

Vindhiya

Cupid's Alarms and Other Stories



Translated by: Andy Sundaresan

VINDHIYA

**CUPID'S ALARMS
AND OTHER
STORIES**

FOREWORD
by
Rajam Krishnan

TRANSLATED
by
Andy Sundaresan

ALSO BY ANDY SUNDARESAN

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CUPID'S ALARMS AND OTHER STORIES

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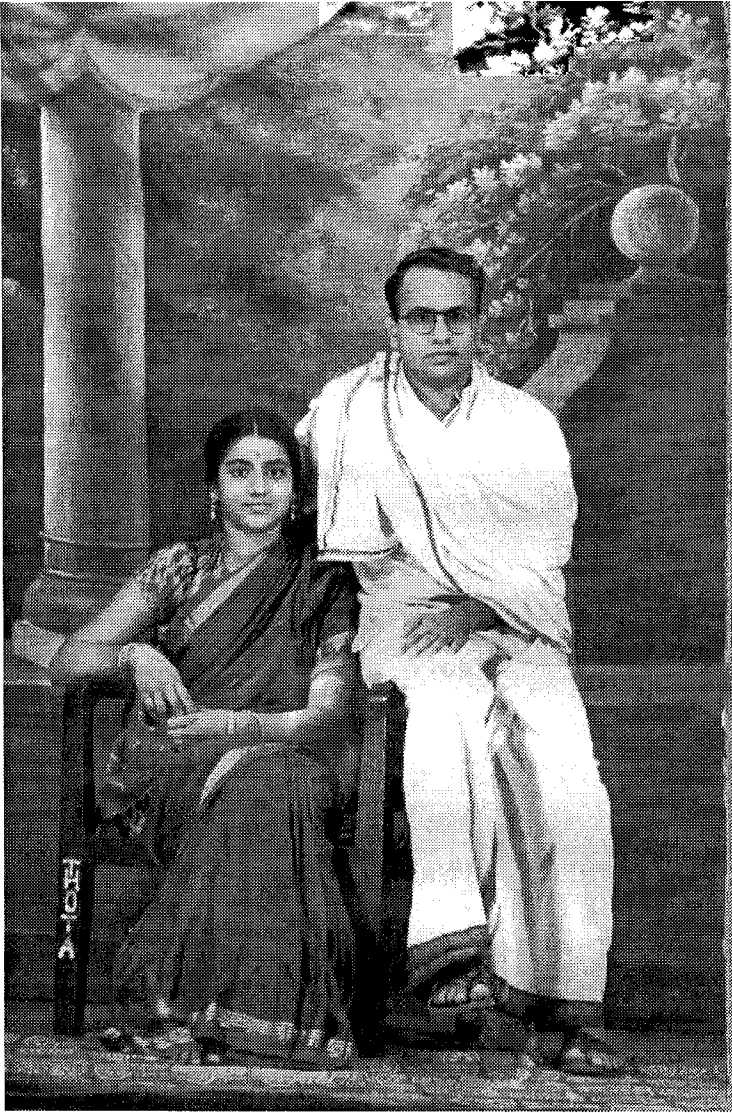
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Author India Devi with her husband
Prof. V. Subrahmanyam

IN MEMORY OF
PROF. V. SUBRAHMANYAN
(1919-2001)

CONTENTS

Translator's Note

Introduction by Dr. S. Naranan

Foreword by Rajam Krishnan

Acknowledgements

Sources

Cupid's Alarms/ 1

Parvathi/ 27

A New Month/ 51

The Folded Palms/ 75

Intuition/ 93

The Warmth in his Eyes/ 109

Sweet Remembrance/ 125

A Loving Heart/ 141

A Childlike Heart/ 155

The Missing Word/ 181

Glossary/ 201

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Our sister India Devi wrote these stories between 1947 and 1960. I remember our mother saying she published one hundred short stories and essays under the pen name *Vindhiya*. But only eighty-two of them survive to this day.

India Devi was a writer recognized for her skilful rendering of domestic scenes. She tells her stories with tenderness, compassion and understanding. The result is an affectionate portrait of the family as the ultimate refuge of human spirit.

Some may consider her stories treacle and overly sentimental. But in her stories bad things happen to good people – like Parvathi in a story in this collection (*Parvathi*) who confronts her misfortunes. *Vindhiya's* characters don't whine; they don't give up on life. Instead, they rely on their faith and community—family and friends to help them through. They know that life is but a passing shadow on their journey.

Our father the late Prof. K.N. Sundaresan meticulously collected and preserved these stories over many years; he tagged each story with relevant data –the name of the magazine that published the story, the date of publication, whether it was a prize-winning story, other tidbits and put them away in a folder. Those days we had no copying machines, but we always had more than one copy of the published story because, along with the complimentary copy of the magazine, my sister and brother-in-law were subscribing to some half-a-

dozen Tamil magazines – including *Kalki*, *Ananda Vikatan* and *Kalaimagal*. A few years ago my elder brother Dr. S. Naranan organized *Vindhiya*'s stories in two bound volumes and added a valuable index to each. Those volumes served as a basis for my translation work; they also made my task easier to contact the editors of the magazines to obtain their formal permission to translate the stories into English.

So, first and foremost, I owe my grateful thanks to my father Prof. K.N. Sundaresan and my brother Dr. S. Naranan whose initial efforts made this book possible.

Andy Sundaresan

INTRODUCTION

This is a personal account of some glimpses into the life of my elder sister India Devi who was a distinguished short story writer during the years 1947 to 1960.

It was 15th August, 1947—the Independence Day—when India was liberated from British rule, a day of national rejoicing. For the family of Sundaresans in Berhampur, a small town in Orissa, there was one more reason for rejoicing: a short story by their eldest daughter India Devi had been published on the same day in the prestigious Tamil magazine *Kalaimagal* (*Avani*, 1947). She was only twenty years young.

India Devi had no formal schooling in Tamil. Our father taught all his five children Tamil at home at an early age. Reading Tamil was nurtured by a steady stream of Tamil magazines of the day—like *Ananda Vikatan*, *Kalaimagal*, *Swadesamitran* and *Kaveri*. India Devi's second language was Telugu. She passed the SSLC examination and was soon married at the age of 15. For a few years she lived with her husband and in-laws in a joint-family in Coimbatore. In the next five years she was exposed to all facets of middle class Brahmin joint family, a vastly new experience

after her sheltered life far away from Tamil Nadu. Perhaps this triggered an outpouring of emotion that found expression in her short stories.

None in our family had any inkling of India Devi's talent for Tamil writing. Until she left her parents' home in 1942, she was well known in town as an accomplished vocalist and a violinist in *Carnatic Music*. She gave concerts regularly in temples and local music halls. She was beautiful, often compared to the beautiful film actresses of the time. But there was no indication of even a latent talent for writing.

The first story *Parvathi* dealt with a delicate theme rarely talked about in public; the girl child's coming of age as a woman. The saga of Parvathi overcoming her trauma to assert herself to gain the rightful place in the family seemed to echo the spirit of a new resurgent India heralded by the Independence Day. Incidentally, Parvathi was the name of her mother-in-law whom she greatly admired.

Soon after, India Devi moved to Cuttack (Orissa)-only about 200 km from Berhampur-with her husband V. Subrahmanyam (1919-2001) who was a Professor of Economics, and they lived there for the rest of their lives. They had no children. During the next thirteen years India Devi was a regular contributor to *Kalaimagal*, *Swadesamitran*, *Kaveri* and other Tamil magazines. She had many admiring

readers, especially among women of all ages. Ki.Va. Jagannathan (*Ki.Va.Ja*), the eminent Tamil scholar, author and editor of *Kalaimagal* had a high opinion of her work and constantly encouraged her to write more. He published 13 of her stories in *Kalaimagal* - each after critical review. He returned one of her stories – written at his invitation for the ‘Twin Story’ feature (*Irattai Kathai*), titled *A New Month (Matham Piranthathu)* with the comment that the story didn’t measure up to the usual excellence expected of *Vindhiya*’s stories, and requested her to write another one. The letter ended with an apology for returning the story. The new story she wrote and submitted to *Kalaimagal* is regarded one of her best. Our father Sundaesan admired it for the skill of story telling and its unusual theme. Soon after the publication of *The Folded Palms (Koopppia kai)* in 1954, Ki.Va.Ja asked for a ‘similar story’ for the special *Deepavali Malar* of *Kalaimagal*. Another story highly praised by Ki.Va.Ja was the prize-winning story, *A Loving Heart (Anbu Manam, 1949)*. Another distinguished Tamil writer and *Vindhiya*’s contemporary complimented her: “You should change your name from *Vindhiya* to *Imayam*,” —an allusion to the small mountain range *Vindhya Hills* and the lofty *Himalyas*.

India Devi was greatly influenced by her father K.N.Sundaesan (1899-1983), a gifted and prolific writer of plays and poems in

English and Tamil. A gold-medalist from St. Joseph's College, Tiruchirappalli, in M.A. (Maths), he was forced to seek livelihood outside his native Tamil Nadu in his twenties, like thousands of Brahmins who were affected by the 'Communal G.O.' of Madras Presidency in the 1920's. He became a lecturer in Berhampur, thousand miles away in what is today Orissa (on Andhra Pradesh-Orissa border). As a Sanskrit student he had no formal education in Tamil. But his love for Tamil was so great that he considered himself an exile from Tamil Nadu and was determined to immerse himself in Tamil studies. He mastered Tamil classics (especially the *Sangam* literature) aided by the English commentaries by the English and European missionaries like Rev. G.U. Pope and others. His early writings were in English, but he switched almost exclusively to writing in Tamil after a meeting with C.F. Andrews, an associate of Mahatma Gandhi, who advised him that he should emulate Rabindranath Tagore whose contribution to Bengali literature was even greater than to English literature. In his profession as a teacher of undergraduate mathematics, he taught with distinction for nearly 50 years and is fondly recalled and admired by his students. But he liked to be remembered as a Tamil playwright and poet.

Our mother Thaiyal had little formal education but was an avid reader of Tamil. She

was a pragmatic woman with a lot of common sense, and a perceptive critic of both her husband's and daughter's writings. My father often sought her opinion and valued it highly. She encouraged and disciplined her daughter in her musical training to become an accomplished artist.

A staunch nationalist, ideologically steeped in the freedom struggle from the 1920's, my father named his eldest child 'India Devi'—to the consternation of many traditionalists. India Devi was proud of her name, but she chose the pen name *Vindhiya*. *Vindhiya* published 100 short stories and essays in all – from 1947 to 1960.

Readers can guess that most of her stories are autobiographical. But there are stories in which she is only an observer (for example, *The Warmth in his Eyes*, *The Folded Palms* and *The Missing Word*). These are true-life stories from her experience and rate highly for narrative skill. India Devi started writing a long novel around 1950 but didn't finish it. I read the early parts of the novel and immediately recognized it as a story of her life. I had the privilege of reading it because I was asked to type it! My father had acquired a Tamil typewriter manufactured in Germany in 1939 and it is still a prized family heirloom. At the urging of my father I had learnt typing at the age of 12 and a year later I devised my own typing lessons to learn typing Tamil in blind touch. There is an

interesting background to the typewriter. The German firm (*Bijou*) decided to manufacture typewriters in all languages whose alphabet can be accommodated on the standard English Keyboard. Tamil was the only Indian language for which this was possible because of its compact alphabet.

Smt. Rajam Krishnan has written an insightful analysis of *Vindhiya*'s stories in her Foreword. I will add a few random comments I consider noteworthy.

Vindhiya's stories are based on a mix of her own real-life experiences, enriched, enhanced and embellished with imagination, creativity and narrative skills in different degrees. *The Warmth in his Eyes* is a straightforward, faithful rendition of actual events in the life of the blind child prodigy violinist Marella Kesava Rao, a disciple of the celebrated blind violinist Dwaram Venkataswamy Naidu. In contrast, I guess *Parvathi* is mostly fictional. *A New Month*, *A Loving Heart* and *A Childlike Heart* are based on actual incidents greatly padded and enhanced in content. *A Loving Heart* explores the psychology of childhood and *A Childlike Heart* delves into the psychology of old age, the second childhood. Most stories are centered on problems and dilemmas women face in life; for example *Cupid's Alarms*, *Intuition*, *Sweet Remembrance* and *A Loving*

Heart. But the dilemmas get resolved in the end in a delightful way by compassion and clear thinking overcoming prejudice and superstition. An extreme example perhaps is *Sweet Remembrance* in which the dilemma is “To wear or not wear *that* sari.” It is said there are no villains in *Vindhiya*’s stories. This is largely true although her characters span a wide spectrum of hues and shades. The closest to a ‘villain’ is perhaps Seshan in *Cupid’s Alarms*.

Not all of *Vindhiya*’s stories are women-centered. *The Warmth in his Eyes*, *The Folded Palms* and *The Missing Word* have an O.Henrian twist in the end, testimony to the author’s art of story telling.

Every major character in a story usually has a name, perhaps to facilitate author’s narration. In *The Folded Palms*, the businessman’s name is not mentioned, although it is a crucial element in the story at the end. The reader is forever clueless about the name. This sounds like a riddle and it is unraveled only by reading the whole story. This is an example of the ‘art of suppression’, which *Vindhiya* practiced skillfully. In this story based on a true incident related by me to my sister, the ‘extraordinary act’ of the hotel waiter Subramanian acquires a new dimension by making this character a non-believer. This is a brilliant embellishment of raw facts. The story is my favorite perhaps because as one who gave *Vindhiya* the seed for

its blossoming and unfolding, I can appreciate fully the beauty of its creation. I have read the story many times, every time with a lump in my throat as I read the last sentence.

India Devi's life acquired a new direction in early 1960's towards religion and rituals. It is a moot question if this was partly due to her not having children. Both she and her husband disclaimed it was a lacuna in their lives. They indeed felt that their numerous nephews and nieces were like their own children. But one can perhaps glean in *Vindhiya's* stories a tinge of disappointment of not having a child of her own. In Cuttack, she was the prime mover, the driving force and instrumental in building a *Murugan* temple with a lot of help from her husband and many influential friends. As a great admirer of my father's works, most of which remained unpublished until his death in 1983, India Devi took up in earnest the task of publishing them. Again, with the help of her husband she published several books of poetry by our father in the genre "Sangam Poetry clothed in modern raiment." In early 1990's she got the rest of our father's entire poetical works (of over 2000 pages) in digital format on computer discs – at a time when computers were just beginning to be used in India.

Many have asked me: "Why did *Vindhiya* stop writing at the peak of her successful career at an early age of 33?" Whenever I put the same

question to my sister she would say, “Nobody asked me to write and I had the urge to write then (for 13 years). Now, I just don’t have the inspiration to write.” Her detachment from the early literary phase of her life was strikingly revealed to me in 1994. I had gifted her a two-volume collection of xerox copies of 82 of her surviving works (out of a total 100). At that time she showed little interest even in perusing it. Some years later she expressed her appreciation of my efforts and said, “I can’t believe I wrote them.”

Although she stopped formal writing, India Devi was a prolific correspondent and an ardent diarist. Daily, she recorded in meticulous detail her thoughts and events of the day before going to bed, usually around 1 or 2 A.M. The diary format was ‘free’ unfettered by ‘page a day’ formula. Other routines before bed included music (singing, violin) for which she had renewed interest, a reading of her father’s poetry, and prayers. Her last diary entry was on 6 October 1999, the day before she died in a tragic accident at home. All her diaries are preserved and someday may serve as an invaluable resource for anyone interested documenting the story of her life.

Due to the dedicated efforts of our younger brother Andy (Ananda Rangan) Sundaresan, who has translated *Vindhiya*’s stories in this book, the book is appearing on the occasion of her 80th birthday anniversary and the 60th

anniversary of her debut as a story writer in 1947. Although the book is mainly the handiwork of Andy, 12 years younger than India Devi, he succeeded in making it a family enterprise involving his two brothers and a sister – all senior citizens today! The family and, hopefully the readers as well, will welcome translation and publication of the remaining 90% of *Vindhiya*'s works in the near future.

S.Naranan
Chennai 600041
January 25, 2007

Dr. S. Naranan (b.1930) was an experimental cosmic-ray physicist and X-ray astronomer based mainly in the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Bombay, India in a career spanning 42 years. He is firm believer in the interdisciplinary character of science and has diversified his interests to other fields such as mathematics, statistics, computer science, biology, genetics and linguistics. He lives in Chennai, India.

FOREWORD

It was sometime between 1948 and 1950. We were staying in quarters attached to the Government House Complex, *Ootacamund*, which was the summer resort for the Governor of Madras. Our dwelling was situated in an area a little elevated and facing the lush green slopes with a beautiful valley below. A stream wound its way in the middle of the valley garden, where flowers and vegetables were grown for the Governor's household. One could see rows of *Aram Lilies* on both sides of the stream adorned like a pearl necklace. Amongst the breathtaking varieties and species of colorful blooms seen during summer in Nilgiris, a velvet rose has a mild fragrance. But *Sweet Piece* varieties, with long stem and blooms in all shades and hues were grown in the valley. Their sweet scent and pleasing aroma would fill up the air and the surroundings.

It was during one of those days while I found myself lying on the grassland enjoying the earthly paradise that I came to know of Mrs. India Devi and her prize-winning short story selected for the international short story contest held by the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1950. *Kalki*, the Tamil magazine, invited Tamil entries, collected and took the responsibility to select the stories, both at the national

and international levels, by a panel consisting of three learned scholars and eminent literary personalities. One of the stories selected, entitled *Cupid's Alarms*, was written by *Vindhiya Devi*.

Later, when I understood that her original name was India Devi, I surmised that she could be from a family involved in the freedom movement. Kalki published her story in two installments.

In the annals of Tamil literature the short story era began in the early twentieth century. *Kulathangarai Arasa Maram* (The tankbund banyan tree) written by Va.Ve.Su. Iyer (V.V. Subramania Iyer), the patriot, scholar, revolutionary (and contemporary of V.D. Savarkar and Subramania Bharathi) is hailed as the first modern Tamil short story.

In the early days many women marked their eminence in the field of Tamil literature with no formal education. One can't forget veteran *Kothainayaki* who didn't even have the knowledge of Tamil alphabets when she first felt the urge to write. She learnt the alphabets with the help of a neighbor, a woman, and started writing short stories and novels. She started and edited the journal *Jaganmohini* for women against the wrath of *sanatanik* Brahmins who burnt the bundles of her journals in streets. *Kothainayaki*, a Gandhian to the core and dedicated with indomitable spirit, stood firm for social change. She succeeded and many

women followed her while enriching the modern Tamil literature with their valuable contributions. *Kumudhini*, *Gugapriyai* were the forerunners; *Saroja Ramamurthy* and a host of others followed.

One should remember that some sixty years ago man-woman relationships in contemporary Indian society were largely examined within the confines of traditional family. In all stages of her life the woman has a commitment, as the guardian angel, to her husband, children and other members in her domestic circle while upholding human dignity.

As a young wife the woman comes to live with her wedded partner, hitherto unknown. He too faces the same predicament. But the woman has been brought up with patriarchal values and those values are blended in her. She has to adjust and cope with the new life and surroundings as well as the unknown developments that arise.

Short story writing comes naturally to women. Anything can inspire a woman's inner self—a speck, an event in her circle, a particular person's odd behavior, a word uttered by a child; any such trivia could stir her. The urge to develop a story begins; a new light, a new meaning to all that happens in her routine, mundane life takes up wings; the force brings out in words breaking up the crust. It is the blissful experience of creative writing.

The story could open with a dialogue or with

a statement. The main theme or the message wouldn't be in the words to be grasped and felt by the readers. The creator then transforms her experience to the reader in an art form –telling the story, short and crisp, with a poetic charm.

In a drama enacted, the actor plays the single role pertaining to his character only. But the author, the creator, reveals her own personality in all the characters she brings out in her creations.

In the prize-winning story *Cupid's Alarms*, we have two women, both young and of same age; their husbands are friends. After her friend goes home for delivery, the narrator begins to suspect the motives of her friend's husband; this subsequently leads her to question her own marriage and wonder if she is married to the 'ideal husband' of her dreams. *Cupid's Alarms* resurrects a common theme of domestic life – the fragility of marriage and how inarticulate despair can wreck it. The protagonist finally discovers what goes on in her friend's marriage, so do the readers.

As I read the story now, I was reminded of the social mores and the first-rate imagination that inspired the short stories of that era.

I understand India Devi contributed short stories, between 1947 and 1960, to several Tamil magazines. During that period *Kalaimagal* was a super star in the Tamil literary firmament. When the late Ki.Va. Jagannathan was its editor he encouraged and introduced several

young writers to the Tamil literary world. Ki.Va. Jagannathan had distinguished himself as the disciple of Prof. U.V. Swaminatha Iyer known as *Tamizh Thatha*, the Grand Old Man of Tamil Letters. Under Jagannathan's stewardship *Kalaimagal* carried the works of U.V. Swaminatha Iyer and other well known writers like Na. Pichamurthi and Ku. Pa. Rajagopalan. The magazine also featured translations of Bengali works by T.N. Kumara Swamy and T.N. Senapathi and the Marathi works of Kandekar by Ka.Sri.Sri. A second generation of writers, starting from Akilan and T. Janakiraman also made their debut in *Kalaimagal*.

It should be mentioned that over the years *Kalaimagal*, as part of its tradition to encourage new writers, held several contests. Among them one invited writers to pen a story based on the events for each day of the week. Since each day in a week carries certain social as well as religious significance to the Tamils (and to others as well in other communities) these stories touched upon the prevailing fashions in quotidian life; in another contest, the participants were asked to pen stories with a given *first* sentence; yet another stipulated a story with a given *last sentence*. India Devi won the first prize in the last two contests. I am pleased both those stories are included in this collection.

In early 1950's *Kalaimagal* ran a monthly

feature in which the editors invited two writers to contribute stories with the same title. *Vindhiya's* story in that series was called *A New Month*.

The heroine of that story is fully aware that her husband Seshadri – a lawyer—orders his aide, on the first day of every month, to send out two money orders; one of them is the alimony to his first wife. The lawyer Seshadri is a robust man with earthly passions; he has no desire to don the ochre robe as mark of a *sanyasin* and renounce the world. He takes Vaidehi as his second wife and continues the alimony payments to his first. This is a story that very subtly amplifies a social reality: the actions of well-meaning individuals ultimately enhance human dignity. Time too serves as a healer: the first wife eschews flaunting her ‘superiority’ and the events that unfold gradually work to nurture rather than alienate the two wives.

The story *The Warmth in His Eyes*, the most haunting of stories in this collection, celebrates human spirit and raises our consciousness as we see it triumph.

The young blind violinist (his teacher is blind too!) claims an extraordinary feat even more amazing than his virtuosity; he experiences light and color in his music. How does his father’s photo on the wall inspire lofty sentiments in him? He knew his father only through touch, yet his association with the old

man simmered with life and warmth. He transcended his own condition and 'saw' his father – just like everybody else. The mysterious and quasi-mystical way the violinist found the truest expression of his art is revealed by the author's power of display and exposition.

We pride ourselves as a society that cares a lot for child workers. Some sixty years ago, if a family suddenly faced the loss of its earning member, usually the father, the only course open to the offspring was to drop out of school and wait on tables. The same fate awaited a boy who was an underachiever in school; he was mocked at and often ridiculed as someone fit only to wash dishes or be a waiter, or even worse, condemned to tend the cattle. (Of course, the situation has considerably changed; nowadays people spend a lot of money to have their children educated in hotel management; again, institutions specializing in milk production and distribution are demanding people with special education and training!)

It is in one such episode quite common some fifty years ago the author introduces a waiter, a simple, decent young man who professes no particular interest in religion – juxtaposed with a rich, deeply religious businessman. Their sensibilities mesh beautifully in *The Folded Palms*. The waiter helps the businessman in an emergency and the latter returns him a favor, discreetly, unbeknown to him. The story has a surprising end and in so doing it extols the human

spirit that transcends conventional virtues of piety and devotion.

I recall a magazine titled *Cauvery*, an excellent monthly on par with *Kalaimagal* – published from Kumbakonam, now defunct. *Swadesamitran*, enlightened by the immortal *Subramania Bharatiyar* also ceased publication in the Seventies. India Devi's short stories published in other magazines like *Parijatham* and *Ciru Kathai* also carried her imprimatur. Today *Kalaimagal* is still being published, yet the general trend among the magazines has been to succumb to demands of purely commercial interests; consequently, the writers who celebrate human dignity are becoming rare.

The family has always served as a point of departure in the evolution of human civilization. A social unit with man and woman acting as two separate individuals will not be strong enough to act as a cohesive component of the society; a family with a man, wife and children exerts a much stronger, positive influence; such an arrangement makes for a strong, resilient bonding among family members, thus empowering the society at large. This is akin to the chains in a crocheted fabric that keep it tightly woven. When it comes to strength and flexibility, who can deny a crocheted fabric is preferable to a spool of thread?

Today under the pretext of modernity, literature is being subjected to assaults undermining human dignity.

All of India Devi's stories were written in the post-Indian independence period when humanity rose like Phoenix from the ravages of World War II. An air of optimism hung in the air and the peace one experienced then was quiet, orderly and placid; there was no room for stirring or turbulence. Her stories reflect the era when Indian society surged toward a new renaissance. These stories, even as they celebrate the dignity of woman, never fail to stress the concomitant ascent of man. I believe they are like the incomparable little stars that add honor and glow to the Tamil literary firmament. When they are translated and made available in other languages, I do hope these stories would convey their unique, yet universal character.

I revisited *Ootacamund* some fifteen years ago. The stream swirling through the garden from the state governor's mansion can also be viewed from the city center. I watched it from the racecourse. The stream has now turned into a gutter carrying the city sewage; what I remembered as the *Green Fields* has been reduced to a vast concrete jungle.

As I read this collection of short stories, I recalled the grassland surrounding that 'earthly paradise'.

I had never dreamt that one day I would be penning a foreword to an anthology of short stories of India Devi whom I have never met face to face. It is a privilege bestowed upon me

to go through her stories and enjoy this valuable collection. I feel it is a loss to the Tamil literary world and people like me that India Devi didn't continue her writing career. I congratulate her brothers and sister in finding out her stories after all these years and bringing them out in this collection. I hereby convey my heartfelt thanks to her brother Dr. S. Naranan who personally met with me and presented me with this opportunity. I also convey my thanks to Andy Sundaresan and other family members involved in this book. At a time when the literary world is becoming purely commercial, I hope this publication will prove a breath of fresh air! May this event prove beneficial to the world at large!

Rajam Krishnan
Chennai 600 041
July 22, 2006

Rajam Krishnan (b.1925) has been an important writer on the Tamil literary scene for more than the last fifty years. She is the author of more than eighty books of fiction and non-fiction, including *Kurinjithen*, *Alavai Karayile* and *Verukku Nir* for which she won the *Sahitya Akademi Award* in 1973. Rajam Krishnan is still active and contributes to *Dinamani* and other journals on current affairs viewed from a woman's perspective. She lives in Chennai, India.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank my elder brother Dr. S. Naranan for reading an earlier draft of this MS, offering valuable suggestions and for personally meeting with Smt. Rajam Krishnan in Chennai to have her contribute the foreword to the book.

I thank Smt. Rajam Krishnan for her comprehensive, thoughtful foreword and analysis of the issues and concerns explored in these short stories.

For suggestions as to the stories to be considered I thank my sister Selvi Viswanathan who first drew my attention to no fewer than eight of the items that are finally included in this volume.

I thank my younger brother Seenu who, with discernment and tact, saved me from many errors which had slipped through all the nets that were cast before the MS took the final shape. His suggestions have greatly enhanced the idiom, style and language in these stories. Because of his advice and meticulous reading of the text, this is a better book.

I thank my niece Divya Srinivasan for her work on the photograph on the back cover.

Finally, I thank, again, my daughter Anu, who, amidst her other obligations, went through the penultimate and final versions of the book and offered many valuable suggestions.

To all of these people I express my gratitude, but I am alone responsible for any errors that remain.

Andy Sundaresan

SOURCES

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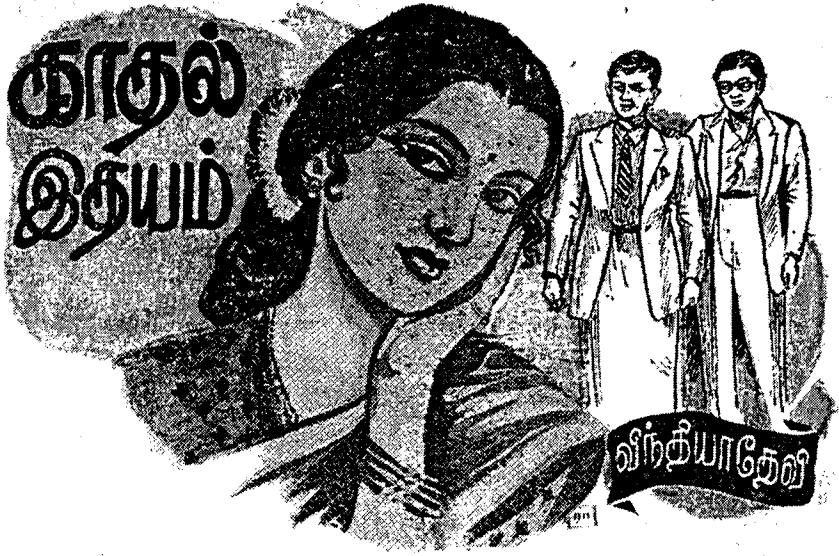
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Special thanks are due to the editor of *KALKI* for permission to use the cover and illustrations from the *KALKI* issues of August 19/26, 1951.



