

## *A high, like heaven*

Outside, the air was chilly. The deforested Himalayas were rough grey, and the first rays of the Sun were seeping through the hilltops. The young couple was staying at Gobindghat, the village in the foothills of their destination, the idyllic Valley of Flowers. The hotel room they had spent the night in was small, airtight, insulated, and that had kept them warm through the icy night.

Inside, Sneha was awake. It was 5 a.m. in her watch.

She opened her eyes slowly, looked at her watch, hesitated, closed her eyes again and then awoke with a start. She brought out her digital camera and looked at the tiny screen with its little thumbnails. She took the camera closer to the dim night light above the bed and then zoomed in to expand the faces.

The pictures were pretty, the settings idyllic. Ashish, her husband, was handsome, tall; slim with curly hair down to his shoulders. His high cheekbones made him look almost darkly seductive. When she enlarged the pictures it was so obvious that she seemed happier than him in the pictures, always smiling. She noticed how Ashish seldom smiled -his happiest expression was a smug half-smile, but she was always beaming bright, pearly-white smiles, as if the holiday would never end.

In the morning, they would visit the most peaceful place on earth – the mystical Valley of Flowers. There were two little brochures on the hotel's bedside desk, which she went through sceptically, hesitated again, before she kept one in her purse and threw the other in the dustbin.

She looked at herself in the mirror and for a brief moment, slept off momentarily, had a dream that she was bathing in a sea of flowers, her silky, long, straight hair tied up in a bun. She could see herself -short, and fair complexioned, pretty, and smiling and then, dissolve, and then she saw herself in a white bikini, surrounded by yellow anemones, and then fade, and then the dream changed to her posing for a photo shoot. Then it morphed into small thumbnails on her digital camera, in various poses for a celebrity photographer.

She rubbed her eyes, and realized she was still in bed, dreaming. Watch check again, this time it said- five thirty. *"It's time to get going, woman,"* she told herself.

Ashish stirred awake at six a.m., but by then, she had already bathed and made coffee. Ashish rolled around, and his wedding-band hand groped for her in the dimly lit room. He opened his eyes and looked around for her, expecting morning-after affection, of the kind where he cupped her breasts while they snored like two spoons rattling together. But today, she wasn't there.

"Neha?" It was shorter, sweeter, and sexier to call her just Neha than by her real name.

"You're up?! Why don't you get dressed? The first tour starts at six thirty!"

Ashish awoke with a start and sprang out of bed.

"We have to find the Brahma Lotus today," he said. He reached for his plug of tobacco and cigarette papers, rolled a cigarette and lit up, rhythmically with a morning raga performance.

"What's that?" she said as she handed him the coffee.

"No time, please Google it on your Blackberry!" he replied rushing into the toilet, gulping the coffee down in one beat of the raga routine, emanating clearly now from his smartphone.

She sat around, fiddled with the camera again and browsed the photographs, her hand shaking a bit. This time Ashish looked changed, almost hopeless.

"They're the same pictures you saw this morning," she talked to herself softly. "Nothing's changed in the last two hours." Yet, he looked, well, pissed.

"What does it say?" He yelled from the bathroom.

"Show some interest in this madness," she reprimanded herself loudly. She dropped the camera in her purse and then googled for the Brahma Lotus and found a page on it on the web. It described how the Brahma Lotus was a rare flower with white petals, bloomed only once a year, most often at midnight.

"Is the blooming Lotus more important to Ashish than me?" she said and then almost bit her tongue, as the bathroom door opened and her well-steamed man appeared.

"What does it say?" He asked again, smiling as he came out of the bathroom.

Patronising condescension, she googled for it too on the phone and got a million hits. Fellow surfers are fellow sufferers. Now that made her smile.

"You already know what it said." She sipped on her second cup of coffee that morning.

"Don't you think it's fascinating? It could be our adventure together!" he said.

"It's amusing. Just what're you hoping to gain?" she raised an eyebrow back.

"Oh, nothing, really! Maybe I should have realised - you don't really care about flowers."

"Maybe you should just explain yourself." Genuine confusion, she googled it, too, and found it was a rock band.

"The locals here believe that couples who find the Brahma Lotus find happiness. It's a blessing from the Creator himself." He tried to look sincere, but his gaze shifted from her eyes to the Blackberry.

"I didn't know you believed in all this, being a man of science." Sarcasm goes great with coffee, she thought.

"Maybe you should talk to your mother about it," he replied. "She's a woman of many prayers, especially for your happiness." Hurried, dressed up in layers, till he got to the warm jacket.

"Can't you just be with me?" she said adjusting her *mangalsutra*, her marriage necklace, in front of the mirror.

"It's almost six thirty. Let's go." He picked up their backpack, and they walked to their tour guide, Pritpal. Sneha offered to hold the backpack. Ashish gave it to her politely.

"How far is it?" Sneha asked Pritpal.

"*Saabji*, it is fourteen kilometres from here. We're in the foothills right now, and we'll have to climb almost four thousand feet. Four hours to climb."

Sneha let out a sigh, but Ashish seemed determined.

"*Saabji*, why're you carrying this yellow backpack?" Pritpal asked, lighting his *beedi*. Sneha said that they were carrying biscuits and water for the trek. Pritpal laughed and said "You won't need it, but you can carry it if you want, *Memsaabji*."

"We'll look for the Brahmakamal - the Brahma Lotus. Will you help us find it?" Ashish took the bag from Sneha and slung it on his back.

"How long have you been married?" Pritpal's smile had disappeared, and he was nodding his head disapprovingly.

"It's been almost a year now. Why do you ask?"

"*Saabji*, I can't guarantee sightings of Brahmakamal, but I know true seekers find it. You'll have to pay me in advance, though." Pritpal looked past them, checking to see if there were other tourists he could deal with.

"I'll pay you right now," Ashish quickly pulled out the money from his wallet and noticed Pritpal was smiling again.

On the way, Pritpal the guide turned out to be a chatty conversationalist with a nosey streak. He walked ahead with Ashish while Sneha trailed a few feet behind.

Pritpal had a lot of questions about the how long the couple had been married, how did they meet, why they decided on each other and what role their parents had to play in the entire story.

So Ashish told him the whole story as men do when they talk to other men about women. Sneha fell further and further behind on the trail.

