

JAYAKANTHAN'S

THE TIMES OF THEIR LIVES
(Sila Nerangalil Sila Manithargal)

Part II

THE TIMES OF THEIR LIVES

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Today Venkatrama Iyer had gone out – all alone - for his morning walk. On his return he had his bath, finished the morning prayers, had his coffee and begun reading the daily newspaper in the main hall. Kanakam now joined him; standing next to a pillar she continued her conversation that was interrupted last night following Ganga's arrival. Because she was continually plagued by Ganga, her eyes swelled with tears as soon as she began to speak. She spoke – haltingly – even as she continued to wipe the tears off her face with the tip end of her sari – from time to time.

“Brother, I have this problem on hand; you must find a solution before you go,” she implored. “I can't dare show my face outside. Haven't I suffered enough because of her? I can hardly open my mouth in her presence. Ganesan keeps bombarding me with all kinds of questions, and I find helpless to say anything to him! See my fate? I have two children – a son and daughter – to what avail? They need not offer me happiness or peace of mind; at least I would like to be spared this humiliation and insult!”

Kanakam stops – unable to go any further. A moment elapses when she emits a violent sob. Venkatrama Iyer watches her with the newspaper still in hand; she looks pathetic.

“Why are you crying? How is this going to solve your problem? How can one escape fate?” He tries to calm her down.

“My daughter lost her head and ended up in an unfortunate situation; still I was very proud of her and held my head high . . .” Remorseful, Kanakam touches her heart with one hand.

“Kanakam, tell me, what can we do? She is no more a child. We must try to change

her only by persuasion. If she is still stubborn we will be left to our own devices.” His words seemed to reveal that he lost interest in the conversation because he had given up any hope of changing Ganga's mind.

“Does it mean we have to simply give up on her? Was this the reason why I struggled hard all alone, stood by her and defied the whole world? Is this how she is showing her gratitude to you - for all the help you have rendered over the years? Forget gratitude, is she not supposed to respect your advice? She is not going to answer any human being, but one day she will have to answer God!” As Kanakam, bitter and angry, lost control and began to cry and curse Ganga in a rising voice, Venkatrama Iyer cut in hastily saying, “Kanakam! You can't do that! One should never curse the offspring if they do something wrong; you can beat them or punish them, but you must never curse them!”

“What am I supposed to do? I am mad as hell! I have had enough! Is it my fate that I have to put up with all this outrage – day after day? She told me she will be back at eight. I can't stand that friend of hers – the face and his chomping on the cigarette all the time! You too will share my outrage when you actually see him!” She suddenly lowered her voice and secretly whispered in Venkatrama Iyer's ears:

“It wouldn't matter if this friend of hers is from our own community; even if he is already married, we can beg his first wife and get Ganga married to him. But I get a feeling that he is not from our caste . . . Can you imagine for a moment how Ganga has completely lost her head? You used to tell me she has no stable mind and I used to ask myself: ‘Why is Brother saying such a thing?’ Only now I am able to understand you. You were quite perceptive in probing her mind. Last night I thought you could have subjected her to even harsher

questioning. Soon she will be here, so also her friend. You are the head of this family and you have literally cared, protected and brought her up. Now you must exercise that right; tell her that friend of hers is not welcome in these premises; tell Ganga her conduct is unbecoming of her. Maybe she thinks there is no male in this house to discipline her. I am sure that friend of hers will simply leave these premises if you act tough and discipline her.”

Venkatrama Iyer lets out a mild laughter at her naïveté.

He closes his eyes for a moment. He lets out a deep sigh; he thinks of the obligation to argue on the behalf of a losing proposition – weighing heavily upon him. He is bitter as he opens his eyes and is about to say something when a car horn is heard. Their conversation is suddenly interrupted, and Kanakam goes inside.

As we were returning from our morning walk Prabhu tried to steer the car into a ‘drive-in’ restaurant, but I said no. Our original plan was to stop at the ‘drive-in’ for coffee. I changed the program; because this is Manju’s first visit to my home I felt everybody can have coffee at my place. Prabhu agreed with my plan, and Manju too seemed quite curious to see our house.

As soon as our car approached the house, Mother, who has all along been conversing with Uncle, averted her face away from us and disappeared into the house. What were they talking? Must be about me – that is what they always do – day in and day out!

Uncle folded the newspaper and seemed ready to invite this gentleman into the house. Prabhu is a little hesitant – because he is meeting with a stranger in my house. I understood his hesitation and informed him in a low voice audible only to him: “My Uncle is here – he is visiting us!”

Uncle smiles at him – as if he is totally ignorant of me or my friend; he acts as if he is being introduced to a stranger in a wedding ceremony.

I formally introduced him to Uncle

“Uncle, this is my friend Prabhu. Full name is Mr. Prabhakaran. This is his daughter Manju!”

Uncle wishes both of them, and invites them inside the house.

“Is your daughter attending college?” he asks. He directs everybody to sit in the main hall. I walked to the kitchen and asked mother to prepare coffee for the guests. She remains silent and starts preparing coffee.

I returned to hall and took Manju to my own room upstairs. Uncle and Prabhu are talking about the morning walk.

Prabhu acts like a school kid – obediently listening to Uncle and answering his questions.

Manju enters my room, examines my bookcase, and begins: “I like your house very much. I really like a small house with small rooms. You have arranged all these books so nicely. Do you like ‘Wodehouse?’ You seem to have the whole collection here! Somehow or other it never occurred to me that you are the kind of person who reads ‘Wodehouse.’”

“Why not?”

“Well, I thought you were interested only in serious reading.”

I said nothing. Manju picked up a book and began reading it – while standing in the room.

“You may as well borrow it – if you are interested, “

“Thanks!” She closed the book. “I never thought you will have such a good collection.” She sits on my bed and immediately gets up saying, “I am sorry!”

“No, it is all right, you may sit on my bed.”

"I visit you almost every day," I tell her. "Hereafter, why don't *you* visit me? We can talk about many things."

"Oh Yes." She reopens the book and starts reading.

Coffee must be ready by now. I hear the sound of coffee being stirred in a jug after adding sugar.

I go into the kitchen and pick up the coffee mugs and arrange them tidily on another plate.

"Where is coffee for Uncle?"

"He just now had . . ."

"That's fine; let him have another cup!" I add the mug to the others on the plate and walk back to the hall. I laugh to myself – imagining I am acting like a candidate for marriage being scrutinized by some prospective suitor.

Manju too comes to the main hall. I wonder why Mother was still hiding in the kitchen. I join Manju in the hall and sit next to her and sip my coffee.

I could see Mother standing afar in the kitchen. I think she was not willing to be introduced to the visitors. Uncle is making some inquiries about us and I imagine Mother was keenly observing what was going on. I know today Uncle is not going to ask Prabhu any probing questions. Why today? I know Uncle will never ask Prabhu any probing questions. Uncle is talking in general terms – nothing personal – and Prabhu too is responding in similar vein.

I took Manju around the house. We both stood on the roof terrace and looked around the neighborhood. I had never visited the roof terrace in daytime. Manju was quite excited as she watched the other houses in the surroundings; at her age everything looks exciting.

I suddenly realized that the time was eight-thirty. I am yet to take my shower. Today is Monday and I have to go to office.

"Don't you have school today?" I asked her. Manju was watching the fun - a woman

atop the roof terrace in another house – third in a row from ours- drying '*vatakam*' in the hot sun.

"I will be going to the school only in the afternoon."

"How come?"

"I have a test in the afternoon. I haven't prepared for the test. I must leave right away." She is in a hurry to leave.

"What did you do yesterday – you had the whole day?" I wonder why I sound so authoritarian.

She too answers in a voice of humility. "You were at my home till the evening; I wanted to study after you left. Mother was leaving for a movie and I wanted to give her company. I decided to study the next day. Today I have come for walking. Now I have to get ready!" She descends the steps and I too follow her.

"Meet my mother." I walk to the kitchen. Concerned that Manju would invade the kitchen Mother had come out and stood near the door entrance. Manju folded both her hands in a respectful gesture toward mother who responded with a foolish grin.

"Daddy! Let us go, I have to prepare for the test."

Prabhu got up as if he was just waiting for her call.

Uncle bids them farewell saying "I am very glad to meet with all of you." I looked at Mother, who seemed baffled by Uncle's attitude. I suspect during these past ten minutes Uncle had a thorough probe of Prabhu; that was the reason why he told me he wanted to meet with Prabhu.

Uncle will be talking with me about Prabhu either this evening or tonight. That will surely help me.

After Prabhu and Manju got into the car I stood by the compound gate. Just as he started the car Prabhu told me: "Be ready at ten. I will come and pick you."

Manju waves her hand. As I lock up the gate and reenter the house I see Uncle was

gone into the house ahead of me. I am concerned he will start a conversation with me once we see one another in the hall; if that were to happen I can never get ready to go to work by ten!

It is getting late. I get ready for a shower. I don't want to be trapped in any conversation with Uncle. I enter the bathroom and close the door – as if to escape from him.

Mother in the kitchen has started her harangue. She yells loud enough for her words to reach Uncle in the hall. She screams on the top of her voice. I have never heard her holler like this. I have seen her give in to loud outbursts – a few times – when Ganesan caused her aggravation. She had never lost her temper when Uncle was around. Now she is howling; maybe the sight of Uncle sharing coffee with my friend was too much to bear.

She goes on and on. I let water splash down my body and about to apply the soap when I am rudely interrupted by her outburst; I listen to what she is saying:

She says: “Ask her to pay me just fifty rupees every month and I will go back to my son. He will not abandon me – he will offer me at least some rice-water gruel. I have alienated him because of Ganga; how can I now go back and ask for his help? Won't his wife complain that I would be a burden to them? For all my service rendered to her – to bring her up and help her in her education – let Ganga pay me fifty rupees every month. I will either live with my son or live on my own. I have had enough! I don't want to spend the rest of my life in this house as a cook! I dare not show my face outside; neither do I get any respect inside the house. Everybody is able to keep their honor! (This was with reference to Uncle!) I don't have any honor left to cherish! I want to die! What kind of house is this? Is this a house of prostitution? You may do whatever you want! I don't want to stay here a minute

longer! I had vainly hoped that she would respect Uncle's advice and change; do I have any voice in this house? Uncle will be gone in an hour and then I will be left alone witnessing this farce day after day! Uncle doesn't need to do anything; I am on my way out. For the last twelve years I have tolerated all her humiliation and insults; am I responsible for all her mistakes? When was the last time she called me Mother? Has she ever, on her own, come and talked to me? Why did I put up with all this nonsense? Because I believed she was a nice, decent woman. Now the entire street knows how good and how decent she is! I am the only one she can get mad at! I don't care if you are a big officer! What makes you think you can do anything – just because you are educated and earn a lot of money?”

Mother will never stop. She is bracing herself for a big fight. She hates me totally – with her full heart. She wants to go and live with her son – for a few days. I will never be able to console her. Why should I console her? She blames me – with no justification – that I am causing her humiliation. I am suffering the consequences of my own actions, when did I ever blame her? How can he think so low of me? What makes her think I am acting like a whore? What is my honor, after all? How did I compromise her honor? Maybe she was bored by the monotony of life of the last twelve years; I am also bored by that life! How can I keep on living like this? Can a young woman end up with this kind of life? Why doesn't she think of me as a woman? Uncle is worried about my future, but my mother hardly has any such concerns. When I led a life of abstinence and purity – it suited my mother very well and she was very happy. What about now? Nothing has actually happened to my life! Why do I have to prove to these folks that nothing has actually happened? My main problem is that nothing has actually happened! Properly speaking I am

his 'concubine.' This sounds reasonable to me; I am not arguing Mother should consider this as reasonable. What should I have done? I should have declared: 'This is what life has offered me and I am willing to accept it; those who can't accept it, may leave me!' I don't see any other way out. Had things really turned out that way that was how I would have handled it! Again, what really happened or didn't happen doesn't concern them! It is all right! Maybe it is my fate that I must survive as a single individual! Let me accept this challenge! If I examine the situation – impartially, without pain or anger – this is the best decision for me. I have already made my life quite complicated – I couldn't do anything else! I am myself responsible for creating these complications in my life – I seem to derive some perverse pleasure in doing so. I must not drag others into this and make them suffer. I respect their feelings and their anger. I do respect Mother; so I am willing to honor her wish to live as she chooses.

I took my shower and came out of the bathroom. Mother is still talking. I go to my room and change. The time is nine-thirty. I asked Uncle to join me for lunch. We both sit for lunch. Mother serves us food. No words are spoken till we finished the lunch.

Mother begins her harangue when we are done with lunch and wash our hands. I stared back and notice her eyes and cheeks are blood-red. I feel like crying, but control myself. Why not I address her as 'Mother'? I lock my eyes on her even as I keep drying my wet hand with a towel.

My mind is calm and clear; I have neither anger nor hatred toward my mother. Why didn't I address her as 'Mother' for all these years? Did I think I didn't deserve that title? Now I am going to address her as 'Mother.' I am going to:

'Mother!'

Mother raised her head and looked at me. Tears continue pour down her cheeks.

"Mother, why are you crying? You may do as you please! Why fifty rupees, I can give you a hundred rupees every month. You may go and stay with your son or anywhere you may choose. You are welcome here any time you want to. This is your house!" Mother covers her face and bursts into tears.

"How can you do this? Do you really think this is the right thing to do?" Mother extends both hands toward me as if challenging me.

I reply calmly. "I don't know if you approve or not; I am doing what my conscience dictates me."

'Good heavens! I don't know how that scoundrel could poison your mind!' She hollers at me.

"Mother! Stop mouthing ugly words!" I warned her.

A car stopped in front of the house. I heard the horn and checked my watch. The time is ten!

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It is almost a week since mother had gone over to Ganesan's house. Ganesan came down and took her home. That day the whole house turned into a pell-mell.

Ganesan was ready to beat me up and mother rushed forward to dissuade him. I stood up calmly and silently, thinking, "What if he wants to beat me up? Hasn't he beaten me before? Has he no right?" When I was a young girl – wearing a *paavadai* and blouse – Ganesan would try to beat me up if I wanted to go out and play with my friends; he was elder to me and used to boss over me. "Leave me alone," I used to shout and curse him.

I could make no sense of what people around me were doing. I felt I was watching some movie in a strange, foreign language. Of course, I could understand how others were getting sad and angry at me. I kept

quiet and told myself: 'Let me watch what is going on!'

After all these years I had addressed her as Mother; will this be the beginning when I will be totally alienated from her?

"Am I supposed to beg her? 'Mother, why are you leaving me alone?'"

"Should I cry and plead: 'Mother, don't leave me alone.'"

That's what all of them were expecting of me. Let us say I accede to their demands. What happens next? They will impose more conditions; they will demand that I must not visit Prabhu's house; neither can he visit me in my house; what can I do if they keep complaining: 'Ganga is immoral and wicked; how can we live with her?'

That is the reason why I am silent. I am not happy that mother wants to leave me; neither is it convenient to me. But I feel it is proper that Mother leave me. I must be willing to bear the ensuing hardship and other consequences. I can't simply let Mother feel disgraced when sees me acting friendly with Prabhu; again, it is just not right that others think Mother is actually a part of my scheme of things I want to share with Prabhu.

So I was not willing to listen to others' advice. I didn't plead to Mother that she must not leave. I simply returned to my room. Ganesan was still barking and Uncle was trying to pacify him.

Later, when I came out of my room, Uncle accosted me and said: "Ganesan talks as if you are forcing your mother out of the house. I know she insisted on going to her son's house – that's what she has been talking about for the whole morning. Why don't you tell your brother: 'There is simply no crisis; mother will stay here?'" Uncle is doing his best to entrap me.

I bit my lip and stared at Uncle. Mother acts as if she is endorsing Uncle's words and picks up the bundle.

I turned to Mother and let out a laugh: "Mother, are we fighting with one another? Why are you mad and in a hurry to leave me? I want to have some private talk with you." I held her hand and led her into my room.

Mother could hardly speak. Like a child she follows me into my room.

Ganesan is saying something as if dissuading her. Mother mumbles something in reply but before she could finish her words she finds herself inside my room. I shut the door immediately.

Suddenly I felt the situation has changed: now we are in a new world – transcending the conventions of daughter, mother, respect, disgust, and etcetera. We were just two women facing one another in a private room.

Was Mother a mother the day she was born? No, she was a girl – just like I was! Doesn't she understand how a girl feels – her dreams and needs? How can a daughter reveal them to her mother? Is the daughter supposed to articulate them? She can call herself a Mother – if and only when she understands her daughter's state of mind even when the daughter is silent in her presence!

We exchange glances. Her eyes are teary.

The door behind her is locked. She is still carrying the bundle of the clothes and seems in a hurry to leave. I feel there are so many things I could pour out of my heart.

She stands eagerly looking forward to what I am going to say.

"Mother, I am not forcing you to leave. But I do feel you will feel sort of respectable if you live somewhere else. Please do not misinterpret my words and imagine all kinds of vulgar things about me. I am not that kind of person. I have deliberately chosen this life for me – I had hoped at least you will understand me. This is the kind of life I have decided to live with Mr. Prabhu. That doesn't mean we will live as husband and

wife. We don't deserve that kind of life. I can't think of any other life suitable to me – including a choice to live with you. Still, I don't want you to go out and be a burden to others. Remember this: you own this house, me and my earnings. You are welcome here at any time and you can take from this house anything you want. Ganesan is now willing to take you to his home – because he sees this as revenge against me; but tomorrow, he will keep picking on you at every opportunity; even if he doesn't, his wife will do it or encourage him to do so. Of course, they would be fully justified to do that – because I have ended up like this. You too will feel sad over their comments about me. That's why I am saying this: you are not leaving me because you are mad or you had a quarrel with me. The truth of the matter is you don't like my lifestyle, so you want to live with your son. Why do you have to cry over this? Why should we fight and ask for mediation? Again, I don't want you to go empty-handed; he is a family man, so I will give you some money." I took the money out of the bureau and gave it to her –without even checking the amount. It took me nearly half-an hour to finish my conversation with her.

Mother seems totally traumatized; she stares at me as if in bewilderment.

Her eyes are still moist; she accepts the money.

She stares at me as if asking, 'Do you have anything more to say?'

I pause for a moment and continued:

"Uncle was about to return home today, and I don't want his departure delayed because of you. Once you are gone I will have enough problems taking care of myself in this house; so I don't want to be saddled with Uncle as additional problem. Please make sure you leave the house after his departure; now, you are not going any far – you are going to Triplicane only. I will inform you when Uncle visits us next time,

and you can return home." I casually opened the door and stepped out.

"Why do you have to talk to her?" Ganesan bristled with anger and mother pacifies him.

"My brother has to return home today," Mother reminds Ganesan. "How can I get ready to leave with you – right away? Please wait, let me make some coffee for you. Brother, please come in and have your dinner." I could now detect a new clarity in her voice.

The bundle of clothes is still left on the sofa. Uncle goes to the kitchen.

Uncle is now like a tiger bound in a cage. He seems baffled how to handle himself in the current situation. I think Uncle has now developed a complex – especially after meeting with Prabhu. He has not only accepted - unlike Mother – my relationship with Prabhu but has also recognized the futility of opposing it. Uncle found no time to spend with me – once he got introduced to my 'gentleman friend.' He probably thinks it is a good idea that Mother leave me; else, he could have easily stopped her with one word. Mother would have never crossed him. So there is some real purpose behind Mother's departure and Uncle's tacit approval. Does he think my loneliness in this house would serve his purpose?

But Uncle was prepared to leave for home the same evening. Before he took leave of me, he came to my room, rested both his hands on my shoulders and spoke as if blessing someone prostrating before him: "You have won the game! Still, you need to be careful! I have a lot of things to talk to you! I will be here next week, we can talk things over! I am leaving now! Be a smart girl! "He pinches my cheeks before leaving.

Outside, he tells Mother: "You may go to Ganesan's house -if you really think it will give you some peace of mind. That's how I look at things. After all, Ganesan is not your

enemy- is he?" He takes leave of Ganesan too.

Uncle is not given to indulging in talk with Ganesan. He thinks Ganesan deserves no respect. For a long time Ganesan has alienated Uncle – by talking down when Uncle came to rescue me and Mother – when Ganesan threw both of us out of the house.

Soon Uncle was gone. Mother and Ganesan left after some time.

For the last one week I am all by myself. Loneliness seems to be the ultimate outcome of my success, and this makes me ill at ease. I always led a kind of isolated life – burying myself deep inside me. But this loneliness – a part of my physical existence – reinforced by my awareness – scares me. It is midnight; I am closeted in this small room in this small house – staring at a ceiling above me whirling at speed. This loneliness is what makes me very sad.

Lying on my back I catch a ray of light gleaming into the room from the street and caught in a rotating fan blade. A large pillow lies next to me; another pillow is at my feet. I am stroking the pillow next to me – as if fondling a baby.

How about having a baby? I am already thirty! I have Mother with me, but for how long? What happens next? Why should I earn all this money? For my brother's kids? Maybe I can adopt one of his kids; but Ganesan will never agree. Why can't I have my own children? You mean, with Prabhu? Oh, no! Then, how else? How nice it would be if sex and children are not related to one another! Don't the family planning campaigns we hear mean the same thing? One can have sex, but there would be no conception – doesn't family planning mean exactly that? I look at it quite differently. I don't want sex, but I want a child! Is that really possible? Yes, it's certainly possible! We are living in an age when science can

make even the most imaginative thing become a reality! I have read about couples using this technique. It is called artificial insemination. Suppose I go for it – will anybody really believe me? Why not I go for it? Still people will say it is Prabhu's child. So what? I don't care! That will be a damn good strategy to fool everyone! Oh, how fantastic!

