

**THE SHOW NEVER ENDS**  
**PART II**

There was a temple across their new house. The chimes from the temple bells - during the early morning, and late evening hours - seemed musical to Kalyani's ears and swelled her heart.

She savored and cherished the new experiences now part of her life. Everyday the temple bells in the early hours would wake her up; she would warmly glance at Ranga next to her, still asleep with his hand clutching to her body; after carefully freeing herself from his hold without disturbing his sleep she would emerge from her bedroom and come out into the garden to be captivated by those roses and other flowers.

How beautifully those roses have now blossomed, a new wonder to behold!

As she was now carefully examining each one of the rose plants spread around in a row after row, she recalled the comments Ranga made some six months ago when she first had these potted plants shipped from her house in a truck.

They needed two trucks to ship all their furniture and other items when they had planned to relocate to this house. The potted plants themselves needed one full load of a truck. Ranga noticed Kalyani paid special attention to the plants - something that was noticeably missing when it came to other household items. When the plants were to be moved, Kalyani gave special instructions to the movers - more than a few times - as to how they should handle them with care and concern; and not only that, after the truck laden with plants left for their destination, Kalyani took a taxi so as to arrive at the new house well before the plants were to be unloaded, and personally saw to it that they were properly handled and set up in the new garden to her satisfaction. Ranga was quite amused by her obsession with rose plants.

"This is certainly a costly hobby," he couldn't help remarking. "Only the rich can afford it. Gardening has become fashionable just like breeding dogs and other pets. I believe a vegetable garden would serve a better purpose. If one wants to promote beauty, why let that beauty go waste and serve no real purpose? Growing grass or crotons is an activity indulged in by the rich who want to show off their wealth and how they can squander money on their petty schemes. I recently read a book titled '*Maharajahs*' wherein the author has described how in our country a

community had taken upon itself to indulge in just this kind of waste and luxury. So from our perspective, don't you think gardening is just a wasteful pastime?" Kalyani, when she first heard these words, bit her lip and tried to understand what really lay behind Ranga's caustic comments.

They have been married - that is, legally, under a civil marriage - for just over two days. She was pained by his harsh comments over something that was dearest to her heart. She was tongue-tied at his harsh criticism that she was wasting her money on plants and was actually trying to ape some upper class cultural snobbishness; this was followed by a nagging suspicion that Ranga could be even right in his criticism. She moved about in silence, still busy in organizing those pots in some order very much like handling children at the nursery school.

Ranga sensed her silence to mean hurt feelings; bewildered, he snatched a rose and smelled it, and walked over to her: "Why are you silent?" he whispered to her. "Did I say something wrong?"

She laughed away at his words with a brief remark: "I am still thinking over what you have just said."

She pondered over his comments for a long time and said nothing. She had now sixteen varieties of roses and fifty pots; twenty pots were made of concrete and the rest, small and large, were of ordinary earthen material. The potted plants were somewhere in the price range of thirty to forty rupees a piece. For the first time she mentally calculated how much she actually paid for all those items.

She had nourished and watched every thorn in those plants shoot up and grow; and what about her sheer enjoyment at observing each and every bud flowering into something full and colorful? Was it just her vanity, something she tried to ape from the so called upper class society? She could not bring herself to believe such was the case; her eyes turned almost moist - she certainly didn't deserve those attacks.

Later, when she realized she was about to contradict Ranga on this subject, she grew wary and cautious. She smiled at him and spoke up her mind, her words gentle but never defensive.

"You may be right in saying that gardening is something people indulge in out of vanity, I won't deny that," she said, and continued. "But only those who are actually involved in it - even if they had only tended

one blade of grass - will understand what a pleasant experience it is. I agree with you that a vegetable garden is a good idea, but don't you think a rose is much more beautiful than an egg plant or some other vegetable? Why am I doing all this? At this time I find myself in a position to grow these plants, I can afford the time and money, so I have taken up this hobby. Even this is not enough, I would like to own even more rose varieties . . . but that has nothing to do with vanity born out of my comfortable life . . . Had I lived with you in a small cottage in a poor neighborhood, I would still think of nurturing a small rose plant in a small pot or even a metal can. I enjoy watching these plants grow everyday - as they produce new leaves, new buds and then new flowers . . . if you think all this amount to a waste, then we might as well say life is a waste. And what about the egg plant? That's a waste too . . . even human life can be considered a wasteful thing . . . If you look just at the economic aspects of it, gardening is also a big business. Last month our Pattamma was able to sell the roses in our house for over a hundred rupees. . . ." Kalyani was pleased she was able to make her point; she gathered a handful of roses and presented to him.

Ranga took the roses and deposited them next to the wall near him, and continued to smoke.

He was still convinced he was right about his comments on gardening. Kalyani thought maybe Ranga was growing jealous over her interest in roses, and the thought amused her.

Ranga was still adamant in his opinion, and continued: "What our country needs right now is not roses or crotons; it is things like egg plants, peanuts, rice and wheat. We live in a country that keeps begging the rest of the world for its food imports like rice and wheat. I think it is a crime to waste our money on things we really don't need at a time like this." Kalyani thought he was lecturing like a professional actor doing a stage rehearsal.

She again laughed. She was very proud of him. She understood how deeply Ranga thought about even the small issues of every day life, and that realization set off her appreciation for him and also provoked her laughter. Did Ranga understand that?

"You keep on saying these roses are a waste of time and money but as I was telling you our Pattamma was able to earn an income from them. What do you think of the men and women who eke out their livelihood making those concrete and earthen pots or selling the rose garlands? They are able to survive because of these rose plants . We all eat

everyday, does it mean we all must be producing what we eat? If that were the only justifiable reason why should I stage the dramas? Why do you have to write your drama reviews? I am afraid you have some irrational anger against these roses . . . maybe it has got to do with the book *Maharajahs* you have read. Nothing that is born on this earth is a sin or crime, it is our minds that create sin and crime." Ranga now realized how widely Kalyani differed from him in his basic outlook, and this caused him even more irritation.

When it came to roses, he never changed his opinion . While he was able to appreciate Kalyani's unabated pleasure and happiness in taking care of the rose plants, he still felt her excitement was some kind of a luxury imported from the upper class society.

He saw gardening as snobbery only, nothing else. He had a long list of items falling under that category - such as breeding dogs, breeding fish, listening to cricket commentary, reading the crime novels by Perry Mason, etc. , and these always disgusted him. In fact he saw even our religious festivals, ostentatious celebrations, and political anniversaries in the same light.

So it was not easy for him to accept his wife's personal tastes for simply what they were; he could not just give up his personal convictions amassed over a long period of time.

So finally they stopped talking about roses and other flowers.

Ranga saw how he had given up his friends, neighbors, duties and responsibilities and even books because of her, yet here she was unwilling to sacrifice even one single rose plant from her past; he could vividly remember how fanatically Kalyani was determined to uproot every single rose plant from her old garden and replant it in the new one. His reaction was certainly extreme, yet he didn't realize its intensity. He was also repressing his hurt feelings toward her without ever revealing them in public.

The first discord between Kalyani and Ranga arose out of roses, but Kalyani was not too much concerned about it, neither did she think it had caused an ill will between them. Yet, whenever she happened to see the roses, she could not help recalling Ranga's harsh comments.

The chimes from the temple bell had subsided. Just before the last chime had died down, the milkman was at the door announcing his arrival with a bell.

Kalyani, who was in the garden examining the various buds, flowers and the thin, long stems like a woman's fingers cut and pruned here and there, heard the milkman and turned toward him. As the milkman opened the gate and let himself in, she went inside the house to bring a vessel and collect the milk from him.

Now Pattamma was no more living with her. Last month Pattamma and the *tabala* player Dhamu were married in a ceremony that was personally arranged and celebrated by Kalyani and Ranga much against Pattamma's mothers' wishes. Since then Pattamma and Dhamu have moved away to another house.

Nowadays Kalyani was able to manage the kitchen all by herself. An old woman was recently hired to take care of other domestic chores; an old man is now in charge of the garden.

The servants will be home around eight.

It was when she entered the kitchen to prepare coffee that Kalyani remembered Pattamma. Today Kalyani has a busy schedule before her - a drama performance at night, and a stage rehearsal in the afternoon; she had better get ready and try to finish the domestic chores well ahead of time. At times like this when she felt overwhelmed with work, Kalyani recalled her good old days with Pattamma.

When Annasami had casually mentioned to her about Pattamma and Dhamu meeting in private, Kalyani's response was quick. She knew Ranga was very proud and pleased about her seizing the matter right away, and as a matter of fact, he has been congratulating her saying that her actions in favor of Pattamma were quite bold, lofty and noble.

When Kalyani wrote to Pattamma's mother Sundaravalli about the situation fast developing, that lady lost no time in coming over to their place - ready for a fight.

That day the front hall in Kalyani's house presented the sight of a court in session.

Though Annasami, Ranga, Kalyani, Dhamu and Pattu were all lined up on the same side, Sundaravalli was prepared to take them all in a stride.

Halfway through, Annasami changed his position, and leaned toward Sundaravalli.

