

THE JOURNEY

Mother is standing near the kitchen entrance wiping tears off her face. Father is in his room upstairs – sulking in rage. My younger brother, like a cat lost, is prowling aimlessly inside the house. I am ready; what is there to be ready about? I have packed in my suitcase the four or five pieces of dresses I had brought with me. I put away the two books in a hand bag. It is time to leave for the rail station; still, no one seems willing to talk to me.

Having nothing else to do I asked my brother to fetch me a taxi. Mother, taken aback, called him back but he had already slipped out of the door. Then Mother went upstairs to call Father. I didn't want Father to walk down the stairs, so I went up to him.

“Let her leave, if she wants,” he was yelling “Where's the need to see me if she doesn't listen to what elders say?” I entered his room just when Mother came out in tears. Father averted the eyes away from me. I was at loss for words. To ask for

his forgiveness seemed quite an anomaly; I know he would never forgive me. Still, I am in no mood to reconsider my decision. It is not that I don't love or respect him; I also have love and respect for myself. I believe I am doing the right thing and this concerns my life; I know Mother is upset and Father is angry, still I can't bow to their wishes. Will he relent if I plead with him, “Father, please don't force me in this important matter. If you are concerned with my happiness please don't insist that I marry the boy of your choice.” Who knows? On the other hand might I give in if he says, “My dear girl, my honor is now at stake; I have already given my word to the boy's parents; this alliance came to us unsolicited and I want to keep my word.” Does it mean I reject my love and regard for Father because I reject his advice?

“Father,” I addressed him in a tone of a formal leave taking. Just then the horn sounded from the taxi street below. Finally, Father said, “Okay, you may go.” I came down the stairs. Mother was putting a few oranges into my handbag. I was on the

verge of making a ritual protest: "Mother, why I need all these?" but resisted the impulse. I know she's upset, so I silently walked to the taxi. "Study well for the exams and take care of your health." Those words were from Father who had just then climbed down the stairs to see me off. As I neared the taxi I heard Mother say, "Wait a minute, come back here." What happened? I looked around and noticed a lone priest on the street walking toward our home. "What's the big deal?" I muttered to myself and entered the taxi. My brother put away my suitcase inside the car.

"Make sure she has a safe and sound journey," Father cautioned Brother and I couldn't help smiling at the little fellow. The taxi sped on its way.

"Sister! Can I ask you something?"

"Why did you tell Father you are against this marriage?" he asks with a little hesitation. I said nothing and looked out; the glass window has been tarnished with dirt making the view hazy. I pulled down the glass window. Now the air felt hot - reminding me of Murthy's breathing.

"Sister, I have already told all my friends that Shekar is going to be my brother-in-law!"

I feel sorry for the poor fellow; how can I comfort him? Shall I assure him he would be soon getting to know a nice, different brother-in-law? I recall Father informed all his friends that Shekar would be his son-in-law. Well, Father has actually hurried through the whole thing!

I didn't expect to see Shekar at the railway station. He opened the taxi door for me. A sudden suspicion overcame me: Is this the last weapon at Father's disposal? I felt my body stiffen.

"Why are you late?" Shekar asked and took the suitcase from Brother. "The train is already on the platform." He added he had already bought the tickets, so we walked to the platform.

"I didn't expect you," I said.

"I want to have a word with you," Shekar said. He took a final puff and threw the cigarette butt on the ground and crushed it under his foot. Whatever he might say, I have made up my mind; I will let

him know I am not about to change my decision. The engine blared and we hastened our walk. The first class compartment was at the farthest end of the platform and we got tired on reaching it fighting our way through the men and women milling the platform. I sat in the compartment near a window. Brother stood outside holding on to the window sill; Shekar was nowhere to be seen; then I saw him coming down with a few magazines in hand. How thoughtful of him! I took the magazines and thanked him.

Shekar took out a cigar and struck out a match when the engine blared, again. Suddenly, the flame went out; he lit another and shielded it, successfully, with the other hand. The train shook a little and began to pull away.

“You wanted to have a word with me,” I blurted out feeling a little ashamed I couldn’t hold back my enthusiasm. Shekar stared at me with the matchstick still in his hand. Then the flame hurt him and the cigarette fell off his lips. The train was now in motion but my eyes were still riveted on his face.

What was he trying to say? That I had deceived him? That I was acting stubborn and not heeding the elders’ advice? That he could certainly find a wife more beautiful and intelligent? Then in a quick, wild sweep Shekar came up to me and extended his hand. I offered mine. Smiling and affectionate, Shekar clutched my hand with his and then let it go. The train sped on.

Until then I had scarcely noticed the other passengers. The compartment was deserted except for a *Swamiji* reading some philosophical text. Good company, I thought. Maybe the shadow cast on the wall revealed my presence to him because he raised his head from the book. He looked like a Bengali. “How far are you traveling?” he asked. I was a little taken aback on realizing that I was keenly watching him for some time now, and told him, “I think I am going to Waltair.” My answer sounded awkward even to me; after all what does the word “think” mean?

He half smiled and said, "I knew right away when I noticed you that you are going to be a philosopher."

How flattering, I thought, with a chuckle. Lest the Swamiji felt offended, I looked at him, again. He calmly looked at me and redirected his attention to the book in hand. My admiration for him grew stronger and I didn't want to cause him any more inconvenience I began reading *Leviathan* that I presently drew from my bag. Some fifteen pages into the book, I could go no further with the train wobbling and inducing head ache. I spent the next few minutes watching through the window the trees and farms passing by. I recalled Shekar rushing with his hand stretched toward me on the platform. I remembered the magazines he had bought for me. I glanced through the pages of TIME and then read a couple of stories from the Telugu weeklies. Soon I got bored and cast aside the magazines. Now I took out the book by Hobbs. The lights went up; the trees and objects now glistened in bright colors; far away, the moss-laden mountains seemed daubed with a

light touch of paint. The lines on the book pages seemed to be fading and I wiped the eyes with the tip of my sari. The letters were in no hurry to reach my senses and were becoming less and less familiar.

Again, I looked at the Swamiji. He was still in his form, fully concentrated on the book. What's he studying – so seriously? I hate those passengers who never engage in informal chitchat and banter with others. As for me I am forced to keep myself occupied because I am always preparing for the exams. Suddenly I felt hungry and there were no signs the train would soon stop in any station. I remembered the oranges mother gave me. I took out one and was about to peel it when I, after a pause, took out another and offered it to *Swamiji* "Would you like one?" He accepted it with a smile but set it aside and continued reading. I was aghast. I was determined to draw him into a conversation. I was looking at him even as I was peeling the fruit. I could not help thinking about him: How old is he? Where does he come from? What's his name? Why

did he become a monk? When? Where does he live now? Then, I provided my own answers: He could be fifty, belongs either to Banaras or Gaya. What about his home town? I began imagining the towns and cities he could have hailed from, but nothing came to mind. What made him renounce life? Was it because he couldn't take care of his wife and children? Did he accumulate a lot of debt? Or did he seek this life because he could never get any gainful employment?

“I think you are confused!” Suddenly I heard the words uttered in Telugu. He's an Andhra just like I was, though I have no idea of his region. I was a little ashamed that I was watching him too closely for some time now; still I managed to question him, “What makes you so sure I am confused?”

“Well, you seem unable to concentrate on any single task.”

“Does it mean my thinking that you were concentrating on your book was just an illusion?”

“Well, why don't you take this book and test me?” he said, smiling. He beat me in my game. I looked at the book's title: *Ramakrishna Paramahansa*. I flipped the first page and saw the stamp, *Ramakrishna Mission Library, Calcutta*.

I asked as I returned him the book: “How long have you been involved in this?”

“More than twenty-five years.”

“Pardon my curiosity. What caused your aversion to life?”

“It is no crime to satisfy one's curiosity. It does one's mind no good to avoid a direct question and go on beating around the bush; it is neither healthy nor helpful to one's mind. You are assuming that I dislike this world. No, the truth is I lost interest in what the material world could offer me. That's the reason for my present way of life.”

I acknowledged his reply with a smile. I felt like asking him why he found no joy in the material world, but that might be disrespectful. I changed my line of questioning.

“Where are you headed now?”

“I have been designated as a spokesman for the Vivekananda Centenary Celebrations; I am presently visiting the main branches of our Mission and collecting information to give a lecture on Vivekananda’s philosophy. I am on my way to Calcutta after a stopover in Vishakhapatnam.”

“How long will you be staying in Vishakhapatnam?” I was eager to know. He replied, “Just one day.”

“I will surely attend your lecture,” I told him.

Our further conversation was interrupted when the train reached Kazipet. A couple entered the compartment, and their luggage – trunks, suitcases and other paraphernalia consisting of fruit baskets, flower bouquets, pickle bottles - filled up the entire compartment. One could hardly move around; when you want to go to cloak room you have to jump around the items on the floor and make your way. I suspect the couple had, inadvertently, let their goods scratch the Swamiji’s legs. Poor man! I

noticed the smirk on his face that lasted just half a minute before turning into a smile. I mentally extolled his tolerance.

