

Ripples is the herald of a new genre of novel. It is written in lyrical prose and a very pithy style. It is completely free of the conventional shackles of embellishment, quotes and identification of the characters. In fact, it can be called a nuclear novel. If a whole episode can be described in one word the author has just done that.

The novel is about two love stories, totally unrelated in the space-time dimension. There is no chronological order in the two stories. And yet the reader never loses the thread of either. While the two main characters are not unburdening themselves on each other yet it is both catharsis and absolution for their unrequited love.

It is a novel of mood and meditation, repentance and remonstrance, exorcism and damnation and reminiscences and resurrection. It is a story of the love of two persons who are far apart in space time relation, but find themselves on the same wavelength as they pass a night under a full moon, on the bank of a forlorn pond, reliving the agony and bliss of their love. Their nightlong company away from the lights and noises of the city and reminiscing their past is their salvation from the memory haunts. It may prove to be yours too.

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By
Raj Gill .



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Raj Gill is a writer-journalist with very wide and varied experience of life and its vagaries. Hailing from Lyallpur (Pakistan) he had to foot it to India over three hundred miles through a continuous hail of bullets and ambushes in 1947. As such he has deep knowledge of human misery, fear and hunger.

As a journalist he has covered the two Indo-Pak wars. He specialises in Ecology, Agriculture and Defence. He is a keen hunter as well as a wildlife preservation campaigner. He believes that only a genuine hunter can be good preservationist. His writing is richly sprinkled with references to wildlife and Nature.

He says that he writes because he enjoys writing. The reader and publisher are a second priority. He writes in three languages, i.e., English, Punjabi and Urdu. He is widely translated in other Indian languages.

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RIPPLES

(Novel)

By

Raj Gill

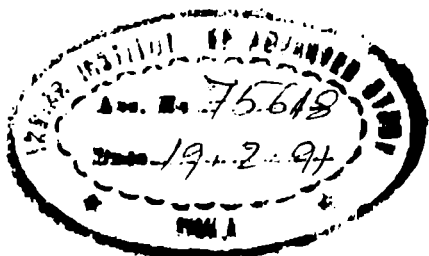
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To
My Children
Rajpal, Jaspreet
&
Harpreet

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Ripples

A pond. Far from the city. Farther than memories. Nearer than dreams. Like a man battered by life. Lost. Damned. Alone. Empty. Numb. Longing. Not hoping.

They had come on the pond suddenly. Unknowingly. Under the pale light of the rising moon. They stopped. They got out of the car. They sat by it. On the bare ground. Selecting an elevation. Wide and level. Wondering. Why did they stop there? At that pond. Unknown to them. Unheard. They could not dig a memory of that pond. They had nothing common with it. No anguish. No agony. No dream. May be there was. Desolation. Desolation that enwrapped the pond. Desolation that inhabited their minds. Nevertheless they were there. Not by plan. Just like that. Like a gust of wind. Moving in all directions. And yet not having one. Not even a destination. The milk bathed moonlight gave the earth a silken touch. The air was warm. Comfortable. A plush atmosphere. They sat quiet. Part of the larger solitude. She put her chin atop her drawn up knees. Enclasped her legs with her arms. Leaning forward. Ponderous.

Moody moonlight, no.

.....

So moody. So ponderous. Just like us.

No. Moonlight is always calm. Cool. Dispassionate.
Isn't dispassion too a passion?
How can it be?
Of the storms.

Silence. Overwhelming. Enfolding feelings. Sentiments. Passions.
Providing them cover. Though itself without one. Always bare.
Naked. Unaware. Unconscious. Silence which is also a bond. A
bridge. Spanning distances. Between two hearts. Two minds. Two
bodies. Silence which gifts uniformity. Anonymity. Removes
difference of rank. Status. Puts life to sleep. Only hearts beat.
Minds talk. Agonies breathe. Silence. A continuum. With infinite
dimensions. Unfathomable. Incomprehensible.

Shall I fetch the car seats?

No. I like it this way.

Ground is rough. Soon you may not find it comfortable.

It's a comfort. I mean the contact with earth. Reminds you of
your roots. Forbids you to build castles in the air. Reminds
you of realities. Chastises you of fancies.

Quite a lecture. From you. of all the people. You turning a
philosopher, eh?

Isn't everyone a philosopher? Even you.

I don't think so. Philosophy is profound. Deep. Too deep for
a common man.

No. Philosophy is just rationalisation. Between that which's
within reach of one's mind and that which is beyond.

The moonlight took on a tinge of gold. The water in the pond
seemed to giggle. Wind did not stir. But it did appear to have. The
moon climbed higher.

Where's Bains?

Don't know.

I thought!

No. Nothing of the sort.

Still.

You don't mean I have a crush on anyone I talk to?

No. Sorry.

The atmosphere began to hot up. There seemed to be a steaming layer on the water in the pond. The ground did feel hard. Hard and gritty.

Life is so strange. You yearn for someone. But you don't reach out. You know you can. But you just don't attempt. You evade it in spite of wanting it so much. You can't work up the courage. You look for rationales. Platitudes. Excuses. Even lies. Anything that can restrain you from reaching out. Meeting. An age passes before you realise your weakness. Your loss.

Yes.

But by then it's too late. It always is. Storms have blown over. Waters have flown on. All that is left behind is arid. Dry and dead. Deserts of your own making. Entombing your longings. Desires. Wishes. Dreams. Four years! Just to talk about. To tell a yarn. But then waters never reverse their course. Time can't retreat. And the deserts go nowhere. Nor does the desolation in one's mind. It's there. Always. For ever. Beyond the pity of the monsoon clouds. Insensitive to the wet caress of the easterly wind. An everlasting, infinite desolation. Creation of just four years. Four years! Everyday he was around. For four years. Somewhere. Some place. At a corner. Near the bus stop. In the varandah outside the classroom. Watching. Waiting. Longing. Suffering. Just to say the words that stormed his heart. Obsessed his mind. Four years!!! God.

They had not planned to meet that evening. It was a chance meeting. Both of them were invited to the same party. Unbeknown to them. Both were surprised. Meeting after two years like that. None had expected the other to be there. And yet it happened. Anup had returned from Andaman only a few days ago. Neera did not know that he had been posted back to Delhi. He had not informed Neera. Nor he had contacted her after his return. He had wanted to. But he had not been able to rustle up enough courage. He felt guilty. Because he had ignored her for two years. No letter.

No message. No telephone call. Yet he had not been able to forget her. He remembered her. So often. Believed that she would know. Feel it. That someone remembered her. Somehow. By telepathy. Or some other intuitive way. May be she did not. But he had believed it. Was convinced of it. She would. He willed it.

It was a strange emotion. He was not in love with her. And yet the love was there. It was not the love between two beings who felt attracted physically to each other. It was neither the fatuation of adolescents. It was something that could be all of these things and yet was above them. Sort of transcendental. And yet earthly. Bonded by common agonies. Anguishes. Miseries.

And then the effort to forget. The realisation of futility. Apprehension of mirages. But the feeling stayed with him. And the urge. The urge to make the impossible possible. To realise the unrealisable. A search for an excuse. An aid. A support. To live on. To bear the anguish. The real anguish. To escape the shadows. Not to give in. However heavy the odds were. Even the age. Age that turns a tiger into a bag of bones and skin. Age takes away the mercurial ripple of the mighty muscles. Effects the mind. But still cannot touch memories. Memories that defy age. That never die. Never fade. Go on. On and on. Searching. Seeking. Like creepers. Putting out feelers to seek walls. Supports. To lean against. To climb on. To live upon. The golden law of life. The eternal principle of living. That every living being inherits by birth. The principle of seeking a support. A wall. He has to search for it. Sometimes he has to build one. A wall. For himself. Anup too was building one. He had sought out one, long, long ago. But lost it. The one he was building up too remained incomplete. Because he was transferred before he could complete it. It was desolation where the wall should have been.

Neera felt excited to find Anup at the party. But she was also shocked. She could not explain the two contrary feelings. And a third was rearing its head. The feeling of disappointment. Having been ignored. Not informed of his return. And some more. Confused and vague. All like a pack of wild dogs. Rushing at her. She felt helpless. Defeated. She wanted to escape the snapping jaws of the dog-feelings. There was only one place she could be safe. And that was with Anup. She wanted to move. Go ahead.

To reach him. But she could not. She was rooted. Out on the fringe of the party. Away. Apart. Abstract.

Suddenly Anup turned. He was not called for. He had not a reason to. Still he did. Urged by something deep, deep inside him. He saw Neera. Right opposite him. Across the room. And then he was walking. Pushing. Edging. Skirting. A sort of dream-walk. He pulled up right in front of her. Almost touching her. His arms started to rise. To reach around Neera. But could not make it. They fell back. Slowly. Reluctantly. And yet he could not restrain himself. His feelings. He put them in one word.

Neera!

Neera missed a heartbeat. Lost a breath. It seemed as if the earth had suddenly halted in its orbit. The quaking moment passed. She recovered. She spoke.

Hallo Anup.

They were overwhelmed. Standing face to face. Apart. Yet locked in an embrace. The party was infringing upon the intensity of their feelings. Clinking glasses. Metallic noises. Acted hallos. Fake laughs. Parties have no place for feelings. Anguish. Longing. They were caught in it. Caught amidst stale jokes. Mock smiles. Loaded compliments. The party started to assault their privacy. Pushing them apart again and again. It whirled around them like the currents of an eddy in a mighty river. They felt drowning in it. They struck out for the bank. At last they were out of the eddy. Out of the crazy river. Away and safe. Secluded. They sat in Anup's car. Relieved. Safe. Close. Together.

Shall we go home?

Haven't we come out of one?

Coffee?

No.

The sides of the car started moving. Closing in. She felt the fingers of fear touch her soul. Clutch at her heart. The car walls became the maws of a giant pincer. She shivered.

Let's go out somewhere. Out in the country.

Anup started the car. They started moving. Heading in a vague direction. Not knowing where. His mind was not on the road. It was elsewhere. Thinking. Appraising the course of his life. Nothing ever clicked. He hoped. He expected. Became sure of getting it. And then he lost. Right at the last moment. The whole thing collapsed. Like a house of sand. Collapsed as you gave the final touches to the beauty you had carved out of the wet sand.

It seemed that the car was moving of its own volition. His hands were also governed by the volition of the car. The city was left behind. Fields rushed on towards them. Eager. Excited. Hurried. They drove on. Cutting a swathe through the oncoming fields. And then the pond. They stopped. Neither of the two had spoken. None had wished to stop. And yet they stopped. Or the car stopped. Probably impelled by some intangible pull. They came out of the car. Started walking towards the pond. Chose an elevated spot. Broad and level. Overlooking the serene waters of the pond. They sat down. Not close to each other. But not apart even.

They had been silent in the car. Sitting apart. Each in one's own corner. And yet they had not felt apart. The warmth of their bodies had bridged the gap between them. It made them feel happy. It gave them a new bond. Strange. Strong. Almost tangible. Intense. Deep. Accompanied by a hope. Hope which was growing. Strong and fast. And then the sudden realisation. The hope was not growing fast. Just moving. Slowly. But it was. And the fact was an assurance. Assurance of a fulfillment. There was satisfaction in it. Not in the speed. But in the certainty. In the forward movement. Thoughts filled her mind. Thoughts that were memories. Reasons. Logic. Deductions. Conclusions. Running through her mind. Exposing the chicanery of life. Playing tricks with you. Mocking. Deceiving. Cheating. Never letting anything happen at the appropriate time. Always delaying. Meetings that have to be are not. When they come to be the character is changed. They are no more meetings. Just confrontations. Shot with arguments. Making 'yes' sound like 'no'. Shattering faith. Sowing suspicion. Dashing hopes. Blasting expectations. Destroying. And yet not destroying totally. Nothing ever goes right. Why? What does Nature get out of it? For that matter destiny too. Why the discrimination?

Wood burns and reduces itself to ashes. Ashes that are dead. Unfeeling. But why does not man's heart burn down to ashes? It too burns. Smokes. Smoulders. But it is never reduced to ashes. Ashes from which a new heart can take birth. Like Phoenix. Why? Why? She felt a chill run through her being as she battled with these thoughts. She suddenly felt abandoned. She struck out blindly. Trying to reach out. To touch some reality. To unburden the load on her mind. The night continued to be quiet. Calm.

How strange there's no peace for man. Never. Noways. There's no source of peace. No time. No place. You never know when you get it. You don't know when you'll lose it. It just happens. Either way. Even getting it becomes as dissatisfying as not getting it. There's no rhyme or reason to this scheme. No pattern. No system. Like the game of luck. When you expect it, are sure of it, you miss it. When you've given up hope you get it.

And despair. You never know when it hits you. It's sudden. It's lethal. You realise it only after you're stuck. By the time life has taken to a corner. Directions have changed. You're lost. You can't do anything. Can't fight. Just have to accept it. Your lot. Your fate. You can't imagine what it's like unless you suffer it. I have. You find yourself steeped in hostility. Everything looks strange. You yourself feel estranged. Nothing appeals. Nothing soothes. It happened. All of it. It was excruciating. Didn't like anything. Didn't switch on the radio for months together. Songs sounded like dirges. Company was poison. Loneliness was death. Only one feeling. One urge. One obsession. Run. Run. Away. Away. Where? Didn't know. I would have if I had known.

That's life Neera. You never know when it delivers you a mule's kick. Nor when it's going to serve you manna. Now take this. I get a feeling of deep fulfillment, of having reached when I'm with you. I don't know why. I feel as if my search has come to an end. I've reached. Arrived. I feel at peace. Content. Relaxed. Absolved. I don't know why. You aren't a part of my life. I never sought you out. I never even dreamt of meeting you. Our meeting was a sheer matter of chance. And still I know that had I not met you I would 've still been

groping for peace. My soul would 've been as tortured as it had been all these years. And restless too. Infinitely restless. And burning. Burning like green wood emitting thick smoke. Acrid smoke. Nothing else.

I feel shaken when I think of the four years he waited to speak out his mind. To express his love for me. Four years! Four years is not a short time. It's an age. Yes, an age.

You're right, Neera. It's an age. Age which's a tyranny. A multi-edged knife. One can pass an age riding a ripple of a smile. One can pass it too burried in a sigh. It can be a tomb of your desires. Wishes. It is also a cross. I carry it too. Everyone does. Not to atone a sin. Not even to atone the sins of others like Christ did. No. Just to atone one's conscience which did not sin. You know Neera there're sins which are innocent. Pure. Like virtue. Like a lamb. And atonement becomes the punishment. The maneater. Bloodthirsty predator. In such a state, the cross becomes a part of your body. Another limb. Then only a Christ can help you. Rescue you. A Christ that is there in each one of us. Unique. Private. You've yours. I have mine. She has her. Her. If I meet her again. Once. Only once. Even for a moment. May be that will absolve me of my sins. May be then I can shed my cross. Tear it out of my being and dash it on the rocks.

Why don't you call on her?

If it were that simple! That easy.

Yes. You're right. Absolutely right, Anup. It is not so easy..How much I had wanted to meet him after rejecting his proposal. Wanted to change no into yes. Tell him it was not intended as no. It was just a slip. Unintentional. Wild. Impassioned. He had sprung it on me so suddenly. He should've known better. And then why did he take it? My no. As final. Positive. Why did not he resist it? He should have known that an abrupt no from a woman, in fact, amounts to yes. I wanted to tell him all this. But I couldn't. Couldn't go through the necessary movements. Just kept on thinking about it. Planning. Never doing it. Going to him. Telling him the truth. Confessing the fumble. But no. I didn't. And then the very need for it was lost. Only regrets were left. Regrets that are my lot. And a question. Why did he have to wait for

four years? Four years are too long a time. Too long for things not to change. Not tend to change. They do. Even mountains do. Rivers too. Fertile lands become barren. Sometimes even in less than four years.