"If Pattamma's mother is opposed to this marriage, what can we do?" he asked Kalyani. "We can't get involved in this! You better send back Pattamma with her mother!" Kalyani now recalled how she was amused by Annasami's sudden gesture - as he threw up the towel on his shoulder and was about to walk away from the situation on hand - the scene still made her laugh.

"What are you laughing at, all by yourself?" Ranga asked her. He had just then got up from the bed and come directly to the kitchen.

"I was thinking about Pattamma," Kalyani explained to him. "I was just remembering how Annasami that day suddenly started supporting my aunt."

Ranga let off a long sigh. He warmly recalled the love between Dhamu and Pattu - he knew they believed their love was something special, it seemed to transcend their lives.

Sundaravalli, Pattu's mother, had already been informed of the impending plans for the marriage between Ranga and Kalyani, and she had earlier sent her blessings to the couple.

But when she came to know that Pattu was to marry Dhamu, Sundaravalli was totally against it. She said she had already selected a much better alliance for her daughter; had she known Kalyani would be doing something like this to her daughter, she said, she would have never left Pattu in Kalyani's custody in the first place. She then requested that Ranga, as a member of her family, mediate in the matter and settle the dispute between her and Kalyani and see to it that Pattu would consent to return to the village with her mother.

It was Ranga who had invited Dhamu to Kalyani's house so that Sundaravalli could personally take a look at her daughter's fiance. Dhamu just sat there in a corner, silent, his head bowed.

Kalyani stated the situation on hand. "It is not something terribly complicated," she said looking at Sundaravalli. "It so happens that Pattu and Dhamu are fond of each other. At first I was not aware of their love. I simply thought because they seem to be interested in one other and, if you approve, then this marriage can take place. However, if you are against it, we can't do anything about it. Just like our Iyer (she meant

Annasami) was saying a few minutes ago, can we force you into this? Pattu is your daughter, and you are entitled to decide her future. You can take her back with you and settle the marriage with the boy you have in mind. What do you say?" She looked at Ranga to see if he concurred in her opinion.

"But what is your personal opinion in the matter?" Ranga nudged her. "What do *you* think of that boy Dhamu - do you approve of him? After you state your opinion in the matter, we can leave it to their decision."

"How is our opinion going to help anyone?" Kalyani asked in a voice tinged with a little bitterness. "I don't want to say more because someone may even suggest I am not even qualified to give advice to others." She was not certainly afraid to speak her mind.

Ranga then addressed Pattu: "Listen to me," he said. "I think you need to listen to your mother because she knows what is best for you. What more can you do?"

Before Ranga could finish, Pattammal raised her head and looked across all of them.

"*Akka*," she said addressing Kalyani in a voice that brought out her courage and determination. "I had believed all along that you will support me. If you all decided that I must return to my village with my mother, rest assured that I wouldn't elope with Dhamu; not that I can't do that, but Dhamu and I have already decided that we shouldn't do anything that makes us a laughing stock before others. But I want to make this clear. When my mother decides to arrange another boy for me, I won't be alive. You can just wait and see. Let us say today I am leaving all of you and returning to the village with my mother. In a few days you will get a letter in the mail saying Pattamma died ...." She broke down feeling her voice choke; Dhamu started sobbing, covering his face with hands. Ranga too felt his eyes turn moist, and Annasami took off his glasses and kept on wiping his eyes with the towel.

Kalyani reached to Pattu and pressed her shoulders.

Sundaravalli was speechless; she sat on the floor and silently cried.

When they all disbursed, Ranga privately called Dhamu and assured him everything would be fine. "Don't worry, be brave," he told him. "Your marriage with Pattu will surely take place."

Kalyani had a long conversation with Sundaravalli in private suggesting that she give up her stubborn attitude toward her daughter's marriage.

Except Kalyani everyone believed in their hearts that Pattammal, once she was deprived of Dhamu's company in her life, would commit suicide. Her facial expression and the way she stated her position seemed to reinforce their belief that she actually meant it; they were a little frightened by her firm stand.

After this incident Ranga had time and again lauded Pattu's chaste heart and firm determination.

Now, with coffee in her hand, Kalyani could read Ranga's mind full of memories as he let out a sigh. She recalled Pattu-Dhamu wedding celebrated in a grand manner in Tirupati.

With no formal rituals, and not even a simple meal, Ranga and Kalyani were united in a register marriage. Yet, as Annasami teased them on that occasion, Ranga and Kalyani took upon themselves to perform Pattu's marriage with all the trappings of a conventional ceremony.

"I didn't enjoy the opportunity of attending a party at your wedding," Annasami had complained at the time. "How about your coming to my house for a feast? I have been planning one for some time but you were turning it down. Now, when we return to Madras after this wedding, I would like to invite you both to my home for a lunch. Kalyani, I will hold you responsible. If you are not showing up this time, I refuse to visit you any time in the future!"

It was while they were at Annasami's house that a feeling began to grow in Ranga's mind that the discord that arose between him and Kalyani over the rose plants was just the beginning, and would gradually mushroom into several such strifes.

During the lunch, Ranga had referred to Pattu's tenacity in love and her determination. Kalyani heard him in silence as he lectured for a long time.

She has been surprised by his recent comments on the subject of love. She had thought all along that Ranga had no sentimental feelings about love or how lovers were often willing to sacrifice for one another.

Here was someone, she felt, who, in keeping with his contempt for political rhetoric, dismissed one's claim of love for flowers or pets as a kind of vanity; yet he seemed naive enough to call love among two teenagers a lofty ideal; it seemed to go against his nature.

"I am really surprised at your comments," she said. "If you come across a love scene in our drama I know how you would tear it apart in your reviews. I think this Pattamma's love affair is also something like that - an example of melodrama. At her age, everybody feels and acts that way. But nobody will die for that kind of love, and certainly no intelligent person will go that far."

Ranga felt he could intellectually agree with her position; he could even bring himself to argue exactly what she just said, and what is more important, she had learnt all these verbal tricks from him. He was annoyed by her opposition to him, but still tried to restrain himself.

"You are a woman, and you must be able to understand Pattu's feelings," he said. "When lovers are desperate enough to say they want to kill themselves, you must show compassion at their plight. Don't you think they deserve some sympathy? Can you think of everyone in the world reacting the way they did? I believe their feelings should be respected."

Kalyani was not silenced by his words. Annasami was listening to their arguments as he was sitting next to them. Annasami's daughter was busy serving them food, and his wife was totally preoccupied with her kitchen and guiding her daughter, now and then, to take a good care of the guests; she hardly paid any attention to the conversation between Ranga and Kalyani.

"Dhamu is a nice boy," Kalyani continued. "That was the main reason why I felt Pattu should marry him, and I was not certainly taken in by her threat of suicide. Maybe Pattu thought she was speaking the truth, but I knew she would never go to any extreme step, and would, sooner or later, get over her disappointment in love. My aunt is always a kind of nervous, so she took her daughter's threat quite seriously and simply surrendered to her! Pattu is really a smart girl, she knew how to deal with her mother, and she certainly did! Of course, her threat to kill herself had nothing to do with love or anything!"

Ranga replied with a loud laughter: "You are looking at the world from your own point of view," he said. "You need an entirely different perspective to understand that mindset. I am afraid you don't get it!"

"I can certainly understand that mindset," Kalyani replied. "I am telling you that will eventually change. People who threaten to kill themselves do not give up their lives that easily."

"People may not actually give up their lives," Annasami now intervened. "But if they declare such an intention, we can be sure they are in love."

Kalyani soon forgot all about those arguments at Annasami's house. She was now free, proud and happy in her new married life, savoring and enjoying her time in Ranga's company; her verbal bouts with Ranga did not as much stay in her conscience because they were part of her uninhibited expressions when she was face to face with him, and simply flowed and merged into her other day to day memories.

But Ranga was still thinking about their hot conversation at Annasami's party after their return to home that night. He was restless and totally confused.

He tried to probe deep into Kalyani's mind and her attitude toward him: *She is an artist. A connoisseur. In the same way she admires the roses, her own beauty, her makeup, her talents, and treats them as her hallmarks to be savored, cherished and preserved, she also considers my partnership an important part of that life.* What is wrong with that?

Still, as the idea began to sink in, he felt repelled by it. "Is that all to life?" he asked himself. "What about personal relationships? Can a woman enter into a relationship just to satisfy her ego, happiness or simply because she can buy off people like some luxury items?"

"What can one make of such a relationship - albeit a convenient one? Is it love? Is it not something like a business transaction? Aren't our traditional family ties more meaningful and nobler?"

'When Pattu declared she was ready to sacrifice her own life for Dhamu,' Ranga thought, 'one can certainly see some naiveté in her attitude, but that kind of love has in it the elements of sacrifice, determination and purpose. It is not born out of ego, selfishness and is not certainly based on mutual accommodation. It is not that everybody feels that way . . . and indeed it doesn't happen to everybody.' Ranga sighed at this acknowledgment.

Though he appeared cheerful and happy in Kalyani's company, he was often absorbed in his own thoughts often followed by deep sighs. The night he and Kalyani had returned from the party in Annasami's house, he was mulling over in his bed.