Swamiji said he would not have any dinner that night. His meal consisted of the orange I gave him, washed down with plain water. I got out, walked over the platform and brought packets of *puris* and potato curry. I bought a *lassi* from a vendor on the train. Around ten, I believe, I went to sleep.

I woke up early in the next morning when the train reached Eluru. Only now did I take a good look at the woman who boarded the train at Kazipet. She could be twenty-five and while one may not call her beautiful, she did possess an attractive face. It looked like a familiar face, though I couldn’t remember where I might have seen it. Her husband was a total stranger to me, but the woman was definitely someone I had seen before. I set out to confirm my suspicion and began asking the woman, “Where are you going?”

Her reply, “We are getting off at Nidadavolu and then proceeding to Narsapur,” dampened my spirits.

I know no one from Narsapur. Where else could I have seen her? Could they be from either Hyderabad or Waltair? I am not familiar with any other city.

Now, it was her turn to question me. I told her I was going to Waltair.

“Are you studying there?”

“Yes.”

“Where? At the A.V.N.?”

“No, I am with the University.”

“Do you happen to know one Murthy – Y.N. Murthy?”

Now, I could hardly contain my excitement. So she knows Murthy; I hope she’s not related to him.

“How do you know him?” I asked as if I own Murthy to myself.

“He’s my elder brother,” she replied with a touch of pride in her voice.

Now I could make out the connection. It was the facial resemblance that set off my doubts. She inquired me about my area of study, and I told her.

“You seem to know my brother very well,” she said and moved closer to me. Meanwhile, her husband brought in and served us *idlis*.

“Do you happen to know that my brother has a girlfriend?” she asked in a gossipy tone. Suddenly I became reserved and my lips were quivering. I managed to plead ignorance, and tell her: “He has many admirers and friends; he moves socially with a lot of people.”

The woman saw me as plain and simple.

“I asked because I heard rumors that he is in love with a girl,” she said. “Our father has lined up quite a few girls for him, but he wouldn’t budge. My mother keeps worrying if he is interested in a girl from a different caste.”

‘You need have no concerns,’ I desperately wanted to assure her. ‘I am the girl he’s in love with!’ But I restrained myself and tried a

distraction: “Where do your parents live?” The woman was easy going, frank and open. Feed her a tidbit of anything and she would keep talking about it – expressing her opinion with no reservation whatsoever. I liked her disposition and felt happy she would be my future sister-in-law. I could certainly look forward to enjoying her company in future.

Murthy’s sister and her husband got off at Nidadavolu; Swamiji and I were the only passengers left in the compartment; each one of us picked up a book and resumed the journey.

The train reached Rajamundry. I was feeling listless and thought of taking in a walk on the platform.

“Swamiji, I should be back shortly, “I said and arose from my seat.

“Please come back soon,” he said, smiling. “You seem to forget yourself while reading magazines.”

The bookstall was at the far end of the platform. I was standing and watching the scenes unfolding

before me. A vendor, carrying books on both hands, asked me – in a mild tone – if I would be interested in buying “*Helpful Guide for the Teenager.*” I said no but he wouldn’t listen and went on drawing my attention to other books like ‘*The Marital Bliss,*’ ‘*The First Night,*’ and ‘*The Sixty . . .*’ I sternly told him I was not interested. He walked away toward a compartment. Now a flower vendor passed me hawking roses and *kanakarambalu* with his ear-splitting shouts. I noticed a man selling grapes and I thought of buying some for the Swamiji. As I was walking towards him, I heard a voice calling my name. It was a female voice and I turned around with disbelief. It was Sudha! She sprang toward me and grabbed both my hands.

“What brings you here?” I asked her.

“Why don’t *you* tell me what you are doing here?” she asked making a face.

“I am traveling to Waltair – from Hyderabad.”

“We now live here. My husband recently got a transfer. Why don’t you stay with us – at least for half a day?” Sudha was ecstatic.

“No, I can’t, I have to study for my exams. I will surely visit you during the holidays. Now, why don’t you come to my compartment so we can do some talking?”

“Let me introduce you to my husband, he’s standing over there.” Sudha pointed to a man who was keenly observing us. I offered him duly my respects.

“This is Rama,” Sudha informed her husband in exciting voice. He smiled and looked at me, “So I am now occupying your position.”

What does he mean? I was flabbergasted.

“I heard from Sudha that you both were intimate friends – who ate from the same plate and shared the same bed.” I smiled with embarrassment.

“Please stay with us for a half day,” Sudha pleaded, again.

“I think you had never been to Rajamundry before,” the husband said.

“Why make her feel she’s missing this city’s streets and alleys? I want her to break the journey for my sake,” Sudha chided him.

“Okay, okay, she will do it for your sake, not for me.”

“Please stop fighting. I will break the journey,” I assured the couple.

“Please put your mutual admiration on hold; first let’s get your luggage out off the compartment,” he reminded us.

We hastened to my compartment. I felt a little guilty as soon as I saw *Swamiji*: didn’t I tell him I am going to Waltair? Was I deceiving him because I am now breaking the journey? I introduced Sudha and her husband Raja Rao to *Swamiji*.

“*Swamiji*, my friend insists that I spend a day with them, so I am getting off here.” My face showed my guilt but he smiled at me.

“Have a good time,” he said. “We will meet again.” I looked at him with disbelief. I couldn’t bring myself to ask him how that was possible. I felt like prostrating myself at his feet and seeking his blessings. I picked up my suitcase and took his leave. He walked with us to the door to see me off.

I waved my hand till the train disappeared from my view.

“Since when did you get interested in *Sadhus*?”

I turned around and noticed Raja Rao mischievously smiling. He was chomping on a long cigar.

“What is so odd in getting to know noble souls and holy men?” I countered.

“Well said.” He drew in a puff and his posture irritated me. Sudha didn’t seem to pay any attention. “Come on, let’s go,” she wanted to take the suitcase away from me. I resisted. “Let me carry this,” said Raja Rao and I, again, said no. He stooped forward and snatched the suit case away from me. I looked around to watch Sudha whose face showed no

emotion. She gripped my hand and we both continued to walk.

When we came out of the station Raja Rao hired a *jatka*. Sudha entered first and I followed her but slipped. Raja Rao ordered the *jatkawallah* to lower the rear end of the cart for the ‘helpless women.’ That brought a chuckle from Sudha. I was mad but immediately threw myself into the cart. Raja Rao followed me as soon as I straightened myself inside. The cart, again, tilted backwards.

“*Babayya*, please come forward,” the driver implored and I crawled along. I had reached almost the end; still the cart was tipped to the backside. “That wouldn’t do, please move further up,” the driver told Raja Rao. Following his advice, Raja Rao came up further and totally occupied the space Sudha and I shared before; his knee and shoulders now rubbed against me. Despite myself, I kept quiet.

“Go next to the Saraswati Power Press,” Raja Rao instructed the driver who flourished the whip and the horse sped on. Then Raja Rao lit a cigar; the

smoke filled up our surroundings; I could hardly breathe, and coughed.

“Why can’t you put away that damn cigar?” Sudha asked her husband, visibly annoyed. “Rama is feeling ill at ease.” He stared at me but I turned away and looked out. Raja Rao stopped smoking though the fumes continued to waft over us.

Finally, the cart stopped in front of a two-storey house. Suddenly Raja Rao jumped from the cart and the sudden shift threw the cart backwards causing us to smack at one another. We got down and looked. Sudha and Raja Rao lived on the second storey. We made our way up through a spiral stair case followed by Raja Rao carrying our luggage.

Sudha had decorated the house very well; multi-colored curtains hung on the doors; the sofas in the drawing room displayed throw cushions and head supports in flowery designs; fresh flowers showed up in a vase on a table nearby and the walls had a couple of colorful paintings. The whole room atmosphere evoked a pleasant feeling and I slumped into a sofa. Sudha went inside to make coffee and I

began scanning the magazines on the table. Raja Rao lit another cigar.

Sudha served coffee in cups, not steel tumblers. While sipping I told her the cups were beautiful.

“Why can’t you tell frankly that the coffee is terrible?” Raja Rao asked with a smile. Lest Sudha feel offended, I told Sudha, “The coffee tastes very good; the cups go well with it.” Sudha smiled and said, “Someone brought us the cups as a wedding gift.”

“By the way, how come you didn’t attend our wedding?” Raja Rao asked me.

“Well, did you invite me?”

“Oh, I am in trouble,” Raja Rao chuckled, “Didn’t your bosom friend extend you a formal invitation?”

“Our Sudha is not complaining that I didn’t attend her wedding.”

“I see. You are quite a smart girl,” he said, smiling.

“Why do you keep teasing her like a little girl?”
Sudha came to my defense.

