

**KILL
DEATH
DO US
PART**

and other stories

Jayakanthan Translated from Tamil by Andy Sundaresan

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JAYAKANTHAN

Translated from Tamil
by
ANDY SUNDARESAN

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About Author Jayakanthan

Dhandapani Jayakanthan was born in Cuddalore, India in 1934 and grew up in Madras (now Chennai). At the age of twelve, he joined a commune. Like many other intellectuals in the thirties, Jayakanthan saw in the Soviet experiment the only hope and alternative to fascism. He became a member of the Communist Party in 1952 but left it in disillusionment in 1964 - the year when the Communist movement was heading toward a split. Written in Tamil, one of the richest languages in India, Jayakanthan's early works were mainly concerned with the working class as revealed in his short stories and novels. Among the latter, *'Unnaiyppol Oruvan'* (*Someone Like You*) was made into a movie and received the President's Award.

The period 1964 - 88 may be called the 'time of genius' when the author produced several first-rate short stories, novellas and novels. They reveal the rich variety of his scenes and characters and his remarkable talent for invention. Probably no other writer presents such dazzling pen - portraits of Indian, albeit, Tamil characters or so profound a study of human condition - the lofty and the majestic as well as the base and lowly - with an affirmation: "I sing the glory of life!" His ability to transform the realm of the ordinary into moments of empathy, beauty and nobility is what makes Jayakanthan so accessible and popular with generations of readers both in India and increasingly abroad.

In 1972 Jayakanthan received the *Sahitya Academy Award* for his novel, '*Sila Nerangalil Sila Manithargal*'. The president of Sahitya Academy in giving the award remarked that Jayakanthan, speaking the oldest language in the world, was the youngest to receive such an honor. The Tamil writer was 62 then. He is also a Fellow of the Sahitya Academy as well as recipient of awards from the Government of Tamil Nadu and the Tamil University in Tanjore.

In March 2005, Jayakanthan received the distinguished *Jnanpith Award* for his 'outstanding contribution towards the shaping of Indian literature' and 'his deep, sensitive understanding of human nature.' Jayakanthan is only the second Tamil author to receive the honor.

Critics have hailed the Tamil literary scene in the Sixties as the 'Age of Jayakanthan.' Jayakanthan's enormous literary output includes 200 short stories, 35 novellas, 15 full novels and 15 collections of essays, including Romain Rolland's biography of Mahatma Gandhi that he translated into Tamil. His works have been republished in a collected edition of 12 volumes.

For Kamali, Anupama and Thaila

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A Note From Jayakanthan

My friend Andy Sundaresan has perceptively reviewed my writings and assembled a collection of stories under the title “Jayakanthan On Marriage” and translated these stories into English. I thank him on behalf of Tamil literature for this creative effort.

I recall gratefully the release of an anthology of my short stories entitled ‘*Trial by Fire*’ during my visit to the US a few years ago. I find it appropriate to express my sincere thanks to Prof. George Hart for the valued Foreword he had penned for that book.

My warm good wishes to Andy Sundaresan who has regard for me and my writings, to his family and to my many Indo-American friends.

My good friend Dr. K.S. who has translated into English some of my works has contributed a Foreword to this book. When I express my thanks to him, I am not fulfilling a mere formality.

This translation work gives me joy and satisfaction.

D. Jayakanthan

15th January, 2005

Chennai

Foreword

Jayakanthan is widely acclaimed as the most eminent Tamil creative writer of the second half of the twentieth century. Any attempt to make his writings accessible to a wider readership through English translation is laudable. Andy Sundaresan's volume of Jayakanthan's stories is, in this context, a welcome contribution.

Jayakanthan's creative world is marked, among other things, by the following aspects: a laser vision that penetrates into the inner recesses of the human mind; a capacity to capture subtle emotional vibrations; a nuanced presentation of certain aspects of human relationships generally avoided by earlier Tamil writers; a perceptive analysis and portrayal of the problems of change and modernity faced by a traditionalist society; and an overarching humanity and compassion enveloping his entire work like a delicate aroma.

While JK has dealt with an entire range of characters and situations, he has devoted particular attention to the institution of marriage and its myriad problems. Marriage is recognized in the Indian milieu as the cornerstone of social stability. Logically enough, it has assumed an aura of sanctity. This sanctity itself has had a stifling influence on a natural flowering of the personality of the man and his wife. Such warped personalities lead to deep emotional turmoil beneath a façade of harmony. The situation is accentuated by a newly emerging feminine assertiveness. JK recognizes that the success of the institution of marriage lies in mutual love and understanding and a conscious attempt to curb the tendencies of dominance and emotional

aggression. Compromise at the margin without losing one's 'self' should provide the key to meaningful harmony.

Informed by such an understanding, JK has woven many stories. These are not idealized constructs. Shorn of romanticism, his characters tread warily the 'terra - firma.' You encounter rolling waves of dynamic tension and changing uneasy equilibria.

It is indeed perceptive of Andy Sundaresan to have discerned this core concern running through a number of JK's stories. His stringing these stories together in a volume gives the book a certain unity and personality.

Sundaresan's percipient understanding of the original work and his felicity of diction helped recreate the Tamil original in a different cultural idiom. I am confident that the universal problems underlying man - woman relationship in the context of a marriage bond, as reflected in these stories, will strike a chord in readers with varied cultural backgrounds.

The purpose of this effort will be well served only if the book reaches a wide non - Tamil readership. I hope this objective will be accomplished.

K.S. Subramanian

Chennai, India

December, 2004

A literary critic and a long time friend of Jayakanthan's, Dr. K.S. Subramanian, a former senior official of the Asian Development Bank, Manila, has written extensively on Jayakanthan, other Tamil writers, and literary topics. He has translated two of Jayakanthan's novels '*Jaya Jaya Shankara*' and '*A Man, A Home, and A World*' from Tamil to English.

Jayakanthan On Marriage

“When a male enters into matrimony, he believes he is marrying to satisfy his own personal needs; the female too feels likewise. Any action undertaken for a personal need will ultimately lead to dissatisfaction. The real goal of a marriage lies somewhere else. Marriage is the first step in a process where a man or woman, who has been living for his or her own sake, is willing to live for another person. Marriage forms the narrowest, yet the most basic, circle of cooperation in social relationships. It is this spirit of mutual cooperation and sacrifice that finally elevates the partners and thus the human society they live in.”

From Jayakanthan’s short story, *‘The Scorching Truth’*

I can still vividly recall that day in April of 1994. I was walking through the aisles in Cerritos Public Library in Los Angeles when I pleasantly came across a stack of Tamil books by Jayakanthan. The library had just begun offering the local Indian population books in vernacular languages Hindi, Gujarati, and Tamil - a welcome trend later adopted by other community libraries in California. I instantly grabbed a couple of Tamil books and started reading them right away.

I was familiar with Jayakanthan’s works in India when they were published in popular Tamil magazines *‘Ananda Vikatan’*, *‘Kalki’*, and *‘Kalaimagal’*. At home we probably subscribed or had access to some half-a-dozen Tamil periodicals. My father was a Tamil poet and my sister a writer of Tamil short stories. It is they who bred in me a

love for literature and we often discussed Tamil short stories at dinner time. For a long time Jayakanthan has been my idol.

The Cerritos Public Library helped me renew my interest in Jayakanthan.

As I began to read the stories after nearly an interval of twenty years, I felt my two teenage daughters living in US and who knew very little about modern Tamil literature, should be introduced to its richness and variety. So I began translating the stories in my spare time from Tamil to English. Soon I realized that in trying to help my children appreciate Jayakanthan, I was educating myself by discovering even more nuggets.

Translating Jayakanthan's works has been my principal hobby for the last ten years. I have so far translated three novels, six short novels, and thirty short stories. Fortunately there is such a rich, vast output by Jayakanthan that I can keep myself busy with the task for many years.

Some of my translations - short stories - were published by *Chindanai Vattam*, New Jersey, under the title '*Trial by Fire*' to coincide with Jayakanthan's visit to US in June, 2000. A few more stories can also be read on the Internet on the website '*Jayakanthan Pakkam*' hosted by Mr. P.K. Sivakumar of New Jersey.

'*Trial by Fire*' was an attempt to introduce Jayakanthan to non-Tamil readers in US as well as to Tamils who needed a good English translation of Jayakanthan's works. It included short stories to illustrate the author's depiction of common humanity - *Manithabimanam* - and thus embraced several universal themes: the compassionate

treatment of a rape victim; the redemption of a man in despair facing financial ruin, and the inner struggle of a nun forced to choose between her parish and domestic bliss, to name only a few.

As my involvement in Jayakanthan's works became wider and deeper, I was especially struck by the author's treatment of marriage in his writings. Jayakanthan examines gender issues in different contexts, albeit in an Indian setting: love marriages, arranged marriages, marriages founded on a lack of understanding and respect; unusual marriages suddenly emerging between young women and relatively older men; couples trying to work out their marital problems through unconventional methods - outside the family framework; marriages where one partner is stronger of the two, and so on. Accordingly, I decided to bring out this new collection of the Jayakanthan's stories based on a single theme: marriage.

This anthology of Jayakanthan's stories on marriage may be called Volume I - encompassing one short novel and six short stories. Another anthology - Volume II - is planned for the future.

Marriage has been described as an egalitarian, shared, lifetime experience. This is not too far from the romanticized view that marriage is bliss - as revealed in conventional morality plays and fairy tales.

Here are stories created by Jayakanthan with all the pain, compassion and wry humor at his command. We are invited to focus on men and women as they go through an education in marriage in compromising and not

compromising, but most of all in seeing, hearing, feeling and listening to overcome the emerging complications. Occasionally, the reader gets to see a slice or observe an episode in these stories. What happens next? Will there be a welcome improvement in the couple's marital relationship? Did they find out what would sustain their marriage? Some of the stories are amusing and some are tragic. But every one of them draws the reader to identify with the characters and want to know how the couple will resolve their problem.

The characters in these stories are fragile and courageous, reasonable and irrational, but most importantly, they are human. We see the changes they go through - in love, trust and loyalty - and in the process catch snippets from their attempts to make the best out of their married lives.

And what a cast of characters we have - full of variety, surprise and fascination! Here is a sample:

- The insecure and arrogant Anantharaman (“... *Till Death Do Us Part* . . .”), a free-thinking intellectual and writer - struggling in his personal life to reconcile with his wife's freedom and equality;
- The indifferent, brash and ‘me - worry?’ Seetharaman (*Every Hero Deserves a Heroine*) who aspires to the life of a ‘movie idol’ and has no qualms in exploiting his good - natured wife; and his wife Mathuram, a shy, submissive, properly - brought up woman, making a last grab at saving her marriage - on her own terms;
- The cool, taciturn Seetharama Iyer (*Caesar*), who easily disarms the critics of his much younger, dutiful wife,

Mangalam;

And there are more - all sharply and poignantly delineated in these pages.

I want to thank Dr. K.S. Subramanian for contributing the Foreword to this book.

I want to thank my daughter Anu and my brother Seenu for going through the manuscript and offering many helpful comments.

I want to express my gratitude to Anu for patiently listening to my intentions about this book and for carefully reading the result and organizing the material camera - ready for publication.

I want to thank Akka Mathioli Saraswathy for her support and guidance in making my endeavor to publish this book a reality.

Finally, I want to thank Author Jayakanthan for his permission to translate his works for publication and for his generous time, encouragement and inspiration.

Andy Sundaresan

El Cerrito, California

January, 2005

Acknowledgements

1. *Jayakanthan Sirukathaigal* (The Complete Short Stories of Jayakanthan), *Parts I and II*, published by Sethu Chokkalingam, *Kavitha Publication*, Chennai, 600 017. First Edition, August, 2001

2. *Kokila Enna Seithu Vittal?*, a collection of two short novels, '*Kokila Enna Seithu Vittal?*' and '*Samoogam Enbadu Nalu Per*', published by *Meenakshi Puthaka Nilayam*, Madurai 625 001. Eighth Edition, January, 1994.

3. '*Trial by Fire*,' published by *Cindhanai Vattam*, 4, McIntire Drive, Belle Mead, New Jersey 08502. First Edition, June 2000.

4. *Jayakanthan Manivizahmalar*, Souvenir published on the occasion of author's sixtieth birthday, April 24, 1994.



“Till Death Do Us Part. . . . ”

Anantharaman was only one of the twenty assistant editors of a distinguished English weekly; still he enjoyed a privilege denied to his colleagues. That could be explained by a special column that appeared under his byline - every Saturday - under the title, 'Eye on the World.' He used his column to express his personal opinions on any topic he chose - literature, politics, art, economics or the national leaders. While his pronouncements invariably brought widespread controversy and attacks from the readers, the fact remained that a special class of readers was fanatically in love with what he had to say, week after week.

The weekly - with a circulation running into millions - was published simultaneously from New Delhi, Bombay and Madras. The publishers were fully aware of Anantharaman's rapport with his readers who seemed to relish his weekly column one way or the other. Accordingly, the publishers extended a special honor to

Anantharaman - providing him with a forum to offer his own views on any subject that interested him.

Anantharaman was now seated in his air - conditioned room proof-reading the galleys of his article due for publication in the next issue.

It was a time when the national leaders, prominent men and women from all walks of life as well as the national publications were unanimous in their call for national integration. While he essentially agreed with their views, Anantharaman, given to introspection and originality, analyzed the situation from an entirely different angle and penned his comments on national integration.

He made a few corrections here and there - he always took a special care to make sure his opinions were profound and expressed with absolute clarity leaving readers with no ambiguity. He was willing to spend many long hours in the office working on an article even if it meant missing his dinner or sleep. Now, when he went through his final draft, he was more than pleased with his work. It was a feeling that comes not to a run-of-the mill newspaper columnist; it was the ultimate delight of a supreme artist striving for excellence.

He once again read through a particular paragraph in the text:

‘Integration is something that should first evolve inside each and every individual. How is integration possible in a society where the vast majority of the population goes through fragmented lives? The truth of the matter is our personal lives are totally devoid of any social responsibilities and we care nothing about the society at

large. The upshot is we end up leading many different lives - the life we lead in our home is so different from the one we project outside our home; again, we seem to be alienated from our own selves, and sometimes we are unable to recognize our own persona. Given this dichotomy in our individual lives, where is the hope for national integration?' He picked up on his own comment and ruminated over it.

"Yes, it's true! I am myself a perfect example of what I have written," he muttered to himself while the foreman just entered the room through a side door for his proof-read copy. Anantharaman, surrounded on all sides by large printing presses, felt all those busy and noisy machines which would get his opinions in print and eventually disseminate them to his readers were now mocking him.

Soon the foreman picked up the corrected copy on the table and left. The noise from the printing machines rose in a crescendo and filled the surroundings. Anantharaman too felt his deep-seated thoughts suddenly aroused - like a mass of water deep underground suddenly galvanized by an electric current passing through it.

He seemed caught up in the web of his own creation, as the words came back to haunt him: "... the life we lead in our home is so different from the one we project outside our home; we seem to be alienated from our own selves, and sometimes seem unable to recognize our own persona . . ."

He recalled, for a moment, the honor and respect he enjoyed in his social milieu. Then he remembered his

personal life - where he saw himself as a pathetic figure enduring his days in utter humiliation, pity and ridicule brought on him by his own insecurity, adolescent jealousy and mean-spiritedness. The vast chasm between his personal and public lives - now once again brought home to him as a cruel irony - left him with bitterness and self-contempt. "What a hypocrite I am!" he confessed to himself.

He always thought in English. As a matter of fact he hardly knew any language other than English. He could speak Tamil and Malayalam - albeit some corrupted versions.

'... the life we lead in our home is so different from the one we project outside our home; again, we seem to be alienated from our own selves, and sometimes seem unable to recognize our own persona . . .' He thought of himself leading multiple lives.

He recalled the episode from earlier that morning. There had been several such episodes in his domestic life - some in the mornings and others in the evenings - and every one of them left Anantharaman with shame and self-pity followed by a vow that he would guard against their recurrence; yet they happened time and again, and he found himself vulnerable and unable to prevent their recurrence. He now recalled the exchange of harsh words between his wife Kokila and himself. But then Kokila too shared some responsibility, he told himself. Those words now rang in his ears and he was left with a nagging thought: "I shouldn't have dragged her into this kind of situation."

“We are sharing a life that we both deeply resent in our hearts, don’t you agree?” That was the question he posed to Kokila that morning. Maybe he shouldn’t have openly asked such a question, even though he knew that was indeed true. He now lit a cigarette and still perched on his chair he pushed it back toward the wall, slightly opened the green screen and looked down through the glass window of that four-storey office building.

That was no street. It was where the ordinary *coolies* and *rickshaw-wallahs* made their home huddled together in the shadow cast by a skyscraper. When Anantharaman saw them - was it a scene of domestic violence? - a man tightly gripping his wife’s hair and assaulting her, it appeared to him like a scene from a silent movie.

“It was something that no husband should ever ask his wife; if he did, what could be her likely response?” His mind went on conjuring all the possible responses - but beyond all of them he felt Kokila’s two words hacking away at his heart . . .

“She is no ordinary wife,” he muttered to himself, followed by a dry laughter.

“We are sharing a life that we both deeply resent in our hearts, don’t you agree?”

“So what?” Suddenly Kokila’s face was free from the phony smile that had taken a permanent presence on her and was now replaced by utter contempt and hatred spewing from those eyes and curved lips which no man would ever like to witness from his wife. How ferocious those eyes had turned while revealing what was festering

deep inside her! Kokila seemed to be breathing fire at her nostrils, crude and tense, slowly dilated and shrinking. Crude teeth suddenly pierced through her small lips and twisted her mouth into a gory spectacle . . .

Anantharaman now shook his head in horror; even the thought was too much to bear. As soon as he noticed that sudden transformation on her face he was determined to hurt her even more, and told her: "You hate me, I too hate you!"

She raised her eyebrows and calmly replied: "So what, that's certainly no secret!"

"I know you are planning to elope with that guy . . ."

"Stop it! Aren't you ashamed to talk like this?"

"Shame? You are talking about shame? Do you know what shame is?"

Kokila too yelled at him: "I can't believe our day has started off with this headache - the first thing in the morning."

Anantharaman stared at her for a moment. In those few seconds he found some calmness and made up his mind. He wanted to act even more stubborn and arrive at a final solution. He spoke calmly but with a heavy voice: "I should never again see even his shadow inside this house, do you understand?" He keenly looked at her face to see if it had registered any change.

She sighed deeply and continued to stare at him.

He jabbed his fingers at her and continued his harangue: "I know everything! You seem to get all the

pleasure in your life just by looking at his face!” His mouth turning into a slimy twist, he went on: “You seem to delight in his very presence, and I can’t stand it. If he is that important you better meet him outside this house. I will never allow this drama inside this house!”

Kokila looked at him - a pathetic figure sick in body and mind - and laughed. A laughter emitting no sound. Her lips parted slightly as she looked at him with utter contempt. Her very look dismissed him with a disdain.

Unaware of what he was actually doing, Anantharaman dashed his coffee cup on to the floor. Kokila turned around to escape from its impact and continued to watch him with a mischievous smile on her face. He expected she would pick up the cup from the floor. But she seemed to be relishing his getting mad at her; she stood aside near the wall with her arms across the bosom, and let out a sarcastic remark: “You’re really something!”

He was shattered. He felt he was hurt by his own temper. He returned to his room and sat on the bed.

Kokila understood his madness was getting under control, still she felt anger rising within her. “Looks like this madness is never going to end!” she screamed at him. “We have become the laughing stock of this community. I have suffered enough for the last ten years! We must put an end to this!”

“Yes, that’s what I was saying too. We must put an end to this!” Anantharaman yelled at her, his suppressed anger now returning to him.

“Why do you have to yell? You want to publicize our life to others? Tell me, what do you want me to do?”

“He should never again enter these premises. If you care for our happiness, you should never set your eyes on him.”

“Okay . . .” She could have ended the argument and let it go. But she continued: “Now, suppose he stops coming here and I too don’t see him again. Would that mean our marriage would suddenly flourish and blossom? What if you accuse me that I am always thinking of him, day and night? Where does that leave me?”

She was teasing him with her acid tongue revealing her cold-blooded heart. Anantharaman was determined to get back at her in full revenge.

“Forget what I feel. The truth of the matter is both of you can’t live that kind of life. After all, you are two Platonic lovers, aren’t you?”

She was offended, not because he teased her but because he cast aspersions on her character. Her stomach churned, and she spat on the floor.

Wrongly assuming that he was indeed her target and that she narrowly missed him, Anantharaman grew madder and lost his mind. Livid with anger and desperate for meting her some punishment - he thought any punishment would do - he pressed his nails on her chin, stared into her eyes and spat on her face.

The next moment he was ashamed of his own conduct; he could stand there no more. The quietness of the surroundings scared him and he hastily withdrew to a corner of the room away from Kokila’s eyes. His eyes turning moist, he was overcome with self - pity. He recoiled at his own crude behavior. “How could she turn

me into such a wretched human being?”, he asked himself, and silently mourned for the union that bound him with Kokila in a messy, grisly alliance. He shuddered to think that he might be enduring such horrible episodes for the rest of his life. He wondered why marriage in Indian society is often reduced to an intractable link between two human beings who are simply punished for their feelings and in the process condemned forever.

Later, when he turned around, Kokila was nowhere to be seen. Through the door he noticed her in the bathroom washing her face.

Just as he was sorry for his own weakness lurking deep inside him, he also sympathized with Kokila’s external weakness. When he remembered that his most recent behavior toward Kokila was in dark contrast with everything that marked his fame and reputation, he imagined how normal and healthy his life would look if he were just a *coolie*, an illiterate villager or a brute from a jungle with no claim to culture and education. Then he would have no qualms in throwing out another man - whether he was Kokila’s friend, relative or some other human being - from his house and taking Kokila to task and render her punishment as he chose; he could simply act on the authority that he was her husband, seize her by hair, beat her up and consign her to a room corner with a feeling that he acted properly and correctly. No guilt or shame would ever bother him, and there would be no room for controversy, agreements or concern over human rights. Any further protest from his wife would be answered with even more blows. Even if this smacked of uncivilized behavior, it would be totally free from the

falsehood now so clearly present in his life reeking with hypocrisy and deceit.

‘I lead multiple lives. Personally my life is so different from the one I project in the public. My life at work is vastly different from the life I project toward my readers. I am different from what I am and what my wife really sees in me! I am also a stranger to myself! How many fragmented lives are buried deep within me!’

The office boy now entered the room with the mail and Anantharaman, who seemed occupied watching the outside scene through the glass window, now heard the sudden roar of the printing presses. Still perched on his chair, he pushed it toward the desk and resumed his duties of an editor.

He read the letter delivered by the office boy.

It was from his publishers. They wanted him to meet with the company Board of Directors the following day at eleven in the morning to discuss further their decision to transfer Anantharaman to their New Delhi office. They made clear that he was to leave for New Delhi the very next week.

Anantharaman’s initial reaction was one of mild irritation. Still he believed he must discuss his job transfer with Kokila.

‘Life is more than a man’s professional demand to make a living. Wherever his profession takes him he owes it to his wife and children to follow him - because he is either blessed or cursed by such an obligation . . .’

How would Kokila react to this news of transfer? She might think this gives her a pretext to keep away from her 'friend'; again, she may realize that many of the professional contacts and acquaintances she had developed during her work as a receptionist in Anantharaman's company are now living in New Delhi. These facts may encourage her to warmly welcome this transfer . . .

Wait a minute. Kokila reacting with warmth and cooperation?

In the last ten years that was something totally alien to Anantharaman. All his hopes toward that end seemed to go nowhere.

'She hardly misses a moment when she reminds me, time and again, that she is never happy being my life - partner; how sarcastically and cruelly does she scar my heart while accomplishing that act! I too have occasionally found myself caught in frenzy and been cruel to her, still I can't bring myself to hate her and I have a lot of respect and love for her. How can I reveal to her that I hold her as an icon deep in my heart deserving all my admiration and love? Still, she festers inside and I am unable to convey my true feelings to her!' He agonized over his ten-year marriage that had reduced him to a pathetic figure.

Just when it occurred to him that Kokila might welcome his transfer, he remained cool toward his bosses who chose to act on their own about his new assignment without any prior consultation with him. He decided to discuss the matter with Kokila.

As he folded that letter and tucked it into his pocket he recalled his last parting words to Kokila that morning. After that spat in the morning he and Kokila managed to avoid any contact with one another within that small three - room apartment. Before leaving for work he forced himself to go to the kitchen, silently tiptoe behind her and stand in silence. For a moment Kokila didn't realize his presence. When he coughed to let her know of his presence, she ignored him and continued with her chores. Anantharaman was so ashamed of his conduct - for spitting on her face - that he festered inside and bowed his head down.

As he addressed her 'Kokila' he felt his voice buried deeply within him. He raised his eyebrows toward her thinking she would face him with teary eyes. But she seemed perfectly normal - as if nothing untoward had happened - and stared back.

"I am sorry!"

She laughed. A laughter with no sound. The lips parted slightly and she seemed to be mocking him: Who cares what you think?

"I am sorry I acted like an animal . . . "

"What else could you have done?"

He gnashed his teeth and locked his eyes on her. "Yes, I admit I am a horrible creature! If you don't like me, why can't you just leave me? I say - GET OUT!"

Kokila bit her lower lip and bowed her head down in some serious thought. Then she quickly raised her face and spoke in a clear voice: "Okay, I will leave. I was actually waiting for these words. I am glad you are acting boldly -

at least after all these years.” She said no more and left the room. A little confused whether he should accept or reject her decision, Anantharaman remained silent for a few minutes; then his stubbornness got better of him and he hollered back.

“Get lost,” he screamed at her. “Who is stopping you anyway? I don’t care, I have nothing to lose! I can get married again. For the last ten years . . .” He felt his voice suddenly choke up. “I can certainly make up for those ten years. You will be the real loser.” His lips quivered and the body shook up in tension.

Kokila, who now walked past the bathroom with a vessel in her hand, turned around and addressed him: “Mr. Anantharaman, . . .”

“This can’t be Kokila, my wife,” Anantharaman thought.

She spoke as if addressing a stranger. “What kind of world do you think you are living in? Do you realize I can throw the same words back at you? I am also free to do what I want. When my parents opposed our marriage with all the vehemence they could muster, I was able to stand against them and act on my own. Do you think leaving you would be a harder task for me?” Her words hit him right in his face and she soon disappeared into the bathroom.

Anantharaman stood frozen.

While their marital life was marked by several such episodes in the past he felt the situation now had reached a crisis.

“After all I always knew that she was capable of pushing things to a crisis,” he told himself. “Why did I foolishly

play into her hands and let her pick on my words?" He regretted his impulses but refused to gauge the inner meaning of her words.

He had been ruminating over his domestic quarrel on his way to work. Once at work, he almost forgot the whole episode.

That morning, rather unexpectedly, Kokila's male friend had visited them. He made similar appearances the previous evening and every day prior to that - at different times - as Anantharaman could recall.

Because Anantharaman knew the visitor was not really interested in him, he made light of his visits and often responded with a smile or a nod as if acknowledging his presence - either when he ran into him in the main hall at home or while he walked past the friend and Kokila when they were engaged in some conversation.

He knew the visitor was a distant relative of Kokila's, a family friend or a former schoolmate, or someone who went beyond all these categories and enjoyed certain rapport with her family.

The visitor had studied with Kokila till the tenth class; then he went either to Banaras or Bombay to live with his aunt and pursue higher studies; he returned home after ten years to begin the life of an air pilot. He was now thirty-five years old, still a bachelor because he had not found the 'right girl'. All these minute details - dry, boring and certainly of no particular interest to Anantharaman - were constantly drilled into his ears by Kokila who seemed obsessed with her friend and made him invariably a topic in her daily, desultory conversations with her husband.

The visitor's first appearance in their home came as a goodwill ambassador to bring reconciliation between Kokila and her parents - who resented their daughter's love marriage with Anantharaman. As a matter of fact, the visitor thought the parents' anger toward their daughter Kokila was incredible - bordering on a joke.

When the friend first confronted Kokila's parents and heard the mother's litany of complaints against her daughter - beginning with the daughter's civil marriage to someone outside her caste - he thought Kokila had really married some savage from an aboriginal tribe in Borneo. Only later did he find out that Anantharaman belonged to an *Iyer* rather than an *Iyengar* sub caste, and he laughed till his sides ached.

