

ROCKING CHAIRS

Background

That bungalow is tucked away in a corner, all by itself, seemingly piqued by other houses in the street. It stands there totally alienated, frozen into a passive sluggish state, like a thief shunning company, harboring suspicion and resentment toward others even while stowing away his secrets within himself.

The house is shut off from the outside world - its gateway, doors and windows permanently closed. On the door, at the main entrance to the house, one can see black, plastic, nameplates with the following names printed in small letters:

Miss. M. Janaki, M.A.

Mr. M. Aadarasan, B.O.L.

Miss. M. Chellam, B.A.B.T

At the top of these nameplates, on closer observation, one can also notice the sign of another nameplate that has been recently dislodged from its place.

Occasionally, a huge lock would be seen weighing down the main door even with the occupants inside the house. The servants and an old woman, who served as a cook for the family would enter the compound through the gateway, walk along the adjoining narrow path leading to the backyard, thence to the house. The key to the backdoor is always in the cook's custody.

The mother of the three children on the nameplates at the front gate is one Alankaravalli who is currently living in the bungalow with her offspring; she is the daughter of the well known, but now deceased Tamil Scholar Rao Bahadur Makizamaran Pillai. Some twenty years ago, in an incident that quickly turned into a scandal and which everyone in this family would rather vehemently try not to remember, Alankaravalli's husband, a habitual gambler, committed suicide in a remote hotel room. Nowadays Alankaravalli,

whenever she goes out, locks up her offspring inside the bungalow; they are her treasures to be put away in a safe haven.

When Alankaravalli's children were young and growing under her care that was her way of protecting them from the evil influence of her totally disgraced, and much despised husband.

If she was convinced in the good old days about the propriety of such protective methods to bring up her children in seclusion, now she seems to have come up with even better reasons to stick up with that old practice. Her methods were never questioned - not even once - by her children who are now occupying high social positions and are earning hundreds and thousands of rupees in their professional careers.

Why would Alankaravalli never let anyone question her methods? To answer this question, it is sufficient to point out that no one outside her own family dares to confront her on this issue. But then, how can one explain the unconditional surrender and total acquiescence of her grown-up son and daughters to her dictatorial methods? Janaki, the last of the family has a M.A. degree and supervises a large division in the government postal department where she is held in high esteem for her competence and enforcing strict discipline among her staff; then, there is her sister Chellam, who works as a headmistress in a high school. Lastly, there is the Tamil lecturer Aadarasan, who terrorizes the entire college with his grim look and grave posture and never gives in to smile or warmth. How in the world would these adults let themselves be held as hostages - locked away behind bars?

Is it something so natural to their lifestyles? Is it a sense of comfort they feel following their own insecurity? Do they feel so attached to their mother that they dare not protest - lest they hurt her feelings?

The truth of the matter is nobody knows; but that's the way life goes on in this house.

The house doors would open at nine in the morning. Like a prison guard letting out his wards, Alankaravalli would stand at the main door entrance. She would eschew anything even remotely resembling the harsh demeanor of a prison guard; she would look

like a mother-hen on alert, eagerly protecting her brood swarming around her small feet.

Alankaravalli would stand at the main door entrance to check against all ill omens in the surroundings: is there a widow in the vicinity? How about bullock cart carrying firewood? Or a single brahmin? Does a crow fly from right to left? Her eyes would be scanning the scene to discern any potential disasters ready to strike her offspring.

The three children - now all past their thirties - would be standing in the living room, their foreheads smeared with *vibhuti*, the sacred ash, waiting for their mother's next command. A short while ago, Alankaravalli had finished offering her prayers to *Lord Muruga* - showering entreaties on her deity to protect the children "from each and every kind of misfortune that may conceivably befall them."

"My dear children . . . the young one, Chellam . . . Janaki dear." the mother would address them all in a low, affectionate voice and they would respond in unison: "Yes, mother, here we are . . ." their voices mixed with fear and respect.

The ritual would continue further as the mother bids them farewell on their way out after making sure the omens were right and sounding a final warning: "Watch out . . . Be careful!" repeated at least three times. Alankaravalli would invariably draw Janaki close to her, fondly kiss her cheek and let her go. She would watch the children go down in steps and walk into the street; she would continue to stand at the gateway to observe them turn around the street corner. At the corner Janaki would turn around and wave back at her mother. Alankaravalli would then feel immensely gratified; a sense of pride and accomplishment would seize her: the eyes would turn teary because all her efforts and sacrifices have come to fruition and she could bring up her children with no trace of her husband's disgraceful past ever tainting them. She would gently wipe the tears with the tip end of her sari, close the main door and, once again, stand before *Lord Muruga's* picture in a thankful gesture and pray for his continued grace and blessings.

This ritual will repeat itself every weekday and Saturday; the formalities would commence early in the morning and conclude by nine in the morning.

The children who left home in the morning as one group would return later in the evening separately, one after another. Alankaravalli would once again present herself at the gate to personally welcome them back home.

At the center of the main hall stands a large but short, round table surrounded by five rocking chairs. On the table are a few English and Tamil daily, weekly and monthly newspapers and magazines. There is a radio at one end of the hall, a telephone at another far away corner. These are sparingly, if ever, used in the house.

Occasionally Alankaravalli would call her daughter at work and talk to her over phone. Once in a while Aadalarasan would call home to inform he had been held up and would be late - by half an hour or so - to show up at home. Other than talking to themselves, the family members never used the phone to engage in any conversation with outsiders. Again, they used the radio to listen to some programs other than popular film music.

Soon after returning from work in the evening and changing, the trio would descend on the rocking chairs. The rocking chair has no legs, only feet that are shaped like a bow on either side to provide comfort to the occupant by its forward and backward movements. All the family members enjoyed the rocking chair - its whirling sound seemed to rhyme with the mood of the occupant who can control the motion as he or she desired - now slowing it, steadying it or speeding it up after a few, short intervals by increasing the motion two or three-fold, either in a playful or angry mood.

Alankaravalli's rocking chair was made out of an old easy chair outfitted with an artistic handiwork. It is so old it can't use a canvas sheet; its seat is fashioned out of an intricate cane work, the cushions made of coconut yarn.

Only when the mother occupied her rocking chair and started the conversation - always with a question - did the children open their mouths.

Sometimes when the mother was not in the 'right' mood, she would even avoid talking with any of the children for an entire day. And, when that happened, neither would the children bring themselves to engage in some desultory conversation among

themselves. Why not? Why would the siblings act as if they are at cross with one another? Why should they turn away from one another and keep on rocking their chairs as if they can't stand one another?

Do the children believe that by engaging in chitchat among themselves they would be showing disrespect to their mother?

Maybe, by her studied silence the mother is sending them a message: are they rocking their chairs because they seem to agree with her - whatever that message might be?

The truth of the matter is: nobody knows; but that is the way life goes on in this house.

The old woman - who serves as a cook - would come and serve snacks in small plates set on the dining table; she would also set up a tea pot, cups and saucers and depart without even a fleeting glance at the family members; she had better be, otherwise she would be fired from the work the very next day for her indiscretion. Even under extreme hunger, the family members would stay silent in the room - no whining or sighing is allowed.

The rocking chairs would continue to sway as usual.

Suddenly Alankaravalli would sigh and give in to some emotional outburst calling *Lord Muruga's* name in despair. Like an orphan craving for love and affection, she would shed copious tears.

The children would watch her intensely; their eyes would turn teary.

Aadalarasan, never given to smile, would bury his face in both hands. Chellam, who always sat in a chair and immersed herself in knitting, would suddenly drop the needles and the paraphernalia on the table and rush to her mother and sit at her feet in strict reverence. Janaki would fight tears off her face, gently caress her mother's cheeks and explode with a scream, "Dear mother . . ." followed by incessant sobbing.

"My dear children don't cry," Alankaravalli would console them. "I can't bear to see you cry. . . I am not feeling well." She would try to pacify them after pampering them with kisses and sweet talk.

Slowly and steadily the children would restrain their feelings...

Alankaravalli would then launch into a discourse usually with a roll call of the achievements of her late father - the well known Tamil scholar Makizamaran Pillai; or else, it would be a rehash of all the sad and painful events from her life with her in-laws several years ago, often interrupted by tearful gestures and choking voice. Finally, she would conclude with a dire warning about the world she and her children happen to live in, its other inhabitants, the others' low, mean disposition and how to steer clear of them. The main thrust of her advice to the children would be a moralizing one, invariably a rundown as to how people like themselves - coming as they from an elitist, superior class of the general population - ought to conduct their lives. Even before all this takes place, the children would openly narrate their daytime experiences just gone by - at school, at office, and at college - one after another.

Occasionally the tone of their conversation and the mutual exchange of comments on their daily experiences would degenerate into an acrimonious debate and grow so bitter and resentful that the participants would hurl objects - may be a newspaper, a book or a cup - at one another; sometimes there would be charges and counter-charges about lack of love or affection between one family member and another, followed by threats of suicide or 'to get even with one another.' All this would take place amid tearful showdowns and noisy brawls. And, as they are seized with frenzy and tend to lose themselves, the participants would often become self-destructive and bash their heads against a wall.

When the feelings grow stronger and more intense, the mother and children would just give up their mutual love and respect and engage in nasty quarrels and mutual recriminations.

Then, at last, Alankaravalli would stare at the peaceful face of *Lord Muruga* on the wall; she would sob incessantly even while smiting to herself on the face and chest.

"*Muruga, Muruga,*" she would scream at the top of her voice. "Do you call yourself a god? If you are so powerful, please take me to your grace! Have I not suffered enough? All my efforts to bring up my children under my care have been in vain. This is an ungrateful world . . . Please take me to your abode!" When she

got ready to smite her face in frustration, either Janaki or Chellam would jump at her and enclose her in a warm embrace.