“A little girl? You are doting on her, so I thought she too would be like you,” he jerked a finger in her direction to convey his wife was chubby.

Now it was my turn to defend Sudha. “I remember our Sudha as a woman with style and refinement. Now she seems to have changed – maybe due to her new association!”

Sudha began to giggle; His face turning ashen, Raja Rao didn’t appreciate my hinting at his own corpulence. Still, he dismissed my words with a mock laughter and disappeared into the next room. Relieved, I rolled on the sofa comfortably.

“Why did you go to Hyderabad?” Sudha wanted to know.

“My parents still live there. Only last year my father was transferred to Hyderabad. I will be finishing my studies this year – so they wanted me to stay with my aunt in Waltair.”

“Did you go home on vacation or was there any problem?”

“There was a problem.”

Suddenly panic seized Sudha: “What happened?”

“I had to go against my parents’ wish.”

“Did they find a boy for you?” She winked at me. “Who is he?”

“A son of my father’s friend. He visits us quite often. He works in the university there.”

“Why did you reject him? Isn’t he good-looking?”

“No, it has nothing to do with his looks. For some reason I had never felt like marrying him. I have been always close to Murthy and I have decided to marry Murthy Now Murthy doesn’t belong to our sect. My parents also feel he is below our status. We are living through times when even caste doesn’t matter anymore. Why talk about sects?”

Sudha showed no inclination to agree with me. She said, "Whatever the situation, our parents will always act in our best interests. We should never hurt their feelings."

"Don't you think I am old enough to know what is good for me? What's wrong if I want to decide on a man who will be my life-time companion?" I spoke the words with self-assurance and poise.

Sudha let out another mild laugh. "Well, you will find happiness when you make your own choice. What else do your parents need? They will come to terms with your decision."

Sudha collected the coffee cups and went inside. Raja Rao now emerged in a white *dhoti* and a khaddar *jibba*. For the first time in my life I was convinced that a man could look attractive even in a *dhoti*.

"How do you like my city?" he asked as he occupied a chair in front of me.

"What can I say when I haven't been shown around?"

Raja Rao called out for Sudha who emerged from the kitchen wiping off her wet palm with the tip of her sari.

"Your friend is upset that we haven't shown her around the city," he told her.

"Sudha, your husband has wild imagination," I said.

"What is the problem?" Sudha asked." This evening we can go to the *Pushka Lake*. From there we can visit the museum too. Shall we now go to a matinee?"

"Good heavens, I have just now changed. Do you want me again to put on a suit and pant?" Raja Rao asked with concern.

"Don't worry, you look decent in this attire," I blurted out, and bit my lip. I averted my face away from Raja Rao and looked at Sudha who now walked toward the kitchen. Soon we were having our lunch and Raja Rao continuously badgered his wife to serve me this or that dish. I hated being force-fed like a child and lost my patience.

“Sudha, you better take care of your husband and make sure he is well fed. I am afraid he feels shy when he watches me.” I turned to face Raja Rao and said “Don’t limit yourself – I won’t mind at all!” We three enjoyed our lunch competing with one another and emerged fully sated.

After the matinee we three began to walk from the Rama Talkies. We gave up the idea of the museum and walked to the *Pushka Lake*. On the way we saw a banyan tree; Sudha suggested we go to a shrine nearby and she led the way when Raja Rao cautioned her: “Don’t go there. It’s dangerous.”

Confused, Sudha stared back at him.

“There are *Sadhus* in that temple,” he said. “I am afraid your girlfriend might refuse to return home with us.”

Sudha turned around; I was waiting just for an opportunity to teach Raja Rao a lesson.

Walking along the bridge, I heard the outbursts of laughter from children gathering around the bridge columns and bathing. I too felt like taking a

dip in the river Godavari. We scooped a little of holy water with our palms and sprinkled it against our faces. Satisfied, we wetted our feet and walked to the Hanuman Temple. We bought coconuts and flowers and were about to offer worship when Raja Rao asked me.

“What are you wishing for?”

“Why should I tell you?”

“Well, I know what you will wish for,” he said.

“Oh, you do? Let me hear it.”

“You will offer a *mogali* flower and wish for a husband.”

“I hate *mogali* flowers!” I sneered.

‘Some woman’, Raja Rao mumbled to himself and walked away.

On our returning home Raja Rao suggested we dine in a restaurant so that Sudha would be spared from cooking our dinner. We had a good meal and then walked back home. The time was nine when we returned and I was totally exhausted. Sudha

asked if we could play a game of cards and I said no. Then she went to the terrace and made beds for all the three. We spent some more time talking about the movie we saw that afternoon. Suddenly Raja Rao left our company saying he was feeling chilly. Still drowsy, I indulged in chitchat with Sudha. After a while she too was gone.

The breeze blending with the aroma from the *Night Queen* was slowly drifting and wrapping the terrace all over. I recalled at once the *Night Queen* that was specially planted next to my uncle's bedroom; it must have now grown tall to send forth its aroma. I remembered my visits to my grandfather's home where, in summer, we children used to sleep under a *bogada* tree. When I woke up in the mornings, I would count the number of flowers that had fallen on me. Nowadays I am not that much fond of *bogada* flowers; I actually like jasmine flowers: They are pleasing to the eye giving off a fine aroma.

I was feeling drunk and rolled on the bed.

Was I dreaming? Is that my own wedding I am witnessing?

Festive images were now flashing before my mind's eye: colorful flowers swinging from one end to another; banana plants adorning both sides of a pandal, its roof woven with *palmyra* leaves; the rustle of silk saris; Auntie is handing turmeric to the old women, I feel someone smearing sandalwood paste to my face; cousin Sasi is sprinkling rose water; Auntie is decking my pigtail with flowers; the pigtail is still in progress when the priests keep hollering, "Bring in the bride!" The groom offers me a *mogali* flower and wants it must also embellish the braid; I say no. "Smell it, then you will like it!" he says, and I protest, "I don't want it!" and close my eyes. The groom again flourishes the flower to my nose when I wiggle myself from Auntie's and flee the scene. Everybody is laughing. The groom keeps coming after me with the flower in hand and I too keep retreating till I am up against a wall. He caresses the flowers against my cheeks and, caught under the strong aroma, I could hardly

breathe. The thorns prick me and the groom's hot breathing sets my head whirling. I could offer no more resistance. The other flowers adorning my braid were crushed against the wall and fell on the floor. I am mad as hell and push him away with all the force I can muster. I feel my whole body shudder.

Then I opened my eyes.

There was no groom and no *mogali* flower. I notice Raja Rao standing beside me and hissing – his heavy breathing overwhelms me. Both my hands are glued to the bed. I screamed, but I couldn't hear my own voice. Suddenly I felt a mouth caressing mine amidst cigar fumes. Feeble and vulnerable against the weight crushing me from the head to foot, I could only shed silent tears. I wished Sudha would show up, so I called out for her when I, once again, felt my stomach churn following a thrust of a mouth into mine and a load on my chest. My legs seemed broken, rendered immobile, my spine falling off. Then, suddenly, I felt the load off my chest and strolling away from me robbing me all my

vigor. Totally worn out, I felt the cool breeze drift along. Still, I remained inert and lifeless, stuck to the bed. I looked up at the sky; the moon seemed to have lost all his sheen while the stars blinked nervously.

Slowly, I got a sense of what happened. I remembered thinking of flowers but not when I actually drifted into sleep. Was it a bad dream? Then Raja Rao came back to my mind's eye and my body shook in the cold breeze. Silently, I sat up on the bed, buttoned up my blouse and let my sari fall down the ankles. I stopped shaking, but my mind was in turmoil.

How did I end up like this? Why had I become vulnerable? Tears wetted both my cheeks and ears. Disgust, self-pity, anger and shame filled me all at once. How did I end up like this? Nobody would hear my muted question. I was the single soul under the vast sky hovering over me. I wished the daybreak would never come; I thought of suicide – drowning myself in *Godavari*; why not hang myself with my sari? But I did none of these. I lay on the

bed staring at the sky with no idea what to do next. I was unaware when I went back to sleep.

I woke up when the sun's rays hit my eyes. I tried to get up but the whole body ached. Memories were slowly coming into sharp focus and I was in no mood to get up: will I see *him*, again? How could I face Sudha? How could I look into my own face in the mirror? Baffled, I again sought refuge in sleep: Murthy appeared in my mental screen, suddenly our love and marriage turned strange and remote, my future cast in a hazy mist. I felt this episode will inevitably alter my whole future in a way I had never imagined; I am now a totally different person, physically as well mentally, and I don't know how it will shape my future. Murthy appears before me in warmth and with his ardent love, and I see him turn into a bubble and slowly fly away from me. What a difference a single day makes! What if this had never happened? Yesterday I told myself: 'I will call Murthy as soon as I reach Waltair and convey my decision to him: 'Murthy, I have opposed my parents' plan that I marry Shekar; now

I am here for you.' Murthy would be delighted and take me into his arms. But now, when I go back to Waltair, I will do my best to avoid him; I could face him no more. Then, one day, he would confront me and I would confess: "Murthy, I lost my honor on my way to see you." What would Murthy say? How would he react? Would he find me disgusting? Yes, certainly, he would. Where is the surprise if he thinks I am foolish, weak, and vulnerable? After all, now, I hate myself. Who will decide the punishment for me? Am I to punish myself? My God, why don't you speak? Is your silence retribution to me?

