

## **TRIAL BY FIRE AND OTHER STORIES**

*Dhandapani Jayakanthan was born in Tamilnadu, India, in 1934. His formal education ended in 5<sup>th</sup> grade but he continued his self education at the University of open road. The result is a prolific writing career which spans almost half a century and consists of 200 short stories, 35 novellas, 15 novels and 550 essays in Tamil. He has also produced award winning feature films and directed a few. He is a Fellow of Indian literary Society known as Sahithya Academy and received many awards for literature including Sahithya Academy Award. Some of his works have been translated into English, Ukrainian, Hindi, Telugu and several other Indian languages. Recently a documentary has been produced on Jayakanthan by Sahithya Academy. He lives in Chennai, India*

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JAYAKANTHAN

TRIAL BY FIRE  
and other Stories

Translated from Tamil by  
Andy Sundaresan



Cindhanai Vattam  
New Jersey

Published by Cindhanai Vattam 2000

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This book is published by Cindhanai Vattam to honour the US visit of  
Mr.Jayakanthan

**CINDHANAI VATTAM**  
**4, McIntire Drive**  
**Belle Mead**  
**NewJersey - 08502**  
**USA.**

**Cover Design by**  
**Pugazhenth**

Printed at DesignNet, Chennai-12.  
Ph : 044-6612551

*For my parents and  
sister India Devimani, who initiated me  
into the joys of printed word.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Meenakshi Puthaka Nilayam, the original publisher of these stories in Tamil. For copies of the original contact: Meenakshi Puthaka Nilayam, 48, Dhanappa Mudali Street, Madurai, Tamilnadu, India.

The English and Tamil Titles are given here along with the name of the short story collections in which they appeared.

- 1) A Personal Revelation- *Suya Dharisanam*: a story in *Suya Dharisanam*, a short story Collection. First edition 1967 and Eighth edition 1994.
- 2) Trial by fire- *Agni Pravesam*: a story in *Suya Dharisanam*, a short story Collection, First edition 1967 and Eighth edition 1994.
- 3) He is only a devotee- *Pavam Bakthar Thaney*- a story in *Irantha Kaalangal*, a short story collection - First edition 1969 and Seventh edition 1995.
- 4) The Low Class- *Tharakkuraivu*- a story in *Yuga Candhi*, a short story collection- First edition 1963 and Sixth edition 1977.
- 5) The Lunch Boxes - *Sotru Cumai*- a story in *Thevan Varuvaaraa?*, a short story collection, First Edition 1961 and ninth edition 1996.
- 6) Those cowards- *Anthak Kozhaikal*- a story in *Suya Dharisanam*, a short story Collection, First edition 1967 and Eighth edition 1994.
- 7) The Millionaires- *Latchadhipathikal*- a story in *Suya Dharisanam*, a short story Collection, First edition 1967 and Eighth edition 1994.
- 8) Beyond logic- *Tharkathirku Appaal*- a story in *Yuga Candhi*, a short story collection- First edition 1963 and Sixth edition 1977.
- 9) The Cross- *Siluvai*- a story in *Sumai Thangi*, short story collection, First Edition 1963, Eighth edition 1994.
- 10) Adults Only- *Adults only*- a story in *Yuga Candhi*, a short story collection- First edition 1963 and Sixth edition 1977.
- 11) Only Mistakes, not crimes!- *Thavarugal, Kuttranga! Alla*- a story in *Guru Peetam*, a short story collection, First Edition 1971, seventh Edition 1995.
- 12) Many Angles, Many Views! - *Ethanik Konam, Ethanaip Paarvai*- a story in *Pudialvaarpugal*, short story collection. First Edition 1965, Fifth Edition, 1994.
- 13) A Literary man's Political Experiences by Prof. M.S. Venkataramani, Vikas Publications, New Delhi, 1975.
- 14) *Jayakanthan Manivizhamalar*. Souvenir published on the occasion of author's sixtieth birthday, April 24, 1994.

