



இறந்த காலங்கள்..

ஜெயகாந்தன்

REMINISCENCES

Anantha Sarma alighted from the car and stepped on the paved walkway that snaked along the sea shore. His grandchildren, who occupied the car rear seat, were eagerly looking forward to their next stop at a movie theater, and cheerfully waved their hands in a parting gesture. The driver, who had opened the door for Sarma and then stood aside on the left side of the car, politely asked him: “Is it all right if I come back to pick you up - with the children - after the movie?”

Sarma could hear nothing in the gusty wind blowing across the beach; for some time now, his hearing had been impaired.

“Grandpa . . . Mani wants to tell you something!” That was Sarma’s maternal grandson Pacha who slowly raised his hand to the mouth and shouted - his voice reaching above the din and clamor of the

stiff breeze.

That was too much for Sarma's ears; he admonished the boy: "Why do you have to shout like that?" Then he turned to the driver, and in a voice cool and courteous, said: "What do you want?"

"Nothing in particular . . ." the driver said as if apologizing. "I want to know if I can pick you at half past nine on my way to the movie house to get the kids back home; or should I come earlier?"

"Don't do that? Why don't you come here after you drop the kids at home? I don't want to roam around movie houses or shops with them."

Mani had asked because the drive from home in Mambalam to the beach was quite a long one; he preferred to avoid it, if only he could, and now that Sarma wanted him to make this additional trip, the driver was less than pleased. Sarma noticed the grin on Mani's face and understood his displeasure.

"Why don't you do this? How about coming here after you pick up the children after the movie?"

“I can, but by then the time would be half-past nine!”

“That's fine. See if you can make it earlier. This is summer, and if I stay outdoors for a while, it would do me no harm!” Then Sarma thought: ‘Maybe the driver thinks it is waste of a time to make an extra trip to oblige an old foggy like me! . . . Maybe he is right!’

After the car departed, Sarma began walking slowly and steadily with his glossy walking stick. Because his feet were like a child's - tender and pinkish - even a small marble or stone caught between his feet and footwear caused him excruciating pain.

‘Useless fellows! Why the hell there is no cement flooring this side of the road - just like over there?’ he cursed. ‘They have left the road unpaved, and I can hardly walk!’ He strongly condemned the city officials in his heart.

He wore a light, decrepit *dhoti*; it was improvised from an eight-foot *dhoti* cut into two. As he walked, the tail end of the loincloth hanging between his two

legs was visible through the *dhoti*. A large shirt hung loose on his frame - it was difficult to know if the shirt sleeves were short or long. The huge shirt pocket was full with sundry items: a handkerchief to clean his clogged nose; a leather case for eyeglasses; and a silver snuff box. His bald head was shining bright, and at its back, a patch of gray hair grew like a crescent. He carried a thick, heavy shawl on his shoulders as a forethought; it would serve as a cloak to protect him from chilly weather lest the sea breeze should blow harder, later.

He walked for more than five minutes on the ground that separated the paved walkway from the sandy beach. It took him ten more minutes to reach his final destination; after reaching the new metal road that circled around the interior portion of the beach, he raised his head seeking a corner in the beach sheltered from human encroachment or noise.

That was *his* place; there was a landmark for its ready recognition, and it belonged to him. He was accustomed to sitting there - the same spot - whenever he came to the beach. Occasionally, when he

happened to see someone sitting there - even with no deliberate plan or intent - Sarma's face would bristle with senseless anger; he would be deeply hurt with a feeling that his entire evening has been wasted. But today, fortunately for him, nobody had usurped his territory.

Seating himself comfortably on the sandy ground, Sarma looked up at the empty sky, and then the surroundings: boys running around him in circles; girls building houses afar in the sand; young men in pursuit of their heart throbs; and pairs of lovers seeking their own privacy amidst the crowds gathering on the beach. To Sarma, all these were old, familiar, tiresome sights. How long will they continue? Will they last for ever? Presently, everyone on the beach seems caught in a groove and engaged in some diversion, but finally one day they too will be bored with their routine. That is the reality one has to face in life, Sarma told himself. He felt a dry, vapid comfort following such a thought. Again, these games, dreams, joys and pleasures will revive under a new generation . . .

The truth of the matter is life never becomes dull or tiresome. It is people who find life humdrum and boring, but life, as such, never becomes stale or decrepit. Life blossoms anew every second; it is the flower that fades away in course of time, but not the life force that gives rise to it. This is the eternal unity or contradiction in the universe between *Paramatma*, the God and *Jivatma*, the Man. Flower is the man, and life-force, the God!

A child over there is happily engaged in scooping the sand over and over again with its tiny hands; a young fellow afar with sunglasses has set his eyes on that girl; he has overcome his shyness and is now riding up and down the beach road in his motorbike giving in to some lusty outbursts; he finds delight in declaring his love for that girl with some silly gestures to draw her attention. And then, there is this pair of lovers who seem to be enjoying each other's company, oblivious to the crowd surrounding them. Such is their delight! Yet, all these are mere delusions, Sarma reminded himself. These activities too, one day, will pass into inevitable oblivion. When he

realized that he too in the past had lived through such experiences, Sarma couldn't help recalling his own naiveté in childhood when he literally believed all the fairy tales his grandfather had told him. He was now reliving those days, and felt a little sad.

‘Over everything is finally over,’ Sarma murmured to himself. ‘I am now blessed with many grandchildren! I see them go through their lives just like I did many years ago; my sons and daughters are now engaged in routine activities like falling in love; getting married; quarreling with one another; or taking part in some rituals. All this is now history! Like a helpless bystander I am now watching this drama playing to an inevitable finale.

Do you see that bench - the cement bench - laid out in the open space, on either side, between the walkway and the dip a few feet away from it on the sandy beach? Two years ago my friend Venkatachari and I were sitting on it. That was our daily routine. He lived in *Luz*. I would pick him up on my way home; later his car would come to take him home; his driver would finally drop me at my place. That was

the daily routine till two years ago. In the beginning, his son . . . what was his name? It was a good name . . . Good heavens, people whose names I remember very well are already gone! . . . As for the other names, I keep forgetting them as soon as I hear them . . . I am becoming forgetful day after day . . . My eyesight is also bad. If night comes I become blind . . . Nowadays my memory is also failing me . . . Sometimes I hate this life! Why do I have to live like this! . . . So Venkatachari and I would come here and sit on that cement bench. In summer we would be here by four in the afternoon and stay on till nine in the evening - talking about old familiar things

“Now, do you remember this? In Nineteen twenty-six, . . . ” that’s how we would begin our conversation .Otherwise we would talk about the most recent one to leave our band of senior citizens. Often times, we would just stay together without talking to one another - like a husband and wife dutifully bound together by time and tradition.

‘Shall we go home?’ Those would be our last words. Sometimes we would talk about death; that

would usually come with a long sigh followed by a couple of homilies to the effect that to live beyond a certain age may not be a good thing. Occasionally we would vent our frustration on today's youth and decry the modern trends. We would scream aloud: 'How come things have turned so bad?' Sometimes we would even get into some big fight with one another! But the very next day I would be at Venkatachari's doorstep; if I get into a bad mood and abandon his friendship, where can I go and sing out the rest of my gripes?

It happened two years ago; it was getting dark, Venkatachari opened the car door, supported himself with walking stick against the ground and got out of the car. He turned toward me and said: "We will meet again tomorrow." Those were his last words when we parted company . . . just like everyday . . .

That night - around two at night - Satagopan - yes, now I remember his name, it comes back to me, he was Venkatachari's eldest son, the Chartered Accountant; he phoned me, and said: "Father passed away . . . There were no complications . . . He couldn't

sleep till midnight, and suddenly complained of chest pain. I phoned for the doctor and he arrived. Father passed away at twelve thirty. ”

He said it in such a matter of fact; that was it . . . At that time Venkatachari was sixty-eight years old; now that is my age too . . .

Nowadays I come to the beach all by myself . I lie down on the sandy soil. I can't sit because my back hurts; the cement bench also pricks my skin. Even the sand that sticks to my body as it presses down the ground gives me a burning sensation for five to ten minutes; that's the reason I have spread out my shawl on the sand and made myself comfortable. I do have a pillow in the car but today I forgot to take it out with me. When I set my head against the pillow, stretch myself out on the beach and stare at the sky above I begin to feel this human life is insignificant . .

Twenty years ago, five of us - myself, Venkatachari, Ragottama Rao, Sivam, Pattanna - used to take a brisk stroll on this walkway with our walking sticks. Venkatachari and I were the only ones who had not yet retired from service; the rest

were senior to us. We would walk for a mile and then come back and sit on the cement bench. Pattanna would entertain us with his jokes, often making us laugh till our sides ached!! He was very witty – sometimes he would drag some innocent bystander and make fun of him; occasionally he would even say things in a bad taste! That was his way of having fun; when the body fails, the mind tries to compensate; he had that weakness . . . He too is gone now . . .

Everyone of them said the same thing when parting company: “We will meet again – tomorrow.” Five has come down to four . . . then three . . . then two . . . I am the last survivor; I am sitting here, all by myself, counting my days, sighing and brooding over my youth

It is all just talk, only talk - all this whining about getting tired in life or hating it . . . He who enjoys life never avoids life's pleasures, even if he strongly desires to relinquish them .. .See, it is just impossible! If a woman dressed in a sari of bright colors now suddenly walks past me, don't I feel like raising my eyebrows and staring at her? . .

But I would restrain myself, and try to comfort her with words like, “My dear child, aren’t you the daughter of so and so . . . ?” I would try to get close to her and even physically touch her! My god, what a horrible thought! The human mind could be so fickle and mean . . . Yes, it is mean!

What a shame! Sometimes I feel so ashamed I just want to end my life!

If I am gone, a chapter will come to an end; I think somebody is standing next to me . . .’

Sarma suddenly turned around and faced a stranger.

He seemed as old as Sarma, but his appearance was so unbecoming of him, very different from Sarma's. He wore a large shirt with stripes in multiple colors, just like that fellow with the sunglasses on the motorbike, dressed in a short - sleeves shirt, a polyester pant and vigorously chomping on a cigarette; Sarma felt a stab of jealousy just by looking at him.

‘He is an eyesore,’ Sarma thought. ‘Can't he show

some maturity at this old age? The fellow's pot belly . . . the pant pulled over it all the way up to the chest . . the cigarette . . . he is just awful!

Anyway Sarma could care less and turned away from him when he heard the stranger address him: "Excuse me, aren't you Mister Anantha Sarma?"

"Yes, I am. " Sarma's reply was sullen.

"Can't you recognize me?" The man smiled revealing his false teeth, and sat on the beach next to Sarma.

Sarma stared back at him. He desperately wanted to score a victory in the challenge now posed to him, and struggled hard to recognize the stranger.

"You see . . . by evening my eye sight gets a little blurred, . . ." he began, when the stranger burst into huge laughter, and loudly screamed: "Good heavens! I was afraid you might say you can't recognize me because I have grown old ."

Sarma was a little irritated; why do old people have to play teasing games?

“I am Rangamani . . .”

“Rang . . . I can't believe it! Rangamani We met many years ago . . . My goodness! . . . Exactly forty six years ago . . . Just now I was thinking about my colleagues - friends of my own generation who are no more . . . The last one was one Venkatachari, you don't know him, he's not from our batch; later, he became my friend and a business client . . . I was thinking about him a short while ago . . . See, God is great! How did you find me?” Sarma was excited as he made further inquiries.