Then the children would plead with their mother for her unconditional forgiveness. They feel so closely bound to her through loyalty and affection they would repent for causing her even the slightest distress.

"You did it to her; it was only you, no question about it!" each sibling would try to put the blame on another for causing mental anguish to Alankaravalli.

In the end Alankaravalli's compassion would forgive all her children. She would try to please them all - the children who always loved, appreciated and cared for her and are now willing to repent for their infractions - by reciting a devotional song on *Lord Muruga*.

She would sing a line and pause, and the children would follow that line and finish it. The children would lose themselves in ecstasy and Janaki would easily become very emotional and shed copious tears. Aadalarasan would fold both his hands in a respectful gesture and clap them continuously to follow the beat and rhythm of the song while his body swayed in the rocking chair. The entire scene would resemble a ritual where the participants are vigorously involved in exorcising the evil forces through prayer and worship.

After a while, their common prayer, "Muruga, . . .Muruga" would turn into an emotional bond; the participants would feel they are like small boats carried along in a flood of devotion and treated to sweet lullabies while floating on a wave of bliss.

Then suddenly or soon after the religious fervor was drained, someone in the group - usually it would be Alankaravalli - would open her eyes as if awoken from deep slumber and observe the surroundings.

Exactly at half past eight - except when emotional feelings, re-creations and mental anguish had their way - dinner would be over.

Dinner meant, of course, rules to be strictly adhered to - like what could be eaten and what must be avoided - and these have

been worked out in detail. Alankaravalli would often serve a dish only after she has carefully evaluated its qualities in terms of nutritional value and effects on body and mind.

At half past eight the family members would retire to the patio upstairs and sit under the open sky.

If there is moonlight they would savor the atmosphere like small kids; they would even play 'hide and seek' with one another.

By ten they would return downstairs. Before they retired to bed Alankaravalli would serve them a glass of milk and a 'mysterious pill.' She too would help herself the 'mysterious pill' with milk.

Janaki would invariably protest before complying with her mother's demand.

"Mother, what is it?" she would ask, "Do I have to?"

"Are you kidding?" the mother would reply. "I know why you must take it. You work hard the whole day and your body needs rest." Then, suddenly, all the family members would remember they are missing another member from their family.

"Mother, when will Elder Brother come back?" Janaki would ask tears swelling her eyes. Alankaravalli would fondly draw Janaki into her warm embrace.

"Thanks to *Lord Muruga* he would be joining us soon," she would reply. "He's hale and healthy. When I met him yesterday he made enquiries about you . . . Didn't I tell you? He's a saint, a great scholar like your father. It doesn't matter where he lives; wherever he lives that place would turn into a shrine . . ." Alankaravalli would shed tears while patting Janaki to comfort her. Then she would make the bed for Janaki.

Then they all would take to their beds which are laid in a row in that wide, spacious room and go to sleep even while carrying on their conversation. Sometimes, while talking with one another, they would feel as if they are under a spell and slowly drift into sleep.

Occasionally, Alankaravalli would refrain from taking the 'mysterious pill;' others would have take theirs and gone to sleep

while she would walk out of the bedroom, go over the hall and sit on a rocking chair in a corner.

In the darkness enveloping the surroundings her solitary rocking chair would be swaying on the floor to its own beat and rhythm.

Why is Alankaravalli indulging in this strange behavior?

What is the 'mysterious pill'?

Where is that so-called Elder Brother Janaki was referring to? When is he coming home?

What kind of mother is this Alankaravalli who seems determined to keep her grown up children in such a sorry state? Why doesn't it occur to her that her children deserve - apart from herself - a personal or a marital relationship with another human being and, as a mother, she has an obligation to promote such a relationship? Is it not an intrinsic part of maternal love? Don't the children ever think of these things?

On the other hand, is it possible that Alankaravalli wouldn't let her children think about such relationships, now or in the future?

Is it possible the mother is so confused about all these things that she spends all the time by herself in a rocking chair through the night till dawn whiling away her time in a limbo - tossing from one state to another?

The rocking chair, now swaying ever more rigorously, seems to provide the answer:

'Nobody knows!'

** ** **

Scene I

Today is not Sunday - it is Thursday, but Janaki didn't go to work. Maybe she has accumulated a lot of vacation or called in sick - today she has stayed home. She is all by herself, there's nobody else in the house. The time is three in the afternoon. A short while ago Alankaravalli had her lunch, served Janaki a meal, said a prayer to *Lord Muruga* and gone out after advising Janaki to stay indoors and take care of herself. The cook - the old woman - would be home by four.

Janaki is seated in her rocking chair.

Across the street - probably from a house next to theirs or even further down, a film song, albeit a popular one - is heard from the radio.

It is a typical film song scattered with verbiage of sexy, suggestive words - words like cheeks, kisses, lips, honey, heaven and spell - in a duet exchanged between a man and woman intoxicated in love and ready to succumb to all kinds of perversions one can imagine.

Janaki rises from the rocking chair and examines the scene around her; she feels flushed and ebullient knowing she's alone, all by herself.

Nobody is home! Yes, she's alone - all by herself!

"Mother is gone, yes, she's gone! Gone already . . ." she murmurs to herself, switches on the radio in the room corner and listens to the song as it continues its refrain: " Kisses . . . lips . . . waist . . . cup . . . honey . . . spell . . . heaven"

Janaki returns to her seat and rocks the chair to the beat and rhythm of the song - like a violin bow responding to a tune in the background music . . .

She feels her whole body roused ; her eyes become teary, and she is overcome by a childish delight as if floating on a merry-go-round . . .

Why does a cheap film song and its tuneless, trashy music cause her such turmoil?

The song comes to an end.

Even before the next song is announced Janaki jumps out of the chair and shuts off the radio.

"What a horrible, vulgar song!" she jeers unable to contain herself. She could hardly bear listening to any traces of the new song now heard in air across the neighborhood, so she quickly slams the nearby window.

She returns to her chair and to its low motion. She caresses her cheeks, lips and lets out a sigh. She pulls out an English magazine from the round table, reads a joke and laughs.

"How mischievous! Men are very mischievous - all of them!" she murmurs. Then she places her middle finger against her lips as if recalling something - there is now a mischievous smile on her face - as she races to her room, brings out a handbag and ferrets out a business card from it.

"Mr. A.P. Sundaram, the Photographers!" She repeats the name a few times and paces up and down the hall; then, laughing to herself, she reaches to the nearby telephone and picks up the receiver. She dials only two numbers when her face suddenly changes expression; she puts down the receiver.

She starts sweating; she stands close to the telephone and stares afar - talking to herself in a loud voice:

"What's wrong about it? Sundaram is my former college friend, a very nice fellow. I even mentioned his name to Mother the other day, and Mother was not upset. Why can't I invite him? Why not?"

Janaki takes the receiver again and now she finally dials the five digits.

The telephone rings at the other end. Again, Janaki sweats and wipes her face with the tip end of her sari; her whole body shakes as she trembles and holds the receiver close to the ear.

"Yes . . . Mr. Sundaram please . . ."

"Is this Mr. Sundaram speaking? This is Janaki . . ."

Her ears as well as her neck are now flushed red; she tries to clear her throat.

"Remember you promised to visit us? Have you forgotten? Why don't you join us for tea - this evening?"

"Yes, how about now?"

"What if you don't know them? I can introduce them to you - my mother, sister and brother . . . Yes, I am the last . . ."

"That won't be necessary . . . There's nobody else in the house! I am all alone . . . I am really bored . . . Are you coming?"

"You have my address? I gave you the other day . . . Number sixteen, it is off the main road, slightly hidden from the public view - just opposite the playground . . . Okay, I will be expecting you . . . You must not disappoint me . . ."

She puts the receiver back, happily saunters on the hall, and tidies up the place. She collects the magazines on the table and stacks them in some order. Then she stands before the mirror, examines herself, changes her sari in her room and soon returns to her rocking chair and its slow motion.

Suddenly she feels tense, rises from the chair, and picks up a key hanging on a nearby wall and paces up and down the hall.

'I am an idiot,' she chides herself. 'I have phoned and invited him, but the house is locked outside. Will he think there's no one here and simply walk away? I can surely see him coming if I keep the window open . . . I can call him, hand over the key and have him open the door . . . But, really, what will think of this? I must confess to him that Mother does this for my own safety . . . Will he think Mother locks me up in the house because she doesn't trust me? I can answer that 'smart' question too . . . If Mother doesn't trust me, why would she leave the key with me? After all, I could let him into my house on my own, can't I?' Janaki is thinking along these lines while awaiting Sundaram.

A very old model car arrives on the street below and blares an ear-splitting noise; Janaki hastily opens a window and watches the car.

"Mr. Sundaram," she addresses him. "Are you surprised that the door is locked? Come in . . . Please take this key and open it." She eagerly extends her hand through the window.

"Please come in," she respectfully invites and leads him into the house.

The visitor looks well bred in stylish clothes. His shirt and slacks are dark gray and his tightly worn shirt makes him look taller than he really is. The long stretch of the white buttons on his gray shirt attract attention. As the visitor toys with his cooling glasses in his hands and decides to sit on one of the rocking chairs, Janaki - who was all this time transfixed on the visitor's looks - hastily suggests that he sit on another chair.

"That's a rocking chair," she informs him with a dramatic gesture of her body and hands when the visitor responds by saying, "This too is a rocking chair." Janaki feels her face redden.

"I am sorry . . . that chair belongs to my elder brother, so we generally don't sit on it," she says trying to hide her embarrassment.

"Thanks. I think it will be inconvenient for me to sit on a rocking chair with my tight clothes," the visitor explains. "May I use one of those?" He points to a row of regular chairs with legs, and Janaki agrees. "Please wait, I will get one for you." She walks over to the corner and fetches a chair for Sundaram.