They had been married a year now. Ashish had married late, almost at thirty five. He had not been convinced marriage was the right choice for him, but worried aging parents had blackmailed him into 'settling down'. A set of specifications had been hastily drawn up and posted on a matrimonial website, followed by cold discussions about the merits of each potential match.

Ashish had been shocked to see how callous and cold his parents could be in discussing the merits of each candidate. His father at the age of sixty could describe each candidate's figure and could make innuendoes about whether they would keep him happy. His mother could keep count of each article of jewelry each candidate wore in the matrimonial website. When he had raised objections to this method of evaluation, they had challenged him to find a better way himself.

After the candidates had been shortlisted, being filtered on religion, caste, complexion and height in that order, his parents had set about arranging meetings at cafes and getting the prospective brides to 'talk heart to heart' with him. He had found he did not have much to say to women, and this disappointed them because they were quiet. They too had been under similar pressure from their parents to get married. There had been a few who had been willing to sleep with him and try it out before they reached a decision.

Sneha had been the one who had been open to the idea of dating before mating, and three dates later she had proposed marriage. He had accepted and told his overjoyed parents over the phone he was sure he would marry Sneha.

Sneha had then decided to hold off on the sex bit till they were both convinced this relationship would lead to a marriage. Ashish had almost called it off thinking she was frigid. In response, Sneha relented. They had met at a pay-by-the-hour motel, to determine their compatibility in bed. Ashish had no experience sexually, and their first attempt had been a disaster. On the second attempt, Ashish had realized passionate sex was a step-by-step process, and it would be better if they got married first. Sneha had been just too uptight to be able to relax. That same day Sneha had declared her love for Ashish. He had found he also wanted Sneha and had decided he was in love with her.

Ashish had then fixed the time for the wedding, and they had gotten married in a traditional Indian setting which had made both sets of parents happy. It was exactly a year ago.

*"Saabji, are you happily married now?"* Pritpal asked.

*"Who's happy, my man, but I think I love her 'cause she loves me,"* Ashish replied, looking back over her shoulder.

*"Saabji, you're very polite and refined. It's a sign of quality education."* Pritpal smiled, looking back over his shoulder, too.

They rested a while, and Sneha caught up with them.

*"Why did you have to tell him the whole thing, Ashish? Voices carry in the mountains."*

*"I didn't say anything to offend you, did I?"*

She sat down on a coarse stone bench someone had thoughtfully placed there.

*"You just don't know do you, Ashish? And anyway, why should you tell Pritpal anything?"* Sneha opened her backpack and brought out the camera and handed it to the guide to click a picture of the two of them. When the guide handed the camera back after the flash, she reviewed it and deleted the picture.

*"Can't you ever smile? You look like a serious adventurer, Ashish."* She got up and walked close to the edge of the pathway and looked down, where the mountain slope sharply dropped a few hundred feet.

*"Memsaabji, be careful don't walk too close to the edge!"* said Pritpal as he caught her by the arm.

"I'm fine. I'm free now, and I can take care of myself, thank you." Sneha twisted her arm, but Pritpal was reluctant to let go until Ashish intervened. "You are mountain man, a hill tribal. What do you know about us city dwellers? I'm happier now than I was at my mom's house, just a burden on their minds. I used to have a job, and I can get one again. So don't think I'm any less than a man." Sneha pushed Pritpal away and stared hard at her husband.

"No offense meant *memsabji*. I just like you to be safe."

They started the climb again. Ashish noticed the mountains they were climbing were made of stone and sea sand.

"Look, there are small sea shells in the soil." Ashish scooped up some sand in his hands.

"Where's the sea?" she looked around and reached for the binoculars from the backpack.

"It's thousands of kilometres away," said Ashish.

"Then how did the sea shells get here?"

"It happened several million years ago. The entire Himalayan range was under the sea."

"And then?"

"The seabed rose because of tectonic movements and gave birth to the Himalayas."

"You're very smart. How did you know?"

"It's the only logical explanation. The Himalayas are Fold Mountains, and this must have been a sea-shore a long time ago."

Sneha shivered and was suddenly cold. She asked for another sweater from the backpack.

A kilometre went by, the air became cooler, and a light mist started to appear on the pathway ahead of them. Soon, they walked into the mist, and Pritpal asked them to stay close. Sneha moved closer to Ashish.

"Ashish, do you love me?" She asked quietly and looked to check if the guide were listening.

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I know." Ashish lit up a cigarette. "You're the only girl I know well and to know someone extremely well is to love that person."

"But then why aren't you happy?"

Ashish had taken a while before he answered. He was pulling hard on his cigarette, and the hot tip sharpened and became pencil like. The smoke from his cigarette mixed with the fog. Dampness filled the air.

"What is happiness anyway?" Ashish countered with his own question. To this, Sneha had no answer. Suddenly, a Sikh wearing a jacket appeared out of the mist.

"Do you want some hot tea?" the Sikh was waving a glass of hot tea in front of them.

"Where did you come from?" Ashish asked.

"We have been around for ten years. We serve the pilgrims trekking to Hemkund." The guide explained the first seven kilometres of the path to the Valley of Flowers were common with the way to Hemkund, a Sikh pilgrimage site.

"How much is the tea? Neha, do you want some?"

"I could use some warmth, don't you have some coffee?" Sneha started to open her purse.

"It's for one hundred and twenty five rupees" said the Sikh.

"This is just plain looting. It costs five rupees elsewhere. Forget it." Ashish put up his palm to stop Sneha.

Ashish moved on, Sneha followed, and the guide was laughing again.

"How'll you find the Brahmakamal in this mist?" she asked the guide.

The guide stopped laughing. "*Memsaabji*, true seekers will always find it."

From then on, there was a tea merchant every ten or fifteen minutes. The price of tea kept coming down, but Ashish's only comment was India was shining.

The guide started to tell the story of an Englishwoman who came to the valley to watch the flowers. Her name was Margaret Legge. She had found the Brahmakamal and written about it. Later, she slipped, fell, and disappeared somewhere in the valley, and a monument had been erected by her sister many years later.