Kalyani was helping herself with betel leaves. She would normally chew tobacco when Annasami was around, but of late, she stopped taking tobacco even in Annasami's absence if Ranga was around; the simple reason was Ranga used no tobacco; even more important, she would not be able to carry on conversation with him while chewing tobacco.

But today Ranga was in no mood for conversation. He was lying on his back in the double bed staring at the ceiling fan above - watching his image on its nickel plate.

After a short while Kalyani came in and took her place on the bed next to him.

She didn't know what was on his mind; she boldly pushed herself against his chest and asked, "What are you thinking?"

"Remember our conversation this afternoon? I am still thinking about it."

She bit her lips and started thinking: "What did we talk about this afternoon?"

He thought she must be joking; she must be remembering what they had talked about earlier that afternoon, Ranga told himself, and now she was trying to dismiss his thoughts as of no consequence. He didn't feel like reminding her the essence of that conversation, and kept his mouth shut.

"Why don't you tell me . . . what did we talk about?" she gently fondled his chin.

"It was about love, we talked about love . . ." His reply came only after she needled him a few more times.

Kalyani tightly held him and giggled even as his thick hair felt the warmth of their intimacy. She showered him with kisses and rambled away - and every time she planted a kiss she punctuated it with a word.

"Why- do - we - have to - talk-about - love? We - are- already- in - love! Love - needs no- language! Does - it? Why - do - we - need - to- talk - about - it?" She was teasing him, her arms tightening and releasing his body from her grip, while her lips continued to press on him here, there and everywhere. Ranga took her face in his hands and, riveting his eyes deep into hers, he coolly asked: "Do you really love me? Do you know what love means?"

She was not hurt by those stinging remarks, she didn't understand their full import.

"Your coffee is getting old," she reminded him. "You seem lost in some thoughts with the coffee cup in your hand." She drew a chair next to him at the dining table and touched his shoulder.

He was wearing a tee shirt; Kalyani's fingers fondly played on his bare shoulder as she bent her chin over to his nape. Her lips whispered again: "What are you thinking?"

Ranga eagerly gripped her hand. He was ashamed to pour out the feelings lurking deep inside him; he was painfully aware that he could neither fully understand them nor express them. It hurt him even more to think that his life lacked the clarity and happiness that were so easily evident in Kalyani's. He blamed himself for his state of frustration and confusion, and thought it was only proper that he secretly resolve it by himself. That meant he needed to clarify certain matters, allay his suspicions, and then begin to trust his instincts. Only Kalyani could offer those clarifications, help put those suspicions to rest and finally confirm his instincts. She was his savior, his eyes desperately sought her help.

Kalyani saw his anxious face and sensed the turmoil in his mind. Still, she was unclear about the situation on hand. She tried to console him like a child so that after some persuasion he drank the coffee.

As she watched him drink the coffee, she thought: "Here is somebody who had sacrificed everything to share his life with me. I had better keep him happy and not hurt his feelings. If he becomes trapped in a kind of emotional bind or male ego, I need to empathize with him and try to make him feel happy." She internalized all these thoughts without ever verbalizing them.

"I have a lot of work to do," she told him. "I have a drama performance to night and a stage rehearsal in the afternoon. Do you want to get ready for shower?" She went to the bathroom to prepare hot water for him.

After coffee Ranga lit a cigarette and walked into the hall where he found a few Tamil and English magazines and dailies. He eagerly started reading them.

When Kalyani returned from bathroom to ask him to get ready for the shower, he was still immersed in his newspapers. She thought he might be done with them in half an hour or so and went back to the kitchen.

She knew Ranga would normally forget his surroundings when it came to reading news items and the political matters of the day.

When Ranga had the shower Kalyani would accompany him to the bath room and wait for him outside. She treated him like a child, letting him stand in the bathroom, personally taking care of his needs. She would even clean up his nails; and after the bath she would apply powder all over and gently touch his body. Ranga was always amused by the fact that she enjoyed pampering him in every way she could.

The time was nine when Ranga combed his hair and got ready for breakfast. Kalyani was waiting for him. She had no immediate tasks at hand; she needed to attend to the next set of tasks once Ranga left for work; the servant maid was washing the dishes in the backyard. As Kalyani approached the bed room to collect the clothes that needed washing, Ranga was coming in the opposite direction.

"Please wait for me," she told him and rushed to the bedroom, collected the clothes for laundry and dropped them off to the servant maid before returning to the dining room. Ranga had a magazine on his left hand even as he was getting ready for breakfast.

This had become almost daily routine when she had to put up with Ranga's attention swinging from the magazine to breakfast. She mildly rebuked him and tried to pull the newspaper away as she sat next to him. He too smiled and calmly laid the magazine on the dining table.

Kalyani served him breakfast on a plate. Ranga began to eat and then handed over to her the magazine to look at a news item he had just finished reading; he spoke no words as the magazine changed the hands.

It was an English magazine; the news item had a single column title about an incident- it was displayed in an obscure corner. "What is the big deal?" Kalyani thought and glanced at it.

It was about a pair of young lovers who committed suicide somewhere in a hotel. Kalyani wondered why Ranga wanted her to read it. She stared at him, confused by his suggestion and quite frankly disgusted at the consequences of reading about such incidents.

Ranga was silently eating the breakfast; he raised his eyes toward her.

She didn't understand the meaning of a word in that report. "What is the meaning of the word 'liaison'?" she asked. He asked her to spell every letter of that word, and then explained to her that in the context of the news she was reading it meant 'illicit love'. He helped her to correctly pronounce that word.

"I remember Pattamma's words that day," he said. "The reason lovers feel heart-broken and kill themselves has everything to do with their falling in love in their youth."

"There is no particular age when people will do crazy things," Kalyani commented.

*How can she be so crude,* Ranga thought. He steadied himself and asked.

"How do you feel when you read this news item?"

"Of course I feel sorry for them. But when I think about it, the whole thing is so disgusting!"

"Disgusting, that's what you said? Don't you feel sympathy for them?"

"Yes, I do. That's why I said I feel sorry for them."

"All right," Ranga said as if he had settled a question between them. Later, after washing his hands on the plate, he began as if subjecting her to yet another test. "Do you think these young lovers don't know how to live? Do you think they are cowards?"

"I won't call them cowards," Kalyani replied. "But I will say they don't know how to live; I will say they hate life. I will even go far as to say they are mentally diseased."

Ranga lit a cigarette. Kalyani suspected Ranga could be carrying on this discussion for an hour or so, so seemed his refrain and determination. She always enjoyed conversation with him, but today the



subject was not up to her taste. Again, she was overwhelmed with the tasks ahead of her, tasks she could attend to only after Ranga's departure. Still she wanted to please him; "What the heck," she said and sat on a chair close to him to continue the conversation.

"Why don't you have your lunch?" he asked.

"I am going to wait for a while," she said. "I need to have my shampoo done, I have a lot of things to do." Ranga didn't hear any of these words.

"I wonder," he said, "how much these young lovers loved each other, so that they were willing to sacrifice their lives for each other?"

"How come you and Pattu are so obsessed with death that you keep on glorifying love?" she asked. "If those young lovers had not killed themselves and chosen to spend their lives together, I can understand their passion for life and appreciate the intensity of their love." She again smiled at him.

That was a sane and healthy rejoinder from Kalyani and it hit Ranga smack on the face. He forced a smile, but desperately searched for words - words that would hurt her feelings, hurt them really hard.

"Kalyani, let me ask this. It doesn't matter if you don't love me even after these thirty years. But have you ever loved anybody- I mean anybody - at any time in your life?" He delivered the blow quite deviously and suddenly - he relished his own strategy; he was still smiling at her.

Kalyani felt a chill go down her spine. She steadied herself for a minute steeling herself against his verbal assault.

*What is actually going on here between the two of us?* she began to wonder.

For the first time in her life she could understand the unbelievable, frontal attack on her personal honesty and integrity.

She was tongue-tied for a while, then let out a pathetic laugh. She was haunted by a question tearing her heart apart: *How could he possibly accuse me that I don't love him?*

*Maybe I never loved him, is that possible?* She was seized by a self doubt. *Can that be true?*

'Maybe I don't deserve his love,' she thought. That possibility unsettled her.

'Why would he mistake my love for something else?' she asked herself.

"Where did I go wrong in expressing my love for him?" After so many days, when their relationship has come this far, she saw a crisis in her marriage, and she didn't know how to cope with it. What is more, she thought, where does it leave her, even if she could make some sense out of such a crisis?

Only now could she understand the reason behind Ranga's strange behavior in recent days - his studied silence and aloofness wrapped in deep thoughts. She shuddered at this realization inflicting pain on her heart and mind.

"Kalyani, why are you silent?" Ranga inquired. "Did I say something wrong?"

He felt a little guilty even as he smiled and touched her affectionately.

She gripped his hand, and felt like crying. She resisted that feeling, knowing fully well that Ranga would easily misinterpret her tears to mean she was acknowledging her unsatisfied love toward him. She was determined not to react to his accusation with tears.

Ranga thought he had gone overboard and that he should not have asked her that kind of question.

"Kalyani, we have been arguing about several things," he tried to comfort her. "This is just one of those things. You must not be offended by any questions I happen to ask."