Anantharaman's first meeting with Kokila's friend occurred one day when he saw the visitor seated on a sofa in the main hall sharing a joke with Kokila - giving in to a loud outburst of laughter. That was probably the reason why Anantharaman took a strong dislike toward him. He seemed to be totally lacking in manners, Anantharaman thought. Shouldn't he be aware his conduct left a lot to be desired - especially when he was in the presence of a married woman? While he tried his best to hide his contempt for the visitor, Kokila could easily discern her husband's strong reaction. She was sure about one thing: every time her friend showed up her husband seemed to experience a sudden mood change. Because she was no stranger to her husband's volatile moods, she took it in stride; her ten-year old marriage had inured her to certain illusions and she was now resigned to a new situation confronting her.

It is not that she didn't respect her husband's feelings. Level headed and practical, she was in no mood to give credence to his underlying weakness and consequently ruin her own future. The truth is she has been deliberately bending backwards to accommodate her husband's unwary moods.

As a receptionist in Anantharaman's company she was easily charmed by his fame and reputation. She dreamed of becoming his intellectual companion. For a long time she hoped for a role where she would share her life with someone who seemed to epitomize the modern intellectual ethos. She was expecting the impossible; still, she remained stoic and was willing to wait. She was not sure if her dream would ever come true. Still, she continued to foster such a hope deep in her heart, though occasionally she would feel frustrated and ask herself, "Am I wasting my days in some false sense of hope?"

It was only after her hope became a reality that she could discern the falsehood weighing heavily upon her life. She worked hard to make it a truth. She was willing to surrender but not accept defeat. Like a flower she was willing to submit herself at her husband's feet, but when he trampled upon that flower, she unconsciously turned into a thorn.

How flexible she had been in meeting her husband's demands! She sacrificed her own parents, resigned her job, changed her hairdo, and was willing to accept the role of a lonely wife locked up in her apartment - all to what purpose? During all these transitions in her life she even dreaded to think that her actions had only one goal - to please her husband. It took her a while to realize her

condition and swallow the hard truth. Still, Kokila wanted to keep the truth away from others and treat it as a secret - it was a disease that lay buried deeply within her and would go to the grave with her. Now it finally dawned upon her that any further attempts on her part towards such an end would only bring her even more shame and humiliation.

How did her life end up like this?

How could an intellectual who enjoys fame and reputation elevating him higher and higher on the ladder of success act so mean and horrible when it comes to his own wife? Simply put, he demeans himself and his spouse and, if anything, seems to be wallowing deeper and deeper in a cesspool of shame and humiliation. She suspected her case would hardly be welcomed in any court of law. If someone were to tell her what her husband was really like, she would have hardly believed those words. No judge would even understand the crux of her case - which affected her as well as her husband. And because any judgment would be based on a third-party decision, it was bound to affect adversely one of the parties to the dispute and would be seen as an injustice meted to that individual. So Kokila was quite adamant that no third party should ever be a privy to her secret.

So far she had been quite successful in convincing even her friend - the one who enjoyed her trust and confidence - that her marriage has always been a happy one.

Still, what can one say about the episode that morning?

'This can never be hidden as a secret anymore. I have reached a point where any further accommodation will

be next to impossible. If there is anything I must do at this point in my life I have to raise my head and stand up for myself. If fate has condemned me to take this kind of life, why can't I try to reach for something beyond it? If this is a humiliation, why can't I cope up with its consequences? What is the big deal? Am I confronting a new situation in my life? Why should I be concerned over my loss of reputation when my life is already a sham, and this marriage is only a facade?' While her mind grappled with her future and new ideas to get away from a beaten path, Kokila seemed stuck; she didn't know what she should do next.

Till now she had never experienced such a dilemma. Her life had been marked by so many unpleasant episodes, but they hardly reached a point of no return. This was something Kokila realized only now, as did Anantharaman.

Everything in life functions within a set of boundaries. Marriage, which is confined to two individuals operating within a larger, wider circle of social institutions, also has certain boundaries. Just as two nations or two societies functioning under certain agreements or contractual obligations seek to safeguard their mutual interests and promote goodwill, likewise, the partners in a marriage seek to promote harmony and understanding with caution and vigilance. While this seems common knowledge, and theoretically so obvious, many are unable to practice it in real life.

Even some intellectuals like Anantharaman are prone to exhibit this tendency in their personal lives - by virtually crossing those boundaries.

He violated this cardinal rule the very first day he signed on the contract to take Kokila as his wife. Even before the ink dried on the warm, lofty images that Kokila had painted about her future and enshrined them in her mind, Anantharaman's impetuous remarks shattered her dreams and scarred those images.

Those who live by feelings and tend to cross those boundaries - unconsciously or otherwise - can never retreat to their own shell. It becomes almost a second nature to them - whereby they keep on violating those norms, again and again. And when this does occur in a marriage they invariably find themselves mired in quicksand.

Occasionally the truth would hit Anantharaman - that he was being deprived the simple pleasures of marital life - and actually drowning under a load of mean, petty squabbles and painful irritants - piling up day after day.

And he would shed tears - in private - over his folly in marrying Kokila. "After all, what was her real crime?" he asked himself. "The only crime she committed was to lose her mind over my intellect, yet she now finds her life reduced to cruel punishment. Haven't I shaken the very foundations of whatever she had built in my memory?" Now Kokila was certainly privy to Anantharaman's private sorrow; still for someone inured to her heart scarred beyond repair, his tears seemed phony and meaningless. While she seemed inclined to dismiss them as of no

consequence, she did offer him some consolation - just to make him happy. Anantharaman too understood it was only a comforting act on her part. Thus their marital life took on a phony show and seemed never to transcend the simple truth that they were husband and wife united only in physical intimacy - and nothing more.

Many a time Anantharaman had personally sought forgiveness from Kokila. She too accepted his pleas and forgave him, but that bordered on a ritual. As Anantharaman pondered what he could possibly do to have her faith in him restored, he understood the emptiness of their marital life more than she did. In so far as their personal relationship was concerned, he had always been touched by Kokila's candor and honesty, and this drove him, one day, to ask her, "I seem to think you never loved me, am I right?"

She replied, "You are right."

"You are telling me the truth."

"I too feel the same way."

He gnashed his teeth in desperation and exploded: "Then why the hell are we living together?"

She raised her head and stared at him as if she was planning to ask the same question. Now she had to answer him: "For the simple reason that we pledged ourselves before the world to live together."

In the final analysis, marriage, civil union - all these rituals, whether they are old fashioned or modern - do only one thing: they tie up two individuals - whose souls never seem to find union - into a bond. They both seemed

to share this paradox. The next logical thought stemming from their conversation now dawned upon both of them, but they suddenly became silent and continued to stare at one another - with neither affection nor hatred.

He sighed deeply and asked, "What can we do now? What do you think we should do?" Kokila's mind was already made up on the subject, so she answered him at once - albeit with certain frustration in her voice.

"As far as I am concerned, I have decided to live my life. I feel ashamed to admit openly to the world that our marriage has turned into an utter disappointment. Let my parents - who have totally rejected me but still nourish a secret pleasure in their hearts that I am leading a very happy, but selfish life - continue to feel comfort in what they are imagining. I also realize I will never find happiness in throwing my body to other men. When I say this, you must not think I am willing to sacrifice my life for your sake. This is my fate, and this is how I respect myself. Others have nothing to do with my choice."

He felt her words and posture seemed to reveal Kokila's essential feminine nature which shone brightly before him. He pleaded with her as if seeking refuge under her shadow.

"Kokila, I need you!" Like a child prattling, he sought her favor. She, on the other hand, knew herself and answered:

"Well, I am here!"

"I can't live without you!"

"I know, that's why I am here!"

When he realized all his deep - seated feelings were being met by her superficial assurances, he was less than pleased, and even felt a little tired by Kokila's attitude.

And so he decided to live his life - just like she had done.

It was quite a welcome change in Kokila's life - when her lonely, monotonous life took a turn for the better - by her childhood friend suddenly appearing on the scene. While so many changes occurred in their individual lives - some longed for and some resented - she was elated that he had not forgotten their relationship and now visited her.

After they parted company, the friend even wrote her a letter. Later he confessed to Kokila that he often thought about that letter, felt his action had been very childish and chuckled to himself. Nowadays that episode leaves Kokila with only one reaction: a mild laughter out in the open - but deep in her heart - an urge to cry and mourn her loss.

Her friend soon became an envoy between Kokila and her parents - on the very first day of her marriage to Anantharaman.

Six months ago - some ten years after her marriage - Kokila visited her parents with her husband's permission. She resented the fact that her parents had not - even once - made inquiries about her absent husband. She was determined that her next visit to her parents would be only in the company of her husband - provided her parents duly extended a formal invitation to their son - in - law. She had avoided visiting her parents for the

last six months, so it became necessary for her friend to make frequent visits to Kokila at her home.

The friend didn't make a big deal over the fact that he and Kokila's husband spoke very little, if any, in an exchange or that Anantharaman had shown no interest to mingle in their conversations. Kokila had already briefed him about her husband - because she wanted her friend to think highly of Anantharaman.

“My husband is always thinking about his work - his mind is always on his writing and nothing else. I too feel a little scared over his obsession.”

And she continued: “He may be seriously thinking about something and I wouldn't like to disturb his current of thoughts. Occasionally, he would even forget his dinner. He would even ignore people in his very presence. Those who don't know him are apt to mistake his attitude.”

Initially the friend was a little shocked by Anantharaman's indifference. Soon he got accustomed to such behavior; still because he felt Kokila was the one who deserved his friendship he continued his visits. He traveled widely - his business trips took him to other Indian cities and foreign capitals. So Kokila enjoyed their conversations which were always marked by his good taste and often dealt with his new life experiences. Kokila and her friend found so many topics to talk about - and invariably on every occasion - Kokila would remind her friend that it was high time he got married and settled down in life. And every time the friend would give a different response depending on his mood at the time.

But whatever the explanation, he seemed to reveal some deep-seated, profound meaning in what he said.

The friend visited Kokila quite regularly - either by a car or scooter. But invariably every time he called on Kokila he showed up empty-handed prompting Kokila to ponder, "He goes to all kinds of strange places, how come he doesn't bring me anything? Doesn't he find something interesting in those far-off lands?" Still she understood she certainly had no right to expect any favors from him, and she seemed contented that he was at least visiting her now and then.

His visits would suddenly light up some corner in Kokila's dark life and brighten her face, and when he failed to show up, that glow would gradually fade from her face letting darkness take over once again. These mood changes seemed to escape even Kokila's attention, but not Anantharaman's, who had long nursed his own suspicions and duly confirmed them.

Kokila of course understood that her husband strongly disliked her friend's visits but she chose to act as if she never knew. She expected this might soon become a major crisis in her life, but certainly she was not going to lose any sleep over it.

Anantharaman harbored no suspicion over Kokila's character; he certainly had no fear she might one day betray him. If such a thing had ever happened, he would have hardly expressed any regret. He might even feel pleased that such an event would give him a pretext to sever a tie that now seemed almost a permanent shackle.

One day Anantharaman started a conversation with his wife about her friend. He seemed piqued by the fact that even he, by mentioning her friend's name, could instantly brighten Kokila's face. Kokila seemed intoxicated in her own memories and she went on talking. Anantharaman festered inside; still he suppressed his feelings and asked her:

"I think you both haven't seen each other for many years, am I right?"

"Yes, that's true. For many, many years . . ."

"Ten years, maybe?"

"More than ten years."

"Did you think of him over those years?"

"Not really. After all we meet a lot of people in our childhood."

"If he didn't happen to live far away from you, you might have even married him, don't you think?"

His question suddenly made Kokila sober and realize that she was now involved with another man - her husband.

Even in the dim light hovering over her in their bedroom Anantharaman could see the sudden change on her face. Kokila, now fully alert, answered him:

"How can I answer that question? If circumstances were favorable, I might have married someone even better than him."

"After you met him, did you ever regret that you might have made a hasty decision about your marriage?"

“No, I didn’t.” She could have stopped right there, but continued: “The very day of my marriage . . .” Suddenly she seemed caught up in some strange emotion and words failed her. She buried her face on a pillow and sobbed incessantly.

Anantharaman grew mad and exploded with a touch of sarcasm - while staring at her back.

“I am sorry. I didn’t realize that my question would cause you so much pain.”

Kokila suddenly stopped crying and now stared back at him. “No thought about my friend would ever bring me any pain. I don’t think I have to explain to you what I think of my friend.” She wanted to share some more thoughts on her friend with Anantharaman, but she sensed she would be misunderstood, and so remained silent. Her lips quivering, she finally spoke her mind:

“You may ask me anything - frankly and without beating around the bush. I too will answer you likewise. But I am afraid you would never understand.”

“I am able to understand even your bad English. Go ahead and tell me what’s on your mind.”

“I have to say this because I feel sorry for you. I hold my friend in high regard. I don’t consider him such a low life who would try to seduce another man’s wife. You should have no reason to harbor any unfounded suspicions over him. I think I have made this clear to you on several occasions-and the more I try to drive my point home, the more irksome the task becomes.”

Anantharaman never again raised the subject of Kokila's friend in their conversations. He tolerated her friend's visits - albeit with some irritation.

But today as he woke up early in the morning, he looked out from the bed and realized Kokila's friend was in the house.

The friend was seated in one of the cane chairs in the front hall and Anantharaman could see only his back. The visitor was dressed in white shorts and Anantharaman noticed Kokila standing close to his large, hairy thigh engaged in some interesting conversation. Some conversation! She was offering the guest either coffee or Ovaltine.

Anantharaman stood near the bedroom entrance and stared at them. And when neither of them failed to take notice of his presence, he lost his temper and slammed the door hard and walked toward the bedroom.

He thought he had in a way conveyed his irritation to both of them. But they seem to have been totally unaffected and continued their conversation as usual.

Anantharaman was seething with rage even after he found himself inside the bathroom. He continued to hear traces of the ongoing conversation between Kokila and her friend; some occasional bursts of laughter spilling out of their companionship seemed to mock him from afar.

He couldn't stand it - the fact that his wife seemed intoxicated in a conversation with a man not her husband and that the friend's very presence could transport her to sheer delight.

Now, Anantharaman realized that he - a product of this modern, civilized society - was exhibiting a behavior that went totally against his grain. Still he seemed caught up in a struggle. He has been forced to carry on as if life was a burden; fate had bound him with a woman in a marriage where he saw himself as a virtual prisoner with no hope of release. Yet, his wife, by the very presence of her friend, seems able to transform herself into a new person - how easily is she able to bottle up all her frustrations and bitterness to take a plunge into a new whirlpool of bliss and happiness! This, and only this, was something he could never tolerate.

He stayed in the bathroom for more than ten minutes. He tried to calm himself after cursing under his breath, "What a way to begin a day!" He let water from the washbasin run over his face. A few times he filled up his mouth with water and spit it into the basin - making more than the usual noise. Then, seemingly free and satisfied, he pulled out a towel from a nearby stand and buried his face in it.

Then he heard Kokila's friend take leave of her. Soon he heard the scooter start.

Anantharaman opened the bathroom door.

Kokila, who stood in the hall with a vessel in her hand watching a scene through a window, now turned around.

Was she standing there - enjoying her friend's ride on the scooter?

"He was saying he's going to Cairo . . ." The words instantly blurted out of Kokila's mouth and when she

found out they failed to bring any smile or comfort on Anantharaman's face, she felt she ought not to have spoken them. Still smiling, she walked past him.

"How quickly does her face darken when she looks at me!" Anantharaman asked himself. "Well, why blame her? She wants to please me, so she forces a smile at me. But I know that smile is phony! She could have as well not smiled at all! Why this posture? It is a smile totally lacking in any warmth or glow."

As usual Kokila served him coffee. He silently drank it. Occasionally he raised his eyebrows and stared at her. It was then that he suddenly posed her a question:

"We are sharing a life that we both deeply resent in our hearts, don't you agree?"

He had hoped - rather selfishly - that she would assure him with some comfortable words. Now when he recalled the events following her answer, he couldn't help blaming himself, saying, "I never seem to learn anything from these episodes - day after day."

Once he came to work, he was actually transformed as a new man.

As he read through the readers' letters about his article that appeared last week under his byline in '*Eye of the World*', he forgot all the humiliations from his personal life and felt he was once again floating on the waves of success of his intellectual pursuits. He was so taken by the new mood he immediately started and finished the next week's assignment.

“This professional life echoing to the sounds of printing presses is so quiet and happy,” he grumbled to himself as he got ready to leave for home at the close of the day. A little weary and sad at the prospect of his domestic life soon to unfold and torment him, he began his journey home.

Occasionally, he and Kokila experienced a brief lull in their domestic life following a storm. While they both could sense that lull as a sign for yet another storm ready in the making, they seemed to find some comfort in the intervening calmness.

Anantharaman was at peace as he returned home in the evening. He was eagerly looking forward to discussing his job transfer to New Delhi with Kokila and felt confident it might presage a new turning point in their future.

His mind juggled with all kinds of ideas as to how he would approach the matter with Kokila. First he would begin by venting his anger at this job transfer, and Kokila would act cool and try to calm him down. Then he would tell her that he would be willing to accept the transfer for her sake - wasn't it the truth?

He had mixed feelings as he began climbing the steps to his house - pleased that he always scrupulously followed the habit of involving Kokila in all his personal decisions, but a little sad that Kokila never seemed to appreciate his good sense. When he paused casually at the turn of the stairs winding up to the door entrance, he noticed the front door locked. He was instantly overcome

by mild irritation and an ominous feeling that literally froze him.

“Good heavens! What has Kokila done?”

“Uncle! My mom asked me to hand over this to you!”

Like a robot Anantharaman turned around, came down a few steps and took the key from a girl who walked up to him with her arm extended toward him. He glanced at the girl’s mother who stood in a corner farther away next to a window - desperate to ask her if she any message for him. “Why ask her?” he told himself. Once he opened the door and walked inside he would know everything. He tried to hide his rush, bowed his head down and ascended the steps. The moment he set his eyes on the front hall, he understood what had actually happened.

A few paper balls - they were letters half finished, crumpled together and abandoned by the writer - lay on one of the chairs in the front hall. Anantharaman deposited his leather bag on a table amid those cane chairs, and read one of those letters.

“My dear . . .” the letter began, and as if disapproving the tone, the words were scratched out.

He read another. It began, out of blue, with no salutation or address. “I am gone; you may make up your mind where I might have gone.” Here again, the words were scratched out.

Another was ripped apart in several shreds, but she had penned a lot of words in them. Anantharaman was in no mood to piece them together and divine their content; he had neither the patience nor found a need for such an

undertaking. He collected the trash, threw them into a dustbin in a room corner and walked to his room.

He found Kokila's chest of drawers left open. She probably forgot to close it or felt it was unnecessary to do so. As he locked his eyes on that empty chest, he felt he was standing in a temple *sanctum sanctorum* with the reigning deity missing.

The clothesline hung across the room was now bare and empty.

He opened another room door and stared inside.

There was not a single trace of a woman having lived in that house till a few hours ago. It was more like a bachelor's den. Anantharaman returned to his room.

Close to the window stood a dressing table on which sat a dual - photo picture frame and an envelope under it. Missing from the table were Kokila's cosmetics and other paraphernalia. Did she forget to take out from the picture frame one of the photos that could have been easily removed? Or did she leave it to Anantharaman's choice - to eject it from the frame and banish it forever?

He opened the dressing table drawer. It was bare except for his shaving set. As he paused for a while to close the drawer his hand picked up the picture frame. He kept staring at her face. Her photo was taken before their wedding. He could discern the glow on that face, a testimony to all her dreams and hopes following her marriage. His photo too was taken quite a long time ago - it revealed a majestic look free from any contradictions.

"It's all history!"

He kept staring at both photographs - again and again. Meanwhile, the envelope, freed from the load of the picture frame on it had flown out and fallen on the floor. Anantharaman picked the envelope and stared at his own reflection on the mirror of the dressing table.

As he unconsciously muttered to himself under breath, "Good heavens, what has Kokila done!" he understood his reaction only by watching the movement of his own lips from the mirror. He noticed his face turn groveling with pity and despair - reducing him to a helpless child. Instantly he was overcome by self - pity and his eyes turned moist.

He let out a deep sigh - as if letting out all the emptiness lurking in his heart. He coughed loudly and averted his face away from the mirror. For no particular reason, he let out a dry laughter.

His hands once again grabbed the picture frame. He was suddenly overcome by anger. He gnashed his teeth.

If he couldn't bring himself to see both the photographs in a single picture frame, he could have easily removed the clip in the rear and set them apart. Growing frenzy brought all the strength he could muster to twist the picture frame up and down to break it into two even as he failed to notice that the metal frame from one of those breakaway pair scratched his thumb and caused it to bleed.

Amidst all this confusion, he retrieved the envelope that slipped off his hands and landed under the cot. He held the envelope high and examined its contents against a window light. Inside, he could see, the outline of a

shadow - a letter folded over and over - may be twice or even four or eight times.

“Why should I open it?” Anantharaman asked himself while staring at the sealed envelope. “Must I confirm through this letter that Kokila has left me - for ever? Will it reveal her destination? Why should I really care about her whereabouts?”

He noticed his name scrawled across the envelope: Mr. Anantharaman.

Mr. Anantharaman. He repeated his own name in a rusty, dry voice and cast the letter away. He didn't bother to turn around and notice where it landed. Still mad and upset, he removed his shirt and tossed it at a nearby stand.

He paused to think if his anger and restlessness were triggered by Kokila suddenly abandoning him. No way, he assured himself. He tried to bring his feelings under control by masking his inner turmoil - by humming a tune.

As he headed toward the rear of the house, he realized he rarely hummed to himself when he was in a pleasant mood; he immediately stopped humming.

He opened a thermos flask in the kitchen and found it empty. He collected some water from the water tap and gulped it. He opened a closet covered by a wire mesh and took out a biscuit tin and carried it to the dressing table in the bedroom.

Once he put down the biscuit tin on the dressing table he seemed forgetful of his intentions. He knelt down before a radio next to the dressing table and spent an inordinately long time tuning for a particular radio station.

There was no music - only a cacophony of sounds followed. Visibly irritated, he shut the radio off and climbed on the bed. Sitting cross-legged, a little bored, his eyes shifting across the surroundings - the entire house as well as the bedroom - he let out a deep sigh followed by a sudden laughter - as if he finally attained some enlightenment. "So this is how finally everything comes to an end!" he told himself and wiped off his face with both hands.

He was trying hard - really hard - to act as if he suffered neither loss nor pain over this sudden turn of events in his personal life. He firmly believed - wanted to believe - that he was only enjoying whatever happiness he could make out of this event.

"My ordeal is finally over; still I need to examine this issue coolly and with a sense of detachment. It's important for my own sake." Determined, he lay on the bed, flat on his back, both his hands locked under his head, and ruminated over his marriage. The snapshots of those ten years, one after another, some isolated and others in a continuous thread, flashed before him as he tried to examine them free from confusion and burden.

Suddenly the envelope - that letter he had thrown away - intruded into his thoughts.

He remembered the letter only because he felt Kokila too would have gone through the same motions - just like he was now going through - before she actually penned her thoughts. Still, he adamantly refused to bring himself to respect her intentions and actually read her parting words.

He tried to speculate what she could have possibly written.

She could have articulated her final decision to leave him and thus end their marriage.

Or she could have revealed her inimitable cleverness and blamed the whole thing on her husband. She might have written: "You must be happy that I have the courage to act to sever our relationship - something you could have never done on your own."

On the other hand she might have simply left him a laundry list - an inventory of the household items - and asked him to take over the duties and responsibilities which her husband, during the last ten years, had simply foisted upon her.

What if she really tried to hurt him with that letter - by frankly admitting her deep - seated emotions as well as her dreams for a future life - with that friend over there? She might be acting really vindictive - penning her thoughts in a vile, salacious, unsavory language.

While his mind was grappling with all the possible scenarios, he finally zeroed in on the last premise.

When the truth finally did sink through - that his personal life had indeed reached a point of no return - his eyes swelled with tears that dripped down from the corners of his eyes. Overcome by unbearable grief he gave into a violent sob and wept even while pressing his forehead to the pillow shifting his face from left to right. He felt some comfort as well as peace of mind - something denied to him over the last ten years of his marriage - with the pillow soaking wet and getting a little warmer.

He was no more mourning over his personal loss or for Kokila, so he felt free to shed copious tears.

He mourned over the best ten years of his life - he saw them for what they were - veritable lies. Still grieving, he gradually slipped into slumber.

Later, when he suddenly woke up, he noticed the whole room enveloped in darkness. He wondered what time it was when the clock on the wall struck seven. He switched on the room light. He was ravenously hungry. A simple question - whether he should go back to bed hungry or go out for dinner in some restaurant - soon turned into a major dilemma for him.

Just then the girl from downstairs appeared and conveyed her mother's inquiry to him - whether he would like her to warm up the milk she had bought for him. Anantharaman didn't want to bother her mother, so he said he would warm up the milk himself. When the girl departed, he suddenly grew anxious, wondering how the landlady and her husband, who had become Anantharaman and Kokila's close friends over the last ten years, would now react to the breakup of the couple's marriage.

He recalled his very first visit to the landlady - it was after he and Kokila had decided to get married.

Assuming the couple was already married, the landlady inquired Kokila about her children: "How many?" Anantharaman now recalled that scene - Kokila blushing at the question and trying to hide her face behind her husband. "What a lovely moment that was," he now thought.

Anantharaman also recalled the landlady's reaction when the couple answered her query by extending her their wedding invitation. She thanked them and spoke her mind:

"You are really lucky in finding this place. I am sure by next year you will become proud parents." He now let out a deep sigh.

"How will that family react - the one that dotes on us with warmth, love and affection - when it finds out that our marriage is collapsing?" He dreaded even to imagine the impact but pondered over other possibilities: "Am I not selfishly denying myself some comfort - by simply refusing to tolerate a little pain for the sake of others?" he asked himself. "How could Kokila be so insensitive and walk away - just like that! What made her act that way? Could she have confided her problem to the landlady who could be privy to what was going on in our marriage? No, that's impossible! I wish Kokila's departure was less dramatic. We had checked into this house together and now we should also check out together - and then take on our own individual paths. How can this possibly happen - now?" His mind was in turmoil.

"I have already warmed up the milk!" the landlady now walked into Anantharaman's house - explaining her visit by saying, "I was afraid my little girl might drop the vessel. Do you have a flask cleaned up and ready for use?"

After pouring milk into the flask she looked at Anantharaman perched on the bed and asked, "Have you eaten? Would you like me to send you some hot *dosas*?" She walked out without even waiting for his reply. Then

she suddenly stopped on her way with a question: "When is Kokila coming back?"

"I really don't know," Anantharaman answered, and continued. "She has gone to see her parents. She can make up her own mind how long she wants to stay with them." He knew he could swear that Kokila was not visiting her parents; still he managed to utter a lie.

"Of course, that would be a natural reaction. People do get back together after years of quarrels and estrangement. With strong blood ties, how can people act otherwise?" The landlady seemed to be talking to herself - yet her voice was loud enough for her words to reach Anantharaman's ears.

Only now did he ask himself: "Where could she have possibly gone?"

Surely she wouldn't be visiting her parents. Anantharaman recalled her last visit to her parents - a trip that ended in a disaster - a bitter experience for Kokila as she explained to him on her return.

That day as he awaited her return Anantharaman felt a little pleased thinking that Kokila was at least able to sustain a warm relationship with her parents even as she was being denied every semblance of happiness by her husband.

Kokila in a happy mood?

But as soon as he noticed her face on her return, he understood she had met with failure. He expected she would regale him with all kinds of stories about her visit back home after an interval of ten years. But she seemed

dejected, a picture of utter humiliation as she silently moved away to her room and sat alone in a corner.

“What is wrong? Why is she like this?” Muttering to himself he entered her room and switched on the light. He knew something was wrong, yet he asked her an innocent question: “Now that you have visited your parents, when are they coming here?”

Kokila stared at him for a moment. Her lips quivering, she spoke in a firm voice: “My parents will not be visiting us. And I too will never visit them again!”

“Why, what happened? Didn’t they treat you properly?”

“Well, they treated me fine,” she answered and sighed. “It was my fault. I should have never gone there - alone.”

“What are you saying? What happened?”

Kokila seemed tired even to talk about it. Scowling, she continued: “It was all messed up. If they really wished to accord me a proper treatment they should first realize that now I belong to a different family. So I have made up my mind never to visit them again - unless they formally invite both of us.”

Anantharaman tried to guess from her words what might have transpired at her parents’ house. Meanwhile, Kokila wiped the tears off her face and began: “My mother followed me to the street corner and whispered to me, ‘Please do visit us now and then. When is your next visit?’ I really got mad! Of course, she is the only person against whom I can vent all my anger. I told her, ‘You must extend us a formal invitation, otherwise forget about any more visits.’”

“Those were your exact words?”