They had trekked almost ten kilometres by now. The mist had disappeared a few hundred feet below them, and the beginnings of a verdant valley were visible. The atmosphere was much thinner now, and their voices did not carry too far in the thin air. Quietude fell on the three of them.

It was getting harder to breathe at the high altitude, and every word spoken was an extra effort.

Ashish seemed to be irritated, and he gestured "Lotus" at the guide to which he only shrugged his shoulders. Ashish was getting nervous, Sneha was still.

"I'm tired", she said and sat down on a rock.

The cloud had come back. Ashish heard her but decided to catch up with the guide instead. He went close to him and whispered "Brahmakamal" in his ear. Pritpal, the guide gestured towards a bend in the pathway. Sneha yelled "Ashish!" He turned back and went towards her while the guide carried on for a few meters.

Sneha had caught her breath back. When Ashish came back, she gestured for him to sit on the rock.

"What does knowledge have to do with love?" she asked.

"Everything" he gasped, "knowing something is the same as loving it. It's the same thing really. I love Physics because I know it and I know Physics because I love it."

"I'm not like you."

"I know Neha."

"Ashu, I love you because I want to."

"I see."

"Why can't you be happy with that, Ashu?"

Suddenly, they heard Pritpal scream from somewhere above them.

"It's the Brahmakamal! He's found it!" Ashish was excited.

Sneha and Ashish got up and climbed up the pathway to where Pritpal was shouting.

"Where is it?" screamed Ashish.

Through the fog, they could see the flower growing out of large sea shell embedded in a hillside. It was greenish white, and had large petals five inches long, with two broad leaves on its stem. It was in full bloom.

Sneha tried to touch it, but the guide stopped her.

"This is a rare moment. It never blooms during the day. I have never seen it like this, *Memsaabji*. Just do a *darshan*, say a little prayer and let it be." He folded his hands in reverence as though they were witnessing a miracle.

Ashish brought out the camera and clicked pictures. Sneha was unimpressed, Ashish was pleased with his achievement, but two minutes later, the smile was gone again.

“Let’s climb further to Valley of Flowers,” Ashish turned quickly and pulled the flower out of the hillside and the guide let out a sharp gasp.

“*Saabji*, there is a curse on the one who carries the flower out of the Valley!”

“Then you can carry it”, said Ashish, and thrust the flower on the guide who fumbled initially, and finally nestled it as if it were a child. Sneha stared at him with wide eyes.

“What’re you staring at? It’s just a flower.” Ashish signalled upwards and started to hike up the path.

They climbed up the mountain and reached a ridge. The ridge was the separation between the grey, sandy mountains they had been climbing and the verdant valley below. To the left, they could see a river running through the valley, to the right was the glacier. All the flowers grew wildly like weeds. They were like a pointillist’s impression on a large canvas of a flower pot with a million flowers. A soft breeze below the valley shook the plants and a soft yellow and blue pollen cloud moved from one part of the valley to the other.

The mist had turned into clouds in the distance. They could see the clouds roll up and down the hillside. On the valley’s floor, lavender, yellow and mauve flowers seemed to comfort each other with their fragrance. Small butterflies with yellow and blue wings pixelated colour in the midst of these flowers.

Ashish was silent while the guide lit another beedi. Ashish asked him for a match and walked away from Sneha.

Sneha wandered among the flowers. She saw a flower which looked like a pink multi-layered fountain. It had small insects buzzing around it. Then she saw another which looked like a flowering fern with petals in the colour of an open coal fire. Another flower looked like a purple crown with blue sepals. A blue butterfly flew away from it as she approached it. She walked to the bell shaped droplet like white flowers and smelt them. They had no smell.

She walked to a vine which had pink dainty pom-poms hanging down from it. Anemones in shocking pinks dotted the hillside. She flitted from flower patch to flower patch. Then she realized that she had wandered quite far from where they had started

Sneha walked back quickly. She could not see Ashish or Pritpal, so she walked to a rock that looked somewhat familiar. She realised that she was lost, and so sat on the rock, heavily, and started to cry.

Scratched on the rock was a message which read ‘Face yourself, to change your world- ML.’ She reached into her purse and brought out the brochure from the hotel. The woman who had disappeared years ago was Margaret Legge.

She looked around and saw no one. Not a single human being, tourist or guide, only some animal on the far side of the hill. The only thing she could see was pretty wilderness all through. Why was she scared of all the beauty and serenity? Did she need to panic? If Ashish genuinely missed her, wouldn’t he find her? All she had to do was to sit and wait. He had said he loved her, so he would find her.

But Ashish did not come looking for her. An hour passed by, she sat on the familiar rock, and no one turned up. Not Ashish, no guides and no other tourists either.

She read in the brochure the Valley of Flowers was an eighty seven square kilometre area. It was an area of complete serenity and solitude.

Two hours later, she decided to get up from the rock and start walking back down to Gobindghat when she noticed the backpack. It was lying a hundred yards to her right and two hundred yards above her on a hill side. She almost ran to it.

Ashish was sitting next to the backpack, hidden among the tall flowers. He looked at her through bloodshot eyes and dilated pupils. He was smiling. He had a *chillum* in his hand, and she could smell the pungent marijuana smoke on him.

He turned to her and said “Happiness is a high, like heaven.” He smiled for the rest of the day.

They trudged down, leaning backwards to prevent themselves from slipping and falling forward on the slopes. It took a lot less time going down the hill than it had taken on the way up.

'He'll be OK without me,' she said, to no one in particular.

He neither replied nor acknowledged something was drastically wrong.

'You're just...'

'I'm what, say it, please... Ashish.'

"...very, very average," he replied.

"Did you know it's our wedding anniversary today?" she asked him eagerly, clutching at his jacket. They were back in the mist, in this leg of the journey.

"Ah yes, of course, something not to be forgotten," was his reply. The guide too was stoned and started laughing and soon Ashish too was laughing silly.

"We need to talk. I need to make a decision." Sneha appealed, but Ashish could not stop laughing.

They trudged down, heavy-stepped, until they reached the sandy parts of the hills again. Pritpal kept giving them instructions to be careful — going down could be slippery, they should not try to run, shouldn't keep their hands in their pockets. Pritpal carried the Brahma Lotus in his hands. They came upon the bend where the large sea shell had been embedded in the hillside, from which the Brahma Lotus had grown.

