



Rajendra Kumar

Love Story  
Series

5

A Murder  
of Crows

The Obooko Edition  
**A MURDER OF CROWS**

Rajendra Kumar

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**The Series:**

This series of love stories presents many different ways in which humans express love, the most personal of emotions, and all the varied ways in which they experience its consequences, both sweet and sour.

**This Story:**

Jason, an alcoholic, having lost everything except his life, seeks support from AA. Staying sober is still a daily struggle. One day, however, is the beginning of a change from struggle to hope when, Emily, a richly dressed woman with a hostile attitude, walks into an AA meeting he is attending. Hope for himself and for someone else. A simple talk between the two about addiction and AA at coffee grows into friendship and, for Jason, into love which remains one-sided and unexpressed. But his care and concern for his love fails. After Emily does not show up for her AA meetings for four weeks, he goes looking for her and finds her dead body, mostly eaten by wild animals and birds, on her ranch property. Later autopsy reveals meth overdose as the cause of death. What is he going to do now?

## A MURDER OF CROWS

They say that once you've admitted to your addiction half the battle is won. That was certainly not true for Jason. After being homeless for a year and tired of lying to the strangers at street intersections or supermarket parking lots that he needed money for a bus fare home or for food so that he could have means to quench his thirst for booze and get a temporary relief from that indescribable sense of pain, agony, and despair, he walked into an AA meeting and announced to the group, "My name is Jason and I am an alcoholic."

Within a week he had a bunk in a dorm for addicts, food to nourish his body, and a sponsor to nourish his soul. He also had a job as a janitor so that he could pay for some of the services he received and not feel like a total charity case. It was a hard journey with many boulders to negotiate along the way, and he stumbled most of the time. He would still beg, steal, or rob to secure his poison and often end up in a gutter with all kinds of predators around, or, if he was lucky, in jail. Even his sponsor began to be disheartened after getting him out of the slammer only to find him in the sludge filled holes in the river banks or other such places. When this happened for the fifth time within a month, he sat down with Jason for a serious talk.

"Do you want to die a painful, miserable death? Do you?" he asked.

"What option do I have?" was a very honest answer.

"Life is an option. I was once where you are today. I made it, so can you. You just have to want to live."

"I want to live. Who doesn't? But, when the body's demands start, everything else disappears. You know how it is?"

"I know how it is. I have been there. It's a mind game. Your need to live has to be stronger than your need to drink."

"I guess I'm losing the game."

The talk did no good. Yet, there must have been some desire to live and some hope of a miracle which made Jason continue to attend the AA meetings. Good

thing, because one day in one of those drab rooms with the overpowering smell of coffee, unwashed bodies, and cigarettes, where stories of degradation were narrated, he found salvation.

Salvation came with a name, Emily. Of course, no one knew that, not at the time.

When Emily walked into the group for the first time, all eyes riveted toward her. They exhibited surprise and incredulousness at finding someone among themselves who did not seem to belong there.

About 45, 5-8, 130 pounds, oval face with dimpled cheeks, salon treated yet frizzy shoulder length strawberry hair, faded blue eyes, parched lips covered with gloss, loosening skin tone, slouchy gait, and a fiery demeanor in designer jeans, patent leather pumps, and rust colored silk blouse. There was a whiff of expensive perfume also. A classy lady with a decaying figure, effortfully but hopelessly maintained. She looked like a beautiful toy, broken and put together with glue.

Who was she and what was she doing there in a dump of a place, occupied by people who were trying to regain the lost pieces of their lives?

The group leader ventured to get the answers, "May I help you?"

She ignored the question and posed one of her own, "Is this an AA meeting?"

"Yes." The answer implied, "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I'm here to attend."

"You know ma'm, this is a male group?"

"I know. I have been to a female group. The women are too catty, so I decided to come here."

Some members snickered. So she was looking for male sympathy, or maybe just a male, maybe even to invade the sacred male territory and bust balls.

Jason, on the other hand, was blown away by her beauty and deportment.

The group leader seemed to be above such prejudices. He said, "Well, you're welcome to join us, but this does cause a problem. The men will be inhibited in

their speech. They may be hesitant to open up.”

“It’s their problem. I have heard everything. Nothing is going to shock and embarrass me. They can say anything they want and use any lingo they prefer.”

“Okay then. Please take a seat.”

She did, one next to Jason. Not by any design though. It just happened to be nearby.

As always, the meeting started with the introduction of the newcomers. When it was her turn, she said, “My name is Emily.”

That was it? Where was the ‘and I am an alcoholic.’ part?

Everyone looked at her questioningly, imploring her to complete the sentence and then talk about herself.

The unspoken question hung in the air, yet Emily kept silent.

The group leader then encouraged her, “Please tell the group about yourself.”

“There’s nothing to tell. I don’t want to be here. It stinks. I am here because my therapist says that I have to attend AA meetings at least once a week.”

“Why?” asked the group leader.

“He thinks I have a drinking problem.”

“And you?”

“I don’t have a drinking problem. Actually, I don’t have any problems.”

“So why do you have a therapist?”

The question clearly got Emily riled, “Listen, you asshole, I haven’t come here to answer any questions. I intend to just sit here for an hour, try not to listen to your sad tales of ruined lives because of booze or whatever else, and go home.”

The angry retort shook Jason. He thought that calling someone the stinking part of his anatomy was totally uncalled for. He looked around and saw disquiet on everyone’s face. Even though the invective was thrown at just one person, it obviously hit everyone. So Jason was not surprised when the group leader huffed, “Ma’m, this is not good for the group. We don’t operate this way. If you’re not going to participate, you should leave.”