I am caught up in all these weird thoughts; I have to lie in the bed for the next six to seven hours. Then the milkman would show up; after that I have to await Manju and Prabhu. Then I have to go for the morning walk. On my return I have to cook. Now that I got a rice cooker a few days ago, cooking is not a problem. It is only a matter of minutes.

The other day Prabhu asked me as I locked up the front door and joined him for the morning walk:

"Your mom is not home?"

"No, she has gone to my brother's house."

"Is anything wrong? Did she quarrel with you?"

"No, nothing like that," I lied. But he knew what was going on. He is too simple to be fooled.

I invited him and Manju to my place for lunch the next Sunday. Yesterday was Sunday and I had been to their house. What a surprise! Padma, who had all these days closeted herself in her own room, was now visible. She would not talk with me, but smiled at me. That too was just a formality; I know she doesn't like me. How could she? That was when I realized it was probably not a good idea to spend a lot of time in Prabhu's house. Now that I am all alone by myself why can't I have them to my place? This is just the beginning. "Next Sunday let us meet at my place. Manju, why don't you come over?" Manju was very pleased.

"Just a visit? Are you giving us a party or something?" Prabhu asked.

Manju cut in saying, "If it comes to partying, we can go to a restaurant."

"Why? You can have a party at my home. I can prepare the dishes myself. Manju, can you give me a hand?"

"Sure, I can give you all the help you will need," Manu answered and explained her suggestion: "When it comes to Daddy the word party means only enjoying non-Vegetarian food. That's why I suggested we can go to a restaurant."

"I can't help it," I shrugged my hands.

"No, no, I will not expect all that at your place," Prabhu assures me. "Anything that Ganga prepares at home is fine with me."

I still feel sleepless. Still there are five more days for the next Sunday. I am planning the menu for the next week lunch.

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I drew the blanket tight – thinking of lying on the bed till the milkman showed up. I keep imagining it is still midnight. I am lazy even to check the alarm clock. What is the big deal? Let the daybreak come at its own pace.

Suddenly a thought occurs to me: did I lock the front door? What about the one in the rear? Shall I go and check? No, the milkman will be here soon and I can find out at that time . . . What if some thief had entered the kitchen and stole some vessels? So what, everybody on this street knows I am a single woman living in this house; if not today, maybe some other day a thief will certainly come into my kitchen! Let him take whatever he wants – in the kitchen. I am not bothered as long as he doesn't come into my room! But then, why would he come into my room? He would like to concentrate on only things that are outside the watchful eyes of the residents. Why would he knock on my door - to reveal his intent to steal?

Why am I obsessed with theft? Maybe I am beset by all these fears – real and imaginary - because I am all by myself, locked up in the house! I had no such concerns as long as Mother was around. Her absence makes me feel I am carrying an extraordinary burden! Still I don't feel like owning anything in this house! If I want to get some 'asafetida' I need to open all the boxes on the kitchen shelf. Now I remember where asafetida is stored; but I can't recall in which box fenugreek was stored. I have decided I must inscribe labels on all the boxes – describing the contents.

What if I get an old woman as a cook-in-residence? But where can I find her? Even if I could hire someone, Mother may strongly disapprove. Mother might drive away the new cook in a day or two under some pretext. What if I try to hire someone and see how Mother reacts? What if I ask Mother to find a cook? She can certainly find someone in Triplicane, someone personally known to her. Excellent idea! That would give me a helping hand and reduce my work load at home. Say Uncle suddenly shows up, then, I will end up cooking for him and take care of his other needs. I am scared to live alone in the house – imagining a thief could be in the kitchen. I have decided my first task after daybreak would be to discuss this with Mother and get her hire a cook.

When I go walking this morning – on my return – I can stop at Ganesan's home and discuss this with Mother. No, I better not! Ganesan will think I am purposely insulting him! Why, he may be even tempted to strike me! Maybe I can get off at Pycrofts Road on return from walking and then go to Ganesan's house. That would mean I am going to their house after twelve years! No, I can't do that! Of course Mother can surely visit him – because she his mother – even if they don't see eye to eye on several matters. My situation is different; I can just stop by

the house and ask for her; I can take a taxi from Pycrofts Road and visit her. I can certainly call out through a window either Mother, brother or sister-in-law or even the kids

I think finally I caught a few hours of sleep. It is close to daybreak now.

I hear a bus plying on the Spur Tank Road; could be a lorry or truck, who knows? I hear a crow cawing. In Madras a crow can be heard cawing any time of the day. People are moving about on the streets; someone is herding the cattle . . .

I hear the milkman shouting a couple of homes away; somewhere, in a house, I hear a woman sprinkling water in the house front; elsewhere, I hear hard scraping of the soil with a broom. I rise from the bed and see through the window. It's still dark, but the daybreak has arrived. I switch the room light and note the time is already quarter to four.

The daybreak brings me joy. I didn't sleep well last night, still I feel full of life. I get up, walk to the hallway and switch on the light. I check the backdoor and found it firmly shut. I reproach myself for harboring unnecessary fear and anxiety. I wash myself in the bathroom and return to the kitchen. The vessels left in a pile in the sink after my dinner, need washing; I pick only one for milk and wash it.

I hear the milkman at the front door. I open the door to broad day light. A woman is working on a *kolam* in front of the opposite house. I too must doodle a few lines once I put away the milk in the kitchen. Why not ask Mother to hire a servant maid to do these chores? How come she wants to do everything by herself? Soon I must find a servant maid; for the last one week I have been doing everything and I know I can't do so for ever. I have to attend to many other tasks. I need to go out.

"Where's your mother?" the milkman asks while pouring milk into the vessel.

"She's visiting her son."

He nods as if he understood something. After all he visits so many houses in our street and must have heard all kinds of tittle-tattles. Once people come to know he supplies milk to a particular house won't they try get all details from him?

The daily newspaper arrives when I walk back to the kitchen with milk. I return to the hall and ease myself onto the sofa to begin reading the paper.

I hear a car screeching to a halt in front of the house. Has Prabhu already arrived? I look out; my god, it's Uncle – stepping out of a cab with a leather bag in hand!

He did say he would visit me 'the next week'; I recall his words but didn't realize that a week has passed so quickly! Now I need to get Mother home!

Uncle looks very excited.

"I left yesterday evening and the train brought me to Egmore by five-thirty! It's not bad, and the fare too is much less. How are you doing?" he asks while grabbing my hand.

"I was worried maybe you were gone for your morning walk and I may have to wait for you at the front door."

"Please sit down, I will get you some coffee," I tell him and escape into the kitchen. I start cleaning the vessels while Uncle keeps himself busy reading the newspaper.

I know Uncle's sudden rush has nothing do with any official work but only because I am all by myself at home. Yes, I can read his mind. He must be imagining and sighing every day that I would like to rejoice in his company when Mother is away. He became so impatient that he took the train yesterday. Once he finds himself here in the morning, he would also have the opportunity to see me in the company of Prabhu. Very clever of him, but I too know how his mind works!

I serve him coffee and he looks as if taking a stock of me.

"Kanakam – did she return home after she had gone to see your brother?"

"No, today I want to go and see her," I tell him and Uncle becomes silent. I too drink my coffee while standing and awaiting his words. I knew what he would say: "Why should you go there? Let her come – on her own accord."

That's exactly how he begins:

"After Ganesan threw you out of that house, did you ever visit it?"

"No."

"Then, why does he come to this house?" He asks.

"He comes to see our mother. His children too would come – to see their grandmother."

"I see; that's how you too want to visit your mother over there!" He makes that sarcastic comment and extends the hand. I take the coffee tumbler and tell him:

"I won't be going – exactly - to their house. I will simply stand outside and say, "Uncle is here," and return in no time." I let the cat out of the bag and return to the kitchen followed by Uncle.

"So you are going there – only for my sake?"

"Yes, that day Mother told me I should let her know of your arrival."

"Oh, but I have come here for a private conversation with you!"

"So what, didn't we have private conversations before? Was Mother always with us? She must have told you all that you wanted to know." I spoke as if I didn't know what he was thinking.

Uncle laughs. Why this laugh – he's faking it! "You have become quite mischievous," he says and nears me to pinch my cheek.

I hear a horn sound.

"Uncle, you can have a shower; the hot water's ready in the bathroom. Please close

the door. I will return soon." I go to my room, check myself in the mirror, lock my room and bid farewell to him.

What is going to say? I don't even look at his face.

Mother is now back home. Just as I had planned in the morning I rode in a taxi from Pycrofts Road and conveyed the news to Mother – even without getting out of the taxi. How fast has Ganesan's daughter Santa grown up! It was she who first saw me, rushed shouting 'Auntie!' held my hand and dragged me into the house. I was in no mood to oblige her. .

"Call grandma," I tell her. She darted into the house screaming, "Grandma! Grandma, Auntie is here . ." I keep worrying she might slip and fall down. .

I notice the faces staring at me. Many have changed their familiarity – and there are some new ones. I see Mother coming; she is in panic.

"What happened?" She asks in a high-pitched voice.

"Nothing serious," I assure her. "Uncle has come. I can take care of him in the morning and go to work, and I want you to come this afternoon."

Isn't she indispensable! Mother beams with a flattering look on her face; let her. .

She bends down and whispers into my ears: "I better tell you right away. Even if it means I come and stay with you for only a few days, promise me you will have none of those folks visiting you."

I said that's fine with me.

Why Mother insists on this silly demand, I ask myself.

Uncle, to be sure, was a little disappointed. As soon as I returned home I prepared the meals in the cooker and had my shower. Then I served him lunch and he was raving about my cooking. "Why don't you stay home for one day?" he asked and I feigned panic, and lied: "No . . . No, today I

have to attend to some important work..." Then, I left for work.

Of course, it was Prabhu who picked me up and Uncle came out and wished him. Prabhu too returned the gesture – as he politely got down from his car and asked, "When did you come?" Later, when I rode with him to work, he asks me a question that must have plagued him all along.

"Did your Uncle ever ask you about me? Doesn't he ever wonder: 'Who's this stranger coming everyday to our house and taking out this young woman from our family?'"

I answer him with a mild laugh: "He knows everything about us; you are not a stranger. Are you?"

Prabhu is in shock.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say." Then I comforted him. "So what? What if Uncle knows? When he is so subtle and acts tactful, why can't we reciprocate in the same manner? If he acts like a daredevil and confronts us then we too must acknowledge it. Don't you think so?"

"How can we do such a thing?" Prabhu asks with a scowl on his face. "He is an honorable man . . ."

"So are you. That's why he treats you with utmost decorum and formality," I comfort him. "Uncle is a civilized person. He will never embarrass you with any questions."

I return home from work and I hear noise in the kitchen. Mother is home.

"I don't feel comfortable with this cooker . . ." she mumbles to herself.

Uncle sounds anxious awaiting me. He asked me to return home early, so I took a cab and returned home.

Nowadays I no more take a bus to work. Again, if you look at my clothes and makeup, a bus would not be a suitable conveyance.

"Come in, I am glad you are home in time."

Mother has prepared tiffin. The aroma from *uppuma* fills the air. Her presence makes me happy and is also convenient to me.

Uncle and I help ourselves with *uppuma* in the hall. Then Uncle retires to upstairs and calls me.

"Why don't we go to the roof terrace and enjoy the breeze? I too want to talk with you – in private." He spoke while standing on the stairs and Mother too heard his words.

Uncle is sitting on an old cane chair that has been exposed to recurrent rain and heat – its seat completely turning into black and white patches.

"This is a good chair! Why do you let it rot like this? Have it repainted and it will serve you for ten more years!" He taps hard on the chair.

Then he looks at me and asks with a wink, "How is life?"

"Fine," I answer him.

22

Uncle has gone back to his home. Mother has left for Ganesan's. I am again left all alone. All this happened a few hours ago.

Essentially all relationships are ephemeral – that includes your siblings and everybody else. Marriage is the most enduring relationship between two individuals. It lasts forever - whether the couple detests or loves one another. What if they are divorced? They are seeking divorce only because they are looking for even better relationship in their individual lives! Else, they will go for separation – which is a relationship with no attachment. Marriage inspires the partners to keep going with their lives; it survives the loss of their siblings and other ties. Absence of marriage breeds a sense of loneliness – even when you are

surrounded by your own family members and other relatives!

Marriage is the only condition that is amenable to divorce and renewal. Thus it becomes a very important and reliable requirement in one's life. Other relationships come about in our lives – by hit or miss – owing to our own will or against our will – and eventually become a part of what we want and cherish. But only marriage seems to be the answer for our psychological and biological needs.

That's why one can't divorce one's mother, brother or uncle.

But marriage is different; it is a very important relationship basic to all other relationships in human life. That's how it has become an important institution in human life.

I don't have any such relationship; consequently I have been denied any meaningful relationship.

Uncle won't be coming back. I know it, it's like a divorce. So Mother too may keep away from me. I have to get her back on some pretext. I very much wish Mother stays with me. . What should I do?

I am sitting on the veranda – just like mother used to – with the light on and watching the street. I hate to stay inside the house – all alone. I can now understand how Mother felt when she was closeted inside the house. I would like to watch the street, but unfortunately what is there to watch? The whole street thinks of me an object worth watching – day after day! I have become a kind of g legend; people have heard all the gossip about me and now they pass through the house casting glances at me.

I ignore them totally – while reading a book on hand.

What kind of book is this? It is terrible! But I can't get rid of it! I keep reading it even as I grumble it is boring. I want to give the author the benefit of doubt, but he

doesn't seem to deserve it. I have already read a few pages. .

I should get a radio. I never had a fad for radio; otherwise I could have bought one a long time ago. The radio from the next house is splitting my ears; how about getting a radio in our home too? It may give me a semblance of company. I can tolerate the radio talk; it is the music that gets on my nerves.

I am still sitting at the door entrance; I don't feel like going inside the house. . Mother had already prepared the food before she had gone to Ganesan's, otherwise I can kill sometime in the kitchen. What if I go out and meet Manju? No, I can't just do that! Prabhu too wouldn't be coming this way. I have asked him to keep away from my home for the next two days – because I wanted to please Mother. I feel bored. Don't I have any company! There is emptiness everywhere! Nothing makes sense! This book is so boring; I close it and put it down.

Suddenly I see someone standing next to the compound gate. "Who is that?"

"Auntie, it is me!" She is Mother's friend. She holds on to the gate and cranes her head toward me. I feel so gratified seeing her. I invited her into my home as if I was just waiting for her, got up and opened the gate. Lest she should run away because Mother is not around, I held and grabbed her into the house. The other day I tried to avoid her because I felt she might simply 'stick' to me. Now, I am deliberately trying to draw her into my fold.

"What is your name?"

"Meena!"

"Why are you here at this hour? What do you want? What grade are you in?" I purposely avoided asking just a single question because she might answer and flee. She is probably confused. She probably thinks I am very proud; maybe she is amazed I am loquacious. Maybe she is

feeling proud of herself – because she gives a curt reply:

“Sixth standard – in *Seva Sadan*.”

“What brings you here? What is going on?”

“Nothing in particular. My auntie tells me all your folks are gone, including the grandmother. I said no, so my auntie and I had a bet. I came to check with you. Is Grandma inside the house?”

For a moment or so I feel terribly angry. Why are these people so much interested in other peoples’ affairs – even to the point of betting on what is going on in the neighborhood? Maybe they are gossiping that I have driven out Mother from home. .

“What was your auntie betting on?” I asked, but she wouldn’t say anything. Maybe she feels she has spoken too much; she bit her lip, bowed down her head and began scratching lines of the floor. I feel like smacking her on the head.

“Auntie, can I ask you something?” she begins.

“Hmm, go ahead!” I too plod her.

“Is it true that grandma had quarreled with you and is gone? Are you quarreling with one another? Will grandma never come back?”

I didn’t know what to say, though I felt very sorry. Maybe Mother had herself complained to someone in the neighborhood.

“Quarrel? Who told you that kind of nonsense? She has gone to my brother’s house. She should be back soon.”

“Are you going to be alone, all by yourself?” Poor girl, she wants to ask more, but feels she should not. I think I must not get mad at her. Maybe the only image she has of me is the woman who – day after day - gets picked up for a car ride and is then dropped back.

“Yes, I am alone, all by myself. It is hard. Would you like to give me company?”

“You mean here? Permanently?”

“Yes.”

“Good heavens, I can’t. My mother will beat me up!”

“No, she will not. You may stay here for a while and then return home. I too have to go to work and take care of other things. Tomorrow I am going to have a new radio in our house. Would you like to come and see it?”

“Radio? Oh no! Why don’t you get a transistor?” She sounds so cute.

“It is a good idea. I will get a transistor radio tomorrow.” A call is heard from somewhere ‘Meena.’

“Auntie, I am here!” the girl responds and waves at me saying, “I will see you tomorrow.”

I once again got back to my book I was reading. My mind is not in it. I remind myself that Uncle will never again be visiting our home and that makes me quite happy; but I also feel sorry that Uncle has ended up in such ignominy. The last time he was here he told me, “Ganga, you have won!” This time he conceded defeat – though not acknowledging it in so many words.

Last night Uncle and I were chatting till ten. Last night was the first time I treated Uncle very harshly. It also turned out to be the last time.

We had talked about a lot of things – occasionally even interesting topics. After all, when it comes to interesting conversation Uncle has few peers!

I was explaining to him about my present situation and how I have decided to live my future. Uncle seemed to be engaged in serious conversation with me but pretty soon he descended to a level quite unbecoming of him. Suddenly he began talking about my personal life, especially my relationship with Prabhu – in a manner of collecting some statistics - in a crude, vulgar language that irritated me.

He was seated on a chair. I was on the floor with my back against a pillar – both my knees raised in the front – answering his questions. Quite often his leg was touching my thigh and I was trying to shift my position even as I was trying very hard to make sense of what I was saying. How is he able to talk of such lofty themes while indulging in such rowdy behavior? Suddenly I began gnashing my teeth; I couldn't even understand my own words. If your mind is not fully involved in a conversation, the words end up meaningless. .

Uncle keeps talking something unclear to me and suddenly twists his foot toward me; his big toe and the next finger pinched my thigh hard. Darkness was all over me and without even realizing that Uncle was the culprit I screamed 'blackguard' and got up from the floor.

Uncle laughed away as if he has not heard me. No sooner I cursed him – deep in my heart - I felt sorry for him. I felt I must not flee the scene; so I stood near the wall and cast my eyes across the opposite street. Maybe I shouldn't have got upset with him – because I know his character. This uncle is someone who embodies - within himself - all his perversions. Maybe I should have simply got up from the floor and not uttered that epithet. I admonish myself for making my feelings public. While his conduct couldn't be condoned, I can't help recalling all his support and help, his status, his age and his real interest in my welfare; my mind is in turmoil as I agonize myself: 'How come he is such a morally depraved person?' Think about this: What is his age, and what is mine? How could he develop such a wayward behavior? What does he actually think of me? Does he really believe he can seduce me? Else, does he get some perverse pleasure by going after me? Should I not put an end to this state of affairs? I must speak out bluntly and speak my piece right away; I was beset with all these

thoughts as I raised my head and looked into the sky, when Uncle slowly followed me . . .

Now I could not bring myself to curse him; I began to cry. I was determined not to curse him. Gnashing my teeth, I freed myself from his encroaching hand, faced him directly and spoke to him calmly, as if nothing has happened between us:

"Uncle, please don't touch me! "

Uncle stands as if frozen.

"Why? Can't I touch you?" He whispers to me. How dare he think he is justified in asking such a question? What should I say? He again tries to touch me, and I am overcome by disgust. I suddenly recall all his support – the financial help and the hospitality – how nice it would be if I can simply pay him back everything?

He holds on to my hand and begs – amid his tantrums. I am getting mad. He also says something about Prabhu – in some crude, vulgar language. I couldn't bring myself to look back at him. Uncle mumbles something – comparing himself with Prabhu. I warned him in the harshest language I could muster:

"Shut up! You can't even come to his heels." I feel as if possessed as I screamed those words at him: "You don't deserve any more respect! I know you have rendered me a lot of support – financially and otherwise. Still, that doesn't mean you can do anything you like. If this is how you expect me to surrender to your demands, here is my answer: I will gladly repay you double the amount of the financial obligations we owe you. Never again enter these premises. Thanks for all your support. Now you should get out!"

As I begin descending the steps I hear a trembling voice:

"Ganga, please come here!"

I went up and stood facing him; he stood with his face bowed down.

"You reject me because I am old?"

I feel sorry for him. He is wise and learned in so many ways but he acts stupid

when it comes to this. His mental turmoil and the trembling voice convey only one thing: he is getting on his years. How can I avoid laughing at him?

He is desperate to prove that he is not an old man! What is my concern if he is old or young? He says:

“You say I should not touch you! I have the power to punish you and beat you up! Do you understand what I mean?” He talks as if he is joking, but I understand the venom lurking in his words. He wants to subject me to his brutal lashings – just like he did to Ambujam Auntie. I remembered the scars on Ambujam Auntie’s body . . .

“I know you are accustomed to beat up others. You may beat me, but don’t you ever touch me!” I wiggled my body before him. Uncle is ready to begin his outrage and unbuckles his belt; I suddenly grabbed it and wanted to thrash him hard. The belt is in my hand.

“The time is ten-thirty, how about coming for dinner?” Mother is upon us – climbing the stairs.

So last night – contrary to my routine - I didn’t share dinner with Uncle; neither did I have any conversation with him. In fact I didn’t even look at his face. I simply cast his bed from my room. He made his own bed.

He left for home only a few hours ago – that was when we saw one another face to face. I felt he was conveying to me – by some indication – that he would never again visit us. I too kept quiet. I knew – deep in my heart – that he wouldn’t be coming back.

