

## A Very Happily Married Woman

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Sunil had flown to Sydney for a meeting that had ended on a Friday afternoon. It was late in the afternoon; he had to spend the final night at a hotel in Sydney's Chinatown and fly back to Melbourne early Saturday morning. He hated flying at night and he was in no great hurry to get home. At about 5:30 pm he entered the hotel.

It was then he saw her at the reception of the hotel. He slowed his progress while he tried to figure out where he had seen her before. After a few minutes the answer came out of the deep recesses of his ageing mind. She was Anita from Auckland, New Zealand. She was the cousin of his cousin's wife, the same age as he was – in the mid-fifties. Yes, he had met her once before, very briefly, at his cousin's house in Melbourne some five years ago. He remembered he had complimented her on her looks. In fact he had thought she looked ravishing for her age and had wondered what she would have been like at twenty-one.

Anita had finished whatever she was doing at the reception desk and started walking in his direction, presumably to go to her room. She had not noticed him until he had moved close to her and said: 'Hi, Anita!'

She was taken aback, as if she had been woken up from a trance. Her brain appeared to be searching and her vocal cords responded after a brief moment, gazing at his face:

'Anil, is it?'

'No, Sunil. Ramesh's cousin from Melbourne, remember?'

'Aha, Geeta's husband's cousin. From Sabeto in Fiji. Yes I remember meeting you a few years ago when I was visiting them.'

'Five years ago'.

'That long? I thought it was like a few years.'

'Anyway, what are you doing in Sydney on a Friday afternoon?' Sunil asked.

'I had come to attend a conference, actually. And you?'

'I was here for a two-day meeting and will be flying home early tomorrow morning - hate flying at night.'

'I am also flying home to Auckland tomorrow morning around ten.'

'Are you staying at this hotel?' Sunil asked.

'Yes fifth floor, I'm in room 512,' Anita replied.

'Well, what do you know, I am in room 535. Were you going up?'

'Yes,' she said.

Sunil's desperately searched for a way to prolong their chance meeting. He felt he needed to be with someone tonight. He has this feeling sometimes at lonely hotels.

'Tell you what; if you have no plans for dinner, why don't you let me buy you dinner. I'd like to know more about what you have been doing.'

Anita hesitated a moment, looked at his face and said, 'No, actually, I've not made any plans for dinner tonight.' Then she started explaining, 'I am a very happily married woman, Sunil. I've got two wonderful kids and I am not one to be gallivanting in strange cities with strange men. Aren't you being a bit presumptuous, asking me just like that?'

'Come on, Anita, if it is any consolation, I am also sort of a happily married man with two wonderful children. Besides I am not a total stranger to you and I do happen to know Sydney a little. So there you are. You should have no problems with me.'

Anita softened up a bit and said: 'OK, but no funny business. What time and where?'

'Why don't you freshen up and meet in the lobby at, say, 6:30?' Sunil suggested.

'OK, 6:30 it is.'

They took the lift and both went to their rooms. Sunil had a shave and shower and changed into casual clothes. A liberal splash of his expensive CK after-shave lotion ought to do it. Meanwhile Anita had also showered, changed into a knee length skirt and a light stylish top, and applied fresh makeup. At about 6:20 Sunil came down and Anita joined him about five minutes later.

'You look gorgeous,' Sunil said to Anita.

'Hey, I told you, no funny business. You do smell nice, what is it?' replied Anita.

'Thanks. Nothing very special.'

They walked out of the hotel and Sunil led the way to a pleasant Chinese restaurant he had visited previously. As they walked both were careful not to accidentally come into contact with each other. He knew a respectable degree of separation had to be maintained. The streets of Syd-

ney's Chinatown were abuzz with activity. Sounds and smells of Chinese cooking emanated from the brightly lit restaurants displaying live fish, crabs and lobsters in large glass tanks in the windows. Sunil expertly navigated his way to the restaurant. The young Chinese girl at the door led them through the large crowded place to a 'table for two'.

'The food must be good here, lot of Chinese seem to eat here,' Anita commented.

They studied the menu for sometime and politely discussed the various dishes.

'I think I will go for something simple. Chicken Chop Suey and rice,' Anita remarked.

I do not eat meat so I'll go for Vegetarian Fried Rice,' Sunil replied.

Anita looked up, surprised. 'I did not know you were a vegetarian,' She commented and then added, 'Is it for religious reasons?'

