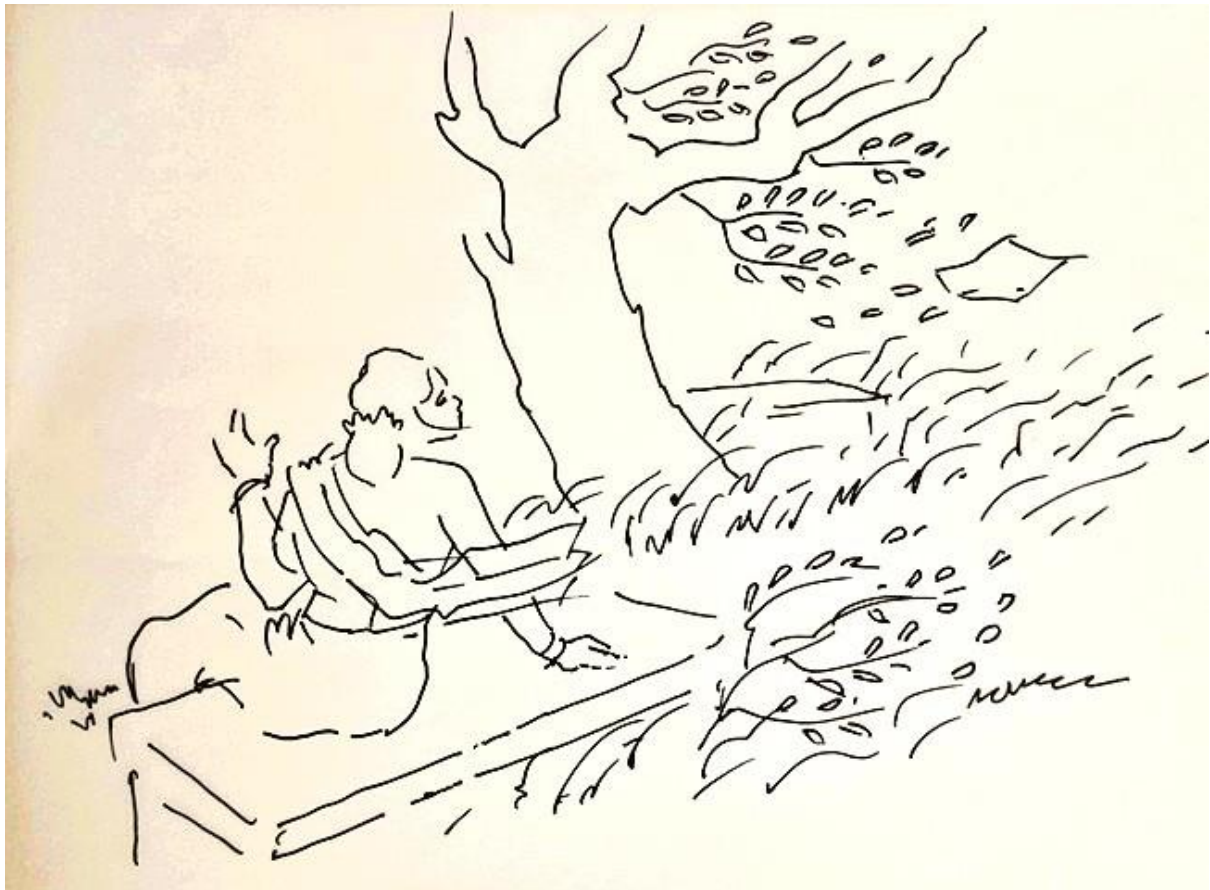




A Providential Encounter

By BS Murthy

Stepping into a sprawling park nearby, Latha headed towards a lonely bench to sit on the horns of a dilemma. Soon, as if they got wind of her morose mood, the monsoon clouds began to engulf the setting sun to sync the environs with her gloomy demeanor. But yet, unmindful of her bereft state, the charm of her middle-aged form enlivened the surroundings, emanated by the eyes of the beholders. If anything, enhancing that sense of espial, the romantics among them envisioned her maiden frame entwining her man as an ever-eager creeper. All the same, lost in her thoughts, she was oblivious to the goings on around her enchanting presence.

However, as her mind began muddying her thoughts, she grasped the note she had tucked in her blouse, closer to her heart, and hardly had she pulled it out to review her plan of revenge, a gust of wind snatched it from her hands. Nonplussed though, she readily recovered her wits to pursue that ariel piece for its retrieval before it landed in alien hands. So, not losing sight of that self-incriminating thing, she ran with the wind till that dropped into a secluded portion of the park. Then, holding her breath for a while, she hurried her way into that nuke but upon seeing a semi-gray-haired man engrossed in going through her outpour, missing a heart a beat, she stopped in her tracks. However, gathering her wits in time and having weighed her options - reclamation or abandonment – she headed towards him.

“Excuse me, it’s mine,” she said embarrassedly pointing to her note that he began to pocket.

"How am I to know that it's yours?" he said questioningly.

"You know that it's not yours either," she said argumentatively.

"True, but what if I were to put this damned idea into the wrong head," he said without taking his eyes off her.

"I'm Latha," she said lowering her face

"Have it," he said handing it over to her.

"Thank you," she said with a sigh of relief.

'It's Okay,' he said thoughtfully.

'Oh, what would he be thinking about me?' she began to envision, leaving him hurriedly. 'Whatever it is, what difference does that make for me? But isn't something more in his stare than mere desire? Whatever it is, probably that could have held him back from befriending me. Could it be contempt for my character? So be it, but how do I care. Oh, no, he's privy to my plan and could imperil me when the chips are down. What if I seduce him into becoming my accomplice? But looks like he's too level-headed to get into a vulnerable position to compromise himself. So what, I've nothing more to lose by way of trying. Even otherwise, his semi-grey eminence is worth courting.'

