

## Prologue

It was dark, dank and foreboding.

He was in a grotto with a guide. It had many different natural rock formations. The patterns on the rocks reminded him of cave art, primitive and pristine. He passed his hands over their rough edges, felt their invincible strength, and wanted to see more.

As the light from the torch fell on the rocky walls, he could make out a few shapes—a human brain, antler’s horns, icy mummies; he watched their shadows loom over tortuous passages. He felt the treacherous floor under his feet.

After covering more ground that was uneven and slippery, watching the bizarre shapes and shadows, he noticed that the passage suddenly opened into a series of catacombs. He didn’t know why but he felt he should return now.

“Let’s head back.” He told the guide as evenly as he could, trying not to betray his growing anxiety. The rocks responded with a humming echo, much like the sound from the base chord of a tightly strung guitar. It soon degenerated into deafening silence.

“I haven’t taken anyone this far into the grotto before,” the guide replied quietly, ignoring his plea to return. Was there a hint of accusation in the woman’s voice?

“I don’t blame the poor girl,” he conceded. He was so captivated with what he had seen back there that he had asked her to take him further and farther into it, ignoring her protests.

“I think we missed a turn somewhere back there.” The roof arched in places and hung close to the uneven floor. They almost bent double to get through the shrinking passages. When a passage got too narrow to pass through, they backtracked and picked another one. The guide seemed clueless and he began to panic as the light from the torch became weak.

“Do you carry spare batteries, woman?” he asked without hope. The light went out just as he saw the guide shake her head in the negative.

Darkness rushed at him. “Hey, stay close,” he cried out in despair. The guide seemed not to hear him. He heard his own voice echo hollowly, but no sound came from her. Bummer! Why do they have female guides here?

He crouched and flailed his arms around him. He felt the roof just above his head. The walls on either side narrowed as he moved forward. The guide could not have backtracked without stumbling into him. So the only option was to keep going forward.

A faint point of light ahead seemed to beckon him. The passage narrowed further making him crawl. Then, suddenly, the floor collapsed and he felt himself falling, falling freely, arms flailing as he screamed and screamed...



# ONE

Thoughts crowding behind his creased brows, Avinash climbed to the third floor of the school building. He needed to talk things over, the things that weighed heavily on his mind. He needed a fresh mind to talk to, an innocent mind, a mind that had not yet experienced life's vicissitudes.

Students in gray and yellow uniform bounded up the stairs, chattering and giggling. A couple of intrepid boys slid down the railing, but jumped down abruptly when they saw Avinash and scampered off to melt into the crowd of fellow students.

He walked into the classroom amidst hushed voices and a morning greeting from the students. The cheerful and animated faces of his young wards never failed to lift his spirits, no matter what state he had been in.

Despite the four fans that hung from the ceiling, and the couple of fluorescent lamps on the walls, he made sure the windows were open. They let in light and occasional breeze into the room.

“What is history?” Avinash wrote on the blackboard. The study of history, he believed, must begin at one's doorstep. One's past must be understood first; the decks must be cleared for the particular, before one could comprehend the general.

A few hands went up. He looked at their eager faces and pointed at a boy. “It is about what happened before we were born.”

He turned to another student, walking down the room.

“It is about kings and their kingdoms.”

A girl piped in. “History is about how people lived in the past.”

When he finished hearing them all, Avinash went back to the board and wrote, ‘Yesterday is history’.

“Sir, but what happened yesterday is not in the history reader,” remarked a girl. The class erupted in laughter. Everyone joined in the chatter and the giggles that followed.

Avinash smiled briefly and waited until the merriment subsided. “Yesterday and the many, many yesterdays before it make up the past.”

He looked at each student in the eye, seeking his or her attention and inviting participation.

He continued. "What you study from the reader is the recorded past. Therefore, it is mostly about the people and the events which have had a significant impact on the world."

"Sir, does it mean that only important people make history?" asked a boy.

"Does it mean, Sir, that what I do now does not matter at all?" inquired another.

Avinash thought for a moment. "History is not limited to what is recorded in the books. Each one of us is making history even now."

"How, Sir?" He knew that their interest was now thoroughly aroused.

"The history of a people is the sum total of individual histories of every one of them. So what you do today matters tremendously." He added thoughtfully, "the brain records its own actions."

"Sir, I remember what I did yesterday. Is that part of my past?"

Avinash responded slowly. "Yes. That's right. The brain recollects what it has recorded. Memory is history."

He had been teaching high school students for about a decade now; even so, he had always looked forward to it anew every day. He made it a point never to start the class with a lesson. Instead, he would open a topic for discussion and make sure everyone joined in. Hands went up, ideas floated and arguments ensued. Moderating now and then, but generally allowing the topic to unfold, he would gently coax them to go deeper into it, until it set the mood for the lesson to follow.

