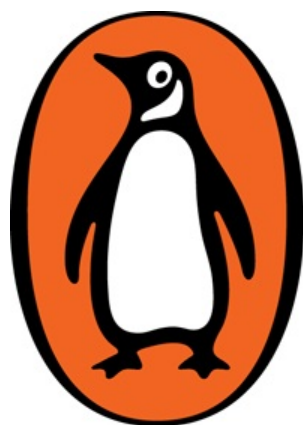
The book cover is framed by a decorative border of various flowers. On the left, there is a large, vibrant red flower with many stamens. At the top, a branch of white five-petaled flowers hangs down. On the right, there are two stylized flowers with green centers and red and yellow petals. At the bottom left is a blue lotus-like flower, and at the bottom right is a white lotus-like flower. The background is a warm, textured yellow-orange.

# KAMA THE RIDDLE OF DESIRE

*'This is an exquisite book, at once tender  
and profane, like desire itself'*

SHASHI THAROOR,

# GURCHARAN DAS



GURCHARAN DAS

---

KAMA THE RIDDLE OF DESIRE



PENGUIN BOOKS

# CONTENTS

## *Prologue*

### The Beguiling Realm of Kama

#### 1. Kama Strikes Early

*The wondrous world of kama optimists*

#### 2. Growing Pains

*Kama pessimists strike back mightily*

#### 3. A Suitable Match

*Kama optimists and pessimists reach an imperfect compromise*

#### 4. If You Are Kissed, Kiss Back

*The self-deceptions of a nagaraka*

#### 5. The Party

*Only a woman, not a man, may express jealousy*

#### 6. What Do Lovers Want?

*Pleasure, adoration or empathy?*

#### 7. Friends and Lovers

*The discovery of romantic love*

#### 8. The Day of Days

*The heart finds rest where there is no twoness*

#### 9. The Enigma of Marriage

*Duty to oneself versus duty to another*

#### 10. Happy Love Has No History

*Is it possible to trust someone who has not been unfaithful?*

#### 11. Love-Death

*What indeed is finally beautiful except death and love?*

#### 12. Those Were the Days

*Each stage of life has a love of its own*

*Epilogue*

The Riddle of Kama

*Author's Note*

*Notes*

*Acknowledgements*

*Follow Penguin*

*Copyright*

## Also by Gurcharan Das

### Novel

*A Fine Family* (1990)

### Plays

*Larins Sahib: A Play in Three Acts* (1970) *Mira: Rito de Krishna*, tr. Enrique Hett (1971) *Three Plays* (2001, 2011)

### Non-fiction

*India Unbound: From Independence to the Global Information Age* (2000) *The Elephant Paradigm: India Wrestles with Change* (2002) *The Difficulty of Being Good* (2009)

*India Grows at Night: A Liberal Case for a Strong State* (2012) **General Editor**

#### THE STORY OF INDIAN BUSINESS

*Arthashastra: The Science of Wealth* by Thomas R. Trautmann *The World of the Tamil Merchant: Pioneers of International Trade* by Kanakalatha Mukund *The Mouse Merchant: Money in Ancient India* by Arshia Sattar *The East India Company: The World's Most Powerful Corporation* by Tirthankar Roy *Caravans: Punjabi Khatri Merchants on the Silk Road* by Scott C. Levi *Globalization before Its Time: The Gujarati Merchants from Kachchh* by Chhaya Goswami (edited by Jaithirth Rao) *Three Merchants of Bombay: Business Pioneers of the Nineteenth Century* by Lakshmi Subramanian *The Marwaris: From Jagat Seth to the Birlas* by Thomas A. Timberg *Goras and Desis: Managing Agencies and the Making of Corporate India* by Omkar Goswami *Indian Railways: The Weaving of a National Tapestry* by Bibek Debroy, Sanjay Chadha, Vidya Krishnamurthi *Dharma of Business: Commercial Law in Medieval India* by Donald Davis

*For Bunu, my wife*

*The delight that the mind and heart experience in enjoying the objects of the natural world of the five senses is kama.*

—Mahabharata IV.33.37



# Prologue

## *The beguiling realm of kama*

*Desire is the essence of life.*

—Mahabharata XII.167.34

‘Our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness,’ wrote Vladimir Nabokov in the opening lines of his memoir, *Speak Memory*. Whereas the fearful unknown of the dark voids drove my father to mystical religion, I was drawn to the bright crevice, curious to discover the extraordinary visions that might lie therein. There I found kama, which means ‘desire’ in Sanskrit. Unlike animals, human beings are not governed by instinct alone. Instinctual desire travels from our senses to our imagination, whence it creates a fantasy around a specific individual. These fantasies are the source of intense ‘pleasure’, which happens to be the other meaning of kama. Despite constraints, men and women found a way to communicate their fantasies and this gave rise to erotic love. Most societies worried about this charming human inclination by instituting monogamy via the institution of marriage for the sake of social harmony.

This is a memoir of kama and I sometimes wish I had written it when I was younger, when desire was more troublesome. Young, vigorous warriors are supposed to be better candidates for sex, not ageing cyphers who are resigned to mostly look back:

*It is unbecoming and perverse for men  
Who are aged to have erotic passions.  
Nor is it meet for ample-hipped women  
Whose bosoms are flaccid to cling to life or love.*

Kama is not only the joy of sensual attraction but also the aesthetic delight one feels while, say, beholding a Mughal miniature of great beauty. Kama can be a

desire for anything, but it refers generally to erotic desire. Kama is also the desire to act. It drove Shakespeare to sit down one morning and write the dazzling *Othello*, whose eponymous hero turned out, alas, to be one of the unhappiest victims of kama. Since my ancient Hindu ancestors realized that kama is the source of action, of creation and of procreation, they elevated it not only to the status of a god, but also saw it as one of the goals of human life. They thought of it as a cosmic force that animates all of life.

There is another rich word in Sanskrit, *smara*, which means ‘memory’ or ‘love’ depending on the context, especially a remembrance of sexual love. In writing this memoir I have learnt that the recollection of love is sometimes more powerful than the original confused experience itself. Memory binds us to our former selves, sews together events that have not met before, reshuffling the past to suit our present. Marcel Proust, the French novelist, believed that only in recollection does an experience become fully significant, as our imagination arranges it in a meaningful pattern, recreating it to suit our desires.

Remembrance takes us back to the wellsprings of being, to the cultivation of a private consciousness as well as to the mystery of eros.

Although the two dark eternities before and after our brief lives are identical, Nabokov believed that human beings are more afraid of the abyss after death and viewed the one before birth more calmly. While I was in my mother’s womb, I remember overhearing my parents, much like Abhimanyu. They were recently married and they were talking about kama. Visiting them was my mother’s charming, fun-loving cousin, Ramu, who is best described as a ‘kama optimist’. He told them stories about kama’s ability to give ecstatic pleasure and regaled them with strategies from the *Kamasutra* for entering the ‘web of desire’, as William Blake called it. Unfortunately, my mother dozed off just as my unworldly father, who was a kama pessimist, began to warn her about kama’s darker, sinister side: how it creates but also destroys; it inspires love, but is uncontrollable, obsessive and violent; a neighbour’s wife is an intoxicating temptation—giving in to it brings pain and tragedy, destroying families and peace. Because my mother fell asleep, I had learnt how to enter kama’s web but not how to exit it; and it has taken a lifetime to discover how to enjoy desire but not too much—how to strike a civilized balance between overindulgence and repression.

The beguiling world of kama is full of paradoxes. I desire only what I don’t

THE BEGINNING WORLD OF KAMA IS FULL OF PARADOXES. I DESIRE ONLY WHAT I DON'T HAVE. Once I attain it, kama dies. Plato wisely observed that desire is a lack of something that one does not possess. Lovers long to unite in order to fill this deficiency. But how can something that is missing, or perishes once attained, be a goal of life? Yet, kama is ubiquitous and indestructible. Kamagita, a 'song of desire', embedded deep inside the Mahabharata, reminds us that when we control one desire, another pops up. If I give up desire for wealth and give away my money, a new craving emerges—a desire for reputation; if I renounce the world and become an ascetic, I am driven by a desire for heaven or for moksha, 'liberation', from the human condition. King Yayati realized that he had grown old but his thirsts were forever young.

*In the very moment of enjoying kama, Yayati thought that even in a thousand years these pleasures would remain unsatisfied, and this prospect filled him with melancholy.*

More than 2500 years ago in the forests of north India, some curious fellows while conducting mental experiments called the Upanishads were struck by the unsatisfactory nature of kama. To find an answer to the riddle of kama was also central to the Buddha's project. The ancient yogis sought ways to quiet this endless, futile striving. Hence, their goal was *chitta vriti nirodha*, 'to still the fluctuations in the mind', says Patanjali. The answer of the Bhagavad Gita, the great post-Vedic text of Hinduism from the second century BCE, to this riddle is to learn to act without desire. But how is this possible when 'man is desire', according to the earliest Upanishad?

*You are what your deep, driving desire is.  
As your desire is, so is your will  
As your will is, so is your deed.  
As your deed is, so is your destiny.*

The Gita is aware that a person cannot stop desiring; nor does it want him to lose the will to act; what it means by 'desireless action' is to renounce the personal rewards of your actions—act so that you don't care who gets the credit. I have read this refrain dozens of times, but I remain sceptical that a person can give up his fundamental, egoistic desire and still remain human. We tend to blame the Victorians for the prudishness of the Indian middle class, but lurking deep in the Indian psyche is deep pessimism about kama's prospects; it led the great ascetic

god, Shiva, to burn the god of love in frustration when the latter disturbed his thousand-year meditation. Hence, desire exists *ananga*, ‘bodiless’, in the human mind.

In this surfeit of kama pessimism, I was drawn oddly enough to the kama optimists. It may have been because of my incomplete prenatal education, or perhaps the accident of encountering a happy, ganja-smoking pandit, discovered by my grandmother to counteract my Christian missionary school education, where I was taught to equate desire with ‘original sin’. The pandit told stories of playful, mischievous gods, who created the world for the fun of it, and one of them, Krishna, danced the *raas leela* with 40,000 women for an entire Brahma night that lasted 4.5 billion human years. From him I learnt that our civilization was the only one that elevated kama to an aim of life and left behind a legacy of erotic Sanskrit love poetry, the *Kamasutra*, and erotic sculptures at Khajuraho. Even the devotional love of god took a romantic turn in the *Gitagovinda*, where Radha, a married woman, longs to unite with her divine, adulterous lover.

I am at an age when I mostly relive memories, some intimate, others wistful, and still others so distressing that I am left sweating. I am not a grizzled roué, however, looking back on the adventures of my prime; nor a satiated libertine who regrets the dying of the old fire. Much like the next person, I desire to desire. During my memoir, I tend to stop my narrative, and while I wait to recover I offer the reader observations on what I have learnt about kama from my life, my friends, and literature. Fiction is a better teacher than reality because we have never lived enough; literature extends our horizon beyond our confined, parochial experience; and it is more objective—we do not envy a character as we do in real life.

The underlying premise of this memoir is that we live for a while and then we die. It matters to us in ways that it does not to other creatures. What is this mattering? We want our lives to have meaning. Well, kama too is a gesture in the direction of a meaningful life. We are constantly reminded about dharma, ‘our duty to others’; the thought escapes us that kama is also a duty—a ‘duty to ourselves’. This memoir is a reminder that kama is needed to realize our capacity for living a flourishing life. Socrates pointed out that we are unique among creatures in being able to address the question: how shall I live? This question was so important that he claimed that the unexamined life is not worth living. Ironically, the citizens of Athens put him to death for forcing them to think about

ironically, the citizens of Athens put him to death for forcing them to think about the meaning of their lives. This memoir attempts the same project with the hope that Socrates's tragic fate will not befall me.



## KAMA STRIKES EARLY

### *The wondrous world of kama optimists*

*Desire is powerful indeed;  
it engenders belief.*

—Marcel Proust

I remember waking up suddenly on a frosty day just after dawn. I was four and only half awake. It had been raining, and along with the wetness there was a rawness in the air. I could hear the wind blow. I ran to my mother's bed. She stretched her arm and I nestled by her side. She felt my body and pressed me close to her.

'Did you have a bad dream, Amar?' she asked.

I leaned towards her, sought her heat, and placed my head against her. I felt the smell of her skin in her big bed with her soft arms around me. Before I could answer, I was blissfully asleep. So much happiness did I feel from her sensual warmth that day that I got into the habit of jumping into my mother's bed whenever I could. I would lose myself in her body's peculiar aroma of melted butter. Half awake and half asleep, I would rub myself against her. One day she became aware of what I was doing and she admonished me gently.

She told my father and he was not pleased. It's not healthy for a boy who is almost five to sleep with his mother, he told her. He wanted me to learn to grow up independent. She was more accepting, however, protesting that it was a natural and innocent thing. But eventually, she gave in and the intimacy between mother and son came to an end. I felt resentful for months.

Another memory of my childhood is of spending time mostly with myself. I would sometimes miss my mother and I remember searching all over the house for her. I recall feeling an aching absence. When told that she was away at the bazaar or at a neighbour's house. I would grow anxious. I was loneliest at night

when I was sent to bed early and I spent what seemed like hours feeling uneasy and restless on my pillow.

Later, as I grew up, I was relieved to learn that I was not alone in my anxiety. I felt reassured when I read about the young narrator, Marcel, in Proust's novel, *Remembrance of Things Past*, who used to wait longingly for his mother to come and give him a goodnight kiss. When she finally came and kissed him, he would feel comforted; but the effect was temporary, for he would soon be filled with pain at the thought of her imminent departure. 'So much so that I reached the point of hoping that this goodnight kiss which I loved so much would come as late as possible, so as to prolong the time of respite during which Mamma would not yet have appeared.' On another occasion, he dozes off while reading a book and longing for her; he awakens half an hour later to find the book still in his hands but there is no sight of his mother. Unable to sleep, he goes and waits on the staircase landing, and this is where his parents find him dozing. Fearing punishment, he thinks, 'Too late, my father is upon me. Instinctively, I murmured, though no one heard me, "I'm done for!"' But his normally stern father is filled with sympathy at the sight of his vulnerable son and suggests to his wife to spend the night with the child. This is at the beginning of Proust's extraordinary, intimate and seductive seven-volume novel.

Ever since childhood I have lived with this nagging feeling of loneliness. It is different from solitude, which I have always found to be restful and even creative. Perhaps, because solitude is chosen while loneliness is not. My loneliness is a restless longing, and it never seems to go away. It is there even when I am with someone, or when I am in a group, and especially when I am in a crowd. In India, of course, people are hardly alone, and if you do find someone who is habitually alone, you feel pity for them. I wonder if the extreme pleasure of kama is meant to overcome this feeling of loneliness, or at least is a recompense for it.

~

If kama strikes early in human life, it also emerges early in primeval time in a civilization. My grandmother wore the softest saris, and as I was feeling the smoothness of the cotton fabric one morning, she casually mentioned that in the



beginning there was nothing in the universe, only darkness. The cosmos was created from the seed of kama, ‘desire’, in the mind of the One. When I went to the university, I discovered the famous hymn of creation in the *Rig Veda*, and it confirmed what she had said:

*In the beginning desire descended on it,  
that was the primal seed, born of the mind.*

Kama is a masculine noun, and in this speculative hymn is the first allusion to the cosmogonic function of desire. Although it does not explain which causes what, it does suggest that desire was the first act of consciousness, and links cosmic desire to the great heat of *tapas*, the generative heat of sexuality and consciousness.

Kama can also mean ‘pleasure’, suggesting that desire is about anticipation; and pleasure is the emotional satisfaction from achieving the desired object. It recognizes as well that desire leads to intention and intention leads to action. So before one can act, one must have the desire and the intention to act.

‘You wouldn’t wake up in the morning without desire,’ my grandmother said while she was explaining that the softness of her cotton saris came from years of washing.

In cosmic terms, kama’s great heat is the primal biological energy, linked to prana, the ‘life force’. Indians had understood early on that desire is everything; without it human beings are nothing. The living cell would fall apart without the animating principle of kama. It is the wellspring of all activity. A few centuries after the *Rig Veda* came the *Atharva Veda*, and it raised kama to the status of something resembling a creator god, who lorded over the other deities. And this god felt lonely and wanted a companion. Since it was as large as a man and a woman in close embrace, it split its body into two, giving rise to man and woman. I have thought about this primordial division and felt that the poet was reminding us about the fundamental loneliness of the human condition. To overcome it, the primordial man copulated with the woman after the splitting, and this suggests to me that the intimacy of kama helps us to surmount some of our primal loneliness. A kiss, an embrace is thrilling because it helps to conquer our feeling of isolation in an alien, anonymous world.

And what can we infer about a civilization that regards everything as beginning with kama, unlike, for example, the Judaeo-Christian tradition, where in the beginning was light when ‘God said, “Let there be light . . .”’ If the Hindu cosmos is born from kama, I ask myself, what is the significance of the fact that this primal biological energy is at the origin of my civilization? As a child, I asked my grandmother what was there in the void before kama, but she thought I was just being naughty. Kama is a serious subject of inquiry in many great texts—the Vedas, the Brahmanas and the pioneering philosophical mental experiments called the Upanishads—all of them early strivings of human beings to understand the nature of the world and of the self. The epic Mahabharata devotes forty long chapters to grasp kama’s nature. All this earnest questioning happened well before Vatsyayana decided to compile the exquisite *Kamasutra*. He understood that kama is not merely a natural energy, it is also an art to be cultivated. Kama is used both in sexual and asexual contexts in the ancient texts, and it carries connotations of action, creation and procreation. Early on, it seems, ancient Indians had understood that this ‘divine energy’, also called shakti, is the source of the sexual drive and the force behind the life instinct, and this happened thousands of years before Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung.

The *Rig Veda* says in another creation myth that the gods made a sacrifice of Purusha, ‘the cosmic person’, at the beginning of time. Into a fire altar, fluids, mantras and other offerings were made. Before being offered to Agni, the god of fire, Purusha gave rise to his feminine self, Viraj, out of his own being, and was then sacrificed and ritually dismembered. Through the sacrifice, Purusha became the universe, and his limbs became the sun, the moon, stars, animals, plants and human beings. This was the primordial sexual act that gave rise to the cosmos. The fire ritual linked human beings to the divine and ensured their perpetuation. The Upanishads state that ‘man is made of desire’ and explain that the ritual sacrifice replicates the sexual act as the fluid is offered into the fires of the womb. Thus, kama has the capacity to beget life.

There are other, more charming Hindu myths of creation but now that I am in my old age, I am especially drawn to the ones related to kama. I feel compelled to make some sort of peace with my restless mind that has troubled me all my life with the vexatious problems of desire. Even today, there are annoyances that refuse to go away and continue to colour insistently the recollections of my early days

My earliest memories of desire are those from Lahore in undivided India. The next thing I remember is our family trying to escape with our lives during the partition of India in 1947. We were fleeing to Delhi amidst talk of death. Partition was a bad deal for everyone but it was the only one feasible. It was the creation of a few privileged men without the consent of the people. In the end, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, 'the bad boy', was 'sent off with a moth-eaten state', while the Congress got 'what it wanted, but continued to complain that they were robbed of their cherished dream of a united India'.

I was curled up against my mother in the train at Lahore station, clinging to her neck, making it wet with my tears. The warm breath from her wheezing chest covered my cheek. She was asthmatic, and her chest heaved in an eruption of coughing. Suddenly, I was separated from her and I was passed to an uncle through the window of the train and taken away from the women's compartment. I thrashed about on the berth next to my father as the train jerked and then lumbered out of the station. The clackety-clack gathered force, drumming into me the conviction that I was being carried farther and farther away from the safe harbour of her neck and breast. I must have gone to sleep and the next thing I remember is of being deliriously happy when I was reunited with her the following morning when the train pulled into the Old Delhi station.

My father was a doctor by profession, and since doctors were in demand, he quickly got a job with the government. We had never seen anything quite as grand as Lutyens' Delhi, and we embraced it with reckless abandon, and this helped us to forget the ones we had lost in Pakistan, including my aunt who had been hacked to death while trying to escape. Initially, we lived in tents like refugees, where I remember my mother crying all day long waiting for news about her family. Soon, however, we shifted to one of the newfangled colonies built by the public works department that came up in South Delhi to house middle-level officials. Our whitewashed flat was situated near India Gate.

I was put in an English missionary school run by the Christian Brothers, and it taught me early on to deny desire, linking it with guilt and shame. I cried on the first day when my mother left me in the headmaster's office. He took me to Class 1 where I stood shyly behind the door, refusing to go in. The boys were

half asleep when we entered but everyone jumped up when they saw the head. I was shorter than the others and my hair was cut square, parted in the middle like a peasant's. I was ill at ease in a new shirt that my mother had bought the day before—it pinched under my arms. My ill-fitting khaki shorts braced up tight around my thighs. On my feet were sturdy new Bata shoes, which marked our middle-class status.

The boys began to go over the lesson. I listened intently sitting at the back, not daring even to cross my legs, ignoring the paper airplanes that flew past and landed periodically at my feet. From my mother's playful chatter at home, I was familiar by now with the letters and numbers that the boys were reciting. When the bell rang in the afternoon, everyone left. I stayed at my desk, and I think I would have kept sitting there all afternoon had the teacher not returned to pick up her bag. She told me that school was over and I could go home.

The daily two-mile ride to school on my bicycle framed my new life. In the mornings, I would be rushed and nervous, my hair wet, as I hurriedly rode to school. In the afternoons I would dawdle back, often in the company of other boys. After I reached home, my mother would sit down with me at the dining table with milk and sandwiches, and shower me with questions about the day's happenings. She would bring out pictures that she had lovingly cut from magazines and tell me animal stories from the *Panchatantra*. I liked hearing them again and again, and she kept on her lively prattle till my father returned from work. Sometimes, her mood would suddenly turn melancholic as she remembered someone who had been left behind in Pakistan.

There was nothing striking about my school life. I played during recess, worked in study periods, paid attention in class, enjoyed sports and managed to stay comfortably in the top half of my class. My mother was ambitious and had dreams of greatness for me, wanting me to become a successful man. She especially wanted me to speak and write English well even though our politicians exhorted us daily to shed our unholy attraction to the colonial language. The English that I grew up speaking was a new idiom that was quietly emerging under the bright Indian sun inside our English-medium schools across the country—it was more confident, less imitative than the speech of the earlier generations of Indians.

My mother had a great and unfulfilled desire to belong to Delhi's fashionable society. She would go out every evening to Connaught Place, the main shopping

society. She would go out every evening to Connaught Place, the main shopping arcade of New Delhi. She wandered around 'CP', as everyone called it, stopping before the glittering shops. Since she didn't have the money, she contented herself by looking yearningly at the beautiful displays in the windows from the outside. Her great disappointment was to have an unworldly husband, who was shy and reclusive. She wanted to dress up and go to glamorous parties but he was happy with his own company. He loved his work and was totally absorbed in it. He usually came home tired and preferred to relax in the evenings—take solitary walks, meditate and read spiritual literature.

The natural answer to my mother's gregarious disposition would have been to join a club. There were a number of social clubs in Delhi and the most exclusive one was the Delhi Gymkhana Club, the meeting place of the most fashionable and powerful in the nation's capital. She would sometimes bring up the subject but my father would gently explain to her that it was beyond our means. As a government doctor, he earned a modest salary, and my mother ran the house on a tight budget. Her major expenses were on school fees, uniforms and milk for her growing son. She had worked hard to get me into an English-medium school although it cost more than they could afford. At the end of the month there was little left for anything else. A private clinic soon opened near our home, which offered twice the salary to its doctors than her husband earned. She encouraged my father to join it. They had a number of arguments but my father gently stood his ground, insisting that he was happy where he was. She wished he were more ambitious and kept nagging him about it.

My mother must have transmitted her anxieties to me, for I grew up with a sense of deprivation. I would compare myself to my classmates who had things that I did not possess; to those who were more attractive to girls than I was; and especially to those who made it to the school cricket team. My father admonished my mother one evening, saying that she was overambitious about me, and this was not healthy. He said children come 'through' us, not 'from' us, and parents are only a medium by which life expresses its longing for itself. So, our children are not 'our' children.

'What a peculiar idea!' exclaimed my grandmother, who was visiting us at the time.

Ignoring the interruption, my father went on to explain that a *jiva*, 'soul', before it takes birth, is neither male nor female but is drawn to parents with

certain personalities suitable for its own growth. Once it finds such an environment, it chooses to be born there. Children come with their past karmas and destinies to fulfil, he said, and we should not impose our desires on them. They are guests in our home. We should love them but not try and fulfil our dreams and ambitions through our children.

My father did not convince either my mother or my grandmother and went out for a walk. Both mother and daughter looked at each other with a resigned expression that said, 'What else did you expect!' My mother's mother always thought that my father was a bit cracked.

~

By the time I was sixteen I sometimes accompanied my mother on her evening round of Connaught Place. Everyone in Delhi went to CP no matter what the season. Between six and eight, the thing to do was to get dressed and stroll along the wide, winding Georgian-style colonnade with its glamorous shops and smart cafés. She went there 'to be seen and to see others'. There was a veritable fashion parade each evening of men and women who vied with each other in the elegance of their attire. Named after the third son of Queen Victoria, the First Duke of Connaught, CP was designed in the form of two concentric circles, creating an inner, middle and outer circle with seven roads radiating from a circular park. Since many Indian princely rulers had their 'Delhi homes' nearby, they came to shop here, and my mother thought it a prize to spot one of them.

One evening, as we were waiting for my father in CP, we heard a familiar voice.

'Gauri Masi!'

My mother turned around but could not immediately place its owner.

'Anand!' she said suddenly with a cry of surprise.

Anand was the son of one of her oldest friends, Geeti, who had been in college with her in Lahore. Geeti had married Dev Tyagi soon after college and my mother was at hand while Anand was growing up in Lahore. Anand mentioned in a matter-of-fact manner that he had just returned after finishing his university studies in England. My mother thought him charming and handsome. He had a fashionable beard and she detected a playful gaiety in his eyes that drew her to him like a magnet.

‘What about you and your family? Oh, how I miss Geeti!’ And she plied him with a thousand questions. Anand’s father had become a powerful official in the government. Anand himself did not know what he was going to do next. Before he left, my mother extracted a promise that he would bring his family to our home. When my father joined us on our round, he found my mother a bundle of excitement, thrilled at the prospect of meeting her old friend from college. An ‘England-returned’ son meant that they must be well-to-do. My mother was envious, imagining them living in a big bungalow and giving dazzling parties.

‘How can I invite them to our little home?’ she moaned. She wondered how they had the means to send their son to England for an education. ‘They must have inherited the money!’

A week later, I was wandering aimlessly in CP when Anand spotted me. ‘Come, Amar, come, let me take you to the Gym,’ he said, warmly putting an arm around me.

‘Gym?’

‘Yes, the Gymkhana Club.’

I hesitated. ‘That is a very grand place . . . we are not members.’

‘But I am. Come and meet my friends.’

The hall porter greeted us at the desk where Anand signed me in as his guest. I must have looked younger than my sixteen years because the porter asked me my age. Anand was a good five years older. We walked past smoke-filled card rooms to a lounge full of young people and laughter. I looked around me with awe. Bearers in starched white uniforms with green cummerbunds and sashes and tassels were gliding between the tables. ‘So, this is where the smart people meet,’ I thought. As Anand hailed a group of young people to join us, I was intoxicated by my first encounter with an inaccessible and forbidden world—the glamour, the clothes, the sophistication of language and manners. I imagined these people dwelling in big houses, with tall hedges and high gates, leading a life quite unlike my own.

My eyes seemed to be pulled as though by a lodestone, and they alighted on a girl with brilliant, laughing eyes. She seemed to be the same age as me and vaguely familiar. She was tall, slim and well made. Under a mass of raven hair was an insolent smile. I could not remember where I had seen her. Her friends called her Isha. I kept gazing at her, hoping she would recognize me. But she looked through me as she chatted vivaciously with her friends. I couldn’t make

out what they were laughing at. She was utterly beautiful and her daring manner dazzled me.

‘Shh, there she is!’ said a slightly older, sultry woman in our group with an ample bosom. There was silence as all eyes turned to look at a woman in a white chiffon sari, her upper lip curving prettily on her oval face. Although no beauty, she had an arresting face with thick black eyelashes that crowned her dark eyes. I stared at her rising bosom. Suddenly, everyone in our group began to gossip about her in hushed tones. I gathered that she was the second wife of one of the seniormost civil servants and had apparently been seen in the company of a younger man in one of the shadier cafés in CP. Someone added another bit of salacious ‘news’ and soon our group was having a nice laugh at what they believed to be a scandal in the making. I was drawn by the immoderate atmosphere of subdued sensuality and continued to watch without fully taking in what was being said.

‘For heaven’s sake, he is her cousin and they grew up together. He is visiting them for a few days!’ Anand said, putting a stop to the mischievous tittle-tattle. The scandalmongers felt ashamed.

‘Enough!’ Anand said, suddenly getting up. ‘Don’t you have anything better to talk about than spread lies about someone who is not here to defend herself?’

‘See, you have driven him away!’ said Isha with a wail, accusing no one in particular. She gave Anand a look of adoration as we left.

My head was spinning when I returned home. It was my first encounter with a forbidden world and I was thrilled. I tried to recall Isha’s thin face, her shining brown eyes, her long dark hair, and the unusual way she tilted her head. The more I thought about her, the more inaccessible she seemed to become. I lay awake for hours thinking about her.

A few days later I realized suddenly where I had seen her, and the discovery left me breathless. It was in a grand house in red sandstone, surrounded by a vast garden on Prithviraj Road with the number 23 written prominently on the gate. I bicycled past it every day on my way to school and I had once seen Isha accidentally through the hibiscus hedge when I had got off to fix the chain of my bicycle. What had been an impersonal landmark on my daily journey now acquired a special character, and as the days went by, it became the chief source of pleasure in my life. As soon as the bell rang in the afternoon, announcing the end of school, I would hurriedly gather my books, jump on to my bicycle before



end of school, I would hurriedly gather my books, jump on to my bicycle before any of my schoolmates decided to tag along. A red round postbox—a proud symbol of the British days—stood a hundred yards from Isha's house, and it announced the pleasure that awaited me. When I reached its daunting gate, I would slow down, take a deep breath, and jump off my bike. I would walk past her house slowly with measured steps.

My heartbeat would quicken as I looked through the wrought-iron gate. It gave a view of the side of the stone house and a winding path leading up to a long, majestic entrance, mellowed by years of Delhi's weather. I walked along the hedge that circled the house and I could see the lawn indistinctly and tell if they had company. I would observe servants in uniform, moving back and forth on the lawn with the tea service. I became skilled at hiding behind a giant neem tree, watching the goings-on.

On my lucky days, I was able to spot her. I knew it was she by the dread that seized my heart. A tiny brown dog would follow her everywhere. Sometimes she would be talking to her friends. At other times she would be playing badminton at the side of the house. I saw her up close on one occasion and suddenly everything turned brighter. She was in light blue, sitting on the lawn a few yards away from the hedge. She was speaking with an older man of indeterminate age and her friends were chatting nearby. Her head was unmistakably tilted as she listened to him. I envied all her friends because of their good fortune: they were able to be close to her, and I yearned to be part of their group.

Suddenly she looked up and saw me. Her lively eyes seemed to mock at me. A shiver ran through my body and I quickly moved away. A few minutes later I heard a voice. It was the same older man who she had been talking to. He told me that it was not polite to stare at people. I was mortified and quickly retreated. Overwhelmed with terror, I jumped on to my cycle and raced home. When I went inside I burst into tears. For weeks I was depressed and could think only of the contrast of my drab life with the brilliance of her world.

At night in bed before going to sleep I would imagine Isha, always in grand settings, surrounded by beautiful people. They would be dressed stylishly and laughing all the time. As Anand appeared, they would turn to look at him with rapture. Isha, in particular, gazed at him exultantly. What was there in those deep, dark eyes of his that showed on the surface? It was an unreachable, magical world. Sometimes, I would awaken in the night and wonder what time it

was. I could see a ray of light beneath the door of my room that came from a bulb on the landing that my parents had left on. My thoughts ran along various gloomy channels of their own making but they always came to rest at the same dismal destination. I couldn't get Isha out of my head.

~

My first encounter with Isha, as I think about it, has a significance that goes beyond our chance meeting. It is difficult to explain why my eyes fell on her, and not someone else, on that fateful evening in the Gymkhana lounge and seemed to get glued there. It was not because she was the most beautiful. All the women in the lounge were suffused with some sort of beauty in my eyes. Nor was it her defiant, laughing face. Perhaps, it was something in her eyes—a sort of magical light. I wanted to possess it. It was at this moment that love entered my life.

And as I ponder some more, I realize that even as a sixteen-year-old, I was becoming a diminished creature of habit. I had been a 'good boy', living a predictable life of routine. I would go to school, study for exams, play during recess, and was generally liked by my teachers. The accidental meeting with Isha broke this monotonous routine. It shook me out of a dull and deadening apathy. I became alive and began to live for the first time with the whole of my being, alert to the present and aware of an enchanting quality in a pair of eyes that I wanted to possess.

In Proust's novel, *Remembrance of Things Past*, the young Marcel also discovers much the same thing. He is on a train, going for the first time to Balbec. The train stops at a little station between two mountains, and he spots a tall girl emerging from the station house, carrying a jar of milk. She walks past the windows of the train, offering coffee and milk to the few awake passengers.

*Flushed with the glow of morning, her face was rosier than the sky. I felt on seeing her that desire to live which is reborn in us whenever we become conscious anew of beauty and of happiness.*

Marcel feels the need to be noticed by the milk carrier. He signals to her and when she fails to see him, he calls out to her. But it's too late. The doors are closing; the train begins to move; she slips away from him into the distance. Watching her recede on the horizon, he yearns to hang on to his memory and his

excitement. He realizes that his life is speeding away from her and his imagination creates a fantasy of returning one day to meet her. In an earlier part of the book, Proust reminds us that ‘the memory of a particular image is but regret for a particular moment’. Perhaps what Marcel is regretting in this elegiac passage, and thus remembering, is not the missed opportunity with this country girl, but rather the passing of a moment made beautiful by an imagined happier world.

Both Marcel and I had awakened to a renewed sense of life and beauty. Why does this not happen to us more often? Proust thinks it is because of ‘habit’. The routine of our life deadens our sensibility and makes us undeserving of desire. My encounter with Isha interrupted my dull existence, as did Marcel’s on the train, awakening dormant capabilities in both of us. Proust explains:

*But in this again the temporary cessation of Habit played a great part. I was giving the milk-girl the benefit of the fact that it was the whole of my being, fit to taste the keenest joys, which confronted her. As a rule, it is with our being reduced to a minimum that we live; most of our faculties lie dormant because they can rely upon Habit, which knows what there is to be done and has no need of their services. But [today] my habits were missing, and all my faculties came hurrying to take their place . . .*

Over the years I have come to realize that one has to be deserving of desire. By its nature, kama insists that one live in the moment. Desire exists here and now, not as an abstract concept. It is an emotion directed towards a specific individual and one has to be open, attentive to life, and ready to seize the moment. Marcel woke up too late and lost the moment. It is not easy to be alert. Unless one is attentive it is easy to settle into a dull routine. The present tends to escape us because we are more comfortable living in the past or the future. Only by shaking off the predictable everydayness of our lives do we become worthy of kama. The anxiety that sometimes wakes me at four in the morning also brings with it an alertness that had been so long lost to me that I find it both unnerving and exhilarating.

~

My grandmother used to fret that I was growing up lopsided as a result of my education in the English missionary school. She felt I was losing touch with our Hindu tradition, and she gently suggested one morning that I be shifted to a traditional Indian school. My mother was adamant and refused point blank. My

traditional Indian school. My mother was agnostic and refused point-blank. My father was unwilling to interfere. They had many arguments, and since my mother was adamant, they compromised by balancing my English education with lessons in Sanskrit from Hindu texts. So, the following morning, my grandmother put on her best silk sari and marched out with an umbrella and determination. She found a Brahmin pandit from the local Shiva temple in our neighbourhood. He smoked ganja and my parents thought him ‘thoroughly unsuitable’ but they let my grandmother have her way. The pandit added me to his roster of reluctant, unruly pupils who he instructed two evenings a week.

The pandit’s mind ran decidedly in an erotic direction. In his first class, I recall, he gave us a colourful account of creation. It was also from the *Rig Veda*, only more flamboyant than my grandmother’s. After the One had removed darkness and created the primordial waters, his seed produced the *hiranyagarbha*, ‘golden womb’, usually called the ‘golden egg’. One day the egg separated itself into two shells: one became the sky, the other earth, and the yolk became the sun.

*In the beginning arose Hiranyagarbha who was the one lord of creation. He held in place the earth and the sky.*

The pandit explained that the egg was the universal germ from which everything else appeared. It had both female and male aspects—the embryo was female, which was fertilized by the male seed.

After the cosmic being got a companion, he wanted to copulate with her but the female fled from his embraces, thinking that there was something wrong and incestuous in uniting with her producer. She assumed various disguises. She took the form of a doe; he became a stag and he copulated with her. She turned into a cow; he became a bull. She then changed into a mare; he became a horse, and so on . . . to ants. This was how everything was created, including human beings.

These charged tales of the pandit did not fail to arouse us and the golden egg became a persistent visitor in my dreams. Eggs were a forbidden delight in our vegetarian home, and this added to their attraction. On some nights, it was Isha that seemed to split from my body, turn into a naked woman, and run away from my embrace. I thus began to live a clandestine life of the imagination that emerged from the pandit’s Vedic account of beginnings, with Isha making it all

too real. This rich, nocturnal fantasy world stood in stark contrast to my pessimistic days at the missionary school,

*where Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,  
And binding with briars, my joys & desires.*

I rebelled at the idea of original sin. I could not think of myself as a born sinner, as a result of the fall of man from Adam's rebellion in Eden when he ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. Unlike the Christian account, which left me with feelings of shame and guilt, the pandit offered a decidedly optimistic view of creation based on kama.

In the next class, the pandit took us on a tour of our neighbouring Shiva temple, around the corner from where I lived. At the entrance, he pointed to a lingam enclosed within a yoni sculpted in stone. Shiva, he explained, is a god of fire who transforms the heat of desire into tapas, 'spiritual heat', through the practice of yoga. Although sexual fluids normally flow downwards and out, Shiva's meditation forces them to flow upwards, transforming them into a powerful spiritual force. The pandit then guided us to a platform in the temple that he called a stage for the dance of Shiva, where the god dances his cosmic dance, and playfully brings about the union of male and female, and this, in turn, leads to the birth of consciousness and the creative flowering of a world. We mortals, of course, experience the world as maya, 'illusion', of separate and ever-changing forms and objects rather than as an underlying divine unity. The pandit asked us to try and imagine in our minds the dance of Shiva, and referred to the performance as god's *leela*, 'divine play'. By now we were growing restless, and so he let us loose to play football on the temple grounds, watching us from afar with an amused look.

In the following class, the pandit asked, 'Why does God act?' One of us replied, 'To make things happen in the world.' Another piped in: 'He acts to do good.' A third said, 'To reward good people and punish the bad ones.' None of us had got it right. The pandit explained that God is playful. He dances and creates the world in play and thus makes the world sacred. 'He is naughty like the god Krishna—he steals butter, plays tricks, flirts with pretty, young cowherdesses, and defeats demons . . . all in the spirit of light-hearted sport. He does it all for no other reason but the sheer joy of playing; he plays for its own sake without any grand purpose. This is his *leela*.'

God is not like human beings, added the pandit. We act because we desire something that we don't have. He has everything and doesn't need anything. So, he acts for the fun of it—he likes it, 'much like you, playing football on the grounds of the Shiva temple'. He compared the divine pleasure of leela to a great monarch who lacks nothing but goes on to the playing field for the sake of amusing himself. Or a healthy man who wakes up in the morning from deep sleep and breaks into a dance merely to express his own exuberance.

The following day, I innocently mentioned in the Bible class at school, the pandit's idea of God creating the world out of a desire for play. Father Antony pounced on me, saying that God has no needs or desires, and he certainly does not play. If he had needs, then he wouldn't be God. When I mentioned this to my grandmother, she said that the English in India were renowned for their cold-blooded, temperate nature and stiff upper lip. Their passions were restricted to property, propriety and prudishness, and she wondered how they reproduced at all. I later overheard my mother complain to my father that this sort of talk of my grandmother's was most unsuitable for her son's ears.

The high point of the pandit's 'lessons' was a sensual story from the *Shiva Purana*, in which the creator Brahma sank into the darkness of his interior and created from his vision a female of unequalled beauty, Sandhya. 'With billows of blue-black hair, she stood before his gaze,' said the pandit. 'Neither in the world of humans nor of gods existed a woman of such perfection. So perfect was she that Brahma could not take his eyes off her.' He wanted to possess her and strange thoughts of desire ran through the god's mind, as well as in ours.

In the shifting gusts of confusion, Isha began to return in my nocturnal imagination in the form of the naked body of dusky Sandhya. She would split from my body in my dream. I remember feeling the warmth of her nakedness, as vividly as my mother's body on that chilly morning in Lahore. Sandhya's intense heat would permeate my body. I would try to become one with her and I would wake up. My cheek would still be warm from her kiss. To make certain that I was not dreaming, I would pinch myself. I knew that I was awake and conscious. Gradually, she would dissolve in those few seconds and vanish from my mind as I became fully awake, a nocturnal discharge remaining the only evidence of my gratified body.

Even at that age, I was sceptical of the existence of either the Christian God or the Hindu *atman*, ‘soul’. But I knew that I preferred the playful, fun-loving Hindu gods to the jealous, wrathful God of the Old Testament. I certainly believed in Isha’s ability to tempt and torment me. The latter distress seems to get mixed up in my memory with the blurry moments of half wakefulness when I would variously imagine ‘the golden egg’ and Brahma’s primordial urge to possess the blue-brown-haired Sandhya.

~

By now the daily bicycle ride to and from school had become the most important feature of my life. Isha means ‘to own’ or ‘possess’ in Sanskrit, and the word seemed to acquire a magical quality in my mind. When someone in school casually uttered it one day, I felt I ‘possessed’ her and it left me with a thrilling sensation. My moods fluctuated. If I spotted Isha I felt ecstatic and life seemed to surge in me. When I looked up at the azure sky, the light flowed right into my soul. Equally, if someone mentioned ‘Malik’, Isha’s last name, an unusual sense of pleasure would fill my world.

Although my mother had reconnected with Geeti Tyagi, the two friends from Lahore did not resume their earlier intimacy. It was partly because they moved in different circles and her husband was conscious of his superior status in the civil service. But Anand made a habit of dropping in on us. Over tea on our terrace he would recount, much to my mother’s delight, the latest goings-on about town. When he was speaking casually about Isha’s family one day, my mother exclaimed, ‘Aren’t they the same Maliks who used to have cotton mills in Lahore?’

Anand nodded.

‘Their daughter was in college with my uncle’s son, Ramu. In fact, he got to know them well. But, of course, he knew everyone. The Maliks were very wealthy and moved in different circles. It’s too bad, isn’t it, that both father and son died suddenly. It must be lonely for the two women.’

‘Yes . . . living all alone, mother and daughter, in a sprawling house with dozens of bedrooms. But they are always giving parties and Isha is growing into a real beauty,’ said Anand.

I reddened.

‘I hear they are among the most fashionable people in Delhi,’ said my mother. ‘I saw them from a distance in CP the other day—the mother was in a beautiful Banaras silk.’

After Anand left, my father made a perceptive remark. What made Anand attractive, he said, was not his enviable education in England but that he never spoke ill of anyone. I agreed with my father and recounted the incident at the Gymkhana Club where he came to the rescue of the lady in the white chiffon sari whom everyone was happy to gossip about.

Thanks to Anand, my parents finally got to meet Isha’s family. One morning we received an elegant cream envelope with ‘23 Prithviraj Road’ embossed in gold letters. It was an invitation from Aditi Malik to her party. In an offhand way, Anand had mentioned to us that a Cabinet minister would be coming, as would the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi. My mother was thrilled at the idea of meeting important people whom she read about only in the newspapers. I tried to imagine the brilliance of the approaching party—the brightly lit drawing room, the splendour of the clothes, the lavish food and the important people.

I was in a state of wild excitement on the day of the party. As I was combing my hair in front of the mirror, I was overcome with despair. I was convinced that I was not good-looking. How could I be, with these long ears and thick lips? When we arrived, I was thrilled to see the brilliant lights blazing from the mansion. A police guard stood at the brightly lit, carpeted entrance. As cars drove away, new ones took their place. From them descended beautifully dressed women. Before I realized, a liveried servant in a mirrored vestibule was helping to take off our coats. I tried to assume a dignified manner appropriate to the occasion. My mother adjusted her hair and her silk sari in the mirror but I could not see myself clearly. I seemed to be a part of one glittering whole. As we reached the door leading to the main drawing room, a continuous sound of voices and glasses and the rustle of silk saris greeted us.

My mother was happy when she spotted her old friend from Lahore, Geeti Tyagi.

‘Gauri, oh Guari!’ exclaimed Anand’s mother. They hugged each other and began to speak at the same time. Anand’s father was stiff as a pole, filled with self-importance. My father, on the other hand, was relaxed and detached. Anand rushed to introduce us to Isha’s mother, Aditi Malik, who was busy greeting a number of guests standing in a line. My mother reminded Aditi Malik that she



had first heard about our hostess from her cousin, Ramu, when they were all studying in Lahore.

Our hostess grew confused as she looked intently at my mother. Then she slowly remembered, 'Yes of course, dear Ramu, such a charming man! He used to be a frequent visitor at our house. Doesn't he now live in Bombay?'

Isha, standing beside her mother, asked me if I liked fireworks. I was tongue-tied and did not answer. After a pause, I managed to say, 'Are you having fireworks? When are they going to start?'

'Soon! If the weather holds out.'

'How nice that you could all come!' her mother said. 'We must now renew the old friendship that began with dear Ramu in Lahore.' She put her arm around my shoulder and said, 'Isha will join you shortly, son.' I felt a thrill hearing this and believed that a great happiness awaited me that evening. She turned to Anand. 'I can't think of a better person to introduce you to my guests. He knows them even better than I do.'

'Meet Cho Yo!' said Isha with a smile, as she saw me jump from the nip that her dog had surprised me with. 'He is a Tibetan spaniel . . . quite harmless. His name means "turquoise goddess". It's also the name of the sixth highest mountain peak in the world . . . it's in Nepal.'

I looked around the grand drawing room and was captivated by the paintings on the walls. I had never seen pictures like these before. Isha explained in an offhand way that her grandfather had created a modernist collection of art around the time he built the house in the 1930s. He used to visit his customers in Europe in those days and one of them had taken him by chance to a gallery near his office in Paris. 'Modernism was in the air and he gradually became aware of the different schools—Impressionists, Cubists, Symbolists, Expressionists and others,' she added. I had heard of neither the word 'modernism' nor of the different schools that Isha mentioned casually. I was afraid to ask. At first, I found some of the pictures very strange but gradually, I was drawn to them.

Isha left to join her mother to greet someone who had just arrived but Anand noticed my bewilderment as I kept looking at these perplexing pictures. He explained that Isha's grandfather had begun to buy a few modest works in the 1930s and they were now very valuable. 'Not everyone likes them, so you shouldn't worry if you don't understand them.' More importantly, he added that her grandfather had passed on his love of original beauty to his son and his

her grandfather had passed on his love of visual beauty to his son and his granddaughter, Isha. So began my education in the visual arts and Isha's house came to be defined in my mind by these extraordinary works of art.

Anand took us to his mother and we sat down beside Geeti Tyagi, who was conversing with a plump woman. She introduced us deferentially to the 'princess of Chandi, one of the most picturesque hill states in the Himalayas'.

'It's been an unusually damp October, hasn't it? We usually come down to Delhi only after Diwali but my husband had a meeting to attend this year.' Saying this, the princess leaned over and exposed her bounteous bosom through her low-cut blouse. She paid no heed to the people sitting across the room who were trying to catch her eye. She gave me a smile and said in a confidential tone, 'I must get to know this handsome boy.'

The women who were trying to catch her eye were the princesses from two other hill states, Samba and Sunet, near Chandi. All three old and proud states had been integrated into the Indian Republic along with 562 others in a process that began in 1947. The Rajput Sens of Bengal had founded Chandi in 1200. The princess told us with pride that the town of Chandi was sometimes called the 'Varanasi of the Hills'—it had eighty-one temples, Varanasi had only eighty. The old royalties, such as these princesses, did enjoy some distinction soon after Independence, but their feudal prestige had quietly begun to fade in our noisy democracy. To be sure, the local thakurs, zamindars and the old landed gentry held sway in the rural areas but they mattered less where it really counted—in the urban life of the nation.

They were being replaced by a new English-educated, westernized class, men like Dev Tyagi and my father, who were referred to as 'brown sahibs' as they gradually stepped into the shoes of the departing British rulers, and cornered the rewards of power in the new republic. This official elite too had a clear sense of hierarchy and privilege, mostly based on rank in the government, as my mother painfully discovered by way of the growing gulf between her and her old friend, Geeta Tyagi.

There was a general stir near the entrance as the Governor and the Cabinet minister arrived. Official, plain-clothes policemen pushed back the people who had crowded near the entrance. A whisper ran through the gathering. All eyes turned to the entrance, and the crowd divided into two rows, as the important guests came in with their wives. Anand got up to leave but the generously

bosomed princess slowed him with her arm. Her eyes were filled with desire. ‘Don’t go away, you rascal!’ She turned to the others and said, ‘He is just about the most irresistible man in Delhi.’

My eyes were roaming nervously and I recognized some of Anand’s friends from the Gymkhana Club. I spotted Isha leaning against the fireplace with her back to us. The ubiquitous Cho Yo was sitting quietly beside her. She turned around as she had sensed that she was being watched. She looked me squarely with her impetuous, dark eyes, and I blushed. She came across the room and began to chat with my parents, explaining who was who in the room. ‘That is General Sahni with his daughter Usha—isn’t she beautiful? They are here briefly. And the young lady sitting in the corner is from the Jaipur royal family. She has the best jewellery in Delhi. Don’t you think she has a glow? That’s because she is expecting. She doesn’t attend big parties and only drops in at small, informal gatherings. Mother is flattered that she came.’

At this point a handsome young industrialist, Bharat, who belonged to the distinguished Mirla clan, interrupted us. ‘Isha, has your mother heard about the new textile policy?’

‘Mother dear, she’s hopeless about these things.’

‘But she must do something! Nehru is either going to nationalize or destroy the textile industry.’

‘Mother believes that Nehru can do no wrong.’

‘Let me go and speak to her.’

The Maliks and the Mirlas belonged to the third pillar of our society: it was based on money—especially, old money—specifically, the business houses that had emerged in the nineteenth century. These houses were founded by the old mercantile castes, initially based on commerce; gradually they discovered opportunities in modern industry, beginning with textiles in Bombay and Ahmedabad in the second half of the nineteenth century, and more broadly after the First World War. They were under constant threat from Nehru’s socialist state. Thus, Indian society in the decades after Independence was based on three pillars: money, feudal connections and power. Isha’s and Bharat Mirla’s families were examples of the first—they were old money. The princely families belonged to the second, although they were in steady and genteel decline. Anand’s and our family represented officialdom, the third bastion. Real political power soon shifted to the politicians, but harring a few families, not many

power soon shifted to the politicians, but during a few summers, not many among them enjoyed the respect of society.

My eyes continued to feast on Isha as the earnest young businessman left to find Aditi Malik. I did not follow what was being said. Instead, I felt irrevocably drawn into a strange and magnificent world which was far removed from my everyday life. I tried to make a clever remark to Isha but the conversation did not flow easily. She pretended to be interested but I could tell that she was listening carelessly. I was not amusing her. Her eyes were wandering and soon they came to rest on Anand, who had just walked across the room. She left me suddenly and skipped over to him. Seeing Anand at the centre of attention, I was filled with confused feelings. I admired him and felt insignificant in comparison. There was no getting away from my misgivings about myself—I felt awkward and ungainly. I looked at my hands, and they were thick and broad compared to Anand's, which were long and fine.

Dinner was served late and it was as brilliant as anything we could have imagined. Soon after the feast we got up to leave, and as I was gathering my coat in the vestibule, Isha came up to me. With her face perilously close to mine, she said, 'Why don't you come and play badminton with us one of these evenings?'

'Badminton?' I asked.

'I say, you *know* that we play in the evenings.' She smiled conspiratorially. 'I even know the tree behind which you hide and watch us.'

I was mortified. The world knew about my shame and I wanted to run away.

'Why do you just stand there?'

'B . . . b . . . b . . . because I like to watch you,' I stammered. Instead of being angry, she renewed her invitation. 'Yes, do come, Amar, we always need a fourth.' It took a few moments for the stunning news to sink in. All was not lost then. My parents were saying their goodbyes to Geeti and our hostess. I was relieved that no one had overheard Isha and discovered my shame. I looked up at Isha and she was beautiful.

Both my mother and I were in a trance as we left the party. I felt that a new life of pleasure awaited me. My mother said that if I studied hard I might become affluent one day and live this sort of life. My father joked that wealthy people always seemed to impress my mother and he counselled me that it was more important to be good than to be rich. On the way home, we did what everyone does after a party—we gossiped about who was there and who said

what to whom. My mother was touched by Anand's kindness at introducing us to the Maliks.

'He's certainly very popular,' said my mother.

'He explained that the pictures on the wall were very valuable.'

'I felt them to be quite strange,' my mother said.

Neither my father nor mother mentioned that women found Anand astonishingly attractive, which was the real reason for his phenomenal social success.

~

It is more than fifty years since Isha leaned terrifyingly close to me in her damp mirrored vestibule and gave me that conspiratorial smile. Its memory has laid quietly in a musty corner of my mind, and I thought I had forgotten it until now. I have seen many grand houses in my life but none has made the impression on me as 23 Prithviraj Road that Diwali evening. Meeting Isha awakened in me a sense of life and beauty, shaking me out of my dullness. But I have realized, like Marcel, that living in the moment is not easy. Marcel yearned to be noticed by the milk-girl but he missed his chance. The alluring prospect of meeting a beautiful stranger is thrilling, of course. But only a few are lucky enough to stop their daily 'commitments' and do something about it. It is easier to stay in one's comfort zone. I wonder, however, what if there were suddenly no routine or habit in our lives? Wouldn't life be delightful, particularly if one's life were continually under the threat of death, which, in a sense, it is for all human beings. You'd think that the fear of death—or as Karna puts it in the Mahabharata, 'I see it now, the world is swiftly passing'—would get people going.

Ancient Indians were aware of the value of alertness. They believed that a human being was made up of three gunas, 'attributes'—sattva, rajas and tamas—and one's character depended on the proportion of each quality. A person high in sattva was likely to be more aware, alert and harmonious; a personality dominated by rajas was inclined to be ambitious, passionate and restless; and where tamas prevailed, such a person had a tendency to be dull, passive and lethargic. The human project they felt was to try and climb the ladder to sattva through right thinking, right actions and right food. The Bhagavad Gita emphasized this, reminding us that the proportion was not a given, and with

emphasized this, reminding us that the proposition was not a given, and with effort one could change one's personality.

In my later years I have come to believe that alertness is not all. I value routine and the habitual ways of looking at the world. However much I may prize being alert to the fleeting world, I don't think exhilaration can sustain me. Excitement can be exhausting. Delightful as it may be to live continually under the threat of death, one might expend all one's resources in doing so. So, there must be other ways to be deserving of desire than to live only for the moment and for the thrill of happiness that comes from physical and emotional intimacy.

Perhaps we need both: habit, to avoid the kind of suffering that Isha brought me, and awareness, to ensure that our lives are not lived merely as biological organisms according to the inertia of *tamas*. Aristotle, the great Greek philosopher, would have agreed with me on the value of habit. He thought that habit was essential for building character—only by repeatedly acting in a certain way does a person acquire a certain character. And pleasure results when one acts according to one's character, he thought. These actions are also the result of one's earlier karmic deeds, according to the Hindus. Since *kama* also means pleasure, Aristotle seems to have offered a nice insight into the meaning of both the Sanskrit words, *kama* and *karma*.

Both habit and attentiveness have their attendant hazards as well. Marcel returns to the hotel where he traditionally stayed when visiting the seaside village of Balbec. He remembers the first time he entered the hotel, and contrasts the weirdness of that first experience with the relaxed comfort he now feels:

*This time, on the contrary, I had felt the almost too soothing pleasure of passing up through a hotel that I knew, where I felt at home . . . Must I now, I had asked myself . . . go always to new hotels where I shall be dining for the first time, where Habit will not yet have killed upon each landing, outside each door, the terrible dragon that seemed to be watching over an enchanted existence . . .*

Is Marcel contradicting himself when he makes the dramatic shift from embracing routine to ask if he must now seek out new hotels where habit has not yet had a chance to kill 'enchanted existence'? I think Proust is saying that we need both. We need the unfamiliar which creates risks and even threatens our lives; we also need the boredom of the *tamas*-like routine, which is capable of slaying the 'terrible dragon' of the unfamiliar. In order to have both, we must be willing to endure the suffering that the Ishas of the world will bring to us.

My parents never did find out quite what my grandmother's lascivious *sania-*

My parents never did find out quite what my grandmother's mischievous, ganja-smoking pandit had been up to. But he had given me a symbolic key, and it had opened the door to kama's secret garden, a rich mythological world quite unlike the prudishness that characterized the daily world of my English missionary school. The Irish Brothers would have been shocked to learn that God had created the world from desire—from His own need—an idea that is so alien to the world of Genesis, where the Almighty has no needs or desires. I learnt many things from the missionaries and they also instilled deep inside me a 'middle-class morality', as George Bernard Shaw called it, which instilled in me permanent feelings of guilt and shame when it came to desire.

The Roman Catholic missionaries would have been equally scandalized at the thought that the Creator could feel lonely, split himself, and create a woman in order to be happy. How could God, who was by definition self-sufficient, feel lonely? My Irish schoolteachers could not understand why we, schoolboys, did not feel shame to express our fears and easily confessed to feelings of lonesomeness. When the boy sitting next to me in Class 2 began to cry one day—he missed his mother—our teacher scolded him for being weak and childish. 'Seven-year-old boys don't cry like sissies,' he thundered. I was relieved that I wasn't the one at the receiving end that day. I was unaware at the time, and so was the good Irish Brother that the Indian answer to transcending loneliness and becoming independent is to achieve self-sufficiency via meditation, with the eventual goal of moksha, 'liberation' or transcendence from the flawed human condition.

The pandit came into my life and offered a gentle corrective. He taught us that kama is the 'delight that the mind and heart experience in enjoying the objects of the natural world of the five senses'. One evening he pointed to a sunset from the window in the class, and said, 'Enjoy it! To enjoy the sunset is also an act of kama.' He opened the door to a new world that was filled with the joy of being alive, and he taught me early in life to love the world of the senses and to relish life itself.

Another pandit, a more conventional one, would have insisted on the stories of dharma and duty. He would have focused on Rama, the symbol of the good and dutiful king—certainly more appropriate to mould young minds. He would have told us about Sita, his dutiful wife, who followed her husband into exile where she was abducted from the jungle; and how Rama waged a successful war to

reclaim his chaste wife; but when people questioned her chastity on her return, Rama sent her away, sacrificing their conjugal happiness in order to preserve the kingdom's honour.

Like most Indian boys, I grew up on stories of the gods Rama and Krishna, both avatars of Vishnu. Rama's is a story of conjugal love in which dharma triumphs over kama. But the pandit preferred Krishna's tales of illicit love. He told us how Krishna has an open love affair with Radha, a married woman. During raas leela, he dances with thousands of *gopis* and gives pleasure to each one. Eventually, he becomes the king of Dwarka and marries 16,108 women.

Not surprisingly, I grew up confused between the pure, austere Sita and the fun-loving Radha. While Sita is Rama's wife, Radha is Krishna's love; Sita embodies chastity, Radha sensuality; Sita is a queen, Radha is a milkmaid. Sita signifies the legitimacy of marriage, Radha denotes illegitimacy—her lover may be a god but she is a married woman; Sita's is happy monogamy, Radha's is romantic, illicit love. And so, I came of age admiring Sita but loving Radha. In my ganja pandit's stories, Radha always got more attention and ever since I have tended to lean towards her.

Alas, the pandit's classes came to an abrupt end one day. We learnt that he had fallen seriously ill. My grandmother was away at the time and when she returned, she was too tired to argue with my mother or to look for a replacement. But I missed him and his classes terribly. He had gifted to me the world of play. He himself was ever-playful and he wanted us to grow up retaining the spirited quality of leela.

As I grew older, I came to appreciate the idea that the creation of the universe might have been an involuntary act which may have unfolded without a plan. It sat well with my modern, scientific world view and is not inconsistent with the old Indian idea of primordial desire creating the cosmos or the idea of divine leela. It makes sense to me that kama is a creative power, the chief motive behind the flowering of phenomenal life on earth. The split of the cosmic being helped me to understand the Jungian idea that a man carries female traits in his makeup—his 'inner feminine'—just as a woman has male characteristics. It explains why the seemingly rigid differences between male and female appear to fall away in the union of love. Kama's blind energy seems to me a natural urge to restore us to the original state of oneness which had been split into male and female. Brahma's primordial attraction for his daughter, Sandhya, has made me



aware of a primal incestuous tendency in human beings. The poet had called her Sandhya, 'dusk', which is neither day nor night, but a threshold between the conscious and the unconscious, when man and woman encounter each other for the first time in a moment of confusion in the archetype of seduction. It also seems logical to my scientific mind that where sex is the basis of procreation, the multiplication of species had to be incestuous in the beginning.

Above all, my grandmother's ganja pandit seeded in me an optimistic attitude towards kama. This happy outlook flourished within the Indian civilization, elevating desire to a *purushartha*, 'aim of life', along with the other goals of dharma (moral well-being), artha (material well-being) and moksha (spiritual well-being). That a sense-intoxicating emotion could be promoted to the status of a lofty deity says something about a culture. So also is the notion of a playful, mischievous god who creates the world for no other reason than the sheer joy of the sport. On hearing Krishna's flute, the women of Vrindavan would sneak out of their homes into the forest, where they danced the raas leela in a circle with their lover-god through the entire Brahma night which lasted for 4.5 billion years. Krishna multiplied himself so that each believed that they were dancing exclusively with him.

Kama optimism flowered in the first half of the common era, reaching a zenith in the courts of the Gupta empire, 320 CE– 550 CE, and of King Harsha subsequently, and it left an impressive legacy in the erotic culture of the *Kamasutra* and other arts, especially love poetry, most of which is about 'illicit love'. It also manifested itself in the erotic sculptures in the temples of Khajuraho in the ninth century, which have long puzzled people. I believe they were an expression of the power of the Chandela Rajput kings—just as *rajdharmā* was a manifestation of the king's duty, so was *rajkama* a demonstration of the king's pleasure. It seems to me that a civilization whose origins lie in kama would tend to be more understanding of the fallibility of human beings. If a civilization did not have a jealous god at the beginning, nor the Ten Commandments, it would allow dharma to be negotiable. Such a culture, it seems to me, would be more accepting and indulgent towards human desire, and possibly more humane.

The ganja pandit brought a corrective to the Victorian attitudes that I acquired at my Christian missionary school. Thanks to him, I was more relaxed when it came to physical desire, unlike most of my schoolmates. I sometimes wonder if

came to physical desire, unlike most of my schoolmates. I sometimes wonder if they went on to make a trade-off in later life, sublimating the natural desire for another human being into a desire for 'things' and 'objects'. Is it possible to argue that the ubiquitous desire for 'shopping', which originated during the industrial revolution in the West and which has now swept the world, might originally have been a subliminal response to the ignominy associated with sexuality in the Judaeo-Christian tradition? Certainly, the middle class that came up under British influence in India and has continued to flourish in post-Independence India, had internalized these prudish Victorian attitudes. Of course, after the sexual liberation in the twentieth century, these attitudes have changed dramatically in the West and are going through a similar process in the rest of the world.

Thinking about the past tends to bring me back to my lonesome childhood. Remembering one's childhood is the next best thing to probing eternity, says Nabokov. The yearning to jump into my mother's bed I think may have had more to do with my feelings of incompleteness rather than with erotic pleasure. The drama of my days as a child was related to a constant feeling of need and lack, accompanied by an almost intolerable seeking of solace from the most marvellous creature on the earth. At some point in my adult life I realized that sexuality does not aim merely at bodily pleasure and release but seeks to fill the same void. If kama had been only about bodily pleasure, then masturbation could have substituted for intercourse, and we could all have gone about our lives in peace and tranquillity without all the hullabaloo of love.

Because I was a lonely child, I became aware early on of another 'self' inside me that was always watching me, sometimes making me feel guilty or ashamed. This other self is not Plato's lonely self that is searching for its other half, yearning for love. It is our reflexive consciousness. The *Mundaka Upanishad* famously captured the idea of the 'acting self' and the 'witnessing self', and it did it thousands of years ago in a charming verse about two plumed birds who sit on a peepul tree: one eats the fruit, while the other, eating nothing, looks on intently:

*Two birds, twin images  
in plumage,  
friends, ever inseparable,  
cling to a tree.*

*One eats the fruit,  
eats of the sweet and eats  
of the bitter,  
while the other watches,  
watches without eating.*

There is still some of that child in me that gets excited at the thought of the two birds sitting on the tree. The difficulty, though, in becoming too conscious of my other self—the witnessing self—is that it makes me grow detached from the world. It is one thing to be aware of the witness's involuntary presence; it is quite another to become obsessed with oneself. When that happens, I find that you run the risk of becoming morbidly self-conscious and the witness has become a competitor to your friends and those you love.

But let me not dwell any more on the melancholic aspects of self-consciousness. My mind is drawn to the poor sixteen-year-old who came under Isha's spell. I smile at this adolescent who was willing to make a break with habit and risk his life for a vision of beauty and happiness. One of the benefits of age is to be able to escape some of the torment that is the lot of the young who are hopelessly in love. I laugh lightly and ironically today, and I'm not entirely sure why. I am thankful though that I am no longer that vulnerable adolescent. Yet, I am not so old that I cannot envy the luck of the person who will eventually possess Isha. The impulse of lust stings me at this unseemly thought and makes me blush.



## GROWING PAINS

### *Kama pessimists strike back mightily*

*If you want to understand, really understand the way things are in this world, you've got to die at least once. And as that is the law, it is better to die while you are young, when you've still got time to pull yourself up and start again.*

—Giorgio Bassani, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*

Soon after the Maliks' Diwali party began my education in badminton and love, a phase at once more pleasurable and painful than anything before it. Through the excuse of lending myself as a fourth in badminton, I became a familiar visitor at 23 Prithviraj Road. I would arrive punctually at quarter past five, peep in hesitantly, and if I saw Isha in the garden, I would open the gate. Cho Yo would sometimes come running up to me. I would go past the unused tennis court, set my schoolbag on the lawn, and join the badminton game in progress. An hour later, Isha would leave for the club and I would bicycle home to my gloomy schoolbooks. I seemed to fit in neatly into that idle hour of her busy social life.

When I woke up each morning I would ask myself: will she be there today? If it was raining, my hopes would be dashed. There would be no badminton and Isha would probably go directly from her school to visit a friend. The weather was an important ally and I prayed for each day to be clear. Sometimes, even on a perfectly sunny day, she would callously decide to go off with her mother to shop or visit someone. On these days, I would circle around her house and ensure that she was, in fact, absent, and return home defeated.

On the following day I would ask her where she had been. She would answer baldly that she had gone to so-and-so's birthday party. Or to a tea dance at the Ambassador Hotel. I would be curious to learn more and she did not mind telling me who was there and who was not, what they said and what they wore, and

who fitted into the social hierarchy and who did not. And so I felt that I had, in fact, attended the party. In this way I got to know her friends, and more importantly, I began to share her confidences. I knew whom she liked and disliked and I felt a thrill to be part of her world even in this vicarious way.

She usually returned from the club in time for dinner. But occasionally, she would return home early to dress up to go to an evening party. These were grand affairs, to which I was naturally not invited. She often went with her mother. The clothes and the jewellery determined the brilliance of the party, as the people present were always the same. Since she had begun wearing a sari she was even more conscious of clothes. On these evenings, I would be at home, filled with longing, and thinking of her laughing and flirting.

One evening Isha did not go to the club. She asked me to stay back after badminton and got busy with getting ready for a party in honour of the new British high commissioner. After she had dressed, she asked me how she looked.

‘Come, Amar, you may ride with me to the embassy,’ she said.

I looked puzzled. ‘I am not inviting you to the party, you fool. I am inviting you to ride with me. After the car drops me, it will bring you back here, and you can pick up your bicycle and go home.’

The prospect of sitting close to Isha even for a little while, enclosed snugly in a car, was unexpected happiness. As I got in with my schoolbag, she warned me to be careful and not crush her new dress. She leaned back as though seated in a comfortable armchair at home. I sat up nervous and stiff with my bag between my legs, trying not to touch her clothes. I smelled the padded leather seats, the armrests and the luxury inside the saloon car. As the driver picked up speed I felt exhilarated as we flew along the wide boulevards of Lutyens’ Delhi. Soon a heavy mist came along, and then drops of rain fell on the windowpanes. Inside, it felt perilously intimate. The car stopped suddenly and I was thrown back against her. Her long plaits softly brushed my cheek, and I felt a thrill. The rain grew stronger. We started to move again. My arm touched hers by accident but she did not remove it. I looked at her and there was a suggestive smile on her face.

She took my hand just before we reached our destination and pressed it gently. She alighted quickly and was soon lost in the confusion of the fashionable clothes and the glittering guests who were all arriving at the same time. The car turned around. I looked back and thought I spotted her in the crowd. She seemed

turned around. I looked back and thought I spotted her in the crowd. She seemed to smile at a familiar-looking man, who was tall and lightly built with straight, black hair. He put his arm around her in a familiar way, and I knew it was Anand.

On the way back I was filled with jealous thoughts. I told myself that it might not have been Anand; it might not even have been Isha. I began to believe that I had been mistaken and so my jealousy gradually subsided. But I was tormented by another thought: she was enjoying herself in a place of enchantment that I could never hope to approach. The picture of Anand placing his arm around her kept intruding, however; perhaps it was only an innocent gesture, and there was nothing to it. Moreover, had she not pressed my hand before leaving? When I remembered her touch, I felt reassured.

I woke up the next morning determined to find out what had happened the previous evening. Was Anand there or not? I rushed to her house after school. She had left early to visit a friend, but her maid told me that she would be at the club subsequently. I jumped on to my bicycle and rode till I reached the imposing wrought iron gate of the club. I waited there for her. At last, after almost an hour, I saw her arrive in her saloon and eagerly went up to her as the driver slowed for the gate to open. She was not pleased but she asked me to hop in.

‘I was told that you were going to be at the club, and I thought I would catch you.’

As we got off at the reception area, she said, ‘I haven’t much time. Neena will be here soon. I told her I’d meet her here at six.’

‘Do you mind if we talk for a bit?’ I implored.

‘If you want to,’ she said indifferently.

She walked in brusquely, signed me in as a guest, and quickly led me to a waiting room. I tried to think of something to say but I couldn’t. She didn’t bother either. After an uncomfortable silence, she got up. She wanted to get rid of me.

‘I must go,’ she said, and left without saying goodbye.

I walked back to the gate to get my bicycle. I was feeling miserable and should have gone home, but I couldn’t. I walked with my bicycle to the exit gate. The gatekeeper looked suspiciously at me but chose to ignore me. While I was waiting, a car similar to Isha’s came by towards the gate. My heart leapt and I

hurried to have a look. I was about to say something when I realized it was a stranger. After more than an hour Isha's car finally appeared. When she saw me, she turned her face the other way. I begged her to open her window.

She was annoyed. 'Why did you wait for me?'

'Because I had to.'

'Don't you have anything else to do?' She turned around to see if anyone was looking. 'Did anyone see you waiting for me?' she asked.

'I must know: was Anand there at the party last night?'

'Were you spying on me?'

'No. I thought I saw him as I was leaving.'

'And what if he was?' she asked defiantly.

'Why are you so beastly today? You were so nice to me yesterday.'

'I don't like to be surprised,' she answered coldly. 'Listen, Amar, I am going away to Calcutta for the winter holidays with my cousins. You need not stop at our house any more.'

'Will I see you again?' I pleaded.

'Perhaps.'

She began to close the window of her car and motioned to the driver to move on.

'Wait!' I shouted.

She turned her head and looked the other way.

~

The *Rig Veda* thought of kama as a basic force of nature, permeating all animate life. To me, however, kama seemed only to pile one humiliation upon another in my one-sided love for Isha. Yet, this has not deterred me from trying to penetrate kama's mysteries. After all these years, I have still not fully grasped its ambiguities, and much of kama remains a riddle. In the course of my life, I have learnt many things, however. Initially, kama was an animating principle in the Vedas; it did not have a specific object of love. How then did a force of nature metamorphose into romantic love?

There are hints in the Upanishads; as well as in Plato, in Freud and in Proust, all of whom I encountered at the university. But no one, as far as I can tell, has offered a definitive answer. Based on my own experience, I have come to believe that, unlike animals, human beings have the power of the imagination



believe that, unlike animals, human beings have the power of the imagination, and this power is somehow able to transform kama's impersonal energy into sexual love for a specific individual. The complex human mind does not stop there. In its boundless ambition it turns this life force into other kinds of love—self-love, love for parents and children, friendship and love for humanity and God. Odd as it may seem, these other forms of love are also an expression of the same instinctual energy. Thanks to our ability to fantasize, kama has thus come a long way from being a force of nature to an emotional orientation towards the world, spreading through the psychological life of all human beings. Without imagination there would be no such thing as love.

What the ancient Indian poets referred to as kama, the Greeks called eros. Eros fascinated the great philosopher Plato, and his dialogues, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, are among the most influential works on love in the western tradition. In them, Plato offers a striking way to think about this emotion. He says eros is a longing to possess someone. Lovers long for sexual intercourse because they are driven to fill a lack in themselves and to possess the person they love. In the *Symposium*, Aristophanes refers to a mythical time when human beings were 'whole' and did not need each other. Even our shapes were round and symmetrical and we could roll in any direction. As a result, we were very powerful and we challenged the gods. But Zeus, the king of gods, found a way to cut us down to size. He literally chopped the spherical beings into two.

As a result, human beings stand erect, walk on two feet, and seem to have unfinished front parts. Our incompleteness makes us long for our other half. This search is the origin of sexual desire. Each human being is seeking to unite himself with the other half to become whole again. As our genitals face outwards, the male can insert itself into the female, and in doing so restore the original round and complete nature. The profound pleasure we get from sex is a recompense for living in this unnatural, chopped state of loneliness. Hence, Plato defines love as 'a demand for the whole . . . We love only that which we do not wholly possess.'

I bought into this account fully because my childhood and adolescence were bathed in a constant feeling of absence and of wanting to possess what I did not have. Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, referred to this 'lack' as the human longing to return to a womblike state of oneness—the memory of a time when we were infants and did not differentiate the world from ourselves;

we believed we were whole and complete; when we learnt to separate the world from ourselves, this 'lack' expressed itself as a yearning for our mother's love. As we grew older, we gradually got over these infantile feelings. Many adults do not, however, and Freud felt that this brought about excessive jealousy, revengeful thoughts and wanting to possess and control our lovers—all this comes in the way of attaining a mature and healthy adult relationship of love.

I find that in India we are quite willing to acknowledge our feelings of neediness and lack of self-sufficiency, but in the West, it is considered shameful to admit to it, for it suggests a lack of control. The western male, in particular, is unwilling to disclose that he is vulnerable and suppresses his awareness of attachment to others. This difference may go back to our formative experiences as children, which have nurtured our emotional intelligence as adults; also the fact that many of us grow up in joint families in India unlike the nuclear families in the West. The infant experiences many moments of discomfort and frustration, which are useful. 'Indeed, some frustration of the infant's wants by the mother's or caretaker's separate comings and goings is essential to development—for if everything were always simply given in advance of discomfort, the child would never try out its own projects of control . . . The child's evolving recognition that the caretaker sometimes fails to bring it what it wants gives rise to an anger that is closely linked to its emerging love.'

However, much as Plato, Freud and the poets of the *Rig Veda* might disagree, they wanted to illuminate the human condition and teach us how to live. More than any thinker after the *Rig Veda*, Freud grasped that the living cell would fall apart without the animating principle of kama and tried to connect human love to a cosmic force in nature. He also sought a connection between the life force and the intimacy of the infant's life. And he went on to speculate that romantic love aims to restore the lost unity of the 'womblike state of oneness'.

In trying to understand what lovers feel when they see the boundaries between them melting, he thought that this might suggest a return to an earlier state of oneness in infancy: 'originally the "I" includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present I-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive-indeed all-embracing feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the I and the world about it.' Freud harks back to a state where the infant has not yet acquired a sense of its 'I-ness' and the two individuals do not yet exist. Recognizing the attraction of adult

ness – and the two individuals do not yet exist. Recognizing the attraction of adult love for an earlier unity, he wrote, ‘Love desires contact because it strives to make the I and the love object one, to abolish all spatial barriers between them.’

Freud’s ‘womblike state of oneness’ reminds me invariably of my ganja pandit, who introduced us boys to the ‘golden womb’, hiranyagarbha. This enticing metaphor acquired different meanings in later Sanskrit literature as it tried to make sense of the world. Samkhya texts speak about Purusha and Prakriti making up the embryo in the primordial womb from which emerges the world. Puranic texts tell us that the creator god Brahma emerged from the golden womb. In yet another tradition, Brahma himself is the hiranyagarbha. The Upanishad calls it the ‘soul’ of the universe, or brahman, and goes on to tell us that the hiranyagarbha floated around in the emptiness and darkness of non-existence for about a year, and then broke into two halves, which formed swarga, ‘heaven’, and *prithvi*, ‘earth’.

For Freud, kama evolves in human life from the undifferentiated unity of the womb and of early infancy to establish us as individuals with a distinct sense of ‘I’, distinct from the rest of nature. Ancient Indians also believed that kama was not merely an impersonal tendency in nature but an activity in the human mind. My father once told me a lovely story from the Mahabharata to illustrate this. He said there was a bright young man named Vipul, who was asked to protect Ruchi, his guru’s beautiful wife. Indra, the philandering king of the gods, had long lusted after Ruchi and when the guru left for a trip, Indra saw his chance. He turned himself into a handsome prince and came down to seduce Ruchi. But Vipul knew that kama originates in the mind. Using the psychic powers he had acquired through meditation, he entered Ruchi’s mind and kept it firm and steadfast. She thus did not succumb to Indra’s advances and was deeply grateful to Vipul.

What my father did not tell me was about the remorse that Vipul felt afterwards. Vipul worried that by entering Ruchi’s mind, he might have been guilty of psychic intimacy with his guru’s wife. He believed that he had experienced an intimacy with Ruchi that was far greater than that of the physical act of sex. Because kama is psychic energy in the mind, Vipul agonized for years thinking he might have been guilty of something far more profound than a bodily exchange of fluids.

Unlike most of my classmates, I didn't go anywhere during the winter break. It was unusually cold in Delhi and I felt irritated and restless. I could not get Isha out of my mind. It was a ceaseless hunger. My parents were unhappy with my school report. I had always done reasonably well in school, but my grades had plunged this term. They knew something was wrong but did not say anything to me, at least not directly.

'The Malik girl has turned his head completely,' I overheard my mother complain one evening.

'It's part of growing up.' My father shrugged.

My mother began to pace the floor, her face becoming more and more animated. 'She is toying with him. Is it surprising that he is doing poorly in school?'

'He'll learn.'

'You must do something!' she moaned.

My mother was secretly pleased that I was welcome at the home of the lofty Maliks where she thought I would meet the right people. In her eyes, we were middle class and they were upper class; in between there was an undefined 'upper-middle class', and this is where she hoped I would end up. After finishing school, she expected me to go to the right university, then enter the right profession, join the right club, and rub shoulders with the elite of the land. She hoped I would make the right match with a girl of her choice and repeat the process with my progeny. This was her dream of the enviable happy life.

Since my father didn't make enough money, my mother felt that she had missed the chance to send me to an elite boarding school, like Doon or Mayo. She hoped, however, to make up for it by sending me to the right college—she had her eyes on St Stephen's, where she hoped I would play cricket and tennis, and acquire the basic intellectual equipment, but not become a scholar. She wanted me to be an 'all-rounder', a brown sahib.

My father was a quiet man. He loved his work and refused to be drawn into office politics. While at the university in Lahore, he had discovered the theosophists, especially the writings of Jiddu Krishnamurti, a mystically inclined seeker. Instead of becoming a 'brown sahib', he developed a lasting passion for the spiritual life. This unfortunately also made him somewhat detached. I sometimes wished we could talk. There were long silences when we were

sometimes wished we could talk. There were long silences when we were together—silences in which he was comfortable and I was not. Twice a day he would disappear to meditate, and then he was not even physically available. So when I needed to chat, I turned to my mother.

I was surprised therefore when he pulled me out of the house one evening for a ‘father and son talk’. We walked in silence before he got the courage to come to the point. ‘You’re a *brahmachari*,’ he said gently. ‘You should be devoted to your studies.’ Ever since childhood, I had been hearing the ‘b-word’. It was usually to remind me of the first stage of the Hindu life, when one is a student and requires to be celibate and think only high thoughts. My father said that my thoughts seemed to be running in the low directions these days.

But he did not blame me. The culprit he felt was the ‘high society’ in which I was moving—where people drank and smoked and the women were far too liberated. The second problem was kama. He likened human desire to wild horses. ‘A brahmachari is a charioteer and he learns to restrain these horses.’ It is not an easy thing to do, he admitted shyly. ‘Even the mighty god Shiva succumbed to desire.’ He recounted how the ascetic god had been deep in meditation when a rush of desire for his wife, Parvati, overcame him. He opened his eyes and saw Kamadeva, the god of erotic desire, lurking about with his bow and his flower-tipped arrows. Suspecting him to be the villain, Shiva opened his third eye and with the heat of his gaze, reduced the love-god to ashes. When his wife, Rati, discovered her husband’s body, she wailed:

*Where have you run to and left me  
whose life rests in you, our love cut off in a moment  
as a lotus can be left when  
a flood of water breaks through a dam?*

She pleaded pathetically before Shiva and her lament was so genuine and deeply moving that Shiva restored the god of love to life on the condition that kama would remain ananga, ‘invisible’.

‘Invisible?’

‘Yes, desire is in the mind and this makes it even more dangerous.’ He said that desire is born in the mind and enters the body invisibly through the senses or memory. Since it is a powerful psychic energy, a brahmachari must be wary of it, not squander it. Only after marriage, in the second stage, *grihastha*, is one

allowed to yield to sexual desire, and that too for the purpose of procreation, not recreation.

As my father talked, I began to understand that kama was the chief obstacle in my father's spiritual project. Since desire was responsible for enslaving him to the law of karma, he had embarked on a mission to liberate himself. Meditation was his means but like Shiva, he worried that kama interfered with his meditation. He said kama was born of the mind, and like objects of the mind, my love for Isha was unreal. Because it was mental it could die just as quickly. Unlike the pandit who spoke of leela in the context of aestheticizing the world, my father interpreted god's leela to suggest that our phenomenal world of objects and desires is unreal and that a wise person learns to be detached from it.

'So, don't feel too bad, my son,' he said gently.

I was moved by my father's efforts to alleviate my pain. Initially, I had felt defensive about our 'father and son talk'. But soon I realized that it was probably a greater struggle for him. While I did not buy into his metaphysics, I was grateful for his concern. I was in love with Isha and she was no 'mental illusion'.

~

The first day of school after the break was wet and cold. I was cycling home at a fast clip trying to avoid the rain. My heart was heavy. The deputy head had told me off for doing badly in the previous term. Neither was there any hope of seeing Isha—she had made that pretty clear. Full of gloom I did not notice that I had passed the round postbox, the prized signal that her house was around the corner.

Suddenly, Isha stood before me. She was waiting at her gate in a pink raincoat and a pink hat, and black gumboots. Her face was wet from the rain. Cho Yo stood beside her, equally wet. She gave me a big smile and signalled me to stop.

'I was beastly with you, wasn't I?' she said, as we walked to the house. Cho Yo followed us, yelping merrily. She took me to the kitchen where the maid gave me hot cocoa and biscuits.

A painful burden began to lift. I was in disbelief and thankful for every kindness that might come my way. My heart felt lighter but I could think of nothing to say. Isha took me upstairs to her room. There was a log fire in the fireplace, and her face glowed in its reflection. She went across to the window,

and I followed her. She pointed to the rain outside. As she did, her wrist and arm brushed mine, and I felt that her body was smoother and softer than anything I had felt. She looked straight and hard into my face as she had done the first day that we had met in the Gymkhana Club. I felt nervous and uneasy. I looked around at the paintings on the wall and I felt a sense of awe.

‘The one behind you is a Klimt; he was an Austrian painter. I like the woman in the gold dress, and Mother allowed me to hang it in my room. Do you want to look at the paintings that my grandfather brought in the old days from his business trips in Europe?’ she asked nonchalantly.

I nodded. She smiled and took my hand and we ran downstairs to the living room. She turned on the lights and pointed to the painting of a girl in a bright dress. ‘This is my favourite—it is by Renoir. Over there is a landscape by Cézanne; and those dancing figures are by Matisse.’ I was puzzled by the geometrical shapes in the abstract picture next to it. ‘It is a Braque. It takes time to love these works but now I adore them—they are my family. The one on the wall behind us is a scene of Paris by the impressionist Pissarro.’ Thus, my education in modern art continued for a short while when just as suddenly, Isha took my hand, and we ran back to her room.

‘I like your curly hair, Amar,’ she said. After a pause, she added, ‘You may kiss me if you want to.’

I was confused.

‘Have you ever kissed a girl before?’ she asked.

‘No,’ I said.

‘Do you know how to kiss? I can show you if you want.’

I nodded nervously.

‘Close your eyes, Amar.’

I felt her draw closer. Her breathing was heavy. I felt her hands on my shoulders and I waited, but nothing happened.

‘Open your eyes—you look so odd with your eyes closed.’

I opened them and stepped back. Her long, brown lashes, and thick braids enveloped her big eyes.

‘Come near. Nearer,’ she whispered. ‘I won’t hurt you.’

She grabbed my shirt and my face became flushed. I looked eager and apprehensive.

‘You may put your arms around me, Amar.’

Obediently, I bent over her and placed my arms clumsily around her neck. My heart beat violently. She raised herself, tossed her hair back with a quick motion of her head and kissed me on the lips. She stopped, and then kissed me again, this time for a very long time. She smiled faintly and slipped away to the other end of the room. My heart beat anxiously as I followed her.

‘You do like me!’

‘Yes,’ I mumbled hoarsely.

She put her arms around my neck again, and her braids fell on my shoulders. She pulled me towards her as though we were wrestling, locked together. I did not resist. Her cheeks were inflamed by the effort. She laughed and said that I was tickling her. She held me gripped between her legs like a pole that she was trying to climb. We rocked back and forth. She was soon out of breath with the strapping exercise and the heat of our bodies. I felt a few drops of sweat wrung from me by the effort. A feeling of great pleasure came over me that I did not understand then.

She turned around and ran downstairs. As I was leaving, she repeated, ‘I like your curly hair.’ Then she added in a matter-of-fact way, ‘We are having some people over on Monday. Some of my friends will also be there. So, be sure to come—but change out of your school uniform.’

When I returned home the rain had stopped. The grass was wet, and there was a strong smell of the earth. A nightingale sang in fitful snatches. I looked up at the partially clear sky. The road from 23 Prithviraj Road to my modest, middle-class home had been transformed into a magical path. I did not think that I deserved such happiness.

~

My grandmother’s cheerful pandit leaned insistently towards kama’s delights and would have approved, I expect, of the pleasure I had experienced from my involuntary ejaculation that wet afternoon. Isha had given me my first romantic kiss and I still feel giddy thinking about it. I check my heartbeat as I recall the pleasure I felt from Isha’s lips pulling on mine, her tongue moving sensuously in my mouth. I detect no stain or shame, which surprises me because boys and girls from good families did not go around kissing each other in my day. Things have changed a bit now; the middle classes are a bit more relaxed about love and sex.



But when it comes to marriage, we still prefer ‘arranged’ to ‘love’ marriages. Isha, of course, belonged to a different class and women in the upper classes were always freer and stronger.

The pandit taught us that kama is a primeval force of great power and hence the ancients elevated it to a godlike status. Desire acquired a divine nature when Kamadeva, the god of love, sprang from Brahma’s primal and incestuous desire for Sandhya:

*Seeing her and being aroused by her, I pondered over what had happened. As I did so, O Best of Sages, an extremely handsome youth stepped out of my mind.*

Brahma’s full-time job is to create beings and his favoured method, the pandit told us, is to ‘think’ beings into existence. Perhaps he is lazy, but it is clearly an efficient technique, and it highlights the mind’s power to create reality. Each of us, the pandit used to say, tends to create an idiosyncratic universe out of our own thoughts. The mental origin of Kama is another reminder that desire is a mental activity. In any event, Brahma was equally surprised to see the well-formed youth, who had

*a slender waist and a broad chest, with wide thighs and hips . . . he had a blue lock of hair on his head; beneath restless eyebrows, his eyes threw [coquettish] glances . . . arousing the sentiment, O dear One, of sringara rasa.*

Brahma said to Kamadeva:

*Go and enter the minds of all living beings in an invisible form and create desire in the hearts of gods and humans and procreate the world.*

And he gave the erotic god five arrows of scented flowers and a bow of sugar cane. Each flower-arrow, the pandit explained, had a different flower tip, signifying the five stages of love from its birth to its death. In the first stage is *priya*, he said, when one sees the object of desire; the second is *moda* when one acts to acquire the object; *pramoda* is the third stage when one enjoys the object. Inevitably, that pleasure pales gradually in the fourth stage; the last arrow is *maran* when love dies. After telling us the names of the different flowers for the various stages of love, the pandit had suggested that we bring a flower each to

the following class but the main effect of this, as far as I can remember, was to turn the next class into a shooting gallery of flying flower-missiles.

Unlike my father, the pandit would have diagnosed my obsession with Isha quite differently. He would have judged me as a victim of Kamadeva's flower-arrows. I was in the second stage of love, he would have said, having been struck by the second flower, *moda*, when one is smitten and tries to acquire the object of desire. It didn't matter that my love was not reciprocated; the god of love was merely doing his job, which was to inflame *my* desire, not Isha's.

Before the handsome and youthful love-god emerged sometime in the second century BCE, there was a Vedic demigod called Kama, who basically granted petitions and fulfilled all desires, including the desire to slay rivals.

*O Kama, slay those who are my rivals; make them fall down to the blind darknesses; make them all senseless, sapless; let them not live any day at all.*

This earlier Kama could also arouse desire in a woman so that she might be more receptive to advances:

*The arrow feathered with longing, tipped with desire, necked with resolve, let Kama pierce you in the heart.*

This Vedic demigod evolved over the centuries into the charming divine youth with his sugar cane bow and passion-tipped arrows. He came into his own, however, in the later epics and the Puranas, where he troubled the great Shiva and even the creator Brahma became his victim. It needs a degree of kama optimism in a civilization to have the creator become a victim of the god of love and succumb to incestuous feelings for his daughter.

I thus grew up with two different views of kama—an optimistic Hindu notion gifted to me by the pandit and a pessimistic western Christian belief that I acquired from the Irish Brothers at my English school. They traced the origins of erotic lust to Adam and Eve's disobedience to God's commands. Procreation, they said, was part of God's divine plan, but lust and eroticism were the consequences of our own disobedience. In Paradise, we would have been fruitful and multiplied, but the procreative act would have been strictly a matter of will, not of indecent and shameful desires of the flesh. True love, they said, is the spiritual love of God. The person who taught us our Bible class was a 'puritan', a word that held no meaning for me at the time but later I came upon a

a word that held no meaning for me at the time, but later I came upon a mischievous quote of the American humorist H.L. Mencken who defined such a person as one ‘who lives with a haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy.’

I also discovered later that much of Christianity’s ambivalent attitudes towards sex and love could be traced to Augustine of Hippo’s early Christian teachings, especially in his book, *The City of God*. As to whether there was sex in the Garden of Eden, he was ambivalent. He would have preferred if children had been begotten by purely spiritual love, ‘uncorrupted by lust’ and without the sexual act. ‘Copulation would have been just like shaking hands.’

I continued to live with the mistaken idea of equating the West with Christianity, believing it to be body-hating and uptight (compared to the freewheeling, sexually liberal ethos of ancient India) until I reached university. There I discovered Kamadeva’s cousin, Eros, who had fascinated Plato. Eros was one of the first gods to be born in Greek mythology, as the archaic poet, Hesiod, tells us in a poem called ‘Theogony’. In the beginning, he says, there was chaos and out of it was born Eros, the ‘fairest among deathless gods’:

*First of all chaos came into existence, thereafter . . .  
All of the deathless gods who inhabit the heights of Olympus,  
. . . also Eros, most beautiful god among all the immortals,  
Loosening limbs, dominating the hearts and the minds and the well-laid  
Plans both of all the immortals and all of susceptible mankind.*

Eros was followed by Darkness and Night, and they united in love to produce Light and Day. As Hesiod says, eros achieved its goal of creating desire by ‘loosening limbs and weakening the mind’. Like kama, eros was initially an abstract principle of desire, but it went on to become the son of the goddess Aphrodite (Venus). He too was youthful and had a bow and shot arrows to make people fall in love. Eros is what drove Paris to fall in love with Helen, the wife of Agamemnon, and brought about the Trojan War. Eros is also playful—he shakes his victims and causes confusion, according to Sappho (not unlike Kamadeva who shook up Shiva in meditation). The main difference is that Kamadeva was independently powerful whereas Eros was mostly an assistant to his mother Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Yet, in spirit, they were identical as I learnt from reading *Daphnis and Chloe*:

*Love, my children, is a god, young and beautiful and winged. That's why he delights in youth and pursues beauty and gives wings to the soul. And he can do greater things than Zeus himself. He has power over the elements, he has power over the stars, he has power over his fellow gods . . . The flowers are all Love's handiwork. The trees are his creations. He is the reason why the rivers run and winds blow.*

Did Indians borrow Kamadeva from the Greeks or was it the other way around? As a cosmic principle of desire in the creation myths, Kamadeva appears earlier—the *Rig Veda* is dated around the fifteenth century BCE while Hesiod is in the seventh century BCE. But as a god of love, Eros seems to have come first. Handsome Kamadeva is not visible in any written text until the second century BCE whereas the youthful Eros is found in Euripides's *Iphigenia at Aulis* (406 BCE) and in the writings of the Alexandrian poets of the fourth century BCE. Of course, it is impossible to say with certainty because both gods evolved in oral storytelling. The similarity between the cousins suggests communication between the two peoples. Certainly, after Alexander the Great's campaign to India in the fourth century BCE, there were continuing relations between the Greeks and Indians under Chandragupta Maurya.

~

As soon as I returned from school the following Monday, I changed into fresh clothes and put on a new sweater. My mother was disappointed that there was no gold-embossed invitation from 23 Prithviraj Road on this occasion. But she was happy that I was going. Aditi Malik was famous for her informal get-togethers where my mother had heard that the most interesting people gathered. She thought I might meet a powerful politician or a crafty official or even an industrialist—and all of them might further my advance in the world. A conversation with a writer or an artist might open my eyes to the latest trends in the world of art and literature. She thought me exceptionally fortunate to have the chances that had been denied to her. As I was leaving, she thrust a box of sweets in my hands to give to Isha's mother.

I arrived early at Isha's house and waited nervously for the others to arrive. Some of the staff moved about arranging things in the brightly lit drawing room. I knew many of them by now. Everyone surrounding Isha had acquired a special significance. I smiled at a pretty maidservant in glasses. She must have been in her thirties and was always warm and considerate to me. She seemed to sense

her attitudes and was always warm and considerate to me. She seemed to sense my vulnerability. She offered me hot cocoa. I blushed as I declined her offer. She was still treating me like a boy. I was embarrassed because I felt very grown up this evening.

Soon more guests arrived. I looked around trying to spot Isha. I walked a few steps to the window on the right, and I knew at once she was there by the terror that seized me. She waved from afar and smiled, and my world brightened. I was still a bit giddy from her kiss the previous evening. I remembered the delicious sensation of her lips tugging on mine, her tongue moving in my mouth. She must have been thinking of the same thing because she came over and said, 'Did we kiss yesterday?' After a pause, she added, 'It was just a kiss; it really didn't mean anything.' Then she flitted over to her mother, who was welcoming two dignitaries. General Thapar, the chief of staff, and a high-ranking official from the ministry of culture had come together and had arrived early.

'I think people are plain stupid who want to stay at home rather than go to a party,' I overheard the bald-headed Justice Seth say. 'If you are not seen everywhere, you are soon forgotten.'

'Come, come, you are too cynical, Judge,' said his companion, whom I recognized from the Diwali party, with a laugh. 'Hardly something to teach this bright young lad,' he said and looked directly at me. I smiled uneasily. 'If you are inclined to think the worst of your fellowmen . . .'

'Look at Chandi,' interrupted the judge. 'Ever since he abandoned society he has been forgotten.'

'Did I hear my name?' asked a well-endowed lady with a bounteous, exposed bosom, who was sitting nearby on a sofa and whom I remembered vividly from the Diwali party. The men immediately turned around and moved closer to her.

'Not you, my dear, but your extraordinary husband,' replied Justice Seth.

Whenever her husband's name was mentioned, the princess of Chandi put on a dignified expression. It was no secret that the husband and wife were not getting along ever since her affair was exposed. I had heard about the scandal from Anand who had unexpectedly dropped in to see us a few weeks earlier. The princess was relieved when her husband decided to become a yogi and move to a forest lodge on his Himalayan estate. My father was filled with admiration for the prince but everyone in Delhi's society felt sorry for him. The princess responded to solicitous remarks about her husband's decision by making it

appear that she was the 'injured party'. As in all things, she managed an expression that people found attractive and gracious.

My father, who was generally quiet, suddenly became animated during Anand's visit. He denounced the artificial nature of society and its infidelities. He likened Chandi's situation to the world-weary king of Ujjaini in the first century, who was rewarded with the unimaginable gift of immortality. The king loved his wife intensely, he recounted, and gave her the precious gift. The queen, however, was in love with one of the courtiers and bestowed it on her paramour, who, in turn, passed it on to one of his mistresses. The mistress, it turned out, was in love with the king and she presented it back to him. Reflecting on this bizarre chain of events, the disappointed king cursed his love, renounced society and retired to the forest.

Whereas my father spoke in praise of renunciation, I took a different, more discouraging message from his story. The paradoxical situation, both of the king and the prince of Chandi, had to do with the inherently unequal nature of love. The one who loves more is always more vulnerable, and I was only too aware of this in my obsessive love for Isha.

'I always thought His Highness was a bit peculiar,' said the judge trying to win the princess's sympathy. Men who had never said a bad word about Chandi suddenly became critical, hoping in this way to come closer to the lovely princess. She had always been regarded as a great beauty and had turned many a head, especially in her youth. The judge had openly flirted with her but without much success. Her attraction lay in the mystery of her life, and now that the mystery had been exposed, some men in Delhi's society took that to mean that she might be more easily available. But they were mistaken.

Our gracious hostess had now joined the group. 'His Highness was always an independent man and I am afraid he found our parties trivial and boring,' she said, trying to console the princess. She had, in fact, liked the old prince and had been observing over the years his growing revulsion for society. His wife, however, couldn't do without it. There was bound to be tension when two people were so different in a marriage.

Bharat Mirla also joined the group and in a soft voice reminded Aditi Malik that she ought to devote more time to overseeing her businesses. He pulled out a newspaper clipping from his pocket and read out news about further controls in the offing over business houses.

‘I don’t trust Nehru, Aditi. Not one bit.’

‘Such a darling man, Jawaharlal! How can you say that? I think I am in love with him.’

‘So is Edwina Mountbatten, and every woman I know.’

‘But he is such a saint!’

‘No, he is a socialist. In any case, saints should not be allowed to run countries.’

Bharat Mirla was expressing a minority view. Except for the business community, everyone was in love with Nehru—from the upper-middle class down to the poorest. He sought five goals—national unity, parliamentary democracy, a slow reform of society, a socialist economy and non-alignment in international affairs—and the country was behind him on all these objectives.

Isha’s mother was distracted suddenly, and I followed her eyes, which went to the entrance where she had spotted Anand arriving. Through her eyes I saw Anand walk in. He was wearing comfortable white pants and a loose-fitting white shirt with a sweater tied around his neck. Nothing remarkable in itself, but the effect he produced was of quiet Oxbridge elegance. He seemed to grow handsomer as he moved gracefully, with an air of easy assurance and confidence. I turned to look at Isha, who blushed and became visibly aroused by Anand. Her eyes remained fixed on him as though she were under a spell. My eyes were fastened on her, and so it came as a shock when Anand came suddenly behind me and put his arm around me. Isha rushed towards us and I thought I would finally get a chance to talk to her. But she had eyes only for Anand and she ignored me. She grasped Anand’s hand and led him towards the alcove.

I watched the two with torment. She kept unashamedly staring at his face. I noticed an easy intimacy between them as she casually put her hand on his head, trying to fix the centre parting of his hair. As it came down, her hand touched his lean neck and slim arms. I was left in no doubt about Isha’s feelings. It was more difficult to decipher how Anand felt. Despite his ironic look, he must have found her attentions agreeable. I was troubled by the way he looked at her naked shoulders and arms. I had a feeling that the barrier of modesty, which is usually present between a man and a woman in public, had collapsed between them. If Anand had placed his hand on her bare arm or even her neck, it would have been the most natural thing. I could not make out what they were saying but I felt there were hidden, intimate meanings in everything they said. Suddenly I was

there were hidden, intimate meanings in everything they said. Suddenly I was embarrassed, becoming conscious that I had been spying on them. I felt guilty and jealous at the same time as I turned away.

My eye caught that of Isha's mother, who was once again engaged by Bharat Mirla. I had an imploring look that seemed to ask: what does all this mean? But Isha's mother was oblivious to the torment in my soul and smiled back warmly from afar with a look which seemed to say, 'I am so glad you're here and I hope you are happy. Do enjoy yourself.' Despite my best efforts, I couldn't help turning back to look at my tormenters. Isha squeezed Anand's arm above the elbow. He seemed startled. Her brilliant eyes looked deep into his. I shivered as Anand gave her a tender smile. She took his hand and led him outside. I groaned. I too was irrevocably drawn outside and followed them towards the lawn.

It was a bright moonlit evening and I had to be careful not to be seen. I walked quickly and stood behind the closest tree. I saw them kiss. I looked at her and saw a joyous light flash in her eyes from the reflection of the moon. A smile of happiness curved her lips. Anand seemed to make an effort to control himself and his face acquired a strange look. His usual self-possessed manner and carelessly calm expression had vanished. He was bewildered, humble and even submissive.

They kissed again, and I escaped from behind the tree and from the party.

After that evening, I realized that Isha would not belong to me; my feelings would not be returned and I would never attain a certain kind of happiness. It was painful as I saw her grow more and more distant. Her manner also became distracted. With a feeling of weariness, I would begin each morning by thinking about the ways that I might please her. I wanted to bring her something that would light up her face and she might smile in the way that she had on the day after the winter break. On a rare day when she managed to be kind to me, I would imagine how nice it would be to hold her hand, to sit on the sofa, talk intimately, and even kiss her. Or lying in bed, I would try and picture that I had broken my leg. Wouldn't it be wonderful if she would be the nurse assigned to look after me? I got into the habit of oscillating between fear and hope and subjecting every bit of evidence to elaborate consideration, desperately wanting to give it a more hopeful interpretation.

Instead of my fantasies, I would be faced with the reality of seeing her irritated as soon as she saw me the following day. She knew I would come back,



as tender and submissive as before, and so she began to treat me as she would a servant. I could not help myself, but despite everything, I could not bear the thought of not seeing her. If love cannot exist without the imagination, neither can the rebuff or the snub. For weeks on end, after the party, I lay awake in bed going over the scenes beginning with the day that I had first seen her. I pictured her sitting in the club lounge, drinking tea and looking with admiration at Anand. I thought of the many ways that my life might have been different and I would begin to sob. I would shift on my pillow and resolve never to see her again. But the next moment I wanted to be with her; I wanted to touch her. Her long face, her smooth skin, her dark eyes would not leave me.

~

Yes indeed, kama is a mighty pain. It is a wonder that the vulnerable boy managed to survive his miserable, jealousy-racked love. If I had been able to counsel the hopelessly-in-love sixteen-year-old, I would have given him advice somewhat different from his father's. This is because I am hopelessly in love with life. I would have reminded him that kama is an attitude of the mind—a world without it would indeed be arid and unbearable. I would have warned the adolescent about the mighty risk in loving another human being. But I would have added that one must also be ready for the day when beauty, joy and pleasure will become bitter.

If my grandmother's ganja-smoking pandit was a kama optimist, my father was a kama pessimist. He belonged to a long and distinguished line of kama doubters and worriers going back thousands of years to the Upanishads—yogis, gurus, ascetics and all manner of spiritual entrepreneurs who had struggled with the temptations of desire in their goal to liberate themselves from human bondage. The sannyasi, 'renouncer', has always stood tall and splendid—'a theatrical figure in ochre robes'—who has loomed large in the Indian imagination throughout history. The most famous, of course, was the Buddha, but even in later Vedic writings and in the Upanishads, the ascetic had begun to offer an alternative lifestyle.

The cheerful connotations of the word 'kama' began to turn gloomy. Although desire had divine antecedents, it arose from a feeling of incompleteness. The Upanishads try to show that this need for completeness can be fulfilled

spiritually through meditation. Their central theme is that a wise person avoids desires and attachments, for they bind him to the objects of his desire, and these bonds survive death; he who desires is born again. According to the *Chandogya Upanishad*, our desires are only satisfied when we have found our real self, our atman. But these very desires must be given up in order to attain the state of knowledge in which we realize that our atman is identical to the cosmic brahman. In the process, the meaning of kama also changes. In a later Upanishad, the Mundaka, the seer combines both senses of desire—to want to achieve what one desires and ironically to be free from that desire.

Kama pessimists began to flourish in north India when another lifestyle became possible with economic surplus after the sixth century BCE with the introduction of wetland paddy cultivation on the plains of the Ganges River; agricultural surplus brought prosperity; merchants emerged and so did other occupations; population grew and so did towns and kingdoms; and all this transformed the social, economic and political life of the people. Suddenly, it was possible for a person to choose a life. If kama optimists chose the settled, worldly, urban life of the ‘householder’, kama pessimists renounced it in favour of the ascetic’s wandering life. The renouncer challenged the old notions of heaven and immortality, which had been the great goals of the householder’s life. He insisted that the true goal was liberation from the human condition of suffering and repeated cycles of birth and death.

In a moving dialogue between an anguished son, who represents the new ascetic spirit, and his father, who reflects the more relaxed older order, the young renouncer says:

*The world is afflicted by death . . . The delight one finds in living in a town is the rope that binds . . . Of what use is wealth to you who must soon die. Of what use are wives and relatives. Seek the self that has entered the cave.*

He tells his father that he must give up his false pursuit of ‘heaven’ and dedicate his life to liberating himself from kama—renounce desire and lead the life of a celibate ascetic.