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## Publisher's Note

"Literature is a mirror of life", someone observed a long time ago. But some mirrors are convex and some concave. It takes an extraordinary skill to reflect life as it is. When literature depicts life truthfully, one sees not only the beauty but also the power and utility of literature. Each person has only one life to live but literature makes it possible to see and feel the lives of the many. Thus the author becomes a creator and the work becomes an art. Jayakanthan is one such creator and his works are great forms of art.

During the past fifty years, Jayakanthan has been a prolific writer in Tamil, a language spoken by 60 million people in the world. He has written 200 short-stories, 35 novellas, 15 novels and 550 essays. If the author's mastery of social observation is fresh and amazingly close to our hearts, it is even more amazing to see that quality and creative energy directed in marshalling the hundreds of characters who people his stories. Subramania Bharati, the great Tamil poet, once said, "It is easy to recover any loss in Tamilnadu except for the poems of Avvaiyyar". When we take stock of the twentieth century Tamil literature, the same statement holds true for few others, including Jayakanthan.

Cindhanai Vattam takes pride in bringing this anthology of Jayakanthan's short stories to the US readers. In this anthology we try to give a feel for the variety and intensity of Jayakanthan's writings - how he presents the inner workings of human mind, depicts the subtle feelings of individuals and draws profound conclusions from these character-studies. This is the hallmark of Jayakanthan we intend to present to the readers in this volume.

**Trial by Fire** gives the common Indian outlook on rape and in this case how a mother handles the situation to safeguard her daughter from the onslaught of society in the traditional Indian context.

**A Personal Revelation** describes the inner turmoil of an individual, who happens to be a brahmin and is in conflict with himself.

**The Lunch Boxes** shows the plight of a working class woman trying to educate her child; in doing so we glimpse the nobility and endurance of ordinary people.

**The Millionaires** is about a life on the edge and its redemption.

**He is only A Devotee** is a story that takes place in the "Twilight Zone".

**The Low class** is a dialogue between two individuals leading to the question whether language alone can reveal a person.

**The Cross** is about the confession of an uncommon nun- is she really uncommon?

**Beyond Logic** may seem an episode out of the Twilight Zone. But it's not. It takes place right in front of a railroad station in Madras City. To whom do the fruits of charity belong - to the giver or the receiver?

**Those Cowards** is a portrait of a sex addict - but this is no usual titillating story.

**Adults Only**- A light-hearted tale of the impact of adult emotions on an adolescent boy.

**Many Angles, Many Views!**- A family crisis in which everyone has his or her own point of view. How does one feel about the final outcome? the irony of the situation is sure to engender an emotional response -anger or sadness.

**Only Mistakes, not crimes!**- A story of sexual harassment - but with a twist. No stereotypes here -either in the characters or the way the story ends.

I personally thank Mr. Andy Sundaresan for the lovely translations and Prof. George Hart of University of California, Berkeley for encouraging Andy to do this valuable work and involving me in this publication. My thanks are also due to the original publishers of these short stories in Tamil and to the author Jayakanthan for giving permission to publish them in U.S.

I appreciate Mr. Ramakrishnan, writer from Tamilnadu for taking care of the printing work and Mr. Pugalendhi for the cover design.

This book is published by Cindhanai Vattam to honour the US visit of Mr. Jayakanthan on the occasion of receiving an Excellence Award from the Federation of Tamil Sangams of North America for his life time contributions to Modern Tamil Literature.

Muruganandam  
Belle Mead,  
New Jersey  
July, 2000

## Foreword

Jayakanthan is a thoroughly modern writer. His stories are realistic, his dialogues reproduce with uncanny accuracy the myriad dialects of modern Tamil, his sensibility is grounded in the moral ambivalence of the twentieth century. Yet, for all that, he is a product of two thousand years of Tamil literature and history, and without some awareness of that literature and history, many aspects of Jayakanthan's writing will escape the reader. In this foreword, I will remark on several themes that run through this remarkable body of writing and performance, suggesting how they appear and are used in Jayakanthan's work.

