

# PURE AS A CRYSTAL

BY

"MAHARISHI"

TRANSLATED FROM

TAML NOVEL *SPATIKAM*

BY

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## PURE AS A CRYSTAL

Did I do the right thing? Sometimes, I wonder; my anxiety only increases all the more when I keep looking at Visu's face . . .

Didn't our elders tell say one should never misplace one's generosity? "Don't indiscriminately welcome everyone into your home," they say. Did I ignore that warning? I keep mulling over it. What's my error? Quite often I stumble into confusion and bewilderment and this fretfulness freezes my whole body . . .

At my age, certainly I don't deserve this cruel punishment!

Yes, it is really too much!

Where can I possibly go and complain? And who's there to listen to me, anyway? I keep talking to myself. Otherwise, I pray and whine before God who's ensconced in the dark *sanctum sanctorum* - safely hidden from public view. I like Him in preference to people who have eyes but wouldn't see; have ears but wouldn't listen; and have a mouth but wouldn't speak. I feel a little comfort and satisfaction in seeking the

refuge in the One - the *Nirguna Parabrahmam* - who has spread his glory all over the universe.

Will *he* ever return?

I will not go around asking questions; all I do is to ask God only. I can hardly muster any courage to say that *he* will return one day. I can't even begin to think of such a possibility . . . Why?

Five-year-old Visu is lying on the bed with the eyes closed; he's not sleeping, yet. He is enjoying listening to the heavy downpour outside. He's too young to know life's ups and downs or how one's mind works. Once in a while he will nag me for a bed-time story and I too will indulge him with some tale of a king and queen; Visu thinks real life is exactly like that. His mind is callow - like a little bud not yet ready to shoot up and spread the aroma around.

The child doesn't know how I feel distressed when I notice what Ammaponnu<sup>1</sup> is going through. My love and concern for Visu and Ammaponnu hasn't driven me to complain to God why I have been put through this ordeal. I miss you so much I feel like cursing you aloud but, I know, my heart will melt the moment I set my eyes on your face! How can I explain the magic on your face?

Will *he* return?

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<sup>1</sup> A term of endearment. Means a mother's (favorite?) daughter

My God, will *he* ever come back?

The rain has totally stopped; I can hear the rain water rushing along the sidewalks; now and then, the trees shiver in the gusty wind and I listen to the sound of water dripping from the leaves. There's no other noise. How can you expect any clatter after eight in this *agraharam*?

Gopalachari residing in the house across the street is vigorously chomping on betel leaves and arcea nuts and spitting on the street; I can hear the old Ajji *Patti* living two houses away pounding the betel leaves in a stone mortar; and from the last house in the street corner where Kakkarai Karnam and Venkat are playing cards with a hurricane lantern on their front porch, you may hear an occasional banter followed by a loud noise; otherwise, the whole village seems buried in deathly silence.

The rain has stopped but you still feel the cool breeze. Air rushes into the house the instant you open the front door. There's a light pole close to my front porch but its hurricane lamp has long extinguished in the rain. I open the door ajar and peer out; the long porch is empty - just like my mind is. That's where *he* used to sleep - bundled in a long *soman* - wrapped from head to foot.

"Yagnam, . . . . Yagnam, are you sleeping?" I keep asking, and there would be no response. "Maybe he's fast asleep," I tell myself and back away into the house.

No, he's not there; he's surely gone.

The whole *agraharam* is enveloped in darkness. I see people walk by, some slowly and others fast, on the street; I can't recognize any of them. The film music coming from the Sarada Touring Cinema House in Vannarpet fills my ears. I hear many sounds: someone suddenly breaking into a song; people yelling and screaming at one another, followed by a baby crying.

Slowly, my thoughts go back to several years ago when I felt the same mood all around me. Yes, just like now, it was also a dark night . . .

"Can I rest on your porch for a while?" someone asks me in a kittenish voice. In the dim street light, I could hardly make out his face. I thought he was someone passing by, so I gave my consent, closed the door behind me and returned to the kitchen.

Next day morning, when I opened the front door, he was already gone!

Maybe he's an only a bystander, who knows? I didn't think much of him.

The previous day was *Ekadasi*; that day was *Dwadasi*. When I was getting ready for the midday meals, I saw him again - standing in front of my house.

He sported lots of curled hair, say, like Subbuni, another resident in the opposite row, and looked very tall with deep-set eyes. He wore a shabby *veshti* while a torn towel hung carelessly on his shoulders. He looked like one of those milestones on a highway, squashed and beaten and covered with muck and dirt; still, the face had some aura to it.

Was this the same fellow who asked for my permission to sleep on my porch? The revelation shocked me.

He stood at the house entrance staring at me.

"What do you want? Why are you shy?" I asked him in rather an intimidating voice. He seemed so weak he could hardly open his mouth. He pointed his hand at his mouth and belly.

I told you that day was special - *Dwadasi*- and, to share one's food with a guest on such an auspicious day, was considered a virtuous deed. The young man looked like a Brahmin, my heart melted in no time. I cut off a banana leaf from my backyard, invited him into the house, and served him food.

I admit I am a hard-hearted person and no one in this *agraharam* messes with me. I always keep my relationships

with others at arm's length; I know they badmouth me as miserly, quick-tempered and not easy to get along. I know all of that but, as far as I am concerned, it is no big deal. I don't have to depend on anybody. I have some landed property in Saliangalam which yields close to 250 to 300 liters of paddy every year; I have men who gather and deliver the crop at my home in two bullock carts, hoard it away in a barn, and cover it up. I live in a house that belonged to my ancestors - it is quite spacious and boasts two large foyers. Two huge tamarind trees occupy my backyard and, in the months February through April, you will notice their branches growing heavy and bending downwards with clusters of fruits. If I were lucky enough to protect those fruits from the wayward boys who keep throwing stones at them, I will end up with enough to fill in at least two or three sacks for every shakedown. I can sell them in market and make some extra money. I never lend money to others! How can I be sure they will repay me? Why should I have to go after them? They are all useless fellows, anyway - they have neither the knack nor the decency! I stay away from them because I want to make no enemies or friends.

I was talking about something else and easily got distracted; what I meant to say was . . .

First, he wanted my permission to rest on the porch; next, he asked for food. How could I figure out anything about him in just two days? There's no reason why I should have particularly cared for him - he was one of those passing through the agraharam. But the third day's the important one. What is it that made me drag the fellow forcibly when I noticed him tired and sitting on the porch of a opposite house that belonged to the village priest? God was just waiting to see when we both will 'hook up' with one another! How could my thick-head have known anything about it?

I was standing outside of my house when I noticed him, and he stood up immediately as if waiting for a cue. He seemed awkward and hesitant, so I waved my hand and called him. He came up to me, laughing. I pulled out a \_\_\_\_\_ leaf from backyard and served him a mixture of *sambar*, *rasam* and *koottu*.

"This is all I have got," I told him. "After eating, I want you to clean up a couple of these utensils." He nodded and immediately began wolfing down the food before him; he was really *that* hungry.

I was saying the third day was the most important one; yes, it was very important.

I asked him only to clean the two grimy utensils. But he also vigorously drew water from the well and filled up two large containers in the backyard.

"You need anything else?" he asked me. For someone who had never before heard a word offering help, his question bolstered my spirits.

It has been close to eight days since I collected some 15 liters of paddy from the barn and asked Mariamma to take it to the mill for machine-grinding. She's not been seen since the last four days; people told me she was gone to offer condolences to a family. Does it mean I have to wait till she returns?

