

THE SHOW NEVER ENDS
PART I

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The visitor was expected only at four in the afternoon. But Kalyani got ready by three. Because she did not like the idea of meeting with the gentleman alone, she had asked Annasami to be home at half past three.

She was in the verandah seated on a ratten-chair awaiting Annasami anytime now and, as her regular pastime, watching the children from the nursing school across her house.

Her mood, as she watched the scene inside the school compound which was fenced by bamboo and wooden boards lined with white, violet, bougainvillea flowers and where the children were cheering, shouting, and laughing as they were going up and down on the slides and see-saws, alternated between heaviness to smile to a sigh. Now and then, she turned her head toward the street corner; she secretly wished Annasami showed up before the guest arrived.

She felt, for strange reason, that at this first meeting - she believed there would be several such meetings with the visitor in the future - Annasami should be with her.

Was she on guard or feeling insecure? She couldn't fathom her own mind.

In fact, Kalyani was never able to reach into the depths of her own mind. At some point in her life she would think she knew who she was, but then, as time moved along, she would be exposed to yet another slice of life, and she would readily acknowledge she is not that former person. It was feelings that bound her to life with all their wonders as she tried to discover more and more about herself.

But she felt she didn't understand herself. She felt overwhelmed by a tremendous load of hopes, desires and ideals weighing on her, but she carried on because she had no other choice.

Life had taken her through several paths, and she always felt certain ambivalence. Who is the real me, she kept asking. There were many stints: after high school she worked as a government clerk with a salary of one hundred rupees; then she got interested in dance and music and had opportunities to display her talents - easily winning the admiration of others; at her mother's urging she was even convinced she could become a popular movie star. But whenever she got ready with her costume and facial makeup, and even in all her previous endeavors, she would grow leery and begin to wonder if deep inside her there was any sense of accomplishment. or

satisfaction. This uncertainly would numb her, and she would sit in silence and spend long hours mulling over.

Today something told her she was acting really strange.

Annasami didn't know who the visitor is going to be. Had he known, Kalyani was sure, Annasami would have never come. There had been recently some misunderstanding between the two men, and Kalyani was determined to bring about a reconciliation or even promote a friendship between them; that was the main reason she wrote a letter inviting the visitor to her house.

It was Annasami who introduced her to the visitor.

She was now watching the children in the nursery playground and laughing with them, but her mind conjured up images from an incident she has recently witnessed: that was last month, in a theater, late in the evening, when her play was scheduled to commence in a few minutes; suddenly she heard a commotion following a hot exchange of arguments between the visitor and Annasami; she was not done with her makeup yet, but she got up, ran up the stage and peered through a side opening at the audience.

That scene now grew vivid and strong in her mind.

Invariably, in every theater there would be openings or some slots, natural or man-made, on the partitions at either side of the stage. They are the windows the players use to watch and enjoy the world of audience. Yes, it is true, what we have here is a two-way traffic, the audience and players watching and admiring one another!

Players on the stage sometimes derive as much, if not even more, secret pleasure, from their audience. Before a play commenced, Annasami, as the man in charge of the show, would gauge the pulse of the audience for the Kalyani Art Center plays by scanning his eyes across the crowds visible through the openings, and take stock of their varying moods.

The audience, of course, was always made of a great diversity: there were the society bigwigs presiding over the evening program; the special invitees; film producers looking for a story that could be adapted from the play; directors who 'discovered' movie stars and movie directors discovered by movie stars; the jealous members of rival drama groups who came, with a heart burn, to watch the play; and then there were usual partisan crowds - those who were pleased with what they saw - warmly cheered and applauded, while their counterparts who only wanted to embarrass did so by indulging in cat-calls and often supplementing their own dialogues with those of the actors on stage. So, the openings on stage partitions served as informers to spy on the audience in their state of appreciation, excitement or boredom. Annasami would not only gauge the audience response from such a vantage point - except when he himself was acting in the play and appeared on the stage - he would also share his observations with Kalyani. Such an investigation into the effect the play had on the audience gave him an ammunition to eventually score points with critics when they reviewed the play in local newspapers or magazines.

It was last month, they were in the theater, the first bell had been given, Kalyani was preparing herself for the upcoming third scene standing before a large mirror toying with lipstick when she was diverted by a noise that at first only mildly annoyed her; it soon grew louder and then became just intolerable. She looked around for Annasami or someone to attend to the disturbance, but it soon became apparent to her that the blatant clamor afar belonged to Annasami himself. She ran out of the make-up room, and raced on to the stage where she glued her eyes to an opening on a panel to the left side of the stage.

Annasami was shouting on the top of his voice, muttering words that seemed to make no sense to people close by - some twenty or thirty people were surrounding him - and oblivious to the fact that the leather bag normally strapped to his shoulder as well as the towel clasped to it were now lying on the floor. "Just because you have a pen, you think you can scribble any nonsense?" Annasami was yelling at someone in that crowd. "Then, it becomes a free-for-all thing. If you say you are a drama critic why don't you just stick with the play? Why do you get into personal attacks? Why don't you just work for some, smutty, yellow journal? And what do you know about drama, anyway? I have thirty years of experience in drama and arts. You are just a kid. How dare you come here and attack us? Do you think we are afraid of you critics and would put up with all the garbage you write? No, never. I want you out of here; GET OUT!"

Annasami spoke fluently in English, and for once Kalyani marveled at the way the elegant style of that language masked the intense resentment in those words.

She looked at the target of Annasami's assaults. That was a young man who appeared ready to take on even more barbs, as he replied calmly, his words clearly reaching Kalyani's ears:

"All right, what do you want me to do now?"

Annasami was now screaming loudly, jumping all over. The only word Kalyani could understand was 'apologize' repeated over again and again. She wondered why in the world Annasami was making such a big fuss about apology. The young man was defiant as he put his arms around his chest and calmly asked: "What if I don't?"

Again there was commotion. And when she was able to get through the shouts and noise, Kalyani recognized some of Annasami's outbursts:

"I will drag you to the court; I will sue you for libel; I will see that you are fired. What do you take me for?"

"All right, why don't you do just that?" the young man asked calmly. He knelt down and casually picked up the towel on the floor and handed it over to Annasami.

"You wanted me out of this place, so I am leaving."

That was the end of the matter, Kalyani thought. . But soon, she noticed a few others in the crowd - maybe they were journalists or drama critics like

him - lending him support and shouting inaudibly in the melee. Kalyani could not understand anything from their loud voices.

Like a fire sweeping all over, the place was soon mired in even more commotion and confusion. It seemed the crowds were now split in two- with partisan groups poised for a fight - one for Annasami and another for the drama critics. The next scenario could bring people at each other's throats.

Barring a few members of the drama group, such as stagehands, orchestra crew, some theater staff, a few actors in the make-up room ready for their stage appearance, all the actors and actresses seemed ready to take part in the ensuing confrontation, and they had all converged close to Annasami.

Kalyani thought it was time she intervened in the matter - she wanted to walk up to the stage in spite of her make-up, grip the microphone by hand and personally plead for restoring peace and order. But as she removed the triangle-shaped silk scarf over her forehead, she noticed the young man had preempted her move. He was now standing on a chair and requesting the crowd to stay calm.

"This is no fight, nothing serious, everything is fine, let us not get carried away," he was assuring his listeners. "Please go back to your seats. The first bell has already been given, the play is about to begin." He began to pacify the audience who stood nervously in the last rows. Then he walked over to his supporters in the hall, put his arms on their shoulders to hush them. Next, he met with the orchestra crew and other drama staff and bade them to return to their normal duties.

Then he looked at Annasami who was by now quite upset by the unexpected turn of events of the day. As if to find a rapport with Annasami, the young man dragged him into the backstage saying they could discuss the matter in a more congenial atmosphere.

Kalyani, who has been all this time watching the entire proceedings through the opening on the stage panel, now hastily retreated to the make-up room and regained her position before the mirror. She pulled the silk scarf over her forehead, and started behaving as if she had never left the room. She resumed applying lipstick and casually watched from the mirror the young man and Annasami enter the makeup room, one after another.

She heard the young man's words addressed to Annasami: "Sar, if you privately made some derogatory remarks about me, and if I get even with you, then it becomes strictly a matter between the two of us. But, if you shout words like 'Get out' at me in front of others, the feeling would grow that you have insulted a journalist, so you will find yourself in an awkward situation. I am very sorry I became responsible for creating such a big scene here. Let us move on. Please give instructions for the second bell, and let the play begin. I have so much work to do. I wish you had taken the whole thing rather sportively." Then, as Annasami left the room, he sat on a metal chair in the corner, and lit a cigarette.

Kalyani was observing all of this even as she was now giving a slight touch-up to her eyes and brows. Annasami gave the order for the second bell

and let the actors and actresses have his blessings before leaving for their stage appearance. In a sudden change of his voice, he spoke to the young man: "Mr. Ranga, don't go away. Please wait for me, I will be back."

Kalyani smiled to herself, quite amused by Annasami's short-lived temper, but the name she heard him utter now touched a familiar chord in her. She let the name sink for a while into her mind, recognized it, raised her eyebrows and once again watched the young man through the mirror. Then she turned around, fixed her gaze on him and slowly arose from her seat.

She had heard a lot about this Rangaswamy aka Ranga.

He had been part of a large organization engaged in publishing numerous popular dailies, weeklies and monthlies in several Indian languages with a wide circulation all over the country; Ranga was especially well known among the Tamil readers patronizing those publications.

He had other things going for him. Ten years ago, he became popular through his short stories in a weekly magazine, where he was serving as its assistant editor, and Kalyani, then working as a clerk in a government office had read his short stories, and enjoyed them. She had always known him as Ranga, the short story writer. However, she was unaware that Ranga had given up writing short stories for some time now; this has happened rather gradually, as his stories were first received well, then became controversial, and later were condemned and banned outright from the magazine. Ranga, since then, has been writing in another section of the magazine on a variety of topics and Kalyani chanced to read them, only occasionally. And then he suddenly seems to have disappeared, that was the end, she never came across his name, again.

During those years Ranga had become an astute journalist who excelled in working with politicians and their leaders; he was feared as well as admired because he would often catch his targets off guard with questions that brought forth some unintended comments and sooner or later landed his targets in a controversy; at the local press conferences held by visiting national politicians, Ranga had established a star value for himself by his probing questions and his ability to pin down the speaker on the issue at hand. The politicians who were familiar with his tactics often played their parts very well: if a question in a press conference originated from someone other than Ranga, their response would come after a steady pause; if the questioner was Ranga himself, the pause would last a little longer.

There were occasions when Ranga as a matter of fact forced some public officials to say some foolish things in his presence and later, when they would come up with a retraction, Ranga would have his magazine publish the following day their views on a 'seven-column' article. Ranga would also have the decency to give them an opportunity - their rebuttal would also be published prominently in the magazine. There was a secret behind such a dignified gesture on his part: he would tell his colleagues at the end of the

press conference that a rebuttal would indeed be forthcoming, and when it did appear in the magazine, that amounted to a double whammy for him.

Ranga, the journalist, also became a cause for complaint in the political arena. Some political leaders, on their very first meeting with him, just hated his guts and jumped on him. Ranga however saw such behavior as an opportunity to understand their reaction to him. Whether they were mad at him or insulted him, he always reacted with a smile, reminding himself that he was a journalist first and last, and that he can treat everything as news. Unruffled, he would ask the next question as if it was his duty to do so. Some politicians therefore tried to curry favor with him.

A sense of non-partisanship coupled with an independent spirit and self-confidence that refuses to be taken in by any politician could be a part of a tradition among the American or British journalists. But in India, especially in Tamil Nadu, whenever journalists come out with such laudable qualities, they see themselves, much to their predicament, knocked down from behind by some unknown forces. So it happened, two years ago, following an unfortunate incident, that Ranga lost his position as a political correspondent. The owner of his firm personally pleaded with Ranga that he had to let him go as a journalist, much against his will, due to pressure from an unavoidable top-level source; but he convinced Ranga that he could work as a cultural critic for the same organization. It was ironic, Ranga thought at the time, that the owner was unaware that the cultural world was subject to as many pressures and warring groups as the political arena.

However, as far as Ranga was concerned, it was no loss.

So Kalyani now recognized Ranga, the erstwhile short-story writer turned into a cultural critic. Around the same time she gave up her clerical job and had entered a different world as a full time professional stage actress.

As she faced Ranga, Kalyani felt some affinity with him, because, just like herself, he too was a product of the cultural world.

However, she had never personally seen him before. Her mind never grappled with the question whether Ranga was young or old. His name reminded her some of the barbs he had employed in his drama reviews, and the short stories she had read and enjoyed a long time ago.

Ranga had once called Annasami an 'amateur officer' and the title became so popular that her drama crew used it as a euphemism for Annasami in his absence. And when Kalyani first heard the description she scoffed, provoking Annasami's ire. Ranga's review reflected truth so eloquently that it hurt Annasami.

Two months ago, while reviewing a new play staged by Kalyani's drama company, Ranga had indulged in a personal attack on Annasami.

He had satirized how the state government has embarked on a mission to employ full, salaried employees like Annasami to destroy the Tamil theater. He wrote a long piece criticizing the practice of public officials taking time off from their professional duties and fully committing themselves to organizing drama performances.

In that review Ranga tried to convince his readers that the play in question had indeed defied the norms of a conventional play.

Kalyani was always awed by Ranga's writings. She was impressed by the fact that Ranga was able to pick on the flaws and weaknesses that eluded the watchful eyes of other critics. Then again, he always seemed to be armed with some sort of four pronged strategy or plan to argue and rebut his detractors; she knew Ranga's detractors usually reacted to his comments with usual heartburn and very little sophistication. As for herself, she laughed away at his barbs with a mild curse, even if occasionally pained.

When the theater and movie professionals met and discussed Ranga's reviews, they invariably hated his guts; but even if they didn't respect him the way she did, Kalyani nevertheless understood they approached him with a sense of fear.

Even though Annasami - in so far as he was singled out for a personal attack in a review of the play in question - thought Ranga was arrogant and mean spirited, he had a veiled admiration for him, and respected him. He had felt confident that Ranga would admire the play in question, and therefore extended him a special invitation.

"I am telling you, he will surely enjoy this play," Annasami confided to Kalyani several times. Kalyani also started nursing a vague sense of optimism: maybe it will all turn out fine, Ranga would probably write a favorable review, after all who knows what's in store?

But it turned out to be a wishful thinking. Only when Ranga tore apart the entire play in his review column did Kalyani recognize its obvious flaws. "These flaws and drawbacks can be blamed neither on this drama company nor on the playwright," he had commented. "They have strictly to do with the fate and misfortune of Tamil Nadu."

