

REDEMPTION

1

The rail track ran east-west in front of Krishna Iyer's house and along the secluded section of the village *agraharam*. Trains passed on the tracks more than a dozen times a day and for the majority of the villagers they served only one purpose—to inform them the time of the day. At the back of the house ran the river Cauvery; that river had its own glorious origin atop a far away mountain, inspiring awe and scare among onlookers as it snaked its way spewing foam even as its huge waves washed the rocky terrain on its journey and came to be revered as Grand Cauvery but now that's all history. That great river has now lost all of its intensity and drive; it is reduced to a narrow brook silently running its course—like an old woman, a sole survivor who struts and spends her days recalling her glorious days gone by, amidst dry, empty laughs and occasional yawns, fully resigned to her creeping inevitable end.

At the front of the house one can see Rajaraman, the second son of Krishna Iyer and who has since renounced the world and taken vow as a monk. He could be found usually in front of the house, sitting on the cement floor, enclosed on all the four sides by a canopy woven from palm leaves, watching the railway platform and the trains afar as well as the branches of a banyan tree swinging back and forth in air. Otherwise, he could be spotted at the riverbank behind the house, usually around noon when there was not much of human traffic, inside a dilapidated shrine since abandoned and now in ruins. He would be lying flat on his back, the right leg raised like a stump on the ground, the left leg pulled over to the right one, vigorously shaking the left foot—as if fanning a kitchen fire. Occasionally, he would be lying on one side, his palm supporting his head overflowing with massive tresses, his eyes staring at the creek. Even then his right leg would be standing erect, the left folded on it—the left foot shaking as usual. The dark, shining locks from his beard would flutter in the

cool breeze and gather dirt from the floor while a '*beedi*' spewing smoke would be dangling from his lips.

One always sensed something majestic and imperious in Rajaraman—whether he was sitting still or lying on the floor.

In the same posture he adopts while staring at the creek, he would - while facing the railway platform and the trains in front of the house - cast himself in the role of a monk in deep meditation; his left foot would be placed over to the right thigh while his right knee—dark and robust like a bamboo stick—would be up in the front and below his shoulders. His long right hand would be resting on the knee, the '*beedi*' held between his fingers, spewing smoke. That's certainly a scene to behold; not everyone can display such comeliness.

Whether he was sitting or lying on the cement floor in front of the house or meditating near the riverbank, Rajaraman's eyes would never be focused on any particular individual. Everyone in the village knew who he was, but he would recognize no one, not even when that person showed up right in front of him. Even when Rajaraman's eyes were open, those standing before him would feel he has not actually set his eyes upon them. There was always certain strangeness to Rajaraman's face, he seemed so alien to himself that it often seemed he might suddenly stand up and pose a question to his own siblings or the acquaintances: 'Who are you?' He never initiated conversation with others; yet he never failed to respond when addressed by others. And when he spoke he gave the impression that the permanent silence residing within him has been scarcely broken, his reply seemed to echo the very words addressed to him. His conversation was also like silence, so nobody ever spoke to him.

Occasionally Rajaraman would think of something and smile to himself. And what an enchanting smile it was! It was a smile that would also wrench the hearts of those watching him. Beyond his beard and '*beedi*', Rajaraman exuded the innocence of a child.

Krishna Iyer's family was steeped in orthodoxy. The elder son Raghupathy was very much a village type, still it felt to his lot to carry on the family tradition and preserve its morale. He lacked his father's erudition and scholarship in scriptures; neither could he command respect among the high-caste Brahmins the way Krishna

Iyer did. Still Raghupathy's manners were worthy enough for the family to merit respect from the outside world.

Krishna Iyer had hoped Rajaraman's life would be exemplary and one of his crowning achievements would be that he not only excel his father in scholarship but also prove smarter in worldly matters. So he was devastated to see the son turn into a monk – a pathetic figure in rags and disheveled hair and chomping on a 'beedi.' During the last ten years when Rajaraman deserted home and was crisscrossing the country as a monk in ochre robes, the father spent his final days, sick and bedridden, in agony and terrible pain longing for the son's return. He never saw his son again, and died last year with Rajaraman's name still on his lips.

The village elders among the high-caste Brahmins who recoiled at Rajaraman's wayward life came to think of Krishna Iyer's death as a blessing since he didn't have to see his son wallowing in sin.

A few others—again, among the Brahmin community—who often felt disgusted when they heard about Rajaraman's slide into depravity but were nevertheless enchanted in his presence by his pleasant smile – sought comfort in the thought that, any way, a monk was not bound by the religious conventions.

Last year, at the time of Krishna Iyer's death, his three daughters and other relatives who swarmed around the house couldn't help feeling certain resentment, albeit with some deep sigh, that the entire family property was being bequeathed to the eldest son Raghupathy totally ignoring another soul who had a legitimate claim to a share. They made a big deal about the fact that Krishna Iyer's son Rajaraman was nowhere to be seen.

Krishna Iyer had already bequeathed to his three daughters their share of property when he was alive. Because he had a deep faith that his second son would certainly return home before his father's death, he had taken upon himself to personally safeguard that portion of his property after his elder son Raghupathy was given his due share.

Krishna Iyer left a will with clear instructions to Raghupathy: were Krishna Iyer to die before Rajaraman returned home, the portion belonging to Rajaraman must be put in a separate account and safeguarded as before; it should never be invested in any

profit-making venture. And when Rajaraman returns home –the father seemed certain about that—he must be handed over his share of the property.

Rajaraman was called affectionately *Ambi* by his family members. Even after a lapse of ten years since he parted company from others, his name continued to be displayed on Krishna Iyer's properties, such as land, farms, plots and gardens clearly indicating his title to them with painted signs and instructions for all to see and follow.

If Krishna Iyer nursed lofty dreams about Rajaraman's future it was not just based on blind faith. If that were true, he could have certainly bestowed such faith on his elder son Raghupathy; his total faith in Rajaraman carried a special significance.

Rajaraman had shown a keen interest in scriptures and rituals even when he was young. Raghupathy was kind of a bully—always playful and even mischievous; everyone seemed to agree that he could hardly learn anything in school.

Rajaraman successfully completed his education – first in the village Vedic school and later in the high school in the neighboring town Mayavaram. When he finished his high school at fifteen, Krishna Iyer wanted him to attend a college. It so happened that in his family nobody other than Krishna Iyer ever had an English education. Krishna Iyer did make a try but gave up after attending just a year in college at the Annamalai University. Now he wanted his son should have a shot at higher education – because the boy seemed ready for it and could rise to whatever position he wanted to. The fact that the father could afford to send his son to a college also intensified his heart's desire.

He admitted Rajaraman in Annamalai University.

Around this time Krishna Iyer had a boyhood friend –Sambu Iyer – who owned and ran a hotel in Chidambaram. Sambu Iyer was a Palaghat Brahmin. He was a simple, mild natured man totally devoted to his hotel business. Occasionally he would remember his former friend Krishna and drop in a card.

"Krishna! Yesterday I suddenly thought of you and I very much wish to see you," Sambu Iyer would write. "Now you are very much on my mind. I am visiting you tomorrow. You better

stay in town—don't just go away on some other business.” The message written in huge letters would sound as if Sambu Iyer was actually speaking to Krishna Iyer.

Sambu Iyer was heavy in body as well as in voice. Never given to speak in low pitch, the words came out in a loud, rasping voice producing a guttural sound.

When Krishna Iyer read his friend's message he felt those huge letters were echoing the voice of the person who actually penned them.

It amazed Krishna Iyer to think how fast time seemed to flow when he and Sambu Iyer were together, even just for one day.

Sambu Iyer would travel by parcel train from his town and reach his destination at six in the morning. He would return home the same night by another passenger train leaving at ten. He lived just thirty miles away and because the travel was by passenger train the journey would last an hour and half.

He would visit Krishna Iyer once a month – usually on a Wednesday – when his hotel would be closed for the weekly holiday.

Even during those days when Krishna Iyer's wife was alive, Sambu Iyer visited his friend alone. Krishna Iyer's wife Indumathi passed away twenty-five years ago while delivering her sixth baby. As long as she was alive, she would treat both men to a sumptuous meal – served on a banana leaf in the main courtyard; she would stand close to the kitchen door and murmur: “Next time around, please bring your wife to our house.”

Sambu Iyer would scarcely raise his head as if overcome by shyness and respond: “Of course, I will . . . Now, why don't you plan to visit us?” But he never, not even once, had his wife accompany him on any of the trips; neither did Krishna Iyer's wife ever visit Indumathi.

Both men enjoyed their mutual company so much that they would forget the entire world when they were together. Krishna Iyer would postpone all his business dealings of the day in anticipation of Sambu Iyer's visit. He would turn in promptly at six in the morning at the railway platform awaiting the train from the eastern direction.

Off the pair would go, laughing and talking to one another while wandering among the fields and groves – holding an umbrella in one hand while the other carefully held up the loose end of the *dhoti*. Lustily cheering to one another they would bathe in Cauvery for an hour —both in the morning and the evening. Often the pair could be spotted in some field or grove or near a well or a street corner munching a snack. Occasionally they would enjoy jackfruit soaked in honey or some other fruit depending on the season of the year. Once in a while Krishna Iyer would dice a tender cucumber with a jack knife hanging from his key bunch and serve them to his friend. Often the men would treat themselves to a silver plate full of betel leaves and nuts and a large mug of drinking water. In the evenings their servants would seek them out, and without their masters asking, serve them coffee and snacks right on the spot. After dinner both men would retire to the railway platform opposite to Krishna Iyer's house. Cool breeze would fill up the place and the servants would stand in a farther corner in preparation to a formal farewell. As the time drew for the train to arrive, Krishna Iyer would begin his usual refrain: “Can't you stay tonight and go home tomorrow morning?”

“No, I really can't . . . I have promised I would be back tonight . . . Again, she will be all alone, and I have quite a few things to attend in the morning,” Sambu Iyer would reply—invariably offering some pretext before taking off. On those occasions, Raghupathy, Krishna Iyer's elder son, was the only one who seemed to enjoy Sambu Iyer's company; he would be circling the elder man and stay close to him fondly addressing him, ‘Sambu Mama.’

Rajaraman was not that easily accessible. He would show up before the elders only if and when his presence was sought. He would speak only when spoken to. But, once drawn into conversation he would speak with no hesitation. Once he knew why his presence was actually needed and the business was seemingly over, he would ask, in the manner of a busy, no-nonsense adult: ‘Can I go now?’ If someone had asked him to show up just for fun or no particular reason they would most likely be embarrassed by his curt questioning.