Here's someone offering me to help; shall I suggest that I go out with him to the mill? Why not?

I was a little scared to ask but I asked him anyway.

And he said yes.

I told him we may have to make two trips to the mill - walk around a track in Gopalachari's backyard, take a turn and, then stroll along the wall of the *Sivan Kovil*, but that's all unnecessary. The ear-splitting noise from the rice mill could be heard in the surrounding eight villages . . . One can easily find the way . . .

He offered me timely help. That's how one develops love and admiration for another person.

It is only when our mind and action are in harmony with one another that we can come to the right decision about other people.

His modesty as well his offer to help me, and the way he accomplished it - these were enough to encourage me to feel a special liking for him.

Usually I never prepared anything special for him; that was the situation until the last four days. But now, as I start washing down the rice, I pause to think: should I cook a little more?

I do add two more fistfuls of rice; the cooked rice rises almost to the brim of the vessel.

Why should I prepare the extra food for him?

Why should I?

Whom should I ask this question? I have to ask only myself!

Every night, he comes casually and sleeps on the porch. He gets up at dawn and, using a mix of water and cow dung, he scrubs the house - the front and the living room. He bathes in the village pond and, with the clothes still wet and dripping, goes to the temple where he stands in a corridor in loincloth and dries the clothes in the hot sun. He dresses in a hurry, enters the garden next to the temple and gathers flowers for worship - *arali*, *nandiyavattai*, and others in his

towel. He carries them to the temple premises and strings them together. One day he offers the garland to *Lord Ganesha*, another day to the *Lord Subrahmanya*. Yet, another day, he wraps it around the neck of the *Nandi*.

I hear from people who saw him in the temple premises talk about him. I am told he doesn't talk much with anybody.

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"What's your name? . . . "

I asked him one day after serving food. That's the fourth day of our acquaintance.

"Yagnam." He answers me while looking at the food and performing *parishesanam*.

Once he was done with the ritual, I asked him, again:

"Where are you from?"

"From *Kumbakonam*."

"You have nobody?"

He nods his head saying there's no one.

"I don't understand your nodding . . . "

"*Patti*, I have nobody to care for me; I am an orphan. My father had seizure and was run over by a car in the middle of road; my mother had died before him."

"Oh, I am sorry . . . But how did you end up there - in *Kumbakonam*? How did you get along there?"

"My hometown is *Mayavaram*. But I grew up in *Sastri's* household in *Kumbakonam*."

"Grew up?"

"I came to that house after my father passed away."

I asked him no more questions. For the present, I thought, that was enough.

After the meal, he gathered the leaf, and got up.

Quite a decent fellow, he was, and well-behaved too. A bright patch of sacred ash always adorned his forehead, with a dot of vermilion at its center. Heavy, dense locks covered the head and, the way he combed and gathered the tresses into a braid, gave them a special appeal.

I heard, every day, Yagnam helps the temple priest during the evening rituals; he vigorously scrubs and cleanses the brass lamps in rows along the pathway leading to *darshan*; not only that. Yagnam also recites the *mantras* along with the priest when he performs the *deeparadhanai*. As people keep telling me things what they consider mundane and ordinary about Yagnam, I feel as if I have heard something extraordinary about him. I feel elated whenever I come to know someone who commends his behavior. Of course, he's just somebody who sleeps on my front porch, eats whatever I serve him; there's no other relationship between us. Still, I am thrilled when I listen to people talking about him.

"How long were you there with *Kumbakonam Sastri*?"

"Say, five to six years."

"What were you doing there?"

"I would sleep on the Sastrigal's porch and bathe in *Cauvery*. I would accompany Sastrigal when he goes out to perform rituals at peoples' houses. I took part in death ceremonies and obligatory rituals on new moon and special occasions. He taught me some *mantras* and I too learnt some, on my own. It was he who introduced me to *Vedas* and their recitation, and soon I joined a group of priests and started chanting the *Vedas*. Isn't that a great privilege? I consider it a gift bestowed upon me by my ancestors. I had only a brief stint at the *Vedic* school, and I would be lying if I said I had willingly wanted to study there. It was very convenient to me; the food was good and I ate probably what two students would eat together! Eventually they threw me out, then I came to the *Sastri's* house. Even then I didn't think I would stick around there for a long time. How do you expect the world to care for someone who has studied only up to fourth class?"

"But then something happened: slowly the *Kumbakonam Sastrigal* began to like me; a bond developed between us, and his daughter Komali too was affectionate toward me."

"It's a miracle how *Sastrigal* thought of treating me as one of his regular disciples!"

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I would listen to his stories only when Yagnam sat down for his meals.

He asked me one day.

"*Patti*, you are so kind and generous to me that you invite me into your kitchen and feed me every day, but I don't know how I can ever repay your hospitality," he was saying. "I feel I am slowly becoming more and more indebted to you." For a moment I was stunned; it was a question I myself never understood, it was a question with no answer. Was my concern for Yagnam a little too much? I know people are already gossiping about us, why should I tolerate them? "Did you notice this woman's fancy in her old age?" asks the resident Gopalachari with a wink. "She drags a young man passing by and makes him her permanent guest. With one foot in grave, why does this old hag need all this charade?" Gopalachari is always a little patronizing and mischievous. But I know he is a decent fellow and harbors no ill will . . .

Do you know how I answered Yagnam?

"I don't care who you are. I like you. You understand me very well, know what I want and are very helpful to me. If I

were blessed with a son, do you think he will treat me any better?" I noticed his eyes become teary.

"Patti, I am indeed a lucky fellow. It is almost a month since I left *Kumbakonam*; actually, I walked all the way. I didn't mind my legs aching, but I could not bear the heartache."

"What are you saying?"

"I am talking about my heart, *Patti*," he says, "They broke my heart!" He was close to tears. Poor fellow! I don't know who tormented this boy! After all, he's an orphan; why would anyone care?

Didn't he mention about a girl called Komali? Was there some strain in their relationship? But this boy looks decent and well-behaved; I see no reason to suspect any bad behavior on his part. But I can easily imagine some hitch: either he put her in a jam or she did him in. I was determined to know what happened, so I asked him.

"What happened there to wound your feelings so deeply? The other day you were mentioning about one Komali. Was she the source of your problems?"

With no hesitation whatsoever, he said yes. I felt inwardly a little proud that my suspicion was correct.

"I am not responsible for what happened," he said. "I am always aware of my position, my status and what I deserve;

I have never tried to cross that line - even by an inch. I am aware that I will get recognition only when I recite the *mantras* deep from my heart in the company of other Brahmins. One can't claim to perform the ceremonial rites on a new moon by just rote recitation. You have to pronounce each word correctly with proper accent as laid down by the elders. That's how you earn respect of others who reward you for your services. Otherwise, they will dismiss you in no time with just two *annas*!

"When you accompany other priests in Vedic recitations, be aware that you stop acting like a bragger. Better to keep your mouth shut and learn to gladly accept whatever is offered for your services. That's how you get a chance to accompany your mentor the next time. I must always acknowledge my limited knowledge and be aware that I am not a full-fledged priest. So, how can I clamor for things beyond my shortcomings? This applies to all aspects of my life. Knowing as I do, how can I accede to the wishes of a girl who's way above me?"

I keep staring at Yagnam. He goes on as if reciting *mantras* in a ritual. He is hiding nothing and reveals everything to me from his heart.