All because of one wrong word. One wrong word in four years. And that one word proved to be my doom.

Moonlight was changing. Turning gold from orange. The earth was shedding its plush feel. It was taking on a silky hue. Dreams were lacing the sleep of the waters in the pond. They had sat still. He cross-legged. She with her knees drawn up. Anup moved. Actually he did not. It seemed so though. Perhaps it were his lips. Yes.

I can't ever forget that morning. It's as fresh in my mind as ever. Even tonight. At this very movement. That face. That dreamy look. Those hair. The morning sun's rays were giving them a golden sheen. The yearning in her eyes. The half open lips. The whole scene is as alive before me now as it was that morning. How much time has passed since? Thirty years. Thirtyfive. But the hunger to meet her is still as sharp as ever. Hasn't died. Hasn't even waned. Don't know if she'd be able to recognise me even. I'm gray now. Age changes the features too. May be I can remind her. May be she'll remember. May be she won't. Can't say. Mind's a tricky creature. Fickle. Mostly.

Four years and none of us acknowledged that which we had in our hearts. We knew it. We were fully aware of it. Wanted to confess it. Share it. But dared not. Nevertheless, I waited. Impatiently. Wanting him to say the magic words that each woman wants so much to hear. Just waited. Silly.

I don't understand. I can't explain. This urge of mine. To meet her. Why should it be there? Driving me mad. What for? Can't even say what I hope to get out of the meeting. If it ever come to. Even if she remembers. Then what? Nothing's going to change. Nothing's going to be recovered. Of the past. Of the lost years. Of a life unlivd. And yet the anguish. The longing. The yearning. If once. Only once. Even if she doesn't remember. Even if she doesn't speak. Utter a word. Still...She too must've gone gray by now. Like me. May not have. Who knows?

Yes. Who knows? None knew about us. Not even a suspicion. Only Komal knew. How did she know about our love I don't know. I had made such a close secret of it. But she learnt. She knew. She never let it out though. Not to me even. She knew I knew that she knew. She would not admit it though. Even hint at it. But she helped. Played the hedge for us. For our meetings. Created opportunities for us to be together. Even if it were for minutes only. She was the cocoon that gave us the privacy. Which we could've never managed. A timetable for our unscheduled meetings. Unscheduled and unlocated.

Tell me Neera, what'd you name such a madness as I have. I just don't understand it. Can't name it. Madness it is. Sheer madness. Irrational. Meaningless. A crazy obsession. Like that of a child. Who wants to touch fire. Or reach out to the moon. At least he has his innocence. His ignorance. It's not so with me. And still I want to. Knowing I gain nothing out of it.

Where's she?

Don't know. She started teaching in some college. At Amritsar. Don't remember the name of the college. Don't know if she's still in the same college. Still in service even. May be she changed the college. City too. She wasn't married then. She might have later. Don't know.

They were sitting still. Silent. As still and silent as the atmosphere. As the pond. Only moon was moving. And the shadows. And the voices in their mind. Unknowingly they had crept closer to each other. So close that when they talked they could feel the vibration in each other's body.

Neera let her hair down. They cascaded thickly over her back. She jerked her head to straighten them out. The black of her hair took on the sheen of the moonlight. It imparted a richness to her hair. Anup was dazzled by it. His hand, as if of its own volition, rose and reached the hair on her back. He started caressing the hair in long downward strokes. Neera's shoulders shivered by the thrill of his caress. He kept on caressing the hair. She could feel the warm touch of his fingers through the cloth and hair on her back.

She imagined she could hear the low crackle of sparks caused by the friction of his fingers against her hair.

I adore thick, long, black tresses. Especially when they're long and rich enough to cover the whole back. Karuna also had long rich hair. They'd reach below her hips. I could never tire of gazing at their silken beauty. Neera, do you realise that hair are the most fascinating part of a woman's beauty? One may be fair, rosy or beautiful. But if she doesn't have rich, long tresses her beauty is wasted. But the one who has, even when she is dark and not of sharp features, she is damn attractive to men. Hair have a very special sex appeal. Neera, why don't you let your hair hang down all the time?

I'd love to. But there's office.

She leaned against Anup's shoulder as she explained. He lifted a couple of tresses and spread them over his face like a lace net. She turned and saw what he had done. She smiled. Silently. Amusedly. Then she pulled back the tresses. But Anup retrieved them and hid his face in them. She let him indulge in his small play. She herself was enjoying the feel of his body. He was speaking through the mesh of her hair.

It was a November morning. Late November. The winter had been early that year. There was chill in the air in the morning and evening. Frost at night. It was a working day. About nine. The sun was still struggling with the thick strands of fog. It was chilly. So chilly that it turned our nose tips and ear rims the colour of brick fresh from the kiln. They were waiting for me and Karuna. I mean the other students of my group. They were gathered at the first culvert on the channel which led straight to the school. The channel passed outside the village.

There was no pact as such to wait for anyone. We had just fallen into the habit. If one of the group was late the others waited for him. Just like that. No explanation was asked. Perhaps the explanation was there in their running up to the group and being breathless. And in the shame writ large on their faces. That day it was Karuna and I who were late.

Others waited for us. As soon as we arrived they turned about and started for the school. Some walked on the channel bank. Others on the path below. Some still away through the fields. A matter of whim. Nothing else. Like there were some who travelled all the three paths, jumping from one to the other. And those who walked along the off bank which was infested with thorny weeds. Walking on it was a pretty precarious proposition. The show-offs would take off their shoes and walk barefoot on the thorny weeds.

The channel was not running that day. Its bed was dry mostly. Only little puddles here and there. So, that day some were walking on its bed. Those who were walking along the bed suddenly gave out a gleeful cry at the third culvert. Everyone converged upon them excepting Karuna and I. We stood where we were. Wondering. They were behaving oddly. Like so many cranes dipping their heads in a puddle to catch the last fish. And then we discovered what the excitement was about. Each one of them came up with a slat of ice. Apparently the puddle had frozen overnight. It was a rare treat. The ice. Just like manna to us villagers. Ice was a rare sight in a village those days. There were times when we legged it to the nearest town just to eat ice. And the ice was there. In that puddle. For the taking. And no nonsense about it. No squeamishness too. None would've slacked his thirst from that puddle. But ice was a different story. Transparent and pure.

Suddenly I realised that Karuna was looking hungrily at the ice in the hands of the boys and girls. The longing for it was plastered on her face. It showed in her eyes too. The desire to taste the ice had made her lips to open hungrily. I asked her if she wanted some. She nodded eagerly. I went to the dip. Only the roiled, brown water was left behind. The ice was gone. I looked around. A boy still had a sizeable piece in his hand. I snatched half of it. He did not fight me. I was stronger of the two. When he saw me passing the piece to Karuna he even smiled benignly as if it were he who was making the gift. He even nodded to the other half in his hand. I looked at him severely. He turned his face. Not ashamed. But smiling. Mischievously. I looked at Karuna. She was all excitement

and confusion, gazing at the slat of ice in her hand. And in all that excitement and confusion she looked very beautiful. Not the beauty of the earth. But the beauty of the heaven. You know what I mean. There was a sort of inner glow under her rosy skin. And then the rays of the sun were playing a sonata on her hair. The reflected light created a halo around her head making her look like a Greek goddess. Diana, I named her in my mind. I kept on gazing at her. I was just mesmerised by her ethereal beauty. I could've stood there and continued gazing at her for all of an eternity. But the party started for the school leaving behind the two of us. Moonstruck. Dumb.

Take some.

No you have it. You like it, no.

I won't unless you do.

I looked at her amazed. The firmness in her voice was some— thing new to me. I broke a little piece and put it into my mouth. She too started licking her ice. Her pink, little tongue was darting out and in rapidly. With every lick she shivered ecstatically. It gave her the mercurial effect of a mermaid breaking surface. I watched her forgetting my ice.

Suddenly I became aware that she was staring at me. Fixedly. I was surprised. Then I followed her gaze. She was looking at my right hand. One of my fingers was bleeding. Perhaps it was nicked when I snatched the ice from the other boy. Suddenly she emitted a tiny, muffled cry and rushed to me. She snatched my hand. Next she was sucking the injured finger to stop the bleeding. She continued till the bleeding stopped. I wished it had not stopped so soon. I did will it to bleed some more. But perhaps her will was stronger than mine. My wishing was though totally selfish. We were standing body to body. There was a peculiar warm sensation running between our bodies. But then I started getting scared. I felt that if I continued to stand like that I would start melting like a burning candle. She must've felt somewhat similar sensation too. Because she withdrew from the touch abruptly. But she did not relinquish my finger. We started for the school. She held on to my finger all the way. That day I was pulled up a number of times by the teacher for wool

gathering. I just could not concentrate on anything. I was so steeped in the morning events.

The memory of that morning is emblazoned on my mind. The halo round her hair. The dreamy glow in her eyes.

And the play of emotions on her face. A drama that Shakespear could learn some from. It is said that memories fade. With time they're forgotten. I did feel once that my memories were beginning to fail. They did not. A little later I knew it. On the other hand, they became ever more strong. More fresh. As if they were of that very day. They pervade my being. They are a part of my heartbeat. They're the fragrance of my breath. Sustenance to my soul. No. They're my soul. And now my soul's my agony. Agony that's there to stay. To stay till she appears on the scene. Till I see her once again. Even if she refuses to speak to me. Refuses to raise her eyelids or flutter her lashes the way she did when excited or eager. Neera, she's my salvation. My agony would stay till she sucks it away. The very sight of her would do it.

While talking Anup's hand slipped out of the silken mesh of her hair. It sought out her hand. Enclasped it. Neera's fingers moved. Enwrapped themselves around the edge of his palm. The anguish of the two minds gelded in the clasp of their hands. Moulding the agony of their souls. The frequency of their breath, the pace of their heartbeat and the swell of their hot blood were all in harmony. Attuned to each other, they were. Perfectly. Running on the same frequency. A partnership in infinity. An infinity of mortification.

The moon had been steadily ascending towards zenith. The shadows were beginning to dwarf. Neera was feeling at ease. Her body was slack. She put her back broadside to his shoulder. The support and the touch both were comfortable. She stretched out her legs. She looked at the pond. The water was still. She wondered what was there beneath that stillness of the water. May be storms. Hurricanes. Tornadoes. Also awaiting fulfillment. To be released. To be liberated. By a thunderstorm. Thunderstorm which is a midwife to deliver the tornado. The cyclone. The hurricane. How strange! Everything that is to be must first be delivered. Needs a midwife. That way the God must be a Supreme Midwife.

She shivered at the enormity of her extravagant imagination lambasting God also.

How strange it sounds, Neera, the way I am unburdening myself to you. Trusting you with that which's so private to me. I hide it from myself even. I couldn't ever think of sharing it with anyone. I just couldn't bear the idea. Not even with Rekha. Don't know why. She has been a wonderful companion. A loving wife. An affectionate mother of my children. I trust her. I love her. I know if I had shared my secret with her she would've been understanding and not jealous. She is not the common run wife. Always pecking and nagging. Imagining things. Seeing ghosts. Chasing shadows. And yet I haven't been able to bring her in on my secret of which I am more jealous than a brooding hen is of her eggs.

But here you are. A stranger. Unknown. Unsought. Too young for secrets. And yet I don't want to keep anything back from you. Not even my shame. In fact, I want you to enter my soul so that you can fathom the depth of my anguish. Agony. If I could be a slate I would write the story of my love from the first encapturing moment to the perpetual agony which it has come to be, so that you could read it clear. Words, when spoken, always fall short of the actual meanings. A word spoken is a half truth, no.

May be it's a matter of affinity of souls. A pull between souls of the same kind. In feelings. Sentiments. Emotions. Even experiences. A common affinity which rises far above the dimensions of age and relationship. Free of pacts. Promises. Pledges. It's something you just can't explain. May be it's just being together. Just knowing each other apart from human values. Considerations. Social constraints. Traditions. Habits.

I have never before considered sharing my own feelings, emotions, thoughts with anyone. There're times though when I can feel their turbulence like that of the lava locked inside a volcano. I feel like opening up. I feel if I didn't I'll explode. Die. Still I keep the lid on. Tight and firm. It's torture. It's agony. It's punishment too. Beyond contrition. Expiation. Penetence. You've to live it. Unless death delivers you from

it. But right now it's different. So different. Unbelievable. The lid has been lifted. Not by me. Not by anyone. Of its own. There hasn't been an explosion. No jet of fiery, steamy lava. Rather a sudden let in the pressure. A miracle. Incredible. But true. I wonder if it is. Really. It's so hard to explain. I mean this happening. The feeling. The relief.

We're both crazy. No, Neera? Coming here in the wilderness at night. Like we were coming home. Like we own all these lands. Pond. Even the atmosphere. No doubt. All that you own up is yours. The peace. The calm. The pulse of life. None of these is individual property. These are for them who can feel them. Accept them. Be one with them. The question of ownership rears its ugly head only when it's hunger for material gains. Wealth. Luxuries. Carnal indulgence. But it doesn't apply to love. Pure, abstract and pristine.

That's a lot of philosophy, Anup.

Philosophy is a part of life, Neera. Of living. One learns it or ignores it. Life. Circumstances. Both are great masters. It's them that make you feel your heart's throb. Your pulse beat. Especially the circumstances. Separating you when you want to be together. United.

Or bring you together.

That too. Though the reverse is more true. Yes. Life and circumstances. So complicated. So unpredictable. Mostly at cross purposes. Clash and clang. If it weren't for life and circumstances I would've married Karuna. Even against the wishes of my parents. Against the wishes of her parents too. She too would've rebelled. I was sure of it. Because our marriage would've been lawful. Legal. She was of my village. But she didn't belong to our community. Our caste. Her family was from another village. Another sub-caste. They had settled on maternal lands. Her mother's grandparents had died without a male issue. Her mother was the only heir. So they settled in our village.

It's always like that Anup. Things that should be do not. Deserts that one doesn't deserve, are served to one. Had he dared propose four years earlier. Even expressed his feelings. Given a hint. Things would've been different. But no.

He must act dumb. Even a slight hint would've made all the difference. I'm sure my parents would've consented. Readily. They couldn't have acted any other way. He was so handsome. Tall. Broad in the shoulders. And intelligent.

A slow breath. A sigh. And then other thoughts. Many. Right ones. Wrong ones. Related. Unrelated. But never the true one. The desired one. Always different. Tempting. But misleading. Making the obvious obscure. The evident evasive. Playing games with you. You know it. And yet you play. Play to cheat. To escape. Because there is an urge. Inside you. Wanting you to run. To desolation. To wilderness. Away from life. Away from truth. Away from your own self.

Both of them were lost in the past. Not the past which they did not want to acknowledge. But the past which was to be as yet. According to their wishes. A past to which they wanted to give birth. To cover up the other past. The real one with only one dimension. One direction.

She had been selected for Provincial Civil Service. Her first posting had been in the Directorate of Publicity and Information in Delhi. She had preferred to sit for the Delhi service than Punjab Provincial Service. She wanted to be away from Punjab. From people who suddenly seemed to be strangers. Anup was her boss. The Director.

