

Passing the Spirit

Arvind's plane landed in Rochester, New York, in the morning hours of a cold spring day. There wasn't much traffic at the airport since it was a Saturday and the daily commuters were all resting at home or the hardy ones cruising on Lake Ontario in motor boats. In no time, Arvind found himself at the "Arrivals" curb with his backpack, waiting for his ride. He wore a gold brown semi-formal jacket, ironed blue jeans, and pointy dress shoes. Experience had taught him that in America business could happen any moment anywhere, and so, he didn't want his attire to be an obstacle.

As he stood there leaning against a massive concrete pillar of the terminal, he watched the disciplined and noiseless machinery of cars, limos, buses, and rental pick-ups roll in and out, smoothly hauling people and bags away in an unending repetitive cycle. Occasionally, an old man or woman would start crossing the road at snail's pace causing a minor traffic jam. At this, no one fretted but waited patiently. There were no hiccups in this machinery; no shouting, no pushing, no shoving. No one seemed in a hurry, and yet, no one was wasting time waiting longer than a few minutes. Everyone seemed amiable and cheerful; some even joked and laughed loudly.

Rochester is known for its harsh winters and warm and pleasant summers. Today – the spring being in its second month – it was supposed to be relatively warm. But, due to an overnight heavy downpour, it was closer to freezing. A few wispy gray clouds still remained in the sky to tell stories of the rain, but otherwise it was a bright sunny day. The roads and buildings sparkled under the coat of a cold sluggish film of water, and the bitter wind could quickly cool your ribs if you did not hold your jacket snug to your chest.

Arvind's ride, in the form of his college friend Parag, appeared shortly in a black shiny Lexus SUV. Fancy cars like Lexus were no longer a novelty in India, but still, they seemed so much more *at home* on the clean and spacious American roads. Parag's Lexus made a crunching sound as it crushed the tiny gravel under its large all-season tires, before it stopped in front of Arvind and ejected its driver Parag to greet Arvind.

For Parag and Arvind this wasn't exactly an emotion-filled meeting of long-lost friends. They met so often – at least twice a year – that they hardly had anything new to talk about. Parag was a professor at the University of Rochester, and he visited India – and thus met Arvind too – on every available pretext: conferences, joint research projects with Indian universities, or just plain family vacations. So, the ride to Parag's house in South Rochester was mostly silent, barring an occasional reference to the unexpected chilly weather outside.

As mentioned, the weather wasn't exactly spring-like, and yet, the spring bloom was unmistakable. As Parag cruised along Brooks Avenue, Arvind surveyed the beautiful soft greenery all around him. The Americans had no doubt cleared up vast stretches of forest land for development, but still, they had managed to maintain a wonderful balance between the

human need for order and structure and the nature's preference for unruly and greedy chaos. The massive trees that lined and hung over every road, the lush green hills, and the cozy, modern houses nestled in this greenery almost like bird nests hidden inside dense trees, were all testimony to that amicable coexistence. The green of the leaves was so fresh and cheerful. Coming out of the long dead of winter, it was as if life was proclaiming its ultimate superiority over nature's odds.

After a while Parag got talking and fired his usual questions at Arvind.

"How is business?"

"How is the Indian stock market doing?"

Arvind was in the business of manufacturing low-power, high-precision pumps that are typically used in medical instruments like dialysis machines. Parag really had no insight into what it took to do business in India, but he, nevertheless, always pestered Arvind about intimate details of his business. He brashly asked uncomfortable questions such as "Why is your business performance below the industry average?"

Arvind valued Parag's opinions, since he was a professor of business management. But, he regretted that Parag never gave importance to the soft aspects of his business – like the modern, progressive, and ethics-oriented culture Arvind had painfully nurtured in his company (which wasn't very easy to achieve in India), or the kind of high quality customers he had acquired and maintained (which most companies also wanted but didn't do anything about beyond false advertising). These aspects obviously meant that hard, routine parameters like *revenue growth* and *profit after tax* could not be the sole barometers of his success.

But Parag, being a professor, had his standard theories and metrics and he applied them indiscriminately. Moreover, being an old college friend of Arvind, he felt he had the right to dissect Arvind's business as if it were a case study for his management class.

