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GENERAL IMPACT FACTOR

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## Paths cross for a reason, or do they?

### G Venkatesh

Venkat had learnt to embrace his loneliness with grace. It was not without potholes and bumps - the path to this state of acceptance. A state in which one fools oneself with myths and beliefs one is really not sure of, but which nevertheless are part and parcel of human culture – for the sole purpose of ensuring that life ‘moves on’. Till the age of 36, he had been lonely. No woman to call his own, or for that matter who would call him her own. Then, Varshita happened to him...welcome rain on parched earth. Literally and metaphorically. Her name means ‘rain’ in Sanskrit and he was a Capricorn – an earth sign. But within a span of a dozen years, she was snatched away from him by the cruel hands of Fate. A nurse at the hospital where she passed away, had assured her – *Venky had a life before he met*

*you...he will manage on his own.* Varshita had been very concerned about Venkat, always, without fail. *'He will manage on his own.'* Or for that matter, what an old Norwegian friend had messaged – *'Sorry Venky, now you need to trudge along in life, alone.'* Alone. On his own. The world was just giving up on him, wasn't it. It had given up. None had explicitly mentioned that after the period of grief, Venkat was well-poised, on the strength of how he had lived his life, to find true love again. Well, at times, he thought, there is great satisfaction in proving people wrong. He had done that so many times in life. None would have dreamt that he would go abroad and end up as Associate Professor in Sweden, for instance. None would even have thought in his/her wildest dreams that he would get married in the first place, let alone to a strikingly beautiful North Indian girl – he was known to be an ungainly, unsocial, not-very-attractive individual. A loser on the marriage market in India. But the fire in his belly had been with him, in the absence of any positive encouragement or support from anyone around him. People did offer lip-service, but owing to the fact that females never really wanted to befriend him, his internal motivation had not been enough for him to feel eligible and desirable. He used to find all sorts of men walking hand in hand with beautiful women, and often laughed to himself and drowned his anguish in coffee – he was a teetotaler.

With a cup of coffee in hand, Venkat was waiting at Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport to board the Emirates flight to Dubai. A woman who reminded him of some Bollywood film actress from the 1990s, walked up to him. 'Excuse me, can I borrow your pen for a minute?' Venkat always carried a pen in his shirt pocket – a parrot-green one, to display his enviro-friendly credentials, by default.

'Sure, here.'

She sat four seats away from him and started writing something on a sheet of paper. Meanwhile, a young girl who had been entrusted with the responsibility of doing a survey of air travellers was moving from person to person, trying to get them to answer a survey questionnaire. None obliged, and the girl looked tired and sad. She

then came over to Venkat. Even before she could repeat the same request, Venkat asked her for the questionnaire, got out another pen from his backpack and filled it up. The girl was touched. She thanked him profusely.

‘Most welcome. I hope you get enough responses today. Good luck to you.’

The woman who had borrowed Venkat’s pen was looking askance at him. She got up, walked up to him, and asked, pointing to the seat next to him, ‘Can I occupy this seat, if you do not mind?’

‘Most certainly.’

She handed over his pen back to him. ‘You seem to have a treasure trove of pens in your backpack,’ she said, and the ice was immediately broken.

Venkat smiled. ‘Oh yes, pens and pencils and books. Livelihood implements, you see.’

She nodded; Venkat expected her to ask him what he did for a living. But she did not.

‘You are Venkatesh, right? From Our Lady of Perpetual Succour High School, Chembur?’

Venkat was spellbound. He turned and looked at her, with questioning eyes, and she burst out into laughter. ‘Don’t be scared. I am not a sorceress.’

‘If I may ask you.....’

‘I saw your interview on TV a few months ago. About the book which is being adapted to a film script. It may be too late to say it, but please accept my condolences.’

‘Does my face really stand out from the crowd? That comes as an indirect compliment. Thank you.....’

‘Oh yes, how rude of me not to have told you my name. I am Jennifer. St Anthony’s, Chembur. 1987 batch, same as you.’

‘Can we shake hands now, so that I can say – Nice meeting you, Jennifer?’

They shook hands. She giggled like a little girl.

‘So, now, I know everything about you, as I checked you up on LinkedIn. I gather that you are now flying to Oslo via Dubai? Or is it to Stockholm?’

‘Oslo. Then, I take a train to Karlstad from there. And you, Jennifer?’

‘I am flying to New York. I am a school teacher there.’

Venkat wanted to ask her if she was single or married, but desisted. He thought she herself may mention it, if she thought it was necessary. She was 50 years old, obviously not a spinster. She however did not look her age. If one would have to guess, 38 would have been a likely one.

Jennifer broke the silence. ‘I tell you what, nobody can say that you are 50 years old. And don’t blush,’ she patted him on his hand.

‘Thanks Jennifer,’ his face lit up with a smile which lingered on foolishly for a while, and she was looking at him intently and smiling, herself.

‘Did the producer ask you if you yourself could act in the film? After all, you used to act in plays at OLPS when you were a student...now do not stare at me with eyes wide open. I knew people who knew people who knew you at that time. But those details are not important, are they?’

‘No, maybe not. Maybe yes, if this thought keeps popping out of my subconscious repeatedly. And the producer did not ask me if I could play myself in the movie. He is thinking of big names – Ayushman Khurrana, Ranbir Kapoor, Dhanush etc., and that gladdened my heart. He thought any of these three would like the story and the script based on it.’

‘I will look forward eagerly to watching the movie when it is released.’