On his visits Sambu Iyer invariably sought Rajaraman's company. Now, all the children in Krishna Iyer's family were

deprived of motherly love, but it was Rajaraman who seemed to epitomize that pathetic state; that was true even when his mother was alive. So Sambu Iyer had a soft corner for the boy. There was something in the boy's face –call it glow or fervor –that endeared him to Sambu Iyer who often imagined he was in a trance in the boy's very presence. Rajaraman's posture was one of a budding Vedic scholar, quite an imposing one to watch: the front portion of his head shaven, the rest of the locks sheathed into a tuft; small red-stone studs adorning his ears, and a red-border towel serving as an outerwear covering his body from the waist to the knees; his lean, fair, frame, naked above the waist, exposed his rickety bones and displayed his sacred thread.

When Sambu Iyer asked to see Rajaraman the boy would be usually immersed in reading some book or meditating in the *puja* room. Often Sambu Iyer would forget why he had called the boy as soon as Rajaraman showed up. He would look at the youth with warmth and smile, come closer and touch him with affection. "You have become so thin," he would chide him. "You shouldn't be spending all your time in studies, you must also play and have fun; now and then you must laugh too . . ." Rajaraman would remain still, say nothing in response.

Krishna Iyer would watch all this with heavy heart; he understood Sambu Iyer's demonstration of love betrayed a frustration of having no children to call his own.

On every visit, Sambu Iyer would invariably ask Rajaraman to sing in his presence, at least once; otherwise he seemed to feel as if he has missed or lost something. That feeling would continue to grow and fester inside even after he returned home.

And Rajaraman would sing instantly without any fuss or hesitation. His response, always, seemed quick and generous as if he was eager to let out the ever-growing melody lurking in his heart for others' enjoyment. Like a professional musician, he would simply close his eyes and, as if opening a flood gate, instantly break into a song.

When he recited the *slokas* from *Mahishasura Marthini* or *Suprabhatam*, the listeners found themselves in a trance imagining if the singer himself was the actual composer of those hymns. His

Sanskrit diction was excellent. He was equally adept in rendering Tamil hymns.

When Rajaraman was done, opened his eyes and silently looked around, he seemed to be asking: 'Can I go now?' Sometimes he would, literally, utter those very words. His manner suggested he felt any social interaction with others was simply unnecessary; it seemed as if someone was always seeking him out for company and he was only too eager to oblige.

Sambu Iyer had mentioned to Krishna Iyer a long time ago: "Krishna, *Ambi* is your son only till he completes his high school. After that you must let him live in Chidambaram under my custody. I will take care of his education. What do you say? Why should I even ask you, I have already made up my mind . . ."

Accordingly, when Rajaraman was fifteen, Krishna Iyer traveled with the boy to Chidambaram and admitted him in a local college; later, he entrusted the boy to the care of Sharada Auntie, Sambu Iyer's wife.

That was the first time Krishna Iyer met with Sambu Iyer's wife.

Rajaraman's first face-to-face encounter with Sharada Auntie triggered the memory of his own mother, dead five years ago. He felt his heart beat heavily as that memory blended with a strange mixture of pleasure and fear. He hastily pressed his chest lest his heartbeat should draw attention from others.

When Krishna Iyer took leave after entrusting his son to Sharada Auntie's care, it was Rajaraman who wept uncontrollably – even though he thought it made no sense.

"How come you are so peevish?" Sharada Auntie asked as if mocking him. "I heard Uncle (she meant her husband) say you are a nice, smart kid. I can't just believe this happening!" She warmly held the boy in a tight hug.

It was a memorable experience for Rajaraman – the first time he felt the softness of human body wrapped in a silk sari pulsating with pleasant odor, the warmth of a human heart and the intimacy of a caring soul.

Once again he tried to compare his dead mother with this Auntie.

He thought this Auntie was a little taller than his own mother, maybe she even had a fairer complexion; Sharada Auntie seemed even more affectionate than his own mother.

Rajaraman's mother always seemed to be in a bad temper because of her weak constitution, chronic illness, and too frequent child births she had endured – one almost every two years. She would be always biting her lips as if in constant pain. The *kumkum* on her forehead would forever be marked with lines owing to the permanent wrinkles; her skin prominently displayed huge patches of turmeric on its pale, white, bloodless texture. She was absolutely incapable of doing any work; she always sat in her own room with an infant in her warm embrace. Needless to say the children had terrible time as long as their mother was alive.

The children were given strict orders how to behave at home: no running or fast walking in the room was allowed, and certainly no weeping or crying – breaking the silence.

Was Rajaraman's personality shaped by this strict discipline at home? Raghupathy and the other children often violated these rules and were harshly punished.

Occasionally Rajaraman would like to see his mother and venture into her room and find himself driven out – just like other siblings. To this day, he still vividly remembers his hurt feelings following those episodes.

It goes without saying that the children were mostly brought up by servants and an old woman who served as the in-house cook. Krishna Iyer, once in a while, would spend some time with the children – playing, scolding or even advising. When it came to Rajaraman, all this was simply unnecessary.

The day before Rajaraman was admitted into college Krishna Iyer had asked to see the boy. He suggested that he get rid of his tuft and have his hair closely cropped. Else, the father suggested, the boy could end up being a laughing stock among other students and friends. Rajaraman openly resented this advice and grew livid with fury.

“Would you rather I cast away my sacred thread too and smoked a cigarette?” he asked and Krishna Iyer was a little frightened. And Rajaraman himself was a little intrigued by his strong reaction. Then why did he make his feelings public when he and Krishna Iyer parted company?

After that episode Krishna Iyer never again broached the subject of Rajaraman's hairstyle or anything that had to do with his personal preferences. He felt a little proud that he could accept the boy's independence.

And when Krishna Iyer paid him a visit after two months he was surprised to see Rajaraman with cropped hair. He was a little frightened and eagerly pulled the boy's shirt collar and examined the left shoulder. The sacred thread was still there!

“It's Auntie's idea,” Rajaraman said, somewhat shy, his head bowed down. Krishna Iyer couldn't help laughing.

Now Auntie's voice was heard from the kitchen. “Uncle too (she meant her husband) said the same thing. I want our boy to be like others. What is the big deal about the tuft, anyway? If he really wants, he can certainly have it, later. I think our *Ambi* looks great with cropped hair. Again, because he is sporting cropped hair, he hasn't turned back on his religious practices. Show me any kid from the present generation who regularly performs *sandhi* twice a day or carries out all the rituals prescribed by our religion with such a dedication . . . Our *Ambi* will never give up those rituals.” Sharada Auntie tried to put Krishna Iyer's concerns to rest.

“I too told him the same thing in our village,” Krishna Iyer tried to explain. “He wouldn't listen to me. But I knew all along that he would change his mind in a month or so – after he has seen other people around him.”

“You really think so?” Sambu Iyer now spoke. “*Ambi* is not the type to change because of what others do or say. But when Sharada says something, nobody can refuse!”

“I have no problem with that,” Krishna Iyer replied. “After all, these things come out of warm heart and are expressed in good faith. If your wife doesn't tell him, who else will?”

Rajaraman didn't volunteer any comment.

Rajaraman's entry brought a little brightness into Sambu Iyer's life.

It totally changed Sambu Iyer's daily routine. Previously Sambu Iyer would leave for the hotel early in the morning, come home at noon for a lunch silently shared with his wife, rest for a while on the front porch, then go back to the hotel to conduct business and return home late at night, around ten. Now, just for the sake of Rajaraman, Sambu Iyer spent almost all the time at his disposal – except for those hours when Rajaraman was gone out to college—at home. He loved the boy's company so much that he not only shared the meals with him thrice a day, he also used the boy's presence as a pretext to spend more time talking to his wife.

Sambu Iyer had never spoken to his wife looking directly at her face. He would be either looking at a wall far away or keep ripping the corners of a hand-held fan in the kitchen, while talking. Rajaraman often wondered how the couple had engaged in any conversation when he was not around.

Soon he became a bridge between the couple.

At the center of the main hall in their house were carved patterns and designs on the cement floor to play *Daya Kattam* and *Sokkattam*. Sharada Auntie and other women from the neighborhood would often meet there and in the afternoon to play indoor games.

When Rajaraman arrived at their home Sharada Auntie was thirty-five years old; still, one day when Rajaraman returned home from the college he was surprised to notice that he could hardly distinguish his Auntie from the other young women surrounding her – all virgins – playing the indoor games.

When those women were a little confused what to do next – whether they should treat him as an adolescent and invite him to join them in the games, Sharada Auntie briskly arose from where she sat, saying, "Our *Ambi* is home . . ."

"Auntie . . . Please go on . . ." Rajaraman told her and walked to his room.

When Auntie followed him to his room and said, "Why don't you come and play with us?" Rajaraman riveted his eyes on her and said, "I never play games with women."

"How come you play with me?" she asked.

"You are like a mother to me," he replied and Sharada Auntie was visibly moved.

Face reddening, he bowed down his head. As she closely watched his face, Sharada Auntie had a feeling that the boy had suddenly grown up and become an adult. She noticed the small traces of hair around his lips. Still, those reddish lips betrayed a feeling that he was still a child.

"I should really consider myself lucky to be your mother," she said and warmly caressed his cheeks as if exorcising the 'evil eye' cast upon him.

Sambu Iyer lacked any of this – he was not someone given to demonstrating his real feelings for the boy. It was a long time since he had heartily accepted Rajaraman as his adopted son. He was toying with a fond hope that he would discuss with Krishna Iyer his adoption plan. He was worried if Krishna Iyer would give his consent. If the adoption plan failed, why not think of some other plan which would allow the boy to continue living with them? After all, Rajaraman would be finishing college in two years, so Sambu Iyer eagerly looked forward to the prospect that he could secure a decent job, nearer home, for Rajaraman and make him a permanent occupant in his home. He felt his imagination grow wild—believing all his dreams for the boy, one after another—would eventually come true.

Such was the effect Rajaraman had on Sambu Iyer and Sharada Auntie, who, bereft of any other solace, sought the boy as their common inspiration. Till now the couple had spent their lives talking to one another only in some symbolic gestures—never in direct intimacy—usually staring at walls or the ceiling in mute silence. Now Rajaraman came into their lives and changed everything; his presence gradually erased the emptiness looming over the couple as the pair exchanged mutual happiness and concern for the boy.

Sharada Auntie had never seen her husband smile. She had never heard him compliment his wife for serving him a special meal or anything she did for him with care and concern. Neither was Sambu Iyer somebody to complain if his wife's culinary skills left something to be desired; if she happened to add too much salt

or even forgot to add any in the meal, he certainly made no mention of it. Later, when she herself tasted the food and found out what was missing, she would simply sigh and resign to herself, saying, "My husband is stoic, almost like God, nothing would upset him, one way or the other."

So she never made any demands on her husband—even to satisfy her own personal needs. While attending to her kitchen chores she would informally tell Sambu Iyer—as if she was alone and humming a tune to herself—that she bought, for a hundred and fifty rupees, a couple of saris from a vendor the previous afternoon. The same evening or the next afternoon when Sharada Auntie was crossing the main hall or happened to serve him coffee or a snack, Sambu Iyer would let his eyes wander on the floor or the ceiling and speak to her:

"I have put away two hundred rupees in the niche in the wall—for the sari vendor. You may keep the balance fifty rupees . . . it will come handy . . ."