Even if he comes – I would never let him touch me. No more feet-pressing or rendering any personal services.

I have also told Mother that she should hire two hands – one for cooking and another for house work. Should Uncle ever visit us – he is free to stay with us.

But I know Uncle’s mentality. He will simply keep away from our home by

convincing himself: ‘Ganga is now a mistress to some untouchable. No respectable person would ever go to her house.’

Of course Mother would be thinking Uncle would visit us as usual. Should Uncle visit us after some extraordinary interval, Mother would surely ask him why. And Uncle would give her that reason. And Mother would think it reasonable! After all she too shares his opinion!

The time is nine. I don’t feel hungry. But I must finish the dinner. I turn off the veranda light and go into the house.

I serve rice on a plate when I suddenly stop to think: ‘Did I shut the front door?’

I shake off my hand and rush to check the front door.

23

I haven’t gone for walk in the last three days. Neither have I met with Manju during this time.

Prabhu visited me at work. I watched him from my office as he waited for me in his car outside my office and craned his neck from the car window and looked at me. I pressed my nose to the glass window and examined his face. He didn’t know I was looking at him; his face was hidden in the cigarette smoke. I looked at my watch; I have two more minutes to go; I went back to my seat.

RKV’s short story has been published in the latest issue. I have finished reading it in the afternoon. Now I once again scan through the story. I am still waiting for the story *The Purification Fire* – the sequel he had promised for *The Trial by Fire*. This story is also good, but I feel a little disappointed that it is not the story I have been eagerly awaiting for some time now.

The time is five and I am leaving. The magazine with RKV story is in my handbag. I haven’t brought my briefcase today.

A big crowd was at the elevator. I wish I had arrived a few minutes earlier. The elevator comes and everyone is rushing in. I stand aside and let others to get in. The operator asks somebody to move in and lets me in. 'I am sorry,' the man ahead of me says and makes room for me. Soon the elevator is in motion and I arrive at the ground floor ahead of everybody else. Prabhu spots me and opens the door for me. I still feel tense and excited and try to mask them from others. I take out my handkerchief and swipe my forehead. Prabhu says:

"I feel as if I haven't seen you for a long time. I was afraid you may ask me not to show up today. I couldn't help calling you this afternoon and I am glad you wanted to see me." He is so happy to see me, and acts like a child. How about me? Why should I hide myself under the pretense of honor and dignity?

"I too feel I have missed you for a long time. I wanted to call you but you have preempted my call. Do you realize how happy I was when I heard your voice?" I felt my voice choke.

Suddenly I felt like asking myself: 'Are we talking like two lovers? This is how lovers exchange their words with one another. Why should we pretend otherwise? I feel so concerned about his health and his wellbeing; he too feels the same way about me. How did this bond develop between us? For most of the folks relationships begin in a lofty, elevated plane and end up in sex; maybe in our case the relationship began in a cruel, savage accident like sex and has now grown into a respectable, mature friendship

"What's on your mind," he asks me while driving the car on Mount Road.

"Nothing in particular," I said and raised my head when a radio advertisement came into my view. I had put away cash to buy the transistor and that was the main reason why

I wanted to phone Prabhu. I am sure the little girl will surely show up in the evening and ask to see the new transistor!

"Let us stop at some shop and buy a transistor radio," I said. "Please help me. I am totally ignorant when it comes to shopping them."

"I am also equally ignorant," he replies. "Manju is an expert in this. She has seven different types of transistor radios at home. I think my company has a dealership with electronic goods. Do you need it immediately? I can have it sent to you tomorrow."

"No, I need one, right now. I am so bored at home."

"How come? Didn't your mother come back?"

"No, she came but again went back."

He reversed the car direction, drove further and stopped the car in front of a shop. We both walked into the shop – in full public view of other shoppers. Do we look like eligible couple? A few are looking at us as if ready to bless us.

A woman certainly gets a lot of respect when she is a man's company. Nobody would dare subject her to any ogling or eve-teasing. Of course, it all depends on the man she is with. Prabhu looks quite manly but he is also head-strong and a little pig-headed. We are walking and somebody crosses our path; Prabhu casts a look at him – an orderly look – and the fellow stands frozen. As I follow Prabhu this stranger moves further away and lets me pass.

Should I find myself shopping here alone – I am sure - these men would try to brush against me or at least crane their necks toward me. If there is more than one man, they would even make some nasty comment; they would suddenly giggle for no particular reason! Now I don't see any road-side Romeo here!

We got royal treatment in the radio shop. Prabhu takes me directly to the shop

owner's air-conditioned room. The shop owner arose from his seat and warmly welcomed us. He served us coffee. He engages Prabhu in conversation – just standing next to him –without the air of a business man. Only these occasional glimpses into Prabhu's demeanor would reveal to others the warmth, respect and reputation that Prabhu commands in public. I feel maybe I shouldn't have dragged him into this situation – just for buying a transistor radio.

Soon we are shown – one after another – many transistor radios- piling up on a nearby table. Some kind of music or noise could be heard from a station in each one of them.

Finally, the owner himself took out a transistor and displayed it before us: "This is a Japanese model, the top in the line!"

"How do you like it?" Prabhu asks me. I am trying to figure out how to operate it. I gave him no reply.

The owner made a strong recommendation of it. Prabhu agreed and said, "Go ahead, and pack it!"

I whisper to Prabhu: "What is the price?"

Why is he laughing? He says even as he continues to laugh to himself: "I never realized this model comes with a price! You know something? We need to pay no money now, because I am buying it through my company. It will be paid out from our account when the account is settled at the month end."

"But I am buying this for myself."

"No, this is my gift to you. So far I have bought you no gifts. Please, you must not reject my gift."

Words failed me. Fortunately, we are the only two people in the room. "Okay, still I would like to know the price."

"He will bring us the bill," he answers me. The owner approaches with a sheaf of papers. He takes down my name and address. We will be getting the license in two days. I checked the bill. My God, the

price is eight hundred and ten rupees! It is too much!

I got the transistor radio and reached home before darkness closed by. I must cook right away. I get an uneasy feeling that I am making too frequent visits to Prabhu's place. I am not quite happy with Padma's reception.

When he dropped me off at my place, I invited him into the house and served him coffee. The milk was bought that morning; there was no time to get milk in the evening. Still, he told me coffee tasted very good.

He laid the transistor radio on a teapoy and tuned it.

"Do you like Carnatic Music?"

"I have no taste for music – either classical or otherwise. I would normally listen to some music when I am alone; that was the reason why I wanted to get a radio. But why waste so much money for it? I didn't want to raise any objection in the shop – because I thought that would be improper. Please take this transistor with you, and get me another one – an ordinary one for two or three hundred rupees – as your gift." Prabhu's face is suddenly transformed; he casts a strange look at me even as he continues to drink the coffee.

"Did I say anything to hurt you?" I asked him.

"Yes, you can't refuse what is offered as a warm, pleasant gift."

I apologized saying, "I am sorry!" "Thank you very much! I am very pleased with your gift."

He changes the subject and says, "I love Carnatic Music; I love Jazz; I also enjoy Hindustani Music. I just can't stand this film music. But that's what Padma always listens to."

"I haven't seen Manju for the last three days," I mumble to myself. He too joins with me: "Yes, I too miss her."

"How come? You too haven't seen her?"

"Yes, it is true! She was fast asleep when I left home. Again, I miss her because I am not going for the morning walks."

"Starting from tomorrow, let us go walking," I told him. Then I asked him, in the same breath, "What is your next program?"

He laughs. He winks and asks, "Can I answer your question?"

"Yes, go ahead."

"I am about to meet a girl-friend," he says and scratches his head. "I call her a girl friend, but she is just a girl, not a friend. In a real sense, when it comes to mentioning someone – either a man or woman as my friend, a philosopher and guide, it can be only you. So I can't bring myself to call some other person my friend. She is just some sort of What shall I say?" he seems to be fighting for words.

"Well, I know what you mean," I assure him. "No more explanations are needed!" He bows down his head as if disgraced, and then suddenly breaks in:

"You need to speak the truth! Your mother had left you because she quarreled with you, am I right? And I know it has to do with me! "He is rather blunt in his assault.

"Yes." I answered in a monosyllable and stared at him. He too stares back at me. I don't know what is in his mind.

"Ganga!"

"Yes?"

"No one will understand our mutual affection; neither will someone believe what we feel for one another – unless you get married to someone." Suddenly his eyes begin to sparkle.

"Who cares?" I laugh away and try to comfort him. "Why should we care what others think of us? I certainly find some meaning in our friendship. I feel quite happy. This is the life I really wanted for myself."

Now Meena is slowly approaching me.

Some film music is heard in the transistor.

"Meena, come in," I invite her into the house and she locks her eyes on Prabhu.

"She is Meena from the next – you are in our next house, am I right?"

Meena says, "No, I live in the third house."

"She is from the third house, and is a friend of my mother's. She is the one who gave me the idea to get the transistor radio. Do you like it?"

She seems stunned by what she saw.

"Auntie, it looks great! You can hear all the international stations; must be quite expensive "She picks it up and examines it.

"Now there must be film music in Madras . . ." she says and tunes for some station.

Prabhu bids me farewell. Says he will show up later with Manju for the morning walk tomorrow.

I heard the car horn and peered down the street from my room. I see only Prabhu in the car. Manju is nowhere to be seen.

I locked up the house and got into the car. I didn't ask him why Manju didn't come. I can sense something is going on and wanted him to open up. I am silent; he too seems a little sad and angry.

We were both silent for a while. I knew his mind is in turmoil. I watch his face and feel overcome by pity.

"What is the matter?" I ask him. His lips start quivering – like a child's.

"Come on, what is this?" For the first time I touch him and try to console him. My God, he is crying – like a baby!

"Please, tell me what happened?" Concerned others might be watching us, I pulled out the handkerchief and thrust it toward him. He took it and pressed it hard against his swollen face. His nose and eyes are shot blood-red. He coughs and then takes

out a cigarette and lights it. He collects himself, throws a smile at me and says, "I am sorry!"

"What happened?"

"Didn't I tell you yesterday – that nobody will understand our friendship? Even Manju . . ." He feels his voice suddenly choke. "Even Manju is not convinced . . . She refuses to join us in walking . . . When I ask her why, she gives all kinds of silly explanations . . . How ridiculous!" I feel sorry to see him in such a pathetic condition. I could never believe he could be so childish.

I told him: "It's not Manju's fault. I can understand her mind. Don't worry, let me speak to her. She is a nice girl, she must have been shaken up by someone talking; I will talk to her."

He stopped the car near the Gandhi statue and offered alms to the cripple. He gave him alms for all the three days.

We both began walking. I feel a little odd that Manju is not there with us.

24

Manju has been here for the last half-an-hour. I think she is here without her mother's knowledge.

This morning Prabhu was with me when I phoned Manju. I told him I would be calling Manju as soon as I reached my office. He wanted to know what we would be talking about, so he followed me to my office. This is his first visit to my office. The time is ten and the office workers were slowly entering the cubicles – one after another.

"Please come in," I invited him into my office and offered him a seat in one of those chairs facing me. I have had so many visitors coming to my office and meeting with me, but it is the first time in all my professional service that I have a visitor who came exclusively for my company.

Rangaswamy brings in drinking water and covers the glass with a plastic lid. After ordering him to bring two cups of coffee I telephoned Prabhu's home.

Luckily, Manju was the one who took my call.

She seemed a little baffled when I told her, 'I am Ganga calling.' I was trying to probe her reaction, so remained silent. She didn't even wish me. She must have been in confused state of mind – as I can discern from her voice.

"Daddy is not home," she demurred.

"Your Daddy is here, "I informed her. "I called because I want to talk with you; I want to meet with you. Under the present circumstances it may not be a good idea that I should visit you, so why don't you come to my place? Today is Saturday and you may drop in this afternoon. Your Daddy won't be here, and we can have a private conversation." I sounded a little authoritarian as I spoke.

She wouldn't say anything. I changed my posture and tried to put her at ease.

"Are we still friends?" She replied as if answering a teacher in a class room.

"Yes."

"When two intimate friends want to part company- due to circumstances beyond their control and with no hard feelings between them – they should at least say 'good bye' to one another; don't you agree?" Maybe my words hurt her and she started crying.

"I am sorry," she said and was about to continue when she felt her voice choke. I too felt sorry I was hurting a sensitive heart.

"Manju, take it easy! I need to discuss a lot of things with you, that's why I want to meet with you. A time has come when I need to explain everything to you . . ." She replied, "I will see you at two" and suddenly put down the receiver. Padma's face now loomed before me.

"What is she saying?" Prabhu was curious.

"She is coming home," I told him.

"What are you going to tell Manju?" he asks. I told him, "I will let you know after our conversation." His face is suddenly transformed. Maybe he is recalling that scene twelve years ago. Maybe he is scared I am going to discuss that episode with his daughter. Don't his family members know his notoriety? But his present concern is not that Manju would be privy to his past indiscretions. He is ashamed to realize that Manju would soon know how our friendship began in the first place; he shudders to think she might think our relationship continues in the same mode.

Rangaswamy brings in coffee. I normally don't drink coffee at work. So he has no office supplies – like jug or mugs for my exclusive use. Poor fellow! He must have gone around and borrowed these from somebody. Wait a minute! Rangaswamy is a smart fellow, he has no qualms in simply walking into some office and claiming whatever he wants! How can anyone refuse him? They could do so only at their peril – because he would answer them by simply breaking the jug and mugs in their presence saying it was just a slip and he dropped them by accident. He will follow with a challenge, "I am doing your work, can you do mine?" I asked him while he was pouring coffee for both of us:

"Rangaswamy, where did you get the jug and the mugs?"

"I borrowed them from Mrs. Manuel! All new – just bought yesterday. We too need to buy for a set for our use – it comes to three rupees. ." He keeps talking on and on . .

"Okay . . You better clean up the plates." I shut him off from further talk.

The office has begun to function in full swing. I let my eyes roam around; most of The employees are in their seats. Mrs. Manuel greets me with a smile. I too reciprocate her greetings. All the women employees are looking at me and

exchanging glances among themselves. I feel elated.

I finished my coffee and told Prabhu: "You don't have to come in the afternoon. I can go home myself. Let us meet this evening; I will let you know of my conversation with Manju.

"Okay," he says and rises to leave.

"Let me see you off, " I said and followed him to the elevator. But I changed my mind and got into the elevator with him and accompanied him to his car. When he got into the driver's seat I told him: "Manju is no more a child. It is better she learns the truth about us rather than listen to all kind of wild gossip. I am certainly not ashamed about our friendship, and she should know what is going on." I patted his arm resting on the window and comforted him with words, "Please visit me this evening." I sent him away like a mother dispatching her kid to the school. I stood there till the car disappeared from my sight. What will people think of us? Why do I care what they think?

An hour later, I took a cab and came home. Manju arrived five minutes later; she stood at the doorstep as if entering –the first time – a stranger's house. I acted with my usual demeanor – taking her hand gently and leading her to the main hall. I sat facing her.

"How come you don't come for walking anymore?" She trots out a litany of reasons – she is busy with her school work, exams and so on . . .

"I too have not been to your house for some time now," I said and examined her face. She shook her head and stared at the floor. I thought she might ask why I don't visit her home anymore, but she didn't. Maybe she thinks it is better to know why she had to visit me at my home rather than my seeing her at hers.

"Would you like to eat something?"

"No, I ate just a while ago."

"I am hungry; I haven't eaten since the morning," I told her and went in. I brought a tray filled with biscuits and laid it between us. I start nibbling a biscuit.

She has been here for half-an-hour and only now she picked up a biscuit. I don't know where and how to begin our conversation. Fortunately I remembered the short story, 'Trial by Fire.'

"Don't you see any connection between any of the recent developments – your not going for walks; my not visiting your home; and our not meeting with one another?"

She raises her head, slants it toward me and locks her eyes on me. How big are those eyes? When I see those eyes I think of her as a baby; otherwise, she is a full-fledged woman, just like me. She reaches to my height and resembles me in her body buildup. She is wearing a sari just like me. If she sports a hairdo just like I do, we both will look alike. What really distinguishes her from me are her eyes – she is still a child.

I can read those eyes – she does see a connection between the three developments I had just now brought to her attention.

Does Manju have any boy friends? Well, you can't simply trust today's girls! After all she does look quite pleasant and attractive – enough to make men swoon before her! At this age – even I am not immune from their prying eyes! Still, I don't think Manju would act stupid as I did when I was her age. Why not I ask her? Am I not her friend? Why can't I start our conversation from this angle?

"Aren't you eighteen?"

"I am running eighteen," she replies.

"So, you have completed the sweet seventeen," I wink at her. Simultaneously my mind festers inside over my 'bitter' seventeen.

"Once I too was a young seventeen-year old girl." I grumble to myself. Does she understand why I am saying this? Does she think I am just babbling?

I start talking to myself-without directly looking at her and staring somewhere in the ceiling – but I am talking only for her. I am acting as if I am trying to teach her a poem – just as I used to with her school lessons – parsing line by line, making every word clear to her. She looks at me on and off as she shifts her eyes from my book to my face.

"I too was once a seventeen-year old girl. But it was never a sweet-seventeen. It was in my seventeenth year that I tasted the bitterness of life. You are blessed with a dear father; whether he is a bad husband or a bad human being, still, as far as you are concerned, he is your dear father. You are also his precious daughter. Yes, you are his most precious child!" I probably repeated the last sentence more than once. I don't remember when arose from my seat. I once again settled into my seat.

"If my memory serves me right," I continued, "I had never set eyes on my father; I was never anybody's favorite child. I have once shared your age, only the age; and no other privileges! Do you know why I am talking about these things? We are good friends – that means we should know everything about one another. I think there is nothing new I need to know about you. Am I right? On the other hand there are a lot of things you need to know about me. I think it would be unfair on my part not to reveal all the details about me." I paused and keenly examined her face. Again, those big eyes! I sense a sudden bewilderment in them!

"To come to think of it, I am simply amazed! I was so stupid at seventeen! You couldn't believe such stupidity even when you read it in a story. You felt that story was such an affront to the intelligence of female college students that you wondered how such a story could be even written. You are right; just being a college student does not give one automatically smartness and worldly experience! It all depends on one's background and how one was brought up.

You are quite fortunate in having someone like Padma as a mother; you have seen my mother, she is totally ignorant. She never comes out of her kitchen . . . Do you remember that story?" I cut in suddenly with a question and watched the reaction on her face.

"Which story?"

"*Agni Pravesam.*"

"You mean RKV's story?"

"Yes, that's my story too." I averted my face away from her and kept talking:

"To put things in a nutshell, RKV's story is really my story. Every detail in that story – the college, that bus stand, the car, the young man, that girl – is true except for the end – which is entirely different. There is no mother like the one you read in that story; neither do you find girls in real life that you come across in stories. You will not find someone like my mother in that story. Are you asking me how do I know? It comes out of my own life experiences and the lessons I have learnt. I am the 'girl' in that story; and the 'young man' is your father." Her face turns pale.

"This happened twelve years ago. Thus ended the final chapter of my life. What I am now saying mayn't make much sense to a modern college student like you. For someone born in times when boy-friends, dating and pre-marital sex have become widely acceptable – both in theory and practice – and your like-minded friends, my decision to 'end' my life over this minor folly would seem a little crazy and an extreme step. Remember this: human life, at every juncture, is willing to put up with some crazy shtick – which, again, owes its existence, to even crazier tactics I became a victim to such a maneuver.

"Anyway - this is a problem defying a solution but had come to a closure. The story may be old, but it has created new problems. I am not confessing anything, but I have to explain something. Don't imagine

for a moment that I am saying these things to get your sympathy or forgiveness. I want to clarify certain matters to you. Until now I have never taken this kind of interest and care in any other person. I want you to know the truth and understand my real situation, I don't know why, but I do feel some good will come out of it. I am not your father's lover – as others allege. It is a label I wanted and got. I don't long for any relationship but love that label. I am slowly beginning to think: we love one another, but it has nothing to do with the word 'love' as you describe. Ours is more than love, it's different. We could never develop a relationship imagined by others. What happened to us was no relationship; it was an accident. You must understand this. To the extent your mother can claim that she is his wife, I too can claim that I am your father's mistress. As far as I am concerned, it's only a label. I don't care what others think of me, but I don't want you to understand our relationship in crude, simplistic terms. I don't know why - maybe it has to do with the love and respect your father has for you. It is not really important whether you like meet with me or not; maybe your mother told you not to see me, maybe she is right. What is not right is if you, on your own, refuse to associate with me. You are no more a child; I hope you understood what I have been telling you. As far as you and your family are concerned, I am your well-wisher! I will be more than pleased if you consider me as your family friend. If not, I won't feel sorry. Your father's reputation – already compromised – will not worsen by linking my name with him. On the other hand, my reputation will take a big hit by this friendship. That's what I want. We must not let our good friendship be hurt. That's what I wanted to tell you and invited you to my home. .Now, how about some coffee?"

She smiles – as if reassuring me.

"I am sorry I caused you a disappointment about the Sunday party," Manju says. "I want to talk about it. I also promised to help you with kitchen chores. Now, let me help you with coffee." Unpretentious and informal she follows me into the kitchen.

I sense a new bond developing between us. I look at her sari in amazement; it is the first time I see her sporting a sari. I comment on her sari and she says, "There is a big story behind this sari."

25

Today as soon I met with Manju I wanted to compliment her on her new dress. But sensing her visit was to discuss a serious matter between us I deliberately didn't want to say anything to spoil the atmosphere – by referring to her sari or the jewelry.

