

# THE UNGRAMMATICALPOEM

Ramanathan also 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 occasionally published in a literary magazine was enough to endear him to his friends at work and the 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; they also nursed jealousy and some resentment because of his youthful indiscretions.

Ramanathan was thirty-five years old. His parents living out of the town visited him often and begged him to get married and settle down in life. But Ramanathan 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 of the lodge practicing *yoga* on the roof terrace, noticed a woman leave Ramanathan's room. He immediately stopped his workout, sought the other tenants and explained to them 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 of the lodge - 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 the 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 others 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, he 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. Finally, he revealed he gave the woman fifty rupees and 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 hands, 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-repute!”

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 one-night stand . . .

“Listen to me! Don’t get me wrong, you will surely regret your actions in the future,” he warned Ramanathan, and continued. “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 nearby 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 are you standing? Please have a seat.” Ramanathan was careful not to exhale the smoke toward Iyer and he 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 the shelf. Krishna Iyer began turning the pages of the magazine laid before him while answering Ramanathan.

“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 he began reading it. He knew Tamil only sparingly; he knew Ramanathan wrote poetry, but until 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 shot back, 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 volume 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 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 another woman’s life while converting mine into a hell. Having known all this, does it make any sense if I still try to get myself 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?”

“Some legal interpretation! To what purpose? To do whatever one pleases?” Iyer shot back. “Are we now talking about social obligations? 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 love was pleasure only. In our ‘conjugal life’ we would be actually suffering hardship – but as two separate individuals. What is 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 share their hardship and still want to live in harmony. But you have chosen to call such a union animal life. You are calling promiscuous

behavior 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 cynical gesture, took out a cigarette and lit it.

"That's not what I said. I was saying human life needs a moral compass. The foundation of our morality is one woman for one man. Any massive effort undertaken to destroy that foundation is immoral and should be condemned as a social disease. Why bring up justice here?" Iyer seemed vexed.

Ramanathan responded calmly and patiently – in stark contrast to Iyer's emotional outburst 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 derision 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 their 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. Again, you mentioned the word 'human obligation' - which I find very amusing! Such an obligation must be 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 he finally concluded, in a mocking tone: “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 shot back. Seemingly reluctant to talk any further on the subject, 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 the readers even more poems in a 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 both his 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 window nearby

and stared at the sky. He spoke the words softly but audible enough for Iyer's ears.

'This fellow is too bookish,' 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 he 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 asked himself.

## 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 could not help reading it right away - standing on the street corner.

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

“ ...in the last issue of *Experiment*, there was an attempt to compare Emperor *Shajahan*'s glorious gift of *Taj Mahal* to his wife with a philanderer's to his secret lover. Tamil Nadu will 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 blab from a crackpot. This is an insult to Tamil culture, Tamil scholars and others who cherish Tamil values. To think that the editor of this magazine would lavish praise on this poet and laud him as part of '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 – a woman's voice from 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.

He 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 a 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 moslem and a grocery store next to it. A woman was selling refreshments in a street corner – warming up the snacks in a stove improvised from a discarded metal frame - its smell hanging in the air. A few urchins were standing on a pile of garbage 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 by whitewash for years. 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 that 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 she 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.

“Ssh, say no more,” she waved her hand toward him, “What about my honor?” Ramanathan was a little confused by what she really 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 the woman 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 took out a cigarette pack from his shirt pocket. Only one cigarette was left in the packet. He laid the pack on the mat for use as an ashtray and lit the cigarette. He let his eyes wander over his surroundings.

Following the main entrance to the house, 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 and broken. Frequent rains scarred the walls and the 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 reflections of others who visited these premises?

As he was savoring that scene, he heard the room door open, so he turned around. .

As the woman advanced toward him, saying, “You may like to read these,” she 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. Maybe 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 familiar surroundings – as 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 as 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 a 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. Ramanathan struggled hard to get a measure of this strange woman.

She unfurled her ponytail 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 on 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 village. I have seen her quite often.”

“How can that be? She told me she is from Bombay and was staying in the dak-bungalow 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 and 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 a loan? I am not joking, I really mean it! Do you want some money?” He understood her question as genuine – the way she asked him - 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?” she wanted to know.