Sundaram takes the chair and Janaki sits opposite to him.

The main entrance to the house is still open.

Janaki smiles at the visitor quite innocently, but this only increases his embarrassment.

"Do you know why I invited you?" she asks. Sundaram pleads ignorance by twisting his lips and wriggling his shoulders.

"You are a photographer, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I want to show you a couple of photos, that's the reason I invited you. Please wait." Janaki disappears into one of the interior rooms.

Sundaram takes out a cigarette packet and a matchbox from his trouser pocket and examines the surroundings. Finding no ashtray in the vicinity, he feels apprehensive about smoking in a new

place, and returns the cigarette packet and the matchbox to their original place.

Meanwhile Janaki returns with her old college note book she keeps dusting as she approaches the visitor. She takes out two passport-size photographs from the book and relishes watching them.

Noticing she is deeply immersed in the photographs Sundaram tries to engage her in small talk and asks, "Where is your mother?"

Janaki raises her head in response to the visitor's voice. Her looks now seem to fall on a total stranger; her face grows livid, at first dark, and then stern.

"Did you say something about my mother?" Sundaram is taken back by the hostility in her voice.

"Nothing in particular," he tries to calm her. "I was just wondering where your mother is."

Janaki's face registers even more panic.

"But why? Why are you asking about my mother?" She retorts. Sundaram is unable to fathom her sudden agitation.

"It is no big deal. I was just curious, there's nothing more to it." He manages to pour out but Janaki still feels upset, her face flushed red.

"Mr. Sundaram, don't play tricks with me," she warns him. "I have a brother as well as a sister living in this house. Why do you keep asking about my mother? Why? Don't hide anything from me!"

"I am sorry . . . I didn't mean anything when I inquired about your mother," he tells her. "Please believe me. I don't intrude into other people's affairs. Please excuse me if I said something wrong. I have no particular motive or anything." Sundaram feels hurt and bows his head down.

Janaki's eyes become teary. She feels her throat blocked with emotion.

"Mr. Sundaram, I am sorry. Please look at me." As she touches his shoulders and turns around to face him Sundaram could see Janaki overcome by emotion.

"Janaki, what's this?" He laughs and tries to humor her.

"I just want to let you know . . . I am not suggesting you should not have asked about my mother. Why do you have to get upset and offer any excuse or apology?"

"All right . . . Where are the photographs?"

"No, I won't show them; first, you need to repeat the question you asked me earlier about my mother. Only then will I believe that you are not mad at me . . . Go on, ask me again." Sundaram is afraid Janaki may suddenly burst into tears while making this entreaty.

"Okay, where's your mother?" He asks as if comforting a baby.

Janaki too responds like a baby, easily pacified and comforted.

"Mother has gone to the temple. She would be back by six. Are you satisfied?"

"Yes, really, she has gone to the temple." Janaki repeats with an emphasis. Then she pleads with Sundaram - making a pathetic gesture.

"Please . . . Please ask me no more questions. You must listen to me; I have a reason for making such a request. Don't mistake me, you will understand as things go along and I will explain everything. I will not hide anything . . . you will ask me no more questions today . . . Do you agree? Is it okay with you?"

"Okay . . . Why only today? I won't ask you any questions; satisfied?"

"See, you are getting mad at me . . . Did I ever say you must never ask any questions?"

"Okay, I meant just for today. Now, Janaki may I say something?"

"Go ahead!"

"I will never get mad at you; I will not mistake you. You must not assume I am suspecting you or getting mad at you. Agreed?"

"All right . . . You are acting smart! Can we continue our discussion on the photographs?"

"Certainly!"

"See this first photograph . . ."

"Let me see . . . Is this not our Ramanathan?"

"I told you - no more questions!"

"I am sorry . . . I was just about to say that he and I were classmates in the first year Intermediate Class . . ."

"Of course, I knew that. I too went to the same college - but I was in a different group. You discontinued after Intermediate. Ramanathan was in my college till M.A., classmate too . . . Anyway, what do you think of this photograph?"

"Let me see, it is well taken. As a photographer, that's my first opinion." Janaki bites her lip and nods her head in admiration of his cleverness and restraint while rendering a professional opinion. Then she hands over to him another photograph.

Sundaram glances at the second snapshot, realizes the young man in it is a total stranger to him. He smiles and returns both photographs.

"No comments?"

"Equally good, I should say."

"Sundaram, I can only say you are very clever - too much clever! A deep person . . . rather very cunning . . ." "Suddenly Janaki seizes one of his arms and begins to twist it with her hand.

Sundaram is quite appalled by her boldness and the unwarranted liberty she takes with him. Still, because he is a young man, he seems to enjoy the physical intimacy with a woman.

Janaki now sits triumphantly on the round table a few feet away from him, both her hands crossing her chest, her eyes penetrating through him; she lets out a long, deep sigh, and laughs. Sundaram too responds with a laugh.

"We are both acting. Do you understand what I mean? It is all acting! It is all humbug!" She comes down with a thunderous laughter.

"Do you really think I invited you to ask your professional opinion on these photographs? Let's stop playing those foolish games and come to the main business. What do you think of the men in these photographs? What do you actually think of them? You must tell me everything - I mean everything!"

Sundaram can't help admiring Janaki's facility with English language: "Janaki, you speak English so well I seem to forget that I went to school with you! I rather get a feeling that I am face to face with a prestigious government officer!"

"Don't change the subject!" Janaki warns him. "You are trying to escape!"

"No, not at all! There's nothing to escape from. I do know who had escaped and run away . . . I don't know him personally, but I have heard a lot about him . . . You know him even better; Ramanathan was a Romeo even in those days . . ."

Janaki's voice turns stern at the mention of Ramanathan's name. She continues:

"Romeo . . . In any college where there are decent girls we see men acting like Romeos. Do you know what happened to that Ramanathan? He's just a country brute! He ended up with a cheap country girl as his own Juliet! Looks like she came from among his relatives! Why didn't he think of her in the first place? Whatever happened to his native intelligence? He wrote me a long letter, a love letter . . . I will show it to you sometime . . . What does it all mean? He married her only for her money; what do you call such a relationship? I call it male prostitution . . . It's all right . . ." Her deep-seated anger and resentment blocks her further even as her lips twist and squirm in violent temper.

Sundaram tries to gauge her intense feelings and understand what might have actually led to such an estrangement between her and Ramanathan. He is a little frightened that his thoughts might turn into some wild imagination.

But Janaki gives him no time for such a solitary perusal; she explains the situation to him:

"Mr. Sundaram! I have never mentioned these things to others; I have no one to talk to - except my mother . . . My mother be-

lieves her children tell her everything - whatever happens in their lives. As far as I am concerned, I have hidden a lot of things from her. But I will say this: I have done nothing wrong, but my mother wouldn't tolerate even this behavior from me. She would feel so humiliated with shame . . . So I have hidden this from her . . . Poor mother, I have betrayed her . . . She still treats me like a child and trusts me . . . Mother, she's a great soul . . . "Janaki buries her face in both hands and sobs uncontrollably.

Sundaram lets her cry to her heart's content and does nothing to stop her. After a while, Janaki collects herself, wipes the tears off her face, and smiles at him. "I am sorry. To me, Mother is the world, she's my god. The only thing I care about is that she is not hurting, I ask for nothing else. You must meet her . . . She raised all of us . . . And how much she has suffered! I will tell you everything . . . Now I find the air suffocating here. Do you mind if we go upstairs?" She wants to close the main door to the house but, before doing so, turns to Sundaram and asks him to go upstairs ahead of her. Janaki closes the front door, stands at the feet of staircase, raises her head and informally asks Sundaram: "Shall I bring you a cup of tea?"

"I won't mind!"

Janaki prepares tea with hot water from the kettle on the dining table and carries two sets of cup and saucer in a tray to upstairs. She's apparently in a happy mood because she hums a tune as she moves up the stairs.

A large portion of the patio is under shade. There's a playground just behind the house, and one can see children and young men at play. A group of teenagers is about to start a volleyball match; a young man with strong muscles and huge thighs, wearing a tight, dark, red shorts is atop a pole fixing the net, and Janaki's eyes are locked on him.

Sundaram takes the tray from her hands and sets it on a nearby table. Janaki seems to enjoy watching the various activities now going on in the playground, sits on a cane chair close to the table. Sundaram occupies another chair opposite to her.

They both sip tea in silence. Janaki is pondering how she can continue their earlier discussion centering on the 'Ramanathan affair.'

She begins - rather abruptly.

"Yes, I liked him; why, I will even say I loved him. I don't know what you think of love. I loved him in my own way. Now, Mr. Sundaram, tell me: what do you think of love? I am asking the question from an intellectual point of view; after all, everybody seems to know its ordinary meaning; I don't really mean *that*. . ."

"I see . . . I know only its ordinary meaning. I think love . . ."

"Enough! Stop it! I am not referring to *that* . . . How mischievous! Men are so mischievous, every one of them!"

"No, I am not joking . . . I am not making fun of what you are saying. I know love only from its ordinary meaning . . . I am willing to learn of its intellectual and other meanings if you care to explain them to me."

Janaki ponders for a moment and begins like a teacher trying to establish a theory or a lawyer bent upon converting a lie to truth: "Love is not sex; love is noble and superior; sex is dirty and brutal. If love means loving one's body, anyone can indulge in love and that love will simply possess that body like a plague, corrupt it, pollute it and in the process gets destroyed. If you really get down to it, no human being can ever possibly love his own body. So, how can you call one's admiration for another person's body love and lend dignity to such a feeling? I call that infatuation!"

Sundaram seems puzzled and starts scratching his head.

