

**THE SHOW NEVER ENDS**  
**PART III**

It has been raining most of the preceding night, occasionally punctuated by thunder and intensifying into heavy downpour. Kalyani, alone and sleepless, was watching the fun outside. She was sitting on the bed as if awaiting Ranga.

She definitely knew he wouldn't be coming. Of late his arrivals and departures followed no definite plan. Ranga would show up at his own will and also leave as he chose. On his arrival Kalyani would welcome him with a smile and also treat him in the best manner during his stay.

It was only Ranga's face that revealed to Kalyani a growing sense of alienation between the couple. There have been hardly any heated discussions, yelling or arguments between them. Now and then Kalyani would agonize over her hopeless situation and, secretly, shed tears. Ranga certainly had no idea she was crying; he also never imagined his studied indifference was causing her pain; he would hardly believe it even if someone mentioned it to him. Of late he has been thinking over the matter a lot and finally arrived at a definite opinion about her.

Ranga now realized that his plan to marry Kalyani was made in haste, a major blunder on his part. He felt Kalyani didn't expect his marriage proposal but felt pressured and so, docile and well meaning, she acquiesced; maybe she didn't refuse his offer simply because she felt, otherwise, Ranga might try to distance himself from her. The truth that their marriage actually brought no change in Kalyani - her lifestyle pretty much has remained the same before and after their marriage - hit Ranga like a ton of bricks. As far as Kalyani was concerned, the marriage seemed to lack any meaning or purpose. What Ranga was hoping for - a bond deepening between two souls - has been reduced to a total waste. "How could I be so naive?" he wrestled in his heart.

Yet, Ranga nursed no feelings of anger or sorrow toward her. He believed it was his euphoria that had led to his foolish action. He needed to steady his mind and think of the next step.

He believed his withdrawing from their relationship would be the ideal situation for both of them. If that were not true, he told himself, let Kalyani insist that Ranga get closer to her. If she doesn't and implicitly agrees with his plan, it would only confirm Ranga's worst suspicion; that he had

shamelessly cringed before her and then ended up torturing himself. 'I caused this disaster,' Ranga concluded, "so it is only fair that I stay away from her." So he slowly began his retreat.

Unfortunately Kalyani's generous instincts only confirmed Ranga's wrong conclusions because she scrupulously avoided any interference in his personal behavior toward her.

When Ranga showed up or stayed away from her Kalyani asked him no questions; neither did she do anything to convey any sign of her sadness in his presence. She steeled herself to accept what fate had in store for her.

They started behaving not as husband and wife but as two friends.

That night Ranga, saddened and lying on the bed next to her, abruptly got out and, like a peeved child, walked away to the terrace and slept on the bare cement floor. When Kalyani, horrified, woke him up the next morning, he offered a simple explanation: he liked lying on the cool floor. And she believed him.

However, the events and conversations of the subsequent days revealed his broken heart to Kalyani. Always trusting and admiring his decency and uprightness, Kalyani was ready to accept any decision he was contemplating about their future. And when he sought her opinions, she spoke without concealing her inner thoughts. She firmly believed she had no right to intrude into any of his plans arrived at without consulting her.

During the last six months, she could count on her fingers how many nights Ranga had stayed in the house. She understood that to question, force or beg him for an explanation would only lead to dire consequences. She grasped the situation on hand, steeled herself with stoicism, neither sadness nor resignation coloring her thoughts. She was determined to keep herself ready to face any consequence and thus always displayed a pleasant disposition in her day to day life.

She has been accustomed to a lonely life. But of late, her situation makes her feel sorry for herself.

Her mother has died. Pattu has moved away after her marriage. Kalyani's life looks pathetic even as she reminds herself that she has a partner to share it.

She remains awake the entire night with the lights on; or simply closes her eyes and lies on the bed thinking nothing in particular. Occasionally, she would read some book or even catch a little sleep.

Outside, the rain has fully stopped; the clear sky was visible through the window. The chimes from the nearby temple could be heard. Kalyani who was seated on her bed awake till four in the morning, her face set between the two knees joined together, watching the sky, thunder and lightning through the window, now got up, walked to the window and looked at the rose plants.

The roses, soaked wet in the rain, were shedding droplets like pearls; the wind had shaken some petals littering them on the ground. That sight horrified Kalyani. She continued to stand there watching the fun until the milkman showed up at the door.

It would be at least two hours till the maid or the gardener reported for work. Until then she would be home alone, all by herself; she has accustomed herself to indulge in such diversions and lose herself in sundry thoughts.

Last month, one day, early in the morning, just like now, Kalyani happened to be watching roses after awaiting Ranga the whole night in vain, when Ranga arrived suddenly on his scooter; he had not been home for the last two days.

Kalyani forgot all about missing him in the bygone days and invited him into the house. Ranga seemed tired; she suspected he must have spent a sleepless night.

She brought him coffee. Ranga was lying on the bed, his eyes closed, lost in some thought. He got up from the bed when Kalyani touched his forehead. Kalyani handed him the coffee cup and smiled. He too smiled and took the cup from her hand. Sipping from the cup, he told her, "I am now coming straight from my village. I left it around three in the morning."

"How is the girl doing?" Kalyani enquired with a smile.

"She has grown up in the last one year," Ranga said. "That was the reason why I went to see her. She might think I am a stranger but as a father, am I not obligated to pay her frequent visits?" He offered an explanation for his visit.

He recalled his Chinna *Naina* who made him realize his duty as an absent father. On those days when Ranga didn't show up at Kalyani's, he was not preoccupied in any other diversions; he has been spending his time holed up in Number 16, Adikesavalu Nayakkar Street - in one of the newly refurbished apartments that he had recently rented.

Ranga had led a lonely life for many years but never did he feel the boredom that he had to endure in just one year of his married life with Kalyani. Now, after this moving away, he feels serene and relaxed. As far as Ranga was concerned, one must lead life with full meaning and purpose; anything else, he concluded, was immoral.

From time to time he moans the fact that he had not chosen to live as a friend of Kalyani whose association and camaraderie would mean he could enjoy a momentous life with her. He believes Kalyani herself was unaware that her temperament was not conducive to a wife's role, so how could Ranga disparage her? Withdrawing was the only option.

He remembered the adage that a wife has no identity of her own; it is solely defined by her husband. Accordingly Ranga concluded he could boast of no qualifications for the role of Kalyani's husband. He has no plans to marry any other woman. He is convinced that the split in their marriage would offer the badly needed solace and comfort to both of them. But he was worried how to break this news to her; he was even embarrassed at his hesitation. Before doing so, he wanted to create a context, so he returned to his perch in the Adikesavalu Nayakkar Street; thus he shattered the customary premise that his house was the one where he and Kalyani lived together. Still he did not fail to honor his normal domestic obligations.

So the bond between the couple never snapped. There was no mutual ill will, hence no enmity. What happens to a marriage in the absence of innocence, love and sacrifice? It is reduced to a simple business deal. That was how Ranga wanted their ongoing relationship to be; he displayed proper self-respect, friendship and thus wished to end their relationship.

When Kalyani neared him and extended her hand to take out the coffee cup from the table, he fondly grabbed it and asked her: "Are you happy?"

"Of course, I am happy. Aren't you here?"

"So, were you unhappy when I wasn't here?"

"That is not what I meant. I am happy when you are here but I am not sorry when you don't show up. I will start imagining why you didn't come; I will conclude maybe there is a good reason for your absence. I will because you even more sorrow if I start suffering due to your absence, so I would never let myself suffer due to your nonattendance."

