

THE SHOW NEVER ENDS
PART IV

Ranga has now permanently moved back to the *Adikesavulu Naicker Street* occupying one of the recently furnished portions in the old house.

As usual in the mornings the boy from the Kakka Shop brings him tea and buys him the newspaper. Every morning Ranga has his breakfast on his way to work. He will have lunch with no definite plan where to have it. Again, dinner would be at night - the usual, with *briyani* - say, around ten or eleven - in the hotel on Mount Road. Ranga feels his life is repeating itself - following a dull routine.

'Well, every life - in one way or the other - falls into a routine,' he consoles himself.

Over these last six months, after his visit to his lawyer-friend Raghavan with Kalyani to discuss their divorce, Ranga has been slowly withdrawing himself from Kalyani's orbit.

In the beginning, he used to visit her once a week, and then he has been gradually increasing that interval. Presently, he has restrained himself enough to keep away from herself for three months.

He has undertaken this as a solemn oath, calling it a mission, an experiment in truth.

Every day - when he gets up in the morning or retires to bed at night - he imagines Kalyani's face as her image is enshrined in his heart. He has now put up her photo on the wall - enlarged and framed.

She appears in it with no makeup and in a simple dress - taken after she had an oil bath, her tresses freely falling over her shoulders. Whenever Ranga looks at it, he warmly recalls her genial disposition, her commitment, her upright conversation and her pleasing voice always edifying love. It is not that he loves her; he fully understands that he literally worships her.

It is only his separation from her that reveals to him how great and memorable those days were.

While recalling her memory Ranga often thinks about himself and wonders, 'How do I compare myself with her - in status and disposition?' He believes Kalyani is a mold made of an entirely different and higher metal; he concludes his own inferiority complex was the source of all the problems the couple was now facing.

Even granting that society is experiencing erosion in caste and class distinctions, Ranga thought, such aspects would probably continue for a long time to come and influence how people conduct their individual, private lives.

To Ranga to talk of gender equality and proclaim that all the members of the humanity are the expressions of The Creator - whether one calls it a socialist doctrine or *Advaita* Philosophy - was just an attempt of a rational mind to understand the external world through intellect. The notion of equality might not be always true just because one seeks it as an ideal. Contradictions and agreements are, after all, a part of the natural world and to deny them can only be called a figment of imagination. As Ranga reminisces every moment of his former days with Kalyani he is thoroughly convinced of the truth: he and Kalyani, in the eyes of the law and egalitarian society, may be deemed equal, but he knows better: Kalyani is way above him in every respect.

Take the case of the lion - the majestic jungle beast that hunts for a prey, consumes it in moderation to satisfy his hunger and abandons the rest. Then there is the hyena that subsists forever living on carcasses, it too comes under the category of an animal. Still, can one call them both equal - just because they share the common factors like birth, death, survival, reproduction, four legs and a tail?

It was with this state of mind does Ranga spend his days in gloom and misery away from Kalyani - putting her up high on a pedestal while seeing himself humiliated and groveling before her.

Still - Ranga was confident that he too can raise himself to her status, and that faith keeps him going with his life. He believes his very actions - staying away from her, his non-communicative behavior, shielding himself from her company, hospitality and service (the things he always enjoyed most) - would finally boost his vigor, quality and demeanor.

Yet those close to him in that neighborhood were thinking that Ranga had been once infatuated with a stage actress, spent a few months in her company, and then returned to his turf, tired and disappointed. That's how they were talking to another about his retreat.

Two months ago, on a Sunday, while Ranga wanted to go out for a walk, he thought - might he have a sudden mood change and visit Kalyani instead. That caution made him stay holed up in his room for the rest of the day. On other days his professional duties and other routines didn't pose such a lure. It is only on Sundays that Ranga recalls the former days he had spent with Kalyani. One day he forced to bury himself in some reading and writing when *Chinna Naina* came up to his room chomping on a *cheroot*, still coughing now and then, the smoke drifting

into the air. He was panting even as he sat on the floor facing Ranga and glancing at Kalyani's photo on the wall.

"Naina, why do you have to come up all the way like this?" Ranga politely chided him. "You could have just given me a call and I would have come down." He also feared the visitor could be a nuisance.

"What's the big deal? These stairs are nothing," the old man scoffed. "Haven't I built this house - climbing ladders with loads on my head? It is just that I am suffering from cold for the last two days." He drew a strong puff with the *cheroot*.

Ranga was still concentrating on his reading. But - unbeknown to the visitor - he noticed Chinna Naina staring at the photo on the wall. But the old man simply had no reservations as he approached the photo and lifted his eyeglasses to avoid the glare from it.

"She doesn't look like a movie actress or drama actress at all! She looks like someone in our families!" he said, and laughed.

'What a horror! Talk about our family women!' Ranga grumbled to himself.

"Well, looks like you have put things behind you," the old man was saying, "Why do you have to put this photo on the wall? Don't you think it is high time you married your sister-in-law and started your family with your daughter?"

Ranga gave no reply. He felt -nor resentment toward him or others who were mouthing all kind of nonsense about him and Kalyani. He knew it would be just impossible for them - and Ranga saw no necessity to change their opinion -understand his state of mind or his involvement with Kalyani.

