? Naomi had snuggled up to Kawai, suggesting coquettishly that they go to this beach town for a brief holiday. Poor Kawai had agreed, getting blatantly cheated in return, just as I had to watch Urvashi in the arms of that fat boor barely a week after being talked to by her in a tone which could only have come from a loving wife.

We had long finished our respective doses of caffeine. An old couple came and occupied the table next to us. They looked like south Indians. The lady wore a silk sari, a shiny nose ring, and ear studs. The man had on his forehead a bit of ash, which looked like a vague imprint of three fingers.

"What can you do if your love is insulted? You don't stop loving, do you?" I said. I knew that my reply sounded mawkish and did not fully convince even me, but Rochester heard it and kept quiet as though he knew I could not reply anything else, as if this was one place I could not avoid coming to, inevitably.

"How did you think the book ended?" Rochester asked.

“Oh, it surprised me. I expected Kawai to walk off. Instead, this shameless man married Naomi, agreeing to her brazen condition that she could continue to see other men,” I said.

“What else could he do? Naomi wouldn’t marry him otherwise,” Rochester said.

“Why did he have to marry Naomi under these circumstances?” I said.

“Why are you chasing Urvashi then? Don’t you know about her affairs with other boys?” Rochester asked.

“She might stop that once we decide to marry. I certainly won’t tolerate it after marriage,” I said.

“What if she doesn’t?” Rochester asked.

“I don’t think it would come to that. I would change her totally. If necessary, we will go and settle down in some far-away place,” I said.

I looked at Rochester’s face. It did not appear convinced. Was I myself convinced? I asked myself. The answer, of course, was no.

“Anything else you’d like to say about the book?” Rochester asked.

“The book offered me confirmation in some ways. For example, Kawai liked to lick Naomi’s feet. I could do this for Urvashi. I could kiss her feet if she asked me to,” (I remembered my fantasies about Urvashi’s ears. How I wanted to drench them with my love, lick them repeatedly, bite them, kiss them, but of course I couldn’t tell Rochester all this). “One more thing. This book has inspired me to write my own story some day. I might title it “Urvashi,” like ‘Naomi.’”

Rochester smiled cryptically. With that, we ended our talk.

CHAPTER 14

September 21, 1995:

An amazing thing happened today. Around 9.30, I heard a commotion in the office. Thinking that something untoward might have happened, I rushed to where my co-workers had gathered near the International Business Group. When I heard what had excited them so much, I wanted to pinch myself and see if I was not dreaming. Joshi told me that all over India the idols of Ganesha and Nandi (the Holy Bull, Lord Shiva's attendant) drank milk! When I asked how a stone idol could "drink milk," Joshi explained it to me. He said that he had just returned after offering the milk himself. You touched a teaspoonful of milk to the end of Ganesha's trunk, and, lo and behold, the milk vanished. I still couldn't believe it. Upon return from the office, I saw Rochester standing in his front yard, talking to two of his fellow teachers. I also saw Mrs. Rochester dressed in a sari and looking for a change like the lady that she is. Rochester's son and daughter, too, were dressed. Were they going out? I asked Rochester. No, he told me, they were just going to the temple in the Indian Textiles Township to offer milk to Ganesha and Nandi. Is it true then? I asked. Yes, Rochester said. I accompanied Rochester's family to the temple.

The low-ceilinged courtyard was filled with a long line of devotees, each carrying a glass or a bowl of milk and spoons in their hands. I watched in disbelief as the idol “accepted” spoon after spoon of scented milk (some had mixed in the milk the expensive saffron leaves to make their offering more delightful to Ganesha’s palate). When I took my spoonful of milk near Ganesha’s lips, it did seem to be sucked up by the idol. Rochester’s colleague, the physics teacher, said something about capillary action. I think he is right but I’m not sure. At Vitthal’s *paan* shop, people were talking about the same thing. One man said that his relatives had called up from the U.K., where the same “miracle” had taken place in temples. Another man said that this “miracle” proved that Hinduism was the truest religion in the world. The third said that perhaps this is a sign that the end of the Kali Yuga (or the age of Kali, considered the age of sin and sinners as per the Hindu mythology) is at hand.

I had started my Urvashi pursuit as a marketing strategy. I had prepared a chart and maintained a journal. All this had taken me to her eventually. It would be wrong to say that this was useless documentation. If I had not succeeded in winning over Urvashi, the fault lay with me. Some variable had been missing. What could that be? It was impossible to think on these lines then, when the process was still on, but now, at a safe distance from those events and having matured in my understanding of the fair sex, I am

in a position to analyze my failure. The foremost reason behind my failure was my inability to connect to Urvashi. I don't know why I was unable to do this most rudimentary of things in relationships. It was my lack of confidence perhaps. I'd grown up under a critical pair of eyes of a strict father, who was a narcissist. He seldom saw anything good in me. His constant criticism about my poor physique and brown complexion (he himself was a lot fairer), and his you-could-have-been-handsome lines broke my morale year after year. To my horror, I found most of these to be true.

There was another reason for my diffidence in front of the fair sex. I read Gandhi's autobiography when I was in the ninth grade. My poor self-esteem found in Gandhi's views a virtuous justification for my weaknesses. It was easier to be "virtuous" than brave. Around this time, my family was rocked by a scandal created by one of my uncles. He started living with his own sister-in-law. All this provoked in me a sense of disgust for sex. I remember being wooed by a couple of classmates in college. I ran from these girls, thinking them to be "fallen and corrupt." I remember touching lit matchsticks to my hands whenever I masturbated after repressing my desire for a long time. Hurling abuses at myself, I swore in the name of this or that god, only to masturbate again within hours. Urvashi's young but sharp eyes had seen through the pores in this man called Porus.

I started this chapter by mentioning my chart and journal before trailing off to talk about my childhood and early youth. I wish to return to these documents now because I remember the point I wanted to make about them. My point was that, although my pursuit of Urvashi had started with an element of planning, it had now become a free-for-all, do-what-comes-to-your-or-someone-else's-mind type. It was as though my mind had

ceased to think. It could only spur me to action, today this, tomorrow that. Dushyanta and I had visited more than a dozen houses of people belonging to Urvashi's caste to get them to apply the pressure on the family. It was clear to both of us that nobody wanted to do our bidding. Nobody cared. Or perhaps they saw clearly the hopelessness of the situation. I remember some of these encounters.

I don't want to encumber the reader with the details, like characters' names and other things. It suffices to say that I was not comfortable in a single one of these situations. I saw on these people's faces something strange. They liked me and yet they did not like me. They wanted to help me and yet they did not want to help me. It was my own contradiction thrown back at me. Rochester, too, came up with a name we could approach for help, that of a colleague of his, a notorious man from Urvashi's caste, who both drank and womanized. Upon our request, the man went to Urvashi's new house and talked to her family. He came back and told that they would "beat me up" if I did not leave their daughter alone. I was angry at the "impudence" of Urvashi's family and vowed to forget this whole goddam affair. I had reached a stage where only a miracle could have improved my chances. In a way, it was a stage, as though what all had happened had never happened, as though I had never met Urvashi and her family. It was like going back to square one with blockades and barriers everywhere around you, so you could not advance any further.

The only thing I did in those days was to drive my motorcycle to that busy road alongside which Urvashi lived. I had once seen her make a turn into a narrow road at a village near our township. Next time, when going to the road near Urvashi's house, I took this road, which snaked around the boundary wall of a petroleum plant, through small

farms and railway crossings. It was fun, driving on that road. It gave me a sense of adventure. As a child, I used to steer my tricycle to vacant grassy yards, imagining myself in the bushes of Africa.

There was an overpass beside Urvashi's house. The house was visible from there. Often, parking my motorcycle near its sidewalk, I stood gazing in the direction of Urvashi's house. Once, I spotted Urvashi on the terrace, pacing about with her sisters. She could have seen me if she looked hard enough and apparently she did that day, for she stood holding the parapet for a few moments, looking in my direction. I stood transfixed, as if I were a statue. After a few embarrassing seconds during which I sweated but was unable even to wipe it, Urvashi resumed her pacing, freeing me to hop on my bike and flee the place.

Sometimes, I saw Urvashi on her *Luna*, sitting erect as usual, Bhairavi weighing down the pillion seat. Our eyes met for a moment before our vehicles took us past each other. Her eyes looked vacant. She might as well have been watching a lamppost. Time was running out, and I knew I was out of the race. Urvashi had been admitted, I was told, to a college in Baroda city. College meant new life and new boyfriends. It was bound to take her further away from me. Didn't I say time had turned against me?

One Sunday morning, I was awakened by a persistent buzzing of my doorbell. Having been up until late the previous night, I wasn't exactly my hospitable best when I opened the door. It was Bhargav, after a long time; also, his trademark grin was missing.

"Where the hell have you been?" I said.

"I've been busy," Bhargav said.

"Doing more work?" I said.

“That and some problems at home.”

“What happened?”

“Porus, promise, you won’t tell anybody.”

“You got married secretly or something?”

“No. My sister eloped with a boy from Gajnera.”

“Your sister? But she was in school.”

“Yes. She left the house yesterday. Mother saw her packing. When asked, she said she was going to a friend’s for a sleepover.”

“How did you find out?”

“They called.”

“Have they got married?”

“Yes.”

“Who’s the boy?”

“He’s a Patel from Gajnera.”

“Oh.”

“I will never speak to her again.”

“No. You can’t do that. She’s your sister after all. Also, a Patel boy isn’t necessarily bad (one of the commonest Indian surnames abroad, Patel was originally a title given to land holders or village chiefs. Since their function seems to have been agriculture related, they would most likely fall into the third caste of Vaishya). He must be rich at least.

“Come, Porus, you of all people shouldn’t say this.”

“All right. He isn’t a Brahmin, but it’s your sister not you or your brother. Your sister is not going to carry the family name forward.”

“Let’s not talk about it, okay.”

“As you wish.”

Although I felt fatigued due to insufficient rest, I was glad to be with an old friend in the time of his distress. After brushing and washing, I accompanied Bhargav to Madras Restaurant. I ordered a plate of *Samosas* for him, his favorite dish. As he ate, the more recognizable Bhargav began to emerge.

“Urvashi’s *Luna* is up for sale,” Bhargav said, suddenly.

“What?” I asked, open-jawed, as if the Eiffel Tower itself were on sale. “How did you know?”

“Through my sources.”

“Well, then we’ll have to buy it.”

“What’ll you do with a sputtering, run-down moped?”

“What I’ll do? I’ll put it in a display case if I could. On the serious note, if they are selling her *Luna*, maybe they need money or perhaps Urvashi herself needs money. My buying it will be one more proof of my sincerity.”

“Or foolishness,” Bhargav said, smiling.

“Hey, you’re becoming rude.”

“No, no. I meant it as a joke. Do you want to buy it?”

“Yes. Inquire about the price discreetly. We’ll be the highest bidder if necessary.”

“You’ll look funny driving it.”

“I’ll not drive it. I’ll have it. Perhaps someday I might actually drive it, too.”

We'd finished our tea. I asked Bhargav to hurry lest the Luna be sold to someone else. He left, promising to be back by evening.

I went home and took out my bank passbook. The balance in my account was less than two hundred rupees. I would need at least there thousand rupees to buy the *Luna*. Where would I get the money? Asking Rochester was out of the question. The man was chronically impoverished, partly due to his recently-lifted suspension and partly because his wife forced him to withdraw all his salary and give it to her. Dushyanta could lend me the money. However, I didn't want to spoil my good impression on him. He believed me to be a well-heeled, systematic young man despite my civil services debacle, which he blamed on my preoccupation with the Urvashi matter. Also, Dushyanta was hardly a better money manager himself. In fact, his lack of financial well being was one of the reasons behind his delayed marriage, though his being overage was no less important a factor. Rochester told me about a recent incident involving Dushyanta's marriage negotiations. A teacher friend of both Rochester and Dushyanta was entrusted with the task of going to a house in the township to conduct marriage negotiations for Dushyanta. The would-be bride was a thirty-something lady. When asked by the family about Dushyanta's financial affairs, the teacher painted such an accurate picture that the negotiations were immediately called off. Even the normally altruistic Rochester could not control his laughter narrating the incident to me.

In the evening, Bhargav came again. I'd figured out the source I'd tap to buy the *Luna*. Only a month ago, I'd received a credit card from the Gujarat Bank. I had shown Rochester my embossed name below a crouching tiger. I could withdraw up to seven thousand rupees.

“They want five thousand rupees,” Bhargav said.

“Isn’t that a bit high?” I said.

“Very high.”

“What choice do we have?”

“Of not buying it.”

“No. That’s not an option. I’ll give you the money tomorrow, but I want you to convey to them immediately our intention to buy it.” As Bhargav prepared to leave, I remembered something and stopped him, “Wait. Don’t tell them I want to buy it.”

“What difference would that make?”

“They might refuse to sell it then.”

“They don’t care who buys it.”

“Maybe. But I want you to do as I say.”

“Okay.”

After Bhargav left, I went downstairs to check the space below the stairwell where I parked my motorcycle and Rochester his scooter. A small *Luna* could fit in without much difficulty.