Sharada Auntie's tastes were impeccable. She always wore pure silk saris; when it came to jewelry she adorned only diamond studs.

The women from the neighborhood were both appreciative and jealous of her. "She is so lucky, her husband gives her anything—even before she asks for it," they would say. "In our homes we have to fight, day in and day out, whether it is a sari or something else." Yet, the truth of the matter was no one had ever seen Sharada Auntie and Sambu Iyer together in public—visiting a temple, attending a festival or marriage or doing some shopping. Neither did anyone even observe the couple engaged at home in a private conversation.

Occasionally, around midnight for a short duration, Sambu Iyer's bed—covered by mosquito curtains on all four sides and spread out in the front porch—would be empty. However, pretty soon, the occupant would be back, certainly well before the early hours of the day lest someone notice his absence. Only then could Sambu Iyer bring himself to sleep.

When Rajaraman spent sleepless nights for his exams, the couple too was determined to forego their sleep and spent their time playing the indoor games, one after another, through the

entire night. Occasionally, Sharada Auntie would prepare coffee or tea and serve it to Rajaraman. She would also serve some to Sambu Iyer, saying, "You need something to drink, you have been awake the whole night." Sambu Iyer would also entertain her saying she too needed a drink because she was also spending a sleepless night.

As she watched the boy's face lit by the table lamp afar in the study room, Sharada Auntie would gratefully acknowledge that she owed all her happiness to Rajaraman.

Sambu Iyer would suddenly draw her attention and pronounce in his usual, guttural voice how he was about to beat her in the game presently going on, and start vigorously polishing the dice in his palms before rolling them on the floor.

Sharada Auntie would chide him—lovingly—with a reminder: "Please, please . . . Lower your voice; remember we are keeping awake because we want to help *Ambi!*"

If the lights in Rajaraman's study were on, so would be the lights in the rest of the house. If he was awake, so did Sambu Iyer and Sharada Auntie. If his eyes showed any signs of anguish, the couple would feel their minds in turmoil. If his face registered any traces of sadness, the whole household would look as if steeped in gloom.

While the couple did their best to keep Rajaraman in good humor and make him happy it so happened that occasionally he did exhibit a sense of unhappiness; the couple would reciprocate his dark mood with theirs without even asking what actually upset him. Then again, when his mood changed from the unpleasant to the pleasant, their moods too would change accordingly.

While it is true that Sharada Auntie's affection and Sambu Iyer's concern visibly affected his behavior, the fact of the matter was Rajaraman continued to spend his days just like he was used to back in his village—alone, all by himself, either in his study or in the *puja* room.

Rajaraman frequently observed very strict religious practices—often fasting the entire day. The couple would follow his example and fast the entire day without ever questioning him why.

When Rajaraman was attending his exams, the couple would rise early in the morning, take a bath and retire to the temple to offer their prayers for his success. The entire neighborhood would be amazed at this unexpected event. Nobody has ever seen a couple offer a prayer with such religious fervor for their own offspring.

As Rajaraman was rushing along for his exams, the couple would offer him temple *prasadam* and bless him for success. When he prostrated before them and arose, they would warmly embrace him even as they unabashedly shed copious tears.

Yet, Rajaraman seemed untouched by this flow of abundant love publicly showered on him. Like oil that would never mix with water, his presence in their surroundings seemed remote and aloof; his company with them seemed ephemeral, never enduring. One had a sense that he was ever ready to take leave of them and go far away on some pilgrimage . . .

He seemed always ready at somebody's beck and call, trying frantically to extricate himself from the clutches of those who lovingly held him for a while; he was like a little bird, restless in a lonely world, ready to flap its wings and fly away at any time . . .

If that were really true one can argue that all the love and affection the couple showered on Rajaraman would eventually come to nothing and, in retrospect, may even cause them inconsolable pain. It seemed the couple could never even pause to harbor such a thought, because they were afraid even to face such an outcome. The upshot of all this was they continued to pour out even more love and concern on their beloved 'child.'

Rajaraman had finished his Bachelors exams and the college has been closed for vacation. Tomorrow he is leaving for his village. The college has already been closed for the last ten days.

During these four years he had been to his native village many a time and would normally return the previous day the college reopened. Even when his eventual return was a certainty, Sharada Auntie would get terribly upset over the prospect that she would be missing the boy's company and condemned to spend her days in utter isolation—pathetically looking over the walls or the ceiling at home. Now that his college education has come to an end, she wondered: What happens next? When is he likely to show up,

again? Does this mean she must cling to only some thin hope, nothing else? To Sharada Auntie the future seemed an illusion barely offering any assurance.

When she realized she was in no position to cultivate a permanent relationship with Rajaraman, she was seized with a feeling bordering on frenzied madness. Suddenly she was jealous of her husband who, if he wanted, could just take a trip to the neighboring village at his own convenience and meet with Rajaraman. "He has cultivated a relationship with that village even without Rajaraman playing any role in his life," she told herself. "As for me, without Rajaraman I have no relationship even with my own husband! Some relationship! Maybe I am being naïve, good for nothing, and trying to deceive myself with some fond hope . . . Even if one rears a child for an entire life, it actually means nothing . . . Only when you carry the baby in your womb for ten months can you claim a viable relationship. . ." She spent, day in day out, secretly crying to herself and wiping the tears off her face with the loose end of her sari. Still, she never made her feelings public or known to others. She continued to share her company with others as usual—engaging them in conversation when they were willing to talk with her and laughing with them when they were in a mood to laugh.

Tomorrow Rajaraman would be leaving for his home. Sharada Auntie has a very busy schedule ahead of her.

With the college closed for vacation *Ambi* would be normally helping Auntie with the daily chores; he would perform all the domestic chores — much against her protests — like carrying water into the house, fiercely working the pestle while Auntie shoved in portions of the wet rice into the grinder . . .

So, today also, he helped her in the daily errands; then he went to the temple. It was a common knowledge that he always offered his prayers at home, in his *puja* room; today seemed an exception.

Someone had seen him returning from the temple; but he never returned home.

Nobody seemed to know where he went.

The next day Sambu Iyer rushed out to the village invoking the names of all gods he could recall. Having failed to locate

Rajaraman there he sought out Krishna Iyer and returned to Chidambaram with him. Desperate and in shock Sambu Iyer went about asking each and every soul on his way—even strangers with any remote connection to his target—the same question: “Have you seen our Rajaraman?” He searched out the temple premises and riverbanks, in vain. His heavy voice resounded all over the town in utter desperation.

It saddened Krishna Iyer to see his friend caught in frantic inquiries, repeated in vain. “Have you seen our Rajaraman?” He tried to comfort his friend: “Don’t lose your heart. Rajaraman is a smart fellow. No harm would ever come to him. I am sure he will return home, safe and sound.”

A week later Krishna Iyer asked Sambu Iyer to join him when he consulted a famous astrologer in town.

The astrologer who studied Rajaraman’s horoscope praised the subject to heaven. “Are you telling me this boy is your son?” he asked with a touch of skepticism in his voice. “The horoscope clearly shows the subject is nobody’s son. Should his biological parents feel that way, I can only say they are smarting under an illusion. If they persist in such a claim the astrologer can only sympathize with them and walk away. . Remember this horoscope belongs to a *rishi*, a sage. . . You need have no worries about him. . Be proud and happy that he was part of your life . . .”

“Where did he go?” Sambu Iyer asked in a tone tinged with desperation. “When can we expect him to return home?” The astrologer laughed away at the very question.

“You wanted me to study the horoscope, didn’t you?” he countered. “Don’t ask me to speculate. All I can do is to study the horoscope and tell you what it reveals. I am in no position to speculate – because what I speculate may or may never come true. To answer your question, the subject might return home; on the other hand, he might never come back.”

Sambu Iyer could hardly contain his anger. Lips quivering, he shook off the towel on his shoulder and arose from where he sat. “To heck with your astrology and all the humbug,” he said and shouted epithets directly at the astrologer’s face and started walking down the street.

“Sambu . . . Sambu,” Krishna Iyer ran after him pleading for restraint and pulled up his friend who seemed terribly upset and ready to smash some invisible target to pieces. He fondly patted on his friend’s back and comforted him, saying, “Sambu, it’s very important we pause and calmly understand what is going on. Why do you fault the astrologer? Was Rajaraman ever like the other boys? When I found out that he was very religious and scholarly from a very young age, I used to be a little frightened myself –I dreaded he may suffer a premature death. I am grateful god has not been unkind to us; god has given us hope that *Ambi* is certainly alive, somewhere. That should make us happy . . .” He spoke the words bravely – even as his eyes turned teary.

Now Sambu Iyer got really mad and screamed on top of his voice:

“Well, why should I really care? After all he was not my son, was he? If that were the case do you think he would have committed this outrage? Some sage! I denounce him as a traitor! And I am raving like this because I failed in my duty! You had entrusted that boy to me and I feel obligated to hand him over to you and turn my back on him forever! But I stand here helpless desperately looking for him all over the town! Such is my curse, my fate!” Overcome by grief Sambu Iyer was smiting his head with both hands and went on sobbing uncontrollably.

Krishna Iyer watched his friend with utter dismay.

Sambu Iyer continued to weep endlessly as the pair walked back home. Krishna Iyer gave up any attempt to console Sambu Iyer.

They returned to Sambu Iyer’s house. Sharada Auntie was nowhere to be seen. They heard, from time to time, the pathetic heart-wrenching sobs of the woman from the kitchen. Gloom seemed to have engulfed the whole house.

The whole day Sambu Iyer sat on the plain cement floor, his hands clasped behind the tresses, eyes closed, while both his feet were kicking against an opposite pillar. Krishna Iyer was horrified to think that his friend –his entire being–would gradually dissolve into a lifeless figure.

Krishna Iyer stood there for a long time – leaning against his umbrella on the floor. After resting on the swing for a while, he walked back to the kitchen. There he saw, much to his horror and panic, Sharada Auntie – who, unaware of his presence–was lying on the floor, hair disheveled. He coughed a little; Sharada Auntie, who now noticed him, immediately covered her face with the loose end of her sari and sobbed.

Krishna Iyer tried to comfort her:

“What is this? I know how much love and affection you poured on that boy,” he said, and continued: “Please don’t blame yourself for his sudden disappearance . . . Why should we imagine for the worst? I strongly feel Rajaraman would return home. . I am confident he is alive, somewhere. Please stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

“I don’t understand why I should continue to live.” Sharada Auntie again cursed herself and beat her chest.

Krishna Iyer bowed down his head and silently retreated from the kitchen. He felt the couple would never find peace of mind as long as he stayed close with them.

As he came back to see Sambu Iyer – who remained in the same position since they both returned home –he took leave of his friend saying, “I will see you later.”

There was no response from Sambu Iyer.