The discussion with his young wards also afforded him the opportunity to talk about matters that concerned him most.

In a small brick colored pocket notebook that measured no bigger than a visiting card, he kept notes in shorthand. He now wrote, 'The mind has an extraordinary capacity to record and recollect things from the past. The sharper the memory, the finer the recollection. And consequently, the greater its weight on the mind.'

The notes he kept were random and he wrote them as they occurred, unedited, without cross references, which meant there was no way he could recover an item from the notebook, except by painfully going over the pages one by one.

Avinash knew that living in this age of laptops and tablets, this was an anachronism. He knew also that his profession, that paid so little, did not permit him the luxury of an electronic notepad. Nor did he have any inclination to acquire one; he disliked gizmos of all sorts.

“Hey, Avinash,” Sheela, the science teacher, called out. Avinash looked up briefly at the full-bodied sari-clad lady with a liberal brown moon on her forehead. He hastily stuffed the little red book into his trouser pocket.

She pulled a chair beside him and flopped down in it. Avinash cringed inwardly and pulled himself closer. He felt repelled at the ingratiating smile and the obvious attempt at intimacy.

“Busy, are you?” Looking into his face she attempted to make eye contact.

He turned round to greet her, but avoided her eyes. “No. Not really. How was class today?”

He knew what he was going to hear, but braced himself nevertheless.

“Oh, horrid. They are all so naughty.” There, he thought, she was off on her hobbyhorse again, complaining about the students. “They don’t let me teach properly. I wonder what they will come to; these kids are a rowdy lot!”

As usual, Avinash held back the urge to tick her off; he had no problem with any child from the same class. To him, the way you teach is more important than what you teach.

She must have been quite vexed today, for she was more eloquent in her vituperation than ever before. “It is a pain handling these little devils! They want to play all the time. Ma’am, I want to go to the rest room. Ma’am, I am thirsty, can I drink some water? Ma’am, she is pulling my hair. Bah! I wonder how anyone can teach them anything! Sending them to school is a way for the parents to get a break, I’m sure. *Meri kismet*,” she slapped her forehead, “My karma.”

“Karma troubles us in different ways,” he wanted to say. Instead, he gave her a pitiful stare as he walked out of the staff room. “I have a class now,” he said on his way out. “See you later.” She knew her subject, he mused, but the tragedy was that she couldn’t handle the children.

In the doorway he paused and shrank back against the door to allow Syamala, the computer teacher, to pass. They looked at each other for a

moment, and she smiled a greeting. Avinash stood rooted to the spot as he gazed into her eyes.

*The eyes—the same size and shape, the sparkle in them and the color, a greenish blue, my God, he thought, the color matches too. A flood of memories threatened to overwhelm him, but he quickly recovered. He nodded and creased his face in a return greeting. His eyes were unsmiling, though his heart thrummed rapidly.*

He passed her by and walked across the courtyard with quick darting movements. Arrested by their squeals of laughter and playful exuberance, of the children playing there, he leaned against a wall and allowed his mind to unleash the flood.

*“Hey, stop that!” she cried and laughed out loud, shielding her face from the rush of salt water he hurled at her. He bent down again to dip his hand into the inward wave, but she quickly came up behind him and imprisoned him in her arms. He felt her limbs, soft like dough, moving with grace, like a deer, and at once fresh and fragrant, like a flower.*

*The setting sun cast a long undulating shadow of one entwined figure on the wet sandy beach. The waves from the Bay of Bengal carried the shadow back and forth, time and again. The sea seemed to sense the joyous moments and sent wave after rolling wave to join in the merriment.*

*Still bent, Avinash felt Neha’s lissome figure melt into his own, stirring in him energies that swept him from head to toe. Time and again. Like the waves crashing around their feet. He looked upside down at her tiny feet, balanced on tender shapely legs; they dug into wet sand and created frothy eddies when the waves receded.*

*He lifted himself up slowly and felt her quivering on his back. Her arms, fair and slim, completely encircled him. He looked at the long slender fingers interlocked and pressing against his chest.*

*“Don’t let me go.” She said, and sounded a little breathless. Her chest heaved slightly and her breasts rubbed against his back, sending hot searing currents coursing through his veins. He couldn’t see, but knew from long familiarity, that her lips were a wee bit parted, almost imperceptibly, as always when she felt consumed by passion or became resolute about something.*

*He savored the joy from the fleeting moments of togetherness available to them. Like the waves, the joy of being with her crested in his heart, followed by a trough of despairing thoughts of her going away from him. Time and time again.*

\* \* \*

The school bell, sharp and strident, broke through his reverie. Avinash shook his head and jerked himself forward.