The next day, Bhargav drove Urvashi’s green *Luna* to my house. Gripping the little vehicle in my hands, I swept my fingers over its black leather seat. I bent and smelled it. Did it have Urvashi’s scent? I sat on it, my legs spread-eagled. Bhargav was right. If I stood with my legs wide apart, the whole *Luna* would pass through without touching me.

Bhargav and I had just gone upstairs to my apartment when Rochester’s son called out my name. “What’s it, Shilu?” I asked from the balcony. It wasn’t Rochester Jr.

who met my eyes but Samar, Urvashi's brother, and his gang. Though I was shaken, I stepped back inside my house to tell Bhargav about our unexpected guests. He was in the toilet. When I told him, he asked me to wait for him. I could hear the laughter and loud talk of Samar and his friends. As we climbed down, Bhargav asked me to leave everything to him. "Let me speak," he said. Samar and his friends had dragged the Luna out onto the concrete strip in the middle of our apartment block. Two of his friends sat on it, fiddling with the handlebar.

"What's the matter?" Bhargav asked. "Have you come to return the money?"

"We don't want to sell it to him," Samar said, pointing his eyes at me.

"It's Bhargav who has bought it, not I," I said.

"We don't believe you," said one of Samar's older friends, a well built, long-haired young man.

"Ask Bhargav if you don't believe me," I said.

"He's your friend. He'll say what you want him to say," the long-haired boy said.

"All right. Return my money and take your *Luna* back," Bhargav said.

There was a silence in the group. After conferring with Samar, the long-haired boy came forward and said, "Okay, we don't want it back, but we'll not tolerate if Mr. Chaturvedi drives it."

Bhargav was about to reply but I cut him off. "What'll you do if I drive it?" I asked. I had been getting angrier from the moment I had climbed down the stairs to meet these ruffians. They had the cheek to come right up to my house and threaten me?

"We are telling you. If you don't remember it, don't blame us if something happens," the long-haired boy said.

“What the hell will happen?” I barked and stood facing the long-haired boy, pushing Bhargav behind me, who held my arm and was trying to get me to back off.

“Let’s give him some *prasada*,” the long-haired boy said, using a euphemism for spanking, which literally means an offering to God. At this, he and a jet black boy began shoving me. I was taken aback by this sudden attack. I had thought my talking loudly would scare these boys who knew I was an officer. When I was manhandled, I realized how fragile my body was as compared to, say, my determination. I was never physically strong and years of smoking had further weakened me. Bhargav pounced on the long-haired boy and quickly had him on the ground. Another boy replaced the long-haired boy. Both he and the jet black boy held my each hand firmly, as if I were trying to jump into a nearby well or something. I flailed my arms with as much strength as I could muster but their grip was viselike. But, apparently, the purpose of the boys was to simply hold me. Steeping forward now, Samar slapped me on the cheek. “You bastard,” he said. “You have harassed us all for a long time.” I was stunned. Even now, he looked to me a replica of his sister. I had always waited for the day when we would become friends, going out on excursions around Baroda on my motorcycle. Maybe Urvashi would accompany us or maybe we would go alone.

“You are mistaken, Samar. One day, you will regret this,” I said. The point made, Samar turned around to go, followed by his two friends. The long-haired boy, still held on the ground by Bhargav, had asked everyone to leave. Bhargav threatened to keep him nailed until he did so. Hearing the commotion, Rochester came out of the house. “You rascals, what’re you doing here?” he shouted. Rochester was solidly built and had a reputation for short temper. Samar and his friends took to their heels.

Asking Bhargav and Rochester to wait for me (I proposed the three of us go to Madras Restaurant), I climbed back upstairs on the pretext of changing my clothes. I sat on my cot and cried. Why did I have to suffer all this humiliation? I wasn't stalking or calling Urvashi. I did not even talk to her. All I wanted with me were her memories. That is why I had bought the *Luna*. Of course, I had not given up my pursuit, but I did not want to press the matter beyond its breaking point. I was willing to bide my time. Did Samar act on his own or was the family involved? Did Urvashi have this engineered? My mind again crowded with questions. The only good thing about what had just happened was that Rochester hadn't seen me getting slapped. He loved me too much to allow me to continue my pursuit after that. Before coming upstairs, I had whispered into Bhargav's ear not to tell it to Rochester.

No one except my father had ever slapped me. As a child, I often faced bullies, but I had always managed to use my wits to escape any trouble. Once, I had accompanied my father to Surendranagar. It was when he had developed claustrophobia and begun avoiding the touring. Thinking my presence would embolden him, I agreed to go with him. After leaving me at the guest house, my father went to meet some doctors. As I was free, I decided to take a long walk in this "in-the-middle-of-nowhere" kind of town in the central Gujarat. The day was hot and I walked up to the bus station, a distance of two miles or so. Before returning to the guest house, I spotted and walked up to a cart selling lemon juice. Just then, a young man with a frayed shirt and the ruffled hair came for the juice. Honestly, I heard an alarm in my mind, an unknown sensation, an ill feeling. As I gave the two-rupee coin to the vendor, I spotted a one-rupee coin kept on the edge of the cart. Since I had to take back a rupee anyway, the price of the juice being one rupee, I

took the coin and pocketed it. Suddenly, the man with the ruffled hair grabbed my hand. Pulling my shirt, he accused me of stealing the one rupee. I now understood the mistake I had made. The young man had kept the rupee, and without bothering to tell the vendor I had taken it, so the man was justified in getting angry with me. I apologized to the man and said I forgot to ask before pocketing the coin. But the man was in no mood to pardon me. He dragged me to the porch of a closed shop. A crowd of onlookers meanwhile gathered on the other side of the road. I saw that some of them signaled me to run away. I understood from their sign language that the man had other friends and that they were nearby. As the man pushed my head down to the wooden porch of the shop, I pushed him back with all the strength I had. He had not expected this and went reeling to an auto-rickshaw parked behind him. I ran in the direction of the Boston guest house with all the power I could summon. So fast did I run that I didn't even look back. Only after reaching our room and finding my father there, did I care to breathe. I told my father what had happened, who immediately dragged me out to the spot from where I had fled. My father was physically strong. He asked the auto-rickshaw drivers and the like people present on the spot. However, the young man with the ruffled hair was nowhere to be found.

Even though all indications pointed at my certain defeat, I could not accept the reality and reverse my course. There was a reason for that. I had a sense that such a mess was bound to be created in affairs like this, and that time—if allowed to lapse—would set everything right again. In terms of marketing, I had over killed the product, i.e., myself. I needed freshness desperately, and only time could provide it. Yet time could also act the other way. It could kill the whole thing off permanently. Urvashi had started going to college and it was only a matter of time before somebody picked her or she chose

someone for that lifelong commitment. At any rate, it seemed to me that there was no turning back now after having endured so much. What if Samar slapped me? Wasn't he the most misguided of all Urvashi's siblings? Hadn't even Urvashi's mother apologized to me for his behavior? Who knows, if the family comes to know about the present incident, they might send someone to assuage my feelings. I was brought thus where I'd stood all along—I had to work through the mess and bring the matter to a successful conclusion.

I had gone to Rajoo's house once or twice and met with his sister and brother-in-law. They treated me with respect, but there was a hint of sarcasm in the brother-in-law, who seemed to consider my pursuit irrational. I never tried to justify myself, there was no point in that, people had their own minds, and you had no right to trespass there. If you respected their views and asked for help, they might help you, provided your request was reasonable. Both my business background and my instincts had taught me this much about people.

Rajoo's sister was a kindly lady who always treated me with affection. Since they were former neighbors of Urvashi's family, they could visit them easily enough. Rajoo's sister promised me that she'd speak with Urvashi in private and convey my feelings to her. Her husband seemed not to have any objection to this. Accordingly, one day, the couple set out to visit Urvashi's new house. Next day, in her drawing room, Rajoo's sister narrated to me what happened. Being shy and sensitive, she took her time giving the full account. It had not been easy to find Urvashi alone. Her sisters and mother guarded her as though she were a princess under threat of abduction by an evil king. A pure chance—Urvashi's volunteering to prepare tea, which took her to the kitchen—gave Rajoo's sister

the opportunity to follow her target. For a change—for normally she was the most innocent of women—Rajoo's sister threw a wide smile to Urvashi's mother and sisters, who did not extend their vigil to the kitchen. After Urvashi had mixed milk and water, poured sugar and tea powder, and put the pan on boil, Rajoo's sister mentioned me.

“Porus wanted me to talk to you. He wants to know what is your final answer,” Rajoo's sister said.

“I have told him a hundred times. My answer is no,” Urvashi said.

“Why not? He's young and handsome and an officer. Above all, he really loves you. Hasn't he waited all these years for you?”

“Hmm,” Urvashi said.

“Is it your family that refuses?”

“No, it's my decision.”

“Don't you think he'll be a handsome groom for you? He's so tall, just like Amitabh Bachchan.”

“I don't like Amitabh. I like Aamir Khan.”

“But you are quite tall yourself.”

“What's the hurry?” Urvashi said.

Rajoo's sister said she couldn't believe the words she had heard. For my part, I could not have been more pleased in months. So, all was not lost. Urvashi did care for me. Maybe there was some hitch and she waited for things to clear up. Rajoo's sister had acted wisely in not pursuing the matter further. I admired young Urvashi's tact even though I had been at its receiving end. If she didn't want me to hurry, I certainly wouldn't. Why should I? As long as she made me believe she was mine. This one

wondrous line made me forget that she had also said that she did not want to marry me, that she did not like the tall superstar of Hindi films. There wasn't any harm in her liking Aamir Khan, who was five feet tall and cute as Romeo himself might have been. If there were a survey of teenage girls in Baroda and they were asked who their favorite film hero was, the chances were bright that Aamir Khan would emerge as a winner. Urvashi couldn't be blamed then.

Rajoo's sister told me that *Navaratri*, the nine nights of circular *garba* dances, was approaching and that I should use it as an opportunity finally to settle the issue, hopefully in my favor. The painful memories of the last Navaratri were still in my mind. That and the fact that I never liked the festival to begin with made me uneasy momentarily. But I had a few weeks' time and I resolved to work out a strategy. I could always count on Rochester for advice. The man had worldly wisdom and was the most rational being I had met despite his idiosyncrasies. When I told Rochester about Urvashi's promising words, he said nothing. My long association with him had made me accustomed to his silence as a response and his seeming inattentive looks. I knew from experience that the man missed nothing but responded to only what he thought was worth responding to. Still, I liked to bounce my ideas off Rochester, knowing that he would never forget to tell me something that he needed to. As we took our customary evening walk along the dead-looking trees lining a township road, Rochester took out a volume from a cloth bag slung over his shoulder.

"Vanity Fair by Thackeray," he said. "It's a great book to understand women."

I laughed out loud at his attempt to be the marketing guy for a change. It felt good to be able to laugh so freely. I took the book gratefully. I needed to read something

thoughtful before my next encounter with Urvashi on a *garba* ground. We never discussed a book until I had finished it. This kept me from sharing my growing enthusiasm over Thackeray's novel. The book surprised me with its lifelike observations, and I felt as if I somehow knew some of the characters well enough to be able to strike up a mutually interesting conversation with them.

The book was a welcome relief from my long days in the office, where Poly Vinyl Chloride, the product I helped sell, was going from crisis to crisis. Due to our forced selling in March (to show a happy figure at the end of the financial year), we had built up large stocks in April and May. June turned out to be one more low-selling month, and by July, we were holding 35000 MTs of unsold PVC. Naturally, everyone in the group was under pressure, and my boss became more and more abrasive. I understood his enormous pressure and helped to lighten it by doing whatever I could, staying in the office until nine or ten p.m..

After about two weeks, I completed the book and was ready to discuss it with Rochester in our old Madras Restaurant. As usual, I ordered a coffee for Rochester, the only "treat" he'd allow me to give him.

"Liked it?" Rochester asked.

"It was great," I said. I had long been waiting to shower praise on the book for the sheer pleasure it gave me in my otherwise lonely nights.

"What did it teach you about women?" Rochester asked.

"That they are capable of both the greatest devotion and the shrewdest manipulation," I said.

"Which character did you like the most?" Rochester asked.

“Dobbin and Amelia,” I said.

“Oh, not Becky? I thought you’d like her the most,” Rochester said.

“Well, I liked her, too, but she was very manipulative. She even cheated Rawdon Crawley, who was totally devoted to her,” I said.

“So you dislike a woman’s cheating after all,” Rochester asked.

“Sure, who doesn’t?” I said.

“Did you see similarities between Becky and Urvashi?” Rochester asked.

“They are similar in some ways, but Urvashi cannot be Becky. Becky is too selfish,” I said.

“All beautiful women are selfish. They want men to hover around them, leaving all the other business aside. They want to be praised and courted, and they always want to make the final choice,” Rochester said.

Just then, there ensued an argument between two waiters in the restaurant. It was something about the tip meant for one that had been taken by the other. The waiters brought the check, along with fennel seeds, in a small dish. They put the dish on the table and walked away, doing something else in the meanwhile. This gave a chance, sometimes, to the other waiters to quietly walk up to the vacated table and claim the tip.

“I think you are making too strong a statement. Look at the beautiful Amelia. Now, who can accuse her of manipulation?” I said.

“What about her manipulation of Dobbin? Doesn’t she want him and not want him at the same time?” Rochester said.