Looking back over her shoulders and seeing his stare, she walked towards him.

"Sorry, I forgot to ask your name," she said upon reaching him.

"Is it the cause of your comeback?" he said with a smirk on his face.

"What else do you think it could be?" she said making it even Stevens.

"So, you're smart as well," he said wearing his admiration for her on his sleeve.

"As well as what?" she said teasingly, pleased with herself.

"I'm Mohan," he said invitingly.

"Thank you, Mr. Mohan, but that's no reply for my query," she said coyly.

"Well, but there's no prelude for that?" he said expectantly.

"May I sit, as a prelude?" she said, slipping out of her slippers.

"Oh, I'm sorry for being unchivalrous," he said, standing up.

"Maybe you're overawed," she said coquettishly as they sat together.

"Looks like you're unnerved," he said for a repartee.

"What rubbish?" she said mawkishly.

"Never mind, I'm no blackmailer," he said sincerely.

"Thank you for not making it worse for me," she said suggestively.

"Now, you're free to call it quits," he said tentatively.

"But I'm not done yet," she said seductively.

"With what?" he said anticipatively.

"I've another side of my 'scandal sheet' to show you," she said enticingly.

"I suppose it's a fair offer," he said assuming an attentive posture.

She was barely thirty when her husband, a Major in the Indian Army, laid down his life in a counter-insurgency operation in Kashmir. So as to wholly devote herself to his ageing parents, to whom he was the only child, she gave up her schoolteacher job, and came to lead her life with them in the shadows of the martyr's memories. However, after their death, in quick succession, to overcome her ennui, she took up teaching all again. That was five years back, when she turned forty. Soon, as it happened, she was drawn to a twenty something colleague that set up their passionate liaison in which she was on cloud nine all again. But ever since her lover, that was a week back, broke with her to get engaged with a young woman, she has been left gasping in the pit of despair.

"Why spare your boyfriend and spoil his betrothed?" he said in a manner of knowing the answer.

"I don't want to lose him to her," she said resolutely.

"Suppose you make it a perfect murder that's rare any way, would it insulate him from another dame?" he said questioningly.

"I didn't delve into all that," she said confusedly.

"It's the villainy vanity that failed you to figure it out," he said thoughtfully.

"What do you mean by that?" she said in half-protest.

"If it were a case of love turned into hatred, you would've wanted to see his end but as he snubbed you for her sake, I suppose it's your vanity that makes her the target of its hurt," he said in a helpful tone.

"It's possible," she said after some contemplation.

"You're sensible," he said in a complimentary manner.

"But still your counselling helps," she said invitingly.

"I'm not a psychologist," he said evasively.

"But you seem so," she said, and added, "if you care to tell me about yourself, I'm all eager to listen."

"Evan as deeper thoughts tend to evade the radars of close relationships, how strange it is that our apprenticeship of acquaintance should begin with the exposure of our dark secrets," he began stoically. "To begin with, though bright, being poor, I was down to earth but when a rich man's attractive daughter married me for love, so to say, my

ego got energized. But it's her wifely devotion that gave birth to my manly vanity that is besides our smart son, who, in time, became a decorated cop. When we were in search of a suitable bride for him, the Naxals managed to get their nemesis to plunge us into gloom."

"Oh, what a fateful coincidence!" she exclaimed, interrupting him.

"But as you would see, the effects of it varied widely," he said as he resumed summarising his life. "Lo, living in my vanity world by then, in my son's supreme sacrifice, I came to see my service to the nation as his father, furthering my illusion. Sadly, as my wife widowed me five years back, though I could overcome her loss in time, devoid of her adoration, I became a fish out of water. Not for long though as my hand of vanity led me to a poor lass of quality, whom, with my wealthy attentions, I enticed into marrying me. That was three years back, and ever since, people mistook her for my daughter, bolstering my vanity no end."

At that, he paused even as she was listening wide-eyed.

"It's thus, given my situation, I failed to fathom her feelings," he began saying. "It's only the other day that she made me privy to the villainy of my vanity that has been stymieing her, not so much in my bed but in her life, as she put it. Instead of wooing her with my wealth, had I won her with my affection, she might've fallen in love with me, never mind my grey hair. As the familiarity of the well-heeled living began waning the thrill of it, for long, she was yearning for a normal life with a man she loved. Asserting that she could bear it no more, she pleaded for separation from me without any encumbrance, and seeing her plight, as I had no heart to refuse, it didn't take me long to accede to her request. Whatever, as a recompense, I even offered her enough money to last her life-time that she has flatly refused. So, after she moved out of my place this evening, as a prelude to divorce, I came here to take a serene look at the falsity of my vanity, and you know what followed."

"Oh, how remarkable," she said in awe and added, "you make me seem so small."

"Why spoil me by stoking my vanity," he said half in jest.

"Well, I will be failing myself if I don't confess that I came back to you with the idea of seducing you into becoming my partner in crime," she said shamefacedly.

"Blame it on the villainy of vanity," he said patting her shoulder assuredly.

At that, pulling out the damning thing from her blouse and having shredded it into tiny pieces, she blew them away from her palm as if driving out vanity from her life itself.

"Will you let me be your life partner?" she said turning to him with an appealing look.

"See, it's not wise to act on the rebound," he said sounding caution.

"But isn't it stupid to lose track of our providential encounter?" she said spiritedly.

"Do you think I'm a stupid?" he said suggestively.

"I would let the time decide," she said mischievously.

“Who knows what life has in store for us,” he said philosophically.

“Isn’t it said that If hopes were dupes, fears may be liars,” she said in hope, extending her hand.

Then, as if not wanting to lose track of each other, hand in hand, they headed towards the exit.