CUPID'S ALARMS

Original title: **Kaadal Idayam**

Published in **Kalki** (August 19/26, 1951)

This story won the second prize among the four Tamil short stories selected for the International Short Story Competition organized by *New York Herald Tribune* in 1950.

The cover illustration is for this story.

CUPID'S ALARMS

I was eagerly and anxiously awaiting my husband's return from work. For the past two days he has been coming home with a friend. I was concerned if he was bringing his friend home again today. Will it be a such a disaster if he didn't bring his friend home everyday?

I have been trying very hard to share my feelings with my husband but it hasn't been possible. I am at a loss to articulate my vague antipathy toward his friend Seshan. How can I possibly say anything about him in my confused state of mind?

Anyway, I had developed this ill feeling toward Seshan ever since Sita, Seshan's wife, left for her hometown for delivery. When she was in town the Seshans were our regular guests and we too used to visit them quite often. On weekends the four of us would often visit the city just eight miles away. We enjoyed the beauty and cool breeze of Marina beach and the excellent food served in the neighborhood restaurants.

As long as Sita was around I was quite pleased with the friendship of that couple. Just two months ago Sita left for her hometown and it was only after her departure that Seshan's

visits to our home became more frequent. Deep in my heart I wished he visited us less often.

I tried my best to nip that wish as soon as it cropped up in my head, saying to myself: ‘Well, his wife is not home, so he comes here to spend time with my husband. Sounds quite reasonable! Why am I indulging in some baseless ill feeling toward him?’ I was trying to rationalize my fears, but my mind was restless.

While my mind was in such turmoil, my husband, on the other hand, would invariably invite Seshan for lunch every Sunday and insist that he also join us in our evening trips to the city. Clueless, Seshan too would accept those invitations without any hesitation and show up promptly at our home.

I loathed Seshan’s intrusion. Why should an outsider come between me and my husband?

I know my husband is smarter than me in judging people and their character. Maybe it is his long-term association with a friend that prevents him from severing the relationship with Seshan. Too bad I too end up talking with Seshan because I see him daily. Who knows, even Seshan himself doesn’t want to come between us. Is it possible he is simply unable to refuse right away my husband’s invitations due to his wife’s absence as well as his close friendship with my husband?

While I could tolerate the notion that Seshan join us for lunch on Sundays, I could never bring myself to accept the idea of his

accompanying my husband *every* evening. How can I convey this to my husband?

Here they come . . . I can hear not only their footsteps but also their conversation! They are coming together! My husband doesn't seem to care, and is clueless. Should I tell him?

This has been going on for several days. I have been festering inside and couldn't even summon the courage to say, "Please, don't!" I continued to spend the days looking for reasons to justify my husband's actions. But how can I tolerate the situation if subsequent events and episodes in our daily outings mired me in even more suspicion and disgust? How could my mind be at rest when bombarded with a constant, nagging question: Is Seshan a gentleman? And deep inside me the answer was always, 'No, he's not!' Can you fathom all the reasons that cause the thunder in the sky and the roaring waves in the ocean? And can we prevent them from occurring? So it is with the human mind: no amount of rational introspection can calm it down.

The other day all three of us were traveling in a bus. I was pleased about our seating arrangement in the bus; my husband was in a middle seat, Seshan to his right and I sat to his left. Then, a woman boarded the bus. Ever a gentleman in the best sense of the term, my husband got up from his seat to offer it to the woman; Seshan immediately moved to the

empty seat and the woman took Seshan's empty spot! I started burning inside! Shouldn't Seshan show some decency by offering the woman *his* spot because he happened to be a third member of our party? Now he is offering his own seat generously to the woman by moving closer to me! Does he really want to position himself between two women?

Instinctively, I got up and told my husband: "You may sit down, I am going to stand."

"But why?" he asked.

"Just because I want to," I said. I was so mad at his naivete but his face registered no change.

"No, you may sit down," he said. Meanwhile the bus came to a stop and he said, hurriedly, "This is where we get off."

Good heavens! We are getting off the bus! What a relief!

'Never again should you invite your friend to our outings!' I felt a desperate urge to utter those words as soon as we reached home.

But once we were home that thought disappeared in no time like a rabbit down the hole. I could hardly raise my voice.

By his very nature my husband could never find fault in others; neither could he spot any existing faults in others. He is unable to grasp things even when they are plainly visible before his very eyes! The natural instincts like jealousy and disgust seem totally alien to him; so how will it help if I bring them up?

One day, the following week, my husband suggested we go to a movie. Of course, Seshan would be joining us. I told my husband I wasn't interested. He was visibly upset as I could see a sudden change in his face. Maybe I should have openly protested at the time. Even if I had, it would have accomplished nothing. The friend would certainly accept my husband's invitation and my absence will only disappoint my husband. So there is no point in telling him now.

'I should speak my piece tonight – without fail,' I told myself and all three of us went to the movie.

The heroine in that movie was well known for her beauty. There were many occasions when others, including my husband, used to compare me with her. Still, that day, when Seshan complimented me with similar expressions, I cringed! But why? I told myself that Seshan was only doing what many others have done in the past and it was only my own ill feeling toward him that made me find fault with him. Under the circumstances how can I dare express to my husband my thoughts about Seshan? My mind was in turmoil.

I began to think of the best way to avoid these kinds of situations in the future. I finally made up my mind that I should never again accompany these two friends on their outings.

But this determination didn't last long. I

could escape joining them for a week by giving some excuse. The following week began with the first day of the month—the pay day. I needed to buy household items with care. So I accompanied them to the city.

We were approaching a bookshop. As soon as we entered the shop my husband asked me, “Why don’t you check on some books? Meanwhile I will run to the nearby shop and get some soap and toothpaste.” I was a bit shocked, and grumbled. “What are you saying? You are leaving me alone, here?”

“Are you scared? Seshan will be here, I will be back soon.” My husband disappeared in no time.

Fine! Seshan would be a good companion! What’s going on here? Does my husband really understand Seshan’s character or is he totally impervious to his motives? I was thrown into utter confusion. What a gulf between these two friends! What is the mystery that binds these two men into such an intimate friendship?

So, instead of selecting books, I was indulging in the psychological implications of their friendship when I heard Seshan address me: “Bhanu, look here!” Despite myself, I raised my head.

“Check out these eyes! They look exactly like yours! Yes, I have no doubt, they’re exactly like yours!” Seshan was saying while his eyes keenly looked at my face and then roamed the corners of a magazine that he had held open in

his hands. Then he handed over the magazine to me. It was an English monthly featuring snap shots of several pairs of eyes under a banner 'Beautiful Eyes'. Seshan had drawn my attention to a pair described as 'Dark beauties'. Seshan now loomed before me like the mythical snake, *Adishesha*.

"Hmm, maybe . . ." I made a terse comment and returned to my book search.

Is this how a gentleman behaves with another woman? Are there no limits to one's conduct in public places?

My husband who promised to return in no time showed up after what seemed like ages and I angrily asked him, "Why this inordinate delay?" He was very cool as he answered, "What delay? I was gone only for eleven minutes – how else can you shop?" He waved his watch in my face. "Oh, what's this book in your hand? Is it a good one? Shall we buy it?" He picked the book from my hand and began discussing it with Seshan. He went on extolling my competence in book selection.

I made up my mind. At present no purpose will be served by my lodging any complaint against Seshan. First, I will have to confirm my own suspicion that Seshan is not a good man. I need some tangible proof to convey my dissatisfaction over Seshan; mere grumbling would be of no avail. Isn't it possible that Sita would be privy to her husband's bad conduct and wayward behavior? She must be surely aware

of her husband's manners – that he loses no time in getting cozy with other women and flirting with them. Once I come to know of Sita's opinion of her husband I should have no hesitation in convincing my husband that he must heed my loving advice . . . He must give up his friendship with Seshan . . .

I wrote a letter to Sita. After covering the usual matters in a typical letter, I cast my net at my target.

“We Hindu women worship our husbands as Gods. When we are in their presence they will praise us sky high and declare that we are incomparable and they can't live without us. Once we are away, they will heap the same praise on another woman! We can never trust these men!”

I included the above remarks in some context.

Sita might probably say something in the affirmative: ‘You are right.’ That would certainly confirm my suspicion about Seshan.

As I folded the letter and put it away in an envelope to mail it I watched my husband asleep in bed. My heart warmed up to him with a thankful thought: “This charge would never apply to you. This only applies to other men especially to Seshan.”

Sita's reply soon arrived. She wrote: “The conventional wisdom seems to be that men are not trustworthy. But one must not generalize and blame all men. I believe there are surely

many decent men in this world. I always pride myself as the wife of an ideal husband. Don't you feel the same way?"

Poor Sita! Is that what she really thinks? Does she believe Seshan is an ideal husband? How different are our views about her husband! Is it possible Sita's role as a loyal, loving wife prevents her from seeing the real person that is Seshan?

Oh, am I not a wife too? I always believed my husband is the best among men, personified love and impeccable character; could this also be a hallucination?

I believe others admire my husband as well for his decency and stellar qualities. Don't others see him as an exemplary man? Perhaps the answer is no! Otherwise, why should Sita question me whether I was proud of my husband – just like she feels about her?

I lost my peace of mind after reading Sita's letter. I spent the following days in ceaseless thinking and confusion.

I could never give up my fondest hope that my husband was entirely different from Seshan.

Of course, I was also haunted by another thought: what if my hope is just a pipe dream – because I too might be suffering from a wife's illusion?

At the same time I couldn't bring myself to think, 'I shouldn't trust my husband, either.'

What a strange twist of events! Far from my husband casting any aspersions on my character

because of Seshan's conduct towards me, I ended up suspecting my husband's character! How did this happen? I realize that trust is the foundation of marriage, but I now begin to sense a slight weakening of my faith in our wedded bond.

Was there ever a trace of weakness in our bond? We were deeply in love with one another and it cemented our mutual trust – which made me proud of myself. But now . . .

One day I made a casual remark about Seshan in front of my husband: "Some friend! You will never give up your friendship with him!"

His response? An innocent smile!

"The husband who constantly keeps an eye on his wife and exercises some control over her is the one who really loves her," I said on that day. "On the other hand, the husband who never seems to care what his wife does or who ignores her dallying with strangers is the one totally lacking in any real love for her." I was bold enough to speak my piece but could hardly bring myself to stand right there and watch my husband's face as I uttered those words. I guess I wasn't heartless enough to pour out all my deep-seated feelings in a single outburst; neither was my tongue dipped in enough acid to lash out at my husband in snarling eloquence. So I ended up mouthing something in inarticulate despair – leaving my mind mired in even deeper turmoil . . .

How can I free myself from this predicament? Is my husband like all those ordinary men – full of common faults? Isn't he that unique, perfect man I always thought of him to be? Peace eluded me . .

A change of place might help. I was feeling churlish, my mind caught up in confusion. Getting away for a while might clear the mind . .

I told my husband, "I need a change of place." I was a little hesitant to speak out that *I* badly needed a change of scenery.

"Of course, we can certainly do that," he said. "Shall I apply for vacation? I can take vacation for three weeks; we can spend ten days with your parents and ten days with mine. Let us have some fun!"

The way he spoke thrilled me, both physically and emotionally. Though I realized our being together wouldn't immediately heal my ongoing mental agony, my love and affection for him made me welcome his vacation plan. The fact that my husband would also be temporarily free from Seshan's companionship itself seemed worth the effort.

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We soon began making plans for a joyous vacation. I was still haunted by that nagging suspicion but dismissed it in no time because of my intoxication with the cheerful days ahead.

First we visited our in-laws.

My previous visits to my in-laws, maybe three or four at the most, essentially centered on

family obligations to take part in some rituals or religious festivals. Those trips never lasted more than a few days. Now I was going for a ten-day visit. I had never been close to my in-laws and now I viewed them more like my friends. I was quite excited and looked forward to having some fun with them.

However, my excitement lasted only a few days. During my previous visits it was quite rare for my husband to go out without taking me along. This time, his behavior was totally different. He went out all by himself at his will and pleasure and returned home, leisurely, as he thought fit.

‘What’s he up to? Is he visiting any of his old friends? Was he interested in any girl before marrying me?’ I was intrigued with all kinds of doubts.

My longer stay this time also made me privy to some new information. Slowly, I became curious to learn a few more details through my in-laws about my husband, especially what kind of man he was in his younger days in college.

A few days after my arrival here a young woman visited us. My husband spoke with her, fondled her baby and kissed it. Soon after the woman departed my mother-in-law said, “There was a time when we had seriously considered this girl for our son; now she has become a mother. I wish you too will soon become a mother.”

The news that the woman was a possible

candidate as a bride for my husband rang in my ears; at the time I conjured the vision of my husband kissing the baby. I was so deeply upset that I blurted out: "If he had married her, maybe he too would have been blessed with a baby!" I am not sure if they understood what I meant. My husband said nothing; nor did his mother.

One day during lunch my husband made a comment: "Today the dishes seem to have soured a little more than usual; maybe the tamarind was in excess."

"Yesterday you were saying only the *rasam* was sour; today you are saying everything has soured," I teased him with a smile. "Maybe in a few days you will feel the same way with me too, who knows?" I glanced at my mother-in-law, who said nothing.

Why wouldn't she offer me a word of comfort saying, "My son would never do such a thing?"

Soon the day approached for us to bid farewell to my in-laws. That afternoon I was busy packing when I heard my mother-in-law speak to her husband.

"See, how much the marriage has changed him!" she was saying about her son. "His wife has virtually toned him down!"

"Stop saying such things," her husband cautioned her. "His young wife will feel hurt if she hears what you are saying."

"Let her know! Sooner or later, she will!"

his wife countered.

So, my speculation does have some basis, after all! Looks like my husband was indeed a different man before marrying me and now I have totally subdued him! I am his young wife! Is it enough if things are fine, now? Will this be permanent? How long will it take for a cotton swab and fire to take their natural course should proper circumstances arise?

I kept my mouth shut and walked away from them. I noticed my husband reading some book. I was angry and yelled at him, “Why don’t you go some place without having me as a burden? Have you no more friends left?” Smart as he was, my husband sat there – a picture of innocence. He simply smiled at me as if he were privy to my ignorance. Of late he talked to me a lot less than he used to.

We took off the same evening and headed to our next stop. I was in high spirits during the journey, though I was festering inside. For the next ten days we would be staying with my parents enjoying their hospitality and the special privileges of my home; that should certainly ease some pain.

My parents, my elder brother, his wife as well as my younger sister and brothers were delighted to see us. How much fun, freedom and privilege I could enjoy at home – this is where I was born and grew up! After I got married and moved out, I had visited my parents only a few

times and I always came alone; only now was my husband accompanying me. I arrived at my parents' house as a responsible wife but still my childishness got the better of me. Soon after our arrival my husband asked me something, but I simply ordered my younger sister to attend to him and rushed out to see my friend next door. This happened within an hour of our arrival! My poor husband!

But soon I noticed something; while I felt guilty that I wasn't attending to my husband's personal needs, he wasn't particularly eager to seek my services or cooperation! He seemed to be always in good spirits and could get everything to his satisfaction through the services of my sister-in-law, younger sister and brothers. Have I forgotten him? No, it was he who seemed to have totally ignored my presence in the house! While he felt free and rightful to move around the home that gave him his wife, he didn't use the same rights to address me or order me around as his wife.

One day I got so mad at my husband that I blurted out, "I am going shopping with my friend!" and walked out. "Go ahead," he said smiling, very casually. Does it bother him if I am gone? Once he sits down with my younger sister to play chess he can get into deep concentration for several hours! If he wanted a glass of water he stopped asking me now — even when I was home! It seemed he had lost interest in my serving him drinking water with

my own hands! Shouldn't I explore his capricious behavior? I felt outraged that he could simply ignore my presence and act as if he had nothing to do with me. I began throwing around barbs and not-too-polite remarks. Once in a while my conscience would prick me: Am I being fair? Still, I could never rein in my tongue. What was I thinking? There was a time when I scrupulously tried to avoid hurting my husband's feelings; now I seem to desire the exact opposite. Yes, that's the plain, unvarnished truth. Let my husband know that I am now fully liberated from any misapprehension and that I have understood the real person within him. I am no more under any illusions about his shortcomings and I want that revelation to shame him. That's my goal.

I felt I haven't succeeded in confirming my suspicion that my husband was far from my ideal. Still, how can I continue to worship him – now that I realize that sometime in the future he could be dethroned from the high pedestal I have erected for him?

The time for our departure was fast approaching. "We are supposed to head back home, am I right?" asked my husband.

I was about to taunt him, "Why, don't you feel like going back to work?" but kept quiet.

"Don't you feel the last two weeks simply flew by?" he asked..

My younger sister and brother suddenly

broke into a laughter. What is so funny? What did my husband say, after all? I was very upset.

“So you think time has just flown by? Why don’t you just stay back if you want to? Who is stopping you?” I snapped back, rudely.

“I don’t have any more vacation, but you do!” my husband replied in a clear, grating voice. “Do you want to come home after a few more days?”

Maybe he wanted to be away from me back home because he couldn’t do so here. Angry as well as sad, I retorted: “That’s fine, I will stay!”

Finally, my husband was getting ready to leave for home; I too was eager to accompany him, but why should I force myself to follow someone who doesn’t acknowledge my real feelings? I remained cool and impassive, while trying to contain my emotions stemming from assaults to my pride and self esteem. I avoided any intimacy with my husband and spoke very little; I was afraid my intimacy might open a floodgate of tears. Tears! No! What is the point of tiring oneself screaming when there is no chance of an echo?

There was some tenderness in his voice when my husband took leave of me. Was he trying to soothe my feelings? No, no way! Was our separation inevitable? Again, the answer is a definite no; had he wished he could have simply asked me to accompany him. I think he was actually feeling sorry to leave behind a nice vacation spot where he could spend ten days

without me ever intruding into his enjoyment. Soon, I would be leaving too, so where is the need to stage this show for me?

The truth is men enjoy socializing with women; Seshan is a very good example. My husband too wanted to endear himself to my sister and sister-in-law. Among Hindu communities it is rare to see women who are extrovert and socialize with men. So men usually come across only a few members of the opposite sex in close encounters, and they immediately go crazy and hover over them with their silly grins! And the women – the usual flirting type – will join in their game, but they are mostly a scattering few. But men are always the same!

Poor Sita! She doesn't know what kind of man her husband is! I got lucky . . . Thank goodness, I had a wake-up call . . .

Dismal thoughts follow a dark mood, but the mind being resilient, a revival of sunny outlook brightens the spirits. Soon after my husband's departure I began to feel a strong urge to return home. Meanwhile, I received a letter from my husband.

“Sita is back from her hometown,” the letter read. “She was quite disappointed to learn that you are not in town. She had been gone for six months and is now back with her baby. I don't like the idea of forcing you to return home; you needn't think of rushing back immediately because of me or Sita. You may return after

staying with your folks as long as you wish.”

I was totally dissatisfied with the letter. I had a nagging fear: is my husband trying to insinuate himself between Sita and Seshan just like Seshan did – between us? Is my husband bent on risking his self-respect – just like Seshan did?

I can return home at my own will and pleasure, my husband writes. Does he know what I really want? I am afraid the answer is no. He is lacking that inner love to know my mind. As for me, I want to go home!

How can I tell this to my parents? My husband has been gone only for a week!

“I am a little concerned about things over there,” I informed my mother. “I want to go home.”

“Why, what’s bothering you, Bhanu?” Mother’s inquiry carried a real concern.

“My husband was very warm and caring back home . . . ” I began. “But his attitude changed as soon as we visited his parents. He becomes a totally different person when he is in the company of others; that happened even when I was with him.”

“Well, if he treats you the same way at your home as well as at his parents’, that will not do him any good; it may even create a few problems for you,” Mother said.

“You know, my in-laws were saying that my husband was a very different person in his youth and that he gave up his recklessness after I came into his life. So, how can I trust him?”

“Don’t be so naive,” Mother admonished me. “You would have understood these things had you lived with your in-laws. This is how parents, in general, talk about their sons. There is some truth to this; in youth the sons normally act like bullies and rebels; once they get married and take over the family responsibilities they would give up all their audacity and boldness. This is the general trend all over the world.”

My God! Mother too has fallen a victim to the charms of her son-in-law! How will these folks ever understand what I am saying?

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I was making plans to leave for my home. Mother had a bit of advice for me: “My dear girl, I know you are a little short-tempered; your husband is cool and steady. I think these distinctions are to be welcomed but they should never be allowed to grow wider. What all I am saying is you need to show a little more accommodation and understanding with your husband.”

Good heavens! Why are my parents so solicitous toward my husband? Yesterday my younger sister, elder brother as well as his wife were rehashing some old episode and were echoing the same sentiment: “Poor man! Bhanu had a big fight with her husband!” Why are these people so easily taken by outward appearances?

I should always obey my husband, no exceptions to the rule; that pretty much sums up Mother's advice to me. She's upset that I am occasionally picking on him. I love my husband, deeply; still, am I not supposed to have the clearest opinion of who he is? Shouldn't a woman fully understand her husband?

I reached home; "Why this sudden return?" asked my husband in a voice tinged with surprise. I remained silent. I was in no mood to start a fight. I was sure there would be several opportunities ahead to convince me that my sudden arrival was a shock to him.

"Bhanu, do you know how much I missed you?" my husband asked.

"Well, are you not the one who asked me to stay back with my parents?" was my quick rejoinder.

"I was a little startled to see you so excited, frolicking and romping around gleefully in high spirits the moment you entered your parents' home," he said. "I was afraid I might interfere in your freedom, so I tried to act as if I had forgotten that you were my wife. After all, here at home, you are juggling around all the time to take care of my personal needs; I didn't want to burden you with the same responsibilities over there. So I let you be on your own, still on certain occasions you got upset and picked on me. I thought a few days' stay without me around might make you feel better."

Exuberance and surprise overwhelmed me:

'Could this be really true?' The very thought threw me into ecstasy.

Still, I wasn't free from my deep-seated suspicion. Is he sweet-talking to me because of his euphoria at my sudden return?

The very next day I visited Sita. She wasn't the Sita I had known before. Now she had grown leaner and had a baby on her lap. There was a simple innocence—call it naivete—on her face. Yes, she is a plain, simple and naïve woman!

Somewhere during our conversation I raised a question, followed by a laugh: "When you were away your husband often visited us. When I went away, did my husband try to crash into your household?"

"It would have been really very nice if that were the case," Sita said with a crack in her voice. I was puzzled. All these days I loathed Seshan's intrusion into our marital company; now Sita seems to have been a little surprised that my husband was *not* intruding into theirs!

"What do you mean? I don't understand!"

"Maybe he didn't want to associate with my husband," Sita replied. "Your husband visited us only once; that was when he wanted to see the baby . . . That's all . . ." Her eyes glistened.

"Why? Sita, what happened?" Her reaction shook me up.

But she refused to give any more details. She started sobbing uncontrollably while trying to

contain her emotion. All I could grasp between her sobs was the revelation that of late Seshan has been involved with one of his girl friends.

“Sita, I will see you tomorrow. I can’t bear to see you cry,” I told her and returned home.

My mind was in deep turmoil. As soon as I reached home I complained to my husband, “Why didn’t you tell me about Seshan?”

“Why should I say bad things about other people? They have a way of coming out in public, sooner or later . . . Now, you too have found out . . .”

“Sita herself told me, that’s how I found out. Was he always like this?”

He nodded his head in affirmation.

“My God, how come you never resented his company? Did you really think he could be a good friend? Poor Sita, she was proud she was married to a decent man! Given Seshan’s character, I can’t understand how you could cultivate friendship with him!” I was angry as I hurled the questions at my husband.

He was calm as he spoke: “He’s what he is! Can you change a man by lecturing or hating him?”

His words seemed to carry an inimitable resonance.

The following day I again sought Sita’s company. I wanted to comfort her, and spoke my piece: “Sita, see how things have turned out for you. You believed your husband was an ideal one and see what happened. This is how

the world is. I am beginning to think sometime in the future my dreams and hopes too may end up empty and meaningless. One can never trust these men!”

“Bhanu, don’t say that!” Sita cautioned me. “Don’t compare your husband with other men. It is possible one day my husband might change under your husband’s influence, but your husband is certainly not the type who could be led into promiscuous ways.”

Didn’t she also hold Seshan in a lofty position in the past? Hasn’t that collapsed now?

“Sita, you too were once proud that you were the wife of an ideal husband! And you ended up being deceived. You think I am married to an ideal husband? What if you end up disappointed again?” I was struggling hard to bury my mental agony as I spoke these words.

“How long did my dream of an ideal husband last? Only four months into our marriage!” she said.

“Don’t you remember the letter you wrote to me when you went home for delivery?” I reminded her.

“Oh, that letter . . .” she said with a pause, followed by a dry laugh. “What makes you think that I would admit the truth on my own? But now, when it is out in public, where is the need to hide the truth? Besides, I told you now because I thought you had already known about it.”

Sita’s words revealed a truth to me: deep in

my conscience I felt Sita's words suddenly opening a magic door – revealing the interior of a cave.

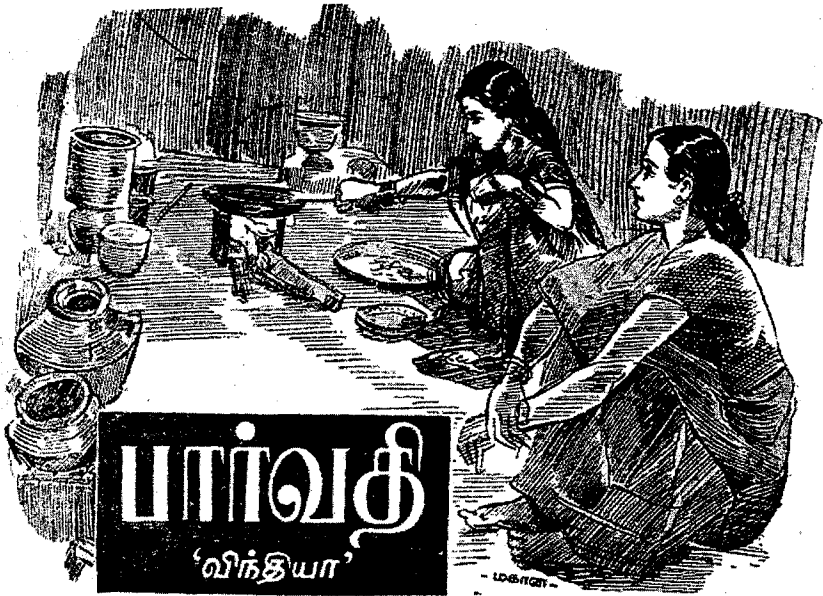
She knew her husband's philandering, yet she hid her real feelings when she wrote me that letter because she didn't want to undermine her husband's honor. On the other hand, I had undermined my husband, an ideal one, with my suspicious mind and unproven charges! How else to describe my behavior during our vacation? Mother was right: instead of cultivating a spiritual ignorance that might have helped me to live with peace of mind and stop finding fault with my husband I was indulging in silly experiments! That's my real ignorance!

What a revelation! I could now discern Sita's, that naïve woman's devotion and pure love toward her husband with my own pettiness towards mine.

Sita! Till now your letter had been a source of mental agony, but now I see it as a beacon of light to chart my future! It is a testimony to your superiority in character, propriety, and culture!

While my heart warmed up to Sita, I could also feel a sense of awe and anxiety stirring within me; am I the lofty wife my husband deserves?

Oh, my heart is aching for his words of comfort and assurance!



PARVATHI

Original title: *Parvathi*

Published in *Kalaimagal* (August, 1947)

This was the first story of India Devi published in *Kalaimagal* when she was twenty. It is a sensitive portrait of the coming-of-age of a thirteen-year old girl; how, as a victim of tradition and heartless men, she faced ostracism and abandonment from others but finally transformed her life with honor and position restored.

PARVATHI

I had just finished my morning house work and was about to take a break. I was browsing through a Tamil magazine when I heard Meena, the ten-year old girl from our neighborhood approaching me. She said, "Auntie, my mom wants you immediately." So I dropped the magazine and followed her to her home, just four houses away from ours.

Meena's mother Rajam welcomed me at her doorstep in a voice mixed with anxiety and apprehension. "Please come in," she said. "I am totally confused. I needed to consult you right away, I am sorry for making you walk in this hot sun. What can I do? I find myself helpless!"

"No problem, I don't live too far from you, anyway," I assured her and entered the house. "Why do you need my advice? Tell me."