"Komali was studying in *Kumbakonam* College, she's very beautiful. *Kumbakonam Sastrigal*, by family tradition,



was a priest but he had been always a practical man, and worldly-wise. He had no other children. So Komali grew up as his favorite; she too was very smart and beautiful . . ."

"Yagnam, you too are smart and intelligent," I cut in. "If one were to ignore wealth and status, it won't be easy to find a young man equal to you. Well, go ahead with your story."

"At the beginning, I mistook Komali's attitude towards me as one of sympathy and consideration. I had wrongly assumed she was concerned that I had a poor self-image. Then, much later, I came to realize that's not the case . . ."

"One day I was caught in a heavy downpour and suffering from cold; there was a marriage ceremony in *Samimalai* but I couldn't accompany the *Sastrigal* for the rituals. 'Some fellow! Quite useless; you are sick just when a big opportunity knocks on the door,' *Sastrigal* yelled at me. 'Take care of the house when I am gone for four days - this is a three-day wedding. It is a pity you are missing this great event.' Then he took a few other boys for help and left.

I was the only one left behind.

It was quite a big house. It had a large backyard with at least fifty coconut saplings and almost an equal number of arcea-nut trees. 'Don't just wrap up yourself with a blanket and stay in the bed too long,' *Sastrigal* ordered me. 'I want

you to collect all the arcea nuts and weed out the bad ones and bag the rest.'

He had been gone for two days. The third day, after the evening rituals, I was busy picking out the arcea nuts scattered on the ground.

I didn't notice Komali when she came up and stood in the backyard. She had already returned from the college at four. For some time now, there has been a mystery in her looks and gestures. Everything I had never imagined or dreamt about her or tried to safeguard myself against, Komali was trying to make me understand! To the extent I ignored her signals, she had also grown more determined than ever. The arcea nuts were littered on the ground and when I picked up a few and walked towards Komali she seemed inclined to clutch them from me at first, then she relaxed her grip. The nuts fell on the ground; I grew angry, but she laughed.

'What is this?' Her behavior unnerved me.

'These are arcea nuts,' she says - pointing a finger to the ground.

Darkness had already crept in.

We were the only two souls standing in the backyard. The wind was blowing hard, and I was struck by her beauty. I didn't know what she found attractive about me, but I realized I didn't deserve her attention. I composed myself and

stood right there, but Komali grabbed my hand and gave into violet sobs. She didn't know what to say; neither did I. I struggled to get away from her, and ran. My fever - receding a little while ago - then returned and spread with a new vigor all over my body. I trembled with guilt. I could never imagine her looks, her gestures and her sighs would carry such an import.

'Don't you like me?' She asked in a quivering voice, came up and stood beside me. I didn't know what to say. Then, suddenly, I managed to ask her a question.

"Komali, I don't understand you. Why are you attracted to me?"

"It is the mind that, at the beginning, through eyes, triggers one's liking or disliking for any object or person," Komali began as if lecturing me. "It is the sight that determines what the mind desires. The mind is undergoing constant change. Once the sight triggers a sense of satisfaction and longing for some object, the mind pays no attention to other human frailties." While I couldn't fully grasp what she's trying to say, I did understand her way of thinking.

'You are saying what we perceive by sight determines what's right and what's wrong,' I told her. 'Well, if the mind were to accept everything the sight triggers with no discrimination or judgment, it will only end up as a dumping ground

for all the garbage one can imagine. It is essential that both the mind and the eyes act in harmony with one another.' I spoke the words involuntarily; it was as if another Yagnam had emerged out of my persona. I didn't realize I could actually speak those words.

'What one perceives by sight is also influenced by the mind,' I went on. 'Both the eyes and mind play their respective roles but the final outcome is left to the mind only. Just because one's eyes are attracted to an object or person, it doesn't automatically follow the mind has to accept it. The mind that doesn't distinguish between what is right and wrong is actually a confused mind.'

'It is not just the eyes, my mind also desires you,' Komali told me.

I was scared even to understand what she's saying. I let out a laughter, not because I was indifferent to her words; neither was it because I understood everything she said. But I fully realized I was caught up in utter confusion. And I made up my mind: I would never yield to Komali's desire; it was not a desire, one should call it a perversion. And I decided to untangle myself from that crisis before her madness swelled further. I couldn't afford to stand before a fiery confrontation. Till now I had been playing safe walking on a

knife's edge and figuring out how to free myself with my reputation still intact.

"Komali, you have a great future ahead of you. I wish you will find a husband of your heart's desire and lead a happy, married life. You are well educated, and it is only just and proper that you deserve someone whose status and qualifications match yours. As for me, I am an orphan and I live at your father's benevolence. My personal life has hardly taken any root. Could a sparrow ever aspire to become an eagle? Do you know where my home is? It is the front porch of your house. I get my daily meal thanks to your father's hospitality and your serving it to me at his pleasure. And where do I get my *veshti*? It is what I get as a gift when I perform the rituals under your father's supervision. I myself would never volunteer to receive any gifts; I do so only after your father grants me permission with a gentle nod. That's what I wear with no guilt. Absent these three, my life is a void. This world really looks quite foolish to me when I begin to think that someone is willing to go beyond this void and extend their sympathy and consideration to me.'

Komali was still sobbing. I left for my evening *sandhi* and proceeded to the *Hanuman ghat*. I was feeling feverish and didn't make it. But I was content to escape from Komali.

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"*Patti, Patti . . .* "

Visu is calling me.

I feel as if an interesting religious discourse comes to an end, abruptly. I want to stand right here at the entrance for a while and keep watching the empty *agraharam* enveloped in darkness.

I have a lot more to say about what Yagnam told me and what I wanted to tell him.

Visu, the child who just now addressed me as *Patti* - is the link between me and Yagnam. He's a reminder of our bond.

I go inside. At a corner in the front foyer rests a millstone mounted flush on the floor; a hurricane lamp sits on it. A few moths and white ants lay dead around the lamp, their wings curled up.

"You are not sleeping yet?"

"*Patti*, I am scared."

"What are you scared of? You are a male . . . Go back to sleep . . . I am always here." The boy tightens his eyes, and I go and sit close to him. He holds on to me with one hand while sucking on the thumb of the other.. He's already five but has problem pronouncing some words. He can't utter the sound 'ra'; he always says 'da.'

Of late, quite often, Visu recalls his father. He constantly nags me, 'Patti, let's go to the *Visalakshi* Temple, we will find father there.' I couldn't put up with his harassment so, one day, I took him to the temple. As soon as we entered the premises, he was yelling, 'Father, father, where are you?' It was such a heart-wrenching experience for me. Visu grumbles to himself, 'I keep calling Father, but he's nowhere to be seen!'"

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"Do you have any news about Yagnam?"

I was crossing Rajavayyar's *mutt* on my way home when Rajavayyar with a hand-held fan scratching his back, leans forward and asks me.

"No."

"What happens next?"

"What's the big deal? Is Yagnam a child? See what he has done; he left me in a lurch; is that fair? People ought to realize their own responsibilities . . . I feel terrible when I watch that poor girl *Ammaponnu* crying . . . It is God' will I have to endure this ordeal; who can escape fate?"

I kept walking with Visu as we crossed the *agraharam*. I could hear people talking - some audible enough to my ears and others keeping it to themselves. How can you keep a village or its people from gossiping and bad-mouthing?