Manju usually sports a *salwar-kameez*; she owns that costume in some fifty different designs: a canvas - like cloth with large, colorful squares; a few others in dark colors with heavy embroidery work; a few in saffron-color and others in pure, jasmine-like complexion and intricate needlework; a few had heavy embroidery work on the back and the front; while some came with bells or pleats woven around the collar.

Salwar-kameez suits Manju admirably. Occasionally Manju will sport a *dupatta* over it. She will look decent even without *dupatta*. Sometimes I have seen her dressed in a simple frock. She will look like a child in that posture.

Today she looks like a typical Indian woman in a sari. Is there a message from her, 'I am a grown-up woman and you can have a serious discussion with me?' That's how I see it. She came down here to have a serious talk with me. We do have a serious problem here. She is very frank and open with me; she does sound very skillful and

adroit when it comes to talking about a knotty, serious subject!

I was listening to her while preparing coffee in the kitchen.

Her mother has strictly forbidden Manju from wearing any *salwar-kameez*. She told Manju may attend college – provided she is willing to dress up in a sari and go to college in their car; otherwise, the mother told her daughter, she can just forget about college education and stay home. In the beginning, the mother gave no reason and simply ordered Manju: "Stop going to college from tomorrow." She later relented and settled for compromise and a deal: Manju blurted out all this to me in rather a brusque manner – with no subtlety or understatement. I couldn't help admiring her; I listened to her with deep attention and appreciation – even as I was very careful not to look directly at her face to conceal my own reaction to what she was saying. .

She asked me: "Miss Ganga, let me ask you. I have so many friends – who are all girls. What if I have a boyfriend? He is just a friend! There is nothing more between us. My mother asks whether I am in love with him! She screams at me – like a brute – that she will break my leg. I felt so ashamed – when she tried to hit me in front of my boy friend! I was depressed for two day – I was crying and not eating. Then I told myself: 'Poor mother, she is ignorant and knows nothing'. Now I have stopped meeting with my boy friend. I too told him why I can't be seeing him anymore."

"How did you meet him?" I asked her.

She is reluctant to reply at once. Is she shy?

She tells me he follows her in a scooter – driving along the road next to her car - when she goes to college. What do you think of that?

I was listening to her with no comment.

Then, one day, Manju's car failed to show up to take her to college. Why, what

happened? She probably asked the car driver not to show up. Or she might have left for college even before the car showed up. One can understand these details even without asking . . .

One day she was standing at a bus stop for a long time. The bus never showed up. Then she and a couple of her friends walked to a nearby 'drive-in' for coffee or ice cream. There she saw her future boy friend sharing an ice cream with some of his friends under the shade of a tree. One of those boys happened to be a boyfriend of Manju's friends. Soon greetings were exchanged and the scooter-fellow whispered something into the ear of one of his friends setting off a laugh. Manju knew he was actually talking about *her* and she wanted her friend to introduce him to her. Then everybody got introduced to one another. Things followed the usual course: introductions, ice creams, matinee shows, scooter rides and trysts. And just as Manju said, 'nothing happened, so what is wrong?'

How casual does she sound! I don't think she was doing anything wrong. These girls, in other words, are not stupid like I was. They knew how to mix with boys and also how to protect themselves. They are not afraid of others and always move in groups. They seem to enjoy this, and I don't fault them. Had I been like them I would have handled myself quite differently when I was offered the ride many years ago: as soon as I entered the car I would have understood the driver's intention, said 'No thanks!' and pulled myself out of the car.

I used to be overcome by shyness in the presence of any man. Why should a girl feel shy before a man? The man mistakes this shyness for love. Shyness thus becomes a symbol of love, and that makes the man exploit the situation and proceed further in his plans. What is responsible for this travesty of events? Because of the taboos that are imposed upon the girls: from the

very young age, girls grow with inhibitions: no staring, talking or mixing with men. So during the adult period, the very notion of a man or his very appearance causes a thrill – a tingling sensation. The girls also convince themselves this is a sign of good discipline, a moral high ground, even a symptom of virtue. This is exactly where all the troubles have their origin.

I believed such a thrill which a woman feels for other men – any man for that matter – is immoral.

The reason why Uncle had such a poor opinion and underestimated my character was because he had noticed my shyness and thrill in the good old days.

Now I have traveled way beyond those feelings. I don't suffer any more shyness or thrill in the presence of men. I am not scared of men. A few days ago I had harbored some fears – that someone might try to rape me – and now I have none. Remember how I snatched the belt from Uncle's hands? That very moment my fear had taken leave of me. Now I feel neither fear nor thrill as I mix with men. Now I am now really mature!

Good heavens! I am talking about my story even as Manju is telling me hers. I am keenly listening to her even as I am thinking about myself.

"How long did this friendship continue?" I asked her. "Then what happened?" Still I haven't shared with her my own feelings in this matter. I am so nonplussed!

We both returned to the sofa.

Looks like she had met him only five or six times. On all those occasions she had gone to some matinee show. Then one day her mother came to know when she got dropped off at home in a scooter. Manju introduced her boyfriend to her mother.

Padma became mad in no time. She began screaming in the presence of the boyfriend reminding her daughter, "We are sending you to college to study, not to find a boyfriend," and asked the boyfriend to get

out of the house. Poor Manju! She is on the verge of bursting out in tears as she narrates the episode to me. I can understand how she feels humiliated.

Padma threw out all her *salwar-kameezs* and ordered Manju to wear only sari. She forbade her to go out and even threatened to stop her from going to college.

That was when Padma warned Manju: "Did you actually think I will let my children go out and do things at their own whim and fancy – just like I let your father do? Do you want to follow the example of Ganga – who claims to be your father's friend and always keeps his company? You have been thoroughly spoiled soon after she started visiting our home. I don't want her to come here; neither should you go over there. You mustn't go for walking or anything without my permission."

Poor Manju was in tears for two or three days before she agreed to all the restrictions imposed by her mother. And she was able to get Padma's permission to go to college.

Manju told me until this time, that's till her mother alleged that I was claiming to be her father's friend and spending all my time with him, she had never harbored any such suspicions about me. Initially, she couldn't bring herself to believe that her mother might be telling lies; only when she realized that her mother had begun to suspect her own daughter's motives did she begin to acknowledge that her mother's accusations contained no truth. Still, she respected her mother's words and decided that she would no more join me in the daily morning walks. When Manju spoke with her father she was careful not to say anything negative about me; she simply told him, 'Ganga is your friend – I want to have no truck with her.' She now feels sorry for speaking about me in that manner; she also feels bad she couldn't change her mother's heart.

I gave her a piece of advice: "The most important thing for you is to win your mother's heart."

I laud myself that I could sense these underlying problems in their lives and have steadfastly avoided going to their home. I have been quite shrewd!

"Do you love your boyfriend? What is his name?" I wanted to know if she was scared of her mother and was about to give up the one dearest to her heart.

"You mean Samji?" She laughs, and continues: "His name is G. Swaminathan, but we all call him Samji! How nice! Everyone has a funny name! I am called Munch. I have a friend called Krishnaveni who is referred to as Jikki."

She keeps talking but wouldn't answer my specific question. I wanted to probe further, but then felt it wouldn't be a decent thing to do. I must respect her privacy!

She goes on talking about her friends and how they all used to exchange jokes with one another; suddenly she becomes silent and looks at me with a grave concern; then she smiles at me – it is no full smile, it is tinged with some sadness too. Then she speaks in clear, plain terms:

"Miss Ganga, you asked me something about love! My mother too asked me – but she asked in a harsh voice, and you are asking me in a sympathetic tone. I couldn't bring myself to tell her; but I want to ask you: do you think men and women can't share between them anything other than what you call 'love'? Is it impossible for a man and woman to be just two good friends? I like Samji; I don't know whether it is love! We are just friends! We have simple definitions when it comes to our friends; boyfriends are those friends who are boys, and girlfriends are those friends who happen to be girls. There are no other meanings. Presently, I am not old or mature enough to select a partner on my own. We are still children and we are still playing games. Our

lives will be healthy and happy if we are given now - in equal measure - the privileges of children and the freedom of the adults tempered by their wisdom and sense of values.”

Vow! How wonderfully she is able to articulate her feelings? I feel like drawing her close to me and embracing her! My eyes turn misty, but I am not crying; I feel gratified.

“Samji is a nice fellow; he is witty and makes everyone laugh. We - friends - love one another; we never think ill of one another. We keep our manners because we are very concerned how others look at us. We are frank but at the same time we have reservations. I see another man just a man. I suffer no complex that I am a woman. I want to be a man’s friend because of his other admirable qualities. I move with him because I know he will not misbehave with me. If he misbehaves, we will have to change our attitude. Now, there are men who take undue advantage of this situation - where women informally mix with opposite sex - and do misbehave; they may misbehave deliberately even when such an opportunity is non-existent. For example: take your own case. You were talking about your teen-age experience. Who was responsible for it? Was it your boyfriend? If my father was your boyfriend, it would have never happened! Am I right? Only now he is your boyfriend. Do you see the difference? Because I view friendship in such terms I have not misunderstood your friendship with my father. But many people mayn’t understand that kind of friendship. As far as I am concerned, my mother is more important to me than friendship. Because I want to make my friendship acceptable to my mother, I want to obey her and then I can engage her in a conversation. Only then Mother would even listen to what I am saying. So . . .” She lets out a deep sigh and brings both her lips together with a click as

if savoring what she has just said. Her eyes turn teary, she wants to cry; she wipes her eyes. I feel a lump in my throat and try to swallow it hard.

She clears her throat and smiles at me. She continues:

“The next day I invited all my friends to a ‘drive-in’ party. I did so after getting my mother’s permission. Everybody was surprised to see me in a sari. I asked Samji - in front of everyone-forgiveness on behalf of my mother. Then I spoke about my parents, their roles in my life; I explained why obeying my mother was very essential to me. ‘To me education is the most important thing in my life. I enjoy studies more than anything else and I am not willing to sacrifice college on any account. We can always be friends. But friendship is not just ice cream parties, matinee shows and exchanging jokes! It is the understanding - and I want you to understand me! I want to confirm what I have just said: we are only friends.’ Samji cried and we all had ice cream in silence. Nowadays, when we see one another, we only exchange greetings. There is nothing more between us!”

She looks into the watch for time. I watch her and take a measure of her age and maturity.

“Manju, I really admire you.” I embrace her. I gave her only school lessons, but I feel she has taught me a lesson in life.

“The time is five. I have told Mother I would be home by five.” My heart feels - secretly - a little guilty.

26

I gave a complete rundown of the day’s events to Prabhu when he visited me that evening. Only briefly did I touch upon the harsh treatment Padma meted out to Manju’s boyfriend. I made his stay much longer than usual because I wanted to bring out the highlights of my conversation with Manju in

full details - forcing Prabhu to stay till nine. Then he could take it no more; he started fidgeting, - rubbing his forehead, shaking his hands, yawning and trying to light the cigarette off and on.

I could sense what was going on. He badly needed a drink. I knew he never ate before liquor. Still, I volunteered a question: "How about having your dinner here? I will make it simple."

"Oh, no," he screamed as if in a shock. "I am not actually hungry. Had I known I would have brought my stuff with me. Please excuse me! I will see you tomorrow! It is getting late."

I laughed and saw him off. Later, when I was alone, I recalled his attitude: He has been simply nodding his head in approval as I was talking to him about Manju and he never uttered a single word.

What was on his mind? Was he ashamed that the underlying secret between our relationship is now revealed to his daughter? Does he feel ashamed to see his daughter? Is he mad at me for revealing the secret to Manju? Is he surprised that his daughter has grown old enough to have a boyfriend? Does he feel sorry that Padma had acted too harshly with her daughter?

He never made his own feelings public. Maybe he is satisfied with only one thing: that Manju has not misunderstood his relationship with me. Probably he is not concerned with any of the other things I mentioned to him.

I thought about all this that night. Still, I never raised any of this when I met with him the next morning. Why should I? I have spoken my piece and why should I know what he thinks? If he wants, let him speak out. He never mentioned anything, I too didn't press him.

We exchanged very little in the last four days. There was nothing important to discuss. He visits me at six in the morning and then we go for walk. He drops me back

at home and again picks me up while going to work. I haven't seen him in the evenings for the last two days. I took a taxi to return home. Maybe he has some important work to attend. Still, for the last four days he looks a little strange; he seems lost in some serious thought. When I ask him, he says. 'It is nothing.' I feel sorry for him. He used to be jolly and actively engaged in a conversation. What happened? Why does he want to become a new person? He doesn't have to be like this . . .

Only today -after the last four days - he has met me at work and gave me a ride.

I keep watching his face closely - in sideways - when he is driving.

He has changed in so many ways. His face looks quite healthy - except that he has not shaved for the last three days. The daily walks have taken off a few pounds from his body; his belly has also shrunk.

But his face looks weary and tired. Is he eating properly? Is he avoiding food because he is depressed? Whatever may be situation, why should he starve?

"What did you have for lunch?" I asked. Probably he didn't hear me; still he nods his head as if he understood what I was saying. I knew, he has not understood my question. I ask him again - a new question.

"I feel you have not eaten your lunch; am I right?"

"How do you know?" He seems a little surprised at my question.

"I can see it from your face!"

"Really? You can see it on my face? Now tell me, what more can you find out from my face?" He starts joking with me.

"You are not all right! Something is bothering you for the last two days, I can see it clearly. I haven't seen you in the evenings for those two days. I thought you may be busy with some work. But you are quiet even in the mornings. Are you worried about something? Does it mean you must forego eating?"

He remains silent and lights a cigarette. "If I forgot my lunch there was only one person – my ayah - who would ask me why. Now you are the second person to ask me that question." He exhales cigarette smoke.

He continues: "Does it mean I can blame my folks at home? If I don't eat at home, they assume I am eating out.. Am I the guy who regularly eats at home?" He is talking to himself.

I feel terribly sorry for him. "Please tell me what is bothering you. Whatever may be the reason why should you forego your lunch or dinner?"

"I told you I have not eaten at home. I didn't say I was starving myself."

"How about having dinner in my place tonight?"

"Okay; thanks."

"If you want we can order some non-vegetarian dish from a restaurant – I won't mind!"

He seems totally surprised.

"Oh, no." He wants to continue but is stuck. He continues after a moment: "I have brought the mini-bar with me because I decided to have dinner with you. You think I look a little strange for the last two days? That day I had a big fight with my wife . . . I was really upset . . ."

"I am sorry!" Did I open the can of worms because I shared everything with him? I knew I was very discreet in discussing the family matters, still I couldn't help feeling I was responsible.

"No, no, what was your fault? She (he meant Padma) thinks she is a great dictator." He bristles with anger and goes on and on:

"She expects everybody to obey her command. She turned out to be quite a savage and threw out all of Manju's *salwar-kameezs* and wants her to wear only saris – just like a grandmother. I don't like it. I told her: 'Stop this nonsense; you are unnecessarily interfering in everybody's rights. Manju is my daughter too! She can

live as she pleases, you better get out of her way! This is my house too. . . ' Padma never seems to understand what I am saying.' He keeps talking.

"You don't seem to have even the basic understanding that Manju exhibits. I wouldn't have told you any of this had I known you would start quarreling with your wife. If you see Padma as a mother – you wouldn't have got into this angry mood. Which mother would stop worrying about her daughter – given the lifestyles of the girls today?" I tried to calm him.

"So? You think Padma is doing the right thing?" He turns his angry look at me. I smiled. He looks beautiful even when he gets mad at me!

"It is not the question of being right or wrong! Isn't it good when parents discipline their children? Did Manju ever complain to you that her mother was giving her a hard time? She seemed very gracious when she spoke to me, saying 'My mother doesn't know what she is doing; she is just ignorant!'"

"A woman has the right to discipline her daughter, but her husband mayn't discipline her. He enjoys no such right! I am just a puppet. She has all the power. What a fate!" He protests vehemently.

He seems to have had a big fight with Padma and has been badly beaten. I don't feel like needling him anymore.

"Shall we have some coffee before going home?" He asks me.

"Let us have coffee after going home . . . I have an idea! How about changing at my place and then going out to a 'drive-in'?" He is awfully pleased when I make the suggestion.

"Why can't we eat out?"

"No, I can cook at home. It will be a matter of few minutes only. We need to pick up the non-vegetarian dish for you from some restaurant." I sound quite excited.

He too seems liberated from his mood and suddenly starts smiling like a child and says, "Okay, let us go!"

We reached home. He eases himself into a sofa in the hall and I go into the kitchen to prepare coffee. I haven't even gone to my room. I put away my handbag on another sofa in the hall. Poor man, he has not had anything since the afternoon . .

"Do you want some biscuits?"

"No, thanks."

Why ask him? I brought a tray with biscuits and some drinking water. "Go ahead, you really look awful – as if you haven't eaten for the last four days. Why are you spoiling your health like this?"

He nibbles a biscuit, and says with a laugh: "You seem to exaggerate because of your love for me. I am all right; I am having my regular meals."

"That's a lie!" I go back to the kitchen and prepared coffee. Nowadays cooking has become for me an easy routine! I can prepare coffee in no time! Mother used to take such a long time! Of course my coffee will never come close to what she used to prepare, still this is fine for an emergency.

I served him coffee and went to the bathroom to wash before changing. It is nice to have a male for company at home.

I wonder if he would stick around after dinner and the drinks. What if he actually does? I am not scared of him. What if I suggest he stay? Why would someone, already drowning in a sea, need a veil? Should he stay overnight, where can he possibly sleep? I think of Uncle's bed, but I am overcome by utter disgust. He doesn't have to use it. I can offer him my bed and I can sleep on a mat on the floor.

Anyway let me wait and see what he says after dinner. I won't dissuade him if he wants leave; I have no right to interfere with his plan, if he has any.

I dressed and came out of the room.

"You look great!" he says.

"Thanks. Shall we go?"

By the time we got down the street after I locked the house, most of the folks in our neighborhood had a good look at us . .

I told him what I think of Manju. I want him to know what a smart and intelligent woman she is. I spoke at length with him because I wanted to impress upon him that he need not pick up a fight with Padma by siding with Manju. Prabhu keeps nodding his head as if agreeing with me - even as he keeps his face stern; he laughs when I laugh. Yet, within a few moments following that laugh, his face is blanketed by darkness, which perturbs me.

He stopped the car in a regular spot on the beach. Soon an ice cream vendor showed up. I thought Prabhu would call out the vendor and order ice cream. But he is looking far away, lost in some thought, totally oblivious to the vendor's call to prospective customers, and is chomping on the cigarette.

"Shall we get some ice cream?" I asked him.

"Oh, yes . . . Let me get two cups of *pistha* and two cups of *vanilla*!" He seemingly suddenly overcome by joy and lets out a cry of delight. But I am not fooled, I know he is just acting!

I joined him in sharing the ice cream. To be honest my joy too is faked. He is acting to please me, and I am also acting to please him. I can sense some deep wound in his heart – but how can I ask him to reveal it to me? Even if I did, why should he oblige me? I believe he wanted my company only because he wanted to forget his wound, so why should I remind him of his pain? Still, I find the situation unbearable. I have never seen him in such a pathetic condition . . maybe his health is affected?

I think of all this, but dare not open my mouth.

Soon we are done with the ice cream. I am just waiting to see how he will dispose

of the empty cup. Normally he will throw it high into the air with one hand like a ball and hit it like a bat with another hand as it came down.

But today he did no such thing. As he put away the empty cup like others, I had a feeling that he has been completely robbed on his character.

“Aren’t you well?” I asked him.

He silently stares at me with me. He laughs – a dry, empty laugh. My mind is in turmoil.

He suddenly breaks in: “Life is not worth living . . .”

“What do you mean?”

“I want to die!” My whole body trembles.

“Please . . . Tell me what happened . . .”

“I am sorry,” he says and frees himself from my hand resting on his shoulder.. “Please leave me alone!” He gets off the car and walks on the sand and locks his eyes on the sea far away. I begin to feel I am seeing something new and strange in Prabhu’s behavior. I tell myself: ‘Why this change? Why can’t he like his usual self – childlike, funny and playful? How can I help him?’ I can hardly move from where I sat.

His hair is all messed up in the sea breeze. He keeps smoking. I remained in the car and kept watching his back . . . How long can I remain in the car watching him? Soon I too got down from the car and stood next to him.

He is aware I am standing next to him. He says without even turning to me:

“Let us go home; I need a drink!”

27

I shrink from a disaster in the making. I have seen Prabhu before – overcome by anger and sadness. But what is happening now seems unique and something totally different. He doesn’t open up to me and is festering inside. How can I help him?

He lights another cigarette after returning to the car. He laughs and says: “I am sorry I spoiled your evening like this.”

“Why these formalities?” I asked him. “I feel a little comfortable that I am with you when you feel awful. But I don’t know how to cheer you up. Unfortunately I have never learnt those skills. I have never been a good company for a man.” I venture a few more words to dispel his dark mood.

“Don’t bother,” he says, “I will be all right . . . Stop worrying , ,” He comforts me and whistles a tune. He wants to look normal.

“Shall we go to some movie?”

“Which movie?”

“Any movie of interest to you; any English movie – it would be a diversion for you.”

“No . . . I get easily bored sitting in a movie house. We can go, if you want – I won’t mind. If you really want to know, now I am very much need of a drink!”

I get it. He wanted a drink, but I ignored his wish and am talking about movies and dramas. Looks like I too got confused – because I was trying my best to change his mood.

He drives the car toward my home.

I reminded him: “Let us go to Mount Road and pick up some non-veggie dish for you.”

“It is okay, I don’t feel like eating anything now.”

“No, you should eat well. You can’t simply drink on an empty stomach. We have a lot of time. Please reverse the car.” I am quite firm in what I want him to do, and he obeys me.

