

**JAYAKANTHAN'S**

**THE TIMES OF THEIR LIVES**  
*(Sila Nerangalil Sila Manithargal)*

**Part I**

## THE TIMES OF THEIR LIVES

### 1

It is raining like crazy. Everybody keeps leaning forward on the one in front when the bus takes a turn. The fellow standing behind me is deliberately trying to brush up against me. I know he is doing it on purpose, but what can I do? If women claiming equality with men want to work and make money they must go out and put up with all these troubles. There are only four seats in the bus reserved for women; maybe that was fine in the good old days when only a few women ventured to go out for work. But now, even an entire bus for women only may not be a bad idea! Poor souls! Why should women end up like this – competing with men and suffering the consequences - even after paying the full fare? If you think it is not degrading enough to allot only a few seats for woman passengers, how could it be more degrading to run a bus strictly for women? I think it's a good idea; I will write and send it for 'Letters to Editor'.

The heavy downpour goes on. The canvas covering the bus windows is fully wet and shaking in the wind. There is an awful stench in the bus owing to the muck, moisture and congestion. The whole place reeks with male odor! The short belt I am holding on to as a grip in the steel bar above me- I can't imagine how many use it every day - is made of leather and stinks too! Why can't they make these metal grips – just like they have in the electric trains? This is also a good idea worth putting down in a letter. The bus is now going on a level ground, no turns or curves, but the fellow behind me is stealthily moving forward and trying to touch me. How dare he do such a thing? Is it fair?

The other day Kala told me of an incident. Somebody misbehaved like this and she hit him with her slippers - causing a riot in the bus. Kala is certainly capable of doing

something like that, still I think she made that up – she probably *wanted* to beat him with her slipper. Didn't I feel like striking the fellow behind me? Can a woman do everything that's on her mind? Who knows, maybe he is an old man and is leaning on me with no ulterior motive. I want to turn back and look at him, but I can't! No, I am positive, this fellow is acting deliberately; he can't be old . . . I understand what is going on. Those who brush up against you accidentally will never do so – slowly and in measured steps. I feel terrible; because of rain I thought tonight I will not have a shower when I go home. But tonight, I will. Shouldn't people be ashamed to take advantage of women caught up in a crowd? What kind of men are these? Does it ever occur to them that the same outrage may happen to some womenfolk in their own families? Give me a break! Why would these men ever think of their own families? The wretch who is trying to drag a woman off the street is certainly superior to these men; yes, I would certainly say so. If she wants she could go and dally with him; otherwise she will simply say no and walk away. But this man is different! He is a scoundrel who takes advantage of a woman trapped in a crowd, who is in a constant fear of losing her honor and dignity but is decent and generous enough not to make a big scene.

This should be another point worth mentioning in my letter. This is very relevant to my earlier opinion of running a bus exclusively for women. I must write this not for the Tamil but only the English newspapers and that will surely bring good public response. The letter should be a few tightly packed sentences conveying the message right on; even if it means spending two days on such a letter, it will be worth the effort.

'Men should voluntarily give up their seats to women passengers.' (And women should respond with thanks; and the man in

question should say in return, you are welcome-how ridiculous!) I will never write that kind of nonsense. If someone offers me a seat, I will never take it. Who is this dude trying to please me? Am I a handicapped person or a senior citizen? No man offers me a seat because he respects my age or status. Am I old enough to deserve such attention? I am not yet thirty. I don't dress up like other women; still this cad is trying to push up against me; what will happen if I dress up in style? What makes these rogues see me that way? Is it because I take extra precautions to avoid such an image? How come all the men I come across feel the same way about me, yes, I mean all men, no exceptions. I haven't seen my father. How about my brother? Yes, I have one. Some brother! I am actually reluctant to talk about him – because he is my own brother. Otherwise, how could one tolerate such harsh words he hurls at me? Words are cruel enough, why should he keep repeating, again and again, 'You are *not* my sister.'

I have also observed how my brother behaves in a bus – and I would say the guy behind me is certainly much more decent; my own brother's looks will be even more disgusting. I don't know what's on his mind when he looks at me; I don't know what kind of stories he imagines about me when he spins them before his wife! And she in turn will embellish his stories – adding one detail here and another there - and spread them around to other tenants in her apartment complex!

Now this man behind me is trying to lean on me or even touch me. Does it mean one can link both of us in some relationship? That's what my own brother will do. He will link me with every other man – except himself! I don't even know what this fellow looks like; I dare not turn around and see if he is dark, red, young or old! Why does that matter to me? But it is different with my

brother; any woman caught in a crowd will automatically make him invent a relationship! Suppose my brother is now watching this scene. I can imagine how he will 'look' at it. .

He will first imagine that he has seen this man and me together on several occasions. Instantly, he will grant this guy a position in my office – as my co-worker; he had also bought bus fare for both of us. And I was deliberately trying to insult my brother – by acting cozy with this office friend in his presence; I am haughty and proud. "Who are you to question me? I am self-educated; I have, on my own, carved a career even better than yours." Brother feels ashamed and disgraceful, thinking, 'How dare she act like this? All the passengers are cursing her saying, 'How dare she act like this – openly in a bus?' Brother feels so humiliated he bows down his head in shame and hastily gets out of the bus in the next stop!

This would be the version that my sister-in-law would narrate to her friends after she has all the input from my brother. One of the tenants – a housewife – would respond:

"I too have seen with my own eyes; it must be the same fellow."

Another would volunteer: "Was he the same fellow or somebody else?"

My sister-in-law would resume her story: "Why should we care? We have already washed her off our hands. Still, my husband feels terribly hurt – because she is his own sister. He feels so small and humiliated! My mother-in-law was blessed with such a decent son, but she is also cursed with a daughter who robbed the family of its honor!" Following this, my sister-in-law would simply dote on her husband . . .

After she has passed on all the details from her husband to others and gauzed the public opinion, my sister-in-law would once again continue her harangue with my brother:

"We can't simply dismiss this matter, we do have a conscience. We moved away from them because we didn't want their money or home; that has not certainly hurt your sister, she is doing very well. Nobody is going to blame us because we left them to their whim and fancy. If your sister succeeds in life we are not going to share any of her prosperity. But if she gets a bad name, everybody would say she is your sister. At the time you punished her –as a brother – for her crime; any other man would have actually hacked her to death. What about your own mother? Did she ever say, 'What is wrong if a brother renders punishment to his sister?' As soon as the daughter was ordered to leave the house, she too joined her and walked out. Else, would she be now enjoying a big house and cozy life? Was she ever cursed to live in this damn Rs. 30- rental nightmare -infested with bugs and cockroaches and kids running all over the place? Everything was planned in secret and worked out in detail! Your sister's crime and your punishment to her became a pretext for your mother's move. I remember her often telling me: 'I had great faith in my son; I thought he would be highly educated and land in a big job. What if I desire? He failed in Matriculation three times. So I pinned my hopes on my daughter: that she will come out first in the entire state and may even become a *collector*. Hopefully God will give her a long life.' Now her dream is fulfilled – the daughter got high education and also landed in a big position. So how does it matter if the daughter goes around with some stranger or the other? But we are being blamed – everybody keeps mentioning she is your sister. Now, don't you see your mother, now and then? Why don't you tell her what is going on? I heard rumors that your sister is seen wandering at night in a park near *Panchavati* after seven; what if she is highly educated and enjoys a high position? I feel so ashamed when I hear these stories!" When my sister-in-law talks my brother would

never interrupt her; he would pay her full attention – silently - as if listening to a gospel.

"Okay, okay, I hear you; what do you think I should do?" He will gnash his teeth and explode with a question: "Will she listen to me if I talk to her?"

"That's entirely a different matter," sister-in-law would answer him. "Whether she listens to your advice or not, let us simply let her know what we hear from people around us. What happens next, let us leave it to your sister and her mother. I brought this up because you are being blamed for everything. Otherwise, why should I care?"

The bus screeches to a sudden halt as if it hit a massive road barrier. The fellow behind me finds his entire body pressed against me in a sudden impact - much to his great desire and satisfaction. He certainly bears no blame for this mishap.

I was thinking about the Letters to Editor. I have often thought of writing letters on many topics; but they always stay as mere thoughts only and soon lose their novelty. Eventually I get bored and comfort myself: 'What will be actually served by just writing a letter?' That topic will be simply forgotten.

Once in a while I will come across some very interesting letters in the Letters to Editor Section. That is the first thing I always look for in the newspaper. Next . . . I will read the Matrimonial Section. I have no interest in responding to any ads or meeting with any prospective suitors. It is just an interesting diversion for me! I will never get married-

I have decided a long time ago that marriage is not for me. Maybe that has something to do with my peculiar interest in matrimonial columns, it's certainly no crime.

Looks like the bus has stopped at Egmore. I can't see where we are because all the windows are closed. Many are getting out of the bus; it is still raining outside.

The bus conductor is asking the passengers in a loud voice to get off at Egmore. Many are rushing into the bus. A

few seats in the Ladies Section are now vacant and I instantly occupy one of them. I have only three more stops to go, but I was determined to get away from that 'leaning bull' I can now clearly see him. And that laugh! Shameless fellow! He looks like a typical Romeo on the buses – with his hair falling on the forehead. He wouldn't have known that I have seen him; I pick up the weekly magazine *A* from my handbag and brandish it against my face. Then his face simply fades away from my memory.

I start reading a short story – the one I had read a couple of pages at the lunch hour. It is a story by RKV based on an incident similar to the one I had years ago. I always like RKV's short stories. I think the author must be a woman writing under the pen name RKV. Maybe I feel that way because all of RKV stories are based on themes dealing with modern woman.

At work my co-workers often discuss RKV's controversial stories; but I never take part in any of them. I laugh when I listen to their nonsense. I also occasionally get irritated.

They think I have no literary interest. I too feel the same way about them – from their chatter. My taste stays with me, why should I share it with others?

Let me read the story – written by RKV:

*She reminded one of an unadorned, virginal flower possessing a beauty and elegance uncommon among many of those priceless gifts; now, as she stood there in open space drenched in rain, her legs, long exposed to cold weather and growing pale and white, looking like a pair of ivory carvings; her feet, trembling in the cold and growing numb, forced her to crouch, with her upper garment and the blouse sticking to her small, wet frame, while her face was graceful like that of a temple deity. She was a beauty to behold; she could easily turn men on – to grab and possess her . . .*

Only RKV is capable of writing like this. His sentences are long, but one is never put off by their involved construction; they evoke vivid images, one after another, in the reader's mind.

Some twelve years ago, I too was standing in that posture; I too was wearing an old, faded upper garment – often made out of my mother's old sari; I too must have looked like a small, temple deity. Is this my story too?

I continue to read further:

*She was now left alone, all by herself, the stray bull now standing next to her as the only companion. Afar, in the college campus, there was some semblance of human activity. Suddenly darkness came down like a curtain, followed by a strong wind that shook the tree branches lining the street and let the water droplets fall on the ground. The girl took refuge under a tree. The rain, which had abated a few minutes ago, now resumed in full vigor. The girl tried to run across the street and go back to the college campus, when a large car ran into her and suddenly came to a standstill after barely scraping her; the sudden brake made the car swing gracefully in the front as well in the rear.*

*She cast her eyes on the beautiful car – from its rear to the front driver's seat – in awe.*

*The driver – a young man with an attractive face – smiled at her, bent down and opened the door of the rear seat.*

*"Please get in . . ." "I can drop you at your place," he said and let his eyes devour her, just like her eyes did to the car.*

*The girl felt her ear lobes and nose flush with red. "No, thanks," she answered. "The rain will soon stop, and I can catch a bus home."*

*"Oh, it's all right! Get in!" He was pressuring her. She was still standing in the rain and he did everything short of dragging her into the car with his own hand . . .*

*She let her eyes wander back to the tree where had she sought refuge a few minutes*

earlier; now that space has been taken over by the bull . . .

The car door was still open. As she felt the rain water creeping its way into the car in a blast, she tried to close the door, and felt the driver's hand firmly press on hers. Horrified, she pulled it back and looked at him. The young man was smiling. What a pleasant smile it was!

And now he too got out of the car and was now standing in the rain . . .

"Um . . . Get in!"

Now she couldn't refuse his invitation.

As soon as she got into the car, his hand shut off the door tight as if confining her to a prison.

The car glided on the road as if surfing on a wavy sea.

Her eyes roved across inside the car. A blue fan mesmerized her eyes as if luring her into a dreamy world. The warmth she now felt around her proved a welcome change to her body long exposed to the cold weather. She didn't feel the car was running on the ground; it seemed floating above the ground.

"How wide are these seats!" she wondered. "One can even easily sleep on them." She felt she ought to show a better taste, especially because she was now sitting there in a corner with her books still held against her bosom; slowly she set the books and her lunch box on the seat and eased herself comfortably to make her posture seem a little more imposing and dignified.

"The car itself looks like a home; with a car like this one will not need a home. He – this gentleman – probably owns a house, how big will that be? Will it be like a palace, with lots of servants? And who will be living in that palace? I don't know anything about him. Now, what's this thing right here in the middle? If I pulled it between two seats it comes up like a table; one can use it for reading, writing, or even sleeping – two people can easily lie on it, with their heads on either side. And this small lamp! It's so

beautiful! It is shaped like a lotus bud – no, it rather looks like a jasmine bud! I would like to see it glow. . . but what if this gentleman gets mad at me!"

"There is a switch below, can you see it?" the young man asked her even as he was driving the car and casually watched her from the rear view mirror.

She switched on and admired the lamp glow brightly, then shut it off fearing it might consume too much power. Then she became conscious of herself; with her two hands she tried to squeeze the water trickling down the top of her.

"Hmm, why did I wear this damn upper garment today?" She cursed herself and tried to hold the tip of the garment and squeeze it dry. She heard something snap open; the young man was just then opening with his left hand a small compartment next to the steering wheel; she was thrilled to see a small red lamp glowing inside it, as he took out a small Turkish towel and handed over to her.

"Thanks!" As she helped herself first to dry her hair, arms and hands, and then her face, she was pleasantly overwhelmed with the aroma emanating from the towel; she savored the smell by pressing her face even harder into it.

The car was now making a turn around a street corner and she suddenly lost her balance; frightened, she could only exclaim, "Mother!" while her books as well as the round, stainless lunch box rolled over from the seat.

"Sorry," the young man now smiled at her. He slowed down and continued to drive at a reduced speed. The young girl was a little embarrassed at her own reaction; she quickly gathered her books now scattered around and eased herself into a comfortable position.

Nothing was visible through the car windows because a layer of smoke-filled moisture covered them; the girl wiped the window clean with the tip of her upper garment, and looked out.

*The street lights were now aglow; along the way, images of well-decorated shops could be seen reflected in the pools of stagnant water on the street. She heard people talk about a world underground. Could this be something like that?*

*Why is the car going on this street?*

*"My God! My house is on the other side," her lips grumbled in a whisper.*

*"That's fine, who says no?" the young man too grumbled in a low voice, and smiled at her.*

*"This is certainly no fun," the girl told herself and nervously played with her hands. Because she was aware he was watching her, she kept smiling to keep him in good humor.*

*The car sped on.*

*It soon emerged out of the city's busy commercial district, passed along the wide lanes dotted by huge, tall buildings and avenues lined with beautiful bungalows and magnificent gardens, before turning into a trunk road away from the hustle and bustle of the city.*

*"T.B. Hospital . . . T.B. Hospital!" the conductor utters twice to draw my attention, the second time calling out a little louder. It is still raining outside; this morning was bright with sunshine when I left for work, so I didn't take out my umbrella. Now I quickly made up my mind; instead of getting off at this stop and waiting for the rain to subside, how about continuing the trip all the way to Mambalam Terminus while reading this story and then return home in the same bus?*

*"A ticket to Mambalam." I buy a new ticket and return to my seat.*

*'That leaning bull' is now sitting in a front seat and stares at me, again and again. Maybe he thought I was following him! What a joke!*

*The bus resumed its journey.*

*I get back to my story.*

*This looks like just my own story. How will it end? Why do I get teary?*

*Suddenly a thunder is heard . . .*

*That day also there was a thunder . . .*

The RKV story concludes with the following words:

*Outside, the sky seemed torn apart. Lightning struck pell-mell; thunder echoed far and near. That lightning must have hit somewhere!*

The truth of the matter is -it struck me - right on my head!

## 2

After slamming the main door to the house shut and locking it from inside following Ganga's departure to work at ten, Kanakam finds herself sprawled on the bare cement floor and sobbing to herself till four in the afternoon. This has been her routine for the past one week.

Soon after receiving the milkman at four - once she freshened up her face - and resumed her chores in the kitchen, Kanakam would be once again festering inside and secretly crying . . . .

Last week, following a heavy downpour, when Ganga returned home late at night - she had forgotten to take her umbrella and Kanakam grew worried and anxious - she locked up the house, took the umbrella and went out in search of her daughter - spending more than an hour at a bus stop awaiting her.

Then, sometime past eight, after the rain had subsided, she saw Ganga get off a bus arriving in a direction opposite to the one of her regular buses from work. Kanakam, who watched Ganga from the opposite street was scared even to address her daughter by name. She crossed the street and ran as fast as she could; still, she could catch Ganga only near their home.

She was concerned Ganga would be bewildered by seeing the house under lock, so she rushed past her and opened the front door while explaining the situation in the best possible manner: "Give me a minute. It has

been raining the whole day and I was concerned you didn't take out the umbrella to work. So I came rushing to the bus stop to receive you. Some rain! There are no street lights and a small, sharp stone has pierced my foot! I can't walk fast; still I was trying to catch up with you. . .” She spoke as if addressing a stranger without actually looking at her daughter's face. After unlocking the house, she turned around to see if Ganga would at least acknowledge with a smile all the trouble her mother had taken; she realized at once that Ganga had not paid any attention to even a single word she had uttered; it was as if Ganga had no time for such trivial matters, was deeply immersed in some knotty problem on hand and couldn't be bothered by some childish prattle. Ganga stared at Kanakam with a playful smile on her lips and the mother suddenly became silent as if she was guilty of some crime . . .

“Read this.” Ganga uttered two simple words in a deliberate, harsh voice and threw a magazine at her mother – not even caring to hand it over to Kanakam's hand extended toward her. Then Ganga directly proceeded to her own room and went to bed – without dinner.

Kanakam spent the whole night – reading that story, again and again.

Since that day – for the past one week – Kanakam is in pain thinking of something that causes her to occasionally break down into tears.

Kanakam is crying in secret; Ganga mayn't know that her mother was crying; even if she did, she wouldn't have cared. As far as Ganga was concerned tears are just dirty water. Ganga never cries. Her mother knew her own crying would have no effect on her daughter, so she cries to herself - away from her, in secret.

During the last twelve years – except when Ganga lived in a hostel for two years to pursue her college education – the mother and daughter have been living in the same

house sharing their time and meals; they spent the days and nights together, exchanged greetings before going to bed at night and in the morning after rising from the bed; yet, while they shared a mutual company with no other person coming between them, there was always a wide schism between the two; just like Ganga lived away from the outside world and her relatives, she also lived away from her own mother.

She had stopped addressing Kanakam as Mother since the last twelve years.

It was only in the last ten years, after her age past forty, that Kanakam is enjoying a happy, comfortable life.

During these last ten years she had no need to go out and borrow coffee powder from a neighbor; she never failed to do so prior to this ten-year period. Ganga is taking very good care of her mother; if Kanakam, on any morning started coughing after rising from her bed, a doctor would definitely show up on the same day by nine. If Kanakam ever found herself sewing together the border of a sari, she would be presented with a new sari the same evening. At the month's end Ganga would personally hand over to Kanakam two one-hundred-rupee bills, and will not even tell her how that money may be spent. Hardly a month passed in these ten years when Kanakam had not bought some new stainless steel vessel. Not only was she spared from borrowing coffee powder, sugar or some *dal* from other tenants; now Kanakam finds herself in a position to offer generously anything to others at her doorstep; what more comfort and independence could a widow at her age of fifty possibly ask for?

Once in a while her son Ganesan would show up. He would gripe over his woes – his struggle to cope with a salary of Rs. 300 and life in a shack with a monthly rent of Rs. 30. Still, he didn't expect his mother to help him with her daughter's wealth. He was proud enough to spurn such an offer if it was ever made. He was certainly inclined to borrow



money from others; his mother certainly wished he approach her for money, but he never did. And his mother never gave it to him. His visit to her home had nothing to do with money.

He would sit in the main hall and grumble about Ganga, and Kanakam would engage him in conversation while quarreling with him and refuting all his charges against Ganga. Ganga wouldn't stir out of her room until Ganesan was gone. If Kanakam, at her own choice, wanted to present her grandchildren with gifts of clothes or traveled to her son's house to prepare a special dish or snack for the kids, or even invited Ganesan's family for a get-together on some festive occasion that brought down the house in a near riot, Ganga never exhibited any displeasure or negative feelings over such actions.

And her poor mother thought Ganga – deep in her heart – relished all those actions!

Whatever Kanakam chose to do, she did it for Ganga. She secretly mourned for her daughter, whose life had come to a standstill, winding up virtually with no promise of continuity and devoid of any hope or accomplishment.

Kanakam went on living trying hard to forget – like a bad dream - her concerns and thoughts.

Until last week – when Ganga hurled the magazine to her mother's face and asked her to read that short story – Kanakam had not realized Ganga, deep in her heart, nursed so much anger, frustration and vengeance.

Usually, in the evenings, once she was done with the kitchen chores, Kanakam would come out of the house and take a look at its surroundings. Around that time the street lights would already be lit; she will switch on the veranda light, go inside and light the lamp in the *puja* room. Then, armed with some magazine, she would sit on the veranda and read it or watch the ongoing fun in the street. All these were her external

activities; her mind would be in turmoil – thinking, over and over, why Ganga was not yet home. She knew her worry was unwarranted and meaningless, still her mind told her there was a reason underlying that concern.

One could never be sure when Ganga would return home from work; on certain days she would be back around five-thirty; sometimes she could be as late as six, seven or even eight. Who can question her?

'Why should anyone question her? She is not someone caught up in unseemly things; she lives her life like an ascetic. Other women may go to movies, plays or concerts, but our Ganga shuns all of them. You can never spot her in any crowd, she has become so hateful of human faces. That's why she doesn't even look at me! Now, I am standing here right at our doorway; another woman is standing over there in the opposite house. Have you ever seen a woman who doesn't stand at her doorway and watch the fun going on the street? Yes, that would be our Ganga! Where is grace in any home with no woman at the doorway? Such a gesture will not be called improper in a community where decent families live. A woman might look for her husband returning from work; another might be looking for a maid servant sent on an errand; the kid who had gone to school will certainly return home, but its mother might come out to simply enjoy watching that scene. These are normal in all communities, but unfortunately this home is not blessed with those simple joys. .

Our Ganga would never watch any fun on the street. Occasionally, there will be a marriage procession or the local deity would be carried along the streets in a religious ceremony. On those occasions I would be the one rushing from the kitchen and coming out into the street. Ganga would always remain in her room- either reading or writing something; otherwise, she would be simply lying on her bed, crossing both her arms

across the bosom and staring into the ceiling.

I am scared even to knock on her room door. I would soon forget she was my own flesh and blood; some fear would suddenly grip me. .

How can this state of affairs continue?

What else can she do?

What can I tell her – as long as she doesn't want to tell me anything? What is there to talk about, anyway? She goes to work, and till the end of my life I have to cook meals for her and spend my time waiting for her to return from work! That's my life! Was there any day when my life didn't start with a chore in the kitchen? My life has been literally spent in the kitchen! How many more years? Won't she be able to find a cook after I am gone? Still - our Ganga would always remain the same person . . .'

Now, I want to ask, why are these people badmouthing her? When Ganesan visited me last week – Ganga was at home, in her room – how crudely did he disparage her – either intentionally or because he didn't know she was in the house! Did she pay any attention to what he said? When she acts dignified and says she doesn't care a bit what others are saying about her, shouldn't these folks at least feel ashamed and keep quiet? Whatever her attitudes, what right do these people have to attack her?'

Our Ganga, whatever she does, will act royally and be open about it. She will not stand by the window or door and eavesdrop into others' conversation. She will directly look at a person and say exactly what is on her mind – no shilly-shallying. She is a very private person; she would never, never unnecessarily, have a truck with anybody!'

Not even once had she come home with another woman and introduced her to me as her friend. Does she have any friends, at all? Does she ever talk or laugh with another person? Is she a loner at work too? I am really amazed . . .

And something else; you see women who are married to a man earning fifty rupees a month, apply a handful of powder to their faces, splash a fistful of *mascara* running across from the eyes to the ears, while making faces on their way to work! I don't even know how much Ganga makes. . Ganesan says she should be making seven hundred or seven fifty. . Maybe he is right. . Ganga simply washes her face with soap and water. . She doesn't even sport a *kumkum*.

Why are people badmouthing her? They are grousing Ganga goes walking! So what? Ganesan thinks that is big news! Obviously walking is out of question for him – because he lives in a shitty street in Triplicane! He is mad because Ganga takes a bus all the way from her home to the beach road; so what, that's her decision, and she can do as she pleases . . .

She has no friends; she has no home to go to. She hardly visits any temple; neither would she worship at home. I always light a lamp in the *puja* room. Ganga never even enters the *puja* room.'

Maybe she has something on her mind when she goes for a walk – in the morning as well as in the evening. In the morning, first she goes out for a walk and then only takes a shower; in the evening she takes a walk on her return from work and then has a shower. Ganesan thinks this a big deal – the other day he rushed all the way from Triplicane to enlighten me on this news! His wife must have been behind this, and he simply carried the 'message' from her.'

Remember the day when Ganga threw that magazine with that story at my face? There was a heavy downpour on that night too -just like it was described in this story.

I acted like a devil and beat her as if to death – without thinking for a moment that she was my own flesh and blood. I grabbed her head and violently dashed it against the wall – again and again. Her whole body had suffered bruises and she had fever and high

temperature. 'You can't stay in this house even a minute longer,' 'screamed that wretched fellow; seizing her by neck he threw her out into the street.

She lay there like a corpse - cast away on the street. How can a mother bear such horror? I rushed to her side and lifted my poor child. 'If you want her, you better leave this home with her,' my son said and shut the door. I carried the poor girl and brought her to the veranda. Everyone in the neighborhood was watching us - as if enjoying the fun.