"That is rather a very convenient principle," Ranga answered with a chuckle. "You are happy when I come, otherwise there is nothing! Kalyani, you are indeed very smart! What if I never show up? Will you be happy then?" He keenly observed her face.

Kalyani clasped his both hands and pressed them to her cheek; the smile on her face registered no change and, as a matter of fact, she smiled even a little more, and closed her eyes. It was as if she was already imagining the likely scenario that Ranga had just described to her - the present turning into the past. She spoke as if she was talking to herself:

"I will never feel sorry. When you are not coming, I will continue to cherish the memories of the days I had spent with you. I will never feel sorry for anything that connects me with your remembrance."

Seizing Kalyani and setting her beside himself, Ranga spoke as if comforting her: "We will always remain best friends. Aren't we now living like friends?"

She gave no reply. But Ranga expected a response. "Why don't you say something? Shall we become best friends?" he asked.

She now explained her situation in the clearest terms. "I will again tell you what I thought the day I invited you for a feast and offered myself to you. I never imagined you would be marrying me. Had you failed to show up the following days, I would not have accused you of deceiving me or felt any sense of disappointment. I would have cherished the memory of your visit as an achievement. I have never thought about our relationship, neither did I care what others would talk or were already talking about us. I know this world, I am aware of the wretched things people say and the slanders they are capable of imagining. What I most value is an honorable life and a spotless mind. I have been associated with you that are gratifying enough for me. When you proposed our marriage I felt as if a bouquet of flowers was dropped over my head. What if it happened or didn't happen? Tomorrow, if you ask for a divorce, I will not refuse it. Should you marry another woman, I would be there and root for your happiness. You may do whatever you choose to do. I only want you to be happy. I will never be a

burden to you." Kalyani spoke as she held him in embrace and showered him with kisses.

On several occasions Annasami noticed that Ranga was continuously absent when he visited Kalyani. Two days ago he repeated his concern to Kalyani when he visited her for a new drama rehearsal. That night he told he would be leaving her home only after Ranga returned. So he kept talking to Kalyani after sending away every member of the drama group home. "I must see Ranga today," he insisted. "I haven't seen him for so many days!"

Kalyani was embarrassed. Her instinct told her Ranga wouldn't be coming even if they stayed awake the whole night. How to reveal this to Annasami? Had she known about Annasami's wish a little earlier, she could have lied that Ranga had informed her he would be extremely busy that day and might return home only after midnight. She also felt discomfited to offer such an explanation, and started thinking:

'Why should I hide this? There is no reason why I should share my marital problems with others; some day everything will certainly come out into the open, and tongues will wag. Let them, I am not concerned about what others think of me and that would be the right attitude on my part. But . . . Annasami's case is quite different! He's no outsider; I may have no familial relations with him, yet he is someone who stands apart from me, fully committed to my happiness and well-being. Can I count on anyone else as a relative or my best wisher?

What if he gets to know - say tomorrow - what is happening to me? He would be terribly hurt and even suffer mental agony. He might even feel guilty that he was responsible for my distress. I must never put him through such agony.'

So it was only proper, Kalyani concluded, that she offer Annasami a hint about the ongoing conflicts between her and Ranga and how they might shape their relationship in the days ahead.

She invited Annasami into the hall and asked him: "*Sami*,<sup>1</sup> the time is already half past nine. Can you get a bus or a taxi at this time?" She sat on the floor close to the door while watching the street outside.

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<sup>1</sup> A term of endearment for the elder men.

Like a school boy in rapt attention Annasami was going through the lines of a new drama in a thick exercise note book. He turned around and spoke: "What if I can't get a bus? I will take a taxi. Why don't you ask your husband to give me a ride in his scooter? By the way, why Ranga is still not home?" Annasami looked at his watch.

"Shall I get you some milk or coffee? You haven't eaten anything since the afternoon tiffin, am I right?" Kalyani arose from her seat. She sensed once their conversation started it would not be ending that quickly.

"No, no, my stomach is still full with that *masala dosa* and *vadai*," Annasami assured her. "I am not hungry . . . Because you already got up, bring me some ice cool water." He also got up, went out, spat out the betel juice and returned to the hall.

Kalyani brought him water in a vessel, a tumbler and set them in a nearby table. Annasami gurgled some water, spat it out in the backyard, and then helped himself with two mouthfuls. Then he returned to his seat and got ready for the *paan*. He pulled out two betel leaves and, with his index finger, smeared lime paste to them. His teeth were already gnawing the arcea nuts and he pushed the leaves into the mouth. Then he shoved the metal betel box towards Kalyani.

Kalyani too helped herself with betel leaves and nuts. She was wondering how to begin the conversation with him.

The sound of a motor cycle on the street drew Annasami's attention and he exclaimed, "Okay, he's here!" Kalyani didn't even care to turn her face.

"Most probably he won't be home tonight," she spoke as if talking to her after the scooter passed their house.

"What? What did you say? He is not coming home? Why? Why should he toil day and night like this? After all, he has no kids to take care of . . ." Annasami teased her.

Kalyani keenly watched Annasami's face, then she spoke at once even before that look could betray her sense of despair or fervor to reveal some sad news: "He has not been home for many days . . . Remember he had rented a room in *Chulai*? Now he has rented another room there. He comes here only occasionally." She smiled lest Annasami think her voice was tinged with sadness.

"What? What did you say?" Annasami asked in bewilderment. "Why do you keep smiling? What happened? Did you both have a fight? Some misunderstanding, dispute? I know Ranga is a decent fellow . . ." He arose from the chair, came up to Kalyani and sat on the floor beside her. He took out some tobacco from the metal box and crushed it in his palms. He was visibly worried; he sensed something awry going on in Kalyani's life and sympathized with her.

Kamali smiled again and spoke:

"We have no quarrels or disputes. Even now we are both happy when he comes here. Still, does happiness alone make a marriage?"

Annasami was confused. He was mulling over her words 'Does happiness alone make a marriage?'

"Tell me everything! I need to know everything, Go on! Ranga wanted you to rent out your own house and move in here; then why should he go back to his room in *Chulai*?" The words shot up in quick succession.

"I don't know what happened to cause this split; I think he too may feel the same way. That's the reason why we both are keeping quiet about it."

"Kalyani, I can understand all that stuff. If one starts probing what causes detractions in a marriage, they all will look trivial. Often times, it will be even difficult to recall what the reason behind them was. I can understand it. Still, what does it mean when Ranga stays away from you and rents another room? Does that make any sense to you?"

"My heart understands what is going on," Kalyani told him. "I am prepared for any eventuality; I am spending my days with positive feelings. I don't want to see you feel hurt and left in dark should there be a crisis in the days ahead. That is the reason I told you everything." She bowed down her head and, after a moment, continued: "I am afraid our marriage won't last much longer."

"Why do you say that? A marriage is supposed to last forever," a saddened Annasami offered his explanation.

"That's the kind of marriage you and your *Mami* had," Kalyani said. "Whether you disliked her or she disliked your actions, your relationship will not be broken - that is what it is. What about me? I am only an actress. I wanted to marry him and my desire has been fulfilled in a very short time. It

was my sheer luck that I got married to him and led a family life. No elders, gods or goddesses ever blessed our union. Tell me, how long do you think registration and law will sustain a human relationship?" Even as she was speaking, Kalyani began to scrawl the name Ranga on the floor with the stem of a betel leaf. Annasami noticed it, but Kalyani was unaware of what she was doing.

"You are crazy! Nowadays the laws are more powerful than our gods and goddesses. People simply can't do as they please. Do you think Ranga can easily leave you? Don't blabber something and put some wrong ideas into his head! We are talking here about registered marriage - it is not a child's play." He spoke as if comforting a child, cheering up her spirits.