“Well, that’s because Dobbin wasn’t very expressive of his feelings. Maybe Amelia just didn’t know how much he loved her,” I said.

“Most men are like that. It’s hard to tell a woman exactly what you think of her. I mean, the woman you love,” Rochester said.

“Then why do you blame me that I am not able to face Urvashi?” I said.

“I don’t blame you. I tell you that you have to do that if you want to win her,” Rochester said.

“How do you think I should do that? She doesn’t even want to see me,” I said.

“How would Dobbin approach her if he were in your place?” Rochester asked.

“I am not sure if Dobbin would have liked her in the first place. Dobbin loved Amelia not only because she was beautiful but also because she was virtuous, probably more because of her virtues,” I said.

“So what do you take from that?” Rochester said.

“I am no Dobbin. I like women who are manipulative. It makes them sexier,” I said.

“Then you think you are more like George Osborne?” Rochester asked.

“Perhaps yes. I am certainly as narcissistic and pliable, but I have something of Dobbin, too, his sincerity,” I said.

“Either way, Urvashi is lost to you,” Rochester said.

“How so?” I asked.

“You said you find Urvashi similar to Becky. Becky treats George Osborne with contempt, although hidden, and she keeps away from Dobbin because she fears his sincerity,” Rochester said.

“You cannot generalize like that. I told you Urvashi couldn’t be Becky. How can you say so?” I said.

“I say this based on history, which is the only basis you have when predicting human affairs,” Rochester said.

“You aren’t talking to demotivate me in my pursuit? Aren’t you supposed to help me get Urvashi?” I said.

“Sure. Let’s talk about the book,” Rochester said.

Suddenly, I saw that Dushyanta walked into the restaurant accompanied by a tall (she was very tall) foreigner. He did not see us and sat at one of the tables in the front—a few tables away from us—facing the restaurant entrance. I was able to see his back and the foreigner’s face, which was too long, almost triangular. I told Rochester about it. He merely smiled. For a moment, I almost rose to go and say hello to Dushyanta, but I checked myself. I didn’t want to intrude. If they were still there when we left, I’d say hello. If Dushyanta saw me, he’d call us to their table.

“You know what I most like about it?” I said.

“Dobbin and Amelia, you said,” Rochester said.

“Yes, but what I like about them, that I didn’t tell you. I like the fact that Dobbin and Amelia marry in the end,” I said.

“You think they should’ve?” Rochester said.

“Certainly. George Osborne never deserved to marry Amelia. The man was too flighty, too insincere,” I said.

“So you think sincerity meets sincerity in the end?” Rochester said.

“Not always, but it’s good if it does,” I said.

“What if it doesn’t?” Rochester said.

“Sincerity can develop. You cannot be blind to true love for long?”

“But Becky was just that, blind to love. Wasn’t she?”

“Again you are comparing Urvashi with that selfish woman,” I said.

“Oh, yes, we won’t argue on that. Let me hear your opinion on the last paragraph of the book?”

“You mean, the ‘*Vanitas vanitatum!*’? It certainly has depth, but I don’t know what to make of it. If you think that whatever you might do, you cannot escape unhappiness, what is the point of life and making a choice about what you want?” I said.

“I agree. You couldn’t have said it better,” Rochester said.

Both Rochester and I had not finished our coffee and tea. I left it for the waiter to pick up. Rochester gulped it down as though it were unjust to leave it undrunk. Dushyanta had seen us and come to our table. He introduced the foreigner with him as “Ebeth” or “Abeth.” She was from Holland. Dushyanta had met her at a yoga workshop organized by the Aurobindo Ashram. Quite a character, this Dushyanta, how many people does he know?

Having decided to put forth my best show during *Navaratri*, I bought costly and colorful readymade shirts. No readymade pants ever fit me, and there was no time to get a pair tailored. I wore the shirts and showed them to Rochester, who said they made me look like a prince. If one shirt was lemon yellow, another was the color of a plum. There was a sky blue silk shirt that had a few brushstrokes of parrot green and orange. The shirt shone like a garden light and felt like a woman’s body. I had told an unbelieving Dushyanta that I would join a dance class to learn the *garba* dance, but *Navaratri* was round the corner and it was not possible for the best *garba* instructor to train me in such a short time.

Around this time, a Hindi movie called “Hum Se Hai Muquabla” or *Your Competition Is with Me* was released. I wouldn’t have heard of it, as I never watched new Hindi films that flooded the market like onions, but a song in the movie, which soon topped the popularity charts and could be seen on TV frequently, caught my ears and, not any less, my heart. Its words were:

Urvashi, Urvashi, take it easy Urvashi,
A slim, finger-like body doesn’t need a pharmacy,
Mantra for victory is “take it easy” policy,
Four full-moon nights these, youth a mere fantasy.

One day, I drove my bike to a theater near Urvashi’s house. As luck would have it, the movie was being shown there. I half expected and half feared to see her on the road or at the gates of her housing society, or even on her terrace from where it was possible to see the movement on the overpass. But I did not see anyone. Inside the theater, I sat on a wooden seat (I wondered if the theater was built in 1911), the last in a row, with my legs spread, for there was no one in my immediate vicinity. The movie was the usual Hindi movie fare—a poor hero winning a rich heroine because he is a dancing sensation—but the songs were another matter. It was the only time in my life that I saw a movie in the company of total strangers. I looked around in the intermission to see if Urvashi or someone from her family was there. But I wasn’t so lucky. I sat in the balcony, where many rows of seats were empty, but I heard uproars from the floor below and figured it

might be more fully occupied. If only Urvashi were here beside me, I thought, this would be heaven.

CHAPTER 15

Navaratri is the most popular festival in Gujarat, Gandhi's home state. It's celebrated around September to honor the Goddess Durga. Durga is the archetypal goddess in Hinduism. She is worshipped as Kali in Bengal and in various other forms and with other names throughout India. Historically speaking, the original inhabitants of India, the natives of the Indus Valley Civilization, worshipped female goddesses. The Vedic Aryans, too, brought their own female deities. It's most likely that the present female pantheon in Hinduism is the result of the Aryans mixing with the Indus Valley people, as is true of numerous other things about India. The festival lasts nine nights and ends on the night of *Vijayadashmi*, the day Lord Rama is supposed to have slain the demon-king Ravana. Both men and women dress ostentatiously for the *garba* dance. The men wear colorful silk *kurtas* and tight cotton *churidars* and throw a bandanna around their shoulders—a few wear turbans, too—for the 'ethnic' look. Women wear colorful, embroidered blouses and long skirts—known locally as *chania cholis*. They wear heavy make up on their faces, matching bangles on their arms, and the most conspicuous earrings. Around midnight, the dance begins.

Both men and women keep moving in a circle—taking two or three steps to the front, then they turn sideways as though stepping back, then they zoom ahead again with a renewed flourish. Clapping at the end of every movement, the hands follow the feet. There is the famous Aarkee Group's *garbas* that have more than fifty thousand people dancing on a large ground around a temple-shaped stage made for singers and musicians.

No wonder even the BBC showed the Aarkee *garbas*. Baroda is the most famous city as far as *garbas* go. During Navaratri, more than a hundred different *garba* dances are organized in the city. I was always a non-garba type. One, I didn't know how to dance. Two, I hated the traditional outfit. Some men and boys did dance in a shirt and pants, but they were considered tasteless and no one looked at them.

Rajoo informed me on the first night that Urvashi would come to *Garbas* near his sister's house. He told me that a relative of Urvashi lived nearby, and the girls would stay there during most of the festival. This was a good opportunity, because I could always go to Rajoo's sister's house. On the first night, I wore my plum-colored, long-sleeved shirt. I had had a hair cut—that and my clean-shaven face combined with the shirt to give me a debonair look. Rajoo's sister had a nice little tenement. The front yard was still uneven and weedy. A heap of sand and a pile of bricks lay in a corner. Rajoo's brother-in-law wanted to build a deck here with a flowerbed around it. I parked my motorcycle in the front yard and went inside the house.

In the bright drawing room—the result of the white light, floor tiles, and walls—I sat on an easy chair. There wasn't much furniture in the house, as expenses had been on the rise since the purchase of the house itself, which was mostly paid for by a housing loan provided by Bharat Petrochemicals at a lower rate of interest. I sat enjoying the family's hospitality and talking with Rajoo's young niece and nephew when Urvashi, yes Urvashi herself, appeared at the door looking like the most beautiful girl in the world. She was followed by Bhairavi and one other girl I did not know, possibly her cousin. Urvashi had put on a silver-colored dress that wound around her body the way a shimmering skin wraps around a fish. She looked at me with the complete assurance of a

queen, like Catherine the Great, for example, when she looked on her former lovers. I couldn't help but think that she made this perfectly ordinary room look like the court of *Indra*. Effortlessly, she disappeared into the house. I heard bits and pieces of a discussion surrounding her dress, the matching silver necklace, and the white earrings that dangled from her ears like dripping nectar.

I had not noticed if Urvashi's sisters were surprised to see me. Urvashi herself had seemed a perfect picture of joy. Her white, glistening cheeks had quivered and reddened, so there was no doubt in my mind that she was as happy as she could possibly be. I heard her giggles from inside the house and could only imagine how her earrings must have danced to her laughter. This was perhaps the apogee of my misfortune, that I was just a few steps away from her and yet could not see her at her sexiest best. How might I have appeared? Perhaps like a monk in utter self-restraint, or like a dying soldier smiling at his young wife—if he gets to do that—one last time. When Urvashi came out, she did not look at me, though I found her once again floating on the mosaic when she passed by me within a distance of a stretched hand. Soon, she was gone, her smooth, creamy upper back enticing me one last time.

After a while, I followed Urvashi to the *garba*. Rajoo accompanied me. I joined the crowd standing on the periphery of the ground. My height easily gave me the best view. I did not see Urvashi for some time. Finally, she came into sight, her slim, lithe figure gyrating to the *garba* song. Goodness, this was a girl worth dying for, let alone living for. How young and flower-like she was! Perfect in her steps and delicate in her hand movements. For once, I envied Bhairavi the most in the world, for she followed her in the circle. The songs came one after another. It was a small group of men and women

who sang in a chorus. I stood there watching my beloved until it was time for a break—at the end of a continuous dancing for three hours.

It was well past midnight. I had taken care to see that I wasn't standing anywhere near Urvashi's family. I did not want them to see me for obvious reasons. But when I saw Urvashi darting towards me, I panicked a little. A thought crossed my mind: was she coming to say hello? Well, the truth was that Urvashi's family (to my horror) stood directly behind me, albeit at some distance. If Urvashi saw me, she did not acknowledge it. It really hurt, as there was no one to stop or even notice her if she wanted to. I moved a little into the crowd so as not to be seen by her family. I saw her again when she went back to dance. She looked slight, her neck leaning forward a little, like a peacock's, as she skipped ahead to join the circle. It was almost dawn when I drove home. I had seen Urvashi's slippery back as she trotted to her relative's house at the end of the *garbas*. My last thoughts before hitting the bed were that this was only the first night and that I had eight more nights to try my luck.

My luck, however, did not change. One night followed another. Urvashi looked more and more beautiful but remained more and more distant. She glanced in my direction but there was nothing else. Had she forgotten her own words that I was not to hurry? All the lights and color and joy that spread around me did not matter so long as Urvashi was not with me. Rajoo tried to humor me, took me to the Aarkee *garbas*, said Urvashi was inferior to me in all respects, but I was not convinced. Urvashi alone could please me in the whole world. My existence equaled and ended at her. My growing depression was multiplied many times by what I heard from some of my acquaintances.

“She meets up every night with --,” said one.

“I saw the two of them together in an empty plot behind a house,” said another.

I felt like the soldier who is hiding in a pile of straw, holding his breath as the enemy spikes are poked into the pile, almost touching his skin. I could do nothing but watch helplessly until my time came, if it came at all. I remember the last *garba* night, for that was when we came closest to each other. As usual, when I started to return at the end of the garbas, I turned to the fast emptying ground for one last look. Suddenly, my eyes caught her coming to me, all by herself. I stood looking at her, not believing what I saw. She halted as suddenly and looked at me. It was all a miracle as I stood, my lips sealed. I don't know how long we stood there, looking at each other. It wasn't very long, I am sure, but when I saw her turn back, I wanted to cry—only my lips hadn't recovered from their paralysis. Even now, I remember the brown earth below our feet, the godly silence of early morning, and Urvashi standing like a nymph descended from the heavens. I was to see that form of hers in recurring dreams, until, one night, it came in a flash and never returned.

Navaratri had come and gone. I had lost my last chance. When I told Rochester that we had stood facing each other, he looked at me with such a furrowed face that I understood that the man had been grieved personally. He quickly settled into his philosophical silence, though, looking somewhere in the distance. I passed the first few days after the festival in dazed indifference. It seemed as though the end was in sight. I had come a long way, almost four years, and I had achieved nothing but endless pain and disappointments. I sometimes cried when walking alone in the township, sure that nobody would notice a crying young man of twenty-five. Nights, when I walked on those solitary township roads, Urvashi's face appeared before my eyes, bringing a flood of

tears that not even the roaming dogs noticed. I was worse off than these canine creatures, I thought; at least they didn't have any complaints about their fate.

