# Chapter 1: London

## Red Lion and Sun

I had arrived at the Red Lion and Sun a busy, bustling old pub at Highgate, London, a bit early that day, it was an unusual place to hold a meeting to handover the design and implementation details to any team whatsoever, but it was 2013 and keeping the affairs casual had become the norm by now. Matt who was the software architect and my boss Richard who was the Creative Director arrived afterward, followed by our in-house graphics designer Kathryn and finally the product manager of our company Mr. Zhang. My belly was still not accustomed to a full English breakfast at early morning hours so I was having cereals and fried eggs, it was a perfect breakfast meeting out in the English summer.

A new version of the flagship product of our online gaming company Digital Dreams was to be launched within some 6 to 8 months. So, as it was called, Orbis was an online virtual world platform designed and developed by Digital Dreams which was started back in 2003. By now it was been 5 years I was working in game design and the journey of working in a tech company alongside engineers, artists and people from variety of other fields was both challenging and thrilling. I was promoted to lead designer just six months back, and I was buckling down the concept design for various other games the company developed. Investors were finally ready to pour money to develop the new version of Orbis, and now I was excited over this new project I was going to be assigned as a game designer and that’s was why may be I ended up bit early that day.

Add the article about sacred feminine from lions roar.

Dr.Zhang proceeded to tell Matt that they will be employing some additional 5 servers as the market research had predicted increase in gamers as well as that we needed increased graphics appeal. I had never bothered myself with the technical details and my work largely influenced and got influenced by the graphics that Kathryn designed. Dr.Zhang never spoke in much detail only the top level details about the schedules, teams and market research were discussed by him. It was now Richards turn to give us the further briefing. The new version of Orbis was to be designed over the top of the previous game engine, which made the technical part of implementation bit easy, but most importantly the major change was needed to bring about in the game play design. We were having many signups by gamers or Residents as we called them within the Orbis but we were not able to retain them, it was now my responsibility to alter the game play so as to keep our Residents within the system. Kathryn was then briefed about the new graphics that needed to be developed to run on the newly acquired graphics processors or GPU’s as the tech guys liked to call them. As the meeting finished three of us took the underground to Kings Cross where our headquarters was located and Richard and Dr. Zhang went to Luton Airport, they were to travel to Zurich later afternoon to have meeting with our investors, and that was why they called upon a breakfast meeting in a pub, on the way.

## The Studio

We got to the office at St. Pancras Square within half an hour, it was a great day, I liked my office, and I liked the environment, the minimalist furniture, the Macs and Xerox machines, the coffee room and lounge. It was all perfect, all that mattered to be fulfilled from my side was now to fire-up my laptop and pour in my creativity and ingenuity to design the most acceptable version of Orbis to retain Residents and this is where the entire conflict began, the moment I sat down, on my chair, entire external reality now coalesced to this singular process of requiring to that one part of my being to put to work and that one part which compelled me to reformulate my entire life and everything I had into it, that one part which got screwed up, which is my Mind. The next 21 years of my life revolved around just this, my mind, and its incessant obsessions.

After the office I usually had some me-time in the Costa on the way to underground Metro. I enjoyed sipping the Caramel Cappuccino, which was much better than what the vending machine in the office had to offer. I had a great morning, it was exciting, but then the day followed, of course I was not supposed to deliver anything at all that same day, and Richard was pretty cool and lenient with the deadlines unless I didn’t stretch it unreasonably, but I never did. But that was not problem, the problem was lately I been sucked into this rabbit hole of some previously unknown part of my being.

## Café Latte

So I entered the Costa in the Arcade near the station, as usual Choi took the order and asked me to wait to the serving side, and as usual the pierced girl handed me my Cappuccino, I felt the warmth of the cup, not letting it to spill from the slit, grabbed my usual seat by the window overlooking all the busy pedestrians rushing hurriedly towards the station. I always indulged in that complex of condescending them who at that moment didn’t had that luxury of sitting and sipping, asking myself, why do they all pace up when the next train is right there in just 5 minutes, knowing perfectly well that I will be part of that same ritual in just about 10 minutes as I’ll finish my indulgence.

*TALK ABOUT SADNESS*

*Life is passing by while you are drowned in sadness.*

I was waiting for the 17:45 underground to Bromley, where I lived on the Scott’s Avenue with my husband Aakash, on all the other days I’ll catch the 18:00. It took exactly 42 minutes considering the change at Victoria. Some of the days, I will stroll in Waitrose before heading home to pick up something special for dinner, apart from all the weekends when I would definitely go.

## The Weekend

Went to watch the Russian movie Loveless and they are back home.

I love the lamb shank that they have in Waitrose with the red wine, the Cab-Shiraz and Aakash loved the Peri-Peri chicken which he devoured with diet coke, after the Friday activity we usually didn’t bothered with cooking. I was washing the dishes and he was clearing up the table,

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Half past Ten”

“I am glad we went to see the movie”

“Yeah, after a long time, something realistically sensible”

“Aakash, do you believe two people can spend a lifetime together?”

“It’s a ridiculous convention passed down from god knows where.”

“A five-year contract would be ideal. Or an agreement subject to renewal.”

“Would that be applied to us too?

“No”

“Why not?”

“We are the exception that proves the rule.”

“So you think we will stay together?”

“That sounds like a strange question”

“Doesn’t it bother you to never get to sleep with anyone else?”

“No. Does it bother you?”

“Sometimes, yeah”

“I’ll be damned”

“On a purely speculative basis”

“I wonder whether somethings wrong with me”

“I don’t have fantasies like that. I am content”

“Well so am I”

“Oh Now I get”

“I know why Zhenya and Boris in the movie go through hell”

“They do not speak the same language, I mean in terms of expressing themselves like expressing their thoughts and feelings, I think he did not ever understood what she meant when she said what she said, that really is a couple story moving for separation. They should translate everything into a common language.”

“Ahhh I think its simpler than that”

“You and I we understand each other, we speak the same language, that’s what makes us click”

“I think it’s different expectation from life”

“If you speak the same language and trust each other, expectations are not the problem”

“Ha ha ha you and your philosophical theories”

“No, I have read it all the time”

“Sometimes it’s like Husband and wives talking on phones that are out of order, it’s like listening to recorded voices. Sometimes all you get is vast silence of outer space. I can’t say which is worst”

“I have my doubts. What if we were not having our degrees and into some blue collar jobs back home in Mumbai.”

“No, it’s not like that. If you speak the same language, your environment isn’t a factor.”

“That’s a romantic point of view, doesn’t sound realistic”

“Would a life like that affect us, Aakash?. Are you serious?”

“Yes, I am serious”

“We wouldn’t get along as well.”

“I really mean it, regardless of language.”

“Isn’t there as much potential for loneliness now?”

“Absolutely not. A dull strenuous job will wear people down to a greater degree.”

“You are dumber than I thought. And you are the romantic by the way.”

“Awww we will see.”

“And exactly what will we see?”

“I don’t know, do you?”

“You are, teasing me.”

“Yes, I am”

## Trip to French Riviera

What’s up with the travel in this days of consumerism?

Try to stuff your being with as much experiences as possible before you die, because once you are dead, you are dead.

## The Pregnancy talk

Later at night we are half tucked in bed we both were reading respective books.

“Aakash I have something to tell you.”

“Don’t worry its nothing bad.”

“Now that sounds ominous. What is it?”

“I am pregnant.”

“What should we do?”

“Should we be having a baby at this point of our career?”

“So do you want to have an abortion?”

“I want this to be a joint decision.”

“It’s your decision”

“Why mine?”

“It’s obvious.”

“You are the one who will end up with the burden and the delight.”

“You mean it’s all the same to you?”

“Not at all”

“What do you want, truthfully?”

“It’s not that easy.”

“Is it so hard to be honest?”

“You are being unreasonable.”

“You know I do not react immediately, it takes me time to get hang of a situation.”

“Do you want to have a child at the moment?”

“I have nothing against it. It might even be nice.”

“But you are not at all enthusiastic. Give me an honest answer.”

“Why should I be honest all the time? Tell me what you want.”