Kalyani responded with a loud laughter.

"What matters is one's heart, the heart only," she said, and continued: "Do you think a marriage can prolong under legal obligations and religious compulsions? I have no hatred or resentment against my husband. Please don't imagine I am saying all this to denigrate him. I only wanted to let you know what is now going on in our relationship so that you wouldn't be taken by surprise. You will definitely know when my husband formally asks for a divorce. I have already given him my consent. Rather than living as a husband and wife, we have decided to live as good friends."

"What drove your decision to this unfortunate situation?" Annasami couldn't help asking.

How could she explain it to him? Was it absolutely necessary? Kalyani hesitated for a moment. After all Annasami cared for her like a mother and he certainly deserved that privilege even more than a right. Still, given that she herself was only vaguely aware of what was going on, how could she clarify the situation to him? Nevertheless, she tried:

"I don't know what the real reason is," she said. "There may be another reason, I don't know about it. Let me say this - I am not sure even if this is the right one. Suppose I wind up my drama company, give up acting and go and live with him in his new house. That may make him happy, but I am not willing to do that. I don't like such talk - because I don't like making deals. They never stop. Do you know what he thinks? 'How can she refuse if she really loves me? She chose to live with me only because this arrangement helps her to lead her life on her own terms. What kind of life is this? Doesn't love, bond imply a willingness to compromise and make sacrifices?' How is this possible?" He suggests divorce. But he also says he is not willing to

sever our relationship. He thinks it need not be confined to the notion of marriage. He tells me "If you insist that our relationship has to be a marriage only, you better change your mind . . ." She went on and on but Annasami could not take it anymore and he cut her short.

"Kalyani, this is not a game . . . Whatever may be situation, Ranga is still your husband, is he not? If he is willing to support your profession, that would be great. Otherwise, a wife is expected to obey her husband. Listen to me: I am offering you advice not as a father, but as a mother! Don't act stubborn . . . Let me ask you: how does your acting really help you? Somehow or other, we folks are struck in that profession. Why should a decent woman like you destroy her life? Why don't you listen to Ranga? I know you don't aspire any big role in your profession or want to act in movies . . . Why don't you just give up all this and go and live with him like a happy wife?"

Kalyani was profoundly touched by Annasami's fondness for her; he was even asking her to give up her drama troupe . . .

"No, I can't do that. That might destroy not only my life, but his too." She rejected his suggestion out of hand.

Annasami had a final comment, "Still divorce under our Hindu Marriage Act is not a simple matter. Are you imagining we are living in some western country?" and let out a sigh.

Kalyani laughed, and said. "Our marriage will not come under Hindu Marriage Act. It falls under Special Marriage Act. I don't foresee any complications with it."

"Still, how could a family woman talk like this?" he wondered.

"How can I be a family woman? How can you pose such a question to me?" Kalyani, again, laughed. That laughter conveyed all the bitterness that enveloped her entire life.

Annasami was dumbstruck.

After this event, Annasami made several visits to Kalyani's when Ranga was present but he intentionally avoided talking to him. This aloofness on his part became a topic of discussion and amusement between Ranga and Kalyani.

Soon the milkman arrived. The rain also stopped. Only when Ranga came after nine and was having his breakfast did Kalyani realize it was a Sunday.

"We are going to see a lawyer today," Ranga told her. "We need to consult him about our divorce."

Kalyani, as usual, responded with a smile.

"But today is Sunday!" she said.

"That's the reason why he asked me come. He is a friend of mine, my college classmate; a very learned man. He was the one who essentially influenced my thinking. A strong communist. He has visited many foreign countries." Ranga went on raving about him.

Ranga had already discussed with Kalyani about their divorce.

He had explained to her that what stood in the way of their happy and peaceful life was their marriage. "There is a sense of fullness when a man and woman establish a relationship without a formal definition of a man and wife," he told her. "Whatever may be the nature of such an involvement, it would be free from mutual expectations - whether they are sought, fulfilled or refused by one to another. Marriage becomes necessary only to a relationship based on the notion of duty and no love. Marriage becomes a hindrance when a man and woman profess deep love for one another."

While Kalyani did not consent to his elucidation, she understood the rationalization behind it. Viewed from Ranga's perspective, she not only accepted his decision and also believed that she should fully cooperate with him.

They also discussed other issues involved in their relationship. In the beginning, that's how they both were living before their marriage. It was Annasami's advice that actually led to this outcome. It was their independence and self confidence that paved their decision to marry.

Kalyani treated Ranga's proposal for marriage and his present decision for divorce with the same outlook and even Ranga was surprised by her response. Yet he was decent enough not to dismiss her reaction as one of indifference and felt friendly and trusting of her.

He pondered about Kalyani's love that seemed aloof towards life and others.

He had not been home for the last two or three days and now presently it has been three hours since he arrived.

That morning Kalyani served Ranga coffee in a mood as if he arose after sharing the bed with her the previous night. She prepared hot water for his bath and, as usual, helped him with the shower. By the time Ranga had finished reading the newspaper; she too finished her bath and invited him for breakfast. Ranga watched her in amazement: there seemed to be no disruption in their daily routine; - everything was in order and perfect sequence.

Kalyani was in the kitchen. The servant maid was assisting her and engaging her in chitchat. Ranga, who was reading the newspaper, closed eyes and was resting.

"Would you like some soup?" Kalyani asked him entering the hall. Realizing she had disturbed him, she smiled in embarrassment.

Ranga got up and sat erect on the sofa. "Oh, you have brought me mutton?" he asked and took out one of the glasses. Kalyani took the other one and sat opposite to him. She addressed the servant maid and asked her to keep a watch on the vessel on a stove.

Both started sipping the soup when Ranga asked, "Did Pattu visit you recently?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you . . . She is on her family way . . ." Kalyani said and continued as if holding back her happiness. "She visited me two days ago and said, 'Is this what I really wanted now?' Looks like that Dhamu fellow is no good. He's into drinking and I heard he is not even giving her money for food. Pattu has been crying all the time. I asked her, 'Why don't you come and stay with us for a few days? At this time, you must eat your favorite dishes and feel happy.' But she said no and went away." Kalyani picked up the empty glasses.

"Why? Why can't she come and stay here?"

"Well, she is scared. She thinks Dhamu will abandon her. 'If I were to come, I have to come alone,' she says. This is love - where the lovers pledge

to die for one another!" Kalyani said with a tired voice. Ranga smiled to himself.

When Kalyani returned after putting away the glasses, Ranga had lit a cigarette.

"When are we supposed to visit your lawyer friend?" she asked.

"We can visit him anytime. 'Sunday I am home only, you are welcome anytime.' he had told me. He's a bachelor; he lives with his old mother and servants. Very interesting character. We will go in the evening."

"He is a Brahmin?" Kalyani asked.

"Yes," he told her. He strayed from the topic and said, "I feel sorry for Pattu."

"We too share some guilt in what she is going through," Kalyani said. Ranga made no comment.

Kalyani continued: "I knew things would come to this. People do have an option to leave their sanctuary but to return to it is not under their control. They shouldn't be too confident about going back to the starting point. Why act stubborn and get caught in a hopeless situation?"

"I didn't pay attention to what you were saying," Ranga confessed.

"What I meant was . . . Take our own situation. We can decide to marry or get a divorce or live together as we choose. Will this be possible for everyone? Those who can't should not act stubborn - that's what I am saying."