Rangamani took a deep puff and then discarded his cigarette. A grin appeared on Sarma's face as he enquired: “Looks like you haven't changed a bit. I can see you have aged a little, but you have not changed at all. Have you any grandchildren? How many?”

Rangamani laughed. “You say I haven't changed, then, where would I get grandchildren? Remember the last time we met? I am just like the way you saw me the last time!”

As Sarma gasped at these remarks Rangamani

noticed that Sarma had lost almost all his teeth.

“You never got married?” Sarma asked Rangamani. He was not sure if his question was congratulatory or tinged with pity.

“So what? I have seen life - I have lost nothing because I didn't get married. I have seen life - in all its dimensions - to the fullest extent possible.” Rangamani seemed to be floating in air as he spoke those words.

They have met off hand after forty-five years, and instead of exchanging information on everything from the beginning to the end, the two men now felt comfortable owing to their long friendship to talk about themselves starting from their present circumstances.

“How many children do you have?” Rangamani asked. “How many grandchildren? And great-grand children? The last time we met, your wife had gone to her parents' home for delivery . . .”

Sarma felt a slight prick in the heart.. Why does Rangamani mention about his wife going over to her

parents' home for her delivery? Does Rangamani have something in mind? Sarma was a little scared, but he managed to conceal it , and said: “Yes, I remember, you went to Delhi after my marriage. Didn't you?” He was now harboring a false suspicion but posed it as a query.

“Hi Ananthu! I am telling you, you are certainly getting old! You are also losing your mind! How can you forget how our other friends and I went on a binge during your marriage? We got you into hot waters; you don't remember any of those things?”

“Yes, yes, I do remember now, ” Sarma replied. “I am getting old, I keep forgetting things.”

“What do you mean you are getting old? You are sixty- eight? Why do you call yourself old? I am also sixty eight! Ananthu, our people seem to be coming apart when they get old; look at the Westerners and how they live! An old man in West marries a twenty-five year old woman and fathers a child the following year! Do you know this? Most of the young women are attracted to old people like us.” Rangamani lowered his voice, winked his eyes and

burst into a loud laughter attracting the attention of others in the beach.

** ** *

“Shh! Please . . . Please lower your voice.” Sarma was horrified, and covered his ears in dismay. He also wondered, deep inside, how Rangamani could lead such an active life.

“Ananthu! Is our Pattanna still around?” Rangamani inquired.

Sarma pressed his lips together. “It is more than ten years since he was gone.”

They both smiled at one another as if they have not yet overcome their disbelief at this sudden encounter. Rangamani pulled out a cigarette from a packet and offered it to Sarma. “No, thanks!” Sarma politely declined, and took out the snuff box from his pocket, saying “Of late, I got into this bad habit; I must give it up!”

“I am as old as you are,” Rangamani said. “You have become forgetful. But I can't forget anything!”

Even after I found you on the beach and came over to you, you couldn't recognize me! Do you know how I found you here? I have parked my car close to the pavement. I came to Madras only a week ago.”

“Where were you all these days?”

“All kinds of places; for the last ten years I am living in Bangalore. Let me finish what I wanted to say. I saw you getting off your car. Normally I am interested in old people like us - yes, . . . I mean old men only (Rangamani was mischievously winking) because I might come across someone I know. Then I saw one of your grandsons! His face resembled yours exactly as I remembered it in the good old days. As soon as I saw that boy in the car, I could confirm you as my friend Ananthu!”

Anantha Sarma was thrilled to learn that he had a grandson in his own image.

He let out a deep sigh. “I suppose in course of time people will recognize us only through our grandchildren! Rangamani, I can't thank you enough! I am glad you came along when I was grieving over

the loss of my friends; nowadays I am feeling very lonely.”

“Why do you need those old friends? Don't bother with them. Why don't you enjoy life with young friends? That is what I do. You are the only friend I have at my own age. Only time will show how our friendship would turn out . . . Okay, now, why don't we go to my place? ” Rangamani glanced at his watch.

“You have a car? ”

“Yes. Do you see that Ambassador parked over there? My driver is also with me. Why don't we do this? As soon as we go to my hotel room we can call your home – you have a phone, don't you?– and ask your folks not to send the car to the beach to pick you up. Ananthu, let us get moving. It is getting late.” Rangamani rose in hurry as if it was an emergency and he needed to attend a program at some scheduled time. “I feel like talking to you personally about something . . . Let us first have a couple of drinks . . . then we can talk!”

Drinks! Sarma was hesitant if he should accept the invitation. Then he recalled Rangamani was a heavy drinker even in their former days.

‘How is he able to remain so youthful - just like he was so many years ago- in body, mind and spirit?’ Sarma could not help wondering . He was determined to keep pace with Rangamani, and briskly walked with him by supporting his walking stick on the sandy soil and now and then trying to catch his breath.

Rangamani was staying in a special cottage that had all the modern amenities and was part of a hotel establishment. It provided the usual comforts of an affluent household - like air conditioning, a refrigerator, sofa set, bath tub, two rooms, a double bed, radio, telephone, etc.

Once they both were inside the cottage, Anantha Sarma went around the place as if investigating the rooms and their contents. He saw Rangamani's expensive clothes scattered all over. And he grinned like a disapproving critic when his eyes scanned Rangamani's toilet items, fashion aids as well as the

empty liquor bottles discarded after use.

Even before Rangamani changed after his arrival at the cottage, his driver - who spoke *Kannada* and also served as his servant - had set up on a teapoy a wine bottle and two glasses.

After slipping into new clothes, Rangamani washed his face in the basin. He went to the mirror, combed his hair and applied some face powder. Then he opened a small box and pulled out a syringe; as he extracted some fluid into the syringe and, like a doctor, examined it under light, Sarma joked: "What are you doing? Do you want to give me a shot?"

"I am having a shot myself, " Rangamani replied. He then eased himself on a nearby chair and pushed the needle into his thigh. "I ate quite a few mangoes this afternoon. I have mild diabetes - so I am taking this shot."

Sarma arched his body while supporting himself with the walking stick on the floor and watched Rangamani in amazement. Rangamani took out a bottle of perfume and pumped the scent around his

own body; when he pointed it in Sarma's direction, Sarma seemed appalled. He screamed "No, no!" and moved away as if avoiding pollution. As he desperately tried to shake off his shirt to get rid of any of its traces, Rangamani burst into laughter, and said: "This is good, imported stuff . . . You can see how mild it is!"

"Forget it, there is no way I can have any perfume sprayed over my body," Sarma replied. "I would become a laughing stock when I go home." He tried to ward off any traces of smell from his shirt.

"Come on, let us go and sit in the living room." Rangamani now accompanied Sarma to the teapoy with the wine and the glasses. He sat on a sofa next to the teapoy. Sarma too shared the sofa but he sat crouched a few spaces away.

"By the way, how much are you paying for this place? " Sarma asked with curiosity as he surveyed the ceiling.

Rangamani addressed his driver and inquired him in his native *Kannada* language about the room rent.

“Seventy five, sir!”

“Seventy five rupees? . . . You mean per day? . . .”
Sarma started sweating. “It is too much . . . Criminal waste of money . . . How long you have been here?”

“I am here for the last nine days . . . today is the tenth day . . .”

“Seven hundred and fifty rupees!”

The driver mixed drinks for Rangamani. It became clear that he was not just a driver working for Rangamani. He whispered something into Rangamani's ears.

“Is that right? You mean tonight, at eight?”
Rangamani asked, and then turned his glance toward Sarma. He seemed to have revived his youth on watching Sarma's face. He winked his eyes and addressed the driver: “Let her come . . . ask her to wait in the next room . . . This gentleman is my old friend - he knows everything. So let her come, there is absolutely no problem . . .” He continued to drink.

Sarma understood everything.

‘How could he?’ That question first became a mystery, then a disgusting thought, and finally turned into deep irrational jealousy touching off a welter of confused feelings. Sarma felt his heart beat faster and his whole body tremble.

“Have some soft drinks!” Rangamani said, and Sarma agreed, “ I think it is a good idea. ”

Rangamani's driver brought a glass of soft drink for Sarma. Sarma smelled the glass a few times with intense suspicion before he took a sip.

Sarma tapped his walking stick mildly on the mosaic floor and laughed to himself while pondering over Rangamani's strange behavior.

“Ananthu! I can understand why you find life very tiresome, ” Rangamani broke in. “That's the reason why you keep complaining about getting old. What else can you expect from the kind of life you have had so far? I am not faulting your family life; I am referring to the way you have led your family life - about your own attitude toward life in general. When one is confronted with false fears - and they come in

so many forms! - fear of community, fear of spouse, fear of god, fear of scriptures, fear of disease, fear of death, fear of self, fear of one's own shadow - one is bound to get tired with life! Don't you agree?"

Sarma narrowed his eyebrows and stared at Rangamani. On the surface he didn't find Rangamani's views strange or controversial. Now he suddenly felt a little frightened; was Rangamani trying to lure him into some freakish ways or even trying to pervert his mind? . . .

"Rangamani, I agree with you. But so what? What was supposed to have happened has already happened. We can do nothing about it - whether it was right or wrong. We can only count the rest of our days before we breath our last." Sarma let out a deep sigh.

"That's it? What a pity! You say you are left with only counting the days? Why days? I think you have been counting the years! Yes, years!" Rangamani's lips flushed red in excitement: "You say what was supposed to have happened has already happened. When did that actually happen? Can you tell me

about it? When? Have you finished it yourself? The truth of the matter is it has not happened, and it is not over yet! All these years - for the last forty years - you have been living just counting your days . . . You are not the only one, there are many like you . . . What else have you done? What else have you enjoyed?”

“Rangamani! I am afraid you have completely misunderstood me! Who can say I haven’t enjoyed life? I have had a successful career and earned good money for the last forty years. I have given my daughter and two sons a decent education. My wife took part in my sixtieth birthday rituals - she passed away five years ago. She had the honor of predeceasing me - just like she had wished and prayed. . I also have a dozen grandchildren, how can you say I have not enjoyed anything?”

“Some enjoyment!” Rangamani mocked with a gesture. His wine glass was now empty.

“Have your drink!” Sarma averted his face a little away from Rangamani and poured some wine into his glass.

“Oh, thank you!” exclaimed Rangamani and helped himself with more wine. Then he held Sarma's hands and pleaded with him: “Would you like to join me tonight for dinner?”

“Dinner?” Sarma asked a little bewildered. “My dinner is only a couple of fruits, and a little milk. That's all!”

“That's fine . . . we can have something light; it is not important what we eat . The important thing is we have to eat together! Now, when do you have to be home? The time is now seven thirty . . .”

“I usually go to bed by nine or nine thirty. Nowadays I don't sleep very well. I keep rolling in the bed . . my back hurts . . I often get up and sit on the bed and eagerly look forward to the daybreak . “.

“I know what you mean, ” said Rangamani, followed by a youthful laughter. “These are the problems of old age.” Then he continued. “Why don't you call your home now? You can tell them you met one of your friends from your good old days and that you are talking from his house. Tell them you will be

late.”

“Where is the phone? . . .” Sarma rose from the chair.

“Stay right where you are, the phone will be brought to you.”

Rangamani’s driver fetched and placed the telephone before Sarma. Sarma made the call as if under duress - only to oblige Rangamani. He showed no particular enthusiasm or excitement while he dialed home.