“I happen to have asked you first.”

“When did this accident happen? You are on the pill, aren’t you?”

“I forgot to take them when we were on your trip”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I figured, it didn’t matter.”

“Do you want to have a baby?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“May be I thought that if we got pregnant, then it was meant to be.”

“Oh, my God! Come on!”

“A modern women like you who preaches birth control.”

“True, it doesn’t really make sense.”

“I guess you’ve already made your mind up.”

“I guess I hoped you would be pleased.”

“Well, I am rather pleased. Our parents will be treating themselves with joy.”

“Right now they tolerate anything we do. One more stupidity on our part could hardly matter. ”

“You know I will enjoy having a baby around. And you will look awfully cute with a bulging tummy”

“What’s wrong now?”

“Nothing.”

“You are crying, so something is wrong”

“I am telling you it’s nothing.”

“There must be something.”

“Do you know what you want?”

“No”

“May be we don’t want kids at the present moment as our life is not what we want at the moment.”

“Do you think so?”

“The prospect of breast feeding, all that laundry, and getting up at all hours, we are not ready for all that at the moment.”

“I feel so guilty.”

“Why?”

“Guilty that I wanted to have a baby and looked forward to it, only to change my mind when it actually happened.”

“Why impose moral aspect on it?”

“I will be killing my child”

“You can’t think like that.”

“Well, I do.”

“You have to be practical.”

“No I don’t.”

“What’s the issue here?”

“The issue is Love.”

“Aren’t you being a bit too intense?”

“No.”

“Could you enlighten me?”

“No, I can’t it a emotional thing.”

“It’s as if I don’t perceive myself as real anymore. You aren’t real either. Neither is anyone else. But the baby is real.”

“May be it’s the other way round.”

“I feel like a pitiful self-indulgent coward who cannot connect with reality and ashamed. There is no love or joy or affection in our lives. We could very well have this baby, and I was right to be pleased and day dream about it. I think it was an honest feeling. I’m matured enough to be a mother now.”

“I don’t understand. It’s like you had the abortion already.”

“I have.”

“You can’t judge yourselves for your thoughts.”

“This is a serious matter, Aakash”

“It will influence our future.”

“What if we do something we can’t take back?”

“What if we haven’t realized how serious this is?”

“What a ridiculous, nebulous, intangible talk.”

“They are pure ramblings of your mind.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Not one damn word makes sense.”

“We’re trying to run away.”

“We are trying to avoid drama here, which is healthy in my opinion.”

“You don’t look very happy.”

“I find this conversation very dis-tasteful.”

“Aakash, couldn’t we have this baby and just be happy about it. Couldn’t we enjoy our little slipup and just love it for happening.”

“I have said it all along that it will be nice.”

“You made this conversation difficult, not me.”

“Should we make a decision?”

“What decision?”

“To keep the baby.”

“The issue wasn’t really the baby. It was about you and me.”

……… dialogue which leads to planning abortion…..

## Later in hospital

“How are you?”

“I feel a little sick.”

“Was it rough?”

“Not really.”

“Can you lower the bed?”

“The doctor said you could come home tomorrow or the day after.”

“I need to catch up on my sleep.”

“We will spend a week in Lake district when you are up to it.”

“I can take time off after tenth.”

“That might be nice.”

Other small talk

“Aakash I really regret doing this. I really do.”

“You will feel better tomorrow.”

“What have I done?”

“There’s no point on dwelling on it. In a few weeks’ time you would have forgotten all about it.”

“Do you think so?”

“I am convinced you will.”

“Aakash I don’t know how to get over this?”

“Don’t you think you should take rest now?”

“I really have to go now.”

## 

## What is Orbis?

Richard and Dr. Zhang had a successful undertaking in Zurich. We were able to get the required funding, which meant that, now some of the funds were allocated to me for the purpose of pure research. For the most effective and optimised implementation of those systems I consulted experts in fields of Psychology, Business Management, Sociology, Mathematics and Computer Science.

So, Orbis was basically not a game, in the sense of a usual computer game, it didn’t had any specific task inside it to be fulfilled, no manufactured conflict, no dragon which you have to slay and no princes that you have to save. It was a virtual platform where gamers or Residents as we called them were free to build their own worlds, interact with other Residents or to the simulated Orb Agents, make online relationships, build cities, shops, watch movies, go on dates, swim through rivers, go on a Cruz on the virtual ocean, do pretty much everything that can be simulated. It turned out we can create entire universes just with our minds.

Beyond all the immersive system design of Orbis there was one big reason to the platform which kept the Residents engaged in the Orbis. There was an internal currency to the Orbis called the Orb Dollar or Orbs and Residents can not only earn and spend and buy the Orbs but also there was a chance to earn real world money. They also would get a stipend inside the Orbis if they subscribe to paid version of the Orbis. These Orbs can then be used to buy what-not inside the Orbis, jewellery, cars, yacht, an apartment overlooking ocean and everything that could be created by the Residents. And there was a way to earn real world money through the Orbis.

So the deal for real world money was that the Residents were positioned in the Orbis environment of their choice, and a level was assigned to that state of Resident and environment combined. This level was called Innocence Level. Whenever the Resident will interact with Orbis, meaning create something or destroy something, or interact with other players inside the Orbis either forming a cordial or hostile relationship the Residents were given points called Karma Points. Based on the actions of the Residents Karma Points were deducted or added. When this count reached certain threshold the Resident was shifted to another level. The deal was that the Residents should interact as much as possible and go from the level within the level and create environment as much complex as possible around them. Earn more Orbs and earn or loose Karma points.

The way to earn money was to get back to the Innocence Level from the deepest level that the Resident has got herself into. The way to get out of the level was to denounce your possessions at that level. Make your possessions part of the Orbis system and convert your possessive relationships into non-attached relating. Once the Karma points are zeroed down, you are at the Innocence Level and you can exchange whatever Orbs you had with the real world Dollars with the current exchange rate of the Orbis banking system.

Orbis had about 20000 CPU’s connected together at several facilities across Europe and the United States. And in the virtual space there were 250,000 people per day that were wondering around the active city, the population of Orbis was kind of equal to a small city, the space itself was 10 times the size of London and was about as densely built out. Unlike the real world and like the internet the whole thing was expanded rapidly, so that kind of exploration was matched up with the amount of content that was in there, it provided space of truly infinite possibilities. Orbis had some 100 million user created objects, an object meaning anything in virtual world like a book or a vase which had a code attached to it. The Residents created anything and everything that can fascinate human imagination and of course that can be permitted by the virtual environment. The sheer scale of what people can do when they are enabled to do was amazing.

You could also go into outer space and explore, and exploring space was one of the most sought out things to be done in Orbis. Why was that, why do gamers as people wanted to do that, because if they went in the outer space they could begin again, they will become someone on that journey and they will leave society and life as someone behind, and they would transform irreversibly. If they travelled far enough they had no idea what they are going to find out there. It was so different than what we see on Earth that anything was possible. We as humans crave the idea of getting into new place and creating what’s possible.

Everything in there was like sea of information that Residents interacted with. What made the difference was that information was presented to the human gamers using the most powerful symbols rather than text. The important thing was the experience of creating, consuming and exploring information was implicitly and inherently social, and they were always there with other people. Humans are social creatures and we enjoy the information in presence of others, it’s essential to us.

The virtual world platform was not some kind of utopia. The magic of infinite possibilities of anything can happen can only happen in an environment where you really know that there is a fundamental freedom at the level of individual actor, at the level of Lego blocks that make up the world, there was no grand scheme of rules of people interacting, or new way of laying out a city, there was no attempt to structure the mechanism to make it utopian.

Residents could also get pregnant and have a baby in Orbis. Amongst others they built the ability to procure the baby and nurture the baby as a purchasable experience that others can have. If gamers were given the opportunity to create in the world, there was really one thing that they wanted, that was fair ownership of what they created, so the Orbis terms of service provide that gamers retain copyright for any content they create.

