

LOGA VIRAHSAWMY

INK  
BLOSSOMS

***(SIX SHORT STORIES AND A NOVELLA)***



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# **PART 1**

Short Stories



## **THE ADOPTED BOY**

As soon as Arjuna saw Chitra at the wedding of one of his best friends, his heart started to beat faster. He could not take his eyes away from Chitra, nor could he understand the feeling of excitement and happiness he felt while looking at that beautiful girl with long silky hair in a pastel green organza sari.

The wedding was followed by a vegetarian meal served on banana leaves. Arjuna made sure to sit by the side of Chitra. His first question was “are you related to one of the parents?”

In a cheeky voice, “No! Why do you want to know?”

By then Chitra was feeling some kind of attraction to this striking looking boy dressed in a red raw silk kurta over a white pantaloons. At the wedding ceremony Chitra pretended that she was bending to put the pleats of her sari correctly but in fact she was putting her head slightly up to look at Arjuna.

“I am the bridegroom’s best friend. We were at University together”, Arjuna said and then joked by saying “the wedding would not have taken place without me!”

“Really! Same here. I am the best friend of the bride and we were not only at University together in Cambridge but we did the same course,” Chitra said before adding in a cheeky voice “the wedding would not have taken place without me also!”

“What a coincidence!” Arjuna said. They chatted a lot and when they went to wash their hands, Arjuna held the pallu of Chitra’s sari to help her take the soap and wash her hands.

After less than one year they had the most sumptuous wedding followed by a memorable honeymoon in the Seychelles.

They lived in a mansion that Arjuna got from his late father being the only child. The two professionals lived happily as in a fairy tale but there was something missing in their lives. However hard they tried, Chitra could not get pregnant. They did all sorts of state-of-the-art treatments but in vain. Chitra agreed when Arjuna said he would do a sperm analysis. “The semen analysis will help our gynaecologist to know if the problem is with me. Maybe I am infertile, Chitra.”

With tears in her eyes, Chitra thanked her husband. “I do not know many men who would have agreed to undergo this test. Most men tend to blame women for infertility. I know so many women who went through violence because they could not get pregnant. One of my friends even had to ask for a protection order followed by a divorce as her life was at stake with all the violence she went through. Even her mother-in-law joined in making her life miserable. I really appreciate your decision. I know there are lots of preparation for the sperm test. I will help you, my darling.”

When the results of the test arrived, they both decided to prepare the best meal and opened a good bottle of red



wine. They did a beautiful setting of the dining table using a starched linen table cloth, crispy white napkins, their silver cutlery, crystal glasses and porcelain dishes.

After dinner, when they were having their last glasses of wine in the living room, Chitra opened the discussion. "What next? Let us now be guided by our dreams. We have a nice and comfortable spare room that we can turn into a nursery with colourful curtains, a crib, a table for changing diapers and all the amenities for a baby. When our child grows up, we can turn the room to suit a teenager with all IT appliances."

"I agree with you Chitra but there is more to it than the what next you have mentioned. I know our dreams can guide us but the journey to reach our destination is very important."

"I know there are quite a few babies who are orphans, while others have been abandoned or mothers leaving their babies in hospitals beds and ran away but I would not like to adopt in Mauritius. I believe India would be the best place. Over and above, adoption can be quite tricky in Mauritius. They do not have any legal structure that has made its proof." Chitra explained.

After a few visits to India and going through an official agency, they got their long-awaited baby. A baby boy who was brought to the orphanage by the police. The baby covered with blood was wrapped in a dupatta full of holes, without any clothes on and not even a diaper. While doing their rounds, the police heard the cry of a baby. They looked everywhere and finally found the baby

in a garbage bag. The research of the police to find the birth mother was in vain.

As soon as Chitra and Arjuna saw the baby, with one voice they said: "This is our boy."

The baby would not let go of Arjuna's thumb. "This boy will be very attached to me. I am sure when he grows up, he will take over my business. At least now I know I have somebody to take over this flourishing enterprise."

Close families got a shock when Arjuna and Chitra returned from India with their bundle of joy. The bad mouths started to talk. "Instead of adopting a child in the family they preferred to go to India. Now all their fortune will go to a bastard."

The proud parents threw a big baby shower party. They wanted to give those close to them the opportunity to gather together to help play a part in the child's life. They invited all their close friends and relatives to the party. They had to hire a big bungalow on the beach to accommodate their friends who came from abroad. In the evening after a grand dinner of several courses, there was the most magnificent fireworks display of such colour and spectacle that it was the first time that Mauritius had witnessed such a quality display.

The new parents thanked all those present with all their beautiful gifts and said they knew that those present would play a big role in the life of the new member of the family. They chose that day to announce the name of the baby. "Ganesh".

“Yes, Ganesh it is. The remover of obstacles and the patron of intellectuals”, a proud Arjuna said.

An old Chachi (aunt) approached the cot where the baby lay and she stared into Ganesh’s eyes. She placed the palm of her hand gently onto his head and she said: “Your big eyes are as black as longan seeds, your long black eye-lashes are like silk, your black hair is like satin, your skin is like that of a peach. One day you will become a great man, my son. Your eyes will sparkle like the stars in the sky. You will be exceptionally intelligent.” She, then, turned to Ganesh’s mother and father and said: “I hope I will see this baby turning into a successful man before I die.”

Ganesh grew up into a lively boy. But the parents had to face a big problem. With some help from his parents, he started to walk as late as three years old. At the age of four Ganesh could not talk. The only words he could mumble were “ma...ma, pa...pa and Oyi”.

“Mama and papa, we can understand but what about this Oyi and he keeps on repeating Oyi. There is no child by the name of Oyi at his pre-primary school”, Chitra said. Although reluctant, Arjuna agreed that they took Ganesh to a speech therapist.

The speech therapist found nothing wrong with Ganesh and encouraged the parents to have more patience with him. She even told them that she had a mother who came to her after her daughter started to talk saying how she regretted that her daughter had started to talk. “She not only talked nonstop but had the vocabulary of an

adult and even swore a lot. May be Ganesh is observing a lot and accumulating a rich vocabulary in the process.” Seeing how the parents were upset, the Doctor agreed to do a little test with Ganesh. She showed Ganesh some pictures on a big screen. The child got very excited when seeing these pictures on the screen but when the picture of a lorry appeared, he jumped on his chair and pointed at the screen and said “oyi, oyi, oyi.”

“If I were you, I would not worry at all. Ganesh is an intelligent boy knowing what he wants. It is clear that he likes lorries.”

“Does he have some brain problem? Or maybe he is dyslexic, Doctor. He cannot write simple sentences. He makes lots of confusion with his alphabets and writes them upside down”, a worried Arjuna asked the Doctor.

“Time is his best remedy. If at the age of eight he still has problems, I will recommend a good a specialist.”

Both Chitra and Arjuna started having doubts if they had taken the right decision of adopting a child without knowing his background. They even thought that a lorry driver framed a young prostitute in the slums of Mumbai to have sex with him for a small amount of money.

“I am sure his birth mother could not read or write. It was a one-off affair with the lorry driver. Or else how can we explain that Ganesh is dyslexic and has an obsession about lorries, Arjuna.”

“I had plans for him to take over my business in the textile industry and even thought that he could open new doors with creative ideas and go out of the box with new

markets. I wonder if a stupid boy like Ganesh, whatever help he gets, can become a successful business man. The old Chachi was completely wrong. We now have to face the music and see what best we can do for Ganesh”, a sorrowful Arjuna said.

Ganesh always pointed to a lorry when he saw one. When he was given a most complicated Lego with lots of pieces for Christmas, Ganesh mounted the lorry in no time.

“Do you remember the puzzle we gave him, Arjuna? Both you and I could not have put together these 1000 pieces of that lorry together. It was a complicated one as it was full of merchandise on a rough road. Ganesh did it. Both the lorry Lego and the puzzle sit on his table.”

“Yes, indeed. He can’t be that stupid. He is always making clever and funny remarks. Let us give him more time”, the loving mother said.

At the age of eight Ganesh could make himself understood when he talked and also started to write with the help of his parents. As for his drawings they were always lorries in different shapes, sizes and colours.

As Ganesh grew, he became interested in only one thing. Lorries! Year in, year out he asked for lorries for his birthdays and Christmas. When his father travelled on business, the first thing he asked for was whether there was a lorry in the suitcase. There was not a single toy shop that could rival with the collection of Ganesh’s lorries. He was so spoilt, and everyone loved him so much that they always gave him lorries!

Arjuna once said: "This is not possible! Chachi made a mistake. There is no way that he will become a great man. It is more likely that he will be a lorry driver!"

To which Chitra replied, "Let it be! It does not matter if he becomes a lorry driver, what's wrong with that? I will rather have that than a boy going into drugs and breaking into people's houses. As long as he does his work well this is most important."

When Ganesh turned ten, the old Chachi appeared at the door with a lorry in her hand. Ganesh's parents were surprised and said to her: "How do you know that this child loves lorries? That's something you could not have known! This child will never be a great man like you said. He only likes lorries! We are certain that he will become a lorry driver. In his vocabulary there is only one word: "Lorry!"

The Old Chachi did not reply. She gave Ganesh the little lorry and left.

Ganesh became an expert on lorries. The bigger the lorry was, the more he liked it. As Ganesh continued to grow, his love for lorries also grew. He would make his father take him to see lorries on the roads and at the fire station. His father knew the Manager of the fire station and once the Manager even agreed for Ganesh to sit in the driver's seat. When Ganesh saw the rubbish collection lorries, he would clap his hands and shouted 'Dustcarts'. His father said: "I was sure that he would become a lorry driver, but now I have doubts. He seems to have changed allegiance to rubbish collection lorries."

It's more likely that he will be a Dustbin-man. Now, I remember, he was found in a garbage bag. Perhaps he will end up working in the Department of refuse collection at the Municipal Council."

One day he made his father take him for a ride in a lorry. Even his mother had to give in to her capricious son. She had to sell her car to buy a small van, because Ganesh refused to travel by car. He would say, "Go lorry! Go lorry! No car, no! Don't want car! Ganesh wants Lorry!"

His parents began to have serious worries. They had already made great plans for Ganesh for his tertiary education. They now realised that all their plans would fall apart.

Ganesh was sent to the best private school and after his secondary education, his parents wanted to send him to Scotland for his University studies in economics, finance and computer studies.

His mother had bought him a computer and his dad encouraged him to work on the computer and even put some games that could interest him. The only games that he played were games with lorries. Bob the Builder was among his favourite cartoons.

Most of the time when Ganesh came back from school, he would sit by the window, close his eyes and listen to the lorries passing by. Then he would recite all the different makes and models stored in his head. He not only knew the makes but also the countries that they came from. He would repeat: *Ram, Ford, Honda,*

*Chevrolet, GMC, Nissan, Toyota* as if he was repeating his homework.

Even though his parents had lost all hope for Ganesh's future, their greatest consolation was that their child loved his school. He was not on top of the class but was a good average. There were a few complaints from his teachers saying that instead of following classes he would look at the window and would shout and disturb the whole class whenever he saw a lorry passing by.

After passing his Cambridge School Certificate, his dad decided to send him to a boarding school in Edinburgh to do his Highers. Chitra was heartbroken. "He is too young. Can't he do his Higher School Certificate in Mauritius and then his university studies in Edinburgh?"

"No, Chitra. This boy needs some discipline. He is still young. Better send him now. He will meet new friends in a new environment. Who knows? He might become less obsessed with lorries. We both have friends in Edinburgh and I will talk to them so that they may have a look on him."

After his Highers, Ganesh went to university to do his degree in Economics, Finance and computer studies.

A mature and independent Ganesh came back to Mauritius after spending five years abroad. The proud parents asked him what he would like to do. They got the shock of their lives when Ganesh replied "Lorries". His Father felt dizzy and nearly fainted: "Have I paid for all those years of study for you in Scotland, to hear that you want to be a lorry driver! What are we going to do with



you Ganesh? You are our only child, we thought that you would take over my business. All my hopes are shattered. You are bringing shame to your mother, to me and to the whole family.”

Ganesh did not reply.

After a few years, lorries were competing among themselves on the roads of Mauritius, both in rural and urban areas.

The lorries were in different sizes, shapes and colours. There were small lorries, big lorries, removal lorries, recovery trucks, crane trucks, bobcat machines, 10-ton, 20-ton and 30-ton lorries. There were lorries to collect rubbish, to work on construction sites, working at the docks, working for the Central Electricity Board as well as lorries to carry merchandise for markets and for carrying workers.

All these lorries had one thing in common. On each of them there was the picture of “Ganesh” and below the deity was written “Road to success with Ganesh”.



## **DURGA AND PARVATI**

She was the most beautiful woman that Durga had ever known. Her beauty, her personality, her slim figure and the way she dressed, surpassed any Indian actress. But this was the first time that Durga became really aware why people could not take their eyes off her when they saw her. Such an imposing personality. She was very often embarrassed when people stared at her. She had to bend down her head.

So beautiful in her white sari, a white garland of fresh Chrysanthemums, her favourite flower, around her neck, a white tikka on her forehead. The light make-up enhanced her beauty. Her contagious smile did not leave her face. Durga kissed her cold face and talked to her in a soft voice. She shook her shoulder gently and implored her to reply to her. A member of the family pulled a chair and asked her to sit down. She kept on talking and nobody could hear what she was saying. When her sobbing started to show too much distress, her aunt gave her some water and talked to her. "She had a great life. She went in peace. You should be happy. You are her torch bearer. You have learnt everything from her. She will now live through you. She has left you an incredible legacy."

She looked like a princess in a fairy tale, sleeping on the broderie anglaise sheet. Her body was covered with the most beautiful and complicated bed sheet that she crocheted herself.

Parvati prepared all her burial items to the smallest details when her doctor told her that the cancer was at the last stage. She did not argue or tell her children to take her to the best hospital in Europe or in India. Instead, she packed her burial items and placed them in a big blue pillowcase. She even put some naphthalin tablets in the pillowcase to keep moths away.

Durga looked at her mother and past memories came back like a vengeance. She smiled when the episode of the thief in the house came to her mind. Parvati took her four daughters to the picture to see Lagaan for the third time. They were all big fans of Aamir Khan and enjoyed A.R. Rahman music. While Durga was driving on the way back home, all the children joined their mother in singing Ghanan Ghanan, the more so that the rain was about to fall. They got a shock on reaching the house. The door was wide open, broken window panes were on the floor, and clothes were all over the bed. Durga immediately called the police. Fortunately for them, apart from a few Benares saris and some fake jewellery, nothing much was gone. Parvati had the habit of tying together all her jewellery which included her sets of gold and diamond wedding jewellery and put them in the oven before going out. But she was devastated when she could not see her white sari that she bought in India. She wanted to wear this sari for her funeral. Durga told her that this was a good sign and that God was on her side and she would not die so soon. "Who knows? You have outlived dad. Maybe you will outlive us all."

The next day, Parvati, took a taxi and went to buy the classiest cotton white sari with a silk border together with the assorted raw silk choli.