The oldest literature we possess in Tamil is called Sangam Literature and dates from the first two centuries of the common era. It contains much of the finest literature ever written in South Asia (or anywhere else): the Eight Anthologies and Ten Songs explore life from many different perspectives and approaches. The poems are divided into two overarching categories: akam, or "interior," love poems that concern life within the family, and puram, or "exterior," poems about life outside the family, including poems on the king, heroism, death, poverty, and ethics. It is not at all strange that Jayakanthan's stories should mirror these two views of life, as they have persisted among Tamils (and, it has been argued, other South Asians) to this day. Such stories as "Trial by Fire" and "Many Angles" are carefully crafted to show the views and interactions within a Tamil family, while such stories as "The Lunch Boxes" and "The Millionaires" deal with the life of the poor and ethical issues in society at large.

Most classical Indian texts view the world from a religious perspective: usually, tragedy is seen as part of a cosmic scheme, precipitated by past deeds and dealt with by devotion to divinity. Sangam literature does not share this characteristic: tragedy and suffering are purely and simply part of the human condition. Here, also, Jayakanthan is prefigured: in his stories, he does not hide beyond a philosophical facade or attempt to explain suffering in philosophical terms. Like the poets of ancient Tamil, Jayakanthan sees suffering as inherent in life, brought on by men's indifference to one another and by the irrational demands of society.

Any reader of these stories will be struck by Jayakanthan's affinity for the lower classes. He brings to life ordinary, low-class people in many of his stories-"The Low Class," "The Lunch Boxes." This focus is a very ancient one in Tamil literature. The Sangam poems themselves were



modeled on the productions of low-class bards and drummers, and many of the "exterior" poems describe with great realism the poverty and suffering of low-class performers.

Even in the earliest times, Tamil society was, like that of the American South, rigidly structured with many rules. As time went on, these rules only became stronger. There were restrictions between the mixing of castes—as there were between races in the South. There were family obligations, generosity sanctioned by power, and a host of other kinds of behavior that one had to either avoid or engage in. The result, inevitably, was a conflict between what was felt to be ethically or morally right and what was demanded by the social order. A similar conflict has been used by modern American southern writers such as Faulkner. In South India, the conflict between the socially enjoined and the ethical has been exploited by writers from Sangam times. One ancient poet describes how a king is generous to a reckless bard of lower class in spite of that bard's insulting behavior; another narrates how king Nannan would go to hell for killing a young woman who desecrated his special tree. Jayakanthan uses the conflict he still sees in the society around him in almost all of his stories. "Trial by Fire" is a good example, showing a young girl who, by the standards of the society, should never be allowed to be married, and yet who by any rational ethical standards should have a full life.

This leads to another opposition that has characterized Tamil literature through the ages: that of *aram* (often translated as righteousness) versus *maram* (valor, striving for glory or position). From the earliest times, we find an opposition being made between these two qualities. *Maram* is the irrational and reckless bravery that a warrior exhibits in war. It includes not only boldness, but a desire to force one's will on others and prevail and to attain status and rank. It is often associated with extreme, self-serving conduct. *Aram* is compassion, self-sacrifice, acting according to the dictates of religion, calmness and patience. These two qualities are contrasted again and again through the history of Tamil. In the stories given here, *maram* often appears as a striving after pride and status, while *aram* manifests itself as a willingness to sacrifice, to manifest calmness and forbearance. In "The Millionaires," for example, the young hero shows *maram* as he curses his servants, but then, when he sees his father's picture, suddenly reverts to silence and patience—*aram*.

A few hundred years after Sangam literature, the concern with moral issues found in the earlier literature crystallized into a series of works on moral themes that are still held in the highest esteem by the Tamils. Chief

of these is the *Tirukkural*, arguably the most famous and best-known work in the language. Consisting of very short verses (*kural* means "short verse" and "dwarf"), the *Tirukkural* is an exhaustive study of the aims of human life. The best-known sections of the work examine ethics and morality with a fineness of sensibility that has rarely been equaled. Ever since this great work was written, Tamils have been mesmerized by it. They quote it profusely, put its verses on buses, attach them to bicycles, put them in public places, and show an affection for the text and the ethical issues it explores that I have not seen among any other group. Certainly this moral awareness informs Jayakanthan's writings: virtually every story he has written is a meditation on ethics, its ambivalences, and its working out. Whether it is the opposition between chastity and kindness ("Trial by Fire"), between a man's good nature and temptations ("Only Mistakes, Not Crimes"), or between a man's choice for a bride and his family's desires ("Many Angles"), Jayakanthan's stories always involve the working out of some complex moral dilemma. They remind us of an ancient Tamil and Hindu principle: that *aram* (*dharma*) is characterized by extreme subtlety.