I am a sinner! Even at the time I was wildly cursing and striking my daughter - who was lying unconscious on the veranda; then, overcome by emotion, I was smiting myself - slapping my face and punching my stomach. A few neighbors came and consoled me. They served both of us coffee and snacks. Later, they served us food - this gave them some perverse pleasure because even as they were showing sympathy for our plight they seemed to be secretly laughing and talking with one another about the punishment meted out to us. My little girl had her head bowed down and not even once did she raise it. She didn't even open her eyes. I was stranded on that veranda with my grown-up daughter - as if expelled from my community. Knowing her plight, a few teenagers gathered around my daughter - and were casting looks that were downright leery and obscene. I tried to protect her from their prying eyes; when overcome by anger, I too cursed and spanked her and cried along with her. I thought of taking her to the beach and drowning her and then killing myself. Then, after a couple of days, following my letter with a personal request, my brother Venku visited us and took us to his home to live with him. It was his generosity that gave us food and shelter and it was he who got Ganga into a hostel and paid for her education. And what about Ganga? She was a smart student and came first in the entire state! Which college would

refuse her admission? So she studied hard and is now in a high position!

How much did my daughter and I suffer in those days! I wouldn't wish even my enemies to have their children undergo what my daughter had gone through!

It was her fate; she got into a situation at an age when she didn't know what she was doing; the result - her whole life has been destroyed! After all these years, Ganga seems to be suggesting I am actually responsible for her pain and agony . . .

Where is the need to tell me? My mind is in turmoil - ever since I read the story in that magazine . . .

I never imagined my daughter's life would end up like this. Because of my anger her life was ruined; I forgot to put down that fire - a truth - and let it grow. . I didn't realize I could have actually hidden that episode from the world. .I could think of an alternative only after I read this story. Only now I understand there are people who face such unfortunate episodes in their lives, yet manage to keep them under wraps and go on living normal lives. Is it enough if a woman gives birth to a girl? Is it enough if she watches her grow in body and mind? My daughter's life was destroyed because I didn't know how a mother should act in such a situation. Only those who have endured such horror would appreciate this story! I can understand the situation now, but it's too late! Only now I am mature enough to understand what happened in the past; at the time she was seventeen and I was thirty-seven!

Some fiend secretly led her astray and violated her; I made it public and consequently ruined her life.

Now I can actually recall my first reaction when witnessing that horror! I was so mad my anger totally wiped out my mental capacity to act with wisdom and discretion.

The girl in this story too faces her mother with the same dilemma; when I try to imagine

how that mother would react to that scene, I now experience the same rage.

First, the mother batters her up just like I did. The other tenants rush in and ask her what happened – of course, people always want to know what is going on – that’s their nature . . .

The mother in the story – silences them right away, saying, ‘Nothing – why should she get wet in this downpour?’ How smartly does she handle the situation!

My god, why didn’t I think of saying something like that? Would my daughter’s life have ended up in disaster if I had uttered those words? Looks like I too was responsible in turning her life to a tragedy; no, I must not include her; I am alone responsible for this tragedy . . .

When I read in this story – how the mother, after bashing her daughter and crying over their fate, takes her to the bathroom, pours bucketful of water over her head and lovingly gives her advice – suddenly I feel peaceful and serene. I am also angry that I could not bring myself to act like that mother.’

That mother’s advice to her daughter – I feel as if it was meant for me:

*“My dear child! This incident must never be revealed to anybody. Otherwise, an entire family will be destroyed! Nobody would pause even to think what might happen to their own family if the victim is one of their own offspring. I know there is a crowd that’s always indulging in gossip and spreading all kinds of rumors. But you must never be concerned with them. There is no flaw or blemish in your character; I am saying this because it is true and I want you to believe it and feel that way deep in your heart.”*

“Looks like it was I who ruined my daughter’s life.” Kanakam now mentally tortures herself and returns to the veranda and awaits her daughter from work.

A taxi stopped before the house.

A little scary, Kanakam arose from where she sat.

Fortunately for her, it was her brother Venku Iyer who alighted from the taxi.

Kanakam invited him into the house by opening the front wooden gate and addressing him, “Why - at this unusual hour?”

“I arrived in the morning itself; my train was late, so I went directly to the court. Then I was going here and there with my clients. Where is Ganga?” After his enquiry, Venku Iyer entered the hall, tossed his black coat on to a nearby chair and threw himself into an easy chair.

“She is not yet back from work.”

“It is already eight. Is she still roaming the city streets? Why don’t you discipline her?” His question carried not only a touch of power and authority but betrayed a whiff of anger.

### 3

When it comes to criminal arguments, I must tell you, everybody thinks Venku Uncle is a tiger. He is now vigorously brandishing a hand in the air – with the other marking the page of that magazine out in the front – and gesturing as if cross-examining a witness in the court. Mother, who is leaning against a pillar, saw me coming up the steps leading to the house.

Initially I was at a loss to know what prompted Venku Mama to talk so loud; but once I noticed that magazine in his hand and Mother facing him, I could understand not only what he was now talking but what he might have spoken earlier.

What could he have said, exactly?

He would have lashed out at RKV - in the most severe language – in one continuous stretch:

“Writers like RKV must be prosecuted and thrown out. Anyway, what is the big moral in that story – which your daughter wanted you to read? Can anyone say

everything would be just fine if a bucketful of water is poured over that girl's head? If that was acceptable, the girl may commit the same crime everyday and her mother too could 'purify' her every day with a bucketful of water. Even prostitutes take showers everyday – but nobody would argue they have suddenly become chaste women. If you commit a crime, you must have the decency to admit it, you can't just argue what you did was right and acceptable. Where would be the rule of law and order in the world if one is willing to accept what is suggested in this story? Then marriage will lose its sanctity and become just a meaningless ritual. What made Ganga ask you to read this story? Does she really think you should have concealed the truth from public? Or, just as you were saying – is she trying to blame you for what had happened to her? What makes you think so? No decent housewife would ever conceal such an outrage! You loved your daughter very much, yet why didn't you think of keeping quiet about that episode? Because that would go against your grain; a mother would think of covering it up only if she too was promiscuous. The author of the story speaks from the point of view of the girl, but I see it from the mother's perspective. Any cover-up on the part of the mother would be simply wrong! Then there won't be any concern for right and wrong in human conduct! All the crimes will be simply covered up by their perpetrators. You must be really proud that you didn't act like the mother in this story. Where is the harm to your daughter because you did not hide it? On the other hand, by conscious cover-up, you would have committed an unpardonable sin against your family reputation and the sanctity of marriage! If any of our family members suffers from an incurable disease – the proper course of action would be to isolate such a person - even if it is our child. I don't understand why are you getting upset over this? . . .”

That's vintage Venku Uncle! To lay out his case with force and logic – that's his stock in trade!

I am still standing at the doorway. Uncle is talking with mother, he hasn't yet noticed me. I listen to his full-throated voice; still don't catch the sense of even a single word he is speaking. Because I am joining him in the middle of his speech – though I know what he is talking about - I fail to understand him. Why is his voice so loud and blaring? He is accustomed to raise his voice in the court. One should never confuse his voice with rage; actually, when Uncle is mad, no sound will emerge.

One should ask his wife Ambujam Auntie about Uncle's anger. Of course, Auntie won't say anything. I don't think she would have confided in anybody about it. Good heavens, why do I feel nauseous thinking about her? She always looks pale and anemic - like a plant withering under shade; her head would be always bowed down as if in utter submission; she would be working all the twenty four hours - I think she will be finally washed out by domestic fatigue and weariness; she seemed like a fairy in an ancient myth who was condemned to eternal servitude and was patiently awaiting salvation – promised sometime in this life. I knew only death would be her salvation. Her memory just makes me sick. .

Uncle is now seventy, so Auntie must be close to sixty. But she would never address even boys by directly looking at them; even when dealing with the servants around the house she would gently sneak behind a door and mumble the orders in a kittenish voice. She has no relatives to speak of, and I often wondered if there were any – but then, she must have had some – probably they stayed away from her. Nearly half of the Uncle's property came from hers. For some reason they had no children. Uncle actually married a second wife but she passed away within two years of her marriage – it was said her death

was caused by a mental problem or some malignant influence. After that Uncle was never interested in marriage.

Remember when my brother threw us out of the house? At the time when Venku Uncle came and took us to his home I had an entirely different opinion about Ambujam Auntie. Even now mother dislikes Ambujam Auntie. Mother calls her a 'Living Cobra.' There was a legendary cobra living in Uncle's house-garden in Tanjore; it would harm nobody, so it was left to roam about freely in the garden; it has been living there for many years, and so it was named a 'Living Cobra.' Mother would call Ambujam Auntie the second 'Living Cobra.' in that household. Mother often told me: 'She looks like a quiet, little kitten but is very cunning and mischievous; only Venku Uncle could handle her; she is really a witch who cast spells on Uncle's first wife and caused her premature death. Like a ghost haunting a treasure chest, she is doing her best to see that nobody can ever lay hand on their wealth.'

Mother had time and again warned me about Ambujam Auntie; yet, she left me in Uncle's house and returned home within the next two days. I was so scared of Ambujam Auntie I shunned her like plague. Auntie always worked in the rear and never ventured into the front section of the house; so I spent all my time in Uncle's company up in the front. Only later did I realize the truth: I was literally riding on the back of a tiger! It was Ambujam Auntie who revealed that truth to me. Only then I did I find out what that anger would do to this 'Tiger Uncle.'

I don't remember when or how it happened. One day, when Uncle was gone out, Ambujam Auntie emerged from the rear and came over to me up in the front – addressing me, again and again, "My child." I was desperate to flee from her – after opening the front door and running headlong into the street. I had my back to the wall and was stealthily moving around; I was biding

my time when I could lean back on the wall with both my outstretched palms and then with one violent thrust reach out to the front door and run out of the house . . .

Bur when I saw this woman, much older to me – crying like a baby even as she was fondly addressing me as a child – I lost all my fear and actually pitied her.

Instantly I asked myself: what am I afraid of? When I thought of what I have gone through in the past and what had brought me to this house, I couldn't help laughing at my naiveté. Why fear like a baby? After all, compared to the injustice I suffered at the hands of my mother, brother and others, what more can this 'witch' do to me? So I let out a mild laugh and comforted her with a question, "Auntie, what's on your mind?" She stopped crying, wiped her eyes and stealthily examined her surroundings.

"I am afraid to stand here; why don't you come to the rear?" she said and ran away. I was a little puzzled, still I bravely followed her. Only later I found out what a nice and decent woman she was. We spent a lot of time talking together when Uncle was not around in the house. She confided in me so many secrets about Uncle which no other person would ever know; these revelations were shocking, and seemed so preposterous that even Uncle's sworn enemies would call them atrocious. All of Uncle's vices and perversions are mostly hidden from others – but not from me - who skillfully outwitted him, and not from Auntie who was the unfortunate victim of her marriage. Soon I began to see Uncle as a tiger and his house as a tiger's den.

I am now watching Uncle standing on the stairs. His black coat lies on a nearby chair. His shirt is hanging from the easy chair. He is seated on a chair - only sporting an undershirt and a monstrous belt across his waist. Ambujam Auntie would know how dangerous weapon that belt is!

One day Auntie showed me the mayhem that belt had unleashed on her body – the shoulders, neck, back, chest, buttocks and thighs. How could this tiger – even at the height of its maddening rage could assault selectively those areas to conceal this horror from others? I have seen the scars left by the belt –black stripes branded on the skin. Auntie could identify each and every one of those lesions: ‘This one in red was inflicted yesterday; the blue one – that was last week . . . and the ones before that are all in black.’

She told me: “My dear child! You should not reveal this to anyone. I too wanted to believe this would never be known to any human being. But then I realized when I die and my body is dumped on the funeral pyre, these lesions will be seen by the *pariah* who claims the last piece of cloth on the corpse. Despite myself I have now revealed this secret to you. You must not betray my faith in you; promise me you will keep this secret.”

I gave her my promise. I will never reveal this secret to anybody. What makes me stick to this decision is not just my promise to Auntie; it also has to do with the timely help I got from Uncle; when I was orphaned and had nowhere to go, he came to my rescue and sheltered me; later, he offered financial support and cared for me when I was in the hostel and studied in the college. When I begin to think of all these actions stemming from his generosity I feel strongly that – so far as I am concerned – to pick on his weaknesses would be a mortal sin; I must not do it, I will never.

But this uncle is a tiger, and I must be on my guard when dealing with this it. This was the lesson I learnt from Ambujam Auntie.

Uncle still has not noticed me standing at the doorway. I came just a few minutes ago. Before he finished his last sentence in blaring voice, I recalled all these memories from my past.

He flung down the magazine on the floor in a ruthless gesture that reminded one of his

hatred for that short story and its author. It was when his hands were about to unbuckle the belt that he saw me. I too locked my eyes on him.

Uncle’s face does look like a tiger’s. His curly hair reaching to the ears like two metal wires twisted into a spiral and the eye-brows laden with dense hair forming knots accentuate his tiger-like posture. This tiger is smiling at me; it shows love and support; still, it’s a tiger. So, I too smile and show my gratitude. I must also protect myself. This circus has been going on for the last ten years. Taming a tiger is a part of the circus, so is the act of living with a tiger.

Once he noticed me, Uncle’s tone is completely transformed.

“Come, . . . come,” he greets me as if inviting a baby crawling before his very eyes, and extends his hand toward me even as his belt is stuck to the waist hanging like a sword. He rises from the chair, approaches and draws me into his tight embrace. Mother standing nearby is moved and wipes the tears off her eyes. Uncle is old enough to have a daughter when Mother was a baby crawling on the floor. His manner would evoke only one response from onlookers: he is demonstrating his desire to be friendly and intimate with children.

In so far as Uncle is concerned age is a cover; he, himself, is a cover to his own personality. His appearance, speech, his moralistic lectures, his erudition in spiritual matters and the faith he espouses in time-honored rituals – all these have drawn many to surrender at his feet. This is not an exaggeration, it is the truth. In and around this city and neighborhoods, when someone gets mad at someone, there is this refrain, which I have often heard: ‘Why don’t you just chop off his (the enemy’s) hands and feet? Don’t worry; we always have *Vakil Venkataraman* around.’ Uncle is so good in arguing his case that he will get a murderer to walk out of the court as a free man; he can also get an

innocent man convicted as a murderer. I am told all the judges in the court are mesmerized by Uncle's command over English. The Sanskrit pundits visiting the local *Saraswati Mahal* normally stay with him and Uncle will conduct his discourses with them in Sanskrit. I don't have to tell all this as today's news. This is known to everybody acquainted with him.

This man at seventy will be seen by others as an old man frolicking with his granddaughter, but I know better: I can't reveal to the world that he is actually a rowdy and a woman hunter – worse than the man behind me in the bus trying to brush against me; he is worse than that stranger who duped me after a ride in his car. Still, my own family members will not believe me if I were to speak ill of Uncle. But my heart knows; I am grateful to this tiger even as I am scared of it.

I am like the proverbial cat that had a brush with fire; once is enough. I will never allow myself to be bamboozled again – was it really my blunder? I had nothing to do with it?

Even if it is true that I acquiesced – against my own free will – it really means I was taken in. Maybe that was the reason why at the time I used to think men are essentially bad. But even then – when I found refuge and started living in Uncle's house – he proved to me that I was not mistaken.

Good heavens! What if Ambujam Auntie hadn't warned me saying, 'He is a tiger, you better watch out?' So what? Would that mean I would have been victimized a second time? Maybe I would have been double crossed, again. Still, whatever might have happened, I am positive about one thing: I would have never gone to Mother and repeated my past mistake of foolishly confiding everything to her!

So I haven't even revealed to Mother that I have seen through this Uncle as a tiger. When such a foolish idea came to me, I just remembered everything from my past. I

recalled how eagerly I sought Mother for solace and comfort – as if I was seeking atonement from God. How mercilessly she shattered my hopes!

That night I initially felt I must not reveal anything to her – but the very next instant I acted against my instinct; from that time onwards I have come to believe that my mother is only a convenient connection to my life but not someone nourishing and supportive enough to evoke any warmth and affection for her. So I stopped talking with her! Should I now renew my acquaintance with her – just to reveal to her that Uncle is a tiger?

These are really matters where one simply can't help another. Every woman has to depend on her own instincts at the time I needed all the help and support from that tiger. I was not willing to kill myself; to end my life, I thought, was unjust. My brother threw me out into the street; Mother was saying she would like to drown me in sea; only Uncle was saying he wanted to admit me in a college in Tiruchi.

I decided I must learn to tame this tiger without ever becoming its victim. I must learn how to think and not let myself be duped by him. He is a good tiger; I must cajole him, learn the tricks and ride on his back; but I should never surrender. Once in a while Uncle transforms himself into a tiger; then I let him into the cage and shut off the doors. Some men act like animals and they have a rationale for such a behavior; we too must disguise ourselves to suit the occasion and save ourselves. This is what I have been doing with Uncle for the last twelve years and managed to survive.

Now I find myself in the clutches of that tiger.

After embracing me with words, "Come, come . . ." Uncle continues: "My dear child, why are you so late? You are coming from work, am I right? You normally don't go anywhere else. . . If the office closes by five,



you must put away the files at five and walk out of your office! You must have definite hours for everything! 'Are you talking about Ganga? She would be at work at this time; she would come home at this time' – that's how people should talk about you. Why do you have to work so hard? Then, what happens to your health? You probably had something in the morning before you went to work; what did you have for lunch?" He keeps stroking my back – as if eating my body. He also presses hard on my arms and shoulders. I wriggle my body and answer him:

"Curd Rice."

He bursts into sudden laughter as if I uttered something funny. "I know! You would have taken only curd rice for lunch! What else could your mother have given you? Now you are a big officer! Have you now become a section officer? Aren't you ashamed to have curd rice for lunch? I am not suggesting you should go to the canteen and stand in line with those other men! You can always send your peon to get your meals. Did you have at least some coffee in the evening?"

I feel angry and irritated why this old hag is harassing me.

*'When I was orphaned and left on the streets, you came to my rescue; you gave me education . . .'*

I feel like crying; I control myself and nod my head saying, "No, I didn't." I twist my body, again.

"Why do you want to hoard money even without helping yourself with a cup of coffee?" Uncle asks. He now pinches my cheek hard.

"Please stop it! You are hurting me!" I protest and my eyes turn moist. My shouting was phony, but my tears were real.

Mother is relishing this scene.

"Kanakam, why don't you make some nice, hot coffee for me and my niece?"

Mother goes inside the house.

"Uncle, let me go! I need to change!" I free myself from his clutches and escape to my room.

"Don't close the door. I am following you!" He thinks he is only teasing me!

"Uncle, you are really embarrassing me!" I flee and rush to my room. Uncle thinks I am just bashful!

Once I find myself in the privacy of my room I pause for a minute, recall my humiliation and begin to cry; tears overflow from my eyes and reach down the cheeks.

Tears – that's the dirty water purged from the human mind.

#### 4

Uncle and I are going for the evening walk. It is Uncle who actually got me into this routine.

When I lived with Uncle in Tanjore – I went for walks only because I wanted to please him. I was soon bored with those exercises and my legs began to ache. Early in the morning around five, Uncle would get ready for the walk; sporting shorts, he would come to my bed and nudge me up with his walking stick, saying: "*Kutty*, get up! How long can a girl lie in the bed?"

I would rise from bed as soon as I heard his voice and rush to the bathroom, wash my face, and adjust my '*paavadai*' and upper garment. Uncle, armed with his walking stick, would be waiting for me in the main hall till I joined him.

In the beginning I even felt a little proud that such an elderly gentleman was treating me like a friend.

I even felt sorry for Uncle – when I imagined his going for walk without me.

I thought he was really pleased because I was willing to give him company.

But pretty soon I got bored with the evening walks.

Our house was on the West Street. We would take a turn at our road end, turn south,

and catch the Hospital Road taking us beyond the Big Temple to the New Canal Bridge. While returning we walked along the Siva Ganga Garden. Occasionally, we would try different routes. Only in the mornings we would try different routes. The evening walk invariably took us to the Big Temple where we would circle the temple premises – from left to right – in a mode of worship - before coming to the Siva Ganga Garden. Here again we would walk around the Garden. Our final destination would be a banyan tree in the western corner of the garden. From there one can look down and see the Siva Ganga Lake. We would rest on a raised platform near the banyan tree till seven.

Everything that Uncle spoke, his questions and the stories he used to tell me, would always remind me the stranger who gave me a ride his car.

Onlookers might think a girl and her grandfather were going for a walk.

Whatever our discussion, it would invariably come back to that car episode.

“So, as soon as that fellow invited you for a ride, you were willing to go with him?”

“No, no, initially, I refused.”

“Was it a conscious thought, or just a talk?”

“I was really scared; so I refused.”

“How did that fear disappear?”

“I was still afraid when I got into the car.”

“Did you like him?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“Then why did you get inside the car – even when you were scared of him?”

“It was raining . . .”

“Was it a heavy downpour? Did you get completely wet? Were you feeling cold? Because of the cold weather (now Uncle speaks in a hushed voice as if trying to ferret out a secret from me; he is winking at me and his hand resting on my shoulder tightens its grip; I want to cry, but I am scared) did you feel like holding somebody –in a tight embrace?”

Words failed me. My mouth was dry; I felt something blocking my throat.

“Come on . . . tell me, you wanted to go for it . . .” He shakes my shoulder.

“No, I didn’t want to . . .”

“Don’t lie,” he says, “If you were not willing that incident would have never taken place.”

At the time I thought: maybe I should indulge in some plain-speaking

I wanted to forget all my regard for this Uncle and thought of addressing him in some derogatory term, and say my piece: ‘At this moment, I don’t like the way you are talking and acting with me. I feel like killing myself because you are humiliating me! I am disgusted when you try to fondle me, pinch my cheeks and thighs. Still I am putting up with all this shame; I am pretending like an innocent girl fondly addressing you as Uncle. What happened to me in that car is nothing compared to what I am now going through. That doesn’t mean I willingly gave my consent. Women caught in secret schemes by sexual predators never willingly submit themselves to what is forced upon them. Now you are an old hag with one foot in the grave, yet you are oozing with libido. Don’t you think my tormentor – at his age – might feel the same way? Because you imagine that even you could attract me, you also think I was also attracted to that predator in the car. The truth of the matter is even if I liked him, I would never like you! So I am telling you: Devil, get your hand off my shoulder!’ I feel like unloading all this on Uncle like a ton of bricks; I am mad as hell, but I can’t say anything. I swallow my anger and pride. My throat hurts, my mouth becomes dry.

Uncle will occasionally enlighten me on the worldly matters. He will explain how our scriptures and social mores are primarily based on the rightful conduct of women; he told me men and women share a basic difference when it comes to evaluating their moral judgments and that this is inherent in

human nature; accordingly, the man is free to practice either monogamy or polygamy based on his moral judgment; but as far as the woman is concerned, nature has decreed she embrace monogamy. This doesn't mean, Uncle hastens to say, that women are inferior to men. It is because of their superior status that women are so ordained. He will often quote from '*Manu Sastra*' and '*Mahabharata*' to support his arguments.

Sometimes I found his expositions very interesting; his arguments always seemed logical. I will often come up with questions to challenge him. But I will never ask.

I know his mindset and his felicity with words. So I knew what his replies would be to my unasked questions. So I never ventured any questions. No useful purpose would be served, anyway.

One day I did ask him a question. I asked it because I couldn't foresee what would be his answer. I thought he might not be able to come up with a suitable reply. So I asked: "You are telling me that a woman should practice marital loyalty and should therefore be faithful to one man. But in *Mahabharata Draupadi* is married to five men. How did our scriptures allow it?"

I was a little hesitant when I asked the question. I thought I caught him right on.

He replied: "Polygamy had undergone change because our scriptures wouldn't accept it. Have you noticed something? In this context – it did not occur to you to ask about *Kunti*. I can understand what is on your mind. What this means is a barren woman like *Kunti*, who wanted to be blessed with children, was allowed that special privilege. That is at the core of this episode and not the fact that she was married to five men. You have similar examples of *Dhrutharashtra* and *Vyasa*, who were also born as gifts from the Gods. We must take from our epics the core principles and not the episodes." I am flabbergasted when Uncle starts elaborating

on such themes, so I stopped asking any more questions.

Uncle offered explanations not only from a historical perspective but from a scientific point of view as well. He often quoted examples copiously from flora and fauna. He would argue one rooster could take the place of ten hens; as far as he was concerned he would argue bluntly – with astounding clarity and no ambiguity – that men and women must be governed by different laws.

Sometimes he would volunteer a sagely advice: without any sense of propriety or sympathy he would begin our conversation with the words, "When it comes to dishonored women like you . . ."

I believed he was justified in using that kind of language - by simply bowing down my head and listening to him.

"Those who think you deserve to be drowned in the sea or burnt alive for your conduct are stupid. You certainly have a future. But that future should never become a drama where you can pretend to be a virgin; you can never dream of a domestic life prescribed by our scriptures."

Finally he would conclude our conversation zeroing in on the same topic.

When Uncle began discussing that episode he seemed as if recalling vividly each and every fragment of what had actually happened; my whole body would squirm in shame as if Uncle was mentally undressing me. He asked me questions as if he was imagining himself in the role of that stranger – the predator - and thus wanted to relive those moments; his eye balls seemed struck in excitement.

"You really don't know him?"

"Hmm . . . No . . ."

Suddenly his face registered a change because he was mad at me and jealous of the stranger in the car.

"Do you realize what a sinful and depraved woman you are? Otherwise, how could you possibly submit to a total

stranger?" When I heard this question I couldn't help thinking of my brother who seized my neck and threw me out the house; my mother who thought of drowning me in the sea. I thought both of them were much better and more humane than this Uncle.

"Strictly speaking that stranger is your husband. The major aspects of your life – marriage and family life - had begun, ended and were reduced to veritable lies in that car; if you now want to enjoy those privileges they can be realized only with that stranger. Let us say we are able to locate this stranger; now, how are we justified in asking him to accept you as his wife? He is never going to believe what you say; he will only think of you as someone who is willing to go along with any stranger promising a ride in his car. Neither you nor I can reasonably argue that he is wrong in his judgment, can we? So you must accept that normal, marital life – in so far as you are considered – is out of question. You must give up any such hopes."

Uncle lectured to me on so many subjects – I found them bitter, harsh and often disgusting. Still, when I think of what I have become today, it was Uncle's speeches that helped shape my personality. Whatever his intent, his speeches helped me understand myself, this world and –even Uncle.

Sometimes he sounded brutally frank in expressing his opinions: "You can be only a concubine to someone, and not a wife to any man. By opting for such a life you will not be compromising our ancient scriptures. You will receive redemption and blessings."