"Rama, will you have some coffee?" Sudha wakes me up. I looked at her; she was her normal self. I rose; I wrapped up the sari around my cheeks lest she note the stains the tears had left behind. Fortunately my eyeglasses saved my predicament and I believe Sudha had not noticed any change in my face. So, was Sudha in dark as to what happened last night? I began tidying up the bed.

“Leave the bed as it is, the servant maid will take care of it,” Sudha said and I followed her into the kitchen.

She handed me hot water in a vessel. I took out toothpaste and brush from my hand bag. Brushing done, I washed my cheeks with hot water; the cheeks burned, the odor from the mouth seemed strange and the eyes turned teary. I washed my face and returned to the living room where Sudha was waiting for me. Silently, I took the coffee cup from her hand. What shall I tell her? How can I ignore what had happened to me? Should I act as if nothing happened to me and simply await her opening up a conversation? But, she doesn't say anything. Does she know something? Then, how come, she is silent? Did she know before it actually happened or afterwards? If she did know first, how could she put up with that? How did she come to know later? I wished Sudha would say something.

“I made *uppuma* for breakfast; would you like some?” I said okay feeling my whole body in a deaden state. I wondered: how am I now interested

in breakfast having gone through this harrowing experience? Sudha brought *uppuma* steaming on a plate.

“What about you?” I asked.

“I just now had breakfast with my husband,” she said in a tone that betrayed the same sense of love and affection for her husband. Was she in dark about the outrage? If so, should I tell her? Silently, I ate the *uppuma* when Sudha began dicing the vegetables; she didn't even ask me why I was silent. Would that mean I looked the same person? I congratulated myself over my self-possession.

I checked my watch; the time was nine. I had over-slept; I had only one more hour left before leaving for the railway station.

“It's getting late; let me take my bath.”

“Yes, go ahead. Meanwhile I will get the lunch ready. Then we can leave.”

“Sudha, why bother? I can go myself to the station.”

“No way! How could I let you go alone? My husband had to go on some urgent errand; he said he would try to come to the rail station. He wanted me to accompany you to station after lunch.”

Sudha set up hot water for my bath. I felt disgust overcome when the water ran down my body; I felt like scorpions and centipedes crawling all over my body; the ritual –cleaning every nook and corner of my body and limbs thoroughly – seemed a charade. Soon I was finished with my bath and donned the sari to appear before Sudha.

I combed my hair and wore the *kumkum* on my forehead when Sudha served food in two plates. I sat for lunch but didn’t feel like helping myself with even a morsel of food.

“What happened? You don’t like the food?”

I said I wasn’t feeling hungry and got up.

Sudha tidied up the house and got ready to leave. We hired an auto rickshaw. The auto rickshaw sped on, but I was silent watching the shops that lined up our way. My mind was in turmoil: why haven’t I

spoken anything with Sudha throughout this whole morning? I could no more show the warmth and informality as before; like a large wall, Raja Rao loomed between us.

Suddenly Sudha asked, “Rama, when are you visiting us, again?”

“Again?” I blurted out without realizing how thoughtlessly I spoke the word. Sudha now gripped both my hands and said, “Please forgive me,” I looked at her face; I instantly I pitied her.

“What’s this? What’s your crime?” I said as if ignoring her plea. But at that very moment, we both seemed to have come to a perfect understanding and all the worldly problems seemed to have been solved.

We checked in at the railway station; my train had been delayed. We began pacing on the platform. After a while Sudha suggested we go to the far end of the platform; we found a sandy ground sheltered away from the crowd, near the

iron fence, to sit and talk. I spoke no words and was fidgeting with my handbag when Sudha began.

“What do you plan to do next?” she asked collecting a few marbles on the sand.

“What do you suggest?” I asked with a smile masking a rage that was about to explode from a flickering, dying candle.

“I have wronged you. I caused you injustice. I never thought this would ever happen to you.”

“Forget it! There’s nothing else we can do about it!”

“That’s the only drawback my husband has.”

I stared into her eyes; they displayed the pain of an apologetic mother shielding her erring son.

“He has no other vices; he provides everything I need – financially or otherwise. He would never let me wanting anything.”

My good heavens! *What a foolish woman*, I thought.

“That’s the truth,” Sudha continued. “He never ignores my role in our family life. His only problem, I would say, is . . .”

That’s enough, I thought.

“Our marriage was not a love marriage,” she continued. “It was an arranged marriage. I would even say that it was love on the first sight. My husband wasn’t interested in marrying any other girl. He decided to marry me even when his parents were hesitant; they expected more dowry but he insisted that they accept me as their daughter-in-law.”

I had an entirely different tack on Raja Rao. What can I say when Sudha says she holds him in such high a regard and esteem? I was silent.

“I would feel hurt even if a single instance arose where my husband seemed indifferent to me; I would feel rejected and suffer self-confidence. I once asked him: ‘Do you love me?’ He would draw me into his arms and assure me, ‘I will always seek refuge in you even when I go after other women.

But for you, I will go crazy.’ He told me this not once, but several times. I didn’t help asking him, “Then, why do you have to run after other women when you claim you are so fond of me?”

So, she did ask him. I was eager to know why Sudha didn’t challenge her husband’s assertion of his love for her. Excited, I looked at her face, again.

“He asked me: ‘Will we die if we miss our meals? Does it mean we would avoid snacks and nibbles? Still, even after consuming so many items, can we stop enjoying the main meal?’ I thought he could be right. What is a big deal if one violates the social norms and morals? He certainly loves me, he would never abandon me. I trust him deep from my heart.”

How could a wife let her husband run after other women? Sudha preempted my question.

“I cried a lot and begged him: ‘How can I tolerate my husband committing adultery with other women? Do I have any self-respect left?’ My

husband had a ready answer; he said, “I won’t mind if you’re going with other men as you please.’ His suggestion was disgusting: what happens to a family when both the husband and wife become flirts, act on their own, and ruin their marriage? Well, if he can’t change his behavior, let him do as he pleases, I comforted myself. Now, Rama, tell me, what more I can do? He tells me, “Whatever, I do, I will let you know. There are no secrets between us.’ Was I ever consoled by his words? His frank confession did nothing to lessen the horror of what I am going through,” she said tears spilling over.

What a stupid woman, I thought and looked at her. So, she knew it all along. Her husband was set to rob me of my honor and ruin my life while she’s an accomplice. She might call herself a docile wife, but I call her a monster. What makes her think she could play with my life and honor? She had failed to guard me against a predator, let alone warn me of any impending danger. What am I supposed to think

of her? I am at loss with words; still, my mind is in turmoil; I cast a pathetic look at her.

“Even in a worst crisis, one has to act courageous for self-preservation,” Sudha said as if imparting me a wise counsel. This only infuriated me more than ever and I wanted to kill her right away. Even as I grasped her understated advice, I couldn’t come to terms with my situation.

The truth of the matter was I had become vulnerable and a marauder used me as if he had my consent. Who’s responsible for this horror? When a sick boy craves for candies, his mother would make sure that they are hidden away from his grasp. But can you blame the kid if he helps himself with what’s within his easy reach? He acts on his instinct. So can I really blame Sudha?

“It was never my intention to drag you into our house to exploit or betray our love,” Sudha was saying. “We are childhood bosom friends, so I wanted to have your company for half a day; but then, I had never imagined my husband would misbehave during that brief stay; it never occurred

to me. The moment I set my eyes on you I wanted to take you home and relive our old days with excitement and talking. I had no other ulterior motive. Please forgive me.” She held my hands and begged.

Her words made no sense. What was this forgiveness going to accomplish – either for her or for me? Can this pardon help put my shame behind me? What about Murthy?

Suddenly, the train arrived and my body began shaking. I stood helplessly watching the engine when Sudha took my handbag and suitcase and led me to the compartment which we reached shortly. We found an old couple and two middle aged passengers already seated when we entered. “You have good company,” Sudha said, much to my irritation. I wanted to stay alone for a while and think for myself. I desperately wanted to go to Waltair and enjoy a brisk walk on the sandy beach; when was the train going to move?