Heavy silence hung inside the house. I was a little surprised that Saraswathi, who usually greeted me on arrival at their home, was nowhere to be seen. Saraswathi was their eldest daughter; after completing eighth grade in the local school she found out she had exhausted her chances for any further studies in town, so she stayed home. She turned out to be a smart girl: reading all kinds of books, on

her own, to broaden her horizon; at thirteen the training she received from her mother was invaluable; she sewed all the clothes for the home and mastered classical music; she helped her mother with daily household work. What more does she need? I often used to pray that Saraswathi should get a good husband deserving of her. I was very fond of her.

Missing her from sight, I asked the mother, "Where is Saraswathi?"

"It is Saraswathi that I am concerned about," Rajam informed me. "I am in a big dilemma and wanted to consult you. That's why I sent for you." She slowly poured out all her concern from her heart and let out a deep sigh.

Well, the news about Saraswathi was indeed an auspicious one. Mother Nature had unleashed her forces on this girl and she had 'come of age.'

Till yesterday she was merely a young girl wearing a *paavadai* and top, but today she has blossomed into a young woman.

Instead of rejoicing the blooming event Rajam seemed worried though, deep inside, she was pleased.. Rajam was struggling with how to face her predicament in this non-traditional town – a confusing mixture of city and a rural village. She had no desire to hide her daughter's coming of age; at the same time she was not bold enough to announce it. She turned to me for advice because she had a special regard and affection for me.

I gave her what one might call on-the-spot,

cut and dry advice with no hesitation whatsoever. My reaction was spontaneous.

“Look, Rajam, think no more. Let the public know about this event; draw a *kolam* – with the mixture of red ochre, turmeric and limestone in front of the house and get on with other formalities. You must formally seat Saraswathi on a wooden pedestal and begin the rituals, right away.”

“*Mami*, I am rather surprised at your daring advice!” Rajam said. “I feel exactly as you do, but I could never summon the courage to follow my instincts. You have no misgivings, none at all!”

“Yes, I have none; you too must not give in to unnecessary fears. Please do as I say. We should never hide the truth; you will never know what the consequences might be. Today is an auspicious day – Friday. Go ahead and announce the news. Be brave and follow my advice!”

“Yes, that’s my wish too,” Rajam replied. “I will not act against my conscience nor against your advice. I will go ahead with further plans and I would like you to attend the three-day rituals at our home.”

I returned home with peace of mind. The next three days at Rajam’s house were scenes of celebration marked by rituals, feasts and numerous gifts and blessings to Saraswathi. On the fourth day Rajam herself visited me; the face that was crestfallen the other day now

shone bright.

“*Mami*, had you not sounded so bold and determined that day I wouldn’t have made up my mind and followed your advice,” Rajam said. “Do you know how happy and satisfied I am, now? Still, I am curious about one thing: what made you render me that advice without any hesitation, whatsoever? You sound quite liberal in these matters!”

“You are right; I have learnt a lesson from a blunder I committed in the past in a similar situation. My younger sister, an innocent, mother-less child, was a victim of my misjudgment. She had to endure terrible suffering. Her experience has been an eye-opener to me.”

“What? Are you talking about Parvathi? I remember seeing her with her husband when they visited you six months ago! Are you telling me she had a difficult life?”

“Yes, I mean that same girl Parvathi. We agonized for years if she would ever live with her husband. For two and half a years after their marriage her husband wouldn’t accept her into their home.”

“You mean he discarded his wife initially? When I saw them they seemed an ideal couple. Nobody could have thought any disaffection ever existed between them.”

“Indeed, it is unbelievable,” Rajam answered, and continued. “Because Parvathi and her husband are now living happily, our past difficulties and mental agonies seem just like bad dreams.

Only by God's grace their troubles finally ended."

"What caused this crisis, *Mami*? You were saying you committed a blunder. What happened?" I wanted to fulfill Rajam's curiosity and also to get it out of my chest. So I set out to give her all the details.

Do you remember we lived in Tiruchi district for six years before moving down here? It was within those six years everything happened: starting from Parvathi coming over to live with us and finally joining her husband and living happily with him. She lost her parents when she was hardly ten, so we raised her in our home.

She too came of age like Saraswathi. But the way I handled her situation was totally different from what I had advised you. I kept her condition entirely secret.

Even as a girl Parvathi's body exhibited growth beyond her age. She was not even thirteen. She had an innocent child-like face. Yet, since she had a well-developed body, I told her friends and neighbors that I encouraged Parvathi to don a sari. I was so convincing with my story that no one doubted it; everyone accepted it.

I wholeheartedly believed all along that I was acting in her best interest! Parvathi was motherless and I took upon myself to be responsible for her comfort and happiness. I didn't want her to become an object of rumors and gossip; I was especially concerned that she should never feel

hurt by someone casually remarking why she didn't get married yet. At the time I didn't realize that the adage 'Man proposes, God disposes' would apply to her case! Everything that unfolded later was contrary to my expectations!

When Parvathi was about to turn fourteen we found a boy for her and performed her marriage. Her husband seemed steeped in orthodoxy; so I informed Parvathi's future mother-in-law and a few other relatives, rather in a self-gratifying tone: "I am told nowadays families are hiding puberty before their daughters get married. Those who live in such fear are bound to reap dire consequences. As for me, I was determined I would publicize the fact if she came of age. And because I was brave, by God's grace, Parvathi now is not facing any problems. Her marriage is taking place according to our Hindu scriptures and also without violating the *Sarda Act*." I spoke with conviction as if I was uttering the absolute truth. They all seemed to accept my words in full faith and I congratulated myself at my shrewdness.

Parvathi's in-laws lived in a village not too far from ours. So her mother-in-law, sister-in-law and her two children accompanied her husband and came over for the *Adi festival*. Had they followed the current custom, the in-laws would have sent, rather discreetly, only the husband. Still, these were plain, rural folks and because they all lived nearby, all of them descended on our house for the occasion. It was

then that Parvathi had the most traumatic experience of her life.

Parvathi had her period then and informed me about it in privacy. Till then, even though I had been keeping her condition a closely guarded secret from others, I was careful to ensure that she followed the strict rules of seclusion at home when she had her menses. That had been a family tradition and I didn't want to compromise now by admitting her to freely mix with other family members on a festive occasion. She had been married for three months; so I decided to publicize that she had 'come of age.' The timing seemed appropriate; after all, the relatives from her husband's side were now present; and the fact that I could easily do away with some obligatory invitations for the ritual and save travel expenses for the in-laws pleased me even more. Not a moment to lose, I told myself, in a congratulatory tone.

So I announced in an unequivocal voice that Parvathi came of age that very day and set about making arrangements for the celebrations.

Some half-an hour later I noticed Parvathi's husband – who had been deeply engrossed on the veranda reading a book – suddenly marching into the house. His voice echoed like thunder; his words struck us like a lightning.

"It would be a great sin to set my eyes on your daughter," he yelled at me. "We hereby sever our relationship with your family!"

"Why? What happened?" We cringed in utter

shock. His mother inquired: "Vasu, what is the matter?"

"Well, why don't you read this and find out for yourself?" the son screamed and threw down the almanac on to the floor. "You will find out what the stars foretell about your daughter-in-law!"

His face was fiery and I was scared even to look at him; still, I managed to blurt out a few words.

"I see what you mean . . . We can perform *Santi* to ward off the malefic effects. You may consult others . . . There is nothing wrong in performing a *Santi* . . ."

"Oh, you think her character can be changed with *Santi*? No, the problem is I am married to a woman who is immune to any *Santi* or other purifying rituals! You too can find out from the almanac that there is no single redeeming feature about her when you analyze her star or other celestial aspects. I have no desire to remain in this house even for a single minute!" And addressing his mother in the same breath, "*Amma*, are you coming with me or not?" he walked briskly out of the door..

"Please wait," his mother implored him. "If you leave, why should we stay here? What are we supposed to do? Just wait a minute. We have our bags and luggage inside and you need to take care of them."

"Never again am I stepping inside this house," shouted the young man. "You may get

them yourself. Else, leave them in the house. Let them be a reminder to the slut that she was once married to someone!”

Rajam, can you believe he actually spoke those words? You can imagine how we felt. We were already shivering by his yelling and screaming. As I accidentally glanced at Parvathi lurking in a corner with a pale and cadaverous face, I was overcome by pity and sadness. Like a sharp spear, his words pierced my heart. Horrified, I collapsed on the floor in utter disbelief, “Oh, what’s he saying?”

Then I heard Parvathi’s scream ‘*Aiyo! Amma!*’ piercing my ears. What really haunts me to this day is her addressing me as mother. Why did she scream ‘mother’ for help? Didn’t I, her sister cause the problem? Was she thinking this tragedy would have never happened if her mother was around? That feeling keeps wrenching me all the time . . .

She had come of age on an auspicious Monday; on that occasion, according to our scriptures, she deserved to be lauded and affirmed to the world as an embodiment of unswerving loyalty, a chaste woman, a paragon of noble qualities and the prospective mother of good sons and daughters. But, as fate would have it, the day I declared to the world her transition to womanhood, the scriptures chose to condemn her future to a life of barren woman and widowhood. What a travesty! This is a conspiracy of fate wrought by my own stupidity and lack of forethought.

Parvathi's husband was in no mood to listen to anybody's advice. He remained stubborn and returned home. For the next one year we detected no change in his behavior.

Day by day, Parvathi became depressed and physically fragile; how could a woman cope with such a nightmare – total ostracism by her husband?

One day she ventured an opinion and said to me: "My husband does believe in scriptures. If only he knew that I came of age on that auspicious Monday with so many glowing forecasts about me, how glad he would have been? We too would be feeling happy about it!"

I was stunned by what she said; her abrupt remark nearly unnerved me, and as her words continued to haunt me for the next few days, I asked her, "Shall we inform the truth to your husband? We can frankly admit that we had lied to him."

"Sister, no, let's not do that! He would probably get mad that we had lied to him. He may even accuse us of trying to twist the facts to suit the occasion. I don't think my husband is given to serious reflection before he acts or says anything; don't you remember how stubborn and self-righteous he sounded that day? Sooner or later he will have a change of heart, even without our persuasion if I am destined a good future. On the other hand, if I am unlucky, he will permanently carry the impression in his mind that we always lie and he will never change. So let's

leave the matter to my fate and see what happens. Let us do nothing at this time." Parvathi was steadfast in her opinion.

But my mind was restless. I couldn't help thinking of taking some action to redress her condition.

I asked my husband to write a letter to Parvathi's husband. The letter implored him to spend some time with Parvathi and get to know her and then form an opinion. All we asked was a chance for Parvathi to prove she was worthy of her husband.

His response was terse and quick.

"It would be impossible for me to associate with your Parvathi to know her," he wrote back. "My faith in our scriptures remains unshaken."

Meanwhile, we noticed a change in Parvathi. For someone whiling away her days like a walking corpse, there was a sudden surge in her spirits. She was becoming livelier and more active, day after day leading us to think that she was up to something . . .

I was pleased to see her face sparkle with a glow. One day I pointed to my husband in a voice tinged with pity: "Poor Parvathi, she's trying her best to forget her sorrows and get on with her life . . ."

"How long can I feel sorry for myself?" Parvathi cut in. "I am not going to waste my life. I have a decent education, so I am going to find a job and eke out a living."

"What are you saying? Eke out a livelihood!

Don't we have enough money to take care of you? I don't understand what you mean! I very badly need your presence in this house to keep my body and soul together; should you ever leave these premises because of some job opportunity or career, you might as well forget about your sister! Even if you see her alive, she will be sick or crazy!" I threatened her without mincing any words.

Parvathi tried to calm me down. "Please, please, don't get me wrong! My first priority is that I should feel good about myself. I feel like writing essays and short stories. I have so many ideas buried in me. Only when I pour out all my thoughts into the open will I have peace of mind. As I keep myself occupied in writing I will forget my worries."

"Well, by all means you may indulge in whatever interests you. We happily welcome your permanent presence in this household free from worries and able to write at your own pace." I promised our full support to her future plans.

Soon Parvathi became deeply immersed in writing. Only she knew what she wrote and how much she wrote. She never gave any details and we too never asked her.

Parvathi got a lot of mail; she was always the first person in the family to accost the postman as soon as he set foot on our doorstep. She would keep to herself any mail personally addressed to her. She would simply inform others that she received some mail, but no further details. If some-

one asked her, "What is it about?" she might answer, occasionally, with a whiff of sadness: "They rejected my story." Sometimes she would exclaim happily and declare, "They have accepted my story!"

"When do you think they will publish it?"

"It will take a while; it is not going to be published immediately."

Once, when I asked her, "Why don't you let us read your story?" she answered: "Sister, I will never show my stuff to others before it gets published. It will be published in a magazine under my pen name. Then I can find out what you think of it. If you knew that I had written it you will think it was great – no matter what! I must get an honest opinion!"

A year passed quickly with this diversion and less sadness. Then, one day, out of the blue, we received a letter from Parvathi's husband addressed to my husband.

"What a surprise!" we all thought. But the message inside jolted us even more.

"Please bring Parvathi." Just three words were scribbled in the middle of a white paper inside the envelope.

'Why this sudden change of heart? Did Parvathi play a role in this?' Such a thought hit me like a lightning.

"Parvathi, here's a letter from your husband!" I shouted at her with joy.

"Does it say I am welcome in his house?"

Parvathi asked, casually smiling, as she approached me.

“How in the world do you know?”

“I knew; my mother-in-law wrote me last week. She hinted her son’s heart might change. So now we have proof confirming her suspicion.”

“Your mother-in-law wrote to you? We seem to be getting all kinds of new information!” I was losing my patience. “Why don’t you give us all the details?”

“I had a vague feeling that my mother-in-law would stand up for me,” Parvathi began. “Usually, when men begin demonstrating their love toward their wives very early on, their mothers tend to grow jealous and start harassing their daughters-in-law. But my situation is different; my husband hates me, does it mean my mother-in-law too despises me? Isn’t it possible she might take pity on me? A few mothers-in-law might take the side of their sons but that wasn’t how I felt about mine. I decided my first goal should be to endear myself to my mother-in-law.

Any mother-in-law, I told myself, would be amenable to her daughter-in-law’s piety and devotion. It seemed to me, then, what she would normally demand from her daughter-in-law was love, loyalty and acquiescence. It was by God’s grace that I realized this great truth, and now my wish had come true!

My mother-in-law wrote me a pleasing reply

to my very first letter. I was quite happy to receive it even after a month. She sounded sympathetic to my situation in the next four or five letters, but she never raised the possibility of advising her son to change his mind. Then she wrote me a couple of letters wherein she criticized her son's attitude, saying, "He's stubborn, he's not going to change!" Then, as days went by, there were marked changes in her tone; she mentioned that she kept pressing her son to reconsider his decision and take me into the household. She also wrote, with some sadness, that her son was getting irritated whenever she mentioned me by name. A few days later she wrote that she had been noticing quite a few changes in her son's attitude; instead of easily getting worked up at my name, her son was becoming a little more patient and was himself bringing up my name in some occasional chitchat. So there has been some gradual mellowing of my husband's heart and now he wants me to join them."

We all stood there listening to her with our mouths wide open.

"Parvathi, how did you get this idea and such wisdom?" asked my husband.

"I am quite amazed you could win over your mother-in-law with your correspondence," I told her. Now, what did you exactly write to her?"

Was it joy, awe or pride that overwhelmed us at a time like this? It was sheer pride!

"Sister, wait a minute! I have kept the copies of all correspondence; I also have my mother-in-

law's letters. Let me go and get them." Soon she returned with a file.

In her very first letter Parvathi had penned the following words: "I feel blessed to have a nice person like you as my mother-in-law but feel unfortunate because I am denied the honor of serving you and receiving your warm blessings"

In another letter she had written:

"It is quite common that a girl will be blessed with a loving husband; but to be blessed with an adoring mother-in-law is a boon that is conferred on a woman only after several births as a reward for her virtuous deeds! I have attained you only because of some merit from my previous births. But, you are denied my care and service in your golden years.

I was festering in my childhood that I had nobody to call *Amma*. After marriage I was so happy that I found you to call *Amma*. Only in this letter I am addressing you with that appellation; I don't know when I will have an opportunity to address you – in person – as *Amma*."

"I find solace and comfort in your empathy and compassion. Your love and blessings alone will redeem me from my predicament," said yet another letter.

"It is your deep attachment to my cause that will gradually lighten my husband's heart. As I fondly look forward to the days when I would personally be serving you and receiving your blessings, I remain convinced that my future would be free from any grievances."

“I could never bring myself to share my thoughts with others – even with my own sister and brother-in-law because I feel uncomfortable to do so. But I seem to get peace of mind in sharing my thoughts with you and hearing from you.”

This was how Parvathi had articulated her thoughts in several letters in so many ways.

The upshot was gradually Parvathi was able to bring around her mother-in-law who took her side and relentlessly argued with and coaxed her son to give up his stubbornness. And finally, one day, the son yielded to her wish.

Rajam, listening to my story, interrupted me: “Does it mean Parvathi’s husband lost his faith in the scriptures?”

“No, that never happened. The truth was now out and he came to know his wife came of age on an auspicious Monday which, according to the almanac, bestowed upon her the appellation of a chaste woman. Now her husband is personally witnessing the truth of that prediction in their daily lives in Parvathi’s every word and deed. He is now very fond of her – because it is fondness that has grown stronger day after day over a long time.

I must say that at the time the husband’s mind was not fully made up into accepting Parvathi. He relented only because his mother constantly nagged him. Though he was becoming aware of his wife’s religious bent he never seemed to have

developed a favorable opinion about her. Once in a while his mind would waver in her favor but he would instantly revert back saying to himself, “Well, she’s just acting!” and inure himself to his stony heart. Yet, as his mother’s nagging continued, day and night, and was becoming unbearable, he remembered our entreaty that he give Parvathi a chance to know her. So, to appease his mother as well as to appraise his wife from closer quarters, he thought it was a wise plan to invite Parvathi home. “Let Parvathi come,” he informed his mother. “She could serve you as you please and I am not going to stand in her way.” It would be strictly a deal between Parvathi and her mother-in-law, the son reminded the old woman and concluded with his snarling eloquence: “You may treat her as your daughter-in-law, but I will not! Do you hear me?” When the mother wrote this to Parvathi, the latter wrote back: “Even if I am not welcome in your home as your son’s wife, still I would like to come because of you.” Parvathi believed that once she moved into her husband’s house she might be able to change his mind.

Prior to her departure Parvathi handed over to my husband three family diaries from our house for the years 1940, 41 and 42. She told him, “I need a favor from you. Please write on the 1940 diary cover: *Highlights from Parvathi’s life: May through August*; the same words should appear on the cover of 1941 diary and as for the cover of 1942 diary you may write *Highlights*

from Parvathi's life, October. She took the diaries after my husband inscribed the appropriate words on their covers. My husband had made copious notes and kept records about Parvathi's stay at our home from the day of her arrival till her departure now. Still, Parvathi felt it necessary to have these additional references marked on the diary covers.

She carefully tucked away the diaries in her suitcase. We thought she was up to something – some plan to win over her husband – so we stopped worrying about her.

Even after a month and a half after she moved into the house, we soon came to know, Parvathi's husband had no change of heart. Parvathi spent all her time in the company of her mother-in-law; she came to believe her future happiness depended only on her mother-in-law and this faith alone kept her going. While she was disappointed that her husband was still aloof and showed no signs of mellowing, she seemed to draw inspiration from the love and affection her mother-in-law bestowed upon her. The mother-in-law was totally taken by Parvathi's innate nature – obedience and devotion. Both their minds seemed to resonate with one another.

One day, Parvathi put away in an *almirah* the three diaries in some conspicuous place that her husband would notice – adjacent to other items like coconut oil, comb and *kumkum*. When her husband picked up coconut oil and one of the diaries out of curiosity he noticed the words on

its cover and started reading the contents.

First he noticed the notes on the 1942 diary. “What was the highlight of her life in 1942?” he wondered. “After all, I have quarreled with the family and moved away from them in 1941!” He quickly turned the diary pages to the month of October. Under the date 20 he read: ‘Parvathi has begun writing essays and short stories. May God give her peace of mind!’ “What is this? She writes stories?” A little amazed at this revelation he began scanning the pages of the 1941 diary, those under the month of May. Under the date 7, he read the entry: ‘The most sacred day in Parvathi’s life; it’s her wedding day!’ He then turned to the month of August, and under the date 14, he read: ‘The most traumatic day in Parvathi’s life; her husband has rejected her. What her sister and brother-in-law did with their best intention to insulate Parvathi from social stigma landed her in the worst disaster of her life! Because we lied about an important event in her life that occurred in 1940 as if it occurred in 1941, Parvathi, an innocent, mother-less girl is being rejected by her husband’. Getting even more amazed at what he was reading Parvathi’s husband now started on the 1940 diary and began turning the pages for the month of June. Under Monday, the tenth, he read the following: ‘Today Parvathi has come of age. An auspicious day in her life!’ Pleasantly surprised, he dropped the diaries and began pacing up and down the veranda. Was it surprise, happiness, anger or

sympathy? He couldn't discern his own mind – which was in turmoil.

That night, as usual, while serving him dinner, his mother began her refrain: “I don't know when you are going to change your mind! The only thing I do around this house is to serve you food; as far as all other chores are concerned, that poor girl does everything! What do you actually think of her? Is she just a cook in this household? Does she have no rights other than performing all the domestic chores? Hasn't she ended up with all these responsibilities only because she happened to be married to you? She has rights but can't enjoy her life; looks like she's born only to toil – day and night!”

The son now spoke as if waiting for that very cue. “Mother, I can't take it any more! You are making my life miserable! You want me to plunge into family life, am I right? I am willing to follow your advice. Starting from today Parvathi will be my wife! Okay?” He feigned anger even as he expressed his desire to accept Parvathi as his wife.”

Rajam again interrupted me; she seemed quite impressed. “I am glad Parvathi's husband had a change of heart. Not bad, quite a smart son-in-law, I should say! It is nice to know that the couple are now reconciled and living happily. That's what we really wanted.”

“You are right. They are living happily and I have forgotten all the suffering we endured. One

day I asked Parvathi: “What if I had told the truth earlier? Do you think your husband would have accepted you right then?”

Parvathi said, “Sister, we can’t be sure. My husband was stubborn and self-righteous to start with, and he simply hated us. He would have never accepted our word in good faith. In a way it is good that he came to know the truth about me in his own home – because around that time there were already signs of his mellowing. The very reason why I went to live with my mother-in-law was because my husband – still defiant – was slowly opening up to us. Later, when he knew the truth he didn’t get angry with us for hiding the fact. I think we did the right thing in not revealing the truth earlier. I realized it then and that’s why I insisted we shouldn’t inform him. I wanted to reveal the truth through the diary.”



A NEW MONTH

Original title: **Matham Piranthathu**

Published in **Kalaimagal** (June, 1951)

This is one of the two stories published under a special monthly feature *Irattai Kathai* or Twin Stories. Two writers – unknown to one another – were invited to contribute a story with a given title. The other writer of the series was one G.S. Mani; a few readers in the author's home town confused that name with India Devi's husband – known among the circle of friends as *V.S. Mani* and thought the two stories were by a wife-husband team!

A NEW MONTH

Seshadri was a successful lawyer who steadily advanced in his profession with his famed verbal skills in court arguments. An unsavory episode in his life left him bitter, so unlike other members of his profession he grew indifferent to amassing wealth. His career brought him no regular, monthly income; still, every month, his mind was nagged by one inevitable compulsion.

On the first day of every month he would pick up two money-order forms; setting aside his feelings for a moment, he would briskly fill in the forms and hand over them to his clerk along with appropriate amounts of cash, for disposal. Of the two money-orders he sent, one was for the monthly rent he owed to his landlord; the other took care of the alimony he owed to his former wife who had since separated and lived away from him. Seshadri seemed to feel the same way about both the commitments, but there was a marked difference: while he felt a sense of gratitude in paying the rent he was weighed down by shame with the other. Seshadri was grateful because in the last ten years the owner hadn't raised the rent of twenty-five rupees. But he didn't seem to appreciate the fact that despite the rapid growth, over years, of his own personal

income, his former wife hadn't demanded an increase in the alimony amount. He heard through the grapevine that Kamala, his former wife, was supplementing her income by singing on the radio and tutoring music to aspiring young girls. Seshadri could have successfully argued that he was under no obligation to continue paying the alimony to his first wife, but he didn't even want to think about it; he was averse to contemplate any changes to the prevailing situation.

He felt uneasy whenever he heard Kamala announce the change of her address. Then, one day, she wrote him a long letter—of four lines—to express her gratitude. She wrote: “I am very happy to note that during the last four months I received your money-orders promptly on the dawn of a new month. Even when there was a slight delay I noticed you were always remitting money on the first day of the month. Please continue to do so; I consider your payments as a great help and look upon them as my monthly paychecks.” Seshadri lost no time in tearing off that letter into pieces and consigning them to a waste bin; still, having read the letter how could he forget its contents? ‘Is she really showing her appreciation or trying to be sarcastic?’ he asked himself. He fumed as he concluded the latter was indeed the case. ‘It is not that I have started caring for you, you haughty woman!’ he murmured to himself. ‘It so happens that my homeowner lives out of town and when I send him the rent I just throw off money for you too, that’s all!’ Of

course, he never wrote back to her; that would mean acknowledging that he really cared for her!

One day he received a letter from his landlord that read: "We have been very generous and didn't increase your house rent all these years but you have exposed your pettiness. You have sent us the rent after deducting six *annas* as the money-order commission. You seem to forget that the M.O. fee is actually your responsibility. So, starting from next month, the rent will be forty rupees. We know the house can fetch us seventy or eighty rupees but because you have been the resident for the last ten years we have limited the rent to forty rupees. You may continue to live in the house if you are willing to spend, every month, forty rupees and eight *annas*."

The letter made Seshadri sad as well as angry; he thought he had sent the money-order the last month just the way he had always done over the last twenty months. And now he gets this nasty letter! What happened?

He pulled out the old records from his office drawer to know what happened. He recalled at the time he hadn't filled up the money-order forms himself and had simply handed over the cash to his clerk; it was the clerk who caused the foul-up. Normally the M.O. commission would be deducted from the amount sent to Kamala; now it happened for the rent sent to the owner. The clerk erred by sending the full twenty-five rupees to Kamala.

As far as Seshadri was concerned this was no mere slip. It loomed large as a full-blown crisis. Still, he didn't take the clerk to task. He wrote a personal letter to the owner explaining that his clerk made a mistake and pointing out that the person who acted petty over mere six *annas* and penned the rude letter was the owner himself. Seshadri also demonstrated – albeit, discreetly – his own generosity by mentioning to the householder that he agreed a rent of forty rupees for the house seemed rather low. Still, he was plagued by a different worry: what if Kamala wrote a letter thanking him for sending her money without deducting the commission?

The panic lasted a few days. He had peace of mind restored only after three weeks. He told himself, “She's not going to write to me; she wouldn't.” Meanwhile, the next month began.

He gathered, as usual, in his hands the two money-order forms. The rent was forty rupees and the fee eight *annas*. He wrote a note to the addressee: ‘Please accept this as rent for *Sarada Nilayam*.’ Then he picked up the other form for Kamala and set about writing. But he was stuck; he couldn't proceed further.

Should he deduct the fee from her payment?

He recalled his reaction, the other day, to the letter from the owner. Wasn't Seshadri mad that the householder acted rather mean over mere six *annas* fee and had even penned an impolite letter? After all it was the owner who chose to live out of town; Seshadri had even thought of

arguing that the money order commission was not the tenant's responsibility. It was a matter of only six *annas*, but it stripped away all the respect he had for his landlord.

What would Kamala think?

Legally, Seshadri was bound to 'remit' every month (yes, that was the operative word; you can't substitute it with the word 'give') twenty-five rupees to Kamala toward alimony. So, under the terms agreed upon, wasn't she entitled to receive the full twenty-five rupees? Of course, Seshadri could choose to act strict and tough toward her by deducting the commission from her alimony, but is it the right thing to do?

He felt his mind caught in a whirlwind – insinuating him: 'Why can't you humiliate her with your own generosity? How about subduing her ego and pride by making her a little bashful?'

He called the clerk and told him: "Listen, this time there will be no room for any mistake; we have one money-order for forty rupees with eight *annas* fee; the other for twenty-five rupees with six *annas* fee. I am handing over to you sixty-six rupees in cash and I have also filled in the forms; Once you are done with them at the post office you may go and enjoy a nice soft-drink for two annas in this hot weather!" He felt a little better after he sent away the clerk to the post office.

Emerging out of his office room, Seshadri walked to the rear foyer of the house to wash his face with some cold water. His wife Vaidehi was

standing there; she knew her husband had just then dealt with the money-orders.

That would be one occasion when Vaidehi excelled in displaying her sang-froid; she was totally free from any sense of inferiority complex stemming from her status as a second wife and seemed to relish whatever joy and privilege life has bestowed upon her. She could do this because she was gregarious and knew how to don different hats to suit the occasion. She would betray a little change when a new month began; however, on all other occasions, as a typical housewife, she would give in to the usual grievances – that she missed going to the movies or the milk she bought the other day from the street vendor left a lot to be desired. Once the month began she would simply stop complaining about anything and everything; even a serious crisis like a sudden water shortage would scarcely unnerve her.

And this afternoon, as usual, Vaidehi smiled at Seshadri and told him, her voice rising in excitement: “I am going to prepare *Masala Vadai* today. I will pack enough so that others too may enjoy it!”