He remembered that he had dreaded the moment of parting even though he had been urging her to go. No, not just urging, but insisting, almost demanding, tragically so... My karma, he sighed.

Driving back home after school, Avinash reflected on the tendency of his mind to persist in established modes of operation. Isn't it called mind-set? He asked himself. Is it inertia? Newton, as Sheela might explain, described inert matter as persisting in motion or at rest, until it is acted upon. Is it true for the mind also, he wondered, which in its material form is what we know as the brain? He pulled over to the curb and jotted his thoughts into the red book.



## TWO

The drive from the school took about ten minutes. He drove an old, fading, off-white Fiat which he had purchased a couple of years ago from an acquaintance. He enjoyed driving, and drove leisurely, allowing the racing, zigzagging motorbikes to overtake him.

He passed by a row of shops that were being razed and cleared for a big shopping complex. The past is erased and replaced by the present, he noted, and remembered someone pointing out on a train that unless the old passengers alighted, how could the new ones get in?

He slowed as he neared his first floor apartment near Abid's. This place had been a hub of business and merchant activity with cinema halls and street shops, roadside vendors and rickshaw pullers before the center of commerce shifted to the upmarket areas like Banjara Hills.

He parked the car in the street—a cul-de-sac—and climbed the stairs to his two-room tenement.

In the sit-out just outside the main door, he flopped down on a chair and removed his shoes, placing them on a shelf in the corner. He relaxed for a while.

A *koel* cooed from the large mango tree that rose like an umbrella over the house. He searched for it and gave up. Cuckoos, pigeons, sparrows and a host of other birds either roosted or used the tree as a stopover. The tree was thick with leaves, and its long and hard branches arced over the building to form a canopy, shading the verandah from the noon sun.

Picking up a dusting cloth, he went inside. He had furnished the room with just the things he needed. He swept clean the writing table near the window which overlooked a park on the main road. The same table on which he had written letters to Neha...back in Vizag...he shot a look at the trunk in the loft where he kept her letters—sealed from sight and dust. But the memories of her—they were etched in his brain—whose material seemed more resilient to the ravages of time than paper.

A metal wind chime made clinking sounds and drew him towards it. He went over to the window where he hung it and polished its chiming

rods. He loved it for its sounds, though he did not believe in the feng shui lore.

At the head of the table stood a small chocolate colored clay figurine of seated Buddha, his favorite. As a child, he had read about the Sakyamuni, one of the several titles of the Buddha, in a colorfully illustrated children's book. He had been especially moved by Gautama's compassion towards the bird which his step-brother had shot down with an arrow. He fondly ran his fingers over the figure, wiping dust particles from the creases and crevices in it. The artist had skillfully crafted the serene face and the composed figure of the Buddha.

On the opposite wall, a cloth painting hung in a wooden frame. He took special care in dusting it since it was a relic from the past, passed on from father to son for so many generations; no one in the family could tell how far back in time it went. He ran his duster along its framed periphery and then wiped the canvas gently. He felt a strange kinship with the painting, which he put down to sentiment.

Above the painting, a wall clock hung from a nail, its white background revealing the dark slender hands that glowed in the dark. An iron cot lay below it along the wall, its mattress covered by a clean white sheet. Next, he cleaned the table lamp perched atop a small stool beside the bed, which served as his reading lamp during night. He also dusted the wooden shelf beside the door which held a rack of books, a small bundle of neatly folded clothes and a small black and white TV.

He went into the kitchen, adjoining the living room, and washed the used utensils in the sink. He kept his living space sparse and clean.

He then showered, slipped into pajamas and made some tea. He carried the teacup into the living room—his study-cum-bedroom—and switched on the TV to catch up with some news.

The evening sunlight streamed into the room from the open window. He watched it for some time as it shimmered with lingering dust, lighted the far corner of the room and made grotesque shadows of the furniture. The colors on the painting deepened, and shadows from uneven folds streaked across it, giving it a surreal look. It seemed to hold him in thrall, as he sat there, rooted to the spot, oblivious to time and space.

But soon the spell broke as a soft westerly breeze set off tinkling sounds from the wind chime. The winter day would end quickly and it was time to begin cooking dinner. He ate vegetarian food and his tastes were

simple. His culinary skills did not extend beyond basic necessities. He ate early and frugally, and used the least number of utensils possible in order to keep his after-dinner chores to a bare minimum.