“Sambu, I am leaving now,” Sambu Iyer told him. “I will let you know as soon as Rajaraman returns home. You too must let me know if he shows up here. You will certainly respond if I write to you, won’t you?” He seemed to be pleading like a child.

Sambu Iyer, his eyes closed, slightly clapped both his palms, in a respectful gesture toward Krishna Iyer.

And then a year later, when Sambu Iyer’s corpse was on display in the main hall, Krishna Iyer returned to pay his last respects.

It was then that he learnt that Rajaraman had graduated from his college–securing first class in B.A.

Sambu Iyer and Sharada Auntie spent the intervening years as if enduring a punishment meted out to them. Previously, Sambu Iyer used to talk to his wife staring at a blank wall or the ceiling. Now he did nothing of that sort; he simply stared at the blank wall or the ceiling in muted silence. Not a single word was ever spoken.

Sharada Auntie wandered in her home like a living corpse. It has been a long time since the neighbors had seen her.

Just before his death Sambu Iyer expressed a desire that he rest his head on his wife’s lap. He stared at her face like a baby and had his final word: “I am not mad at anyone, I hope you will at least forgive me.”

After Sambu Iyer’s death Krishna Iyer took upon himself to settle the personal affairs left unfinished by his friend.

And he continued to visit Sharada Auntie now and then to inquire of her welfare. During those visits, he would always sit on the front porch and Auntie would stand inside, near the door. On his every visit Krishna Iyer would convey to her his fervent hope that Rajaraman would certainly return home.

Yet, when Rajaraman did return home, Krishna Iyer was in no position to convey the good news to Sharada Auntie. His life came to an end before Rajaraman showed up, but that was never known to Sharada Auntie.

“It’s almost a year since he visited me,” Sharada Auntie reminded herself one day. “How is he doing?” So one day she sought out a friend and sent him to the village to check on Krishna Iyer’s whereabouts.

The friend returned the same evening and informed her about Krishna Iyer’s death and Rajaraman’s homecoming.

He also added several details; one of Krishna Iyer’s daughters, married and living in Calcutta, had been to Dakshineshwar on pilgrimage; there she happened to see Rajaraman as a bearded young man in saffron clothes watching with joy the boats floating on the river Ganges; she initiated a conversation with him in Tamil and soon came to know that he was from the South and identified him as Krishna Iyer’s second son. It was Raghupathy, Krishna Iyer’s elder son, who took upon himself to personally meet with Rajaraman and bring him home. It was only after Raghupathy

gave an assurance that Rajaraman could continue to live like a monk that he consented to return home. Sharada Auntie learnt that Rajaraman now lived in a shed, modeled after an *ashram* specially built for him.

Sharada Auntie grew restless.

2

Do you see that shrine on the Cauvery riverbank—near those steps leading to the stream below? A blank wall facing the north side of the shrine and next to a pillar, has collapsed owing to the cactus branch that has rammed through it and has since grown into a huge tree. Among those dry leaves dropping off on to the ground you can spot Rajaraman, the monk and the second son of Krishna Iyer

Yes, that's me. I am talking about myself.

To speak about myself, I am told, is arrogance. The truth of the matter is I am very arrogant. I would even go further and declare that I am arrogance incarnate, pure and untainted. It is my self-consciousness—the I in me—that helps me understand everything about me; I can stand apart from that I and understand me through my ego.

A cremation is in progress on the opposite riverbank; that's Rajaraman, an imperious and majestic figure silently resting on a pile of firewood and cow-dung cakes and slowly being consigned to flames that are clearly visible from this side and are gradually changing from red to bright orange . . .

What you see on those flames is not me; neither my arrogance; nor Rajaraman. This is what happens to every human being on this earth.

And it has been going on since day one, it will go on forever!

When I think about it, I can't help chuckling to myself. And as I continue to inhale my *beedi* while these thoughts are going on in my head, I can feel the smoke slowly getting into my throat and choking me up. Again, I burst into loud laughter,

I am smoking a *beedi*.

Is it a cruel fate that Krishna Iyer's second son smokes a *beedi*? Rajaraman is sorry his father is not alive. He is really sorry his father can't see him smoke. He imagines his father watching him smoke, and chuckles to himself.

Rajaraman's father too must have been cremated on the opposite riverbank—just like his son. The same thing must have happened to Krishna Iyer's parents, his grandparents and other ancestors . . .

When Raghupathy came looking for me and eventually brought me home I knew, deep in my heart, that I too would eventually end up in a funeral pyre made of firewood and cow dung cakes and I would be watching him go up in flames. I have seen Rajaraman in every corpse I have since witnessed at this cremation site, and amused myself; now I am doing the same thing . . .

Quite often, my moods turn merry. When my mind is in turmoil, I try to snatch the strands of my inner thoughts and spin them into a net, like a spider's web. When I see myself caught in that web, I cackle up, rip open the web, and escape.

I am quite amused when I stand apart from Rajaraman and scrutinize his actions.

I scrutinize him quite often. Whenever he tries to cast off his disguises—one after another—I keep counting.

And how many disguises has he donned—to conceal my real nature!

All those religious practices he had observed, and everything about them—the rituals, fasts, Sanskrit *slokas*, Tamil hymns - are just a sham! He used them as a smokescreen to conceal my real identity! I was able to steer clear of those masks and see myself hidden within him.

I can't help laughing

He had no real faith in any of those religious practices. The truth of the matter is he was scared of me and, because he wanted to escape from me, he cast me in those various disguises.

Rajaraman is an atheist, an absolute fraud, a shameless hypocrite! He is no more scared of me; there is no need to seek refuge behind any of those disguises or masks, and even before he

began discarding them, one after another, I have decided to Part Company with him.

I am not Rajaraman anymore; I am just a mortal.

I haven't deliberately sought any holy cities or rivers in my journeys. These so called holy sites crossed my path and, when they did, I too joined them with thousands of others in celebrations. I wandered all over those cities as they crossed my path; I also took dips in all those rivers I came across.

Who cares whether it is river Cauvery, Ganges or some dirty sewer? Aren't they merely different names of a single source – the great ocean?

Every riverbank has a cremation ground, and every cremation ground gathers corpses. And how are corpses different from one another? Call them female, male, father, mother – still, they are all the same. When it comes to cremation, can you tell me who is superior and who is inferior?

In Calcutta there is a place called Kalighat. There you have a sewer flowing (of course, you dare not call it a sewer because any Kali worshipper would simply hack you to death!) –it is considered a part of river Ganges. For that matter, half of the river Ganges is used as a cremation ground. On one side of the river you have living human beings taking holy dips; on the other, you have dead bodies floating on the river. That water too is considered holy and many pilgrims would sprinkle it over their heads to purify themselves! I was amused by all of that –just like those devotees who worship the water to cleanse their sins and quite a few others who called me *Rishi Maharaj* and prostrated before me!

The truth of the matter is those devotees were seeking neither a *rishi* nor a holy river. That goes for me too! It just happened that during those wanderings both corpses and rivers touched my feet!

I didn't plan to become a *rishi* or a hermit by sporting saffron clothes or letting my hair grow into a *sikha*. The truth is my clothes eventually turned into saffron; the same thing happened to my hair too. I scrupulously avoided any masquerade—but soon ended up with one.

Everything on this earth is a facade. If you declare you have sacrificed everything that's a façade too. Often Man fakes the

body he carries by putting false fronts –several of them in public. How funny, I can't help laughing!

But, in the final analysis, no disguise would come to his rescue.

I remember sitting on the riverbank not far from the shrine in Dakshineswar watching a boatman singing and rowing along that great river Ganges, when I heard a voice: *Ambi!*

That was Rajaraman's sister Jagatha with her husband and a three-year-old child dressed up in a sweater and woolen cap!

Because Raghupathy used to call me *Ambi* affectionately, everybody knows me as *Ambi*. Rajaraman, who has since disappeared, is now back! I again sought refuge in a disguise.

His first instinct was to free himself from others and run away. But after running a few yards, he asked himself: 'After all, why should I?' Laughing to himself, he retreated his steps. Jagatha's daughter was a little scared, and hollered.

A wire was sent to Raghupathy who soon arrived on the scene. Everybody felt sorry for what *Ambi* had gone through and shed their usual tears. When Raghupathy wanted *Ambi* to accompany him back home, *Ambi* protested vehemently.

During his two days of stay in Dakshineswar Raghupathy noticed – much to his horror – how *Ambi* was enjoying himself smoking a *beedi* or *hookah*. A few men who virtually lived under a huge banyan tree showered honors on *Ambi* addressing him as *Maharaj*. *Ambi* seemed gratified by such treatment.

The next afternoon Raghupathy bought some *ganja* and served it to the *Maharajas* living under the banyan tree. During the next two days he entertained *Ambi* and his other friends. But he asked only *Ambi* to accompany him to back home.

When Raghupathy informed him, his eyes teary, "Father has passed away—it's almost a year," *Ambi* simply responded with a loud laughter. Then he felt the occasion demanded he express something appropriate, so he said: "Is it already a year?"

When like a beggar *Ambi* pleaded with Raghupathy saying, "I feel terribly cold here; can you buy me a woolen shawl?" Raghupathy could take it no more. He broke into a chockfull of tears, and cried aloud:

“Of course, I will get you a woolen shawl,” he assured him, amidst tears. “Back home you have everything you can ask for – a decent home, landed property and a lot of servants at your command. It’s fate that has reduced you to living here with rags and trying to protect your body from cold with just bare hands . . .”

Did *Ambi* really want a woolen shawl? Probably not, because the very next day Raghupathy bought him a shawl for eighty rupees – in gray color with flower designs in all the four corners – but *Ambi* never wore it. It was never unpacked and is still in Raghupathy’s custody.

And when *Ambi* boarded the train leaving for home he asked Raghupathy, ‘Can I get *beedi* back home?’

“Of course, a lot of it . . .” was the reply.

“Then, do you promise me this too? . . .” *Ambi* waved the packet of *ganja* in hand.

“ . . . You will get whatever you ask for . . .”

When he realized all his worldly needs could be contained in one tiny packet, *Ambi* couldn’t help breaking into loud laughter – attracting the attention of everyone on the railway platform. Raghupathy was a little scared.

And, when *Ambi* did return home – walking from the railway platform to his house – the entire village swarmed to witness his homecoming.

The village was rife with gossip that *Ambi* had renounced everything, at age thirty; they are calling him a *rishi* – a sage. They believed he had given up everything – love, affection, all personal needs – and everyone seems to agree. Looked one way, that’s probably true: he had always lived like a *rishi*, even as a boy he had never demanded anything from his parents or others. The truth of the matter is he behaved as if he always wanted to please others and lived accordingly. Only the beard and the saffron clothes were his new possessions! The other day he suddenly thought about it, went to the barber shop and returned home – his head fully shaven! So now he shows up in another disguise! Which is better – the one with all that hair messed up or the new

one with a complete shaven head? He seems to prefer the new one

...