Chinna Naina suddenly thought of something and grumbled, "Men by nature might be brave, but when it comes to women, they show a white flag!" and let out a loud laughter.

"I know, you got mad at her and came back. But you are not able to forget her! What is your problem? Who says you should give her up? Let her stay aside. Go, marry your sister-in-law and set up a family; then you can visit the other woman as and when you wish. That's how you can maintain your respect here or elsewhere . . . Let me tell you something." He flashed his eyes mischievously and approached Ranga; he lowered his voice and spoke, "That way your wife will admire you. Remember a women's love and affection always depends on competition."

Ranga saw the old man was in a jolly mood. He also thought how an individual could be capable of rationalizing and living an entirely contradictory life.

"Chinna Naina, do you know that I married that woman in a registered marriage?"

"Yes, you told me. So what?" He dismissed the question as of no consequence and continued to chomp on the *cheroot* with his eyes closed.

"If I marry again, on the very day of marriage I will be handcuffed and thrown into a jail." said Ranga and laughed.

"Do you think that woman would actually do such a thing? No married woman would ever like her husband jailed," Chinna Naina said and again glanced at the photo on the wall.

"I really don't know. But she might; the law gives her that right."

"See, that's why I have been saying you should have done some real thinking before getting into this mess. You are an educated man, how come you ended up like this?" Annoyed, the old man scratched his head, and said:

"How about this?"

"What?"

"Can't you buy her off with some money?"

"What if she's not willing?"

"Then, why don't you file a suit? You are an educated man, there must be some loop hole in law you can use."

"Chinna Naina, that requires three years' time. I can even apply for divorce only after three years of marriage," Ranga explained.

"How long you have been married now?"

"It is almost two years."

"Forget it, you have only one year left; then you can get rid of her; you should never get involved in marriage and family life with that kind of woman."

Ranga was relieved the elder wouldn't raise the topic of divorce for at least one more year. Again, the old man would surely share this news with other members in the neighborhood. Ranga felt bold that no would be broaching the subject with him for a year.

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It was early in the morning; the time was not yet seven. Ranga was half asleep and was rolling on the bed.

The voice from the radio in the tea shop across the street could be heard, so also the clamor from the women collecting water from a tap. A road roller was blaring as it inched its way on ground while workers were hurrying and bustling on their way to a mill. Meanwhile a taxi entered and stopped in front of the house, and Ranga felt he -heard its passenger pay the fare and enquire someone nearby about his namesake. Ranga suddenly got up from the bed and ran to a window to see what was going on down below.

Annasami was standing with a bag in hand. The taxi that brought him was now reversing its direction.

Ranga was wearing only a *lungi*. He grabbed a towel, threw it on his shoulder and ran headlong downstairs.

"Sar . . . Please come . . . Good morning, what brings you here - to this faraway place?" He warmly welcomed the elder man.

"Good morning, I purposely came to see you," Annasami informed, his face revealing no feelings in public. He followed Ranga and climbed the stairs.

"Please be seated." Ranga offered him a chair in his room.

Annasami sat on it and observed the large photo of Kalyani on the wall. His eyes turned misty as he fixed his gaze on it. 'Why? This fellow doesn't even bother to visit her,' he thought. "Is this just for a show?"

"I actually wanted to visit you in your office, that won't be a proper place to talk with you. I also thought you might even throw me out. That's the reason I wanted to catch you early in the morning. I came directly here after getting your address. I had never been to this area. I have been to some areas in Bombay and Calcutta, this is just like one of those . . ." While he was still talking, the boy from the tea shop - who noticed a guest - brought them two cups of tea.

Ranga seemingly appreciating the boy's gesture, laughed, extended his hand and asked, "What about the newspaper?"

"It has not yet come, you got up earlier today," the boy said.

Ranga and Annasami drank the tea.

"I want you to go out with me . . . We can talk on our way," said Annasami.

"We can talk on our way out. We can also talk here. . Tell me, what is the matter?"

"Kalyani is not well. She returned only yesterday after a two-month stay in a nursing home." Even as Annasami was talking, Ranga, in despair, interrupted him, "What? What happened?"

"Well, a lot of things have happened," Annasami said in a tone of resignation. "Come on, get dressed up! We have to leave right away."

"I will get ready after shower," said Ranga, grabbed a towel and soap and ran to the bathroom. He finished the shower in a hurry.

As he was showering, Ranga was caught in so many thoughts and his mind was in turmoil. He had refrained from asking about Kalyani's condition in detail only because he was scared of what Annasami might tell him, so he sought refuge in the bathroom; still, his mind continued to vex him. He finished shower in two minutes and returned to the hall.

He now recalled to mind some recent events: Kalyani complaining of fatigue and overtiredness - on either day or night - as she took his hand, felt her forehead and asked him to check if she had fever; on the days of rehearsals and drama performances, she spoke of constant pain in her hip or legs while turning over on the bed. Ranga now realized he had ignored those symptoms only because he wanted to believe Kalyani had no serious health problems.

'What could be the problem?' he was thinking when he neared Annasami and asked him, "Tell me, I hope it is not serious."