I recalled some events when I finished my conversation with Rajavayyar. It had to do with Yagnam, setting off a flurry of memories, one after another. It was like digging a parched piece of land for water; as our conversation progressed, I felt the water seep out in a continuous stream.

That night I fed Visu and helped myself with fruits and buttermilk. Carrying the meditation beads I walked up to the front porch. *Ammaponnu* was still in the kitchen silently doing her chores.

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Yagnam has now become a member of our family. I dote on him. He has carved a place for himself in our hearts claiming an equal share in our family affairs.

"His name is Yagnam."

"I see . . ."

Rajavayyar stares at him. Yagnam utters the *mantras* and formally introduces himself with lineage.

"Where were you in *Kumbakonam*?"

"With Seshagiri *Sastrigal* . . ."

"What do you know?"

"I had the privilege of accompanying the priests when they performed the various religious rites. I have learnt some *agamas*. I have not yet formally taken a vow . . . Then, suddenly, I felt uncomfortable and had to leave . . ."

"You couldn't get along there?"

"Well, that's one way of putting it. It happened because I didn't see eye to eye with others. I was subjected to unnecessary anger from some quarters."

Rajavayyar stares at me. His look seems to ask me, 'What should we do with this fellow?'

"I would like you to show this boy a way," I tell him. "I approached Ramanatha *Gurukkal*, and he said, 'Talk to Rajavayyar. He is elder to me, and let's see what he says. I can't promise you anything,'"

While we were talking, Ramanatha Gurukkal emerged from his house; he lived in the house across the street. He probably heard what we were discussing . . .

"Ramanatha, can I see you for a minute?"

He approaches us.

"What do you think of this boy? Can you use him? Is he any good?"

Rajavayyar posed the question pointing to Yagnam with his right index finger.

"He's presently employed in the temple kitchen. He's well versed in *Ashtottaram*, *namavali* and he recites *mantras* with correct accent and inflection. Says he knows *Rudram*, but I didn't have a chance to listen. He claims to know a few *agamas*. I know where he's coming from: he's a direct dis-

ciple of *Kumbakonam Sastri* who hails from the tradition of *Ukkur Pranatharthi*. I have no problem to take him in if you approve . . ."

Yagnam stands silently in a corner with the towel wrapped around the waist while Ramanatha Gurukkal considers his case.

Rajavayyar, an authority on *Vedas*, explains some key elements of traditional temple worship to me and Yagnam. He asks Yagnam a few questions which he answers with much humility. He asks him to recite some *mantras*, and Yagnam complies. He gets stuck once in a while and, when Rajavayyar supplies him a word or phrase, Yagnam is able to proceed further with no difficulty.

Yagnam again becomes silent. Rajavayyar thinks for a while and, again, turns to Yagnam.

"How about rote recitation? What do you know?"

"I am conversant with certain ritual protocols. I am also familiar with *Raghu Vamsam*. I can recite *Mahanyasam*."

Rajavayyar then outlines some modes of traditional worship and asks Yagnam to enunciate a few *mantras*. "Let us hear how you will address first a bachelor, then a woman and finally a *sanyasi*."

Yagnam responds - and with each delivery - he explains the manner how the address is directed toward a bachelor, a woman and a *sanyasi*.

Rajavayyar is suitably impressed; still, I notice certain hesitation in him. For a long time he keeps thinking to himself, and then turns to me.

"There are two kinds of idol-installation - *Agama Prathishta* and *Vaidika Prathishta*," he says, and goes on." In the tradition of *Agama Prathishta* it is only the *Adi Shivaites* who are authorized to act as temple priests; they are considered spiritually endowed to touch the idols, perform *abhishekams* and conduct other services. The same rules apply to *Vaidika Prathishta* as well. A few rules might be relaxed a little, but permission to touch the *lingam* is never granted. The priest can help in performing other duties, but it is mandatory that he has formally taken a vow to dedicate himself life to religious service. Such an assertion imparts an energy to his consciousness. As the consciousness rises, there's greater awareness, joy, love, togetherness, and focus in everything a person does and experiences."

Rajavayyar articulates on each and every aspect of temple worship and Yagnam listens to him like a true disciple.

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Yagnam began his duties helping the priest in temple worship culminating in *deeparadhanai*. The officiating priest stands in the *sanctum sanctorum* while Yagnam, positioning himself in the *Artha mandapam* - the interim space between the *sanctum sanctorum* and the temple exterior - hands him lamps, one after another. Eventually, Yagnam got his wish: he was granted permission to enter the *sanctum sanctorum*. He considers it a great gift, and who can disagree with him? To serve God is a special privilege. One may achieve everything in life or one can go after it. But to serve God is not the prerogative of everyone! The job mayn't mean much - it doesn't carry the status of a *Tahasildar* - but even a king might be denied that honor. My body goes into rapture when I think how God himself chooses and filters the candidates to serve him!

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Days are just passing by. I see many strangers come and go by. One day, suddenly, I saw a funeral procession crossing the *agraharam* . . .

I am totally oblivious to what goes on around me. I don't know when my life is going to end; I am reminded of my own mortality only when I witness another's death . . .

I am getting on in my years, so I hardly move out of the house. I recall the days when I used to visit the neighboring

villages on Sundays and other festive occasions, but not anymore. Those towns and villages now seem as distant as *Benares* and *Rameswaram*. That is yet one more sign I am getting old . . .

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Finally I persuaded Yagnam to move into my house and sleep in the front foyer. It was only after I turned informal and easygoing did I realize his reticence and quiet manner.

Every morning, Yagnam rises well before dawn, thoroughly scrubs the house with cow dung and, sometimes, even draws a *kolam* with rice powder in front of the house; he seems to know everything.

Every morning he bathes in the village irrigation channel; if, for any reason, the water is not available, he would directly proceed to the nearby river .

His face always looks bright and serene. He looks long-limbed with a sturdy frame and fair skin. The nose looks well-proportioned, and a red stud always adorns an ear. His face exudes a child-like charm. He doesn't laugh much, nothing seems to particularly amuse him. If he ever indulges in a serious conversation, you can be sure he is getting into something deep and profound. Ordinary folks might not understand him, but I do.

One day Yagnam was talking to me about temple worship.

"The *gopuram* - grand and magnificent as it is - can never be a substitute for the *lingam*," he lectures to me. "Before we enter the temple premises, we must pause and pray five times at the entrance: the conventional wisdom holds that there is a *lingam* in each of the four directions; the fifth one, called *Isaanam*, is said to be the sky, so we should face the sky and offer our prayer."

He also mentions *pradakshinam*, the practice when we go around the *sanctum sanctorum* in the temple: he tells me we should go round nine times!

"Why temple worship?" he asks me and answers it himself. "Our lasting commitment to Lord Shiva helps us raise our consciousness; we attain greater awareness and free ourselves from worldly ties. This is the highest bliss we can ever attain through temple worship."

Ramanatha Gurukkal showers love and affection on Yagnam.

My brief encounter with Rajavayyar distracted me from what I was trying to say. Let me get back to Komali.

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"Yagnam, go ahead with the rest of your story," I said. "Komali kept sobbing, you were saying. Then what happened?"

"Komali was studying in college but her mind was a like a child's. Her naïveté left her unprepared to understand what's going on in her personal life, and how to deal with it. I was hoping she would be reasonable and that I could talk her out of such extremist behavior. But she's in no mood to give up her obstinacy. How could I possibly convince someone with no commonsense?"