“You are so frank and open, so let me tell you the truth!” Ramanathan explored his shirt pocket and ferreted out the magazine *Experiment* and other contents- which included 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 door entrance 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 lots of cream.’ She turned to Ramanathan: “Do you like special cream with tea?”

“Of course, I do!” Ramanathan replied. “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 cigarettes!” She pointed to the empty cigarette pack on the mat. “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 the magazine, *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 with you? 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 the 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 the affirmative without even looking at him and continued to turn the pages of *Experiment*. She seemed interested in reading the contents. For a while they both remained silent; Ramanathan, who was staring at her all this time, now 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, 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 yet met a man who can’t help asking me those 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 almost 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 what 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 tried to assure her, and concluded with some hesitation. “I was just wondering why you are showing me this special affection and hospitality . . . .”

“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 solve everything? If that is true how come men just don’t stay home with their money? Why should they come looking for my 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 every person 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?” she 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 to retrieve 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 tea cup and transferred it to Ramanathan’s.

“Why? 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 already 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 stay tonight for dinner. I am a very good cook.” She was about to say more, but then suddenly became quiet. She must have sensed something deep inside her heart that prompted her to act that way: Wasn’t it true that every human 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 approached her close to a pillar and said: “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 terrible 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 even a simple conversation,” Sarala said, and demanded. “Why do you 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, tonight you will have 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, she jotted down a shopping list. Then she opened the front door and called out.

“*Akka*, I am here.” The boy in the khaki half pant duly 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 privileges of marital life.

*How does it matter, anyway?*

His jealousy for the 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 both had enjoyed that night – it was marked by the 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 doorway, he couldn't help blurting out the word 'Thanks' with his head bowed down. Sarala, standing a few steps above him, and 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.

"Will 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 Sarala's 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 are here for a long time. Because I am new here 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 slammed door for a moment before descending the steps leading to 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 still 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 own room first.

But he could hardly speak to Krishna Iyer who was still busy in his workout - with his head on the ground and the feet up in a *Yoga* posture. Unwilling to disturb him, Ramanathan moved away from Iyer and stood in a corner facing the eastern sky growing brighter with the day's onset. Despite his sleepless night, Ramanathan's body and mind raced with excitement.

'She' has 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 all 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 Sarala as a fallen woman 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 Ramanathan and held him back.

'Does it mean I have no obligation to challenge Iyer's opinion that a prostitute would always follows her own code - just like a poem ought to conform to its own grammar?'

'No, I must certainly challenge him on that! 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 this? Let me wait till I get my next paycheck.' Pleased he made the right decision, Ramanathan gently shook his head, felt happy at heart and walked back to his room

Krishna Iyer had absolutely no idea about 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 pride and glory.

### 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 glow; today 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 somebody beyond all that, totally opposite to such a label.

Suddenly he had an idea while walking down the city market; immediately he 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 a woman would be reigning in his heart. Ramanathan was someone who never hid his feelings from others – even if they provoked some 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 rude 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. I will not let her cook today. 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 for 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 hard. I know, I can feel it. . . “Ramanathan was floating in his dreams about her as he neared 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 promptly delivered to him when the boy in khaki half pant appeared before him and gave the news in a plain, simple voice:

“The police took Sarala *Akka* away . . . ”

Until now Ramanathan had never experienced such a disappointment in his life. Saddened, he struggled hard to fight the tears up 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 *sari*,” Ramanathan told the woman. “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 her 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 house and conjured Sarala's image on the door. 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 befallen Sarala.

#### 4

Krishna Iyer reacted with a 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 the hypocrisy that was the 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, little by little, forming dark lines on the floor.

Krishna Iyer felt a little embarrassment at Ramanathan's tender heart. He shook up Ramanathan's shoulder and told him: "It is possible no code or rules shape your life, the prostitute's 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 as if challenging him.

"You mean a social code? For the society? You must be kidding! There is no such thing!" Ramanathan inhaled the cigarette smoke deep into his lungs. The ash from his cigarette butt 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! As rational human beings, they will analyze everything under the sun, dissect every aspect of it, and endlessly debate their point of view.

They would define a code, occasionally violate it and argue, among themselves, when it may be violated and when such an action would be defensible! But poetry and pleasure are a different game – they defy deliberation and analysis! That’s how things are in the real world!

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