“Well, I wanted to speak out a lot more. Don’t you understand? I am visiting my parents after an interval of ten years, and I expected them to ask me why I had come alone; make some formal inquiries about my husband, and finally suggest that next time I visit them my husband should accompany me. They never did any of these things. So I concluded they didn’t respect me. Why should we visit them if they don’t respect us?”

“Nonsense! Are you offering me as an excuse? Are you suggesting I will go if they invite me?”

Kokila answered as if suddenly cutting him off. “That’s an entirely different matter. When I demand they respect you, I m not asking for your sake. I will say they respect me only when they respect you.” Anantharaman lost no time in showing off his instinct for sarcasm so typical of him. “You really hold me in such high esteem?”

“Of course, I certainly do. We may have a lot of personal problems between us, but they must never affect how others look at us. I certainly don’t want others prying into my personal problem - that’s something I want to keep secure within these four walls and not talk about. Do you understand my concern? Whether our decision to get married was right or wrong, it matters only to us, It does not concern others.”

As he now recalled that conversation, he firmly concluded Kokila would not be visiting her parents.

“Where else could she have gone?” he wondered. “As for her friend, he has gone to Cairo. What if . . . No, what a horrible thought!” As he was grappling with confusion,

the landlady arrived with food for him - two *dosas* on a plate with a lid covering them - and served it on a nearby table. "Let me get some drinking water," she said and disappeared into the kitchen. After she returned from the kitchen with a glass of water for him, she said: "Please don't eat out in hotels and restaurants, your health will get worse. You can be our guest - till Kokila returns home." She left the room without even waiting for his answer.

Three days later, when he was totally free of any thoughts about Kokila, Anantharaman happened to see her; that morning he was riding to work in a taxi and when it stopped at a cross section to let pedestrians pass through, he saw Kokila amidst the mass of humanity on its way to work. She wore a pair of sunglasses and carried a plastic bag in her hand - just like she used to when she worked as a receptionist in an office before her marriage. Anantharaman thought of her only after he noticed her and at the time he didn't actually think of accosting her or talking to her. As Kokila along with other pedestrians climbed on the pavement and started walking, Anantharaman hollered at the driver to stop - without even realizing that was simply impossible. The driver turned around with irritation and when he noticed his passenger staring at a woman on the pavement, he mistook his intentions and chuckled to himself. The taxi was still in motion and Anantharaman, who never let his eyes waver from his target, again screamed: "I said stop the taxi!"

"I can't stop here," the driver protested and veered the vehicle and his passenger into another street - away from

Kokila. He stopped the taxi near a bus stop further down the street.

Anantharaman dumped the fare on the driver's hands - scarcely bothering to check the amount - and rushed headlong into the crowd in pursuit of Kokila. After a while he caught the sight of her glimmering red - color sari afar and quickened his pace, even as his mind was preoccupied with questions, "Where is she going now? Is she going to work or looking for employment?" - which made him feel sorry for her. As he slowed down getting closer to her - some twenty feet away - he felt tired and started sweating, the skin under the necktie growing wet. He pulled his handkerchief from the coat pocket and wiped off his face. How should he approach her? He toyed with the idea and continued walking. Kokila too heard the steps - in some orderly fashion - behind her; she soon became aware of them fast approaching her, and when she felt they were meant to draw her attention, she suddenly turned around.

For a pair who had drifted apart from one another, this sudden encounter was a little unsettling; for a moment they both seemed stuck.

Kokila removed her sunglasses and wiped them off with the tip end of her sari. Anantharaman once again wiped off his face with the handkerchief. Then they both began walking, side by side, in silence. One thought weighed heavily on both of their minds: 'What exactly is the other person thinking?'

As they walked past a restaurant - the one where they used to spend hours together when they were both

working in the same company - he stopped. He asked her respectfully - as if requesting a close friend: "How about some tea?"

She wanted to oblige him - but words failed her - because he seemed to her a stranger after this temporary break. She silently followed him into the restaurant.

It was an air - conditioned restaurant on the top floor of a building. It looked totally deserted when Kokila and Anantharaman arrived. Even when the place was overflowing with patrons the restaurant afforded privacy to customers by the dining tables staggered all over the hall leaving ample space between them. A waiter in a white uniform appeared in the opposite corner; the pair walked past several tables displaying 'No Service' boards and finally found a table near a corner, and sat facing one another. Kokila laid her plastic bag on the table and Anantharaman examined its contents. There was a popular Tamil weekly and the weekly supplement of the English weekly - the one for which Anantharaman served as an assistant editor. The supplement had been folded - and from one of the folds emerged a sentence; by noting just two words of a sentence Anantharaman could guess it was from his article on national integration.

'She must have certainly read that article; what does she think of my statement about an individual fragmented into two - one in his personal life and the other in the public? Is she laughing at me because she recognized me as one of those individuals?'

His mind a little confused, he bowed his head down and realized the waiter was standing next to him.

“Tea and biscuits,” he ordered, and the waiter left.

Anantharaman rubbed both his palms and keenly looked at Kokila on the opposite seat. She seemed totally immersed in reading a tea advertisement under the glass on the table.

“Everything is fine, and I want to thank you!” he suddenly began, and continued: “You found an easy solution to our problems. I am ashamed I don’t have your determination and strength. But while I accept your decision, I can’t accept your method. Let us assume two individuals want to start an enterprise; they enter into a contract and can do so only by following certain rules and regulations. If they want to make certain changes in their contract, once again they must follow another set of rules and regulations. If one of them unilaterally violates this basic principle - even if there are thousand reasons to do so - that would be against the law. Civility demands that they mutually annul the contract and part company after a handshake! If this civility is essential in a business deal, it is even more important in a marriage - don’t you agree?”

The waiter served them tea and biscuits, and left.

Anantharaman keenly watched the waiter till he disappeared from his view. When he turned around to look at Kokila she averted her look away from him and bowed her head down. From the beginning she had been a little wary of what would happen in the restaurant. She was concerned over all the kinds of questions he would be bombarding at her as well as any unpleasant incidents that might arise in a public place. She had expected him to question her, “What were you doing these three days?”

followed by a second one, "Where are you going now?" Because she felt he would react strongly to her letter and display his natural anger and outburst openly in the public, she preferred a restaurant as a refuge and simply followed him.

But what a surprise! Here is her husband - calm and cool discussing, in a soft voice - civility among human beings! When he stared at her, she felt she was in the presence of a stranger, and bowed her head down. Anantharaman spoke again looking at her.

I am being transferred to the New Delhi office. I was suddenly asked to give my consent, and I have agreed to go. I am really pleased with this transfer order. Do you realize how I have been rescued from a terrible ordeal?" He began biting his nails.

Now they keenly examined one another. Anantharaman continued: "Next Thursday I am leaving for New Delhi. I have only one regret. I feel sorry for our landlady. It was she who really made me change my mind - when I was simply going on my way totally ignoring you - to meet with you and speak to you. I remember her whenever I am free from hunger. It is kind of strange to think that sometimes love is proffered so easily - we are showered with love - without having to pay any price! You know how much she dotes on us. Now let me remind you of something you were saying the other day: 'We may have a lot of personal problems between us, but they must never affect how others look at us. I certainly don't want others prying into my personal problem - that's something I want to keep secure within these four walls and not talk about.' She would be simply devastated if she comes to

know that we are going to be permanently separated. She saw both of us as a married couple when we first met her; I would rather prefer we also take leave of her as a married couple. After that, when we are left in this vast sea of humanity to go on our individual paths, we won't have anyone to care for us. He quickly corrected himself, I am sorry, I meant I wouldn't have anyone to care for me. So I'm making this plea - for the landlady's sake."

"What should I do now?" Kokila broke her long silence, her voice coming loud and clear.

"What do you mean? Every individual has to fulfill certain obligations; don't you see this applies to your case as well? Please don't think I am ordering you, this is an obligation we mutually share. We must formally get a divorce. I am not suggesting you should continue to bear this burden till the divorce is formally settled; I will be gone in just four days - and in the future if either of us wants to go through divorce and formally end our marriage, we need to cooperate with one another. That comes later, but right now there is something I want you to do. Consider our landlady as a small world. She thinks you are visiting your parents. She keeps asking about you invariably everyday, and I keep lying to her. How can I possibly convince her with some plausible explanation, day after day? Therefore . . ." and Anantharaman paused. He was scared to even ask Kokila a favor that she come and stay with him - temporarily for a few days - before he took off to New Delhi. Now that he had appealed to her good sense, he expected Kokila to signal her willingness, and as she continued to bow her head down in silence he began to fester inside that she would not be willing to go

ahead with his plan - even as a phony exercise to save his face.

“I am sorry to bother you; I am interested only in one thing - that this major event in our life concerning both of us - must be settled to our mutual satisfaction. As far as I am concerned, I really think the landlady and her family members shouldn't know this; this is not something that will make anybody happy. So I have made up my mind to leave this area as soon as possible . . .” Even as Anantharaman continued, Kokila extended her hand toward him, and asked: “The key please!”

“Thank you,” Anantharaman took the key from his coat pocket and handed it over to her. He didn't even wait to see her pick up the key. He poured the tea from the pot into two cups.

Lest he should mistake her silent approval of his plan, Kokila asked him in a slow, discreet voice: “When are you leaving for New Delhi?”

“This Thursday - only four more days! You will have nothing to worry about. Just four days, after that we owe nothing to one another.” He understood her concern, so he gave her his assurance.

A hollow earthen lamp flickered in a niche of the wall on the way to the second floor of their apartment.

Anantharaman had not been to work for the past two days. But he was not at home, either. He was quite busy finalizing the last minute details of his upcoming New Delhi trip. Today as he returned home after attending a

farewell party the landlady accosted him right at his doorstep. As soon as she noticed him she rushed into her home and called aloud for her husband, who, nervous and a little hesitant, soon found himself pushed and dragged along with his wife whispering behind him, "Why don't you go and talk to him?" He glanced at Anantharaman ascending the stairs and told his wife, "He is gone!" The wife gnashed her teeth and mocked him saying, "Why can't you just call him back?" Upset, as well as embarrassed, the husband addressed Anantharaman, who was a little amused by watching the caller behaving like a shy, sixteen - year old girl. "He is coming," the husband informed his wife and retreated into his house, even as he awaited another command from his wife.

"How funny," the landlady chided her husband, and continued. "We are planning a feast for our good friends, why don't you formally invite him? Why can't you just speak out?" A little confused and unable to comprehend his wife on his naivete, the husband could only say to Anantharaman, "My wife is saying something, why don't you just come in?" and drew a chair for the visitor.

"You know quite well we have been planning this feast this whole morning," the landlady again mocked her husband, and murmured, "And you seem very eager to disappear, to hide somewhere. Looks like I am the one wearing the pants in this house. I have already invited his wife. I want you to formally invite her husband." She welcomed Anantharaman into the house saying, "Why do you keep standing there, please sit down." She directed him to a chair.

“I was a little concerned you might have other engagements for tomorrow,” the husband ventured a question to Anantharaman.

“No, as of today, I am done with all the parties,” Anantharaman replied. “I have decided to spend the whole of tomorrow and all the time I have at my disposal till my departure on Thursday at home only. I have already disposed off all my furniture. Still, I have a lot of packing to do.” He declined their offer for company and started descending the stairs to his apartment.

As soon as he disappeared from their eyes, the husband told his wife quite enthusiastically, “See, how the whole matter was easily resolved! You were making a big deal about inviting him!”

“Don’t act too smart,” the landlady again chided him and Anantharaman couldn’t help smiling to himself at the landlady’s interrogation of her hapless spouse. But as soon as he entered the front hall of his apartment, the smile on his face suddenly disappeared.

For the last three days their apartment seemed overwhelmed by unusual calmness. He knew his wife lived in the same house but he never bothered to find out in which corner she might be lurking - away from his eyes and ears.

As usual, early in the mornings, he had his coffee served near his bedside. By some coincidence, it was fresh and stayed warm when he tasted it. The bathroom tub always welcomed him with warm water; the toothpaste and the brush were ready at hand when he needed them. His clothes seemed to suddenly spring out of his dresser,

and as soon as he was done with his shower, he started to dress. Around nine thirty in the morning when he happened to notice Kokila at the dining table - with the food readily served on the table - he sensed her presence but dared not directly look at her.

While the early part of the day was spent in these rituals, the evenings and the nights continued to play havoc with their human minds. Both of them endured their pain - individually - in their own way.

Anantharaman thought he was alone prone to this sudden pain, so did Kokila who felt fate had ordained her to this agony. The upshot was each person tried to hide the mental anguish from the other; their mutual silence masked a stubbornness that hung heavily on both of them.

The past three days had been a revelation to Anantharaman: two worlds seemed to be living within those four walls.

When he was changing in his room, Kokila came out of the kitchen and spoke to him - the first time in the last three days.

“We have been invited to a feast. The landlady spoke to me this morning.”

“Yes, she told me too . . .” He felt Kokila must have spoken those words without directly looking at him; so he too spoke without facing her.

Kokila thought for a moment why they both should carry on their lives in mutual hostility and hatred, and she wanted to defuse the situation, a bit. For the last three

days, when she served him coffee and snacks, she would silently serve them and move away. Now she asked him, in a simple gesture, "Would you like to have some coffee and snacks?"

It was a simple question routinely addressed to him in the past ten years, but how strange does it sound now? He was stunned - because he didn't expect her to pick up a conversation - so casually and informally. Realizing that he might be reading more into her question than what she actually meant, Kokila tried to dispel his surprise and said, "I asked you because you had the party at the office."

"Yes, you are right. I will have coffee only," he answered and walked toward the bedroom.

Kokila watched him thoughtfully for a moment; she felt the ongoing situation quite unbearable. "Well, just one more day," she let out a deep sigh as she headed toward the kitchen. "This is nothing compared to what I have gone through in the last ten years."

After helping himself with coffee Anantharaman started packing the goods for his trip the following day.

He seemed utterly confused when he tried to sort out the contents of an ancestral, monstrous wooden bureau in the house. The contents in the lowest tier were mostly dolls that were carefully wrapped with old clothes and routinely displayed in the annual *kolu* event. They were a symbol of cultural heritage - dolls accumulated for over a century from Anantharaman's ancestors as well as others Kokila had eagerly collected over the last ten years. How could he possibly claim they belonged to him?

As soon as he and Kokila got married and started living in this apartment, Anantharaman traveled to his hometown in a village in Kerala near Palaghat to settle his ancestral property rights. He now recalled how Kokila at the time was overwhelmed with joy on looking at those wonderful curios be brought home. Granted she later turned out to be an entirely different person - as far as her role in their private, marital life was concerned - the fact remained that she was an exemplary housewife who deserved these wonderful possessions. Even if Anantharaman could claim the dolls belonged to him and not to her, can he honestly take good care of them? Again, the contents in the middle tier of the bureau were the wedding gifts from the couple's friends - didn't they really belong to both of them?

Leaving the bureau still open Anantharaman walked over to the rear part of the house in search of Kokila. She was near the dining table reading a book. Seeing him suddenly walk in, she raised her head and locked her eyes on him.

"Please follow me," he told her and walked back to the bureau. When she followed him and entered the room she was once again overwhelmed at the sight of the bureau with the most wonderful objects from her memory.

Anantharaman spoke to her - again without directly facing her.

"I am confused what I should do with this bureau. It is priceless. It mustn't be sold. If we have no choice we can probably leave it with the landlady. But inside this bureau

we have things you have collected over the years. If you want, you may take everything in this bureau or those that you feel actually belong to you.” Kokila now understood the dilemma facing them.

Other than the monstrous bureau that room had no other big furniture worth its name. For the past two days Anantharaman has been using a sleeping bag. The furniture in the dining room as well as the sofa in the living room had already been disposed off - the movers would be taking them away tomorrow. But what about this bureau? She agreed with him that it was priceless, and mustn't be sold. But why does he keep saying things like, 'Your collection', 'What belongs to you', etc?

“There is nothing in this house that is mine or which I actually want for myself,” she shot back.

Anantharaman now turned around and looked at her.

“You must understand that I am simply making a suggestion. I have no ulterior motive, and I believe neither of us is actually unhappy about our parting with one another. I don't really understand why you are so upset at my suggestion.” He pathetically watched her fiery face.

“I have already given up everything. Why should I be unnecessarily dragged back and asked to lay claim over this or that? I can't help getting upset.” While she muttered to herself, Kokila seemed to sense she had gone overboard. She bowed down her head and stood there.

Anantharaman continued: “Haven't you realized by now we have given up our rights - either to get mad or console one another?”

She didn't want him to say anymore, so she raised her head and said, "I am sorry!"

"That's all right," he said trying to defuse the tension hanging in the air. "At least, let us try to be good friends. You have been of great help to me during the last three days. I will remember your warmth and cooperation even after we are permanently separated from one another. I hoped I could leave with you what I regard the most valuable gift we ever had in this house - I felt it would be a nice gesture on my part. I didn't imagine for a moment it would cause you so much pain and irritation. Okay, you may go now." He put an end to the problem at hand.

Kokila couldn't bring herself to move away, and she continued to stare at him. She realized, for the first time in ten years of their marriage, she did something wrong. And how discreetly did her husband handle the situation - making her realize her own mistake! She lauded him deep in her heart, but now felt fear grip her all around: "What if he had done like this in the last ten years - thereby revealing to me my own shortcomings?" She felt sorry as she recalled that she had never, not even once, graciously accepted his shortcomings. Till this moment, she had been feeling that her husband was the sole cause for their marriage coming apart; now she seemed a little confused. Was her determination based on a wrong premise?

As Anantharaman was trying to reach across a stack of books in that bureau - while standing on a stool - Kokila approached him and asked, "May I help you?"

“Please,” he answered with a smile and as he bent down the books rolled down from his hands and landed on the floor - raising dust.

As she cleared the dust and collected the books, she noticed a photo album among them. She pulled it out and laid it separately from the rest of the books.

She sorted out the books and bundled them together with a knot. Her hands were covered with dust and she went to the bathroom to wash. Anantharaman, who has been whetting his curiosity for a long time, now discreetly picked up the photo album and examined its contents. As soon as he heard Kokila return from the bathroom he dropped the album right there and returned to where he was. Now his eyes fell on the double - photo frame which he frenetically pried open the other day to dislodge her photo; later, he let the photos stay together, not because he preferred it that way but because, he realized, the frame, once stripped of a photo, had lost its balance and couldn't stand on its own. Again, Anantharaman realized at the time that he had acted really mean and nasty, so he restored both the photos to the frame - lest someone should get to know his shabby behavior.

Kokila, her hands cleaned up, now picked up the photo album, and asked him on her way out of the room: “May I keep this photo album?”

Anantharaman gave no immediate reply. He thought of her recent outburst when he suggested she might feel free to take whatever she believed belonged to her. Now that she was asking his permission, he was a little puzzled how to respond. He quickly pointed his hand toward the double - photo frame suggesting she might take that one

too. Kokila bowed down her head and thought: "Why do I need his permission, anyway? If I want something, I can certainly take it." Determined, she left the room.

As she sat alone in the dining room and pored over the photo album, Kokila imagined she had been married just over a month ago and begun her life in their new home. "How nice it would be," she asked herself, "if these bitter experiences could suddenly vanish - just like my hopes and dreams that have since turned sour? How wonderful it would be if time runs backwards - affording us an opportunity to relive our days but not repeat the past mistakes? Our life is like a large spool of thread with a lump in the middle, why I can't I simply get rid of the knot and tie back both the ends?" She concluded her thoughts with a deep sigh, muttering, "Nothing more is possible at this time - it's a done deal."

"Why didn't he ask me about *that* letter?" Kokila wondered. "It was penned with enough venom and cruelty to offend a male ego, and the very fact that I want him to talk about it proves my deep - seated contempt and hatred for him. Am I solely responsible for this hostile feeling? Had I not carved out a place for him - deep in my heart?" While her mind was in turmoil, she felt the photographs from the album were rushing towards her with a secret message: "You too have had some happy moments to cherish in your life!"

"Why didn't I see this album all these years?" she asked herself. "I have had so much contempt and hatred for my marriage that I dumped this album with the rest of the garbage. It is over; I can't undo any of this mess. I brought all this myself. I was a student till I was fifteen, and I have

a certificate to prove it. Then I had a career - which resulted in a marriage, and I have a wedding invitation to prove it. What about my ten-year married life; don't I need a certificate to prove it? Couples who commit themselves to a married life don't need these props, so my husband won't be needing this album. But I certainly do." Determined, she locked up the album in her personal suitcase.

For a long time, late into the night, Kokila and Anantharaman sorted out the household items.

Anantharaman sought Kokila's help to move a huge wooden shelf. As Kokila interposed herself between the shelf and the wall and tried to move it toward him, she cautioned him with a warning, "Watch out, be careful with your foot - don't let the shelf crush it in no time!" It was only after she hollered at him Anantharaman cautiously began moving his foot away from the encroaching shelf.

Kokila stared at Anantharaman as if chiding him for his brashness while muttering, "What audacity!"

Anantharaman smiled to himself muttering under breath, "What a concern!"

It was only then that Kokila noticed *that* envelope - lying between the wall and the shelf. She picked it up at once. Why did she feel so happy and pleased - totally overcome by an admixture of surprise, relief, and satisfaction? "Did he ever read this letter? Maybe he didn't," she asked herself and tried to tuck it away - secretly into her possession.

"Kokila!" She was a little stunned by the tone of her husband's voice as he now addressed her. She faced him

while her hands tried to hide the envelope - away from his attention - behind her back.

“Starting from tomorrow we will be permanently separated. For the last ten years we have lived together - never asking each other what rightfully belongs to you or to me. We have accumulated over the years quite a few things and now we face the unfortunate task of dividing them between us. We must give no room for complaint that either one of us has not been fair in dealing with the other.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I am just trying to tell you that the envelope in your hand belongs to me.”

Kokila smiled. Anantharaman had not witnessed such a smile on her face for a long time. He instantly recalled her ‘friend’ now in some faraway Cairo, and this only strengthened his stubbornness, as he now demanded her: “Please hand over that letter to me.”

“Does it belong to you, no, it is mine.” Only her eyes were smiling.

“A letter doesn’t belong to the person who wrote it. Please read the name on its cover. It belongs to me.”

“Why are you acting like child? You don’t need to read this.”

Anantharaman was mildly irritated by her posture realizing she was taking him for granted. Still he cautioned himself that he must not resort to his old methods and demean himself in her presence. He continued to stare at her.

He has been pining for a long time - secretly - for just this picture of Kokila, smiling and dallying with him - but now he asked himself, "How dare she?" He saw himself as someone vulnerable, desperately seeking the attention of a fairy in far away heaven; when he just started consoling himself that she was beyond his grasp, that very fairy suddenly surrenders at his feet. Still, the male ego would feel hurt rather than be pleased by such an overture. That was how Anantharaman saw himself in the current situation.

"That letter will protect me," he tried to explain to her. "Now you are in an entirely different state of mind, and I am fully aware you were in no such mood when you penned that letter. I know you made up your mind after a careful analysis and decided to sever the tie between us - a tie masquerading as a phony relationship. That was the reason why I couldn't bring myself to read that letter. I am scared when I think of my weakness for you. In the future, when I am physically away from you, that weakness might grow strong enough to even force me to think of renewing our phony relationship; I may even lose my self - esteem and crawl before you like an insect pleading for your acceptance. On such occasions this letter will save me from my descent to shame. So please hand over the letter to me." Kokila simply stared back at him woefully confused how she could actually disobey him.

While he understood he must act decently at their parting company and not remind her of the unpleasantness of the past, Anantharaman nevertheless decided to speak bluntly and tell her what was on his mind.

“Now, remember your trying to remind me from time to time that you hate me. If that was not a lie, you better hand over that letter now.”

Kokila walked close to him and handed over the letter - without even glancing at his face.

She returned the letter - not because she wanted to reinforce his suspicion that she hated her husband. What prompted her to act spontaneously was his open confession - his avowed weakness for Kokila - which might one day draw him back to her like an insect. Kokila dreaded that prospect.

“Maybe it wasn’t quite an auspicious time when I asked the couple how many children they have - when I first met them,” the landlady remarked as she bid farewell to Kokila and Anantharaman after entertaining them at her house.

“Since then I was eagerly hoping for the arrival of a baby in your household. I wish you well and now I hope you will be the proud parents in the next ten months. Please let me know the good news and I will lose no opportunity to come and visit you as proud parents. I am also very eager to visit cities like Delhi and Banaras . . .” Her eyes turned teary as she fondly caressed Kokila’s cheeks.

For the past five or six days Anantharaman has been struggling hard to cope with the rituals arising out of his frequent, unavoidable, private encounters with Kokila inside the house. So he could care less now that the

landlady was also contributing her share to his woes. He ignored her comments and descended the stairs.

Later, on their return from the feast, when Kokila entered the hall since cleared off all the furniture - carrying the gifts from the landlady, her face sweating and laughing to herself over something on her mind - she saw Anantharaman seated on a nearby window.

Anantharaman was visibly angry. Kokila's very presence made him feel he was being subjected to systematic torture, by one and all. He resented the fact that Kokila was getting special treatment. Now, the last day of their separation, he felt even more hurt. "Have I not suffered enough?" he asked himself. "Does she have an iron heart?" He averted his eyes away from her gaze and looked out through the window.

Kokila seemed untouched - either by his looks or his head abruptly moving away from her. Silently, she walked to her room.

As far as Kokila was concerned, the silence she displayed - on impulse - when last night she returned the letter to her husband - had now taken a permanent hold on her. She seemed to be thinking, "There can be no conversation between us. There is nothing else to talk about." A sense of finality now hung in the air.

The previous night, the couple found themselves closeted in their separate rooms; neither could sit idly doing nothing or retire to bed; they ended up pacing up and down their confined spaces under the blaze of the room lights. Each was aware of the shadowy movement of the other in the other room - as could be observed

from the light gleaning through their door hinges. No one dared to open the door and reach the other. Their mutual silence could have been broken only under one pretext - one might say, a sheer accident - if both had simultaneously opened their individual rooms and chanced to see the other person.

It was on their last night that the couple thought about one another with warmth and sympathy.

Many a time Kokila struggled with a question, "Am I doing the right thing? Am I acting on some vague impulse?" She kept asking herself, "Why didn't he read my letter? How come he never asked me - not even once - where I was or what I was doing in the last three days?" As the questions refused to fade away, she was drawn into some soul - searching. "Could I have been partly responsible for becoming the victim of my husband's ill treatment over the last ten years?" The past few days made her realize they both could live together and lead pleasant, mutually respectful, lives. "Haven't I corrupted a decent human being by just abandoning him?" she pondered. "The very idea that I wanted to leave him seems to have made him a better, more civilized person."

As a woman, alone and sleepless at nights, she was naturally touched by her husband's anguish and pain. Occasionally, Kokila would open her room door and stare at the opposite room - its door slammed shut.

She couldn't bring herself to voluntarily approach Anantharaman and defuse the tension hanging in the air. What dissuaded her was not her giddy pride or self esteem. In doing so, she felt, she would be hurting the self - esteem of a noble, human being.

While Anantharaman was, more or less, in the same state of mind, he didn't harbor any illusion - even for a moment - that their present life might continue. Still, the sense of imminent loss of a warm and pleasant life pricked his conscience and left him smarting with an empty feeling.

"Is it true? Am I going to lose her for ever?" The very thought was unsettling. But because he firmly believed this separation between the couple would eventually bring some relief to Kokila's present life he was willing to accept this outcome; in a way, it would also bring to an end his ill treatment of Kokila over the last ten years and inflict upon him the punishment he certainly deserved. When Anantharaman occasionally opened his room door, he too sensed Kokila pacing up and down in her room, but he imagined she was thinking about *her* own future after their separation. Anantharaman could never bring himself to think - even for a moment - that Kokila could be actually thinking about him.

What began as his last hope but soon got nipped in the bud was the episode linked with that letter. When Anantharaman told her, ". . . you remind me constantly that you hate me. If that was not a lie, you better hand over that letter to me," Kokila could have acted - on some humanitarian ground - and simply refused to return the letter. It is one thing for a woman to say she doesn't feel warmth toward another person; it is entirely another thing to say she really hates the same person. How could Kokila refuse to acknowledge this significant change in her behavior? There could be only one conclusion, Anantharaman told himself: She hates me; hence she could do what she actually did.

Why, Kokila could have simply said, "Okay, you may have this letter - if you insist." Her silent gesture as she returned the letter to his fold and silently disappeared from his view told her husband a lot about her state of mind. Anantharaman even felt a stab of jealousy over her prompt response. He felt ashamed he could not steel his heart the way Kokila could.

And that was the reason why he deliberately chose to avert his gaze from her when they encountered one another within those four walls. Slowly and steadily, he began to entertain the hope that he was able to extricate himself from the past linked to her memories.