“Okay, okay. Since I have to be here, I’ll put up with your crap.”

Yet another mention of something foul smelling. Jason was taken aback at the use of street language by a high class lady, but he reasoned, maybe she had come down to a mud hole from her lofty perch, many addicts did. Whatever, he kept silent, and noticed that every one else did, too. The unwritten protocol required them to be conciliatory to all group members, irrespective of their behavior. Besides, it was the group leader’s task to handle the situation.

And he did, “Okay, so you want to tell us why you are in therapy?”

Emily answered, “I’m in therapy in lieu of going to the slammer. You want to know more? All right, I’ll tell you. I was convicted of public disturbance and endangerment. By the way, all charges were false, made up by the police. Still, I got convicted. The judge told me to get some therapy or go to jail. Me, jail? I am a highly educated woman, a university professor of math, no less. I have a standing in society. You think I belong in a jail? To do time with drug addicts and prostitutes? Hell no. So, I am talking to an idiot, that’s my therapist, twice a week, and paying him a hundred bucks each time. Now he is requiring me to attend these meetings. Man, maybe I should have gone to jail instead.”

Being an alcoholic himself and having spent years amongst other druggies, Jason could see very clearly that Emily was very ignorant and naive about the addiction process. Everyone else must have seen this, too, because he noticed them try to hide their smirks. The group leader, while appearing to maintain a more serious expression, said, “You can do that any time you want, go to jail, I mean, but while you are here, might get some good out of it. ... So, what disturbance and endangerment did you cause?”

“None. Like I told you, this is all a fabrication by the police.” As she said this, Emily wiggled in her seat.

“Still, could you tell us what happened?”

“They claim that I threw a beer bottle at the bartender because he wouldn’t give me another drink. You see, I was having a good time with my lady friends, celebrating my birthday, having a few drinks, and this bartender refused to give

me another beer saying that I had enough. How did he know I had enough? Anyway, that's what the police report says. None of that is true. The police took me to jail where I remained until the next day when I was presented before the judge who let me go on probation. These lying creeps ruined my birthday."

"So you didn't throw a beer bottle at the bartender, you didn't have too much to drink, and you do not have a drinking problem. Is that so?"

"Precisely."

"Ma'm, you said you were celebrating your birthday with some lady friends. Don't you have any family?" It seemed like the group leader was determined to dig into Emily's life.

"You mean a husband and kids?"

"Yes, or a gentleman friend."

"Are you implying that I am a lesbian?"

"No, no, no. We don't care about anyone's sexual orientation. We don't discriminate against anyone for any reason."

"That's good to know. To answer your question, no, no boyfriend, no family. I had a family. A son, he is on his own and doesn't care even to send a Christmas card to me. A husband, he left. You know what that bastard said before leaving? Said that I was an alcoholic and he couldn't put up with me. I think he had some chick he wanted to screw and used my drinking as an excuse to leave me. Yes, I drink, I admit, but I am not a lush."

This had gone on for too long, so Jason felt relieved when the group leader abruptly said, "Okay. Welcome Emily."

Everyone echoed the group leader. Jason additionally turned his head toward Emily and smiled as if to say, 'You're a screwed up mess, but I like your guts.' That was probably because he himself was a screwed up mess, although he had thrown away his guts long ago after getting over his denial. Emily needed help with her denial, and he thought he could help her.

The Emily scene had taken so much time that the rest of the meeting had to be galloped. In the end came the usual serenity prayer. Everyone stood in a circle

holding hands with the persons next to them.

Jason, being seated next to Emily, was now standing beside her. As he held her hand on his right, an electric current ran through his body. He hadn't had a female touch in a long time. Accidentally brushing against women in the street or shopping malls wasn't exactly touching them. Touching Emily felt sexual, even though it wasn't supposed to be so, not in the present context.

'No, there's nothing sexual here, probably some static,' he tried to convince himself against self-doubts.

When everyone dispersed, Jason followed Emily and before she got out of the room, he said to her, "Nice meeting you ma'm. See you next week."

"Sure," Emily answered without even looking at him.

Because of Emily's disinterestedness, Jason hesitated to continue, but something within him implored to be bold. So he said, "You came to the right place. We are a family and we help each other."

Emily looked at him with disdain and said, "No one helps anyone. So, what do you want?"

"Nothing. Really, we do help each other."

"Stop this bullshit. I don't need any help."

She sidestepped and walked past him. Jason watched her get into her Jaguar and drive away.

The rebuke did not faze Jason. He looked forward to seeing Emily again and getting to know her better, necessary for him to be of any help to her. His inner self sniggered. Immediately he admonished it, 'Shut up. My motives are purely altruistic.'

His self defied him, 'Admit that you're after her body. When was the last time you got laid? Many months ago in an alley outside a shelter for the homeless with a bitch who didn't know what she was doing and whom you never saw afterwards. So your hormones are raging and you think a pussy might be within reach. Fuck your holy pretense and accept the reality.'

'No shit. Maybe you're right, but I don't have to behave like a clod. I will act

like a gentleman toward her and try to help her. She does need help, you do agree?’

‘Yes, but make sure sex does not get in the way.’

Next week upon spotting Emily in the group Jason purposely took a chair next to her and said, “Hello.”

Emily said, “You again, the do-gooder.”