At that very point, Pritpal slipped and fell off the path, into the mist along with the Brahma Lotus. His cry was drowned in the eerie silence that fell around them.

All Sneha could hear was her heart beating loudly.

"Ashish, did you see that?"

"See what?" A thick bank of mist moved in and for a brief moment, Ashish too seemed to disappear.

"Pritpal's gone. Oh God! He's dead! Can't you do something!"

"Did it really happen? I thought it was the grass making me see things. This is bloody good grass."

"You're supposed to be the intelligent one, Mr IIT-IIM, Ashish, think of something."

"My intelligence tells me that Pritpal was the surefooted guide who was cautioning us."

"And he told you not to pull out the Lotus."

"Sneha, it's a curse, and here all science fails. I give up."

"Then all we can do is just to wait.'

They sat and waited in the cold and damp mist.

Almost an hour later, a party of four came down the path, and they just followed them all the way to Gobindghat.

Once there, they tried to behave normally as though nothing had happened. Higher priority activities took charge of their frozen minds — packing, checking out, finding lunch, boarding the bus back to Delhi — and they went through them all mechanically and in complete silence.

As they were getting ready to board the bus, Sneha spotted a police officer near the bus stand, and a police station close by.

She turned to Ashish, her conscience pricking her about Pritpal's unreported fall, but Ashish was hiding behind her.

"Don't you think we should report his death? I mean he must have a family who waits for him."

“No, Sneha, don’t be silly. There’ll be too many formalities, and we’ll definitely miss the bus back to Delhi. Besides I have to reach back at the office tomorrow. We can’t get involved in a legal mess. Pritpal was a guide, he should have known better.”

The entire trip back to Delhi went by without a word spoken or any kind of physical contact. She avoided his gaze and shrank away from him even when the bus navigated tight bends in the hills and his body lurched on to hers.

Back in Delhi, Sneha abandoned all semblance of politeness and let Ashish have the full benefit of her true nature, one which was clearly ambitious, self-respecting and driven. Ashish, unable to deal with the exploding criticism of his personality on a daily basis on weekdays, and on an hourly basis every weekend, decided he had made a mistake in marrying Sneha.

They split up a few months later. Sneha and Ashish filed for a divorce stating incompatibility and irreconcilable differences. The judge agreed almost immediately on grounds of ‘mutual consent’ and their marriage lasted exactly one year six months and three days.

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*For alternate endings please visit the URLs below:*

<http://www.riturajverma.com/lph/alternate-endings/a-high-like-heaven/1-2/>

<http://www.riturajverma.com/lph/alternate-endings/a-high-like-heaven/2-2/>

## ***The emotional cripple***

“Emotional cripple: A pathetic waste of spineless dung that doesn’t have enough balls to look himself in the mirror, in the morning. Well, UrbanDictionary.com puts it pretty well.” Payal read out the definition from her 3G phone. The coffee shop they were sitting in had few other customers that Saturday morning.

“And that, you think, is referring to me?” Rakesh blurted out. He put down his cappuccino cup and crossed his arms. His wife Payal’s face was expressionless.

“Rakesh, I’m just telling you how you’ve been behaving with me all these years. Emotional cripple is your name for yourself.” Payal sat up tense, slightly rocking her body.

“All these years” isn’t correct. I may have said it once, when your argument did not seem to make sense.” *Beg dammit, beg, you fool, or you will lose her, he thought.*

“Oh, so everything still has to be logical, right? Won’t you ever understand? We make emotional choices every day,” her breathing stopped midway.

“You’re mixing two entirely different things, Payal. See, we do things either for Love, or for Money. When we act out of Love, we are totally selfless and irrational. When we act for Money, we are rational, but self-centred. Do we have to discuss this right now?” Rakesh gingerly put down his spoon in the coffee saucer.

“No arguments, please, not now, not ever.” Payal placed her clenched fists on the table. Her wedding ring looked dull.

“Rakesh, why did you marry me? Did you think that you loved me? Or did you actually love my money?”

Rakesh knew the previous question was an attack on a core area; it was a heat-seeking missile which would cut to the heart of the matter. Why had he married Payal and where did things go wrong?

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Several months ago, Rakesh's father, Pramod, was anxious that his son would never start a family.

"You are brilliant but naive. You cleared the IIT, the world's toughest engineering exam, but you can't fix a flat tire. You have an MBA from a top business school, but you still write cheques that bounce. You need a partner who will complete you, help you develop."

Before Rakesh could react, his mother, Sulakshana, also jumped in.

"Beta, you turned thirty last month. I am pleased that you are doing well, now that you've been promoted to a director in the company. It's time to settle down. Find a worthy partner in life, and just live a healthy life."

"Listen to your mother. She's a PhD in philosophy," said Pramod.

"Socks? Why? How? Who? Give me some answers, *ma*. If I'm convinced, I could think about it," said Rakesh. 'Socks' was his name for his mother, short for Socrates.

"Beta, talk to your friends. People who know you well enough. I don't want to preach to you. I'd rather you find your own path." With that started Rakesh's journey looking for a mate.

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The next week, Rakesh had gone to meet Amitav, carrying a bottle of scotch. They had decided to open the bottle at once.

"Just like old times," Amitav said, slapping Rakesh on the back.

"Lucky for you, my wife's out of town on business." They had finished the bottle half way before the subject came up.

"Why did you get married Amitav? Why an arranged marriage? I mean, you are a sharp guy," asked Rakesh.

"The question why is naive, Rakesh. You can't go through life being single. It's too damn lonely," Amitav yawned.

"Are you sure? Is marriage necessary?" Rakesh said, and then added, "Is it sufficient?"

"Of course, because we need to satisfy all our needs- sex, food, shelter. It's old Mr Maslow's pyramid. If you can't satisfy your basic needs, you can't go to the next level. Seems you could use some self-actualization," winked Amitav.

"I see. Okay, so maybe dad's right. But how do you decide who to marry? You've had women before," said Rakesh, and winked back.

"I've got a model for that- the theory of the Three Bees."

"I've heard that before, I think," said Rakesh, pulling his chin.

"Ha. I heard it first when we were at IIT," Amitav out a short laugh. "The Three Bees, *yaar*, is Beauty, Brains and Bank balance. Let me ask you, given a choice, what would you want?"