"In the evenings I would perform *sandhi* in the *Hanuman* ghat. I enjoyed watching the river's flow that lent a special beauty to the sanctity of the occasion; the setting and atmosphere would leave one breathless: the uninterrupted sounds of fluttering leaves filling the air; the bats hanging upside down from tree branches; men in groups leisurely strolling along the river bank while others spread their towels on the ground and sit in meditation for the *Gayatri Japam*. Add to these others who were in the vicinity just to savor the backdrop while stray monkeys, in groups, would get ready to wreck havoc amidst the prevailing tranquility.

"That was my retreat where I would perform *sandhi* twice a day when Komali came down to meet with me in privacy. I would be embarrassed and I tried to convey my decision to

her in every possible manner, but she wouldn't take a no for answer. I loathed the very idea of her visiting me alone at odd hours: what if I became a target of her father's anger or get caught up in a scandal? I might soon end up as a laughing stock in the community. Her daring and audacity were enough to convince me that Komali cared little about my apprehensions and would never change her mind. Still, I didn't hate her. She was a real beauty with a lovely face and a prominent nose like her father's. She was motherless, so her father doted on her; his hopes for his daughter's future were beyond the means of many a young man. He wanted her to finish her BA when he would marry her off to some big government official. I have heard him tell his friends proudly, 'My daughter will be marrying a collector; I don't want even to look at the horoscopes of the ordinary and commonplace suitors. I am really aiming high and not concerned about the cost involved; so don't bother me with the sundry and ordinary references.' So, *Patti*, tell me: how could I give in to Komali's childish pranks?"

"I panicked even to imagine what might happen next. And, one day, the disaster really struck me."

Here, Yagnam paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. His face turned weary but he inured himself to reveal what needed to be told. He sighs deeply, and continues:



"If one develops the wisdom and maturity to accept as experience the apathy and rejection of others, I would consider it as the best teaching moment in one's life."

He remains silent for a while, and continues:

"If we start talking about human frailties, we can understand them from many perspectives. I certainly have them just as you do. Even as I am now telling you how my life in *Kumbakonam* took a tragic turn, I would like you to take a look at that *mirasdar* who, a moment ago, crossed our street. He too has them. That's also true of *Kumbakonam Sastrigal*. I am sorry he was so fired up that he gave up any poise or sophistication when dealing with me. I am not complaining because I became a target of his anger, but only because he didn't show even the basic courtesy to listen to what I was about to say.

I won't call him uncaring; that would be a betrayal. He is my *guru* and I am not qualified to judge him. Granted he acted partisan toward me, still he was the linchpin that shaped my life. The very fact that today I can boldly stand up in public and chant the *mantras* - I owe it to the first lesson he taught me. He is the prime reason why I am deemed qualified to join the groups to chant the *Vedas*. I owe him my fortune, so I first pray and seek his blessings when I accom-

pany the eleven brahmins in *Ekadasa Rudra Japam* or begin to enunciate the *mantras* with cadence in a *yagna*.

And the *Sastrigal* totally misunderstood me!

Somehow or other he must have heard the rumors or Komali herself might have made some foolish remarks in his presence to provoke his anger. That was the reason why he was vindictive toward me: he threw me out of the house, seized my *madisanji* and belongings, and cast them away on the street.

"Idiot, this is betrayal: you are a parasite and arrogant too! How do you expect your wicked tongue will ever utter the sacred *mantras*?" he cursed me. "Treachery helps no one, you are doomed forever!" He withdrew into his private room after publicly denouncing me.

I heard a scuffle and Komali's screams when she was beaten up; I could stand there no more, and walked out.

*The Hanuman ghat* and the *choultry* on the riverbank became my home and refuge.

On the eastern side of the main burning ghat was a spot with concrete steps descending to the river. It was hidden from the public view and not many pilgrims came there to bathe. It essentially served men who wanted to take a dip in the river after cremating their ancestors. *The Hanuman ghat* lay on the eastern direction and this was also the starting

point for the *Reddiar Agraharam*. There were homes on both sides of the *agraharam* - say some twenty or thirty. The *Hanuman Temple* was at the farthest corner. The temple rests at the center of a sandy ridge with trees. Sitting on that spot and facing the river one can see the *Perumangudi* cremation ground afar. Now and then, you will notice a corpse being carried along, followed by smoke rising afterwards. Even before that smoke cleared away you will notice the funeral parties returning in groups. Beyond the burial ground was a grove of banana plants and *naaNal* trees; there was a stretch of empty space after the grove and then, the river. Here, everything around you reflected human life in all its aspects. That's where I used to pass all my time, alone.

I made my living by accompanying four or five priests on rounds when they offered services to the pilgrims. I would make out a fire with three bricks at the river bank and prepare my own food which, quite often, ended up in the hands of the monkeys swarming around the place. I would eat whatever I could save. For a while, my life went on like that.

One evening Komali showed up when I was praying in the *Hanuman ghat*; she stood there looking at me and crying.

I calmly explained the situation to her.

"Komali, you must change your attitude," I said. "I don't deserve you. Again, your love for me is misplaced; certainly I have played no part in it and I have been explaining that to you all along. Still, what I had feared became a reality; I have become a target of your father's ire. My mind is in turmoil. Do you know how many priests are mocking at me? Some of them are even running away from me! Still, I have patiently borne too much and am going through my life. Do not forget I have a lot of respect for you, and that comes out of my concern for you. I wish you the best wherever you happened to be. Stop torturing me; please don't visit me again."

Yagnam's eyes turned teary when he spoke those words.

He was silent for a moment, bowed down his head, and after a while, spoke again.

"I was talking and Komali was still crying.

"Komali, you better leave. Someone might come looking for you," I said.

She spoke - still crying.

" 'I will not leave. I will always follow you,' she was saying. 'We both can go away somewhere.'"

"I was in shock. I felt as if being swept along the river by a strong current.

"Go away? Go where?"

"Anywhere you like."

"I could not help laughing. 'Komali, you are crazy! You are studying in a college but you make no sense! You have absolutely no idea what life is; do you think it is just a dream? It is not enough if you open your eyes; you must also open your mind! Dream disappears the moment your eyes are opened, but that never happens with events in real life! You can't sow wild oats and expect sugarcane to grow! And marriage is not a game! It is not a game that children play with their dolls; once the game is over, the children would simply take back their dolls and go home! You need to change your mind so that it will lead to a healthy life in future. Please forget me; I eke out my life from day to day; should the wind blow hard, I will end up simply starving! A tramp too lives by begging, but he has some hope of survival. I have none.' Then I went down the steps to perform my *japam* and spoke no more. Komali came rushing after me and, when she was close, she pushed me into the river, cursing, 'I wish you are dead!', quickly ascended the steps and was gone. Still, I felt no anger toward her."

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This brings us to the end of Yagnam's story - the first part. He was denounced by the Kumbakonam *Sastrigal* as a traitor

and, heart-broken, he roamed all over the places and finally came to *Oratta Nadu*. I know what happened afterwards.

He received the *Panchatchara Mantram* and *Deeksha* from Rajavayyar and is now serving at the *Kasi Viswantha Temple* in *Oratta Nadu*.

Everyone showers love on Yagnam. His daily chanting in the temple captivates the listener's ears. He has also started going out to teach the *Vedas*. He assembles the boys who had been recently invested with the sacred thread and teaches them *sandhyavandanam* mantras. Daily, he draws buckets-full of water from the well for the temple *abhishekams*. He intones the *mantras* during the prayer sessions with such a passion and rich voice, and his performance is so stunning that at least half of those present keep looking at him in awe.