The truth of the matter is he had never given up the earthly pleasures; he had never known how to control his senses

Actually, he is someone who satisfied all his carnal pleasures; he abandoned his senses to their own whim and fancy . . .

I find it quite funny that people revere him as a sage and feel sorry for him. He is being lauded for his sacrifices – apparently he had given up things in life to please others and, in so doing, had endured a lot of pain and suffering – but I know the truth; he has betrayed himself! He has been always reveling in pleasures; he is a hedonist among the hedonists – who now stands exposed before others in broad day light! I am quite amused when he is celebrated for his virtues – austerity, celibacy and abstinence! Some virtue!

I have understood something; people are just plain stupid! I find everyone – I mean everyone – is crazy, mean and disgusting! Even the bigwigs, those who are said to be on the high moral ground and are attracting large crowds when they preach (I call them the big fools!) are no exception! It is amusing to watch those bigwigs being applauded and glorified!

I am referring to all those I have personally known in my life – Krishna Iyer, his wife Indumathi, Raghupathy, his wife (I can’t recall her name now), Jagatha, the other children in Krishna Iyer’s family, their children and this useless impotent Sambu, his wife Sharada; Rajaraman has thumbed his nose at all of them, who, I think, are just animals . . .

According to science, these animals are called human because they wear clothes. Forget science, I am telling you, that’s the truth! The cow, goat, lion, tiger, bear, rhinoceros, and man – these are just individual names given to the animal species. Every animal is unique and different from another. Man is also such a unique animal. They say that’s what makes man superior to others. I think it really makes him inferior . . .

It is only man whose life is governed by morals; they certainly poses no problem to the animals. But the lives of human – animals are influenced by so many rules – often spelled out as ethics, values, scriptures, rituals, taboos, etc. Of course, these rules are

often violated. There is always a desire to violate them; often that desire turns into anger and frustration. In the process, people become either victors or make others victims. Even all these human-animals violate these norms in their individual lives. When it comes to group, they proclaim themselves the defenders of the very standards that they are trying to compromise. In the final analysis, what people expect is a false front - trying to deceive others as well as themselves. He poses as a scholar among the ignorant, even more scholars among the educated; he gives in with no shame . . .

Certainly the animals don't have these flaws; these apply only to humans. Now, tell me what makes you superior?

I become jealous when I watch the lives of animals. I am overcome by pity when I see the suffering of animals. Humans and animals lead lives that are on friendly terms in tune with nature. It is only the human life that is in conflict with nature. And Man is so proud about it! I think he is so vain and arrogant about this class distinction! I find it all amusing . . .

I am glad they don't think I am crazy. They are even calling me a god-man . . .

I know they are stupid, but I understand them very well. I understand myself too. These people do not understand me nor themselves.

If you psycho-analyze Rajaraman, you will find he is abnormal; his behavior falls into a special category.

I have split up his personality into bits and pieces - and keenly scrutinized him. I can start to get on from him, can unite myself with him; I can even destroy him. Will I myself be destroyed if I do him in? I never thought about it; it is a waste of time! I know I am hiding inside him and his spirit always reigns over me. So where is the need for playing the silly games to embrace him or get rid of him?

Now, when was the first time I tried to hide myself? Why did I hide? And where did I actually hide myself?

Indumati - Krishna Iyer's wife - Rajaraman's mother - had gone out to take a shower . . .

She forgot to lock her room and left the key on the door itself. That was *her* bedroom and she wouldn't let anyone inside. She always stayed in the bedroom, day and night. It was only the old woman - the in-house cook - who would occasionally address Mother as 'Indu', 'Indu' and freely go into the bedroom and prowl around. Mother would always keep the door partly ajar and, after helping herself with what the woman brought for her, she would promptly shut the door. As long as Mother lived in the house, I had never seen her bedroom fully open.

Occasionally, when the old cook or Father entered the room, I would catch a glimpse of the room and, oh, what a grand view it offered! I felt that room was totally alien to our family, that it belonged to some stranger who had nothing to do with us. 'Is it not a part of this house?' I would ask myself, craving for an opportunity to enter it. 'After all Mother does stay there, doesn't she? It belongs to us too . . . Why can't I see what's inside?'

It was a large bedroom, with windows covered by blue screens. The door entrance was adorned by an array of multicolor glass tubes and bells. Inside was a huge bed - I have never seen a bed so big - it was very wide . . . Maybe I felt it was huge because I was a small kid, but I would still say it was very large; I think you can put two-dozen babies on it - across the length and breadth. Opposite to the bed stood an *alimarah* with a large mirror; you can see the reflection of the entire bed in that mirror, and then you would get the feeling that the room was twice as big. During summer the room would be very cool and, in winter, very warm . . . Wooden boards, fully painted and shining bright, covered the ceiling. Occasionally Mother would open the *alimarah* and the whole room would be filled with some pleasant aroma; what attracted me to the room was this very special aroma - from the *alimarah* and Mother . . . What was inside that bureau? Well, I never found out . . . I could hardly wait to know . . .

Father would visit that room quite often. At nights he would sleep on that huge bed. Jagatha or Meena or whoever happened to be the youngest child, would sleep in a crib next to bed. Mother too would sleep on the bed, next to Father; I know because I have watched both of them from the crib.

If any child became sick, then that child would be allowed to sleep in Mother's bedroom. I remember how even Raghupathy,

when he took ill, was allowed to sleep there. At some point, I even wished I became ill and gained entry into that room.

Otherwise, we would all sleep, in row after row, on mattresses spread on the floor in the main hall. I would be sleeping close to the entrance of Mother's bedroom. I would keep awake after everybody else had gone to sleep. With everyone fast asleep - or when he was so convinced - Father would appear on the scene. As soon as he entered Mother's bedroom and locked the door, I would feel totally alien in the house, a complete outcast. I would get totally mad at Father; I would feel like running away from home. Then I would hear a bell from the nearby railway platform announcing the arrival of a train, and I would imagine that the bell was beckoning me. After a while a train would arrive on the platform; I would imagine it was waiting for me. Later, when the train departed, I would imagine it was missing me and let out a deep sigh.

Right then I figured out Father for what he was; I lost my trust in him. His attempts to endear himself to me - occasionally doting on me, calling me a smart kid or even patting on my back for a good job done- never fooled me.

The one who, like a thief, eluded us in dark when we were asleep, stealthily opened the door and entered the bedroom, was the real Father; the other one we saw in the daylight was a fake. He was trying to fool me. I too can fool him. Can't I?

Mother had gone for a shower, there's nobody around. Looks like Mother forgot to lock up the door, the key was hanging on the door. A thought occurs: 'Why can't I just peep in for a few minutes before she comes back?' My whole body starts shivering, I could hear my heavy heartbeat.

I am doing exactly what Father used to do at night; slowly and steadily I open the door and slide my body into the open space.

My god! What a huge room! I stand before the mirror with my hands around the hip; I get up on the bed, sit on it and watch myself in the mirror; again, I stand up. do the same thing. Then I sprawl on the bed and watch the ceiling; I even keep rolling on the bed for a while . . .

My god! Looks like Mother is coming back! I hear some voices in the main hall . . . What can I do now?

I get off the bed and hide under it.

I see Mother coming; she enters the door, shuts it behind her, then sits on a chair in front of the mirror - her body wrapped in a towel. Then she takes the towel off, dries her hair. I close my eyes; I don't know what else to do. Mother continues in the same posture and continues to dry her hair. Suddenly, there is a knock on the door.

"Who's there?" Mother asks. Fortunately, it was the cook, the old woman. Mother wraps the towel around her body, slightly opens the door and helps herself from the old cook a plate with smoldering coals and aromatic scent emanating from them. Only now I could notice Mother's belly; why is it monstrously so large? I feel like crying . . . I feel sorry for Mother . . . I feel guilty for acting like a thief . . . here I am, hiding under her bed, watching her as she - oblivious to my presence - is fully naked and humming a tune to herself. I wished she would soon dress up and leave the room so that I too could escape in no time . . . I keep blaming myself, 'Why did I try to hide here? That was my first mistake, what can I do now?' While I was confused and trying to find a way out, I see Mother casually sprinkle some powder on the smoldering coals on the plate, steel herself erect on the chair, wriggle her body backwards to let the fumes warm her neck.

I am still under the bed trying to retreat my body away from her - slowly crawling on the floor with my forearm and knees supporting my weight.

Suddenly Mother's eyes fall upon me under the bed.

She springs from the chair with a jerk of her body as if the fiery coal touched her skin, letting the small cloth covering her fall on the floor. She stoops to pick it up and, in so doing, kicks the plate with the fiery coals. She sweeps the towel over her body and screams:

"You devil, what are you doing there under the bed? Come out quickly! I say, come out . . ."

I get up and stand next to the huge bed, which now stands between both of us. I don't know what to say - I notice her entire

back reflected in the mirror ahead of us. Her face is flushed red - is it humiliation, anger or disgust? Gnawing her teeth she hollers as if banishing a total stranger - someone she had never seen in her entire life before.

"Now, get lost! Get out!"

I opened the door and fled; I hated to stay in that house any longer. I went out of the door to the backyard, came to the riverbank and sought refuge in the shrine where I cried for a long time.

I felt so ashamed that I prayed to god that he should take my life - right away. I did feel a little comfort when I imagined how others would feel sorry for me after my death.

I am sorry I committed a sin but certainly that was not my intent. Now Mother is upset, she is mad at me. She thinks I deliberately tried to intrude into her privacy. The more I think about it, the worse I feel about myself, and want to cry even harder. It is all over; whatever I may do or say, Mother is not simply going to change her opinion about me . . .

That day I begged god to forgive me more than a hundred times. I implored him to wipe out Mother's anger against me. I sat in the *puja* room and wrote down *Sri Rama Jayam* a thousand and eight times to atone my sin . . .

After that incident, I didn't feel like going into Mother's bedroom, again . . .

After that, whenever I saw Mother, I noticed her face bristle at me with anger. Of course, that was her normal reaction towards everyone - except Father. I used to think she was mad at me because of my indiscreet act - hiding under the bed in her room. Occasionally, she would call me, ask me to sing a *shloka* or song in her presence. Previously, I used to enjoy such overtures; but now, after that incident, I felt no joy from those acts. Passively I would go to her when called; she would ask me something, and I would respond. Sometimes she would stroke my back, hug me close to her and kiss me. I hated those gestures; I would feel her very touch disgusting wondering, 'When will she be done with me? When am I getting away from her?' Mother would ask all her children to leave the bedroom before she starts nursing the baby in her arms -

yet, she would never ask Father to leave the room; he would stay right inside after we all left.

At home, Mother had never served us food - not even once. It was the old woman - the cook - who served us lunch or dinner. But Mother always served food to Father. And you know, how? First, the old woman must carry all the dishes - curry, soup, etc - from the kitchen to the main hall and arrange them in close vicinity to her so that Mother can reach them by hand. Once Father sat on the floor Mother would start serving him food on a banana leaf spread in front of him. After he finished eating, Mother herself would sit before the banana leaf, then the old woman would serve her food.