I got the sense of the inner meaning in his advice: 'Why not becomes my concubine?'

Uncle is a decent man. Till now he had not directly asked me such a question. Would I have refused - had he asked? I am not sure. My refusal might sound even unreasonable. Till this moment I shudder to think if he would suddenly confront me with such a choice. Would he achieve that ambition without actually asking as much – do I

actually deserve his respect? - making me a victim by sheer force?

Uncle is certainly capable of doing something like that. This tiger is also hungry. Once he created such a situation but I was able to outsmart him. That smartness I owe to Mahatma Gandhi's text – his advice to women. Not the entire text, just the last sentence, which I underlined in red ink and left on Uncle's desk.

"This is my advice to women; I wouldn't advocate non-violence to you when someone is trying to outrage your modesty. You are free to use any weapon at your disposal. If you are unarmed, why not use the teeth and nails that nature has given you? Under the circumstances the murder you commit and, failing that, the suicide that follows, will not become sins."

That evening while on our usual walk Uncle referred to my note and calmly gave his reaction.

"You have read this book rather too late in your life. . . I am glad you have read it, at least now! It will apply to those who try to force you to submission. But that stranger didn't force you. When it comes to girls like you, no force may be actually necessary. ."

He is right. But he didn't believe his own words. That's the reason why till now he had made no attempt to take me by force. Should he ever try I will neither kill him nor end my life. Those red-ink lines I had casually marked on that text – at some point in my life out of fear – have protected me all these years.

Because of my habit of regular walking regimen in Tanjore I followed that practice in Tiruchi and here – even when I had nobody as a companion. Whenever Uncle visits Madras on business he too makes it a point to join me in these walks.

After we moved to the present home in *Panchavati* I have begun walking on Spurtank Road and feel quite happy about it. I walk along the Canal Road till I reach

Harrington Road level crossing. Again, in the evening, I go around a big circle.

From the other side I go up to Kasa Major Road, cut across Pantheon Road and walk along the College Road; I recall exactly the spot where that car stood twelve years ago. I stand at that bus stop for a few moments. Then I return to the bridge after walking through the Village Road and coming back to Spur tank Road.

On most of the days when I go for walk I see a foreign lady coming in the opposite direction. I don't know if she is French or Russian. There is a Consulate nearby – yes; it is the office of Belgium Consulate. This woman finds herself dragged along by a dog, and I often feel it is quite an exercise for her. She beams a mild smile as soon as she sees me; sometimes she greets me, and I too return her gesture. I don't know her name, but I think of her as 'The Lady with a Dog.'

I think either Chekov or Turgenev wrote a short story under that title. I remember that story whenever I happen to see her. I also think of Chekov and Turgenev.

She probably thinks I am fond of her dog!

I hate pets; I don't understand why people are willing to put up with cats and dogs. To adore pets, I think, is a kind of perversion. After all, isn't perversion a natural, human instinct? Is it true that even animals exhibit perverse tendencies? RKV often mentions the word 'perversion' in his short stories....I think a more apt word would be 'mania.'

Venku Uncle is also a pervert. Does he suffer from sexual perversion? No, he is a pervert, a sadist, otherwise why would he abuse Ambujam Auntie? What makes him press hard on my shoulders – again and again – even after I protest he is hurting me? Sometimes blood oozes from the skin when Uncle pinches my cheeks. Why can't men talk to women – without actually touching them?

I see no sunlight, the time is not yet six. There is a nice breeze as Uncle and I are

walking. I carry a bag on my shoulder and Uncle sports a walking stick; we both look like a girl and her grandfather.

Uncle begins his usual refrain, saying, "I too read that RKV story. Looks your mother cried a lot after reading that story. I also heard that you asked her to read it. What did you really mean by your suggestion?" He grips my shoulder hard, and I helplessly wiggle my whole body.

I see that foreigner with her dog coming in the opposite direction. I am walking in the opposite direction with a tiger. As we near one another, the dog barks at Uncle and he stares at the woman.

I call her 'The Lady with a Dog.' Does she think of me as 'The Lady with a Tiger?'

If I were in her shoes, that's how I will think of me:

I am the Lady with a Tiger!

## 5

Criminal Lawyer Venkatrama Iyer (as Uncle is known in the legal circles) has ripped apart – page after page – RKV's short story; still, it seems to come back to haunt him –like the slaying of the legendary, invincible, *Jarasandha!*

Whatever maybe his arguments in defending Kanakam's action in openly and brutally exposing her daughter's blunder to the whole world – by strictly conforming to the ancient scriptures that extol traditional Indian values and our cultural heritage – deep in his conscience that RKV story assails him-like a public prosecutor who rises from his chair with a sly smile on his face to challenge his counterpart in a legal battle.

'My honorable . . . .'

'You may feel quite pleased that you had succeeded in your intent – to reduce Ganga as a hapless victim by smearing her name and reputation; on the other hand, can you prove that our ancient scriptures and traditional

values have been rendered safe and secure because of the punishment meted to one Ganga? Are you suggesting there are no other daughters and mothers of that ilk living among us? How did our ancient scriptures and culture render them the retribution they actually deserve? How just is the doctrine which seems to proclaim: 'Those who conceal the truth are forgiven; but those who confess to their transgressions are to be punished.' Forget the scriptures and the notion of justice – doesn't our Indian Penal Code – drafted by some British citizen – allow some leeway even when dealing with an approver?"

Venkatrama Iyer smiles to himself – he gets a sense that the prosecutor's line of attack has run into a snag.

'What is material in this case is not the extent of harm caused to our ancient scriptures and cultural heritage. The central point here is the examination of the insight a daughter and her mother bring to a particular situation in their personal lives – steeped as they are in our ancient scriptures – and how they deal with it. . .'

'Okay! Let me put the question to Kanakam herself.'

"Kanakam . . .Kanakam!"

Venkatrama Iyer was resting on an easy chair; he had been reading the newspaper, then let it fall on his face and went to sleep. He dreamt about RKV story and woke up with it still lingering in his memory. His sudden utterance brought Kanakam, busy in the kitchen, to her feet. Because Venkatrama Iyer was leaving that evening Kanakam had to prepare the dinner a little earlier than usual. As soon as she heard him address her, she dropped the task on hand and rushed to him...

"Are you busy? I called you for no particular reason. Get me a glass of water."

"How about some coffee?"

"Why drink coffee at odd hours? I am going to leave in an hour . . ." He followed her into the kitchen, politely accepted with both

hands a small vessel with water and sat on a stool nearby.

"Get me a *pappad*; not on a plate, let me just grab one with my hand."

Kanakam was touched by his utter informality; here is the famous criminal lawyer who enjoys a top position in his professional career, evokes admiration and high esteem as a pundit in any public forum or gathering; yet, he is so easy and unceremonious in her kitchen –perched on a small stool and enjoying a *pappad* he personally had asked for!

"I called you because I was thinking about that short story," he told her, and continued "You told me you broke down after reading it, that's not right! If you think that was right then it would only mean you feel sorry that you didn't cover up that outrage! Don't you find it disgusting – when you really come to think about it?"

Kanakam was totally unprepared to follow his foray into a serious discussion; she became silent, her face registering a change.

Her loneliness –augmented by her crying in secret for the past one week – had found some reprieve in the last two days because of her brother's comforting company; he will be gone in an hour, and she will once again find herself saddled with the same burden as before. Her eyes revealed her craving for a breather.

Venkatrama Iyer totally misunderstood her mind.

He turned grave and serious thinking Kanakam was actually feeling sorry for not covering up that episode. He now spoke his mind:

"If that is how you feel about that atrocity, do you know what you should have actually done? That night when Ganga showed up at home you should have demanded her to identify that perpetrator. Then – whatever his caste and family background – you must have surrendered your daughter to him and be done with it! Not only that; you should have

renounced all your relatives and other connections and taken a hike! That would be the only reasonable thing to do! What makes you think that you must cover up this incident and get her married to another man? That would amount to prostitution!" He concluded by smiting his head as if in distress.

This was too much for Kanakam who instantly broke down and sobbed incessantly. She spoke even as she tried to wipe the tears off her face with the tip end of her sari." I feel terribly sorry that my daughter is not able to lead a normal life like other women; I also see many women who have committed improper acts, yet find themselves in envious circumstances. Whether by intent or not – my daughter's life has ended up like this; are you telling me I shouldn't get upset?" Her pathetic question now revealed to Venkatrama Iyer a mother's inner turmoil. He regretted he had spoken those harsh words. He paused for a moment and calmly told her;

"You must not feel sorry, it is not fair! I agree you can't be happy because your daughter's life turned ended up this way. That is her fate! We should feel sorry for her fate. You must feel sorry for what your daughter had done, and not for what you did. Are you crying because she is blaming you? Have you lost your mind? Why should you feel sorry you have not acted like the mother in some story – just because some idiot wrote it? Human life is made of so many vagaries, but we ought to use our judgment in how we conduct ourselves. Now, let me ask you a direct question: do you have faith in our scriptures and what they say about morals in regard to marital loyalty? The writer of that story has little or no faith in those ideals. Every word in that story confirms that. At least you believe in them, don't you– answer me!"

He spoke as if casting that short story as an indicted felon standing in a dock and Kanakam as a witness for the opposite camp

standing in another. He assumed the role of a lawyer cross-examining Kanakam, the witness from his own side. He questioned her as if she was forced into only one choice: Yes or No.

"Have you faith? Answer me!"

Kanakam was a little confused how to respond. She also failed to understand why she had to answer such a question. She had not read and digested the scriptures to grasp what Venkatrama Iyer had referred to; she thought of her simple family background and the family values she has learnt from her own life and from those other women who lived before her.

"Because of that faith I even thought of taking my daughter to the sea and drowning her and then killing myself," Kanakam replied and cried covering her face with both hands.

"Ssh . . Don't cry . . I was not saying things to make you cry; you shouldn't cry . . There is no reason why you should. . Remember this: you have shaped your daughter's life –when it faced extinction – into a beautiful thing, and you must feel proud about it. . People who have faith in morals must not allow themselves to be swayed by acts of some erratic and wayward folks. After the entire world is full of such capricious men and women. It is possible there is not only a mother who condones her daughter's immoral behavior by pouring water over her head; maybe there are several mothers who have no qualms in accepting the ill-gotten wealth from their daughters who behave like whores, day after day! Will decent women cove-up this kind of sluttish behavior?" As he went on and on, a suspicion grew in Kanakam's mind: maybe that story was advocating the most reprehensible conduct possible and was actually acting as an apologist for the life styles of wayward women.

‘Just as he said - is it possible a mother would cover up such a shame only if she herself was promiscuous?’ she asked herself.

“Could it be that the writer of this story is also a rogue – just as my brother accuses him?”

‘Why is Ganga reading all this stuff? Why did she angrily toss the magazine at me and say, ‘Read this’? Is she mad I didn’t go along with her? Well, I am not born in such a family! I did the right thing, I have no regrets. I don’t have to feel sorry over anything I have done - just like my brother says.’

“I am crying because she was born in my womb.” Kanakam wiped the tears off her face and raised her head as if her conscience was clear.

“The time is up, please have your dinner,” she invited him and spread out the banana leaf for him.

After finishing his dinner, Venkatrama Iyer washed his hands and returned to his chair and resumed his conversation with Kanakam:

“You must not cry on any account. Don’t mistake me because I am plainly talking about Ganga. Ganga is certainly better than so many of today’s girls, still she has no stable mind. We can’t blame her for her outlook, it has to do with the world we live in. Even strong-willed persons find themselves vulnerable to external pressures. Do you understand what I mean? Some fellow writes a story defending an atrocious behavior and even a magazine has chosen to publish it! And many are avidly reading that stuff! If it is a question of simply disciplining a girl you can forbid her from reading that awful stuff. Values always beget taste and decorum. Why go this far? This story has upset even you – someone who knows everything! Why, because of your love and affection for your daughter!”

“Does it mean my daughter’s life has to end up like this?” Kanakam touched her heart with a hand and mourned.

“Why? Don’t you know? Remember the fate of our Judge Sivarama Iyer’s daughter? She was only eight. The father was very fond of his daughter and son-in-law. The son-in-law drowned in a river when he went for a bath. The girl ended up as a child widow and returned home at that tender age. It was her fate; you must accept this is also your fate . . .”

Kanakam’s body felt as if scorched by the fury emanating from her brother’s pitiless heart spouting cold-blooded pronouncements.

“My God! Don’t you think that would be gross injustice to womanhood?” Dismayed, she closed both her ears...

“By current standards, some may even argue that to deny the *thali* to a widow should be construed as injustice to womanhood! When people are willing to accept *thali* as sanctioned in our scriptures how can they oppose its forfeiture if the woman becomes a widow? We get ourselves into hot waters only because we are deeply committed to ideals like chastity and marital loyalty. If we give up these values we can certainly live with ease and comfort.”

He continued: “If someone compels your daughter to a life against her own will that would be a sin. Even a greater sin it would be if you palm her off on another man – by pretending she is a virgin. If your daughter is actually smart and can find out that ‘stranger’ and declare to the world she wants to marry him, will we be denying her wish? Why can’t she do just that?” His words betrayed self-confidence bordering on arrogance; his conceit and scorn were surely mocking Ganga-as if challenging her: ‘Show me if you can!’

Just now I am entering the house. The taxi I came in is waiting outside for Uncle.

This morning Uncle told me when I was leaving for work: “Take a taxi this evening



when you return home; I can use it to go to the rail station.”

That has been always Uncle’s routine.

Normally his work in Madras would last only a day; but he will always overstay and spend a few more days at our home. Sometimes he may stay beyond two days, but never less than two. When he is on vacation he may even spend more than two weeks – much to my chagrin!

Wait a minute! Why am I acting so mean? Who can claim dominion and property rights in this house – if not Uncle? But for Uncle where would be my house, my job and even my life?

I certainly have no problem with Uncle visiting us and staying in this house. My concern is only in regard to the problems he creates for me. Where can I possibly complain about him?

He joins me in the walks – both in the mornings and evenings. Otherwise, he never stirs out the house. Never!

I am responsible for bringing the taxi for him. When I go to the market to buy vegetables and groceries I would get him a wad of betel leaves. Occasionally, if he runs out of stock, I will have to go myself. Mother would not go, and certainly, Uncle will never!

Should a Wednesday or Saturday intervene during his stay here, he would get ready for his customary oil bath; clad only in a short towel hanging down his waist he will turn the whole house into a bathroom.

‘See how this oil is dripping down my scalp; why don’t you help me with my back?’ he would accost me at my door when I am getting ready to leave for work. In Tanjore the entire backyard was used as a bathing ghat! How is that possible in this ‘C’ type flat?

I really get mad when I see Uncle sitting comfortably in the main hall with a pail of oil nearby; he would help himself with spoonfuls of oil from the pail and smear them to his

body – starting with his belly. What a disgusting sight!

He will never go out and get a taxi for himself. I must get one when I return from work. Today, I came a little late - on purpose. Should I arrive early he will insist I accompany him to the rail station.

I see nobody in the main hall when I enter the house. Maybe Uncle is having his dinner in the kitchen. He is ready to leave as I can see his leather bag lying on the chair. The easy chair is unoccupied – the newspaper is lying on it.

I know Uncle is talking with mother – only about me.

‘ . . . is actually smart and can find out that ‘stranger’ and declare to the world she wants to marry him, . . . Will we be denying her wish? . . . ’

I am suddenly stuck.

Uncle’s voice, about to continue, also is stuck. Like a rat, he alerted himself as soon as I entered the house. Maybe mother let him know of my arrival with a hand sign.

He helped himself with the buttermilk he scooped with his hand, and glanced at me across the main hall.

‘Ganga, are you home?’ How can this man who has been talking about me in such fiery tone so quickly moderate his voice and act as if nothing has happened?

‘The taxi is waiting outside. The driver was saying he can’t wait too long . . . ’

‘How can he say such a thing? The taxi fare includes waiting charge too,’ Uncle grumbles and rises from his seat.

I go to my room.

As I am changing, I hear a knock on the door.

‘Ganga, it is getting late, I am leaving now. Please drop me a letter. I never seem to hear from you.’ He keeps talking standing at the door.

I came out of the room and Uncle grabbed my hand and began ‘Be a nice girl. Don’t read all kinds of nonsense and spoil your

mind. On any day you may be exposed to a thousand opinions- you need to choose only the one that is appropriate to you. It won't be necessary to examine each and every opinion to know if it is right or wrong. Be a good girl". He drew me into his embrace and affectionately kissed me on my forehead.

"See you later! Kanakam, take care of yourself! Ganga . . . Good bye!" He went on and on till the cab disappeared from our view.

I was still standing at the doorway, and maybe Mother was a little surprised. I know Mother was a little sad – or proud- that I never wanted to stand at the doorway or watch what was going on in the street. So she seems to have been puzzled.

For the first time I am looking out at this street – from my home where I have been holed up for the last two years.

I glance at the opposite house; a car now enters the compound where two children are playing hopscotch with their *pavadais* raised above their ankles. Maybe it was their dad who was in the car. Seems like he is in a bad mood because he asked them in a harsh tone, "Why are you playing even after the street lights have been lit?"

The girl in a green *paavadai* tossed out the slice in her hand and mumbled a few words to the other girl and then disappeared into the house. Maybe this girl belonged to another home. Left to herself, she continued to play hopscotch by cheerfully throwing and catching the small scrap to her heart's content. Emerging from the compound she continued to walk on the street and when she came to my house she stopped for a moment looking at me. Maybe she too was a little surprised by my presence. Even as she was watching me she continues to toss the scrap up into the sky, claps her both hands together and again catches it. She keeps doing it for some time. Some game! I couldn't help laughing.

"Auntie, why are you laughing?" she asked and approached our compound gate.

I didn't know how to respond; I was shy to talk with an outsider – even if it was only a young girl. How freely this girl was moving with others? Words failed me; I again let out a laugh.

"Where is grandma?" She opened the compound gate with a question.

Oh! Maybe she is Mother's friend. I looked around. Mother was watching me with apprehension. Her very look revealed something to me; she must have told the girl about me.

'She is grouchy – she never comes out of her room' - that's probably how Mother had described me to this girl. This girl was determined to get me talk to her, now she has found an opportunity. Still, I couldn't bring myself to have a conversation with her. I simply walked back to my room and now Mother took over. Later I watched them both from my room engaged in a conversation.

That brat was asking mother: "How come your auntie never talks with me? Is she too proud?"

"Why do you call her auntie? You should address as your sister . . . Where were you gone – I didn't see you in the last two days!"

"I saw that grandpa visiting you . . ."

"What if he was visiting me? What does he have anything to do with you?"

"I am scared of him! Who is he?"

"He is my brother; he is uncle to my daughter."

"You mean your own brother?"

"No, he is my cousin brother-actually a generation removed."

"Brother-one generation removed? What does that actually mean?"

"Why do you ask – if you don't know?"

"People ask only things they don't know; tell me what you actually mean."

The girl was a perfect companion to Mother; both were garrulous. I am lying down on my bed and watching the ceiling. The time is only six thirty; I can take a shower and go for a walk. Why am I sleeping at odd

hours? Thank god, I feel so happy Uncle is gone; two days seemed like two months. The truth is he is harassing me too much. I feel incapable of saying 'no' to him on any account; to say so would seem unfair!

An old man is resting on a bed in the main hall and he wants me to press his legs to ease the pain; can I refuse without being accused of unfairness? First, my mother would think so. Okay, if I oblige him and massage his legs that will not be the end of the matter! He would drag my hand and fondly ask me, 'Is your hand hurt?' and begin snapping the knuckles – one after another - to ease my pain! I feel like smiting my head and running away. Now I am really glad he is gone home.

What was he telling mom?

*'If your daughter is actually smart and can find out that 'stranger' and declare to the world that she wants to marry him, will we be denying her wish?'*

Uncle thinks I am not smart enough. He is so confident that I would never find 'that stranger'. Even if I did, he thinks, 'that stranger' would never believe me. Is this Uncle's judgment in my case?

I try to remember that stranger's face; it looks like a picture sketched out and instantly erased. If I were to see him today in a crowd of ten probably I will not recognize him.

But the words he spoke to me on that day still ring in my ears, loud and clear: *'Do you know this car has been following you for the last two years? . . . .'*

Yes! I can find him if I can find that car... Who knows, maybe he is still following me in that car! I don't worry anymore about anyone following me! How does that matter? I am always reluctant to turn back – because I feel scared!

Did I give up looking for him because it is an impossible task? I felt there was no need, so I didn't go after him. My initiative had nothing to do with the possibility that he wouldn't believe me; it is rather that I never

believed anything about him and so never sought after him.

Now I begin to think: what if I try to find him? That mayn't be hard; probably there are only ten cars – in Madras – resembling it. Will it be still in his possession? How does it matter if the car ownership has actually changed? We might be able to get close to him once we lay our hands on that car . . . . Wait a minute! What kind of craziness is this – after an interval of twelve years? Why not? At some point in life everything does look a little crazy. . . . Let me explore this craziness . . . . .

Yes, I am going to find him.

## 6

Six months have since gone by, I am still looking around for that stranger. I have been combing through several cars like the one he had; still, I couldn't find his car.

Is it going to be a hard task to find him – just as Uncle was challenging me? Will I never see him again? I feel a little sad at that possibility.

During these twelve years I had never, not even once, tried to look at any car or its driver. I never cared to turn around and see if someone in a car was following me. I wouldn't have cared if some car actually hit me. As far as I am concerned, I had made up my mind that no man would never again intrude into my life. Even now I am not interested in someone because I love him or want his company. But I need him now – very badly- for a very good reason. The truth is I can't bring myself to love any man. I wouldn't hold anyone in high regard – as long as I see him only as a man. I loathe the very notion of contact and intimacy with a man! Maybe the men too feel the same way about me. Maybe they too think - like Uncle does - that I will go along with any man who wants to seduce me. I don't know why. Is there

some sleaziness in me? Do men feel emboldened because I look too naïve or innocent? Do I turn them on and bring their animal instincts into the open – because of my decency and compassion?

I simply don't understand – is it my fate-why every male seems ready to misbehave with me? All he needs is that I raise my head and look at him. If I oblige by answering some question from him, he has only one reaction: a foolish grin! I can see through his intention right away!

Even the bus conductor who dispenses tickets makes it his habit to touch my hand with his finger when I tender the bus fare; he does the same thing when he returns me the change. One day I checked to see if he does the same thing with other passengers; no, I concluded I have been singled out for this special treatment. Whenever the conductor approaches me I panic because he might actually touch me!

In essence, when it comes to men, I am overcome by a vague fear mixed with contempt. It is the kind of feeling that comes when we run into a cockroach. Do we ever flee the cockroach because it is going to bite us? I am talking about a similar fear...

But now I am actively searching a cockroach – on purpose.

I feel I have suddenly become self-conscious. I have begun turning back, now and then, to see if anyone is following me. While riding on the bus as well as when I go for my customary walks I have made the habit of examining each and every car on the road. Suddenly I feel that car is behind me or wish it were; I imagine such a possibility all the time.

Nowadays, in the evenings, I have begun standing on our doorway and watching the street. I keep staring at each and every man who comes in my view. My very look makes some men uncomfortable; a few simply bow down their heads. I imagine asking them, right away: how come you object to my

staring at you while you don't mind staring at me?

I try to recall 'his' face again and again and try to carve it in my heart . . .

I seem to visualize a multitude of faces the instant I close my eyes. They are always the male faces; some sporting a mustache, some unshaven, day after day, with no mustache but dotted with green patches; round faces; long faces; faces with sunglasses; faces that are bright and clean; a few with pimples and scarred by smallpox; a few looking a little foolish but always smiling and exposing long teeth. How many different faces! Everything is different and unique! No two faces look the same, yet they keep changing over time and alter the man beyond recognition. And how many different noses too! A few noses remind us of some animals or birds - like a goat, horse, monkey, eagle, parrot or a mouse . . . .

I think this diversion has actually turned into a hobby; the truth of the matter is I don't long for these faces; I feel neither joy nor cheer by watching these dudes. Whenever I stare at any man I begin to wonder if he would be, in some way, known to 'that' stranger; I even think if I should ask him directly about my quarry – but what can I possibly ask? I don't even know 'that' stranger's name! Neither do I know that car license number! How can I say anything that makes sense?

Good heavens! How ironic! I don't know anything about this stranger – even his name or what he looks like! Yet, according to Uncle, he means everything to me! Uncle is a pundit and authority! What more do I need? His word is a gospel . . . . .

Am I someone like Uncle alleges – a woman with loose morals? How did I allow myself to yield to someone – a total stranger – without even trying to understand anything about him? Won't that make me really a bad girl? No, that happened because of my naïveté. Had I actually longed for his

company and willingly surrendered to him, I would have certainly thought of protecting myself from its consequences. I didn't. I was really stupid.

Does it mean I am now searching my husband? Am I like *Sakuntala* who was married to Prince *Dushyantha* in a secret marriage or *Damayanthi* who was separated from her husband *Nala* - trying to locate my husband in these city streets - in one car after another? Maybe he has now married another woman and even become a father. Will he even remember me? Will he recall that episode if someone whips up his memory? I didn't even think of keeping a memento to commemorate that encounter! I am really, really, stupid!

I have got to find him, I must prove my smartness to Uncle. That way I can keep him in check and away from me - at least for a while.

It is lunchtime. Everyone in my section has gone to the canteen. In the neighboring section - cordoned away for lunch - three girls are engaged in some chatter. I don't feel hungry. The curd rice I brought from home is on the table. A few files awaiting my signature are in a pile on the table. Another pile - a huge one - of the files I have already signed off is sitting on another corner of the table. Today air-conditioning makes me a little chilly. I also notice, next to the telephone, a glass of water with a plastic lid on it. Why does this peon Rangaswamy bring it every day? I never touch it - on any single day! He says he is doing his duty; but he will frown if I ask him to take out these files.

"You say you have signed off those files? Okay, be done with it. They will go where they are supposed to go. Do you want them to go somewhere else? Then please put them in another bin and let me know - later."

I never order anyone. During lunch time it is common for a woman to call another for

company. Nobody invites me, neither do I invite anybody. I have no friends . . .

Rangaswamy will always quote me as an example. The hardest thing for him is to actually perform his official duties. He will gladly take orders from anybody if it means he has to go out of the office. I never send him out for any personal work.