But my mind hadn't accepted destiny's verdict yet. Slowly it regained control over me, shoving aside the emotional part. There must be some way still, it egged me. I thought and thought, pacing my little pigeonhole at nights. At last, I remembered someone. I knew the "immoral" sisters, Urvashi's friends in the township, at least by face. Dushyanta certainly knew them, and they could be contacted through him. They were the only people Urvashi visited after she had left the township. They could thus be very useful. Dushyanta didn't need to be pushed to start working on this idea. The sisters were contacted and one of them agreed to meet me. I met her in Dushyanta's house, no less than a temple to me, where a year before, I had sat face to face with Urvashi.

"Why does she refuse?" I asked Urvashi's friend, one of the "immoral" sisters.

"She has been completely brain washed."

"Is there no hope?"

"Run away with her."

"I want to avoid that. That's why I approached the family."

"That was nice of you. But you will never get her that way."

"Does she love me?"

"All I can say is, once in my house, she told me how tall you were and how handsome."

"Did she say that?"

"Yes."

“Is there nothing else we can do? Like my going to their house to answer their doubts, or our meeting at someone else’s place?”

“It’s beyond the talking stage. You have to act if you want to marry her. Frankly, there’s no other way. The family would never let her marry you.”

The girl had told me something that had comforted me most since my meeting with Urvashi herself. But the question was, how would I run away with her? The thought was so alien to my nature. I required a reincarnation for doing it. Even if I were ready, how would I carry it out when I could not even meet her? And if I was caught in the act? Could I trust Urvashi to back me? Urvashi’s family had already threatened me. Samar had slapped me in front of my house. Perhaps they would beat me to a pulp, get me imprisoned. The charge? —attempting to rape a girl, or some such thing. Porus Chaturvedi, the Brahmin, whose ancestors wrote the Rigveda, charged with an attempted rape and sent to ten years’ rigorous imprisonment. Or Porus Chaturvedi publicly humiliated and laughed at, the Chaturvedi name reduced to dust. Running away was no option—even for Urvashi. I could not, not for anything in the world, drag my family’s name down into the abyss. I had to think of the other solutions. Surely, I had at least one other option.

Urvashi’s friend’s revelation that it wasn’t Urvashi, but her family, who had refused, had encouraged—if not emboldened—me. As always, I returned to Rochester, now that I had to think again. Rochester promised to think about it. That was enough. I had set the scientist, the philosopher, to work and he would come up with something. My own brain did not seem like a thing to rely on. Rochester asked me if I wanted to read about Urvashi. He had me shocked for a moment until he revealed that he was referring

to the mythical namesake of my girl, who was *Indra*'s favorite. He gave me a thin, pink-covered book titled *Vikramorvashiyam* by Kalidasa, translated from Sanskrit into English by C.R. Devadhar. He also gave me a copy of the Penguin Rigveda.

"Read the story about Pururavas and Urvasi," he said, pointing at the Rigveda.

"What?"

"Pururavas, Urvasi's lover."

"Oh God!"

Naturally, I could not wait to devour both the play and the story. I finished reading them the same night. I was struck by the different endings in both. In the Rigveda, Pururavas, who is a king, loses Urvasi eventually. In Kalidasa's play, they are united in the end when Indra awards Urvasi to Pururavas for his help to the Gods in their fight against demons. Were I and Urvashi the reincarnations of the legendary lovers? What was in store for us in this birth? Would a miracle happen again? Would I meet my *Indra*, the capricious king of the Gods? Or Would I never have Urvashi as my wife as was the fate of Pururavas according to the Rigveda? Rochester told me that Kalidasa probably modified the myth to give the audience a happy ending. We were seated in the same old Madras Restaurant. The waiters, too, now snickered to each other, pointing discretely at our table. The young crowd had long given up observing us. The whole township knew that we were the best of friends. Rochester's dark but handsome face had a peculiar fierceness that kept people at bay. He was polite to everyone yet no one dared to talk to him.

"Which version do you like more?"

"Is that a question to ask? Obviously Kalidasa's," I said.

“What else do you like besides the ending?”

“Kalidasa’s description. Things like Pururavas saying, ‘My fond desire becomes more fervid as impediments obstruct the pleasure of union, as the current of a river, checked by uneven rocks, splits itself into a hundred streams,’” I said. I had underlined many such lines that tickled me with delight.

“But theirs was a mutual love,” Rochester said.

“What do you call love? Isn’t it mutual attraction? If that’s the definition, I can tell you for sure we love each other. I had doubts, but Urvashi’s friend proved what I all along felt in my heart. It’s her family, her caste, that won’t allow our union. I don’t know why they oppose our marriage. How long will we have to live under the yoke of the caste?”

“And your family? Are they ready to welcome her?”

“The honest answer to that is no.”

“That’s it. You can’t blame them alone.”

“Perhaps it’s all destined,” I said.

“What?”

“Our remaining apart, like the story in the Rigveda.”

“Powerful. Isn’t it?”

“Yes. I remember Urvashi’s advice to Pururavas, ‘There are no friendships with women; they have the hearts of jackals.’”

“They do. Beautiful women,” Rochester said.

“Promise me you will think of a solution. I will never give up,” I said.

“I have already thought of something,” Rochester said.

“What is it?”

“We will perform the *Vishnusahastranam Yajna*. Our Brahmin ancestors performed such fire sacrifices all the time. For the king’s victory, for bountiful crops, for cattle, for progeny.”

“What will we have to do?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing much. There are a few things we need. We will have to make a brick altar. As for coconuts, flowers, and firewood, the priest at the temple in Bajwa will bring everything,” Rochester said.

I had seen the poor, bicycle-riding priest—a tall, fair-complexioned man with sharp features, dressed in a white dhoti and a white *kurta*. Betel-leaf chewing had stained his teeth. We went to his small house in Bajwa village. It was a one-bedroom tenement. Cardboard was stuffed in places where the window glass was broken. Two thin boys with keen eyes and the comely features of Brahmins watched a Black and White TV. Calendars showing Lord Shiva, his consort Parvati, son Ganesha, and Lakshami, the goddess of wealth, hung on the whitewashed walls. An iron cot, covered with an old bed sheet, showed from the adjoining bedroom.

After we had waited a few minutes, the priest arrived. He met us with characteristic Brahminical positivism, oblivious of his poverty. We decided upon the oncoming Thursday for our *Yajna*. It would be performed in my house, and besides the priest and myself, Rochester would be there with his wife and two children.

The *Yajna* was performed in the evening, the auspicious time or the *muhurta* having been decided by the priest after a careful scrutiny of the Hindu calendar. Around 4.00, an hour before the start of the *yajna*, the priest arrived on his bicycle. He was

dressed in a spotless white *kurta* and a *dhoti*. A tiny oval made from sandalwood paste showed on his forehead. Having brought a few bricks and a little cement from a nearby construction site, Rochester and I had constructed a squarish altar in the center of my drawing room. The priest declared the altar to be all right, though he said that, ideally, it had to be pyramidal. He laid a cup of tea I'd handed him on the floor and sat cross-legged in front of the altar. He took out a small glass bottle from inside his cloth bag. Declaring that the water in the bottle had come from the holy Ganges, he sprinkled a few drops on the altar. Now it's pure for our purpose, he said. Next, he arranged banana leaves around the altar, as though he were about to wrap it in them. He inspected a dish of fruits—two apples, a handful of *chickoos*, and an orange—we had prepared as an offering to the Gods. He asked me to untie a packet of *pedas* (round and flat sweet cakes made from dried milk powder) I'd brought and put some in the dish along with the fruits. He'd finished arranging the logs inside the altar and now asked me for Ghee or clarified butter, the fuel for the fire. Pouring spoonfuls of clarified butter onto the logs, he put some straw on top of them. Having lit the fire with a match, he expertly shifted the logs with another log in his hand. Soon, the fire was ready for the sacrifice to begin, its long flames consuming the straw mercilessly and turning the logs black.

The priest and I sat on two wooden boards facing the altar. Rochester and his family sat on the floor around us. At the start of the *Yajna*, Rochester asked the priest to dedicate it to the cause of my marriage with Urvashi. The priest gave the dedication in Sanskrit, of which I understood only two words: the word for “dedication” (something like “*samarpayami*”) and the name of Urvashi. Then the *Yajna* began, an hour-long recitation of Sanskrit hymns in praise of Lord Vishnu.

Of the Hindu trinity of Gods, Vishnu is the preserver, the other two being “Brahma,” the creator and “Shiva,” the destroyer. Although his role was relatively minor in Rigvedic times, Vishnu became one of the most powerful Hindu Gods by the time the Christian era began. Both the Hindu epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, center on Vishnu, for *Rama*, the hero of the first, and *Krishna*, that of the second, are incarnations of Vishnu. Such was Vishnu’s all-embracing power that even Buddha was named an incarnation of Vishnu.

Of dark bluish complexion, Vishnu has four hands, carrying—one in each hand—a mace, a lotus, a conch, and a discus. The last acts like a boomerang, returning after beheading a foe. A story in Mahabharata mentions a king named Shishupala, the ruler of Magadha. Once, furious at Krishna for some reason, Shishupala went on cursing *Krishna* to his face. Krishna warned Shishupala to stop before he had uttered the hundredth cussword, for if the king didn’t stop, Krishna’s discus would sever his head. The arrogant king ignored the warning, and the discus did the rest. The most common image of Vishnu, however, is one in which he is reclining on a serpent’s coil in the middle of an ocean.

When the priest had finished, Rochester recited the famous *Purusa-Sukta* hymn (or The Hymn of Man) from the Rigveda. The hymn, which refers to the sacrifice of primeval man, says of the origins of the four *varnas* (or castes): from the mouth of the sacrificed man sprang the Brahmin, from his arms the *Kshatriya*, from the thighs the *Vaishya*, and from his feet the *Shudra*. For a moment, I thought it ironic that one should sing Purusa-Sukta at a sacrifice to promote a union between a Brahmin and a *Shudra*. Soon, however, I was drawn in by Rochester’s sonorous voice, his loftily held head, the

fragrant smoke of the incense sticks, and the inscrutable but enchanting effect of the correctly pronounced language of my ancestors. I had a distinct feeling that Urvashi was not to remain away from me for much longer.

I waited patiently for some positive development. I looked around every time I stepped out of my house. Was she there somewhere? I went to the overpass near her house. I was ready to stop her on the road, if necessary. I walked every evening to the “immoral” sisters’ house, to see if Urvashi had by any chance come. I went to Dushyanta’s house in the hope that there might be some news, or that I might meet someone who knew her. I went to Rajoo’s sister’s house. Had she visited it recently? The more I looked around, the more I did not see her. I went to the college where she was studying, in hopes of finding her at a bus stand where I had once seen her. She was never there, even at the times when she usually returned from classes.

CHAPTER 16

1995 ended with Urvashi as far away from me as she had always been, with the exception of that one week in 1994. The *Yajna* performed in my house became a distant memory. Rochester and I stopped discussing the subject. I had long grown weary of it myself, but now even I felt as though I could not continue it any further. I had become thin and my eyes looked as though they had seen a lifetime. I still have some pictures from that time, and if you looked at them, you would believe me.

In my office, a man named Vaghela worked as a lower division clerk. Although holding an insignificant post, Vaghela was trusted by even the senior managers to get something done. He was clever as a fox and dogged as a spider. He had known for a long time about my Urvashi obsession, as did practically everyone else in the office. One day I asked for his help in the matter. Vaghela was very loyal to you if you respected him, and I had always shown my respect to him. After a few days, he came to my cubicle with a plan. He knew a *Tantrika* who could help me. He lived in a nearby village and was famous for his miraculous results. I remembered Rochester's opinion on the *Tantra*.

"These people are anti-God. They are worshippers of the evil forces. Though they are very powerful and can indeed perform miracles, one who takes their help can never enjoy the fruits thereof. He must pay the price, as do the *Tantrikas* at the end of their lives."

Even so, I was willing to try. Maybe nothing happened to you if you took their help. In any case, I was confident God would always protect me from any evil forces.

After all, what wrong had I ever done except love a “lower-caste” girl? I told Vaghela that I was willing to go to the *Tantrika*. (The word *Tantra* or *Tantrika* originated around the 7th century AD, though it had always existed in one form or another. Of the four Vedas, the fourth, the Atharva Veda, is a collection of magical spells and incantations. *Tantra* grew in power as a deviant sect of Buddhism known as *Vajrayana* (or the vehicle of thunder), which mainly spread in Tibet around the 8th century AD.)

We set out one morning, Vaghela riding on the pillion seat of my motorcycle. We crossed the Indian Textiles Township then the GSFC Township. Baroda was a city of large industries. Huge iron columns, some of them burning LPG, could be seen from miles away. We came out on the Ahmedabad-Baroda highway. The road, normally busy, was unusually crowded today. There had been an accident. Trucks, tankers, busses, cars, two-wheelers, all crawled haltingly. We passed by the Hotel Tiara, from opposite which an exit went straight to Urvashi’s house. I looked around, just in case. Nothing.