Janaki's voice continues - like a lecture from an audiotape: "That Romeo Ramanathan didn't love me, he was infatuated with my body. And, do you know how he hid his vulgar feelings for me? He acted like a decent man and wrote poems on me. For two years I thought his love for me was pure and noble; he acted like a civilized human being and I started liking him. We used to meet in private and talk for several hours. Now I am a little frightened to think of those days . . . I have never mentioned this shameful affair to anyone . . . For some reason or other I feel like sharing it with you; I trust you . . . Sundaram. Please touch my hand, see how it

has turned cold . . . My whole body is beginning to shake . . ." She holds both her hands in a grip; her tongue becomes dry, the eyes cast a fearful look. "One day we went to the beach," she goes on. "He talked about several things. He said he would like to take me to *Mahabalipuram* in a taxi. He wanted me to lie to my mother that I would be going to Mahabalipuram with my schoolmates on an excursion trip." Suddenly her face turns grim, anger and resentment tinge her voice.

"Do you know what he did? He asked me to lie to my mother! He said he would arrange a private hotel for both of us; he assured me I mustn't worry because we would be eventually get married, any way . . . Then, you know what he did? He tried to kiss me! Oh, what a horrible thing! I ran away from him . . . as fast as I could till I came to the Marina Beach bus stand . . . Because I momentarily lost my balance while running, I threw up my slippers on the beach . . . Everybody was watching us and this shameless fellow picks up my slippers and follows me all the way to the bus stand, drops them off at my feet and starts crying! What a scoundrel! He accused me of insulting him. What do you think of *that*? He tried to insult me and, when I didn't go along with his demands, he says I am heartless . . . he would have nothing to do with me . . . That's all right with me, I don't give a damn . . . And that was the end of it!" Janaki's face now undergoes all kinds of aversions and loathing before she concludes her monologue. Even after she vents out all her frustrations and hurt feelings, her face seems affected with even more agony and anguish.

"You know, I like men. That doesn't mean I will allow them to manipulate me . . . This is something no man ever seems to understand . . . It is a pity . . . Somehow or other I begin to think you are not such a man and that's the reason I am able to move with you so freely . . . Am I right?"

"Go ahead . . ." Sundaram too is lost in his own thoughts.

"Now, tell me, am I right in trusting you? Will you misbehave with me? Will you?"

Sundaram lets his eyes penetrate through her.

"Do you think I am crazy or something?" he retorts. "You have already told me enough, and I will never give room to any indis-

cretion. Please believe me . . . To tell the truth, you have opened my eyes . . . When I first came down here I knew only the ordinary meaning of love but now I can see love has many loaded and extraordinary meanings . . . I am glad you trust me, thank you very much . . . Still, you haven't told me about the second photograph."

The volleyball game is by now well underway. Janaki becomes more and more agitated as the ball gets tossed from one to other. She walks close to the patio wall and keenly watches the game.

The match gets into full swing and Janaki, who was all this time immersed in conversation with Sundaram, is now totally transformed. Sundaram's question didn't sink deep into her. His inquiries about the second photograph didn't reach her ears, but not her conscience. "The same usual story . . . I mean a similar story, not just with these two men; all of the men are the same . . ." She keeps talking even as she feels her whole body aroused and, every time the ball in the court has an impact, Janaki feels she's the target. Her eyes continue to stare at the ongoing match.

Janaki feels her whole body come apart as she watches the teams on either side - big-muscled young men jump and snatch the ball and deliver firm blows. Every blow delivered to the ball seems to hit the instincts deep inside her. She holds Sundaram's hand in firm grip and gnashes her teeth. "Mr. Sundaram, please help me," she begs. "I can't stand anymore . . . No, I can't!" She seems about to faint, supports herself against the parapet wall, and is anxious to go downstairs.

"What? . . . What happened? Why this sudden . . . "Sundaram is totally taken back.

"I have already told you not to ask me any more questions," She replies, "Let's go down . . . Please help me . . . I will explain everything once we go downstairs." Sundaram supports her unsteady frame with his hands and leads her slowly down the stairs.

When they reach the hall, Janaki drops off into a chair. She's sweating all over her body, and sweat drops collect on her nape and underarms. She rests under a ceiling fan and wipes the sweat off her forehead with the tip end of her sari.

Realizing she's back to her normal state, Sundaram ventures a question, "What happened? Why this panic?"

"It's always like this. . . ." Janice answers, her eyes half closed. "I had a dream recently. There's a playground like this one where some ten or twenty big-muscled men are playing volleyball match . . . But there's no ball! They are tossing *me* up in the sky - on both sides of the net! What a horrible dream!" She wriggles her body.

After a while, she opens her eyes and feels as if she is looking at a stranger.

"Mother . . ." Her faint voice unconsciously pleads for help as she tries to get off the chair.

"She has gone to the temple; should be back soon . . ."

"I know, of course . . ." Janaki tells him. "Please go away . . . Don't mistake me . . . I will never forget your help . . . You must visit me again when my mother and others are at home . . . I would like you to make frequent visits to our home . . . But now you must leave, right away . . . please!" She looks so keen on Sundaram's departure that she, as if by force, leads him back to the main door and lets him out. As soon as he leaves, she closes the door behind him, but quickly opens the window.

"Mr. Sundaram . . . please, just a minute . . ." she beckons him, hands over the key. "Please lock the door and handover the key back to me."

The door is locked.

She receives the key from him, waves her hand through the window and bids him farewell, "Cherio!"

The car rattles off, again, blares its horn and departs.

Janaki returns calmly to her rocking chair and its slow motion.

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Scene II

It is three hours since Sundaram was gone.

Chellam is sitting on her rocking chair and is busy knitting a sweater with a dark-brown woolen bundle lying on her lap. The chair is swinging to and fro as she keeps working.

Aadalarasan comes from inside the house with a Turkish towel covering his tee shirt and dense *vibhuti* stripes adorning his forehead. The hair around his ears looks slightly grayish as if colored by *vibhuti* in close vicinity.

Janaki is ironing her clothes on a small table in a corner. On one side of the table are stacked, one after another, her saris and blouses.

Janaki's forehead shines from the excess of *vibhuti* her mother had just applied. . .

Janaki seems a little agitated and immersed in her own thoughts, even as she continues to iron the clothes. She's occasionally biting her lips and trying to hide her feelings. She seems on the verge of breaking down and shedding tears any time now. Alankaravalli doesn't seem to discern Janaki's state of mind.

"The young one," Alankaravalli fondly addresses Aadalarasan: "Did you like my lunch today? I had only a pickle to go with the curd-rice. Anything special in college today?"

Aadalarasan replies in a typical, bombastic Tamil, a growing trend among the purists in the academic circles of the day. His speech is affected and conveys a commanding, albeit an imperial style as he articulates his thoughts.

"Nothing of any distinction or great importance has actually come in my way," he says. "It is in my character not to concern myself with these mundane affairs. I strictly follow the principle of total detachment where my academic interests are concerned. However, I must confess to my present predicament: an ugly event has taken place in the privacy of our Principal's room and I am in a dilemma as to how to describe it to you . . ."

Alankaravalli's eyes are now wide open and she is eager to hear what her son has further to say on the incident in his Principal's room.

Janaki is also eager to join in their conversation and gets ready. She pulls out the electric cord from the wall plug and asks her mother a favor:

"Mother, please ask Brother that he give up speaking in pure Tamil . . . Only then the story will be interesting . . ." She collects the clothes on the table and gets ready to go over to her room. She turns around, faces her brother and repeats her request: "Brother, please . . ."

Once she leaves their company, Janaki's heart reverts back to her former state: it is in turmoil.

Alankaravalli now addresses Aadalarasan: "The young one, I too feel the same way about this pure Tamil. It is pleasant to the ears only for a short while. One can go on listening to it even when there is no content or it makes no sense . . . Such a language had its time and place . . . Your grandfather excelled in chaste Tamil when he lectured in good old days . . . What a profound scholarship! And what erudition! His style and eloquence were so appropriate to his days but, now, things are different . . . Everything has changed! Values have deteriorated, so did Tamil as a language. . . Anyway, what happened in your Principal's room today? Go ahead, tell me!"

"Brother, please wait . . ." Janaki's plea is heard from afar. She hurries up from her room, attempts to gather the iron box away and in so doing her deliberately presses one of her fingers against the hot surface of the iron. She feels the intense heat, blows through her lips into the blistering skin; her face is distorted under acute pain and she lets out a cry.

"My god, Janaki, what happened?" Alankaravalli rushes to her side. Aadalarasan too jumps to her side and grabs her hand in despair. After a while Chellam, who sat all the while passively, notices the panic among her mother and brother, panics herself. "Why can't you be more careful?" she chides Janaki and then with a worried look asks her mother, "Is this life-threatening?"

Janaki is still crying like a baby. Chellam looks helpless and asks again, "Mother, can we get some ointment for her?" Alankaravalli gets mad and gnaws her teeth. "I know what needs to be done . . . Don't lecture to me about ointment or other medicines!" She again prays to *Lord Muruga* and scoops out a little *vibhuti* from a plate near the altar and applies it to Janaki's forehead.

"This is the mother of all medicines," Alankaravalli says. "The pain will be gone in no time, it's gone! Janaki, your body is fragile - like a flower - why do you have to iron your clothes? Where's that fat servant-maid? You must leave all these tasks to her . . . My dear girl, come closer . . ." Alankaravalli tries to comfort Janaki; she blows through the blistering skin, fondles her head, holds her within her embrace and finally helps her to a nearby chair . . .

Janaki, after a while, stops crying.

"All right, now let's hear about that incident in your Principal's room." Alankaravalli asks Aadalarasan and Janaki seconds her move. "Brother, please tell us about it . . . I was so eager to hear your story I accidentally touched the iron . . . Please go on."