While watching television, she crocheted the white sheet and did the hemming of the sheet of broderie anglaise to put on her death bed. Durga was the only one who knew where she kept her burial items and her jewellery. Durga even teased her and asked her if she did not want to make a rehearsal of how she would be like on her death bed. "I can take a picture so that you have a good idea how beautiful you would look like in all the things that you have bought and handmade." Durga teased her. She laughed and commended Durga for her sense of black humour.

Parvati believed in the natural aptitudes of Durga. "Compared to your sisters, you are a hard worker, a fighter and always prepared to accept challenges. You will do better than me. I fought to be able to go to school and I finished my primary schooling with good results. I was first in my class. My teacher came home to talk to my father so that I could do my secondary education but he refused. Instead, he asked my mother to start looking for a husband for me."

Parvati got married at the age of 15 and had her first child at the age of 16. "Contrary to other girls and even my sisters, I won a lottery. A good husband who was prepared to help me grow. Every evening he sat with me and gave me tuitions. I sat as a private candidate for my Cambridge School Certificate and came out with flying

colours. I remember how I used to take you on my lap, gave you the bottle and studied at the same time. By the time I wanted to do my "A" "Levels, your little sister came. Looking after four children and being a house manager at the same time, studies became nearly impossible. But your dad encouraged me in my drawing, painting, sewing, knitting and even bought a harmonium for me," Parvati told Durga in one of their intimate conversations.

Parvati broke quite a few stereotypes. With all the skills she acquired, she not only became economically independent but helped in the family's budget. She made a reputation as the best dressmaker in town. She was the first woman in her family who dared being the provider together with her husband. She did not have any preference for her daughters although she had a soft spot for Durga as her gut feelings told her that Durga would follow on her footsteps. Furthermore, Durga shone in everything that she did. From academic studies, music, cooking, pottery or doing things with her hands.

Looking at her mother on the death bed surrounded by white satin and wearing what she wanted to, Durga decided to please her mother one last time. She wiped her tears, went to her room and came back with a guitar.

Families and friends joined her in singing Amazing Grace. Durga ended the song by singing two lines from the Hindi version of Amazing Grace:

*I once was lost, but now I'm found  
Was blind but now I see*

On these notes, the mortuary staff all dressed in white suits, wearing white caps and white gloves came to take the casket for cremation. Instead of asking a priest to conduct mukhagni (the Hindu cremation ceremony), Durga asked her sisters to join her in a few mantras to thank their mother. "Mum you have led us from untruth to truth, from darkness to light and now from death to immortality. May your soul find good body.

**Vo hameshaa ke liye meraa hogaa**

**.....Hameshaa tu meraa hai.**

**You will always remain mine... You are mine forever!"**

On their return from the cremation, a pundit did a short prayer.

The sisters did not even wait for the pundit to go when they started to discuss on what they would take. The eldest sister wanted to have her mum's wedding jewellery, while the other two fought for chains and gold bangles, one of the chains which had a big diamond pendant with little tanzanite stones insert around the diamond. The three of them fought for their mother's exclusive silk sarees.

Seeing Durga standing and observing them, they asked her to choose something. With a firm voice Durga said, "I made my choice a long time ago".

The youngest sister went into a fit and said: "You will certainly not get the chain with the diamond pendant nor the silk saris I have chosen. In fact, I intend to wear the new sari for my wedding."

"No, I have chosen the best of the best."

"What is it then. Tell us. Is it all the beautiful paintings, the knitted and crocheted shawls that mum did?" The eldest sister questioned.

"No! Better than that."

"Why are you being so secretive? Mum had a preference for you. She must have given you a few jewels in secret before her death," the second sister argued.

"Yes, she gave me the best that she had before her death."

"You bitch!!!" The three sisters said in unison.

Durga looked at them straight in the eyes and said, "Yes I have taken the best of everything."

"What is it then? Show us. We can ask the jeweller to value all the jewellery so that we all have equal shares", the youngest sister suggested.

"No! There is no need. Money cannot buy what she has given me."



“Tell us what it is then”, The eldest sister said in an authoritative tone. “I am the eldest one and it is my duty to decide now that mother is gone.”

“She has given me the beauty in her heart, her technical and her writing skills, her art of living, how to be creative with my hands and be the best cook in the family. These are the gifts that I will always cherish and they will be passed on to my children and grandchildren.”



## **RAMON**

Drugs, prostitution, alcohol have all joined hands to spread their tentacles on any prey that they can catch. The country has never known such an alliance.

Cyclones, droughts, floods, poverty, Covid, HIV/AIDS are not as bad compared to this great consortium which has decided to destroy everything on its way.

Parents are afraid when they send their children to school. They prefer to leave their children in front of the school gate and get them in the afternoon. Children are advised not to buy anything outside the school premises. But even then, there is no guarantee that the consortium will not get the children in its net. Some parents prefer to wait either in the car, on bicycles or on their two legs outside teachers houses when children go for private tuition.

Adolescents are fighting with their parents as they are no longer getting permission to go to night clubs. Some have their own tricks of jumping over windows and come back before their parents are awake. The more parents put down rules and restrictions, the more the children become aggressive with the result that they easily fall in the consortium's net. Forbidden fruits have become very tempting. Juicy fruits of all colours of the rainbow filled with a new variety of worms.

The fruits do not look at religion, culture, age, social class, colour of the skin or sex. Fruits that are being distributed like Diwali cakes but they are doing so much harm that

Diwali diyas are refusing to light. Even the Sun has given up and prefers to sleep leaving people in the dark.

Meanwhile, Ramon, the monkey was enjoying himself. He kept on annoying his surroundings. He spent his day sitting on the jointly owned wall of the two neighbours making all sorts of gestures to the seamstresses working for Madam Samy. He, sometimes, jumped from the wall and run after the girls to steal their bananas and peanuts that he was so fond of. He once pulled the skirt of one of the girls.

Ramon was not only mischievous; he, also, had a good nose and could detect any smell from a distance. When he smelt camphor and sandalwoods, he stood outside Madam Samy's prayer room, put his palms together and waited patiently for Madam Samy to give him his share of prasad (devotional offerings made to God). Madam Samy used to caress his head, put a piece of coconut in his mouth and gave him a banana that he enjoyed peeling himself.

Madam Samy did not mind when Ramon sat next to her on the prayer mat. He listened attentively to kirtans and fixed his eyes on the statue of Lord Hanuman. Nobody could understand this connection between Ramon and Hanuman. One of the devotees once said: "Maybe he thinks he is the reincarnation Lord Hanuman. They seem to be sharing secrets."

Madam Samy did not mind when Ramon played with her square sealed paper packages full of praying powder.

Unfortunately for Ramon. One day he went a bit far. He ran after one of the girls, touched her breasts, pulled down her skirt and pinched her bottom. Devi, the best seamstress of Madam Samy was so upset that she gave her resignation.

Madam Samy was in a dilemma and told herself: "I have to make a choice. I will not only lose my girls but my clients as well if Ramon continues with his mischievous behaviour."

She had a neighbour-to-neighbour conversation with Ton Filip, the owner of Ramon.

Ton Filip had a man-to-man talk with Ramon. "We all love you. The girls are always bringing bananas and peanuts for you. They even share their food with you. Madam Samy is more than a neighbour. She is like my family. I do not want to put an end to this strong relationship because of you. I am so sorry; I will have to put you under lock and key in the cage. I know it is a harsh punishment as you have never been locked but you are forcing me to take a drastic decision."

This decision had a strong and far-reaching effect on Ramon. He went on a hunger strike. He turned his head away when Madam Samy and the girls visited him. He refused their bananas and their peanuts. His bright eyes became dull and full of tears. He sat on his long fluffy ash coloured tail when they tried to caress his tail.

Ton Filip was heartbroken seeing Ramon in this state of depression and getting thinner and thinner as days went by. He took Ramon out of the cage and let him back in his

big house but making sure, this time, that all doors and windows were closed.

One day, on his return from the market, Ton Filip got the shock of his life. One of his windows was wide open. He immediately thought that a burglar had forced the window as there were so many of them around. He left his basket full of vegetables and fruits on the steps, grabbed an iron bar and opened the front door. He found a few broken glasses and plates on the floor. He looked everywhere and there were no stolen goods. There was nobody in the house either. He started to call "Raaamon, Raaamoon, Raaaamon. Where are you? Stop being cheeky and come out of your hiding place. I have no time to play hide and seek with you." Ton Filip looked at Ramon's favourite hiding places but could not find him. "Ramon, you must have been bored staying on your own. I should have put the television on. But please come to daddy." No sign of Ramon. He ran to Madam Samy, knocked loudly on the door and asked if Ramon was there.

"No. Sorry Ton Filip. Ramon is not with us. The last time I saw him was this morning when I waived at him. But how come he opened a bolted window?"

Ton Filip jumped into his red Morris Minor and took the direction of the market. He thought intelligent Ramon must have followed him to the market as he used to take Ramon with him from time to time.

He had tears in his eyes thinking of the great moments he had with Ramon and how he adopted the monkey.

One day when he was doing his patrol in Site Zako, a hot region on the outskirts of Port Louis, where drugs, drug dealers, pimps and prostitution were rife, he found this half dead little monkey. Children were throwing water, rotten fruits, gravels and anything they could get hold of on him. When they saw Ton Filip in his uniforms, big leather belt and heavy police shoes coming towards them, they quickly ran away. Ton Filip took the monkey in his arms like a baby and brought him to his place. He wanted to call him Hanuman but changed his mind and decided on the name Ramon. He looked after Ramon like a baby. While feeding him with a bottle he told him, "You are my Hanuman. You will one day be the combination of strength, compassion and devotion like Lord Hanuman. You will be able to overcome the toughest adversaries. You will successfully tackle difficult problems you are faced with. You are the child that I could not have."

Ton Filip lived on his own since the death of his wife. Ramon was everything to him. When Ton Filip took his retirement, he became even more attached to Ramon.

They very often had dinner together. Ton Filip turned vegetarian because of Ramon. He always had plenty of fruits and nuts in a tray so that Ramon could help himself. Ton Filip even put a statue of Hanuman between Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ on his prayer shelf.

He read the newspapers to Ramon. They watched television together. He told Ramon how drugs were causing havoc and destroying lives of children and families.

Ramon was free to play in the yard, climbed trees and visited Madam Samy until that fatal day when he went too far with one of the girls.

While Ton Filip was searching for Ramon, the neighbourhood heard the news. Adults and children started to look for Ramon. Boys and girls climbed trees and called his name, “Raaamon, Raaamon, Raaaamon.”

“How are we going to live without Ramon!” Madam Samy and her girls said in unison. “Ramon is our best friend.”

Madam Samy suggested to accompany Ton Filip to the police and to the MSPCA. “You are a good man, Ton Filip. I am sure the police or the MSPCA will help.”

“I am not sure if these organisations are mandated to do this kind of search. Light a diya and some incense sticks near your Hanuman, Madam Samy and pray for Ramon to come home back safely. I will do the same thing. I am sure my Hanuman, my Virgin Mary and Jesus will protect him.”

Ton Filip had bad memories while working in the police force. He was among the rare police officers who did not take bribe. They hated him for that and very often he had to do the patrolling on his own. But he assured Madam Samy that he would, nevertheless, ask for the help of the police. “They do not have to go out of their way. Maybe they can look for him while doing their patrolling.”

Ton Filip got a shock when he entered the police station. His former colleagues ran towards him to sympathize and promised to look for Ramon.



With the speed of lighting, Ramon found himself at his birth place, Site Zako.

Ramon was too small to understand why the place was called “Site Zako”. But being the companion of Ton Filip opened his eyes. He knew why the inhabitants killed his mum. He understood why the place was called “Site Zako” and why children were ordered to kill him. He would have been dead like his mother had Ton Filip not come to his rescue. The adults could see that Ramon was intelligent and ordered the children to kill him after having tortured his mother.

Neither seen or known, Ramon climbed a tree and started to look around. Just like Lord Hanuman, Ramon exhibited extraordinary abilities throughout the tasks he was about to undertake. This included speed, strength, courage and wisdom. He had to seek vengeance. He still remembered what he saw when the children wanted to kill him. His eyes were like lanterns, his ears heard more than normal and his nostrils smelt all the rots.

Hiding on the tree, Ramon opened his eyes, his nostrils and his ears wide. He started to look everywhere with his eyes like radars. There was a full moon and he could see the movements of people. He remembered the smell of the children. The neurons in his brains started to work overtime. The articles that Ton Filip read to him came back to his mind. He was like Arjuna getting advice from Krishna.

Day 1: He saw small children walking in the street distributing little square papers that Madam Samy put at

the feet of her Hanuman. With one of their fingers, the devotees used to put a dot of the powder on their forehead like a tikka. But Ramon could not understand why children were distributing prayer powders to people who looked more like devils than angels.

Day 2: He saw the same thing. He then watched the adults. He heard another kind of prayer. Adults were repeating mantras before reaching nirvana. He jumped from one branch to the other and noticed that the adults were inhaling the powder given to them by the children, instead of putting it on their foreheads. He was fast enough and could collect a few pieces of the paper. He put them in his strap shoulder bag that he took from Ton Filip before leaving the house.

Day 3: He noticed a well-dressed lady, wearing branded high heels shoes and the perfect make-up, walking in the street. He followed the lady, from a distance, thinking she was on a date. To his surprise he saw the lady talking to the men who were inhaling the powder. They discreetly put fat envelopes in her bag. Intelligent Ramon guessed why these people were giving money the woman. He followed the woman to her house, jumped through a window, hid behind a wardrobe to know what was going on. Ramon decided to camp there feeding himself on stolen fruits from the basket of Madam Zip Sere.

Day 4: He saw a few children wearing rags with no shoes on entering the house during school hours. They stood around a table doing chain work. A group cut papers, another group measured powder with a spoon and put

in the papers. The last group folded the papers just like folded papers near the feet of Hanuman at Madam Samy. The last group of children were waiting to take the papers for prasad distribution.

In the afternoon they all returned to Madam Zip Sere who gave them a piece of bread, a mug of tea and some money. They went back home the same time after school hours.

Day 5: A beautiful Sunday morning. Ramon thought well-dressed Madam Zip Sere was going to Sunday mass. This would have been the first time that Ramon entered a church. Madam Zip Sere took a bus, got down after two stops and instead of going to church, she walked towards a big mansion. The gate and the outside of the house looked like a 5-star hotel. Politicians, business persons and many other Madam Zip Sere were drinking champagne around a swimming pool.

Ramon followed the Madam who walked into a huge luxurious room. Ramon hid behind an antique chair. His big eyes were like that of a real detective. He saw a fat man behind a desk. The well-dressed fat man in a three-piece suit stood and shook hands with Madam Zip Sere.

Madam Zip Sere opened her bag and gave a thick envelope to Fatman who started to count the money. Fatman took out an envelope from his drawer and gave it to Madam Zip Sere. Fatman opened his safe, kept the money and at the same time took out a sealed parcel and gave it to Madam Zip Sere.

“You have done so well. Let us join the others and have some champagne.” Fatman said.

Ramon left the room, jumped on the gate and ran to his house.

Meanwhile the house of Ton Filip was like a mortuary house. People were coming and going, some were even crying while others brought garlands made of striking gold and yellow marigolds. They told Ton Filip it was the colour of hope and Ramon would come back.