Before heading to the railway platform to catch the train, Anantharaman and Kokila stopped at a restaurant for coffee. Inside the restaurant, even while seated close to one another, they exchanged no words or glances. They both seemed to have been preoccupied with some private thoughts - in their own separate worlds - and occasionally let out deep sighs. They continued to look around and watch people and things around them, yet their passive minds evinced no particular interest in what caught their eyes. When drawn into a conversation by other customers in the restaurant, they reacted with a smile and formal expression. All this betrayed their surreal, robot - like behavior.

When someone reminded Anantharaman that his train was about to depart, he checked his watch and casually arose from his seat. Kokila followed him to the train.

Usually, when the couple found themselves amidst busy, milling crowds, they would present an image - entirely different from one of infighting and argument

within the four walls of their home; Kokila would firmly grip Anantharaman's hand and let it encircle her body as the pair made their way on the busy sidewalks. If on occasion Kokila forgot to hold his hand, Anantharaman's face would bristle with scorn; how many questions would be hurled at her from across his face! His very look would reveal to Kokila how much he despised - not just Kokila but the entire crowd milling around them. When Anantharaman extended his hands toward her - like an owner fondling his puppy - Kokila would respond instantly by cuddling close to him even as he remained miles away from her thoughts.

Now as Anantharaman walked out of the restaurant ahead of Kokila and as she found herself trailing him through the crowds to get closer to him, Kokila recalled her past experiences. She seemed utterly confused to divine her present state of mind over those past memories.

It was only after he reached his air-conditioned compartment did Anantharaman turn around and take note of her. Seeing the railway guard ready to wave the green flag to signal the train's departure, Anantharaman leaned one leg on the platform while trying to board the train. Now he got ready to have a last glance at Kokila's eyes - those eyes that have eluded him since last night.

"Why are those eyes looking so blood-shot and reddish? Why are they hesitant to look at me directly? If anything, those stealthy eyes seem to lurk downward and avoid my attention." When he tried to follow his eyes to her eyes and to their target, he noticed the white envelope half - concealed in his coat pocket.

He chuckled to himself and smiled at her.

“Please, . . .” Kokila extended her hand toward him as if begging for that letter. He felt ill at ease.

“Why this predicament - at a time like this?” he thought. He was determined not to give in to her demand, and continued his refrain: “No, that letter belongs to me.” Yet, as he continued to stare at her - this would be the last time he would be seeing her for the rest of his life and he wanted to carve her face in his heart as a memory - his eyes turned teary even though he was totally unaware of it.

Kokila now nudged closer to him and pleaded. Her voice grew fainter and almost lifeless: “Maybe . . . sometime in the future . . . we will be seeing one another . . .”

Why is the guard in such a rush? Kokila felt someone pushing her back and she turned around. It was not just the train that suddenly jolted a little as the guard signaled it to move . . .

Anantharaman boarded the train even as he watched Kokila running behind the train pleading for the letter. He was going away from her, the distance between them was narrowing, and she was doing her best to reach up to him; his male ego wouldn't permit him to desert her at this moment. He had only two choices: either he should get off the train or grab Kokila and take her into his embrace.

But Kokila gave him no such trouble. She tightly gripped the door handle of the moving train and boarded it, even while murmuring, “Please, please . . .”

A little panic seized Anantharaman, yet he managed to hold her waist and eagerly drew her into his embrace.

The train was gone.

After a while, when the couple found themselves outside the platform under a tall electric lamp post, Anantharaman's hands eagerly fretted out the envelope from his coat pocket, shredded it into pieces and cast them to the winds.

Was he not quite adamant about the letter - never yielding to her desperate pleas to return it? Then, why did he tear it into pieces?

Oh Kokila, look what you have made him do!

What happens next? Where do they go from here?

NOTE:

Original title: "*Kokila Enna Seithu Vittal?*" published in 1967



The New Shoe Will Pinch

After slamming the bedroom door in her face, Nandagopal found himself standing outside the house. He had no idea whether he should leave the house or go out somewhere. He was mad at his wife and felt insulted by her total indifference - as she turned away from him, crawled toward the wall and continued to sleep - rather feign sleep. Nandagopal had kept himself awake the whole night to give her company and longed for a simple inquiry from her, "Are you not going to sleep?" in vain. He felt so humiliated he darted out of the bedroom after angrily slamming the door behind him.

If his wife was really asleep, the slam must have shaken her out of her slumber. Concerned that the neighbors might have been rudely disturbed from their sleep, Nandagopal was overcome by shame at his own behavior; he glanced stealthily at the opposite row of houses now visible in the darkness hovering over the courtyard. Their house doors were locked and a bright

lamp in the corridor was visible through the ventilator. Somewhere in a house a table fan was whirring at high speed. He checked his watch, but was unable to read the time in the dark. He wondered, "How about going out now and returning after the daybreak?" He felt a little hesitant to leave his wife alone with the front door unlocked. He was convinced of one thing: his wife was being deliberately adamant and doing her best to punish him.

What should he do? He was confused. He felt sorry for himself. Call it fate; after all, he was living happily, all by himself. He had a decent job, a steady income and freedom to enjoy either happiness or unhappiness as he pleased. That was the life plan he had charted for himself, but what has actually happened? He was foolish enough to trust that 'devil' who lectured to him on those grand ideals - marriage, spouse, and family - which seemingly represented true happiness and lent a meaning to human life. Nandagopal let out a deep sigh; caught between re-entering the house or going out somewhere, he lit a cigarette and stared at the starry sky.

The very word 'devil' uttered under his breath brought back the memory of Girija. Such a sweet, decent woman, how could he call her a devil! He cursed himself - after all it was he who has been living with a devil at home! Still, he found some justification for his anger because it was Girija who was instrumental in his decision to marry and have a family.

Suddenly a thought occurred to him: "What if I visit Girija now?" Really that would not be a problem; he could

visit Girija any time he wanted. During these six months, whenever he felt after some unsavory encounter with his wife that he was trapped in his marriage, he remembered Girija. But only now he actually thought of visiting her.

But he was plagued by another thought: however he might have behaved before his marriage, is he not being unfaithful to his wife if he now abandons her at home and goes after Girija? Granted his wife is a shrew and that he is mad at her, how would he feel if his wife, on her own, did exactly what Nandagopal is now trying to do? He rubbed his forehead. The very thought was unbearable to contemplate.

The clock struck one. Surely the time couldn't be an hour past midnight. Nandagopal slowly opened the bedroom door and glanced at his watch in the light gleaning from the room. The watch read a few minutes short of eleven-thirty. Confirming that the clock struck eleven-thirty, he once again looked at his wife through the narrow opening. She lay there, no movement one way or the other, just like before, and this made him grow madder. He felt a strong urge to rush to her bed, whack her on the back or even kick her hard. Then he restrained himself - overcome by disgust at his own extreme reaction.

He had been witness to such crude, violent episodes in his childhood. Suddenly in the middle of the night he would hear his mother's violent screams and arise from bed, his whole body trembling. Like a mad man his father would be assaulting Nandagopal's mother - repeatedly hitting her all over, sparing no part of the body, as she

continued to curse him while sobbing uncontrollably. The more she cursed the more assaults she would be subjected to.

Those days left Nandagopal with the cruelest of memories. The very next day of that outrage, life at home would go on as usual as if nothing unpleasant had occurred between his parents. Nandagopal found the whole experience obscene - his mother readily and dutifully attending to her husband's needs and the father coyly addressing her and discussing the family matters. All this was inexplicable to the young mind and left the boy with utter disgust.

He endured all this till he was fifteen. It was not his parents' violent quarrels, rather their crude attempts to 'explain' away everything that outraged him and scarred his mind. He hated his father with all his heart. Probably those episodes colored his view at a very young age and made him believe that family and marital life are the most disgusting experiences one could ever imagine.

Now his father is dead, and his widowed mother lives all by herself in a village. Whenever she tried to talk Nandagopal into marriage - she seemed desperate that her son should get married before she breathed her last - he would make fun of her - invariably reminding her of her own marital strife. The mother would feel sad, as well as offended. Still, she would lose no ground and respond with a touch of pride, "What was wrong with my marriage, any way? Certainly, I have no regrets." Finally, Nandagopal would end the conversation by scoffing at her face with a declaration, "I am not going to get married. The subject is closed."

It was Girija who eventually talked Nandagopal - when he had already spent nearly thirty years in the city and had grown accustomed to bachelorhood - into marriage, and fostered in him the dreams for a wife and happy family. Prior to his acquaintance with Girija, he never had such a relationship with another woman. He was a stranger to her, but she was friendly with many other men. Of course, she was not someone to deny those connections, but during the days when they had known one another she was a truly, caring friend of Nandagopal's and she taught him how a woman's company and relationship could bring happiness, ease and comfort into a man's life. "Those two months certainly gave me a sense of a rich, abundant home life," Nandagopal recalled. Now, he couldn't help but remember the other woman who had only a short while ago humiliated him and drove him out of the house even as she continued to rest cozily on her bed. Growing mad and his eyes turning moist, Nandagopal pathetically returned his gaze to the house.

He knew his wife would never get up and try to calm his temper. Because he had become familiar with such episodes during the last six months, he could easily predict the follow up and the eventual conclusion on every occasion. Still, those episodes had become somehow unavoidable. He could never make sense out of those constant quarrels. As days went by, he began to wonder as to how long he could endure this double whammy - a life that reeked with disgrace and pain.

Inside the bedroom - in the dim light visible from where he stood - he noticed, with a touch of sadness, the clothes hanging on a clothesline swung across the room and the vessels in the kitchen strewn all over the floor.

The house consisted of a single living room adjacent to a kitchen, and a wall with no door separated the two; a tub stood in a corner of the kitchen and a small courtyard with a bathroom formed the rest of the living quarters. The monthly rent was forty-five rupees; the monthly household expenses came to one hundred and fifty rupees. Nandagopal's monthly salary was three hundred rupees. Life under these circumstances would hardly be a problem if the couple found harmony and a meeting of minds. Nandagopal now longed for his former days - when he and six of his friends lived in a co-op with all amenities and each tenant contributed his share of one hundred rupees. That nostalgia now added only bitterness to his state of mind.

Nandagopal let out a long sigh and stood up. He felt he would find some solace if he could spend the night in Girija's company. His conscience again pricked him, but he brushed aside any concern saying, "I have no ulterior motives," and comforted himself with an assurance, "A conversation with Girija will certainly give me a peace of mind." He went into the bedroom and put on a shirt. His eyes blinked as soon as the forty-watt lamp came on - dimming the night lamp.

He gently tapped on his wife's shoulders. She wouldn't move.

"I am not trying to wake you up," he explained to her, and continued. "I am going out; you better keep the door locked." He pressed her shoulder a little harder to turn her around.

Irritated, his wife got up from the bed. Scowling, she riveted her hateful eyes on him.

She had been lying on the bed all this time and hardly moved an inch. Yet, when he told her that he wanted to go out she displayed a kind of indecent haste. This, more than anything else, infuriated her husband.

Shouldn't she ask him at least where he was going - at a time like this? No, she did not.

'You said you wanted to go, then why don't you get lost? I can hardly wait to go back to my sleep!' That, essentially, seemed to be her attitude as she ignored Nandagopal standing next to her and walked back to her bed and sat on it, her face still showing irritation and temper. Nandagopal bent down and groped under the cot for his footwear. The task was made a little harder by the shadow cast by either her sari or one of the cot's legs. He found it downright insulting that his wife should be cozily seated on the bed while he was on the floor, pathetically down on his knees. As he angrily picked up the shoes and tried to get up, he struck his head against the narrow metal edge running along the cot. He felt acute pain and his eyes turned teary. Still his wife remained there, on the cot, unperturbed, a picture of a calm, silent spectator. Nandagopal at once imagined how he would react if it were his wife who hurt herself - in a similar situation. Then, certainly he wouldn't remain a silent witness. But that feeling only exasperated his sense of self - esteem. He averted his face away from her, put on the shoes and walked out.

He let the door remain open, silently walked to the courtyard and unlocked his bicycle in the corner. Aware that his wife couldn't possibly see him in the dark, he turned around to see if she was still watching him from the room door entrance. His heart sank as he heard her

slamming the door and locking it up. He was saddened she didn't crane her neck and watch him leave. Soon, the forty - watt lamp in the bedroom was turned off and the low - watt night lamp glowed in the dark and became visible through the ventilator.

Nandagopal began walking and pushed the bike along the way. As he reached the main gate the old woman resting on a nearby bed and coughing inquired him: "When are you coming back?" On his reply he would not be returning anytime soon, she bolted the gate and Nandagopal found himself standing on the main street. As he lit a cigarette, the streetlights suddenly went out. As Nandagopal started pedaling, the bike light came on illuminating the road ahead of him.

*** *** ***

Girija's house was in West Mambalam on a street full of potholes, stagnant pools of sewage and roaming buffaloes. She lived alone on the second floor of a house accessible from the street through a staircase. Girija's mother worked in the city as a live-in maid in an affluent family. She visited her daughter once in a while to enjoy a non - vegetarian meal - something she couldn't get at her employer's house. Girija also had a twenty-five-year-old brother who worked for a movie company; he too visited her only occasionally. Girija had studied only up to tenth class. She is now thirty and has no permanent job. She has been working as a temp and in spite of her uncertain future she leads a contented life and is always cheerful.

Nandagopal first met Girija last December in a city exhibition where his employer, a cosmetics dealer, had a booth. On his first encounter he had a vague feeling he had met Girija before; was it because she was working as a salesgirl and her face radiated such a feeling? Soon, he found out. Sometime later, when he happened to work in the same exhibition as a shipping clerk - a part time job he performed for two months in the evening shift - he became friendly with her and noticed her face embossed on the top of every consignment that carried facial powder. He sympathized with Girija when she sought, at the time, a recommendation for a permanent position from each and every contact she came across. Nandagopal knew it was beyond his capacity to help her, so he refused to get involved.

Girija had a pleasant disposition with everyone who crossed her path. It was she who first invited Nandagopal for tea and engaged him in a conversation. After work, when she returned home at night around eleven-thirty her sales manager would invariably offer her a ride in his car. There was some gossip going on about that manager and Nandagopal was a little offended by Girija accepting his invitation. Then one day when the manager made the usual gesture, Girija introduced him to Nandagopal and told her boss, "Mr. Nandagopal lives close to my house, and we are planning to leave together; we have many things to talk about!" Nandagopal smiled at her and nodded his approval.

He found Girija's speech a little funny; she spoke Tamil haltingly, invariably lengthening every sentence into a question. Only later did Nandagopal come to know that

her mother tongue was Telugu. She had studied Tamil at a city school but spoke Telugu at home. 'What a lively conversation she carries on with everyone!' Nandagopal thought admiringly of her as he continued to pedal his way to her home.

It was only after his close acquaintance with Girija that he found out that she was really leading a happy life. After that brief stint at the exhibition, one day, he ran into her on a street corner as she emerged from a house in the city residential area. Girija told him she was working as a telephone worker where her duties included servicing the customers' telephone sets - which meant cleaning up the set and enhancing its appeal with a scent. Nandagopal understood that she always made her living by involving herself in some decent job. She was already thirty, and either trust or necessity forced her to maintain contacts with men. He knew right away that Girija never lost her head and never let her professional obligations compromise her character and sense of values.

Nandagopal would often go out seeking Girija's company. They would carry on conversation for hours. Girija would offer him only coffee. She would buy all kinds of film magazines. Whenever she had money to spend, she would go to movies. Like an expert on the movie industry, she talked on and on about films, the stars and inside stories about actors and actresses. She told Nandagopal about her brother - the young man from a movie company - advising her: "Do as you please, but never believe anyone who promises you a career in films. Because I am in films I would appreciate you keeping away from me - that would be the only way I can save my

honor and dignity.” Girija told Nandagopal she was strictly following her brother’s advice.

Nandagopal was acquainted with Girija for only two months. The mere thought of those days now filled him with joy.

Was he now being punished - how else to explain the pain and disgrace he was now going through - for trading that happy life for something else? He had one more mile to go, and he continued to pedal hard.

One day, during her regular job hunt, Girija sought Nandagopal’s help and wanted to see him at work. Because it was almost close of business, Nandagopal asked her to wait for him in the office lobby and later he joined her. They both walked to a nearby hotel. Girija looked very tired. Nandagopal was thinking of ordering only two cups of coffee. Girija seemed to have read his mind, and said: “I don’t want just coffee. I would like to have something more.”

He was touched by her utter frankness. That day he entertained her lavishly. He extended her sympathy when she told him she had not eaten the whole day and was struggling to get a job. She asked him to recommend her to any employer. He promised to help even though he knew better - he had no hope he could be of any help. That evening he accompanied Girija to her home, brought her groceries and gave her some extra cash. She asked him to stay for dinner.

That night he noticed and admired her culinary skills. Her dinner reminded him of his own mother’s affection and hospitality. During dinner Girija took great care of

his needs and made repeated inquiries in regard to his personal tastes and preferences.

Nandagopal spent that night at her home. That was when Girija openly talked about her, her mother, brother and other family members. Then she suddenly thought of an idea and opened up to him: "If you are willing to pay me what you are now contributing to your co-op, I can cook meals for both of us. What do you think?"

He gave his consent after a long deliberation. Their brief friendship soon turned into a close relationship. It was a kind of new experience for him and Girija too felt the same way about him.

Soon he found himself in a trance; for someone who rejected marriage and family life out of fear and disgust, now he felt how a woman's company could really lead to a rich, pleasant, meaningful life.

Girija's house and the life in it proved a very simple part of their daily existence. The single room upstairs served both as a kitchen and a bedroom. For shower and other facilities one must come downstairs. Sleeping meant lying down on an uneven floor with dents. If Girija's mother or brother ever showed up suddenly they came only during the daytime - he had to pretend he had been visiting Girija and had come just then. Nandagopal seemed to take all these in stride.

Girija scoffed when he revealed his deep-seated fear of marriage, and suggested a remedy. "Are you frightened to get married because your father abused your mother? I can understand a young girl reacting to such a fear. Now, the simplest way you can handle the matter is not to abuse your future wife. Problem solved!"

Nandagopal spoke about his marriage and his mother's frequent pleas for him to wed soon. Girija and Nandagopal saw no contradiction or confusion in their ongoing conversation - even though they lived as two adults under one roof, with the man opening up to the other about his marriage and the woman vigorously urging him to get married. Maybe this happened because each one of them, while in solitude, was keenly aware of that contradiction deep inside their own hearts. Now they realized they could discuss this matter more often - as if it was an ordinary problem to be easily shared with one another.

Then finally one day Nandagopal mentioned his cousin Vatsala, who had studied up to tenth, was fondly brought up by her parents and came with the highest recommendation from his mother. Nandagopal had seen Vatsala before and agreed she was indeed a beauty.

Despite herself Girija was overcome by a sense of disappointment mixed with some sadness. Still, she reacted with delight and congratulated him on his choice. She teased him after conferring a title, 'The New Bridegroom'. She gave him a lot of advice. Her maturity and life experiences helped her to be his mentor and he thanked her for her advice. Nandagopal told her she was the sole person responsible for preparing him for his upcoming marriage and family life - given that he steadfastly opposed marriage and shunned women like a plague. Girija responded with an enigmatic look and chuckled to herself.

During the last two months they lived together, Girija worked in a nearby nursery school as a temp - an

untrained teacher. She also enrolled in some advanced tailoring classes in the evenings since she had already taken a basic course in tailoring.

Up until his marriage date was finalized, Girija stayed with Nandagopal. Then she gave him a bit of her mind: "Please don't mistake me. You have only one more month for your wedding. You must go back to your co-op. Eat well and take care of yourself. I will be pleased if you visit me, after your marriage, as a friend."

Now Nandagopal's heart festered to recall how Girija's eyes turned moist after those parting words. He locked up the bicycle in front of her house and raised his eyes toward the stairs. He noticed the light glowing in the room upstairs. He scratched a matchstick and read the time from his watch. It was midnight.

He began climbing the steps briskly as his heartbeat quickened at the surprise that was awaiting Girija with his sudden appearance after all these days.

Hearing footsteps of someone coming up and a head suddenly appearing at the top of the stairs. Girija, who was seated on a stool near the sewing machine and working with a needle arose from her seat and asked in an intimidating voice: "Who is there?"

Even before Nandagopal could reveal his identity she seemed overwhelmed with joy and fondly greeted him. She restrained herself from an impulse to embrace him, and working her agile fingers and knuckles, exclaimed: "What a surprise to see you at this hour! Come in, please do sit down." She spread out a mat for him on the floor.

She was a little bewildered by his response; "I suddenly wanted to see you, so I am here!" Still, she managed to conceal her real feelings. "Have some water," she said as she offered him a glass.

It took a while for both to control their emotions at this sudden encounter. Nandagopal inquired about the new sewing machine. Girija told him she had successfully completed the tailoring course, and that she recently bought the sewing machine in installments and was now making good money. She proudly displayed a gold necklace she had recently bought for herself, saying, "I have not given up my temp job in the nursery school." His heart warmed up to her words, and he was very pleased.

"Now, how are you doing? How is your wife?" Her enthusiastic questions drew only a sad look from him - followed by a long sigh.

Girija began picking up from a huge pile of clothes lying next to the sewing machine - sorting them into various categories - even as she continued to keep Nandagopal engaged in conversation. She knew right away that he had been distraught by some sad event; in fact that was the reason why she first served him the happy news. She did not do this as an afterthought. It came to her quite naturally. Now, when she could absorb his dark mood in her mind, she too shared his sadness.

Nandagopal lit a cigarette and inhaled the smoke deep into his lungs. He stared at the ceiling as he exhaled the smoke. He tried to dust off the cigarette ash carefully through his fingers and expressed his frustration without directly looking at Girija:

“I am now paying the price for the crimes I committed against you. To come to think about it, I could have even married you! What can I do now?” Girija arose from her seat, came over and sat next to him.

He went on and on: he told her how Vatsala never stopped crying in his presence all these days - from the first time she left her parents after her marriage to this day; how she was not interested in living with him, and that she was always insulting him. Why, even today he was humiliated in her presence when he hit his head against the cot. As he continued his litany of complaints against his wife, he was becoming sadder and sadder.

Girija listened to him silently. She picked up an oil case next to the sewing machine and tried to gently pump its contents to soothe her foot injury - a boil that had erupted between the toe and the next finger.

“Your wife is a simple girl. She doesn’t know what she’s doing!” Bewildered by what Girija said, he raised his head and stared at her.

“Do you really think she is your equal because she got married to you? Didn’t you tell me she was her parents’ favorite? Now, consider this: how would she feel if she had to give up all the company she ever had to begin a new life with you - alone - in another town? So you have to understand her psychology and change your behavior.”

She continued:

“Now, you are ‘experienced’, do you know what I mean? When it comes to girls, some of them may think men are a kind of strange breed! They might fear to approach men; they might even feel disgust toward men! Now, why didn’t

I feel that way toward you? Because, I am a 'trained woman'! Now, tell me, who in this world wants a woman to be 'trained' to qualify as a wife? You were saying a few minutes ago that you could have married me, then how come you never thought of such a thing before? The only reason is I am already a 'trained woman'! So remember this, you are much more experienced than your wife. She is just a child! You must treat her the same way I have treated you. Then you will find out that things get better, day after day." Nandagopal started wondering how Girija could explain things in such simple terms. He felt that his idea that he should visit her and have a conversation with her had been proven right . . .

Suddenly Girija stopped talking and keenly began oiling her foot injury.

"What are you doing?" he asked and bent down closer to look at her injury.

"Last week I bought a new pair of shoes and they keep pinching. Because I keep moving my legs when I work this machine, my injury doesn't heal quickly." She now held her face close to Nandagopal, and smiled. "Have you noticed something? Even though a new shoe pinches, do you think anyone would prefer an old pair of shoes?"

She was still smiling as she spoke those words. He tightened his grip on her hands and broke down.

NOTE:

Original title, "*Pudiya Cheruppu Kadikkum*," published in 1971



Under Siege

For nearly two hours, Vasu stayed in his room upstairs awaiting the arrival of Miss _____. Growing impatient, his face reddening, he sauntered to the cupboard and opened the liquor cabinet.

Like a connoisseur surveying a rare art display he examined the stack of beautiful wineglasses and a bottle of scotch in the cupboard.

Those glass pieces were so elegant and eye-catching as to tempt even teetotalers into helping themselves with a sip.

“Rightly or wrongly,” Vasu muttered to himself under breath, “What the society condemns as immoral ends up as the most beautiful.” He quickly swallowed the hard liquor from the glass in his hand, filled it with some more and walked to the veranda.

The large veranda festooned with plastic, Venetian blinds as well as his air-conditioned room displayed a

foreigner's - albeit a Western - flavor. In a way, one might say, Vasu's tastes too reflected a Western touch. He walked to the gramophone at the corner of the room, set his wineglass on its top, and played a record.

Instantly, the song '*Number fifty-four, the House of Bamboo*' could be heard and Vasu began twisting his body in tune with that song. Jabbing and twisting his fingers in the air he began pacing up and down the veranda.

Not until the song was finished did he notice the chessboard on the teapoy wedged between the two large sofas in the veranda. He glanced through the window - first outdoors and then at the wall clock in the hall. Again he looked at the chessboard he had set up at two in the afternoon. "Where is this Miss," he wondered, "the one who promised to show up at three?"

Vasu had met her yesterday in a party where she got his attention and was even attracted to him. What was her name? He could not recall.

Names never meant much to him, neither personal connections. Vasu followed where his feelings took him and he worshipped beauty. He celebrated physical beauty and was willing to go to any lengths to defend his attitude as a worthy goal. Everything he did in his personal life - the way he carried himself, his speech, clothes and manners reinforced that goal - to radiate a sense of beauty. And that has served him very well in the last thirty-five years. He was always keen on offering his friends and close associates what they desired most, and he would accomplish that without any hassle; invariably what he sought was always in his possession or within his reach.

That was what happened yesterday when he casually asked her, "What is your hobby?" Vasu was pleased when she replied she was a chess champion. He too played chess, so he teased her with a challenge - bordering on arrogance: "Do you think you can beat me in a game of chess?" She accepted his challenge and answered, "I will try my best."

She also relished his rejoinder - expressed as a kind of philosophical statement: "Winning and losing are the natural consequences in any game."

As far as Vasu was concerned, the very fact that she accepted his invitation was a kind of victory for him. His main concern centered on her visit only - not on who would emerge as the winner in a game between them. This is a game between a man and a woman, he reminded himself, and today's winner could be tomorrow's loser, and vice versa.

Now only one thing frustrated him. His invitation had been accepted but the guest was nowhere to be seen.

He gulped the liquor from the glass. The clock struck five-thirty.

She had promised to come at three, now it was already five-thirty and she had not even bothered to inform him by a simple phone call the reason for her delay. Vasu grew angry that he had been acting like a fool wasting his time waiting for her. He felt resentful and angrily kicked the teapoy.

The black and white chess pieces rolled down the teapoy - scattering on the linoleum carpet.

Trying to control himself, Vasu threw himself on one of the sofas and closed his eyes.

In the silent moments that followed, the soft music from a *veena* downstairs entered his ears and stirred him.

He now casually remembered his wife Sita who has been living with him in the same house - downstairs - and trying to get his attention not just for the last two hours, but for the last two years.

Two years ago when Vasu was leading a life at his own whim and fancy with no restraint or control, his parents decided to confine him to a family life and found a wife for him.

They were happy he accepted their suggestion with no reservation. His immediate consent more than pleased them.

'Other than leading an independent life can anybody point out a single reason why I must be called a bad guy?' That was the question Vasu posed and no one could adequately answer him.

Scorning his ancestral property, Vasu attained success and prosperity through his own cleverness and business acumen. As an independent contractor he amassed a lot of wealth; still, he left a void in his father's heart. His father wished the son led a more orderly and disciplined life.

Vasu's parents had hoped marriage would change him. And when they found out he continued the same lifestyle after his marriage, they concluded his wife should take the blame. For some reason his wife remains indifferent

to his activities - just like he is indifferent to hers - and is leading a lonely life.

Some lonely life!

A couple united in mind and spirit but living apart from one another can certainly sustain their marital life. However, things are not the same when a couple finds their bodies in union while their minds and spirits have drifted apart. That's a lonely life too, no question about it.

That's how life went on in this household, where Sita followed the example of a traditional Hindu wife. She was always at her husband's beck and call, ready to serve his needs at an earshot; she wished and did exactly what her husband wished and did. Still, her eyes always displayed an empty look - just like the life she endured.