Ranga keenly listened to her words. He understood that Kalyani was trying to articulate her opinions on events and life like a witness. She went on:

"Pattu would have had a happy life had she consented to marry the boy chosen by her mother; her love too would have found fulfillment. There would be no danger that our admiration for love might get tarnished. I am not saying this only with reference to Dhamu and Pattu. Even if Ambikapati and Amaravati had been married, they would have ended up with the same fate. Their reputation rests only because they were never married."

Ranga felt it was a cheap shot hurled at legendary lovers.

"How can that be? Do you mean to say that all those who love and marry one another end up only in tragedy?"

"I didn't say that. We can see what will happen by looking at the modern-day lovers. When people start asserting their love with words like, 'I will die for you!', 'I will never think of any other person,' 'I want to live only with you, otherwise I reject life forever,' they will end up with this fate. It will remain a problem whether they get married or not. They lack maturity, they are only ruled by feelings. Any action strictly based on feelings will have dire consequences. These folks can never think straight. That's what I had figured out. But I didn't express my opinion because nobody would have liked it."

Ranga mulled over her words. He understood that, unlike his intellectual outlook, Kalyani's opinions on several issues were grounded on real experience. To a certain extent, he could accept her point of view. 'The most matured are those who are done with living,' he told himself. "It is those who keep living that are exposed to the turmoil, travail and tears in their lives."

"How could you figure out that things will turn out this way?" he wanted to know.

He wanted to light another cigarette and opened a match box. Seeing it was empty he threw it out of the window. Kalyani went to the kitchen to bring him another match box. There was some delay before she returned. Meanwhile Ranga heard a sputter from the kitchen of something being fried and stirred in a vessel followed by Kalyani's voice, "Please wait. Let me get this down. I will be there in a minute."

A few minutes later she returned as she kept wiping her face with the tip end of her sari and handed him a match box.

"Are you done with your kitchen chores?" Ranga asked.

"No, it will take me one more hour. I get easily bored with cooking standing next to the oven," she said . . . You asked me how I was able to guess things . . . I feel the same way when I listen to you or read your drama reviews. I would ask myself, 'How is that he alone is noticing these flaws - things that I and the other critics missed all the time? That is what I think when you asked me that question. I am forty-four. I have known many folks



and heard of many love affairs. Just like you have been watching plays, I am also watching life. I hear many people merely jabbering 'The World is a stage,' 'Life is a drama,' etc without actually understanding the import of what they are saying. I have come to believe there is no more wonderful drama than our life itself. You have once written that in a play the character's dialogue must reveal what happens to him in the end. That element may be lacking in our plays but I do notice it in real life. I may miss the significance of a certain event but when its implications are revealed later, it becomes a valuable experience. When, later, a similar event crops up, it becomes a tool. That's how we gain experience."

"That's great!" Ranga reacted with sarcasm. "Annasami thinks 'Drama is my life!'. But you are claiming 'I have understood drama as life'. How funny!"

"I didn't mean it as a witty remark," Kalyani replied. "I do see my life as a drama. I consider the people I encounter in my life as new characters. Just as in a drama, I see many a melodrama occur in my life as well. Such was the life affair of Dhamu and Pattu. We seem to delight and applaud when there are sudden twists in a play. Why do we think we should never face such turns in real life?"

Ranga wondered if she had just given him the answer to the question he had posed earlier.

'How could she adopt the kind of love - totally detached and impassive - towards life and others?' was that question. Was this her reply, "I savor life as a human drama?"

"I too play a role in this drama - whether it is good or bad," Kalyani continued. "You may disparage it in your reviews, 'This is no drama!' Still I am duty bound to take upon that role and play it cheerfully to my best. Don't you agree? That's how I am expected to act in real life too. I knew eventually Dhamu and Pattu would suffer in their marriage, but I had to play my role, so I said yes. In a few days when Pattu visits us looking feeble and pathetic, it will be our role to offer her help. I am now preparing myself to do render that help cheerfully and dutifully." From the way Kalyani was sharing her feelings for Pattu and revealed her best motive, Ranga's regard for Kalyani stepped up a notch further.

If Kalyani had been thinking all along about Pattu and preparing herself for unforeseen events, Ranga told himself, it goes without saying that she

must have even more deeply thought over their relationship after their divorce. That realization filled with awe.

It was decided that they visit the lawyer at four that afternoon. Till then Ranga was home talking to Kalyani. It has been several days since he shared his company with her.

In their new situation where the couple would soon free themselves from a relationship of a formal marriage and start living as good friends Ranga eschewed his extremist feelings for Kalyani and got a better sense of her. He now boldly faced the bitter truth that he had not adequately fulfilled his role as her husband and that it would be hard for him to assume such a role. His steady and rational mind had convinced him that there were any number of inherent contradictions in the couple's outlook toward mundane affairs and human life in general. To try to reform those contradictions, he believed, would mean a betrayal of his conscience, a very cruel act. To him, this was no time to try to determine whose outlook was the right and proper one.

They shared their lunch together. It reminded Ranga of the first time Kalyani had entertained him at her home and now he, once again, savored the food as well as her company.

It had been many days since the couple rode on Ranga's scooter. Along the way Ranga went on raving about his lawyer-friend Raghavan - how he had been an ideal to all his friends during their college days. It was evident Ranga was literally worshiping Raghavan as a warrior and continues to admire his temperament that helped him nourish his friendship with his old classmates long after they finished their college education.

Kalyani, who was seated on the scooter behind Ranga holding on to his shoulder, said, "I never imagined you had any friends at all!"

"Yes, you are right," Ranga answered her. "I am never close to anyone. Indeed that's the reason why other reporters respect me. I have actually forgotten all my classmates, but no one can forget this Raghavan! Such a dynamic personality - and he comes from an elite society. I never called him my friend, but he would never let me go if he ever saw me. A couple of days ago I ran into him in a drive-in restaurant. That's when we talked about a few things, this and that - not about our divorce, in particular. In the good old days we would approach Raghavan - just for 'fun' - to 'solve' our personal problems. We would think of some issue and, after we deeply analyzed it among ourselves - we present it to him. 'What do you think?' someone

among us would ask him with a mischievous twinkle - expecting him to lecture us. Ergo, Raghavan would respond with a half-an-hour thesis. But as far as I was concerned I would listen to him with the same seriousness he showed when he offered his response. My involvement would be resolute and full. He is a genius! He has all the references in his fingertips! Every subject - whatever it may be - has a depth that needs to be explored - don't you think? That's Rashaan's approach. He must have sensed something in our conversation, so he asked me, "Why don't we talk to one another - just as we used to do before? Why don't you come tomorrow?" So we are here!" Ranga turned the scooter into a lane in Alwarpet and steered it inside a compound lined with five or six bungalows.

Kalyani read the name of the owner - R. Srinivasa Raghavan - on a brass nameplate.

As she got off the scooter, Kalyani found herself standing amid a grassy pasture in front of the house and watching a throng of roses lining it on either side.

"What a big garden!" she could not exclaim in admiration. "I wonder how they are maintaining it!"

The house was like a mansion. The mosaic floor has been polished bright and reflected the images of those who trod on it.

On entering the house the couple noticed tapestry and, next to it, a large photo of a man who loomed large - like a lion, full of mane and curls, his eyes sharp and probing - proclaiming him as a historical figure. Kalyani remembered Ranga telling her that his lawyer friend was a communist, so she guessed the man in the photo must be a communist leader.

"Can you tell me who he is?" Ranga asked her.

Kalyani hesitated for a moment lest she give a wrong answer. Then reluctantly, she asked "Is he Marx?"

"Good . . . I thought you mayn't know," he said and gently patted on her shoulder. "Karl Marx," he uttered the full name.

"I remember reading about him in social studies," Kalyani said.