The idea that the birth of the universe and life on earth originated through kama did not sit well with the ascetic Shramana traditions. The renouncers had abandoned their families in order to meditate in the forest. To them, women and sexual desire were ever-present threats. Yogis and rishis like Agastya suffered

from the anxiety of losing spiritual merit that had been gained after years of meditation and tapas. The epics and other stories are full of the temptations of the heavenly apsaras, ‘nymphs’. So is the involuntary ejaculation of semen, from which life is created and which sages learnt to hold back as a precious life force, akin to spiritual energy. The cult of chastity was a means to longevity: to store up semen was to store up life. Chastity was a method of acquiring—through the subjugation of the senses—supernatural powers, and even, in Taoism, immortality.

The renouncer’s narrative, thus, changed to the loathsome nature of the object of desire, the woman’s body. All known accounts of the Buddha’s life come to us 500 years after he lived, and the most famous one, the *Buddhacharita*, shows ugly, repulsive scenes of women lying sprawled around. Ravana’s harem in the Sundarakanda in the Ramayana shows demonic women confined to the *anthapuram*, the part of the palace that houses the womenfolk. The divide between the kama optimist and the pessimist grows, reflecting perhaps the dual nature of the human being—the erotic and the ascetic in all of us.

The pessimists felt that desire could not be trusted because it was the product of *ahamkara*, ‘the human ego’, which is as unreal as the world it creates in the human mind, falsely making us believe in ‘I am this or I desire that’. This powerful, instinctual force easily gets out of hand. The renouncers cautioned the people about its link to our negative moral emotions—to greed, anger, attachment and other frailties of the human ego. The Mahabharata likens this psychic energy to a ‘brilliant and strange tree’:

*Growing in the heart of man from the seed of confusion, kama is a many-coloured, brilliant and strange tree. Anger and ego are its two main trunks; ignorance is at its root; excessive ambition is the water that nourishes it; its leaves find fault with others; its sap is the demerit of our earlier lives; there is anxiety in its twigs, sorrow in its branches, and fear in its buds; the creeper that climbs on all its sides is covered with longing. This is the mighty kama tree whose roots spread far and wide.*

Faced with this image, even the most optimistic person might turn sceptical about kama. The epic continues relentlessly:

*Greedy people, chained to their desires, sit around this mighty tree, hoping to enjoy its fruits. But a wise person who has mastered his desires, is able to cut the tree at its roots, and become free from the sorrows of old age and death. The fool, however, climbs up the kama tree to gather its fruit, and is thereby destroyed.*

Kama began to be linked with other negative emotions. The Mahabharata often connects kama with *krodha*, ‘anger’, thereby inventing a compound word, *kamakrodha*, and making a psychological relationship between the two. Religious pilgrims began to take a vow to abstain from a formulaic set of negative emotions, beginning with kama—‘kam, krodha, *lobh* (greed), *moh* (attachment), *ahamkara* (ego)’. Buddhist iconography pictured the three obstacles to Nirvana as desire (snake), hatred (chicken) and stupidity (pig), and picture them vividly on a wheel of life in which each animal is biting the tail of the one in front. They are responsible for keeping us ‘sleepwalking’ through life. Desire is the most dangerous, for it is responsible for creating maya, an illusion of reality. We even suffer from a desire for heaven, which is the basis for the Mimamsa philosophy. According to Buddhists, we must sacrifice the desire for heaven as well—that is, oddly enough, give up ‘the desire for desire’.

The kama pessimism of the Upanishads reached a peak in the Bhagavad Gita. Krishna states clearly that the chief danger in human life is desire. He calls it ‘an insatiable fire’. It is the cause of anger and greed, and blames the delusion of the ego: ‘I have achieved this; I am successful; I am rich; I am noble.’ The *Gita* does not blame either desire or action but famously blames the ‘desire for the fruit or reward of the action’. Krishna counsels us not to repress our desires but eliminate the ‘I’ factor in them. This requires discipline and sacrifice. Thus, without egotism a person finds peace.

The high philosophy of Advaita Vedanta also devalues desire. There is no creative role for cosmic desire in Adi Shankara’s strict monism in the eighth century ACE. Obviously, desire cannot exist in the absolute unity of the brahman, which is eternal, unchanging, infinite and the transcendent ground of all being in the cosmos. As long as something remains, a desire is possible; but when there is nothing else except the absolute unity of the brahman, there is no place for desire.

Buddhists, of course, were the ultimate pessimists for whom kama meant *trishna*, ‘craving’. They thought of Kamadeva as Mara, the god of death, who sends his three daughters, Desire, Delight and Discontent, to distract seekers from their spiritual goal. Since the pleasures of the senses were the chief obstacles to spiritual progress, kama had to be overcome at all costs. In the

*Buddhacharita*, Ashvaghosha, puts these anti-kama words into the Buddha's mouth:

*Antelopes are lured to their death by songs; moths fall into the flame for the sake of beauty; the fish, avid of flesh, swallow the hook. Thus Kama bears evil fruit . . . The same things that point to happiness bring misery.*

Despite all this negativity, both Hindus and Buddhists were forced to admit kama's positive nature. They recognized its presence in every human action. They refer to it sometimes as *samkalpa*, 'will' or 'intention', as in the following passage from Manu:

*Acting out of desire is not approved of, but here on earth there is no such thing as no desire; for even studying the Veda and engaging in the rituals enjoined in the Veda are based upon desire. Desire is the very root of the conception of a definite intention.*

Hence, there is ambivalence about kama.

A curious song called Kamagita, in the later part of the Mahabharata, captures this ambivalence. The epic war is over. Although the Pandavas have won, Yudhishtira plunges into great depression. He recalls the moment where all of Draupadi's children were killed as they slept, and he cries, 'This victory feels more like defeat!' Filled with remorse, he holds himself responsible, and decides to abdicate the throne to become a hermit. Krishna Vasudeva explains to him how kama is at the heart of the problem. Desire for those he has lost is behind his sorrowful memories; it is also behind his decision to renounce; fighting a war or cultivating tranquillity depends on kama. He mocks the arrogance of those who think they are beyond its reach. The answer is not to deny this indestructible force in human life but cheerfully respect its power and work towards finding the right balance between kama and the other aims of life. The bhakti mystics did not deny kama like the ascetics but channelled it towards the love of god.

~

If I had not met Isha, I would not have learnt so early in life the lessons of rejection, humiliation and ridicule. Kama has a way of making us fall, reminding us of the messiness of being human. Once Isha mentioned casually that she could not imagine a love based on friendship. I did not know what to make of

this bizarre thought. Only later did I comprehend its true perversity when I encountered Micol, first in Giorgio Bassani's novel, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, and later in Vittorio De Sica's film based on it. I have never been to Ferrara where she lived but I feel in my heart that I must have. Both the Italian ducal town and the gardens of its most extraordinary family are etched vividly in my soul.

Like Isha, Micol was beautiful and elusive, whom the narrator loves but cannot possess. She flirts with him, teases him and rejects him. The other characters in Micol's life are not unlike Isha's friends. They meet in the sprawling gardens of the Finzi-Continis's mansion; they play tennis and they flirt. A similar gulf exists between her wealthy, haute bourgeois family and the narrator's humble middle-class life. The unnamed narrator is always on a bicycle, while her family has many cars. The scene where they first kiss is unforgettable. He falls deeply in love with Micol but is confused to find himself encouraged at times and ruthlessly scorned at other times. The parallel couldn't be more precise.

The mystery is why Micol can't respond to the gentle narrator. This has always been the nagging question in my memories of Isha. I concluded eventually that Micol, like Isha, was a siren in the making, a femme fatale like Marlene Dietrich. 'Love—at least the way she imagined it—was something for people reciprocally determined to get the upper hand,' says Bassani. 'It was a cruel, fierce sport . . . to be played with no holds barred, and without ever calling on goodness of soul or sincerity of purpose to mitigate it.' Bassani's insight into the perversity of desire finds echoes in Proust's all-seeing Marcel. This is what I think Isha must have meant when she said that she could not love based on companionship and camaraderie.

Like me, Bassani was also forced to confront his younger self in his memoir, trying to relive his past in a manner untainted by nostalgia. His tone is elegiac. What he is recreating is an elegy for a vanished culture and people who have since disappeared. He chronicles the relationship between the daughter of the Finzi-Continis family and his younger self from the rise of Benito Mussolini until the start of the Second World War. When Mussolini's Fascist government declares public tennis clubs off limits to Italian Jews, Micol invites her Jewish friends to play on her private court. Yet, in that seductive garden, Micol does not think of herself as Jewish. She will not admit that it may be her shared

think of herself as Jewish. She will not admit that it may be her shared Jewishness with the narrator that is the real obstacle to accepting him as a lover. She does not want her life to end in the pious, smug satisfaction of a Jewish bourgeois family life.

There are other parallels. There is the tragic storm of the Holocaust raging outside the garden of the Finzi-Continises. There were also storm clouds gathering over the Malik house. Aditi Malik and her friends were equally indifferent to the rough winds of Nehru and Indira Gandhi's socialism threatening to take away their family's mills and their wealth. Not a week went by when someone or the other from the left wing of the Congress party or from sundry socialist and communist parties did not make a speech in Parliament threatening to nationalize some industry. The assault of the socialist state was the beginning of a later descent into a totalitarian state during Indira Gandhi's Emergency in the mid-1970s. The Emergency was benign compared to the Holocaust and it seems bizarre to even make the comparison, but the fact is it was a palpable attack on the freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution.

Bharat Mirla did try and warn Aditi Malik but she remained as passive as the Finzi-Continises. In the end, the government did not nationalize her mills but shackled them with regulatory controls of nightmarish proportions unmatched in any democracy. The liberal voice of C. Rajagopalachari called it 'Licence, permit, inspector raj'. Indira Gandhi raised tax rates to 97.5 per cent with a wealth tax topping it, which took the effective tax rate above 100 per cent of the income, forcing the few honest among the wealthy to sell their assets in order to pay their taxes. Since there was no one in the Malik family to look after things, they and many business houses went into a quiet, genteel decline. As I think about it, the ancient Greek word *athymia* comes to my mind; it means 'spiritlessness' and this characterized the mood of 23 Prithviraj Road.

The enchanting 23 Prithviraj Road exists in my memory not only as a grand house with a splendid garden behind an enclosed wall but as a symbol of an enclosed state of mind, not unlike the garden of the Finzi-Continises. The guests at Aditi Malik's impressive parties were mostly in denial. Oh yes, they were able to see that the days of the old royals were numbered—both of small ones like Chandi and big ones like Jaipur. But they could not imagine what the fate of the old business families would be. Isha's mother refused to see the nation's descent into an insidious 'licence raj'. I have the nostalgia of looking back for a lost time

and place, and of a generation that was unaware of itself slipping away.

For me, the ambiguity of the enclosed surroundings is matched by the sexual ambiguity of Isha. My father dismissed her as a ‘cruel snob’ and a contemptible ‘creature of appetite’. He said this, I suspect, partly to assuage my hurt. I think another classical Greek word, *thymos*, describes her better. Thymos is praiseworthy passion, which Plato, in the *Republic*, called the spirited part of the soul. It is the opposite of *athymia*. If the rest of them at 23 Prithviraj Road were spiritless, Isha was full of spirit and honest to her own code. She played her part. Her role was to sustain my enchantment—keep alive my obsessive desire. She accepted me one day; rejected me the next; she stole a kiss one afternoon and claimed it didn’t mean anything the next; she took me away in her charmed carriage; and abandoned me thereafter.

~

There is no rational basis for love. My eyes fell on Isha that evening in the Gymkhana lounge, not on any of her friends, and they stayed there as though transfixed. So, it happened quite by chance that I chose Isha. What was in those eyes, I wonder—laughter, impudence—that drew me to her? It was something unknown to me and I yearned to possess it. Clearly, she came and filled a void, a feeling of incompleteness that had defined my childhood and had continued into my adolescence. My unhappy love for Isha was a demand for restoring that wholeness, with its roots going back perhaps even to my anxious longing for my mother when I was a child. Love, I have found, helps to end that isolation. And yet, that very quest to conquer loneliness through love is not something that any society accepts easily (unless it is shackled by marriage and legal propriety). Hence, it has been the source of stigma over the centuries. But it needn’t be this way. Over time I have learnt the difference between solitude and loneliness. Whereas solitude is restful and creative, loneliness I find is a restless longing that never seems to go away. It is there when I am with someone, when I am in a group, especially in a crowd. This is indeed bizarre in a country where we feel pity for someone who is habitually alone, unless of course, it is the renouncer.

Even though I lost Isha in the end, I believe I gained something in return. I succeeded in possessing what was in her eyes: signs of a life unknown and ungoverned that I yearned to join with my own. And thinking back on it fills me with exhilarating desire—a desire that slowly becomes painful. My love for



with exhumating desire . . . a desire that slowly becomes wisdom. My love for her, I now realize, led me to understand aspects of myself that I did not know existed. Proust states it far better than I:

*. . . when we are in love with a woman we simply project into her a state of our own soul, that the important thing is, therefore, not the worth of the woman . . . that the emotions which a young girl of no distinction arouses in us can enable us to bring to the surface of our consciousness some of the most intimate parts of our being . . .*

More than the body, it is our imagination that is responsible for love. From the imagination, it moves to the physical body. I may have cursed Isha at the time, but I am grateful to her for opening the doors of my mind to a taste for beauty and love that has lasted all through my life. It continues to lure me and sometimes I want to tear myself from its fetters before decrepitude overtakes me completely and my sensuality becomes a lecherous mockery of itself. But I do not have the strength to renounce those attachments because every movement evokes both the memory of some past pleasure and a new longing.

Isha brought modernity into my life. It is hard to believe that there existed in traditional India people like Isha, Anand and their ilk, whose minds were as free with regard to love and sex as any European in the post-war period. Part of the reason, I suspect, lies in the old Indian tradition of kama optimism. The other is that the upper and upper-middle classes in India had internalized the thoughts and habits of their counterparts in the West. Jawaharlal Nehru was our chief modernizer. Not unlike Aditi Malik, everyone loved him, and he created the idea of modern India, stitching together a country frustratingly diverse in its languages, religions and castes. And the wonder is that it has survived intact into modernity with the formal institutions of democracy. With his education at Harrow and Cambridge, Nehru was as charming as the most attractive Englishman, and people thought nothing of the fact that he might allegedly be having an affair with Edwina Mountbatten, the viceroy's wife.

It was a contested modernity, however. Ever since the 1920s when Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru's mentor, entered politics, he offered a different vision of modernity. Gandhi translated the same modern Enlightenment values of liberty and equality into the traditional language of dharma; he had greater empathy for the old hierarchies and values; he even envisioned a future based on the ideal of ancient self-sufficient village republics. People saw in him a great renouncer in the classical mould of the yogis and the Buddha. Incredibly, he also believed in

the classical mould of the yogis and the Bhagavad. Incidentally, he also believed in celibacy! In the end, Gandhi's rhetoric resonated with the masses (more than Nehru's) and he succeeded in uniting a frustratingly diverse country and wrested power from the British colonial state without shedding an ounce of blood. Unlike Nehru, Gandhi was a 'kama pessimist' and the old historical dialectic between kama optimists and pessimists still continues, especially after the ascent of the Hindu Right. With the benefit of my years, I have a lurking cynical feeling that kama pessimists, for all their good intentions, have also had an unconscious, 'haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy'.

I spoke about being deserving of kama. This is a strange idea, for no one deserves to be unloved just because they fall short of certain standards. Yet, Isha made me feel that I was 'unworthy' of her love because she could not respond to it. Although she did not share my romantic feelings, I believe that the genuine love I offered her could have been rejected in a loving way. To be worthy of kama in this sense is this ability to love in return. The question I ask myself after all these years is this: if Isha did not have this ability, could it not have been evoked by my love for her? Such is the hope in the heart of those who love, convinced that the depth and nobility of their love will awaken love in the other; it has taken me a lifetime to discover that this is not always true.



## A SUITABLE MATCH

*Kama optimists and pessimists reach an imperfect compromise*

*While talking to one  
She is looking desirously at another  
But thinking of a third.  
Who really is her beloved?*

—Panchatantra I.146–148

‘My family was thrown into a panic the day . . . the day I grew up.’

My mother raised her eyebrows.

‘You know what I mean?’

‘When you got your period?’

We had new neighbours. The Sharmas had recently moved into the house next door and their sixteen-year-old daughter, Avanti, had dropped in to introduce herself. Two years had passed; I was now at university.

‘Ever since then,’ Avanti continued, ‘my parents have spoken in hushed tones once a week about finding me a suitable Brahmin boy, preferably from the Saryupariya *gotra*. Earlier this year we performed a puja at the Vishwanath temple in Varanasi, but it obviously hasn’t worked as I am still unmarried. I still fast on Mondays because it will negate the consequences of my misdeeds in previous lives that are delaying my marriage.’

‘And what if they don’t find a suitable boy?’ I asked.

‘Oh, that would be tragic!’ she replied.

‘Does he have to be a Brahmin?’ I asked.

‘Of course. What a question, you silly boy!’

Avanti had an oval face, a straight nose, a full mouth and a body that had ripened early. She had good skin and colour on her cheeks that radiated health. She was clearly attractive but the overall effect was quite the opposite of the

angular, sinewy Isha. Her earthy physicality was deceptive—there was a peculiar intensity in her eyes, tempered by a bold, smiling sidelong glance.

After she left, we looked at each other in disbelief. I was disarmed by Avanti's open, naive charm; my mother was suspicious, thinking her too forward. But yet, she decided to invite her family to tea the following evening.

'It's the neighbourly thing to do,' said my mother, who in actual fact wanted to satisfy her curiosity about our new neighbours.

'They are a conservative Brahmin family,' she told my father, 'but their daughter speaks confidently to strangers about her periods.'

Roshan Sharma, Avanti's father, was a show-off and the dominant presence at tea but we found his wife more charming. She was reticent and smiled a lot. He told us with pride about Ujjain, his home town in Madhya Pradesh, which had been the capital of an ancient kingdom of the legendary princess Avantika and that was how their daughter got her name. Sharma-ji talked about his job in the forest department. My father volunteered helpfully some names in his department but our guest was not impressed as they were not 'high up' and did not qualify as 'contacts'.

Mrs Sharma giggled nervously and kept downplaying her husband's bragging. In reply to my mother's question, she told us how she had met her husband via black-and-white studio photographs exchanged between their families. They had met only once before they got married and that too in a family gathering where everyone was sizing up everyone else.

'We too were married via pictures!' My mother laughed. 'Of course, we are not Brahmins like you.'

Sharma-ji knew this already and I detected a subtle, superior smile on his face. He tried to console us for our inferior status but my mother retorted gently. 'We have always been more democratic in the Punjab and this is perhaps why Brahmins have never enjoyed a superior status.'

'Ah yes,' he said, feeling sorry for us. 'To survive, Hindus had to become Muslim; others became Sikh; still others turned to Arya Samaj. What a mess!'

'Yes, caste is all confused here.' My mother laughed.

'Of course, you are modern and we are traditional,' he said, staring boldly at my mother's bobbed hair, sleeveless blouse and heels. 'Take the Maliks for example—both mother and daughter smoke, drink and go dancing in the Imperial Hotel. We're not like that.'

‘Ah, you know Aditi Malik?’ asked my mother.

‘Oh no, they are “hi-fi society” and we are simple folk.’

I did not like the direction this conversation was taking. Sharma-ji was snooping, and my mother promptly changed the subject. ‘My cousin, Ramu Mama, is the only one we know who stays at the Imperial!’

‘Don’t listen to him!’ said Avanti, dismissing her father. She had a natural grace as she sat at the other end of the room. Though she hadn’t spoken a dozen words, she seemed perfectly at ease and in a curious way appeared to take part in the conversation without opening her mouth.

Sharma-ji was itching to talk about what was uppermost in his mind. At the first opportunity, he asked if we could suggest a suitable boy for Avanti. Both his wife and daughter were embarrassed but they were resigned to his coarse ways.

‘Avanti is still young, what’s the hurry?’ asked my mother.

With self-important gravity, Sharma-ji rose to his full height, like a doctor proclaiming a diagnosis, and explained that the problem lay in an inherent conflict between the biological and social nature of women. Quoting Manu, he asserted, ‘Every woman desires every man she sees.’ It is not her fault, of course; it is her *stri-svabhava*, ‘biological nature’, and it has to be tamed and controlled by *stri-dharma*, her ‘duty to her family and society’. So, she must marry as soon as she attains puberty. An unmarried woman has to be chaste; a married woman has to be faithful and produce sons, according to the dharma texts.

Avanti was discomfited by this talk; my mother looked at my father sceptically; but I was fascinated. Sharma-ji was not to be stopped. It is not a woman’s fault, he said, if her innate nature makes her fickle and untrustworthy. The men of the house must protect her from her inborn sensuality and ensure that *stri-dharma*, her paternal heritage, triumphs over her demoniac *stri-svabhava*, her maternal heritage.

My mother was not amused. ‘Where is the evidence about women’s “untamed nature”?’ she protested. Both Sharma-ji’s wife and Avanti detected my mother’s discomfort over these remarks. And before Sharma-ji could reply, mother and daughter got up to leave. As they were going out of the door, Mrs Sharma put her arm around me affectionately and called me ‘Amar, the immortal one’.

Sharma-ji turned to my father and congratulated him for having successfully

Sharma-ji turned to my father and congratulated him for having successfully discharged his obligation to the gods by producing a son.

‘You’ll certainly go to heaven!’ he said.

After our neighbours were gone, my mother gave a distasteful look. ‘What an uncouth neighbour we have got!’

‘Fortunately, his wife and daughter make up for him,’ I said, consoling her gently.

~

When Avanti skipped into our lives, I did not imagine that it would set the stage for the next phase in my kama education. I learnt something about my mother too. Having grown up on a diet of Jane Austen, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and other English novelists at college in Lahore, she had a modern mind and was deeply opposed to patriarchy. She and my father had a relationship of reasonable equality, although she wished secretly that she had continued to work after marriage. What she missed even more was a rich emotional and intellectual life with her husband. This was due, perhaps, to their different temperaments—he was unworldly and she was worldly. Despite her education in English literature, however, I would discover that while she was modern in certain ways, she was not modern enough to believe in what we Indians call ‘love marriage’. But of that, more later.

Avanti’s father’s obsession to get Avanti married introduced me to the grand compromise in history between the kama pessimists and optimists, creating a legitimate middle ground for desire that is sanctioned by society, religion and law. Sharma-ji’s views about the inequality of men and women initiated me to the deep patriarchal prejudices within our culture and my ‘modern’ mother’s condescending response to Sharma-ji was my first encounter with feminism.

I grew up believing that men and women were mostly equal. Although my mother and father did not share their inner lives, they seemed to have a relationship of reasonable equality. In fact, my mother was stronger than my father; my grandmother was even tougher. And in my own generation, Isha and Avanti had minds of their own. Come to think of it, many Indian women, beginning with the Vedas, were emancipated in their own way. To begin with, Indrani, the wife of the king of gods, seems to have had a fair degree of autonomy, going by the sexually explicit dialogue between her, Indra and

monomy, going by the seemingly explicit analogies between her, and the  
Vrishakapi. The same goes for the women in my favourite epic, the Mahabharata  
—Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Satyawati were all sturdier than their men. Hence,  
I wonder if the stereotype of the submissive, long-suffering Indian female—Sita  
and Savitri—is a myth propagated by the dharma texts in order to keep women  
in line.

You can always find an alternative tradition in Hinduism to the orthodox one.  
A bhakti sect called Radhavallabh Sampradaya in Vrindavan raised Radha above  
Krishna as the supreme deity. The standard greeting among its devotees is not  
'Jai Krishna' but 'Jai Radhe'! Like other Vaishnava sects, they were inspired by  
Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda* of the twelfth century, in which the great god Krishna  
falls in love with a married woman, Radha, and even implores her to place her  
feet on his forehead.

Contrary to this, I gradually became aware that while men and women are  
biologically unequal, societies around the world have institutionalized this  
insidiously into an inequality of power—that is, patriarchy. Because women  
were supposedly weak, they had to be guarded. Since no man could guard a  
woman all the time, Sharma-ji believed that she had to learn to guard herself by  
controlling her thoughts, feelings and acts. That is why Brahminical culture  
created inspiring stories to teach a woman her stri-dharma. One of these was of  
Sambula, a lovely princess who married the heir apparent of a vast kingdom.  
Unfortunately, he contracted leprosy and decided to renounce the throne and live  
as an ascetic in the jungles. Everyone at the court was relieved at this decision,  
including his parents and his wives, as his open sores had become foul and  
rotten. Sambula insisted, however, on accompanying her husband and they built  
a hut by the river.

Sambula rose each morning, and then bathed her husband's leprous skin with  
cool water, and left to gather fruits and vegetables for their lunch. One day deep  
in the forest she came upon an inviting pool inside a cave and decided to bathe.  
As she stepped into the water, her radiance lit up the forest. A demon saw her  
and made advances. Sambula struggled and cried out for help. The ogre  
threatened to eat her. The god Sakka, however, heard her cries. After rescuing  
her, he explained that it was not he who had saved her but cosmic dharma—her  
own accumulated virtuous deeds over many lives.

When she returned to her leprous husband, he grew suspicious. He did not



believe her story and spoke instead about the deceits of women. The desperate Sambula cried, 'Oh, my husband, how can I convince you of my devotion!' In the end, she decided to perform an 'act of truth'. During a religious ritual, she proclaimed, 'I have never held anyone dearer than my husband. If I speak the truth, his disease will be cured.' She poured water over his diseased skin, and sure enough, his sores were washed away.

Cured, the prince returned to his kingdom. Eventually, he became king and his father retired to a life of quietude. Gradually, the young ruler was attracted to other women at the court, some of whom he married. Sambula and her sacrifices were forgotten. When the old king heard of Sambula's plight, he returned to the palace and reprimanded his son, saying, 'You have a virtuous wife. Treat her with dharma.' The son was ashamed, fell at Sambula's feet in apology, and from that day rendered her the honour she deserved.

Classical Sanskrit literature is filled with such stories. Manu, the lawmaker, says men of the house must guard their women from their 'innate' addiction to sensual enjoyment. Otherwise, they will bring sorrow both to their own and their husband's family. It is a husband's responsibility, in particular, as he is vulnerable to the loss of his progeny through the infidelity of his wife.

Sambula's tale is a fascinating variant of Sita's in the Ramayana. Both women accompanied their husbands to the forest; both were objects of lust for demons; both aroused suspicion about their fidelity; in the end, the virtuous character of both women saved them. The dharma texts created a social code and an ideal of stri-dharma that conditioned women to accept a subordinate place in a patriarchal society. These stories helped them to internalize this ideal Hindu womanhood, such that they 'voluntarily' aspired to it. It was all very cleverly done, according to the feminists.

Buddhist narrative literature is also filled with stories of women's uncontrolled sexuality. My favourite recounts a dialogue between two parrots who were left behind by a travelling Brahmin to watch over his unfaithful wife. Seeing her carrying on with many men, the younger one observed, 'A woman is not safe even if one carries her in one's arms.' The older parrot, however, was more inclined to offer a solution: 'Only a wife's love can curb a woman's lust. Alas, the Brahmin's wife doesn't love her husband.'

I never did buy Manu's crude, patriarchic party line about the 'insatiable appetite of women' and have found its popularity surprising. It seems to me a male fantasy and feminists have a point in viewing it as a tool of patriarchic control. It might have been a way to teach people that promiscuous sex is a waste of physical energy and is the road to ruin. My father, I know, was suspicious of women, although he never aired his feelings openly. In fact, he was invariably shy and courteous with the opposite sex. Of course, there are plenty of stories in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana that are hugely complimentary to women but feminists argue that stories valorizing women were, in fact, a Brahminical conspiracy to 'brainwash' them—to condition them to stri-dharma—a rhetorical device to ensure women's chastity and domination by the male establishment. Sharma-ji's moral panic over the early marriage of his daughter may also have been the result of misogyny and a fear of *varnasamkara*, 'mixing of castes', which not only Manu but the Gita also expresses eloquently. The custom of *niyoga*, whereby either the brother of an impotent or dead husband or a revered male from the same caste would sleep with the wife for the sole purpose of procreation—its purpose was to retain male control over female sexuality.

Sexuality as female animalism is not unique to India. Greek tragedy, especially Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, is grounded on this prejudicial premise. Shakespeare's Othello makes the same point when he cries out:

*O curse of marriage that we can call these delicate creatures ours  
And not their appetites!*

In his sexual anxiety, Othello believes that whilst a man is considered master of the female, there is an element of the female—her capability for sexual pleasure—that is beyond the grasp of man. The concept of the woman as not quite human is embedded here. Desdemona is 'delicate' like a dove yet a ravenous beast of 'appetite'.

~

Avanti came over a few days later to inquire from my mother about a tailor to stitch her clothes. My mother raised her eyebrows, wondering if our visitor had another motive behind her visit. Avanti was lively as ever and happy to sit and

chat, and soon my mother's misgivings were allayed. No mention was made of her father's awkward conversation. A quarter of an hour later, my mother jumped up—she was late for the doctor. Rushing out, she asked me to give Avanti directions to the tailor's shop in Khan Market. I said I would do better—I would show her the shop. My mother gave me a look—her apprehensions were clearly aroused.

It was a sunny winter morning. Avanti brought out her bicycle and I watched her as she pushed it up to the street with an uninhibited swing of her hips. With a hearty laugh she jumped on to the bike and I followed on mine. Without a care in the world, I watched the blue sky. Along the way I showed her India Gate. She stared at it and I felt as if I too was seeing it for the first time. There was little traffic and we talked light-heartedly as we rode. I realized I was seeing ordinary things through her fresh eyes. She chuckled a lot and her eyes sparkled. Soon we were talking like old friends. Yet, there was a distance—I sensed a curious detachment on her part, as though she was not all there. We bicycled silently until we went past 23 Prithviraj Road. I felt sick suddenly. Avanti jumped off her bike and looked at me with alarm.

She put her hand on my forehead and I blinked several times in succession. Then the dam burst. I couldn't stop my tears and in a frenzy I recounted the story of my unrequited love for Isha. Sad memories returned. I pointed from afar where we had played badminton, the vestibule where she had leaned close to me, and her room where we had kissed. I showed her the tree behind which I used to keep vigil after school, watching the goings-on of their house on the off-chance that the door would open and Isha would come out. She listened intently and did not allow the fire of my rage to mute into self-pity. In consoling me she did not make light of my feelings and seemed to understand what a mighty pain it was to love and mightier still to love in vain.

'If you have to love a woman, silly boy, she might as well be good-looking,' said Avanti with a smile, trying to cheer me up. 'At least, you will have the memory of a nice face.'

'Oh, that she was—she was good-looking.'

It was the first time I had spoken about Isha in a year, and a great burden seemed to lift. We bicycled on to Khan Market where Avanti completed her work at the tailor's while I browsed at Bagir Chand's bookshop. We made a detour coming back. I took her past the Delhi Gymkhana and showed her the

spot outside the gate where I had waited endlessly for Isha to come out. I stared at the lifeless entrance until the doorman came out and gave a welcoming smile to a young couple as they were entering.

We bicycled home quietly, lost in our thoughts. As we approached the final turning off the main road, I tried to avoid an approaching lorry and my bicycle swerved into a hedge on the side of the road. In the process I dropped my pen and then got down to search for it in the hedge.

‘What are you looking for, Amar?’ she asked.

‘My pen, I think it must have fallen here,’ I said.

She joined in the search. After a few minutes, she spotted it beside a bush next to the hedge. She tried to reach down for it. I sprang to her aid and I stretched out my arm. I felt my chest brush against hers and I felt a sensation of nervous pleasure. She got up red in the face and gave me an embarrassed look as she handed me my pen. I noticed her well-developed breasts with tense delight.

By the time we reached home my heart had grown lighter. We got down from our bicycles. As we walked home, I felt a sense of gratitude, the sort of emotion that a patient, who is long sick, feels when he realizes that his recovery has finally begun. I peered into Avanti’s dark eyes, black in the shadow, but a rich brown in broad daylight. They seemed to hold successive layers of colour, darkest at the depths and growing brighter and brighter towards the surface. I saw myself reflected in them in miniature. Thanks to Avanti, I began to create a distance from my painful past, assuaging the more hurtful recollections, and I hoped one day they would get pushed into memory boxes that were less hurtful, more neutral.

~

Sharma-ji’s view of society was a bit like young Marcel’s middle-class aunt in Proust’s novel. He had an insatiable curiosity about the rich and the high-born but disapproved of those who tried to ape their ways. The next time we met, he again brought up the subject of the Maliks for no other reason except idle curiosity, I suspect. Avanti had scrupulously kept my confidences and her parents were oblivious to my connection with Isha. My mother too was determined not to pander to his nosiness. He referred to the Maliks as ‘modern, hi-fi types’ and reiterated that his family had no wish to be like them. ‘We

believe in sticking to our place in society,' he said smugly.

When Sharma-ji realized he was not getting anywhere on the Malik front, he decided to open another one. Picking up on the stray comment about my uncle Ramu, he inquired about him. My mother explained that the colourful son of my maternal grandfather's brother—everyone called him 'Ramu Mama' in our family—had made his fortune in Lahore and now lived an aristocratic life in Bombay, hobnobbing with Parsi dowagers and princely families from Gujarat.

'Yes, good old Ramu Mama, he is our only real link to what you call modern, hi-fi life,' said my mother. 'He always stays at the Imperial Hotel when he visits Delhi.'

'Why doesn't he stay at the Gymkhana Club? It would be more economical, and just as prestigious.'

'But he is not a member.'

'Not a member?' echoed Sharma-ji.

'Yes, he has been making endless efforts to get himself elected to the Gym but someone on the committee consistently blackballs him.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. He finds it hard to understand—he is so well connected and, of course, so eligible—a member of clubs all over the world. He thinks it may be envy—he is an outstanding tennis and bridge player, you see, and the blackballer is afraid that he will show him up.' Thus, they went on chatting. My mother was happy to talk about Ramu Mama, whom she greatly admired. He was a shy, discreet man and never guilty of dropping a single name. We had been quite ignorant of Ramu Mama's brilliant social connections until Anand had filled us in about his colourful life during one of his unexpected visits.

'Sharma-ji is in heaven today.' His wife suddenly interrupted our conversation. We were at our neighbour's house for dinner two weeks later. Mrs Sharma had something on her mind. Just as we had arrived, the husband and wife had been having a scene and she could not contain herself. Sharma-ji explained with some self-satisfaction that a marriage proposal had arrived for Avanti from back home in Ujjain and he wanted our opinion. A conservative, old, wealthy Brahmin family that had been in business for almost a hundred years wanted Avanti's hand for their twenty-five-year-old son.

'It's a perfect match.' Sharma-ji beamed. He elucidated that the boy was just the right age. The nine-year son with Avantika conformed perfectly to the

the right age. The nine year gap with Avantika conformed perfectly to the dictates of the shastras. At serious moments such as these, he referred to his daughter by her formal name. The horoscopes of the two matched. The only defect was the gotra—he would have wished for a higher gotra within the Sharma sub-caste. Other than that, it was ideal.

‘What ideal?’ exclaimed his wife. She didn’t want her daughter marrying into a business family. They were stingy and mean-hearted. ‘Besides, how will we meet their demands for a big dowry?’ To top it, the proposal had come via Sharma-ji’s brother, who was completely unreliable. ‘He always gets swayed by money,’ she said dismissively,

‘But Avantika is not getting any younger,’ countered Sharma-ji.

‘For pity’s sake, she is only sixteen!’ Mrs Sharma protested.

‘That’s old!’ he said. ‘All the girls in my father’s family were married by puberty.’

Mrs Sharma calmly said that she would prefer her daughter to marry someone from a modern, professional background. ‘Someone like him,’ she said, looking at me.

‘What does Avanti think?’ asked my mother, suddenly apprehensive.

‘Avanti thinks the boy is a weakling,’ said Avanti.

‘But you’ve only seen his picture, Avantika,’ her father appealed.

‘He is feeble.’

‘What!’

‘No spine, I can tell. He’ll do his mother’s bidding.’

‘You can tell all this from a studio photo?’ said Sharma-ji. He got up and brought out a large photograph of a reasonably good-looking young man and passed it around proudly.

‘You’re boring our guests, Father,’ moaned Avanti.

There was a knock on the door and Avanti ran to open it. She returned a few minutes later to say that it was a poor, distant female relative of theirs from Ujjain who urgently needed 200 rupees for the medical treatment of her son. Both husband and wife obviously knew her and they looked at each other in irritation. With a scowl, Sharma-ji said, ‘Tell her that we don’t have that kind of money.’

‘Besides, we have guests for dinner, Avanti,’ said his wife. ‘Ask her to come back later.’

‘Come back for what?’ thundered Sharma-ji. ‘She is not going to get a paisa from me.’

‘Why?’ asked Avanti defiantly. She looked at her mother and said, ‘I know there are 200 rupees in your purse.’

‘But that’s for your clothes!’ protested Mrs Sharma.

‘The clothes can wait, not her son.’ Avanti went and took the money out of her mother’s purse and gave it to the woman. The conversation resumed.

Sharma-ji expressed his fears as though he were speaking to himself. He worried that life was changing around him too quickly, especially in the way young people behaved with each other. Avanti would soon be going to college and he didn’t want her to get into the wrong company. Girls of Avanti’s age would attend lectures with boys; they would mix freely with men; and walk with them on the streets. There was always a fashionable set in each college. She would meet other girls who would choose their husbands from among the boys in college. And he suddenly grew silent.

‘What’s wrong in a girl choosing?’ I asked. In the old days, girls from the best families chose their husbands through *svayamvara*. ‘Didn’t Damayanti choose Nala in this way from a line of suitors?’

‘Look, I don’t know where the world is going. I am a traditional Brahmin,’ said Sharma-ji. ‘I cannot accept a love marriage.’ He reminded us that begetting a son and marrying off a daughter were the chief responsibilities of a father, according to the Dharmashastras. ‘If he fails in these two, he goes to hell,’ he said mournfully.

‘I have no problem with an arranged marriage as long as it’s the right person,’ said Avanti.

Mrs Sharma looked around for support.

‘It’s the people who have to get married—they should decide and take responsibility for their lives,’ I said suddenly. My parents were surprised at my announcement.

‘What about *your* son?’ asked Sharma-ji. ‘Will he have the freedom to decide?’

Avanti looked at me.

‘Of course, I will decide,’ I said with bravado.

My mother turned to my father uneasily, and I could tell she was uncomfortable. Intellectually, she had a feminist disposition, but when it came to

her family, she believed in the old Indian ‘arranged marriage’ instead of the modern ‘love marriage’. But she diplomatically skirted the issue, saying, ‘I hope he will listen to us.’ My father tried to comfort both his host and his wife, saying that parents worried too much—young people were more sensible than we imagined.

It was easier in the case of a son, felt Sharma-ji. Someone without a daughter could never know the anxieties of a girl’s parents. ‘Will she be safe? Will he treat her with respect?’ he voiced his fears. A boy could effortlessly turn a girl’s head. And how lightly boys took their flirting, unaware they were playing with a girl’s life.

‘I must admit I too worry sometimes,’ confessed Mrs Sharma.

~

I didn’t take Sharma-ji seriously at the time but over the years I have grown to empathize with his deepest anxieties. There is indeed a difference between having a son and having a daughter, and the parents of a daughter seem to be more vulnerable. In Sharma-ji’s case, his fears were more acute because of his conservative Brahmin background. To some extent, his anxieties reflected a worry that fathers everywhere have for their daughters. The world is a dangerous place and he had a niggling fear when Avanti went out, especially at night. However, the solution to this apprehension that the ancient Indian civilization devised was unique and brought about a compromise between the kama optimists and pessimists.

By the middle of the first millennium BCE, the ascetic ideal began to take a mesmerizing hold on ordinary householders, and young men in large numbers thought of adopting the renouncer’s life. Seeing hordes departing for the forest, the established order felt threatened, and it responded decisively and innovatively. The *Manusmriti* forbade men to renounce kama till they had successfully fulfilled the householder’s duty to produce offspring in the second stage of life. Oddly enough, India was underpopulated at that time, and this might have contributed to elevating kama to one of life’s aims. ‘The secret of Hinduism may be found in the dialogue between the renouncer and the man-in-the-world [grihastha].’ Since kama is needed for perpetuating the human race, the establishment struck a compromise between the kama optimists and



pessimists. It did not deny kama but created a clear, well-defined boundary for it to operate. The Dharmashastras affirmed that kama is legitimate as long as it is for procreation in the second ashrama of life.

The obligation to have a family—a son, in particular—came from the novel Vedic ‘doctrine of debts’—to gods, ancestors and seers. Begetting a son achieved the prized goal of immortality.

*A debt he pays in him  
And immortality he gains  
The father who sees the face  
Of his son born and alive.*

*Greater than the delights  
That earth, fire and water  
Bring to living beings,  
Is a father's delight in his son.*

There is a Vedic imperative for populating the earth, and procreative sex becomes obligatory. Lopamudra sums up the Vedic attitude: ‘Men should go to their wives.’ By the time of the Mahabharata, it becomes a formal duty of a man to make love to his wife during her fertile period: ‘By ignoring the fertile period, a man commits a sin which leads him to hell.’

The ashrama system of the stages of life was an elegant historical conciliation of sorts that tried to synthesize the demands of the kama optimists and pessimists. It divided human life into four sensible stages, accompanied by rites of passage at each one, allowing the individual to embrace and renounce desire at appropriate times of his life. It provided security to the family by confining the pleasures of kama to the worldly, second stage of life within the confines of marriage, and denied access to kama in the first stage, decreeing celibacy for the student. On retirement at the third stage, *vanaprastha*, one was expected to disengage from worldly pursuits, begin to detach from kama, and seek the meaning of life. In the fourth and final stage, *sannyasa*, one was expected to become totally celibate again, renouncing the world in quest of spiritual release from human bondage.

This also meant that a young man in his first ashrama should not be tempted to pursue the ascetic life, which explained my father's inhibitions about initiating me too early into his mystical practices. It is also why King Suddhodana advised his famous son Gautama, the future Buddha, to:

his famous son Gautama, the future Buddha, to.

*Give up this plan, dear child! The time is not right for you . . . [Your] senses are excited easily by sensual pleasures, a young man is incapable of the hardships of ascetic vows . . . and solitude.*

The ashrama system was thus a grand historical compromise but it did not satisfy either the kama optimists or the pessimists. The optimist suddenly found that kama's sphere of operation had been tamed by society and confined to marriage—everything beyond it was 'illicit love'. The pessimist found that the establishment had converted his ambitious project of renunciation into an institution of old age. The dharma texts, as I mentioned, recorded this compromise between the kama optimists and pessimists. The institution of marriage was the deal. Society everywhere seems to have spontaneously and unconsciously achieved a similar settlement between the erotic and ascetic sides of human nature. In rejecting the perpetual celibacy of the pessimistic renouncer and the libertinism of the optimistic seeker of pleasure, Hindu society brought about a new decorum in sexual relations. The dharma texts legitimized marriage and codified its rules. Thus, there arose a third voice between the renouncer and the voluptuary, the voice of the average householder, who is a person of moderation in most societies. He is generally focused on leading an ethical life with his wife and children in the wholesomeness of a family atmosphere.

The ancients had grasped kama's threefold nature: it is procreative; capable of ecstatic pleasure; and wildly uncontrollable. They saw in it a potential for great tragedy. A woman, in particular, was more vulnerable because of patriarchal inequality. Kama optimists thus had to be tamed, and marriage was the answer. Kama pessimists presented a different challenge. The sannyasi, 'renouncer', was obsessed with the idea that desire was the source of human suffering. He offered the ordinary householder liberation from the human bondage to desire. The price, however, was high—he must renounce sexuality in favour of celibacy.

There has always been lingering anxiety within the Brahminical establishment that kama pessimists might prevail. The renouncer has always been a charismatic figure in India—from Gautama Buddha to Mahatma Gandhi. If he were to persuade large numbers of householders to defect and renounce the world, he might threaten the very survival of the species. If men stopped procreating during the second ashrama of life, it would also undermine marriage, thus endangering the grand synthesis between the kama optimists and pessimists.

Like many renouncers, Gandhi believed that sex entailed frittering away the power of the semen, which was akin to a 'life force', and this undermined spiritual progress. He felt the loss of semen led to the dissipation of energy and power, and somewhat like Freud diminished the civilizing power of sublimation. In his autobiography, Gandhi narrates his feelings of guilt that at the moment when his father was dying, he was making love to his wife, Kasturba, and this might also explain his obsession with celibacy. In later life, Gandhi conducted infamous experiments to test himself if he had overcome his sexual urges by sleeping naked with young members of his ashram, Manu, Abha and Sushila. Some members of the ashram were convinced that Gandhi's body was the 'body of India' and they equated celibacy with ensuring that the body remained pure and deserving of India's freedom from colonial rule. The violence accompanying the partition of India, in Gandhi's eyes, meant that Indians had somehow failed in achieving that state of purity. Nehru, of course, dismissed Gandhi's advocacy of celibacy within marriage as 'silly and unnatural'.

Unlike animals, people are also motivated by fancy. Desire travels from our senses to our imagination, whence it creates an illusion around a particular person. Society ensures that this human ability is employed for marriage and the stability of society and survival of the species. Marriage has made kama acceptable by converting it into 'conjugal sexuality'. Societies everywhere have exploited the human's charming inclination towards fantasy around a particular individual by instituting monogamy via the institution of marriage. Marriage has made kama acceptable by converting it into 'conjugal sexuality'. Hence, the Dharmashastras insist that sex is only for procreation. It was a natural follow-up, as I have said, to another arrangement within the Indian civilization—the four-stage ashrama system. The grihastha, or the householder stage, is based on the evolutionary benefits that emerged from the institution of family. When the survival of our species mattered, the family was supremely useful as an economic unit of production and consumption. Monogamy was needed for the family to endure. If individuals did transgress when young, they could redeem themselves through marriage and become respectable.

Not unlike 'morality' and the 'market', marriage seems to have emerged spontaneously in history. Friedrich Hayek would have called it 'spontaneous order'. Kinship through marriage and the prohibition of incest are among the first features of human culture, making a major break with our primate ancestors.

Early human beings, who lived between five and 1.8 million years ago, had little use for marriage. Like bonobos, they presumably had sex with many partners. They shared food in exchange for sexual favours, including same-gender pairs. Women would collect nuts, fruits, and insects while carrying babies and did not need men to provide for them. There was no advantage in a loyal pair.

As the climate became warmer and forests declined, between 1.8 million and 23,000 years ago, human beings began to move out to the prairie and their diet also changed. They began to eat the meat left behind by predators or killed by male hunters using tools. A meat-based diet meant that men had to go out and hunt and the women had to look after the children and this created greater interdependence between the male and the female. Those babies had a greater chance of surviving where the couple stayed together for at least three or four years. Between 23,000 and 10,000 years ago, humans began to grow their own food, and this led slowly to an agricultural revolution. About 4000 years ago they invented the plough, which meant an even greater division of labour. Men did the physically harder work on the land; women stayed behind, cared for the children, and did household chores. This economic unit was so productive that men and women began to stay together more permanently. Marriage was a historical consequence. Since the community recognized the couple, the ritual of marriage became more public; the more public it became, the greater the recognition. In course of time, it became a legal contract, giving the man some assurance that the children were his and giving the woman some security that she would not be left destitute if the man moved on.

A telling story in the Mahabharata reinforces this evolutionary account of the shift from polygamy to monogamy. The epic clearly believes that society in earlier times was not monogamous and sexual attitudes were far more liberal. The young and attractive sage of the Upanishads, Shvetaketu Uddalaka, felt disturbed at seeing his mother leave the house at night with another man. He was even more surprised that his father did not get jealous or find anything wrong in her actions. He decreed monogamy and this led to society's control over sexuality.

In prehistoric societies, women's sexuality and reproductive power seemed to pose no problem. It was accepted as an inherent part of their being. Shvetaketu's parents were relaxed about their promiscuity. But after marriage emerged as an

institution, legal texts such as the Dharmashastras imposed stringent controls on most societies. Women's sexuality became a problem: their essential nature, their maternal power, had to be controlled by paternal power to serve the social and political order made by men. Thus, men of the dominant classes subordinated women and effectively controlled their sexuality.

The laws of the Dharmashastras were mainly concerned with regulating the behaviour of the householder in society. Hence, they are only interested in the procreative side of kama, not its erotic or recreational aspect. Cohabitation is a duty of both men and women and there are penalties if they do not perform it. A man must ensure that his wife's *ṛitu*, 'menses', is not wasted. The objective is to produce children, especially sons. Intercourse that does not produce progeny is looked down upon as much as the celibacy of the ascetic's life. A *rajasvala*, 'menstruating', woman is temporarily barren and a man who copulates with her is guilty of sin.

The evolutionary explanation for mating lies in the biological desire of men and women to ensure that their children survived. Some of the discussions in the Sharma household about a suitable husband were not so different, I reckon, from what went on in the mind of a prehistoric woman. Sharma-ji wanted for Avanti a mate who would provide for the family; who did not beat her or heap her with physical abuse; and who was faithful and did not abandon her. She judged a man for his ability to build a nest for her children.

Other species evolved similar mate preferences. When a male African village weaverbird spots a female, 'he displays his recently built nest by suspending himself upside down from the bottom and vigorously flapping his wings. If the male passes this test, the female approaches the nest, enters it, and examines the nest materials, poking and pulling them for as long as ten minutes. As she makes her inspection, the male sings to her from nearby. At any point in this sequence she may decide that the nest does not meet her standards and depart to inspect another male's nest. A male whose nest is rejected by several females will often break it down and start over. By exerting a preference for males who can build a superior nest, the female weaverbird solves the problems of protecting and provisioning her future chicks.'

In a similar way, human beings are descended from a long and unbroken line of ancestors who competed successfully for desirable mates. Women, like weaverbirds, prefer men with desirable 'nests'. I was amused to read that

American women valued many of the same things that Sharma-ji's family wanted in a groom. Dozens of studies in America show that women basically want a husband who will provide for the family. Hence, money, power and status are usually at the top of their preferences. A large study in twenty-six countries, on all the continents, came up with the same finding. Similarly, studies reveal women's preference for taller and stronger men, which evolutionary scientists interpret as a cue for the physical protection that primordial man offered a woman in prehistoric times.

Early on, our ancestral mother determined that sex entailed unequal costs. A human child meant the encumbrance of internal fertilization, a nine-month gestation, and lactation. She, thus, had to be careful in selecting a mate who would be able to provide for her and the children. Our ancestral father could basically walk away after impregnating her. In his case, there was natural bias for casual sex without commitment. There is, indeed, much truth to the old saying that some men will be 'cads' who prefer to mate with many women, while others will be 'dads' who invest their resources on a single woman and her children.

Given this biological inequality between the sexes, I have sometimes wondered why men marry at all. Since reproduction of the human race needed our ancestral fathers merely to impregnate our ancestral mothers, casual sex without commitment would have sufficed. Yet, a human male seems to provide his wife and children with enormous resources—to an extent that is unprecedented among primates. It is a puzzle.

~

The marriage proposal for Avanti fizzled out. The rich Brahmin family from Ujjain backed out when it became clear that Avanti's family could not meet their expectations for a dowry suitable to their status. Sharma-ji had offered what was perfectly reasonable for a professional, middle-class family, but as Avanti's mother had predicted, it was inadequate for a business family, as they felt diminished in the eyes of their business peers. Sharma-ji had been tempted to take a loan against their family home in Ujjain but Mrs Sharma had put her foot down, and she had been supported enthusiastically by my mother.

In the end, the boy's side found another girl from a business family in Indore.

Mrs Sharma was relieved. She had always thought it a bad idea. Sharma-ji was disappointed but Avanti was delighted. She felt as free as a lark and practically flew over to our house and smiled a lot as she gave us the news. As I listened I began to understand her. She thought of marriage as something that had to be done—an obligation to her family and society and she did not want to spend much time thinking about it. Unlike other girls of her age, she did not yearn for a handsome, rich, young prince. It was a traditional rite of passage and so, why fret over it? It was the same detachment towards worldly things I had observed in her on the way to Khan Market.

A few weeks later I was surprised to spot Avanti sitting on the floor in Ramakrishna's bookshop, absorbed in a book, oblivious to the world. I had accompanied my mother to shop for curtains that morning in Connaught Place.

'What are you reading?' I asked.

'Oh, just a book,' she said, closing it hurriedly. She tried to hide the cover and then gave us a smile so engaging that no one could take offence with the rebuff in her answer. But she was less successful in hiding the title.

'Bhagavad Gita!' exclaimed my mother. 'I do marvel at what young people are reading these days.'

Avanti blushed and got up. 'I come here early and I have the place to myself at this time. They are nice here and let me read until it gets crowded and then I buy the book and leave.'

'How about a chai break?' I suggested.

'But only if we are not disturbing your reading,' said my mother.

'I was thinking of taking a break anyway.'

Soon we were sitting in a tea stall near the bookshop. Avanti radiated health and playful gaiety. Her fresh spontaneity made the others sitting around us look old and tired.

'Why the Gita?' asked my mother.

'Well, I know so little about these things,' she replied modestly. 'I thought I would educate myself. Besides, they don't teach these things in school.'

'So, this is what you do in your spare time?'

'Yes, I read.'

'What are you looking for in these books?' I asked.

'If I knew it I'd be on the way to finding it,' she replied in a sincere, sweet manner that could not possibly give offence. Then she giggled in a nervous sort

of way.

‘Can we take you back home later with us?’ I asked.

She looked at me and said, ‘You can take me first to the Hanuman temple.’

I looked at her quizzically. She explained that she had promised her father to pray for a husband. ‘He thinks I botched it up the last time.’

‘You don’t seem to be in any hurry as far as I can tell.’

‘That’s true. But since I did promise, I feel I should go.’ She rose, saying that she must return to her book inside. While leaving she gave us a smile of such sweetness that it lit her face with an inner light. I promised to return for her after an hour.

After Avanti left, and as we slowly sipped our tea, my mother observed, ‘She has a lot of self-possession for so young a person. She isn’t quite like any girl I’ve met.’ This was the most favourable thing my mother had said about Avanti. Over time I noticed that she had let her guard down—she no longer imagined that Avanti was about to ensnare her son.

While Avanti returned to her reading, we went to buy the curtain material, and before I put my mother on a bus, I promised her that I would drop a package for Ramu Mama at the Imperial Hotel. I then accompanied Avanti to the temple on Irwin Road. We were greeted by monkeys at the entrance. I smiled.

‘Why are you amused?’ she asked.

‘To be greeted by monkeys at the temple of the monkey god—it seems appropriate.’

What struck me, however, was an Islamic crescent moon on the temple’s spire. Is this why, I wondered, the Hanuman temple had not been destroyed by Muslim invaders? There were many pilgrims about, all devotees of Lord Hanuman, and they undoubtedly had favours to ask of the monkey god. As we were going in, Avanti informed me that the Pandavas had first built this temple at the time of the Mahabharata.

‘And you believe it?’ I asked.

‘Of course.’

I was never surprised when Avanti expressed complete faith in what I regarded as charming myths. We took off our shoes and went inside the temple where Avanti spent a few minutes in prayer before the image of Hanuman. When she had finished, we struck the temple bell enthusiastically.



‘Did you pray for a husband?’

She nodded. After putting on our shoes, we lingered outside the temple, leaning against the railing.

‘You seem so far away, Avanti.’ I sighed.

‘I’m sorry, I can’t help it.’

She gave a rueful smile. I looked at the trees in the distance. ‘I miss Isha.’

‘She wasn’t right for you,’ she said matter-of-factly.

‘If only I could get her out of my head.’

‘It’s only your puberty of sorrow.’

‘Sometimes I wish I could be sensible like you. If I could settle down to the idea of an arranged marriage, I would not yearn for some great happiness through love . . . and not have to suffer so.’

Avanti became annoyed. What I had said was neither correct nor polite, she protested. ‘I have just as much right to happiness in love as you do, silly boy.’ She glared.

We talked about this and that. She grew relaxed and at one point giggled and her eyes sparkled. But she was clearly looking for something in life and I did not understand what it was. I looked at her oval face and it seemed as though it was lit by an inner flame rather than the light of the day. She straightened up suddenly and said, ‘It’s getting late.’ I asked if she minded if we stopped on the way to drop a small package for Ramu Mama.

‘At the Imperial Hotel?’ Her eyes widened. ‘I’ve never been inside.’

‘There’s always a first time.’

‘My father won’t like it,’ she said softly.

The hotel was on Queensway, a name that changed a few years later to the less monarchical and more democratic Janpath. Since it was not far, we walked. She was ahead of me on the narrow footpath and my eyes gravitated towards the unmistakable swinging of her hips. I was thinking that each time I began to understand Avanti, she surprised me. I could not imagine her reading the Gita. As we drew level I looked into her eyes and detected the same sense of remoteness—as though she was not all there. It was not coldness, and you could not take offence; it was just a lack of involvement with the moment. All this gave her an air of inscrutability.

‘I say that was a nice thing you did that day—giving money to that woman.’

‘It happens all the time—my father finds it so easy to forget his duty to others,

especially if they are poor relatives.'

We stopped at the imposing entrance to the Imperial.

'So, this is where they have dancing, right?'

I nodded.

'Do you know how to dance?'

'No.' After a pause, I added, 'But Isha did, and she used to come here all the time.'

We were in awe as we entered the lobby of the hotel. Neither of us knew what to do. Instead of going to the concierge to drop the package, or ask him to ring my uncle's room, we made a dash for Ramu Mama's room, whose number was boldly written on the envelope. I spotted a staircase, and without a fuss we began to climb up. We must have ascended with an air of such confidence that the few guests we passed on the way must have thought that we had lived here all our lives.

When we reached my uncle's door, I knocked softly. After a long silence, I heard my uncle's flustered voice. I announced that I had a package. After another interval, the door opened and a confused-looking man in a silk smoking jacket emerged. He was clearly shocked to see us.

'Who is it, darling?' came a female voice from inside.

'It's just a package that my nephew has brought!'

'Well, ask him in. I'd love to meet your nephew.'

My uncle obeyed reluctantly—he welcomed us inside. I don't know who was feeling more embarrassed by now but the three of us waited for the female voice to be embodied. As we sat down in the cosy living room of his suite, I introduced Avanti to Ramu Mama. My eyes fell on a huge tray of fruit in the corner, and my uncle went up and picked it up and set it beside us. It was a gesture to appease his own feelings of embarrassment rather than an act of hospitality. Eventually, a beautiful woman in a luxurious pink silk sari and exquisite jewellery entered and showered us with a gracious smile. Avanti and I had never seen such a sight.

'How like your family he is!' she remarked, bowing her head slightly.

'But you have never seen my family?' said Ramu Mama, still flustered.

'I have seen their photos, and he has your father's lovely eyes.'

'He seems to take more after his mother, who is of course, my cousin,' muttered Ramu Mama. He formally introduced his companion as Kamini

introduced Ramu Mama. He formally introduced his companion as Kamini.

‘Kamini Masi!’ she corrected him. By adding the suffix to her name, she had subtly underlined to us that she was related to me.

‘I have an idea,’ she added with a bright smile. ‘It’s teatime, and why don’t we take our young friends down to the tea lounge? I’m sure they would love to dance.’ While Ramu Mama changed into an evening blazer and shoes, she chatted cheerfully, putting us at ease. Beneath her idle talk, it was clear to both of us that she was a highly intelligent woman.

I reddened. ‘I don’t dance.’

‘Neither do I,’ said Avanti hastily.

‘We’ll just have to teach you then.’

After a pause, Avanti said, ‘Such beautiful pearls!’

‘His uncle gave them to me on my birthday, my dear.’

Soon we followed my uncle to the lift, and for the first time in our lives Avanti and I rode in an elevator. As we were walking to the lounge, Avanti whispered in my ear that Kamini Masi was an actress—she had seen her in a number of movies. To confirm this, heads turned to stare at the apparition in pink as we entered the tea lounge where a band was playing. As we were getting seated, Ramu Mama proudly reintroduced his companion as a ‘star’ from Bombay’s Hindi cinema.

‘Not a “star”, Ramu dear, I’m what is called a “B-grade actress”. Yes, perhaps a decent or even a high B, but not an A, mind you.’ She smiled and we were struck by her frankness and her friendly manner that had no trace of theatricality. Meanwhile, Ramu Mama was still feeling embarrassed by my presence and did not know quite how to treat me. Kamini Masi solved this problem right away. She summoned the waiter and ordered tea for everyone and pastries and samosas for the young—‘They are hungry,’ she told the waiter, ‘so bring plenty of food!’ Then she pulled my uncle’s arm and guided him to the dance floor. The band started a waltz; other couples followed and soon the floor was full. Neither Avanti nor I had seen anyone dance the waltz before. Ramu Mama and his beautiful companion were clearly the best, as my uncle effortlessly led her around the floor. Soon, they were gliding a few inches above the ground. Avanti and I watched them mesmerized. I had fallen in love with the Kamini Masi.

‘I would love to dance like that!’ I said.

‘So would I,’ said Avanti.

Soon the tea arrived, and when Kamini Masi saw the waiter placing it on the table, she signalled to her dancing partner, and they glided towards us. She clapped her hands and said, 'Come, come, eat up, you must be hungry!' She picked up the pastries and passed them around. I selected a chocolate pastry and Avanti a pineapple one covered in cream, and we began to gobble them. As soon as we were full, we got up.

'Don't you want to learn to dance?' asked Kamini Masi.

'Not today,' I said shyly.

I thanked my uncle. Kamini Masi gave both of us a kiss.

'Children, now go home safely, your parents will be waiting,' Ramu Mama said, shaking our hands warmly.

We were in a daze as we came out and did not have to wait long at the bus stop outside the hotel. Since the bus was full we had to stand. On the way we passed Isha's home. Both of us saw it but ignored it. Suddenly at a blind turn, the bus swerved and we were thrown into each other's arms. It was an unexpected and pleasurable feeling. We did not rush to separate. Slowly we recovered but avoided looking at each other.

So deep an impression did the evening make on both of us that within minutes of reaching home, we gave our respective families a minute-by-minute account of our visit to paradise, omitting no details. In doing so, neither of us had anticipated the reaction. What we thought was a triumphant adventure, turned into a near tragedy. My mother's affection and awe of her cousin evaporated and was replaced by middle-class moral judgement. Despite her feminist views, she thought it inappropriate for a bachelor to be carrying on an illicit relationship in public, and that too in the company of adolescents. I defended him, saying that it was my mistake and that I should have just left the package downstairs. She blamed herself for sending me to deliver it. But this was nothing compared to Sharma-ji's thunderous reaction. He came rushing over and blamed us for defiling his daughter and ruining her future.

'Who will marry her now!' he screamed at the top of his lungs.

The unfortunate event soured our neighbourly relations. My mother was not particularly troubled because she felt that the Sharmas were not really 'our sort of people'. She had a superior air when it came to Avanti and still feared that I might fall for her.

It also cooled my family's association with Ramu Mama and our link to the

high life, at least for a few years. Avanti and I thought it such a pity that two of the most attractive and kindest persons we had ever met were lost to us. Despite our families, Avanti and I remained good friends. The incident proved to me the immense power of the compromise between kama optimists and pessimists. Marriage, I realized, is such a commanding norm in our society that any relationship outside it, between consenting, loving adults becomes illicit and subject to punishment. This is why most societies, including the West until recently, have created myths which forbid people to create attachments outside the bonds of marriage.

~

Our relationship with Ramu Mama was a bit like Marcel's family's relationship with Charles Swann. Swann was a faithful friend of the family and a constant dinner guest. Through him we are led, either directly or indirectly, to all the important characters of the book. He is wealthy, intellectual and Jewish, with a great taste in art. I instinctively admired him, as I did Ramu Mama, although I also empathized with young Marcel's fears that Swann's visits to dinner got in the way of his mother's ritual goodnight kiss. For, on those days,

*Mamma did not come up to my room. I said good night and went to bed . . . I should have liked not to think of the hours of anguish which I should have to spend, alone in my room, without the possibility of going to sleep . . .*

From Marcel's fears, Proust moves on to inform us of Swann's secret life as a member of Paris's famous Jockey Club, which had the same halo around it that the Delhi Gymkhana Club had in my imagination. Swann was a close friend of the Prince of Wales and one of the most sought after men in the aristocratic world of the Faubourg Saint-Germain.

*Our utter ignorance of the brilliant part which Swann was playing in the world of fashion was, of course, due in part to his own reserve and discretion, but also to the fact that middle-class people in those days took what was almost a Hindu view of society, which they held to consist of sharply defined castes, so that everyone at his birth found himself called to that station in life which his parents already occupied . . .*

It is curious that Marcel refers to his great-aunt as having a 'Hindu view of society' but, of course, Sharma-ji also had some of the same misgivings about

Ramu Mama's socializing with the princely families of Gujarat—families who were clearly above what he thought was our uncle's proper 'station in life'. Sharma-ji's views matched Marcel's great-aunt's and his obsession with Avanti's marriage prevented him from seeing the good qualities that Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi possessed. His single-minded preoccupation, verging almost on mania, may seem odd to non-Indians today, especially in the West, but until the late eighteenth century, most societies around the world regarded marriage as an economic and political institution, not to be trusted with the individuals concerned; that one should marry for love was a strange and even dangerous idea.

In premodern Europe, marriages were not based on sexual attraction but economic circumstance. Marriage was a means of organizing agrarian labour among the poor.

Kissing, caressing and other forms of physical affection associated with sex were rare among the peasantry in seventeenth-century France and Germany, although men found opportunities for extramarital liaisons. In the nineteenth century, the idea took hold in the newly emerging middle classes that marriages should be based on romantic love. It coincided more or less with the emergence of the novel. As romantic novels became popular, 'romancing' became a synonym for courting. The marital bond got disentangled from wider kinship ties; husbands and wives became collaborators in a joint emotional enterprise and the 'home' became distinct from the workplace. And this idea went right down to the working classes. The aristocracy, of course, had always made its own rules—their women were freer, liberated from routine work and reproductive trials, and available to pursue sexual pleasure.

Coupling love with marriage and motherhood held in check the subversive character of romantic love. Adding stability was the idea that true love was forever. Since marriage was effectively forever for most people, the ideal seemed to work in theory. In reality, of course, romantic love did not lead to marriage in most cases and it meant years of unhappiness for couples in a highly repressive society. We forget how repressive it was: in Britain, unmarried girls who became pregnant were sent to reformatories and mental hospitals. The Mental Deficiency Act, passed in 1913 in England, allowed local authorities to certify and detain indefinitely, unmarried pregnant women who were poor,

homeless or just ‘immoral’. One woman, born in 1918 in London, recalls that her mother whispered to her every night as she went to sleep that she must not have sex before marriage or she would go insane.

Nevertheless, the institution of the modern ‘love marriage’ has become the norm in the world, supplanting the old ‘arranged marriage’. But when Avanti protested outside the temple that she too had as much a right to romantic love, she was expressing a modern ideal that came into India with the British Raj and flowered in Bollywood cinema. The persistence of ‘arranged marriage’ in India, however, surprises everyone. No one quite knows why it endures. My own guess is that the compromise struck between the kama optimists and pessimists over marriage must have been a profoundly weighty moment in our society’s history; and the dharma texts thereafter went on to perform such an effective job of conditioning young men and women over the centuries that ‘love marriage’ has not made the sort of headway that it has elsewhere.

Ideas create meaning in the world. Romantic love is one of them. It is based on wish fulfilment, and while a part of us knows its limitations, it helps to escape the unpleasantness of ordinary life. When Avanti staked her claim to romantic love, she imagined it to be one of the great goods that human beings rightly cherish and naturally wish to enjoy. Bertrand Russell, the English philosopher, called it the ‘source of the most intense delights that life has to offer . . . something of inestimable value, to be ignorant of which is a great misfortune to any human being’. But unlike some Romantics, Russell denied that this kind of love ought to be the basis of a happy or stable marriage. He thought marriage depended on ‘affectionate intimacy quite unmixed with illusion’.

Although we never spoke about it, Avanti must have known that romantic love contained a glamorous mist that prevented lovers from truly understanding each other’s being—the sort of mist that coloured our afternoon with Ramu Mama at the Imperial Hotel. Modern Indian society, not unlike other societies, also contains a covert emotional history, of stories of men and women like Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi. The difference between the ‘chaste’ sexuality of marriage and the erotic or passionate character of extramarital affairs has existed in all societies, schism of women into pure (marriageable) and impure (courtesans, prostitutes, concubines and actresses). Kamini Masi clearly belonged to the second category. The irony is that Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi had lived together for so long that they were no different from any married

Must have lived together for so long that they were no different from any married couple except that they were probably happier. They just never bothered to get married. Society, however, could not respect this choice.

In the end, there is no logical connection between love, sex and marriage—the three ideas that many believe to be naturally connected. People love each other without marrying, especially gay persons; people certainly have sex with those they do not love, and love others without having sex with them. So, love and sex fall apart theoretically. People also have sex without being married; many marriages are sexless because of boredom. So, sex and marriage are also not logically related. Many couples do not wish to have children and women can get pregnant without having sex; thus, procreation and sex do not always go hand in hand. Equally, childless marriages are common and children are sometimes born out of wedlock. So, procreation and marriage come apart. People love each other without having children or have children when they don't love each other. Thus, there is no conceptual reason to connect love, sex and marriage.

~

Isha introduced me to sexual modernity, while Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi reinforced a liberal attitude that is inherent in a modern outlook on life. Isha brought great thrill and excitement into my life, but great pain as well. Avanti came along a few years later and helped to heal some of it. My recovery was like a blue haze on a Himalayan mountain—a haze that envelops everything at a blissful time when adolescence is just coming to an end, and with it are gone the limitless possibilities of youth. Who has not had that feeling?

Anything could have happened between Avanti and me. I was vulnerable and hungry for affection after Isha. But Avanti was aloof and her remoteness marked a clear boundary in our relations. She was different from anyone I had ever met. She neither had the upper-class glamour of Isha, nor the prissiness of the new Indian middle class in the making. She was her own person. She was also a seeker, but what she was seeking was unclear to me, and perhaps, even to her.

If Avanti offered intimations of a different way of living, Sharma-ji's traditional insecurities over marrying off a daughter introduced me to the power of patriarchy embedded in almost all cultures. I couldn't swallow his and Manu's notorious idea that 'every woman desires every man she sees'. It even



appears, most amusingly, in the animal tales of the *Panchatantra*, where a beguiling nymph, Panchachuda, reluctantly discloses the secrets of a woman's heart in a half-joking, half-serious manner to the mischievously insistent sage Narada. 'I am a woman; so, how can I malign women?' she says, before revealing everything in one of the first great exposés of all times—about a woman's wily and faithless nature:

*While talking to one  
She is looking desirously at another  
But thinking of a third.  
Who really is her beloved?*

I accept that I am a product of patriarchy as much as the next man but I have always found it difficult to relate to its central notion of hierarchy. Beginning with Isha, I seem to look up to women rather than down on them. What interests me more, however, is the difference between the sexes. Like Othello, I am curious, for example, as to who enjoys sex more—man or woman? This question has intrigued human beings for thousands of years and the Mahabharata offers a charming answer in the story of King Bhangashvana, who had the rare experience of living life first as a man and then as a woman. Because of his exemplary life, he was given a choice of gender towards the end of his life—would he prefer to be born as a male or female in his next birth? To everyone's surprise, including the god Indra, he chose to be reborn as a woman. Why? Because, he confesses, a 'woman enjoys sex far more than a man'. The ancient Greeks have a similar story in the life of Tiresias. No doubt, both stories are the product of the male imagination!

I have hypothesized that the institution of marriage was born as an unconscious compromise between the kama optimists and pessimists. Shvetaketu was the first to make the novel suggestion that men should not generally sleep with other men's wives and he decreed monogamy. Ever since mating and matchmaking have become an art in which men and women and their families ruthlessly pursue the opposite sex in order to achieve their economic and political goals. It is not so different in the evolution of other species. Peahens are partial to peacocks with glittering plumage and dull-feathered males are left behind in the evolutionary dust. Peacocks today possess brilliant plumage because peahens have been attracted to it over the history of

evolution.

The grand compromise between the kama optimists and pessimists, if the evolutionary thesis is to be believed, suggests how social pressure for commitment to marriage may have emerged because it conferred reproductive benefits to our survival as a species. But it was an imperfect deal and it entailed costs. It was a ‘civilizing’ institution but it reduced the freedom of both sexes, and far more in a woman’s case. The accompanying ideology of *stri-dharma* and *pativrata* restricted a married woman severely and there were severe penalties for those who broke the rules, not to speak of social ostracism.

Time is a healer and with its passing has receded much of the pain of my adolescence. Now, after fifty years, I am able to look back on my early days in Delhi with a knowing and sympathetic smile that old age accords to youth. The ‘knowing’ is an awareness that kama is not just at the root of creation but it is the source of much ‘good’ and ‘bad’. It lurks behind passion, pleasure, creativity, jealousy, anger, violence, and more. But are the two sides linked inextricably? Is it possible to experience pleasure without pain? Can creativity exist without violence? These are not easy questions and they persist even today.



## IF YOU ARE KISSED, KISS BACK

### *The self-deceptions of a nagaraka*

*When a man has become educated, he enters the householder stage of life and begins the lifestyle of a man-about-town . . . He settles down in a city—a capital city, a market town, or wherever he has to stay to make a living. And there he makes his home in a house near the water, with an orchard, separate servant quarters, and two bedrooms.*

—Kamasutra I.4.1–2

The hero of the *Kamasutra* is called nagaraka, a cultivated man about town, which is the image I had of myself when I came to live in Bombay in the 1960s. After completing university, I found a reasonably good job in the big city. Ramu Mama got me into the Bombay Gymkhana Club. Feeling tall in the confidence of my twenty-four years, I embraced Bombay—it was my *nagara*, ‘city’, and I its nagaraka—before they changed its name to Mumbai. The next thing to do was to find a place to live and to love.

It is hard to imagine that I was the same person who had once been a wary, nervous and introverted adolescent in Delhi. For this I have to mostly thank Avanti, who gave me the confidence that I could even begin to imagine myself as a nagaraka. But Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi also played their part in helping me to lose some of the shyness of my adolescent years. Following Bombay’s custom, I became the ‘paying guest’ of a Gujarati lady who had two spacious rooms with plenty of light on the roof of her two-storey house near the old Colaba post office. It overlooked a mango orchard with a splendid view of the sea. It had a huge open-air terrace that became my living room, except during the monsoons.

I placed a low but large divan at one end of the front room, covered it with a handloom print from Gujarat with frolicking elephants, and surrounded it with colourful cushions so that it served as a sitting couch during the day. I lined the

room with books and a small painting by Gaitonde that I had acquired on instalments from the Chemould Art Gallery at Kala Ghoda. I placed a birdcage, a wrought iron swing, and a stone chessboard in my open-air living room. I had acquired these from Chor Bazaar and my terrace flat became ideal for parties on the weekends when I adorned it with flowers from the flirtatious *phoolwali* around the corner.

Without realizing it, I was following the script of the *Kamasutra*, whose first chapter entitled ‘The Lifestyle of the Man-about-town’ goes like this:

*In the outer room there is a bed, low in the middle and very soft with pillows on both sides and a white top sheet, and a couch. At the head of the bed there is a mat and an altar, on which are placed the oils and garlands left over from the night, a pot of beeswax, a vial of perfume, some bark from a lemon tree, and betel. On the floor a spittoon. A lute, hanging from an ivory tusk, a board to draw or paint, and a box of pencils. Some book or other, and a garland of amaranth flowers. On the floor, not too far away, a round bed with a pillow for the head. And a board for dice and gambling. Outside, cages for pet birds. And set aside a place for carpentry or woodworking and other games. In the orchard, a well-padded swing in the shade, and a bench made of baked clay and covered with flowers.*

I did not need a spittoon as I had a brand-new sink in my bathroom of the latest design from Hindustan Twyford. Instead of a lute, I had a Harman Kardon music system. In place of a dice board, I had a chessboard. Nor did I need the bark from a lemon tree as I used Colgate toothpaste:

*The lover, who in the evening, sucks  
a stick of lemon bark, smeared with honey,  
is not plagued by foul breath  
when he is caught in the net of his woman’s arms.*

Happily, I did not suffer from bad breath, as some of the women in my life have reassured me. I followed the *Kamasutra*’s advice to have a book of poetry on the table to read aloud at the right moment to the right person, and I did furnish the room with a special couch for sleeping after sex.

*The lover makes love with his beloved  
wherever he happens to be,  
but a wise man, a pure man,  
does not sleep there on that polluted bed.*

I had discovered the *Kamasutra* at university. After returning from class one afternoon, I stumbled on a banner on the window of a bookshop that announced: ‘The first legal translation of the sex classic, the *Kamasutra*’. The ancient Indian text had finally come out of the closet after almost a century of clandestine, pirated editions as a result of the victory in a London court of D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in 1961. I quickly bought a copy on instalments and it opened up a whole new world of desire.

So began my education in *ars amoris*. I discovered to my delight that the *Kamasutra* is not a sex manual but a charming, surprisingly modern guide to the art of living. Addressed to both men and women, it teaches good manners:

*The best alliance plays the game  
so that both sides taste one another’s happiness  
and treat one another  
as unique individuals.*

It initiated me into the enviably happy life of a civilized nagaraka and I began to keep a copy of the book on my coffee table, a hint to my friends that I was a sophisticated sensualist. Having a superior sex handbook also meant the promise of secret pleasure.

‘Don’t be hurtful or barbaric!’ says the *Kamasutra*. It tells the man to satisfy a woman first and measures success in bed by how much the two enjoy each other in equal measure; be gentle with a virgin and first remove her fears and inhibitions; don’t approach your wife sexually on the first three nights after the wedding; instead, use this time to understand her feelings, win her trust and arouse her love. Indeed, the *Kamasutra* is a great leap forward in the history of kama in India by introducing the notion of love in sex.

The *Kamasutra* describes extravagant soirées where women are decked in lavish jewellery with elaborate hairdos that they hold in place with delicate, ornamental hairpins. There were twenty-two such exquisite hairstyles that I counted personally in the miraculously preserved paintings in the caves at Ajanta. The characters in them give picnic parties in gardens at the edge of the city where everyone comes smartly dressed. I could easily have been one of the guests at these picnics, who exclaims:

*Behold the splendour of the park!*

*The trees resplendent in their fruit and bloom  
Protected by the king's keen guard from doom  
And by the creeper vines closely embraced  
Like men with their women interlaced.*

Who would not be attracted to the nagaraka's sophisticated and hedonistic lifestyle? On a typical day, he has his limbs massaged with oil, teaches parrots to speak and engages in a whirlwind social life of games, music, and salons on art and literature, ending in a night of pleasure. Since I spent a third of my day at work, I wondered how the nagaraka made a living, or if he was wealthy, when did he manage his investments? But I did not dwell on these details and was content to be seduced by kama's optimism. The premise of the Kama Shastra tradition—of which the *Kamasutra* is the most famous text—is that kama is one of the legitimate aims of life and sexual pleasure exists for its own sake and not just as a means of procreation. Towards the end of the book it offers the best advice I have ever received.

*If you are kissed,  
kiss back.*

I did not have to wait long before I got a chance to test its counsel.

~

I thought I heard an unmistakable voice call out my name. I looked around and it was Isha. She was sitting on a cane sofa on the veranda of the Bombay Gymkhana Club. With her hands folded in her lap, she was facing the vast playing field with Victorian buildings on the horizon against the evening sky. I felt a thrill.

‘I had heard you were living here, Amar,’ she said.

‘It feels like a lifetime since I saw you! What about you? What brings you to the big city?’ I asked.

She opened her empty hands in her lap in a gesture of futility, and looked up slowly. ‘Nothing—hoping to find a job, hoping to escape from myself.’

‘Can one ever escape from oneself?’

Her lips curled into a smile. ‘You’ve changed,’ she said. ‘So much confidence . . . not the frightened, tongue-tied Amar I remember on the bicycle in Delhi.’

Yes, I had changed and she was the right person to notice it. I wanted to tell

Yes, I had changed and she was the right person to notice it. I wanted to tell her about everything that had happened since we parted: how the scars from the wounds she left behind had finally healed; how the healing began the day after Avanti moved next door; how Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi had helped settle me in Bombay, and more importantly, had cultivated in me a self-assured, optimistic attitude to life. Their love for fine clothes, ornaments, salons and beautiful people had reaffirmed my attraction for the nagaraka's life. For me, 'the way of kama' was not to live life in a fleeting or idle manner but to invest every action in one's life with passion. I wanted to tell her so many things. Instead, I merely said, 'Everyone changes, don't you think?'

'Most people don't,' she said, tilting her head in the characteristic way that I remembered so well.

I noticed that Isha's face and body had filled up a bit to her advantage. She was no longer quite as angular but she was still strikingly beautiful, I thought with a twinge. She was in a plain cotton sari with a sleeveless blouse that drew attention to her handsome neck and shoulders. In the late afternoon sun, her 'cotton look' emphasized a newer, friendlier and mellower disposition than the one I had known.

'Stay awhile if you are not pressed,' she said in an insistent voice.

I sat down beside her.

'What will you have?' I asked as I rang a shiny brass bell.

'What does one have in this remnant of the British Raj?'

'Fresh lime soda?'

She nodded. I signed for two fresh lime sodas. As we waited for the drinks, the memories of our days together in Delhi came racing back. I found it difficult to believe that this disenchanted woman was the same person who had brought me to my knees. As for her, she had obviously lived a life but its disappointments seemed to have left her even more beautiful.

'So, what are you doing here?' I asked.

'I am waiting for my husband. I seem to be only waiting these days.'

The bearer returned with two bottles of soda, a bucket of ice, a jug of sugar syrup, a container of salt and two glasses containing fresh lime juice. She added both sugar and salt, as well as ice to her drink. I drank mine without anything.

The mention of her husband made me mildly jealous. I wish I could have reciprocated her confidence and given her some token of acceptance. I was not



very good at small talk and the conversation faltered. I pointed in the distance the splendid municipal corporation with its extravagant domes and minarets, and the St Xavier's College nearby. Behind it was the JJ School of Art, where Rudyard Kipling was born, hundred years ago when his father ran the school. 'Victorian Bombay at its exuberant best!' I exclaimed. 'And if you go back another hundred years, all you had here were coconut and palm trees swaying in the breeze from the Arabian Sea.'

'I always liked your curly hair, Amar,' she said, looking at me intently. 'So, you like the big city?'

'Yes. It's a fine place where a lot goes on, and there is a chance for everyone. Delhi feels like a village after this. I love the energy here—you can almost smell money in the bazaars. I can put up with the overcrowding for the sake of being a part of it.'

'You have become wiser in the ways of the world. Tougher too.'

'You're gentler,' I said.

'... and more patient,' she added.

And sadder, I thought. I had heard that she and Anand had broken up and her mother had died soon after. She told me slowly and deliberately that her family's fortune had collapsed and the shock had killed her mother. Their grand house in Delhi was now in shabby disrepair. Occasionally, there was disappointment on her face as she spoke about the people we knew. She was bitter that most of her mother's friends had let them down when they had needed help.

'You wouldn't have done that, would you?' She looked up with a smile, her dark eyes sparkling. 'You are a good person.'

I smiled and wondered where this was going. 'Do women like men for their goodness?' I asked.

'Depends. What do *you* think attracts women?'

'Power? Position? Wealth?'

'You *have* become a man of the world.'

Both of us laughed. We talked lightly and easily. Isha did not speak about her husband even though I gave her several opportunities. She must be twenty-four now, I thought. There had hardly been a difference in our ages. What had been different was her family's status and wealth. What had seemed terribly important then had ceased to matter today. In the breeze of the early evening, we watched the buildings in the distance suffused with the glow from the setting sun. Long

strips of mellow orange light fell on the playing field and on the rows of commuters in the distance as they crossed the maidan along a narrow track that connected the Western Railway at Churchgate to the Central Railway line at Victoria Terminus. The rich, long shadows touched the great buildings at the back.

‘I say, I am dining with my uncle, Ramu Mama. Why don’t the two of you join us? He has a great cook. I can call Kamini Masi from the club.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Why don’t you check with your husband? They will be happy to see you. Ramu Mama knew your mother well in Lahore.’

‘I’ve promised Neena. You remember her, don’t you?’

‘Oh, she’s here? After a pause, I added, ‘She never liked me.’

‘She will like you now. Your smile . . . it fills your whole face. You’ve got it from your father, haven’t you?’

Isha’s husband arrived finally, accompanied by several friends from work. ‘Vikram Suri,’ he introduced himself. We shook hands.

Suddenly, I recognized him. ‘So, you are the wizard of Dalal Street!’

‘You’ve heard of me?’

‘Who hasn’t? Your picture was in the *Economic Times* last week.’

I turned to Isha. ‘You didn’t tell me.’

‘I didn’t know he was in the papers. Honestly, I have no idea what he does.’

As I got up to leave, Isha took my hand. She walked with me towards the club entrance and there gave me a sensual kiss dangerously close to my lips, whispering that we would meet again ‘very soon’. Without a thought, I kissed her back. Suddenly embarrassed, I turned to see if anyone was looking.

~

The pleasurable sensation of Isha’s kiss lingered for the next few days. The physical action of a kiss involves the mere rubbing of an area of nerve endings against the soft, fleshy, moist skin tissue of the other person. However, the hopes it engenders goes beyond the carnal sensation. I was swept by a forbidden, adulterous thought that Isha’s attitude to me might have changed—perhaps she did care for me. The kiss inspired in me the promise of pleasure and hope. My imagination sought to hold and savour not just her mouth but her entire person.

Proust expresses the opposite viewpoint. He feels that a kiss might produce a pleasurable physical tingle but it does not often deliver the beloved person. His narrator, Marcel, is attracted to Albertine, on a holiday while walking along the Normandy Coast one brilliant summer's day. He is attracted to her rosy cheeks, her black hair, her beauty spot, her impudent manner, and she evokes in him the smell of youth and the sea in summer. However, she is reserved with him at the seaside. Marcel returns to Paris at the end of summer, where Albertine pays a visit to his apartment. In contrast to her aloofness by the sea, she now kisses him ardently.

She lies close to him on the bed and embraces him. It's a promising moment. But it doesn't have the intended effect. The kiss does not evoke the magical past of her attractive and confident manner beside the summer sea. Because of the awkward kissing position, he feels squashed that he can hardly breathe. It is a particularly inept kiss, and it is a disappointment. The mistake, Proust points out, is our tendency to believe that a kiss or some form of physical contact might in fact put us directly in touch with the object of our love. Disappointed with the kiss, he wonders if there was ever any truth to his romantic attachment to Albertine.

I had instinctively invited Isha to Ramu Mama's flat because it was my second home in Bombay. It was where I had lived when I arrived in the city on a wet monsoon evening. The black-and-yellow taxi drove me to his flat on Malabar Hill, carelessly bouncing over the puddles. The street lights glistened on the moist asphalt. Bombay in the 1960s was *urbs prima in Indis*, 'India's first city'. It was an open-hearted, hopeful place that offered jobs to everyone even though it did not offer them a home. Its streets were lined with peepul, raintree and acacia, and they were washed daily with chlorinated water.

The Portuguese princess Catharine of Braganza had gifted Bombay to Charles II, king of England, as dowry on their marriage in June 1661. More than a hundred years later, the original seven islets were still a dreary settlement resembling the backwaters that flowed into it. But then it rose, and spectacularly in the troubled conditions of the eighteenth century, and displaced Surat, the premier Mughal port of India. Bombay offered a great natural harbour with miles upon miles of deep, sheltered water, perfect for big ships. It had a vigorous naval police to safeguard vessels on the high seas from pirates. As a result, Parsi ship and dock builders, legendary Gujarati men of trade, Jain shroffs, Marwari

ship and dock builders, legendary Gujarati men of trade, Jain shroffs, mid-west bankers, Konkani Muslim traders, Baghdadi Jews and European free traders came in droves. And so, the city became a melting pot of communities and acquired its cosmopolitan character.

It was Bombay's diverse, tolerant, welcoming personality that attracted Ramu Mama after the Partition in 1947. As a man of wealth, leisure and considerable charm, Ramu Mama quickly found his way into the highest rungs of the society. What really fascinated him was its cinema world. He came at the high point of black-and-white neorealistic cinema which brought masterpieces by Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt, Mehboob Khan, Dev Anand, and pre-eminently, Raj Kapoor, who along with his magical co-star, Nargis, charmed the newly independent nation with *Barsaat* (1949) and *Awara* (1952).

It was not unusual for Ramu Mama to be dining with a Parsi baronet on one night or a cricketer from a royal family of Saurashtra on another. On a different evening, he found himself with a coveted courtesan of the city, who had once been an aspiring 'B-grade' actress, and she turned out to be Kamini Masi. They fell in love at first sight but he was not the marrying kind, nor was she. They never bothered to marry for years but she did not have to sleep again with a producer to get a part in a film.

Why would an elegant, wealthy man of the world, who was in demand in Bombay's highest circles, want to be publicly in love with an actress-courtesan? Clearly, his social sphere diminished as a result—he could not take Kamini Masi to some of the grand homes for dinner. Some said that a courtesan had trapped him but then they didn't know Kamini Masi. She was one of the most beautiful and talented women in the city; not only was she an accomplished actress with a significant fan following, she was a genuinely good person and it was this quality—her generosity of soul—that had struck Avanti and me when we first met her at the Imperial Hotel in Delhi. At that time, they were unmarried but eventually, they did marry because it was more convenient that way.

Ramu Mama became my model of the *nagaraka*, the urbane man of culture in search of pleasure. He took me under his wing and opened many doors into Bombay's society. He also gifted me a special 'kama attitude' to life, thus continuing where the ganja priest had left off. But it was not he who taught me the significance of the *Kamasutra*. For this I have to thank Raj Desai, the celebrated writer, who casually mentioned one evening: 'There is another way to

live one's life, and that is to live for the sake of pleasure—this is the essential message of the *Kamasutra*.'

Everyone called him Raj and it was through Ramu Mama that I met Doli Sihari, his trusted assistant at *Marg*, a respected journal of the visual arts. She took me to the éminence grise one day. I felt a wave of excitement as I entered Raj's artistic home on Cuffe Parade lined with books and paintings. I was surprised to see an elegant man in his sixties moving about gracefully in an embroidered kurta in his comfortable and scholarly flat, so far removed from the relentless oppression and poverty of his fiction. But he was also an aesthete, and a serious student and critic of Indian art. In his younger days, he had moved in the artistic and socialist circles in London, including the famous Bloomsbury Group. On his table lay the *Kamasutra*.

'Do you know it?' he asked. 'It's a new, scholarly translation.'

Raj went on to narrate the exciting tale of how the first English translation had been published illegally in Victorian England in the 1880s by Richard Burton and R.A. Athburth. To escape jail, they had created a fictional Kama Shastra Society and published the book 'privately—only for the society's members'. This was at the height of 'Victorian morality' when the English middle classes believed that 'a sensible woman did not experience sexual desire'. Burton had hoped that the *Kamasutra* could become a weapon to wage a clandestine war of sexual independence in the nineteenth-century western world.

The *Kamasutra* must have led a similar 'war of freedom' 1500 years earlier in order to rescue pleasure from three powerful adversaries: a Brahminical establishment that pronounced in the dharma texts that sex was only for reproduction, not for recreation; from the renouncers of desire—Buddhists, Jains and yogis, who regarded desire as an enemy of spiritual progress, and equated Kama, the god of love, with Mara, 'the god of death'; and a third, uncultivated but pervasive view among ordinary people that desire was a straightforward matter of physical gratification, a belief that pervades even in the Mahabharata, despite the romantic stories of Nala and Damayanti, Shantanu and Satyawati, and Arjuna and Subhadra.

Vatsyayana, the author of the *Kamasutra*, teaches us that human desire is a matter of culture, far more than of nature. Unlike females of other species, women do not have a specific mating season, and so the union between the sexes

has to be regulated by society. One has to go beyond nature to cultivate erotic desire and sexuality, which is not only about the sexual act but about the attitudes, values and beliefs surrounding it. It is a 'social construct', as Foucault would say. Sexuality was rescued from nature in the urbane life of the princely courts of India during the first six centuries of the Common Era. The *Kamasutra* was a product, most likely, of the suave imperial age of the Guptas and its aesthetic and sensual culture. The elite in the Gupta courts were drawn to the sixty-four arts, which included love poetry, singing, dancing, playing musical instruments, arranging flowers and cooking gourmet dishes that are catalogued in full in the text.

The *Kamasutra* presumes that sex should be a useful, refreshing and physically reviving pastime, a bit like a game of badminton or tennis—something that everyone should play as often as possible in order to relieve the stresses of life. It needs to be freed from a gratuitous sense of confusion and guilt, steeped in longing and awkwardness. Raj wondered if it might be possible to appropriate the *Kamasutra* for the liberation of the contemporary Indian middle class. 'We are just as repressed as the Victorians, don't you think?' He suggested that we should lure today's middle classes with the liberal past of ancient India and 'give them the same medicine that Burton administered to the Victorians'. He went on from there to produce a narrative for the emancipation of prudish India.

If Ramu Mama was my model of the *nagaraka*, Kamini Masi was my inspiration for the romantic *ganika*, the second most important character in the *Kamasutra*, a most sophisticated and accomplished courtesan. The *ganika* had a privileged education in the sixty-four arts. From painting to playing musical instruments, from arranging flowers to picking fruits, from watching sunsets to reading poetry, there is no aspect of the sensual life that is not covered in the ancient text.

The *Kamasutra* appealed to me as a metaphor. It made me feel modern, even sexy, in a society where the reality around me was that of Sharma-ji's patriarchy. Because the ancient text presents women as 'subjects' with real emotions and desires, rather than as objects in the dreams of men or simply recipients of male lust, I could identify its *dramatis personae* with Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi. The text defied the essential principle of Manu's patriarchy that women are the

sexual property of men, whether fathers, husbands or brothers. To believe otherwise was indeed a subversive thought in a newly independent country that was fully absorbed in the idealistic project of nation building. Yet, it was precisely the freedom of the mind that Independence had brought that made it possible to harbour such feminist hopes in the 1960s, much before feminism formally arrived on our shores. The patriarchal world view finally began to be unbound around the same time as the economic reforms in the 1990s when the minds of the young became decolonized.

~

Two days later, Isha dropped in unannounced at my office.

‘Nice office,’ she said. ‘But it’s a bit cramped, isn’t it?’

I was in shock.

‘I had to see you.’

I stared at her in surprise.

‘I was with some of your Rajput friends last night. They think the world of you. Sanghram Singh sends his salaams.’

‘He is certainly one of the most distinguished men in our city.’

‘He wanted to sleep with me.’

There was a pause.

‘And?’

‘I refused. He smelled terrible.’ She laughed. ‘I told him that I was in love with you. Poor fellow. It hurt him. But he was nice about it. He has invited us both to dinner tonight.’

I did not know quite what to make of Isha’s words. Was she toying with Sanghram Singh or with me? I didn’t believe a word she had said. She seemed to be creating a world of ‘play’, much like god’s leela, where everything is as real as you want it to be.

‘His flat has quite a view of the bay,’ I said.

‘Do you want to go?’

‘If you want to.’

‘Pick me up from my house.’ She jotted down her address. ‘Shall I see you at eight-thirty?’

‘Too early. Believe me, no one will arrive there before ten.’

‘Good, we’ll have his flat to ourselves then.’

She turned to leave. ‘Wait, I’ll see you down.’ We took the lift to the ground floor, where I hailed a cab, and she was gone.

We arrived at Sanghram Singh’s at nine, and as expected found ourselves alone. Even our host was absent. But we were graciously shown in by a liveried bearer who offered us drinks.

Unmindful of the bearer, Isha took my hand in hers, and asked me to show her the view. I led her to the grand balcony across from the drawing room and opened the door slightly. A thrilling flush of wind from the sea grazed our bodies and sent her black hair flying. Our drinks arrived. I asked about her husband but she did not want to speak about him.

‘Kiss me,’ she said.

‘Here?’

She nodded. I looked around.

‘Before the servants . . . and all?’

I quickly leaned over and kissed her, but on the cheek, and then I looked around furtively. She giggled.

‘Why are you laughing?’

‘That wasn’t a kiss,’ she said.

Both of us remained quiet, absorbed in our thoughts as we watched the waves below. We sipped our drinks in silence.

‘You know, I don’t remember you as particularly good-looking,’ she said, staring at me. ‘You had a broad nose, thick lips and common brown eyes. But look at you now! That same broad nose reveals sincerity; the thick lips are sensuous; and the brown eyes show a special kind of strength.’ She turned away. Glancing around her, she frowned and added, ‘In all this decadence, there’s only one thing that is wonderfully clean and fresh, and that is you.’ After a pause, she said, ‘You must be immaculate to the hollows of your toes!’

She took my hand, and after a pause, said, ‘I can’t stand all this. Let’s go.’

I looked bewildered, thinking it rude to leave like this.

‘I’m bored. Let’s go to your place.’

The bun on Isha’s head came undone as we walked out and hopped into a taxi. She leaned back and her hair flew. Her sari kept brushing against my chest. When my arm touched her body, she turned to kiss me. As our lips met momentarily, she turned away again and pressed her face against the window.



As soon as we arrived, I looked around the street stealthily and led the way up the airless stairway to my flat; she followed unasked and unrestrained. As soon as I closed the door, she came towards me. I looked around uneasily. She turned her face and moved slightly away. I had the feeling that she knew all there was to know about men. But I detected something sad on her face and I placed my hand reassuringly on her forlorn shoulder. There was a haunting unhappiness in her which spoke to my heart.

‘What is it?’ I was confused.

Softly, reticently, I kissed her. She covered her face with her hands. I took her hand and drew her to me. Although I had visions of being a nagaraka, I had little real experience with women. Nevertheless, my hands moved instinctively up her body and I stroked her breasts confidently. I felt her back, her hips and her rounded bottom hidden by her sari. Gently caressing her, I felt her warmth and was aroused.

She wanted to lie down and I moved towards the bed but she insistently pulled me to the floor. We lay on a soft mat. I looked at her face surrounded by rich, luxurious hair, almost covering her brooding eyes. My hand felt her body again. I stroked her face soothingly and gently touched her lips. She kissed me, more ardently. I reached out under her sari and touched her leg. Then my fingers slid more boldly to her thigh. I could feel her shiver beneath my hand. She leaned forward with a sigh. My hand climbed up to her breast. I felt the front of her body insistent against mine. I reached for her high, arched behind. She gripped me in a tight embrace, her leg gently but insistently pressed against my hardness.

Her blouse was in the way and my fingers fumbled clumsily with the hooks. She took charge and began to remove her clothes. I saw her naked body for the first time and I was filled with wonder. As I touched it softly, she burrowed closer to me. I moved my lips and tongue along the hollow of her shoulder and neck. I kissed her breasts softly, taking the nipples in my lips in tiny caresses. I began to swallow her nipples with my tongue, until she grew impatient and she thrust them into my mouth. She put her arms around me and I felt her naked flesh against mine. We sank in sharp pleasure as she guided me inside her. For a moment I was quiet. Then I began to move inside her. She lay still, feeling my motion within her. My movement became more anxious and resolute. Presently it was over. I hugged her for a long time. At long last I drew away.

We lay in a shadowy silence. A breeze began to blow from the sea, gently

we lay in a shadowy silence. A breeze began to blow from the sea, gently caressing our naked bodies. I couldn't make out what she was thinking. She lay there with my arm around her, her body barely touching mine. Eventually I roused myself and drew away from her. I covered her with a sheet. I picked up her petticoat, blouse and sari and placed them on the bed. I went out on the terrace. The sky was full of stars. The sea was in shadow, almost in darkness. I could hear the dark waves rising softly and heaving. The breeze continued to stir the coconut trees. I looked up at the stars and the great vastness beyond. I turned again to the sea and asked myself what sort of karma had brought Isha and me together again—this time she with a husband—in this anonymous city.

I went to sleep beside her and was wakened at dawn by the sound of a noisy seagull that had settled on the ledge of the terrace. A van from the Aarey Milk Colony went by. Isha opened her eyes languorously. I traced her mouth, her eyebrows gently with my fingers. I couldn't believe that we had slept the whole night together. She kissed me shyly. We breathed quickly between our kisses and soon were drunk in Colaba's sea air and knew what we wanted of each other and replicated the same urgent dance of the night.

We dressed slowly and in silence and made our way down the melancholy staircase. 'Interesting place you have here!' she said as she followed me down. We had not shaken off the spell of the night and could not bear to be separated. On the street we did not touch each other and parted speechlessly as Isha got into a taxi on Cuffe Parade. She looked back and gave me a long, lingering look.

Walking along Cuffe Parade, I felt the sensual city ringing in my ears as I wandered aimlessly about Colaba's streets, amazed at how much that was familiar had changed. I felt free, no longer Isha's prisoner as I had once been. Bombay had taken hold of my imagination. Heaven lay close above and I, a nagaraka, stood between it and my nagara.

~

After I began my adulterous affair with Isha, I felt an 'unbearable lightness'. I felt light 'not like a feather but like a bird' and it pointed me in the direction of the *Kamasutra*'s erotic rasa. Bright and playful like the frolicking, fun-loving gods of the Hindu pantheon, my mood was devoid of the heaviness that I associated with romantic love. The *Kamasutra* assured me that adultery was

ubiquitous, even commonplace in the world, almost making me forget that there was a third person, Isha's husband, lurking in the shadows. It suggested that if a woman is ready and willing, the would-be nagaraka would be foolish not to capitalize on his good luck! But the *Kamasutra*'s most important lesson is that the lightness of eroticism has to be cultivated, like the sixty-four arts, and not left in the careless hands of nature.

When I was with Isha I found that I stopped taking myself or my life too seriously. We did simple things, laughed a lot, and I lived in the hedonistic spirit of a nagaraka. I lost my sense of self-importance, and on some days, I felt as though I was a speck of dust in the universe. If I died tomorrow, the world would continue as though I had never been there. Oh, a handful of people would miss me but even they would forget soon enough. Kama taught me that there is another way to live: if you believe that in the end nothing matters too much, you live in the moment and forget the future and the past. This was a priceless gift from my affair with Isha

But my fears also returned at times. 'I can't afford to become Isha's captive again,' I said to Kamini Masi one evening. She had become my confidante. She didn't like to dine alone and sometimes invited me home when Ramu Mama went out. She instinctively understood my wish to hold on to my 'unbearable lightness'; she took me under her wing and instructed me in *sringara rasa*, the 'erotic mood'. If I didn't want to become Isha's prisoner, she said, I must acquire an eroticism that is hedonistic but not impassioned. Only thus would I be able to retain kama's weightless charm. After dinner she pulled out a slim volume from Ramu Mama's shelves and began to read a few verses from Vidyakara's anthology of classical love poetry. Occasionally, we read short erotic verses called *khandkavya*, which were always bright, suggestive, intimate and light-hearted. I borrowed her copy and, in my enthusiasm, I recited them to Isha but they fell flat on her ears.

To cultivate *sringara rasa*, Kamini Masi reminded me, I had to be aware of kama's enemies: attachment and memory. To illustrate this, she narrated a mythological story of the gods with such graphic descriptions of their nightlife that I blushed. The nagaraka's prize, she said, was to become a 'heroic' lover of all women and not become the 'romantic' lover of one woman.

Where a high courtly culture flourishes, a philosophy of love is born. The *Kamasutra* is a product of what many historians have called India's 'golden age', associated in particular with the Gupta dynasty that rose in north-east India in the early fourth century. Whether the Gupta empire deserves this honour is a matter of personal judgement. My own moral and aesthetic values seem to incline in that direction. It was a time when Indian culture seemed to be at its most self-confident and widely admired for its artistic and scientific achievements. It reached its zenith in the arts, crowned by the classical Sanskrit poets—Kalidasa, Dandin, Vishakhadatta, Shudraka and Bharavi. The astronomer Aryabhata had calculated correctly the length of the solar year, using two crucial Indian inventions: zero and 'Arabic' numerals. Vatsyayana probably wrote his *Kamasutra* in this period, imparting the *nagaraka* ideal of the urbane, sophisticated life to the male elite in the Gupta courts.

The Guptas had revived native Indian power after a long period of foreign dominance. Before 320 CE, foreigners had ruled over much of north-western and western India—Graeco-Bactrians, Persians, Scythians and Kushans had ruled successively for half a millennium. Society was essentially aristocratic, and as in all aristocratic societies, the main preoccupations were the pursuit of war, religion and sex. Although the Guptas were conservative, their attitudes were remarkably liberal. The time was apparently ripe to look within and wage a war of sexual freedom in order to rescue 'pleasure' from its three main spoilsports: society, religion and nature. And so, the *Kamasutra*, a rebellious text, found a comfortable home in their courts. Indeed, the spirit of the times infused the *Kamasutra*'s liberating project with a certain offhand grandeur.

An adulteress like Isha is called *asati* in Sanskrit, but the term can also refer to any unmarried woman who is not chaste. While in religious literature she is a 'bad woman', in classical love poetry, *asati* is invariably painted in cheerful, complimentary hues, a 'fair return for the damnation heaped on her head in religious works'. Although the love poet praises her, her anticipation of pleasure is not unmixed with anxiety:

*My husband is no easy fool,  
the moon is bright, the way is mire  
and people love a scandal;  
yet it is hard to break a lover's promise.  
Driven by such thoughts, a certain beauty*

*in going to a meeting set for love  
starts from her house door many times  
only to turn back.*

Despite the anxiety and fear of scandal, the poet thinks that illicit love is superior to the boring, domestic routine of married sex:

*Where the moon is not inveighed against  
and no sweet words of a messenger are heard,  
where speech is never choked with tears  
and the body grows not thin;  
but where one sleeps in one's own house  
with one's own subservient to one's wish;  
can this routine of household sex,  
this wretched thing, deserve the name of love?*

Isha, of course, never mentioned her husband. Neither did I. From the moment she offered me her love, I unconsciously began to believe that I had a right over her; her husband was superfluous. No doubt he was in a pitiable position but how could that be helped? Curiously enough, the *Kamasutra* insists that it is not a handbook for adulterers and even offers advice to husbands to look for clues for their wives' adulteries. Vatsyayana states that it is generally not a good idea to sleep with another man's wife, but just in case, if one is tempted, he has a chapter titled 'Reasons for Taking Another Man's Wife'.

Despite its tolerant attitude, the fact is that the society of the *Kamasutra* was patriarchal and a woman's sexual pleasure was not held on par with a man's; Kamini Masi reminded me that women were *bhog*, 'objects of enjoyment'. To a male lover, adultery might be fun but it was terrifying to a husband. The dharma texts ignored the wife's viewpoint and were harsh in punishing adultery. When they were lenient, it was because of a woman's procreative potential—menstruation swept away a woman's sins after a month. The *ganikas* may have lived a more liberated life but wives were bound by strict social rules. Girls received only limited education and were married off early. While Buddhist nuns, actresses, courtesans and prostitutes had more freedom, they were socially at the margin, and widows were never treated well. The average wife, Kamini Masi felt, was usually unloved and neglected. For this reason, she had not insisted on marriage to Ramu Mama, trading a loss in public image for the sake of private happiness.

~

On a lazy Sunday afternoon during a break in the monsoons, I caught an unexpected glimpse of Isha walking idly on the street below my flat. It was eighteen months now since we became lovers. She wore a thin, white, almost gossamer, sari with white sandals. The pale, lengthening rays of the afternoon sun fell on the curves of her body, heightening them in the waning light. I watched her from my terrace but she did not look up. A black-and-yellow Fiat taxi went by, carrying a saffron-robed Brahmin with a familiar mark on his forehead and she gazed darkly at him. As she walked past, she smiled as if from some private satisfaction. It was a sad, quick smile, one which I had seen only rarely. There was something touching and pliantly feminine about it. Soon, she had disappeared into the tired streets of Colaba and I was left wondering what had really been on her mind.

