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## Editor's note

The book is, after language, the greatest of inventions. You are almost tempted to imagine Prometheus arriving in a river valley, with a flaming torch in one hand and a book in the other, to teach slumbering shepherds the arts of reading and writing. The rebellious god's graver offence must have been that he stole the other fire from high heavens and brought it to earth, to warm and light up mortal lives.

Illuminated, mortality would glow and burn with splendor, and take measure of the gods. So Prometheus had to be punished – he had gifted, in the alchemy of his transgression, the glory of tragic awareness to humankind. The gods felt smaller. Jealous.

There are some who cannot imagine life without books. There are others who cannot think of life with books. The second tribe, obviously, outnumber the first, yet it is the first who live richer lives – if only because they can live more life and can live many lives. Reading frees. You can be more than you are. You can be many.

As I scribble these lines in a notebook – I nowadays find longhand writing kinder to reflection – on this sunny and windy winter Saturday morning, the New Delhi World Book Fair is being inaugurated. The fair will take place, probably spectacularly, while all around bookstores continue to fall to emptiness before vanishing, or their spaces are usurped by more profitable businesses. Last week I returned from Delhi, carrying home more disappointment than books. I had searched three of the surviving bookstores but found only one book to buy. This shopkeeper sold books by weight – one kilo for two hundred

rupees. I have seen less indifference in fruit sellers – many pat and fondle their apples and oranges before seeing them off. The book I chose, hardcover and neatly sealed in a transparent sheet, cost me only seventy rupees. I don't know if I should be happy over my lot. Probably, I should be saddened. But I am told that more people are today reading books than ever before.

Perhaps bookshops have never relied for survival on the individual reader but on networks of libraries. Yet libraries are what no policy maker, no government in India in many decades has been willing to even look at. I remember once seeing a union railway minister enter the library of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study: the moment he reached before the first shelf of books, something repulsed him so violently that he did not pause for a while even but took an instantaneous U-turn, and walked out into the lobby, followed by his train.

You often wonder how much might change for the better if you had a library in each neighborhood and every village. Today's gods – with red beacons on their vehicles for quotation marks – probably do not want them down there to be reading and thinking and imagining and understanding beyond a point.

I wish these small-minded gods knew that human resources also need to be nourished on the other fire, that books and libraries alone provide that nourishment, and that nations live and grow only when they are amply fed.

*Rajesh Sharma*

### Something...daring

“You're two hours late, Leila.”

“Used vacation time this morning.”

“Something special?”

“Something. . . daring.”

“Your father called.”

Using the office phone, she dialed her father's cell.

“That job must be keeping you busy. You don't answer your phone anymore? Always voice mail, voice mail, voice mail. Been calling you all morning. Why don't you pick up?”

“Sorry dad, busy morning. Lots of meetings.”

She hated lying to him again. But she had no choice. And about her own marriage, no less. The one that happened in the morning. No one went off and married first thing Monday morning at City Hall and then went to work. She did. She and Kamaljit Singh did. They eloped. She smiled thinking about it.

“Mommy has something extra special planned for you tonight. She found the perfect match for you, good husband material. His family is coming tonight for the interview. It's a great arrangement, and she's certain. Pick up samosas and snacks at grocery. Maybe go now before they run out. Two dozen. It would save us some time.”

February, Valentine's Day, large pink and red hearts danced in the storefronts on her way to the Indian grocer. She walked slowly in frigid air, her eyeballs hurt in the single digit temperatures, but she hardly paid attention. Elated, she recalled