Very silently, Ramon entered the house, scratched the shoulder of Ton Filip. Ton Filip knew this scratch but did not turn around as he was afraid of being disappointed. Ramon scratched his shoulder again and kissed him on the neck. Ton Filip turned round and Ramon fell into his arms. They started to kiss each other like two lovers. All the people in the room clapped their hands.

Ramon took out the pieces of paper from his satchel and handed them to Ton Filip. In a language that only Ton Filip understood, they both went into the red Moris Minor and Ramon led the way to Fatman’s mansion.

Two days later, there were wide coverages in local and international media showing pictures of handcuffed Madam Zip Sere and Fatman.

Ramon made the headlines with catchy titles showing him in the arms of Ton Filip. Some of the titles read “Ramon the hero”; “Ramon the detective”; “A monkey did what the police could not do.” “Biggest drug dealer in Mauritius discovered by a monkey”.

One of the articles showed a picture of Ton Filip hugging Ramon with the caption: "The soul of Lord Hanuman entered Ramon to save hundreds of lives."



## **FAMILY SECRETS**

Julie spread love wherever she went. She was the best student in her class and her teachers commended her for that. One of her teachers once told her: "Julie, you have a great future. You will become a great personality. Who Knows? May be one of these days you will become the J.K. Rawlings of Mauritius. You have so much imagination and talent. There is nothing much to correct in your essay apart from punctuation here and here. Or, maybe you will turn out to be a great politician. You talk so well. Your ideas are very clear and you seem to know what the population needs most. You always take your group to a high level each time you take part in a debate. You are such a good girl that you very often join a weak group to empower the girls."

Very often, during recreation, instead of going into the yard to play with her friends, Julie ate her sandwich in the classroom so that she could help her friends to do some catching up with their work. Most of her friends came from vulnerable families and their parents could not afford to give them private tuitions. She even shared her lunch with them. She gave them her unused shoes, dresses, books and satchels.

Julie was brought up by her grandad with the help of her aunt, Sonia. She never knew her mother. She was told that her mother died while giving birth to her and her dad ran away. Nobody knew where the dad was. Once when a decomposed body was found in the sugarcane field, the

grandad was called by the police to identify the body. "No! this is not my son in law. I hope the police does its job properly. This has been going on for too long. Whether dead or alive, my granddaughter needs to know what has happened to her dad. I cannot do your job; I can employ a private detective," Mr. High Society told the police in an angry voice.

"No, Sir. There is no need. We have experts in the different departments. It can be a case of crime or suicide. We do not know yet. You are a well-known person and people know you have money. Who knows? May be the criminals wanted to blackmail your son-in-law," the Commissioner of Police replied.

"Suicide or crime, your search has been going on for too long. You look as an incompetent lot."

Each time Julie asked if her dad had been found, her grandad made her sit in his lap. "Grandad is here, darling. You know how much I love you. Aunt Sonia looks after you so well. May be your dad went overseas to work after your mother's death. He was such a good engineer. The authorities have promised to look into the matter."

Julie never took the school bus. Her grandad insisted of driving her to school. He even employed a casual driver when Julie was invited to her friends' place. Knowing, the social status of Julie's friends, he always made sure that Julie took a few goodies with her.

Grandad taught Julie how to swim and how to ride a bicycle. Julie was the one who always won when they played scrabble.



One day, coming back from school, Julie was surprised to see aunt Sonia crying. "Auntie, why are you crying."

"Tears of joys, darling. I am so happy when I see how you are growing into a beautiful girl. So intelligent and always helping others. You are so good in everything that you do."

Julie found this difficult to comprehend. There was always so much sadness in the voice of her aunt. Very often she was close to tears for no reason at all. Julie had never seen her smiling even when she showed her pictures of her friends, her drawings or her good grades at school. She hugged Julie, congratulated her but the sadness in her voice remained.

Once when the two of them were sitting alone in the kitchen, Julie held her aunt's hands and said: "You are such a beautiful woman with a big heart. You are always giving me gifts. You look after me just as my own mother would have done. I am so grateful for that. It is because of all the love that you shower on me that I do not miss my mother so much. You taught me how to cook. I am a big girl and yet you still tuck be in bed and give me a nightcap."

"I am so proud of you, Julie. You are a fast learner even in the kitchen. You make the best pancakes. They are as good, if not better than Tania's pancakes."

"Eh! Auntie, you are keeping secrets from me. You never told me you had a good friend. How come I have never tasted the pancakes of Tania? I would so much like to meet her. Please do take me with you when you go to see

her. I know grandad does not like people coming to the house but we can meet her when we go for our walks. I will make some pancakes for her so that we can compare.”

Aunt Sonia bent her head and started to cry. A convulsive pain ripped through her and she could not stop. Julie gave her some water to drink.

“Please, auntie, tell me why you are in so much pain. I have never seen you like that.”

“You must promise me not to tell grandad that I uttered the name, Tania.”

“I promise, auntie. Please do tell me what has happened to her.”

“She is no more.”

“What? You mean she died. Now, I understand why you are so sad. It must be heart breaking losing a friend so close to you.”

“Not only my best friend, but.....”

Sonia started to make convulsive gasps again, drank some water and tried to talk but her words were not coming out.

“No worry auntie. I understand. We can pick up the conversation about your friend, Tania, some other time when you are in less pain.”

“No, darling. It is now or never. You are big girl and understand lots of things. Tania was not only my friend..... She was my sister. You have never met her. She died before your birth.”

Julie pressed her head on Sonia's breast and said: "It must be my fault. My mother died when she was giving birth to me. My father ran away and now you are telling me that I had another aunt I had never seen. Why so many tragedies and so many family secrets? Why was the name, Tania, never mentioned? She would have loved me as much as you do auntie Sonia."

"Stop crying, darling. I have been meaning to tell you but Tania's situation was so complicated that I wanted you to be a little more mature before telling you the full story. Now is the time."

Tania was Sonia's junior by two years. They lost their mother when they were both in their teens. Nobody told them how their mother died but there were rumours that she committed suicide. Apart from being very close, Sonia protected Tania and looked after her like a mother. According to Sonia, Julie looked very much like Tania. She was the pride of her teachers being on top of the class. She took part in school debates and her team always won. She was the apple of Sonia's eye. Her life took another turn during her secondary education.

"Did she commit suicide like grandma?"

"Please do not say that. We are not even sure if your grandma committed suicide. No! Tania did not commit suicide. Thinking about it. Yes, it was a different kind of suicide."

Sonia held Julie's hands and told her how one day she found drugs in the inside pocket of Tania's uniform. Sonia could not believe that such a bright girl was taking drugs.

Confronted by Sonia, Tania swore that she kept the drugs for one of her friends. She made Sonia promise not to tell their father. Tania started to miss classes and went out with her friends during school hours. Sonia talked to her and she denied saying that her friends were jealous of her because she was doing so well in her studies. She started coming back home late at night until one day she disappeared completely.

The case was reported to the police. They took urgent action and even made arrangements so that the picture of Tania appeared in all media outlets.

Sonia was devastated and started doing her own search. Tania's telephone was switched off and her friends refused to talk to Sonia. They said that they did not want to be interrogated by the police. Sonia decided to knock at the door of Tania's best friend and implored her to give her some information. She refused to say a word until her mother reminded her how Tania was good to her. "She shared her lunch with you. She gave you her unused branded shoes and clothes which looked as new. I believe you owe this to her, Nadia. If you know something, please tell the lady. She is so devastated. You must help her." Nadia agreed to talk on the condition that her name would not be mentioned to the police.

Nadia explained in details how a few times she saw Tania meeting a chap and gave him money in exchange for some pills. Nadia asked her why she was buying pills from a stranger. She said that she was under much pressure at home and needed anti-anxiety pills. She was under 18

and the pharmacy would have asked her for a prescription. Tania turned a deaf ear when Nadia told her that she should talk to her sister. After a week or so the chap was accompanied by a much older man. The three of them talked and Tania accompanied them. She had been missing classes since that day but she always brought a letter of excuse signed by her father saying that she was sick. Nadia knew she imitated the signature of her dad and told her so. She denied.

Two weeks after her meeting with the two men, she left home and stopped going to school. There was a picture of her in all media outlets under the section of missing persons. The police interrogated her friends and her teachers but Tania was nowhere to be found. Non-Government Organisations caring for drug users were very cooperative. They finally found her in the underworld of drugs and prostitution. She was injecting drug with soiled needles. She prostituted herself in order to be able to buy drugs. The officers of the NGOs took great care of her and asked for the consent of Sonia to take her to a rehabilitation centre. Sonia signed a consent form while her father did not want to hear the name of Tania. "I do not want to hear the name Tania mentioned in this house. She has brought shame to us, a family with good reputation", Mr. High Society told Sonia.

One day Sonia got a call from the Rehabilitation Centre saying that Tania had disappeared late at night. Sonia joined the search team. Her body was found the next day in a criminal underworld where poverty, prostitution,

drugs, HIV/AIDS were rife. She died from an overdose. With the help of the centre, the funeral took place on the same day in the presence of members of the centre and Sonia. They performed a short ceremony before incinerating the body. The next day Sonia threw the ash in the river that flowed behind their house and threw some flowers in the water.

This brutal news on Tania left Julie in a state of numbness before she started to shake like a mad person.

Sonia took her to the bathroom, washed her face and made her drink some sweet warm milk.

In her voice full of tears Julie asked if they could one day go to the river to say a prayer and scatter some rose petals.

“Of course, darling. Roses were the favourite flowers of Tania. I know you can pray as I very often hear you pray before you go to bed.”

As promised, Julie kept this family secret. But she stopped doing well at school. She, very often, cried in class and her teachers could not understand. When they saw things getting from bad to worse, they decided to send her to the school psychologist. Julie refused.

Julie's mind became very confused. She could not concentrate. She had blurred vision and could no longer take part in debates. She was not coherent when talking. The headmistress who was fond of her as she was the pride of the school, talked to her and encouraged her to see the psychologist. The headmistress promised that

the conversation between her and the psychologist would remain confidential.

"I agree but please do not tell my grandfather and my aunt Sonia that I will see a psychologist."

"We promise", the headmistress and her teacher replied in unison.

The psychologist talked to Julie for nearly half a day. The Headmistress sent some drinks and snacks for them to eat but everything remained untouched.

Julie, followed by the psychologist, came out of the office in tears, hugged her teacher and the headmistress and said: "I feel better."

The psychologist, on the other hand asked the headmistress if they could talk in her office. "I am very sorry. We did promise Julie that the matter will remain confidential but this is now above me. It is my professional duty to inform the police and the child protection unit. I will make sure that Julie does not have to go to the police station."

"So, the officers can meet her at her home," replied the Headmistress.

"This is out of question. The meeting must take place in your office, if you agree."

The next day a lady police officer and the head of the Child Protection Unit met Julie in the office of the headmistress. Complicated questions were made easy so that Julie could reply. After the meeting, the child protection unit took Julie with them. "She cannot go back

to her home. We will find a good shelter for her to stay until this case is over,” the head of the Child Protection Unit said with the agreement of the police. The officers promised Julie to telephone her aunt Sonia.

Grandad did not object to go to the police station. On the contrary he was wild. “I will kill the bastard who did that to my beautiful and innocent granddaughter.”

When the Criminal Section of the police started to grill him, he asked for a lawyer. He took the best lawyer who had never lost a single case. He stayed at the police station until late at night and was kept in custody. He was refused bail.

Mr. High Society appeared in court and was found guilty on four criminal charges.

1. The “suicide” of his wife.
2. The rape of his eldest daughter with whom he had a baby. In fact, Sonia was sent to one of Mr. High Society’s friends in Reunion Island during her pregnancy and delivered the baby there.
3. The repeated rape of her second daughter which led to her death.
4. The rape of his granddaughter which had a devastating blow on her psyche.

When the sentence was pronounced Julie rushed into the arms of Sonia and shouted in a loud voice: “I love you mum.”



## **MY BEST FRIEND**

“I could not believe my ears when Martha telephoned me on that Saturday morning. I cried my heart out. I, throwing myself on the sofa, sobbed so loud that Martha got a shock. She apologised for being the bearer of bad news.”

“I am so sorry, Anju, I should have come to see you in person. But I live so far and to add insult to injury my car is at the garage. It would have taken me too long to reach your house by bus. By then, it might have been too late.”

Martha felt it was her duty to telephone Anju. She knew that Anju never listened to the local news or read local newspapers. Anju never missed an occasion to criticise the media saying that she felt there were more gossips and sensational news in the media than trustful information.

“Sexism, stereotyping and treating women as objects in the media are contributing to violence,” she once told Martha. She not only stopped listening to the radio, she also stopped buying newspapers and gave her television set to her maid. She kept on saying that by listening to the radio, watching news on television and reading local papers, she felt being part and parcel of all the one-track mind journalists giving news from their viewpoints only.

“I cannot listen and read news that are so biased. I even did a one-week monitoring on the articles of a mainstream media. I, then, wrote an article, with facts and figures, highlighting the bad portrayal of women, the

absence of women's voices and sent it to the Editor-in-Chief of a mainstream newspaper. But, of course, my article was never published," she told one of her friends before taking the decision to listen only to BBC Radio Channels 2 and 4.

As opposed to Anju, Martha loved all the juicy and sensational news. She often forwarded articles through WhatsApp to her friends. Once, she even forwarded a video of a young group of school boys and girls in their uniforms in obscene positions on the desk of their classroom. One of her friends warned her that by forwarding this kind of video, she would have problems with ICTA and the police. "You can be prosecuted. The police will call you for an interrogation. They will want to know the source of the video and can even accuse you of being part of a cybercrime network. I advise you to be careful, Martha. When you get this kind of video you should delete it and not forward it," one of her friends told her.

She became more careful with videos and articles with sexual connotations, but kept on with her insane manners of forwarding all kinds of fake news, prayer chains, and videos on WhatsApp. She did not miss the opportunity of asking her friends to click on a link to know the traits of their personalities or how to receive big money. She lost a few friends when once she sent a video criticising the religious practices of a certain community.

Anju's stomach was in knots. In a tearful voice, she asked Martha. "What you are telling me is impossible? You must have got the wrong person. We were supposed to meet for dinner tonight."

Martha gave all the details she heard on the radio and even added: "To the credit of the radio, the announcer highlighted how she was a good professional and had saved quite a few lives. The announcer even gave details of her qualifications, her length of service and her selfless approach."

"But did you hear the name?"

"Yes, of course. Otherwise, I would not have telephoned you."

Anju could not stop crying. "Mary. Oh! My Mary. How is this possible? We were supposed to have our monthly dinner tonight."

"Be brave Anju. I should get my car in the afternoon when I can come to see you. I can even stay with you if you wish."

Mary Grant was among the front liners who was not afraid to work with those infected and affected by Covid 19. She paid particular attention to mothers and fathers with small children. She made sure that the children received updates on the health of their parents. She was so caring and did such a sterling job that the Minister of Health agreed to her suggestion of putting a support group in place for those who had lost loved ones so that they could connect and share their griefs. This created a good networking and the grieved parents and children

met regularly to share experiences. The group was called CSG (Covid Support Group). A psychiatrist, a nurse and a generalist joined them from time to time when they needed medical advice. CSG organised open air activities and from time to time they rented a van so that they could walk on the beach, mask on.

