

Utopia

He loved watching the waves kissing the seashore. The beach, *Travellers' Paradise*, lives up to its name. The vast stretch of sand was dotted with tourists from distant countries who were basking in the sun. Tiny tots built and demolished sand castles. Swimmers engaged in constant duels with the ascending waves.

He would capture this montage of the beach with his eyes. After taking a stroll for a bit, he would lie down on the pristine white sand and stare at the azure sky. He liked spending his summer evenings on that beach. That evening, too, after his office hours he had gone to the beach. He sat down in his usual place – the crag below the massive rocks. Soon, he got lost in reverie.

His father's email had not left his thoughts, 'It has been almost a month since I last heard from you. You seem to have completely forgotten the fact that two souls are wasting away here, thinking of you all the time. Your Ma checks her emails everyday, looking for the messages that just don't come. On some nights, she jumps out of bed to see if there is any mail from you. Then she remains awake, muttering god knows what. My sleep, too, is affected. I give her sleeping pills when it becomes unbearable for her. You know she has high blood pressure. We visit the doctor on alternate days. She swallows more pills than food every day. Her doctor has been advising her to keep away from the blues. Son, why had you insisted on us getting a computer when you don't even write back to us? In your last email,

you had written to us that you don't get time to write a letter or make a call. But you carry a laptop wherever you go. You can connect to us anytime you feel like. One line – "Ma, I'm fine" – can you not type this much and send her just that? I write to you what happens here every day. Or do you not even read those mails? Or is it that you are just not interested in our daily affairs? Do as you wish. I wrote all this only because of the ache festering in my heart.'

The unhappiness behind those words pricked his conscience. When he went back home, he immediately sent a reply to his father:

'The workload and deadlines keep me occupied even on holidays, the business trips I have to make whenever the company demands, the discussions and conferences to be attended...' He described in detail that his busy schedule didn't leave him any time, even to send an email.

He expressed his regret and asked his parents for their forgiveness. 'My mind is filled by worries about both of you. Often, you and Mom appear in my dreams. When awake, it is your image that my mind pictures.' This was the content of his email. He ended it with the usual sentences: 'Big hug and kisses.'

Though memories continued to disturb him, he did not get up from his bed. He was barely twenty when he had arrived in San Francisco after getting selected through campus placement at Madras IIT. He was a topper. The lanky, five-feet and seven-inches, wheatish-complexioned Balasubramanya Menon, son of Thannikkal Ramachandra Menon, was an extraordinarily intelligent boy since childhood. Marks of masculinity were just beginning to appear on his face. He was a vegetarian. He was the typical Shiva devotee, lighting a silver lamp before the image of Lord Shiva and praying to him every day.

All that was part of the past now. The innocent lad of the twenties got lost in the material success and worldly pleasures as he approached his thirties. Now, he held a position of an assistant manager heading the IT department of a multinational company.

He became self-indulgent and was answerable to none. Time and again, he vowed to break free from his present way of life but he never succeeded.

The cold palm on his forehead woke him up from his serpentine thoughts.

‘Why are you so late?’ He asked without opening his eyes.

‘Awful traffic!’ Jessica sat on the bed, caressing his forehead.

‘I thought you wouldn’t come today.’

‘What happened to your phone, Jessy? I had called you several times but it was coming busy’. He seemed annoyed.

‘Oh, yesterday I got so engrossed in watching Albert Feud’s *All About a Woman* that I lost track of time. It was half past one when the film ended. I went to sleep but forgot to set the alarm. It was quarter to seven when I woke up. You know I have to go to work at eight. In a hurry to reach office, I forgot to carry my phone. I’m sorry if I had made you worry, Balu.’

‘It’s all right.’

He put his arm around Jessica and brought her face close to his. Her fragrance and the warmth of her body always filled him with passion. Her smooth, dusky skin fascinated him. He snuggled up to her.

‘You look very sad.’ She ran her fingers through his hair.

He thought of how she was always able to read his sadness.

‘It wasn’t a good day for me.’

‘What happened?’

‘Mail from Dad.’

‘Shit!’ Jessica was furious. ‘There is no possibility of the old man leaving you alone. Can’t you just end the whole chapter with a “Please leave me alone”? But you don’t have the guts to do that!’

‘Jessy, please!’ he felt smothered.