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How I miss him! He's not here nor there. He seems to be gone forever!

The boy Visu keeps asking me every day, then cries. She -*Ammaponnu* - does make her feelings public. She reveals all her love, wishes, happiness and sadness through her eyes, eyes only. She is voiceless.

*Ammaponnu* is a beautiful girl; she doesn't know what deceit and hypocrisy are.

Do you remember one Aravamudu who used to live at the end of the *agraahram*? Next to that house we had a full-grown orchard with flower beds, and *Ammaponnu* used to live in a hut next to it. Facing her hut was the house of one Viswantha Iyer whose daughters Vedavalli and . . . (I can't recall her name!) were *Ammaponnu's* friends.

*Ammaponnu* had no father, only a mother. She did have an elder brother, but he was a useless fellow: he eloped with some girl and has not been seen again for several days.

Yes. *Ammaponnu* is a mute!

Only the mouth wouldn't utter a single word but she understands everything just by watching peoples' faces! She's really that smart!

Very large eyes. An innocent face. I remember seeing her as a little girl running along the *agraharam* from one end to another; now, she has really grown up!

In the beginning she and her mother lived in a house in *Sailamada* Street, but they got evicted. The mother begged Rajavayyar for help: where else could she go and live with a mute daughter, she asked him. He took pity on her and set her up in a hut in one of his plots.

*Ammaponnu* eked her livelihood by working as a maid in a few homes. Life was really tough and when I was sick or tired, she would come and offer to help me in household

chores. Her eyes would flicker like the wings of a dove when she looked at Yagnam; she always turned shy in his presence.

When Yagnam walked past her hut with a flower basket in hand, *Ammaponnu* would handover him a garland she had herself strung together. We are supposed to believe she was presenting that garland to the deity, but this was simply her ploy to meet with Yagnam, every day. After handing over the garland she would continue to stare at him. And she thought I couldn't figure out what she was up to!

She's inarticulate, but has very expressive eyes. One can see her regularly in the temple during the evening prayers standing with a bowl of oil in one hand next to a tall brass lamp that almost reaches to her height. I could never figure out what she was exactly doing there: her eyes would constantly keep looking at the deity, so intense was her meditation! I could easily find out what was in that poor girl's mind. I noticed Yagnam too was looking at her in an affectionate way and, every night, after the ceremony was over, he would accompany *Ammaponnu* to her hut, where her mother would be waiting for them, and Yagnam would hand over the mother the temple *prasadam* - the *chundal*, curd rice, and a few bananas. I know this happened every day, but they thought I never knew anything about it!

"*Ammaponnu* is a very nice girl, but poor," I told Yagnam one day. "She comes from a good family. What do you think?"

Yagnam was embarrassed. I took the matter to Rajavayyar who welcomed the news with delight. "You don't have to worry about *Ammaponnu's* credentials," he assured me. "I know everything about her family members and their background. *Ammaponnu's* grandfather was a well known priest in *Vaduvoor*. His brother was a chronic gambler who ruined the family. The family gradually fell into bad times; no friend or relative came forward to rescue the children leaving them as orphans. *Ammaponnu's* ancestors are from *Mannargudi* and belong to the *Brahacharam* subsect."

I too was impressed. I called *Ammaponnu's* mother in Rajavayyar's presence and asked for her opinion.

"God willing, if this alliance does come through, I can only say *Ammaponnu* is a lucky girl," she said.

I suggested to Rajavayyar that he call Yagnam and ascertain his wish but, Yagnam, when he came to see the elder, rarely opened his mouth. Didn't I know what the fellow's actually thinking? He was smart enough to hide his real feelings.

Do you know how he responded to Rajavayyar's questioning?

'I owe my present position, status and qualifications to the blessings of the elders,' he said. 'It is by the grace of *Patti* that I found a shelter in the service of Goddess *Visalakshi* of *Oratta Nadu*. You have been the architects of my present life; so how can I reject your suggestion? The girl may be mute and can't utter a single word, but I feel more than satisfied. I don't have any other hopes or aspirations'.

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Of course, there was a lot of gossiping and blather among the village folks. 'Did you hear this? This hag wants to be a guardian of some orphan and even got him married! Why can't she just pass the rest of her days chanting the Lord's names? Why this nonsense - we already know the world is not getting any better. And you know what, she even found a dumb girl as his bride - a fitting choice to match her own tantrums and fits of temper.' This and many more tittle-tattles! Who cares? Let them talk to their hearts' content.

You hear people often joke about a marriage: the wedding took place in a village; the music was played in a temple; and people had a feast in their individual homes; that's how the Yagnam-*Ammaponnu* wedding took place.

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*Ammaponnu* comes along, picks up Visu resting on my lap, and carries him on her shoulder to her bedroom. She

spreads a mat on the floor, covers it with a sheet and lays Visu on it; she too lies down next to him . . .

I begin to think *Ammaponnu* feels even more desperate than I am, but she's smart and remains calm. I could never simply go through any of this!

*Ammaponnu* speaks through her eyes; she has learnt to reveal all her thoughts with her eyes only . . .

We both feel distressed over Yagnam suddenly vanishing from the village without a word; sometimes I am so overcome by emotion that I imagine the worst in the days ahead; every day I look forward to Yagnam returning home but, gradually, my disappointment turns into a bitter denial. My heart aches every time Rajavayyar, Gopalachari, Kakkarai Karnam or Hotel Panchu express their concern for Yagnam and make enquiries. I even checked with a local astrologer and he assures me Yagnam would surely return. I tried a few other methods of divination and came to know that Yagnam had been traveling in northerly direction; every portent indicates he would surely return.

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The big chariot in the village festival has already gone through two full rounds; water has already flown twice into the dry village pond; the temple jackfruit tree has yielded several bunches of ripe fruits . . .

He hasn't returned yet; meanwhile, *Ammaponnu's* mother has passed away; Yagnam didn't show up for her funeral, either.

It's bond with no real bond. What is the actual relationship between me and Yagnam? I seem to have developed a fascination that's a leftover from what had connected us together in our previous births. I seem to have only settled the score for what I owed him in my previous birth. Maybe that's what God really meant. Let it be. The more I agonize over the present situation the more I have come to feel that longevity is actually a long sentence.

'*Patti . . . Patti,*' Visu keeps crying and I go inside; he refuses to sleep next to *Ammaponnu*; he wants only me; he's not that close to his mother. He runs and grabs my hand as soon as he sees me.

"Why can't you be with your mother?" I admonish him. "You are already acting like a stranger to her. Do you think you can bully her when you grow up?"

"*Patti*, I want to sleep next to you . . . "

He keeps holding on to me and starts crying. *Ammaponnu* comes out and drags him toward her.

He still acts stubborn and wouldn't give in. Of late he has been suddenly getting up at midnight and asking for his fa-

ther. I feel miserable and spend most of the time cajoling him.

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I watch Poomalai, the postman delivering the mail; he stops before each house and calls out the resident's name.

Pichu Iyer's son who has returned from Singapore after a long time is walking with a mouse trap with the mouse in it, followed by his lame dog running after him . . . .

I see the godown that Pichu Iyer had built a long time ago. Now it serves as a girl's high school; there's noise all around.

I see bullock carts amble their way raising dust, one after another, on the street.

'Patti, have you eaten already?'

'Oh, it's you? Come in . . . I haven't eaten yet.'

"I have prepared this with *madi*. This is special - for you."