Just then suddenly, as if belying all her expectations about the host and the image she had carved in her mind, there emerged Mr. Srinivasa

Raghavan in a *lungi*, hair disheveled, a loose shirt hung on his ailing, bony form, wearing dark-black eye glasses, and chomping on a cigarette.

"Hi Ranga," he laughed with excitement.

Ranga introduced Kalyani as his wife. Raghavan welcomed her with a smile exposing his dull, yellowish teeth.

"Please be seated," he directed them to a sofa. "Please excuse me for presenting myself in this attire. I have slept off the entire afternoon. I believe in spending a holiday as an entirely total holiday," he said and continued. "There is too much of work with - all these cases, hearings and arguments. Today I want to forget all of that. He ended with a question, "Would you like coffee or tea?"

When Ranga said "We just now had coffee at home," Raghavan murmured to himself, "Okay, then let's wait for some time and then have some tea. Why don't we sit on the lawn and talk?"

That was exactly what Kalyani had expected. When they waited, a servant came and laid out three cane chairs and a teapoy on the ground.

Raghavan directed the servant to bring some tea and biscuits after a while. He did most of his talking in English; it seemed he talked only with the servants in Tamil.

He addressed Kalyani. "Does your husband still write? I knew in the past he was a short-story writer. Do you read them? For a general reader, his views are hard to accept. How about you?"

"I agree with my husband on most of the things. But I also have contrary views on a few other matters. I like roses, but he thinks tending roses or maintaining a garden like this is a waste. I can never bring myself to agree with him," she said.

"Waste must never be justified," Raghavan said. "As far as I am concerned, this big house and so many servants are a waste too, but I can't do anything about it so long my mother is alive. I am told my grandfather was a *Diwan*, so she thinks she is a *Zamindarini*. I too like roses . . . Now, Ranga, why don't you like roses?"

Ranga dismissed the question with a laugh.

“Not only that,” Kalyani spoke. “He doesn’t like cricket. He hates those who listen to cricket commentary.”

“Well, people have their own likes and dislikes,” said Raghavan putting an end to the topic under discussion.

They drank tea. Raghavan offered Ranga a cigarette and lit one for himself.

“Okay. Let us come to the main issue,” he began. “Ranga, how can I help you? Do you want some references for any of your stories? Is this anything related to your friends?”

Ranga answered him: “This concerns only me and my wife.”

Raghavan twisted his eyebrows. Ranga continued.

“A year and half ago, we both had a registered marriage. Now we want to have a divorce. Neither of us has any objection to divorce. We like to know: What is the legal procedure? How can we go about it? Are there any problems?”

Raghavan laughed. “I will tell you the next course of action - that is not complicated. But what is the source of this fantastic idea? I am not asking this because of my curiosity. Divorce should be based on some concrete reason. What reason are you offering?”

“What reason? Well, we don’t want to continue living like a husband and wife.”

“That is already evident from your application for divorce,” Raghavan said. “You must have a valid reason and state it in your application. For example, did either one of you suffer from some incurable condition - like venereal disease?”

“No, no, nothing like that,” Ranga stopped him.

“Did either one of you commit adultery?”

“No,” again Ranga offered denial.

“Can you furnish a certificate that one of you is barren or impotent?”

“No,” Ranga said again and turned to Kalyani, who now spoke. “When recently approached a lady doctor for an unrelated problem, she told me I can have a child if I undergo some small procedure. She said I am not a barren woman. So I didn’t go in for that procedure.”

“Well, then what other reason can you possibly offer for your divorce? Did one of you force the other to change the religious affiliation?”

Ranga now offered his firm explanation: “We are not going to offer any false ground for our decision. We are ready to offer this truth. ‘We don’t love each other.’ Is this not enough? Could two loveless couple live together? Can the law force a couple - who don’t love each other - to live together?”

Raghavan laughed, again. “How do you know you don’t love each other? How can you prove it?” He smiled again.

“How do you know you don’t love each other?” He repeated the question while shaking a finger and directing his look from Ranga to Kalyani and, then, from Kalyani to Ranga. Having never expected such a question, the pair was thrown into utter confusion.

Raghavan smiled again as he looked at them: he understood at once that the statement he heard, “We don’t love each other,” was an unvarnished lie. But his look of cynicism escaped Ranga’s attention who wanted to say something. Kalyani, aware she was not obliged to offer any response, remained silent. Raghavan waved his hand as if asking Ranga to ‘wait a minute’, and went on.

“I don’t know anything about love; I don’t think I am likely to come across any opportunity to know about it in future, either,” he said with a wink. “But you asked me about the law: “How it can force a loveless couple to live together? Was that your question?” He was making sure that he got the question clarified because their conversation was in an admixture of Tamil and English.

“Yes, I wanted to know how any law can force a loveless couple to live together.”

Raghavan laughed again, and spoke: “Do you know that law can’t dictate that every couple who want to get married should love one another? It is not for the law to investigate and determine that every couple ended up in their marriage only falling in love with one another. You both jointly expressed a

wish to get married. You both asked for its formal and legal approval. Now all that the law expects from you is that you always adhere to the terms of law; whether you want to live alone or together makes no difference - as long as you satisfy your commitment to law. A significant feature of law is that can be changed - but that can be done only through another law, otherwise it would mean a violation of law."

He paused for a moment and continued:

"The law does provide you a right to end your marriage - a legal contract - but it is concerned that you exercise that right for proper justifiable reasons. It is not enough if you state a reason, it should also be proven. How will you prove you do not love one another? Because she likes roses and you don't? Our national laws will need a better reason. I am not offering my opinion on this subject, our laws do not treat marriage as such a simple matter. Our courts believe nothing should be done to ridicule the institution of marriage - degrading or compromising its sanctity. So you have to prove that you don't love each other! Okay, now let me ask you . . ." he turned to Kalyani: "Do you hate your husband?"

Kalyani gave no answer and laughed. That very response revealed to him that she could not hate anyone.

"Can I say something?" Ranga intervened before answering Raghavan. He wanted to lay out in detail his reasons for divorce. He has been a little annoyed that Raghavan chose to ignore his plea for divorce in a playful mood and was mocking the couple.

"Go, ahead," Raghavan said, and lit another cigarette.

"We both believe we can remain as two good friends without a formal relationship of a husband and wife," Ranga began. "We mistook our mutual friendship and got married in haste. We want to get back to our old status. Does this mean we should hate one another? Should we accuse one another of some crime? We are not out to ridicule our laws or the institution of marriage, still we are not willing to humiliate ourselves. One should never ridicule human sentiments, don't you agree?"

"Ranga, you are completely mistaken," Raghavan replied. "I have already told you that you have the right to apply for divorce, that it is a simple matter. I asked you for a reason and because you could not state it properly, we ended up like this in a circular argument. No argument ever ends as long as there is a question that demands an answer. You said you

have been married for over one and half years. Barring some special considerations, you can't apply for divorce within three years of your marriage. Your case is stuck on this very point and that was the reason why I addressed this issue, again and again, Even if I accepted for argument sake that you two don't love one another that would not suffice. This has nothing to do with your love business. Can you think of any other reason? If you do, I want to hear it . . . Now, let me ask this: What made you think that you fell in love with one another, in the first place?"

Once again this was an unexpected question facing Ranga and Kalyani who silently exchanged glances. Raghavan was averse to press this question any further, and continued:

"Do you think the phrases like, 'I love him,' 'I hate her,' would explain one's love or hatred for another? I don't know much about that. I may understand if you care to explain that to me . . . I am talking about love only. To insist that a couple should be forced to live together against their will would certainly mean a veritable hell . . . Is that true in your case? I am asking this not as a lawyer, but as a friend . . . even that mayn't be right . . . I am asking as someone eager to understand what is love . . . Is that all what love is?" He turned to Kalyani. "Why are you silent?" He drew her into their conversation.