As if this were not enough, the VIP who presided over the function on that day praised the play with a sickening adulation. "Just as a great poet is born once in a thousand years," he reminded the audience, "a play like this blooms once in a hundred years in a cultural garden." He spoke the words punctuated with smiles and smirks at Kalyani and Annasami flanking him on the stage; Annasami was simply elated, but Kalyani felt the VIP was stretching his admiration for the play a bit too far.

She could still recall the last sentence in that review with a chuckle. Ranga had written:

"All said and done, we are indeed fortunate that a play such as this appears only once in a hundred years!"

As these words came down her memory lane, while seated before a mirror in the makeup room, Kalyani bowed down her head lest Ranga should notice her facial expression.

She had resented Ranga for implying that Annasami had, by his actions, called into question his own professional integrity; by suggesting that the state government intervene in the matter, she thought, Ranga was trying to get Annasami fired. Kalyani agreed with Annasami this only showed Ranga's sheer arrogance.

In the last two months Annasami had been seeking a kind of revenge on Ranga.

With Annasami, anger was a passing fad, a touch and go; this was known to other members of her drama company; Kalyani now wondered how Ranga knew it too.

Annasami now returned from the stage and, as he hurried past Kalyani, he decided he should formally introduce her to Ranga.

He was in a kind of dilemma - whether he should first apologize to Ranga for his bullying tactics or go ahead with his introduction plan. After some hesitation he decided to do both - simultaneously.

"Kalyani, this is Ranga, I want to introduce him to you," he told her. "He is our Enemy Number One, but I think I went overboard today." Then he turned to Ranga: "I am very sorry, you must excuse my bad temper. I insist you see this play right away. It doesn't matter if you find holes in it or want to attack it, the important thing is you must watch it."

"Is this a punishment or something?" Ranga chuckled as if amused at the invitation. Then he tried to put Annasami at ease: "Even before you're asking me, I had decided to watch the play till intermission, and leave the latter half for another day - even if it means buying a ticket on my own. And I am doing this, mind you, not just for your play, but for my magazine. That's my professional duty!" He greeted Kalyani with folded hands.

Kalyani, who has been all this time watching Ranga through the mirror, now directly faced him. Words failed her, but she returned his gestures - not just with her hands but with a warm heart.

She was surprised even more at the contrast between Ranga's writings and his real image. When she had read Ranga's short stories she felt the writer who penned them was someone with 'thirty years of experience' just like Annasami had claimed a few minutes ago. Now she found herself tongue-tied, watching a young man some thirty years old, his calm and

steady repose belying his age. The occasion demanded she say something, so she said:

"I have read your short stories. Why don't you write them anymore?"

"Short stories?" Ranga looked as if surprised by the question, as he raised his eye-brows and started scratching his chin.

Ten years ago he had written some short stories and later, at some point of his life, he felt embarrassed to go over them, so he shunned them altogether; now, when an appreciative remark greeted him from a least expected source, he felt totally unprepared for it. He answered:

"Now that I have become a drama critic, do you think I ought to keep those short stories in my mind, without hurting my professional integrity?"

Someone now walked close to Kalyani and asked her to get ready for stage appearance. Kalyani took leave of him, and said: "I like your short stories and also your drama reviews. I think the world of drama will improve only when everybody appreciates - or even understands - your reviews. I am very pleased to meet with you. We shall meet again sometime soon. I have a lot of things to discuss with you."

Then she slipped into darkness behind the stage and, from where she stood on the stage, she watched him again. Ranga was still standing there in the makeup room, staring into the darkness that just enveloped her, smoking a cigarette and wrapping up himself in some deep thoughts.

A month after that incident Kalyani wrote a letter to Ranga at his magazine address. He was uppermost in her mind during that month and she was curious to find out if he too harbored similar feelings about her. She knew absolutely nothing about him - except his writings and the image she had of him at their last meeting. So what she knew about Ranga were just thoughts, and they remained as thoughts only. At best, she felt a little comfort by occasionally conjuring up his image in her mind.

There was yet another reason why she wrote the letter: to promote friendship between Annasami and Ranga. But this was some kind of afterthought on her part: she reasoned to herself that if her letter didn't bring forth the response she secretly yearned deep inside her, at worst, she will be able to hide her disappointment by working for such a reconciliation, which by now was already a done deal.

She omitted her name and address in that letter. It was an anonymous letter, and simply read:

Respected Sir:

If you are able to guess the author of this letter, please try to come and see me.

The letter was unsigned, and once she wrote it, Kalyani vacillated for two days about her action, and then finally mailed it. After a month, she received a reply.

Ranga wrote he wanted to interview her on a particular day at four in the afternoon, and asked her to confirm her availability. He had signed the letter.

Kalyani agonized for a few days as to how she should respond. She knew Ranga was using his signature to test her identity. Then, one day she made up her mind and confirmed her availability by phone.

He would be here soon for that interview.

The time was not yet four. The nursery school was near anarchy. While Kalyani liked all the children at the nursery school, she had her own favorites. She would watch these toddlers as they arrived and left the school premises - some came in auto rickshaws, a few walked with their servants, and a few others rode on the rear seats of their servants' bicycles - and, as if beckoning them with a secret code, Kalyani would smile and gesture with her fingers. The children too would eagerly reciprocate with smiles glowing on their faces.

Kalyani had an unusually large garden in the small compound attached to her house. She was very fond of roses and had six varieties of them; that's all she could afford in the last six months; if she had her way she would have liked to grow even sixty varieties of roses. Occasionally the children from the school would approach her and innocently extend their small hands for the roses, and Kalyani would gladly oblige them.

She now heard the school bell ring and, with her expectations multiplying, she wondered who was going to be the first to meet her eyes, the school children, Annasami or that visitor Ranga?

A taxi was turning at the street corner. It could be carrying Annasami; on the other hand, its passenger might be Ranga. Slightly panicked, Kalyani rose from the chair.

Annasami had promised to be home around half past three. She started thinking how she would handle Ranga should he actually arrive before Annasami did.

She could have Ranga wait in the front hall so that she can go into kitchen under the pretense of preparing a snack with Pattammal, the helper in the house; Annasami might arrive a short time later, and everything will be fine; once in a while she can walk to her room past Ranga to fetch an article or something and formally apologize to Ranga for keeping him waiting. She can return to the kitchen after handing over him a magazine, book or photo album to keep him otherwise engaged. As her mind was working out all these ideas so that she can delay her interview before Annasami showed up, she heard Annasami's voice. He alighted from the taxi, slightly bowed his

head, cleared his throat and spat the pan onto the roadside; he loudly tendered his apology to Kalyani for being late. He paid off the cab driver and entered the house.

He walked directly to the main hall, looked around, and turned his head toward the kitchen, savoring the aroma emanating from there. "Are we celebrating something?" He asked. "I guess Pastime is preparing a special dish, the flavor of ghee is all over the place." He entered the kitchen and teased the girl in charge. "Hi Pattu, tell me what's going on! Is somebody coming to propose you for marriage; or is somebody visiting your mistress?"

Pattammal, a fifteen year old girl, grinned and dismissed him with a mild irritation. "You have nothing better to do than tease me with all these remarks!"

Kalyani, who was still at the verandah, didn't hear the exchange between Annasami and Pattammal. She now turned toward the hall and addressed Annasami: "Do you know who is coming to our house?" She watched the expression on his face. "It is your best friend, Mr. Ranga!"

"Oh, I see," Annasami replied. "Let him come, I am not worried." He sat on a sofa in the main hall. He actually didn't believe her words.

"Sar, I am telling the truth," Kalyani assured him. "He asked me if I can grant an interview for his magazine, and I agreed. I thought I will be more comfortable if you are around when I do the interview. After all, you are my guardian, aren't you?" She gave him Ranga's letter.

Outside, the school bell rang again, and Kalyani left the hall and moved to the verandah where she stood to watch the children darting out of their classes with joy; just then Ranga came along on a bike and, because Kalyani was totally caught up with the children, she didn't notice him arriving at the house and opening the compound gate.

Ranga smiled as he saw her totally absorbed in the scene; he too stood there enjoying the children after he put away the bicycle in a corner alongside the compound wall.

When Kalyani turned around, she greeted him with a surprise: "Mr. Ranga, glad to see you. When did you arrive? I have been waiting here to see you come in." Then her eyes fell on his bicycle. "I missed you because I was expecting you in a taxi or a car." Then she led him into the house. "Please come in, Mr. Annasami is also here"

Ranga feigned nervousness. "I am a kind of scared to face Mr. Annasami," he said as he entered the hall, and greeted the older man on the sofa...

"Come in, Mr. Ranga," Annasami welcomed him. "Only a few minutes ago I came to know about this meeting between us. Can you tell me what is

going on? Seems like the lady of the house is trying to set us up on a collision course!"

Ranga ignored the tone of Annasami's voice and sat on the sofa; he moved the leather bag from his hand to his lap.

"No Sar, I am not here to start a fight with you," he assured Annasami. "I am planning to do a magazine piece after interviewing Miss Kalyani, the stage actress. I think your presence will be a big help." He pulled out a note book and a pen from his bag and then gazed at Kalyani as if signaling to her that he was ready to begin the interview right away.

"Can we have some tiffin before we begin?" she asked him in a voice marked by hesitation and respect. "Do you have any other engagements?"

"Actually, I was thinking if I could wrap up the interview early so that I can go out and have tiffin in some restaurant," he answered. "I haven't had any lunch, there was no time for that. I was taking the afternoon nap and woke up only at half past three. The bike ride from Chulai to this place took almost half an hour. If you are offering me tiffin now, I wouldn't mind staying here for dinner as well!"

His remarks set off a loud, if unwarranted, laughter from Annasami. As Kalyani weighed in his comments she imagined Ranga was probably single with neither a home nor obligations to a wife and children. However, she quickly brought herself to realize she could be totally wrong about this - as she was walking toward the kitchen - after all, married men with families do eat out in restaurants. Don't they?

"Mr. Ranga, have you any children?" Annasami's query rising well above the clamor of the children in the neighborhood school brought her to a full stop, and the few seconds that elapsed between the question and the reply seemed to last forever, and tested her patience. She quickly regained her composure and pricked up her ears.

"I have a daughter, just five years old," Ranga said, and she secretly bit her lip. Her reaction was quick but short-lived, after all she was someone who had matured through bitter experiences in life.

Annasami's voice, restrained but with a touch of sarcasm, was once again heard. "No more kids? Are you into family planning or something?"

"No Sar, nothing like that," Ranga replied. "My wife passed away during her delivery. My daughter is now living with my wife's relatives. I am living all by myself." Annasami was visibly embarrassed by Ranga's explanation, feeling guilty for abruptly hurting him with a personal question. He could only mutter, "Mr. Ranga, I am very sorry."

Kalyani reacted with a spirit of stoicism, which was soon replaced by a feeling of disgust at herself. As she struggled to free herself from self-pity, she found a way out, reasoning she heard nothing and knew nothing from the conversation she just heard, especially the truth about Ranga himself.

She entered the kitchen and ordered Pattammal to serve sweets to the guests. She returned to the hall, and set up two small teapots in the space between the sofas occupied by Ranga and Annasami. Soon Pattammal brought sweets in two stainless steel plates and laid them before the guests.

Ranga watched Pattammal with a puzzled look - is she a housemaid or a close relative, he couldn't tell - and as if to answer him, Kaylan spoke: "Pastime is my only companion," she said after formally introducing her. "But for her I would consider myself an orphan locked up in this house. Last month I lost my mother after she was bedridden for a month. At that time Pastime and her mother - who is my aunt - visited us from the village. Pastime has been good enough living right here and rescuing me from loneliness; of course, I am not sure how long this arrangement would last."

Pastime, who by now moved away from Ranga's view and stood between the kitchen and the main hall, spoke in a shrilled voice: "Sister," she addressed Kalyani. "Don't say such a thing, I will never leave you. I will always be your companion in this house."

Kalyani returned her with a smile. "How can you be so sure?" she asked. "What will happen when your mother comes along with a marriage proposal for you? You can't refuse to go, neither can I force you stay with me." She took one of the plates with sweets and sat on a moda next to them. Pattammal served water to everyone.

As she came close to Kalyani to serve drinking water Pattammal whispered to her: "I want to see you get married before I do." At which Kalyani, mildly annoyed, could only mutter, "You are acting crazy, now get back to the kitchen."

Ranga noticed a giant sketch of Kalyani's mother in the main hall; a small bulb, lit like an eternal flame, stood over its metal frame decorated with a silk garland. A harmonium, a table, and a rug rolled into a bundle, could be seen at one corner of the hall. He guessed the hall served as a main arena for their drama rehearsals. He remained silent till he finished the tiffin.

Kalyani probed to discern from Ranga's face any signs to the effect that he knew the anonymous letter came from her, only her. She found none, this only strengthened her suspicion that he indeed knew it, and was on guard.

Kalyani has been thinking all this time that the anonymous letter was a smart move on her part, but now she congratulated Ranga in her own heart for outsmarting her: he has been very clever in all of this, quite cool in his method, revealing at no time any hint of the letter, and now, after a month, he is visiting her - ostensibly to do an interview. She smiled to think how she

refused to oblige him with a letter of confirmation and used a phone to let him know her availability. Now that he is here and had met Annasami in her house - quite unexpectedly - could he be doubting that Kalyani was the one who wrote the letter? Is he confused about the whole thing?

Annasami's voice broke her thoughts: "Why don't we do the interview while having the tiffin?"

"Annasami is my mentor, guardian, and guide," Kalyani began. "I think it would be proper for him to talk about me, rather than I talk about myself. That's why I have requested him to be here this afternoon." Then she paused, and thought: Why am I saying these things?

She saw Ranga return a smile as if suggesting he was not really interested to know why she had invited Annasami.

After they drank coffee, Kalyani brought in a wad of pan leaves and spices. As if eagerly waiting for them, Annasami readily grabbed a handful of betel nuts and emptied them into his mouth. He seemed to have a voracious appetite for pan - something he was in the habit of chewing in his wakeful hours; his addiction was said to be so strong that he occasionally forgot to clear his throat and empty it before going to sleep!

Kalyani helped herself with a pan. Annasami suggested to Ranga that he was welcome to join them. Ranga politely declined, and lit a cigarette instead. Kalyani soon brought him an ash-tray, but as she laid it before him, she noticed it was dirty with cigarette butts, used match sticks and thin veins discarded from used betel leaves.

"Pastime, why don't you keep the ash trays clean?" she shouted at the young girl, her voice mixed with irritation. "These are the ones that always get filled up, thanks to the music party folks coming here." Pastime soon brought in a new, clean ash tray and gave it to Ranga.

"That's great," Annasami complimented Kalyani. "I must say you have trained Pattammal very well." Then he pried open the small tobacco packet, and asked Kalyani:

"Would you like some?"