We spent the next few minutes watching the traffic on the platform. Presently a lady entered the

compartment, accompanied by a two-year old child, to see the old couple. The child was adorable; the mother had an attractive face. The child endeared himself to everyone; Sudha offered him chocolates and drew him close to her. She spoke to the kid as if she had known him for a long time. She's very fond of children; she has no children of her own. She had been married only three years, and one could see how, within this period, her husband was treating her. Sudha suffered from an illusion; well, it was the illusion that sustained her marriage. What would she gain by alienating her husband and suffering his hostility and bitterness? Sudha was seeking self-preservation and she still has the rage to live and do the best with whatever fate handed to her. It was her firm belief that her husband loves her that keeps her going. She's innocent but smart too. I am sorry for her plight but I was also bored with her.

The bell rang for the train to pull out of the platform and the kid darted back to his mother dampening Sudha's spirits. She composed herself and bade me farewell saying, "Rama, take care of

yourself; looks like my husband couldn't make it. Please write to me and keep in touch; don't think I was dead." She was on the edge of tears and I didn't know whether I too should cry or comfort her. "Please return home safely," I said. The train began moving.

Sudha waved back at me; far away on the platform, where the ticket collector stood, I noticed Raja Rao who had just then arrived. Had something delay him or was he late on purpose? Had he come only to escort his wife back home? Maybe Sudha was right; her husband would take very good care of her. But he also wanted 'snacks' on the side. The more I thought how he had treated me, the more I wanted to murder him; but he's far away standing next to a gate. Presently Sudha joined him and he drew her closer and put his arm around her waist, then carefully guided her out of the gate. The train was moving fast; suddenly, my heart seemed weighed down by helplessness; I guess that's when the lucky souls have a heart attack. The train sped on and I must go on my journey as well.

“Are you visiting your in-laws’?” asked the old woman. What a brazen question! I dismissed her saying, “No.” But she was stubborn.

“Then, you are visiting your parents’?”

I wanted to laugh away but restrained myself. Again, I answered, “No.” I felt like teasing her, but she wouldn’t leave me.

“You are going for studies?”

Quite a smart lady, I must admit. I nodded with a smile. Feeling triumphant the lady again looked at me and turned to her husband for chitchat. The couple on the upper berth were acting like newlyweds; they cuddled together and were carrying on an endless conversation. Feeling bored, I picked up a book from the handbag when I noticed a packet inside. I opened and, much to my surprise, I saw a white sari and a matching blouse piece. A handwritten note was on the blouse piece.

“Rama, I feel like sharing a lot of my thoughts with you, and I am not sure if I can. But there’s one thing I must. It was never my intention to cause you

any harm. You are my childhood friend, yet I am responsible for this outrage. Please forgive me.”

Sudha

I tore the letter and cast off the bits out through the window. As they drifted along in the air I thought of my parents, younger brother and Shekar, their images before me voicing their own judgments, one after another. My mother’s pitiful look and wail, ‘My poor girl, how did you end up like this?’ My father’s sneer: ‘And so much for our family reputation!’ My younger brother pleading, “Sister, now all my friends know about you. How can I look at them with a straight face?” Sister too has a protest: ‘I have been telling her, again and again, that she must not be seen going around with those boys; she’s already twenty, but doesn’t know what she’s doing.’ Her husband too throws a barb at me: ‘Do you remember how you made a big fuss about my touching your hand accidentally when we were playing a game of cards during my visit to your home? What do you have to say, now?’ Then, Shekar: ‘I knew all along that you are going to be

hurt. You wouldn't listen to me, so I couldn't care less.' Finally Murthy: 'Rama, you belong to me. I will always love you; nothing will ever make me change my mind. Your heart is pure and I welcome you with open arms.' But, in an instant, he changes his mind and dismisses me with a scorn: 'You are now defiled; I will have nothing to do with you!'

I was caught up in strange, unformed thoughts gnawing at me like flies hovering over a lacerating wound. I felt my head reeling. I sought refuge in a book; the memory of the upcoming exams brought relief that lasted only a few minutes plunging me, again, into grief.

Why do I need to pass these tests – while I can't even pass the real test in life? Don't my parents lacking in a formal education, lead quiet, moral lives? Why do I have to suffer this agony? What was my sin? Why did God bring me into this world?

Suddenly, I recalled *Swamiji*. What a great soul! Here's one who had removed himself from the pleasures of material world and engaged in a noble pursuit: total devotion to God through self

sacrifice. It is our love and pursuit of the mundane – family, friends and other pulls that lure and sink us deeper and deeper into grief. They only condition us for more greed and more selfishness – away from enlightenment. Dependence and attachment to the material world will never help us move forward. Why suffer like a squirming fly wallowing in hot sauce? Better to keep away from these enticements and spend the rest of my life in selfless service and meditation. Why didn't think of this before? I must move away from all – my parents, brother, sister, auntie, uncle, Shekar, Sudha and Raja Rao. Not until I stop thinking about myself, can I hope to attain permanent peace. As long as I let myself be surrounded by thoughts about them, I will never feel free to think about myself. I have to forget my past and chart out a new life free from bonds and boundaries. Then I will be free from my present problems – family, education, love, and attachment. The only way I can make my problems disappear is to forget my past; which means, I must snip my

bonds with others and walk away. That's the only choice left.

I was breathing heavily, quite happy that I found a solution to my problem. I put away the book in the bag and let my mind explore how I could implement my plan; I must have dozed off sometime later.

The engine whistle woke me up at daybreak when the train reached Waltair. Circumstances rudely interrupted my plans even before I could give them some shape or coherence. Auntie and Uncle were ready to greet me on arrival and they, even with no effort on my part, had my luggage taken out of the compartment. The endless journey I was planning now came to an end, but I was not disheartened, I had not lost my nerve or determination. Time is still on my side. I had overcome my earlier reservations and gained the strength to go ahead with determination. So, I went with them with a firm resolve.

Then, suddenly, I had a question:

“How did you know I will be arriving today?”

“This morning we got your father's telegram and we immediately left for the station,” Uncle said. I could not help laughing.

“What do you mean you got the telegram this morning? I was supposed to arrive yesterday. I had stopped in Rajamundry.”

Auntie rubbed her cheeks. “We thought the date mentioned in the telegram was a mistake, so now we are here.”

We boarded a *jatka* and were on our way when Auntie, her voice eager and excited, asked: “Did your parents finalize your marriage plans?”

I said no. Their faces turned ashen.

“Why, what happened? Was there some haggling over dowry?”

“No, I don't think there were any discussions regarding dowry.”

“Why? Good heavens, do you think they changed their mind?”

“No, I didn’t consent to this alliance.” Auntie would not believe me; she asked the question, again, and I nodded my head in confirmation. All of a sudden, the vehicle had a jerk and I hit my head against a side. I did not pat on my head and, for a while, nobody said anything.

“Did they put off the wedding plans because of your exams?” Now I answered her question with no ambiguity; I said, frankly, that I was not willing to marry Shekar.

Uncle asked, “What do your parents say?”

“Well, Mother cried and Father was fuming.”

They must have resented my stubbornness. No one spoke till we reached home.

I was resting in the bedroom and reading a newspaper when I heard a knock on the door. I opened it to let my friend Radha in; she sat on a chair and asked, “What’s the big news?”

“What do you mean?” Her look unsettled me.

“Why did you suddenly go home? Are your parents doing fine?” She smiled, and added: “Were they looking for a boy for you?”

I nodded in assent.

“Then, why do you look so glum? What are you trying to hide?” She fondly pecked my cheeks.

I was ashamed at my naughtiness; my eyebrows narrowed.

“So, it didn’t work out?”

“Don’t even bother to ask. I was against the alliance.”

Radha smiled as if telling me what lay behind my decision. I thought she was mistaken.

“Why do you laugh?” I asked as if pleading ignorance.

“Do you know – Mr. Murthy had not taught a single class since you were gone?” She laughed, and added, “He found some pretext or the other to stay away from the classes.” I didn’t share her jovial mood, and she went on:

“Yesterday he made enquiries about you in the college library. I told him you might be back either today or tomorrow. He tried his best, but couldn’t conceal his joy.”

I might have gone head over heels at some other time – feeling a little shy but savoring the pleasant thoughts – but now I felt indifferent as if she was talking to me about some stranger. I think Radha paid no attention to my mood. She suggested we go to the library and I told her I couldn’t and had to attend to some urgent needs. She wouldn’t budge so I put on the slippers and went out with her.

“Auntie, I shall return soon,” I called out while Auntie emerged from the kitchen wiping off her hand with a rag.

“Aren’t you going to change?” she asked. I told her that won’t be necessary.

“Radha, have a cup of coffee,” Auntie asked her.

“No, I won’t have it now,” Radha replied and walked out.

At the library, Radha got busy going over catalogs to check on books. I went straight to the stacks. I lost all the interest to prepare for the exams. No book seemed to interest me. I noticed in a shelf in front of me a collection of books on philosophy. I had a quick glance over the titles and then reached a set of books that I examined with considerable interest; those in the last row included works by *Ramakrishna Paramahansa*. One of the volumes, prominently displayed, drew my attention. It included the speeches delivered by *Paramahansa* over the years. I wanted to read it to quench my thirst for philosophy. Just as I was pulling the volume from the shelf I noticed another book blocking its way; that book was by Laski. I was excited and took it too. I showed the books to Radha.