When they were kids, Mary and Anju lived next door to each other, went to the same primary and secondary schools. Mary went to do medicine in Surrey while Anju got a scholarship and went to Delhi to study fine arts. By the time Mary returned to Mauritius, Anju was already married with two children. The bonding remained so strong that when Mary got married, she insisted that Anju read a passage from the Bible after the priest's sermon. They both made history as this was the first time that a woman of Indian origin, in her beautiful red sari, went to the alter to read a passage from the Bible in a church.

After Mary's honeymoon they took the decision that they would meet at least once a month either for lunch or for dinner. They were both careful about their diet but enjoyed their red wine.

Although they both had their own cars, their husbands insisted of dropping them and coming back for them so that they could enjoy their red wine and have quality time together.

Their respective husbands were successful business persons, one in offshore and the other one with textiles companies in Mauritius and abroad. Busy husbands but

caring at the same time. The four of them met socially from time to time.

The evenings that Anju and Mary spent at the restaurant were special. They shared their joys, their pains and problems with in-laws. They sometimes took the restaurant by storm when their giggles turned into laughter while sharing jokes on their work. Anju talked a lot about the behaviour of the young girls in the school where she worked. "Can you believe it? A young Hindu girl who climbed the walls of the college, to meet her boyfriend during lunch time. She was encouraged by her friends who made sure there were no teachers around until one day when I asked her to meet me in my office, she was nowhere to be found. One of her friends leaked the secret. I immediately called her to my office, after school hours, had a long discussion with her and suggested that she did a pregnancy test. She was not only pregnant but had contracted the HIV virus."

"Poor girl, I am sure with you around, she's in good hands", Mary replied before saying, "let me tell you a story that is hard to believe. As you know I had my private surgery before joining the hospital. Once a couple came to see me to get advice on contraception. They already had four children and said they would not be able to cope with more. I advised birth control pills and told them that the pills could be bought over the counter in any pharmacy. They came back to see me after six months. I got a shock when I saw that the wife was heavily pregnant. With eyes wide open, I shook my head and asked what has happened with the pills. They said that it

did not work. After some questionings the man said that he drank the pills diligently every night.” Anju and Mary laughed so much that they had tears in their eyes.

Once they decided to go to an upmarket restaurant which had opened its doors recently. The atmosphere was romantic, with dim lighting, soft music and scented candles on the tables. They were laughing so loudly that the manager went to their table to say that he was having complaints from his clients. “You should be more discreet. We do not accept same sex couple in our restaurant. Your booking was done on line and we had no means to know your credentials. We do not want to lose our regular clients. This place is for couples and lovers. I would advise you to stop being so noisy. This is considered vulgar in our restaurant.” Anju and Mary laughed even louder, paid the hefty bill and left without even giving a tip to the waiter. While they were waiting for Anju’s husband on the pavement, the Manager went back to them and said: “Prostitutes are not allowed in front of our restaurant. You had better leave before I call the police.”

Mary could not hold her tongue. “OK. We are leaving. But, let me tell you that we can telephone our good friend right now.”

“Go ahead! Call the police and I will see what you can do. The Commissioner of Police has dinner here from time to time.”

“You mean the Commissioner of Police and his mistress!

Our friend is the wife of the Senior Minister sitting in the most romantic corner of your restaurant drinking champagne with his mistress. The Senior Minister should be in Parliament right now discussing an important piece of legislation.”

The Manager was speechless. He opened his eyes wide and shook his head when at the same time he saw an important man in his BMW picking up Anju and Mary.

“Come, Mr. Manager, let me introduce you to my husband”, Anju told the Manager arrogantly.

Anju was all dressed up for work when she received the call from Martha. After all her sobbing, she took a deep breath, closed her eyes, recited a mantra, drank some lemon balm water before telephoning her husband to announce the bad news. She changed into a black outfit, dropped her children at school and went to the mortuary house.

Head bent, she walked along the corridor. She saw a man walking with an assistive cane. She hugged him and offered her condolences. The man did not respond.

She saw a lady all dressed in white with white boots and white gloves. She went towards her to ask which room she should go to. “I am so sorry. The coffin just left the mortuary house.” When the lady saw the distress of Anju, she said: “You may still have time as the family has decided to take the coffin to her house for a final prayer before going to the cemetery.”

It took Anju less than 30 minutes to reach Mary's house. She cried her heart out when she did not see any cars or the hearse outside the house.

With a lump in her throat, she decided to knock at the door to ask one of the maids which cemetery she should go to.

Instead of a maid, a beautifully well-dressed Mary, who had cut her long hair very short, opened the door and hugged Anju.

"Eh! What are you doing here? Our monthly dinner is tonight. I have booked the best restaurant in the North as Sanjeev is prepared to take us there and bring us back. He is meeting some clients from overseas at a hotel there. I did not want you to see me in my short hair before tonight. In fact, I have taken a day off after a very long time. The Covid situation is getting better and I thought of pampering myself a bit."

Anju hugged Mary so tight that the tears rolling from her eyes started to wet Mary's dress. "So sorry. Suddenly I have become emotional seeing you with your salt and pepper hair. People will soon ask you where you had your strands done and where you bought your shampoo. I did not even know that you were so daring. Look at these beautiful well painted nails."

"Have you taken a day off as well? Come inside. Let us have a cup of coffee."

"No, sorry. I have to rush. I took a day off to attend to a parents' meeting at Lola's school."



Anju rushed back home. Telephoned Martha, "There is not only ONE Mary in Mauritius." She then telephoned her husband. "So sorry Khevin, you still have to babysit tonight."

She very much later learnt that the old man she hugged at the mortuary house was the father-in-law of one of her friends. He suffered from Alzheimer and left the house without informing anybody. The police eventually found him.



## **BLOOD AND INK BLOSSOMS**

Tazou, Yanou and Rachou: Names given to them by their grandmother. She had to be different. She refused to call them by their real names.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare wrote: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by another name would smell just as sweet." Indeed, calling them by nicknames made them as sweet if not sweeter than their real names. Grandma was told by her best friend, the priest, not to give them nicknames as they all had biblical names. "So what? This does not mean that they are not blessed children," was the reply of grandma.

But what grandma did not expect was that the grandchildren would give her nicknames as well. Not one but three. When Tazou, the eldest one, started to call her mémé, she quite liked it and encouraged the other two to do the same. No! They had their own little ideas and refused to be influenced. Yanou called her Logs and Rachou called her Grandmother. Families and friends argued with grandma. "Your grandchildren have no respect for you. They should have called you grandma and not give you nicknames." Very gently grandma told them "What's in a name? I respect their choices. In fact, I am very happy that the idea of giving me nicknames come from them."

It was a bit confusing when the three of them were together and decided to call her. They enjoyed shouting

the nicknames they gave her in public places including supermarkets, shops, markets and shopping malls.

Once they took the supermarket by storm when the three of them shouted together “Mémé, Logs, Grandmother.”

People looked at them with curious eyes. A baffled shopkeeper made an announcement to say that three lost children were looking for their parents. A terrified Shop Manager took over the microphone. “Dear clients. I have an important announcement to make. Three children have lost their parents. They are shouting, “mémé, logs and grandmother”. I am making an appeal to the parents to come and see me immediately. I am also asking all clients who have seen three unattended children roaming in the supermarket to please bring them near the counter. If I do not see the parents, I will have to report the case to the police as well as the Child Protection Unit of the Ministry of Gender.”

Instead of three children, a smart elderly lady approached the Shop Manager. She was impressive in her blue jeans and raw silk white shirt. She wore a long necklace with assorted earrings. She looked quite chic, edgy and super on-trend in her bright silver hair falling on her shoulders. “Do not worry, Sir. They have the bad habit of shouting names”, the lady said.

“Who are you? Are you one of the parents? Where are the other two? They are not shouting one name but three: mémé, logs and grandmother”, the Manager replied.

With a smile the lady said: "I am a bit like your promotion. Buy one and get two for free." A bewildered Manager looked at the lady straight in the eyes.

"No! Sorry Sir. I am not joking. I am three in one. They are my grandchildren. Do not worry! They get lots of pleasure in shouting the names they have given to me as if they are in an auction sale. Once they are done with their shopping, they will wait for me at the counter and ask me to pay."

The three grandchildren never missed the chance of accompanying their grandma to the supermarket. They enjoyed taking the child supermarket trolleys. They felt free and at ease to do their own shopping either on their own or following grandma. So free, that, they did not only put their favourite brand of biscuits, chocolates and cereal in their trolleys but bought other few items for their parents as well.

Passing in front of the cereal section, Rachou would say: "Ah! there is no cornflakes at home." She would put, not one, but, two boxes of Kellogg Cornflakes and other breakfast items in her trolley. Once she said she was very thirsty and decided to open a brick of soya milk that was already in her trolley. She had a big gulp and grandma had to take her to the toilet to vomit. As for Yanou, it was always different cuts of fresh meat. Tazou, on the other hand, went for lamb shanks. "Nobody can compete with you in making the best steaks and the most succulent and tender lamb shanks", Yanou and Tazou told grandma. On top of choosing their best pieces of meat they made sure

of adding a few fresh slices of salmon. “We like it half cooked”, Tazou and Yanou said while Rachou shouted, “No! I want mine well cooked.”

But, when the children spent long week-ends in hotels with their grandma, it was the other way round. Grandma had to call them all the time. She had no sense of direction and could not find tables booked for them in the restaurant. She very often followed them with her plate for buffet breakfast and dinner to make sure that she did not lose her way. If the children wanted to stay late to enjoy their evenings, dancing or watching films, they had to take grandma to her room first in case she lost her way. It happened once or twice that she could not find her room and had to go back to the children. It was always Yanou who held her hand to accompany her to the room while the two girls kept on dancing or watching their films.

They were on top of the world when once grandma and grandad decided to take them to the races. They were all dressed in colourful jumpsuits, wearing trainers that were given to them by their parents for their birthdays. They had their backpacks full of goodies prepared by their parents. They were warned to hold tight the hands of grandma and grandad which they did. Instead of eating what were in their backpacks, they insisted on buying popcorns with their own pocket money. They could not resist the aroma of freshly roasted peanuts and hot fried pakoras. The grandparents had to stop at quite a few stalls so that they could eat hot pakoras and drink alouda. They were overjoyed with the spinning tops of all

colours of the rainbow that their grandparents bought for them. When they saw children running with windmills, they asked for that as well. They were warned not to run with the colourful windmills but to keep them in their hands. Grandma and grandpa held their hands tight to prevent them from running after the sellers riding bicycles full of all sorts of plastic toys. "How can they cycle? Their bicycles are so covered with toys that they cannot even see where they are going", Rachou questioned. "They have their own secrets to find their way", Yanou replied. Tazou added, "They look like cartoons in story books." They were thrilled with the roar of the crowds and seeing children running around.

When the races started, they got really excited and had real fun in the vibrant atmosphere and exuberant crowd watching the races. They were like Eliza Doolittle in "My Fair Lady" when they started to cheer for their favourite horse. Fortunately for the grandparents they did not say "Come on Dover, move your blooming arse"; but only said "quicker, quicker, go faster, go faster." They shouted so loud that people around them joined in their cheering. The grandparents were also enthralled by the races. After the races, when the grandparents looked around, they nearly fainted. The children were nowhere to be found.

What a nightmare? They ran across Champs de Mars shouting "Tazou, Yanou, Rachou". No reply! They talked to the sellers of peanuts and pakoras. Nothing! They stopped the bicycles of the sellers of windmills and spinning tops. Nothing!

When the crowd started to get thinner and thinner, they thought it would be their chance to find the children. Nothing!

By then it was getting late and one of the parents telephoned. "You spoil them too much. I know you have taken them to their favourite restaurant in the capital but please bring them home as soon as they finish eating. They need to take their bath and go for an early sleep after this long day."

Doing her best to put a normal voice, grandma responded, "We have only three. It gives us so much joy to spoil them."

With tears in their eyes, the grandparents jumped into their car and went to the nearest police station. They could not believe their eyes when they saw Tazou, Yanou and Rachou sitting on the laps of police officers eating plum cakes with big mugs of hot chocolate in front of them. "Grandma, grandpa, we are having a great time. The police officers are taking good care of us. They even gave us a demonstration on their work and taught us a few tricks on how to catch a thief. Would you like to eat some plum cakes with us?", Yanou said before adding, "The police officers said that next time they will take us to see the fire lorries."

The grandparents were so happy that words were not coming out from their mouths. "We do not think the police will have to do that Yanou. We will see how this can be arranged. Meanwhile, please thank these nice



officers for looking after you so well. We have to go home. Your parents are waiting for you”, Grandpa said.

The police officers took the grandparents to task and were even a bit harsh with them. They took all the blame and promised never to leave children unattended. “So well behaved children. Fortunately, one of our officers saw them. I was hoping that nobody would come for them. I wanted so much to take them home with me. This would have been a dream for my four-year-old daughter who is always asking for a sister or a brother.”

The secret of being refugees in a police station was well kept by the three grandchildren until they left for their university studies.

Well before their university studies, they travelled by plane for the first time when grandma decided to take them to Rodrigues. Contrary to their parents who were quite anxious, they were all very excited. “This is not a long-haul flight. It takes only 30 minutes to arrive in Rodrigues. I promise to telephone you all as soon as we reach our destination”, Grandma assured the parents.

Sandwiches and juices were served on the plane. Yanou ate his chicken sandwich quite fast and asked for another one. “Big boy must be quite hungry!”, the airhostess smiled and gave him another sandwich as well as a few sweets.

A 4 by 4, assigned to them by the travel agent, picked them at Rodrigues Airport and dropped them at the only five-star hotel on this small island. The excitement was at its peak at the hotel. They helped themselves not once

but twice to breakfast and dinner. As for lunches they looked at the map and decided where to go and what to eat. In the evening they enjoyed walking on the beach and talked to fishermen. Once they insisted that grandma bought a beautiful 'vielle rouge'. "However, much I love you, I definitely won't buy this bright fresh red fish although it looks very tempting. Who will cook it?" "Buying it is your problem but having it cooked is our problem", Tazou and Yanou replied in unison. "If you do not want to buy this fish, we will. We have our own money." Grandma gave up. They took the fish to the hotel kitchen and the chef was too happy to prepare the most delicious dish for them making sure that all bones were removed.

They preferred the craft market to road-tripping along scenic routes. "We need to buy local crafts for our school friends and our parents", they argued. "What about walking with tortoises? You can take pictures with them", Grandma suggested. "No, we prefer to explore the small islets. Let us have a picnic on Ile aux Cocos. My friend showed me pictures of this gorgeous islet with soft white sand and clear water. She said that the birds flew over her head", Tazou said. "So, craft market and Ile aux Cocos, it will be. Then what next!", Grandma enquired. "I would like to take you to "Grande Caverne" but I am a bit afraid that you may start shouting "mémé, logs and grandmother". This will echo in the ears of the visitors. It is a cave with weirdly-shaped stalactites and stalagmites that you might be afraid of." They gave the idea a good thought then replied: "It will be like in our fairy tale books

with the shadow and different shapes of dragons. Yes, we will love that. We promise not to shout your names, hold hands and follow the guide. We have our torches.” Grandma assured them that there was no need for torches as the cave was well equipped with lights, handrails and walkways. They behaved really well and enjoyed “Grande Caverne” without shouting the nicknames of grandma.