Annasami raised his head, took out a *paan* from his box, and asked, "You haven't seen Kalyani for the last two months. Am I right?"

Ranga gave a ready reply because he had been always haunted by her memory: "As of today, it is two months and twenty-two days."

Annasami let out a deep sigh, stuffed the *paan* into his mouth, locked the betel box and put it away in his handbag.

While in conversation with Annasami, Ranga applied some face powder, changed, and got ready.

Annasami was in no mood to have a warm conversation with Ranga. He was afraid he might unintentionally hurl a few -barbs at him. He knew Ranga, even with a rebellious streak on many issues, had always behaved with civility and integrity with others. So he was seething with anger that Ranga had chosen to abandon his wife and simply walk away. Still, he

restrained himself - only because he knew how Kalyani loved Ranga and respected him. To get mad at Ranga, he concluded, would only mean he was getting mad at Kalyani. Still, Annasami found it hard to start a conversation with Ranga.

"Is she alright now?" Ranga asked as they were getting to leave.

"That's what the doctors say," said Annasami and got up from the chair. "The doctor says she's recovered. But Kalyani is still unable to walk. Her legs look pallid and shrunken. She might be able to walk or not walk at all. The doctor feels optimistic about her recovery."

Ranga was puzzled. 'How could she develop such a serious condition?' he agonized. It pricked his conscience he had left her in home under such dire circumstances. Realizing he had no justification to blame anyone why he was not duly informed, he bowed his head.

He knew Annasami was actually expecting such a question and getting ready to pounce upon him. He didn't take the bait.

"Come on, let's go," said Ranga and started. Annasami noticed his pathetic face and empathized with him; he knew Ranga was fretting inside.

'Poor fellow! What could he do? Did he ever think Kalyani would fall sick? If we had ever known that the people we get mad at will end up like this, we would have never quarreled with them! Who knows what the future holds?' Annasami thought in Ranga's defense. When Ranga locked up the room and began going down the stairs, Annasami stood beside and said:

"It is now almost two months. Kalyani simply neglected her health and avoided seeing a doctor. Every night she was feeling feverish, but never stopped taking part in rehearsals or dramas. Nobody knew how she suffered at nights - who would unless she tells someone? So, one day, she was fully bedridden. Fortunately Pattu was there . . . She's still there, maybe she's due for delivery . . . She's the one taking care of her. . . We admitted Kalyani in the nursing home . . ." They were now down at the bottom of the stairs when Ranga turned around and looked at him.

"Why are you staring at me? I told Kalyani we need to inform you, but she said stubbornly no. She said you would understand. 'Let him come when he wants, we don't need to trouble him. I am not going to die,' she said. How could I disobey her? I really don't know what's going on between both of you. We knew there must be some reason why she spoke so precisely, so we kept quiet." While Annasami was still talking, Ranga went to his scooter at the end of the veranda and returned pushing it along the way. His face taut and tense, he has been listening to what

Annasami was saying. They both appeared like a pair exchanging some general or business news on a street corner beside a scooter.

"They have conducted x-rays, blood tests and concluded that Kalyani is suffering from T.B. in her spinal cord. That's the reason she suffers from pain in her back and legs. In just a month she has been reduced to half! She's much better now, still both her legs seem frozen . . . That's what really upsets me. Doctor says she would certainly be able to walk. That is comforting . . . God will save her." His eyes turned teary.

"Come, please get on the scooter," Ranga said and had Annasami seated behind him. He started the vehicle and with a roar it sped through the streets.

He was trying very hard to conceal his restlessness.

On his arrival, Pattammal emerged from a room and told him Kalyani was resting.

"Did the doctor visit her in the morning?" Ranga asked. "No, he's expected shortly," she said. "He gives her a shot every day."

Pattu cried as soon as she saw Ranga, and he was embarrassed. He couldn't determine what made her cry. Was she crying because of her own helpless situation or complaining to Ranga why he had deserted Kalyani under these circumstances? He made no comments and entered the room.

Annasami sat in the hall preparing a *paan*.

Ranga entered the room where Kalyani was resting on a stool near the bed and stared at her. He was distressed, but he was determined not to cry.

She lay there on the bed her face bleached and unconscious like a baby. He noticed her head pressing down on the pillow while the rest of her body hardly made any impression on the bed. On the other side of the bed stood a wheel chair. The windows were open. Even the vent down below that would be normally closed was now slightly ajar revealing a rose. The angle of the wheel chair as well as the position of the pillow revealed to Ranga that Kalyani must have sat there either that morning or previous evening. This gave him a sense of comfort.

He thought how she must have struggled and endured her agony and fever in loneliness. Why didn't she inform him of her illness? To even think that Kalyani had not be informed only because she was acting mad and spiteful, Ranga thought, would be one of the biggest blunders he could ever commit. He again recalled her hospitality and generosity. 'How could she be so tireless and active - working in the garden and

conducting her dramas?' he wondered as she now looked like a baby, helpless and abandoned. He looked back; he had accepted her high-mindedness as his right and, when she was sick and needed help, he hadn't helped her with even a dose of medicine.