The sarcasm was biting, but Jason ignored it, “Sorry, if I came across like that. I just want to be friends. Here we are all friends, looking after each other.”

“They are?” She asked, sounding incredulous.

“Yes. I have a sponsor. And you won’t believe how many times he has rescued me after I have fallen off the wagon.”

Emily looked thoughtful. Jason kept his lips sealed. A couple minutes later the meeting started.

When it was Emily’s turn to speak, she ignored the expected reflection over her personal life, past and present, and went on to complain about her having to be there, “I asked my shrink, ‘How long do I have to attend these meetings?’ and he said, ‘Until you admit you have a problem and then after that to deal with the problem.’ What a dunce. How am I going to deal with a problem which doesn’t exist? Well folks, I am on a two-year probation. I complete that and I’m free of all requirements. No therapy or AA for me after that.”

The group leader said diplomatically, “This is a place of self-discovery,” and he moved on to the next person.

The group leader’s comment must have touched Emily’s sensitivity center, because after the meeting was over, she turned to Jason and asked, “What did he mean by self-discovery. I am an intelligent woman and I know the word, but I am not sure what he meant.”

Jason answered, “He meant coming here is a personal learning experience. It has nothing to do with any legal requirements.”

“You mean all these people are here by their choice?”

“Well, the circumstances may have forced them to make this choice, but it’s a

personal choice nonetheless.” Jason was elated that Emily chose to talk to him.

“You chose to be here?”

“In a way, if I wanted to live. I am still struggling but I am making progress.”

“You mean this shit works?”

“For many it does. It is working for me.”

“What did you do? What’s your problem?”

“It’s a long story, and we have to vacate this place.”

“Tell me about it. Let’s go to a coffee shop. I’m buying.”

The iron door had suddenly crumbled and Jason walked into Emily’s life. So now he had a chance to be of help to her.

Once they were seated in a Starbucks with their paper cups filled with steaming hot beverage, Emily said, “You know what? I made a good decision to leave the women’s group. Here, men don’t criticize me in spite of my complaining.”

Jason was surprised. That was not what they had come to the coffee shop to talk about. But he let Emily decide the direction of the conversation and answered, “I don’t know about women’s group. In AA we are here to support and help each other, not criticize.”

“They seem to be living up to their credo. They are also so courteous and gentlemanly. From the looks of it, they seem to be low class. Yet.”

Jason smiled, “It’s your influence ma’m. They don’t want to use street language in front of a lady. In that respect your presence is a good thing. ... And appearances can be deceptive. Some of them belong to upper socioeconomic status, only they don’t look it. Besides, AA is a brotherhood where social strata don’t matter.” He left unsaid that some men were not really that courteous and kind, they were probably thinking of finding a way to get into her pants, probably thinking that she came to a men’s group only to look for a bone.

“You talk like a smart man.”

Jason noted that finally he had become the focus of the talk. He answered meekly, “I used be an engineer. I don’t look it, though. My drinking destroyed

my whole life in every way.”

“Every way?”

“Yes. I was fired from my job, my wife kicked me out of the house, my son doesn’t even acknowledge me as his father, and I have been in and out of prison numerous times. And look at me, my body is a wreck, probably my mind too.”

“How do you survive?”

“Right now I’m in a shelter. But in the past I begged, stole, robbed, scavenged, slept in alleyways, abandoned buildings, garbage dumps, parks, whatever.”

“You did all that?”

“Yes. I don’t do that any more, thanks to AA.”

“So you were an engineer, huh, and ended up being homeless.”

“Listen to the stories in our group and you will find many men like me. Addiction doesn’t discriminate. It is an equal opportunity destroyer.” Realizing that he was being clever, not a smart way to talk to a fellow traveler, he tried to modify his statement, “I didn’t mean to...”

“No need to apologize. I know what you mean. But I can’t believe it; you seem to be describing my life, at least in part.”

“I am?”

“Yes. Don’t you remember, my husband left me, I went to jail, am on probation, and my son won’t talk to me.”

“Well, all of us alcoholics have a lot of similar experiences.” There, he said it, clearly implied that Emily was an alcoholic, although unintentionally.

It did not go unnoticed by Emily who said, “So, you think I am an alcoholic.”

“It’s not for me to judge.”

“If I’m an alcoholic, it’s not a judgement, it’s a fact. Am I?”

“From what you have described in the group and to me here, yes.”

“Oh my. And all this time I thought the world was ganging up on me and I have been in a fighting mood. Just the other day, one of my students complained that I came to the class drunk, which led to my interview with my supervisor

who warned me that I would be disciplined if I ever again showed up with alcohol on my breath. I was ready to slap both the student and the supervisor for their impudence. I had sense enough not to do that. Still I don't understand. A glass of wine before going to teach calms me, relaxes me, clears my mind, makes me creative. And they don't want me to do that. I have to give up my pre-lecture drink if I want to keep my job. That's unfair."

"I thought so, too. Now I know better."

"You're saying I have to give up my drinks?"

"That's for you to decide. I decided not to drink to get my life back. I began fighting my demons. I'm still fighting."

"You mean you're still drinking? Then how is AA helping you?"

"Well, at least I know I have a disease, and every time I slip, I get up to fight my battle again. I couldn't do that before AA."

"How long do you have to do this?"

"All my life."

"All your life?"

"Yes, to stay sober."

"I don't think I could do that."

Aha, she considered doing it. It was an admission of the problem. Jason was elated. He encouraged her, "It's not impossible. You have to put your mind to it."