Many a day, when Vasu's friends - men and women - partying late into the night brought down the house in some noisy celebration bordering on an orgy, their old cook would grow impatient and throw up her hands in despair, asking, "How can this go on in a decent family?" But Sita would remain calm and unperturbed - like a recluse watching the scene from afar. Other than smiling she would never utter even one word supporting the old cook.

Vasu, who had a simplistic view of Sita, saw only a naïve human being behind that name. He could discern neither the deeper, larger-than-life person nor the multiple dimensions of the woman who was married to him. There was a particular reason why he now thought of her.

This morning he had asked Sita to come upstairs. She had come to collect his dirty clothes for the laundry. Only

now did Vasu recall that the visiting card the woman in the party gave him the previous night was left in his coat pocket. It came back to him in a flash because now he found himself in the same state he was when he tucked away that card in his coat pocket.

He pushed the button of a nearby calling bell; instantly, the *veena* downstairs stopped playing.

He used the calling bell to draw Sita's attention because he made up his mind never to go downstairs looking for her, on any account. That's because whatever his faults, Vasu was enough of a gentleman to respect others' sentiments. One day, not too long ago, he walked unannounced into his wife's living quarters downstairs with footwear and a cigarette in one hand. Sita, a symbol of Indian womanhood, was outraged and yelled at him: "This is a *puja room* - a place of worship!" Vasu instantly regretted his intrusion and begged forgiveness. Muttering "I am sorry!" he hastily retreated and vowed never again to set foot in those premises. Even if he did he wouldn't have liked those surroundings, including the *Tulasi Mandapam*, *puja room*, and the stripes of red paint alternating with white on the ground paved with cow dung on festive occasions.

After all, modern technology had given Vasu an opportunity to call his wife from anywhere he happened to be. What more did he need?

Sita came up - climbing the steps - and faced him.

She must have sensed his state of mind from the tension that hung in the air. But she betrayed no emotion.

She was smiling and Vasu, his eyes shot with blood red, returned her smile.

“Remember, I always told you to check the pockets before you send out the clothes for the laundry?”

“Yes, you have told me.”

“Did you check the pockets - this morning?”

“I did. I found this one, and kept it under my care. I wanted to give it to you when you asked for it.” He took the visiting card from her, glanced at it, raised his head and said, “Thank you.” She returned his smile and turned around to leave.

“Sita!” Suddenly he thought of something and addressed her.

She stopped and looked at him.

“Come here,” he said and she came up to him. “I know you have studied up to tenth. Can you read this?” He extended the visiting card to her.

“Miss Suguna - Lecturer in English!” After reading the name of a women’s college, Sita read out a telephone number from the card.

Vasu keenly observed to see if her face registered any change after she read the card. She remained calm and was smiling, and he asked himself: “How can she be like this?”

Again he keenly looked into her eyes. Did he grasp the latent sadness in those eyes? He wondered why he never deeply cared for her; did she care for him? He found comfort in a frank, albeit brutal thought; like an outsider,

a third party, he concluded she was legally married to him and it didn't really matter to him if she ever cared for him.

He was bored and he needed company. Now he found company in her presence, so he invited her to join him.

She sat on the other sofa opposite to him. As her foot touched one of the chess pieces on the carpet she picked up and looked at it.

"Do you know anything about it?" he asked her as if questioning a child.

"This is a chess piece."

"Do you know what it is called?"

"White Bishop."

"Do you know how to play chess?"

"Sort of . . ."

"Let us see, why don't you set up the board?" Vasu lit a cigarette.

He locked his eyes on her as she bent down to collect all the pieces. A few seconds elapsed before he concluded he was enjoying her beauty.

He looked at the teapoy to examine if the chessboard was set up properly - with the white and black pieces on its squares. Then he asked her, "What's yours, white or black?"

"Black," she replied and was awaiting his move.

When he made a move, she responded with hers. The game proceeded with four more moves.

“Have you read any books on how to play chess?” he asked.

“Not really. I learnt the moves from watching others play the game, now and then.”

The telephone rang. Vasu, deeply immersed in the game, paid no attention until three rings. Then he asked Sita to attend to the call. She walked up to the phone and picked up the receiver.

“Hello, this is Mr. Vasu’s residence. I am his wife speaking . . . Okay, I will inform him.” Sita put down the receiver, returned to her sofa and gave Vasu the message with no change of expression on her face.

“That was Miss. Suguna. Says you both met at some party. She had promised to visit you at three this afternoon. She had to attend to some urgent work. Says she is leaving now - in a few minutes.” Sita sat on the sofa to continue the game.

As she moved her piece, Vasu continued to stare at her.

“Your move now,” Sita reminded him. Vasu paid no attention to her words, and asked her, “What do you think of me?”

“What do you mean? You are married to me, so I think you are my husband.”

Vasu scratched his head and bowed his head down. “Are you mad at me?”

“No.”

“Sorry for me?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Why should I?”

She answered all his questions. But when she ended up asking him a question, he couldn't come up with a reply.

Vasu was eager to know what Sita thought of him, and her reply that she had nothing to say didn't sit well with him. Only now he realized she had been bottling up all her resentment and secretly building up her hatred for him. He expected her to ask him in return, “What do you think of me?” When he realized that she didn't even care to ask him such a question, he was overcome by a feeling of emptiness - which he could neither accept nor reject. That feeling laid a siege - trapping him in a war zone.

‘She comes to me because I asked her to. She sits on the sofa when I offer her a seat. She obeys all my commands, but she has no complaints, says nothing to me. Now, I have done nothing for her sake. She is my subject, but she has neither love nor hatred for me. One displays love and anger toward another only when there is a sense of attachment in their relationship. Sita lives with me under the same roof - with a sense of detachment in life.’

“Do you think I shouldn't care for you - just like you don't care for me? Is that convenient for you? By showing indifference toward me - are you not suggesting - you must be left to your own will?” Vasu uttered these words as if in a drunken state - to deliberately hurt Sita.

Sita's eyes sank, but she didn't cry. "This is fate, it's the woman who always gets the blame," she muttered to herself, and continued, "I am a Hindu wife. No person can corrupt another person. You can't help someone who wants to be corrupted."

Her words took him aback. He felt an urge to go and help himself with another glass of wine. Then he decided against it, and resumed his seat.

"Okay, let us play," he said, after a long, deep sigh.

"It's now your move," she calmly told him.

"I must win her - at least in this game," he told himself and moved the pieces.

As the game proceeded Sita lost her strong pieces one after another. The white pieces were moving forward and taking her pieces off the board - in quick succession.

Then suddenly Sita moved one of her pieces and concluded the game, saying, "Check and mate."

Vasu keenly examined the board to see if he could move any of his pieces to free his king. He noticed all his pieces were under siege. It was true that all the white pieces had advanced on the chessboard; it was also quite plain that Sita had lost all her strong pieces. Still, the stark truth remained that his king was trapped in a siege.

"Sita, well done!" he tapped her shoulders and congratulated her.

She remained calm and smiled.

Downstairs, the door bell sounded.

“Sita - that must be her,” Vasu said as panic now seized him. “Tell her I am not home!” Sita weighed in his lie with a bitter smile and went down the stairs.

“Send her away and then come back,” he ordered Sita and began setting up the chessboard for the next game.

After a while his body was thrilled to hear the footsteps coming up the stairs. His body now seemed overcome by a new sensation - something that had eluded him all these days. Still, the permanent emptiness in Sita’s eyes remained unchanged.

He invited her to play, and she indulged him.

NOTE:

Original title: “*Muttrugai*,” published in 1965



Every Hero Deserves a Heroine

For the last fifteen minutes Seetharaman has been actively working on his hairdo - pressing hard the back of a comb deep into the smooth, luxuriant locks to shape them into wavy curls.

The aroma from the beauty aids - hair oil, snow, face powder and perfumes - blending with one another, hung in the air.

A paraphernalia of his toilet aids covered the major portion of a nearby table.

At their center lay a razor, not yet cleaned, with soapy lather. While he spent nearly half-an-hour with his make - up, Seetharaman had neither the time nor patience to clean up the razor after its use. It doesn't matter, anyway; after all, there is always Mathu ready in the wings to take care of those small matters.

Mathuram is really very proud - deep in her heart - of her husband . . .

Early in the morning when she stands next to his bed to wake him up - with a cup of coffee in her hand - she seems overcome by a supreme sense of pride: how he enjoys sleeping those long hours!

After finishing her domestic chores, when she gets to washing her husband's wrinkle-free clothes - a second time - under a water tap in the back yard, she would occasionally ferret out a cigarette pack from a shirt pocket. Instantly, she would conjure the image of her absent husband and her face would glow with delight. That feeling - again - is a different kind of pride!

Everyday, when her husband leaves for work she would hand over to him a new handkerchief even as she would ask him - gently - what he did with the one she gave him the previous day. Seetharaman would smile sheepishly, and Mathuram would relish that scene too.

Why is she able to go through life displaying absolutely no boredom or irritation and only a sense of pride and continued devotion to her husband even as she dismisses - rather casually - the irresponsible behavior of a father of two? What is the secret behind her attitude?

What is known to two souls can never remain a secret! So, Mathuram is the only soul who is privy to that mystery. One might wonder if her husband shares that knowledge. But then if Seetharama had any inkling or knowledge about it, would he be acting like someone who is a witness to his wife's actions from close quarters, enjoys all the privileges from a dutiful wife ready to serve him at an ear shot and yet goes through life at his own whim and fancy?

But Mathuram would never characterize his behavior as indifference. He was always like that, she tells herself. His speech, manners and style always seemed to convey a sense of apathy and coldness. She understands his temperament only too well.

“Seetharaman is a lucky fellow!” That is how his friends at work spoke of him. But their opinion was not based on what they knew about his wife.

At work, they fondly called him, ‘Hero Seetharaman.’ He regularly acts in the plays staged by his office recreation club. He always plays the male lead - the hero. He believes he deserves nothing less and others seem to agree.

Seetharaman is said to be so handsome, lucky and smart it is generally agreed that one day he would be definitely acting as a hero in the movies too!

At work Seetharaman’s attitude betrays a feeling that his position as a clerk lends an aura to his office. That’s how he conducts himself at work and gets away with no work, idle chatter, gossip, and jokes. The other clerks - always busy, hard working and duty-conscious - seem to love his company - and they listen to his parleys with their mouths wide open.

A few junior clerks at work - bachelors with no family commitments - even envied Seetharaman - a father of two and nearly forty years old - and his lifestyle. They festered inside that they couldn’t emulate Seetharaman - the way he dressed, enjoyed the movies or lavished money on beauty aids.

Did they ever know the real reason for his carefree attitude - that he was a father of two children and happened to be married to a woman like Mathuram?

There was no particular reason why they should, and it wouldn't matter, anyway. As far as Mathuram was concerned, she would consider it no big deal if Seetharaman professed ignorance about it. But what about Seetharaman himself? Should he not be at least aware of his own conduct - given his role as the head of a family and a need to raise his level of consciousness?

As far as Hero Seetharaman is concerned, he pays no attention to his professional life, family or wife. He's after only one goal - a hero's role in a movie! He is eagerly looking forward to that day! He has heard of quite a few young men getting a lucky break in the movies . . .

Whenever his mind was engaged in anything other than his upcoming movie role, Seetharaman's eyes displayed total indifference . . .

Kamala, a typist in his office and one of his co-workers found those eyes enchanting and fell in love with his fame and talent. She also acts as the female lead opposite to Seetharaman in the plays staged by their office recreation club.

Mathuram is totally fascinated, as she looks transfixed by her husband keenly scrutinizing himself in the mirror. She reacted the same way the other day when she watched her hero husband appear on stage with the heroine Kamala in one of those office plays.

As he now retraced a few steps from the mirror and carefully surveyed his reflection - the minor chain dangling from the neck, the *dhoti* flowing down his calves covering his slippers - Seetharaman cast a glance sideways at Mathuram who stood in the room corner - her face dark and weary, her wet hands wiping off with the free end of her *sari*.

Aware he was watching her, Mathuram let out a loud laughter. Then she neared him and spoke in a gentle, comforting voice: "Please listen to me. I have arranged a maidservant to deliver you lunch from home. Your health is getting worse day after day because you adamantly refuse to have lunch at home. Everyday you have your breakfast at home and then end up in some goddamn hotel or restaurant for lunch . . ." Seetharaman, seemingly paying no attention to her words, turned around, extended both his hands toward his wife, rested them on her shoulders and closely examined her face. That look betrayed a new, deeper thought now going through his mind.

" . . . Why are you staring at me like that?" Mathuram felt a little shy and bowed her head down.

"Hmm, you were saying something; I lost you," he apologized to her. He couldn't bring himself to reveal what was in his mind, so it was just a casual remark - a ritual.

"What's the big idea?" she asked with a smile. "Are you getting ready for some new office play or something?" As he shook his head to signal his denials she relished the gentle play of his curly locks on the forehead, and explained what was on her mind.

“I have arranged a servant maid who will be delivering your lunch at work. And that starts from tomorrow - do you like my plan?” She certainly didn’t expect he would appreciate her move and compliment her. He too reacted rather casually - casting her announcement aside - saying, “You are talking about my lunch? That’s fine, you may do as you please,” and again seemed hesitant to come out with something. He continued to rest his hands on her shoulders and whispered to her, “Mathuram . . .” in a soft voice.

“What is it you want?” she asked him in a voice full of warmth and affection. He responded with a smile.

Here was somebody who seemed always eager to flee from her and escape to work humming a favorite tune barely paying any serious attention to his wife. Mathuram was a little confused by his strange behavior this morning.

Seetharaman seemed lost in some thought and silently opened his handbag. He remembered he forgot to hand over to his wife the previous day - his payday - money for the household expenses. He now offered her cash and she counted the bills. They amounted to fifty rupees.

She stared at him as if asking, “Is this what is bothering you?” He smiled again. Satisfied, she too responded with a smile.

As far as she was concerned, the subject was closed.

How could she expect to run a family solely depending on the income from her husband?

Mathuram's mother bequeathed her house to her daughter when she breathed her last. Mathuram had retained a part of the house for her own use and rented the rest to three tenants. She also bought two cows and regularly supplied milk to those tenants. She didn't consider it a big burden to run a family with two children and an imprudent husband. While she certainly took all this in stride she would occasionally ponder: "How does my husband spend his salary of one hundred and fifty rupees?" But she would smile and remind herself, "Men have to take care of so many expenses - why bother?" Still, she felt she would be failing in her duty if she didn't remind Seetharaman of certain runaway expenses.

"That's why I have come up with this idea. We are wasting our money and your health is also getting spoiled. Ever since you started having your lunch in some hotel or restaurant, your body has been reduced to half. So I am going to ask this maid to deliver your lunch from home." As he heard her repeat the same thing over and over, Seetharaman grew impatient and screamed on top of his voice.

"Yes, yes, I heard you! I will eat whatever you may send from home! I promise I won't be going to hotels anymore! Are you happy?" He was getting ready to leave for work.

Mathuram was upset that her husband misunderstood her intention. Saddened and overcome by guilt that she got him mad just when he was about to leave for work, she stood there in the hall, shaken a little and in silence.

But Seetharaman who seemed angry and stormed out of the room did something unusual; to her utter surprise,

he stopped at the door exit. Instantly, he became quiet and glanced back at her.

Mathuram continued to stand with her head bowed down.

He slowly approached her, gripped her shoulder and gently shook it, asking, "Are you sad?"

"Why should I feel sad?" she replied, a forced smile now playing on those moist eyes. She realized her husband was trying to negotiate a kind of deal with her - and what was now going on was just a prelude. "Why is he playing this game with me?" she asked herself and stared at the rupee bills in her hand.

"Mathu, Mathu, please come inside, I want to discuss a matter with you." With mock enthusiasm, he moved his hand resting on her shoulder to draw her close to his embrace, and slowly led her to the bedroom. The sheer intensity and eagerness that he displayed when he coaxed her and entered the bedroom slowly abated as he suddenly plunged into deep thought and sat on the bed.

"Please tell me, what is it?" Mathuram stood before him resting both her hands on her waist. She held the rupee notes in one of her hands. She thought he was asking for them and she was ready to hand over them once he said so.

"It is nothing," he began, and continued: "I have been seriously thinking about this matter, and I think it will be in your best interest too." Sensing that he was still unable to bring himself to reveal what was on his mind, Mathuram nudged closer and sat next to him.

“Why don’t you speak out?” she asked and fondly turned his chin toward her. Her eyes conveyed a hopeful message: Ask me anything, and you will have it. As Seetharaman continued his silent posture, she made a little fuss by moving away from him saying, “Okay, I have got to go - there is lot of work to do.”

“Don’t go,” he pleaded with her and warmly drew her into his embrace. Overcome by emotion, he bowed down his head closer to her face. “Mathu, do you remember? You used to say my joy is your joy too, do you still feel that way?” His breath was scorching her cheeks.

“How does it matter now?” Mathuram asked. “You are about to leave for work, and you have messed up your clothes.” She tried to disengage herself from his grip.

Meanwhile her mind raced ahead to guess what might be lurking behind her husband’s strange behavior. ‘Maybe he has spent his entire salary and now wants to get back the fifty rupees he had just given me for household expenses. What if I don’t have these fifty rupees? It’s no big deal - I can still manage things as usual - take one problem after another - as I always do! I feel sorry for his entreaties and embarrassment. I really wonder how he spends all his salary!’ Even as she was caught up in all these thoughts, she felt it was unbecoming of her - she certainly had no right - to question a male, especially her husband, to account for his expenses. Her inborn virtue pricked her conscience. Sad, she once again looked at him, and smiled.

Seetharaman was softly whispering in her ears . . .

“You must help me,” he began. “I mean - this is not for me, I feel a little hesitant to ask this favor from you. Do you remember Kamala, the typist in our office?” He suddenly felt his voice choke up.

“You mean, your heroine Kamala?” Mathuram teased him.

‘Hmm, how funny! My husband never stops spending everything he earns; maybe he is also in the habit of lending money to others! Why is he so vain and proud?’ Mathuram thought to herself. Still, she expected her husband to respond to her remark about that ‘heroine Kamala.’

She recalled an event from the past: one night when they returned home after attending an office play in which Seetharaman and Kamala had lead roles, Seetharaman inquired her, “What do you think of our heroine?”

Mathuram feigned anger and shot back: “What a question! You are asking me about *our* heroine?” and averted her face away from him.

“Mathu, she was the heroine in the play only. In my life, you are the heroine. Don’t you agree?” At the time that was how Seetharaman comforted her. Mathuram now expected the same response from her husband.

But now Seetharaman remained silent with his head bowed down, buried in some deep thought. Then he began, “Yes, it is her. She is coming here this afternoon, and I want you to help her with your generosity. Will you do it - for my sake? She is depending on you, you only. She would be grateful to you and follow your advice and

act in deference to your wishes. She is a nice person and she has nobody else to help her.” He went on and on and Mathuram disliked his open, affectionate, solicitude for Kamala. She even felt a little irritated at his exhortation.

“Okay, let her come,” she replied and tried to change the subject. “Are you not late for work?”

“I will see you later,” Seetharaman answered her and left for work as if he was reluctant to part her company.

Mathuram’s mind was in turmoil. What is going on, she asked herself. She remembered the innocent, childlike face of that heroine Kamala. She recalled her earlier suspicions about Kamala and instantly blamed herself: “How can I be so mean - imagining all kinds of negative things about another woman?”

That was her nature. Whenever a problem confronted her - whether it had to do with her husband, the family or the children - Mathuram knew how to rationalize the situation and seek a comfort level.

Otherwise, she would just get bogged down with the various stray thoughts now crossing her mind . . .

In an hour or so, her daughters - two hungry souls - would be home from school;

The clothes - her husband’s and the children’s - lay soaked in a bucketful of soap water and she must wash and dry them;

She must check into the kitchen and see if the rice is cooked properly;

The cows must be fed on time . . .

“I have so many things to do,” she thought. She felt overwhelmed by the workload but instantly got ready to plunge into a busy schedule. She dismissed everything from her mind, picked up Seetharaman’s dirty razor from his room and walked to the bathroom.

The only time when Mathuram can slow down a bit and rest is around two in the afternoon. She would initially plan to rest for an hour in the main hall - on the floor, with the free end of her sari spread on the floor - enjoying the cool breeze through the doorway leading to the rear end of the house. But she would always wake up earlier than planned, wash her face and get ready with the hairdo. If she missed this opportunity she would never be able to take care of her hair. Whatever maybe her busy schedule at home, she was determined to look nice and decent - it lent a touch of grace to her and her home. Around three in the afternoon she would be done with her hairdo.

Does it mean she is ready to greet her husband home from work some three hours ahead of his arrival? No - the flower vendor would promptly show up at four. And she has two girls at home. She is less than honest when she tells herself that she buys the flowers only for her two daughters.

As the evening drew closer she would be pacing briskly between the kitchen and the front of the house. When Seetharaman left for work in the mornings he was accustomed to see his wife dressed as if in rags, her face and hands dirty, the hair disheveled. Why not spring a

pleasant surprise when he returned home in the evening and cast a sideway glance at her?

Quite often, he would simply ignore her and she would dismiss his attitude as of no consequence. Occasionally, he would let out a loud laughter on noticing her makeup. Mathuram would never catch the subtle message behind his gesture - that he was actually mocking her.

Today around three in the afternoon she sat in the front hall with a mirror set up against the wall and began combing her hair. As usual, when she noticed a gray patch up in the front, she parted the locks and studied her face in the mirror. Once she applied oil, that gray hair simply vanished in no time!

It was while she was applying oil to the hair that Kamala showed up. Seized by panic that Kamala might notice her gray patch Mathuram suddenly stopped working on her hairdo, ran to her bedroom, examined her face in a mirror, and continued combing the hair. Then she asked herself: "What if she notices my gray hair? Why should I feel she must not notice it?"

"Is it because of my concern that Kamala who appears on the stage with Hero Seetharaman would be disappointed to learn that in real life he was living with someone who could be hardly called a heroine or someone deserving his stature?"

Kamala entered the house.

"Please come in," Mathuram greeted her. "The last time we had met was during your office play. Why don't you

visit us more often? Please sit down, I will be back soon.” She briskly combed her hair three times before she reemerged with a warm smile and escorted the visitor to the main hall.

“Why do you keep standing?” Mathuram directed her to a double - sofa in the main hall; she herself occupied another one. That was how she usually entertained strangers who visited her home.

Kamala, who sat on the double-sofa, looked around and inquired, “Where are the kids?”

“They are not yet back from school!”

“I see, the younger one goes to school too?”

“Yes, I admitted her a few days ago. She is kind of moody. One day she is eager to go to school, another day she would just rather stay home.” Mathuram gently laughed, and Kamala responded with a smile. A little confused how to continue the conversation, Mathuram spoke about her second daughter. “She becomes very mischievous if she stays at home. The elder one is docile and obedient; the younger is very different. She hates to wear any clothes, none at all. As soon as she returns from school she takes off her gown and underwear and walks around the house naked. I have done everything to change her and even beat her up a couple of times - but nothing seems to work . . . ” She explained her predicament with a smile.

“Well, she is just a child!” Kamala said in a comforting tone and laid out on the sofa a large biscuit tin and two large chocolate bars.

‘She is here to ask for money - why should she bring all this stuff?’ Mathuram thought.

‘When you pay someone a visit for the first time, how can you afford to go with empty hands?’ As her wont, Mathuram could understand Kamala’s action. Still, she managed to say, “Why do you have to do this? It is a waste of money.”

“Sister, you are talking as if I am a stranger,” Kamala said with a touch of intimacy in her voice and looked at Mathuram.

Mathuram warmly acknowledged her smile and keenly examined the visitor’s make-up, clothes and hairdo - like a goldsmith weighing in the jewelry for its pristine quality. In between she managed to sneak into the kitchen to start preparing coffee for the visitor.

Because Kamala seemed hesitant to broach the reason for her visit, Mathuram initiated the conversation, saying, “My husband had mentioned about your visit before he left for work.” Kamala’s face suddenly registered a change and she asked, “What did your husband actually tell you?”

“Nothing in particular, I would say. He said that you would be visiting us today. He told me you have nobody else to support you. I wanted to ask him a few more details, but there was no time. Now, tell me, where are you currently staying? Where is your hometown? Even if your parents are not alive, I do hope you have some other relatives. Am I right?” Mathuram quickly piled up her questions, one after the other.

Kamala offered no immediate answer. For a moment she sat there with her head bowed down. That head gradually descended further down while the veins from her neck seemed ready to burst open and the ear lobes turned red . . .

When she raised her head and looked ahead Mathuram was shocked to see Kamala's red, tearful, eyes.

Concerned that her chance remarks had offended the visitor, Mathuram asked her in a comforting tone, "Why are you sad?" and approached her.

"I have come to you because I consider you my sister," Kamala said in a voice choked with emotion. She bit her lip and words seemed to fail her.

"I lost my parents at a very young age and suffered a lot at my uncle's house," Kamala began, and continued. "I struggled hard to finish my education and finally escaped from that hell. Now I live in a hostel - but how long can I go through this life of an orphan with no friends or company?" Kamala ventured the question - her nose reddening and quivering as she asked it. Mathuram understood her agony.

"Why can't you get married and settle down? What is your problem, any way? If you were someone like me - with no formal education - I would surely understand your situation. This should cause you no worry." Mathuram offered her encouragement.

Kamala sighed deeply.

"That would happen only if I have relatives or concerned elders, and I have no such support. Because I

am fully aware of my situation, during the last twenty-six years I had made up my mind to live as a single woman. The only person I know, who cares for me and is willing to rescue me is my office friend Mr. Seetharaman." As she concluded, Kamala and Mathuram keenly exchanged glances.

Mathuram was suddenly seized with an outrageous thought. It was such a wild, perverse idea, yet it caused no panic in her, she seemed inured to it, and it allowed her to probe deep into Kamala's mind. Kamala too seemed taken aback wondering if Mathuram had a premonition of what she wanted from her, and she stared back at her.

'What if she refuses to grant my wish? Will she also condemn me in the harshest language and drive me out of her house? What if she humiliates me by inviting all the neighbors to render justice to her cause?' As these concerns, one after another, gathered momentum, Kamala began sobbing incessantly and buried her face in Mathuram's arms.

Now, Mathuram couldn't bring herself to comfort Kamala with any words or gestures. She stood there passive and inert - like a statue - and riveted her eyes on Kamala who approached her and buried her face in Mathuram's arms.

Still crying, Kamala tightened her grip on Mathuram's hands and clearly spoke her mind: "Sister, I want to share my life with you . . ." All this time tears remained her armor, and now she unleashed her sword and plunged it deep into Mathuram's heart.

“You must take pity on this orphan and show the way. My very reputation is in your hands. Please forgive my betrayal and grant me refuge. Please understand that your child and the baby now growing in my womb are the same !”

The sword was retrieved and once again plunged deeper into the heart. Mathuram gathered all the strength she could muster, and closed her eyes as if resigned to the new challenge facing her.

“I will never forget this help till I breathe my last,” Kamala went on. “I mean this honestly - for you as well as our family.” Mathuram calmly interrupted her, and grumbled.

“Kamala, that’s enough. My God, I can’t take it anymore . . .” Like a wounded animal, Mathuram slumped on the sofa and began tossing her head left and right.

She remained passive for nearly half an hour. She never opened her eyes.

Kamala sat there - overwhelmed by a sense of shock and anxiety. She had spoken her mind, made herself clear to Mathuram and all she had to do now was to await Mathuram’s response.

She was caught between fear and sadness as she considered Mathuram’s situation. Contrary to what Kamala had expected, Mathuram didn’t get mad or resentful when Kamala explained to her the reason for her visit. How could Kamala crush the heart of such a noble soul? Her guilty conscience made Kamala’s pent up

emotions grow even more intense and she burst into tears. She continued to weep in silence . . .

After a long silent crying spree she approached Mathuram and fondly addressed her, "Sister . . . Sister . . ."

Mathuram now sat erect with a clear face and a determined look, her eyes reddish like lotus leaves.

"Why are you crying? Be brave," she comforted the visitor and withdrew into her bedroom. She wanted to be left alone. She stared at the bed and her husband's clothes in a nearby stand.

From where she stood, Kamala could see Mathuram pacing up and down the bedroom, her hands folded in the back.

Mathuram stood before the mirror at the same spot where her dear husband used to get dressed. Because she dressed up in a hurry this morning the gray patch in the front was now exposed. Her face too had shrunk. She even seemed obese and looked older than her real age.

"How does my husband look?" she asked herself. "Well, he looks just like he always does . . ." She suddenly cast her glance away at Kamala sitting in the hall.

'She suits him very well. Only I have become an old hag. But how can that be?'

"I am certainly younger than my husband, how could I have grown older than him? Yes, my old image has nothing to do with my growing old. It has to do with my stupidity, ignorance and my ill advised . . ." She started gnashing her teeth . . .