"I'd want all three. Who wouldn't?"

"Okay, hotshot, name some women who have all three Bees."

"Bipasha. Ms. Gul Panang," Rakesh suggested the names of more film stars and models.

"Correct. And what do you have to offer any one of them? Why would they select you?" Amitav played with his tea coaster.

"Could it be because of love?" Rakesh moved closer to the edge of his seat. What he got in response, was a guffaw.

"Who wouldn't want to fall in love with a beautiful, intelligent, successful woman? Each of the three Bees represents a quantum level of energy. For you to reach the level where you have all three Bees, you would have to compete to get there. Some of these guys might possess the three Bees themselves."

"I'm handsome, but I am no runway model," said Rakesh, settling back on the sofa.

"If I were you, I'd choose two out of three Bees and settle into a lower energy level called the middle class energy level. The only question is- which two?"

A sip of the bitter alcohol numbed Rakesh's ego into submission.

"I'd go for Beauty and Bank Balance," said Rakesh.

"Wrong again. So you'd prefer a rich man's silly but pretty daughter? Think again. Does intelligence in a woman intimidate you?"

"No, no! How can you even think that? You've known me long enough. I'm sure I'm smart enough to handle an intelligent woman, any day. My last tested IQ was 165. Why should intelligence intimidate me? It intoxicates me." Rakesh raised his glass in a toast as proof.

"OK, on the other hand, can you suffer idiots? Do you find it harder to communicate with people who are not as sharp as you?"

"Yes, I do," said Rakesh.

"Then why would you choose Bank Balance over Brains? You need to have your *fundas* clear. Think about it. It is about your life, no one else's." Amitav poured him another drink and looked him straight in the eye.

"I guess I just want to take a shortcut and marry a rich woman. What's wrong with that? Doesn't enough money ensure some brains? She would have at least gone to a reputable school or college, whatever that might have cost her parents." He chuckled. By now, three fourths of the bottle was finished.

"You are on your way to being a perfect house-husband."

"Never thought of it that way," Rakesh replied.

"You should wisely choose this time."

"I would go for Beauty and Brains, I guess."

"Now here's the problem. A woman with Beauty and Brains can easily get the Bank balance. We are back to square one."

"True. So the real choices are only Beauty without Brains or Bank Balance."

"Aha! Like all Indian men, you are obsessed with Beautiful women. There are just two slight problems."

He named five movie stars, all sex symbols in the Indian media and again "Who is the most beautiful of them all?" Rakesh named Manisha. Amitav pulled out his mobile and showed him an image of Manisha standing next to him.

"That is what she actually looks like."

The picture had looked nowhere close to what Rakesh had seen in the movies.

"I went to a product launch party where she was the brand ambassador. She is just as plain-looking a person as I have ever seen. Beauty can be enhanced through lighting, fashion, cosmetics, surgery, and youth can be preserved for longer periods of time."

"There must be some beauty that doesn't change."

"Let's call that kind of beauty inner beauty, which brings us to the second problem."

Amitav had pulled out a picture of his wife, Sangeeta. She was pretty, but not a dazzling beauty.

"To me, this woman, my wife, is prettier than all the movie stars we mentioned a few minutes ago."

“But then beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder, they say.”

“That is the nature of the second problem. If you love someone, that person automatically becomes beautiful in your eyes. The reverse is also true. Ever noticed how women’s behaviour changes automatically if you tell them that they look pretty. Women are programmed to think that someone who tells them that they look pretty could be in love with them.”

“So technically speaking, you could marry a not-so-attractive woman and still find her beautiful?” Rakesh felt a bit better at this.

“Yes, as is the case with most arranged marriages in India. It’s not as terrible an option as you think. It keeps the lineage going.” Amitav refilled whatever was left in the bottle between the two glasses.

“Oh! I suppose a little bit of cash in the form of dowry helps, too, because it adds to the third Bee, i.e. Bank Balance. It makes sense.” Rakesh was a follower now.

“That is the fundamental law of the marriage market. Let us get back to the choices. What’re the real options?” Amitav slurred a little.

“It’s down to just one combination -Brains and Bank Balance.” Rakesh heaved a deep sigh as if signalling Amitav to go head.

“I’d argue that a woman with Brains has the potential to get a Bank Balance. The overriding factor should be a woman’s intelligence. At the end of the day, that’s all that matters!”

“That means that you’re talking of a career-oriented, working, independent woman. Is that what you chose?”

“Yes, Sangeeta works in a multinational bank.”

“But does a working wife not add pressures to your life? I mean, do you ever fight about who will do the housework? Or about who is better as a professional?” Rakesh had downed many drinks and had been slurring.

“Oh come on! Are you so drunk already? Whatever happened to the possibility of hiring a maid, a driver, and a cook and having a fairly easy lifestyle?” His raised eyebrows stated the obvious.

“So that’s your formula! The urban middle-class definition of success – working couples with several lower middle class people working for them. Lots of employment generation for the next rung!”

“That’s India’s growth story today. Go for the smartest female you can find, maybe a doctor or lawyer, or an MBA from a top management school. Whatever happened to that girl Payal from the PGDM program?”

Rakesh took a few seconds to come back to the changed direction of the conversation.

“Payal is OK, I guess, but I hear she has gone back to her hospital. Did you know she was a medical doctor before she joined the IIM?”

“Now there’s a candidate with Brains and Bank Balance!” Amitav said with a naughty smile.

“Enough. I am convinced.” Rakesh smiled back in agreement.

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The next day, Rakesh went about locating Payal’s whereabouts. He checked Facebook and LinkedIn and got her contact details.

When Rakesh finally found her, he just showed up at her hospital without an appointment. Payal had seen him waiting and had been sweet enough to call him in immediately. He had nothing to lose so he just plainly admitted that his real intent was to find her out and see her. Her amusement had been evident when he had asked her out for a movie.

“Don’t get ideas about me, Rakesh. I’ve dedicated my life to curing people of disease. I’ve got no time for romantic nonsense. I can’t go out for movies, walks, or dinner dates. I have to be available, constantly, to my patients in case there is an emergency. So, let us be practical, mister, and understand that we can be friends and nothing else.”

"Don't you see marriage in your life?"