"Do you?"

"Yes, and it has yielded results, although not enough. I need to work harder."

"What's holding you back?"

"Nothing. I guess I need a strong motivation."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Something like I had once in college. I was a football player, a quarterback no less. I don't look like an athlete anymore, alcohol has made me a wimp. Anyway, I had a girl friend who watched every game I played, and you know, even though I was playing in front of a large audience, I was performing only for one person. She was my motivation and it helped improve my game. I

lost her too. I have lost a lot.” Jason’s voice cracked and his eyes filled up.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scratch your wounds.”

“You don’t need to be sorry. It’s my life, my doing. But I am rebuilding it.”

He wiped his eyes dry.

“So you are saying that we need someone in our lives to save us from self-destruction.”

Jason was pleased to hear the word ‘we’. Emily was beginning to associate herself with the other addicts. “Yes. At this time I have just one life-line, my sponsor, but that’s not enough. I need a more personal relationship.”

Maybe it was too much to digest, or too thought provoking, or too disturbing, or too something else, but Emily brought the whole conversation to an abrupt halt, “I have to go.”

Both got up together. Emily gave Jason a hug, a kiss on the cheek, and said, “See you at the next meeting.”

“Keep coming,” Jason mumbled the usual AA slogan while trying to regain his balance which had been disturbed by Emily’s unexpected and clearly contrary-to-her-character reaction toward him.

The following week in the AA meeting room, Jason’s eyes were glued to the door, expecting Emily. When she entered the room, he made it a point to sit next to her. Emily smiled at him in a friendly way and said, “Thanks for the talk the other day. There’s something I want to tell you, after the meeting. It won’t take long.”

“Okay.”

The meeting was uneventful and routine as usual. At the end, Jason followed Emily out the door and when they were alone, said, “What is it?”

“First, I am going to say to you and only to you that I may have a problem, and I want to follow your lead and do something about it.”

“And?” Jason knew that if you used the word ‘First’ you had to follow it by at least a ‘Second’.

“And I also use meth.” She quickly walked away from Jason, got into her

car, and furiously drove away, like a woman who admits to her husband that she is an adulterous and is too ashamed to face him.

Jason wondered if he had lost her. He immediately corrected himself, 'Can't be. She is over her denial and wants to deal with her problem. I'm sure she will be at the meeting again.'

He was right. He did see Emily, but quite different from the one he had known.

This day she was dressed plainly in a white T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers, nothing fancy. Her hair was unruly although combed. Cracks on the lips, bags under the eyes, wrinkles around the mouth and on arms were prominent. She looked like an ordinary housewife who had been sick for a long time. It was obvious that she wasn't there to impress anybody. Jason found her beautiful in her simplicity. He welcomed her and they sat together. When it was her turn to speak, she said in a matter-of-fact way, "I am sorry for my past behavior. I do see now that I have a problem. Thank you for your support."

She remained silent for the rest of the meeting. When all the rituals were done and everyone got up to leave, Jason turned toward Emily and said, "That was brave."

"Thanks to you. I took your suggestion and tried not to drink today. The craving was so strong I caved in."

"I can't be an example of success. I, too, slip every now and then."

"But you do go without a drink for a while."

"Yes. Compared to the past I do have a longer stretch during which I don't drink."

"How do you do it?"

"There is no formula. We all have to find our own ways. You will find yours."

"But I listened to you. You're my role model."

Jason was floored. Except for his sponsor and maybe a couple of other AA members, no one ever looked up to him, no one ever tried to copy him, no one

ever cared about what he had to say, not since he became an alcoholic.

He didn't say anything and Emily didn't wait for a response.

However, his mind raced, 'Now there's someone putting me on a pedestal, looking at me as her savior. I can't let her down. I've to be strong, stronger than the craving. I'll save Emily by saving myself.'

The resolve was followed by questions, 'How am I going to do it? I've told Emily that everyone has to find his way, so what is my way? All the ways I have tried so far have failed or have had minimal results. What new thing could I try?'

He got an answer, came to him in a strange way. He was waiting for his bus after his day's work to go to the shelter and saw a bar across the street from him. He had the urge to get a quick drink before the bus arrived. His feet shuffled but couldn't move, like they were glued to the floor, like there was an invisible barrier. Within a moment he knew what it was: an image of Emily crying for help. His feet became steady and his desire to cross the street subsided. Now he knew. Every time he had an urge to drink, all he had to do was think of Emily and he would be saved. Then he remembered his strong motivation of his college football days, his girlfriend. Now he had Emily.

He had to use his newfound technique several times during the following week and it worked each time. He was elated at his success. Next time he saw Emily walk into the AA meeting room, he rushed to her and said excitedly, "You know I have been sober a whole week."

As he said it, a question stirred in his head, 'Are you trying to impress her so you can use her female treasures?' The hidden premise behind his actions, although potentially accurate, was too deprecating and difficult to accept, and so he answered his own question, 'No, absolutely not.' Rejecting the validity of the question was easy for him because, having been an addict himself for years, he was adept at being in denial. This did not necessarily mean that he was in denial or maybe in denial only in part. Maybe there was a combination of unconscious and conscious motives, there was the unconscious attempt to attract a female by flouncing his peacock feathers of accomplishment and there was also the

conscious effort to help a fellow traveler negotiate the gravelly and rocky path.

All this transpired within a fraction of a second, and his mind was diverted to Emily who was voicing her defeat, “I can’t say the same thing.” She looked dejected.