“Who is this? Geetha? Oh, it is Sulo? I can't find any difference in your voices! The driver said he will pick me up from the beach after he first picked up the kids from the movie theater. Tell him that won't be necessary. I am now calling from my friend's hotel;. Yes, we are seeing each other after forty years. He wants me to have dinner with him . . . Yes . . . Nothing heavy . . . I will have the usual stuff . . . So I will be late . . . Keep no milk for me tonight . . . You mean at our place, for dinner? Sure, I can invite him..” Sarma looked at Rangamani while on phone.

Rangamani now seemed excited like a child, he came over to Sarma and asked for the receiver.

“Here he is . . . on the phone. Why don't you invite him yourself?” Sarma handed over the receiver to Rangamani, who now spoke to the person on the other end.

“Who is this? . . . You are Anantha Sarma's daughter-in-law? You are the wife of his eldest son? Okay! How many grandchildren do you have? It is kind of late to ask how many children, am I right? Ha . . .ha . Yes, I saw the grandchildren in the beach only from Pacha could I recognize your father-in-law! So many years have passed . . I have traveled all over the world! Now I am settled in Bangalore . . .Sure! . . . Tomorrow I have to attend to some important personal work . . . I will make it some other time . . . Thanks anyway for the invitation . . .” He ended his conversation with a greeting. Sarma's face turned ashen.

Sarma's face was totally changed. He now strongly felt that he should not have let Rangamani speak with his family members. Nevertheless, he felt some

comfort at the thought that the chances of Rangamani ever showing up at his home were quite remote.

Rangamani now seemed tipsy, his face flushed red. He was reciting to himself:

A flower blooms anew everyday for me;

I too bloom anew everyday for you!!"

** ** *

Outside, a taxi was heard screeching to a halt. As Rangamani's driver opened the car's front door, a woman clad in a blue silk sari, her head partly covered, entered the house. The driver led the woman into one of the interior rooms; Sarma cast his eyes downward and stealthily observed her.

He began to sweat; 'Why this predicament?' he asked himself. 'Why do I have to go through all this at my old age?'

"Do you remember our last meeting?" Rangamani asked. He winked his eyes mischievously. "Her

name . . . Do you remember it?"

Gomathy! The name was struck in Sarma's throat. He was afraid to come out with it.

"Gomathy!" Rangamani said; he warmly recalled the golden moments from his past association with her, and her beautiful face.

"Maybe she turned into an old hag or even dead! When it comes to our people, both mean the same thing!" He let out a deep sigh, and said: " Ananthu, you haven't changed a bit!"

"Rangamani, you have traveled all over the world, you know a lot of things more than I do. But I would like to give you a small advice . . ." Even before Sarma could finish the sentence Rangamani burst into wild laughter.

"Ananthu! Nothing has changed with you! You always offer advice to others, that has been your style for the last forty-five years . . . Aren't you tired of offering advice to others?"

"If you want to drink or do things as you like, they

all come down to your personal choices. . . I can't say anything about them . But have you ever paused to think that in your advanced years you have nobody to take care of you or even inherit your property and wealth?" Sarma was making this emotional plea when the driver emerged out of the interior room. Sarma unconsciously turned his eyes toward the room and instantly took stock of the woman inside.

“Who told you I have nobody? I have a lot of them. Of course, my situation is quite different from yours in the sense I am not legally married to any particular woman and can make no claim that she take part in my sixtieth birthday rituals! But there are several women in my life with whom I enjoy intense, nurturing relationships! So certainly there would be someone to take care of my property when I am gone. Let us not worry about it!" Rangamani dismissed Sarma's question on inheritance as of no consequence.

Sarma turned over the wine bottle on the teapoy and read the label. “Scotch whiskey. Is scotch famous?" he asked with curiosity.

“Hmm . . . this is good stuff! Do you want to try some?”

“No, I am a heart patient . . . Why bother?”

“You are, really? Do you know wine is good for the heart? This is the best medicine for heart patients. Instead of orally administering it, the doctor injects it into your body!”

“I had a British friend who visited me once - that was long time ago, I don't remember his name - I tasted a little wine then. I felt my head reeling, so I held back .”

“I see, I think you have changed a little since I saw you . . . We are seeing each other after several years - and I don't think it would be proper for me to celebrate this occasion all by myself . . .”

“Okay, pour a little, just a little . . .” Sarma said and Rangamani poured some wine.

“Okay . . . That should do it, ” Sarma protested. “I want to test - with a small sip, that's all . . .”

Like a young bride Sarma was overcome by fear,

desire and shyness as he readied himself to try the wine . . .

The time was nine.

Sarma was steadily and carefully tasting the small amount of wine in his glass; that was enough to exacerbate his imaginary feelings. He thought his eyelids were growing heavy and that his head was slowly reeling.

Rangamani was at the height of his enjoyment, laughing, feeling free and uninhibited. The items on the table - cakes, biscuits, and fruits were scattered pell-mell signaling the dinner was coming to an end.

Sarma was sober and fully conscious of himself; yet, he pretended as if he was intoxicated.

“Hi Rangamani! I am not as innocent as you think! Do you think people should act openly with no inhibitions whatsoever - in full view of everybody? Are you suggesting one ought to carry a placard around one's neck? You are a fool! You have messed up your life and feel sorry for yourself! It is your sense of frustration and disappointment that

have driven you to this drinking spree!”

“You are right!” Rangamani replied. “I act like this whether I am happy or not. So actually I can't tell you whether I am happy or sad . . . But I am free, and that is the most important thing for me. As for the placard you have mentioned, I carry none, but others are attaching labels to me. I don't care . . .” He took a match stick, scratched it against a rough edge, and lit a cigarette.

Suddenly Sarma asked him. “Rangamani, I want the truth , , , Did Gomathy ever mention to you anything about me? ”

“Well, she talked about several things. She said she would give up anything for my happiness and would be willing to accompany me to London . She also said she would go with me anywhere in the world. She was telling the truth, she was really in love with me.”

“She didn't mention anything about me? . . .”

“About you? What is there to say? Those days

everybody thought of you as a nitwit.” Rangamani dismissed the question with a laugh.

Sarma forced himself to join and laugh with Rangamani - but he did a poor job at that; he began with a loud outburst, but stopped half way through.

“Rangamani,” Sarma said, “can you think of any sad, unforgettable event in your life?”

“Why? Why do you ask?”

“There has been such an event in your life. I am eager to know if you are even aware of such a thing.”

Sarma cleared his throat and spoke; he wanted to confound Rangamani who now seemed either drunk or immersed in some silent thought..

“This is an old story . . . It has to do with a woman and deserves to be forgotten and erased from human memory . . . Now, you claim you are always young at heart; you just now recited a poem saying that a fresh flower blooms everyday for you and that you too feel renewed everyday, that's why I am addressing this question to you. Don't you think what you did to

Gomathy was gross injustice? If you don't think so, then this poem and your philosophy are just a sham!” Sarma deliberately wanted to provoke Rangamani.

“Ananthu, I fully understand what you mean,” Rangamani replied, and continued. “But I have not left Gomathy because of what you think or what Gomathy had imagined. My action had nothing to do with her being born in a low caste . . . I wanted to live like a free man, and I believed marriage would be an obstacle to my goal. Even now, after all these years, I have not changed my mind. That is the reason I am glad I didn't get married. It has been the right decision for me. I don't have faith in the so called love. When I talk about love, I am not referring to the ordinary love between a man and a woman. I mean everything. I am talking about the love between a father and son; brotherhood; motherhood; compassion; pity; and patriotism . . . I can't afford to give up anything because of these . . .” Rangamani spoke with his eyes closed while trying to make a point, here and there. with hand gestures.

“Are you . . . I mean - are you suggesting you

love yourself more than anybody else? Are you a kind of narcissist?"

"No, that is not true!" Rangamani retorted. "I notice this in everyone, including you. You are all narcissists! You try to project your 'self' on everyone you come across and then love that person! I am not like that. Let us take Gomathy's case. Are you not suggesting I should feel sorry because I left her when she was willing to sacrifice everything for me and fully commit herself to me? I am glad I left her for that very reason! You will never understand these things. You love your wife because you expect things from her. I am not personally talking about you - I am speaking in general terms, it applies to the majority of the human beings and to any segment of human population. I can't tell you who actually influenced my thinking - whether it is my upbringing, my education or the people I came across in my life. I think I owe it to my own life . . . I feel disgusted when people mouth empty words like 'noble qualities' or 'culture.' It is like getting some emotional comfort after you part with a few cents to a

pidling beggar cringing pathetically on the roadside. I think it obscene when a mother indulges in extravagant love and affection toward her son. Maybe it has to do with my becoming an orphan - my mother died on the third day after I was born - before I even knew what maternal love was . . . But that makes me happy . . . I had never missed my mother any time in my life . . . I feel the same way about my father too . . . He lived in London . . . I enjoyed every time a guest or someone visited our home, but I didn't turn sentimental or overflow with emotion at the thought that my father was coming home from thousands of miles away, nearly after an interval of a year. I never got entangled in such distasteful thoughts. Our estate manager - do you remember him? His name was Murali Rao; you know what type of man he was. Since I was a child I have never been overwhelmed by unnecessary sentiments or feelings. I didn't have to carry any burden beyond the limitation of a human being to help himself grow in life . . . There were friends, so many of them - men, women, some professionally known while others I could appreciate for what they were . . . They were

my life's acquaintances! There are no constraints or bonds in such a life. Freedom becomes a man's moral duty!" Rangamani seemed carried away. Because he spoke fluently and occasionally used some French phrases that intruded casually into his monologue, Sarma understood one thing: Rangamani was not just articulating to Sarma some point of view; he was thinking aloud to himself.

"Hmm . . . Your father's wealth and property as well as your stay in a foreign country are responsible for your lifestyle and unbridled freedom," Sarma reasoned to himself. "But what about ordinary people like us? It is just impossible! We feel committed to our homes, to our caste, and to our tradition; fate has ordained us to get an education, work hard, earn our livelihood, and manage our families."

"You may be surprised to know that neither my father's estate nor his wealth helped me in anyway," Rangamani continued. "My father lost his estate within a short period after I went to London. So he lived under my care - with the money I had earned in

a shipping company - and he died after a while. I was very happy when he died. My happiness was my final homage to my father. I detested the idea that such a wealthy man had to subsist under my benevolence. He knew he was dying and that really excited him, it is like a prisoner feeling excited when he gets out of the jail; that was the way my father felt in his last days . . . Later I went to States . . . I did not even like the idea of depending on my formal education or my wealth. Our manager Murali Rao visited me in London and urged me several times to return to India. For two days he arranged a meeting with me and his four attorneys who argued that I could reclaim, by court actions, the property my father had lost years ago. I refused. I was not willing to lose this golden opportunity. I wanted to find out how much I counted as an individual, what kind of price tag my name carried. So I shaped my life with my own efforts. I worked in laundries; washed dishes in big kitchens; drove taxis; and I had the opportunity to enjoy life's pleasures in these circumstances in an amazing way. Then I spent the next twenty unforgettable years in Hong Kong as a small business

man. After World War II, I accumulated enough wealth to equal the status of my father when he inherited his ancestral property. Then I wanted to gamble with my life. In Hong Kong I owned a home that looked like a royal palace - with cars, bank balance, and a departmental store. If it was true that I created them with my own efforts, I asked myself, why should I not take on a new challenge: how about giving up all my assets in their entirety, becoming a pauper and trying to earn them all over again? So I gambled with my life! And that was a very exciting game!”