It was getting dark, so the servant switched on the lights on the veranda and the lawn. The blue neon light above the space where they were seated showered cool light over them.

Kalyani began in a soft voice: "I think there is no definite guide to understand the factors involved in love. Just as you have mentioned a declaration of love - for or against - another person is only an assumption, a posturing. It could be genuine or false. One can sense its real nature only by going through life's events. As far as we are concerned, it is possible that our initial posturing had proved to be false. We are decent, intelligent and united enough to arrive at this decision for divorce. Our mutual love might be authentic or false - who knows? But what is important is we are ourselves denying it. Don't you think that is material to our case?" Her steady, calm articulation led Raghavan to think that Kalyani could be the person who suggested the idea of divorce; he recalled how, a few minutes ago, Ranga was struggling hard to make a convincing argument for divorce. He shifted his glance on the couple - from one to another - even as he tried to think who among them would have made the initiative. Never given to patience to mull over things too long, he promptly raised the question.

"Who among you came up with this idea of divorce?" he asked, still laughing. "I think you were the one. Am I right?" he asked Kalyani pointing a finger. Kalyani responded with a generous smile which prompted Ranga to wonder, 'What a wonderful actress she is!'

'How could she conceal myriad feelings in a smile?' Ranga asked himself in amazement. Her reaction could be interpreted as an affirmation or a denial. She might be signaling a question to Raghavan, 'How could you be so wrong?' or evading the question, hinting 'How does it matter?' She might even seem wallowing in self pity.

"No, no, you are wrong," Ranga intervened and informed Raghavan. "I was the one who proposed to her and now I am also the one who suggested we divorce. She's the one who gave her unconditional support to both."

Raghavan let out a deep sigh.

Suddenly Ranga remembered something. "I forgot to tell you before. Kalyani is a well known actress."

"Is that right? I don't see movies," Raghavan expressed his appreciation and said he was sorry he had never seen any of her movies.

"She's not a movie star," Ranga explained. "She's a stage actress and runs her own drama group. She's not interested in acting in movies, she is devoted more to drama and loves acting. That's the reason why she can't love even me." Then he turned to Kalyani and said, "I meant it as a joke. Just ignore what I said."

Raghavan lit another cigarette, closed his eyes and, with his head raised, he seemed lost in a thought. Cool breeze wafted through. He suddenly straightened up, looked at Ranga and laughed. "I can bet you both are not going to divorce. You are just fancying it. When I say this I am not denying that divorce could be an option. Yet, whatever the situation, you are never going to live apart from one another. I have seen quite a few cases like yours." He continued to speak in a tone praising Kalyani and told her: "I think you are doing the right thing. Leave everything to his devices. If you start protesting, things will only get worse; he will succeed . . . Give him a long rope . . ." Ranga cut him short.

"What did you say? Are you suggesting that I came to this decision under some emotional cloud? We have both thought over this matter and arrived at this decision. This is not like the cases you have handled before." As Ranga

tried to inform Raghavan of his firm opinion in the matter, the latter patted on his back, still laughing.

"Ranga, I agree with you. This is indeed a strange case. I agree you have not come to this decision based on your emotion. What I meant was some day you might change your opinion based on emotion. Any how . . . let me state the procedure . . . First thing: now you can't apply for divorce. You need a minimum period of three years after marriage. Just as I had mentioned earlier, if there are no other reasons and if you both want divorce on mutual consent, you must demonstrate in your application that you both have been living apart from one another for at least one year. After that period, the law requires you haven't withdrawn your application. This is what the legal procedure entails. Normally when two individuals contemplate divorce, as far as they are concerned, their marriage is over. But I don't feel that is the way in your case. So, as a first step, you must start living separately from one another. That is the first requirement - to prove that both of you can't live together and can live apart from one another. This is not just a court order, this is something you both ought to make it possible. You need stop immediately things like friendly meetings, small chitchats or casual exchanges. It is not enough to declare "We don't love one another." That's when you will realize you are speaking the truth. Do you understand what I mean?" he asked Ranga.

"We are now basically leading such lives," Ranga said.

"Forget 'basically' and all that stuff. I am talking about total and complete separation," said Raghavan in a firm tone shaking a finger. .

Kalyani looked at Ranga. His face evoked pity in her as it signaled that he seemed poised to accept a challenge now thrown at him. She knew his tenacity: Ranga could handle any problem he encountered. But her heart was in turmoil as she realized that, in the final analysis, what drove Ranga into this resolve was his inflexible mind and the dogged determination.

The time was now eight and the couple took leave of Raghavan when he held Ranga's hand and offered him a piece of advice:"You don't have to act in a hurry. Please think over and both if you can finalize this matter. If necessary, you may take even an additional six months. This has to do with your life; it is best you do what makes you happy."

The couple bade Raghavan farewell and rode back home on the scooter.

Raghavan half smiled as he watched Kalyani holding on to Ranga's shoulder while seated behind him. It occurred to him that given Kalyani was an actress and Ranga seemed determined to get divorce, Ranga might actually succeed in his plan. What was happening in their married life, Raghavan wondered. Could it be that Kalyani was a totally different person in her past prior to her marriage with Ranga?

Once the scooter disappeared from his view, Raghavan thought no more of the couple and returned to his house.

On their way and till the couple returned home, they exchanged no words. They seemed unconscious of that silence because each was mulling over Raghavan's recent assertion that they needed to live one year apart from one another.

As for Ranga he readily seized their parting as a challenge. He conceded their separation would offer him no comfort or happiness; still, if it were to cause no pain or anguish to Kalyani. He would gladly bear his sadness in stride and live away from her.

'What is her problem?' he asked himself. 'She would be quite happy with a single rose or a single petal of croton! If not, just as she has been saying, she would be happy looking at herself in the mirror - spending the whole day in all kinds of diversions: trying to shape her eyebrows in a variety of ways at her pleasure; trimming the nails and applying polish; she would be lost entirely indulging such amusements. Why does she need me for her happiness? My self-respect demands that I remove myself away from her, and I can certainly do that. It is true I will miss her, but that would be only *my* private pain, *my* private grief. I don't want her to know what I feel. Kalyani would always feel happy; she would never miss me and, knowing this, how can I humiliate myself living with her? Raghavan too thinks I can't live away from her, he is taking her side! That is fine with me. Each one knows his own mind and there is no need to share it with others. At present, whatever is the situation, I can't function as Kalyani's husband. I will see her again, after a year, as a good friend. If I see her enjoying a croton leaf or even a mere wall, I would congratulate her as a great connoisseur! Ranga was acting headstrong as he chewed over these thoughts.

Kalyani too was caught up in her own thoughts:

"How did we end up like this? He says our relationship hurts both of us; I can accept it for argument sake, but what makes him feel that way? This is what a relationship comes down to? What makes him act so stubborn that he

is agreeable to this one-year separation to sever our relationship? I know his persistence, still he doesn't understand one thing! Why one year? I would be willing to wait him forever! I can certainly cope with a one year separation. Probably, he too can. But after that period, he can't return to me on any account, and he won't. This too is something he doesn't understand! Now, I was saying I would be waiting for him forever . . . This is only my hope, I don't know what I would feel tomorrow . . . After a while, I may start thinking, 'Why wait any longer?' That's how human nature works. This is the reason why laws have been enacted. I know he has come to a wrong decision but there is no way I can change his mind. I have heard people say that one's mistakes must be corrected by others, but I lack the basic qualifications for such an undertaking. That's the reason why I need to exercise caution. I know he is making a mistake and I can try to correct it only by cooperating with him."