## Simulacra

I was in Richard’s office with Kathryn and Matt, I always loved to see the skyline of central London, and all those glass covered skyscrapers stretching to the horizon they felt like hope for our modern civilization, in this age of information. We had discussion about technology and graphics upgrades for the new version of Orbis internally called the ‘Simulacra’. Then Richard told me, “the Simulacra is to be designed to enhance the immersive experience for the residents, to such an extent that the line between their real life experience and their virtual lives should be so much blurred that the Orbis has to become their reality”

Two days down, I was on BA flight WR101 to Bourgogne, I had a scheduled appointment with the fabled Prof. John Baud, a French psychologist who theorised the ‘mass control hypothesis’. The subject of our meeting was effective design of the in-system experience and Residents interaction with the Orbis simulation to enhance their sub-conscious identification with the virtual world.

Prof. Baud explained me that the design of the simulation be done into four aspects, ‘the reflection of reality’, ‘the perversion of reality’, ‘the pretence of reality and finally what the Orbis became ‘a Simulacrum’, which bear no relation to reality whatsoever. The current version replaced all realism and meaning with symbols and signs. The meaning was being so much destabilised that the Residents failed to be sure of what’s real and what’s not real. Advertisement, he advised were to be designed in order to create a hyper-reality, i.e. the content be such that it appears more real than the actual object itself. Visual representations of real world objects, were photo-shopped, modified, placed on strategic places in the Orbis and then made to consume via variety of interactions. Eventually, these digitally mediated imageries stopped being projections of something and grew into their own realities which bore no resemblance to their original, becoming things in themselves, they were what Prof. Baud called ‘Simulacra’, which existed regardless of reality. Prof’s involvement with Digital Dreams was supposed to be confidential, after all we didn’t wanted the deception to be obvious to the Residents.

Back at St. Pancras, Matt, Kathryn and their teams implemented my designs perfectly. The next of the improvisations of the Orbis were to come in advertisements, Richard suggested,” The design of this version needs improved in-game advertisements of myriad of products. You need to design models of how the advertisements will be presented to the Residents, these models will be interactive and should be designed that ways.”

The simulations were programmed to deliver messages to subconscious of gamers. The simulated Ad bill-boards and interactive stations were designed to emotionally influence the subconscious in a fleeting instant, with colour, words, images and music. Subliminal advertising had become the norm of reaching the subconscious, and gamers were exposed to hundreds of subliminal messages each session. Penises and Breasts were concealed in the background of the product placements or on the products themselves, this triggered the arousal and feel good factor which was sub-consciously identified with the product. The humans behind the Residents, just like the simulation were programmed through the visual and auditory media.

In the end what started as a creative endeavour to let people enjoy the virtual world ended up being a dungeon of commerce where all that mattered was the profit. It all got calculated, everything got controlled and

## Cool\_Jaz Delphi

It was back in the 2013 when I had just joined Digital Dreams that I logged myself in to Orbis, I was the one who was going to help make the game, so I was going to be one who enjoys it. I played into Orbis, for duel reasons, one obvious was to experience the game play myself in order to improve the simulations for other gamers, and the other was an escape, an escape from the mundane reality that I sometimes needed, an escape into world of possibilities, in to dreamlands, into fantasy lands.

When registering for the game the first thing you did was choose a new name for yourself and in that world, in the empire I inhabited I was Jaz Delphi, I always fancied to be princess Jasmine from Disney’s Aladdin, and here was my avatar Cool\_Jaz. Any vestiges of a real-life name were left behind by my new alphanumeric first name and was supplemented by an unrecognisable last name chosen from choices given by the Orbis. The next I choose the ‘avatar’ or online persona, in other words how I was to appear, incorporating height, body shape, skin colour, and hair, or the online version of how I looked, I was pretty in real life as so was how I made my avatar, look just like me, although I made my eye colour blue, I loved that tinge in my eyes.

**“Welcome to ORBIS, please refrain from any hate activity which slurs a real-   
 world individual or real-world community”**

My glowing younger avatar was instantiated on a dance deck by the sea, cool jazz music was playing and I received a complementary Pina Colada. Over the bar tender held the sign with one word, ‘Communicate’, to my right was the exit, leading to a long promenade ending at the pie, which read the sign, ‘Appearance’. I was on the ‘Tutorial Island’, as we had designed, I was zero days old with no history, and I was surrounded by similarly bewildered neophytes, all as beautiful as I am. There was one Resident with an avatar of a Crab, whatever reason he had to be that way, it was his game to play. I quickly learn to, walk, talk and use my hands, I then approached Sophie88 Obscura, who was standing at the end of the dance floor and asked her why she has entered Orbis. She insisted, as most people I questioned did, that she was curious and thought it was harmless fun.

I am teleported off the island and onto a quiet town square. Music is playing, the fountain is splashing, and a voiceover is suggesting places to go. But other than a lone girl sitting on a bench, there is no one around. A poster asks me to “help keep our world clean” – it is an imported imperfection, where a discarded virtual object will remain in situ until someone virtually picks it up again and puts it in the virtual bin. I sit down on the bench beside the girl. Her name is Aneris, she is chatty, and happily tells me where I can find a good club. She also joined out of curiosity, but stayed because she finds freedom here.

It is a sinister, capitalist freedom. There is complete freedom of appearance and personality, and freedom to indulge in all sorts of vice, and the world is programmed in such a way that trespassing, theft and violence were also completely possible, it just affected the Karma points. It surprised me to find that few people minded this kind of completely free citizenship, happy to execute the right to commit crime and be punished for it.

Our social relation is quickly catalogued, and I move on. In fact my avatar fell into a moat at that point, but luckily I had mastered the controls to the extent that I can hover (I later learnt how to fly), so my avatar floats out unharmed and dry. I go to the club recommended to me. People danced, drank and chatted. People around me were sipping virtual drinks. It was a stunning display of sign consumption, the onscreen drink was ostensibly devoid of use value, and yet online users had spent real money to take part in the social ritual. Although to refer to real money was misleading, inside Orbis all transactions were handled in Orb Dollars, simulated money. This is the unrestrained exchange and consumption of signs at its most explicit. One side of the club had a row of gambling machines and the other a row of chairs where avatars could sit and watch advertising, getting paid Orb Dollars in return. In “Orbis” Dr. Baud described gambling as “a desert form, inhuman, uncultured, initiatory, a challenge to the natural economy of value, a crazed activity on the fringes of exchange”. In fact *everything* in Orbis was a crazed activity on the fringes of logical exchange. Even if you do not sit down it was hard to ignore the all-pervasive advertising.

## London Underground

I am on my feet again and moving through this endless motion of humans going towards further going towards furthering. I am going towards the train, my train, if I take the long route from the Underground station towards my house, which sometimes I did if I had to buy the grocery from the supermarket, I would end up going through the Shopping centre lane. Walking over the mosaicked road as I glanced on my right behind the smallest building, I could see the famous Banksy ‘*shop till you drop*’ graffiti on the partially dilapidated construction. It was a nice joke to paint that art so that it can be seen over the shopping avenue.

*PUT MORE STUFF HERE.*

# Chapter 2: Dream has collapsed.

## Costa 2

The strategy is simple, the strategy is society has given you ideals of how you should be. And it has enforced those ideals so deeply in you that you are always interested in the ideal, ‘how you should be’ and you have forgotten who you are.

TALK MORE OF SARTRE PHILOSOPHY THAT MAN IS INDEED FREE TO BE WHO HE WANTS TO BE

## Discussion in the evening

Some discussion about some activity

“You were awfully attractive back then.”

“Aren’t I now?”

“What?”

“Awfully attractive. Of course.”

“But married couples aren’t as hot for each other after a while.”

“That’s not true in our case, though”

“We are just too busy.”

“When evening rolls around, we are exhausted.”

“That wasn’t meant as a reproach. I swear.”

“We like each other in every other way.”

“Not in that way. Not very much any way.”

“Oh, yes, we do.

“Our life is full of little evasions and restrictions.”

“I can’t help the fact, I don’t enjoy it as much as I used to. There’s a perfectly natural explanation. Don’t lay this guilt on me.”

“Don’t get so upset.”

“I think we have it nice.”

“Things aren’t as passionate as they once were, but we could be worse off.”