** ** *

“Within a few years I became a pauper. Do you know how peaceful that life was? If one enjoys all luxuries and artificial pleasures in life and then finds himself on the streets, one does find peace of mind; but then I found out that life was not really simple anymore. It was only then that I discovered something strange about life.

If it is awfully difficult for a pauper to become a

millionaire, it is equally difficult for a wealthy man to become a pauper. To give away one's money for charity or throw it away in a vast sea is like committing suicide. If one makes an investment in a business with an intention to lose money but ends up getting back not only the capital and also profit, it is not easy to become a pauper! Even when I invested in some risky ventures - which others vehemently shunned - I made money. Wealth and women are the same! They are always drawn toward those who enjoy them best . . . There is a Chinese proverb that says something to that effect.” Rangamani concluded with a chuckle.

As soon as he heard the word 'woman', Sarma remembered the single occupant presently in the other room, and turned his eyes toward it. The door being slightly ajar, that woman was watching both men from inside the room. As Sarma's glance fell on her, she rose, pulled the door gradually toward her and finally closed it. Rangamani noticed Sarma's eyes transfixed on the door till it was firmly shut.

“Do you know - I have children in all colors all

over the world,” Rangamani continued. “But I have married nobody. I hope you will not presume that I avoided marriage because I didn't want to accept responsibility. In every country I had worked, I have given away my income from that country to my children born there - or to their mothers. I have returned empty handed from my overseas trips. Only the hands were empty, not the heart! After all what is life? We come here and we leave just as we arrived - in between there is life! My memories, in so far as those children and their mothers are concerned, remain warm and pleasant. I don't miss the children or their mothers. It is only proper they too feel the same way about me. I am not afraid about death; neither do I mourn the loss of my peers. I think the strangest thing in the world is when people mourn their dead. Do you know this? I have never cried in my life; I never wanted to cry. A lot of people want to cry and seem to get some pleasure out of it. But I must confess to something. I returned to India when I turned sixty and once I made up my mind to remain in this country, I wanted to settle down in Bangalore. I went to Madras where I happened to visit my former

home - I used to live there some ten years ago. I became teary when I looked at it - I don't know why. Now there's a bank in that building. I asked the driver to stop for a while. I was overcome with sadness - it makes no sense at all. I felt my throat blocked. I thought I was acting crazy; I hastily retreated."

"You didn't think of Gomathy - even at that time?" Sarma asked.

"Exactly!" Rangamani continued. "I remembered her. But I was not feeling sorry for her; neither did I feel guilty because I left her. I can't explain what happened. I was moved - that's all I know. There was no sadness or bitterness. Ananthu, I have to tell you another strange thing. It is true I have traveled all over the world, met with so many people. But in my relationships with women I would always recall Gomathy. That doesn't mean she has carved for herself a permanent place in my heart. She appears just like that when my thoughts run heedlessly along Maybe it is because she was the first woman I had experienced in my life. Not even my

mother! Then I would tell myself: maybe Gomathy felt the same way about me . . .I wish . . .”

The time was ten.

“The time is up,” Sarma said.

Rangamani now winked his eyes, and spoke. “If you insist you faithfully adhere to fidelity in marriage, I don't want to recommend anything else to you.” He laughed and looked at Sarma, who remained silent.

“Ananthu! I am asking a personal question . . . forgive me for my curiosity . . . Were you always faithful in marriage? Did you ever go out of the way? I mean any extra” Sarma quickly raised his head and didn't want to let Rangamani's suspicion gather even an iota of credibility.

“Never! I feel very proud about it!”

Rangamani nodded his head, and smiled.

“Why, you can't believe me, do you? How can you? You have lived an entirely different kind of life!”

Rangamani smiled, again. "Did I say I didn't believe you? Why do you think that way? I think it is getting late for you. You too seem to be in a hurry to leave."

"Yes . . . I am ready to leave . . ." Sarma got up.

"Let me get the driver," Rangamani said. Then he turned to the woman, who now stood at her room door entrance, and said. "Maybe he is sleeping already; go and find him." The woman went out in search of the driver.

Sarma now spoke as if he suddenly remembered something. "Did you ever find out what happened to Gomathy? She was totally devoted to you and she was willing to sacrifice everything for you and go wherever you wanted to go. All she wanted was a word from you: Wait for me. She said she would have waited for you till her death. Do you know how she ended up?"

"Tell me . . ."

"She ended up like any ordinary, pathetic whore who goes through life destroying others and finally

destroying herself. And you are responsible for that terrible tragedy. If you had not rejected her, she could have become your ideal wife.”

Rangamani smiled and lowered his head. Then he spoke:

“Maybe she felt that way. I can understand her. She was probably mad at me or wanted to avenge me – in her crude way – by subjecting herself to such a tawdry life. I can't help it! She shaped her own life with her own anger, with her sense of justice and finally with her sense of satisfaction in punishing me with her actions. As far as my life is concerned, she played no prominent role in it except that she was the first one to grace my heart. That's about it. Maybe that's the reason I think of Gomathy whenever I am with another woman. I was not moved even when I saw Hiroshima amid its horror and tragedy, but when I happened to see Gomathy's house nearly after thirty five years I became teary - it is such a childish thing. I realize these feelings are meaningless even as I feel overcome by them.”

“When you found out that a woman who took a vow to commit herself to you – as far as she was concerned she had already dedicated her life to you – has been finally reduced to destitution and cast aside like a wretch, don't you feel sorry for her?”

“To tell the truth, I have been scarcely touched by such sentimental feelings,” Rangamani replied. “A woman makes a man happy and in return she also receives happiness. Beyond that, when a man or woman, losing themselves in some ecstasy, stake out their future out of some whim or fancy, their lives end up as sad, foolish episodes. Such lives would spawn only boredom and hatred . . . Think about this! How can you ever surrender your right to another person – whatever may be that person's relationship with you - to determine your own future? When a man professes love for another woman, and tries to redeem it by solemnly declaring that he couldn't possibly live without her, I think he is indulging in one of the most vulgar and coarse exploits I can ever imagine. When Gomathy started acting that way, my feelings for her, as well our relationship, came

apart.”

Outside, they heard Rangamani's driver presumably wake up and steer the car out of shed.

“The car is ready, ” the woman informed as she came in. Sarma got ready to leave and now he understood why Rangamani was eager to send him away. Rangamani tried to get up from his seat to bid Sarma farewell, but he was too drunk for such a gesture.

“I am sorry, I am dead drunk, ” Rangamani said. “After all these years I have met with you and I was indulging in some sort of retrospection and reliving my past. Can we meet, again, tomorrow? How can I contact you?” He shook hands with Sarma.

“At the same location - in beach.. We will meet at half past four, ” Sarma answered.

“Now, you don't have to show me to the door. Please continue to rest. Good bye.” Sarma took leave of Rangamani and walked to the door. The woman was standing near the entrance to close the door following his departure. Sarma stared at her. As he

started imagining her appearance in Rangamani's company following his imminent departure, he couldn't help wondering, again: "How could this fellow . . . ?" The woman was a little drunk herself, and she too laughed when she looked at Sarma.

"Why are you laughing?" Sarma asked her rather boldly and stood next to her; he felt his body suddenly invigorated.

"Nothing, " the woman answered, and continued to laugh.

"What a laugh!" Sarma joked, and turned around to see if Rangamani was watching them from afar. Rangamani was now lying flat on the sofa vigorously chomping on a cigarette.

"What a laugh!" Sarma said, again, and fondled the woman's cheek and pinched it hard, while his body moved forward making a direct, physical contact with her body.

"Ouch . . ." she screamed, albeit playfully.

Sarma suddenly freed himself from her and moved

away . “Maybe I shouldn’t have done that,” he mumbled to himself and walked to the car, his head bowed down.

The woman now closed the door behind her and scratched her cheek . “Some men,” she muttered to herself, “are really so mean that when they want to get corrupted, they want to have it free.”

Back at home, Sarma could get no sleep that entire night.

For a long time after they had known one another, Sarma harbored an ambivalent attitude toward Rangamani; it was a combination of fear and closeness. While Sarma immensely enjoyed Rangamani's company in social and business circles, he was fully aware of his reluctance to invite Rangamani to his own house. He had a nagging fear that Rangamani was a bad influence on women: what if he tried to seduce the women in Sarma's household or caused some scandal? Rangamani seemed endowed with a gift, he could entice any woman, and this awareness piqued Sarma. But he immediately felt ashamed for entertaining such suspicions about

Rangamani. His conscience pricked him that it was not Rangamani who acted mean and secretive toward women, but Sarma himself who was guilty of such infractions. Sarma, who has been tormented by such guilty feelings in the past, now realized something: he was seeing Rangamani after so many years, but Rangamani has, essentially, remained unchanged; similarly, Sarma's feelings toward Rangamani showed no remarkable change either, and this too upset him.

There was a time when Rangamani and Sarma were studying in the same college. Rangamani came from a wealthy, prosperous family. Though heir to vast riches, he lost his mother on the third day of his birth, and was brought up under the careful supervision of Murali Rao, the estate manager. While he acted both as the child's father and mother, Murali Rao treated Rangamani - the son of the rich estate owner, then a very independent spirit living in far away London -as his own boss. So it was that Rangamani could enjoy the privilege of estate wealth and the total lack of control under Murali Rao's

nurturing care. Till the age of ten Rangamani studied under a retired principal as his tutor in a village near Chittur; then he came to Madras and had his education, first in a convent and then in a college, where he met with Sarma. It was Sarma's plain, native appearance - his tuft, sandal paste-mark on forehead, the turban, and finally the innocent look - that endeared him to Rangamani.

During Rangamani's student days Murali Rao had arranged for his accommodation in the second story of a house that belonged to his concubine Chellathammal. Chellathammal had a daughter, Gomathy; it could not be ascertained if Gomathy was Murali Rao's illegitimate daughter. But there was a majesty in her appearance and one could detect an imperial style in her manner. When she was fifteen, she fell in love for Rangamani; but he, unaware of her interest, was deeply immersed in his own studies and the modern city life. It was Sarma who first found out about Gomathy's infatuation with Rangamani. Sarma excelled only in one thing - he knew a woman's vulnerability. Sarma was married

when he was nine, and even before his parents and in-laws, following tradition, arranged the nuptials for the young couple, Sarma started a secret liaison with the bride. Later, when his conscience pricked him for indulging in such a taboo, he sought consolation in the fact that the woman in question was his future wife. Sarma's whole life has always been full of guilty feelings and compromises. Now that his dormant feelings were coming back to badger him, Sarma seemed tormented by one question: Why did I have to meet with this Rangamani, in the first place?

Granted they had met unexpectedly, Sarma told himself, 'I should have just spent some time with Rangamani in the beach and be done with it. But I went with him to his hotel, drank some stuff, talked about this and that, and finally corrupted my mind and above all I did a very foolish thing - I pinched that woman's cheek! What a stupid thing to do! Won't she think I am a dirty old man? No . . . Why should she think bad of me? After all don't old men fondly touch the cheeks of small children? It is something like that . . . But is it, really! '

Sarma, unable to sleep, got up and sat on the bed. He felt the middle of his back itching. He arched his hand in every possible manner to reach out and scratch his back. Then he searched around and got hold of a hand-held fan, and used its stem to vigorously stroke his back to get relief.