All her life she had forgotten about herself because she was always thinking of her husband. While he spent long hours grooming himself to eternal youth, she was even unaware that she was growing old . . .

Only now did she think of all those events from her past that left a lasting mark on her figure. Still what horrified her now was not that another woman had conspired to steal her husband from her, but that she had been all these years easily deluded into a lie - a fantasy - where she has been literally wasting the precious moments of her life. That bitter truth now jolted her into a new realization.

She sighed deeply. Words seemed to fail her. Still, she managed to speak to herself:

“It was I who carried all the burden of this family, why shouldn't my hair turn gray? Did I ever live like my husband - with no worry or concern? He would be a hero forever if I continue to stand by him and offer him all the support and protection he wants. I never took care of myself - I cared only for him, he was always the object of my concern. And what about him? Was he even thinking of me? What a shameless fraud! And what a cruel exploitation! I just can't imagine the life I lived all these years! My stomach turns! I can't take this any more! I don't want to look at his face again! This nightmare should end!” She grumbled, on and on.

She walked back to the main hall. Casting a sympathetic look at Kamala she sat opposite to her and spoke:

“Kamala, I can’t change your fate. You want to share your life with me; did I ever have a life of my own? This is my fervent plea to you - please take my life - all of it! I have lived with my husband for the last fifteen years, and only today I found out the sum total of that life, as far as I am concerned, is zero! My God, how much I have given and struggled all these years! Forget it! I want you to meet with my husband right away and tell him there is no place for him any longer in this house! If I see his face again, I am sure I will go crazy and holler and end my life! I can suffer his betrayal, but I can’t endure the horror of his mocking me in his triumph! You must also understand that neither my children nor I ever depended on anybody else for our survival. Maybe in these last fifteen years we had some faith in my husband’s goodwill and cooperation, but we had never, never depended upon him for anything; nobody can, and nobody will - he is made that way! Please go back and tell him that he is not welcome in this house. What more can I say? He is already done with one heroine. Don’t you think he will be needing another one?” Mathuram arose from her seat.

Kamala was touched by the clarity in Mathuram’s voice and the steady calmness in those words. She understood Mathuram’s decision was not made on the spur of the moment. Kamala bowed down her head and silently started picking on her fingernails. Mathuram now looked back at Kamala with warmth and affection.

Mathuram recalled Kamala’s recent entreaties - that Mathuram treat her like her own sister and be a guide to her future.

“Kamala, you say you consider me as your own sister. You want me to be your guide. But what advice can I give? At the time when my mother was alive, and when I told her I was determined to marry my future husband, she did her best to dissuade me, but I was in no mood to listen . . .” Mathuram’s eyes turned teary as she recalled her dead mother. She continued, as if talking to herself:

“Maybe my mother had a foresight because she bequeathed her own house to me rather than to her sons. This is the house that has been taking care of my family - I should rather say this house and the two cows. I feel sorry I have misplaced my love and affection - not caring enough for this property and the two cows.”

Suddenly her gentle voice turned harsh and the mood changed into anger as she exploded: “This is my house! I won’t allow any trespassing!”

Kamala was taken aback by her appearance and the intensity in her voice.

Concerned that she would blurt out her deep-seated, personal, marital problems to Kamala if she stayed any longer, Mathuram hastily withdrew into her bedroom.

Kamala stared at the bedroom door. She covered her face with both hands and burst into tears.

Why was she crying? Was she thinking of her own fate?

She was visibly moved by Mathuram’s stoic rejection of her husband when she said, “He is already done with one heroine; the nightmare is over!” Her bosom heaved as she thought to herself: “This is a real woman!”

She reminded herself that Mathuram had no formal education; she was not someone who lived secure with the knowledge that all she needed was to go to some office and sit before a typewriter to guarantee her an income of one hundred and fifty rupees. Touched by Mathuram's boldness and optimism, Kamala realized she herself was no orphan and that she didn't have to beg others for any favors. Mathuram's posture nurtured her self-confidence.

"Should I let my situation deteriorate further?" Kamala asked herself, and Seetharaman's face instantly appeared before her. Only now could she discern the message lurking behind those cold, indifferent eyes . . .

He had a nice, decent, hard working wife who loved and served him well - and how did he actually treat her? When Kamala weighed in his actions - objectively, as an outsider - she felt outraged.

Like venom, intense hatred filled her whole body . . .

Yes, now she could put things in proper perspective. She saw no particular reason why she found Seetharaman attractive. If anything, that could be only construed as weakness on her part. There were so many reasons - she could recall the events from recent months - why she now found him totally repulsive.

Mathuram was right. Now, what were her exact words? 'Fraud.' 'Exploitation.' 'My stomach turns.' When Kamala paused to feel the depth and meaning behind those words, she felt they served her as eye openers.

She sat erect. Her eyes flickered with indifference . . .

“Granted I am facing the problem of an unborn baby, is my situation any worse than what has befallen a mother of two?” she asked herself. “Should that ever happen, would Seetharaman do anything about it? His story with the second heroine must also come to an end.” She made up her mind; she opened her handbag and pulled out a pen and some plain paper. Determined and pressing the lower lip a little hard, she began penning a note to Seetharaman . . .

The time was approaching seven in the evening and Seetharaman was waiting for Kamala in a city park. She had promised to meet him with the good news by six, but she was nowhere to be seen. This, however, didn't worry him a bit. Vain and proud, Seetharaman expected only success in all his endeavors. So even now, he remained optimistic about his current scheme.

As usual, pleased that his selfish plan would be realized soon - he would be blessed with two wives, one to bring in money and the other to serve his needs - he was humming a tune when he reached home at eight. He was in a pleasant mood expecting to be welcomed by two women with smiles on their faces!

But when he reached the front hall, he found neither Kamala nor Mathuram. Only his two daughters could be seen. Uma, the elder was sitting on a sofa reading. Lata, the younger one, stark naked, stood behind the sofa and was teasing her sister by pulling her pigtail.

On a sofa corner was a biscuit packet, its contents strewn all around.

As soon as Seetharaman entered the house, he heard the kitchen door violently shut. He felt as if the slam kicked him right in his heart.

He walked toward the kitchen.

He knocked on the door and called, "Mathu . . ."

From the narrow gap along the hinged door he could see Mathuram in the kitchen with her back to the door. He could hear her distinct voice.

"If you have any manhood left - get out of this house!! This is my house, you are not welcome here!"

"Mathu! Open the door! Let me explain . . ." He pleaded as if he was bursting into tears.

"No, I will not! I don't want to see your face again! My God, I don't want to be called the wife who spat on her husband's face!"

Seetharaman felt as if he had been violently slapped across the face. He started sweating. For the first time in his life he experienced an unfamiliar event unfolding before his eyes.

He got angry too . . .

"What are you saying?" he protested. "What can you do if I refuse?" He kicked the kitchen door hard.

Mathuram exploded into a hysterical laughter as if the glass vessels in the kitchen were being smashed into pieces. She spoke even as her laughter rose in a quick crescendo: "Okay, stay right there. These two children

need only one parent - either a father or a mother. Now you can take care of them!” Seetharaman heard a loud thud - the sudden snap of a rope strung across the kitchen.

He started trembling as if he could visualize everything taking place behind the locked door - like an x-ray film displayed before him. Realizing that every moment of his continued presence in the house would be only tightening the noose around her neck, he screamed on the top of his voice:

“Mathuram, I am leaving! I am leaving, I will be gone . . .” He started banging on the door with both hands even as he shouted at her.

“Get lost!” He felt her intense anger and hatred by the manner Mathuram whipped the rope across the kitchen door.

What actually led him into screaming was not his love for Mathuram strong enough to dissuade her from the suicide plan; Mathuram knew it was her husband’s cowardice - the reality that he would be forced to take care of the children once she is gone - that made him cringe before her. What a despicable human being! Her body reeled with disgust.

Only now, for the first time in her life, she went against her grain. She didn’t rationalize Seetharaman’s action and seek a comfort level. She saw him for what he really was - a man with feet of clay.

Seetharaman hurried to his room and stuffed his clothes in two suitcases and returned to the hall. When he noticed a letter sticking out from the mailbox, he put down the suitcases, retrieved the letter and started reading it.

The two girls in the hall were unaware of what was going on in their surroundings and were apparently enjoying the candies Kamala had brought for them. Uma, the elder girl, took a bite of a large Cadbury chocolate, set it aside and was busy writing something on a slate.

Lata, the younger one, slowly tiptoed toward her sister and unconsciously picked up the same chocolate piece and took a bite of it.

“Why are you stealing my stuff? Daddy, see what she is up to!” Uma protested to her father standing close to her.

Hearing her sister’s complaint, Lata returned the chocolate piece to the original spot and moved away from her. Uma picked up the candy, stared at it a few times and returned it to her sister saying, “I don’t want it! It is a spittle!”

Lata now stared back at the candy in her hand.

She realized Uma refused to eat the candy because it was defiled. Lata stared at it with a touch of jealousy. Then she too cast it away saying, “It is spittle!” Then she spat on the floor and rubbed her mouth with the back of her hand to ward off the effect of tainted candy.

That candy now fell at Seetharaman’s feet. He noticed it.

He crushed the letter in his hand, picked up the suitcases and started walking. Soon he was out of the house and stepped on to the street.

“Uma, come here - Daddy is going on a trip!” Lata ran into the veranda and Uma followed her.

When Seetharaman turned back to look at his children, they, as usual, raised their hands above their heads, and bade him farewell.

Seetharaman's cold, indifferent eyes - a sight to behold and which he always wore as a badge of honor to win popularity and admiration among his friends and others as a hero - now, swelled with tears.

NOTE:

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Privacy is Sacred

1

“Can you hold for a minute, I will get him on the phone . . . May I know who is calling?” As the question came over the phone he gnashed his teeth, and answered, “This is Venu, his son.”

After a while, his father’s voice was heard in the receiver. “Hello, this is Sundaram speaking . . .”

He felt his boldness, anger and resentment suddenly desert him and throw him into utter confusion: his lips quivered, the voice became hazy and clouded, but he managed to speak out: “This is Venu. I need to talk to you, in private.”

“All right . . . I will be home shortly . . .”

“No . . . I don’t want to talk about it at home . . . If you are going to be there for a while, I can come over and see you in ten minutes.”

“Oh, I see . . . you can come over . . .”

“Thanks.”

Venu put the receiver down and wiped the sweating drops off his forehead. He was still feeling tense. He was readying himself for the great task ahead, and went on sermonizing to himself:

“Hmm . . . this is my duty! I owe it to myself to uphold the dignity of this family! Should he not realize that his conduct is so unbecoming that even his own son - even if he is just a boy - has a right to condemn it? This is certainly a shameful affair! I will try to play cool and confront him directly with his own secret; he will probably deny the whole thing and come up with some lame excuse, but it won't wash! I will show the letter - good heavens, it is a love letter! - I filched it from his personal cabinet - he may get mad and accuse me of using duplicate keys for prying into his personal belongings - but I think my crime is nothing compared to what he did; well, it was only after checking on him the day before yesterday when he went to the late night movie with that woman that I made up my mind to get to the bottom of the whole thing, and searched his room . . .”

As Venu dressed in a hurry and got ready to leave, his Mother Ramani Ammal, on her way to the *Ladies Club*, noticed him.

In the past few days her maternal instincts were a little unsettled by changes in Venu's speech and behavior. Now, his demeanor, on the face of it, suddenly alarmed her.

His weak constitution, she thought, may be due to his irregular eating and sleeping habits. He had now grown leaner and darker. Because he had not shaved that

morning, a mild stub of hair could be seen above his lips, on his chin and around the corners of his ears. Something was apparently causing him mental anguish as could be gauged from the tired look in his eyes and the dark circles under the eyes.

“He has grown up into a young man,” she told herself. “And he may have personal problems he would rather keep to himself. To intrude into his private concerns would be anything but civilized.” So she was very discreet in her approach.

“Hi Venu,” she called, and fondly gripped his shoulder. “Where are you going?” Venu recoiled at her very touch.

“I have to take care of a few personal things,” was his curt reply.

“What is wrong with you? Whatever it is - can I be of any help?”

“No thanks.” As Venu tried to go past her, she stopped him.

“Please go into the kitchen,” she almost entreated him. “The old woman - the cook - has prepared some special dish for you. Please help yourself.” Then she looked at her watch; it was getting late for her, so she departed.

Venu, his head bowed down, thought about his mother.

‘She is so naive and innocent! His father certainly had no difficulty cheating on her. Then, there was her appearance: a garish display of makeup that seemed so inappropriate and inelegant at her age, with its thick layers of facial powder, and lipstick; a blouse with almost no

sleeves; her low, kittenish voice as she strained to speak in English.' Venu felt anger and disgust overwhelm him.

He saw in the hall his two brothers and the six-year old sister, who had just then returned from the convent school and were busy removing their shoes and socks. His heart warmed up to them even as he felt a touch of sadness for their plight. "Here is an irresponsible mother and an immoral father set out to destroy the future of these children," he thought. "Can I do anything about it?"

"I have to do something about this, and it is my duty! I am not a small helpless kid any more! I am already twenty-one! I am an adult!"

He suddenly thought of his grandparents who brought him up - away from his parents.

"Thank God, I didn't grow up in this irresponsible atmosphere!"

2

Twenty-five years ago Venu's father Sundaram and mother Ramani had gone to the same college, loved one another, and were united in a love marriage. Because they belonged to different castes, Sundaram had alienated his parents when he took Ramani as his wife.

As a little girl, Ramani Ammal had studied in convent schools and grown up in the European tradition. Her family was literally brought up in that alien culture. It could be even argued that Sundaram was attracted to her because of her very Western manners.

So when Sundaram entered into a marriage opposed by his elders, he totally avoided any contact with his parents for nearly two years. Venu was born two years after his parents married.

Sundaram's parents - his father Ganapatia Pillai and mother Visalam - having missed their son's affection and company, now rushed from their village, traveled by train and visited their grandson in the city. It was Venu who, over the years, slowly eased the family conflicts and served as a bridge to bring his father and grandparents together.

When Venu was six years old, Ganapatia Pillai asked Sundaram that he be allowed to bring up the boy under his care. Ganapatia Pillai decided to accept the boy as one of his own and bring him up in his own household - this was his way of atoning for his 'crime' of losing his only and dearest son to a foreign woman and an alien culture. So Venu moved to the village where he lived with his grandparents and had his education. His own parents' house, for all practical purposes, held no special meaning for him; it was like any one of those many houses that belonged to his other relatives and which he occasionally visited during his vacation.

Ganapatia Pillai belonged to the caste of *Veera Shaivites*. He was also a Tamil scholar, and a practicing *Shaivite*. His wife Visalam epitomized the vanishing breed of Tamil women from the last century. To her even sitting before her husband and chatting with him was nothing short of a sacrilege.

Whenever Venu visited his parents during the holidays he had a strange feeling that they, as well as their lifestyle, were alien to him. As a child he grew up amusing himself and his grandparents by talking about his parents in the city - often making fun of them. Then, as the years went by and he grew older he started comparing his parents with his grandparents. To him, his grandparents were the ideal couple and represented the best in Indian tradition.

Venu loved his parents, but they fell short of his high esteem and respect.

After finishing high school, Venu went to college in the nearby town of Chidambaram. Though his education embraced up-to-date and modern trends, they did not affect his own life.

It was only a few months ago that Venu finished his college education and came to Madras.

At first he was reluctant to part company with his grandparents . . .

“I am not interested in any job whatsoever,” Venu told his grandfather. “It is because the educated folks are leaving for the urban areas that our county is facing all kinds of problems. I would rather stay in the village and take care of our farms.” Venu’s passionate pleas to his grandfather had no effect; only his grandmother seemed to appreciate his sentiments.

The grandfather, resting on an easy chair for a long time with his eyes closed, spoke to his wife: “How come you are siding with the boy? How did you feel when our son was not around us? Won’t Venu’s mother feel the same way? His education was the main reason why he stayed

with us. Now he owes to himself to go and live with his parents.”

“Nobody is complaining over there that I am not visiting them,” Venu said in a mild protest.

“Venu, we have always enjoyed your company, even more than you did ours,” Grandfather tried to reason with him. “I think you should stay with your parents for a while, and then we will see how things shape up. In fact, we are going to miss you; once you take the train and move out of this place. I don’t know how your grandmother and I will be able to go on . . . Just imagine that you are visiting your parents only for the holidays, so it won’t seem long. What do you think?” Grandfather finally persuaded Venu to change his mind and agree to go to Madras to live with his parents.

On earlier occasions, Venu had come and stayed with his parents during the two month long annual school vacation. But now even two days were enough to induce boredom. He seemed totally unhappy.

The rituals of daily life at home disgusted him - his parents at the dining table sitting opposite to one another; his mother rolling in bed till eight in the morning; and his father always at her beck and call to serve her needs.

He thought of his grandmother, now sixty, who got up early in the morning and began her day with a cold-water bath before adorning her face with the traditional turmeric powder and *kumkum*. He marveled at the way she took care of her husband’s personal needs in her advanced age, and as Venu vividly remembered every incident from

his grandparents' life in the village he compared it with that of his own parents.

"My father is certainly a henpecked husband," Venu concluded. "Mother is always busy going to movies or attending ladies club meetings, and Father doesn't even seem to care; neither does Mother care about what Father does. What kind of relationship is this? What kind of life is this, anyway?"

"But then, why should I be bothered about these things?" he tried to comfort himself. "I have come to stay here because I made a commitment to my grandfather. I will leave soon anyway." But then Venu was soon caught in an episode that caused him even more shock, anger and resentment. It occurred last week.

The time was eight at night. The telephone rang. Sundaram was upstairs. It was Venu who answered the phone.

"Hello! . . ." He gave the phone number.

"This is Vatsala speaking; I thought of meeting you at the college itself, but you had already left. Seems like today is the last day for 'Sound of Music', can we go for the late show? Why are you not saying anything?"

Venu was confused. If he had any doubt that it was a wrong number, it quickly disappeared when the caller mentioned about 'meeting at the college.' He didn't know what to do; he simply put down the receiver and fled the room. Alone, he sat in the next room, and pondered.

"The caller must have felt confident that no male adult except my father would answer the phone," he thought.

“So this caller - Vatsala - must be someone who regularly made such calls to him.”

After a while, the phone rang again, and kept on ringing. Venu didn't stir from his room.

Sundaram came down the stairs and answered the phone.

“Hello?” He gave his telephone number.

Venu slowly arose from his place and walked toward the wooden board that stood between his room and the hall where the phone was located. He pricked his ears and tried to overhear - yes, he was eavesdropping - the ongoing telephone conversation in English.

“Not really . . . I was upstairs . . .”

“

“It is all right.”

“

“It could be my eldest son. Yes! He is in town . . . Just a few days ago . . . Yes!”

“

“But, there are no other adults!”

“

“Yes. I can manage . . . okay!”

“

“Nine thirty? Okay!”

“

“Don't worry! . . . ”

“

“I can't hear you...what are you saying?”

“

“Ok . . . Bye . . .”

As the conversation was about to end, Venu slowly slipped out of his room, and left.

Since that incident Venu had not met with his father. Though they both lived in the same house, he cleverly avoided his father's eyes.

A few days ago he went to his father's room after carefully avoiding anybody's notice. He needed a few more clues to confirm his suspicion about his father.

He used duplicate keys to open his father's desk and cabinet; he certainly felt no shame acting like a thief. Because his efforts yielded a few clues that could possibly cause him even more shame and humiliation, he felt his actions were proper and justified.

“Why should I be afraid?” he asked himself. “Why must I hide myself from my wayward father? I must bring him to his senses and correct him - that's my duty . . . But how can I talk about these things? I can't do it at home because Mother will find out . . . I must meet with Father somewhere outside our home. . What if he doesn't heed my words? . . . I can deal with that later; the first thing is to confront him directly and hash out this matter in the open . . .” So Venu agonized over this matter day and night, often feeling restless and confused, and finally yesterday he came to a decision.

“I must confront him tomorrow and expose his secret,” he told himself. “Why should I be afraid? I am not a small kid anymore! I am an adult!”

3

Sundaram parked his Morris Minor car on a new road that ran inside and around the seashore. Venu opened the car door from the passenger seat side, alighted, and stared at the sea afar. He wrapped together the corners of his *dhoti* fluttering in the sea breeze, moved a few paces away, and stood on the sandy ground. For the last ten minutes - since he met with his father at the college and arrived here - his mind was perplexed how to broach the issue with his father. Even if his father was guilty of a crime, Venu wanted to make sure he didn't say anything whatsoever that might be deemed improper - coming from a son to his father; he was also scared that he might lose himself in some sudden angry outburst.

Sundaram alighted from the car, folded his coat before putting it away inside the car, raised the glass windows, and locked the car.

He stood next to Venu, looked at his watch and said, “It is only five.”

“That's why there is not much of a crowd,” Venu said, and forced a smile.

There was not even a trace of shadow on the sandy beach.

They suddenly became silent and walked toward the shore. To outsiders the pair would not look like a father and a son; they seemed more like two brothers or a teacher and a student. There were quite a few similarities in their facial features; the son had grown as tall as his father, but lacked the father's loose flesh, and looked much leaner.

As he walked with his head bowed down, Venu looked at his feet pressing hard on the sand below.

His heart grew heavier every second; all the repressed anger suddenly seemed blocked at his throat; his face reddening, he bit his lips, again and again.

When he raised his head and stared at the waves afar, a gentle breeze washed away the tears at the corners of his eyes.

Sundaram looked at him with warmth; he coughed, and then smiled at him as if to comfort him; Venu felt his lips quivering.

"Can we sit here?" he asked. Venu sat down with no comment. He wondered: how to begin?

He spent a few minutes in some diversionary tactics - now staring at his father's face, then lowering his face down as if lost in some deep thoughts, and then scribbling a few lines on the sand . . .

Sundaram certainly knew what Venu had intended to discuss with him in this face-to-face encounter. He was aware that they had not seen each other for a week after that telephone incident. He knew Venu was affected by that episode; but he thought his son was avoiding his

presence only because he was an adolescent and wanted to act quietly and decently about it.

Sundaram understood that the boy had been deeply affected by the telephone incident. He was less than happy at the situation now confronting him, but he didn't want to act like a coward and avoid it; he decided to face the challenge head on.

But he didn't want to raise the subject on his own.

Venu suddenly started grumbling, as if talking to himself: "I am sorry this is a very shameful subject!" He paused, and continued, "Do you understand what I am talking about?"

Sundaram showed no excitement; he nodded his head - meaning he knew exactly what Venu meant.

His father's composure whipped the boy into frenzy.

"I never thought you would turn out to be someone like this . . ." He turned emotional and was now nervously scratching his hands. His hair was now disheveled in the sea breeze. He tried hard to restrain himself; his heart heaved and he breathed heavily.

"Venu, don't be silly," his father admonished him. "You are not a kid anymore. Think carefully and calmly." He fondly tapped on the boy's shoulders.

"Yes, yes, I am an adult," Venu replied, bit his lip, and continued. He preferred to speak in English probably because he thought a son and a father could discuss these matters only in a foreign tongue!

"Father, do you remember that telephone incident? I have been keeping a watch on you from that day . . . I

never believed my father would turn out to me a womanizer. . . This concerns our family, does it not? Does this behavior accord with your age and status? I think Mother has been always naive and foolish, and you have been cheating on her all these years! . . ." Sundaram, who has been all the while smoking and listening to Venu with no interruption whatsoever, now hastened to stop him, and spoke:

"Please, don't drag your mother into this! You may state your opinions on anything and everything you want, and I will certainly listen to them. But don't try to bring your mother into this. I understand your mother better than you do. You think you understand me, but your mother understands me even better - after all your mother and I have been married for twenty five years, and we will continue to live together till the end of our lives . . . you may continue now!"

"You have been cheating on Mother and leading a phony life. You can never deceive me . . ."

Sundaram responded with a smile as if to mean he had no necessity to deceive Venu.

"I have not made up my mind solely on the basis of the telephone incident," Venu continued. "I overheard the conversation when you answered the phone the second time. And again when you took the car and rushed out of the house after nine that night, I followed you and saw you both in the movie theatre . . . But I didn't think that was good enough to prove wrongful conduct. So I entered your room and checked the contents in your desk and cabinet. I even found a file stuffed with your love letters . . . and here is one of them!"

He fished out a letter from his pocket and angrily tossed it.

Then, his eyes still teary, he turned away from his father's sight; he wanted to cry out, but he felt his voice choke.

The blue lights along the seashore now began to glow. People started gathering on the sandy beach, and a small crowd was now approaching in their direction. Venu and his father remained silent till that crowd went past them, when Venu said:

"You are my father, and I really feel sorry I had to explain all these things to you. You will have to change your behavior in the future. That is all I would like to say."

He was not sure what more he should say. Sundaram silently let out a long sigh and stared into the sky. He was pondering what he must carefully avoid saying at a time like this.

"I remember Grandfather telling me," Venu suddenly broke in. "He said you and Mother had a love marriage. I wonder if all love affairs finally end up this way!" There was a touch of sarcasm and mock humor in his voice as he keenly looked at his father's face.

Sundaram continued smoking even as he was buried in deep thoughts. He sighed and glanced at Venu. He expected to offer something in his own defense, but then sensed life's reality: age and experience are entirely two different things; so are one's experience and one's maturity gathered from such an experience. So he changed his mind, and asked. "All right, now tell me - how does this personally affect you?"

Venu was appalled by this seemingly innocent question, and he felt both pity and anger toward his father. He forced a smile, and spoke:

“Father, you are a professor; you were born in a respectable family, you are presently a father of four children. And by acting like a philanderer well in your advanced years, you are compromising your family reputation as well as your social standing. Are you telling me this doesn’t concern me, your own son? Are you implying it doesn’t affect your son?”

Sundaram watched Venu’s face while he spoke; it was exposed to light on one side and hidden under darkness on the other, and instead of looking directly at his father’s face, Venu’s vision seemed scattered in all directions.

“Venu, you call yourself an adult, and it is certainly true you are an adult,” Sundaram said. “But you are lacking in the maturity of a grown up man. To begin with, as a father I don’t think I need to share my own private affairs with you. You say you are concerned about my social standing and family reputation. I appreciate your concern. But they will never be compromised. When it comes to safeguarding my own interests, I am even more concerned about them than you ever will be. If they are ever in peril, how can I prove to you that I am capable of putting a good fight to defend them? On the other hand, why do I need to prove that to you?”

Sundaram’s voice was firm and assured. He betrayed no nervousness or guilty feelings, and now Venu was a little frightened at his own lack of self-confidence: “Am I doing something wrong?” the boy wondered. He felt outraged by his father’s plain audacity: here is a man well

into his years caught in an illicit relationship with a young woman, yet he was trying to outwit his accuser with his felicity for words.

“Are you asking why you need to prove it to me? I am your wife’s son. You have betrayed your wife’s trust!” Venu bit his lip.

“Hmm . . . Did your mother complain about me?” Sundaram calmly asked.

“No . . .”

“Then why are you interfering in our personal affairs?”

“I am your son! It is my duty!”

“No Sonny, it is not your duty! A son has no right to interfere like this!”

Venu bit his lip. He wanted to cry. He wanted to curse his father to his heart’s desire, end their relationship, and flee once for all, never again to set his eyes on him.

Sundaram felt sorry at Venu’s frustration and mental agony. Here was a youthful mind, he thought, obsessed with something that didn’t concern it in the first place, yet it was entangled in it, and was incapable of letting go what it could not otherwise accept or endure. Sundaram understood the boy was undergoing a mental torture; he warmly touched his hand.

But, like a peevish child, Venu spurned his father’s hand. He was on the verge of bursting into tears, and he managed to speak out even while trying hard to contain his hurt feelings: “Father, I find the whole thing so shameful . . . why do you have to do all these things?”

Sundaram laughed to himself, and then replied:

“My dear boy! How can you ask me such a question if you claim yourself to be a grown up man? I can understand your good intentions. If you think ill of me, I would like you to keep your opinion to yourself. As time goes by you will be able to judge what is good and what is bad . . . you will also understand in course of time where one may draw the line between the good and the bad . . . Because I am your loving father I am willing to forgive you for what you have done to me . . . Now think about this - don't you think it is a shameful thing for a son to spy on his own father or pry into his private matters? If I were in your position I would feel ashamed the rest of my life for having done such a thing . . .”

Venu could not comprehend what he heard, especially his father's charitable offer to forgive him for what he called a shameful act; still he realized it was beyond his powers either to change his father's behavior by persuasion or force him to admit his moral turpitude.

4

“Mother . . .”

Venu was the only child in the family who preferred to call Ramani Ammal Mother and his father, Father. Everybody else addressed them as ‘Mommy’ and ‘Daddy’.