"No Brother, no," Chellam intervenes, and screams: "Let's not discuss the Principal room incident anymore!"

As the trio looks at her totally surprised, Chellam explains her concern.

"Maybe what our younger brother wanted to tell us - this episode in his Principal's room - is fraught with some evil omen. I think that was the reason why Janaki got hurt even as we were getting ready to hear it. Luckily, *Lord Muruga* came to our rescue, that's the way I feel. Maybe Mother can give her opinion in the matter . . ."

Alankaravalli steadies herself for a moment, smiles, and returns to Chellam.

"I think your instincts are right. My dear ones, forget the Principal room story for today, we will talk about it some other time. Today the omens don't look good . . . After all, who can escape fate? As long as we have got a head on our shoulders, we have to think about others; that doesn't mean we have to invite head ache. We need to understand people around us and know how to survive

their evil doings . . . Chellam, what about your school? I am sure you will have a lot of things to talk about. Your craft teacher is notorious for scandals . . . Sometimes I wonder how you are able to manage that monkey brigade." Alankaravalli turns chatty with Chellam as she tries to engage her in a conversation.

"Well, if it is just a simple story, I can easily share it with you," Chellam begins. "But what we have in our school are so many hundreds and hundreds of scandalous stories, and I can't decide what can be told and what can be omitted. I normally keep myself away from all this rotten stuff . . . I don't talk about them or listen to others gossiping around . . . But how can you ignore some of these terrible things when they are happening right in your own classroom? Today I got so mad I yelled at that Buffalo Rukmini and even wanted to fire her but then changed my mind. What if some inquiry comes along and I am asked to explain why I fired her? So, I just hollered at her, "Get out of my class!" and the whole class was terrified . . ."

"Why? What happened?"

"Mother, I can't tell you, it is so vulgar!" Chellam shakes her body in utter disgust; but her very hesitation prompts the curiosity of her listeners.

"Brother," Chellam requests of Aadalarasan. "Can you please move out for a while? We need to talk about it in private . . ."

"But why?" Aadalarasan protests. "What if I wanted to stay - right here?" He turns to his mother. "Do you see how she treats me - like an outsider?"

"Maybe it has something to do with the subject she wants to talk about. It could be some delicate matter - about women, in particular? Why do you need to know about such things?"

"Mother, that's not fair!" Aadalarasan protests, again. "Chellam has no respect for me because you too want to treat me like an outsider. Haven't you all jumped at me when I was talking about the incident in my Principal's room? And, it had to do with men! I am not going to leave this room on any account!" He pulls out a newspaper and shields his face away from her.

"Mother . . . I will tell you later . . ." Chellam winks at her mother and returns to her knitting.

Janaki is a little concerned that she might be the next one to be put on spot; her eyes continue to stare at others in the room.

She is feeling guilty over inviting Sundaram at her own initiative and keeping his visit a secret from others. Sweat drops collect on her forehead and face even as her eyes seem tired and her lips quiver.

"Mother," she slowly addresses Alankaravalli in a choking voice.

"Yes, my dear! Does your hand still hurt?" Alankaravalli asks, concerned.

"Hmm, it is not that," Janaki replies. "Mother, I want to share something with you . . . I will never do anything wrong . . . I will never consciously do anything wrong . . . Please tell me if I did something out of the way . . ." Alankaravalli listens to her repeated entreaties, comes over to her and warmly hugs her.

"My dear girl, you will never do anything wrong," she comforts Janaki. "I will never mistake your actions; have no fear, go ahead."

"Mother, do you remember my telling you the other day? The gentleman's name is Sundaram; he went to college with me, very nice boy. . . So child like . . . he was here this evening." Janaki concludes and smiles as she turns her eyes to face her mother and siblings, one after another. Deeply aware that intentions are well meant, she feels hurt when she sees Aadalarasan's face turns stern and harsh.

"Mother . . . see how Brother is staring at me!" Her eyes turn teary.

"The Younger One!" the mother admonishes him. "Why do you threaten your sister?" She turns to Janaki. "Ignore him; now tell me, what happened?"

"He came and he was immediately gone," Janaki explains. "He was sorry he came when nobody's around. I wanted to introduce

him to Mother, brother and others. He said he would visit us again. Mother, do you think I did something wrong?"

"Of course not, it is okay . . . By the way, how did he know our address?"

"Well . . . You know, he had once come down to our college to photograph the students in a party . . . At that time I gave him my home address . . ."

"But how did he know you would be home today?" Alankaravalli's pointed question came upon her calmly with no trace of agitation or sarcasm normally associated with Aadalarasan. Janaki is too smart to realize that she has been trapped and she is still smarting with guilt over keeping Sundaram's visit and their long conversation a closely guarded secret.

"Well, he probably tried to reach me at work, and they must have told him I was on leave. Looks like he was in this neighborhood on some business and probably came to see you - just like that! How am I supposed to know these things? And how can I avoid inviting a visitor right at our doorstep? I handed over the key through the window to let him in - and I didn't even talk to him! What's there to talk about? He was gone in no time, nothing was said or exchanged between us . . . Is anything wrong with what I did?"

"Wrong, dead wrong!" Aadalarasan's voice is grave and accusatory. "You were wrong in welcoming him to our house - when no one was around - by voluntarily handing over the key through the window! You could have simply told him to visit us some other time. After all, what is that we need from an outsider, anyway? What you have done is wrong, wrong, dead-wrong!"

"Mother, see how he talks? Do you think I did something wrong? If you think so you may kill me with your own hands! I have my own conscience, I have done nothing wrong! I want to know what you think . . ." Janaki starts crying as she pleads for her mother's understanding.

"Your brother is certainly justified in questioning what you did," Alankaravalli tries to argue on her son's behalf. "Be rest assured that neither he nor I will ever mistake your intentions. But this world is so corrupt and you don't know how to deal with it."

Aadalarasan suddenly thinks of something and goes upstairs.

"Mother," Janaki continues: "This Sundaram is a very nice man. He knows about Ramanathan too . . . He knows I was friendly with Ramanathan . . . But I simply quashed all his enquiries with one stroke. I told him he mustn't talk about Ramanathan any more, it is all behind me; I even lied to him you know nothing about it. Do you understand why I did that? You know Ramanathan misunderstood my relationship with him; I wanted to make it clear to Sundaram that I could care less about this Ramanathan thing . . . Was that wrong on my part?"

Aadalarasan now suddenly makes his appearance before them sounding, "Mother . . . Mother," He has come down carrying the tray with cups and saucers in one hand; he seems excited as if revealing a secret hidden behind a screen.

Pin drop reigns for a few minutes. Sheer hatred and deep resentment visible on his face, Aadalarasan mocks Janaki: "You say the visitor came and was immediately gone, as I right?" He bares his teeth at her in contempt and mimics Janaki's earlier gestures, as well as her earlier remark, "Mother, did I do anything wrong?" and extends the two cups and saucers in Alankaravalli's direction.

"Mother, see what really happened! They had a tea party up in the roof garden - which was the simple reason why this lady officer had not gone to work today and stayed home the whole day. Do you know why I went upstairs? I suspected that the fellow might be still lurking there; I can't help thinking he could still be in this house somewhere. . . Let me now check the bedroom . . ." He puts away the cups and saucers on a nearby table before embarking on his next investigation.

Janaki who all this time stood passive overcome by fear and guilt, now loses her temper. "Damn you, you bastard . . ." she gnashes her teeth and hurls a cup and saucer at him.

The cup and saucer shatter to pieces on the floor and Aadalarasan, suddenly frightened, seeks refuge near next to Alankaravalli.

"See how she curses me? She has no respect for me!"

"Don't talk about respect," Janaki rebuffs him. "Don't you ever threaten me . . . That may work with Chellam . . .?"

"Why are you dragging me into this?" Chellam protests with a pathetic gesture.

"Why would I drag you into this?" Janaki hits back. "If I want to drag you . . ."

"Janaki, watch your tongue!" Alankaravalli admonishes her.

"You are always suspicious of me and speak ill of me," Janaki complains. "But I always treat you with respect and admiration." Janaki buries her face in both hands and sobs uncontrollably.

"My dear boy, are you happy now?" Alankaravalli turns to Aadalarasan. "See what you have done? It's not fair! She is one of us, and we must not cast aspersions on her . . . If we ourselves think ill of her, what about others? I know my daughter . . . Now, Janaki, why are you crying? You started the whole thing, said so many things and now you are crying too . . . After all your brother is your well-wisher; he's not suspecting you of anything. Please calm down. We are all living happily as a family and some outsider comes along and destroys our peaceful life. Looks like god doesn't want us to live in peace . . . If I am gone, I think, everything will be fine . . . I wish my life comes to end right now . . . Muruga, please take me to your abode. . ."

"Mother, don't feel sorry for yourself," Janaki pleads with her, and Chellam too joins her. "You must not say such things." Aadalarasan covers his face with both hands and calmly returns to his chair. Janaki and Chellam are now holding Alankaravalli, who wipes tears off her face, and says: "I am absolute positive that the children born in my womb will never do anything wrong. Maybe Janaki is right, this Sundaram could be a nice fellow, who knows? Why must we condemn him even before we have a chance to meet with him? Just because that Ramanathan was a jackass how can we presume all men are bad? After all Sundaram promised to visit us again, didn't he? Why can't we ask Janaki to invite him tomorrow? My dear boy, what do you think?"

"That's fine with me, if you think so."

"Hmm, we get to know him . . ." Alankaravalli winks at her son making sure Janaki hadn't noticed her hand gestures, the secret message, exchanged between the mother and son.

"Yes, Mother . . . I will ask Sundaram to be home tomorrow . . . He has given me his phone number . . . How about past five tomorrow evening? Younger Brother, you must try to be home early and join us . . . Sister Chellam, you too . . ." Janaki is excited, goes back to her chair, and rocks it.