The next day grandma insisted that they visited St. Gabriel Cathedral. A stone church built in the 1930s and the biggest in Rodrigues. Luck followed them as they had the chance of attending a mass that was going on. The assistance as well as grandma were amazed when the three children, held hands, walked to the choir, stood behind the singers and joined in singing the hymns. After the mass the priest waited for them at the gate of the church to congratulate them.

Before the end of this five-day holiday, they spent the whole day in Port Mathurin. They not only bought local handicrafts, rattan baskets and other souvenirs, but the children decided to buy dried octopus and dried fish. Grandma was flabbergasted. “I will certainly not put these smelly items in your suitcases. All your clothes and your shopping will stink.” The children did not even respond; instead, they walked to the Manager and asked for old newspapers. They did the packing themselves.

A few days after their return to Mauritius, the three grandchildren put ink to paper and wrote a story book on their visit to Rodrigues. The book was enhanced with

their own drawings; pictures of places they visited as well as pictures of Rodriguan women and men from different walks of life. The front and back covers were made with vacoas leaves. The book entitled “Grandmother by Grandchildren” sat proudly on the coffee table in the living room of grandma.

## **PART 2**

A novella



# **WHEN OLD FRIENDS MEET**

## ***THREE OLD FRIENDS***

There was electricity in the air when the three old friends met after nearly 45 years. They met by chance in the supermarket. Was it fate? Was it luck? Was it Karma? But it had to happen and it happened.

Sarah, Latah and Zorah were school friends. Since day one at primary school, they became good friends. They shared their lunches. They helped each other with their homework, they played pranks on their friends. They called themselves the three “H” as their names ended by “h”. They said that their “H” stood for: harmless, hospitable, and helpful. They kept to their motto and were always already to help a friend in need.

They were on top of the class and got very good results for their Higher School Certificate. Sarah was a laureate and got admitted to Oxford University. She studied architecture. Latah got a scholarship and went to Delhi University to study biodiversity while Zorah, who, also got a scholarship, went to study landscaping combined with architecture in Canada.

While overseas they communicated regularly through WhatsApp, emails and zoom. On their return to Mauritius, after their studies, they met quite a few times for lunches in restaurants until Latah stopped coming.

Zorah and Sarah heard that she got married. They tried to contact her but in vain. Her Facebook account was deleted.

Zorah and Sarah met a few times. One day Zorah told Sarah that she was going abroad for further studies. She did not say where. This was the end of the story of the three friends until they met in the supermarket.

They recognised each other immediately. They all had grey hair, had put on weight except for Zorah who kept her slim figure. Latah was dressed in a salwar kameez while Sarah wore a beautiful pair of designer pants over a beautiful flowery shirt. Zorah wore a magnificent flared skirt made of African wax printing cotton. Her branded handbag matched her branded pair of shoes. They went for coffee and could not stop talking. They made the promise to stay in touch. After a few social gatherings including coffee, lunches and dinners, they realised that they had so many secrets to share that meeting on and off was not the best solution.

“We are all over 70. Time is against us. We were 20 years old the last time we met physically. We cannot wait for another 20 years to share all our joys, pains and sorrows. We are all financially independent with a good revenue. Don’t you think it will be a good idea if we spend the rest of our days together. What about staying together in a big mansion with our own bedrooms with attached bathroom and toilet as well as one or two guest rooms?”

Latah and Sarah looked at Zorah and with one voice shouted “YES”.



“You are a genius. This is a fantastic idea,” Latah added.

“OK, in that case since I am in the business, I can start house hunting and we can decide what is best for us”, Zorah suggested.

“We trust you. We know you will look for what is best for the three of us,” Latah and Sarah said in unison.

The project was finalised during a wine and dine evening in Zorah’s apartment. They looked at several houses and went for a five-bedroom mansion with a big kitchen, living, dining and a creole style veranda facing a well-designed garden.

The next day the three jumped in Sarah’s car, with picnic baskets, to visit the place. They fell in love not only with the mansion but with the garden which was stunning.

They could not believe their eyes. Latah tried to talk but could not find her words, she finally said: “This is a dream place. Our garden will make a positive contribution to biodiversity. We will eat what we grow. The stream nearby will provide all the water needed for the garden. We can contribute to protect the environment and go completely green with photovoltaic modules for electricity. My dream of working on biodiversity in Mauritius will come true with our mansion. I can already imagine butterflies in their vibrant colours flying all over the place. I never thought in my wildest dream that one day I would be able to bring to Mauritius what my family and I did in India. In India, we supported communities by promoting access to technologies and good practices for farmers, fishers, herders and foresters. We addressed

the root causes of poverty. We helped them to adapt to climate change problems.”

Zorah hugged her friends and said: “As the saying goes everything happens for a reason. We have all been through difficult situations where we sometimes lost our own sanity. There was something hidden in our mess and that something is the three of us meeting to heal ourselves. Let us give ourselves a chance and not let the storms we have been through disrupt our lives.”

## ***LATAH***

After my studies in India and with my PhD in environmental science, I had no problem in having a job. In fact, I had so many choices that I had problems in choosing one. The University of Mauritius wanted to have me to do research; the government wanted to employ me as a Senior Environmental Consultant working on food systems resilience; the private sector wanted to have me to work on a variety of green projects. I finally went for a job in a nongovernmental agency working in Mauritius and African countries on water issues, climate change, ecosystems, waste management as well as rural and urban land use.

The work was getting hectic for me with only a few junior staff. The organisation gave me an Assistant. Yusuf and I worked really well together and we came up with innovative projects. We had nothing but praise from Governments in countries that had water problem. We

solved their problems. They wrote official letters to the NGO to commend our work. They told us how communities were grateful to have running water. Yusuf and I had a special bond. When we went abroad, we stayed in the same hotel so that we could work at night. We had all our meals together. He became a vegetarian as he wanted to eat like me. The friendship developed into love and passion. People started to talk. The gossiping was so rife that my mother forced me into an arranged marriage. "A good Hindu girl from a well-known family cannot go out with a Muslim boy. There are so many Hindu boys with top jobs who have asked for your hand and you have always refused. I will not take "NO" for an answer. You will get married to a Hindu boy and that's the end of the story. I will make sure that he is suited for our family."

"I am not a merchandise to be sold, even, to the best buyer. I will rent an apartment and live on my own until my organisation asks me to settle in one of the African countries. In fact, the proposition has come up." I shouted at my mum. My father showed lots of sympathy, agreed with me, but could not argue with my mother.

"No, you will not do that. You have a debt towards us which you will never be able to repay." My mother started to cry on top of her voice. My father and I could not control her. She then started to have jerky and uncontrollable movements. My dad and I thought she was on the point of dying. We called the family doctor who gave her some medication. To calm her, I had to promise that I would get married to a Hindu boy.

Yusuf was devastated when I gave him the news. He asked me to join him in any African country where we could get married. "Yusuf, I love you. Something of you will always be with me. My parents, especially, my mother is making me pay for something which is not my fault. I looked after my little brother like my son although I was only 15 and he was six years old. My mother prayed day and night to have a son. She did lots of pujas to thank God when the son was born."

"OK, they have their son and you have your life. Moving with me will be the best solution," was the response of Yusuf.

"No, Yusuf, it is not as easy as that. Let me tell you what happened. My brother insisted in accompanying me wherever I went. One day we went to the shop. On our return we saw some boys playing football. The ball came right at his feet. In a fraction of second he left my hand, took the ball to give it back to the boys. He was hit by a car and did not survive the accident. My mother has always blamed me for the accident. She went through grief therapy to deal with her intense pains. I, too, had to go through therapy to be able to process these painful emotions. It took a long time before my nightmares stopped. My mother kept on blaming me for this loss."

"Latah, getting you into a forced marriage is emotional blackmail. Can't you ask your father to talk to her?"

"My father sympathises with me. He knows that his son died in an accident and has never blamed me. But he is afraid to lose his wife."

That was the end of the conversation with Yusuf.

I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl after eight months of marriage. When questions were asked, I insisted that she was premature. My husband was the first one who did not believe me as the baby was so healthy, had grey eyes and did not look like us. The relationship with my in-laws went from bad to worse. I could no longer bear the badmouths and the gossiping. I had my own little idea and one day I left the house of my in-laws. I took a plane to India.

My daughter and I lived in a small village where poverty and violence were rife. I helped the women to take control of their lives. I put in place a few projects on the retention of rain water, planting of fruits and vegetables. Due to poverty and transport problems, parents could not send their children to the nearby schools. I opened a small school and trained an assistant. We were the only two teachers.

The sale of vegetables and other foodstuff to neighbouring villages allowed some girls to buy their own bicycles. This gave them the chance to go to colleges. My daughter was among those girls.

She went to college with them on her bicycle until she was ready to go to university. I did know if it was fate but Sandya did the same course that I did at Delhi University. When I asked her why? She said she wanted to follow my footsteps.

After her Masters in Environmental Science, Sandya returned to the village with a nice-looking boy and a bag

full of innovative ideas. “Will you not introduce me to your boyfriend, Sandya?”

“Mum, you are embarrassing Joshua, he is not my boyfriend. We became good friends at university. We connected even more when he told me that he had some roots in Mauritius.”

“Oh, my God. This is a small world. How come, you have roots in Mauritius, Joshua?”

“No, not roots really but I was told that I had relatives who were buried in the Jewish Cemetery at St. Martin in Mauritius.”

“This is news to me. I did not even know that Mauritius had a Jewish Cemetery. Were your relatives born in Mauritius?”

“No! I do not think so”

Very gently, Sandya stopped short the conversation. “Mum, we are both very tired. We would like to rest a little bit. We can pick up the conversation some other time unless Joshua wants to continue, of course.”

What was supposed to be a short visit for Joshua became a permanent one. Joshua was so involved in our work. He came up with new ideas of solar heater for cooking and heating water instead of cutting trees for wood. With his experience as an Engineer, Joshua helped with the construction of a big dam so that the villagers had water all year round. Joshua could not believe his eyes when I gave him a demonstration on how the villagers used to get water from a well.

Working together and staying under the same roof changed the relation of Joshua and Sandya. They fell madly in love.

They both wanted a religious ceremony. An elderly lady in the village agreed to perform the Hindu rituals while another lady performed the Muslim and the Jewish rituals. The wedding was followed by a vegetarian meal served on banana leaves. Although born and raised in England, Joshua managed very well eating with his fingers.

During one of our evening conversations, Joshua said that he would like to visit the Jewish Cemetery in Mauritius. "My parents told me that some of my relatives were deported to flee the Nazi persecution of the Jews in Germany. They were deported to Mauritius in 1940 and were detained in prison. They died and were buried in Mauritius. I need to research more on them. We need to know our past."

"You are right my son. May be one day we can all go to Mauritius together. I would like Sandya to meet her biological dad."

"Yes, Mataji, you too have a sad story. Sandya told me all about it."

Nearly a year after the wedding, I got news that my dad had a massive heart attack and was in intensive care unit. "Mum, you must go. Joshua is so caring he will help me when the baby comes. The chachis are looking forward to help with the delivery."

I was in a dilemma. “No, I can’t. If something happens to the baby or to you, Sandya, I will have myself to blame for.” I was so lucky in helping with the delivery of a healthy baby girl, put her in the arms of Joshua, before rushing to the airport.

I could not believe my eyes when I saw my dad on the hospital bed. He was like a broken puppet. His right arm was paralysed. His face drooped. His mouth twitched and no words came out. Yet, I felt that he recognised me. I fought back my tears and asked him if there was something I could do. My dad moved his left arm and did signs with his fingers. I wrote “I love you” on a piece of paper.” My dad moved his head, took the piece of paper and sketched an “S”. “No, I am not your sister, Sita. I am Latah. I will stay with you for as long as you need me. My dad scribbled an “S” again. “Do you want to play riddle as we used to when I was small?” He turned his head and scribbled a jagged “a” and a crooked “n”.

“Now, I get it you are asking for Sandya. She is very well and could not come as she has just given birth to a princess. She wants you to know how much she loves you. You must get well. She wants her family to meet you in Mauritius.”

One evening I was alone with my dad when I saw tears rolling down his cheeks. I knew this was the end. I asked my mother to come into the room. The nurse gave the time of death. Although I was by then a grandmother, I felt completely lost in front of my mother. The furious expression in her eyes made me feel small. She had



always been judgmental and opinionated towards me. She hated me and never forgave me for the death of her one and only son that was a gift of God. By the way she looked at me I could see that she was not grieving her husband but her son.

The cremation was held the next day after a series of prayers and rituals. I insisted on taking the clay pot holding the ash of my dad. Instead of going to the river, I went to the garden.

Yusuf came to the wake and attended all the rituals from a distance. While I was digging the ground to plant a tree for my dad, I felt two strong hands around my waist. The four hands dug the hole in the garden and we planted a guava tree. Yusuf put his palms together when I did a little prayer: "You will have your favourite fruit all the time, my dear dad. I love you."

"I have lost you once. I do not want to lose you again. I want to see my daughter." Yusuf whispered in my ear.

"Not only your daughter but also your granddaughter who looks very much like you. Same eyes, same features...." I could not finish what I had to say as by then Yusuf could not control his emotions and hugged me tightly.

We travelled to my adopted village together. Yusuf was in ecstasy when he saw Sandya. He lifted her up like a small child and kissed her profusely. Yoshna started to cry seeing a stranger hugging her mum. Yusuf immediately put Sandya down and held Yoshna in his

arms. Yoshna pulled his beard gently, caressed his face as if she had always known him.

“Lost and found. What a story?”, Sandya said before hugging her dad again.

“I never thought, in my wildest dream, that I would see the love of my life again, let alone my daughter and granddaughter. Now, tell me, who is this charming young man smiling at us.”

“This charming young man is your son-in-law dad. Joshua came to the village to see our work but the village has adopted him. We have a bungalow not far from mum.”

“I would have recognised you anywhere in the world. My wife and my daughter look so much like you”, Joshua said with a smile before hugging Yusuf.

After a week or so, Yusuf asked me to marry him. He got worried when I looked at him straight in the eyes.

“Oh! My God don’t tell me that you will refuse. The man that you were forced to marry is dead. You are free, Latah!”, Yusuf said in a troubled voice.

“Eh! What took you so long? My answer is... My answer is .....YES. I want to spend the rest of my life with you and our family.”

A Maulana did an intimate Muslim wedding in the hall of a Mosque. The ceremony consisted of a few readings from the Qur’an before we exchanged our vows in front of our children.