"A little," she demurred, gathered a very small amount with her tiny fingers, and turned her face away from them before dropping it into her mouth.

Ranga couldn't help laughing, and joking: "How am I supposed to do the interview if both of you keep on chewing tobacco?"

Annasami gestured as if he wanted to say something.

"You said you have no other engagement for the day," Kalyani reminded him. "Didn't you?"

Ranga began the interview with a question: "Madam, did you get any opportunities to act in the movies?"

"I have made up my mind that I would never act in movies," replied Kalyani. "I would like you to include that statement in your interview. That way nobody will ever again walk into my house - to lecture about this or that movie role - and ask me if I will be interested. Your clarification would save me a lot of trouble." She turned to Annasami, whose face now registered a change at the import of her words.

As a journalist who had conducted several interviews, Ranga felt he was now witnessing something new in Kalyani, an ordinary actress, someone with no star value and certainly no name recognition. He thought this was remarkable because his work had carried him far and wide to interview many women, actresses as well as professionals from other walks of life. That exposure had given him an edge - to probe into human psyche in all its aspects and ferret out its dark secrets.

Again, an actress in our society remains an open book with no privacy of her own; to even imagine she has privacy is just a wishful thinking. When the facts of her private life are fully known to public, others would contribute even more 'facts' - facts that bear no relation whatsoever to her own life - to lend color and drama to her image. Her fame would grow in direct proportion to that image.

He knew Kalyani, an aspiring actress, was yet to make her impact on the public at large; he believed she might eventually rise to the top, but in this very first interview she had demolished such a hope he held for her future.

As a critic Ranga didn't favorably look upon the plays he was called upon to review; if anything, he felt only pity or disgust watching them. His attitude toward the players was no different.

"The Tamil Theater is nothing but a ladder used by its actors and actresses to climb and reach out to the Tamil Cinema," was how he had summed up his observations. "It only serves as a screen to hide their own personal lives - lives that brim with poverty and shame."

Now into his first interview with Kalyani, he paused momentarily to reflect on his harsh comments; while he understood his conclusion on Tamil plays was based on solid reasoning, he now conceded his verdict inflicted a wanton cruelty on his targets.

Kalyani's character revealed elements in total contrast to those affected by other actresses known to him in his career. What struck him as a welcome change was her total, disarming style, no nebulous lines there, she was uncommonly frank and direct in her approach; she had welcomed him from her verandah dressed in a plain cotton sari; there was certain artlessness, even a childlike innocence in the way she helped herself with tobacco in his

presence; after their conversation had gone for a while, she had casually arisen from her chair and sat on the carpet, with her back against the wall, explaining she felt more relaxed carrying on the dialogue that way. All these small acts made Ranga feel he may have to reconsider his opinion of Kalyani as a professional actress.

Considering her exposure to professional acting was only brief, Ranga thought Kalyani was amazingly sharp in learning from her experiences and figuring out her own place in that medium; she knew what worked, and what didn't; even when she occasionally felt herself trapped in the stage and cinema career, she was someone who could reflect upon her situation and think through her vulnerability calmly, and gain a sense of clarity and purpose, no mean achievement for someone that young, and something that Ranga had witnessed only among a very few in his career. He thought he is yet to come across another actress with Kalyani's maturity and grasp of reality.

As the interview continued, Kalyani spoke clearly and firmly on the topics under discussion as if she was well conversant with them and had been already thinking over those issues. Ranga could appreciate how well she communicated - always pausing before answering his question; pausing after her reply; and in between, pausing with a smile to show her good taste, simple decency and maturity. When he was done with the interview he was still haunted by her pleasant face.

Again, as he was pedaling his way toward Mount Road for dinner in a restaurant, Ranga could see he was still charmed by Kalyani's attractive face with almost no jewelry, bright lips revealing a sparkling row of white teeth, and by her posture as she regarded him, while her small fingers were gently trying to push back tresses falling on her eyes.

The interview lasted three hours.

Annasami had overcome his initial reluctance to get involved in the interview, and he too made a few observations of his own, here and there, making sure he was not intruding into the conversation between Ranga and Kalyani. He had been helping himself with tobacco five or six times during the interview - may be as a ploy to keep himself silent when the other two talked.

When Annasami was deliberately drawn into their conversation with a question, "What do you think?" he feigned his inability to talk, and walked out to clear his throat. He would delay returning to the hall to offer his own opinion in the matter by picking up some odd conversation on the way with Pattammal in the kitchen and indulging in some gossip.

Annasami had personally disagreed with Kalyani over some of the topics she discussed with Ranga, but he refrained from offering his own opinions

during the interview. Even Ranga could see Annasami was struggling hard a few times to maintain his composure.

When Ranga was about to take leave of Kalyani after thanking her for her time, Annasami congratulated him on his success, even as he indirectly referred to Kalyani's artistic talents.

"Mr. Ranga, I think you have done an incredible job," he said. "I had never realized Kalyani had such sharp opinions on so many topics, and your questions, one after another, literally brought them out for all to see. However, I have one observation to make: do you think you ought to publish all this stuff? To what purpose? I am not suggesting what you should do, I just felt like speaking out, if you don't mind . . . There is something else: before this interview goes to press, do you think we will have a chance to go over it?" Annasami now turned to Kalyani as if seeking her approval for his request.

"If you don't mind . . ." Kalyani glanced at Ranga as she slowly spoke the words. She also thought this would afford her yet another opportunity to meet with him. Ranga complied with her request, saying he would personally bring it over to her to look at the final draft.

It was then that Ranga remembered he needed one of Kalyani's photographs to serve as an insert in the magazine interview. Kalyani went in and fetched an old album. He spent some more time right there with her, going over the photographs, one after another, and comparing them to the real person now standing before him. Kalyani stood next to him curious about his choice and somewhat ill at ease by his eyes darting now and then from the photos to herself; some pictures in the album were glamorous enough to cause her blush.

He finally chose one that showed her with no make-up and in a posture just like she was now standing before him. It must have been taken soon after she had an oil bath, the wavy hair let loose and dropping on her shoulders.

"Can I have this?" Ranga asked her politely; Annasami was so appalled by his choice he ventured a ready, if mild protest. But Kalyani didn't mind, in fact she took Ranga's choice very well. "Why, that's my picture too," she said calmly and handed over it to him.

When inquiring her during the interview how old she was, Ranga betrayed a smile at the prospect that actresses invariably understated their age; but she surprised him saying she was thirty three; he had guessed she would be thirty, and would probably suggest an age below twenty five. "Which month?" he had asked her unconsciously, and pat came the reply: "September". "So, you are only six months younger to me," he countered, much to her surprise.

Annasami intervened. "What do you mean, thirty three?" he asked Kalyani in a tone tinged with incredulity. "Are you crazy or something?"

"I am telling the truth," Kalyani replied. "I was born in 1937." Annasami started counting the years going through his fingers.

He was ready for an argument. "You can say your age is thirty two that will be correct; September is still far away. Only when you completed thirty three years, you can argue the age is thirty three. You don't say a baby is a year old on the day it is born, do you?" He continued in a voice marked by sadness. "One can see a lot of actresses - real old hags - talking and behaving as if they were babies born only yesterday. Why do you have to add more years to your age? Why don't you tell the truth as it is? That is only fair."

"All right, agreed, let us put an end to this," Kalyani took Annasami's admonition with a laughter. "Let us say my age is only thirty two, he can put it down in his notes." Ranga recalled that laughter as he now found himself at the restaurant. He locked his bicycle near the entrance.

The time was past nine.

Ranga wanted to leave for his apartment immediately after dinner, and work through the night with his interview notes; he desperately wanted to complete the task at hand so that he can review the draft with Kalyani the next day.

He normally had his dinner only after eleven, if he had not missed it on purpose. For some years now, he did not even bother to adhere to a definite schedule concerning work, food or sleep; occasionally he would even forego his lunch or dinner. Among his expenses, food always rated the lowest; he literally survived on tea and cigarettes.

Now he felt a pang of hunger and, as his wont at nights, he wanted to have briyani, and preferred this particular restaurant in Mount Road.

As he comfortably seated himself in a private dining room, a waiter came and served him a glass of drinking water. Ranga ordered briyani, and as soon as the waiter left the room after closing the door behind him, Ranga helped himself with a swallow from the glass; he then took out the photograph from his shirt pocket and closely studied it.

He felt Kalyani was again smiling at him as if she was meeting him for the first time, sharing a secret between them. He recalled the words behind that smile: If you are able to guess the author of this letter.

He smiled as he imagined her lips now uttering those words.

He tried to mentally organize his earlier conversation with her in some logical sequence, and that very act now pleased him. He was determined to continue such an effort over and over again so that he could work on the entire interview in a single session, something he wanted to perform as a professional obligation; he relived the entire time he spent with her,

recapturing the fleeting moments, here and there, and enjoying every minute of it.

How many wonderful things she had actually spoken that day!

Ranga's appraisal of Kalyani amounted to this:

First and foremost, she was that rare specimen, a wonderfully, superior woman. She was also a connoisseur (it was hard to determine which came first, the woman or the connoisseur); secondly, she was an actress and purveyor of culture, and this quality was again shaped by her refinement and good taste. She had a natural inclination for excellent manners, and the fact that she was not tainted by outside influences in her chosen field, was a testimony to her strong character.

He pulled out his diary and checked his notes.

He had asked to know why she chose acting as a profession and how she began her career. He went over her answer in his diary where he had scribbled her comments. Meanwhile the waiter came in and served him briyani. Ranga began his dinner slowly keeping the diary with notes close by on a left hand corner of the table.

He conjured up her image as he carefully tried to expand on those notes and put them in perspective:

"I like myself," she had begun. "I often think I am very beautiful; I feel happy about my body, my voice and my own thoughts. Even now I feel like spending many hours watching myself before the mirror; doing simple things like painting my eyelashes; touching the eye brows with a pencil; trying different hairstyles, one after another, without getting bored; trimming my nails and polishing them; trying different cosmetics - I loved doing these things since I was a small girl. I feel very happy when I am singing and listening to my own voice; I can also enjoy listening others sing, just like I admire other beautiful people. When I say I admire beauty in me, I am also saying I can see it and enjoy it in others - I often think I can get easily swept away by beauty wherever I happen to see it. When I have nothing else to do, I am kind of indulging in self-love, and I guess this habit has helped me love others as well. Maybe that was the reason why people see me as an actress. I guess what has actually made me choose acting as a profession is this self-love, this habit of appreciating things about me and myself."

"Of course, when I am down, frustrated over something," Kalyani continued, "whether it has to do with my profession or something remotely connected with it, I would yell at my mother asking why she got me into acting; again, I would also take on my boss (Ranga could see she was referring to Annasami) blaming him for all my troubles - but the truth of the matter is they are my well-wishers and give me full support in my career. But, when all is said and done, as I just now mentioned to you, self love has

been the greatest influence in my life, and I am alone responsible for choosing acting as my profession."

"What do you think of Tamil plays?" was Ranga's next question and he read what she had replied; her comments so amused him now that he was about to explode into wild laughter.

He seemed haunted by her memory - especially her smiling face - for a long time after he ended the interview. He was in a trance, Kalyani always beaming at him, mentally intriguing him - first when he was riding on his bike from her home to Mount Road, later at his dinner in the restaurant, and then again when he was returning home somewhere in the city corner; he felt trapped in her images, one after another, her soft-spoken words, and finally, the interview itself.

It suddenly dawned on him: it was not that he had interviewed her, Kalyani too has interviewed him, in her own way, and to come to think of it, she had accomplished it rather very cleverly.

She had figured out the main aspects of Ranga's personal life - his single life, his wife passing away, and his daughter's life with his wife's relatives - during that interview. He was now all the more convinced that Kalyani's line of questioning had a definite purpose: she was not out to patronize him, she really cared about him.

Now, riding the bike on a narrow, dusty, deserted lane, he unconsciously blew a whistle. "I am acting weird," he thought. "Is this some kind of infatuation or something?"

He tried to dismiss those feelings with no further thought. "This is all sentimental stuff," he assured himself. "I have a professional duty to consider- the interview has got to be done by tonight. Why should I emotionally get involved in something like this?"

He wondered if his lifestyle - a dull routine, no woman to share his company - had something to do with his confused state. Then he thought of Sumathi, his sister-in-law, his late wife's younger sister, who was keenly interested in marrying him, and of his total rejection of such an idea.

When he reached his apartment at eleven at night his mind was still jostling with images and events of the day gone by, Kalyani's attractive face looming large among them.

Ranga lived in a small house in Chulai, a small, sleepy village with a few traditional brick-built tile houses, a road-side water tap that served the village women who patiently awaited its grace with their clay pots laid in rows, and a tea shop at the street corner open all the twenty four hours to cater to the mill workers of a nearby factory. Ranga had rented a room in the front portion of a house on the Adikesavalu Naiker Street. He was paying a rent of

twenty five rupees for his room; because this was the house, he was told, where his parents once lived, and since the street was named after his grandfather, Ranga felt a kind of street-loyalty akin to patriotism.

He knew he commanded loyalty and respect from the residents of the Adikesavalu Nicker Street, a sentiment well deserved by his parents and himself. His family had lost much of its wealth over the years, but not its prestige. The elders in the village respected Ranga for his family honor, the younger generation for what he is today.

Most of the Chulai residents known to Ranga were mill employees, day-to-day wage earners, or simply poor workers. Except for a few, most of the houses had multiple families. The daily lives of these men and women were subject to potential discords and disputes because they came from different occupations and sought different things. There was always room for group mentality, rivalry, enmity, and, last but not the least, differences arising out of political creeds and trade union loyalties. Still, they acted and behaved like the members of a single caste or a tribe; their group loyalty nearly always surpassed the multitude of things dividing them.

Ranga was the most educated among them. He had graduated from college with a bachelors degree some fifteen years ago and has been getting a kind of royal treatment ever since.

He was sought by groups of young men claiming certain political affiliations as well as others who ran rival political organizations; Ranga was able to tread carefully between the two, offending neither party and volunteering his own time and help when they needed them.

When women saw him, they would stand in his presence as a mark of respect. The owner of the house would accept the rent with no complaint when Ranga chose to give it to him; someone made sure that Ranga's room was always cleaned up in the morning, and that fresh water was brought in for his ready use; a boy from the neighborhood would run up to the nearby shop and fetch hot tea before giving him the wakeup call; the youngster would also buy cigarettes and newspaper for Ranga. Ranga would read two English daily newspapers in the morning, the Tamil dailies later in the office.

Ranga would never stop his bike on his way to work, unless, of course, someone walked toward him for a conversation, when he would get off his bike in a polite gesture. He would never - absolutely never - smoke while on that street; because he was fully aware of the respect they had for him, he too was inclined to show the same respect toward them.

