Article FAMILY-24

The unfinished story

You can perhaps predict its conclusion. ■ **by D.P. Sabharwal**

RU Crazy?' The message flashed on the mobile screen and he smiled. Ever since he had typed the words: 'I told him that you are my GF,' some 40 seconds back and sent it, he had been waiting for her reply. He had no idea as to how she would respond.. say something in an appreciative tone or a plain outright No, or blow her top. Nothing of that sort happened.

He read the short and crisp message again and a broader smile flashed across his closed lips. 'No, there is nothing to suggest that I am crazy. I just told him the truth.' He typed and sent the message and lapsed into memory lane.

He had met her more than a year back, during one of the events he was conducting. She had come as an escort with one of the participating teams. Their first meeting was a routine stuff. He introduced himself during the customary interaction, prior to the start of the event – like with any other 'guardian delegates' he had met during the last so many years; ever since he had been conducting the event.

However, their saying 'hello' to each other a split second later was neither routine nor customary. When she introduced herself, his reaction was, 'Oh, you are the one from Holy Angels!'

There was definitely something familiar and special. Of course, it was nothing like 'love at first sight' because both of them were in the twilight of their lives. Yet, their greeting each other was much more than perfunctory — it could be termed as mutual appreciation of each other at first sight. He was tall, handsome and attractive in spite of his grey hair and casual dress, and she was immaculately dressed and possessed a killer's smile.

The 3-day event passed uneventfully. He was thoroughly occupied in conducting the programme and she in guiding her students to the finish-line. They did not exchange a single word, though any hidden camera would have caught them stealing a few glances at each other. It was a couple of days later, that he received the e-mail: 'Programme was conducted most professionally. My personal thanks for enabling my team to win the competition.'



His first reaction was that of disbelief and to some extent even disgust. How could she convey two diametrically opposite messages in a single sentence: Compliment him for a good job done and suggesting that he had enabled her team to win? He had kept total

distance from all the participating teams, in line with his policy of being 100 per cent uninvolved and neutral. Angry yet maintaining his calm in the written communication, he simply wrote back; 'Thanks for the compliment but I did nothing special to enable your team to win.'

'I am sorry if I conveyed wrong meaning. I did not mean to implicate you in any wrong-doing, which was not there at all. I can't think of thinking so, not even in my dreams. What I meant to convey was, that it was your prompt answers to my doubts and queries – and I know there were a large number of them – that helped me to prepare my team for the competition. I wish to express my gratitude to you for being so considerate and, above all, for being so prompt and elaborate in your replies.'

So, he sent her a message: 'Kept the mobile deliberately switched-off to test my self-control. When switched-on, I was surprised to see so many messages. When I showed the same to my children, my son noticed that so many were from you and his question was: 'Papa, who is she? You have never spoken about her'.'

The next message was even more explanatory: 'I remember the instance when the same questions were asked by me as well as two of my students, due to some goof-up at our end. And you replied to all three of us in your inimitable cool and professional manner, which raised our morale. Honestly, I shall never be able to forget your kindness and humaneness.'

He sent customary polite thanks and that put the matter to eternal rest as far as he was concerned. Then, after a few days, he received a request: 'Sir, will it be possible for you to send a few pictures of us on stage with the dignitaries? What we took with our cameras are not of good quality and we have a presentation in front of the entire school tomorrow. I know, it is asking for a bit too much but I hope you would oblige.'

Being a gentleman, he obliged.

A couple of days later, out of sheer impulse and going outside the call of duty, he inquired as to how the presentation went. The reply was definitely more than what he had expected. The mail was exhaustive. Towards the end was the statement, 'Each one of us – me and the students – spoke about you, your enthusiasm, knowledge and the extremely efficient way of conducting such a big event almost single-handedly.'

The mail ended with yet another request: 'Sir, can you kindly share with me the secret of your energy and the josh (zeal and enthusiasm)?'

Being a professional at writing and penning his thoughts, without any problem whatsoever, he paused for the first time at his keyboard. The reply was carefully worded: 'The secret of my *'josh'* is my passion for aviation and the thrill I get when I interact with students.'