“Without a doubt.”

“Sex isn’t everything after all.”

“If you are not satisfied go find yourself a mistress, who is more imaginative and exciting. I do my best I assure you.”

“There we have it.”

“You have got that look again.”

“I haven’t got any look.”

“That look and that tone of voice. Instead of brooding, just spit it out.”

“You will just lose your temper.”

“No. I am listening with an open mind.”

“Sometimes I wonder why we complicate problem this problem so awfully.”

“Making love is pretty basic.”

“It shouldn’t be a huge overshadowing issue.”

“It’s your mothers fault, if you ask me, though you don’t like my saying so.”

“What a superficial analysis.”

“Don’t be a sourpuss, I am being nice.”

“You think it’s my fault we don’t enjoy it anymore.”

“You just said you do your best.”

“I really do”

“Can’t you hear how preposterous that sounds?”

“Are you calling me a liar?”

“No, for God’s sake.”

“Then I don’t understand.”

“Let’s drop this and go to bed. It’s late night.”

“It’s like you start a discussion to get me all riled up only to yawn and say it’s bed time.”

“Leela, you suffer from devastatingly high standards. We have often joked and argued about it. But can’t our poor sex life be spared of your ambitions?”

“Why won’t you cut me some slack? First you attack me for not trying and then for not making effort”

“Oh yeah, what a mess I have made.”

“Yes, you sure have.”

Now taking me in his arms.

“It would have more helpful if you were kind.”

“There, there sweet heart, I shouldn’t have bought it up.”

“It’s possible to talk too much about these things, you know.”

“Yes, it is.”

“I know you should discuss everything and not keep secrets. But in this case I think it is wrong.”

“I think you are right.”

“Some matters should be protected from prying eyes.”

“You think so?”

“I am sure of it.”

“We hurt each other for no reason, and the barbs are still thee when we go to bed. Its like lying on bed of nails. What are you laughing at?”

“The bed of nails bit.”

“Go on and laugh then.”

“Let’s go to bed then.”

“Only if you admit that you have been insensitive.”

“I apologize.”

“Don’t I give you enough affection?”

“Affection takes time.”

“Then you don’t get enough.”

“We don’t get enough or do enough.”

“That’s why I wanted us to go away this summer.”

“Affection should not be kept for just vacations.”

“OK. That’s nice for a moron.”

“It’s lucky I am married to you then. “

“You have moments of greatness interspersed by sheer mediocrity.”

“I am sure that’s true. You are adorable even if you do scold and fuss.”

Kissing and fondling my breasts, while I pull away

“Right I am nearly asleep and way.”

In bed while he is reading a book

“If you like you can make love to me.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I am too tired.”

“Good night.”

## Shalini

Aakash is back home early from work trip to Manchester. Leela is happy to see him early and welcomes him.

“You‘re here already? I wasn’t expecting you until tomorrow”

“What a lovely surprize! Are you hungry? How sweet of you to get here sooner. I went to bed early. There was nothing much on TV so I turned in early. I had been dieting today.”

“Would you like a sandwich?”

“That sounds nice.”

“Or should I make some Chapattis or heat up some soup?”

“Sandwiches and beer will be just fine.”

Some dialogue related to something.

“Listen, change into your pyjamas and I’ll bring a tray up to the bedroom.”

“Sounds good.”

“And here I was worried you might be angry with me.”

“Why should I be angry?”

“I was nasty on the phone last night.”

“Oh, that. That was nothing.”

“I called back, but you were switched-off.”

“I was pretty tired.”

“I did spent the day with my workaholic colleague Sam. It makes you wonder about the work-life imbalance some people have.”

“I still think I behaved badly.”

“Let’s drop it.”

“You never want to finish discussions, do you?”

“All I wanted to say was you were right, but so was I. If you don’t want to wear a tuxedo, that’s your business. I agree.”

“But if I think you should get a new tux, then I have a right to say so.”

“I don’t like tuxedos. I hate wearing a tuxedo. It’s a ridiculous get-up.”

“Yes, you told me that. Let’s not quarrel. I Love you even if you won’t wear a tux. It’s hardly essential to our marriage.”

“It sure looked like that last night.”

“I told you I was wrong.”

I was so hungry and dizzy because of dieting all day. I kept on talking and Aakash was silent as a guilty scared child.

“I have lost almost 2 kg this week.”

“Does it look like that, see my belly”

“I can feel the difference though.”

“But it seems so point less at times.”

“I mean why should we deny ourselves good things in life.”

“Why can’t we be fat and cheerful.”

“Remember Aunt Swati and Uncle Rajesh?”

“They were big, fat and Cheerful.”

“They slept in the cheeky double bed of theirs holding hands, content with each other fat and happy.”

“Why can’t we be like them?”

“Brimming with contentment.”

By this time Aakash’s face had turned dead serious.

“What’s the matter?”

“Are you upset?”

“Has something happened?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Tell me.”

He said with a grim voice.

“I came here to tell you something.”

“I’ve gone and fallen in love.”

“It’s absurd and probably a big mistake.”

“Most probably a big mistake.”

“I met her at a convention in January.”

“She was the Marketing manager with T-mobile.”

“Actually she is in process to set a start-up in telephony.”

“She is nothing much to look at.”

“You would probably thing she is ugly.”

“I have no idea what this will lead to.”

“I have no idea about anything.”

“I am utterly bewildered.”

“Of course, I am happy in one way. But also I do feel damn guilty about you.”

“We have always gotten along so well. Things have been no better and no worse than for the average family.”

“Say something for God’s sake.”

I was shocked, like all of a sudden life lost its meaning. I replied in a deep chocked voice.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You probably think it was wrong of me not to tell you sooner.”

“I didn’t knew how it would turn out. I figured I did get over it.”

“I didn’t want to worry you.”

“It’s funny.”

“What’s funny?”

“That I didn’t notice anything. I didn’t suspect a thing.”

“Everything’s like just been usual. Better in fact. You have been so sweet. I’ve been a silly blind fool. I didn’t even notice. Christ.”

“No, you never noticed. But you have never been particularly observant. “

“Where do we go from here?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want a divorce? Are you going to marry her?”

“Why tell me tonight of all times? What’s the sudden rush?”

“We are leaving for Paris tomorrow. I want to get away. At least for a while. I was going to go this fall anyways to see Tim and his wife.”

“Shalini had to do some market research for her start-up and wants to do it this fall. I want to be with her. I can’t make it without her. So we are leaving tomorrow.”

“Now that I am here, talking to you, I feel like scrapping the whole thing. I just feel frightened and tired. Nothing could be more absurd or cliché. I know just what you are thinking. I have no excuse.”

I said in a sad voice.

“How do you know what I am thinking?”

“I am trying not to feel guilty. That would just be an act. This is how it is, and nothing can be done about it.”

“Let’s go to bed, it is late. I guess you will be leaving early tomorrow.”

“I have an appointment in office at 9:00.”

“Then I suggest we go to bed.”

I was devastated with a very heavy heart I cleaned the table and took all the cutlery to kitchen.

See the video again and express how she is feeling till the time she goes to bed. Video @13:40

“Aren’t you going to change?”

While he is changing…

“Do you know if my grey suit is here or at the dry cleaners?”

“It’s at the dry cleaners.”

“What a nuisance!”

“Did you wanted to take it with you?”

“Of course.”

“I have the receipt, if you’d like to pick it up.”

“I won’t have time. I’ll be busy until 3:00. And then we leave.”

“If you like, I could pick it up. I’ll do your packing too, you are not good at it.”

“No, thank you.”

“Now you are being silly.”

“I am quiet conventional.”

“Besides the suit I will make sure you have everything in it. There are clean shirts and underwear so you can take those with you.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“It all depends.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have been commissioned at the Paris office for six months, and I will be helping Shalini with her research after that, so I guess I’ll be away for at least seven or eight months.”

I gave a sigh of pain hearing that.

“Don’t make an emotional scene. I want to make a clean break.”

“And if I am not here when…”

“I don’t give a damn.”

“Do you know how long I’ve had this in mind?”