There was some murmur from the next room. Sarma pricked his ears and listened. Was he imagining things? His mind swiftly traveled to that far away hotel room and peeped through the keyhole. He sighed.

‘How curtly did I protest to Rangamani that I was always faithful in marriage! Yes, I am. Rangamani was downright arrogant when he asked me if I ever had any extra . . . Rascal, did he know something? Did Gomathy tell him something on that day? Even after all these days he flatly denies it; maybe he thinks I am a hypocrite! Let him, I don't care! If I am taken to a session with *Chitragupta* or *Yama* and asked to testify I will stand firm and declare that in my entire life I have never touched any woman other than Mangalam . . .

Mangalam bore me four children, and she had been delivered all of them at her maternal home. She was the favorite daughter of her parents. She would go for delivery during the seventh month of her pregnancy and would come home after the baby was three months old. During those four occasions, only once I was entangled with Gomathy. I had never even dreamt of Gomathy! Her status, beauty and her intimate relationship with Rangamani - they all belonged to a special class! I would often visit her on the pretense of meeting with Rangamani; Gomathy used to make fun of my tuft and address me as : Mr. Tuft! Later. she showed me some respect and used to address me Mr. Tuft Master! Whatever Rangamani might say now I think what he did to her was gross betrayal. Gomathy had simply wished that Rangamani would ask her to wait for him when he was gone overseas, and she said she would gladly oblige him; but Rangamani refused outright to do anything of that sort! He didn't even speak to her! He was to go abroad on a ship the following day and for nearly a week before his departure he was roaming all over the places and attending farewell parties. I too

went to those parties with him; I would stand in a corner and watch; I had fun during those cocktail parties! Gomathy wanted to throw a party for Rangamani the day before his departure and I was the only guest invited. How beautifully had Gomathy decorated the hall upstairs! Those days there was no electricity, so the decorations mainly consisted of lanterns and bells. Gomathy was waiting for Rangamani the whole night, she was sitting on a chair, her hands leaning against the table while her eyes were overflowing with tears Rangamani, who promised to return soon, never showed up that night I too waited for him and I was hungry. Gomathy suggested I taste some food, which I did and my hunger was soon gone - just by tasting the food. Casually I fell asleep on the sofaAnd when I got up in the middle of night I saw Gomathy drinking something from a glass . . . A short while ago she was like a fairy from a dream world, but now she seemed like a mad woman, and she suddenly grabbed me!

It was incredible! And it was like heaven! After

that I had never experienced anything like that! Many men, rich and wealthy were waiting at Gomathy's doorstep to win her favors! After all, I was nobody!

That day, before I was to leave the town, I went to see Gomathy, and requested her: "Gomathy, you must never reveal what happened between us to Rangamani or anybody else . . . You must give me your word." Only then I realized how silly my concern was. She laughed at me and said: "Why would I do such a thing? It would only reflect on my own character!" Gomathy always talked like that; she was a very proud woman and her pride was her beauty! Rangamani didn't care for her beauty and simply spurned her!

Sarma yawned a couple of times and restlessly rolled in the bed.

He prayed for sleep and yawned a third time. The time was now an hour past midnight.

'Is it only one hour past midnight? Of course, it can't be three and half hours past midnight! My god,

when am I going to catch some sleep? Now, to come to think about it, life is always like that . . . Men occasionally act fickle - minded and go out of line, but it seems to me Rangamani is making a big deal about such moral lapses . . . What the heck, why should I spend sleepless nights thinking about him anyway?

But . . .but . . . can I dismiss him outright as of no consequence? Can it be true that Rangamani enjoys life without any attachment ? Doesn't our Indian philosophy aim for such a goal? Is that Rangamani's philosophy too? Don't philosophers often talk about the steady mind, the non-attachment of a water drop on a lotus leaf? But then, why would Rangamani get so emotional and shed tears while watching his old house in Madras? Does it make sense?

Rangamani seems to be going through life in full steam , honing and sharpening his body and mind, day after day! My God, when am I going to sleep?"

** ** *

"Driver, today I don't want to go to beach; take me

to the *Kapaleeswar temple . . .*”

“Yes sir!”

The car sped on.

Slowly and steadily Anantha Sarma approaches the temple entrance, supporting himself with his glossy walking stick.

The chimes from the huge temple bell fill the air. A bevy of female worshippers clad in silk saris rustle past Sarma and enter the temple. Sarma raises his head, and with a hand partly shielding his eyebrows, he stares at the colorful procession, and follows it.

What is Sarma doing here in the temple? Has he forgotten about Rangamani who is waiting for him at the beach?

THE UNGRAMMATICAL POEM

1

Ramanathan dabbled in poetry.

He was a typist earning one hundred and fifty rupees in a small company that boasted no connection whatsoever to literary matters. The fact that poetry was his hobby and that his poems were serially published in a literary magazine was enough to endear him to his friends at work and other tenants in his lodge. Other than their admiration, his hobby brought him no reward or privilege. But Ramanathan never did anything for reward or privilege. His friends recognized that he was well read, that he read even more to broaden his horizons and that he wrote poetry; but they also nursed jealousy and some resentment because of his youthful indiscretions.

Ramanathan is thirty-five years old. His parents living out of the town often visited him and begged

him to get married and settle down in life. But Ramanathan has stubbornly refused to accede to their request.

As far as his parents were concerned they were sad their son has chosen a life of celibacy. However, among his friends, Ramanathan was a target of rumor and wild gossip – that he was always busy chasing women!

Recently, he was reckless enough to bring a woman to the lodge – after a late-night encounter with her in a movie house. Early in the morning, around five, Krishna Iyer, one of the tenants practicing yoga on the roof terrace, noticed a woman leaving Ramanathan's room. He immediately stopped his workout, sought other tenants awake at the time and explained what was going on. Like a perfume laced with alcohol, the news spread all over the lodge.

That evening when Ramanathan returned to his lodge from work a few tenants followed him into his room. He was the only tenant who happened to be the single occupant of his room, had a radio and a good

collection of books. Other tenants often came to his room to listen to his radio or borrow books. But when Ramanathan saw five tenants enter his room – all at once - he turned around to see what was going on and noticed several other tenants gathering on the veranda. As the visitors began to make inquiries about ‘that woman’, each one took Ramanathan to task in his own fashion, and what followed was close to a riot. However, Ramanathan remained calm and unperturbed. After changing – silently - he sat on a chair and - with the woman still fresh in his memory – and went on talking about her: that she hailed from north India and was visiting the city with her family members and staying in the nearby visitors’ bungalow. He added he met her in the local movie theatre and described how he had to work really very hard to convince her to accompany him to the lodge. He revealed he gave the woman fifty rupees and finally concluded with a brief description of her beauty and looks.

His attitude stunned the tenants who had hoped Ramanathan, once caught red handed, would admit

his transgression and show repentance. His stubbornness was simply appalling. Finally, one of the tenants forced himself before Ramanathan with folded palms, followed by an entreaty: “Young man, you are free to destroy yourself, if that’s what you really want. But please do us a favor. Don’t bring women to this lodge and convert it into a house of ill-fame!”

Ramanathan answered calmly – while casually lighting a cigarette.

“I guess we are all tenants of this lodge; why do you harbor some special concerns that do not bother me? Let the owner of the lodge come and voice his objections – if he has any. You may leave now.” His harsh manner led those tenants to seek the lodge’s manager to launch a complaint against Ramanathan.

Krishna Iyer, the prime reason for the riot, did not follow them. He stood right there staring at Ramanathan - in shock and a little wonder.

He recalled an incident of a few days ago – when Ramamathan’s mother, an old woman in tears,

begged her son to get married. Iyer was now saddened as well as outraged at the son's behavior. Not only has he rejected her wish out of hand; he was squandering his money in return for possible disease and ill reputation. Krishna Iyer was itching to ask Ramanathan a lot of questions but the very first sentence to emerge from his mouth was, "Mr. Ramanathan, do you really mean to say you paid that woman *fifty* rupees?" Iyer just couldn't resist asking such a question. He knew what fifty rupees meant: he was struggling to save and send home fifty rupees every month – that was the reason he stopped eating in a hotel and instead bought a stove to prepare meals at home. To think someone would throw away that kind of money for a one-night stand . . .

"Listen to me! Don't get me wrong, you will surely regret your actions in the future," he warned Ramanathan. "People are struggling to eke out a daily existence – even to earn five or ten rupees. I have seen you struggle too - once in a while. Why do you have to squander your hard-earned money in vices?" As Krishna Iyer shot out the questions in quick

succession, Ramanathan rose from his chair, picked up a magazine from a shelf and passed it on to Krishna Iyer, saying, “Mr. Iyer, once you see things from my perspective, I am sure you will be convinced I am doing the right thing.”

“Prostitution, from any angle, would never be the right thing to do,” Iyer countered. “I can only say this much: your life as a womanizer is absolutely wrong!” He helped himself with a pinch of snuff while averting his face away from Ramanathan.

“Why do you keep standing? Please have a seat.” Ramanathan was careful not to exhale the smoke toward Iyer and let it out through a nearby window.

Iyer remained silent. Ramanathan, immersed in some thought, was still standing while inhaling the smoke. After crushing the cigarette butt in an ashtray, he asked, “Mr. Iyer, may I ask you how long you have been married?”

“Why do you need to know, now?” Iyer seemed irritated.

“Please tell me,” Ramanathan answered him. He

dropped the magazine on the table and took out a heavy, bound volume from a nearby shelf. Krishna Iyer began turning the pages of the magazine laid before him while answering him:

“I got married when I was twenty two.” Then he noticed the title of the magazine, *Experiment*, and muttered to himself: “This certainly looks new to me.” As Iyer began turning the pages he found a poem by Ramanathan highlighted by a pen, and began reading it. He knew Tamil only sparingly; he knew Ramanathan wrote poetry, but till now he had never read any of it. The title of the poem, *The Price of Love*, drew a mild, suppressed laughter from him. Ramanathan was saying, “You were married when you were twenty-two. I am now thirty-five.” Iyer charged, again, his words spoken in rising excitement: “What kind of man are you? Some ten days ago your mother was here pleading with you to get married; she also met with other tenants, in your absence, asking them to advise you to get married. Are you telling me you are thirty five years old and that’s a good enough reason for your promiscuous

life?”

“Why don’t you have some patience and listen to what I am saying?” Ramanathan urged him. “What can I do if you keep hitting me without listening to what I want to say?”

“Okay, okay, let me hear you out. Why are you against marriage?”

Iyer composed himself and began turning the magazine pages. Ramanathan set the heavy book on the table, drew a chair and sat on it - facing Iyer.

“I believe a man earning a salary of one hundred and fifty rupees ought to choose suicide rather than marriage,” Ramanathan began. “I know – here, in this lodge - four men are living in one room. I can never imagine such a life for me. I need the whole room for myself; I also need a radio, and I want a lot of books. I can think of so many things I still want. I can’t think of giving up my present privileges and holing up myself in some goddamn hovel with a wife and kids – subjecting them to a life of poverty and disease!”

“Well, that’s how people have been living for

generations,” answered Iyer without averting his glance from the magazine.

“You are right. I am opposed to such a family life. Pigs and dogs also have family lives. Don’t you think humans ought to choose human lives? Marriage in my case would mean ruining a woman’s life while converting mine into hell. Having known all this, does it make any sense if I still try to get shackled in a marriage? Our government is now engaged in family planning; I wish they would rather campaign against marriage. If it is legal for a man and woman to remain in matrimony without a child, why should we make it illegal for them to love one another outside a formal marriage?