\* \* \*

As he lay on the bed that night, Avinash looked out of the window. He spied a star shimmering in the dark blue patch. As he watched, he wondered if it was really out there. The light he saw was what remained of a star that was in all probability now dead and gone eons ago. Like the events from his past.

It lives now, though it might be dead for all I care, he mumbled to himself as he fell asleep.

≈

## THREE

He was correcting the students' term papers in the staffroom when Sheela came sashaying in, fuming at no one in particular. Hameed who taught gym came in next, followed by Aruna, the music teacher. Sheela curled her lip at Aruna who took the chair beside Avinash and resigned herself to a seat far from him.

Syamala came in and announced, "A picnic has been arranged for class VIII. The principal wants two volunteers to handle the children."

Sheela became silent and appeared to be immersed in her work. Hameed suddenly developed a muscle cramp and complained that he was doing more gym than the children he was supposed to teach. Avinash asked for the details and Syamala gave him a computer printout. Aruna looked over his shoulder as he read out the circular.

The children would be taken to a park in the school bus. The volunteers could send in their names through Syamala.

"Count me in." Avinash said quietly. He returned the circular to Syamala without looking into her eyes. As she turned away, he caught sight of the blue green luminescence in her eyes. A shadow passed across his face that no one noticed. He looked troubled and felt his heart race.

Aruna declined because of a family function, so Syamala volunteered. She went into the computer room to fill in the volunteer names and hand it over to the principal.

Sheela got her tongue back. "God, isn't it hard enough to handle them in the class?"

There was no encouraging response. Hameed limped out of the room mumbling to himself. Aruna played gently on the flute and the notes floated mellifluously across the room. Avinash went back to his corrections.

The wall clock struck the hour. Avinash looked up at it briefly, gathered his papers and proceeded to the classroom.

\* \* \*

“Sir, I have a question.” A frail hand rose diffidently. Avinash looked at the girl in spectacles and nodded. “Sir, isn’t history also about progress?”

“What according to you is progress?”

“Progress is ...it is how we progress, you know, Sir.”

“Give me an example.”

“Um, from barbarians we became very sophisticated,” ventured the girl.

“History is about change, certainly. It records how the change has occurred over a period of time. But all change is not progress, is it?”

“We no longer live in caves and in the jungles. We have homes and streets.” A boy from the back bench joined.

“That is a change alright, and it is progress, too.”

“Sir, is there change that is not also progress?”

“What is progress?” Avinash put the question again, looking at the whole class.

“To progress means to improve.”

“To become better.”

“To grow.”

“Okay. Alright.” Avinash raised his hand. “Think this over. In the olden days, we went to war with arrows. Each arrow could kill only one soldier. After a thousand years we have learnt to kill more efficiently—we use missiles that could potentially wipe out thousands of soldiers in one second.”

A boy let out a low whistle that drew titters from others.

“Yes?” Avinash pressed for a more enlightening response. “Given the definition of progress, do you call this progress?”

“Maybe we need to redefine progress,” someone said, and a few others supported him.

“Yea, yea,” they seconded and thumped the benches.

Avinash shook his head. “Consider this; it is not just soldiers dying by the thousands in a battle field, even civilian life is at a great risk of annihilation or permanent genetic injury. Think of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the Cold War. Or, in our own time, the terrors unleashed by religious and ideological fanatics, who have progressed from rebellious victims to soulless militants.”

A girl responded, “Sir, it is certainly progress as far as the weapons are concerned.”

“So,” concluded the teacher, “what has progressed is our capacity, not only to destroy legally people en masse, but also to boost our hatred in society to murderous limits. I wonder if you would call that progress.”

He waited for the thought to sink in. The class fell silent for some time.

“Sir, you said memory is history. Does memory lead to progress or not?”

Avinash looked thoughtful for some time, his eyes scanning the questioning faces before him. He said, “An arrow evolved into a missile, right? And hate, that built the arrow, progressed into mass murder. So now we have become sophisticated barbarians.”

He paused, and then said, “If memory is holding you back, then there can be neither change nor progress.”

“But without memory, I could not go back home,” protested a girl.

“Or remember anything for the exam!” said another.

“We are talking about the memories of hurt, of loss...” Here he paused, wondering if he was not sliding into his own past. Into that region of memory that held his greatest secret—his hurt, his loss, his guilt, his fear.

He shook his head as if to clear it and continued, “It is progress when you move up from class to class, from the position of a clerk to that of a manager. Is it progress when, psychologically speaking, you are where you have always been?”

The children looked perplexed, but he went on all the same. ‘Sow the seeds,’ was his motto, ‘who knows where they will sprout?’

“What would you call it, Sir, if it is not progress?”

“We don’t have a word yet, do we? Let’s try and invent one.”

