

T H E U N F I N I S H E D S A G A

A Love Story

By

Reshma



A shiver ran down my spine as I thought of the evening ahead. My nerves were over-wrought, I was flicking the menu without anything making sense, I'd looked at my watch an endless number of times, and I'd just lit my sixth Marlboro. I was nervous. These were turning out to be the longest fifteen minutes of my life. A waiter materialized as soon as I replaced the menu, and if my behavior surprised him, his training prevented him from revealing it. My blank look prompted a one-sided discussion on aperitifs, and he certainly looked relieved when I settled for a dry martini.

She'd said eight, and it was still only ten-to, but rather than pace restlessly in my penthouse, I'd chosen to be amongst people. And therefore shown up a full half-hour earlier. The drink, when it arrived, helped, and as I allowed the soft strains of music to take over and penetrate my being, I found myself relaxing a little. And it was in this partly euphoric state that I spotted her at the entrance.

She hadn't changed at all – there was no mistaking the statuesque figure – the same proud carriage, head held high, chin up – she might have been conducting a demo at some finishing school. My heart did a quick somersault at the nostalgic sight, and threatened to leap right out. I rose jerkily.

How did one greet someone after all of twenty-six years, I wondered, as she reached me in measured strides. I made a tentative move to offer my hand, changed my mind, and stood there variously shaping my lips without producing any sound. All those carefully rehearsed opening lines deserted me as I shuffled on my two left feet.

"Time seems to have treated you well!" She eased my discomfiture with an understanding smile. No, even I hadn't changed at all, and least of all, in my responses towards her. I may have traversed from a gauche

teenager to a questionably mature 48-year old, but she still retained the ability to tie me up in knots; and hold all the threads.

I returned a wan smile. "But as always, time saved its best for you! You look absolutely wonderful!"

And I wasn't exaggerating. In fact, I couldn't help feeling a trifle disappointed. Her appearance had somehow upset me. I hated to acknowledge it, but deep within me had been lurking a hope that she too would have been unable to find happiness without me. But her serenity, her radiant, dignified demeanor threw me completely off gear. I aborted any ideas I might have entertained of raking up the past, or at least posing as the poor-old-martyr. Even though it was true, why hold her to an emotional ransom when she seemed to be doing so well in life. Going through the motions of ordering drinks and dinner and keeping up a polite conversation wasn't easy, but I did it. Both her children, it turned out, were long settled, and it was for her elder daughter, who had recently delivered a baby boy, that she was visiting New York. The irony of fate... if only her parents had shared her broad-mindedness about marrying their daughter to an immigrant... if only...

Something snapped inside me. Something fragile that I'd held on to... for so long... and I felt the same sense of loss as when I had first boarded that plane, more than a quarter of a century ago. Scenes swam before me... scenes typical of those times... when elopements were taboo, and arranged marriages the order of the day. Foreign lands were distant, mysterious entities, beset with too many unknown factors for "well-bred, homely" girls...

"Hello Jayant, this is Neelima! Remember me? I am visiting your city. Want to meet me at Florentine's on Friday night at eight? I'll be waiting."

Not remember her! I must have played back that precise message on my answering machine dozens of times... Her voice had jolted me right out of my comfortable existence, to take me back to another lifetime. Almost.

"Huh, did you say something?" I suddenly returned to the present. "Snap out of it man, I say!"

Her voice broke my reverie. Was I really so transparent? At twenty-two, when I had left India for this land of opportunities, a penniless young man, I hadn't blamed Neelima's parents for keeping her back. After all, what I was offering them were dreams, mere dreams; and I had always been such a poor salesman. My hopes were finally dashed when I learnt of her marriage to an army-man, and from then on I'd left her alone, never attempting to unearth anything more about her.

"I'm really very happy for you." I did manage to snap out of it completely, and finally heaved a sigh of immense relief – as if a heavy load had just lifted itself off. All these years, spent, proving myself to the whole world, but most of all, to her, to them – that I was worth it after all... too busy to enter matrimony... waiting... somehow, to discover her remorse when she finally met the suave, successful person that I had turned into... All that, and so much else was washed away, as I stood up, feeling cleansed and light-headed, and shook her hand. There was sincerity and genuineness, as I wished her all the best in life, before finally parting... once again.

* * *

"Dear Jayant, God knows I have no right to come marching back into your life like this – and I wouldn't, in fact, have even met you, if fate hadn't intervened in a most opportune manner. But when my daughter's friends mentioned you, I couldn't resist the temptation. Calling up during working hours was intentional; I knew you wouldn't be there and therefore wanted to give you the choice of ignoring my message without any embarrassment.

I would have left you alone if you hadn't shown up. But then you did. And what had begun out of sheer curiosity gave way to something much deeper once we met, and I realized that you had never married. The evening was spent in banalities, when there was so much more to exchange. If this is destiny giving us one more chance, I do not want to thwart it this time.

Too long have I lived with facades, but not any more. Captain Samant and I realized soon after marriage, what a gigantic mistake it had been. Two nice, but completely incompatible souls trapped together. Till heaven do us part? But I was only twenty, and optimistic, and both children followed in quick succession, supposedly to bolster the relationship. Add to that, the uncertainty of war, the long intervening years of separation, and the hope was kept alive.

But the tumultuous journey from Captain to Colonel was just what it was – a charade to maintain appearances. It was only when Parul got married and Rishabh, too, moved off, having joined the Army, that the masks came crumbling down and I began to experience a severe vacuum. Societal pressures kept me from walking out of that hollow institution, till my grandson provided a temporary respite. And these past eight weeks have brought home to me what I've been missing without realizing it – the peace, the quiet, the feeling of being free... incomplete, yes, but nevertheless, free... I know I could never return to him now – knew it, even before I met you, so have no qualms about that.

But now... I'm wondering... could two incomplete beings attempt once again? After all, what more is there to lose? Waiting... Neelima" I folded the letter with trembling fingers, swallowed the lump in my throat, and reached for the phone.e.