"Oh, by the way, where is Gautam?" Parag suddenly remembered that Arvind wasn't supposed to be traveling alone.

Gautam was Arvind's only child – a handsome lad of 19 years. Arvind's heart warmed at the very mention of his name. Arvind had married his college sweet-heart Vinita, who had, quite tragically, died after delivering Gautam, due to some unfortunate mistake of the surgeon performing her C-section. Through tearful eyes and with a longing look at the warm tiny bundle by her side, she had bid goodbye to Arvind and left him alone to care for the infant boy.

Vinita's death was a shattering blow for Arvind – a bolt from the blue really – who had also just launched his own business. Thanks to the support and active help of his strong-willed mother, he had managed to recover from that catastrophe. He did not remarry, and instead tried to play the dual roles of father and mother for his son. Gautam had grown into a loving, warm-hearted, and handsome son, who never ceased to amaze Arvind with his achievements.

"Gautam?" Arvind recovered from his reverie. "Oh, yeah, Gautam! Well, he is flying in alone this afternoon," he replied. "He had some work at his department that he needed to finish before taking off."

After completing his 12-year schooling in India, Gautam had enrolled into the pre-med program at NYU in the Big Apple.

It took about 20 minutes for Arvind and Parag to reach their destination – Parag’s sprawling riverside mansion. Parag had bought this house as a sort of reward for himself for his confirmation as full professor at the University of Rochester a couple of years ago.

“Wow! Impressive!” Arvind beamed at the beautiful house, which was one of many similar houses lined up along the western edge of the Genesee River. When they went around the house to the riverbank, Arvind noticed a boardwalk at the end of which there was a small boat tied by rope. A massive current of water flowed with a deep gentle roar as it rushed to meet Lake Ontario up north.

“Cool man! Is that your boat? We should do some rowing after lunch,” Arvind walked eagerly forward as if to embrace the quiet beauty of the scene.

“We got the house pretty cheap,” said Parag as he stood looking at the house with his back to the river. “The earlier owner apparently was in a hurry to leave. I think he was having difficulty making his payments. So, we squeezed him a bit.”

Even after two years, Parag seemed preoccupied with how much he had paid to buy the house, instead of appreciating the beautiful natural backdrop the house provided to his daily life. Arvind continued to gaze at the river, at the wild grass that grew near the bank, at the occasional duck that passed by in the water.

After lunch, which was served by Parag’s wife Charu, Arvind was shown into his room. And then everyone just vanished in their respective rooms. Charu, to Arvind’s surprise, did not speak to him much, aside from making superficial inquiries about his travel and Gautam. She had ordered a garlic-

flavored specialty pizza for lunch and had served it meticulously on a vast dining table in expensive-looking cutlery. But, for cheap conversation she didn't show the slightest inclination.

Arvind thought she might be preoccupied with the impending evening get-together. The get-together, indeed, was to be a big affair and hence surely meant a lot of work. Still, Arvind couldn't help but reflect upon how his friendship with Charu had gone downhill over time. They had first met when she had married Parag and arrived at Pittsburgh while Parag was in the final throes of his Ph.D. dissertation. Arvind himself was in the last semester of his master's program in biomedical engineering.

Although Parag and Charu lived in the married students' housing complex, Arvind was practically a daily visitor for dinner or for a late night coffee ride to Denny's. And he had become Charu's de facto go-to-guy for any help inside or outside the house. Charu made it a point to declare to people that he was her *second-best* friend. (Parag, being her husband, had to have the *first* place according to Indian tradition!) Why women had to discuss such things openly was of course beyond Arvind!

A smile came to his lips when Arvind recalled the day when Charu and he had traveled together in the university bus to her department. (After her arrival in Pittsburgh, Charu had wasted no time in enrolling into her own master's program in journalism). They sat next to each other in the bus on a bench near the door, and Charu was constantly babbling away in his ears about her classmates and their romantic affairs. Whether it was due to the jerks of the moving bus or something else, he didn't know, but, Charu had slid closer and closer to him. So close in fact that he could see the texture of her smooth cheeks and measure the curvature of her sensuous lips! When he searched her beautiful eyes from such close quarters, he saw that

they betrayed no discomfort or even a hint of embarrassment that their bodies were pressing into each other.