Then, taking the topic on to another track he wrote: 'I must say that you have been highly enthusiastic and energetic as compared to most of the teachers I have come across, during the past so many events that I have conducted. You genuinely deserve my compliments.'

And thus started the chain of correspondence that graduated from the computer to messaging on the mobile phone. The initial exchange of once a month gave way to weekly messages, that were primarily formal and of a goody-goody nature – talking about work-routine, happenings in their schedule of work, the interests in life and the like.

The first significant mail was when he wrote: 'All these days, I had thought of not bothering you with yet another mail but realised that 2 weeks, 14 days, and more than 20,000 minutes is too long a time not to hear anything from you...'

The reply was almost immediate and cryptic: 'I was awfully busy with the school annual function. Nonetheless, I missed my friend all along.'

'I missed my friend' was one of the briefest but most appealing messages, that he had received so far. It was also the first acknowledgement, that the mere acquaintance was moving towards friendship ... genuine friendship to be more exact. His immediate reaction was to SMS her, 'Your friend, too, feels the same way.' But then, he checked himself.

He debated and deliberated as to whether what he was thinking was right; whether he was subscribing the right meaning to the simple sentence or was he unnecessarily pumping air into the imaginary balloon? It could just be a tailored reply.

He decided to fathom the sincerity of the developing friendship by remaining silent for a few days. Initially, he had decided to stay quiet for about a week, but then he found his own anxiety level increasing as he started receiving her messages from third day onwards. He could not hold himself beyond day 5, when the intensity of messages increased and the tone appeared to reflect tension and worry on her part.

So, he sent her a message: 'Kept the mobile deliberately switched-off to test my self-control. When switched-on, I was surprised to see so many messages. When I showed the same to my children, my son noticed that so many were from you and his question was:

'Papa, who is she? You have never spoken about her'.'

'What was your answer?' was her instant query.

'What do you think should have been my answer or what do you think I said?'

'I don't know about what you said, but... well, you could have told the truth and said that she is an acquaintance from some event that you conducted?'

'No, I did not say so.'

'Then what did you say?'

I simply said, 'She is my GF.'

'R U Crazy?'

This message, as mentioned in the beginning, was the one that had appeared on the mobile.

'No, there is nothing to suggest that I am crazy. I just told him the truth,' was his reply.

'Oh, no! I thought you to be a sensible and mature person. How wrong I was! How can you be so...' She signed-off without completing the sentence.

He waited for some time – in fact, till the next day, to spill out the beans. He wrote: 'You are not wrong. I was and I am, indeed, a sensible and mature person. But then, there is another aspect of mine with which you are not conversant. I love dramatics and do theatre. So, I played a prank on you. To tell you the truth, nothing of that sort happened. Neither my son asked me anything nor did I tell him what I told you. Relax, but yes, I would repeat that you are my GF.'

'I never knew this aspect of your personality. I must say that you are a good story-teller, Raju sir,' she appeared to be relaxed and it was the first time she had addressed him this way, showing a bit of informality.

'So, you have accepted yourself to be my GF?'

'We will talk about it some other time,' she wrote and signed off.

They opened up after this incident and started exchanging 'forwards', containing good and appropriate messages about life, friendship and related issues. One day, she sent him a poster that read: 'Some people come in your life as blessings. Others come in your life as lessons.'

'What have I entered as?' was his query.

'I knew you were going to ask, so I thought about it. To be truthful, you are both. And from today onwards, I would not hesitate to call you my BF.'

'So, my GF has accepted me as her BF?'

'Yes... and all due to my mother.'

'Wh...at?' was his really surprised reaction.

'You see, my mother is my good friend, so I spoke to her about it and she said, 'Why not? If you find him to be intellectually compatible, go ahead.' And you know she explained to me as to how I would turn out to be a winner in this relationship.'

'Winner? You think this is some sort of game we are playing?' irritation was oozing out from his written message.