A big surprise awaited us when we came back from the Mosque. The whole village was gathered at the gate of

our house. They threw petals of orange marigolds on us. The most respected old lady of the village was on the steps of the veranda with a bronze plate containing flowers, incense sticks, camphor, a deeya and red tikka in a small bowl. She lit the lamp, the incense sticks and the camphor before moving the aarti plate in front of us clockwise three times, put a tikka on our forehead and asked us to do the same. I took the tikka with my middle finger and applied it on Yusuf forehead. Yusuf did the same. While touching the feet of the sage, the whole village in their most melodious voice sang an aarti mantra:

*"Goddess Lakshmi, Goddess Saraswati, Lord Ganesha, we bow in front you.*

*Goddess Lakshmi give this couple wealth, fortune, power, beauty and prosperity to continue the work of the village.*

*Goddess Saraswati, the mother goddess of knowledge, music, arts, speech, wisdom and learning, given them guidance for the benefits of our children and the children to come.*

*Lord Ganesha remove all obstacles on their way."*

Tables and chairs were organised inside the house for the whole village. Steel glasses, banana leaves and big bowls of rice and a wide variety of vegetable curries were placed on the tables. This was the best wedding ceremony that anybody could have had.

Joshua and Yusuf invested themselves with new projects on food security, water retention, green energy and

other environmental issues. The village got the name “Paradise on earth”.

I still rejoice when I think how the Government of India got news how “Paradise on earth” was thriving and changing the lives of hundreds of people. The Minister of Environment called Yusuf. “I have heard a lot of your little village and would so much like you to share your experience with us. Your village is a model in the alleviation of poverty. If you do not mind, I can get one of my Senior Officers to liaise with you for the sharing of your experiences. What about a training course? Your wife can, of course, come with you. We know she is the pioneer in empowering the villagers.”

“What a story!”, I teased Yusuf. “You are a big man. Recognised by the Government of India. Are you going?”

“Why not? And you are coming with me.” After this high-level workshop, Yusuf was offered a job as Chief Consultant on Environment for the Government of India. Yusuf refused but helped them through zoom whenever they needed his help.

We also helped nearby villages with innovative environmental projects until Yusuf became quite sick with a cancer. He became completely dependent on us. The elders of the village insisted on becoming his care givers. Very politely, Sandya refused, and instead moved with us. Sandya and Joshua became full-time nurses. They bathed Yusuf every morning and helped him to eat and drink. In the afternoon they pushed him in his wheel chair and put him under his favourite banyan tree. Yusuf

smiled when Yoshna read fairy tales to him. Yusuf could not control his emotions when one day Yoshna said: "Granddad, let me show you how to walk. Put your hand into mine and we will do small steps like my baby doll." We all laughed and helped Yoshna with this ritual for a few minutes every day until one day with tears in his eyes and in a faint voice, Yusuf said: "I am so sorry, my darling. You have given me the best of what can be expected. Let me go now."

Yusuf died peacefully on my lap with Sandya, Joshua and Yoshna sitting by his feet. We sang his favourite song "Kun Faya Kun". At the cremation we sang a few Hindi devotional songs and took the ashes back in the garden. A neem tree still stands proudly in our garden in the village.

Another dilemma struck me when I got news that my mother had a stroke. Sandya and Joshua talked to me and helped me to take a decision. "Bury the past mum. I know how much you have suffered through no fault of yours. She is your mum and you must help her." Sandya encouraged me to go.

"Do not worry Mataji, we will look after everything and, if you need help in Mauritius, Sandya can join you. You know that I am capable to look after Yoshna on my own. I will look after everything. There are lots of hands to help."

My children encouraged me to bury the past. Reaching Plaisance Airport, I took a taxi and went direct to the hospital. I could not believe my eyes when I saw my

mother. Her face was twisted. She could not talk but had tears in her eyes when she saw me. "I think she recognises you," my aunt Sita said.

The Doctors and the nurses told me to get prepared. "She will not be able to live on her own when she gets out of the hospital," one of the nurses said.

I stayed in my parents' house and used my mother's car to go to the hospital every day. I sat by her bed. Did my best to hold her hands and caress her forehead. I tried to give her a kiss but could not. My mother has not hugged me or given me a kiss since the death of my brother. She was furious with my dad when she saw how much my dad cared for me. My dad and I used to hug, to hold hands and we even met in restaurants during my lunch time.

During one of my visits, I saw my mother making signs for a piece of paper and a pencil. She tried to put some words on paper. I got a shock as I thought she was trying to imitate my dad who used to play riddle with me. However hard my mother tried she could not hold the pencil. After one week or so she tried again and this time very diligently like a three-year-old child she tried to write an "l" then "o" which I could read. The nurse helped in guessing the other alphabet which was a "v". "Madam, your mother is saying that she loves you."

"This is not possible, nurse. She has always hated me."

"I do not know what happened between you and your mother. Let the past be the past. Time is for forgiveness. She had tears in her eyes when she saw you."

I tried very hard and finally I could kiss her on the forehead. The facial paralysis of her face prevented her from smiling but she did her best to show me that she wanted reconciliation.

After two weeks at the hospital, I got her admitted in a health centre. Two specialists taught her how to speak, how to walk and how to eat. I visited her every day. I helped her to walk with her walker, held her plastic cup so that she could drink, wiped her face. It was really painful when one day I sat with her for lunch. The food fell all over her bib before reaching her mouth.

During one of my visits, she held both my hands tied. I thought it was part of the exercise. No! She wanted to talk. Because of her dysarthria, she had problems in pronouncing the words she wanted to say. She lacked control in the muscles on the left side of her mouth and face. She tried very hard and finally I could understand what she wanted to say.

My mother died peacefully after two months at the health centre. I went according to her wish and gave her a full Hindu death ritual with prayers and mantras. After the cremation I threw the ash in a nearby river.

However, much I wanted to book my ticket to return to my village, I could not. There were still all the prayers after the funeral and the big 13-day prayer followed by a family meal.

After the 13 days, I decided to make an audit of my parents' assets. I could not believe my eyes when I saw all the expensive gold and diamond jewellery and

kanjivaram sarees of my mother. I contacted my parents' lawyer who told me that they did not only possess the big house but large pieces of land in rural Mauritius and other properties as well.

I wrote to Sandya and Joshua for their views on the assets. "Take your time mum. The most important thing is that you made peace with your mother and she asked for your forgiveness before her death. We are not ready to leave the village yet. But when we come to Mauritius, we can discuss about all the assets."

## ***SARAH***

Contrary to the traditional couple, I kneeled down and asked Mark to marry me.

"Why did you take so long to ask? I thought you would never ask."

I raised my head, looked at him in the eyes and said: "I am no longer in my 20s and my knees are hurting and the diamond ring in my hand is about to fall. Thinking about it. Are you not the one who is supposed to ask?"

Mark laughed on top of his voice, helped me to stand up and gave me his finger to put the ring on. It was a single diamond set in a sandblasted band of white gold.

We kissed passionately like two young lovers. "I have more surprise for you."

I gave him a bunch of red roses, a bottle of champagne and a voucher for two nights in a five-star hotel.



“I love you, Sarah. It has always been you and will always be you.”

During our romantic dinner at the hotel, the “I love you Sarah” triggered an impetus in my mind. “Mark, thinking about it. Just one of my mad ideas. No, leave it. This is too farfetched. It will not work and you will all think that I am mad.”

Mark held both my hands tight and lovingly said: “I know you can come out with mad ideas. But go on. Tell me what is on your mind?”

“OK! But please do not laugh.”

“Cross my heart. Promise. Go on. What is this mad idea of yours?”

“I was thinking that....”

“Go on!”

“Our son is getting married to his long-time partner.”

“Yes, but this is not a mad idea. We both know he is getting married and we have both agreed to help with the preparation of this big event.”

“What about the two of us getting married? We have been together for so long. Our son is getting married.....”

“So, you want us to get married before accompanying our son to the alter?”

“Yes, but....”

“What but? I agree.”

“I mean we can celebrate our wedding together with that of our son.”

“You mean get two for the price of one.”

“Mark, you are so horrible. If you agree we can find out how David and Danny feel about this mad idea.”

“Of course, I agree. I believe there is method in your madness. This is a fantastic idea. Once we get back home, we can talk to David and see how he feels about your mad idea. I do not think they have started with the organisation of the wedding yet.”

David was overwhelmed. “What a brilliant idea. You are a genius mum. Parents and their son getting married together. This is really getting out of the box. I am sure Danny will agree.”

The same night an excited Danny telephoned to say that he liked the idea so much that he did not have words to express his happiness before adding: “We have to decide what to put on the invitation card. With my artistic and graphic designing background I can put something on paper. I know my staff will help but this is a big challenge. My company has made quite a reputation for the best designs for cards, brochures and other work of art; but this one will be quite something. Parents and children are getting married together. Let us have a zoom meeting so that we can brainstorm.”

Danny did a great job with this exclusive and unique invitation card. But, apart from the invitation card, planning was huge on both sides. We wanted something intimate but grand at the same time. Our friends were scattered all over the world. They needed to get the invitation quite early so that they could book tickets.

Danny's parents helped with accommodation. "But, as for you mum and dad, you will stay with us. After the wedding you will have the flat all to yourself. We are planning for a long honeymoon," David told his parents. "We will not take NO for an answer. We do not want you to stay in a hotel. You know how big and comfortable our flat is without mentioning the state-of-the-art guest room." Danny added.

Quite a few members of our families refused the wedding invitation with a note saying. "We regret we have to apologise. We cannot be part of a wedding which is against nature." Others replied positively and said: "This is incredible news. You are breaking up with traditions. Not only your son is getting officially married to his partner in church, the parents are sealing their love in front of a priest as well."

The priest was the godfather of Danny, and being gay himself, he was over the moon when Danny and David asked him to celebrate their wedding. He suggested the most original ceremony. "This wedding will represent a landmark in my career as a priest."

As the four of us wanted to shine by ourselves, we did not want any bridesmaids to walk down the aisle with us. David and Danny walked hand in hand wearing different colour of suits with one white orchid on the lapel and colourful bowties. I wore a vintage stylish tea-length lace dress with a three-quarter-length sleeves and a flattering off-the-shoulder neckline and Mark wore a three-piece

suit with a floral tie. We followed them with our bouquet of white orchids.

The priest started the ceremony by saying: "This is your chance to share how you truly feel, think about what your love and what marriage means to you. Repeat these few passages from the bible after me. May I suggest that couples who are in the audience come forward and join me in repeating these beautiful passages.

Corinthians 13:4:5: *"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.*

Psalm 143:8 *"Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life.*

Ephesian 4:2 *"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love."*

Song of Songs 8:6 *"Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire like a mighty flame."*

After the exchange of rings, Danny and David sang "Love is love" by Culture Club.

We all stood up and joined in the first stanza:

*You don't have to touch it to know  
Love is everywhere you go  
You don't have to touch it to feel  
Love is every second we steal*

The Church ceremony was followed by a sumptuous lunch in a hotel outside Oxford. We refused to be bogged down by rules and broke stereotypes by making our own speeches. Each one of us had a different story to tell on our partners. The speeches were all short, funny, with incredible anecdotes.

The next day after the wedding, Danny and David went on their long honeymoon while Mark and I enjoyed our friends. Some we met again after 40 years. We stayed and partied with a few of them in Scotland. A holiday that took us back in memory land and made us remember all the mischiefs of our university days.

No longer young and with all the excitement of the wedding and the holiday, we needed some rest on our return. Alas, one day when we were having lunch, we heard a loud knock on the front door. I was really angry. "What a cheek, Mark. If the fisherman continues knocking at our door to sell his fish, I will find myself calling the police. I don't know how many times I have told him that I will meet him on the beach whenever I need fish."

Before I had time to go to the door, it opened with a bang and two voices shouted: "Surprise, surprise."

"My God! I can't believe it. What are you doing here? You were supposed to be enjoying yourselves in the most exotic places of the planet," Mark told them before I sneered and added, "So, you used only part of the wedding gift!"

“No! We honeymooned in the most beautiful places on earth. We visited the rainforests in north of Queensland. We visited the Daintree Rainforest and the Mossman Gorge. We had the opportunity to experience some of Australia’s most breath-taking natural scenery. We learnt about the Kuku Yalanji people and they shared with us their fascinating history on the environment.” An excited Danny went on and on before David could take over and said: “We also learnt a lot on food security in a village in India. The villagers venerated their mentors, a Mauritian family, like Gods. The Mauritian family insisted that we stayed with them for a few days. We learnt a lot on the environment, food resilience and the Hindu culture. After these few days we were like natives eating with our fingers on banana leaves.”

“But, why are you here? Have you not seen enough of us?” I told them.

“How can a holiday be complete without the most fantastic parents on earth,” Danny and David said in unison.

We had a terrific time during the four days they spent with us. We shared the unforgettable memories of our joint wedding as well as pictures and videos. We even did some gossiping on the people who refused to attend the wedding. David got a shock when I told them how my cousin, who was horrified by our invitation and refused to attend the wedding, nearly committed suicide.

“What? She wanted to commit suicide because of a gay wedding?” a confused Danny said.

“No, she heard that her daughter was going out with a girl. She was devastated. She threw her daughter out of the house. She was in such a state that Mark and I offered to take her with us for a few days. We shared with them how happy you are as a couple.”

We had the most extravagant holiday. Danny showed his dancing talents at the nightclub. David, on the other hand, taught us how to do parasailing, windsurfing, scuba diving and other sea activities. We even went for big game fishing with some friends.

Their departure left an emptiness in the house. One day while we were busy doing our own things, Mark with his writings and me with my knitting, my telephone rang. I answered but there was so much excitement at the other end that I could hardly hear what our boys were saying. “Please, take your time and one at a time. I really cannot get what you are saying. Go slowly and tell us all about this excitement.”

As usual I put the telephone on loudspeaker so that Mark could take part in the conversation.

“We now have a big house with a magnificent garden on the outskirts of Oxford”, David said.

“We know that and we also know how thrilled you were when you bought the house. You even sent us a few pictures,” I told the boys.

Danny took over. “There is something missing in our lives.”

“What do you mean?” Mark said. “You are happy as a couple. You are both doing very well in your respective profession and now you have a big house.”

“Surprise, surprise!” Danny and David shouted. “You do not get it?”

“How can we get it. The last time you said ‘surprise, surprise’ we saw you on our doorstep,” Mark responded.

“Dad, mum, you don’t get it,” Danny went on. “You will soon be grandad and grandma. We did not tell you all this time as we were waiting for all the papers to be signed. This is now done, grandma and grandad. You have a grandson. His name is Damien.”

We hugged each other and cried with happiness. We opened a bottle of champagne to celebrate our grandson.

Mark and I invited ourselves to spend time with our grandson. There were a few house rules that we wanted to ignore but could not. David knew that I would poke my nose into the way they were looking after the baby. “Mum, I know you believe you know best on how to raise children because you have raised me but Danny and I have our own ways. You are allowed to stay with us to enjoy Damien. Enjoy your grandson. Make the most with him and let us do the rest.”

They refused all our help. At night when we heard Damien crying, we both got up. We could do nothing as either Danny or David was already up feeding the baby and changing his nappy.



“Mum, we told you not to get up. We are capable parents. You are our role models and we want to raise Damien like you have raised me,” David said with a smile while caressing the head of the baby.

Our grandson, Damien, was so lucky to have parents like David and Danny. They knitted and crocheted mittens and booties as well as beautiful baby clothes and colourful jackets for Damien. I did not even know that my son was so good at knitting and crocheting.