Crushing the possible unconscious motivation, he followed his conscious course and said, “Let’s talk after the meeting. I’ll tell you about my technique. Maybe it will work for you, too.”

“You have a technique?” Emily seemed eager to find some way, any way to help her.

And Jason noticed, not only did she look dejected but also haggard. The failed effort was probably taking its toll on her. He needed to get her on a straight and smooth path and get her to a point from where she could see the destination and feel herself capable of getting there.

Once more both sat together, Jason very happy and Emily with lifting clouds from her countenance. After the meeting, they got themselves comfortable in a Starbuck’s with steaming cups in front of them.

Emily started, “So what’s this technique?”

“Well, this may not work for you but it’s worth a try. Right?”

“Yup, worth a try.”

“You remember I told you that we need a person who is the center of our existence.”

“Yes, although I don’t think it was put quite this way.”

“Maybe not. Anyway, I have one such person.”

“You do? Who?”

He didn’t want to name her. Emily was his motivation and she didn’t need to know about it. Also, he thought that if he mentioned her name she might think that he was trying to prop up her ego so that he could lead her to his bed. And if it was his unconscious motivation, he didn’t want Emily to even have a smell of it. So he said, “That’s my own secret. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, of course not. So I have to find someone to please with my efforts,

someone I really care for, someone who is important for my existence?”

“Yeah. You said it.”

“That’s a tall order. I don’t have anyone in my life who meets those qualifications.”

Jason’s heart sank a little. He was hoping she would immediately pick him to be her person. After all, she had been trying to copy him, he had been her ideal.

“Look for one,” he said in a subdued voice.

Emily must have noticed the change in the way he spoke because she asked, “Is something wrong?”

“No, not really. It’s just the person I want to impress doesn’t even know.”

“Oh, you’re in love. Tell her. We girls like to know.”

“I can’t. It will look like I want something from her, and I don’t. But she will be impressed with my accomplishments, that I know.”

“It’s totally unselfish then, the love part, I mean.”

“Yes.”

“I wish I had someone to love, to impress.” She reached over and touched his cheek gently.

He was tempted to say, ‘Yes, you do. It’s me, me, me,’ but controlled himself. He couldn’t expose his feelings. So he said, “You’ll find one, keep looking. Remember, however, our recovery is more important than our need to have our love returned.”

“Yes, you’re right. I need to learn this lesson, too.”

Unselfishness can be pious but disheartening.

Jason cracked a sad smile because he couldn’t articulate his love for Emily, and Emily copied him because she did not have anyone to love. Different although in their focus, both were dealing with the matter of the heart, and it was beginning to be the most important thing in their relationship. The conversation then pushed on to other inconsequential topics.

In the shelter, as he lay watching the dark, ugly ceiling, his mind drifted on to his talk with Emily. Until she hinted at it, he had not thought of being in love

with her. Now it was real. He wanted Emily well, was willing to do anything for her, and he had not thought about sex with her even once. That's the interesting thing about love. You can love someone without that someone's knowledge. You can't do that with sex. So he was in love with Emily in a Platonic way.

Now his thoughts changed direction and become occupied with Emily. She had changed a lot in such a short time. It had been only a few weeks when she had walked into the AA meeting room, angry, upset, and totally in denial. That was perfectly normal, natural, of course. When you are being attacked from all directions, and the thing which is important in your life maligned, it is natural to be angry. But she was not angry anymore. Now she showed no hostility toward anyone, admitted that she had a problem, was willing to find ways to deal with it, and was generally polite, respectful, and relaxed. She was still having problem opening up to the AA group, but she was completely free with Jason, so much so that she even told him about her use of meth. She had also changed in her demeanor and reactions to others. There was no attempt anymore to flaunt her education and wealth, and she was beginning to see the AA members, certainly Jason, as humans deserving of equal treatment. Finally she was one with other addicts, who were together trying to stabilize their boat caught in a hurricane. That meant that there was hope for her. She was like a withered flower trying to regain its shine.

Jason saw this change primarily due to her personal connection with him. Which meant that he had assumed a responsibility for her and would have to continue to look after her welfare.

Not a problem for him. This was exactly what he wanted. If he could get her life straightened out, that would be his biggest achievement in life. Not to mention that, in the process, he would have his own life on track to stability.

It was when the sun rays were trying to penetrate the darkness of the dingy room that Jason fell asleep and almost missed his bus to his place of employment.

That day, after work, he went to see his sponsor to apprise him of his

progress and see a pleasant smile of victory instead of an often occurring defeated look on his face.

His sponsor was pleased to see him and after a few simple pleasantries, said, “It has been quite a while, a couple months at least, since I had to bail you out of jail, or check you out of a hospital, or pick you out of a gutter, and feel bad at all those ungodly things you did. You are a changed man. Now what do you attribute it to?”

“I am in love and want to fix myself for her,” Jason said proudly.

“Someone I know?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“It’s none of my business. I am happy for you. Keep it going. It’s a lifelong task.”

“I know, and thank you for your patience and all the care you have shown for me.”

“Well, now I will never have to go looking for you. My task has lightened.”

His sponsor’s task might have lightened, but Jason’s task had heightened. While keeping himself sane and healthy, Jason was monitoring Emily’s progress, or lack of it. While he did see some change for the better, such as never coming to the AA meeting drunk, never going to a bar or even to a restaurant where liquor was served, never being cross and disgruntled, rarely upset or complaining, he knew that she was still drinking, now mostly at home. And about meth, he had no clue. Clearly, Emily was still very secretive about her activities except for the ones which were totally public such as going to work, shopping, or amusement.