Kalyani smiled at him. Her anguish was still transparent in that smile.

"I am sorry, please don't feel bad," he told her. "I am late for work, and you have a lot of work to do. We will talk again in the afternoon." He approached and kissed her on the forehead. Then he rushed to his room to change his clothes and leave for work.

Now, nearly after a year, Kalyani recalled her anonymous letter to Ranga and how he was able to guess correctly that it came from her. She had written in that letter:

*"If you know the author of this letter, please and come see me."*

How could he guess that she indeed wrote that letter?

She remembered the answer he had given at the time.

He began saying it was probably the way she looked at him through the mirror when Ranga had stood with Annasami in the makeup room.

Then he listed the other reasons: after their mutual introduction by Annasami she complimented him for his short stories - she had read them all and remembered them very well - even though they were written some ten years earlier; he remembered how that night Kalyani, standing on the stage against the dark background, cast her eyes at Ranga smoking a cigarette in the makeup room. Kalyani now vividly recalled all these scenes, one after another.

She stirred herself out of those thoughts and arose from her seat; Ranga will be soon leaving for office and she wanted to see him off.

Ranga came close to her and affectionately addressed her. She tried to smile.

"Kalyani," he said. "I shouldn't have asked you that question. I was wrong ..."

"You are late for work," she told him, her tone generous and reassuring. "We can talk again this afternoon."

"You don't feel sad at what I said?"

"I can't say I am not sad," she replied. "I will be lying if I said such a thing. But then, what if I feel sad? Only those who cause us sadness are also capable of giving us happiness." She was very generous with her words.

He wanted to hug her, but because he noticed the servant maid in the backyard, he suggested she accompany him to his room.

Later, they happily emerged out of his room.

"There is the eye paint on your cheek," she told him and rubbed it off with the loose end of her sari.

He pushed his scooter to the street and then started it. He waved his hand, and she warmly bade him farewell with her hand and a smile.

After Ranga's departure she returned to the dining room and sat in one of the chairs.

She was not smiling anymore.

*Why did he say that?* She fought back her tears and wept in private as she recalled his words again in solitude.

Ranga's conscience pricked him that he shouldn't have hurt his wife's feelings that morning. He was still trying to determine why he had suspected she didn't love him anymore. He probed deep into the events of past one year to look for any clues that might have led him to reach such a conclusion.

Ranga tried to judge Kalyani by looking at himself as an outsider, some kind of a third person. He found it hard to ignore his own family background, prejudices and principles, and look at himself and Kalyani in just human terms, it seemed just beyond him. If the task was rendered impossible, he thought, where was the point in undergoing the confusion and anguish and getting caught up in a kind of mental exercise?

In spite of his formal education and his tendency to approach global problems, cultural matters and political issues as an intellectual, Ranga thought, when it came to his own personal problems, he was acting strictly as an heir to his ancestors, the Adikesavalu Naicker family. That knowledge, on a few occasions, shamed him. But he could surely think of a fundamental basis for such a belief.

Kalyani's status as an artist and connoisseur, Ranga thought, was shaped by her own childhood and her exposure to the upper class lifestyles that eventually became a part of her personality without her ever realizing it. Yet Kalyani believed, and continues to believe to this day - so Ranga thought - that those cultural mores essentially belonged to her own class, and this confusion in her mind unnerved him. According to him she was totally wrong in calling attention to her exclusive cultural legacies, there was nothing redeeming or noble in them, and they were totally irrelevant to their marriage.

As the idea began to sink in that Kalyani would never be willing to sacrifice anything for him, Ranga had to accept the frailty of their marriage; there seemed to be no glue holding them together. Did he act with indecent haste in confirming their friendship and transforming it into a permanent relationship - by wily nilly dragging them both into matrimony? For the first time in his life Ranga saw himself riding on the crest of confusion wave.

But he refused to apportion any blame to Kalyani for this predicament. He could never deny the truth that Kalyani did not suggest or force this marriage on him. She was ready for any kind of relationship with him, with no qualifications whatsoever asked, whether it was temporary or permanent and even when it came with no specific assurances or expectations. And because Ranga didn't forget this important element in their relationship even though he acknowledged that their marriage was probably a hasty decision arrived at with no regard to its consequences, he could not attach even a token blame to Kalyani. He realized he and he alone was responsible for his plight.

And therein lay, he suspected, the seed of his current predicament. What if he was nursing a nagging suspicion all along that Kalyani's frank albeit unbending stand against him actually meant that she desired no personal involvement with him? He felt guilty at the thought that he had selfishly duped her into a trap much against her own will.

His suspicion grew that what he finally ended up with Kalyani was a marriage of convenience, on her own terms; this truth insulted his personal ego.

Occasionally he tried to shake his head and caution himself: what if I am indulging in some wild imagination, giving life and form to matters of no consequence? Still, there was no escape. Like the moss in a pond parting and coalescing after the impact of a stone, his mental morass swept around him time and again and easily subdued him.

He continued to talk with Kalyani as usual because he was convinced rationality would eventually persuade her to alter her rigid opinions on matters of life, love and their joint effort to make their partnership successful and rewarding. But invariably every time he was in conversation with her Ranga showed a tendency to forget the main intent of their conversation and poke fun at her by uttering something that hurt her feelings or seduced him with a sense of pride and satisfaction.

Kalyani, who always discerned something worthy and beautiful in everything that Ranga brought into their conversation, was not turned off by his barbs or put-downs; her challenge to him was direct and the rebuttals straightforward. She didn't indulge in shouting matches or counter arguments. She had great faith that Ranga would appreciate her intelligence and depth of knowledge. Thus she felt obliged to do her best, made a special bid at asserting her position, and eagerly and seriously debated the issues with him.

When Ranga listened to her arguments in silence Kalyani even imagined that he was impressed with her progressive views. She was inclined to argue with him at considerable length only because Ranga seemed to encourage her to think for herself and take a stand. It was as if he was testing her steadfastness to her own opinions by bombarding her with the same question again and again often disguising it in a different form and style.

She could see his mind was in turmoil but was unable to fathom the reason for it.

But that morning when Ranga posed her a question culminating in his lack of faith in her, his own agony and frustration, Kalyani felt as if a screen before her was torn apart. She felt a total void in her heart and mind.

Her very first reaction at his accusation was one of emptiness. She felt isolated and desperate as if all that she felt supportive of her now seemed remote and beyond her reach. But when Ranga approached her to openly apologize over his comments, she forgot her pain and regained her composure.

And after he was gone, she once again felt empty in her heart. Maybe she doesn't know how to love him, she told herself. Why doesn't he understand her love? Does she deserve love from others? She felt small and low inside; how could she possibly restore his faith in her, that question was mind-boggling. Though she was preoccupied with her daily duties and responsibilities her mind was again and again seized with these questions.

At his office Ranga seemed totally disinterested in work. He smoked for a while, proof-read a couple of galleys; he had to a lot of writing, but he couldn't bring himself to do anything worthwhile.

He thought Kalyani by now would have got over her initial reaction at his uncalled-for remarks; still he felt uneasy, he had expressed his feelings so openly. He checked his watch several times. He desperately wanted to rush back home and comfort her; he wanted to forget the bad things he said that morning; he wanted to make love to her and thereby melt away all their vexations in ecstasy and physical gratification.

Kalyani was eagerly awaiting him. He was home earlier than usual. Since they moved, Ranga was joining her for lunch at their home almost everyday.

Soon after his arrival she thought he would change and come to the dining room. Some ten minutes had passed, and then she found him in bed. She sat next to him.

"Don't you want to come for lunch?" she asked. He arose from the bed, took her and threw a friendly smile. She returned his smile. "What is it?" she inquired.

Their minds were now seized with one question. A single incident was at the center of their confrontation as could be seen from their disarming smiles. There was no cover-up here, and their smiles betrayed no pretensions.

Their bodies were very close to each other on the bed in a tight embrace as his hands were around her waist, her head bent toward him, and her hands rested on his nape.

"I shouldn't have asked you that question; even if it occurred to me."

"What is wrong about asking if you actually thought so?"

"Yes, it is true . . . I thought so."

She didn't ask why he thought about her that way. It would serve no purpose.

He again expected a conciliatory reply from her. He was like a teenager to her, the image certainly didn't fit him.

"Do you still love me?" he asked her.

"I don't know," she replied, and continued. "I always thought I did. But now that you ask me that kind of question, I begin to wonder if I was

only imagining that I loved you. But I can tell you this much: the kind of love you are talking about doesn't seem to be essential to a married life."

Her reply shook him up. He raised his eyebrows and weighed in her words. Then he fired away the words rapidly at her: "Then what do you think are essential things to life? Rose plants? Facial makeup? Your drama company? Or is it a man and woman living together?"

She smiled to herself without opening the lips. As she slowly began to wipe out the drops of sweat on his forehead with the tip of her sari, she told him: "The essential things in life are sincerity, honesty, and compassion."