As he now approached the house, he was struck by a question: Why all this respect and loyalty for me? The question was festering inside, it had something to do with his life in Adikesavalu Naicker Street, with the village folks a part of his life. He got down from the bike, unlocked the front door and switched the light.

After opening the doors wide open, he went out and carried the bike into the room and put it away in a corner.

There were clothes weighing down heavily on a rope that ran across the room. In a corner lay a stack of empty cigarette packets, discarded butts and wads of white paper that had a semblance of having been used for some writing and later abandoned. Close to the window stood a table on which lay several stacks of books; there were also books in another shelf laid against one of the walls; the wind had apparently strewn the newspapers all over the room. Ranga knelt down and gathered the loose sheets lying around, folded, and put them away. He then slipped into his night clothes; one look at his lean frame as he put on a new shirt, revealed his pathetic condition.

He let the windows open fully after anchoring them with the side hooks, and helped himself with drinking water from a pot in the room corner. He lit a cigarette and sat near the table to begin the task at hand. He gathered his leather bag, took out his diary and the Kalyani's photograph; he again studied her face.

He again faced the question that haunted him a few minutes ago: why all this respect and loyalty for me? Now he got the answer.

He dutifully resumed writing the article on Kalyani using his diary notes. Halfway through the article, he remembered that letter.

It all came in a flashback.

He had met Kalyani in a drama theater where she happened to congratulate him on the short stories he had written many years ago; then, after a month, he got an anonymous letter from someone simply stating:

If you are able to guess the author of this letter, please come and see me.

He knew Kalyani wrote that letter, he was positive, no second thoughts about it. Then he interviewed her at his own option and, now, it is almost midnight, he keeps on looking at her picture awed with her voice and laughter.

"What is the meaning of all this?" he asked himself. "Are we in love?"

He admitted to such a possibility with a surprise and disbelief.

He had never fallen in love with any woman. He never let such romantic notions - yes, he always thought love was some kind of foolish sentiment, a figment of imagination - touch him; he never believed in them any way. Somewhere in his life, when he was to realize that a man needed a woman to share his life, he was willing to take a wife. He lived happily with her, she was someone valuable to him, and he loved her. When she passed away he mourned her loss, and he still thinks of her with affection. If he found

another woman - someone exactly like her - he would still feel toward that person exactly as he felt toward his late wife.

After all, what is this love, Ranga wondered. It is something the mind gets into - a crazy pastime - it sets you thinking, craving, appreciating, mulling over things again and again. All to what purpose?

There was a time when Ranga even thought that arts such as poetry, drama as well as their enjoyment were the social perversions indulged in by the privileged class and the idle rich. Was he afraid to speak out? Or was he silent because it would serve no purpose? The truth of the matter is there was indeed a time when he did subscribe to such views.

For example, he had always thought movies had a harmful effect among the poor and the underprivileged who lived in his neighborhood; they were spoiled because they hoped to live their lives fashioned after the movies - with all the trappings of the privileged class depicted on the silver screen.

Now those time-honored convictions and opinions are being tested, much to his disbelief. But he could see the writing on the wall: Kalyani loves him, no doubt about it. Ranga too has read her mind and he too has succumbed to her love.

He was witnessing the beginning of a love between two mature, experienced adults. Granted there was something peculiar, albeit foolishness in such a relationship, he was confident they would face the problems squarely and deal with them in a practical manner.

The immediate problem is how the neighbors would treat this relationship. They might carp at him, verbally attack him and disapprove his hanging around with a professional actress.

He was not willing to deceive himself by rationalizing such attacks are unlikely.

He knew he must face up to such assaults sometime in the near future.

That determination gave him a little consolation, but also left him with some confusion and restlessness.

He worked through the whole night and finished the article. Then he put off the light and retired to bed. He lay on the bed his with his hands pulled together under the neck; sleep eluded him as he was still haunted by Kalyani's smile.

He eagerly waited for dawn, when he would go and see her.

** ** *

A long time after Ranga left Kalyani's home, Annasami was discussing with Kalyani her interview with Ranga. He was mentally going over her comments during the interview.

He was a little upset that Kalyani didn't confide in him about the interview well before he arrived at her home; there were absolutely no secrets in Kalyani's life that were not known to Annasami. If anything, he was privy to a few secrets about Kalyani's personal life which were not known even to Kalyani.

It was only much later in her life that Kalyani knew she was born in a family of devadasis. She was born at a time when the social mores had undergone profound changes and her community had already gained wide acceptance. Kalyani was totally unaware that her parents were never formally married to one another; her mother was able to marry her husband only through a temple ceremony where she was 'dedicated' to him. Still, the relationship, while not a conventional marriage, meant the woman after that ceremony remained faithful to one man till her death, and Annasami had looked upon the family with respect.

Years ago, Kalyani's father had worked as a head clerk in a firm where Annasami's too was employed. He was fairly senior to Annasami, and following his death, Annasami personally helped that family to settle the financial matters relating to insurance and provident fund. He also helped Kalyani, then staying at home after doing her tenth-standard, to work as a clerk in his own office...

Since then, there have been many changes in Kalyani's life, and Annasami was worried about her: Kalyani's mother is now dead, how long can Kalyani depend on Pattamma to live with her? She has no one to protect her, and she doesn't seem to bother. Annasami had tried to probe her mind to allay his worries, but she was not very helpful; she would either dismiss his concerns as of no consequence or elude him with some clever reply.

He was intrigued by some of the questions Ranga had asked her in the interview, as well as the answers she had given him.

After confirming that she was not interested in any movie roles, Ranga had asked her: "Does this mean you are planning to get married after some time and then permanently give up acting?" Annasami considered the question very appropriate and nodded his head as if congratulating Ranga. He was eager to know the answer as much as Ranga did; Kalyani smiled and replied:

"I cannot definitely say I will not get married; but why do you think I should give up my professional role as an actress? It is possible I will never get married, but why should it mean quitting the theater?"

Ranga followed up with a question on Tamil dramas.

"If you are saying your involvement in Tamil drama is going to be that serious, does this mean you are quite satisfied with their quality?"

"I don't claim to know much about the Tamil theater or the world in general," Kalyani replied. "Once in a while I hear people discuss some cultural matters and I too feel like offering my own opinions. I like Tamil plays, I love them for the simple reason I am involved in them. I know critics like yourself find defects in these plays, maybe you are right, the plays are wanting in something, but I still feel good about them because I am acting in them. The most important thing is how I enjoy myself: I enjoy putting makeup on my face, walking up to the stage and standing in the limelight; I can never think of giving up that joy and pride for anything else. After all I have been deprived of simple pleasures which many young women like me take for granted; I have given up my job; maybe I have given up marriage, family and kids too; the only thing that sustains me after all these losses and makes me happy is this acting, and I will never give it up. These plays may not be good enough for you; and as you have recently commented in one of your reviews, one may think they are not plays at all. So what?"

Annasami was saddened at those words. He has been working hard to groom and promote Kalyani as a popular actress - he hoped to advance his own career and share the limelight with her - but now he felt his hopes were dashed leaving him in utter disappointment.

He was upset even more because of the potential damage the interview might cause to Kalyani's public image; had she taken Annasami into confidence with just a few words, he could have used his influence and arranged for a press conference, if not a small party, to promote her fame. He could have even arranged to publish a profile on her - some attractive colorful photographs accompanying a well written piece. After all, he was actually waiting just for such an opportunity to launch a publicity campaign on her behalf.

But his plans have now gone awry. Because Kalyani had chosen to act on her own, she had confided in this useless drama critic Ranga, and what is more, she had dragged Annasami into this game making him a privy to the interview questions and her own answers. He thought Kalyani had botched the whole thing, it is going to make things worse, and he grinned at the prospect what all this meant for the future.

After finishing her duties in the kitchen Pattamma sat on the verandah awaiting Kalyani. She expected Kalyani to have dinner after Annasami had taken leave of her, but this didn't happen. So Pattamma went inside and proceeded to sleep in the backyard after spreading a piece of cloth on the cement floor. She could see the moon from where she was, and sighed. Very soon her mind was free from any thoughts of Kalyani, Annasami and the dinner, and as she let herself dreaming on something else, she was drawn into sleep.

Annasami helped himself with a few betel leaves, his face still grim owing to his concern over the interview. Kalyani could understand his mood from his studied silence, but she didn't like the idea of drawing him into a conversation against his own will. She let time drag on for a while; then, on some pretense, she went to see Pattamma in the kitchen. Pattamma was already sleeping in the backyard and Kalyani looked at the clock; it was getting late. She thought of spending some time in the backyard under the moonlight. She too expected Annasami would be leaving shortly.

She thought of finishing dinner after Annasami's departure so that she can spend the night savoring the pleasant memories of the evening - the interview with Ranga, his questions, his ever - pleasant smiles, deep insight, and above all, his level headedness.

She felt a bit of conversation with Annasami might cheer him up and even hasten his departure from the house.

"Sar, you seem to be thinking deeply about something," she addressed him. "Let me have your box of betel leaves." She broke the silence between them, and helped herself with a few betel leaves.

"I wish you had told me in advance that you wanted to do an interviews with the press," Annasami spoke, suddenly. "Even a small hint or a word with me could have done the trick, and I would have come up with a great plan. You probably know about this Ranga, he is a crazy fellow, and you have told him everything. - I mean everything. I am worried what will be actually published in his magazine. I am telling you, he is very dangerous."

Kalyani understood Annasami detested the very idea of her personally inviting Ranga to her house for the interview. She also hated the implication in his words that he need to have a say in her personal decisions; still she didn't want to take on him directly on the matter, because that went against her nature. She remained silent, as Annasami continued:

"You know something?" he asked. "There, in my house, my folks are getting mad that I am not even showing half as much interest in their personal problems as I do in your case. They are so jealous." He mumbled inaudibly to himself for a few seconds, paused and continued: "But they have nothing to worry about, everything is taken care of. I don't interfere with them, and they are happy to be left to themselves. You will be surprised to know how many saris my wife and daughter have been piling up recently." Kalyani simply listened without any interruptions as Annasami continued his tirade against his wife and daughter, again referring, as usual, to irrelevant details about them.

Annasami had this habit of venting out his frustrations and anger at his own family in her presence, and Kalyani always reacted with a dignified silence; that was her way of showing her respect for his family members. But she never understood why Annasami made a big deal about this, never missing an opportunity to remind her of their anger and jealousy toward her.

Kalyani could comprehend how much Annasami cared for her, and it became clear that what annoyed him most was the personal invitation she had extended to Ranga without his permission. He seemed concerned over what would eventually get published in the magazine. Kalyani chose to calm his fears on the last concern.

"I don't know what others think of Mr. Ranga," she calmly said, while helping herself with another betel leaf. "I believe he is a very straightforward man. Again, he has promised to show us the final draft of the article before it went to press, didn't he?"

Annasami paused to think of the inextricable bond between himself and Kalyani's family.

He thought of his own role over the years, first as an amateur actor and later as a promoter of the Kalyani Art Center, a role that contributed barely anything to his own financial wellbeing; if anything, he was called a fool by his wife and daughter for such an undertaking. He ignored their insults and remained totally dedicated to Kalyani's career; however, it pained him to think that practically there was nothing in that relationship except for the emotional trap he found himself in.

"Kalyani, remember this," he said. "You may decide to act in movies or may not; you may decide to get married or may not, these are your own choices, your personal matters. Why do you have to express them in public? You are to use this interview to advance your career, and not to get yourself forced into a corner by admitting what you actually want or do not want in your life. Do you know how the other actresses in your profession are handling these matters? They will first rehearse the whole thing to be on guard what to say in the actual interview. I am really sorry you didn't ask for my advice in such an important matter as this." Kalyani knew Annasami was making his feelings public, he was pouring out of his heart; she arose from her seat and left him signaling with her hand she will be back in a minute after clearing her throat.

Annasami watched her leave the hall with warmth and a little satisfaction. Just as her sudden absence at this time wouldn't deprive him of an opportunity to have her listen to his side of the story, he reflected, her decision to do the interview with Ranga without his permission had not actually driven her away from his sphere of influence. His eyes were on the verandah door as she disappeared behind it, and later, when she did return after a few minutes, his gaze was still riveted on the door and again on her, as if his looks eagerly sought to grab and forcibly draw her close to him.

"SAR, what are you staring at?" Kalyani inquired him with a smile, and Annasami tried in vain to dismiss her remarks. Soon his eyes became teary, and Kalyani was horrified.

"Sar, have I done anything to hurt your feelings?" she asked him and arose from the chair. She felt it was only appropriate that she stand and address him because he cared for her and she, in turn, respected him; over the years their relationship has certainly fostered a sense of equality between them but she didn't want to misuse that privilege now. She acknowledged that Annasami was free to point out her drawbacks, if any, and that she certainly owed him an explanation for her behavior.

"No, no, nothing like that," Annasami hastened to assure her. "I am all right. You have done nothing wrong, do sit down."

"I wonder how long you want to continue your life like this - I mean, as a spinster," he continued. "Personally I am against it. You have also started telling everybody you are already thirty two years old. Have you ever seriously thought about your single life?"

Pat came Kalyani's reply. "Sar, so far nothing serious has happened to me, so how can I get serious about my marriage?"

Annasami felt titillation sweep his entire body.

What on earth does this woman mean? Annasami was puzzled. "Are we both talking about the same thing?" It seemed incredulous.

"Nothing serious can ever happen, all by itself", he said his mouth wide open, and exposing all his teeth. "One has to create it."

Kalyani showed no particular interest in his words, and she simply let him go on. He began, his tone suddenly turning personal, his voice first assertive, then gradually fainter: "When others become serious about our relationship we can't just ignore them and deceive ourselves as if nothing has happened. To be frank, I find you are closer to me than my own family members. Kalyani, do you understand what I am saying? You are the only important person in my life."

Kalyani now clearly saw the man behind those emotional outburst; she reacted with neither shock nor sorrow. She thought Annasami's feelings were justified; however, she was surprised why till now she never thought about them that way. She braced herself to cope with the awesome task now facing her.

Her mind was clear on one thing; she recognized Annasami's motives ran deeper than anything crassly sexual, it was much more complicated than that. He was actually confused, she thought, because his admiration for her beauty and talent, as well as his faith in her future and his own efforts to advance her career - all these, and above all, his sense of isolation from his own family members - worked their way into his psyche, and somewhere along the line made him simpleminded and come up with a notion that he was in 'love' with Kalyani. She thought it could be just platonic love born out of his affection

and wellbeing for her; she found a rationale for his confusion and acknowledged his right to express his feelings to her directly.