"Of course, it's most practical to marry another doctor."

"I see. And what can a doctor do that an engineer can't?" Rakesh had a spark in his eyes.

"You are jealous!" she laughed.

Things progressed, despite the fact that she had little time. They would meet on Sundays, watch movies at a multiplex close to her hospital, discuss global politics and his life in a MNC.

Payal was a true doctor. She was most clinical about reproduction and considered sex as a biological act that leads to pregnancy. The medical part of love was fun to know from her perspective. From arousal to orgasm, she saw it all as several stages of an automated biological process that human beings were programmed to do.

"What about love?" Rakesh was curious.

"What about it? It happens to people, but it hasn't happened to me yet."

"Wow! Never happened to you, huh?" Rakesh's surprise took Payal by surprise.

"How are you defining love here, Rakesh? Let us be clear. I am not a virgin. In medicine, you learn as you go along. I learned with a friend of mine in my first year of medicine. But that was merely about the human body, not the emotions inside."

Rakesh was heartbroken, and his face reflected the disappointment. She noticed his changed expression.

"It was nothing. It was just a chapter in the book- we wanted to understand human anatomy better." Her hand touched his.

"And are you still in touch with him?" Rakesh said, almost choking.

"Well, we are just professional colleagues. He works in a government hospital. I have my own hospital."

Her clinical, ambitious side shocked Rakesh. His competitive nature made him try harder for her. He tried seducing her with walks on beaches, deep conversations on hilltops, boat rides, and thought-provoking plays.

Payal was sharp enough to know where all this was headed. When a few weeks of attempted seduction had gone by without any response from the woman herself, Rakesh started to lose interest in her. It seemed to be an investment without returns to his practical mind. His excuse was that his work was taking up too much of his time.

Just when he had almost given up on her, he got an SMS from her.

"Wanna fuck?"

"Ya. Where?"

"RT here RT now."

He ran to a cabbie. "To Payal hospital, quickly!" The cabbie and the people around felt that it was a medical emergency. The cabbie drove at breakneck speed.

When he had reached the hospital, he got another SMS from Payal, this time telling him the room number where she was waiting for him. It was her most expensive air-conditioned hospital room, with a double foldable bed and an oxygen tent. But the room seemed to be more of a massage parlour than a hospital room when he entered.

"Go have a bath." She had handed him the soap, the shampoo, the lovely new towel, and sandalwood paste.

"What is the sandalwood paste for?" Rakesh asked.

"Apply it on your penis and scrotum. Rinse and repeat. And do as the doctor says."

The sandalwood paste had some other herbs in it as well; it smelled uniquely different, yet pleasant. When he had finished his bath, he had a rock solid erection. He had come out into the room only to see that the lights dim, the

bed propped up and something decidedly arousing playing on the television set – a Japanese massage scene. Payal was under the covers and had gestured to him to join.

“I think you could use a massage yourself!” she had offered, and he had accepted, happily.

“You are a genius with your hands, you know. You could make ten times more money as a massage therapist,” he told her half way through.

She had laughed, the beautiful white pearls inviting him to lose himself in her. As she continued touching him in hitherto unknown erogenous centres, she took him into another, unexplored world. The next morning had been a Sunday; she did not have to go on her hospital rounds. They just lay there sleeping in each other’s arms.

“You truly spoiled me last night.” Rakesh groaned.

“You just enjoy complaining,” she replied. “Yes, it is visible on your face. Did you think only men have access to literature on sex?” Her smile had driven the point home.

“Do you mean Masters and Johnson?”

“Yes, but did you know that Johnson was a woman named Virginia.”

“Uh... yeah!” said Rakesh looking at the TV screen.

It had suddenly struck Rakesh that Payal could have a higher IQ than his.

They were together the whole of Sunday morning; exploring each other and enjoying each other’s company. Around noon, Rakesh felt that he had died and gone to heaven. He knew that she was the one woman who could keep him happy, in whatever way he could think of.

“Marry me. Please,” begged Rakesh.

“Thank God for the ‘please’.” She gave him a sideways glance that amused him quite a bit, and said, “I can’t say yes right now, but can I get back to you in a couple of days?”

“What will change in a couple of days? Is it a polite way of saying that I was awful last night?”

“Oh no! Of course not! Your sexual responses are perfectly normal with respect to your age. Would you mind coming in for a health check-up tomorrow? It’s on me.”

“Sure, but I am not your patient, you know!” Rakesh was confused.

“I’m just making sure that you never will be.”

The health check-up had been exhaustive, scanning every organ in his body. She extracted every fluid in his body and put it under a microscope. At the end of three days, all the reports were in.

“You have a chance of getting diabetes after the age of forty, likely heart disease after fifty. But other than that, you are perfectly healthy.” Payal told him beaming.

“So? I already knew that.”

“Yes.”

“So, why did you get all these tests done?”

“I had told you the reason on Sunday. And I repeat. Yes, my answer is yes, I will marry you.” Rakesh was overjoyed.

Although he thought, it was a funny criterion to decide upon something as weighty as marriage but then he thought of his theories and the class Amitav had taken with him. That did it. They had decided to get married immediately, just after informing their parents.

“Do you want to invite your parents or would you rather want them to send out the invites?” She had asked. Rakesh was impressed that she actually went into all those details. “I am okay either way. Let’s ask them.”

Pramod and Sulakshana had been keener to be hosts rather than guests. Their happiness knew no bounds as their son had finally decided to get married and that too to a smart woman.

Payal's father had only one concern—Rakesh was not a doctor. It was not his fault; their entire family was mostly doctors.

"I think you would have different things to think about; something other than diseases and patients all the time. It could be a refreshing change for me." Payal was keen on the variety that he would bring to their conversations and lovingly winked at him to make him feel comfortable. He agreed with his daughter.

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A few months after a rather glorious wedding, Rakesh, had been working hard in his job. He had moved up a couple of slots in the past year, but try as he might, he could not come close to the money that Payal made.

"Where am I going wrong? I happen to be among the top brains in the country! Yet all I get is this stupid salary!" complained Rakesh, one day.

Payal was sympathetic initially and understanding.