"They are the most essential things in one's life - sincerity, honesty and compassion," she continued. "I will always be sincere to you, I will be always supportive . . . the way you are supportive to me . . . When it comes to love, everyone has their own definition of love, so I am trying to answer your question this way. Love may be essential to short stories and dramas, but life is something more serious; life is not a drama. I remember your telling me some time ago that we are not teenagers . . . I am not the first woman you have ever met in your life, nor you the first man I have ever met in my life . . . Let us live showing sincerity, honesty and compassion to one another. If you believe this kind of relationship is not love as others tell us, so be it. Let us leave that love to remain at its high pedestal, it will be safe and sound there. Now let us get ready for our lunch." She changed his heart and state of mind and led him to the dining room. Ranga accompanied her in silence.

He was silent during the lunch. He suspected what he just heard from her certainly went against her grain. The notion of sincerity she alluded to could serve as a basis even for an impersonal business relationship. Ranga was appalled by Kalyani's suggestion that sincerity - sincerity alone - could be the mainstay of partnership in human lives. He believed life was something that can hardly be subjected to a cool and rational analysis; one needed passion and excitement to grasp life and make it a wholesome experience. If a rational mind was all that one needed to understand and enjoy life, why do people have to get married? Where is the need for conjugal life? Those who plump for intellectual thinking have after all taken a vow to keep away from the mundane world; they have deliberately shunned the simple joys of life. What kind of family life is that which glorifies ascetic living? Kalyani has been lecturing about passion in one's life, yet what kind of passion has she in mind? If life is just for living, then he might just well be satisfied with this food she is now serving! This will be more than enough! Why does she have

to prepare different varieties of dishes, even special ones to cater to his tastes? Life is not just one piece of a deal, Ranga thought, it is several things, and how rich and diverse are the parts that make it whole! How can Kalyani claim that love is not essential to marriage - after all marriage is a relationship that links two total strangers who seek to share their experiences, each partner committing to live as the other's better half. If love is absent in such an alliance of shared experiences and feelings, doesn't it just degenerate into what Bernard Shaw cynically called - legalized prostitution?"

When their eyes met again, they were smiling at each other. Ranga seemed less than pleased with the lunch, and Kalyani suspected it may have to do with her preparing it in a hurry that morning.

Then she remembered about the stage rehearsal coming up in the afternoon.

She had asked Dhamu to bring Pattu with him.

As she handed Ranga the towel after he washed his hands after the lunch, told him: "Pattu will be here soon. I have sent for her. I have asked her to stay and attend the drama performance. Do you want to come for the performance too?"

"I have to think about it," Ranga said. "I have already seen it." He returned to the dining table and lit a cigarette.

"Why don't you have your lunch?" he asked her. "The time is half past one. You say they will be here by two." Then he fondly asked, "Can I help?" and served her some vegetable curry.

"All right . . . that's fine . . . Thanks," Kalyani responded with a smile. "You don't have to do any of that stuff. Please sit down."

He sat in a chair opposite her and smoked; suddenly he remembered Devaki, his first wife, for no particular reason.

He knew he had never been subjected to the kind of feelings in Devaki's company he was now going through, day after day. Those were the days when he felt he needed a partner, a woman, an indispensable ally in a man's life; he respected her role in his life and loved her. And when she was gone from his life, he mourned her loss.

During those days he firmly believed that love was kind of naive and immature feeling. He never felt his love for Devaki with the ardor that now possessed him.

Now, at thirty-five, he found himself in an awkward situation with Kalyani triggering a reexamination of his values following her comments and arguments. He tried to dismiss his thoughts with a mild laughter which now seemed to be infected with a little bitterness.

As Kalyani raised her head, her view was obscured by his cigarette smoke.

Soon the music party accompanied by Annasami arrived. They got ready for rehearsal after rolling a large carpet in the front hall. Dhamu was missing among them because he had gone to fetch his wife Pattamma from their home.

Kalyani, who was chewing pan after lunch, heard a taxi arrive at the front gate and went out to receive Pattu. She saw Annasami instead and welcomed him with a smile. "Please come in," she said. "It is as if you have come at the right time to offer me tobacco!" She extended her hand toward him.

Annasami went in, sat on the carpet and started playing the *tabala* awaiting Dhamu. Soon the musical sounds from harmonium, clarinet and the violin filled the atmosphere.

Ranga closed his ears in a mock protest and told Kalyani he was leaving for work, and went to his room to change. As he walked past Annasami in the hall, Annasami teased him by pounding on the *tabala* even harder.

As he was changing, Kalyani joined him. Because he saw her chewing pan and tobacco he hastened to gesture her with his hands - to stay away from him.

"I am using only the mild *panneer* variety tobacco," she said trying to put his mind to rest. "This is no worse than those cigarettes you smoke everyday."

"Cigarette smoke just goes up in air," Ranga said. "On the other hand, I am afraid this tobacco stuff might fall on my clothes. By the way, Annasami seems to be in his best form today, he is pounding away at *tabala* with such a great force! Is he mad at his wife or something?"

"When it comes to organizing drama performances, Annasami is an all rounder," Kalyani said. "However, when it comes to speaking his lines, he can come out with all kinds of nonsense! In fact today's rehearsal is mainly to help him brush up his lines. You would never know how atrocious he could become - sometimes - on the stage!" She vividly recalled in her mind one of the recent incidents that set her off giggling.

"Did he cause some kind of disaster on stage?" Ranga asked with a smile. Because Kalyani didn't reply, he hugged her close to him and wanted her to explain. She tried to free herself from him and begged him to let her go so that she could go out and clear her mouth. Later when he saw her return, with her hands trying to straighten her disheveled hair, he again asked: "What did Annasami actually say ? Why don't you tell me?"

She didn't want to say it in the open. She came close to him, gripped his shoulder and then whispered in his ears. Because she kept laughing while murmuring those words, Ranga didn't clearly understand them.

"Tell me first, and then you can laugh, " he said and fondly pressed her.

She stopped laughing and again whispered to him. Ranga responded at once, and his wild laughter rose above the shouts and clamor of the musicians in the hall.

"Mr. Annasami!" he exclaimed. He couldn't resist rushing out to personally ask him about it, when Kalyani used all her force to back off with a mild rebuke. "Never do such a thing," she warned him. "He will think I am mean and disgusting." She was serious, and stopped Ranga, who was still laughing as if bursting at his seams.

"It is getting late, you must leave now," she said and, as she started to leave the room, Ranga again extended his hand to draw her close to him. As she hastened to escape from his grip she inadvertently hit herself against the one of the doors that opened with a bang.

Annasami turned his head and looked. Kalyani remained calm as if nothing has happened and coolly returned to the hall and sat among the rehearsal group.

Dhamu and Pattu were now entering the house.

"Pattu, come in," Kalyani fondly welcomed her. "Looks like you will show up if and only when I send for you. Don't you feel like visiting your sister once in a while?" She was feigning resentment at Pattu, who now appeared shy as she stood next to Kalyani.

"*Akka*, I am thinking of visiting you almost everyday, but I need an escort. My husband comes home everyday only at eleven . . . "

Kalyani called out for Ranga. "Please come over," she said. "Your heroine is here!"

Ranga, getting ready to leave for work, was cleaning his cooling glasses, and he warmly welcomed Pattu and Dhamu. "Pattu, how is life?" he asked.

"Our lives are just like our minds, that's all I can say."

"That's really something," Ranga said admiring her words. "Looks like you have learnt a lot of things in just two months!" Then he returned to Kalyani. "Did you hear what your sister just said? *Our lives are just like our minds!* Sometimes people come up with profound thoughts just like that, it is amazing."

He let the words sink again into his mind: *Our lives are just like our minds!*

Suddenly Annasami started pounding away at *tabala* in excitement.

"*Sar*, do you want to practice your *tabala* or read your lines?" Kalyani asked Annasami. She casually took the *tabala* from his hands and put it away. "You can't afford to utter any more nonsense on the stage!"

"That was no nonsense, " Annasami was defensive. "I was just trying something for a comedy effect, that's all!"

Dhamu now intervened and addressed Annasami. "Can we give you a title - call you the king of nonsense?" He continued to say something when Annasami angrily cut him off. " You shut up!"

"*Sar*, do you remember what was your screw up - I mean, the royal screw up?" Kalyani said addressing Annasami, and then turned to Ranga. "I don't think you know about it. You must hear this before you leave for office, it will take only a minute!" She once again went out to clear

the *pan* from her mouth and, when she returned, she tried to narrate an incident from one of their recent stage performances.

As soon as she began her story several members of her audience who were already familiar with that incident started clapping their hands and tittering among themselves.

"It was the climax scene in a drama called '*The Home and the Outside World*,' when a guy comes along and tries to strangle me," Kalyani began. "Annasami was acting as my father, so he is shocked at what is happening to me; he has quite few lines to express his outrage on the stage following this particular scene. I knew it - it was my gut feeling that he would commit some guffaw - still I thought no big deal because he was supposed to be saying things under tension and, even if he did something out of line, I thought, it may end up actually sounding natural in this context. And what happened? He - my father- comes along and stands on the stage just like a potted plant, saying nothing! The bad guy is supposed to strangle me only after Annasami's speech, but he is keeping quiet! So the fellow starts choking my neck, and I try to tip off Annasami by shouting at him, 'Father, why are you silent? Please say something, now!' And you know what he did? He stares at me and says: 'What can I say, I have forgotten my lines.' He turns around and yells, 'Where is the prompter?' As Kalyani brought her story to a conclusion Ranga joined others in a wild laughter.