Sunil hesitated before replying, 'It is for moral, health and religious reasons in that order. I do not like the idea that an animal is killed so that I can have a meal.'

'Aren't you a bit of a hypocrite? Wasn't an animal killed for the shoes you are wearing?' Anita asked smiling, looking directly at him.

'I suppose you are right. Maybe it is for health reasons after all,' Sunil replied and made a mental note to be careful with this woman as far as any future 'debates' with her were concerned. She was not only beautiful but seemed to have a tongue to match.

Anita was pleased with her logic and concluded, 'The chicken I am ordering would have been killed anyway even if I had not ordered the dish tonight. So technically it was not killed especially for me.'

They were interrupted by the waitress who came to take their order. They ordered Chinese tea with their dishes. The meals looked pleasant and were served quickly. During the meal they made small talk and occasionally studied each other without making it too obvious.

Sunil noticed that Anita had well-manicured long fingernails that were tastefully painted a dark shade of maroon that contrasted well with her very fair complexion. He noticed again how pretty she was and slim. She had well groomed, shoulder length hair curling inwards towards her body near the shoulders. She was expensively adorned with a gold watch, a diamond wedding ring and a fine gold chain around her neck. Her table manners were impeccable. She exuded westernized sophistication far beyond the capacity of many Indo-Fijian women. But Sunil had no doubts in his mind that this woman could easily metamorphose herself, without effort, should an occasion like an Indian wedding warrant, into the epit-

ome of Indian female virtue by dressing up in traditional Indian finery and bedecking herself with lots of hand crafted, heavy, 22 karat solid gold jewellery, thick bangles, heavy necklaces, and large ear-rings.

They left the restaurant after about an hour and decided to stroll towards the Harbour. Soon they came to the railings at the edge of the boardwalk overlooking the sea.

'The view is so breathtaking,' Anita observed gazing at the myriads of lights and reflections on the water. It was a warm October night and it was wonderful to just peer into the darkness at the glittering water and smell the sea.

'There's beauty everywhere, most of the time we fail to see it,' Sunil commented.

Anita did not respond but put her arms on the railings and faced the sea while Sunil leaned on his back to the railings to face Anita a few feet away. Anita was lost in thought as she peered into the darkness. Sunil maintained silence to accommodate Anita's privacy.

'Thinking of home?' he asked after a few minutes.

No,' Anita replied but did not elaborate. She was thinking more as to what the heck she was doing there with a man she hardly knew well.

Sunil waited; after a while Anita turned her gaze onto Sunil's face and said,

'I now remember what you had said to me that day, five years ago in Melbourne when we had met at Ramesh's place'

'I don't remember,' he lied, knowing full well that she was asking about his comment on her beauty.

'Think hard. Did you not say something about how I looked? Do you not remember telling me that I was beautiful?' she probed.

'I must have said that. You still are,' he said quickly without looking at her.

'Are what?' She wanted to hear him say it again.

'I said that you still are very beautiful,' he repeated.

'Do you really mean it?'

'Of course, I always mean what I say,' he responded.

Anita became pensive and turned towards the sea again.

Sunil placed his arms on the railings, without turning his eyes towards Anita, he said slowly,

'But my best friend tells me that I always talk nonsense.'

Anita turned sharply to face him and retorted, 'So what you said about me being beautiful was nonsense. I had judged you correctly. On that first day we'd met I had categorized you as a 'charmer', we used to refer to the likes of you like that at the university.'

'I am glad that you, at least, had an opinion of me. Any thought is better than none,' Sunil replied and added, 'No, that was and is still true; the bit about you being beautiful. My best friend is not always correct in his judgment,' he replied.

'Then, why is he still your best friend?' Anita asked relaxing a bit.

'Because he has known me from the day I was born and he is the only one who knows my darkest secrets,' Sunil replied still looking away from her.

'Do you tell him everything? How can you tell someone everything anyway?' Anita asked without interest in what she asked. She was still looking at Sunil's face.

'I don't tell him. He just knows,' Sunil replied. 'Do you know that it is easier to tell a stranger everything about oneself? It is like talking to your doctor. Not that my friend is a stranger, or a doctor, for that matter.'

'But, surely you cannot reveal your darkest secrets to anyone.'

'Yes, you are correct. There is a theory that we communicate with others through "windows" and there is a "window" that is never open to others and that contains your darkest secrets.'

'Sounds like a good theory to me. So how could you trust someone that much?'

'Does that imply that you have not told your husband everything about yourself?'