Isha wanted to work, not because she needed the money, but because it was the fashionable thing to do. She was unwilling, however, to put in the hard work of finding a job. During those days of Nehruvian socialism, the private economy was tiny, nor was it expanding and jobs were scarce. In the end, Isha found one through one of her husband's contacts, whose advertising agency needed a copywriter. It was a glamorous job for someone in her position and gave her a chance to get out of the house and tell her friends that she was 'busy'. She had a superior attitude towards the people she worked with which didn't make her any friends. Neither did it make her less moody and she remained restless as ever.

My doorbell rang half an hour later. I opened the door and there she stood on the landing of the staircase, her light cotton sari disguising inadequately the roundness of her hips that were surprisingly large for her slim figure. She gave me a look of terrifying directness and fatigue. I inhaled the warm afternoon smell of her skin as she stepped in. Taking off her sandals, she washed her feet under the tap in the bathroom and came and sat down on the cool floor of red terracotta tiles.

'What's bothering you?' I asked.

'Nothing, I am just tired.'

'Is there something on your mind?'

'It's nothing. I am just weary of the world.'

She seemed a lost soul as unattainable as ever. In the peculiar light of the

monsoon afternoon, she had the same melancholic expression that I remembered from our meeting on the veranda of the Bombay Gymkhana. She talked listlessly and I listened leaning on an elbow, taking an odd pleasure in entering her world of small vanities. There were long silences. She was much concerned with the opinion of servants and shopkeepers; she showed no interest in money, nor any responsibility in managing it; she avoided having to face anything unpleasant, and willingly accepted every superstition that came along her way. I took her confessions as a propitious omen of a deepening relationship. Her words were fresh but later when I tried to recall our conversation I remembered only the patterns, not the substance. She seemed prematurely exhausted by experience.

‘Come, take me for a drive in the rain!’ she announced suddenly. Before I could protest, she had rushed downstairs and sprang like a puppy into a black-and-yellow taxi. She felt like a puppy in the way she began to lick and caress me in the cab. We drove from Colaba to Marine Drive and stopped for coconut water at Chowpatty beach. A few people had the same idea and they peered into our taxi but they could scarcely see us. I paid and handed back the empty coconut shells and we drove off to continue our lovers’ existence. She seemed unable to endure the space between us and pressed her legs against mine; then brought her face closer to mine, her cheeks pallid and warm. It was a delight to feel her leaning against me and it reminded me of countless scenes in Hindi cinema of couples in love seated side by side in a taxi going nowhere in particular.

It began to drizzle and Isha wanted to walk on the beach. So, we turned around and headed back to Chowpatty, where everyone was running for cover. We were the only ones going in the opposite direction towards the sea. The sky had grown dark and she moved into my arms, and I felt the same feminine suppleness pressed against my body. We kissed to the roar of the monsoon sea. I looked around for fear of being spotted. We kissed again, a long, lingering kiss, as the drizzle turned into a shower.

‘This is madness!’

‘Yes, divine madness!’

Soon, we were back in my flat. We took off our wet clothes, dried ourselves and she lay naked beside me, breathing lightly and staring at the wooden rafters and the fan on the ceiling. Her brown skin and dark hair glowed from the

weakness.

‘I have always loved your curly hair, your dimples and your big eyebrows,’ she said as though she were making a catalogue.

Soon our conversation was infused with intimacy and the afternoon became filled with the healing power of her words. Suddenly, I was conscious of an unusual silence in the flat; I could hear the tap dripping in the bathroom. She turned on an elbow, and lowering her neck, she gazed for a long time into my eyes. Then she gave me the same sad smile I had seen many times. I was about to say something when she pressed her warm hand on my mouth. We lay on the floor watching each other, eye to eye, our bodies touching and healing temporarily the sadness and the languor of the afternoon. I felt her strong mouth on mine and my arms closed on her.

After we had made love, she lay lightly in the crook of my arm, her hair blown across my mouth by the sea breeze. She got up slowly. Sitting up on the floor, she clasped her ankles, then got up and pulled out one of my old loose shirts from the closet and threw it over her and walked to the terrace to look at the sea. I followed her after a while. I watched my lover’s face with passionate concentration as it reflected the benign light of the fading afternoon. I observed that our behaviour, our attitudes, even our passion was in some ways a response to the luminous, sea-swept city. I remembered one of our first kisses by the sea—a kiss broken by her laughter. Later, she had placed her hand in mine as if to make amends. It had been an overture to a ravenous and possessive sexuality. The one sure clock in our life was the sea and its tides at which we gazed continuously from my terrace. Each passionate encounter left a different meaning about love.

Isha was clearly troubled and it had to do with something beyond our love. She was beautiful, I thought, and beauty, if it is accompanied by intelligence, stirs a feeling of inferiority in me. The sun was falling flat across the sea and the water was pale with it. It was the hour for making confidences to a lover.

‘Look here, Isha,’ I said after a pause. ‘What more do you want from an afternoon like this?’

‘I don’t know,’ she answered wearily.

‘Is it your husband?’

‘I never think about him, poor fellow.’

There was a long silence. I watched her intently. ‘Do you still love Anand?’



She was startled. 'What . . . why do you ask?'

'That handkerchief over there, with an A on it—you've been trying to hide it all afternoon. Is it his?'

'Odd that you should ask, I ran into him a few weeks ago.'

'Here in Bombay?'

'Yes, he has just moved here . . . with a big job too.'

'But you didn't tell me?' I became wary. My mind, like a lake of clear water, was suddenly clouded by a disturbance below the surface. Isha tried to reassure me but it was to no avail.

'How sad you look!' she said.

I began to understand her restlessness. She had never quite shed Anand, and now he had begun to loom large once again. The memories of my past returned with new fears. The handkerchief, which had been unimportant until a few minutes ago, now assumed in my mind an ominous significance. I could imagine her looking at Anand much the same way she was looking at me. I felt mad with jealousy and suddenly I wanted him dead so that things might be just as they had been in the past eighteen months. Having once experienced the disappointment of her love, I was terrified by her ability to hurt me. She was fickle and capricious and had no sense of loyalty. She only wanted to be adored; nothing else mattered. So, was my happiness over? I was angry with her husband who seemed to stupidly do nothing, although the situation demanded it insistently. He ought to be suspicious; he ought to guard Isha from predators like Anand. I felt irritated by his indifference and his inability to establish his rightful claims on his wife.

But I was torn. I had been the greatest beneficiary of his inaction. If he grew suspicious, it might also undermine my own fragile position, and I would be the loser. So, I retreated quickly from this awkward mental space. It did not stop me from retaining a self-righteous belief in my sense of entitlement to Isha's affections. I did not feel guilty or ashamed for loving Isha; instead, I felt indignation, contrasting her husband's apathy with my own love. I may not have had any legal claim to Isha, but I felt more deserving of her love.

Soon, it began to drizzle. Gradually, the rain turned into a monsoon torrent and we rushed inside. Isha took a towel and dried my forehead and hair. At her touch, a feeling of happiness coursed through me. She took off my wet shirt and dried herself. Despite knowing her intimately for more than a year, I felt shy

seeing her naked body and looked away. But she seemed completely at ease. On the roof we could hear the rain beating down. From an overflowing gutter the water poured in a steady stream on to the street. As the air turned thick inside, I opened a window and made tea for us.

The rain had penetrated my guard but also washed away some of the tension. It was still pattering down but the force of the storm was over; only a trickle now issued from the gutter. I sighed as I watched this woman whom I loved so obsessively. I felt no exhilaration this evening, only sadness and resignation.

‘I feel jealous,’ I said.

‘Love demands jealousy.’ She shrugged matter-of-factly. ‘If you are not jealous, you are not in love.’

I suspected I was no longer her only lover. Two weeks later I knew for sure. The phone rang early on a Saturday morning.

‘Hello,’ said Isha, ‘are you asleep?’

‘No, but when can I see you? This morning?’

‘I am with Anand.’

‘If only you could come . . .’

‘No, it isn’t possible.’

Isha told me that she had come to see me the previous evening but had found the door locked. When I heard this, I felt the same elation I used to feel when I went past her house in Delhi. In the past two weeks, we had met only once, and that too briefly, even though I had left messages for her at work.

‘Can I invite you both to lunch?’

‘No,’ she replied firmly.

‘Then when can I see you?’ I implored.

‘I don’t know. Stop being irritating.’

Isha had cooled and her prickly manner was new and hurtful.

‘Look, I must go out now,’ she said suddenly and hung up.

‘Go out,’ I thought unbelievably. And where was she going? I no longer trusted her, nor believed anything she said. She had always disconcerted me with her lies. In the months before Anand returned to Bombay, I tended to mostly accept what she said even though it was less than the truth. She led me to think that our affair would never end, that one day we might even marry. I shouldn’t have believed her, of course, but I liked to hear the sound of the words coming out of her mouth, if only to give me the satisfaction of rejecting them myself.

out of her mouth, it only to give me the satisfaction of rejecting them myself. She constantly played a game of make-believe, knowing all the time that our liaison was a temporary distraction which would be over sooner rather than later.

~

‘Love demands jealousy’ were the words Isha had used, and this is one of Proust’s unique contributions to our understanding of kama. The torment I felt at Isha’s absence was part of a recurring pattern, beginning with the anguish I used to feel as a child at my mother’s absence combined with the impossibility of possessing her. Proust’s great insight is that jealousy heightens the anguish at the beloved’s absence and the lover’s impossible desire to possess the beloved. In the first volume of his novel, the lover is Charles Swann, who is besotted with Odette, a former courtesan who will later become his wife.

Jealousy begins one evening when Odette complains of a headache and declines to make love. Swann suspects that

*perhaps Odette was expecting someone else that evening, that she had merely pretended to be tired, so that she had to put the light out only so that he should suppose that she was going to sleep, that once he had left the house she would put it on again and would open her door to the man who was to spend the night with her.*

Swann returns at midnight to spy on her. He thinks he sees a light in her window and knocks on the shutter; he hears a voice; the window opens. Two old men stand in an unfamiliar bedroom, looking at him questioningly. It’s the wrong window! His doubts about her fidelity remain, however. He does not tell her of his misadventure although he is

*glad that the satisfaction of his curiosity had preserved their love intact, and that, having feigned for so long a sort of indifference towards Odette, he had not now, by his jealousy, given her the proof that he loved her too much, which, between a pair of lovers, for ever dispenses the recipient from the obligation to love enough.*

Swann concludes that Odette is not seeing another man and has not lied to him. But jealousy has reduced him to a shameless ‘peeping Tom’. Impassioned by ‘the desire for truth’, he spies on her, bribes her servants, listens at the door. He tries to explain every moment in Odette’s day. One afternoon, he calls on her unexpectedly, but she does not answer the door, though he hears noises within. He tortures himself wondering about her relationships with others. Facing

uncertainty, he is forced to admit that he cannot possess every aspect of Odette's being. As his jealousy grows, Odette feeds it by cooling off herself and keeping him at arm's length.

Proust belongs to a long western tradition of kama pessimists who thought of passionate love as a pathological condition leading to madness. Beginning with Plato and Cicero and followed by the Christian Fathers, they considered passion to be a disease. Like a doctor analysing himself, Swann is lucid in his prognosis:

*He realized at such moments that interest, that gloom, existed in him alone, like a disease, and that once he was cured of this disease, the actions of Odette, the kisses that she might have bestowed, would become once again as innocuous as those of countless other women.*

Swann has made a diagnosis but this does not mean that he can do anything about it. Likening the suffering to a 'deep, secret wound, which tormented him day and night', he engages in evasive actions to avoid confronting the fact that he is a patsy in his relationship with Odette. His love follows a downward spiral, reaching new circles in hell, as he discovers that she once worked in brothels and likes women as well as men. Eventually, his love diminishes like a fever. And as it ceases, so does his jealousy. No longer in love, Swann is indifferent when he discovers that he was right—Odette had slept with his rival on that day—and he marvels why he ever loved a woman who was not at all his type.

~

Kamini Masi's diagnosis of my 'disease' was quite different from Proust's. She felt that I had breached a central tenet of sringara rasa when I got romantically entangled. I had gone against the classical ideals of dispassionate love. The *Kamasutra* would have regarded my obsessive, romantic love for Isha with distaste. A real nagaraka would not have let hurt pride get in the way and would have accepted with equanimity the fact of being abandoned by a mistress who had grown tired of him. Isha was actually doing a better job in following the *Kamasutra*'s script. In a chapter titled 'How to Get Rid of Him', the text states cold-heartedly:

*If a man is attached to her and has done favours for her in the past, even if he now yields but little fruit, she keeps him around by lying. But if he has nothing left at all . . . she gets rid of him . . . and gets support from another man. She curls her lip and . . . talks about things he does not know about.*

*She punctures his pride. She has affairs with men who are superior to him. She ignores him . . . She does not offer him her mouth.*

The erotic love of the Gupta age was a precarious balancing act. It sought passionate pleasure without becoming victim to tender, romantic feelings and the destructive possessiveness of sexual desire. It searched for equilibrium between the disorderly, instinctual forces of nature and the civilizing attempts of culture. Vatsyayana confesses that it is difficult to reconcile these opposing forces in order to achieve balance and preserve harmony:

*When the wheel of sexual ecstasy is in full motion, there is no textbook at all, and no order.*

Love in the nagaraka's world is not romantic but hedonistic, somewhat alien to us 'moderns'. I must confess I was not attracted initially to classical Sanskrit poetry. I found it formulaic, impersonal and lacking in spontaneity. I couldn't relate to the erotic mood of sringara rasa, which I found depersonalized. It was voluptuous and delightful but it did not touch my heart. For one whose sensibility is moulded by individualism, it is difficult to identify with the impersonal protagonists of these poems. They speak not of a particular man or woman but of man and woman in general—he is always handsome; she is always beautiful.

Slowly, over the years, however, it has grown on me. I no longer mind if the nayika, the 'heroine', has a face that always resembles the moon; her eyes are those of a fawn; her body stoops erotically from the weight of her full, rounded breasts; her tiny waist, her wide hips, and her thighs like the trunk of an elephant. It is a cultivated taste, I have discovered, which revels in the endless playfulness of love's ambiguity. According to the *Kamasutra*, the nayika is an 'independent heroine' just as the nayaka is an 'independent hero', both words originating in Sanskrit drama. Although these courtly lovers operate in a patriarchal world defined by the dharma texts, these appellations eliminate their social differences. As lovers, they are free agents—she could be a married or an unmarried woman of any class—thus, placing the world of pleasure beyond the sordid reality of hierarchy and power. This discourse of the courts of 'early historic' India was a foretaste of the medieval bhakti movement. In Jayadeva's poem *Gitagovinda*, the heroine, Radha, has as much human agency as her divine lover, Krishna.

I think I failed as a nagaraka partly because of my ‘modern’ sensibility. I envy Isha for her cool, classical sensibility that is right out of the *Kamasutra*. Isha could have been a heroine in a poem in one of Vidyakara’s anthology:

*I like sleeping with somebody  
different*

*often  
It’s nicest when my husband is  
in a foreign country*

*and there is rain in the streets at night  
and wind*

*and nobody*

But Sanskrit love poetry does not shed much light on male jealousy—my triangular problem with Isha’s husband or with Anand. Roman elegies do. I identify with Roman poets as they project their jealousy on to husbands or rival lovers. They teach how to keep an affair illicit; avoid the husband; and not let rivals, like Anand, muscle in. I succeeded on the first two counts but failed on the third. Thus, Tibullus addresses the husband of his mistress:

*But you, incautious husband of a deceitful wife,  
watch out for me, too, that she commit no sin,  
and take care that she doesn’t hang out and chat with young men,  
or recline with her garment loosened and her breast exposed,  
or deceive you with a nod . . .*

Again he berates him:

*But your wife has become an expert, and yet you, idiot, sense nothing  
when she moves her body with new skill.  
Do you think that it is for you that she styles her hair  
or combs her fine locks with a close-toothed comb?*

As I think about it many years later, my earlier, adolescent love for Isha had fed on the same impediments—the chief one being that girls were inaccessible to an Indian middle-class boy. And so, I went on to invest my beloved object with everything that was precious. Isha did not face the same problem—she belonged to a higher class where barriers were more porous, going back to mythological

times. When I moved to Bombay, my situation changed thanks in part to Ramu Mama's introductions. I climbed quietly into the upper-middle class and began to think of myself as a nagaraka. But I never shed the naive illusions of my adolescent years and this became a problem when Isha returned to my life in Bombay.

~

There are few things that human beings are more dedicated to than unhappiness. They have many reasons to be unhappy but the fickleness of love is clearly at the top of the list as I have learnt from Isha. So did Swann from Odette—reading about it tore my heart; but strangely enough, it consoled me as well. There the comparison ends. Odette was a courtesan; Isha was not, but both moved in high circles. The more apt resemblance is with Kamini Masi. Unlike Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi's relationship, where a certain touching authenticity prevailed, Swann's liaison with Odette was false. Falsity was woven into the fabric of the Parisian high society that Proust describes. The French novelist Gustave Flaubert reminds us: 'Everything was false, false army, false politics, false literature, false credit, and even false courtesans.'

Courtesans have, of course, existed in all times and places but 'there has never been an epoch in which they made the noise and held the place they have usurped in the last few years', wrote another observer of Parisian society in the 1870s. 'They figured in novels, appeared on stage, reigned in the Bois, at the races, at the theatre, everywhere crowds gathered.' This is the backdrop of Proust's novel. The courtesan was 'the necessary and concentrated form of Woman, of Desire, of Modernity . . . and part of the myth 'that the courtesan's attempt to be one of the ruling class should eventually come to nothing'. Her game was 'to play at being an honest woman' but her admirers were aware of the game.

Odette plays the game, and she isn't alone. Every member in the Verdurin's salon that she inhabits exudes falseness. As a result, even Swann becomes false.

*It appeared that [Swann] dared not have an opinion and was at ease only when he could with meticulous accuracy offer some precise piece of information.*

Swann rarely ventures an opinion that is not determined by his obsessive love. When he does take a stand, for the first time, in defending some of his

when he does take a stand, for the first time, in defending some of his aristocratic friends against the Verdurin's disparaging remarks, his honesty contributes to his expulsion from their salon.

Odette's attempts to be part of high society made me laugh and cringe alternately. Proust calls her a *cocotte*, 'hen', a term for women who have not achieved the highest rank in the world of courtesans. Though Odette succeeds in ruling Swann sexually, she had by no means cultivated, like Kamini Masi, the *Kamasutra*'s sixty-four arts. Had she become accomplished in them, she might have become a *ganika*, a title reserved for the most beautiful, talented and virtuous among the courtesans in ancient India. Odette, despite her beauty, remained a *veshya*, an ordinary courtesan.

~

The act of sex may be nothing but when you reach my age you learn that at any time it may prove to be everything. The pain from my encounters with Isha is long past now, and so perhaps, I have the benefit of distance. Isha was tiring of me and needed the freedom to move on. She faced an old human dilemma: how does one reconcile devotion and loyalty to an old love with the freedom and excitement in discovering a new one? How can one be able to love and still be free?

Devotion and autonomy seem incompatible most of the time. Isha's dilemma was shared by two of the greatest heroines of literary realism. Anna Karenina faced the same predicament in Tolstoy's great novel set in imperial Russia in the nineteenth century. Anna was torn between loyalty to her son and husband versus her lover, Vronsky. Madame Bovary faced a similar problem in Flaubert's masterpiece of the same name. Set a few years earlier, during the 'July Monarchy' in provincial France, Emma Bovary also failed to cope with her illicit affairs in order to escape the banalities and emptiness of provincial life. Both women took great risks and in both cases the establishment found a way to curb their freedom. Society acted in a subtle way, placing the onus on the women to resist their own desires and sublimate their passionate feelings. It is dispiriting that women who stepped out of line in western fiction and opera in the nineteenth century had to die. The dharma texts of the Brahminical establishment in India managed to brainwash the upper-caste woman in a similar subtle way placing the burden on the woman to curb her own freedom



similar, subtle way, placing the burden on the woman to care for her own freedom, and preventing her thereby from snatching a tiny bit of joy from a dreary, dutiful life.



## THE PARTY

*Only a woman, not a man, may express jealousy*

*He who is not jealous is not in love.*

—St Augustine

I was asleep when Isha came in late one night. She used her key to get in. I had been thrilled that she was finally coming and had waited for her. But then I must have fallen asleep. I remembered the light of the moon shining through the window while I was waiting, and it was the same moonlight that woke me up. I noticed that she was intoxicated and dishevelled. She must have been with another man, I thought, and it must be Anand.

‘Where have you been? It’s so late.’

She was taking off her clothes and did not answer.

‘I was watching the moonlight waiting for you,’ I said, trying not to sound stood up and slighted.

She remained silent and slipped into bed.

‘Did he throw you out? Is this why you have come now, so late?’

‘Go back to sleep!’ she said with finality and turned her back on me and soon she was asleep. But her sleep was not peaceful; she stirred often and tossed and turned, which confirmed my suspicions that she had been unfaithful. Perhaps, she was dreaming of making love to Anand, and this was what was behind her restlessness. My desire seemed to grow with my feelings of jealousy. Each time I tried to touch her, she turned and rolled away in a rebuff. She snubbed my attempts to caress her. But this resistance only heightened my desire. In the end, my efforts to possess her defenceless body were not successful.

It is just as well that she didn’t say anything before falling asleep as I wouldn’t have believed her anyway. She had got into the habit of lying. She had said blandly a few days earlier that she was calling from the Cymbhane Club

said blantly a few days earlier that she was coming from the Gymkhana Club, but I knew she wasn't there. That was the moment when my trust had begun to break. It also meant that she had lied to me on other occasions. This shameful undercurrent of deception shattered our relationship irrevocably. Yet, I continued to feel angry and jealous. I had a sense of entitlement, a feeling that I possessed her even more than her husband.

In the bright light of the following day, I woke up to find Isha sleeping in my bed. I was happy and all was forgotten. She looked more lovable than ever. There was an innocent mystery to her and it drew me like a magnet. Happily, as she was asleep, I did not have to talk to her. I could be myself. I did not have to chat about silly things. Since I was no longer under her gaze, I did not have to behave in a certain way so that she would think well of me. I was free to create an image in my imagination. Perhaps it wasn't Anand she had been with in the night. She may have been a passive victim of another man's attention, an object of male desire rather than someone she was actively pursuing. With that self-deceptive thought, I felt again the possibility of love.

~

'If you are not jealous, you are not in love,' Isha had once said in irritation.

Isha didn't know that Augustine had said the same thing centuries earlier. Ramu Mama, however, expressed a similar thought over lunch one day. In his usual offhand way, he said, 'Since love is hard to detect, we should look for it in jealousy, which is the visible sign of love.' Kamini Masi and he worried about my growing jealousy over Isha, and they decided to take me out and cheer me up. Kamini Masi, in particular, was puzzled why someone from an upright family would leap into a crazed, jealous relationship with a married woman when he had the prospect of choosing a girl from the best families. Why would an eligible bachelor like me, she asked, risk his reputation by being publicly and obsessively in love with a married woman? And why would he remain obsessed when there was no future in it?

Evolutionary biology, I discovered, may have an answer to Kamini Masi's question. Jealousy has deep evolutionary roots that may have helped human beings survive as a species. Our primate forefathers could not be certain of their children's paternity; hence, they jealously guarded the child's mother to avoid wasting their scarce resources on another man's offspring. Our foremother in

wasting their scarce resources on another man's offspring. Our foremother, in turn, was highly sensitive to a rival female who might run away with her man, leaving her alone in a hostile world. Her jealousy helped to guard against a straying spouse.

According to David Buss, one of the founders of evolutionary psychology, 'Jealousy is emotional wisdom, not consciously articulated but passed down to us over millions of years by our successful forebears.' It is what scientists call an 'adaptation' to the problem of survival which helped our ancestors cope with reproductive threats. It helped to ward off rivals and conveyed commitment to a straying partner. Of course, one is not conscious of this evolutionary logic. I do not say, 'Oh, if Isha is sleeping with Anand, then I can no longer be certain of my children and this will endanger the replication of my genes.' Instead, I feel jealous. A woman deliberately evokes this emotion in a hapless boyfriend to test if he is truly committed.

Jealousy is thus a useful emotion, not a sign of immaturity as Kamini Masi thought. She also found it odd that I was more concerned about how often Anand was sleeping with Isha whereas she would have been more jealous about her emotional commitment to him. Evolutionary biology suggests that men and women are different in this respect, and it may be due to the inherited emotional wisdom. Because fertilization takes place inside women's bodies, not men's, there is always uncertainty about paternity. A woman's infidelity endangers a man's confidence that he is the genetic father. He may have invested his resources over decades on another man's child. Women, on the other hand, are always certain. Their worry is about the loss of their man's emotional commitment to a rival. Hence, a husband's 'one-night stand' is less threatening. She wants to know instead, 'But do you love her?'

I also uncovered in my explorations in evolutionary biology the answer to another puzzle. Isha had other lovers besides Anand and me, as I found out later, and her propensity for affairs bothered me. I had grown up believing that men had a craving for variety but not women. I was wrong. Surely, sex requires two persons, and mathematically, the number of heterosexual encounters should be more or less similar for both sexes. Indeed, men's passion for multiple partners could never have evolved unless there were women who shared the same desire.

Are women by nature just as promiscuous as men? The jealousy of our primate forefathers suggests that Isha may have inherited her propensity for

infidelity from her ancestral mother. Had our female foremothers been naturally faithful, our forefathers would not have suffered jealousy. Recent empirical research shows that female infidelity exists in all cultures—seemingly the highest in Sweden and the lowest in China—and it is a major reason for divorce around the world. ‘Sperm competition’ research confirms this.

*If a woman has sex with two men within the course of a week, sperm competition can ensue, as the sperm from different men scramble and battle for the prize of fertilizing the egg. Recent research on sperm competition reveals that men’s sperm volume, relative to their body weight, is twice that which occurs in primate species known to be monogamous, a clue that hints at a long evolutionary history of human sperm competition.*

If this is true, then a woman’s reproductive tract must have been a battleground among male sperm to gain access to the vital egg in order to transport the male gene to the next generation.

A woman always runs a greater risk from infidelity than a man. She risks violence from a jealous husband, and if he walks out on her, she may end up on the street, without the means to support her family. Yet, she still goes ahead and has an affair. Evolutionary research suggests that one explanation may well lie in the instinct of survival—a particularly severe winter may have posed a great risk to our ancestral mothers of starving without meat that only a male would have provided from the hunt. A second benefit from having an affair with a man with healthy genes provided protection against changes in climate. A third benefit is protection against the death of her mate. Since disease, war and food shortages made survival precarious, the chance of losing a husband was high.

Palaeontological data shows that injuries were mostly to male skulls and skeletons. And today, when divorce rates are above 50 per cent in many cities of the West, the same sort of ‘mate insurance’ provides a safeguard against the reasonable risk of losing a partner.

Interestingly, women seem to have sexual intercourse with lovers when they are at the peak of their sexual desire, when they are most likely to conceive. A survey of 1152 women revealed that they experienced greater sexual desire when they were ovulating and timed their illicit sexual liaisons during this period. Sex with husbands, on the other hand, occurred when they were *not* ovulating, suggesting that she wanted to keep her man rather than conceive with him. None of this is conscious, of course.

The lesson from evolutionary theory is that jealousy is necessary to protect

~~The reason from evolutionary theory is that jealousy is necessary to protect~~  
against the threats of sexual treachery. In a hazardous world where human beings are not monogamous by nature, and infidelity threatens to destroy a lifelong relationship, evolution has forged elaborate defences against these hazards. There is thus 'emotional wisdom' in jealousy. Feminists, of course, don't like such evolutionary excuses for men's bad behaviour. The closer we are to cavemen, they think, the more we are likely to treat women like, well, cavewomen.

~

One morning as I was rushing out to work, the phone rang. Thinking it was Isha, I dashed back in to get it. I had been trying to meet her but she had refused to take my calls—was she calling to apologize?

It was Avanti! Her soft, cheerful voice was healing. She was on a visit to Bombay and I invited her promptly to dinner that night. But she preferred to meet earlier in the evening, insisting that I show her Marine Drive. She wanted to ride on the upper deck of the famous Bus Number 123, which ran along the deep, graceful curve of Bombay's ultimate seaside promenade—our equivalent to Beirut's Corniche and Cannes' Croisette.

Over the years, Avanti had remained in touch. Her long, chatty letters would arrive at regular intervals and describe Sharma-ji's indefatigable, and sometimes humiliating, attempts to find her a husband. She was still unmarried but it didn't seem to bother her. She had been reading seriously and did not hesitate to write at length about her never-ending search to make some sort of sense out of life. Sometimes her letters were so abstruse and dense that I had to reread them in order to understand them properly.

We met at the entrance to my office. She greeted me with irrepressible delight.

'Amar!'

I gave her a hug.

'I'm not late?'

'As if you could ever be late,' I said, taking her arm affectionately. She had changed. The pretty, plumpish girl was now a graceful woman. She had lost much of her baby fat and developed an appealing, smartly rounded figure. She looked physically far more attractive than I remembered her.

‘How I love that smile on your face! It is irresistible,’ she said.

‘And you, my healing beauty?’ I said.

‘Healing?’ She looked surprised. ‘You are the man about town, why should *you* need healing?’

I changed the subject as we walked to Churchgate station. I had casually mentioned in my letters that Isha was now married and had come to live in Bombay, but had not told her about our affair. We clambered aboard the red double-decker bus and went up right to the front of the upper deck. Luckily, a couple was getting off at the next stop. We promptly grabbed their front-row seats and were rewarded with a heart-stirring view of the bayside boulevard. We feasted on the vast expanse of the Arabian Sea on one side and the magnificent art deco buildings on the other. Although it was early evening, there were already a few romantic couples about, stealing a cuddle and a kiss among the quiet palms.

We began to speak fast and at the same time, and this helped to get over some of our initial bashfulness. Inevitably, we spoke about our days as neighbours in Delhi, and then stopped abruptly to look questioningly at each other. She recalled vividly our bicycle rides to Khan Market, our visits to Connaught Place, and even our bewildering meeting with Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi at the Imperial Hotel. I turned suddenly and pointed out a building on our right. She knew it. ‘Chateau Marine!’ she exclaimed. I raised my eyebrows, impressed. Her hair was flying in the breeze and I thought there was something exquisite in the way it landed on her shoulders.

‘It’s Nargis’s home—every child knows it, silly boy!’

I understood why she had insisted on visiting Marine Drive. Of course—she was a film buff and wanted to see the homes of the cinema legends. She told me that Nargis had grown up in a flat in that building with her mother, Jaddan Bai, a famous singer at the time. Mother and daughter had run a popular salon there, and aspiring actors, producers and writers used to pay court in the evenings to the two formidable ladies. One of them was the brilliant Urdu writer Saadat Hasan Manto, who went on to write the most poignant story about the partition of India that I have ever read.

Avanti was in great form and narrated how Nargis first met her lover and co-star, Raj Kapoor, here. She had been cooking dinner, making chapattis, when the famous actor had knocked; she had rushed to open the door and he found her



famous actor had knocked, she had rushed to open the door and he found her covered in flour. Avanti burst into a laugh at her own story; so did I, seeing her happy and carefree. In their salons, she told me, they used to gossip about Nargis's rival, Suraiya, whose apartment we were now passing. I pointed out to the ground floor of another elegant art deco structure, Krishna Mahal. Avanti said that Suraiya had thrown her lover's ring into the sea 'right about there'! She indicated with her outstretched arm the spot where Dev Anand had broken their affair.

'He is still my heart-throb!' She sighed.

Hindi cinema, which later came to be called Bollywood, has always been a mirror of our desires at the national stage. As I think back to those early decades after Independence, I find that the mirror reflected the innocence and idealism of Nehru's Age, as heroes and heroines chased butterflies on the Dal Lake in the Kashmir Valley. The talk of movie stars reminded Avanti of Kamini Masi, and I filled her in about the important role that Ramu Mama and she were playing in my life. Soon after the art deco buildings, we followed the sweeping curve of the sea, passed the gymkhanas with their open cricket fields, then a shabby aquarium and a nondescript hostel for female students till we reached Chowpatty beach at the foot of Malabar Hill.

'This is where they immerse Ganesha, don't they?' Avanti exclaimed. 'It's Tuesday today, you know—Ganesha's day.' Then she asked a thousand questions about Bombay's boisterous ten-day festival to the god, most of which I was unable to answer.

Against the setting sun, I watched Avanti's oval face, which had now acquired the loveliness of a woman in full bloom. She still had the same clean skin and colour of her younger days. Her full mouth and rounded body could not be more different from Isha's angular looks. We watched children of all ages playing around an ancient Ferris wheel and a merry-go-round. The hawkers were busy setting up bhelpuri and kulfi stands. Our bus turned and we rode up a winding stretch, rounded Teen Batti, and further up the hill along fashionable houses and gulmohar trees till we reached Hanging Gardens. We got off and stretched ourselves. She had loved the bus ride. Marine Drive had been everything she had hoped for, especially the homes of the film stars.

I felt an awkward shyness as we sat down in the café. We spoke rapidly, almost feverishly. After speaking non-stop for ten minutes, we were quiet

suddenly. I asked about her parents.

‘They are still looking for a suitable boy.’

She had graduated, and to get away from home and the marriage market, she had applied for a job of a copy editor at the *Bombay Post*.

‘Here?’ I said incredulously.

‘Well, *you* are here, and I thought I would at least have one friend.’ After a pause, she asked, ‘Are you happy to see me?’

‘I am thrilled.’ I meant it. She was just what I needed. It was a relief to speak in a straightforward way without having to dance around Isha’s frenetic and impulsive moods.

‘I didn’t tell you about it on the phone. I wasn’t sure . . . besides, I might not get the job.’

‘You must come home,’ I said. ‘I shall have a party for you—you must meet my friends.’

‘So, how does it feel to be a successful man about town?’ she asked.

‘Anand is the real nagaraka,’ I replied with a wry smile, trying not to sound bitter.

‘Anand?’

‘I have caught the disease again, Avanti.’

‘What, you silly boy?’

‘Jealousy.’

I gave her a full account of Isha’s return into my life, beginning with the fateful evening at the Bombay Gym when she reappeared, vulnerable and forlorn. Avanti listened intently. I tried to skip over our lovemaking but she insisted on hearing it all. She kept returning, wanting to know the graphic details of the physical act, desiring the tiniest particulars. I was embarrassed but she clearly was not. I felt flattered at seeing her mildly jealous.

‘So, when you phoned this morning, I thought it was Isha,’ I said, concluding my story. ‘I haven’t been sleeping well lately. I wake up at night in torment wondering what to do. Ever since Anand came to Bombay, I have been feeling a stinging hurt. The old desire for her body has been replaced by the ache of jealousy.’

‘It’s an infatuation,’ Avanti said blithely.

‘How do you know?’

‘The past has come back to haunt you. You’ll get over it.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

Avanti dismissed my misery as ‘hurt pride’. She was more concerned about Isha’s husband and about my reputation. ‘It’s not good for you. Even when they are not true, reputations remain in people’s memories.’

‘What does it matter if all of Bombay knows,’ I said with bravado.

‘Society is unforgiving.’

I argued that ‘reputation’ is not an innate part of a person’s personality. What matters is *my* memory of the look in her eyes when I held her pliable body, and the feelings in our hearts when we possessed each other entirely. ‘Perhaps if you didn’t see her for a while, she’ll miss you and come back,’ she said. Then we fell into silence. Having unburdened myself, I felt that a weight had lifted.

‘Do your parents know?’

I shook my head.

‘I miss your father, Amar. He is very special person—he’s in the world but not of the world. Your mother never liked me. I lost touch with them after we moved houses.’

‘What about you, Avanti? Any boyfriends?’

‘No, I’m not adventurous like you. I think it is wrong to make love outside marriage.’

‘I meant . . . happiness?’

‘Happiness is a word I am too scared to utter.’

Soon it grew dark. There was a breeze from the harbour and I watched her hair blow. The animation on her face was replaced by a mournful expression. It gave her a sense of mystery and I didn’t want to pry. Gradually, the extended arc of the street lights below came on, transforming Marine Drive into the ‘Queen’s Necklace’, a choker-length of twinkling jewels. We watched the lights in silence.

I looked at her and she gave a melancholy smile. Eventually, we got up, much to the relief of the waiters, and took a cab to her uncle’s apartment in Back Bay where she was staying. We sat apart in the taxi but were thrown together suddenly as it turned sharply. The street had been dug up and some workmen were pushing a drainpipe into the ditch. Avanti’s face glimmered under the street light. In the semi-darkness I noticed the long line of her neck. I couldn’t make out the expression on her face.

As we turned towards Marine Drive, we were welcomed by a gust of salty air.

The sea was dark but a few fishing boats lit with hurricane lanterns were rocking in the water. On the other side, the bright flats of the rich were spread against the western night sky. Avanti leaned against my shoulder but looked away. Her hair blew across my eyes. I could see in the distance, through her hair, the bright string of boats swaying rhythmically on the water. She sat resting gently against me.

On an impulse, she stopped the taxi. As we walked along Marine Drive, the sea seemed to grow sombre and the palms on either side cast scrawny shadows. Black-and-yellow taxis rushed by noisily. Having talked all evening, we were content to walk without speaking. Eventually, we sat on the smooth cement sea wall and stared at the dimly lit stars that hung in the cloudless night. The water was smooth and dark, hardly making a sound against the sea wall. A white-haired man holding the hand of a young girl passed by. Two slim boys, arm in arm, followed them, speaking loudly in Marathi. One of them was carrying an idol of Ganesha. He saw Avanti look admiringly at it.

‘Would you like to touch god’s feet? he asked. ‘It’s Tuesday.’

‘Certainly!’ exclaimed Avanti.

As she reached over to touch Ganesha’s feet, I wondered how Avanti always seemed to find an intimate moment with the divine. Why couldn’t I touch god on Tuesday evenings?

~

I was delighted to have Avanti in Bombay. She was just what I needed at this tumultuous time. She brought peace, calm and a dose of reality into my life. She dismissed my feelings for Isha as ‘infatuation’; I resented her glib attitude, thinking that she wasn’t taking me seriously. ‘Infatuation’, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is an ‘intense but short-lived passion in contrast to lasting feelings of love’. I wondered if there was any truth in what Avanti believed.

One of the great studies of infatuation is Turgenev’s late novel *Spring Torrents* about an encounter between a young Russian nobleman, Sanin, and an Italian girl, Gemma, whose mother runs a café in Frankfurt. While on a European holiday, Sanin visits the café and orders a glass of lemonade from Gemma. He is bewitched by her ivory skin and wavy hair and is so drawn to her

that he misses his coach. Over the next few days, he visits the café daily and is more and more enchanted by her, especially ‘the black depths of her eyes suffused with shadows and yet luminous at the same time’. He learns that she is engaged to be married to a plodding merchant but she doesn’t care much for him. Gemma, on her part, is also attracted to the charming Russian. They exchange ecstatic love letters, and Sanin is so overwhelmed by her that he decides to sell his Russian estates and move to Frankfurt. He proposes marriage to her.

Providentially, Sanin learns of a potential buyer for his property—a wealthy young, married Russian woman, Maria Nikolaevna, who also happens to be on a holiday in Germany. He visits her to discuss the sale of his property but instead is seduced by her powerful personality and voracious sexuality. Sanin abandons Gemma and sets off for Paris with Maria Nikolaevna and her tame husband. This dramatic turn of events proved Avanti’s point. I was suffering from the same sort of fantasy as Sanin and this is why she referred to my feelings for Isha as a passing ‘infatuation’. My overactive imagination had concocted an illusion of a sophisticated nagaraka, making me believe that I was in the same league as Isha.

How could Sanin have seriously considered selling off his estates in Russia to devote the rest of his days in managing a family café and living happily with Gemma and her slightly hysterical mother? It was a delightful dream of Sanin’s, and once he met an attractive woman of his own class, he quickly realized it. Both of us were victims of weaving romantically fictional narratives in our minds. Sanin’s rapid seduction by Maria Nikolaevna showed me disturbing aspects in my character. Both of us had created an image of an ideal of freedom in our heads which was fuelled by Isha’s and Gemma’s charms. Surely, it was madness on Sanin’s part to believe that he could become a man of business and run a café!

Turgenev has illustrated an important feature of kama. Infatuation can be propelled not just by a mistaken notion about the other person—thinking that she is lovelier and more sympathetic than she really is—but also by an error about oneself. In imagining ourselves to be someone else, we create an appealing vision of our own character and ignore our flaws and fears. What we need at this point is a reality check, and is that what Avanti had provided me? She had concluded that friendship is a better guide to love than infatuation.

Avanti may have devalued my feelings for Isha but she failed to assuage my

Avanti may have devalued my feelings for Isha but she failed to assuage my obsessive jealousy. She tended to view the world in a rational way. Perhaps because she had not suffered as I had. Dharmakirti, the Buddhist poet and philosopher of the seventh century, expresses how our mind blinds us to the wisdom of the heart and how pain, above all, strips down our rational defences and puts us in raw, direct contact with the emotional truth of our being.

*A hundred times I learnt from my philosophy  
To think no more of love, this vanity,  
This dream, this source of all regret,  
This emptiness.  
But no philosophy can make my heart forget  
Her loveliness.*

Dharmakirti, however, does not express his feelings of jealousy in his poetry, and certainly not as openly and innocently as I did to Avanti. In fact, none of the poets of the classical Sanskrit tradition did. They would have understood my feelings—and even empathized with my pain—but they would not have *expressed* male jealousy. In the aesthetic sensibility that developed in classical India a woman could be jealous but not a man. The *rasa*, ‘mood’, of female jealousy was, in fact, extensively cultivated in classical poetry. A jealous man, on the other hand, lowered his dignity, risking becoming a figure of ridicule.

Patriarchy has always demanded stricter fidelity from a woman than a man. An unfaithful man is rebuked but an unfaithful woman loses her sense of worth, her *udarata*, ‘nobility’. As a result, the aesthetic sensibility that developed in the classical period allowed a woman to express jealousy, not a man. Her man still retained his *udarata* and was worthy of her love even if he was unfaithful. But a jealous woman was resigned to tears or silence. A man, however, would have demeaned himself if he had expressed jealous feelings since his unfaithful wife or beloved would already have lost her value and honour. She would have become *asati*, ‘wanton’, when she was unfaithful. A jealous man or husband would have been considered foolish in caring for something that was of little value. This is why there is no expression of male jealousy in the *Kamasutra*.

Avanti did get the job and soon she settled down in a paying guest flat in an old, nondescript building in Colaba, not too far from where I lived. She helped me to plan the ‘grand party’, as she called it, where I had promised to introduce her to my friends. I may not have succeeded as a nagaraka, but I wanted my party to be modelled after a ‘salon’ in the *Kamasutra*:

*A salon takes place when people of similar knowledge, intelligence, character, wealth, and age sit together in the house of a courtesan or in a place of assembly or in the dwelling-place of some man and engage in appropriate conversation. There they exchange thoughts about poems or works of art, and in the course of that they praise brilliant women whom everyone likes . . .*

As we were making a guest list, I found that I had friends in three social circles of Bombay. When I asked which circle interested her the most, she said that the circle didn’t matter, only the person did. She did insist, though, that I invite Isha, Anand, Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi.

Those who belonged to the high end of Bombay’s society seemed to know each other and met often at each other’s parties. They belonged to different circles, however, and while these sometimes intersected at weddings and funerals, the rest of the time people preferred to stay within their own circle. When I arrived in Bombay, I naturally gravitated to the ‘boxwallah’ circle, which was made of executives like myself who worked in the larger multinational and Indian companies. I got to know some of them at the Bombay Gymkhana, where I played tennis regularly. While I made many acquaintances in this circle, I sought the friendship of only a few.

I yearned for the circle of intellectuals—writers, journalists and artists—some of whom I had met through Raj Desai and Ramu Mama. I would see them in coffee houses and loved the clash of ideas in their conversations. But they did not accept me easily, thinking that I had sold out to the commercial world. A third circle consisted of academics, and I did manage to make a few friends from Bombay University, but they too were suspicious of my commercial connections. Once in a while I would get a chance to enter other circles—of government officials, entrepreneurs and even a few merchant princes—but I never managed to find an enduring place in any of them.

‘To which circle does Anand belong?’ asked Avanti.

‘To the most fashionable one, of course,’ I replied. ‘With an excellent job, his father’s connections, and an education in England, all the doors seem to open

before him. Besides, he is a charming bachelor, and all the mothers of eligible daughters swoon over him.'

'Is this envy speaking?' she asked.

'Perhaps,' I confessed. I didn't like Anand's crowd. He moved among spoilt young men who made their own rules; they had contempt for ordinary, middle-class people. In his world, all the men were handsome and all the women beautiful; there was only gaiety, laughter and abandon; men and women didn't have to live as husband and wife; and they found nothing wrong in seducing a girl and abandoning her.

'Ah, your precious world of the nagaraka!' Avanti gave me an ironical smile.

In the end, we invited only a few people—those who I thought Avanti would like to meet and who might become her friends. A week before the party, I proudly took her to dine with Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi. She had the same reaction to their stunning apartment as I had when I saw it for first time with its brilliant views of the Arabian Sea. She was taken up with their carpets, paintings and books. They were wonderfully welcoming and it turned into an emotional reunion. Their warmth moved her and at one point she had tears of joy in her eyes. It confirmed the impression she had during their first encounter at the Imperial in Delhi.

As soon as we sat down to dinner, Ramu Mama broke the news. He had heard a rumour at the stock exchange that Vikram Suri was thinking of leaving Bombay.

'Is Isha going with him?' asked Kamini Masi.

'I doubt it.' Ramu Mama quickly retreated, however, saying that all this may be idle gossip. I tended to believe him. Isha hadn't mentioned anything but then she never talked about her husband. So, I couldn't be sure.

'Why is he leaving?' asked Kamini Masi.

'Well, he has made a fortune,' said Ramu Mama. 'So, he doesn't need to work. I mean he is already a legend on the exchange—it takes a lifetime to make the kind of money he has in a few years.'

'So, what will he do?' she asked.

'They say he wants to retire to an ashram near his village.'

'It must be difficult—what with Isha and all . . .'

'He's merely following the stages of life, isn't he?' said Ramu Mama.

'Still, isn't it a little early to be entering the third stage?' asked Kamini Masi.



I felt sorry for Isha's husband. My thoughts went back to the prince of Chandi many years ago as I recalled a similar conversation at Aditi Malik's party. I had felt sorry for Chandi just as I did now for Vikram Suri.

~

Just as I was coming out of the bath, Avanti arrived at 'her' party. 'You said to come early,' she said, feeling embarrassed. 'So, here I am.'

'Give me a minute. I am glad you came before the others.' I got dressed and led her to the terrace, where I offered her a drink. I had never seen her in a sari and I thought that her full figure filled the folds of the pink Banaras silk nicely, creating an alluring impression.

'I don't know,' she said nervously. 'No one has ever given a party for me. Tell me, how can I help?'

'Just give me moral support—I need it to face Isha and Anand,' I said.

Soon, the others arrived and they arranged themselves spontaneously into two groups: one on the terrace around Avanti; the other inside around Kamini Masi, who was speaking to Madhu, an attractive journalist with deep, intelligent eyes and sharply outlined eyebrows. Kamini Masi was wearing an understated blue ikat sari from Orissa that underlined her preference for traditional Indian aesthetics. Conversation seemed to waver in both the groups, as it often does in the first few minutes at a party, broken by new arrivals, greetings, offers of tea and drinks, and as people hunt for an interesting subject of conversation.

Raj Desai arrived soon after the others and gravitated towards the first group, accompanied not by his wife but by Doli Sihari. All heads turned to look at the balding eminence. He noticed my copy of the *Kamasutra* on the coffee table, and gave me an approving, conspiratorial look. Doli went to greet Madhu but Raj's eyes caught the fresh and natural face of Avanti, who was listening to a conversation about a new exhibition of Ara, a lesser-known figure among a serious group of artists known as the Bombay Progressive Group.

'His still-lives are really quite good,' a young critic with the *Bombay Post* was telling Avanti. 'You must go and see the show.' He was Madhu's husband and I had invited him because I thought he was a kind man and would be helpful to Avanti at work.

Turning to Raj, the critic added, 'He deserves to be better known, don't you

think?’

‘No,’ said the greying eminence dismissively, and it brought the conversation to a halt. There was an uneasy silence and people looked at each other awkwardly. An older woman in a quiet, elegant print asked the great man. ‘Oh, don’t be malicious—tell us something amusing.’ She was an old friend of his and not a bit daunted by his status.

‘That’s difficult, my dear Sheila. Only scandals and gossip are amusing; unless, of course, you are a great storyteller, as the *Kamasutra* over there teaches us.’

‘And what does it say?’ Avanti asked.

Raj looked admiringly at Avanti, dwelling a little too long on her firm, rounded breasts. ‘Well, it says, you must first learn to be playful, not self-important; second, speak to her not about yourself but about her; finally, don’t show off by talking too much Sanskrit.’ Turning to Avanti, Raj said, ‘Will you be a dear and hand me the *Kamasutra*, it’s just behind you? Opening it, he found the page he wanted. ‘Listen to this! It’s in the chapter called “Lifestyle of the Man about Town”.’

*The man who tells stories in society,  
neither too much in Sanskrit  
nor too much in the local dialect  
becomes highly regarded in the social world.*

‘Ah, to be a playful, self-effacing raconteur!’ exclaimed Sheila. ‘Alas, all the men I know are just the opposite—they only want to hear their own voices—like you, Raj.’

Ignoring Sheila, Raj informed us that Blaise Pascal, the French philosopher, had offered the same sensible advice. ‘Would you like people to think well of you? Then don’t speak well of yourself,’ he quoted Pascal.

‘But what about seduction?’ Sheila asked. ‘Does this formula work for a seducer too?’

‘Yes indeed, the *Kamasutra* says seduction is the art of making others think that you are more appealing than you are.’ Raj’s eyes rested again on Avanti’s breasts.

‘I know such a person!’ said Indu Vakil hesitatingly. She was a bright activist lawyer at the Bombay High Court. ‘I met him only last night.’

‘Who, who?’ asked Sheila.

‘Anand Tyagi.’

‘Of course,’ said Sheila. ‘He is Dev and Geeti’s son.’ Turning to Indu, she asked, ‘Tell me, what’s he like?’

‘You’ll soon find out—he’s coming this evening,’ I said.

‘Well, he is certainly the talk of the town,’ said Sheila. ‘All the women are falling over him, I hear—especially one, Isha Malik.’ I felt a stab of jealousy.

‘Stop it, you gossips!’ pronounced a grey-haired lady who had just arrived in a pink and grey French chiffon sari. Ruchi Saigal was the wife of a powerful executive in the Tata group of companies, and she was much in demand socially mainly because of her husband’s position.

‘Men always get away with it; society can be cruel to women,’ said Madhu with a sigh.

‘Isha is married and ought to know better!’ said Ruchi.

‘But the upper classes, my dear, you know, how . . .’

‘What upper classes!’ hissed Ruchi, cutting Madhu mid-sentence.

‘Well, Isha is old money, after all, what with the mills and all . . .’

‘Old wealth declining into poverty,’ said Ruchi smugly.

‘Even Nehru—he carried on with Lady M. The upper classes are different, Ruchi,’ said Sheila. ‘I don’t know how Isha’s husband copes with it, poor fellow.’

‘Vikram Suri is a brilliant man,’ said Madhu. ‘They call him the wizard of Dalal Street.’

‘My husband says the same thing but I think he is a fool . . . to let his wife slip out of his fingers. Men are so inept at these things,’ said Ruchi.

‘They say he is going away to an ashram,’ said Madhu.

I noticed that Ramu Mama had remained silent throughout this exchange even though he probably knew far more about Vikram Suri than anyone else in the gathering.

‘Jealousy makes us do strange things,’ said Raj.

‘I have never felt jealous,’ said Mrs Saigal. ‘Only insecure and immature people do.’

Ruchi Saigal tended to see the world in black and white. She didn’t get a reaction, however, as all heads turned to the door as Isha walked in holding herself very erect, followed by her husband a few paces behind. Looking straight

ahead, she moved with a quick, firm yet light step and stopped directly before me. She apologized for being late and gave me a strange look. She turned to look around and I thought she was searching for Anand. Not finding him, she frowned. I hastened towards Avanti, and with an affectionate arm around her, I introduced her to Isha. Before they got a chance to say a word, Raj swooped upon us and swept Avanti away.

I was pleased to be alone with Isha at last but she was not. She was fidgety and uncomfortable. I had been in a state of despair, anxious to have a word with her. Since I had told Isha so much about Avanti, I knew she would be curious and would come. This was my chance and I practically dragged her to a corner on the terrace where I thought we would not be heard.

I miss you, Isha. Perhaps I am mistaken . . .’

She looked coldly into my face. ‘No, you are not mistaken. I may be looking at you, listening to you, but I am thinking of him. I love him; I am his.’

‘But what has happened? I love you, Isha. I want to marry you.’

‘Then do this for me, never—never utter those words again.’

‘I am willing to wait. I ask only for the right to hope . . .’

‘And suffer?’

‘Yes, I’ll wait. I shall love you from afar. There’s only one happiness in life for me—your love!’

There was an uncomfortable silence.

‘But you did love me once, didn’t you?’ I asked.

‘I can’t say if it was love. It might have been something else, something less personal.’

‘You mean you never loved me?’

‘Yes, if you want to put it that way. But I’m not sure. At any rate, I don’t feel the emotion of love for you. Whatever might have existed between us, it’s over.’ There was a long pause. I was hurting and didn’t know what to say. ‘Now, let’s forget all this and enjoy your party. I cannot stand you looking at me with that long, sad face.’ Then she disentangled her sari, turned around, and went inside.

Unlike classical Indian poets, writers in the West have never felt shy about expressing heartbreak or male jealousy. Roman poets, around the same time, accomplished themselves in expressing this moral emotion. They wrote freely about their love affairs in Latin elegies, concealing the name of their beloved under a pseudonym. I was particularly drawn to Sextus Propertius from the Augustan age (50–15 BC). His bitter and torrid affair with Cynthia veered wildly between emotional extremes, somewhat similar to mine with Isha. I could easily identify with the debilitating effects of his affair:

*Has some wrong finally driven you out of the shut doors of  
another and brought you back to my bed?  
For where have you spent the long hours of the night that was  
supposed to be mine,  
you who return exhausted when the stars, alas, have run their  
course?*

I remembered Isha and the night she made me wait for hours, getting home intoxicated and promptly falling asleep in my bed. Like Isha's sleep, Cynthia's is also fretful and restless. Seeing her tossing and turning, the Roman lover grows suspicious that she herself might have been unfaithful.

*And as often as you sighed and gave an occasional shudder,  
I froze, trusting readily in an empty sign,  
lest some dream be bringing you unfamiliar fears,  
or someone be forcing you to be his against your will.*

Just as I expected exclusive attentions from Isha, so does the Roman lover, and he feels anxious at the thought that someone else might try to possess Cynthia. Although his jealousy is unjustified, he has invented a rival and fears Cynthia's infidelity. I too had been guilty of invoking an imaginary rival before Anand came along. In fact, to make her infidelity more bearable, I had tried to imagine her as a passive victim of male desire. Although my fears might have been groundless, I can't be sure, but they weren't an obstacle to feeling jealous. What matters is that I *believed* in them. Jealousy needs a rival and if there isn't one, it invents one.

Much as Isha's resistance this evening had served only to heighten my desire like the Roman lover's, I found it imperative to re-establish my claim over what I had lost. My feelings of love were superseded by my desire to have what

another possessed. I began to look upon myself as Isha's suitor rather than an established lover. I wanted to test how she would respond to me if she thought I were someone else—to know how it felt to be in the position of a rival who steals what belongs to another. Cynthia's lover wonders if his rival is someone like him, capable of edging him out. All this raises questions in my mind about whether Anand had a better claim to Isha's attentions.

I learnt from the elegies of Propertius and Ovid that it is often better not to show jealousy. Repression is a better strategy in an erotic relationship. It is tiresome to hear accusations and be the object of adultery charges.

*Continual accusations have made many unpopular.  
Often a woman is overcome by a man's silence.  
If you have seen something, always deny you have seen it!  
Or if perhaps something has hurt you, deny you are hurt!*

A jealous outburst is counterproductive. Better to keep quiet to avoid becoming an object of derision. The advice of the Roman elegists is ironical—they could not help expressing their own jealousy—but it makes one also appreciate why Sanskrit poets were reluctant to express male jealousy.

~

When Isha said 'It's over,' she broke my heart. Heartbreak is the helpless side of love when you become aware that you must let go but cannot. It happens sometimes at the end of an affair and is often the result of unrequited love, which, according to some, is the only kind of love there is. I would normally have plunged into depression. Instead, I felt a burden lifting. To my surprise, I felt free from the doubts and agonies of jealousy that had been torturing me all these weeks. It was as though a painful tooth that had been aching for a long time had been removed. It was a relief to know that I could resume my life once more and think about other things. But this liberating thought quickly gave way to a baser one. I wanted to see Isha hurt, to pay for what she had inflicted on me. I now hated her and wanted her to suffer for taking away my peace of mind. It was another phase in my kama education.

Meanwhile, the party for Avanti was in full swing. There were voices outside and I moved towards the door. I could tell it was Anand. I glanced at Isha and she was staring at the approaching figure. Avanti also turned to look at him.

‘Ah, here you are at last!’ I greeted Anand as he entered the flat. We were meeting after almost ten years and for some reason, he did not seem as tall as I remembered him. He had shaved his beard and sported a clean-cut look. But the rest of him was the same—a well-formed square frame, short-cropped black hair, a good-natured expression on his calm and resolute face, loosely fitting clothes. As he came in, his gentle eyes shone above his faint and modest smile. He embraced me warmly and turned first towards Isha and then Avanti. Turning his friendly eyes from one to the other, he said whatever came into his head.

I watched Anand move effortlessly from one person to the next. People were attracted to him, to his sparkling eyes, black hair and eyebrows, and smiling face. He seemed to produce an effect of kindness and good humour. The women were especially drawn to him—it didn’t matter if they were young or old—a smile lit up their faces after meeting him. Anand was a natural *nagaraka* and the skills of the *Kamasutra* came to him intuitively. When he saw a woman, he looked first at her clothes, and seemed to find a nice, original way to describe them. To one he told a little anecdote, to another he described an emotion. But he didn’t fail to leave an impression on everyone he met.

After a round of meetings, he decided to speak to Avanti and I could tell that she was immediately captivated. They spent a fair amount of time together and I wondered nervously what they were talking about. What was going on in his mind? Was he undressing her in his imagination, trying to imagine how her naked body looked like? Or was he thinking how he would make love to her? When I looked at her face, I found a new expression in her eyes and I grew concerned. Their conversation came to an end finally. As he was walking away, I saw a quivering light flashing in Avanti’s eyes. She gave a smile of excitement that involuntarily curved her lips. She had always been a sensible person, hard-grounded, and now she seemed intoxicated with admiration. ‘Yes, there is something diabolical about him,’ I thought.

Anand reached Isha ultimately. She was waiting eagerly and her face lit up. Her dark eyes shone under her thick lashes, resting with friendly attention on his face. There was an easy familiarity between them; their body language made it obvious that they were lovers. My heart continued to sink. I trudged to the far end of the room and dropped into a chair. I could not keep my eyes off them, however. They had moved quietly to a corner on the terrace where they stood talking, oblivious to the world. Leaning in a relaxed way against the wall, he was

talking, oblivious to the world. Leaning in a relaxed way against the wall, he was listening intently.

Desperate to find out what they were saying, I got up and went towards them, pretending to collect empty glasses.

‘What do you want from me?’ I overheard Anand say.

But they were suddenly distracted. Isha’s husband had dropped a glass and everyone turned to look at him. Isha had once confessed to me that theirs was a humdrum, desireless marriage; she had ceased to feel anything physical for him a long time ago. He was standing alone next to the lamp on my desk and in that light, I thought his collar was sticking out—he looked like the man who delivered newspapers daily at my door. The light must be playing tricks. Still it was hard to imagine Vikram Suri as ‘the wizard of Dalal Street’. His plight had to be worse than mine; at least, I had the security of possessing nothing, and I could not lose what I did not possess. He still owned her presence on the dining table, the sound of her feet on the stairs, the opening and closing of doors, perhaps even a kiss on the cheek.

I was reminded of my role as a host and I went towards him to gather the pieces of glass while offering him another drink. On the way, I heard Ruchi whisper to Sheila, ‘This is becoming embarrassing!’

‘What did I tell you?’ replied Sheila. Others in the room also glanced more than once at Isha and Anand. ‘It’s quite improper,’ said Ruchi, although she was enjoying the sight of a brewing scandal. Soon, Isha and Anand joined the others. Isha’s husband was surrounded by those who were avidly interested in the stock market. They were blatantly pumping him for stock tips.

‘Your husband has such an easy way of making the most complex ideas simple to understand,’ Kamini Masi said to Isha.

‘Oh yes,’ said Isha with a smile, not taking in a word that was being said.

‘I must confess I don’t understand the stock market and feel quite ridiculous,’ said Anand.

‘You . . . ridiculous! Now that’s a joke!’ retorted Sheila. ‘A man is ridiculous who is rejected by women, not the one who conquers them.’

‘My dear Anand,’ Ramu Mama added playfully, ‘how can any husband feel safe with you around?’

‘No, no . . . surely I am not a predator. Am I?’

‘Women want you and surely you must enjoy it,’ said Kamini Masi.



‘One of the aims of civilization is to make life as pleasurable as possible, isn’t it?’ said Anand. ‘The difference between animals and us is that they have no choice but to eat and sleep alone. A cultivated human being neither eats alone, nor sleeps alone.’

‘Well, I am glad my niece is not around,’ said Sheila. ‘She is finally going to marry and I don’t want her getting ideas.’

Avanti was calmly taking in what was being said. She had a smile on her face and seemed perfectly at ease, although I detected the same quality of detachment in her. She rose above the gossip and the decadence. A sudden breeze made her lift her hand to flick her hair backwards. I hoped she was enjoying ‘her party’, although someone else was not. Vikram Suri went up to his wife and suggested it was time to leave. He had work to attend to before the markets opened in the morning. Without looking at him, Isha replied that she would be staying for supper. He looked unhappy. He turned around to thank me for the party. I urged him to stay but he left politely.

~

My heart went out to Isha’s husband. I concluded that he could only cope with his unfaithful wife by deciding to quit society. He must have seen through the absurdity of the gay social whirl of the big city where

*if you keep quiet, you are dumb  
if you are eloquent, you are pretentious  
if you are distant, you are arrogant  
if you are intimate, you are presumptuous  
if you are patient, you are not manly  
if you are impetuous, you are ill-bred.*

Whereas I felt sorry for Vikram Suri, my father would have viewed his renunciation in a more positive light, thinking it the right thing to do when one has completed one’s duties as a householder. Certainly, Suri had made enough money to retire into the third stage, vanaprastha. True, they did not have any children, but that was Isha’s choice, and to this extent his duty to the second stage of life would always remain incomplete. My guess is Suri had seen through life, realized its transience and decided it was time to escape the prison of the sensual world. Thanks to Isha, his position in society had become completely absurd. As for me, even now, when I have grown old, I oscillate, as one of the

absurd. As for me, even now when I have grown old, I vacillate, aware of the irony in enjoining a deluded man to abandon the world of his delusion.

There is another lesson about kama here. Every love affair, like every marriage, is unequal. And the one who loves more is also more vulnerable.

Desire has a restless quality and it seeks novelty. One is not content with what one has and is often unable to reciprocate love. I loved Isha but she loved Anand and who knows whom Anand loved. Vikram Suri's plight reminded me of Bhartrihari. He vacillates between worldly indulgence and asceticism, but eventually retires to the tranquillity of the forest. Soon, however, he begins to miss the gaiety of the court life, and in particular the woman he loves.

But the next moment he is not sure. He is confused between the two sorts of life:

*Cut off all envy,  
Examine the matter,  
Tell us decisively, you noble men,  
Which ought we to attend upon:  
The sloping sides of a majestic mountain  
Or the buttocks of a woman abounding in passion?*

Even after the fog lifts, the ambiguity of kama remains:

*I do indeed speak without bias,  
This is acknowledged as truth among men:  
Nothing enthralls us like an ample-hipped woman,  
Nothing else causes such pain.*

After six months in the forest he realizes that he cannot live thus, forgotten in a hermitage. He misses his unfaithful wife. But he is a kama optimist at heart and decides that it's worth the risk of falling in love as long as one is aware that there will come a day when love will become bitter. So, he returns to the city and begins anew a life of kama.

*At first she rebuffs me,  
then in a mood born of dalliance,  
passion is roused;  
slowly her body falls languid,  
and composure is shed,  
leaving her bold enough to indulge in games of love  
played by her limb's abandoned gesture—  
a woman's pleasure is my delight.*

The story has no ending, for he gets discouraged once again. He is easily enticed by women and invariably gets ensnared in their bondage. He begins to feel again a revulsion against the world's sordidness. He longs for the calm of the forest to dwell as an ascetic on the banks of a mountain river and pass his days in spiritual meditation. The theme of Bhartrihari's poetry is the confusion, longing, pain and ephemeral pleasure of love. Even in his erotic verses, he keeps returning to life's absurd transience when he should be focusing on sustaining the mood of love.

*Bearing the luster of a full moon  
at its loftiest phase,  
the lotus-face of a slender girl  
locks honey in her lips.  
What is tart now like unripe fruit  
on vines of gourd,  
when time has run its course  
will be an acrid poison.*

~

Soon after Vikram Suri left, supper was served. Avanti and Kamini Masi helped out in the kitchen. Isha and Anand left soon after; they left together which aroused looks from some of the guests. After another hour or so, the last of the guests had gone. Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi were the last to leave. Only Avanti remained. Jealousy and defeat were written on my face; she put her arm around me, trying to comfort me. Then the dam burst. I broke down and began to cry on her shoulder.

'I can't help it. It's tearing me up from inside. I set myself to become a nagaraka and I botched it up, didn't I?'

'You are trembling.'

'I am miserable, Avanti,' I lamented.

'It's my fault,' she said, hugging me. 'It was I who wanted you to invite Isha and Anand.'

'No, no . . . I was the one who desperately needed to see Isha and knew she would come running if I invited Anand. I hate her.'

There was silence as she held me and I felt her comforting warmth against my body. We remained thus until my pain began to ebb.

'I love Isha now even more when I am jealous . . . when I actually hate her.'

'Maybe there's your answer,' she said

‘Maybe there’s your answer,’ she said.

I looked at her puzzled.

‘I almost wish you had succeeded in becoming a nagaraka,’ she said with a nervous laugh. ‘At least, you wouldn’t be taking yourself so seriously. You would have cultivated a playful attitude—here today, gone tomorrow; you’re a speck of dust, you don’t matter; if you die, no one will miss you . . . not for too long anyway. A handful of people may, but even they will forget you after a while; the world will continue as though you were never there. So, enjoy the game while you are alive—loosen up and live with a light touch.’

Avanti suddenly grew embarrassed, realizing that she had been sounding preachy. I confessed to her that for a few moments during the evening I was jealous of her and Anand as well. ‘The look you gave him worried me,’ I said.

‘Don’t worry, I have very few expectations.’ She said this in a matter-of-fact way, as though she were speaking about the weather. She laughed nervously and finally got up to leave.

‘My heart still aches for Isha!’ I moaned.

~

Male jealousy reached a pinnacle in Othello, Shakespeare’s most romantic figure. I do not have a scrap of his heroism but what I have in common with him is the intolerable thought that another man might possess the woman I love.

‘At least Othello had a right to be jealous,’ Avanti argued. He was a husband whereas I was only Isha’s lover in an adulterous relationship. Isha had never promised me anything. Why should I feel betrayed?

I retorted that my jealousy was a natural reaction to the fact that Isha preferred Anand, and so I had a good reason to feel jealous.

‘Maybe both you and Othello are naturally jealous.’

‘What?’

‘If you love her more when you are jealous, then we are not speaking about love; it’s about possession. You miss *not possessing* her.’

Avanti had a point. Shakespeare too evokes the idea of possession when Brabantio is told that he’s been ‘robbed’. When asked of what, he is told of his daughter, Desdemona, as though she were an expensive piece of jewellery that has been stolen from him and is now in ‘the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor’. Shortly thereafter, he speaks of his daughter to the duke as though she’s his

property: 'She is abused, stolen from me, and corrupted.' Brabantio is unwilling to accept that his daughter has a mind of her own and has chosen Othello out of her own free will.

Unlike Shakespeare, who thought of jealousy as the fear of losing a possession—either household property or a person—Avanti believed that love was the opposite. It was about giving, not owning. It was about bringing happiness to the beloved. Hence, she called both Othello and me 'naturally jealous'.

'How can you say that!' I protested. 'Othello's flaw was the opposite—he was too trusting.' He was easily deceived by Iago, a kama pessimist, who saw only animal desire in Desdemona, a desire that would soon be satiated and be ready for a change. Iago believed that Desdemona would change her affections as soon as she tired of Othello's body. My own reading of Othello is that he was too impulsive. Without waiting for real evidence, he became unreasonably jealous and then acted with violence. 'He may have been foolish and tragic,' I told Avanti, 'but I still admire his love. It has majesty, and he is far nobler than I could ever be.' Seeing the wreck of his faith and his love, he says:

*If she be false,  
O, then Heaven mocks itself!*

This is the tipping point of the play. Till now, Othello was a brave warrior and a devoted husband but from here onwards, his jealousy builds and his personality disintegrates. His anxieties, his vanities coalesce to create reasons for him to believe in Desdemona's betrayal, and of his own undoing. From sexual anxiety it is a short leap to sexual jealousy. Othello idealized Desdemona as something sacred. Her purity has been polluted, her sanctity desecrated like a violated temple, and only her death can extinguish the sacrilege and restore the pre-existing holiness. I never had these illusions about Isha. I may have felt the madness of revenge but I was incapable of violence. Othello's love and grandeur, on the other hand, remain undiminished till the end, and so does my admiration for him.

If the expression of male jealousy reached a peak in the sixteenth-century England of Shakespeare's *Othello*, it climbed a notch higher in Proust's novel in early twentieth-century France. Proust makes us believe that the gender of jealousy is 'masculine', quite the opposite of the conclusion reached by classical Indian poets. Like Avanti, his premise is that male jealousy depends on a patriarchal society's belief in 'possession' and 'control'—that a woman is a man's possession and he must control his possessions. Both possession and control require an up-to-date knowledge of the woman's activities. Thus, knowledge is critical.

Swann's love grows with his jealous obsession with Odette's affairs with other men. He constantly needs to know what is happening in her life. Even when he finds out that it is quite harmless, his jealousy does not go away: he is 'gluttonous of everything that would feed its vitality'. He becomes suspicious of something else; he is forever searching in his obsessive desire to know. His curiosity is like a historian's who is deciphering manuscripts to get at the truth. Swann's curiosity appears to be satisfied when he finds a love letter. He thinks it is Odette's but he is wrong. His jealousy

*rejoiced at the discovery, as though that jealousy had an independent existence, fiercely egotistical, gluttonous of everything that would feed its vitality, even at the expense of Swann himself.*

Swann is never sure whether Odette is telling the truth. Like Isha, Odette lies. She conceals her doings from Swann, which seems logical to her; only, he cannot understand it given his patriarchal mindset. Odette is not only impossible to possess, she is unknowable. Isn't this true of all human relationships? It is not true that the more you love the better you understand. The only wisdom in love is that 'the other is not to be known'.

Finally, Swann marries Odette for reasons that no one understands, including himself. But his jealousy has nothing to do with being a husband. The volume ends with Swann exclaiming to himself:

*To think that I've wasted years of my life, that I've longed to die, that I've experienced my greatest love, for a woman who didn't appeal to me, who wasn't even my type!*

Proust appears to come to the same bizarre conclusion as Avanti—'great love' has less to do with the appeal of the beloved and more with the jealousy of the lover. And Odette was not even Swann's type!

lover. And Odette was not even Swann's type.

Proust helped me to prove Ruchi Saigal wrong. She believed that only insecure and immature people felt jealous. Avanti too felt that my compulsive jealousy was a defect in my character—that I may be a ‘controlling’ person. Yes, I did have possessive feelings towards Isha but all lovers do. It is a natural reaction to the fear that your beloved will prefer another. Ruchi Saigal called it ‘unhealthy’. Feminists also believe that male jealousy is related to the patriarchal ‘ownership’ of a female but they too are wrong.

One can tell a possessive person by their concern for the things they own. At the time in Bombay, I was the proud owner of my first car, a red Standard Herald—and I would naturally have been upset if someone had stolen it. Was I similarly troubled because Anand had stolen Isha? Surely, a car is an object while Isha was a subject. Was I somehow guilty of treating Isha as an object? The loss of an object such as a car, it seems to me, entails indignation or feeling wronged, not jealousy. When Isha chose to sleep with Anand rather than me, I became jealous because she *preferred* to sleep with him rather than me. Cars cannot choose or prefer in that way. Choosers are persons, not objects, and jealousy deals with persons.

I may have been guilty of Ruchi Saigal’s second charge, however—of feeling insecure with regard to Anand. I wanted Isha emotionally for myself. Avanti felt my insecurity was just another way of being possessive in an objectionable way. I can, however, imagine cases of being jealous without thinking of someone as an object. Since I regarded Isha as a choosing person rather than an object, my wanting her to prefer me to Anand was definitely *not* that kind of insecurity.

Finally, did jealousy mean that I was a ‘controlling’ person? Was I trying to manage Isha’s behaviour in an objectionable sort of way? Many of my married friends expect sexual exclusivity from their spouses and they tend to control their behaviour. But I only wanted Isha to prefer me to Anand and did not want to manipulate her in other ways. Thus, I don’t think I was guilty of being controlling either.

In the end, I felt proud that I had refuted all the charges that Ruchi and Avanti had levelled against me. But this philosophical sparring left me exhausted. It may have helped me to understand my jealousy but it did not diminish my suffering. Swann’s jealousy regarding Odette made me realize that there might be unexpected benefits in jealousy. One of these was to make me take an interest

in others. Some people are by nature inquisitive about others' lives. I am not. When I began my affair with Isha, I was not interested in her day-to-day life. I paid little attention to what she said to someone or what another told her. Our relationship existed in a stratosphere, disconnected from mundane life. It was only when I began to fear losing her that I became inquisitive, like Swann. When she refused to see me, for example, I would wait for her at her grocery store, hoping to run into her. I took an interest in the commonplace details of where and with whom she was spending her time. My jealousy opened up another world, as it did for Swann.

~

Bhartrihari, Proust and Shakespeare have described the emotion of jealousy in wondrous ways. I find myself drawn to these in the autumnal vanaprastha of my life, perhaps, because I've become more and more accepting of human weaknesses. When I ought to be thinking of retiring to the tranquillity of a forest to contemplate, I remain incurably ensnared in the city's temptations. Women are still an enigma to me. I am attracted, not to a single woman, but to every woman who is young, affectionate, charming and voluptuous. Her eyes still turn my head in the evening fragrance of the garden. The direction of my thoughts stings me and I blush at harbouring feelings not befitting a man in the seventh decade of his life. But I have learnt to smile indulgently at myself. I may feel a little ridiculous but then I think the renouncer too might be a tad ludicrous.





## WHAT DO LOVERS WANT?

*Pleasure, adoration or empathy?*

*A woman desires any attractive man she sees in the same way as a man desires an attractive woman.  
But, after some consideration, the matter goes no further.*

—Kamasutra V.8.1

Several years had passed and much had happened. After abandoning me, Isha had been on and off with Anand. I had suffered terribly during this period but after months of relentless pain, I seemed somehow to get over her. I knew I was succeeding because I had kept my cool when I ran into her at the Bombay Gymkhana one evening. Earlier, I would have been nervous and tongue-tied; she too would have avoided me. But now, looking distraught, she drew me towards a quiet corner.

‘He is tired of me, Amar!’ she announced.

She looked utterly unlike the woman I remembered. I had not seen her in more than a year. Both morally and physically, she had changed for the worse. I discovered that her relationship with Anand was indeed in trouble. ‘He doesn’t love me any more . . . he finds me a burden,’ she confessed bitterly. ‘Yesterday, I went to see him. I pleaded with him. I offered myself to him. But he was cold and turned me away.’ A flush of shame spread over her. She sat for a long time unable to go on. ‘He just sat calmly, his smug face looking down at me.’ A feeling of anger came over her, and she clenched her fist, a gesture so coarse, so unfeminine, I thought.

She had grown stouter, I thought. When she spoke of Anand a spiteful expression distorted her face. I looked at her as I might at a faded flower in which it was difficult to trace the beauty that had once made me pick it up. ‘I know, but I can’t help it, Amar,’ she said. ‘You can’t imagine what torture it is to be always waiting for him. I may be jealous of his affairs but I can put up with

them. I don't want him to abandon me.'

The way you abandoned *me*, I thought. Changing the subject, I asked Isha about her husband.

'My husband? He doesn't torment himself. He comes and goes but he's at the ashram more and more. I know him—he's steeped in falsehood, through and through. If he had any feeling, could he possibly live with me as he does? He understands nothing, feels nothing. Could a man with any feelings live in the same house with his *guilty* wife?'

Isha wanted to talk only about Anand and she promptly returned to him. She complained that he had no sense of loyalty.

'You were the one who used to say that there is no loyalty in love.'

She gave a look that made me regret what I had said. I sat listening to her for a long time. Consternation was written on her face. She interrupted herself now and then with the same interjection: 'He's crazy. He's crazy.' She worried that Anand saw her out of duty alone, and not out of love. 'As though he were meeting his mother,' she said bitterly, 'as though respect could replace and fill the empty space left behind by love.' She became more and more miserable, and my attempts to appease her failed.

When she had finished, she hung her head and I saw a tear trickle down her left cheek.

'I have lost him for good.'

She turned away from me and wept silently, leaning her face against the back of the chair. Her face, which had been utterly beautiful a year ago, was now twisted with profound grief. She did not care to hide her pain but there was nothing I could do. I didn't know what vain, conflicting hopes she had cherished. She had made it clear that she would have been content to let him have his other women as long as he came back to her eventually, or at least remained a part of her world.

'If I don't stop crying, my eyes will be terrible and I am going out to dinner tonight.' She took a mirror out of her bag and looked at herself anxiously. 'I must go and wash my face with cold water, yes, that's what I must do,' she said. She looked at me reflectively. The old mocking light in her eyes had faded, but a different sort of smile, a consciousness of something that I didn't know had spread over her face like a gentle sadness. She left me as suddenly as she had

arrived.

~

I felt that each of the three persons who ruled my emotions expected something different from kama. For Anand, it was the carnal pleasure he took in being in his beloved's arms. Isha found in love the vain satisfaction of being adored. Avanti claimed that it was the joy of bringing happiness to the person she loved (although she hedged it, saying that she didn't know if she had the altruism to pull it off). Anand sought physical gratification; Isha's motive was self-love and she needed a lover to feed her vanity; Avanti wished the good of the 'other', transcending Anand's natural appetites and Isha's social and psychological needs.

I formed these stereotypes in my mind at a time in my life when I was uncertain that these pigeonholes would hold in the future. Life has a logic of its own and things don't work out the way we expect them to; people have a way of surprising us. I was confused—I did not know what I wanted out of love. It was perhaps all of these. I couldn't place my own motivations neatly in one of these compartments. I felt I wanted something else from love. Ever since I had lost Isha, life had been flat and insipid. Her love had brought a certain excitement in my life, and there was now a 'hole in my soul', as the ballad goes. After losing her, I had become aware of an ineffable void and longing that love had filled when I had been with her. And this emotion didn't seem to fit into any of the mental compartments

Meanwhile, I remained good friends with Avanti. She had grown more attractive and confident. She began to wear nice clothes and her physical lure surged as well. Best of all, she had a lightness of life, like yeast to bread which lightens the dough as it rises. In the depth of her being, she seemed to be aware that it was only a role that she was playing, and this prevented her from taking herself or her life too seriously. But our relationship remained firmly at the level of friendship. It was deep and profound—we would have done anything for each other. I was still vulnerable when it came to Isha, but anything could have happened between Avanti and me. However, both of us showed restraint and dared not cross the line. Avanti had discovered a guru and an ashram at Igatpuri, about three hours away from Bombay. She would sometimes hop on to a train and spend the weekend at his retreat. I tried to draw her out about the guru and

and spend the weekend at his retreat. I tried to draw her out about the guru and his teachings but she was reluctant to talk about it. I sensed that she was herself unsure and I did not press.

In comparison to a certain emptiness at the centre of Anand's life, Avanti's had a core of fullness. If desire is a lack of something, as Plato suggests—an urge to fill a void, an urge to completion—then the accompanying fantasy is of an ideal or an idealized object. To the extent that there is a lack of realism, possession can lead to disillusion; so, Anand's search continued. Avanti had some inner resources; at least, she had the capacity to judge others realistically; so, she didn't need to fill an inner void with excited fantasy.

I wondered if there is also a clue in the word 'restraint', which has an old-fashioned ring about it these days. It might explain my relationship with Avanti and point to an answer to my nagging question about what lovers wanted. In pursuit of this clue, I found something in Vatsyayana's sage advice in the *Kamasutra*. He says, 'A woman desires any attractive man she sees the same way a man desires an attractive woman. But after some consideration, the matter goes no further.' Vatsyayana suggests that to be civilized one must exercise a certain amount of discrimination and restraint. He thinks sexuality is a matter of culture and art, and so, too important to be left to nature. And for this restraint, human beings may have paid a price as Freud pointed out in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Of this, more later.

The natural tendency of human beings is to pursue sensual pleasure, but the civilizing process restrains them from pouncing upon each other like animals. Does one have to translate every desire into instant pleasure each time? Is there not pleasure in desiring itself? It may be a good thing to have a rich 'private life' of secret desires and not translate them into the physical world of one's 'public life' in order to preserve a degree of sanity. This is why Anna and Sergei decide that their love affair must remain a secret in Chekhov's intriguing story, 'Lady with a Lapdog'.

Human desire, as I have pointed out, seems to begin as sensual excitement, and then travels from our senses to our imagination, whereupon it creates a fantasy, which translates the physical arousal into a series of mental images. It also turns the sensual excitement into attraction for a specific person. While a man fantasizes about the woman he desires, he comes to realize that she too is a desiring subject and his pleasure depends on his ability to communicate his

fantasy to her. The same probably applies to a woman, and in this way, fantasies give rise to the specifically human art of seduction. Society, however, exploits this human capability in order to create social conventions, such as marriage and family, for the purposes of social harmony. From the viewpoint of nature, however, fantasies are about enticing humans to accomplish ‘freely’ what animals do instinctively.

Society has found many ways to channel the ‘sense of freedom’ created by our imagination. Around the world, people have been made to believe that the pleasures of the flesh are sinful unless consummated within marriage. The birth of romantic or passionate love, however, led to an irrational overestimation of the desired person. Love’s power was strangely addictive and contagious. In India, lovers were conditioned through stories of fidelity and sacrifice. Some lovers in the West, under the weight of Christian teaching, began to believe that their desires needed no carnal outlet. The danger for others lay in the delay between the emergence of the fantasy and the sexual act; in their frustration, they began to idealize each other. When they finally married, their hope for eternal bliss turned into disappointment and even repugnance. These tensions between public morals and private desires are some of the discontents of civilization.

Women, in particular, have been the prime targets of this ‘civilizing mission’. Societies have established moral systems that promote the ‘feminine’ values of modesty, constancy and fidelity. Women are taught to be modest and faithful, and to take pride in resisting their desires. While a ‘respectable’ woman is expected to remain modest at all times, once married, she has to embrace a second virtue called ‘constancy.’ In India, dharma texts and stories in the epics and Puranas created a social code that promoted an ideal of female virtue, stri-dharma, which conditioned women to accept a subordinate place in a patriarchal society. In recent years, fortunately, some of these stifling impositions that injured the human temperament have loosened around the world.

~

Over the next few weeks I noticed that the enthusiasm of Bombay’s society for Isha waned quickly when it discovered that Anand had dropped her.

‘People are beginning to throw stones at me,’ she said.

She had dropped by at my flat unannounced. She had just been to see Neena

and had found her friend's manner very different.

'You know how fond I am of you,' Neena had told her. 'I am always ready to do anything for you, but I have to be candid. We had hoped that Anand would make an honest woman out of you and marry you. But this is not going to happen, that's what I am hearing. Please don't think I am criticizing you. Not at all! In your place I might have done the same. But I have daughters growing up, and I must mix in society, if not for my sake, at least for my husband's.'

Hearing Isha recount this conversation, I realized the fragile nature of friendships in the upper echelon of Bombay's society. She spoke bitterly about what she had to expect from her friends. She reminded me that only a few months ago, they were applauding her for her courage, for defying the old rules of society, but as soon as they learnt that there was going to be no marriage, they began to abandon her like rats on a sinking ship.

'What about you?' she asked me abruptly. 'Do you think any the worse of me?'

'Would you care?'

'I want you to think well of me. So, tell me honestly.'

'Well, I loved you, and you know that. So, I can't be very objective.'

'Tell me honestly, damn it!'

Honesty needed the sort of bravery that I did not possess. If I were to be honest, I would have called her 'self-centred'. I would have reminded her that not once did she express remorse for the pain she had brought me. Not once did she acknowledge our relationship in public. But I didn't say any of those things. I discovered to my relief that I was free of her. She no longer had that old hypnotic hold over me. So, I gave a very different reply.

'Well, you are beautiful, but you know that already. You have grace and charm. Obviously, you were brought up with good taste, especially in art. But I think your defining quality is determination; you won't let anyone come in the way of ruthlessly going after what you want.'

'Ruthless?'

'Of course, I was on the wrong side, and so I got hurt.'

'What else?' she asked with a faint smile.

'You lack tenderness.'

The smile died on her lips and she gave me a glance that was lacking completely in subtlety, and before she could collect herself to reply, the phone

rang. I went to answer it in the other room.

It was Avanti. I told her that I couldn't speak and would call her back.

'I hear Isha has come back to you?'

'What!'

'Everyone in Bombay is talking about it.'

'No, it's nothing like that. I'll tell you when we meet.'

'You better.'

'Are you jealous?'

'I mean I shouldn't have to hear of these things from others.'

I sensed a hint of jealousy there and I felt flattered. I returned to Isha, who continued to unburden herself, until she suddenly remembered that she had tickets for the opening night of a much-awaited new play by a young Indian writer.

'Come with me? I don't want to go alone,' she said.

'Are you really going to the theatre?'

'Why do you ask with such alarm? Why shouldn't I go?'

'Yes, of course.' I frowned.

'Exactly.'

'Isha, you are setting yourself up.'

'What do you mean?'

'Don't you know . . . ?'

'I don't care!' she shrieked. 'Do I regret what I have done? No, no, no! If I had to do it all over again, I would. For me, there is one thing that matters. I love him. I don't care about people.' There was a strange glitter in her eyes.

And so, we went to the play. I listened with one ear while my eyes roamed around in the dark trying to spot anyone who might be gazing at us. I saw the bald head of Raj Desai. He was sitting with Sheila and he suddenly blinked angrily at something the actor uttered. I also noticed the elegant and very proper Ruchi Saigal sitting nearby with her husband—too near for comfort. I had not seen them for months and worried about her sharp tongue. She had met Isha at my party two years ago and had been cool towards her ever since. My eyes returned to rest on Isha, who sat with her head proudly erect. Her eyes were smiling at the dialogue on the stage.

Soon, it was intermission. As the lights came on, Isha suggested we go down for coffee. I didn't want her to run into people, so I discouraged her. But I



not come. I didn't want her to run into people, so I discouraged her. But I slipped out to go to the toilet. When I returned, Isha was standing, looking anxiously about her with her brilliant eyes. A few feet away, Ruchi Saigal was also standing, her back towards Isha, speaking excitedly to her husband, who kept glancing at Isha. Her face was pale and angry. Her stout and balding husband was trying to pacify his wife while glancing apologetically at Isha.

'I think she's mean and hateful.'

'Who?' I whispered.

Isha pointed to Mrs Saigal with her eyes. 'She had no right to behave as she did!'

'But what happened?'

'I don't know, I was sitting quietly waiting for you. And suddenly, she screams.'

'What!'

'There isn't a more spiteful creature than that woman!'

'But what has she done?' I asked.

'She insulted me. Her husband began talking to me from across the aisle, and she shrieked at him. She made such a scene, using offensive words in a loud voice and everyone turned around. I didn't know where to look.'

'Oh, Isha!' I said.

'It's all my fault, all my fault!' she cried, tears streaming and despair and anger seething in her voice.

'I told you not to come here. I knew it would be unpleasant . . .'

'Unpleasant!' she cried. 'It was awful! As long as I live, I shall never forget it. She called it a disgrace to sit beside me.'

'A silly woman's chatter,' I said. 'But why risk it, why provoke . . . ?'

'I want to go home. Please, let's go.'

~

The news of the incident at the theatre spread quickly. Kamini Masi was curious to know what had happened. I was dining at their flat a few days later, along with an old psychologist friend of theirs. But it wasn't idle curiosity on her part—both Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi were genuinely protective of me ever since Isha had gone out of my life. She didn't want me to get hurt again.

'Isha is a narcissist!' said the psychologist.

I looked at him, puzzled. He had met Isha through her husband some years ago. She wasn't a patient and so he felt free to offer an opinion. I was curious to understand what motivated Isha.

'What matters to her is not to love but to be loved,' he explained. 'To love means to become vulnerable and this requires one to lower one's self-regard.' Freud believed that romantic love was an outgrowth of our primary state of narcissism, or 'self-love', as infants. As we grow up we learn to move beyond self-love and direct our desires towards another. To be in love is to expose oneself to the beloved. 'One trades a certain amount of narcissism in order to love another,' he added. Thus, love has a function in helping us grow up. We must begin to love in order that we don't fall ill. Some, like Isha, never learn to redirect the narcissism and they are perpetually discontented in their love lives. Freud assumed that an individual had a finite amount of libido to direct and the less one directed it outward, the more it was directed inward. This was Isha's problem.

Isha's misery was part of another old story. The pursuit of love in defiance of society's rules almost always seems to end badly. No one has recounted this better than Leo Tolstoy in his great novel *Anna Karenina*. When I first picked it up, I thought it was a love story but soon realized that it was about the tragic consequences of illicit love. Tolstoy, in fact, warns us about the dangers of kama in one of the great opening lines in literature: 'All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' These lines baffled me for a long time until I connected them to Isha. Like Isha's marriage, Anna's was a loveless one. Anna was unhappy with her husband, Karenin, who was mostly concerned about his social position. She felt their marriage was all show and she was vulnerable when she met Vronsky at the railway station. She then risked everything, ran away with him, and brought ruin on herself and her family. In the end, she threw herself under a rushing train.

I felt enormous compassion for Anna, as I did for Isha, even though she had broken my heart. Isha was also defeated by a cruel society, and I asked myself, should I applaud the two women for their passion or should I condemn them as their societies did? Reading Tolstoy's novel has taught me to rise above the questions of admiration and condemnation and face the stoic truth: this is how the world is. Isha, like Anna, discovered that love is both a curse and a blessing.

In some stories, the heroine experiences love mostly as a godsend miracle. Elizabeth Bennet, for example, in *Pride and Prejudice*. But in Anna Karenina's life, it came as a wild, elemental force over which she had little control. Indeed, there were grand moments of fleeting happiness but more often, love was terribly cruel and dangerous. Hers was a noble affair with Vronsky even though it ended with her killing herself. At the end, I wondered, would Anna have been better off had she not fallen in love with Vronsky? And would Isha have been better off without Anand?

This hypothetical question is not easy to answer and it may not even be legitimate. It certainly goes against the religion of love that has taken such a mesmerizing hold on the human imagination, persisting for thousands of years ever since Nala's love for Damayanti in the Mahabharata or the lyrical poems of Sappho (to cite only two examples from antiquity). Romantic love was only discovered in the medieval period both in the West and the East, and it quickly became full-blown. In the religious mythology of star-crossed lovers, Anna's death was a noble sacrifice to love. She surrendered everything—her son, her home, her family, her enviable place in society—for the sake of love. Nothing good seemed to come from her romance with Vronsky. Everyone, I suppose, would have been better off if it had not happened: her son, Seryozha, and her husband, Karenin, certainly. Was it worth it?

It doesn't help to pose counterfactuals—what if the law was not biased against women? Or if religious prohibitions against divorce were absent? Or courtship conventions did not force girls to marry young? The point is that this was how it was and it turned out badly for Anna Karenina. The tragic consequences of illicit love expose an old conflict between dharma and kama. If dharma is a duty to others, especially to the social order, kama is a duty to oneself. In the epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, marriage is mostly idealized as a social and religious duty. The obligation of chastity is a far greater obligation for a woman than a man in a patriarchal society. In its didactic stories, dharma usually trumps kama because the female protagonist intuitively recognizes her duty to dharma and the error of hurting others in the pursuit of her pleasure.

Stories on this theme abound in all cultures. Most of us are aware of dharma, our duty to others. But we do not recognize that we might also have a duty to ourselves. It is odd to think of kama as duty when one normally thinks of pleasure and desire as temptations. Anna Karenina sneaks to us because she

pleasure and desire as temptations. Anna Karenina speaks to us because she forces us to think of kama as a duty. Who has not been tempted by the alluring prospect of love when a handsome and charming stranger comes along, especially at a time when conjugal love has waned and the fear of mortality has set in? One might think that this is one's last chance for a certain kind of happiness before one dies. Might this have been the subconscious reason that drove Anna Karenina to Vronsky?

Anna and Vronsky were kama optimists and took great risks with their lives. But society is neither optimistic nor pessimistic, it is realistic. It is not kind to illicit love and their lives ended badly. Anand and Isha were kama optimists as well. They defied Bombay's establishment, transgressing the boundaries of social acceptability. When they did not redeem themselves through marriage, society came down harshly, especially on Isha—a woman is always more vulnerable in an unequal, patriarchal society. Even in the relatively liberated upper-middle-class circle that Isha moved in, she stood out. When we last met at the Gym, she had juxtaposed 'love' and 'respect'. That seemed odd to me. Most of us value respect and do not consider it the opposite of love or a substitute for it. Respect is a public virtue, while love is a private one. Once people began to realize that Anand was not going to marry her, Isha quickly became an outcast and lost social respectability. What she feared most was the loss of Anand's love. Respectability was her husband's great concern, preferring a rotten marriage to an honest divorce.

*Anna Karenina* is a cautionary tale about the perilous nature of love. But even more, it is about the importance of balance between sexual freedom and sexual convention. So, one answer to the question, 'what do lovers want?', lies in the desire for a balance between liberty and greed. It is a delicate poise. Although this sort of repression has mostly disappeared in the West since the time of Anna Karenina and sexual freedom pervades young lives, the balance still matters. Even in these liberated times in the West, Anna's conflicts are relevant. A woman may still live with a man she doesn't love; she may still feel shame and guilt for having a secret affair without telling her partner; she may still hate her man for forgiving her; she may still find that her friends side with her partner; and she may still find that the man for whom she left her husband doesn't understand her at all.

Avanti and I had remained in close touch since she came to Bombay, going out to the movies, exhibitions and concerts. She spent more time dressing up, especially in the evenings, and I liked to be seen with a good-looking woman. She was forever reading books and was happy to talk about them. So, we always had interesting things to say to each other. A few days after Isha's humiliation at the theatre, Avanti called, sounding nervous and worried. She had received a telegram from her parents. They were arriving the following day. She was apprehensive that they were bringing another marriage proposal and she wanted me to be around for moral support. 'Will you come home for dinner?' she pleaded.

'I shall do better. Let me invite you to the Taj Hotel, all three of you—you won't have to worry about cooking and serving and we can chat at leisure.'

'Oh? That would be so nice. But you know, I think they would be more comfortable at home.'

'In that case, come to my place. Shall we say eight o'clock?'

And so, two days later, I looked down with anticipation from my terrace and spotted Avanti walking towards my building accompanied by her parents. Her face was hidden by the shadows of the banyan tree. I felt my heart skip a beat, and I didn't quite understand why I was trembling with anticipation. I was supposed to be performing a duty and why was I all in a quiver? A few minutes later I opened the door and welcomed the Sharma family. Avanti's mother gave me a warm hug. I drank in with glad eyes the special way in which Avanti walked in behind them—the way she leaned her head in a way that was hers alone, sloping against her shoulder.

After we sat down to dinner, Sharma-ji asked Avanti how she spent her time.

'Reading.'

'And what do you do on weekends?' he asked.

'Nothing much, I read.'

'For how long?'

'Oh, I don't know for sure. Many, many hours. I also have Sanskrit classes at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan on Saturdays—they have a very good teacher. Sometimes, I go to the ashram at Igatpuri.'

'You are too young to go off to ashrams. And what is it going to lead to?' he asked.

asked.

‘Wisdom if I am lucky; but some knowledge I hope,’ Avanti said with a playful smile.

‘It doesn’t sound very practical,’ said Sharma-ji. His sense of the practical was robust and well defined: a man had to work; a woman had to get married.

‘Did you hear from any of the families we wrote to you about? We sent you three proposals in the past year.’

‘Yes, some of them did call. I did answer some phone calls. I said I would call them back.’

‘And?’

‘I forgot.’

Sharma-ji explained that a ‘brilliant proposal’ had recently come from a ‘very nice Brahmin family from here, from posh Malabar Hill’.

‘You can’t imagine the thrill of reading the Upanishads in the original,’ interrupted Avanti. ‘It’s as though you were walking a few inches above the ground.’ She got up from her chair, impelled by an exhilaration that had seized her. She walked around the table. ‘I wish I could make you feel the excitement of the life of the mind. It’s rich and illimitable. I feel a sense of elation—I wouldn’t exchange it for anything in the world.’

Mrs Sharma gave her an indulgent look.

‘Is there something in particular you are looking for?’ I asked.

‘I want to make up my mind whether there is a god. What happens to us when we die? I want to know whether I have an immortal soul; will I be reborn?’

Sharma-ji gave a gasp.

I was impressed by the lightness of Avanti’s tone, as though she were making small talk about the weather. Although she spoke of serious things, she spoke of them with light-hearted modesty.

‘But, Avanti,’ pleaded her mother, ‘people have been asking these questions for thousands of years. If they could be answered, surely they’d have been answered by now.’

I looked on with amusement at this extraordinary conversation.

‘Don’t laugh as if I’d said something daft,’ Avanti said sharply.

‘No,’ I said, ‘I think what you’ve said is something important. If people have been asking these questions for thousands of years, it proves that they can’t help asking them and they will go on asking them.’

She smiled at me. It was cosy and trustful, but I also detected something rueful in it. I continued to watch her as she chatted about this and that. There was constant change in her expression, from grave to gay, from reflective to playful. But I also sensed that something was troubling her—was she a little frightened of herself?

Suddenly, Avanti jumped up with a grin. ‘With all this excitement, I have to go to the bathroom.’

With her daughter away, Mrs Sharma turned to me. ‘I don’t understand the possible use of learning a dead language like Sanskrit.’

‘And you are only supposed to go to the ashram towards the end of your life. What’s the good of knowledge if you’re not going to do anything with it,’ wailed Sharma-ji.

‘Do you know this is precisely what I admire in her,’ I said.

‘But it is so unpractical. She should be learning to cook and look after the house,’ Mrs Sharma said.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Sharma-ji with exasperation. ‘When she was young, she was like everybody else. You wouldn’t think it now but she played a good game of tennis.’

‘And badminton too,’ added his wife.

‘She used to do all the things that ordinary people do. She was like everyone else.’ Sharma-ji turned to look at me. ‘Now, you’re young like her; you’ve lived in the city and known her for many years; how do you explain it?’

‘But this is why I admire her—she is not your usual middle-class type. She wants something else, and even if she doesn’t get it—even if the dream doesn’t come true—its rather thrilling to have dreamt it. She wants to make something of her life.’

‘Oh, you’re no help,’ Mrs Sharma said with frustration.

‘Besides, there are worse ways to spend your life than reading and meditating.’

‘You’re not the father of an unmarried daughter,’ said Sharma-ji with resignation. Then he suddenly gave me a strange look. ‘What about the two of you? You do see a lot of each other, don’t you?’

‘Oh yes, we are very good friends. In fact, she is my best friend.’

Avanti’s parents failed in their mission to get their daughter engaged. She met the young man on Malabar Hill but dismissed him immediately. Sharma-ji felt

the young man on Mumbai train but dismissed him immediately. Sharma-jiji felt discouraged and irritated. To lower the domestic temperature, I suggested an evening picnic after work on Juhu beach. So, the following day, we found ourselves on the beach amidst strollers, hawkers and sundry entertainers. Unsurprisingly, the subject of marriage came up again, and a long discussion ensued. Avanti was grateful that I had come along. She was in a conciliatory mood and reassured her parents that she was not against marriage but the time was not right and neither had the right person come along.

‘But you’re not getting any younger,’ lamented her mother.

‘You’ll die old and lonely,’ warned her father.

By the end of the evening, Avanti had put their minds at considerable ease, saying that she believed in the duty of a woman to marry, and she would do so. They looked at me, seeking some sort of reassurance, that I would see to it that she fulfilled her promise. Then Avanti said something very interesting. She believed in love, she said. ‘But in an authentic marriage, love is born after marriage.’ True love existed in the heart, she felt, and it is selflessly directed to bring happiness to the beloved. ‘It is pure and altruistic unlike self-seeking desire.’ She was willing to wait for marriage before giving in to desire. Clearly, she had given the matter some thought.

After a couple of weeks in Bombay, Mr and Mrs Sharma returned to Ujjain feeling somewhat less bothered but still anxious about their unmarried daughter. Although she cried profusely at the railway station, Avanti was relieved to see them go. Slowly, our lives returned to normal.

~

When Sharma-jiji had given me that strange look and asked ‘What about the two of you?’, he was struggling to understand how two adults—male and female—could be friends. He presumed, as do so many, that such a friendship is a rare and difficult achievement. Although he was a proud Brahmin, he was also desperate to see his daughter married, and would have settled for me had we decided to marry. Meanwhile, he tried but failed to comprehend our relationship.

Kama, of course, means both desire and pleasure; and the pleasure can be of all kinds, not just the sexual kind. One of the great sources of pleasure in human life is friendship. Aristotle certainly thought so. The visit of Avanti’s parents to Bombay got me thinking about the significance of my relationship with Avanti.



Aristotle believes that there are three kinds of love—agape, eros and philia. Simply put, agape is the love of God for man—so, at least a Christian believes; eros is the romantic love between lovers; philia is the sort of love that exists between friends. The obvious difference between eros and philia is that one has sex with one's eros lover, not with one's philia friend. The subtler difference is that one can be in erotic love with someone who doesn't reciprocate one's feelings, as in my case with Isha; however, it is rare to have a non-reciprocal friendship. Friendship is by definition mutual.

In the highest form of friendship, Aristotle believes, friends hold a mirror to each other. Since they do not judge, friends are able to let their guard down and see their real selves in their reflections. In this way, friends help each other become better persons, not only enriching their own lives but also enhancing the meaning of life. This is why friendship is an integral part of happiness and a flourishing life. I sometimes puzzle at the easy way some people refer to their remotest acquaintances as 'friends'. They don't hesitate to call business associates and colleagues friends, some of whom they barely know beyond the shallow roots of their professional connections; they drop names of celebrities, calling them friends; they mistake mutual admiration for friendship. By overusing the word, they render true friendship empty of meaning. It is important to use words correctly and a way to bring precision in this case is to follow the method of the Stoic philosophers when they instructed people in ethical behaviour.

Stoics used to think of human relations in the form of concentric circles, with oneself at the centre; the family came in the innermost circle, followed by a wider circle of neighbours; then an even wider one of local community; next came the fellow citizens of a nation; and finally, humanity in the widest circle. The ethical path was to learn to gradually widen one's circle of concern from oneself and one's family to the whole of humanity in order to become altruistic. The same method could be used to define a true friend by creating concentric circles of intimacy. In the outermost circle are acquaintances, followed by a circle of persons with shared interests and positive regard; in the next circle are kindred spirits, with the same values and bound by mutual sympathy; finally, in the innermost circle are friends, before whom we are willing to strip our public selves and reveal our imperfect, vulnerable selves, with the confidence that it will not diminish their admiration or affection for us.

will not diminish their admiration or affection for us.

Going by this, I would have said that Avanti and I had a lot going for our friendship. There was truth and tenderness in our relationship, with plenty of complex conversations between human hearts. We derived much pleasure in going to concerts, exhibitions and movies. In fact, having Avanti for a friend was indispensable to my spiritual survival in Bombay. Ironically, it was Sharma-ji's search for a husband and sexual partner for Avanti that made me aware of the significance of my friendship with her in the context of kama's broader sense of pleasure.

Aristotle, I think, would also have approved of Avanti's definition of love. He called *philia* a desire to do 'what is good for the other, not for one's own sake but for theirs'. The Sanskrit word for acting for the good of someone else is *anrishamsya*. Aristotle refers to this virtue in the context of friendship, which he regards as the best species of love. Like Avanti, he connects love with kindness. What is remarkable about Aristotle, and Avanti's approach is that human beings normally don't behave in this way—they act out of self-interest, which was the usual motivation driving Anand and Isha. Aristotle suggests that in friendship and in love another person comes to be a 'second self', meaning that concern with what is good for them directs our actions.

'The good of the other' is closely linked in Aristotle's mind with human happiness, which appears to be the aim of everyone's life. This, in turn, depends on living virtuously, he believes, rather than for the sake of wealth, power or status. Some feminists, however, do not approve of seeking the 'good of the other' because they believe it exploits women. Women can 'love too much', they feel, and are prone to sacrifice for their family, and thus become subordinate to men. Aristotle would have defended himself by arguing that happiness depends on many virtues—courage, sociability and intelligence—not altruism alone. One can't make another happy unless one possesses these qualities as well. Thus, there are limits to making a person happy whose character is flawed. This is a sobering thought for romantics who believe that 'love conquers all'. If Aristotle is right and if love aims at happiness, and happiness depends upon virtue, then the main thing to look for in a suitable partner is virtue and character. This is also the lesson that Jane Austen teaches us in her novels. She uses the simple expression 'affectionate kindness' to define the virtue of such a character.

It is easy to condemn Anand. He was a dissipated rake but it was impossible not to like him. As long as he had been a rival, I found it difficult to approach him, let alone fathom him. But after Isha went out of our lives, I got to know him well and we became surprisingly good friends. We met sometimes for lunch at the Gymkhana, and on each occasion, he was affable, radiating friendly warmth. I am convinced that he rose in his career, in part at least, because of his good-natured geniality. His pleasant temper was fundamentally democratic, transgressing all hierarchies. He could be just as charming to the girl who sold flowers outside his flat as to a mighty Parsi dowager. He may have sinned against husbands but he did not sin against the human spirit.

Marriage had never presented itself as a real possibility. He disliked family life and the idea of becoming a husband was to become trapped, even ridiculous. He was extremely fond of women; so fond, in fact, that once he had come to know more or less all the women in Bombay's upper social circles, he decided to venture further afield into the unknown. If the daughter of a cook or a chauffeur caught his fancy, he would not hesitate to pursue her. He would smile, flirt and charm her but he was careful not to hurt her. He would never deceive her—he made it clear from the beginning that his objective was mutual recreation; and reminded her constantly that there was no future in the relationship beyond the giving and taking of pleasure. His success lay in meticulously following the *Kamasutra*'s advice to give pleasure to the woman first before thinking of his own.