For the most part, Sangam literature consists of relatively short poems that describe a vignette or situation and illuminate an emotional state or need. For this reason, A. K. Ramanujan, who first translated Sangam love poems into English, titled his translation *The Interior Landscape*. The *Tirukkural* takes this tradition of small works illuminating a whole and, with its moral emphasis, takes it even further, compressing each thought into one and a half haiku-like lines. A famous verse attributed to the poet *Kapilar* describes the *Tirukkural*:

A tiny drop of water as it hangs on a blade of grass  
 even smaller than a millet seed mirrors  
 the tall palmyra tree — just so is the breadth  
 of the small *venpa* of *Valluvar*, O king  
 of rich lands where female birds sleep in the caves  
 to the singing of women pounding their mortars.

This could be applied just as well to many of Jayakanthan's short stories. He comes from a tradition that excels at compression, at expressing much in a short space, and he uses the instincts and methods he learned from that tradition to pack an enormous amount into each of his stories. For that reason, they can be read again and again; with each reading, one feels he has found new suggestion and new nuances.

Dilip Kumar, a visiting Tamil writer from India, recently told me that he feels young Tamil writers need to pay more attention to their own tradition, to understand and use its resources and its richness. Jayakanthan, I would contend, demonstrates the validity of Kumar's observation. A writer who is fully aware of all the traditions, devices, and history of modern writing in the West and India, Jayakanthan nonetheless exploits fully the extraordinary heritage of Tamil literature in his writing.

**George L. Hart**

Professor

University of California

Berkeley

July 2000

## Introducing Jayakanthan

Jayakanthan's is a bold and vigorous voice in Tamil arts and literary world. In the almost fifty years since he first published a short story in *Sowbhagyam* (1950), a non-commercial Tamil journal, he has emerged from obscurity to a position as perhaps the best known of all modern Tamil writers. Writer, journalist, essayist, pamphleteer, film-maker, and critic - he has been challenging his readers and critics in both form and content, and makes the works of his contemporaries to seem increasingly trivial and old-fashioned.

I want to introduce Jayakanthan to US readers through his short stories. At a time when Indian fiction is engaging interest in the United States, as can be testified by the growing popularity of writers like Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Divakurni Banerjee, Sashi Tharur, Vikram Seth and others, the fact remains that much of that literature comes from Indian authors who write in English. A vast amount of Indian literature in the other 18 regional remains virtually inaccessible to foreigners; in fact even a vast majority of native Indians remain ignorant of this rich heritage because it is not available in English, a language reassuringly familiar to the elite or as a translation in their own mother tongue.

Jayakanthan is a Tamil writer whose stories and essays, published over the years in Tamil journals, have commanded a very wide readership. Some of his stories have appeared in English translation and been included as part of anthologies of short stories by other Indian authors; however, what is available in translation pales into insignificance when one considers the author's vast output that includes hundreds of short stories, 35 novellas, 15 full novels, and numerous essays. The National Book Trust of India, a state enterprise, published in seventies a selection of Jayakanthan's short stories in various Indian languages. The author also received national exposure through his works broadcast over *Doordarshan*, the national television, and by his induction into the prestigious national Sahitya Academy as a Fellow, the youngest person ever to be so honored by that body.

This is a first step - a small one - in a way to introduce Jayakanthan to Tamil and non-Tamil readers in US. We start with the short stories - because offering them in a first publication seemed only natural thing to do. It makes a lot more sense to introduce to new readers his short stories

rather than the longer pieces (novellas and novels). Jayakanthan began his literary career as a short story writer and there is much in this selection to savor the range and scope of his vision. These stories, I believe, not only stand as valuable windows into the main body of work of a great Tamil writer, but are also remarkable pieces of literature in themselves.