'Relax, friend. You call me GF which, as per Mom, stands for Good Friend. Same way, I am tempted to call you my BF – which means Best Friend. So you can see who the winner is: while you gained a good friend, I got the best friend.'

He allowed the new, somewhat happy but unexpected turn of events to seep in. Thereafter, he sent the message: 'And what else did your intelligent mother tell you?'

'She asked me if I was sure of your being a gentleman, who was interested in a genuine friendship and was not looking for something else in the relationship.'

'What something else



was she referring to?'

'Come on, don't be naïve. You know what she could be referring to.'

'No, I don't know. And for a moment, assuming that I do, I still would like to know what she meant,' he was trying to get to know her mind on this issue.

'Well, she wanted me to ensure that you are not hankering after a casual affair, that would culminate in an evening in bed... If that is what you wanted to hear?'

'Yes and thanks for being so open. I appreciate you on this account. But I would like to know as to what was the response of my GF?'

'I told her that, whatever little I know of you, I can say with confidence that you are a perfect gentleman, who knows how to behave and would always stay within social limits.'

'Thanks for having so much confidence in me. But, in case – just in case – I go astray and you know what...'

'Simple, you would be the loser. You would no more have me as your GF,' and she signed off in her usual manner.

This conversation melted the ice between them and their friendship entered a new phase. They became a bit more frank and open. When he was presented a 'smart-phone' on his birthday, by his children, one of the first messages he received was from her: 'I welcome you with the flowers of the season. These are straight from the Rashtrapati Bhawan. I wish I could send you the real ones. So happy that you have joined WhatsApp.' As an afterthought, she wrote: 'Chatting now would be easier.'

His immediate reply was: 'You are amazing in your pic. You certainly do not look your age: I did some back-of-the-palm calculations from the hint you had given some time back, that you finished your school in 1986.'

'Is it flattery? I did not know you were good at that, too.'

'No, it is a true and genuine compliment. Want me to get my opinion vetted from my children?'

'Stop kidding.' And she signed off.

Your latest pic on Face Book is really good. *Dil chahta hai dehkta hi rahun,'* he sent a message one day.

'Don't look too much. Your power would increase!' she teased him in view of his thick-powered glasses.

'Looking at your reply, *Dimmag* (head) says: She is right, accept the advice. However *Dil* says, Ok, so what? Just ignore. But you know, both *Dil* and *Dimaag* are good companions. I am in a dilemma. What do I do? Whom should I listen to?'

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Her reply was simple: 'Go off to sleep and let your head rule your heart.'

'Though it does not appeal to the heart but head say listen to the advice of your GF. Moreover, the head is placed at a higher level than the heart, so it is logical to give it the upper hand and finally I tend to fall in line with you since *'dil to pagal hai, dil deewana hai...'*

'You are getting sensible. Moreover, I need a friend; not some *deewana* or *pagal,'* was her reply.

'Wah, kya baat kahi hai! I appreciate it from the core of my heart,' he wrote. After some thought, he added: 'If it were not real life and a movie scene, the hero might have said: *Wah wah, bahut khoob. Dil karta hai ke jin hontho say yeh baat nikli hai, un hothon ko choom loon.'*

'Hey, how many pegs of whiskey did you have today?' was her next message.

'Don't worry. It is neither under the influence of liquor nor is it under the compulsions of the heart I am saying so. It is the writer in me that is putting such ideas into my brain.'

'I wonder if you are wishing to be that movie hero! In any case, it is a nice thought, worth appreciating...' She added a winking smiley to the message before bidding good night.

Now it was his turn. One day, he made the first request: 'Please send me a selfie.'

'Arey... why do you need a selfie?'

'To see a fresh and million-dollar smile of yours.'

'Open 'FB'. You can see a number of pictures... and I am sure the smiles there are not stale.'

'But those are for common consumption. The selfie would be exclusively for me.'

'What do you mean? Those on FB are not for any Tom-Dick-and-Harry. They are for only special friends and cousins...' and the chat stopped.