After a long time, we reached the bridge on the river Mahi. The narrow bridge would not allow any speeding, although the traffic had become normal now. Tobacco fields, flower gardens, and clumps of mango trees surrounded the road. Vaghela asked me to turn into a narrow exit. The road looked eerie in the middle of the day. An occasional bicycle or a two-wheeler passed speedily by. Farmers could be seen ploughing tiny fields, a pair of bullocks leading, a small brick cottage, a water pump, and a well completing the scene. A cool breeze now tempered the hot sun, which had drenched us in sweat on the highway. Cranes, parrots, and hawks flew above us, while mynahs and pigeons greeted us on the road.

It took us an hour or so to reach the *Tantrik's* village. We had to ask directions to his house. When we reached the "house," all we saw was a hut in a corner on a small, brown, furrowed farm. My shoes dug into the ridges of the powdery soil. In the foyer of the hut, a few villagers, dressed in tight-fitting, stained white clothes, sat on charpoys, chattering and smoking bidis. Vaghela went up to the men to inquire about the *Tantrik*. I stood waiting near the parked motorcycle. Vaghela returned with a smiling face.

"The *Tantrik* will come out in a few minutes. He's having his lunch," Vaghela said.

So they also had their lunch time, I thought foolishly. The *Tantrik* emerged from the hut shortly, had a few words with the men sitting on the charpoys, and walked over to where we stood near my motorcycle, whose tires had sunk into the soil. He looked about forty and was dressed in a shirt and pants. He was the color of the soil around him, grey on the head. His face had that lost look of a man who is so resigned to life's struggles that nothing moves him anymore. His face resembled a rock, with its scratches and lines. He stared at us with the same expressionless face.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

Vaghela quickly explained.

"What's the girl's name?"

"Urvashi."

"And *Bhai's*?" He addressed me as a brother, the universal way men are addressed in Gujarat.

"Porus."

Tearing a page from a notebook in his hand, he drew on it a horizontal rectangle, dividing it into different sections by drawing lines all over it. Then he wrote a word in every section. I could not make out what the words meant. They all ended with an after-sound of a bell—mmmm. Having filled all the sections, he bent and picked a pinch of soil from the ground. This, he sprinkled over the page. Then he closed his eyes and recited a mantra in a tone barely audible. He folded the page into squares and gave it to me.

“Touch this to a horse’s tail and your wishes will be fulfilled,” he said.

“Horse’s . . . but where do I find a horse?” I asked.

“Don’t worry, sir, you will find one near our office. In Gorwa. Near the Hanuman temple, tied to the *Peepul* tree,” Vaghela said.

But how do I touch this to its tail? Won’t it be angry and kick me? I wondered. I could not express my fear to Vaghela. I was too ashamed to ask him to touch the paper to a horse’s tail on my behalf. What would he think? I thought. I had always appeared brave in front of him. On our way back, I found the whole idea ridiculous. How on earth could you marry the girl you loved by touching a suspect piece of paper to a horse’s tail? Ridiculous. I could have laughed out loud if it were not for such a serious purpose, my life itself. Wasn’t Urvashi my life?

Well, that was the end of the *Tantrik*’s paper. I threw it away first thing upon reaching Baroda, after dropping Vaghela at his house, of course.

I never saw Urvashi again after that (except in dreams sometimes). I hankered for her a month or so more. One evening, as I walked on the road outside the township gates, a sudden realization caught hold of me. I could never marry a girl who had reduced me to such a state. She had trampled upon my dignity and worth as a man. Whatever I might

say to flatter my ego, the fact was that if she really wanted, she could have married me. Caste was a big barrier, but people married outside of caste and against family all the time. Maybe Urvashi was helpless. She was the youngest daughter and probably needed to think of her older sisters' marriage. If she married outside her caste, it might jeopardize her sisters' weddings. But what made her cling to that fat boy? And what about the things I'd heard about her flirting with other boys? Why did she do it when she knew a man like me was after her wholeheartedly? Did she have no heart? Or was this the way beautiful women behaved, as Rochester always said? I had come a long, long way, but even I had my limits. Maybe my mind was only fooling me. I had reached a stage where I would not have been able to marry her anyway. Or maybe I would have. Who knows? You have to live life even when it hurts you in some way. I wanted to show Urvashi that she had not finished me, that she could never finish me, that I could put my love and everything aside when it came to my dignity and honor as a human being.

Mulling over these thoughts, I walked up to Prabhat's and stood there, smoking. Prabhat told me that he had been thinking of closing the shop. Why? I asked, surprised. Because I want to concentrate on the contract work with the Indian Textiles Company. Is it really all that much? I asked. Yes, he replied. It was unthinkable for some moments, Prabhat's not being there at Undera circle. A few boxes had opened up recently, but these were run by kids, high school drop outs who neither had the skill to run a *paan* shop nor the right manner with the customers. Prabhat's would be sorely missed. An era seemed to be ending. I had been thinking on my way to Prabhat's about marrying, not Urvashi but someone else. Curious thing this change was, it came and swept everything aside, which then became history, memories, analysis, lessons, and, sometimes, even a

book. I took one last look at Prabhat's, which to me always resembled a bird's nest—cozy, firm, welcoming.

What did birds feel when they left their nests? Did they ever vacate their nests the way we do our houses? Did the young ones, after they were fledged, ever return to the parents' nests? Why do we cling to houses? To shops? To corners? To squares? To towns? To cities? Prabhat was an ordinary man, the kind you forgot about as soon as you saw him. Then why did I feel so emotional about not having the chance, possibly ever, to see him again? Why do we remember a human being years after we have last met or seen him or her? Someone with whom you shared nothing but a few moments of leisure? Of loneliness? Were these the agents of God sent along to keep a watch over you, give you a hand if you faltered, love you when the whole world had closed its doors?

The reader would remember my saying that it was in Dushyanta's spacious and homey drawing room that I met my wife for the first time. It happened a few days after my last meeting with Prabhat. I sat with Dushyanta, autopsying the Urvashi matter for the one thousand and tenth time, when a family arrived at his door by an auto rickshaw. We heard the loud gurgle of the auto rickshaw engine, but Dushyanta didn't move from his seat. There were just too many people who came to his house. Often, they sat waiting for their turns to speak with Dushyanta in different parts of the house. Some would sit in the drawing room, leafing through a magazine; some would go inside one of the two bed rooms to take a quick nap; and some would wait outside on the porch, attracting the stares of the neighbors who thought Dushyanta was a politician. The family that had arrived outside soon made its appearance in the house. A tall, fair, and handsome-looking old man was the first to enter. Dushyanta excitedly got up from the sofa and shook the

man's hands in delight, all the time exclaiming, "But Mr. Solly, what a surprise! What a pleasant, pleasant surprise! But you didn't even write your usual post card."

Mr. Solly was Dushyanta's only uncle. For some reason—Dushyanta made a point of that—he didn't call Mr. Solly "Kaka," the usual address for uncle in Gujarat. I had once or twice heard Dushyanta talk of Mr. Solly, but I always felt that maybe this Solly had been Dushyanta's college principal or professor or some such guy. I didn't know Solly was his uncle. Anyway, Solly, who was wearing a thick, plaid coat, sat on a sofa, while the rest of his family, his two daughters, went into Dushyanta's bedroom, each carrying an old style leather suitcase in hand. I moved to a nearby chair, giving Dushyanta room to talk with his uncle. To complete the projection of my non-intrusive intentions, I picked up a copy of *Filmfare* lying on the bottom rack of the center table. I wanted to linger for a few moments and then leave. I reached the end of the magazine, which had some juicy pictures of Raveena Tandon and an interview with a Pakistani actress, when I heard a question from Solly.

"So, you're the Porus Dushyanta writes so much about?"

"Yes sir, I am Porus Chaturvedi," I said, putting the magazine away.

"I'm Lieutenant Colonel Solly Mehta. I'm five years into retirement, but feel I have a war left in me."

"Did you go to war?" I asked, adding for the sake of politeness, "You must have."

"Of course. I fought in both the '65 and '71 wars with Pakistan. I was only a year late for the '62 war with China," Solly said.

Dushyanta had in the meantime left to get some snacks from Madras Restaurant. He asked me to keep Mr. Solly company while he went and returned quickly. As always,

with Dushyanta, it was a question of one or the other of his values or principles. "I like doing my own work," would be his simple answer if I pressed him to share a little work with me. Solly's two daughters had not emerged in the drawing room again. Perhaps they were taking a shower after a long journey from Jamnagara. The girls were fair, more so than their father. The older one was taller, thinner, and, to me, looked the more attractive of the two, though the younger one was cute in her own way, with dimples in her cheeks and a slightly upturned nose.

"Do you think we'll ever have a war again?" I asked, to fill in the time.

"Oh, sure. Do you think Pakistan will stop meddling with Kashmir until then?"

Solly said.

"But war is no solution. We have fought three wars and not solved any problem."

I said.

"All those were half-hearted wars. We were on the verge of winning when the politicians cried "Ceasefire!" and then, like lame ducks, we stopped," Solly said.

"But don't you think, sir, a war now would be more dangerous, given that both our countries, we more than they perhaps, are closer to acquiring nuclear bombs?" I said. I recalled having read in the newspapers the strange (to me, at least, they sounded strange, as if we were about to be attacked by aliens or dinosaurs) descriptions of the missiles the two countries had been developing: short-range, medium-range, ground to air, ground to ground. Even stranger were the names given to them: Agni (fire), Prithvi (the earth), Trishul (trident), and Nag (serpent) on our side; Ghauri and Ghazni (medieval Muslim rulers who had carried out raids into India) on theirs.

“That’s true, and that is why I’m mad at the government for their shortsightedness in losing the advantage we had. After the 1971 war, we had 90,000 prisoners of Pakistan. Bhutto was ready to sign on dotted lines, and that lady, who had no experience in wartime diplomacy, released them all. In return, we got a piece of paper, the so-called Simla Agreement, which Pakistan has violated consistently ever since.”

Solly’s daughters came out into the living room. I was hoping to see them again. Watching good looking girls at such close range was nothing short of a luxurious bath or sauna. The older one looked a bit older now, wearing a sari and having arranged her hair, which had been loose earlier, in two short braids. Ugh! What an old fashioned dame, I thought. She spoiled her image in my mind. The younger one looked smart in her tight-fitting *churidar*. Yum, she had fully grown breasts, too. The older one smiled at me a few times. Maybe she has started having ideas about me, I thought. The younger one was a picture in contrast. She hadn’t even looked at me properly. That she was sexy, however, I could have accepted without a single objection.

I looked at Solly with some embarrassment. He must have been watching me looking at his daughters. Dushyanta hadn’t returned, despite his, “I’ll be back in five minutes” line. I wanted to go out on a walk with Solly’s older daughter, despite her *school-teacherish* hair-do. We were four people in the room and everyone was quiet. God, I was dying of boredom. Did Solly’s older daughter look like Urvashi? I asked myself for the tenth time. The answer again was a no. She didn’t look bad, though, if only she loosened her hair once again. Where is their mother? I thought suddenly. Funny that I shouldn’t have thought it before. Maybe she hadn’t come, had been sick or something.

"I'm sorry, Porus. I almost forgot. This is my daughter, Nisha," he said, pointing to his younger daughter. Nisha? Is she the same girl who used to tie Rakhi on my wrist? No, of course not, she cannot be the same fat, white girl. That Nisha didn't have dimples in her cheeks, and she certainly wasn't so silent. Besides, this Nisha wasn't as white. She was fair, not white, my kind of complexion. "And this is Sarika, my second wife," Solly said, pointing to the woman whom I had thought of as his "older daughter."

"Oh, hello madam," I said, after my initial shock subsided, turning to an even older-looking Sarika. To Nisha, I just offered a quick, awkward smile. The lucky old dog, I thought. But how could she? I put brakes on my thinking. I had no business to pry into their lives. Dushyanta returned at last. He had brought fresh, crispy *Samosas* and *Kachoris*. We ate these with the tea that Sarika had prepared. Realizing that I hadn't given Solly and his family any time alone with Dushyanta, I left Dushyanta's house despite Solly and Sarika's insistence that I eat dinner and go.

I felt bad about Sarika. She was a good looking young woman. I would have loved to go out on a date with her. Why did she marry an old guy like Solly? Perhaps that is why Nisha was serious all the time. How would you feel if your father married someone who could have been a few years your senior in college? And Solly, he was one heck of a funny fellow. Insisting that Dushyanta, his own nephew, address him as Mr. Solly! That's the kind of stuff comedy is made of. Did Dushyanta find Sarika for Solly? I had no information that he had, but what if he had got the two married? How could Dushyanta have done such a thing? Marrying a fifty-year-old with someone who was barely twenty-five? That night, both Urvashi and Sarika came into my dream, but they

did not have two separate bodies. Rather, like a flip-flop hologram, each became visible as the other faded.

CHAPTER 17

My dream began with Sarika coming alone to my house. When I opened the door, I recognized her pretty face below the hood of an oversized overcoat. I asked her to come in, my heart pumping faster than I had ever found it to be. It was obvious why it suddenly got excited. I had not received any female guest in my house. Of course, my grandmother stayed with me briefly, and Mrs. Rochester came upstairs sometimes, but I am not talking about my friend's spouses or my own relations. What had happened? I wondered. Had something happened to . . . no, that couldn't be. I had seen him hale and hearty when I left Dushyanta's house an hour ago. Why had Sarika come alone? Where was Dushyanta? And Nisha?