“Not the affair with Shalini, but how long I’ve wanted to leave?”

With my throat heavy, I couldn’t resist that pain.

“Don’t say it.”

“I wanted to be rid of you for 2 years.”

“No more.”

“You are right words don’t mean much.”

I started crying. I couldn’t bear the pain.

He threw his cell on the wall and yelled at me.

“I don’t give a damn. You can name your price! All that interests me is to end this.”

“Guess what I am fed up with most of all.”

“All this harping about what we are expected to do and what we must take into consideration.

“What will your mother think? What will the friends say?

How shall arrange our dinner party?

We should go to the coast, to the mountains, to Cornwall.

We must celebrate Diwali, Holi, birthdays, name days –

Every single goddamn occasion!

I know I am being unfair.

I know I am way out of line. I know we have had a good life together. And I think I still love you.

In fact I think I love you more now that I’ve met Shalini.

Can you understand this bitterness? I can’t think of a better word than bitterness.

No one can explain that to me, since I have no one to talk to, except Johnathan and he’s an intellectual illiterate with little to offer beyond his money, though that does come handy.

I don’t understand any of this bitterness that just keeps growing.”

I just kept looking at him with sorrow as he continued pouring out his heart. Then words left my lips.

“I don’t understand. How come you haven’t said anything?”

“How can you discuss that which you can’t find words for? How do you say that sex is boring even when technically everything is fine? I feel like hitting you looking all prim eating your breakfast.

It’s not your fault, Leela. Everything’s going down the tube and God knows why.”

“I must have done something wrong.”

At which he yelled.

“Would you stop it? Blaming yourself is an easy way out!

Let’s you feel all noble and humble.

Neither of us is to blame. There is no point wallowing in guilt. Though God knows I feel so guilty I can barely breathe.”

I tried to console. He charged in rage.

“I don’t want your sympathy! All these words I am spouting are just empty talk. I don’t imagine for one minute that I’ve touched on the truth about us. I don’t think there is such a thing as truth.

No matter what we will say or do will hurt.”

I pleaded “Don’t go.”

“That’s impossible.”

“What if I beg?”

“It’s no use and it’s embarrassing.”

“Could you postpone your trip, may be for a month or two?”

“I believe we can save our marriage. We could make a fresh start allow me that much. May be Shalini would understand me. Maybe I should meet her and talk to her. Let’s face this together. You are presenting me with fait accompli. You are putting me in a ridiculous and intolerable situation.”

“I know exactly what you mean.”

“What will your parents say? What will your brother think? What will our friends think? Lord, think of all the gossip! What about the dinner parties we are already scheduled to attend? To hell with all that!”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean.”

“Nothing.

I’ll set the alarm for the morning. When do you need to leave?”

“Please set it to 5:30.

I need to pack and I have to be at work at 9:00.”

“There, it is set for 5:30. I’ll wake up on my own anyways, so you don’t have to worry.

Tell me about Shalini. For the Love of - .”

“What’s the point?”

“I want you to.”

“Why torment yourself?”

“It’s not self-torment. I want to know what she’s like. It’s much worse to try to picture someone you know nothing about. Do you have a picture of her?”

“Could we not do this? I am trying to sleep.”

“Please do it for me.”

“You asked for it. Where did put my phone? I guess it is charging outside in the living room.

Here are two pictures of her. That one was taken two years ago when she was on vacation. The selfie was taken two weeks ago. It’s a good likeness.”

I started crying and tears rolled down my cheek as I peered at her on the iPhone screen.

“She has a lovely figure. And lovely breasts. Right?”

“Yes, she has lovely breasts.”

“Does she dye her hair?”

“It’s possible.”

“What a nice smile. How old is she?

Twenty-five?”

I busted out crying.

“She hasn’t been very lucky in love. She’s been in a relationship twice.

In that respect, I think she’s made muddle of her life with all sorts of men.”

“Does that bother you?”

“It sure does. Her frankness can be quiet unpleasant. I would prefer not to know anything, but she insists on giving me details of her erotic past. Which is trying since I suffer from retrospective jealousy. She has no illusions. She says she has no great hopes for two of us. She’s convinced I’ll back to you, that she doesn’t have a chance against you.

Sometimes it sounds like lines from some old hackneyed melodrama. She tries to protect herself from every kind of failure, a somehow rather touching trait. There is something childlike about her, in spite of her intelligence and her general competence. She is insanely jealous but so am I. She is terribly afraid of you, and I can understand that. But she is also afraid of my colleague Sarah and all the other women I am associated with. She is unsure of herself, but I do help her as much as I can. It’s all pretty strange and bewildering.”

“Are you good together in bed?”

He changed his demeanour and with merry feelings in his heart which he tried to hide on his face he blabbered.

“Yes, we actually are. At first it was awful. I wasn’t used to it. Being with other women, I mean.

I guess, you and I have spoiled each other. We took a trip together.”

“You went away together?”

“I was away for on-site job to Barcelona last summer, remember?”

“Back in June?”

“We fought so much that they asked us to check out. I told you I changed my hotel because the hotel was so noisy. We ended up on a squalid place on a back street, and suddenly we clicked. We made love round the clock. It was better than anything she did ever experienced before she said, which was extremely flattering.

I know what you are thinking and it’s true. Things between two of us improved after Barcelona, too.”

I was in immense existential pain at this moment.

“Did you tell that to Shalini?”

“I didn’t dare. I told her you and I stopped sleeping together long ago. I said I was impotent. Since I had been Impotent with her, I claimed it happened with you too. The problem with Shalini is that she is so damn intuitive. Or maybe I am just a lousy liar. She can tell when I am lying. She can see straight through me. But that is probably good as it keeps me on my toes.”

“I have always been so gullible.”

“Not just gullible, you and I have taken refuge in a hermetically sealed existence. Everything’s been orderly and it’s all gone like clockwork. But the lack of oxygen has smothered us.”

I uttered sobbing.

“And now you little Shalini will review you?”

“I don’t possess much self-knowledge, and all know very little about reality, in spite of all the books I have read. But I believe this catastrophe is chance of a life time.”

I ridiculed.

“Has Shalini filled your head with garbage like that? How naïve can you get?”

“This conversation can do without your taunts and sarcastic remarks.”

“You are right. I am sorry.”

He lashed out.

“I am trying. I am trying to be as I can, and it’s not exactly easy. We have never talked like this before. Is it any wonder we are naïve, insecure and childish?

What else could we expect? This affair with Shalini is disaster for you and me both. I’ve tried to break free over and over again, but it is impossible. She won’t let me go. And I am obsessed by her somehow. It sounds so damn melodramatic to say you are obsessed by anyone, but it’s the only word that fits the bill.

At first I resisted, but now I have let everything go straight to hell. And that suits me just fine.”

I uttered after his monologue.

“You are in a tight spot.”

“I just don’t know. I don’t know anything.”

“Come and lie besides me.

Please.”

He came back in bed like a child coming back to mama.

“I want you to make love to me.

Please.

For old times’ sake.

Lie here in my arms.

We will fall asleep together.”

“I don’t think I can sleep. The best thing would be to pack and leave.”

“Lie down and close your eyes.

You will doze off.

We need rest.

Tomorrow will be a tough day.”

He started crying.

“I am so goddamn ashamed of myself.”

“We will talk about that later.

Right now it’s just you and me.

We have a few hours left together.”

Next morning I helped him pack his bags.

“Good bye Leela and Take care. Good bye.”

I hugged him and couldn’t let him go.

“We will make a fresh start. We will throw out our stale old routines.

We will talk about the past and figure out where we went wrong.

You will hear no accusations from me.

Aakash… this all seems so unreal Aakash…

I don’t know what to do Aakash.

You are shutting me out.

Any solution will be better than this.

Couldn’t you promise to come back that would tide me over.

Then you wouldn’t be leaving me without hope.”

I tried holding him tight, he shrugged me and left.