The old woman was quite a moody person. If she was in good mood, she would say about Mother, "Poor woman, she's sick, what else can she do?" Otherwise, she would murmur with a touch of sarcasm, "How come she can't do her domestic chores, but can get herself pregnant every year?" Previously, her comments would hurt my feelings, but now I tend to agree with her remarks.

Slowly, I began to withdraw myself from Mother. For a long time, I avoided any face to face contact with her.

Even when she became terribly sick, I would visit her only when asked to. Raghupathy and other children were by her side during her last three days; I was holed up in the *puja* room, praying. Everybody thought I was praying for her health; the truth is I was hiding in that room.

Father sat on one side of the bed, wiping tears off his eyes and sobbing uncontrollably, "Indu . . . indu . . . don't leave me . . . ; this Raghupathy, Jagatha, Meena and the rest stood on the other side and cried. I was sick watching them and wanted to flee from the room. So I sought refuge in the *puja* room.

I know it is a sin to harbor such thoughts about Mother when she was on her death bed and avoid her by escaping to the *puja* room. So, once again, I sought god's forgiveness and wrote *Sri Rama Jayam* a thousand and eight times to expiate my sins.

Eventually Mother died and everyone in the family mourned her; I too watched others sobbing and cried a little. Raghupathy was the one who cried the most. Father cried on and off; suddenly

he would feel overcome by emotion and bury his head in a towel and burst into tears. As I watched him, I felt happy in my heart. 'Serves him right,' I would tell myself. 'Now he would no more stealthily enter the bedroom like a cat!'

Poor Father! I know I am not supposed to feel that way about my own parents; so, once again, I sought god's forgiveness. I applied *vibhuti* to my forehead and cried that my mind be freed from such evil thoughts . . .

Since Mother died, I had never shed a tear in her memory . . .

Because Mother had misunderstood me and was upset over my conduct, I sought her forgiveness too - just like a devotee prays to god to purge all his sins.

After Mother's death, her bedroom became an open area, its doors left unlocked the entire day. Now, it looks like any other room in the house. I feel sorry to see Father sleep on that huge bed, all by himself. Jagatha, Meena and, occasionally, Raghupathy - that is, everybody except me and the cook - would share that bed with Father; again, during the day time, that bedroom would echo with the noise and clamor indulged in by all the kids; I never took part in any of that. I knew Mother was totally against such unruly behavior. Again, once the bedroom became easily accessible, everything I had imagined about it - when it was forbidden to us - lost its glamour. Now I found no aroma in that *alimarah*, the room has lost its beauty - everything is gone once Mother is gone! I am not sure if the room really had some mysterious aura that is now totally lost; did I imagine some such aura? Is Mother a part of my imagination too? Yes, I think Mother, Father, siblings, love, affection - all these were just products of my own imagination . . .

So, Mother - a reality - gradually became a lie; the very idea of Mother became a part of my imagination, and then she became a permanent feature in my dreams . . .

She appeared in my dreams the way I watched her the other day in the bedroom hiding under the bed. As she walks with the towel wrapped around her bosom, that small piece of cloth keeps unraveling now and then, but Mother is indifferent because she thinks nobody was around. Her thighs and knees are milky white - I can see the veins right through the skin. Just as she did the other

day, she pulls out the towel, stands before the mirror and dries her hair. Now I am not under the bed; I am lying flat on the bed, just like Father used to. My eyes are not closed tight; they are perfectly open. I am able to see Mother's entire back as well as her front reflected in the large mirror. She watches me through the mirror, she knows I am there and breaks into a mischievous smile. She wraps herself with the towel, walks and sits next to me on the bed, and presses me against her naked bosom. Her wet tresses caress my back. I feel intensely happy, and cry - I don't know why. I feel very sad and cry incessantly as if heart-broken. Mother now whispers in my ears: "*Ambi*, take it from me; I will never drive you out of this room. I did so the other day because of your father. Your dad - that Krishnan fellow - is a wicked man. It was his wickedness that kept me away from my children. His Indu is now dead; he now spends his days on the Cauvery riverbank watching Indu's corpse consigned to flames on the cremation ground on the other side of the river. What you now see is *Ambi's Indu*." She keeps talking even as she hugs and pulls me down on the bed and covers me with a blanket - just like she used to with Father . . . I could hardly breathe . . . It feels good, but I struggle to breathe . . .

I woke up . . .

My god! What a nightmare! My whole body trembles with shame; my stomach churns, I feel so mad I hate myself! I feel like beating my head against a wall and crying . . . What is happening to me? Why am I getting these horrible dreams? Is it some kind of curse? Never before had I indulged in such crude, disgusting thoughts about my parents, never! Isn't it a sin to indulge in these wild thoughts?

I spent the following entire day to atone my sins . . . I fasted the whole day - didn't help myself with even a spoonful of water. I locked up myself in the *puja* room and recited the prayers . . . I wrote down *Sri Rama Jayam* in a notebook till my hands ached; I also performed other rituals -like smiting my head and prostrating before the Ganesha idol till my hands and knees hurt; I was crying the whole day . . .

Father and others misinterpreted my actions as rituals; they thought I was practicing harsh religious services because of my strong devotion to Mother, and were quite proud of me.

I keep dreaming these episodes quite frequently; so I keep going through these motions - day after day - crying, fasting, and writing *Sri Rama Jayam*

As the years went by, these dreams continued to haunt me in several ways

Quite often I would dream of fairies and beautiful young women; when I wanted to get romantically involved with them, they - every one of them - would suddenly turn into Mother! How I wished these episodes continued - in a dream-like fashion - without ever becoming real events! As long as the dream lasted, I never felt such a relationship with Mother was immoral, disgusting or sinful. It seemed fine, a perfectly reasonable thing to do: Mother belonged to me and I could claim her as a matter of right. However, once I am awake, those very feelings horrified me - doubling my sense of guilt and sin. . . .

I became a split personality. A part of myself is very pleased and savors the dream but, when I am awake, another part of my nature pricks my conscience. The body withers as if a large sword cuts through it. I begin feeling some devil has entered my mind and manipulates my thoughts - how obscene and vulgar are those thoughts! During the daytime I pray to god to expiate my sinful thoughts, but at nights the devil takes over and plays with my mind! On several nights I have tried to keep awake to avoid these horrible dreams; sometimes, I would just give up and tell myself, 'What the heck?' But the truth of the matter is I feel very happy when that dream comes back to me. How can I possibly confide these private feelings to anyone, other than god?

Women never interested me; what is there to be interested in them, anyway? I will never feel interested in them. Raghupathy and his friends would often gossip - indulging in all kinds of vulgar talks about women - and their conversation would disgust me. I felt they were rejoicing in a wild behavior and would get mad at them. Raghupathy was a kind of scared of me; he and his friends treated me as an adult and showed me respect. I am amused when adults admire me as noble and god-fearing; deep in my heart I thought they were fools. I was slowly losing my respect for adults, but I never made my feelings public.

Every month, without fail, this Sambu Mama would show up at our house - what a jerk! And how condescending! He and Father enjoyed their mutual company and, quite often, I would be asked to join them. Sambu Mama would ask me to sing or recite this or that particular *sloka*; Father too would harass me. I know Sambu Mama never understood the meaning of any of those *slokas*; if he had any taste for these things, I knew it was all phony, so why would I be pleased when he commended my talents?

Every time I listen to Sambu Mama tell father, "Ambi's college education should be left to my responsibility" or "He is your son only till he completes high school," I would feel outraged. His sense of helplessness - the fact that he couldn't father a son - disgusted me. It seemed so gross and indecent!

And finally, I was proved right. When Father accompanied me to Sambu Mama's house and entrusted me to his care, I had a premonition that some terrible tragedy would follow. And that made me cry.

That unique feeling - what I used to experience in my dreams toward Mother - and which I never came close to enjoying in real life toward any other woman, overwhelmed me when I first set my eyes on Sharada Auntie. And I felt so happy! Only a soul that spends its entire life caught up in the memory of its mother would appreciate my state of mind.

As far as I was concerned, that terrible tragedy occurred the very day I became a member of the Auntie's family

Since my meeting with Sharada Auntie I haven't encountered Mother in my dreams; it is Sharada Auntie who now appears in my dreams, just like Mother used to. Everything in the dream goes on just like before.

But I don't feel get upset over these dreams, I am not frightened of them; neither do I write *Sri Rama Jayam* to expiate my sins. The truth of the matter is I eagerly looked forward to those dreams, day after day

Occasionally, I would get a feeling that I am wallowing in sin; my conscience would prick me I was secretly indulging in the most immoral, vulgar and wild thoughts involving someone who treats me much better than my biological mother and showers

upon me all her love and affection. If this was not a betrayal pure and simple, what else is it?

But what can one do about it? Dreams are beyond one's control and you can dislike or hate dreams only after you have experienced them. It is possible I started liking the new dream because it had prevented me from witnessing the previous one; still my nature and intellect continued to agitate my conscience.

Maybe it was that stab at my conscience or the feeling that I needed to protect my reputation that spurred me to go ahead and with my strict ritual practices as before. But I had lost my faith in them, they just suited my convenience.

I doubt if any parents would have ever doted on their offspring the way Auntie and Mama showered their affection on me. But I believed their conduct was quite naive, if not foolish. Because I felt they would be displaying the same affection toward any other boy in my position, I accepted their love with no particular interest. Remember, to me even the sympathy and goodwill of my own parents seemed foolish gestures; so I had a sense that what I was experiencing in Sambu Mama's household was a kind of naive, sad, desperate move on their part to appease me. But I felt it was my duty not to hurt their feelings; it was never my habit to hurt others' feelings. But, then, I messed up my life - only because somewhere in my childhood I had hurt my mother's feelings - even though it was not my fault.

Beyond these foolish gestures, I could sense a special relationship emerging between me and Sharada Auntie. It happened not because I was Rajaraman, the son of her husband's friend Krishna Iyer; neither was it because Auntie - bereft of her own son - treated me as her surrogate son. It went beyond all that.

It is a relationship that develops from a chance encounter with a face in a running train: you haven't seen that face before, you are not likely to see it again in the future.

At college, I had watched many girls in fashionable clothes rouse boys with their laughter and sweet talk, but they meant very little to me. On the other hand, I did feel a kind of charm and fascination watching Auntie toiling in the kitchen - her face covered with ash, the forearm trying to swipe the sweat off her face.

Did I feel that way because I saw her in my dream the same day I first set my eyes on her? Or did she appear in my dream because of what I thought of her?

During all our face-to-face encounters - when we were playing the indoor games, or when Auntie lovingly entertained me at lunch or dinner, or even when she observed my face, felt something was wrong and touched my forehead asking, "Do you have a headache? Are you suffering him fever?" or when I insisted on helping her with the pestle as she struggled to grind the flour - I had a sense that grew steadily day after day - the sense that my every-day dream might become a reality any moment now. We both were aware of such a possibility, still kept it at bay with our mutual exchange of greetings; Auntie would formally address me as, "My sweet child," and I would respond, "Mother."