"I came here because I felt a connection with you, but now I feel as though I shouldn't have come," Sarika said, walking in as if she had missed the train and was back for the night.

"No. It's perfectly all right. Good that you came. Why, I was thinking about you, well, I was thinking about you all," I said.

"You say so because you don't know anything about us," Sarika said, drawing a step closer to me. She had taken off her overcoat, showing her navy blue velvet dress that set off her white skin so well. Suddenly, I saw Urvashi in place of Sarika, talking to me with the same wifely authority she showed when she asked me not to write any more letters to her. The next instant, however, I saw Sarika's luxuriant black tresses, falling

around her like thick black cobras. Deeming it yet another of my Sarika-Urvashi mix-up, I braced myself for what was to come.

“What do I need to know?” I asked her.

“That Solly and I are not married, that he’s simply blackmailing me,” Sarika said.

“Solly and blackmail? Why would he do that?” I asked.

“You don’t know. It’s a long story but it suffices to say that my family is heavily indebted to Solly. We are Brahmins, too, but poor. My father retired from the postal department two years back. He worked as a postman for 25 years. Everything was right until his retirement. He got his provident fund and gratuity amounts, some five lakhs in all. He deposited all the money with a private sugar factory. He did it because the interest was higher, he said later. A year ago, the factory went bankrupt. One fine morning, a co-worker of my father, who was invested, too, came and told him. The factory was locked up. The security personnel said that it was due to labor problems and that things will be normal in a week’s time. A year has passed since. People have filed cases against the factory but there is no solution in sight. To add to our woes, my father has started drinking heavily,” Sarika said.

“Drinking after all this? Doesn’t he have any shame?” I asked.

“Well, my mother has tried everything. She even went to a *Tantrik*, who gave her a *Bhasma* (ash). She mixed it with my father’s drink one day,” Sarika said. We were sitting on the divan in my drawing room, side by side, but a little apart. The divan didn’t even have a bed sheet on it and the dirty, torn mattress—I thought with regret—was spoiling my impression. Again, I saw Urvashi sitting by my side, as she sat that

September morning on a bench in the township medical unit, her eyes moist when they looked up at me.

“What happened then?” I asked, focusing on conversation instead of changing apparition of my interlocutor. Whoever she was, she’d emerge eventually if I just listened to the end.

“Nothing. Next day, my father woke up late. He was sick for two or three days. Then he hit the bottle again,” Sarika said.

“So, how come you got married to, I mean, got together with Solly?” I asked.

“Solly was our long time neighbor. I was there when his wife died. Poor lady. She never once ventured out of her house, save when she went to some temple, mostly alone. Solly never took her anywhere. When my father began to drink, my mother tried to manage by doing odd jobs such as sewing clothes, doing chores for neighbors, but, slowly the debts piled up,” Sarika said.

“And Solly helped with the money,” I said.

“More than that. He literally got my younger sister married. He spent nearly 50,000 rupees,” Sarika said.

“But you don’t have any younger sister. Do you mean, Bhairavi, your older sister?” I said, for it was Urvashi talking to me. No, there was no mistaking it this time. She wore the same damask T-shirt and a pair of blue jeans in which I liked her so much.

“What are you saying? I’m the oldest child in my family, and who’s Bhairavi?” Sarika said.

I was shocked by the suddenness of change. Was I being seduced by a succubus? Did she have the ability to change her form? Had she been following me for some time? I

looked again at the woman sitting next to me. There was no doubt she was Sarika. Maybe I was hallucinating, the result of too much caffeine. Let me finish the talk so Sarika can go back before it was too late.

“Oh, I’m sorry, please continue. The name Bhairavi just came to my mind. She’s my friend’s sister. She recently got married. So, what I wanted to ask you was, didn’t you suspect Solly’s motives?” I asked.

“At first we were a little uncomfortable with him helping us so readily. Then we thought maybe there is selfless help, that humanity is still alive among some people,” Sarika said.

“Have you two . . . I mean, do you two plan to marry someday?” I asked.

“He has forced me to sleep with him, if that’s what you want to know. Though it’s no use to him. For all his outward virility, the man is spent. He takes all kinds of herbal concoctions but to no avail,” Sarika said.

I was shocked by the woman’s bluntness. I wouldn’t have expected even a city girl to say the things that she had said with perfect ease. Was it due to her desperation? Some impending disaster? Why had she chosen me? Did I look like a sitting duck? I couldn’t even offer her a cup of tea. There was nothing in my house, no milk, no sugar, no tea, not even a working kerosene stove. It was just too late to go to Madras Restaurant. Besides, could I have gone there with her so late when there wouldn’t be any one else except the two of us, the cynosure of all the waiters’ eyes?

Suddenly, Sarika put her hand on my thigh. Her touch electrified me. No, this isn’t happening, I shouldn’t respond to her signal, she might really be Solly’s wife, even if the second one and a lot younger to him. But Sarika lay on the divan and pulled me

down, tearing at my newly bought silk shirt. Goodness, what power she had in those thin, white hands. For a moment, I wanted to loosen her grip and stand up. She didn't know what she was doing, but I helped her instead, throwing her dress on the floor in a heap with my pants and underwear.

I felt her flesh as our bodies touched. So this is how it was. My God, there was nothing more pleasurable. Gripping her loose hair, I kissed her white forehead. Then, holding her head between my palms, I kissed both her ears. Long and shaped like the pod of a broad bean, they reminded me of someone else's ears. Of course, they were Urvashi's. So I was making my Urva, oh the sweet, sweet fortune! I kissed Urvashi's hairy crotch, her armpits, her ass. She helped me insert. After repeated to and fro, which made her scream like a female chimpanzee and made me clasp her with all my power, I sat holding her hands, watching the wondrous locking mechanism created by nature, the pleasure I gave her, simply by being who I was and by letting my body do the job it was equipped to do. This is how two animals mated. Period.

Urvashi lay on the bed, moaning, her legs dangling from my shoulders. Clenching my teeth, I began pressing against her again. My sexy, lizard-like whore, take this from your lover. Here, take it again. Oh God, what a sweet, sweet fuck you are . . . oh God, take it all . . . I was screaming. Urvashi kept repeating, "My love, my sex." She moaned so loudly, I couldn't hear my own words. We lay fastened to each other for several minutes before I kissed Urvashi's ears and she bit my face off.

"Not so hard. It hurts," I shouted.

"I can eat you alive. Darling," Sarika said. Where was Urvashi? Hadn't I finally fucked her? Was she resting in the bedroom, having enjoyed our lovemaking? Did I fuck

both Sarika and Urvashi? The last face I saw was Sarika's. She dressed quickly. I promised her that we'd get married that very morning, at 9 sharp, when the courts opened. She pulled my head down and kissed my face, my neck. I was afraid she might force me onto the divan again, but maybe because Solly was an early riser, she straightened her dress, threw her overcoat on, and left, blowing me kisses, to go and sleep beside the old Solly. The first light of morning had just begun to fall.

I had never before seen such a complete dream, why, it felt so real that when I woke up I felt as though I had finally lost my virginity. I saw a thick stain of semen on my mattress. For once, I didn't blame myself for masturbating. It wasn't my fault this time. I found a cigarette I'd stashed away in the drawer of my study table. Lighting it, I came out on the balcony and stood puffing at it. Slowly, the dream recounted itself in my mind, beginning with my opening the door to let Sarika in. I have been a little inventive with a few lines of dialogue that appear here, but what I describe is the essence of what I saw in the dream. I'm not relying on my memory here. I wrote down all the specifics of the dream in my blue book. At the end, I wrote a reminder to myself: discuss with Rochester.

I analyzed my dream on the way to my office. What could it all mean? Why did I dream of Sarika and Urvashi, one who was married and the other who rejected me? Did it indicate a change in my fortunes, maybe a surprise outcome in the Urvashi matter? Even a strong dream such as the one I saw failed to convince me. My blue book was replete with such signs and indications. Urvashi would never be mine, I told myself. I actually said it out loud. Why Sarika then? It was true that I was attracted to her the moment I saw her, but perhaps it was my reaction on the rebound. I would have found any girl that

somewhat resembled Urvashi attractive. Also, Sarika was married to Solly. What I saw in the dream, I now recalled, was the story of a recent B-grade Hindi movie I had seen. Rajoo had forced me to accompany him to the movie, had even bought the tickets. However, we came out in the intermission. Rajoo complained about the loss of money, but I told him I couldn't bear it any longer.

By the time I reached Dushyanta's house in the evening, having spent the day in the office, half going about my day to day work—calling up the warehouse, the regional offices, dictating memos, perusing a newly arrived set of paper in my "in" tray—and half thinking of Sarika (I was one incorrigible idiot who didn't heed his own mind). I was convinced that I was crazy. Until recently, I'd have wagered my head to anyone who had predicted that I would think of someone other than Urvashi. And now, a brief meeting and a sexual dream later, I couldn't wait to see Sarika, who had been married God knows how long. It was Nisha who answered the door. She went back in swiftly, no welcome, nothing. I walked into the house and sat on a sofa. Seemingly, Dushyanta wasn't at home. He might have gone somewhere nearby and would return soon. Where was Sarika for whom I had come? Maybe she had gone out, too.

"Dushyanta tells me that you write poems." It was Nisha who asked this. She sat facing me on an easy chair.

"Yes, sometimes," I said.

"I also write poems," Nisha said.

"Do you? In English?" I asked.

"No. In Gujarati. Why, is it bad that I write in Gujarati?" Nisha said.

“No, no. Absolutely not. I just asked. I like Gujarati poems myself, by Kalapi, for instance,” I said.

“So, you like only love poems,” Nisha said.

“Who said his poems are only about love?” I said.

“Most of them are, though they are allegories,” Nisha said.

“Which would be your favorite Kalapi poem?” I said.

“Without a doubt *Jyan jyan najar mari thare . . .*” Nisha said.

“Do you know it by heart?” I asked.

“Yes,”

“Can you sing it for me?”

And then this sexy girl with dimples in her cheeks sang for me part of the poem.

Every object I see reminds me of you.

Tears that flow from my eyes are full of you.

I see you in the red cheeks of lovers,

where there're gardens and flowers.

When I look at the calm sea waves,

I feel as though you come riding over them.

At night, in my arms below the dark and wide sky,

You look like a starlet that twinkles unto me.

“Wonderful. You sing like an angel,” I said.

“Would you like some tea?” Nisha asked.

“Okay, but where’re Dushyanta and your parents?”

“They have all gone to the city. My mother has to do some shopping. Then they might go to some restaurant for dinner,” Nisha said.

“You didn’t accompany them,” I said.

“No. I don’t like going out much,” Nisha said. She got up and went into the kitchen.

Hmm . . . the step daughter problem, I thought, the usual neglect, the all-too-happy father in no mood to notice anything amiss. Nisha wore a simple *churidar* that girls wear when they’re home. I noticed that she looked older—she couldn’t be more than twenty, for she herself had said that she just finished college—because of her beefy body. She looked more handsome than pretty, but she had a presence. I didn’t follow her into the kitchen, I didn’t want to, she hadn’t attracted me in that way. Besides, even if she had, could I have dared to follow someone I had just met into the kitchen? I doubt it. Nisha emerged with two cups. She put one in my hand and the other on the table between us. Apparently, she didn’t drink her tea hot.

“So, what do you want to do in the future? I mean, what would you like to study further?” I said.

“Nothing. I want to get married,” Nisha said.

“But you can do your graduate studies. After all, you seem too young to marry right now,” I said.

“How old do you have to be to get married?” Nisha said.

“I didn’t mean it in that sense. Of course, everyone decides that for himself or herself. I only wanted to say that you could still add to your educational qualifications, get on your feet, before you marry and settle down,” I said.

Nisha didn’t say anything. But it was clear from her face that she didn’t find my advice a particularly pleasant prospect to consider. I’d finished my tea and thought I should leave now, as Dushyanta and others would probably not come until late in the night. I rose to go when Nisha said, “Sit. Where’re you going, leaving me alone?”

“I was thinking I’ll come again tomorrow. Are you leaving Baroda tomorrow or the day after?” I said.

“No. We’ll be here. We’ll not go until we finish our job,” Nisha said.

And what is that? I wanted to ask but didn’t. It seemed too rude a question to ask. Instead, I said, “Okay, I’ll stay for a while, but I have to have my dinner, and if I don’t leave by 11, I’ll have to sleep hungry,” I said.

“I’ll cook something for you,” Nisha said.

“Oh no, no. You don’t have to. It’s just that everything closes at 11,” I said.

“But what’s the problem. I have to cook for myself in any case,” Nisha said.

“What would you like? There’s some eggplant in the house. I could make its *sabji* (vegetable gravy) along with chapattis. Will that be okay?” Nisha said.

“That’ll be great, but again, you don’t have to do it,” I said.