“What a legal interpretation! To what purpose? To do whatever one pleases?” Iyer retorted. “You were just now mentioning your financial condition as an argument against marriage. Are you telling me you can afford to pay a prostitute fifty rupees for a one-night stand?”

“Yes, you are right. What I have spent on her affects me only and nobody else. I try to be generous to

the best of my ability. That means I give up my money only and nothing else. What we both shared in our relationship is pleasure only. In our 'conjugal life,' we would be suffering hardship - but as two separate individuals. What's wrong in making life a bit easier and more comfortable?"

"Some life!" Iyer sneered. "Stop that crap! The word love applies only when a couple shares their hardship and still wants to live in harmony. But you have chosen to call such a union animal life. You are calling promiscuous life a human and worthy goal. What a strange logic! And what a perversion!" Iyer exposed his teeth in a sarcastic gesture.

"For a couple to enjoy life, they should create their own hardship and suffer together. Is that what you really mean?" Ramanathan responded with his own gesture, took out a cigarette and lit it.

"That's not what I said. I was saying human life needs a moral compass. Human morality rests on the principle, 'One woman for one man.' Any effort to destroy that foundation is immoral and should be condemned as a social disease. Why bring up justice

here?”

Ramanathan responded calmly and patiently – in stark contrast to Iyer’s emotional outbursts and his attempts to pour out all his opinions in one stretch. He began as if he had already considered all of Iyer’s arguments and made up his own mind. His words betrayed his contempt for the prevailing social mores; hence a tone of sarcasm marked his tone: “Remember *Shajahan*, the emperor who built *Taj Mahal* in memory of his wife? If he were to talk of marriage in lofty terms that would certainly make sense. But what about an ordinary family where a husband feels helpless to please his wife when she demands the barest necessities – a sari or nose- screw to maintain a decent life? Why talk of love and harmony in their miserable lives? Our so-called family system is also very phony – it has actually helped prostitution mushroom into a business. What we claim – generation after generation - as our great civilization has been really responsible for prostitution. Let me say this: what you are saying is certainly valid for those men who deliberately violate social

mores and look for forbidden love outside marriage; they have no choice. They are in a conflict: they don't want to compromise their present life and at the same time they want an outlet for their physical needs. You also talk about human obligation which I find very amusing! Such an obligation must be laid at the root of a social edifice and not imposed on the individual only. Such a principle ought to govern the whole society and not just one man. You also talk of the moral principle, 'One woman for one man.' But how can you enforce that principle when an individual is struggling hard to provide minimum comforts to his wife?" Ramanathan once again muttered under his breath, followed by a mild laughter: "One woman for one man." He laughed again – his laughter growing more audible, and concluded: "There are a lot of men like me; and we have a lot of prostitutes too. So the principle, 'One woman for one man' may be valid, after all."

"Please don't use the word 'family' in the context of your lifestyle - which I find totally disgusting," Iyer screamed. Seemingly reluctant to talk any further

he casually folded one of the magazine's pages and started reading Ramanathan's poem, *The Price of Love*. Ramanathan continued to watch Iyer's face betraying no visible reaction. Iyer, as he continued to read the poem with a scowl on his face, found his disgust for Ramanathan extending to his poem as well and to the editor of the magazine who, while lavishing praise on Ramanathan's poem, welcomed from other readers even more poems in similar vein.

"This poem is just like you," Iyer sneered. "You violate the social norms and this poem too violates rules of grammar!" He flung the magazine on the table and rose from his chair.

"Violating rules of grammar? What do you mean? I don't know any grammar!" Ramanathan laughed as he shrugged off his both hands.

"Why do you write poetry if you don't know any grammar?"

"I do know how to write a poem!" Ramanathan too rose from his chair.

"You are fooling yourself thinking you have

written a poem.”

“You are right. Love, marriage, art, tradition and social mores - all these are meant to fool human beings.” Ramanathan walked to a nearby window and stared at the sky. He spoke the words softly but audible enough for Iyer’s ears.

‘This fellow is too bookish and totally screwed up,’ Iyer thought.

He also felt a little sorry for Ramanathan. He recalled the lovely face of the old woman – Ramanathan’s mother – who showed up the other day before her thirty-five year old son, held his cheeks affectionately and begged him: “My dear boy, you may marry the girl of your own choice.” Iyer stood silently behind Ramanathan and touched his shoulders.

“Mr. Ramanathan,” he began, “I feel very sorry for you. I realize just as your mother had warned me – that I would never change your mind. Let me say this: you feel moved by great emotions and have penned these poems, but remember this: those prostitutes are not fooled by any such lofty ideas. Your life and your

poems may not follow a set of rules or norms, but those prostitutes certainly have their own, and they use them to rob you of your money. Even if *Kubera* were to appear before them - with no cash - they would throw him out in no time. If you understand this, you will realize the phoniness of their relationship. You are a decent man and well read. Think for yourself and make up your own mind.” Krishna Iyer wanted to say more, but felt he had spoken enough. He took leave of Ramanathan and left the room.

Ramanathan picked up the magazine from the table, glanced over his poem and muttered, “*The Ungrammatical Poem.*”

“Conform to grammar? Should that be the only criterion for a poem?” he wondered.

2

That evening, on his way back from work, as he approached a bookshop near a bus stop, Ramanathan noticed the current issue of *Experiment* on display. He bought a copy and immediately began turning the pages. “I must renew the subscription,” he muttered

to himself, and after noticing a reader's response to his poem, he couldn't help reading it right away standing on the street corner.

It was a stinging attack on his poem, *The Price of Love*, as well on similar attempts at experimentation in modern poetry. The article, while mocking the author, went on - in this fashion:

“ ...in the last issue of *Experiment* there was an attempt to compare *Shajahan's* glorious gift of *Taj Mahal* to his wife with a philanderer's to his secret lover. Tamil Nadu would never forgive the author for this terrible sin. This vulgar poem (indeed what the author has penned should not be called a poem at all, but that will be a discussion for another day) defies all conventional rules of poetry – whether they have to do with the structure, theme, or grammar and is no more than a blabber from a crackpot. This is an insult to Tamil Nadu, Tamil scholars and others who cherish Tamil values. To think that the editor of this magazine would lavish praise on this author and laud him as a part of the ‘New Poetry Movement’ surely hurts the sensibilities of decent men and women.”

Ramanathan let out a loud laughter – the pride was too much to contain, he had outraged the society quite successfully – totally oblivious to the fact that he was in a public place, exposed to other bystanders. He heard an echo to his laughter – from a woman afar. As he turned around, he noticed a young woman near the bus stop sign staring at him. He understood her from her very look.

She made her intent clear to him – either by an eye winking at him or her lips parting in a smile – and after a flashing a ‘come hither’ look, she slowly moved away from where she stood. Ramanathan followed her.

Walking ahead of him she took a turn into an alley at the rear of a movie theater and stopped in a corner awaiting him. They both entered the alley as strangers, but once they faced one another, they continued to walk together. Ramanathan was quite surprised at this hideaway – in such close proximity to the city thoroughfare. He was not someone who felt he was above stalking the city alleys at night, yet he realized he had never been to these surroundings before.

Mostly cottages lined their path. At the far end of the alley were a few houses with roofed tiles. Crowds were gathering around two shops – a tea-stall run by a Muslim and a grocery store next to it. A woman was selling refreshments in a street corner – warming up snacks in a stove improvised from a discarded metal frame – and its smell hung in the air. A few urchins were standing on a pile of garbage and trying to fly kites far into the sky.

Walking past all these, the pair stopped near a house whose bare red brick walls seemed totally untouched for years by whitewash.. As the woman retrieved the key from her waist and tried to unlock the door, a few women from the houses in the neighborhood – some like her and others less sophisticated than her – were keenly watching her and Ramanathan. Their faces betrayed no discernable emotions, yet they were winking and exchanging messages among themselves.

Opening the door, the woman turned around and, smiling, invited Ramanathan into the house. It was only when he followed her and stepped into the house

did Ramanathan suddenly remember something.

Around this time of the month, he was short of money because only a few days ago he had spent it all on a north Indian woman. Presently he was left with only a little change for his bus fare.

He remembered Krishna Iyer's words; he knew their meaning without someone explaining to him: "Even if *Kubera* were to appear before them - with no money - they would throw him out in no time."

The woman noticed Ramanathan hesitate, and now verbally invited him: "Please come in."

"I am sorry; I only wanted to know the house," he told her in a soft tone. "I will see you another time."

She understood, in a way, what he meant, yet she smiled and asked, "Why? Do you think this is not an auspicious time?"

Ramanathan was really embarrassed. He didn't want to hide anything from her, so he bluntly told her the truth: "Now I don't have any money." She seemed to ignore his words and countered, "Well,

why do we need to talk for all to watch us in public? Let us go inside.” As she entered the house and Ramanathan followed her, she swiftly closed the door behind them. Then she leaned on the door, held both her arms against her bosom and let out a loud laughter – feigning anger. Totally uninhibited, like a boorish thug, she grabbed Ramanathan’s shirt and yelled at him, her voice slowly turning into a sneer: “What kind of man are you? How dare you show up for this kind of business with no money? Do you think you are a great lover or something?”

Ramanathan totally relished her reaction –the ‘feigning’ anger and the ‘thuggish’ mannerism in her disposition seemed a natural asset endearing her to others. He held her hand still tugging at his shirt and spoke as if comforting her: “Don’t get me wrong; I haven’t walked into this place because I am naïve or stupid. I would never give up an opportunity like this. It was my force of habit that made me walk in without realizing I have no money. Let me go, I will surely visit you another day.” He tried to open the door.

“Shh, say no more,” she waved her hand toward him, “What about my honor?” Ramanathan was a little confused by what she actually meant.

“Don’t you understand? Haven’t you seen how every woman on this street was watching you follow me? Now, if they see you going out of this house, they would think we had a row and botched a deal. So they would approach you for any bargain, and that’s going to hurt you. You may stay here for a while and then leave.” Ramanathan continued to stand on the floor, so she spread out a mat on the floor saying, “Why do you keep standing? You may sit down; you need to pay no money for this!” So Ramanathan sat on the mat. She grabbed a sari from a rope hung across the corridor and, like a decent hostess, sought his permission: “I should be back in a minute.” Then she disappeared into an adjoining room and closed the door behind her.

Ramanathan pulled out a cigarette packet from his shirt pocket. Only one cigarette was left. He laid the packet on the mat for use as an ashtray and lit the cigarette. He let his eyes wander over the

surroundings.

Following the main entrance, a small open porch stretched ahead to the rear of the house; next to it was the main living area of the house – where he was presently seated – made up of an uneven cement floor. These and the room – the one he was now facing and into which the woman had just disappeared – made up the entire house. The pungent odor emanating from the sewage carried along the brook at the rear of the house made its presence felt - though invisible to the naked eye - whenever an occasional breeze blew across the house. The tiles on the roof closer to the backyard seemed ravaged by time.. Frequent rains scarred the walls and soot from the smoke caused by newspapers set on fire on the porch gave the surroundings a surrealistic flavor of a modern painting. As he stared at those scarred walls, Ramanathan felt he was watching several forms and faces. Were they the reflections of others who visited these premises?

As he was savoring that scene, he heard the room door being opened and turned around.