As he left I got so much confused I had no idea what to do neither was anything around me making sense anymore. My entire life looked like came down like a house of cards. In confusion I called Rohit our mutual friend, it was as such, quiet early on to call him, but I did it any ways. It was all just so unreal, I wanted to burst into tears but crying would have just made it worst. I told Rohit that Aakash is in love with a girl named Shalini and that they are leaving for Paris today. I urged him to call Aakash and tell him to wait for a bit, but he said that he had already talked with him, and that he knew it all along. He knew, but he never told me, and he called himself my friend. How could he be so damned disloyal to me? I didn’t care what he said, for all those times we had gotten together, and he didn’t said a word. How many others already knew it I did really like to know, and he told, ‘lots of people’. That left me in disgust and agony, I was left paralysed on bed.

## Vale of Tears

Aakash came back after some 8 odd months.

“Hey, you are back”

“You look nice, that’s a pretty top.”

“You think so, I bought it few weeks ago, but I think that’s too girlish for me.”

“Take your jacket off. Standing here in hall makes me nervous.”

“Haven’t been able to get much done today. It’s silly, but it’s been more than eight months since I have seen you.”

“How come you suddenly…“

“Shalini is in Manchester for a week.”

“Would you like tea?”

“Yes please, I will love to have tea.

Straight, it calms me down.”

“Can’t Shalini let you see me without starting a fight?”

“If you are going to start with that I did better leave.”

“You have said yourself that she is insanely jealous.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Are you such a coward that you can’t stand up to her.

I am sorry”

“That’s all right. I know you find the situation absurd.”

“How are things Aakash?”

“Pretty much as usual. And you?”

“I can’t complain, I guess. Could be worse.”

“It was silly of me to suggest meeting you, coming home.

We can’t talk without hurting each other.”

“I have an excellent suggestion. Let’s have dinner.

We are probably both starving and that’s why we are both touchy.”

“That’s an excellent suggestion.”

We had a nice dinner with pleasant conversation.

“I don’t mind telling you that things are going pretty well for me.

I got my Paris office posting extended by 2 years.”

“Really.”

“It’s a great opportunity, both financially and career-wise.

That’s where things are happening in my field.

And I’ll be glad to emigrate there if there’s nothing to keep me here.

I’m fed up with this design backwater. So I’ll be there for long if all goes well.”

“Congratulations.”

“And now for the unspoken question.

Will Shalini still be living with me?

The answer is ‘no’.

Shalini’s been good for me. She’s taught me things about myself. But there’s a limit.

To be honest I am tired of her. I suppose it’s dis-loyal of me to bad mouth her. But she forfeited my loyalty long ago. I’m fed up with her. Her emotional fits, her tirades and tears, followed by making up again and endearments.

The food is great. Ahh! Here I am, going on about myself. But I am in such a good mood.”

“Then perhaps we could discuss our divorce.

If you are going abroad, we could at-least get the ball rolling. What do you think?”

“As you like.”

“I’d like us to file for divorce. You never know. I might want to remarry, and things will be complicated if you are in France.”

“You have someone on mind?”

“May be I do, maybe I don’t.”

“Come on tell me more. It will keep me from rattling on.”

“Would you like some more wine.”

“Nay, stop being so evasive.

“I am curious: Do you have a lover?”

“I’ll get a coffee, you do want coffee, right?”

“Yes, please.

Our apartment is a decent place to live in.”

“You live out of town right?”

“We like in a high-rise on tenth floor, with a view of Paris at distance.

Shalini actually likes the place rather than living in the city, she says it fits in with her picture of the world. It’s familiar. I don’t really care where I live. For me every domicile is only temporary. Security must come from within.”

“Does yours?”

“I didn’t feel that way as long as I lived here. Material things were so important, we became dependent on them.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Our sense of security was anchored in externals.

Our possessions, our house back in India, our friends, our incomes, our food, our parents, holidays.

I’ll describe my take on security. The way I see it…loneliness is absolute. Anything else is an illusion.

Never expect anything but trouble. If something nice happens all the better, just don’t imagine you can do away with loneliness. A sense of togetherness can be created in, say, religion, politics, love art. But loneliness is still all encompassing. The treacherous part is every once in a while you are struck by an illusion of togetherness. Just remember that it is an illusion. That makes it easier when everything returns to normal. You have to face the fact that loneliness is inevitable. It puts an end to your moaning. Then you feel safe and secure. And you learn to accept how pointless it all is with a certain satisfaction. I don’t mean you should resigned, you should carry on as best as you can, if only because it’s better to do your best than to give up.”

“I wish I was as certain as you.”

“It’s all talk. You find yourself expressing thoughts to fend off the emptiness inside. It’s funny, come to think of it. Has it ever stuck you that emptiness hurts? You did think it would make you dizzy, or queasy in spirit. But this void inside me is physically painful. It stings like a burn or like when you were little and you’d been crying, and the whole inside of your body ached.

At times Shalini’s tremendous career commitment astonishes me. She’s so sincere and so involved in her start-up. Her work answers her questions and fills the void inside her. I wish I could live the way she does. I really mean that without any sarcasm.

Why are you sneering?

Do you think I am talking rubbish? But so do I…but who cares?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about. It seems so theoretical. I don’t know why. I rarely talk about such huge matters. I guess I move on another plane.”

“A superior plane I suppose? A special plane reserved for women with a privileged emotional life, and a happier more down-to-earth approach to the mysteries of life.”

“Perhaps, I wished if that were true.”

“Shalini gives herself airs like that. Particularly when she had read her-self the latest feminist mag.”

“Sounds like you are disappointed.”

“That’s just your imagination.”

“You should know I think about you all the time. Wondering if you are all right, or if you are afraid or lonely. Everyday several times a day, I wonder what I did to cause the breach between us. I know it’s childish way of thinking but there you are. What did I do wrong?”

“Why not ask a psychiatrist?”

“I see one several times a week.”

“What have you learned?”

“Nothing. Basically, I am learning to talk. And I moved your things out of the study room and moved mine in.

It left me feeling guilty but awfully bold.”

“Well, I will say the therapy worked then. I will like to hear about your inner quest. That’s much interesting I’ll tell you.”

“There’s nothing interesting I’ll tell you. Though something funny did strike me, but I haven’t told my therapist yet.”

“That sounds interesting.”

“y therapist told me to jot down everything that pops into my head. No matter how irrelevant. Thoughts, memories, dreams. I haven’t written much so far, I am not much used to writing. It generally turns out stilted and kind of silly.”

“Oh yeah, why don’t you read me what you wrote last night? I’d really like to hear it.”

I was so happy to hear that he wanted to hear my innermost thoughts, which up until now even I was not aware of, I was so happy to know that someone is there to share myself with.”

“Would you really like to hear it? Are you sure. I’ll just get my notebook.”

I rushed in the study room to get my notebook.

“I was awake till 3:00 writing and so I looked like the dickens this morning.”

“You look pretty, so terribly pretty Leela.”

“No compliments, please, take an interest in my soul instead.”

“Go sit down.”

He tried to get intimate despite my best efforts to keep him away he insisted. I asked him to let me read to him instead. I had been thinking about it all the time, about having sex with him, I’ve been longing for him. But after he will leave I’ll be left with my longing and I didn’t wanted that. I finally made him stop groping me.

“Don’t you realise I am in love with you? Sometimes I hate you for what you did to me. Sometimes I don’t think of you for hours, and its heaven.

I have everything, I could want. I have my friends and my job that I enjoy and I am good at. Yet I feel like I am bound to you. I don’t know why.

May be I am a masochist, or the kind of women who could only love one man. I don’t know. It’s so hard Aakash. I don’t want to live with anyone but you.

Other men bore me. I’m not trying to make you feel guilty, or blackmail you emotionally. I am just telling you how I feel. That’s why I can’t bear you kissing me, and making love to me. I can’t explain it in any other way. Because you will walk away, and I’ll be left longing for you.

I’ve sort of enjoyed having you at distance. So let’s keep our hands to ourselves. You’ll just leave me devastated.”

“I am still in love with you.”

“Why say that when it isn’t true.”

“Don’t you think I have longed for you?

I have. We were good together. We were friends. We had fun.

If we feel like having sex, why shouldn’t we? It just shows we still long for each other. Why we have all these reservations? Why worry about tomorrow?”