“Yes, of course,” Seshadri replied broadly smiling at her while drying his face with a towel. Then he observed her from the corner of his eyes and informed his wife in a clear voice: “Remember, starting from today, the house rent is forty rupees!”

• • •

An old wisecrack described a husband as a woman's first child. Vaidehi certainly saw Seshadri that way. She was attached to her husband in a loving and affectionate way and seemed wary about anything that might exacerbate her husband's mind, already in turmoil. She never liked to check or even glance at the money-order form that her husband made out to Kamala every month. She had full faith in Seshadri that he had no interest in his former wife and that indeed was the reason why he had married her. Every time her husband dealt with the money-order to his first wife, Vaidehi had a firm conviction that he would be only recalling his first wife's shortcomings and extravagant ways.

That wife sued her husband in court that eventually awarded her alimony. At the time Seshadri was a budding lawyer smitten with his young wife. How much has he suffered! He felt utterly miserable and had even toyed with the idea of paying off his first wife a large, single payment so that he would be free from the burden once and for all to gain peace of mind. He wasn't making a lot of money, still he felt it worthwhile to borrow money, if necessary, and arrive at a quick settlement. He cringed in despair as he watched Vaidehi witnessing the court proceedings with teary eyes filled with fear, shame and sadness. But Kamala and her mother wouldn't budge even an inch; they insisted alimony payment in installments, and that

was how the judgment was finally rendered. The family squabble was exposed to the public causing much pain and humiliation to Seshadri, who broke down in the presence of his wife.

That was the day Vaidehi made up her mind: her husband had an obligation to fulfill – which meant, every month, he had to affix his signature to a money-order form; there was simply no way he could avoid it. Then again, he was forced to write Kamala's name in a couple of places, and he performed all these tasks, mechanically, like a robot. Even if he recalled Kamala's name once in a while, Vaidehi told herself, it would trigger in him only some bitter memories. And Vaidehi would hardly care less! That was the vow she took on that day.

And it was then – culminating in that sad episode – a bond developed between Seshadri and Vaidehi. Soon Vaidehi seemed totally free from fear and anxiety and displayed care and tenderness toward her husband. She offered him comfort and courage when he needed them; in turn, Seshadri treated Vaidehi with respect and admiration.

The couple nourished their love out of sadness that served as a quilt. There were signs of offspring, still no child survived more than nine months in Vaidehi's womb. Finally, they all ended as still-born and invariably every delivery seemed to pose a danger to the mother's

life. Kamala had lived with Seshadri only for short time. She resembled her mother; with swagger and snobbish manners she grew estranged from her mother-in-law. Eventually, she preferred the company of her own mother and moved away from others. She was indeed a beauty to behold, but looks alone never won her friends.

Now Kamala is motherless. The overprotective mother who showered love and tenderness on her daughter is now gone, leaving the daughter to a life mired in ruin. But the dire consequences stemming from her counsel to the daughter are still very much in evidence. But for her mother, Kamala would have never ended up in her current predicament; consequently, Vaidehi too would have never had the misfortune to be a second wife.

Occasionally, Seshadri would feel some pang of guilt: was he to blame? After all, wasn't he a lawyer who could weigh in and size up a situation to find out on which side justice lay? It was Vaidhehi's steady role in his life that curbed his innate fickleness and brought him peace of mind. He fully shared Vaidhehi's notion that life was meant for living. Thus he could gladly welcome Vaidhehi's active public role as a member of the local ladies club. Totally free from any sense of inferiority and imbued with warmth and excitement in her mission, Vaidehi seemed to enjoy her private and public roles. What more a woman would need?

Vaidehi came to know, through someone, that in the last seven or eight years Kamala had relocated to three different cities. But she was in no mood to find out if her husband was aware of those address changes or what he actually thought of her moves from one city to another. Neither was she privy to the fact that the six *annas* commission was initially deducted from her alimony and later restored.

But both Seshadri and Vaidehi came to know almost simultaneously the news about Kamala moving to Madras to take up a new position as a music teacher. Kamala had formally informed Seshadri of her address change. The news unsettled Seshadri who made frequent business trips to Madras. He was scared to imagine he might bump into Kamala – accidentally – during those visits. Then he comforted himself —saying he could always ignore her and walk away as if he had never noticed her.

Vaidehi heard the news in her ladies club; one of the girls there broke the news. “I have heard of a lady who has just arrived in Madras to give music and Hindi lessons to my younger sister,” she began, and continued. “Her name is Kamala Devi. She is said to be a first class singer and we must invite her to our club for a concert.” She also added a few tidbits about this Kamala Devi – albeit in a tone of complaint. Another club member close by alerted the girl by rolling up her eyes as if hinting ‘Say no more!’ and silenced her. Pretty soon Vaidehi realized that

most of the club members seemed to know who that Kamala Devi was. She approached the club secretary and opened up to her.

“I am interested in listening to her music,” said Vaidehi. “Let us arrange her concert in our club.” The secretary was totally amazed and empathized with Vaidehi’s bold move. “It may not be the best thing to do,” she pointed out. “You may feel hurt.” But Vaidehi persisted, so a call went out to Kamala Devi. It was close to a miracle that the invitation did finally reach Kamala without Vaidehi ever making any further inquiries to locate Kamala’s address and also without compromising the news of Seshadri’s alimony payments to her. But, finally, Kamala didn’t accept the club invitation. “I am averse to perform on a stage before any audience,” she wrote back politely declining the club invitation. “It was never my intention to perform in the public, in the first place. I am quite contented with my present efforts in encouraging young girls to improve their musical talent. Please forgive me.” Vaidehi was exhilarated when she first read those words. She desperately wanted to share the news with her husband, but words simply failed her.

The news also reached Seshadri. If Kamala’s concert was ever to take place it was still an open question whether the club members would have admired the concert or disliked it. But the small note Kamala had penned created quite a stir. Individual club members talked about it

and spread the news among others in the community. Seshadri too was a little surprised when he first heard it and wondered, "Did Kamala actually write it?" Should he ever accidentally bump into her, he told himself, he must find out if there has been a noticeable change in her.

Soon his thought gained some momentum. During his next business trip to Madras he ended up spending four days in the city; the new month began during that stay.

As he picked up the two money-order forms in the local post office to fill them in he felt reluctant to grab the pen. It has been some time since he had met with the owner. Why can't he pay the rent in person? He could do the same thing with Kamala too! Only once, just once! It could be done in no time!

On the first day of his arrival in the city Seshadri took a trip in his client's car through the street where Kamala lived. He recalled Kamala, his wife of two years, now living in one of those houses on that street. He let out a deep sigh which, like the obnoxious smell spewing out of a hyena, depleted his body and plunged him in despair.

He had never before hired a rickshaw in the city – all his visits were conducted in taxis on official business – but now he engaged one. First he wanted to meet Kamala and pay her off – thus relieving his mind; then, he would meet with the owner.

He felt a little shaken while entering the street where Kamala lived; he began blaming himself for losing his nerve. He recalled Kamala's address. Soon he reached it, but there was nobody around. How about simply turning back? He didn't want to back off at the last moment. He got off the rickshaw. He found himself standing before an apartment complex. For a moment he seemed lost. He noticed a boy coming out of the building with a shopping bag in a hand. He stopped the boy and inquired. "You mean Kamala Devi?" the boy asked and replied, "Please go straight into the building – it is the last *arai* you will see!"

'The last *arai**? The ultimate slap? I deserve this – for coming here without telling Vaidehi.' Seshadri felt humiliated as if someone was repeatedly slapping him in the face. He was in no mood to enter the house. He once again stopped the boy and asked him, "Can you please deliver this to Kamala *Mami*?"

"If you want me, I will, but you better hurry up," the boy said. "My mother would get mad if I don't get the groceries for her on time!"

Seshadri opened his briefcase to pull out the cash envelope for Kamala when he heard a voice: "Babu, are you still there? I am glad I found you! Get me a quarter-kilo of tomatoes."

*In Tamil, the word *arai* would mean a room as well as a slap on the face. Hence Seshadri's strong reaction.

Seshadri raised his head in the direction of that voice.

That voice belonged to Kamala!

"*Mami* herself is here," the boy informed Seshadri. "You may yourself hand it over to her . . . You want tomatoes, a quarter-kilo? . . . Okay . . ." The boy was gone.

"Please come in." Kamala invited Seshadri into her apartment, somewhat tongue-tied.

"I came to hand over the rent money,. . ." Seshadri said, haltingly.

"Rent money?" Kamala felt bold enough to ask him a question.

"Well, what I meant was . . ." Seshadri broke in, and continued: "I have also brought the payment I owe you."

As he bent down to pick out the envelope from his briefcase, Kamala asked him. "Why do you have to stand in the hot sun? Please come in." Seshadri followed her.

The building had only seven or eight apartments and the pair walked through small, individual units until they reached the last one. A beautiful screen adorned the main entrance. Once they were inside, Kamala offered him a chair and stood a little away.

Who would speak first? And, about what?

"It is only the first day of the month, so early in the morning!" Kamala was saying and forced a laugh. What was now plainly visible to Seshadri were her much paler complexion, the mildness of her eyes and the dryness in her

laughter. Was she blaming herself for ruining her life—one of redolence and aura – into a life of forbidding odor?

“I felt like seeing you, so I am here,” Seshadri blurted out with no further hesitation. He handed over the cash envelope to Kamala – which she politely received from his hands and put away in a corner shelf. She didn’t check the amount; why would she in his presence?

“Nowadays I have some income, and on a few occasions I even thought of writing to stop these payments,” Kamala said. “But I couldn’t bring myself to say so!”

“I couldn’t bring myself to say so!”

How frank and open does she sound! That has been always her hallmark! Even in those good old days her words and questions had the stamp of an expert lawyer arguing a case! And that’s where the problem actually began!

Seshadri glanced at her for a moment. He too felt like telling her, “I am also making a lot more than what I used to.” But he didn’t.

“I was thinking of writing to you on my own,” Kamala was saying. “I wanted to invite you – as a lawyer – to my house.”

‘How many things did you think of writing to me?’ A tempting question lingered on the tip of his tongue but found no outlet from Seshadri.

“I need your advice on an important matter. It has to do with a house in my village.”

Once his professional opinion was sought Seshadri's voice changed.

As if addressing a new client he said excitedly, "Let me hear you," – politely, the way he normally spoke to strangers and elders. Then he corrected himself and said, informally:

"Tell me, what is it? I can take a look! Why don't you give me all the details?"

Kamala stared at him in a strange manner and then picked up a letter from the almirah and set it on the teapoy before him.

As he began reading that intimidating letter Kamala disappeared into the next room. Seshadri heard a rattling sound and raised his head. It was then that he noticed his surroundings. Every single item in the room seemed well chosen and displayed with taste and decorum. He noticed a *tambura* in a corner; yes, he could tell it was a *tambura*, not a *veena* because it didn't have two knobs, and was resting against a wall in a protective cover. He also wondered if Kamala had scribbled the names *Kamala-Seshadri* in some places . . . Maybe in some book or other . . .

Again he heard a sound from the next room and Seshadri returned to the letter in hand. Meanwhile Kamala returned with *cocoa* in a cup.

"What is it?"

"A drink. Would you like a cup?" she asked him smiling.

Seshadri couldn't refuse; he began sipping

cocoa from the cup.

“I will definitely look into the matter about this house in your village. It belonged to your mother, so it should come to you. Nobody can stand in your way . . . Now, I must leave; I will see you later.”

He arose from his chair. Kamala followed him to the door as he took leave of her.

“You just disappeared without a word,” complained the driver when Seshadri returned to the rickshaw outside.

“I have one more house to visit,” Seshadri informed him and settled into the rickshaw. Kamala joined both her palms in a symbolic gesture to bid him farewell saying, ‘*Namaste!*’ He returned the gesture in kind.

As the rickshaw turned at the street corner Seshadri noticed Kamala was still standing on the veranda. Suddenly he had a mixed feeling: he was seized by panic that he had committed an unpardonable sin; on the other hand, he was also proud that he had accomplished an impossible feat. He remembered Vaidehi: was he being unfaithful to her? The very thought stunned him. ‘How can that be? Who is Kamala, after all? Was she married to somebody else? No, then how can anyone accuse me of betraying a trust? Hadn’t Kamala lived with me for two full years as my wife?’

Kamala! Vaidehi!

Vaidehi with her big black eyes and curly locks and of brownish complexion, his second

wife! Kamala with curly brownish locks, lotus eyes and of fair complexion, his first wife!

Both are his wives, can't he live with both of them? Does the law prevent bigamy? But he is a member of the legal profession and he is fully aware of the nuances of the law!

It was only when Seshadri opened his briefcase to sort out the money he owed to the landlord that he realized his mistake: he had exchanged the cash envelopes, one for the other! The envelope with forty rupees ended up with Kamala. He smiled to himself, took out fifteen more rupees from another pouch in the briefcase, added them to the twenty-five in the envelope and handed it over to the landlord.

"Why don't you dispense with these monthly payments?" asked the owner. "I too would be happy to be rid of the burden. I am willing to sell the house. Why don't you buy it off?"

"Let me think about it," Seshadri replied with a smile. His mind was into something: why should he buy a house in his hometown? He was actually thinking of moving to Madras!

Vaidehi had noticed that in the last few months no money-order receipts with Kamala's signatures were being received at home. Why? What happened? Did her husband stop making the alimony payments to her? Won't she cause any new problems?

She hesitated to ask her husband. Of late

the litigation work – his caseload – was getting heavier, day after day. How could she talk to him about that ‘other woman’? At home Seshadri looked peaceful and was in a care-free mood; how could she upset him?

She checked with the office clerk. “Remember he (Seshadri) used to send money-order, every month, to one Kamala Devi? She had some legal problem and he got a settlement in her favor. Maybe she wanted the money due to her to be offset against the fees she owed him.” That revelation surprised Vaidehi, but the clerk didn’t know any more details.

Even as she was plagued by this disclosure, Vaidehi became privy to another rumor: a lady living in a neighboring street was leaving for Madras to take up a position of a Hindi teacher substituting the same Kamala. Kamala, who presumably sought four months leave on medical grounds had a change of mind and resigned her job! Her sudden departure led some to gossip about her alleged medical condition.

“Did Kamala get into some messy affair or something?” Vaidehi wondered. Could that be the reason why her husband suddenly cut off the alimony payments? Was Seshadri weighed down, again, by shame and festering inside? Vaidehi was convinced she needed to have a frank talk with her husband; only then the couple could rid their minds of inner turmoil. She was becoming restless. She couldn’t help

thinking, "We wouldn't care for anything in life if we were blessed with children. God is testing us! As a family we are in constant prayer for an offspring," she thought. "The irony is, it appears there is going to be an unwanted offspring, bringing further shame to Kamala." She was overcome by sadness.

Seshadri, who returned the following day from Madras, seemed totally tired and exhausted. He had lunch following the customary bath; he was now immersed in some deep thought.

Earlier in the morning he had gone out on some personal business. He was seated in the front hall when Vaidehi approached him. He keenly watched her face before handing over to her a note.

"Is it from the lady-doctor?" his wife asked and started reading it. She reread it a few more times before grasping its full import and reacting with a total shock, "Can this be true?" A few years ago she was privy to the news that the concerned lady-doctor had performed on her an emergency operation following a miscarriage; still, the doctor never explicitly told Vaidehi that she could never again conceive. Later, the lady doctor did inform Seshadri her diagnosis discreetly, through a note – when he had gone to the hospital to fetch his wife home.

Seshadri had carefully saved that note. "Why did you keep it a secret for so long?"

Vaidehi asked him, sobbing. "Why are you telling me, now?"

"I didn't want you to feel sad," Seshadri comforted her. "But, now there is a compulsion _____"

"Compulsion? What are you saying? I have heard the proverb: if you miss once, you will miss thrice. Are you thinking of getting married, again?"

"As if I haven't had enough problems, already, Vaidehi," quipped Seshadri with a dry laughter, and continued:

"Vaidehi, listen to me. I am a lawyer. As a lawyer I am bound to defend my client even if he is another lawyer who did something wrong. Now that I myself stand as the guilty party, . . ." he broke off.

Vaidehi was stunned. Still, she braced herself to face the impending blow.

"She says she couldn't bring herself to refuse alimony; she still wants to be a part of this family . . . If you look at her now, you will not be angry at all . . . She's in her family way; the month has begun . Only you can help her, Vaidehi."

In a flash Vaidehi grasped everything and she tried to maintain her composure.

She held back the turmoil mounting within her while betraying her feelings through muted sobs . . .

"Where is the need for my forgiveness?" she asked, after a pause. "So far so good –

there's no third wife in sight!"

What was it lurking in Vaidehi's doleful smile? How different this new month would be?



THE FOLDED PALMS

Original title: **Kooppia Kai**

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He was an ordinary waiter who rendered timely help to a wealthy business man; but then he did something even more extraordinary . . .

THE FOLDED PALMS

I keenly watched the young man who served me the early morning breakfast; he looked bright enough to be a college student but fate had ordained him to wait on tables. Who can divine God's purpose?

"When will the newspaper boy show up?" I asked. "I need it right away."

"I can get it for you, sir."

"Are you the agent?"

"No, but I have been buying the newspaper regularly for the last one month. I am holed up here and I thought maybe I should find out what is going on in the world. Let me get it for you." He disappeared and returned in no time with the newspaper.

"How far have you studied?" I queried.

"I lost my father when I was in the eighth grade, so I had to drop out of school, sir."

"Do your duty and never lose faith in God; everything will turn out fine." That is my stock in trade advice to cheer up others.

He smiled back at me.

"Why? Don't you believe good days are ahead of you? The most important thing in life is to have faith! Try to develop faith, and God will show the way!"

"I do have faith in my future, but I am

unable to have faith in God.”

“God exists only for those who are willing to commit their full faith in Him; for others he is only a mere stone. I wish God gives you faith and courage.” I began turning the newspaper pages.

“Enjoy the paper,” the young man said and was soon gone.

Around eight-thirty, I was on my way out to attend to my business affairs – when I called out the young man and asked: “What’s your name?”

“Subramanian,” he replied with a smile.

“Do you know any temple around here?” I asked. “I would very much like to visit it during my outings.”

“As you go out of the hotel, please walk straight on the main road without taking any turn. That will take you to a small grove with a fence and green banana plants. I think the temple is situated somewhere inside that grove. I am not sure if there’s any other temple around this area.”

“How would you know unless you ask somebody?” I quipped and settled in the taxi. I thought to myself: let Subramanian know that all the prestige and wealth I enjoy now hasn’t stopped me from making temple visits at every opportunity I could afford.

I am someone who begins a task everyday only after scribbling the words *Sri Rama Jayam* in a book. I typically handle hundreds

and thousands of rupees in my business deals. Now I suddenly found myself entangled in a crisis. Looks like I must return to my hometown right away to personally take care of an urgent matter at hand.

I remembered that I had put away a wad of bills in my suitcase as I was making preparations to leave home; now it is missing. Did I lose it in my travel? I am positive nobody in this hotel could have touched it. Now I have no cash even to return to my hometown! Who can help me at this hour? I have no friends or relatives around this place – in fact that was the only reason why I ended up staying in a hotel.

“Would you like to have some soft drink?” Subramanian inquired me as he entered the room. “Your face looks weary and tired.”

“Get me some cold water,” I said. “I am now caught in a crisis.” I smiled even as I hinted at what I was going through.

“Sir, may I ask —what is bothering you?”

“Get me some cold water. I will let you know.” I sent him away.

I needed at least seventy rupees right away. Can I ask Subramanian to loan me that kind of money? Could he afford it? Would he think I am some kind of a shady businessman who cuts deals in hotels? After all, we do hear stories about people posing as rich businessmen and cheating innocent people . . .

My heart shrank in shame. But my feelings got the better of me and I found no reason why

I couldn't ask a favor from a less privileged soul.

The young man returned with cold water.

"It does me no good to feel ashamed to ask you a favor; I need at least seventy rupees immediately. I can certainly sell my ring and get some immediate cash, but I am averse to doing such a thing. Can you lend me seventy rupees? I will pay you back as soon as I reach home. You can send me the ring after you get the cash. This is a deal based strictly on mutual trust." I spoke my piece.

The young man spoke with no trace of hesitation, "Why talk of a ring when a deal is based on trust?"

"Well, you may keep the ring – as a temporary measure." I began removing the ring.

"No, please don't! I have sixty rupees to spare if you want. You may send the money after you reach home."

I was heartened by the young man's ready gesture; he has faith in human beings even though he has no faith in God. I thankfully accepted his sixty rupees. "Your help is timely and most welcome," I again thanked him, followed by my assurance, "You will get back your loan in a week."

A surprise awaited me when I rushed to the hotel lobby to check out!

The hotel manager was talking with a man in khaki uniform while directing his hand toward me: "He's the man I was talking about."

My son had sent me cash by wire – with a cryptic message: “Cash left at home by mistake. Sending telegram-money order today. Acknowledge receipt.”

That’s what I call God’s grace!

“Subramanian, you have a golden touch,” I told him in elation. “You gave me sixty rupees, and now I have two thousand rupees in my hand.”

“I am very glad to see you happy, sir.”

“I have decided to stay in this hotel for two more days,” I informed him. “I intend to return your sixty rupees only when I check out. I have a feeling that as long as I have your cash in my possession I will be successful in all my business deals.”

“That’s fine with me; you may keep the cash as long as you want,” he answered with a smile. “I am kind of delighted you value my sixty rupees even after receiving two thousand rupees.” Then he turned business-like and asked me: “Will it be fine if I serve you *chappathi* and *koottu* tonight? You can also have coconut *chutney*.”

“That’s fine,” I replied, and complimented him. “I am quite pleased you remember what I had asked for in the morning. After all every customer asks for a different item and it would be hard to remember what one exactly wants. I have been living in the North for the past eight years and *chappathi* has become a regular part of my menu at nights.” I wished Subramanian

would join me in informal exchange, so I indulged in some plain chitchat. But he left me immediately; maybe he felt it wouldn't be appropriate for him to indulge in such a conversation with me.

I called him back. "I didn't visit the temple this morning. I didn't have enough time to wander through the grove and locate the temple. Now that I feel relieved, I think this is a good time to pay my visit. As for my dinner tonight, I have changed my mind; I don't want anything." He listened to me, nodded his head and was gone.

I had barely walked a few steps away from the hotel when Subramanian came running to me. He handed me a flashlight saying, "This should help; it will be dark around this time."

"Thanks. I never thought about it. Even if I did, I don't have one and would have certainly asked you."

"Starting tomorrow I will be at work from noon till night," Subramanian informed me. "Another boy will take care of your needs in the morning. You may return the flashlight to me tomorrow evening."

"How come you were on duty today – the whole day?"

"You are right. Raju, the boy who was supposed to come this morning was sick. Tomorrow I have only half-a-day duty; but I will be here in the evening as a substitute in Raju's place."

“Why don’t you join me? Do you never visit temples?”

“I have no hard feelings that I should never visit a temple. Now I need to prepare soup for Raju.” He left in no time.

I began walking. I couldn’t help thinking about Subramanian on my way to the temple: here was a young man, a decent fellow, hard working and very sensitive to peoples’ needs. I warmly recalled his simple gesture as he made sure that I had proper directions to go to the temple myself. He’s a waiter at the hotel –and that certainly is a responsible job demanding attention and discipline.

And how helpful was that flashlight he had so thoughtfully given me! The moonlight as well as the street lights made my venture into the grove amidst the shrubs and bushes somewhat manageable, but once I found myself inside the temple, total darkness hovered over me. The only light I could catch came from a two-lamp bronze piece that hung from the ceiling; it flickered from the short vicks soaked in oil but was barely sufficient to dispel the darkness around. I managed to have a *darshan* with the help of the flashlight.

I informed Subramanian about this when I returned the flashlight to him the next evening. “You better pay a visit to the temple during the day,” he told me. “That will be emotionally satisfying to you.”

Now, good advice should be welcomed

from any quarters. So on the third day I once again went to the temple soon finishing my ablutions and morning bath. The temple was small, but tidy and well kempt. *Maruti* stood before me, tall and grand, the mount *Sanjeevi* held high in one hand and his tail, thick and unusually long, coiled into a loop. His posture seemed to assure the devout that anything is possible in the world as long as one had faith. A young man served as a priest and conducted the daily worship. He seemed infused with a traditional outlook as he performed the rituals. I wondered how much faith he really had in his heart.

I recalled Subramanian: here was a young man exemplifying a steady state of mind, equable temper, and majesty in simplicity and dignity in labor. Now, faith in God is indispensable to any active mind: it lends a meaning and purpose to the life force; how come Subramanian had not understood such a need?

I saw him in the evening. "How is your friend doing?" I asked. "You may offer him this *kumkum* and *prasadam*."

"He still has fever," Subramanian replied. "I do hope the fever will subside in a couple of days."

"Have faith and apply this *kumkum* to his forehead," I said with a smile. He too returned the smile.

"You may lack faith in God, but let me offer you this in full faith. I strongly believe

there is God. Let me ask you: look around and see how many miracles are there in nature! Every object in nature is different and has its own structure and beauty; so does every tree that produces a different leaf, a different fruit or even a different flower. And what about the grass, the weeds and the numerous insects? Even the millions of poisonous weeds and the insects we come across in nature exist for some particular reason. Billions of life forms follow the cycle of birth, life and death. No two people look alike! How did all this come into being? I am not arguing the case for existence of God but I do believe there is some supreme intelligence or a force beyond our grasp and imagination. And we have carved an image of such a force and call it God. To have faith in such a God is called devotion. We have nothing to lose and everything to gain from such devotion. You were telling me the other day that you have faith in your future; can you lead your life without faith in God? You may try and you will soon find your mind in turmoil. Do you see what I mean?"

I concluded with a question. This is the first time I delivered a homily on the existence of God. I felt I made a convincing argument.

Subramanian lowered his eyes as he answered me. "What can I say, sir? For some reason or other, I never felt like worshipping God. I don't know why."

"Do you know what our science tells us?" I

asked him, and continued: “We are told everything in this universe was caused by certain phenomenon and that the same process can be duplicated in our laboratories. If that were true, what would be my reaction? I would only say the universe itself is a laboratory and God is its chief scientist! Human life owes its honor and dignity to its mind and soul! We read a lot about scientific research and discoveries everyday but the more I read about them the more I feel a sense of awe and wonder and develop faith toward God. What can I do? That is the reason why I end up advising people like you!”

“You are elder to me, and it is only natural that you want to advise me,” Subramanian answered. “As for me, I don’t think I lack devotion. I am simply unable to express what’s on my mind.”

That night I wound up all my business deals and made preparations to return home. I was quite elated as I called Subramanian and spoke to him.

“Please show me your hand the – golden hand that brought me luck. I want to present you a ring as a memento; you must accept it.”

I knew the hands that served me for the past few days and I had already bought a ring for him. All I needed now was to make sure the ring would fit his finger.

“No, thanks. I am not accustomed to receiving such favors.” He beat a hasty retreat.

‘What a haughty and proud boy!’ I thought.

“Do you consider this some kind of a bribe?” I felt terribly sorry that he wouldn’t reconsider his decision. I repeated my plea at least three or four times to no avail. I thought of suddenly dropping the ring into his shirt pocket but that too was impossible because Subramanian stood before me with both hands folded across his chest.

“Wait a minute! I owe you the money you lent me the other day! Did you think I was trying to offer you a ring instead of cash? This is also meant to be a token of my gratitude. Come on, please accept the ring!”

“No way,” he said and moved away.

“What a haughty and proud boy!” I thought. But my anger was soon gone.

I put the ring away in my suitcase hoping I could present it to my son for having saved me from embarrassment by sending the telegram money-order when I needed it most. I picked up a roll of bills and counted the money to be returned to Subramanian in a separate envelope. I thanked Subramanian when he came to bid me farewell. Outside, a taxi was waiting for me.

“Subramanian, I am leaving. Only God knows if we will meet again.” Those were my parting words as I took leave of him.

That young man – the simple waiter–believed I had given him the right amount of cash, so he didn’t even check the contents of

the envelope in hand. He once again gazed at me with both his palms folded in a reverential gesture; was his heart warming up to my devotion and religious fervor?

• • •

I returned to the same village after an interval of four years. I came to the same hotel — with a vague hope I might meet Subramanian, again.

Subramanian was nowhere to be seen. I checked with the waiter who served me the breakfast.

“No, I really don’t know him,” he said. “I have been here only for the one and half months. After all, who can survive in this profession for more than four years? Such a person deserves to be worshipped in a temple. Even God would be hard put to endure such patience.”

I smiled and said nothing.

The boy had inadvertently reminded me of the temple. Only Subramanian was in my mind as I arrived at this hotel; I had actually forgotten the temple. There was a good reason for my state of mind: I might come across temples and green banana plants in various places but where can you find someone like Subramanian?

I visited the *Maruti* temple. Now there were far fewer green banana plants around the temple area. A new water tap had been installed in one corner of the grove. A few boys were decorating the temple entrance with colorful papers and

other paraphernalia.

“What’s going on?” I inquired the temple priest.