Komali enters the house holding a large vessel with *avial*.

'Oh, why all this?'

'That's fine, Patti. My husband loves this dish. This morning he had left for his camp.'

She hands over the dish to *Ammaponnu* and fondly pecks on her cheek saying, "You are so childlike . . ."

'Patti, I am leaving . . . I have some work at home.'

Komali is gone.

I recall a stanza from the *Sankhya* Chapter of *Bhagavad*

*Gita*:

*There is no wisdom in  
him who is uncontrolled,  
And there is likewise no concentration  
in him who is uncontrolled,  
And in him who does not concentrate,  
there is no peace.  
How can there be happiness for him  
who is not peaceful?*<sup>2</sup>

I used to recall this *sloka* whenever I happened to look at Yagnam. Wasn't he the one who's content with things at-tuned with his status, practiced self-restraint, and never lost his bearings? Ordinary men and women, by instinct, would desire and seek what are reasonable and in accord with their standing, so they are automatically rewarded with happiness and peace of mind.

In so far as Yagnam had rejected Komali who's way above his position and chose to marry *Ammaponnu*, he made a wise choice.

That's what I understood when I first met with Komali.

She showed up one day . . . and, then disappeared like a rooster that leaps out of trash after rummaging through the ashes. Here and there, the trash may contain a few old emb-

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<sup>2</sup> From *Bhagavad Gita* by Winthrop Sargeant, 1994

ers , and someone might have thrown in a burning match stick or smoldering coal over it. That would be still seething and the rooster that came to hunt for food would accidentally step on it and soar high with a shriek.

Komali's present visit has not only triggered something new, but it caused me discomfiture.

Suddenly, one day Yagnam disappears; I came to know about it only two days after his disappearance.

Ramanatha Gurukkal visited me a few times; soon, others too - mostly strangers - were suddenly making enquiries:

'Where's Yagnam?'

Everybody is asking me; whom can *I* ask?

What about the kid Visu who seems totally lost and, for the last two or three days, roaming around the house with his thumb tucked into the mouth? He too must be mulling over the same question.

Yagnam's sudden disappearance became a mystery and baffled many because they doted on him; I too feel the same way. But only now I remember something: since the last few days he has been acting a little strange; he was not eating properly and has been shunning the close company of others. I even noticed his eyes - this was some two days before he was gone - and they hinted anguish. Maybe he was

recalling the old days, I thought. I never believed it would lead to this serious situation.

My mind was caught up in turmoil when Komali showed up at my home. At the time, I remember the evening prayer was in progress.

*Ammaponnu* had gone to the temple with the oil bowl; Visu had stayed back at home with me.

I was sitting in the doorway when I heard someone come up and stand beside me.

"Is this the residence of Mr. Yagnam?" I heard her question.

"Who are you? Please come in . . ."

She told me she's the wife of an overseer who recently moved to this area. I keenly examined her face; I had never seen her before in the *agraharam*.

"Why do you want to see Yagnam?"

"I must see him at once . . . I need to discuss a few matters with him."

I understood her in just two minutes. I ventured a question.

"You are the daughter of the Kumbakonam *Sastrigal*, am I right?"

She seemed immensely pleased, and also surprised.



'Yes,' she replies. I returned to the front foyer with her and we both sat facing each other.

My heart felt heavy as I pondered over her enquiry for Yagnam.

"You have come to see Yagnam, but now he is not here. We don't know about his whereabouts. He has been gone for nearly ten days - he left on a Wednesday. Nobody knows where he is."

"Really? . . . "

"Yes, I am telling the truth . . . Now, why do you want to see him? He has told me about you and your father . . . Whatever you may say, Yagnam is naive and innocent. There was no excuse why your father should have humiliated him. Both of you have hit him very hard . . . "

She starts crying.

Her tears brought no change in my attitude toward her. If anything, I grew a little angrier.

"What's the use of crying? That's his fate. He was heart-broken and came here as an orphan. I was the one who gave him shelter because of his decency and good intentions. He told me his story - everything - and I understood many had contributed to his humiliation. Well, that's his fate. Now, he's one of our family members. *Kasi Visalakshi* showed him a way, now he is married."

"See her? She's his wife!"

Ammaponnu has just then returned from the temple and Komali looks at her - fervently.

Her face brightens, gradually.

"You are a very lucky girl," she addresses *Ammaponnu*.

"You are blessed with a good husband and I wish you all the best in life." Then she turns to me. "*Patti*, he told you all about me and my father, didn't he? It is all true. I am the one fully responsible for his suffering; it was my misunderstanding that brought him hardship. I have really wrecked his heart." She again starts crying.

She stops after a while and continues:

" I have been trying to see him for a long time. I got married three years ago. My father found a groom for me exactly as he had been thinking all along. Soon I too realized my error, and the one who showed me the right way was Yagnam himself. At the time I had been emotional and was carried away by the notion that infatuation was true love. Yagnam explained to me that life's not a dream - something one can forget on opening the eyes. Marriage, he said, was a problem that every human being faced in life and there could be only one solution to it: one should arrive at the solution calmly, free of emotion and confusion. If one fails to solve the problem the first time, it becomes beyond any further solution.

This was the lesson I learnt from my experience. To be honest with you, Yagnam actually rescued me from a great blunder I was about to commit but, unfortunately, he paid a heavy price."

Komali went on and on and I was patiently listening to her.

"My husband is well-educated and earns a good salary. He's fond of me and I too enjoy a happy married life with him. I am overwhelmed with joy and every minute I think of Yagnam and feel grateful to him. I realize I owe my happiness to him. Should I not personally thank him for opening my eyes to the real world? That's why I have been searching for him; what I meant was my mind was searching for him. I had a lingering hope that I might accidentally run into him in one of the cities where my husband would be posted. My husband is very religious and believes in rituals. Anywhere my husband is posted, during the festival days and other special occasions, we would invite a *Sastrigal* to our home. I would enquire every visitor if he knew of one Yagnam who lived in their neighborhood. I could never find out where Yagnam lived. It was the first time I saw him -unexpectedly- in a temple here."

"Overjoyed and imbued with devotion I wanted to exchange a few words with him - by revealing my mind and

expressing my thanks to him. Looks like my wish is not going to be fulfilled. You are saying he has been gone for ten days!"

She wipes the tears off her face and gets up.

*Ammaponnu* is keenly watching Komali go on.

"Some ten days ago, on a Friday, I visited the temple. There was a big crowd of devotees waiting for the *darshan* of the deity.

"Suddenly, I heard some *mantras* resonating in my ears - and I felt the voice was familiar to me. I couldn't see the reciter in the *Artha Mandapam*; there was smoke all around and also very little light.

"Once *deeparadhanai* was over, I saw Yagnam coming out carrying a plate with camphor-lit lamp. Still, I didn't recognize him."

"I hovered my hands over the camphor flame and touched both my hands to the eyes. Then I requested him to perform an *arathi* for the deity and extended an *archana* plate to him; it was only then did I see his face. His hand was shaking, and so did mine too. He offered the camphor lamp to all the devotees present and returned to *Artha Mandapam*.

"I pushed myself out of the female section of devotees, hurried and stood outside the *Artha Mandapam*. I saw Yagnam joining the main priest in the *sanctum sanctorum* in a

full-throated recital of the *mantras*. He was sweating all over the body.

"He soon emerged out of the *sanctum sanctorum* and returned the *archana* plate to me. I received it with a smile and spoke to him:

"How are you doing? You live here?"