“Where did you find the Laski book?” she asked. She seemed thrilled at my discovery.

“It was in the philosophy section.”

“I hid it there myself,” she said. “The other day I couldn’t check it out because I didn’t have my

library card with me. Once I finished the book by *Kautilya* I wanted to go back to *Laski*, but forgot where I exactly hid it. I have been looking for it ever since.”

“Never again play these pranks,” I chided her with a pat on her back. She was surprised to notice the *Paramahansa* book in my hand. I said I wanted it for my Uncle and escaped her further prying.

We met our friends Sumathi and Raghava Rao just as we were coming out of the library. The three invited me to the college canteen but I was in no mood to comply. I was no more the previous Rama; I wanted, as far as possible, to deal with my new identity; they had neither the knowledge of what had happened to me nor learnt the lessons I was beginning to digest. They were still young and it would serve me well, for my own progress, to stay away from them. Firmly, I sidestepped their request, and left. I began walking away with my head bowed.

“Why? Why, such hurry?”

I raised my head. It's Murthy! The face shone even brighter under the sun's rays playing on it. The broad forehead, sharp nose and the chiseled cheeks pointed an intelligent man staring at me – but I felt as if I was looking at him for the first time.

“I was looking for you,” he said, holding my hand, “Let's go to the beach. You can look at my face as long as you wish.” I seemed to have forgotten everything in his proximity – my past episode – and succumbed to him. Even as I was cursing myself – inwardly – for losing my head, I obeyed him. He proceeded toward the beach and I walked beside him.

Murthy asked me the same questions which Radha had asked earlier: about my sudden trip home and the well-being of my parents. I told him about the wedding plans. That Shekar was planning to go to US for studies and my parents were eager to have me married before his trip. I told him everything.

Murthy suddenly stopped walking and stared at me. I understood his despair: what would I say? His

heaving – the rise and fall of his breathing – rammed into my ears.

How much he loves me! What an ardent and passionate lover he is! For a second I seem to lose my firm resolve: I felt like grabbing his body and clinging to it declaring in a lusty cheer: *I am yours, I belong to you.* But I resisted the impulse.

“I didn’t want to get married,” I said, my voice growing sullen. As Murthy yanked me into his eager hands and held me in his tight grip, I felt my feet caught under the sand below, my face smothered in his breath. I conjured Raja Rao’s face: that jabbing chin and the pungent cigar smoke overwhelming me. Did I lose myself? The *Ramakrishna Paramahansa* volume slid from my hands. I came to my senses, let go myself and stepped back; Murthy’s face told me he felt jilted. I let out a mild laugh –after suppressing any lingering thoughts of Raja Rao. Murthy returned my smile with his own and resumed his brisk walk on the beach. There were so many things I wanted to tell him, so I too trudged along.

As usual, we sat on the sandy beach and watched the waves roll by. Murthy advanced toward me and, placing my feet on his, he started pouring fistfuls of sand on my feet. Until now, I too had joined in that pastime; he used to tell me, “Both of us should steer our boat of life.’ Presently, my hands were resting on my lap. Murthy looks, alternately, at me and the waves while his hands are busily forming sand castles on my feet.

“Tell me more about your wedding plans,” he teases me. Maybe he’s now convinced that I belong to him, to him alone. How would he respond if I tell him that I have changed my mind and I belong to nobody? He will be crushed and all his hopes, like those waves, would be dashed. I will be hurting him with truth, but I have no other choice. A house with no foundation would be hardly a house. Murthy completed his sandcastle and was steadying the formation with a few smooth touches – first along the sides and then at the top. He was thinking how to narrow the tip at the apex when, as if I had learnt by rote, I told him:

“Murthy, I am not into marriage. You must forget me.”

He drew back his feet as if under electric shock. The sandcastle crumpled down but I didn't move my feet. Murthy composed himself and began collecting the sand around my feet when I moved away. I rested my chin on the knees in front of me.

By now the sun was gone and darkness slowly hovered over the beach. Murthy's face betrayed a weary look, the charm had vanquished. I noticed he was, silently, collecting small sandstones. I felt sorry for him – here's someone who always sought something noble and decent in life and now he has withered away – like a dry leaf twisting in a breeze. Should I now mention about Raja Rao I would be casting a stone into tranquil waters. I needn't subject him to any more anguish. It is better to lop off a tree entirely rather than slice it branch by branch.

“But why, Rama? Why are you against marriage? What happened?” He was growing emotional.

“Well, I don't feel like getting married; that's all.”

“Please look at me and repeat what you have just said. Don't you want me? Why are you silent? Why are you mad at me? What was my crime?” He grabbed my hands in despair.

I calmly told him: “You have done nothing wrong.”

“Then, why are you trying to alienate me?”

“It's not just you. I want to stay away from this world.”

“Why is this aversion?”

I said nothing.

“I can speak and convince your father if you are against his choice. Trust me: even if your parents are unwilling, I will protect you against any danger. I cherish your company and I will do anything to preserve our friendship. Please don't leave me alone.”

“Murthy, you are mistaken. I am not retreating because of my parents; neither have I lost my trust in you. Simply put, I lost my interest in marriage; others have played no role in my decision.”

“So, you have decided not to get married, but for how long?” Murthy raised his voice. “Aren’t you a woman, a normal human being? Is it not normal for young women to seek male companionship? Don’t you feel the same way? Do you plan to kill off your desire for earthly pleasures? Why this hatred?”

“I don’t believe man-woman relations are inevitable. There are so many ways a human being can enjoy productive life; marriage is not the only course.”

“Then, why did you befriend me and loved me?” he questioned in a trembling voice. He was upset and no amount of my explanation would reassure him. So I had to work on him with patience. “Murthy, it’s getting dark, let’s us go,” I said and rose after scouring the sand particles on my sari.

Murthy too got up and patted my shoulder with his right hand saying, “Stop acting silly; don’t let crazy ideas confuse you.” What was he saying? Alarmed, I stared at him. Suddenly, Murthy bent down and laid his cheek on my forehead. My lips touched his nape while his other hand encircled my waist. My heart relented and I moaned: ‘I need Murthy.’ Instantly Raja Rao’s face floated before me. It was like, every time you help yourself with a glass of milk, you touch it with your lips only to throw it away because a fly fell into it. Raja Rao intrudes into memory whenever my heart warms up to Murthy. I realized I could never marry Murthy to deserve his unconditional love. I could never be disloyal to Murthy, so must keep away from him. I made up my mind to tear down my obsession for Murthy.

We walked a few more blocks when I suddenly remembered about Swamiji’s lecture in the city. Good heavens, maybe he had gone back to Calcutta.

“Where are you going?” Murthy asked; he thought I was getting absentminded.

“To Ramakrishna Mission.” He let out a giggle.

“When did you get into spirituality? Are you renouncing the exams too?”

I shrugged off his comment and continued to walk; he pulled me away to the right.

“You sounded so serious that, for a moment, I actually thought you wanted to join the Mission,” he said panting as if rescuing me from danger. He held my hand and never let it go till we reached home.

The next morning I left home with books in hand for the Mission. Auntie said nothing thinking I was going to the library. I headed straight to the Ramakrishna Mission; on my arrival there I was mulling over how I should reveal my purpose when I noticed the *Swamiji* afar. He immediately recognized me and welcomed me inside. He offered me a chair and sat facing me.

“I got lucky because your Calcutta trip has been delayed; I am sorry I missed your lecture.”

“My trip has been postponed until today due to some unavoidable circumstances. I am very happy to see you again. How are your studies?”

“I need to discuss an important matter with you. Please let me know if you have any objection; otherwise I can meet with you later at your convenience.”

“Go ahead and tell me what’s on your mind. How can I help you?”

I had never met such a generous man in my life.

“*Swamiji*, I made up mind to follow your path,” I said looking into his eyes. “I am unhappy with my present life.”

He smiled. “What made you come to this decision at such a young age?”

I had no ready reply and bowed my head down.

“When a man is beset with problems, he feels helpless and seeks God’s help. He can’t discern God’s silence,” he said, and continued. “Man has to understand about himself before he can understand

God. It's only when you fully comprehend your situation your problems will, one after another, find solution. The way to solve your personal problems doesn't lie in running away from them. You will flee from one problem only to face another. All your problems were born in your mind; the day you analyze a problem in detail and with clarity you will have peace of mind."

I couldn't share his outlook; I wasn't trying to hide my ignorance, either.

"What do you think I should do now?" I begged him while trying to contain the growing upheaval. "Certain episodes from my past are torturing me. What can I do to free myself from this tangled web? Is there a way out for me?"