'I could not tell anyone my deepest secrets. I operate on a sort of "need to know basis". I do not tell people what they do not need to know. Besides what you don't know doesn't hurt you'.

'My friend, he is not just someone. He is very special,' Sunil replied.

'Is he someone I know? Who is this best friend of yours anyway?'

'Yes, you know him. It's me. I am my best friend. I am the one who knows me best.'

Anita looked away in disappointment and added, 'I agree with your *best friend*. You do talk nonsense, Sunil.'

'I am serious,' said Sunil. 'Have you ever listened to your best friend - your own self or have you always been trying to live for other people like your husband, your kids, your dog, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera; planning all aspects of their lives; trying to have your way in most situations?'

He at once regretted the personal attack. Sunil was not totally unaware of Anita's background. Geeta, Ramesh and he had talked about Anita after Sunil's first meeting with Anita. Geeta had told Sunil that Anita's mother was quite influential in Anita's life and was the main decision-maker in the household, being a high school teacher of some re-

pute compared to Anita's father who was a tradesman in the Public Work's Department. Anita had always enjoyed the privileges of being the only child of a school teacher and she was brought up in an intellectual environment living comfortably in a nice house in Rewa Street in Suva.

Geeta had also told Sunil that Anita never had any close friends in school because of her very high-headed views and independent attitude. It was a great surprise to Geeta that Anita had married and even more surprised that the marriage was successful. She had attributed this to the fact that Anita, like her mother, was the sole decision-maker in her own household, and that Anita's husband was a laid back person who was more interested in his business than worrying about the social aspects of family life.

In comparison, Sunil had been brought up on a sugar cane farm in Sabeto and was one of eight children of his parents. His father had died when Sunil was quite young. The family had continually struggled financially. Sunil had somehow managed to finish his degree in accounting.

Anita was taken aback by the sharp words. No one had ever challenged her *modus operandi*. She was very comfortable in her role of a wife and mother. She was a university graduate; she considered herself a modern woman who, at age twenty two, married a businessman she had met through a mutual friend and after that things just fell into place: kids, house, car, full-time profession as a teacher, part-time mum, chef, washerwoman, nurse, entertainer, chauffeur, etc. What more was to be expected? They had also followed thousands of Indo-Fijians and migrated to New Zealand in the late 1980s. Admittedly her husband had to spend long hours at his business in the new country but he was a good provider and that he loved her was beyond question.

Had Sunil touched a raw nerve? She remained silent but her mind was working in overdrive. Sunil also kept quiet giving her time to gather together her scattered thoughts. He knew he had fired a rather hard first shot at her neatly arranged, pigeon-holed opinions.

'Do you love your wife?' Anita turned to face him boldly and tried the old strategy of 'attack is the best form of defence'.

'What's that got to do with the price of eggs?' Sunil asked.

'Just answer my question,' Anita said defiantly, not wanting to back down or slacken her attack.

'I think it is getting late and you must be tired. Should we head back?' Sunil said.

Anita was determined not to let go of the discussion so quickly. She was a fiery debater at university and she could feel the old excitement building up tonight as if the 'smell of blood' was in the air. She was far

from being tired. In fact she had not been so intellectually challenged in a very long time.

'No, I am not tired but let us sit on that bench and continue with some more of your *nonsense*,' She said pointing to a small bench with ornate wrought iron ends.

'Well, if we are going to use the word 'love' then we first have to agree on its definition and establish whether it is important in the whole scheme of things or not,' Sunil replied, sitting down.

'Come on, everyone knows what love is and how important it is in our lives.'

'A cheap, rash generalization; I expected better from you, Anita.' Sunil regretted the slight condescendence in his voice.

'OK, why don't you ask your best friend what he thinks about love?' Anita teased.

'As a matter of fact, my best friend and I have had long debates, well into the wee hours of many nights on this subject.'

'And what conclusions have you come to?'

'Well, to separate fact from fiction, we really have to go back in time to our cave-dwelling days. As is with all species, nature has only one purpose and that is survival of the species at all cost to ensure continuity. It is, by far, the strongest instinct in any species, perhaps only second to sustenance. These are the bottom rungs of the needs of all creatures.'

'Now if, nature depended on a wishy-washy, concocted emotion like love for procreation then, I am sorry to say, that the world would have been devoid of species today. No! Nature is not stupid to let emotions run her schemes. She depends on real, automatic bodily functions to do her "dirty" work. She has created real instruments or sensors i.e. the five senses that trigger automatic real bodily actions that fulfil its requirements.'