Once he had an affair both with a maid and her mistress, and he went out of his way to treat them equally. If anything, he made the maid feel like a princess, showering her with expensive gifts. He had the knack of making every woman he knew feel special. He preferred women of the lower classes, he confessed, because they did not have pretensions. Their natural, healthy (and sometimes plump) flesh aroused him far more than the gaunt, pinched, melancholic looks of the women in Bombay's fashionable society.

I envied Anand's instinctive affinity for the *nagaraka*'s light and playful world. He was carefree by nature, the sort of person who fell sound asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow. His main problem, much like the *nagaraka*'s, was boredom. It was a permanent threat. He continuously sought

novelty to overcome monotony, and this was the main reason he had dropped Isha. A pleasurable liaison involved a prompt consummation and a quick separation. A single day passing without the pleasure of flirting with a new woman and conquering her was unbearably boring. He even extended his reach to the demi-monde where his happiness depended on a commitment to active amorous commerce, where there existed a whole hierarchy of commercial women—from high-class ganikas down to straightforward prostitutes. The *Kamasutra* elaborates this hierarchy in ancient times based on the same premise that a man about town requires an incessant succession of novel adventures.

Anand was different from me in another way—he never let his pride get in the way. He always tried to anticipate when a woman would tire of him. The art lay in knowing when she was beginning to lose interest; then learning to accept the situation with equanimity; and quickly moving on. He was good to women. After an affair was over, he remained protective of the woman. He rarely spoke or gossiped about her, and this enhanced her trust in him. This may be one of the reasons we never spoke about Isha.

Anand was deceptively big-hearted despite his frivolous life. He was constantly helping the women he had slept with, especially if they were poor. He argued that every woman who bestowed her love on him was honourable in a certain way, and in his eyes she had a right to financial help as much as a lawful wife. It was part of his code which defined with unfailing certitude what should and what should not be done, and hence he was able to sleep well at night. I think he got this feudal munificence from his father, who, in turn, got it from Anand's grandfather—they were descended from a line of medium-sized zamindars near Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh. He probably inherited his philandering nature—the sense of being entitled to seduce every woman that came along from his feudal ancestors.

'Would you like people to think well of you?' Anand asked me one day over lunch.

'Of course,' I replied.

'Then don't speak well of yourself. You cease to be modest as soon as you proclaim your modesty.'

Anand was instructing me in seduction strategies. Seduction was a perpetual ritual, he explained, where the seducer and the seduced constantly raised the

stakes in a game that never ended. Sex, on the other hand, had a quick, predictable and boring ending in an orgasm. What came to Anand naturally, others had to learn from the *Kamasutra* which also thinks of ‘play’ as an erotic activity and advises a lover to be playful, for this is the way to win the heart of a woman.

‘You must always dress well when you go out on the street.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, because there is always the chance that you might see someone special and who knows what might happen after that. If you walk out of the house and say to yourself, “Today is the day I’m going to meet her. Then you *will* run into her and something *will* happen.” The important thing is to always be open to adventure. Since seduction is the art of being attractive to others—a way of getting her to say “yes” without asking her any question—you have to be always alert and at your best.’ The seducer must be careful, he added, in recounting his past conquests. ‘Evoke a bit of jealousy but do it with the right blend of vagueness and detail. Let her know that your former partners have done well by reposing their trust in you. This is how you make her believe in your promises of future happiness.’

Anand had a cynical view of romantic love. He felt it was a contrived scarcity, which turned sexual satisfaction—something plentiful and readily available in nature—into a rare commodity in modern society. In a very different context, Freud had explained that the scarcity came about partially as a result of the ‘civilizing’ process. He had argued that culture gets much of its energy by subtracting it from sexuality, and he viewed civilization as an exchange of happiness for security. He felt that restraint of sexual satisfaction was probably necessary and even desirable, but it troubled him. Anand had not read Freud but he shared his view that placing barriers on natural sexual pleasure was a cultural invention. Freud had called this civilizing process ‘sexual sublimation’. At any rate, it had the result of artificially limiting the supply of sex, which had been bountiful in nature, and led to many present-day sexual discontents.

It was a self-imposed civilizing process and one of its ways was romantic love—that human capacity to create a fantasy in the imagination for the love of a specific individual, making one believe that only one person could fulfil one’s erotic and affectional desires. Romantic love, of course, thrives on the absence of the loved one with a marked preference for unrequited and often tragic

of the loved one with a marked preference for unequalled and often tragic relationships. In this way, romantic love creates an artificial scarcity—somewhat like the scarcity created by companies in the global market for diamonds or natural pearls, which is a bit ridiculous when you come to think of it—and the western world, especially Americans, have bought this myth of romantic love as the only genuine basis for marriage.

Many psychoanalysts, from Freud onwards, have argued that since romantic love thrives on the absence of the loved object, it is the consequence of prior, unconscious experience. ‘Love at first sight’ could well be a ‘transference’, in the psychoanalytic sense, from the parent as an object of fantasy. Its focus is not the actual parent, but a fantasy image of the parent which the human mind has retained unconsciously. It looks backwards, hence its preoccupation with the themes of nostalgia and loss; being incestuous, it dwells on obstacles and non-fulfilment, on tragedy and transgression.

While romantic love has entered people’s imagination through Bollywood in India, it is still not *the* key factor in marriage decisions. This may be due partially to the persistence of the joint family, especially in rural areas, where the bond between child and parents is more casual. The child tends to have many caretakers and is aware of the presence of many suppliers of love, unlike the modern child in the West, who is brought up in a small, detached household, and whose emotional life is heavily bound up with a single person. The underlying scarcity on which romantic love is based depends thus on an intense parent–child bond. It creates scarcity by concentrating one’s search for love on a single individual, who is an unconscious fantasy of a parent with whom sex is taboo.

~

Anand would have been more comfortable, I am convinced, in the urbane salons of the Gupta empire that flourished in the civilized space created for kama in an age when the erotic came out in the open and was considered ‘bright, shining and beautiful in the ordinary world’. Poets and artists of the classical period, as I have said, developed a highly aesthetic and sensual culture of the erotic sringara rasa. A ‘cult of erotics’ flowered, celebrating sensuousness in ‘an age of abandon’.

Secular intellectuals, called Charvakas or Lokayatas, challenged the kama pessimism of the Buddhists and Jains and the kama realism of the Brahminical

dharmas. They were squarely on Anand's side in the debate on what lovers wanted. They proclaimed that the 'only end of man is enjoyment produced by sexual pleasure'. They thought that lust is the sole motive of sexual attraction, and sexual pleasure is the only legitimate goal worthy of pursuit. A successful life seeks to accumulate these moments of pleasure. Thus, they offered a profound challenge both to the renunciators and the Brahminical establishment and its dharmas:

*Can begging, fasting, penance, exposure to the heat of the sun . . . be compared with the ravishing embraces of a woman? Such are the fooleries of these unenlightened men . . .*

The classical poets, on the other hand, would have been partially on Avanti's side in what lovers wanted. Many believed in true love and their verses lyrically describe 'love in separation' where the nayika and nayaka pine for each other rather than seeking Anand's instant gratification. Some of their verses even speak of Avanti's idea of altruistic love.

A Charvaka (literally a 'sweet-talker') was sometimes called Lokayata because his common-sense ideas resonated with *loka*, 'the people'. His heterodox philosophy, presumably named after the founder, is one of the schools of Hindu philosophy, albeit a lowly one. It rejects Vedic authority and trusts only human reason and common sense. I may not have succeeded as a nagaraka but I was attracted to the optimistic philosophy of the Charvakas. I felt a sense of liberation in being able to trust my own senses, not having to submit to a god or a guru, not having to think about what happens after death.

*While life is yours, live joyously;  
No one can escape death's searching eye:  
When this body becomes ashes,  
How can it ever return?*

It is easy to understand why the hedonistic Charvakas got a bad reputation with the establishment. Believing only in the here and now, they challenged the mumbo-jumbo of traditional religion, and were dismissed as *nastikas*, 'non-believers'. The Bhagavad Gita speaks scornfully of their 'asura' world view, saying that it emanates from their central belief that the cosmos was born from the sexual urge of kama. Their critics failed to appreciate that pleasure was not

only for oneself but for everyone; one avoided suffering not only for oneself but for others too. They condemned war and Vedic sacrifices of animals. They believed in giving priority to kama and artha over dharma as a goal of life. Shouldn't kama, which is the desire to live, be the first goal because everything is over after death? And what's the point of a long life if you don't have the means, artha, to sustain yourself?

Lokayatas, like Anand, stood up for women and female sexuality and railed against the pessimistic misogynists of the conservative establishment: 'They boast of family dignity but in truth they hold their women in check because of jealousy. Why don't they restrain their men? Both men and women, after all, suffer from blind passion,' wrote the poet Sriharsha in the twelfth century. They questioned the hypocrisy of social conventions, and wished for a love that would be natural and not artificial. The *Kamasutra* was obviously on their side. Believing that innocent physical pleasure is the only honest, spontaneous pursuit, it dismisses in a few short verses the idea that the sexual act is meant only for having children. It asks why would human females, unlike animals, be able to have sex even when they are not in their fertile period? This is an extraordinary challenge to a tradition that is obsessed with the idea that sex is only for procreation.

They would have applauded the *Kamasutra*'s discovery of the woman as a subject in sexual life, not just a passive recipient of man's lust.' It tells us that a woman who does not experience the pleasures of love might end up hating her man, and she might leave him. This is exactly opposite to Manu's message in his law book: 'A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust and is devoid of any good qualities.' In this cheerful kama optimism about the 'cult of the erotic', it is sobering to remember, however, that it was mostly about male pleasure. Women were objects of the male gaze both in poetry and sculpture, and the typical patriarchal household persisted in its obsession with female chastity.

~

Anand had been after me to invite Avanti to lunch but it hadn't worked out. She was either too occupied or too wary. She had fascinated him ever since he met her at my party. He ran into her several times subsequently and even tried to



seduce her once but did not succeed. To put him off, she told him jokingly that she was in love. Instead of deterring him, it only increased his ardour. She liked his forthright ways, however—he did not pretend and she did not judge. She admired him for adhering to principles even though they were the opposite of hers.

‘I say, what’s with you and Avanti?’ Anand asked one day.

‘We are good friends.’

‘Is that all?’

I nodded.

‘I don’t believe men and women can be friends. When that touch of ambiguity is lacking, the relationship is sterile.’

Anand was not used to failure, and he kept after me to fix up something so that the three of us could meet. I didn’t want Avanti to get hurt like Isha and I had tried to put him off. I told him about her parents’ visit, and in particular what she had said about the altruistic nature of love. Suddenly, he got very excited and insisted that he must set her beliefs right before she came to grief.

We finally met on the terrace of my flat one evening. Anand arrived first and settled down with a whisky and soda. Avanti came soon thereafter.

‘I’ll have a cup of tea,’ she announced.

‘Surely, you don’t want tea!’ cried Anand.

‘Yes, tea, I think,’ she said with a gentle smile that seemed to convey that she was not ungracious or unappreciative of Anand’s natural exuberance. She was charming and affable as she took off her sandals and settled down after a day’s work. She looked at me fondly as I brought out a tray with tea and biscuits. She turned to Anand and asked him about the book in his hands. He grinned like a child and announced shyly that he had made a connection between Avanti’s name and Avantika, the legendary city of the imperial Guptas, which Kalidasa calls ‘heaven on earth’ in *Meghdoot*. It brought a smile to Avanti’s face. Anand added that Kalidasa’s poem was about a pining lover, who asks a cloud to take a letter to his beloved far away in the Himalayas. While dictating the message, the lover becomes ‘the world’s first travel guide’ as he informs the cloud about the sights he will encounter, including an erotic moment in the city of Avanti:

*Here the breeze at dawn,  
rising from the Shipra with its opening lotuses,*

*carries over the city  
the sharp and liquid calling of the paddy birds;  
touching the body softly,  
soothing the weariness of ladies from their night of love,  
it whispers  
like a skilful lover who would ask for more.*

Trying to imagine the ‘weariness of ladies from their night of love’, I was impressed at the way Anand had done his homework. He knew that books were Avanti’s soft corner and he had chosen to seduce her with a book. His gambit seemed to be working as he grew bolder.

‘Let me read my favourite verse—I promise it’s the last,’ he said.

*Her dark-blue robe, the water,  
has slipped from her hips, the banks,  
and reached the reeds  
as if barely held up in her hands.  
On removing it, my friend,  
you will be weighed down  
and struggle to journey on:  
who can leave naked thighs  
after tasting their delights?*

Avanti blushed at the last line. Anand was clearly trying too hard and his strategy seemed to rebound. Avanti, who had been in an easy, relaxed mood, changed her tone suddenly, saying stiffly that love was not about ‘naked thighs’ but existed only in the heart and was directed selflessly to bring happiness to the beloved.

Anand praised her forthrightness but argued that it is always better to follow nature. ‘Pleasure is the natural outcome of the attraction between a man and a woman.’ The human temperament is sensual, he said, but society had imposed unnatural values. We should put more faith in our own physical impulses and not adopt artificial notions like modesty and faithfulness.

‘Isn’t modesty a nice thing in a woman?’ she asked.

‘No, modesty is not natural.’ Anand felt that it made a woman ashamed of her own desires; and after marriage it enforced another artificial virtue called faithfulness. Once she had conquered nature and become totally artificial, a ‘modest’ woman believed that she had the right to be admired.

Avanti was not impressed. ‘I am sorry but we are not all motivated only by

pleasure. Isn't the delay between desire and pleasure a part of the civilizing process? Otherwise, how are we different from animals?'

'No, it turns people towards god, religion, bhakti and all sorts of unnatural things.'

'Unnatural?' said Avanti sharply.

'Yes, religion enslaves us, making us forget our true, free nature.' Anand explained that religion was chiefly responsible for converting a joyful sexual relationship into a right of exclusive ownership, and then getting the state to legalize and enforce it.

I interrupted this remarkable dialogue with an offer of drinks. Avanti rose to stretch herself.

'I don't know, Anand,' she said. 'Your ideas are too extreme. Your world is all about nature and selfish pleasure. Where is the place for tenderness?'

I went to the kitchen to fetch drinks and sandwiches. I was proud at the way Avanti had resisted his seduction. But when I returned, there was a sudden quiet. Anand had moved closer to her. Their conversation had become more intimate. They were too absorbed in each other and didn't see me. As Anand passed her a biscuit from the tray, his hand grazed her full, rounded breast in what appeared to be an innocent gesture, but I could tell that it was a carefully planned move. She blushed but did not recoil. It had given her pleasure. He seemed pleased at the way the seduction had got back on track and he felt emboldened.

'When I was climbing the staircase to this flat—it was the most beautiful moment this evening.'

'Why?' she asked.

'It was the anticipation of meeting you.'

Avanti had let her guard down and was clearly relishing his attentions. He reached for her hand, again in a perfectly innocent way; he clasped it as if it were a piece of china from an expensive private art collection. He raised it to his chest, bent over her and inhaled deeply, savouring its scent. She felt the warmth of his breath and it seemed to arouse her. I marvelled at the mastery of the seducer, observing the delicate movement of his body. Lips made contact with skin. This was another well-rehearsed move by a consummate nagaraka. I couldn't help but admire the professional at play. His hypnotic nature had begun to mesmerize her.

I was observing a new facet of Avanti and growing increasingly

uncomfortable. I felt like a voyeur. It may have been a role that suited Charles Swann in Proust's novel but it was upsetting me terribly. I was afraid at what might happen. Events were moving too quickly. I felt angry with Anand for misusing my relationship with Avanti. I despised my own jealous feelings. I wanted the performance to stop, but I felt helpless. I went back to the kitchen to think. When I returned a few minutes later, Anand looked at me and comprehended the look of jealous suffering on my face. He stopped the seduction; he did it in such a gentle, polite way that Avanti could not take offence. He rose to leave suddenly.

'I must go,' he said, looking at his watch.

'Why must you leave?' Avanti implored.

'The time has just flown. I have to meet someone at seven.'

'Do stay, Anand.' You can phone and postpone . . .'

'I can't I'm afraid.' He gave us both a good-natured smile and left.

Anand's departure left us both in a state of confusion. The question on our minds was: why did he have a change of heart? I wondered if he had a private code of honour that none of us knew. What ended the seduction in progress was when he perceived the look on my face and realized that he might be transgressing. And the sudden appearance of an appointment was a gallant 'white lie' to protect Avanti from feeling hurt at his act of stopping the seduction midway.

As I thought some more about this incident, I believe all three of us discovered something about ourselves that evening. Avanti became aware of the 'woman' in her, full of untamed desire that had broken free for the first time and found uninhibited expression. There had been hints in the past but this evening clinched it—at least, in my eyes. She was not, however, ashamed at this discovery. It was almost as if she was relieved. I had seen her in a new light and I found her more attractive, more human, and it probably provoked my feelings of possessiveness and jealousy. She too must have seen it on my face. To know that she was desired seemed to have a positive effect on her. Both Avanti and I became aware of the fine line between friendship and desire. I must have harboured these feelings unconsciously but only now did I become aware of them. Oddly, Anand too became more 'appealing' in both our eyes. In his amoral life, we realized that he had a sense of boundaries when it came to the objects of enticement. What ended the seduction was when he appreciated what

objects of enchantment. What ended the seduction was when he appreciated what he saw in my face, and probably felt a peculiar sense of loyalty to me.

~

The surprising restraint shown by Anand left me confused. Just as I was beginning to despair over finding a satisfactory answer to my insistent question about what lovers want, I discovered a clue on the serene face of a sculpture of the Mathura school. I had been dawdling in the National Museum in Delhi one afternoon when I chanced upon it. What I saw on the composed face of the Mathura sculpture was a feeling of cool harmony, and it made me reflect on the values of the classical age in Indian history. Her face revealed urbane restraint—as though she understood the *Kamasutra*'s sagacious advice about letting the matter rest 'after some consideration'. That harmony, I thought, might be the result of having found the proper place for erotic pleasure in human life. This, in turn, might come from having achieved any number of stabilizing balances that I had been struggling with—between dharma and kama, passion and dispassion, sexual freedom and convention; and between what the Mahabharata calls *pravritti-laksano dharma*, 'the active way of life', and *nivrutti-laksano dharma*, 'the contemplative way of life'.

To return to the question, what do lovers want: is it carnal pleasure or adoration or the good of the other? This simplistic triad of wishes had emerged in my mind as a sort of working hypothesis based on observing the three individuals who were at the centre of my emotional life. My own experience as a failed *nagarika* had taught me that lovers needed to balance the positive and negative aspects of kama. This meant solving the dilemma that Isha had left me with: how to obtain passionate pleasure without getting embroiled in destructive possessiveness and jealousy. The latest incident with Avanti had struck a cautionary note.

The poets and the artists of the classical period were aware of the need for a fine balancing act between these opposing forces of kama. Kalidasa captured it nicely in the restraint of his verses about dispassionate love. In the following elegantly polite dialogue in *Malavikagnimitra*, the king extricates himself from a difficult position when his wife discovers his love affair. The queen invites him to see the Ashoka tree in their garden where she presents him with his paramour,

adding that the tree only blooms because of the beauty of his new mistress. The king's humble reply is an epitome of Gupta self-control, couched in double meaning, as he subjects the tree and himself to her kindly rule:

*Your Majesty is not mistaken  
in doing honour to this Ashoka tree  
that scorned the dictates of the lovely spring  
and let its blossoms only waken respectfully  
beneath your care.*

The *Kamasutra*'s nagaraka, similarly, could not have been successful unless he reconciled the demands of dharma and kama, which was Vatsyayana's cautionary warning in the opening lines of his text. In the same period, Bhartrihari's love poetry depends on a delicate balance between convention and freedom, and he should have known it after the huge reverses he experienced with women. Kamini Masi's eyes contained the same understanding when she instructed me in sringara rasa. On the gaze of the Mathura sculpture was not merely understanding about the puzzles of kama but a deep compassion for the flawed human condition. Her civilized composure is at the heart of the classical values of harmony, restraint and balance, which were behind the self-confidence of the age of the Guptas.

The incident at the theatre in Bombay when Ruchi Saigal snubbed Isha suggests that while lovers are happiest in their private world, they also desire acceptance in the public world—at least, they don't want to be shunned. The story of Anna Karenina is filled with rich insights into many things but it is certainly a testimonial to this truth. A closer look at Anand suggests that lovers have complex motivations. Not only does he seek sex but the game of seduction is almost more important. The chase matters as much to lovers as the destination. Seduction is also the game that the great lover-god Krishna plays in his divine leela. So powerful is this game that even Avanti, the most unlikely person, almost succumbed to Anand's seductive charms.

There is something to learn from the ancient Greeks about the difficulty of balancing the dilemmas of kama. Just as India searched for a balance between dharma and kama, the West sought something similar between the Apollonian and Dionysian principles. In Greek mythology, Apollo and Dionysus were the sons of Zeus. Apollo, the god of reason, reflects the rational principle in life; Dionysus, the god of chaos and irrationality, represents emotions and instincts.

Dionysus, the god of chaos and irrationality, represents emotions and instincts. Apollo is also the sun god, full of light, clarity and form, whereas Dionysus is also the god of wine and fertility, representing drunkenness, passion and ecstasy.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the nineteenth-century German philosopher, used this binary to illuminate Greek tragedy. He felt the Dionysian spirit displayed creative and intuitive power while the Apollonian was necessary to give it form and structure. Both were needed in life as well as art. Without the Apollonian, the Dionysian lacked form and edifice to make an intelligible piece of art, and without the Dionysian, the Apollonian lacked the vigour and hunger. Although they are diametrically opposed principles, they complement each other in human life. Nietzsche criticized the modern age for being too rational, seeing the world primarily as an object of knowledge, and lacking the tragic spirit that depended on exposing the irrational depths that lay beneath our coherent surface.

There appears to be a remarkable similarity between life-affirming kama and the Dionysian principle. Just as Nietzsche felt regret over the submergence of this principle in the modern West, I feel sad about its loss in contemporary India. The excessive emphasis on dharma in today's India has devalued kama. It has not yet recovered from the ascetic influence of Mahatma Gandhi, who held up celibacy as a goal of life during the struggle for India's independence. The urban middle class has still not shed the Victorian 'middle-class morality' (as George Bernard Shaw called it). As a result, the creative life force of kama has been forgotten. India needs to repossess it, and with it one of the goals of the ancient Indian life. Only thus will harmony be restored to the chaotic modern Indian experience.

So, when life gets too much for me I go back to the National Museum to gaze at the tranquil face from Mathura. I reflect on the values of the Guptas—passionate love, harmony, detachment and urbane restraint—and remind myself about the classical balance as one way to live a flourishing but sensible life. I lost that balance when I fell in love with Isha—I became possessive and jealous and spoilt my chances of becoming a nagaraka. In the end, what lovers want is not so very different from all human beings—to be able to cope with the cruelties of day-to-day life and still retain a vision of goodness and beauty. This comes from achieving civilizational equipoise. The gaze on the sculpture from Mathura spoke to me and held out the hope that even I could live a successful life in which all the purusharthas are in equilibrium.





## FRIENDS AND LOVERS

### *The discovery of romantic love*

*Sometimes the day is better than the night  
and sometimes the night is better than the day  
but I wish day and night would both disappear  
when I am not in the loving arms of my lover.*

—Amaru

Almost six months had passed since Anand's aborted seduction and Indira Gandhi was now firmly in the saddle in Delhi, ready to begin her long populist rule. She had succeeded her father after decimating the opposition from the old guard of the Congress party and gone on to win the General Election in 1971 handsomely. No one imagined at the time that her son Sanjay would defy all norms of decency and constitutionality and try and build a version of gangster rule, and Indira's hubris would lead to the Emergency in the mid-1970s. Mercifully, it did not last very long.

The confused events of that evening in my flat had the unexpected consequence of bringing Avanti closer to me. After Anand left, both of us were embarrassed at first but soon realized that we had learnt something. We were not sure what it was but it was the source of pleasure. I was surprised that given her middle-class upbringing, Avanti was not a prude and her response to Anand did not bother her a bit. She confessed honestly that she liked him—she had been tempted and had almost succumbed but she was also relieved that it did not go any further.

She took time to recover while I stood still, gazing at her. She took my hand in an innocent, friendly way, and said, 'I am glad *you* are not a nagaraka.' There was sadness in her eyes as she recounted incoherently about something that had happened when she was twelve. She spoke haltingly and waveringly about a

distant uncle who had tried to force himself on her in Ujjain. She had fought back, and in the end had succeeded in running away. But she had lived in fear of him for years. The incident with Anand was, in fact, the opposite—it turned out to be cathartic. It had jogged her memory, but on this occasion, she felt that she was in charge. It had, thus, helped her to put her past fears behind her. She was in the end grateful to Anand.

After a long pause, she raised her head and there was a stoic quality in her eyes. As we walked down the stairs to the street, she seemed to be at peace. I gazed at her and found in her a peculiar nobility, something I had not noticed before. Her head, her neck, her arms, her whole figure, in fact, seemed to be defined by a courageous sort of beauty. After I dropped her home, I stood still on the street for some time, thinking. She was a complex soul with both an erotic and an ascetic side to her.

~

Kama has always had a troubling relationship with violence. A lot has been written about it, but one of the most engaging examples I know is an Urdu story by Saadat Hasan Manto, set during the violence which accompanied the partition of India. What attracted me to it initially was its title, ‘The Woman in the Red Raincoat’, which conjured the memory of Isha in a pink raincoat that afternoon waiting for me in the rain by the gate of 23 Prithviraj Road. Manto’s is the story of a young man who has lost his bicycle shop during the partition riots. Since he has nothing to do, he joins a roaming band of arsonists. Soon, he is bored and one rainy day, he decides to abduct a woman. He has no feelings of revenge, nor is he driven by ethnic or religious sentiments. He just wants some excitement.

*I’m not sure I was thinking even. I was in a kind of daze, very difficult to explain. Suddenly a shiver ran down my spine and a powerful desire to run out and pick up a girl took hold of me.*

He stops the first woman who goes by. He can’t see her face. All he can tell is that she is wearing a shimmering red raincoat. He doesn’t ask if she is Hindu, Sikh or Muslim, and takes her home. In his faintly lit living room, he doesn’t quite know what to do. He doesn’t want to rape her and suggests politely if she is interested in sex. He even says that she can leave if she is not interested. After overcoming her initial fear, she seems to relax and to his surprise, she agrees.

*I was about to get up, when she grabbed my hand and put it on her breast. Her heart was beating violently. I became excited . . . taking her into my arms.*

Just then, his servant brings in a lamp, and he discovers that the woman he has abducted is not young or attractive, but an older woman. Shocked, he says: ‘You may leave now if you wish.’ She goes away but dies on the way home in a car accident. His friend reprimands him later.

*You are her murderer. In fact, you are the murderer of two women. One, who was a great artist, and the other who was born from the body of the first woman in your living room that night and whom you alone know.*

The second woman he is referring to is the one who emerged from a new awareness of her sexual self, a paradoxical consequence of abduction and aborted seduction. The story is engaging, I find, because it isn’t about ethnic hatred or the normal sexual violence associated with the partition of the country. It is about a romantic seduction gone awry. From it, I learnt that kama is complex—the abducted victim becomes a desiring subject; the abductor becomes a polite seducer and then cruelly snubs the object of his seduction. The author of the story, unable to understand the complex motivations of his characters, is only able to say, ‘But then these were strange times.’

~

Avanti began to spend more and more time at her guru’s ashram in Igatpuri. Often, she would be gone for the entire weekend, sometimes combining it with a holiday on Friday or Monday. While making small talk over tea, she randomly uttered one evening, ‘All is sacred!’ I gave her a quizzical look; she explained that this revelation was the premise behind all Indian speculation—*sarvam khalu idam brahma*, ‘this whole universe is truly brahman’. And brahman, she felt, was the closest Sanskrit equivalent to ‘sacred’.

‘If that is true,’ I said half-jokingly, ‘then the body of a man and a woman is also sacred. And the love that unites the two bodies is also sacred.’

I was surprised that she agreed with me and I was amused at the idea of my ascetic Avanti thinking of sexual love in sacred terms. ‘Everyone—high or low caste, animals and gods—they are all sacred, and so is their desire to unite with each other. It is the same desire to unite with god.’

I looked at her sceptically.

‘It is because god is lovable.’

‘Do you think that human beings made god lovable by investing him with their love?’ I asked.

‘No, silly boy, it is the other way around. Because god is lovable, human beings can develop into creatures capable of loving him.’

Even though Avanti was now more and more preoccupied with her guru, she continued to read voraciously. She was a relentless seeker and would surprise me with a new idea that she had encountered. I told her once to loosen up and enjoy the small pleasures of life. She gave me a funny look.

‘Reading and meditating are pleasures too!’

Avanti’s rebuke reminded me that kama means all kinds of pleasures, not only sexual pleasure. Plato and Aristotle would, of course, have agreed enthusiastically with Avanti. The Epicurean poet Lucretius believed that intellectual pleasure was, in fact, the highest. Avanti’s inner world, it seemed to me, was a quiet refuge from an outer world of anxiety and turmoil. Some form of contemplation has always been the path to enlightenment, and it is a recurrent theme from the Buddha to Boethius, from Socrates to Schopenhauer.

A few weeks after this extraordinary conversation, Avanti informed me that she was going away. Her office had transferred her to Bangalore—the newspaper wanted to strengthen its local reporting team in the newly growing city. The night before she left, we went to see an exquisite film—Satyajit Ray’s *Charulata*—and did not realize then that it would have a profound effect on our lives. As we left the cinema mesmerized, I casually mentioned to Avanti that I thought she resembled the heroine, played by the actress Madhabi Mukherjee.

‘Really!’ she said with a smile.

The film had spoken to both of us. It held a significance for our lives that we were either too shy or too scared to confront. With tears in her eyes, she came close to me and gave me a hug as we bid farewell.

~

*Charulata* opens with delightful audacity in a long, almost wordless sequence with the graceful heroine looking out of the window, trying to amuse herself, studying passers-by with engaged curiosity. She turns around and picks up a

book lying on the bed; then discards it. She selects another one from the shelf. Before she can open it, she hears sounds in the street, and runs to pick up her opera glasses. She darts like a bird from one window to another, watching a street musician with his monkey. Then she trains her glasses on a chanting group of porters trotting with a palanquin. A portly, self-important Brahmin with a black umbrella goes past. Her husband now enters the room engrossed in the galley proofs of the next day's paper; he scarcely notices her. She focuses her glasses on him as though he too is a species from the wondrous but unattainable world beyond her nest.

A romantic drama, *Charulata* is based on a semi-autobiographical novella by Rabindranath Tagore. Set in an upper-middle-class home during the late nineteenth century, it presents a portrait of India's cultivated classes in Calcutta at a time of intellectual ferment, a historical transition, when educated Indians became aware of the possibility of freedom from the British Raj. *Charulata* is the cultured but neglected wife of a liberal, enthusiastic newspaper owner and editor, who is kindly but distracted, thinking only of his next editorial. The winds of change are stirring inside her as well. Not content to be a passive Hindu wife, trapped in the brocaded cage of their home, she wants attention and yearns for freedom.

Into the boredom of *Charulata*'s life arrives charming young Amal, a cousin of her husband. Full of life and enthusiasm, he is an aspiring writer, and is immediately drawn to her. True to their cultured upbringing, they reveal their feelings only through subtle hints—a sidelong gesture, a fleeting glance—as they drift unwittingly towards love. In a dazzling scene set in the leafy garden of their house, Amal lies on his back on a mat, watching his sister-in-law as she sways on a swing, back and forth, rising high above him, both delighting in their new-found erotic feelings. There is calm without but fire within.

After this inspired moment of unconscious emotion in the garden, the mood of the film begins to darken imperceptibly. Amal becomes aware of his romantic feelings for her, and he flees promptly into a marriage and exile in England. She is devastated by her loss and breaks down on hearing of her beloved's marriage. The husband suddenly comes face-to-face with the profound depth of their feelings for each other. From here the narrative moves silently towards the desolation of a trust betrayed.

What gives the film nobility is the innocence and delicate pathos of the three

What gives the film nobility is the innocence and delicate pain of the three lives. Their lack of consciousness and guile about what is happening within them gives them dignity. When there is an awakening to the reality about what is going on, there is genuine tragedy. Amal is the first to realize it; the heroine grows imperceptibly from unconscious to conscious striving; the husband is left to face the sudden, stark and unbelievable revelation.

~

I began to miss Avanti as soon as she left. I was surprised that her absence affected me as it did. I began to lose the desire to go out and do all the things that we used to do together. I stopped going to concerts and movies and began to spend more and more time alone. I thought of Avanti constantly; she seemed to become an impossible obsession. Like Amal in *Charulata*, I realized I had been unaware of my feelings for Avanti. I suspect the film affected her too although I couldn't be sure exactly how. We had been afraid to speak about it the night before she left.

For the first time, the idea presented itself to me that I was in love with Avanti. I went to bed but couldn't sleep. The film's heroine kept invading my thoughts. I turned on the light and sat up. After a few minutes, I put out the light and lay down again. But my mind was agitated and I went out of the stuffy bedroom to the terrace. I grew calmer as I smelled the air of the sea. Avanti's image kept intruding—her unmistakable oval face, soft, dark hair and big, wondering eyes that smiled nervously as she called me 'silly boy'; all the memories of her were covered in mysterious enchantment.

Soon a doubt crossed my mind. What if Avanti did not share my feelings? Was I being overconfident and deluding myself? Would her 'spiritual' project prevent her from accepting my love? I began to see my life in a new light and didn't get any sleep that night. I hadn't eaten much the previous day but I didn't feel hungry. I went downstairs in the morning, half-dressed, feeling fresher and better. While walking on the street, my body was remarkably light, as though it was independent of me. I moved without any effort of the muscles; it felt as though at any moment I might fly. I saw things on the street for the first time: children were rushing to school: silver-grey pigeons flew from the roof of a building down to the pavement; an old man sprinkled the pavement with the previous night's leftover roti for the birds; two boys on their way to school ran

after the pigeons; one of the pigeons fluttered its wings and flew off, flashing in the sun. From an open window came the smell of freshly made idlis. It was all happening at the same time and none of the things I was seeing—the boys, the old man, the pigeons—seemed of this earth. After making a long round past Afghan Church, I returned home.

I felt I had to act. I was about to call my office to book a ticket to Bangalore when the phone rang. It was Avanti! She was calling from the railway station in Bangalore to say that she was coming to Bombay to attend a meeting. It was a last-minute decision. I wanted to say something but I was tongue-tied. I told her I would meet her on the platform and she must stay with me. She muttered something about a company guest house and then the line got cut. It was all happening too quickly and I had to speak to someone. I went to see Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi.

Ramu Mama's eyes sparkled when he heard the news. Kamini Masi had tears as she asked why it had taken me so long. 'Here I have been trying to make a match of the two of you for years!'

'What should I do?' I implored her.

'You love her, don't you?' she said, wiping her moist eyes.

'Yes,' I whispered.

'I am so happy, Amar.'

'Lucky boy!' said Ramu Mama.

I told them that Avanti was arriving by the next train.

'Well, then you must tell her as soon as she arrives.'

As I was leaving, Ramu Mama said, 'We should have a party for the two of you.'

'Let's find out first how she feels.'

'I bet she will be delighted,' Kamini Masi said.

'We shall soon find out,' said Ramu Mama.

'I'm scared,' I confessed. 'She has refused so many . . . and then there's her spiritual business.'

'Believe me, she is all woman!' said Kamini Masi.

'But . . .'

'Ask her to stay with us,' she interrupted. 'It wouldn't be right for her to stay with you.'

'She did say something about a guest house . . .'

She did say something about a guest house . . .

~

Kamini Masi was a ‘romantic matchmaker’, and had been working behind the scenes for years to promote the romance between Avanti and me. Alas, the tribe is not much appreciated. Even Jane Austen was ambivalent about her matchmaker in *Emma* who ‘believed herself in the secret of everybody’s feelings and with unpardonable arrogance proposed to arrange everybody’s destiny’. Young Indians snigger at the their matchmaking aunts, forgetting that theirs is a selfless act. Classical Indian stories are kinder; the matchmaker is usually a goose, the most famous being the one that brought Nala and Damayanti together in the Mahabharata. My favourite, however, is Suchimukhi, the romantic goose who makes Pradyumna fall in love with Prabhavati in a sixteenth-century Telugu story by Pingali Suranna. The goose begins thus:

*What images can I marshal  
to describe the beauty of her body, from toe to tip?*

She then starts to make a list: her ankles are like the fruit of the banyan tree; her feet are like the lotus; her toenails resemble the crescent moon; and . . . she stops suddenly to complain that these clichés are inadequate to describe Prabhavati’s beauty.

*I am trying my best to describe her, but I can’t touch  
even a billionth of her beauty. Don’t conclude from this  
that I’m any less of a poet.*

The goose goes away but the hero is by now sick with love and desperately tries to imagine what Prabhavati looks like.

*With rising desire, following the words of the goose,  
he intensified the beauty of the images she had used . . .  
He composed the girl in his mind . . . [and] finally, he got a glimpse of her in his inner eye.*

Because our hero has a pure, ‘unfettered’ mind, he is able to create through the goose’s metaphors a living reality of Prabhavati.

~



I stepped out of the car and entered Victoria Terminus. Conscious of my throbbing heart, I rushed past passengers and porters towards the arrivals board, anxious to find out if the train from Bangalore had arrived. Then I ran to platform number two to wait for Avanti to emerge. I was thinking of only one thing—I would see her soon, not in my imagination like Pradyumna with his ‘unfettered’ mind, but in flesh and blood.

Avanti finally came out. I immediately spotted her as I took in her oval face, straight nose and full mouth. She stood on the platform slanting her head in her usual way, sloping against her delicate shoulder. Another man was beside her, helping to unload her luggage. My heart sank. Soon, however, I felt reassured—there was reserve in the way she spoke to him. No, she does not love him, I decided.

As I approached from behind, I noticed that she had become aware of my nearness. She had the same desirable, rounded body that had long been the object of my desire.

‘Avanti!’ I shouted.

She turned to look around and gave me a big smile. She took my hand and introduced me to the man beside her. He was a colleague, a journalist from her newspaper.

‘Ah, we haven’t met before,’ he said indifferently, holding out his hand but suggesting by his body language that he wished to be left alone with Avanti. She continued to hold my hand, however. I gazed at her as we walked on the crowded platform, seeing only her clear, truthful eyes through the love that flooded my heart. She was happy to see me and I felt reassured. She was walking close to me in the crowd and our bodies kept touching each other, sending a thrill coursing through my body. As we came out of the station, she thanked her colleague for looking after her during the journey. She told him that she would find her own way to the company guest house and would see him at the office the following day.

As we were getting into the car, she noticed a book on the back seat.

‘It’s for you.’ I blushed.

‘What is it?’

‘It’s ah . . . Jayadeva’s *Gitagovinda*,’ I said awkwardly. ‘I . . . I thought you might enjoy it.’

She gave me an enigmatic smile

She gave me an enigmatic smile.

Avanti came home with me from the station. On the way, I peered into her eyes; they had turned dark inside the car and I found myself reflected in them. I was dying to pour my heart out but instead we made small talk about her journey and her work. When we walked into my apartment, I experienced a feeling of awkwardness. Now that I was alone with her, I felt confused, and did not know where to begin. I asked if she wanted a fresh lime soda and she readily accepted. The simple gesture calmed me.

‘Now tell me about you,’ she said.

I couldn’t contain myself any longer. I told her everything, beginning with my realization while watching *Charulata*; I told her how much I had missed her and stopped doing the things we had done together; how I had spent the previous twenty-four hours sleeplessly, not eating, just walking the streets thinking of her; I told her about my plan to take the next train to Bangalore when she had phoned.

‘I have fallen in love with you, Avanti.’

I looked into her eyes, and I saw all that I needed to know. She kept looking at me intently and did not waver.

‘You have?’ she asked in a whisper.

There was silence.

‘I too passed a sleepless night on the train thinking of you. I too thought that if we didn’t act, I would end up like sad *Charulata*.’

‘Is it really true?’ I asked in a husky voice.

She nodded.

‘I cannot believe it—you love me?’

‘Yes!’

There was no need to say more. Pleasure had lit up her face. Both of us moved instinctively closer. I raised my arms and put them around her and pressed her to me. She yielded, shy and happy.

~

What Avanti and I had discovered is called ‘romantic love’. They say it occurs in the opening moments when two persons realize that the other holds a key to their happiness and their normal reserve drops suddenly. It is a mistake to

believe that romantic love was born in the West. Since the beginning, lovers have experienced it everywhere but in the twelfth-century West, it became an obsessive topic of aristocratic manners and literature. Curiously, romantic love flowered in three different parts of the world around the same time. In the West, it came from a tradition born in the twelfth-century Christian Europe culminating in Joseph Bédier's *Tristan and Iseult*; in Islamic Persia, it developed in the romance of Nizami Ganjavi's Layla and Majnun; in eastern India, it blossomed in the divine love of Radha and Krishna in Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*. It is remarkable the feelings that Avanti and I shared—once imagined to be the province only of the elite—have now become a part of the global mass culture.

Whereas the erotic love of Sanskrit love poetry and the *Kamasutra* is bright and shiny, romantic love is often dark and heavy—even tragic as in *Romeo and Juliet* and other stories. In erotic love, the beloved enlivens the senses and is a source of excitement and delight; in romantic love, sexual desire becomes secondary as the lover disappears in the contours of the beloved in a quest for oneness. Romantic love is grounded in the personal and subjective, and not surprisingly, it became one of the cherished values of 'modernity' and has been embraced avidly in the modern world. In India, a distinct rendering of romantic love emerged in the medieval times as a sentiment of bhakti—a love of the divine—in contrast to the light-hearted erotic love of antiquity.

Romantic love idealizes the lover as a superior being. There is constant longing, tenderness and willing surrender, though still in the service of sexual desire. A beloved's value lies in the difficulty of obtaining her. When it first appeared in the western Middle Ages, it was directed towards a beloved with whom the lover could not possibly have sexual relations; the lovers were separated by insuperable barriers of class, caste and convention. So thoroughly had the Church succeeded in making men and women feel sex to be inherently impure that it was impossible to feel a romantic sentiment unless she or he was unattainable.

Similarly, romantic love was expressed in India in the devotee's impossible and unbearable love of god in the devotional religious tradition of bhakti, which originated in south India but flowered in medieval north India. Bhakti was, above all, a personal relationship between the devotee and a god or goddess in contrast to the ritual religion of the earlier Vedic texts. It became popular in

post-Gupta times from the sixth to tenth centuries CE as Brahmin priests harnessed its popularity by composing the texts known as Puranas. The philosophical foundation for bhakti was laid by Ramanuja in the eleventh century. Unlike Shankara's absolute monist unity, Ramanuja believed in the separateness of the individual soul from the brahman. Ramanuja argued that consciousness and perception imply difference. By virtue of this duality, desire is real; the human soul desires god. He thus reinforced the validity of the creation hymn in the *Rig Veda* where desire is the first seed in the mind, implying that the infinite needs the finite; the formless desires form.

In the West, romantic love originated in courtly life, in the ideal of chivalry in the Middle Ages, and was elaborated in rich romance literature. It expressed love as a uniting energy in which two persons seek to become one. As Isolde says to Tristan:

*We are one life and flesh . . . You and I, Tristan and Isolde shall forever remain one and undivided! . . . I am yours . . . you are mine . . . one Tristan and Isolde.*

Chevaliers and knights in the Middle Ages aspired to platonic, non-marital relationships with women of nobility whom they served in an elaborate ritual derived from the moral code of chivalry. Love poetry developed from these beginnings in the court of Emperor Frederick II and went on to flower during the Renaissance. Telling a story is one of the meanings of 'romance' and it culminated in the romantic novel in the nineteenth century, disseminating the ideals of romantic love to the new middle classes and eventually the masses.

It reached its apogee in the Romantic movement, of which the English poet Shelley was one of the chief apostles. Shelley expressed in an imaginative way exquisite emotion about love, which he considered wholly good and saw no reason for it to be restrained. But his biographers have explained that his love rested on obstacles. If Emilia Viviani had not been carried off to a convent, he might not have written 'Epipsychidion'; if Jane Williams had not been a virtuous wife, he may never have written 'The Recollection'. Romantic love flourished in part because of social and other barriers.

Kamini Masi played an important role in my education in romantic love. She was prescient and worried that my romantic feelings for Isha would bring inevitable pain and she tried to shield me by explaining the difference between

erotic and romantic love. She urged me to cultivate the erotic attitude of the nagaraka—light-hearted, hedonistic and not impassioned. The nayaka and nayika in erotic love poetry are generic, anonymous characters. ‘You must learn to become the heroic lover of all women, not the romantic lover of one woman,’ she would say. But this was not an easy task—even the great god Krishna failed and succumbed to the romantic love of Radha in the *Gitagovinda*.

In the western world, romantic love was born under the watchful eye of medieval Christianity, which made a sharp distinction between flesh and soul and taught the pessimistic doctrine that fleshly desire was an appetite, much like hunger and thirst. It thought of sexual appetite as a sign of original sin within the body and inherently polluting. So, it had to be denied if one wanted to live a healthy life. After Pope Gregory’s reforms, the Church took the extreme step to ban sexual pleasure for all Christians, promoting the extreme ideal of celibacy. By the early twelfth century, churchmen went around teaching that even legitimately married couples would be committing a sin if they succumbed to feeling ‘desire-as-appetite’ for each other. As a response to this radical idea, the troubadours, ‘travelling singers’, in southern France composed songs about an idealized, non-sexual love called *fin’amors*, ‘pure love’, based on stories of chivalric knights like Lancelot, who performed noble deeds for the ladies of the courts based on ‘pure love’. A troubadour, Giraut de Borneil, wrote that the mastery of desire by pure love resulted in a joy that was ‘a hundred times’ greater than the satisfaction of ‘desire-as-appetite’. And their god approved of this innocent, non-sexual courtly love.

The notion of ‘desire-as-appetite’ did not resonate in India, although there are suggestions of it in the writings of Jains, Buddhists and other kama pessimists. While the *Buddhacharita* riles against the human body, the common folk adhered to the old Vedic ideal of the world and the human body as sacred; they did not distinguish between sacred and profane or flesh and spirit. The practices related to kama in the courts and temples of the Senas in Bengal and the Gangas in Orissa, where the *Gitagovinda* was born, did not think of sexual pleasure as ‘animal’ or as bodily ‘appetite’. Romantic love in India had its origins in Puranic Hinduism, which flowered in multiple, independent regional kingdoms across India after the decline of the Guptas in the sixth century. An encyclopaedic mosaic of plural Hinduism, the Puranas synthesized popular myths and legends

and festivals with the high philosophy of Vedanta and wove them into the bhakti movement. Romantic love arose at two levels: among the people, it was through the devotee's mesmerizing love for the divine, propagated by bhakti saints; among the aristocracy in the medieval courts, it was born in the aesthetic opposition of bhava and rasa, particularly srīngara rasa. Bhava consists of transient daily emotions, such as despondency, joy and lust (*rati*). Rasa, on the other hand, is an aestheticized, almost sacred, version of these emotions, wherein a devotee ritually enacts or meditates on divine sexual love as a part of god's leela, the divine play of Shiva and Parvati or Krishna and Radha.

Temple and royal palace were closely linked. Priests and women of the temple venerated the images of the gods and goddesses in the same way as courtiers and palace women treated kings and queens. Life at the court was 'aestheticized'. At the court, bhakti referred to the loyalty of a nobleman to a maharaja; at the temple, it was the love of a devotee for god. *Darshan* at the court was the power of the sight of one's feudal lord; at the temple, it was the sight of god, expressed through puja. The srīngara rasa of the court was depicted on the temple walls as the loving sexual embrace of the male god and his female consort.

The worlds of bhakti and srīngara rasa could not be more different from medieval Christianity in Europe. The flesh and the soul were not opposed; sexual pleasure was not an 'animal appetite'. Love in India did not have to master lust as in the *fin'amors* of Europe in order to render it innocent. Instead, the nobility in Indian medieval courts practised an aesthetic, refined 'love-lust' of srīngara rasa while the common people accessed the spiritual power of a personal relationship between the worshipper and god in their hearts or in the darshana, 'gaze', of their gods in sexual embrace on the temple walls. It reached a peak in the temple dance, which portrayed myriad emotions associated with sexual love—jealousy, fear, anger and compassion—consistent with the *Natya Shastra*, Bharata's treatise on the performing arts.

~

Not letting go of each other's hands, Avanti and I walked into Ramu Mama's flat. We were early, well before the others arrived for the promised 'celebration'. On seeing us from afar, Kamini Masi gave a breathless cry and ran up to greet us. She took our heads in both her hands and kissed us, wetting our cheeks with

her tears.

‘I’d always hoped for this!’

Ramu Mama drew us towards him with his strong arms. He took Avanti in his arms, kissed her on the cheek and her face, and repeated it again with me. I felt a deep affection for this suave, middle-aged man who was suddenly clumsy and awkward. ‘I am very, very . . . plea . . . Oh, what a fool I am . . .!’

‘So, it is settled!’ Kamini Masi said. ‘Now, you must go home to your parents and get their blessings.’

Suddenly, Ramu Mama stopped Kamini Masi who was going to the kitchen. He put his arm around her and, like a young lover, kissed her tenderly. The older couple appeared muddled for a moment and it was suddenly unclear which of the two couples was celebrating their love.

‘Are a lot of people coming tonight?’ I asked.

‘Only our crowd,’ said Ramu Mama. ‘Who do you want to meet, Amar? I’ll introduce you to . . .’

‘Who do *you* think he wants to meet tonight?’ interrupted Kamini Masi impatiently.

I blushed.

‘I’ve also invited some of your crowd,’ he said. ‘Raj, Sheila, Madhu and her husband, Indu Vakil and . . .’

‘Not Ruchi Saigal, I hope.’

‘No. Not after what happened at the theatre.’

‘No one seems to invite her any more,’ said Kamini Masi. ‘I haven’t seen her in ages.’

‘Anand?’

‘No, he is away.’

‘So, what did you tell my friends?’

‘Nothing.’

‘I’m relieved,’ I said nervously. ‘We are not even engaged.’

‘Shh . . . tonight is our secret celebration—a secret shared only by the four of us,’ Kamini Masi said.

‘And fifty guests?’ Ramu Mama asked.

‘All this cloak-and-dagger business!’ Kamini Masi took Avanti’s arm and led her affectionately to the kitchen. Avanti gave me a sidelong glance. Ramu Mama went in to dress, and I went to their sprawling balcony overlooking the Arabian

Sea. Avanti joined me a few minutes later and we listened contentedly to the waves of the Arabian Sea. I looked into her eyes.

‘I never dared hope . . . it was meant to be,’ she said.

‘I still can’t believe it.’

‘I wasn’t aware of it. I only knew that I couldn’t stand the pain that Isha kept inflicting on you and . . .’

‘You wanted to protect me?’

After a pause, she asked, ‘Why did you give me the *Gitagovinda*?’

‘Did you read it?’

‘At one sitting . . . last night.’

‘And?’

Before she could answer, Kamini Masi came looking for us. The apartment had begun to fill up. Soon, we were being introduced to Ramu Mama’s aristocratic friends and to Kamini Masi’s ‘filmi’ types. Avanti and I went up to them and found it surprisingly easy to make small talk. In the crowd and the chatter, Avanti and I got separated. I was happy to see some of my old friends. I hadn’t seen them since Avanti’s departure. Raj came with Doli, who asked, ‘What’s the occasion?’

‘Why, a chance to meet—isn’t that reason enough?’ said Kamini Masi.

‘And what is *your* news, Doli?’ I asked.

‘Raj only talks about the war. It’s so boring.’

‘I heard this morning,’ said Ramu Mama, ‘Nixon and Kissinger have sent the Seventh Fleet to the Indian Ocean. Do you think America will enter the war?’

‘No. It’s a symbolic gesture to lend support to their ally, Pakistan. Mind you, though, they are pushing India further into Soviet arms,’ said Raj.

‘You’d love that, wouldn’t you, Raj?’ said Sheila, who had just come in.

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘He’s an old Lefty! He’d love it if India was in the Soviet camp.’

‘Which would provide a nice ideological cover for Indira to pursue her socialist agenda,’ said Ramu Mama.

They were referring to the short war between India and Pakistan in the winter of 1971. It had begun with atrocities by the Pakistani Army that killed hundreds of thousands of East Pakistani civilians and drove more than fifteen million refugees into India. To stop the genocide, India went to war and ended in splitting Pakistan into two, creating the new nation of Bangladesh. American



splitting Pakistan into two, creating the new nation of Bangladesh. American President Richard Nixon, advised by the wily Henry Kissinger, refused to admit to the genocide; instead, they lent support to Pakistan, sending a military task force of the Seventh Fleet into the Bay of Bengal.

Suddenly, Raj noticed Avanti in the distance, walking to the library. ‘She is as exquisite as ever!’ said the greying eminence as he scurried towards her.

~

I had good reasons to give the *Gitagovinda* to Avanti. I had hoped that India’s greatest love poem would get Avanti to fall in love with me. Jayadeva’s work is both an erotic poem and a religious allegory—it doesn’t distinguish between spiritual and carnal love—and I wanted to convince Avanti that the sacred and the profane are intimately interwoven in a human life. I succeeded.

The setting of the *Gitagovinda* is wonderfully romantic: a blooming forest on a full moon night on the leafy banks of the Yamuna River. In the terse opening lines, Jayadeva sets the scene with Nanda expressing a father’s concern for his son’s fear of darkness.

*Clouds thicken the sky.  
Tamala trees darken the forest.  
The night frightens him.  
Radha, you take him home!*

*They leave at Nanda’s order,  
Passing trees in thickets on the way,  
Until secret passions of Radha and Madhava  
Triumph on the Jumna riverbank.*

In the voluptuous, dark night the pair follow a winding path. The ‘home’ to which Radha brings him is a thicket in the forest. Krishna pretends to be afraid of the dark but the darkness arouses their desires. In this secret space, Krishna and Radha enact their divine love, a celestial leela that creates the world spontaneously.

Radha is India’s first truly romantic heroine; Krishna is the supreme lord who appears to restore righteousness in the universe. The grove where they make love is the ‘interior castle’, the inner self according to mystics; and Radha’s skirt when it drops is the falling away of the veil before the ‘all-seeing’ god.

After their first night of love, Krishna deserts Radha to play with other girls

After their first night of love, Krishna deserts Radha to play with other gopis, 'milkmaids'. He is light-hearted and flirtatious and is out to have fun while engaging in the serious business of destroying evil in the world. Radha is an ordinary worshipping milkmaid, who is married and wilfully committing adultery. Intense, solitary and proud, she is every bit equal to Krishna's passion, and unwilling to share him with anyone.

*While Hari roamed in the forest  
Making love to all the women,  
Radha's hold on him loosened,  
And envy drove her away.  
But anywhere she tried to retreat  
In her thicket of wild vines,  
Sounds of bees buzzing circles overhead  
Depressed her—  
She told her friend the secret.*

As promiscuous Krishna chases after other milkmaids, Radha is intensely jealous. She curses her bad luck for falling in love with an unfaithful philanderer. But her heart has been impaled by 'the arrows of Kama'; she yearns for him and doesn't know what to do.

Eventually, Krishna remembers Radha and abandons the milkmaids; he broods; he feels contrite; and begins to search for her. He meets one of Radha's friends and pours out his grief. She tells him how much Radha has suffered in his absence. He entreats the friend to go and appease her and beg her forgiveness. When Radha sees her friend return without Krishna, she grows suspicious, convinced that her lover is enjoying someone else's favours. Her friend tries to intercede on Krishna's behalf but Radha interrupts her: 'If the pitiless rogue won't come, why should I blame the messenger? He wantonly delights in loving many women.'

*Dark Krishna, your heart must be blacker than your skin.  
How can you deceive a faithful creature tortured by love?  
Damn you, Madhava. Go, Keshava, leave me!*

Her friend advises her not to let wounded pride come in the way.

*Delay is useless, you fool  
It is time for lovers to meet!'*

---

As the night approaches, Krishna returns finally to Radha. Her anger has softened and he behaves as any unfaithful man.

*Lovely fool, I am here as your lover.*

He beseeches her to punish him in whatever way she wishes.

*Place your foot on my head—  
A sublime flower destroying poison of Jove!  
Let your foot quell the harsh sun  
Burning its fiery form in me to torment Love.*

This might be the only instance in human history when a god invited a human being to place her foot on his head. And so, having soothed Radha with his pleas, Krishna dresses elaborately for their rendezvous and lights up the forest. She nears the edge of their bed, masking her smile by pretending to scratch her foot, her ‘modesty left in shame’.

Krishna says, ‘I stroke your foot with my lotus hand . . . I am faithful now. Love me, Radha.’ And so, the first romantic heroine of India, secure in her power, unites with the first divine hero of India. She sits astride him, adopting the *viparita* or *purusayita*, ‘reverse missionary position’, from the *Kamasutra* and launches an attack from above, a signal that their love battle has begun.

*Her hips were still,  
Her vine-like arm was slack,  
Her chest was heaving,  
Her eyes were closed.  
Why does a mood of manly force  
Succeed for women in love?*

~

I saw Avanti the instant I entered the library. It was more than half an hour since we had been separated. Ramu Mama’s was a typical Bombay party where one couldn’t be sure if one was coming or going. You were collared by one person and then passed on to another like a football. From afar, I noticed that Avanti looked relaxed—fresh, smooth and clean as though she had come out of a bath. I hadn’t realized that she wore only one piece of jewellery—a string of pearls that was just the right length to set off her breasts. Her unpretentious physicality aroused me. She smiled joyfully as soon as she saw me and rushed towards me.

aroused me. She smiled joyfully as soon as she saw me and rushed towards me.

‘I’ve been waiting for you!’ she said.

‘You know how it is at parties. You meet one person and before you know it a second one drags you away. And then another.’

‘I am learning to be invisible at a party, Amar, and this has set me free—I could be dancing naked without people thinking me crazy.’

‘I think sometimes of the tea dance at the Imperial when we first met Ramu Mama.’

Hearing his name, Ramu Mama came up to us in his smart blue blazer and asked if we were enjoying ourselves. I gave him a look that said, ‘How can you ask such a question?’

Suddenly, there was laughter nearby as Raj made a joke about a member of Indira Gandhi’s Cabinet.

‘All your comrades are sitting pretty in Delhi, Raj,’ Sheila said.

‘Ah, yes . . . and becoming good reactionaries.’

Kamini Masi breezed by and told Avanti to ignore the political talk and try her samosas. ‘I made them myself.’

I noticed that while Avanti’s body had a relaxed sensuality, her eyes were as intense as ever. She moved closer and took my hand.

‘Who would have imagined that my best friend would become my best love!’ I said.

‘Only friends deserve to be lovers.’

I looked with a benign gaze at the gaiety of the party and felt grateful for this exceptional turn of events in my life. From a life of obsessive jealousy, gloom and darkness with Isha, I now felt joy, hope and light in my future life with Avanti. As I was about to ask her about her reaction to the *Gitagovinda*, Kamini Masi came once again and whisked her away to help her examine the dishes on the buffet table. Ramu Mama returned and set his heavy person on the sofa beside me. He seemed tired and looked earnestly into my eyes.

‘The girl is a treasure, Amar . . . she is a rare one.’

‘But . . .’

‘She loves you and that’s that.’

‘Our parents still have to agree.’

‘It won’t be easy for Gauri, I know. She’s still ambitious for you.’

‘She keeps reminding me of it every other month.’

Just as he was about to speak, dinner was announced and he jumped up, remembering his duties as a host. I spotted Avanti at the buffet, helping Kamini Masi. Watching her movements from the corner of my eye, I felt she seemed perfectly at ease and appeared to take part in the conversation around her without saying anything. She looked amused as she smelled a particular dish; then frowned at the next one. Soon, she came to the end of the buffet table and turned to look at me.

Both Avanti and I were too excited to eat. We could only nibble; our minds were on the life that lay ahead of us.

‘What was Ramu Mama saying?’

‘He called you a “treasure”.’

Avanti beamed joyfully. ‘Kamini Masi also said something nice about you.’

‘What did she say?’

‘She said that you are sincere . . . without any of the artificiality of successful young men.’

We went on chatting thus, oblivious to those around us. People had begun to leave as they tend to, soon after a large dinner party. We were left alone in the dining room except for the servants. One or two couples came by to say goodbye. When everyone was gone, Avanti and I moved to the balcony and remained silent for a long time, listening to the sea below. Both of us were in a daze. Suddenly, she turned towards me and asked if I really loved her. She then became confused, feeling that she ought not to have asked it.

‘I love you as surely as I know that I exist.’

~

It was Kamini Masi who had introduced me to India’s greatest love story as a part of ‘my education in sringara rasa’. But my sceptical mind couldn’t understand how a god, who is supposed to love all creatures, becomes the exclusive lover of Radha. How is it possible for Krishna to forget that Radha is someone’s wife? And why does Radha engage in an adulterous relationship with a god who is brazen, forever flirting and repeatedly committing infidelities?

My confusion, I now realize, was due to my education at a Christian missionary school, which compelled me to see kama in opposition between the secular and the religious. True, my grandmother’s pandit had healed some of this

.. .. .

disorder but his influence had been short-lived. Avanti's upbringing was different—she wasn't a victim of this binary. Moreover, she had deliberately reclaimed the Vedic world view at the ashram in Igatpuri. When she referred to the cosmos as sacred, she made it clear that the bodies of men and women were also sacred; and so was the act of love. Since then I had called her my 'erotic-ascetic'.

Avanti and I thus came from two different ends in our understanding of the phenomenon of bhakti. I understood it as a sublimation of human love but Avanti began with the assumption that the cosmos was sacred. All phenomena in it were suffused with god's love, including human love. Those persons who reciprocated god's love became his devotees (bhaktas). Therefore, bhakti was a natural extension of god's love for all creatures.

Avanti also believed that Krishna reveals both an inclusive and exclusive love. As an exclusive lover, he appears to choose Radha, one gopi above all others, and love her in a special way. As an inclusive lover, he loves all the gopis simultaneously. In each case, the love expressed is a metaphor for god's relationship with the soul. Exclusive love reveals god's unique love for each soul; inclusive love reveals his capacity to love all souls. Krishna can thus love all souls uniquely and equally, felt Avanti. In the ecstatic dancing circle of the raas leela, each of the gopis is joined with Krishna, who answers all of their longings in a way that transforms the erotic impulse into mystical fulfilment.

Even more intriguing was the finale of the *Gita Govinda*. Is it about Radha's triumph? And what does the conquest of a nayika over a nayaka mean? And that too, a *human* female's victory over her *divine* male lover. Was Jayadeva enacting a pure male fantasy? The role reversal is a secret desire in the male imagination—the woman losing her inhibitions as she climbs atop, revealing a side of her character buried by social convention. Could it also be an act of trust and self-revelation for a woman to act out the 'male part'?

The *Gita Govinda* was written in the court of the last Sena ruler of Bengal towards the close of the twelfth century and quickly spread throughout the Indian subcontinent. From a court poet, Jayadeva became a popular wandering singer of religious poetry, a pioneer of the medieval bhakti movement. His poem remains, even today, a source of religious inspiration. It has been sung and danced to without interruption for seven centuries in the Jagannath temple in

Orissa. Its attraction lies precisely in its ambiguity between the divine and the human, appealing both to the religious Vaishnava acolytes seeking spiritual illumination and the seekers of literary and aesthetic beauty. Hence, it appealed both to Avanti's spiritual side and to Kamini Masi's aesthetic side. The latter explained that its bhakti rasa converts a psychological poetic experience into a transcendental one in the mind of a trained aesthete, who loses her sense of separateness in order to experience the transcendental emotions between Radha and Krishna.

The great mystic saint of Bengal, Chaitanya, and his Vaishnava followers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, began to read the poem as a coded text of deep spirituality. They thought of Radha's love as an exemplary metaphor of union with god—they either eliminated the erotic verses or read them as metaphorical expressions of anxious communion between god and his devotee. They distinguished between the two words for love—*prema* and *kama*. The *prema* of the devotee is the pure and selfless love of god (a bit like the Christian agape) while *kama* is selfish human love to satisfy lust. On the other hand, their rival Vaishnava-Sahajiya tantra sect, which developed in seventeenth-century Bengal, believed that the *parakiya*, 'illicit', love of Radha was superior to *svakiya*, 'conjugal' love, and they resisted attempts by mythologists to turn Radha into Krishna's wife. They felt that *parakiya* love was truer, less selfish and more difficult to sustain because it faced great obstacles from society's conventions. Hence, in their eyes it qualified as pure divine love. The Sahajiyas, however, were forced to become a clandestine sect because of social disapproval of their beliefs.

A most ingenious account of what is going on in this poem was offered in the sixteenth century by two disciples of Chaitanya. Rupa Goswami and his nephew, Jiva Goswami, explain that from an absolute point of view, Krishna (as bhagwan, or god) represents a unified, undifferentiated reality. But ordinary human beings are only able to see the world in multiple, differentiated forms and beings. The differentiation exists within Krishna's nature and this is what Jayadeva depicts in Krishna's relationship with Radha. When the divine lovers unite, the evolved devotee experiences the harmonious unity of cosmic desire. When they separate, the reader or listener becomes aware of his everyday world of different objects.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, *The Times* in London carried a review of Sir Edwin Arnold's verse translation of the *Gitagovinda*. The reviewer wrote: 'Nothing could be more graceful and delicate than the shades by which Krishna is portrayed in the gradual process of being weaned by the love of "beautiful Radha, jasmine-bosomed Radha".' Arnold, however, did not translate the climactic scene, saying in a footnote: 'part of [this canto] is here perforce omitted, along with the whole of the last one'. The 'perforce' had to do with Victorian sentiments of Arnold's readers who would have been shocked by a god engaging in sexual intercourse with a mortal—and flabbergasted in imagining Radha sitting astride Krishna while making love to him.

The Victorian prudish mindset continues to flourish in contemporary India while it has disappeared in its home. As a result, the Indian middle class grows up making a distinction between the soul and the flesh, the sacred and the profane, and equates desire with animal appetite. The average textbook used by Indian university students teaches Krishna bhakti solely in terms of the soul's longing for god. Without realizing it, they have reduced human freedom in their imagination.

~

As I think back to those days when I discovered my love for Avanti, I cannot imagine my good fortune, and had anyone suggested that I'd be given a second chance at love, I wouldn't have believed it. Ever since Isha abandoned me, I had given up all hope. It was getting late at Ramu Mama's party but we were reluctant to leave. Eventually, we rose. Kamini Masi inquired if Avanti wanted to stay the night in their guest room as it wouldn't be right for her to stay with me. Avanti told her that she had booked a room in her company's guest house.

On the way home, I parked the car at a quiet corner on Malabar Hill. We gazed in silence at the Queen's Necklace. She said she was feeling warm and reached across to open the window on my side. Doing so, she brushed her breast against my chest. This was an intimate gesture and I took it as a signal and immediately made the next move. We were hesitant and fumbling to begin with but soon we were locked in an embrace. Gradually, I became bolder and insistent and our habitual restraint fell away. As the tension of keeping up appearances collapsed, the energy flowed out of me. With a woman's alert



instinct, she registered it. Both of us were swept by the same intoxicating feeling.

When I dropped her at the guest house, I reminded her that her gesture of ‘innocently’ brushing her breast against mine was a lesson in seduction from the *Kamasutra*. With feigned annoyance, she said, ‘Silly boy!’ and gave me a gentle, affectionate slap on my wrist. She turned serious suddenly and said that for a woman her whole dignity depended on marriage and children. One may try and sentimentalize it, but this love and marriage business is an old thing. Poets may have glorified romance but they were mostly men. Women have always known that the whole business of kama is an emotional orientation to the world and cannot be separated from their family.

Curiously enough, Sigmund Freud had also conceived of love not merely as libido or a discharge of kama energy but as an emotional orientation to the world. Love permeates nature, he felt. This tendency demands that the world be worthy and deserving of our love. He showed this through the viewpoint of an infant, for whom the world is lovable because it is surrounded by loving parents, who respond to its needs. It wouldn’t survive otherwise. Freud did not believe that the divine is transcendent; rather, it is immanent in nature. Of course, Freud the doctor-scientist did question eventually, how could the divine be manifest in nature? What sort of a force should we be looking for?

When love is conceived as the urge for primal unity, a biological longing for oneness, then human life takes on a cosmic dimension. Love becomes ‘sacred’ and this is what the bhakti saints celebrated—a human expression of a cosmic process. Bhakti’s origins lie in the seventh century CE with the devotional outpourings of the Alvar poets in the Tamil country in the south of India. They made a decisive break from the ritualistic Vedic religion, offering to the people love and devotion as the true path to enlightenment. The bhakti movement spread across medieval India, gaining wide acceptance by the fifteenth century, reaching a zenith soon thereafter when it also became the foundation of Sikhism.

The first reference to bhakti is actually a thousand years earlier in a stray verse in the Upanishads:

*He who has the highest bhakti of God  
just like his God, so for his Guru  
To him who is high-minded,  
these teachings will be illuminating.*

The Bhagavad Gita introduces *bhakti marga*, ‘the path of devotion’, as one of the three ways to spiritual freedom—the other two being *karma marga*, ‘path of action’, and *jnana marga*, ‘path of knowledge. Meanwhile, charming legends grew around the god-hero of the Gita. In these folk tales, Krishna is the mischievous child who steals butter from the kitchen; he is the fun-loving youth who hides the clothes of the bathing gopis; as he grows up, he becomes attractive beyond belief, and no woman is immune to his charms. This is only a step away from the romantic lover of Radha.

*Krishna! When you remove  
with the breath of your mouth  
a particle of dust from Radhika's eye,  
you blow away at the same time  
the pride of other milkmaids!*

The folk tales gradually transformed into a rich love life of the gods which are recorded in the medieval Purana texts. Eventually, the bhakti movement had a profound social impact, offering women and the low-born an inclusive path to spiritual salvation that had been confined previously to high-born males alone. An envious Jain renouncer wondered how the frolicking gopis found a path to heaven and enlightenment without going through years of tapas, meditation and austerities. The gopis did better than the renouncer—they fulfilled their desire for love while the renouncer's desires remained unrequited. He had to be reborn, ironically, to fulfil those unreciprocated desires.

I return to the question, what indeed is going on in bhakti, and how does one begin to make sense of god as a lover? Does it mean that Indians could not distinguish between the sacred and the profane? Western psychologists explain the notion of divine love suffusing the cosmos as a ‘sublimation of human carnal love’. The problem, I think, lies in the western mind which is conditioned to think of the world in separate boxes—a box called ‘religion’ versus a box called ‘secular’. Bhakti poetry breaks this distinction. The sentiment of love and beauty flows from the heart of the sensitive listener who transforms it into a sacred, cosmic life force, something universal and permanent. The answer lies with the devotee and not in the world outside.

Avanti once explained that the human heart is fickle and our infatuations soon turn into boredom or even revulsion. In contrast to the transient and ephemeral

nature of human happiness and sorrow, bhakti poetry offers something permanent and protective in the love of god. It transforms our evanescent human experience into something lasting, something fleeting into eternity. Turning a human passion into a cosmic reality, I believe, was an ingenious answer of the kama optimists to the pessimistic renouncer. Since love is directed towards a transcendental and immortal object, kama leads to *sukha*, 'happiness', and not to the Buddha's *dukkha*, 'sorrow'.

In India, romantic love happened to take a religious turn with bhakti, which suggests that there might be a connection between the human goals of kama and moksha. India's civilization explored this relationship in a completely different way in the tantra texts, which teach how to conquer desire by converting sex into a ritual. In other words, using desire to conquer desire. This is not as shocking as it may appear, for even secular love depends on ceremony and metaphor. The imagination of the lover turns the erotic into a rite of sorts. Because imaginations differ, love does not mean the same thing to the lovers. In Proust's novel, when Swann and Odette want to make love, they speak of 'faire crottelle' and they are referring not merely to copulation. Proust explains: 'That particular way of saying *to make love* did not mean to them precisely the same thing.' It meant one thing to Odette and another to Swann. To her it meant a pleasant, light-hearted erotic pleasure; to Swann it was a harrowing sentiment which grew out of the painful love he felt for Odette.

With the birth of romantic love, we have come light years away from desire as an animal appetite—from those biological cells that multiply by splitting, by budding or by parthenogenesis, but there is a small island of life in which reproduction takes place through the union of germ cells, gametes. This is the island of sexuality, and its domain is a limited one, encompassing the animal kingdom and some species of the vegetable kingdom. Human beings share with animals and certain plants the need to reproduce sexually and not only by the simpler method of self-division. The human imagination invents and provides constant variations whereas the animal always seems to repeat the same sexual act in the same way.



## THE DAY OF DAYS

*The heart finds rest where there is no twoness*

*This state where there is no twoness  
Where the heart finds rest,  
Where feelings do not dry with age,  
Where concealments fall away in time  
And essential love is ripened,  
Sacred is this state of human fulfilment,  
Which we find once if ever.*

—Bhavabhuti

Shaving in front of the mirror, I said to myself, ‘I know this is not what you expected, Ma, but Avanti and I have agreed to marry.’ And then, my self-assurance left me. I grew shy and couldn’t go on with the rehearsal. The truth is that I was unwilling to face my mother. She would disapprove of Avanti. On my last visit to Delhi, she had suggested it was time I thought of ‘settling down’ and had offered to introduce me to girls from the ‘best families’. When I casually dropped Avanti’s name, she froze.

My sulky mood did not leave me the entire morning. I stared out, brooding at the harbour, from the brass-framed window in my new office that had come as a reward with my recent promotion. A flock of seagulls flew past, turning their glittering wings to the light. Ferries connecting the mainland with the city glided in the harbour, scampering between the waiting cargo ships, forming a pattern of reflections like water-brush-stroke images of swaying masts and rigging. The play of light and colour created a dissonance upon the surface of the sea in sympathy with my sullen state. Turning around to face my polished desk, I decided to act.

I picked up the phone and asked my assistant to book train tickets to Delhi, and send a telegram to my mother giving the details of my arrival. She would

assume that I would be coming to see someone in the government, which was a common feature of business life in those days when the socialist establishment saddled the private sector with the most intricate controls.

I needed to see Avanti. I phoned her and asked her to join me for lunch at the Gymkhana. But when I got there, I found a message, saying that she had been held up in a meeting and would only join me after lunch. As I was reading her disappointing message, I heard a familiar voice.

‘Well, well, congratulations are in order, I think.’

It was Anand. He came forward and put his arm around me with spontaneous warmth. I had not known that he was back. We were meeting after a fair interval, and despite our different lifestyles and temperaments, I was drawn to him, as old friends are who have known each other for a long time.

‘A . . . A . . . Avanti was meeting me for lunch,’ I said hesitantly. ‘I just got a message—she’s held up at work.’

‘In that case, let’s go in to lunch, and she can join us. Lots to catch up on.’

I was wary. The incident in my flat six months ago had dampened things a bit. I was not jealous of him because I was more secure in my relationship with Avanti. Neither did I envy him—I was certain in my mind that I didn’t want to live the kind of life he did. Nor did I feel threatened because this was the way he was with all women. Yet I was guarded—I didn’t quite know how Avanti would respond to him. I was tempted to back out of his impulsive, friendly invitation but found myself being led into the dining room by his good-natured charm.

‘I have been hoping to run into you, Amar. Why haven’t we seen you anywhere? Where have you been?’

‘How did you know about Avanti and me?’

‘Shh . . . dear boy! Bombay is a small town and news like this is on every paanwallahs lips within twelve hours; and in twenty-four, if it’s raining.’

We sat down to lunch and he continued in his usual good-natured way. ‘I am very glad to finally see you after so long. You must tell me everything that has been going on. It seems the whole world was there at your Ramu Mama’s party.’

‘I don’t think Ramu Mama knows that you are back.’

He spoke openly, without a hint of feeling slighted at not being invited. It was the same confident Anand, who didn’t let such things come in the way.

‘Yes, it’s true Avanti and I are planning to get married. It’s a rather sudden decision.’

.....  
'When is the event?'

'Well, we haven't decided.'

'Have you told your mother?'

I shook my head.

'Hmm. You have your work cut out.'

'She won't like it, I know.'

Anand had kept in touch with my parents over the years and he knew all about my mother's ambition for a 'brilliant match' for me. She had, in fact, asked him and his mother on more than one occasion to recommend a girl 'from the right family'.

'When are you going to tell her?'

'This weekend.'

'It will not be easy.'

'What?'

'To "sell" good old Avanti.'

'Any chance of your coming?'

'You need help to sell her, eh?' He smiled mischievously.

'Frankly, yes!' Anand was still a favourite of my mother's and his word meant a lot to her.

'I can't, Amar. Not this weekend. I'm spending it with someone.' He gave me a knowing look. 'Tell you what—I will speak to your mother the following week when I have to be in Delhi on business. Then we'll celebrate with a party.' Suddenly, he stopped and frowned. 'No, it wouldn't work. I have this exquisite creature at home, but she is quite unsuitable for your crowd. Yes, it would be a disaster, I'm afraid.'

As I listened to him carry on about his latest conquest, I was amused at the thought of how different our lives were. Yet, we remained friends. It seemed to both of us that the life we led was the only real one; the other one's life was a mere illusion. While I envied his playful, light-hearted way with women, I could never be like him. And now that I was in love with Avanti, I was more than happy to sacrifice all other temptations. Anand could no longer hurt me as he had once with Isha.

'How does it feel to be in love?'

'Loving one woman, Anand, is like getting to know all women.' I gazed into

.....

his eyes. 'You've never loved, have you?'

'No.'

He got up to go. As he was leaving, he asked with a glitter in his eye, 'And how is our dear Kamini Masi? She is still a beauty, isn't she?'

He is impossible, I thought, as I saw him walk out. The love that bound me to Avanti was so unlike Anand's momentary infatuations. Although he was open and sincere in his attachments, he had perforce to play the game of love. And this inevitably meant having to lie, deceive, scheme and constantly think about the next conquest.

After Anand left, I went to the veranda and ordered coffee. As I sat waiting for Avanti, I had a strange feeling. I remembered that this was where Isha had sat when I had run into her, soon after arriving in Bombay. She too had been waiting. For a few fleeting seconds, I relived the happy memories of those months with her before sad thoughts enveloped me.

Before long, Avanti arrived in a bustle. Opening her handbag, she took out a letter. 'Here!' she announced proudly, handing it to me. 'Read it,' and rushed to the bathroom.

It was a flattering letter from her company appreciating her services in Bangalore. The last paragraph informed her that she was being promoted to assistant editor and being transferred back to Bombay. I was delighted. I was dreaming of our life together after marriage when I noticed a scruffy paper on the floor with Avanti's distinctive handwriting. It must have dropped when she pulled out the letter from her bag. I picked it up, and as I was putting it safely in my pocket to hand it back, I saw two rows of neatly written notes. They were headed, 'Pros' and 'Cons' and I quickly grasped that she had been debating whether to marry or not:

#### Pros

- (1) Love
- (2) Children and family life
- (3) Lifelong companionship
- (4) Solitary life is horrid, esp. in old age

#### Cons

- (1) Loss of freedom, to do what I want, esp to pursue my meditation and reading
- (2) Time-wasting quarrelling



(3) Having to visit relatives—I esp fear A's mother

Underneath the two rows, there was a conclusion: '4 vs 3. Ergo, marry A. QED!'

I smiled with pleasure. Here was someone who had remembered from her schooldays that mathematical proofs ended with the Latin initials QED, *quod erat demonstrandum*, 'thus it has been demonstrated'; this was how Avanti had proved to herself that marrying me was the logical answer.

When Avanti returned, I gave her a big hug, congratulating her on her promotion.

'Isn't it wonderful, silly boy! I shall be working here again.'

We plunged quickly into what needed to be done. I told her that I planned to spend the weekend with my parents to gain their consent.

'Your mother won't approve,' she said with a frown.

'I know.'

'Well, you'll have to work hard.'

'What about *your* parents?'

'My father will have a problem.'

'Because I am not a Brahmin?'

'Yes, but he'll come around.' She stopped herself. 'What am I saying? They'll be so relieved—they are convinced that I am going to die a spinster.' She stopped again and scowled. 'Amar, I am afraid of your mother. She doesn't like me.'

'It's not you. It's about her . . . her dreams of a grand alliance for her son. Anand and I were just saying . . .'

'You met Anand?'

'Yes, we had lunch together.'

'Anand!'

'When you didn't show up, I met Anand and we decided to have lunch together. In fact, we hoped you'd join us—he wanted to congratulate you.'

'And you *told* him about us?'

'He already knew and he was happy. In fact, I asked him to come with me to Delhi to help me persuade Mother.'

'And?'

'He couldn't come. He's involved with someone and couldn't leave her alone.'

There was a pause. She grew pensive. I explained to her that she shouldn't hold what had happened against him. 'He tries it on every woman. It's a game and he just has to play it.'

'I don't understand you. He took Isha away from you . . . not once but twice. How can you behave as though nothing happened?'

'He didn't steal her. Isha left me.'

Avanti realized that she had touched a raw nerve. I was hurt and she could tell. She came up to me and put her arm around me.

'Well, I am glad she did, silly boy. You are now mine. You have such generosity of spirit—no wonder I want to marry you.'

Both of us smiled.

'Perhaps you are right. What happened that day was about me almost succumbing to his game.'

'He is an ally now,' I reassured her. 'He has a hold on my mother, and if anyone can persuade her about our marriage, it is he.'

Avanti suddenly realized that she too ought to go home this weekend so that we could announce a wedding date soon. Getting up with a start, she declared that if she was going home, she had better go and look for wedding saris for her family and relatives. Fortunately, she had got some money from her company—arrears for the months she had been away in Bangalore. As she was leaving, I handed her the paper with her scribbles.

'It must have fallen out of your bag,' I said casually.

'Are you sure?' she said, turning red.

'It was on the floor and I picked it up.'

'Did you read it?'

'Yes.'

'Well?'

'I agree with your QED.'

She was embarrassed. 'I didn't mean for you to see it.' There was an uneasy pause. 'I am dead scared of this marriage business, Amar. You know how I have avoided it all my life . . . all the minefields laid by my parents. I still worry. Seriously, do you think it will?'

'What?'

'Work out.'

I looked puzzled.

‘Our marriage? Will I still be able to meditate and all?’

‘Of course.’

‘And visit my guru on the weekends?’

‘Of course.’

‘Oh!’ she remembered suddenly. ‘I must go and get the guru’s blessings.’

‘You mean he has to approve?’

‘No. I just want his blessings . . . for our marriage, I mean.’ There was another uncomfortable pause. ‘Amar, please, let’s never interfere with each other’s interests. If I go away to some place where I want to be myself, you mustn’t worry; you mustn’t ask.’

‘What’s the use of falling in love if we both remain the same? I mean, isn’t love supposed to change us? Break our solitude, transform us?’

We continued thus, speaking about the difficult balance between intimacy and independence. She felt strongly that the solidity of togetherness should not be taken to such an extreme as to render love fragile. When lovers are expected to fuse together, it should not lead to a paralysing dependence that will not allow them to continue to grow. She insisted that love should leave their individual integrities in place.

‘Isn’t it the best kind of love when we become what we love and yet remain ourselves?’ she said.

~

Before she had reached QED, Avanti’s analysis of the pros and cons of marriage had revealed a passionate concern for her freedom. She was seeking the right balance between togetherness and individuality. No one, I think, has expressed this better than the Lebanese-American poet Khalil Gibran in his masterpiece, *The Prophet*. In these lines, he gives advice on the secret of a loving and lasting marriage:

*Let there be spaces in your togetherness,  
And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.*

*Love one another but make not a bond of love:  
Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.  
Fill each other’s cup but drink not from one cup.  
Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf.*

*Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone,  
Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music . . .*

Virginia Woolf, the English novelist, had similar doubts as Avanti about marriage. She was anxious about her freedom, especially her ability to work. In her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, one of her characters says, 'I worship you, but I loathe marriage. I hate its smugness, its safety, its compromise and the thought of you interfering with my work, hindering me. What would you answer?'

Avanti worried that our intimacy might transform her sense of time and space. Indeed, intimacy can easily become oppressive when there is a constant demand for emotional closeness. In these circumstances, the rational course is for the two persons to negotiate their personal ties, somewhat in the way politicians negotiate their ties with voters in a democracy. In marriage, open and free communication presumes open and free communication between the two. It also needs a degree of equality and respect for the other's capabilities. This is often not the case.

Fourteen years into her extraordinary marriage to Leonard, Virginia Woolf wrote about a related problem—her horror of the 'dailiness' of marriage:

*. . . the horror of marriage lies in its 'dailiness'. All acuteness of a relationship is rubbed away by this. The truth is more like this: life—say 4 days out of 7—becomes automatic; but on the 5th day a bead of sensation (between husband and wife) forms which is all the fuller and more sensitive because of the automatic customary unconscious days on either side. That is to say the year is marked by moments of great intensity . . . Hardy's 'moments of vision'. How can a relationship endure for any length of time except under these conditions?*

It is only these occasional 'moments of vision' that make a marriage last. Otherwise, one might as well accept that marriage is 'sex for money', which Woolf compared to writing: 'Writing is like sex. First you do it for love, then you do it for your friends, and then you do it for money.'

Behind Avanti's and Virginia Woolf's concerns about marriage is the burden of centuries of mythology about romantic love, which encumbers couples with unrealistic expectations. These hopes are more acute in the West, but even in India, the middle class had begun to carry them soon after Independence, thanks largely to Bollywood. Choosing a man or a woman *for the rest of one's life* is to gamble. This is why older friends and relatives urge the young couple 'to think it over' before taking the decisive step. They foster the illusion that the choice of a

wife or husband is governed by a certain number of accurately weighable pros and cons of the sort that Avanti had written down on the piece of paper which she did not want me to see that afternoon at the Bombay Gymkhana.

Avanti's was a natural delusion of common sense. The truth is that no matter how hard you may try to anticipate the future, weighing carefully the probabilities of success and failure, you will never be able to foresee how the two of you are going to develop in the future. The factors involved are too many. Just imagine, nature has needed hundreds of thousands of years to select a species which seems now to be adapted to its surroundings. And yet, we nurse the presumption that we can, during one lifetime, resolve the problems of two highly complex physical and moral beings to adapt to one another. This is what unsatisfactorily married persons suppose after having convinced themselves that a second or third trial is going to yield a closer approximation to 'happiness'.

It seems to me that it would be far more appropriate for young people to learn that their choice must always have an arbitrary element, of which they are undertaking to bear the consequences. To choose a woman for a wife is to say to 'your' Avanti: 'I want to live with you just as you are.' For, this really means: 'It is you I choose to share my life with, and that is the only evidence I have that I love you. It is the only honest way for two human beings to give themselves the right to use the word "love".'

~

As the train pulled into the New Delhi railway station, I saw the slim, awkward figure of my father on the platform. He threw up an arm in a clumsy gesture of pleasure as I stepped out of the train. I touched his feet and we embraced with feeling. His eyes were the same—innocent, sincere and remote. There was an embarrassed shyness between father and son as we walked out of the station into the waiting car.

'Your telegram got your mother worried. But telegrams always worry her.'

'There wasn't enough time for a letter.'

'That's what I told her.'

'How does she like the new house?'

'It is bigger and the grass and the garden have come up. She stays busy with the flowers.'

Their new home was not far from the station and before long we entered the expansive government bungalow, which came with his recent promotion. We walked out into the garden at the back, where my mother sat in the winter sun, waiting for us. I touched her feet and we embraced with trembling tenderness. My father looked on with a smile at the reunion of mother and son.

‘Amar!’ is all she uttered.

Still holding hands, we sat down. My father poured us a glass of buttermilk. The earlier awkwardness between father and son had vanished. My mother spoke enthusiastically about my father’s recent elevation to the head of the medical department, which she termed ‘a fitting reward’ after twenty years of service. There were many perquisites that went with the position which enchanted her—a retinue of office staff, a big house with a garden, and servants to look after it, an office car with a chauffeur. These were symbols of power and summed up what she found thoroughly delightful about her new life. No longer was she a ‘nobody’; she was a ‘somebody’ with prestige and status. Suddenly, she was surrounded by sycophants; even though she could see through their flattery, she enjoyed it. She was now in demand socially and a feeling of gaiety entered her life. Having waited for so long, she was determined to make the most of it.

She complained about my father’s all-too-casual reaction to his elevated status. He didn’t make an effort to cultivate society, and she couldn’t very well go out alone. Nor did he help out in their sprawling new house and garden—it was left to her to plant shrubs and furnish the house. It was clear to me that my father disliked the sudden ramping up of their social life, which interfered with his set routine, especially his meditative evening walk. He found their new ‘friends’ false and boring. The one redeeming feature was his work, which was now more interesting, involving as it did motivating and training younger doctors, who responded to him eagerly because he was not political and cared genuinely for those who worked for him.

There remained only one unfulfilled wish in my mother’s life. It would complete her happiness if she were able to make a grand alliance for her son. She was about to launch on a roll call of families with eligible daughters when I stopped her.

‘Well, that’s what I came to talk about . . .’

She grew pale. ‘It isn’t the Sharma girl, is it?’

‘Yes, Avanti.’

She scowled. Her dream of a brilliant match for her son was suddenly replaced by the prospect of a dowry-less bride.

‘Well, you better go inside and have a shower. You are filthy after the train journey. The geyser is on and there is plenty of hot water.’

I walked uneasily to my room. In the corridor I stopped to see pictures of the family on the walls, some in sepia going back to my grandfather’s days. While I showered, I asked myself why I feared my mother. What if she didn’t give her assent to Avanti? What would I do? I couldn’t imagine marrying without her approval. Curiously enough, my father’s reaction did not enter my head. I assumed he would go along. In fact, Avanti’s spiritual inclinations would be an advantage in his eyes.

An hour later, I was seated on a cane sofa having tea on the veranda overlooking the garden. The sun was strong now and I had moved into the shade. My father had left for work. A few minutes later, my mother, looking pale and agitated, arrived. I began to speak feverishly about Avanti. She heard me in a composed manner, although I could tell there was an upheaval inside her. She could not understand why her son would wish to bring her pain when everything was going so well in her life. She subdued her feelings, however, adopted a quiet tone, and we discussed the whole matter peacefully. The alliance, she confessed openly, was not what she had hoped for as regards birth, wealth or rank. There were far worthier families with attractive daughters.

‘I’ve never loved anyone as I love Avanti,’ I began.

‘Not even Isha?’ she asked sceptically. ‘Have you latched on to Avanti on the rebound?’

‘Rebound?’

‘After Isha, I mean.’

‘I would have been miserable if I had married Isha—not that it was a possibility.’

‘I had always dreamt of a different life for you . . . different from ours. Even now, I am filled with such yearnings when I pass 23 Prithviraj Road . . .’

‘And what about Isha’s poor, suffering husband?’ I said bitterly.

In her dreams of status and wealth, my mother tended to gloss over the pain that Isha had brought into others’ lives. Although we never discussed it explicitly, she had heard whispers of Isha’s promiscuous life. She found it

explicitly, she had heard whispers of Isma's promiscuous life. She found it distasteful but she excused it as 'upper-class morality'. In her mind, the upper classes were different, and sexual freedom was an expression of their power and status. What mattered to her was the indelible image etched in her mind of a privileged life of the sort that Aditi Malik had lived.

'Marriage is a serious business, Amar . . . and it is irrevocable. I'm not saying it should only be a matter of calculation. But the emotions and upsets of a love marriage are not a part of our tradition. You marry to have children, it's as simple as that. That's why it matters into which family you marry.' There was nothing wrong with Avanti's family, she added, but they were 'ordinary' people. They might be proud Brahmins with an ancient heritage but this did not bring success in the modern world. Her other objection, albeit less important, was the proximity of our ages. She felt that ideally a bride ought to be five to seven years younger than the groom, 'because a woman ages faster'. When that happens, a man is tempted to look elsewhere. Avanti was only a year younger and this added to the risk.

'And I believe that anything is preferable to marrying and living together without love,' I declared.

'Of course, we should expect to live with love . . . but in an arranged marriage love develops gradually.'

For one human being to love another was not easy, she explained. It needed work. 'This is the work of marriage. The trouble is that young people today are unprepared for this work, especially when differences emerge.' Rather than being a fault line, the gulf ought to be a source of deeper communion, she explained.

'But Avanti and I have known each other for a decade, and so have our families. It almost feels like an arranged marriage . . . except that love has come before marriage rather than after it.'

'I don't understand, Amar. I always thought Avanti was the conservative daughter of a traditional Brahmin family and would only marry within her caste.'

'Her family may be conservative but Avanti has a very modern sensibility . . . in some ways even more modern than mine.' There was a pause as my mother looked at me sceptically. 'What about love?' I asked. 'Don't you believe in a love that just happens without having to work at it?'



‘Romantic love is a myth. You have to learn to live with the other person with their differences. This is what an arranged marriage does. By matching family backgrounds, one minimizes differences and risks. Marriage is a bit like life itself—it has its limitations about how exciting it can be.’

‘So, you don’t approve of Avanti?’

‘Why don’t you wait for a year, Amar? If you still feel the same way, then go ahead.’

‘You don’t like her! I know it.’

‘If it’s the right thing to do, it can wait. The main thing is not to hurry.’ This was her final take on the matter and the conversation ended.

The following day I found the house stirring at dawn. I sat up on the bed covered in a quilt, my legs drawn up under me and my chin in my hand, feeling depressed after the previous day’s conversation. I wondered how I would impart the news to Avanti. I dressed quickly and came down in time for a walk with my father. In the mood I was in, every promise of distraction offered relief. We walked mostly in silence towards the river. I saw a bluish fog rising from the water of the Yamuna. The air was crisp and the sun was ascending from behind the horizon. We turned to walk along the bank. Feeling somewhat shy, I asked him if he agreed with my mother’s views on Avanti.

‘Your mother has strong views.’

‘She doesn’t like Avanti.’

‘No, she had other plans for you. In her heart, she secretly hoped to make a great match for you.’

‘What do *you* think about Avanti?’

‘I like her.’

‘Then, speak to Ma, please!’

‘Yes, of course. But I don’t know if it will do any good.’

‘Well, try anyway.’

With that reassuring thought, I felt a release of tension. There was some hope, I felt, as I walked back home on lighter feet.

~

Behind the confused strife between mother and son was the uneasy coexistence of two moral systems, one inherited from orthodox Hindu kama realists and the

other from the romantic tradition of the kama optimists. In the mother's mind, marriage was a religious duty for the sake of the general well-being of society and the human species. The British Raj in India had reinforced this duty with a Christian stamp and saddled it with a Victorian middle-class morality. These repressions were very real in the Indian middle class when I was growing up in the years after Independence.

In contrast to the mother's religious morality, the son embraced another morality, which derived from European modernity. Although it arrived on Indian shores on the coat-tails of the British Raj, it had older Indian roots in the erotic tradition of ancient times and of bhakti in the medieval period. The young middle class breathed the atmosphere of romance and passion mostly through the mesmerizing influence of Hindi cinema. But with one difference. Whereas the old 'arranged marriage' has practically died in the twentieth-century West, it continues to be well and alive in India. As a result, there is much confusion with regard to the nature of conjugal happiness. In older, conservative minds, passion and marriage remain irreconcilable, if not mutually exclusive. Younger Indian minds have become more liberated especially after the 1990s and look to a more open future; girls, especially, are becoming more spirited and independent.

In my mother's eyes, marriage was a utilitarian institution of limited purpose. She reflected the kama realist view that society had to impose laws to counter the natural human tendency for sexual promiscuity. Sex had to be confined within marriage, and indeed, family was the institution that ultimately ensured the survival of civilization. This view has also been conventional wisdom around the world. But human beings have had to struggle with it and try to make bearable the 'unnatural' restraints of sexual constancy imposed by marriage. The cultivation of erotic love in ancient times and romantic love in medieval times came about partially as a reaction to these impositions of Christianity in Europe and the Dharma texts in India.

To Gauri, the idea of a 'love marriage' between Avanti and Amar was clearly subversive. She might have thought differently during her idealistic days in college in Lahore when she was introduced to romantic novels, where passion was something morally noble, and needed no law or custom. Whoever loved passionately was supposed to be exalted and for them social barriers had ceased to exist. But Gauri had a practical nature and soon outgrew these ideas. She saw through the mirage of romance where love fed on obstacles, short excitations,

and partings. For this and other reasons, marriage could not be founded on the fleeting emotions of love and passion.

And now to confront Amar's passion was disagreeable, especially at this pleasant, comfortable stage in her life. In her mind, modern 'love marriage' undermined the basis of the institution which lay in its indissolubility and the husband's juridical responsibility towards the family. When the modern 'love marriage' couple experienced the daily humdrum of routine and conflicting temperaments, they wondered, 'Why did I marry?' And they seized the first occasion to fall in love. This was the dangerous side of a 'love marriage'.

In the real world, Gauri believed that marriage was made up of daily togetherness, boring routine and growing accustomed to one another. If lastingness was what marriage was about, then it had to be established on the basis of duty and convention and not individual risk. Such a life was hardly conducive to sexual passion. Years ago, she may have argued with Sharma-ji about his obsession with getting Avanti married soon after puberty; she may have disagreed with his extreme views about women; but she basically was on his side when it came to the soundness of the institution of 'arranged marriage'. The families of the boy and the girl had to be responsible for the choice of a lifetime partner.

Curiously enough, Gauri didn't seem unduly bothered by Isha's or Anand's sexual affairs, which to her mind reflected 'upper-class morality'. She judged people through the lens of social classes and felt that the upper classes were naturally liberated from the demands of reproduction and routine work, and had the leisure to pursue sexual pleasure. In her mind this sexual licence was hardly ever connected with marriage. Had the question of 'love marriage' come up of Amar marrying Isha, she would have judged the matter differently. But when it came to middle-class Avanti, only an 'arranged marriage' would do. In her world, respectable middle-class people who sought to create permanent attachments through passionate love were doomed.

~

I returned to Bombay empty-handed and depressed. Avanti had obtained her family's approval in the meantime. As expected, Sharma-ji had voiced reservations about our caste differences but his wife had quickly demolished his

objections. Anything was better than the disgrace of an unmarried daughter, she had said. 'Besides, we've known their family for a decade and Amar is a good boy. He will look after our Avanti.' She had always secretly hoped that something would 'happen' between us. Avanti reported all this to me excitedly when we met on my return from Delhi. Her light-hearted, happy mood evaporated when I narrated the unfortunate story of my weekend.

'Your mother hates me. I've always known it.' Humiliated and angry, Avanti took it as a personal rejection. 'She was suspicious of me even when we were young.'

I tried to protest. 'She just wants us to be sure . . . to wait another year and if we still feel the same . . .'

'We have waited for a decade,' she said cynically. Avanti was hurt. I tried to explain my mother's reasoning—her suspicions about romantic love.

'And why didn't you put up a fight for me?'

'I did . . . but I failed. I have never won a fight against my mother.'

'Indian boys—they are cowards, no spine!'

'It's only a year, Avanti,' I pleaded.

'And what do I tell *my* parents? They are already planning the wedding. My father has been transferred to Delhi and he suggested we hold the ceremonies there. They are ready to announce it to the world.'

'Tell them it will happen after a year.'

'But what if it doesn't? It's *their* honour too!'

I remained silent. She was hurting.

'There's nothing more to say, I suppose,' said Avanti. 'I'll see you in a year . . . if you still want to get married.'

'Wait!' I appealed to her.

'I'll see you in a year,' she said with finality and showed me the door.

Over the next two weeks, I called her every day; she wouldn't pick up the phone. I went to her flat a number of times but she did not open the door. I called Anand to ask if he could speak to my mother. But his secretary informed me that he was abroad on an assignment and wouldn't be back for three months. My heart sank.

This desperate state of affairs went on for several more weeks. I became disheartened and began to believe that it might be over between Avanti and me. Kamini Masi tried to bring us together. At last she succeeded when both of us

Kamini Masi tried to bring us together. At last, she succeeded when both of us showed up at her home one evening but Avanti was cold and barely acknowledged my presence.

Ramu Mama broke the ice and suggested a solution—a quiet, civil marriage in Bombay.

‘You mean without our families?’ Avanti was shocked.

‘And a year later, you could have a proper wedding with all the religious ceremonies and with the families.’

Avanti rejected the idea immediately, saying it wasn’t worth hurting her parents when it was not their fault. As for me, neither could I think of marrying without my parents’ consent.

‘Amar’s mother may have a point,’ Avanti said bitterly. ‘We may not even want to marry a year after he meets all the girls his mother has lined up.’

‘I don’t intend to meet anyone, Avanti. I love you.’

Ramu Mama offered to fly to Delhi and talk to my mother but I didn’t think it would work. He was not a good ambassador in this situation. Although she was in awe of his social position and his connections with the highest society, he was tainted in her mind by his relationship with Kamini Masi.

‘Have you heard anything from your father?’ Kamini Masi asked me.

I had, and the answer was in the negative; so, that door too was closed. Matters deteriorated rapidly after that. In the succeeding months, I gave up all hope. I was so discouraged that I stopped trying to meet Avanti. Both of us became reclusive, and so the opportunity to run into each other at social events was also gone. A colleague of Avanti’s at the office told me that her life consisted only of work, reading and weekend visits to her guru’s ashram. I began to resent my mother and stopped writing to her. I ignored her letters, and when I did reply, it was a few perfunctory lines. She suggested a number of potential girls but I refused to meet any of them. Seven months passed thus, and I began to reconcile myself to the fact that I may have lost Avanti forever.

~

Avanti blamed our failure to get married to ‘male narcissism’, an influential idea also formulated by Freud, whose perspective on the mental life has dominated the world for more than a century. Avanti picked it up in a casual conversation with Ramu Mama and a psychologist friend of his at the Bombay Gym. Freud

explains that the male infant initially loves itself since it has no awareness of a separate world. It is a brief period of 'primal narcissism' when it feels omnipotence followed by the discovery of his mother's breast as the first external object. This brings with it an 'oceanic feeling', leaving an imprint of two narcissist images in its unconscious: 'I am perfect'; and an idealized image of the parent: 'You are perfect and I am a part of you.' It is an intense image of a 'lost paradise', which pulls the child back unconsciously right through life, especially in difficult moments of stress. As the child grows, he learns to overcome his childhood attachment to his mother and outgrows this primary state of infantile narcissism. He moves away from self-love to love others, trading a certain amount of narcissism in the process, which renders him vulnerable to the beloved and some loss in self-esteem. Erotic love in later life turns his love outward instead of inward and plays an important role in preserving his mental health. Love for others helps him become a mature individual and acts as a civilizing factor in bringing a change from egoism to altruism.

'You're still a mama's boy!' Avanti told me after she had bought this account of primal narcissism wholesale, believing that I had not fully made a break from my mother and blamed it for my inability to persuade my mother to marry her.

'Narcissism' comes from the Greek myth about Narcissus, a handsome youth who rejected the advances of Echo, a nymph. Instead, he fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. Unable to consummate his love, Narcissus 'lay gazing enraptured into the pool, hour after hour'; the word today signifies the pursuit of gratification from vanity and egoistic self-admiration. In daily usage, it means excessive absorption with oneself accompanied by a certain amount of hubris.

When Avanti asked Ramu Mama's friend if I was a narcissist, he was careful in differentiating the use of the word in child psychology versus its use in everyday language, where it carries negative connotations of lacking empathy, being selfish and arrogant, susceptible to flattery, bragging and megalomania. To ensure that Avanti did not carry the wrong impression, he spoke about a 'healthy narcissism' which he equated with 'self-esteem', a normal part of growing up.

Freud argued that a certain amount of narcissism is healthy and essential for normal human development. Narcissism becomes unhealthy when a person is unable to direct all or most of his libido, or sex drive, outwards; then he becomes

unable to direct all or most of his libido, or sex drive, outward, then he becomes incurably sick or psychotic. He keeps returning to the original state of omnipotence and finds it difficult to direct his love towards another external object.

When Avanti called me a ‘mama’s boy’, she was unwittingly echoing the conclusion of the distinguished Indian psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar, who contends that ‘among Indian men the process of integrating these archaic narcissistic configurations developmentally is rarely accomplished in the sense that it is among men in the West. [But] this does not mean that Indians are narcissistic while westerners are not.’ He explains that it is a matter of degree and it may have to do with the Indian father. ‘The ambiguous role of the father in Indian childhood is yet another factor that contributes to the narcissistic vulnerability of [the] Indian male. For the narcissistic injury inherent in the abrupt dissolution of the mother–son bond can be tempered through the reinforcement provided by the boy’s identification with his father.’ At the moment of the child’s severance from the mother’s intimate company around the age of five, he needs another guardian to guide his sense of identity.

Unfortunately, the father in India tends to be a ‘distant figure’ and I can confirm this from my own experience. I admired my father but did not have emotional access to him. Kakar says, ‘In autobiographical accounts, fathers, whether strict or indulgent, cold or affectionate, are invariably distant.’ He gives the example of Mahatma Gandhi, who was surprised by the uncharacteristic reaction of his father to a confession during adolescence:

*I was trembling when I handed the confession to my father . . . He read it through, and pearl-drops trickled down his wet cheeks, wetting the paper. For a moment he closed his eyes in thought and then tore up the note . . . Those pearl-drops of love cleansed my heart, and washed my sin away . . . This sort of sublime forgiveness was not natural to my father. I had thought that he would be angry . . . But he was so wonderfully peaceful.*

I tend to think that Avanti was wrong in ascribing excessive male narcissism to me. The emotional turbulence that I experienced over Isha during my adolescent years may have been decisive in helping to create a healthy break with my mother and overcome any latent narcissism—consistent also with Freud’s belief that the welling up of libidinal energy occurs first during puberty and adolescence. In a repressive society like ours where obstacles to sexual intimacy are huge, it was a harrowing experience, as it arose in the context of doubt,

uncertainty and fears of rejection. In all societies, adolescents feel some insecurity, not knowing if their love will be reciprocated but in my case it was frightening, chaotic and traumatic.

Freud related infantile narcissism to his more notorious idea, the ‘Oedipal complex’. He believed that attachment to the mother would inevitably lead to antagonism towards the father (who is supposedly a rival for the mother’s attention). He felt that it was a crucial task of childhood to overcome this complex as it would inhibit the person from developing mature adult relationships. The reason that we are not aware of these Freudian thoughts is that they reside in an unconscious region of our minds, where they lie seemingly forgotten. They are unacceptable to the conscious mind and it represses them, primarily because of their sexual content. Civilized life depends on repressing many unconscious desires, he felt, but we end up paying a price for this repression in terms of happiness and mental health.

~

When things couldn’t get worse, I got a call from Anand one morning. He asked me to join him for lunch. He was unaware of what had happened but he immediately grasped the gravity of the situation and volunteered to fly the following day to Delhi to speak to my mother. In any case, he said, he had another meeting coming up in Delhi and would try and bring it forward. He left the next day, met my mother and called me immediately afterwards. I couldn’t believe it—my mother had relented and agreed to the marriage. He had to repeat himself three times on the disturbed trunk line before the news sank in. I ran to meet Avanti and she too was incredulous. Both of us couldn’t comprehend Anand’s selfless act and felt profoundly grateful. We rushed over to Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi to give them the good news.

‘Ah, in that case, I must fly up and congratulate your parents personally,’ said Ramu Mama. True to his word, he arrived at our home in Delhi the following day with a present that was generous even by his extravagant standards. It was a rare ruby necklace that had belonged to the Jaipur royal family since the early nineteenth century. He had bought it some years ago at a Sotheby’s auction in London.

‘You should be proud of your son, Gauri,’ he said, congratulating my mother.



‘And the girl, Avanti, um . . . she is a gem.’

My mother turned away. After a pause, she collected herself and said, ‘Let’s not talk about it. It’s decided.’