"My dear girl, memories are dangerous. Past events as well as memories about past events will only stand in your way to cope with your present situation. They would undermine what presently goes on in your life, suck all the energy out of you and grow even stronger to enfeeble you. By giving more importance to the past, you are neglecting

your present responsibilities. This negligence will lead to undesired experiences; they too would recede into past and occupy your mind. All these memories owe to your own invention. The primary source for your problems is your own mind. Now, how was it possible for you to forget, easily and quickly, some life events? That's because you didn't attach much significance to them. As for the episodes that continue to torment you, you have concentrated on them and preserved them in your mind. So, what's the solution? You should disregard them as of no importance. They will lose their force and effect on you when you attach no importance to them. Keep your eye on the present, don't lose it by obsession with the past. You are a young woman, there's still a lot of time for acquisition of spiritual knowledge. It doesn't befit a cultured person, caught in a transient emotional uproar, to flee from her problems. You will achieve renunciation when your mind is free from ego and attains serenity, Presently you will not accomplish anything worthwhile by distancing yourself from

your problems. You are not running away from your problems – rather you are running away from the circumstances surrounding them – but they will always remain with you. It is your mind alone that can solve your predicament. Can you suddenly run away from your mind? No, you have to work on it; vigilance is needed. You're an educated woman; what more can I tell you? For now, go back to your studies.”

My reverence for Swamiji left me with no further argument. I promised I would follow his advice and took leave after paying my respects. I was returning home and came to the Caltex station when Murthy came into view. I was now running into the very person I have been keenly trying to avoid.

“Where have you been?” he asked casting an affectionate glance.

“I was at Ramakrishna Mission.”

His eyebrows narrowing, he said: “Rama, something is going on in your brain; I have been

watching you after your return from home. You are acting strange - like a very different person. What's on your mind? Why don't you say you love me no more and frankly admit that you want to marry the boy of your father's choice. Why this unnecessary bickering?” His voice began to shake and the face reddened in the hot sun.

“Murthy, you are imagining things,” I protested.

“Then, tell me the truth,” he rushed me.

“I will, let's go.”

He led me to a nearby cashew nut grove. We walked a good distance before reaching a large cashewnut tree. We took refuge under the tree and stretched our legs on the leaves strewn all over. Murthy took the books out of my hand used them as a pillow to rest his head on. He took my hand and placed it on his chest asking, “Come on, let's hear it.”

My whole body shuddered and I tried to pull away from him, but he tightened his grip. His

heartbeat grew sharper and my hand began to shake following the rise and fall of his breath.

“Murthy, on my trip from Hyderabad, I spent a day with my friend in Rajamundry,” I began. I had to start my story somewhere.

“I see. Who are your friends in Rajamundry? How could you wander over all those places when I am, here, pining for your company?”

He questioned in jest but I took the words with my guilt-ridden heart: *My heart is pure and untainted; how could you allow yourself to be tainted, and surrender to another man?* I dare not look into his eyes.

“I have a friend Sudha in Rajamundry. She came to the station to see someone off. She forced me to spend a day with her.”

“She forced you and you said yes?”

“No, that’s not what happened. That night Sudha’s husband . . .”, despite myself, I lost self control. Frightened how I should continue, I stared at Murthy whose eyes, like a deer in panic at the

sight of a hunter, were riveted on me. I felt his hand tightening the grip on my hand and crushing the fingers; suddenly I wanted to confide in him.

“That night, her husband came and . . .”. Again, words failed me and I bowed my head down. Murthy’s hand had turned into a stone and I thought my fingers would break under weight. I could no more tolerate the intensity of his look, so I told him everything concealing nothing.

Murthy loosened his grip and my hand, resting on his chest, came down. I knew the news will shock Murthy; the revelation would surely stun anyone from a traditional, conservative family. I didn’t think he could stomach the truth. For a long time we both remained silent. I was looking over the dead, dry leaves around me awaiting his response. Slowly, he raised his knees and held his chin on them. He let his hands stroke his locks and grumbled in a painful voice, “Rama, why did you tell me all this?” I could see three folds across his forehead; I felt sorry for him.

“How could I cover up such a thing?”

“How do you expect to go on living with such a dark secret?” He was starting at the sky above.

Murthy was a normal human being. He knows and understands the social mores. What else could I expect from him? I understood his predicament.

“Murthy, you are mistaken. I am not trying to exploit your love; I am willing to accept the consequences of my moral weakness. I had no intention of coercing you into my situation.”

“What am I supposed to do next?” he muttered under breath. How could I console him? A crow resting on a branch nearby flapped its wings and flew away. A few leaves fell on me bringing Murthy to full attention. He grabbed my both hands and pleaded: “Rama, how I can go on without you?” He was acting like a child and I even felt like drawing him closer to my heart.

“I am not going anywhere,” I told him. “I am not going to end my life. What if we can’t live together? I will always cherish your love – any time and at any place.”

He wouldn’t listen. He went on his trail raising the voice, “Rama, I want you –I need you - but not like this.” I know what he meant. I released my hand from his grip. I wondered how I could ever fall in love with such a naïve and emotional person.

“Come on, let’s go. It’s getting late,” I said and picked up the books.

We walked from the cashewnut grove to the junction in silence. On our arrival at the main road, I preempted him by saying, “I want to take leave of you. Whether I deserve it or not I want you to forgive me.” The weather was hot, my mind in turmoil. I had to admit that Murthy’s reaction had unsettled me; suddenly dumped, I felt like being tossed into an abyss. What am I supposed to do next? Worn out, like a robot, I headed back home.

“What happened to you? Your face looks so ashen,” Auntie asked on my return. I set down the books on a table and slumped into my bed.

“The summer heat must have been quite severe,” Auntie said. “Why don’t you wash and change and have some food?”

I gave no reply but was looking at the ceiling. Pretty soon, the mind was fabricating all kinds of thoughts.

I knew all along that, when I revealed my plight, Murthy would despise me and obliterate his love for me. I had been mentally preparing myself to face the consequences. Yet, when it happened, I was overcome by grief; was it because I had been clinging to a slight hope that Murthy would understand my dilemma and marry me? Was there no hint – even a slender hope – in my conscience that I had actually carved a place for Murthy in my heart? Then, why do I feel distressed by his rejection? Does it mean everything I told him about the institution of marriage was a pretense? No, I had thought over the whole matter and told him exactly what I had in mind. I haven’t deceived myself and to think that his attitude had hurt me makes no sense at all. Presently what provokes my behavior is my

arrogance. Arrogance is the culprit behind every evil on the earth. I will have no peace of mind until I overcome it. I can now fully comprehend my mind; I am at peace. I have been struggling all along how to deal with my relationship with Murthy, but now he’s gone and all my attendant responsibilities have vanquished. There’s no room for self-deception or betrayal. There are no obstacles to the path I have chalked out for myself, and I can go ahead. I have to go on, I must.

I finished coffee around three in the afternoon and headed for the train station. I want to meet with Swamiji – and notwithstanding his advice to the contrary – I would accompany him to Calcutta. I told Auntie I was going to the library. Well, after all a lie is no big matter when you are trying to sever your bonds with this material world!

I was waiting for a bus; a couple of them, one after another, rushed along and headed toward the town; no bus arrived from the town. I stood patiently when, suddenly, Ramamurthy appeared before me afar. He’s walking toward me; how can I

avoid him? Once you are in his company, there's no escape. I wish he was going on some errand in the opposite direction.

"Rama, why are you standing in the hot sun? Where are you going?" My heart fell, but I managed to tell him, calmly, "To the train station."

"Are you receiving someone at the station?"

"Yes," I lied. I will be facing more people along the way and it is inevitable I will be lying more often. I always believed in telling the truth but why let others suffer at awkward moments? I prefer telling small lies for a higher purpose.

Fortunately for me a bus heading toward the town arrived . Ramamurthy jumped into it. He turned back and kept on looking at me until he found a seat in the bus, his face registering disappointment in not digging up more details from me. When one gets lucky, it would mean someone else faces bad luck. That's the way of the material life; now, I am about to enter a world free from its

egoism and problems. Liberated, I sucked in the air deeply. My bus arrived.

The train was already in the platform when I hurried, bought the fare and eagerly paced on the platform to stumble on the Swamiji. Suddenly, I noticed a familiar face. I stopped and looked; it was Shekar who got down smiling. He neared me before I could steady myself.

"I can't believe I got this lucky," he was saying. "I got an unexpected welcome."

I too responded with a polite gesture. He was getting his luggage off the compartment when I looked around to locate the *Swamiji*. I found it uncomfortable to leave Shekar and go looking for the *Swamiji*. I found it even harder to let Shekar know that I am renouncing this world and going away to Calcutta. I was looking at my fare when Shekar said, "Come on, let's go."

I didn't want Shekar to think of my plan as ridiculous. I am not sure if this is the right time for me to go to Calcutta. Who knows, maybe there will

be, always, some obstacle I would be facing. When will I be successful? Having come this far, I am not going to retreat, and Shekar would never understand what I am up to.

“What’s on your mind? Are you waiting for someone? By the way, what brings you here?”