“No Aakash, no, please. I don’t want. I what you to stop it!

I don’t want to pine and weep and long for you. Please understand. This is really how it is.

It’s no good if you want to persist. You might as well leave.”

“I am trying to understand but I can’t.

Look I’ll just sit here. I’ll sit here and you can read it to me.

Then I’ll go back to hotel and call Shalini and tell her I was in the pub.

May be I will have some more coffee.”

With heavy heart and composing myself from tears I sat on sofa with my book.

“I just feel terribly foolish. I just want to hide somewhere and cry.”

“Well…if you like, I could leave now. We could have dinner tomorrow.”

“No stay after all. I am busy tomorrow.

I can barely read my own writing. The beginning isn’t important.”

And I began reading my inner most scribblings, with confident firm voice.

“Yesterday I was seized by a reckless gaiety.

For the first time this year, I felt a zest for life, eager to know what the day might bring. And here it is.

Suddenly I turned and looked at an old school picture from back then I was 10. I seemed to detect something that had eluded me up to then. To my surprise, I must admit that I don’t know who I am. I haven’t the vaguest idea I’ve always done as I was told, as far as I can remember. I have been obedient, well adjusted, and almost meek. I did assert myself once or twice as a girl but mother punished any lapses from convention with exemplary severity. My entire upbringing and that of my sister, was aimed at making us agreeable. I was ugly and awkward, a fact I was constantly reminded of. I later realised that if I kept my thoughts to myself and was ingratiating and predictable, my behaviour yielded rewards.

The most momentous deception began at puberty. All my thoughts, feelings and actions revolved around sex. But this I never told my parents. Or anyone at all, for that matter. Being deceitful and secretive. My father wanted me to follow his footsteps and become a Doctor, I dropped hints that I wanted to be an artist, or do something else in the world of technology. But they laughed at me. Since then I go on pretending. Faking my relationships with others, with boys. Always putting on an act in a desperate attempt to please. I’ve never considered what I want but only, ’What does he want me to want?’

It’s not unselfishness as I used to believe. It’s sheer cowardice. Even worse, it stems from me being ignorant of who I am. I’ve never led a dramatic life. I have no gift for that sort of thing. But for the first time I feel excited by the prospect of finding out what I want to do in life. In the snug world Aakash and I lived in, taking everything for granted, there is an implied boredom and death that frightens me more and more when I think back on it.

The trappings of security comes at high price, the constant erosion of your personality. It’s so easy right at the outset to thwart a small child’s attempts to assert itself. In my case, it was performed with injections of a poison that is 100% effective. Guilt. At first it was directed towards my mother. Later towards others. In a flash I see what kind of person I would have been had I never allowed my-self to be brain washed. And I wonder whether I’m hopelessly lost. Whether the potential for joy that was innate in me is dead, or whether it merely lies dormant and can be awakened.

I wonder what kind of wife and women I would have become if I’d been able to use my resources as they were intended. Would Aakash and I ever gotten married in that case? I’m sure we would have, because if I analyse it honestly, we were genuinely in love in a devoted and passionate way. Our mistake was that we never break free from our past to create something worthwhile on our own terms…”

I was immersed in reading my own thoughts and bothered to take a glance at Aakash, he felt fast asleep. I was bewildered, I looked at him and I looked at my scribblings which at that point felt acutely meaningless. My conversation bored him, I cleared the coffee table.

I woke him up as it was his time to go.

“When are you leaving back to Paris?”

“In two months, till then I am staying in Shalini’s apartment in Suffolk. We will discuss divorce in about a month, before I leave.”

Scene after this you might like to add.

## The Illiterates

We couldn’t get in terms of divorce in two months, Aakash left for Paris, dealt with the dread of loneliness. After about one and half year, he turned up back in London. By that time all was set mentally and as well as we were married under Indian jurisdiction it took time to get the papers filed in India, get them back to UK to be signed, I being in need did all the required logistical work. He called me one fine evening in his office after work to get his signatures. Those signatures which will be setting me free to explore new life.

“Sorry, I am late. Dad called right when I was leaving, and he went on an on even when I told I was busy. How are you doing? You look pretty sick.”

“I have a cold. It started with sore throat I thought would pass and progressed in to sneezy chest cold that keeps me coughing all night long. I am running a temperature too. I was going to postpone this meeting but since you had to take the papers to Pune, I guess we’d better file these papers so that you can leave, right?”

“Poor Aakash. I hope Shalini takes good care of you.”

“She came down with a stomach flu. It’s terribly romantic.”

“You will pull through.”

“You are certainly in a good mood.”

“May be I am.”

“Any special reason?”

“I am always excited before going to India. And its spring and I bought a new skirt. What do you think? Isn’t it nice? Though the light in here doesn’t do the colour justice. What do you think?”

“It’s nice.”

“I am glad we could meet here at your office. Saves us some time.”

“It’s not exactly cosy. But its fine for divorce matters.”

“Look at this. Here’s the agreement, word for word as we decided.”

“Then I don’t need to read it.”

“Never sign what you haven’t read.”

“Don’t look so grumpy.”

“I am not grumpy.”

“You are as grumpy as can be.

Here’s list of our common banks accounts and property and its distribution. It’s just a list. It doesn’t require a signature.

Make sure I haven’t fleeced you out of anything.”

“Your sarcasm is wasted on me. I have such a miserable cold.

How about a cup of tea. I have got this new stuff called ‘Lapsang Souchong’, it’s Tibetan, my grateful Parisian colleagues gave me a whole case.”

“Not bad, huh? I like it.”

“I don’t care for tea as a rule but this is very nice.

It’s hard.”

“What’s hard?”

“Getting divorced. It’s just paperwork.

We have been living apart for two years, we rarely see each other, we’ve both agreed to it, but I still feel guilty. It’s strange.

On my way over, I was in a good mood. I was determined not to cry or be affected by it all.

Aakash, let’s go sit over the couch.

Is this building empty tonight?”

“No there’s a night watchman.”

“Aakash give me a kiss.”

“I’ve got a cold.”

“I never catch your germs, so give me a kiss. I want you to.”

“Was that what you expected?”

“Much better. Now put your hand on my breast.”

“Are you seducing me?”

“That’s right. Right here on the carpet. Right now. Doesn’t that sound like fun? You look suspicious. Afraid of the night watchman? After all we are still married. People should make love on the floor more often. Lock the door. No one should walk in on us. You never know. I’m kind of prude. Lock the door. Just in case the watchmen comes.”

“Right.”

“Close your eyes or I’ll feel self-conscious. If the watchman comes now. He can join us, we will fell liberated. Let’s stay here all night, and make love. We will file our divorce papers tomorrow.”

After a bit of cuddling the emptiness hit back, but it was with sense of freedom of finally having got a closure.

“Let’s sign these papers and go out and celebrate. Pay tribute to a long and happy marriage.”

“I think I’ll take them home and study them in peace and quiet.”

“Why the about face now after all our talks?”

“You told me yourself, I should read them.”

“Then by all means, let’s read through the whole thing. Make sure I haven’t cheated you.”

“Why are you so upset?”

“I am not. Let’s start reading.”

“You look pissed off.”

“I am. But I’ll control myself. Like I always do when subjected to your whims. Let’s get off this tedious subject. It’s late and tomorrow’s a working day.”

“Don’t you want to have a dinner?”

“No, thank you.

I am grateful for the favours already bestowed upon me.”

“Talk about whims!”

I yelled banging my fist on the table.

“Now look here, Aakash!

It’s pointless even trying to discuss this now. Let’s stuff these into an envelope. Then you can take them home, and you and Shalini can pore over the wording to make sure I haven’t screwed you over.”

“What’s going on, Leela?”

“Nothing.”

“We were good friends a minute ago.”

“Right.

What happened with you Aakash? You used to love me so much. You were so gentle and patient. Much more patient than I was. Do you remember how worried you used to get over every little illness? You dealt with them better than I did. You remember our Saturday nights together? What happened? Where did we go wrong? Where did all that love go? And all that joy?”