Then, finally one day, the dream became a reality and all those trappings of a formal, normal, natural relationship as well as those elements holding it together - time, age and the surroundings - vanished in no time - just like a dry leaf caught in a fire . . .

I have been hiding myself inside Rajaraman in various disguises; now I decided to tear through those curtains and come out into the open . . .

In the backyard, Auntie was fiercely working the pestle and was steadily shoving small portions of wet flour into the grinder.

Ambi was done with his college; his exams ended some ten days ago, but he delayed returning to his village on some pretext. Auntie too wished that *Ambi* stayed back on some purpose. Of late, no women from the neighborhood have been visiting Auntie - because of *Ambi's* presence at home. And Auntie has been spending a good deal of time with *Ambi* - engaging him in the afternoon with indoor games, getting him to sing *slokas* or simply gossiping with him about this or that. Ten days have since gone by and tomorrow *Ambi* will be certainly gone. That reality has forced Auntie into silence. Her face had become flushed red as, every time she averted her face away from him, she kept on wiping her nose and eyes with the loose end of her sari. Hasn't she treated him all these days like an infant? And for what purpose? Suddenly she was overcome by a sense of emptiness followed by uncontrollable tears and fury. Still, she managed to control herself and not make

her feelings public. She acted her usual self - engaging others in conversations when they wanted to talk with her, and laughed with others when they were in a mood to laugh. *Ambi* understood her mental turmoil and he couldn't help laughing at her predicament; her real feelings seemed funny to him.

Auntie stopped shoving flour into the grinder, raised her head and stared at *Ambi*. He was somewhat taken by her new look; he felt it was a look familiar to him in his dreams over the last four years.

"*Ambi*, why are you staring at me?" Auntie became aware that part of her sari covering her bosom was slightly ajar and she hastily tried to pull it back. Suddenly she went numb and cast her eyes on him. Unruffled, his hands still steady on the pestle, *Ambi* riveted his eyes on her, and said: "I am thinking of my mother!"

Auntie's lips quivered as she tried to fight off tears.

"My dear child, consider me as your mother!"

His hands, still resting on the pestle, grew tighter, and *Ambi* too moved his lips.

"Fortunately, my mother is no more . . ."

Auntie's eyes become teary, and she spoke:

"I am indeed fortunate your mother is no more . . . Otherwise, how could I have been blessed with such a lovely child?" Caught in an emotional bind, her words grew incoherent as she sprang to life and hugged the boy.

"Please call me your mom . . . just once . . ."

Ambi was breathless. "Mother . . ."

"My god! I had never dreamt I would be so blessed! My dear child, is this real, not a dream? Are you sure this is not a dream?"

The dream became a reality.

Auntie, who has been crying all this time, suddenly broke into a laughter; after a while, she started crying, again. Now *Ambi* too joined her and cried.

Auntie tried to comfort him. "*Ambi*, I am your mother. Remember this, I will be always your mother . . . This is just fate

. . . . It is natural that a baby would like to suck the mother's nipple . . . it is perfectly a natural thing . . . you have become a real baby . . . "Auntie went on and on, perhaps trying to comfort *Ambi* or herself.

Ambi was satisfied. He was comforted by a feeling that he had finally attained a pinnacle, an experience to last his whole life. He has been craving for this very moment, the kind of ecstasy eagerly sought by those human-animals who are for ever caught in an eternal quest. *Ambi* felt he had attained a kind of salvation; this single experience had taken him to the limits of pure joy.

No more anguish from dreams haunting him all these days; he has now banished, once for all, the devil reigning in his mind. "Until now Mother was just a woman to me," he told himself, "But now I see Mother in every woman." He felt a great relief in unburdening his guilt weighing down heavily upon him and finally had peace of mind.

He returned home from the temple late in the evening when darkness hovered over the surroundings.

The whole house was plunged in darkness. The lamps that normally twinkled at dark from the niches in the walls on either side of the front porch were nowhere to be seen. The house seemed totally abandoned: the front door as well as the one that led to the backyard were thrown open. *Ambi* groped in the dark, entered the house and was about to venture a question, "Auntie, have you forgotten to light the lamps?" when he suddenly heard someone sobbing inside. Shocked into silence, he grasped something awful hung in the air.

He saw nothing in the darkness around him, but his mind sensed everything. He felt *Sambu Mama's* presence right there with Auntie. The chains supporting the swing in the front room made noise as the swing went through some erratic movements. Someone - either Auntie or *Sambu Mama* - was resting on the swing, the other person was seated on it. *Ambi* couldn't make out who was doing what . . .

He couldn't bring himself to step into the house; like *Ahalya* turned into a stone by sage *Gautama*, he stood at the door.

Auntie was desperately smiting her head on the swing's wooden surface. Sambu Mama was trying to restrain her.

"I know what you are actually going through, but what can we do about it?" he was saying. "You were desperately craving for children; had you been blessed with one, this would have never happened! I know you started treating me like a child too and because I didn't want your motherly love go down the drain - just for your sake - I had myself brought this boy to live with us. But just because you are obsessed with children, does it mean you would become a real mother? This world is wicked and immoral; there are some men so inhumane and evil they would think nothing about committing incest!"

"No, nothing like that has ever happened . . ." Auntie was telling him. "He is still a child, I am still his mother! What could I do? I felt as if my own baby was feeling hungry and wanted to touch my breast . . . Even now, I feel the same way . . . It is just fate, there is nothing more to it . . . I haven't been unfaithful to you . . . I have not betrayed you . . . I am willing to go through any trial by fire to prove my honor; my conscience is pure, I have not been disloyal to you . . ."

"Good heavens! I know how you feel about me; I am not casting any aspersions on you. It is others who have taken advantage of you! I have destroyed your life and even reduced you into a barren woman! I feel I must share the blame for your miserable life; I have betrayed your faith in me, I am the worst type of human one can imagine!"

Someone is again heard beating the head against the swing wooden frame. I think this time it is Sambu Mama; Auntie tries to stop him.

"My god! Why should you feel responsible? You should really get mad and hack my body into pieces! Why don't you just do that? That's what a husband is supposed to do! Why should I still continue with this life? For what purpose? Why?" Auntie's hands were fiercely pounding her chest.

"Stop it, you are downright crazy! Say no more about my manhood and how I can prove it by hacking your body . . . Let us come to some decision . . . I agree nothing hanky-panky has happened . . . Tomorrow I will myself escort the brat to the village

and hand over him to his father, it is no big deal . . . I don't think any father would have raised his own child the way we cared for *Ambi*. Why don't you ask his father how he raised him: my blood boils, he should pay a price for this, and yes he must!" Sambu Mama was mad as hell and began gnawing his teeth furiously. .

"Please . . . please, just listen to me. Don't curse my child, please don't . . . Enough is enough . . . Please get up, there is darkness all around . . . let me brighten the house with a lamp . . . then, let's go to the temple . . ."

Auntie got down the swing, walked to the kitchen and lit up a lamp which she carried to the front porch. Just as darkness made its exit from the front of the house to the backyard, so too *Ambi* did gradually make his way out. Like *Indira* recoiling from the curse cast upon him by *Sage Gautama*, he fled fast from the doorstep into the street outside . . .

He was not running away in search of something elusive; in fact, he was running headlong into a void and soon he himself became a void, stripped of all false layers that bundled him together. Until now he had diligently managed to hide me in many of those layers - some as his personal relationships, some as day-to-day interactions with others, and still others as a means of creating a false front to the outside world. Now, those layers - all of them - have been peeled away, one after another, totally exposing him in his hot pursuit . . .

3

Rajaraman, who has been resting for a long time seated on a cement floor in the shed next to the house and smiling as he watched the seemingly comic scene unfolding before him - the branches of the banyan tree afar in the railway platform - suddenly arose from his seat as if suddenly remembering some urgent task at hand, and began walking toward the shrine on the riverbank.

Around the same time, the signal for the train approaching the platform from eastern direction was given. Rajaraman crossed the *agraharam* on his way to the shrine and soon approached the corner store dispensing pawn, betel nuts and cigarettes. Naicker, the owner, came out of the store and respectfully handed over to Rajaraman a pack of *beedis*, followed by a polite gesture.

Rajaraman received the pack, smiled like a child, and asked, "Match box?"

Naicker made a dash into the shop and returned in no time with a match box for Rajaraman. Yet another polite gesture followed. As Rajaraman departed with a smile on his face, Naicker let off a deep sigh. Two customers at the shop were now engaged in a conversation about Rajaraman. One said, "He is on his way to salvation." The other seemed to contradict him with a remark, "Looks like he has already attained some divine power."

Naicker pulled out an account book from a drawer and made a note, '*Ambi* Iyer owes thirty-two paise for a pack of *beedis*,' and spoke his mind, again letting a deep sigh. "This is fate . . . Why should this man live like a wretch? He has everything a man can dream of - a fine ancestral family, decent education, property and good looks . . . If his father were alive, the old man would have been appalled at this young man living like a beggar, disheveled, in dirty rags, chomping on a *beedi* . . . What a fate!"

Arriving at the shrine on the riverbank, Rajaraman got ready for his daily ritual. He opened the small *ganja* packet from his lap and briskly stuffed the powder into *the beedis*. The task took more than ten minutes. He eagerly took out a *beedi*, examined it with a smile, lit it and inhaled deeply into his nostrils. He let his body slide on the dirty floor; flat on his back, the right leg raised like a stump on the ground, the left leg pulled over to the right one, vigorously shaking his left foot - as if fanning a kitchen fire - while his red-shot eyes riveted on a scene on the opposite bank . . .

There, smoke could be seen rising from a pier stacked with wood, dry cow-dung cakes and wet soil.

A signal was given for the train from the eastern direction to depart the railway platform.

A lone passenger carrying bags - Sharada Auntie - surrendered her ticket to the station master and asked him, "Where's Krishna Iyer's house?" Even as she was questioning him, her eyes caught the sight - far away - of a shed covered with a canopy woven from palm leaves. The station master directed her to the same house.

Auntie knew only Krishna Iyer and Rajaraman in that house. She had seen Raghupathy once - but that was a long time ago.

When Raghupathy was to be married, Rajaraman was gone from home for over two years and Sambu Mama had been dead for over a year. Raghupathy and Krishna Iyer visited Sharada Auntie and personally handed her the wedding invitation, but they didn't formally invite her for the occasion. That was the only time when Sharada Auntie had met with Raghupathy. Now she was a little worried if Raghupathy would actually recognize her. She paused for a moment and wished she had brought her friend to avoid this predicament.