“For the next three days we will have a *kolu* of *Hanuman* dolls in the temple premises; the program starts tomorrow night.”

“You mean at night? Do you have electricity around here? Are you going to get gas lights?” I asked and looked up.

What a surprise! There was a light hanging down from a pole!

“When did this happen? I was here four years ago; at the time there was no power.”

“We have had electricity for the last four years thanks to some charitable people like you.”

I took a walk around the temple and its surroundings to see if anything needed fixing.

My eyes caught a black stone with some inscription engraved on it. I approached it and read the contents. Immediately I rushed to the priest and asked him, “Who’s the gentleman mentioned in this inscription?”

“I have already told you; it was somebody like you who was kind enough to donate eyes to this temple.” Aren’t lights similar to eyes?

“I know what you mean,” I murmured to myself and again inquired him: “Do you know how much that patron offered?”

“I really don’t know. Could be fifty rupees or more.”

I returned to the hotel after my work. A new

waiter older than the boy I saw in the morning now approached me.

I didn't want to wait until the night when there would be fewer people around to inquire the hotel manager about Subramanian. So I directed my question to this young man.

"Do you happen to know anybody here who might know about one Subramanian? Have you heard of a boy called Raju? Is he still here?"

The boy smiled and said: "I am Raju; Subri is my friend."

I learnt Subramanian gave up the hotel job because he was determined to finish his high school education. He has been successful in his efforts and is now employed as a typist in a city.

"Have you been here for the last four years?"

Raju's face turned dark as he revealed his mind. "I too wanted to quit this job and try something else. But luck hasn't favored me. So I am stuck here."

"He told me you were sick, and that's how I remembered your name. Subramanian is a good boy."

Raju smiled again as he spoke. "Oh, now I get it! You must be the gentleman who offered *kumkum* and temple *prasadam*! Subri spoke about you as he applied the *kumkum* to my forehead. Maybe it had a real effect, because the fever was gone very next day!"

“But Subramanian probably had no such faith.” I teased Raju.

“I am not quite sure about that; the very next month Subri insisted on bringing power to the temple and its premises. He wouldn’t answer me where he got the money for his inspired mission. He’s an extraordinary fellow! He’s lucky too! He may call himself only a typist, but that title carries a lot of respect. Now, let me ask you: what would you like to have? *Ovaltine?*”

Raju left. I got deeply immersed in my own thoughts.

Does Subramanian hold me in high esteem? Was he turned off by my wealth? Is it possible he suddenly turned religious? Or was he trying to show his appreciation to me for my religious fervor?

With a heavy heart I recalled the scene as Subramanian bade me farewell – both his palms folded in a reverential salutation. I really hope his attitude toward me has not changed all these days. I am averse to accept any honor that has been now thrust upon me –and I certainly don’t deserve it. Let my past gesture rendered purely out of my affection for Subramanian bestow upon him the respect and esteem *he* only richly deserves.

You see . . .while returning to Subramanian the sixty rupees he lent me at a critical moment I had included as a gift an additional amount of sixty rupees. And Subramanian had used that

gift to perform a noble task for the temple. I have absolutely no doubt of his intention: the name inscribed on that black-stone was **my** name.



INTUITION

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An English translation of this story by the author's father Prof. K.N. Sundaresan first appeared in the Souvenir published on the occasion of the 57th Orissa Annual Medical Conference in Cuttack, Orissa, in 1952. Used with permission.

INTUITION

I was harping upon the same argument but Shanti was still unsatisfied and restless. I repeated again:

“To the doctor, this mundane human body is just a machine. He looks upon it always with a physician’s eye and from the medical angle; no other thought can pass in his mind when he examines a patient!”

She started from home, as though convinced but all along, on the road to the doctor’s dispensary, she resumed her old queries. For a while I enjoyed this exhibition of her nervousness as though I was sipping the first spoonful of sherbet, and therefore smiled amiably—but soon it was no more sweet, and I was about to lose my temper.

It was a strange place to which I had brought Shanti to begin our married life – oh, what treks and trots I had not made to spot out the town’s two foremost doctors recommended to me! They were: Dr. Ranjan – still young, a smile always illumining his face and credited with a lucky healing hand; Dr. Ramdas, wonderfully capable, with a long experience and ready with a witty word. Of the other medical practitioners, two never took the learned profession seriously, another was always sick,

another was a mere money grabber, and about another the townsfolk said, "He's a *Yama!*"

When I first submitted this report to my wife, I added that Dr. Ranjan's house being nearer to our own, we should prefer to consult him—but Shanti chose the far-away Dr. Ramdas.

"The elder man has more experience, doesn't he?" she said, but I could guess her motive was to avoid the cheery young doctor.

So it came to pass we were now on our way to Dr. Ramdas – yet Shanti was a prey to her old fears. I couldn't tolerate this any longer.

"When examining, well . . . a doctor has to touch and feel the patient – how can he help it? Otherwise, you will have simply to mope in a corner with your ailment. I can't shoulder the responsibility –you better go to your father and take what *lehyams* and *choornams* he makes for you!" I burst in a fury.

From my short experience with her I knew a little harshness would quickly bring her round to her usual jubilant mood. Now, as I had expected, in a humbled husky voice, she complained, "It is all easy for you to say – but how would you relish a lady doctor pulling away your shirt to thump upon your back and to rip open your mouth like a devil?"

"Immensely, immensely, I would relish it all" was my brave, mischievous reply.

She was now quiet. Poor thing, this was the first time Shanti was having anything to do with a doctor, hence her palpitation. But when some ague catches you – dare you be lazy or shy? Does any doctor shrink from a patient or shirk his duty? Why then this timidity and unfounded alarm to approach a guardian angel?

To break the guilty silence that lay between us heavily, I thought I should say: “Shanti, were he not a medicine man would I suffer him to come near my wife?” And I did it after all. Ah – the radiant glow that blossomed on her cheeks – like a withering shrub greening to the kiss of water at its roots!

Dr. Ramdas greeted us pleasantly. He just counted her pulse at the wrist and prescribed a few medicines. If the pain recurred, we were to report to him at once – that was all. Shanti – need I say? – returned home with a gay singing heart.

But within two or three weeks, again the pain was shooting at her left chest – to Dr. Ramdas together we repaired, again. This time, Shanti’s worst fears came true. Like a player on a drum, the diagnosing doctor thumped on her back, up and down. She was asked to lie on a cot – the abdomen, the lungs and the heart were thoroughly scrutinized. To hearten her up all the time, of course, I was there beside my beloved – but when leaving the doctor’s room she was in high trepidation. Bitterly she pooh-poohed: “Just for a simple diagnosis of this

pain, the old man is making such a big fuss!"

How prophetic were her words! Though we drove thrice to Dr. Ramdas's clinic, there was no progress made. On the way out, on the way back, while we were traveling on the roads, Shanti was plaguing me with her doubts and dilemmas.

According to the doctor's instructions, her temperature was noted down every day, morn and even. The chart revealed the presence of a slight latent fever. "So, here is cause for some alarm," proclaimed Dr. Ramdas, astutely!

Shanti was sick of all this. "When this pain shoots next time – I will simply bear it stoically for two days – it will pass away without a drug or doctor," she boasted heroically and obdurately, but when the unwelcome visitor actually popped in, even if only for a day, she could stand out headstrong and inexorable. There were no signs of the agony subsiding. Shanti was throbbing, twitching and chafing – unable either to sit or sleep; I rushed out for the doctor. He was not in town. Shall I therefore return home foolishly without medical help to my darling? Why not call Dr. Ranjan?

For a moment Shanti was stunned to see by lamplight this youngster stand by my side with his inevitable handbag – but in the throes of her stabbing spasms, she showed no traces of aversion or recoil, for wasn't this a moment when even a quack gets a royal welcome?

The minute's march past of her pulse must

have paraded before Dr. Ranjan an epic story – for he at once proceeded with speed to examine her back, mouth, and lungs. Handing me a prescription for some plaster to be applied to her chest, he said he would drop in himself next morning to fix it up.

“Doctor, can’t you give me something to forget this pain – that I may sleep quietly?” Shanti begged him, plaintively.

“Certainly, I will – this very moment – I will send it through Mr. Murthy; don’t you worry!” he cooed, as I accompanied him to the door.

In a couple of days she was vastly improved – but her frequent body fever and trembles had left her rather very weak and weary.

“Dr. Ramdas has returned, I am told – shall I call him? Should we not report to him the grave turn your ailment took in his absence?” I asked her one day.

“Where is the need, dear? – especially when a doctor did visit us this morning?” she demurred. Shanti was right, Dr. Ranjan seemed no less a master in his profession; why should two doctors be summoned simultaneously for treatment?

After a few weeks, the appalling affliction broke loose again – Shanti was in torment. “Here I go – for the doctor,” I said as I was putting my *angavastram* over my shirt.

“Which doctor?” queries Shanti – opening her eyes and lips even in the midst of her

tribulation.

“I haven’t forgotten – nor am I one to stint even some long walking! Of course, I am bringing Dr. Ramdas.”

“He charges rather high; call Dr. Ranjan, he would do!” . . . words I could scarcely believe as coming from her.

“What will Dr. Ramdas think of us, Shanti? And he is in town now! The disease will come into our grip only if the same hunter tackles it and continuously – is it not?”

“As you please!” was her laconic reply.

On my way to Dr. Ramdas, I was musing on Shanti’s behavior. Was she speaking the truth when she trotted out the excuse that Dr. Ranjan’s fees were lower? Didn’t she say, ‘As you please?’ in the most unpleasing tone, in displeased temper? She didn’t, of course, press her argument – was it, after all, in mere dismay? Surely, I was doing the correct thing in going for our first choice, Dr. Ramdas!

On the previous occasion when I learnt that Dr. Ramdas was out of town, I was sad and worried about what to do next; today, the same piece of news threw me into a fit of rage and wrath. For, the obvious alternative was that I should invite the beardless Ranjan now; however, his sleek handsome visage rather a repulsion to me now. .

Shanti couldn’t suppress her surprise when she saw him again with me in our home. That smile on her lips . . . was it a grateful greeting

to the familiar doctor or was it mocking me as if to say, 'What you please to do is just what I pleased to command – you are my slave!' No trace was there of her bodily pain.

My trance lasted only a trice. Shanti's drawn, dour face and Dr. Ranjan's quiet, stately dignified way he went about to explore her condition – these healed, at once, what sore there was gaping in my mind.

Dr. Ranjan came again on the morrow and at last announced: "The symptoms are the symptoms of pleurisy!" With good food and proper medical care Shanti ought to be well again, soon, he assured us and left instructions as to the diet, drugs and doses.

We had a boy cooking in the house for the last three months who was very much attached to the family – so the food front gave me no scare. Would Shanti reject or refuse the expert treatment of Ramdas? That was my worry and woe.

"What Dr. Ramdas couldn't discover over weeks, Dr. Ranjan claims to have unveiled in a few days; Shanti, do you think it is wise we heed to Ranjan's scribbled prescriptions?" I asked her.

"The temperature chart and my recent relapses are the data which Ranjan has used exactly as Ramdas would have done – don't think Ranjan has done any magic or pretends to. After all, tonics and ampoules are of the same standard, whoever prescribes them," she said

adroitly – trying to leave upon me the impression that she nursed no bias in favor of Ranjan. “Ranjan will do for us,” she pronounced as though with an air of finality.

“Is this fair, Shanti? With thousand queries you piled my ears when I took you to Ramdas – now you coolly accept as gospel whatever Ranjan says!” – I wanted to ask her, the words were often trembling on my lips – but they never leapt into utterance. Had I spoken, I should be ashamed of myself indeed.

We did as Dr. Ranjan bade us. I escorted Shanti myself to the dispensary for the injections. Her wan thin face was now getting rosy and chubby – but my heart was smarting with a nameless thorn.

It was I who had wished to approach Dr. Ranjan – she wanted the more experienced Dr. Ramdas; had events taken their course as I then desired, would I be now a prey to these, low, shameless thoughts of jealousy?

No, no – Ranjan was not her first choice, I must think of no evil about him or Shanti.

But who knows? This might be the notorious double game at which every woman is a prima donna – under a fair exterior, roaming their vamping ways!

“No, no, mad Murthy! Think not so of your darling sweet-heart!” conscience whispered when I sat before the mirror; “How could Shanti have known you would be fetching Ranjan if Ramdas was out of town?”

But my lips hissed back to the mirror: "She knew Ramdas was away – so, she pretended pain, yes, pretended, pretended, pretended . . ."

I rose up with a will. This hailstorm in my mind should cease. Impossible that Shanti should be pretending agony! On Ranjan's part, a benign sympathy for the patient, and on Shanti's part a reverent esteem for her deliverer – are these not natural feelings that ennoble humankind to Himalayan divinity? How stupid of me to put a base construction on them! With what indelible gratitude I still cherish the memory of the eye doctor who, with one drop, washed away the excruciating pain in my right eye three years ago?

Yet . . . When the words, "A doctor, how indispensable to society! Night and day he is dedicated to the noble role of conquering pain – peerless and par excellence is the doctor's mission!" came in a rhapsody of praise from Shanti's lips, they sounded fulsome and funny – an echo of a devil's voice!

One day, as we were returning from Ranjan's dispensary, I said: "I met Ramdas yesterday in the bazaar – I trembled lest he should ask me questions."

"What would he ask you? The reason why we had not called on him again? Well, you might make the ready answer that Ranjan was your college friend," said Shanti coolly.

Friend indeed! More like an enemy he is now! College friend! I must parade this whole

lie for her sake?

Her ways were still inscrutable. I tried another ruse. "Shanti, do you ever recall how you skulked and shied – refused and resented, when I first proposed to take you to the same doctor Ranjan? Oh, God, why is a woman so fickle?" – in such words, by hints or hits, wittily or naughtily, softly or sternly, I longed to fish out from her depths a clue to the current of her thoughts. To them all she only laughed and laughed and laughed – a blank sweet laughter!

Like the fluttering paper held down under a glass paper-weight, my heart was throbbing – ah, was Shanti too in such a predicament tearing herself under the burden which was holding away from flight? Oh, was she scheming to fly away from her husband?

One day with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, she began: "I have made a study of doctors."

"Bravo, Shanti! Doctors study drugs and diseases; you who take their pills and potions have studied doctors. Tell me, what is the conclusion of your thesis?"

"A thesis it is – but how can I declaim it extempore in magic words of grace and beauty? So, read what I have written here – after much deliberation," she said, putting a piece of paper into my hand.

I read through the contents:

"Doctors are of two kinds: the depraved and

woman-mad villains form one group; stoic, noble philosophers make the other. They sink into these types very easily, right at the outset of their career of knight-errantry. But there is not much of difference between the two patterns. To the former, the human body is a toy, a plaything; to the latter it is an image, a shadow. To both, flesh and blood make but a mere machine."

As I read and reread this bizarre caricature, wondering at the bold sweep of the author's hectic imagination, I could not help exclaiming, "Shanti, . . . as abstruse a thesis indeed as any D.Sc, Doctor of Science wrote!" And my thoughts next moment were struggling to trace to which type Ranjan and Ramdas belonged.

"I too have made a discovery, Shanti!" I said and Shanti opened her eyes with surprise.

"What is it? Tell me," she cried impatiently.

"*Nalayini* carried her beloved sick man somewhere – says the story; in a like manner, more comfortably than in a basket I escort my suffering wife to her doctor — —"

Her interruption lashed at me: "Ludicrous! What are you insinuating? Is my disease the disease *Nalayani's* husband picked up or do you bracket a doctor with a whore?" the words tumbling down in a cataract of fury.

"An exact fit – rather, a ten fold correspondence as the astrologers say of two matching horoscopes!" I thundered venting out at last my bottled feelings.

"Oh, that is it – is it?" Shanti rose trembling

with passion. Hastily, she bundled into a knot the hair she was combing – and advanced upon me.

“Were there a canker deep in my soul – what manna or medicine would succeed in making me today a picture of health and strength that I am?”

I was stunned. She poured on:

“You abhorred Dr. Ranjan; I detested Dr. Ramdas. How to reveal this to you was my constant heartache. Do you think I haven’t noticed the recent sourness in your face? Things have come to a head today – I will tell it all!”

What has come to head today? On the brink of what precipice were we standing – facing a fall to what depths?

She went on, in a slightly lower voice – still indignant and strident:

“Age signifies nothing here. Ramdas maybe elderly and a senior – Ranjan may be a strippling and a junior – but he is a big and magnificent man, that fellow is little and gross.”

Epigram and enigma! In just four meetings what paltriness and meanness has she spied in Dr. Ramdas? To my eyes both the medicos had behaved exactly alike!

Shanti’s words were still tearing the air like lightning: “Dr. Ramdas’s face was repugnant to me from the outset – but having walked into his parlor, I had to conceal my dislike. Whereas, when my eyes first saw Ranjan, I repented: Wherefore did we dismiss him as a

novice? – how foolish?”

I recovered myself enough now to say with a banter: “I don’t recall now – did Ramdas ogle at you?”

“He ogled or tickled – I can’t say,” she replied ironically. “But I sounded the man in a wink of the eye. If you don’t want Ranjan to treat me, be it so, I will betake myself to my hometown to take the injections per his direction – and when I am completely well again – my temperature is always 98.4, neither more or less by even a jot I will rush back to your arms. Ah, these men! They fly into a rage to hear that a woman is ill – what hell they won’t make if jealousy and suspicion take a hand to poison their love!”

The fever in my soul was gone – I was perspiring with joy – even as the patient perspires when the malarial fit is forsaking its victim.

“Well, then – pack up your things for the Monday train!” I began solemnly, seriously – only however to end in a burst of my own uncontrollable laughter!

A lovelorn eagerness plaintively glowing in her eyes, a halo faintly rippling around her lips, Shanti unloosened her hastily-knotted unkempt locks – to comb it down again – for she must now turn it into the usual, long plait that she knows her Murthy loves so zealously – to see and to handle everyday.

My lips were itching at this golden moment of our reconciliation to ask her in an abandon

of frankness: “Did that monkey tickle you? Or stare or leer at you?” but would she care to reply at all? “I knew somehow,” is all she would say.

Verily I am sure – it is intuition that has led her all along – warning here, coaxing there, and everywhere hovering about her as her family goddess. Ah – yes, it is intuition, again, that has saved me now, for I see Shanti as the purest woman – unsullied, undefiled. She has openly confessed she took a fancy at once for Dr. Ranjan – still, my intuition proclaims that Shanti is without taint or stain.

Not he who has read much makes the successful doctor – he who can intuitively hit upon the right diagnosis becomes the miraculous savior of society; so too intuition with me. Intuition whispered from the depths of the seabottom that Shanti and Murthy rhyme as though with one mind ever – hand-locked and wedlocked in one long life of sweetness and love.



THE WARMTH IN HIS EYES

Original title: **Vizhiyin Vemmai**

Published in **Kalaimagal** (November, 1954)

He was blind, he couldn't perceive light and its wonders; but he claimed he did . . .

The story is based on real people and incidents in the author's life. The name Kesavan is a take on *Marella Kesava Rao* (1924-1992), a violinist from the author's hometown, *Berhampur, Orissa*.

THE WARMTH IN HIS EYES

Back home where I grew up as a teenager *Deepavali* was one big bash we all indulged in. The town in the East Coast where my parents had settled down in the late Twenties—far removed from the South (now called Tamil Nadu) celebrated *Deepavali* with a full measure of pomp and ceremony marked by constant illumination of lamps, bonfires and fireworks. People lined their houses, courtyards, roofs and gardens with oil-filled earthen lamps, candles, and occasionally, even electric lights.

Everyone in our neighborhood, including the elders in the community talked about ‘those incredible *kumpis* from the Achutham family’ as part of the fireworks during the festivities. The Achutham family lived some five or six houses from our home. Invariably every year *Deepavali* lured me to their household; still, it was Kesavan of that family who held me spellbound throughout the year.

Kesavan’s eyes had neither sparkle nor vision. Still, his fingers seemed musically gifted and divinely inspired. His hair was gray but his fingers reminded one of delicacy and tenderness beyond what one can imagine in a young woman. Kesavan personified a flaw that was

more than compensated by a grandeur – his musical talent.

I was just a boy when I heard my folks mention about Kesavan taking music lessons. I was not yet into appreciating the melody or the resonance of strings. I had only recently begun my lessons. Still I was intrigued to imagine how Kesavan would actually handle a violin – because my mother was often talking about it.

“Can you really believe what goes on during those lessons?” Mother asked us. “His teacher too was blind! When he wanted to teach the student the intricacies of *talam*, the teacher would slap his own thigh so hard that Kesavan could hear it! The teacher would play just one tune and Kesavan would follow it and set the bow on his violin. Kesavan’s father would sit beside him patiently and coach his son in all tasks involved: how to hold the bow; how to place it on the strings and how to play the tune. The father has to constantly work with Kesavan to get the right posture, the right touch and the right tune! Can you imagine how complicated the whole process is? How is it that they couldn’t find in this town a teacher who is not blind? What a misfortune!” Mother seemed totally taken by wonder as well as pity. My curiosity was raised and I too would hop in and watch, with awe and wonder, Kesavan play the violin at his home.

Kesavan’s parents believed their son was blessed with a keen sense of music and adept

hands. They put their faith in God and admitted him in a music school. Kesavan returned home after five years of training as a young musician and a genius. Everyone was impressed by his erudition and learning.

Kesavan had two younger brothers; the elder among them was elder to me and was studying in college; the younger was much younger to me. I was close to neither of them because I was still in high school and busy with my final year exams. Every day many music lovers would troop into Kesavan's home merely to stare at the prodigy and see him play the violin; Kesavan practiced violin twice, every day, without fail. I too would sneak in around that time and keenly watch him.



It was during *Deepavali* I witnessed that heart-wrenching scene. That was the first time I shed a few tears over Kesavan's plight.

Wasn't I talking about those incredible *kumpis*, the best the Achutham family offered as part of the fireworks? The *kumpi* is a ground flare, a pyrotechnic device that produces a brilliant light without an explosion. Usually, the *kumpis* would be lit around ten at night even when the firecrackers are bursting away in the streets. As usual, I had gone to the Achutham house to watch the fireworks. Everybody, both young and adult, seemed totally enthralled and enjoying the fun. I have heard Mother often telling us such fireworks could

be witnessed in Tamil Nadu only during the marriage ceremonies held in towns like Tanjore; but here in our town it was a common occurrence during *Deepavali*. In the prevailing Andhra culture it was a sight to behold watching them light up every house, in every street. Invariably, the *kumpis* were home-made. People bought the ingredients, mixed them according to some formula and let their boys and girls load the mix manually in small earthen pots. How densely the mix was packed determined how well the *kumpi* performed; every pot from a house carried a sticker with the name of the packer scribbled on it!

There are two types of *kumpis* just like there are two types of hand-held spinners that produce sparkles. You have to simply light the narrow crevice at the top of the pot, and wow! – instantly there would spew from it a long stretch of efflorescence with buds, flowers and other ornamental designs. Depending on the ingredients used the sparkles would be either whitish or reddish-brown.

“Gee, see how high it soars!” exclaimed Kesavan’s younger brother as we were watching the scene with our mouths wide open. Achutharamier inquired the boy: “Did you pack this one?” “I really don’t know,” he replied. “I forgot to notice the name on the sticker.”

“You better check the name before you light the next one,” announced a voice. That

came from Kesavan!

I was saddened. Kesavan can't enjoy these fireworks, and he doesn't seem to feel sorry for missing all the fun.

My mother who was seated along with other women in a row nearby now inquired Kesavan's mother: "Sometime ago you were saying Kesavan, as a boy, felt he could see things under bright lights or sunlight. Does he still feel the same way, now?"

"Well, we certainly had our hopes raised when we first heard him say so. We consulted an eye-specialist and Kesavan even had an operation," she said. "But nothing happened; God hasn't answered our prayers."

Kesavan, who was keenly listening to the ongoing conversation, now joined them: "I can see a bit the same way, now."

"Is it so?" asked my mother. Kesavan's mother was silent.

"Why don't you let him try a *Vishnu Chakram*?" my mother suggested.

I immediately ran to Kesavan's younger brother and informed him. Soon we got ready to watch Kesavan trying a hand-held spin wheel on the veranda.

As he lit the small fuse to the spin-wheel the boy cautioned the elder Kesavan: "Please hold on to the wheel, firmly; you must also stand erect so that the wheel can spin, freely." Kesavan followed the instructions. The spinner sent forth sparks for a while and then snuffed out.

“You may drop it on the floor,” his father told Kesavan. He loosened his grip and let it fall.

“Did you see any light?” his mother approached Kesavan and keenly awaited his answer.

“Yes, I did.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, her curiosity raised still further.

“Do you really think so?” the father now joined her. “Did you see any light?”

“Yes, I saw a light . . .”

“How was it? How did you actually feel?”

“It was hot . . .”

“Hot? . . .” The father let out a sigh in utter disappointment. The mother, her naivete’ now fully exposed, snuck behind her husband.

It was not that Kesavan couldn’t distinguish between light and heat. He was aware of his limitations: he fully understood that unlike others, he was blind and could never enjoy the movies, the plants and flowers in the garden and other beautiful objects in the world. He could never look upon those dearest to him, but he knew they could see him and the world around them. Then, why did he say he felt it was hot? The truth of the matter is, while others saw a glow among the fireworks, Kesavan sensed warmth in them.

Kesavan lacked the sight in his eyes; one could see that he functioned with common sense that seemed imbued with ardor and inten-

sity like electricity. Now, electricity functions both as light and sound, and just as other could enjoy music, talk-shows and plays in a radio, Kesavan also listened and understood the day-to-day events through it. At home he was the one who used the radio most and he had no problem dialing and fine-tuning it himself to a particular station he desired. He also insisted that he go for a walk, twice, every day, with his father as escort. The father was indeed a great help; he would throw his hand on Kesavan's shoulder and lead him outdoors; it was he who accompanied Kesavan in concerts with his *tambura*. He also acted as a guide to his son when he had to travel out of town to perform, and because this meant that the trip be undertaken by two, the remuneration paid to the artist didn't leave much after the expenses. Still, what about the fame? The sight of an aged father and a blind artist hopping from one city to another certainly seemed an ordeal; but who could be a better companion to Kesavan than his own father?

Some felt Kesavan's music needed to sound a little more sonorant and assertive; it was also said that he was puny and weak, so he was encouraged to add to his diet milk and eggs along with some prescribed medicine. Still, the grace and tenderness in his hands never waned. So his concerts were always marked by high quality; they excelled even without a microphone. Now the microphone remained a feature only in

special concerts. So Kesavan's fame spread far and wide – which meant he had to travel a lot out of town.

During their travels Kesavan always insisted they patronize a *Madras* hotel. He was especially fond of *Madras* snacks. At home he ate very little close to what you might expect a two-year old to consume. One day we had invited him for lunch at our home and I remember how pitiable that occasion turned out to be! The dishes were served on a banana leaf but Kesavan's fingers were pathetically groping around them! While his father poured all his love and affection on his son, I was told, there were some occasions when he felt frustrated and irritated with his son's stubbornness. He found it especially hard to keep looking for a *Madras* hotel in their outings when he felt quite tired and exhausted. He was conscious of his own diet and followed strict food habits; still, it was he who always volunteered to accompany Kesavan on his travels whether the situation was convenient or inconvenient to him. Of course, there were other sons at home, but they were still in school and how could they afford to give up their studies and travel from one city to another? So the father did his best to serve as both eyes and a walking stick to his son. He looked forward to seeing Kesavan rising in fame and sporting all kinds of embellishments worthy of a full-fledged musician. He bedecked his son with a ring for the hand that played the strings;

a gold bracelet for the hand wielding the bow; a *jarigai angavasthram* to adorn the shoulders holding the violin; and finally a gold chain for the neck. Kesavan had neither seen these adornments nor he ever personally sought them. But the father saw them.

The father often used to say in an appreciative tone, “The Tamil musicians surely knew how to nurture their fame and wealth.” So it was that he approved of such embellishments for his own son. Soon Kesavan began wearing dark eyeglasses with gold frame; one could see Kesavan’s unsteady, white eyes move up and down only when he was home.

As a boy I could only appreciate music but had no idea of the theory or science associated with it. Then, sometime in my youth, I wanted to take lessons in playing *mridangam* from a Class IV radio-artist-teacher in our town. My elder sister was taking lessons in *Carnatic Music* and as I listened to her singing my interest in classical music grew even more – something that was also acknowledged even by my sister’s music teacher! I wished I could practice by accompanying Kesavan in his home. I was getting on my years and felt a little more confident about accomplishing my goal. I sought Kesavan’s permission ‘to practice’ with him and he granted my wish with no hesitation. Most of the days Kesavan was out of town, so I made the best use of my time when he was home.

Kesavan had *Upanayanam* and was invested

with the sacred thread. Our family presented him with an incense-stick-holder made from sandalwood; we especially ordered through a friend of ours. It's something Kesavan could appreciate by its fragrance.

"These Tamils are really the best when one comes to think of their brains and love of arts," Kesavan's father was telling his wife, and his words still ring in my ears. "We had so many gifts, did any one of them compare with theirs – in spirit and substance?" Yes, I can never forget his words of praise. Neither can I ever forget the father's generous tributes to the Tamil culture and its musicians that they were second to none in the world. I hold him in reverence just the way his own family members did.