A few times Emily invited Jason to go to a concert or a movie with her, saying, “I have no friends left. You’re my friend now, my only friend.” These outings were never treated as dates, not by her. Jason was just a faithful and pleasant companion. He was happy to be with her but unhappy to be treated like a pet.

One day she even invited him to her home, “I want to celebrate the day I met

my husband. I understand now why he left me. He was a good man and I want him back. I may have said terrible things about him in anger and out of desperation, but the truth is that I love him. One day I will beg him to come back, one day when I am fully recovered.”

This hurt Jason. He had thought that Emily was his for the rest of his life. That dream had shattered. Still he was happy that she was making progress.

Jason went to her home in her car after the AA meeting. He was surprised to find that even though they ate in her home, the food was not home made, it was catered. Emily explained, “I don’t know cooking and don’t have time to learn.” Then what was the purpose of inviting him to her home? They could have very easily celebrated whatever she wished to celebrate in a restaurant without the fuss of having to serve and clean. He even pointed out, “We could have gone to a restaurant. That would have saved you a lot of trouble.”

“Yeah, but it would not be as relaxed. We could linger here as long as we want. I don’t get to spend time with a friend because I don’t have any except you. Loneliness is one reason I keep slipping. Alcohol is a very faithful friend. It never complains, it never lets you down. And meth does the same. I told you about meth, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, alcohol does that but at a severe cost. You know, we all know. You could try to sever your ties with it and develop new relationships.”

Well, he was tempted to tell her about his feelings and offer to move in with her, but that would be too self serving and would look like manipulation. His motives were pure and he did not want them to be sullied by selfish desires.

“That’s the struggle. Developing relationships is hard work. Drugs are easy. Anyway, I am trying to change myself and maybe one day I will succeed. In the meantime let’s enjoy our company.”

So they were going to linger, but ‘What would we do while we lingered,’ wondered Jason.

It turned out that it was an unnecessary concern. Their conversation was wide ranging and so captivating that Jason lost track of time. They talked about

all the fun things they could do when they would be free from the shackles of drugs: traveling around the world, sailing and hiking, tasting international cuisine, singing and dancing in exotic locations, and falling in love.

When all this day dreaming became too much, Jason said, “We need to think about having fun now, enjoying life.”

“I do that sometimes; I go to my ranch.”

“You have a ranch?”

“Yes. When I get tired of everyday routines, I take off for my ranch.”

“Is it somewhere nearby? Can I visit it sometimes? It sounds exciting.”

“It’s about 18 or 20 miles from here. Not far. You go down highway 83 for 12 miles, turn right on a rural route 212, go another six miles, turn left on a dirt road, another six-seven miles you will find a sign that says Shady Ranch. It’s a misnomer because there is no shade. The 50 acres I have are filled with brush and cactus. This was the name when I bought it and I didn’t change it. You have to drive a couple miles on the property to get to the house which is a two bedroom small ranch house. There are no city services. I have a small generator for electricity, a well for water, and a septic tank for refuse. It is good for a retreat. Sometimes I stay there for days when I can.”

“That’s more like 26 miles.”

“Could be, I never really counted the miles.”

“Whatever, retreat sounds good, but what do you do there? How do you pass your time?”

I read, cook, take long walks, watch the wild life, sunsets, and sunrises. I do carry my cell phone but I keep it off. I use it for emergency only.”

“You cook? Isn’t that what you said? Cook?”

“If you can call it cooking, fry a hamburger, put together a salad. Sometimes I don’t cook, just eat fruits and nuts. I bring my provisions with me. Often I don’t eat at all.”

“But why? Don’t you get hungry?”

She smiled as if saying, ‘Don’t you get it?’

Jason sat there, a look of incomprehensibility, both hands raised, palms up, suggesting, 'What?'

"You're so innocent. That's because you have never done drugs. Right? Am I right?"

"I don't know if I am innocent, but I haven't abused drugs."

"Okay, what's to hide from you? You're my confidant. ... I don't go to my ranch for the reasons I gave. I go there to do meth, have a long session, several days long. I call my dealer to meet me along the way, and I take my Jeep. I have a Jeep and it's a four-wheel drive."

All of a sudden Jason lost his desire to visit her ranch. After a thoughtful minute, he said, "You will have to start going there for all the reasons you mentioned earlier."

"I hope to be able to do that, one day, but I am not there yet."

"Does that mean you are slipping on both, alcohol and meth?"

"Yes."

"I don't know much about meth, but, along with alcohol, it looks like a deadly combination."

"It probably is. I need to give up both. ... Hey, here's an idea. You have a girlfriend you want to impress and it's helping you stay sober. Isn't this what you told me? Right?"

"Right."

"I could use my husband as my motivating force. Except he is not around to be impressed."

Jason didn't want to hear about Emily's husband. He feigned to look at his watch and said, "It's late. I should be going."

It was late. In fact, It was past midnight.

He saw Emily a few days later at the AA meeting. He had seen her as a wilted plant which was beginning to come alive. This day he saw the plant wilt again as if it was deprived of water. He asked, "What's the matter? You look sick."

“I called my husband. He is the one I wanted to impress with my recovery. I wanted to use him as my motivation. But he hung up on me. I have no hope, no one to work for. I didn’t even want to come to the meeting today. I came only to tell you about my disappointment.”

