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Gaurav's Troubles

Geoffrey Kain

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, kaing@erau.edu

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Gaurav's Troubles

Gaurav's troubles began when he was very young, actually before he had learned to walk. While removing a pot of hot oil from the stove, his mother had stumbled, sloshing some of the oil over the edge of the pot and splashing little Gaurav on his lower left leg and foot, and across the back of his left hand and arm. He was badly burned, infection followed, and the apothecary-cum-physician at the village clinic was not certain the boy would survive it. But time heals at least some wounds, and Gaurav recovered, though he was deeply scarred. In fact, the ensuing infection in his leg had apparently reached the bone, because Gaurav took his first steps—and all of his steps thereafter—with a definite, distinctive limp.

Gaurav was also left with a lurking mistrust of his mother. Even as he slept, he retained a semi-conscious sense of watching her with one eye. His was a vague yet tangible fear, about which he suffered some guilt, but he was not able to suppress this foreboding. It didn't help that as he sat, some time in his fourteenth year, sampling some of his mother's freshly fried *pakor*as together with the village astrologer, the astrologer rather nonchalantly and very quietly suggested (after pulling his hand back from a still too hot, freshly fried *pakora*) that rumors persisted in the village that Gaurav's early childhood accident was not entirely, in fact, an accident. "Who says such things?" Gaurav pressed. "It does not matter who, it is just widely understood. That's all," the astrologer replied.

This validation of Gaurav's own uneasiness, a strange fear that he had always felt was probably without foundation, developed into an increasingly intense suspicion of his mother, and correspondingly also into a deeper sense of shame for mistrusting the very person who had brought him into this world and nurtured him, had been his source of comfort (most of the time). It was true that she often seemed to lack connection with him, that she could be occasionally cruel—but not terribly so—and that sometimes his questions and comments to her caused her to set her jaw, purse her lips, accelerate and intensify her slicing of vegetables as she prepared him yet another meal.

But overall, his childhood had been a happy one. His mother had defended him on many occasions, cared for him when he was ill. Of course, Gaurav realized his mother must also be frustrated by her husband's rather rare appearances at home, serving as he did as a traveling construction laborer on various Big Government projects in

their state (dams, roads, bridges, etc.). But surely if she wanted to be separated from him, she would have done so by now?

After many weeks of wrangling with these emotions, he returned to the astrologer, this time to consult about his future. Gaurav wondered how he could continue to live with the conflicting feelings he was experiencing, whether it wouldn't simply be better to confront his mother directly about the allegations surrounding his early childhood accident. The astrologer cautioned him against this. He asked Gaurav to return in a week. He would draw up a horoscope and offer him the best advice made available to him.

Gaurav waited impatiently during the next week, distracted from his studies, spending more time than usual on menial tasks assigned him by his mother, taking long routes home from the school, despite his limp, thinking also about his father.

Gaurav's father was able to read and write only a little, while his mother could do neither, but the village teacher saw promise in Gaurav at a very early age: the way he handled chalks, the intriguing and graceful drawings that he produced, the questions that he asked. Many adults in the village had thought of Gaurav as being blessed with special gifts, and the teacher had more than once firmly encouraged Gaurav's parents to start him in school. Gaurav's father reluctantly admitted that literacy might have its advantages, and he agreed to enroll his son.

It was after this that Gaurav's father began his trips away from home, stints that stretched to longer and longer absences. Whenever he would return for his brief visits, though, Gaurav's father asked closely about his son's progress. The teacher had only good reports to offer. Gaurav showed true promise. His language skills and artistic abilities were excellent, and his arithmetic was also solid. The teacher was aware, though, that the boy's family circumstances and his physical limitations may never allow his natural abilities to shine far beyond the schoolroom. He shared these concerns with his friend, the astrologer.

When the week was up, Gaurav met with the astrologer who spread his cryptic diagrams out before him, hemmed and hawed, mumbled a series of incomprehensible phrases while tracing over lines and signs on the sheets, and finally came around to delivering to Gaurav the conclusion that clearly made him quite uncomfortable in the delivery: he must find a way to be removed from his mother's care, and he must avoid contact also with his father. "Contact with your father will only bring the intense pain of your childhood accident back to the foreground, and further time with your mother will only lead you into an ever deeper darkness."