Ramu Mama could see that her heart was heavy. She didn’t want to hear about the marriage. She still hadn’t reconciled to it although she had given her consent. As far as she was concerned, her hopes had been dashed, and she would have to live with it. She changed the subject and said to Ramu Mama, ‘Amar adores both of you. You’ve looked after him like a son.’ Then they talked about the family and the old times in Lahore.

After an hour, Ramu Mama rose to leave. He handed the ruby necklace to my mother, quietly and unobtrusively. The look that my mother gave him was priceless. To be able to gaze at a necklace worn by the queens of Jaipur, and that too now under her own roof, was beyond her wildest dreams. She felt transported into the stratospheric world of the royalties. It helped to assuage some of her pain, not only because of the ruby’s value but because it elevated her in the eyes of her friends and relatives. The whole world would talk about it. No one in her acquaintance would have a daughter-in-law who possessed a royal jewel.

‘You can’t do this, Ramu!’ she uttered. ‘It’s . . . it’s far too valuable. It belongs in a museum. Why, I wouldn’t be able to sleep with it in the house . . . and think of the cost of the insurance.’

Ramu Mama, beaming with pleasure, said that Avanti would look lovely wearing it. ‘Gauri, promise me, you will ask her to wear it on her wedding day.’ As he was leaving, he let slip unassumingly that the necklace carried a lifelong insurance policy and Amar could sleep comfortably at night.

~

Behind my mother’s preference for an arranged marriage was an understandable wish—the couple should be compatible. It was conventional wisdom in her circle of family and friends that a marriage would endure if the couple were of similar backgrounds. I am not wholly convinced of this argument. I know of plenty of marriages that have flourished between couples of hugely diverse backgrounds, far more different than Avanti’s and mine. My favourite example is that of forty-five-year-old Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the great Russian writer, and

twenty-year-old Anna Snitkina, two very different people of very distinct backgrounds.

Anna entered Dostoyevsky's life as a fledgling stenographer of humble means when he was already a celebrated writer. He was no great catch, however. He remained sick with frequent epileptic fits; his finances were in disarray; he was addicted to gambling; his relatives sponged off him; and he was prone to unreasonable jealousy. To keep creditors away, he sold the rights to a collected edition of his works on the condition that he would write a new novel of 175 pages within a year. At the time he was deeply absorbed in writing *Crime and Punishment* and before he realized it eleven months were gone. He was in despair, fearing that if he did not deliver the new book in the next thirty days, he would lose the rights to all his works to the wily publisher.

Dostoyevsky thought up an innovative solution—he would dictate the book, a radical idea at the time. A friend recommended Anna, who was the best student in the new local stenography school and needed the money. She was thrilled at the invitation. For the next twenty-five days, they worked diligently. Anna would arrive at Dostoyevsky's house at noon and stay until four; each night she typed what he had dictated and proudly tallied the number of pages they had completed. Despite the gulf in their backgrounds, they became friends. She was moved by the respect he showed her, treating her like a partner rather than hired help.

One day he asked her, 'If I were to marry, what kind of wife should I choose—an intellectual or a kind person?'

'An intellectual, of course.'

'Well, no, if I had to choose,' he said, 'I'd pick a warm and kind person, someone who would love me despite my flaws.'

In the end, the collaborators succeeded in completing the novel on time. He paid her fifty roubles and they said goodbye. In the following days, he found his life bleak and empty. He missed Anna's vivacious presence. Three weeks later, he invited her back to help him complete *Crime and Punishment*. He also asked her opinion about a new novel that he was contemplating, and excitedly began to narrate the plot. It was about a sick and troubled middle-aged artist, who had fallen hopelessly in love with an attractive, exuberant but younger woman. He felt singularly unworthy of her as he felt he had nothing to offer. He asked Anna

if the young heroine of the story could possibly fall in love with such a flawed, debt-ridden hero.

‘Isn’t it impossible?’ Dostoyevsky asked.

‘No. Why impossible?’ Anna explained that the heroine was sensitive and wise, and the artist had a kind, responsive heart.

‘And do you really think she could truly love him for the rest of her life?’

Anna nodded. Dostoyevsky fell silent, and then he hesitantly added. ‘Put yourself in her place for a moment,’ he said in a trembling voice. ‘Imagine that this artist—is me; that I have confessed my love to you and asked you to be my wife. Tell me, what would be your answer?’ He became suddenly embarrassed and nervous and regretted what he had said.

The façade of fiction had fallen and Anna was stunned, realizing that this was no longer about literature. She couldn’t believe that Dostoyevsky had actually fallen in love with her and as he was afraid of being rejected, he had created the pretence of fiction to save them both embarrassment. She looked into his troubled face and said, ‘I would answer that I love you and will love you all my life.’

Fyodor and Anna were married in February 1867 and remained deeply in love until Dostoyevsky’s death fourteen years later. What emerges in Anna’s memoir, *Dostoyevsky Reminiscences*, is the extraordinary story of two very different people from completely distinct backgrounds who complemented each other perfectly and brought great happiness to their lives.

‘I was not distinguished for my good looks, nor did I possess talent nor any special intellectual cultivation, and I had no more than a secondary education. And yet, despite all that, I earned the profound respect, almost the adoration of a man so creative and brilliant,’ writes Anna.

She was unable to comprehend many of his ideas. He once tried to explain a chapter, ‘The Grand Inquisitor’, from *The Brothers Karamazov* to her, but it went completely over her head. She was practical, however, and also understood the demons inside his head. She worked hard to free him and his family from debt. She had a good head for business and quickly mastered the book trade, separating the good from the bad publishers and creating plans for mass distribution of his books. She not only saved Dostoyevsky but made him into a national literary success.

Many years later Anna asked herself how it was possible for two very

Many years later, I had asked herself how it was possible for two very different people to live together happily. She got the answer from a friend, Strakhov, in a letter that she quotes in her memoir:

*No one, not even a friend, can make us better. But it is a great happiness in life to meet a person of quite different construction, different bent, completely dissimilar views who, while always remaining himself and . . . and not currying favor with us . . . he would stand as a firm wall, as a check to our follies and our irrationalities, which every human being has. Friendship lies in contradiction and not in agreement!*

~

There were many weddings in Delhi that winter but in none would the groom's mother have borne her disappointments with such stoic dignity as Gauri Kumar. The ruby necklace had mitigated some of her discontent but it could not compensate for her lost dreams of grandeur. Both Avanti and I had wanted a simple wedding. Sharma-ji, however, wasn't going to be denied a grand traditional ceremony; he had to show off to the world. In deference to my mother's wishes, he had compromised reluctantly to a Punjabi Khatri wedding, instead of a Brahmin one. By now, Punjabi weddings had become the norm in Delhi ever since refugees from Punjab flooded the city after the partition and changed its complexion irrevocably.

I arrived in Delhi a few days before the wedding to give my mother moral support and help out with the arrangements. Avanti was already there, settled in her parents' new home, which everyone called the 'wedding house'. It had all the bustle and gaiety of a place of anticipation. There were sounds of the young everywhere—Avanti's cousins and their friends were continuously in and out of the house, chatting interminably, laughing incessantly. Their excitement was infectious and fed the matchmaking and gossip of the older women. The delicious breath of feminine anticipation pervaded the sensuous air. Although it was Avanti who was getting married, it was the younger girls who found themselves immersed in the currents of desire which traversed the house, and reverberated around them, and grazed their untouched maidenly bodies. For the older relatives, it was mostly a chance to see the big city, make merry, enjoy the hospitality of the bride's family and ventilate old grudges.

I woke up early on the morning of my wedding and exclaimed, 'My day of days!' I rushed downstairs to find my parents examining a handsome white mare  
—which I would ride in the evening to the bride's house for some wedding

on which I would ride in the evening to the bride's home for our wedding ceremony. With her usual attention to detail, my mother was instructing the horse merchant to make sure that she was washed and groomed till her skin shone, and then saddled and caparisoned brilliantly.

‘What do you think of her?’ she asked.

‘Beautiful!’ I said.

We then scrutinized a gold-embroidered robe that I would wear, a pair of Kashmiri slippers with turned-up spurs, and a deep yellow velvet scabbard with silver mountings.

‘So, they meet with your approval?’ she asked proudly.

‘Completely!’

My ‘day of days’ went by quickly. My mother remained busy with dozens of arrangements. I was with her much of the day but she did not let her guard down, nor express her reservations about Avanti. Years later, however, she revealed to me that what she found most difficult to cope with in my relationship with Avanti was the emotional equality implicit in it.

‘What do you mean?’ I had asked.

‘You give her so much importance. Boys didn’t do that in my day.’

From the way I spoke about Avanti, she felt I was speaking about an equal. She envied Avanti for this. Her own marriage, in contrast, was a traditional institution based on the old division between housewife and the male breadwinner. This is how her life had been and her mother’s and grandmother’s. But now, she found, husbands and wives were becoming collaborators in a joint emotional enterprise that even trumped their obligations to children and parents. When she asked about Avanti’s job, she was secretly jealous of Avanti’s opportunities and her ability to engage with the ‘maleness’ of the outside world. She begrudged the uninhibited way we laid claim to sexual pleasure outside the compulsions of reproduction.

I arrived at the bride’s house at sundown looking like a princely warrior about to lead a ceremonial charge. The bride’s family was waiting anxiously under an arch of flowers. It was an impressive sight. Quite unlike his Brahmin ancestors, Sharma-ji stood out in a pink turban. He wore a cream-coloured double-breasted gown which flowed like a robe, emphasizing his height. Behind him stood obediently, in order of seniority, his brothers, his brothers-in-law and his nephews—all arrayed in pink turbans. The women of the house, adorned in silks

and gold, stood at the back, eager to see the groom.

Sharma-ji came forward and solemnly placed a garland of marigolds around my father's neck. They embraced. All the other pink-turbaned members of both households followed suit, exchanging garlands with their counterparts. I pushed aside the veil of white flowers that cloaked my nervous face, alighted from the horse, and was led by the women towards the veiled bride. Avanti wore a heavy red sari adorned with gold threadwork that matched the rubies around her neck. She placed an elaborate garland around my neck. This was no ordinary gesture—she was re-enacting the ancient svayamvara, 'the bride's choice', following in Damayanti's footsteps in the Mahabharata. So beautiful was Damayanti, the story goes, that all the gods had vied for her hand; but she was in love with Nala, a human prince; the gods assumed his human form and she became confused at her svayamvara; when confronted with half a dozen Nalas, Damayanti kept her poise, noticed that only one of her suitors cast a shadow, and she confidently garlanded her human love.

The women of the house led us inside, where I was made to sit next to the bride. I was put through a bantering session in which I was quizzed and teased by the women from Avanti's family. Kamini Masi had prepared me for the ritual and so I wasn't totally at a loss for answers.

'Why are you so late, sir?' inquired one of the women. 'We thought you might have changed your mind.'

'Ask my horse, dear madam,' I replied.

'And why, sir, didn't you marry a good Punjabi girl from your clan rather than our Avantika?'

'Because there doesn't exist a princess of Avantika in the Punjab.'

'And, sir, how does our Avanti happen to be wearing such a precious necklace this evening? Did you steal it by any chance?'

This was a question we had not rehearsed. I answered simply, 'For that, dear ladies, you must ask my Ramu Mama.' Not surprisingly, the necklace had created a sensation the previous day when my mother had handed it to Avanti. Sharma-ji couldn't stop talking about it—it lifted his status in the eyes of the world—but Avanti herself was embarrassed when asked about it and feared for its security.

Appearing satisfied with my answers, the women laughed enthusiastically. Everyone remarked how beautiful Avanti looked. The unusual light and shade in

Everyone remained now spellbound. Avanti looked. The unusual light and shade in the room seemed to give her a fragile and iridescent quality. Her soft, black plait interwoven with flowers appeared longer than usual, setting off her pale face and her striking eyes. As we got up to move to the stage in the middle of the garden for the wedding ceremony, I caught my mother's eye in the distance. In it was an unmistakable look of disappointment. Her heart was weighed down and this diminished some of my happiness. She had determined to keep secret her feelings of regret but I had penetrated her stoic exterior. She tried to atone for it by putting on a pleasant smile but the damage had been done.

Avanti and I climbed on to a platform decorated with white flowers and open to the stars. Two priests, one from each family, were about to begin chanting Vedic rites in Sanskrit. The crowd paid no great attention to us. Following my gaze, Avanti noticed a group of my loud relatives who seemed to fall upon each other with cries of joy. They met only at weddings and funerals, embraced tearfully and exchanged the latest gossip about our second and third cousins. Avanti's eyes caught Anand in the crowd and her eyes sparkled. He was staring at her and she gave him an imperceptible smile. He was speaking to Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi, who also turned to look at us. Avanti showed them with gratitude the ruby necklace she was wearing.

I was surprised to see Isha, who was talking to my mother. She turned to look at me and I gave her a smile of deep gratitude for coming. She was looking older but still had the same insolent smile under a mass of dark hair. I discovered the next day that she had left behind with my mother a ridiculously expensive present—a diamond necklace for Avanti. At a distance was another group—this one consisted of my poorer relations. They sat quietly in a corner, content to observe the festivities, not feeling the need to make small talk. Silence was not an awkward thing in their life; they were happy merely being together with their own—simple people trying to enjoy a frail night of happiness.

The pandit intoned 'Om Swaha', and the ceremony began. The parents of the bride and the groom picked up incense and threw it into the sacrificial fire. Avanti and I sat across from the priests with their elaborate trays filled with incense, holy water from the Ganges, sacred thread, honey, flour, rice and fruit. The pandit explained that the wife was part of her husband, and henceforth no religious ritual could be performed without her. I held Avanti's hand and repeated in Sanskrit, 'I hold your hand for our happiness. May we both live to a

ripe old age. You are the queen and shall rule over my home. I am the heaven, you are the earth. Let us marry and be joined together. Your heart I take in mine. Our minds shall be one. May God make us one.'

The interminable ceremony went on. Eventually, Avanti and I took the seven sacred revolutions around the holy fire. On the first round, I prayed for sustenance; on the second for strength; the third for keeping our vows and ideals; the fourth for a comfortable life; the fifth for our cattle; the sixth for harmony during the different seasons; and the seventh round was for fulfilling our religious duties. After this, Avanti mounted a stone, which symbolized the strength of our union. Together we gazed at the Pole Star, and prayed for constancy. We vowed that we would be loyal and never get separated like the seven stars in the constellation above. Avanti sipped the holy water from the Ganges to wash away her impurities and begin a new and pure life. Finally, Sharma-ji 'gifted' his daughter to me in the honoured ceremony of *kanyadan*.

It was two in the morning and the long Vedic ceremony was over. Avanti and I were married. As we walked inside, I noted the crowds had thinned. Most of the guests had left soon after dinner, and only a few close relatives were lingering. I had no way of knowing what was going on in Avanti's mind during the ceremony.

~

We were back in Bombay and glad to be by ourselves. One evening, Avanti beckoned me with her eyes. I tilted my head so that my face touched hers and I placed my mouth on hers. She kissed me for a long time, and then there followed a well-ordered sequence of short kisses, each one different from the previous one. Breathing deeply, I remained standing, astonished at the way nature guided my beloved, and now my wife, to kiss the way she did.

Avanti looked at my face anxiously. I smiled and she felt comforted to be at home with me. The anxiety of keeping up appearances had disappeared. A subtle energy flowed out of me that made her feel at ease and happy, and at home. Her female sensibility registered it instinctively. I felt my blood heating up. I bent down towards her and kissed the brown nipple of her breast. Looking up, I saw her face full of longing; her eyes, with contracted pupils, yearned for more. From her breast flowed the answer: trembling uncontrollably, she was ready to give herself to me. She agrees that she remembers nothing about what happened after



herself to me. She swears that she remembers nothing about what happened after that:

*Well, really there is nothing I can tell  
of what men do in love; no, not a word:  
He started to undo my dress, and—  
well, I swear I can't remember what occurred.*

I put my arms around her and drew her to me. I'd always desired to feel her full roundness but suddenly she felt surprisingly small. As I lay her on the bed, there was no resistance. She became even more desirable nestled beside me. My blood vessels burnt with wanting for her, for her softness. Softly, I caressed her, stroking the slope of her legs and thighs, and she moved her warm body nearer and nearer to mine. My hardness rose against her with insistent assertion. As she felt me, she let herself go, yielding with a helpless quiver.

She awoke to the new thrills rippling inside her, responding to each thrust, rising to a climax. She lay quiet at first but then began to utter wild little cries. Soon it was over, too soon for her. She could do nothing to prolong it. She could not harden me or grip me. I lay still. She waited and cried softly as she felt me moving out of her, contracting, and then I slipped out of her. She wanted to appeal softly to me to come in again and fulfil her. With soft, benevolent fingers she stroked the hair on my head which lay on her breast. I had not yet satisfied her wild craving. I came and finished so quickly while she lay dazed, disappointed and lost.

'Silly boy, you are a curious, gentle lover,' she said. 'Very gentle yet detached; aware of every sound outside but not of the splashes inside me.' Vatsyayana would have been disappointed with my failure to learn his foremost lesson—give her pleasure first before yourself.

As the days passed, she learnt to hold me gradually, to keep me there inside her even when my crisis was over. And I discovered how to be more skilful and to stay firm inside her while she was still wildly alive, climbing to her own summit. As I felt her achieving her satisfaction, I felt a sense of fulfilment. Vatsyayana would have approved of my progress.

'Ah,' she whispered trembling. Soon she was still, clinging to me as we lay there in our respective remoteness. I laid my hand on her arm and softly, gently, I began to move down to the curve of her crouching thighs. And there my hand softly stroked the curve of her body in a tender caress. We lay in stillness. What

Sohay stroked the curve of her body in a tender caress. We lay in silence. What was she feeling, what was she thinking? She was a strange woman at this moment; I wanted to speak but dared not break her mysterious quiet. I lay there without moving, my body on hers, both of us wet with the sweat. We were so close, yet fundamentally strangers, and peaceful and serene.

Thus, the game of love went on. Our bodies got to know each other in those warm, sweet nights. We learnt to sleep naked and uncovered, damp with perspiration and the odour of heat beneath the whirring fan above and the windows open, seeking any kind of breeze we could find. Sometimes, it was better in the day and at other times at night.

After years of being friends, Avanti and I were now lovers. I felt in those delicate night hours how archetypal to human consciousness was marriage. We awakened early, often at dawn, and we would sit on the terrace, looking upon the greyness of the air and the white, curling sea waves. As we sipped chai silently, I felt an overwhelming gratitude, for being able to live in harmony with this woman.

This is, perhaps, what love is. All that we might hope to accomplish is the sharing of our solitude with another person. Love is founded on an understanding of our primal aloneness, something I learnt early in childhood with my mother—the intimacy of kama helps us to overcome this loneliness. For the first time in my life, I felt that being on the earth is a limited experience. It will end one day although the world will continue without us. I had to love Avanti because time was limited. In this love, I experienced the value of time, having lived like a spendthrift for much of my life.

Six months later, we moved into a larger apartment in the same neighbourhood of Colaba. Avanti spent the first few weeks furnishing the new flat. She had the walls painted, bought new handwoven curtains for the windows, and equipped the place with cane and rattan furniture, suitable to the tropical climate of our city. She bought some crotons, ferns and umbrella palms from the nursery nearby. The only expensive thing she acquired was a leather easy chair for me. But she never stopped working even when her friends advised her that she should now ‘fulfil herself as wife and mother’. Leaning on the windowsill, her magnificent head slanted to one side, and a loose cotton gown wrapped carelessly around her, she would wave to me as she saw me off. Only then would she dress and quietly rush off to her journalist’s job.

I would set off to work, with a spring in my step, my nostrils filled with the morning air of the sea. Without a care, I plunged into my work. Each evening I would hurry home, find Avanti waiting at the window, and mount the stairs to our flat with excitement in my heart. A walk together on Cuffe Parade in the evenings, followed by a light dinner, constituted the new pleasures of our life. I would awaken each morning with surprise to find her beside me on the pillow; watch the early sunlight falling on her cheeks and her eyes, looking larger than ever as she blinked in quick succession while waking up. I had first encountered the dark eyes a decade ago; now they reflected the light filtered through the curtains, and seemed to carry layers of colour, dark at the depths and growing brighter towards the surface. I thought to myself that I was a lucky man.

~

Nothing quite evokes the erotic pleasures that Avanti and I experienced in those early days of our marriage as the *Kumarasambhava*, the greatest poem about conjugal love. Written by Kalidasa in plausible, elegant Sanskrit in the fifth century, it recounts the marital life of the gods, Shiva and Parvati. To compare our human love to the cosmic love of the gods seems presumptuous but it is easy to forget that *this* divine couple are the parents of us all; they are present in the marrying of every couple and their union is the model for every union. Like the *Gita Govinda*, Kalidasa's poem is passionate, but unlike it, the passion is erotic and worldly, not romantic and mystical. Even though events take place on a cosmic scale, Shiva and Parvati come alive as two persons whose lives are dappled with subtle humour.

The poem opens in the snowy abode of the Himalaya, the king of the mountains and father of Parvati. The gods urge the father to give his daughter in marriage to the great god Shiva. From this divine union will be born Kumara, who will destroy the demon Taraka, who has been terrorizing the gods. Her father agrees and sends Parvati to Shiva's Himalayan hermitage where the ascetic god is engaged in meditation. Kama, the god of love, accompanies her to divert the god's mind towards love. He shoots Shiva with his first arrow of infatuation. Angry at being disturbed, Shiva burns Kama to ashes with the heat of his third eye. But Shiva is so impressed with Parvati's sincerity, earnestness and charm that he falls in love with her. Kama may have been burnt but his work is done. These are the opening and the final two sentences of Kalidasa's epic poem.

is done. They agree to marry and the final two cantos of Kalidasa's epic poem describe the wedding and lovemaking of the divine couple.

The last or eighth canto is notorious. Medieval Indian commentators reprimanded Kalidasa for daring to depict explicitly the mating of gods; prudish Victorian translators were too shocked and omitted it. By today's liberated standards, it is remarkably discreet, filled with alluring and sensuous descriptions of nature. The intimacy of the gods is fused with an attitude of reverence and the tangible presence of the transcendent. As a homage to one of the greatest kama optimists of all times, Kalidasa, I shall quote from these verses on cosmic conjugal love, borrowing freely from Hank Heifetz's poetic translation, which has also captured Kalidasa's metrical patterns.

Shiva and Parvati have just got married. The great god is reclining, curious, pretending to be asleep when his wife turns around to look at her lover. As he opens his eyes with a smile, she closes hers 'as if struck by lightning'. She stops his hand moving to her navel but the knot on her silken robe 'loosens by itself, all the way'.

*Alone together, before she would let her robe fall,  
and cover Shiva's eyes with both her palms,  
but now she was left troubled by that useless effort  
as the third eye in his forehead looked down at her.*

As they kiss, she keeps her lower lip away from his teeth and lets her arms hang when they embrace; but even with her restraint and lack of response, he finds pleasure in loving his wife. He kisses her gently, leaving her lower lip unharmed; runs his nails without scoring her and 'she bears only what she can bear'. The following day:

*Eager to find out what happened in the night,  
her friends questioned her when it came to be morning,  
but she, out of shyness, did not calm their curiosity  
though her heart longed to tell them all about it.*

When she looks in the mirror, she sees her lover behind her and tries to hide her traces of pleasure. When her mother sees the divine couple, she sighs with relief, 'for nothing lifts a mother's heart more than knowing her daughter is loved by her husband'. Thus, the days go by. As Parvati comes to know the taste of pleasure step by step, she abandons her earlier reserve. When he holds her to his

chest, she embraces her lover without hesitation. She no longer turns her face shyly, nor tries to fend off his hand moving to the knot of her belt. Soon their love has become so rooted that it is a pain to be separated even for a short while.

After a month, the heavenly couple leave Parvati's home in the Himalayas, and go on a whirlwind tour of the world, not unlike modern-day honeymooners.

*Rich in the embrace of Parvati's breasts,  
he rode as swift as the wind to Mount Meru  
where they passed a night devoted to love  
on a bed made of flakes of gold leaves.*

On the way, she stops to swim naked in the Ganges.

*In the Heavenly Ganga, Parvati struck her lover  
with a golden lotus and closed her eyes  
as Shiva's hands splashed her. Swimming, she needed  
no waistband, as the fish glowed around her.*

As they glide from place to place, Shiva describes the breathtaking beauty of nature and animals in the setting sun. He shows her elephants leaving their feeding grounds for the shore 'where lotuses have closed around bees'; wild boars leading their herds out of the deep mud with tusks that have 'fed on sprouts of tender lotus stalks'; peacocks settled on a tree, their 'feathers opening to drink the reddish gold of the fading sun'. He tells her:

*The lotus, though its petals have closed like a bud,  
still, for the moment, is slightly open as if,  
out of love, it were leaving the space for any bee  
that wishes to enter and stay there the night.*

And points to a mountain:

*See how the mountain itself has broken up  
the evening light among the tangled manes  
of its lions and its trees flowing with . . . their  
new leaves and its peaks rich with ores.*

As the sun sets, it is time, he reminds her, for evening prayers, which means that he must leave her for a while. She is angry and jealous. He tries to appease her on his return:

*Give up your anger, angry without a cause!  
I have bowed down to the twilight and no other.  
Don't you know that your husband in the rite of life,  
like the cakravaka bird, will always be faithful?*

Day turns into night and he likens his beloved to the stars as 'the moon seems to kiss the face of the night'. He tells her to 'use the moonlight slivers to fasten her hair while the moon is busy uniting with its due star, the face of which is sparkling like a newly-wed girl trembling with fear as she and her bridegroom are joined together'.

Shiva now picks her up, 'she who is heavy with the weight of her hips, her golden belt hanging down, and he enters a house of jewels with its splendours created by the power of his mind'.

*Though, as they loved, the moon suffered when she seized  
his hair and they tried to outdo each other scratching  
where nail marks should not be made and Parvati's belt-string  
easily opened to him, still he was never satisfied.*

*Only through compassion for his beloved, when the lines  
of stars were sinking low in the sky  
and she was holding tightly to his chest,  
he showed some willingness to close his eyes.*

Looking at his lover's face, her eyes sleepless and red, her hair tangled, he is filled with passion, and makes love to her again, culminating in this final verse:

*With the day and the night the same to him,  
Shiva spent his time making love  
and he passed twenty-five years  
as if it were a single night  
and his thirst for the pleasures of loving  
never became any less in him  
as the fire that burns below the ocean  
is never satisfied by the rolling waters.*

~

Twenty-five years of making love, indeed! The original in Sanskrit says literally, 'a hundred and fifty seasons' and as there are six seasons in the Indian year, the poetic translator has made it easier by converting the gods' cosmic lovemaking time into mundane human years.

I was just as confused by Kalidasa's verses as I had been by Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*, trying to make sense of god as an erotic lover. Avanti, however, had no problem. Drawing on the teachings of her guru, who was a Kashmiri Shaivite, she explained that unlike kama pessimists such as the Theravada Buddhists, who regard the body as the primary cause of suffering and ignorance, Shiva's body is pure, infinite consciousness. This cosmic consciousness is contained in the human body, as also in the bodies of other creatures down to the lowest life. From an individual's perspective, the human experience is the result of past karmic actions. From a cosmological perspective, however, it is the result of Shiva's cosmic desire. The cosmic polarity between Shiva and Parvati (Shakti) is manifested as the sexual desire of male and female bodies.

Kamini Masi had a different take on my dilemma. She said that it depends on the one who listens to Kalidasa's poem. For the believer, it is about divine love suffusing the cosmos, and this includes human sexual love. It fills you with transcendental bliss because it is about your god; if you are a non-believing aesthete, it evokes the emotions of the *sringara rasa*; if you are neither, it confers the divine blessings of the gods. So, it is up to you.

The *Kumarasambhava* raises the question as to whether our actions are preordained or not. Parvati's marriage to Shiva was determined by the gods who wanted her to produce a son, Kumara, who would grow up to liberate them from the misdeeds of the ghastly Taraka. Her father helped by sending her to serve Shiva with the help of Kama. But what about my marriage to Avanti? Was it predetermined too as though destiny had provided each of us a platonic other that we just had to find? Since it happened against the fierce opposition of my mother, at times there seemed nothing inevitable about it. And yet, you could say that the die was cast the day she came bouncing into our home as our neighbour a decade ago.

I jokingly called Avanti my 'erotic-ascetic', a phrase that is used famously to explain the paradoxical nature of Shiva. It is captured in the ubiquitous representation of the *linga* in every Shiva temple. Shiva is also the mythical founder of yoga, wherein the yogi draws up the seed, *urdhvaretas*, conserving and sublimating his sexual energy via meditation and ascetic practice and transforms it into creative power. The raised *linga* is thus a natural symbol of chastity in yoga, and later in tantra practice.

This helped me to understand why Kalidasa found no inconsistency between spiritual aspiration and human desire when he described the uninhibited lovemaking of Shiva and Parvati in canto eight. Where the non-believer sees a contradiction in Shiva, the devotee finds none. Shiva conforms to 'human nature' with both its ascetic and erotic tendencies. The god is normal and whole. It is the ascetic who is abnormal, aspiring to chastity and trying to rid himself of the erotic side of his humanity; the libertine is equally deviant on the opposite side. Shiva is also a householder who fulfils the duties of a husband, including the pursuit of kama. Appropriately, his wife is idyllically beautiful, endowed with curved hips, generous upward-tilting breasts and lotus eyes. She can only wait so long during her husband's ascetic practice. When her patience runs out, she seduces him into lovemaking, and they unite for a period equal to Shiva's meditation.

Shiva, the yogi, transforms sexual desire into spiritual heat, tapas, through yoga. Although sexual fluids normally flow down and out, Shiva's yogic practice directs the flow upward, raising the power of his seed to the eye centre. This rising spiritual force is manifested in the myth where Shiva burns the love-god, Kama, who had interrupted his meditation when he pierced him with the arrow of 'fascination'. Shiva later took pity on Kama's grieving wife, Rati, and revived the love-god, allowing him to live bodiless. Shiva says to Rati, Kama 'is not destroyed but lives in a sublimated state'. Indeed, kama exists in the human mind as an emotion. The yogi sublimates the emotion of desire during his practice and transforms it into creative power. Freud understood this. He regarded sublimation as a sign of civilization and human maturity whereby socially unacceptable sexual impulses are deflected in human beings, and often transformed into creative acts.

What is common between the kama pessimist and the optimist is the Sanskrit word tapas, which means the heat generated in the creative act of meditation as spiritual power; but it can also signify the heat of kama, the heat of desire in the sexual act. At the cosmic level, tapas is the generative power that creates the universe. At the individual level, tapas is the heat experienced as sexual passion in the body. The worlds of the pessimist and the optimist are thus related, and it falls on myth to resolve these apparent contradictions, in the same way as dreams help resolve inconsistencies in our daily lives. In his myths, Shiva appears to be balanced and pragmatic in the way he combines the two roles. He



is against the excess of the erotic libertine as well as the excess of the ascetic renouncer:

*He (Shiva) is able to mediate in this way because of his protean character; he is all things to all men . . . The myths make the Hindu aware that his society demands of him two roles which he cannot possibly satisfy fully—that he become a householder and beget sons, and that he renounce life and seek union with god. The myth shows the untenable answer arrived at by compromise . . . The myth makes it possible to admit that the ideal is not attainable.*

In the Shiva myths, women are not simply givers but also the recipients of pleasure. Additionally, the eighty-four sexual postures (*maithunasana*) described by Vatsyayana are meant to be learnt by both male and female yogis, who unite with their consorts in imitation of the love play of the gods. Women too were empowered within the ashrama system to attain liberation, the fourth and final aim of life. For many Hindus, men are not spiritually superior. In fact, some sages even stated that women are more capable of attaining liberation than men and there are famous examples of powerful female ascetics, gurus and saints, including Gargi, Lallesvari and Mirabai.

The practice of bhakti offers another solution to the paradox of Shiva's dual nature. Bhakti came later in history and addressed the related question of the devotee's love for god and vice versa. Just as Krishna and Radha's love keeps the universe going, so does Shiva and Parvati's. Just as Krishna acts for no other motive than leela, so does Shiva, who tells Parvati that since they are gods, their love is for its own sake and self-sufficient, and does not have to lead to reproduction like human love. Hence, there is no reason to have a son. She replies, however, 'What you say is true, but nevertheless I wish to have a child. I long for the kiss of a son's mouth.' Hence, another myth has to be created to accommodate Parvati's desires.

~

Soon after we moved into our new apartment, Avanti invited 'the conspirators', as she referred to the trio that had collaborated to make our marriage possible. And so, Kamini Masi, Ramu Mama and Anand were at our home one Sunday for lunch. There was much fun, laughter and happy talk as we reminisced about our days together. I mentioned to Anand that the *Kumarasambhava* was the perfect

answer to a cynic like him who believed that love and marriage did not go together.

‘It’s possible but not likely,’ he said. ‘Desire is founded on pleasure but marriage is based on social utility.’ Marriage, he felt, was about duty, honour and fidelity and not love necessarily.

‘You’re hopeless!’ declared Kamini Masi.

As I think back to those happy days, I ask myself, when had life been so good to me? I felt as though I had climbed a few steps on Plato’s ladder of love. In his famous dialogue, *Symposium*, Socrates introduces his teacher, Diotima, who says that a lover is attracted to something good in the beloved. This ‘goodness’ might consist of any number of things—from physical beauty to intelligence to ethical traits of character. The lover hopes that possessing this ‘goodness’ might lead to a better life. Even the search for the ‘other half’, which Aristophanes refers to in the same dialogue, is a desire to possess the ‘good’ in the other half. It doesn’t mean that the beloved is a good person overall but the lover is drawn to the good qualities in the beloved. By uniting with each other in marriage, the lovers hope to pass on this goodness to the next generation through their children.

Plato’s ‘Idea of the Good’ attracted Avanti instinctively as she was already inclined to think of love in an altruistic way. It appealed to me as well because I hoped unconsciously to have Avanti’s good qualities rub off on me, making me a better person. We were ready to climb Diotima’s ladder. It was a natural step to move up from attraction for each other’s bodies to a love for the specific ‘good’ qualities in the other. From here, Plato expected us to climb to the next stage, where we would begin to perceive the same goodness in other human beings and learn to esteem them equally as though we were all ‘part of a single sea’. Thus, we would evolve from a selfish love for each other to a love for all humanity, becoming morally better as we ascended Plato’s ladder to the ultimate ‘Idea of the Good’. This is the origin of the phrase ‘Platonic love’, which was first used by Marsilio Ficino in *De amore* (1484).

Unlike Plato’s metaphor of the ladder of love’s ascent, I think the emotional state in my conjugal relationship with Avanti is captured better by Bhavabhuti, the eighth-century Sanskrit poet and playwright. He thought of love as a fulfilling emotion when the heart finally finds rest, when there is no yearning any more ‘no twoness’.

any more, no twoness .

*This state where there is no twoness  
Where the heart finds rest,  
Where feelings do not dry with age,  
Where concealments fall away in time  
And essential love is ripened,  
Sacred is this state of human fulfilment,  
Which we find once if ever.*

Perhaps the explanation lies in the fact that Avanti and I had been friends before we became married lovers. Nietzsche put it well: ‘It is not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages’; this is why, ‘When entering into marriage one ought to ask oneself: do you believe you are going to enjoy talking to this woman right into your old age?’ Everything else in marriage, he felt, is transitory—most of the time you are together you will be conversing. The great advantage of friendship is that it values differences between two human beings far more than married love; the differences between Avanti and me, I felt, would make us both richer. The truth is that it is unnatural for two human beings to be together constantly. The work of married love too often leaves us feeling unprepared, and nowhere more than when lovers confront the gulf of their daily differences.

Nietzsche is not necessarily the most reliable source for advice on marriage considering that he never married himself. He did propose to the stunningly beautiful Lou Andreas-Salomé in 1882, whose only claim to fame is that ‘she is the woman who never married Nietzsche’. Salomé was then twenty-two and he was thirty-seven. At that time, she was in an affair with the author and gambler Paul Rée. She replied that she preferred Nietzsche as a friend because she valued her freedom too much to marry anyone. Nietzsche’s mistake was to propose too hastily—he forgot that a woman will not voluntarily give up her liberty for a man who is unknown and untested.

Considerations of liberty are understandable but expectations of perfection are not. I had my differences with my mother but I agreed with her about one thing: the myth of romantic love creates a desire for perfection in lovers, and this presents serious risks when it comes to marriage. The more we idealize a person, the more disheartened we grow when we get to know them. The sad truth is that human beings are imperfect and our yearning for perfection often kills love.

*Where the myth fails, human love begins. Then we love a human being, not our dream, but a human being with flaws.*

My mother did have a point when she said that sensuality often makes love grow too quickly; the root remains weak and easy to pull out. Both Avanti and I were aware that we had not approached marriage through sensuality. Although we had always found each other attractive, we came to it through friendship that morphed one day into love. Our relationship had a logic of its own. It was neither driven by the sex drive, nor motivated by the traditional considerations of property or progeny. Because we had been friends, there was a certain equality and mutuality in our relationship that my mother envied. We would have to negotiate constantly and work through it because it did not follow the old rules.

We were unaware at the time, but a new world was getting ready to emerge in India after the 1990s' economic reforms which would unbind India mentally and unleash a sexual revolution, beginning with the upper-middle classes, and we would catch up with a sexual revolution that was already under way in the West. A female English friend came to visit us in 2001, and from her we acquired a fashionable new vocabulary, including words like 'commitment' and 'relationships'. She casually asked Avanti why she had not agreed to any of the proposals that had come from her family for an 'arranged' marriage.

'If you are going to marry,' Avanti replied, 'it might as well be someone you know and like.'

Our friend surprised us when she said, 'I approve of the sensible Indian idea of an arranged marriage.' She said that her friends in the West subscribed to the 'silly idea of a perfect soulmate'. It is an illusion, she felt, and it does great damage as everyone seems to be searching for a flawless partner. The more they idealize the lover, the more disillusioned they get. It is because of this illusion that so many marriages in the West end in divorce.

'Marriage has its inherent limitations on how exciting it can be,' said Avanti, sounding a bit like my mother.

'But neither do we want our lives to degenerate into comfortable mediocrity,' I said. 'We want marriage to make us better persons.' Although my defensive response was addressed to our English friend, it was meant for Avanti.

One evening the three of us went to a movie called *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Our friend was keen for us to see it. 'Everyone is talking about it in London,' she

said. It was about what we had been discussing—the ‘illusion of the one soulmate’, and how so many women in the West fail to take a pragmatic approach to relationships; and so many British men suffer from the disease called ‘the man’s failure to commit’.

We enjoyed the movie immensely and discussed it threadbare over dinner. The next day we were still thinking about the film when our English friend told us a true story about her closest girlfriend, who informed her breathlessly one day that she had finally met, late in life, ‘The One’.

‘My heart sank!’ she exclaimed. ‘And, of course, The One turned out to be a rat.’ She said that for years she had been drilling into her friend’s head that the perfect man did not exist. It’s one of the reasons why so many English girls stay single for so long. The boy next door is not good enough. ‘It’s for this reason that I hanker after the pragmatic Indian idea of arranged marriage. It’s refreshing to know that your man doesn’t have commitment issues and your woman doesn’t have mystical ideas about the perfect mate. Both are content to settle down to a normal life—it’s the grown-up thing to do.’

Our English friend left after a week but not before making her point in a telling way. She recounted that Thomas More, the English statesman, fell in love with the younger sister in a family, but thinking it might reduce the chances of the older sister, he married her instead.



## THE ENIGMA OF MARRIAGE

### *Duty to oneself versus duty to another*

*There is melancholic sadness  
at the very heart of kama*

—Mahabharata I.85.7–8

As we were changing into our pyjamas, Avanti mentioned casually, ‘Not tonight.’

‘Why not?’ I asked with a forced smile.

‘No, not tonight.’

‘But that’s what you said last night; and the night before; and every night this week.’ After a pause, I asked, ‘What shall we do then?’

‘Let’s read.’

‘But we do that every night.’

After more than a dozen years of marriage, I suffered from the inescapable sulk of a lover. Avanti no longer felt the same physical desire. I remembered wistfully the blissful months immediately after our marriage when both of us used to rush home from work in anticipation of the evenings and nights of utter delight. But slowly and inexplicably, desire receded from her end, especially after the children came along. I felt resentful. My work too became more demanding and I came home later and later. I felt our marriage was caught in a middle-age inertia and it was beginning to dull my sensual feelings. Every desire seemed to become a decision in our unloving proximity.

We had raised two lovely girls while I had spent the years slogging and climbing the ladder in the shipping company where I worked in Ballard Estate. Even though I had risen to the top, life had grown increasingly tiresome. Although Avanti and I had a good marriage in all other respects, the daily routine of life had taken its toll. With the passage of time. I was becoming

increasingly aware of my mortality, wondering if this is all there is to life. Feeling frustrated and unhappy, I complained to Ramu Mama. He listened sympathetically but didn't offer any advice. We met again the following week and he told me he had spoken to his old psychologist friend—the same one who had once explained 'male narcissism' to us over dinner. Sensing my reluctance, he said, 'Meet him at least. See him as my friend, not as his client, without any obligation.' I agreed half-heartedly.

'A woman loses her lover as soon as she makes him a husband,' said the psychologist, sounding like an oracle. He diagnosed my nagging discontent as a universal dilemma. I had fallen into the 'romantic trap' that creates an illusion that love will last forever. Of course, one knows in one's rational mind that love is not supposed to endure or even to be exclusive, but the immediate rush of desire makes one believe that love for *this one* person will last forever. I agreed with him instinctively. This is how I had felt in the early years of our married life when Avanti and I couldn't get enough of each other and I felt our desire for each other would never die. But sooner or later, we did get enough of each other. Avanti, more than I, no longer felt the same physical craving. It was possibly the result of lazy access. The availability of each other's bodies is too easy in a marriage.

'Yes, sexual desire gives way over time, especially with the coming of children,' he said. 'It's something else . . . another sentiment, another kind of love that is more mature, longer-lasting, almost maternal, akin to a tender companionship, but it is love, nevertheless.' He suggested counselling, jointly for Avanti and me. 'Where they love, they have no desire, and where they desire, they cannot love,' said the oracle, quoting Freud, who had observed this problem in many of his patients.

I was puzzled. 'You mean because Avanti and I love each other, our desire has waned?'

The mundane reality of everydayness takes its toll, he explained. You are presented daily the physical, moral and personal defects of each other, plus the tiresome work of raising children; all these contribute to the decline of passion. The more common problem he had encountered was the opposite one—how to maintain male potency in a long-term relationship. 'After years of monogamy,' he said, 'it is not uncommon for men to develop acute sexual disinterest, even



secondary impotence.

When I broached the idea of counselling, Avanti laughed. She dismissed it as something ‘high-fangled for immature people’. It was not a serious problem, merely a phase in our lives, and I was making too much of it—it would go away, she said. I let it be and never mentioned it again. But it didn’t go away. My feelings of resentment gave way to resignation and sadness. I concluded melancholically that desire must fade inevitably in middle age. Isn’t this what happens to every romance? Even the great love between Anna Karenina and Vronsky faded in the end and then . . . and then, I didn’t dare to think any more of the consequences.

Avanti’s answer to my gloomy restlessness was not to take passion too seriously. A bit like my mother, she had decided that one ought not to base something as significant as marriage and children purely on ephemeral emotions. Although we didn’t dwell on it, I was convinced that in Avanti’s eyes, marriage ought to be sustained by shared values, common interests and doing things together. She was wise in believing that romance and marriage did not always have to go together. If a marriage evolved after a dozen years into a companionship of friendship, it would be trusting, intimate and grounded in honesty with a commitment to the well-being of the children. ‘If only men and women could be equals and genuine friends in marriage!’ she had once exclaimed when we were discussing the marital problems of another couple we knew. This was true to character; Avanti had always believed in genuine Aristotelian *philia*, ‘friendship’, where love consists in giving and wishing the good of the other. Meanwhile, I remained vulnerable.

~

Amaya and I were not supposed to meet but we did. Both of us were travelling on the Deccan Queen bound for Pune where I had planned to attend the memorial service of a childhood friend. Avanti didn’t know him well and didn’t feel like accompanying me. And frankly, I was happy to have some time to myself. As Amaya got on the train, I noticed her striking face. She vaguely resembled Catherine Deneuve—fragile and melancholic with her lustrous hair framing a face of dignified wilfulness. We exchanged a few awkward words when she was trying unsuccessfully to locate her seat. Although we were seated near each other in the chair car, we did not make eye contact after she sat down.

near each other in the chair car, we did not make eye contact after she sat down, but we did cast furtive glances at each other. Towards the end of the journey, she suddenly broke the ice. She asked if I knew where the National Film Institute was located.

I told her that it was in the Deccan Gymkhana area. After a few seconds, I added that it was on my way, and since I had a car meeting me, I would happily drop her. If she preferred otherwise, I would find her a taxi. She was grateful for the offer of a lift.

‘Ah, you are a film-maker?’ I asked.

‘No, a historian.’

‘What is a historian doing at the film institute?’

‘I am a historian of cinema and I’m giving a lecture. It’s part of a festival of Satyajit Ray’s films.’

‘Hmm . . . my favourite is *Charulata*.’

‘Oh, it’s a lovely film!’ After a pause, she said, ‘But I love the Apu trilogy the best.’

She was beautiful with sad, brown eyes and at least ten years younger than me. She didn’t ask about me—what I did or where I came from. Anything I said would have been inadequate.

Soon the train arrived at the station in Pune. As Amaya got up and began to collect her things, I repeated my offer to drop her en route. She smiled gratefully and followed me. We made small, impersonal talk on the way to her lecture. When she got off, we said goodbye with warmth and propriety, without exchanging phone numbers or addresses. We didn’t even know each other’s names. If she thought any further about my gesture, she would probably put it down to the kindness of a stranger whom she would never see again.

After she left, I realized I was drawn powerfully to this obviously attractive but serious woman. I told myself it was silly of me to make anything of it. I had just met her on the train and I knew nothing about her. I was not looking for love; yet, I was vulnerable. I had never been unfaithful to Avanti in the dozen years we had been married. As the car sped towards the memorial meeting, I kept thinking of Amaya. Soon, however, I got distracted and my mind became occupied thinking about the people I was going to meet. I had known some of them from my schooldays. I thought about my friend who had died, but for some reason, I did not grieve for him. He had been a happy man. Unlike me, he was

forever joking and laughing. Memories of my childhood came rushing back, and they seemed to settle, as they always did, on the same recollection: I am feeling cold and isolated on a winter morning in Lahore; I jump into my mother's bed; soon I begin to hear my mother's heartbeat and feel her warmth.

~

When I think back to my first meeting with Amaya, it is a verse from a medieval female poet, Bhavaka, that reminds me how vulnerable I was. Although the Sanskrit poet is referring to a wife's boredom at the disappearance of passion after marriage, it could just as well have been describing my own discontent at Avanti's flagging desire:

*Where the moon is not inveighed against  
and no sweet words of the messenger are heard;  
where speech is not choked with tears  
and the body grows not thin;  
but where one sleeps in one's own house  
with he who owns, subservient to one's wish;  
can this routine of household sex,  
this wretched thing, deserve the name of love?*

The poet has underlined in this verse what Socrates tells Agathon: 'one does not desire what one does not lack.' Unlike the differences between Avanti and me, this verse seems to reflect the sameness between men and women. But folk wisdom tells us the opposite—men seek novelty and get bored with monogamy while women want long-term security and are happier with habituation; unlike men, they prefer commitment and are more likely to experience sexual pleasure and fulfilment in a long-lasting relationship. If this is true, then how can relationships between men and women ever be successful? There is an inherent contradiction between what men and women want. Monogamy is antagonistic to male sexuality but it is apparently necessary for female sexual fulfilment. If such wisdom is correct, there can never be equilibrium between men's and women's needs, and heterosexual love is doomed to failure and unhappiness.

Proust also raises the same question about the boredom and repetitiveness of daily life, and how long the average human being expects to be treasured. When Marcel was a young boy, he longed to be friends with the beautiful and vivacious Gilberte, whom he met when he used to play on the Champs-Élysées

in Paris. Eventually, his wish came true. Gilberte gradually grew fond of him and invited him regularly to tea at her house, where she served him lavishly with cakes and sandwiches. He was happy at first but after a while he began to take it for granted. What was an impossible dream had now become routine. Desire is about anticipation laced with the uncertainty of fulfilment, and the problem lay in Proust's old enemy—habit. We become contemptuous of what is familiar and tend to prefer the novel, which reinforces the folk wisdom that a long acquaintance with a loved person and knowing a person too well breeds boredom. This is especially true of a married couple.

Another tenet of folk wisdom is that men care mainly for physical beauty and I wondered if this was true about my instant attraction to Amaya. However, I discovered that evolutionary biology bears this out. Studies show that beauty is not only in the eyes of the beholder. Symmetrical faces with sharp lines and high brows, like Amaya's, win out in job interviews, in finding mates, and even in the care that mothers give to their babies. They have a biological advantage in the Darwinian natural selection process. Folk wisdom also believes that men love egocentrically, even selfishly, demanding the continual satisfaction of their own desires; and are notoriously disloyal and non-exclusive. Women, on the other hand, are supposed to be more concerned with character and mental beauty; they tend to love unconditionally; they value love for its own sake; they give far more and their love is constant and exclusive; they define themselves as moral agents in their capacity to care. But this wisdom is contradicted by studies on women which show consistently that women pick men on the basis of wealth, power, prestige, industriousness, reliability and intelligence.

Poets also seem to agree with the 'folk' that there are genuine differences between men and women. They too believe that men are more concerned with worldly pursuits whereas a woman's whole identity depends on love. The English poet George Byron wrote famously:

*Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,  
'Tis woman's whole existence.*

Neither the poets nor the folk have got the story quite right. Many biologists and anthropologists have claimed that there aren't sharp differences between men and women. The biologist Mary Jane Sherfey believes that women by nature have sexually insatiable appetites—something that Manu had also claimed in his

have sexually insatiable appetites—something that Iyama had also claimed in his dharma text. She says that left to their own devices, unimpeded by the imposition of cultural norms of proper behaviour, women would enjoy having multiple sexual partners probably even more than men do. The anthropologist Meredith Small also thinks that neither men nor women are ‘naturally monogamous’. So far, at least, I haven’t found a definitive answer to the question of gender differences in love and sexuality. And if there are differences, are they natural in origin or largely the result of culture? Whatever the facts, it needed the wonderful ancient Greek female poet Sappho to remind us that not only is love more important to a woman but it represents a superior way of life—grander, for example, than military or commercial success:

*There are those who say an array of horsemen,  
and others of marching men,  
and others of ships,  
is the most beautiful thing on the dark earth.  
But I say it is whatever one loves.*

~

The following day I arrived early at the Pune station for the journey back to Bombay. Since I had time to kill, I got myself chai from a stall on the platform, found an empty bench, and began to go over the events of the previous night in my mind. I had dined with old friends and they had complimented me on my speech at the memorial service. One of them had quipped that the best part of my speech was its brevity. Another had inquired about Avanti and why she hadn’t come. I had been evasive. My thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a vaguely familiar voice.

‘Hello stranger, is this seat taken?’

I got up with a start. Seeing Amaya’s lovely face, I burst into a smile and made place for her on the bench.

‘Are you like me,’ she asked with a nervous laugh, ‘always afraid of missing trains and always showing up too early?’

‘No, I think I got the departure time wrong.’

‘I saw you from a distance, and thought I’d thank you once again for the lift. It was kind of you.’