'Imagine a caveman looking at a cave woman. Does he say, I really want to procreate with her but I don't think I love her enough so I will just go and find someone that I love. No way! On seeing a pretty woman, say, like you, most of his senses would have started to ring amorous bells and "things" would have started to stir in his loins, adrenalin would have started to pump throughout his body. Then he would have taken out his club, hit the woman on the head, dragged her into his cave and would have made sweet music together, albeit a bit one-sided one. Nine months later another human being would have been added to the population count. Now that is what is called the marvel of nature. No! Nature could never have relied on a chance emotion called "love" to do her procreation

work.'

'OK, Mr. Darwin, two questions: first, seeing me like this tonight, does the stirring in your loins propel you to want to club me and drag me off to your cave, and second, so where did the concept of love come from,' she asked.

'Yes, if I were a caveman I would definitely want to club you and drag you into my cave, but I would have had to compete with other rivals and success would not have been guaranteed. You know, the natural selection and survival of the fittest theories. Fortunately, especially for women, as enlightenment dawned, social structure was established and conventions of marriages, one-man-one-wife, etc were implemented in most societies and then someone had to invent love to go hand in hand with marriage; there could only be a marriage where love was present. So, since then everyone has been looking for love.'

'Don't know how many people have found it so far. Some people have the view that there is a lot more fun in the actual process of looking for love than in love itself. By the way, this institutionalization of marriage truly stuffed up nature's natural selection process and that is why we have so many idiots in the world today – yours truly included.'

Anita found Sunil's logic plausible and was truly exhilarated by the discussion. She felt alive, rekindled, and full of life – a feeling she had lost and forgotten a very long time ago. She had slipped into mundane routine without realizing it. Why did it take so long for her to find someone as stimulating as Sunil? Her mind was beginning to modify her initial "charmer" assessment of him. Furthermore her mind was also trying to modify her stereotypical materialistic categorization of all men and especially Indo-Fijian men. She also realized that she could never have this kind of conversation with her husband – a very disturbing realization. She started to feel an affinity towards Sunil as if they had a previous connection going back many past lives. She realized that she could tell Sunil anything. All he had to do was probe.

'Coming back to my original question; do you love your wife?' Anita persisted.

'Well, we have not defined love and have not established its usefulness in life but the short answer to your question is, yes, I love my wife. But having said that I will also say that I love my kids, I love my dog, I love my friends, I love nature – I do love a lot of things. One cannot be constrained in one's love. To live is to love.'

'Does that mean that you also love me?' Anita asked.

'I love all beautiful and nice things. That's what the senses are for. Remember Mother Nature. And you? – "*Shall I compare thee to a sum-*

*mer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate.*”

Anita became pensive again and Sunil added, ‘Imagine, how you would feel, if you were to enter a garden full of beautiful flowers and were told strictly to look at one flower only. You would want to enjoy the beauty of all flowers. In fact one should enjoy all beauty, period.’

‘How would you feel if someone else came to your garden and wanted to enjoy the "flower" in your home?’ Anita asked with a sly smile on her face. That is definitely a weak spot for all men; a sort of chink in the male armour, she thought.

‘Well, that sort of thing happens more in modern societies now because if one were to fall out of love, as happens very regularly in relationships now-a-days, then one is expected to end the relationship and seek love elsewhere. One is not expected to remain together in a loveless marriage. Personally I would like to believe marriages are built on a stronger set of commitments than just love...’

It was getting late. Time had just flown by and it was around nine at night. Sunil suggested that they head back to the hotel. Anita hesitated. She really did not want this evening and discussion to end. She was experiencing a thrill that she had long forgotten.

‘Can we have coffee together when we go back and can we talk a bit more "nonsense" over coffee?’ she asked.

‘Mmm, that sounds like an open invitation?’ Sunil joked.

‘The invitation is only to coffee.’

They walked slowly, shoulders touching at times now, confirming the new affinity. They entered the hotel and agreed that they would change and meet in Sunil’s room.

Sunil changed into a tee shirt and track pants, brushed his teeth and switched the electric jug on. He also pulled the bed sheets back and switched the main lights off leaving the stand lamp lit. Ten minutes later Anita came into the room. She had also brushed her teeth and her hair, changed into a cotton dress and had strategically put a few dabs of perfume behind her ears. For what purpose, even she did not know.