Nisha headed for the kitchen. I heard the clank made by the flat pan when she must have gripped it with the tongs to overturn the baked side of a chapatti. For a moment, I thought of my mother, standing for more than an hour at our kitchen platform, preparing chappatis—40 or 50 of them—for the whole household to eat. We were a

family of five—three of us children and our parents—but we ate up those many chappatis. I had grown tired of reading film magazines that Dushyanta bought on and off or somebody else did and left in Dushyanta's house. I'd kept the front door open. Outside, it grew dark. A gentle breeze filled the room with some fresh air. It seemed to flow through my body and mind, dusting away the cobwebs, and the air arrested there for God knows how long. Ha! It even seemed as though I were a householder, and my wife were preparing a meal for the both of us. So this is how it was, this feeling. It wasn't bad. I had often heard that a man was incomplete without a woman. Indeed, a man was! How could he not be so? It was the woman who taught him to relax, to take it easy, to live life.

The dinner was ready, Nisha announced, tell me when you want to eat. I fiddled with a tape recorder that refused to play. It was kept on top of a shelf affixed to a wall in the drawing room. I wanted to listen to some old Hindi film songs. The cassettes were all there, arranged on a shelf in a closet built into another wall: of the films, there were those of *Madhumati*, *Mughal-E-Azam*, *Amrapali*, *Sahib*, *Bibi*, *Aur Ghulam*; of the singers, Mukesh, Rafi, Talat, Hemant, Manna Dey, Kishore, Lata, Aasha, in short, all greats; and of the music directors, there were song-collections of Salil Chaudhary, Shankar Jaikishen, Ravi, Hemant (the same singer Hemant who sang as the Gods would sing, Dushyanta used to say). It was a revelation, Dushyanta's music library, for his taste was a carbon copy of my own. I loved these very names. However, there was a slight difference between our musical tastes. Dushyanta's collection had a few cassettes of new Hindi films. I had not bothered to see which these were after my eyes had detected their identity in one glance. I despised new Hindi films and everything about them.

"Give that to me. I'll fix it for you," Nisha said.

“But I know it doesn’t work. Dushyanta never finds time to take it for repairs,” I said.

“He should have told me. I know how to fix basic problems in these electronic things,” Nisha said.

“Where did you learn to do that,” I said.

“Oh, on my own. I used to watch a boy in my neighborhood do these things.”

“You worked as his assistant or something,” I said. I was ready to hear the last part of the neglected-step-daughter-story: her carrying on a secret liaison with a neighborhood boy.

“No. I used to go to the shop because his sister was my friend,” Nisha said.

“Do you like the boy?” I wanted to ask her but my good sense prevailed and I merely yawned.

“You know where the screw driver is in this house?” Nisha asked me.

“Probably in Dushyanta’s bedroom or maybe it’s not there,” I said.

Nisha went inside the bedroom. This time, I followed her. I wanted to help her look for a screwdriver with which to open up the insides of the tape recorder. It was the same room where Urvashi and I had sat, where I had kissed her on the cheek. As I entered, everything came flooding back to me, but I concentrated on the search, forcing the thoughts out. The steel cupboard in the room was locked. There lay a few books on Dushyanta’s study table, a writing pad or two, a penholder with a miscellany of pens, small pictures of Aurobindo and Mother Pondicherry (an Indian revolutionary-turned sage and his French disciple-compatriot). The books were mostly about these two spiritual beings, whom Dushyanta worshipped. Their titles either contained the word

meditation or spiritualism or a combination of the two. My position with regard to spiritualism—whatever it meant—was that I neither respected nor disrespected it.

Although inclined toward extremism in most of my views, I have always been wary of extreme stances, mine or somebody else's. What if you are wrong? is a question I always ask myself, even if I am convinced my views are right and rational and well-founded, which, sometimes, they are. We searched the two drawers of the table, where, besides letters, cards, and a few oddities—such as broken keychains, business cards, power bills—we didn't find anything else.

We were about to leave the room, our search having yielded nothing, when Nisha asked me to close my eyes. Thinking that she wanted to show me something striking or odd, not at all unexpected in Dushyanta's house, I did as I was asked to do. She gripped my shoulders gently—the way a photographer sometimes adjusts your posture—bent me a little, and kissed my closed eyes. I was stunned, and thrilled to the core. I opened my eyes to see Nisha smiling at me. She looked beautiful, dressed in a light brown *salwar kameez*, which matched our skin complexions. Her long black hair, her filled-out and proportionate body, and her well-developed breasts made Nisha look like a woman. I could hold myself back no longer. Putting my arms around her, I kissed her lips, then her neck, her breasts. We tumbled onto Dushyanta's bed. I slid my hand beneath her *kameez*. I wanted to see if her breasts were for real. They were, and, for the first time, I realized why men hankered so much after them.

Finally, a little sweat later, we got up. I had, of course, ejaculated inside my pants. But we were afraid that Dushyanta, Solly, and Sarika might be back any minute. Nisha smiled at me. I couldn't say if it was her shyness or her amusement at my inexperience.

The girl had punk. I had known that right from the start. Unlike Sarika, Nisha was everything I wanted to avoid in a woman, even if it attracted me in some unknowable, Sandra Bullock kind of way. I remembered a quotation I'd read recently in the Times of India: "Hanging and wiving go by destiny." It was by one of the greatest Taureans ever: William Shakespeare. Was Nisha my destiny? Was it because I had dared to choose and the Gods now wanted to show me my place? We'll give you the opposite of your heart's desire. In the department of marriage, you'll have to accept what we give you, for you—who never obeyed his own father—need to be made to obey. On the other hand, everything said and done, Nisha seemed to be good in bed, I could make love to her, and she'd make a good wife.

We rearranged the thick, patterned bed sheet. It was eleven at night. I wondered if I should leave, but the near-sex-encounter with Nisha had made me forget everything else. Nisha led me out of the room. She had mellowed so much I couldn't believe it was the same Nisha who coldly opened the door for me a few hours back. Did it prove that a woman could be had if you provided her sexual pleasure, something Rochester, Dushyanta, and my friends said in relation to my Urvashi pursuit? As though reading my mind, Nisha asked me, "What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing. What can one think after an experience like this?" I said.

Nisha smiled. "Will you marry me?" Nisha said. "Of course, I'm not forcing you to say yes. Only if you wish."

Goodness, this girl needed to be a boy, I thought.

"Why not first understand each other? Say, for a month. And then decide," I said.

“One month?” Nisha frowned. “I cannot wait that long. Boys have already started to come see me.”

“That’s only to be expected, but I still think we need more time,” I said.

Nisha didn’t reply to that, but I saw that her face had turned dour, a little sad, like when she had opened the door for me, only more so.

The doorbell rang. Solly, Sarika, Dushyanta, and a curly-haired young man with a thick black mustache stood at the door. Dushyanta stepped in first. He was the only one to smile at me. Sarika and Solly assumed grave expressions upon seeing me in the house. Cold and standoffish, this Sarika was the opposite of the one who had come in my dream. “Have you been waiting long?” Dushyanta asked. “I understood when I saw your bike outside that you’d have stopped by after dinner.”

I lied, “Yes.”

Nisha went into the kitchen. I could hear Sarika questioning her: Why did you prepare only so many chapattis? Why only one vegetable? Why no sweet dish? Solly and the curly-haired young man meanwhile sprawled on the sofas. The young man was telling Solly about a camp he had come back from recently, somewhere in the Himalayas. Apparently, he was a professional in such activities, maybe a guide, or a tour operator, or both. I was interested in wildlife, nature, and all, but since the conversation did not include me, I kept quiet. Soon, I began to wonder what I was doing there. Nisha was still in the kitchen. She came out once to give everyone a glass of water, holding a tray, but she didn’t look in my direction. She was back to being the Nisha who opened the door for me, unsmiling and dour.

I felt tired of it all. What was happening to me? Every time there was a positive sign, a kind of a victory, indicating I'd marry someone, the clouds or the demons of defeat and disappointment came rushing in to spoil everything. As I sat squirming in an easy chair, my anger slowly building, I caught sight of Sarika, who was standing near the dining table, which she had been preparing for the dinner. She had been looking at me for some time. Suddenly, I saw her call out to me, not loudly, but with a flick of her palm. Ushering me inside the kitchen, she asked me why I seemed tense. I smiled and said that I was tired and wanted to go home and sleep. Nisha looked at me sharply but didn't say a word. I couldn't control my anger any longer. Who was this boy to whom such deference was being paid to by Solly, Sarika, and Nisha? And why? If this was a possible groom for Nisha, why hadn't she told me? We had kissed, almost made love. Before Sarika could say anything further, I stormed out of the kitchen and the house. I kick-started my bike and drove away.

I did not go home but instead drove toward the city. The roads were quiet except for an occasional two-wheeler. Driving on these summer nights was pleasant. It was the only time, save early mornings, when you felt there was something other than the heat people associated as readily with India as they did Kangaroos with Australia. I remembered Nisha. Would she, too, succumb to family pressures? I didn't know the curly-haired boy. Was he to marry Nisha? Why did she kiss me then? This episode was turning out to be even more dramatic than the protracted Urvashi affair. The Urvashi saga had taken years, whereas this had built up in a matter of hours.

I was driving listlessly, deep in thought. There were two roads that took you to the city from the township. For the first mile or so, there was only one road, then it branched

out into two roads. One went straight through Gorwa, Alembic, Genda Circle, Alkapuri, to the railway station. The other took you around Subhanpura, Ellora Park, Fatehganj, to the same destination. Stated simply, if you went driving to a place called nowhere, the chances were high that you'd reach the railway station, which is what happened with me.

Traveling in India is still predominantly through its railways—a gift from the British—spanning more than 60,000 kilometers and carrying about 14 million passengers daily. The night life around the railway stations is a world unto its own. Not only do eateries of all kinds—vegetarian only, non-vegetarian, south Indian, Gujarati *thalis*—swarm the place; covered wooden carts sell tea in road corners; paan shops do brisk business selling *paans*, *masalas*, and cigarettes; and even an occasional magazine stand remains open to offer you the “brain snack”—newsmagazines, those meant for women, magazines for children, magazines that have crosswords and puzzles, magazines in Gujarati, magazines in Hindi, magazines in English, magazines on films, on fashion, on how to make pen friends, and even literary magazines striking you with short stories, poems, and essays.

I parked my bike outside Gaylord Restaurant, my usual place for tea at the railway station. Climbing the three steps to the small, nest-like place, I sat at an empty table. After finishing my tea, brought in a large cup and saucer, I stopped to buy a cigarette at a *paan* shop outside. The cigarette felt good after a long time. I was back to being the bachelor boy I had been in 1992. But wait, I had been a bachelor all along. What had changed and only recently was that I had just been kissed by a girl who had further declared that she wanted to marry me. When I thought of that, I thought of Nisha. Otherwise, she seemed to me like one of the many girls I'd seen. Did I love her? She did

seem to me to be a wifely kind. Someone you could marry and show off without shame or unnecessary attention. She was a Brahmin, like me, so that settled the caste issue, and though she was attractive and sexy in her own way, she was far from being a girl you wished you could make invisible sometimes, for the fear that others—the unworthy—would defile her with their eyes. What this translated into in my mind was that Nisha was good, perhaps even beautiful, but she was no Urvashi.

I could not marry my “dream girl.” I had laid down my arms and surrendered, and even Nisha, who wanted to marry me, was lost to me. I thought about my flight from Dushyanta’s house. Taken aback, Solly had followed me out, but I hadn’t even said goodbye. And what about Sarika’s attempt to inquire what was wrong with me? Nisha, too, looked surprised: why did I want to leave? Only Dushyanta, who was in the toilet, hadn’t witnessed my “walk out.” But it was all his fault. He didn’t introduce me to the curly-haired, mustached camp organizer? He didn’t ask me to stay for the dinner, no—I had told him I finished my dinner—for tea or something. Dushyanta was not interested in me. He was through with me. Perhaps he felt humiliated by my Urvashi debacle.

These were my thoughts as I drove the five mile distance to my house an hour past midnight. Somewhere on the road, I think it was near Undera Circle, I had a hopeful thought: could Dushyanta, Solly, Sarika, and Nisha have been looking for me? It was a ridiculous thought. Only I had the cheek first to insult a decent family then expect them to come looking for me. I laughed out loud. The only good thing was that the next day was Sunday, so I was free to sleep late, until noon. No, I told myself, I will wake up early and go to Dushyanta’s house. I will apologize to Solly and Sarika, even if Nisha’s marriage were already fixed with that boy.

CHAPTER 18

I did not have to wait for the next day. As I neared my house, I saw Dushyanta's green scooter parked below my staircase. Although I was ready to forget Nisha and move on—for I was nearly convinced she'd marry the curly-haired guy—I was nonetheless happy to see the sign of Dushyanta's presence. I straightaway went to Rochester's house, for where else would he have waited for me? Dushyanta said that he had been waiting for me for more than an hour, that Nisha was waiting for me, too, and that we should go to his house immediately. I asked him to clarify the curly-haired guy's role. Dushyanta said the young man was a friend of Solly's, that they went on trekking trips together, and that, yes, the man had asked Solly for his daughter's hand—which the latter wasn't disinclined to approve—but that Nisha herself said "no." He further said that it was not easy to persuade Nisha to see me again. "Why?" I asked.

"She said she couldn't trust you after you ran away leaving her alone," Dushyanta said.

"I left only because I couldn't bear to be in the same room with the curly-haired guy. I felt his eyes surveying Nisha from head to toe, and I just couldn't sit there watching it," I said.

"Sarika told me the same thing," Dushyanta said.