‘But it was on my way.’

~~~~~

‘People don’t do these things any more, not unless they have a motive.’

‘I had none.’

‘I know, you didn’t even ask my name.’

‘I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.’

‘I am not disturbing you, am I?’

‘How was your lecture?’

‘I think I may have bored them.’

‘What were you speaking on?’

‘On Ray’s use of music in his films.’

It began to drizzle. Although there was an awning above us, I noticed that raindrops were falling on her silk sari. I took out a wrap from my handbag and gave it to her. She protested but then accepted it with a smile. We chatted on and the time passed quickly and soon we were boarding the train. We managed to get a kind passenger to exchange seats with us and were able to sit together on the way back. She was still shy and our conversation remained intermittent and impersonal. Gradually, she opened up.

‘You were despondent yesterday?’ she asked.

‘Was I?’

‘Yes, you have such a transparent face.’

‘It was nothing really.’

‘I thought perhaps you were grieving for your friend.’

I looked puzzled.

‘Oh, the one who, you know . . . whose memorial service you attended.’

‘Oh yes, yes.’

We began to talk more freely and there sprang an easy understanding, the sort of trust that exists among old friends. She told me that she lived in Baroda with her husband in a spacious house near the campus. Both taught at the university.

‘Have you ever visited Baroda?’

‘Yes, you have a good school of fine arts, and I have a few friends there.’

‘Time passes quickly in Baroda because you are forever visiting each other. It’s boring. You know exactly what someone is going to say before they say it. How I wish I could live in a big, anonymous city! A city like Bombay, where people value their time . . . and privacy. Plus, of course, the museums, galleries, film premieres—the latest in everything! The only excitement in Baroda is when your friends quarrel.’

Amaya had just had a quarrel the previous week with her husband because she wanted to look after her ageing parents. She had suggested bringing them to live with her but he had refused.

‘Well, I think he is probably right.’

‘But we have so much space!’

‘Still, it’s his privacy.’

‘Yes, I know. And here I was just speaking about privacy . . .’

She suddenly stopped and pointed excitedly at the strange light outside.

‘Yes, pink and grey, the signature of a monsoon sky!’

We looked at the sky and continued our light banter and gradually the masks began to fall. I reciprocated her confidences and gave her a brief outline of my life—how I grew up in Delhi, got a job in Bombay, married Avanti and had two children.

‘You have such a wonderful comforting manner,’ she said, peering into my eyes. ‘I feel I have known you forever.’

I couldn’t contain my feelings of discontent for too long. ‘Of all ridiculous things, Amaya, the most ridiculous seems to me to want to be constantly busy. Ever since I can remember, I have made “to-do” lists. All day I keep hurrying at work from one thing to another. Then I just crumble into bed at night feeling totally incomplete.’

Amaya was surprised at the sudden change in our conversation. She appeared eager to hear more. ‘I seem to live out my days in a dull, loveless stupor, while there is a whole life that remains unlived. This hurry-hurry of life has become my enemy. Where is the joy?’ Even while having fun, I told her, I feel I have ‘to do’ something and the rush continues. ‘I don’t have the courage to miss the opening of an exhibition or the premiere of a film. I cannot stop myself from reading the latest book that everyone is talking about. Even keeping up with the news in the daily paper is a burden.’

‘So, how would you want to live?’ she asked.

‘I think I should like to go to a museum and spend an hour in front of a single masterpiece; or read just one book and take six months over it. And read it slowly, again and again.’ After a pause, I added, ‘You must think I am crazy.’

‘I think you are lucky. At least you know what you want.’

We continued to talk in an easy, fluent way, about light and serious matters, and the time passed quickly. We hardly noticed that the sky outside had turned

and the time passed quickly. We hardly noticed that the sky outside had turned cloudy and dark. Soon it began to rain. Our conversation too seemed to become more intimate. Before long we were exchanging confidences, the sort that lovers save for one another.

‘I think I could fall in love with you,’ I said.

‘Me too.’

‘How did we get from there to here?’

‘I don’t know but I am happy we did.’

‘So, you think we’ll meet again?’

‘Yes.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘It’s fated.’

Between pauses we were stealing burrowing stares of longing, and by the time we reached Bombay, it was clear to both of us that we were profoundly attracted to each other. We had moved into a dangerous zone and were completely vulnerable. As we parted at the station, I placed my hand affectionately on her shoulder and she quickly reciprocated by gripping my hands tightly. There were enough reasons to believe that our brief encounter on the train might become a full-blown affair.

~

‘Every personal existence is upheld by a secret,’ wrote the great Russian writer Anton Chekhov. This line from ‘Lady with a Lapdog’ keeps running through my head as I think of those difficult weeks after I met Amaya. I think about secrets, about how hard it is to know another person completely, and about how much we need our hidden, interior lives. Human desire is mysterious and veiled, and this makes it difficult to understand ourselves.

I couldn’t get Amaya out of my head. I felt I had two lives: one, open and visible to Avanti and our children, to our friends and acquaintances; the other life was in my mind, concealed from everyone. In this secret, unseen life, I felt I was sincere and did not deceive myself. But in my ‘open’ life at home, at work, and at the Bombay Gym, I hid my innermost thoughts about Amaya, and these were by far the more honest and the more interesting. I loved Avanti but I also felt a powerful desire pulling me towards Amaya, and this desire seemed to become the true reality beneath the mundane surface of my daily life.



It didn't surprise me that I turned to one of Chekhov's wisest stories to make some sort of sense of the confusion in my mind. On the surface, 'Lady with a Lapdog' is about illicit love, but it's deeper meaning lies in the tension between our public and private selves, between the person we show to the world and the one we keep to ourselves. I discovered Chekhov at twenty after I saw his play, *The Seagull*. I had gone with a friend and both of us came out of the theatre mesmerized. We resolved on that day to read everything he had written. Before long, we were on a Chekhov spree—swapping books, reading plays and recommending stories. One of these was 'Lady with a Lapdog'. Vladimir Nabokov has called it one of the greatest stories ever written. I must have read it many times, and each time I wanted to go back and read it again. One of its byproducts is that it taught me to write sparingly. At some point one realizes that 'less is more', and Chekhov reinforces this lesson, letting the reader's imagination complete the picture, especially when it comes to emotions; he endows commonplace objects, say, a woman's earring or an open window with immense, startling power, which reveals the mystery of existence.

This story is about an adulterous affair between a Russian banker and a young, married woman on holiday in Yalta. Dmitri Gurov is unhappily married, has a daughter and two sons, and is frequently unfaithful in order to escape from his loveless marriage. The young lady, Anna Sergeyevna, is introduced to us as a 'young blonde, not very tall, in a beret, walking along the embankment; behind her ran a white dog'. People at the hotel refer to her as the 'lady with the little dog'. After they meet, Gurov discovers that Anna too is trapped in a loveless marriage. The two spend their brief, delightful days together, walking, taking drives in the country and making love. Eventually, they return to their spouses and to the routine of their quiet, desperate lives. Gurov thinks at first that this was another pleasant fling and expects to forget Anna soon. But he cannot. He is haunted by her memory and realizes he has actually fallen in love for the first time in his life. He goes in search of her, chances upon her in a small-town theatre, and discovers her looking 'lost in the provincial crowd, not remarkable for anything with a vulgar lorgnette in her hand'. She confesses that she still loves him and they begin to meet secretly in Moscow. Both are, however, troubled by the illicit nature of their love. They struggle to find some sort of integrity in their secret relationship. While they are grappling to find a solution,

the story ends . . . without a resolution.

Chekhov's story took on a profound significance for me after I met Amaya. At the end, Gurov and Anna are left wondering how they can free themselves from the intolerable fetters of conventional middle-class life. The lovers think they will find an answer and a new, splendid life will begin. But it is clear that the complicated part is just beginning, especially since divorce was not permitted at the time. The truth is that there is no liberation from the real bondage of life wherein we never know our true selves. Gurov and Anna believe that it will work out but Chekhov is less optimistic. I wondered if this meant that my relationship with Amaya was doomed even before it had begun. It was a heartbreaking warning when my secret desire for Amaya was the only true reality in my humdrum daily life.

It occurs to me that 'Lady with a Lapdog' is a low stakes version of *Anna Karenina*. Both women are named Anna; both have a fateful affair; both feel guilty and profoundly sad at the end. But Chekhov's Anna neither suffers from Karenina's cosmic despair, nor does she become a victim of a tragic suicide. She is in a melancholy state in the end, in agony over the shameful secrecy of her affair and desperate to become free of the intolerable fetters of social bondage. 'How? How?' Gurov asks in anguish but, of course, there is no answer.

The division between public and private life both in Chekhov's story and in my secret desire for Amaya corresponds to a distinction that the historian of religion and philosopher Mircea Eliade draws between two modes of being. He calls it the sacred and the profane. In premodern times, Eliade says, 'Man wished to live as much as possible in the sacred,' which he believed was 'the true reality . . . saturated with being'. He believed in the cosmic love of Radha and Krishna in *Gita Govinda*, and of Shiva and Parvati in the *Kumarasambhava*. These were not stories—the gods were real and they lived the true reality. Anna and Gurov also believe that their secret love is sacred in some way—it is the only true reality of their lives. I felt the same about my romantic feelings for Amaya—there was something 'sacred' in our powerful, ineffable attraction for each other on the train; the 'profane' lay in the everydayness of outward appearances that I presented at work, at home and in society. Eliade uses the term 'hierophany' to designate this type of momentary disruption: 'By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes something else, yet it continues to remain itself.' Human life is a constant search for the sacred, for it constitutes true reality.

~

I arrived home in the evening from the station to a scene of domestic bliss. Avanti was reading a book, a cup of tea beside her. Our younger girl, Arushi, aged four, was sitting on the floor writing down alphabets in her schoolbook. The older one, Akhila, aged eight, had a needle and thread in her hand and was learning to do embroidery. Our middle-aged Labrador was sitting between them, watching everyone with polite interest. He barked as soon as I entered the drawing room. The little one squealed with delight, leaped up and ran towards me. Jumping into my arms, she showed me the rings on her fingers.

‘Look, Ma’s rings! Do you think I am wearing too many?’

‘Certainly not, you must put on more.’ She giggled and ran back to her schoolbook.

Avanti gave me a warm, welcoming smile and came towards me and embraced me affectionately. She asked if I wanted a cup of tea. By now Akhila and the dog had also crowded around me.

‘She’s not supposed to be wearing Ma’s rings.’

‘Yes, I will! Ma let me.’

The Labrador didn’t want to be left out of the conversation and woofed gleefully.

Little Arushi asked her mother, ‘Where did I come from, Mummy?’

‘You were my lifelong desire, my love.’

I went up to shower and change. Tagore was right in believing that a mother’s desire for a child was the purest form of desire. As I thought about the comfortable, cheerful scene below, I was filled with the warmest feelings for this family which was mine and mine alone. Amaya’s hold over me had loosened. Avanti’s open-hearted, comfortable greeting pushed away resentful feelings. I tried to locate the good and the beautiful inside her, beneath the layers of habit and routine in our daily life. I remembered how she used to carry on her back the younger girl when she was a baby as she pushed the older girl’s pushchair, talking to both of them incessantly. Only the other day, she had come home irritated with her boss but had had the presence of mind to reprimand the man from Electric House for overcharging us on the previous month’s utility bill. She was determined, impetuous and alive.

So what if we had stopped making love! I felt suddenly that it wasn’t

something so odd. Even the psychologist had reassured me of that. What was perverse was my reaction—my attitude that relentlessly dissected it as some sort of failure in our marriage. I felt it was I who should learn to think about it in a more mature way. Instead of feeling let down, I had to learn to accept that a gradual decline in the intensity and frequency of sex between a married couple is merely an inevitable fact of biological life and, as such, an evidence of a deep normality. To rebel against it was to protest that life was not perfect or permanently happy. It needed a certain wisdom in life to redraw one's expectations about a successful life. Instead of dwelling on our failure, it needed maturity to turn over to the other side of the bed, and be ready to accept with stoic calm, rather than rancour, some of the necessary compromises of long-term love.

The following morning, I quietly slipped into my daily routine. I joined the children at breakfast and chatted with them till it was time for school. I hugged and kissed them before Avanti took them down in the lift and put them on the school bus. Meanwhile, I read the *Post* over coffee. At 8.15 a.m., I went down and spotted my driver and the gleaming Mercedes-Benz waiting to take me to work. As soon as I entered my office, I turned to look out of the window. It was a calm day after the monsoon storm. Looking out at the harbour had become second nature, a habit cultivated over the years. It helped me to focus on the most important things I had to do. Soon, I became slowly absorbed in my work. Over lunch, I discussed the day's news with my colleagues. After work, I played tennis at the Gym and was home in time for dinner. Occasionally, Avanti and I would go out in the evening—to the theatre or for a film or an exhibition. When we were invited out to dinner, I mostly went alone because Avanti preferred to be with the girls at dinner time. I had resumed effortlessly the customary pattern of my life, and Amaya had quietly slipped into a distant recess of my mind.

So I thought. But two weeks later, Amaya suddenly reappeared. It was a rainy morning and I was on my way to the office. Her image came into my head and remained with me, becoming more and more vivid as the day went on. She accompanied me home and was present in the stillness of the evening when I heard from my study voices of the children preparing their lessons. I smiled as I looked at the sharp, delicate features of her face. When I shut my eyes, I heard snippets of our conversation on the train. When I opened them, she peered at me, first from the bookcase and then from the window. She seemed younger and

first from the bookcase, and then from the window. She seemed younger and lovelier than I had imagined. She admonished me for having returned to the futile busyness of my life, making 'to-do' lists and hurrying around all day long. Whatever had happened to my resolutions?

She did not visit me in my dreams that night but the next day she kept following me about like a shadow. This is ridiculous, I thought. I must be going out of my mind. I wanted to confide in someone but I was too ashamed. And what would I say? That I was in love? Avanti had noticed that I was suddenly preoccupied—she called me 'distant'—and put it down to pressure at work. At the office, someone also remarked that I was unusually detached. Meanwhile, Amaya kept flooding my mind relentlessly.

To preserve my sanity, I decided I had to see her. Before we had parted, Amaya had told me that the best way to reach her was to call her when her husband was away, teaching a class at the university. So, I phoned her one evening from the office.

She answered with a businesslike 'hello'.

'Hello stranger, is this seat taken?' I asked, trying to sound matter-of-fact but I was actually trembling.

There was a long silence at the other end.

'Why didn't you call?' She finally broke the silence. 'I was so worried. I thought you had made a fool out of me.' She sounded terrified.

'How have you been?'

'I knew you were not that sort of a person. I knew you'd call, and here you are. Oh, how you frightened me! I was half dead. How about you?' She was breathing hard.

'It was all normal for the first couple of weeks,' I said. 'I got caught up in the routine of life and everything seemed to be the same. And I thought we would never meet again. But then all of a sudden, you entered my head a few days ago. And I can't seem to get you out.' With my heart beating violently, I told her how she kept appearing in the most unlikely places.

'I have missed you terribly,' she said.

'You are there all the time . . . at work, at home. I don't know what to do.'

'I think of you every day,' she said.

'I hear you in my head talking to me, smiling at me. Honestly, I think I am going crazy.'

‘I am so unhappy, Amar.’ She said my name for the first time. ‘I have thought of nothing but you. I want to forget you but I can’t.’

‘Shall I come to Baroda?’

‘Oh no! Everyone knows everyone here. No, I’ll come. I’ll see you in Bombay.’

‘When?’

‘I’ll call you. Let me organize things here.’

‘Come soon.’

‘I’ll call you. At work, right?’

‘Yes.’

‘What do I say?’

‘Give your name and say you have business with me. I’ll tell my assistant to expect a call from you . . .’

‘But what if he asks about my business?’

‘He won’t.’

‘Oh Amar, I am miserable.’

‘For how many days can you get away?’

‘I don’t know. Where will I stay?’

‘I’ll find a place. Don’t worry.’

‘I shall never, never be happy here.’

‘Call me.’

‘I will . . . definitely.’

~

Amaya did call the next day but I suggested we postpone our meeting. She was devastated. I wasn’t quite ready, I explained. I felt torn. I loved Avanti and the kids, and didn’t want to jeopardize my marriage. Yet, I loved her too and believed genuinely that she may be my last chance for a certain kind of happiness. Since I was caught in a dilemma, I needed time. If we met now, it might be too soon—I wouldn’t be comfortable and our meeting would be a failure. Amaya was clearly unhappy but she understood my predicament. As for her, she said, her mind was clear. She had never loved her husband and she had finally found someone in her life whom she could love; and she was willing to wait.

Behind my transparency and rationalizing, the truth was that the relationship

Behind my temporizing and rationalizing, the truth was that the adulterous thought of seeing Amaya was plainly thrilling. I tried to think about it objectively. Who has not been tempted, I reasoned, by the alluring idea of an affair with a beautiful stranger? Especially when one is in middle age, and after tiresome years of raising children. There is also the fear that life is passing by and one may never get another chance at ecstatic happiness. It is quite another thing what one does about this captivating thought but the idea itself is so natural, so human. There is, of course, the fear of adultery and the hugely negative public verdict. But I sometimes think the fault may also lie with the person who refuses to admit to adulterous possibilities. Such a person would be doing ‘wrong’ in the deepest sense if he refused to entertain the idea of illicit love. Could one really put faith in such a person who has never been tempted?

What inhibits a person from acting on these exhilarating thoughts is a cloud of guilt that hangs over one at the prospect of hurting others—one’s spouse, one’s children, one’s parents. There are always victims in adultery. To someone like myself, an Indian male, the dilemma presented itself as a clash between two goals of life, dharma and kama. Dharma is duty to another, and kama is duty to oneself. Even the *Kamasutra*, a book devoted to hedonistic pleasure, states at the beginning that the restraining hand of dharma must trump kama. We are made all too aware as we are growing up about our duties to others and forget that we also have duties to ourselves. Of course, one is also inhibited by the ‘public verdict’. Human beings may have become more liberal and modern but society remains traditional. I was frightened at the thought that if my affair was discovered, I would be branded a cheat, a rat and a scumbag.

It is curious to think of kama as ‘duty’ when it is, in fact, a normal human inclination to maximize one’s own pleasure. Human beings are self-directed and protective of their own interest, and none more so than the ‘me’ generation. This is why we need to be reminded about dharma, our duty to others. The interests of others do not come naturally to us—it takes effort. Since childhood we are bombarded by the Mahabharata’s exhortation: ‘Do not inflict upon others what you would not do to yourself.’ This conditioning of dharma is relentless and we become all too aware about our duty to others—to our family, our community, our nation—and in many cases, even begin to feel guilty about our ‘selfish’ urges of kama in both its meanings of ‘desire’ and ‘pleasure’. Yet despite this, the Indic civilization elevated kama to a goal of life, where pleasure had a place

in the good life and was worth striving for. This thought would not have made sense to me when I was studying in my Christian missionary school and learnt to associate kama with sin. Fortunately, my grandmother's ganja-smoking pandit came along as a nice corrective, who taught me that kama is intrinsically valuable, and so I feel more comfortable today with the thought that kama may also point to something valuable that I owe to myself in order to live a good and flourishing life.

The *dharmasankat*, 'moral dilemma', that I hinted at, but did not elaborate on the phone to Amaya, was simply this: Do I betray Avanti or myself? As I wrestled with the problem, I could not find a way out. I was being pulled by two conflicting aspects of my character. I faced an impossible choice: to be a good person and not hurt others (dharma) or fulfil a natural, human capability that I had been given for pleasure and happiness (kama). Both ends were part of my conception of the good life. The dilemma lay within my 'character', as Aristotle would have said. Either way I would lose, I reasoned. If I decided to have a fling with Amaya, I would put my love for Avanti at risk. If I abstained from temptation, I would resent the lost opportunity for a certain kind of happiness and might even blame Avanti. And the resentment might turn me into a stale, repressed and mean man. If I decided to keep the affair secret, I reasoned, I would have to lie all the time, and become inauthentic. Confessing to it, on the other hand, would be worse. It would bring needless pain to everyone and probably end my marriage. A broken marriage would most certainly affect the girls, who were still too young to understand. If I placed the children's interest above mine and remained in the marriage for their sake, I should be prepared for the disappointing day when they would inevitably leave home. If I put my own interest above theirs and ignored them in my decision, I would earn their unending resentment. Thus, there was no answer and perhaps this is why the Mahabharata says:

*There is melancholic sadness at the very heart of kama.*

Part of the problem emanates from the fact that kama is blind primal energy, as the Vedic myth points out, embodying the unconscious power of instinct. This explains why the vast majority of rape cases are incestuous, among persons that one knows, not strangers. Hence, dharma, the power of discrimination, has to



step in, for unbridled kama can be dangerous. Even the god Brahma could not resist his daughter's beauty in the *Shiva Purana*. As the couple go around the sacred fire, Brahma sees Sati's naked feet; desire overcomes him, and four drops of semen fall to the ground. The gods are, after all, projections of human frailties.

I am also convinced that the ideal of modern marriage that Avanti and I had embraced unconsciously is also responsible for this dilemma. It is a recent phenomenon, as I have said, which was born around the industrial revolution, an ethos of the new emerging middle class. It combines three ideals—family, love and sex—all of which make exclusive and excessive demands on a couple. The original idea behind marriage was to raise a family; then a second ideal of romantic love was added; and finally, a third belief was appended—that one's partner should also be a great performer in bed. In earlier times, a man might have fulfilled these three distinctive needs through three different individuals according to a masculine perspective. A wife made a comfortable home and cared for his children; a lover met his romantic needs, albeit clandestinely; and a prostitute was always available for great sex on payment. This division of labour met the needs of men who were in comfortable circumstances. In my grandfather's time, a man did not have these contradictory expectations of modernity. He did not expect romance from marriage—it was a social duty to have children and perpetuate the family. If he felt the desire for great sex, he might have visited a prostitute; if he felt the need to combine romance with sex, he might have gone to a cultured and accomplished courtesan. It wouldn't have troubled him or my grandmother unduly. Of course, it was a one-sided business and my grandmother didn't have a choice; it was a patriarchal society.

Today we make intolerable demands on one individual to meet all the three needs—familial, romantic and sexual. A woman feels huge pressure to fulfil all the three tasks, plus the additional stress of having to make a successful career outside the home. All that *she* wants, according to Kamini Masi, is a 'love marriage with a good and loyal man'. The ambition of the modern marriage places a huge burden on a couple and this might also have been behind my unconscious desire in wanting both Avanti and Amaya. When the ideal of 'love marriage' took hold in the eighteenth-century West, it replaced an older, more mundane reason to get married—a motive that is still well and alive in India:

people marry because they reach the age of marriage; their families think they ought to 'settle down', protect a few assets they own, and raise a family. The modern 'love marriage' reached the new middle class in India via cinema and legitimized romantic love as the basis for marriage. Countless movie screens in the twentieth century showed moonlit nights and bumblebees on the Dal Lake in Kashmir, and young people rebelling against their parents, yearning for an institution based on feelings rather than economic and social status.

In the West, these feelings were encouraged by novels in the nineteenth century. They were certainly behind the tragic fate of the heroines of two of my all-time favourite novels, *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*. Both women had enviable financial security but were trapped in loveless marriages. Both had modern, romantic expectations from life, and they dared to fulfil them illicitly. Society, however, was not kind to their adulterous affairs and their lives brought heartbreaking tragedies. Had they lived in premodern times, they would have accepted their loveless lot. Or had society evolved a mechanism to meet the burdensome needs of love marriage, it might have been different. The response of modern bourgeois society has been to push the problem under the rug.

The dilemma of 'duty to the self' versus 'duty to another' is old and universal. It afflicted the House of Windsor egregiously in the twentieth century, creating a constitutional crisis. Edward VIII, the king of England, shocked the world when he chose kama over dharma. He abdicated the British throne for the love of Wallis Simpson, a divorced socialite. Sovereignty devolved upon his brother George VI and soon thereafter upon his niece, Queen Elizabeth II. At the time of Elizabeth's coronation in 1953, her sister, Margaret, wished to marry a divorcee, Peter Townsend, sixteen years her senior with two sons from a previous marriage. Since the Church did not permit remarriage after divorce, the young queen asked them to wait for a year—a bit like my mother—hoping that given time, the affair would peter out. But it did not. Queen Elizabeth agonized over the dilemma, trying to find a way out of the Royal Marriages Act, 1772, so that Princess Margaret could marry Townsend and also keep her allowance, her royal title, and stay in the country. But it didn't work out, and she had to force her sister to choose duty over love, even as the people of Britain stood solidly behind Margaret's romance. Unlike her uncle Edward, Elizabeth preferred duty to the State and the Church at the risk of breaking her sister's heart. This

dilemma was portrayed elegantly in a recent television series, *Crown*, shown in 2016 to high praise.

Edward and Margaret obviously chose kama over dharma but classical Indian tradition would have supported Elizabeth. The conflict between dharma and kama is debated candidly in the classical texts of ancient India, along with the third goal, artha, ‘material well-being’. Dharma almost always wins. The epic Mahabharata says that ‘dharma is the best, artha is the middling and kama is the lowest, and man should so act that dharma would be the principal goal of his life’. The less ambivalent Ramayana, obviously, sides with dharma. Manu believes that one should try and achieve all the three goals of the *trivarga*, but when they are in conflict dharma should be preferred. Even the secular non-dharmic texts, the *Kamasutra* and *Arthashastra*, are careful to toe the line of dharma. However, some of the medieval commentators took the opposite view. Yashodhara states in *Jayamangala* that kama is as basic to human life as food. Interesting analogy that! Kama is usually linked to procreation in the classical texts—to perpetuate the species. But here the commentator refers to what is good for the individual and not only for society, and the implication is in favour of the physicality of sexual love. He adds that if one denies desire, it only grows, and leads to an unhealthy state of frenzy which endangers the body.

~

In the end, kama won over dharma. I met Amaya a week later at Bombay Central. She looked even more beautiful than I had remembered, vulnerable and elegiac. Masses of shiny hair covered her big eyes. We took a taxi to a small but clean hotel in a quiet, leafy place in Wadala, a part of the city with parks and college campuses, but decidedly unfashionable. I drew Amaya to me in the taxi and began kissing her hands and her face.

‘What are you doing? Are you mad?’ she whispered in horror, pushing me away.

I tried to reassure her that riding a Bombay taxi was an anonymous experience.

‘Don’t, there are people on the road.’

As we were getting out of the taxi at the entrance to the hotel, someone went past on the road. Amaya grew afraid. ‘Let’s go in quickly,’ she whispered. The

lobby smelt of the cheap scent characteristic of small hotels. It was quiet and almost empty, and Amaya was relieved. We entered our room and I shut the door. She looked around and after she had reassured herself that we were alone, she fell on my chest. She looked pale, exhausted by the journey and the suspense. Our kiss was slow and prolonged. Her lips seemed to exude the moisture and fragrance of freshly cut flowers. Although it was our first kiss, it felt completely natural, as though we had known each other in another life. She turned around suddenly and looked again to see if anyone had seen us. I faced her intently, put my arms around her, and kissed her.

‘So here you are, at last!’ I said.

She turned away from me and pressed her handkerchief to her eyes. She was crying.

‘I am so happy,’ she said.

‘Let’s have some tea. You look exhausted.’

‘I’m scared.’

I rang for tea. It came quickly and as I poured it, she went and stood at the window with her back to me. She was crying again.

‘Come, come, this will warm you.’ I rose to comfort her. I put my hand on her shoulder and handed her the cup. The lace curtain spread a lattice across her body that I traced with my fingers. While she kept looking out of the window, I turned and saw my reflection in the mirror on the dresser. My hair was beginning to turn grey—I seemed to have grown older during the past year. And now with a grey head, I couldn’t believe I had fallen in love again.

I returned to the sofa and she joined me. It was tiny, barely able to hold the two of us and our knees were touching. It was the first time that either of us was going to be unfaithful and there was an awkward feeling about taking the next step. Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Amaya jumped up, her face a picture of consternation. It was the room boy, asking if we had any laundry to give and when he might clean the room. After closing the door, I saw that Amaya’s face had turned pale. Her long hair hung mournfully and her eyes were filled with tears again.

‘It’s wrong. I despise myself.’ She was speaking more to herself than to me. ‘It’s not my husband, I am deceiving myself. It’s wrong, even you will despise me.’

I reassured her that I could never despise her, but she remained nervous and

unhappy. I offered her some water which was lying in the jug on the table. She drank it in silence and felt better. I decided that we needed to get out of the room. She was reluctant at first but then agreed. We walked towards the docks, where I had heard that there was a restaurant frequented by shipping agents, their clients, and others who sailed on merchant ships. I thought we would have lunch there. We walked in silence and soon found a quiet park. It was mid-morning and the breeze had begun to blow from the sea. She sniffed the flowers in the park. I spotted a bench and she smiled for the first time.

‘Hello stranger, is this seat taken?’ she asked.

Both of us laughed; she seemed to relax for the first time and become the person that I remembered on the train. We sat and chatted cheerfully. She spoke about her life. She had married early. She was only nineteen and didn’t realize what she was doing. Her husband was a good, honest man but he was not her type. Ever since then, she had yearned for something more in her life. She found meaning in cinema, especially in the study of art films, but it also made her more and more discontented. The films confirmed to her that there was something else to live for. Then I came along, out of nowhere, and something happened. She suddenly felt that a different sort of life might be possible.

I was content to listen to her in the silence of the park—a quiet punctuated by the sounds of mynahs, parrots and taxis. Soon the monsoon sky began to get covered in clouds. She remembered what I had said on the train—about breaking the daily trance of busyness and inattention; it reminded her of something that her father used to say. Look at the sky at least once a day, he had taught her; focus on only one stretch, one piece of the sky and watch it change.

‘You’ll become aware of the air around you, Amar, the scent of the morning freshness, a tree, a garden wall overhung with green branches, a handsome cat, the face of a beautiful child. Try it one day! Begin with a section of the sky and watch it change . . . the rest of the day might turn out to be different. It might open your eyes.’

The sky above us, however, was now threatening rain. It began to drizzle. We jumped into a taxi and reached the restaurant well before the lunch crowd. Both of us were hungry. We talked openly, our conversations ranging from love, life and the city. She was her wilful self. The classic Catherine Deneuve look was back, and she was soon enjoying the admiring glances of those around us. Her hair kept falling on her face and she gently brushed it away with her hand. After

hair kept falling on her face and she gently brushed it away with her hand. After lunch, I asked her if I could show her something of Bombay. Museums? Art galleries? She did not answer. After some time, she said softly, 'Let's go back to the hotel.'

As we headed towards the street corner to hail a taxi, she walked ahead of me on the narrow pavement. I watched her hips shifting beneath her sari, an arousing movement of her rear against the light fabric. We sat close in the taxi and I felt her sari was charged with static electricity, clinging in wavelets to her thighs, and the charge seemed to slide across to me. She held my hand as the taxi turned and then glanced at the bustling city, its living people, and beyond towards the grey sky. She was no longer shy when we entered the lobby of the hotel and walked comfortably to our room. Once in the room, there was no awkwardness. She began to take off her sari without warning and suddenly she was naked. Her determined self was now in charge and she took the initiative.

Once in bed, she clung to me unconsciously and I felt stirring inside her a strange, growing passion, swelling till it filled her space. And then I began a rhythmic motion that was a deepening whirlpool, swirling deeper and deeper within her till she consisted only of feeling. She began to cry but it was different from the morning—these were inarticulate cries of life. She could soon feel me ebbing away, leaving her alone. The storm of weeping continued and then it was quiet. Soon, it was over for me. I lay still after I had finished. I began to withdraw but I never quite slipped out of her even after it was over. She receded into an unworldly silence and a mysterious zone so far away that I could not reach her. She clung to me and I held her close but we said nothing. She crept nearer and lay her hand on my chest, and before long, there was utter, incomprehensible stillness.

I mentioned the relationship between kama and dharma but I have an inkling that there might also be a connection between kama and moksha. In that stillness, after making love to Amaya, I truly experienced 'self-forgetting', living in the present, not the past or the future. Avanti believed that the mystic also lives in the present. In that stillness, I experienced a childlike sense of wonder, unclouded by the usual fear of the future or regret for the past. Avanti felt that in meditation, a spiritually evolved person raises his level of consciousness to another degree of perception where the past and the future disappear. Only the stillness of the present remains. This is why the *Kamasutra* reminds us that kama

is for its own sake, an end in itself, not for producing children or serving another end, such as transcendence, as the tantra philosophers would have us believe.

The next thing I remember hearing was the sound of water running in the shower. After some time, I followed her into the bathroom and I turned her around in the shower admiringly. She was pliant and docile without her clothes. She moved readily to my touch. She was utterly beautiful, surprisingly slim. A bit of dark hair between her legs. We stood beneath the shower. I nestled flat in the meeting of her behind. I began to scrub her back and then I soaped her breasts; we glistened beneath the water.

I wrapped her in both the towels. She felt soft as velvet as I carried her to the bed. We lay across it diagonally. We remained close for a long time, without talking. Gradually, I began to draw the towel apart with care. Her flesh appeared, still smelling a little of the soap. I put my arms around her; she opened her legs but I resisted the temptation to go in. I was content to hold her and feel her bare body beside mine. I didn't know what to think. I hardly knew her. Yes, I loved her but I wondered what she was really like. Who was this woman called Amaya? She turned to look at me.

'You are not on a power trip—that's what I like about you. You're as comfortable in a rundown taxi as in a chauffeur-driven Mercedes-Benz. None of the "managing director" stuff about you.'

I blushed.

'What will Avanti say when you get home?'

'She doesn't know.'

'Will you be staying with me tonight?'

'I shouldn't.'

'Do you want to?'

'Yes.'

'Then why don't you?'

'There will be less lying if I don't.'

'Do you love Avanti?'

'Yes, I do.'

'I don't love my husband.'

'That's the difference. Mine is a more difficult situation.'

'Does she love you?'

'Yes.'

Yes.

‘Do you love me?’

‘Yes.’

‘How can you love us both?’

‘I do. I love you both—that’s all I know, and I know it for sure.’

‘Eventually, Avanti will find out. What will you do then?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Marriage is overrated, you know.’

There was a long silence. She had quietly fallen asleep without another word. I continued to lie beside her as she slept. Then I went and stood by the open window, looking out at the lights and the night. It was one of those moments when you can hardly believe that you are alive and are deserving of such happiness.

~

And so, we began our affair. Amaya came to visit me once a month. She would come usually for a few days and always wanted to stay in the same hotel, in the same anonymous, unfashionable middle-class neighbourhood where she felt safe in the belief that we wouldn’t run into anyone we knew. I would meet her twice a day—at lunch and in the evenings after work. We made love both times and afterwards there were clandestine partings, and I would go home to Avanti and the children in time for dinner. I have lingering memories of quick disrobing, the unveiling, the exposure of our bodies, and of our secret talk. The carnality of the affair was brutal. I was surprised at her capacity for simple sexual pleasure: her voice would change as quickly as her personality, assuming a hoarse, brazen, almost dissolute sound; her cheeks warm with a touch of red on the cheekbones, would be ardent, reminding me of the girls that Anand would occasionally go to meet in Bombay’s slums. At the same time, she could turn phrases and do things that got inside me and made me feel alive. I hold memories of a certain dignity in the way she responded to stray comments about people on the street or in the hotel; of glancing through the trees towards the horizon; in observing the dusky light filtering through the curtain in the evening, falling on her naked body. Her integrity lay in her consistent and determined belief in what she wanted from life, and in this she was true to herself.



‘*Mar gai main!*’—I am dead—is what Amaya would sometimes utter in Hindi, at the point of climax, which would also push me over the top. In France, they call it *la petite mort*, ‘the little death’. The dictionary defines it as the post-orgasmic state of unconsciousness after a sexual act, with the release of chemicals that relax the body, leaving it in a state of euphoria. In brain scans on women in the throes of orgasm, neuroscientists have found lower blood flow to parts of the brain. Avanti too had voiced ‘little death’ once but in a very different sense to mean the spiritual release of the soul that comes with transcendence through the expenditure of the ‘life force’. Her guru had taught her that orgasm is the closest some people come to a spiritual experience of the divine because of the momentary loss of the self. It is in a sense, he said, a rehearsal of the ‘big death’ when one is released from the human bondage of the cycle of births and deaths.

The affair with Amaya made me reclaim a degree of leisure in my frenetic activity-filled life at the office and at home. I realized that leisure is not the same as the absence of activity. It lies in the stillness of conversations; a feeling of oneness when Amaya and I were near each other and not necessarily making love. It was in looking forward to seeing each other; then in the slow pleasure of enjoying each moment when we met. Nothing quite concentrates the mind in the present as kama. When I was with Amaya, my mind seemed to focus only on the sensations present at that time and I lived exclusively in and for those moments, forgetting the normal human condition which is to long for immortality. I failed to remember that I inhabited an impermanent universe in which at the end there is only death. Kama, by affirming life, taught me that this is how life ought to be lived: in the here and now; this is the natural way of love.

When I compare my love for Amaya to my adolescent love for Isha, I cannot help but conclude that love at a later age seems to be richer and finer than young love. This was also the conclusion of the French writer Marie-Henri Beyle, better known by his pseudonym Stendhal:

*For the very young, love is like a huge river which sweeps everything before it, so that you feel that it is a restless current. Now a [mature] sensitive person has acquired some self-knowledge . . . will be a thousand times more brilliant and durable than those of the sixteen-year-old, whose privileges are simply happiness and joy. Thus, the later love will be less gay, but more passionate.*

Amaya’s greatest gift to me was to open the door to ‘pleasure’, the other

meaning of kama. In contrast to kama pessimists, Aristotle's ideas on pleasure had come to me like a fresh breeze during my college days. My favourite Greek philosopher has a balanced view of life, somewhat similar to the ancient Indian sages who invented multiple goals of life. Aristotle's ideal life gives a prominent place to pleasure, and I think he would have understood my life of pleasure with Amaya even if he wouldn't have exactly approved. Of course, he was partial to 'intellectual' pleasure (in contrast to 'sensual' pleasure) but with his usual common sense, he pointed out that even eating, drinking and sex are necessary and pleasurable aspects of the natural human life. Excessive indulgence is what is bad, not pleasure itself.

Aristotle defines pleasure as an 'unimpeded activity'. By 'activity', he doesn't mean that one needs to be active in an athletic sort of way; even the activity of resting on a beach and watching the waves can give pleasure. But his point is that pleasure is not the consequence of an activity or a separate activity; the activity itself is enjoyable. In other words, making love to Amaya and 'enjoying making love to Amaya' are undifferentiated—they are not two different activities. Aristotle also warns that if I engage in two activities at the same time—reading and listening to music, for example—I am likely to get less pleasure from either; to enjoy music is to listen to it effortlessly and not be distracted by reading and vice versa. If I eat sweets in the theatre, I am likely to diminish my enjoyment of the play.

Opposed to Aristotle was another school of thought in ancient Greece called 'hedonism'. Somewhat like the Charvakas in India, hedonists believed that pleasure is the highest good and every human being should strive to minimize pain and maximize pleasure. This is the secret of happiness. Ethical hedonism is supposed to have originated with Aristippus of Cyrene, a student of Socrates, but its most famous advocate was another ancient Greek, Epicurus, who thought that the greatest good was the absence of pain. He believed in modest, sustainable pleasure, in a calm, free and tranquil state. This came through living virtuously and rationally among friends. He praised the simpler pleasures, and advised abstinence from overindulgence in bodily desires—for example, eat moderately; likewise, with sex. A wise life of pleasure entailed neither to harm another nor be harmed. He too had a bias for intellectual pleasure; he felt that it was less important what you ate than who you ate with. The best state of mind a person could achieve is one of calm serenity.

A modern version of hedonism, utilitarianism has had a huge influence on policymakers in recent times. It is associated with two British philosophers, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, who believed that the duty of the state is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain among its citizens. Their liberal followers placed some of the blame for the citizens' misery on social conditions and believed that the state could ameliorate them through reform. They contributed indirectly to the creation of the 'welfare state' in the second half of the twentieth century. Instead of 'pleasure', they used the word 'utility' and their goal was to maximize it.

Freud's concept of the 'pleasure principle' has also influenced thinking in modern times. Based on the simple idea that human beings seek pleasure and avoid pain, it serves as a 'positive mechanism' that motivates a person to recreate in the future pleasurable situations, avoiding painful ones. Darwin gives the example of the most practical definition of pleasure I have come across: 'I heard a child a little under four years old, when asked what was meant by being in good spirits, answer, "It is laughing, talking, and kissing."' Freud contrasted the pleasure principle with the 'reality principle' which gives a person the ability to defer immediate gratification of a desire. Infants and children are governed far more by the pleasure principle but as we mature, alas, we learn to postpone gratification in favour of long-term goals. Hence, Mill, following Plato, differentiated between higher and lower pleasures, with a definite preference for the former, more intellectual ones.

A contemporary kama optimist is the French philosopher Michel Onfray, who defines hedonism as an 'introspective attitude to life based on taking pleasure yourself and giving pleasure to others without hurting yourself or others'. He seeks a joyous aesthetic of sensuality that engages the brain's and the body's capacities to their fullest extent. He has thus explored the sources of sensual pleasure in science, painting, food, wine and sex. But his quest for pleasure is also deeply ethical because one must never indulge in it at the expense of another. My main reservation about hedonism is its insistence that pleasure and pain are the sole basis of intrinsic value. I value beauty, goodness and justice even though I may not have experienced them or derived pleasure from them. They are good in themselves—there are other things we value besides pleasure.

One day, while Amaya and I were making love, I thought suddenly, 'I am making love to Amaya.' Thus, I was no longer making love, but thinking, 'I am making love.' I became aware of my 'self' watching myself. When I was watching myself, I wasn't making love any more. They were two different experiences. The first experience was of making love and the second was the thought, 'I am making love.' I could not do both simultaneously. To think about making love I had to stop making love, at least briefly, in order to 'think about making love'. The unconscious present of making love was lost, replaced by a conscious thinking moment. My inner experience had changed. I was no longer in the unthinking present, no longer experiencing the pleasure of making love. I was thinking of my 'self' rather than unconsciously making love—thinking perhaps about how I could do it better, how I could become a better lover.

One of the great discoveries of ancient Indian philosophers was to find these two persons within us: the doer and the observer—what is called 'reflexive consciousness' in western philosophy. One of them is making love; the second is reflecting on the person who is making love. It made me aware that the doer in me was living a life focused on the present while the witness in me was concerned with observing and judging the doer. The doer kept changing from one moment to the next, as a different sensation entered into my head. What provides continuity between this moment and the next is the observing self, which creates the illusion that I am the same person from one moment to the next. The ancient philosophers in the Upanishads were aware of this dichotomy and they called the observer *ahamkara*, 'I-ness'. But they also realized that 'I-ness' (or the ego) is the principal cause of human problems. It is responsible for envy, status anxiety and other 'egoistic' and selfish behaviour. Hence, they proposed that the only authentic way to live is 'self-forgetting', learning to forget the 'I-ness'.

The concept of presence has long been familiar to Buddhists, who believe that the experience from moment to moment is the only reality. The 'permanent I' is an illusion, a narrative fiction of 'I-ness' that provides continuity, making me believe there is a 'self' that I cannot feel or touch but which continues from one moment to the next. The only authentic life is in the present moment; in recent years, this idea has grown popular in the West under the name of 'mindfulness'. It teaches one to fully inhabit one's experience. My father used to say that the

It teaches one to fully inhabit one's experience. My father used to say that the great human flaw is to live in an abstract future rather than in the concrete present. The genuine way to live is for the present—focused on the 'acting self', who is only aware of the moment. Our memory creates the illusion that the 'I' of this moment of making love is the same as the 'I' of the moment when I am thinking of making love. It creates the illusion of a separate thinker who provides continuity to our experiences in the past. Ironically, our recollections, our memories are also taking place in the present. Thus, it is not possible to separate ourselves from our present experience; our life consists entirely of present moments.

Kama has made me aware of this old truth. I have spent a lifetime looking forward to pleasure in the future but when it does arrive, I don't slow down to enjoy it. I keep looking forward to the next pleasure. Thus, I am chronically disappointed. I have to thank Amaya—and the leisurely experience of making love to her—for making me aware that leisure is not only a luxury but it is essential to the human spirit. It is in the 'slow living' in the present moment that creativity is also born. Galileo invented the clock while watching leisurely a pendulum swing in a cathedral. I consider kama a 'duty to oneself' because the act of love forces one to be in the present—it make one 'alive' to the moment. It is quite the opposite of our productivity-oriented work culture, which prizes 'hard work' and makes us plan forever for the future. Our ancients realized this connection between kama and creativity, which must have been one of the reasons why they raised it to one of the goals of a flourishing life. To become aware of this higher purpose of kama, a 'duty to oneself', can help reclaim our primordial humanity.



## HAPPY LOVE HAS NO HISTORY

*Is it possible to trust someone who has not been unfaithful?*

*You are what your deep, driving desire is.  
As your desire is, so is your will.  
As your will is, so is your deed.  
As your deed is, so is your destiny.*

—Brihadaranyaka Upanishad IV.4.5

One evening in the park with Amaya, I suddenly felt helpless. The ground was unsteady and twisting sideways, and I fell into a flower bed. This happened a little over six months after we began our affair. With Amaya's arm around my shoulder, and my arm around the small of her back, I hobbled up the path on to the road, and we took a cab to the Port Trust hospital nearby. Meant for the employees of the Port Trust, it made an exception and treated me in the emergency room. I had broken a bone just above the ankle. When I got home, I had to lie to Avanti about what had happened. My explanation was so stilted that even I didn't believe it.

So, the deception began. I piled lies upon lies and grew more and more uncomfortable. While convalescing and feeling bored at home one day, my eyes fell on an old copy of the Old Testament that someone had left behind in our flat. I leafed through it aimlessly and stopped at the terrifying verse from Leviticus. In it, God asks Moses to tell the Israelites:

*If a man commits adultery with another man's wife . . . both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.*

I grew afraid. The verse took me back to my unhappy days at the Christian missionary school, where I learnt to feel guilty about any sort of pleasure, especially the bodily kind. They taught me that it needed willpower to resist

temptation and only the weak-willed strayed. Even in my parents' home, the expression 'a life of pleasure', such as the lives of Ramu Mama and Anand, had disparaging overtones. I looked at the sun rays streaking in through the embroidered curtains that Avanti had brought from a visit to Jaipur.

I had been genuinely torn between the two women in the past six months. It was a different love I felt for each one but it was true and authentic in both cases. And it could have gone either way. I used to waver by the day, by the week. On some days, I thought I couldn't live without Amaya. On others, I felt only Avanti and the girls would make my life meaningful. I was at an impasse.

A gentle breeze began to blow and the curtains began to move gently. I decided that I couldn't stand the abnormality of my life any more. I hated the deception. It was unhealthy to live in this way. I was constantly in conflict and struggling to make sense of the direction in which I should go. I was in a quandary. In the midst of these unhappy musings, Avanti arrived.

'You're home early?' I said.

'Yes, the interview finished early, and I was concerned about your ankle, and so I thought I would write it up later.'

'Who were you interviewing?'

'Just some dumb idiot in the health ministry. Are you hungry? The girls will be home soon. Would you like a snack with them?'

I didn't answer. Avanti looked at me with concern.

'You look miserable. I know this injury must be difficult, sitting around the house all day.'

'I want to tell you something, Avanti.'

'What is it?' There was concern in her voice.

'Oh, nothing.'

'What?' She looked at me insistently.

'Well . . . I've gone and fallen in love. It's absurd, I know. A big mistake, I'm sure. I met her in July on the train to Pune when I had gone for Ashok's memorial service. She lives in Baroda and teaches film at the university there.'

There was pin-drop silence.

'So, this has been going on for a long time?'

'It was wrong of me not to tell you, but I thought it wouldn't last. I figured I'd get over it. I didn't want to worry you.'

There was a pause.



‘Is she beautiful?’

‘Yes.’

Another pause.

‘It’s funny!’ she muttered.

‘What?’

She was speaking quickly as though to herself. ‘I am foolish, a blind fool—I didn’t notice a thing.’ She stopped suddenly and then resumed: ‘Everything’s been just the same. Better, in fact. You’ve been kinder.’

She gave me a puzzled look. I was feeling cold although it was a warm day.

‘Why tell me about it today?’

‘Because it’s been getting to me. I have been feeling guilty. I lied to you about my injury.’ Then I told her the whole story.

‘But you are in love . . . so you must be happy!’ she said in a bitter, unnatural voice.

‘I am not, that’s the thing. I love you.’

‘Then why?’ she asked.

Before I could reply, she left the room. Soon I heard the sound of plates breaking. I rushed to the kitchen and found Avanti hurling on the floor, plate after plate, cup after cup, and our prized bone china too which my parents had given us at our wedding—the Wedgewood set had come to my mother as dowry from my grandfather and she had passed it on to us. I tried to stop her but she pushed me away and continued with the demolition. I couldn’t bear it and left the house, hobbling on my crutches. I returned after an hour and noticed that the porcelain china cupboard was empty. Every single piece was lying shattered on the kitchen floor.

I went and sat on the sofa in my study. Avanti came in after an hour and sat down at the desk, her face ashen-white.

‘Why don’t you marry her?’ she asked.

‘Because I am happy with you and the girls.’

‘And you love me?’ She had tears in her eyes.

‘I adore you.’

‘You don’t want a divorce?’

‘No.’

‘What’s wrong with our marriage?’ she asked.

‘It’s a good marriage.’

it's a good marriage.

'Then why?'

Avanti got up. I feared another bust-up. She circled the room like a beast, twice, and then sat down.

'Where are the girls?' I asked.

'With their friends. I called Sheila and asked her to keep them for the night.' She looked at me, desperation in her eyes. 'Why is this happening? What am I going to do? There are people coming home tonight.' She looked at her watch.

'Who?'

'Ramu Mama, Kamini Masi, Anand and . . . I thought they would cheer you up . . . you have been in low spirits since your injury. It was meant to be a surprise.' She was shaking.

'Oh!'

She looked out of the window at the sky and said, 'I had gone out.'

'Where?' I began to grow afraid.

'Marine Drive.'

'Why?'

'I went to fling the ruby into the sea.'

'The ruby necklace!' I was aghast.

'Then I thought of dear Ramu Mama. And I thought, why hurt the poor man—he's been so good to us.'

'You didn't chuck it?'

'No, don't worry, it's back in the safe upstairs.'

I was relieved.

'Is she good in bed?'

'Yes.'

'Is the sex really good?' she asked in a harsh voice.

'Avanti,' I pleaded, 'why must we speak about . . . ?'

'I want to know!' she said, raising her voice.

There was another pause.

'Tell me, what shall I tell the girls?'

'Nothing.'

'But they will have to know.'

'Why?'

'And what will they tell their friends?'

‘You are moving too quickly.’

‘Here, just the other day I was saying to the little one that you were working too hard . . . and you . . . you were romping with your lover . . . What shall we tell our guests tonight?’

‘Nothing.’

‘But they will sense it.’

‘You can blame me.’

‘That’s easy,’ she said with a hoarse laugh.

‘How could I have wronged you so . . . so deeply.’

‘Stop it! Blaming yourself is easy. Makes you feel noble and humble.’

‘I feel ashamed. I can hardly breathe.’

‘Your self-pity is sickening.’ She gave me a look of such loathing that I recoiled.

There was a long silence.

‘Tell me about your woman. I don’t even know her name.’

‘Amaya.’

‘That’s a nice name. What’s she like?’

I didn’t say anything.

‘I want to know. I want to meet her.’

‘What!’ I was shocked.

‘Do you have a picture of her?’

‘Really, this is too much.’

‘Show me her picture.’

I limped across to the drawer of my desk and pulled out Amaya’s photo from a jumble of papers and gave it to Avanti.

‘She is beautiful! What lovely hair too. No wonder you fell for her. ‘How old is she?’

‘Thirty.’

‘Ten years younger than me. She’ll steal you from me, I’m sure.’

By the time we were done with our conversation, the sun had set. It was getting dark and a spring cloud hung over the balcony; behind the trees the horizon was clear in the fading glow of twilight. The guests were expected soon. Both of us went to the kitchen and cleaned up the mess and then went upstairs to dress for dinner.

Although Avanti put up a brave front at the party, she was in torment the

entire evening. She didn't get much sleep that night, and in the morning I met her at the dining table.

'So, where do we go from here?' she asked.

'I don't know.'

'Are you going to marry her?'

'No.'

She was pensive; she seemed to be speaking to herself. 'Where does this leave us—the girls and me?' Before I could say anything, she asked, 'Tell me, where did I go wrong?' Her eyes were wet.

'Nothing. You're not to blame. It is me, me . . . I have done wrong . . . I still love you.'

'How is that possible?' she exclaimed. She then looked at me and quickly looked away. There was silence. I could hear the clock ticking. When she spoke again, her voice was low, almost a whisper.

'How is that possible?' she repeated the question as though speaking to herself. 'How can you love two people—it's disgusting!'

'Maybe it's a sickness, and it will heal.'

'What do I say to your mother? She's coming next week. But she never liked me, anyway.'

'Oh, forget her. It will be over soon.'

There was another silence.

'So, when do you want to leave?'

'I don't.'

'But you'll have to.'

'I love you and I adore the children.'

She explained that she had thought over the matter and decided that it would be impossible for us to live together in the same house. She thought it would be a good idea if I started looking for a place to stay. When I mentioned the kids, she said she would find a way to tell them something, and she got up and left.

~

There is an abundance of clichés surrounding adultery but the truth is that it is different each time. What hurt the most in my conversation with Avanti was her recollection of the innocent babble of our four-year-old . . . about my supposedly

working hard when I was, in fact, cavorting with Amaya. A verse from a medieval Sanskrit anthology has the same ring about it, awaking the painful memory.

*Again today  
Your cruel father has not come  
child, the day is over  
darkness has swallowed the path  
let us sleep.*

I concluded from our talk that the normal human intuition about adultery is mostly correct: cheating in a marriage is unethical for many reasons. By falling in love with Amaya, I had broken a promise to Avanti and was guilty of wrongdoing. I was also responsible for hurting Amaya by making her an occasional companion who would always come ‘second’; although she didn’t protest, it would eventually affect her image of herself. Her husband was the third aggrieved party although he did not know as yet about our affair. Our children were also victims, for Avanti’s pain would flow down to them. Finally, our parents couldn’t be unaffected. Moreover, there was the guilt of deception; I had lied to Avanti. For all these reasons, I felt diminished in my own eyes. I had always thought of myself as a certain type of person, and now my sense of self-worth was shaken.

I wondered if there might be any way to mitigate my guilty conscience. After all, there are situations when even lying (to save a life) or killing (in self-defence) can be justified. Could there be a ‘good’ affair, or at least, not a ‘bad’ one? What about the duty of kama, one’s duty to oneself? In this moral reverie, I had so far dwelled on dharma but could there be circumstances to override one’s duty to others? Could there be benefits from the affair that might outweigh the suffering? I tried to imagine a situation where both couples had terrible marriages, and in these circumstances, the happiness from a genuine affair of the heart (or even a divorce) would outweigh the pain caused to others. This was obviously not true in my case. But there could be situations where I could argue that I had a duty to look after my emotional well-being. Even if adultery is generally wrong, could there be conditions under which it might be morally right? A strict duty moralist would say ‘no’ and insist that I adhere to a code of ‘no cheating’. A strict ethical egoist, however, who justified his acts purely on

the basis of maximizing his own pleasure would come to the opposite conclusion. But these are extremes and generally most people's intuition falls in between.

These moral musings left me troubled and uneasy. The ideal thing, I suppose, is to not be tempted; if one is, then not to rationalize one's self-serving behaviour by appealing to the duty of kama. There are no easy answers in ethics and it often comes down to one's own judgement and self-image. Of course, one should do right by others, but it is also important to do right by oneself. My concern for Amaya made me think about the importance of self-respect. Just as my own self-image was diminished by this affair, I wondered if Amaya's affair with a married man lessened the respect that she owed to herself.

'Romantic love is adulterous by definition.' There has always been a conflict between romance and marriage. Religious and political establishments want a married couple to live faithful, predictable lives for the well-being of their children, the family, the social order and the species. But there have existed at all times free-spirited individuals, often artists and writers, who have sought happiness through passionate love. These kama optimists were a subversive force, for they challenged the safe and steady order created by the kama realists. They have existed everywhere but in ancient India they belonged to a long tradition which flowered in the classical Gupta age and persisted in the medieval courts. The poets wrote mostly about the pleasures of illicit love and rarely praised faithfulness.

*. . . and there is the deep shyness  
of one's own wife  
the most beautiful and most  
graceful showing  
her love  
opening flower  
but who in this world can  
fill one with joy  
like another man's wife  
loving with naked breast.*

The pleasures of adultery may be momentary and often mixed with fear, but they are clearly worth it, according to these poets. As I said, an adulteress is called asati in Sanskrit and there is even a term, *abhisarika*, to describe the woman who

visits her lover's house at night. Straightforward admissions of adultery, such as the one below, are charming but rare.

*'Where are you going, fair maid, on such a night?'*

*'To where he dwells that is dearer than my life.'*

*'And fear you not, so young, to go alone?'*

*'But Kama is my escort who has well-feathered shafts.'*

What drives one to illicit love is often the deathly routine of domestic, conjugal sex or the complete lack of it, as I knew so well from my life with Avanti. The *Kamasutra*, of course, offers instruction on how to seduce other men's wives and its supreme lesson is not to get caught.

Adultery was common in the premodern West too, especially among men, when marriages were arranged. But why does it persist in the modern world when romantic love has entered the marriage scene? Since the nineteenth century, novels and plays in the West have dealt mostly with the younger generation's struggle to establish 'love marriage', replacing the traditional one of parental choice. Young people have since grown up believing that romance is a noble thing and above the laws and customs of society. The attitudes, earlier confined to poets and artists, have become democratized as today's youth think that one has not lived until they have experienced passion at least once in life. The 'honeymoon' symbolizes romance within marriage as the couple run away for a few days from the mundane demands of domestic life. But inevitably, romance fades over time, and they become vulnerable to adultery. No one teaches them that the desire for possession is much more exciting than possession itself—'to possess her is to lose her'.

My mother did warn me. During the turbulent days when I insisted on marrying Avanti, she cautioned that marriage is about getting accustomed to one another and to routine and lasting it out. Romance is the opposite, feeding on obstacles, short excitations and sorrowful partings. The advantage of the Indian 'arranged marriage', she felt, was that you entered into it without illusions. You knew from the beginning that it was forever and you tried to create conditions for lastingness. In modern 'love marriage', you are not prepared. When conflicts of temperament or tastes surface, you ask insistently, 'Why did I marry?' And since you are brainwashed by romantic propaganda, you seize the first occasion to fall in love with somebody else. This is just as easy now for women since

more and more are educated and working.

In the West, after the sexual liberation in the 1960, the young have lost much of their regard for marriage. Today, they breathe a permissive culture of the Internet. However, many are still drawn to the ideal of remaining faithful, bringing up children and living through thick and thin. But marriage is going out of fashion and adultery is not even worthy of gossip. The old protections provided by society's safety measures and social compulsions are fading. When you are the victim of adultery or separation or divorce, you are on your own, mostly alone in your unhappiness.

Is there an irreconcilable contradiction between marriage and human longing? Is adultery a law of nature? There are some marriages that combine harmoniously the ideals of romance and family and endure happily despite adultery. But they seem to be an exception. When the physicality of desire diminishes in a marriage but love between the two is still deep and mature, how does one prevent the calm love of a happy marriage from being shattered by the storm of a new desire for another person? This was at the heart of the crisis in my marriage. The other difficulty was that middle-class society had not found a way to cope with adultery. Of course, with the breakdown of marriage, western society is more relaxed now about personal living arrangements. But the India in which I grew up was not so different from Anna Karenina's Russia. A third problem was one of authenticity. I found it impossible to sleep with Amaya and not spoil the things I cared about at home with Avanti and the girls. My inner feelings began to differ from what I displayed to the outer world, particularly after my accident. I felt the endless deception corroding my spirit—the same spirit, ironically, that Amaya had been responsible for energizing and lifting.

2

After Avanti's announcement, I was in shock all morning. I went through the motions at the office but I was unable to focus on anything. The world had collapsed around me and I didn't know what to do. The only certainty in my mind was that I didn't want to lose Avanti and the girls. I phoned Kamini Masi. Perceptive as ever, she had detected that something was wrong the night before. I asked her to meet me for lunch and I told her everything. I begged her to meet Avanti. 'I'm afraid she is going to leave me. Please speak to her.' She phoned

|   |  |  |   |  |   |  |  |   |   |    |   |  |   |    |  |   |      |
|---|--|--|---|--|---|--|--|---|---|----|---|--|---|----|--|---|------|
| A |  |  | 1 |  | 1 |  |  | 1 | 1 | 11 | . |  | 1 | 6. |  | 1 | (T.) |
|---|--|--|---|--|---|--|--|---|---|----|---|--|---|----|--|---|------|



Avanti as soon as she got home and asked her to come by after work. 'It's urgent, my dear!' They spent the evening together and the same night Kamini Masi met me in a quiet corner at the Bombay Gym.

'All is not yet lost, my boy. She is unsure,' Kamini Masi said. 'It matters to Avanti that you were not disloyal even though you were unfaithful.' This was the conclusion that Kamini Masi drew from her tête-à-tête with her. Then she went on to recount what had transpired between them.

'Everything is finished now, after what has happened—it's over!' Avanti had declared. 'I love him dearly and there are the children—I am tied, you see. But I cannot bear the thought of another woman in our lives. It's torture.'

'I feel terrible,' I said. 'I wish I could take her pain away in some way and make it my own.'

She gave me a strangely censorious look and said, 'What have you gone and done, Amar!'

'I feel miserable, Kamini Masi.'

Kamini Masi returned to her conversation with Avanti, who had told her: 'It's been going on for more than six months, and I didn't suspect anything, believing that I was the only woman in his life. It never entered my head that there could be someone else. Just when you are convinced that you are happy . . . suddenly there is a tragedy . . .'

'Poor thing, she broke down and hid her face in her hands,' Kamini Masi recounted to me. 'I was deeply moved by her agony and tried to comfort her.' I told her, "Your pain is my pain, Avanti. You are the best thing in Amar's life. I have known you both ever since two innocent, charming teenagers came to deliver a package at the Imperial Hotel in Delhi; I cheered when you got married. And now after more than twenty years, the only thing I am sure of is that Amar is a person of integrity and he loves you. These things happen in life, and I'm sure it will pass. Give him a chance. He is filled with remorse."

Kamini Masi stopped suddenly and looked at me suspiciously. 'You're not going to make a liar out of me, Amar—you do love her, don't you? You do feel remorse?'

'Of course,' I said.

She resumed her account.

'I can imagine being carried away by desire,' Avanti had told her. 'But deceiving me deliberately for six months . . . And to go on being my husband at

the same time as . . . as this . . . this slut. She is pretty, Kamini Masi, and ten years younger. I have no chance.'

'Give *him* another chance, Avanti. I'm sure he doesn't want to break the marriage. He knows what a jewel he has in you . . . besides he loves you.'

'But I haven't exactly been a good wife,' said Avanti. 'We haven't made love for ages—and it's my fault. I love him but I have gone off the physical thing. I know it bothers him—he even went to Ramu Mama for advice, and they consulted a psychologist. Is this all that men care about, Kamini Masi?'

'I'm no expert,' Kamini Masi replied, but men do seem to care more about the physical thing. The sensible ones though, like your man and mine, they would never jeopardize their homes and families. We should allow them a little slack, I think, for their sanity and ours. Amar is good-hearted and he's ashamed for the children's sake and for yours.'

'Yes, yes,' Avanti said. 'I realize that his position must be terrible too—it is worse for the guilty than the innocent—if he knows he is the cause of all the misery. But how am I to forgive him? How can I be his again after this? For me to live with him now would be too painful. Just because I love him as I do, just because I cherish everything we have had in the past . . .'

'And she broke down again,' said Kamini Masi.

'That awful woman is young; she's so good-looking, you have to see her hair!' Avanti went on bitterly. 'Look at me, my youth is gone, my looks are gone.'

'No, no, you are still very attractive!' I reassured Avanti. Gradually, she began to calm down.'

'He is such a noble person—why did he do it?' Avanti kept asking insistently.

'I had no good answer to give her and merely said, "Do we ever really know why we do the things that we do?" She grew thoughtful again and I said to her, "I don't know how much love there is still in your heart for him. You alone know whether there is enough to be able to forgive. If there is, then forgive him!'

'Yes, but he has kissed her . . . he has slept with her. What am I to do, Kamini Masi? Help me, I have gone over and over this all night and all day and I can see no way out.'

'I couldn't think of anything to say, Amar. Every word she uttered went straight to my heart. She is not your average woman. She has dignity in the way

straight to my heart. She is not your average woman. She has dignity in the way she controls herself and doesn't give in to emotional displays. Neither is she your typical Bombay society lady—she means what she says. She is not only the mother of your two daughters—she is a person in her own right. She is natural, elegant, without guile. And then she has another dimension which is beyond my reach.'

'But why do you think there is hope for me?' I asked with desperation.

'By what she said at the end. Avanti will forgive you for having an affair because you didn't flaunt it—you didn't make it public. You protected her. She may think that you lied to her, but in fact, you were safeguarding your investment in a life together. Infidelity is merely a matter of the flesh—a weakness that humans are prone to, like needing to pee. Loyalty is a matter of the heart.'

I was completely overwhelmed by what this wonderful woman had just said.

'And there is something else we talked about. Betrayal. There are many ways to betray a person. Certainly, adultery makes for news but there are lesser, though no less powerful, ways to betray, including not talking to your wife, being ill-tempered, seeming distracted, or simply being bored and boring. All of us know people like that.'

'If anyone can save my marriage, Kamini Masi, it is you!' And I hugged her impulsively.

'You do love her, don't you?'

'I love her with all my heart . . . but the thing is that I also love Amaya.'

'Well, you will have to choose.'

'I honestly don't know what to do.'

'You can't have both.'

~

Kamini Masi was right: I had to choose. So, I engaged reluctantly in the unhappy task of comparing the two women. The affair with Amaya had certainly brought the excitement of variety, the thrill of the unknown and the pure physical bliss of sex, untethered by any emotional attachment or anxiety. On the other hand, my marriage to Avanti had created a deeper, longer-lasting and more fulfilling relationship that had enhanced other aspects of my life. They had both brought happiness but it was of different kinds. It would be ideal, I thought, if I could

combine the two—to have the security and a deep, enduring sense of emotional satisfaction that comes from marriage with the animalistic thrill and pleasure of a novel, uncommitted affair. The more I thought about it, the more impossibly utopian the idea seemed.

Divorce is, of course, the natural alternative to adultery. I examined the possibility of leaving Avanti and marrying Amaya. Curiously, I had never given divorce a second thought because I could not imagine a life without Avanti. I had told Amaya at the outset that I loved Avanti and the children and would never leave them. While divorce has the advantage of being open and legal, I reasoned, it is no better than adultery in breaking the ethical duty of fidelity—the promise of the wedding vow. It also does more damage to the children by making the break permanent. Its main advantage is that it breaks the deception that is usually associated with adultery. Divorce might present greater harm to the relationship since it is final—a marriage cannot survive divorce whereas it can survive adultery. Besides, I could not even begin to imagine a final break with Avanti. Hence, I concluded that in my situation divorce was not viable (and might not even be ethically preferable to adultery).

This conversation with my conscience was not taking me anywhere. I didn't want to lose Avanti, but I found it difficult to break with Amaya. I was genuinely torn. There must be something wrong with me to love two persons at the same time. The two seemed to fulfil different needs but both loves were real. Many will judge me badly, I know, but that would be wrong. Why can't a human being genuinely love two people at the same time? I also wondered if by loving both Avanti and Amaya, whether I was unavoidably shortchanging both. After all, you cannot love a second person without taking something away from the first. Right? No, wrong. This assumes that whatever you give when you love is limited or scarce, so that giving some love to Amaya means giving less of it to Avanti. This might be true with things like money or even time, but not with affection. If a parent can love more than one child equally, why can't a romantic lover?

Perhaps the answer to this frustrating riddle of kama lies in the distinction between desire and love. Desire is a mysteriously vague wish, a helpless craving, a sharp longing, and confusingly out of control. Love, on the other hand, is a steadfast, continuing presence. If desire is brief, love is lasting. If desire drifts

beyond the veils of propriety, love is generally confined within social expectations. It does not need constant sexual expression to affirm it; it is mostly there and sometimes does not even expect a response. Yet, it is as vulnerable as desire because memories make you feel as though it is forever. At that point, you feel liberated as though your love does not depend on the beloved, just as the beloved does not depend on your love.

What all this mental debate was leading to was a realization that my feelings for Amaya were closer to desire and for Avanti closer to love, although it was not as clear-cut as it appears in black-and-white prose on this page. And it was natural for Avanti to expect fidelity from me. Moreover, I was supposed to love her exclusively as a part of our wedding vows. But what if, theoretically speaking, Avanti had not sought exclusivity? What if we had made clear to each other from the beginning that we would not restrict our affections? There do exist such marriages although they are rare. Deborah Anapol, a clinical psychologist, helped to found a movement in the 1980s based on the idea of 'open' relationships. She invented a new word, 'polyamory', in her book, *Love without Limits*. The movement caught on and the word entered the *Oxford English Dictionary*: 'The practice of engaging in multiple sexual relationships with the consent of all the people involved.' It is based on the assumption that love is by definition not monogamous.

Although we had never spoken about it, I knew that Avanti was essentially oriented to monogamy, believing that love included the promise of exclusive affection. But I could imagine another woman who might see things differently. Sociobiology, as I have said before, tells us that human beings are by nature polygamous. It is social customs, laws, religion and conditioning that have forced us into monogamy. In other words, monogamy and fidelity require effort whereas polygamy comes naturally. But customs and habits do change and in the contemporary West it is rare to find anyone who has had only one sexual partner for an entire lifetime. The issue there is not so much whether to love one person or more than one—it is whether to have multiple partners sequentially or at the same time. There is no scientific evidence that monogamy is better in terms of health, happiness or longevity. Nor is there evidence that women are biologically inclined to prefer monogamy; they are just as capable of having 'secret affairs'. Of course, neither men or women like being lied to or treated with inconsideration.

There is a long tradition of ‘free love’ movements in the West; polyamory is only the latest. The intellectual basis of this tradition lies in the liberal idea of choice and freedom from state regulation and religious interference in personal relationships. Although ‘free love’ is identified in the popular imagination with promiscuity and the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, free-love movements have historically not promoted numerous sex partners or short-term sexual relationships. Rather, it has opposed state regulation of sexual relations. Utopian movements advocating free love go back to the second century ACE; Adamites in North Africa rejected marriage and original sin; the Cathars in medieval Europe lived simple, vegetarian lives with similar social freedom. It was the French Revolution and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment that gave impetus to choice in love and feminism. Utopian socialist communities came up in many places in the early nineteenth century, which promoted divorce, women’s rights, contraception, passion, and in some cases, even extramarital sex.

~

In the end, I decided to break with Amaya and immediately went into a depression. I couldn’t sleep at night. I lost my appetite and couldn’t focus on my work. She had been one of the great experiences of my life, and how could I just walk away? How could I inflict so much pain on her? It went far beyond the extraordinary pleasure that we had tasted—I was in love with her very being. And if I were to give up this happiness, I feared that I would become completely flat and impoverished, doing a grave wrong to both of us. But Kamini Masi was right—I had to choose, and I had chosen Avanti.

So began a very unsatisfactory period in my life. After many restless nights, I phoned Amaya and told her that I could not leave Avanti. She could see that I was torn and in anguish, but she also realized that our relationship had come to an end. She tried to hide her bitterness and suggested we meet.

When we met, Amaya stared at me silently for a long time and then she said, ‘You look tired.’

‘I haven’t been sleeping well.’

‘But you have such a predictable life. Tennis at six, dinner at eight. You should be sleeping well.’

‘I don’t think I slept at all last night.’

‘Domesticity is killing you—you’re in chains.’

‘Perhaps you are right but the thing is I like those chains—I’m not wild like you.’

‘Wild?’ she cried.

‘Yes, that’s what gives you the guts to . . .’

‘You are wrong. I used to be a staid, sensible person . . . until you came along. It’s *your* fault. You’re the one who untamed me . . . who has made me feel this way.’

‘I don’t know what to do, Amaya.’

‘Come here and give me a kiss.’

‘But I love Avanti.’

‘But you love me too!’

‘Yes, but . . .’

‘You don’t want the same self-satisfied routine, day in and day out.’

‘You’re wrong—Avanti is different. How can I explain? There is a saint in her. She’s forever reaching out. She makes me feel cheap and vulgar. She is a cut above me.’

Amaya laughed.

‘Why do you laugh?’

‘If I don’t, I’ll cry.’

‘Don’t, please.’

‘I want to burst into tears.’

‘I want you to be happy.’

‘Come here then, my love.’

‘I want everyone to be happy: you, Avanti, your husband, everyone.’

‘Stop it! You’re my man, come and make love to me.’

She pulled me down and we kissed. It was slow, long and lingering. I tried to extricate myself but Amaya grabbed me and wouldn’t let go. We kissed again. She let herself go entirely limp and passive in my arms.

‘You have to understand, I love Avanti.’

‘She has god on her side. I have only you. So, who needs you more?’

‘Amaya, please . . .’

‘Ever since I was young, I have hoped that one day I would meet a person like you. And I did . . . after a lifetime of thirsting . . . I found you and I can’t just let you go.’

‘I must, Amaya.’

‘Please don’t go.’

‘I must.’

‘Then make love to me before you go.’

‘No.’

‘I beg you.’

‘I can’t.’

I flew out of the room, shattered. I vowed that we wouldn’t meet again. But we did. I wanted greedily and desperately to see her for one last time. I told her on the phone that we couldn’t make love. I didn’t trust myself. I suggested we meet in a public place, not a hotel.

‘What do you think?’ she asked.

‘What?’

‘Can I trust myself?’

I remained silent.

‘But I want to make love . . . even if it’s for the last time.’

‘But that will defeat the purpose.’

‘Why?’

‘Because we won’t be able to end it then.’

‘Who wants to end it! You’re mine forever.’

There was the additional obstacle of finding a public place where we could meet and talk freely. I was afraid she would burst into tears and we would make a spectacle. I couldn’t think of a place. And when I did, Amaya vetoed it. There were unhappy phone calls over the next few days in which I suggested alternative spots but she found a defect with each one. She wanted to meet only in ‘our’ hotel. This rigid impasse made us both irritable. We felt the sordidness and the humiliation of the whole thing, and this added to the imminent wound of the impending closure. She was hurting. I wished I could lessen her pain but I was not sure if there was a graceful way to end things. I felt an awful sense of doom when we finally met a few weeks later in an anonymous Udipi café near Bombay Central.

‘You’re blindingly beautiful,’ I blurted out thoughtlessly and regretted it immediately.

‘You can’t just leave me,’ she announced.

‘I can’t.’



‘I must.’

‘You have broken my heart. I’ve lost you.’

‘Can you forgive me?’

‘So that you can sleep better in your comfortable, middle-class bed, surrounded by your wife, your children and your dog? Well, I’m not going to give you that satisfaction.’

What an amazing transformation, I thought. She looked the same as the day I had first met her but inside was another human being.

‘Please try and understand.’

‘So, I was just a diversion?’

‘No . . . you know that I love you. I always will.’

‘Are you really abandoning me?’

I was silent.

‘Do you really love me?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Then why are you doing this to me? Why are you leaving?’

‘We’ve been through this so many times, Amaya.’ After a pause, I added, ‘At least, you have been honest and consistent, which is more than I can say about myself.’

‘There’s no comfort in that.’

Gradually, she grew quiet. There was a long silence. And then without ceremony, without saying goodbye, she got up and left. For a brief moment, I had a terrifying thought that she might hurt herself. I ran after her. She was walking in a daze to the station at Bombay Central, where she bought a ticket for Baroda. On an impulse, I decided to accompany her. I wanted to be sure that she reached home safely. She hardly spoke a word during the journey. My attempts to make gentle, affectionate conversation failed. Proust says, ‘When two people break up, it is the one who is not in love who makes the tender speeches.’ We reached Baroda in the middle of the night, where I said goodbye. She handed me a letter. I thought I might have to wait in the station for hours for the train back to Bombay. But as it turned out, I didn’t have to wait long.

~

On the train rushing back in the dark, I discovered that the window next to my seat had become a mirror and Amaya’s beautiful face kept mocking me, gazing

seat had become a mirror, and Amaya's beautiful face kept mocking me, gazing penetratingly until the first light of dawn appeared. Proust says, 'The memory of a particular image is but regret for a particular moment,' and Amaya's image seemed to evoke a lament at the passing of moments made even more miserable by an imagined, happier world. Suddenly, I remembered the letter. It was crumpled in my pocket. I pulled it out and read it hungrily:

*Dearest, it breaks my heart when I realize I may never see you again. I'm writing to say that the happiest moments of my life I owe to you. What happened is not your fault . . . it just ended the way it did. You are not to blame yourself. You are the best thing that ever happened to me. Your love made me come alive, even for a short while, and that is good enough. Love, A*

Amaya knew better than me that I still loved her and her letter was a reminder. Her absence had left an ache that seemed impossible to heal, but I have memories of her that no one can steal. I realize now that every moment of our life together held far more meaning than I dared to acknowledge. I appropriated her love and her laughter cheaply and didn't pause to consider that they were sacred. Although it was a flawed love, and even though we shared it imperfectly, I reawakened to love's beauty.

I am still puzzled about how I happened to love two people at the same time. Once you reach your fifties, perhaps you understand that just as there are many paths to God, there are many paths to happiness. It is a false myth that there will be only one great love in your life. To believe thus is either a sign of emotional immaturity or a wish on your part to make you believe that your life is more interesting than it is. Whether the myth is true or false, the truth is that in the end I failed to protect Amaya as I tried to save my marriage. Ironically, it was that marriage now that was in the greatest danger.

Happy love has no history; it exists only in fairy tales. In real life, passion is a misfortune. As I think about it, my love for Amaya was doomed from the beginning; it could only take the form of adultery; she snatched at it blindly, becoming obsessive and permanently insecure; in the end, love proved most untrustworthy, leading to humiliation and defeat.

It was beginning to be bright outside and the window was no longer a mirror. In the clear light of day, I was stung by a nagging feeling that I never truly understood Amaya. Was it because it is 'difficult for a woman to define her feelings in a language which is chiefly made by men'? Yet, her letter showed she remained a kama optimist till the end. She instinctively understood that kama

.....  
was the most powerful force within us, the most mysterious and the most deeply bound with human life; she venerated it even though she knew that love had no afterlife.

~

So, I returned home to my safe, conventional, middle-class life undamaged, except in my heart. I reached home trembling with fear, hoping fervently that I could make up to Avanti. I entered the apartment and waited nervously for her to emerge from the kitchen. Proust says that the ‘conversation of a woman one loves is like the ground above a dangerous subterranean stretch of water; one senses constantly beneath the words the presence, the penetrating chill of an invisible pool; one perceives here and there its treacherous percolation, but the water itself remains hidden’.

I stood up tensely as soon as she came out. She pointed to two suitcases in the corner. She had packed them, she said, with all the essentials I would need because I would not be living here any more. She spoke calmly but with determination. She had made up her mind.

‘But for heaven’s sake, Amaya has gone out of my life!’ I moaned. ‘She is as good as dead.’

‘Well, you are dead as far as I am concerned.’

‘But, but . . .’

‘I hate you.’

‘But I love you.’

‘Let’s not have a scene.’

‘Are you saying you want a divorce?’

‘I don’t know what I want. I just want you out of here.’

‘But, but . . .’

‘Let’s not discuss this any more. The lawyers will figure it out and they can talk to each other.’

‘Can I see the children, at least?’

‘They are in school but I’ll send them to see you.’

I left in shock, carrying the two suitcases. Fortunately, a ‘transit flat’ of my company happened to be available at the time and I moved into it. Each time I tried to contact Avanti, she either hung up on me or didn’t come to the phone.

My assistant cancelled all our social engagements and I learnt to spend the evenings alone. It gave me plenty of time to think. I knew in my bones that Avanti still loved me. Instead of ‘I hate you,’ she had really meant to say:

*Sometimes I love you, sometimes I hate you.  
But when I hate you, it's because I love you.*

The words are from a song by Nat King Cole and were familiar to both of us. I wondered if I was fooling myself this time around; she may have really begun to hate me. Love and hate are both aspects of kama but they are also aspects of each other. Is it possible that Avanti loved and hated me at the same time? She may have loved me but hated my relationship with Amaya. Love makes one selfish and demands exclusivity; hatred, on the other hand, is happily shared.

When Avanti said ‘I hate you,’ she may have also meant something darker. Albert Camus, the French writer, describes a lonely man in his existentialist novel *The Outsider*, whose only companion is a dog that constantly follows him around. The ungrateful man, on the other hand, is impatient, forever cursing, kicking and deriding the poor creature. Yet, when the dog dies, the man is bereft—he ‘loved’ the dog. The abuser was profoundly attached to the victim. This is one of the most paradoxical aspects of kama that I discovered in those lonely days when Avanti had sent me away. I realized that I had taken her for granted, forever judging her over the smallest thing. And yet I still hoped that Avanti ‘hated’ me in the spirit of Nat King Cole’s ‘I hate you because I love you’.

~

I loved Amaya down to my soul. The look on her face, as she left without saying goodbye, keeps haunting me. I tell myself I have to stop looking back with longing for those days. Vijjika, a seventh-century female poet, reminds me of Amaya’s sorrow:

*He's stopped loving me  
no longer cherished in his heart  
no more affection for me  
passes me in the street doesn't know me  
o friend as I go on looking back  
with longing for those now lost days  
what keeps my heart from falling to pieces.*

Those days are indeed lost forever. Amaya was not supposed to be in my life. We just happened to meet by chance on the Deccan Queen one morning. I still cannot fathom after all these years what led a devoted husband to plunge into an impulsive love affair from which he struggled vainly to escape. My life was supposed to be a tale of two friends who fell in love; they got married despite the usual obstacles; but one of them didn't anticipate that romance would fade inevitably; he grew restless and was unfaithful. This was not supposed to be in the script; he was torn between his two loves and couldn't make up his mind. He was caught in Blake's 'web of desire' and because his mother fell asleep while he was still in the womb, he did not know how to escape.

In my darkest moments, I loathed my life and wished I could get away from all women to a tranquil place free from desire. I felt an aversion for kama and 'the mess of love', as D.H. Lawrence calls it:

*We've made a great mess of love  
Since we made an ideal of it.  
The moment I swear to love a woman, a certain woman, all my life  
That moment I begin to hate her.  
The moment I even say to a woman: I love you!—  
My love dies down considerably.  
The moment love is an understood thing between us, we are sure of it,  
It's a cold egg, it isn't love any more . . .*

From Avanti and Amaya, my mind went back to the woman who had first broken my heart. When I had asked Isha to marry me on the terrace at the party that I had given for Avanti, she had dismissed me contemptuously as though I had offered her a 'cold egg'. This was, of course, before the tables turned and she became Anand's victim. And now, I find that I had behaved no better in sending Amaya away.

When Isha had refused my love, she had said that she found this 'love marriage business' a dreadful bondage. She found middle-class domesticity repulsive and wanted something different from life—something more open than the narrow intimacy of couples who live confined lives behind shut doors. She didn't like 'affairs' either, for they tended to degenerate into another kind of coupling in her mind. I don't think Isha knew what she wanted.

In these cynical moments, I envied Anand's unemotional, carefree life of a nagaraka. Lawrence's vision of love consisted similarly of two words,

‘independence’ and ‘attachment’. He visualized lovers as two pole stars, not one as the satellite of the other—both equal, inseparable yet separate, moving together through space. Like Lawrence, Anand was a primitivist, who celebrated pure bodily, animal love, which Lawrence calls ‘love without ego’ later in the same poem. Both rejected the cerebral ‘sex in the head’ which makes a mess of human love.

When I split with Amaya, I didn’t know if Avanti would forgive me and take me back. So, I was taking a risk. Why didn’t I marry Amaya? Why did I return to Avanti? As I think back to my anguished struggle at the time, I believe that I missed another kind of love in the companionship Avanti had provided over the years. Once achieved, it was unalterable and lifelong. Possibly, my love for her had grown deeper and profounder than I was aware of. With every passing year, I had got used to a permanent and undiluted happiness in her company alone. It was certainly a different kind of love from what I felt for Amaya, which too was as real as anything I have known.

Had I been a young American, I would probably have gone to Avanti instantly and announced—in the interest of transparency, no less—‘I have fallen in love with someone else, dear. I want a divorce.’ Since Americans take the romantic view of marriage more seriously than anyone else, there are more divorces and less happiness in their marriages. If I had done that, I would have thrown away years of investment in my marriage. Instead, I chose to keep the affair a secret for almost half a year. Avanti blamed me for the deceit but it gave me time to think. Was it out of kindness that I concealed my affair until I was certain about what I wanted in life? I try and console myself that these are the sort of white lies that make for civilization.

Perhaps I am justifying my affair with Amaya in a self-serving way, but I have concluded that in a balanced marriage, husbands and wives should not blame each other for chance disloyalties; they should feel pleased that they have for the most part managed to remain devoted to each other. Too many get it wrong—they put the ethical focus on the false idea that the urge to wander is something terrible. But in reality, it is the ability to remain together that is worthy and honourable. We should not praise celibacy—it is not natural or particularly admirable. I believe that we should praise fidelity instead, which helps to make marriages endure. Fidelity is an achievement, worthy of dignity and praise.

~

Ever since I can remember, I have felt needy and insufficient. As a child, I longed for my mother. When I grew into an adolescent, the object of my yearning changed to Isha. When I couldn't possess her, I felt miserable. Luckily, Avanti came along a few years later and we married eventually. I was deliriously happy for some years but gradually the romance went out of our lives. My desire, however, did not, and I craved for new pleasures. This is when I met Amaya and fell in love with her. My life has taught me that human desire never seems to end; as soon as you have what you want, a new and unforeseen desire emerges.

In the Mahabharata, King Yayati discovered the same truth: kama is endless. The more you feed desire, the greater it becomes. The stronger my cravings, the less satisfied I feel. One day Sharmishtha, a princess, and her best friend, Devayani, the daughter of a powerful Brahmin, were out in the woods. The girls came upon a pond and since it was hot, they decided to swim in the water. When they came ashore, the princess mistakenly put on Devayani's clothes. Enraged, Devayani accused Sharmishtha of stealing her clothes; they fought and the princess stripped her and pushed her down a well.

Yayati happened to be out hunting the same day and he heard Devayani's cries and rescued her. He gave the naked girl his upper garment to cover herself and they fell in love instantly. Yayati went and asked Devayani's father for her hand. The Brahmin agreed to the match on two conditions: one, that Yayati should remain forever faithful to his daughter, and two, that Sharmishtha should atone for her bad behaviour by becoming his daughter's handmaiden. Yayati agreed.

In due course, Devayani gave birth to a child. Sharmishtha grew jealous and eventually seduced Yayati, who broke his vow and succumbed to her advances. Their affair went on for years and Sharmishtha had three sons by him stealthily. As the children were playing one day, Devayani was struck by the resemblance of one of them to her husband. She asked the boy about the identity of his father. On learning the truth, she went into a rage and complained bitterly to her Brahmin father, who cursed Yayati and deprived him of his youth and vitality.

Since Yayati had been a just and good king, the public protested and the

Brahmin had to relent. He gave the king a way out: Yayati could recover his youth and vitality if one of his sons would exchange it with him. None of his sons agreed to the swap except the youngest, Puru, born of Sharmishtha. Thus, Yayati went on to enjoy a thousand years of pleasure. He discovered in the end that his sexual appetite was still undiminished and declared: ‘The hunger for pleasure can never be satisfied by more pleasure . . . not all the grain in the world; neither all the gold, nor all the women, are enough for a man. A man grows old but not his desire.’ Dismayed by this bizarre realization, Yayati returned his borrowed manhood to Puru, whom he anointed as his successor. He then renounced kama and retired from the world.

The root of this puzzle of kama lies in human insufficiency. Our longing for love comes from being incomplete. When we possess another person, we feel more whole, more secure and more at ease. Love helps to still desire. But only temporarily, it seems, for desire has a clever way of metamorphosing. You achieve one desire and another appears. Money, applause and power are common desires. They give us temporary satisfaction but soon enough, they tend to inflate in the form of a desire for more money, more applause and more power. They are self-seeking and self-directed.

Genuine love, on the other hand, is other-directed, as Avanti always reminded me. St Augustine felt that the love of God is the ultimate other-directed love and it is capable of breaking the cycle of ever-increasing desires. By transforming one’s desire from being self-directed and selfish into caring for another human being, one can help break the cycle of endless desire, and liberate oneself from human bondage. But it is easier said than done; it appears to me to be too idealistic a route for the ordinary person.

Desire is indeed insatiable but Yayati’s answer, *vairagya*, ‘detachment’, is not the right one either. Renouncing kama and living in an emotional wasteland is too extreme and also beyond the ordinary individual. My own attempts at trying to extinguish desire have proven this amply. So, the riddle of kama remains: how do we rechannel the primal force of kama towards a positive end?

~

The problem lies not only in our insufficiency or in our endless desire but with romantic love itself. We imagine that we are special, as I did when I met Amaya.



But the banal truth is that in countless nauseating novels that came out in the West in the mid twentieth century, the same situation is repeated over and over again: the same husband who fears the same flatness and the same old jogtrot of married life in which his wife loses her 'allure' because no obstructions come between them. Such husbands are pathetic victims of a myth, the mystical promise of which faded long ago.

Although my sympathies are with kama optimists, my affair with Amaya has brought home a sobering lesson. I always believed in passion as something that would alter my life and enrich it with the unexpected, with thrilling chances. Even though I loved Amaya till the end, I now believe that passionate love is an everlasting, guileless illusion of humanity. Notwithstanding all I have said in favour of romantic love, I believe it is a deceptive fantasy of freedom and of living to the full. A human being becomes truly free only when he or she has attained self-mastery. A person in a state of ecstasy and passion loses self-control. The challenge is how to live a life with love and still remain genuinely autonomous.

When it comes to the old debate between dharma versus kama, the *Kamasutra* had a reason to choose dharma. Some acts, such as breaking a promise, are wrong. Adultery involves the breaking of a serious commitment made at marriage; it causes more pain and hurt than other broken promises; the 'wronged' spouse views it as rejection, as loss of affection. Since it also entails deception in most case, it is tainted by the wrongness of lying. Since sexual love is supposedly exclusive, adultery entails deceiving the spouse or the extramarital partner about 'feelings'. This is quite apart from the emotional disease of jealousy, which is not only a destructive passion but is based on regarding the spouse as a possession or as an object.

There is another challenge to romantic love which Simone de Beauvoir posed in the middle of the twentieth century in her famous book, *The Second Sex*, which is rightly considered the harbinger of contemporary feminism. For Beauvoir, the riddle of kama originates in the fact that the word 'love' doesn't mean the same thing to both sexes. She quotes Nietzsche from *The Gay Science*:

*The single word 'love' in fact signifies two different things for man and woman. What woman understands by love is clear enough: it is not only devotion, it is a total gift of body and soul, without reservation, without regard for anything whatever. This unconditional nature of her love is what makes it a faith, the only one she has.*

A man, on the other hand, has other interests. Even if he loves a woman deeply, she is only one part of his life; she is not as necessary to him as he is to her. For Amaya, loving me became central to her identity and her womanliness, but I never defined myself in the same way. She was intelligent and must have been aware of this; yet, she willingly accepted this self-deception.

Beauvoir argues that it is not only patriarchy that has foisted on women this false romantic ideal that Nietzsche speaks about, but ironically, women themselves have accepted this view of themselves. Happiness in love for a woman is to be a part of a man—a superior being, ‘a god’, in Beauvoir’s words—and she is forever resigned to her second place. Inevitably, her man turns out to be flawed, and when he falls, tragedy follows (as it did in Amaya’s case). The woman eventually gets disillusioned, realizing that it was a false ideal. It led to bondage and when she realizes it, she feels her life has been a wasted sacrifice. What is particularly damaging about her self-deception is that she genuinely believed that she was acting for the sake of her freedom, her fulfilment and her self-realization.

This is why Beauvoir’s critique is so brutal. She has exposed romantic love as a dishonest sham as far as the woman is concerned. Whereas the woman in love sought a form of self-realization and emancipation, it turned into a descent into servility and loss of self-respect. Romantic love is evil because it harms the woman and leaves her pitifully dependent and insecure. When the woman begins to fear the loss of her lover, she tries to manipulate him. Even if the manipulation works, the woman knows, somewhere deep within, that she is weak, powerless and open to exploitation.

Beauvoir’s answer to popular romantic love is a different kind of love—she calls it ‘genuine love’—which entails the ‘mutual recognition of two liberties’, where both remain free and neither is mutilated by servitude. Since Beauvoir’s time, women have achieved some victories and have come some way. Their efforts to achieve independence and an enlargement of their field of interests and activities have been remarkable in many cases. But the romantic ideal still persists for far too many, and this was expressed by Marlene Dietrich with guileless melancholy in her famous song, ‘I Can’t Give You Anything But Love’.



## LOVE-DEATH

*What indeed is finally beautiful except death and love?*

*For an instant he is a child,  
For an instant a youth delighting in passion,  
For an instant he is a pauper,  
For an instant fat in prosperity,  
Then, like an actor,  
With withered limbs of old age,  
His body covered with wrinkles,  
A man at the end of his worldly existence  
Falls at the curtain to death.*

—Bhartrihari

On a sultry evening two years later, I got a phone call. I was working late in the office. On the line was a doctor from a hospital in Delhi.

‘Sir, the problem is serious. Isha is very sick.’

‘Would you define “very sick”, doctor?’

‘She’s dying.’

There was silence. I didn’t know what to think. Why was the doctor calling me? I hadn’t seen Isha in years. I waited for the doctor to explain.

‘I’m very sorry to have to tell you this but she gave me your number and asked me to call you.’

I insisted that there must be some mistake. ‘She is still young.’ Perhaps the nurse had slipped up and given him the wrong X-ray or something.

He replied with as much empathy as he could that Isha’s vital tests had been repeated three times. There was absolutely no question about the diagnosis. I could, of course, speak to the haematologist.

‘What about her husband?’

There was confused silence at the other end.

‘But aren’t you her husband sir?’

But aren't you her husband, Sir?

I realized my mistake, remembering suddenly that Isha had separated from Vikram Suri long ago and he lived in a remote village. Her mother had passed away. She was the last of the Malik family line and she didn't care for her few distant relatives. Surely, she must have someone in Delhi—some close friends in Delhi?

'No, doctor, I am a good friend,' I replied. 'What about her family?'

'We have no family members on our records. She wanted me to phone you right away. I also have a letter for you.'

'Dying?' I repeated incredulously. 'But that is impossible.'

He explained that whatever therapy they had at this stage was merely palliative—it could give her relief, but there was no going back. It was a matter of hours. Possibly a day. He made sympathetic sounds. He was empathetic but I couldn't just keep taking his valuable time. However, I had to know what had happened. What had caused the problem? There was another long silence.

'What should I do?'

'Come quickly.'

'What shall I tell her?'

'Act normal.'

I told him that I'd be on the next flight to Delhi. There was one at eight o'clock and I'd try to get on it. He said to come directly to the emergency ward where he was on duty. He would be there all night.

'Do ask for me at the reception. '

'Can she speak?'

'Yes.'

I thanked him and hung up. Isha was dying and she had no one to turn to except me. The next thing I was thinking about was God. An improbable *nastik* like me—perhaps not a diehard atheist but an agnostic for sure—and here I was, with the strange idea of God creeping into my thoughts. I wanted to blame someone, to hit out at someone. Suddenly, Isha's face was before me. She was smiling and I begged God to save her. For someone who had never prayed, here I was begging God to let her live. I had to act normal, the doctor had said.

I phoned Avanti and told her that Isha was dying, and I was rushing to the airport to catch the next flight to Delhi.

'What about her husband?'

‘Well, you know . . . they have been separated for years.’

‘She must have someone in Delhi?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘How strange! You haven’t been in touch with her for more than a dozen years. Or have you?’

‘No, the last time I saw her was at our wedding. I was just as surprised that she gave the doctor my name and number.’ I gave her a quick rundown of what the doctor had told me.

‘What about Anand? After all, she was in love with him. Why didn’t she give his number to the doctor?’

‘I don’t know.’

There was a long silence.

‘Hello! Hello, are you still there?’ I asked in desperation.

‘You’re sure you haven’t been in touch with her?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘I mean she is dying and all.’

‘Then you had better go, shouldn’t you?’ And she hung up.

I managed to get on the last flight of the day to Delhi. My head was a confused jumble of emotions. I was surprised at my strong reaction. I had got over her a long time ago. Besides she had hurt me in a way no one ever had. But the news of her dying had brought back all the emotions buried somewhere deep inside me. I had called Avanti twice before leaving but she had not responded. It must be a nightmare for her—first, to cope with my relationship with Amaya. That had cost me her trust. Now a dying Isha had come back to haunt her. No wonder she didn’t believe me.

It was almost midnight when I reached the hospital in Delhi and went directly through the main door to the Emergency. Except for the woman at the reception desk, I was all alone. She called the doctor, who came in a few minutes and took me inside his office. He gave me the letter. I could make out Isha’s handwriting on the envelope. I didn’t want to face her and suddenly had the urge to run away . . . far away from the hospital. But the doctor encouraged me to go inside and see her.

‘She’s going any minute.’

‘What?’

‘Go!’ he almost shouted.

Isha was asleep when I entered. I went and sat in an armchair beside her. She looked pale but still beautiful. I asked myself why she was granted so little happiness in life. I sat still, thinking of her and didn’t notice when she woke up. She smiled and held out her hand.

‘You?’

I rose and went closer and held her hand.

‘Isha!’

‘How lucky for me.’

I looked into her eyes. They were ineffably sad.

‘Is it really you?’ she asked. ‘I think I am dreaming.’

She remained motionless, unable to stir, her frightened eyes riveted on me. Her face was pale and rigid. Only on its lower part something quivered.

‘It is you! I can’t believe it.’

‘Isha!’ is all I could say.

‘You actually came.’

I was in tears.

‘You are the only one who really loved me.’

I kept looking at her. Soon her eyes closed. After what seemed a long time, the nurse came in and I looked at her inquiringly, pointing my eyes towards Isha. She checked her pulse and requested me to wait outside. The doctor rushed in as I was leaving the room.

‘You have to save her,’ I whispered.

I kept waiting on the bench outside the emergency ward. Half an hour later, the doctor came out of her room. I stood up. I looked at him and I knew it was over. Isha had not regained consciousness.

‘She was still young!’ I whispered.

He put his arm around me and took me into his office. He could feel my pain but did not want to pry into our relationship. He was quiet for some time and then began to speak gently. In a diffident manner, he said that Isha may have had a ‘death instinct’, an unconscious tendency for self-destruction. He explained that it was the opposite of the ‘life instinct’ which aided survival, propagation, sex and creativity. Freud believed that human beings generally sought pleasure and avoided pain, which he called the ‘pleasure principle’. But occasionally, Freud found in his patients a desire to restore themselves to an inorganic state

Freud found in his patients a desire to restore themselves to an inorganic state from which life had originally emerged. Sexual desire could divert this destructive instinct, he added.

‘But she didn’t commit suicide?’ I interrupted.

‘No, she didn’t, strictly speaking; but she gave up all hope; she felt her life was over and wanted it to end.’

‘She wanted to live—no one wants to die,’ I protested. I told him that I had read about someone who preferred to live on a narrow ledge while remaining standing on a square yard of space for a thousand years, rather than die.

There was a long silence.

‘I could be wrong about the death drive, sir. Even Freud thought he was being speculative about it. So, it’s only a supposition on my part. All I can say is that she was fortunate to see you before she died.’

After a pause I asked, ‘Can I see her again?’

‘Of course.’ He led me into the room where Isha was lying and left us alone.

When I confronted her dead body, I found it an object without a subject; it was limp, ungoverned and inert. I felt awe in the face of death. Perhaps I was responding to the unfathomable spectacle of a body without the ‘self’. It was a radically different sight from what I had seen just a while ago. This body was not *her* but *hers*. Isha had always been a free, lively being who was a subject, never an object. But I didn’t want to touch her body. To feel it now without the rite of mutual acquiescence would be to pollute it.

When I turned to look at Isha again, I got a different feeling. What I was seeing had once been a solid, lasting entity. Isha had gone from being a very live love of my dreams once upon a time to this inert corpse which would be ashes and water tomorrow. Had I loved a transient illusion? Had my passion been for an unreal object? It was a fleeting thought and it passed quickly. What I had just experienced was the transience of the object of my desire.

Eventually, I staggered out of the room and returned to the same bench where I had been sitting. After maybe half an hour, I realized I couldn’t just sit there forever. The doctor was on his rounds. Since I didn’t know what to do, I went outside. It was pitch-dark. I looked up at the stars and decided that this was where Isha had gone. I looked down and there was a hole in the ground. A taxi came after a quarter of an hour, bringing a patient. It was looking for a fare and I hopped in. It took me back to the airport.



What is this power that the dead have over us who are left behind? It is frightening, this deathless love we continue to feel for the ones who are gone. The dark, unmentionable truth is that death is never far from kama—it can destroy those who yield to it. The god Kama is a slave of death even as he tries to elevate life above our finite, limited being; the same impulse that leads us to revere life pushes us in the opposite direction and this is Kama's burden.

In the years after Isha left Bombay, I had persuaded myself that I no longer loved her, and I had almost succeeded. On one occasion, in fact, I made a rigorous analysis of my feelings and concluded that she had been a passing infatuation. As the days went by, the intellectual conviction grew in me. This comfortable, rational citadel, built on calculations of the intellect had been turned upside down now and I was overcome by uncontrollable grief at her death. I had clearly been blind to the wisdom of my heart.

The narrator in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* has also been a victim of the same intellectual recklessness until suffering brings him face-to-face with the truth. In the middle of the novel, he discovers that he doesn't love Albertine any more . . . that is, until he hears the news of her death. When they had first met, she had been part of a clique of girlfriends who were free and active. They moved around in a group on bicycles, played tennis and might even have had lovers. His eyes fell on Albertine by accident. Once he selects her, however, he becomes possessed and consumed by her. In his cooler moments, he is ambivalent, doubting whether he could ever marry her. He vacillates. Then one day, based on the same sort of rational calculation that I had made with regard to Isha, he decides he no longer loves her.

Hearing of her death, Marcel is overwhelmed with grief and sorrow, jolted by the realization that, indeed, he still loves her, and profoundly. Martha Nussbaum, the philosopher, analysed this situation elegantly a few years ago in her book, *Love's Knowledge*. She argues that the knowledge of the heart cannot be provided by reason or by sciences such as psychology. 'Knowledge of the heart must come from the heart.'

The other cause of our myopia about the complexity of the emotional universe is the old Proustian villain, habit. Marcel's false conclusion about his feelings for Albertine is due partially to plain familiarity. He has got used to her. Habit tends

to conceal from us the things that cause us pain, especially those relating to our deepest needs and vulnerabilities. And the intellect compounds the problem by doing a cost–benefit analysis of the heart. ‘Cost–benefit analysis is a way of comforting oneself, of putting oneself in control by pretending that all losses can be made up by sufficient quantities of something else. This stratagem opposes the recognition of love—and, indeed, love itself,’ says Nussbaum.

In order to grasp the truth of our heart, the answer lies in pain and suffering. Proust says:

*Our intelligence, however lucid, cannot perceive the elements that compose it . . . I had been mistaken in thinking that I could see clearly into my own heart. But this knowledge, which the shrewdest perceptions of the mind would not have given me, had now been brought to me, hard, glittering, strange, like crystallized salt, by the abrupt reaction of pain.*

The realization that I still loved Isha surprised me in the same way. The combination of my intellect and habit had concealed the truth by creating a comfort zone of self-deception. The pain I suffered from her loss in the hospital finally penetrated the illusory defences that I had created. I had to finally acknowledge that I still loved her. ‘The suffering itself is a piece of self-knowing.’

My sorrow at Isha’s loss raised another question in my mind. Could it be evidence, not of love but of something else, perhaps of fear or grief or some other emotion? Since I was alone and suffering in solitude, I wondered if my emotions were an expression of my loneliness or my ‘incompleteness’ (in Plato’s words) or my own ‘neediness’. Was this then truly a love for Isha or an expression of a lack in myself? The truth is that one can only know what is in one’s own heart and not in another’s. Marcel has the same doubts:

*I understood that my love was less a love for her than a love in me . . . It is the misfortune of beings to be for us nothing else but useful showcases for the contents of our own minds.*

Nussbaum does not agree with Proust. She believes that these doubts are another form of self-deception so that one does not have to face the sufferings of love. Love itself exists, however, and is not merely a figment of our imagination.

~

As I ponder over the mystery of Isha’s heart. I am convinced that she was not in

... depend on the mystery of kama's nature, I am convinced that she was not in love with Anand or me or anyone else; she was in love with love itself. All the time she was true to her profound and secret thirst. It didn't matter whom she loved—the important thing was to love. The last time I saw Isha was briefly at our wedding when she brought an extravagantly expensive necklace for Avanti. Once my mother had mentioned, en passant, in one of her letters that she had been to the memorial service of her mother, Aditi Malik, where she had seen Isha in mourning. She had moved back to 23 Prithviraj Road, and she looked quite haggard; perhaps it was the death of her mother or it had to do with her lifestyle, she couldn't be sure. My mother mentioned that she had heard rumours that Isha had been seen with a succession of very unsuitable men.

Certainly, Proust is on Isha's side when he says, 'What matters in life is not whom or what one loves . . . it is the fact of loving.' He illustrates this in a conversation about a certain Mme de Sevigne:

*' . . . Mme de Sevigne was after all less to be pitied than most of us. She spent a great part of her life with the person whom she loved.'*

*'You forget that it wasn't "love" in her case since it was her daughter.'*

*'But what matters in life is not whom or what one loves . . . it is the fact of loving. What Mme de Sevigne felt for her daughter was far better . . . than the commonplace relations [her husband] had with his mistresses. It's the same with a mystic's love for his God . . .'*

It is natural to impute a tragedy such as Isha's to causes beyond her, and the human mind tries to imagine scenarios of how it could have been prevented. What if Isha had married a man whom she had loved? What if the social order had been more accepting of her promiscuous nature? What if Isha hadn't fallen in love with Anand? You become attached to tragedy's victim and tend to look for outside causes, finding it impossible to blame her.

Isha might or might not have been in love with love, but her doctor seemed to think that this is often the way out for someone who is a slave of passion. To love passion for its own sake is to court suffering all the way until death comes as a relief. Thus, passion and the longing for death that passion disguises are connected. Isha became aware of this and was willing to test its truth by risking her life.

The only way to understand Isha's terrible relationship with kama, I find, is through a myth that grabs the 'death instinct' and transforms it into a sacred goal. I thought initially of the story of Heer-Ranjha close to home from my

beloved province of Punjab; or of Laila–Majnu, a bit further away in Iran; and even further is the adulterous romance of Tristan in distant Europe, transformed by Wagner into a tragic, passionate opera beyond good and evil. Instead of these, I decided on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, everyone's favourite tale of romantic love and death, which is no longer Shakespeare's property but belongs to the world. I have an uncommon slant on the story.

Not unlike Isha's tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*'s love was threatened more from within—by their own flaws—than without. It was not only the working of fate, as the prince of Verona suggests in his famous prologue:

*From forth the fatal loins of these two foes  
A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life.*

No, Shakespeare's tragedy is not so much about the innocence of tender love betrayed as we were taught to believe in school. It is, in truth, about the frustrated, dark barbarity within human beings when they are denied the splendours of kama. The viciousness of the feuds in the city is matched by the violence inside the hearts of the young lovers. Whatever obstructs their love seems to only intensify it until they reach the last obstacle: death. It is as though the lovers never had any other desire than the desire for death.

The play begins, not surprisingly, with death—another scuffle on the streets of Verona in which one of the families' retainers is killed. Its cause is an ancient feud between two aristocratic Italian families, the Capulets and Montagues. The Capulets have a daughter, Juliet, who, at fourteen, has become marriageable; the Montagues have a young melancholic son, Romeo, who arrives with his friends uninvited to a masked ball at the Capulets. He has intimations that this party will be the beginning of his end. He sees Juliet from a distance and falls in love at first sight. Soon, they get a chance to speak and then kiss without even knowing each other's names.

*Romeo: Thus from my lips, by thine, my sin is purged.  
Juliet: Then have my lips the sin that they have took.  
Romeo: Sin from thy lips? O trespass sweetly urged!  
Give me my sin again.*

*[They kiss again]*

But just as quickly they discover they are enemies. Juliet wails:

But just as quickly they discover they are enemies. Juliet warns:

*My only love sprung from my only hate  
... Prodigious birth of love it is to me  
That I must lose a loathed enemy.*

Romeo leaves soon thereafter with his friends. Immediately, however, he turns back; he leaps over the wall of the orchard of the Capulet estate, where he spies Juliet at a window, and he hears her speak his name on the balcony in these immortal lines:

*Wherefore art thou, Romeo?  
Deny thy father and refuse thy name.  
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,  
And I'll no longer be a Capulet . . .*

*What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other word would smell as sweet . . .  
Romeo, doff thy name,  
And for that name, which is no part of thee  
Take all myself.*

He informs Juliet that he would happily give up his name which has become hateful to him. She is afraid for his life if her kinsmen spot him but he finds greater peril to live without her love. They exchange vows of love and decide to marry. She wishes him 'Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow/That I shall say good night till it be morrow.'

Romeo rushes to his friend and confessor Friar Lawrence, who consents to marry off the young lovers secretly; in their love, he hopes to end the ancient feud between the Capulets and Montagues. The following day, as Romeo awaits Juliet, Friar Lawrence fears calamity. Soon, Juliet arrives and they are married. Juliet's nurse is aware of their secret and finds a rope ladder to help Romeo climb on to Juliet's window for their wedding night.

The next day, Tybalt—Juliet's cousin—is in a rage; he has discovered that Romeo had been present at the Capulet's feast; he challenges him to a duel. Romeo tries to appease him but his friend, Mercutio, accepts Tybalt's challenge. Romeo tries to stop them; he leaps between the combatants. Tybalt wounds Mercutio fatally. As he lies dying, he curses both families for quarrelling senselessly:

*A plague o' both your houses!  
They have made worms' meat of me.*

Romeo is inconsolable. He wonders if Juliet's beauty 'hath made me effeminate and in my temper softened valour's steel'. In a macho frenzy of revenge, he kills Tybalt and is then banished by the prince from Verona for his crime. When he learns of his expulsion, he is terrified, preferring death: exile is like a 'golden axe' that cuts off his head. Meanwhile, Juliet waits impatiently for her beloved with another premonition of death. Soon, she learns about what has happened and is deeply disturbed at finding herself married to her cousin's killer. At the thought of her husband's exile, she feels as if she has become death's bride.

Eventually, Romeo steals into Juliet's room in the night and they consummate their marriage. The next morning the lovers awaken to the sound of a lark heralding the dawn. As they bid farewell, mortality is not far from Romeo's mind. After he leaves, Juliet is overwhelmed by a sinister image of her lover descending into the garden below, 'as one dead in the bottom of a tomb'. She then learns of another reversal—her father, affected by recent events, intends to rush her wedding to Paris. Unable to reveal that she is already married to Romeo and unsure of what to do, she hurries to Friar Lawrence and threatens to kill herself. He devises a plan to reunite her with Romeo: she must drink a potion the night before her wedding to Paris and appear dead temporarily; after she is laid in the family crypt, the friar and Romeo will retrieve her secretly, and she will be free and happy to live with her husband, away from quarrelling parents.

That night, before taking the vial, as she bids goodnight to her mother and nurse, Juliet has another presentiment of death. The next day, the nurse and her parents discover Juliet's pale, limp body as

*Death lies on her like an untimely frost  
Upon the sweetest flower of all the field.*

Her father laments pompously that death is now his son-in-law. The Capulets' arrangements for their daughter's wedding turn into preparations for a funeral.

Meanwhile, Friar Lawrence's message does not reach Romeo in exile in Mantua. When he learns of Juliet's death, he procures a vial of poison from a reluctant apothecary and rushes back to Verona to take his own life beside Juliet's tomb. His intentions are ruthless: 'Savage-wild *More fierce and*

*inexorable far* Than empty tigers on the roaring sea.’ Outside the Capulet crypt, he sees Paris scattering flowers on Juliet’s grave. They fight. He kills Paris, enters the tomb, opens the vault and sees Juliet’s inanimate body and discovers that death has not been able to conquer her beauty.

*—O my love, my wife!  
Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath,  
Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty.  
Thou art not conquered. Beauty’s ensign yet  
Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks.*

The image of death as a lover continues to hover in the tomb as the play nears its end. Romeo drinks the poison and dies. Juliet awakes to find Romeo asleep; she kisses his poisoned lips to revive him but realizes that he is dead; she buries his dagger in her chest, falling beside him.

Every scene in Shakespeare’s tragedy seems to conjoin love and death, making us believe that the two sides of kama are inherently intertwined in human nature. Romeo and Juliet courted ‘love death’ the moment they met at the Capulet feast and succeeded finally in embracing it in their tombs. Freud believed that love (eros) and death (thanatos)—the erotic drive and the death drive—lie at the root of human desire. But the irony is that grand, imperious and infinite desires, the sort that torment Romeo and Juliet, can never be satisfied. Plato teaches that desire depends on the lack of its object. If the object is obtained, the desire dies. Our young lovers must thus remain forever unsatisfied, continually reproducing their desires. The impossibility of satisfying desire leads them to consummate their love in death. So, to keep our sanity we need a myth or a story and, as the prince says in the last lines of the play:

*Never was a story of more woe  
than this of Juliet and her Romeo.*

Kama is a subversive force, posing a danger to society. But society fights back to maintain order. Hence, the standard reading of this play is as a humanist tragedy about passion’s battle against the social order. Romeo and Juliet know very well that marriage is the rite that consecrates love. As soon as Juliet suggests marriage to Romeo as his ‘honourable’ purpose in the balcony scene, Romeo hastens to Friar Lawrence to get them married. Despite this, our lovers are like Isha—essentially defiant of institutions and antisocial to the core. Of course, the

Isha, essentially defiant of institutions and antisocial to the core. Of course, the Capulets and Montagues did eventually reconcile, and so the ‘death drive’ of the young lovers did serve a social purpose. Whether Romeo and Juliet is a tragedy of character or of fate is an old debate—it appears to me to be a combination of both inside and outside forces—and it will go on. Whether Isha or Shakespeare’s lovers were responsible for their own deaths matters less; more importantly, they remind us of our humanity.

~

‘Everything has gone from me,’ I told Kamini Masi. ‘I retain only the certainty of Avanti’s goodness and I can’t go on spoiling her life any longer.’

‘Don’t be too hard on yourself.’ She empathized with my situation in which I had to cope with grief over Isha’s death, the pain of abandoning Amaya, while trying to save my relationship with Avanti. She consoled me, saying that time would heal things.

‘I don’t know two people who deserve more to be together than Avanti and you.’

Kamini Masi put her faith in Avanti’s spiritual disposition. It would eventually help her to resolve our relationship. Unlike Isha’s death drive, Avanti had another sort of desire, which trumped all others—she sought obedience to the eternal. Kamini Masi explained that from Avanti’s viewpoint, my love for Amaya or Isha had been a form of human bondage. For her, wisdom lay in recognizing that life is transitory and the little time that we have should be spent in seeking liberation from this bondage. Avanti did not take human passions too seriously and did not believe that marriage should be based on emotions.

‘So, where does it leave us—our marriage and our kids?’

‘She may have spiritual ambitions but she is also a woman and feels betrayed. She is aware of the nobility of your heart, messy and hidden as it might be. Once she gets over her jealousy—it will take time—she will return to you one day. She knows you better than you know yourself. Patience, dear boy.’

I felt better after this conversation. If I knew Avanti, she must be engaged in an analysis of pros and cons, and had not yet arrived at her QED. Kamini Masi had mentioned that Avanti had blurted out ‘I hate him,’ and I had felt deeply hurt. I tried to make sense of Kamini Masi’s reassurances that deep down she



loved me. How could one love and hate a person at the same time and I realized that the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. Love and hate are discrete rather than opposite experiences. When two people call theirs a love–hate relationship, they are referring to different aspects of each experience. Didn't Elizabeth and Darcy love and hate in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*? It felt almost therapeutic in recalling Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy, everyone's favourite couple. They are both disdainful of and fascinated by each other. One person's hatred increases the other's enchantment. In the process, Austen seems to ridicule the whole notion of love at first sight, what Romeo and Juliet had experienced in Shakespeare's play.

In their disastrous first meeting, a sullen, arrogant and aristocratic Darcy is unforgivably rude to Elizabeth and her family, and attempts to sabotage the relationship of her sister Jane and his best friend. A promising start to a novel about a love–hate relationship! As the story progresses, each emulates the other's thoughts and behaviour. They are attracted to each other; although they begin to love, they are not aware of it; and they fight to undo that love. Finally, Darcy proposes marriage but his proposal is so convoluted that instead of love, it inadvertently expresses hatred. In a hilarious but dramatic scene, Elizabeth is hurt, angry and vindictive, accusing him of not valuing her. She squashes his massive pride by rejecting his proposal. To win her over, he writes a long letter explaining himself. Although it is in a tone of wounded pride, it is a genuine love letter and the turning point of the story.

Gradually, Elizabeth's hatred is replaced by guilt and shame at her behaviour towards Darcy. 'How despicably have I acted!' He too confesses, 'I was . . . allowed, encouraged, almost taught . . . to think meanly of all the rest of the world, to *wish* at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own.' Their earlier hatred was directed outwards, towards the other; now it is directed inwards, towards themselves. This reversal of direction causes a change in behaviour in both and leads them to love and be loved. As Elizabeth and Darcy go through their mating dance, their manners are transformed, especially Darcy's, who becomes kinder and rescues the Bennet family from disgrace. As love replaces hatred, humility and caring supplant pride and prejudice.

They say hate is the other side of love, and this is what Kamini Masi meant: if you haven't really hated someone, you haven't really loved them. The lesson for

Avanti and me was to learn to turn our hatred inward rather than outward and convert it into love. This is no easy matter and the lovers in *Pride and Prejudice* take a good-sized novel to achieve it. I hoped that no matter how angry and hostile Avanti felt right now, she would get over it. Once she grasped that Amaya was gone, and Isha was dead, she might slowly begin to understand. And having done so, I hoped her hostility would fade.

In any case, Avanti would have agreed enthusiastically with Jane Austen's premise that love at first sight is not a good foundation for marriage. Gratitude and esteem are far better, and hence she would expect that Elizabeth would have a change of sentiment. This is the reason that Kamini Masi too felt that Avanti would come around.

~

'When sorrows come,' Shakespeare says, 'they come not single spies, but in battalions.' Two years after I had broken up with Amaya, I continued to live separately from Avanti and the girls. The 'transit flat' of the company was no longer available and I had shifted to a modest one-bedroom flat in the western suburb of Khar. Its chief disadvantage was that it was far away from Avanti and the girls, and this seemed to cut me off even more from them.

I woke up on a cool morning in December to find myself staring at my face in the newspaper. After putting the kettle on the stove, I was fumbling with the *Bombay Post* when my eyes fell on the photograph in a popular gossip column which had an account of my affair with Amaya. Its only redeeming feature was that it reported accurately that our affair was over long ago. I was still trying to absorb the import of the news when the phone rang. It was Avanti. She said sarcastically that I was famous and asked if I had seen the photo and the news item. She mentioned that it was our older girl who had been the first to point it out. 'Look, Ma, look who's in the paper!'

It was rare for her to phone me. It was I who would always call, usually to tell her when I would be coming to town to pick up the children after school and take them out. Although her manner was cold and matter-of-fact, I sensed she wanted to talk, especially about Isha. But the call was interrupted by a knock on the door. I asked if I could call her back.

'No, don't bother.'

A few days later, I received a message from the chairman of the board of my company. He requested me to come for a special board meeting that he had called at his home the following evening. 'What is it all about?' I asked. I wanted to be prepared, just in case any papers were needed. He replied that he couldn't discuss it on the phone; nor was it a subject that he wanted to talk about at the office. Hence, he was holding the meeting at his home. And no, I didn't need to bring any papers.

I arrived at his home to find the entire board assembled in his living room, speaking in hushed voices. As soon as I entered, the conversation stopped and from the grave faces around me, I felt perturbed. As soon as I sat down, the chairman cleared his throat nervously, and began to speak about a legal notice that he had received a few weeks ago. It was from a lawyer in Baroda that gave details of an offence I had committed based on Section 497 of the Indian Penal Code. I was puzzled and asked what it was all about. He explained that Section 497 related to adultery. I was frightened. The lawyer was acting on behalf of Amaya's husband and stated that his client wanted me removed from my job, failing which they would be forced to file a First Information Report (FIR) with the Baroda Police.

The chairman went on to say that he had ordered a confidential investigation and the report from the agency had come in a few days ago. There was clearly substance to the complaint, corroborated by the fact that my wife and I were living apart. The board had discussed the issue at some length over several sittings, and in all fairness, he added, the board was divided on what to do. On the one hand, there was a strong feeling that I was a 'high performer' and far too valuable to the company to let go. On the other, the company could not afford a scandal that might sully its name and impact its share price on the stock exchange. The report in the *Bombay Post* had already been damaging to the reputation of the company. Hence, the company had decided not to 'fire' me but 'suspend' me for an indefinite period until 'things cooled down'. They hoped that this action would satisfy the complainant and the issue would be resolved.

Feelings of guilt and shame overwhelmed me, and I sat in stunned silence. I couldn't think straight; my head was crowded with unhappy thoughts of Amaya which refused to leave. The chairman paused and everyone looked at me for a response. At the mention of 'adultery', I had already pronounced myself guilty. I didn't bother to deny the charges, but I mentioned that the affair had been over

long ago, although my wife and I continued to live separately. I looked at the legal member of the board and asked incoherently about the penalty under this offence. He replied matter-of-factly that Section 497 was punishable by up to five years in jail, but he hastened to add that hardly anyone had ever been convicted under this section.

The chairman stated that my family could stay in the company flat while I was under suspension. They did not want me to attend office but I would be retained on a consulting relationship at half the salary and had to make myself available to give advice to company executives at a discreet, neutral location, which might as well be my anonymous flat in the suburbs.

Terrified, I went over to see Ramu Mama.

‘Ah vengeance—the oldest and basest of human motivations!’ exclaimed Ramu Mama.

Since Amaya’s husband was driven by revenge, I worried if it might escalate into a court case. Since I was completely out of touch with Amaya, I had no way of knowing how her husband had discovered our affair. I worried for her. Ramu Mama suggested we meet Indu Vakil, an old friend of ours who practised at the high court. She quickly hired a detective and made a discreet investigation. The probe revealed that Amaya’s husband had no real evidence but had hired a lawyer with a dodgy reputation for fabricating evidence and ‘fixing things’. He was behind the plant in the gossip column and the damaging photograph. Indu didn’t think he would take this further as the husband’s main objective was to hurt my career and he had already succeeded in doing so.

‘If it does go to court, Anand might help ensure a fair trial,’ Ramu Mama suggested. Anand’s life had taken a dramatic turn in the past year after Rajiv Gandhi became prime minister, succeeding his mother. They had been classmates in Doon School and remained friends. Over the years, they had met discreetly, and he had now been appointed adviser to the prime minister. Anand had just shifted to Delhi after taking a leave of absence from his company.

This was the saddest period in my life. I yearned to live in my own home with Avanti and the girls, but as the months went by, I became resigned to the idea that it might never happen. I was the subject of gossip in Bombay’s commercial circles and so it was just as well that I lived in an anonymous flat in the suburbs. Since I was not welcome in the company’s office, the senior executives of the company would routinely come to consult me in my flat.

company would routinely come to consult me in my flat.

The only redeeming moments during this gloomy period were my get-togethers with the children. Two afternoons a week I would meet them after school and take them out to a café at Churchgate. It was usually for cake and ice cream at Bombellis. Sometimes, they wanted samosas and pakoras instead, and we would go to Berry's next door. Once in a while, they wanted mango ice cream sandwiches and we would hop across the street to K. Rustom's. I would have preferred to take them to the Bombay Gym but it would have meant having to meet people, and this would fuel gossip, and I certainly didn't need that.