“We all have disappointments in life. Find someone else who would be proud of your improvements.”

“I don’t have anyone.”

“Think. Someone who cares for you. Think and you will find such a person.” He hoped he would be such a person.

Emily only hung her head.

Jason did not see her again, not in the way he had known.

When Emily did not show up for the next AA meeting, Jason thought she might be sick. He couldn’t call her because she had not given him her phone number, so he went to her home. It was locked.

Thinking that she might have gone out of town due to some personal emergency, he waited until next week, still no sign of Emily. He thought maybe she joined another AA group, or she was sick and in the hospital, or got in trouble with the law and was in jail. Since the AA members are anonymous, he did not have her last name without which it was impossible to find out where she might be. He didn’t have her therapist’s name either, so he couldn’t call him or her, not for any confidential information which he couldn’t get anyway, but just to find out if she were around.

Then it came to him. He called the university math department and asked to speak with a professor Emily. He didn’t need her last name because there couldn’t be many Emilys in one university department. He was informed that she had not been to the department for two weeks, and they had been unable to locate her.

Jason went to her home again, and again he found it locked, her mail box full.

Three weeks had gone by. Jason was worried sick. He didn’t care if she had

been drinking and doing meth. He didn't even care about his own recovery and about impressing her. He just wanted to be near her, wanted to take care of her. But she was nowhere to be found.

Another week went past without any news.

Then he slapped himself hard. How stupid of him not to think of it. She had gone to her ranch, where she always went to get away from all the pressures and demands and indignities of life, and to have a meth session, this time not for a few days, but for a long, long time.

He remembered the directions to her ranch which she had given him on that night of celebration at her home. He must go there. But he had no car.

He went to his sponsor, "I need to borrow your car for one day."

"What for?"

"I can't tell you that but I will assure you it is not for any illegal or harmful purpose."

"I have seen how faithful you have been to your program recently, so I trust you." He gave Jason keys to his Nissan Versa.

It was not a four-wheel drive but better than nothing. He shouldn't have any problem on the paved highway 82, and the rural route 212 probably would be a drivable dirt road, then he would walk the rest of the way. That was doable.

He started his journey.

As expected, the state highway and the rural route were not a problem. He left the car on the side of the road, locked it, and started walking. It was a late summer morning and the sun had begun to scorch the earth. Jason could feel the heat coming down from the sky and rising from the earth below, finally colliding into explosion upon his body, or so it seemed to him. He had barely gone a mile when he began perspiring profusely and finding it difficult to breathe. A hat on his head and a full camelback on his back helped, but they, too, had their limits. He had never been in such a hostile environment and did not know how to deal with the life threatening elements and situations. He had only taken some precautions necessary for arid wilderness survival he had heard about on a TV

program and hoped for the best. Irrespective of what he faced or might face, he had to go on toward his destination where he hoped to find his Emily. The destination which did not exist on any map. He had only a vague idea of what this place was and where it might be, based on the things Emily had said during that dinner only a few weeks ago.

It took him over four hours to locate the ranch house. He was so exhausted that he collapsed on the porch. A few minutes later when he regained his composure, he looked around and saw a Jeep. That meant Emily was there and his difficult and effortful journey had been fruitful. He got up slowly, walked up to the entry door, and looked for a bell button. Not finding one, he pounded on the door to announce his presence. The door burst open, it wasn't locked. He called, "Emily, Emily, it's Jason. Emily."

There was no response. Maybe she was on meth and totally oblivious to the world around her. He stealthily walked into the house and made his way straight toward what looked like bedrooms. One bedroom was in guest-ready motel room condition. The other appeared to be the master bedroom, bigger with a bath, and it was a mess. The bed had a bare mattress, the bedsheets were on the floor in a heap and the pillows without any cover were piled up on a dresser whose mirror was cracked and whose drawers were open exposing women's underclothing and plastic bags filled with white powders and pills. The hardwood floor was scratched and was covered with dust. The attached bathroom had a stained toilet and sink, and the uncurtained shower area was filled with assorted garbage. Not a place of rest or retreat for sure.

Jason checked every part of the house but there was no sign of Emily. However, the presence of drugs in the bedroom and partially dried fruit peels in the garbage indicated that she had been there recently. Where did she go? Clearly she hadn't gone back to the city because her Jeep was still there. From what she had told him about her life style in that place, he was sure she had not gone away with someone else.

So, where was she? If not in the house, then outside the house, and probably

not very far, not in this hot weather and unforgiving terrain. He needed to look around for her. Covering her entire property of 50 acres appeared impossible, but he was confident that he could cover more area than would be possible for Emily, which meant he was likely to find her.

He started going in a circle around the house, gradually widening it.

It was easy to visually scan a large area because of an absence of tall trees or vegetation, so he felt that he may not have to walk far from the house. He was right. He was about 500 feet from the house when he spotted a big lump approximately 50 yards away which did not look like any bush, tree, rock, or mound. It didn't look like anything that was indigenous to that area.

Curious but also fearful that it might be Emily, most likely dead, he walked toward it.

As he got closer he could smell decomposing flesh and a murder of crows flying away, caw-cawing in the process. When he got within ten feet of it he could see that it was a human body, a female body, but so much mutilated by vultures, crows, wild animals, and other scavengers that identification would be difficult. Not so for Jason. The body was partially wrapped in a white silk night gown in shreds, eyes pecked away, cheeks, breasts, stomach, genitals, and thighs eaten and gnawed. Yet, Jason could identify it to be Emily by her few remaining strawberry color hair and the contours of her face decipherable from the bone structure and some uneaten flesh stuck to it.