Gaurav was baffled by this dire prophecy. He had only wished to somehow make things right with his mother. He had worked hard in school and at home, hoping to impress and please her. His father had come around less and less often, true, and in fact Gaurav had not seen nor heard from him for the past year. Avoiding contact with his father did not seem so hard to do, but why should he make it a point to avoid his father entirely? And how could he possibly leave his own mother? She was quite a capable person now, but who would care for her in adversity and, later, in old age? It was all totally unnatural.

Gaurav challenged the astrologer, politely at first, then vehemently. The astrologer was adamant. The horoscope was clear.

The astrologer had a plan. Together with the teacher he arranged for Gaurav's transfer to the home of the teacher's own brother, in the city. The rationale offered to Gaurav's mother, they explained to the boy, was simply that Gaurav's abilities were so promising that only in the city, under his brother's close care, could Gaurav truly flourish. If Gaurav were given room to make his fortune, surely his mother would then benefit directly. She was persuaded with difficulty, the astrologer told Gaurav, but she did agree to release her son into the teacher's care.

No sooner had Gaurav gone than the astrologer became visibly a much more frequent visitor in his mother's kitchen.

Gaurav did well in the care of his new home. His further education was seen to, as promised, and Gaurav, thinking that eventually the time would be right to return to his village, distinguished himself so well that he was encouraged by his headmaster to compete for a fine scholarship to an architecture program overseen by a relative of his at an American university. Gaurav secured the scholarship, and his new family assisted through their various connections to secure a sponsor. These successes, though realized piecemeal over several years, proved dizzying to Gaurav. He wished to return to his village, to embrace his mother before he would need to prepare for his departure. His surrogate father discouraged him. The horoscope had been clear. The directive was undeniable. Do not tempt fate. Avoid further contact, hard though it was.

So Gaurav instead wrote a lengthy letter to his mother, describing his most recent achievement, and promising her that he would return to her some day, not long in the future. He intended that his letter be read to her by his former teacher in the village.

The powerful pull of his heart proved too strong, however, and he quickly and silently plotted his return to the village alone.

Gaurav slipped out before dawn, leaving a note on his bed that

read, "I had to go back before my departure for the university. I will return here after saying my good-byes." He quickly boarded a bus that took him most of the way toward the village, traveling the better part of a day, then went on to less-traveled roads in the back of a truck, then a short way on pock-marked dirt roads by bullock cart with a farmer, and planned the last stretch of several miles through the countryside on foot.

As he neared the end of his trek in the bullock cart, they came to a stop behind a large truck filled with workers, blocking the way. The truck spun its tires, trying to get out of a deep rut filled with mud. The truck rocked forward, then back as a number of the workers, covered in dirt, pushed on the rear of the vehicle. It didn't appear to be budging, even though the engine raced and the tires spun, flinging mud everywhere.

Gaurav hopped down from the cart and approached the truck to see what he could learn of the situation. He saw that the truck blocked the way completely, just at the point of entry to a fork in the road. He walked alongside the truck, acknowledged the workers who continued pushing, rocking the large dilapidated truck, considered the situation and returned to the cart to talk things over with the farmer.

Just as he was about to climb back into the bullock cart, he heard someone call his name. He turned quickly and saw a man approach him, wiping the sweat and dirt from his face, a face he clearly recognized.

Gaurav was stunned as his father embraced him, then held him at arm's length to take in his son in a great, thirsting glance, and then embraced him once again. His father had been driving the truck, working to get it out of the mud, but noticed the young man limp past, felt he knew that limp, looked hard again, saw that it was his son, and came running. Gaurav was happy, too, but also cautious and puzzled. Overwhelmed. Unsure of why his wayward father would be so thrilled to see him now, when he had (Gaurav felt) virtually abandoned him over the past ten years, Gaurav found his father unsure of why his son had left orders with his mother that she not reveal where their son was now to be found. Although Gaurav did intend to obey the prophecy and avoid his father, he had left no such message with his mother, nor with anyone else. "It's not true," Gaurav insisted flatly, confused by this news from his father.