Anup's first impression about Neera was that she was a misfit. She was too good and too intelligent for the service she had opted for. She did not belong to it. Her character, mannerism, dress, conversation, all bespoke of good breeding and superior intellect. She was so different from the rest of her batch. He could not resist admiring her personality. She was so beautifully proportioned. She had a figure which set off a million tingles in the onlooker's mind. The sweep of her curves could be equated to the soaring flight of an eagle. However she was unconscious of her own beauty. Figure. Her beauty was of its own kind. Her walk was bereft of the illusion of a rippling motion that a walking gazelle gives you. And yet there was more grace in her walk than that of the gazelle. It was the grace of mighty rivers. Her conversation was free of embellishments that go under the name of sophistication. It had the gravity of wisdom. Wisdom that one inherits. Not the one

that is acquired. She did not indulge in fashions which are becoming increasingly whimsical. Rather eccentric. But the most reputed *couturier* could get inspiration from her dresses. Her face was free of the artifice of rouge, powder and lipstick. But one could not, at first glance, guess the absence of the make-up. But all these counts did not epitomize her personality. It was her conduct and demeanor that won her praise. Her colleagues did not consider her their equal. They treated her as someone far superior to them. They were not constrained to. But they could not help it. She never raised her voice even in argument. Or anger. She never ordered about her subordinates or bitch about her bosses. And yet she got done anything and everything she wished. Even from those who were veteran shirkers. It surprised her superiors. None ever tried to flirt with her. Or to cut a joke with her as they did with other females of the batch. Everybody addressed her as "Ma'm". Anup too could not help getting impressed by her. In fact, he was a little in awe of her. And in truth he was deeply attracted to her. Not in the physical sense. But in a very subtle, intellectual way. It was this tugging attraction for her which made him break his own principle one day. His principle was never to be free with his subordinates. Freeness bred impudence, he said.

You look tired Neera. Come and have a cup of tea with me.

No Sir. I don't feel like. And then there's the report to be sent to the Chief Secretary today itself.

Forget it. Have your tea. Leave the report with me. I'll take it to him tomorrow.

She agreed. She took a seat across the desk. Anup was not one for small talks. So he started discussing the working of the department with her. Sought her opinion on how to tone up the department. To make it more efficient and disciplined. He did it more to know her mind than from the necessity that the department really needed any toning up. He was a disciplinarian. The fact was thoroughly home to his staff. She gave him her opinion and suggestions without any hesitation. Her attitude all along was that of an equal and not of a subordinate. Anup accepted several of her suggestions. He considered them innovations which he should have thought of himself. He admitted to himself that he did regret that those innovations were coming from a raw hand.

Anup was greatly impressed by Neera. She was beautiful. She was intelligent. She was unassuming. She was confident. And above all she was interested in her work. She talked to you with a level gaze. It told that there was no deception in her mind. And this stance of her touched your very soul. It was not her beauty or her gentility that had moved Anup so much. There were more beautiful women around than her. But to be beautiful and also poised and balanced were some characteristics that one did not come across very often. And then the most fascinating aspect of her personality was her not being conscious of her beauty or intellect. She was as much conscious of the two as a flower is of its colour and scent.

She could talk about her private life with as much detachedness and casualness as she could about the official work or the worldly events. When she criticised, it sounded more like an advice than censure. She never showed awe of another's status. Nor did she ever gave an impression of inferiority to anyone. One just could not put one's finger to pinpoint the most characteristic aspect of her personality. Every aspect was characteristic.

One envied her. Her presence was like that of the nightingale which comes to your window in the morning and sing whether you listen to her or not. But you are conscious of her even in sleep. It is in the nature of the nightingale to sing. So it was with Neera. Gravity and sincerity was in her nature. Part of her personality.

Neera too was impressed. By Anup. He was different. Too different. Almost aloof. Not of the common run. Confident. Conscious of his responsibility. Clear about his actions. Never hesitant. Never doubtful. He did not demonstrate his authority. Nor did he use slaciousness to get things done. He did not try to pry into Neera's personal life. Nor tried to dig into her past. What was her family? What was their social status? Economic status? The gamut of conversation of every Indian. But not with him. He just was not interested. Nor did he try to bend her to his own will by vaguely hinted lures or insinuated threats concerning confirmation and annual reports. After all, Neera was on one year's probation. He could easily mar or make her career. He did not tempt her with first shows of movies or dinners and dances at most expensive restaurants. None of these. None of the blarney.

She had been in the department for several months. It was their first long conversation that day. Over several cups of tea. It went

smoothly. No arguments. No resentments. Totally satisfactory. Ended on a happy note. With no promises. No commitments. But they parted unconsciously hopeful. Wanting more such meetings. Wishing them. Willing them. And they did meet. Many a time. Over a cup of tea. Discussing official or unofficial matters. Never scandals. Nor colleagues. Only matters that concerned them. Official or personal. Without being officious. Without being prying. But there came an end to their growing friendship. Or may be not friendship. Just growing understanding. Anup was posted to Andaman Islands. He left. Rather in a hurry. His predecessor was involved in a scandal. Anup had to take over before matters became worse and public. She herself managed a transfer to another department. There had been no communication between the two. No telephone calls. No letters. No messages. Not even inquiries from those who travelled between Delhi and Andaman and were known to both. Yet they did not forget. They remembered. Bound by some intangible link. A link which was not at the mercy of a relationship. Nor nurtured by sentiments. Not even an emotional bond. A link akin to that one develops with a cave where one goes to think. To remember. Even to talk aloud. To himself. Or may be it was like the link that makes the birds, landing in a field, to separate out in like groups. Not to pair off. But just to be with one's own kind. Those meetings were their precious memories. Memories which were free of obligations. Untouched by considerations. Absolved of the sense of possession.

We were post-graduate students together in the Punjabi University at Chandigarh. I used to commute by bus to and from the university. I did not stay on the campus. I along with a few of my girl friends had rented a house and sort of converted it into a hostel. He rode a scooter. I often noticed him parked along the road a little short of my bus stop. He did not seem to be waiting for someone. Nor did it look like a breakdown. He was always sitting astride it. Lounging in the seat or over the handle bar. Nor he was engaged in any kind of activity ever. But he used to be there. Just like a poet. Caught in mid-step by the Muse. Only it couldn't be true. The Muse choosing that particular stop always. Perhaps it was I for whom he waited. Waited for the day I'd accost him on my way to the bus stop. Ask for a ride. To the university.

To my Home. Whichever might've been the case. But I didn't oblige him. Never. In fact, I felt amused at his crude attempt to be familiar with me. I managed to skirt his strategy without being obvious about it. Making it look like a natural act. But one day I couldn't practice my strategem.

It started raining on the return trip. No, not raining. Pouring. Looked more like a cloud burst. There was water on the road. Water everywhere. Rippling, swishing water all around. It sounded sinister. More so with the rain-lanced wind screaming. I was drenched even under the bus shelter. There was no escape from the rain and the wind. Whichever position I took under the shelter the rain reached me. That was the first day I didn't see him lounging by the roadside. Perhaps rain scared away his romantic inclination. There was no traffic on the road. Buses simply had disappeared. No taxis. No auto-richshaws. I was alone at the stop. It had been almost an hour. Not even another human being. I was beginning to shiver. A chill was seeping through my flesh to the very bones. My wet clothes clung to me. No amount of wringing the clothes could make them at least stay free from my skin. The roof of the shelter was leaking from a dozen places. I was playing a jig to escape the water jets.

That day I really felt angry. I resented his absence. In fact, I wished he was there as usual. Everyday he was there with the clockwork regularity. But the day I needed him he was not. What a selfish brute! A road side Romeo. Nothing else. I simmered. I gritted my teeth. He must have known that the bus service would be disrupted, I told myself. That I'd need him to reach home. But I also felt guilty. For the first time I realised that I had not responded to his worship even though it was done in a dumb and clumsy manner. But then, I began to doubt. If he really worshipped me? Whatever it was that was the first day I thought about him. Angrily. With resentment. And regrets. I had come to like his presence around me. I had to admit that. In desperation I decided to walk home. Through the water. Rain and wind. There was no other way. If I continued to stay on at the shelter I was bound to get pneumonia.

As I was about to step out I saw him. He was coming from the opposite direction. In the other channel. Away from me.

Going towards the university. He had spotted me or not I couldn't say. Not with certainty. But a minute later he was driving down my side of the channel.

How long you been waiting here, Neera?

Why?

The state of your clothes say it must be about an hour.

So what?

No, nothing. If you want, I'll drop you at the hostel. Buses are a far chance today.

I felt I should refuse like I did previously. But then there was the question of rain. I was wet and cold. Damn cold. There didn't seem to be any let in the rain. Nor there was any sight of transport on the road. I was shivering. My body was visible through my wet clothes. I was so conscious. Particularly about my breasts. All my efforts at wringing my scarf dry and covering my breasts with it were of no use. I was wet before I could be dry. And to my shame I hadn't put on a bra that day. Snapped the hook of one that I wanted to. Others were in the laundry basket. I decided to do without one that day. And now I was in a fix. What to do? In the end I agreed to accept the lift. Though I wish I had done it with more grace than I showed. I rode pillion. He set out. But at a snail's pace. Slower than the slow motion parts in pictures. The truth was that most of the time I felt it weren't us who were moving. Rather it was rain and the wind that moved. We were sort of stationery. The speed at which he was driving could have beaten a louse. I felt angry. I knew it was deliberate. The slow speed. I felt insulted. Thought of jumping off the scooter and legging it home. But I didn't. I kept glued to the seat and to his back. Getting drenched. But less than him. He did provide me some cover. We reached the hostel. He stopped at the gate. I got down I was about to thank him for the kindness he'd shown me when he spoke.

Why can't it rain daily like this?

I was instantly offended by his comment. I felt like retorting. But I also realised that I owed him gratitude. And I did feel a little affection for him at the bus stop. I couldn't decide which of the feelings to own. Or which was my true feeling.

So I just walked into the hostel. I hurried to my room. Closed the door and straightway started divesting myself of the wet clothes. Just then I heard him kick-start his scooter. Instantly I felt pity and sympathy for him. The poor boy, I thought sadly. But who was really the poor one, in fact? I couldn't decide that too. As I couldn't decide why I was always cross with my own inner feelings. Not accepting. Disowning. What an irony of life! When you want to reach out you react violently. By the time you realise your mistake it's too late. By then many a water have flown under the bridges. Springs have come and gone. One loses count of springs and autumns. Winters and summers. Only one gnawing thought remains. Did one do the right thing? You keep on juggling the question. Come up with all sorts of answers. But never the true one. Never the truth. Only rationalisations. Explanations. Believing to believe that you want to believe. Knowing fully well that you're cheating yourself. Being untrue. Evasive. Cowardly.

Anup withdrew his shoulder from her. He turned and put his back to hers. He retrieved a lock of her hair and spread it across his face. This silky touch of the hair soothed him deeply. Soon he was lost to dreams.

The moon had climbed some more. Shadows sought cover to hide. The pond too seemed to be sleeping. The texture of the earth became more soft and deep than its earlier plushy appearance. It was absolutely still. Not even a breath of whisper in the wind. They sat back to back in the stillness. Neither talking nor making any movement. Almost for half an hour. Quiet. At peace.

They were startled out of their ecstatic state by the shrill alarm call of a lapwing. The poor bird perhaps had been terrified by a dog or a jackal. It went up in the air calling shrilly, loudly, "What've you done. What've you done." So typical of this bird. It landed at last into the field it had arisen from after waking up every one within the reach of its shrill call. It stood watchfully away from its nest in a furrow. Watching. Checking. Before it walked to it and sat on the eggs. They were disturbed by the shrill call. They separated. Wheeled around. Came face to face. A little shy. A little embarrassed. Because the telltale signs of their emotional orgy in their respective dream worlds were still there on their faces.

In their eyes. They feared lest they betrayed their inner thoughts. It took them a little while to overcome their emotional upheaval.

How many things are there in life, Neera, which amuse you and deeply move you too. Small, small, little, little things. Matters. Happenings. Incidents.

Moon had nearly reached the zenith. Shadows had shortened considerably. The water in the pond looked gray. The atmosphere was once again quiet. The lapwing too had gone to sleep. It was a rare solitude they were sitting in. It seemed as if Nature was granting them favours. Isolation. Privacy. And in that isolation they were endeavouring to remove the isolation and loneliness that pervaded their minds.

How insignificant. How ridiculous. But how important too, Neera. Important and vital. All those little matters. Incidents. Coincidents. You were walking down the varandah. You caught a glimpse of someone special to you through the window. Your feet ground to a stop. Of their own. Without any directive from your mind. Without your intention. And then you're edging towards the window. You don't know it. But you are doing it. You edge till you're concealed by the corner of the window. But you can see all right inside. Only you're not seen from within by anyone. How many times it happened. You forgot where you were going. You forgot about your own class. You forgot about the possibility of the headmaster or the drill master passing that way. Sometimes you stood there for the duration of the whole period. The feet went numb. They hardly could bear your weight. You had to lean against the wall to relieve your feet. But you stuck to the window.

And then the punishment when you returned to your own class. Made to sit an hour after the school. But it was nothing compared to the bliss that I experienced watching her. I could pass my whole life glued to the corner of that window just to be gazing at her.

Neera, there're so many things in life which look small, insignificant or incidental. However, when you consider them in isolation from other factors you realise their importance.

Their significance. One may not pay any attention to a happening, an incident, a remark, or an observation at the time. But one may be stunned by the magnitude of its importance or effect later.

Isn't it often that the far reaching effects of certain events and incidents which looked so casual and unimportant then, are realised by us when they aren't of any benefit to us? It's the meaning, the truth behind them, that counts. Not their dimensions or magnitude. The meanings, the truth we can realise only when we examine them outside the context of the daily mundane life. When you probe their depth and consider their psychological background.

Standing by the window I would watch her. Each and every impression on her face I recorded in my mind. Every single gesture. Chewing the rear end of the holder when not able to do the sum. Wiping the nib clean in her hair. Peering furtively at the teacher to ascertain whether he had spotted her failing or not. And then out of sheer desperation putting down her copy willing herself to bear the punishment. Just imagine all these emotions rustling about on her face. There could not be any magic or fairy play better and more fascinating than the play of emotions that I watched on her innocent face. Add to that the yearning and annoyance. Add to that the knowledge of someone's presence. She would know I was out there by the window. She would want to look my way. But she would dare not. The helplessness would annoy her. Make her vengeful. She would twist her lips angrily. She would want to squeal on me. But she never did. Often admitting defeat and turning her face away from me. Towards the wall.

I didn't care then about her agony. I was so wrapt in my devotion to her. But now I realise how cruel I was. Cruel and selfish. And foolish. The risk I was taking. Had I been caught I'd have received caning at the morning prayer. In front of the whole school. It could mean even expulsion from the school. From home too. My people certainly would 've not born with me after so lowly a conduct on my part. Love and romance in the honour parlance of my people were conducts unbecoming of an upright, honourable person. Love was good folklores, worship or for the family. But it was

anathema when it was for a woman. It was worst for a woman. If, her people would've not thrown her out, they'd have just killed her.

One day Neera had inquired of Anup if there was a spot anywhere along the Yamuna where one could sit in solitude without being intruded upon. Where one could be in harmony with Nature. She did not sound nostalgic or sentimental. Her query was as casual as it would have been had she asked for a paper clip or inquired of a market where she could buy a certain type of cloth or a particular article. Anup told her that there was just such a spot. Upriver of the Wazirabad barrage. The river on its course through the city was just a stinking, slurry current. Even the once prized picnic spot, Okhla, was now no better than a cesspool. One could not even breathe there freely. The only stretch of the river in the Delhi territory with clean and healthy environments was above the Wazirabad barrage. There the health of the river was watched zealously. Because ponding of the river water was done these to supply drinking water to the city. The banks for several miles upstream of Wazirabad were off limit for grazing or dumping. No drain or sewer was permitted to discharge into the river in this stretch. Therefore, the banks and the waters were clean and fresh. She expressed her wish to visit the place. Anup agreed to take her there. That very day.