They celebrated Damien’s first birthday party in Mauritius. Danny’s parents came to Mauritius for the first time and fell in love with the country. Our friends and relatives adopted them. Damien did his first steps in the sand on the beach and started to talk on the very same day of his birthday. “This is a miracle child”, both proud grandmas said with once voice. “May be his future as an athlete is being born right on this beach,” Grandpa Mark added.

Mark and I felt like two orphans when they all left. We zoomed them and looked at videos and pictures nearly every day. We went to see them at least once a year.

We all agreed that the 5<sup>th</sup> birthday party would be held in Oxford. A party with lots of fun games for the children in the big garden followed by a grand dinner under a marquis for the adults.

Three weeks before the party, while having dinner on the beach, we heard the ground telephone. “Let me go, Sarah. Who is this idiot who rings on a ground telephone nowadays?”

Not, seeing Mark coming back, I shouted: "Dinner is getting cold and the wine is getting hot. Why do you always have to engage into long conversations with people, Mark?"

No reply.

I ran to the living room. Horror! Mark was unconscious on the floor. I shook him a bit, put some cold water on his face and asked him to talk to me. He looked at me with tears in his eyes and could not say a word. I thought he had a stroke and I rushed to call an ambulance. In a weak voice he said: "No need for that. Book our tickets and get our suitcases ready."

"But Mark, the birthday is in three weeks."

Still in a faint voice: "One thing at a time, book the tickets immediately and I will tell you more in a minute."

Danny and David with Damien in his car seat at the back were involved in a bad car crash. They were on their way home after all the shopping for the birthday when a lorry coming from a side road hit their car. The car went upside down on one side of the road. The lorry driver immediately telephoned the police who telephoned an ambulance to take the injured to emergency in the nearest hospital.

We took a taxi at the airport and went direct to the hospital. Horror! We saw Damien with lots of bruises on his face in the arms of his grandma. "The Doctor said that fortunately he was well dressed from top to bottom with his cap on. Otherwise, it could have been fatal," Danny's dad said.

“What about our sons?” We asked.

“Danny is out of danger. He is back in the ward with broken legs and arms, broken ribs and wrists. His broken arms and legs are in cast and they have bandaged his chest. We do not know about David. He is still in the operation theatre,” Danny’s dad answered with tears in his voice.

We asked to see Danny. We were allowed to take Damien with us. A nurse kindly accompanied us and gently told us not to talk too much to him.

We could not believe our eyes when we saw Danny. He was like a zombie. He looked at Damien and tried to talk. We placed Damien by his side on the bed. He touched Damien with his good hand and faintly uttered: “I love you darling. All will be fine and soon dad will be with us. We will celebrate your birthday some other time.” Damien tried to put his head on his dad’s chest but the pains were too tough for Danny to bear. The cringe on Danny’s face made Damien rushed into our arms.

We spent the night walking in the corridor of the hospital drinking coffee and waiting for the Doctors to come out of the operation theatre. At 2.00 a.m., the main specialist came out, shook his head. I fell into his arms. “I am very sorry! We did everything that we possibly could. My condolences.”

Our world turned upside down. We were in shock and lost all our means. Danny’s parents called one of their best friends who promised to take over for the organisation of the funeral. Their friend lost her sister

recently and knew a good funeral director who understood the pains of bereaved families.

The funeral director was very supportive and guided us throughout the whole process. Danny was devastated and insisted that we waited for him to be on his feet for the funeral.

It was the most painful funeral that one could have imagined. Danny was in a wheelchair pushed by Damien. The same priest who celebrated their wedding did the funeral service. At the end of the ceremony, Danny placed a bouquet of white orchids on the coffin. He took the microphone from the priest, controlled himself and recited the poem of W.H. Auden:

*Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,  
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,  
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum  
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.*

*Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead  
Scribbling on the sky the message 'He is Dead'.  
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public  
doves,  
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.*

*He was my North, my South, my East and West,  
My working week and my Sunday rest,  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.*

*The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,*

*Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;  
For nothing now can ever come to any good.*

We suggested to take both Danny and Damien back with us to Mauritius but Danny gently refused. We did not insist.

Danny suffered terribly from depression, anguish, fearfulness and nightmares. He went to see a specialist and was diagnosed with (PTSD) Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. For the sake of his son, he agreed to go for treatment to regain control over his life. Damien seemed to understand when his dad had to go through treatment which included psychotherapy and was sometimes groggy with the amount of medication he was taking.

We suggested to move to Oxford for a short period so that we could help Damien but Danny assured us that he could manage. He, finally, agreed that his parents moved with him for some time as he could no longer cope. We travelled more often to Oxford although by then Mark too was suffering from depression.

I had to be strong for Mark, Danny and Damien and did my best to mourn David with the help of a priest. From time to time, all the memories of David throughout his childhood came back with a vengeance and chilled down my spine. Some nights both Mark and I could not sleep. We tried with sleeping pills and the next day we still felt exhausted and spent most of the day in bed.

Mark was incapable of mourning our only child. I did my best to help him by telling him that we still had another son and he had to be strong for Damien but his grief was

too painful to bear. He went through therapy. He became very fragile and was in extreme fatigue, with nausea, headaches, food aversion and sleepless nights. It was difficult for him to do anything. He refused to walk on the beach. His friends organised fishing expeditions which he used to love but he refused. His depression so was so severe that sometimes he stayed in bed the whole day. It was hard for me to watch him wasting away.

I asked Danny's parents to bring Damien to Mauritius thinking that this would help. But unfortunately, Mark did not have time to wait for his grandson. He died peacefully in his sleep.

Danny and Damien were present for the funeral. Danny placed a delicate bouquet of white orchids on the coffin while Damien placed a drawing that he did with granddad. A colourful drawing showed him holding the hand of grandad tightly. Close families and friends walked behind the casket carried by pallbearers to the church. At the end of the short funeral mass, I plucked my courage to read the poem of W.H Auden but I could only recite the first stanza.

*Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,  
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,  
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum  
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.*

## ***ZORAH***

While at the University of Toronto doing my masters in Architecture, I met Yuri. He was finishing his doctorate in Astrophysics. All his friends and especially girls revered him like a god.

Yuri was the centre of attraction wherever he went. He had blue eyes and blond hair that fell on his forehead. Very handsome and attractive with his not too well shaven beard. But well groomed. Confident. Strong personality. A manly vocal voice that was imposing. Classy and smelling good perfume all the time. Treated people well and with respect. He was always dressed in designer clothes and shoes. He had the ideal body for catwalks. His charismatic appearance and attractiveness washed the eyes of both women and men. He was not only the best-looking man on the campus but also considered to be among the most intelligent ones. His supervisor sometimes asked him to lecture undergraduate students.

I noticed Yuri on the campus from time to time. He was always surrounded by girls. I never went close to him. Not my type. Too imposing personality for me.

I met Yuri face to face at a BYOB party that my friend threw to celebrate her new job. There were plenty to drink and eat. I was on my own drinking soda when I saw this man coming towards me. "Eh! On your own and drinking soda at a BYOB party. I brought some champagne. Would you like some?"

I got a shock. Why would a man like Yuri talk to me? “No! That’s very kind of you. I do not drink alcohol.”

“OK, let me get you some Shandi. It is a mixture of beer with lemonade. I will make a light version for you. Why don’t you try it?”

“If you say so. Fine. I’ll go for it.”

Yuri came back with a glass of champagne and a glass of Shandi. We started to chat about university life and our respective studies. He got very interested in my background and the country I came from.

We made comments and laughed on people around us who were drunk. Some of them were kissing and caressing without bothering if people were looking at them.

At nearly midnight, I told Yuri that it was time for me to go.

“Eh! Are you Cinderella and have to run on the stroke of midnight? Stay for a little more. I promise you will not lose your shoe.”

“No! I can’t. I do not want to miss the bus.”

“You came here by bus. Do not worry I will drop you to your place.”

“Very kind of you. I am used to travel by bus. Furthermore, I live in a safe area.”

He insisted on driving me back to my place. “Listen, it is still quite early. Stay a bit longer. Enjoy yourself. I like your company.”



I told him that I had an early lecture the next day and had to go. He insisted on giving me a lift. "To tell you the truth I was not enjoying the party. I accepted the invitation to please one of my old friends."

We talked a lot during this short drive. When we reached my flat, he stopped the car and kept on talking "I would so much like to meet you again. Shall we exchange mobile numbers?"

I was speechless. I told myself that he was making fun of me. White man with blue eyes, blond hair wanting to exchange telephone numbers with bronze skin girl with long black hair tied in a bun. This was not possible. We were poles apart.

At his insistence, I gave him my mobile number and he immediately sent me a missed call. "You have my number now." He kissed me on the cheek and left. I turned red. I was so embarrassed that I had problems in finding my keys. While searching for my keys, I felt a presence behind my back. "Let me help you find your keys." I did not know what to say and gave him my bag. He handed me the keys. Gave me a kiss on my neck and left.

I could not sleep and thought of him all night long. I did not hear from him nor see him on the campus for quite some time. I thought this was the end of the story.

One day he appeared on my doorstep. "Sorry, I did not give sign of life. You have been on my mind so much that I did not know how to cope with this relationship. I thought I would get over it and accepted an offer to facilitate a short workshop outside Toronto. I could not

get you out of my mind. Here I am on your doorstep and asking you out for dinner with me.”

I did not know what to say. “Do not say anything. I will wait for you in the car.” I asked him to come inside and to wait for me in the living room.

It was very embarrassing the way he looked at me in my apple green satin dress, high heel shoes, long earrings and my hair captured in a braid.

“You are so delicate with your long satin hair as dark as the night and your eyes that turn from grey to green.”

He took me to the best restaurant in Toronto with the most exquisite cuisine. He slowly introduced me to some red wine. I made a grimace. He laughed and encouraged me to sip the wine which I did and finally enjoyed. I drank only one glass and he finished the whole bottle.

I did not even have time to search for my keys when I felt two strong arms surrounding my small waist. We looked at each other with passion. Without warning he kissed me on the mouth, his warm lips went down my neck then my shoulders.

He opened my door.

We fell on the sofa and he kissed me more deeply this time. He paused, then kissed me hungrily. I moaned with pleasure and he enjoyed the sensations of my body as I became aroused. He opened my dress and kissed my breasts. I was out of breath and told him that I had never had sex.

“Do not worry, I promise not to hurt you. We will go slowly. I want you to relax and enjoy. Feel comfortable, pay attention to your body. You might feel some discomfort as the experience is new but you will get over it.”

It did hurt and I bled a bit. It was far from being magical as often seen in films. But Yuri was caring. He looked at me, caressed my hair, caressed my body and said: “It will be better the next time.”

Our relationship became so strong that we had to see or talk to each other nearly every day. Yuri was a source of support for me. He helped me with my dissertation and accompanied me when I did my viva. He suggested that I moved with him. “What is the point of renting a flat when we are together all the time. Let us stay together in my flat.”

His flat was not only bigger than mine but luxurious with state-of-the-art facilities. What had to happen, happened. I did not have my period for two consecutive months. Yuri accompanied me to the gynaecologist who confirmed I was pregnant. We were on top of the world. Yuri became even more caring. He did all the household work and accompanied me to the Doctor. He was so excited when he saw the scan of our baby girl that he asked for a printout.

By then I was working as a research assistant and could work from home from time to time. One day when I came back home after a long day doing research, I saw a big fat

envelope on the mantelpiece with Yuri's handwriting: "To Zorah from Yuri".

I opened the envelope and saw a huge amount of money and a few cheques. My mind worked overtime. I said to myself "Yuri must be having a double life. He has not been honest with me. Where does all this money come from, if not from selling drugs? All the lavish spending on restaurant, gifts, jewellery and designer clothing must come from drug money."

I then saw a letter in the envelope together with the printout of the foetus scan.

*"Dear Zorah,*

*I love you with all my heart. Never in my life I thought I would fall in love and be so happy with a woman. But I am not sure if this is really what I want in life."*

My heart was so heavy that I stopped reading and told myself: "My intuition did not betray me. He wants to continue his life as a drug magnate."

*"I am an Astrophysicist. I am more interested in my work than in building a family. I know you will be a great mum and dad. I want to work for NASA. May be one day you will hear that I am doing some kind of project on the moon! (No, I am joking). You might think that I am a coward but I want to do more for humanity than raising one child. With my Astronomy background I know I can contribute to science education. With all the problems humanity is facing with all sorts of pandemics including*

*Covid 19, I want to do advanced research in medicine and consumer products. Understanding the universe is not an easy task. Astronomy helps to study how to prolong the survival of our species on earth. These issues are more important to me and I know I will not have time raise a family and I do not want to disappoint you.*

*I have never told you but I come from a very rich family. The flat is mine and I am giving it to you. I have talked to my lawyer. See his contacts at the end of this letter. Tell our daughter that she is part of me although she will never be able to meet me physically. Please do not try to contact me. My work demands lots of confidentiality. If you need help my lawyer will help.*

*In remembrance of all the magical time spent together.*

*Yours for ever*

*Yuri”*

I was broken to pieces. I sat on the floor rubbed my tommy and could not stop crying. I telephoned my sister who promised to come for the delivery and to stay with me until I was ready to go back to work.

Eva was the most beautiful girl on earth. She looked like a girl straight from a fairy tale. Curly blond hair, blue eyes and fair skin. But there was a lot of sadness in her face. She started to play the violin at the age of five.

My life took a new turn when Neil, one of my colleagues, and I were given a big contract to work on the planning, designing and constructing of a hospital in Vancouver. The contract came with lots of fringe benefits including a

flat with all amenities and a car. The contract was too challenging to refuse.

Neil and I moved to Vancouver and Eva stayed with us. We looked like a married couple with the most beautiful daughter. Our friendship turned into close intimacy. We had long conversations after dinner at home. Neil was a real cordon bleu. We had a child minder who came only during the day.

The intimacy turned into some kind of attachment, closeness and sexual attraction. I was so afraid to start a new relationship that I lost my appetite and could not sleep at night.

We knew we were attracted to each other. The way Neil looked at me, the way he held my hand when I helped him in the kitchen, spoke for itself. Neil became even more caring and the way he protected me at work was embarrassing.

Our friendship changed into a set of emotions, intimacy, commitment and trust.

One day he told me that he had a few designs to finish and to go back home on my own. After a few hours, he came back with a huge bouquet of red roses, knelt down, offered me a diamond ring and asked me to marry him. I immediately accepted with the condition that if we had another child, Eva would remain his eldest daughter. "How can you even say that. I love her like my own biological daughter. Of course, my love for her will never change."

We got married at the civil status office followed by a meal in a restaurant. I did not want the Chef of the family to cook.

After one year of marriage, we were blessed with another girl. Eva was excited to have a sister and she played mum with her. We really enjoyed family life especially when Eva was on holiday. Neil and I took turn to carry Ivy in the child carrier backpack to go hiking or mountain biking. I played with Ivy on the beach when Neil took Eva for water sports activities.

In the evening we walked a lot around the city with our two children. We very often went to Stanley Park where Ivy enjoyed crawling and protective Eva walked behind her.