Jayakanthan was born on April 24, 1934 in a lower middle class family in a small village near Cuddalore in Tamilnadu. Denied the warmth and affection of a father who was mostly absent from home and eventually abandoned the family, Jayakanthan's formative years were spent with his Communist uncle, in what he was subsequently to learn, was a small party commune. Earlier, his mother's efforts to educate her son came to nothing, and the boy dropped out of school in fifth grade. The commune life was a turning point in the boy's life; as an errand-boy in the office of *Janasakthi*, the official journal of the Communist Party, Jayakanthan saw around him well-read men, patriots and persons who made great sacrifices. The good-for-nothing boy, as his mother saw him, was soon transformed into someone who "was ashamed of my degrading qualities, became a self-respecting man." The Communist party inculcated in him the dignity of labor, and soon he was doing all kinds of blue-collar jobs - a porter at the railway station, a vendor of 'song books' at movie houses, an assistant to a *tongawala*. He worked at these jobs with a sense of honour and dignity and it was during these years, Jayakanthan later claimed, he was enrolled in the University of Open Road. His "studies" in that university were to be the indispensable foundation for his subsequent literary work. He described his life of those days in one of his essays:

*"There was a time when I numbered among my close friends rickshaw-drivers, prostitutes, rowdies, pickpockets and cigarette-butt scavengers. Perhaps because of that fact I can never work up disgust towards their kind. There is a sense of involvement among them. Sometimes I even wonder whether I wouldn't have been happier if I had decided to live among them as one of the 'family'. Truly, an attraction for their life came to be planted in my youthful mind . . . There is in the life of such people a flaming passion, a liveliness, and truth!"*

Jayakanthan's career so far embraces three principal phases: the usual time of apprenticeship (1947-1964), when he tried to make up his mind if he would become a writer and what kind he should be; the time of genius (1964-1988), when he not only settled upon his "personal credo" and his vocation, but produced the most remarkable series of first-rate short stories.

novellas and novels; and the period of "consolidation and affirmation" (1988 to the present), when the presentation of his kaleidoscopic vision of humanity - *manithabimanam* - was enriched and elaborated upon and the author tried to push far beyond it to attempt a statement about universal truth.

The period of apprenticeship produced short stories that are interesting primarily for what they say of a young man groping for a style and subject. His early years of growing up in the City - Chennai - provided him with the characters, settings and conflicts that appear in his short stories. They dealt with lives and loves, trials and tribulations, and the cupidity and the nobility of the humble and the lowly. In addition, the speech patterns and rhymes that flow through the dialogues of his early short stories (published in an anthology titled 'One Morsel of Rice') reflect these influences. The criticism would soon grow that Jayakanthan could write only about people from the "lower strata." Jayakanthan explained his stand in an interview:

*" . . . They hold a notion that I have all along been writing about people of the 'lower strata.' But haven't I really been writing about high level people among the so-called 'lower strata'? . . . Who belongs to the higher strata and who to the lower strata? That cannot be determined by their position or by their place of living. It is by how they are - how they live - that a determination should be made.*

*"However lowly and 'decadent' are the matters that I have to take up broadly for depiction in my story, I tend to place special emphasis on whatever is elevating and meaningful for life embedded in them. And thus I sing of the glory of life."*

When I read Jayakanthan's stories again for writing this anthology I discovered things I didn't perceive before. Even among those I considered my favourites, I found there is much more to learn and admire - for example the author's command over Tamil, whether it is gutter slang spoken by a *rickshawallah* or the sophisticated, mild-mannered phrases in a middle-class Brahmin family - invariably in every story it is the dialogue that breathes vitality into the narrative, his empathy for characters who are trying to deal with some problem at hand.

I discovered each story has something that personally touches and reveals a particular aspect of the reader. Some might consider this a drawback, as some critics certainly did, that the last thing a short story should do is to preach. On the other hand what Jayakanthan does is to

introduce us to the characters and let us watch them speak and act. His stories are vivid portrayals of life as he sees them, and they embrace the humanity as a whole.