Yes, he had now ended up as a mere memory. The father who escorted Kesavan with his hand resting on the son's shoulder is no more. And how they parted company is indeed a tragic story.

It was at the Vijayawada radio station that Kesavan gave most of his concerts. For a long time his father was hoping he could relocate the family to Madras where his dreams for his son could be realized: Madras was more famous as a cultural center promoting art and music; again, Kesavan would have an opportunity to perform in the concerts from the local radio station. The father was nursing these hopes when the tragedy struck the family.

After a radio concert in Vijayawada, the pair

was all set to return home by train. The train was late by an hour and half much to the father's chagrin. They set their luggage aside and were awaiting the train on the platform. Kesavan, as his wont, was asking his father about this and that, and the father responded with curt answers. When the son persisted with one more query, the father seemed to have lost his patience and admonished him: "Why don't you keep quiet? I can hardly answer you! Please leave me alone! I think this damned heart-ache is killing me!" Kesavan, once he sensed his father's angry mood, became silent and didn't utter a single word. After a long time he asked his father for some water to drink; hearing no response, he thought his father might have stepped aside, so he waited for him to return.

Suddenly there was some commotion on the platform following a train's arrival. "Father, is this our train?" Kesavan inquired his father – and got no answer. He thought his father might have gone out to buy the tickets. He felt like standing up and as he did he felt someone holding his hand and mumbling to himself, "How can someone sleep like *this*?" Then he inquired Kesavan, still grasping his hand, "Are you blind?"

"Yes. Are you a railway official? Where is this train bound?"

"Who is the gentleman sleeping next to you?" asked the officer, his voice a mixture of surprise and confusion.

“I really don’t know,” replied Kesavan.

“Who is your escort?” asked the official.

“My father is with me; he has gone to buy the tickets for us.”

Hushed voices were soon heard all around. Questions were fielded at Kesavan; he was asked to give all kinds of details – his name, hometown, why he came to Vijayawada, and so on. “Did someone offer your father some drink or something?” they asked him. “Was he complaining of any health problem?” They wanted Kesavan to give them all the details since he and his father had left the radio station and arrived at the train station.

Kesavan answered them to the best of his ability. “Father often complained of chest pain,” he told them. “Today also he mentioned about it. Still, what can he do? Only he can take care of me.”

“We are very sorry! It’s very tough. Your father has passed away. He is gone leaving you all by yourself. He is dead. Do you understand what this means?” The railway official asked him.

“What? Father is no more? How did this happen? When?” Kesavan was thrown into utter confusion. The officer held Kesavan’s hand, directed it to his father’s body and allowed him to touch and feel it.

“Can it be true? Is it really my father? Could he be just resting? He was telling me he couldn’t sleep last night because of mosquito bite.”

Still skeptical, Kesavan tried to wake up his father as if he were asleep.

The railway officials and others sympathized with Kesavan. They conveyed the sad news to the radio station staff who offered Kesavan shelter in their premises. A telegram was sent to Kesavan's mentor as well to his folks back home. It was said Kesavan's younger brother, who received the wire, was so traumatized that he tried to commit suicide by jumping into a well in the backyard. His mother, who was preparing a favorite dish for her husband and son returning home, noticed her other son running headlong like a madman and held him back. Soon the house was plunged in gloom and darkness.

The mother objected to sending Kesavan's other brother to Vijayawada to accompany Kesavan back home. What if he too tried to end his life by jumping across a rail track? But it was he who finally made that trip. He assured his mother: "I am the only one left in the family to take care of Kesavan; I will never end my life! My life is dedicated to Kesavan!" He returned home with Kesavan. The father's body didn't return home. It was duly cremated because the eldest son, Kesavan, invested with sacred thread, was there to perform the last rites. "I was so discomfited after seeing the body that I decided to have it cremated immediately," explained Kesavan's brother, and wept. He held Kesavan's both hands and moaned,

making his feelings public: “Kesava, our father is no more! You have lit the funeral pyre, but you have never set your eyes upon him! What a misfortune! You have never seen our dear father!” Kesavan, who was silent for moment, gently whispered: “I could see, I felt the heat!”

Kesavan had never seen his father; his interaction was only with his father’s body and life. Both are gone now, still among the family members Kesavan seems to possess more energy and self assurance following the loss of his father. Perhaps he sees his father, even after his demise –just as before.

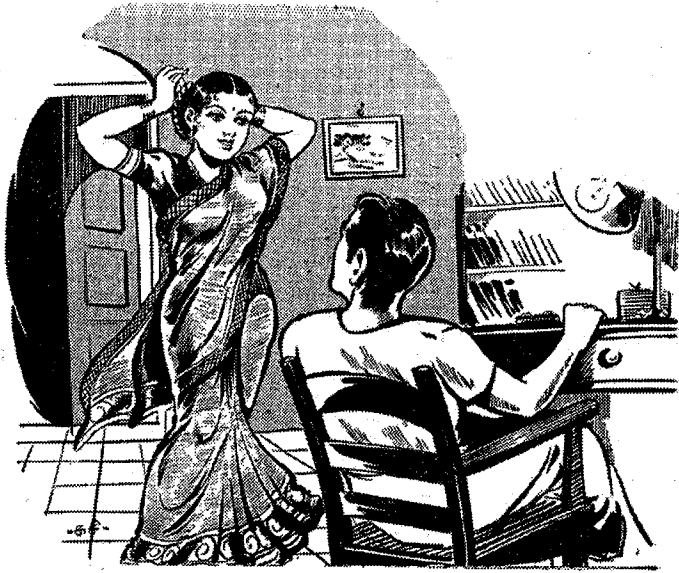
“Look, we have recently enlarged our father’s photo, ” Kesavan informed me, one day. I raised my head at the wall. Achutharamier, as I knew him in real life, now loomed before me from a huge frame festooned with flowers.

“It feels like I am seeing him face to face,” I told him. “I still can’t believe he is no more with us!”

“That’s how everybody feels about Father,” Kesavan said. “We keep thinking he has gone to some town and eventually we too will join him. You see what I mean? If it is impossible for him to come to us, it is only fair that someday we will be destined to join him!” He concluded with a dry laughter.

Musical talent, a philosophical bent and worldly wisdom. How many men even with full vision could claim to possess them? And that too at such a young age?

The eyes are supposed to exude coolness – a sense of serenity and assurance. However, what one senses in Kesavan's lifeless eyes is a reflection of his divine gift and inner wisdom simmering into warmth. Neither beauty nor tears reside in those eyes. Yet they are powerful enough to draw tears from others' eyes. Such is the glory of Kesavan's eyes eclipsing even the magic of his expert fingers.



SWEET REMEMBRANCE

Original title: **Uravin Inimai**

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At first that sandalwood colored sari caused quite an animosity in her; but then it became a soothing balm; what happened?

SWEET REMEMBRANCE

Sharada sounded both rushed and chirpy as she came down the living room while casually inserting a few hairpins into her coiffure of curly locks. "Please look at me, how does my hairdo look?" she asked her husband. "And which sari do you recommend? It's going to be a hot day!" She pulled out two saris hanging from the frame of the mosquito net and held them in her hands.

One of the saris sparkled with the glowing color of a tender mango leaf heralding spring; the other with a color reminiscent of the firmament hovering over the earth, dark blue.

"You can wear either of them; how about the blue one?" Ganapathi asked.

"You mean the same one I had yesterday? You don't think the mango colored one will look nice? Well, I will wear neither, I will try another." Sharada opened a bureau without turning her back.

She examined the blouse she was presently wearing for a moment and let her eyes wander on a row of saris, inside. Ganapathi noticed her selecting a snuff-colored sari.

"When are you going to wear *that* sari?"

She turned around with a startle.

"When the time comes," she replied and cast

the sari from her hand over to her shoulder. She slammed the door shut and quickly disappeared into the next room. After a while she returned dressed in the snuff-colored sari dotted with tiny squares as her fingers adjusted the folds near her ankle. "This artificial silk yarn is pretty good," she said. "I could have easily bought four such saris; we just wasted forty rupees!" She made sure her words were audible enough to reach her husband's ears as she got ready to leave.

"We didn't buy that sari, intentionally; did we? It came into our hands – rather by chance," Ganapathi told her, calmly. "If you don't like to wear it, why don't you find out if someone in the neighborhood might be interested in buying it from you?"

"As if I have nothing else to do!"

"Exactly! Just check with someone."

"I can't believe this! How come you never thought of dropping a card to that gentleman friend of yours? And now you are suggesting I ought to sell it! Whom can I ask? What am I supposed to tell them? It's just sitting there; it is 'hard' to wear it. Forget it! Let's just think we gave forty rupees for charity!"

"I have already told you no purpose will be served by my writing to him. If he were inclined to write, he would have simply sent the money after he got his paycheck! Even if he sends the money he will probably insist that we not return the sari. Maybe he thinks we would

surely return the sari, that's why he has neither sent the money nor written a letter. He gave us a sari worth one hundred rupees and we paid him forty rupees which served him well at the time. So I think you should make use of it. What's wrong with that sari?"

"What's wrong? Well, nothing is wrong! Do you remember? One day, soon after our marriage, I wore my cousin's khaddar silk sari because I was very fond of it. Remember what you told me then? 'Don't you have your own saris? Why do you have to borrow from others?' Those were your exact words! And now you are talking like this; you think this sari as a big deal."

Ganapathi didn't foresee this line of attack from his wife. "Well, we had no other choice at that time. Did we?" he asked.

Sharada didn't answer. "It is getting late, I will see you later," she answered him and set to leave. The maid servant had already called for a cycle-rickshaw that was now waiting for Sharada outside the house. Sharada dusted off the violin box with a rag, picked it up and settled in the rickshaw. It's true humans and vehicles travel in the same road but in different paths to ensure safety; still, accidents do occur, don't they? That's how the human mind, while on a single track, it keeps maneuvering in divisions and subdivisions, often stumbling and getting mired in confusion.

'We had no other choice at the time. Did

we?" That's what Ganapathi had asked. Sharada recalled those words as she was now riding in the rickshaw toward her friend's home. "Yes, there was no other choice," she agreed.

• • •

It happened when Sharada and Ganapathi visited Calcutta during the *Dussehra* holidays. They got acquainted with a gentleman on the train during their return trip. He easily endeared himself to the couple thanks to his informal style and social manners. The couple was quite impressed with his demeanor and business credentials; his life seemed an open book and one felt after a brief conversation with him that his checkered life had experienced the good and bad, the happy as well as sad episodes. He was on his way to take on a new assignment and Ganapathi asked his new friend to drop by should he happen to be traveling in the area, the next time. Sharada too extended the invitation; he thanked the couple and parted company.

Then, suddenly, one day, after two weeks, that friend showed up at their doorstep. Slowly, the couple became privy to the reason for his sudden visit. He needed some cash and explained the reason for his predicament. He was very convincing and what he now told them seemed to square entirely with what he had told them during their first encounter. It was evident he now faced an emergency.

Ganapathi had no cash on hand. Their

Dussehra vacation had sucked up all their savings. He sought his wife.

“How funny, he is asking us!” Sharada said. ‘Had we some cash left over, wouldn’t I have bought a *santiniketan* sari!’ she thought to herself.

As if by cue, the gentleman-friend now pulled out a sari from his suitcase and told Ganapathi, “Please accept this and give me fifty rupees.”

“I will certainly loan you the money if I could,” Ganapathi told him. “I don’t need this sari to help you at a time like this.”

“I need the cash very badly,” the friend explained. “I would feel a little more comfortable in accepting money from you in exchange for this sari.”

Ganapathi took the sari to Sharada and explained the situation at hand.

“How does the situation change now, suddenly? We still have no cash to spare!” said Sharada even as she admired the sari’s sandalwood color.

“I think I will have to loan him what I have put away for the house rent. What else can we do?”

“Are you suggesting we accept this sari? It does look quite expensive to me.”

“We can’t afford to give fifty rupees for this. We can offer only forty rupees.”

“We don’t need this sari,” Sharada told her husband. “Let him send the money after he

returns home. I think he wants us to have this sari as a matter of trust.”

Ganapathi returned the sari to the friend. “You may send the money after you return to your hometown. I think I can manage till then.”

“Just keep the sari anyway,” the friend said. He locked his suitcase, and soon left.

After a few days, growing a little apprehensive, Sharada unfolded the sari and examined its condition; she was right, it wasn't a new sari, someone had already worn it. One could easily notice several creases from the folds stretching out like tracks along its width.

She immediately folded the sari and put it away in the same wrapper she first took it out for examination. ‘It must have been worn by his wife who, he was telling us, passed away some ten years ago,’ she told herself. And that was the end of that sari; she never again touched it; she hated the very idea of touching it.

Was she scared because that sari belonged to a woman who had a premature death? Or was she disgusted over the revelation that the sari in question had already adorned another female body? Or was Sharada thinking she had no claim to the sari because once the gentleman-friend returned the loan, her husband would be obliged to return it? Was she ashamed that the couple accepted the sari as a collateral for some timely help rendered? Whatever the reason, that sandal-wood colored sari could never keep company with the other saris in the bureau,

so it languished in the same wrapper from which Sharada took it out.

“No use writing a letter to him,” Ganapathi told Sharada one day, laughing. “You might as well just close your eyes and wear that sari. Everything will be fine.”

“I can’t even bring myself to touch it,” Sharada confessed to him.

“I can unfold it for you,” Ganapathi said, smiling. “Still, I wouldn’t know how to wrap you in a sari.” That’s how the couple interspersed their conversations regarding the sari – quite jovially as if sprinkling consecrated sandalwood water at each other. Only today that exchange ended up as an argument.

She’s never going to wear that sari, no question about it. So what happens to it? Forget the sari, what about the forty rupees the couple had given away especially when they could least afford it?

For Sharada, who was never given to hypocrisy or pretentiousness the sari issue loomed large as a dilemma; it was quite a pleasing, fashionable garment, no doubt about it; its silk fabric was woven with Zari gold threads rendering intricate patterns; the border was very striking and would easily attract the attention of the onlookers. What if the friends kept pestering her with all kinds of questions: “What was the occasion? Where did you buy it?” She could easily shrug them off by saying, “My husband bought it; I really don’t know the price.” She

can always get away by saying such things but her real problem is whenever she dons that sari, her mind would be in torment, no doubt about it. Under those circumstances, where is the need to wear it?



The cycle-rickshaw reached its destination and her friend Thulasi greeted Sharada with excitement. The other friends and some new women there noticed Sharada alighting with a violin and immediately guessed her to be the violinist in their orchestra. A cultural program was planned at the Raj Bhavan, the state governor's mansion, as part of the Republic Day celebrations. A concert performance by these women would be one of its highlights. It was at Thulasi's home that the rehearsals for the concert were held. Sharada was ecstatic at Thulasi's hospitality. Thulasi admired Sharada's musical talent and always openly expressed her appreciation.

Sharada wanted to attend the Raj Bhavan function dressed in her best sari, and she immediately conjured the sandalwood colored sari stowed away in the bureau at home. She also recalled her husband's advice that she ought to try wearing it. Sharada returned home, her mind made up: she would follow her husband's advice, make good of the forty rupees paid for the sari and wear it for the Republic Day festivities.

She examined the sari, a second time. "I am supposed to wear it, right? What do you think?"

“What is the point of just asking me?” Ganapathi grumbled.

“I am going to wear it for the Raj Bhavan function.”

“I see!”

“I want to try it once, today, and see how it looks.”

“Do you have a matching blouse?”

“Yes. The one *Manni* had sent me sometime ago.”

Sharada moved away from Ganapathi. She quickly unfolded the sari and set to wear it. She gathered the garment into pleats, draped a part of the garment over her bosom and shoulders, and methodically finished the rest of the task.

Then, laughing, with a silly grin, she returned and stood before him.

“You look great,” Ganapathi told her.

Sharada examined herself in the mirror. Suddenly she felt as if a layer of wet sandalwood paste on her whole body was slowly hardening and burning the skin. She didn't seem to mind Ganapathi's presence; “I feel strange,” she murmured, and hastily unwrapped the sari and threw it on the floor. Then she gathered her old sari, wrapped it over her petticoat and darted into the bedroom.

Ganapathi didn't ask her, “What happened?”

“It certainly makes no sense to go to the Raj Bhavan function with some rankle in my heart,” Sharada told her husband after a while. “It could be a double whammy – the sari and

my performance ending up as unmitigated disasters! This is not the best time to don this sari.” She concluded with a sense of frustration.

Because she spoke those words as she folded the sari and hastily returned it to the bureau. Ganapathi offered no comment; maybe, he thought, she could wear it on some other occasion. Sharada’s demeanor was one of calmness as well as pride; she reminded him of the incense stick that was gentle and aglow despite its fire and smoke.

Did she feel something different about the sari because she had actually tried it even if it was only once? Sharada once again examined the sari; she felt her behavior toward the sari was similar to a husband’s—one who lives with his wife simply for the ‘crime’ of having taken the wedding vows but totally neglects her. At the same time Sharada couldn’t ignore the fact that it was indeed a beautiful sari. After all, if character was an ornament to a good wife was not beauty the hallmark of a sari?

She has now established her right to the sari; then why did she have to discard it so quickly and with such an overwhelming disgust? Granted the sari was pre-owned and passed on to her; still, why this sudden outpouring of revulsion? Can’t she just imagine she was actually wearing her own mother’s sari?

Instantly Sharada was seized with panic. Both her parents are alive; her mother is hale and healthy, with a happy married life. ‘The

first owner of this sari was a woman who had a premature death. How can I think of my mother at this time? Good heavens, I hope no evil ever comes to Mother!

Why can't she think of another woman, say someone she might think of as a sister—after all Sharada had no sisters to call her own! No, she can't! She does have someone she always addresses as 'sister' and that would be her cousin, her aunt's daughter! 'That sister is now expecting and I wish no evil ever comes to her, either,' Sharada thought. None of her close relatives had anything to do with this sari; why can't she just imagine some friend say, an unknown friend, had presented it to her as a gift?

She put away the sari, out of sight, in the bureau and shut the door. The loose end of the sari she was now wearing got caught in the door. She opened the door to free the garment and again closed it. As she closed that door it opened a door to her inner memory, and a face peeked from it. It was the smiling face of a woman from a photo she had seen on the train when their railway acquaintance shared a few snap shots from an album. The woman in that photo was the first owner of that sari. "Poor woman, how fondly she would have donned this sari!" Sharada felt. "She had an unfortunate death and that curse has rendered this sari as untouchable! So it is languishing here, like a sinner, unused."

She began thinking in this vein and soon she

had a change of heart. "She's my friend!" she told herself, and imagined the woman in the photograph draped in that sandalwood color sari. Her heart melted.

Sharada's attitude toward the sari took a new turn; was it the forty rupees she had invested in it? Or was its excellent quality? Or was it the mellowing of her heart for the dead woman? Whatever may be the reason, Sharada now commiserated with that young woman.

Still, what about Ganapathi?

• • •

Sharada was getting ready for the Republic Day program. She was done with her hairdo and had already worn the golden-colored blouse. She picked the sandalwood colored sari in her hand. Can a husband reject his wife because, hitherto, she belonged to her parents? She held the sari with no trace of resentment or malice in heart. Ganapathi was stunned: "You are wearing this?" he asked in awe.

"Yes," she replied, smiling. "This sari will not be responsible if my performance today is substandard."

"Then, why do it? You resented it so much the other day."

"But today I am going to wear it with lot of enthusiasm."

Still, Ganapathi was ill at ease, and spoke his mind: "I too thought about it for a while; I was trying to figure out why you resisted wearing it. You were giving all kinds of reasons, some-

times joking about it. Then I realized you were scared about it. So why should you wear it?"

Sharada stared at him in utter surprise. She recalled that, once in a while, she used to tease her husband with a remark, "You will surely remarry should I die."

Was her husband now concerned this sari would do her harm, if she decides to wear it? Maybe he is scared.

She burst into laughter. "No! Such a fear never crossed my mind. Since this sari actually belonged to another woman, you yourself didn't approve of it in the beginning. And when you had second thoughts and suggested I wear it, I felt strange. But now? I realize I was wrong in getting angry at that friend of ours for twisting our arm to accept the sari. Now I will think of his wife as a friend who helped me to wear this sari."

Ganapathi wasn't fully convinced by her explanation, still he felt as if he had tasted some sweet tender coconut milk.

"That's fine, as long as you feel comfortable with it," he assured her.

'Don't you think I am happy knowing that you are so concerned about me?' She thought to herself and set for the program.

That night, some time after the program ended, Ganapathi was amused as he listened to Sharada bragging to one of her friends: "This sari is a gift from my old high school friend; she sent it from Assam. Of course, it is of very

superior quality – otherwise why would she send it to me from such a far off place?” However, that revelation didn’t diminish his respect for his wife. The sari had, over time, brought Sharada closer to the other woman: sweet remembrance, exuding in small doses, cemented a bond between the two. That sari became a symbol of her friend. Wasn’t it true that Sharada held her friend in high esteem?

A LOVING HEART

Original title: **Anbu Manam**

Published in **Kalaimagal** (August, 1949)

This is a prize-winning story where the participants were invited to pen a short story beginning with a sentence, *The child shrieked aloud.*

A LOVING HEART

The child shrieked aloud. I rushed to the hall and was horrified. The crying had stopped but her face had turned pale and lifeless – because she couldn't breathe. Yes, the face was deathly gray, the neck erect, eyes wide open and the body frozen. I closed both her ears, still there was no sound. Time was passing: one minute . . . then, three more minutes elapsed. My God! I want her to cry aloud! There's no one around! What will happen next? Panic seized me as I turned around . . .

“Oh, there he is!” I noticed my husband and for a moment I was in shock. Why is he just sitting there and doing nothing? Why are men so indifferent? Why can't they have feelings? I was seething with rage; my heart was reduced to cinder floating on a combustible heap. Then, suddenly, the child let out a cry and the cinder turned into holy ash. I realized what had happened; maybe my husband didn't! How will he know? He probably thought the child simply stopped crying! I have brothers and sisters, so I do know a bit about children!

It was only after the child began breathing, did I myself begin to breathe normally. I heard a voice: “What a relief!” I turned around to confirm my inkling; yes, that was my husband

who spoke those words. A few minutes ago he was casually perched on the edge of a chair next to the radio; now he was cozily resting on it; he seemed fully relieved. He knew what the child was going through and felt guilty he didn't know how to stop her from crying. Poor man! Deep inside he is also very fond of her, but he is a man and ignorant about these things. I am a woman; can he do everything I could do? In spite of all his love for the child he is unable to act readily and do the right thing at times like this

I was overcome by myriad emotions; despite a sense of inadequacy and sadness, my heart now beamed with joy; I was able to revive the child's breathing! It was not only that I was relieved over what had just happened, I felt proud about myself and gathered the child in my arms and held her around my hips. I glanced at my husband from the corner of my eyes. I felt like I was walking on air as I realized he was savoring me posing with the child. I didn't want to leave him without some small talk, so I asked him a question that I had almost forgotten. I inquired: "Whatever happened to Bala? Why was she crying? Did she get hurt, somewhere?"

"I hit her!"

My God! What's he saying? Why is he torturing me? Good heavens! Could it be true? Did he actually hit her?

I stared at him again and after unloading my disgust, anger and anguish in a single glare, I

disappeared into the kitchen. I couldn't stand it; I couldn't simply make any sense of his senseless brutality; all these days he would only threaten others, but now . . .

Manni now entered the kitchen—she had just finished her bath; I was ashamed even to look at her face.

“Lalitha, what happened? Did the child cry? Why, are you crying too?” I could no more contain my emotion, so I told her everything. I described how the little girl felt terrorized, went on sobbing without a break and how her chin was still trembling in shock . . .

Manni didn't say much, but her face, especially, the eyes, revealed sudden amazement and a tired, weary look. Her posture seemingly saying, “This is the usual stuff!” only exacerbated my agony to break down.

Just then my husband came over and stood at the kitchen entrance.

“I was not myself today,” he began. “I have been very harsh with the girl. I was listening to the news on the radio when she came over and asked me something. I hit her without realizing what I was doing – slapped her on the cheek. Poor girl, she reeled with pain; she never thought I could hit her that hard, *Manni!*”

Manni stared at him when he finished talking. After all there is a formal relationship between them for apologies to be offered and accepted in good faith!

That's how I felt at the time; I wasn't sure

what *Manni* was thinking. I wasn't angry with *Manni*; I was furious at my husband. Shouldn't he have some common sense? Even when a father punishes his own child, he obviously angers the child's mother; the same thing happens when a mother punishes the child provoking reaction from the father. Let *Manni* say something openly, without mincing words, only then would my husband understand our predicament. Now, I too will have to pay a price and become an object of shame and ridicule – just like him! My husband is unemployed and spends all his time loafing around, listening to news or gossiping with others! On the other hand, my days are spent in constant pain, feeling anxious about our future and humiliated living on others' mercy and generosity. Despite myself I have swallowed my pride to accept the traditional view that we may receive help from my brother-in-law's family. Still, all said and done, do we have a right to encroach upon them for our needs and well-being? They have their own family and obligations. We are not yet a family, but we have certainly become a family of burden to them!

The truth of the matter is we are putting them through much hardship. Can *Manni* utter a single word to express what's on her mind? Never! Poor *Manni*! She's patiently listening to my husband while silently gathering Bala in her hands.

“*Manni*, let me have Bala for a moment,” my

husband pleaded with her. "I am somewhat scared that she might never again come to me!"

Manni swayed the child toward him. "Come on, please take her! What does the child know, after all? Bala, here is your *chittappa*! Please go to him, he's calling you!" My goodness! What is this? How come Bala is not eager to go to him? She is averting her face away from him and seeks refuge in her mother's shoulders!

Maybe *Manni* is a little satisfied that the child is openly able to demonstrate what she herself couldn't. My husband felt put down.

Manni had a mild laugh as she tried to put my husband at ease. "Please go to *chittappa*," she coaxed the girl. "He's not going to hurt you." But the girl once again looked at my husband and refused to go to him.

"She needs oil bath," *Manni* informed my husband, and continued: "She hates oil bath, so she will cry and forget the whole thing; she will come to you in half an hour." My husband agreed and left.

I was still struggling with several emotions rising within me. "*Manni*, you are really a special kind of person," I told her. "I don't think anybody else will keep quiet like you!" I knew she was upset and festering inside; still, I felt, deep in my heart, she was very magnanimous and forgiving. Wasn't that plainly obvious to another woman? Isn't this a natural reaction of a mother?

My mind was in turmoil; still, I managed to

hide my feelings and helped *Manni* in giving oil bath to Bala. Later, when my brother-in-law returned from work, I told him what happened.

My brother-in-law looked at the girl and my husband, back and forth, and said: "Poor fellow, he is not himself. He must be worrying about something, and brooding over it. This girl must have done something to upset him; she's quite a mischievous girl!"

I told him what his wife would have liked to tell him.

"Poor girl, she committed no mischief; looks like my husband was listening to the radio when she asked him something. And he _____"

My husband preempted me. "Yes, that's what actually happened. I wasn't thinking of anything in particular. Once I swung my hand, it went out of control, I couldn't stop it! She got hit very badly! Poor girl!"

I welcomed my husband coming forward to say something. Still, why does he have to say, "I wasn't thinking of anything in particular?" Why should he admit he was idling around the house doing nothing? I can see he too is festering inside . . .

Maybe only children would be impressed by such frank admission of what happened, the way he sounded majestic as he uttered those words: Bala, who was standing a few feet away from us, now cooed at my husband: "*Chittappa!*"

“Come here, . . . come, . . . sit here,” he invited her; she hesitated a little, then smiled, watched him through the corner of her eyes and stood next to him; then, she suddenly pounced and eased into his lap!

We felt as if we were ensconced on a throne!

To be sure, things did become a lot better within the next few days. We started living as a happy family. My husband got a job and we soon moved to another city where we proudly settled down in a house calling it our own.

My husband and I spent happily a year and half. We had no children of our own; while this was something we always thought about, we never considered it an unmitigated loss. Isn't Bala our child too! Now she has got a brother too! We often thought of those two children with warmth and affection. We found comfort in knowing that a child's heart is always a loving heart; we continued to cherish our days with Bala and warmly recalled her love for us.

However, one day, those pleasant memories disappeared like a beautiful sunset. I heard a news that quickly shattered my peace of mind. My parents and my *Manni's* parents lived in neighboring towns and my mother happened to visit them. At the time Bala was also there—because she was visiting her maternal grandmother. How happy and eager I was when I inquired my mother about Bala whom she had met for the first time! And how terrible Mother

sounded when she answered me! And how pained she sounded as she spoke!

I knew Bala was a smart and well-behaved girl. She is every bit what one can expect in a five-year-old girl – diligent, friendly and spontaneous. When Mother asked her, “Do you know who are your *chittappa* and *chitti*?” she replied: “The one who hit me while listening to the radio is my *chittappa*; the one who puts *seekkai* powder into my eyes when I have my oil bath is my *chitti*!”

“This is how she describes them to whoever asks her,” informed *Manni*’s mother.