She was reluctant to voluntarily introduce herself to strangers. The thought suddenly occurred to her: 'If Krishna Iyer were alive . . .' Then she remembered she was not even formally informed of Krishna Iyer's death; how could she possibly expect anybody to recognize her? She began moving from one house to another looking for her target.

'What if nobody knows who I am,' she comforted herself. 'My child will certainly recognize me. Can you believe this? I heard he had become a monk! What a travesty! Would his father, if he were alive, give up on him and do nothing about it? I am going to confront *Ambi*. I can't believe Raghupathy brought him to the village with an assurance that he can continue his monk's life . . . Some brother! Now *Ambi* would listen to me! He will never reject my advice! I am going to make Rajaraman, *Kalyanaraman*, a married man!' Her mind racing with all kinds of thoughts, Sharada Auntie reached Krishna Iyer's house and eagerly glanced over the shed next to it.

She groveled at the very sight before her.

'Does my child live *here*?' She was in total shock. 'I see no cot, no bed, not even a lock; no privacy, either! My god, what a fate!' She was trying to contain her emotions when Raghupathy, who had just then come out of the house, noticed her standing there, her face away from him.

Noticing the expensive silk sari and the gold-frame eyeglasses, Raghupathy ventured in a tone of profound respect, "This is Krishna Iyer's house. You are looking for someone?"

Auntie turned around.

"Please come in, please do . . . I am really very sorry . . . I wish you had dropped in a card, then I would have myself come up and brought you to our house . . . You are standing in a hot sun . . . Please come in . . ." Raghupathy now turned toward the house and called out for his wife: "Come and see who's here!"

Sharada Auntie was a little amused at his sudden excitement.

'You want me to drop in a letter?' she thought of asking him. 'How come you didn't even think of letting me know when your father passed away?' She sat on the cement floor next to the shed.

Raghupathy who returned with his wife carrying a baby on her waist didn't understand why Auntie chose to sit on the cement floor.

"What is this?" he begged her. "Please come in."

"That is fine. Now that I am at your doorstep you are inviting me into your house. I heard you lost your father . . . Why didn't you let me know? Couldn't drop a letter? I know women like me are not invited to weddings only . . . Anyway, I don't want to talk about you or your father . . . I am here to talk to my child. I heard he has been here for more than a year, how come you never informed me? I am here to see my child, where is he? He lives in a shed, doesn't he? I must see him right away; we can talk about other things later. Where is he?" Sharada Auntie was desperate and went on and on . . .

"I am really sorry for offending elders like you," Raghupathy answered. "Please forgive me; I admit my mistakes. I am always accustomed to follow my father's instructions in each and everything I did, so when he suddenly passed away I was thrown into utter confusion; so a lot of mistakes were made . . . What I committed in your case was a very serious mistake, I feel ashamed even to ask forgiveness . . ." He joined both his palms in a respectful gesture and literally begged her to come into the house.

'All this posture comes naturally to a Cauvery - delta Brahmin,' was what Sharada Auntie thought of Raghupathy's entreaties.

Still, she was not taken by his total acquiescence. "Forget it, where is my *Ambi*? I must see him."

"He was here . . . I did see him a short while ago . . ." Raghupathy started looking for *Ambi*, here and there, in the surroundings.

"If he is not here, he should be at the riverbank," Raghupathy's wife said.

"Why don't you both keep company, right here?" Raghupathy said, "I will be back in a minute."

But Sharada Auntie arose from where she sat, collected her bags and stopped Raghupathy on his way out.

"No, I would rather like to go and see him myself . . ."

"You have been in the hot sun all this time," Raghupathy protested. "Why don't you rest for a while? I will bring him home in no time." He was trying to impress her.

"The only relief I now need is to see my child; I have undertaken this journey all the way from my village; don't you think I can walk to the riverbank?" Sharada Auntie didn't wait for any answer, soon got down the street below and began walking. Raghupathy followed her; his wife pursed her lips in amazement, watched her husband and Sharada Auntie walk away, and reentered the house.

Rajaraman who, while watching the flames from the cremation ground, was mentally imagining his own body was being consigned to flames, had already smoked four *beedis*. Intoxicated by drugs, he couldn't help laughing to himself.

'Whatever maybe its depth or width, human life is like a river flowing between two banks. The body is like a boat that floats on the river - from one end to other; once the body dies, the boat is abandoned at its destination, but human life continues its journey. Now, what happens to the boat? Who sustains it? Well, maybe that's not important, but why burn it?' All these thoughts weighed down upon Rajaraman even as he continued to laugh.

'I physically stand here at the bank of the river, but my life has become like a boat cast away on the other bank. Am I waiting for the moment when the boat would be set fire?'

He lit another *beedi*.

Now Sharada Auntie noticed him at a distance and came dashing toward him. Poor Raghupathy, in hot pursuit after a woman much older, could barely keep pace with her.

"*Ambi . . . Ambi* My dear child!" Her terms of endearment shattered the shrine walls even before Auntie physically reached her target.

It was only after he heard her voice three or four times did Rajaraman bring himself to turn his head in her direction.

Auntie carried bags in both hands; something fell off from one of the bags. She kept running oblivious to the loss, her eyes swelling with tears. Raghupathy, following her, picked up the fallen object - it was her eyeglasses in a leather case. He was concerned she might suddenly slip and fall down, so he desperately tried to catch up with her.

As the pair came into closer vicinity Rajaraman, who has been all this time watching them from afar with some amusement but no particular interest, stirred and sat up. On seeing him, Auntie was thrown into a deathly silence, her mouth agape in utter shock and pain. Her body shaking in disbelief, she now braced herself, slowed down her pace and finally reached the shrine.

Rajaraman, scarcely moved by her intense feelings of maternal love, continued to laugh as he looked at her.

That look revealed to Auntie that Rajaraman didn't actually notice her. What if he asked a question, "What's happening here? Who's this woman?" Such a possibility alerted her and she agonized over the consequences of that unspoken question. That would be unbearable, the very thought was too shocking to her, so she gave in to violent sobs.

"*Ambi*, don't you recognize this Auntie?" Raghupathy asked him.

Rajaraman, still laughing, the permanent silence still reigning in him, answered as if echoing the very question addressed to him.

"Why wouldn't I know? . . . I know her very well . . ."

"I knew my child will surely recognize me." Sharada Auntie seemed comforted. "*Ambi*, why this pathetic life?"

"Raghu, please take this lady to our home!" Rajaraman asked his brother even as he continued to smoke the *beedi*.

"That's fine *Ambi*," Sharada Auntie told him. "I have actually come to see you; I am in no hurry to leave." She sat on the dirty floor, next to the pillar.

Rajaraman suddenly broke into a wild laughter.

Sharada Auntie was a little frightened by the intensity of that laughter.

Once the laughter had subsided, Rajaraman riveted his eyes on the far away cremation ground far away.

Auntie began taking out the contents from her bags.

"I know you love these snacks . . ." She fondly addressed him and picked out one of *Ambi's* favorite dishes - jackfruit dipped in syrup - and handed it to him. Rajaraman now had a *beedi* in one hand and his favorite snack on the other. He seemed to enjoy both - as he began alternately chomping on the *beedi* and taking a bite of the snack.

"What about him? . . ." Rajaraman asked about Raghupathy.

"No, thanks," Raghupathy told him. "I have just now had some snack."

Sharada Auntie was wiping tears off her face, now and then.

"*Ambi*, do you know you have passed the exams?" She suddenly informed him.

Rajaraman stared back at her, his face registering no emotion. Unable to swallow the snack, he laughed again, rather loudly.

That laughed scared Auntie even more.

"Uncle (she meant her husband) passed away a year after you were gone . . ."

"I see, you mean he passed away so soon? And he left you . . ." He pursed his lips as if offering some sympathy. There was a certain weirdness in his reaction; he seemed to be reading a script handed over to him.

Sharada Auntie now closely watched his face.

A suspicion slowly began to grow in her mind: is it possible *Ambi's* mental faculties have been impaired? She tried to dismiss her concern by remembering that Rajaraman did tell Raghupathy a little while ago that he knew who Sharada Auntie was and he even suggested that she be taken home. Still, Auntie knew, something was definitely missing in Rajaraman. *What is it? He had it before and now lost it.* Only her heart seemed to know it. Is it possible Rajaraman's life as a monk - his pathetic lifestyle, especially the *beedi* that disgusted her - was responsible for this behavior?

Still, she couldn't bring herself to leave her child to his own whim and fancy. She believed others - people close to *Ambi* - had not acted responsibly in taking care of him. She was mad as hell toward all of them.

Again, she was overcome by a strong belief, albeit a naive one, that her child would surely heed her advice, never reject it.

She began the first shot at her strategy: smiling, she asked him, "*Ambi*, do you know why I am here?"

His eyes were still riveted on the cremation ground.

"My child, please look at me." She felt encouraged enough to touch his chin bristling with a dense beard, and turn it toward her.

"I have come to make you the child of my old days," she said. "I want to make my Rajaraman a *Kalyanaraman*, a married man . . . I am waiting for you for the last ten years! I have carefully preserved Uncle's property so that I can hand it over to you before I breathe my last; my only wish is that you must perform the last rites for me . . . My dear child, enough is enough! Please stop living like a hermit! Why should you end up like a recluse? You have everything, what more do you need? You can live like a king! Please give up this austerity and stubbornness! Now you are free to come with me or stay right here but, please, do not condemn yourself to this terrible life! You must not, never!" Auntie was sobbing continuously.

'How is this drama going to end?' Raghupathy grew curious, crossed his arms to the chest and was ready to watch the fun.

Before Sharada Auntie could finish her words, Rajaraman had smoked two more *beedis*.

He seemed to have grasped none of what Auntie was trying to convey to him. He was staring at nowhere and was laughing to himself.

He pulled his left leg over the right thigh, let his long left hand rest on it, raised his head and stared at her as if demanding to know who this woman was standing before him. His words shot through - like a needle cutting its way through Auntie's sharp eyes.

"Your child is burning over there . . . on the opposite bank . . . You might as well set fire to all your property . . . Can't you see Rajaraman, myself and everything set on fire? Please take another look . . . "His words as well as his manner scared Auntie; she couldn't bring herself to stop him or contradict him.

Auntie wiped the tears off her face and keenly looked at him. "Why don't you do this?" He paused for a moment, and continued: "Have all those assets turned into *beedis*; then, I myself will set them on fire!" Seemingly pleased with his high sense of humor, he burst into a loud laughter.

'He's not my child,' Auntie told herself. 'My child will never talk like this . . . What he says is true, he is not my child, he's nobody's child.' She felt she probably overreached herself and offended him with her words.

She silently watched the cremation ground on the opposite bank and broke into uncontrollable sobbing.

There, the wisps of thick smoke from a mass of wet soil stacked with fragments of firewood and cow-dung fuel cakes abated a little but quickly shot through the interspaces between the fuel and firewood to emerge as flames - changing from red to orange and soaring high into the sky.

Rajaraman, exhaling smoke through mouth, chuckled to himself like a child.