They left by Anup's car. They parked the car at the end of the road and started walking along the bank. They halted soon at a level green patch. They were opposite a mud bar in the middle of the river. The mud bar was full of birds of many species and sizes. Small birds waded the shallows. The larger birds stood snoozing either on the mud bar or in the water. They were mostly herons and storks. A pair of Sarus cranes were moving about idly, aimlessly on the flat of the bar. A good number of ducks were on the water looking like puff balls. There were a couple of anglers across the river on the opposite bank. They looked like statues. Carved. Motionless. If you closed your eyes to a slit and then peered at them they too looked like storks. The water in the river was flowing. But so slowly that it appeared still.

There was a delectable chill in the quiet atmosphere that is so peculiar to the river surrounds. She was gazing at the water. At

least it appeared so. Though, in reality, she was caught in the stormy current of some other river, somewhere far in distance and time. Anup was silent. He was picking carefully tender shoots of the emerald grass and breaking them into a chain. Once in a while he would chew the top end of a shoot relishing its juicy sweetness.

Why can't man be one with cities as he can be with Nature? Large water bodies. Mountains. Jungles. Deserts.

May be a man from the mountains or deserts would feel the same way with cities the way an urbanite feels with mountains and deserts.

You know it isn't true. People from mountains or deserts feel so nervous and insecure when they're in cities. They feel threatened. Hunted. They want to rush back to wherever from they had come.

That's because they're still so primitive. Their attachment with mountains or deserts is that of a child with mother. However much the others may love him, indulge him with tidbits, sweets, toys, he still rushes back to the mother at the first chance.

She did not pursue the subject. She was already elsewhere. In a different world. Just then, a team of shelldrakes emerged from the opposite horizon. They planed down to land at the mud bar when they realised the presence of human being on both banks. They executed a tight wheelabout and flew away honking the sky asunder. They startled some of the dozing birds on the bar and in the water. Several of them including the two Sarus rose in alarm. They flew around a little, made some probing calls and then returned to the mud bar.

Neera too returned from her mental wandering. She detached herself from her surrounds. She turned to her immediate personal issues. Anup was a priority issue. Why was he being so nice to her? He was considered a hard man to work with in the office. A disciplinarian in the sterling sense. Punctuality was his faith. Pending work was a red rag to him. None could deceive him claiming a heavy workload. He did not expect miracles. He did not ask for Herculean tasks. But he did not give any concession in the normal, standard quantum of work expected of each of the

official including himself. Most did not want to be posted in his department. But those who had been were later grateful for the opportunity. Because they received a training that would stand them good throughout their life. They would be able to face any work challenge. Work became worship with them.

Neera herself was one of them who would not have work pending. This had been her attitude right from childhood. It had been so through her education career. As soon as she returned from school she would sit down to finish her home task before she sought a diversion. She just could not be at peace with herself if any work was pending. But then Anup was not expressing his satisfaction with her work. Work was never talked of between them. It was something else, she was convinced. She wanted to know that something else. To understand his attitude. Neither solacious, nor flirtatious. Then what? He was a happily married man. Contented. At peace, apparently. This was so obvious from his demeanour. He loved his family. You could feel it if you heard him talking to one of his family member. His intentions too were not dishonourable. Neera was sure of it. She had failed to spot any kind of aberration in his character. And yet she could not dismiss casually their increasing familiarity. There must be something back of it. Had to be. Not with her. She was clear about it. But with him. She was sure. There could not be any relationship without any meaning. Without any value.

So far Anup had never taken any liberty with her. Not even a hint of it. No exploratory probing. No baiting. Still he was seeking something. Could be anything but not an affair. Something nevertheless. What? This puzzled Neera. And she was not the one to sleep over a puzzle. He had not tried to establish any sort of physical contact with her. Not even a handshake. He was never flippant in his conversation. He did not use the normal ploys of a philanderer. Movies. Disco. Restaurants. He did not use the subterfuges of a boss. Nothing of the sort. Still Neera was not satisfied with the situation. It was a relationship. But not an affair. Nor even friendship. Nevertheless a strong relationship. She felt it. Recognised it. But did not understand it. It annoyed her. She wanted to discuss it with him. But she did not, remembering an observation of Anup. He had said once that none would ever divulge the secrets of his heart on just being asked. If he ever did he would when he felt like it. Of his own. Not for asking. She

decided to wait. He might, tell of his own. You never knew.

Whenever I'm with you Neera I feel as if I've found my lost soul. I don't know how to explain it. There's an easy explanation. Links from our past births. But then I don't believe in the Karma philosophy. I mean where it relates to birth cycles. I believe in one birth. And that will explain my agony too. For there're no past births. No future promises. Neither hell nor heaven. Nevertheless, I've a deep feeling for you. It reaches down to the bottom of my soul. I know it. I can't explain it. And I don't understand it. It is not rooted in desire. The best I can explain it is this way. You know you're left with a feeling after a dream. You don't want to cling to that feeling. You don't discard it too. It's just there. You cherish it.

There's another aspect to it too. Whenever I'm with you I want to open up. To divulge to you my most private and cherished secrets. I want so much to share my memories with you. Memories and agonies. Anguish and misery. All that I haven't shared with anyone so far. Not even in my dreams. Not that I'm hiding a guilt or a sin. Nothing like that. Only there're some events. Not big. Nor insignificant. Just events. Minor events in the casual parley. Bits of conversation. Small, small incidents. Not meriting any notice in themselves. But very very important to me. May seem to you humdrum. Just the way the cherished collection of a child. Glass beads. Broken limbs of toys. Cowrie shells. Threads. Rags. Apparently rubbish for the adults. But more precious than jewels for the child. The parents would never realise it. Because they can't put themselves in the mind frame of the child. Therefore they can't assess the value of those nick-nacks. But for the child each bit is associated with people, places and events. They're memories. As pleasing and gleaming as moonlight on snow.

I too have such a collection of memories. Banked in a corner of my mind. The secret most corner. It may appear rubbish to others. For me they're more precious than my own life. I'm madly jealous about this treasure of mine. I wouldn't bear anyone having a fleeting glimpse of it even. But it's not so with you. You I can take on the grand tour of my memories.

It beats me why. But it has to be. I can't escape it. Unless you refuse. And I've a strong feeling you wouldn't.

Why? I can't tell. I don't understand. This pressing urge. What for? The question seems to me absurd. There's a wish. A desire behind all this. But it isn't related to you. Not in a remote way even. I hope you do understand what I'm trying to tell you. Perhaps it is neither a wish nor a desire. It's a search. Perhaps everyone of us seeks something. All his life. Something special. Someone special. May be both. May be the person more. Someone in whom one wants to lose one's identity. And another with whom one wants to share the secrets of one's soul. Not for the pleasure of sharing. But to understand them more deeply. Fully. Neera you too must have realised that events, incidents, memories become so many cobwebs in the mind. These cobwebs turn into a myriad of knots. You want to undo the knots. But you can't. You need help to do it. Help of an understanding, sensitive person. Who doesn't want to destroy. Rather would try to restore things to their original state.

The water in the river kept on its sleepy path. Birds were quiet. Some slept. A few on one leg. Some with their beaks under the wing. The anglers dozed blissfully. They held on to rods subconsciously. Worms writhed on their hooks praying for salvation. Deliverance. The effort for which was not within them. It was with someone else. A fish. Or a tortoise. A breeze stirred up. It added to the chill in the atmosphere. But they did not get up. They continued to sit. Mooning and musing.

I must be mad. Burdening your mind unnecessarily. What I haven't been able to solve with my experience I want you to do with your inexperience. Crazy? No?

Do you think age, experience and emotions are co-related?

.....

Why don't you answer, Anup?

I was thinking about it. You're right. There's no relationship as such. Feelings and emotions last for ever. Beyond the imprisonment of life and death. Independent of their subject. They don't have to go through the developmental process of

age and experience. Perhaps I became too emotional. I'm sorry.

They sat in silence for some time. Each suffering from an unknown guilt. Each blaming. Accusing. Accusing oneself of an uncommitted sin. Feeling ashamed. Not daring to talk. Afraid of self betrayal. Not even raising eyes. Smitten with a sudden feeling of alienation. Estrangement. Not wanting to confide. Not wanting to be the trust for the other. Not wanting to know. No more curious. It happened. The way it happens to those preening before a mirror. Suddenly becoming conscious and moving away from the mirror. Daring not to go back to it. Failing to recall the emotion that the image in the mirror evoked. Or to put it another way not being able to face up to it.

They got up. Suddenly. Together. Just like that. None was thinking of it. Of getting up. Of leaving the mesmerising environments. None had wanted it. Still. Together. In a single, smooth, flowing movement. And they started for the car. Two refugees. From their own selves. From their overwhelming emotions. From their declared wishes and desires. Also from their undeclared wishes and desires. They knew not which. How often one is aware of the fact that one's desires and wishes are beyond attainment. Beyond one's destiny. One wants to discard them. Like old, worn-out clothes. But just cannot do it. They just go on piling up. And one loves the pile. In an immoral way. A sort of sinless indulgence. An immorality without shadows of piety.

Neera there's a thought with me which is leading me a merry dance. It's worrying me. Bothering me. Growing into an agony. I confess that I can't explain why should it be so. I've asked myself that. Again and again. But of no use. It doesn't concern me. It doesn't touch my life in any manner. And yet I seemed to be bound to it. There may be several reasons for it. I may not know them all. But one I do. Clearly. Fully. It's the gnawing sense of having failed. Failed to reach you. Your depth. May be it's because of that I want to know what you want in life. Not that it concerns me in that way that it'd affect my own life. No. Not that way. In fact, I don't find any justification for such a thought in my mind. I can't get rid of it too. I don't think I'll be able to even if I tried. Not till I know.

know about you. It won't help me in any way. I don't think I could either be of any help to you even. It sounds silly. It is. I know. But still. It's like being hooked. I don't want to probe. To pry. But still I want to know. May be it won't matter to you if you tell me what you're aiming at in life.

Aim? I don't think I've one. At least I'm not aware of it. Never was. I did have a wish once. A longing. To be a lecturer. I intended to as soon as I finished post-graduation. And, may be, to pay more attention to my poetic talent. If you call them aims, any of them an aim, you're welcome to it. But it was not to be like that. It's not necessary, Anup, that it has to be God to dispose what a man proposes. More often it's a man. One or the other. It was so for me too. Not God. But man. My parents. They didn't want me to pursue a career. They wanted to marry me off. The degrees were part of my dowry. Bait. Bait for netting a good groom. Education or no education I was doomed. The eternal woman. The housewife. The mother. A chattel to man. His ego. A toy. For his indulgence. Well I didn't want to be the that. I didn't want to be the master. But I didn't want to be the slave too. Equal partner? Yes. Nothing less. Nothing more. Love was above that. So was affection. They cement the equal partnership.

I didn't want to rebel. But I didn't want to submit as well. I decided on IAS. My misfortune. The examination was just over. The next was a year or so later. Too long to wait. So I sat for the first one that came my way. The DANU service. I made it. So I'm here. A matter of pride for my parents. A social show-off. But they are still sore. It's not their way. And their way should've been the only way. That way was their inherited thinking. What direction life will take from here, this point, I can't say. Not as yet. What surprises life has in store for me I wouldn't dare surmise. Well as they say, whatever will be will be. I'll face it when I'm called to. Meanwhile, let life deal the cards. I'll play by the ear. I've faced much till today. I've the courage to face more.

So long I've the moral strength. And the conviction that I'm right. When I lose these, if I lose, then that would be the end. Then there'll be no reason left for me to live on. Then there'll

be no sense for wishes. Desires. Future. Aims. They'll be of no use to me. They'll just be so many yellow leaves riding the autumn winds.

Anup was transferred to Andaman Islands. Tarun was posted somewhere in Punjab. Neera felt lonesome. And alone. To weave the fabric of her life. As if anyone could. One could make an effort. Many efforts. But one could never take into account all the circumstances, elements, factors that life throw in one's way with the abruptness and ferocity of a volcano. God! What a beast Life was.

Then that day. The party. The meeting. The surprise. The drive out. Where? Nowhere. Anywhere. The countryside. The pond. Pond which too was lonesome. Longing for company. Languishing. Pond whose waters seemed virgin of the touch of the aquatic birds. Perhaps frogs and fish too did not favour it. The pond which was like an open shell. Awaiting the rain drop. A bird. A companion. Another existence. To confirm its own.

There are things in life, Neera. Many. Yes many. Small. Little. Of no significance. In themselves. But their memory's so emblazoned on one's mind. No. Not mind alone. The soul too. In fact, they become your soul. Your life. Your living. Where to locate yourself in the evening. Where to go on Sunday. What point to visit at what time. Which place. When to go to the gurdwara. When to visit which house. Especially uncle's. When to sit at the woodland culvert. When to perch on the plum tree. Planning. All planning. Meticulous. Precise. Just for one objective. To meet her. Karuna. Who bothered whether the meeting was a dumb one or a talkative one. Conversation or no. Even a touch, a feel was enough. Mere seeing was heavenly. I'd timed her movement on all the days of the week. Her presence at various fixed places. At specific times. The schedule was sacred to me. It couldn't be disturbed. For any reason. For any one. At no cost. Not that the disrupting factors did not turn up. Sometime Ma or Pa'd have an errand for me at the critical time. I'd refuse. Knowing the outcome. A rebuke. A strict reprimand. I took it. Patiently. Not minding. Not regretting.

They were once again sitting upright. Shoulder to shoulder. Neera's left hand fingers were beating a tune on her left knee. Anup casually took hold of her hand. He started exploring the topography of her hand. First the whole hand. Then finger by finger. Neera watched him silently. Amused. Smiling faintly. Giving a wry twist to her lips. At last he was satisfied with whatever he set out to find and having found it. He did not release her hand though. She felt pity for him. Pity and sympathy. She decided to bolster his courage. She stretched her fingers around the edge of his palm. It was a compassionate gesture on her part, he realised. An unspoken permission. He could hold on to her hand. He accepted it. Mutely. With a faint pressure. A pressure as faint as that of the Will 'O wisp, caressing your cheek in passing. They sat contented in the togetherness of silence. Then he started speaking. To himself.

There was a particular hour for which I stayed restless the whole day. The hour was that of four in the afternoon. I could never miss that hour. That appointment. It was not in reality. I mean appointment. But I took it so. With myself. That was the hour when the village girls went to the tank to fetch water. In the canal colonies of Lyallpur the ground water was saline. Therefore undrinkable. The drinking water drawn from the irrigation canal was stored in tanks. Each village had a tank suiting the size of its population. The tank was filled weekly. It took about a day and night for the silt in the water to settle down. But it hardly mattered. Everyone used alkali to clean the water in the pots. The tank was walled up on all sides. This was to prevent cattle and dogs from entering the tank. Pullies were provided to draw water from the tank. Chains and water buckets were permanently locked on the pullies.

Karuna did not like to join the crowd at the tank. She, therefore, came to the tank a little before them. Only on rare occasions she was accompanied by another girl. Otherwise she was always alone. The main crowd arrived at half-past four. I'd arrive at the tank a few minutes before four. This way, I never missed meeting Karuna.

I would be all excitement and eagerness as I set out for the tank. My imagination would be afire. At time I felt as if I was

on a flying white steed. I'd post myself by the pullies and wait impatiently for her. I would sight her as soon as she emerged from her alley. I'd not shift my gaze from her person even for a fleeting moment till she reached the pullies and put down her pitcher. My excitement was not so much for helping her fill the pitcher as it was for helping her raise the pitcher to her head. If there was more than one girl at the tank they helped each other. But if there was only one then she had to look around for help. I managed so that it was always I alone who was available to help Karuna.