Sunil made the coffee both black with no sugar. The room was well furnished with one double bed, a writing desk and chair and a sofa facing the large window. There was a coffee table in front of the sofa. They took their coffees to the coffee table and sat on the sofa. She placed her mobile phone and her room key on the coffee table. He sat on her left at one end of the sofa and she sat on the other end. The degree of separation had returned as a result of the short break. They remained mostly silent and pensive while they drank the coffees. The room faced the same harbour

they were enjoying outside. From the fifth floor the view was even better.

‘OK, do you want to continue the discussion?’ Sunil asked, putting his cup down.

‘Where were we?’ Anita replied.

‘Well, we had just concluded the chapter on love and marriage, and previous to that we talked about whether you were taking time out for your own self or were you just spending all your time and effort taking care of others around you, including your immediate family.’

‘So you are implying that I should have a private life as well as one with my family?’

‘What I am implying is that we only get one shot at life and we can spend all of it earning money, producing children, looking after family, etc. or should we take some time out to do something special for our own selves so that boredom does not set in into the marriage.’

‘But, when I do things for my family, is it not the same as doing things for my own self because I am part of my family?’

‘Don’t you have any higher aspirations for your own self in life?’

‘Define “higher aspirations”.’

‘Well, different people have different definitions. By higher aspirations, I would mean things that are not done for the pursuit of earning money, having children, running a household, etc. By higher aspirations I mean reading works by famous writers, writing prose or poetry, music, painting, climbing mountains, finding your roots in India, seeking high ideals and God, etc.’

Anita thought for a while and then replied in counter attack.

‘So, I am assuming that you do all the things you have mentioned and on the strength of that you consider yourself superior to me. You have classified me as a lesser being, because I don’t seek high ideals and God?’

‘Hey, you wanted to continue the discussion and that was a valid question.’

‘Well, well, Mr. Smarty-pants, I have a household to run. I do not have time for all that higher aspirations and I do watch the odd Hindi movie when I have time. We also get a pundit to conduct an annual religious ceremony at our home. I really do not think that those things you have mentioned are vital for my life. Many people spend their entire lives not having done what you have mentioned and they lead quite normal, contented lives. Besides I have been told that India is dirty, smelly, polluted, and everyone there is out to cheat the tourists. Why should I want to find where, in India, my forefathers came from? But to get back to your logic about whether love is necessary in life, I put a challenge to you

to prove that doing all the things you mentioned are indeed necessary for the fulfilment of life.’

‘You are absolutely correct. These things are not at all necessary for the fulfilment of life. My best friend is correct once again – I do talk nonsense – sorry,’ concluded Sunil.

‘Hey, hey you cannot get out of it that easily. Come on, you have to continue the discussion.’

‘OK, to ascertain what is necessary and what is not necessary in life, we have to look at what great thinkers have said on this topic. After the basic needs of food, shelter, procreation, etc., a person has the need to achieve higher things ...’

Just then Anita’s mobile phone rang.

She picked it up and said “.... Oh, hi love, ... it must be around midnight there. Why?”

Sunil guessed that it was Anita’s husband and made a move to leave but, without looking at him, Anita placed her hand on his knee signalling him to remain seated.

‘Yes, I have had dinner..., I went out with a friend....., of course a girl friend, one from the conference....., I am in my room now.....’

Sunil could only hear one side of the conversation. He was seeing a different side of Anita.

There was a long pause and Anita continued ‘You are so weak. Why can’t you tell him that he cannot take a year off from University and go to London to take a working holiday. He has to finish his Masters... Well, I will be home tomorrow and I will talk to him... Yes, I am OK, the conference was good... Which shirt...before I left, I had asked you whether you would need that white one or not and you had said no, so I had not ironed it. It has been washed. If you need to wear it tomorrow then get Ragni to iron it for you, otherwise just wear the dozens of shirts that I already have ironed and put in your drawer...Yes, I will see you tomorrow afternoon around three... bye, take care, love you.’

Anita carelessly threw the phone back on the coffee table. Sunil could see that she was a bit ruffled but he kept quiet and gave her time to recover.

‘I cannot believe it. My son wants to take a year off, go to London. When we were young we rarely got the opportunity to do higher studies and these people ...,’ she did not finish.

He waited for Anita to talk, maybe about her husband, and she did.

‘I can’t believe my husband. He is OK with my son going to London but can’t iron a stupid shirt himself. Why do I have to do all the dirty

work around my home?’ she was beginning to talk to herself.