I keep staring at him until he steers the car in front of a Moslem Restaurant facing a row of cars and parks it between a pair of cars. His eyes were locked on the road ahead and never wavered to left or right. But darkness hovered over his face.

The waiter came and bowed to us.

He orders something and asks for a plate. He then orders *Idiyappam* and turns to me saying, "What are you going to cook at home – after this hour? You can also eat *Idiyappam* – it is a vegetarian dish. Do you know *Semiya*? It is just like that. Let us have a dozen. Make it quick," he orders the vendor.

"You have milk at home?"

"Yes."

"You just pour milk over *Idiyappam* and add sugar. It will taste great. Do you know Manju will easily finish more than dozen." He suddenly recalls her and his face darkens; the eyes turn moist.

I have made up my mind that I will not ask him any more questions. I feel he will surely open up and reveal to me what is bothering me. Otherwise, why should he visit me even as he festers inside? Today he has decided to have dinner with me and even had brought his stuff. He is here to share his pain with me. I want to leave him to his own devices and keep enjoying the scene outside.

When I turned back I see him pressing his face against the steering wheel.

"Are you sleeping?" I let my hand touch his shoulder.

"No!" He straightens up.

I am a little surprised that I don't mind casually touching him. I don't feel I am brushing against a man – a total stranger of the opposite sex.

Only now I am becoming aware that Prabhu had never touched me. Never, not even casually! Is it because he suffers from some guilt? No, in general, people never touch one another in a conversation!

It doesn't seem a big deal when a woman touches a man; on the other hand it does seem a bit awkward when a man brushes against a woman. Why do I feel that way?

Maybe it is because I have never freely touched any man other than Prabhu. That could be the reason why I don't object when he touches me . . .

The waiter brings his order and delivers it in the car. He has been quite prompt.

I look at the bill – it comes to nine rupees and some change. He hands over the waiter eleven rupees and puts the stuff away in the rear seat and starts the car. I noticed some liquid in one of those tins.

"It may sprinkle, why don't I carry it my hand?" I asked him.

"No, no . . . It won't sprinkle. Even if it does, we can have it cleaned up!"

"Please listen to me! I am not saying your car seat will be damaged; it may be all lost when you want to drink it!" I explained my concern.

He parks the car on the street very close to our house. The car can hardly enter the compound, nor could it be parked within its confines. By the time I open the front door he emerges from the car gathering all the food in his hands.

"Let me help you," I tell him. He bluntly refuses.

"Take the top portion only," he says, "Don't touch any of the other stuff." Only now I understand what he means.

"So what? I don't eat non-veggie stuff only because I am not accustomed to it. Otherwise there is no prohibition that I should not touch it or look at it."

He puts away all the stuff on a teapoy and goes back to the car. Then he returns with a black box that looks like a suitcase.

Oh, is this the mini-bar he was talking about?

He opens the box; inside there is a beautiful velvet lining surrounding two wine glasses and a bottle of whiskey . . .

Suddenly his face turns bright.

"Why don't you join me?"

Good heavens! How dare he ask me such a question? He wants my company!

"Do you want me to become like you?"

"Never! You can never become like me! I am good for nothing – a useless fellow!"

Okay, forget it! Can you help me?" he asks me.

"Please get me some water – drinking water."

Only now I remember. I have watched him drink at home. He will mix liquor with soda. How could I forget?

"Please wait a minute. Let me go and fetch some soda; there is a shop close by." I rise up to leave.

"Please, Ganga! No, we don't need any soda. Water is just fine – you can use water too . Please don't bother! Please sit down!" He gets up and blocks my way.

I feel sorry I am not offering him the best treat.

He mumbles: "Why do you have to oblige a drunkard – by rushing to a shop and getting soda – and that too at a time like this?"

"What are you saying?"

He stares at me; his eyes and lips glow dark red and his forehead narrows.

"Please don't torture me with your love and affection; I don' deserve any of that."

"Why are you babbling even before you got drunk?" I joked and returned with water in a pitcher from the kitchen.

"I prefer raw," he says and pours some into a glass and gulps it in no time.

I feel the pungent smell.

I picked up the bottle and smelled it. My god! How strong is the smell! My nose starts burning . . . It is all pure spirit? What will happen to your liver if you drink it all the time?

"Would you like to have something with this?"

"Ganga, don't imagine things! I am fine! We can keep talking with one another. That was the reason why I asked for water. I want this to go very slow . . ." He lights a cigarette.

I asked him, "Will you ever advise me to drink?"

He stares at me for a few seconds and says: "You must not end up like me. There is nothing wrong in tasting a drink - once in a while."

"That's how everything starts . . ."

"You are right! It starts like that. You better don't touch this!" He pulls the bottle away from me.

"I am going to drink today . . ."

"No, please don't!" I can't help laughing at his panicking.

"I was just teasing you," I comforted him.

We became silent for a few minutes. I keep thinking: suddenly fear grips me that I might lose him; will I start drinking if I ever lose him? Will I be drinking in his memory?

"I wish there will be no time or occasion in my life to take up drinking."

Prabhu says: "My life has become a total bore. It is empty and has dried up. I think it has come to an end. I don't like anything. Sometimes I feel I may become crazy; I even feel I have already become crazy. Only now I feel a little relaxed. I ask myself: 'Why should I live'? I can also ask the question – 'Why did you live so far?' I have already asked it; I lived so far only for my own happiness, and that too has now come to an end. Life has no charm for me! Everything is now a routine, a bore, stagnation." Sweating beads cover his entire forehead.

I went inside and returned with a towel which he takes and keeps next to him. I took out the towel and try to wipe off his forehead.

"Thank you, " he says and wipes off his forehead.

"Let me describe an incident that is responsible for reducing my life to a bore, " he says and takes a sip from his glass.

"Two days ago I listened to a record in my radiogram, "he says. "It was an LP but I played it at 78 RPM. Only then I could

enjoy it, otherwise it seemed so dull. Normal life, for me, has become very dull.”

“One more thing! Ganga, to tell you the truth, I might have committed suicide but for you! Why should I live? I have no honor or respect left! I am an orphan! You are just a poor, stupid woman – still trying to hang on to me!” He keeps laughing.

His words hurt me deeply, but I listen to him silently – because I want to understand this man and what is causing this havoc.

28

Prabhu is now in a grave, alarming mood. I think he wants to open up to me – pouring out all his feelings. Under the circumstances I find his behavior funny, but I dare not laugh – because that would mean inflicting a brutal assault to his ego; I just bit my lip and keep quiet.

He looks a little funny – the way he is seated on the sofa - crossed-legged-and in a pant!

At home he normally sports a ‘*lungi*’ and a loose shirt made of either of silk or linen. I have seen him enjoying his drink while seated on a cushion or a cane chair in the veranda. What a royal display! He had servants at his beck and call – one to attend to his personal needs, another to serve any fresh, hot food of his liking and yet another to bring in all kinds of snacks to go with his drink. Poor man, now he is alone –with no new clothes to change and dressed in something too tight at waist. I can hardly breathe; I am glad I had at least a water jug for his use. He had spread all his paraphernalia on the sofa – he really looks funny!

This is the fourth glass he has poured for himself. He had lit a cigarette and is watching its flame – till the matchstick burns out. I am worried he may burn his finger; maybe he did – because he drops the

matchstick in the ash tray and sucks his finger.

“Did you get hurt?” He laughs as if my question deserves no answer. Again, darkness hovers over his face.

“There is no purpose in living,” he says and stares at me. I think many a time I myself had this feeling. I believe a lot of folks wouldn’t be able to answer the question why they are living. Prabhu has raised this as a new question, and should I answer him our conversation will take a different track. I let him talk further – by turning my grave face toward him.

“A man should have a purpose in life,” he says, and goes on. “He should try to achieve an ideal. It can be anything - otherwise what is the difference between a man and an animal? It is not important if he achieves that ideal because in the final analysis achieving his cherished goal would amount to nothing! It is not over once the ideal is achieved. So, that’s not the point. It is not important if you have achieved your goal, but you should have an ideal. It is like tying a carrot before a donkey. Do you know that story?”

I do know the story, but I want to keep him in a pleasant mood. So I told him, “Tell me, what is it?”

“You have become like Manju – because of your association with her. She too will forget the important lesson and will go after some example like a donkey or carrot,”

“Please, let me hear it. I don’t know that story!”

“Do you know a donkey would go after a carrot?”

“Why?”

“Because it wants to make ‘*sambar*’ with it!” He is mocking at me and I feel I shouldn’t have asked him ‘Why?’

“It is in some nursery poem I read in school, now I don’t remember it. I still remember vividly the picture depicted above the poem. A boy is sitting on a donkey with

a long stick in his hand – at the end of which is a bunch of carrots. The donkey runs headlong to catch the carrot. A man goes after his ideal just like the donkey goes after the carrot. Life stands as a metaphor for running. I don't have any such ideal. I have been thinking for a long time: Why should I live? As a student I was a muff; as a businessman I am a flop; as a husband I am unworthy; as a father I am undeserving. . . “

He goes on: “If you knew what a low life I am, you too would ask me to get out. The very fact that you haven't done so only shows your graciousness; it doesn't mean I have any reputation.”

He is struggling hard to make a point but seems diverted. What he is telling me is nothing new; he is trying to enlighten me on something new but keeps repeating the same thing. I know these are the opinions he has of himself – and they are cast in concrete and will never change. He has developed a pitiful image of himself that is pacifying to him. Because there is nobody to push or shove him around, he is hard on himself.

“*Well, what are you going to do about it?*” I wanted to ask him but didn't. I feel terribly hungry. The time is already ten-thirty. I may have to wait for one more hour!

“Do you want to eat something?” I ask.

“Why don't you open that packet?” He points toward one on the sofa and I picked it up and handed over to him. “Do you want a plate?” He nods his head and I hand over him a plate. I take a couple of biscuits for myself. Prabhu opens the packet and I notice its strange contents. What is it? There are also a few round slices of tomato, half of a lemon and two green chilies. I am curious how he is going eat this stuff.

“Is this mutton?” I asked him.

“This is chicken,” he explains. He squeezes the lemon over it and picks up a piece from the plate.

He is now filling up his sixth glass. How long he will be doing this – drinking and

eating? He asks for a napkin and I hand him a towel.

Suddenly he breaks in:

“I would have gone to my club only ten times after our meeting. I myself wanted to give up the habit of going to the club, but every day I made that decision I would end up the same evening in the club. Sometimes I will tell myself: ‘Today I am not going to gamble, I am only visiting.’ But eventually I will do exactly the opposite. What really bothers Manju and Padma about me and the club is this: money is involved here. They are not worried about anything else. When it comes to gambling, the family members of every man involved in gambling think their man is losing money. I find this very amusing! If everybody is losing money how can it be called a game? Another interesting point here is the family members see only the money their man lost; they never see the money he wins – because that money never shows up at home. So here is the lesson: ‘Whether you win or lose in a gamble, no money ever reaches home.’ And this really makes the women back home mad. On the other hand the men who come to the club don't care about money. Are they coming to the club to make money? No, they come there for company. My club – it is not a club where everybody can easily become a member! Only millionaires are admitted into it, so how can I refuse when my friends invite me? All millionaires have a complex – including myself. I thought I was the only fellow with that hang ups, but now I know everybody does. These millionaires can't understand that there is no connection between their own personalities and their wealth; they can't imagine themselves apart from their wealth. Absent their wealth they amount to absolutely nothing! I have found this out of my own experience. A lot of men – smart, intelligent and very accomplished – live ordinary lives because they have no wealth. All their intelligence and smartness

is spent in taking care of their families and providing with them with food and shelter. I am not sure if our millionaire friends – absent their wealth – will take care of their families. Many of our club members are called gentlemen and one should watch their manners after ten at night. That's why I was not very happy about going to the club. Still it had become a habit with me; habits, by themselves, never give one pleasure. We keep on doing the same thing again and again because one day, we think, it may give us some pleasure. Soon it becomes a routine, so where is pleasure? We keep on repeating it again and again – like a donkey going after a carrot."

He keeps talking even as he continues eating. Still he has not zeroed in what he wants to convey to me.

"Ever since we met, more or less, I have stopped going to the club. Occasionally I will visit and show my face up there. Remember, we have not been seeing each other in the last four days; I was actually going to the club. Do you know, it is Manju who gives me money to play card games and I always pay her the money back before I ask for more. The other day I needed money, so I asked her, but she had none. I asked her to take money out of Padma's bureau – with a promise the money would be returned the same day. She had done this before – at least on least three occasions. Initially, she refused; but later obliged and I ran all the way from the club to get that money. I took five thousand rupees and lost it all in two hours! It all ended in bad luck! The game was going on late into the night, and I couldn't leave in the middle; I am also losing money. I was scared what Manju think of me if I didn't fulfill my promise to her. So, what did I do? Oh, what a shame!"

He has finished almost half the bottle. Will he drink more? Looks like he had enough! How can I tell him? The jug is empty, so I asked him:

"Do you need more water? Can I bring some?"

"No, I have drunk too much today; this is the limit; you too must be getting very hungry. Why don't you have *Idiyappam* with milk and sugar? Our Manju can easily eat a dozen cakes . . ." He keeps repeating what he already told me. I think he doesn't remember his own words.

I went to the kitchen and boiled the milk.

He is telling me: "Have you ever heard this expression in English – 'As uncomfortable as an Englishman found cheating cards in his club?'"

No, I didn't. Instantly I realize what a disgraceful situation that would be. As I begin to think that Prabhu might be guilty of such a lapse, I feel extremely sorry for him and felt I should join him in his morning walks. I recalled I asked him a short while ago – in desperation – if he burnt his finger; now I asked him, "Are you guilty of any such act?"

He utters 'tsks' and fixes his gaze on me. His eyes are shot blood red and moist. He nods his head like a child.

29

That evening Prabhu stayed till late into night – an hour past midnight – and left for home, immediately. I pleaded with him to stay overnight and leave in the morning, but he wouldn't oblige. He left the liquor bottle, glasses and the paraphernalia on the sofa and how could I stop him? I bade him farewell saying "Please drive carefully," and cleaned up the mess after his departure. I couldn't sleep the whole night. How come he is behaving like a spoiled child? He felt so shameful and humiliated that he contemplated even suicide! I seem to agree with him, still I didn't reveal my reaction and tried to calm him down. I told him he should never again think of resorting to such

an extreme step. I feel sorry when he cries like a child. My stomach turns! What a fate!

Forget the money, what is the big deal! Why should he think of cheating the cards? He keeps asking himself, "Why did I do such a thing?" I think his drinking must have screwed up his mind. Otherwise he is not someone who would resort to such mean acts. He went to the bathroom and substituted his playing cards with the ones from an old bag and came out a winner. But they caught him right on! What a horror! He must have been terribly ashamed. Apparently nobody said anything. One of those players – a good soul- told Prabhu, "You are drunk, please go home," and literally tried to lead him to his car.

Prabhu was already in tears. He kept pleading, "I am sorry . I didn't mean to cheat. . Please forgive me . . ."

One of the players asked him: "How long have you been indulging in this 'double-play' and cheating us?"

How could he prove that this was his first violation?

"Friends, believe me!" he screamed and begged them: "I belong to a very respectable family. Some devil made me do this, please forgive me!"

One of the players burst into a laughter when Prabhu said he came from a respectable family.

"I am prepared to pay any fine for this transgression," Prabhu said while all the employees of the club – including the peons – stood watching the fun.

"You should never again enter the premises of this club – your club membership is hereby cancelled. You are no more welcome here." He heard the unanimous verdict from the club members when he got into the car.

Prabhu decided on a suicide plan to be carried out the same night. He bought a bottle of sleeping pills and a bottle of whiskey, and his plan seemed simple and

straightforward: He will pop in two sleeping pills followed by a glass of whiskey. But at the last minute he lost his courage; still he feels it a shame to be alive; he imagines everybody is laughing at him, and he keeps constantly listening to their laughter.

He was talking about this – again and again – till an hour past midnight.

"I would say everything is for your own good," I try to console him. "You don't have to go the club anymore. They will soon understand that you acted in some confused state of mind. You don't have to torture yourself with any guilt feelings. Don't your friends really know you? Still they chose to punish you because they wanted to subject you to the club's strict rules. Please consider their decision to keep you away from the club premises as a favor to you; otherwise you may end up going there again and subjecting yourself to even more insults and barbs. Please think everything is for your best."

Prabhu seems comforted. He respects me so much that a few words of consolation seem to work on him.

For the last one week Prabhu shows up at my home in the evenings. He stays till nine or ten and then returns home. I don't think he has any more liaisons. He seems to have lost interest in everything – except drinking. I am always there – should he want to talk with someone.

From that day onwards he has not even shaved. Why this resolve? I have reminded him a few times, and every time he offers a different reason.

"Why, this looks fine too! Do you know in the eighteenth century the beard was the fashion all over Europe? That fashion is now being revived all over the world. This is not the beard of a mendicant. I will trim my beard in next days and it will look great!" He keeps lecturing to me.

This morning I told him again when we went for walking: "Please get rid of this beard! It's no good for you!" He winks at me and gives a mischievous reply:

"I am not causing any inconvenience to anybody with my beard. No one has any complaints! Why should I get rid of it?"

He is talking to me in a playful mood. But I begin to feel he is going through some major change.

Nowadays he has stopped visiting his girl friends –after ten at night – with a liquor bottle. He visits me regularly – everyday. He goes home around ten or twelve. Again the next day he shows up for morning walk, then at my office and at my home in the evening. This is certainly a big change!

Okay, this change is to be welcomed. But why this gloom and unhappiness?

When will he revert back to his good old days – as a happy, cheerful fellow? I keep my fingers crossed.

I see a car come up the street. Prabhu had dropped me at my home, gone home to change and is now back at my place. He carries with him that mini-bar suitcase which I take from him and put away. He steps into the hall and lights a cigarette.

"Ganga, I found something, but I don't know how to deal with it." He begins suddenly and scratches his beard.

"What are you talking about?"

He extends his hand toward me for a book in my hand. I hand over the book: it is '*Brothers of Karamazov*.'

He flips the pages as if shuffling a deck of cards. He selects a particular page and reads a passage seemingly absorbed in deep appreciation.

"Well said! Ganga, please come here. Read this paragraph," He points out a specific paragraph to me.

I read it:

"A man will fall in love with some beauty, with a woman's body, or even with a

part of a woman's body. A sensualist can understand that and he will abandon his own children for her; sell his country. Russia too! If he is honest, he will steal; if he is human, he will murder! If he is faithful, he will deceive . . ."

I don't understand why he wanted me to read this stuff. As I was reading, he was nodding his head as if approving each and every statement in it.

"This applies not only to men, it applies to women too." For a moment, he stares at me.

"What are you saying?" I asked him, utterly confused.

"Manju is in love with that boy," he says. "I have now found out. She is trying to deceive her mother, you, me and everybody. I am sorry she is doing this in secret. She does this because Padma is very strict with her. I have been thinking about this for some time; I was mad even with Manju because she kept you in dark. Now, just like it was mentioned in this book, to be faithful in love means deceiving everybody else. Let us say Manju openly told her mother, 'I am in love with this boy, so I want to meet with him.' What will happen? Padma will lock her up. Still, if this is what Manju wants to do, where is the end?" He scratches his beard.

He continues after a pause: "Why should we worry how it ends? Today's youth need no lessons. Where is the law that love should actually end in a marriage? But I have a question: she has deceived her mother, but why should she deceive you and me?"

"How can you call it a deception?" I countered. "She probably tried to get the permission from her mother; having failed, she probably decided what she wanted to do without her mother's knowledge - something that can also be concealed from you and me. But let me clarify something to you. Manju's love is not like the one you read a few minutes ago from that book. She

will never abandon anything for the sake of anything. She will never give up her mother, her studies, or even a cup of ice cream. She is smarter than her mother, you and me. I want to caution you: Don't think it is love. She is not trying to deceive anybody. Tomorrow Manju may ride a scooter with a Ramji, someone like this Samji.. That's how she is telling Samji that going on a scooter ride with him doesn't constitute a love affair with him. This is very essential for girls who go to college. They realize they can't be college students for the rest of their lives; similarly, they can't have this kind of life for the rest of their lives. This is all part of college life. Let us assume tomorrow Padma selects a boy for Manju; then Manju might willingly accept that choice and consent to marry him. These Ramjis and Samjis may even attend her marriage and bless her! Every generation looks at its problems in a different way. Don't worry about Manju. She is a smart girl."

All my explaining has not convinced him. "It is Padma who is primarily responsible for this mess," he says. "When you see how an open and frank relationship has become so secretive there is no way to know how this matter will end. I must discuss this with Padma." I can understand the concern of a responsible father; but I also realize his strategy will never work with Padma.

He suddenly explodes: "All these mothers are stupid." I think of my mother.

"Would like to eat something?" I asked him.

"What do you have?"

"Good heavens! I haven't cooked anything. But I have some *pappads*'.

He shakes his hands and says: "Fired *pappads* go well with whiskey."

"You can have hot, fried *pappads*," I tell him and went into the kitchen.

He starts drinking.

I am back with a plate full of *pappads*. Prabhu seems suddenly stimulated and rambles on even sounding - occasionally - a little sensible and serious. One thing becomes brutally clear to me: he is bent on suicide. One day or the other he will kill himself. I feel extremely sorry for him. Nothing seems to interest him anymore; he has lost everything. He drinks not because he enjoys it but because he wants to forget the void and emptiness in his life. What a pathetic life! Women no more occupy his mind; he says he had deluded himself in the past with their obsession. Is it because he has grown old? Do men age suddenly, I wonder?