Yesterday when I was sitting - just like now - in my chair and observing the surroundings through the glass screen behind me - the Mount Road and the cars in the traffic - it suddenly occurred to me!

Is it possible that the writer RKV could be the stranger I am looking for?

For some reason, I keep thinking RKV could be only a woman.

But Uncle seems to think the author must be a man! He also thinks he is a rowdy!

When I think of the way the incidents, location, that car and the characters were described in the story, I begin to think: maybe it is the work of that very stranger I am after!

But as soon as I think of 'that' stranger as an intellectual worthy of my admiration, I find myself in a state of distress and helplessness. I tell myself, at once: *I wish it were not true.*

Think about it! Where is RKV - the embodiment of common humanity and superior human consciousness - compared to that low life - the rich minor who is cruising every evening in his luxury car trying to pick up some unwary girl?

Till now I have been thinking RKV must be a woman because those stories are based on female psychology and the new social problems confronting women. Even if RKV is a man, I hope he is not 'that' stranger. No, he shouldn't be.

Now, why should I say such a thing? Maybe he is not. But what makes me *wish* RKV should not be that person?

Well, he shouldn't be. Should that ever happen how can I continue to admire RKV's writings? That would certainly make RKV a

hypocrite; what he writes and what he actually does in his private life would be entirely two different things. All his opinions will be reduced to just a conjurer's tricks. If RKV and his opinions are simply lies, then it would actually mean I am also a lie – because I had also acknowledged them.

How can that be? Twelve years have gone by and during these years I too have changed from a simple, naive, school girl . . . Isn't it possible these years could have also transformed that stranger from a vile womanizer to a RKV? How could he be immune to consequences of time? After all maturity and wisdom are the rewards to a life that is hit harder and harder as time goes by. . Maybe he is now married and even has a daughter - ten to twelve years old attending a school! Will he think of me when he sees his own daughter going to school? Does he, once in a while, feel the shock and horror that what happened to me might also happen to her?

Human life being what it is, anything can happen at any time; nothing is impossible. The question is how you deal with the consequences: First, how do you face the problem?

Should RKV turn out to be the stranger I am looking for – that would become a dilemma because I have such an admiration for his writings. My personal encounter with him will also complicate the single life I have chosen for myself. My mind will be forever in torment owing to something that wouldn't matter even if I happened to live permanently with another man or get married to him.

What if I simply give up this idea of finding about the real RKV or my attempt to locate that stranger? Do I really need to go on this bizarre hunt?

I see all these cars on the road – right before my eyes. I am watching the scene from the seventh story of this building. Hundreds of men and women are on the road as if ordained; some are standing; some are walking; cars in different colors – black,

white, blue and green – are following one another; they are racing in both directions of the road. I can only see their tops from where I stand. I can't see the passengers – inside the cars.

Will that stranger be riding in any of these cars? How many cars does him actually own? He probably owns a big car as well as a small one. How about this one – rushing along like a white rabbit, it is a small car – my God! – That monster lorry coming in the opposite direction has crossed the yellow line and hit this car! Good heavens! What happened to the brakes?

I am watching the scene right before my eyes. In no time that lorry has bit the car.

I could hear no sound from where I am standing. . .

That small, white car is shattered in the front. I can't see anything else; crowds are surrounding the scene of accident. The police are on the spot. The scenes behind that screen seem like a silent movie . . .

The office employees gone out for lunch are slowly returning; the typewriters begin rattling again.

Rangaswamy picked up the files and engages others in a conversation – as if sharing some happy news – say, a marriage.

“That man is dead! He looks very elegantly dressed! I could never see his face, it is totally smashed! He is gone!”

“Rangaswamy, please!” I hollered at him and closed my ears in shock and horror. He too shut up and walked away. I feel like bursting into tears. My mind craves to turn around and watch the scene of accident. But I couldn't summon enough courage.

I watched the scene again through the screen at the close of business - as I was getting ready to leave for home. The police was still on the scene; a crane was lifting that small car. My stomach was churning . . .

How nice and elegant was that rabbit in the afternoon! I am sad to see it now smashed,

reduced to a wreck and hauled away by a crane.

The world loves beauty – wherever it is found and whosoever claims it as their own. When that beauty is cruelly destroyed, all share that grief. . .

Rangaswamy says the driver of that car is dead. I feel – for some reason – that might not be the case. Whatever that man, I pray he has not suffered a tragic death. He may end up in a hospital and he will survive. His life is not in danger; after all I don't see any blood at the accident site this Rangaswamy is a sick fellow. . He always acts a little dramatic and spreads around all kinds of rumors. .

On the other hand – what if the driver was actually that stranger? Good heavens!

## 7

I have since found out RKV is actually a man, just like Uncle had thought – not a woman; I feel a little sad about this discovery.

I am now in a telephone conversation with a sub-editor of the magazine which published RKV's short story. I introduced myself as a long-term reader of that magazine. That seemed inadequate, so I explained to him that I am an avid reader of RKV's writings. I talked about that story in detail; when I am on phone I am totally free from any inhibitions that I am talking to a third party. I feel as if I am talking with this very telephone receiver in my hand. I really talk too much. It is my nature that I always keep talking to myself. I remember that story, line by line. As I carried on the conversation – first by introducing myself as a reader, then as the admirer of that short story – I suddenly panicked that I would suddenly blurt out that I am the heroine of that story. I suddenly stopped talking. I suddenly remembered why I made that call: I was simply trying to get RKV's home address. I feel a little hesitant as I make that request.

“We are not supposed to give a writer's address to others without getting his formal permission. Why don't you do this: if you want to communicate with him, please send your letter to our office. We will forward your letter to his attention.”

“I need to personally meet with him and discuss certain matters,” I demur in my reply. I was actually complimenting myself for this gesture. How bold do I really sound now?

The man at the other end too demurs:

“I see what you mean. You want to meet with him, but how can we volunteer his address without first checking to see if he would like to meet with you? Why don't you do this? Let me have your phone number. He too has a phone. I will check with him and get back to you in ten minutes.”

I gave him my phone number. He asks for my name, and I hesitated a little. I couldn't bring myself to reveal my name. I tell him, “Please call at this number and ask for extension 63. You can reach me directly at that number. Thanks.” Then I settled back in my seat and was waiting for the next phone call.

I was sitting all by myself – doing nothing – till the next call came from the sub-editor to give me RKV's address. I am really crazy. Is it necessary I should just drop everything and keep waiting for that call? Why not I just open up a file, or act as if I am busy? I keep thinking of doing something but do nothing. I am still sitting idle. .

From the corner of the room where I sit I can see the entire section under my jurisdiction. Why, I can see the next section too . . .

The entire hall looks like a large meadow. The hall is filled with tables, chairs, files and typewriters. A narrow strip runs along the middle of the hall – and I see a few employees running along that path with files in their hands; Rangaswamy, as usual, is walking at his own pace. Two employees suddenly show up on that path and exchange a joke and laugh

to themselves. Two more are wishing one another. There are six people surrounding one table, four of them are visitors – I haven't seen them before. They are busy introducing themselves to one another. Finding no place to sit, they walk to the next table and carry back some chairs to their table. One of them – in a white shirt and black trousers keeps playing with his sunglasses while letting his eyes scan the entire hall. He is acting as if everyone is aware what he is doing. When his eyes reach me, I avert my eyes away from him.

As I observe how this office functions and how its staff is busily engaged in their day-to-day activities, it all seems so mechanical and routine – like opening a clock and examining its inside.

Is it possible one of those four visitors could be that stranger I am looking for? Or is it the one in white shirt and black trousers? How many features seem common to this fellow and the one I am looking for? A man's features certainly undergo many changes over a period of twelve years . . . after all, am I still the same person I was – twelve years ago?

I once again turn around and watch through the screen the parking lot and look for *that* car. There are so many cars in the parking lot, but none like that one.

Why this obsession? How come every man, every incident, every crowd and every accident, in the final analysis, tricks me into this fixation?

Last night as I was lying on my back on the open roof terrace and watching the sky above I noticed a small plane with a red-green light at its tail end. Maybe it was a plane heading to Bombay or New Delhi, who knows? Immediately my mind rambled on busy passengers traveling on planes – especially business people. Finally, I told myself 'that stranger' too was a passenger in that plane. Whatever my thoughts might be

they break into bits, going round and round in circles and finally zero in on 'that stranger.'

What does this mean? If I openly admit this, others will conclude that I am in love with him. I can never love him, the very idea is unbearable to me. Then, why is my mind after him – in an eternal quest?

I have made up my mind, and I have a plan. I firmly believe that one day he will suddenly appear before me. That might happen this very second or the next one. I even think he might be present in this very office building. What if I call somebody and ask about him? He might be that very stranger or someone known to him! But I am still searching him. Nobody knows that I am always thinking of him. The telephone rings.

"Yes? . . . You are right! I had asked for it. Please wait, let me note it down. Go ahead His full name is Mr. R. K. Viswanatha Sarma? Door number 16, Mandhaiveli? Thank you very much! Does he have a phone number? Not at home? Okay, let me have his office number. . . Extension: 88? Okay, thanks a lot!"

I jot down his address – the address of R. K. Viswanatha Sarma – who writes under a pen name of RKV – on the blotting paper in my writing pad – in red ink and big letters. So I got his address, what to do next?

That is my nature! I always think of big ideas; I must do this and do that; write letters to the editor, and so on, but end up doing nothing!. How about this time? Is it the same story?

Why don't I write a story? Based on my lifetime experiences and problems? Wait a minute! If I am to write a story – I should begin thinking in Tamil! I am sorry – why didn't think of very this statement in Tamil? I must think in Tamil before I can write a story . . .

I can certainly pen a story based on my experiences, problems and ideas. Still, can I ever put them down like RKV does? Why not? Even if I can't write like RKV, I can try



a different style to express myself. Okay, what should I do now? Can I go and meet with RKV? From the street address it seems he is living in some lane or an alley; well, what makes me think a writer will be living in a palace? Maybe he has a job too and has many daughters. The name Viswanatha Sarma tells me he could be a fairly old man. He couldn't be the minor who roamed in a luxury car . . . So he can't be that stranger I am looking for. I can certainly visit him at home without any fear. Still Viswanatha Sarma is a man and I must be careful. I can't just blabber and suddenly announce that I am the heroine of his short story. . . So, how should I express my reason for visiting him?

I will simply say I am his fan! Won't that be enough?

Let us wait and see how things proceed, then proceed further . . .

I must not go empty-handed when visiting him. What should I take with me?

I am not accustomed to giving gifts; neither have I received any. I have an idea! Why not buy and give him his own books? What kind of joke is this? Present him his own books? Let me pause and think for a minute. Why not give him his own books and ask for his autograph? I am sure he will appreciate my gesture. Who knows how many of his readers and admirers have visited him and got his autograph? I too can do the same thing. . Today is Wednesday, why not I see him on Saturday? Will he be home? I can call him at work and get the appointment . . What is his number? Double eight. . “

I am now on my way to see RKV. Some six months ago our office was in Parry's Corner; had I gone around that time I could have taken a bus along the beach road. Now we have moved to Mount Road and this route is quite boring to me. .

I got off the bus at Mandhaiveli bus station. I was a little puzzled which way to turn to go to RKV's house. I am scared to ask

anyone. Does it mean I must roam around every street in the neighborhood?

A cycle rickshaw came along; why not ask its driver? I opened the paper slip in my hand and ask him.

“You should have got down at the previous bus stop,” he told me. “Now you can't go back the same way you came – because it is one-way street. Give me six annas, I will take you right to that house.”

I took the cycle rickshaw. After we rode two or three streets we finally ended up in a narrow lane. Another vehicle came in the opposite direction. Both the drivers sounded the bells – insisting the other should give way. They even stopped the vehicles and got ready to fight with one another

My driver thinks he has the right of way because he is carrying a passenger which entitled him a stronger case.

Maybe this rationale applies to cycle rickshaws only and my driver seems determined to fight for his right. His language sounds awful and in terribly bad taste. I am scared to think that pretty soon both the drivers could be at each other's throat. I turned around by accident and noticed the number on the next house as 13. Why not I get off and walk – my house is only three numbers away.

“I need to get off here,” I told my driver and handed over forty paise to him – even as he was still engaged in an interesting exchange with the other driver.

Fourteen, Fifteen and then A and B. Now I see Sixteen. .

Is this the house?

8

“Yes, Prabhu Organizations . . “

“ . . . . . ”

“May I know who is calling?”

“ . . . . . ”

“Can you please tell me what is it about?”

“.....”

“Okay, let me handover the receiver to his secretary. You can talk to him. Please hold on. . .”

“Hello, this is Rao speaking . . Mr. Prabhu is out of town. May I know who is calling?”

“.....”

“A relative? He is expected sometime late in the afternoon flight. Please call him at home – after two.”

The telephone in the hallway – a lonely, isolated area in that vast bungalow – has been ringing for a long time. Outside the sun was shining bright; far away, close to the compound gate, the gardener was watering the plants and the green turf. Farther into the rear portion of the house where the telephone call could be hardly heard, the male servants and the female cook were engaged in some interesting conversation. Padma, the mistress of the house is closeted in her private, air-conditioned room upstairs and enjoying a *pan* following her lunch. A film song is heard from the radio nearby.

The telephone bell has been ringing for a very long time . . .

A huge car entered the compound. Because it is a Saturday, Manjula, who had been to school to attend a special class, has just returned from her college and walked fast to reach the hallway.

‘Is there no one to answer the phone? Where has everybody disappeared?’ A little annoyed, she cast a look around and picked up the receiver.

“Yes, this is Mr. Prabhu’s residence. May I know who is calling? Do you want my father?”

“.....”

“I really don’t know. Please hold on. I will find out.” She left the receiver on the table and called out her mother a few times. . She ran up the stairs – two rows in a stretch.

As soon as the room door was open, a film song could be heard from the radio

“Mother, how come father is missing for the last two days? Is he in town this morning? Some lady – calls herself Ganga – wants to talk with him. Will daddy be at his office, now?”

“This morning there was a call from Bangalore. The car has gone to the airport to pick him up. Anyway who would know the exact details about your dad – when he went and why he went? Has the racing season already begun in Bangalore? Ask her to call at his office and speak to that Rao . . Why are they calling us at home?”

As soon as Manjula closed the door the film song becomes inaudible outside the room. Manjula coasted down the stairs with a hand holding on to the wooden balustrade, ran and picked up the receiver.

“What is it you want to discuss with him? I am his daughter. You can’t see him today if it has to with his business. Mr. Rao, his secretary is in the office, and you can talk to him.”

“.....”

“Yes, you are right. He is out of the town. Please call after three . . . Please . . Just hold on. I think he’s coming . . .”

The huge car parked in the portico was moved to a shed to let a small car just then entering the compound to take its place.

Dressed like a typical college student and looking like one and chomping on a cigarette, a man got out of the car. He threw the cigarette butt on the ground and crushed it with his shoe while staring at his daughter who now stood before him.

“Oh, this is awful,” he says. “Do you know how nice the weather is in Bangalore? Next time you must come with me. Why can’t we go just for a weekend?”

“You mean with you? Just imagine what mother would say!”

“Why? She wouldn’t let you go with me? Then let her take you. Manju, why don’t you do this? Ask mother to go to Bangalore with

you the next weekend. It is wonderful. I too can join you later . . .”

“That’s simply impossible. I have got exams. After all you have nothing to worry about - no exams or business. . By the way, there is a phone call for you. She has been waiting for a very long time, says her name is Ganga.”

“Ganga?” He rubbed his forehead and walked to the phone while Manju went inside.

His driver brought a small suitcase from the car and walked to his room upstairs at the other end.

“Yes, Prabhu here.”

Words fail me. I feel my throat choked up. My eyes swell up with tears.

“Hello, . . . hello, . . . .” His voice pierces through my ears.

“Hello . . . This is Ganga speaking. . “My voice trembles as I speak the words.

“Ganga? Which Ganga? What number do you want?”

“This number only. This is not a wrong number call. You do know me, but not my name. You will not recognize my name, you will know when you see me.”

“Oh!” How meaningful is that single word! My life in the last twelve years – my own fate – is buried in it! Did he recognize me? Does he recall that evening? Does he visualize my face too?

He asks, “Why do you want to see me?” What should I tell him? Is he still unable to understand who I am? Or is he asking that question on purpose? Maybe he is asking because he doesn’t want to reveal to me that he knows my identity.

I try to restrain my panic and confusion and act cool. I speak very informally and with a lot of self assurance.

“It is not a simple matter that can be discussed over phone. It is very important that I meet with you - in person. You will understand why – when you see me. I came to know your name only yesterday. But I

know you very well. We have both met one another some twelve years ago. One evening there was a downpour; I was standing in front of my college near a bus station. Do you remember? . . . Hello, do you hear me?”

I went on listening to murmurs from the other end as he was nodding in gentle approvals; then suddenly he became silent. I grew concerned and shouted on top of my voice: ‘Do you hear me?’

“Yes, I hear you!” His voice grew a little thick and seemed suddenly choked up.

“You took me in your car, do you remember? We went to the Island Grounds; I knew its name as Island Grounds only after five years. . Do you remember? I am not sure if I will recognize you if I see you. But I can still recognize that car. I never again saw that car. Why do I need to see it, anyway? I have never bothered to see either you or your car. But now I have to see you. I must meet with you.”

“You say your name is Ganga?” He let out a deep sigh that sounded like a cobra hissing into my ears.

I recalled him now exactly as I remember seeing him on that evening; as I viewed him from sideways in the dim light hovering over us inside the car, he looked like a cobra or a peacock

Now, on the table next to me, I can see his photo by turning a few pages in the souvenir published on the occasion of his employees’ recreation club annual celebrations. I can read his name printed below the photo. I haven’t recognized him from the name or the photo. Once I recognized him I see the snake lurking behind those eyes.

“Do you remember any of the things I am talking about? Do you now recognize me?”

He wouldn’t commit himself to anything I ask him. I don’t seem to get a clue of what he is thinking. He is closemouthed; what all I hear is only murmurs.

I wonder how many girls he had dealt with. I bit my lip thinking how many women

– his victims - might have called him over phone and were deceived. The sudden silence between us stretched yet into yet another conversation. For a moment I thought of putting the receiver down. Why not let him do that? I remained quiet. I even felt like teasing him with a question: ‘How come you don’t say anything?’ But I kept silent and waited what he would say next. “Ganga . . .” Good heavens! He is addressing me by name! How should I respond? I simply murmur, “Hmm . . .”

He breaks the silence, and says:

“I am really surprised . . . I am not sure if I thought of you after that incident; I certainly did, but I could never imagine that I will get a telephone call from you after an interval of twelve years . . . I remember you as a young girl . . . I am very eager to know more about you . . . Where are you calling from? How are you? What are you doing now? Do you have a phone at home?”

He keeps on piling up questions – one after another. I respond only with a murmur; my voice is choked up, I feel a stab in my throat and will probably break down for no particular reason. I feel an intense desire to curse him to my heart’s content, but don’t. I begin to think to blame him or curse him will be unfair.

“Hello . . . hello Ganga, do you hear me? Please, don’t disconnect! Hello . . .”

“Yes, I hear you!” I was concerned he might put down the receiver thinking wrongly that I did. “I am sorry!”

“How did you spot me?”

I let out a mild laughter – after getting my feelings under control.

“This is the danger confronting the celebrities. You can never escape from the eyes of common people. The one who spoke with me on the phone – is she your daughter?”

“Yes, she is studying in the college.”

“College?”

“Yes, she joined this year.”

Doesn’t he remember me – even when his own daughter attends a college? His daughter must be at least fifteen years old – if she is attending a college. Does it mean he was married when that incident took place?

“Why don’t you visit me? You are welcome at any time, my doors are open to you! You must meet my daughter. She is a very smart and sweet girl!”

He is raving about his daughter. I remember there was a time when my mother too praised me sky high about me for my grades and how I performed in the college. I don’t know how to respond when he talks about his daughter. He again asks me:

“Why did you phone me?”

“I want to meet with you.”

“Why this sudden urge? After all you haven’t thought of me all these twelve years, did you?”

“Don’t people change with times? Some six months ago I never imagined I will be interested in meeting with you. But during these six months – every moment – I am searching for you. The only thing that can help me identify you is your car. I see several cars everyday but never that one. Do you still have it?”

“Yes, I still have it, but it is used by others in our family. My daughter drives it when she goes to college. I have a small car – and that is the modern fashion.”

“I see, you got a small car because you have become a big shot! By the way, do you have a white car?”

“Yes.”

“Did you go to Mount Road last week?”

“Why do you ask? I drive through Mount Road at least a few times almost every day!”

“Nothing in particular. The other day there was an accident in front of our office. I was scared – thinking of you.”

“Does it mean . . . You are working in some office? Are you married? How many children?”

I laugh. It is a strange laugh. As far as my office staff is concerned, they would consider me queer if I ever laugh or smile. Why do I laugh now? Maybe the man at the other end is scared of me. .

“What is the matter? Why do you laugh? What is it you find so funny?” He keeps asking and I keep laughing.

“Please stop it!” he screams on top of his voice. My eyes are swelling with tears. Seems to me I can stop this laughter only by crying loud. My god! I must not cry! Everybody in the office is looking at me!

I am sitting on a revolving chair. The staff wouldn't know I am crying. I keep smiling, turn my back to others and turn around in my chair.

My voice shows laughter, but my mind is crying. When I cry, I stop laughing. I wipe my face with a handkerchief and answer him - after a long interval.

“Yes, I am now working in an office. I will give the other details when I personally meet with you. We have to meet. Where should we meet?”

He asks my office address. He wants to come and see me right away. I don't think that would be a good idea. Shall I invite him to my home? No, I would rather not make it public that he is 'that' stranger. What if - just like Uncle said - . . .

‘Let us say you have found this stranger; how do you justify his accepting you? He will never believe you. He will think you are the kind of the girl who will go along with any man trying to seduce her.’

I begin to think: *Maybe he is now talking to me with such a mind-set.* Now I am on my guard. I am no more a naïve, stupid, school girl . . . I am really smart!

“How about meeting at the same location?”

“Which location?”

“The place where we met before, I mean in front of the college, near the bus station.

Otherwise, why don't we meet at the Island Grounds, say at five-thirty?”

9

I still have two more hours to kill before I can meet with that Prabhu - a second time in my life. I am still suffering the consequences of having met him - the first time - twelve years ago. What if I had never met him? What if I had never accepted his car ride? What if I had not surrendered to his macho demands? And what if I had not been stupid enough to blab everything in my mother's presence?

Probably no big change would have actually happened in my life! Remember the women I met at RKV's house the other day? I too would have wound up like some of them : getting married to someone, becoming a mother to half-a-dozen kids, compressing the whole world in one hour, pretending as if I was scared of my husband and occasionally scaring him too; this is, after all, a woman's lot!

Else, instead of the kitchen chores, a woman might end up working in an office - just like me, or the girl sitting opposite to me in front of a typewriter. Or she could be like the typical woman-employee who gets her hands smeared with ink, is always conscious of the prying eyes of the male co-workers. She would try to hide her 'thali' by tucking it under her blouse or openly display it to let know every one that she has a 'license'. Once in every two or three years she shows up tired and exhausted with an oversized belly - fulfilling her traditional role of motherhood. A few times, with a scowl on her face, her nose and eyes reddening, she would spout a litany of complaints against others - just like those women in RKV's household - literally converting this office into a village pial. So in the final analysis a woman's life reeks with monotony and drudgery. How does it matter whether she had an education, a job, income or no income?

The other day at RKV's I spoke about all these issues. .

During these six months he had penned two or three more stories after that one. So I began talking with him about his most recent short story in the magazine. It took me only ten minutes before I could discuss those stories and get back to 'this' particular story.

Then, around seven-thirty I took leave of him and his mother. Till then we were talking about only one story. I still feel I have a lot more to talk about that story.

I was quite smart in hiding my own identity. I am positive what he penned was actually my own story. He couldn't recognize me, but I could recognize him. Is it possible that no one who had seen me so many years ago would recognize me now?

I found out that R.K. Viswanatha Sarma, the famous author writing under the pen name RKV, was actually employed as a library assistant in our college. This discovery is really no big deal because he is still in the same position. Those days he used to sport a tuft; he was a simple man who washed his own clothes and was always surrounded by girls who would make fun of his tuft. They were quite impressed by it – it was thick and dense resembling the outer sheath of a coconut.

The girls would invariably tease him saying, "Sir, you must promise to handover your tuft to us – if you decide sometime in the future to change your hairdo!" He too would cut through their funny remarks and retort with an apt reply: "I will certainly do so; but when the time comes, what if you are actually sporting cropped hair?"

Now I am able to visualize him. He has studied only up to seventh or eighth grade. Still, I am told he is very knowledgeable; even in those good old days I heard people saying he knew many things totally unknown even to the librarian. Our college always boasted one particular group of students; these students, even if they occasionally

skipped their regular classes, would never miss a single day without signing up at the college library. RKV was always thoughtful of those students; he would know – nobody knew how – what books would be useful to these students and come up with a list – much to their surprise and appreciation.

That evening, as we sat down on two cane-chairs in the porch engaged in a conversation in the backyard of his house under a shelter festooned with jasmine creepers, the glow from the surroundings fell on RKV's back and I couldn't clearly see his face. However that brightness directly fell on my face; so he must have clearly seen my face.

We had a desultory conversation – jumping from one subject to another. He suddenly asked me: "You were saying you did your M.A. in Economics; which college did you go to?"

I didn't see his face. I panicked for a moment – thinking he recognized my face. I told him I did my studies in Tiruchi and Chidambaram.

"I see, so you moved to Madras only after you found a job in the city?" he asked and I instantly nodded my head and replied, "Yes". Then we once again went back to that short story. I volunteered my opinion: "Maybe these experiences are quite normal for the girls from the city and the suburbs. I am neither from the city nor the suburbs; so I can never believe this kind of story!" How daringly I lied!

He laughed. In the darkness around me I could see only his teeth. His daughter Kausi rushed toward him and he picked her up and let her sit on his lap. Then he spoke:

"You are the first one to ask me this question: Can this story ever happen? But others are picking up a fight and asking 'How can you write this kind of story?' Nobody seems to be questioning if such an episode is credible. As far as this story is concerned, my imagination is limited to its conclusion only. This story is based on an incident that took

place in our college – some twelve years ago.”

The light in the porch irritated my eyes and I moved around a little – from light to shadow. The jasmine flowers kept falling from the shelter; the little girl got off from RKV’s lap and began circling around the shelter while catching the flowers - one after another – in the manner of scooping droplets from a waterfall. RKV was telling me my own story. There is no other story like mine – so he is telling me my own story!