As the woman advanced toward him saying, “You may like to read these,” and handed over to him a couple of Tamil magazines, Ramanathan got a glimpse of her smile as well as an arm with jingling bangles extended toward him. Her body was still concealed behind the door, which once again closed behind her.

As Ramanathan began reading the magazines silently, he felt he was in a familiar surroundings – in a friend’s or relative’s house.

After a while, the woman emerged – dressed in the sari she carried into the room – and faced Ramanathan while standing next to a pillar. Smiling as well shy, she asked: “Do you remember seeing me before?”

Ramanathan was in a little awe and wonder: “Is this the same woman, who some ten minutes ago broke into a wild laughter while tugging at my shirt?” he asked himself. He also recalled how she invited him into the house – as if entertaining an old friend or colleague. She displayed even some social grace in the way she sought his permission for changing; and

now she stood before him like an authentic housewife. He struggled hard to get a measure of her.

She unfurled her pony tail hair and let it fall on her shoulders as she began: “I know you very well. I have noticed you in the movie house a few days ago. I thought you were also watching me. So I burst into laughter a couple of times to draw your attention. Only later did I realize you were interested in that north Indian woman. So I gave up.”

“Oh, you mean that day? Do you know her?”

“Yes, but not personally. She is from this place. I have seen her quite often.”

“How can that be? She told me she is from Bombay and was staying in the dak-bungalow somewhere here . . .”

She hung her head and smiled to herself while her words seemed lost in a grumble: “In this profession, where people are willing to deceive themselves, it is certainly no crime to deceive others.” While Ramanathan didn’t exactly understand her words, he could guess what they meant.

“What I meant was,” she continued, “Even before you said you came here by force of habit, I knew you are used to this kind of business.”

“Yes . . . I am really sorry. Now you have to go out again, am I right?” Ramanathan asked while bowing down his head while deeply inhaling the cigarette smoke.

“Ssh . . . don’t worry about that . . . Just as you are here by force of habit, I too invited you by force of habit. Otherwise today I don’t feel like going out. This is a profession where a woman can’t afford to stop making money when she can-. still, I am not going out now. I have a lot of money . . .”

“A lot?” Ramanathan couldn’t help laughing while raising his head to face her.

“I don’t mean in hundreds,” she replied. “Where can I expect that kind of money? Yesterday I got thirty rupees; I am now left with twenty rupees after my expenses . . . Why do you ask? You need some money as loan? I am not joking, I really mean it! Do you want some money?” He understood her question

as genuine – the way she asked - first as a prank and then with a concern.

He was sure she would have advanced the money if only he has asked for it. He acknowledged her words with a grateful smile; he crushed the cigarette butt against the empty packet to extinguish it.

“How much money you have?” the woman wanted to know.

“You are so frank and open, so let me tell you the truth!” Ramanathan fumbled in his shirt pocket and ferreted out the magazine *Experiment* and other contents - a key and exactly seventeen paise.

“What is this key?”

“My room key.”

“I see! Did you have your coffee this evening?”

“No, I wanted to, but ended up buying the magazine instead.”

“Yes, I noticed! You were standing there on the street, acting crazy and laughing to yourself!” She

extended her hand to have a look at the magazine. Then she remembered something and, with the magazine still in her hand, walked to the front door and fondly addressed some one. When she returned to where Ramanathan was sitting she was followed by a twelve year-old boy dressed in a khaki half pant and no shirt. The boy cast his eyes, now and then, at Ramanathan.

“Run to the *Kakka* shop, . . .” she was addressing the boy while turning to Ramanathan as if seeking his permission: “They don’t serve coffee here, I will get you some tea.” She ordered the boy: ‘Get two strong cups of tea – with a lot of cream.’ She turned to Ramanathan: “Do you like special cream with tea?”

“Of course, I do!” Ramanathan answered. “That’s how tea is served in the community where I live!” Ramanathan wanted to speak freely and informally just as she did.

“Some community!” she countered as if mocking him. “Looks like our guest is in the habit of patronizing only the best hotels in the city! Don’t you know every tea-shop worth its name serves tea with

special cream?” She now turned to the boy: “Why are you staring at me? Go at once and fetch tea!” The boy hastened to leave.

“Wait a minute! Do you want anything else? Looks like you are done with the cigarettes!” She pointed to the empty cigarette packet. “Get a cigarette packet too!”

“I don’t have enough cash . . .” the boy answered.

“Half a packet should do!” Ramanathan told the boy.

“Why? Get a full packet,” she ordered the boy and gave him an extra one-rupee bill.

Once the boy was gone, she sat at another corner of the mat and began turning the pages of *Experiment*.

“What kind of magazine is this?” she asked. “It has no pictures or anything of interest. Why would anyone spend eight annas for this kind of stuff?”

“Well, there are some folks like you and me who enjoy reading it.”

“Why do you include me? I will never waste my money with this kind of magazine. I love only these two magazines; one of them carries a serial novel and every week I am eager to know what happens next..” She mentioned names of two weekly Tamil magazines. Ramanathan noted the name ‘Sarala’ beautifully handwritten on the covers of the two magazines in English, so he inquired her: “Is your name Sarala?” She nodded her head in assent without even looking at him and continued to turn the pages of the magazine *Experiment* and seemed interested in reading the contents. For a while both of them were silent; Ramanathan, who was staring at her, wanted to ask her something, so he began with an opener, “Sarala! Do you mind if I ask you . . . ” when she raised her head and faced him; she seemed to have read his thoughts in no time and her face turned grave.

“No, I know what you are going to ask me! ‘Who are you? What is your sad story? Why did you end up like this?’ Is that what you want to know?”

I haven’t met a man who can’t help asking me

these questions. I have to lie to every man – depending on his own individual taste! Do you know why? Because, even when offering some sympathy the man in question wants to hear an interesting story! Idiots! Please ask me no questions so that I don't have to tell you any lies!" She seemed to be begging him but there was no mistaking her real feelings; sadness mingled with irritation hovered over her face even as she tried to restrain her anger. Yet these feelings were on display for a few seconds only and were soon gone.

"Can't you just see me for who I am? This is business, plain and simple - what more can one say about it? Those who are not involved in this business – let them observe me from afar - and curse me or feel sorry for me; but others, who understand this business and are in my premises to buy what I am selling – why do they act so hypocritical and feel sorry for me?"

Her words struck Ramanathan's ears like a steel hammer – because he was just about to begin his conversation in such a vein. Still he didn't expect his

words would subject her to such ferocious temper.

“No, I was not asking any of those questions,” he answered her, and concluded with some hesitation. “I was just wondering why you are showing this special affection and hospitality for me”

“Because I like you,” was her prompt answer. “That is my choice! What is wrong if I want to treat a decent man with some respect and dignity? Is it my fate that everything I do should be based on money only? No, right now even if someone enters these premises with hundred rupees, I will refuse to entertain him! That is my choice! Some money! Who cares for money?” Seemingly angry and irritated, she bowed down her head and sat on the mat. Then she slowly composed herself, stared at Ramanathan and spoke: “Well, one needs money too, but can money accomplish everything? If that is true how come men just don’t stay home with their money? Why should they come here looking for company? How about myself, I too want to spend my money. So I exchange my money and get what I want . . . So, what do people mean when they say ‘Money is everything?’ The

truth of the matter is: you don't have in your possession what you want, and I too don't have in my possession what I want. And money helps everyone to buy what is wanted - don't you agree?" She went on and on and Ramanathan watched her with some fascination.

"Had you come here with a lot of money, I would be thinking of the best way to have you part with your money. If two people should enjoy their time together, one of them has to spend the money. Now I have the money, and I would like to spend it. What do you think? Are you offended because I am paying for you? Then you are free to leave these premises right away."

"No Sarala, no! I respect you, I consider you as my equal!" As he spoke these words Ramanathan felt his eyes becoming teary - driving Sarala into panic. She grabbed his hand and apologized: "Did I say anything wrong? Did I offend you? I am not mad at you; I was thinking of someone else. Please forgive me!"

Just then the boy who had gone out for tea

returned – and made his way through the main entrance giving Sarala and Ramanathan a few moments to bring their feelings under control.

The boy brought in two cups of tea in a metal tray which he laid before them and handed over a cigarette packet and some change to Ramanathan. Ramanathan took the cigarette packet and left the change on the mat. The boy continued to stand next to Ramanathan.

“Please give him a tip,” Sarala told Ramanathan who picked out 15 paise from the change and handed over to the boy.

“How much?” the woman asked the boy while winking at Ramanathan and continuing: “You got lucky today! He is a very generous gentleman. Now, you may go and come back later for the tea cups.” The boy thanked Ramanathan and left.

She handed over to Ramanathan a cup of tea. Then she slowly removed the floating cream from her cup and transferred it to Ramanathan’s.

“Don’t you like cream?” Ramanathan asked her.

“But you like it even more,” she answered with a laugh..

As he was sipping the tea Sarala glanced at him and said, even as she was drinking from her cup: “I really like you . . . Now that you asked my name, can I ask yours?”

“Ramanathan. “

“You say you live in a lodge. When you are short of money how can you afford to waste your money like this?”

“Who says I am wasting my money?”

“I can see that without someone telling me . . . Now you are short of money, what are you going to do about your dinner?”

“No problem there. I have prepaid for meals in my lodge.”

“I would like you to be my guest tonight. Please don't refuse my invitation. I really want you to stay tonight for dinner. I am a very good cook.” She was about to say more and then suddenly became quiet.

She must have sensed something deep inside that must have prompted her to act that way: Isn't it true that every human being is cursed with a past?

“You will have your dinner here, and I am going to cook - after a long time,” she said and got ready to work by entering the kitchen.

As she began gathering the utensils stacked on the porch and set about washing them, Ramanathan neared a pillar and asked her: “When I see these utensils it seems to me you normally do no cooking. Am I right?”

Sarala raised her head and faced him after wiping off the sweat as well as the tamarind ash mix off her hand. “To cook just for myself is the most disgusting thing I can imagine – this would be self-evident to any good cook. Why should I care to cook when I don't have anybody to appreciate the meals I prepare? I can simply order a meal for six annas. There is nothing more enjoyable than making dishes and sharing them with others! Tonight, thanks to you, I have that privilege!” She laughed, but her very laughter masked some inner sadness.

After washing the utensils and setting the fire in the kitchen she approached Ramanathan and made an anxious inquiry: “What is your favorite dish?”

Ramanathan was too embarrassed to say anything.

“I don’t understand why you don’t like to have even a simple conversation,” Sarala said, and demanded. “Why hesitate to tell me what is your favorite dish?” Ramanathan smiled and told her: “At nights I will have only some soup and a *pappad*.” Sarala too liked his choice.

“Fine, you will have the tomato soup and *pappad*. We can also have potato chips, *rasam* and curds. . . That would be great!” She congratulated herself over the menu while acknowledging Ramanathan’s suggestion. Then she picked up a paper and pencil, and leaning against a pillar, jotted down a shopping list. Then she opened the front door and called out.

“Yes sister, I am here,” the boy in the khaki half pant showed up. He followed Sarala as she went inside the house and emerged with a shopping bag and money.

“You must get all this stuff in five minutes!” she ordered the boy who darted off into the street in no time.

That night Ramanathan was privy to the hospitality of a young woman who served him dinner with her own hands; he also had a little exposure to the real blessings of a marital life.

How does it matter, anyway?

His jealousy for emperor *Shahjahan* grew even stronger.