He wanted to look at her legs and slightly unfolded the blanket. They looked like stumps of a banana plant - pallid, shrunken, fully out of control. He noticed the green nerves etched on the knees and legs. He touched her legs while watching her face. She felt no sense of touch and continued to sleep. Then the slight movement of the blanket must have stirred her because she opened her eyes slightly. Her sleep disappeared all of a sudden as soon as she noticed him. Kalyani smiled when her eyes met his and she fondly extended her hand toward him. As he grabbed it with his both hands, he noticed it was bony and emaciated, the nails have lost their color.

For a long time they spoke no words; still the luster on Kalyani's face when she set her eyes on him didn't vanish. Ranga buried his face in her hand.

Silently she comforted him stroking his chin and cheeks with one hand and running her fingers through his tresses.

Ranga choked as an admixture of joy and sadness overwhelmed him and, like a baby, he shed tears.

"Why didn't you let me know?" he asked with some diffidence even as he knew there was no justification for such a question.

Kalyani let out a hearty laughter. Ranga right away understood she had recovered from her illness and was hale and healthy. When she spoke, he found her voice sweet and clear presumably because she was brief and succinct.

"Didn't I send Iyer (she meant Annasami) to personally inform you? Didn't he mention about it? I thought you might visit me after a couple of days, but you were nowhere to be seen. I got sick two weeks after you left. I have been hoping for your visit but after your prolonged absence I determined you made up your mind to stay away from me. I didn't want to shake your firm resolve. Even now I wanted you to come only to help you resolve our divorce." Ranga listened with a blank face as Kalyani spoke with no change in her smile and demeanor.

The doctor came around nine. Guessing the doctor's toward himself - his recognition that Ranga was the patient's husband who has been remarkably missing all these days - Ranga introduced himself to him and explained that Kalyani got sick when he had been away on a family

matter. He said he came as soon as he got the news and enquired about her latest situation.

"Your wife has a strong will power," the doctor told him. "I can say she's now fully recovered. Still, it will take a while before he walks as she did before. In certain cases, it might even take a couple of years. Be assured she will definitely going to walk."

He also spoke to Kalyani. "My advice is you try frequently to stand and walk; that will be hard. But now you have your husband to help you. Don't try it when you are alone; that will be dangerous. Try to hold on to his shoulder, then slowly try to walk to the wheel chair and sit on it. Never do anything in a rush. You must practice little by little . . ."

When the doctor gave Kalyani a shot and was about to leave, Ranga accompanied him to the door and again returned to Kalyani and sat beside her.

Annasami stood near the door entrance and told Kalyani, "I am leaving now. I have to go to work . . . Mr. Ranga, I will see you later." He promised to return later that evening.

After Annasami's departure Kalyani asked Ranga who had been sitting beside her and holding her hands: "Don't you have to go to work?"

"No, I am taking a month's leave and staying with you," he informed her. "I will stay at least until you can independently walk and sit on the wheel chair. I feel terribly sorry I was not with you when you were helpless. You referred me as your husband; do you know how I fretted what the doctor would be asking me?"

Kalyani smiled. She was wondering if she should now reveal to him the reason why she sought his presence through Annasami.

The fact that Ranga didn't show up for the last three months confirmed her thinking that he was determined to avoid her company for an year paving the way for their eventual divorce.

She now wanted to let him was no need for that one year waiting; a sufficient ground has arisen for their divorce to be effective immediately.

She believed her serious illness rendering her crippled and incapacitated would be a reason enough for the annulment. She harbored neither an ill feeling nor hatred to hurt Ranga but only sought to help him in his endeavor.

But now, as she listened to Ranga's words of repentance for his past behavior, his open declaration of regret and guilt and his plan to take

time off from work to take care of her, Kalyani was convinced this was not the right time. To do so, she felt, would mean subjecting him to the most cruel a spiteful punishment. Instead she wanted to convey her utmost happiness for his love and visit; she looked at him, again and again, with warmth and affection.

Annasami left some time after the doctor's departure; he was happy and relieved that he had at last united Kalyani and Ranga as he took leave of them.

Ranga went to his office, handed in his leave application and returned home around one in the afternoon.

Since there was no male member in the house, its front door was kept locked even during the day time. Pattammal opened door after she heard the scooter's sound on arrival. Ranga guessed she must have been resting for a long time. He immediately recognized her situation from her demeanor -she stood there biting her lips and enduring the pain.

"Shall I call for the midwife?" she asked.

"No, she will be here this afternoon," Pattammal said and retreated.

Who would take care of the house and the inhabitants once Pattammal takes to bed following delivery? That's the question that now occupied Ranga's mind. He recalled Pattammal's mother Sundaravalli to memory and as he stepped into the hall he noticed her standing right there beside bags and boxes on the floor and helping herself with a *paan*. She now stood up in deference and said, "*Thambi*¹, come in." Anxious, her eyes restless, she moaned: "I got the letter only yesterday. I find Kalyani's health so shocking! I wish you had informed me earlier."

Ranga offered no reply. He sighed and bowed down as if asking for her forgiveness. The woman herself offered a comforting thought, offering her own prayer: "God will certainly restore her health and she will soon start walking."

Ranga made a formal enquiry, "When did you come?" and walked to Kalyani's room. She welcomed him with a smile as if awaiting him. He drew a chair and sat beside her and informed he had applied for a month's leave.