Sunil let a minute’s silence pass and asked gently: ‘Why did you lie to your husband about dinner and where you are now?’ And quickly added: ‘Don’t tell me. It’s on a “needs to know principle”.’

Anita was too agitated to say anything. That one phone call was enough to have taken the wind out of her arguments. She had lost her train of thought, lost any edge she had built over Sunil in the discussion. She was busy trying to find a way to resurrect some worth back into her opinions but she was having difficulty finding any. Silence was her only option for the time being. She was hoping that Sunil would say something that may give her an entry into the discussion again.

‘Let us finish the coffee,’ Sunil suggested. They picked their cups up and admired the view down the harbour from the window.

After they had finished their coffees Sunil, without asking, took some red wine from the bar fridge and poured a glass each. Anita took the glass without comment and took a sip.

After a while Sunil asked, ‘Do you want to talk about it?’

‘Tell me what would you do if you were in my shoes?’ Anita asked, turning her head abruptly to face Sunil.

‘How old is your son?’ Sunil asked.

‘Twenty-five.’

‘Well, I would treat him like the adult he is and respect his wishes to go to London.’

‘You would, wouldn’t you? And what about his studies?’

‘He can come back and complete it and even if he doesn’t, it will not matter.’

‘It will not matter? Of course it will matter. He has to complete his Masters. He has got this golden opportunity to do it. After that I would like see if he can get entry to do medicine. His grades were not good enough to get him into medicine after high school.’

‘Does HE have to complete his masters or do YOU want him to complete his Masters?’ Sunil asked.

‘What is the difference?’

‘Big difference.’

‘I think you want him to complete his Masters so that there is a chance that he could get entry into medicine and become a doctor and then you can hold your head high in the community and say to everyone “My son is a doctor”’.

Again Sunil regretted the personal attack and added, ‘Why can’t you let him decide for himself? It is his life. How long will you be making decisions for him? And who will he rely on to make decisions for him when

you are gone, say in twenty five or thirty years' time?'

'So you think that I should not give a damn as to what my kids do?'

'No, what I am saying is that you should learn to let go. Let the kids make their own decisions about their lives. They are not kids anymore. In fact, some people are of the view that kids do not really belong to parents but are lent to parents by God to teach parents many things. Anyway, your son is an adult not a kid anymore. If you push your way too hard then one day your kids will rebel and you will lose them forever. By the way how did you get on with your mother when you were growing up?' added Sunil consciously wanting to delve deeper.

'My Mother! No one could have gotten along with my mother. I used to secretly call her Hitler.' Anita retorted and added, 'Do you know that my mother wanted me to do medicine but I defied her. I had always wanted to be a teacher and I became one.'

As soon as she said this, Anita regretted the slip and instantly realized that she was doing to her son exactly what her mother tried to do to her.

Reading Anita's body language accurately, Sunil, fully aware of Anita's accidental slip asked her softly: 'Do you want your children to say the same things about you in, say, twenty year's time? Don't you want to break the cycle? You just have to let go, you know. Give the children some autonomy and that will not only give you peace of mind but will also give you time to do things that you like, in your own time and space. Did not a prophet once say: *Let there be distances in your togetherness. Eat together but not from the same plate.*'

Anita was taken aback by her own realization and the logic of Sunil's arguments. Was she really no different from her own mother? She became quiet and was now looking straight ahead towards the harbour.

'It is a bit too late,' Anita said softly after a while. She could feel tears welling in her eyes.

'Too late for what? It is never too late,' Sunil tried to console her.

'You don't understand. My mother died a few years ago and I never made peace with her. She tried so hard to get close to me in her twilight years but I, like a fool, held my ground and never forgave her. Now it is too late. I wish so much that I could wind the clock back and hold her once more and say, 'Mum, I am so sorry, I do love you very much''.' Anita said, still looking straight ahead out the window. She used her sleeves to wipe the tears in her eyes.

Sunil was quiet for a while and said softly, 'As I said, it is never too late. What you could not mend with your mother, you still have the chance to mend with your kids.'

They were quiet for a long time and the silence was beginning to get slightly uncomfortable.

Sunil chose to change the subject and said; 'About your husband – I am afraid that you have not been a very good wife at not training your husband to be self-sufficient in your absence.'

Anita, glad to get out of the uncomfortable impasse, turned and looked sharply at Sunil and retorted: 'I have been a very good wife. I've taken very good care of making sure that all my husband's needs are fully met without complaint.'

Her anger was more due to the realization of her own shortcomings than with what Sunil was saying.