"Rakesh! You don't need to worry about something as petty as money. You are so bright, brighter than more than half the population out there. Relax! I am sure you will be hugely successful someday soon. Just wait and watch!" She planted a kiss on his burning cheeks and massaged his ego with sweet words. But that was not enough.

His greed meant he had to work longer hours too. This put a further strain on their marriage. It was becoming a dangerous combination—the extra attention that everyone around seemed to give her, her annual turnover which was much more than his, his insecurities with all that and his all-male ego. She was a woman, and she was supposed to be a dedicated wife. When he was trying hard to gain a strong financial ground, should she not leave everything to help him?

"Why're you never there when I come home after a long day, Payal?" He sounded too demanding, but she did not say anything to that.

"Payal, I need to earn more. You know how much I make. It's nothing if we want to secure our future," said Rakesh, trying to vent.

"But we have enough money. Why are you so worried?" She was now concerned about his behaviour.

"You have enough money, I don't."

"Well, my money is yours too. We're married, aren't we? It's not yours or mine anymore, it is ours. You just said it, out future, our life. No?"

This pacified him for some days. With this new understanding of a common pool of money, they had started to live their life on whatever time was available to them with each other.

Initially, he had no qualms about the fact that she made twice as much as he did, but he was extremely particular that her money was hers, and his money was his. They would share certain expenses, but he would not put up with any largesse on her account. He would always insist on paying for anything that was too expensive.

"How can you earn so much more than me?" His concerns were too deep rooted to be pulled out so soon.

She tried to explain things to him patiently, trying hard not to lose temper in any way. "Doctors are closer to gods, that's why."

"Hah. So you say."

"Oh! Weren't our gods forever curing people? You can earn all the money you want. When it comes to your health, you will have to spend it. Finally, you'll end up giving your hard earned money to a skilled doctor who will help you stay alive longer, and in a healthier way."

From then on, Rakesh spent more time in the gym. This meant he had even lesser time for Payal.

“Why do you need to exercise so many hours now-a-days?” she asked.

“To stay healthy, so that my money does not end up with a doctor.” Although he said that, with a chuckle, she could read the undercurrent of irritation.

“Don’t you have the privilege of having a doctor in the house? You wouldn’t have to pay. We could buy a bigger house and you can make a gym in the house. That way I could get to see you more often, Mr Husband.”

That sounded fair, and so they set about buying a large house. The bank sanctioned the home loan on their combined incomes, and it created a monumental liability for them. Payal was confident she could clear the loan soon.

“Well, I can’t afford such a large house,” he told her flatly.

“You don’t have to, *we* have to, and *we* will,” she reassured him.

“Okay, but we split the EMI half way.”

“Fine with me.”

The EMI put an enormous pressure on cash flows for Rakesh and a disproportionately large chunk of his salary went into the financing of their dream house. This made Rakesh all the more insecure, and he started to take bigger challenges in life. He would be gone for days on trips to Europe and USA and come back for a few days before flying out again. The gym that they had built in the house was unused – equipment rusting at a slower pace than their relationship.

Even when Rakesh was home, he would think about making more money. His insecurities grew and so did their fights.

“Why are you doing this to me, Rakesh? Don’t you love me anymore?”

“I am an emotional cripple, and love is just a program created for reproduction, remember Doctor.”

“So why aren’t we procreating?”

“Because we don’t have the time anymore.”

Payal thought that Rakesh was probably short of money. Maybe that was why he was behaving strangely. She started to pay a larger portion of the EMI. This left Rakesh with some additional cash in hand, with which he bought IT equipment and converted the gym to a home office. He was so engrossed in his work all the time that they were like two separate individuals living under the same roof.

“Do we need all this stuff, Rakesh?”

“Yes, I am working towards building my own website. When I am ready, I will quit this job. Then we can have as many babies as you can handle.”

“I am ready for babies even now; but you have quite a lot of things on your mind other than me.”

It hurt her immensely to see his callous attitude.

“And what happens to the high EMI if you don’t work?” he asked her, quite matter of fact about the logic.

“Why do we always fight about money dear? Does life offer no other meaning for you? I know I told you that life is a mechanical process and all that; but can’t you see how it affects me to see you so obsessed with money. We have everything, but we can live happily only if you control your ego, and stop getting so competitive.”

“We are just discussing, it’s not a fight. You are making it look like one.”

The discussions kept getting longer than needed every time and were always about money. As far as she was concerned, money came to her because she was doing the world a favourable turn.

One day they had a bitter argument. Rakesh had been drinking too much that night. He had just lost a substantial contract to a competitor, and he was bitterly cursing people around. It was a meaningless discussion.

Rakesh was not thinking straight and wanted to prove that he knew much more than her; but kept losing to her on every argument. Ultimately, she managed to prove that she had a higher IQ than him.

That was it! His drunkenness on alcohol and his out-of-control ego could not hold him any longer. He slapped her across the face.

He left for Europe the next morning in a huff. When he got back ten days later, he found the nameplate of the house changed. It bore only Payal's name. All the locks were new too, and he could not get into the house. It was 2 a.m. in the morning, and he had nowhere to go.

He looked around and found a large stone which he threw into one of the windows. It shattered the glass and half the window. Payal, awakened by the loud crash, realized that something was wrong. She quickly called the police. The police arrived and caught Rakesh trying to push his suitcase through the hole in the window. Just that they thought he was trying to pull it out, stealing.

Rakesh had a tough time convincing the police that he was trying to get into his own house. They thought he was a burglar. He showed them his passport. Payal did not come out that night. She was still smarting from the slap she had received. She decided to let Rakesh suffer for what he had done. Rakesh spent the night in lock up and Payal suffered just as much.

By the next morning, he was extremely angry. He could not believe what his wife had done to him. How could she bring their personal problem out to the police station?

His marriage had reached a break point. He had decided: he would give her one more chance. That's it!

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"Rakesh, why did you marry me? Did you believe that you loved me? Or did you truly love my money?"

Rakesh paused and let out a deep sigh.

"Can I get back to you in a day or two?"

"Rakesh, I think I already know the answer to that question. You don't need to waste two days for that. You have to make a choice today. Is it love or money?"

"Give me some time. I will have an answer for you for sure by the end of the week."

Payal looked disgusted. This was no business meeting; this was no missed deadline. This was their life, and he just did not care. She was clear that if Rakesh chose to pursue money, she would throw him out. It was his loss, totally.