Venkat smiled, and nodded gratefully.

She eyed the book in Venkat's hands. *Mindsets in the classroom*, by Mary Ricci. 'That must be interesting. Of course, relevant to both of us, in our professions, I see.'

'Oh yes. This is insightful. However, I always tend to look at ways of using the knowledge we gain by reading such books, to do better in our professions and benefit our customers – in this case, the students. That is a bit strenuous, I must say, but rewarding.'

She was listening intently, without batting her eyelids.

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The boarding announcement was on. Jennifer would board first. Venkat had to wait.

'If possible, we could catch up in Dubai and have a cup of coffee, Jennifer. You have a safe flight. Of course, it is the same flight for both of us, so I am wishing myself safety indirectly.'

'Yes, how selfish of you,' she chuckled. 'My transit time is very short in Dubai, so let us see how it goes. Hope to see you there then.'

Venkat boarded and was walking down the aisle to his seat, when someone tugged at his backpack from the right.

'You have a safe flight too,' Jennifer said, with a mischievous smile in her eyes. The dimples in her cheeks stood out, quite like bookends between two neat rows of white teeth.

'Thank you, Jennifer. You pulling at my backpack? What will people say?' He joked, winked and walked on. It seemed a bit unbelievable. They had met just 40 minutes ago, and were behaving as if they had known each other for a pretty long time. His heart bounced about in the pericardium, but he calmed it down.

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‘Ladies and gentlemen, we will soon be landing in Dubai. We are late by 15 minutes, I am afraid, but we hope that those of you with connecting flights, will be able to board them without any problems.....’

Security check in transit. Venkat wanted to look around for Jennifer, and was somehow worried that he may not be able to see her again. He turned right, and saw her in the parallel queue, a bit tense. She perhaps was worried that she may miss her connecting flight. She looked up at Venkat and smiled. She seemed to have slept long on the flight from Mumbai to Dubai. Venkat made a gesture, telling her not to worry and that she would be able to make it to the connecting flight in time. After all, it was also an Emirates flight.

She made it quickly through the security check and Venkat waved goodbye with a smile. But she decided to wait for him. When he passed through, and reached her, she said, ‘I am sorry, Venkat. We may not be able to grab a coffee.’ Her fair ear lobes had reddened a bit, because of the stress she seemed to have experienced in that queue.

‘No worries, Jennifer.’ He took out the book he had been reading and gave it to her. ‘This is for you. I finished reading it on the flight.’ He thought she may refuse to take it, but she did, with great delight, and that sent a wave of happiness through Venkat’s heart.

‘Take care, Venkat. I will look forward to watching the movie.’

‘Take care, Jennifer. Have a safe flight. Now, I am not being selfish,’ he grinned.

She waved like teenage girls do, and rushed towards her gate.

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To a 50-year old who looks 38,

*Paths perhaps cross for a reason, or do they?*

*If we meet again, we can have that coffee,*

*If we do not, just remember this day and smile.*

*Your students are indeed lucky.*

*Thank you so much for your pleasant company today.*

– The 50-year-old who looks 37 ☺

She read this, written in beautiful cursive script, on the first page. The sense of humour – banter which is said to win women’s hearts - made her smile, a smile which lingered on, like Venkat’s had, in Mumbai.

And he had also hidden his name card inside the book. Of course, she did not really need it to get in touch with him, if she wanted to. Information was all over the Internet, these days.

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Some weeks passed by. Venkat kept thinking about Jennifer for some days at a stretch. But then work kept him engrossed and time fled past at a brisk pace.

Then, one day, closer to the end of the year, he got a call on WhatsApp, from a number with the ISD code +1. A call from the USA. He answered the phone.

‘Hello Venkat, this is Jennifer here.’

‘Hey Jennifer. So nice to hear your voice again.’

‘Okay, let me cut to the quick. Will call later for sure to talk at length. Do you plan to visit Mumbai during Christmas?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Okay, then I will get in touch with you and we will have that coffee we missed.’

‘Sure.’

‘The movie is being released during the Christmas week. Do you fancy watching it with me?’

Venkat had sworn to himself that he would never again visit a cinema theatre with anyone. Frost-2, the last movie he saw with Varshita, would be his last. But he relented. Looked at Varshita’s garlanded photograph, and with her unspoken consent, said, ‘Why not, I will be happy to. You know I cannot watch it alone. It would be depressing for me. If you would.....’

‘If I would, what?’

‘If you would hold my hand, it will be easier for me. The half-life of the trauma I suffered seems to be a bit too long.’

There was silence at the other end. Venkat thought he heard sobbing.

‘It will be my pleasure, Venkat. And maybe you could visit me and my parents for Christmas, if you do not have any other plans?’

‘Most certainly, Jenny.’

‘You called me Jenny?’

‘Yes.’ Venkat did not realise he had done so.

There was a 10-second silence. ‘It sounds no nice when you say it.’

Venkat assumed that she was not attached. Widowed or divorced or unmarried, did not matter. She would tell him anyway.





## **G Venkatesh**

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G Venkatesh, born in Chennai and brought up in Mumbai, is currently an Associate Professor at Karlstad University in Sweden. He holds two Master degrees – Mechanical Engineering (India), Industrial Ecology (Germany/Singapore), and a PhD in Industrial Ecology (Norway). Venkatesh has published four volumes of poetry, four e-books, and over 100 scientific journal publications; crosswords, and articles of various genres in magazines around the world.

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