"But how could she have? I didn't tell her anything," I said.

"Well, guess she knows you well enough in just two days," Dushyanta said.

Rochester sat on a chair without saying a word. Mrs. Rochester and the children had gone to bed. It was odd that I was in the company of two people who helped me the most in my Urvashi pursuit. And I was about to meet with a girl who could very well become my wife.

We set out, I on my motorcycle and Dushyanta on his scooter, for Dushyanta's house to talk to Nisha. Solly came out, grinning to welcome me. I shook his hands and we entered the house. Sarika smiled at me and pointed toward Dushyanta's bedroom. Apparently, I was to have a private talk with Nisha. Nisha sat on the same bed on which Urvashi had sat one and a half years back. I pulled the same plastic chair up to talk to Nisha.

"I nearly left to go to my aunt's house. I didn't want to see you ever again," Nisha said with a pout that, along with her upturned nose, made her look sexier than she had been in the evening, when I was with her.

"I'm sorry, but even my leaving showed that I loved you. Otherwise, I could have sat here with that boy who came to see you," I said.

"He had not come to see me. He came to see my father, who called him tonight. After you left, we—Sarika and I—asked father to tell him to leave," Nisha said.

"Oh no, that wasn't required. He could have stayed for the night," I said.

"Look who's being generous?" Nisha said, pinching my cheek as if she were my schoolteacher. Taking her in my arms, I kissed Nisha. As if she were watching all this through a secret camera, Sarika came in with a plate of sweets. She applied a red dot on my forehead and put a sweetmeat in my mouth.

Next day, I went to the railway station to see Solly, Sarika, and Nisha off. Solly and Sarika told me that the engagement ceremony had to be in my parents' house. Sarika gave me a short list of things I needed to buy for the ceremony. It was to be one set of gold earrings, a gold necklace, a wrist watch, three saris of which one had to be silk, and a coconut. All these things would cost me at least ten thousand rupees, which I didn't have and would have to borrow, but what was I to do? On the one hand, I didn't want to lose Nisha. On the other, it was difficult to refuse Sarika. She wasn't unlike the one who came in my dream, imperious and beautiful. I found myself nodding my head to every word she said.

After the train left, I returned to my office with a heavy heart. Nisha wouldn't reach Jamnagara until late night. I would have to wait until tomorrow morning to telephone her. I telephoned her every day until the day when I went to Jamnagara myself to escort Nisha and her family to my parents' house in Ahmedabad. Before leaving for Jamnagara, I went to Ahmedabad and informed my parents. My father behaved calmly, but perhaps he was merely being non-committal. He hemmed and hawed. He wanted to wait and watch. His distrust of his eldest son's abilities was as deep as ever. My mother did not speak much in the presence of my father, as was usual. Nevertheless, she took me to the best Sari shops in Ahmedabad, also to our family jewelers.

We took a night bus, called a luxury coach. The luxury, however, ended at the properly upholstered seats and a defective video. Sarika and Solly sat together, I and Nisha a few seats behind them. We did all those foolish things in the few hours of our bus journey that an about-to-be-married couple does. It was Nisha who took the initiative. I looked out the window at the dark blue sky and the stars that shone as though they were

all glad I was returning to my senses. Nisha dangled her leg on my thigh. I turned and squeezed her. She seemed as soft as a ball of feathers. We kissed repeatedly. I bent over her as though we were about to make love in our bed. Nisha asked me when we would reach Ahmedabad. I said in the early morning. I showed her the stars, the passing landscape of western Gujarat, full of colorful lores of valor. I told her how I loved reading Jhaverchand Meghani's short stories in Gujarati even though I couldn't understand everything. Meghani wrote about the Kshatriya tribes of Saurashtra (or western Gujarat. The word literally means a hundred kingdoms), about characters that lived and died for honor, about overflowing rivers and roaring lions.

Early morning, we reached Ahmedabad. Even though I had informed my father before starting, he wasn't happy to receive us so early. "They could have waited an hour or two in some guest house before coming here," I heard him say to my mother, who was as mute as she had always been. Solly, Sarika, and Nisha sat on a divan in our drawing room with tired faces and sleepy eyes. My mother offered her guests water and tea, but my father went into his bedroom and refused to come out.

"What's wrong, Papa," I asked him.

"You wake me so early and then ask what's wrong?"

"But the bus reaches here early. What could we have done? Should we have checked into a hotel for an hour or two?" I asked.

"Yes. You could have taken them to some cheap guest house or they could have taken you there," my father said.

"All right. Maybe we should have done that, but now that they are here, at least make them feel welcome," I said.

“You are teaching me how to welcome guests in my own house?” my father shouted. I was shocked. One of my weaknesses in relation to my father had always been my utter inability to predict his moods and responses.

Solly couldn’t take it anymore. He came right into the room and said, “Mr. Chaturvedi, we are sorry to have inconvenienced you so, but we’ll not be long. The ceremony will take about half an hour and we plan to return immediately.”

“You will not speak between a father and a son. You have already convinced him to marry your daughter. Did you, sir, even ask him once whether his father will approve of his choice?” my father said.

“We have not forced your son to do anything. It’s he who wants to marry Nisha,” Solly said.

“Yes, Papa, she’s my choice,” I said.

“You don’t understand anything, Porus. You are just being manipulated,” my father said.

“Enough, Mr. Chaturvedi. We didn’t come here to be insulted like this,” Solly said.

“Don’t shout. I didn’t ask you to come here,” my father replied.

Solly walked out of the house. Sarika and Nisha left, too. It had been less than fifteen minutes since we entered the house. I followed them out. It must have been six in the morning. We didn’t speak a word until we reached the end of the road that led to my father’s apartment. A tin-roofed tea shop opened early. I ordered tea for all of us. I said sorry at least ten times. It was Sarika again who persuaded Solly to give in. Porus and Nisha make a great match, they love each other, Porus is independent, this is a small

issue, such were her arguments. My young mother-in-law wasn't going to lose me. We began our trudge to my father's apartment when I saw my father, dressed in his purple cotton coat, walking toward us. What followed then was a scene that convinced me again why my grandfather was wrong in stopping my father from becoming an actor. His embrace of Solly earned him my Oscar right then. Short-tempered as my father was, he was no fool. It did not take long for him to realize his mistake when he made one, especially if it was as blatant as the recent one.

Three months later, Nisha and I got married at Jamanagara. Rochester, Prabhat, Bhargav, Chandresh the gypsy, Rajoo, and my other friends came. Dushyanta couldn't make it. He was marching to Gandhinagar, Gujarat's capital, with a farmer's association to protest against draught in western Gujarat. He called on the day of the wedding, though. My father gave his blessings for the marriage, but he refused to share the expenses. I knew he would and had prepared for this eventuality. Rochester, Rajoo, Dushyanta, each contributed ten thousand rupees. I was to pay them back as soon as I could. I took a provident fund loan from my company. It yielded twenty-eight thousand rupees.

I arranged a bus to take all my relatives and friends to Jamanagara. My father's anger flared up from time to time. "I will not accept any gifts from you. I don't believe in gifts," was a public greeting to Solly when he tried to present my father with a shawl. "Why are you behaving like a fool? My father said to Rochester, who, as was his wont, argued with an over-zealous police officer who stopped our marriage procession— Gujarat's chief minister was visiting Jamanagara that day for a certain mass marriage ceremony. My father protested the cold dinner we had been served the previous night,

when we arrived. As an extended protest, on the marriage day, he refused to eat the breakfast, a snack made from gram flour, served along with the tea.

Despite these alarm bells, the marriage ceremony was concluded. Nisha and I sat on two red-upholstered, fancy chairs—the kind you have the king and queen sit on in a play—placed on a raised platform. The priest sat on the floor. We sat facing each other, with the fire altar on the floor in front of us. Nisha wore a white silk sari with a pink border. I wore a dark maroon suit, a light pink shirt, and a matching tie. My brother Vicky stood by my side to assist with anything I might need. Nisha was similarly assisted by Sarika. Solly sat with the priest on the floor, on flat wooden stands. The guests, numbering a few hundreds, crowded in the hall below the platform. They sat variously, some on chairs and some on mats spread on the floor. Throughout the hour and a half long ceremony, I frequently looked in the direction of my father and grandmother, who sat next to each other. My father didn't smile even once. My grandmother was reserved, too. Even today, I cannot forget the tightly drawn, self-satisfied faces of my relatives on that day. If this was how Brahmins were supposed to behave, it was better not to be Brahmins. Obviously, my point is, that this is not the way for a Brahmin to behave, that a Brahmin should have humility that accompanies knowledge and wisdom. But let me say no more. I don't want to commit the same sin I'm exhorting against. In this way, amidst the chanting of the sacred Vedic mantras, Nisha and I were married.

At night, when we prepared to go, Sarika declared her intentions to accompany Nisha and me. On the way, we stopped at the famous Shiva temple of Somanath. The Rigveda tells us that Soma (or the moon) was the chief God of Brahmins—thence comes

the word *Somarasa* (or the nectar of the moon), an intoxicating drink popular among the Indo-Aryans in the Vedic age.

We reached Ahmedabad in the morning. We left for Baroda the same day. There was no way I was going to spend our first night in my father's congested house. Besides, there were too many guests in the house. Just before I left for my marriage, I moved into a C-type apartment in the township, which had larger rooms, including a spacious balcony. As we entered the house, the reality of life stared me in the face. I had no furniture—save a few plastic chairs—no TV, no refrigerator, no telephone, and no double bed, even. I also had debts amounting to 50,000 rupees. It was when I thought of all this that I felt that I had been a reckless young man all along. I looked at Nisha. She seemed cheerful in spite of the empty space in the house all around her. Drawing her close to me, I kissed her on the lips. I told her that we would have everything one by one. We would just need to be patient. She nodded then buried her face in my chest.

We spread a wide cotton mattress on the floor for our wedding night. Some day, we would do this in a five-star hotel room, I told Nisha. My prognosis about Nisha being good in bed wasn't wrong. I kissed Nisha all over, on her full breasts, her pink naked ears, her dome-like ass. When I entered, it was with the pent up energy of, say, a pressure cooker. Never had I felt better in my whole life. Nisha screamed with pleasure, "Oh, Porus, do it again. Oh God, it's so good, but it also hurts." I asked her if I needed to be smoother in my insertion. "No. I can take it. You come rushing in as you did the last time. Come, come, what are you waiting for?" "Here I am, Nisha, oh my love, oh my love." In this way, we made love three times that night.

Sarika stayed with us for a month then went back. She sat behind me in my motorcycle and took me to this bazaar and that temple. I sat stiffly on my driver's seat at first, avoiding contact with her body. Slowly, however, I began taking liberties. I would sometimes sit touching her body so that it would seem as though we were married. After a few moments, however, I would once again create a little distance between us by sliding forward on the seat. If Sarika noticed this or felt about it in any way, she never showed it. She smiled at me mysteriously from time to time. In doing so, she appeared to me as Urvashi II. There was nothing more between us, and this certainly didn't stop me from enjoying my marital bliss with Nisha.

It was in the fifth or sixth month of our marriage that Nisha discovered my "blue book" and the poem I had written for Urvashi. It was my fault. I wasn't careful enough. That day, Nisha cleaned a closet in which I had stuffed all my books, files, papers, letters, and the like. I had thought of the possibility of Nisha's finding out my Urvashi notes. However, her liberality in allowing Sarika and me to go out together had persuaded me that her finding it wasn't going to be of much consequence. I was wrong. Not only did she accuse me of keeping her in the dark about the affair, she made me light a pyre in our front yard. Then she tossed my blue book, a few cards I had bought for Urvashi, and the poem I had written about her in the pyre. Only after she left, after some time, having overlooked that the blue book hadn't fully burned, did I hide what remained of it under a rock. I kept the unburned part, a few pages of my journal, which I have quoted in this book, in my office drawer.

Nisha and I often visited Jamnagara. Sarika and Solly came to Baroda, too, only more frequently. I must say that it was hard for me to resist Sarika, even though she was

my mother-in-law by relation. I did nothing without consulting Sarika first. And I awaited, with a mix of stifled pleasure and dread, her asking me to take her out. But, let me repeat, by no means was I unsatisfied with Nisha in any respect. If she had destroyed my “Urvashi” papers, it was understandable. For some curious reason, Nisha was equally devoted to Sarika. I think she felt grateful to her for taking care of Solly. Why am I attracted to Sarika then? The answer is that there is no answer. Maybe she reminds me of Urvashi or maybe I am a man with a weak character.

It was in the third year of our marriage that our first child, a boy—we named him Charudutt (based on the Brahmin hero of a 4th century AD Sanskrit play)—was born. It was in the seventh year of our marriage that we came to the U.S. for my graduate degree in creative writing. Again, it was Nisha who initiated everything. “If you love to write, why not make it your profession?” she said one day. “Darling, are you more intelligent or more beautiful?” I responded, pleased with the suggestion. Rochester was happiest when I was accepted by Williamson University. My father termed it a “lucky break.” Solly and Sarika came to the Bombay airport to see us off. I had told Sarika only a week before our flight. She seemed upset with me on that account and only said, “We’ll miss you.” I was glad to end the “something-nothing” between us on this cryptic note.

Nisha is my life now, as she will be until I die.

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