"No . . . No . . . This is too much," Annasami protested. "I agree I forgot my lines and was at my wit's end for a few minutes, but I never called for the prompter. They are just making up this story."

"Iyer is trying to put his best face, he is still trying," Dhamu was now saying, and Annasami's face grew tense and red. "You shut up," he screamed at him.

"Are you telling me you people never do anything wrong?" Annasami shouted at those teasing him. "Do you realize how many things I am supposed to take care of in this drama company? I am the guy who negotiates deals with the theater owners; I am supposed to take care of catering services for all the employees; if the *chutney* is missing for *vadai*, this Dhamu fellow will run up to me with the snack packet and throw it at me. As soon as I have disposed off the vendor who supplies the sweets, I am expected to go and attend to the next scene on the stage. Sometimes I have to sit in the pits and give instructions to time and coordinate the scenes. So I always feel stressed out and, once in a while, I forget the lines." He appeared pathetic and sad.

Ranga tried to calm him. "Mr. Annasami," he asked. "Are you saying these people who are making fun of you don't know what pains you are going through everyday? In a large company like this, when people get together, they feel like having some fun at others' expense. It is just a talk, they mean no harm or disrespect to you." Then he put on the cooling glasses and took leave of them. Kalyani followed him to the door to see him off.

Soon afterwards a scooter was seen speeding away from the house.

When he arrived at work in the afternoon Ranga busied himself writing the matter pending from the morning hours. He was determined to concentrate on work, and did so till four.

The office boy brought him tea at half an hour past four. Ranga sipped the tea and lit a cigarette. He has been writing for two hours with his head bowed down in deep concentration. He slightly pulled away from the table, eased himself on the chair, then raised his head and observed the ceiling fan above.

He remembered Pattu's words earlier that afternoon. "Our lives are just like our minds." The words seemed so trite and commonplace, yet how meaningful!

"What is life after all?" Ranga asked himself. "We all have only one life to live on this earth, yet why is it everyone sees it in so many different ways! Is it not because of our minds? If two people have the same mind, they would never see the problems in their lives differently. There is no conflict. If there is a sense of common understanding and mutual usefulness, then that relationship poses no problems. That was exactly what happened in my relationship with Devaki, my first wife, and I had no problems with her. My mind was attuned to that kind of relationship and I was happy. But now, from the day I had met Kalyani, I have been subjected to so many feelings. Are they not meaningful and real? Are feelings only for exploiting one another? To serve only a kind of mutual accommodation? Kalyani says love is not essential to marriage! What does she exactly mean by that? Does it not mean she doesn't love me? Or is she exercising caution in committing herself because she thinks I will take her for granted? Is it possible that her caution and hesitation are telling me that she doesn't actually trust me? If she is really that careful and independent, why did she encourage me this far in the first place? Granted she didn't herself seek this relationship with me, the fact of the matter is she did everything to narrow the

distance between us; again, why did she agree for this marriage?" For a long time Ranga was thinking on these lines, and then got ready to leave for home.

Only when he was riding on the scooter did he realize that Kalyani would not be home at this time; she had her drama performance. He had the house key, still he didn't want to go home because he would be alone, all by himself; the very thought was sickening.

How about attending Kalyani's drama performance? It didn't seem a good idea either. Maybe he can go to a movie-which meant he has to go home first and change; the possibility that he would change and step out of the house just for a movie tired his mind, and he shunned the idea.

Then he suddenly thought he might visit his old folks in Adikesavulu Naicker Street -T hotha, Chinna Naina, the tea shop owner . . .

It has been almost six months since he last visited them, and he felt guilty over totally forgetting them for so long. He immediately changed the scooter direction and sped along.

When he entered the Adikesavulu Naicker Street, a few women at the roadside water tap were surprised to see him. Ezumali, who noticed him from a distance, ran home to announce Ranga's arrival.

Ranga's demeanor seemed unchanged in all these six months as he set foot on this street; it was as if he was coming back to his own home from work, a daily routine in his former days in this village. He parked the scooter close the house, went up the steps and entered.

"Come on boy, come in, very glad to see you," said Thotha as she warmly welcomed him. "So you know the direction to our house! Do you still remember us after all these days?" She called out Chinna Naina - her husband-announcing Ranga's arrival. Ranga noted that she was addressing her husband as a singular person - something very common in those social circles - but he felt strange at such a salutation. Then he remembered even Devaki used to address him in singular person only.

Chinna Naina who was engaged in some carpentry work in the back yard came up to them. "Sar, please come in," he said in voice mixed with warmth and feigned respect. "How are you doing?"

Then he ordered Ezumali to keep open Ranga's room in the house. "I am taking care of your room just as I used to before you moved away,"

he said. "Every week I have it cleaned. I want to build another room above it, still working on it."

He led Ranga to his old room.

Ranga let his eyes roam around. He sadly examined his books, the rope swung across the room to hang up his clothes, his writing desk and the chair, and his bed rolled over in a corner into a bundle.

"Have a seat," said Chinna Naina and drew a chair close to him. He took out the towel on his shoulder, wiped the chair clean before Ranga sat on it.

"Please do keep visiting us now and then," he said. "After all we care for you. How long ago did you move out from us?"

"It is almost six months," Ranga replied.

"Six months?" Chinna Naina was surprised. "Seems like yesterday. You haven't thought about us for six months? How is your daughter doing? Are you visiting her regularly? Do you keep sending money regularly to her?"

Ranga chose to reply the last question. "I am sending money as usual," he said.

Then he heard the voice of *Kakka*, the tea shop owner. "How are you doing?" he inquired of Ranga. "You don't come here quite often." Ranga acknowledged his greetings.

"I came along because I haven't seen you for a long time," *Kakka* said and took leave of him. "I shall send some tea for you."

The boys and girls living in that house now gathered outside the room and were having fun watching Raaanga. Thotha too joined them.

Ranga felt gratified at their warm reception. Though these caste members strongly disliked the idea of his getting married to Kalyani in a register marriage, they seemed to have forgotten all about it and were now treating him with the same affection and generosity as before.

Soon the boy from the tea shop came up to him with a broad smile and handed over a cup of tea covered with a saucer.

"How are you doing?" Ranga asked and patted on his back.



"I am all right, " the boy said. "Only you have left us. Where do you live now?" He made a few enquiries.

"Why don't you visit me in the office?" Ranga asked.

"I will, " said the boy, and asked: "Do you have a cafeteria in your office?"

"Why? Do you want to give up Kakka's tea shop?"

"Nothing like that," the boy replied. "There are now too many workers in the tea shop. So I am wondering if I should move out at the earliest opportunity. But wherever I go I will feel like coming back to this place - I can not just give up this street and these people . . I will certainly return to this village . . ."

"Did you hear what he just said?" Chinna Naina asked Ranga. "He is a kid who roams around all places for a job so that he can barely survive; have you noticed his love and affection for us? You are not like him, you just abandoned us!"

"Why would I be here if I don't have affection for you?" Ranga asked.

"No, I am not saying anything against you," Chinna Naina assured him. "I just want to mention about this boy's special love for us."

Thotha now approached them after clearing and walking through the crowd at the doorstep. She was carrying a plate with some snacks.

Ranga laid down the tea cup on the table and took the plate from her.

Chinna Naina sat cross-legged on the floor, very near to the wall.

The young boys and girls slowly started moving away; the tea shop boy too left saying he would be back to collect the tea cup.

Chinna Naina took out a *cheroot*, snipped it with his fingers, removed the label, bit the edge and spat. Then he asked Ranga: "Did you really marry that actress in a register marriage?"

Ranga replied in the affirmative, wondering why Chinna Naina could doubt such a thing. Chinna Naina laughed to himself at Ranga's reply; he must have sensed something funny.

"But how is that possible?" he asked Ranga. "She is someone who freely mixes with strangers . . . . she also performs on the stage . . . . how could she possibly fit the family life?" He looked around to see if Thotha was within their earshot, and then continued: "This was many years ago . . . . before you were born. Those days we had no female actresses in dramas; boys, only small boys, did women's roles, and they were even better than actual women! Only later on a few women began to come out and act in public, and they gradually started drawing more and more crowds to their shows. Have you ever heard the name Sabha Ranjitham? She used to act as one of the younger sisters in a drama called '*Aravalli Suravalli*' - She was somewhere from the South and very popular. Many men - rich zamindars and seths- used to wait for hours just to get a chance to say a few words to her! And you know what happened? One day she asked her admirers: 'You all seem to so fond of me; will any one of you be willing to marry me and have a family ?' It was just a question, a simple question, but they all got so mad at her remark that they were ready to beat her up! Such is the status of actresses in our society. Anyway, that's all in the past. Ranga, listen to me: you loved a woman and you got married to her, that is fine. Now you should make sure that she gives up all this drama and cinema business, and is willing to come and live with you. You can ask her to come down right to this house and live with you and take care of you. It is only proper that she is willing to come and join you. You must never go after her, that would be a very demeaning! If you hang on to her, our caste members will begin badmouthing you!"