The family members are soon deeply immersed in their own thoughts while their chairs continue to undulate to their own beat and rhythm.

** ** **

Scene III

"Mother . . . younger brother . . . Chellam, he's here, Mr. Sundaram; he's punctual just as he promised . . . He's a very nice man . . ."

"Why do you have to get excited?" Alankaravalli admonishes her. "A little modesty and shyness mayn't be out of place now." She continues: "You may sit in a corner . . . Be conscious you are in the presence of an outsider." She grabs Chellam's rocking chair and brings it to rest, and orders: "Nobody should swing the chair till he leaves the room because doing so would mean showing disrespect to him . . . I am mentioning this for Chellam and the younger one too . . . I will do all the talking, you just keep watching what goes on . . . That doesn't mean you have to be passive and remain silent; if he asks some question, you may give a simple answer. Now, remember this: we haven't invited him for a party or entertainment. We are testing him, we should never let him use his tricks on us." As Alankaravalli is outlining those plans, Sundaram alights from his car and enters the house.

Like two stage actors playing their assigned roles, Chellam and Aadalarasan look at Sundaram with forced smiles.

Seeing all of them dressed for an occasion or about to go out on an invitation, Sundaram is quick to understand this is a formal meeting. "Have I kept you waiting?" he asks. "Am I late?" He looks at his watch.

"No, you are on time," Janaki assures him. "Please meet my mother . . . Mother, this is Sundaram, my college mate . . . He's a leading photographer . . . Please come in." Alankaravalli notices Janaki's reaction.

"Please come in," Alankaravalli invites Sundaram into their company. "This is my second son Aadalarasan, a college lecturer, and this is my eldest daughter Chellam - she is a high school headmistress . . . Please sit down." She directs him to a chair - the same one that Janaki had offered him yesterday - it belonged to the eldest member of the family and has not been used for a long time. At her touch, the chair starts rocking and seems to beckon Sundaram to its warmth.

Sundaram feels a little frightened, and hesitates.

Meanwhile, Janaki goes in and fetches a chair with legs.

"I am sorry, I forgot . . ." she says. "Mother, he told me yesterday he's comfortable with this kind of chair."

"Thank you." Sundaram takes that chair.

Alankaravalli now addresses Sundaram. "Yesterday when you came, none of us was here, and Janaki told me you were gone immediately. You must not mistake us; here, in this house, we follow a tradition. We visit people only after giving them some advance notice. We have been following this custom since my father's days. My father Rao Bahadur Makizamaran Pillai was a great Tamil scholar; he served as a *tehsildar*. We belong to a very prestigious family; all our family members have been raised with traditional values, religious fervor and Tamil scholarship. Now, of course, things have changed! It is fate! Fate corrupts and that's how people change! But change doesn't affect each and everyone; it has not changed this family! We are a special class, we live our own lives with honor, and the present generation may even look at us with suspicion and disapproval . . . But one can't fault them; they have their own morals, we have ours . . . We have a unique style . . . I have single-handedly brought up my four children . . . Only *Lord Muruga* knows what I have gone through . . ." Alankaravalli's eyes become teary; the children's eyes turn bright and look at their mother.

Sundaram feels a little awkward; he is not quite prepared for the tension in the air so soon after his arrival, but he listens to her with sympathy.

"Then, my eldest son was just eight years old; the two sisters were younger to him by two, two years; the younger one was only six. Chellam was four and Janaki was an infant. Do you remember those days? How old are you?"

"I am thirty-four."

Alankaravalli bends her fingers and makes some mental calculations, "I see, you are as old as my younger son . . ." She is once again lost in her own world of good old days. "It was the war time . . . there was famine all around. These four children even suffered from skin rashes . . . For some reason, those days everyone suffered from skin disorders . . . I had to take care of these children, I had no one to help me. Unfortunately for me, my father had also

passed away." Alankaravalli mourns for her dead father and tears copiously flow from her eyes.

"So Janaki's father is no more?" Sundaram volunteers a question with some hesitation.

"It's fate, only fate!" Alankaravalli replies. "What more can I say? I grew up as my father's favorite daughter, but fate tossed me into hell. I was spared the horrors by the grace of *Lord Muruga*. Now I am living as the fondest mother of my children. What I had endured in the interim period was hell, just hell! Please ask me no more questions; it is too painful."

"If you call that hell, how did you end up with these wonderful children?" Sundaram thinks - naively - his question would demonstrate his admiration for Alankaravalli and her children.

"That's where you are totally wrong," Alankaravalli answers him. "I have experienced what life is all about. When I was fourteen, I became the mother of my first child; he was a sweet child, all my children are sweet . . . As you know, a pearl is born in an oyster shell just as a lotus is found in a swamp . . . Does it mean we can pick up the oysters and string them together as a necklace? Because of the lotus can we jump into the swamp all over? What do you say?" Sundaram is tongue-tied at her rhetoric.

"I keep talking about myself and our own family," Alankaravalli admits. "I forgot to ask about you. Janaki tells me you went to school with her . . . Where are your parents now? Are you married?"

"My parents live in a village. They want me to get married, but right now I don't feel like getting married."

"I think you may be right. My eldest son was also against marriage . . . He's a great philosopher . . . Now, he has become a monk." Alankaravalli closes her eyes, opens them again and stares at the picture of *Lord Muruga* on the wall.

"Well, you have been here for a short while and I think you have been bored enough - come on - let's have some tea." Sundaram is now led to the dining table where he is first served a snack.

"We always like simple food habits; I am not sure if you like this . . ." Alankaravalli's modest apology strikes Sundaram rather ironic as he struggles to swallow a snack served to him.

"Normally I take no snacks in the evening," Sundaram explains. "I take only coffee. I have no strong opinion as to what I should eat or should not. You were telling me a few minutes ago some people never change . . . I belong to the ordinary group of people who change . . ." Sundaram is laughing even as he sounds a little serious.

"So when I come across a family that follows a strict regimen and sticks to it, I am overcome by respect and admiration," he adds. "Because if someone can succeed in some effort which is beyond ours, we should be more than pleased. What do you say?" He tries to open a conversation with Aadalarasan.

"How admirable, what a lofty idea!" Aadalarasan feigns praise and looks at Alankaravalli who seems to agree with him by nodding her head and appreciating her son's cleverness.

"How come she's not saying anything?" Sundaram glances at Chellam while nibbling a biscuit and trying to draw her attention into the conversation. Chellam smiles, is overcome by shyness and bows down her head.

"She's always like that," Janaki tries to explain. "She doesn't talk much, that's her style."

"All my children - every one of them - is different, and by the grace of *Lord Muruga* they all turned out fine," says Alankaravalli. "You must meet with my eldest boy . . . You will never come across such boys anymore . . . He's just like his grandfather . . . All these are my children of course, but he's different . . . What do you say?" She turns to Aadalarasan.

"Yes, I agree . . . I feel like worshipping him."

"He's now forty years old; even now he is childlike and would sleep next to me . . . He would do nothing to displease me . . . He wouldn't question me on any account." Alankaravalli's voice is suddenly choked with emotion and she tries to wipe off the tears with the tip end of her sari.

There is a sudden lull in the air with a whiff of sadness.

"Where's he now?"

Janaki's face turns ashen in panic. The children are helplessly staring at Alankaravalli - it seems as if Sundaram asked a question he was not supposed to; it is as if a cop was caught with a gang of murderers and was demanding to know the whereabouts of a slain victim. The children seem to want their mother to extricate them from this rather unsavory situation.

"I am sorry . . . Did I hurt your feelings?"

"No . . . nothing like that . . . He has been so close to our hearts, he has never been separated from us even a day, so we feel terribly sorry for what we are going through . . . Now, how about some more tea?" Alankaravalli raises the teakettle over Sundaram's cup.

"That's enough . . . that's fine."

After tea, they remain seated at the dining table for some time. Nobody says or speaks anything.

Suddenly, Alankaravalli begins:

" . . . He was like a child . . . but he was a sage. Even during those bad days I had him go to the college and get a B.A. degree; he graduated with flying colors . . . I personally took care of him, talked with others and got him a job . . . Remember the bank you saw on your way to this house? He worked there as the bank agent. It was his income that helped me bring up my children and put them through college. Everything was fine; I wanted his life to follow the usual, conventional course and got him married . . . That was my undoing . . . "

"She's an educated girl, his wife - she came from a prestigious family, and beautiful too - so I was pleased with their marriage. My son was a philosopher and she was an animal, a brute - that's my mistake. I had foolishly entrusted my boy to the care of a wild animal . . . I really don't know what happened . . . Suddenly, one day - it was midnight - I heard my boy cry, 'Mother . . . mother.' I came out of my room and he was standing there before *Lord Muruga* with folded palms and shedding copious tears . . . That devil of the woman was standing right there with her hands on the hips and mocking him. 'What did you do to him?' I asked her.

Now, tell me, did I do something wrong? Can't a mother ask a question? She said something in English - I too can understand English - she called my son impotent and shouted on the top of her voice so that everybody could hear . . . She was gone the next day . . . I certainly deserved that treatment, I surely did . . . My son too was gone the following week . . . Later, he became a travelling monk . . . Now, do you know the story of *Ramakrishna Paramahansa*? How about *Adi Sankara*? Have you read Mahatma Gandhi's writings on celibacy? Who are those people? Can anyone call them impotent? After all a dog and pig live with potency . . . Anyway, it's a good riddance, it is our good luck that our daughter-in-law is gone for ever . . . You can't even call her a human being . . ."

"Where's he now - I mean your eldest son? I would very much like to meet with him."

"Oh, what a nice man to move with!" Janaki is deeply engrossed in her brother's memory.