"It is going to be one, please go and have your lunch," Kalyani told him. Her forlorn face revealed she regretted she couldn't serve him lunch. Ranga too had the same thought and bowed down. Kalyani fondly touched his knee stretching on her bed and teased him, "Shall I come and

serve you lunch?" while, unaware to herself, she was shedding tears. Ranga wiped her cheeks and spoke in an assertive tone: "I know you will soon get better and serve me food."

Kalyani nodded her head sharing his optimism. Ranga opened a bureau in the room corner; there were some of his clothes and *lungis* washed and stacked. He changed and donned new clothes.

"Did you have your lunch?" he asked her.

"Yes, Pattu promptly takes care of those things," Kalyani replied.

"I am sorry I am causing her a lot of trouble."

He walked to the dining table. Pattu had already set up all the items on the table and was standing next to the table.

Ranga chose self-service. "Please go and take rest," he told her. "Everything I need is right here."

When he finished lunch and reentered the room, Kalyani enquired, "Did you meet with your lawyer friend, again?"

"No," he replied, lit a cigarette and sat beside her.

Only now Ranga thought of their three-month separation and what foreshadowed it - their divorce.

He recalled his earlier comment, 'We don't love one another.' Even now he felt the same way about their relationship. He ruminated over that comment.

'Is that true? Maybe she didn't love me on my terms; still, how true and sincere is my love for her! That's what really matters! As far as I am concerned, whether she loves me or not makes no difference; I need her, these three-month separation proves I need her company. It was my obstinacy that made me endure her physical separation for three months, I can show the same tenacity through my entire life. But that would be a wretched, cursed life! Why should it end up like that? It would only mean a life wasted in intransigence and pigheadedness! Even if I chose separation from her, can I ever wipe out from my heart all those sweet memories? If that were true, does our separation serve any purpose, at all? On what grounds can I claim she doesn't love me? It would only mean I need her love even more and not that I never loved her. I keep thinking of her every day - while rising up early in the morning, and retiring to bed at night - so how does it matter whether I live with her or away from her?" Ranga was thinking and was at peace as he went on smoking.

¹ A polite expression - meaning, affectionately, a brother

Kalyani riveted her eyes on his face. She expected him to talk further but Ranga had already made up his mind not to discuss anything with her.

Didn't she tell him, "Let's no more talk about our divorce or our living together? We have talked enough. We can live as we wish, there is no need to work out any plan. Let's not argue what's right or what's wrong." Ranga had accepted it as a healthy suggestion.

"What are you thinking?" Kalyani asked him.

He smiled and replied:

"I have understood I should not speak out what I am thinking. We think about a lot of unnecessary things . . . We often repeat thinking over the same thing, again and again. Sometimes we realize no purpose will be served by thinking." He paused now and then, as he spoke these sentences.

"How is your drama group functioning? Don't disband it, you should try to run it." he advised her.

"You are right. Iyer (she meant Annasami) was saying we should stop staging plays until my leg has fully healed, but I firmly said no. I insisted he should find another woman to act my role. There have been no drama performances for the last three months. All the past bookings are still pending," Kalyani said revealing her concern.

The time was close to two.

"Why don't you rest for a while?" he said. Kalyani grabbed his both hands and said, "You too can rest here."

The door was ajar. Ranga shut it and gently eased himself on the bed and embraced her as if holding on to a baby. Her slender, midget body seemed enveloped in his hand. Other than a perception that the person lying beside him was a wonderful soul deserving of his love and support, and harboring no notion that she was a woman, he was a man or that she was a wife, he was a husband, Ranga's mind went beyond all these norms as he hugged her as if donning a soft a garland around his neck. He sensed her body and mind flicker in excitement - like a pigeon cuddling within folded palms.

In the evening he himself prepared coffee for both and entered her room.

"Good heavens, why do you have to do this?" she stopped him. "Where is Pattu?" she asked and tried to get up.

That's when he noticed her movement. All the movement was only above her waist. There was hardly any semblance of motion below it.

"Remember, hereafter I will be the one doing everything for you. Why should we bother Pattu for everything?" He cooled the coffee and served it.

Kalyani wanted to sit down after finishing her coffee. Ranga approached her when she sat down pressing down both her hands sideways.

"Hmm, try! Get up!" he encouraged her. Unable to move her waist or legs, Kalyani tried to raise her head by pressing hard both her hands on the bed. After a couple of attempts, she was fully exhausted.

Ranga supported her and laid her on the bed. "Do you want to step down and stand on the floor?" he asked.

Kalyani seemed excited even imagining such an exercise; like a baby she nodded her head in assent. As Ranga grabbed both her legs and let them fall to the ground, he noticed they were just hanging in the air showing no locomotion. He wondered 'How will she ever stand on the floor?' and gently urged her to set her feet the floor while tightly holding her.

Kalyani could not figure out if her feet were actually touching the ground.

"Do you see my legs touching the floor?" she asked.

"The doctor has told us not to rush. This exercise is enough for today," he said, gently gathered her body with both hands and set her back on the wheel chair.

"Were you sitting on the wheel chair yesterday?"