Sometimes she would be late. Such times were terrible for me. Because then I had to help all the girls. The girls would not help each other when I was around. They wanted me to help them. They enjoyed this little tyranny. Because they knew about my love for Karuna. In a way they were jealous too. This was their way of getting even with me. By the time I'll be through drawing water and giving them a hand with the pitchers my arms would be so sore that I'd be afraid lest they came off the sockets. If it weren't the girls then there would be the village menials who did not have access to the pullies. Someone had to fill their pitchers set a little distance away. I could not say no to their pleading. The poor wretches. At such times I'd wish hell and damnation to my love and hate her for coming late. But all of it I'd forget instantly as soon as I saw her.

It was an ecstatic experience to help her raise the pitcher to her head. Perhaps you'd hate me when I tell you why I was so keen to help with the pitcher. But since I am telling you all I must also tell you this particular part. You don't have to work your imagination hard to get at my feelings during those few minutes she was at the tank. It was a blissful sight when she bent over the pulley. The muscles in her back rippled along the central canal. There was a rhythm in the movement of her arms as they went up and down tugging at the spokes. Her half sleeve would become a quarter sleeve as it was pulled up thus setting off the beauty of her smooth plump arms. Her whole being gave me the feeling of sun-spangled fish in the icy waters of the mountain brooks. The expressions on her face, as she exerted at the pulley, changed like the

seasons. But the climax of my visit to the tank was the moment I helped her with the pitcher. It held a million promises for me. Some I reaped. Some I always hoped to. Like small wriggle of the fingers or that wee bit pressure of the hands as they met. It would set a million electric impulses in my body. I'm sure that she too experienced these. Because she never took precautions to avoid these accidental touches. Sometimes I believed that she manoeuvred them deliberately. But I wouldn't swear to that. I never asked her. And she never admitted of her own.

The real moment would be when the pitchers was level with her shoulders. I'd manage to tilt it so that some of the water would spill over on her side. It'd slide down the side of the pitcher and drop over her breasts, wetting her shirt front. The wet shirt would cling to her brafree budding breasts. Her nipple would peep out so arrogantly that one felt like squeezing them a bit to put them in their proper place. They would be a challenge to me, to dare touch them. The aureole around her nipples would grow darker. Or at least I felt so. I couldn't be sure. Because I never saw them under normal conditions. The only time I had a glimpse of them was when they were under the wet shirt.

One day she caught me at it. My gaze was glued to her nipples. She blushed crimson. She forgot about the pitcher on her head in her rising indignation. The pitcher tilted forward and fell down. It nearly crushed my right big toe. I cried out in pain. I instantly stooped down to inspect the injury. She too. In the process our cheeks rubbed against each other. Startled we straightened up. We came closer to each other in the process. Her breast was wedging into my chest. She seemingly was not aware of the touch. On the other hand, she was staring at me guiltily. There was so much misery in her look at what she had done that I felt like taking her into my arms and rocking her out of it. Just then she realised the press on her breasts. She jumped back as if she had received an electric shock. Then she started crying. Perhaps in penance. I turned aside my face and kept silent. I was beginning to feel guilty myself. I did. Genuinely. Honestly.

I limped for many days. But it was a delight. I wished I could limp the rest of my life. Because every day she would inquire about my injury. Earlier, she hardly talked at the tank. Now she had an excuse. But the experience of a long look at her wet breast that day and then subsequent press from the maddening flesh against my chest is something nothing else can equal. I have played with breasts of many a woman since then. Perhaps some which were far more beautiful. And yet the intense emotional experience that I enjoyed that day has never been repeated.

Neera withdrew her hand under a sudden flush of modesty. She picked up the scarf from over her breast and then placed it back with care. Anup too felt a little uneasy after the confession. He shrank away from her imperceptibly. He was feeling as embarrassed as the person who starts changing clothes without bolting the door thinking that there was none in the house but finds, suddenly, at the critical stage, someone walking into the room. He was feeling a little guilty too. He felt as if he had exposed himself physically before Neera. He did not know what to do. He almost broke into cold sweat. He wanted to make amends but did not know how. He wanted to run away. But he also realised that he could not leave her alone in the wilderness. He wanted to hide his face in shame. But that would be exposing himself before Neera twice. How strange it was that moon, moonlight, waters, earth crops, deserts mountains none ever became conscious of their nudity. But man! Why him?

Neera sensed his predicament. She felt pity for him. She quietly extended her hand till it covered his. His hand was no more warm. She applied a little pressure to his hand. She wished it to be warm again. She willed it through her own hand. It began to respond. And then he took her hand between his two and pressed it tenderly. He breathed deeply in gratitude for her gesture to alleviate his embarrassment. He was deeply touched by her. It made him so emotional that he lost his voice. They sat for a long time like that. Bound by the warm bond of their hands. Anup managed to take control of his overwhelming emotions after a while. He suddenly drew Neera and pressed her to his shoulder in a very affectionate gesture. He put up an arm around her shoulders. A sort of solace. Neera settled moulded into his

shoulder. They were acutely conscious of their bodies, heartbeats, breathing. Two of everything but sounding like one. Each becoming a little more potent. A little more fast. Their arms tightened a little more ever so often. Realisation of the intimacy of their emotions was growing stronger with them. The whole atmosphere shrank to the confines of their bodies. And then a contentment that was beyond the carnal and emotional spheres. It was deep. Very deep. And special. Neera did not want to get out of her half-sitting half-reclining posture against Anup's shoulder. She was using him to live another time. Another experience. Trying to understand it better in the light of the new one. She was reviewing those past experiences in an uninvolved manner. Like a satellite. High above. Independent. Watching all that was happening below. Uninfluenced. Unmoved. Impartial. Unemotional. But this survey of her past did not give her any satisfaction. She encountered struggle in all the moments that were important in her past. Everywhere. In all situations. Mostly mental struggle touched off by traditions, jealousies, greed and other such elements in human life.

Why can't life stay smooth and straight? Natural Why does it have to be convoluted? Complicated? At cross purposes?

It'd be an insipid life if it were not. Life is worth it because of the conflicts and contrasts that it impregnates.

But why should it not be the same for all. Why is it bitter for some and sweet for others?

Life doesn't decide it. It's decided rather by your own thinking. Your likes and dislikes. Your goals and ideals. And all these in turn are governed by your environments, your heritage. Your economic and social status. Sometimes some people, helped by their intellectual strength, overcome all these handicaps and rise far above their given status in life. They're counted among the great men of the world. But most succumb to the social and economic handicaps and suffer all their life.

But how do you explain one's conduct when a person persists on going in a certain direction knowing fully well that he was going the wrong way?

That's his misfortune which dogs his heels all his life. He suffers but does not want to understand it. There's no reprieve for such a person.

Neera took a deep breath and sat up straight. Her left side which had been flush with Anup's was almost numb. She pulled up her knees and put her chin over them. She enclosed her legs with her arms. She tightened her grip to get the cramps out of her body.

It is amazing the way things happen right before your eyes and yet are not noticed by you. They are a part of your life. An important part of your daily routine. But you ignore them. Consider them not of much concern to you. You never took out a few moments out of the routine of your life and paid that special pattern, that special happening, close attention. Never thought of seeking the truth of those patterns which were so intertwined with your life. There must be some link. There must be some significance to them. It can be accepted that once in a while you do come across some action or movement that is not part of your scheme of life and ignore it. But if it persists you can't. Then you've to find the link. The relationship. The secret. But I didn't. How surprising! I saw him daily. Noticed that he managed to make contact with me somehow. No doubt, his meetings with me seemed to be casual. Not planned. But their persistence and regularity should have told me. Should've alerted me. Why was he always alone when near me? Why did he take such special care not to appear interested in me when waiting on a roadside especially for me? On the other hand, if he was so interested in me then why did not he express it. Why was he dumb about it?

It never occurred to me that it was his special code of signals. Or else why would he go out of the way to procure special notes for me? Lend me books. Help me in a thousand small, small ways. I did benefit from his notes. In fact, I wouldn't have secured such high marks had it not been for those notes. And books. But there was nothing outwardly emotional about his acts. No sentimental touch to his playing me.

He never tried to feel me. Snatch a hug. Or find an excuse to hold hands or just to touch. Even accidentally. Always correct in behaviour. So gentlemanly. And now I think what a control he had over his feelings. His passion.

And then I became constantly conscious of his presence in my life. In my surrounds. I began to have a lurking feeling that he was interested in me. But why doesn't he express it, I'd often scream in my mind. There were moments when I felt like shaking him up. And to ask him if he weren't human. If he didn't have a heart? If he didn't have normal human feelings of love and hate? Why didn't he express them? Why didn't he open up? Say that which he was carrying in his heart. Which was a crushing burden on his mind. I knew, in a feminine way that it was all true. But I didn't give him the intended aid. Didn't confront him with his own cowardice. Perhaps out of some traditional reluctance. Inhibition. May be because of false prestige. Wrong sense of honour that I had inherited. May be an inflated ego. I don't know which. But whichever it was did not help me. On the other hand it harmed me. Ruined me.

She let out a long-held breath with a deep sigh. A long, hot breath. Which instantly pervaded the atmosphere. Heating it up. Anup's arm moved of their own accord. Went around Neera. Tightened. He did not know under what motivation. It was not love. It was not the physical desire. May be because of some common bond. Bond that could be agony of the soul. Or anguish of the heart. A shared secret of life. Or may be it was a new initiative or initiation of a new experience. Or may be it was the music in their soul. Or rhythm in their blood. Or the slow roll of the marrow in their bones. it could be anyone of these. Or something altogether different. But it was there. They knew it. Though they did not understand it. The bond. Of which they were intensely conscious. A bond which held them but did not make them one. Which drew them closer but did not urge them to be intimate. Which touched the strings of their soul but spurned the physical hunger. Perhaps it was because of that bond that she was she and he was he. The puzzle-play of life.

A small bird with pointed, curved wings flew over to the pond. It circled over it checking up the surrounds. Trying to detect dangers.

It spotted Anup and Neera and gave a shrill alarm call. Next moment it was winging its way away from the pond. From the danger. Flying to some other pond. To a safer night rest.

It was a beautiful bird. Its sudden appearance made them fully conscious of their being together. And alone. Made them realise what they had wanted, but had not acknowledged. It appeared as if they were awaiting that bird's arrival to arrive themselves. His disappearance left them sad and lonely. Lost.

Hopes dog my heel

Memories flee my mind

Life without your love

Is ever raging strife

Once again, Neera.

No, Anup, no.

Who said it.

None I know of.

You mean, Neera. *You!*

Sometimes. When the mood is on.

I could never imagine. No doubt man is the most complicated puzzle. One can never unravel it completely.

Any collection?

No. I've never thought about it.

I'd like to read some. Or if you'll recite.

I've never.

Well you don't mind my reading them. Would you?

If you can lay hand on them.

Anup was combing his beard with his fingers. Thinking. Thinking about the Chinese box. The one which contains another when you open it. You open the second and find a third one. So on and on. A puzzle. A mystery. Neera was also somewhat like that. A puzzle. A mystery. Hard to get at the real Neera.

He was also very fond of poetry. I mean, Tarun. He would recite Shiv to me for hours together. Especially his "I befriended a Shikra". He introduced me to Amrita Pritam's

poetry. One day he happened to see my copy containing my own occasional compositions. He was so engrossed in the poems that he forgot me. He had picked up the copy while I was making tea. I felt angry at first. Nobody has the right to look into one's private papers without one's permission. But my anger cooled off as I watched the pleasure on his face while he went through my poems. Then I felt happy. He had forgotten Shiv and Amrita for the moment. When he finished the last one and looked up at me his eyes were moist.

I've really liked your "A Shard of Death". If you could gift me that.

I felt that he was just being sentimental. So I took the copy from him and put it back on the shelf. I made a fresh cup of tea for him. But he did not drink it. Nor did he talk any more. After a while he stood up and left without saying a word. I slumped into the chair he had vacated. I was feeling as empty as that chair after he had vacated it.

A Sarus pair trumpeting sonorously flew over them. They must have been startled by a prowler. Now they were flying to a more safe and secluded place, docked in their memory for such an emergency. A place where they could be alone and together. Listen to each other's heartbeat. Nothing else. Away from the predatory gazes. From strange eyes. Free to entwine their necks or put their beaks under their wings knowing fully well that when one slept the other would be awake and alert.

I learnt much later that Tarun himself was a poet of some standing. Widely published. In great demand at poetic symposia. His medium was English. Many a time I made him recite to me his poems. But he never showed me the copy. I didn't ask for it either. Didn't find the courage. Or perhaps I was afraid that my request would be a confession of my inner feelings for him which I didn't want to show. And anyway who wants to confess. Everyone prefers to suffer, to accept punishment than to confess. May be it is because of this that Christs and mansurs are crucified.

You're absolutely right, Neera.

Anup went into a bone-breaking stretch to get the stiffness out of his muscles. Then he drew a deep breath that tingled the skin of his soles even. Some memory was stirring deep in his mind. Rebellious. Revolting.

There were meetings. Small. Passing. A Small talk. A word or two. Never more. Plentiful of smiles. Laughters. And the shared delicacies, roasted grams, dates, sugar crackers. The excruciating tension of waiting. The disappointment of a meeting. Always short. Always unsatisfactory. All that was there. But that which should've been was not. The confession. Confession of my love. And a confession in return as a reprieve. We crucified the confession.

My sister Jeeto knew about our love for each other. She was not my real sister. A cousin. But an angel. She wouldn't hurt a fly even. She would devise occasions for us to meet. Often alone. She would find some excuse to leave us alone. Together. But we'd just go dumb the moment we were left alone. The tongues would get locked. If we did manage to loosen them we talked of such dull matters which did not justify either our feelings or our being alone.

You have done your home work.

No, not yet. I'll do it at night.

You didn't come to the tank yesterday.

I was having a headache.

Will you accompany me for picking plums tomorrow.

Yes. If sister accompanies us.

That was the specimen of our talks when we should've been opening our hearts to each other. Just a sort of disjointed conversation. More to fill the gaps of silence.

Words which sounded more of moaning than mooning. Jeeto'd return to find us like two terra cotta statues. She'd be annoyed with us. But she never gave up her efforts. After all she had to lie about her errands to be calling on someone just to leave us alone. Sometimes she'd be late while returning. Then Karuna'd be upset. Thinking of all sorts of explanations she'd have to give to her mother for being out so long. On such occasions Jeeto'd offer to accompany her to take Karuna's blame on herself. But all this did not give me

the satisfaction I longed for. The joy and contentment I sought in her company. On the other hand, it'd leave me all the more dissatisfied and restless. I looked for spring full of flowers. Not with a single bloom. It was hot dry winds. Scorching sun. Not the wet breeze of the monsoon. The nostalgic autumn gusts.

At last I made up my mind to open my heart to her. I decided to do it in a way which didn't have a precedence. Which should rather set a precedence. An endeavour which only a true lover could dare. Which should stand out as a solitary instance in the annals of history. My resolution was further cemented by the fact that on that particular day the whole house was at my disposal. The family had gone to attend an engagement ceremony in the village. They weren't to return till evening. So there was I and the empty house and the whole day before me. Even the evening was to be mine. Because I knew that the festivities'd continue till after dinner. The womenfolk were to return only to milk the buffaloes and set the milk for curding. I had managed an out pretending home work that I must finish.

I was prowling in the house like a caged tiger. The tiger wants to escape the captivity. I was perhaps wanting to escape my decision. I was doing things which were meaningless. Had no purpose. I combed my hair three times. Did my bun as many times. Even used my aunt's scent on myself, an unheard of thing for boys. Considered absolutely vulgar in the village society. I changed my shirt several times. Opting now for the Lucknow kurta and then for poplin shirt. Similarly I vacillated between pyjamma and dhoti. And there was no count of going to the mirror to check on my cosmetics and appearance.

Neera's head was couched on his shoulder. Her hands were locked on his other shoulder. The feel of her arms on his back and chest was very comforting. His one hand was caressing her plump upper arm. Anup could smell her body scent exuding from the caressed arm. His other hand rested on hers. There was intense anguish in his voice. He didn't know for whom. That which was past, or that which was yet to be.