She was not ready to leave it at that, ‘No, this cannot be allowed. I admit young Indians like you are intelligent and well-mannered. But none of you have a spine. Mere slaves! Like a dog on a leash! Who wastes time on folks who do not permit a free life? Is it a sin to live with the girl you love? This is the umpteenth

time I'm telling you all this! And it's not just me. Our friends – don't they raise the same issues? You are a slave to traditions and principles.'

Jessica's words pierced his heart. He was sad that Jessica and his friends were simply unable to understand that the Indian culture and the circumstances in which he was brought up were different from the American way of life.

'Jessy, it is not as easy as you think. I...'

She shot up even before he could finish talking. 'You will never understand no matter how many times I explain! Let's not quarrel and spoil this pleasant evening.' Jessica held her hand out to him. He took her hand slowly.

Late in the night, he occupied himself with reading and listening to the melodies of Roger Grass. Jessica, deep in sleep, had her arm wrapped around him. The phone started ringing. She stirred to pick up the phone. After saying 'Hello' she gave the phone to him.

'It's for you.'

'For me?'

'Yeah.'

It was his father. His face was blanched. 'What is it, Dad? Didn't you get my email?'

'Who answered the phone?' his father asked gruffly.

He stuttered, 'She is... my... colleague.'

'Colleague? You think I don't know that it is midnight there! What business could she have there at this time of the night?'

He kept quiet for a while, hoping that his dad would calm down. He tried to offer him an explanation, 'Dad, this is America. Unlike in our country, there are no stipulations here as to when and where a man and woman can meet or talk. This girl comes and lives with me occasionally. I also go to her place. This is common here. There is nothing wrong in it. Absolutely nothing...'

His dad's voice was surly, 'Many of my friends had told me that sending you to America would mean losing you. Back then, I had shouted at them. But that is exactly where we are now. So, you have

been living with who knows what type of girl. And now you have the temerity to justify yourself? Great!

His dad banged the receiver down.

He leaned back on his chair and closed his eyes. As the cat was out of the bag, he knew that neither his mother nor his father would ever be satisfied with his explanations. His heartbeat quickened at the thought of their hostility. He opened the refrigerator and gulped down a cola. A bottle of the drink did him no good. He took out another bottle of cola and jumped back into bed. Jessica pulled the chair closer to him. She could see that his ever-pleasant face was clouded with worry.

‘Your dad?’

‘Yeah.’

She said callously, ‘He won’t leave you alone till his last breath. Vicious fellow! He is a blood sucker. The first time I see him, I will shoot him to death.’

‘Jessy, stop it! No more of this anymore!’ Her words incensed him. ‘Did I ever say anything bad about your parents? Did I?’

His glare and aggressive tone frightened her.

‘Have you forgotten your drunk father raiding this apartment while looking for you and then fleeing with my expensive wrist watch and dollars from my wallet? Did I ever say a word despite all those provocations? I had quietly put up with it, thinking I shouldn’t cause you pain. And now, how is it troubling *you* if my dad calls me and advises me?’

He took a pause. He seemed to be struggling to control his emotions. ‘My dad is not a blood sucker. He loves me. That’s why he takes the liberty of scolding me. He loves me beyond words. I love him too.’

He paced the room to blow off steam. Moving the window curtain to one side, he looked outside to find serenity in the view of the night. He could faintly see few vehicles, with their headlights lighting the road which was obscured by fog. The high-rise condos, standing erect side by side each other, were quiet.

A cold hand came to rest on his shoulder. He turned around. Jessica's expression looked contrite. He pulled her towards himself. 'Did I hurt you, Jessy? I'm sorry.'

She pressed her face to his chest but said nothing. After each such episode, it became clearer to her that there was going to be no escape for him from the clutches of his parents. She was afraid that he might even give her up, succumbing to their authority. 'Well, I can leave him if it comes to that. I can tread my own path and forget him forever.' But her mind would not allow her to leave Balu. She knew that he is a young man without any corrupt addictions. Completely different from the American youth, he is unblemished, reliable, sincere and honest.

'Forget about everything. Come, let's go to bed.' Jessica pulled him to the bed and turned off the lights. She fell asleep as soon as she closed her eyes.

But he couldn't sleep. His father's words whirled in his mind. 'Everything is my fault. Why am I trying to blame this poor girl...?' He felt bad for Jessica. He embraced her warmly. She smiled at him with half-open eyes.