Mother, naturally upset, poured out to me all her advice, criticism and refutation because she thought she owed them to me. But I turned more and more despondent.

The child hasn’t forgotten anything! She hasn’t forgotten *chittappa*’s beating; nor did she forget her *chitti*’s constant refrain, “Oh, my dear girl! Did I put *seekkai* in your eyes by mistake?” while I gave her oil bath.

A child is harboring mean thoughts about us! I was even beginning to think, “Why can’t Bala simply forget about us?”

I mentioned this to my husband how Bala hasn’t actually forgotten about us. He felt sorry; it stayed with him only for a few days. But I wasn’t that lucky; I am a woman cursed with guilt, agony, reflection and imagination.

“How nice it would be if we had children of our own?” I asked myself. “Then, our love and

affection will have some recognition.” Soon I found an answer.

Maybe because I was constantly festering inside, one day I felt a sudden urge. Remembering that Bala has now returned to her parents I thought of an opportunity to fulfill my wish. We both traveled to my brother-in-law’s house.

We wished to win back Bala’s warmth and affection for us; she’s still at an impressionable age; she is yet to mature both in body and mind. We felt winning her back mightn’t be an impossible task, after all.

I was momentarily thrilled when Bala greeted us at the doorstep exclaiming, “*Chittappa . . . Chitti*,” and jumping with joy. ‘How much does she love us!’ I thought to myself. ‘She feels for us so deeply in her heart!’ Then I recalled that past episode. It is almost close to two years since she has seen us, and she hasn’t forgotten; yes, she can’t! One may occasionally forget moments of love and affection, but not an act of violence . . .

I braced myself: am I not here to nurture love and wipe out aversion?

I took Bala into my arms, entertained and played with her to my heart’s content. She too enjoyed our company going around us in circles with joy and was in a playful mood. I was hoping my efforts to win her back might actually succeed . . .

After lunch we all gathered in the front hall. Bala was sitting next to my husband; the infant

lay on my lap. My husband is not good in handling infants! Six of us were in the hall – including my brother-in-law and his wife. I noticed a photo on a nearby table and seized the moment.

I picked up the photo and fielded questions at Bala. I felt she might reveal her mind by recalling those unforgettable feelings she still nursed against us. She might be inclined to refer us not simply as *chittappa* and *chitti* but rather as the *chittappa* who beat her up and the *chitti* who hurt her eyes with *seekkai* powder!

Bala glanced at the photo. “This is the *chittappa* who bought me a train; and this is the *chitti* who bought me a silk dress!” she exclaimed.

“You devil!” her father now teased her. “How come you are talking about things they bought you a long time ago? Have you forgotten the gifts they bought you now – the toy car, the doll, and the drum?”

“Isn’t she something?” *Manni* seconded her husband with obvious pride. I was confused. Had Bala spoken about the gifts we brought her now, I would be willing to concede that she has indeed changed her opinion about us. But . . .

‘My mother; could she have been wrong? How could she have been so wrong about *this*?’ The thought turned into a puzzle, but I felt a huge load off my mind; my ears were pleased to hear these soothing words from Bala.

We were getting ready to return home and

were on our way to the train station. *Manni* couldn't make it; only my brother-in-law and Bala came with us.

Has Bala totally forgotten about her *chittappa* hitting her hard and *chitti* hurting her eyes with *seekkai* powder? I can certainly ask her myself, but what if I rekindle those old painful memories? Concerned, I raised the question with my brother-in-law. Bala was sitting on my husband's shoulders and watching the scenery around the platform.

"She has forgotten all about it!" he said, smiling. "Looks like you are the ones who won't forget!"

I gave him the reason for my misgiving and smiled so that he wouldn't be offended by my inquiry.

"Oh, I know what you mean! Yes, it appears that's how she spoke over there. But after she returned home, she says just the way she described to you the other day."

"How come? It sounds quite funny!"

"It does sound funny, now," my brother-in-law said. "But at that time . . ." He lowered his voice and offered an explanation.

"If Bala were living with her grandmother, she would be still speaking the way she did before," he said. Why? I wondered.

It seems at some point *Manni* had shared her gripes with her mother. That lady, Bala's grandmother – couldn't forget that bit of news. So, when Bala came to live with her, the old

woman made inquiries about Bala's dear *chittappa* and *chitti*; she 'coached' the granddaughter thoroughly; she presented Bala not only with questions but also provided 'appropriate' answers. When Bala's father went to pick up his daughter he was a little taken aback at Bala's pronouncements on her *chittappa* and *chitti*. It was only after watching her face closely did he understand the truth behind her behavior; Bala's face was free from any traces of hatred, anger or resentment. The father could notice sparkle in her eyes and affection pour out of her laughter. So he sort of figured out what had happened. Once the girl was 'rescued' and brought home his first priority was to train Bala to say nice things about us. Soon, there came a noticeable change in Bala's language and speech; but the sparkle in her eyes didn't change!

Well, that's probably what happened. What would a child know about anger and resentment, anyway? A child's heart is a loving heart, for ever! It is pure, untainted and easily imitates what it is told!

I couldn't help admiring my brother-in-law's wisdom and his uncanny ability to fathom into a child's psychology. Still, I couldn't stop telling him: "Now you will train Bala to include the toy motor and the doll in her talk. Poor girl! How will she know these gifts aren't anywhere close to her grandmother's love for her!" I teased him." He didn't seem to agree with me.

I found no need to indulge in any reverie or day dream as the train took us back home. I have no illusion of witnessing a baby come out of my womb, open its eyes to the new world, breathe life and give in to a loud shriek. I could only recall two scenes – flashing alternately before me: Bala, on that day, shrieking aloud after getting hit by my husband; and Bala, who only a few moments ago, shrieked aloud while parting our company. I am ashamed of my own naiveté in doubting a child's loving heart! Now I felt like shrieking aloud!



A CHILDLIKE HEART

Original title: **Kuzhandai Ullam**

Published in **Kalaimagal** (May, 1950)

This was a prize-winning story where the participants were invited to pen a short story ending with a sentence, *He let out a deep sigh.*

A CHILDLIKE HEART

That letter, like a child, totally engrossed the young couple.

Lalitha read through the letter several times before handing it over to her husband who had just then finished his bath and was entering the hall. "This is from Father," she told him. "Says he has given up his position and they are coming here next week."

"Nonsense! What are you blabbering? Tell me exactly what the letter says," Viswam admonished her, feeling a little panic rising in his voice.

"Well, you can read it yourself. Maybe you are scared thinking that it is my parents who are coming!" she said in an angry tone. That was the first time ever I noticed Viswam rebuke his wife; I was a little taken aback.

"Oh! my parents are coming? Really?" Viswam pressed forward to take the letter from her, but then stepped back. "My hands are wet, and I need to dry my hair; why don't you read it to me? Let me listen as I comb my hair."

"You will never get the proper sense if I read it," she countered in a stiff voice. "Remember, when you read aloud a story for me, I never feel satisfied until I read it by myself. Right? You too will feel the same way, if I read it now!"

She laid the letter on a nearby table and briskly walked away.

I was a little bewildered. I know Lalitha always enjoyed her husband reading aloud the short stories to her. Why is she chaffing at him now? Her sudden hostility seemed so alien to her. Has her husband's single word – blabber – touched off her anger?

Why am I so keen to probe into this simple skirmish? I think I know what is going on. Lalitha was upset because her husband panicked thinking that it was her parents who were coming over. That and that alone led her to react the way she did. Poor woman! That's no unreasonable reaction, I would say!

Viswam approached the table after combing his hair. He read the letter a couple of times and set it on the table. I too came over to him and made some formal inquiries.

"Mama, please sit down," he said. "This is from my father." He handed over the letter to me.

I too read the letter a few times. There was one particular passage in it that forced a reader to pore over the words, again and again.

We now find ourselves facing a future of declining years with our skills and abilities reaching a finale; so what else to do but come over there? How many more years can I serve? It is almost five years since I have officially retired from my position. I can understand how others feel about my situation. The time to spend our

days with you is fast approaching.

That was the main thrust of the letter—the most important message in it; like the cream that floats on the top of churned milk!

I have seen some of the letters penned by Arunachalam, Viswam's father. To me they seemed just a string of words totally lacking in emotion. His letters were always brief and occasionally included a few inquiries about one's health and well-being. Viswam often told me his father never gave in to emotions. Still, I could never bring myself to think of Arunachalam's 'letters' as letters. Living as I do far away from home I always poured out my emotions in letters I wrote to my folks back home. Letter-writing is an art and in my opinion it makes the exchanges between two individuals evoke feelings of intimacy. For one who dismissed Arunachalam's writings as nothing more than brief, colorless notes, this was indeed a breath of fresh air: he has now penned a letter that seems to sit up and breathe!

I returned the letter to Viswam and asked him: "Looks like your parents are coming here next week; shall I vacate my room?" I did worry I may have to.

But Viswam firmly and politely refused to accede to my plan. He said he always enjoyed my company and asked me to stay on so that I could be now a good companion to his father as well.

I felt relieved about my not needing to look for a new accommodation. I was thrilled to think that at my age of fifty I could serve as a companion to the thirty-year old Viswam and the sixty year old Arunachalam. Exhilarated, I returned to my room like a cow returning to the barn after grazing in the meadow.

Soon, I sensed a change in the prevailing atmosphere in the house. Viswam was resting on an easy-chair and Lalitha was busy in the kitchen. Occasionally she would step into the front foyer but in no time would retreat to the kitchen like a spun marble. She didn't hover over Viswam; this behavior was totally foreign to her, something I had never witnessed before.

Meanwhile their daughter Geetha, having returned home after playing outside with her friends, chatted away alternately with her parents and me –with her usual toddler-talk bringing in some excitement but no change in the prevailing mood. Their infant-boy was quietly sleeping in the cradle - like the all-knowing Lord Vishnu reposing on the ocean of milk.

Sensing that the elders were somewhat withdrawn, Geetha slowly approached the cradle. Did she cause some mischief? The baby opened his eyes and began to cry; Viswam arose from his easy-chair and approached to rock the cradle. Lalitha too came over.

“Please stop rocking the cradle, the baby is hungry and will not sleep anymore,” Lalitha said and gathered the infant in her arms. Then

Geetha asked her daddy something; he feigned ignorance and turned to his wife who now offered an explanation to her daughter. Soon the couple found themselves reverting to their sunny mood and I could see the glow on their faces; the resonance in their voices turned to one of congeniality much to my delight.

Yes, I was getting a little concerned; here was a decent couple that seemed united and happy with one another; Lalitha seemed always sweet and Viswam too always caring. So my mind was unsettled by the events that unraveled in the past one hour.

The couple won my love and admiration within a few days of my renting their room. They are smart and intelligent. They both hailed from good families and followed their typical family values. Both had grown up with the support of their parents; Lalitha was quite familiar with her in-laws having lived with them for a few years. What more qualities do you need to make them an ideal couple?

Unfortunately, my job forces me to live away from my folks, so I am in no position to offer any fatherly advice to my children. My wife is chronically sick and can't join me. So I found all the strength and inspiration from this happy couple, to correspond, individually, with every member of my family and offer them advice as and when they needed it.

That was the reason why I was distressed and only God knows how disconcerted I was by

the young couple getting upset with one another over some inexplicable reason. No, I am wrong! Looks like even children seem to have grasped the situation now!

In no time the couple had forgotten their differences due to the children needing their attention and company and were back to their informal, pleasant exchanges and resumed playing with the children as before.

Lalitha had the infant on her lap and was sitting on the floor away from her husband and talking to him. Viswam was broadly smiling at her and asked, while turning the pages of a book in hand: "Shall I read a story for you?" Then he held back, laughing as he bit his tongue, "Oh well! You did tease me you wouldn't understand if I read out for you!"

"No, that's fine. Why don't you read it to me? I am ready to listen," she answered as she moved closer to him. Viswam complied.

One day Geetha, approached her mother and kept nagging her to braid her hair. She held a comb in her hand which she thrust toward her mother. Lalitha was busy and was reluctant to do it. When the child insisted, saying, "I have got to go to school!" almost in tears, Lalitha couldn't help bursting into a laughter. She seemed rather proud at her daughter feigning anger and now turned to her husband: "Do you see how she is whining and making demands on me like royalty?"

"Why don't you braid her hair anyway?"

Viswam asked.

“Of course, I will! Otherwise, is she going to stop pestering me any time soon? I better do it right away so that she won’t get on my nerves for the rest of the day like a little devil!” So saying, Lalitha sat opposite to her husband and began slowly working on Geetha’s hair. Just like her parents enjoying their conversation with one another on the simple, day-to-day family matters, Geetha too was savoring the experience: the smooth touch of the comb hugging her curly locks along with a pleasant thought that a colorful silk ribbon would soon adorn them.

While such happy scenes were usually the norm, I have occasionally noticed a dark shadow creep in

One day I heard Lalitha speak out during a chat with her husband: “Well, so be it! You get upset if I want to be open about my feelings and think aloud! You call me the big devil, the little devil’s mother. That’s enough. So I am going to keep my mouth shut! I know I will have this freedom and privilege only for four more days!”

Viswam didn’t reply and Lalitha moved away. For the next half an hour tension hung in the air. Then Geetha came running into the house – crying aloud that she had fallen down and hurt her knee. Concerned, Lalitha at once seized her daughter into her arms; Viswam got ready to clean the wound and apply ointment

and bandage it, when Lalitha directed him exactly to where the ointment was in the house. The shadows of conflict disappeared in no time.

Still, my heart was in turmoil. My friendly outlook toward the young couple seemed compromised. Until now I regarded the young couple and their family life in a different light; I had nurtured only love and affection toward them. But now I seem to be discovering some alarming symptoms and felt like a doctor needing to warn them of the dire consequences.

The next day Geetha again approached her mother for her hairdo and dragged her to the same spot near her father armed with all the paraphernalia –the mirror, comb and ribbon.

“Good heavens! What a hassle!” Lalitha feigned irritation and set braiding her hair.

“Well, she’s certainly going to demand your attention,” Viswam said, laughing. “Maybe my mother too will ask you to do her hair – after all, she too is returning to her second childhood!” Then he turned to his daughter and fondly inquired her: “Geetha, do you know your grandpa and grandma are coming here to play with you?”

“You mean grandpa is coming? The one with gray hair sticking out of his ears?” Geetha asked.

Maybe Lalitha felt a little offended by her husband laughing at Geetha’s question; or was she angry because Geetha suddenly shook her head? “Stay steady, don’t move!” she ordered

and struck her gently on the head with her knuckle.

“Don’t smack the head,” Viswam admonished his wife. “That will harm the brain, don’t you know?” Then he continued, smiling: “Lalitha, get this! Now we have four children in our family! I have a daughter and son: Geetha and my father! You have a daughter and a son – my mother and Arun! What do you say?”

“Please stop the gibberish!” Lalitha chided him. “You seem to literally believe what your father has written in that letter. What makes you think of your parents as children? It is laughable!” She stopped her husband’s smile in no time.

“Haven’t you heard people say old age and childhood are one and the same thing?”

“I know . . . I know . . . It is indeed true,” Lalitha replied. “I seem to be losing my mind. I don’t seem to understand these sayings!”

I watched all this with certain apprehension: the way Lalitha twisted her tongue as she expressed her agreement with her husband, the speed with which she finished her daughter’s hairdo and how she rushed back to the kitchen. All these actions spun my fluid thoughts into a knotty braid and strengthened my suspicion about her.

Lalitha doesn’t seem elated at the prospect of her in-laws’ visit . . .

Things at home were relatively quiet for the next three or four days and I presumed this had

to do with the fact that Viswam's parents had not yet confirmed their visit with yet another formal letter. I was also unsettled by the fact that young Geetha was informed of her grandparents' visit much later. Soon the day dawned upon them but it was strange that none of the family members had shown any visible joy or delight.

'Whatever it might be, surely there is an element of indifference in her,' I thought to myself about Lalitha. Under the circumstances what can Viswam do? The very fact that he seemed calm and steady made me extend my sympathy toward him.

The elderly couple arrived on that day. I returned home from work, deliberately, half an hour after their arrival.

I offered the old man respects with folded palms as I entered the front hall. His wife was inside perhaps having a bath or performing her daily prayers. Only Viswam was with his father and he introduced him to me. His father seemed happy to see me.

The very first question he asked me was: "You still have some five or six years to retire; am I right?"

"Hmm, I have exactly seven more years!" I told him.

"So, after seven years you too will be a child!" he said with a smile.

I found his remark a little strange; I laughed away and said, "Once a child turns seven, it is

no more a child! Does it?"

I thought he too would join me and give in to laughter. But he didn't and he countered me. "What I meant was – in our tradition – as we survey life backwards; we are stuck with childhood only. And that's the reason why we retire from our profession and end up seeking refuge and shelter from others." I couldn't agree more with him.

I returned to my room after a little more conversation with Arunachalam. Later, his wife Kamakshi Ammal entered the hall and, after a while, she rested on a wooden bench. Meanwhile, Lalitha brought some fruits, diced them and served them to her in-laws before they retired for a nap.

I watched Lalitha. She paraded the children before their grandparents and entertained them with a pleasant disposition. Gone from her face were any traces of resentment or boredom that I had expected to see in her. She was a picture of joy and delight. Still, I wasn't fully free of my suspicion about her: I wondered if the old couple would be able to spend their days in this house with all the happiness and satisfaction they deserved. I looked at them, now resting in the hall, with warmth and respect; I again offered my silent prayers for their health and well-being.

Soon Arunachalam and I became close friends. He was keen on conversing with me at every available opportunity. However, his wife

never volunteered to speak with me. She was only a couple of years elder to me; yet, she was the product of an old generation steeped in tradition and orthodoxy. But, if Arunachalam ever noticed me while he was talking with his wife, he would invite me to join them and his wife wouldn't leave our company abruptly and walk away; she would rise as a mark of respect, stay back and observe our ongoing conversation and occasionally say something.

Such were a few occasions when I could engage the old woman in chitchat; soon I realized something. It was not just Arunachalam who seemed prone to describe himself living through a second childhood; occasionally, his wife too expressed the same opinion.

"We are like children; we need someone to take care of us and feed us!" I was amused to hear this comment invariably everyday, from at least one of them.

There is no denying that the couple deserved to spend their old age in peace and comfort. It has been part of the Indian tradition that even emperors and kings of yore, once they reached their advanced years, thought fit to relinquish their power and kingdom to the younger generation and dedicate themselves to spiritual quest and contemplation. But in the present generation very few are willing to follow that route. They want to cling to their position and power as long as they could and are unwilling to cede their role to youngsters. But this couple,

in the tradition of the old, has chosen to put themselves under the care and command of their son and daughter-in-law!

I mentally congratulated the elder couple for their sagacity and judgment. I wished in my heart that Viswam and Lalitha would always treat these elders with love and affection. Presently, I see Viswam and Lalitha as a loving, caring couple, but will this continue for ever? Ever since her in-laws' arrival Lalitha had stopped going out with her husband; she has not been mingling with her neighbors in a friendly banter as she used to. Neither has she found time to play with her own children or even discipline them. I haven't seen her sitting on a chair in front hall reading a book. But how long can this false veneration go on? Lalitha certainly had some qualms about her in-laws moving in here, now there is little evidence of those concerns. How long could one keep these feelings at bay?

I wasn't particularly sympathetic toward Lalitha. I was struck by an irony: after enjoying all the useful products of a banana plant – the fruits, the flowers, and the leaves – which are all outside the plant, we, un-contented, seek to get to the edible core of the trunk – hidden under layers of the bark after the tree is chopped down. That seems to be the way our mind works!

Thus I was waiting for Lalitha's innermost feelings now dormant and lurking deep within

her to emerge anytime now . . .

The local movie house was showing an English film. I remember Lalitha nagging Viswam about it a long time ago. "When do you think we can see it in our theater?" she asked him. "It is based on a story I read in my English class. The other day you were saying the theater owner is your friend; so, why don't you suggest he show that movie, here?" She stopped talking about it after nearly a month and now that movie is being shown in a nearby theater! I guessed Lalitha may now venture out of the house to see the movie. Viswam too knows about her interest in this film, so he himself might go out with her. So the young couple might soon resume their routine outings while the seniors stayed at home. Doesn't it sound natural?

I informed Lalitha about the film. "Is it so?" she said, that's all. Maybe she expected that her husband would suggest they see it together; on the other hand, she herself might talk him into escorting her to the film . . .

'So that's how things are!' I thought. Lalitha is a smart girl, but she doesn't easily reveal herself to others! How else can you explain her present apathy? She seemed awfully excited about the movie when it was not within her reach! And now . . .

A few days went by. What I had expected didn't take place. I was a bit stunned to think of a possible truth: could Lalitha be dimwitted?

Nothing about the movie was ever discussed at home and today would be the last day to see it! I inquired Viswam; the couple was not planning to see the movie, he told me. And he had no plans to see it on his own, either.

I was itching to protest over this slipping opportunity; I made up my mind. That afternoon I raised the topic in the presence of the elderly couple. I said it was a movie that Lalitha was eagerly wanted to see, at the same time, hinting to Viswam about it.

“Does Lalitha see English movies too?” asked Arunachalam with a little surprise in his voice.

“Back home she wouldn’t go to any movie – Tamil, English or anything even when the neighbors came and insisted she join them” said his wife.

“Do you mean to say people never change?” Arunachalam broke in. “I have been employed for forty years and now I find myself doing nothing. You have spent all your years in the kitchen, cooking meals for everybody, and now you are at the mercy of someone preparing meals for you.”

“What’s wrong with that?” asked Viswam and directed the question at me. “*Mama*, what do you think? Why should a person spend her entire life serving others?”

“You are right . . .” I replied and nodded my head.

I was mired in confusion.

I saw Lalitha walk by a few feet away on some errand. She was a picture of a typical housewife: confident, responsible and yet very concerned how she was running the house.

Later, I noticed her busily drying some *madi saris* on a clothesline. My heart ached, wondering what she must be feeling.

I had an idea. I informed Viswam: "You mustn't miss this movie; I am going to get you two tickets, one for you and one for her, right away! Be ready!" I left for the theatre with a sense of relief.

Viswam acceded to my request to go to the movie with his wife. Lalitha hesitated when I informed her of the plan and handed the tickets to her insisting – repeatedly – that she must see the movie; her in-laws too supported me. Eventually she came around. She finally left for the movie only after checking several times with her in-laws to ensure everything would be fine with them during her absence from home.

Once Lalitha and Viswam were gone, I returned to the elderly pair to offer them company.

"Nowadays I notice that Lalitha looks very happy," said Arunachalam.

"Hmm, I can see that . . . I remember the days when she never argued with her husband. Now, just four days ago, I saw how she went on hammering him because he bought something else instead of the special dal she had asked for. Do you know how hard she was on him?" his

wife said.

“That’s why I was saying we should remain invisible to their eyes,” Arunachalam told his wife.

I wanted to let them realize I was in their company. Also, I knew the real reason why Lalitha at the time literally ‘bombarded’ her husband with a couple of questions, I now wanted to offer an explanation.

“Lalitha badly needed that item for cooking,” I informed them. “She was naturally concerned because it had to do with preparing a special dish; a cook’s nightmare.”

“Well, people would be a little more respectful and reserved if there are elders around. Now there are no more elders in this house, we have become children, why should anyone think of us as seniors?”

Good heavens! How I wish the world had more of these kinds of folks, an elderly pair like Viswam’s parents and a young couple like Lalitha and Viswam! I was itching to scream aloud and express my appreciation; still, I managed only to say:

“I don’t see Lalitha as that kind of person.”

Still, my defense of Lalitha lacked some vigor because our conversation soon veered into another direction. Presently, I had a realization: I ought to maintain a position midway between both the couples just like my own age was. That’s what my friendship with the family demanded of me.

It seemed to me for some time now ever since their arrival my heart has been leaning toward the elderly couple. Today I had an awakening: my conscience is clearer.



Days went by. It is now almost two months since Lalitha's in-laws came to live with them. It is three weeks since Lalitha and Viswam saw the English movie. Still, Lalitha hadn't begun going out with her husband or watching the movies in a theater. The house seemed to be her whole world.

Viswam took his parents to places of interest in the neighborhood such as temples and parks and also wanted his parents to get acquainted with his friends. I know he is an ideal son. But, is he an ideal husband?

Quite often the in-laws would ask their granddaughter to go with them in their outings. Occasionally she would go, but most of the time she would rather stay home with her mother. Lalitha went out with her in-laws only rarely. One day Lalitha asked her mother-in-law to accompany her to a nearby park but the old woman told her, "I am tired because I have been going out every evening for the last four days. Maybe you can go with Viswam?" I was thinking Lalitha would at least find someone in the neighborhood for company, but she didn't even try.

I thought about Lalitha's former days, her life with her in-laws under their roof, and then

her life with husband here. How many dreams she must have had when she lived under the control of her in-laws? What is now holding her back is fear, not hatred!

With those thoughts, I was in no mood to admire the elderly couple, but by no means could I blame them either. Under the circumstances, their reaction seemed only natural and what one would expect of them. Still, why should Lalitha be so scared?

This is her family and she is dealing with it to the best of her ability. Why can't she visit her neighbors and friends at her spare time? Maybe she feels she would be caught in some gossip and rumor-mongering, so prefers to stay home where she has some control.

It has been a long time since I witnessed a scene still green in my memory: Lalitha and Viswam playing a game of dice in the front hall while Geetha sat next to her daddy and the infant lay on Lalitha's lap. No more scenes of Viswam reading out aloud stories and Lalitha enjoying them. What has now become a common sight was the children delighting their grandparents and father with their prattles and games while Lalitha deliberately stayed away or stood watching them at a distance or toiled in the kitchen.

Sometimes I took the elderly couple to a temple or some religious discourse solely to bring some sparkle to the household and the faces of the young couple. That was the only

thing I could do and I was quite satisfied with my efforts. Still I am only a third party in this house; is it proper of me to show this much concern and get involved in their lives?

Is that my real worry? I examined the issue from another angle. One day I too will grow old like Arunachalam and spend my life at the mercy of others. Today, I am criticizing these elders, but who knows how I would be at their age? Do I find any fault with the young couple? No, none at all!

I have heard that those facing retirement often feel anxious about their future. Now I begin to understand what lies behind that concern. While my age and uneasiness for the future makes me identify myself with the elderly couple, my heart and conscience seem to ally with the younger couple!

One day, following my prodding, Lalitha and Viswam went to see a Tamil movie with their children. I had some office work, so I was in my room writing.

The elderly couple was engaged in some conversation and after a while, they were discussing about their son and daughter-in-law. Curiosity overtook me: what were they saying?

“Well, why don’t you just tell them?” said Kamakshi Ammal.

“I am just wondering how to break the news to him,” said Arunachalam.

“What do you mean? He is our son, isn’t he? Why should we fear or hesitate? You must tell

tell him without any reservation.”

“Yes, I will. There are still two more weeks to go.”

“Please let him know in the next three or four days! Once it is confirmed, I need to buy a few items here.”

“Hmm,” said Arunachalam, and then there was silence. I guessed the couple must be discussing about their upcoming *sixtieth birth ceremony*. I stopped writing and approached them.

“We are not discussing the *Sixtieth Birthday Celebration*,” Arunachalam explained to me. “That took place last year. Now we are talking about another ritual – our own hearts’ desire!”

I was baffled. He explained the situation to me.

Arunachalam hasn’t yet retired from service, but now he wants to. The reason: While some of his colleagues seemed to appreciate his passion for work and the desire to continue in service, he is aware that there are others clamoring behind his back that he is greedy and hungry for power and money; he is quite happy with his present situation and willing to quit, but he is facing a dilemma: how could he possibly defend his plan to come and live with his son here when his superiors haven’t officially let him go? Is that necessary? On the other hand, continuing to live at their own home, as before, even after retirement, will surely undermine their reputation. Therein lay the dilemma.

The couple had come here because Arunachalam was entitled to his annual vacation and also because they wanted to investigate the prevailing situation. If the atmosphere was congenial, he would make a decision about the retirement; otherwise, he would go back and continue his service.

Now their vacation is coming to an end and they want to inform their son of their decision. They have made up their mind to return home.

“I don’t get this,” I told Arunachalam. “Just because someone accuses you, wrongly, of greed and power you mustn’t give in to their demands. I believe the country still needs the services of people like you.” Yes, those were my exact words!

The next day Viswam too heard their plan; he was taken aback. “How come you never told me you were here on vacation?” he asked, his voice cracking. The fact that his parents didn’t confide in him certainly saddened him.

“Well, had we revealed to you we came here on vacation you would simply pamper us like special guests and we would be grasping for our breath!” said his mother.

“Yes, that’s exactly the point!” Arunachalam seconded her.

Still, the tone in their voices bewildered me.

Both claim they are children; yet, is there anything common between them and children? Children always display total, unqualified trust in their parents; they wouldn’t find fault with

their parents even when they punish them! Again, children always act to bring the parents together when tensions appear; in fact, children often like to claim they have 'grown up' and want to act like adults!

I didn't worry the slightest that Arunachalam and his wife – whose conversations were invariably founded upon an expectation of shelter and refuge from others – may finally return to their home.