RKV told me he never knew that girl’s name; but he did know the name of that young man. He said the young man was a born womanizer. Then RKV paused for a moment and told me that the young man left the college soon after that incident. When RKV recently saw the young man he thought the young man’s face belied his real nature.

“What happened to that girl?” I asked and he replied he never knew. It didn’t seem an important matter for him. Then he continued: “What might have happened? I came to know from other girls that she was beaten up by her parents. She was thrown out of the house. Never again did she show up at the college. Later, when I came to know all of this, I got mad at her mother.”

“Were you writing stories – even in those days?”

“Yes, I certainly did. But nobody knew about it, I was not so well known. The editors would simply return my manuscript.”

“Why did you think of writing this story – after all these years?”

He, once again, let out a laugh.

“Let me tell you something: this RKV is still a library assistant in this college and this institution is proud of him. During the college annual celebrations, this RKV was generously praised and honored in the various literary functions. He often lectures in the college programs and also gets invitations from other colleges. Do you remember the young man in the short story?

His real name is Prabhu. The full name is Prabhakaran. When our college reopened this year I saw his car in our college compound – after an interval of twelve years. He and his daughter got off the car and were walking toward the principal’s room. He will be somewhere between thirty five and forty; his daughter could be fifteen or sixteen. Still, she reaches almost to her father’s height. Later, one day – the daughter tells me she too is a fan of RKV – she found out I was there so she invaded my office with a troop of her friends and admirers. She kept asking me, ‘How could you write these kinds of stories?’ Do you know the kind of readers who visit me? The majority among them are like her! How can I respond to them? You understand what I mean? It is my fate – I write something and end up with all their barbs!” He laughs and I too join him, laughing.

“I have an uncle, “I told him. “He will simply torch you if he ever sets his eyes on you. He is determined to curse you at least once a day. He is a very strong critic of yours.”

“I see, “he replies and seemed actually pleased.

“Kausi, my child, please come and have your dinner!” The girl’s grandmother – RKV’s mother - comes along. The girl hid behind a chair and made a secret gesture to her father not to reveal her hideout. The grandmother kept on shouting ‘Kausi’ again and again, and RKV starts giggling at her plight. He continues: “I seem to get some thrill in causing aggravation among others. In a few minutes she will be slapping my daughter hard for this behavior, but my daughter will surely repeat the same mischief tomorrow. That’s what makes the difference between a girl and her grandmother. Do you see what I mean?”

RKV’s mother seems to have grasped only a part of her son’s comments. Suddenly she breaks in: “Are you discussing his stories? Only people like you seem to like his stuff!

What does he write, anyway? He has a queer look on everything. I don't like any of his writings. Still, nobody can win an argument with him. He will turn things upside down – calling what is reasonable as unreasonable. I really wanted to make a lawyer out of him, but I couldn't afford the money for his education. Who knows? His father worked as a clerk in a lawyer's office – which has probably rubbed off on him! He too was just like his son, always opposing the prevailing view."

RKV laughs, again: "Remember the expression - 'compressing the world in an hour' - I mentioned a few minutes ago?"

"Enough! Stop making fun of me! Where is your daughter?" Kausi jumps out from her hideout and claps her hands as if she had successfully cheated her grandmother.

"Don't act too smart! Go and fetch your mother. I must get my kitchen chores all done before ten. . . By the way, do you want some coffee? My son will never ask you or offer you anything. . . Once somebody gets into conversation with him, he will never stop!" A little weary and tired she walked back into the house. My mind was still stuck on that story.

"What happened next? Did his daughter ever visit you?"

"Yes. She knows my story by heart and can literally recite it to me! Then somebody came to see me with that girl – and requested me to attend the Employees Recreation Club Annual Celebration in her father's office. . . I took part in those celebrations. That was when I saw him face to face. Now he is not his former self; he is now a respectful gentleman, yes, he is a gentleman. Then I recalled his past. I must also reveal another truth. I want to reveal it in another story. You probably think he ruined that woman; I know many other women who shared her fate. People are accusing me of offending them with this story; what would happen if I come up with a sequel? I am going to call it 'The Purification Ritual Fire'. Just wait and see

how people are going to scream when that story comes out!"

I wished he told me that story. I didn't think it would be proper for me to make that request. I was carefully watching what he will say next. Suppose you ask someone – who you know is a good singer – to entertain you; what if he makes a big fuss? RKV is now in that mood.

The old woman serves me coffee. There is a sudden lull in our conversation.

"I hope you like this, it is called coffee," she jokes and continues. "We don't seem to get good milk in this neighborhood. How about your place? Do you get milk from the depot or buy from a milkman?"

"The milkman brings his cow right to our doorway. Occasionally my mother will pick up a quarrel with him and so end up buying milk from the depot."

"Who are the folks living in your home?"

"Me and my mother. My brother and sister-in-law and their family live in Triplicane."

"Good enough." She picked up the coffee cup and goes inside.

"You called that story *Trial by Fire* and you want to call the next one *The Purification Fire*? Quite an apt title, I should say."

RKV again laughs. "My mother is a woman, and so are you. I am exempting both of you when I say this: in general, women are not really very smart, but women themselves may not be responsible for that. It is a different matter. I have come across some of the worst specimen among women in our college. Of course, the heroine of my story *Trial by Fire* is also from our college. But she was an exception. A lot of folks ask me if such a student can exist in real life. That's a good question. My answer is in all my writings I deal only with exceptional subjects."

"My uncle asks me: 'How immoral would be that girl's mother – if she could bring



herself to hide her daughter's outrageous conduct?" "

He laughs: "Does your uncle have any daughter?"

"No."

"That would be his natural reaction."

The time is now seven-thirty. I asked him for his autograph on an anthology of his short stories. He went inside, signed the book and handed it over to me along with a copy of the souvenir he had mentioned earlier. He turned a few pages and showed me that photograph: "You were asking me if this incident is plausible. Here is that hero!"

I looked at the photograph. Now that the man in the photo has been identified as 'that stranger' I can see the cobra lurking in those eyes.

I turned a few more pages of that special issue and came across RKV's picture.

I again requested his signature on this page and asked if I could have it as a memento. .

"You will find my article in there, and you can read it," he told me, signed his name across his photo, and handed over the book to me.

I am now sitting alone in my department. I am about to leave in a few minutes to meet with that stranger. He will not be able to recognize me. People who have seen me in those days can hardly recognize me today. I have to find out if this man – the one waiting for somebody he could hardly recognize – is really the stranger I am looking for!

## 10

I can see that car parked afar. It is not yet dark; a part of the Island Grounds is still under sunshine. I see another small car – someone is taking driving lessons- going around the Island Grounds in circles.

I am now approaching the *Monroe* statue. I can recognize that big car from here.

I am seeing that car after an interval of twelve years.

I can imagine how the car will look like. But even now I can't imagine how that stranger will look like.

I don't know why – I don't feel scared a bit to meet with a man – all alone. I feel I am justified and have the right to do so.

I walked across the main road and then strolled through two more lanes. I noticed two other girls marching in the neighborhood; they are probably employed in the Secretariat nearby. A few girls are walking alone while some others are in groups of two and three. I also see men and women treading in pairs. That stranger from the car must be observing all this traffic; how will he recognize me in this crowd?

I remembered. He had come in a car – the one he doesn't use any more – to help me spot him.

I get down on the meadow and keep walking. The evening sunlight strikes my back and a lengthening shadow on the ground follows me. I know 'he' recognized me.

I imagine I am growing as tall as that shadow and surveying the whole meadow.

That car is parked in the meadow at one of the farthest corners. I am approaching it from another corner carrying my hand-bag – as if strolling on a straight-line leading to that spot. Like a toy, the other car used in the driving lessons, continues circling the Island Grounds. At this time the large meadow seems totally deserted; there is no other noise or traffic - except for that car, myself and the small car going around the meadow.

The stranger now opens the car door and looks at me while still blocking the car door with one of the shoes and playing with his sunglasses. Still, I don't recognize him.

What am I actually going to accomplish after knowing his identity? Why am I seeing him? Why did I work so hard to find him and ask him to meet with me? Now that he is here, what am I going to tell him?

Fear grips me as I approach the car. Why did I get into this mess – unnecessarily? I dare not raise my head.

I have reached the car.

He too gets out of the car and stands on the meadow. Now I raised my head and lock my eyes on his face.

Yes, it is him!

He says ‘hello’ and extends a hand toward me . . .

I try to compare him with the young man who opened the car door for me, saying, “Please! Get in.”

He was lean and tall; the tight dress he wore at that time – just like he does now – seemed appropriate. Now flesh is oozing from several parts of his body; he now looks only of average height; then he was lean and seemed taller. Now he is corpulent and looks short. Gray hair has grown around both the ears. Those eyes and brows still look the same.

Answering “hello,” I too mildly grip his extended hand. The two fingers – because of heavy smoking - seem hardened and blood-red... I am overcome by disgust soon after our handshake. I feel like scrubbing the hand hard once I go home.

He says, “The time is five-thirty, there is still sunlight. Why don’t we sit in the car and talk?” I opened the car door – the one in the front. He takes the seat in front of the steering wheel. I stand outside after opening the door on the passenger-side.

“Get in!” He sounds exactly like he did years ago.

We spend a long time in silence. He keeps chomping on his cigarette.

“Why did you laugh when I asked you if you were married?”

I bow down my head and reply: “Marriage is a pleasant occasion. Are we not supposed to greet it with laughter rather than gloom? Won’t I be laughing when you are inquiring me about my marriage?” I am really acting

smart! How did I learn this art of pretending and mouthing these words?

Why is he staring at me? Does he recall I was just a naïve, stupid girl some twelve years ago?

I suddenly break in: “I am surprised you have a daughter old enough to attend a college. How many children do you have?”

“Remember the girl who spoke with you on the phone? She is Manju, my eldest daughter. After her I have two boys – Subash and Babu. Subash is twelve years old. Babu is the younger one.”

I sense from his manner of speaking that he is quite remote from his children.

“You were married even at that time, am I right?” I asked. “Your eldest daughter was already born, am I right?” He nods his head in approval.

“How come you never mentioned anything about it?” I grumble...

“We never bothered to acquaint ourselves with one another,” he says. “That’s good. If I try to know about the people I meet in my life, there would be no end to it. When two people get together, they should never try to exchange their burden with one another. So there is a real pleasure when you meet a total stranger. We share only pleasures. Let people keep their problems to themselves. No person can ever accept another person’s problem. So I never even ask the people I come across in my life: ‘What is your name?’ I don’t reveal my name, either.”

“That suits you very well,” I answered. “You feel you needn’t know about others. But you ought to know that the people you meet with may not feel about things the same way you do.”

Maybe he didn’t understand what I meant. Still he nods his head as if he grasped what I meant.

“Do you understand what I am saying?”

“No, why don’t you tell me again?” He nods his head again and lets out a peevish smile. He is certainly a little dimwitted!

When we first met he seemed quite smart. Looks like twelve years can make a lot of difference!

I spoke out – growing a little bolder:

“You might have gone through a lot of experiences in this car – just like what happened between you and me; you might have had many girl friends from my own college. There must be many girls – some you have met only once, others you meet quite often and still others you meet occasionally. Most of these girls might have even got married. Probably they invited you to their weddings and you had also attended them with wedding gifts. You might have even blessed them – as an elder member deserving of their respect. See how people take things easy?” As I concluded, I raised my head and faced him. He certainly looked dumb and stupid. .

“That is why I could ask you if you are married and have children.”

I think of Uncle and his words: ‘He will not believe you. He will think you are one of those girls who would go along with anyone who is trying to seduce her.’

I repeat my question to him just as Uncle put it – forgetting for a moment that I am a woman who minds her language: “If I were someone willing to surrender to anyone who wanted to seduce me, by now I too would have been a married woman. I would have been married even if I didn’t go along with those demands. Do you remember your words that day, ‘I don’t need these certificates!’?” I think he is confused over my reminder; he narrows his eyebrows and stares at me.

“Certificates? I never said anything of that kind!” I note his confusion, and laugh.

“You mayn’t remember that. I can remember every word and every position; why, I even remember every move. You held my shoulder and shook it. I told you: ‘I am scared; this is all new to me.’ Then you asked me smack in my face: ‘Who needs all these

certificates?’ Do you remember?” He scratches his forehead.

“I am sorry; do you feel embarrassed a little? Are you feeling sorry that a beautiful evening is being wasted today just as it was twelve years ago? Mr. Prabhu, I called you to let you know that what was wasted was not just an evening.”

“No, no, nothing like that. I feel happy for speaking with you over phone and also now for meeting with you. I knew even then that you were not the type of the girls I used to pick up and take in my car. That’s why I felt guilty. I forgot about you because I really wanted to get you out of my mind. I decided to forget you after that evening. Shall I tell you a truth? You are the only girl I ever seduced in my life. The other girls were already tainted.” He inhales deep into the cigarette and lets out the smoke. His eyes turn moist; he averts his face away from me and looks out. I too turn the other way.

The small car encircling the meadow is now gone. The meadow is totally deserted except for two of us. The long shadows cast a few hours ago have gradually merged into darkness. The sky has changed from red to gray and is slowly turning dark. Confusion reigns in the mind: is it evening or morning?. If you think it is morning, it does look like it. The light from the Iron Bridge is visible afar; all the beach lights are now lit. Because there is still light around, one need to look at those lights to realize they are actually lit. I look at my watch. The time is already six-thirty.

I turned around. He is resting his chin on the window and still looking out. Or he might be closing his eyes. The curly locks have fallen on his forehead. I watch him again, just as I did many years ago. He does look handsome – even though he doesn’t resemble his former self; then it was different in an up-to-date style. His look is always trim – then as well as now. The aroma from his perfume pierces my nose when the wind blows from his side to mine.

I feel sorry for him when I think of his worth – minus his wealth. With a body like this, he will never be able to do any work. It is possible he had never made any money on his own. He tells me I am the only girl he had ever ruined in his life; what about his wife? Maybe he doesn't think of her a victim because he is legally married to her! As far as his wife is concerned, her only consolation will be his wealth! Now, I am still a little confused – why did I invite him here? Why do I keep talking all this? Why this confusion? This is my right! Yes, I am exercising my right! I suddenly let out a laughter, and he turns around.

“You say you have been thinking of me for the last twelve years; then why did it take you this long to find me?” I think he is needlessly imagining things. But I also get a sense that, contrary to what my uncle told me, he is not questioning the sincerity or veracity of what I was saying. If anything, he seems to be treating each and every word from me with a little more faith than it deserves. Poor man, I shouldn't deceive him!

“No, no . . . I thought of you only some six months ago, and I have been looking for you for the last six months. Prior to that - I had never thought of you or searched for you.”

He paused for a moment and spoke: “I think you stopped coming to the college after that incident. When I happened to drive into those premises – even with no particular intention of seeing you – I never set my eyes on you. Am I right?”

I let out a deep sigh. I feel like asking him, ‘How would you know what I had gone through after that episode?’ Suddenly my chest and lips dry up; I am stunned to think if I could ever pour out in a long stretch everything from my memory – from the moment of my first encounter with him to the present. The memories from that past keep bombarding me in no particular order; one thought intrudes into another even before I

could deal with the most recent one. People, their faces, their epithets, the college and the hostel, friends and lecturers - all these keep rushing into my psyche - both as a sight and sound. I hear a cacophony of sounds even as I am overwhelmed by images. I feel my head reeling. I closed my eyes and leaned on one side.

“What, what is the matter?” He touched my shoulder.

I jumped out as if in disgust by his touch but soon became sober. “I am sorry.”

I blurted out – instantly changing my anger and calmly looking at him.

Poor man, his hands were trembling.

“Don't misunderstand me. I haven't misunderstood you, either. My mind was on something else, so I reacted when you touched me . . .” I keep talking - on and on.

“Can we go somewhere else, it is getting dark here.”

“Sure!”

“Can we drive along the Iron Bridge to the Beach Road and have something – coffee or cool drinks – in the Marina Canteen?”

“Fine.”

I recall my ride in this car some twelve years ago – while seated on the rear seat – as we then entered the Island Grounds and then retreated from it; I imagine as if I have obliterated from my memory everything that happened to me since then and that I have literally spent all my days in this car and found myself transferred to the front seat; I also imagine that I was never molested by him and had spurned his advances the way I did a few moment ago.

The car is in motion. Suddenly I noticed that the steering wheel for this car is on the left side. Other cars have it on the right side. Is this car specially designed so that it can make sudden stops at the bus stops and sweep people off their feet?

I began: “After that incident I left this town. My last visit to the college was on the day I rode in your car. You dropped me at the

street corner and were gone. I went home and cried before my mother – and told her everything . . .”

“My goodness!” He bit his lip.

“Tell me, who was that guy?” my mother asked me. But how could I tell her?

A lot of things happened since then. I went to Tanjore and lived with my uncle. I did my studies in Tiruchi and Chidambaram. I got a job in the city and I have been living here for the last six years. I will not get married; I can never have a marriage. That doesn’t make me sad; if anything, I am happy about such an outcome. Still, an unmarried woman gets no respect in this society. People are unwilling to believe that a woman could remain single and still live without a man’s company. They simply wouldn’t allow such a life. Does it mean I should get married and taint my reputation? What do you think?”

He again looks at me from sideways. I am a little scared if he would suddenly burst into tears.

“Why aren’t you saying anything?” I asked him. He clears his throat.

“You have a lot of things on your mind. I am a useless fellow, good for nothing! You seem well read – I don’t even feel qualified to stand next to you. Are you surprised I can talk in English? I have had only a high school education – that too in a convent! How does that really help me? I can’t speak decently – either in Tamil or English! So I am often afraid to speak out!” He was laughing as he spoke those words. I could sense how he is overcome by low esteem and inferiority complex. We were silent for a few minutes. The car entered a restaurant.

He asks me: “You are a vegetarian, am I right? I think you are a Brahmin – from the way you speak. . .”

I gave no reply.

The car stops.

A waiter comes along and salutes him. Maybe the waiter recognized him. Does he come here quite often?

“What do you want? Tea and biscuits?”

“Just tea . . .”

“Okay, just bring tea . . .”

Once the waiter was gone, he examines me fully in light. “I am happy as well as sorry in meeting with you,” he begins and then seems lost in some thought. Then he continues: “You should have treated the whole thing as an accident – the outcome of a practical joke. How could you let it ruin your entire life? One should take things easy in life.”

I think he really feels sorry for my plight.

“You know something? When I was on my way to meet with you I thought you were already married, and even had a couple of kids. I thought maybe you wanted to see me as a friend – to seek some help. Else, I thought you called me as an old acquaintance.”

“Are there girls who have been married and are still interested in your company?” I tease him.

“Why not? Anything is possible in this world! But as far as I know you are the only girl who has wasted her life . . .” I cut in hostility.

“How is it possible? Forget about my conscience. Anyway, who would be interested in marrying a woman after her character is compromised – in public?”

“What are you talking about? There are several ways how a girl’s character could be compromised. I know many cases. Don’t we have married women who live with another man after divorce? Did anyone get to see you lose your morals? I believe our meeting today should have a consequence! Tell me, what do you think?”

The waiter brings tea.

He takes a cup and saucer from the tray and hands them over to me. He takes another set. The waiter leaves and Prabhu takes a sip from his cup.

“I want to see you as a married woman! Really, that’s my wish! There is no justice in

a girl like you wasting her precious life. I will myself find a groom for you. I will find someone who can think beyond these silly moral judgments. What do you say?"

"... Now he has changed, he is a respectable gentleman. Yes, he is a gentleman." That's how RKV described him the other day, and I now recall those words.

11

I didn't utter a single word from the moment he began talking about my marriage in the restaurant and until we came out. I also feel a little queer for drinking tea at this odd hour.

I am also a little scared if someone from the crowds around us – either riding in a car Or plainly walking on the streets – will recognize me. Wait a minute! What if somebody notices me? I started all this because I wanted people to take a notice me! Why should I be scared? I am holding my head up with pride. .

The car is now moving on the Beach Road – albeit slowly - like a marriage procession. I savor the sensation from the breeze as it glides through with the aroma from the cigarette smoke. My god! How can I say such a thing? Aren't decent girls supposed to turn their faces away in disgust? How bad can a girl get – if she is actually enjoying the cigarette smell? Ask Uncle about it – and he will expound a new theory!

'Cigarettes, as a symbol, represent men. When a woman admits her fascination with that horrible cigarette odor, she is unconsciously craving for male companionship. .'

I know how Uncle's mind works. I am slowly turning like Uncle – by imagining, looking and debating things in his fashion. It was at Uncle's suggestion that I found this man. Uncle, what is your take on me? Do you admit I am really smart?

I wish Uncle is now watching me riding this car with him! Well, sooner or later, he would be seeing it . . ."

Prabhu is silently driving the car. I feel sorry for him. I think he is festering inside – with some guilt. I open up to him.

"I feel I have been already married – twelve years ago. Our scriptures have a name for it - *Gandharva Vivaham*, – the marriage that took place between *Sakuntala* and *Dushyant*. That marriage took place in this very car."

The car screeches to a halt as he suddenly applies the brakes. An old woman – she looks like a member of the fishermen community – drops her bag in the middle of the road and runs out. He brandishes his hand and screams obscenities at her – like that rickshaw driver did on my way to RKV's house.

I am appalled – why does he utter these coarse and uncouth words?

He restarts the car; he seems to have been a little ashamed of himself, so he sort of apologizes to me: 'Do you see what would have happened if I were careless for a moment? This goddamn woman shows up all of a sudden – like a ghost in the middle of the night! Even if the car barely touches her, she will scream and holler and collect a huge mob in no time. If I were single in the car I would have simply ignored the whole thing; now, with a woman as a passenger – I can't stand it! I really got scared . . ."

I am amused by his Tamil; it is absolutely nothing like the city dialect. It sounds more like an Anglo-Indian trying to speak Tamil. His Tamil is totally lacking the grace I find in his English. The fault is not with the Tamil language. It is his Tamil that is wanting in grace or style.

"You better talk in English," I tell him and he continues to drive the car even as he starts talking to himself:

"I feel terribly sorry! I think you are insulting the institution of marriage as well as

yourself - when you describe that car episode as your marriage and me as your husband.”

“I am not trying to claim anything from you when I describe that car episode as my marriage,” I try to calm him. “I believe I have given up my legal right to be a wife. I can only be a concubine to someone, not a wife anymore. Should I be forced to choose such an option, it will only mean I am humiliating myself. That was the reason why I started looking for you. Not because I want to be your wife or your mistress. Still, if you grant me the status of your mistress, it will help me a lot . . .”

“Stop that nonsense! That will do you no good. You have already hurt your life for the last twelve years, no need to cause any further damage. As your friend I am willing to offer you any help. Please try to straighten your life. Haven’t I caused enough ruin to your life? You have a bright future ahead of you – if you are determined to make it work. Please don’t try to link your life with me. I am good for nothing. At the time I met you, I was at least a rich man – that is, I was the son of a millionaire. I knew I didn’t deserve that title. Now I don’t have even that title. Now I am just a man married to millionairess. Okay, do you think we can spend some time here? Are you in a hurry?”

He is pointing to the parking lot opposite the IG Office. I notice his face suddenly turn sad and confused.

“I am in no hurry. I don’t have to answer to anyone.”

He turns the car into a sandy road parallel to the Beach Road – and asks me:

“You live alone?”

“No, my mother is with me.”

“You are the only two in your family?”

“Yes, I do have a brother, but he lives away from us. He threw me and my mother out of home that same evening. For two days we lived literally on the veranda - facing the heavy downpour and the hostile crowd. My mother cursed me and beat me, but she was

the one who steadfastly cares for me. That is the main reason why I can’t leave her to others’ care. She is actually responsible for my life ending up like this, but can I bring myself to hate her?”

He stops the car and gets out. He lights a cigarette. He looks above the sky as he inhales the smoke into the lungs. He circles the car, comes close to me and says:

“You are right, you can never hate her. Do you know what my father did to me?” He sighs deeply. I know he is agonizing over some personal problem. He is looking at his watch. I know the time- even without looking at it; it is seven thirty.

He continues:

“Usually around this time I will be in my club. I go home around midnight. Sometimes I go home around two or three. Only recently I have come to realize that I am an alcoholic.”

Suddenly I raise my head and face him.

“Do you understand what I am trying to tell you? To put it in ordinary language – I have become a drunkard. It is not that I can’t live without that habit; but without it I have no value! Don’t you think it is funny? As far as my wife is concerned – that woman, the millionairess.”

Good heavens! How his face bristles with contempt when he utters those words!

“She has neither love nor respect for me – as her husband. But she is afraid of me because I am a drunkard. She is scared of me when I go home; I am drinking only because I want to scare the hell out of her. She will be hollering and screaming when I am not drunk; I raise hell when I am drunk and she will keep quiet. So I felt this is better.” He laughs as if he is narrating a comedy; I feel my stomach churning.

He continues:

“I am leading the life of a prisoner. I have no claim to any assets that are held in my name. I also exercise no responsibility over those assets. You must read my father’s will if you really want to understand my situation.

To live in that house – as a man with my head proudly held up – will mean only one thing: a dead soul!”

He continues, again:

“This is how my father describes me in his will; this is the very first sentence: ‘My only son Prabhakaran is a good-for-nothing fellow; he suffers from immoral behavior and bad conduct.’ After penning a long list of my credentials my father bequeathed all his assets to my wife because he wanted to protect me and my future. He added a sub-clause in the will as to how much income I am entitled to receive each month and explicitly stating how I may spend that money!. After all this benevolence, at the time of his death, he grabbed my hand and assured me that he was doing all this for my own good. Still, can I bring myself to hate my father – because of what he did to me?”

An ice cream vendor comes along. Like a child, he asks me: “Can we have ice cream?”

“No - thanks!”

“I love it.” He runs after the vendor and calls him. The vendor’s cart sands next to the car. After a brief exchange of words, he picks up two cups and an ice cream bar. He hands over two and half rupees. I enjoy the fun watching him.

“Just taste it, you will like it!” He hands over a cup to me. I am a little confused.

I have tasted ice cream before, but not like this; I feel embarrassed to be seen in the middle of a road, in a car, licking an ice cream bar. He was done with his ice cream in no time – as he licked off the cup clean, and now staring at the sky above while sucking on the spoon in his mouth.

“Our Manju will easily finish four cups. Everybody at our home likes ice cream. Padma will get mad if she ever found out. So everybody gets behind me.”