Ranga raised his eyebrows and began to think.

"Tell me this," Chinna Naina continued. "This actress -your wife - what is her caste?" He was trying to probe deeper, but Ranga refused a direct answer.

"I don't know," he answered. "But again, nowadays who is bothered about those things anyway? I think she belongs to our caste." Then he seriously tried to examine Naina's suggestion.

Maybe it has to do with his former association with these caste members - he now sensed a meaning and purpose in their lives. He has been feeling a peace of mind within the past one hour of his coming here and sharing his time with them. He began to feel something unreal and

phony about himself, that he actually abandoned his friends and well wishers and embraced an artificial rôle marked only by a thin veneer of self importance.

'These men and women- every one of them - are by nature hardworking and therefore feel rewarded by life's pleasures with all the respect they deserve,' he told himself. "They can go through life without phony tastes and vulgar displays. They would never condone the crime of spending hundreds of rupees on cultivating roses or crotons; such sensations would be beyond them. The women would be willing to sacrifice anything for their husbands. The children seem to relish and enjoy the simple *vadai* and *chundal* sold by the road side vendors, and they do taste good. The simple lives of these men and women seem to tighten their bonds even closer. The women and children who may seem an eyesore to us are valued and cherished by the men in their lives. The relationships one sees here are stable and permanent - they are broken only by death. Of course, one certainly sees problems here - but they are no big deal - and they will disappear if the economic conditions of the population show some visible improvement'. Ranga was haunted by a question: has he committed a blunder in giving up all this and choosing instead a kind of hotel life?

Chinna Naina sensed his confusion and spoke. "It is never too late," he said.

"You have to think carefully about the whole thing. You are a man. Nobody can treat you as an outcast if you decided to marry a woman from a different caste. Now I am planning to build two more rooms upstairs, and you can move into them. Why do you have to live somewhere else like an orphan? Remember, this street is named after your grandfather, and you can't command the respect you get here anywhere else. Can you?"

"That's impossible," Ranga replied. "You may give all kinds of reasons, still I can't move in here. I promise to visit you at least once a week."

"What are you saying?" Chinna Naina seemed puzzled. "If you say that's impossible, then why do you have to go out there and live with that woman? Can't you get another woman? I think your words are totally lacking in honor and self respect. You seem to be the only man in Adikesavulu Naicker tradition who is willing to surrender to a woman." He tried to dismiss Ranga right away gesturing his hands as if he was done with him; but he changed his mind. He paused, and continued: "

People like you always regret their decisions and sooner or later change their minds. One may easily get turned on by a woman and start an affair with her, but it would be wrong to let that woman control one's life. You have to make sure your wife obeys you, that's what happens in good families, and not the other way around. You are an educated man, but you seem to be trapped in a sort of blind love." He weighed in each and every word to make Ranga even more restless, yet come to a firm decision.

Ranga was well aware of Chinna Naina's conservatism, and his opinions on tradition and custom were not certainly unexpected. Yet, he felt a traditional life might be preferable to a choice made in the name of modernity and civilization that robbed one's peace of mind and self respect.

But Ranga could not bring himself to think that Kalyani would ever accede to such an idea. What if he did bring it up before her and she rejected it outright? Then what happens?

But if Kalyani really loved him, how could she possibly reject such an idea?

Haven't a few men were ready to surrender even their royal crowns? What about those numerous European women who, after their marriages with Indians, willingly gave up their native life styles to embrace a totally alien one? But then, Ranga had to confront a question with himself: if it was really love that drew him to Kalyani, where was the need for his own confusion, why can't *he* simply embrace her lifestyle in good faith?

'When an individual tries to connect his life with another, a relationship begins right away - and that's exactly what happened between me and Kalyani,' Ranga thought. 'Am I responsible for trying to unsettle this issue and thereby create new problems?'

Was not human psychology - his own - to blame for all this?

He cleverly masked his confusions before Chinna Naina; he helped himself with the snacks and tea.

Thotha asked him affectionately to stay for dinner. He politely declined saying he had to leave on some errand; he promised to visit them again.

As he emerged out of the house, he met with a few young men belonging to rival political organizations waiting for him.

"Sar, we miss you very much," said one of them.

"Last week we had a notice from the local municipality," said another. "We wish you were there to read it and tell us how we should respond. Now we feel our right hand is cut off."

"No big deal," Ranga replied. "I will be able to help you. I plan to come here once a week." He could sense their warmth and appreciation on hearing this news.

He settled his mind on one thing; he was certainly attracted by this village and its people; still it would be totally wrong for him to drag Kalyani - a total stranger to such circumstances - along with him and subject her to this hardship and new experiences.

Kalyani returned home from her performance around ten at night; Ranga was home at half past eight. He thought he could listen to radio for a while and began dialing various stations but met with only disappointment and irritation. He shut the radio off and walked up to the rose garden. There, in the middle of the rose plants were laid a pair of sand-filled, four-foot wide walkways that were lined with triangle-shaped red bricks and snaked along the rows of flower plants. Ranga set up an easy chair on a walkway, got a few cigarette packs and an ash-tray in a *moda* next to it, then eased himself into the chair and stared at the stars in the sky above.

The moon was absent that night; darkness was all around him. Even the light from the street lamps was dimmed by the branch of a nearby tree.

Ranga lit a cigarette. He recalled to mind Chinna Naina's advice earlier that evening. would be a brutal thing to do, a deliberate effort on his part to violate her basic rights.

"Such an action will not only cause her embarrassment, it would be a betrayal of trust," he told himself. "It amounts to a veiled attempt to exploit her good faith in our relationship, and condemn her to a harrowing, primitive, family life - all the while paying lip service to noble sentiments like equality, civility and decency."

Chinna Naina's advice made a lot of sense when looked from his own perspective. But, as far as Ranga was concerned, he couldn't think of asking Kalyani to give up her acting profession and move with him. Still Ranga felt if Kalyani could ever unhesitatingly accept any circumstances strictly based on her love for him, he would count himself the luckiest person on earth. Certainly he was not a sadist who derived any pleasure by enslaving a woman; he would always treat her with love and affection. She would occupy a distinct position in his life- as a wife and the proprietor of his household.

The question still haunted him: would Kalyani ever forgo something to prove her love for him?

But then, has not Kalyani dismissed love as of no great consequence in human relationship? He could only curl his lips in disappointment.

He was totally opposed to Chinna Naina's idea that he have Kalyani move to Adikesavalu Naicker Street to lead the kind of life he led earlier with Devaki, his first wife. He hated the very idea. That would make his life just mechanical, and he wanted no part of it. And he would certainly gain nothing in subjecting Kalyani to such a life.

But he could still do something with Chinna Naina's advice. He might be able to test Kalyani's love-it could be deep inside without her realizing it-with this trial balloon, and watch her response. Will Kalyani welcome his idea and move with him to the village?

He paused and questioned himself: 'Why am I planning all this? Why do I feel like testing her with all these schemes? Why am I inclined to doubt her love?'

'Kalyani is my wife, she is formally and legally married to me. Yet this truth has not been too well perceived here; if anything, that fact has been relegated to a secondary place in all this analysis. Why?'

'It seems to me that Kalyani is not unduly affected by any feelings of insecurity, anxiety or self doubt regarding our relationship; surely she is not itching for testing me to prove anything. Why?'

'I am positive my feelings for Kalyani have remained at the same level as before. Am I harboring a feeling that her love for me has diminished? Is that a reason for my restlessness?'

'But again, how can one begin to measure and evaluate one's love for another? Does my lack of trust in her mean that my love for her has increased? On the other hand, does her total trust in me prove her love for me has diminished? How can one be sure about these things?'

There was confusion all around him. Only Kalyani, Kalyani alone, could clear that confusion.

Kalyani returned home by ten. Ranga was in deep thoughts with eyes closed, heard the taxi arrive and opened the eyes. There were a few other passengers in the taxi and Kalyani was bidding them farewell. Meanwhile Ranga folded the easy chair and carried it inside the house. When he returned to the lawn to pick up the *moda* with the ash tray Kalyani met with him, and asked: "Have you been waiting for a long time? I had expected you at the performance."

Ranga was silent, and smiled. She had arrived from her performance without changing her costume or makeup; he took the small box from her hand and guided her to the front of the house where, under the bright lights, he found her extremely beautiful; the stage attire as well as the makeup seemed to enhance her natural charm.

"How was the performance?" he inquired.

"It was very well received," she said and walked toward her room. Ranga followed her. As Kalyani went through the motions of removing her makeup and changing her clothes, he sat there, in a chair next to her, watching everything like a small kid having fun.

"Where is Pattu?" he asked. "Did she go home directly from the theater?"

Kalyani, who was applying face cream, nodded, and then explained. "I feel sorry for Pattu. Seems she is not really floating in her love marriage as you seem to think. I had asked her something in the afternoon and she came and cried to me in privacy. I felt sorry but didn't want to probe deep into her problem. How can we help? After all, she brought it to herself? Don't you agree?"