Eva enjoyed Vancouver. I heard her talking to her little sister. "You know, Ivy, one day I will become a great star either an actress in a film or a violinist." She taught her three-year-old sister how to play the violin but Ivy was more interested in drumming. For her fifth birthday she insisted on having a full set of drums. We were quite surprised to see how well she played. Eva not only encouraged her but they did their own concert with a duo of violin and drums. We registered them to a music school. Furthermore, this encouraged me to go back playing sitar and I bought one. The vivid memories of my dad and I playing the sitar together came back. Neil, on the other hand, showed his vocal talents. We called ourselves "The magic orchestra"

The children enjoyed Vancouver so much that we bought a house and Neil adopted Eva officially. She was called Eva Khan Gibson.

During my spare time I helped a few NGOs in Africa and Asia to improve the lives of those on the margin of society. I struck a chord with an NGO in India looking for an expert to do a project for a hospital. I not only worked on the project on pro bono basis but tried to get some funding for them. They asked me to be physically present to head the project. I agreed as it was an NGO trying to improve the lives of people in a village, especially women who needed medical care.

I took Eva with me knowing that Neil was more than capable to look after Ivy.

One day Eva said: "I miss Ivy mum; but I am so happy to have so many sisters in the village. I would love to stay here all my life." She went to school with them and was top of the class. When we came back to Vancouver, I registered Eva in a private school.

She was so beautiful with her blue eyes, long blond hair and slender figure that boys could not take their eyes off her. Unfortunately, she became big headed and thought her beauty was more important than her studies. The Director of the college called me a few times to complain about her behaviour and her bad grades. I got a shock when the Director told me that one of the teachers saw her nude and having sex with a boy in the toilet.

Neil and I had a long conversation with her. Neil even had to calm me down when I started to raise my voice. She



did not deny. "I am now 14 years old; it is normal to have sex at my age. What can you do? If you want me to leave the house, I can do so. There are so many boys out there who would queue up to have me." All we could do was asking her to take her precautions. We thought this was the end of the story until one day she did not return home after college. I left Ivy with Neil, took the car and did nearly all the night clubs of Vancouver to find her. I finally found her in a nightclub in a remote place. She was sniffing drugs and was completely drunk. I dragged her out. Once at home I put her under a cold shower, wrapped a towel around her and gave her plenty of black coffee.

I had to be on my guard all the time. This situation affected both Neil and Ivy. We quarrelled a lot. "Zorah, think a bit about Ivy instead of caring for Eva all the time. Ivy is a bright girl, on top of the class and has a bright future. If Eva continues like that, she will ruin the future of her sister and you will be part of this tragedy."

I contacted the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction. They put me in touch with a doctor who worked with patients on substance abuse. I gave the doctor Eva's background. She suggested that Eva went through therapy and to contact an NGO dealing with drug patients for help.

I diligently accompanied Eva to the therapist as well as the doctor at the NGO leaving Ivy and Neil behind. One day I was in a workshop outside Vancouver and could not accompany Eva. She did not return home. I knocked at all

doors including her friends, the therapist, the NGO doctor but Eva was nowhere to be found. I went to the police to report a missing person. Her pictures were on television and in the media but Eva did not give any sign of life.

My relationship with Neil was getting from bad to worse because of Eva. "Your behaviour is being detrimental to Ivy. I am the only one looking after her and caring for all her needs." Then in a loud voice he added: "Zorah, you are contributing to ruin the life of such an intelligent girl. Her future will be jeopardised because of you and your drug addict daughter. I am now at the end of my tether with helping Eva."

This was the last straw. I did not reply. It was true that the behaviour of Eva started to have an effect on our family.

I walked to my office and searched for the telephone number of NASA which was easy to get. But the receptionist refused to put me through to Yuri. I telephoned his lawyer who had pity on me and gave me his mobile number.

Yuri got a shock when he heard my voice on the telephone. "Zorah, is that you? What has happened? Why are you calling? Who gave you my telephone number?"

I had goosepimples and in a broken voice I asked him whether a 14-year-old girl came to see him.

"How do you know. Yes, a young girl barged into my office. Security did their best to stop her but she knocked

them down and jumped over them. I asked her if she wanted some money, she said she only wanted me to see her face not the printout of a foetus.”

“Oh! My God. I really cannot believe it. It is her. She is very mature for her age. She must have taken money from my bag. This seems to be well planned. Where is she now?”

“I told her that I did not know what she was talking about and asked her to leave my office. She threw a print out on my desk and ran away.”

In an angry voice I said: “A daughter in search of her unknown father! What a story! I am taking the first flight to meet you in Washington. Please tell your security guards not to stop me. I can be as strong as OUR daughter. I must find her and you will help me. Her name is Eva Khan Gibson. I am sending her picture by WhatsApp although there is no need since she looks very much like you.”

My heart pounded when I saw Yuri after 16 years. He was so embarrassed that he could not find his words. He did not know whether to shake hands with me or to kiss me. He finally tried to hug me but I kept my distance.

Yuri asked me to sit down and in the same caring voice as I had known him, he said: “Believe me Zorah. I have invested myself in my work nearly day and night to stop me from thinking of you and all the distress I have caused you. I apologise for my behaviour and all the harm done to your daughter.”

“What? My daughter! Have you not noticed that she looks more like you than me?” I shouted.

“Shss. Not so loud!”

“I do not care if your staff hear the conversation. You must now put the wrongs right. This young girl of yours has been on drugs and alcohol. She was following treatment until she disappeared. You should have recognised her when she came to you.”

“Mea culpa. Mea maxima culpa. I know you will not be able to forgive me but I will do everything to find her. As in most big cities, there is quite a big illegal drug trade going on in Washington. There are areas where drug dealers and their buyers meet. We will need the help of the police.”

In an angry voice I uttered: “I do not care with whom you want to work with, even with drug dealers if need be. But YOU must find MY daughter.”

Yuri contacted the Emergency Response Unit where he had contacts. The Unit agreed to help and suggested that we follow the police car on one condition. “Your wife must stay behind. She might get a shock seeing these places.” I did not say that I was not Yuri’s wife but just jumped in his car.

We followed the police car to some dark alleys where prostitution, drugs and crime were rife. At a corner of one of these dark alleys, we saw a body wrapped in a dirty shawl on the pavement. Thinking it was a dead body, the police officer switched on the headlamps of his car and went close to the body. He touched the body and

saw a young girl. I rushed towards the girl. Horror! I recognised the shawl.

Yuri lifted the body. I trembled with fear and could not hold my tears when I saw Eva's dirty face with dried vomit. Yuri gently put her on the back seat of the car and I sat with her trying to clean her face with some wet wipes. She rolled on me with her eyes closed. The police put on their siren and we rushed to the nearest hospital.

Eva was immediately taken to the ICU. We waited in the corridor drinking coffee over coffee and finally the Doctor came out and told us that Eva had a stroke.

"I am so sorry that all the drugs she took caused a stroke which damaged the blood vessels in her brain. She must have been on hard drugs like cocaine or amphetamines. We are doing our best but we had better warn you that if ever we can save her, she will not be the same again. She will most probably be handicapped and would have to follow treatment with a speech therapist and learn how to walk again."

I fell into the arms of Yuri and cried my heart out.

"I am so sorry Zorah. This is all my fault. What is the point of working for the whole humanity when I abandoned my own daughter?"

I could not talk. We slept on a bench at the hospital and waited for Eva to be conscious. She finally, opened her eyes, looked at us. I caressed her hand. Yuri tried to do the same. She gently pulled back her hand. I talked to her: "You will be fine darling. You are getting the best care. Your sister and Neil are waiting for you at home."

She tried to smile with her twisted face but could not. I was devastated to see her with all these tubes in her nose and mouth.

“Zorah, it has been a tough day. Why don’t you try and get some sleep?”

“I still have to book a hotel. I guess I will have to stay in Washington for quite some time before being able to take Eva back with me to Vancouver.”

“I know you will never be able to forgive me. But please accept my offer to stay in the guest room of my flat. I promise to give you all the support needed. I will leave my number with the hospital so that they can call you for any emergency.”

I needed warmth. I needed support. I needed help. I agreed with the offer.

Yuri showed lots of kindness and sympathy. He took a few days off so that he could be with me. He accompanied me to the hospital every day where I spent the day. Eva’s situation was getting worse. Late one evening, Yuri came to see me at the hospital. “Let us go out for dinner somewhere. You need to change your mind a bit.” I did not have time to reply when a nurse rushed towards us, shook her head and said: “So sorry we did all that we could but your daughter did not survive. She just passed away.”

The information did not seep in. “What are you talking about? My Eva just talked to me. She told me to forgive her. I put some water in her mouth which she drank.”

"Some people experience a brief surge of energy before death. I am so glad you enjoyed these few minutes with her," the nurse responded.

I fell on my knees and cried like a mad woman. Yuri took over and organised everything. He telephoned Neil who said he would not be able to make it as Ivy had exams.

Eva was not one for church or prayers but one of Yuri's friends agreed to perform a small ceremony at the cemetery. We put some flowers on the tomb and I sang Eva's favourite song:

*When I am down and, oh my soul, so weary  
When troubles come and my heart burdened by  
Then, I am still and wait here in the silence  
Until You come and sit awhile with me.*

*You raise me up, so I can stand on mountains  
You raise me up, to walk on stormy seas  
I am strong, when I am on your shoulders  
You raise me up to more than I can be*

Yuri kindly refused the suggestion of his friend that we had a little gathering at the flat to boost our moral a bit. "You have already done a lot by attending the funeral. We really appreciate. But we need to be on our own." Yuri told his friend.

As soon as Yuri opened the door of his flat, we fell into each other's arms and cried. We hugged really hard trying to get some comfort from each other.

I really cannot explain but we both felt a spike of sexual libido. We undressed each other and had sex on the sofa.

The increase desire for sex did not stop and we could not talk. I was all confused and agreed to have sex for a second time.

I felt really ashamed. Making love after the funeral of my daughter. How could I have done that? I bent my head and said: "I am so sorry; we should not have done that. We should be grieving and not making love. Or was it just sex and not love"

Yuri did not reply but made his way to the kitchen. I followed him. He percolated some strong coffee and offered me a cup with some brandy in it.

In a sad voice he said, "No! This is not only grief. We are still in love Zorah. I have never loved anybody but you." With a smile he added: "Apart from my work of course! Let us stay together for a while and see how things work. We can even have a child together. A child that I promise not to abandon. I have missed you much Zorah. I am a coward. I controlled myself trying not to talk to you. I wanted so much to hear your voice."

I held the famous scientist in front of me so tight that I dropped hot coffee on him. He did not even feel the pain as he was sobbing quite loud and saying: "I ask for your forgiveness and for that of our deceased daughter. If you agree we can put a grave marker on the tomb and put both our names on it."

"You think a grave marker with your name on it will ease the pain? I don't think I will be able to get over this traumatic experience. Seeing her half dead body on this pavement will haunt me until I die."



“No! I do not think it will ease the pain. It is even worse for me as I am to blame. This would never have happened if I did not run away. But with a grave marker she will always be remembered.”

“Yah! You can go there from time to time and put some fresh flowers on the tomb. Apart from birth and death dates, we can put “Eva, daughter of Zorah and Yuri and a violin on top.”

“A violin! Why?”

“Like father, like daughter. She was a great violinist and played in school concerts before her life took another turn.”

Yuri bent his head. His words were not coming out and finally he said: “OK! Let us go for our names and the violin.”

I had long zoom conversations with Ivy and Neil. They encouraged me to take my time. Neil was quite distant and did not talk much. During one of these conversations Ivy said: “You know mam, I am really enjoying being with dad on my own. He cooks what I like, takes me to my music classes, we shop together and he helps me with my homework. We were looking for Universities before your call. I would like to do a degree in architecture and a diploma in music. Dad was suggesting Berklee College of Music.”

I had a lump in my stomach, blamed myself for giving more time to Eva. But then, what could I do? Eva was so difficult.

Yuri extended his leave and took a few more days to be with me. The passion and the strong emotions we had for each other came back. Making love with Yuri was a total bliss. “I feel you in all my bones. I do not think I will be able to live without you again Zorah”, Yuri whispered in my ear while we were making love.

I never felt this intense emotion with Neil. After a few years of marriage, we had sex on demand.

I was another person when I went back home after nearly three months. The strong family ties were not there. Neil was very understanding. I told him that I had to get my bearings and would like to sleep in the guest room. Deep inside he knew that I was still in love with Yuri. On the other hand, he enjoyed being mum and dad with Ivy.

After a few months I told him that I would like to get a divorce. He thought I was planning to go back to Yuri. “No, I am going to live with my sister in Mauritius. I have talked to Ivy and she seems very happy to stay with you and said she would come and visit me in Mauritius.”

## ***IT TAKES A VILLAGE***

Zorah was the last one to tell her story. The three friends could not believe that they had all been through traumatic experiences, and, in some cases, losing loved ones.

During one of their festive lunches in the veranda among their beautiful potted decorative plants and flowers, Latah put her glass on the table and stood up.

“Do you need a mike Latah. You look as if you are going to make a speech,” Sarah and Zorah teased her.

“Friends, sisters, mates, lend me your ears.”

They all giggled. “This is a bad imitation of Julius Caesar, Latah”, Zorah joked.

“Yes, our ears are here. Let us hear what you have to say”, Sarah added.

“Can’t you guess what I am about to say?”

“No!” Zorah and Sarah said with one voice.

“My goodness, try hard and it will come. We have all been blessed by one common gift.”

“Yes, we have one thing in common. GRIEF. I will not call this blessing. Latah lost Yusuf, Zorah lost her young daughter Eva and I lost my son David followed by my husband Mark.”

Sarah tried to change the conversation. “OK. HAPPINESS is what we have in common. In fact, we are blessed. Old friends meeting after so many years and living happily under the same roof.”

“ORGANISE OUR FUNERALS. Yes, we have this in common”, Zorah pointed out.

But, friends, can’t you see, apart from living in a dream house, we have a big gift in common”, Latah voiced out.

A concerned Sarah questioned: "Is this a riddle, Latah? What are you getting at?"

"We are blessed friends. However traumatic our experiences have been, we have a good karma. We not only get on so well and are living happily, there is something that connects us. A VILLAGE!"

"A village?" Sarah and Zorah exclaimed.

"Yes, IT TAKES A VILLAGE. We are all connected to A VILLAGE. A remote village in India that is close to my heart and to yours as well. Sarah, you son, David and your son-in-law Danny spent a few days in the village during their honeymoon. Zorah you worked in the village for some time to build a hospital. And my family still lives in the village."

They hugged each other and could not stop talking about THE VILLAGE.

"Let us make THE VILLAGE come to us", a thrilled Latah suggested.

"AGREE!" Zorah and Sarah responded before adding, "Having Danny, Sandya, Joshua and little Yoshna with us will be a real dream."

"Ivy has never been to THE VILLAGE but was very close to her sister when they were kids. She has always said she would like to come to Mauritius. We can invite her to represent her sister", Zorah said before adding, "Danny can bring Damien with him."

“Why not? Why not three memorials to celebrate the life of Yusuf, David and Eva in the back garden among our beautiful shrubs”, Sarah suggested.

The three old friends got what they wanted: THE VILLAGE under one roof.