"Even now I can try to move little by little and sit on a chair if it is close to the bed," Kalyani said. "But someone has to hold the chair for me. Again, once I get on the chair, someone has to pull me and straighten me up to seat properly me on it," she said laughing as if mocking herself.

Ranga recoiled at her pathetic situation. The old memories rushed in, one after another: Kalyani's daily walks in the garden as she stopped to examine each and every rose and delighting in its bloom; her stately gait and appearance on the stage; her bubbly enthusiasm and dynamism as she attended to his personal needs, full of zip. He let out a deep sigh and seemed on the verge of tears but restrained himself lest it should cause Kalyani a heart-break. So, while Kalyani sat on a chair watching the sky

through the window, he stood behind her, listened to her and laughed with her, his eyes turning misty, now and then.

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Pattu delivered a baby around six in the evening. It was a safe and normal delivery and it took place suddenly even before she could be taken to the hospital and the midwife arrived.

That's when Ranga was wheeling down Kalyani and talking to her in the garden facing the house along the narrow pathway marked by triangle-shaped bricks laid on either side.

Kalyani felt her body shudder when she heard the first human cry; she gripped Ranga's hand tightly and he too patted her shoulder. They both shared the news without a word between them.

Pattu's mother Sundaravalli never came out; she was the one who singlehandedly managed the whole procedure. A little later, the midwife too showed up.

The servant maid, midwife and Sundaravalli have been running here and thither inside the house. The whole house echoed with their chores. Ranga and Kalyani watched their movements from the outside.

But the servant maid showed up briefly and informed, "It's a boy!" and again disappeared inside the house.

Later Sundaravalli invited Kalyani to see the baby. Ranga wheeled her into the room.

A screen had been set up at the center of the hall where they used to conduct the drama rehearsals and, behind it, Pattu was resting. Ranga stopped the wheel chair ahead of a narrow passage that let only Kalyani inside. He noticed the baby when Sundaravalli brought it and set it on Kalyani's lap; Kalyani took pleasure watching it like a new rose blooming in her garden.

"It is a new face, a new character who would brighten our drama in the future," she thought and closed her eyes; it was like a prayer.

The baby began to cry and Sundaravalli took it out of her lap. Kalyani peeked inside, saw Pattu and smiled. Pattu too returned her smile, her face beaming proclaiming her pride as a new mother.

Again, Ranga returned to the frontage with Kalyani in the wheel chair. Meanwhile darkness had already set in.

A little later Dhamu arrived in a car owned by a film company with a tin of sweets to celebrate the baby's arrival. He first served the sweets to Ranga and Kalyani and, later, to others.

Ranga parked the wheel chair under the moonlight, close to the veranda, and lit a cigarette. Kalyani felt she was floating in the air. She now firmly believed Ranga would never leave her. 'Was my accident necessary so that we both can understand our love for one another?' she wondered, looking at her wobbly legs.

She toyed with the idea of informing Ranga why she conveyed through Annasami that he visit her. She noticed Ranga sitting next to her quiet and laid back enjoying the moon-lit night and the fresh white roses surrounding them.

"What are you thinking?" She recalled asking him the same question that morning and his answer.

Ranga laughed. "Seems to me you are the one doing all the thinking. You seem to be looking for an opening so that I will tell you what I am thinking. For the last three months I have been thinking about you; then, I was living away from you. I am now at peace thinking about you in your company rather than mulling over you in your absence. Don't assume I have changed my decision because of your health condition. We make decisions based on a certain situation, but that situation alone might not be the single factor influencing our decision. Do you remember what you said the other day? "We both were already well advanced with the idea of our marriage, so when Annasami suggested it clinched it. I am now here because of your illness; I can also use your condition as a pretext to stay away from you. It all depends on one's state of mind." As he went on and on, Kalyani watched him speechless with her eyes wide open.

She felt a pang of guilt for misconstruing his mind. Her eyes turned foggy and, as if asserting they are not teary, she let out a mild laughter, and said:

"You are right. That's my idea when I asked to see you. Because you never showed for the last three months, I assumed you were strictly following the lawyer's advice and keeping away from me. Now that my health is affected, I thought your divorce application would be approved immediately. That's the reason for conveying my message. I thought I found out a proper reason for our separation; but you are saying it could also be a reason for our reuniting. I find your argument convincing."

Ranga laughed. That laugh revealed a sense of wisdom and an indifferent conclusion: 'Law and social norms lack a humanistic outlook and seek to protect only selfish motives.'

"How shameful are our laws and ideals of social justice that we often laud as lofty and deserve our deference," he said. "When we both were hale and healthy and wanted to separate, the law said no - creating all kinds of legal impediments. Now, when it becomes necessary that we need the company of one another, the same law grants us separation on the same ground. What a horror! Some law! Some ideal! And they say it is for our salvation!"

'Looks like laws only exacerbate hatred and enmity to seek revenge,' he muttered to himself.

He thought further:

'Do the laws exist only to crush the freedom of healthy people and render the weak defenseless? What contradictory set up! When Kalyani was hale and healthy, the law allowed me to have her company, enjoy her physical intimacy and even claim a share of her earnings. And now when she ailing, the same law lacks the moral fiber to insist that I care for her! This only reinforces the primitive human instinct - when people with intellect and soul are scared and put all their faith in law to realize their worst motives!' His face turned red as he was becoming more and more angry.