"Ganga, I keep thinking . . . I want to give up everything and go away somewhere;. I must withdraw from this life. . No truck with anything. . No car, no money, no liquor, no woman, wife or daughter, children or friends. . I must leave everything and escape to some nameless place where I can mix with strangers and start a new life. . I must suffer, work hard and make a living - every single day! I must wander the streets, suffer the vagaries of heat and cold and become one among those many nameless who often go through their lives with no new set of clothes! I must forget everything I had in the past! Do you know I feel? I think I am going to do that!" He goes on and on - seemingly caught in his own imagination

I laughed, and his imagination is suddenly shattered. He thinks I am mocking at him; for a moment his face goes through sudden transformation.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I am laughing at your imagination following a bottle of whiskey. I wondered if the people in your imaginary world could ever imagine you in this state of mind; that set me off into laughter."

He is lost in some thought. His dreamy world and the attendant excitement seem muted. Why did I vanquish it? He seems a little disappointed and asks me: "So . . . You say it is impossible for me . . ."

Even as he questions me why he can't change, he doesn't show any instinct to challenge my premise; he seems to concede my point and expose his vulnerability.

He is asking himself: 'Is this really beyond me?' My mind agonizes how I can console him.

He concludes; "Do you now understand why I am not responsible for any of my actions? Do you feel my philosophy – that one should own up his actions and be willing to accept all the consequences – is the right one?"

I think by now I lost the count of how many glasses of whiskey he has consumed.

Well, it is none of my concern! He is responsible for his drinking.

"You were saying you want to flee to some unknown land and start a new life among the strangers . . . Do you think I can join you in such a life?"

His eyes are now wide open as he looks at me: "What do you mean?" I am sure he knew what I exactly meant, but he acts as if he is confused.

"Yes, I mean exactly that!"

He laughs. Good heavens! It has been a long time since I saw him laugh like this! He is happy and light-hearted and says: "Well, if I can imagine something crazy, why can't you too do the same thing?"

"Please don't change the subject. Do you think I can join you – when you go away to some strange land?"

"Well, that would be like the story of the *Ascetic and his Cat*. Prabhu is always ready with some story to make his point. He is having a good time, why not let him enjoy his mood?"

"What story is that?" He begins right away.

"A mouse filches an ascetic's loincloth. So he brought up a cat to catch the mice. Then he brought up a cow to feed milk to the cat. Then he brought up a boy to take care of his cow. Then he wanted a woman to take care of the boy . . . That's how our story too would end up . . ." He concludes with a laugh and I too join him.

He has finished all the *pappads*.

"Do you want more?"

"Oh, no, it is time for me to leave." He looks at the watch.

"You do care about time?" I ask. He touches his belly. I understand there is nothing here for him to eat.

I think I am going to hire a cook – to prepare both vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes. That will help Prabhu to have his dinner here. I must also get for him a few *lungis*. Poor man, he was wearing the same clothes till an hour past midnight.

The time is now ten-thirty.

He informs me as he bids me farewell: "That's what one's life comes to. It is already ordained; there is nothing we can do about it. I can't commit suicide; neither can I give up everything and go away somewhere . . . It is not that it is impossible to do so, everything is possible . . . Still, it makes no sense, let us live the life with detachment!"

He is casually expressing a high-minded concern about life; I shudder.

I wonder if he is aware of what he just said.

I have heard Venku Uncle discuss these matters, but I could never get an insight into them like I do now. That was just a ritual; but I now seemed grasp its full import.

"Why don't you repeat what you just said?" My sudden response probably unsettled him.

"What was I saying?" he asks. I think I shouldn't have interrupted him and let him talk.

“You said something about living with detachment.”

“Yes,” he says and continues: “I wish I could do something about Manju, you or me. That’s beyond me. So what is the point in worrying about it? So it doesn’t matter what kind of life one leads. Nothing is in our hands. We can’t control our lives, so forget about making any sense out of it! A man may drink whiskey and mouth obscenities; another may just drink cheap liquor and utter profound truths about life. So – in the final analysis – we are just helpless whether we accept responsibility or no responsibility for our actions. So we should feel neither happiness nor unhappiness. One should experience life as it comes, nothing is in our hands”

Good heavens, what is happening to him? Why does he sound so philosophical? But his philosophy seems sensible and appropriate . . . He is undergoing a lot of changes, and they are certainly welcome. I do hope they will have a positive influence on him. A few minutes ago I was scared he might kill himself; now I feel a little encouraged about his future . . .

He is leaving.

We are now going on our regular morning walk. I asked him, “Do you remember our conversation last night?”

“I was not drunk last night,” he replies. “To drink and to be intoxicated are entirely two different things.”

We were walking on the cement pavement. We can’t see our faces as we are engaged in the conversation. I am simply nodding my head.

“The other day I tried to commit suicide; but I gave up after the first two sleeping pills. I see many changes from that day. Now I seem to experience new visions and changes about life. Yes, really!

Let us say you are caught in some serious problem. You want to escape from it, so you think of killing yourself. That is how I

thought of suicide! As far as that problem is concerned, I am a dead man. So if we keep ‘dying’ over one problem after another”

I recalled the couplet from the *Kural*.

Whatever desires we are able to get rid of, liberate us from their torments and pain.

“When I got up the next morning” Prabhu continued, “I felt happy I was not dead. When I looked through my room window I noticed a coconut leaf; a romantic feeling came over me as I stood close to the window and enjoyed that leaf bent and shining like a fan. Even the grass on the lawn seemed to be telling me, ‘you are alive, so you are able to enjoy me!’ That is life! Life could be decent and simple, but we create complications and cheapen it! I wanted to share these feelings with you, but I thought you will be sad to know that I contemplated suicide. I also had a feeling that I am so weak in mind because I couldn’t even succeed in my suicide attempt, now I am free from such a feeling. I will never again try to kill myself.”

I feel totally free from the fear that gripped me last night. I feel like shaking his hand and congratulating him. We exchanged glances. I see freshness on his face.

“When will you trim your beard?” I asked. “Otherwise, you will end up like an ascetic.”

“I will take care of it sometime today,” he replies and rubs his beard.

I am at work. The phone rings. I thought it could be Prabhu. Who else is going to call me? Could be work-related. . . .

“Yes”

“Miss Ganga”

“Speaking”

What a surprise! It is RKV on the phone! I greet him with warmth and respect.

“I want to meet with you. Can I see you at work? Or do you want me to see you at your home? Is your mother home?”

“Mother is visiting my brother. Why don’t you come to my office?”

"Can I see you during the lunch-hour?"

"Please do come."

"Thanks . . . I will be there . . . I will let you know the purpose of my visit later, till then it should be suspense! Are you surprised that RKV too is spinning suspense? Why not? If there is no suspense in my stories, why not spring some in real life?"

I am baffled and wonder what he means. Pretty soon I will find out.

31

I keep laughing to myself, but I am trying to conceal my reaction. I too want to play a 'little game'. I want to look at my face in the mirror; maybe it will reveal my mischievous mood. I am sitting quietly, with my head bowed, on a chair and sharpening a pencil while facing RKV and listening to his amusing story.

"Remember that day when you visited me at my home?" he asked, and continued: "My mother kept on enquiring me about you. I have had so many visitors, but my mother was never interested in any of them. But she singled you out for praise; she admires you and says you are very humble even though you are well read, and enjoying a high, successful career. She asked me how come you are not married, what can I tell her? The other day I told her: 'If you want to know why you don't visit their home?' Even today I had no plans to see you. I am planning to take Mother to meet with your mother! I don't know where you live, but Mother says you mentioned it as Panchavati; so she suggested we go to Panchavati and look for you. But I didn't bother. Now a new situation has arisen, but I can't reveal any more details to you! I want to see your mother and discuss an important matter with her."

"I find your suspense rather very weak," I told him.

"That's why I have given up suspense."

"Why can't you discuss the whole matter with me?"

"I have no problem with it, but I felt it would be better if elder members of the family are involved. But you are the one to make the final decision in the matter. I am not sure if the office would be a good appropriate for our discussion." He keeps looking around the surroundings as if he is guilty of some crime.

"No, it is no big deal," I assured him. "The lunch-time is not over yet." I have finished sharpening the pencil and examine the lead. My fingers tips turned back, I feel embarrassed to look at RKV's face. I am afraid I may burst into sudden laughter. My ears are itching. He is such a smart writer, how come he is so naïve! I am not sure if this is his own idea; maybe he is concerned because I belong to his social class, a woman still unmarried. Maybe his mother is behind the whole scheme. I don't mind welcoming him for a chat . . . I broke the pencil lead, I must begin sharpening again . . .

He goes on and on: he has a cousin – the name is Ramarathnam, two years younger to him; could he be forty? He has been a widower for the last two years, and didn't actually want to remarry after his wife died. He has no kids. He lives in Bangalore and is employed in HMT as a senior officer. He is also an idealist and wants no dowry in marriage. Last month he happened to be in Madras when RKV's mother broached the subject of his marriage. Even RKV seems to have a little concerned that his mother was being very pushy in the matter. "Why is Mother so desperate to get him married?" he thought. Then he consoled himself, saying : "There is nothing wrong about this; It is a good deed and let me see how luck plays its hands," and came down to personally meet with me.

Whose luck? His cousin's or mine? Despite myself, I gnashed my teeth and kept quiet. He probably thought I was being shy over my marriage, so bowed down my head!

"You are not a child," he says. "Nowadays young women are so busy in education and work that they have no time to think of their marriage." The subject of marriage and the attendant problems seem funny to me; but I am a little concerned how to deal with them. Well, why should I deal with them? Why not I just leave it Mother? What will she do? Will she say, 'My daughter is tainted, she needs no marriage.' Or will she say, like all mothers, "Why don't you ask her?" What happens next? Will I simply refuse the marriage proposal? Really, funny!

On the other hand Mother might bring the matter to closure thinking - just like Uncle used to tell me - I will never get married. Whatever may be the final outcome, it is certainly worth watching. . . . The joke will be on others!

RKV asked for my brother's address, which I promptly gave him. I cautioned him even as I handed over the address:

"You asked for my brother's address, so I gave it to you. But you must be under no illusion that I gave my consent to this marriage. I need to think a lot about this."

He thanked me as he took the address. I think my posture with the head bowed down in silence, my preoccupation with pencil-sharpening and casual smile, probably gave him a wrong idea.

"I will have nothing to discuss with you anymore; I will discuss the matter with your mother. I hope she will be home this evening, so also your brother. I came here only for the address. Now I have to go back and take my mother to see yours. I have even taken half-a-day leave for this." He speaks as if he has already performed half of the marriage.

I called Prabhu immediately after RKV left. "I will be going home directly from work. You don't have to come to my office. But you must come to my home. I have interesting news for you." I too injected a tone of suspense in my message.

"Anything about Manju?" he asks.

"No, no, it is about me." He is totally baffled.

"Got a new promotion?"

"No, you would never guess. You will find out when you come to see me. You should at least have the joy of listening to news like this."

"Okay, I will be there . . . Anything else?"

"Nothing . . ."

"Are you quite busy now?"

"Not really . . . How about you?"

"I am dictating a letter. . ."

"Did I disturb you?"

"Not quite. I am done with it."

"I really want to see you at work - when you are busy . . . I am trying to imagine, but can't get around it. One of these days I am going to visit you . . ."

"Oh, you have never been here? How did that happen? It never occurred to me! Why don't you come today? How about coming now? I will send the car . . ."

"No, not today. Some other time - I will suddenly show up myself before you."

"Oh yes."

"Okay." I end the conversation.

"Okay." He responds.

I haven't put down my receiver, neither did he. I am waiting for him to put the receiver down, and he probably expects me to do the same.

"Please put down the receiver," I told him.

"No. You were the one who made the call. You must end the conversation."

"How are you dressed now?" I continued our conversation.

"You mean my dress? . . ." He pauses for a moment, then continues: "Gray color

Dacron suit, cream-color terricot shirt, a tie with a mixture of gray and red . . . Black shoes." He is sincerely answering each and every question.

"Please visit me just like this. I have bought some *lungis* for you." I am actually planning to buy them this evening but feel as if I had already bought them.

"Where did you buy them, when?" He asks with excitement – like a child.

"Well . . . sometime ago . . ." I become a little fussy.

"Now I know what you mean by your suspense! You got me some gift, am I right?"

"No, don't guess." My voice is firm.

"Well, it is now two-thirty! I will find out in the next three hours."

"Okay." I finally ended the conversation and put down the receiver.

It's evening now. By now Ganesan must be home and I try to imagine what is happening there. I took a taxi, went shopping and bought three *lungis* for Prabhu. They do look good! Why they are not allowed to be worn in public? Does one look like a Moslem in it? What is wrong with it? It is soft and colorful. Will he like them? He usually likes my choice . . . The time is six, still he has not shown up . . .

What about dinner tonight?

He has arrived. He is dressed up exactly as he had described and carries the mini-bar in one of the hands.

"Please wait for a few minutes, I am about to finish cooking," I inform him from the kitchen.

"I am in no hurry, take your own time," he says and eases himself into a chair and opens a newspaper.

I finished my kitchen chores and now took a good look at him. He had apparently followed my advice; taken a shower and dressed in the same clothes. The beard does look impressive after trimming. I show him

the *lungis* and he is happy. "Very good," he says.

"I have prepared a sweet," I informed him. "Would you like to try?" I offered it in a plate with a spoon.

"How about you?"

"I will have some after your tasting it." He helps himself with a spoonful and says, "It is very tasty, really very good!"

"Okay, you served me the sweet. Now, let me have the good news! Come on, let us hear it!"

My God! He is going to think this sweet has something to do with the news!

I hasten to tell him – denying any connection between the two.

"It is for me to find the connection," he says.

"RKV visited me during the lunch hour. He called me earlier on phone and said he wanted to see my mother. I told him Mother is not home, so he asked for Ganesan's address. Then he explained the reason for his visit. The real joke is yet to come." I went into the kitchen and brought a glass of water for Prabhu.

I made a slight change in my voice and continued: "RKV mentioned about his cousin, a widower, and an idealist! His mother thinks he would be a good suitor for me. So I too wanted to take part in this joke. I gave him my brother's address. I guess by now he must have gone to see Mother. Tomorrow we will all hear about that joke." Prabhu suddenly cut in – his tone rising into a serious pitch.

"What is there to joke about it?" I suddenly stopped laughing. How can I respond to him? He is deadly serious; I better think a while before answering him.

He averts his eyes away from me, helps himself with a spoonful from the plate and smiles at me.

"Indeed, it is good news," he says.

I curled my lip; he seems to dislike my total indifference over this.

"Ganga, you should really consider this as good news."

"But I don't!"

"Don't rush into a hasty decision! This RKV is so remote from you; still he seems to play a very important role in your life. It is something remarkable."

I realize I have walked into a trap – and can't get out. I know Prabhu never contradicted me, so I had thought now too he would go along with me. But he seems so firmly committed to this alliance that I am a little scared to oppose him. But I have made up mind to oppose him right away...

We both remained silent as if trying to marshal our forces before getting into a fight. What if I drop the matter?

But he might not. I try to contain his enthusiasm with a veiled suggestion: *'You better stop thinking about this.'*

"This is no more in your or my hands. My brother and sister-in-law are involved in this; don't you think their neighborhood will give them some hard, unpleasant facts about me? You were asking me, 'What is there to joke about it?' They do understand very well the joke involved here. By now they all must be enjoying the fun." Prabhu seems to feel I am too hard on myself.

"No, No, nothing like that will ever happen. In the final analysis, if you are willing to say yes, this marriage will certainly take place."

"Okay, let us wait till the ball comes to my court." I brought our discussion to a closure. I know the matter will never reach my level. Even if it does, I will never give my consent to the marriage.

32

I don't know what exactly happened. Four or five days have passed since RKV met with me at work. I am in dark if he and his mother had since visited Ganesan and seen Mother. Didn't he say he will be seeing

Mother the same evening? I am sure RKV made that visit but I don't know what happened afterward. Mother must have been pleased; my sister-in-law must have burst with laughter – but Ganesan would have restrained her. Mother would have treated RKV and his mother with all the warmth and hospitality. What was the final outcome? What was the final message RKV and his mother carried from Mother?

Ganesan must have said: "My sister wouldn't listen to our advice and there is no way we can get her married; this marriage will never take place; she is not for marriage. Why are you wasting your time and energy? We are reconciled to our fate and are not in a position to openly talk about our problem. You mean well, and are trying to do your best, but we don't deserve your generosity. That is all I can tell you. You are a great writer and understand the world only too well. Need we say more?"

Wait a minute! Would Ganesan really say such a thing – especially to a stranger? Well, you never know. He is capable of saying anything disparaging me; Mother, of course, would be in tears; sister-in-law too would be saying something to hurt Mother.

Did I do something wrong? Maybe I shouldn't have given Ganesan's address to RKV. Why am I doing these stupid things – one after another? Why do I enjoy this fun – dragging others into some situations and embarrassing Mother in the process? I expected to get some news the very next day, but nothing happened and now my mind is curious and also in turmoil. I wonder if I can send someone to find out what happened. But who can find out what happened? I was toying with the idea of going home that same evening; maybe that would have helped.

I also occasionally try to comfort myself thinking: "Why bother? Who cares what happens now?" But Prabhu wouldn't. He harps on this subject – everyday. He seems

very serious about this alliance. I ask myself: "Why did I mention this to him?" I want to know what happened in the last few days so that I can at least reveal the outcome to Prabhu and be done with it.

As far as I am concerned, the matter must have ended; that was the reason it never came back to me. Shall I call RKV and find out? What should I ask him? No, I might even send a wrong message – he might think I am really interested in this alliance. The more I think, the clearer it becomes that I shouldn't have played this game to begin with... My first mistake was giving the address to RKV; the second was informing Prabhu about it; I don't want to commit a third mistake. So I just listen to Prabhu and keep quiet. I wonder if he advises Manju this much; no mother would offer so much advice to her offspring!

He tells me he will stop coming to see me after my marriage. I too must do the same! No more contacts, no more phone calls! If he considers my husband to-be a good man, then Prabhu might visit us as his friend. He thinks my husband-to-be is a good man. How does he know? And how does he actually define the word 'good'? I did not ask Prabhu any of this. I am patiently listening to Prabhu's imaginary tales and lectures. He also says there should be no secrets between me and my husband. Should my husband know something about my past or wants to know about it or wants me to share it with him, then – Prabhu advises me – I should openly reveal everything except the name of the predator from my past. If I disobey this command, Prabhu says, he will never again see my face. It is not because he is mad at me, but because he thinks circumstances would make it unfair to continue our friendly relationship. He assures me my family life will be great; any man who is married to me should consider himself as a lucky fellow. Prabhu feels everything is falling in its place – for my

own good – and at a time like this I must do nothing to 'spoil' the final outcome. If I do anything silly and spoil my prospects, he will be mad at me and shun me forever.

Almost every day, Prabhu is preparing me for my marriage and seems to be enjoying his role in it.

We are returning from our morning walk. Today is Sunday, so we had coffee on our way back and taking things a bit easy. The time is nine. As soon as I alighted from the car I see Mother waiting on the veranda with a bundle next to her. She smiles at me as soon as she notices me. I am also happy to see her after a long time. Prabhu seemed a little scared to see Mother and said in a hurry, "I am going to leave now. See you later!" Mother didn't seem to have noticed him or the car. She invites me into the house.

"Have you been waiting here for a long time?" I asked.

"I came only a few minutes ago. But I suddenly got scared. Today is Sunday, so I thought you might have gone out and mayn't return till the evening. I was wondering what I should do."

I unlocked the door. As she entered the house, Mother continued: "I was determined to wait here till you show up. If I return without seeing you your sister-in-law will laugh at me. Will she know that I had to return because the house was locked, not because you drove me out of the house?"

The *lungis* are drying on a rope strung across the porch. I rolled them together and put them away before Mother could see them. What does she know? She probably thought they were only saris.

Prabhu's mini bar is also in the house. Last night he forgot to take it with him; only when the contents in the mini bar are empty does he take it home; otherwise he leaves it here. What will he do this evening? I am sure he has enough liquor stocked at home!

Now that he has seen Mother, he would not be coming back. He will show up only tomorrow – for the morning walk. And because Mother is home, he will signal his arrival with the car horn!

Concerned Mother would notice the liquor case and ask me questions; I took the mini bar and carried it to my room.

I bit my lip as I recalled Prabhu in the past few days drinking at home, helping him with non-vegetarian dish

Mother leans against a pillar and unloads the bundle. I see a few metal cans, bottles and packets – like pickles, spices, *vatakam*, etc.

“I have been away but my mind is always here. Every time I have my lunch or dinner over there I think of what you had prepared and what you had eaten. I can only think; can I ever open my mouth? Any mention of your name – especially if I say it – will be received with disapproval. So I keep my mouth shut. When the office peon Rangaswamy hands over the money to me, I will ask him – just him – about you. Every month I give Ganesan eighty rupees; I keep twenty rupees to myself. What do I need the money for? I spend it for that family only. Occasionally I buy something for the kids; I also buy some items from the street vendors. So I am able to come out and go into that house as I wish. Even then, once in a while, I can’t help clashing with your sister-in-law on something or the other.” Mother is talking to herself as she is getting ready to settle down. .

I am sitting in the hall and listening to her chatter in - silence.

“Tell me what you think of this?” she says and extends a spoonful to me.

“What is it?”

“Show me your palm,” she says and deposits a small portion. What a surprise? I tasted it and told her, ‘This is *Badaam Halva*.’

“Not quite,” she says. “Think again.” She serves me another spoonful. What is there to think?

“I don’t know what it is; but it tastes good,” I told her and arose to wash my hands. Maybe she is upset I didn’t ask more about it. Else she would have served a few more spoonfuls and laughed away at my predicament. Now that I have washed my hands, she let the secret out!