I too accompanied the family members to the train station to bid the Arunachalam couple a farewell. I must admit I too was moved when the final hour came to say goodbye. I was concerned I might make my feelings public just like Lalitha and Viswam, whose eyes turned moist. The only four who didn't appear moved were Arunachalam, his wife, Geetha and the baby Arun!

'This is where I find that these adults and children have something in common,' I told myself. I thought of comforting the teary-eyed Viswam on our way back home.

The train departed from the platform and the elderly couple slowly faded away from our view. We headed back home; I watched Viswam from close quarters.

"Whatever one may think, your parents are not children. Why are you sad as if you have been separated from your children?" I consoled him.

"They are like children," Lalitha replied with

an emphasis in her voice. “Children never sit idle, they are always itching for action. Father is eager to go back to work, and my mother-in-law is desperate to engage herself in one task or the other.”

“Yes, they are like children. They are very keen they should never depend on others,” said Viswam while staring at me. He was paying no attention to Geetha who was now walking along with him without holding her father’s hand.

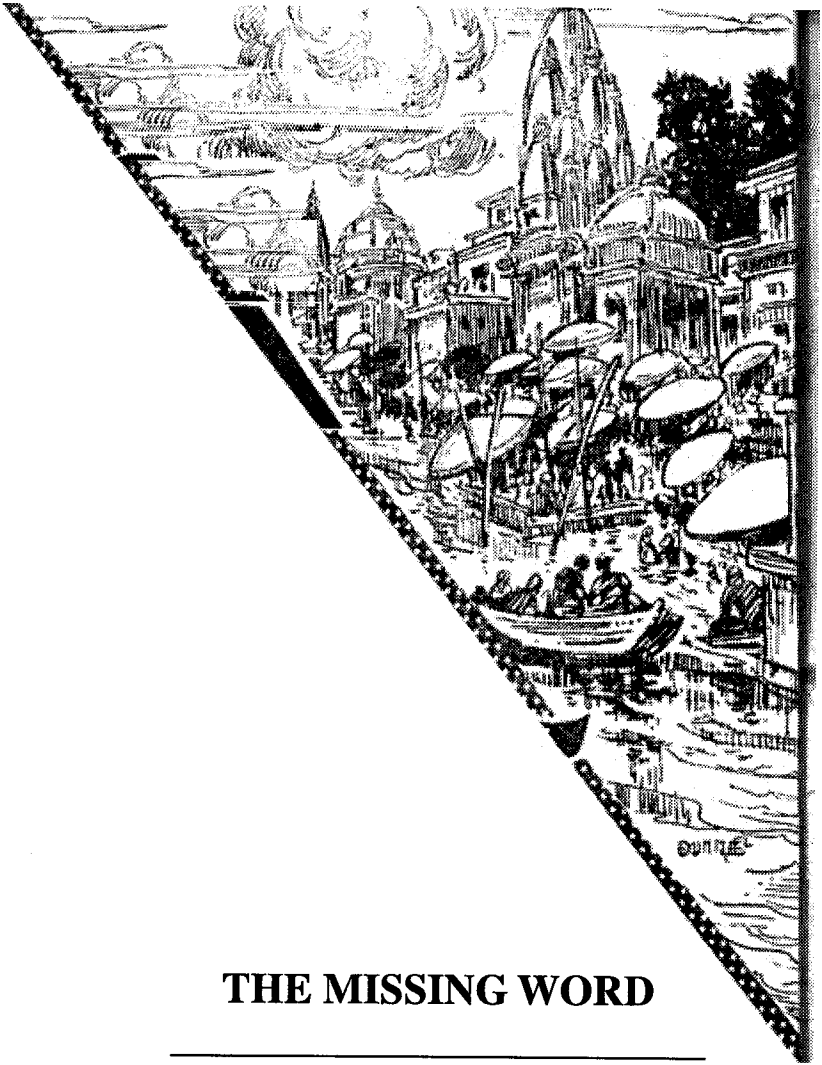
“That was the reason why your father was always saying they were living under others’ grace and care,” I said in agreement. I had no desire to reveal to Viswam that I have since concluded there was very little common between his parents and children.

Now that these two young adults, with their innocent, child-like hearts, openly spoke about the elders, need I say more?

My mind soared to applaud the young couple with the warmest feelings:

“You are the off-spring of two strong, energetic, independent souls; now you both find yourselves in the roles of being responsible parents –even as you embody the innocence of a child. Now you certainly deserve this freedom.”

Maybe Lalitha read my mind or was reacting to the deep sigh of the distant train; she glanced at her husband exuding warmth and affection. He locked his eyes on her while letting out a deep sigh.



THE MISSING WORD

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This was the last story India Devi ever published; it was based on a real incident.

THE MISSING WORD

Pasupathy had a long life; still, does it mean he should abandon his passion for life? Quite often he lost himself in volatile moods and thus had to rein his wavering mind and bring it under control. He played the role of a sage exuding grace, warmth and sympathy and there was n reason to slow down his zest for life. He was seventy-six; one would have thought he could exercise some detachment about life and take things a little easier. He was bent on visiting *Benares*, the Holy City not out of resignation, but because he craved for it!

He had been to *Benares* before and seemed gratified that he had a dip in the Holy Ganges. He had since forgotten all about the city and its holiness. His philosophy was to live with his family and be a beacon of light – like on old lighthouse on the shores of an ocean giving guidance as needed; thus he would fulfill his earthly obligations and fade away from the scene – when his time came. Now he felt tempted to visit *Benares* only because of his grandson Pasupatheeswaran, who was set to leave for that city for a two-year study at the *Benares Hindu University*.

It was the first time the boy was traveling to a city thousand miles away. “Are you really

that old to visit *Benares*?" Pasupathy teased him even as he felt concerned about the college being so far away. The boy's mother was totally opposed to his move. "He has never been to North India," she kept telling everybody.

Eswaran seemed excited about the trip he was undertaking for only one reason: a Masters program in a prestigious institution. He asked, jokingly, "Grandpa, would you like to come with me?"

"You are asking *me*? Forget it!" he replied, smiling. Meanwhile, other family members helped Eswaran in packing and getting ready for his travel. A bullock cart stood outside the house.

"Eswara, you will be staying in a hostel. I may suddenly show up there, one day! Do you think I can stay with you? Make some inquiries and find out a place where I can stay, say, for four months. I will come; I really feel like visiting the holy city," he told the grandson.

"Sure, I will," assured Eswaran. "I would also like my parents to accompany you, if possible."

"Aren't you going to visit us during the holidays?" asked one of Eswaran's younger sisters – a little anxious.

"If you don't, then we will have grandpa bring us over there," said another younger sister. She knew she could always count on grandfather's help, but now she held on to her brother's hands, as if begging him a favor.

“Something is going on here; our brother is going on a jolly, long trip!” That was how other younger brothers felt about the occasion and were enjoying the fun running around in circles.

Finally, Eswaran managed to free himself from others’ hands and settled inside the bullock cart. His father accompanied him to the train station to see him off.

“When will he reach *Benares*? What kind of place is *Benares*?” The children bombarded their grandpa with all kinds of questions. He was now beyond the age when he might have remembered and asked himself, “Why am I talking about this, again?” So he continued to answer as long as there were eager listeners – without losing his sense of humor and patience.



Till now Eswaran’s family members had never been separated from him, so his departure to some far-away city made them a little wary and anxious. A few developments reported in the newspapers exacerbated their concern. Floods were a common occurrence in North India during the rainy season causing much distress to people there. Now, because Eswaran lived in the North, the family members paid special attention every day to events reported from there. When they read that this year the floods were at record levels and causing more damage than the usual, they panicked and sent a telegram urging him to ‘return home at once – it is dangerous out there.’

Eswaran responded with his own telegram: 'The situation is dangerous only to those traveling by road; the train-service has been only partly affected. There is no need for me to return home. Stop worrying about me.' As with any telegram his mother stood frightened even before it could be opened and read aloud! What if it said Eswaran had some accident or even worse that he had died? As if to compound her worry, a couple of words in the hand-written telegram appeared ambiguous and did make the reader halt and trip. The confusion lasted only a few seconds, but it felt eternal to her. Eswaran had given the correct message; it got garbled after someone wrongly transcribed his words.

Somehow, the family managed to get through three months. Meanwhile the *Dussehra* holidays arrived. Only months had actually gone by but the general feeling among the family members was one of a long passage of time. Eswaran seemed a little shy to say, "I will be home for the holidays", but his parents wrote back, "It's a bit of tedious journey; still, if you can, why don't you come home?" Would expenses and tedium stop his longing? So one day Eswaran arrived home; he bought a gift for every member of the family.

Pasupathy now asked him a few questions about *Benares* as if he had never been to that city. Eswaran smiled and said, "Grandpa, there's one good place in *Benares* everybody ought to see; that's our university!"

“I haven’t seen it. This time I am definitely going with you.” he asserted, and continued:

“Your parents were worried sick about you,” he told the boy. “You see, they were always talking about you, what you were doing and what you were eating. Do you want to know why I didn’t worry about you? As you know, I too am intent on going to *Kashi*, so it didn’t bother me. Also I am used to being away from loved ones over the years. Now, I feel like spending four months in *Kashi* without thinking about the house and family,” said Pasupathy, with all his thoughts presently on *Benares*.

“Grandpa, when you are home, you are thinking of *Benares*; once you find yourself in *Benares*, you would be thinking of this home and other familiar surroundings!” Eswaran said, without laughing. After all, he was speaking from his own experience! Only after he moved away from home, did he begin to relish the joys of having lived in his hometown, his favorite spots, the garden, the trees near the well in the backyard and the swing in the front hall!

“It is true,” answered his grandfather, and ended their conversation. He knew his daughter-in-law, Eswaran’s mother, was in the kitchen waiting for an opportunity to converse with her son. The boy’s father, however, was a different sort of man. He seemed uninvolved in matters that had nothing to do with himself or his work. He was quite content after making just after making just a few formal inquiries

when the boy first arrived. With the mother, things were quite different.

Eswaran enjoyed the fifteen-day holidays as if relishing his favorite candy, again and again. He was getting ready to return to school when Pasupathy accosted him with a tease.

“How come you don’t invite me to *Benares* – even in jest?” he asked the grandson. “My heart is still in it because you had first aroused my curiosity.”

“Well, that’s how you got interested the first time,” Eswaran reminded him. “What’s the use of my asking you as a joke? As you were telling me before, how can you stay with me in the hostel?”

“Didn’t I ask you to look for some accommodation in the city? You may look for a lodge or even a slot in a *chowltry*. I am an old man – how can I live in a hostel?”

“Okay, I will, grandpa! This time I will certainly make the arrangements, and please do come. Now that I know the city a little better I feel I can do it!”

“Those words of yours are enough for me, Eswara. Take your own time, and don’t exert too much, my dear boy!” said Pasupathy sounding happily satisfied. Eswaran glanced at him with gratitude: *this great man doesn’t even demand that I follow up on my promise!* A mere word of assurance is enough! Poor Pasupathy! How is that his other sons, daughters-in-law and other grand kids are always complaining

about him? How come he is literally adored in this house? Could it be because his son – Eswaran’s father is his youngest?

With multitude of thoughts, finally, Eswaran left for *Benares* after taking leave of his family members. This time around his mind was full of joy, no more ruffled by fear, hesitation or anxiety. He had only a brief vacation but it turned out to be a great blessing; he felt no worse for leaving his folks behind him; now he had friends to welcome him back; he had classes to attend and even help some female classmates who often sought his help to understand their course material!

‘These girls are quite smart in studies,’ Eswaran told himself. ‘Only if they were a little more patient and reserved!’

It never occurred to him that those young women might actually seek husbands who excelled them in education and career, and eventually would grow more patient and reserved. But then Eswaran hardly had any time to think or do research on them!

Of course, he was slowly becoming aware of his interest in the opposite sex, the kind of woman who would become his wife sometime in the future. Where is she? What’s her name? Is she enjoying *Bharatanatyam* or playing some indoor game? She would be a teenager somewhere in the world – presently out of sight!

His thoughts returned to his younger sisters back home. In the last three months the eldest

of them had come of age.

He thought of his own life the next four years: he would have completed his studies and would be working. Where will his career take him? Then he will involve himself in looking for a suitable groom for his sister; the very thought that he would be playing such an important role pleased him.

Four more years? His grandfather would probably insist that his sister be married in two years.

Well, that's how his grandfather always felt about girls to be married off when they came of age and shone with youth and beauty. "Why must a girl be robbed of her grace and beauty in school?" he would ask. "Wouldn't her husband be happy to marry the girl when she is young and beautiful? Everything in life ought to take place at proper time!"

Grandpa would always insist his opinions were sound and sensible. He would often cite examples to bolster his point of view: "Do you remember seeing her four years ago?" he would ask about a girl from the neighborhood. "Now, at her wedding, she's an eyesore!" Eswaran had no objection to his younger sister getting married off at any time now. Maybe grandpa is right, he told himself; he would never render bad advice!

Eswaran's mind grappled with all kinds of thoughts: the grandfather, the next younger sister and her marriage, during his journey. Yet,

once he reached his school he plunged himself deep into the studies. Days quickly passed by.



Eswaran was getting mail from home and his grandfather too penned a couple of them. But, not even once, did he inquire if Eswaran had secured an accommodation for him. The other family members too never mentioned in their letters about grandfather's desire to visit Eswaran and whether any arrangements to receive and house him in *Benares* were in progress. "Was grandpa just joking, like a child, when he expressed a desire to accompany me?" Eswaran wondered.

One day Eswaran happened to see a relative in the bathing ghat. Pasupathy had written to Eswaran that he should have a ceremonial bath in the holy Ganges on that day when his star coincided with the solar eclipse. When that relative informed Eswaran that he would be leaving for Madras the following day, Eswaran couldn't resist thinking, 'How I wish I too could go, now!' He itched to fly home and his mouth watered. He set about thinking: should he leave the same day, he would be home in two days; the next morning he would enjoy homey meals; he could relax and enjoy . .

That's how his mind wavered for a while but then, after a brief reverie, it was all over, and he felt at ease. Eswaran thought maybe that's how his grandfather too felt about making the trip to *Benares*. Eswaran began concentrating on

his studies; he wrote the exams and arrived home for summer vacation.

Pasupathy asked him in a tone of absolute faith without batting an eye:

“You have found an accommodation for me, haven’t you? Can I go with you this time?”

“No, I haven’t, grandpa! Are you really interested in coming with me to *Benares*?”

“Why you are asking me like that? Are you joking or serious?”

This is how the mind works. It wrestles with inner contradictions that find expression – covertly or overtly; some thoughts are openly revealed, while others are left buried deep inside.

Eswaran shuddered at grandpa’s reaction – now clearly visible from his shrunken face which seemed weighed down by bitterness, disappointment, anguish and disbelief. His heart sank with a feeling that he had committed an unpardonable sin.

“Looks like grandpa is sorely disappointed,” Eswaran told his mother. “I wish someone had written to me about this.”

“Well, somehow it escaped our attention,” his mother answered him. “Maybe we were complacent that you have one more year to complete your studies; we didn’t want to pressure you. Your father never pays attention to these things; neither does your grandfather share his thoughts with us. Poor man! Looks like he really wants to spend four months in

new surroundings! You may look for an accommodation as soon as you return to college, and we will also make arrangements for his travel to *Benares*. We are thinking of sending Vanji with him; Vanji will prepare his meals and also take care of him. I think grandpa is very eager to visit *Benares*, but he is shy about openly sharing his wish! I realize it only now.”

His mother’s revelation surprised Eswaran; and Vanji vindicated his surprise!

“Your grandfather is always thinking of *Benares*,” Vanji informed Eswaran. “In fact, a couple of times he even joked to me saying you actually wrote to him and invited him to *Benares*!”

Well, that’s the truth! It was only with Vanji that Pasupathy shared his innermost thoughts. For someone who was very close to his family members on other matters, his infatuation with *Benares* was something the old man felt reluctant to talk about. “After all, what is so special about this *Benares* any way other than its ancient history as a holy city,” he rationalized to himself. “And I have already seen it!” He once joked with Vanji: “I have an invitation from my grandson; are you now ready to accompany me?” “Good heavens! The timing couldn’t be worse,” answered Vanji. “This month my wife is due for delivery!” “Well, forget it! You will never make it to *Benares*!” Pasupathy said, laughing.

Vanji nursed a fond hope that he could

accompany Pasupathy to *Benares* where he would prepare his meals and offer him company. That was the best deal he could think of – he would be making a pilgrimage to the holy city without having to spend any of his own money! He was only a poor clerk but he looked forward to supplement his professional obligations as an aide or assistant to others who needed someone to get things done for them.



Eswaran had planned to spend the entire summer vacation at home; now he was looking forward to reliving his younger days, again. He himself drove the bullock-cart to a grove where he eagerly collected and savored the cool 'nungu' and drank tender coconut milk under cool shade. He climbed the tall mango tree, picked fruits into bamboo baskets. These were life's small pleasures he relished, over and over again, and who knows when he would enjoy them, again? Where will he be once his university days in *Benares* were over? He gave up any travel plans now and decided that he would simply stay home during the entire vacation.

But things didn't work out the way he had planned.

Suddenly Pasupathy took ill. "Well, I am getting on my years, who knows maybe I am getting the orders from the High Command," Pasupathy joked to his grandson. Eswaran felt all the energy in his body drain off and grew restless. He desperately wished his summer

vacation would come to an end so that he could rush back and find a suitable accommodation there for his grandfather in *Benares*. He wanted the days to go by fast so he now accepted invitations from his friends and visited them in other towns and cities. His visits to a few sites promoting cottage industries offered him an unique and welcome change. He savored all those new experiences and finally set to return to *Benares*.

“Grandpa, why don’t you come with me, now? I will surely find an accommodation for you once we go there. Where is the need for any advance preparation?” Eswaran invited his grandfather to accompany him right away.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Pasupathy told him. “I am averse to do that at my age. Why don’t you find out and let me know? I will ask Vanji to come with me; I think just two months’ stay in *Benares* will be adequate for me. I am not the type who wants to end his life in *Benares*; that will take place only here, on this *Cauvery* bank. I will surely come, don’t feel sorry I am not accompanying you, now. Let me know after you have secured an accommodation, then I will be ready . . .” He settled the matter amicably.

The grandfather seemed weak only in body, his love and enthusiasm for Eswaran seemed unshaken. Eswaran gratefully acknowledged his grandfather’s advice, prostrated before him to receive his blessings and took leave of him.

Back in *Benares*, he immediately started looking for a suitable lodge where Pasupathy and Vanji could stay for a couple of months. Nothing was immediately available; also, the prevailing atmosphere didn't encourage Eswaran to hasten his search for an accommodation. The rail tracks in the Calcutta line had suffered extensive damage due to heavy rains and floods setting off numerous traffic problems. Travel was becoming less safe, the mail was being either lost or delayed. Was this a time when Eswaran, in all conscience, could suggest his aged grandfather to undertake a long journey to a distant city with an escort like Vanji, a total stranger to North India? Even if the rail tracks got restored, one couldn't be sure when the weather conditions might suddenly turn hostile. Under the circumstances Eswaran was loathe to take any risks even as he desperately wanted to bring his grandfather to *Benares*.

"Well, let me wait for some more days," he grumbled to himself. "I am sure grandpa wouldn't be expecting an invitation from me, so soon. He might be even thinking that I had forgotten all about the whole thing!" Then, one day, he thought: "What if I surprise him with an invitation—'Grandpa, come over!'"

While our Eswaran was thinking along these lines, God, the other Eswar had his own plans. Pasupathy who was eagerly looking forward to the invitation, preempted his grandson's move.

Eswaran received a wire from his father:

“Vanji arriving, with grandfather. Meet train station.”

Eswaran was a little disappointed and felt uneasy at the fast moving events. According to the arrangements he had presently worked out he would get the accommodation for the visiting pair only after five or six days. Meanwhile he could put them temporarily in a *chowltry* or monastery. Maybe grandfather is traveling with a few other pilgrims; that must have encouraged him to undertake this journey. Vanji was his companion, and his grandson is all set to welcome him to *Benares*. What else does he need?

Eswaran was elated his grandfather was visiting him all the way from his hometown. He bought milk and fruits; he announced the news to his friends.

“You sound so happy and delighted,” remarked one of his friends. “If I were to know my grandfather was coming to see me, I really don’t know what that shock would have done to me! He would simply start lecturing to me, constantly!”

“I really wish my grandfather would visit me one of these days,” said another friend. “The very fact that someone from back home visits us would leave me spell-bound.”

“Do you think your grandfather would be bringing some home-made snacks? Of course, he wouldn’t be able to eat them himself; still, he could bring them for you! Do you think you could share them with us?” asked another.

“I remember your grandfather brought a large box of special banana chips,” one of the friends reminded another, and shook his head in disbelief: “To tell the truth, I wasn’t impressed with them.”

Eswaran got a little scared. What would happen if these friends met his grandfather? He knew his grandfather loved him, and because of that loving care, what if he found fault with his friends and spoke of them as ‘this trickster, that non-stop babbler, this one who is arrogant and that one who is a fool?’ By the same token, what if his friends didn’t respect his grandfather and made fun of him as an old hag?

“Well, it is very easy to please the elders; just prostrate before them and pay respects and in no time will they warm up to you and shower you with blessings! It wouldn’t matter how many arguments you have with them they won’t feel offended!” Eswaran tried his best to impress upon his friends about his grandfather. He mentioned how Pasupathy always made it a point to wash his own clothes, daily; he reminded them that Pasupathy once occupied a position, which at the time carried one of the most prestigious titles. However, he was worried that Vanji might act silly and embarrass him in the presence of his friends. Then he became mollified thinking that Vanji, after all, was no relation of his!

The next morning, even as he arose from bed, Eswaran was reminded of *vibhuti*. He

recalled that his grandfather had given him the sacred ash which he had carefully saved; he donned a *dhoti*, applied the sacred ash to his forehead and was on his way to the train station. His friends mocked him; someone quipped, "Are you trying to impress your grandfather?"

"I would rather consider this a special privilege," Eswaran answered them. Soon he was at the train station; smiling, he stood on the platform and watched the compartments passing by, one after another. He ran toward the second class compartments thinking, his grandfather, an old man, must be traveling in one of them. He remembered Pasupathy had once casually mentioned that to him.

Eswaran was still searching; he was a little saddened to realize that his grandfather was, after all, traveling third class and retraced his steps. "Aren't you Eswaran?" asked Vanji, who now stood before him. "So you have come."

"So you are here, uncle!" Eswaran greeted warmly as he approached him.

"I have my bed and bag. I am traveling light. Do you think we need a *coolie*?" Vanji asked. "This needs some careful handling," he said and took out a small box in his hand.

A *coolie* was now waiting for them. Eswaran ordered him to pick up the luggage and scanned his eyes, left and right. "Where's grandpa?" he asked.

"Grandpa?"

“Yes. Didn’t he come? Looks like he sent you to arrange his accommodation here.”

“Eswara, did you get the telegram?”

“Of course. Otherwise, am I an astrologer to know that you were coming?” Eswaran asked. “Here is the telegram.” He pulled it out of his handbag.

Vanji tried to answer him without looking at the telegram, but words failed him and he could hardly raise his voice. With teary eyes he read the wire; an important word was missing from it; it was Vanji himself who personally sent the wire, but someone at this end had erred in transcribing his message. It was not his fault, still he continued to shed tears. “Eswara, your grandfather’s ashes are in this tin box inside a small pot. I have come here to immerse them in Ganges.”

Eswaran suddenly felt as if his whole body was buried in a watery grave. He continued to stare at the little box in Vanji’s hands.

“You never got the letter your father wrote to you?”

Eswaran could reply only with a sob; he grabbed the box from Vanji’s hands and started walking.

Did he hope to catch a glimpse of his grandfather who had since been reduced to a link between the vast sky and the barren earth? Otherwise, why was he looking up and down as he briskly walked down the platform?

Who will now comfort Eswaran that his

grandfather's life had finally reached a glorious end, with no regrets? He had his body cremated on the banks of *Cauvery* and his ashes are ready to be immersed in the Holy Ganges; Pasupathy has attained self-realization and has been released from worldly bonds!

Time alone will tell and Eswaran will realize the truth. Fate has now played a cruel joke on him: just like a brass pot sealed with the holy Ganges water, he has been now offered a pot containing his grandfather's ashes. Still, in the final analysis, fate would certainly lose. Soon his grandfather's ashes will be mingling with that eternal, holy Ganges and Pasupathy would become a part of the all-encompassing cosmos with his love and warmth spreading all over.

Meanwhile, Vanji hurried after Eswaran to keep pace with him. His anxiety to persuade Eswaran to perform the last rites with the words, "You are here and as his grandson you are the one best qualified to perform his last rites," seemed unnecessary and gratuitous.

GLOSSARY

Adi festival

Also called *Adi Pirappu*, an important festival for Tamils, especially the newlyweds.

Aiyo, Amma!

A desperate expression of sorrow/shock or helplessness.

Adishesha

The mythical, thousand-headed serpent on whom Lord Vishnu reposes.

Almirah

Cupboard, usually with doors.

Anna

The old Indian currency equal to 1/16th of rupee. *Anna* has been discontinued after 1957 when India decimalized its currency.

Benares

A holy city in Northern India. Also known as *Varanasi* and *Kashi*.

Bharatanatyam

Classical dance of South India.

Cauvery

A famous river in South India.

Chittappa

Father's younger brother or husband of mother's younger sister; Uncle.

Chitti

Mother's younger sister or the wife of father's younger brother; Auntie.

Chowltry

A residential facility for devotees provided either free or for a nominal fee.

Deepavali

The festival of lights.

Dussehra

A festival celebrated typically in October. The celebrations vary from a day to nine days to a month.

Folded Palms

A respectful salutation to elders; also called *Namaste/Namaskarm*.

Jarigai Angavasthram

A long pleated piece of ornament cloth – with gold or silver border – worn by men on their shoulders.

Koottu

A typical stew-like dish from Tamil Nadu, characterized by large, tender chunks of vegetables floating in aromatic gravies or broths.

Kumkum

Made from turmeric powder, it serves as an auspicious symbol. It is widely used for worshipping Hindu gods and goddesses.

Kumpi

A Telugu word; a pyrotechnical device. A spherical, earthen pot shooting up colorful illuminations during firework display.

Lehyam/Chooranam

A medicine made by mixing drugs/herbs with honey.

Madi Clothes

The clothes considered ceremonially pure – worn by orthodox women in traditional *Brahmin* families.

Madras hotel

A term to denote a hotel or restaurant in Northern India where South Indian dishes are also served.

Mami/Mama

A term of endearment – used by a younger person to address an older woman. Literally means aunt. For the older men, the equivalent term is *Mama*.

Manni

Elder brother's wife.

Maruti

The wind-god of *Ramayana*, also known as *Anjaneya* and *Hanuman*.

Masala Vadai

Cutlet-like snack made of lentil or chick-pea paste and fried in oil.

Nalayanee

An exemplary woman from Indian mythology, like *Sita* or *Ahalya*, devoted to her husband.

Nungu

The pulpy kernel of palmyra fruit.

Ootacamund

A popular hill station in the Nilgiris (Blue Hills) in Tamil Nadu.

Prasadam

Food offered to god during worship and later distributed to the devotees.

Rasam

Tangy, spiced, thin and watery dal (legume) soup served with other foods – rather than as a first course.

Santi

A ritual or ceremony to avert or mitigate the evil influence of stars and planets.

Seekkai

Fragrant and resinous powder that serves as a kind of shampoo for women's hair.

Sixtieth Birthday Celebration

A ritual marking the sixtieth birthday of the

householder, celebrated by the family members, other relatives, and friends.

Sri Rama Jayam

A *mantra* recited by the devout to invoke *Lord Rama*; occasionally, the three words are penned by the orthodox before beginning a task.

Talam

Literally means a 'beat'. In *Carnatic Music*, the vocalist marks the *talam* by tapping his thigh with his palm.

Upanayanam

A ceremony to invest an young lad with the sacred thread – marking the transition from child to student.

Vibhuthi

Sacred ash worn by the devotees on their bodies with adoration and respect.

Vishnu Chakram

A firecracker. A hand-held wheel that, when lit, spins and sends forth sparkles. The appellation *Vishnu* is given because *Lord Vishnu* in Hindu mythology is said to carry a *chakra* or wheel in his right hand as a weapon to destroy the evil doers.

Yama

The much-feared god of death who lives in the nether regions called *Patala Loka*.

VINDHIYA

1927 – 1999



CUPID'S ALARMS

Translated from Tamil by Andy Sundaresan

"I believe these stories are like the incomparable little stars that add honor and glow to the Tamil literary firmament."

- Smt. Rajam Krishnan

Rajam Krishnan is a Tamil author of more than eighty books of fiction and non-fiction, including *Kurinjithen* and the *Sahitya-Akademi* -award winning novel, *Verukku Nir*.

Here is a collection of *Vindhya's* short stories published in leading Tamil magazines in the late Forties and Fifties. *Vindhya* published her very first story and won two prizes - consecutively -in *Kalaimagal*, a literary magazine known for publishing several generation-defining short stories. *Cupid's Alarms* won her recognition as the recipient of the *New York Herald Tribune* International Award in 1950.

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