‘I am not born to enjoy those permanent pleasures,’ was how he understood and rationalized his situation. Sarala too shared that sentiment.

Whatever they enjoyed that night it was marked by sadness they both buried deep in their hearts; now and then they openly demonstrated what they felt for one another.

The next morning Ramanathan took leave of Sarala while darkness was slowly turning to daylight; She accompanied him to the door to close it

following his departure. Words simply failed Ramanathan as he bade her farewell. He was afraid how Sarala would react if he offered her thanks; yet, at the threshold he couldn't help blurting out the word 'thanks' with his head bowed down. Sarala, standing a few steps above him, seeing him shy and vulnerable, fondly caressed his cropped hair, and said in a choking voice: "Why should you thank me? Had I been a married woman would I accept any payment from my husband?" She seemed to be begging his favor as she grabbed his face with her both hands.

"See you later," Ramanathan told her. "I will definitely visit you next week." Her hands were still on his face.

They both now recalled her sarcastic question from the previous evening: "Do you think you are a great lover or something?" What about their hearts now? How would one characterize the present state of their minds? Was it love?

"No, it can't be," Sarala's heart reminded her. Her mind was in turmoil as she now heard his assurance – uttered like a lover's promise to his beloved - while

she held his face in her palms. “We are under no commitment to make any promises to one another,” she suddenly broke out. “Do you expect me to wait for you? No, no way! I am not willing to wait for anyone!” Ramanathan was thrown into utter confusion why her eyes suddenly swelled with tears.

She averted her eyes away from him and spoke: “Why worry about tomorrow? I don’t know who would be my companion when you come here next time looking for me. Then again, what makes you think you have the right to have my company?” Ramanathan was hardly in a position to answer her question. They both stood in silence – unwilling to part company. Just then a woman from the opposite house came out and stood on her porch.

“Do you see her?” Sarala asked Ramanathan. “She looks just like she was decked out yesterday – notice how the flowers on her tresses are not crumpled - which means she had been starving the whole day. We all share the same fate. She and her friends have been here for a long time. Because I am new they think I am competing with them and are probably

jealous of me. Any way, please do visit us again – not just for me. I don't compete with anybody. If I am not available, you must visit her. That's all, who am I to advise you on these matters, anyway?" She seemed vexed at the plight of the woman from the opposite house. Then Sarala suddenly dismissed Ramanathan as of no consequence with the words, "You may go now," and abruptly shut the door in his face. Ramanathan stared at the shuttered door for a moment before descending on the road below.

As he began walking on the narrow lane leading to the main street Ramanathan turned around with some reservation. He was pleased to notice that Sarala had come out of her house and stood outside watching him; smiling, he waved back at her and she too reciprocated his gesture and bade him farewell. Ramanathan's heart ached as he remembered how Sarala was fighting her inner demons and losing the battle. What ultimately perturbed him was Sarala's remark about the woman from the opposite house, how she looked in her makeup and her 'non-crumpled flowers' revealed her plight and hunger. The

revelation intensified the truth lurking in his heart and his eyes turned teary. He casually wiped off the tears settling on the corners of his eyes with his palm.

As for Sarala, once Ramanathan was gone from her view, she felt her waving hand grow limp, retreated into the house, shut the door behind her and leaned on it – followed by a deep sigh, still smiling and feeling sad.

When Ramanathan reached his lodge, his friend Krishna Iyer was practicing *yoga* on the roof terrace. Ramanathan wanted to accost him right away and scream aloud: “Mr. Iyer! Remember your lecture about prostitutes and how they conform to their own norms? Now, here is someone I know who defies your stereotype!” He ran to the roof terrace right away without bothering to go to his room first.

But he could hardly speak to Krishna Iyer who was busy with his workout- with his head on the ground and feet up in *yoga* posture. Unwilling to disturb him, Ramanathan moved away from Iyer and stood in a corner facing the eastern sky watching the day coming to an end. Despite his sleepless night,

Ramanathan's body and mind raced with excitement.

'She' had defied all the conventions of a prostitute. She even proved she was totally different from her tribe. How about me, Ramanathan asked himself. 'Am I just a womanizer as Krishna Iyer alleges or someone even worse? How narrow and selfish had I become while 'she' subjected me to her occasional temper, good manners and hospitality? Not only am I a mean, womanizer - I also owe her a debt!' Ramanathan wallowed in self pity and shame as he agonized over his less than 'honorable' conduct with 'her'.

He knew deep in his heart that 'she' never considered him mean. But at the same time he saw himself as a mean-spirited libertine and her as a whore who deserved respect. He imagined he was groveling before her with shame while she hovered over him – tall and grand.

“Good heavens, why should I publicize my shame before Iyer!” His mind cautioned him and held him back.

‘Does it mean I have no obligation to challenge Iyer’s opinion that a prostitute always follows her own code and script - just like a poem conforming to its own rules and grammar?’

No, I should certainly challenge Iyer! But I must never let him make me a laughing stock. I must explain to him the whole episode in detail and watch his reaction. He is, after all, a decent man who respects other peoples’ feelings. Who knows, he may even be moved to tears! Now, how do I deal with my situation? Let me wait till I get my next paycheck.” Pleased with his decision, Ramanathan gently shook his head, felt happy at heart and walked back to his room.

Krishna Iyer absolutely had no idea of Ramanathan’s movements – busy as he was in his *yoga* exercises. For a long time after he finished his workout, the world opened to daylight and continued to bask in its glory and exploits.

3

Ramanathan, who had never lost his heart to any

woman, now found himself attracted to Sarala and her good heart. He spent the next ten days totally obsessed with her.

To his pleasant surprise, his next paycheck included a special bonus and his take home pay came to three hundred rupees. He could hardly wait to rush to Sarala with his new bounty.

Yes, he desperately wanted to visit her and watch her face; this time he was determined 'not to touch her'. He too wanted to grow beyond his stereotype; namely that he was a womanizer. He wanted to be someone beyond all that, totally opposite to such a label.

Suddenly he had an idea while walking down the city market; he immediately entered a clothing shop and bought for sixty rupees a blue silk sari with a thin border – matching Sarala's complexion. He couldn't help laughing to himself as he emerged from the shop. He had never even dreamt that one day he would be buying a sari for a woman or that a woman would be reigning in his heart. Ramanathan was someone who never hid his feelings from others –

even if they provoked a good laughter. That was how he happened to meet Sarala at the bus stop the other day. Now he felt the same mood overtaking him and he relished in pleasant thoughts on his way.

‘How happy would she feel when she sees this *sari*! Maybe she would even say something to upset me! Whatever her reaction, it would be a delight to watch her! I will insist she try this *sari* at once so she would disappear into her room in no time to change. I would then call for the boy with the khaki half pant and order him to fetch special tea from the *Kakka* shop. . .

Then I will take her out to a restaurant and treat her to different types of menu. She would probably insist on cooking at home. What an excellent cook she is! That day she prepared the tomato soup – just like my mother used to. How nice and hospitable was Sarala! I think every woman – even the worst prostitute – is born with this ‘mothering’ habit. Sarala has this quality in abundance. This time I will not let her cook. I will simply tell her, ‘Today you are my guest!’

“Then we would go to a movie! Later, we will come home and spend the entire night talking. Sarala has some education. She has also seen life and gained maturity. She must have endured a lot of pain growing up. That explains why sometimes her talk turns intellectual! What is more enjoyable than a man and woman exchanging ideas in an intellectual discussion?

Tomorrow morning when we part company in a happy mood with our hearts full and pure, Sarala might get angry and ask me: ‘Why the hell did you have to spend all this money on me?’ Then, I would answer her – in a voice touching and moving- just like she did: ‘Don’t you think you would accept a *sari* and cash as gifts from your husband?’ That would surely calm her down; I think, all said and done, Sarala can never get mad at me – even if she tries her best. I know, I can feel it” Ramanathan was floating in his dreams about her as he approached Sarala’s house, when . . .

He was a little disappointed to notice a lock hanging on the front door.

‘Get ready for utter disappointment,’ was the message he got when the boy in khaki half pant appeared before him and gave the news – in a plain, simple voice: “The police came and took sister Sarala away . . .”

Till now Ramanathan had never experienced such a disappointment in his life. Saddened, he struggled hard to fight tears swelling in his eyes. He continued to stand before the house as if paying homage to Sarala.

“Please bring him here,” he heard a voice ordering the boy and turned around. That voice belonged to the woman from the opposite house; she smiled at Ramanathan and invited him into her house.

Ramanathan recalled Sarala’s remarks the other day, “We are under no commitment to make any promises to one another; Please do come again, and if I am not available . . .” as he walked toward the opposite house.

Seeing Ramanathan was silent, the woman spoke up: “The police took Sarala away day before

yesterday. She too is responsible for what happened. She made it very hard for ordinary, decent folks to come to these premises. At least, she should have respected the police, but she never did. We normally get along with police and respect them. Sarala always acted as if she was a grand queen. So the police were determined to get her and finally they did. And do you know how stubborn she was till the end? When the police arrested her and demanded she go with them she started abusing them and they had to resort to violence! She ended up as a laughing stock . . .”

“Enough!” Ramanathan calmly interrupted her. He gave her no reply and took out the *sari* from its box.

“If Sarala was here, she would have sent me to your house with this,” Ramanathan told her. “You may have this. Sarala really loved all of you. As for me . . .” Confused and a little hesitant, the woman accepted the *sari* from Ramanathan.

Ramanathan now recalled Sarala’s comments about the woman as she appeared on the porch on that early morning with her tresses and flowers intact and the plight of women of her ilk. He slowly retraced his

steps.

The woman held the sari in her hand while her eyes shifted from Ramanathan walking away to the locked door of Sarala's house. Either Ramanathan's action or his words dispelled her senseless jealousy of Sarala. She riveted her eyes on the locked door and conjured Sarala's image on it.

Her eyes turned teary as she recalled Sarala's innocent laughter and sad face as well as the timely help she rendered to her in the past. She felt their whole community should mourn for the tragedy that had now befallen Sarala.

4

Krishna Iyer reacted with shock and admiration as he listened to Ramanathan describing his episodes with Sarala. Ramanathan was a little surprised that Iyer could be so moved by the plight of a prostitute.

Tired, sad and disappointed, while pleasantly surprised by a reaction vastly different from hypocrisy that was hallmark of a stubborn, self-

righteous society, Ramanathan slumped into an easy chair. From his cigarette butt, unlit and held between the fingers of his right arm supporting his head, ash was dropping off on the floor and forming lines.

Krishna Iyer felt a little embarrassed at Ramanathan's tender heart. He shook up Ramanathan's shoulder and said, "It is possible no code or rules shape your life, the prostitutes or your poem. But do you realize that the society we live is bound by certain codes and rules? That is what one should learn from your experience. Do you see what I mean?" He stood up on a chair and faced Ramanathan.

"You mean a code? for the society? You must be kidding! There is no such a thing!" Ramanathan inhaled the smoke deeper into his lungs. The ash from his cigarette fell on the floor.

As they continued their interesting conversation, neither Ramanathan nor Krishna Iyer ever bothered to notice the ash on the floor. They could care less. They are intellectuals! They would analyze everything under the sun as rational human beings, dissect every

aspect of it, and endlessly debate their individual points of view.

They would define a code and argue among themselves whether such a code may be violated and if so, when such an action would be defensible! But poetry is a different game - it can hardly wait for their reckoning; it is restive and breathless!

Yes, poetry and pleasure are just like that!