'Had he made his feelings public to me earlier - that is, well before I had written the anonymous letter to Ranga and invited him for the interview,' she asked herself, "would I have gladly welcomed his offer of love?" She could not bring herself to think that all the warmth and guidance he was now offering as well as his concern for her professional advancement were based on such an assumption on his part.

She felt sorry for him; she thought about his family members who disliked him as much as his serious artistic and cultural sensibilities. It made a lot of sense to her to look at the practical considerations that drove people like Annasami to create private lives following their own dreams; and she had known some of them in her own profession.

And what about her own life? Sometimes she felt maybe she was not entitled to the luxuries of marriage, family and children. However, should they ever become realities, she would gladly welcome them, and even live up to them, and enjoy them to her best ability. But she was not willing to trade her career with any of those faraway promises. Just as she made clear to Ranga in that interview, acting meant a great deal to her, she had stumbled on it as a career after a series of disappointments in her life, it made her feel good about herself, and above all, it gave her a sense of profound involvement with others. She can never give up acting, never.

She has been looking forward to meet with a decent man to start a new relationship, a relationship probably tied to her own profession, yet something lofty and meaningful, and free from complications. She was willing to make compromises within those limits.

Her single life was empty and boring, it didn't so much have a purpose, and she wished she could end it. She longed for married life - she was willing to marry even a poor clerk with a salary of one hundred rupees - as long as he was a decent man, loved and respected her.

She has been wary of the professional world she was moving about, day after day; she was only too familiar with the loose morals it spawned, and of the men not unwilling to use women for their ulterior motives - those film producers and other men wielding power and wealth; had she wished, Kalyani could have become a mistress or a 'kept woman' among them, assured of total protection and freedom from any financial worries. But she totally rejected such a route because it would mean corrupting her soul and eventually corrupting her external world.

It never occurred to her that Annasami could possibly fill up that void, only because she had always put him on a high pedestal; her high regard for him blinded her from seeing him for what he was - an ordinary human being subject to usual foibles such as weaknesses, desires, drawbacks and cravings.

Now that Annasami opened up his heart to her Kalyani too felt emboldened to examine her own private thoughts with a clarity and purpose.

Annasami's commitment to her drama company was total; he acted in the plays, he was the man in charge of the entire enterprise, he took care of everything, the small and big, often running the stage operations as if he was supervising a marriage ceremony; he personally welcomed the audience and took care of their personal needs, and when they showed their admiration for Kalyani's performance with applause and repeated cheers, he was more than pleased, he felt totally rewarded by his efforts. However, now, as Kalyani began to think about it, his own family members, his wife and daughter, never bothered to even show up on those occasions, either to watch his performance or anything else in the play.

So it was clear to her that Annasami found a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction in his devotion to Kalyani's drama company rather than to his own family; viewed in such a context, she thought, his suggestion that she accept him as a partner in her life certainly made sense; it could be even considered an ideal solution.

After all, Annasami was not a very old man; neither was she an innocent virgin; she is not someone who has too many dreams, certainly not under the present conditions of her life.

Often men and women see their lives take a dramatic turn due to circumstances, some good and some bad, all of them not entirely under their control. Their artistic and cultural sensibilities could color their instincts and thus corrupt their private lives. To outsiders they might become a laughing stock, their actions just scandalous. Yet, the truth of the matter is the men and women who have embarked on a new course believe with a religious fervor - deep in their conscience - that their actions are just and proper. If this were not the case, they may even be tempted to commit suicide.

Seen in that light, Kalyani thought there could be a justification for a relationship between her and Annasami. The fact that she had already been attracted to Ranga seemed to make her feeling for Annasami a bit less ardent; yet she understood that she and Annasami were now thinking in similar lines- Annasami loved her, Kalyani also thinks that he would be an ideal partner, but she feels she is already committed to Ranga - and she paused for words. How can she point out this to him without actually hurting his feelings?

"Kalyani!" Annasami was addressing her again, his familiar voice choked with emotion; both his heart and mind straining hard, seeking her concern as well as favor.

Kalyani watched him silently.

"Do you know what my dreams are?" he asked. "I want you to become a star full of glory and fame." He was almost begging for her love.

"Sar, you always see me as a young woman," Kalyani chuckled. "To be frank with you, I know I am getting on my years and often feel ashamed even to dream of a star's life. When I see around me so many younger women aspiring to become stars, I am gratified to think your efforts are totally directed at me - somebody who is already past thirty and can count on only her integrity and self respect to succeed in life; this again shows how much you really care for me."

A long sigh escaped from Annasami; he was pleased and a little comforted at Kalyani letting her warmth and affection for him come into open.

He was still smitten with her, mistaking her words to reciprocate her love for him. He could only mutter in mild whispers "Kalyani . . . Kalyani . . ." "to draw her attention further toward him.

As he tried to push himself closer to where she sat, Kalyani wanted to play safe and remind him about Pattamma sleeping a few feet away from them in the backyard. She threw a glance afar in that direction and arose from her seat. She then forced a smile on her face and looked at him lest he misinterpret her abrupt rise from the chair.

Again, it was equally important that he didn't mistake her smile as some kind of assent or favor on her part. "The time is already ten!" she remarked as if trying to hasten his departure. "You may not be able to get a taxi at this late hour." The important thing is for Annasami to know how much Kalyani still cared for him.

But Annasami didn't seem to get her message; he was in no mood to leave any time now. As she left the room and walked toward the moon-lit front verandah, he too followed her.

Kalyani sat on one of the chairs in the area where she awaited Ranga earlier that afternoon. Annasami too drew a chair next to her and sat close to her.

There was some traffic on the street. The houses on either side of the nursery school across the street were now brightly lit.

Annasami went to the hall to fetch the box of betel leaves and nuts. Meanwhile Kalyani made up her mind to reveal to Annasami her affection and love for Ranga; again, she would let him know that she was not upset or mad at Annasami professing his love for her - he was justified in doing so; she needed to inform him the situation as she saw fit and proper without actually hurting his feelings.

When Annasami returned and sat near her, she began:

"Sar, I have been planning to discuss some important matters with you. Now it is a kind of getting late . . . But I see no problem... You may plan to stay overnight if you want . . . I don't want you to misunderstand me. You are the only well-wisher I have ever got, and whatever I want to do - for my good or bad - I need to consult with you." She paused to gauge his reaction.

Annasami too was unable to guess what was on her mind, yet he nodded his head as if he understood her words. He went out to relieve the tobacco from his mouth, and, when he returned, he helped himself with a few more betel leaves.

Kalyani continued:

"You have been very helpful to me all these years and I owe my present prosperity to you. Our drama company has attained fame and success owing to your own efforts. I am not saying these things just to praise you . . . But in spite of all this my life appears to me like a journey with no destination. Sometimes I feel my ambition to become an actress, to act on stage and display my talents that brought me so far in my life. On the other hand, if I had stuck to my clerical job my life would have taken a different turn. Let me face this: only acting gives me peace of mind. If I had no talent for acting, I would have been deprived of this peace of mind also. But if that happened, I wonder, if I might be still dreaming of becoming an actress." She paused. "I am sorry I am digressing.", and continued.

"I want a life where I am peace with myself. That would be just impossible if I become a workaholic or turn greedy or go on multiplying my wants. I am just satisfied with this drama company I now have. I have given up the desire to become a movie star a long time ago. I want a life with dignity and self respect so that I can feel proud and good about myself. I wish I had this attitude a few years ago so that I could have avoided some scandals Any way, they belong to the past and we need to let go of them."

"At a time when the tradition of devadasis was justified and even tolerated, my mother chose and lived a highly respectful life. On the other hand, today, I find myself unable to get into a relationship with a respectful family. You were advising me some time ago that I ought to enter into such a relationship with another man, and I have now decided to do just that. However, for some strange reason it never occurred to me that you could be a partner in such a relationship. . I am sorry I have to say no - especially after you have personally expressed your strong desire for me."

Annasami was listening to her with no interruptions. He was so familiar with her generally commendable traits of fine temperament and sense of justice that he let her continue.

"I don't think I will ever enjoy a life better than the present one - I have peace of mind and enjoy all material comforts. But . . ." She paused, bowed

her head and continued: "Remember Mr. Ranga, who was here this afternoon for the interview? He was here at my own invitation. Even at the very first time I saw him, I kind of took to him, and I had never felt the same way with anybody else. So I myself wrote him a letter." Her voice now drying up, she sweated in profuse drops that gathered on her forehead.

Annasami's eyes began to glow; he couldn't speak up because of the salivating tobacco in the mouth.

"I was not sure if Mr. Ranga was a bachelor," Kalyani continued. "If he was a married man, I told myself, I ought to feel guilty in ever wanting a relationship with him. However, I assured myself that there was essentially nothing wrong in just meeting with someone for a little chat. I am not saying I was affected by a strong sense of love or deep sentiment, nothing like that. I felt it was no crime inviting someone just for company or friendship. Again, I am clear on this: once I lost my heart to him, it becomes something serious and I must not deceive myself into saying it was simply a matter of just company or friendship."

"So I wrote him an anonymous letter on a simple post card: "If you are able to guess the author of this letter, please try to come and see me."

"I thought I can determine from his reply if he is interested in me. Then, after a month, a letter came from him requesting an interview. I was not sure if my letter and his were actually linked to one other as they were meant to be - there was no way to find out any possible connection - so I didn't share this piece of news with you. But I knew I can't do the interview without your taking part in it. If I had known at that time about your interest in me, I wouldn't have certainly written to him; neither would I have agreed for the interview. Now I really don't know what is on his mind." Her words came out of a simple, direct style with no unnecessary embellishments.

Annasami's reaction was quick, and he wanted to respond at once. He again nodded his head and ran out to get rid of the pan. "What a fool I am!" he was talking to himself, his hands smiting against his forehead in a symbolic gesture of blaming himself for being so dimwitted all this time.

"Kalyani, I have been really a big fool," he told her. "I have been of late saying a lot of foolish things, please ignore them. You may laugh away my words as if they were uttered by a stage actor! Let us forget my foolish talk and move on! In a way if I were not acting this stupid, you would have never opened up to me. Ranga is a good man; I think he lost his wife, that's what he told us . . . Good . . . I hope your wish will be granted . . . God bless you. This will be a good match -you and Ranga - and I hope it will become a reality soon . . . I really think so." Annasami seemed so excited at the turn of the events that he could not help expressing his own thoughts in one continuous flow.

Kalyani listened to him, touched by his excitement and savoring his every whim, gesture and word. She was relieved by the final outcome and let her mind float in a pleasant mood.

"All right, I have to go now," he said, taking leave of her. "Ranga will be definitely here tomorrow. I have to attend to some personal work tomorrow, so I won't be able to make it." He winked at her meaningfully and arose from the chair.

He had a final piece of advice for her: "You must get that magazine interview article from Ranga so that I can see it before it goes to press," he said. "No changes may be necessary, but he is a crazy fellow and we don't want him to say something we really don't like. . ." He again smiled at her and was all set to depart.

Kalyani saw him off at the gate and walked back to the kitchen to wake up Pattamma for dinner.

2

Last night when Ranga took leave of Kalyani and returned to his room it was two hours past midnight.

Six months ago Ranga had gone to see Kalyani to personally interview her for a magazine article; once the interview was done, he rushed home and worked through the night to complete the piece so that he could show the final draft to her before it went to press. He eagerly awaited the dawn and raced to her house. Since then, in the last six months, he has been visiting her regularly, but the article in question, based on that interview, never got published.

He woke up late this morning, and after guilping down the morning tea and lighting a cigarette, his eyes caught through the smoke the photograph in a new frame on the nearby table; it was the snap shot he had planned to include in the article - it showed Kalyani with no makeup, dressed in a simple sari. Ranga felt uneasy and even embarrassment over the events of the last six months, and he laughed to himself.

It is true his meeting with Kalyani had set off many warm feelings in his heart; nevertheless, as he had gone through various chores demanded of him in the following day or two - like asking for her photograph, writing up the piece in one sitting through the night and rushing to her home - Ranga believed he was simply reacting to his professional demands, and nothing more.

But his very next meeting with Kalyani revealed to him her real motive. She openly told him that her request to go over the article before its publication was just a ploy - a ploy to get to see him more and more in the following days.

Nobody in his neighborhood had ever seen Ranga leave for work so early in the dawn.

He wished to have the article finalized and delivered to the composing room by ten in the morning so that it could be included in the upcoming magazine Sunday supplement. So he saw a deadline to be met, and pedaled his way through four miles to Kalyani's house.

He saw a few musicians settling down on a carpet in the front hall when he reached the place; they seemed to have arrived about the same time he did, and were getting ready for a drama rehearsal.

A Youngman among them - a tabala player- noticed Ranga but was so occupied with his act that he kept on playing the instrument. Ranga was a little amused by the young man and his aplomb. He was somewhere between twenty and twenty-five - and his hand gestures were strong and forceful enough to let his curly hair fall freely on his forehead. He wore a minor chain, a muslin jibba, a thin mustache, and his manner seemed to be declaring to others that he was not just a tabala player but a kind of *matinée* idol of the future.

Ranga too felt no need to be bothered by them; he felt free to be on his own in that house. He walked into a room next to the main hall and made himself comfortable on a sofa. He went over the article he had brought with him as he tried to hide his face among its sheets. His eyes were on the article in front of him but his heart and mind were alert to catch any human voice amidst the tabala sound.

"Sister, he is here!" he heard a voice announce his presence. "Remember the gentleman who was here yesterday?" There was an immediate response to the call and Ranga could visualize the face that would soon greet him. But he chose not to take off his eyes from the sheets up front.

Only when Kalyani came close and greeted him cheerfully did Ranga get up from the sofa, pick up the sheets and fold his hands together in a symbolic gesture.

Kalyani however chose to avoid acknowledging his formal salutation because it seemed to go against her respect for him. As she approached Ranga she turned to the tabala player and said: "Please stop your music . . . it is splitting my ears." Then she turned to Ranga with her folded hands as if deflecting his earlier gestures. Then they both sat on sofas facing each other. Kalyani had just then taken a shower; the wet hair had moistened her blouse near the shoulders. She removed the towel around her head and dried her long tresses.

Meanwhile a taxi arrived at the front gate and two more musicians got out. Kalyani asked Ranga to excuse her for a minute and went out to receive them. After formally greeting the visitors, she spoke with the tabala player.

"Dhamu," she addressed him. "You can have your rehearsal upstairs, I need to discuss some important matter with this gentleman." Dhamu started packing the tabala and another man with him began folding the carpet. The two new visitors went upstairs.

"Are there any rooms upstairs?" Ranga asked because he wanted to start a conversation. He had conjured up a small shed with a ceiling lined with palm leaves.