Once Gaurav's father had been filled in on his son's achievements and his plan for imminent departure following a short return to the village, he cautioned him against going back. "I know you've come a long way, but you won't like what you find there, Gaurav."

"What are you saying?" Gaurav asked anxiously.

"Let's just say that there's nothing good in the stars," his father replied with a wry smile. "Well, no, let's just say that there's nothing good in how the stars are read...or who reads them. Or where." And then, seeing Gaurav more perplexed than ever, "You will find the astrologer closer to home than you'd like, my son."

Gaurav understood. Angered, envious, betrayed, he set off on foot the remaining miles to the village, seething with frustration and hostility toward both the astrologer and his mother.

Along the way he rested just once, calming himself for a short while by sitting at the edge of a wide, slow stream, wondering at how clearly the great billowing cloud in the sky directly above him was reflected in the flat black water. As he peered more intently at the reflection, he saw how this cloud contained many miniatures of itself within itself, and each of these miniatures contained more like themselves within themselves, perhaps on into infinity.

Following a footpath above the stream's bank, Gaurav arrived at dusk in the village. He limped quietly, insistently toward his childhood home. He hesitated only briefly outside the door that appeared much the same as when he had left. He knocked loudly once, then lifted the rusting latch and pushed the door open forcefully. The door struck someone on the other side. A pained screech quickly followed.

Gaurav took it all in at once. The astrologer, with several cloths in each hand, had been carrying a large pot of steaming hot liquid to toss out the door. When Gaurav pushed the door open, it had jolted the pot, spilling most of its contents over the astrologer's legs. He howled with pain.

* * * * *

Inevitably, in the months and years that followed Gaurav's short return home and then his quick departure for the States, it was widely rumored among the villagers that this unfortunate accident was not entirely, in fact, an accident.

Parmita Kapadia

Madhu and Sushi Go to Amayrika

My mother crossed the Atlantic with a wool blanket and an umbrella. She also had my father in tow. But not me. The wool blanket because although "the States" (everyone's shorthand for "Amayrika") was the land of opportunity, education, and prosperity, everyone knew it was also unimaginably cold. The umbrella because everyone knew umbrellas were very expensive and difficult to find in the States. My father because he had proven correct what everyone had always said about his future prospects by winning a Fulbright scholarship. Not me because everyone felt that a one-year-old belonged at home. Everyone in this context meant family, friends, colleagues, business acquaintances, and neighbors. This being India, it included extended family, friends of friends, friends of colleagues, and friends and colleagues of neighbors.

"Leave Mira at home," my father's elder sister, my *Jaya-fai*, insisted during the first family meeting held to discuss my parents' possible trip to pursue graduate work in the United States, a course of study that meant they would be away from home for nearly two years. Although *Jaya-fai* was an unmarried woman, everyone in the family turned to her for guidance. Even her father had always deferred to her judgment, and after his death, her brothers still sought her advice. "It is better for everyone that way. Both Madhu and Sushi will be able to devote more time to their studies. Without Mira they can study more and finish their degrees faster. It will save much in cost and most importantly they will come home quicker," she explained. To my parents she said, "And, it is best for Mira. She will be cared for better here, with the family, than with you." "Yes. What Jayaben says is right," agreed my *Indira-kaki*. "But, *Indira-bhabhi*, how can we leave her behind? She is only one year old," my mother protested. "Because she is only one year old you must leave her at home. Here, she will have Jayaben, Bhai, Baa, and all the children to care for her," she said referring to her sister-in-law, husband, mother-in-law, and four children who ranged in age from 11 to 18. "And, me. There, who will care?" she asked. Each of the children had a chance to say what he or she thought about the plan. My cousin-sister Sumi said what they all felt, "Mira is our doll. We don't want you to take her away." Swati, the most direct of all the children—she would grow up to become a formidable lawyer—said bluntly, "You will not be able to care for her properly in the States. We will do better here."