I understood his wife’s name is Padma.

“If you really believe what your father wrote in the will is wrong, you can certainly prove it. Don’t you think so?” I keep stirring

my cup with the wooden spoon. I want to swallow the contents from the cup in one gulp.

“What is there to prove?” He looks totally disinterested – still savoring the ice cream.

“What a split personality!” I think for myself. Just a few minutes ago he was talking quite seriously - agonizing over his father’s will and how other members of his family were treating him. Bu now, he seems to have forgotten everything because of a cup of ice cream! And he asks, ‘What is there to prove?’

“You can prove your father was wrong – that whatever he wrote about you in the will is false - with your conduct.”

He crushes the ice cream cup into a ball and throws it into the sky; he whacks it with another hand - like a bat striking a ball.

“Why should I? It is very convenient for me! Once they branded me like this, I have decided to enjoy all the privileges that come with that label. Maybe my dad was right. In the beginning - even after he had carefully planned and written the will – I was able to sway Padma to my wishes and squander a lot of money! One day Padma suddenly woke up and understood what was going on! She could accept everything about me – all my drawbacks except that I had liaison with other women. She reacted like a typical woman when it came to my extra-marital affairs. But the truth of the matter is no woman ever loved me – that includes my wife – and I am tired looking for love. Once in a while I will think some woman actually loves me, but sooner or later I will realize I was sadly mistaken.” He talks as if he still faces cruelty from others. I feel like laughing, but restrain myself and ask him:

“You feel sorry that nobody loves you. Did you ever really love somebody – I mean, including your wife? You are rich, you are sophisticated; you own a car and bungalow and you look trim in your dress. You think every woman you come across will love



your perfume and fall in love with you. Am I right? It is possible some women may be actually attracted to you and even profess love to you, but will you really call that love?" I suddenly recall RKV's next short story 'The Purification Fire.'

He must be elder to me – at least by eight years. But he seems like a teenager who needs lessons from me. I don't feel a bit threatened that I am dealing with another man. I think I am really a much stronger person. If this is true, how weak was he twelve years ago? The very fact that I became his victim tells me what a stupid person I was! I have now grown up – smart enough to realize this wide chasm. How the times have changed! But some folks never seem to change – just like him!

The time is now eight-thirty. Suddenly, he seems in a hurry to leave. I can understand. He wants to go to the club. I told him: "If you are in hurry, you may go now. I can take a cab to go home."

"No, no, I can drop you at your place . . . Where do you live?"

"In Egmore. "

Again the car starts moving. He is smoking and the cigarette smell is all over the car. I remain silent.

As the car enters our street I can see mother waiting for me – on the veranda with the light on. In a few minutes I am going to give her a shock of her life. .

The car stops in front of the house. Mother is looking at us; the light falls clearly on both of us in the front seat. I want mother to see us – so, leisurely, I take my own time to bid him farewell.

"I will call you tomorrow! Good bye, Cheerio!" I get off the car and mother stares at me in utter disbelief.

12

The time is nearing ten, and Ganga is not yet home. I am always worried about her; every day I nervously await her return from work. Nowadays I have become even more Scared, fretting constantly over something or the other.

Every day I feel like asking her, but the words get caught up in my throat. What can I ask her? How can I ask her anything?

What is there to ask, anyway? It's all plain to me. I feel like a ton of bricks hitting me any time now.

She will return home whenever she wants. She will go anywhere at her pleasure, did I ever question her? Once in a while I would unnecessarily imagine she may land in some dire consequences; but I never believed anyone grousing at her.

Ganesan told me a lot of things about her. Did I ever mention any of it to her? Why? Because deep in my heart I always believed my daughter will never go astray; why should I pester her with all this rumor-mongering?

How I defended her when everybody got on the bandwagon to malign her! I used to shut off Ganesan's mouth with just one sentence: "What right do you have to talk about your sister?"

Does she have any friends, at all? Does she ever laugh in someone's company? I often wondered . . .

Her forehead is so bright and clean, I often wondered why she couldn't sport a *kumkum*. Why can't she – this unmarried girl - deck herself with a flower or two at least on Fridays or on some festive occasions?

I used to feel so proud and happy – thinking about her career and daily walks. Maybe god thinks I had too much of happiness! Now everything seems lost!

I used to flaunt a lot about my daughter. Now I feel ashamed to show my face outside my home . . .

Ganesan was here a few minutes ago. I felt every question he hurled at me was nasty and cruel. I could rarely raise my head and look

at him. I just broke down. What does he care if I cry? It is my fate to cry before every member of this family!

What did I actually do to deserve this fate? I have only two children – one daughter and one son. The daughter does all kinds of atrocious things and the son bombards me with all kinds of questions. What can I do?

Why do I need to live after everything I heard about my daughter has proved right?

I begin to worry if Ganga has lost her head. She was once seized by some crazy idea; maybe it has now taken a permanent hold on her. Yes, that's probably what happened! She can't be blamed; something has actually taken her over. Otherwise, why would she do these weird things? I would have never believed any rumors about her – but now I have personally witnessed her craziness!

Nowadays I can smell her perfume reaching to the kitchen - the moment she sets foot on the doorway. This is incredible! I longed she should at least sport a *kumkum*; now she has gone to the other extreme; she carries with her – like a key bunch – colorful markers and every day sports a different motif on her forehead! What is this if not outright craziness? She colors her eyebrows; she lets her hair fall sideways in the fashion of the deity in the local temple; the other day she took all her blouses to the tailor and got them altered; the new outfit fully exposes her arms and shoulders. The new blouses she ordered have no sleeves! They seem more appropriate as under garments!

Of course, I am aware of women who are after weird fashions and display them for all to see, but why did this fad taken over my daughter?

I was proud she had never embarrassed me by bringing home someone calling him as her friend. The other day she suddenly showed up with some jerk; she said he was her friend! That fellow was sitting in the front hall and chomping on his cigarette - the smell was just

unbearable! Who is he? What is his caste? Could he be a Moslem, a Christian or even an untouchable?

How could I avoid him – when she herself dragged him into the house as a guest? I walked up to him and served him coffee on a nearby table - that was enough to make my whole body cringe in shame! Then she sat close to him and began entertaining him.

I was watching everything from the kitchen. He drank the coffee by directly touching the cup with the mouth! Spittle! He had just one sip and put the cup down. Fortunately – once he was gone – Ganga herself washed up the cup, and I sprinkled some water on it before returning it to the kitchen.

She has given up walking. How can she - when this jerk shows up every day – early in the morning!

The moment his car enters our street – everybody comes out of their homes and begin watching the fun – from their doorways and windows!

Ganga has given up all moderation and shame. She holds up her head with pride and cavorts with him. She seems determined to declare to the world: “Look at me; I want to disgrace myself in full public view!”

What should I do? She is now beyond my control. Can I beat her up? She is no more a small girl! Shall I write to my brother for help? What can he do, anyway?

My brother used to tell me often and I was hurt by his comments: ‘Don’t mistake me because I am saying this about your own daughter. She has no stable mind.’ I thought that was gross injustice. Now his judgment has been vindicated! What others have been saying about Ganga has been proven correct!

Why should I put up with all this horror?

I want to flee from all of this! I can easily find work as a live-in cook in some goddamn household!

Good heavens! Why am I crying? Don't I have any authority to question her? Has she lost respect for the elders?

I had enough! Let her come today, and I will decide on my options: do I stay in this house or move out? If I am helpless to do even that, I better give up!

My god! How Ganesan tortured me with all kinds of questions!

Just now I am returning home from work. I was a little delayed tonight. Mother is waiting for me at the doorway with the light on. Usually she will be armed with a magazine. Today she is just staring at the sky.

As usual today I had been to Prabhu's house. He didn't come to drop me off. Today he drank too much, so I asked him to stay home.

His driver brought me home in the big car.

"Do you see the big light over there – where an old woman is sitting?" I tell him and identify the house. He stopped the car, got out and opened the door for me.

"Can I go now?" the driver asked and saluted me.

The car is gone. . As I climb the steps into the house I hear mother incessantly sobbing. What should I do now? Shall I simply ignore her and step into the house? Or should I restrain her by asking, 'Why are you crying!'

I am baffled. Still, it is pathetic to see her cry like a baby. How can I console her? Suddenly I remember I haven't addressed her as 'Mother' for the last twelve years.

I turn around. A head was seen from the window in the opposite house.

"Somebody is watching from the opposite house. If you want to tell me something, you better tell me inside the house." I switched off the light in no time and entered the house. Mother shut down the front door and followed me into the hall. I am scared to turn back and face her. I go to my room to change and shut the door.

Mother was talking to me: "Are you aware only now of someone watching us from the opposite house?"

I note my reflection in the mirror as I was changing. I laugh to myself. I am trying various disguises. I am doing it on purpose.

I can never again become a 'bad' woman. I must at least act like one already corrupted. All these days' people thought I am stupid because I could not act such a role. Now everyone is scared of me. Still, nobody ever thought highly of me then, as well as now. They thought I was a naïve girl who turned bad; now also they see me only as a bad woman. But not naïve or stupid! Now everybody will know I too have a man in my life...

Nowadays no man at work dares to cast his leery eyes at me. They do it on my back, and I don't care!

Why? Am I supposed to live like a helpless widow? I was all along afraid that these jerks will misbehave with me. Now I am not afraid, what do I care if people talk behind me?

They will call me his live-in-lover. A kept woman. That's fine. It sounds just and proper.

But, deep in our hearts we both know it is not true. Let others remain in dark about it. He too has now matured into a point – where he is incapable of any inappropriate behavior toward me.

The other day he came to see me because of some vain hope and self confidence. I knew he felt cheated when I told him I am not in love with him. He is desperately seeking a woman who really loves him. He will never find such a heart! Poor soul!

I can always count on him as a friend and confidant. Sometimes he is like a child; occasionally, he also behaves like a father – which I felt when I watched him in conversation with his daughter. He talks with her – just like he does with me. I am told he has not spoken with his wife for the last ten

years. How can you call their fights a conversation? They are the daily norm, I am told.

I very much like his daughter Manju. Every day I go to their house in the evening – after work. He will settle down with a liquor bottle and a glass on the roof terrace. Manu and I will be talking, and occasionally he will break into laughter without any apparent reason.

He tells me he stopped going to the club ever since he met me. I am a little pleased at this outcome – though I don't know why. All these fashions I got into – I learned from Manju only. I believe I have now discovered a way to live happily and enjoy my life.

Why did mother cry the other day when I returned home? Maybe Ganesan had visited her that day. The other day Ganesan saw me getting into this car in front of my office. I acted deliberately – to spite him – when I got into the car and comfortably eased myself in the front seat. I can feel it – Ganesan watches me everyday like a C.I.D. He must be telling his wife at home that I am riding every day with a different male friend! He must have also told her about my new fashionable clothes. And his wife must have enlightened everyone that I have now trimmed my hair and started wearing a gown. So what? The more they talk about me the faster I am doing these things! What is wrong in dressing differently from others? What is the big deal? What people wear has to do with their personal preference and convenience!

I opened the door and came out. Why is Mother looking at me like this? I too stared at her.

“Do you think you are doing the right thing?” Her voice seems choked. I remain silent.

“You were saying someone was watching us from the opposite house. Do you remember they are still watching us?”

“Let them watch, “I tell her.

“Do you know what Ganesan was telling me this morning? Do you think he will dare ask a mother such questions? How dare you act like this?” She again breaks down.

I can't bear her crying. I avert my face away from her.

“Has Ganesan anything new to say about me? He always gossips about me! What are you crying about?”

“You are right; he always carps at you. But did I ever question you? I had full trust in you. I thought others are just maligning you. But now everything you do horrifies me! I can't stand it!” She smites her stomach in despair.

She continues:

“Have you lost your head? Otherwise why will you roam about with these clothes and make-up? I thought you had no friends. Now you found someone to ruin your life. What kind of friendship is this – between a man and a woman? What will people think if you come home in late night with a stranger in his car? Don't you think it is wrong? Why are you acting like this?” She gnashes her teeth and screams on the top of her voice:

“You miserable wretch! Why don't you open your damn mouth and say something! I keep talking and you are just standing there as if stone-deaf? Else, why don't you just get rid of me?”

Now I turned around. I haven't yet addressed her as 'Mother.' Who is she to lecture me about my clothes? I remain calm and answer her.

“The man in that car is not somebody; he is that stranger. Remember what Uncle said the other day? He said: ‘If she is actually smart, let her find out that stranger and bring him to our presence saying she would like to marry him. Then, are we going to deny her wish?’ Now I have found him after twelve years – on my own – because I am smart... Still, we are not going to live like husband and wife. We have gone beyond those definitions. He has a family. He has a

marriageable daughter. He will be my only guide to my future life. . . . Mother, you don't know about this world . . . There are many tigers out there - prowling like cows in disguise . . . ." I bit my tongue – a little afraid that I may suddenly say something about Uncle. I had promised Ambujam Auntie that I will keep her secrets.

I sensed from her look that mother didn't believe my words. She mocked at me:

"Is that the reason why you are disguising yourself with these fancy clothes? So you have discovered the real world! Your very outfit tells me that you certainly did!"

"Shut up!" I scream at her. (My god! What am I saying? There is absolutely no need to say it, but I have already spoken it!) Are you telling me you are dressed in any manner appropriate to your status? How one dresses up is one's own business. How come you are wearing a Glasco Mull blouse? And a color sari too? Did you get rid of your hair when Father breathed his last? I heard sister-in-law talked about these things too. . Are you including any of this when you are lecturing to me about this world?"

Mother is frozen in her seat.

I skipped my dinner that night. I felt I must atone for my sin – for making mother cry and hurting her with my harsh and cruel comments.

### 13

I am not sure what mother thinks of my relationship with 'him' – after I revealed to her that he was indeed that 'stranger'.

Was not Uncle telling her the other day? 'If she is actually smart, let her find out that stranger and bring him to our presence saying she would like to marry him. Then, are we going to deny her wish?'

Mother could have easily countered him: 'Brother, how can you say such a thing? We don't know anything about that stranger – his

caste, background or anything. How can we throw our child to his mercy? I don't accept your advice. Ganga has no need to go out looking for him.' How come Mother never said anything? That would only mean she found some justification in Uncle's suggestion. I too was closely watching to see how mother would respond to Uncle; her facial expression told me she was basically agreeing with him . . . .

Maybe she too thought I would never discover that stranger. .

How confident was Uncle in my stupidity! He seems equally confident in the stranger's despicable character, He thought I could never stumble upon that stranger; even if I did, Uncle thought, the stranger would not believe me and just walk away. .

It was in such a mood that Uncle challenged me the other day. Otherwise, how could he describe that stranger as my husband – even without knowing his caste and religion?

What if mother and Uncle don't accept my position that he is indeed that stranger? Will they start alleging that he is a new partner I want in my life? Let them, I don't care!

As far as I am concerned my problem is solved. I am at peace with myself. I am happy; I don't feel inadequate on any account

Now it is others who face the problem: will they accept my contention? I couldn't care less if they don't.

I am also aware how people are reacting to our relationship – at work and out there in public. The very fact that people are gossiping about us means a victory for me.

He is a decent man. Within this short period of time we have become quite indispensable to one another.

Only now people at work seem to think of me as a normal person. During the first week they were a little shocked - when I came to work every morning in his car and later got picked up in the evening to go home with him. Now it has become a routine, and

nobody cares; even if they do, they don't huddle together in some corner and talk about it.

For the last one month he shows up regularly at my home at nine-thirty in the morning. Till I get ready to leave with him – I may be in a shower or having my breakfast – he will wait for me in the hall smoking. The longer he smokes, the madder my mother gets. What can I do? I keep quiet and finish my shower.

Last week I bought for seventeen rupees an ash-tray that now sits on the teapoy in front of the sofa. Otherwise, being sloppy, he will discard cigarette butts in the hall – covering every square inch of the space where he happened to sit or roam around! I couldn't simply turn my eyes away from this foul up. Poor mother, she will end up cleaning up this mess . . . !

The other day I told him, "Why don't you go to the car, I will follow you in a few minutes?" I returned to the hall as if I forgot something and then picked up all the cigarette butts and threw them into a dust bin. Mother watched me and threw up her hands in horror. That's when I thought about getting an ash-tray. Initially mother raised objection calling the ash-tray a spittle box, so I came with a plan. The ash-tray will be in the hall when Prabhu visited our home; otherwise, it will stay right in my room.

I do my best to compromise and give in to mother's demands. Still, tonight I ended up in a collision course with her.

Looks like Prabhu too is bored with life; and the moment we became friends, he has fanatically clung to me. He does have an official position; I think he is regularly attending to his work since a month. His official title is Joint Managing Director, and because he is a husband he commands respect at work. He himself told me the other day – and I felt sorry for his pathetic situation: he signs the checks all right – but every one of them is duly sent to his wife at home – who

must countersign them – for their eventual validation. When you actually begin to think about his condition – such an arrangement certainly looks sensible.

As far as his household is concerned, Subash, Babu and he are the three children; he is a spoiled child of Padma. Every moment she is haunted by a fear that he would be a bad influence on the other two kids.

The two responsible adults are Padma and Manju. Manju is a bright girl, just as he had mentioned to me. Padma envies her husband, but Manju loves her father. Sometimes he behaves like a child in Manju's company, and she disciplines him.

"Enough for today – you drank too much!" she would say and take away the liquor bottle from him; he will beg her – repeating the entreaties – and try to snatch the bottle from her hands. .

"Then, I am not going to talk to you." She will get mad at him.

He will watch her pathetically as she moved away from him and look again at the liquor bottle in his hand. He will address her 'Manju', 'Manju' and go after her and drag her back to his attention, saying, "Take away this bottle, I haven't had another sip. Don't get mad at me!" She will gently laugh and comfort him, "It is all right, you may have some – a little more!" He will take the glass and thank her.

He is by far the youngest child in the family.

I recall my first visit to that house – some fifteen days ago. He extended me the invitation the very first day we had met, but I was a little scared. But he was keen that I must meet with his daughter. I was a little amused by the way he was raving about her. But that day, after a brief conversation with Manju I was very pleased that I had an opportunity to meet with her.

Did he actually tell Manju about me – before Manju and I saw one another? I don't know what he actually told her about me, but

she is so close and informal – as if she knows everything about me! No, it is impossible! Why would he tell her – a child – all those things?

I saw Padma only once – the first time I visited them. She invited me with warmth and smile. I felt a little weird; she knew I was going to be there and was waiting for me,

They had arranged for a dinner on the roof terrace – with a long, elaborate, dining table covered with white table clothes, and single chairs on either side of the table. Padma was seated on the host seat and I sat on a chair exactly opposite to her. Manju and Babu were on my left side and Subash on my right. Prabhu was seated next to Padma – on her left. We enjoyed the dinner under the moon light.

I felt a touch of extravagance around that household; we were only six at the dinner table but had four people to serve us. Padma seemed a little hurt that I wouldn't touch any non-vegetarian food.

“You won't eat even eggs?” she asks me as if pitying my obsession. “Nowadays everybody eats everything. I would certainly say eating eggs is not wrong!”

“Is there no life in an egg? She knows nothing about science. She will recognize life only when it screams at you!” mocks her husband.

Manju laughs. I think these are the few occasions when Padma is patient and willing to put up with her husband's comments. He too acts subtle at times like this: he pretends to be drunk so that he can verbally abuse her with some comment. She doesn't care, anyway; she never speaks to him; in fact, she hardly even looks at him.

She graciously lets Manju laugh at his comments, smiles at me and picks up some food with her spoon. She didn't speak for the next five minutes. Then she comes back to the same topic and says:

“I am actually repeating what science has told us; there are eggs that have life in them,

and there are also eggs that have no life – you can always talk to the people in the poultry and buy what suits you. The egg with no life will never produce a chick. So you are not committing any sin by eating that egg.”

I tell her: “I don't eat eggs - not because I think it is a sin; I am not accustomed to eggs, so I never eat them.”

I felt Padma chose to speak after a fairly long interval because she didn't want her comments to be construed as a response to her husband's remarks. To speak immediately after him would mean lending those words – and consequently their owner - a kind of respect, which completely went against her grain. So her silence seemed calculated and deliberate. I confirmed this to be true as I continued to watch her. Whenever her husband spoke, she never responded for the next five minutes; this subtle maneuver certainly escaped her naïve, stupid, husband – who kept intruding, again and again, with more comments. He also seemed to relish the feeling that he had subjected his wife to some putdowns. This Manju is a smart girl; she knows exactly what is going on and that's what keeps her smiling. Prabhu mistakenly assumes Manju is actually complimenting him with her smiles! Poor man!

I thought highly of Padma after our very first meeting; she has brought up the children very well. Subash and Babu never spoke during the entire dinner. Once when Manju reacted with laughter over something and others joined her, Padma gently turned around to watch them – without knowing I was actually watching her. Never again she indulged even in mild laughter.

After dinner, for a while, we sat in the balcony. The two boys said ‘good-night’ to their mother, kissed her cheeks and ran to their bedroom; they bade their father ‘good-night’ without getting any closer to him or kissing him – on their way out.

Maybe Prabhu is unaware how the other family members are treating him. He will feel

really terrible – if Manju is not around. She is the only person who understands her father and treats him with compassion. Does he know that? Even if that awareness doesn't sink deep into him, it does seem to ring a bell; otherwise why would he always harp on his daughter's name in every conversation!

Padma always has a transistor radio beside her, maybe she loves film music! The transistor was always on – in a low volume – during our dinner and also when we were resting in the balcony after dinner. Padma was appreciating that music too – amidst her other preoccupations! Despite all this ostentatious living and extravagance Padma leads a simple life. Her jewelry – the nose screw and the ear studs – are certainly diamonds – but they are small and look elegant on her. She chews a lot of betel leaves, still her teeth are sparking white. She talks a lot about movies – that's where I notice my shortcoming. I don't know what to talk with her. Maybe she and Manju talk a lot about movies. She tells me Manju doesn't accompany her to all the movies; Manju is very choosy about what she wants to see.

Every member of this family – excluding Prabhu – seems to follow some principle.

While resting in the balcony – the time was not even eight-thirty – Prabhu fell into deep sleep and began to snore. Padma seemed getting mad at him, but managed to conceal her reaction; she increased the transistor volume a little; I too didn't want to embarrass her, so I continued my conversation with her without noticing her husband falling asleep.

Padma respects me because I am an officer and well educated. But I am often scared if she would ask me, 'How do you know my husband?' Fortunately, so far nobody has asked me that question!

Nowadays Manju and I talk a lot about Prabhu. I have been visiting their house invariably every evening in the last fifteen days – and talking to Manju. I leave their home around eight-thirty. Sometimes Prabhu

drops me at home in his car; otherwise his driver drives me home.

Manju understands her parents very well. Deep in her heart she feels sorry for her father; she feels embarrassed by the way her mother treats him. But she seems to feel there is no other alternative.

Manju told me a few days ago: her mother would never let her go out with her father. Her mother literally dictates how she should conduct herself with her father. The curious thing is in that household only Manju enjoys some privileges with her father; other children are prohibited from any contact with him. Manju said she was sorry about this – even as she thinks her mother's action just and proper.

One day when the father was drinking his son Subash came to his room. "Come on, have a sip! It will do you good!" the father said and poured liquor in a glass for the boy. Poor boy, he drank the liquor, felt his head reeling and ran to his mother, where he vomited. "Daddy asked me to do it!" he said and started crying. The father stood behind the kid and started giggling as if he it was all a big joke. Even then, I was told, Padma spoke no words with her husband; she didn't even look at him. She dragged the kid into the room and thrashed him. Well, can she thrash her husband? Padma spent the whole night crying and nursing the boy's back and his swellings – as I later heard from Manju.

Prabhu usually spends a minimum thousand rupees every evening in his card games in the club. When he runs out of money at his disposal, he will ask Manju to get him money from home – because he is scared to ask Padma.

"I will return the money to-night – when I return from the club." That's how he would pester Manju for the money. I heard this from Manju herself, who continued: "I too feel how Subash and Babu may end up corrupted by my father. Tell me, do you think Mother is wrong?"



The reason why Manju took to me and invites me to her home every evening has to do with one outcome: whenever I go to their house, Prabhu forgets about going to the club.

I feel very happy about this situation. I will be even more pleased if my intelligence and his naiveté help in straightening Prabhu's life . . .

As far as I am concerned, I know what kind of relationship now exists between me and Prabhu. I have even made him acknowledge it.

The other day when he was waiting for me at the Island Grounds he was fickle-minded; but our conversation and his subsequent understanding of me have stabilized him.

He is now permanently alienated from Padma; which means still he can't help cruising for women or roam around the city's seedy spots for female company. He displays proper behavior toward me – just as I want – only because he has other avenues to satisfy his extra-marital needs. So what do I lose?

I sometimes wonder: after he drops me off at my home late at night – does he always directly go home? Maybe not! Why does he always carry the liquor bottle in his car? Doesn't it mean he wants to spend the night somewhere else? But I never asked him! What do I lose?

My goodness! What do I lose? It strikes me –suddenly! Suppose he drops me at my home late at night and then shows up at his home the next morning, will not that put wrong ideas into Manju's head? She wouldn't think that he had spent the night somewhere else; she would suspect he had spent the night with me! I don't mind others imagining wrong things about me, but not Manju! I should never let that happen! How can I ignore this? I must discuss this with Prabhu . . .

What should I tell him? How should I tell him? Can I openly talk all these delicate matters with him? I am confused. I feel my stomach churning. I missed the dinner last

night because I wanted to atone for my harsh treatment to mother. I am not able to sleep. I am waiting for the daybreak to have a hot cup of coffee.

Maybe I should console Mother with a word or two. What if she keeps crying?

Just imagine how human tongue – once left to itself– can turn so nasty and vicious!

I must have caught a few hours of sleep in the dawn. I see light outside. Maybe Mother has already made some coffee for me. .

I go to the bathroom and wash my teeth. I return to the kitchen, but Mother is nowhere to be seen! The stove has not been lit! The milk has not been warmed up, and is left near the stove!

I try to open the door; it is locked from outside . . .

I think she is coming, I hear the compound gate open. I am really mad. I pick up the newspaper on the floor, open it and try to cover my face. Still, I am curious to know: where did she go? Did she go for shopping?

I can't bring myself to look at her! I cover up my face.

She is now wearing a faded white sari with no blouse. She has completely shaven her head!