At last I sat down to carry out my resolution. I found that I could no more escape it. And there's a limit to prowling too. I found the writing board. Paper. Pen. A plate. And an axe. I was to write her a letter. To open up my heart for her. To convey to her my infinite love for her. And to tell her how much I could sacrifice for her. I was to write the letter in my blood. Not in ordinary ink. How much I wanted to open up my chest and dip the pen straight into the blood in my heart. But I was afraid lest I died before I finished my memo of love.

Neera's arms around him tightened a bit. He had a suspicion that her breathing was abnormal. It was a bit faster. The moon had reached the zenith. Shadows crept under cover. The waters in the pond looked glazed. Sleep too seemed dreaming. Forgetting the mortals. Anup too had stopped talking. Some pull inside him made him to. He breathed deeply to get control over his feelings. To control the hot stream of his blood. He had reached back about thirty years while talking about his love. He did not realise that he was living his past all over again. He felt it the way it was that very day, thirty years ago.

I tried to cut my thigh with the axe. But the axe would just bump off the thick, muscled flesh, leaving behind a white streak but no blood. I persisted and succeeded only getting a dark streak. But still no blood. It irritated me.

I picked up the machete we used to prune the big trees for fuel wood. It had a special tampered steel blade that cut through the arm-thick limbs of shisham and babul as the kitchen knife cut through carrots and cabbages. But I failed still to get the adequate supply of blood to use for my long letter. Only a few drops oozed. And they congealed before I could make use of them. I felt miserable. I felt hurt. I called myself a coward. Perhaps, wanted to provoke myself to a more hard stroke with the machete. But I dared not take that drastic action. So I went for my pocket knife. A razor sharp beauty. I could shave my legs with it. I managed a cut in my thigh. It started bleeding. I started writing. But I found it difficult to write the words legibly. The blood on the nib would congeal halfway of a letter. So I had to dip the nib in the blood again and again to complete the letter what to say

of the word. It brought me to tears. I inflicted a couple of more cuts and persisted with my effort to finish the letter. But the heat and lack of humidity in the air made my task almost impossible. I felt like committing suicide instead of admitting defeat. In the end I found out a way. I'd finish the letter in red ink and sign it in blood. I explained why I was using red ink and apologised for it. Then I wrote out my love, my feelings and my sentiments. I pleaded with her not to disclose the contents of the letter to anyone. Then I made several small cuts with the knife and completed my signature in blood. I placed the letter next day between the leaves of her English Primer and replaced the book in her satchel during recess. I kept myself out of her way for the following couple of days. I was afraid. Really. And feeling guilty too. As if I had committed a crime worse than murder. I was, in fact, in the state of mind of an absconding criminal.

On the third day, I mustered courage and went to the tank at four. I helped her lift the pitcher to her head. She moved her head forward in a sudden jerk. Some of the water spilled out and fell over her shirt front. She waited a little. Then made an effort to straighten the pitcher on her head thereby spilling more water over her shirt front. The wet shirt now clung to her breast and to her belly too. She waited another few moments and then walked away. Without uttering a word. Without mentioning the letter. I felt like crying. I was so deeply hurt by her indifference. I went to the well nearby and sat down on its platform. I drew up my knees to hide my face and cried. Cried till there were no more tears in my lachrymal glands and my eye rims started burning. What could she lose if she had acknowledge the receipt of my letter! If she had not liked it she could have said so. Plainly. And why did she expect of me to help her with the pitcher. She could've asked someone else's help. What cruelty! God!!

I felt like jumping into the well and putting an end to my agony. Thus giving her a guilt that'd torture her all her life. But suicide is the way of cowards. Not of the brave. Not at all of the lovers. Dusk came on. I sat on in the dark. Simmering. Cursing my fate. And wishing the womankind to hell's fires.

I was distracted by the whirl of a rope. Someone had come to the tank to draw water. Who could it be? At that time? It was unusual. Odd. Next I heard the gurgle of the water as it was poured into the pitcher. The pitcher filled with the second bucket. The metallic sound of the empty bucket being dumped carelessly rang harshly. But the drawer of the water didn't pick up the pitcher. Perhaps needed help. I was not in a mood to oblige. Nevertheless, I stood up to help. Perhaps out of habit. As I reached the pullies I was flabbergasted. I felt as if I was doused in ice-cold water. it was Karuna. She had come to the tank in the dark of the night which just was not done.

Are you angry with me? She said in a low, hurt voice. I Couldn't speak.

Alright, if you want it so, she said choking on a sob.

Who says I'm angry,

Are'nt you?

Why didn't you say a word?

Didn't I, silly?

You mean it. Truly.

No, falsely, she said sarcastically.

I was so overwhelmed by her admission that before I knew I held her by her shoulders and drew her close.

Don't. Someone'll come on us.

I released her and helped her with the pitcher. She didn't leave immediately. She continued to stand there with the pitcher on top of her head. I raised myself on my toes and scooped a palmful of water. I poured it slowly over her breasts.

Nupi, she said sternly.

Throw your pitcher at my head.

It won't be like it was with your foot; you know Nupi, she said chuckling under her breath and left.

It was only after she left that I realised her feminine way to acknowledge my letter and love too. I hadn't caused the spilling of water earlier in the evening when I helped raise

the pitcher to her head. She did it herself. Deliberately. And she had waited standing in front of me till the water had seeped down to her shirt front and the cloth had clung to her breasts. But I had been so engrossed with the fate of my letter that I didn't catch on to her subtle, flirtatious gesture. I felt ashamed that I could be that dumb. And to drown my shame I cried a second time, in one evening. Only this time I didn't hide my tears. I cried openly. Didn't give a damn who saw me. Heard me. My tears were my absolution. Draining the poison of suspicion out of my soul.

Neera flung herself at him. Put her arms around his neck and started sobbing, caught in an emotional upheaval. Anup felt as if it were not Neera but Karuna who was clinging to him. He forgot his own anguish. His own bitterness. Instead he was all concern for Neera. He took her into his arms and consoled her. He was caressing her head. A couple of times he even called her Karuna instead of Neera. But both were ignorant of the error. After she got over her crying spell she let her head slip down from his shoulder to his lap. She lay there like a child seeking solace in the lap of a parent. He continued to caress her head. He was still not fully aware of Neera's existence. It was Karuna he was having a union with. All the while Neera continued to absorb the warmth of his body. Relishing it. After a while Neera turned on her back. She stretched out her legs. Locked her hands over her belly. She was staring up at the moon. Her head still in his lap. Anup started running his fingers through her tresses. The strokes becoming longer each time. Then they were on her forehead. They went all round her forehead, along the brows, down the jaw lines, around the chin and then started outlining the shape of her lips. Neera's lips opened receptively. Unconsciously. The feather touch of his finger tips on her lips was like the memory of a kiss in a dream. She held to it hungrily.

The moon was beginning to be tired of being their guardian. It started, stealthily, slowly, sneaking away from them. The moonlight too seemed a bit pale. As if tired by the vigil. It was no more its burnished gold.

Neera what do you plan to be? He had asked me once. We were sitting on a bench in a park. It was a small park.

Triangular. Hemmed by two roads which met at the apex. The roads carried heavy—duty traffic. It was, all the time, blaring horns, swishing tyres, grinding gears and growling engines, blasted once in a while by the profanity of screeching brakes. I often visited that park. I found it an ideal place to think. Think long and deep. The noise around you was like a cocoon. Leaving you alone with your thoughts. Besides it was not a popular park because of the heavy traffic on both roads. Coming across the roads was an ordeal in spite of the zebra crossings. You had to risk it. Besides people have a misconception about the utility of parks. They want parks secluded from the hum of life. But one can get more seclusion and solitude in a park which is isolated by noise. But then you can't teach people all the secrets of life. Even this that confidential talks are best conducted in a noisy, crowded restaurant. Only you need a special temperament for it. The same way as you need special temperament for meditation. For concentration.

What can one plan in life? There're so many around one who're out to destroy whatever you plan. You never get the time or the chance to plan.

You're right Neera. Still there are areas where none wants to lose one's right to plan one's own way. Such as marriage. Or career.

You're right Tarun. There everyone wants to manage one's own way. If he can manage, that is. Otherwise, your circumstances ride your intentions and plans. Ride them rough. They do so with your sentiments and feelings too. Or at least they change the shape of things. Your blood relations. Your social obligations. Family traditions. Taboos. Restraints imposed on you by your own people. Limitations set by others.

How much you can bear? How much you can fight? You're alone. So, more often than not, you're defeated. Crushed. Even, at times, destroyed. Unless you fall in with the general will which none knows of, rightly. But everyone talks of, vaguely. So what'll one get out of planning. The planning has been already done for you. By others. By your owns. Your elders. Exploiting age against your youth. Blackmailing you

with the sacrifices they had made for you. Quoting family honour. Social prestige. Any excuse. Any weapon. To keep you tied to the family apron. Burdened under their dead dreams. Trying to live in you by proxy what they've missed in life. Ransoming your life for their lost hopes or blazing greed. Who cares for individuality? Personality? It has to be the general will. Of the whole family. Even ghosts included. How can you be selfish? So opportunistic? Ignoring the family. Ignoring the family traditions? Ignoring the future of your brothers and sisters? Their children?

You do feel like rebelling. Going for a confrontation. And some times some do. And succeed too. But mostly they're crushed. Under the family pressure. Family honour. So you live on two planes. One you want to own. And the one on which you're just a bonded slave. Nothing else. And then comes the guilt complex. Why not? If it pleases everyone.

Neera you're talking like an ignoramus. I'm sorry I'm using such a harsh word. If it'd been a matter of tradition then we'd have been still in the jungle age. We would've not evolved above it. Or may be even farther back. In the cave age or stone age. We should've been still primitive. Living nude. As good as other beasts. Living on the hunt and the gift of the jungle. But we are not. We've progressed from the primitive stage. We've come a far piece into civilization. Into disciplined society.

Doesn't this prove to you that traditions, customs, mores are good for a particular time and period. But never for all times. The values of the horseman are not the values of a car driver today. All things change. And we're the instrument of change. If we don't, we'd lapse back into the primitive age. Would you want that? Or would you want to lay down new customs, traditions, practices.

Yes. I want to do all that. Forge new paths. Sight new destinations. New lands. New vistas. But if it is possible. Only then. If it's going to be knocking against a rock then you've to find escape routes.

You mean?

I've set my mind on joining the IAS cadre. I've put everything aside till then. Even my marriage.

Well, at least, you've set yourself a goal. A destination. It gives you a purpose to plan. To live.

Do you approve it?

Without doubt.

You don't sound convincing.

There's a lot hidden behind certain things. You've to discover the truth. You would. If you've a mind to. Otherwise it matters not.

But now that I've told you the truth though I don't know why. So come out with it.

I'm grateful to you for it. It has taken a load off my mind.

What do you mean?

Nothing particular, Neera. I was wondering about something. Testing you. I wanted to know whether it would be the sensitivity of a poet or the ordinariness of a person which would win. The poet won. It pleases me. I feel as if I've...

He did not finish the sentence. He just stood up and left. Without even a goodbye. Left me puzzled. I wondered what was he going to say. Why did he want to know all of it? All about my life that was still to be. What right had he? What could he gain from it?

He wasn't there. I couldn't ask him all these questions. The life was as complicated as before. He made it some more. He did wish something. What could it be? Why couldn't he be clear about it. Not to be so circumventing. Just to be straight. May be he had made it clear. But didn't get it. My inexperience. Or lack of wisdom. Don't know which. But I was as puzzled at the end as I was when he started his queries.

Her grief touched Anup's heart. It hurt him. He drew her to his chest. He felt the tears rising in his eyes. But he controlled them. He did not want his weakness to show. He was a man. He could not be weak. He wanted to be her strength. The original character of man, right from the time of Adam. Man, the woman's protector. Her security. Her prayer.

Tarun left. I kept on sitting in the park. Wondering. What did he mean? Where did I fit in it. Encounters. Meetings. Seemingly casual. Though well planned and timed. On road sides. Along varandahs. In the park. Library. Voiceless. Void of touch. Just like that. Expected. But not binding. Wished for. But not acknowledged. And the feelings. wish to share. But not giving or taking.

The intimacy of those moments when he wanted to know about my life and plans was never repeated. It was more of a space time relationship. Relative. But never real. Feelings but no fulfilment. No trust. Though the trust part was never questioned. Because Tarun changed subtly after that meeting. He continued to stalk me as he did before. Was ever cordial. Helpful. Always around. But never was. When you wanted him. His presence in my life came to be, like the tune that haunted you day and night but you did not get at the correct wording of the song. Only a vague, unclear memory of them was there. And the tune! You feel miserable wanting to remember. But cannot. Wording of other songs come to you. But not the one that you yearn for.

Anup had taken Neera into a tight embrace. There was concern and affection in his gesture. And sympathy. Could be it was also a fulfilment of a dream unrealised. It certainly looked like he had arrived at some place he had been striving to, all his life. Of course, it could not be the one for which he had set his sights. But it was a destination all right. It did give you the feeling that you had achieved it. Reached it. Had not failed. It was not the ideal. But it was the idea. Idea of a destination. It did take care of a want. But it did not compensate fully that which you missed.

Desolate minds. Bleeding hearts. Vexed feelings. Tormented sentiments. Struggle. To face oneself. To reach out. To a bank. To a safe harbour. Struggle. To free oneself. To reach a rescue boat. And when one do find a niche, a creek, shallow waters to feel one's feet on the bottom one gives up the struggle. One contents oneself with that bit of relief. Even if it be temporary. Passing. Even when the original struggle does not die. It lies buried in the subconscious. To emerge again and again. To put you afloat to strike out for that for which you originally set out. It never lets you rest. Be at peace. Rather keeps you restless. Dissatisfied. Discontented.

You can never get over it. Though you may, at times, feel that you have.

Neera was crying quietly. Clinging to Anup. For succour. For strength. For a moral boost. Not for lust. Not out of physical hunger. But in a different way. Altogether a different way. A longing for some comfort to recharge one's faculties all over again for the eternal struggle. Man's doom. Love. Absolute love. Love which is God. She was seeking out her God. Through him. And not life's little delights and comforts. Nor collecting scattered bits of hope. Or seeking out horses that are wishes. Anup brushed away her tears with his lips. Performed a sort of ablution for her. And then he started sucking her pain with his mouth. Pain and poison that had accumulated for such a long time. That was proving cancerous for her soul. A bit dispassionately. A bit selfishly. Because he was also seeking his own fulfilment. Offering himself to her to receive back what he had lost. What he was seeking.

Why's your heart palpitating so fast, Neera:

Don't know. It just happens sometimes. I haven't bothered.

This is serious. You must consult a doctor. There can be something seriously wrong.

What can be seriously wrong. Life itself has gone wrong. What more can? What can happen any way? A matter of little time. This way or that way. Who cares!

Go on. Why do you stop? There is no licence for talking nonsense. You don't wish away reality by closing your eyes to it. There's a significance, special significance, for each and everything on earth. Be it an article, element or living being. Majority never realise this truth. So they ignore their individuality. And suffer all their life, because of it.

It's not necessary that an individual should have special significance for his existence. It's more gainful to be fully aware of one's self. One's individuality. One's existence. If you can do that then you can successfully take care of your circumstances. Psyche. Be balanced. Be what you are, in reality. Whatever you may say but it's wrong on your part not to pay attention to this abnormal palpitation of your heart. It's

Not mere carelessness. I'd rather say it's an unconscious step towards suicide. Because you don't have the guts or the will to commit a straight suicide. So you're doing it in an indirect way.

I don't know what you're fishing out of it.