"No, no rooms," Kalyani replied. "We have allotted some open space for rehearsals; these musicians are so lazy even to walk a few steps that they end up working only in the hall." Meanwhile Pattamma brought coffee from the kitchen.

Dhamu, who was on the stairs, glanced at Pattamma and asked: "Pattu, is there coffee for us?" There was a touch of sarcasm in his words. "You don't have to bring coffee over here, upstairs; once I am done with the tabala, I will come down and get it."

Pattamma glanced in the direction of Dhamu, and smiled. "Of course, there is always coffee for you," she said in a low voice and laid the tray with coffee and a few cups before Kalyani. Kalyani took one of them and offered to Ranga. Then she helped herself with another cup and sat before him. She invited Ranga to drink his coffee, and sensing that it might be too hot for him she proceeded to cool it by pouring it into another cup and letting the heat away.

After Pattamma left them, Ranga told Kalyani: "I have finished the article last night. I would like to give it to the printers today after you take a look at it. That way we can have it published in the Sunday supplement."

Kalyani looked at him, but said nothing.

"I wonder . . ." Ranga began with a smile. "I see you surely enjoy tobacco and betel leaves, how come your teeth still look very bright?"

"I am not addicted to betel leaves," Kalyani replied. "I take a few when Master (she meant Ammasami) visits me - of course he visits me almost every day - but I make it a point to wash my teeth afterwards. That way, the teeth stay healthy and bright."

Ranga drank the coffee and then read aloud to her the interview article which Kalyani listened with no interruptions. The music from the rehearsal upstairs - a combination of violin and tabala - seemed to provide a pleasing background to his voice.

When he finished reading, Ranga looked at her for approval. She was still watching him, no word spoken. Suddenly he had a feeling that she had never paid any attention to his words and simply had her eyes glued to him during the entire exercise.

And that look, still focused on him, seemed to pose a question: "What kind of games are we playing?" It seemed to demand, once for all, that they tear away those pretenses - call them interview or magazine article or whatsoever - and frankly admit what they wanted from one another

"How come you are not saying anything?" Ranga demanded. "Do you think some of your comments during the interview were not properly written down? Do I need to revise any of the stuff here?"

"Well, it was Annasami who wanted to see the article before it was to go to press", Kalyani replied. "But let me ask this. When there are several popular actresses, why did you think of interviewing someone like me?" She bit her lips as the words escaped her.

"Well, I usually interview people who are already popular, and those who are likely to become popular," he replied. "And when it comes to dramas, you are certainly a popular actress - no one doubts that."

Kalyani admired his rejoinder, he was right on the target, there was no way one could win an argument with Ranga.

The violin could still be heard from the upstairs. Dhamu was now coming down the stairs shouting "Pattu . . . Pattu" all the way to the kitchen. Kalyani turned toward him annoyed, and asked: "What is it?"

"Nothing, sister," he replied in a timid voice. "I need some water and betel leaves."

"Then why don't you go in and get them yourself?" Kalyani admonished Dhamu. "Why do you keep on shouting Pattu ..? Pattu? Don't you see we are talking here?" After a while she turned to Ranga and asked: "What is the big hurry, anyway? Why do you want the interview to appear in the Sunday supplement?"

"No hurry, nothing like that. You may keep the article with you and show it to Annasami if you so wish."

"All right, can you come back this evening?" she asked. "I am sorry I am troubling you. I hope you don't have to pedal a long distance to come to this house" She wanted him to know of her strong desire for him as well as her inclination not to tire him out.

She knew Annasami wouldn't be visiting her for the whole day; if Ranga agreed to come in the evening, she could talk with him again. Ranga readily understood her mind and accepted the invitation.

"It is no problem for me to come here directly from my office," he explained to her and got ready to leave.

"Where is your house?" she asked.

"I won't call it a house," Ranga told her. "It is only a room! Number 16, Adikesavalu Naicker Street, Chulai!"

She accompanied him to the street in front of the house. While readying his bicycle Ranga told her: "I can't do anything without this bicycle. I am getting a scooter next month. That will make things a lot easier." Kalyani congratulated him on his scooter plan. "It is a very good idea to have a scooter," she told him, and he acknowledged her appreciation.

He took her photograph from his note book and asked her: "Can you please sign on this photograph? Do you usually sign on photographs?" Kalyani was stung by his question and bit her lip.

"Of course I do," she struck back and signed the photograph after laying it on the bicycle seat. Then, her face still red, she asked. "Why did you ask me if I would sign my photographs?"

"No particular reason," Ranga smiled. "Some people don't sign their photographs." He took the photograph from her as she handed it over to him.

When he finally took leave of her and started to pedal the bicycle, he said: "Some people don't sign even their own letters!"

He spoke the words without looking at her. Kalyani wanted to say something, but he had already moved away.

A few feet away into the street Ranga looked back from his bicycle, and Kalyani waved back her hand. The music from the upstairs was still flowing melodiously in the air.

That evening Ranga and Kalyani came closer to understanding the intense relationship between themselves- the relationship that had an uneasy start, got entangled in delays and eventually came to a sudden outcome, as follows:

When Ranga returned to Kalyani's house that evening, the place seemed deserted. Even Pattamma was nowhere to be seen. Kalyani and Ranga remained silent for a long time. She didn't even look at his face; she welcomed him to sit in the hall and then seemingly lost herself in some deep thoughts.

Kalyani now found herself in a situation not quite different from where one plans and walks a long distance to arrive at a house, and having arrived there, feels hesitant to enter it; such a caution is very real and significant, and if it had lasted for some more time she would have probably reexamined her options and retreated - retreated as much distance as she had first ventured out from her resting place.

Then it happened, suddenly, as if that stranger's house doors opened wide and she was freed from the doubts and insecurities weighing upon her. It was as if the stranger eased her fears and assured her: "You are in the right place. You belong to me. Nobody deserves you better!"

Ranga handed over the letter to her without saying as much that his instincts were right . . . It was you who wrote that anonymous letter. As her fingers clutched the letter he warmly gripped her hand.

That was how Ranga recalled the 'love affair' started between them; now that it all came back to him he was surprised at his own courage; he again felt embarrassment like a teenage girl.

The time was nine in the morning. Ranga noticed the young girl - the house owner's daughter who came to clean his room - was eagerly looking at Kalyani's photo on the table.

"Is the bathroom free?" Ranga tried to start a conversation with her.

"Yes, it's available," the girl replied, her eyes still on the photo.

That photo has been framed and publicly displayed in Ranga's room for over a month now. Whoever visited the room has certainly seen it, but so far none had even mentioned it to him - they simply felt it was not a proper subject to talk about. But this girl, Ranga thought, seemed to have a special fascination for the photograph.

He ventured to talk about it. "Why do you keep staring at it?" he asked. "Do you like her?"

"Mm, . . . she looks beautiful," the girl said. "But who is she?" She picked up the frame photograph and studied it.

Ranga wanted her and other residents to know that he will be soon moving out and relocating to somewhere else. "You can take it down and show it to your mother," he told her. "You can tell her I will be marrying this woman pretty soon." The girl felt excited and ran out with the picture in her hand. Ranga got ready for the shower.

When he was in the bathroom he heard a commotion in the front yard of the house with people exchanging their opinions about the woman in that photograph.

"This is Kalyani, the stage actress, I am telling you!" a lone voice shot up and held the crowd's attention. That voice belonged to Ezumalai, the high school kid, the house owner's son.

"You never go to school, and you never do your lessons," his mother was admonishing him. "You failed last year, remember!? But you are always interested in talking about this movie star or that stage actress whenever you happen to see some woman's face!"

"No, I am positive. I am telling you she is a stage actress." The boy confirmed his earlier statement.

"I say shut up, he may hear you!"

"Just wait and see," Ezumalai screamed. "You can see her signature Kalyani right here on the photograph!" Now that he could present a proof to support his claim, the crowd responded with a heavy silence.

Ranga in the bathroom also felt that heavy silence.

Eventually, that article based on Ranga's interview with Kalyani was never published because Kalyani wouldn't give her consent. Ranga was, of course, very serious about its publication; when he handed over the final draft to her for Annasami's review on that evening - he same evening he returned the anonymous letter to her - he believed he was fulfilling his professional obligation.

But when Kalyani confided in him that she was averse to doing interviews, that she was neither a popular actress nor one destined to become one in the future, and that she didn't seek fame, Ranga felt he discovered another side of her personality that was not mentioned in his article.

"I wanted to meet with you and that was the only reason I had agreed for the interview," she told him. "But I want to ask you: how did you find out that I was the one who wrote that letter?"

Ranga paused for an answer.

"How could you be so sure?" she again asked him. "What if I denied that I ever wrote it?"

Ranga explained: "It could be something I remember about you. When you looked at me . . . not directly but through the mirror in that makeup room when I came down with Annasami."

He noticed he had suddenly addressed her in singular person, as if their relationship had become closer and friendlier; it happened rather casually and even naturally- it didn't actually seem he was addressing her informally for the first time.

He followed it up with an explanation as to why he correctly guessed Kalyani must have penned that anonymous letter: first, the way she looked at him through the mirror; how she congratulated him for his drama reviews

after their formal introduction to each other by Annasami; how she appreciated the short stories Ranga had written some ten years earlier, and she did that in no patronizing manner; then too, she kept on looking at him from the stage with darkness behind her and Ranga in the makeup room smoking a cigarette; and above all, Ranga said he felt an emotional rapport with her and determined in clearest terms that Kalyani must have written it. He had known it as soon as he set his eyes on the letter.

It was getting dark and they were still talking through the creeping darkness, even forgetful of switching the light in the hall. Kalyani had even forgotten to serve him the evening coffee.

Ranga has been smoking more than his usual self and the hall was filled with fumes. Kalyani switched the fan to dispel the smoke; she also switched on the hall lights.

Ranga thought Kalyani looked even more beautiful, under the new lights, than he had imagined. She was drawing closer to him, when, luckily . . .

Pattamma, who had been to the temple, just returned. She directly proceeded to the kitchen; stopping somewhere between the hall and kitchen, and away from Ranga's view, she signaled to Kalyani and gave her the temple offerings.

Pattamma's instincts were right on target; as she had watched the relationship growing between Ranga and Kalyani during Ranga's recent visits she has become shy and respectful in Ranga's presence; she preferred to talk to Kalyani in private.

Kalyani came to the hall and stood with the vibuthi and kumkum before her mother's portrait. Then she turned toward Ranga and solemnly stretched her hand with vibuthi.

She smiled and asked: "Do you believe in these things?" She came closer to him, still seated on the sofa, and tried to apply the vibuthi on his forehead. Ranga gripped her hand and guided it to his forehead.

"I really don't believe in these things," he said. "But I won't object to your trying it on me." He felt her apply the vibuthi and then warmly looked at her, without slackening his grip.

It was then that he kissed her on the forehead. Kalyani, concerned that Pattamma may be soon upon them, pulled herself away from him.

Pattamma's voice could be heard from the kitchen: "Why is the coffee still here?"

Ranga and Kalyani realized they forgot all about the coffee.

Kalyani suggested that Ranga stay for dinner, but for some reason he declined. Kalyani was not unduly upset at his response; she saw it as his steadiness and appreciated it.

She then invited him for a feast the following day.

"Feast?" he blinked his eyes in surprise. "What am I supposed to get if I attend it?"

"Well, everything you want," she said and closed her face with both hands.

"Do I need to ask or will I get without asking?"

"Well, you will get to know when you attend," she said after removing her hands from the face. She seemed distressed she had to wait for one more day before seeing him again.

Pattamma came with coffee. She stood away from the hall and addressed Kalyani: "Sister," she said and paused a few feet away from them.

"Come over here, why are you shy?" Kalyani teased her. Pattamma approached them, her head bowed. Kalyani desperately wanted to introduce Ranga to her as her future athan - brother-in-law, but she restrained herself because she was overcome by her own shyness, and bowed her head.

Pattamma ran away to the kitchen after serving them coffee. Then Kalyani and Ranga resumed their conversation. They kept on talking till nine at night, without quite even remembering what they talked about.

Ranga remembered one thing though - what Kalyani told him when he took leave of her.

As he came down to the verandah to unlock his bicycle, she came close to him and said:

"Please do not mistake me. I don't think the interview article needs to be published. After all it has played its role in our wanting to see one other. Let us just forget about its publication!"

Ranga agreed and smiled. The article remained with Kalyani for ever.

And Kalyani's photograph stayed with Ranga, hidden for many days and then eventually framed and displayed in his room, and now it has become a matter of discussion and comments by his friends and neighbors after Ezumalai was able to reveal its true identity as Kalyani - the stage actress. The signature across the photograph proved Ezumalai's claim.

Ranga emerged from the bathroom and walked through the heavy silence in the air. Because he was not properly dressed - he wore nothing above the

waist - he didn't think it proper to stop on his way; he wanted to go to his room first, get dressed and then take care of the matter at hand. But he changed his mind as he crossed the yard, so he turned to Ezumalai. "You are quite right," he told him. "I will come back and tell you the rest of the story."

It was obvious to him that nobody in that crowd would ever approve of his marrying a professional actress.

Back in his room as he went through the motions of dressing up - as he did everything mechanically - like powdering his face, putting on the clothes, combing his hair - his mind was thinking of the intense dissatisfaction he has caused among his caste members. There was no way he could pacify them, certainly that was not his intention. Because he cared for their love and regard toward him, he personally wanted to inform them of his decision and let them know that he will be leaving their premises in a couple of days.

When he had returned to the front yard, the owner of the house brought in a chair for him. He sat on it but was confused as to what to say and how to say it; he silently looked at the circle of people surrounding him.

The lady house-owner and a few others among the crowd didn't think that Ranga could do something so extreme or radical in his personal life.

A few others found comfort in thinking that Ranga was displaying Kalyani's photograph as a show off - a kind of vanity or prank - as many men usually do; when the young girl who went to clean Ranga's room asked Ranga about it, they thought, he had been only joking about his marrying an actress.

The lady house-owner now held the photo in her hand. "Even I was deceived into thinking that you had found a new bride," she told Ranga. "And now they are telling me she is a stage actress!"

Ranga took the picture from her hand and studied it. The smile from Kalyani had a secret message for him: 'Seems like you are prepared to sacrifice everything because of me!'

He raised his head and looked across all of them. He smiled and addressed the lady owner of the house: "Thotha!"

They all belonged to the same caste and, in a sense, felt kinship with one another. Ranga considered the lady as belonging to his own family, like an aunt; because he called her Thotha, her husband became Chinna Naina, and the other members of that caste were accordingly addressed in appropriate terms.

"It is true this woman acts in dramas," he said so that his message went loud and clear. "She doesn't even belong to our caste."

Thotha shot back as if offended. "Why talk about her caste?" she blurted out. "The last thing a shameless woman - an actress - can claim is a caste!" She was unable to control her temper as could be seen from her glowing red face. Ranga ignored her mood and moved on.