Kalyani too - silently - thought about the same subject. She said:

"I can understand what you are saying, but we must also consider the rationale behind the law. Your argument is based on lofty ideals, but how could law force someone who doesn't believe in moral values? We both were happy when we were healthy, now also we are happy together. But what about others? Some couple might be unhappy when they are healthy or unhappy when they get sick. To force them by law to live together would be the cruelest thing, don't you agree? It all depends on how one wants to use the legal means. Does law ever insist that one should not live with an ailing husband or wife?"

Ranga felt his mind was clear; he sensed a rejuvenation in the air as he breathed the aroma from the roses around. He relished that feeling and straightened up. The moonlight glowed as if with more intensity.

"Didn't Annasami say he will be coming?" he asked.

"Poor man! He is free only today. For the last two months he has been staying with me - when he was not busy with his office work.

Sometimes he would even stay beyond midnight. Today he must be feeling relieved you are here . . .". She comforted him.

Ranga was now mulling over the recent occurrences: the conflicting views between himself and Kalyani; their divergent views and emotional interpretations. All of that now seemed hollow and pathetic. None of them seemed to have any-basis.

'What is that I had expected from her and didn't get it?' he mused, and laughed. "It all looks crazy now. Actually, what caused the disagreement between us?" he asked Kalyani.

"Disagreement?" Kalyani raised her eyebrows. "One doesn't call it a disagreement. You have been torturing your mind imagining what we are not. Whatever we are, I have accepted it. That's root cause of the friction. And one more thing: Remember you used to talk about my 'self - that you were unable to accept? Now that I deserve your love and company, you are willing to endure my 'self'."

"No, that's not the case, I have now realized your 'self' is not irreconcilable with me. Not only that; I inhabit a part of my life in your 'self'; it was never a hurdle, it will never be. I was the one who dragged it between us. I have been thinking about our relationship during the last three months. I needed this separation to ponder over all these things. I could indulge in some objective thinking only in your absence. But I never had two opinions about our divorce. I feel the same way now: we can prove to the world how two high-minded individuals, even after divorce, could live as an ideal couple without the coercion of law." Kalyani now smiled and interrupted him.

"You need to say no more. I know what you are going to say, let me state my piece. We would have avoided a lot of problems had I mentioned this earlier; that's what you have expected from me. And because I didn't you had lost your trust on my love. Let me say this: we need no divorce. I will not offer my consent. I need you. Even if someone else takes care of me, will be the same as your caring me? I mean . . . like my husband?" She laughed as she spoke these words, but tears were flowing down her cheeks.

Ranga hastened to say "What I meant was . . ." and Kalyani's response too came in a rush. "No more experiments with life! . . . Let us live it, accept it!" She eagerly grabbed both his hands.

Sundaravalli invited them for dinner.

"What do you have?" Kalyani asked.

"I have everything. You can have a meals or hot *idlis*, as you wish."

“We can have the *idlis*,” Ranga said. “We can have them under the moonlight. Let me get them.” He rose from where he sat.

“No, you stay right here. I will get them,” said Sundaravalli and went inside.

After a while, Dhamu came and laid a stool between Ranga and Kalyani and fetched some drinking water.

They heard the baby crying.

PROLOGUE

"If I were to come to live with you, I will do so only permanently." That's what Pattu said with a gloomy face when Kalyani took pity on her and suggested she move into her household.

Now Pattu finds herself in a new house but not given to shedding tears. She came here for her delivery but stayed back as Kalyani's companion. She and Dhamu are now living in a portion of Kalyani's house posing no burden to Kalyani and Ranga.

Pattu's son keeps crawling all over the place and acts as a consolation to Kalyani to fight off her loneliness. His face delights her just as she used to feel while watching a rose blooming anew every day in her garden.

When not busy with his work, Ranga spends the day with Kalyani wheeling her chair and talking to her. They no more indulge in talking much about themselves because their relationship has sufficiently advanced owing to their mutual trust and conviction.

It is Ranga who now regularly waters the plants and takes care of other activities with the help of a gardener. Still he has not changed his views on tending roses or listening to cricket commentary.

Annasami has taken the full responsibility to manage the drama group, *Kalyani Kalai Arangam*. So far, this year, he has organized four plays without Kalyani acting in them. While Kalyani had no acting role in any of them, she still actively participated in their rehearsals, the script and the details in stage presentation. Everyone recognizes the fact that she is lame has not detracted her passion for the theater.

Kalyani is now well into recuperating her body and mind, displaying a new vigor and glow; still Ranga attends to her like a child. Even as he shares her bed, he hugs her with a paramount feeling that she is a soul deserving of his warmth and company.

In the beginning Kalyani too was baffled how to reconcile their intimacy with the withdrawal pain. She understood her own state of mind as well as Ranga's pathetic situation out of his self-restraint. As days grew, this weighed heavily upon her.

At last, one day, the couple openly discussed the problem.

"We will stay this way till you are fully recovered," he told her.

She laughed. Her face turned red as she wondered how to explain the situation to him.