"I asked him in a formal manner of introduction. But he turned away from me, gestured toward the idol and said, 'Thanks to Her Grace, I am eking out my livelihood.' Then he gathered the *archana* tokens from other devotees and reentered the *Garba Griha*.

"Soon I came out of the crowds. Still, I was determined to see Yagnam and have a brief conversation, but he never afforded me that opportunity. Later, I saw him walking alone along the temple corridor, and I approached him saying, 'Please stop,' but he increased his pace, walked away from me and went back to the *Artha Mandapam*. I got the hint that he was averse to see me in the temple premises. Only later did I find out his address.

"*Patti*, I have a B.A., degree. Yagnam used to say he studied only up to fourth class. At the time he made me recognize that I lacked the wisdom of an educated woman and he set me on the right path; he did this even when he suf-

fered shame and dishonor. My father too ill-treated him. I am here to atone for my past sins and ask his forgiveness."

She arose watching *Ammaponnu*.

'What is your name?' she asked her.

'Her name is *Ammaponnu*. She can't speak.'

'She doesn't?'

'Yes, she's a mute.'

She hugs *Ammaponnu*.

'Your husband is a great man! You are indeed a very lucky girl.'

And she leaves.

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Following Komali's latest arrival and departure my memory went back to the first time she showed up at my home looking for Yagnam.

It has been a while since Komali came and settled down in *Oratta Nadu*. She would visit me at least once a week.

She would blankly stare at *Ammaponnu's* face; she would draw Visu closer and hug him. She has been married for a long time but has not been blessed with any children.

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Days were passing by. I was hoping for many good things, but nothing happened; in fact everything seemed to be leaving reality behind and going along in a new crazy

direction. I keenly watched how Komali reacted to all these changes: her mind seemed pulled in several directions causing emotional stress and leaving her totally confused. Her immediate response has been to shrug the whole thing off with a smile and simply go on as usual. Her visits to my home continued as usual - she would suddenly show up with a smile, talk about this and that, and then leave. I relished her company and, pretty soon, I even began to feel sorry for her.

Gradually, her banter began to touch on profound and philosophical themes. Sometimes she would joke how she was attracted to Yagnam for his plain and to easy-going manner; at the same time, she seemed repenting for having hurt his tender and sensitive heart. As our contacts became more frequent and intimate, I must admit I warmed to her visits and chitchat. But God seemed unwilling for these exchanges to continue much longer.

One day, Komali showed up quite early in the morning around eight. Her eyes told me she must have been crying; she grabbed Visu and held him in her tight grip. she pressed *Ammaponnu's* face between her two hands and showered on her terms of endearments like, "Oh, my dear, . . . my little girl!"

"*Patti*, I am going away; my husband has been transferred to a place closer to Trichy. He has been saying we have to

leave after a week, but yesterday he told me we should leave immediately. I am going away - right now. I came to take leave of you." She fell on my feet in a reverential gesture.

"My dear girl, I wish you all the best in your life."

"I have been hoping all along that I would definitely meet with him (she meant Yagnam) here," Komali said, and went on. " But I could not. I did see him here but I am slipping away without an opportunity to reveal my mind to him. I am afraid this life mayn't afford me an occasion to ask for his forgiveness. Still, I am not going to let it happen. I will be moving around with my husband from one district to another, but I am determined to return to this place - not once but several times, if necessary - to meet with Yagnam in person. I *must* see him to convey my gratitude and seek his forgiveness. I don't take it lightly - this is a very serious matter to me. I do believe he will show up after I am gone; if he returns, please tell him, 'Komali had no ill feeling in meeting with you.' Maybe my attempt to revisit him might have given him some wrong idea."

Komali was still crying when she left; I too shared her anguish.

Now, I am not much given to the habit of analyzing an issue too deeply. I am quite old-fashioned; when something happens, I can think only of the primary reason behind it.

The peripheral issues don't bother me. I am not inclined to examine an issue from different angles.

I am constantly thinking of Yagnam; I am aching to see him; sometimes I am scared to think he might simply leave *Ammaponnu* and Visu to my care and vanish. After Komali's arrival, I was able to sort out things together and make some sense of Yagnam's disappearance. But now . . .

Komali has been gone for a long time; still, there's no sign of Yagnam returning . . . Why?

Is he never coming back? Do I see any omens suggesting he might?

*Ammaponnu* is lolling on the bed, Visu keeps on grumbling to himself . . .

"Patti . . ."

"Who's that?"

"It's me, *Patti*."

"Sounds to me like Yagnam . . ."

"Yes, it is Yagnam . . . I came to see you."

Visu, awakened, hears the voice and rushes to his father; the shock 's too much to contain and *Ammaponnu* too gets up and hurries along.

Yagnam is standing with his face aglow; his nose and parts of cheeks look redder. I notice the locks of hair behind his nape.

"Yagnam, do you realize what you have done?" I ask him with a touch of sadness in my voice. "Your sudden going away was such a shock to us and I could barely endure it in my old age. You are a smart fellow and you need no lessons from me. But this has been a real ordeal for me!"

Yagnam pulls the towel off his shoulder and drops it on the floor. He sits on it and invites Visu into his lap.

"*Patti*, I didn't disappear anywhere. . . " says Yagnam. "I was in shock because I unexpectedly ran into Komali . . ."

"She too became friendly to me," I told him. "But presently she's not here; her husband got a transfer and she's gone. She's sorry she couldn't see you before leaving. She told me she had no hidden intentions in meeting with you."

"Whatever might be her intention, I didn't want to see her a second time. I have no complaint against her. Why should she again visit me when I am already leading a happy life - having molded it according to my own status and desire? And, remember, she's now a married woman, and her husband is a senior government official! The truth of the matter is I didn't expect anything from Komali! You may say she came here to ask for my forgiveness, but that too I never expected from her! I have already offered her my best wishes: that her dreams come true and she find a husband of her dreams. Let her lead a life of content and happiness wherever

she finds herself to be. Why should she try to meet with me, again? She tried to see me a couple of times, but I didn't give any room for another meeting. I was also scared that her insistence on our meeting might lead to some scandal, and the only way open to me was to leave this village. I was determined not to return here as long as she remained in this village; that's why I was gone without telling a single soul,"

"That's rather an extreme step I should say. I could hardly take it."

"I am sorry *Patti*; I knew it would be hard on you. But I had another mission in mind, and I wanted to take care of it. Kumbakonam *Sastrigal* was my first guru and he had accused me of betrayal. Shouldn't I try to dispel that wrong impression? I could hardly learn anything worthwhile without my guru's formal blessings. I couldn't afford to give any impression that I was indifferent to what he thought of me. I sought to change his opinion about me, so I went and fell at feet and told him the truth. He had a change of heart and blessed me. He was the one who told me that Komali had left *Oratta Nadu* and gone over to *Trichy*. My trip back home began immediately. I stopped briefly on my way in *Seerkazi* for *Thoniappar* service. But I have been always thinking of you only."

I continue to stare at him. *Ammaponnu* and *Visu* are so taken by his sudden visit they are still in shock.

I recall a sloka from *Bhagavad Gita*:

*Who's a yogi? The one who controls his mind, integrates it with his soul and is free of all desires.*<sup>3</sup>

*Yagnam* is such a *yogi* - a rare specimen, pure as a crystal, among ordinary men and women.

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<sup>3</sup> *Bhagavad Gita* by Winthrop Sargeant, 1994