You don't bother your little head about that. You're going to the doctor tomorrow and that's that.

But why?

To get a check on the palpitation. You're sick whether you admit it or not. So you've to go to the doctor.

For you it may be unusual. Not for me. It's there for many years. It always comes on whenever I'm deep in thoughts. Deep and desparate. So it isn't related to any physical malfunctioning of heart or any other organ. Besides, it's no trouble to me. No problem at all.

Whatever it's you go to the doctor tomorrow. I'll personally take you to him. And no more arguments.

You're not a doctor. How can you decide?

Doesn't matter.

Is it an order?

No. Just a request. But it can be order if there's the necessity for it. And warrants too.

Anup dear, this palpitation isn't a problem for a doctor. It's a part of me. I always know when it's coming on. I accept it. Because it isn't debilitating in any manner. It's writ for a covenant. An unpromised promise. You want to snatch it too. Why?

Neera it hasn't to do anything with your dreams, longings or desires. You're sick. Even an ignoramus can tell it. A heart that palpitates without any reason is a sick heart. Definitely. You've been foolish not to have consulted a doctor till today. You'll regret it if you still don't. I'll not let you commit this folly. I'm going to take you straight to the doctor first thing tomorrow morning. It's no use your protesting with me.

Who has seen tomorrow, Anup. Talk of now. This moment. Which is true. Which is ours. Till it passes and becomes past.

You think so Neera. But do you know that in this very belief lies man's defeat. He thinks he owns. But in reality he owns nothing. Nothing belongs to him. Everything is borrowed. Even life. Whatever he claims doesn't remain with him. Whoever he owns betrays him in the end.

But so long you have it, it's your, isn't it. Then one can always imprison those dear to one in memories. And who can take away your memories. Only death. None else. And with death ends everything.

You are wiser than your age, Neera.

Wisdom and understanding are at the mercy of the age for the beginning years of your life. But not afterwards. Afterwards wisdom and understanding outrun age. Age then is just a schedule. But not the subject itself.

How's your palpitation?

It's alright now

Let me check.

Neera could not stop him. Could not say anything. Anup put his right hand over her left breast. Pressed it a little to get the feel of the heartbeat better. She shrank in modesty. She shivered in an unknown fear. His hand continued to stay over her breast. Still. Detached. Yet there. Disturbing. Distressing. It caused her heart to beat faster all over again. Anup withdrew his hand. In doing so he could not help rub her nipple. She enjoyed the sensation it caused. She wished that rub to go on. Never to stop. But then she was gripped by a suspicion. Why did he rub his hand against her nipple? What did he have in mind to do that? She suspected him to be scheming something. It made her angry. She felt like getting up that very moment and going home. Not in his car. On foot. Alone. To teach him a lesson. He could not take her for granted. But then she remembered that it was she who had made the first move towards the physical touch. And she had enjoyed it. Had blissfully absorbed warmth from his body. She had herself appropriated his lap. Told him to feel her palpitation. Then why was she being prissy? So she did not get up. She forgot the rub of his hand too. Could be accidental. After all he had not followed it up.

I'll be picking you tomorrow at eight. So be ready.

Why?

We're going to see the doctor.

And I've told you that I don't want to. I'm not sick.

You don't lose anything.

Don't be stubborn. I won't. That's final.

No, that's not final. If you won't agree to I'll call the doctor to the office. You won't like the whole office to know that you're sick. Seriously. Otherwise why the doctor should call. You go to the doctor, or he comes to you. Now you decide whichever way you want it.

I'll be ready.

The moon had searched all quarters of the sky. But he failed to find a companion. Someone to idle away the time with. To exchange pleasantries with. The moonlight too felt the despair of the moon. It grieved her. She paled. The waters in the pond were beginning to look roiled. There was a feel of breeze in the atmosphere. But Neera continued to lie on her back with her head in his lap. Anup's thigh under her head was steadily growing numb. He moved it slightly to ease it a bit. He tried not to be obvious about it. He once again outlined Neera's moist, half open lips with the tip of his right index finger. Then he bent down and brushed her lips with his own. Neera cringed. But she did not resist. Nor did she give her assent in any way. Anup straightened up. Neither pleased nor disappointed. It was an impulsive act. He had just obeyed his instinct. Now he leaned backward on his hands placed behind his back.

Tired. Why don't you lie down a while. I mean if you're not sensitive to the bare earth.

What a thing to say! Aren't we sitting on the bare earth.

He straightened out alongside Neera. Also on his back. He placed her head on his shoulder. She turned around on her side and clung to his body. For sometime they forgot all about their agony and love. All that they were conscious of was their being together. Nothing else. Neither the atmosphere nor the wilderness around

them. Nor the pond or its waters. Not even of the peeping Tom in the sky, the moon. They were hearing their heart beat clearly. It was so loud. Synchronised. And their breaths. Warm and moist and fragrant. And the feel of their bodies. They could pass an age just lying like that. Together and one. It felt so. It would last or not they were not bothered. Time seemed to have stopped. Life too became pivoted on that frozen moment.

How we used to play hide-and-seek on moonlit nights. Boys and girls together. Under the cover of the game how many time you embraced and hugged the girls in a dark room. Around a corner. Under the plum tree. You'll pinch. Steal a kiss. It was all part of the game. Perhaps we played it for those small delights. But it never happened to be Karuna. How I longed for it. To stumble against her in the dark. To stumble in the dark and fall over her hiding by the cotton heap. My soul thirsted for it. My heart cried for it. I rationalised. All right no hugging. No kissing. Just holding hands. Just a feel of her body. But my love for her would rear its war head. I couldn't fight it. I had to submit to it. I had to accept that she was like scripture to me, which could only be honoured. Revered. Loved. But not soiled. Or sinned against.

One day I longed for her so much that I decided to cool the fire inside me by hugging another girl. I watched a particular girl enter the dark barn. I sneaked in after her and waited for her in a far corner. She took time to reach my corner. She did not see me in that pitch dark. I grabbed her. But she was not the same girl. She was Karuna. I felt as if I was struck by lightening.

Oh Nupi, she cried in a very emotional voice. There was a music of a million springs in her two words. But I was hardly aware of it. I was only aware of a guilt. A guilt which was weighing heavier than all the mountains in the Himalayan range. My arms fell down. Lifeless. My mouth was dry. What'd she think of it? What'd she think of me. A cad!

Come on. Let's go. What'd others be thinking about us, she said, grabbed my hand and led me out of the barn. I shiver even today when I think of that incident.

Neera showed her sympathy for his feelings by hugging him hard. Anup too turned on his side. He took her into his arms. And then their lips were absorbed in a Braille lesson. When they could do no more without a puff of oxygen, they parted. A breathless Neera pushed him away. She turned on her back and put her hands under her head. This put a strain on her breasts. They were pulled upright. Pointed at the sky. More prominent than they normally were. Anup felt tempted to make the two peaks. But then for some reason he desisted from it. But his eyes stayed fixed on them.

No one should be afflicted by a quest. It's terrible. To be seeking. Blindly. It's hell.

Isn't life itself a hell?

Especially when there's no meaning to such a quest. I feel urged. Terribly urged. But why, I don't know.

Life itself is a quest. Or why else the cycle of birth and death.

Just a feeling. A sort of pull. With no direction to it. No destination. No shape. No form. Beyond the grasp of words even. Making you pitiable. Helpless. What an affliction! God!! No cure for it. No medicine. Difficult to get rid of. Wanting it. And not wanting it. A strange strife. To be and not to be at the same time.

May be it was such a helplessness or vulnerability that made Buddha and Christ set out to seek *nirvan*. How do you know, Neera, that this quest of yours is not leading you to some revelation. A great secret of life. Or your *nirvan*.

When I was a child I set out one day to find God. For me the God dwelt at the horizon. And the horizon didn't look very far. Not much of a distance. So I set out. Not bothering about the hot sun. Dust. Thirst. Just walked on and on. I left behind the village bounds. Crossed the bounds of the second village too. I was in the middle of a prairie when I lost courage. Didn't feel like turning back. Wanted to sit it out there under the sun, in the middle of the prairie. But then I remembered my mother's rage. So I turned back. Without finding God. By the time I reached home, I was burning with fever. I was in bed for a whole fortnight. Since then my soul is thirsting. Thirsting for something about which I'm not clear. It's there. I feel it all the time. No, not feel it. Suffer it. Even crying

doesn't help. In fact, it adds to the thirst.

Oh Neera!

Anup drew her to him and clasped her to his chest. She sobbed drily and then added her own strength to the embrace. The moon was looking the other way. The moonlight looked worn-out. The whole atmosphere looked sleepy. The pond too had dozed off. It appeared as if the Nature was providing them seclusion. To cry out their pain. To share their pleasure.

No Palpitation now, eh?

No.

Anup touched her breast over the heart. Felt it for a few moments. He was satisfied.

Anup's hand stayed on the breast. He did not withdraw it. Instead he began to learn the geography of her breast. The seeking, searching hand left that breast and reached the other. His fingers, eager, impatient went on exploring. Her shoulders, neck, and then her face. Lips. Then the fingers dropped from the lips. The place was taken by his lips. And the two bodies gelded from head to feet. Their tongues became the playful squirrels. Chasing. Bracing. Weaving. Their breath became a writhing whirl of carbon dioxide in their lungs. The blood stream in their veins was going at the speed of a race horse. The beat of their hearts could make the drummer in the wrestling ring jealous of it. His one hand went on an expedition of her back. It found the high islands down below the spine and settled there. Busy. Neera stiffened suddenly. The busy hand became still. And then limp. The space between their bodies which was non-existent a while ago, now reappeared. The tumult of their emotions began to slacken. The breathing was beginning to be normal again. Neera wiped the chill sweat from her brow. The atmosphere was growing cold.

The insanity. The madness of the whole affair. If I tell you you would call me a fool of the first order. May be a fool seven times. I'm talking of the time when before the partition of the country communal riots were raging. The division of the country was so obvious. Fanaticism was at its worst. A *jehad* was in the offing. Preparation for a *dharm yudh* to counter the *jehad* was the call of the time. So the movement for general baptism of the Sikhs started. Even those who had

been baptised were called upon to be baptised again. To get the right fighting spirit. To grow into a hawk from a meak sparrow. That was the spiritual power of the baptism. It made you a warrior from a common householder. The special significance of this baptism was that it was being administered by using the broadsword of Guru Gobind Singh. That special group also visited our village. It was a rare honour. Both way. That's that they chose our village to be worthy of it and also that it afforded us the opportunity to have *darshan* of the Guru Sahib's famous broadsword. It caused an unprecedented flutter in the village. Those who had never paid homage at the gurudwara were also in the forefront to be baptised.

Special arrangements were being made for the occasion. I was also one of them. I sought out Karuna specially to ask her if she would attend the congregation that day. She gave me a look that made me shrivel. I was so ashamed that I could've hidden my face in the dust. Her look asked a simple question. Was I such a fool that I could imagine that she'd miss such a rare and important congregation. Would anyone in the whole village? We fixed the time of our entry into the gurudwara. Also where we'd be seated. We could not be together. Because the division inside the hall was clear. Women on one side and men on the other. Nevertheless, we wanted to be sure to be as near to each other as could be possible. And we pledged to each other that we'd pray for our eternal love.

Then it was the day of the baptism. The whole village turned out in their fineries. Most of the people had put on new clothes in reverence to the special significance of the day. We, who were to be baptised that day, had put on special dresses. The short sword, knee-length knickers, special kurtas and pyjamas and finely starched turbans, dyed deep blue.

The ceremony started at last. Before it was over I already felt that I could challenge the legendary strength of Rustom. What a transformation. What a miracle. I was really a hawk now. Hawk that was the king of the skies. No other bird could vie him in flight or rapacity or speed. The ceremony

ended with reverberating shouts of victory to the Khalsa. looked at Karuna. She was looking at me. Her eyes were moist. Out of pride and love. I averted mine. Bit my lower lip. I didn't want to cry. Though I was choked with emotions. But I, a hawk, could not cry. It'd be against the tenets of the tenth Guru who initiated baptism.

The ceremony came to an end. Next was langar and then tea. Even on that hot day. Someone had donated tea. It must be partaken by everyone. And then just idling about. None wanted to return home. Everyone wanted to stay on. But at last everyone went home. I did not. Because I learnt that there was going to be a party at the Big Brothers farm house. Which was not very far away. Only a hundred yards from the village outskirts. They were members of our fraternity. So in a way it was a party within the family. You did not need an invitation. You just turn up and be seated. The courtyard of the farm house was the envy of everyone in our tehsil. It was all covered by shisham trees. Right in the middle of it there was a pool, about twelve by twelve feet and four feet deep. The pool was always under shade of the shishams. Therefore, its water was always pleasantly cool. The whole place was always cool even on peak summer days. The Big Brothers had made arrangement for a barbecue. A young and fat goat had been procured for the purpose. And the village cook, who cooked on special occasions, had been summoned. The drink was in plenty. I joined the party. I was welcomed vociferously. I happened to be the pet boy of the village. So I sat with them and started drinking. The drink was being served in a dish by a man who sat in the centre of the group. In a single dish. It was offered to you. You were expected to gulp it at one go. And then chase it with a piece of roast meat. The dish went round so fast that before you could quench the fire in your belly with water or roast meat the dish was back in your hand again.

I felt the drink was getting to my head. To cool the effect, I took off my clothes and went into the pool. The cold water had a sobbering effect on me. But not enough to lessen the exhilaration. I came out of the pool and dressed. I was in no

mood to have any more. Besides I was thinking about Karuna. I wanted to meet her. I wanted to confirm whether she prayed for our eternal love or not. Before I left I took two more dishful of drinks. This time I didn't chase them either with water or meat. Then I sneaked out of the farm house. I started toward her place. I skirted the village to the water tank. Then I got on to the street leading to her house. As soon as I was on the street I realised my folly. It was midnight. I simply could not see her. Unless I was foolish enough to knock at her door and get murdered by her family. It was too late for calling on even your own ones. The cattle too had finished chewing cud and were sleeping. So were the pariah dogs in the street.

Nevertheless, I went on. The alley on which was her house was empty and quiet. Not a soul anywhere. I took a few steps into that alley and came up on a mule. It was a young one. Under a year. And it was lying on its side as if enjoying the cushy feel of the dust. Or could it be having a roll in the dust but stopped sensing my presence. I side-stepped the mule. It was a cantankerous animal. And so unpredictable. I didn't want a kick from him if I passed too close. I reached her house. It was dark. And quiet. Everyone seemed to be asleep. I stood there uncertainly. Not knowing what to do. I felt angry. I felt cheated. I felt choked. I wanted to cry. But did not. I turned around and walked out of the alley in abject dejection. What a fate!

I didn't go home. Instead I walked to the central well. It was dead centre in the village. And it had a wide platform which was used by the village panchayat and also for important meetings and public functions. The well was out of use now. The water had gone bad. It was full of poisonous gases. Since it was deep, the gases did not rise to the platform level. I perched on the edge of the platform. Contemplating treachery in general. And then specifically. Treachery by mankind. By fate. By your own. As I thought over such ponderous matters I slipped deeper and deeper into dejection. And then I was possessed by a sinister thought. To jump into the well. To jump into it and die. To put an end to treachery and deception from humankind and God. May be I cried also. I'm not very sure. But I'd have in the

end jumped into the well had not my uncle, elder to my father, passed that way. Probably he was returning home late from the town. He put an arm around my shoulders and took me home. By the time I lost all senses. I learnt later from Jeeto that I was making a big clamour for water. To douse my head which was on fire. They emptied all the water pitchers available in the house. Jeeto fetched more water from the tank till I sobered down and looked like sleeping. But I was not. I was suffering from deep remorse. I remembered that in between my pleas for more water I had been calling for Karuna. And I remembered that Jeeto once remonstrated with me.