'Yes, I agree completely that you have been a very good wife. Most husbands will give an arm or a leg to have a wife like you but the fact is that a good wife does need to train her husband to be a little self-sufficient. Before their marriages most men are pampered by their mothers so when they get married the wife needs to re-program them otherwise they will not be able to cope in times of crises. In any case, what will happen to your husband if you were to be run over by a bus tomorrow, heaven forbid?'

'Then it will not be my problem. I will be gone.'

'Yes, but it will still be your husband's problem.'

'He will probably get another wife.'

'True, because he will not be able to cope on his own,' Sunil replied.

'And I suppose that you have been fully re-programmed or de-programmed by your wife.'

Sunil ignored the comment and said in a slightly sad tone, 'You know, there was something very positive about that phone conversation.'

'And what is that?'

'That is, that your husband loves you very much.'

'How the heck can you deduce that by just listening to one side of a three minute phone call?'

'You really do not know how men's brains work, do you? The phone call at midnight, the need for the shirt to be ironed, they were only excuses. He is missing you in your absence and most of all he is realizing it, and being thankful for all the things that you do for him. The only way he can express his love is by complaining. My advice to you is to be thankful that you do have such a loving family.'

Anita was again pensively looking out to the sea, trying to hold back the tears. She was very quiet.

Sunil slowly took her arm and pulled her towards him. She slid to be right next to Sunil. He moved his right arm and placed it on her shoul-

ders. She did not resist or react. She raised her left arm and ran the sleeve over her eyes to wipe the tears that had welled again.

'Will you please get me another glass of wine?' She did not want Sunil to see the tears rolling down her cheeks.

As Sunil left to get the wine, Anita wiped her eyes with her dress, brought both her feet up on the sofa, put her hands around her legs and placed her head on her knees.

Sunil returned with the wine but did not sit. Anita took the glass, had a long sip and returned the glass to Sunil. He placed the glass on the coffee table and knelt in front of Anita.

Sunil moved closer to Anita and held her head in both of his hands and softly kissed the top of her head and then her forehead. Then he moved to kiss her eyes. They were shut and he could feel the eyeballs move under his lips and he could taste the saltiness of her tears.

Then he moved and sat beside her on the sofa and pulled her so that his right arm was around her and her head and upper body were resting on his chest. He could feel the warm tears on his chest through his tee-shirt. In between her muffled sniffles she managed to say:

'No one has ever talked to me like this in my whole life, not even my husband. Thank you for treating me like a friend. You have taught me a lot tonight.'

He stroked her hair and said, 'Don't kid yourself. I also learnt a lot from you.' Sunil also realized how easy it was to have the conversation with Anita and wondered whether he should have had or rather could have had a similar discussion with his wife.

Anita was still very quiet. Time had stopped for her. She was oblivious to the world for what seemed like an eternity. Finally she returned to reality and she said:

'I feel very calm and free. I feel far removed from my humdrum life, from my home, husband and children and you know what, I do not experience any feelings of guilt. I am sorry to have misjudged you. Now I realize that you are an OK guy and were, perhaps, meant to meet me here just to put me on the right path. And now I do believe that your best friend exists and from now I will also try to listen to the best friend inside me.'

'I am glad to hear that,' Sunil grinned.

'Can you promise me one thing, Sunil?' Anita lifted her face up to Sunil's and asked.

'Can you promise to be my confidante, if I ever need your help?' she added.

'No problem, your wish will be my command.' Sunil tried to lighten the mood.

Time had flown by and it was almost midnight. Anita again found Sunil's chest and settled in. Sunil noticed that Anita's eyes were now closed and her breathing was slowing down. The wine had taken effect. He also closed his eyes but not to sleep. He was also totally relaxed. After a while he could hear a noticeable increase in the sound of Anita's breathing. She was drifting into sleep. He let the situation continue, finally himself drifting off into the state between sleep and partial awareness; a state of total relaxation.

Sunil was intoxicated with the faint smell of shampoo on Anita's hair and the stronger fragrance of expensive perfume she had used. He had not felt so happy, so contented, so much 'in love' for a long time. He felt like a schoolboy on his first date.