"I am no more a patient," she said. "Why don't you consult a doctor?"

"What can I ask the doctor? What will he think of me?" Ranga grumbled, like a boy.

"Why do you feel shy talking to a doctor? Can't you ask him a general question about other patients with similar conditions?" she said, then paused. "Otherwise, shall I ask him?" Her threat worked and Ranga immediately promised he himself would take up the matter with the doctor.

The next day when Ranga spoke to the doctor - in a roundabout way - the latter discreetly mentioned about another female patient in his ward - who had the same symptoms like Kalyani for the last one-and-half years and had delivered a baby two months ago.

Kalyani regularly attends the drama performances. Even before she makes her appearance at the venue, the stage props, musical instruments as well as her wheel chair will precede her.

In the evening, after returning from work, Ranga holds on to Kalyani's shoulder and gently eases her into a taxi that takes the couple to the theatre. Ranga wheels her to the front row and he watches the entire play along with her.

In the beginning, Kalyani refused to attend those plays.

Still, whatever their worth - even if they were awfully poor in taste and lacked any artistic merit - Ranga knew Kalyani found fullness in them, adored them and they were inextricably linked with her life. He believes he owes her a duty to make sure she never missed a single play.

Still he has not given up airing his strong criticism when he reviews those plays. Just as before, he fiercely tears into their lapses. He has since begun to show restraint on what he admires or detests - and this revealed to him his own high-mindedness. 'This is how the world is,' he tells himself. "Let me guard myself and not lose my individuality; that's more than what I need.' So he finds everything in life amusing: this is one of the great lessons he has learnt from Kalyani.

Annasami still nurses a grudge against Ranga owing to his strong drama criticism. Kalyani often watches and smiles to herself when he and Ranga get into hot and blistering arguments - the heat and eruption being invariably on Annasami's side. Finally, she tries her best to bring their dispute to a peaceful end.

Ranga now has now undertaken some additional responsibilities. Some six months ago he and Kalyani were delighted to learn that Sumathi - the sister of Ranga's late wife Devaki as well as a school teacher in her village school and who has been hoping for a long time to get married to Ranga - is getting married soon.

Kalyani insisted that Ranga must attend the wedding. She assured him she would be able to manage herself for a day without his help.

On his return Ranga regaled Kalyani with many interesting stories - including how Sumathi loved another teacher and got married him.

After a while it was decided that Ranga's daughter Indu, who has been living with Sumathi, should transfer for further studies. Accordingly, last month, after school vacation, Ranga brought his daughter to Madras and admitted her in a local hostel.

Ranga and Kalyani visit Indu every week. They learned Sumathi and her husband too had visited Indu twice during the last month.

Indu boasts to her hostel friends that she has two sets of parents. The irony that the girl couldn't live with either of them was not lost on Kalyani who laughed to herself.

Today a new play is to be staged by the *Kalyani Kalai Arangam*.

Annasami, donning the make-up of a comedian is running all over the place. The time is already half an hour past six - the first bell has already been given - still Kalyani is nowhere to be seen. Annasami very much wishes she be present before the play starts: what is keeping her late? Hasn't she got a taxi? Didn't Ranga return from work, yet? How can Kalyani miss the first day of a new play? He prays she would certainly make her appearance soon.

He concedes 'Well, if she has not by now started from home, even God can't bring her here within the next few minutes,' and instructs the second bell be given. Then he stands against a bamboo partition beside the stage and watches the audience through an opening.

Simultaneously, the lights dim and the curtain rises. The thought that Kalyani isn't there to grace the inauguration of the play is too much to bear, and Annasami is about burst into tears.

Just then, as the curtain goes up and the lights come on, his single view through the opening reveals Kalyani seated on her wheel chair and Ranga steadily pushing it forward.

Members in the audience - those who knew her and others who knew Ranga- greet and welcome her.

Her face glow, Kalyani occupies the first row and Ranga sits beside her wheel chair.

Annasami notices she's whispering something into Ranga's ears.

The play begins. Kalyani is watching the play; Ranga watches her enjoying the play.

Annasami makes his appearance on the stage. He plays a comedian and the audience welcomes him with a round applause.

Kalyani too claps her hand.

A sad thought overwhelms Annasami as he ponders the irony: here is an actress who once, on stage, thrilled a large audience. And now, she finds herself as one in the audience. Even in his comedian's role, he is shaken; the pain is too much to bear.

What he doesn't know is that Kalyani - whether acting on the stage or not - has been always a connoisseur of art.

Now her role has changed into that of a connoisseur.

She will be playing this role until her legs renew with vigor and restore her mobility. This too she accepts with all the seriousness a role demanding of an actress.

It is now almost a year. The doctors keep telling her she will surely walk one day.

Ranga, Kalyani and others share that faith. That's the most important thing.

Possible or impossible? Continuity or not? Truth or false? Human life forever oscillates between these two contradictions and what sustains it is the faith in the words - Possible, Continuity and Truth.

That faith echoes in everything that Ranga and Kalyani perceive in their lives as they seek fulfillment.

The whole house comes down; did Annasami say something funny or has he forgotten some lines? Unconsciously, Kalyani too claps her hands. Laughter and shouts fill the air . . .