“It’s potato halwa! I just added a drop *badam essence*! Nobody would know - it’s just like *badam halwa*! After all, what is the difference? Why waste money? Why buy badam, soak it in water . . .” she goes on and on. I left for my room.

“Do you want some coffee?” she asks. I don’t need coffee, maybe she wants. I said, “Okay.”

She goes into the kitchen and prepares coffee. She is talking to herself. She complains things in the kitchen are now messed up; she feels all the vessels look black as if rusty and needed a thorough wash at least once a week. She says all the rooms need a thorough scrubbing once a week. She feels the floors are sticky; she is also sorry for me for what I had gone through in her absence. She is apparently happy that I was cooking at home and not eating out in restaurants. Now she serves me coffee, and asks: “What do you want for dinner?”

“How about you?” I asked her.

She rushes back to the kitchen.

The coffee tastes very good – and I feel I haven’t tasted like this for a long time. I am also happy that Mother is home. But I realize there is something going on behind all of this. She is just waiting for an opportunity.

I went to the bathroom.

Looks like she had a big fight with Ganesan soon after RKV visited her to discuss my marriage alliance.

I try to imagine who would have supported the marriage proposal.

Mother would have never opposed it. Ganesan was probably against it. Let Mother come out and tell me! Certainly she has not come down to teach me how to make potato *halwa*!

She took over the charge of the house in no time; she started washing the kitchen floor.

I emerged out of the bathroom. Mother is down on the floor scrubbing it hard. Can she ever do such a thing in my brother's house? That house is small – so small that if you pour water on the floor it would reach the other flat! To come to think of it, where can you get this amount of water? Mother must have been waiting for this very moment.

I realize today I am doing things at my own leisurely pace; I had my bath, dressed myself, left my wet clothes to dry above the bed stand, and now lying on the bed reading a book. Otherwise I would be running up and forth between the kitchen and the hall!

I never seem to get this pleasant odor when I cook! Maybe only another cook can perform this magic!

Mother comes to the main hall even as she finishes drying her wet hand. She sits on the sofa and watches me reading a book.

“You remember RKV? He came to see me. He told me you have visited him. He told me you gave him the address; he told me beyond that you don't know anything. His mother too came. They are very decent people . . .” I closed the book and spring to action.

“Remember Venku Uncle was calling RKV a rowdy – totally without any basis! RKV is such a nice man! A big crowd gathered around him – as soon as it was known he was a writer!”

“He thought we were living away from Ganesan family because of some family dispute. You never asked me why he came to see me . . .” Mother is taking stock of me to see if she should continue the conversation. I responded with a laugh.

Things have gone exactly as I had thought. I think Mother and Ganesan clashed with one another after RKV and his mother took leave of them. They patched up their differences and simply informed RKV: “We are going to discuss the matter with Ganga and then get back to you.”

Soon after their departure Ganesan said something disparaging me. “Does she deserve to get married and lead a family life?” he asked Mother. “You seem to have lost your head just because somebody is interested in her.” He probably said so many unspeakable things about me. Mother was helpless; she could only shed tears and remain speechless. Her eyes now turned teary and she breaks down:

“Please listen to me – at least on this matter; please forget that fellow visiting you every day in his car! Everybody says he is an immoral fellow! Why should you subject yourself to any scandal? I was always hoping some good soul will be interested in alliance with our family, now it has come true! This RKV is young in age – still he is a man with big heart! He talks to me as if answering all my questions deep from my heart! He speaks very highly of that gentleman from Bangalore, he is said to be so magnanimous - so different from others.” She suddenly lowers her voice and whispers in my ear:

“He demands to know: ‘As a widower you want me to marry a young virgin; what if the prospective bride thinks that I lived with another woman?’ So he insists he will marry only the young widows who desperately need help. You know what RKV says? ‘Even if he is so prepared no young widow is willing to oblige him; what can I do?’ So you need to have no concerns about this alliance. I think we can be open about everything and finalize this alliance. We

don't need to deceive anybody nor let ourselves be deceived by others. I have been thinking about this alliance for the last three days, I don't think we will get a deal better than this. Now, why do you laugh?"

Only now I realize I am actually laughing.

How can I stop laughing at her words? Am I living as an unmarried woman for the last several years – because there are no suitors interested in me? Mother's naiveté is so amusing! How simplistic she and others sound when discussing my marriage! They expect me to simply forget my past –not just the incident in that car-but everything that has happened until now; the very notion that I should lay my claim for this special relationship and commit myself to a life with a stranger – disgusts me! How can I do such a thing? If I can, it would only mean that what Ganesan has been gossiping about me must also be true! I shouldn't have spurned Venku Uncle's sexual advances; I shouldn't have been embarrassed by other passengers in the bus brushing against me! My body shouldn't have recoiled at the bus conductor deliberately touching my fingers! Only those who understand these concerns would understand why I am opposed to marriage. How can I make an exception for this gentleman from Bangalore? What is just and logical to my mind seems to confuse these folks! How can I make them understand my point of view? I can't help laughing.

My mind is clear about one thing; even if I wholeheartedly consent to a new relationship – whatever you may call it and embellish it with grand names – I would become vulnerable to promiscuous behavior. I strongly believe this alliance could lead to such a life, so I am scared. Otherwise I wouldn't be deliberately keeping myself away from Prabhu. I can't think of anyone other than Prabhu worthy of my love and admiration. This is what I want to say – in

public – deep from my heart: I love him! But this love is not like the infatuation between two lovers. This love will never end and under no circumstances will I accept losing his love and affection. I am willing to offer him anything – including this body – should he wish. Even if Prabhu insists – he is able to come up with some justification – I will never agree to give him up. I am amused to think that Prabhu himself has not grasped this truth about my love.

How can explain all this to Mother?

"Let Ganesan say whatever he wants to say. We shouldn't lose our head because we are desperately after something. This alliance is not going to work. You better not raise your hopes over this."

I can understand how Mother is hurt by my comments. I am a little scared to think that I might really get mad if Mother utters any more words.

Mother lets out a deep sigh; she is scared what might happen next and goes into the kitchen.

I start reading the book.

From the kitchen, Mother starts talking to herself; I try to ignore her.

While serving me food, she again starts her homily:

"Don't imagine your problems are over because you have answered me," she says. "You need to think through this; do you know how people are gossiping about you? I only want you to live a respectable life." She wipes her eyes with the tip end of her sari.

I remain silent. I am determined I shouldn't get mad at Mother and say anything; such a reaction would only reveal my weakness. I get mad only when I am struggling with some unresolved issue or trying to overcome my fear and self-doubt. So there is no particular reason why I should get mad at her. Again, it was out of my quirky attitude that I sent RKV on a mission; now I must lean back and watch the fun!

Mother is able to understand that my silence doesn't mean my consent.

Ganesan showed up in the evening. I was a little scared what he is going to ask me. It is many years since we have had any conversation! Whenever he asks me any question, my mind goes blank. He is sitting in the hall; mother is serving him coffee.

"What is she saying?" he asks. I don't know what Mother is telling him. Is she using some sign language? Ganesan's voice sounds a little loud because he wants the words to reach my ears.

"It is all our fate! This family has endured all the horrors! Does it mean we should work even harder and corrupt ourselves? We are led astray once in a while – because we don't think through our situation. Now if we seem confused when things are working out in our favor – what do you call it? Is it our fate?"

He probably thinks I will respond to his comments. Noticing I am silent, he walks into my room; I am arranging the books on a shelf; I know he is standing close to me, still I can't bring myself to look at him. I feel I haven't seen him in so many years. What remains in my mind are his frequent visits to our home and his constant quarrels. When did I actually see him face to face and had a meaningful conversation? It is one thing not to see somebody; it is something else, when you ignore him. I have been ignoring him all these days.

He speaks even as he munching betel leaves in his mouth. Still I have not turned around to face him.

"We always let you live your own life – just as you wished! Even now we are concerned only with your best interests. If you still persist, you will end up as a laughing stock! You are no more a child! Mother was very much for this alliance. I know you; I am also your well-wisher. That's why we are talking with you – fully

aware that you don't respect our sentiments. This is your last chance! If you reject this alliance, you will be essentially risking your relationship with all the family members. Why do I care? Mother will be enduring pain till she breathes her last! Do you understand what I mean?"

Now I turned around to face him. Still, I don't know what to say. Mother is standing in the hall.

"No, "I said. I feel a lump in my throat. I was overcome by a funny feeling from my childhood: 'Will he beat me up?'"

"No, I can't even imagine such a thing!"

"We never imagined you will ever get married. That doesn't mean life will not present us with some pleasant surprise. If you are really interested in a decent, orderly life, you will certainly grab this opportunity!' He sounds a little firm and authoritarian.

"Why does he care for me? I know Mother is fond of me and her maternal instinct is torturing her. But what about him? Doesn't he spread all kinds of gossip about me? I can certainly challenge him on his special concern for me, but challenging him doesn't seem that important at this time.

I keep thinking: Why he is so much concerned about my future?

Maybe he feels guilty that he had driven me out of his house; still, he wants to convince himself that he did the right thing; so he keeps spreading all kind of stories about me.

"What if you ask that fellow – Prabhu – who took you in the car the other day? Do you think he will be willing to marry you? I am willing to bet – he will flee from you in no time!"

"Why should I insist on marriage?" I bit my lip as the words came out of my mouth.

"Mother, did you hear what she just said?" Ganesan screams on the top of his voice. I laugh to myself.

“Why should we waste our time with her? She always insists on being right. She is prepared for any consequences. I am her mother, so it is my fate! Why should you get involved and suffer her insults? It is our fate! Looks like all the rumors we hear about her are actually true!” Mother is whining in broken sounds.

“Why do you all feel so exhausted if I am not willing to get married? Why can’t you just leave me to my own will? I am very happy for your concern in my future. Thank you very much. Now leave me alone.” I walked into the hall and concealed my face behind a newspaper.

“We don’t feel exhausted because you are not getting to married to anyone. We don’t like the idea of you living as somebody’s mistress. That’s what really concerns us.” Ganesan again screams at me.

I pulled out the newspaper and stared at him. I laughed as I told him.

“You are correct! That is the main reason – why I can’t be married to anybody. No man will be able to live with a woman of my reputation – even a widow might be preferable. So I have chosen a life of my own liking. I am not going change my mind.”

“Shut up,” Ganesan hollers at me. “Have you no shame? How can you defend your action?”

“I feel this is the right choice for me. No more comments.”

We all remained silent for a while. By now it Mother and Ganesan are convinced they can’t change my mind.

As far as I am concerned, the matter is closed. I go to my room upstairs.

I pace up and down the roof terrace for a few minutes. I thought of going for a walk.

Ganesan must have left.

I want to see Prabhu. He would have visited me had I invited him this morning. My heart feels heavy with a feeling that I

might be able to see him only tomorrow during our regular morning walk.

I badly need his company. My life will be wholesome if I can sit next to him and engage him in conversation.

Now I want to go for walk.

34

Prabhu’s office assistant Mr. Rao handed over a visiting card to Prabhu. The card read: ‘Mr. T.S. Ganesan, Ganga’s brother.’

“Let him come,” Prabhu told him and adjusted his tie.

Prabhu noticed Ganesan entering his office with the customary deference to his supervisor. Prabhu has never seen Ganesan before.

Ganga had briefed Prabhu on her brother Ganesan: that he drove her out of the house and is still busy spreading all kinds of rumors about her.

Ganga had in a way led Prabhu to imagine Ganesan’s anger and hatred toward his sister. But now as he faced Ganesan, Prabhu felt he was looking at a vastly different man.

He was also overcome by pity.

He figured Ganesan might be of same age like himself or a few years younger. Here is a man subject to life’s stresses and strains; his hair – most of it - had turned gray – and the cheeks were sticking together due to constant use of betel leaves. He had sacred ash smeared on the forehead. He wore a shirt washed but not ironed – and the collars of his colored shirt were folded into coils. He wore ill-fitting trousers – in white, quite baggy and made out of an old ‘drill’ cloth – hanging down the waist like a skirt. He carried a khaki bag; from its corner one could see the daily English newspaper and his lunch box.

As soon as he found himself inside the room, Ganesan greeted Prabhu with the deference of a clerk and stood in a corner.

"Please sit down." Prabhu directed him to a chair facing him.

Ganesan sat on the chair with both knees sticking to each other. As he laid his khaki bag on the floor the sound of the lunch box could be heard.

"What can I offer you? Coffee, tea or cool drinks?"

"No, thanks. I don't want anything," Ganesan refused with a touch of dignity.

"It is all right! Just a cooling drink!" Prabhu pressed a button on the table and an office peon showed up.

"Cool drinks," he ordered and lit a cigarette. He also offered one to Ganesan.

"No thanks." Prabhu lit the cigarette and inhaled. Silence prevailed for some time because Ganesan was not sure how he should start the conversation. The sound from the air-conditioning equipment seemed to add weight to the prevailing silence.

Prabhu inhaled the smoke deep into his lungs and coughed. He wiped his eyes with a kerchief: "I am sorry, this cold . . ."

"Still, you are going on your morning walks – in this foggy weather."

"The fog is not bad. In a month or so, it will be difficult to go for a walk without a scarf,"

The peon laid down on the table, under two circular bases, two large glasses with cool drinks and straws.

Prabhu took a sip from his glass and asked Ganesan: "Where do you work?"

"In railway office," Ganesan answered with a smile and took a sip from his glass. He checked his watch because he wanted to conclude his mission with Prabhu in half-an hour and then leave for work. Prabhu had absolutely no idea why Ganesan wanted to see him; he seemed preoccupied with everything about Ganesan – his job, income, kids, family obligations and other totally irrelevant details.

"The reason I am here," Ganesan began and only then did Prabhu realize there was a purpose behind his visit.

"Oh, what can I do for you?"

"After long wait, someone is interested in my sister. My mother very anxious the alliance should work out. Ganga's marriage is actually in your hands." Prabhu let out a cry of delight and continued:

"Be assured that this marriage has already taken place. More than any of you, I am the one very much interested in this alliance. I have discussed and argued this marriage with Ganga. Ganga has developed an aversion to marriage following some bitter experiences in her life. You must go ahead and make all the arrangements for this marriage, and it will work out. To come to think about it, this marriage is very important for me; I wouldn't be more interested even in my own daughter's wedding. Ever since Ganga mentioned this I have been imaging her future married life! You know, she is an angel! You must be very proud that she is your sister!" Ganesan felt a little uneasy at Prabhu's glorification; still he couldn't bring himself to believe that Prabhu could be deliberately lying. Prabhu continued:

"Do you realize how Ganga changed me after we became friends? As our family friend she rendered invaluable help to my daughter. Unfortunately I never had an opportunity to voice my admiration for her in public. I am willing to offer any help for her welfare. Now, what can I do for her?"

While Ganesan couldn't fully grasp the fact that Prabhu was being very candid in offering his help in Ganga's marriage, he nevertheless understood the man behind that face: 'Here is a decent fellow who doesn't even know what others think of him! For example, here I am sitting in this room facing him and he is totally in dark what I think of him! He is so decent he thinks

everyone would believe everything he tells them!’

Ganesan ventured to make a statement against Prabhu.

“Can I say something – if you don’t suspect my motive?”

“Not at all! Go ahead.” Prabhu lit another cigarette.

“Do you realize how people are linking you and my sister and spreading all kinds of stories? Leave aside the veracity of their comments. Do you know the prevailing opinion about your relationship?” Prabhu responded by inhaling the smoke deep into his lungs and seemed lost in some profound thought. The smoke had concealed the view before him when he opened his eyes; he used his hands to get rid of it.

“Yes, I know. I am sorry! You know . . .” Ganesan understood Prabhu was becoming emotional. Concerned that he hurt his feelings, Ganesan cut in hastily:

“No, no, you don’t need to offer any explanation. We certainly know Ganga. What I meant was – even after all these rumors – someone is willing to marry my sister. It would seem the prospective suitor is not actually bothered with Ganga’s past. As a matter of fact, he was willing to marry even a widow! So . . .” Ganesan couldn’t go further – his own conscience seemed caught in a struggle.

“Hmm . please continue,” Prabhu went on as he discarded the cigarette ash into the ash-tray without even looking at Ganesan’s face.

The situation had mellowed enough that even Prabhu, a little dim-witted, could grasp what Ganesan left unsaid.

Prabhu suddenly stared into Ganesan’s face and asked, “Do you mean to say . . .?”

His eyes turned misty; but in no time he composes himself and realized he was becoming sentimental – much to his embarrassment. Soon calmness returned to

his face and he bit his lip as if denouncing his own impulsive behavior.

“Are you not suggesting that the help I could render in regard to your Ganga’s marriage could very well be to stop meeting her in person?” While he concluded his question with casual smile, it suddenly dawned upon him that he was slowly withdrawing himself from Ganga’s orbit. He stared at Ganesan and whispered to himself: “Yes, she is yours.”

“Because . . .” Ganesan tried to intrude, but Prabhu cut him off:

“No, no, I don’t need any explanation. This is the right thing to do. Your sister has suffered enough. You certainly know your sister’s mind; but how can you assume her prospective suitor will feel the same way about me? Had I been a caste-member or a relative of your family, I will have some justification to ally myself with you and take part in the celebrations; now the best course for me is to remove myself from your company. The best way to repay for all the help your sister has rendered to me and my family is to keep away from her! Do you see the irony in this? I have no regrets over this; in fact I feel very proud. There is something else; recently I had taken no decisions without prior consultations with Ganga; now, because I know I will not be arriving at this decision by involving her, I have taken the decision on my own. Please tell her on my behalf that I will be willing to meet with her only after she has given her consent for this alliance and a wedding date has been finalized. Till then, she must be clearly told, I will be working on a list of her wedding presents. I think she has a bright future ahead of her. Let us hope for the best and do our best for her. Wish you good luck!”

He left Ganesan with yet another bit of advice: “You may also tell your sister that should she reject this alliance, I will never again see her.” He winked mischievously and laughed.

Ganesan was stunned. He had thought once he suggested that Prabhu should stop seeing his sister Prabhu would react with contempt so typical of him; he imagined a scene where he would be unceremoniously ejected with epithets such as "Go and tell your sister about it. Now GET OUT." He was totally unprepared for what he was witnessing now.

The whole world loves decent people. Ganesan was itching to get out and share his joy with all his family members by letting them know what a decent man Prabhu is!

"Sir, you are a man with the heart of gold! I must confess I have spoken of you in very derogatory terms; I am ashamed to think of my past behavior! Please forgive me. You are a noble soul! I will see you later." Ganesan warmly praised Prabhu and then took leave of him.

A great conspiracy is afoot! I just can't believe how they could get Prabhu involved in it! Apparently my rogue brother Ganesan had met with Prabhu and convinced him of their 'noble' intentions! What did Ganesan actually tell Prabhu? How could he manipulate Prabhu's mind? Prabhu is so child-like and will trust anyone! Now I have to see him. I made several attempts in the last three days to reach him, with no success. He is unavailable at home as well as at work. Why are these folks so thrilled at our separation? Does it mean I can never again see Prabhu? How can I stand it? How about Prabhu? How can he afford to be like this? Can he keep himself away from me? I have been totally isolated; don't I have anybody to call my own?

Mother raves about Prabhu. So does Ganesan. I am told Prabhu promised never to visit our home again; Ganesan seems so brash about it. I think Prabhu will return only if I get rid of Mother and Ganesan. Well, today I am going to get rid of her. They have taken great pains to destroy my

happiness and peace of mind; how can I keep quiet?

They want me to get married! What a horror! It sounds like a funeral to me!

I am full of rage, and I wonder how it will end – provoking me into some uncharted ways. I have never felt this much resentment.

I haven't seen Prabhu for the last three days; I haven't gone for walk for three days; I haven't slept for the last three days; I haven't eaten for the last three days. I also put away my professional obligations on hold for the last three days. So today I am determined to see Prabhu in person; so I took a taxi and went to his home. It has been several months since I visited his home.

While riding in the taxi I checked my face in a mirror in my handbag. What a horrid face!

I didn't even care to notice the road the taxi took to reach his home. So, finally I am at his home and I am seeing him after an interval of three days. I noticed his car parked in the compound. I was determined I shouldn't make my feelings public once we come face to face with one another. I must beg him not to leave me in utter despair; I dumped the taxi fare and ran into the house.

As luck would have it, Manju was wandering on the lawn; she didn't notice me. Lest she should notice my panic, I wanted to act normal and eased into a cane chair in the garden and greeted her with a 'Good Morning!'

Manju was full of excitement as soon as she spotted me. She rushed toward me and sat next to me.

"How is your health? You look weary and tired! You are not well. Daddy didn't tell me anything." She held my hand as she spoke.

"I am fine," I replied while setting my hair neatly and exchanging a smile. "We have not seen each other for a long time."

"Where is Daddy," I asked in a very natural tone.

"Didn't he tell you? He has gone to Bangalore. . . He has been gone for the last three days." "

"He said he should be back today," I said. "So I thought he must be home by now." I managed to lie and straightened up.

"The flight is due only by eleven," she said and turned a page from her book.

"Would you like to have some coffee? How about some breakfast?"

"No thanks!" I wanted to get into her personal side. I suddenly recalled her association with Samji.

I desperately needed to escape from Manju's prying enquiries and sought a diversion.

"Were you not saying you have since given up dating Samji and bade him goodbye?" I asked. "But now heard rumors that you are still going on scooter rides with him! Be careful, what would happen if your mother ever finds out?"