"It doesn't matter where he is," Alankaravalli deflects the question. "Wherever he lives, that site would become a shrine. I go to temple only because he too occasionally makes temple visits . . . Our village is close by and now he lives there . . . I know he will visit us soon. . .By the grace of *Lord Muruga*, he will soon become one among us."

The time is now approaching seven.

Sundaram looks at his watch.

"I am very pleased to meet with you," says Alankaravalli. "It is rarely that one comes across decent people . . . I consider you as one of my own family, you too must consider your siblings as my own children . . . Unfortunately, this world doesn't appreciate the love between siblings; it doesn't even understand the love between a mother and son. I want you to feel free and visit us as and when you please, but remember this: please, please don't make any telephone calls or try to meet with my children outside this house. I am like your mother, I know this world . . . So, do visit us, and talk to us . . . What do you say?"

"Yes, mother."

"Mr. Sundaram, you must visit us often." Janaki takes the liberty of addressing him and seconds her mother's suggestion.

"I will . . . Thank you . . ." Sundaram bids them farewell with folded hands.

The old car rattles off.

After its departure, Alankaravalli is back on her chair and starts conversation with Aadalarasan.

"Looks like a decent boy . . . What do you think? I feel he's a very decent boy." She rocks the chair.

"We will have to just wait and see," Aadalarasan replies. "If that's the way Mother feels . . ." He too starts the chair.

And the chairs keep rolling . . .

** ** **

Scene IV

Janaki is not yet back from work. Two months have elapsed since Sundaram made a visit to this house to meet with the family members. In the intervening period, he has made three visits - every one of them on a Sunday. It was always Alankaravalli who did most of the talking and her children spoke, once in a while, as a simple rejoinder. So the three visits typically followed the same pattern like the first one.

Still the family members have undergone a change in their outlook; they harbor a feeling that Sundaram is trying to test them and in the process using Janaki - one of their fondest and dearest family members - as an instrument to promote his self-interest. So they are deeply suspicious and even afraid of him.

Alankaravalli is now seated on her chair, Chellam is pacing up and down the room searching for a woolen bundle.

"I need it right away . . ." Chellam nervously wrings her hands, goes inside, and brings out a sweater she recently started knitting, unravels it and busily resumes reworking.

Aadalarasan comes to the room dressed in a white shirt; a Turkish towel covers his torso and wide *vibhuti* stripes adorn his forehead.

"My dear young one, please sit down . . . Did you carry out your own little investigation today?" Alankaravalli queries. "Does she still ride with him?" She asks the question with the same interest she evinced the other day while talking about the incident in Aadalarasan's college principal's room.

"Mother, I can't do this spying anymore!" Aadalarasan replies. "I don't think it is really necessary anymore. We need to control the flood with a dam. That Sundaram fellow is a rogue! He acts like a nice fellow when he shows up here but outside this house he's a star-crossed lover! Why blame him? It is Janaki - how can we deal with her?" He gnashes his teeth in wild anger.

"Don't get mad . . . I know how you feel . . ." Alankaravalli tries to calm her son. "She wouldn't do anything wrong . . . Finally, this too would end up like that Ramanathan story. I don't like to see these episodes repeat one after another. These wild Romeos are always looking for some innocent victim. I am going to disci-

pline Janaki today . . ." She closes her eyes as if in a deep thought, and rocks the chair.

"I feel so disgraced!" Aadalarasan shouts. "How can she - a part of our traditional family background - do such a thing? Now everybody knows about them - how she comes home in his car; how he picks her up on her way to work when she gets off the bus and drops her off at the office; they go to restaurants too. Wherever I happen to turn I am asked by each and everyone about my younger sister . . . Everyone has a different story to tell . . . When I am walking alone I get a feeling that someone is following me to reveal to me yet another scandalous story about her . . . Do you know how many times I turned around to get some hint but ended up in vain?" Aadalarasan seems frustrated.

"We are decent people, we want to live with dignity," Alankaravalli says. "Janaki is also like that; she's one of us." Even as Alankaravalli is talking, Janaki is seen entering the house.

Janaki's appearance and looks in recent months have undergone a major change. She is happy deep inside and is immersed in mental dreams.

Even before Janaki could go into her private room to change, Alankaravalli opens her eyes, gnashes her teeth and yells at her, "Janaki!" Her voice is hideous and how violent it sounds!

Janaki approaches her.

"Come close to me," the mother orders her. "I need to see something." She lets her eyes wander over Janaki's body, head to foot.

"Did you go to beach today?"

"Mother . . . I was . . ."

"Did you?" The violence in her voice seems to shake the main hall.

"Hmm, I did."

"Ask why her hair is disheveled," Aadalarasan suggests to his mother.

"There was the sea breeze in the beach . . . so the hair get disheveled . . ." Janaki answers him with suppressed anger.

"Will the sea breeze erase the dot on the forehead too?"

"No, the sea breeze wouldn't erase the dot on the forehead; perhaps it was erased when I used my handkerchief . . . I don't understand these questions!" Janaki yells at him.

"You will understand, yes, you will," Aadalarasan replies, points a finger across her face while gnashing his teeth violently. Then slowly, with a heavy voice, he asks her: "Did he kiss you?"

"Yes, he did kiss me . . ." Janaki answers. She closes her eyes even as she gnashes her teeth and recalls an imaginary scene floating in her mind.

"You devil!" Alankaravalli can no more contain her rage. "I never thought someone born in my womb would do such a scandalous thing . . . *Muruga*, is this fate too?"

"What scandal? Janaki retorts. "Mother, didn't you tell Sundaram the other day that he is like your own son? Would I never go to beach with my own brothers? Don't you ever kiss your sons? Doesn't younger brother affectionately kiss Chellam. I kissed him the same way, what is wrong about it?" She continues: "Sundaram is not a bad man . . . I have already found out everything about him . . . He will never misbehave with me; you need to have no concern . . ."

Aadalarasan now joins the fray. "That Sundaram fellow has already coached her enough; these are certainly not Janaki's words." His voice rises in snarling eloquence, continues with a mixture of mischief, suspicion and vulgarity. "I think she needs to be examined by a lady doctor . . . I am a kind of suspicious . . ." Janaki throws out the lunch box at him, and yells:

"Do it please, take me to a doctor! Mother, I want to know whether I am capable . . . I need to know . . . Younger brother, please help me . . . Why should I ask you? I myself can go . . . Will you believe me if I get a doctor's certificate? It is not because I want you to believe me . . . I want to believe it myself . . . I am going to the doctor right away, now . . ." "She begins to run out of the room.

"Janaki dear," Alankaravalli, even as she's crying, runs after her daughter, grabs her shoulder and stops her. "Do you think I am ignorant? Do you believe a doctor knows more than a mother? No, please ignore what your younger brother says. You know his nature, don't you? I am only worried about others spreading rumors about you. Otherwise, I will never think of questioning your personal conduct . . . Please sit down, don't get mad at me . . ." "She invites Janaki to sit close to her.

Janaki's anger and resentment are from subdued. "Mother, tell me what is right? What is sin? Do you mean to say sex is sin? Then, how did you manage to become a mother of four children? How? Can you explain how? How did you give birth to four children?" She pounds the chair with her arms.

Aadalarasan now seizes her attention and addresses her - like a lawyer.

"Miss Janaki," he asks staring closely at her face and leaning his hands on the chair arms. "How old are you?"

"I am thirty."

"Thirty! How come in these thirty years you didn't feel like asking this question? Why? Why not? Does it take so many years to bring up this question? That fellow must have suggested you ask Mother this question so that he can easily influence you . . ."

"Yes, he did ask me such a question . . . When we discuss sex, he raised this point. I can't bring myself to believe Mother is a sinner . . . It doesn't matter where the question comes from . . . Younger brother, answer me, do you think sex is sin? Is Mother a sinner? Then, the whole world is mired in sin . . . Younger brother, why don't you answer me?"

"Let me answer that question!" Alankaravalli shrieks on the top of her voice. "I did commit a sin . . . Let me explain how I endured that hellish nightmare!" She smites her abdomen, and continues her outbursts:

"It was nothing but hell! I felt as if a wild wolf was tearing my body apart . . . Every time it was like being sacrificed to an evil deity . . . Remember this: women born on this earth are supposed to be preys to male passion! Yes, women are just a game, and men

are so eager to devour us! For women, it is just a horrible pain! I felt that pain when I conceived my children - when I carried them in my womb, and when I delivered them. I still feel that pain today." She tries to smite her abdomen viciously in unabated anger.

"Mother, mother . . . Please forgive me . . ." Janaki tries to grab her mother's hand. Chellam and Aadalarasan are also sobbing uncontrollably.

Alankaravalli wipes her face, folds her both palms respectfully before *Lord Muruga's* picture and talks to herself: "*Muruga*, am I wrong in wishing that my children will never fall into this hellish trap, as I did? Please tell me, am I wrong? After all, how can I control others' fates? Why should I even care? "She keenly looks at Janaki.

"Janaki . . . my younger one . . . Chellam . . . I want to tell you something; if you want to get married and lead your own lives, that's fine with me; I will not stand in your way . . . I will be more than willing to finalize your marriages. Please don't mistake me." On hearing this, Aadalarasan and Chellam move closer to their mother and protest even while sobbing: "Mother, why are you saying all these things? We always want you to live with us. Let Janaki get married, if she want to . . . We will be always living in this house with you."

"All right, Janaki, you may ask Sundaram to visit us tomorrow. I will talk to him . . . But remember this: if you trust him and the outside world and leave our company, you will be facing a lot of suffering . . . As a mother, that's all I can say. You may ask Sundaram to move into this house and live with us." Janaki can hardly believe her ears. She is delighted at this suggestion, smiles and, for a while, becomes speechless. Then she shouts "Mother!" and fondly hugs Alankaravalli. She still fights off tears, laughs again and rushes out of the room with joy.