When Venu came up the stairs and addressed Ramani Ammal, she was leisurely resting on an easy chair, her eyes focused on a paragraph in a book by Julian Huxley.

Venu saw the book cover and read the title, *Knowledge, Morality and Destiny*.

“Mother, am I interfering with your reading?”

“No, why all these formalities? Come on, sit here.” She warmly welcomed him. Venu pulled one of the chairs in the veranda, and sat on it.

Venu was nervous about what to say. Ramani Ammal watched him with affection - she suddenly felt elated knowing she had such a grown up son. Venu started biting his fingernails; he bowed down his head and was lost in thought.

Ramani Ammal was gratified that Venu had, after all these days, decided to come to her either to confide or seek some advice on a personal problem bothering him. Sensing his hesitation, she wanted to speak first, and asked, “Hi Venu, are you bored with life around here?”

“Hmm, it is not that life is boring,” Venu replied as he raised his head and looked at her. “I am not quite comfortable with life around here . . . after all I am only a village type, am I not? I am not able to adjust to your ultra modern lifestyle.” He again bowed down his head and began drawing lines on his palm.

Ramani Ammal paused for a few moments, and again spoke:

“I can’t understand your problem. I don’t think we have changed our lifestyle over these years; I am not sure we have suddenly succumbed to some meaningless, ultra modern lifestyle. You have to express your feelings more openly so that I can understand what you actually mean.”

She struggled hard to understand what was really bothering the boy.

“I often wonder why I actually came here,” Venu continued. “I feel as if I am in a stranger’s house. I find your habits and customs totally alien to my own nature. I feel your relationships and affections are artificial . . . I think you are all leading phony lives . . . I really would like to go back to Grandfather’s house.” Ramani Ammal patiently heard him trying to clarify, a little by little, his problem.

Then they both became silent. The time was sometime before noon - and the house was quiet; downstairs, in the kitchen, the cook - the old woman - was resting; the house as well as the street below seemed totally deserted.

“Venu, why do you suddenly feel this way?” Ramani Ammal asked. “I can certainly see a lot of difference between life around here and at your grandfather’s. Strictly speaking, at your age, you ought to get bored with life over there at your grandfather’s house. After all tastes are acquired through experience. But remember this is your house. Does anybody object to your living here as you please? Whatever one may say, here - in this house - nobody will ever try to force, dominate or control others against their own will. You may not remember this, but when your grandparents were about to leave for their village, you asked that you be allowed to go with them. They too wanted to have you, so I was willing to let you go with them by honoring your own wish! It has always been that way in this house; we even respect and try to accommodate a child’s wish. So can you tell me what is your real

objection to stay here with us?" Venu remained silent, and simply stared at her.

"It seems to me there should be some other reason why you want to return to your village. Am I right?" She smiled at him.

"Yes . . . there is another reason," Venu replied, and struggled for words to articulate his inner turmoil over his father's secrets.

"Venu . . . you have been saying several things," Ramani Ammal continued. "You were saying we are leading phony and artificial lives. What do you exactly mean by those words? How can you rush to such a conclusion? Where did you see phoniness in our lives? There is some artificiality in everybody's life, but can you be more specific about what you are saying? I can see you are saying these things because you are deeply hurt . . . Tell me what is behind all this?"

Venu pulled out the handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his nose and eyes. His face was flushed red.

"Mother, I don't like what Father's doing," he said, and stared into the sky. Ramani Ammal was silent; so Venu felt emboldened to speak to her without directly facing her.

"I have been worried all these days about creating a disruption in our family or causing a rift between you and Father; how long can one postpone the inevitable discord in a family which is led astray? I know Father is being unfaithful to you . . . If I keep this secret to myself, I will be an accomplice to his crime against you . . . So, I don't want

to be a part of this family . . . It is beyond me to change Father's behavior. If you think you can change his conduct, go ahead and try . . . this concerns you and him . . . I want to be out of this." Having vented his feelings in quick outbursts, he now lacked the courage even to look at her face, and desperately wanted to flee.

He thought his mother might lose herself in tears, followed by some pointed queries; rant about her unfaithful husband and curse him outright; or grow conscious of her long - suppressed suspicions over her husband's infidelity now exposed and causing her embarrassment. All these thoughts made Venu uncomfortable and eager to escape from her further attention.

"Venu!" He was stopped by her calm voice that masked her suppressed emotions, now growing more intense, but held in full control.

Her face betrayed no traces of what he expected to see. She warmed up to him and invited him to stay. Venu obliged, and returned to his seat.

"I thought you wanted to discuss your personal problem," she said, and laughed. "But now you want to talk about your father's problem . . . It is really funny. . ."

"Does it mean you already know about these things?" Venu grumbled in mild disbelief.

"I never bothered to get into all that stuff," she replied, and seemed momentarily lost in her thoughts. Then she continued:

“Remember this . . . to the extent you believe that he is your father and he is my husband, it is also true that he is a professor, a scholar, an educator, and a person with a social standing . . . do you agree?”

Venu was silent; his mother continued:

“You never seem to cherish those qualities for which you can rightfully feel proud about your father; do you think it is proper to dwell on things about which you don’t know the full story or matters that essentially have to do with your father’s privacy?”

Venu suddenly sprung to anger. “Mother, I do know the full story,” he continued. “I have proof! I can prove my charges. The phone call he received that day . . . I have heard the conversation with my own ears! I also followed them to the theatre and watched the whole thing with my own eyes! There are so many love letters in a file in a cabinet in his room! When I confronted him with one of those letters, Father could not deny it!”

“Shame on you!” Ramani Ammal exclaimed. “And you claim you have proof! Have you heard of those yellow magazines that thrive on spreading all kinds of rumors and scandals about public men and celebrities? They also claim to have proof to back up their charges! Do you think decent people keep away from trashy stuff only because they are lacking proof? What these sensational papers do is to ignore the good and noble qualities of their targets and concentrate only on their weaknesses and their private lives; nothing good ever comes out of such an *exposé* that’s why we - decent people - shun them. Can you explain to me how your action is different from these

scandalmongers? You also claim to have proof just like they always do! Venu, I feel sorry for you . . . I can only say shame on you!" Her hands tried to cover her ears in horror and disbelief.

"Have you really done what you have just said?" She again asked. "How shamelessly have you treated a respectable man?" Both her heart and mind now seemed thrown into a shock.

Venu thought her words incredulous. He wondered: What kind of woman is she and what kind of wife?

He tried to ease her mind. "I knew I was doing something wrong," he admitted. "But I was trying to protect your own interests as well as the interests of this family."

"Venu, I really feel very sad. Not about your father, but about you . . . How can you do such a thing? How can a son ever do such a thing to his father? . . . I can never imagine you doing such a thing . . ."

"Even after you found out that he is unfaithful to you?"

"It is my problem!" she exclaimed. "That's strictly my private matter! What right have you to interfere in our private affairs?" Her whole body shook in utter disgust, and she continued:

"Listen! Your father and I have been happily married for twenty five years, and we will continue to do so for the rest of our lives . . . So I am totally against doing anything that will compromise that happiness . . . I do know your father's apparent weaknesses . . . but so what? I am the most qualified woman to be his life partner . . . Of course,

occasionally, deep down my heart, I do feel sad. ” She revealed her deep-seated feelings - feelings that had over the years coalesced into a hard mass weighing down heavily upon her, and tears started flowing copiously from her eyes. She took off her eyeglasses and wiped them clean, then walked over and stood on the veranda for a minute before returning to her chair to face Venu.

“Venu, my dear boy, life is not as simple as you think,” she continued. “It is complicated; it’s full of problems. The real challenge in life is managing a happy family steering clear of those complications and problems . . . compassion and love become just meaningless if one can’t practice patience and tolerance. If I had chosen to handle the situation just like you did, by now I would have been responsible for causing a disruption in the family and destroying your father’s reputation. The situation would have just become deplorable had I acted selfish and become so possessive as to keep your father under my control, thereby paying a heavy price for the stability of the family, the reputation of my husband and the future of my children. Don’t imagine because I am saying all these things I am secretly feeling sorry for myself! Of course, there is some sadness in my life; after all total happiness is not something that is easily attainable.”

“It is not a question whether I have a right to speak out . . . should I not weigh in the consequences of such an action on my part? I have asked myself: what is my potential loss? So if I have decided not to speak out at this time, my silence says something about myself; it tells about my culture, my sense of values. Yes, Venu, remember this . . . what do we mean when we say we respect another

person? It means our culture demands we respect that person's privacy and do not pry into his private affairs. What do we mean when we say we love another person? It means we do not try to exploit that person's private weaknesses, even when they are known to us. We continue to admire that person for his other redeemable qualities even as we recognize that person embodies all those weaknesses . . ."

She continued, "How sacred is a person's privacy? It is something very sacred! For any one to violate that privacy is a very brutal and indecent act!"

"Mother . . . you are his wife!"

"So what? If I misuse my privilege, I could be even denied my rights. Don't you agree?"

"Do you think Father would abide by the same standards as you do?"

"Yes, he certainly does. There is absolutely no justification for a man and his wife to engage in mutual suspicion or seek to violate ordinary standards of behavior to pry into one another's privacy. If ever there is a reason for such a violation, it is only because they wrongly assume such a thing . . ."

"A man, his wife, son, mother, and father - they all belong to one single family, but every one of them is a separate human being, an individual unit. Every individual is entitled to privacy; and we need to respect it. To the extent we respect someone, we must also carefully strive to respect the privacy of that person. What did you think of your father? How could you ever think of doing such a thing to him? Do you realize what you have done? Do you

think you can take him on the way you questioned me? I can't even imagine what you did! It is such a terrible thing!"

"But I am not unduly alarmed," Ramani Ammal continued. "Your father is a strong man, and he can handle this, he will certainly overcome his weaknesses . . . I am pretty sure about that . . . Venu, human life is very complicated . . . one has to understand it . . . You ought to read this book (pointing to the Julian Huxley book in her hands); it will broaden your outlook."

Venu was again thrown into utter confusion. It confirmed his long held opinion that only his grandparents were the ideal couple he had ever known.

What Venu never understood was this: his parents were not married in the tradition of his grandparents; and they didn't lead their married life in the same spirit, either.

5

A few days passed. One evening, when Sundaram had returned from college, Ramani Ammal gave him a letter from Venu, who had since disappeared from their home two days earlier without giving any hint whatsoever.

The most significant lines from the letter were as follows:

"I deserve to be only my grandparents' grandson, so I have gone back. If I have violated your norms of right and wrong due to my own ignorance, please forgive me. Yours, Venu."

When they finished reading the letter, the couple regarded one another in mutual understanding.

“One should not assume that people become conservative only when they are past seventy . . .” Sundaram said, and smiled. “One may turn conservative even at twenty.”

Ramani Ammal stared at him with a certain apprehension. Her eyes had turned red.

She masked her deeply held sadness in a smile, and asked her husband. “You . . . you are still . . . ?” Sundaram immediately drew her into his warm embrace even as her quivering lips pressed against his cheeks.

What happens next, you ask? That’s their private affair!

NOTE:

Original title: “*Antharangam Punithamanadu*,” published in 1969



The Scorching Truth

That sight annoyed Somanathan. He felt a little embarrassed on noticing that pictures of *Ramakrishna Paramahansa* and *Vivekananda* flanked, on both sides, his own photograph on the wall. Scowling, he adjusted his eyeglasses and walked toward the wall and keenly looked at the row of framed faces on display.

His niece Kothai walked in with a glass of *Horlicks* in her hand. Somanathan looked at her.

“Who is responsible for this?” he asked her while pointing his index finger at his own photograph.

Kothai put down the glass on a nearby teapoy and answered: “It has been here in the same location even before I came to this house. My husband likes to introduce you to others as one among the most extraordinary people he holds in great esteem. That’s how he introduced me to you as well.” Even before she could finish the sentence Somanathan started giggling, and joked, “What

a strange company! A godless man in the company of two great spiritual leaders!" Then, shifting the cane hanging from his elbow to his right hand he slowly moved toward a sofa in the hall, and sat on it.

Kothai served him *Horlicks*, which the old man drank with his trembling hands. Because he was sweating after drinking the hot liquid, Kothai switched on the electric fan. His gray locks fluttered under the cool breeze and his gaze followed the objects in his surroundings - the radio in the hall, a Buddha's statue in a corner, the blue curtains covering the windows and finally rested on Kothai herself. His child-like face broke into a smile and he warmly looked at her.

That smile seemed to make several statements, all aimed at Kothai: congratulating her for her taste in interior design; inquiring as to how she was doing; and finally expressing a sense of elation that he was very proud of her.

As if answering all his questions calmly and politely befitting a woman, Kothai returned his smile. Somanathan looked at his watch and exclaimed, "Good heavens, the time is already five! What is keeping your husband still at the college? I have to catch a train at seven!" and peered out through the window.

Just then Kothai heard the compound gate open and she went out. Somanathan arose from his seat to warmly greet Parameswaran from work.

"It's not him, it is the postman - there is a letter for him," Kothai said and went inside the house even as she

keenly examined the letter without opening it. Somanathan picked up a photo album from a nearby table and awaited Parameswaran's arrival.

Somanathan served as an English professor in the same college where Parameswaran worked. Parameswaran was also one of his students and when Somanathan retired from his college Parameswaran became a lecturer in the same institution. During those years both men had developed a very close relationship with one another.

Even after Somanathan retired and moved away to his hometown, both men kept in touch with one another through occasional correspondence. Two years ago when Somanathan happened to visit Chennai he met Parameswaran after an interval of ten years. Somanathan was appalled by what he saw in his former student; not only had Parameswaran won promotion as a professor, but he seemed to have aged beyond his real forty years - sporting a *bushcoat*, eyeglasses and gray hair close to the ear lobes. And there was something else; Parameswaran was leading a bachelor's life.

As Parameswaran warmly welcomed Somanathan by holding his hands and respectfully touching them to his eyes, Somanathan patted him on the back and said, "I feel guilty to see you as a bachelor. Do you think my guilt has no basis?"

Somanathan would always bluntly express his personal opinions. But he would not stop with that. He would do his best to achieve an agreement or a compromise from his listeners by inviting their contrary

opinions. That was one of his noble qualities well known to Parameswaran.

Parameswaran led a loner's life. His parents were long dead and he had no other close relatives. If private individuals like Parameswaran ever entered into matrimony, that can happen only through the help and intervention from a few responsible and influential friends. Somanathan, his teacher, friend and mentor certainly occupied such a position. Parameswaran understood the reason behind Somanathan's question.

"Is it a crime to live as a bachelor?" he asked with a laugh.

"It is no crime, still it is not the right thing to do," answered Somanathan, and continued: "If a man in a normal state of health wants to lead a bachelor's life, he must be motivated solely by an ideal. Then bachelorhood becomes a worthy goal. To live a bachelor's life just for the sake of bachelorhood makes no sense, and it may even lead to a life with no purpose and ultimately become a crime! Everything one does in life should be based on a purpose and a meaning. If you can give me one good reason to support your choice, I would be willing to change my opinion."

Parameswaran thought for a moment. It was no thought; it was a stunning realization. He smiled; it was no ordinary smile. It was a kind of surrender.

That encounter led both men into a long conversation. Ten years ago when they had known one another, Parameswaran held his mentor in high esteem; now, over the years, that respect seemed to grow even more and he

was fully taken over by Somanathan's wisdom and persuasion.

When they parted company, Somanathan invited his friend to his hometown during the ensuing college vacation.

"I feel it is my duty to extend this invitation to you," Somanathan told him. "I have a niece - who lost her parents at a very young age and is now in my custody. She too was against marriage, but now I find a change in her heart. Please visit us. If there is mutual consent, I would feel obliged to proceed further in the matter." Parameswaran was visibly touched by Somanathan's marriage proposal based solely on his regard and concern for Parameswaran; he hardly made any inquiries about Parameswaran's caste or family background.

That marriage took place two years ago. There was only one matter that festered inside Parameswaran - before the wedding ceremony.

At the time Kothai was twenty years old; Parameswaran was forty.

Somanathan tried to allay his fears when Parameswaran expressed his concern. "If you believe the age difference does matter, that is your personal opinion and a valid one. Even if there are no other concerns, if you see this alone as an important issue, you can give up this marriage idea. It is up to you to make up your mind and come to a final decision in this matter . . ."

Parameswaran was unable to make up his mind. Because he was fully aware that Somanathan would

neither pressure him nor feel upset if he flatly rejected his suggestion, he felt all the more confused in the matter.

Somanathan who understood his friend's seemingly outward hesitation and his inner consent posed him a straightforward question, "What is really holding you back?"

For a moment Parameswaran forgot he was a forty year old adult; like a teenager he felt shy as he bowed down his head and answered: "This wide age difference . . ."

Somanathan let out a laugh, and continued, "I have already told you that if you think this age difference is a problem for you, you may forget the whole idea of marriage; on the other hand, if deep inside you like this alliance, you must not worry over what others might think of this marriage. Any hesitation or reluctance on your part owing to others' opinion is unnecessary and unwarranted."

"Are you suggesting we don't have to show any concern over what others might feel?" Parameswaran asked, nervously flexing his palm.

"I agree. One ought to give a long and serious consideration to world opinion. But, Mr. Parameswaran, remember this: the world is not just something that is made up of your immediate surroundings; it is scattered all over, as nations and continents. To come to think of it, your concern over this age gap is not a big problem in other societies; it might be even considered as something right and proper! If you want to compress this huge world to suit your own convenience - don't ever imagine that a small gossip-mongering crowd is *the* world - please imagine that world is inside you, it is a creation of yourself

and is located next to your own heart. Then, make up your mind and you will come to the right decision!" He closed his eyes and seemed lost in some private thought.

"What an extraordinary man!" Parameswaran wondered. "And how deeply he is able to probe into a human mind!"

Somanathan continued, even as his eyes were still closed. "When a male enters into matrimony he believes he is marrying to satisfy his own personal needs; the female too feels likewise. Any action undertaken for a personal need will ultimately lead to dissatisfaction. The real goal of a marriage lies somewhere else. Marriage is the first step in a process where a man or woman, who has been living for his or her own sake is willing to live for another person. Marriage forms the narrowest, yet the most basic circle of cooperation in social relationships. It is this spirit of mutual cooperation and sacrifice that finally elevates the partners and thus the human society they live in. On the other hand, when a person feels motivated to enter into matrimony for a purely selfish reason the end result is that individual's family life as well as the consequent social life are caught up in a whirlpool of dissatisfaction, suspicion, pain and agony. You must never imagine you are marrying my niece for your own sake. You are doing this for her, another woman! I have told my niece the same thing. Don't you agree a feeling of mutual trust should be the basis for any relationship?"

Parameswaran thought for a moment. It was no thought . . .

Since his marriage two years ago, he fully understood the meaning of his life. "I can never imagine my life without

Kothai," - that's how he summed up his experience, either because of his personal conviction or because Kothai helped him realize that fact. Convinced that she made him a full man and lent a meaning to his life, he accepted her as his dear soulmate and a valuable guide.

The full weight of their marital life marked by mutual love and affection was brought home to Parameswaran one day when he mentioned to Kothai - up front - his concern over the wide disparity in their ages. Her reply served him as an eye opener.

They were sharing an intimate moment in the bedroom with only a dim light hovering over them; Kothai was leaning over him, her fingers etching lines on his bare, exposed chest and whispering into his ears. He felt his hair stand up from their roots . . .

"To be frank, I too had some concern," she told him, and went on. "But now I am fully convinced that if men and women with a wide disparity in their ages get married, they will find themselves in heavenly bliss. If the partners were of the same age there would be less inclination among them to compromise or concede on a point. I strongly believe this condition - a wide age gap - has brought a sense of closeness and intimacy between us. I really don't know how to express these feelings. All I can say is that I am now very happy!" She spoke haltingly - trying to answer his question - even as she struggled nervously to pick up the right words and pour out the feelings deep from her heart. The upshot was both their hearts swelled with joy and happiness.

As Somanathan now scanned through the various photos in the album that captured the scenes from the couple's trips all over the Indian subcontinent - from the lakes of Kashmir in the north to the beaches of Cape Comorin in the south - he became aware of their happy married life. As he finished viewing the last photograph from the album and put it down he heard an eager, pleasant question, "When did you come?" from Parameswaran who now stood before him with a smile and open arms. Somanathan let out a childlike smile and reached to Parameswaran and patted on his back. "I have to take care of some urgent work, and I must return by the seven o'clock train," he explained. Parameswaran's face shrunk in disappointment. "The time is already five, I will go to the train station with you," Parameswaran said and checked his watch. "That's fine, we have ample time. Why don't you change and have your coffee? Then we can both leave for the train station."

Parameswaran seemed averse to waste even that limited time at their disposal and he began removing his coat. Kothai who stood readily next to him took his coat and soon returned with a towel. When Parameswaran got down on the sofa and began removing his shoes, Somanathan raised his head and looked at the photographs on the wall, and said, "I get a funny feeling when I see myself in this strange company!" Now Parameswaran too looked at the wall and answered him: "What is funny about it? One of these three men gave me faith in God; yet another taught me the lofty goals of bachelorhood. The one in the middle revealed to me the real meaning of bachelorhood and showed me the way to a meaningful life. I was an orphan and he was

my father and mother. His photograph is on the wall because I don't have my parents' photographs. I consider all the three men as honorable saints . . .”

“That's too much praise for a man like me,” Somanathan shrugged his shoulder and let out a simple laugh. “No, I worship you in my own simple fashion,” Parameswaran told him and arose from his seat with a religious fervor.

“Worship?” Somanathan narrowed his eyebrows and said, “I don't believe in worship!”

“Belief in worship is necessary only for the faithful. I seem to achieve some kind of mental strength through this worship. Have you any objections?” Parameswaran asked and went inside the house to change.

“What a sentimental man!” murmured Somanathan to himself.

Soon Parameswaran returned dressed in a pure, white *dhoti*, a full-arm shirt, his forehead smeared with sacred ash, and sat on a sofa opposite to Somanathan. Kothai approached him with a cup of *Horlicks* and the letter delivered a short while ago. Once he was done drinking, Parameswaran calmly tore open the envelope and started reading the letter.

“Dear Professor Parameswaran:

Before you choose to ignore this because it is an anonymous letter, please remember anonymous letters can also reveal some truths . . .

Your entire life is based on a big lie. You don't know the real person behind that idol of yours, Professor

Somanathan. You seem to be exhilarated over your wife Kothai, but you know nothing about her past life. Even before her marriage, she was in love with another man - who abandoned her because she became pregnant before her marriage. Either because of her own good luck or some scheme worked out by her mentor, she had a miscarriage. Your guru has tricked you into marrying her. You may be feeling you are leading a happy life with her, but the reality is you have deceived yourself. ”

His fingers itched to tear up that unsigned letter. He hesitated for a moment and stuffed that letter into his shirt pocket.

“Any important news?” asked Somanathan.

“Hmm. It is nothing,” Parameswaran uttered a lie. He tried to dismiss the letter from his memory. As his eyes scanned his surroundings - first the photographs on the wall, then Kothai standing like a fairy in a corner with a magazine in her hand and finally Somanathan who sat there staring at his former student while weighing Parameswaran’s silence and awkward posture - he was suddenly overcome by a fear that Somanathan might be able to gauge his hidden emotions.

Noticing his face had suddenly turned ashen, Kothai rushed toward him and asked, “Do you have a headache?”

“No,” Parameswaran answered her and when he raised his face and looked at her, his eyes were shot with blood red.

“Your eyes are red,” she told him and touched his forehead. “You have a slight temperature too.”

“Let me see,” Somanathan now broke in and came closer and touched Parameswaran’s forehead. “I think you are tired. You must rest for a while. I am going to leave now. I will be here next week on business and then I plan to stay here for a couple of days.” He fondly patted on Parameswaran’s back.

“I am fine, I would feel better if I go out for a while. I will go with you to the train station. We still have enough time. Let me get ready.” Forcing a smile, Parameswaran arose from his seat and caught his reflection in a mirror. He wanted to be alone for a while, so he went upstairs and stood there on the patio watching the sky above. Two prominent sentences from that anonymous letter - *anonymous letters can also reveal some truths* and *Your entire life is based on a big lie* - stood out in his memory to torment him. He could neither believe nor ignore their import.

Suddenly, he imagined he was talking with that letter.

“What if this letter is telling a truth? Why should I be concerned about Kothai’s past life? She is an ideal wife, and we are leading a happy marital life. Even if there was some unsavory event in her past, how can she be denied a right to life?” He concluded his thoughts with an affirmative note even as the letter fluttered in the breeze. Had he loosened his fingers a little, the letter might have just flown away, but his fingers held it in their tight grip. He was caught in a dilemma - he seemed mad enough to tear up that letter into pieces but felt himself helpless to do such a thing.

“Now this letter is talking about my wife. Whether what it says is true or false, it should not weaken our relationship. Yes, I can't live without her. I am not worried about something that has happened in the past!” He made up his mind and raised his head to look at the sky. Instantly, he felt his forehead narrowing, eyes darkening, and a secret voice from his heart whispering to him.

“You must find out what has actually happened! The truth must come out!” The thought overwhelmed him. “Should I let this mean, gossipy letter destroy my life?” he asked himself and tore the letter when his hands suddenly came to a standstill. The letter was torn in the middle, and he could read the lines: “. . . anonymous letters can also reveal truths!”

“Can it be true? Kothai and I will shred the letter once we prove this is just rumor mongering indulged by an evil mind. Alternatively, we will erase the past from our memory and in the process consign you to flames!”

“Nevertheless, who will help me find out the truth? Looks like Somanathan is here to actually vindicate my trust and thus disprove what this letter says!” With that thought, Parameswaran eagerly descended down the stairs to join his friend.

As they both were riding in a taxi toward the train station, Parameswaran broke the silence and began:

“Mr. Somanathan, you know me quite well; you also know that - thanks to your blessings - Kothai and I are

leading an ideal life.” He could not proceed further and suddenly took out the letter from his coat pocket.

Somanathan was a little shocked at this sudden confrontation.

Parameswaran switched on the light in the taxi and extended that letter toward Somanathan, even as he continued to speak: “I want your answer - without beating around the bush. Tell me if what this letter says is true or false, that’s all I need to know. Your truthful answer - whatever it might be - is not going to affect anybody.” Somanathan noticed Parameswaran’s hands tremble when he extended the letter toward him. Then, calmly, without any signs of panic or anxiety on his face Somanathan read that half-torn letter. Parameswaran, who riveted his eyes on Somanathan all the while, grew tense and anxious as he blurted out, “I need to know the truth! Yes, I want only the truth!”

Somanathan smiled innocently at Parameswaran. He seemed to be saying, ‘I can sense your weakness from the way you are eager to find out the truth!’

He comforted Parameswaran by patting on his back, saying, “I didn’t realize you are such an emotional person. This is not good for your health. You may develop high blood pressure if you keep acting like this . . .”

“I want the truth! I am after the truth!” Parameswaran begged him.

“Search for truth? That is the stock-in-trade for seers and saints who have forsaken this world!” Somanathan chuckled.

Parameswaran was a little offended at his friend treating his question in a playful mood. Still, he tried to remain calm, and kept quiet.

“Parameswaran, the first thing you must understand from this letter is that the intentions behind it are less than honorable . . .” Even before he could continue, Parameswaran cut in hastily saying, “I want the answer in one word - True or false.”

“You mean, in one word?” Somanathan asked looking at his friend’s face

He could gauge Parameswaran’s inner turmoil from his stubbornness.

“Yes - in one word. I have complete trust in you.”

Somanathan laughed as if he was weighing in the promise of a child or a drunkard.

“I am sorry this letter has had such a great effect on you,” he told him. “Here is my answer in one word! False!” He returned the letter with quivering lips.

They exchanged no more words.

Even when Parameswaran saw him off at the train station Somanathan made no reference to that letter beyond his opinion that its contents were a lie.

But Parameswaran felt that the only lie he ever heard from Somanathan was the one word he heard when Somanathan called the contents of that letter a lie. Instantly, he blamed himself for misunderstanding his good friend.

'In no time that letter changed me into a mean, horrible, individual. I should have never shown the letter to him and asked his opinion! What will he think of me?' Parameswaran went on agonizing over his action as he finally returned home.

When he entered the house Kothai was upstairs in her room. Normally, if she happened to be there Parameswaran would directly go upstairs. But now he stayed downstairs, seated on a sofa staring at the photographs on the wall.

Kothai, who expected her husband to join her upstairs, now came down.

"How are you? Anything wrong?" she asked touching his forehead, and now didn't feel any temperature. Parameswaran grabbed the hand probing his forehead. His hand was trembling.