Sunil was so enraptured by this wonderful feeling of intimacy with this gorgeous woman but felt like Raman in R. K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs* when Daisy spends a night at Raman's: *He was struck by the elegance of her form and features; suddenly saw her as an abstraction – perhaps a goddess to be worshipped, not to be disturbed or defiled with course fingers.*

Sunil woke up, reacting to someone flushing a toilet in the adjacent room. He looked at the digital clock on the bed-head. Almost two a.m. Anita was still sleeping. In a very difficult manoeuvre, he put one arm under her knees, the other arm under her neck, gently lifted her up and got up in the same motion and carried her onto the bed. He lay her down and pulled the bed sheet over her. She stirred lazily and went back to sleep. Sunil went to the bathroom, had a drink of water and came back and went to sleep on the sofa.

He woke up again at six am from the discomfort of the sofa. Anita was still fast asleep on the bed. It was no use trying to go back to sleep so Sunil went into the bathroom and had a shave and a hot shower. Then he made some coffee and came to check on Anita. The noise of Sunil's ablution had woken her up but she was still a bit groggy.

Sunil kissed Anita gently on the forehead and said,

'Good morning, princess. Did you sleep well?'

Without waiting for a reply, he sat on the bed and she got up to sit beside him. He took her in his arms and held her tightly.

'You were a true knight in shining armour last night.' Anita replied after a while and added, 'I had a strange dream. I dreamt that I flew through the front door of my house, around into every room. I saw my daughter doing her assignment on her laptop, my son browsing on his computer,

most likely looking for employment and accommodation in London. I saw my husband in bed going through the pages of some document with his favourite nightcap of 'Chivas' on his bedside table. They all looked so happy and content. The strange thing was that no one seemed to have noticed me except the dog. He was sleeping in my daughter's room and his ears pricked up and he looked at me wagging his tail as I flew past. Then the dream ended abruptly.'

'You sure it was just a dream?' Sunil enquired with a smile.

'Of course it was only a dream,' was the quick reply.

'Well, are you going to let him go?' Sunil asked.

'Let who go where?'

'Let your son go to London?'

'Yes, I am. He is a nice kid and he will be OK.'

'Come on, we have planes to catch. Loved ones await us.' Sunil said trying to bring some form of closure to the affair. Sunrise had dispersed the gossamer of intimacy that had prevailed the previous night. The magic was gone.

Anita got out of bed and walked to the door. She opened the door and stood on the threshold. Sunil followed her to the door. She looked back.

'Did you phone Geeta, your cousin while you were in Sydney over the past few days?' Sunil asked suddenly but casually.

'No, but I will call her from the airport,' She said and added: 'Well, Sunil, goodbye and thank you for enlightening me and please do not forget your promise to me.'

'Cross my heart and hope to die,' he said in a child-like manner.

She said 'see ya' and walked out. The door slowly closed behind her.

Sunil stood leaning with his back on the closed door for a long while, deep in thought. Then with great sadness in his heart he mechanically started the task of packing.

Quietly he said to himself; 'Anita – thank you for giving me a whole lifetime's worth of intimacy in a night'.

Anita rang her cousin Geeta from the airport after checking in her luggage.

'I was in Sydney for a conference for the past few days and am flying back to Auckland in an hour's time,' Anita told her after the normal exchange of pleasantries. 'And, by the way, I briefly ran into your husband's cousin, Sunil, in Sydney last night. He told me he was here to attend a meeting.'

'Really? Did Sunil tell you anything about his personal life?' Geeta enquired.

'No, he did not. We did not spend too much time together,' Anita lied. 'Why? Should he have told me something?'

'It is really a great tragedy. Sunil's wife of twenty-five years left him a few months ago. She said that she was feeling suffocated in the relationship and that she has no life of her own. She said that the marriage had gone stale, boredom had set in; she needed space and she needed some time to be on her own. All the love had gone out of the marriage, she said. She would have left him sooner if it wasn't for the kids. She also said that Sunil was too wishy-washy and not pragmatic enough to be successful in life.'

'It is a good thing the kids are old enough to take care of themselves and Sunil is quite capable of looking after himself,' Geeta told Anita.

'Really?' Anita was speechless, shocked beyond belief.

'Yes, and she is talking of going to Fiji for a visit and maybe find someone she likes; to start over again,' Geeta continued.

'I think the flight has just been called,' Anita lied. 'Bye. Talk to you later.' She switched her mobile phone off.

In a daze, she dragged herself towards the gate lounge to wait for the boarding call. Tears were again welling in her eyes. She fell heavily on a seat in the lounge and lovingly and neatly packaged the events of the previous night and locked them safely behind the most secret of windows of her mind.

All she wanted to do now was to get home to her family as quickly as possible.