Balu, I had to take the first available flight. My dad is hospitalised. He is in coma right now. You know that my mother is already bedridden. That leaves only my brother, Lawrence, who doesn't have any sense of responsibility towards his family. Ultimately, it's on me. Dad has very little time left. The doctors say that his condition is critical. Think of my situation, Balu! How I wish you were here with me.

He read Jessica's email several times. He felt sad for her but he couldn't decide as to whether he should go to her or not. He could reach Mexico City in one and a half hours. However, he did not know why his mind did not allow him to do so.

'My office situation is such that I cannot go on leave in the near future. I feel sad that I cannot be by your side when you need me the most. My soul is always with you, Jessy', he told her over the phone. He could hear her crying. She would have guessed that he was avoiding her.



After deliberating for three days, he decided to come clean with his father. 'What am I so afraid of? It's not the first time that such a thing is happening', he thought. He had heard that his parents had been college sweethearts. 'Son taking after his father. As simple as that.'

That day, he did not go to the beach to escape the scorching summer. Instead, he went straight to the condo and wrote a detailed email to his father:

I know that you are not going to like what I'm about to tell you. After my confession will you be angry with me? Will you curse me? Will you disown me? No. I know my father and my mother well. That day, you shouted at me only out of anger, isn't it?

I want to tell you the truth. The girl who spoke to you over the phone the last time you called - we are close to each other. That is, I love her. She loves me too. She is a Mexican, works as a programmer in a company here. She is twenty years old and is beautiful. I understand that it's not according to our traditions and beliefs. But Dad, none of those have any relevance here. You know that well. Whenever Mom calls me, she reminds me that I should marry a girl only from our land. I'm very sad that I'm unable to fulfil the wishes of my parents. You may think of me as an insolent

and arrogant lout. Unfortunately, I'm more or less one in this particular matter. I hope you forgive me.

Balu read the mail once again before sending it. He finally felt at ease.

He was tired of sitting alone in his condo. While being with Jessica for three years, he had forgotten how to spend his time alone. With her around, he never had the mood or need to revisit his hobbies like reading. He decided to go for a drive to fill her absence.

He locked the condo and stepped out. He did not have any specific destination in mind. The fog was pretty thick outside. He got into the car and turned on the heater. He warmed up his cold fingers which had gone numb. He drove till he reached downtown. There were few speeding vehicles. He parked his car in an empty spot on the roadside and walked into a South Indian restaurant. He found a vacant seat in a corner and sat there lost in thought.

The mouthwatering dishes brought by the waiter interrupted his daydream. Thanking the waiter, he started eating the food ravenously. The hunger he felt was like he hadn't eaten since ages. It was past midnight when he left the restaurant.

Overtaking the other cars and breaking the lane rules, he reached his condo within twenty minutes. He was fast asleep the minute he lied down in his bed.



It was the alarm that woke him up. There wasn't any stark difference between today and the previous mornings save a drowsy feeling. 'Jessica, Dad, Ma...' he thought about them. He switched on the computer to check his emails. And there was the mail that he had been waiting for in his inbox: 'Son, if you love that girl, there is nothing wrong. The only thing is you have to marry her. Go ahead. You have

our blessings.' He couldn't believe it. He thought that maybe he was dreaming. He read his father's mail again. He would have hugged his parents if they were by his side. If Jessica was with him, he would have showered her with kisses. All her misconceptions about his parents would have been cleared.

He washed his face with lukewarm water and combed his hair. He could see happiness spreading across his features. He sent a reply to his father:

Dad, to tell you the truth, I cannot believe it even now. I don't have words to convey my happiness to you. Everything feels like a dream. I am really blessed to have both of you as my parents.

Lots of love,

Your son

He took a shower, got dressed and left for work.

Wearing a yellow dress and black overcoat, Jessica was standing in front of his condo. He ran up to her and hugged her. He kissed her several times. 'When did you reach?' He asked without releasing her from his arms.

'Just a little while ago', she appeared shaken up.

'How is your father?'

'He is no more.'

'What?' he was taken aback.

'Last Friday evening, Dad bid goodbye to this world. Though the death of our own people causes sorrow, it is better not to live when one has to depend on others for everything. Poverty, sickness and no one to help – those were my dad's circumstances. The little money that I used to send him every month was not adequate even for food. No one knew where Lawrence was. I didn't wait for him. Dad was buried on Saturday.' Her eyes were wet.