"Why are you so competitive with me? Indian men have such large egos." She had to say it now; it was now or never. Confrontation seemed to be the only way to save her relationship with him.

Rakesh posed a counter question. "Why did you let me spend the night in the police lock up?"

"What makes you think you can slap me around and still live in the same house? I have paid for this more than you have; I have spent days and nights making this house our home. And all you have done is ruining it."

Rakesh thought he saw tears in Payal's eyes; tantrums she was resorting to, but no, she was as stern as a rock.

"But I have paid for it too. So part of it is mine, at least for the time being," he replied.

Payal brought out a layout of the house. The house was divided into two portions – his and hers. Bathrooms, bedrooms, and car parks were easy to divide. The rest was not easy. They drew up a timetable on the use of the kitchen. They divided control over the cook, the driver, and the house cleaner too. Rakesh still felt that he was being restricted.

"Why don't I buy out your share and just throw you out?" said Payal. Things were getting serious. Payal was in no mood for kindness or generosity. She had taken enough of it.

"I need some time to think."

"You can do that on your next flight to the US; meanwhile, you are advised to look for a good lawyer."

"Work can wait. I think we need to put this straight. I think my mother would be a wiser woman to talk to."

Payal could not agree more. She knew that Rakesh's mother was a wise woman.

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Rakesh went to Socrates with fear and trepidation in his heart. He knew she would understand his plight and would guide him through the ordeal.

When he told her what had happened, her expression changed from its usual soft one, and she slapped him tight, right across his face.

As he was still rubbing his cheek and was recuperating from the shock, he asked her, "Socks! What was that for?"

"That was for being such an idiot! I thought you were an intelligent man! I did not raise you to be this egoistic, money-grubbing maniac that you have become!"

Then she slapped him again, much harder this time, with her eyes burning like embers.

"What was that for now?" His surprise knew no bounds.

"How does it feel?"

"It hurts, and it feels horrible!"

"Well that is how she feels right now!"

That hurt more than the slap. As she sat down and waited for him to recover, he was lost in deep thoughts.

"So you think I should apologize and stop being such an idiot? Is that your advice?"

"Why would you apologize if you don't mean it? Don't go on doing things because people ask you to; do them the way you feel like. Just use your head and heart together more often." She was back to her calm self again, but the effect of those words was deep.

Rakesh was quiet. She was right. He would not say or do anything if he were not convinced.

Socks began in all earnest.

"In the old tales of the *Puranas*, they talk of an episode of *samudra-manthan*, churning of the milky ocean. Do you remember I used to narrate this story when you were a kid?"

Seeing his blank look, she just continued on her own, without waiting for a response: During the great churning, everything in the universe was in a state of conflict. At that time, the *asuras* and the *devas*, gods and demons, came together to collaborate."

"Ma, I know the story. That is mythology. What does it have to do with me? Life is not mythology; it is far more real. No *Menaka* will come here."

"One of the products of the churning was the goddess of wealth, *Lakshmi*. She was a beautiful woman, one who had hidden there until then. It is time for your churning to start."

"So you think something positive will come out of this fight?"

"The Goddess Lakshmi has two manifestations – one in the material world and the other in the spiritual world. If the one in the spiritual world is unhappy, the one in the material world vanishes."

Rakesh wondered what that meant. It was difficult for him to envision wealth in the spiritual world. It was relatively easy to chase wealth in the material world. What was the method of pursuing wealth in the spiritual world?

"I don't understand your symbolism. What are you trying to say?"

“Shut your eyes, my child. The form of Lakshmi called *Bhoodevi* represents immovable assets like your house. The form *Shridevi* represents the movable assets. Envision both of these in your mind.”

Rakesh closed his eyes, but every time he tried to envision the Goddess Lakshmi, Payal’s face came to his mind. It was her, his Lakshmi.

“Imagine the two clearly, one stable and the other unstable but quick.”

All Rakesh could see in his mind’s eye were two faces of Payal. One was happy and smiling, and the other was angry with him.

“Now answer the question. What is your biggest asset?”

“It is my marriage to Payal. It must never break. Everything I earn builds this asset, our home together. It has a value to us in our lifetime and to our future generations.”

“Think again. What has the greatest value in your life?”

Rakesh closed his eyes again. He tried to pose the question to himself again. His mind raged with various answers – his job, his wife, the house, but slowly the answer presented itself.

“It is I, my health, my happiness.”

“True. What is the path to this health and happiness? Try and remember when you truly felt happy.”

Rakesh closed his eyes again. He tried to remember the happiest days of his life. The day he cleared the IIT-JEE, the day he cleared the CAT, the day he got his job, the day Payal said yes to him, the day they got married, the day they bought the house. Of all the days he remembered, he remembered the days with Payal with the warmest glow in his heart. It made him smile.

“The path to happiness is through love.”

“What about money?” ‘Socks’ wasn’t going to let him go easily.

“Money can’t bring happiness, but happiness can certainly make sure I enjoy the money.”

‘Socks’ was pleased that he had sought the answers from her but found the insights within him.

“Now close your eyes and see the two forms of Lakshmi in your heart.”

Rakesh closed his eyes and envisioned the goddess of wealth again. This time there were two faces of Payal, and they were both smiling.

“It’s the *Griha Lakshmi*. It’s not life for love or money; it’s life for love *and* money.” Sudden enlightenment had come upon him.

He jumped up in joy and kissed ‘Socks’ on the cheek. He ran out of the door and into his waiting car.

“Home, we are going home.”

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A week later, Rakesh quit his job and started his own business to work on IT systems for hospitals. Payal was most supportive of his efforts. His prototype was tested in Payal Hospital. They formed a strong team and today, Rakesh’s software program is an industry standard.

They have two girls – Padma and Lakshmi. They are twins. Rakesh’s father died and ‘Socks’ now lives with them in the same house.

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*For alternate endings please visit the URLs below*

<http://www.riturajverma.com/lph/alternate-endings/the-emotional-cripple/1-2/>

<http://www.riturajverma.com/lph/alternate-endings/the-emotional-cripple/2-2/>

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rituraj Verma". The signature is stylized and includes a flourish at the end.