"What is it? What is bothering you?" she panicked and looked at him, his face downcast, the lips ready to break into a cry. He looked pathetic, a voice consoling him: 'I am really stupid. My wife is here standing before me - a symbol of truth and integrity! Why didn't I think of showing this letter to her, in the first place?'

Seemingly elated and smiling, he began, "I am fine. Please come closer. I am caught in a dilemma, only you can resolve it. You know how I feel about you, you also know I can't live without you . . ." Suddenly he felt his voice choked up, but he continued: "Read this letter, then tell me - without beating around the bush - if what the letter says is true or not. I need only one answer - truth or

lie! Whatever may be your answer it won't affect anybody or anything! This is a promise! I want the truth! I want to know that my life is not based on a lie!" Even as he was talking to her while extending the letter toward her, Kothai calmly read its contents. Closing her eyes, inured to her fate, she spoke in a firm, but controlled voice: "It is true!"

He stood paralyzed. Kothai continued in a voice rising from a clear conscience:

"That was a mistake I had once committed in my life, and I am not going to blame others. When I found out that my life was going nowhere I decided to do nothing about it. It was Uncle (she meant Somanathan) who time and again took pains to remind me that I was wrong. It was during one of those occasions that I gave my consent to marry you."

"Uncle told me: 'We must not keep alive a falsehood, what is past must be allowed to remain in the past. Let us not resurrect some lies pretending them to be truths. Some truths are like a fire; one needs maturity to handle them. Their basic quality is to scorch those who come in contact with them. Everybody is not mentally prepared to handle such a fiery monster.' Neither Uncle nor I had any intention - as alleged in this letter - to keep my past hidden from you. I am your wife and now I feel I must not keep any secrets from you, so I have told you everything! This is the truth, this might hurt you but I know you have the strength to face it!" Parameswaran's eyes were shedding copious tears, and he felt his whole body tremble. He felt his heart scorched by the knowledge that Somanathan lied to him, and he yelled: "Kothai, I can forgive you! But, just an hour ago - when I showed this

letter to Somanathan - he lied to me with impunity! I can't forgive him, I can't!" Screaming, he jumped out of the sofa, snatched the framed photograph of his esteemed mentor at the middle of the row on the wall - and threw it away. It flew across the hall crashing in a corner. "Some scholar! And some saint!" Parameswaran muttered in self-reproach and ran up the stairs.

Kothai who stood in the main hall heard Parameswaran enter his room and slam the door shut behind him. "Finally, the truth has hurt him", she murmured to herself.

Shocked beyond belief, and caught in a web of a deceptive world that plunged him into a state of bitterness and despair, Parameswaran sought solitude and peace of mind. Corpse-like he sought refuge on the bed.

He heard someone tapping on the door.

Ignoring that call, he tried to remain motionless staring at the empty space around him. He expected the door would be tapped a second time. And when that didn't happen, he let a minute elapse. Then he arose from the bed and opened the door.

There stood Kothai outside the room with a small suitcase in her hand ready to bid him farewell. After they both examined one another with long, deliberate looks, Kothai spoke out in a clear voice:

"I too used to think that your devotion to Uncle always bordered on the obsessive. It is only when you snatched his photograph from the wall and cast it away that I realized that Uncle is really an extraordinary man - someone who can probe deep into the darkest corners of

the human mind. He told me truth would hurt and he also knew you could never handle the truth. When you told me a few minutes ago that you are quite willing to forgive me, it really shows that you are deceiving yourself. If you think I committed a crime, why don't you punish me? But you can't do such a thing. Your heart is too weak to render me punishment; still, you needed to punish somebody, so you went after Uncle. That is your weakness - you are acting like a child who is beaten by its mother and in retaliation tries to hurt its baby brother. We would be punishing ourselves if we continue to live together. Please understand that I am not mad at you. I want to go back to that great soul and tell him, 'You were right. Truth will hurt, it could even scorch people to death; I was ignorant about its impact and so unnecessarily caused a tragedy, and I want to ask your forgiveness.'" She didn't even wait for his response, and Parameswaran silently watched her going down the steps.

He now thought of Somanathan's recent comment, "Search for truth? That is the stock-in-trade for seers and saints who have forsaken this world!" and tried to understand its implication to him.

That was no thought; it was a stunning revelation. He smiled to himself; it was no ordinary smile, it was his surrender.

He scampered down the stairs and reached the hall.

Kothai was just then opening the compound gate.

She heard him addressing her in the clearest voice: "Kothai!"

There, in the hall, Parameswaran restored to its original place the photograph of his friend and mentor Somanathan even as his face cast an affectionate and smiling look at her.

If Parameswaran could rededicate himself as a devotee of Somanathan who answered him with a lie, how could he now choose to renounce his own wife who answered him with a truth?

NOTE:

Original title: "*Unmai Chudum*," published in 1964



Caesar

The situation is quite embarrassing and totally out of control. The din and clamor from downstairs has jolted me out of sleep - and I know what is going on. I am in no mood to face Father now, so for the last fifteen minutes I have been simply lolling on my bed upstairs to avoid facing the crowd below. From the window at the foot of my bed I can see what is going on below.

Mangalam Auntie - the target of a savage attack and the wife of Seetharama Iyer - looks a pathetic figure, sobbing uncontrollably and pleading to God even as she curses the people around her:

“How dare you cast aspersions on me? Let my husband come, I am willing to swear - *holding fast a pile of hot coals in my hand!*”

Her words are incoherent, lost in violent sobs accompanied by rage and despair.

I hear a scuffle, and can feel someone being pushed around and dragged along, forcibly pinned against a wall and interrogated. Several voices are heard in unison.

“Rascal! Where do you think you are going? Let Seetharama Iyer come, I will have him slap you across the face with his slippers! This is downright betrayal! Ungrateful wretch, you are a live - in guest in their house, and this is the price they pay for their hospitality? If I had to punish you, I would have hacked your body to pieces!” That’s my father - agitated and jumping all over the place as if possessed by a spirit. This is typical of him, and I believe this is the third ‘visitation’ he had this morning. Now, Mother too joins him.

“Why should this concern you?” she asks. “We took pity on that naïve Brahmin and gave him shelter. He has the habit of befriending the worst elements possible, offering them shelter in his house and then going away to work early in the morning to return only at night. So we end up witnessing this scandal right before our eyes. I only wanted you to take up the matter with him in private and bring it to a closure, but you have dragged yourself into this mess. Why don’t you just ignore the whole thing and return home?”

“Shut up and leave at once,” Father orders her. That’s enough to scare Mother, who beats a hasty retreat.

“*Sar*, have some patience. Let us wait for Seetharama Iyer. Why should we meddle in others’ business?” I think Narayanan, another tenant, living across from us, is counseling patience.

Father retorted, "Are you telling me this doesn't concern us? How can one tolerate this scandal right here where decent families happen to live? Then it would just mean we are encouraging the treachery inflicted upon a naïve, innocent soul!" Father is screaming on the top of his voice as if trying to bring the whole apartment complex down. Well, he owns the property, doesn't he? All the tenants seem beholden to him and are dutifully silent in his presence. Fortunately, there are no children around; they all must have gone to school. Why is Father acting so nasty and mean? I had a vague feeling early this morning something like this might happen. I have been watching the women - all of them except Mangalam Auntie - huddle together and gossip in secret; then I noticed my mother walk up to Father and confide something to him. Father flared up and with his nose reddening, huffing and puffing, he began pacing up and down the courtyard watching afar the house where Seetharama Iyer and Mangalam Auntie live. So I had some sense of what was to come. I am really stupid. I should have left the home as usual at ten immediately after my lunch - sparing me this farce. I was just glancing through the 'Wanted Column' in the newspaper in my room when I slowly drifted into sleep.

At lunch after serving some rice on my plate Mother rushed toward Father and shared some secret with him - even as she was desperately gesturing with her hands.

I felt the whole thing was downright obscene.

I was waiting for Mother to serve me buttermilk - while letting my hand mix the plain rice on the plate. Why don't

my parents stop meddling in other peoples business? Why should they accuse others of wrongdoing? When I see their perverse pleasure from such acts, I feel sorry I am their son, and curse my fate . . .

“Mother,” I gnashed my teeth and hollered at her. “Why don’t you serve me the goddamn buttermilk before you continue with your gossip?”

No sooner did I utter those words than Father bristled with anger.

“I suppose you are going to be late for work,” he screamed in a derisive voice and continued to savage me till I was done with my lunch. I think he called me ‘a wretched parasite’ at least a hundred times. Ashamed, I bowed down my head, tears streaking through my face and falling on the plate, and finally finished the lunch and returned to my room upstairs.

I have become a real parasite even as I resent that label hurled at me. I feel like running away from home, but where can I possibly go? How many jobs have I applied for and how many people have I even begged for help - in vain! I wish I had at least a sturdy, athletic body; I even tried to get some job in the military, but was disqualified as under-weight. I have only a high school education, what kind of job can I hope to get when even people with graduate and post-graduate degrees end up as unemployed? I am willing to take any job. I even met with Uncle Seetharama Iyer and told him I would be interested in working as a waiter in his canteen. But my timing couldn’t be worse; there was a layoff in that canteen, and the waiter Mani moved out from the canteen to Seetharama

Iyer's own house - that's how events in that household led to the present crisis.

Granted Mani is a parasite in Seetharama Iyer's house, how does it concern my father? When Father brands me a parasite, I know he includes Mani in the same category. Now, what does Father have to say about himself? Has he ever done any physical work in his entire life - say, even for a month? Is he not actually enjoying my grandfather's property? This is a fairly decent apartment complex and it fetches Father a monthly rent of four hundred and eighty rupees. Father has whiled away time - actually his whole life - just playing cards. If Father had built this place as a self made man, probably I would have refused to live in this house even for a single day. Sometimes I feel a strong urge to challenge him when he calls me a parasite. Of course, challenging is the easy thing to do; what happens next, what is my next option? I have none, so I must continue living as a parasite. Can I deny the truth that I really depend on my father? Can I respond by calling him a freeloader too? Though my grandfather or some other ancestor built this house, the fact remains that my father is the current owner. Whether he is crude, arrogant or mean, he certainly deserves my respect. When I confront him face to face, I can do only one thing - obey him without any reservation. If he is mad, I feel so frightened I suddenly become speechless. Only recently did Father stop beating me, but I think I will have that nagging fear as long as he is alive.

I hear Father calling me.

“Here I am, I am coming,” I respond. I tighten my *dhoti*, and climb down the stairs in no time.

The situation downstairs looks quite serious - just as I had feared. The courtyard is full of people. Mangalam Auntie looks at me with quivering lips and her eyes begging mercy; Mani, terrified, is crouching on the floor, his head bowed, his hair apparently messed up in a scuffle, and his shirt slightly torn near the collar. Father is standing next to him, his legs firmly planted on the ground, in the posture of Emperor Napoleon - he seems satisfied he could single-handedly subdue Mani. Missing from the scene are a ~~can~~on and an army division under Father's command. Everyone seems frightened by Father - nobody dare voice any opinion against him, lest he lash out at them. Terror hangs in the air and just like me even those with a sense of right and wrong seem reduced to silence - acting as if they are fully behind Father's actions.

Mangalam Auntie looks miserable even as she continues to sob. I am overcome by shame when I see the evidence before my very eyes of Father acting like a bully to rough up Mani.

Granted Father's anger and actions are justified, but how can he be so naïve to think his actions would not bring shame on Seetharama Iyer - whom he calls an innocent soul? I know Father's temperament; he is quick to judge and 'punish' every one - only to repent later.

Even before I come down the stairs, Father grows impatient and is mad as hell, addressing me three times. First he calls me '*Ambi*', then utters my first name, and

finally gnashes his teeth and hollers, “Where are you - you big, fat fellow?”

I stand before him. I am trembling inside.

“Go to the canteen and ask Seetharama Iyer to come home - at once.”

Mercifully, I am off the hook; I run headlong and get out of the house. Only when I find myself walking on the street do I begin to think calmly.

How dare Father interfere in the most frightening, delicate, and sensitive matter of another man’s wife! How will this end? I am really scared.

Seetharama Iyer is a simple, decent man. I knew him even when I was a kid. I have never seen him get angry; he would be always laughing or making others laugh with his jokes. If others didn’t react to his jokes, he would himself break into a loud laughter. Till two years ago he lived as one among our family - occupying the same room, which I now use. On the walls one can see photos of Seetharama Iyer in various postures doing exercises; often he would ask me to accompany him to the Vivekananda Gym. He would offer me raw peanuts soaked in water. He gave up all that soon after he got married.

He was someone who glorified bachelorhood and remained single till he was forty; then, suddenly one day he showed up with his new bride, Mangalam. Almost everyone relished the story of how he got married. Seetharama Iyer would stand in the courtyard and regale the tenants gathered near the water tap with the events that led to his ‘sudden marriage,’ and Mangalam Auntie,

who listened from inside the house, would relish his story - telling and smile to herself.

The canteen is still a furlong away. It is located inside a tutorial college. I have heard that the principal of the college and Seetharama Iyer went to school together; therefore, Seetharama Iyer enjoys all kinds of privileges. But Seetharama Iyer often told me: "You should not accept privileges simply because someone offers them to you."

Now, what am I supposed to tell him to convince him that he must return home with me? I am not going to volunteer anything; I am just a kid. I will simply tell him my father wants to see him at once. I will tell him this is an 'emergency.'

When I meet with Seetharama Iyer face to face, I always address him as Uncle. But in my heart he always remains Seetharama Iyer.

Two years ago Seetharama Iyer went to Palaghat after getting an invitation for his niece's wedding. Seetharama Iyer used to regularly send every month fifty rupees to his sister by money order. Some quarrel took place at his niece's wedding and the upshot was the bridegroom's father dragged the boy away from the altar just before he was to tie '*thali*' to his bride. I suppose the bridegroom was a timid fellow like me. Seetharama Iyer's sister broke down and pleaded with her brother to 'save my face and the family's honor.' Seetharama Iyer, who was till then busy working with the bride's party and ushering in the visitors, ordered the proceedings to continue as usual and then rushed toward the altar, took the place of the absent bridegroom and married his niece. He would amuse listeners by describing this incident in his own inimitable

style and provoke laughter from them. He is always open, frank and would entertain his wife and others with the narrative. One day he asked his wife - in the company of others:

“In *Swayamvaram*, a princess would often wed a man quite different from the one in her mind. In your case, you were thinking of some other guy about to marry you, but you ended up marrying me. Tell me, what were you actually thinking at that time?” Mangalam Auntie was in the backyard drawing water from the tap. Uncle’s words - uttered in a playful gesture - probably pricked her, but she answered him with a smile.

“I was not thinking of anyone in particular,” she said. “I was praying to God for a happy life, and I am now pleased God blessed me with such a life.”

I reached the tutorial college; the canteen is behind it. As I enter the canteen I see Uncle standing in a corner before a mirror on the wall while combing his hair. He removes a shirt hanging from a nail on the wall, empties its pocket and shakes it vigorously. He restores his purse, puts the *pan* packet and the comb back into the shirt pocket and again examines his reflection in the mirror. Then he notices me standing behind him, turns back, smiles and says: “Come in, would you like to have some coffee?”

“No thanks. My father wants you - he says it is an emergency.”

“Well, tell me when your father didn’t have an emergency. Did you have coffee at home?”

“No, I was asleep. Father woke me up and asked me to fetch you immediately.”

“Okay, why don’t you sit down?” He goes inside and brings some *kesari* and *boondhi* in a plate and serves me on a nearby bench. He addresses someone “Gundumani” and orders a cup of coffee. Kesari tastes good, but even as I savor it, I feel butterflies floating in my stomach. Gundumani serves me coffee. Uncle goes to the counter, picks up an oblong notebook and scribbles something in it. Is he noting down my coffee expense? He returns to my bench, and helps himself with a few betel leaves. I try to swallow the coffee in a hurry.

My mind is in turmoil: I recall the tension back home - Father’s frenzied possession, Mangalam Auntie’s desperate pleas, Mani’s humiliation, the shameless silence on the part of the crowd in the courtyard and my mother’s tacit support for Father’s actions. On the other hand, I can’t help watching before my very eyes Seetharama Iyer’s cool manner, his warmth and affection toward me - while he is totally in the dark about the events at home. I begin to wonder if I am guilty of betraying his good will - because I am also acting cool and enjoying his hospitality. Suddenly I feel my throat choking.

I wash my hands in the sink and hurry him up, “Come on Uncle, let’s go!”

“Wait a minute, don’t rush. I think they are probably short of a hand for the card game. I am also about to leave for home . . . Now, I heard someone saying you want to join the military, is it really true? The military would be a disaster if it lets people like you to enlist in its service! Can

you lift a single rifle? I have been drilling into your ears day after day to take up some kind of physical exercise, but you don't listen!" He proudly displays his strong muscles to prove his point. Seetharama Iyer had long ago given up physical exercise; still his body is in excellent shape.

"Uncle, let's go. Father will be really mad at me!" I beg him. He puts on the slippers and walks out of the compound gate, but not before exchanging some glances and pleasantries with a few neighbors and giving in to outbursts - loud enough to draw attention from people all around. My stomach turns when I think of the irony - a bitter surprise awaiting this decent man at home. I think he is quite popular with the students in the tutorial college; as we walk past the compound gate, we hear a voice: "Uncle, are you done for the day?" We turn around and notice four students standing on the top floor with their notebooks. "I should be back by six," Uncle replies and waves back at them.

Praising those students, Uncle goes on: "They are the students who have failed in their exams. Do you know why they failed? They are not dullards like you. They are really smart - which is why they fail! Now, take your own case: you have never failed in any exam, yet how has that record helped you? The only thing these boys can't do is to pass their exam, but they are smart when it comes to facing all other challenges in life! That's the truth! Now, I just forgot to tell you . . . The other day I spoke to the principal about you. I told him you are a nice kid and would be interested in working as a waiter in our canteen; I also told him to let me know if any position comes up in

the principal's office." Uncle keeps on rambling, but nothing seems to hold my attention.

"Why this big hurry? Why did your father ask you to fetch me home - and that too, immediately?" Uncle winks at me mischievously; I feel like crying.

"Don't ask me, I don't know anything; I was asleep." He didn't understand why I was pleading ignorance. He smiles to himself - like he always does.

For the first time I begin to wonder if what my mother said about Mangalam Auntie and what my father found out could be really true. Till now I felt like an outsider detached from this scandal; now suddenly I am an insider and feel emotional about the whole thing: Did Mangalam Auntie really betray her husband? Is Mani really a scoundrel? If that were true Father's actions seem just and proper! Is Father justified in demanding that Uncle whip Mani with his footwear? Now, what about Mangalam Auntie, how do you deal with her? Would she be committing adultery just because of the twenty years' age difference between her and her husband? How is Uncle going to handle this, sudden bitter revelation? Will he be driven to some outrageous act? Who knows? I bow down my head and walk faster. Uncle too increases his pace.

Daily, in the afternoons, Mani and Mangalam Auntie typically play some indoor game. Mani is also a good singer. Uncle would often encourage Mani to sing. Mani helps Auntie with all domestic chores. Mani also hails from Palaghat - and it is said Mangalam Auntie knew him even in her hometown. Is it possible there was some hanky - panky going on even in those days? How can Uncle

face this outrage? I wish he didn't have to endure this horror . . .

We reach our home.

As soon as Uncle makes his appearance in the courtyard most in the crowd watching the fun as bystanders suddenly flee to their houses. Father continues to display fearlessness and holds on to the court. For a moment, I really feel proud about Father's courage.

"Please come in . . ." Father mumbles something and invites Seetharama Iyer. Mangalam, still crying, suddenly falls at her husband's feet. Mani, still trembling, rises from his seat. Father shoots off in all earnestness, and begins, "Here we have decent families . . ." but Uncle shuts him off, saying, "Please keep quiet." Father suddenly becomes speechless, still bristling. He keeps gnashing his teeth, but Uncle ignores him. Then Uncle pulls up Mangalam Auntie from the floor - as if she was a baby - and asks her: "Why are you crying? Tell me what happened." Mangalam Auntie couldn't make herself clear - because she was still crying - and Father meanwhile began his harangue.

"Why should I care?" he begins. "I rushed here because I feel sorry for you - how these people have exploited your good intentions! If you don't believe my words, ask others assembled here! Where is everybody? Why should I utter a lie? I know you for the last twenty years, so when someone betrays you, I feel they are betraying me! What an outrage!"

Now Mother too joins him. "Didn't I warn you? Why should we care?" Both my parents now shudder to think if they have been uttering lies. Seetharama Iyer remains

calm and turns toward Father: "Rajamani Iyer, Don't I know you? Now, please ask your wife to go home with you." Sensing that Father didn't get the message, Seetharama Iyer turns to Mother and orders her: "Please ask your husband to take you home!" Then he again turns to his wife, mildly taps on her shoulder and inquires: "Stop crying, tell me what happened." Auntie cries even louder, but slowly manages to convey what is in her mind:

"Mani and I were sitting there . . . ," she says while pointing her hand at the floor inside the house. Her hand suddenly comes to a complete stop. Her voice seems frozen and as she recalled the scene inside that house a short while ago, her sobs became even more violent.

"Ssh . . . no more crying . . . tell me without crying." Uncle comforts her as if she was a baby.

"Mani and I were playing *dayam* inside the house. Because it was too hot - the sunlight was directly coming through - I shut the front door. All the windows were open - as usual. Mani complained of headache and was resting. I put away all the pieces after the game - when this Uncle (pointing at Father, Rajamani Iyer) came and . . ." She could go no further. Mani too - standing in a corner - cries along with her.

"Stop acting silly! Stop crying! Looks like it will take some time before Rajamani Iyer will shower on you the same kind of love and affection he now displays toward me! I know him for the last twenty years, but you are new here!" Mangalam Auntie, still crying, goes on: "They dragged Mani into the court yard . . . They are accusing me of all kinds of evil acts . . . I am willing to take an oath

by grabbing a pile of hot coals with my bare hands.” Seetharama Iyer begins to laugh at her protests.

“Rajamani Iyer, what is this? Mangalam is my wife, and Mani is part of our family. I know them and I also know you. Mangalam is new here, but I am here for many years and I also know how you run your family and manage things around here . . . Only the man who trusts his wife can trust others’ wives. Now, let me ask your wife something: You go the religious discourses in our temple, don’t you? Do you know the episode in *Mahabharata*, where Duryodhana’s wife and *Karna* play an indoor game? When Duryodhana’s wife gets up in the middle of the game, *Karna* grabs her waistband and orders her to sit down and just at this very moment *Duryodhana* happens to walk in . . . You must have heard the story . . . Now Duryodhana is supposed to be an evil man, but he was a man, a real man - so he didn’t suspect his wife of infidelity! How can you call someone a man if he can’t trust his own wife? How funny! Rajamani Iyer, do you really think I should talk to my neighbors to judge my wife’s character? I am quite amused by what you think of me!” He gives in to a loud outburst, and continues: “I have a piece of advice to all the husbands living here: every husband must confine himself to taking care of his own wife. That will take care of everything!”

“Why are you still crying?” he admonishes Mani. “Wash your face and go inside.” Mani goes to the water tap, but Mangalam Auntie continues to cry.

“Let me ask you, why do you need all these folks to trust you? I have full trust in you. Let us go in!” He comforts her and leads her into the house.

“I am really afraid to live in this house, why don’t we move to some other place?” Maybe that was what Mangalam Auntie asked him. I heard only Seetharama Iyer’s answer.

“Don’t be silly! Wherever we go, the world is going to be the same.”

I remembered the old proverb I read at school: *Caesar’s wife must be above suspicion*. Whatever one may think of Mangalam Auntie, I think Seetharama Iyer is Caesar.

NOTE:

Original title: “*Caesar*,” published in 1972

GLOSSARY

Ambi

A nickname for a male child.

Bhoondi

A deep fried Indian fritter made from chickpeas - flour and eaten as a snack.

Bushcoat

A short, tightfitting sleeveless garment worn by men.

Caesar's wife must be above suspicion

In Roman society, the wife of the emperor (Caesar) was supposed to be the Guardian of Roman honor. She was supposed to be above reproach; if her morals were called in question, it was a serious problem to her husband's image. Hence the above proverbial expression.

Dayam

An indoor game played by two or more players by moving pieces on a maze of chalk lines on the floor.

Dhoti

Unstitched garment for men that hangs from waist to ankle.

Dosa

Fermented thin pancakes made from a mixture of ground rice and lentils; very popular dish in South India.

Horlicks

A malted, milky hot drink.

“I am willing to swear - holding fast a pile of hot coals in my hand”

This has allusion to the episode *Agni Pravesam* in Ramayana. Sita, Rama’s wife is held prisoner by Ravana, the Demon King, for fourteen years. After Sita was rescued Rama tells her he cannot accept her as his wife after she has spent so long in another man’s house. Sita proclaims her chastity, unswerving devotion and her innocence by undergoing the ordeal by fire.

Iyer/Iyengar

These are names given to the community of Brahmins (members of priestly class/caste). Followers of Adi Shankara, the Iyers are secular in their worship of the large pantheon of Hindu deities: Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna, Ganesha, etc. Among this group, Iyers primarily worship Shiva. Iyengars profess the philosophy codified by Ramanuja and primarily worship Vishnu.

Jnanpith Award

Pronounced as Gyanpeeth Award. In Sanskrit, Jnanpith means

‘seat of knowledge.’ Instituted in 1961, it is the country’s highest literary award given to an Indian writer for outstanding contribution to literature.

Kesari

A sweet dish made by boiling the semolina with cashew, cardamom, etc added to it.

Kolu

Traditionally a women’s festival when an array of figurines are displayed in the houses during the nine days of Navrathri festival.

Kumkum

Saffron powder - worn on the forehead usually by women as a sign of auspiciousness.

Ladies Club

A place for social gathering among middle and upper class women.

Mahabharata

An Indian epic about the war between two groups - the *Pandavas* and the *Kauravas*. *Duryodhana* and *Karna* belonged to the *Kaurava* group.

Pan

An ethnic Indian chew made of betel leaves and other ingredients, typically served at the end of an Indian meal. Eaten as a digestion enhancer and breath freshener.

Puja Room

Room of worship.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa

A great Indian spiritual leader (1836 - 1886)

Sahitya Academy

Established by the Government of India in 1954 to foster and coordinate literary activities in all Indian languages, and thereby promote the cultural unity of India. The word Sahitya, in Sanskrit, implies the unity of word and meaning and also that of the reader and the writer.

Sar

An informal term of respect among the middle class Tamil Brahmins.

Swami Vivekananda

A disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and a spiritual influence on East and West (1863 - 1902)

Swayamvaram

Literally means one's own desire. A ceremony where a maid chooses her future husband from among several suitors.

Thali

A gold chain or a turmeric smeared cord with holy pendants tied by the bridegroom around the bride's neck at a wedding.

Tulsi Mandapam

Basil plant (considered sacred) on a raised platform for worship.

Veena

A classical seven - stringed musical instrument with a gourd - like part, plucked with fingers or plectrum.

Veera Shaivites

The followers of Lord Siva; they are termed the 'heroic' or the most devout.



Jayakanthan

“ ...TILL DEATH DO US PART ... ”

AND OTHER STORIES

Translated from Tamil by Andy Sundaresan

Foreword by Dr. K.S. Subramanian

“Marriage is the first step in a process where a man or woman, who has been living for his or her own sake, is willing to live for another person. Marriage forms the narrowest, yet the most basic circle of cooperation in social relationships. It is this spirit of mutual cooperation and sacrifice that finally elevates the partners and thus the human society they live in.”

From the short story ‘The Scorching Truth’

One can turn to literature to learn about marriage — as an ideal and as a fact. In this anthology of stories by Jayakanthan, widely acclaimed as ‘the most eminent creative Tamil writer of the second half of the twentieth century’, readers will find consolation and inspiration in equal measure.

The title story explores the chasm between the dual roles of Anantharaman – his intimate reality as a banal tyrant and his public masquerade as a free-thinking intellectual. We follow, in the person of Anantharaman, the making of a ‘gentleman’ from a middle class family and his struggle for identity within the contradictions of society.

All the seven stories reflect something of the infinite diversity in marriage and give a broad perspective on the nature of marriage and its manifestations with lucidity and insight. It is the uneasy alternation of feeling, of pathos and irony, of intimacy and estrangement that makes up the sweet and sour pleasure of this anthology.

Andy Sundaresan has translated many of Jayakanthan’s works from Tamil to English. His first book of Jayakanthan’s short stories, under the title, ‘*Trial by Fire*’, was published in June 2000. He lives in El Cerrito, California.

*Photo of Jayakanthan - courtesy of Jayakanthan Pakkam
Website hosted by Mr. P.K. Sivakumar.*