She speaks in a voice – calm and steady: "Why are you upset? This is how I am supposed to live! My mother and mother-in-law lived like this! I have been thinking for a long time; now fate spoke to me through your voice. I am not mad at you. I actually wanted to leave early. . Please wait, let me get you some coffee. . "

I was thinking of getting a Glasco Mull piece in the evening. .

Still I couldn't bring myself to cry at mother in this state. But I do feel sorry for her.

14

Manju has just now returned home from her college. Half-an-hour later, Ganga and

Prabhu joined her. Normally, Manju will begin reading her lessons after eight.

Initially Ganga's visits around this time didn't directly affect Manju's studies. But now Manju returns home as early as six and starts her lessons so that she can take advantage of Ganga's help in her studies. Till now she had nobody to turn to at home when she was plagued with questions in her lessons; so she would end up calling her friends for help over phone; then, instead of seeking clarifications she would spend nearly an hour on phone on all extraneous matters virtually forgetting the reason for the telephone call. Many days were thus reduced to exercises in futility.

Manju is the only member of the family who aspired for college education, so nobody feels qualified to question her methods or reading habits. On several occasions Manju jots down in her note book the topics and questions she needed to discuss with Ganga. Ganga, on her part, became a patient teacher who was never tired of answering any question from Manju. Ganga never got confused by any question addressed to her. In fact, pretty soon Manju realized that she could learn from Ganga things she couldn't otherwise ask her own school teachers.

Of late, Ganga has been visiting Manju at her home as if she is her tutor.

As soon as Ganga shows up in the evening, Manju, who has been waiting for her imminent arrival, will escort her to her room. She will take advantage of Ganga's presence to get ready with preparations for the next day's lessons.

The three rooms in the upstairs of that household belonged to Prabhu, Padma and Manju. Other family members had individual rooms downstairs. Manju's room was neat and tidy – like a well kept library. Ganga has noticed Prabhu's – it was visible from the veranda and one look convinced her of its pell-mell condition. Sometimes Manju will

try to fix the room even while taking her father to task for its poor upkeep.

Only Padma's room had air-conditioning and its doors always remained closed. Ganga didn't even know how it looked.

Soon after he brought Ganga home, Prabhu would go for a shower. An hour would elapse before he finished the shower and changed. Occasionally, Prabhu will indulge in singing – his voice rising loud enough and reaching the living room. Ganga would smile to herself; Manju will slowly tip-toe to the bathroom and ask her father to tone down his voice a little . . . . .

Ganga was quite pleased in the evenings when she was asked to help Manju in her studies; otherwise she might be obliged to go out with Prabhu to the beach or some hotel. It also affords her opportunity – as she found herself comparing the textbooks of ancient history and the modern history – to recall her former college days . . .

When Prabhu retired to balcony with a bottle of liquor in his hand, Ganga would leave Manju and join Prabhu for company. .

Suddenly Manju would interrupt her writing and call out from her seat: "Miss Ganga, I have a question". Ganga would rise from her seat, walk up to Manju and offered her the clarification. Then she would return to her seat next to Prabhu.

Whenever Manju called Ganga to her attention Ganga was becoming a little apprehensive: *What is she now going to ask me?*

She was a little baffled how to answer Manju's questions: "What is the relationship between you and my father? How do you know him?"

And Ganga could guess that Padma and Manju often discussed about her and her visits to their house; that was quite obvious from Padma's indifference and lukewarm attitude toward her.

Ganga felt overcome by shame whenever she put herself in Padma's shoes. She inured

her mind to face any consequences should they arise.

When Ganga and Manju happened to spend together a major part of the Sunday their conversation included many subjects beyond Manju's school lessons; they did shopping together; listened to music from the radiogram; and recently Ganga had even seen a movie with her.

Still, despite her closeness to Prah'u's family Padma seemed quite remote and inaccessible to Ganga. Ganga too was a little wary how she moved with the family members.

She made up her mind that she should never let Manju know that she had read RKV's short stories or met with him or that she knew that Manju too was an admirer of RKV.

"Have you ever read RKV's short stories? He is my favorite author. Have you read his *Trial by Fire*? That's the only one I never liked. Miss Ganga, do you know he works in our college as a library assistant?"

I was stunned why Manju suddenly asked me about RKV. She mentions that very story too! Luckily, she says she dislikes it! I feel like responding to her, 'You don't have to like that kind of stuff.' Shall I admit to her that I know RKV works as a library assistant? Does Manju also know that I too was a student of that college? Does she need to know all that? Did her father ever tell her how he knew me?

"Why are you silent? Maybe you have never read that story! It had generated quite a controversy in our college! We all went to see the author and questioned him; some were even ready to quarrel with him! That story is downright insulting to women; how ridiculous to imagine someone working in a women's college will dare write it!"

"What is ridiculous about it?" I asked in a tone that seemed a little harsh even to me. Did I sound like a teacher disciplining an errant

student? I tried to cover up my reaction with mild laughter.

"Looks like you haven't read it; it really seems to have been written to insult women." Manju keeps repeating her opinion, and I couldn't simply keep quiet. I asked her, "I am afraid I haven't read it. What is it about?" She begins narrating it in her usual style. Her intention is transparent – she is so callous – the way she begins her tirade:

"There is a heavy downpour; there is a bus stop in front of a college; everybody is gone, a young girl is stranded there - alone. Some fellow comes in a car and offers her a ride – she too accepts it, She is so innocent and doesn't know anything! He takes her to some far away outrages her modesty! She comes home and tells her mother everything! What nonsense! Even Tamil movies are much better! Does this feel credible? Show me a girl like her!" She jabs a finger at me and seems ready for a fight.

I keep staring at her – a picture of innocence. .

My god! Just now Prabhu too is entering the room and joins us. I pretend not to notice and ask Manju: "Then what? Is that the story?"

I was getting a little nervous how *he* would try to complete the rest of the story – something natural to him when he rudely intrudes into what Padma says. I can imagine how he would articulate it:

"Do you know what happened next? Her mother and brother cursed that girl and beat the hell out of her. The brother threw the mother out saying, 'Get lost – with your daughter!' So they went away and stayed with the girl's uncle. Finally the girl had a decent education and is now enjoying a high position. But she is dead against marriage. Then one day she found out that man. Who? The same scoundrel who ruined her life! More than ten years have since gone by. The irony here is that man's own daughter is now asking this woman, 'Show me a girl like her!'

And the woman is confused how to respond! Simply she has to reveal her identity by saying, 'She is standing right before you!' "

I keep wondering what would happen if he spoke that way. I suspect maybe he had already revealed everything to Manju. She is narrating a story to me; he is entering the scene; she demands that I show her such a girl – all these suggested to me that a drama is about to unfold . . .

"Story? What story? A film story? English or Tamil?" Prabhu joined us in our conversation and took a seat close to us.

"Daddy, just listen! We are now having a literary discussion.' Manju tried to avoid him, but he simply lit a cigarette and remained silent. Lest he should feel offended by her remarks, Manju tried to pacify him and said:

'We are talking about RKV – the writer who attended the function in your office the other day. We are discussing his short story."

"He is a good speaker, isn't he? Ganga, you won't believe it! He is only an ordinary employee in your college, but he is very gifted!" He raves about RKV.

"Some are born with silver-spoon in their mouth; some others are born with silver tongue. I understand he is very popular in your college. I know him only through Manju."

Manju seems a little confused when he keeps referring to 'your college.'

"Miss Ganga, were you ever a student of our college?" Manju posed the question with a touch of new familiarity in her voice. I said yes – feeling helpless. "Then you must have known RKV!" She cornered me, and continued: "I hear he is working in our college for the last twenty years. His full name is R.K. Viswanatha Sarma . . ."

"I knew him only as Viswanathan. Only recently I heard he is the same RKV. I knew him only as an employee in our college. I know your too are studying in the same college. But it never occurred to me to

connect all these dots; there was no particular reason why I should." I got out of her trap by combining some truth with some falsehood.

I am still trying to figure out what Prabhu had actually told his family members how we got to know one another. It is still a mystery to me. Why should I feel scared of these family members when they are treating me with utmost respect and friendliness? I asked Manju right away – in the presence of Prabhu:

"Manju, did your father ever tell you how we got to know one another?" I turned my face toward him and asked: "Have you ever told her about our first meeting?"

He must have felt that I was pulling the rug under him. I looked at Manju. She too seemed eager to know – as I could notice from the excitement on her face. I knew in a moment: I was indeed a topic of discussion in this household, and that his voice echoed that very sentiment.

"Why should I? This is my house, and I told them you are my friend! Isn't that enough? Every time I bring a friend home - am I supposed to explain how, when and where I met that friend? Everybody knows I bring only my decent friends home. As for others, I go myself and see them."

Manju now whispered into my ears: "It is only after meeting people like you we can believe that our father has decent and honorable friends."

"Manju! What are you whispering in her ears? Ganga, what is my daughter trying to tell you?" He asked me.

"How can I reveal to you what she has confided to me? Now I am going to reveal how we both got to know one another!" I turned to Manju and began:

"One day, I went to the college in a heavy downpour. The bus was nowhere to be seen. Your father came along - driving a car – the other big one. He gave me a ride. Later I went away to Tiruchi. Last month your father visited me at my office – he happened to visit

my department, but he didn't recognize me. I recognized him right away. That's all to it. There is no story here."

I wonder how his face was registering all kinds of emotions – behind me.

"Ganga, I am going out! I can drop you at your home if you want. Otherwise, you are free to stay here as long as you want." Manju noticed his hurry and asks, "Are you going to the club?"

"No, no, I have to attend to some business. Maybe I will also go to club too – later. I haven't been to the club for a while."

"You may go, but don't play cards."

"I might."

"You may, but don't play for stakes."

"I might."

"You may, but don't ask me money."

"Why not, is it your daddy's money?"

"Exactly!" she answered him with a laugh. He too joined in her laughter – like a child.

I feel guilty that I was keeping Mother waiting for me almost every night. I felt I might as well leave early today.

"Yes, let me go with you! I have some work at home." Manju bids me farewell.

## 15

I need to talk with Prabhu – alone. That was the reason I decided to leave with him. Nowadays I don't get the opportunity to talk with him. We can of course talk in the car when he drives me to his home, but that's not enough; to continue our conversation we may have to go to the beach or some hotel. Once he gets home he immediately goes for shower, and then takes up the liquor bottle. I don't feel like having a serious conversation with him when he is drunk. He is already dim-witted and dinking makes him worse - he babbles all inane things. I really feel sorry for him. Why does he have to drink? Does drinking really make him happy? I think he actually

ends up in terrible misery! He sweats a lot and his whole face turns reddish; the tongue gets twisted as if he is blabbering. Sometimes he vomits and his breathing becomes slow and heavy. Maybe this is common to all boozers. Still, I don't understand why people really want to drink!

I don't see any major difference between a problem drinker, a sickly or a deranged person. They all suffer from the same hallucination – that drinking makes them happy! And how the body revolts against such appeasement! The boozers try to coax the body in gentle ways – by supplementing the liquor with soda, ice, sweets, and snacks. Still, the body continues its revolt even after the liquor ends up in their belly – and they confuse it with happiness! That must be the ultimate human ignorance!

It seems to me that a man under the influence of booze could be subject to easy manipulation by others. Those who want to manipulate a drunk to their whim and fancy might consider it the most opportune moment to engage him in a conversation. But if you are trying to steer that person into some rational behavior, it will simply turn into a disaster.

However, that is not the only reason why I couldn't discuss with him what is uppermost in my mind. Frankly, I don't know where to begin – because it is new and alien to me but very personal to him.

Still, I need to discuss it with him. After all there are no secrets between us! He doesn't consider me an outsider. Things wouldn't have ended up like this if he simply regarded me as a woman and respected my privacy. But because he had chosen to intrude into my privacy and even breached it, I feel I need have no moral qualms; I can discuss this matter with him, and I will.

I even think it will be a good idea to go with him to the beach or a restaurant.

Till now I have spoken no word with him. The route he is driving through tells me he is

headed toward my home. Maybe he has some kind of celebration in mind – his clothes look very classy and elegant – and all his drinking, just today only, will be away from home! Should I spoil his fun? No, I am being nasty! He spoiled my life and why should I be considerate to him? Why shouldn't I spoil his evening? Well, I am already doing it! I am ruining his evening!

The car turns to Spur Tank Road when I tell him: "I want to have some coffee."

He is a little confused and stares at me. Normally, when we go out for coffee, it is not just for coffee – it actually turns into a ritual: we park the car under a tree and call for the waiter to take the order- he wouldn't show up for at least ten minutes. By the time we finish our conversation, pay the bill and come out, it will be close to an hour. Customers who want a 'quick coffee' will never enter these premises. And I know today Prabhu is in a hurry to go to his club.

"Can we go somewhere and eat? I need to talk with you. Are you in a hurry?"

He stopped the car. He is bewildered by my request – his very facial expression reveals he least expected it. I could feel his acquiescent behavior – to preempt any of his pending obligations – as he quickly reversed the car direction.

"I am sorry! Didn't you have coffee or snacks at home? Are you hungry? Your face looks pale. What an idiot I am!" He is in distress thinking I am actually starving.

"No, no, nothing like that! I asked because I want to talk with you on an important matter. I am not really hungry." But he pays no attention to what I was saying.

"Where do you want to go? Drive-in? We can go there if you want to eat food in the car. Otherwise we can go to a restaurant."

"We can go to the 'drive-in.'"

The car started moving. Looks like he has completely forgotten his program. He respects me and will take me home only when I want to. He's not at all bothered even when

I stand in his way to fulfill his other commitments. He is a good man. How come Padma – such an intelligent woman - is unable to handle such a good husband? I seem to handle him quite well! If I draw a line and tell him 'You must never cross it!' he will surely abide by it. Even if he crossed that line, he wouldn't do so wantonly and out of deliberation. If you simply ignore that lapse and show your willingness to accept him – again, despite that lapse – he will never again cross that line. I am a little suspicious if he would accede to Padma's demands. He seems more amenable to Manju than to Padma. Why? Because Manju tells him: 'If you keep drinking beyond this limit, I will never again speak with you!' Prabhu obeys her like a child. So she gives him a choice: first she snatches his liquor bottle, he runs after her and then she says, 'I won't speak with you if you keep drinking. If you think that is fine, go ahead and drink!' So he is caught in a dilemma! Therein lies the secret! What will happen if Manju too insists that she too play his game and snatch the bottle from him? Then he will be the winner. It is this competitive spirit that has brought him to this finale.

Manju loves her father. I have respect for him – even if he has ruined my life – because I consider, as my Uncle used to say, that he is my man. He too loves Manju because she is his daughter. He respects me because he knows I have maintained my honor and dignity – even if wronged by him. Does he feel anything toward me – other than this respect? Sometimes I feel there is something else . . . beyond this respect. .

The car was entering the drive-in-restaurant when I posed him a question: "Do you have any other program today? Are you delayed because of me?"

"Hmm." He stares at me. Maybe he is preoccupied. He laughed for no particular reason, and stopped the car under a tree.

'All my programs begin late in the night. Now it is too early. . .'

The waiter showed up. He asked me, 'What do you want?'

"You may order anything."

"Sweet?"

"Hmm . . ."

"What do you have?" He asked and had a conversation with him. The waiter left with the order.

I wanted to tell him right away what was on my mind. I was a little baffled how to begin. Do I really need to discuss all this stuff with him? No, I should not.

"You wanted to discuss something with me, what is it?" He urged me and I grinned and managed a mild laugh. He reciprocated with his laugh.

"Oh, it's nothing," I began. Good heavens! Why am I acting so stupid?

He smiled at me and continued: "You too have turned out just like Manju. You start something and then you try to cover it up. You know, Manju is just like a child! She never treats me like her father; she thinks I am her younger brother. She always gives me some kind of order or advice: 'Do this; don't do that; keep away from this or that!' You too want to do the same thing? Go ahead? You too are like a daughter to me! Yes, I see you in the same light-like Manju!"

Why does he say such a thing? My eyes turn moist. I think of my own father – I have absolutely no memory of him – and I feel a special bond when I now look at him. Suddenly his gray hair and good manners seem morphed into maturity. That's what he really is; then suddenly I imagine him licking the ice cream from a cup. I wanted to speak my piece:

"Yesterday a thought suddenly occurred to me. I have no concerns over it, but I don't want others to be misled by it. We should give no room for speculation or rumor. Don't you agree?"

"What are you saying?"

"Please give me a minute, I am about to begin . . ." I paused for a moment and looked at him; I felt deeply of the bond between us: Yes, I can discuss with him anything – he is not like other men. People have linked me with him and are gossiping about our friendship. Does he know those rumors? Suppose he comes to know about them; will he then feel sorry for me or get scared of a scandal; will he stop seeing me because he feels guilty about destroying my life? . . . Hmm. He is not given to deep reflection, still he will feel sorry over these developments and may even pick up a quarrel with someone subscribing to those rumors. I must overcome my fear of shame and make this clear to him; that would be in the best interests of both of us. So I must speak to him, right away. I said:

"Do you know what people are talking about us?" Probably he had never entertained any such notion..

"What people? Can you be more specific?"

"Say – that waiter – who is now bringing coffee and snack in a tray for us. Can you see over there, in the other car, a retired gentleman huffing and puffing and staring at us; and the folks in my office who have seen you dropping me in your car at work every morning; Why go that far? How about my own mother who sees you when you drop me at home; and your wife and daughter who think you are driving me every night to my home - with your liquor bottle in the car- and happen to see you returning home the next morning . . ."

The waiter approached our car even as I was giving out the details as if from a prepared list, so I stopped suddenly.

"Tray here!" the waiter hollered and a boy dressed in khaki rushed toward the car and secured a tray to its door. The waiter set up the dishes on the tray and asked for confirmation: 'Coffee next?' He was gone after getting a nod by way of approval.

Prabhu served me a sweet from the tray. He too helped himself with one even as he seemed preoccupied.

"I don't care."

"We may not care. I am asking to see if you are aware what they are talking. It is fine if one knows these rumors and ignores them. But what if you don't know what they are actually saying?"

"Well, what are they saying?" He stared at me; I too stared back at him. I count till five and then told him:

"They are saying I am your mistress."

"Nonsense! Who says/ I feel like whipping them with my *chappals!*"

"Why, even my mother thinks so!"

"Oh, I am sorry," he scratched his head, "I will explain everything to her. When did she say this? Everything will be fine if I can personally come down and talk to her. You don't have to worry!" I feel sorry for him.

"What about your wife Padma?" He frowned as if dispersing my words in the air.

"How about Manju?"

"Come on, she is just a child!"

I thought to myself: 'More than you?' I let out a mild laugh, and said:

"So, as far you are concerned, all the problems about our relationship have been resolved! Am I right? The situation, according to you, is very simple! You can talk over the matter with my mother; as far as Padma is concerned, it will vanish in thin air! As for Manju, she is just a child. . . So, we are the only two smart people! . . ."

He answered me:

"I don't know whether we are smart or stupid . . . I don't think one would call it a smart move to worry over things that are beyond our control; as far I am concerned, I am not responsible for any of my actions. I am not a strong person. I am aware of my own limitations. So this stupidity – no, this smartness – comes handy to me. Was there any time when people didn't gossip about me? But I am really worried about you! I

don't want you to get the bum rap. People do suffer from their names getting tarnished, but that shouldn't happen without any reason! Still, it is not too late; I will find a nice boy for you. Once you are married, everything will be fine."

Why does he keep harping on this marriage thing? What makes him think it is such an easy task? What is he actually thinking? Does he have anyone in mind? I tried to probe his mind . . .

I began: "There are two things you need to consider. First, am I willing to get married? Will anybody be willing to marry me after what happened to me? The second question: Can I get married without revealing my condition? Do you think that would be the right thing to do?"

"No, no! That's not right! Still, there are many. . . I want your consent. . . Tell me now – that you are willing . . ."

I felt his suggestions were fraught with dangerous consequences. I must not let it grow; I have to snip it right away.

"Perish that thought! What I wanted to convey to you is that I am not worried about what people are gossiping about us. Whether it is my mother or my folks at work, I can dismiss them with a disdain – just as you can in regard to Padma. But when it comes to Manju – I strongly feel she must not misunderstand our relationship. I still believe she harbors no such feelings but I am scared to think she might. At a proper time in the future I will reveal to her the truth about me; but before such a moment arrives I don't want to see Manju's mind perverted; should that ever happen I might be compromising her trust in me. I highly value her trust in me – then it would mean the whole world trusts me. That's the reason I am asking for your help."

"What do you think I should do?" I felt I can ask him to grant me a wish – just like *Kaikeyi* extracted it from King *Dasaratha*.



“When you go out with me I want you to go home after you finally drop me at my home. I am not bothered where you go afterwards. This is very important to me.”

16

Tonight I wanted to return home early— so that Mother needn't have to wait for me like every day, but it is already going to be ten. Prabhu didn't seem to care! He assured me his programs began late at night — but as we went on talking he didn't seem worried about the time running out and his other commitments. Only a short while ago I reminded him, and he said, casually, that he will drop me at off home. I said no and took a cab.

The cab reached home and as I alighted from it, the time was ten. I handed over the fare and walked into the house. Mother, normally seen at the doorway, was nowhere. The door was wide open! I guessed Venku Uncle must be visiting us! He was resting on the easy chair and as soon as I looked at him, he averted his face away! Does he think I haven't noticed him?

Has Uncle come owing to some official work or because mother had written him to come? How does it matter? My only regret is that tonight I have come home in a taxi!

Normally, when he saw me, whatever may be his level of anger; Uncle will hide his real feelings and fondly invite me into his arms — as if I was a little baby crawling before him. But today I didn't see anything of that.

He seemed to totally ignore me and kept staring at the ceiling. Mother, her head fully covered in her sari, keeps staring at me. I can't see her face, so I am in dark what she is thinking. What do I care what they think! I strode toward my room as if I am not duly concerned.

I asked Uncle: “When did you come?” He stared at me. He wanted to convey he was terribly sorry for me; he was also very angry

toward me. Still he was talking to me because he had all his emotions under control.

“Afternoon!” He answered with a monosyllable, and I don't know how to continue the conversation. I remained silent and walked toward my room. Mother was standing next to a pillar and watching me. I am scared when I watch her face buried in a shroud. The face looked alien and anything but human. I went to my room and closed the door.

I felt so happy to be alone in my room, and thought: ‘Now I have to go out once I change; I must have my dinner with them; I need to talk with them; I need to answer all their questions; I have to partake in all their comments and arguments. I must patiently listen to their advice and profusely thank them for all their help.’ I dreaded the very idea of opening the door and walking out . . . I didn't feel like changing my *sari* or washing my feet. I was not hungry, either.

I didn't mind standing just like that — happily in my room for several hours - till the daybreak! I kept staring at my reflection on the big mirror. . .

What will Uncle think of my new makeup and fashionable clothes? Maybe he didn't notice any of this when he saw me come in. On the other hand, he probably didn't feel he was seeing anything new or shocking. It is quite possible mother had not only asked him to visit us; she must have also briefed him with everything about me — sparing no details . . .

But I am well ahead of anybody else — when it comes to predicting what would be Uncle's line of attack on any subject.

He might even justify everything that has already taken place. He might tell me that I deserved to be expelled from my community for violating its standards. Then he would meet with me in private and lecture me on my duties and obligations — to maintain the integrity of my family and caste.

Let me see what he is going to say . . . Does he still want to have me under his control?

It is more than five minutes since I came into my room. I feel stuck here. I seemed to have found the courage to do what I wanted to accomplish, still deep in my heart I am scared. Tomorrow Prabhu will be here early in the morning, and I wonder what Uncle is going to ask him! Or will Uncle simply ignore him?

Maybe Mother had already informed Uncle 'he' is that stranger. Or is it possible, because she doesn't trust me, Mother is telling Uncle that I am into 'discovering' a new friend in lieu of that stranger and prowling the city streets with him - like a tramp? ..

How long can I keep the door slammed shut? Will Uncle think I am hiding in my room because of fear? I am sure Mother feels that way. That must be the reason she wrote to Uncle to visit us. Does she think Uncle can simply wield his sword and chop off my head in one stroke?

She has hidden her face in that 'shroud.' Her look is throwing a challenge at me: 'Uncle is here, go ahead and talk to him!'

Sure, I will talk with him! Was there anything Uncle and I didn't talk about for over all these years? So I don't mind talking about this. There is nothing wrong if I discuss it with him. Now I have to face him!

I changed my sari, opened the door and suddenly came out and stood in the main hall. Mother was getting ready to serve me dinner and watching me from the kitchen.

"Uncle, did you have your dinner?" I asked him out of courtesy.

"Oh yes! Why don't you finish yours, first? The time is already ten". He sounds so informal. He must be thinking: 'Let her come - after dinner! I can afford to wait,' He must be busy charting a strategy in his mind - weighing in the points and his line of attack. He is lying low to catch me at some unguarded moment. Mother too feels Uncle

will spring a surprise and crush me in no time. What does she know? I was the one who worked with Uncle and also had my training from him!

Silently, I bowed down my head and had my dinner. My stomach was full - with all that stuff I had in the evening in the restaurant. Fortunately, mother was not pestering me to eat this or that dish or trying to serve me food against my will. . I washed down my mouth with buttermilk and finished the dinner. Mother must be thinking that I had spent the day visiting all kinds of restaurants and eating every variety of unhealthy food possible. . .

I am always the one responsible for preparing Uncle's bed. "The time is up, shall I make your bed?" I told him and brought his bed that was rolled into a bundle and stacked away in my room.

"Yes, it is getting late," Uncle said in agreement. I laid it on the cot, spread it wide and dusted off the sheets. His bed is ready! My duty is over! I can now disappear into my room and not show up again till tomorrow morning! I was feeling restless -being alone while Uncle was pacing the hall in silence. I felt he might jump on me in one wild gallop - at any moment now. .

I saw a cockroach coming out from Uncle's bed. It is almost eight months since that bed was used. I stood up frozen - disgusted at the sight of cockroach. Meanwhile Uncle arose from the easy chair and approached the bed.

"Come over here and sit," he signaled to me with a hand and sat cross-legged on the bed; he closed his eyes for a moment and prayed. He held his head against a nearby wall and heaved his body on the bed. With his left foot drawn up and slightly bent he reached to his knee and began stroking it - as if massaging it with oil.

"Why don't you press my leg?" he asked and extended it toward me. I too sat next to him - on the floor - and began pressing his

foot. Every time I pressed it he was letting out deep breaths.