'I know there is no point in being apologetic. I ought to have been there. Me being there for you would have consoled you to a certain extent. But Jessy, believe me, I was burning in my own inferno. You know I'm a worrywart. Even a slight trifle stresses me out. It's not like I don't try to fight this tendency. But I'm finding it impossible. I lose myself while overthinking. All my worries are about us, Jessy. Please look at my face and tell me honestly: Were you not upset that I didn't come? Are you not angry with me?'

Jessica chastised him softly, 'Have you gone mad? I did not have any expectation that you would come. So why will I be angry with you?'

They walked inside the apartment, hand in hand.

'I have good news.' He whispered into her ear.

'Good news?' she asked in amazement.

'Yes, good news for you. But I will not reveal it now. Let it remain a surprise!'

He made Jessica sit close to him on the bed. He played with her fingers and kissed her lips. They satiated their burning desires. Jessica slept soundly. He slept as well, happy in his little paradise.



In the morning he was by her side with a steaming cup of tea. He ran his fingers through her hair to wake her up. She pressed her face to the pillow in refusal. He didn't let her be and tickled her. She opened her eyes at last, not concealing her annoyance. She finally sat up. He offered her tea. She was slowly sipping the warm brew.

'Come on, Jessy! We've got so much work to do! We also have to discuss about our wedding.'

She asked him sharply, 'What?'

He smiled. 'You can't believe it, can you? Dad and Ma have given us their permission to go ahead.'

Jessica carefully placed her cup on the side table. She held her head in her hands and closed her eyes. She slowly raised her head after a

minute and faced him, 'Our wedding? What are you saying, Balu? Do you believe in all that? Both of us are mature adults, you and I are a free man and woman. I love you and you love me. It's not considered eccentric in this country. And it's not a crime for a man and a woman to live together. This does not require consent from anybody else in the world. Marriage is a kind of incarceration. I don't hold its institution in high regard. And then, there's your parents. They are after your money! They want you to be at their beck and call. That's what they want. Parasites!'

Her disparaging remarks about his parents tipped him off. His body was shaking. 'What the hell are you talking about? They gave me their permission to marry the girl I love while brushing aside their beliefs and traditions. Is this the crime they committed? How dare you abuse them!'

His paroxysm of anger shocked Jessica. She got up and went close to him. 'Balu, I'm so sorry. I had no intention to hurt you. I'm against all these rotten traditions. I don't want to be a prisoner of circumstances. I have different plans in life. I cannot sacrifice my goals in the name of tradition.'

He took a long pause before speaking, 'I believe in marriage and family life. Marriage, for me, is a sacred institution. If it is a fossilised concept, then I'm fine being old-fashioned.'

Instead of debating over it, she bid him well and went back to her apartment.

Jessica sent him an email that evening:

We are like day and night. Our perspective on life are poles apart. I cannot live confined within the four walls of a house as the wife of a man by sacrificing all pleasures of life. I'm a dreamer. I need lots of money, Balu. I love luxuries. I love expensive wine, foreign cars and company of handsome young men and gorgeous young women. And I want a huge mansion near the sea with many

servants. In short, I want to become not just a millionaire but a billionaire! As far as my ambition is concerned, it is unbound. These are my desires. I couldn't have said all this to you face-to-face. That's why I chose to write to you.

Yesterday, I came across an article about Indian women. It dealt with young girls being exhibited in front of prospective bridegrooms like animals in an animal market. I also read about virgin girls who are compelled to sacrifice all that is precious to them for men, whom they have not even met properly before entering the bedroom. Mothers-in-law, who burn brides because the dowry was less than what was promised, young girls who have to obtain permission from their mothers-in-law for entering their husbands' room and the stories of those unlucky ones who had to give up their lives by jumping into the funeral pyres of their husbands.

Of course, I'm not saying that these are common incidents. But it is a fact that such things happen not only in Indian villages but even in major cities like Delhi. I was terrified after reading this. I cannot even think of being a daughter-in-law of this kind to your parents, dictated by you, who thinks that the husband is a demigod to his wife. Can't we continue to live like we're living now, free and without being servile towards anyone? Balu, life is short. Why should we waste it?

And now a happy news. A baby is growing inside my womb. A child whose paternity can be claimed only by you. Don't get panicked because of this news. I won't take you to court or demand a large

sum of money like other women. This is the result of our love. This baby will be a lifelong link between us whether you like it or not. Now, what role does the relationship constituted by marriage play in this context?

Her email paralysed him. The world he had imagined came tumbling down. He screamed in his empty room: 'It's a lie! A blatant lie!'