It is no cliché to say that this book would not have been possible without the steady and continuous encouragement from my daughter Anu and Prof. George Hart of UC Berkeley, California, and Mr. Muruganandam from *Cindhanai Vattam*. My thanks to Anu - mentioned here in a formal gesture - go beyond mere words. I asked her to go over a couple of my stories in translations way back in 1995 and tell me how they sound to the uninitiated. She readily sensed my passion for Jayakanthan and suggested we try to introduce Jayakanthan to a wider readership in US, starting with the Bay Area.

Mr. Muruganandam had spent considerable time going through the transcript of everything that makes up this book, and offered me valuable suggestions. Prof. Hart also reviewed the material, and at his suggestion I met with author Jayakanthan in Madras in April 1997.

I take this opportunity to thank Jayakanthan for his time and encouragement.

Ananda Rangan Sundaresan

Berkeley, California

July, 2000

## TRIAL BY FIRE

It has been raining on and off since the afternoon . . .

It is now evening and the students from the women's college were gathered - like a rainbow displaying its colors in a nearby bus station desperately waiting for buses to take them home.

A privileged few stopped the cars and even helped their close friends to ride with them. A gray college van that regularly carried the students to distant parts of the city was soon on its way. For nearly half an hour the scene echoed to the sounds of car horns, laughter and murmurs from students with occasional interruptions by thunder; then, after half an hour past five, a few students, numbering less than twenty - with less than a dozen umbrellas to protect them - were still left in the downpour; they huddled together and sought refuge under a tree next to the bus station.

It was a part of the city where traffic was sparse and the neighbourhood was dotted with bungalows amidst vast gardens full of trees, leaving no haven in the rain; the girls have been waiting for a long time looking forward to board designated buses to carry them to their destination. They stood with their books tightly held to their bosoms - even as they tried to protect their upper garments and saris from the incessant rain.

A bus was heard coming from around the street corner . . .

"Hi, the bus is coming!" The students uttered in one voice.

The bus - that diesel monster - screeched to a halt after splashing the stagnant water on either side of the street.

"Bye . . .bye . . ."

"See you . . ."

"Cheeriyol!" The conductor gave the whistle.

The bus, like a ravenous giant, swallowed half of the waiting crowd, bellowed, and departed.

Only a dozen students were now left in the bus stand.

It was the rainy reason; daylight and darkness were intruding into one another.

A cycle rickshaw came along the street with its driver in a rain coat; he was suddenly stopped in his tracks by a stray bull that came from nowhere and which he tried to ward off with his warning bell that produced only mild chimes; the bull refused to budge and the driver started venting his anger against the animal in some profane outburst with no regard to the girls in the vicinity. After a while, when he was long gone from their view, the girls recalled his vulgar epithets and reacted with glee and suppressed laughter.

Nothing interesting happened for a long time after that; their legs aching from the long wait on the wet ground, the girls were feeling irritated and bored by the total silence around them.

The bus was nowhere to be seen.

The stray bull was still standing in the middle of the street; it was an old bull with one of his horns curved and almost touching the forehead. The rain splashed his back and scattered all around in droplets while washing the animal's yellowish underbelly on both sides and trickled down along two thick dents. And every now and then a part of the bull's body - mostly the area above the right thigh - was shivering in the cold weather.

How long can you watch an old bull with interest? A young girl, who was in every way an exception to the rest of the crowd, sighed and raised her head; she heard the sound of a bus approaching the street corner. The bull now moved aside to let the bus pass by and walked across the street to approach the platform where the students waited; the bull too stood close to them as if begging for some room.

"Hi, this is my bus!" - the eldest among the crowd, now acting childlike, jumped with joy.

"Bye-bye."

"See you . . ."

After that bus left, only two students are now left on the platform. One of them is the young girl already referred to. The other seems like a typical college student, elder to her; it was she who offered protection to the younger girl with her umbrella. The younger girl doesn't look like a college student at all; she seems more like a high school student. Her very appearance reveals she is not from a well-to-do family; she wore a green pavadaï with a matchless blouse - it was made out of her mother's discarded old sari - and an upper garment that almost faded and left an indeterminate red shade; a patch-work of necklace made from a few cheap black beads sewn together with a cotton thread adorned her neck and was held in place with a press button. She had a pair of club-shaped earrings - and one of them was missing the stud. Her eyes sparkled with a glow and innocence and seemed to proclaim that her face could do without any cosmetics or jewellery . . .