Did anyone else hear me.

No.

Why?

They were all asleep. I told them I'd take care of you.

It was nearly dawn. Even Jeeto slept. Tired and exhausted as she was. But I could not sleep. Not after learning about my shameful conduct. Had any of the elders in the house heard me calling out Karuna's name they would've put me to death rather than bear the disgrace or face the contempt of the village. Her fate would've been the same. I felt I could not face anyone. I was so ashamed. I must go away from the village. Anywhere. But away.

I got up from the bed and soft-footed it to the outer door. Billo, our grey hound, crouched, alert and suspecting. The mare too whined a bit. Both went back to sleep when they realised that I was not a stranger. I walked out. From the house. From the village. After two hours walk I landed at my friend and classfellow Parmjit's place. His village was about seven miles from our village. All the way I cried and sang and moaned.

The first demand I made on my friend was for liquor. I was having a wallop of a hangover. And thereafter it was drinking bouts or sleep. My people tracked me down about the fourth day. By the time I was running high fever. When at last I was cured I looked a ghost. A skeleton. Sunken eyes. Pale skin. Vacant expression. No strength in the legs.

And no appetite at all. Temperamental. Doctor had advised for milk and orange juice. As much as I could take. But I was not touching either. All these days Jeeto sat by me and recited scripture in her sing-song voice.

Jeeto, my child, try something with him to make him eat. May be he would listen to you. My mother pleaded with Jeeto one day.

Jeeto set to thinking. Something occurred to her. She beamed suddenly.

Aunt, isn't first of the month today?

It is. Well you go to the gurudwara. Meanwhile I'll see what I can do with the Nawab Sahib.

My mother left for the gurudwara. Jeeto sprinted to Karuna's place and returned with her in no time. She must 've briefed her on the way.

Karuna sat on the edge of my bed. She was holding a plate heaped with orange fingers. I looked towards Jeeto. But she walked out. Smirking.

Come on have one. Won't you ? Please.

No.

Better give it a think.

I'll if you join me.

She looked at me desperately. Her eyes made a silent appeal to me not to be difficult. But I stuck to my stand. Moreover I was not looking at her. So she could not move me. I was staring at the ceiling.

All right, I agree, she said after what seemed like half a century.

I sighed in relief. I was afraid she would refuse. Leave.

You first, I insisted.

She looked at me for a moment and then took a finger. Then she extended one to me. I did not take it. Instead I opened my mouth. She had no choice. She had to feed me. The last one I grabbed. I extended it towards her mouth. At first she hesitated. Then she opened her mouth. I poked only half of it into her mouth. She clumped her teeth over it. I snatched

the other half and put it into my own mouth. She blushed red. Her eyes filled with pain.

Karuna, I called putting all my heart in that one word. I also got hold of her hand. We sat like that. Dumb. Mute. Holding hands. Wanting to talk. But failing to. We let our souls carry on the conversation. We continued to sit in that dumb pose till we heard the sound of footfalls from outside. She instantly withdrew her hand. She picked up the empty plate and stood up. She started for the kitchen. Jeeto met her at the door. She took the plate from her. She told her to wait for tea. Then she went to the kitchen. Karuna had no choiced but to return to me. But she did not. She leaned against the door. She would not listen to me and come and sity by men. By then Jeeto returned with tea. We drank it in silence.

There were some more occasions when we could be alone. But it was always the same. Holding hands and sitting dumb. Never saying what we wanted to say and hear that we wanted to hear. The maximum progress was that we'd now sit close to each other and not at a distance. We looked at each other stealthily. Once in a while we did it simultaneously. We'd blush and turn our faces.

And then came the riots. The arson. The loot. The massacre. Religious fanaticism at its worst. The partition of the country. Exodus. Refugee status. A new world. A new life. Life without roots. Struggles. Difficulties. Strife. Families got divided. Brothers separated. Found their own trails. Chose their own places. Sometimes hundreds of miles distant from each other. By the time we were settled the world had changed. The values had changed. Everything had changed. Ideals. Dreams. Sentiments. Relations. But one dream, one sentiment, one attachment did not die. It survived blood, death and fire. I discovered where her family had settled. Decided to visit them. But in the process of growing new roots I just could not make it. And by the time I could pay a visit to them something inside me stopped me. Dissuaded me.

If she refused to recognise you! If she refused to talk to you. What if she were married by now? Ifs and whats. No end to

them. But my love did not die. It grew stronger. And protective. I didn't want to spoil her life for my love. Love did not demand. Love gave. How could I be her misery? Even her family may take my visit amiss. So I loved her but did not go to her. Found a hundred and one excuses. Defending my own weakness. I realised it too late. Only then it seemed so true. So genuine. And by the time I realised the truth was too late.

Now there's only a wish. Nothing else. To meet her before life cheats me again. Only once. Even for a moment. A glimpse. A close glimpse. Just an affirmation that I'd loved her. Loved her dearly. Loved her all my life.¹ I know this's madness. But this madness is there in my soul like cancer. I can't do anything about it. Perhaps this's my way of expiation. Though I do not for a moment believe that I betrayed my love. The circumstances did wrap my thinking. Circumstances and the struggle to survive after having been uprooted and displaced.

Neera felt an overwhelming emotional upheaval listening to his confession. She clasped him to herself. She stopped this further monologue by sealing his lips with her own. She tried to lessen the agony in his heart with the warmth of her breasts. Her feet sought out his. The shoulders came together in an unison which was neither willed nor desired.

They became short of breath. Their arms were going numb below the elbows. The moon lengthened the distance between them. Trying to sneak away unnoticed. A soft breeze was stirring. Stars started reappearing in the sky. Somewhere a jackal howled at the moon in protest. Several others caught up with him. A moonlit night was not best for hunting. They were not moon crazy. They loved dark. Dark which cover everything. Sin as well as virtue.

How strange it is. The parallel journey of the tracks of two persons. Even though there is no relationship between the two. Nor there may be any possibility of their ever meeting. Still the two keep close. Do not part. In fact, become confidants. Why does life play with us? Take us as toys for her amusement? What does life gain out of it. By putting a

spoke in every wheel? Disturbing plans. Schemes. What one wants to do she won't permit. What one does not she rubs one's nose into that.

You left for Andaman. There was none other around with whom I could share my thoughts. My anguish. My grief. There was a lonely hope though. He might turn up. Might call on me. Then what? A voice arose from inside me. I invariably failed to come up with an answer.

But then one day he did turn up. Suddenly. Without information. Not incidentally too. I mean not being on official duty. He had taken leave. Leave to come to Delhi. To see me. Specially. I was surprised. But I was pleased too. Though I wondered why. He did not want to talk at home. Suggested we should go out. I suggested Coffee House. He declined. He wanted to go to a place where we could be alone. All to ourselves. No intrusions. No interruptions. Like a park or a grove. But I didn't take him to any park or grove. Instead I took him to the same spot on the Yamuna bank that we had visited earlier. You remember. Right opposite the mud bar island.

Neerā, it's heavenly here.

Yes. The enemies didn't spot this one. Or they would've destroyed it too.

You're right. Life always finds some prop to lean against.

Life itself is a prop, isn't it?

How're things with you, Neera?

Not bad. Time passes.

Well that itself is life.

Not living.

What else you can do if you can't live your life your way?

Hang yourself.

No, Neera. Rather one should burn all the rope that can be used for hanging. No rope no hanging.

What a consolation!

No, not a consolation. Truth about life. Life that always ages. Never grows younger. Only it ages sometimes faster

when your companion doesn't want to pull her weight.

Companion! What a joke Tarun. I don't have any notion of a companion even. Any more.

Sometimes you don't want to know even when you do. I don't think I can fancy a companion any more. I did once. Seems a long, long time ago. Waited to. Thought life'd be easier, worth living, if one had a companion. Had some sort of a notion that life's journey would be easier with a companion.

But when you don't want to go on a journey, Neera? When you're scared of your own shadow how can you wish for a companion.

No, Tarun. It's not true. I never shied of a companion. I don't do even now. Only it seems sort of late. I feel sort of wait-weary. And how could I call shadows companion. Shadows who can't appreciate my feelings, my sensibility, my sentiments. May be I would've if even a shadow had been articulate with me. Clear and straightforward. But even shadows stayed away. My soul was thirsty. It was tormented. I groped about. Called in all directions. I heard only the echo of my own voice. None responded. I stumbled about. Till I tired. Gave up. And sat down to eke it out alone.

And when someone offered you a hand you spurned it!

What are you saying Tarun? You know me too well. I was never vain. Nor I'm today. And I never tried to reach for the moon. I made one rule in life. And I've observed it all through. And that rule is not to cheat myself. Never. I still stand by the rule and am ready to pay whatever cost it may incur. I firmly believe that one who doesn't cheat oneself will never cheat another.

Is it? Let me see it.

See!

In your eyes.

Tarun I don't know why you're so obsessed with my eyes. Eyes, eyes, eyes. It's so maddening. The wretches take precedence over me.

Well if they're beautiful can I help it? And then just think how beautiful the person would be who has such beautiful eyes.

Oh go to hell.

I will. I have been. Rather booted to it.

You've nothing else to talk about.

I've. Something very important. But first thing first.

That is.

Let me peep into your eyes.

God. If you must.

Hell and damnation.

What now?

That what I see in your eyes. Falsehood. Pretence. Canard. Hypocrisy.

You're mad, Tarun?

No. Speaking the truth. Nothing but the truth. On my Life. The whole truth. Though you may not believe me.

I may if it's the truth.

Yes it is. Deceiving your ownself. Deliberately.

Tarun, if you've nothing else to talk let's go home.

Tarun didn't say anything. He sat quiet. Absorbed in the deceptive stillness of the river water. Lost to the world. After an age he spoke.

Yes Neeru. But listen to some truths before we leave. You wouldn't like it. I know. But nevertheless. Bear with me. It's a matter of a few minutes for you. I've born it for four long years.

I sat up with my chin on my drawn up knees and just looked at him.

You've deceived yourself for four years. Refusing to believe that someone loved you. Infinitely. Madly. Who could sacrifice everything for you. Offer you his life as if he's offering you a rose bud. But you weren't living on earth. So you couldn't observe those around you. You lived in the fancy world of dreams.

Yes. I was fleeing from myself. My circumstances. My heritage. My orthodox family. If they had their way they would've married me off right after matriculation. But I have been a scholarship winner all through. They couldn't refuse me higher education. It didn't cost them anything. And a degree was a better dowry than a few thousand rupees in cash. I had a dream though. To be an IAS. Thought that being in that covenant service would help me get the right life companion. I didn't want to be a burden on anyone. Nor I wanted to be a decoration on the wall for someone. I was struggling against heavy odds. A family that was orthodox to the boots. Parents whose sense of honour and prestige was a few centuries old. But they were sticking to it. It was a faith with them. Their God. You can't realise what it was like. I felt like a drought hit field awaiting a monsoon which just was not there.

Neeru where should I start. Which moments, hours, days. Which of the places, corners, spots. How many rains, dust storms, dark hours that I suffered for you. All of four years. All on one hope. One dream. Might be one day you'll realise. Know the truth. Accept it. Acknowledge it.

He fell silent. His anguish was too much for him to continue. I felt shattered. I remembered each day, each hour, each moment. Every single incident. Where he waited. From where he watched. Where he managed to meet me. Casually. Apparently. But not so in reality. All planned. Timed. I enjoyed his meeting. I relished his sight. I often felt a queer tenderness for him which was more than love could be. Not because he worshipped me. Was mad about me. But because he was not lowly in his behaviour. Didn't act the Lothario. Was genuine. Honest. And proper. He was a brilliant student. He helped me. Shared all his notes with me. Something so unusual among students. But I'd taken all those gestures as a kindness rather than as expression of a deep love. For me. Me and alone me. When I realised it I felt as if I'd lived blind all my life. And now that he had opened my eyes I realised what I'd tried not to see or admit even when I had wanted to. I felt ashamed. I felt like crying.

What must have he been thinking about my conduct? A proud, vain girl. God! Right then I sensed that he was talking to me. I reverted my attention to him.

Whenever I tried to open my heart to you you subverted it with your craze for the IAS. I had set myself a goal to be a professor in a university. So that I could, all my life, enjoy the pleasure of picking up pearls of wisdom from the vast ocean of knowledge.

But I found you so set on IAS that I changed my mind. I decided to join the Civil Service rather than be a professor. I thought it'd impress you. But then suddenly you went for the Provincial Service. I just followed you.

Why did not you take me into confidence?

I did not want to help you love me. I'd fallen in love with you of my own. Without any incentive. I was hoping that you'd also fall in love with me in time. On your own. In this way our love could be natural, spontaneous and not a gift of artifice.

I had nothing to say to that. What could I.

I've come with a news, he said after about a minute.

I've been selected for IAS.

IAS?

Yes. I came all the way to tell you personally. And to beg congratulation from you.

You deserve it, Tarun. Why beg it? Congratulations. A thousand and some more.

That's all?

Why, Tarun?

Not in words. I didn't wish that. I wanted more than that. Real congratulation. Your hand in congratulation.

Tarun!!

That's the truth, Neera. And you don't have to work for IAS now. One in the family is enough.

It cannot be, Tarun.

Till today I don't know how could I say that. Perhaps I was feeling guilty. Guilty of four years of my indifference.

Apathy towards him. To have kept him writhing on a hook during the best years of his life.

Is this your final decision.

Yes.

Had he insisted, taken hold of my hand, me, I would've consented. But he did not. Perhaps he was too stunned to have thought of it.

Let's go, he said after a while in a natural voice. He stood up. He did not give me a hand to get up. It peeved me. You go. I'll be a while here. I want to be alone. He did not offer to give me company. Nor did he offer to wait for me. He said goodbye and left. And I cried. Cried long and hard. Tried to wash the growing agony in my mind with my tears. That which was possible I spurned. And the impossible I grabbed. Like an idiot. Dolt.

I tried to drown myself in work. But it was not to be. Bains, my batchmate became a nuisance. I got fed up of him. I decided to get transferred to another department. I called upon the Secretary Services and made a request for transfer. He readily agreed to oblige. There was a vacancy in the Education department. He could hand me the order right away, he said. I agreed. He turned towards me after dictating the order. He told me that Tarun had asked him to help me whatever may be my problem.

Tarun was from his village. He was his favourite boy among all from his village. He praised him. He academic brilliance. His conduct. His principles. And his ideals. I cried once again that night. Cried hard and long. Exhausted I fell asleep. When, I could not recall the next morning.

For four years I had craved to hear those words. And when they were spoken, really, truly, I blew them away to the four winds.

He left Delhi without meeting me again. The knowledge that he had left drained me of life. I felt empty. Abandoned.

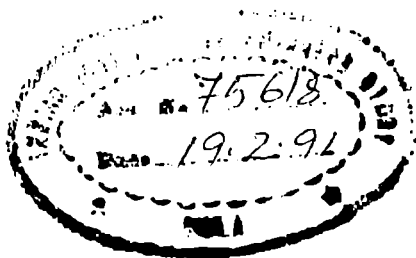
And after that?

After that he bowed his head before his parents. He had been refusing an arranged marriage. He wanted to marry of

his own will and liking. But he had lost the game. What else he could do. He had to marry the girl his parent had chosen three years ago. He had left no more will to resist his parents. He was the defeated one. I was his defeat.

Neera finished and broke into sobs. And then for a long time heaved drily. Anup was rocking her in his arms. Stroking her back to console her. She went to sleep in his arms. After a while Anup too slept.

They woke up to the vista of a golden dawn. They stood up and dusted their clothes. They looked towards each other with some misgiving. They were relieved when they did not find any hint of guilt in each other's eyes. They looked fresh and guileless. They started walking towards the car.



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