Aadalarasan looks peevish and angry, closes his eyes and silently returns to his chair. "Be patient," Alankaravalli whispers to him in an assuring tone. "Nothing is lost."

The rocking chairs keep rolling. . .

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Scene V

The man the family has been ostensibly missing for a long time - the one variously described by Alankaravalli as a sage, philosopher, monk and a dutiful son - is now sitting on his rocking chair. He is dressed in a short-sleeve shirt and white pajamas. Though only forty, his calm posture and mature deposition make him look much older, maybe sixty.

He is alone - smoking a cigarette - and the smoke fills up the entire hall.

Alankaravalli comes from inside the house and applies some *vibhuti* to his forehead.

"I can't believe this," she says. "How did you get into this bad habit?"

"Mother . . . You must forgive me. . . Please don't ask me to give up smoking. . . If you insist, I can give up smoking, but then I will feel terrible. . ."

"That's fine," Alankaravalli answers. "When I look at other boys - the horrible things they do - yours is no crime . . . But please don't smoke too much, it will do you no good . . ."

"Yes, mother . . . I will control my habit," he replies - like a child assuring its mother. "By the way, where are others - brother, Janaki and Chellam?"

"They are saying their prayers . . ."

Janaki now joins them.

"Brother, I am glad I was able to spend two days in your company. I feel like flying back home as soon as my work is over; please, don't leave us anymore!" She holds on to his hand. Meanwhile, Chellam and Aadalarasan join them.

"Mother . . . I would very much like to go back to work . . ."

"My dear boy, what is the big hurry? Please wait for one more month."

Outside, that old model car is heard rattling, followed by a horn repeatedly trying to pierce through the ear drum.

"Mother, he's coming . . ." Janaki is very happy to rise from her seat.

"All right . . . you better sit down . . . I can't understand why he's coming today - at a time like this . . ." Alankaravalli seems vexed by the sudden intrusion of an outsider.

"Mother . . . Who's here?" The elder brother asks.

"Brother, he's my friend . . ."

"Let him come . . . We should all be happy when a friend visits us . . ." He also rises to greet the visitor.

"My dear boy, you stay right here," Alankaravalli orders him. "I will explain everything to you." She walks to the main entrance, opens the door and returns without even glancing at Sundaram. Chellam continues her knitting and Aadalarasan closes his eyes tightly.

Janaki hurries and fetches a chair for Sundaram.

"Mr. Sundaram, please come in . . . meet my elder brother; this is Sundaram, my college friend . . . he is now a leading photographer in the city . . ."

"How do you do?" The elder brother shakes hand with Sundaram and introduces himself: "I am Muthu Manikkam . . . I was unwell for some time and hospitalized . . . Now I am doing fine . . ."

"Please get him some tea," Muthu Manikkam requests of Janaki.

"No thanks . . . I just now had some . . ."

"That's fine . . . I will now have my second dose and I would like to have it in your company. Janaki, please get us some tea. . ."

As Janaki serves them tea in cups on a tray, they take small sips.

"He's here . . . How come everybody is silent?" Muthu Manikkam asks his mother.

"Well, we need to discuss a lot of things . . . I don't know where to begin . . ."

Muthu Manikkam pulls out a cigarette pack from his pocket and pushes it toward Sundaram who at first hesitates and then helps himself with a cigarette. Alankaravalli ignores this brief exchange between her son and Sundaram and, even without looking at Sundaram's face, begins: "Dear young man . . . I trusted you and let you move freely with my daughter, but you have disregarded my advice and chosen to meet her outside this house. Do you admit that was a wrong thing to do?"

"No," Sundaram replies in a monosyllable.

"That's all right, what's wrong about it?" Muthu Manikkam asks, excitement ringing in his voice. "How can we tell him what he may or may not do? Maybe we can talk our daughter out of it, but Janaki is not a child, she's an officer! She's thirty years old! Doesn't she know what she's doing?"

"My dear boy, you don't understand these things," Alankaravalli advises her son. "Just keep quiet and see what's going on . . ." Then she turns to Sundaram, and addresses him: "You have corrupted her mind. She was clear all these days about what is wrong and sinful. But now she thinks those very things are right and proper; you have even asked her to question me on matters that are strictly personal and are of private nature - without any regard to a little decency a mother deserves!"

"Oh, quite interesting," Muthu Manikkam exclaims. "What is it?"

Sundaram responds: "I know what you mean . . . The other day Janaki and I had a discussion about sex . . . Janaki's argument was that sex is sin . . . I told her if that were so, then all humans are sinners . . . If every parent is a sinner, that makes all of us sinners . . . I told her sin is not in action . . . Whether we commit a sinful act or not, we are automatically called sinners because of our association with those who are condemned as sinners . . ."

"Very clever! You are right!" Muthu Manikkam congratulates Sundaram.

Alankaravalli stares at both of them with rising irritation and resentment.

"Elder one, please keep quiet!" she once again orders her son. Then he addresses Sundaram. "Look here, I asked you to come over here only for this: you have changed her mind. Now she insists on marrying you . . ." Janaki is overcome by shyness and bows down her head. Muthu Manikkam is pleased to see his sister in such a blissful mood.

Alankaravalli goes on: "It is important you clearly express your decision on the matter without giving any room for complaint from others . . . But before you have the final word, let me speak out what's on my mind. Janaki is a child; like a parrot, she has been repeating what she heard from you . . . I understand her very well . . . If you get married to her, I will never send her out of this house . . . She can't live away from me, she just can't do such a thing . . . So, you must be willing to live with us, in this house . . . That's all I expect from you . . . You don't have to do anything else for her . . . Think about it, that's all I have to say!" She vents out her feelings in quick outbursts.

Janaki desperately stares at Sundaram - awaiting his consent.

Chellam and Aadalarasan also look at Sundaram; they are concerned he might oblige Alankaravalli.

'How can anyone justify this arrangement?' Muthu Manikkam wonders and silently scratches his head.

Alankaravalli seems confident about the final outcome; she remains calm and quiet as she awaits Sundaram's response.

Sundaram clears his throat and begins:

"There are three issues we need to consider now: they need to be thrashed out up in front whether I or somebody else wants to marry Janaki. Number one: what does this individual - the man who wants to marry Janaki - think of marriage in terms of a personal relationship? Is he getting into this because he has been asked to or . . ."

"Yes, you are absolutely right . . . I myself have become a victim because I followed my mother's advice and got into marriage," says Muthu Manikkam. "What is next?"

"Number two: we need to know if your daughter is capable of leading a married life with a man - I mean, not at an intellectual level - but at all levels . . ."

"Yes, Mr. Sundaram . . . I even thought of consulting a doctor to know my condition," Janaki informs him even as her voice betrays her lack of self-confidence.

"And, finally number three: after they get married, Janaki and her husband must begin a new life and not become a part of this rocking chair lifestyle. They must be released from this dungeon. When a woman becomes a wife she will have to loosen her bonds with others so that the new bond would grow stronger and more intense . . . If a woman at thirty wants to remain a mother's child, so be it, let her remain a child; she would never become a mother; she must not. You must seriously consider these matters. . . After this, it is no big deal . . . Your daughter can easily attract several suitors. I will not be the only one interested in her. Please think it over."

"What's there to think further?" Muthu Manikkam interjects. "I think you have given a lot of thought to this. You are right. Now, Janaki, you are not a child anymore! You are thirty years old, only you can make a final decision in this matter. You must not be concerned over what we or others think . . . Life is meant for living, not for destroying. You may ask me why I am saying this: it is too late for me; I am just made this way. So, I am telling you, one should live! I have already become a mother's boy, and I guess one son is enough for her! Even if I can't enjoy my life, I feel like watching and enjoying others leading happy lives. . . Janaki, why don't you give a try? You will never get a better husband than Mr. Sundaram . . . Mr. Sundaram, please marry my sister. I know you like her, I can see that in your eyes." He seems carried away in exuberance when Alankaravalli, suddenly, accosts him, screams "You cad . . . Shameless fellow . . ." and violently slaps him across his face.

"He's crazy . . . He's loony," she continues. "All these days he was in a nursing home. I am his mother, too fond of him. I have been deceiving myself thinking he has become a philosopher and monk . . . I lied to others that I was visiting a temple but I was actually going to the hospital where he was committed . . . You must

not make any decision based on what this crazy fellow tells you. I have already told you my final decision: I will not be taken by your tricks. I will never, never let my daughter - she's now gainfully employed, earns a good salary in the range of six and seven hundred rupees a month - to be taken away from me. I know this world, I know it better than you do . . . She's not someone who is interested in a life indiscriminately producing one baby after another, and finally ending up in a street corner as a destitute! Now, Janaki, if you want such a life, you are free to elope with anybody you like . . . I will consider it a good riddance!"

"Mother, mother . . ." Janaki implores her. "I shall never leave you!" She lets her hands warmly embrace her mother.

"That brings us to the end," Sundaram mumbles and rises from his seat. "Anyhow, Mr. Muthu Manikkam, I am very pleased to meet with you . . . Good bye!" He leaves the house scarcely noticing others.

Alankaravalli closes the door after Sundaram's exit. Outside, the car is heard starting.

"Mother . . . mother, please forgive me! . . . I said all kinds of wrong things . . . please forgive me! . . ." Muthu Manikkam is pleading and crying aloud.

"I forgot I was crazy . . . You see, I am still a sick man! What would a doctor know about a child's health, anyway? Only a mother would know . . . Mother, don't you agree? That's why a mother is badly needed in this world! Motherhood! Motherhood! Mother, I feel terribly sorry you don't have a mother!"

Elder brother suddenly starts swinging his rocking chair!

And how fast it spins!

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