'Why don't you come home to live with us, Papa?' little Arushi asked one day.

'Because Mummy won't let him,' replied Akhila sharply.

'Why won't she?'

'I shall come back to live with you one day, my princess,' I reassured her.

I lived quietly and rarely went out. Kamini Masi and Ramu Mama tried to cheer me up, inviting me for this or that, but I usually made an excuse. Occasionally, I would visit them quietly in their home when Kamini Masi would fill me in on the gossip in the city about our friends. She said that Avanti was sometimes seen at plays and gallery openings. Once in a while, she would be seen in the company of Anand when he came to visit from Delhi. I was jealous, she could tell, and she tried to reassure me.

'There is obviously nothing between them,' she said.

'How can you be so sure?' I asked.

'I'm not, but I also know Avanti.'

'But he's attractive and powerful. Any woman would . . .'

'No, she loves only you.'

'I don't believe you.'

'They're just friends.'

Despite what Kamini Masi said, I was certain that Avanti and Anand were lovers. I knew from the aborted seduction many years ago that Anand was one of the few men that Avanti found attractive.

'Just remember, Amar, you're a man of principle and you will prevail in the end. Even your love for Amaya was based on some sort of crazy principle.'

Although Indu Vakil did not think the case would escalate and come to trial, she wanted to be prepared for the worst. While studying the law, she discovered that India still retained an archaic law on its books from early colonial days that made adultery a criminal offence. It was based on the patriarchal principle that the husband of an adulteress could be prosecuted because the wife was a husband's 'property'; a wife could not be, nor could the lover of an unmarried woman. Although the British had brought the law to India, they had got rid of it in the UK. In India too, the law had rarely been enforced.

In going through the legal literature, Indu found that most Indians were opposed to the law, finding it patriarchal and discriminatory and out of touch with contemporary reality. Yet, it had lingered because vocal conservatives of all faiths continued to oppose its removal. In 1951, one Yusuf Aziz challenged its constitutionality on grounds of gender discrimination, but the Bombay High Court upheld it on the argument that there were other seeming discriminations in the law, especially on behalf of women. In 1971, the Fifth Law Commission recommended making the law gender-neutral and reducing the prison term from five to two years. The recommendation was ignored.

In 2003, the Malimath Committee, constituted by the Union home ministry, declared: 'There is no good reason for not meting out similar treatment to a wife who has sexual intercourse with a married man.' It concluded that the law should penalize anyone who has sex with 'the spouse of the other person'. The committee's recommendation was met with outrage from the public and triggered the question: why should men or women, acting consensually, be treated as criminals? In 2006, the National Commission for Women argued that the rationale behind the law was 'anachronistic and unpalatable'; at a time when the Supreme Court recognized the legitimacy of live-in relationships, adultery legislation had no relevance in the present day. Moreover, a law that treated a woman as a man's property, like a cow or a car, was offensive. It recommended that adultery be decriminalized and be treated as a civil misdemeanour, not a crime.

Laws against adultery have existed around the world but they have gradually disappeared with changing standards of sexual morality. Originally based on a general concern that husbands might be bringing up children that were not theirs, the laws applied only to married women. In recent times, the courts have argued that adultery laws offend human rights and the freedom to live one's private life

that adultery laws offend human rights and the freedom to live one's private life without interference from the state, especially when the relationships are voluntary and consensual. Europe and parts of Latin America have decriminalized adultery. But in the US, eighteen states still had adultery laws in their books in 2013, although they were rarely enforced. In Asia, South Korea was the last country to strike down its adultery law, in 2015, which had carried a two-year sentence and had been applied extensively—under it, 53,000 South Koreans had been charged and more than half of them had been sent to jail since the 1980s. In many Asian countries, a married woman could also be charged with adultery and a married man could be charged with ‘concubinage’—keeping a mistress. In Muslim countries under sharia law, adultery still carries very harsh penalties for women and is often used by men to dispatch unwanted wives.

~

Listening to Indu's legal talk about Amaya's husband, I realized that vengeance is one of kama's uglier faces. I could easily imagine Amaya's husband plotting a quiet, cold revenge. The French say, '*La vengeance est un plat qui se mange froid*'—revenge is a dish best served cold. Why cold? I suppose because vengeance usually involves cool calculation. The thirst for revenge is a human instinct. If a good person suffers, the bad person should suffer even more—this notion is deeply embedded in the human psyche. This is why we like happy endings where the villain gets his due. Revenge thus fulfils a legitimate human need. It impels us to demand that people pay for the harm they do to others, and it thus brings about a degree of equilibrium to our minds, a sort of 'balance of honour'.

Human beings are, of course, ashamed to admit to such thoughts, and Indu, who had met Amaya's husband as a part of her investigation, was not surprised that he talked of many things but was unwilling to confess to 'hate' or 'revenge'. Generally speaking, those who are motivated by power, status and honour tend to incline towards revenge. Shakespeare's Verona was one of these and suffered terribly from feuds and vengeful behaviour. Romeo and Juliet were victims of such a feud that went on from generation to generation. In India, revenge rebounds upon the avenger through the universal law of karma where you reap what you sow.

One of the most distressing tales of sexual vengeance is Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Kreutzer Sonata*. Unlike Manto's subtle tale of kama's violence, 'The Red Raincoat', Tolstoy's is brutish. In it, a Russian aristocrat, Pozdnyshev, suspects his wife of having an affair with a handsome violinist. She is a pianist and the two sometimes play Beethoven's famous 'Kreutzer Sonata' on violin and piano. The husband, troubled by jealousy, cuts short a business trip and comes home unexpectedly. It is late at night and he finds them together in the dining room, innocently discussing music. Convinced that she has deceived him, he kills his wife in a fit of jealous rage. There is no evidence that she was, in fact, unfaithful. Hence, he feels guilty but he convinces himself that the real crime is lust which turns all women into whores in the eyes of men.

Pozdnyshev's wife was much younger and he argues that he was drawn to her because of her girlish loveliness, in particular by a sexy sweater. She gave him five children but as the years went by he grew tired and irritated by family life. His wife lost her youthful charm and acquired the 'look and smell of a large overripe peach'. Sexual passion, Pozdnyshev says, 'No matter how it's arranged, it is evil, a terrible evil against which one must struggle . . . The words of the Gospel that whosoever looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery relates not only to other men's wives, but precisely—and above all—to one's own wife.' The answer to the riddle of kama lies in abstinence. Tolstoy's protagonist says that there is an inherent inequality in every sexual act and hence it is a form of rape. Although women are naturally weaker, they are forced to level the playing field through their 'sensuality', which helps to erase some of the inequality with men, and lets them gain full control.

The story is autobiographical, expressing Tolstoy's feelings of deep repugnance for his own wife, Sophie. Tolstoy received many letters asking him to explain the novella's meaning. In reply, he wrote an afterword in which he confirmed that he shared Pozdnyshev's opinions. The afterword was called, 'Epilogue to the Kreutzer Sonata', in which he says:

*Let us stop believing that carnal love is high and noble and understand that any end worth our pursuit—in service of humanity, our homeland, science, art, let alone God—any end, so long as we may count it worth our pursuit, is not attained by joining ourselves to the objects of our carnal love in marriage or outside it*

Tolstoy tried to counter the criticism that abstinence would bring an end to the



human race. He explained that celibacy was a noble ideal; he didn't advocate that everyone should abstain from sex but one should try and strive for the ideal. As a Christian, he added that marriage was instituted by the Church, not by Christ. Love, sex and marriage were self-serving and hindered 'the service of God'.

Tolstoy's ideas on celibacy and pacifism had a deep impact on Mahatma Gandhi in India but *The Kreutzer Sonata* created a scandal around the world. It was banned in Russia and Tolstoy struggled for years to get it out of the clutches of the censors. In America and Europe, the novella inspired a movement of celibacy in pursuit of Tolstoy's Christian asceticism. The movement also propagated non-violence, vegetarianism, physical labour and a life of austerity. A young Romanian castrated himself after reading the story. Others were appalled. In 1890, Emile Zola, one of the most popular writers of the day, called the novella a 'nightmare, born of a diseased imagination'. Towards the end of his life, Tolstoy began to doubt his ideas. He confessed in a letter in 1891: 'There was something nasty in *The Kreutzer Sonata* . . . something bad about the motives that guided me in writing it.' Sexual vengeance can have deeply tragic consequences and the actions of Amaya's husband were benign in comparison, say, to the shocking horror of Medea's revenge—she kills her children to punish her husband—in Euripides's play.

~

'What indeed,' asks Walt Whitman, 'is finally beautiful except death and love?' The American poet's words bring me back to the main theme of 'love-death', which defined this period in my life. Yes, I was miserable in having to live separately from Avanti and the children; I was mournful about sending Amaya away; I was angry at the revenge that Amaya's vengeful husband had extracted. But what really defined this period of my life was the profound grief over Isha's death. In the ancient world, poets sang about the sufferings of love but with an expectation of happiness at the end. Love only became an existential issue with the birth of romantic love in medieval Europe. 'Love-death' became an exaltation, a dramatic source of tragedy and ultimate beauty. This catastrophic quality of love turned into a new category of thought, particularly after the German composer Richard Wagner wrote a hauntingly beautiful opera, *Tristan*

*und Isolde*, where the music expresses his romantic philosophy even more than the words uttered by any character.

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is sometimes thought to be an example of 'love-death', or *liebestod*, a German word made famous by Wagner's opera, where at the end, Isolde sings movingly over Tristan's dead body. Wagner brings to life a medieval legend of forbidden love and inevitable death, the story of two lovers who unknowingly drink a magic potion and ultimately die in each other's arms. As a literary expression, *liebestod* (from the German *liebe*, 'love', and *tod*, 'death') signifies that the two lovers consummate their love in or after death. Wagner had understood that where kama itself is the essential motif, it creates a love that is fated to end in heart-rending loss and death.

What exactly is the relationship between love and death? I seemed to get intimations when I watched Isha's face at the hospital—alive at first and dead afterwards. But I only began to understand it after listening repeatedly to Birgit Nilsson sing Isolde's disturbing aria on a CD. Even so, I was mostly confused and frustrated until a young friend sent me an explanation by the English philosopher Roger Scruton. Most of us know, Scruton says, that love is rooted in an animal need and mired in compromise and selfishness; but we also know that 'through love we are capable of sacrifice . . . which nourishes our sense of the sacred . . . This sacrifice offers a kind of proof that we can transcend our mortal condition . . . we can become something higher than victims of our fate.' Thus, 'love-death' is a triumph over our day-to-day mundane life, a final proof of our freedom. Isolde's death is 'a renewal . . . a dramatic proof that love can be fulfilled in death, when death is chosen, and this fulfilment is a genuine redemption'. In this way, Wagner found significance in the sacred qualities of human passion, giving fresh meaning to 'redemption'.

Like Shakespeare, Wagner's ambition was to uncover the nature of tragedy within the human heart. But he sought to achieve it not through plot but by evoking inner states through music. Tristan and Isolde do not act; they feel. German Romantics like Wagner went back to Greek tragedy to show that what makes human beings different from animals is not reason, as the Greeks thought, but their capacity for romantic love. Wagner was deeply influenced by the philosopher Immanuel Kant, whose 'categorical imperative' commands us never to treat a human being as a means but always as an end. This moral notion reinforced in Wagner's mind the fundamental idea of romantic love through

reinforced in Wagner's mind the fundamental idea of romantic love, through which woman becomes a 'subject' unlike the 'object' of earlier erotic love. Although human beings are subject to natural laws, they are also self-conscious and can transcend their fate through moral choices. Thus, Kant provides a philosophical foundation for romantic love, giving women full human agency in a patriarchal world.

Wagner transforms the old medieval Tristan legend into an existential fable by choosing one emotional conflict in each act. In Act One, both Tristan and Isolde are torn by the struggle between kama and dharma—what they owe to themselves and what they owe to others; whether to be true to their own integrity or to society's honour. Individual happiness and social responsibility are irreconcilable. In Act Three, the conflict is between life and death, what Freud called 'eros' and 'thanatos'. Freud would have also termed Tristan and Isolde's yearning as an attempt to recreate our first state of consciousness—the 'oceanic state'—when as babies we do not feel separate from our mothers. As Tristan lies dying in the end, he longs for Isolde to lose herself in an infinity of love. And Isolde in the *liebestod* evokes the primordial awareness of the baby's isolation as the lovers try to escape the limitations of the individual ego and the weight of self-consciousness through death. Isolde's last words are, 'unconscious, utmost bliss!'

Wagner called his ending a 'transfiguration' in order to express the profound irony that the lovers have found their salvation through sin. Death here is not the ending of life but moksha, a 'liberation', a transition to a higher state of being. The relentless musical rhythms release a flood of erotic energy, fusing the sexual with the sacred. Wagner devotees call Isolde's transfiguration the most spiritual moment in all of western drama. I could relate to the music of the *liebestod*—it reminded me of the ending of *the Gitagovinda*, of the mystical union of Radha and Krishna, who also discovered the soul through the body.

This might be one of the reasons why romantic love was born in India in the form of bhakti, 'divine love'. The Vaishnava bhaktas rejected the goal of moksha in favour of devotional love. Whereas the concept of moksha conjures fear, bhakti is comforting and joyful. In the *Gitagovinda*, when Radha and Krishna are together, there is *sambhoga*, 'love in enjoyment'. When they are separated, they use the metaphor of 'love-death'. Radha's friend tells Krishna that only he can save her from the separation of death. When separated from

Radha, Krishna ‘seems to die’. The same sentiment pervades other mystical traditions. In Arab mystical poetry, Ibn-al-Farid says, ‘Death through love is life; whoever does not die of his love is unable to live by it.’ Similarly, Saint John of the Cross says he dies because he does not die, that only in the dying of love, losing himself in union with God will he be able to cry out, ‘Now I live!’

In a programme note, Wagner explained this moment: ‘What Fate divided in life now springs into transfigured life in death.’ Listening to Wagner’s ‘love-death’ music helped me to make some sort of sense of what the doctor had said about Isha’s ‘will to die’. When I was visiting the hospital, I too had a fleeting experience of the sacred, especially when I saw Isha’s eyes full of life at one moment and inert the next. Even though love had been unkind to Isha, she had scorned death for the sake of her belief in love. Her death was not futile but an assertion of her existence.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, love and death converge, especially when Shakespeare plays with the double meaning of death as ‘extinction’ and ‘sexual ecstasy’, or *le petit morte*, ‘little death’. With elaborate images of death and foreboding that pervade even the most joyful scenes, the lovers seem to be searching for their own destruction—rushing into death for death’s sake. I only comprehended Romeo and Juliet’s ritual sacrifice after seeing Wagner’s opera. From the beginning, Shakespeare’s lovers isolate themselves from society and its norms; their love will not bring domestic happiness: no child-rearing; no fulfilled old age. It is a love without a future but they cannot renounce it either. In the end, they defy death and its dominion. Unpolluted by the world’s transactions, they are purified by their deaths. Through their sacrifice, they restore our belief in our human potential. Their deaths are purely a human achievement, not transcendental—no miracles, no supernatural powers, no transubstantiation. Their ‘redemption’ once again is a means for regaining the sacred in the world.

Wagner was also influenced in his thinking by the German philosopher Schopenhauer, who, in turn, was inspired by the Upanishads. These metaphysical speculations, he believed, had been the solace of his life and would be his consolation at his death. The Upanishads use the word ‘atman’, meaning both the individual and the cosmic soul. Salvation comes to the soul with the loss of its individuality and its escape from the phenomenal world into the brahman; into the ‘Welt-Atems Wehendem All’, as Isolde says in Wagner’s

opera. Extraordinary, that a collection of Hindu philosophical texts from circa 800–500 BCE, which were questioning the old Vedic order, should have inspired Wagner to link love and death. For Tristan's dialogues with Isolde, Wagner derived much Vedic imagery from the mental experiments of the Upanishads.

Indeed, there is something tragic and consoling about the Upanishadic dialogues as they describe human destiny. In reflecting on man's search for life's meaning, they conclude that kama is an obstacle. They seek liberation from the attachments of desire through meditation, leading to a merger of the individual atman with the cosmic atman. Wagner did not accept this kama pessimism of the Upanishads and of Schopenhauer. Instead of renouncing kama, he looked to the more optimistic strand of the Hindu tradition, which had elevated kama to a goal of life. The goal of the lovers is also liberation from human bondage in Wagner's opera; it comes from the bliss of merging into an oceanic brahman through death. Their heroism lies not in renouncing futile passion but in refusing to renounce it. In sacrificing their lives for kama, they bring the audience in the presence of the sacredness of love.

~

During this painful period in my life, I was tempted to turn away altogether from kama. The sensible answer was never to fall in love again. I yearned to retreat into a cave in the Himalayas, see no one, live frugally and throw myself into an austere life of study and meditation. I read stories of yogis and ascetics, who renounced the world to escape earthly distractions, made vows of chastity and spent their lives in the forest or the desert. Some of them endured life in caves for forty or fifty years, living only off roots and berries, never talking to or seeing other human beings. The very austerity of the hermit's forest retreat seemed to beckon:

*A mattress of earth for a bed,  
arms of creepers for pillows,  
the sky for a canopy,  
pleasant winds for a fan and  
the moon for a shining lamp;  
with resignation as his woman  
and non-attachment for joy,  
tranquil and easeful, like a king*

*the ash-smeared hermit sleeps.*

I dithered, however. Like Bhartrihari, I vacillated between the secluded life of the hermit and my bittersweet existence in the city. I was in a state of conflict. Life was beautiful during my best moments with Avanti, Amaya and Isha. Yet, the same beauty turned ugly when things went wrong. All this was very painful to a person who tended to find the world mostly attractive. I couldn't imagine myself seriously withering away in the isolation of a forest retreat despite my despondent situation. I sensed the absurdity of my position—it was the dilemma of a deluded man considering abandoning the world of his delusion.

Bhartrihari faced a similar dilemma when he discovered the infidelity of his wife. He asked:

*Should I settle on some sacred river's bank  
to practise austerities?*

*Or should I be the gentleman and wait  
upon women of high qualities?*

*Should I perhaps drink from scriptures' streams  
or maybe taste the nectar of vibrant poetry?*

*How can I decide which to do when life  
is here only for the twinkling of an eye?*

Bhartrihari considers the relative merits of the four ends of life: should he choose passion (kama) or worldly success (artha) or virtue (dharma) or go to the forest and try and liberate (moksha) himself from these goals? All three possibilities had something to commend them but they were all deficient. Desire for women and wealth, he feels, breeds anxiety; virtue is rare and of little avail either in the world or the forest. Even the tranquillity of moksha is vulnerable to sensuous beauty.

In my confusion, I oscillated between one extreme and the other, realizing fully well that none of life's possibilities are what they seem. Then I found an unusual answer in the *Simhasana Dvattrimshika*, in which an ascetic is assailed by similar doubts. Unlike Bhartrihari, however, he is able to resolve them. He feels acutely the absence of pleasure in his life and argues with himself: 'It is a fool's idea that joys of the senses must be avoided just because they also bring

pain. It is like throwing away rice, rich with fine white kernels, just because it is mixed with some particles of husk.' So, he affirms that 'the best thing of all is a gazelle-eyed woman'.





## THOSE WERE THE DAYS

*Each stage of life has a love of its own*

*Those friends are long gone.  
Those green shady trees are now barren stumps.  
Our youth is past.  
Love has been uprooted forever.*

—Gaha Sattasai

Avanti learnt about Isha's death from a short obituary that was tucked away in a corner on page five of the *Bombay Post*. It was brief, formal and poorly written, stating the bald facts of her life, drafted probably by an unthinking clerk from one of her family's businesses. I was still trying to cope with the finality of her death when the phone rang. It was Avanti. She asked if I had seen Isha in the hospital. Had she been sick? How had she died? I told her whatever I knew.

'Did she recognize you?'

'Yes.'

There was a long pause.

'So, how did she die?'

'I don't know.'

'Didn't the doctor tell you?'

'No.'

'Why, didn't you ask?'

'He said something about her giving up the desire to live. I know what you are thinking—no, it wasn't suicide.' But I didn't elaborate on his theory of the death drive.

'Was her husband there?'

'No.'

'And no one from her family or any of her friends?'

‘I don’t know but I didn’t recognize anyone.’

‘It’s strange. I wonder why she asked for *you* after all these years. And you had had no news of her in recent months?’

There was another silent pause. She asked if I was going to Delhi for Isha’s *chautha*?

‘Chautha?’

‘Yes, it’s right here in the paper—you silly boy. It says the ashes will be immersed in the river on the fourth day after the chautha ceremony.’

Did I hear her correctly? It had been years since she had called me ‘silly boy’. My spirits rose and I wondered if it meant anything. I tried to picture Avanti’s oval face and rounded body at the other end. It was rare for her to phone me.

‘Should I go, what do you think?’

‘You must go!’ she said emphatically. ‘You are probably the only one who really loved her.’

‘What about you—do you want to come?’

‘She was *your* friend, not mine,’ she said sharply.

There was an uncomfortable pause.

‘Do you think her husband will be there?’ Avanti asked.

Both of us knew about Isha and Vikram Suri’s divorce. Since she had hoped to marry Anand, she had insisted on it. Poor man, his humiliation had been complete when Isha had insisted on flaunting her relationship with Anand publicly. In the end, he had got disgusted with his wife’s promiscuity and had left the city. While I was feeling sorry for him, an uncomfortable thought crossed my mind. How much did her husband know about us—about Isha and me? When it came to me, Isha had been surprisingly discreet, and so I was never sure how much he knew.

‘Did you read about him recently?’ I asked Avanti.

She hadn’t. I told her about a recent complimentary article about him in *Business Times*, assessing his legacy as one of the great traders on Bombay’s stock market. It had called him a ‘legend’ and mentioned that he was still fondly remembered on Dalal Street. Isha, ironically, had never appreciated her husband, nor even understood what he actually did. I found it paradoxical that she had been married to a man who was admired by so many and unloved by her. When Anand finally split from her, Isha also left Bombay and the only time we saw her

was briefly at our wedding. The overgenerous present, the necklace for Avanti, was perhaps an act of contrition. I couldn't be sure but it was perhaps her way to apologize for the years of pain that she had brought me; an atonement of sorts. After that she had drifted with different men but never seemed to have found a steady relationship.

Soon after Avanti hung up, the phone rang again. It was a crisp, professional voice from a solicitor's firm informing me that they had posted a letter requesting me to come to Delhi for the reading of Isha's will. They required my presence as I had been named the executor. It would take place at the house right after the chautha, he added. I didn't know the person at the other end but I did recognize the firm's name. In the old days, Isha used to complain about them—about having to sign papers all the time.

'Please do come,' he said politely and hung up.

I was puzzled and confused. I had been in two minds about attending Isha's chautha, but this decided it. And so, I found myself spreading my bedding that night in the sleeper compartment on the Rajdhani train to Delhi. Instead of Isha's death, I lay thinking about Avanti and the endearment, 'silly boy', which she had uttered for the first time since we had separated.

~

The past two years of living alone, quietly and in anonymity had made me stoical. Facing constant disappointments—both in trying to reconcile with Avanti and with my company—I had begun to feel a bit like Lampedusa's tragic hero in one of my favourite novels, *The Leopard*. As he watches his handsome nephew dance with his beautiful fiancée at a grand ball, he is aware that they will not find happiness together because 'marriage is a year of fire and thirty years of ashes'. Still, as they dance, he finds the sight charming and magnificent. In each other's arms in the ballroom, they make the most moving couple on earth—who could resist the sight of two young persons deeply in love, dancing as though in the clouds, unaware of each other's defects, oblivious to the warnings of fate, deceiving themselves into believing that the course of their lives would be as shiny as the ballroom floor. Heady from the scent of her hair, he murmurs sweet nothings into her ears as they tenderly clasp their bodies that are destined to die.

Set in nineteenth-century Sicily, the novel recounts the impending doom of the old order caught in the midst of civil war and revolution. In the bleak light of Lampedusa's vision of mortality and decay, experience counts for nothing. The young, with their brief illusions, will make the same mistakes as the old. Happiness is fleeting and it offers little consolation. The aristocratic hero has a mature and wise outlook, however, which is able to see life as a whole. But this is of little comfort because he cannot do anything about it. *The Leopard* is the only novel I know where the film (by Luchino Visconti, with Burt Lancaster, Alain Delon and Claudia Cardinale starring in it) was almost as good as the book.

In my own grim circumstances, I tried a different tack. Like a good Hindu, I attempted to make a genuine effort to control my desires. It had been Avanti who had first suggested the idea many years ago after one of her weekend visits to the ashram. But to me it seemed as though I was completing an unfinished project of my father's and his father's before him. They had both believed that a man becomes truly free when he attains mastery over himself. In completing an unfinished job, it felt as though there was an impersonal karma that was being passed from father to son. In my case, it was ironical, for it tended to make me smug and self-satisfied.

It is in the Bhagavad Gita that Krishna famously prescribes his recipe of acting without desire. It isn't easy, for 'man is made of desire', according to the Upanishads. Moreover, kama is the primeval force, 'the firstborn', according to the creation verse in the *Rig Veda*. When desire turns into intention, and intention into determination, then action ensues, and it is action that defines a human being. Thus, desire is at the very root of being human. So, why does Krishna advise us to act desirelessly?

In a remarkable verse in Book XIV of the Mahabharata, 'Kamagita', 'song of desire', Krishna admits that kama is indeed very powerful:

*Men do not praise souls driven by desire,  
Yet, in this world, there is no activity which is free from desire.*

In fact, kama is indestructible, adds Krishna. If I control my desire for wealth and become philanthropic, my desire transforms into an aspiration for reputation or for heaven; if I renounce the world, my desire will reappear as a spiritual longing for moksha. This means that desires undergo changes moving

longing for moksha. This means that desires undergo changes, moving sometimes from lower to higher ones. The lower ones deal with sensory objects while the higher desires involve intelligence, art and ethics. The noblest desire I have encountered is in Mahayana Buddhism—the Bodhisattva's compassionate desire to free all living creatures from suffering.

In pursuit of Krishna's advice to perform desirelessly, some of us make another mistake. We try and stop desiring. Krishna doesn't mean that one should lose the will to act; what he means by 'desireless action' is to renounce the fruits or the personal rewards of action. This is called *vairagya*, 'detachment'—to act without caring about who gets the credit. This too seemed to me almost impossible. Can one really curb one's fundamental, egoistic desires and still remain human? After two years of hopeless experimenting, I concluded that it was almost as utopian as Marx's ideal of equality. Moreover, I valued the memory of my attachments precisely because they evoked past pleasure and new longings.

Yet, to be civilized is to learn to strike a balance between overindulgence and the complete repression of one's desires. I ask myself where I should have drawn the line when it came to Isha, Avanti and Amaya. They had brought colossal pain but also the best moments of my life, making it enormously worthwhile. I am bitterly aware that I could have saved Avanti a great suffering had I not succumbed to Amaya. Yet, I have a niggling suspicion that by curbing my desire for Amaya, I would have lived a lie, pretending that my desire did not exist when I really craved for her. I would have had to fake virtue.

Though love is neither painless nor wise, it is impossible to ignore. It is as inevitable as it is unreasonable and it is foolish to deny it. It doesn't make sense to escape to the jungles, like Bhartrihari, and live on roots and berries. It takes far greater courage to face the adversities of love. The renouncer's life demands sacrifices but it strikes me as cowardly to run away. At the heart of *vairagya* is a fear of disappointing oneself before someone else does. The yogi is afraid of loving or of being loved. Living with disappointment takes far greater endurance. True, the yogi's existence in the Himalayas may be free of emotional turmoil, but he has almost denied a fundamental, albeit painful, aspect of being human.

They say that 'white lies' are at the heart of civilization. A certain amount of hypocrisy is necessary to control our impulse to tell people what we really think

of them—that they are boring, greedy, loud-mouthed, unreliable and self-centred. Of course, by criticizing others, one runs the risk of being branded a pretentious moralizer, and the Bhagavad Gita is especially harsh on hypocrites who pretend to observe Vedic rituals in order to show off their pious natures. The fact is that our external behaviour (no matter how duplicitous) tends to influence our inner natures. All cultures agree on the importance of a certain amount of self-control of the senses for civilized living. This is why we are repeatedly reminded that dharma is needed to control kama. What white lies are to our outer persona, virtue or dharma is to our inner persona, and both tend to reinforce each other.

Pliny the Elder, the Roman writer, visited India and wrote his famous *Natural History* in 78 ACE. In it, he proposed that the elephant was the perfect symbol of self-control and sexual propriety, crediting the pachyderm with every possible virtue: sense of honour, righteousness, conscientiousness, and above all, a distinct sense of shame: ‘Out of shame elephants copulate only in hidden places . . . Afterwards they bathe in a river. Nor is there any adultery among them, nor cruel battles for the females.’

~

I arrived early at the chautha. My mother was keen to attend even though the Malik family was in terminal decline. It was a social occasion and my mother wasn’t going to be denied a chance to be seen in high society. She had persuaded my father to accompany her and so the three of us took our seats in a middle row under a large canopy erected on the sprawling lawns of 23 Prithviraj Road. I spotted Vikram Suri in a corner, looking hesitant and insecure, and I went over to greet him. He was relieved to have someone to talk to and asked me to sit on the empty chair beside him. I had not seen him all these years and it was difficult to know where to begin. Although Isha had betrayed him time and again, I could tell that he was in silent grief. He probably still loved her even though she was not deserving of it.

To cheer him up, I reminded him of his legendary days on Dalal Street. He modestly brushed aside the compliment. He too had seen the recent flattering piece in *Business Times* that assessed his legacy. He told me that he spent his time mostly in his village in Punjab and occasionally came to Delhi to get a

whiff of the city air. He was rightly proud to have transformed his village—he had set up a school, an engineering college and a hospital there. A significant act of philanthropy!

It wasn't long before the subject of Isha came up. She had been in a bad way the past few years, he said. She might have been on drugs but he couldn't be sure. She believed that she was extremely poor and he would give her small sums from time to time when he visited Delhi. 'You know how rich families are—asset rich and income poor.' He had offered to help sort out her affairs and put them in order but she never took him up on the offer. She seemed to be afraid of the old family accountant, Munshi-ji, who had managed the family's financial affairs for generations and who was responsible for her monthly allowance.

Before I rejoined my parents, Vikram Suri invited me to his village. I suggested we meet sooner and he agreed to dine with me the following night. I had many unanswered questions. Just as we were finalizing our dinner date, I saw Anand coming in our direction. Three of Isha's lovers were suddenly together—a grand testimonial to a person who had lived for the sake of a certain kind of love that none of us ever understood.

Anand had, meanwhile, returned to his firm and moved back to Bombay. He had quit politics after Rajiv Gandhi lost the elections in 1989 amidst allegations of corruption—the infamous Bofors Scandal. Rajiv was weak but his lasting legacy is that he jolted India out of the Fabian socialist era. He was assassinated in 1991, a few months before Prime Minister Narasimha Rao made the most momentous move in India's economic history by scrapping the edifice of socialist institutions built over forty years, and liberalized the economy. This followed the collapse of communism around the world. In the upper-middle classes, the liberalization wave precipitated a sexual revolution as well.

Anand put his arm around me and we walked back to where my parents were seated. He embraced my parents warmly and found a seat near us. It was a full house by now, rows and rows of people dressed smartly in white—a tribute to one of Delhi's grand, albeit decaying families. The programme itself was a simple, dignified performance of spiritual songs performed by one of the great classical singers of the time, Kishori Amonkar. She had been a friend of Isha's mother and had volunteered to sing that morning. She sang exquisitely and touched many hearts. There were no speeches, mercifully, and the whole thing was over in forty-five minutes.

was over in forty-five minutes.

~

Kishori's music spoke to my soul. It evoked in me a despair over the human condition and I found myself once again beginning a steady descent into kama pessimism. In contrast to my fascination with the tragic Wagnerian sentiment of *liebestod*, I began to veer towards the Indian ideal of *shanta-rasa*, 'peace and stillness'. Although his operas are tragic, Wagner had reinforced my optimistic feelings about kama. As a quintessential kama optimist, he had shown to the world how Tristan and Isolde gained salvation through sin, which, of course, horrified the kama pessimists of the Christian Church. I had earlier thought of Isha's 'love-death' as an exaltation, a dramatic source of ultimate beauty.

The mood that Kishori's *rasa* evoked was *shanta-rasa*; it conjured in my mind a solid, living Isha who had turned into a dead corpse in the hospital and consisted today of ashes which were going to be scattered in the river shortly. So, which was the real Isha—the living body or the rotting corpse or the ashes? The Buddhist would have answered that there is no single permanent substance; everything is empty in every way. To my father, death was a dissolution of the self or a merging with the *atman*, 'the cosmic soul', and freedom from rebirth. There could be no love beyond *samsara*, 'the worldly life of constant change', linked inextricably to *karma* and rebirth. The final goal of life was *moksha* from the cycle of *samsara* and human love. The joy and fulfilment of love could exist only here and now, not beyond it.

The Buddhists are, of course, the ultimate kama pessimists. They believe that a person attached to kama is a slave of death, and even call the god of love 'Mara', the god of death. Mara was the famous antagonist of the Buddha in the final days of his struggle for enlightenment under the bodhi tree. In the Jataka stories, Mara poses constant obstacles for Shakyamuni Buddha in his quest for enlightenment. The Jains are not far behind, and in a collection of poems. Amitagati says:

*It is better to throw oneself  
into a blazing fire  
or to jump into the sea  
infested with sharks and crocodiles  
or run into battle*



*where mighty soldiers hurl all kinds of weapons  
—better to do this  
than to indulge in sex with a woman,  
for that would generate hundreds of rebirths  
and endless suffering.*

There is a remarkable story in a Jain literary collection called *Brihatkatha*, ‘The Grand Story’. It is about the adventures of a handsome prince, who acquires skills that make him irresistible to women. He is a pleasant enough fellow and seems to enjoy his good fortune. In each adventure, he ends up falling in love with a different girl and succeeds in winning her over. But as soon as he succeeds with one woman, he begins to desire another. Thus, he drifts from one woman to the next. Eventually, his conquests reach more than five hundred and he decides to settle down. He inherits a powerful kingdom and sends messengers throughout the realm to seek out all the women he has known in his life. They are found and brought to his palace where he marries them and makes them his wives. The story seems to be heading towards ‘and they lived happily ever after’ until at the height of his success, he encounters the possibility of death. As a result, he pulls out his hair and becomes a Jain ascetic.

The Grand Story illustrates the fickleness of human passion. There is no real fulfilment since each satisfied desire gives rise to a new, unsatisfied one. The drift from one girl to the next is a function of fate and destiny. Death teaches him that our emotions are capricious and ephemeral. It’s a universal tale of unfulfillable male passion. It appeared in the West as the story of Don Juan by a Spanish monk, Tirso de Molina, in the sixteenth century. Unlike the Jain story, Don Juan is punished in the end by the ghost of one of his mistress’s fathers.

~

As we rose from our seats, I looked around and recognized Neena. She was surrounded by some of Isha’s friends from the old days; three elegantly attired dowagers—the princesses of Chandi, Sunet and Samba—were getting up from the front row. My mother also spotted them and remarked that they had preserved themselves well over the years. I remembered them from Aditi Malik’s parties. Bharat Mirla, who had also been a fixture at these parties, was getting up from the second row, along with some other members of Delhi’s business houses. He must be pleased, I thought, by the elimination of socialist

controls on business. I had heard something to the contrary, however. Many of the grand old houses were gripped by fear and uncertainty after the reforms, worried whether they would be able to compete in the brave new world. They had been joined by other protectionists in what came to be known as the Bombay Club, and were actively lobbying against allowing imports and foreign companies into India.

As my parents and I were leaving 23 Prithviraj Road, I heard a familiar voice. It was the young man who had phoned me in Bombay from the solicitor's office. He reminded me that I was expected inside the house. I told my parents that there were some legal formalities that I had to attend to with regard to Isha's estate. I asked them to go on home and I would soon join them. When I entered the book-lined study of Aditi Malik, a room I had entered only a few times when I was young, I found two partners from the solicitors' firm seated next to a large Italian rosewood desk. There were others present but I didn't recognize them, except for an unctuous, elderly man in a dhoti, seated prominently in the front. He must be the dreaded Munshi-ji. At the back were standing a few elderly family retainers. One of them was a greying maid in spectacles, who recognized me and gave me a big welcoming smile. I remembered her and smiled back. She was the kind soul, who, sensing my vulnerability, used to offer me hot cocoa when I would come to the house to play badminton. At the other end were seated a few distant relatives of Isha's mother. It struck me that there wasn't a single close family member present. But this was not surprising because there was no one . . . Isha was the last of the line.

The solicitor began sombrely with much legal mumbo-jumbo and after a few minutes, I discovered to my shock that I was not only the executor of the estate but also its main beneficiary. There were murmurs in the room. Each of the family members and the family accountant, Munshi-ji, were given titles either to properties or to small businesses of the family. The servants received handsome pensions. It was all over in fifteen minutes. As we were trooping out, the solicitors asked me, as the executor, to stay. Munshi-ji gave me an ugly look as he rose to leave and the distant family members were visibly unhappy.

'Why me?' I asked when we were alone.

The older solicitor told me in a hushed voice that Isha genuinely believed that she was poor and didn't think she was leaving me anything of real value. 'She

worried, in fact, that she might have saddled you with a headache.

‘Headache?’

‘Yes, mostly to do with unpaid taxes, debtors and bankrupt companies. She had, in fact, moved into a tiny room in the house before she died because she didn’t think she could afford to heat the large old bedroom which she had occupied earlier.’

‘What do *you* think? Am I going to be rich?’

‘The truth is that we don’t know. Your main challenge will be to extract information from Munshi-ji. He keeps things close to his chest. No one has challenged him for decades; so, be careful how you go about it. He will be hostile.’

The solicitor went on to explain that Munshi-ji did not like interference in the family’s financial affairs. Neither Isha nor her mother had paid any attention to the family’s businesses and he had had a completely free hand over the finances, and frankly, had got used to having his way.

‘Over the years we sent messages—first to Isha’s mother, then to Isha—to look into some of the more difficult issues. But they did nothing. Money did not interest them as long as they got enough to manage their lives. As a result,’ he added, ‘there has been no one to look after the companies.’ They had either been run to the ground or the money had been siphoned off by their managers. Some of the properties had been attached by the tax department for non-payment of taxes or hawked to creditors.

‘What about this house . . . 23 Prithviraj Road?’ I asked.

‘The main family homes in Delhi, Calcutta and the summer house in Simla are unattached and free of encumbrances.’

~

It was raining when I returned to 23 Prithviraj Road the following morning. As I stood outside the gate with an umbrella, I was seized by a sudden attack of shyness. For an instant, I seemed to become once more the awkward teenager, who had been filled with fear at the thought of penetrating this forbidding sandstone fortress.

‘This is mine now, all mine!’ I kept saying to myself. I repeated the words in order to give myself confidence. There was a strange thrill in uttering those words but they didn’t seem to give me either self-assurance or a sense of

words but they didn't seem to give me either self-assurance or a sense of ownership. I felt profoundly awed at the formidable wrought-iron gate and the winding path, leading to the classic sandstone structure that I was now able to identify as 'Victorian Oriental', a style that had been popular at the time when Isha's grandfather had built the house in the 1930s. I told myself dismissively, 'It's only a pile of stones,' but it didn't seem to help shake off my diffidence. The gatekeeper, however, arrived soon and put an end to my hesitation. He recognized me, opened the gate and led me in.

I walked somewhat more confidently along the driveway, past the vast lawns, and stopped at the entrance to the main house, where I turned around to survey the expanse of the grounds. The door opened and I was welcomed in with some deference by the same elderly maid in glasses. My heartbeat quickened at the sight of the dark mahogany closet in the mirrored vestibule. It was here that Isha had leaned dangerously close to my face and invited me to join her friends for badminton after school. Shaking off the rain, I shut the umbrella, opened the hall closet and placed it in the umbrella stand. As I was closing the closet, I spied a pink raincoat. Once again, I was seized by fear. Above the raincoat was a matching pink hat and beneath it black rain boots. My anxiety grew at the sight of the rain gear. I couldn't understand what was happening to me. I shivered, as memories began to slowly invade my whole being. Suddenly, it is the first day after the winter break; I am imagining myself cycling home, trying helplessly to keep from falling in the lashing rain. My heart is heavy because Isha has cut me off; I have also done poorly in the exams and got yelled at by the deputy head. But what do I see?

*Entrancing Isha is before me, waiting in the rain in a pink raincoat and hat and black gumboots. By her side is a very wet Cho Yo. Instead of mocking me, her brilliant eyes are smiling, beseeching me to stop. As I slow down, Cho Yo runs up to me. Isha takes my hand and leads me up the winding driveway, past the huge lawns to the kitchen, the dog yelping behind us. I dry myself with a towel, the maid gives me hot cocoa and biscuits.*

The involuntary memory, triggered by the sight of the raincoat in the closet, had assumed a life of its own. I found myself being pulled upstairs into what had once been Isha's exquisite bedroom. There was no log fire burning today in this large, bright room; it was cold, shabby and unkempt. But the Klimt painting was hanging from the same spot. It was here, in front of the painting, that Isha had given me my first lesson in love. My memory has again taken charge and there

she stands, tall, slim and well made, smiling at me insolently. I can feel her breathing as she draws closer.

*'You may kiss me if you want to.'*

*I was confused.*

*'Have you ever kissed a girl before?' she asked.*

*'No,' I said.*

*'Do you know how to kiss? I can show you if you want.'*

*I nodded nervously.*

*'Close your eyes, Amar.'*

*I felt her draw closer. Her breathing was heavy. I felt her hands on my shoulders and I waited, but nothing happened.*

*'Open your eyes—you look so odd with your eyes closed.'*

*I opened them and stepped back. Her long, brown lashes, and thick braids enveloped her big eyes.*

*'Come near. Nearer,' she whispered. 'I won't hurt you.'*

*She grabbed my shirt and my face became flushed. I looked eager and apprehensive.*

*'You may put your arms around me, Amar.'*

*Obediently, I bent over her and placed my arms clumsily around her neck. My heart beat violently. She raised herself, tossed her hair back with a quick motion of her head and kissed me on the lips. She stopped, and then kissed me again, this time for a very long time. She smiled faintly and slipped away to the other end of the room. My heart beat anxiously as I followed her.*

*'You do like me!'*

*'Yes,' I mumbled hoarsely.*

*She put her arms around my neck again, and her braids fell on my shoulders. She pulled me towards her as though we were wrestling, locked together. I did not resist. Her cheeks were inflamed by the effort. She laughed and said that I was tickling her. She held me gripped between her legs like a pole that she was trying to climb. We rocked back and forth. She was soon out of breath with the strapping exercise and the heat of our bodies. I felt a few drops of sweat wrung from me by the effort. A feeling of great pleasure came over me that I did not understand then.*

*As the enchanting dream came to an end, I turned around to find the elderly maid in spectacles holding a cup of hot cocoa and smiling at me. She said that*

maid in spectacles holding a cup of hot cocoa and smiling at me. She said that she had recognized me instantly yesterday. I told her that I too remembered her vividly. She must have been in her thirties then and must be seventy now; she had aged well, I thought.

‘Sir, it is proper that the house belongs to you now. For you were the only one who truly and selflessly loved her.’ Isha had made this confession to her only a few days before she died. She explained to me that even in the old days I had stood out in my guileless innocence amongst Isha’s friends, who were all self-absorbed, artificial and calculating.

I took the cup of cocoa and smiled gratefully but I also knew that I could never live in this house.

~

Isha’s pink raincoat was my ‘madeleine moment’, setting off remembrances of a naive schoolboy on a bicycle who dared to set foot inside the magical 23 Prithviraj Road. These memories lay hidden, undisturbed until today, and now suddenly they had come to life in my consciousness. They were more real than the toast I had eaten at breakfast that morning. Time is neither linear nor clock-like; it’s not a measure of fixed and unchangeable moments. Instead, different moments of the present and the past flow together at the same time. The sight of the pink raincoat, prompted by the unseasonal rain this morning, had opened a reservoir of past memories. Human beings are essentially nostalgic, I find, and their dominant time seems to be the past. Hence, memories flowed in a rush, without being summoned—the raincoat was merely the spark, a symbol of the past that arose unintentionally.

In Proust’s novel, the narrator recounts how it was a family custom to visit his elderly great-aunt on Sunday afternoons. As refreshment, she would offer petite madeleines and cups of lime-flower tisane to her visitors. These were plump little cakes which looked ‘as though they had been moulded in the fluted valve of a scallop shell’. Many years later, when Marcel is older, he is again offered the same two items in a different setting and the combined taste of the two sparks off in his mind long-lost memories of his visits to his dead great-aunt. What follows is one of the most famous acts of remembering in literature, as Proust describes his ‘madeleine moment’:

*No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses . . . And suddenly the memory revealed itself . . . as soon as I had recognized the taste of the piece of madeleine . . . immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like a stage set . . . and with the house the town . . . the Square where I used to be sent before lunch, the streets . . .*

All this from a cup of tea!

After reading Proust's great novel, I had a great desire to visit Illiers-Combray, the small turn-of-the century town, not far from Paris, which Proust transformed lovingly into the Combray of his imagination. I had imagined going there by train one day from Paris, but in the end I never got there, not even by car. Proust, however, has stayed with me, teaching me to be conscious of the sights, smells and sounds that set off memories. He was the first person to coin the term 'involuntary memory' which he felt contained the 'essence of the past'.

Thousands of years before Proust, Valmiki knew that it is not only the mind but the body also has memories, especially those of physical love. In Valmiki's Ramayana, Rama returns after killing the golden deer with a sense of ominous premonition. Sita, his wife, is missing. He searches for her like a madman. He sees her in the trees, in the animals and in the shrubs of the forest. In tears, he asks the kadamba tree, 'Have you seen my beloved who loved your fruit so?' To a tiny deer, he insists, 'You must know where the doe-eyed Sita is!' To an elephant, he inquires, 'Is she with you in the forest?' 'O Sita, my dearest, where have you gone!' he cries, evoking the different parts of her body—her eyes, her skin, the shape of her breasts and thighs. Since he knows intuitively that their separation will be long and troubled, he pours out his love in a flood.

Valmiki realized that memory is an essential part of love, and it sustains and nurtures it. Sita, in despair, a prisoner of Ravana in Lanka, sends Rama a message through Hanuman, recalling how one day, when her body was still wet from a bath, Rama had fallen asleep with his head in her lap. A crow carrying a piece of meat in its beak attacked her. She tried to fight back and in the process her clothes came off, and at that moment, Rama awoke. Seeing her naked, he laughed; she was embarrassed and hid in his arms.

At the very end of the Ramayana, when Sita has disappeared into the earth forever, Rama makes a statue of her in gold, and places it beside him, a reminder of the body he can no longer touch, and the voice he can no longer hear. It becomes the symbol of Rama's memories of his wife; for his brother a memory

becomes the symbol of Rama's memories of his wife, for his brother a memory of her anklets since he never dared to raise his eyes to look at her; and for the subjects a memory of their queen.

After Isha's death, only memories exist: the taste of hot cocoa after a bicycle ride in the cold, blustery rain; the glimpse of her at the gate waiting for me in the pink raincoat; and the musty smell of her rain gear, along with the cap and boots—all these persist, more fragile but more faithful and enduring. Even though Isha is gone forever, I am able to recapture my yearnings, self-doubts, recurrent jealousies and the betrayals. And the reality behind them is kama. Although Isha was cremated rather than buried, Baudelaire expresses my sentiments in his last quatrain of 'Une Charogne':

*Then, O my beauty! say to the worms who will  
Devour you with kisses,  
That I have kept the form and the divine essence  
Of my decomposed love!*

~

The maid's words were just the stimulus I needed to shake off my self-indulgent, nostalgic reverie which had paralysed me so far. In a determined manner, I marched off with a quick, firm step to Isha's mother's study. As executor of Isha's will, it was my duty to go through her papers and those of her mother's to make some sort of sense of the state of the family's finances and businesses. On arriving in the study, I looked around at the elegantly proportioned room with the exquisite rosewood desk which I had admired the previous day. I asked the maid to get Munshi-ji on the phone. When he came on the line, I requested him to come in the afternoon with detailed accounts of the various businesses.

He said he would bring the consolidated balance sheet and profit-and-loss account for the previous year, but insisted that I needed to speak to the heads of the subsidiary companies to understand their accounts. I agreed. He said that he would summon the business heads of the subsidiary companies individually the following week, along with their accountants. I requested him to alert them to begin preparing a presentation of their businesses. We agreed to begin with the Delhi-based companies, move on to the Calcutta business, and review the smaller, upcountry businesses the week after.

'Good! I shall expect you then at 2 p.m. today,' I said.



‘But you won’t understand the accounts, sir,’ he cautioned me. They were written in the Landa mercantile script of the ancient Mahajani accounting language.

‘Then please bring someone who can translate them into modern accounting language?’

‘I don’t have a translator, sir.’

‘Ah!’

After hanging up, I phoned a Marwari friend in Bombay, who fortunately had just the right person, familiar with both the western and Mahajani accounting languages. He routinely translated the old bania books into modern accounts for the tax department. Since their tax returns for the year had been filed, my friend’s load had diminished and he offered to loan the ‘translator’ to me.

‘Can you spare him for a couple of weeks?’

‘He’s a valuable man . . . he’s a damn good accountant too.’

‘That’s why I need him,’ I appealed, explaining that the financial affairs of the Malik family were in a mess and I needed all the help I could get. I would compensate him generously—we would also send him on a weekend holiday with his wife to the Taj Mahal in Agra. He agreed reluctantly.

Two o’clock came and went and Munshi-ji did not show up. I called his office after half an hour and was told that he had suddenly become sick and gone home. I asked for his home number and address. The voice at the other end was reluctant but I was insistent. I phoned Munshi-ji at home, where I was told by his daughter-in-law that he could not come on the line. I expressed concern for his health and asked about the nature of the sickness. Since I didn’t get a satisfactory reply, I informed her that I would be sending a doctor shortly. The maid connected me to the family doctor, who visited him and phoned back in an hour saying that there was nothing wrong with the man. He was just nervous and feigning illness. I called Munshi-ji again and informed his daughter-in-law that I expected her father-in-law to be present at the house at ten o’clock the next morning.

Munshi-ji came the next day and complained bitterly that he had felt insulted. He had never had to show the accounts to anyone since Isha’s father died. Both Isha and her mother had trusted him, a trust built over generations, and he felt humiliated to be treated in this way. I explained patiently that it was not a lack of trust but owners and shareholders had to know how their businesses were faring

trust, but owners and shareholders had to know how their businesses were failing. I reminded him that faking sickness was not a good way to build trust—his actions of the previous day suggested that he might have something to hide.

Munshi-ji opened his ancient briefcase and took out the consolidated balance sheet and the profit-and-loss accounts for the previous year, and handed them to me. I was shocked to find that the Malik family was practically bankrupt. I asked to see the full accounts and he grudgingly sent for them. By noon, the young Marwari accountant also arrived from Bombay. We pored over the accounts all afternoon. Munshi-ji was not very helpful but he could no longer avoid scrutiny. During the following two weeks, I worked hard to uncover the finances of the Malik family businesses. As expected, Munshi-ji kept on stonewalling, but with the help of the family solicitors, I was able to engage a battery of young accountants on a temporary basis from a firm of chartered accountants, who were familiar with the books as they had once audited the family accounts.

~

When the financial issues got too much for me, I would take a break and go and look at the paintings in the house which were still hanging in their original places. Some of their beauty had eluded me then, but I had since become more knowledgeable about modernist art. Their aesthetics meant far more to me now, even though the works themselves needed desperately to be cleaned by an expert restorer. I would repeat Isha's actions when she had smiled at me that day, taken me by the hand, and we had run downstairs to the living room. I would turn on the lights and stand before her favourite Renoir of a girl in a bright dress. Then I would move towards the Cézanne landscape; after that I would look closely at the dancing figures of Matisse. I decided that it was my favourite. Before returning to work, I would examine the impressionist rendering of the street in Paris by Pissarro and the geometrically abstract Braque.

I recalled Isha's words: 'It takes time to love these works but now I adore them—they are my family.' I too felt the same way now.

Towards the end of the week I came upon a scrap of paper in Isha's sloppy handwriting. It was in the tiny, messy room that she had occupied before her death. I had kept postponing a visit to this room but eventually I needed some papers related to one of the family's properties which were lying there, according to the maid. Beneath a jumble of clothes was an exquisitely carved

Burma teak cupboard with a dozen drawers. I opened one and found a hundred letters from friends going back to her childhood. Among them I stumbled on a torn blue-lined sheet on which Isha had hurriedly scribbled some personal thoughts. The scribbles turned out to be a cry. Isha wailed at having deluded herself, thinking that she was driven by love. Instead, she had discovered that there was only isolation at the end. Life had been a gamble and she had lost. What was left in the end was fear, the dread of being alone. I tried to imagine Isha with her wide, troubled eyes, penning these words, her face incandescent in abstract earnestness, wrapping up her life with the words, ‘and then there is no love’.

I have concluded that there is something primal about human loneliness. Animals, they say, do not fear isolation. They fear predators but the dread of separateness is peculiarly human. Adam felt lonely in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and asked God for a companion, someone he could talk to. God obliged but that led to other problems—Adam went on to suffer from the ‘mess of love’, as D.H. Lawrence would have it. Plato too noted ‘absence’ to be the human condition and believed that love helped to surmount this primal isolation. The practical dharma texts prescribed marriage as the answer to conquer loneliness. In the *Gita Govinda*, Radha’s loneliness stems from separation from Krishna and she overcomes it by merging with the deity.

Kama originates in the lonely human condition, and men and women have discovered love to be the best way to overcome this isolation. The need to love and be loved lies deep in human nature. Some of the difficulty springs from our inherited evolutionary past but it has got exaggerated in modern times. We long to be recognized, to be near another person, to be appreciated. These concerns may have played an elementary role in the lives of our primitive ancestors but they have grown exponentially after the enticing hold of romantic love. Even though romantic love is an integral part of the contemporary global culture, there are variations from society to society—for example, there is a difference between the cultures of arranged versus love marriage. Both marital arrangements create their own problems as couples long to be understood, but it is awkward to want to make public too much of one’s inner troubles; and this is one of the riddles of kama.

This is why I am sceptical about the American view of marriage, which demands almost a marital need to express absolutely everything. There

demand almost a maniacal need to express absolutely everything. Even marriage needs a degree of privacy. If you express too easily what should be unexpressed, you risk becoming false. It is just as important what lovers do not say to one another. This is not hypocrisy: it is common sense and good manners. Married couples and best friends should conceal parts of themselves to preserve some mystery. Total frankness is not only impossible but also undesirable. The American obsession with transparency is the cause of too many unnecessary divorces. In the same way, Americans have drained the word 'love' of significance by misuse and overuse: they 'love' hot chocolate, a new dress and a birthday party. In a genuine relationship, 'love' should be used sparingly; we should earn the right to say, 'I love you.' When uttered with sincerity, it carries with it a sacred spirit.

I try and imagine Isha's life after she left Bombay and I am left with the inescapable conclusion that it was not a happy one. The heart-rending words 'and then there is no love' convey not only Isha's dilemma but the self-destructive desire for a love relationship in many women. It is so obsessional that it ensures the woman's failure both in love and at work. Of course, Isha didn't work; nor had she developed other serious interests. Her whole life revolved around sexual love, as it does in the case of many women. A love relationship is obviously very important, perhaps the most important source of satisfaction, but it is not the most trustworthy.

'I must have a man' is the obsession of lots of women. In India, it is translated into 'I must have a husband.' Girls grow up with this single thought, and they are obsessed with this idea so that all the rest of life seems stale, flat and unprofitable. Avanti was an exception in this respect; she fought the pressure from her parents right through her youth. For most girls, however, this emotional pressure brings a feeling of intense rivalry for the attentions of a man, and often results in defeat. In the case of the girl child, the defeat is in relation to the father. But in adult life, it often ends in a feeling of being downtrodden, low feminine self-esteem and constant insecurity.

~

The affairs of the individual companies were in far worse shape than I had imagined. The managers of each company made presentations over the following weeks and to my horror I uncovered a number of frauds. The

Following weeks, and to my horror, I uncovered a number of frauds. The employees of the subsidiaries were just as uncooperative as Munshi-ji, and in desperation, I went over to the solicitors' office to seek their help. They suggested prosecution but also warned me that the legal process would be slow, protracted and painful. It could easily take five years. I went back to my parents' home feeling deeply discouraged.

As chance would have it, Anand phoned in the evening to say that he was visiting Delhi the following day on company business. I invited him to dinner and I told him everything, filling him with the details of the rot I had so far uncovered in Isha's family's business affairs. He rose immediately and made a phone call. Although he was no longer in the government, he still knew people with the influence. The call produced quick results. The following day the station house officer (SHO) from the local police station came to visit me at 23 Prithviraj Road. The sight of police officers evoked fear in the hearts of the company managers. I calmly explained to the managers that the police were here to record the FIRs of the fraud that I had uncovered. The SHO added helpfully that if they came out with the truth at this stage, the law would be lenient. Otherwise, they would be looking at seven to ten years in jail.

Anand's strategy worked. The mere presence of authority brought a dramatic change in the behaviour of most of the company officials. One by one, the senior managers came forward and confessed. My suspicions turned out to be correct. For decades, the managers, the middle officials and even clerks had conspired to siphon money out of the Malik companies after the death of the father. It took a full month to get to the bottom of the rot. Finally, with the help of the solicitors, I filed FIRs with the Delhi Police and launched prosecutions against Munshi-ji and two dozen employees. It entailed the wholesale sacking of more than a hundred individuals as well. The solicitors informed me that at least half a dozen would go to jail. The chartered accountants institute was also informed about the connivance of the accountants in the acts of corruption; this would ensure they would never be allowed to practise again.

I had now spent three months to bring order to the businesses which I had inherited. I had completely restructured the companies, hired new managers and created a modern, accountable organization. About half the businesses would have to close down, but a few that remained would not only prosper but had the potential to generate vast surpluses in the future. If I managed these companies

reasonably well, the income from them would easily pay off all the family debts and back taxes within three years. And there would be no need to sell any of the family's iconic properties. Isha's husband had been right in his assessment that the Malik family was asset rich and income poor. If only Isha had known this and had sought his help, she would not have died in relative poverty.

The projections made by the new set of accountants revealed that I would soon become a very wealthy man. On a conservative basis, they estimated positive cash flows within twelve months; in three to five years, they forecast earnings beyond anything I had imagined. All this without taking into account the value of the fixed assets, especially the grand houses, which were worth millions. When I became convinced that there was no mistake in their forecast, I resolved to take two longer-term actions. I hired a firm of architects to restore the various houses to their original state, as they had existed in the 1920s and 1930s, including the cleaning of the old paintings and insuring them; my second act was to engage a firm of consultants to set up a philanthropic foundation and chalk out a plan for giving away most of the money in my lifetime for primary education.

~

Towards the end of my stay in Delhi, as I was leaving 23 Prithviraj Road one evening, I looked out at the vast park surrounding the house and I imagined Isha's brilliant eyes laughing at me. I was not thinking of my relationship with Isha but of its extreme consequences. This is what makes her story different from the others, wherein love is a positive good. If you have it, you're happy and if you don't, you're not. Didn't we learn this from Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*?

Isha taught me that kama can be a curse as well as a blessing. It's a fundamental force in human affairs, sometimes good, but often awful, cruel and dangerous. Isha, of all people, had seen through the perversity of passion. Once she mentioned in Bombay that there was a lesson that all smart women learnt early in life. It was that all men desire women and a woman must use this fact to her advantage. This was why all wives are doomed to be unhappy, and she wasn't going to be one of them. She was going to play to win. She had few illusions, and thought of love as a cruel, fierce sport, to be played with no holds

barred, and without ever calling on any goodness or soul or sincerity or purpose to mitigate it. I just happened to come along at the wrong time and became her unwitting and frightened victim. Her role was to sustain my enchantment during this vicious game, to keep alive my obsessive desire. She accepted me one day; rejected me the next. She stole a kiss one afternoon and claimed it didn't mean anything the next; she took me away in her charmed carriage; and abandoned me thereafter.

When I met her in Bombay and we began a proper affair, I thought it would be a love story. I was twenty-three, and I had expected she would divorce her husband and marry me. It was all about love, good and bad, wise and unwise. Yes, there was adultery but I had every reason to believe that there would be a happy ending—all of us want happy endings both in stories and in life. When this didn't happen, I tried to find out why—where did the lovers go wrong? The sad truth is that our 'love story' was never a part of the script that Isha had imagined for her life. I tried unsuccessfully for years to make myself loved by her. I now realize that it would have only made me unhappy if she had loved me. Marrying her would have been a disaster.

My affair with Isha was a cataclysm. I can't begin to imagine what a cruel, unhappy existence awaited me if we had married. It would have been as disastrous as Swann marrying Odette in Proust's novel. Like Odette, Isha played the game like the members of her mother's salon. As I think back to Aditi Malik's famous parties, I find that everyone who was there exuded falseness, much like the Verdurins in Proust's book. They almost succeeded in making the noble Swann as false as they were, but in the end, Swann's honesty got him expelled from the Verdurin salon. Falsity was woven equally into the fabric of Aditi Malik's Delhi just as it was in Parisian high society at the turn of the nineteenth century.

I have sometimes wondered why Swann married Odette. Did he do it as a favour after she became pregnant by some other man? Was it out of some peculiar sense of nobility? It is mystifying. Do we ever really know why people do the things they do? But this is not about Odette—this is about Isha. She was my first love and I still admire her for seeking the impossible and having the courage to defy society. In the 1960s and 1970s, divorces were rare in India, and you were quickly stigmatized. We divided women into 'virtuous' and 'loose'; we defined 'virtue' only in terms of a woman's refusal to succumb to sexual

temptation; adultery by husbands was regrettable but understandable. Yet, Isha could get away with a lot; my mother explained it in class terms—Isha belonged to the ‘upper-upper’ class and they made their own rules; it was not uncommon for a woman in her position to have multiple lovers prior to marriage, whereas in our middle-class society a single act of indiscretion was unpardonable and brought quick punishment. To prove her point, my mother reminded me that despite Isha’s pitiable end, the elite of society showed up at her chautha. They may have felt sorry for her but they had also come to pay homage to one of Delhi’s ‘superior’ families.

Isha’s life ended in sickness and tragedy. This is an unfortunate side of kama. In some ways, she bears resemblance to the heroine of Flaubert’s masterpiece of literary realism, *Madame Bovary*, in mid-nineteenth-century France. Both Isha and Emma Bovary were improvident, impulsive and self-dramatizing. Trapped in loveless marriages, both fell in love with a series of unsuitable men who left them unfulfilled emotionally. Neither knew how to reciprocate the genuine love of the one individual who offered it unconditionally and sincerely. Both had made an unconscious connection between love and suffering.

Although their social and economic circumstances were different, Emma’s inner life was similar to Isha’s. Married to a country doctor in provincial Normandy, Emma yearns for glamour, romance and the big city, and begins a series of adulterous affairs with men who consider her nothing more than an amusing distraction. In the end, she neglects her distraught husband and her lovely child; she squanders the family’s money, and raging with unrequited desire, kills herself. Once again, passion seems to be linked to death, destroying its guileless victim. As she is dying, she hears the hoarse voice of a blind beggar singing outside:

*When the sun shines warm above,  
It turns a maiden’s thoughts to love.*

Emma begins to laugh, a ghastly desperate laugh as the beggar ends his song:

*The wind it blew so hard one day,  
Her little petticoat flew away!*

It is hard to imagine a happy ending either to Emma’s or Isha’s lives. Both sought the impossible; both took enormous risks; both suffered from excessive



sought the impossible, both took enormous risks, both suffered from excessive aspiration; both were headstrong, determined and self-destructive; but the universe would not bend to their will. There was too large a gap between illusion and reality. Instead of condemning them, however, I feel compassion. I try and imagine a different fate for Isha but I doubt if she could ever have become a well-adjusted, non-compulsive, responsible and caring person.

I ask myself, why did life turn out so badly for Isha? Was it inevitable? The answer, I think, is that she saw herself mostly as a reflection of male desire. She perceived her role passively—not in loving but in ‘being loved’. Many women make narcissistic investments in their bodies but it doesn’t end quite so badly. Isha’s ended poorly because she lacked guile. Psychologists might blame it on an ‘absent father’ who was only a shadowy existence during her early years, but the question is: why do people fall in love with someone who makes them miserable?

Avanti kept asking me this repeatedly during my unhappy affair with Isha in Bombay. Clearly, my attachment to Isha was irrational. Why was I acting against my own chances of happiness? I could never give Avanti a proper answer. But is there ever a proper answer? It seems to me that my relationship with Isha did not begin on that fateful day at the Delhi Gymkhana Club. It started in our respective childhoods; long before we met, the patterns of behaviour had been settled; both of us had learnt as children to love in a certain way; at least, in how we relate to the other, which went on to govern our later karmic lives.

‘The past is never dead. It’s not even the past,’ says William Faulkner. The memories of my past are insistent, leaving me wondering about the injustice and unknowability of it all. We are quick to stereotype people—‘wicked Isha’, ‘virtuous Avanti’. Kama teaches that we inevitably go through various stages of love under the direction of his five arrows: when we first glimpse another; how we fall in love; how we hesitate, struggle and suffer; and then, how we tire of love; and finally, how it dies. It is not what we might-have-been and should-have-done. It is simply the way things are. Be grateful that you are alive and for what you have.

It had now grown dark and I turned to take a last look at the front lawn; a melancholic verse of Bhanu Datta crossed my mind:

*You stayed awake all night, and yet  
It's my eyes that are throbbing;  
you were the one who drank the wine,  
and yet it's my head that's splitting;  
and in the bower buzzing with bees  
it was you who stole beauty's fruit,  
yet I'm the one that Kama wounds  
with his arrows that burn like fire.*

~

It was now time to return. There were many reasons that drew me to Bombay. I missed Avanti and the girls; I had spoken to them off and on briefly on the phone but it wasn't the same thing. I wanted to tell Avanti about a change in our fortunes and make one final plea to her to come back. I had decided to resign formally from my company. It was not because they had treated me shabbily but I had now tasted working for myself and realized how much more satisfying it could be. I had mostly sorted out the financial mess that I had inherited but I would have to come back to Delhi in order to turn around many of the sick businesses. It was a full-time job and I liked it.

I arrived at Bombay Central on a bright Sunday morning. It was early and I knew that Avanti and the girls would be at home. I couldn't wait to see them and hopped into a taxi and went directly to my old home across from the Oval. I was anxious to break the news about the latest developments in my life, hoping secretly to win her over to the idea of starting a new life at 23 Prithviraj Road. Although money never impressed Avanti, I hoped that she might see this as a chance to make a clean break with Bombay and the sadness of our life there.

Feeling anxious and tense, I rang the doorbell. It was opened by my older girl, and as soon as she saw me, she jumped into my arms. The younger one followed suit. Avanti came rushing and welcomed me with a guarded smile. I sat down and narrated in detail the whole story of Isha's sad end.

'Anand told me that the chautha was packed. But you certainly took your time to come back.'

I recounted at length the events of the past month—the reading of the will, the mess in the family's business affairs and the frauds I had uncovered. It had taken time to sort things out, including the sacking of key managers and accountants. I then told her that I was thinking of resigning from my company since I would

now have my hands full, fixing the businesses I had inherited.

‘Inherited? You mean, she left everything to you! Why?’

‘I don’t know. The lawyers said that she believed she was poor and was, in fact, saddling me with debts and other responsibilities.’

‘Why you? Have you been in touch with her?’

‘No.’

‘So, you are a rich man!’

‘Yes, if I can turn the businesses around.’ There was a long silence. I couldn’t tell what she was thinking. ‘Come back to me,’ I appealed to her. ‘Let’s put everything behind us and make a new life at 23 Prithviraj Road and leave the sadnesses of Bombay behind.’

‘So, you are moving to Delhi?’

I nodded.

‘Surely, you are not thinking of living in Isha’s house?’

I looked at her puzzled.

‘I couldn’t live in her house.’

This was the first signal that Avanti might consider coming back to me. I was secretly elated even though I did not understand why she had strong feelings against the house.

‘Isha wanted you to be the executor of her estate, not the owner,’ she said.

‘But the will states clearly that I have inherited the bulk of the estate.’

‘That’s because she wasn’t in sound mind. You said so yourself—she thought she was poor.’

‘What should I do then?’

‘I don’t know . . . I mean, it’s your life, Amar.’

‘What would *you* do?’

‘I don’t know but I feel we can’t take her money.’

She had used ‘we’ instead of ‘you’ and this was another hopeful sign.

‘But what will happen to the wealth?’ I asked.

‘I don’t think she meant for you to inherit a vast fortune.’

‘So, what will happen to it?’

‘You should go by the spirit of her wishes, not take the will literally.’

I was confused.

‘Ask Ramu Mama—he knows about these things.’

It took a few minutes for the idea to sink in that I might not become rich after

all. It didn't shock me and I didn't protest because deep down, my intuition matched hers. I too was ambivalent about the idea of inheriting a vast empire.

'Ah, you mean we should create a charity trust and all the profits of the businesses should go into the trust?'

'Yes, yes!' She was now excited. 'You should think of yourself as a trustee. I'm sure you'll fix the businesses. You're good at that sort of a thing. You'll do a good job and enjoy doing it. But I would never be comfortable living in her house.'

Was this the third time she was hinting that she might come back? Or was I reading too much into what she said? I felt hopeful.

'What would the trust do with the money?' I wondered aloud.

'Do what Isha's husband has done. Vikram Suri can guide you. There's so much to be done—build schools, hospitals, colleges!'

'Can I say something, Avanti?' I said nervously. 'I cannot think of a life without you and the girls.'

She rose and went towards the window. She suspected what was coming and was embarrassed to look me in the eye.

'I shall say it only once,' I continued. 'I love you from my soul, and will give you all my life, as much of it as you will take. My old life is done. I have repaid my karma—Isha is dead and Amaya has gone forever. Our continued separation is not only absurd but it is a recurring nightmare. That past is dead.'

She remained silent, looking out of the window. After a pause, she said, matter-of-factly, 'The past is never dead but there is another problem.'

I looked at her apprehensively.

'I am involved with Anand.'

I was crushed. I held on tightly to the sofa chair to remain steady.

'And?'

'I haven't given him an answer yet.'

She began to speak as though she were talking to herself. 'I didn't like him at first. I disagreed with his ideas on love and marriage. But over these years, I have discovered a new side to him. He is the one who helped convince your mother about our marriage, for example. He is complicated but a good person at heart.'

'Do you love him?'

'I don't know.'

I DON'T KNOW.

'Do you love me?'

'I don't know.' Although she repeated the same words, her tone was different in my case, I thought. She was obviously torn and confused, but it seemed that she sounded more affectionate when it came to me, giving me something to hope for.

'So, what are you going to do?' I asked.

'I don't know. Anand has invited us, the children and me, for a holiday to a tea garden that his friend owns in the Darjeeling hills. I was thinking we might go there during the children's school break next week.'

'What do the girls want?'

'They don't like him.'

'What do they think of me?'

'Well, they adore you—you know that. Not a day goes by when they don't miss you.'

'So, you are going to Darjeeling?'

'I'm confused—I honestly don't know.'

I was left with an impression that Avanti had not completed her analysis and not reached a QED, and I had reasons to be hopeful.

~

After a tearful farewell to the girls, I left for my apartment in the suburbs. On the way, an infinite feeling of sadness came over me. By moving alone to Delhi, I realized that I might lose Avanti and the girls forever. I had watched Avanti closely this morning. She wasn't physically as attractive as Isha or Amaya, but I could have chosen only her as my life partner. She had blossomed again in my eyes' imagination—a bit like a muted sketch of Cézanne that a casual observer passes over in a museum but a lover of Cézanne, who has trained his eye to dwell on his subtle and subdued qualities, many of them in his imagination, will dwell on it.

To take my mind off these unhappy thoughts, I jumped into action as soon as I arrived in Khar. While I was on the phone telling the landlord that I was leaving, I noticed a special delivery from my company awaiting me on the dining table. Opening it, I discovered that it was a flattering letter from the chairman conveying the board's decision to reinstate me as managing director, effective

from the first of the following month. He was deeply apologetic about the inordinate delay in restoring me to my rightful position, and he had called a special meeting of the board to announce the decision. He invited me to join them for lunch with the board and senior managers after the meeting on Friday.

I phoned him and thanked him and explained, somewhat awkwardly, my changed circumstances. I expressed regret at my inability to accept the honour. A month ago, I thought to myself, I would have jumped at the chance and rushed to the office. He was obviously disappointed but appealed to me to attend the lunch, in any case, to bid farewell to the people I had worked with for so many years. In the afternoon, I visited Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi and filled them in with all the news. They were thrilled about everything except for the uncertainty with regard to Avanti. Ramu Mama called it 'cosmic justice' and suggested that after the house was restored, it would be fitting if I invited my parents to move into one of the wings of 23 Prithviraj Road.

I told them that Avanti had convinced me that I ought not to live there. Moreover, I had agreed with her that the profits from the businesses did not belong to me and I would donate them to a philanthropic trust.

'Your mother will be disappointed,' he said.

'So, how will you live if you quit your job?' asked Kamini Masi

'That's simple enough,' said Ramu Mama, who knew about these things.

'You would pay yourself a generous salary as the person who will manage the businesses and the trust, and then can maintain a comfortable standard of living.'

'And where would you live?' she asked.

'Apart from the salary, the trust would give you a comfortable but not palatial house, not far from 23 Prithviraj Road, which will be your office, and a car in order to live the lifestyle you, Avanti and the girls are accustomed to.'

Kamini Masi said that she would be sad to see me leave Bombay. She hoped that Avanti would finally see the sense in starting a new life with me in Delhi. Although she had been seen increasingly in Anand's company at public events, Kamini Masi repeated her prophecy that Avanti would be mine in the end. 'She is clearly fascinated by Anand but I know in my bones that you are the one she really loves.'

Avanti had confessed to Kamini Masi a few weeks earlier that she was drawn to Anand. 'She still visits the ashram but not as often as she used to.' Listening

to them, I couldn't suppress the intense emotion of jealousy. Kamini Masi came and sat beside me and held my hand.

'She hasn't decided yet,' she said reassuringly. 'She still doesn't trust him fully. Be patient.'

'But they are off to Darjeeling for a holiday next week!' I wailed. 'I'm going to lose her, I'm sure.'

'I know in my heart that Avanti will be yours one day,' Kamini Masi reiterated. Her reassuring words reinforced the hope in my heart that Avanti had not reached a QED.

'I wish I could believe you.'

I asked Ramu Mama what I should do with 23 Prithviraj Road. Avanti had specifically asked me to check with him.

'What did you have in mind?'

'I was thinking that it should become a public space, something that would reflect her family's legacy?'

'What do you mean?'

'Is there anything that Isha or her mother cared about passionately?' asked Kamini Masi.

'I don't know . . . I can't think of anything.' There was silence and after the pause, I said, 'But wait, I think both mother and daughter were very attached to the art collection that Isha's grandfather had built up.'

'There you have it,' said Ramu Mama. 'Turn the house into a museum of modern art. Invest the dividends from the businesses to update and upgrade the collection.'

Although the collection had a number of European masters, which Isha's grandfather had acquired on his trips to Europe, there were a lot of gaps in the collection. The principal opportunity lay in diversifying into modern and contemporary Indian art, especially the period after Independence. While it had some Husains, Razas and a Souza, many members of the Bombay Progressive Group were absent—it needed Ara, Gade, Bakre, plus, of course, stars like Gaitonde, Tyeb Mehta and Ram Kumar.

'You could also buy younger contemporary Indian artists like Atul Dodiya and Sudhir Patwardhan,' said Ramu Mama, all excited. 'In fact, institute an annual prize. When do you have to make a decision?'

I said that I was hoping to restore the building to its original glory when it was

first built in the 1930s. But it would take several years before our cash flows would allow us to begin the restoration.

‘That will give you plenty of time to decide. You must hire a proper firm of architects who have the expertise in designing a museum. You must create an advisory board of eminent artists and collectors and a professional acquisitions committee.’

‘So, there is time. It would be a great monument to Isha’s family and their love for art,’ echoed Kamini Masi.

~

What Ramu Mama said made a great deal of sense. 23 Prithviraj Road is where my education in the visual arts began. I recall vividly when I first noticed the incomprehensible paintings on the walls. Isha had explained how her grandfather had created a modernist collection of art around the time that he built the house in the 1930s. Her father had bought some Indian works too. Isha had introduced me to the paintings nonchalantly, but their house became defined in my mind by the paintings. My education in aesthetics continued when I came to live in Bombay under the guidance of Ramu Mama and Raj Desai. I began to visit galleries and in this way the artists of the post-Independence Bombay Progressive Group became familiar names to me. I genuinely loved their works but, of course, never had the money to buy any of them.

The aesthetic pleasure derived from beholding an object of beauty is one of the meanings of kama, and it is fitting that it should find a place in my memoir. But I wonder if there is a connection between aesthetic and sexual pleasure. On the face of it, they seem almost opposites. Aesthetic beauty requires dispassionate observation of an object from a distance, whereas sexual love is passionate and abhors distance. This is also one of the riddles of kama and it has divided philosophers and poets in the West.

Kant believed that rational, contemplative disinterestedness was necessary for appreciating aesthetic beauty, whereas sexual desire was irrational, sensual and related to the appetites. Schopenhauer, similarly, felt that sexual experience appealed to the instinct of the ‘will to live’, while aesthetic experience was related to perception and knowledge. Nietzsche followed this line of thought and wrote:



*Every artist is familiar with the adverse effect which sexual intercourse has during times of great intellectual tension and preparation. The strongest and instinctually strongest among them do not need to learn this by experience, since their 'maternal' instinct has from the start made its strict dispositions, putting all animal instincts at the service of that one great end, so that the lesser energy is absorbed by the greater dangers of such activity.*

The Kama Shastra tradition in India proposes a contrary thesis. In contrast to western philosophers and other kama pessimists, it insists that sexual experience requires knowledge, training and proficiency. The *Kamasutra* says that whereas animals are driven by seasonal instincts when they are in heat, human beings require the mastering of the senses, the erotic arts, as well as acquaintance with the sixty-four fine arts (such as music, painting, dancing and floral arrangement). The staging of the sexual performance is not merely limited to the act of coitus, but requires an artfully organized space and time; the different forms of foreplay depend on the time of the day and of the lunar month; the post-coital embraces and conversation, including her lying 'in his lap facing the moon', and even the display of arousal are aestheticized.

The aesthetic enactment of the erotic life also had a practical purpose and I regretted I had not employed it in my relationship with Avanti. It was to sustain sexual attraction between a married couple. A medieval text of the sixteenth century in the kamashastra tradition, *Ananda Ranga*, says, 'The chief reason for the separation between the married couple and the cause, which drives the husband to the embraces of strange women, and the wife to the arms of strange men, is the want of varied pleasures and the monotony which follows possession.' The monotony of the sexual act between husband and wife leads to temptation for an affair, which, in turn, results in discord, jealousy and other problems. Hence, the *Ananda Ranga* declares that one of its intentions is to show a husband that by 'varying the enjoyment of his wife, he may live with her as with thirty-two different women, ever varying the enjoyment of her', while also teaching the wife 'all manner of useful arts and mysteries, by which she may render herself pure, beautiful, and pleasing in his eyes'.

~

The next two weeks passed quickly tying up all the loose ends of my life in Bombay. There was a fair amount of nostalgia at my farewell lunch at the company. I returned the temporary accommodation in the suburbs back to the

landlord and since I was no longer in the company's employment, I found a comfortable, affordable flat where Avanti and the girls could move. I shifted to Ramu Mama's flat for the remaining few days. Kamini Masi persuaded Avanti to come to lunch with the girls on the weekend. Avanti was delighted at Ramu Mama's idea of turning 23 Prithviraj Road into a museum. Kamini Masi begged her to reconsider and come back to me. I could tell that Avanti was torn. In the end, she confirmed that she had decided to go on the planned holiday to Darjeeling with Anand.

'Why can't Daddy come with us to Darjeeling?' asked little Arushi.

'Because he has to go back to Delhi, my love.'

'Why can't we go with him to Delhi then?'

Avanti couldn't think of a reply, and the girl repeated her question, to which Avanti answered lamely, 'Because we cannot.' It was a mournful farewell.

As I neared the end of my stay in Bombay, I had a feeling of utter hopelessness. I could feel Avanti slipping away. I loved this woman in a way I can't describe, a feeling of belonging that reaches across all the pain. I looked back on all the years that I had known her, hunting desperately for something that I could hold on to. I felt incomplete knowing that the only true life was inside me and nothing outside would ever compensate for the unceasing yearnings. Yes, I could count on other friendships, such as those with Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi, but close as we were, civility requires a certain amount of concealment—a civilized form of cover-up among friends. It could never match the disruptive, spontaneous emotions that Avanti and I had shared—feelings of hostility, vanity, boredom and even contempt. It is this spontaneity that my mother had never enjoyed with my father and which she had always envied in my relationship with Avanti.

~

I decided to take the longer route by train to Delhi via the Punjab Mail because it would give me a chance to say a final goodbye to Avanti and the girls. The Punjab Mail left from Victoria Terminus (instead of Bombay Central), the same station from which Avanti and the girls would be travelling with Anand on the Howrah Mail to Calcutta, en route to Darjeeling. I found out that Avanti's train would be leaving half an hour before mine and so I could bid them farewell for

the last time from the platform. Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi drove me to the station, and we headed for platform number five, from where the train to Calcutta was getting ready to depart. My train, fortuitously, was leaving from the adjoining platform number four.

I looked out for them but didn't see them immediately. However, the girls spotted us from a distance and they screamed with delight. Avanti turned around and saw the three of us walking in a single file—Ramu Mamu leading the way with Kamini Masi and I following him with the luggage. We couldn't see Anand. I then saw the astonishing sight of Akhila and Arushi running towards us. When Avanti saw the girls scampering our way, she made a dash to catch them. The girls got to us first and threw themselves into my arms. Avanti arrived out of breath a few moments later. She greeted Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi, and tried to extricate the girls from my arms. She was in a fluster, worried they might miss their train. Since her train was leaving from the adjoining platform, I explained, I had decided to surprise her and the girls and bid them a final goodbye at the station. Akhila and Arushi began to howl, insisting that they wanted to go with their father rather than with 'Anand Uncle'.

Avanti stood bewildered. In a panic, she reminded the girls that their luggage was already on the train. She turned to look back, trying to spot Anand. She didn't see him as he was inside the compartment helping to unload their luggage. The girls were holding on to me tightly. Not knowing what to do, she appealed to me to let them go.

'The girls have the right idea,' I said. 'Why don't you come with me to Delhi instead?'

'Yes, yes, let's go on this train!' the girls chorused.

'But we can't, we don't have tickets for his train.'

'That's easily fixed,' said Ramu Mama, spotting the ticket collector of my train. He quickly went across and came back to say that my train had a lot of empty seats. 'I could get you a four-berth private compartment.'

Avanti was genuinely torn.

'Come, come, Avanti,' Kamini Masi said. 'This is where you really belong!'

Ramu Mama decided the matter. He walked with determination towards the ticket collector and got busy buying three seats and negotiating for a compartment. Kamini Masi took charge of Avanti. Putting her arm around her, they rushed back towards the Howrah Mail to reclaim their luggage. Just as they

they rushed back towards the Howrah Mail to reclaim their luggage. Just as they reached their compartment, the whistle of the Howrah Mail went off. Anand came out looking perplexed. He saw Avanti and he held out his hand to help her up.

‘Where are the girls?’ he asked.

‘Anand, we can’t go with you.’

‘What!’

‘We’re going to Delhi with Amar.’

His face fell.

‘I’m sorry!’

The train began to move. Kamini Masi shouted anxiously, ‘Anand, hurry, fetch their bags.’ Anand was in a daze and he turned around, and with the help of another passenger, he pulled out two bags. The women began to walk beside the moving train. He passed the bigger one to Avanti, who practically fell from the impact, and handed the smaller one to Kamini.

‘Wait, there is another smaller one, belonging to the little one,’ shouted Avanti. Anand charged back. The train began to gather speed. Anand found it and threw it out of the window, where it was caught by a puzzled stranger. Kamini Masi retrieved it gratefully. Anand stood at the door and Avanti waved to him with a sad look. The two women rushed towards the Punjab Mail which was now getting ready to depart. Ramu Mama, ever efficient, had bought the tickets and with a generous tip to the ticket collector, had got him to allot a compartment, and we were all set to travel as a family.

Ramu Mama had taken the girls and seated them in the compartment of my train. He directed our porter to bring the luggage inside. Just as Avanti and I hopped on to the train, Ramu Mama jumped off. Before closing the door, I looked out and saw Kamini Masi, whose smiling face seemed to say, ‘I knew she would be yours!’ I followed Avanti to our compartment unable to believe my good fortune.

‘Avanti is now mine forever!’ I thought to myself.

As we seated ourselves, both of us experienced a feeling of awkwardness which usually follows a momentous turn of events. To talk of trifles is awkward and it is impossible to converse seriously after such trials. And yet, the desire to speak is there. But in these moments, it is best to remain silent, and so we did.

When Avanti hopped on to my train, she was expressing an act of forgiveness and commitment. For many years she had held me blameworthy, guilty of having wronged her, but now, for some reason, she was able to view my actions with empathy. Compassion had replaced revenge. It couldn't have been easy. No one is more murderous than a woman injured in love. Think again of Medea, the Greek heroine who killed her children to avenge her husband's infidelity. I didn't waste any time trying to figure out why and how Avanti changed her mind. I was just grateful that an enormous treasure had been restored to me. Years later, Avanti confessed that she came away with me because despite all my flaws, I tried to live life truthfully. My marriage had survived infidelity and my honour came to be born out of dishonour.

Proust was right when he wrote that adultery too has its uses:

*... do we not find every day that adultery, when it is based upon genuine love, does not upset the family sentiment, the duties of kinship, but rather revivifies them. Adultery brings the spirit into what marriage would often have left a dead letter.*

Although I have described a union that was superficially a failure because of betrayal, this period of my life, oddly enough, is a panegyric to marriage. After a struggle, Avanti and I achieved another kind of love in companionship. Once accomplished, it became unalterable, lifelong, and made for a stronger, more successful marriage. Avanti has been my friend, my love, my companion. She is perennial and the best; there has never been anything but absolute goodness in my love for her, just as there has never been anything but complete and bright innocence in her nature. Our relationship has remained fresh and vibrant throughout, even though it became over time mostly unphysical. Although she is physically attractive, I have stopped thinking of her in sexual terms. Our marriage became stronger and finer because we gave freedom to the other without inquiry or reproach, and it succeeded because we found permanent and undiluted happiness in the company of each other.

Fidelity does not come naturally to human beings. The modern young mind values spontaneity, 'being alive' and 'living to the full'. Fidelity is a conventional, old-fashioned virtue like prudence; it is too sober, unromantic and sensible. But in fact, there is an active quality of love in fidelity. It constantly

demands the good of the beloved, and it acts against our natural egotism. It says, 'I want to live with you just as you are.' And this really means: 'It is you I choose to *share* my life with me, and that is the only *evidence* there can be that I love you.'

I have sometimes wondered about Freud's remark that a woman loses her lover when she makes him a husband. I expect he was referring to the tedious routine and habit of married life when the glow of romantic excitement has been left far behind. Even today, when young couples live together before marriage, there is still some uncertainty and an implicit freedom to stray compared to the commitment of legal matrimony. After marriage, the excitement of courtship cannot continue in the same vein, what with the day-to-day business of earning a living, raising a family and coping with domestic problems. The exotic becomes commonplace. Romantic passion becomes 'marital passion', and one needs a different vocabulary to describe the lasting, continuous bond between married adults. The psychologists Elaine and William Walster offer the unglamorous, lacklustre expression 'companionate love', which suggests a relationship closer to what companions and friends share but also has the mutual comfort of lives that are 'deeply intertwined'. It is a far more honest appraisal than the passionate utopia that some marriage counsellors offer glibly and dishonestly; yet, it is a deeper relationship than the one close colleagues or neighbours experience, for it includes moments of intense 'physiological arousal, tenderness, anxiety, relief, altruism and jealousy'. Avanti, I think, would be comfortable with the idea that friendship and companionship are the foundations of a good marriage.

Are there any secrets to a long-lasting relationship? One of them is, oddly enough, infidelity. It is not the illicit affair itself but the threat of it. I agree with Proust's view. Habit does have a way of dulling relationships. Amaya came into my life and rescued me from habit. Time and again, I have learnt that an injection of jealousy also helps. My jealous feelings towards Anand made me value Isha in my younger days and Avanti later in life when we were separated. When you live together, you tend to forget to see the qualities that made you love her. The threat of losing her makes you appreciate her and puts an end to the boredom that has set in.

One of the wisest tales about marital fidelity is Tolstoy's short novel, *Family Happiness*. In it, a young woman, Masha, falls in love with Sergey, her

neighbour in the country. She is young and sprightly; he is older and a loyal friend of her deceased father. They get married; she leaves home to live with her husband and his old mother. They are happy with their idyllic life consisting of laughter-filled breakfasts, evenings of music and intimate midnight suppers.

*He alone existed on the earth for me and I considered him the best and most faultless man in the world; so that I could not live for anything else in the world other than for him.*

Slowly and gradually, the boredom of married life enters her soul. He, on the other hand, is content with the still and orderly routine of the estate. She is lonely—her life seems to be unvarying and repetitive—and she is irritated by his calm manner.

*I wanted movement, not a calm course of existence. I wanted excitement and danger and the chance to sacrifice myself for my love. I felt in myself a superabundance of energy which found no outlet in our quiet life.*

She grows impatient. Finally, he takes her to St Petersburg ‘to bring her out in society’, where she is an instant success. She throws herself into a season of balls and grand parties. He is bored, however, and wearied by this life and warns her about the dangers and ugliness of the social world. She ignores him and is slowly pulled deeper into the social whirl, staying longer and longer in St Petersburg and Moscow, as well as taking trips to Europe. Their trust is damaged as he watches her helplessly become dazzled by the false, empty world in which she moves. They drift apart.

One day, an Italian adventurer tries to seduce her, unsuccessfully, in Baden. This is a turning point of the story and she decides to return home to the lost happiness of her early married life with her husband. In a final climactic scene, she begs for his forgiveness, which he grants confusingly, and they reach a new understanding of their life and of love. She realizes that love changes in every decade of one’s life. One always feels regret for the love that is gone. But wisdom lies in recognizing and valuing the love that has taken its place. There is much intelligence and beauty in this tale about how love changes in the long years of a marriage.

Indeed, ‘each time of life has its own kind of love’. This is one of the lessons I have learnt—about the inevitable death of romance within a marriage and the bloom of long-term love. I remind myself that my marriage to Avanti had also

begun with romance and flowers and butterflies in the stomach. But romance never lasts and when it's gone, something else, possibly better, is left behind if one is lucky. It is a love that has weathered the test of time. After living a lifetime with Avanti, I have concluded that passion in marriage is contained not by morals but by an evolving sense of love.

Tolstoy, it appears, has captured the story of my life with Avanti. The details and character may be different. Sergey is older, self-contained and imperturbable; I was young, ardent and entranced. But the power of the tale lies in the eventual reconciliation of the couple. It has something universal for all of us. We are all, at some stage in our lives, prey to hopes and restless, vague yearnings: 'all the nonsense of life', as Sergey calls it. But he is wrong to call it 'nonsense'. This impossible yearning is the first arrow of Kama and it is necessary at the beginning of love. It was a time when Avanti was utterly wonderful and life blissful. It only became 'nonsense' because, like Masha, I was not prepared for Kama's other arrows. The romance with Avanti was destined to burn itself out. The old love between us had to die in order to make way for something else. Tolstoy says:

*All of us must have personal experience of all the nonsense of life in order to get back to life itself; the evidence of other people is no good.*

Like Masha, I too finally grew up when I realized that the romance of our marriage had to end one day and the old feelings had to become treasured, irretrievable memories. In their place, a new kind of love laid the base for a new life and a different happiness.



# Epilogue

## *The riddle of kama*

*Each time of life has its own kind of love . . . I weep for that past love which can never return . . .  
Love remains, but not the old love.*

—Leo Tolstoy, *Family Happiness*

‘Look at her!’ Kamini Masi said. ‘Arushi is growing into a fine girl.’

‘I worry, though,’ Avanti replied. ‘She is bright, good-looking, but lonely. I feel I have, somehow, let her down.’

Avanti and Kamini Masi were chatting on the sidelines of a badminton game in progress on the lawns of our home in Sunder Nagar. They were watching the girls play a game of mixed doubles.

‘What do you mean?’

‘She gets nightmares—she still hasn’t got over the trauma of those years when Amar and I were separated.’

‘Is this why she clings to Amar?’

‘She needs friends of her own age,’ Avanti said. ‘The house is always full of Akhila’s friends, and of course, they have no time for Arushi.’

‘There’s always so much bustle here. I wish Ramu and I could have had children.’ And a look of longing crossed Kamini Masi’s face.

It was ten years ago that Avanti had hopped on to the ‘wrong’ train at Victoria Terminus and come to live with me in Delhi. We normally went for lunch on Sundays to my parents’ house but today was a ‘special’ Sunday—it was our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary and we were gathered at our home for a celebratory lunch. Ramu Mama and Kamini Masi had flown from Bombay for the occasion. My mother had just arrived and was walking erectly with a determined step, followed by her maid, carrying a shawl and a chair. Just then the younger girl slammed a winner and everyone cheered.

‘You must lose weight, Avanti!’ announced my mother imperiously. She was

now seventy-five, quite grey, but as formidable as ever. She still loved going out and had a far more active social life, although she had become a bit eccentric. She had grown closer to Avanti, however, and even admired her. Initially, they had fought bitterly over Avanti's insistence that I renounce my inheritance of Isha's estate and the grand house on Prithviraj Road. But she soon changed her mind. As the news spread in Delhi's society of my act of renouncement, there was public acclaim for my gesture and she got a chance to bask in the praise and the applause.

Avanti always had a tendency to put on weight but my mother was exaggerating. It didn't in the least detract from the beauty of her face or her body. She was as attractive as ever. Perhaps, it was the effect of meditation. She still meditated daily and occasionally spent an hour or so with my father, discussing spiritual matters. We lived only a few blocks away from my parents.

Coming to Avanti's rescue, Kamini Masi asserted defiantly, 'What do you mean—she is beautiful!'

'No, I'm not—I look frumpy!' Avanti protested bitterly.

'And you never go out socially, my dear. You must be seen.' My mother believed that if you are not seen in society, you are quickly forgotten.

'Where is the time? I am so tired after a day at the office. All I want is to put my feet up and spend some time with the kids and Amar.'

'We are all so proud of you, Avanti—you are holding one of the most coveted jobs in your profession,' said Kamini Masi. Avanti had continued her career as a journalist with the same newspaper in their Delhi office. She was good at her work and had risen to become editor of the op-ed page. I knew that my mother secretly envied Avanti for her success in a man's world.

Turning to my mother, Kamini Masi said, 'Besides, what's wrong with spending time with your husband and children?'

'Nothing. I know my son dotes on her but a wife standing beside a husband in a social gathering is an asset.' The easy, friendly, chattering relationship that I enjoyed with Avanti was another source of envy—my mother had always wished that she could have had the same rapport with my father.

As for me, I had found real purpose in life as executor of Isha's family estate. I had managed to turn the businesses around—all of them were now thriving under professional managers, reporting to independent boards. I had also created a philanthropic trust into which all the profits and dividends of the companies

flowed. The trust too was managed professionally by a CEO, who reported to a group board—a truly distinguished one. Vikram Suri was its chairman and he had played a major role in guiding the trust, creating an impressive portfolio of philanthropic projects in education and health. The house on Prithviraj Road had been restored. It was now a vibrant museum, having acquired possibly the finest private collection of contemporary Indian art over the years under the disciplined advice of a council of artists and art historians. It became a magnet for the city's intelligentsia—a cultural centre that hosted seminars, talks and exhibitions. It had a café that was always full of lively, young people. For overseeing the affairs of the companies and the trust, I gave myself a reasonable salary which was more than enough to meet our family's needs.

As soon as the badminton game came to an end, my father quietly joined the group. I lifted Arushi, sat her on my shoulders and raced with her around our lawn. We giggled and yelled, and it infected everyone with a sense of carefree happiness. As the other guests arrived, we moved towards the wicker chairs placed under a green-and-white umbrella, where drinks were being served in tall glasses. Soon Avanti's parents also arrived, followed by Vikram Suri. Anand was the last to enter, looking as handsome as ever. My mother still loved him and he went directly to her and gave her a warm hug.

There had been a Cabinet reshuffle by Prime Minister Vajpayee that week and much as in every other party in Delhi, the conversation at our anniversary lunch began to hover around the new ministers. Sharma-ji was pleased that a politician from Ujjain had become a member of the Cabinet and he hoped for special favours to come his way. As a former additional secretary to the central government, he enjoyed the status of a 'big shot' in his home town. Ramu Mama asked Anand for his opinion about Sonia Gandhi's chances. As a Congress party loyalist, he was evasive.

I was suddenly called inside to attend a call, and as I was leaving, I noticed that Anand and Avanti had moved closer to each other and begun a conversation. I returned soon and was headed in their direction when I was stopped by my younger girl. But I was still close enough to overhear the following conversation.

'From the looks of it, you've made a happy life here,' said Anand. 'Do you still feel that you jumped on the right train ten years ago?'

'Does one ever know what life might have been if one had taken a different train?'

ramu.

‘Have you ever regretted it?’

Avanti remained silent. After a pause, she said, ‘And you’re still a bachelor?’

‘I was devastated when you abandoned me at the station.’

‘Be honest, Anand. I can’t imagine you ever eating alone or sleeping alone.’

‘The closest I came to marriage was you, Avanti. Of course, I was shattered when you chose the Punjab Mail over Howrah Mail.’

‘But admit it, you must have been relieved too. You are not the marrying kind.’

Anand suddenly looked deep into Avanti’s eyes and said, ‘You’re still a very good-looking woman!’

‘Tell that to my mother-in-law. She thinks I am fat.’

Ten years ago, I would have been unnerved and jealous overhearing this conversation; today, I felt loved and secure and it left me mildly amused. I now joined them and said, ‘If I know her, Anand, she must have done a QED this morning.’ Turning to Avanti, I asked, ‘So, let’s hear the pros and cons of the twenty-five years of our marriage.’

‘Stop it, you silly boy!’

Ramu Mama had also joined our group and he said that there wasn’t any need for a QED—it was written all over our faces.

~

Since the beginning of time men and women have been obsessed with the ideal way to relate to one another. When I set out to write this memoir, I thought it would help me understand this relationship, but now that it is drawing to a close, I am left with more questions than answers. One of the consolations of age is to be able to look back on your life and smile ironically at the puzzles and enigmas of kama.

In this memoir, I have narrated two stories of love: one is my own story—how kama influenced my life; the second is a general narrative in which I have tried to come to grips with the nature of kama through philosophy, literature and history. In weaving the two, I stumbled upon two strands of belief—one was optimistic and the other pessimistic. The kama optimist is generally a liberal, who blames the unhappiness of desire on unjust institutions and wishes to change them by economic, social and legal reform. And he (or she) has been

rewarded by dramatic changes in the way men and women relate to each other in the past hundred years—the mass embracing of romantic love, economic opportunities for women, the pill, the self-presentation of women and the growing acceptance of same-sex marriage. The kama pessimist, however, has not been defeated. Patriarchy still persists, although it is losing its hold. Some human traits are inherited from our evolutionary history; male arousal still seems to be more closely connected with visual stimulation unlike female arousal which seems to depend more on affection; jealousy and possessiveness remain inherited, self-protective instincts; the ‘perfect soulmate’ has turned out to be an illusion and the breakdown of family in the West is worrisome.

There are a number of senses in which I have come to understand the infuriating word ‘kama’. First, it is a cosmic force that created the universe and all things in it, according to the *Rig Veda*. It expresses itself in human beings as a ‘life force’, something that animates life. Second, it is a drive or instinct of life, following the Greek idea of eros and of Freud—‘a will to live’—which attaches individuals to each other and ultimately unifies mankind. Third, kama is love of all kinds, but most often it is erotic love—the fusion of the sexual instinct and tenderness, directed towards a specific individual, ultimately leading to reproduction of the species. Fourth, it is a dynamic fusion of eros with man’s natural aggressive instinct or the ‘death drive’, according to Freud. Fifth, both in Plato and in bhakti, it has a spiritual significance—it is a search for divine perfection, a yearning for the highest good. Finally, kama is pleasure, and it may sound elitist but there are higher and lower pleasures, as both Plato and J.S. Mill said. The dilemma is which is superior, the pleasure or its anticipation? Putting all this together, it is not surprising that the ancients in India elevated it to one of the goals of life.

What I have learnt from my own experience is that I am unable to do without love. I suspect I am not exceptional in this regard—what makes love unusual among the emotions is the human inability to do without it. If this is so, then one can only surmise that love is a good thing in the end. If not, then we would have to conclude that it is merely an unfortunate addiction, something we cannot do without but which eventually brings only sorrow. What I have recounted in my memoir is that, for all the joy it brings, love also produces frustration, rejection and humiliation; and it is prone to dangerous emotions such as jealousy, hate and fear. Pain and pleasure are the two sides of kama.

tear. Pain and pleasure are the two sides of kama.

As I said before, Freud believed that a lot of our mental energy comes from deducting it from kama. He argues that civilization is born from our ability to sublimate the aggressiveness of kama's energy and turn it into culture. Many of our primitive sexual instincts are clearly harmful and hence, society has created laws that prohibit rape, adultery and murder. Sublimation transforms kama's energy into socially useful achievements, including artistic, cultural and intellectual pursuits. Thus, culture is an exchange of happiness for security, and human development is a parasite of kama's eroticism. But this has been a costly trade-off. It has left us in a state of anxiety and perpetual feelings of discontent with regard to sex. What should have been plentiful is made deliberately scarce, leaving us feeling deprived. Romantic love is one of the ways shortage is created, producing through our imaginations the belief that there is only one right person for us. The poor have historically had less inhibitions in this regard, which is why they say, 'Sex is the recreation of the poor.'

Kama has clearly been a driving force in my life, and it has taken positive and negative turns. It has promised meaning and purpose at times, and threatened destruction at others. When I was in another's grip, as in Isha's case, I was in great danger; when I broke with Amaya, I destroyed her spirit—its stain will never wash away. When it came to Avanti, I betrayed her. If only my mother had not dozed off, I sometimes think, when I was in her womb, I would have known how to exit the 'web of desire', or at least been able to cope better with the negative side of kama. Still, I consider it a stroke of luck that it all ended where it did, and every once in a while, I ask myself: how did I deserve this happiness after all these negative turns?

Given all the ups and downs I have faced, do I still believe in romantic love? The world at large certainly does, going by the number of movies and airport novels that are produced each year glorifying love; but it is based mostly on wish fulfilment, I suspect, enabling a person to escape the unpleasantness of ordinary, everyday life. Born in courtly life, romantic love took a turn towards merging with the divine in the bhakti and Sufi movements in India and the Middle East. The medieval knight in the West felt distinguished in fighting for the greater glory of his lady. When courtly love got converted to religious reverence, it gave women an inherent value which had not existed earlier. Abrahamic religions were based on male supremacy—God and Christ were men. But after the twelfth

century, not only did Radha's status rise in India but the adoration of the Virgin began in western medieval religion. High Romanticism reached a peak in the nineteenth-century West—in Shelley's poetry or Wagner's music, for example—but today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the West refers to itself being in a 'post-Romantic age' with high divorce rates and single-parent families. Despite that, the faith lives on and young people around the world believe in romance to bring about happy and enduring marriages.

I have come to the conclusion that romantic love is one of the great gifts given to human beings and we ought to cherish and enjoy it, but not insist that it underlie a happy or stable marriage. Marriage needs affection and intimacy without the illusory baggage of romantic love. More often, it needs a secure, warm and comfortable environment for rearing children. Having stated that, I still believe that the great romantic dream was a decent one, and it has allowed millions to live happy and flourishing lives; it requires, however, realistic resources in a couple to sustain it and accept change in every decade of their lives.

One of the common translations of kama is 'lust' in the English language. It too has many applications—lust for life, lust for gold, lust for power. But most often, it refers to sexual desire. The problem is that we associate lust with 'excess' or 'overindulgence' of desire. Thus, its case is immediately lost. For, excessive desire is bad because it is excessive, not because it is desire. If the notion of excess is contained in the definition of the word, then desire is damned from the beginning. If a person lusts after riches, he is greedy; if a person lusts after food, he is a glutton. It suggests that the person wants more than a proportionate amount of something. When it comes to sexual desire, lust crosses the line of propriety. It stole me from Avanti. It stole Isha from her husband. It conjures the image of a debauched Don Juan with an extreme preoccupation with women to the point of sickness. Living with lust is like being chained to a certified lunatic. In the English language, at least, the puzzle of kama begins in semantics.

Avanti and I have discovered that romantic love declines gradually and one must be prepared for the inevitable day when beauty and sexual pleasure fade and even turn bitter. This ambiguous nature of kama is the general experience of humanity. There may be examples of romantic love enduring but they are rare and exceptional. The reason is that romantic love emerges only from the first

and exceptional. The reason is that romantic love emerges only from the first two arrows of the god Kama, making one believe that falling in love is the essence of love. One is oblivious to the other arrows, and not prepared to cope with the changing nature of love. In the opening moments of a relationship, there is an excited preoccupation with the loved one, delight in their presence, and a vivid conviction that the other is the key to one's happiness.

When Kama releases his second arrow, the lovers move rapidly to a phase of intimacy as the barriers of reserve fall down and there is blissful nearness. The enigma lies in the fact that this state is short-lived. It may last in its full brightness for a few days, weeks, months and even years (especially if the lover is absent). The truth is that desire fades inevitably, which is what happened in the case of Avanti and me. Even the great love between Anna Karenina and Vronsky subsided in the end. The answer is not to throw yourself under a train. Love is a process that develops and changes over time. What happens in the later stages is different from the beginning. To judge the whole experience of kama by the initial experience is sentimentality. And yet, the structure of our minds is set for love and it contributes to the riddle of kama.

Problems begin with the third arrow, 'staying in love', and how to make love last, which is very different from 'falling in love' (the first arrow) or 'being in love' (the second arrow). I experienced the first two volcanically with Isha and Amaya. The first two arrows of kama create a bond that separates the lovers from their environment; 'staying in love' requires the relationship to endure in an ongoing life within the society at large. This was the challenge I faced with Avanti. It is also a problem faced by mystics and bhakti saints, who must retain their love for God on a continuous basis. For most, it is easier to manage the first two arrows, but 'staying in love' during the boring, mundane daily life of the third stage is more demanding. Though exuberant displays of enthusiasm are rare, 'staying in love' can include a large variety of passions: cherishing experiences together; being loyal to the other, warts and all. And this loyalty brings about spontaneous trust and harmony.

The fourth arrow is released at an even more difficult stage because by then, love has not only lost its sweetness but has also turned sour and bitter that it resembles voluntary imprisonment. It is much more difficult to salvage the relationship at this point when there are increasing periods of anger, boredom, disgust and hatred. Fortunately, Avanti and I redeemed ourselves during the



third stage when she took the wrong train and we escaped the fourth stage. The fifth and final arrow is maran, the death of love, which happens when the two individuals become indifferent to each other, sometimes after being divorced or when they have ‘moved on’.

The fifth arrow took an unusual turn with the discovery of bhakti in India. Both the bhakti saints and Wagner were kama optimists when it came to reconciling love and death. When Radha attains Krishna in the end, she achieves the ‘*samadhi* of love’, a higher state of consciousness. Through the course of the *Gitagovinda*, Radha is delighted, confused and anxious when her heart is impaled by kama’s various flower-arrows during the different phases of their love. Unlike Shiva, who is angry when he is interrupted during his yogic meditation by Kama’s arrow—in fact, he burns Kama—Radha and Krishna regale in their battle and play of love. When it is a battle for sexual union, it is the fifth arrow of kama, maran, or ‘death’, at work. Kama becomes Mara, the god of death; when they are at play, Mara is love. Thus, there is tension between the classical renouncer tradition and the spiritual bhakti tradition. Equally, the western and Indian romantic traditions differ. The Wagnerian West seeks glory and exaltation in ‘love-death’; the bhakti romantic seeks peace, quiescence, dissolution of the self by merging with the divine and attaining freedom from rebirth. Freud would have placed the mystico-erotic energy in the unconscious, although he, of course, regarded the libidinal energy purely in materialistic terms.

Part of the problem in understanding romantic mysticism is that, as outsiders, we are used to seeing the world in dualist terms—there is a subject and an object. But to bhakti and Sufi devotees, the distinction between subject and object disappears—suggesting that the experience of divine ecstasy is closest to sexual ecstasy where the duality also dissolves. A related puzzle, which the poet Chandidas emphasizes, is that Radha’s love for Krishna has to be illicit because its force has to be strong enough to break social norms. Radha debates unconsciously that if she chooses Krishna, she risks losing her home and family. If she doesn’t, she loses Krishna. She chooses the latter. Her dilemma is that she cannot possibly possess Krishna. It has to be a selfless love and when she forgets this truth, Krishna disappears.

The five-arrow process does not have to be sequential. In many successful arranged marriages, such as the one between my parents, they never went through the stages of ‘falling in love’ or ‘being in love’ prior to marriage; from the day they were married, they seemed to combine the first three stages and remained at the third all their life. For Natasha and Pierre in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, they too never really went through the first two stages. They got married and ‘stayed in love’ for the rest of their life. It was a different, more mature Natasha, who realized that ‘falling in love’ is not really love. In the same way, many ‘fall in love’, but also fall out of love just as quickly. Perhaps because they are in search of the perfect soulmate, they go directly from the first to fifth stage. In my case with Amaya, I went through the first two stages and realized subconsciously that I would never attain the third stage with her. Or it was the magnetic pull of Avanti that ended our affair after the first two stages.

Another thing I have learnt in narrating this memoir is that kama is not only a force of nature but a product of culture and history. It has changed over time. Kama, as the ancients saw it, was different from the one in the medieval centuries and certainly in the modern age. The value of looking at it historically is that it forces us to think of the various faces of kama—love, marriage, family, the roles of men and women, adultery, jealousy and violence—in a dynamic way. Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* was a pivotal moment in understanding sexuality. It challenged some of our basic assumptions. One of these is the belief of progressive sexual liberation in the future. He argues that the western society of the seventeenth to mid-twentieth centuries (due to the rise of capitalism and bourgeois society) was not as repressed as people believe. Equally, future sexuality will not necessarily be free and uninhibited, and certainly not a ‘garden of earthly delights’.

The dramatic difference in the perception about kama was obvious during my adolescence. My grandmother’s ganja-smoking pandit taught me that kama is a powerful inner fire whose ultimate source is the very same creative heat that gives rise to the universe. Kama gives form to the formless. It creates multiplicity and movement. For this reason, kama was viewed with reverence in India, unlike in the Christian West. The notion of the ‘erotic ascetic’ is also peculiar to the Indian subcontinent, linked through the Sanskrit word *tapas*, ‘heat’, which connects the heat generated in creation, and is simulated in the creative act of meditation as well as the heat of desire in the sexual act. When

creative act of meditation as well as the heat of desire in the sexual act. When the heat from this inner fire is channelled outward, it has the capacity to produce life. When channelled upward, it has the capacity to produce spiritual gnosis. In either case, there is a need for awareness and care. If misused, kama can destroy. For this reason, Hindu canonical texts contain strict regulations regarding proper sexual practices and relations. At the same time, kama is one of the four aims of Hindu life, and certainly allows for the experience of pleasure outside the aims of producing a child. In tantric ritual, pleasure is a vehicle for liberation. In it, the outward and the inward flows of sexual energy are merged in such a way that kama leads to the spiritual goal of moksha.

One of the extraordinary claims of evolutionary psychology is that the tendency to experience love is part of our genetic endowment. It proposes that this propensity of the human mind was born in the millennia between the emergence of the human species and the waning of the last ice age. Evolution is the story of unintended success as our species has propagated itself despite the male tendency to mate with as many females as possible. In this promiscuous tendency lies another riddle—the duty to oneself versus the duty to another. The prospect of an affair with an attractive stranger is a boundless temptation, at least for a man. What inhibits one is dharma, a duty not to hurt others, especially one's spouse. At conflict with this moral imperative is the imperative of kama, a duty to fulfil one's capability for pleasure and live a flourishing life. The dilemma is whether to betray the other or to betray oneself.

Evolution is a record of reproductive success. We have inherited the genetic material of those individuals who managed to reproduce in the face of competition from rivals and the hostile forces of the environment. How could a tendency to experience love have conferred a reproductive benefit on our remote ancestors? Evolutionary psychologists contend that loyalty and care for a mate following conception helps to ensure the offspring's well-being. The male needs to ensure that the mother of his child will be loyal to him and to his child; that she won't mate with another male and devote her attention and nourishment to another man's child. The female needs to be sure that her mate won't abandon her and the child. This may be the origin of the evolution of the emotion of love, which guides an individual to be loyal and caring towards another. This evolutionary thesis suggests how the social pressure for commitment to marriage might have emerged as it conferred a reproductive benefit to the survival of the

species.

If the evolutionary explanation for marriage lies in the biological desire of men and women to see their children survive, another riddle of kama is the reason for marriage in these times. After the invention of the pill, the costs of intercourse have diminished considerably. More and more women are working outside the house and are financially less dependent on men. In the affluent cities of the West, almost half of all marriages end in divorce, and this trend is growing in the rest of the world. More and more children are growing up in a single-parent home and they do seem to survive without both parents. And so, the obvious question: is marriage still relevant?

Marriage brought happiness and harmony in my life after I was able to shed the sexual allurements and poetic feelings for Amaya and heartache over Isha. I found real purpose and contentment by returning to domestic intimacy with Avanti and the children. It is a different sort of bond that unites us. I have concluded that this family bond is the purpose of marriage. If marriage has brought ‘family happiness’ to my life, it had the opposite effect on Leo Tolstoy. In a letter that he wrote towards the end of his life, he says:

*The principal cause of family unhappiness is that people are brought up to think that marriage brings happiness. Sexual attraction leads to marriage and it takes the form of a promise, a hope, for happiness, which is supported by public opinion and literature. But marriage is . . . constant suffering, which is the price for sexual satisfaction; suffering in the form of lack of freedom, slavery, overindulgence, disgust with all kinds of spiritual and physical defects of the mate which one has to bear—maliciousness, stupidity, deception, vanity, drunkenness, laziness, miserliness, self-interest and corruption . . . The principal cause of this suffering is that one expects what does not happen and does not expect what always happens.*

The person who is reviling the idea of romantic passion as a dangerous delusion is the Tolstoy of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, not the Tolstoy of *Family Happiness* and *War and Peace*. He is also pointing to the riddle of kama: the same mocking inner force that motivates the well-being of the human species is capable of bringing great tragedy. It animates life and holds it in place, as the Vedic seers believed, but it can also wreak havoc; it can create conflict and anxiety; it can also spawn contradictory emotions—courage and cowardice, faith and treachery, humility and pride. In its positive form, it is life-affirming; in its negative aspect, it is the death drive. Human life is a continuing struggle between irreconcilable opposites: on the one hand, the loving appreciation of the physical, sensory, self-

oriented desires belongs to each individual's existence; on the other hand, there are fierce but unrealizable cravings motivated by hatred rather than love. The result is the divided human soul.

A peculiarly Indian puzzle emerges from the cosmic and human aspects of kama. While it is the source of creation and widely celebrated as one of the goals of life, an untamed kama is dangerous. It is distrusted, especially by the renouncer, who found it to be the chief obstacle to self-realization and wished to annihilate it. This dilemma was partially resolved by the advent of bhakti. Krishna and Radha are creating the universe in their love-play in the eyes of a bhakti devotee. God takes the form of a lover so that the devotee can gain access to the sacred by means of earthly desires rather than by suppressing them. The metaphor connects her world with the divine, and the erotic can also be sacred.

My life has taught me not to deny kama but try and nurture it, such that it provides energy and meaning without falling into the 'web of desire' or becoming subjugated to its power. Human life is based on *dvandva*, 'pair of opposites'. One of these is the erotic and ascetic sides of our nature. The thing is not to try to deny one or the other side, but to establish a proper relationship with each one. The god Shiva is a role model of the 'erotic-ascetic' and Indian civilization has struggled to transform this duality so that the two aspects of our being integrate themselves into one experience. Both the bhakti and the tantra movements tried to combine the sexual and the spiritual. Bhakti is not a rejection of erotic love; on the contrary, it is a massive investment in it in order to transcend human limitations.

There is another relationship—between kama and moksha. In both, intimate bonds change the contours and boundaries of the self. In sexual intimacy and in spiritual expression, the 'self' expands to include the lover and the divine. In Vedanta, it expands to include all Being; in Buddhism, it eliminates the self; in bhakti, it merges with the divine. In Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, the contours of Father Zossima are altered such that we no longer perceive the 'individual' in him. Both in love and religion, we metamorphose. In the crossing is the pleasure both of the lover and the devotee when the boundary crumbles.

Our capacity for kama's spontaneous enjoyment can easily be distorted by sadism, greed, selfishness and domination. So, how can we get kama to function in a way that it does not harm others? How can we live erotically without injuring ourselves? How can we live with passion without being controlled by

injuring ourselves. How can we live with passion, without being controlled by it? The struggle between kama optimists and pessimists is an old one, both in the East and the West. The optimists focus on the creative, life-giving and transcendental power of love, while the pessimists worry about its excess and subversive power. Poets are generally optimistic, believing that every moment of our lives that is lived without passion, without opened senses, is a moment wasted and unredeemable. Kama is our duty to live every moment as though it were our last and no one has expressed this better than Charles Baudelaire, the French poet: 'One should always be drunk. That's all that matters; that's our one imperative need . . . But with what? With wine, poetry, virtue or God, as you choose. But get drunk.'

Unlike poets, philosophers are usually pessimistic about kama. Kant thought sexual love immoral because it inevitably makes one treat the other person as a means rather than as an end. And behaving towards a person as an object rather than a subject degrades humanity. However, he too reconciled to desire for the sake of the family and the survival of the human species. He approved grudgingly of marriage as it would restrict desire within virtuous bounds. Plato tried to reconcile the optimists and the pessimists through the 'ladder of ascent'. The answer of the kama pessimist—whether a western philosopher or an eastern renouncer—to it is to stay far away from kama—keep ourselves to ourselves, not link our fate unnecessarily to others, and remain detached. Kant does recognize a moral duty to 'love fellow human beings' but he construes it solely as goodwill or a willingness to help one's neighbour. The danger in loving friendship, he feels, is that it will tempt friends into too much openness, a candour that is both inconsiderate and imprudent. Hence, polite and prudent reserve is the right attitude, according to Kant and the Stoic philosophers: 'Do not disturb'. To live a good life, avoid unruly eruptions of the emotions, and aim, like a Buddhist, at a life free from care and concern, a life of stark insensibility.

A more serious challenge to kama optimists is posed by the ubiquity of pornography, especially after the advent of the Internet. Personally, I find porn has few redeeming features—it is brutish, exploitative, weakening, and diminishes the time one needs for idleness and boredom, which are necessary for a normal, healthy life and are often the breeding grounds for creative work. There are periodic calls to ban porn but these attempts generally fail because the state has a duty to protect me from others, not from myself. Constitutional

democracies repose trust in adults, giving them the freedom to pursue their private lives as long as they do not harm others. A person who supports porn would argue in court: ‘Look, I am an adult and how can you stop me from doing something in solitude within the four walls of my room?’ In a free, liberal society, we are trained to say, ‘I do not watch porn but I do not object to your watching it.’ We are taught to respect those who differ from us and give them breathing space. This obviously does not apply to child pornography, which should be banned.

Another puzzle about kama is that love tends to embellish what is purely physical desire or lust, thereby entailing a degree of deception. It is not deliberate lying, according to Shakespeare, but the work of the imagination and madness:

*Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,  
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend  
More than cool reason ever comprehends.*

*The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
Are of imagination all compact.*

Dorothy Parker, the witty American poet, disagrees with Shakespeare, and suggests that lovers engage in a deliberate strategy of deceit.

*By the time you swear you’re his,  
Shivering and sighing,  
And he vows his passion is  
Infinite, undying—  
Lady, make a note of this:  
One of you is lying.*

Unlike Parker, Shakespeare is kinder to lovers. He believes that lovers are like children—impetuous, incapable of self-restraint and addicted to make-believe. When we are in love, the imagination takes over and we tend to see what we want to see—not what the other person is but what we desire the other person to be. Besides, don’t we all want to appear better, more attractive, than we are? Parker’s point is that given a choice between lust and the illusions of love, the sensible, rational and honest answer is straightforward lust. Shakespeare would retort that love is not just an illusion: we are changed by love—‘for the moment at least we are what we imagine ourselves to be’. It makes me wonder: how

much of my love for Isha and Amaya was purely lust?

There is another paradox of kama: when two people love, they become one and remain two at the same time. In the best of all possible worlds, love should not be limited to one person. It is not about just giving each other freedom but allowing the other to love others. If my love for one individual distances me from others, it alienates me from humanity. When I love a person, I am not passive but active—I love the humanity in that person. My love makes me happier, more alive, and oddly enough, more independent. It should make me capable of loving other persons. Thus, true love should never be exclusive. When we first considered marriage, it was Avanti, ironically, who worried that constant intimacy might become oppressive but she didn't realize that love and marriage are possessive. Ideally, love should not be territorial and sex should be a healthy, physical and pleasurable experience, a bit like a game of squash or badminton. And one should be able to enjoy playing it with multiple partners. Alas, this utopian ideal is doomed, for it goes against possessiveness, one of the human flaws that goes back to the evolution of our species.

Kama offers another dilemma: love does not just happen to you; it is a creation and achievement. And yet, it is not an act of will. You cannot simply wake up one morning and state, 'Today, I'm going to fall in love.' 'Good looks' are often a starting point for 'love at first sight', but if you are looking for enduring love, then other qualities matter—kindness, sympathy, understanding, vulnerability. Even if you patiently cultivate some of these benign virtues, love is a matter of luck. The irony is that we spend all our time looking for the right person when all we should be looking for are the right qualities. In Plato's *Symposium*, Aristophanes evokes with great splendour our longing to find the right person and a sense of fulfilment when he or she is found; but he doesn't explain what we should expect from the other person or what will make us complete and self-sufficient.