After pondering over all these thoughts, Kalyani decided to offer her unconditional consent to Ranga's decision.

On reaching home they opened the front door, switched on the lights, and exchanged smiles with one another. Both felt that smile evoked only a sense of pity.

Kalyani invited him for supper. He replied he was not hungry and stayed in the hall smoking a cigarette. Kalyani went inside and only when she reappeared after changing did Ranga remembered he needed to change and went to his room. Kalyani sat in the hall watching him leave the smoldering cigarette in the ash tray.

Apparently, Ranga wanted to finish off the cigarette when he returned to the hall after changing. She expected him to return early before the cigarette was reduced to ashes. Still she showed no traces of fright or alarm. It is one of the ways the human mind works - associating one's present thought with some other thought. What if the cigarette is totally reduced to dust before he returned? She would remain unruffled.

Fortunately, Ranga returned and took out the cigarette from the ash tray. He noticed a strange glow on her face.

Suddenly he asked her, "What do you think?"

She knew what he was talking about, still she asked, "About what?"

"What Raghavan told us . . .?"

“Well, that’s what the law grants us. It allows us separation and if we choose divorce, why can’t we live separate lives before divorce? Once we made up our mind for divorce, the court would make it legal.” She spoke without revealing her feelings.

Ranga let out a deep sigh.

“Are we loathing or fighting with one another?” Ranga asked, laughing. “So, where is the need that we must live apart from one another?”

She too laughed. “Does it mean that we need to start fighting now?” She bowed her head down and remained silent. Then she began with some hesitation and then opened up to him.

“I am not trying to advise you. I am not refusing your suggestion. I am the one who sees eye to eye with whatever you wanted to do. Still, now that you have asked me, I want to say my piece. That way I can make things clearer to myself. Now, do you think all this is necessary? Why act so stubborn? Why can’t we both right away, at this very moment start living the life we want to have after divorce? As far as I am concerned, our marriage has ended the moment you started talking about divorce. I will never try to prove - anywhere or at anytime - that I was married to you. Let us live like two good friends - just the way you have suggested. A woman can have many friends, but I see our friendship as entirely different. Whatever you want to call our friendship it always meant same to me, from the beginning to this day. So, by mutual agreement, let us end our marriage. I think you can continue the same life as before. Our marriage will not restrict you in any manner.”

Ranga had no immediate response. He understood Kalyani was averse to miss his company and involvement for a year. But he felt by acceding to her generosity, he would be only demeaning himself further.

“Let me ask you - why do you wish such a relationship with no strings attached?” he wanted to know.

“You will not believe me if I say what I am thinking. What do words like trust, love, and respect for one’s partner, actually mean? I think any contractual obligations lacking in trust and bond are worth nothing.” There was a whiff of harshness in her voice and her eyes revealed a confused look.

He wanted to comfort her and pressed her hand with his. Kalyani held her emotion at bay and laughed even as she flipped away the hair falling on her forehead.

“I am afraid you find life dull and boring,” she said. “I am not a vamp who can enthrall a man. Everyman seems to admire this phony aggression in another woman. It is not enough if the woman is decent.”

“Correct, you have got the point! You are right on the spot,” Ranga exclaimed. “Come on, let’s eat,” and led her to the dining table. He was speaking even as he walking.

“We keep talking or and reading about a lot of things, still our lives always follow a mindset - the mindset of the society we live in. Our male-dominated society refuses to acknowledge that a woman - even if she is genial, smart, or intelligent - has her own ‘self’. This is something totally beyond his comprehension. I am afraid I too suffer from the same sickness - that’s what my intellect tells me. You have that ‘self,’ It is a declaration ‘This is what I am.’ Unfortunately, I can’t seem to explain to you the concept of ‘self’ in Tamil.”

“Please go on . . . I can understand.”

“I am speaking in general terms,” Ranga said, and laughed. “That doesn’t mean it would not apply to us.”

“A typical man in our society can easily live with a woman with no brains or any level of distinction. In such a relationship neither peace nor fighting has any meaning. But even when he is eager to develop a relationship with a smart, intelligent woman with her ‘self’, he finds it simply impossible. Here, in our case, it is your ‘self’ that has shaped your outlook. You may never lose it, you should never. I can understand that. I don’t want you to destroy that ‘self’ because of me. It will be never destroyed. That’s the reason I want to withdraw from you. This is the truth in our relationship as I see it. By refusing to acknowledge it and fester inside would only mean the height of hypocrisy. It is only after living with you that I have finally realized I am can’t live with a woman who possesses a strong independent mind and free spirit.”

They were now seated around the dining table, but neither of them was in a mood to eat. Ranga kept on talking and Kalyani was keenly listening.

"We can only enjoy happy events just as they come that is how one finds fullness and satisfaction in life. Nothing makes one happy when devoid of richness and contentment. Intellect and education may lead us to think of people in other countries - how they are living and acting - and ape their manners, trying to make our lives civilized. But I call that snobbery. I am not ashamed to admit this. Kalyani, you possess an individuality that defines your 'self' that makes it me hard for me to live with you as your husband. I know it would be impossible for you to give up your 'self.' I too have also subconsciously made several attempts to destroy it. You are a strong woman, finally your strength has revealed to me my weakness. I have to admit that. That is what my 'self' is."

As Ranga went on and on Kalyani understood the rationale behind his words.

The time was ten. Kalyani realized with their long conversation, they missed dinner. She served him food on a plate.

"I am not going to be happy living apart from you," Ranga began. "I don't understand your saying I find my life dull and boring. Are you saying I am tired of this life?"

"That is what I meant", Kalyani admitted.

"No, that's not true!" Ranga replied. "Over time relationships may seem stale and remote, but why would one feel tired of life? I am quite overwhelmed to think how I can part your company for one year. On the other hand, I shudder to think that I would be destroying our life - no, no, I meant my life! It is already damaged enough," and muttered to himself.

"Why do you say that?" Kalyani asked raising her eyebrows.

"Well. I could not lead a life with you the way I had hoped," Ranga explained. "Certainly you were not the reason, I am alone responsible for that failure. I consider myself learned and think of myself as a rational person who understands the external world through an intellect bent. But that outlook makes it very hard for me to live my personal life as a married man: I can't live intellectually my intimate life! Sex and love are based more on emotion than intellect. If one views love rationally, it would look absurd and meaningless. I need a family life as an emotional relaxation only after I set aside my rationality. The tension is overwhelming - how can I handle this strain?"

"I am one who out and out belongs to the Adi Kesavalu Naickar family tradition," he continued. "I am not as sophisticated as you are or as much as I wished to become one. It is only when I am advanced enough to respect your 'self' and nourish it can our life be in order. When that becomes impossible the alternative for me is to become your friend who respects your 'self', don't you agree? Still, I don't want you think that I am eagerly looking forward to part company with you."

"Have some more, "Kalyani was about to serve him some food but Ranga had already washed his hands in the plate.

"How come you haven't eaten anything?" Kalyani was disappointed.

He comforted her, saying "I don't feel hungry after having the biscuits and tea at Raghavan's place."

The couple spent the whole night talking to one another. They sat at the dining table until an hour past midnight, then retired to the bedroom where both lay on their beds and continued their conversation.

They concluded that, as Raghavan had advised, Ranga must stay away from Kalyani - and he was free to do so starting from the very next day, or after a month or after six months. They mutually agreed that they would never circumvent this plan under any circumstances.