Ranga could see how deeply Kalyani was affected by Pattu's plight. He wanted to say something to comfort her a little, and said: "Well, life comes with both joys as well as pains."

"I agree," Kalyani said even as she was still looking through the mirror.

"But the pain should not be so much that the person is reduced to tears. Then it is not the ordinary pain that one may think a part of our lives. So I feel sorry for her". Ranga agreed with her and wondered what could be possibly happening in Pattu's life.

"Is Dhamu ill - treating her?" The thought was just horrifying.

"I told you I didn't ask her too many details," she replied. Then she changed the subject. "Are you hungry? If you can wait for a few minutes I will have a quick shower and join you for dinner."

"Hmm . . . Please hurry up," Ranga said walked to the bathroom with her.

She showered quickly because she knew he has been waiting for a long time. Ranga was soon acting like a small child, following Kalyani everywhere in and around the bed room and standing next to her as she went through her chores. She powdered her face and body, changed her clothes and was ready for dinner in a few minutes. Still, as if thanking him for his cooperation and good behavior, she came up to him as he was seated on the bed, and kissed him on the forehead.

"Come on, let us go and eat, " she hurried him. "The food was prepared in the afternoon, everything must be getting cold." He followed her to the dining room.

After dinner Ranga went upstairs and walked on the open terrace. Occasionally they would spend their nights on the terrace-lying on the cement floor and talking to one another. Ranga expected Kalyani to join him soon once she was finished cleaning the kitchen downstairs. Kalyani emerged from the kitchen, then went to each and every room to switch off the lights; finally she went to her own room, helped herself with some betel nuts, a couple of betel leaves, some lime paste in a finger, and then put off the light. Only a small blue lamp was now left glowing in the room.

"Are you asleep already?" she asked walking into the terrace, and as if answering her she saw Ranga lighting a cigarette afar.

Kalyani sat next to him. She started chewing a paan.

"I had been to *Chulai* this evening," Ranga began. Kalyani warmly received the news.

"I think you haven't seen your folks for a while," Kalyani said. "Were you able to meet with them today? They must have been pleased to see you after so many days." She was quite excited to talk about them.

Ranga sighed and replied: "Sometimes I begin to think I can identify myself more with the life I see among my folks in the village."

"That's hardly surprising," Kalyani said. "After all that's where you were born and brought up. When you go to your hometown you would feel as if you are coming from the overseas. I have never felt such an experience because I have neither a home nor relatives. But I can surely understand how you feel."

"*Chinna Naina* is now building an annex to his house-pretty soon there will be a couple of extra rooms there, and he has suggested I move into one of them. But I gave no reply . . . ." Ranga stopped and watched for her reaction. Kalyani kept quiet for a few seconds when she suddenly remembered Ranga's earlier accusation that she didn't love him. Ranga pressed her hand, and continued:

"I am sorry I hurt your feelings this afternoon. But certainly you wouldn't have liked me to keep everything to myself. Just as you have mentioned, you are always sincere to me. I trust you. You are very supportive of me. You have a lot of respect for me. I wouldn't deny any of this. But I keep wondering if -I am sorry I say this over again and again-you love me as much as I love you. You must not misunderstand my questioning you. I hope I am wrong about this . . . . Kalyani, why don't you say something!" He now arose and sat on the floor.

He saw her beautiful eyes shining brightly in the dark.

She cleared her throat and asked: "Can I ask you something?"

"Yes, of course, go ahead." He leaned closer to her. She closed her eyes and seemed lost in some thoughts.

"Can I ask you a few questions, just like you did?"

"Come on, shoot it . . . ."

"Have you ever loved anyone in the last thirty six years of your life?"

"No, never! I had never believed people can fall in love with one another. For the first time in my life I am experiencing love and other warm feelings toward you."

"That's not love, that's romance!" she replied. "You are now in a romantic mood; you have always tried to understand life through your intellect, and not by any direct involvement and experience. This romantic view of life was responsible for turning many ordinary men wicked, evil and promiscuous; such men have not only destroyed their lives in the name of love and sacrifice; they have even perverted and even vulgarized what are simple, decent feelings. I was interested in you because I always saw you as an intellectual beyond all those limitations."

"Kalyani," Ranga suddenly interrupted her as if to clarify something. She paused.

"Go ahead."

"Granted you are right and a lot of crimes are committed in the name of love, does it mean that a man and his wife should take a vow that they should never love one other?"

"If a man and his wife are ready to get married but fail to see love as a part of their relationship, where else do you expect them to find love?" Kalyani asked.

"How can you be so sure?" Ranga asked. "After all, I have experienced a family life without love. There are quite a few people who lead such lives. Let me ask you this: Will you be willing to give up your acting career and other professional obligations and move into my house in Adikesavalu Naicker Street to run our family? Can you sacrifice something for such a family life? Only then can we claim there is love in our marriage. Again, such a sacrifice should be made willingly, without any coercion-the man does it for the wife and the woman for her husband. Otherwise, such a marriage becomes just a business agreement entered into for some convenience. It is neither meaningful nor respectful. Such a life is waste, it is just a relationship without love, it is nothing but prostitution . . . ." Words came out like a bullets, in full blast, one after another.

Kalyani laughed to herself albeit with some sadness. She understood Ranga was quite seriously involved in what they were talking about. She chose her words carefully.

"I think we often deceive ourselves when we use big words such as sacrifice and surrender. What is sacrifice after all? Is it a deal one makes in a day to day life? Let us say I give up my acting career and other interests and choose to move permanently to your village because I want to live with you. That may not do any good, it may even worsen the problem between us-it may cause you total happiness, but might leave me totally dissatisfied!"

"But if you truly loved me, you would not be dissatisfied," Ranga said, and mumbled. "What about me, after all I did leave my home to come and live with you!"

"But you did so by your own choice," Kalyani recounted. "Had I forced the decision on you or even tried to persuade you into such a decision, that would have been totally wrong on my part. But so far I have always followed your advice. Why can't you understand me from all this?"

"Kalyani, I see what you mean but I still can't help feeling that you don't pay enough attention to our relationship. Maybe I will look less than civilized when I put this so bluntly, but I am going to do it anyway: I think you are a very self-centered woman. You are stubborn; you passionately love things that mean a lot to you. You need me in your life just like you love those roses or relish your makeup while on stage. I understand your affection for me far exceeds what you have for a rose plant. But an average man, a decent man, will never be satisfied with such a thing. He expects his wife to give up something for him or at least prove she is capable of such a sacrifice. I am afraid you can't do that. All this would not have mattered if I haven't changed my attitude in the last few months. But now I am different, I am caught in love. Maybe I sound even a little romantic. I guess you are playing safe and don't want to get trapped in some relationship which you may regret later. But I think such a caution is totally out of place in a relationship where one looks for harmony and meeting of minds."

Kalyani sensed a rationale in his argument, and she felt sorry for him. She knew any further response on her part would only mire them into endless argument. Words escaped her, and suddenly she thought of Sumathi-the woman from Ranga's village; the woman who wanted to marry Ranga and now found fulfillment in bringing up Ranga's daughter Indu as her own. If Ranga truly believed self sacrifice and surrender were the true criteria for love, Kalyani thought, what better example could he possibly ask for? Did not Sumathi's life exemplify everything Ranga wanted?

"I really don't know what you really mean by sacrifice, she continued "If it means doing something against your own will or because you want to please another person, I don't believe in such a sacrifice. One may gladly give up something for an ideal, but that ideal should never be allowed to become an end by itself. Of course, there are a few who live that way. How about your Sumathi? How come you never thought of marrying her? I really wonder why you did not think of her sacrifice as love . . ."

Ranga flew into a rage. Because he was not accustomed to get angry at Kalyani that easily, he could only feel how remote she was from his deep sentiments for her.

He now spoke with a clarity and purpose. "Kalyani, everything is now clear to me. You are right. We now find ourselves taking two directly opposite views on this subject. So far you were the only person who did not suggest that I marry Sumathi. I guess you must be right because you knew me very well. But don't you think it is too late now? Again, don't you think the problem is now out of our hands?"

Kalyani kept quiet. Because she knew he was upset, she tried to calm him.

"I know you always welcomed frank, open discussion and so I was inclined to argue at length with you," she said. "Have I said anything wrong or hurt your feelings?" She held his hand and looked at him.

"No, nothing like that," Ranga replied. "I think you have argued each and every point very well." He was now secretly crying, but Kalyani could not see his face in dark. She understood he was feeling unwell, and tried to cheer him. "Come on, it is getting late," she said. "I feel exhausted, I have been standing on the stage for a couple of hours. We can discuss this further tomorrow . . . if you wish we can discuss it for the rest of our lives. . . ." She fondled his cheek and tried to ease his mind.

Ranga silently followed her. She went downstairs and helped herself with a glass of water. She gave him a cup of water and he accepted it and drank the water. Then they both retired to the bed room. After a while Kalyani went to sleep.

Ranga once again went upstairs and walked into the terrace. For a long time he stayed alone there, chain-smoking. him sleeping on the bare cement floor.

The following day, early in the morning, Kalyani was a little surprised to note Ranga missing from her bed. She went around looking for him in the terrace, she was horrified to see him sleeping on the bare cement floor.

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