Just as Nietzsche felt regret that the kama principle had been suppressed in the modern West, I feel the same sense of loss in contemporary India. The excessive emphasis on dharma and moksha have devalued kama. As a nation, we have not yet recovered from the ascetic influence of Mahatma Gandhi, who practised celibacy as a goal of life during the struggle for independence. Our urban middle-classes have still not fully shed Victorian 'middle class morality' despite the gradual sexual liberation since the 1990s. India needs to reassess the



the gradual sexual liberation since the 1950s, India needs to repossess the creative force of kama and restore the classical balance of the ancient Indian purusharthas. Only thus will harmony be restored to a chaotic nation in transition between tradition and modernity.

Yet, I do feel sympathy for a kama pessimist like my father. He could never know the appeal of the *Kamasutra* as a metaphor, let alone appreciate the vision of Raj Desai's for redeploying the ancient erotic text to liberate the young Indian mind. He belonged to the puritanical, post-Independence generation that was motivated by the spirit of nation building. In his mind, idleness was evil (*'aaram haram hai'*) and the pursuit of pleasure required both time and resources, and these could be better utilized for the critical project of nation building.

The twentieth century has been sympathetic to kama across the world. Prior to the sexual revolution, whom one loved or desired could result in, brutal punishment by the state. There existed terrible laws against premarital sex, adultery and 'miscegenation' in the West, which brought years in jail, mental asylums, chemical castration, and of course, angry moralizing. Premodern India, in contrast, was more relaxed. Colonialism replaced the traditional Indian 'benign neglect' of intimate relations by the Victorian paranoia about sexuality. Repressive laws came into being. For example, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was enacted which criminalized same-sex relations, prostitution, and other 'deviances'.

A broader, more sensitive critique of contemporary Indian attitudes comes from Indian feminism. I find myself at one with feminists because expressions of a sexualized culture are all too often dehumanizing, especially to women. Activists among them have achieved a great deal in India, changing the laws related to dowry, rape, the harassment of women; they have created greater awareness of the subliminal and insidious influence of patriarchy that objectifies women. A group of radical feminists, however, go further and equate kama and erotic pleasure with exploitation. They will not be happy with this book, alas, because they believe that a focus on pleasure ignores the patriarchal structure in which women have to act. In their standard narrative, men are simply oppressors. But there is a more liberal group of feminists who believe that to speak only of sexual violence and oppression is inadequate, for it ignores women's experience of sexual pleasure. The proper balance comes from maximizing women's agency and choice, thus ensuring an egalitarian

relationship between fully consenting, equal partners. This is easier said than done, for the structures of patriarchal power are hidden and they inevitably place women in an unequal, disempowered position.

I return in the end to the gaze of the tranquil face from Mathura which has helped me time and again to come to terms with the riddle of kama. Her civilized composure, as I said before, reflects the classical values of harmony, restraint and balance, which were the foundations of the self-assurance of the classical age of the Guptas. The key word is balance, which underlies the civilizational equipoise of the philosophy of the purusharthas—a good life demands a balance between the plural goals of human life. It is unwise to spend one's entire life pursuing a single high ideal. The gaze on the sculpture from Mathura speaks to me of this balance in which all the four goals are in equilibrium: the life-affirming Dionysian principle of kama; the practical imperative of artha—making a living and bringing up a family; the ultimate aspiration of moksha for the higher meaning of life; while ensuring that the pursuit of all three is under the self-restraint of an ethical dharma.

Our ideal of a contemporary, flourishing life should reflect this sensible plurality of goals: a satisfying job to live comfortably and raise a family (artha); the pleasure of loving the person one lives with (kama); a clear conscience from knowing that one is not deceiving or hurting another (dharma); the intent to give meaning to life either through religion or atheistically (moksha). This classical balance of plural objectives has eroded over time in favour of monolithic goals. In feudal society, the highest virtue was conquest and courage in battle (as Arjuna and Karna exemplified in the Mahabharata). In modern, industrial society, commercial success and professional careerism supplant the feudal goal. All along, there has always been a minority—priests, ascetics and renouncers—seeking a singular spiritual goal. The problem with these singular conceptions of the good life, invariably, is that they devalue the ordinary life of the common man—sowing, ploughing, raising children, cooking and cleaning, chopping wood and fetching water. The monolithic goals exclude the majority of humanity. In recent times, concepts of democracy, the welfare state and female emancipation have given access to all four goals to the majority.

~

I began my memoir with the word smara, and it seems appropriate to end with it. Smara is memory. Kama, the god of love, is sometimes also called Smara, because he evokes desire through memory. These two Sanskrit words are not synonymous, however: kama refers to all kinds of desires, whereas smara designates only amorous desire, both in the Vedic and the classical texts. Our experiences leave impressions on our minds; sometimes these impressions are awakened and we experience them as memory; memory arouses smara. Like Proust, Abhinavagupta, the tenth-century philosopher, believed that memory is not simply remembering past impressions but entails an insight into the past by entering into an imagined world of beauty.

Smara is derived from its verbal root *smar*, ‘to remember’, and it evokes the remembrance of things desired, especially love. The charming love story of Nala and Damayanti, which first appears in the ancient Mahabharata, was transformed in the twelfth century into a powerful romantic poem by Sriharsha, titled ‘Naishadhiya-charita’. In it, Damayanti is suffering profoundly from the pain of separation from her beloved Nala. She blames Smara, the god of love, who has become a part of her own heart. When Nala finally turns up in the flesh, she is thrilled but is also confused. She doesn’t know whether it is the god Smara or her own true human love who is standing before her.

‘Your friend is wondering which one is Smara, and which one is you,’ the poet tells Nala. He explains that Smara has become in her mind a reflection of the reality that is you. ‘How else could there be a resemblance between you and him, since Smara is bodiless?’ (Recall, the god Kama/Smara was burnt by Shiva and is now *ananga*, ‘bodiless’.) In order to reassure Damayanti, Nala says, ‘I am not Smara, I am your own true love,’ and to convince her, Nala evokes memories (*smaranas*) of the past they had shared—the tender secrets of their passion, their own special way of loving, the erotic words they had shared. Damayanti blushes but is secretly delighted. Each verse that Nala utters includes a form of the root word smar—‘remember when . . .’ or ‘you can’t have forgotten . . .’ In evoking memories of the past, he also mentions the related word *samskara*, which refers to the traces left behind in the memory that eventually contribute to the individual’s character and destiny.

The same enchanting story turns up in an exquisite version by the great Telugu poet Shrinatha in the fourteenth century, and it is worth listening to the conversation between Nala and Damayanti. Nala has arrived disguised as a

messenger on behalf of the gods, who also happen to be in love with Damayanti and have sent Nala to plead on their behalf. Truly a cruel mission! Damayanti finds that she is immediately attracted to the messenger but is not in the least bit interested in his message. She commands him:

*What country do you come from, and where are you going?  
What syllables make up your name?*

Nala evades her request and dutifully embarks upon his speech, praising the virtues of the love-stricken gods. Both the messenger and the recipient seem to recognize one another but play a complex game of manoeuvring in which there is room both for doubt and certainty. In frustration, Damayanti says:

*There was a question.  
There was an answer.  
There's no logical connection between them.  
I asked you for your name and your lineage.  
You've spoken at great length about  
somebody else.*

Damayanti continues insistently:

*The gods may be superior,  
but I'm interested in you and your stories.  
Tell me: when you're thirsty,  
do you want water or butter?*

Nala is finding it harder and harder to keep up the pretence:

*I'll tell you this much, lovely lady  
Because you're a royal princess,  
deserving respect. I don't want to be  
unfriendly, so: I'm a prince,  
an offshoot of the lunar line.*

*For a conversation face-to-face,  
The two words 'you and 'I'  
are more than adequate and pleasing  
to the ear. Why ask for a name?*

It appears to be a reasonable solution but wilful Damayanti feels cheated in this game of one-upmanship. She raises the stakes and threatens to end the meeting

with the handsome stranger.

*Do you call this being friendly?  
You give your family but won't give  
your name . . . If you're in the mood  
to deceive us, Sir,  
can't we deceive you in turn?*

*If giving your name is against your rules,  
do my rules allow me to go on talking  
with you?  
Should a princess chat at length with strangers?*

Let's return to Sriharsha's version. Nala continues to extol the virtues of the gods as potential bridegrooms. Finally, Damayanti can't take it any more. In despair, she employs her final strategy. She bursts into tears. Nala can't bear to see her thus and he forgets the gods, his mission and reveals his true identity.

*Why are you crying, my love,  
staining your face with tears?  
Look at me. I'm right here.  
Turn those darting eyes  
to your  
Nala.*

As I approach the end of my life, I take solace in the stories of young lovers like Nala and Damayanti. My own are now memories (smaranas) and yearnings. After great effort, I eventually arrived at a special kind of love with Avanti, and we seem to have found enduring happiness in the company and friendship of each other. I have also come to believe in the great merit of the classical balance between the four goals of life. Nevertheless, the burden of guilt and shame over Amaya and grief over Isha will never go away. I remain at heart a kama optimist, perhaps not as rash as the eleventh-century poet Bilhana, who fell in love with a high princess and was condemned to death. Before dying, smara comes to his rescue and he remembers his beloved's beauty and he brings her alive with his *smriti*, 'the capacity for remembrance':

*Even now,  
I remember her eyes  
restlessly closed after love,  
her slender body limp*

*fine clothes and heavy hair loose—  
I shall recall her in my next life  
and even at the end of time.*

## Author's Note

*Every reader, as he reads, is actually the reader of his own self. The writer's work is only a kind of optical instrument he provides the reader so he can discern what he might never have seen in himself without this book. The reader's recognition in himself of what the book says is the proof of the book's truth.*

—Marcel Proust

I am writing this book on the advice of Anandavardhana, the Sanskrit critic of the ninth century, who suggests in *Dhvanyaloka* that a good book ought to confine itself to one of the four goals of life. I reasoned that I had written a book on *artha*, 'material well-being' (this was *India Unbound*), and another one on dharma, 'moral well-being' (*The Difficulty of Being Good*). It was time to tackle the third goal, *kama*, 'desire and pleasure', something that has troubled me throughout my life. It thus completes a trilogy based on the ancient *trivarga*. A fourth goal, *moksha*, 'spiritual well-being', was added later in history, but it also appears to be clearly beyond my reach. In the book on dharma, I asked, 'How should one live?', and I wrestled with our day-to-day moral dilemmas. Here I examine, how do we cope with desire in order to live a rich, flourishing life?

India is a nation in transition from tradition to modernity and it is just as important to converse openly about desire and the emotional life as about economic prosperity and democracy. For too long, we have repressed emotions and lived with patriarchal stereotypes; this is not healthy for a society. This book is a product of a lifetime of observing people and I decided early on that the only way to capture the rich ideas surrounding desire is through the personal lives of individuals. It is by empathizing with the suffering of the protagonist of this book, Amar, and learning from his mistakes, as he comes of age, that we realize that there is another way to live. Hence, the book needed a story to connect the ideas.

So, I have attempted what seems impossible—to write a biography of a sense-intoxicating emotion. Only a work of the imagination can do this, presenting a mirror to the reader so as to reveal his or her own life: I have thus employed the

genre of fiction as a vehicle. In any case, the line between fiction and non-fiction is tenuous—the only difference being that fiction has to make sense. I did not want to clutter the story with numbered footnotes and diacritical marks. Yet, I did want to help the reader who wished to read more about the ideas sprinkled throughout the text. Hence, I have identified the relevant sentence or phrase in bold by page number in the Notes at the end of the book. I have also tried to be reader-friendly and dispensed with diacritical marks in rendering Sanskrit words into English.

Let me admit, in conclusion, a key limitation of this book. It is written from a male perspective. As a man, my perception of female desire is naturally limited and I ask the reader to bear with this inadequacy, and in fact, welcome comments from both men and women on a complex subject that we do not discuss enough.



# Notes

## Author's Note

Page xi, line 7: **the third goal**. The goals of life emerged early in Indian civilization, soon after the Vedas. Initially they were three, trivarga, and are referred to in the post-Vedic Grihyasutra texts, the Hiranyakeshi Grihyasutra being the earliest. Clearly, the goals brought purpose, meaning and balance to life. The fourth aim, moksha, was added later but it went on to become the pre-eminent goal, almost undermining the classical balance between the goals.

Page xi, introductory quote: Every reader. This quote is from *Time Regained*, the final volume of Marcel Proust's famous *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, a masterpiece of desire and memory. It appeared in seven volumes between 1871 and 1922 in Paris. The novel gained fame in English in the translation by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin as *Remembrance of Things Past*. D.J. Enright adapted it in a revised translation published in 1992 with the title, *In Search of Lost Time*, a literal rendering of the French.

Page xii, line 16: **difference being**. The idea that reality is stranger than fiction has a long lineage. In a canto of his satiric poem, 'Don Juan', Lord Byron wrote: 'Tis strange—but true; for truth is always strange; Stranger than fiction.' Mark Twain said, 'Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities, truth isn't.' More recently, Tom Clancy expressed the same idea.

## Prologue

Page xiii, line 3: '**Our existence**'. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1999).

Page xiv, line 4: It is unbecoming. Bhartrihari, *Satakatraya*, Verse 128 from the third part called *Vairagyasataka*, where the poet is disillusioned with society and life in the court, and his thoughts turn to the forest and to renunciation.

Translated and edited by Barbara Stoler Miller, *Bhartrihari: Poems* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967).

Page xiv, line 26: **only in recollection**. Marcel Proust, *Le Recherche du Temps Perdu*, translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin as *Remembrance of Things Past* (New York: Random House, 1981).

Page xv, line 8: **‘web of desire’**. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Edited by David V. Erdman, *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 463.

Page xv, line 17: **strike a civilized balance**. Abhimanyu, the young warrior in the epic Mahabharata, suffered a similar fate when he learnt in his mother’s womb the art of entering the enemy’s treacherous military formation, the *chakravyuh*, while listening to a conversation between his warrior father and his mother. His mother fell asleep before his father could tell her how to exit the perilous circular formation. On the thirteenth day of the great war, Abhimanyu smashed into a chakravyuh but got trapped behind enemy lines. The sixteen-year-old hero fought valiantly, single-handedly, causing so much destruction that the enemy generals got frightened and it took six of their top warriors to kill him. Mahabharata VII.49.14–16; 22–23; 32–35.

Page xv, line 25: **‘song of desire’**. Mahabharata XIV.13.9.

Page xv, line 33: In the very moment. Mahabharata I.85.7–8.

Page xvi, line 7: **‘fluctuations in the mind’**. B.K.S Iyengar, *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (London: HarperCollins, 2002). This definition of yoga appears in the second sutra of this classic text on yoga.

Page xvi, line 12: deep, driving desire. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* IV.4.5. The epic Mahabharata (XII.167.34) says:

*There is not a human being, nor there ever was, nor will there be in the future, who is without desire. Desire is the essence of life.*

Page xvi, line 18: **renounce the personal rewards**. Bhagavad Gita II.47.

Page xvii, line 6: **devotional love**. Song 5, *Love Song of the Dark Lord*, Jayadeva’s *Gitagovinda*, translated and edited by Barbara Stoler Miller (New

York: Columbia University Press, 1977). Jayadeva's lyrical poem is both a work of literature and a source of religious inspiration.

Page xvii, line 17: **Fiction is a better teacher.** Martha Nussbaum has argued this persuasively in several of her books—*Upheavals of Thought* and *Love's Knowledge*. See also Angela Kallhoff (ed), *Martha Nussbaum: Ethics and Political Philosophy (Lecture and Colloquium in Munster 2000)*, 2001, p. 124.

## Chapter 1: Kama Strikes Early

Page 2, line 35: **seductive seven-volume novel.** I first read Marcel Proust's masterpiece in the famous translation into English by C.K. Scott Moncrieff with the title, *Remembrance of Things Past*. In 1992, D.J. Enright made a more literal translation of the French and called it *In Search of Lost Time*. Its original title in French is *Le Recherche du Temps Perdu*, and it appeared in seven volumes between 1871 and 1922 in Paris. Most of the quotes in this book are from Scott Moncrieff's translation in the revision by Terence Kilmartin.

Proust had a hard time getting his novel published. The prestigious publisher Ollendorf replied to Proust's friend in 1913 after reading the scene I have just recounted: 'My dear friend, I may be dense, but I fail to see why a chap needs thirty pages to describe how he tosses and turns in bed before falling asleep. . . . where one sentence (at the end of page 4 and page 5) goes on for forty-four lines.'

Page 3, line 15: In the beginning. *Rig Veda*, 10.129.4. A more literal (but clumsier) translation of verse 129 provides a clearer, primal and cosmogonic role of kama: 'Covered by void, that which was coming into being, That one was born through the power of heat (tapas). Desire (kama), then, at first evolved as the first seed of the mind (manas).' The heat suggests the yogic heat of meditation as the well as the heat generated in the sexual act. The *Atharva Veda* repeats the assertion: 'Desire here came into being in the beginning . . . as the first seed of mind.' *Atharva Veda Samhita*, translated by W.D. Whitney (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1962), pp. 19, 52.

Page 3, line 23: **masculine noun.** There are many words to describe 'kama' and each one has a different connotation. *Trishna* is intense craving. *Vasana* is more subtle, closer to a tendency. *Ichha* is close to intention. *Kamana* is longing.

*Spruha* is yearning. *Chapalata* is a strong craving for tongue and genitals. *Eshana* is desire for son, wealth, name and fame. All these words suggest forms of desire.

Page 4, line 1: **Desire leads to intention.** According to Manu: ‘Desire is at the root of the conception of a definite intention . . . for each and everything that one does is motivated by the desire for precisely that thing.’ *Manusmriti* II.2, 3, 4. *The Laws of Manu*, translated by Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 17.

Page 4, line 14: **creator god.** *Atharva Veda* IX.2.19–20, 25.

Page 4, line 19: **fundamental loneliness.** *Satpatha Brahman* says that Purusha, the soul of the universe, was alone and ‘did not enjoy happiness’. Quoted in W.J. Wilkins, *Hindu Mythology* (Delhi: Delhi Book Store, 1882, reprinted 1972), p. 286.

Page 4, line 29: **‘Let there be light.’** Genesis (1:3) goes on to say: ‘God saw that the light was good. He separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day.” He called the darkness “night.” There was evening, and there was morning. It was day one.’ However, in *The Gospel of John* (1.1): ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ The ‘Word’ is a translation of the Greek ‘Logos’, and is believed to refer to Jesus, as indicated in other verses in the same chapter. It sets the stage for the development of the ‘Trinity’ in the post-biblical era. *King James Bible* ‘Authorized Version’, Cambridge edition, 1611.

In the Western Judaic-Christian tradition, it is strange to think of God creating the world out of his own need. The mythology of Genesis reveals no operation of desire; indeed, the notion of need or desire would seem to demean the Almighty. Except for western mystics, there is little intimation, as in the East, that the Infinite needs the Finite, that Formless, by its nature, desires Form.

Page 4, line 29: **Hindu cosmos.** This famous account of origin, from the *Rig Veda* X.129, is one of the many cosmogonic accounts in the Vedas.

Page 5, line 22: **primordial sexual act.** *Rig Veda* X.90.

Page 5, line 25: **‘man is made of desire’**. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* IV.4.5. In a later verse, it elaborates:

*Her lap is a sacrificial altar; her hairs the sacrificial grass; her skin, the soma press. The lips of the yoni are the fire in the middle. Verily, indeed, as great as is the world of him who performs the sacrifice, so great is the world of him who begets life knowing this. (6.4.3).*

It is easy to understand why the fire ritual is sometimes thought of as the capacity to beget life. Even the Vedic firepit is shaped like a triangle facing down, to resemble a yoni, ‘vulva’, and is a primordial womb into which ritual fluids are offered in order to regenerate the cosmos perpetually. It replicates, after all, the sacrifice of Purusha in heaven.

Page 6, line 7: **‘the bad boy’**. Meghnad Desai, *The Rediscovery of India* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2009).

Page 15, line 16: glow of morning. This quote is from *Within a Budding Grove*, the second volume of Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, translated by Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin.

Page 16, line 5: cessation of Habit. *Ibid.*, p. 707.

Page 17, line 19: arose Hiranyagarbha. *Rig Veda* X.121. The sun is mentioned in X.82.5–6. This enticing metaphor is given different meanings in later literature. Samkhya texts speak about Purusha and Prakriti making up the embryo in the primordial womb from which emerges the world. Puranic texts tell us that the creator god, Brahma, emerged from the egg and created the world. In yet another tradition, Brahma himself is the Hiranyagarbha. This hymn of the *Rig Veda* (X.121) suggests a single creator deity (Verse 8, translated by Griffith): ‘He is the God of gods, and none beside him.’) And identifies it as Prajapati. The Upanishad calls it the soul of the universe, or brahman, and elaborates that Hiranyagarbha floated around in emptiness and darkness of non-existence for about a year, and then broke into two halves, which formed swarga, ‘heaven’, and prithvi, ‘earth’.

Page 17, line 28: **assumed various disguises**. *Shatapatha Brahmana* (xiv.4.2) says that in the beginning, Prajapati, the creator, was alone in the world. He differentiated himself into two beings, man and woman. The man pursued the

woman in the different disguises she took of the female of each species, and from these unions sprang the various species of beasts. Prajapati is replaced with Brahma in the Purana texts. The *Shatapatha Brahmana* (Sacred Books of the East), vols 12, 26, 24, 37, 47, translated by Julius Eggeling, published between 1882 and 1900. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (I.4) retells the same story: Prajapati is called Purusha. Feeling lonely, Purusha divided itself into two: male and female, *pati* and *patni*. As the male tried to embrace the female, she thought, ‘How can he do that after having produced me from himself? I shall hide.’ She disguised herself as a cow but the male became a bull and embraced her. Thus the cows were born. Similarly, everything that exists in pairs was created, including human beings. The etymology of *pati* and *patni* depends on the story’s account of how the primal hermaphrodite ‘fell’ (*apatat*) into two gendered halves, playing on the verbal root, *pat*, ‘to fall’.

Page 18, line 9: Priests in black gowns. These are the last two lines of the Romantic poet William Blake’s famous poem, ‘The Garden of Love’, published as part of his collection, *Songs of Experience*. In it Blake expresses his belief in the naturalness of sexuality, and says that organized religion, particularly of the orthodox Christian church, represses our natural desires. Blake feels that love cannot be sanctified by religion. The negative commandments of the Old Testament, ‘Thou Shall Not’, could not enshrine the most positive creative force on earth. For Blake, sexuality and instinct are ‘holy’; institutionalized religion imprisons it, which leads to hypocrisy, and kills life itself.

Page 18, line 15: **shame and guilt**. ‘The celebration of heterosexual love in ancient Indian civilization deserves applause,’ writes the English historian A.L. Basham. ‘In this respect, ancient India was far healthier than most other ancient cultures.’ *The Wonder That Was India* (London: Macmillan, 1967; reprinted by Delhi: Rupa, 1981) p. 172. Basham confirms the contrast that I encountered between my missionary school education and that of the pandit’s teachings. ‘The heirs to the Christian tradition tend to look at desire as a source of moral anguish and conflict based on an enduring dualism between the spirit and flesh, mind and body—producing a culture that simultaneously disavows the body while being obsessively preoccupied with it.’

Page 19, line 13: **his leela**. Like many Sanskrit words, ‘leela’ (or ‘lila’) is not easily translated into English. It is loosely rendered as ‘play’. Leela is a way of describing all reality, including the cosmos, as the outcome of spontaneous, creative play of the divine absolute (brahman). In Vaishnavism, leela refers to the activities of the deity and his devotee in the cosmos (*Srimad Bhagavatam*, Verse 3.26.4). The recurring theme in Hindu mythology is of making the world sacred; the creative activity of leela is the divine play of god by which the world becomes sacred on the divine stage.

Page 19, line 18: **divine pleasure of leela**. The pandit’s analogies have been passed down over the centuries. In the twelfth century, the saint Ramanuja illustrated god’s leela by comparing divine pleasure to a monarch who sports enthusiastically on a playing field for the sheer joy of the game. Baladeva, the commentator on Chaitanya, compared leela to a man breaking into a dance for the sheer joy of it. *The Gods at Play: Lila in South Asia*, edited by William Sax (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 14.

Page 20, line 5: **‘So perfect was she’**. *Shiva Purana*, vol. 1, edited by J.L. Shastri (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass), p. 240. Heinrich Zimmer (*The King and the Corpse*, 1975, pp. 241–42) was so captivated by this story of creation and of Sandhya’s beauty that he wrote: ‘The billows of her blue-black hair were glistening like the feathers of a peacock, and her dearly curving dark brows formed a bow fit for the God of Love. Her eyes, like dark lotus calyxes, had the alert, questioning glance of the frightened gazelle; and her face round as the moon, was like a purple lotus blossom. Her swelling breasts with their two dark points were enough to infatuate a saint. Trim as the shaft of a lance stood her body, and her smooth legs were like the stretched-out trunks of elephants. She was glowing with little delicate pearls of perspiration. And when she found herself in the midst of her startled audience, she stared about at them, in uncertainty, then broke into a softly rippling laugh.’

Page 28, line 19: **world is swiftly passing**. Mahabharata VII.2.4. I recommend the translation of Book VII, *Drona*, by Vaughan Pilikian in the Clay Sanskrit Series (New York: New York University Press).

Page 28, line 22: **three gunas**. The concept of gunas originated in Samkhya philosophy but was taken over by other schools of Hindu thought, and was

applied to grammar, logic, ethics and medicine. A number of chapters (3, 7, 13, 14, 17 and 18) in the Bhagavad Gita speak of gunas. In Chapter 18, for example: ‘Action that is virtuous, thought that is without attachment or craving for results is sattvic; action that is driven by the craving for pleasure and selfishness is rajasic; action that is unthinking, under delusion, disregarding injury to others or oneself, is called tamasic.’ (XVIII.23–25).

Page 29, line 26: soothing pleasure. This reflection on habit versus alertness occurs in the fourth volume of Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* called *Cities of the Plain* (also known as *Sodom and Gomorrah*), where Marcel returns to the hotel where he customarily stays when visiting the seaside village of Balbec.

Page 31, line 2: ‘**delight that the mind and heart experience**’. Mahabharata IV.33.37. Vatsyayana has a similar quote in the *Kamasutra*.

Page 33, line 9: **Krishna multiplied himself**. Raas Leela is recounted as a part of the traditional story of the playful god Krishna, which has been recounted in the *Bhagavata Purana* and in other literary works such as the *Gita Govinda*. In this dance of divine love, Krishna dances with Radha and her friends, the cowherding gopis. Kathak, the classical dance of north India, evolved from the Rasleela of Braj as well as the Manipuri classical dance of Vrindavan, also known as Natwari Nritya, which was revived in 1960s by the Kathak dancer Uma Sharma. In Krishna bhakti traditions, Raas Leela is one of the highest and most esoteric of Krishna’s pastimes. The romantic love between human beings in our mundane, material world is merely a diminished, illusionary reflection of the soul’s original, ecstatic spiritual love for god, or Krishna, in the spiritual world.

Page 35, line 1: Two birds, twin images. *Mundaka Upanishad* III. The image can also be found in *Dronaparva* (201:76) in the Mahabharata. *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, edited by Vinay Dharwadker (Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 181. The full poem from the Upanishad goes thus:

*Two birds, twin images  
in plumage,  
friends, ever inseparable,  
cling to a tree.*



*One eats the fruit,  
eats of the sweet and eats  
of the bitter,  
while the other watches,  
watches without eating.*

*Buried in the bole  
of the self-same tree  
one suffers, engulfed  
in his impotence.*

*Yet as he watches the watching  
bird, the adorable one, and sees  
the sweet bitter glory  
as His alone,  
he rises, free  
from grief.*

This ancient account of the birds captures something that we have all observed about our reflexive consciousness—we are conscious and self-conscious. The Upanishad sees a positive feature in this duality—it is an intimation of the human and the divine; the one who eats the fruit is the human self, while the witness is the spirit or the principle of the divine.

## Chapter 2: Growing Pains

Page 41, line 7: **Without imagination.** The single most insightful book on the role of imagination in love is Stendhal's *On Love*, a work which grew out of his intense but unreciprocated attachment to a certain Mathilde Dembowsky, whom he met in his mid-thirties when he was living in Milan. Translated by Philip Sidney Woolf (London: Mayflower Press, 1917).

Page 41, line 33: **'a demand for the whole'**. Plato's *Symposium*, translated by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (New York: Hackett Publishing Co, 1989), III.I02. It is, of course, a story of the origin of a very heterosexual love.

Page 42, line 25: **'some frustration of the infant's wants'**. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum has brought rich insights into my understanding of kama. In her book, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (from which I have quoted above), she argues against the old idea that our emotions are merely animal energies or primal impulses; understanding them can help in our moral

and ethical judgements. As for the infant's development, she says that while these formative experiences can nurture our emotional intelligence, they can also damage it with profound and lifelong consequences. Nussbaum gives the example of a man known as B, whose mother was so merciless in requiring perfection of herself that she construed her infant's neediness as her own personal failing, and resented every sign of basic humanness, rejecting it as imperfection in both her child and herself. Later as an adult, as B recalls his memories of a holding that was stifling, he gradually becomes aware of his own demand for perfection in everything as the corollary of his inability to permit himself to be a needy child. Because his mother wanted perfection, he could not allow himself to be dependent on, or trust, anyone.

Page 43, line 16: **'Love desires contact'**. The first quote in this paragraph is from Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (London: Penguin, 2002), XXI: 68, and the second one from *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (XX:122). For those interested in the cosmological speculations of Freud regarding eros and love, I recommend an excellent little book by the philosopher Jonathan Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).

Page 44, line 18: **kama is psychic energy**. Mahabharata XIII.42.1–3.

Page 46, line 1: **the first stage of the Hindu life**. It was not unusual in our family to refer to the four stages of the classical Indian way of life. The first stage is brahmacharya, the period of adolescence when one is a student and celibate. In the worldly second stage, called grihastha, 'householder', a person produces, procreates, provides security for the family while engaging in worldly pleasure. At the third stage, one begins to disengage from worldly pursuits, and in the fourth and final stage, *sanyasa*, one renounces the world in quest of spiritual release from human bondage.

Page 46, line 9: **'A brahmachari is a charioteer'**. The image of 'wild horses' is not uncommon in eastern and western literature. Manu had invoked it two thousand years ago: 'A learned man, like a charioteer restraining his horses, should keep trying hard to restrain his sensory powers as they run amok among alluring sensory objects.' *The Laws of Manu*, translated by Wendy Doniger and

Brian K. Smith (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 27. The image of the charioteer is also found in Plato. And in the *Kathopanishad*, the individual's atman, 'soul', is likened to a king in a chariot drawn by horses, in which the reins are the mind (*manas*), which control the five senses (1.3.3–4).

Page 46, line 19: Where have you run. This stanza is from Kalidasa's *Kumarasambhava*, the greatest poem of conjugal love. Rati appears in the third *sarga* and her lament takes up all of *sarga* four.

Page 50, line 24: aroused by her. Kama's creation is described in several Puranas, most vividly in the *Shiva Purana* II.18–42.

Page 51, line 4: A slender waist. *Shiva Purana* II.2.2.24–29. 'Sensual love' is a reasonable translation of *sringara rasa*. In subsequent chapters, I elaborate on this important concept.

Page 51, line 19: **when love dies**. Some believe that the five arrows represent the five senses. Tantrics think of them as five aspects of love. Should the arrows fail, Kamadeva carries a noose with which he lassos from afar the victims of desire. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* speaks about desire in stages that are similar to the stages of the five flower-arrows. An alternative catalogue of the stages is: *harsana*, when love excites delight; *rochana*, when it is inflamed; *mohana*, when one is infatuated; in the fourth stage is *shoshana* when love has become parched and dry; finally, *marana*, when it dies.

Brahma also gave Kama a proud parrot to ride upon, from where he could shoot his lotus-tipped arrows of heady fragrance. Dancing apsaras and celestial gandharvas attended him, carrying his banner filled with images of symbols that signified water to remind us of his creative powers. Commanding his forces was Vasanta, the season of 'spring', when the libertine festival of Holi releases some of the bottled sexual desires of men and women.

Page 52, line 6: blind darknesses. *Atharva Veda* IX.2. (translated by W.D. Whitney). See also VI.130.1–3, 131.1, 132.1–5. The *Atharva Veda* is difficult to date and contains material written during different time periods, but was composed roughly between the tenth and fifth centuries BCE.

**Page 52, line 10:** arrow feathered with longing. *Atharva Veda* III.25. I have changed the translation of *kama* here from 'love' to 'desire' in order to be

consistent with the early Vedic understanding of kama as desire. Interestingly, even early on, Kama was shooting arrows into hearts.

Page 53, line 2: **‘who lives with a haunting fear’**. Cited in Amrita Narayanan’s fine anthology, *The Parrots of Desire: 3000 Years of Indian Erotica* (Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2017), fn. xiii.

Page 53, line 4: **Christianity’s ambivalent attitudes towards sex**. This is from St. Augustine’s *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, translated by Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1984). This book was written in response to allegations that Christianity brought about the decline of Rome. Augustine (354–430 ACE) became the leading theologian and spokesman for Christianity, which had been made the official religion of the Roman Empire only half a century before by Constantine. The first part of his life, much of which he spent in Rome, was devoted to eros and the pleasures of life. But after his conversion to Christianity in AD 386, he recast his views of erotic love through the harsh eyes of the Christian condemnation of the flesh. Augustine was born in North Africa around AD 354, the product of a half-pagan world, and only converted to Christianity when he was twenty-nine. Shortly afterwards, he repudiated the woman with whom he had lived since his teens and by whom he had a son.

Page 53, line 11: **Copulation would have been just like shaking hands**. Simon Blackburn, *Lust: The Seven Deadly Sins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 58

Page 53, line 21: First of all chaos. Hesiod, *Theogony*, 116–22. The translation is from the superb ‘Chicago Homer’ website:

<http://homer.library.northwestern.edu/html/application.html>. Hesiod’s is the first Greek mythical cosmogony, which describes the origins of the Greek gods in the epic dialect of Homeric Greek. He synthesizes local Greek traditions into a narrative that tells us how the gods established permanent control over the cosmos.

Page 54, line 8: Love, my children. Longus’s *Daphnis and Chloe* II.7, translated by Paul Turner (Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 48. Longus was a novelist and romancer in second-century ACE Greece, and this is his only known work.

Page 54, line 15: **Did Indians borrow Kamadeva.** Catherine Benton has a fascinating discussion on this and other aspects of the Hindu love-god in *God of Desire: Tales of Kamadeva in Sanskrit Love Literature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 128–29.

Page 57, line 6: **renounced society.** According to popular legend, this world-weary king of Ujjaini was Bhartrihari, the greatest Sanskrit poet of love, but scholars increasingly identify the poet and the traditional author of the masterpiece *Satakatrava* with the fifth-century philosopher-grammarian who wrote the treatise entitled *Vakyapadiya*. The Chinese traveller Yi-Jing's account indicates that Bhartrihari's grammar was known by 670 CE, and that he may have been Buddhist. My own Sanskrit teacher, Daniel Ingalls, wrote that he saw 'no reason why he should not have written poems as well as grammar and metaphysics', like Dharmakirti, Shankaracharya and many others. Yi-Jing himself appeared to think they were the same person because Bhartrihari was renowned for his vacillation between Buddhist monkhood and a life of pleasure. Both the grammar and the poetic works had an enormous influence over their respective fields. In his novel *The Devil Take Love*, Sudhir Kakar makes him, quite plausibly, the court poet of the kingdom of Avanti, setting his story in its romantic capital city of Ujjayini, during the time of Emperor Harsha.

Page 61, line 30: **According to the Chandogya Upanishad.** The two verses below are from Robert Hume's translation, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, of *Chandogya Upanishad* (VIII.7.1), and the third is from *Mundaka Upanishad* (III.2.1–2). See also *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* IV.4.6; III.5.1; IV.4.12.

*The self [atman] that is free from evil, free from old age and death, free from sorrow, free from hunger and thirst; the self whose desires and intentions are real, that is the self that you should try to discover . . . When someone discovers that self . . . all his desires are fulfilled.*

*Now a man who does not desire—who is without desires, who is freed from desires, whose desires are fulfilled, whose only desire is his self—his vital functions [prana] do not depart. Brahman he is and to Brahman he goes.*

*Wise men, free from desires, who worship Purusha (knower of the atman) go beyond what is here right . . . A man who desires prosperity, therefore, should worship one who knows the self [atman].*

Page 62, line 21: The world is afflicted by death. Mahabharata XII.169.  
Translated by Winternitz (in 1923). This is a famous dialogue and it appears in

many texts: Jain—*Uttaraadhyayana*, p.14; Buddhist—*Jataka*, p. 509; and Brahmanical texts—*Markandeya Purana*, Chapter 10.

Page 63, line 22: **‘I am this or I desire that’**. See Joanna Macy, ‘The Dialectics of Desire’, *Numen*, vol. 22, fasc. 2, August 1975, p. 145–60. In this excellent article, the author brings out some of the philosophical debates between what I have called the kama optimists and pessimists. She too rescues kama from the pessimists via ahamkara: ‘Such distrust of desire does not, however, represent a departure from India’s old recognition of kama’s creative power. A closer look at the principle of ahamkara reveals the workings of desire in the evolution of nature, Prakriti. That I-sayer, I-maker, is not only the agent which brings to be the physical and mental worlds, but it does so by its very delusion: its notion of separateness and in-completeness. Feeling needy it makes: spawns mind, sense perceptions and sense objects. The Vedic poet’s claim that desire generates mind finds here in Samkhya a philosophic elaboration of sorts, although one which carries a devalorization of creation that is in no way implied in the Vedic view. Patanjali in his Yoga points out how the ahamkara, begetter and begotten of desire, deludes us. ‘To identify consciousness with what merely reflects consciousness—this is egoism. The ego mistakenly identifies the self with experience, and by thinking thereby “I am happy, I am unhappy” becomes the source of all pain and distress. It conceives of itself as subject, rather than object. And it is in desire more than in any other mental movement that this mistake is made, and the illusion created of the “I” as subject.’

Page 63, line 34: This is the mighty kama tree. Mahabharata XII.254.1–3.

Page 64, line 3: **Greedy people**. Mahabharata XII.254.4–6.

Page 64, line 27: **‘an insatiable fire’**. Bhagavad Gita III.36–37, 39, 41, 43.

Page 64, line 29: **‘I have achieved this’**. Ibid. III.27.30.

Page 64, line 33: **discipline and sacrifice**. Ibid. IV.34.

Page 64, line 34: **a person finds peace**. Ibid. 11.71.

Page 65, line 17: Antelopes are lured. Ashvaghosha, who wrote the life of the Buddha in the first century CE, was a misogynist and perhaps the greatest kama pessimist. He puts these words in Buddha’s mouth 500 years after the Buddha

lived. See Catherine Benton, *God of Desire: Tales of Kamadeva in Sanskrit Story Literature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006, fn. 4.) I recommend Patrick Olivelle's more recent translation of the *Buddhacharita*.

Page 65, line 26: Acting out of desire. *Manavadharmashastra*, the famous law code of Manu, was written sometime between first century BCE and first century CE, and it has connected kama to *samkalpa* perfectly. Interestingly, a distant descendant of Sanskrit, English also has the same relationship between desire and intention and will, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* points out helpfully.

Page 66, line 4: '**This victory feels more like defeat!**' Mahabharata X.10.13.

Page 66, line 28: **etched vividly in my soul**. *Cinema Paradiso*, with the teenager standing under the balcony in the rain at a village in Sicily, also reminded me of the stories of Isha and Micol. The Italian movie by the director Salvatore Di Vita came out in the late 1980s and won the Academy Award for the best foreign film.

Page 70, line 19: When we are in love with a woman. Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*, Part 2. This is the second volume of *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, translated By C.K. Scott Moncrieff.

Page 71, line 1: **modernity into my life**. While Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1976) is known primarily for its path-breaking description of the emergence of sexuality, it offers an equally important account of modernity.

Page 71, line 35: '**haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy**'. The quote is attributed to the American humourist H.L. Mencken who defined Puritanism in these words.

Page 72, line 10: **Such is the hope in the heart**. Robert Nozick makes the same point in *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1990), p. 76.

### Chapter 3: A Suitable Match

Page 74, line 4: **a suitable boy**. The title of this chapter is a tribute to Vikram's Seth's longish novel, *A Suitable Boy*, set in post-Partition India, published in

1993. It is about Rupa Mehra's efforts to arrange a marriage for her younger daughter, Lata, to 'a suitable boy'.

Page 76, line 7: 'Every woman desires every man she sees.' *Manusmriti* IX.12–17. There are a number of English translations of Manu, but I recommend the one by Patrick Olivelle, *Manu's Code of Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Page 76, line 11: **An unmarried woman.** Dharmashastras are Sanskrit texts of the Brahminical tradition that deal with religion, law and ethics, and describe the life of an ideal householder. There is uncertainty regarding their dates, but P.V. Kane suggested the following dates for four of the texts: *Gautama* (600–400 BCE); *Apastamba* (450–350 BCE); *Baudhayana* (500–200 BCE); and *Vasishtha* (300–100 BCE). Sir William Jones had assigned *Manusmriti* to an earlier period, 1250 BCE, but later scholarship has moved it forward to between 200 BCE to 200 CE. Numismatic evidence, and the mention of gold coins as a fine suggests a date of second or third centuries CE, according to Patrick Olivelle (*Manu's Code of Law*, pp. 24–25). The dharma texts evolved over the centuries. Many of them were accepted, some discarded, others reworked via commentaries, as a part of a constant process. For instance, there are seven commentaries on the *Manusmriti*.

Page 77, line 31: **Indrani, the wife of the king of gods.** *Rig Veda* X.86.

Page 78, line 5: **A bhakti sect called Radhavallabh Sampradaya.** 'Krishna as Loving Husband of God', Chapter 5, *Alternative Krishnas: Regional and Vernacular Variations of a Hindu Deity*, edited by Guy Beck (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press).

Page 78, line 10: **Krishna falls in love.** *Love Song of the Dark Lord, Jayadeva's Gitagovinda*, edited and translated by Barbara Stoler Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 10.9.

Page 78, line 16: **that is patriarchy.** I have found Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) to be the best introduction to how women were subordinated to men through history. Based on the study of Mesopotamian and Hebrew sources, as well as Abrahamic religions, it is full of insight about the creation of social structures which kept women in inferior positions and were regarded as marginal to the making of civilization.



Page 79, line 21: **The son was ashamed.** This story can be found in Roy Amore and Larry Shinn, *Lustful Maidens and Ascetic Kings: Buddhist and Hindu Stories of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 34–36. It has also been recounted by Uma Chakravarti in an excellent essay, ‘Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State’ (*Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 28, issue 14, 3 April 1993).

Page 79, line 26: **‘innate’ addiction to sensual enjoyment.** *Manusmriti* IX.2–5.

Page 79, line 30: **infidelity of his wife.** *Ibid.*, IX.6.

Page 79, line 33: **both were objects of lust.** The Mahabharata also dwells at length on the fickleness of women and believes they cannot be trusted because of their uncontrollable sexuality. It points out:

*Just as fire is not satiated with all the world’s wood,  
Or the ocean with all the rivers,  
Just as death is not appeased with all the lives  
So is a woman unsatisfied by all the men.*

In Book XIII, Bhishma illustrates women’s demoniac lust with the story of an old female ascetic who repeatedly attempts to seduce Astavakra. She tells him that for women there is no greater delight than sex or a more destructive urge. Even very old women are consumed by sexual passion and women’s sexual desire can never be overcome in all the three worlds.

Page 80, line 2: **ideal Hindu womanhood.** Uma Chakravarti, ‘Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State’. She writes: ‘That the stridharma, or the pativrata-dharma was a rhetorical device to ensure the social control of women, especially chastity, is now well accepted. As outlined by Manu and elaborated and repeated by Tryambaka in *Stridharmapaddhati* the stridharma was clearly an ideological mechanism for socially controlling the biological aspect of women. Since women, as biological creatures, are representatives of a wild or untamed nature. But through the stridharma the biological woman can be converted into a “social” woman in whom biology has been tamed! In contrast in the Kali age especially there is an inversion of the system in which women lapse into unrestrained behaviour disregarding the stridharma and throwing off all morals. The wicked and

essential nature of women then must be subordinated and conquered by the virtue of the ideal wife. Once the tension between “nature” and “culture” is resolved women can emerge triumphant as paragons of virtue. It is evident from Tryambaka’s text that ultimate social control is achieved when the subordinated (here women) not only accept their condition but consider it a mark of distinction.’ For an overview of the origins of patriarchy around the world, see Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

Page 80, line 12: **‘curb a woman’s lust’**. *Radha Jataka* I.309. In sheer quantity of lust, none comes close to the account of a queen, who insists that her husband be faithful when he leaves to quell disorder on the border. But she seduces a succession of messengers of the king, sixty-four in all, who come to inquire about her well-being. Then she tries to seduce the royal chaplain but doesn’t succeed. When the king returns, she accuses the chaplain of attempted rape. When he is about to be beheaded, the chaplain reveals the truth. He pleads with the king to forgive both the emissaries and the queen, who was a victim of ‘a woman’s insatiable passion and was merely acting according to her inborn nature’ (*Bandanamokkha Jataka* II.264). Another queen, however, was not so lucky. A prince, down and out on his luck, performed great sacrifices to protect his wife from starvation. At the first opportunity, she, however, left him for a common thief. Both then attempted to murder the husband, pushing him down a precipice. But the prince escaped and went on to become king, and sentenced her to death, saying, ‘Women deserve to die, they have no truth’ (*Jataka* II.193).

Page 80, line 25: **Brahminical conspiracy**. Uma Chakravarti, ‘Conceptualising Brahminical Patriarchy in Early India—Gender, Caste, Class and State’.

Page 81, line 3: O curse of marriage. Shakespeare, *Othello*, Act 3, Scene 3.

Page 88, line 27: **‘doctrine of debts’**. *Aitareya Brahmana*, 7.13. Patrick Olivelle has eloquently discussed the ‘doctrine of debts’ in his essay, ‘The Renouncer Tradition’, in *Blackwell’s Companion to Hinduism*, edited by Gavin Flood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003). The domestic life and the triad of man–woman–son is valorized in all the classical texts from the *Rig Veda* and the *Manusmriti* onwards.

Page 89, line 5: **‘Men should go to their wives.’** To encourage procreation, there is a mapping of sexuality on to food. Ghee is a symbol for semen. Birth is related to foods consumed, and daughters-in-law are encouraged to drink payasam and eat mangoes in order to become pregnant; and eat cooked rice with milk and ghee so as to produce sons. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* VI.4.1.

Page 89, line 7: **‘By ignoring the fertile period’.** Mahabharata VII.18.32.

Page 89, line 22: **spiritual release from human bondage.** The ashram system is described in many Dharmasutras, the definitive texts of Hindu conduct for the twice-born Hindu male in a system called *varṇasramadharmā*. The early sutras focused on a single ashram, the householder. But after the grand compromise, the Dharmashastras elaborated the four stages of life in the first five centuries of the Common Era. In typical Hindu fashion, there is no pressure to follow all four stages in a particular order, but the householder stage is clearly indispensable for society to survive and flourish. See Patrick Olivelle, *The Āśrama System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). T.N. Madan focuses on the householder’s life stage in *Non-Renunciation: Themes and Interpretations of Hindu Culture* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987).

Page 89, line 29: Give up this plan, dear child! Ashvaghosha, *Buddhacharita*, 5.30–38, translated by E.H. Johnston.

Page 91, line 16: **‘body of India’.** Vinay Lal, ‘Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharya: Gandhi’s Experiments in Celibate Sexuality’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 9, no. ½, January–April 2000, pp. 105–36.

Page 91, line 29: **exploited this charming inclination.** The word ‘kama’ also undergoes a change in usage from the early Vedic period, where it is a free-floating cosmic force, to a personal feeling between two human beings in the Epic period, to full-blown intimate love in the Classical period. In the Medieval period, the *Gita Govinda* asserts that ‘desire is born in the imagination’.

Page 92, line 10: **‘spontaneous order’.** This phrase describes how some natural and social phenomena have emerged in history on their own without design or planning. The evolution of life on earth, language, crystal structure and the Internet are examples. Thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment developed the

idea of the market economy as a spontaneous order. Friedrich Hayek in *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 6) argues that market economies are a spontaneous order, ‘a more efficient allocation of societal resources than any design could achieve’.

Page 92, line 19: **loyal pair**. David M. Buss, *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

Page 93, line 26: **controlled their sexuality**. Most societies have laws regulating sexuality. The reason seems to be that sex is related to power and the control of sex is a source of power. Foucault explains: ‘Sex was a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species; as a result, sex became a crucial target of power organized around the management of life.’ *Michel Foucault, Vol 1: An Introduction*, translated By Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 146.

Page 93, line 35: **Intercourse that does not produce progeny**. Married life is superior to the ascetic’s, according to Manu (6.87–9). Even the Mahabharata deplores intercourse that is solely for pleasure: ‘*socyam maithunam aprajam*’ (39.62).

Page 94, line 24: **who can build a superior nest**. David M. Buss, *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating*, p. 7.

Page 94, line 35: **A large study in twenty-six countries**. Ibid., pp. 23–26.

Page 104, line 30: **strange and even dangerous idea**. Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 5.

Page 105, line 7: **emergence of the novel**. Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992).

Page 105, line 31: **must not have sex before marriage**. Ibid.

Page 106, line 24: **‘affectionate intimacy quite unmixed with illusion’**. Bertrand Russell, *Marriage and Morals* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1957).

Page 107, line 20: **no conceptual reason to connect love, sex and marriage.** Raja Halwani, *Philosophy of Love, Sex, and Marriage: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2010). Also in Alan Soble, *Philosophy of Sex and Love: An Introduction* (St Paul: Paragon House, 1998).

Page 108, line 22: Who really is her beloved? *Panchatantra* I.146–48, edited by Pandeya Ramatej Shastri (Varanasi edition). These popular animal tales were compiled supposedly around the third century BCE by one Vishnu Sharma, who stole some of them word for word from the Anushasana Parva of the Mahabharata.

Page 109, line 3: **‘woman enjoys sex far more than a man’.** Mahabharata, *Anushasana Parva* XII. 11–53.

## Chapter 4: If You Are Kissed, Kiss Back

Page 111, line 1: **The hero of the Kamasutra is called nagaraka.** The *Kamasutra* defines the nagaraka as a man of the city (nagara), of learning (*grahitavidya*), of means, and a householder. The city is important because he needs the sophisticated culture (*veshavasa*) of the courtesan (ganika) as well as poets, artists and scholars in order to exchange his ideas. Although the term originally meant ‘urban courtier’, it quickly embraced other urban social classes. Daud Ali, ‘From Nayika to Bhakta: A Genealogy of Female Subjectivity in Early Medieval India’, in Julia Leslie and Mary McGee (eds), *Invented Identities: The Interplay of Gender, Religion, and Politics in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 166–69. See also Siegfried Lienhard, *A History of Classical Poetry: Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1984), pp. 15–16.

Page 112, line 22: In the outer room there is a bed. Vatsyayana Mallanaga, *Kamasutra*, translated by Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1.4.3–4. The subsequent references are to this translation.

Page 113, line 6: The lover who, in the evening. Ibid., 1.4.4. This is from Yashodhara Indrapada’s thirteenth-century commentary *Jayamangala*, on the

*Kamasutra*, in the *Kamasutra* translated by Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar (footnote, page 17).

Page 113, line 15: The lover makes love with his beloved. The advice is also from Yashodhara. He writes: ‘The inner bedroom is where the wives sleep. The outer bedroom is for sex. The couch is for the man to sleep on after sex. That is what decent people do; but the lovers of courtesans sleep together with them in the bedroom and have no need for a couch.’

Page 114, line 1: The best alliance plays the game. *Kamasutra*, 3.1.23.

Page 114, line 26: Behold the splendour of the park! *Mricchakaṭika* (*The Little Clay Cart*), attributed to Sudraka, translated by Arthur William Ryder, Harvard Oriental Series, vol. 9 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1905). Also available as a Project Gutenberg ebook:  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/21020/21020-h/21020-h.htm>.

Page 114, line 31: **nagaraka’s sophisticated and hedonistic lifestyle**. Here is the complete, charming account of the nagaraka’s enviably happy day (*Kamasutra* I.4.5–10,19):

*He gets up in the morning, relieves himself, cleans his teeth, applies fragrant oils in small quantities, as well as incense, garlands, beeswax and red lac, looks at his face in a mirror, takes some mouthwash and betel, and attends to the things that need to be done. He bathes every day, has his limbs rubbed with oil every second day, a foam bath every third day, his face shaved every fourth day, and his body hair removed every fifth or tenth day . . . After eating, he passes the time teaching his parrots and mynah birds to speak; goes to quail-fights, cockfights, and ram-fights . . . In the late afternoon, he gets dressed up and goes to salons to amuse himself . . .*

*A salon is where people of similar knowledge, intelligence, character, wealth, and age sit together in the house of a courtesan, or in a place of assembly, or in the dwelling-place of some man, and engage in appropriate conversation with courtesans. There they exchange thoughts about poems or works of art, and in the course of that they praise brilliant women whom everyone likes, and they bring in women who love men equally . . .*

*And in the evening, there is music and singing . . . They have drinking parties at one another’s houses. There the courtesans get the men to drink . . . wine made from honey, grapes, other fruits, or sugar, with various sorts of salt, fruit, greens, vegetables, and bitter, spicy, and sour foods.*

*After that, in a bedroom carefully decorated and perfumed by sweet smelling incense, he and his friends await the women who are slipping out for a rendezvous with them . . . And when the women arrive, he and his friends greet them with gentle conversation and courtesies that charm the mind and heart. If rain has soaked the clothing of women who have slipped out for a rendezvous in bad weather, he changes their clothes himself, or gets some of his friends to serve them.*

*That is what he does by day and night.*

Page 123, line 11: **human desire is a matter of culture, far more than of nature.** All we can be sure about Vatsyayana is that he lived in north India between the first and the sixth centuries of the present era, most likely in the Gupta period of Indian history, which is sometimes called a ‘golden age’ of art, literature and science. Based on evidence in the text, some historians have narrowed its date to the fourth century. Although most of the geographical references in the text are to northwest India, Yashodhara, the thirteenth-century commentator of the text, believed that Vatsyayana lived in Patliputra, the original capital of the Gupta court. What I had seen on Raj’s table was a translation by the scholar S.C. Upadhyaya, of 1961. It was the first legal edition published in India after the ban on *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was lifted in England, paving the way for publication of many books that had been banned so far.

Page 123, line 12: **Unlike females of other species.** *Kamasutra*, 1.2.20.

Page 123, line 17: **a ‘social construct’.** *Michel Foucault, Vol. 1: An Introduction.*

Page 123, line 20: **imperial age of the Guptas.** Daud Ali argues that there existed a feudal courtly culture on the Indian subcontinent from the fourth century to CE 1200. The use of the word ‘feudal’ remains controversial in the Indian context, having been much debated by Indian historians since R.S. Sharma’s classic work, *Light on Early Indian Society and Economy* (Bombay: Manaktala, 1966), on the subject appeared in 1966. See also Daud Ali, *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 22.

Page 123, line 22: **the sixty-four arts.** Vatsyayana says that the sixty-four fine arts that should be studied along with the *Kamasutra* are as follows: singing; playing musical instruments; dancing; painting; cutting leaves into shapes; making lines on the floor with rice powder and flowers; arranging flowers; colouring the teeth, clothes and limbs; making jewelled floors; preparing beds; making music on the rims of glasses of water; playing water sports; making garlands and stringing necklace; making diadems and headbands; making costumes; making various earrings; mixing perfumes; putting on jewellery; doing conjuring tricks; practising sorcery and sleight of hand; preparing various

forms of vegetables, soups and other things to eat; preparing wines, fruit juices and other things to drink; needlework; weaving; playing the lute and the drum; telling jokes and riddles; completing words; reciting difficult words; reading aloud; staging plays and dialogues; completing verses; making things out of cloth, wood and cane; woodworking; carpentry; architecture; the ability to test gold and silver; metallurgy; knowledge of the colour and form of jewels; skill at nurturing trees; knowledge of ram-fights, cockfights and quail-fights; teaching parrots and mynahs to talk; skill at rubbing, massaging and hairdressing; the ability to speak in sign language; understanding languages made to seem foreign; knowledge of local dialects; skill at making flower carts; knowledge of omens; knowing alphabets for use in making magical diagrams; memorizing alphabets; group recitation; improvising poetry; preparing dictionaries and thesauruses; learning of metre; making literary works; knowing the art of impersonation; studying the art of using clothes for disguise;. expertise in special forms of gambling; good at the game of dice; knowing children's games; versed in etiquette; mastering the science of strategy; and cultivating athletic skills.

Page 124, line 12: **The Kamasutra appealed to me as a metaphor.** Amrita Narayan, 'The Pleasure Is Also Hers: Kama Sutra as Metaphor', *Indian Express*, 14 February 2016, <http://indianexpress.com/article/life>.

Page 129, line 2: '**unbearable lightness**'. A philosophical idea in classical Indian thought from the Sanskrit word for light, *laghima*. Patanjali instructs in his Yoga Sutras to develop lightness as one of the eight *siddhis*, 'perfections', in order to overcome the weight or burden of *garima*, which pulls a human being down. Zen Buddhism instructs a student to become 'as light as being itself'. Western existentialist philosophy developed this thought in the twentieth century, and Milan Kundera explored it in his 1984 novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. 'Lightness' does not refer to physical weight but is used in a metaphorical sense, as Paul Valery employed it: 'Light like a bird, and not like a feather.' Kundera expresses the idea of lightness as 'a [life] without weight . . . whether it was horrible, beautiful or sublime . . . [life] means nothing'. Since life is insignificant and since the rules of society are arbitrary and don't matter, we are liberated into a 'lightness of being'. However, a life without significance,



without laws and duties, where our decisions don't matter, is an unbearable idea. Hence, the 'unbearable lightness of being'.

Page 130, line 2: **short, erotic verses called** khandkavya. These are short, almost fragmentary poems, complete in themselves, always about illicit love, suggesting that there was a culture of seduction, not unlike eighteenth-century France. The inspiration for Sanskrit and Tamil love poetry, especially khandkavya, might be King Hala's Prakrit anthology, *Gathasattasai*. Some of the poems have apparently been written by female poets. *The Ethos of Indian Literature: A Study of Its Romantic Tradition* (New Delhi: Chanakya, 1985), pp. 25, 37.

Page 130, line 9: **such graphic descriptions of their nightlife**. D.D. Kosambi, the Marxist historian (and mathematician), in his introduction to the *Subhashitaratnakosha*, speaks about the increasing erotica in classical Sanskrit literature under courtly influence. He says, 'Every portion of the anthology is permeated by the theme of sex. Even in dealing with the gods it is their nightlife which is most often treated with . . . complete lack of reticence. . . . The average Sanskrit poet wrote for the patrician and mainly within the limits of the latter's common experience, which was precisely sex and religion.' D.D. Kosambi, *Subhashitaratnakosha* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. xlvii.

Page 131, line 12: **a 'fair return for the damnation heaped on her head in religious works'**. *An Anthology of Sanskrit Court Poetry: Vidyakara's Subhashitaratnakosha*, translated by D.D.H. Ingalls (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 252. Ingalls translates *asati* as 'wanton'.

Page 131, line 15: My husband is no easy fool. Ibid., p. 830.

Page 131, line 26: Where the moon is not inveighed against. Ibid., p. 823. In this verse by Lakshmidhara, the poet refers to conjugal love as *grihashramavrata*.

Page 132, line 19: **menstruation swept away a woman's sins**. Roy Porter and M. Teich (eds), *Sexual Knowledge, Sexual Science: The History of Attitudes to Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 76.

Page 139, line 14: perhaps Odette was expecting someone else. *Swann's Way*, pp. 386–87.

Page 139, line 26: Glad that the satisfaction of his curiosity had preserved their love. *Ibid.*, p. 391.

Page 140, line 16: He realized at such moments that interest, that gloom, existed in him alone. *Ibid.*, p. 396.

Page 141, line 4: **classical ideals of dispassionate love**. The ideal is best exemplified in the works of the great Gupta poet Kalidasa (circa 400–55 AD). Scholars in the nineteenth century, such as Moriz Winternitz, place Kalidasa at an earlier date, because they thought he was one of the nine gems of Vikramaditya's court. In a brilliant essay, Daniel Ingalls explains the notion of harmony in Kalidasa's poetry. See 'Kālidāsa and the Attitudes of the Golden Age', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 96, No. 1 (January–March, 1976), p. 16.

Page 141, line 12: If a man is attached to her. *Kamasutra* VI.3.39–44.

Page 141, line 27: When the wheel of sexual ecstasy is in full motion. *Ibid.*, 2.2.31.

Page 142, line 15: **the nayika is an 'independent heroine'**. Daud Ali makes these points eloquently in 'From Nayika to Bhakta: A Genealogy of Female Subjectivity in Early Medieval India', in Julia Leslie and Mary McGee (eds), *Invented Identities: The Interplay of Gender, Religion, and Politics in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Page 142, line 30: I like sleeping with somebody. *Subhashitaratnakosha*, p. 825. This anthology was compiled by Vidyakara in the eleventh century. This translation by the poet W.S. Merwin, along with the Sanskritist J. Moussaieff Masson, was published as *Sanskrit Love Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977, p. 109). In this 'treasury of fine verses' of Vidyakara, two of the brightest names are those of Amaru and Bhartrihari (both probably around the fifth century.) Another famous anthology, *Subhashitavali*, is ascribed to Vallabhadeva, probably from the twelfth century, which means 'necklace of fine verses'.

Page 143, line 12: But you, incautious husband of a deceitful wife. Ibid., 1.9.65–74.

Page 144, line 23: **‘They figured in novels’**. T.J. Clarke in *The Painting of Modern Life* argues that the courtesan was a category, a way of perceiving (and representing) a changing Parisian culture. She was, Clark writes, ‘The necessary and concentrated form of Woman, of Desire, of Modernity . . . it was part of the myth that the courtesan’s attempt to be one of the ruling class should eventually come to nothing.’

## Chapter 5: The Party

Page 149, line 25: **‘Jealousy is emotional wisdom’**. David Buss, *The Dangerous Passion: Why Jealousy Is as Necessary as Love and Sex* (New York: Free Press, 2000), p. 4.

Page 150, line 8: **there is always uncertainty about paternity**. In Mormon crickets, fertilization occurs inside the male. ‘The female takes her egg and literally implants it within the male, who then incubates it until birth. In other species, fertilization occurs externally to both sexes. The female salmon, for example, drops her collection of eggs after swimming upstream. The male follows and deposits his sperm on top, and then they die, having fulfilled the only mission in life that evolution gave them. But humans are not like salmon. Nor are we like Mormon crickets. In all 4,000 species of mammals, of which we are one, and in all 257 species of primates, of which we are also one, fertilization occurs internally within the female, not the male.’ Ibid., p. 5.

Page 150, line 34: If a woman has sex with two men. Ibid., p. 35.

Page 160, line 23: A hundred times I learnt from my philosophy. Vidyakara quotes nineteen verses by Dharmakirti in his famous anthology of love poetry. This particular one is translated by John Brough, *Poems from the Sanskrit* (Penguin, 1968). No one is quite sure whether the author of these love poems was the famous eighth-century Buddhist philosopher of that name. Kosambi believed there were two persons. He argued, how could a philosopher write such witty, sharp, and sometimes humorous poetry? Ingalls disagreed with Kosambi. He said that even in his philosophical writings, Dharmakirti exhibits the same

qualities as the poet. He felt that the verses might come from a lost work of the philosopher which was called *Alaṃkara*, ‘figures of speech’. Moreover, Ingalls added, John Donne, the severe logician, could also write, ‘I can love both faire and browne.’

Page 161, line 19: **there is no expression of male jealousy in the Kamasutra.** Daniel Ingalls explains this rather nicely in his introduction to Vidyakara’s anthology: ‘A convention that sets Sanskrit at odds with European literature is that within the mood of love jealousy may be expressed by a woman but not by a man. The convention is not a falsification of life but a regulation of sensibility. A man may express jealousy, but by doing so he shifts the mood to the comic. Doubtless the reason for this convention is that in a polygamous society the code of love cannot demand a strict fidelity from the lover. His infidelity may cause his mistress or wife to be jealous but does not necessarily lower the nobility (udāratā) of his sentiment. His act of infidelity may have been required by social duty or by common civility. On the other hand, if the mistress were to be unfaithful to her lover, she would cease to be a noble mistress. The lover in turn would be demeaned if he expressed emotional concern over the loss of what had thus already lost its value.’ *An Anthology of Sanskrit Court Poetry: Vidyakara’s ‘Subhashasitaratnakosa’*, Harvard Oriental Series 44 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 20.

Page 161, line 27: A salon takes place when people of similar knowledge.  
*Kamasutra* I.1–4.

Page 165, line 32: The man who tells stories in society. Ibid. I.4.37.

Page 168, line 27: **They wrote freely about their love affairs.** I want to thank my young classicist friend and philosopher Udit Bery for introducing me to jealousy in the Roman elegies. The following from Horace’s Odes 1.13, *Cum tu, Lydia*, is addressed to Lydia, in which the poet contrasts the misery of jealousy with the happiness secured by constancy in love:

*When you, Lydia, praise the  
Rosy neck of Telephus, the pliant  
Arms of Telephus—alas!— my  
Liver swells with troublesome gall.  
Then neither my mind nor appearance*

*Remains in a certain seat, and tears  
Fall to my cheeks, showing how I  
Am wounded deeply by tough barbs.*

Page 169, line 3: Has some wrong finally driven you out. Sextus Propertius, *First Book of Elegies* I.3 (35–8), p. 4.

Page 169, line 14: And as often as you sighed. Ibid., 1.3 (27–30).

Page 169, line 27: **Jealousy needs a rival**. Ovid, a famous Roman who also wrote love elegies, says in *Amores* 1.8.95–6: *ne securus amet nullo rivale caveto: / non bene, si tollas proelia, durat amor*. (Whether or not he has a rival, what matters is that he needs one.)

Page 170, line 14: Continual accusations have made many unpopular. The advice from Propertius comes in *Second Book of Elegies* (II.18A).

Page 174, line 22: if you keep quiet, you are dumb. Bhartrihari, *Shatakatraya*, Verse 35, translated by Barbara Stoler Miller, *Bhartrihari: Poems* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967). He is considered among the greatest Sanskrit poets of love. His masterpiece, *Shatakarasa*, is in three parts, each one bringing to life a different aspect of kama. In the first, *Nitishataka*, the poet is attracted to the worldly life and its ambitions of wealth and power. The second, *Sringarashataka*, is about passion, and the poet evokes erotic moods and analyses the nature of sexual love. In the third, *Vairagyashataka*, he experiences inevitably disillusionment with society and his thoughts turn to renunciation and the forest.

Page 175, line 24: Cut off all envy. Ibid., Verse 84.

Page 175, line 31: I do indeed speak without bias. Ibid., Verse 81.

Page 176, line 9: At first she rebuffs me. Ibid., Verse 124.

Page 180, line 25: rejoiced at the discovery. Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, p. 402. This is from volume one of *Remembrance of Things Past*.

Page 181, line 4: **'the other is not to be known'**. Roland Barthes, *The Complete Works of Roland Barthes* (Venice, California: Sandroni Ray/Lemon Sky, 1999), p. 135.

Page 181, line 9: To think that I've wasted years of my life. Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*.

## Chapter 6: What Do Lovers Want?

Page 188, line 6: '**A woman desires any attractive man she sees**'. *Kamasutra*, 5.8.1.

Page 188, line 12: **And for this restraint, human beings may have paid a price**. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, translated by James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010). Freud believed in a fundamental tension between civilization and the individual. The primary tension arises from the individual's quest for freedom, especially for a desire for sex and civilization's demand for conformity. This results in repression and discontent.

Page 189, line 18: **tensions between public morals and private desires**. Ibid.

Page 202, line 23: **friendship is an integral part of happiness**. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. According to Aristotle, friends share a common conception of *eudaimonia*, literally in Greek, 'having a good demon', usually translated as 'happiness'.

Page 203, line 27: '**what is good for the other not for one's own sake**'. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 8, translated by Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1999).

Page 208, line 4: **artificially limiting the supply of sex**. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*.

Page 208, line 18: **romantic love as the only genuine basis for marriage**. Philip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990). Slater, the Harvard sociologist, also argued in his bestselling book on American culture, *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, that romantic love is the result of contrived deprivation by society and civilization. Sexual satisfaction has been made into a rare commodity when it is, in fact, plentiful and readily available in nature.

Page 209, line 14: **A 'cult of erotics'**. Romila Thapar, *A History of India* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), pp. 256–57.

Page 209, line 20: **‘only end of man is enjoyment produced by sexual pleasure’**. One of the best sources of Charvaka’s atheistic philosophy is *Sarvadarsanasamgraha*, ascribed to Madhavacharya (1296–1386), a Vaishnavite Hindu scholar. It was translated by E.B. Cowell and A.E. Gough (London, 1892); (republished London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Trubner, 1914). In my citations I modernized their Victorian language into a more contemporary English.

Page 209, line 28: be compared with the ravishing embraces of a woman. *Prabodha Chandrodaya*, or *Rise of the Moon of the Intellect*, is ‘a spiritual drama’, as the translator J. Taylor subtitles it. The Vedantic play was written by Krishna Misra of Maithila to check the materialism and atheism that apparently took hold of people’s minds after the Gupta Empire. It was written in the eleventh century during the reign of the Chandela dynasty, which produced the magnificent erotic temples of Khajuraho. I would recommend the translation by Matthew Kapstein (New York: New York University Press, 2009). The Taylor translation (1812) of the play is available online: [https://archive.org/stream/. . /prabdhachandr00krsnrch\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/. . /prabdhachandr00krsnrch_djvu.txt). An excerpt is also available in S.V. Radhakrishnan and C.A. Moore, *A Sourcebook of Indian Philosophy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 248.

Page 210, line 16: While life is yours, live joyously. *Sarvadarsanasamgraha*, p. 2. The Charvakas also found no evidence of a ‘soul’ as distinct from the human body. Yes, intelligence exists, but it comes from the same matter as the body, and when the body dies, so does intelligence. There is no heaven or caste or karma.

*Fire is hot, water cold,  
Refreshingly cool is the breeze of the morning;  
By whom came this variety?  
They were born of their own nature.*

*This also has been said by Brihaspati:  
There is no heaven,  
no final liberation,  
nor any soul in another world.  
Nor do the actions of the four castes,  
or priests produce any real effect.*

Page 210, line 24: **The Bhagavad Gita speaks scornfully of their ‘asura’ world view.** Bhagavad Gita XVI.8: *aparasparasambhutam kimnyatkamahaitukam*. Chandogya and Maitrayaṇi Upaniṣhad and the Vishnu Purana persistently refer to Lokayata views as ‘asura’. In the Mahabharata, the Charvakas are called *raksasas* (XII.38.22). Shalini Shah says: ‘What is interesting about this asuralrākṣasa appellation to a sensual philosophy is that traditionally the asuralrākṣasa culture has had a positive empowering sexual image of women which stands in contrast to the misogyny of the Brahmanic tradition.’ Shalini Shah, *Love, Eroticism and Female Sexuality in Classical Sanskrit Literature: Seventh-Thirteenth Centuries* (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2009), p. 64.

Page 210, line 31: **Shouldn’t kama, which is the desire to live, be the first goal because everything is over after death?** *Carakasamhita Sutrasthana*, 11.3–5.

Page 211, line 5: **‘Both men and women, after all, suffer from blind passion.’** *Naiṣadha-carita* of Sriharsha (translated by K.K. Handiqui, Pune, 1965, 17.42, 68, 54, 48, 50) is a Sanskrit poem on the life of Nala, the king of Nishadha. Considered one of the five *mahakavyas* (great epic poems) in the canon of Sanskrit literature, it retells the story of Nala and Damayanti, the daughter of Bhima, the king of Vidarbha, which was first related in the third section, *Vanaparva*, of the Mahabharata. Sriharsha, who lived in the twelfth century during the reign of Jayachandra of Kanauj, uses highly elaborate language in this poem, continually playing with words and in a variety of metres. On Lokayats, Charvakas and other materialists, see *Sarvadarsanasamgraha*, ascribed to Madhavacharya. In the same poem, the poet exposes the double standards of the ascetic spoilsports: ‘Have they really renounced kama? Don’t they long for a heaven with gazelle-eyed nymphs?’ His sobering advice is to admire the human body and enjoy the pleasures of the world.

Page 211, line 10: **innocent physical pleasure is the only honest, spontaneous pursuit.** Wendy Doniger in her introduction to the *Kamasutra*, edited by herself and Sudhir Kakar.

Page 211, line 18: **woman as a subject in sexual life.** Ibid., 3.2.35.



Page 211, line 19: **a woman who does not experience the pleasures of love.**  
Kalidasa's *Meghdoot* says:

*Here the breeze at dawn,  
rising from the Shipra with its opening lotuses,  
carries over the city  
the sharp and liquid calling of the paddy birds;  
touching the body softly,  
soothing the weariness of ladies from their night of love,  
it whispers  
like a skilful lover who would ask for more.*

Page 211, line 22: **'A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god'**. Ibid., p. 30–33. This one is translated by Daniel Ingalls, 'Kalidasa and the Attitudes of the Golden Age', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 96, no. 1 (January–March 1976), p. 20.

Page 212, line 34: **'heaven on earth'**. *Messenger Poems*, translated by James Mallinson, Clay Sanskrit Library (New York: New York University Press, 2006), p. 49.

Page 213, line 5: Here the breeze at dawn. Ibid.

Page 213, line 20: Her dark-blue robe, the water. Ibid.

Page 217, line 10: **the Kamasutra's sagacious advice**. *Kamasutra*, 5.8.1. 'A woman desires any attractive man she sees, and in the same way, a man desires a woman. But after some consideration, the matter goes no further.'

Page 217, line 18: **'the active way of life'**. Mahabharata X.2.4; XII.210.2–5; XII.199.15.

Page 218, line 7: Your Majesty is not mistaken. *Malavikagnimitra*, Verse 8, translated by Daniel Ingalls, op. cit., 21.

Page 219, line 17: **used this binary to illuminate Greek tragedy**. Nietzsche developed the philosophic concepts, Apollonian and Dionysian, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, published in 1872. His premise is that the fusion of Dionysian and Apollonian *kunsttriebe* ('artistic impulses') form tragedy. He goes on to argue that this fusion has not been achieved since the ancient Greek tragedians. He felt that the tragedians, Aeschylus and Sophocles, fully realized the tragic spirit but

the downfall (*untergang*) began with Euripides. Nietzsche objects to Euripides's use of Socratic rationalism (the dialectic) in his tragedies, claiming that the infusion of ethics and reason robbed tragedy of its foundation, namely the fragile balance of the Dionysian and the Apollonian.

## Chapter 7: Friends and Lovers

Page 221, introductory quote: **Sometimes the day is better than the night.** Amaru, *Amarushataka*, translated by Greg Bailey, in *Love Lyrics*, Clay Sanskrit Library (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

Page 224, line 19: *sarvam khalu idaṃ brahma. Chandogya Upanishad* III.14.3.

Page 230, line 14: I am trying my best to describe her. Pingali Suranna, *The Demon's Daughter: A Love Story from South India*, translated by Velcheru Narayan Rao and David Shulman (Albany: State University of New York, 2006), 2.89. Suranna composed his masterpiece in the second half of the sixteenth century after the collapse of the great Vijaynagara Empire. Although he borrowed the outline of the tale from the *Harivamsa*, an ancient purana-like compendium of stories related to Krishna and appended it to the Mahabharata, his magic consists in a 'radically new sensibility', as the translators tell us, 'informed by a growing sense of the individual and the singularity of the experience' that conceives of love as a subjective emotion. Suranna's playful style is filled with rich irony that makes one smile at every turn of the goose's charming words.

Page 230, line 23: **a pure, 'unfettered' mind.** Ibid., 2.107–09.

*In this way . . . he saw her exactly  
as she was. There is nothing beyond the grasp  
of an unfettered mind.*

Page 233, line 16: **it blossomed in the divine love of Radha and Krishna.** A number of scholars have alluded to the possible birth of romantic love around the world in the twelfth century. Sudhir Kakar and John Munder Ross, *Tales of Love, Sex and Danger*, 1986 (republished in a second edition in 2011—Delhi: Oxford University Press). See also William Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900–1200 CE*.

Page 234, line 11: **the devotee's impossible and unbearable love of god.** In the Tamil poems of the Saiva Nayanmar and the Vaishnava Alvars, god appears frequently as a lover, in roles inherited from the more ancient Tamil love poetry of the so-called sangam period (the first century ACE.) The genre is called *akam*, which is the inner poetry of devotion, addressed usually to Shiva or Vishnu, in a devotional context such as a temple. Here is an excerpt from the poet Nammalvar from the eighth century, in which the speaker is a young woman separated from her lover, who is identified as Krishna (in his south Indian form as Kannan). The central theme is always that the god-lover refuses to come to her:

*This lovesickness stands behind me  
and torments my heart.  
This con of a night  
faces me and buries my sight.  
My lord, the wheel forever firm in his hands,  
will not come.  
So who will save this long life of mine  
that finds no end at all?*

Page 234, line 25: **reinforced the validity of the creation hymn in the Rig Veda.** *Rig Veda* X.129.

Page 234, line 33: We are one life and flesh. Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*, translated by A.T. Hatto (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 282.

Page 235, line 4: **Love poetry developed from these beginnings.** I found one of the best accounts of love in the later Middle Ages in Johan Huizinga's brilliant book, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1924).

Page 235, line 6: **Telling a story is one of the meanings of 'romance'.** Anthony Giddens's *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Society* states that romantic love introduced the idea of a narrative into an individual's life. According to Giddens, the rise of romantic love more or less coincided with the emergence of the novel. It was then that love, associated with freedom and therefore the ideals of romantic love, created the ties between freedom and self-realization. One of the first and most influential novels of romantic love was *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (*Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers*) by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, first published in 1774. It belongs to

the *Sturm und Drang* period in German literature, and influenced the later Romantic movement in literature. Goethe wrote it when he was twenty-four years old and immediately became a literary celebrity.

Page 235, line 30: **Even the great god Krishna failed and succumbed to the romantic love of Radha.**

*Before me flash a myriad eyes  
of lotus-eyed women.  
So tell me, where am I supposed  
to rest this pair of mine?*

*With this, Krishna simply closed  
his lotus eyes and stood stock still  
while the goosebumps slowly spread  
over his whole body.*

This much-quoted verse of the seventh-eighth-century poet, Amaru epitomizes the point. It can be found in a number of classical anthologies, *Subhashitavali*, Verse 114 (edited by Petersen), and *Amarushataka*, Verse 43, *Subhashitaratnakosa*, verse 697. *Amarushataka*, ‘the hundred stanzas of Amaru’, ranks high in Sanskrit lyrical poetry. The ninth-century literary critic Anandavardhana declared in *Dhvanyaloka* that ‘a single stanza of the poet Amaru . . . may provide the taste of love equal to what’s found in whole volumes’. Hence, its verses have been used by poets and critics to teach students about sringara rasa.

Page 236, line 15: **the mastery of desire by pure love resulted in a joy that was ‘a hundred times’ greater than the satisfaction of ‘desire-as-appetite’.** William Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900–1200 CE*. Reddy explains how romantic love was born amidst a campaign by the church to take over the responsibility for legislation concerning sexual behaviour and marriage. The campaign was so successful that it led to the development of a large body of canon law treating sexual questions, which were subject to the ecclesiastical courts. These legal and theological developments were part of a larger transformation called Gregorian Reform that swept Europe between 1050 and 1200.

Page 237, line 13: **Life at the court was ‘aestheticized’**. Daud Ali, *Courtly Culture and political Life in Early Medieval India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 77. See also Vijay Nath, ‘From “Brahmanism” to “Hinduism”: Negotiating the Myth of the Great Tradition’, *Social Scientist* (2001).

Page 241, line 3: Clouds thicken the sky. *Love Song of the Dark Lord, Jayadeva’s Gitagovinda*, edited and translated by Barbara Stoler Miller. I believe that Stoler Miller’s translation into English is still the best. It has a gentle, spare formalism. Because Jayadeva’s lyrical poem is both a work of literature and the source of religious inspiration, she shows admirable restraint in the way she negotiates frank eroticism with potentially pornographic subject matter.

Page 241, line 29: While Hari roamed in the forest. *Ibid.*, 2.1. Madhava and Hari are some of the names of Krishna.

Page 242, line 6: **As promiscuous Krishna chases after other milkmaids.** *Ibid.*, 2.10.

*My heart values his vulgar ways,  
Refuses to admit my rage,  
Feels strangely elated,  
And keeps denying his guilt.  
When he steals away without me  
To indulge his craving  
For other young women,  
My perverse heart  
Only wants Krishna back.  
What can I do?*

Page 242, line 12: **begins to search for Radha.** *Ibid.*, 3.7.9.

*Why do I follow her now in the woods?  
Why do I cry in vain?  
Damn me! My wanton ways  
Made her leave in anger.  
  
Frail Radha, I know jealousy  
Wastes your heart.  
But I can’t beg your forgiveness  
When I don’t know where you are.*

*Forgive me now.  
I won't do this to you again.*

Page 242, line 14: **She tells him how much Radha has suffered in his absence.** Ibid., 6.28.

*In her loneliness she sees you everywhere,  
drinking spring flower honey from other lips . . .  
While you idle here, modesty abandons her  
She laments, sobs and she waits to love you.*

Page 242, line 20: **'He wantonly delights in loving many women.'** Ibid., 7.30.

Page 242, line 22: Dark Krishna, your heart must be blacker than your skin.  
Ibid., 8.7.

*How can you deceive a faithful creature tortured by love?  
Damn you, Madhava. Go, Keshava, leave me!*

Page 242, line 26: Delay is useless, you fool. Ibid., 9.10.

Page 242, line 30: Lovely fool, I am here as your lover. Ibid., 11.12.

Page 243, line 2: Place your foot on my head. Ibid., 11.8.

Page 243, line 8: **Krishna dresses elaborately for their rendezvous.** Ibid., 11.13.

*Seeing Hari light the deep thicket  
With brilliant jewel necklaces, a pendant,  
A golden rope belt, armlets, and wrist bands,  
Radha modestly stopped at the entrance.*

Page 243, line 11: **her 'modesty left in shame'.** Ibid., 11.3.

Page 243, line 19: Her hips were still. Ibid., 12.10. For readers interested in the key Sanskrit words employed by Jayadeva, I give below a sampling (with diacritical marks): 1. The word for Krishna's common love for all the milkmaids is *sādhāraṇapraṇaya* (II.i). 2. This generates Radha's envy, *īrṣyā*. 3. She feels like a deserted cowherdess longing for love, *utkaṇṭhitagopavadhū* (II.18), which is, in fact, her basic condition through the night of the drama. 4. She waits in vain for Krishna, all dressed up and ornamented for love, *vāsakasajjā* (VI.8). 5.

She feels deceived, *vañcitā*, by her friends (VII.3) and by Krishna (VIII.7.9). 6. She is jealously enraged, *khaṇḍitayuvati* (VIII.9), imagining the marks of love that a rival has inflicted on Krishna. 7. She is remorseful after quarrelling, *kalahāntarītā* (IX.i). 8. At her friend's urging, her modesty abandons her, *salajjā lajjā vyagamad iva* (X1.33), and she goes to meet her lover. 9. After their ecstatic reunion, she feels her lover in her control, *svādhīnabhartṛkā* (XII.II).

Page 249, line 1: **Arnold, however, did not translate the climactic scene.** Cited in Friedhelm Hardy, *The Religious Culture of India: Power, Love and Wisdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Page 250, line 5: **her gesture of 'innocently' brushing her breast against mine.** *Kamasutra*, 2.2.89.

Page 250, line 26: **how could the divine be manifest in nature?** Jonathan Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). Lear says, 'Analysts tend to dismiss love as cosmological speculation for which Freud had a predilection but which goes beyond the bounds or concerns of psychoanalysis. It is one thing to see the drives as located in the human being; it is quite another to see them permeating animate nature.' That Freud did have such a predilection is beyond doubt. See, e.g., *Civilization and Its Discontents* XXI:119.

Page 251, line 6: He who has the highest bhakti of God. Max Muller, *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* (Oxford University Press), p. 267. Max Muller thought that the word 'bhakti' might have been inserted later into the Upanishad, but later scholars say that the text was, in fact, introducing personal theism in the form of early Shiva bhakti (*hiriyanna*).

Page 251, line 12: jnana marga. In verses VI.31 through VI.47 of the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna describes bhakti yoga as loving devotion which leads to the highest spiritual attainments.

Page 251, line 14: **Krishna is the mischievous child.** See the *Harivamsha*, an appendix to the Mahabharata, perhaps written in the second or third century AD.

Page 251, line 20: Krishna! When you remove with the breath of your mouth. *Sattasai* of King Hala, translated by Friedhelm Hardy, p. 89.

Page 252, line 16: **The answer lies with the devotee.** Raja Pipa, a fifteenth-century bhakti poet from a royal family in Rajasthan, says:

*After searching so many lands,  
I found the nine treasures within my body,  
Now there will be no further going and coming,  
I swear by Rama.*

This is found in *Gu Dhanasari*, translated by Vaudeville. See also Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas: The Bhakti Poets of North India* (Routledge, 2000), p. 292. Another bhakti poet, Mira Bai (c. sixteenth century ACE), who also came from a Rajput royal family. In her poetry, the distinction between human and divine love disappears, as the cosmic life force becomes sacred. The mood is consistently erotic, of sringara rasa, as seen through the eyes of a woman, whether in separation or union. But she also has her share of the ‘madness of lovers’.

*I am fascinated by Mohan's beauty  
In the bazaar, in the way he teases me.  
I have not learned my beloved's sweet desire,  
I only know his beautiful body and his eyes like lotus flowers.*

This translation from the Hindi is in J.B. Alphonso-Karkala (ed.), *Anthology of Indian Literature* (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 540. Mohan is another name for Krishna, meaning ‘enchanter’.

Page 252, line 30: **In India, romantic love happened to take a religious turn.** I do not want to leave the false impression that romantic love was only religious in India. Indeed, there are many wonderful secular stories about ‘true love’, beginning with that of Nala and Damayanti in the Mahabharata. My favourite is ‘The Love Casket’, from the second part of *Brihatkatha*, ‘the Grand Story’, in which a wealthy courtesan is attracted to the noble qualities of the impoverished hero, Charudatta. She is generous to his little son, whose clay cart she fills with valuable jewellery. Although many rich and powerful men desire her, she falls in love with the poor hero. Their lives are soon threatened by a vulgar courtier from the royal family, who molests and attempts to kill her. All end well in the end as Charudatta marries the courtesan after his first wife agrees to it. Two classical dramatists wrote plays on this theme; one of the plays is *Mricchakatika*, ‘The



Little Clay Cart’, attributed to Bhasa, and is performed regularly both in India and abroad.

## Chapter 8: The Day of Days

Page 262, line 5: Let there be spaces in your togetherness. Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1951).

Page 263, line 1: ‘horror of marriage lies in its ‘dailiness’. Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1982). The entry is from 1926, fourteen years into her marriage, and appears under the heading, ‘The Married Relation’.

Page 263, line 13: **Writing is like sex.** These words are credited to Virginia Woolf although they probably belong to two playwrights—the French master of comedy Moliere and the Hungarian dramatist Ferenc Molnar. The attribution to Woolf may be as a result of the following (as a paper in the journal *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 1999, suggests): ‘In June of 1903, more than a decade before she would publish her first novel, Virginia Woolf confessed to a friend that “I have—what you call fallen more than once [. . .] I have sold my brains, which are my virtue” (Letters 1: 79). Twenty-two years later, Woolf compared her publication outlets in another letter and queried ‘whats [*sic*] the objection to whoring after Todd [Editor of Vogue]? Better whore than honestly and timidly and coolly and respectably copulate with the Times Lit. Sup” (3: 200). In both letters, written at quite different stages of her career, Woolf used commercial sexuality to figure a writer’s relationship with her public. Most startlingly, her second letter upholds “whoring” at the expense of respectable intercourse, which is deprecated as a pedestrian form of union.’

Page 274, line 17: **‘male narcissism’.** Freud published the definitive paper on the subject in 1914 called ‘On Narcissism: An Introduction’. However, Paul Nacke was the first person to use the term ‘narcissism’ in a study of sexual perversions in 1899. Otto Rank published the first psychoanalytical paper in 1911 specifically concerned with narcissism, linking it to vanity and self-admiration.

Page 276, line 6: **‘this does not mean that Indians are narcissistic while westerners are not’**. Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 129. The succeeding quotes from Kakar are from pages 129–30. Kakar builds his account based on Heinz Kohut’s *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971).

Page 276, line 26: I was trembling when I handed the confession to my father. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), pp. 27–28.

Page 282, line 7: No one, not even a friend, can make us better: Anna Dostoevsky, *Dostoevsky Reminiscences* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1975).

Page 283, line 13: **‘My day of days!’** I was echoing the words of the twenty-nine-year-old Charles Darwin, the greatest scientist of the nineteenth century, who wrote these words in his journal on 11 November 1838, after his marriage to his cousin, Emma Wedgwood.

Page 284, line 36: **all the gods had vied for her hand**. Damayanti obviously knew that gods do not cast shadows. The famous story of Nala and Damayanti, which is found in the Mahabharata, has been an inspiration for writers and poets over the centuries.

Page 288, line 15: Well, really there is nothing I can tell. Bhartrihari, *Shatakatraya*, translated by Barbara Stoller Miller.

Page 291, line 19: **this divine couple are the parents of us all**, Both Kalidasa’s *Kumarasambhava* (6.80) and the opening lines of the *Raghuvamsa* remind us that the divine couple are parents of us all. The former text also suggests (7.80) that Shiva and Parvati are present in the marriage of every couple and their union is the model for every union. See Gary Tubb, ‘Baking Uma’, in *Innovations and Turning Points, Towards a History of Kavya Literature*, Yigal Bronner, David Shulman, Gary Tubb (eds) (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 71.

Page 292, line 27: Alone together. *Kumarasambhava: The Origin of the Young God*, translated by Hank Heifetz (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2014), 8.7.

Page 293, line 3: Eager to find out what happened in the night. Ibid., 8.10.

Page 293, line 20: Rich in the embrace of Parvati's breasts. Ibid., 8.22.

Page 293, line 25: In the Heavenly Ganga. Ibid., 8.26.

Page 294, line 7: The lotus, though its petals have closed like a bud. Ibid., 8.39; the following stanza is at 8.46.

Page 294, line 19: Give up your anger. Ibid., 8.48–51.

Page 295, line 3: Though, as they loved the moon suffered. Ibid., 8.83–84.

Page 295, line 14: With the day and the night the same to him. Ibid., 8.91.

Page 295, line 23: **'a hundred and fifty seasons'**: The poetic translator I refer to is Hank Heifetz, whose version I have liberally used here with much gratitude.

Page 296, line 10: **The cosmic polarity between Shiva and Parvati.**

Abhinavagupta (c. 975–1025 CE) writes in *Paratrimshikalaghuvritti* (Verse 5):

*Within these (cosmic spheres) this universe is flowing with manifold bodies, organs and worlds.  
There the enjoyer is Shiva, dwelling embodied, taking on the condition of the limited experient.*

Page 296, line 33: **'erotic ascetic'**. The phrase became famous from the title of Wendy Doniger's book *Siva: The Erotic Ascetic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). A profound and insightful study of the Puranas, it helped me to understand how Shiva resolves the dilemma between spiritual aspiration and human desire. In it, Professor Doniger quotes Claude Levi-Strauss, who explains, 'It is the nature of myth to provide a logical model capable of overcoming contradiction.' The book was originally published as two articles based on her Harvard PhD thesis under the title 'Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva', and it examines hundreds of myths and texts—Vedic, Puranic, classical, modern and tribal—relating to the great ascetic Shiva and his erotic alter ego, Kama.

Page 297, line 3: **The raised linga.** Shiva's paradoxical nature is captured starkly in his ubiquitous representation of the linga. The linga is in the shape of a 'phallus'. How does one explain an ascetic with a permanently erect phallus? It is probable that Shiva had prehistoric origins, going back to the Indus Valley civilization. Sir John Marshall, the well-known archaeologist who excavated

Harappa and Mohenjodaro, the first two cities in the Indus Valley, found a seal which shows a god in a yogic position with an exposed, erect phallus.

Page 297, line 31: **Kama ‘is not destroyed but exists in a sublimated state’.**

R.K. Narayan, *Mr Sampat—The Printer of Malgudi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 250. See also Wendy Doniger’s *Siva: the Erotic Ascetic*, fns 42–44.

Page 297, line 35: **sublimation as a sign of civilization and human maturity.**

Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*, in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud—The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works*, translated by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, vol. 21, 1961), pp. 79–80.

Page 298, line 17: He (Shiva) is able to mediate. Wendy Doniger, ‘Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva’, in *History of Religions*, vol. 8, no. 4 (May 1969), p. 301.

Page 299, line 14: **another myth has to be created to accommodate Parvati’s desires.** Ibid., pp. 302–03. Doniger explains, ‘That “nevertheless” is the mythopoeic and philosophical nexus of the cycle of countless versions of myths, told and re-told in an eternal search for the impossible solution. The myth expresses the need that can never be fulfilled, that is always just out of reach on one side or the other, even in the world of the gods.’

Page 300, line 23: **as we ascended Plato’s ladder.** Plato, *Symposium*, translated by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1989), III.I02. Martha Nussbaum has an insightful discussion of the ‘ladders of ascent’ in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 482–97.

Page 300, line 32: This state where there is no twoness. Bhavabhuti, *Uttara-rāma-carita* (1.39).

Page 302, line 4: Where the myth fails, human love begins. Anais Nin, *Diary of Anais Nin*, vol. 3, 1939–44, edited and with a preface by Gunther Stuhlmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969). I was often reminded of Proust

when I read of Anais Nin's attempts to go beyond self-revelation as she tried to understand the fragile human personality.

## Chapter 9: The Enigma of Marriage

Page 306, line 4: **'Where they love, they have no desire'**. In an essay written in 1912, Freud used these famous words in explaining the difficulty that many middle-aged couples experience in having sex with their spouses. Freud's essay bears the extraordinary title, 'On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love', *Contributions to the Psychology of Love*, vol. 11, Freud's complete works (1922), pp. 177–90.

Page 309, line 7: Where the moon is not inveighed against. Vidyakara, *Subhashitaratnakosha*, translated by Daniel D. Ingalls, in *An Anthology of Sanskrit Court Poetry* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965), Verse 823. Also quoted in Sudhir Kakar, *The Devil Take Love* (Gurgaon: Penguin Random House India, 2016), p. 175.

Page 309, line 16: **'one does not desire what one does not lack'**. Plato, *Symposium*, 200b.

Page 309, line 25: **There is an inherent contradiction between what men and women want**. Evolutionary biology seems to support folk wisdom by confirming that there seems to be a difference between men and women when it comes to love and lust. According to David Buss, 'A male cannot lose by promiscuity. Even one who is loyal to a particular mate may still succeed in leaving more descendants if he also tries to mate with other females. Any children resulting from such encounters will have a lesser chance of survival than the offspring of the female to whom he is devoted. From an evolutionary perspective, the male's genetic material will be spread more widely if they do survive. This point is not meant to suggest a subtle calculation on the part of prehistoric males. All it suggests is that an inheritable tendency to non-promiscuous behaviour would not become dominant in the male sex. Thus, in general, we should expect lust and love to be separable for males.' David M. Buss, *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating*.

Similarly, the evolutionary point of view expects female lust will be dependent upon love. 'For a female will have a better chance of reproducing

successfully if she makes herself available only to a mate of whose devotion she is already convinced. Thus, for a female, feeling loved would be a key condition for feeling lust,' says Buss. These are obviously not conscious tactics or deliberate. Prehistoric females did not decide to act with the deliberate purpose of serving reproductive goals. They were the result of imagining involuntary genetic mutations that influenced the structure of the brain which resulted in conduct that individuals did not necessarily control. It does support the folk hypothesis of a contradiction in modern romance—men are more likely to incline towards random sex than women. If this is true, some of the sadness of love is the fault of the evolution of the species. One has to accept the findings of evolutionary biologists with some caution. If they are correct, however, they seem to prove the kama pessimists' contention that we can do little to mitigate the problems of love.

Unlike the kama pessimism of evolutionary psychology, kama optimists believe that love and sex are 'cultural constructs'. Since they are 'made-up rules', we can change them. The twentieth century illustrates some of the dramatic changes in the way women think of themselves; men are finally learning the old lesson of the *Kamasutra* that a man has a duty to please a woman in bed before himself. Nevertheless, some things may well be biological and will resist change—for example, men still seem to be more aroused by visual stimulation and less by affection than women; jealousy and possessiveness is a self-protective device—desire to hold on to what we have and it too will refuse to change.

Page 310, line 21: **They have a biological advantage in Darwinian natural selection.** *The Economist* (November 2013), quotes a study about foxes on a Russian fur farm to underline this point.

Page 311, line 3: **Man's love is of man's life a thing apart.** 'Don Juan I'.

Page 311, line 23: There are those who say an array of horsemen. Sappho, Fragment 16 (a), in *Greek Lyrics*, Richmond Lattimore (ed.), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

Page 315, line 15: **'Every personal existence is upheld by a secret.'** Anton Chekhov's famous story is variously translated as 'Lady with a Dog', 'Lady with a Little Dog' and 'Lady with a Lap Dog'. Anton Chekhov, Ronald Wilks (ed),

*The Lady with the Little Dog and Other Stories, 1896–1904* (London: Penguin Books), p. 223.

Page 318, line 3: **‘Man wished to live as much as possible in the sacred.’** Marcea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, translated by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1959).

Page 324, line 12: **‘Do not inflict upon others what you would not do to yourself.’** Mahabharata XVIII.113.8.

Page 325, line 19: There is melancholic sadness at the very heart of kama. Ibid. I.85.7–8.

Page 326, line 7: **fulfilled these three distinctive needs through three different individuals.** The popular philosopher Alain de Botton offers an interesting perspective to this moral dilemma in *How to Think More about Sex* (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 2012). I am indebted to him for bringing remarkable clarity to the concept of modern marriage and the tripartite division of labour in the premodern marriage, albeit from a male perspective.

Page 328, line 14: **‘dharma is the best’.** Mahabharata XII.167.8–9.

Page 328, line 17: **Ramayana, obviously, sides with dharma.** Ramayana II.21.57–58.

Page 328, line 18: **one should try and achieve all the three goals of the trivarga.** *Manusmriti* II.224.

Page 328, line 23: **kama is as basic to human life as food.** *Jayamangala*, 1.2.37.

Page 336, line 13: For the very young, love is like a huge river. Stendhal, *On Love*, translated by Sophie Lewis (London: Hesperus Press Ltd, 2009).

Page 336, line 31: **Excessive indulgence is what is bad.** There are two discussions of pleasure in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Book X discusses the claim that pleasure is the sole or supreme good. In Book VII, Aristotle examines the way that pleasure, or the desire for it, enhances life (1153a, 2D–23).

Page 337, line 11: **If I eat sweets in the theatre, I am likely to diminish my enjoyment of the play.** Ibid., 1175b, 12–13.

Page 337, line 17: **Ethical hedonism.** *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, pp. 6, 567.

Page 337, line 21: **modest, sustainable pleasure, in a calm, free and tranquil state.** Two English philosophers follow these Hellenistic traditions. Adam Smith also felt that happiness ‘consists in tranquillity and enjoyment. Without tranquillity there can be no enjoyment; and where there is perfect tranquillity there is scarce anything which is not capable of amusing.’ *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (eds), (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), III, pp. 3, 30, 149. A few years later, John Stuart Mill distinguished between excitement and tranquillity as two sources of contentment, the first allowing us to tolerate pain and the second the absence of pleasure. Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (4th edition, London: Longmans Green Reader & Dyer, 1971), II, p. 13. The Stoics would, of course, have opted for the happiest life to be one of calm and tranquillity.

Page 337, line 29: **The best state of mind a person could achieve is one of calm serenity.** Some writings by Epicurus have survived but most scholars consider the epic poem ‘On the Nature of Things’ by Lucretius the definitive work. It presents in one unified work the core arguments and theories of Epicureanism.

Page 338, line 18: **Infants and children are governed far more by the pleasure principle.** Freud first used the insight that the mind seeks pleasure and avoids pain in his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* of 1895. Later, he argued that ‘an ego thus educated has become “reasonable”; it no longer lets itself be governed by the pleasure principle, but obeys the reality principle, which also, at bottom, seeks to obtain pleasure, but pleasure which is assured through taking account of reality, even though it is pleasure postponed and diminished.’ (Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, 16.357). In his book, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, published in 1921, Freud hypothesized the possibility ‘of tendencies *beyond* the pleasure principle, that is, of tendencies more primitive than it and independent of it’.

Page 338, line 25: **‘introspective attitude to life based on taking pleasure yourself and giving pleasure to others’.** Michel Onfray has written two books



directly on the subject, *L'invention du Plaisir: Fragments Cyréaniques* and *La Puissance d'exister: Manifeste Hédoniste*.

Page 339, line 1: **there are other things we value besides pleasure**. The philosopher G.E. Moore asks us to do a thought experiment: imagine two worlds—one beautiful and the other filthy. You have not experienced either. Yet you would prefer the beautiful rather than the filthy world. Thus, human beings value other things beyond conscious pleasure. George E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903). See Chapter 3 on hedonism, which contains Moore's influential arguments against hedonism.

In another famous thought experiment, Robert Nozick asks us to imagine a fantastic machine that provides an amazing mix of peaceful experiences which appear completely real. He argues that the majority of people would reject the choice to live this pleasurable life in the machine, mostly because they would prefer living in reality. Just as pleasurable experiences matter to us, so does living in reality. R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). See pp. 42–45 for the discussion of this thought experiment.

Page 339, line 21: **'reflexive consciousness'**. See Note to Chapter 1 about **'two plumed birds who sit on the pipal tree'** from *the Mundaka Upanishad* III.

## Chapter 10: Happy Love Has No History

Page 343, line 6: If a man commits adultery. Leviticus, 20.10.

Page 349, line 1: Again today / Your cruel father has not come. Vallabhadeva, *Subhashitavali*, Verse 1106, edited by Peter Peterson and Pandit Durga Prasad (Bombay: Bombay Education Society Press, 1886). Reproduced in W.S. Merwin and J. Moussaieff Masson, *Sanskrit Love Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 2.

Page 350, line 18: **'Romantic love is adulterous by definition.'** Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, translated by Montgomery Belgion (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1940), p. 6. Better than anyone else, Rougemont has brought out the contradiction between romance and marriage. He explains that even initially in the Middle Ages when romance was born in the West, when courtly love subscribed to the code of chivalry, and a

knight's loyalty was always to his king before his mistress, the reality was different. He quotes many scholars, such as Mosche Lazar, to claim that the desired end was always adulterous sexual love with physical possession of the lady.

Page 350, line 32: and there is the deep shyness. Tarashashankam, *Kavyamala*, Gucchaka, IV, p. 78, translated by W.S. Merwin and J. Moussaieff Masson, in *Sanskrit Love Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 169.

Page 351, line 13: 'Where are you going, fair maid, on such a night?' Vidyakara, *Subhashitaratnakosha*, translated by Daniel D. Ingalls, *An Anthology of Sanskrit Court Poetry* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965), Verse 816.

Page 359, line 8: **'The practice of engaging in multiple sexual relationships with the consent of all the people involved.'** The definition is based on a definition by another polyamorist, Zell-Ravenheart.

Page 359, line 25: There is **no scientific evidence that monogamy is better in terms of health, happiness or longevity of the relationship.** *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, November 2012.

Page 365, line 21: **Was it because it is 'difficult for a woman to define her feelings in a language which is chiefly made by men'?** Thomas Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1993).

Page 366, line 1: **'conversation of a woman one loves is like the ground above a dangerous subterranean stretch of water'**. Marcel Proust, *Cities of the Plain*, p. 1050.

Page 367, line 29: He's stopped loving me. Vallabhadeva, *Subhashitavali*, Verse 1106. Translated by Jeff Masson, in W.S. Merwin and J. Moussaieff Masson, *Sanskrit Love Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1886), pp. 3–4.

Page 368, line 21: We've made a great mess of love. I have quoted only half of D.H. Lawrence's poem, 'The Mess of Love'. The other half continues as follows:

*Love is like a flower, it must flower and fade;*

*If it doesn't fade, it is not a flower,  
It's either an artificial rag blossom, or an immortelle, for the cemetery.  
The moment the mind interferes with love, or the will fixes on it,  
Or the personality assumes it as an attribute, or the ego takes possession of it,  
It is not love any more, it's just a mess.  
And we've made a great mess of love, mind-perverted, will-perverted, ego-perverted love.*

Page 371, line 8: **they fought and the princess stripped her and pushed her down a well.** Mahabharata IX.18.6–17.

Page 371, line 13: **Yayati went and asked Devayani's father for her hand.** Ibid. IX.18.18–23.

## Chapter 11: Love-Death

Page 376, line 3: For an instant he is a child. D.D. Kosambi, *The Epigrams Attributed to Bhartrihari*, Singhi Jain Series, No. 23, Bombay, 1948. This is most likely Verse 235 from Kosambi; I have used the translation by Barbara Stoler Miller, *Bhartrihari: Poems* (Columbia University Press, 1967).

Page 383, line 2: '**Knowledge of the heart must come from the heart.**' Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 261.

Page 383, line 18: Our intelligence, however lucid, cannot perceive the elements that compose it. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past* III:426. The lines immediately prior to these provide the full argument:

*I had believed that I was leaving nothing out of account, like a rigorous analyst; I had believed that I knew the state of my own heart. But our intelligence, however lucid, cannot perceive the elements that compose it and remain unsuspected so long as, from the volatile state in which they generally exist, a phenomenon capable of isolating them has not subjected them to the first stages of solidification. I had been mistaken in thinking that I could see clearly into my own heart. But this knowledge, which the shrewdest perceptions of the mind would not have given me, had now been brought to me, hard, glittering, strange, like a crystallised salt, by the abrupt reaction of pain.*

Page 383, line 29: '**The suffering itself is a piece of self-knowing.**' Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, p. 263.

Page 384, line 6: I understood that my love was less a love for her than a love in me. Ibid. III:568.

Page 385, line 1: Mme de Sevigne was after all less to be pitied than most of us. Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*, vol. 2 of *Remembrance of Things Past* p. 819.

Page 386, line 14: **the lovers never had any other desire than the desire for death.** Sudhir Kakar and John Munder Ross, *Tales of Love, Sex, and Danger* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, second edition, 2011), Chapter 2.

Page 386, line 23: **He has intimations that this party will be the beginning of his end.** William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 1.4.106–110.

*For my mind misgives  
Some consequence, yet hanging in the stars,  
Shall bitterly begin his fearful date?  
With this night's revels and expire the term?  
Of a despised life, closed in my breast,  
By some vile forfeit of untimely death*

Page 386, line 27: Thus from my lips, by thine, my sin is purged. Ibid., 1.5.106–110.

Page 387, line 2: My only love sprung from my only hate. Ibid., 1.5.138–141.

Page 387, line 7: **where he spies Juliet at a window.** Ibid., 2.2.2–6.

*What light through yonder window breaks?  
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.  
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,  
Who is already sick and pale with grief,  
That thou, her maid, art far more fair than she.*

Page 387, line 10: Wherefore art thou, Romeo? Ibid., 2.2.33–36; 44–48.

Page 387, line 29: **Friar Lawrence fears calamity.** Ibid., 2.6.9–12.

*These violent delights have violent ends  
And in their triumphs die, like fire and powder  
Which as they kiss consume: the sweet honey  
Is loathsome in his own deliciousness.*

Page 388, line 10: A plague on both your houses. Ibid., 3.6.68–69.

Page 388, line 16: **exile is like a ‘golden axe’**. Romeo chides Friar Lawrence that if he were banished, he too would be ‘taking the measure of an unmade grave’. Ibid., 3.3.71.

Page 388, line 17: **Juliet waits impatiently for her beloved**. Ibid.

*Give me my Romeo. And when I shall die,  
Take him and cut him out in little stars,  
And he will make the face of heaven so fine  
That all the world will be in love with night  
And pay no worship to the garish sun.*

Page 388, line 21: **she feels as if she has become death’s bride**. Ibid.

*death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead.*

Page 388, line 26: **mortality is again on Romeo’s mind**. Ibid., 3.5.17–18; 24.

*Let me be ta’en. Let me be put to death.  
I am content, so thou wilt have it so . . .  
Come, death, and welcome! Juliet wills it so.*

Page 388, line 33: **threatens to kill herself**. Ibid., 3.5.53–60.

*Unless thou tell me how I may prevent it.  
If in thy wisdom thou canst give no help,  
Do thou but call my resolution wise,  
And with this knife I’ll help it presently.*

Page 389, line 7: **Juliet has another presentiment of death**. Ibid.

*Farewell!—God knows when we shall meet again.  
I have a faint cold fear thrills through my veins  
That almost freezes up the heat of life.*

Page 389, line 10: **Death lies on her like an untimely frost**. Ibid., 4.5.29–30.

Page 389, line 12: **death is now his son-in-law**. Ibid., 4.5.36–39.

*The night before thy wedding day  
Hath death lain with thy wife. There she lies,  
Flower as she was, deflowered by him.  
Death is my son-in-law.*

Page 389, line 13: **arrangements for their daughter's wedding turn into preparations for a funeral.** Ibid., 4.5.84–90.

*Our wedding cheer to a sad burial feast;  
Our solemn hymns to sullen dirges change;  
Our bridal flowers serve for a buried corse;  
And all things change them to the contrary.*

Page 389, line 25: O my love, my wife! Ibid., 5.3.100–04.

Page 389, line 30: **The image of death as a lover continues to hover.** Ibid., 5.3.111–14.

*Shall I believe  
That unsubstantial death is amorous,  
And that the lean abhorred monster keeps?  
Thee here in dark to be his paramour?*

Page 392, line 34: **'How despicably have I acted!'** Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, in R. W. Chapman, *The Novels of Jane Austen* (London: Oxford University Press, third edition, 1965), II:208.

Page 392, line 36: **'to think meanly of all the rest of the world'**. Ibid., p. 369.

Page 402, line 21: **Sexual vengeance can have deeply tragic consequences.** Manu, the lawgiver, would feel vindicated by his negative view about women on account of Medea's merciless, vindictive attitude towards Jason, her unfaithful husband. Her combination of the 'naked violence, of Achilles and the cold craft of Ulysses's is appalling even by the standards of classical Greek tragedy. Some feminists believe that *Medea* is not about woman's rights but about woman's wrongs, done to her by patriarchal men. In an early speech to the Chorus, Euripides shows the brooding menace hanging over the play:

*Women of Corinth, I have come out of the house lest you find some fault with me . . . There is no justice in mortals' eyes since before they get sure knowledge of a man's true character they hate him on sight, although he has done them no harm. In my case, however, this sudden blow that has struck me has destroyed my life. I am undone, I have resigned all joy in life, and I want to die. For the man in whom all I had was bound up, as I well know—my husband—has proved the basest of men. Of all creatures that have breath and sensation, we women are the most unfortunate. First at an exorbitant price we must buy a husband and master of our bodies. And the outcome of our life's striving hangs on this, whether we take a bad or a good husband. For divorce is discreditable for women and it is not possible to refuse wedlock. And when a woman comes into the new customs and practices of her*

husband's house, she must somehow divine, since she has not learned it at home, how she shall best deal with her husband. Men say that we live a life free from danger at home while they fight with the spear. How wrong they are! I would rather stand three times with a shield in battle than give birth once . . . And so I shall ask from you this much as a favor: if I find any means or contrivance to punish my husband for these wrongs [and the bride's father and the bride], keep my secret. In all other things a woman is full of fear, incapable of looking on battle or cold steel; but when she is injured in love, no mind is more murderous than hers.

From Euripides's *Medea*, translated by Rex Warner (New York: Dover Thrift Edition, 1993). See also the classic essay by Bernard Knox, 'The *Medea* of Euripides', in *Word and Action: Essays on the Ancient Theater* (Baltimore, 1979).

Page 402, line 25: **'What indeed,' asks Walt Whitman, 'is finally beautiful except death and love?'** Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (the original 1855 edition), Book V, *Calamus*, p. 343. Whitman looked to love and death to satisfy desire, acknowledging death's tendency to dissipate the entire show of appearance, and thereby answer desire with the real reality of life.

Page 403, line 4: **This catastrophic quality of love.** The opera is based on the first great work of western romanticism in the eleventh century by Joseph Bedier, *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult*, whose first line begins thus:

*My Lords, if you would hear a high tale of love and death . . .*

Page 403, line 11: **'love-death'.** In a programme note, Wagner explained this moment. Both Wagner's programme note and Scruton's quote appear in Roger Scruton, 'Love, Redemption and Death', Oxford Scholarship Online, 2010; originally published as *Death—Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's Tristan and Isolde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Page 403, line 31: **'through love we are capable of sacrifice'.** Ibid., p. 18.

Page 405, line 23: **Radha's friend tells Krishna that only he can save her from the separation of death.** Jayadeva, *Gitagovinda*, 4.19–21; 6.11.

Page 405, line 24: **When separated from Radha, Krishna 'seems to die'.** Ibid., 5.3.

Page 407, line 31: A mattress of earth for a bed. Bhartrihari, *Shataktraya*, translated by Kala Krishnan Ramesh, in Sudhir Kakar, *The Devil Take Love* (p.

158). Many of us grew up reading Bhartrihari in the fine translations of Daniel Ingalls, Barbara Stoller Miller and John Brough but we should thank Kakar for introducing us to the fresh, elegant voice of a young poet, Kala Krishnan Ramesh.

Page 408, line 21: Should I settle on some sacred river's bank. Ibid., p. 156.

Page 409, line 17: **'the best thing of all is a gazelle-eyed woman.'** Barbara Stoller Miller, *Bhartrihari: Poems*, p. 81.

## Chapter 12: Those Were the Days

Page 401, introductory quote: Those friends are long gone. From the *Gaha Sattasai* (Sanskrit Gatha Saptasati), an ancient collection of love poems in the Prakrit of Maharashtra. The verses were written as monologues usually by a married woman or an unmarried girl, describing secret emotional rendezvous with men. They often describe the 'untidy reality' of the emotional life, almost as a foil to the *Kamasutra*. The collection is sometimes attributed to King Hala in the first century ACE. This poem about the transience of life is from the *Kavyamala*, translated by W.S. Merwin and J. Moussaieff Masson, and edited by Mathuranath Shastri (Bombay, third edition, 1933). *Sanskrit Love Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 21.

Page 414, line 10: **Krishna famously prescribes his recipe of acting without desire.** Bhagavad Gita II.47. This moral insight is called *nishkama karma*: 'Be intent on the action / Not on the fruits of action.'

Page 414, line 11: **'man is made of desire'**. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* IV.4.5.

Page 414, line 22: Men do not praise souls driven by desire. Mahabharata XIV.13.9. It is worth quoting this notable verse fully. It is called 'Kamagita' in which Kama says (translated by Kesari Mohan Ganguli):

*No creature is able to destroy me without resorting to the proper methods . . . If a man knowing my power, strives to destroy me by muttering prayers etc. I prevail over him with the belief that I am the subjective ego within him. If he wishes to destroy me by means of sacrifices with many presents, I deceive him by appearing in his mind as a most virtuous creature amongst the mobile creation, and if he wishes to annihilate me by mastering the Vedas . . . I over reach him by seeming to his mind to be the soul of virtue . . . And if the man whose strength lies in truth, desires to overcome me by patience, I appear to him as his mind, and thus he does not perceive my existence, and if the man of austere*



*religious practices, desires to destroy me by means of asceticism, I appear in the guise of asceticism in his mind, and thus he is prevented from knowing me, and the man of learning, who with the object of attaining salvation desires to destroy me, I frolic and laugh in the face of such a man intent on salvation. I am the everlasting one without a compeer, whom no creature can kill or destroy. For this reason thou too, O prince, divert thy desires (Kama) to virtue, so that, by this means, thou mayest attain what is well for thee.*

Page 415, line 23: **I would have had to fake virtue.** Arindam Chakrabarti, ‘Desire, Desired, and Desirable: Kama as Beginning and End of Life’, unpublished paper presented at a conference on the purusharthas in New Delhi, 4–6 August 2017.

Page 416, line 6: the **Bhagavad Gita is especially harsh on hypocrites.** Bhagavad Gita XVII.18.

Page 416, line 21: **‘Out of shame elephants copulate only in hidden places.’** Pliny the Elder, *Natural History: A Selection*, translated by John F. Healy (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

Page 418, line 3: **Narasimha Rao made the most momentous move in India’s economic history.** The ‘Bofors Scandal’ had to do with payoffs in connection with the purchase of guns from a Swedish company, Bofors. None of the allegations was ever proven but it broke Rajiv Gandhi’s sprits. Narasimha Rao’s momentous act would go down in history as the third great milestone in contemporary Indian history—the political independence from colonial rule in 1947 and Indira Gandhi’s Emergency being the other two. Although India’s economic reforms were ostensibly about unshackling the animal spirits of entrepreneurs, they also laid the ground for the liberation and decolonization of the Indian mind, especially of the young. See Gurcharan Das, *India Unbound* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2000; and New York: Knopf, 2002). It led to a new confidence in the nation, one of its indicators being, for example, the birth of Hinglish, a new language, a mixture of Hindi and English—which went on to become the fashionable language of Bollywood, FM radio and advertising.

Page 418, line 24: **the Indian ideal of shanta-rasa, ‘peace and stillness’.** This is how Anandavardhana, the Kashmiri critic of the ninth century, described the mood of the epic Mahabharata, where everyone dies in the end. He was questioning the common belief that the aesthetic mood evoked by the epic was

*vir-rasa*, ‘heroic mood’, as one would expect from a war epic. In fact, he suggests that the Mahabharata is an anti-war epic and we are left with feelings of *shanta*—a calm resignation leading to *nirveda*, the end of desire. See Gary Tubb’s fine essay, ‘Shantarasa in the Mahabharata’, in A. Sharma (ed), *Essays on the Mahabharata* (Leiden: EJ Brill), pp. 171–203.

Page 419, line 8: **There could be no love beyond samsara.** According to Monier-Williams, samsara is rooted in the term *saṃsṛi* (संस्ृ), which means ‘to go round, revolve, pass through a succession of states, to go towards or obtain, moving in a circuit’. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit–English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), pp. 1040–41. It refers to the ‘passage through successive states of mundane existence’, a transmigration, metempsychosis, a circuit of living where one repeats previous states, from one body to another, a worldly life of constant change, that is rebirth, growth, decay and re-death.

Page 419, line 21: It is better to throw oneself into a blazing fire. Friedhelm Hardy, *The Religious Culture of India: Power, Love, and Wisdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 244.

Page 420, line 12: **he pulls out his hair and becomes a Jain ascetic.** Ibid., Chapter 11, fn. 30.

Page 420, line 33: **the elimination of socialist controls on business.** I had heard something to the contrary, however. The grand old houses were gripped by fear and uncertainty after the reforms, worried if they would be able to compete in the brave new world. They had been joined by other protectionists in what came to be known as the Bombay Club, and were actively lobbying against allowing imports and foreign companies into India.

Page 426, line 10: **Instead, different moments of the present and the past flow together.** Proust was greatly influenced by the philosopher Henri Bergson, who postulated the idea that time is not a linear clock; rather, it is what he called *duration*, involving a ‘flowing together’ of past and present moments at the same time. In his novel, Proust makes reference to his favourite writer, Bergotte, who is probably Bergson.

Page 426, line 29: No sooner had the warm liquid. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 2, *Within a Budding Grove*, translated by C.K. Scott

Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (pp. 48–51).

Page 427, line 14: **‘involuntary memory’**. Medical scientists today are mainly interested in Proust’s concept because of trauma-related memories which involve re-experiencing the event in the form of ‘flashbacks’ when the victim feels as though he or she is reliving the trauma. Typically, memories cause a high level of emotional stress and anxiety in the patient and hence they are generally suppressed. For example, the victim of a car crash upon hearing the screeching of tires experiences a flashback of the collision, which triggers a memory. ‘Screeching tires’ is the equivalent of Proust’s madeleine, or in my case, Isha’s pink raincoat.

Throughout Proust’s novel are scattered examples of involuntary memory, prompted by sights, sounds and smells, which set off memories of earlier episodes in the novel. But the key point is that memories cannot be conjured by us consciously or wilfully. In this scene, Proust’s narrator tries and fails to repeat his experiment:

*I drink a second mouthful, in which I find nothing more than in the first, then a third, which gives me rather less than the second. It is time to stop; the potion is losing its magic. It is plain that the truth I am seeking lies not in the cup but in myself . . . I put down the cup and examine my own mind. It alone can discover the truth . . . It is face to face with something which does not yet exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day.*

*I decide to attempt to make it reappear. I retrace my thoughts to the moment at which I drank the first spoonful of tea. I rediscover the same state, illuminated by no fresh light. I ask my mind to make one further effort, to bring back once more the fleeting sensation. And so that nothing may interrupt it in its course I shut out every obstacle, every extraneous idea. I stop my ears and inhibit all attention against the sound from the next room. And then, feeling that my mind is tiring itself without having any success to report . . .*

*Now I feel nothing; it has stopped, has perhaps sunk back into its darkness, from which who can say whether it will ever rise again? Ten times over I must essay the task, must lean down over the abyss. And each time the cowardice that deters us from every difficult task, every important enterprise, has urged me to leave the thing alone, to drink my tea and to think merely of the worries of to-day and my hopes for tomorrow, which can be brooded over painlessly.*

Page 428, line 5: **At the very end of the Ramayana**. I owe this memory of Rama and Sita to Arshia Sattar, translator of the Penguin *Ramayana*, who recalls these episodes in an essay in the *Intelligence Quarterly*, December 2017.

Page 433, line 4: **This is one of the riddles of kama**. Richard Shusterman, ‘Asian Ars Erotica and the Question of Sexual Aesthetics’, *The Journal of*

*Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 65, no. 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4622210>.

Page 434, line 7: **a feeling of being downtrodden, low feminine self-esteem and constant insecurity**. See Karen Horney, 'Love and Marriage', in *The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love*, edited by Robert Solomon and Katherine Higgins, pp. 190–201. Karen Horney was a distinguished psychoanalyst, who de-emphasized many of Freud's sexual explanations of human behaviour in favour of social factors.

Page 440, line 21: You stayed awake all night, and yet. Bhanudatta, *Rasamanjari*, Verse 13, translated by Sheldon Pollock—'Bouquet of Rasa' and 'River of Rasa' (New York University Press and JJC Foundation, 2009). Pollock tells us that this verse was so admired that Abu al-Fazl found it worthy of translating into Persian and it was imitated by the great Telugu poet Kshetrappa.

Page 448, line 32: Every artist is familiar with the adverse effect which sexual intercourse has during times of great intellectual tension. Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Genealogy of Morals', in *The Birth of Tragedy and Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 238–40.

Page 449, line 35: **while also teaching the wife 'all manner of useful arts and mysteries, by which she may render herself pure, beautiful, and pleasing in his eyes'**. *Ananga Ranga*, translated and edited by E.E. Arbuthnot and Richard Burton (New York: Medical Press, 1964), 128–29.

Page 454, line 14: **Proust was right when he wrote that adultery too has its uses**. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 5, *The Captive*, translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff (p. 257). This is my favourite volume of Proust's multivolume work.

Page 455, line 24: **Romantic passion becomes 'marital passion'**. This inadequate expression is articulated by Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love: The Modern World*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 378.

Page 455, line 28: **'companionate love'**. Ibid., p. 380.

Epilogue

Page 465, line 17: **Freud believed that a lot of our mental energy comes from deducting it from kama.** Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, translated by James Strachey. See also a provocative chapter, ‘Putting Pleasure to Work’, by Philip Slater, in *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), pp. 242–46.

Page 467, line 2: **it needs a secure, warm and comfortable environment for rearing children.** In this respect, I find myself in agreement with the philosophers Bertrand Russell, *Marriage and Morals*, and Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love: The Modern World*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

Page 467, line 25: **the puzzle of kama begins with semantics.** Simon Blackburn, *Lust: The Seven Deadly Sins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Page 468, line 17: **Problems begin with the third arrow.** I have borrowed the distinction (without the arrows) from Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love: The Modern World*, vol. 3 (pp. 380–82).

Page 469, line 5: **The fifth and final arrow is maran.** Stendhal also wrote about the stages of love in his classic essay on love, and the interested reader may wish to compare his stages with those of the ancient Indian tradition. Stendhal, *On Love*, translated by Sophie Lewis.

Page 469, line 15: **Radha is delighted, confused and anxious.** Jayadeva, *Gitagovinda* IV.2ff; VII.4,8; VIII.1.

Page 469, line 22: **Kama becomes Mara.** Manarika explains this in his commentary. See either William Reddy’s *The Making of Romantic Love* or Friedhelm Hardy’s *The Religious Culture of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Page 471, line 16: **The notion of the ‘erotic ascetic’.** This expression was made famous by Wendy Doniger’s *Siva: The Erotic Ascetic*.

Page 474, line 29: **The god Shiva is a role model.** Ibid.

Page 475, line 29: **But get drunk.** Charles Baudelaire, *Twenty Prose Poems*, translated by Michael Hamburger (New York: City Lights Publishers—first

published in 1869 as *Petits Poèmes en Prose*).

Page 475, line 31: **Kant thought sexual love immoral.** Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, translated by L. Infield (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), pp. 163–64.

Page 477, line 3: Lovers and madmen have such seething brains. William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 5, Scene 1. It is Duke Theseus speaking.

Page 477, line 11: By the time you swear you're his. Dorothy Parker, 'Unfortunate Coincidence', in *Not So Deep as a Well* (New York: Viking, 1936), p. 40.

Page 477, line 27: **'for the moment at least, we are what we imagine ourselves to be'**. Simon Blackburn, *Lust: The Seven Deadly Sins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 83. I am indebted to Blackburn for this imaginary debate between Shakespeare and Parker. He points out that the classical philosophers, Epicurus and Lucretius, mistrusted love and would have been on Parker's side of the debate.

Page 479, line 16: ('aaram haram hai'). Amrita Narayan, 'The Pleasure is Also Hers: Kama Sutra as Metaphor', *Indian Express*, 14 February 2016, <http://indianexpress.com/article/life>.

Page 479, line 27: **'benign neglect'**. The phrase 'benign neglect' belongs to Sudhir Kakar.

Page 480, line 11: **for it ignores women's experience of sexual pleasure.** Carol Vance points out that sexuality is both the domain of restriction and danger as well as of exploration and pleasure.

Page 481, line 33: **an imagined world of beauty.** See the rich discussion on how memory evokes desire in Catherine Benton's *God of Desire: Tales of Kamadeva in Sanskrit Story Literature* (New York, 2006), pp. 184–85. Abhinavagupta's reference is cited in footnote 5 in Benton's Conclusion.

Page 482, line 10: **She doesn't know whether it is the god Smara or her own true human love who is standing before her.** Sriharsha's *Naishadhiya-charita* is considered one of the five mahakavyas in the canon of Sanskrit literature. See Charles Malamoud's brilliant Chapter 15 in *Cooking the World Ritual and*

*Thought in Ancient India*, translated from the French by David White (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Page 482, line 30: **The same enchanting story turns up in an exquisite version by the great Telugu poet Shrinatha.** Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, *Shrinatha: The Poet Who Made Gods and Kings* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012). I owe this retelling to their excellent translation from the ancient Telugu.

Page 483, line 10: There was a question. Ibid., 4.50.

Page 483, line 22: I'll tell you this much, lovely lady. Ibid., Shrinatha's Telugu version, 4.57.

Page 484, line 7: **Do you call this being friendly?** Ibid., 4.59–60.

Page 484, line 22: **Why are you crying, my love.** Sriharsha, *Naishadhiya-charita*, 9.103. Quoted in Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, *Shrinatha: The Poet Who Made Gods and Kings* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Page 485, line 12: Even now / I remember her eyes. Bilhana, *Chaurapanchashika* (Fantasies of a Love Thief), translated by Barbara Stoller Miller, in *Bhartrihari and Bilhana: The Hermit and the Love Thief* (New York: Penguin, 1991).

## Acknowledgements

Authors, like Oscar winners, are advised to keep their acknowledgements short. The safest course is to eschew the temptation entirely and instead of gushing with ‘thank yous’ in print, give a hug and box of chocolates instead. I find, however, that a book is incomplete without expressing appreciation to the generosity of those who have helped along the way.

This book took shape at the University of California, Berkeley, where scholars from sundry fields shared with me big-heartedly their wisdom in a ‘Kama Reading Group’ under the leadership of the redoubtable Sanskritist Robert Goldman. Our resident anthropologist, Laurence Cohen, referred to us as a contemporary edition of a clandestine Victorian Kama Shastra society. Since the seminar was not for credit, only a ‘happy few’ (in Stendhal’s words) bothered to join. We were a motley bunch that gathered on Monday afternoons from 3 to 6 p.m. in Dwinelle 203 consisting of intellectuals in the humanities, including an Indo-American novelist with an interest in tantra, a ninety-year-old expert in Jainism and Buddhism, earnest aficionados of medieval bhakti and Sufi poetry, and insistent feminists.

Two years later, I spent two months at the wonderful Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago under the watchful eye of Gary Tubb, Jim Nye and Wendy Doniger; David Shulman and Patrick Olivelle were visiting professors at the time; the philosophers Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Lear were full of insights; Thibaut d’Hubert, Ulrike Stark, Whitney Cox, Sasha Ebling and Ishan Chakrabarty of South Asian Studies were generous with their time.

In the course of writing the book I had the good fortune of discussing some of my ideas with friends and some even offered to read a few chapters. Those who disagreed with my ideas turned out to be the most useful. I list them below in no particular order (with apologies to those I forgot): Udit Bery, Meru Gokhale, Sudhir Kakar, Tarini Uppal, Ravi Singh, Chiki Sarkar, Puru Das, Carole Satyamurthi, Alex Watson, Alex Travelli, B.N. Goswamy, Mrinalini Patwardhan Mehra. David Housego. Malavika Raikotia. Norbert Schürer. Madhavi Menon.



~~Shoma, Dan Kurtz Phelan, Udayan Mitra, Frank Trentman, Janaki~~  
Razeen Sally, Dan Kurtz Phelan, Udayan Mitra, Frank Trentman, Janaki  
Kathpalia, Milee Aishwarya, Chicu Reddy, Tyler Williams, Lokesh Chandra,  
Vikram Chandra, Luther Obrock, Steve Gable, Shoma Choudhary, Arindam  
Chakrabarti, Sudipto Kaviraj, Shanuj V.C. and Gunjan Ahlawat.



# THE BEGINNING

Let the conversation begin...

Follow the Penguin [Twitter.com@penguinbooks](https://twitter.com/penguinbooks)

Keep up-to-date with all our stories [YouTube.com/penguinbooks](https://www.youtube.com/penguinbooks)

Pin 'Penguin Books' to your [Pinterest](https://www.pinterest.com/penguinbooks)

Like 'Penguin Books' on [Facebook.com/penguinbooks](https://www.facebook.com/penguinbooks)

Find out more about the author and  
discover more stories like this at [Penguin.co.in](https://www.penguin.co.in)

ALLEN LANE

UK | Canada | Ireland | Australia

New Zealand | India | South Africa Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at [global.penguinrandomhouse.com](http://global.penguinrandomhouse.com).



This collection published 2018

Copyright © Gurcharan Das 2018

The moral right of the author has been asserted Jacket images © Ahlawat Gunjan ISBN: 978-0-670-08737-2

This digital edition published in 2018.

e-ISBN: 978-9-353-05192-1

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.