Next day, he received a picture of hers in a green *sari,* with a matching blouse, leaning against a tree with greenery all around and a crisp message: 'Taken by a friend in front of the house I stay.'

He immediately sent a message: 'Thanks. Better than a selfie. It is called mutual compatibility... Both adding grace to each other: you and the environment.'

'What a wonderful way of putting it. You surely should start writing fiction. How about a love story?'

'Never tried my hand at a story but nice suggestion,' he wrote. 'I can consider – provided you are the heroine of my love story... any objection?

'No, not at all,' was the reply message with few smileys before she went offline.

Late at night, he wrote: 'I just came back from an official function. After a really long time, I had an extra small peg. You know why? Because of the last conservation of ours in the evening. But don't worry I am in full control of my senses as well as emotions.'

'Which particular part of conversation are you referring to?'

'Writing a fiction ...a love story.'

'Oh, really! Good that you are taking it seriously. I thought you were joking about my being the heroine of that romantic novel.'

'When you are serious, how can I be joking?'

'But... OK... As you wish... So long as people cannot identify it is me, I don't mind.'

'That's lovely, my dear GF. Now what should be the heroine's name... how would you wish to be called?'

'*Arey*, you are the author, not me... If you want my help, you would have to share the royalty...' And there were few smileys added to the message. There was no mention about the word 'Dear' that had been used for the first time in their conversation.

'I am sure, you are not hinting at just sharing money! Anyway, whatever you wish to share, no problems. Tell me the name of the heroine.'

'I shall think and let you know tomorrow..."

Soon another message flashed; 'But listen, I cannot be the heroine; I am the too detached type. You build an imaginary character, with love and affection.'

'Don't go back on your word. You are going to be the heroine; and don't worry about your trait of being a detached person. Together, we should be able to mould the heroine and infuse love and affection in her.'

'But listen, you wouldn't like your heroine to be old, getting close to 50. No one would read the story. Or do you want to write about her past?'

'No, let the heroine be your age. It would have its own plus points, you see! And people would love a lovely personality like yours. And yes, I won't like to get into the past which one can't change. I would love to venture into the future, which can be given any colour one wishes. What do you say?'

'As you wish, I go with you... And now I wish to go off the air.'

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'I know... I know you are on line. I have received quite a few messages in the past few minutes. Believe me, I am not offering any excuses, but my phone has been giving me problems. It needs to be thrown from the top of the tallest building. It hangs every 5 minutes... Well, even then I try, you see,' was her message one evening.

'Great, and on top of that, you got an irritating friend in me!'

'You don't irritate at all, but yes... you are nagging!' (two smileys added.)

'Would it be better, if I try to change and become irritating rather than nagging?'

'No, no; nagging is any time better than getting irritated.'

'But are you sure you want to retain this friend with his absurdities?'

'I am 200 per cent sure.'

'Thanks, dear. I never knew I could have such a high rating,' he wrote and then sent another message: 'Had you said such a thing face to face, I tell you, I would have hugged you... as a result of excitement.'

Her immediate message was, 'Then' followed by another one: 'I will tell you face to face.'

'What you mean by 'Then'? I have not followed.'

'Read it as one sentence: Then I will tell you...'

There was a moment's gap, that appeared to be an eternity and then the message appeared on her screen: 'Oh, my God. It took me so long to understand your sentence... that you will tell me face-to-face!'

'I was under the impression that people from your profession are intelligent!' the pun in her message was clear.

'Yes, I am intelligent, but a novice in this field. Please take me as your student and teach me. Believe me, I would be an obedient and fast-learning student.'

'All right, I don't mind. What is your major weakness in this field?'

'I am too slow, shy and scared to express my true feelings,' he wrote.

'First lesson: Be your own self. Don't change. I will understand your messages, and even subtle signals,' she wrote and signed-off.

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The story that started almost two years back has reached an interesting stage and is far from being over. The way it has gone so far, one thing is certain: it is going to get exciting as it progresses. Will it turn out to be a romantic story or a love story in the true sense? Only time will tell... Or else, perhaps, you can predict! ■