"Thotha," he explained. "After Devaki (Devaki - Ranga's first wife's name) passed away, I was not interested in another marriage. I am not interested in caste or answering to matrimonial columns."

"Then, are you saying you are taking this woman as a mistress?" The lady sounded a little angry and sarcastic.

"Well, you may put it that way. But I have decided to go for a register marriage," Ranga said and lowered his head.

Now Chinna Naina arose from his chair and approached, asking him: "Rangaswamy, do you really think you are doing the right thing?"

"You must remember this!" he continued. "You are the grandson of Adikesavulu Naicker; your grandfather has a reputation here. Your father of course was a spendthrift and destroyed all his inheritance - losing one piece of property after another. But he never did anything to bring disgrace to his caste; he and others were illiterate and had to live at other peoples' mercy. But you are different, you are educated, you are the one to bring pride and fame to your generation. Please think about all these matters. We may try to explain these things to you, but you are already aware of them. If you are telling us you are attracted to this woman, we can understand it, but we can't believe you want to take this extreme step of marrying her. Please consider the matter seriously before you act on your plans." He took off his towel from the shoulder and seemed to walk away from Ranga. Then, after walking over some distance, he retraced his steps.

"Did you ever stop to think that a woman is waiting for you?" he asked. "Rangaswamy, please listen to me. I think you are making a big mistake. Right now, if you let me act, I can arrange a bride for you - a woman from a prestigious family. What do you say?"

His wife now joined him. "There is no dearth of brides," she said. "What about Sumathi - Devaki's own sister? She is said to be eager to marry you. She is beautiful and comes from a good family, what else do you need? I myself saw her recently, and she is taking very good care of your daughter - just like her own. I was hoping all along that you will be marrying Sumathi and settle down into a happy domestic life. But no, you are only interested in giving up caste and tradition and doing things on your own!" There was a touch of sadness and finality in her voice.

Only yesterday did Ranga go over to his village to settle the issue of his marriage once for all.

Today he was already late when he left for work. The caste members seemed personally hurt by his decision as was evident from their conduct toward him.

Last night he returned home from Kalyani's house at two hours past midnight, and because he was discussing his marriage plans with Kalyani he was late for work.

Till yesterday he was on vacation for a week, and had visited the village during that period. Because he was talking to Kalyani about his visit to the village and his discussion with his own folks, he was unduly held up at her home till late night.

He didn't have even time for his breakfast. The sun was burning hot when he rode on the scooter this morning.

During the last six months he and Kalyani got to know each other. Invariably everyday Ranga would leave his room in the morning and proceed directly to Kalyani's house. Again, after six in the evening, he would go to her house from his office. He would return to his room very late at night.

He got his scooter two months ago; in the evenings he and Kalyani would ride together, and their close relationship in public has become a past history among Ranga's colleagues.

Ranga continued to have his lunch away from his room as well as his office - and that suited him ideally from his professional obligations. Of course Kalyani had suggested on several occasions that she could arrange to send lunch to his office, but Ranga firmly declined her offer. "It simply wouldn't work," he told her. "I am not sure exactly where I will be wandering around when the lunch time arrives!"

But his dinner was always at Kalyani's. The morning tea he got from the neighborhood tea shop, then he would leave for Kalyani's house for breakfast. Even if he missed breakfast just one day, Kalyani was upset, so he treated the breakfast at her house as a duty he owed her, and therefore tried to adhere to a strict schedule.

Kalyani even wished Ranga would decide to move permanently to live with her, but she could not bring herself to publicly express her desire. Her steady mind would not let her interfere in his independence and personal lifestyle; she simply enjoyed when he did offer his company to her, and when he was gone from her place she delighted in recalling her good times with him.

Ranga too could discern a change in himself - he was becoming less of a guest and more of an active participant in Kalyani's household, altogether not a pleasant prospect.

Occasionally he felt uneasy and puzzled over his own new rights in that household: he was able to visit her at his own will, walk into her room, take off his shirt and literally sit there in his tee shirt with absolutely no qualms.

His visits also prompted Kalyani to react in every possible way to attend to his personal needs. Whether she was taking part in a drama rehearsal or engaged in some conversation, she would easily break loose and personally attend to him. These may involve inquiries such as: "What would you like to have?" or "Did you have your lunch, why do you look so tired?" or serving him coffee or even plain drinking water. Ranga often wondered if he could objectively understand how all this had an impact on the attitudes of others in Kalyani's establishment toward his growing relationship with Kalyani.

Day after day he began to realize how much he owed his happiness to Kalyani, and this knowledge weighed down heavily upon him. As for Kalyani, she treated him like a treasure to be valued and cherished; of course she did feel sorry that he wouldn't permanently live with her. She had expected nothing more from him.

On the day she had invited him for the party at her place, Kalyani conducted herself as if Ranga had nothing else to demand from her and she was obliged to surrender to him with no qualifications. Kalyani believed she had nothing to lose from such a total surrender on her part. She was mellowed enough to act that way; if Ranga for some reason had decided not to visit her after that day, she would have taken it in stride. She would have considered her earlier contacts with Ranga as just as useful and nurturing experiences. Ranga too was amazed at the composure and the maturity she displayed in her total submission.

Yet, if Ranga was the primary source of her happiness, Kalyani was still not too concerned about the consequences stemming from such a relationship between them, namely how others thought about their alliance, and even more important, whether that alliance would remain just a temporary affair or develop into a permanent bond. Simply stated, Kalyani was very happy and contented, and enjoyed a sense of fulfillment during these six months.

The other members of Kalyani's drama group were quick to accept and even bless their growing relationship.

Ranga on his part continued his professional task of reviewing the plays staged by Kalyani's drama group with the same vigor as before, and this only enhanced his reputation among the crew members. Ranga recently wrote something controversial about Kalyani's role in one of the plays; Kalyani couldn't agree more with his opinion. She was someone who always saw something sound and beautiful in everything about Ranga, so she could wholeheartedly endorse what he thought about her in his drama reviews.

As for Annasami, he could only confirm his worst suspicion that Ranga was indeed a man of strong views. Yet he was friendly toward Ranga because of his closeness to Kalyani. On issues other than the film, drama and

cultural matters Annasami felt comfortable to discuss and share his views with Ranga.

One day last month, while talking with Kalyani Annasami raised an important point with her.

"Kalyani, I am very pleased you found a good companion in your life," he said. "But remember, you can't just go on like this, can you?"

Kalyani was a little confused at his words.

"On the other hand, I do feel and pray to god that my life would go on like this," she said her heart swelling with contentment.

"I hope your prayers will be answered," Annasami gestured with his hands. He paused for a smile.

"Kalyani, when two persons decide to live together," he continued, "I know it goes beyond sharing their emotional and physical needs. But what about the legal, social and financial implications involved? If you think I am bringing up this matter because I have no confidence in Ranga, you are totally mistaken; it is because I have utmost confidence in Ranga I am bringing this up. I feel confident that Ranga and you can live in a permanent relationship, hence my advice to you. I think at a minimum you two must formalize a civil marriage to take care of your future. I am kind of surprised that you haven't thought about these matters; maybe Ranga did." Annasami broke his voice as he heard Ranga arrive by scooter.

Kalyani tried to put an end to the conversation. She was wary that Ranga not mistake their conversation to mean he has lost credibility with her. Kalyani pulled herself together and spoke to Annasami before Ranga could enter the house after locking up the scooter in the front.

"You were saying he must have thought about this, didn't you?" she asked him. "That was the reason why I didn't think about it. He knows what he is doing. I won't discuss this with him."

"You don't have to bring it up," Annasami told her. "But I can certainly discuss it with him . . . Don't you think I have that responsibility?"

Ranga heard those words as he joined them. Kalyani was a little embarrassed.

"Mr. Ranga, I was telling Kalyani that both of you should get married." Annasami explained to him. "What do you think? I am sure you must have thought about such a possibility. What concerns us are not the formalities - like marriage rituals and traditional practices. . . A register marriage will just do . . . Do you think it makes sense?" He spoke in his usual self - not caring for gently probing Ranga's mind but confronting him with his rhetoric.

Ranga glanced at Kalyani; he thought Annasami's suggestion could be a way to lighten the burden that has been increasing and consciously weighting upon him

"Kalyani, what do you think?" he asked her. "I think he is right. I have thought about it myself. My caste members are not going to approve of our marriage anyway and I have to give up on them. That's no big loss . . . The only loss is my long association with them. I think Annasami's idea is acceptable." He went over Annasami's plan a few more times and felt grateful for his interest over their relationship. He welcomed Annasami's suggestion with warmth and gratitude.

Then he thought of his five-year old daughter growing up in the village, of his wife now dead, and Sumathi, the young woman waiting in the wings to marry him.

He wanted to go to the village and inform his caste members of his marriage plans - he thought he owed them the news even if they wouldn't welcome it. As far as Ranga was concerned, he had made up his mind a long time ago that he would never marry Sumathi - but despite his repeated hints the caste members wouldn't believe him. They thought he was against a second marriage because he was still emotionally in love with Devaki; they claimed to know many a widower like Ranga who professed love for the deceased wife and then at some stage changed their minds and consented for a second marriage. So they have been waiting patiently for the past five years confident that Ranga would give in eventually. Sumathi is now twenty two years old.

Ranga conveyed to Annasami his consent for a register marriage. Annasami checked the almanac and chose an auspicious date for the wedding the following month. He also invited them for a dinner at his house on that day. When Annasami informed his wife of this news, she felt a new peace of mind.

Yesterday morning Ranga took a bus to his village, which lay in the Madras-Vellore highway route, some fifty miles from Madras. After his wife died, Ranga had been to the village only twice. His daughter Indu would think him of him as a stranger and try to hide away from him even as he approached her. There was no way she could be drawn to him by a sweet or persuasive talk; if he forcibly accosted her, she would simply cry.

And yesterday, after an interval of two years, when Ranga went to his village he happened to see a young girl in a pavaadai in the company of other children younger than herself playing a kind of 'family game' and ordering others; he immediately recognized her as his own daughter.

"Amma, somebody is here," the girl shouted and disappeared into the house.

Ranga now warmly cherished that village girl in his heart as he now rode to his office on scooter.

He was told his daughter Indu was addressing Sumathi as Amma and even believed she was her real mother. Does it mean Ranga can marry Sumathi? Certainly not. He had firmly and unequivocally informed Sumathi and others of his plans for register marriage with Kalyani - he minced no words and was very candid and direct about the whole thing, thereby created a scene in the village. The only consolation for his caste members was that Ranga was not claiming his daughter from their custody; they inured their hearts to his irrevocable decision, they were reconciled to their new situation and felt their relationship with him was over; it was as if they had washed off their hands in so far he was concerned.

Ranga believed he was doing the right thing-all because of his love for Kalyani, there was nothing else to it.

He was late for work. Because he woke up late that morning and has been engaged in talking with the lady of the house and others about Kalyani, he was unduly delayed. He decided against having the breakfast in Kalyani's place - it was already past ten thirty- and rode on scooter to work. He wanted to be at the office by eleven; he would meet with Kalyani later in the evening or night.

At work he ordered coffee from the office cafeteria. Several matters were pending for his approval to go for printing and were piled up on his desk. But he was in no mood to do any work.

He remembered Kalyani might be still expecting him for breakfast, and possibly waiting for him. What if she herself skipped breakfast?

He remembered Kalyani occasionally used the telephone in the nursery school across her house. Even Kalyani's drama group personnel used that phone to contact her, now and then. In fact when Kalyani made her first call to Ranga she had used that phone only.

Ranga checked the telephone directory and dialed. He politely requested for Kalyani across the school and patiently awaited her voice.

After a few minutes when that voice did come across the telephone wires, he suddenly forgot why he had called her. But Kalyani, having recognized his voice, started the conversation.

"Why didn't you come for breakfast?" she inquired. "Did you have your lunch?" Ranga said he called to answer that very question. Kalyani then insisted that he go over her place for lunch, and he accepted her invitation.

Then he immersed himself in the work at hand. When he finished proof-reading the matters on his desk, the compositor came in and requested matter for two additional columns. Ranga went to work with his notebook and came up with two or three interesting "boxes" to go into the press. Then he noticed

one of the pages he had proof-read needed some changes in the layout; he grabbed that page and raced to the printing house.

Raising his voice above the roar and din of the printing presses around him, Ranga explained to the foreman his layout requirements. Standing next to a compositor who worked on the page set up on a stone Ranga reviewed the layout changes as they were being made. An hour has already passed by the time the changes were made to his satisfaction. He proof - read the page once more and happily returned to his desk.

The time was now an hour past noon. Freed from his official duties his mind again turned to Kalyani. He recalled how his caste members reacted negatively to his marriage plans that morning; it made no sense for him to continue to live in their company any more.

The possibility that he will have to live with Kalyani in her own house after their marriage didn't sit well with him. The alternative - that he could continue to live a single life at his current address - didn't seem proper either. Ranga was a little puzzled that he didn't think through of these consequences till now. Does Kalyani believe - albeit with some confidence - that Ranga would consent to move into her establishment? She certainly had a right to expect such a move from Ranga, still Ranga felt he would be demeaning himself if he chose to move out of his room only to live permanently with her. He realized he owned no house like Kalyani did, and for the first time he recognized the yawning economic gap between them.

He didn't know all the details about Kalyani, but he understood Kalyani occupied a much higher financial position than he did. His own total salary amounted to only five hundred and sixty rupees a month and he had no other income to speak of.

Kalyani owned a house. She was also the owner of her drama company and must be surely enjoying considerable income and savings from such an enterprise. Ranga decided what he ought to do once he and Kalyani were married: he must distance himself from her business and professional matters and, as a first step toward that goal, he must decline any suggestion that he permanently live with her in her house.

He remembered he had a lunch appointment in her house. He would settle the matter with her soon.

Later, when Kalyani was seated next to him and served him food, he slowly began the conversation:

"How many days are still left for our wedding?"

"Seventeen more days." Her voice was quick and to the point.

"We haven't decided how we should organize our lives after our marriage, have we?"

"How can I plan it on my own?" Kalyani asked. "You are the one to decide it."

"According to our convention, after a marriage, a woman goes to live with her husband," Ranga said. "But I don't have a house." His voice sounded pathetic and sad. "There is a street in my village named after my grandfather. But I live in a room that is too small for both of us. We will never be allowed to rent a house there."

Kalyani didn't respond because she was unable to gauge the intent behind those words. Ranga's eyes were riveted on her; he was still silent and smiled. Kalyani spoke now, ever careful that she doesn't hurt his ego and pride.