“No use in crying over spilt milk. People change, relationships are broken-off, and love runs out and so does affection, friendship and closeness. That’s the way it is.

We are emotional illiterates. We’ve been taught about history of India and chants from the Vedas. We have learned mathematical formulas by heart. But we haven’t taught a thing about our souls. We’re tremendously ignorant about what makes people tick.”

I started yawning, at his intellectual masturbation, especially given the context that I wanted him to sign the documents and GTFO!

“That signals end of my lecture. I had nothing to say anyway.

How about some Glen Fiddich and then we can decide about the dinner.”

“I don’t agree with you, but no matter.”

“By the way my contract in Paris went down the tubes.”

“That’s a shame!”

“Well I was pretty disappointed. There was the usual wheeling and dealing. First things were postponed, then there was no money, and then they sent someone else. That’s life, Cheers!”

“When was this?”

“Back in June.”

“I had to request a new leave of absence. Then Daniel suggested that I apply directly to the Human Resource Manager, instead of raising request at the resource office, and then they informed me Ismail is assigned instead. Granted he has done more projects recently but there is something fishy nonetheless.”

“Poor Aakash, I am sorry.”

“I don’t understand their mind-set. Few weeks ago we were supposed to go on-site to Munich, and suddenly the human resource tells us we are not allowed to go. That the project’s funds weren’t received and that we need to continue on last project. That’s not the way to talk to us, damn it! It’s not like we are kids playing hooky. That’s the way they treat you now a days. Like you are worth nothing. People like me have become obsolete, I am a dinosaur now.

Our politics are all wrong too. Not progressive. Not to left, not to right. I already feel like I am over age and out of the race, I’ll be 35 this summer, I’ll expect to live another 25 years. Viewed objectively, I am a dead weight. I’ll spend next 20 years being a damn nuisance. I’m an expensive, unproductive unit that ought to rot. And I’m supposed to be in my prime brimming with experience. But it’s, ‘throw the looser out, let him rot!’

I am so damned tired, if I had courage, I’d pack it all in and move back to India. Or apply for a position as a teacher somewhere in Spain. Sometimes I wish I could…ahh…well that’s my story.

Shalini has a very ambivalent attitude toward the situation. Sometimes she says she loves me come what may, and at other times she calls me a useless parasite. Sometimes she just packs her bags. I don’t know which alternative would be the most satisfying.

By the way…I think she is cheating on me. Not that I care, my jealousy has passed. Actually, everything has passed. I hardly know who I am. Someone spat on me and I am drowning in spittle. Am I boring you?”

“No, it’s funny.”

“What’s funny?”

“I wanted to have sex with you today to see if I felt anything. All I felt was lukewarm affection. You know what? I think I am breaking free at last. It’s taken long time and it’s been very painful, but I am free from you now to start living my own life, and that feels absolutely wonderful.”

“Allow me to congratulate you.” He poured some more of Glen Fiddich.

“I don’t know why I told you. It’s callous of me to say it when you are having such a rough time.”

“But oddly enough, I don’t care.”

“I have taken your feelings into account far too often. Being considerate killed our love. If I hadn’t let myself side tracked by guilt, I’d have known everything I did was wrong. Remember when I got abortion, when sex became impossible? How we put blame on my weakness. We concocted so many reasons why making love gave us no pleasure. Warning lights were flashing all around us, but we ignored them.”

“These post-mortems are so pointless.”

At that comment I lost my sanity, I just yelled out loud without any regard and banged my fists on table.

“Your idiotic sarcasm drives me crazy!

What gives you right to tell me what to think and feel?”

“Lord, how I hate you. I used to think that quiet often.

“Lord, how I hate her. Especially when we made love and I felt your indifference. And I saw you naked in shower afterwards, washing out the nasty stuff I deposited inside you. I’d think I hate her body the way she moves. I should have beaten you. I wanted to smash that hard resistance that emanated from you. But we chatted away and talked about how well we got along.

Tell me, why do I enjoy sex now? I do everything she asks.”

“You just wait. When you’re married to her, everything will repeat itself. Just you wait and see, your behaviour is deeply rooted. Then you will look for a new lover to free you from your loathing.”

“You are wrong.”

“There is such a thing as simple affection, Aakash. To say nothing of sensuousness. And physical desire. In your case that’s all blocked.

Do you really think I wasn’t miserable too? I’d think, ‘Is this how it’s supposed to be? We did console ourselves with the thought that sex wasn’t everything, that in other respects we are happy. Talk about deluding ourselves.”

“You are forgetting certain unpleasant details.”

“Please be kind to refresh my memory.”

“You know what you did? You cashed in on your sex organs. They were a bargaining chip. A night of sex for a night of peace. Good behaviour earned me a lay. Bad behaviour or criticism made you withdraw. It was grotesque the way you carried on. You were worse than any whore!”

“You would never face the truth!”

“What goddamn truth?”

“Some sort of female truth or your truth?”

“You are completely out of your mind! Am I supposed to be a doormat? Am I a substitute for your mother? All that carping about how I neglected our home!”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes, it is. That’s all I ever heard!

You piled the guilt on, you and your parents! I felt inadequate at work at home, and I was a washout in bed too. I was hedged in by all the griping and endless demands! Damn you!

Was it so strange that I used sex for leverage? I was outnumbered, having to fight you, both sets of parents and society! When I think of what I endured, I could scream! I tell you this: Never again!

You sit there whining about conspiracies. Well, it serves you right! I hope you will have it rammed down your throat that you are a useless parasite.”

At which he started laughing like a devil, hurling insults at me.

“You grotesque bitch!”

“So what? That’s what I have become!

The difference between your grotesqueness and mine is that I won’t give in. I intend to face the reality the way it is. If there’s one thing I truly appreciate, it’s being alive. I enjoy overcoming difficulties. I don’t ask for any favours.”

“Great!

Then we don’t have to feel sorry for each other. We can chuck out guilt out the window. We are almost human. It’s a pity we ever met in the first place and decided to be together. What a glorious fiasco. The sooner we sign the papers the better. We will divide our worldly goods and go our separate ways, thank you.”

“Do you think I don’t know what you are thinking? You don’t want a divorce.”

“That’s preposterous!”

“Is it? Then prove it by signing the papers right now.”

“OK, that is right, right now.”

“Aakash, look at me.

Look at me.”

“You have changed your mind. You don’t want a divorce, do you?

You were going to tell me today, right? ”

“Will that be such a crime? You want to hear me admit that I give up? Well, I do! I’m sick of Shalini! I want to come home!”

I this point I was just blank, just kept looking at him.

## Out of Orbis

## After Thoughts

The heart raged and demanded grew melancholy and confused, and toward what end? To articulate what nitwit strategy? Procreation? It told him something... this business

ofhow mind-boggling numbers of sperm competed for a single egg. It was not the other way around.

Of course men would make love at any time and place with any number of women, including total strangers, while females were more selective. They were, in each case, catering

to the demands ofonly one small egg, while each male had millions and millions of frantic sperm screaming wildly, "Let us out! Please, let us out now!" It was like those desperate ads

in the personals column with a dozen requirements and, if they were not enough,

there was added, "Must be a nonsmoker." Feldman longed to meet a woman

who attracted him physically and had the following personality.' a quick sense ofhumor equal to his, a love ofsports equal to his, a love of classical music equal to his with a particular fondness

for Bach and balmy climates. In short, he wanted himself, but as a pretty woman. Pepkin married and raised a family. He led a warm, domestic life, placid but dull. Knapp was a swinger.

He eschewed nuptial ties and bedded five different women a week. Students, housewives, nurses,

actresses, a doctor, a salesgirl. You name it, it held Knapp between its legs. Pepkin, from the calm of his fidelity, envied Knapp. Knapp, lonely beyond belief,

envied Pepkin. What happened after the honeymoon was over? Did desire reallygrow with the years, or did familiarity cause partners to long for other lovers? Was the notion ofever-deepening romance a myth we had grown up on, along with simultaneous orgasm? The only time Rifkin and his wife experienced a simultaneous orgasm was when the judge handed them

their divorce. Maybe, in the end, the idea was not to expect too much out of life.