Manju keenly examined her surroundings. "I see, did Daddy mention it to you? I know what he meant . . . That day – it was the only time – when I was riding the scooter with Samji we crossed Daddy's car. Is Daddy worried? As a matter of fact, everything I told Daddy about my relationship with Samji is true! Poor Samji – once in a while he does act silly! He has grown a long beard and the other day he begged me – literally cried, again and again: 'Tomorrow is my birthday, and I won't celebrate it if you don't join me.' So I went to his party. He is fine now." Manju keeps talking – one thing or the other.

Many of her homilies hardly touch my heart.

"That's exactly what I mentioned to your father," I assured her. "You can always trust Manju; she will never lie."

I stayed for ten more minutes and managed to conceal my disappointment over

not able to meet with Prabhu. I had a cup of coffee and left.

I need to call him during the lunch time. I should talk to him. That should help shatter the conspiracy now being hatched to keep us away from one another. Prabhu will certainly listen to me. He is my man!

35

"Yes, this is Prabhu speaking."

My eyes turn misty as soon as I hear his voice. I cry for no apparent reason; neither can I utter any words. Fortunately, my division employees are away from their seats – they are all gone for lunch. Meanwhile Prabhu has said 'hello' more than a few times. I am scared if he will put down the receiver. I cough again and I think I got my message.

"Ganga! What is this? Are you crying?"

I wipe the tears off my eyes as I spoke: "No, I was not crying. I need to see you at once. How come you left the city without informing me? I heard my brother Ganesan visited you and spoke to you. Do you know what he told me? He says you will never again see me. Well, I didn't believe him. He is evil; I am sure you would have never said such a thing! Why are you silent? Please tell me, did you ever tell him such a thing? Hello . . ."

My stomach turns as his silence lasts a little longer. Is it possible Prabhu promised to Ganesan that he will never again see me? What if he did? Maybe he was trying to pacify Ganesan with some quick fix. Ganesan must have made him come out with such an outrageous statement. I am sure Prabhu will never do anything against my will!

"Why are you still silent? Please say something, anything . . . I am again happy now – after listening to your voice. Can you understand my agony for the last three days?"

It doesn't matter even if we don't see one another. After all we have spent several days without seeing one another. We can endure even a long separation provided there is a lingering hope: that we will be meeting sometime in the future. But lacking such a hope, even a moment of separation becomes unbearable! That was the reason why this morning I rushed to your home. I felt a little better when I came to know you were out of town. I spoke with Manju. Did she mention it to you? The other day you seemed worried about Manju – and her relationship with her boyfriend Samji. It turned out to be exactly as I mentioned it to you. I asked Manju – directly – about Samji. That day was his birthday and he started entreating Manju that he won't be celebrating his birthday if she did not show up. So she attended his birthday party. That is what actually happened; by coincidence your eyes caught them riding a scooter the same day . . . Are you with me? I keep talking; why are you silent? Please say something . . .“

He starts coughing. I get into a playful mood and tease him:

“Are you crying?” I am still laughing. A short pause . . .My God, he says, “yes!”

I can see his face He is terribly sad and is heartbroken.

“What happened? Tell me everything! What did Ganesan actually tell you? Did he pick up any quarrel with you? Why are you sad?”

“No, no, nothing like that ever happened . . . Your brother did visit me and I told him I will meet with you only if you consent to this marriage. He told me your marriage could be in jeopardy if I keep visiting you at home, and I think he is right. How can you let your life be further compromised because of me? Please give your consent for the wedding and let things take their own course; then I will certainly come and see you in person. I seem to think you will never consent to this alliance if we continue to

keep seeing one another as usual. You are a smart woman, intelligent and wise. Please listen to me, and consider my advice in good spirits!”

He is babbling on and on. I am mad and in tears.

“Stop it!” I holler at him. Then I become suddenly quiet. After a moment I start crying, again. Prabhu silently watches me from the other side – albeit with a whiff of indifference, I suppose: ‘Let her mourn over this.’ My heart aches over the realization that even Prabhu has failed to understand how badly I need his support and what an effective bulwark he could offer me being on my side. I had never imagined that one day he would drift so remote from me!

I tell him with all the seriousness I could muster: “I will never consent to this alliance; I will never voluntarily marry anyone. Let us keep meeting one another as usual, that is more than enough for me! I have mentally sacrificed everything close to me – my mother, brother, and family affiliations. I have only one left, and that is you! I am yours! You are my man! Try remembering what you have been saying in the past: ‘We must willingly give up this life and escape into some strange land where we can make a fresh beginning . . . I am willing to join you in your quest. I mean it, really! We love each other! It is true that I was teasing my folks by dispatching RKV on a ‘mission’, but does it justify you putting me through this horror? Please understand me. I need to talk to you. We need to meet at once and discuss many important issues. Will you meet with me?” Again and again I keep wiping the tears off my eyes. My God, how did I end up like this? I am still at his mercy.

He lets out a deep sigh,

“Ganga,” he addresses me, and I feel so happy! I will be just as happy if he keeps addressing me like this . . .

Prabhu tells me I have become too emotional and keep saying things that

actually make no sense; he says, in so far as he is concerned, I am just an outsider; he reminds me I am a good daughter, a good sister and was born in a decent family and thus deserve a good husband and a happy family life. He feels guilty that his sinful behavior is responsible for my present plight; he is also scared of retribution - that his past behavior may even drag his own daughter into a dreadful end. He says he considers me as another daughter, and that the love we share between each other belongs to the same class. No other love is possible, he asserts. I can't believe myself: How have times changed!

He concludes – in a very firm voice:

“We can't love each other. You have yourself said this several times! Do you remember? That is the truth . . .”

Yes, I did say so in a firm voice. The moment it was said its falsehood became apparent! I try to recall the sequence of the events . . .

What was he thinking the day he came to see me after my first telephone call - as he awaited me in his car in the Island Grounds? His make-up, the flashy clothes, the aroma of the perfume and the way he cast his look at me against the enticing evening easily revealed to me the intention behind those looks.

How could I reveal to him the consequences of his outrage, its scars unhealed, and the agony he has caused? But where to begin? My lips are dry

When I met him after many years – that is when I stared back at the man for a second time in so many years - I wanted to pour out everything from my heart from the moment of first encounter with him to the present. I set my eyes on him till that very moment; but was still struggling for words. . .

The memories from the 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 sights and sounds. 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.

Had I remained silent and not protested, my life might have taken an entirely different direction.

Why did I react with such a horror? Why did I frighten him so badly; after that incident Prabhu never again would dare touch me – even if he were unconscious.

Am I being punished for my caution the other day?

He is still talking on the phone. I don't understand any of that. I am still mired in my own thoughts.

I feel like tearing off all the screens masking our friendship – they only seem only veritable lies – and expose us just as a male and female. Suddenly I have an epiphany: is it too late? Have we already crossed that time limit? Prabhu says he will never see me; he will do so only if I see him with a wedding invitation! How crazy can he get?

“I will marry you!” I scream on the top of my voice. “Not because of your wealth or status. – I keep laughing to myself – but because I am fully aware you have none. I know you as a man, and I will marry you as a man. Let us not deceive ourselves anymore! I am not ashamed to admit that I am willing to share your bed!” I whispered the words over the phone even as I was profusely shedding tears.

:”Stop the nonsense.” Prabhu admonishes me and puts down the receiver.

I buried my head on the table and gave in to violent sobs. Tears flow down my fingers.

Tears, the dirty water purged from the human mind . .

A sudden thought occurs to me: have the employees returned from their lunch? Did anyone notice me? I scan the surroundings; there is nobody. The lunch time is not over yet.

I again telephoned to Prabhu.

"Yes, Prabhu here."

"This is Ganga." I feel my voice choke.

A short pause.

"Go ahead." He seems so casual.

"I have already told you what was on my mind." I am trying my best not to cry.

"I believe I too told you everything on my mind," he says followed by a deep sigh.

"I can't live without you." I complain like a child. He too acts like a father patting on a child's back.

"No, you can. Please try."

"Do you think you can?"

"I too think so. I will. . ."

"Why do you think so? Please don't. . ."

He cuts in. "Ganga! I am a little suspicious, is it really you? You must not end up like this. If you find me stubborn and adamant, remember it happened because of you. How can you act like this?"

"I have lost myself, don't you understand?"

"You, you haven't lost yourself. I am the one who thought so once and realized what a mistake it was. I am not prepared to make another mistake. And it is not right for an angel like you. Please forgive me for saying this. I will see you only after you give consent to this marriage or another one. That will become possible only if I don't see you. I want to thank you because it was you who gave me the strength and courage to act this way. I have always respected your advice and ideas; now you must respect my advice. If you are stubborn and reject my advice outright there can be only one outcome – we will have to part our ways permanently. There is no other choice!. May I say good bye?"

I am crazy as hell and I banged the receiver down. Then I told myself: "Good bye!"

My head is reeling; I weep no more; everything looks empty and all my thoughts have taken leave of me – permanently. I feel like a stranger to myself – totally alienated from the people and the world around me. I feel like a living corpse.

I scanned the files waiting for my attention. I briskly sign up all the documents. My lips are getting dry. I gulp the plain water from the glass – so carefully laid on my table every day by the office peon Rangaswamy.

Why not call it a day and go home? I am sure I will have a sound sleep once I go home. I feel so exhausted.

I am ready to go home. Soon Rangaswamy showed up and I told him: "If anyone calls, tell them I am sick and went home." I called back and asked him to fetch me a taxi.

He accompanied me in the elevator to the ground floor. He looks at my face but dare not ask him any question.

Once we are on the ground floor he asks me to wait and rushes out to get a taxi. Mrs. Manuel saw me coming in the opposite direction.

"Going home?" she asks.

"Yes." Her cigarette odor reminds me of Prabhu.

"Not feeling well?"

Yet another nod.

The taxi shows up. I wave back my head at Mrs. Manuel and bid her farewell. I am back in my dream world. I am in a car with Prabhu- he is in the driver's seat. Everything I spoke with him over the phone is just a dream!

I come home. Mother who has been freely resting on her back on the floor in the hall – secure with the knowledge nobody will be intruding into her privacy – seemed a little bewildered at my sudden invasion.

Even before she could venture any question, I disappeared into my room. I tossed out my handbag without even caring where it fell. I discarded the sari and fell on the bed. The whole body ached. I kept lolling on the bed several times; I pressed my leg on hard on the cot to ease my pain. Mother must have thought I would be coming out soon. After lingering for a long time she called out. "Anything wrong with you? Are you sick? You have only half-day work/ This is no Saturday! Are you sick? Open the door! Do you want some coffee?"

I gave no answer. I get up and sit on the bed. Mother expected me to respond.

"Well, what more can I say? I can't do anything if you don't open your mouth! Did you have anything for lunch?" She asks.

I gave no answer. Words fail me. I am a little scared that I may blurt out something in wild anger. Suddenly my eyes fall on that mini-bar. I had it in my bedroom for some time ..

I took the case out and laid it on the bed. Some three-fourths of the bottle is still left. An elegant pair of glasses flanks it on either side. I took the whiskey bottle and examined it.

I recalled my conversation the other day when I wished I would face no occasion to enjoy a drink. Has that occasion arrived now?

I opened the bottle and checked the smell of that yellow liquid. I emptied the contents from the bottle into the glass. I watch my reflection in the mirror – a liquor bottle in one hand and a glass in the other; I stand there, with no sari and only a petty coat. I have since bidden farewell to the old image of Ganga.

I empty the glass contents in one gulp in one stretch . . .

Good heavens! My throat, stomach and the whole body seem set on a fire!

So what ?

EPILOGUE

A lot of things have since happened. But in so far as Ganga's life was concerned there have been no dramatic changes. And that non-happening event seems to have made her turn against herself, her body, her surroundings and her own folks. Her determination to wreck vengeance against her opponents set off a wild fury ready to consume all those lined up against her. Bitter and resentful, her face weary and the eyes shot red-blood, Ganga spends her days and nights alone, occasionally gnashing her teeth.

Her very face seems to have become a total contradiction to her prior image. Not just the face, even her looks and manner, inside her office and outside in the public - as when she talks to the taxi drivers - seem to belie her former image.

It was Rangaswamy, the office peon, who often spoke well of Ganga and even considered her as an exemplary working-woman; now he too seems a little dismayed by her unique manners and has begun vilifying her in public.

Mrs. Manuel and Ganga spend a lot of time together at lunch time. This has now become a daily routine. Ganga spends more than an hour in Mrs. Manuel's room. It has been public knowledge that Mrs. Manuel is a habitual cigarette smoker. It was Rangaswamy who first noticed Ganga smoking a cigarette; now the whole office knows it. Her lips have turned dark – just like Mrs. Manuel's.

Ganga coughs occasionally – as if bringing down the office in one violent thunder. She immediately gulps down the water from the glass that Rangaswamy faithfully supplies her every morning; he has been doing this for several years but until now Ganga scarcely bothered to touch it. But nowadays, after helping herself, she rings the bell and summons him to her office

at least a few times. Rangaswamy too has begun to call her names – just as he does the other bosses; he uses even racier language while referring to her.

Mrs. Manuel and Ganga often go to the movies together. Ganga even visits the Manuel couple at their home. The Manuel couple also visit Ganga and spend many evenings with her – often turning a few good nights into the riotous ones; the neighbors too have often observed the Manuel couple leave Ganga's home weary and tired soon after making their condition a royal public display by starting their motor cycle with a wild uproar. . .

Just last week when Ganga returned home after participating in the Manuel couple birthday party, her taxi driver revealed Ganga's true colors in the public for all the neighbors to watch out and make up their own mind; when he described Ganga in his typical street jargon she tossed out a ten-rupee-bill in his face and continued to disparage him for ten minutes after he left the scene; she stood in the middle of the street and let out a barrage of words – her take on the taxi drivers in general; the prevailing laws on Prohibition and the morbid curiosity of the citizens in the personal affairs of others.

Such scenes were not uncommon in those neighborhoods; a few women from the slums adjacent to *Panchavati* often made their way into suburbs where they indulged in street brawls; but they always spoke in Tamil which often scared the locals. Now the locals are scared of Ganga mouthing epithets in English.

That taxi driver made known to the public that Ganga was drunk; she too publicized a hoax to the public.

She claimed she had a special permit for alcohol consumption; no one could meddle with her; she was also earning a four-digit salary!

Soon after this episode she decided to obtain her own permit for alcohol consumption; Mrs. Manuel helped her to get it.

As far Ganga was concerned, her mother, brother and his family, Prabhu and Manju were now objects of her past forgotten. She scarcely thinks of them; when and if she does by accident, she is overcome by self-contempt.

Of late Ganga has started nit-picking with even the small and the sundry – the milkman, the street vendor, or the newspaper boy – drawing the attention of the locals to join the fray; she constantly makes her presence felt among the locals; when not squabbling with others, she lets her transistor radio blare music much to the annoyance of the neighbors. She wants everybody to know she is having a good time!

Once in a while her mother Kanakam does visit Ganga – maybe to blast her for something or the other. For some reason, Ganga forgot about the monthly payment of one hundred rupees to her mother through the office peon Rangaswamy. As far as Kanakam was concerned, this is certainly a major issue. She let a week pass before she descended on her daughter.

That day Ganga didn't even go to work; she spent the whole day quarreling with her mother.

She refused to offer any financial help to her mother; how dare her mother, living with her son, think of begging money from her daughter? – Ganga demanded to know. Doesn't that family feel any sense of shame? If her mother really needed money from her, Ganga insisted, she need to approach her with some respect and humility! Nobody can dictate Ganga what she can or can't do!

"You must never again enter these premises," Ganga screamed at her mother and tossed out one thousand rupees – not one hundred – at her face. The rupee bills

fluttered and fell all over the corners in the hall.

Kanakam wept even as she was smiting all over her face. Like a beggar she picked up the bills on the floor. She went home carrying the money but not before complaining to the neighbors about her daughter; she literally cursed her daughter in the presence of every neighbor.

“One of these days she will end up like a body eaten by worms,” Kanakam cursed her. “The whole street will rise against her and throw her out of town. Even if no man could ever control her temper, certainly God will.” For a long time after Kanakam was gone, the neighbors were afraid to come out of their houses because they felt her curse still loomed large over the Ganga’s house.

But Ganga strode on the street with her head held high. She had her handbag hung on her shoulder. Her neighbors despised her walking with the free end of her sari caught in a breeze exposing her back for all to see. The teenagers among the neighbors have named her ‘*The Dancing Horse*’; the truth is everybody is scared of her; Ganga is ready to take on anybody.

Ganga spends the day roaming the streets; still she has not given up her morning and evening walks; even if she misses the morning walk, she never misses the evening walk. Sometimes she returns home very late at night after her evening walk.

It is now pitch dark in Spur Tank Road. A far a bus could be seen moving – rather heavily and slowly. It is time for street lights to be lit but thanks to some bureaucratic squabble among the city government officials, many street lights have remained unlit. The road is lined with trees; shadows are cast along the road as well as under the light poles...

Ganga is going on her evening walk; a small car emerges from a side lane –

beaming a light on her. As she turned around, the driver got a glimpse of her and her looks. She wriggled her body as she stood before him. The car suddenly slowed down and went past her.

After traveling a few feet past her, a cigarette butt – still smoldering – was thrown out of the car and fell on the road – as if signaling a message to her. As the stub landed near her, Ganga trampled it under her foot and eagerly stared at the car receding from her sight. The car was about to take a turn to the right into Kasa Major Road; but it now circled around an island and returned to the Spur Tank Road traveling in the opposite direction.

Ganga continued to walk; the car again went past her and Ganga frowned at the light and let out a giggle.

Just like the cigarette end that signaled a message, this nervous laugh too suggested a message.

She never again bothered to look at the car that crossed her. She knew it will surely return . . .

She seemed lost in some dreamy, imaginary world. Her walks always seem to lure her into those, pleasant, dream-like flights.

Ganga has become a fodder for everybody. She too spends a lot of time talking with others. She recently got a promotion. She now has an office car that takes her every day from home to work and back. Quite a few of her colleagues also travel with her; she gives them parties at her home.

The folks in her neighborhood – those living in the house opposite to hers– often watch the proceedings from their window.

While the partygoers at Ganga’s roof terrace remained mainly off the public view, the neighbors did get a taste of what was going on: the clinking of the wine glasses as they were being raised high, the exchange of

greetings accompanied by words 'Cheeriyo' and other friendly banter.

Once in a while Ganesan meets with Prabhu. He complains a lot about Ganga, but Prabhu offers no opinion; he chomps on his cigarette and acts as if he is listening to some sad story from the past.

Prabhu has no inclination to meet or talk with Ganga. He is scared even to think of any occasion where he or she might run into one another!

He often recalls her telephone conversation where Ganga confessed to her secret fear that someone might try to rape her; Prabhu is suddenly overcome by an adolescent fear that he may get into a similar situation should he call on her.

He is also angry that Ganga had totally rejected his advice to put her life in order. She was certainly a different breed of the women Prabhu had met, seen and cultivated in his life; this has bred in him a myriad of feelings about her: guilt, sympathy, love, respect, and devotion. She turned to be an answer to his lonely life; her company gave him the strength he sorely needed; in fact her innate qualities were the basis for cementing the relationship between the two.

Now the very foundation of that relationship has been demolished; Ganga is totally transformed! Prabhu is no stranger to Ganga's new world; he knows it, he has seen it, he has even taken part in it.

What saddens him now is not his loss of someone who deserved his love, devotion and loyalty. As Prabhu recalls the numerous women who were his victims, he wonders if they too were made of same caliber and strength like Ganga – worthy of his love, devotion and loyalty. What if? That realization makes his loss incomprehensible to him and mind boggling. . .

As far as Prabhu was concerned, Ganga's case is behind him. But he thinks: what if I had shown the same love and sympathy to

another victim of my youthful indiscretion? Would she have found redemption?

Prabhu found his life mired in confusion. He often thinks of Manju and worries about her future. He has pretty much lost his faith in everyone. Now, following Ganga's betrayal, he considers Padma a paragon of virtue; he often recalls and gratefully acknowledges how Padma is taking care of Manju and his other children. He too wants her protective shield and finally surrendered to her.

Padma is happy that Prabhu has returned to her fold – totally freed from any obligations other than to his family and to his business. He has even stopped sporting his usual fashionable clothes.

Just as Padma had expected him to do, Prabhu goes to work every day and returns home. He drinks – alone – while at home. His beard, left untrimmed for some time now, has actually grown a bit longer than usual. The gray patch shining among his dark, curly locks extenuate not only his experience and maturity, but his sense of detachment. Prabhu lives through habit – just like his drink!

He often thinks of his father – who often lamented over his son's slide to depravity and grieved on his death bed. Prabhu prays that he grow mature enough not to grieve if and when his children get corrupted. He is trying to attain that detachment.

He firmly believes every human life will surely end in corruption. He has a good example to prove his point: Ganga! He lets out a deep sigh.

The balcony light is dim. Manju is studying for her exams. Prabhu is in the drinking session. The servants are climbing the stairs carrying various snacks to supplement Prabhu's dinner paraphernalia. Padma is seated next to Prabhu and serving him drinks. A Hindi film tune in soft voice

could be heard from a nearby transistor radio.

Padma is telling him: "This afternoon I saw Ganga in a movie theatre. She has totally changed, I couldn't believe my eyes! She couldn't even recognize me! She was with some other Anglo-Indian woman. Haven't you seen her recently? I felt sorry for her. I told myself, 'She doesn't recognize me, why should I impose myself on her?' I was thinking . . ." she wanted to continue when Prabhu cut her hastily; he became angry for no particular reason.

"I don't care, don't spoil my evening, . . ." he screamed on the top of his voice. Padma was a little frightened at his sudden anger; she tried to comfort him and poured some more whisky into his glass.

Yes, Padma too has changed!