Jason almost fainted.

What happened? There was no sign of any struggle, so it was not a robbery, home invasion, or attack. There were no shoes near the body which meant Emily had walked this distance barefoot, probably in the sun, and died of exhaustion, and then became food for the wild life. Why?

Jason fell on the rough, stony ground, and cried. And cried. Then sobbed, and cried some more. The one reason to get his life in order was gone. Before Emily, he was trying to change the course of his life for the better and making only small gains. With Emily, his life had soared and he was able to stay sober

for several months, and it looked like he could do this for the rest of his life. After Emily, all his motivation was gone, replaced with dejection and heartache. What should he do? Not being able to get an answer, he pulled out his cell phone and called his sponsor, the ever ready guidance counselor.

“Hey, this is Jason. I’m in a bad situation, I need you. And, no, I am not drunk.”

“You mean you’re not with the car?”

“I had to walk to where I am.”

“Where are you? And what is this bad situation?”

“It’s a gruesome scene where I am. My friend is dead.”

“Who is this friend? Do I know him or her? How did she die? Did you have anything to do with it?”

The barrage of questions unsettled him. All he could say was, “She was the reason I have been sober.”

He started to cry.

“Okay, okay. Just tell me how to get to where you are, and we’ll take it from there.”

Jason did, slowly and laboriously.

“All right. You stay put, and I will be there soon, with the police.”

Jason sat unaware of his surroundings, unaware of the vultures and crows still hovering above him and the coyotes lurking in the bushes. About half an hour later he passed out. Not completely, every few minutes he would regain his senses but only for a minute or so. He was not attacked by the scavengers who kept their distance probably sensing that he was still alive.

At one point he became aware of the arrival of a police van and emerging of a policeman and his sponsor from it. He was even able to hear spoken words.

The police inspector, apparently upon seeing him, said to his sponsor angrily, “Why didn’t you tell me about the need for medical attention?”

“I was talking to him. He wasn’t sick at that time,” answered the sponsor.

After a gap of a few seconds, he heard the inspector call for an ambulance

and a hearse. He directed, “Not a regular hearse, you know, we have a decomposing, mutilated body.”

A few hours later the scene was cleared. Jason’s sponsor was dropped where his car was, Jason was admitted to the county hospital, and Emily’s body was deposited in the morgue.

Police procedures and legalities would take weeks, but Jason was released from the hospital after overnight observation and after finding no disease or injury needing attention, and Emily was cremated within a week, the cost borne by her husband.

When he got his faculties functioning, Jason went to see his sponsor, and asked, “What do you think happened? Everything indicates death by elements. I understand that, but what I don’t understand is why should an intelligent woman be wandering around in the sun without any protection.”

“Unless she was hallucinating or was delusional. She might have been on meth at the time. I’ve seen the autopsy report and, in spite of the badly deteriorated condition of the body, meth was detected in her system, and the police found meth in her ranch house along with a large supply of different kinds of liquor.”

This was as logical an explanation as any. No one would ever know what really happened. But that was not important. From Jason’s perspective, important was what he should do now.

Before he met Emily his life was dysfunctional but he still wanted to live, and drinking was one way to do it. Crazy indeed. It would have killed him eventually but it eased his pain temporarily, and that felt like living. Now, after Emily’s death, he had no desire to live and, therefore, alcohol had lost its appeal. Actually, death by choice emerged as a solution to his distress, but he did not know how to accomplish it. He knew about many ways to commit suicide, learned from magazine articles, TV programs, movies, and the book “The Final Exit”. However, the idea of killing himself scared him. Strange, the idea of dying did not bother him but the idea of killing himself did. He could see that the

people who clung to life were cowards, only the braves ventured to end their lives by their own hands. He was one of the cowards, not the kind who was stuck to life but the kind who couldn't end it himself. Let something else, someone else kill him, but who would be willing to murder him?

He knew who and worked out a plan of execution.

He went to a toy store and bought a very realistic looking hand gun. Then he walked over to the lake area of the city park where there was the highest concentration of people.

Once there, he flashed his toy gun and yelled, "Duck or die?"

People either started to run away from the scene or fell on the ground as directed. Jason saw some people dialing their cell phones from a safe distance, must be calling 911.

Within minutes he saw action, exactly as he had wished and imagined. A police van, 4 X 4, flashing red and blue lights on top, jumped the curb on the nearby road and barreled down onto the lake beach, its speed somewhat restrained by piles of sand. The driver, while fighting with the steering and barely managing to keep the van in control, brought it to a stop directly in front of him. Four policemen jumped out of the van, guns drawn and aimed at him. One of them screamed authoritatively, "Drop the gun and get down on the floor."

Jason held his toy gun lazily in his right hand, the barrel seemingly having a dialogue with the grainy surface below. He remained standing, totally ignoring the police order.

\* \* \* \* \* End \* \* \* \* \*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Author photo by Bob Cardell

Rajendra Kumar, a retired psychologist, divides in time between writing, hiking, and traveling. Writing has been a passion with him since age 12. His work reflects unconventional ideas which rattle the cage of tradition. It also makes the readers feel all kinds of emotions and prods them to think about a variety of issues. For comments and questions, contact: [rajendrasrivastava@outlook.com](mailto:rajendrasrivastava@outlook.com).

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