"If we both had a marriage formally arranged by our elders we can expect all kinds of conventions to be followed," she said. "But now, as things stand between us, this marriage is not going to create anything new or dramatic in our lives. I had not entertained any dreams of marrying you and coming down to live with you. But when such an unexpected event becomes a reality, I feel very happy. If I know what kind of life you want us to have once we are married, I can adapt to it. If you ask my opinion, I will say this: after our marriage I belong to you, so does this house. You can consider this house as yours and move in."

Ranga had of course expected this from her. He wanted to come out with his own decision in the matter right away but he thought he might be hurting her feelings. He remained silent till he finished the lunch. Then he washed his hands, came to the hall and lit a cigarette after easing himself on a sofa.

"I don't think it is a good idea for me to move here permanently," he said. "But I also realize I can't possibly provide you with another house like this one. I don't want to inconvenience you either. So maybe we should continue our present living arrangements even after our marriage . . ." He saw Kalyani laugh at his words.

"Why are you laughing?" he asked, a little puzzled.

"No, nothing, I am kind of amused how this has turned out to be a problem," she said. "But I agree with you. When one starts a new life, everything should be new, the old stuff needs to be scrapped. I have an idea: what if we rent out my house and use that rent income to rent another new house?"

Ranga thought her idea was worth examining, and he said: "We must be able to rent a house as big as this one," he said. "But only I will pay the rent. The rental income from this house will directly go to your savings . . . or will be used to take care of your personal expenses . . . Do you agree?"

Kalyani again smiled. She could appreciate Ranga's major concern - he was acutely conscious of his relatively weaker financial position even if he never suffered any inferiority complex or loss of self esteem. Kalyani was

pleased all this has not driven Ranga away from her. Had Ranga been concerned with these problems much earlier, she thought, perhaps there would have been absolutely no relationship developing between them.

Ranga understood the reason for her laughter, and spoke: "Maybe you are thinking I am making a big deal about these small matters. My point is we must not let these small things turn ugly and pose new problems for us in the future. We need to discuss them right away. After all we aren't children. I do have faith these will not become a problem between us. But a lot of people create many problems for themselves only because all they have is only a lot of faith . . ." He paused and then changed the subject. "What kind of money are we talking about - if this house is to be rented out?"

Kalyani looked around the place as if setting her eyes on it for the first time. "How about . . . say two hundred and fifty rupees?" she asked.

Ranga agreed with her assessment. He can easily pay that kind of money from his salary and still run the family of two with the remaining two hundred rupees. He was willing to accept the new situation head on because he wouldn't be compromising his honor and dignity.

"I think it's a good idea, let us just do it," he said making up his mind. "I will try to find a decent house we can rent for two hundred and fifty rupees. As for as this house - yours - is concerned, we can probably keep the upstairs for ourselves so you can do your rehearsals and other programs. Meanwhile I will see if I can rent a place that can possibly accommodate your rehearsal needs also. If it doesn't work out, we will just keep the upstairs here and rent out the rest. The upstairs portion is facing the street but we can make sure that it doesn't pose a problem to the tenants."

Kalyani was fully convinced of Ranga's plans and she trusted his instincts. She could see what a decent and dignified man Ranga was. She was not offended the slightest that he was still treating her as a kind of an outsider; on the other hand, she felt it was only proper she become his companion first and then a deserving partner next on his own terms and feel entitled to his acceptance, love and affection.

Ranga said he was late for work and wanted to leave. Kalyani stood at the house entrance to watch his scooter disappear from her view, then went back to kitchen to have her lunch.

That evening Ranga wanted to meet with Chinna Naina to inform him of his plan to vacate his room and move out. He was hesitant as to how he should 'break' the news; he kept on moving in and out of his room and carrying out his other chores before making up his mind; someday the news has got to be delivered, so why not do it right away?

Chinna Naina was smoking a cheroot outside his house near the compound wall. Normally he would start a conversation when Ranga was around but today he seemed aloof because Ranga's infatuation with an actress had upset him; what is more, Ranga had personally admitted to such a relationship in his presence. So Chinna Naina chose to ignore him and went on smoking the cheroot, even after Ranga made his presence felt more than a couple of times.

"Chinna Naina," Ranga invited him to his room. "I need to talk you on some important matter. Can you please come in?"

"What have you got to tell me?" the old man asked. "You are not going to listen to me anyway. You have already made up your mind about the register marriage . . . The problem is if we elders say anything against the wishes of the younger generation we end up losing our self respect." He was still in a complaining mood as he arose from where he sat.

"Please come in," Ranga greeted him into his room and drew a chair for him. The old man was a little pleased that Ranga had not lost his respect for him. He averted his eyes from Kalyani's photograph on the table.

"Chinna Naina," Ranga said. "I find my office is too far from this place, and I am almost late for work every day. So I am thinking of looking for a place close to my work and then vacate this room. What do you think?"

Chinna Naina at once threw down the cheroot, and stood up.

"What is this?" he asked. "You never had any problem commuting to work on a bicycle, and now that you have a scooter are you telling me the situation has become worse? Don't give me that kind of stuff! I have seen a lot of people like you, and you are just a kid! Why do you want to play games with me? Do you think you are just a tenant in this house? Have I ever demanded rent from you? You have volunteered to pay us something and we didn't feel like refusing it. Why don't you just admit that you are now involved with that actress and so you want to move out from here? I have seen many people like you. Even if you want to leave now, you will eventually come back to us . . . because you are a man . . . You don't have to vacate the room. You can lock it up and take the key with you or give it to me. Let me see how long your association with that actress will last." Chinna Naina kept on yelling at Ranga without giving him any chance for a rebuttal.

That evening when Annasami visited her house Kalyani appraised him of their new plan now being worked out - her house will be rented out and she and Ranga would move out to another one. Annasami listened to her patiently and then asked:

"Did Ranga come out with this plan?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Do you see what a crazy man he is?" Annasami asked her. "I can't believe what he is doing! He is suggesting that you rent your house- a nice and comfortable one - and use that income to move into another house! And you are telling me it is a great idea! I think it is just silly! He looks like a proud and haughty husband who wants to drag his wife from one place to another. I think you should talk him into out of this whole idea, tell him he can come and live with you in your own home once you are both married . . . You shouldn't simply dance to his tunes . . ."

"I think you must look at this from his point of view," Kalyani replied. "I tend to agree with him. What if others around him say that he has simply become a slave to an actress and moved to her establishment? I have personally seen how those men who are married to actresses are made fun of. Even newspapers describe such men as "water carriers" or servants in a very derogatory way. What is the reason for hurling such insults? Simply because the actress earns more money and has more material comforts! The men seem to be attracted to her because of her money and material comforts only. I don't want to end up as that kind of actress! Ranga doesn't want to take any chances where he would be treated with disrespect after our marriage, and I agree with him. How can you call him crazy? To be frank, I have begun to respect him even more after he came up with this idea."

Annasami raised his eyebrows and was lost in his thoughts. Then his eyes met hers.

"Why are you silent?" she asked him.

"Nothing in particular," he said. "I am kind of worried if you are going to agree with all of Ranga's ideas and even go to the extent of dissolving our drama company." He was ready to express his deep-rooted concern at this time; if the situation warranted, he was willing to face up to the new situation.

Kalyani wanted to speak out her mind with the utmost clarity she could muster. "You know me very well, still I can see your concern is well justified. Let me ask you this: If my main intention in life is to give up one particular thing under the pretense of gaining something else, and if I had handled my personal problems over the years with such an attitude, don't you think by now I would have become a big actress?" She paused and let her eyes linger on him for a few seconds; during that short time Annasami's mind was crowded with memories of so many incidents from Kalyani's past life - incidents that were known only to him and to Kalyani's mother.

"Whatever I do," Kalyani continued, "I do just because I am totally involved in it. It is demeaning to get involved in one thing because I expect or do not expect something else. If I had decided to act in dramas it is because I enjoy the freedom and happiness that comes from them. Even at a time when you and my mother were saying that my professional involvement in theater will help me get movie roles I had already decided I wouldn't be interested in movies. Are you now suggesting I will give up my stage career after my marriage with Ranga? I will not stop acting in dramas because of that reason. If I decided to give up acting, I will do so first and then get

married to him. I believe Ranga is not someone who will insist on such conditions; should he ever come with such a proposition, I will tell him face to face that I will make no deals, it is totally wrong, and I am sure he will agree with me." She broke her voice as Pattamma was just then getting ready to go out, and approached them.

"Akka," she informed Kalyani. "I am going to the temple." Annasami was struck by Pattamma's makeup and her new dress as well as her face bright and beaming with joy.

Kalyani didn't even look at Pattamma's face because she was immersed in other thoughts. "Please come back soon," she remarked.

Annasami waited till Pattamma had walked out of the door steps and gone well into the street and disappeared from their view; then he lowered his voice and whispered to Kalyani as if letting out a secret.

"I had thought of bringing this to your attention a couple of times," he said. "You know what, there is something going on between Pattamma and our tabala player Dhamu."

Kalyani rolled up her eyes as if she suddenly woke up from sleep, and looked at Annasami in wonder. She understood what he meant.

"Have you some personal knowledge? She asked. "Where, when?"

"I have been watching them in the temple," he told her. "They didn't see me, but I did. I think they are meeting their everyday. I think Pattamma is now going there to meet with him."

"I see, I have been a kind of dumb and didn't know what was happening," Kalyani replied. "You know anything about Dhamu? Is he a decent fellow? If you say so, we can get ahead and finalize their marriage." She spoke like a guardian responsible for Pattamma.

"I think he is a decent boy, but I don't know anything about his family," Annasami said. "Of course, I can find out. You need to talk to Pattamma and her mother. Maybe we can celebrate their marriage along with yours. What do you think?"

Kalyani grinned. She was not too happy at Annasami's suggestion.

"Her situation is quite different," Kalyani said. "We don't know what's on her mother's mind, and how she wants to celebrate her daughter's wedding. I don't think it is a good idea to link her marriage with mine. As a first step I am going to invite her mother to come over here. Please go ahead and make inquiries about Dhamu. Then let things take their own course" She seemed relieved that her own family problems were slowly coming to some plausible solution.

After a while, Ranga came, and Kalyani heard the scooter announce his arrival.

As soon as Ranga entered the house Annasami volunteered to greet him and ask him directly: "I was told you are planning to move out of this house after your wedding. Have you found a place?"

"I am still looking," Ranga replied. "I have talked with a few friends; I have even contacted a real estate broker. It is not that easy to find a house in the city." He eased himself on a sofa in the hall.

Annasami was wondering if it made any sense to rent out a good house and hunt for another one, but he restrained himself, and said nothing.

"Kalyani, we need to have a rehearsal here tomorrow evening, we have only two more days for the performance," Annasami informed her, and was about to leave. "I came to remind you. I will also let others know. I will see you later."

Ranga invited Annasami to have some coffee.

Annasami let off a mild laughter. "Mr. Ranga, you are still a guest of this house. You can entertain me after you move to your new house. This is still our house! Kalyani, why don't you serve coffee for both of us?" His face registered a funny look as if he just uttered a joke good enough to provoke laughter; Kalyani obliged him with a laugh and so did Ranga.

It was the first time that Ranga had stayed overnight at Kalyani's house.

After dinner as Ranga had retired to the patio where he laid a mat on the floor under the bright moon light, Kalyani came up to him- she had helped herself with the betel leaves - and started the conversation. "We have to finalize the marriage for your sister-in-law," she said.

Ranga thought of Sumathi.

"That's not in our hands," he commented. "She is acting very childish, but unfortunately the elders too seem to have lost their mind and are unwittingly encouraging her false hopes. It is always pricking my conscience, but . . . but what can we do?" Ranga was agonizing over his frustration.

Kalyani had wanted to talk about Pattamma but Ranga felt she was referring to Sumathi. Still, Kalyani didn't want to correct him and continued to talk about Sumathi.

"If she is so keen on marrying you why didn't you want to marry her?" she asked. "Is it because she is a village girl?"

Ranga paused for a while and then continued. "If someone asked me why I want to marry a woman, I can give a proper reply. On the other hand if I am asked why I didn't want to marry someone, what kind of answer can I possibly give? Sumathi is not a village type as you suggest. When I recently went to the village I came to know she is working as a teacher in a neighboring town. For some reason, from the very beginning, I never wanted to marry her. The age difference is not a factor. Maybe it has something to do with the suggestion that I ought to marry Sumathi at the time when my wife was sick and bed ridden, and my strong negative reaction to it." He spoke as he lay back on the mat and explored the sky above, and then he suddenly turned around and faced Kalyani.

"How does that matter now?" he asked. "We have already settled the matter, didn't we?"

Kalyani sighed. "Does your daughter recognize you as her father?"

"She knows I am her father because that's what she hears from people around her. But she still treats me like a stranger and shuns me."

"Maybe they thought you will marry Sumathi because of your daughter. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, I said the same thing to Sumathi, and she started crying," Ranga said.

"She told me I am free to marry anyone I wanted, but she literally begged that I leave my daughter with her. I felt guilty for saying those things to her." Kalyani noticed his voice soften at those words.

"Let us say Sumathi gets married sometime in the near future," Kalyani asked. "Then what happens to your daughter? Will they let her come and live with you?"

Ranga discerned a touch of pain and anxiety in Kalyani's voice. Once she was married to him, she naturally felt she was entitled to bring up the girl under her own care.

"You like children, don't you?" Ranga moved on the mat close to her and pressed his face on her lap. He raised his eyes and looked at her face.

Kalyani was speechless; like an innocent child she seized his face, clutched it to her chest and embraced him. Her heart was heavy and in turmoil.

Her fingers held him tight even as they continued to press and probe the back of his head.

"You will have children of your own," he whispered to her and then felt a few tears fall on his back just above the neck. He was horrified and looked at her.

Her eyes were teary, and lips tense. She swung her head as if disagreeing with him. Then she took the corner of her sari and wiped her face. Her white teeth sparkled as she let out a mild laughter.

Ranga lit a cigarette and asked her. "Why did you cry?"

"I must tell this - because you are going to marry me. I can't have children . . . If two persons want to get married because they want to have children, then we should never get married." She spoke very clearly as if purging her heart.

"How can you be so sure?" Ranga asked her. "I am not marrying you because I want children. Still I am wondering how you can be that determined about not having children."

She bowed her head in silence, smiled and continued: "I am not sorry because of such a problem . . . I am not saying I will not definitely have children. . I have a feeling I will never be a mother to my own children . . . and there is a very good reason for such a feeling . . . If we ever want to have our own children, we may have to wait and see . . ."

Ranga wanted to end the conversation on the subject right away, and he spoke with a touch of finality. "The problem in our country," he said, "is we have too many children. If we can't have our own children, it is no big deal. Let us not worry about it."

Kalyani remained silent.