Well, those were the days, and now, Charu didn't seem to have time for Arvind. He could not fathom why she had grown so cold and distant towards him. Or was he expecting too much? An inexplicable sadness came over him, and with a deep sigh he turned his attention to the large surrealist paintings of Salvador Dali hung on the walls of the guest room.

+==+==+

The evening party, of course, was the main reason Arvind was in Rochester. This was supposed to be a re-union of all his Indian friends who had pursued their graduate studies at CMU Pittsburgh twenty plus years ago. They were all new to each other before coming to CMU. But, during their stay in Pittsburgh, they had grown quite close to each other. They had shared groceries, houses, even the burden of hospitality demanded by their parents and other visitors who came to enjoy the wilderness of Pennsylvania. Arvind – a natural leader – was loved and respected by everyone. More than once, Arvind had saved them from difficult situations.

The scandal of international phone calls was one such occasion that could easily have cost several of them their scholarships and even their legal status in the US. The Carnegies Institute of Technology had run an audit of all phone calls made from the EE department and had discovered a large number of calls made to India. In those days, overseas calls cost a lot, and so, the temptation to use the free calling facility available in the offices of graduate students was irresistible. It was actually accepted that such a practice was not wholly unusual – something that the school turned a blind eye to. But, on this

occasion, the temptation had run wild and the bill had crossed some unknown red line.

Arvind, who wasn't involved in this crime, had worked days and nights negotiating and pleading with the graduate advisor, the dean, and everyone else involved in the matter. He had made deft use of the fact that some of the culprits were key members of high visibility projects funded by NSF. He had persuaded the dean to bring the matter down to a settlement under which a monetary fine, albeit a stiff one, was the sole punishment. And the students' official records (and the successful careers that followed) were left unblemished.

After graduation, all these guys, with the exception of Arvind, had found jobs in the US and had settled in various cities. They were now all wealthy and doing well in their jobs – wearing ranks of managers, directors, or even vice presidents. Arvind was in touch with them, but, had not met many of them in years. This reunion at Parag's house, was supposed to bring them all together and revive old memories of Pittsburgh days. Arvind was looking forward to basking in their attention and enjoying the warmth of their friendship once again.

Arvind's son Gautam arrived just in time for the party. He took a taxi from the airport to the house, and like Arvind, was all thrilled about Parag's riverside house and its beautiful surroundings. Parag's son, Karan, was about Gautam's age, and they knew each other already. So, in no time, they had vanished somewhere inside the house, to do things that boys their age did.

The guests started arriving soon after. By 6 pm everyone had arrived and the house was full of people. Even though it was still chilly outside, the guys chose to assemble on the lawn between the house and the river, and sipped beer, wine, or Pepsi. As they met each other, there naturally was a heavy

exchange of exclamations and bursts of laughter. Various comments were heard.

“You have changed so much! Look at that white hair!”

“Man, you haven’t changed at all! Still the lady-killer!”

“Look at this guy! His paunch competes with his bank balance!”

Soon after though, the euphoria subsided and the guys got into discussions of investments, politics in their companies, or college admissions of their sons or daughters – topics for which Arvind had little insight or interest, at least on this particular day. He was hoping for a revival of old stories, reminiscing of CMU days, rehashing of old adventures. But none of that happened and there was no opportunity for Arvind to glow in their attention. It was as if Pittsburgh had been just a quick and not-so-significant stop along the paths of their high-flying corporate careers.

The women stayed inside the house admiring Charu’s new cutlery and furnishings. Someone or the other occasionally walked out to the lawn carrying plates of vegetable dumplings and chicken wings. Arvind tried to catch them in the hope of starting a warm conversation. But, to his disappointment, it never went beyond the routine exchange of hi and hello.

Arvind had known many of these women for a long time – he had attended their weddings and their kids’ naming ceremonies. He had given them expensive gifts every time he visited them and taken them to fancy restaurants during their trips to India. In fact, four of the women assembled there were alumni of CMU Pittsburgh and hence were supposed to be excited about the re-union. During their time in Pittsburgh, Arvind had felt that they all had directly or indirectly hinted at a crush on him!