Kalyani told him she had no plan to move to her old home during the period of Ranga's absence. To do so, she thought, would mean she was denying her relationship with Ranga and retreating from her stand. She was scared to discuss this matter with Ranga at length, so kept quiet; what if Ranga mistook her words as a personal critique?

'I may encounter many changes - some happy, some sad, some I can easily embrace and others I detest - in the future,' Kalyani was thinking. "I want to continue the same routine - imagining our life was unbroken. That would be the only way I can honor my self-respect. To retreat into my shell and live my former life would be an admission that I have failed in my one-and-half year with him. That's no failure. So it is imperative that I must continue my life right here - with or without his company. If I were to mention this, he would misunderstand me - he might think I am saying this only to prevent him from leaving this house. Maybe he feels this one-and-half year married life was worthless; who knows? Well, that's his opinion. I don't consider it futile, so I am not going to revert to that situation.'



“Do you think our one-and-half-year life was in vain?” She asked him.

“No, Kalyani! Why do you ask such a question?” Ranga countered her. “What I feel is I have faulted as to how to live this one-and-half-year life that is what makes me sorry! Had we not heeded Annasami’s advice and hopped into our marriage, we would be leading, happy, lofty lives. We would have never ended up like this. We would be living just like I am now hoping after our upcoming separation. It seems to me even now, right away, we can lead such a life without a divorce. Isn’t that true? Have we not been living like that for the last six months? Didn’t Raghavan say that we are only fancying about divorce - just like that. I even thought that as an option if we could actually live that way. That will create some more freedom between us and avoid conflicts. I am not sure if I made myself clear,” he said and lit a cigarette.

“I am not going to leave you tomorrow or day after,” Ranga continued. “You remember Raghavan’s words that we should not see one another or talk to one another? He said so because he thought that would be an impossible task for us. Not that it is impossible, but I wonder if it is absolutely essential. After three years when we approach the court for divorce, we need only prove that we had actually lived one year apart from one another . . . that’s all what we have to do . . . Now, why do you say you want stay in this house?”

Kalyani laughed. “There is no problem in my living here,” she said. “We are just taking the rent money from the old house and pay it here, that’s all. You will be in my memory if I remain here - it is like you have gone away on out of town on some official work. I will feel even lonelier if I move back to my old house.”

She noticed Ranga’s face turn wretched and said, “Pattu will be here in next two or three months. This is her mother’s house.”

Ranga cast the cigarette away. He now eased himself on the bed next to her. Kalyani noticed his eyes were closed and thought he was asleep or going to sleep. “Shall I put off the light?” she asked.

“Why, do you want to sleep,” he asked her. He was fully awake.

“No, I thought the light might be hurting you?”

“Okay, put off the light. We can sleep when we want. It is already half-an hour past two,” he said. He removed the watch and handed it over to her.

“I know you are not going to leave me and move away permanently,” Kalyani assured him. I can understand why you are insisting on divorce. I am not feeling sad. Take your case. Nowadays you are often continuously absent for two or three days, that is how you are going to act in the coming days. There is nothing to think, plan or comfort me in this matter. I will remain as before - enjoying watching a rose, a croton or a drama. Happiness, after all, has to do with one’s attitude. What more do I need? I am not getting younger; I don’t expect any turning points or changes in my life. A woman can’t hope for sudden events or a revolution in her life. I am not a single woman; I am an institution: I am running a drama company and many people depend on it for their livelihood. I won’t feel lonely as long as I continue to perform my duties and attend to my business affairs. I will never feel lonely, never!” She spoke as if talking to herself.

“Do you feel cold? Shall I put off the fan?” she asked.

Ranga was surprised. As a matter of fact, he was feeling stuffy. He was sweating under the nape and the back.

“Do you feel cold?” He touched her forehead. “You have no fever,” he told her. Still, he felt the sizzling heat.

“This happens occasionally - when I feel exhausted after heavy work,” Kalyani said. How I feel on the days of performance! That’s when I feel cold and feverish.” She stretched her body and slumped on the bed covering herself fully with a blanket.

Ranga let the matter rest there. He was averse to imagine anything further about her health condition.

They both tried to get sleep - in silence - but in vain. As they were lying with one’s back against another’s, Ranga asked, “Does Annasami know anything about our divorce?”

“I told him, he was feeling very sorry. Didn’t you ask me ‘Why has Iyer<sup>2</sup> stopped talking to me?’ Had I given him the authority he would simply fight with you and lock you in this house!” said Kalyani and turned around.

“Remember, he was quite upset that he couldn’t treat us to a formal wedding feast,” Ranga said. “How about a farewell party now?” he said poking fun.

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<sup>2</sup> This is Kalyani’s mark of respect for her mentor

“Poor man! We should never play with the emotions of people who love us,” Kalyani said in a voice of rebuke.

“I meant it as a joke,” Ranga said as if apologizing for his sarcasm. He thought about Annasami. He had thought many a time how he had foolishly followed Annasami’s advice on marriage and then found himself mired in all kinds of problems.

“Wasn’t he the one who suggested we marry caused our present problems?” He again asked.

“You yourself would have suggested it even if he hadn’t,” Kalyani said. “Indeed, that was a factor but not the only reason why we got married. To the extent we believed it was a right decision, we accepted his suggestion in good faith. Aren’t we responsible for our own decisions? We don’t have to feel sorry over our decision; I don’t think our marriage was a wrong decision. Hasn’t our marriage and our one-year-and-half life helped us to understand one another?” She neared and hugged him as if comforting him and seeking warmth.

“Yes, this marriage has certainly helped me to understand myself,” Ranga murmured. “Am I the only one feeling sorry? Had we not got married I will not be insisting that you should act like this or that. So, looks like I am repeating myself . . . Am I not? This has become my obsession!” he uttered to himself.

Kalyani tried to ease his confusion. “Look at the rose in our backyard. I enjoy it. You too will enjoy it. Yet nobody tries to criticize a rose.” But Ranga seemed mystified by her question and thought Kalyani was straying away from the subject.

“Why are you now talking about it, now?” he wanted to know with a puzzled look on his face.

“The reason we don’t think that a rose ought to have an extra petal or possess an additional aroma of a jasmine flower is simply because we accept a rose as it is. We never indulge in imagination or expectations about it. All that we expect from a rose is that it be a rose. If one adopts the same attitude with respect to people - accepting them as they are - we will never encounter these problems.”

Ranga answered her. “Do you know the reason why we accept a rose as it is and don’t expect anything from it? It is simply because a rose too doesn’t

expect anything from us, nor criticize us; it doesn’t demand how we ought to live. But that would not apply to human interactions. Arguments and conflicts are a natural component in a human relationship. That’s the reason I feel we should have exercised more caution . . . Don’t you agree?”

“What did I actually expect from you?” Kalyani asked on spur of a moment.

“I thought you were expecting something from me . . .”

“Why? So that you can validate all your expectations from me and demand more and more?”

“Was that the reason you acted cautious and expected nothing from me?”

“No, if that were the case we would have separated by now; we will be hating one another. Right now you alone are caught up in problems and conflicts, I have none. My life is full. What all I am trying to say is only to find a solution to your problems. I am not sad, I am not disappointed, and I am not afraid of you. Let me tell you something: let us not discuss any more our divorce or how we should be living. We have talked enough, we can live as we please. We need to make no plans about our future or argue what is right or wrong. You may do whatever makes you happy. I will do my best to make you happy.” As Kalyani felt her eyelids heavy and pressing, she fell into sleep even as she was hugging Ranga.

He body seemed still burning.

The daylight was already near.

After a while, Ranga was seated on the bed next to Kalyani and vigorously chomping on a cigarette.

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