I ventured the truth: “I am on my way to Calcutta.”

He didn’t seem surprised; he didn’t ask me why or what happened. He asked, calmly.

“Is that so? Where’s your luggage? Why did you come alone? How are your uncle and auntie?”

I had to tell him everything: “I have decided to join the Ramakrishna Mission. I am averse to living like ordinary people.”

“Have you told your folks of your decision?” he asked, again, smiling.

“They don’t know; won’t they try their best to stop me?”

“Why are you so sure that I wouldn’t stop you?”

“I hope you are not upset as they would be. I am confident you will sympathize with me and encourage my move.”

“I am happy to know of your faith in me. I have only one request to make.”

I looked at him; what does he want?

“I would like to have a brief talk with you.” He looked at his watch. “The train is going to be here for a long time.”

I agreed. I felt a conversation with Shekar would be as informal and easygoing like the one I had with *Swamiji*. I was also interested in listening to what he wanted to tell me.

Shekar carried the luggage to the railway restaurant. He ordered two cups of coffee. We were seated facing each other. In one of the far away tables I noticed Chowdry who smiled at me. I too smiled back at him. Shekar turned back at Chowdry and looked at me as if wanting to know who he was. I told him he was my classmate.

“When are your exams? Are you well prepared?” His ruse didn’t escape me. Even after I said I was going away to Calcutta Shekar acts casual and seemed eager to know about my studies. I was not a child to tell him each and everything he was eager to know.

The server brought coffee. Shekar dropped the cigarette butt in the ashtray and handed me a cup even as the server set a cup before me. Shekar drew that cup toward him.

“I must take this very train,” I let him know I was not naïve enough to be diverted by some desultory conversation with him and miss the train.

“Yes, be assured I will see to it you will take this train,” he said as if he was into mind-reading.

Was I overacting? By the way, what actually brings Shekar to Waltair?

“Are you here on business? You haven’t said anything about visiting Waltair when we saw each other a few days ago. “ I steered the conversation toward him thus sparing me to reveal any further details. Soon, I will continue my journey on this train. I knew Shekar

had neither the power nor the resolve to dissuade me, and that very thought eased my concerns.

“As a matter of fact I am here to talk with you.”

I scrutinized his eye for some possible hoax. His outward appearance betrayed no such motive, still the suspicion lingered that he may be playing some trick on me.

“Did you dream I am going away?”

“This is no hoax.” His assertion, while imposing, was a little amusing to me. What does he want to discuss with me?

“The last time, you arrived at the station late and I couldn’t tell you what was on my mind,” Shekar explained, and continued. “That day I had been to your house early in the morning and your mother told me you were out shopping with your friends. To be frank, I had no dream as you imply but I felt it necessary to talk with you – I can’t explain why – but some vague force was urging me to go to Waltair. So I took time off from work and was on my way.”

Good heavens! Would he go on all over again? I looked at my watch and, as if on cue, Shekar arose much to my relief.

But he didn't go directly to the train; he headed toward the waiting room and I followed him. By this time a large crowd had gathered in the waiting room, and Murthy said, "Let's go somewhere else." We walked to the far end of the platform where he set down the bedding on the unpaved ground. He offered me to sit on his trunk while he was perched on the bedding.

He lit a cigarette; he was calmly smoking as I watched the smoke whirling in small circles above him. Was he watching my face? I averted my look away from smoke and looked into his eyes. He didn't take his eyes off from my face. I was emboldened to rest my eyes on him as if watching the moon for the first time. Finally, he spoke.

"So, you have aversion to the worldly life."

I said nothing – that was a statement, not a question.

"Can you tell me what made you rush into this decision?"

This too drew only silence from me. I didn't know where to start and where to end.

"I am afraid you don't trust me." He let out a sigh. "Please try to erase me from your memory and my very presence here. Let me hear you just like you were talking

to yourself. I will try to understand you. I am not asking for any other favor." He lit another cigarette.

"Murthy is a lecturer in the university," I began, "We love each other. We wanted to get married and that's the reason why I didn't give my consent to marry you. I alienated my parents, caused them pain and anguish before I made the trip to Waltair. On the way, I spent a day in Hyderabad at my friend Sudha's place. She's my old classmate and I couldn't reject her wish. That night, her husband, entered my bedroom and possessed me. I was averse to bury that terrible truth and poison our marital life. Neither my mind nor my body will be cleansed by any cover up. It would mean not only a betrayal of my soul but disloyalty to Murthy arising out of my selfishness. Initially I was hesitant to tell him the truth, then, after some mental struggle, I found another way. Instead of revealing the actual situation I wanted to inform him that I was not interested in marriage and I have decided to follow the footsteps of *Swami Ramakrishna*. I preferred the latter course rather than deceiving Murthy into marrying me. I shared my opinion with Murthy, but he didn't understand me. He wanted to know why I had rejected married life. I revealed the truth that only unsettled him: he acted like a mouse that has

fallen in a well but couldn't make up its mind either to swim out to the top or drown in the well. I hated his frailty and my aversion to the material world has grown only stronger."

Shekar discarded the cigarette after another, last puff. The smoke cleared while he looked at me and said calmly: "I quite agree with you. Still I don't understand the need for a spiritual life. There is no compulsion that one should get married; there's also no obligation that one should renounce the world."

My lips quivered; he went on.

"You have spoken a lot of things - about the betrayal of soul and the essence of pure body. Now, what does purity actually mean? Does a human being live pure if he subjects his body to rigorous discipline? What about his mind? Does the body always remain pure - free of wayward thoughts? A man who capriciously accepts bachelorhood will be always deluded into thinking that he has been indeed practicing celibacy. It would only mean that he's kept the body immune to outward attractions, but he may feel temporarily aroused by the very appearance of a beautiful woman. Only mental discipline and commitment would help him achieve his goal. The purity of mind has no meaning as long as the

notion of bachelorhood occupies his mind; that perception will persist as long as he forces the body to his control. The same rule applies to a woman's marital loyalty. Now, fidelity is not something inborn in a woman; she can't become a loyal wife only because she aspires to such a distinction. Presently you want to renounce this life; do you think, at sometime in the future, you would be free from the thought why you had chosen this path? Your renunciation has no meaning as long as that notion stays with you."

"There's something else. You hate yourself for what your friend's husband had done. There are two reasons for your revulsion: first, what happened to you was in violation of the prevailing social norms and, second, your mind had been totally surrendered to Murthy. Let's say you are driving your car - following all the road rules and regulations- while another driver -who follows no rules - hits your car causing damage. Now, you have been acting steady and correct, still your car has been hit. Now there's no need to ponder over the violation of road rules; you will have the car fixed or buy a new one if it was rendered useless. Or you will choose some other mode of transportation. You may even prefer to walk

rather than drive but will never stubbornly cling to the idea that you should keep off that road.”

What was he trying to tell me?

“Rama . . . ”

I stared at him in surprise. For the first time he was addressing me like an intimate friend.

“You are an intelligent woman and that’s the reason for my affection and respect for you. You are capable of finishing your studies and taking up research work and I don’t wish to see your talents wasted. After your exams, please visit me in Hyderabad. Meanwhile, I will try to arrange a scholarship for you in US. That’s not an impossible task. Even otherwise I could arrange for your trip abroad. You can also work with me on my research projects, and with our joint effort there’s nothing we can’t accomplish. Trust me, I need your cooperation. I know I can choose any woman as my life-time companion, but I am looking for that rare woman with an intellectual bent. I am always attracted to rare specimens. That’s the reason why waited for all these years.”

“What about *that* episode?”

“I never think of trifles; I don’t suffer from such a frailty.”

“Are you telling me you don’t care about morality?”

“It is not that I don’t care. For that matter I am not particularly interested in women. So I had no opportunity to face a situation like this; again, I don’t believe that a woman, even if she had committed what some consider sin, should be dragged into a street and reformed. My ideals always seek a higher ground.”

“I have never loved you.”

“I never claimed I loved you. Nowadays the word ‘love’ has no meaning. Love is not something that happens on the first sight. The friendship growing over a time between couples is also not love; that might be infatuation or simply physical attraction. It is the blood relationship and a couple’s life that begets love. Can you say your parents don’t love each other because theirs was not a love marriage? That’s what they had achieved in their thirty-year marriage. Love begins and flourishes naturally when a couple live with a purpose; trivial matters lose their value and such a love would withstand little flare-ups. Love poses no problems if one has chosen the right person for a spouse. And one can never

hurry in selecting the right person. I never regretted for waiting this long for you.”

These were the very words I had sought in Murthy. I was looking for a companion who saw me as an individual. I was still exploring when love blinded me like a mental fog. Just when my ideals were crumbling, Shekar’s words proved an eye-opener to me. I now clearly recognized my ideal companion.

I heard the train clank; I didn’t stir. The train gave another warning and moved. I was standing still as the train pulled away ahead of me.

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