Arvind might have easily been a coveted trophy throughout his college days – both in India and the US. He was tall and handsome, he was intelligent and funny, he was adept at conversations and a good entertainer on the piano. Plus he was an ace performer in studies. Naturally, he was the most eligible bachelor and his male friends did not even try to compete with him. Arvind had never experienced attention deficit from the opposite sex.

But, despite the overwhelming opportunity to do so, Arvind never took advantage of that attention. He enjoyed female company, and was indeed seen more often with women than with men. But, he somehow managed to keep everyone guessing and preserve his freedom. After his wife Vinita's death, he had avoided the temptation of falling for the charms of the numerous women inside his office and outside, who seemed eager to take him under the comfort of their wings.

Today though, things seemed different. The women were no longer falling all over Arvind. They were all absorbed in themselves. They were focused on their own families. They were busy telling stories of their husbands' promotions and describing their children's accomplishments. It seemed that Arvind had become a side-show, just another attendee of the event. No one asked him to tell jokes or play the piano.

After dinner, groups began to form and everyone was left to roam around or get attached to a group of their liking. When Arvind rose with his wine glass and went to a corner of the big hall and stood there watching the show, no one took notice of him. There were several small groups standing or sitting across the hall, all absorbed in themselves. Arvind felt sad that no one in that crowd – a crowd consisting of people that were once his close friends and some ardent fans – sought him

anymore. At that moment, he sorely missed Vinita. A deep-seated wave of yearning emerged from his heart and flooded all over him.

Wasn't it just a few days ago, or so it felt, that he and Vinita had stood under a tree on the college campus when a sudden snowstorm had hit Pittsburgh? They were on their way to the Panther Hollow Lake for their favorite walk, when this sudden outbreak of a storm had stopped them in their tracks. They were forced to duck under a tree and watch in awe the astoundingly rapid transformation all around them. The snow had come down in large fist-size chunks instead of the usual delicate paper-thin flakes. In no time the lawn of the College of Fine Arts was all covered white. They both had their winter jackets and boots on, so, there was no immediate worry.

Vinita, with her indomitable spirit, had quickly recovered and started chatting up, flickering her eyes all around and glancing occasionally up at Arvind. Tiny snowflakes got attached to her eyebrows and curved eyelashes, and every sentence came out of her mouth with a puff of gray vapor. What had seemed like a minor calamity of nature just a while ago had become a wonderful spectacle in Vinita's vivacious company. Arvind had stood there watching alternately the twin marvels of nature in front of him.

Arvind's eyes slowly scanned the entire hall of Parag's house and were attracted to a particularly exuberant and noisy group. The youngsters had formed their own little groups and this one consisted of the older kids assembled around the pool table in the far corner. One of the boys was gesticulating – apparently narrating some interesting story – and the rest of them, boys and girls alike, were watching him, apparently with full attention and even admiration. It was his son Gautam. Even from that distance he looked so handsome, his face lit up by the

light above him and by his own inner energy. His face looked alive and alert like a leader's. As Arvind watched, a couple of the girls moved closer to Gautam and seemed to compete for his attention. A smile came to Arvind's lips. It was *Déjà vu*. It could have been Arvind himself a long time ago.

The party wore on as food gave way to chatting followed by board games which were replaced finally by group activities. Stories of the Pittsburgh glory days never got a chance to surface. Arvind found solace in being just one of the participants. But, he didn't mind because he was watching Gautam in fascination. Gautam initially contributed from the sidelines but was soon pushed on to center stage and finally became the focus of attention as he conducted the group activities. Kids and adults alike laughed at his wisecracks, happily followed his instructions, and cheered him on. Girls crowded him every time he asked for volunteers.

Later still, when the evening party came to a close, people left one by one. Most were staying at hotels nearby. Practically everyone – especially the women – when they turned to say bye to Arvind, praised Gautam. They cooed in fond voices that he was so well-mannered and smart. They all invited Arvind to visit their cities, but with the explicit condition to bring Gautam along!

Arvind's sadness was all but gone. His embarrassment over losing his leadership position and being sidelined was replaced by glowing admiration for his son's performance that evening. The baton had been passed along successfully. Now, Arvind had no need for any attention.