Mother was already asleep in the kitchen – or rather feigning sleep. She was not going to sleep. She was just waiting for the moment when Uncle will begin interrogating me...

After a while Uncle brushed off his eyebrows and let out a deep sigh. He opened his eyes and looked at me. He laughed for no apparent reason. I felt like laughing, but didn't.

"How come you are blaming me – for all your actions?" He asked rather in a casual, easy-going manner. It took me a while to understand the implication in that question. Even as I was preparing to answer him, he continued:

"You are no more a child! You are free to act in any way in your personal capacity, who can prevent you? We tried to talk with you because we thought you shared our values – like morality, justice, propriety and standards. On the other hand if you think you don't care for any of these, you are free to live as you choose who can interfere with you? In the good old days your brother Ganesan ditched you from his home; today, can your mother do the same? She may have to simply flee the home – leaving you to your own devices! You may do whatever your conscience tells you, but don't drag my name into it! I heard you told your mother that I wanted you to find out that stranger; did I ever tell you such a thing? Do you remember what I actually said? I warned you he will never believe your words; that he will never have a high regard for you. My intent was to state clearly the complications involved in your situation. I never said you should discover that ladies' man and play games with him!" He concluded his angry outburst while brandishing his hand-held fan before me. I bowed down my head and answered him:

"Didn't you tell Mother the other day: 'If she is smart enough, let her find that stranger and . . .'."

"How smart you sound! You are really something!" Uncle screamed on top of his voice, and cut in hastily. Then he continued:

"Did I personally tell you such a thing? Your mother was talking to me, so I mentioned something to her to that effect. You were eavesdropping that day; now you are coming forward and telling me you acted smart because you can defend all your actions based on that single conversation! But do you know what others are talking about you? They are saying you found some man and are tramping the city with him. How can you prove that he was really that stranger in the car? Why should others believe you? Why do you have to end up like this – with everyone casting aspersions on your character?" He continued to smite his face with the fan.

I was silent for a while, so did Uncle. Somewhere in a house the national anthem could be heard from the radio. I waited till it was over; then I suddenly broke in:

"Why do I have to prove anything to others? What do I actually gain by proving to them he is actually that stranger?"

"When I talk about others I am not talking about every human being on this earth." Uncle raised his head, glanced afar into the kitchen and then whispered into my ears as if sharing a secret with me:

"Even your own mother doesn't believe he is that stranger." He winked at me, and I felt my entire body cringe in shame. I wanted to ask him, 'Do you believe me?' Why should I? I can see plainly: he will not believe me - much less care what I tell him.

"Your mother wrote me a four-page letter; she feels ashamed and humiliated. She wrote: 'Only you can help me.' I will show you the letter tomorrow morning. Her situation really looks quite pathetic." He grabbed my hand and began snapping the fingers- one after another. He tried to get closer to me and I

could see his eyes wandering over my entire body. I could understand all the perversions now crowding into his mind. Grinning like a monkey, he said:

“You have changed a lot – your body has grown bigger . . .” I knew his state of mind as he uttered these words. Then he asked me in a voice, secret and private: “Are you taking all the precautions?”

“Precautions? Against what?”

“Conception!” Again he winked at me. I got mad as hell. I felt my stomach churning. I wanted to go out and spit on the street, but I didn’t stir out from where I sat. Meanwhile, he punched me hard on my thigh.

“No,” I replied. Maybe he didn’t understand what my ‘No’ meant. Was I resisting his pinching or telling him I am not taking any precautions to avoid pregnancy? Let him confuse! I couldn’t care less.

“Don’t get into troubles,” he warned me. I said nothing and was only miffed that he had trapped me.

I shrugged off his hand – the first time I ever did. “I feel sleepy. You too need to go to bed. It is getting late.” Looks like finally Uncle understood me.

“Can you get me some drinking water?” he asked me. As I brought some water in a vessel and set it before him, he took my hand and told me:

“I would like to meet that gentleman.”

I was not surprised that Uncle wanted to meet with Prabhu. What amused me was Uncle calling him a gentleman. This is what distinguishes Uncle from others. Whenever he happens to deal with another person in a close relationship, Uncle’s approach will be based on pure reason, and reason alone. When others shunned me it was this quality that made Uncle reach up to me and render all the help I needed. This is no simple, ordinary, virtue. Similarly, even after all this he is not acting like others and condemning Prabhu; he knows Prabhu is someone close to me and so calls him a gentleman, and says he

is eager to meet with him. I admire Uncle for some of these sterling qualities.

“He will be here in the morning,” I said.

“Yes, your mother wrote to me that he comes here every morning,” he grumbled.

I shut off the light in the hall; I went to my room and shut the door.

I can’t sleep. Still, I didn’t put on the lights. I have told Uncle I was feeling sleepy, so I couldn’t in all honesty keep the room lights on . . .

I find myself lying in the dark on my back. The ceiling fan was whirling above me; its stripes, visible like twisted threads and little sparks in orange, seemed to take all kinds of shapes, rising up and down and hitting me like a volley of arrows; darkness was weighing down heavily upon me. I can hardly breathe! Still, I didn’t want to switch on the lights! Why not just open the windows?

I got up, walked to the windows, opened them and stood there, watching. The street and the opposite house are now clearly visible . . .

I recalled my conversation with Prabhu earlier that evening. Only when you observe even the worst human being from close quarters can you appreciate how wide off the mark your premise could be.

Only today Prabu told me a lot about himself. I recalled that sentence: ‘I am not responsible for my actions!’ How dangerous is that mindset! It is not just the people close to him who are going to be hurt; it poses a great danger to himself!

## 17

I am now recalling Prabhu’s conversation with me – about himself - on the beach and in the restaurant earlier this evening. On such occasions he invariably would talk about his father. Maybe he is very fond of his father. I have watched his face on such occasions, and his eyes would sparkle with brilliance. He

seemed to recall his fathers' image, forgot the surrounds, and went on and on:

"I don't even remember my mother's face, then I was too young. My father didn't want to remarry after my mother's death – because of me. That's what he said – not personally to me but to others who broached that subject with him. He would tell them: 'Why do I need another wife? My first wife is gone leaving me an invaluable gift; I must be satisfied and do my best to take care of this boy. If I marry again I may end up with her kids too and get caught up in endless family quarrels. Why the hassle?' Only now I realize that Father was so fond of me that he rejected the idea of a second marriage. My father had no formal education, but he had a good business mind! Maybe one shouldn't be too fond of one's children. Do you know something? My father is actually responsible for my ruinous end. He was very fond of me; but he suffered in his last years because of me. How he cursed me! Then he would regret his rage toward me and shed tears!"

Prabhu wiped his forehead and eyes with a handkerchief. I keep wondering: what was my question, and what he was actually telling me . . .

Yes, I remembered. A few minutes ago he was telling me: 'I am not responsible for my actions. I am not a strong person . . .'

I told him that was a very dangerous attitude. I said. "Do you realize the consequences if you don't own up to your own actions? Others will suffer but you will suffer even more. How irresponsible can you get – when you say such a thing?" He stares at me like a guilty child. I continued: "You are an adult; the basic difference between an adult and a child is this: a child is never responsible for its mistakes, it's the parents who are held responsible. But an adult is not like that; he should not be. You are acting like a child pleading with its mother: 'I can't take responsibility for my action.'" I concluded

with a laugh; maybe that was when he remembered his mother.

Darkness had fully enveloped our surroundings; we were encircled by cars. The ornate luminaries erected at strategic spots of the garden seemed a little subdued; their light, on impact from the cars, reflects into bright incandescence. Occasionally a car rushes along with headlights blinding the eyes prompting Prabhu to hurl obscenities. He seems so casual when mouthing anything profane. Maybe he doesn't realize what he is actually doing, but I am a little scared about the consequences. He notes the scowl on my face and apologizes to me saying, "I am sorry!" Then he is lost in some thought which, after a while, turns into a deep sigh and then, to words. He dusts off the cigarette ash and continues:

"I am really a luckless soul! Does ostentatious living – luxury cars and wealth – assure a happy life? I have become a miserable wretch because I was born to wealth! Had I been born in a poor family – like yours – I would have turned out as a good man! Those days my father used to give me ten rupees as pocket money. Prior to that he gave me one rupee everyday as pocket money. One day I stole some money and when he found out he gave me ten rupees. He told me, "I will give you whatever you want; but you need to promise that you will never again steal.' Ganga, do you know something?" He keeps staring at me with his question and I too peer into the darkness to examine his face. His eyes are sparkling bright; so do his ear and the curly locks in the light that came from the rear and partly fell on him.

"I am still stealing money – my own money! How unfortunate! Had my father slapped me hard when I first stole money I would have been reformed. He should have battered me hard – at least to reform me. But he didn't. Because he loved me! It never occurred to him to pause and think that ten

rupees as pocket money to a twelve-year-old kid going to a convent school in a car may not be a wise thing to do! Even today Padma would not think of giving any pocket money to our boys. As a kid I often used to go out with my friends to eat out in restaurants – I was very proud in doing them those favors – and every day I used to spend all my pocket money!. Sometimes it wouldn't be adequate. Think about it! Some twenty five years ago ten rupees was a lot of money! Maybe your family income never exceeded ten rupees a day! Am I right?" He jabbed his finger in the air toward me.

I replied, "Yes, you are right!" Was my father alive – twenty five years ago? I heard he earned only eighty rupees per month! Then Ganesan got a job, but his salary was only seventy rupees a month. His house rent comes to seventeen rupees. Poor mother! Under those circumstances she must have struggled real hard to run the family!

Prabhu continued:

"My father believed I was saving from my pocket money – after taking care of my daily expenses! He was feeling very proud about it and said as much to his accountant. He would also ask me, now and then: 'Am I correct?' I would simply nod my head. Then I would steal again. I will buy some valuable item for a hundred or two hundred rupees and my father would think I bought it from my own savings . . . Do you really want to make someone a good-for- nothing fellow? Here is the recipe: keep giving him money whenever he asks for it; be generous in giving and you must feed his spending habits with more and more. Then you must suddenly stop giving. There is no better weapon to destroy your enemy; that's exactly how my father destroyed me!"

He seems so knowledgeable, and so articulate! Then why does he act that way? I think he knows what I am thinking.

"Only now all this wisdom dawns upon me," he continued. "And that too- only when

I am with you. Of late I am thinking a lot about you and feel sorry for you. You were telling me I must own up to my actions – but how can I do that in your case? There is no way out, so I kept myself away from those situations. I may avoid a situation, still I must face the retribution for my sin. But here is something I want to make quite clear: I didn't commit that sin consciously; I believed you too were like me – taking part in that act in a playful mood. I realized my mistake the same day . . . Now, after all these years, how can I atone for my sins? But I should do something! Now people are gossiping about us and in a way we are responsible for those rumors. I really can't understand why you are doing this on purpose. If you really want me – I can certainly understand, but you don't harbor any such intentions. Then why should you tarnish your reputation? You were saying Manju mustn't misunderstand you; today she mayn't but tomorrow she might! It doesn't affect me, and I am not worried about anything; I am looking at things from your perspective, and I don't understand you!"

The cars surrounding us have slowly disappeared – one and after. A stray car – here and there – is visible afar. The boy in khaki shirt approached us and asked, "Can I remove the tray?" The boy removed the tray after Prabhu said yes. I realized we spent a lot of time here. I told him:

"Why don't we go somewhere else? I feel a little bored staying here for a long time." He seems surprised.

"Do you want to go to the beach?"

"Oh, yes."

18

The car starts moving. He asked me while driving, "Normally you would refuse to come to beach or restaurant; but today you are eager to go to these places. Why? What is the matter?" He laughs. When laughing he looks like a child. I have seen him laugh like this

when conversing with Manju. Manju too laughs like her dad. What is common between the father and daughter is this laugh.

I bowed down my head and said: "Didn't I tell you? I want to talk with you."

"Oh, you still have something to say? I thought we were done. Any more advice?"

"No, no, nothing like that," I protested and we both became silent. The car was in motion and I asked myself: What am I supposed to tell him? Am I angry that he could have spent this time – wining and dining – with another woman? Why should I get mad at him? Why should I care where he goes – I am only trying to claim my share of time with him as his 'concubine.' What do I care what Manju thinks of me? Why am I caught up in all these false emotions? Why can't I simply acknowledge: 'This is the truth', what is wrong with that? He will not certainly spurn my advances. Good heavens! Is that really a problem? I am totally against it. He is not willing to take any liberties with me – the way Uncle would. Does it mean he is a very decent man? Well, he doesn't seem like one when it comes to other women. He never spends a single night at home. Why is he so considerate and gracious toward me?

Why am I caught up in all these thoughts? I can't understand myself! Can I ever get attracted to him? How absurd! Am I really longing that he should desire me? Should that ever happen will I acknowledge it? I really wish we are attracted to one another. But I am sure I will never be moved by any sexual impulses toward him; and I think he too may find himself in the same boat. Maybe there was a time when he wanted to possess me – when he came to see me the other day, but I veered it in another direction. So he will never again harbor such feelings toward me! Why should he? There is a proverb, 'When the milk is cheap why would anyone buy a cow?' This surely applies to Prabhu. As for me. I will never be attracted to him or any other man. But I am sure about one thing: I

may surrender to any man if he tries to take me by force. I wish somebody tries to take me by force. Sometimes I wish – unconsciously – that no one other than Prabhu tries to force me into submission. Because I want voluntary surrender I seem to think Prabhu should be the one using force against me. It is not just that I want to protect myself from the lustful eyes of other men; because I am keenly aware of my weakness I have made up my mind to take Prabhu as my companion. That would free me from any obligation! I too can declare that I am not responsible for my acts! How dangerous is that notion!

The large moon is looming afar. When viewed from here it appears a few feet above the ground. I can see no sea water from here. Had we come yesterday or a few days earlier we would have seen the full moon. I don't remember where he had parked the car. I keep talking – the mind is crammed with all kinds of thoughts – some willed and some against our will. After the entire human mind knows no sense of propriety; I feel bombarded with all kinds of thoughts . . .

"You said you wanted to talk to me, go ahead!" he opened the car door, let one of the legs hang loosely on the door, and lit a cigarette. I liked the cigarette smell; some day I should smoke a cigarette! What is wrong with smoking? Mrs. Manuel, the head clerk in our office is a smoker. I have seen her; her face will reveal her as a smoker – with her lips in dark complexion. Smoking makes one look manly; I am not likely to get into that habit. I am just imaging things. I stare at a cigarette packet lying between our car seats in the front and I picked up and smelled it. It reminds me of some fruit.

"Do you like the smell?" He asks.

"What is there to like? Somebody smokes a cigarette far away, and we feel our stomach churn. This looks different." I venture a lie.

I want to keep talking, so I mentioned to him about Mrs. Manuel. He doesn't seem to be surprised. After all, everyday he is mixing

with women who not only smoke but who enjoy whisky and brandy with him! He ignores my words and seems lost in watching the full moon.

“Are you bored – because I brought you here saying I wanted to walk with you? Now I seem lost!”

“No, I am not bored,” he assures me and continues: “I don’t understand you. Why did you phone me that day? Why did you ask me to come? Why are you tarnishing your name by linking my name with yours? I want to know what you really think about your future. How can I help you?” I wonder why I am causing him distress.

I really don’t know how to answer all his questions. I was thinking all along that I am doing all this with a broad scheme in mind and forethought. That day he acted on an impulse when he whisked me away in his car without bothering the consequences; am I doing the same thing – dragging him here on some impulse?

Despite myself I blurt out a truth – without thinking of the consequences. I utter the words as if I am in a trance:

“Of late I am suffering from an apprehension: I am constantly in fear that someone will rape me. Should someone try, I am scared I will surrender to him. That was the reason why I sought refuge in you.” But as soon as I uttered these words I felt I shouldn’t have spoken them; I bit my lips and bowed down my head. My whole body is trembling.

“Don’t be silly,” he comforts me. “Are you still a child – like before? Just like you asked me the other day – aren’t you an adult? You are an officer, educated, and a big woman! Who can dare do anything to you – against your own will? It is a baseless fear! Don’t try to cultivate those unnecessary fears!”

My eyes turned moist. Impure water purged from the heart. I wiped off the tears off my face, and continue:

“I have lost faith in me because of what happened in my life. I am scared someone will hurt me against my own will. Should that ever happen – because of my fate – I thought it could be rather you; that’s why I was looking for you.”

“That’s utter nonsense!” He said and continued in a tone of assurance and finality “That will never happen till I go to my grave.” I locked my eyes on his face.

“Do you know something? I don’t claim to be an exemplary character; it is true I have liaison with many women, but I have never touched a woman without her consent. It was only in your case I committed that error. And it happened because of a false belief on my part that you were willing. Think about it! That day - did I compel you? I am not trying to justify my action; I am only trying to point out that a misunderstanding caused that outrage.” He must have been thinking of that episode for a long time.

“At the time I was already spoiled enough, but was still immature. No woman resisted my advances, such was the environment where I grew up. Do you know I was . . . .” his voice is choked when he began, and he continued after a cough: “I was spoiled at my twelfth year!”

I am shocked. I turn bashful – it is all so revolting – lest he should continue with more details of his boyish indiscretions. Fortunately he drops that subject and lights a cigarette. His face turns ugly as he ponders. I can imagine what is on his mind . . . .

I reproach myself – why do I have to push him to divulge his inner demons? But I also feel – in some corner of my mind – that this rebuke is a veritable lie. .

He lets out a deep sigh and cigarette smoke. I wonder if what all he breathes is only cigarette smoke. He is really a heavy smoker, no doubt about it. . .

He continued:

“It all happened probably because I was a motherless boy. I was brought up by an ayah.



I remember her – when I think of my mother. She died two years ago. She had a daughter – now she would be around fifty, living somewhere with her grand children. – Always - in fear, just like you! I was raped by her! I was molested when I was very young, but I never molested anyone. Money! Money! That’s the devil! Else, how could a high school kid ever get a girl friend attending a college? There were girls who stopped my car and asked for a ride. I thought only ice cream and a matinee show were the most romantic things in one’s life. That’s how I thought of you... But I have never seduced a woman. Even now I roam the city streets at night, why? After I found out that Padma despises even my touch, she has become alien to me. She is my wife, does it mean I can force her? I can’t rape any one! No, I can’t!” He gnashes his teeth.

I feel sorry for him. I feel pain in my neck and shoulders. I think I might feel better if I could cry. But I can’t bring myself to shed any tears.

I imagine I am laughing to myself. That doesn’t mean I am happy.

It seems to me I could never be tainted a second time – even if I want to. Is that my fate? How ironic is our close encounter – a convenient embarrassment: we are so close to one another, yet I can’t bring myself to love him and he is unable to take me by force. I can’t help laughing.

I too gnash my teeth and think: “I can’t love you.” I make my thoughts public. “I can never love anyone!”

“You really think so?” He stares at me, pauses and continues:

“I see . . . You think you don’t deserve to love anybody. You also think – in a rather perverse way – that you deserve to be taken only by force against your own will. That’s the reason why you fear it may become a reality. You should know one thing: what happened that day was not a rape. It happened with your consent. But the very next moment

I knew you hated it. But it should not disprove the fact – that before the act and till that very moment – you were a willing participant. It is possible your consent was caused by your innocence, I understood that right away, but you must not consider it as a rape. Because you thought it was a rape you told your mother everything. And then the trouble started. All your problems started from there. You must free yourself from that mental agony – imagining all those things from your past. Think about it: If I were a different type of a predator don’t you think I could have exploited your present weakness and tried to misbehave toward you? I am not saying you should try to hide this weakness from me. You should eradicate that weakness from your mind.”

I think to myself: ‘How can you be so stupid? I am saying all this so that you will take advantage of my weakness! Don’t you understand me?’

A car rushes towards us with its headlights flashing; I closed my eyes and open them when the car is close by. It sports an L board up in the front; an old woman, her head laden with jasmine flowers is at its wheel. Her husband was seated next to her. The car came to a grinding halt and stopped very close to us.

The man gnashed his teeth and screamed on top of his voice even as he raised his hand as if to strike the woman at the wheel. “You fool! How many times have I told you that you should press the clutch when changing the gear?” Maybe he even knocked on her head – without realizing there were onlookers in other cars. The woman looked pathetic; I turned my face away as if I had never noticed them. I was a little concerned Prabhu might burst into laughter. The woman started the car and was on her way. Prabhu kept looking at the car and asked me:

“Why don’t you learn driving?” he asks me with excitement in his voice: “I can teach you. My son Subash – his feet can hardly

reach the brakes, - and he wants to drive this big car! Padma is a good driver. I keep asking Manju to learn driving, but she is not interested. If you get into car-driving Manju too may join you."

"I used to go for regular walks - both in the morning and in the evening, "I told him because I wanted to keep talking. "Now I don't have time for anything!"

"Don't you think it will be nice if we could come to the beach in the morning hours? Let us drag Manju too - she too can learn driving. We can also go for walking on the beach road. What do you think?" He offers a good plan.

I let out a mild laughter and asked him: "Are you aware of something called the morning hours?"

"What are you talking about? I normally return home during these hours. Even if I am home around this time I would be fully awake. The only time when I am asleep is when I am drunk. As soon as I am sober, I remain fully awake."

Suddenly I feel concerned about his health and feel sorry for him. Does he ever reveal all this inner pain and anguish? Even sleep - something common and natural to humans - seems artificial to him. He drinks regularly - everyday; is it taking a toll on his body? What if he suddenly becomes sick?

"Did you consult your doctor - recently?"

"Yes, he asked me to give up drinking. I feel it is better to keep drinking and dying rather than stop drinking and keep living. I am fine . . ." He keeps chomping on his cigarette as if he doesn't care.

We decided we both will show up at the beach every morning. Prabhu thinks Manju too would join us - because of me! Prabhu says he will be giving driving lessons to Manju along the inner road close to where we are now sitting. He wants me to walk every morning from the Gandhi Statue to the Iron Bridge and then return to this very spot. Then we will get together and have coffee at the

'drive-in' restaurant. Prabhu will drop me at home around eight. He will pick me up again at ten to go to work. I must be ready in the morning around five thirty.

The time is already two in the morning. I am forcing myself to sleep and pull the blanket tight over my body. . I remember lying down for a long time with my eyes closed; I really don't know when I went to sleep. Did I actually sleep or am I simply lying on the bed? I heard a car horn; I switched on the light, checked my face in the mirror. I don't feel like having slept at all. I could see Manju sitting in the car. This is her first visit to my home. Shouldn't I invite her into the house? She greets me with a 'Good Morning.'

"You are still asleep? You said you would be ready by five - thirty, now it is already six!" she is shouting

I get myself ready in a hurry, put on my footwear and stepped out of my room.

Uncle had already got up and was now sitting on the bed with the eyes closed in a prayer and reciting mantras. This is the best time; I can leave without being noticed by him. How about inviting Manju into the house? I can do it on my way back. .

Mother who was busy in the kitchen fanning an oven rushed to the door as soon as he heard the car horn; she stopped in the main hall as soon as she saw me.

"I am leaving now, I should be back by eight. Please inform Uncle . . ." I opened the main gate after taking leave of Mother.

A few in the neighborhood - the woman busy drawing a *kolam* in front of her house, the woman from another house standing near the spot where the cow was being milked - are all looking at me with curiosity. Suddenly a window is open in the opposite house and I see a face watching me.

I get into the car - and settle on the rear seat.

"Your house is small and beautiful," says Manju admiringly.

"I wanted to invite you into the house, now it is too late. You must come in when we return."

"Of course, I like only small houses. See ours, it's creepy like the bungalow in the movie *"Bees Saal Baad."* Daddy, why can't we move to that Adyar home?"

"You need to talk to your mom about it," he casually tells her while driving the car and chomping on a cigarette.

"That's a non-starter. Mother will never give up this house!"

"Then you better keep quiet!"

I teased Manju. "So what? What if your mom doesn't want to move out? When you get married and move to a new home with your husband you can select a small, new home." Manju was not feeling bashful or shy.

"Of course why would I stay at my parents' home after my marriage? How about one year honeymoon? I will be off to some place like Switzerland, Paris or some other place! Daddy, don't you agree?"

"Oh yes! But don't take your mother with you to any of those places!"

"Daddy, where did you and mother go for honey-moon?" Manju wants to tease her father.

"We did go on a honeymoon, we went to Ooty! How does it matter where we went? We were still quarrelling when we returned from our honeymoon!" He sounded very casual when he said this.

The car stopped near the IG office. He dropped me off for walking.

Manju comes with a new idea as soon as I got out of the car. "Daddy, why not all three of us go for walk today? I can learn driving later; I can take the lessons from our driver. Walking is good for your health, you absolutely do no physical exercise! Come on, let us go!" She held his hand and pulled him toward her.

"Good heavens, I can't do that! You want me to talk from here to the Iron Bridge? No, if you want, you may go!" He screams like a baby.

"No, Manju is right! You too will enjoy if you start walking!" He ponders for a minute, then agrees with me. He takes a cigarette and gets ready to lock the car.

"No cigarettes." I want him to leave the cigarettes in the car. His face is totally changed. Still he thinks I am reasonable, leaves the cigarette in the car and locks it.

A beggar – a cripple – was sitting on the pavement. I am sorry – he is only a cripple, not a beggar. He is not asking anyone for money. He just looks at passers-by and wishes them. Prabhu gives the cripple some money, which he accepts.

"So the first thing to do in the morning is to give alms!" Manju teases her father.

"Why not? What is wrong with it? I think hereafter, every morning, I am going to give him the alms. Whatever we may be doing the rest of the day, let the first task be a good one!"

They have begun to argue with one another. Manju said: "I don't believe in these things!"

"What is there to believe in this?"

"I don't think by giving alms we will attain salvation or solve the economic conditions."

"Who said so? Let us say someone visits your home. You serve him coffee. Is he visiting our home because he wants our coffee? Let us assume he is someone who can't afford a cup of coffee; does it mean his 'problem' will be solved because he gets coffee from us? No, these are just good manners! When we see a friend we invite him for coffee. Similarly, when we see a beggar we must treat him in the same manner. "

"You know how many beggars are there in this city? Why don't you give alms to all of them?"

“Please stop arguing – as if you know everything! Everybody is giving alms. Who says that will solve all the problems? Your tireless arguing looks more pathetic than my giving alms and the cripple accepting it. These days it has become quite fashionable to argue over everything.”

“I don’t mind you folks arguing with one another – but not while walking,” I intervened. “Please walk faster; you must be sweating on your return. Only then will walking be effective.” I act firm even as I let out laughter.

All three of us keep walking fast . . .

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