She reminded one of an unadorned, virginal flower possessing a beauty and elegance uncommon among many of those priceless gifts; now, as she stood there in open space drenched in rain, her legs, long exposed to cold weather and growing pale and while, looked like a pair of ivory carvings; her feet, trembling in the cold and growing numb, forced her to crouch, with her upper garment and the blouse sticking to her small, wet frame, while her face was graceful like that of a temple deity. She was a beauty to behold; she could easily turn on men to grab and possess her . . .

"There is no bus yet, what time is it?" she asked the other girl with the umbrella.

"It is almost six," the elder one replied in a low - spirited voice, and glanced at a bus now approaching them. "If it is my bus, I should be gone" She began folding her umbrella.

"That's fine, the rain has now stopped. I should be getting my bus too. There is one leaving the terminus at five forty five. If it is my bus, I too can go home."

She spoke as if she was trying to ease the elder's concern, her voice sounding sweet and her mood appearing childlike; the elder girl grew fond of her, touched her cheeks, and said: "Be a nice girl and go home!" She

gave her a parting kiss with her fingers.

Two buses came along, one after another. The elder one took the first bus.

"Bye-bye."

"Thank you! My bus is also here!" She bade farewell to her friend but felt only disappointment after checking the number on the second bus. The driver of that bus watched the change in the girl's facial expression and understood she was not waiting for this one; he did not even care to stop because there were no other passengers waiting for a bus.

She was now alone, all by herself, the stray bull now standing next to her as the only companion. Afar, in the college campus, there was some semblance of human activity. Suddenly, darkness came down like a curtain, followed by a strong wind that shook the tree branches lining the street and let water droplets fall on the ground. The girl took refuge under a tree. The rain, which had abated a few minutes ago, now resumed in full vigor. The girl tried to run across the street and go back to the college campus, when a huge car ran into her and suddenly came to a standstill, after barely scraping her; the sudden brake made the car swing gracefully in the front as well as in the rear.

She cast her eyes on the beautiful car - from its rear end to the front driver's seat, in awe.

The driver - a young man with an attractive face - smiled at her, bent down and opened the door of the rear seat.

"Please get in . . . I can drop you at your place," he said and let his eyes devour her, just like her eyes did to his car.

The girl felt her ear lobes and nose flush with red. "No, thanks," she replied. "The rain will soon stop, and I will catch a bus home."

"Oh, it is all right! Get in!" he was pressuring her. She was still standing in the rain and he did everything short of dragging her into the car with his own hand . . .

She let her eyes wander back to the tree where she sought refuge a few minutes ago. Now that space has been taken over by the old bull.....

The car door in front of her was still open. As she felt the rainwater creeping its way into the car in a blast, she tried to close the door, and felt the driver's hand firmly press on hers. Horrified, she pulled it back and looked at him. The young man was smiling. What a pleasant smile it was!

And now he too got out of the car and was now standing in the rain . . .

"Um . . . get in."

Now she could not refuse his invitation . . .

As soon as she got into the car, his hand shut the door tight as if confining her to a prison.

The car glided on the road as if surfing on a wavy sea.

Her eyes roved across inside the car. A blue fan mesmerized her eyes as if luring her into a dreamy world. The warmth she now felt around her proved a welcome change to her body long exposed to the cold weather. She didn't feel the car was running on ground; it seemed to be floating above the ground.

"How wide are the car seats!" she wondered. "One can even easily sleep on them." She felt she ought to show a better taste, especially because she was now sitting there in a corner with her books still held against her bosom; slowly she deposited the books and her lunch box on the seat and eased herself comfortably to make her posture seem a little more imposing and dignified.

"This car itself looks like a house; with a car like this one would not even need a house. He - this gentleman - probably owns a house, how big will that be? Will it be like a palace, with a lot of servants? And who will be living in that palace? I don't know anything about him. Now, what is this thing right here in the middle? If I pulled it between two seats it comes up like a table: one can use it for reading, writing, or even sleeping - two people can easily lie on it, with their heads on either side. And, this small lamp! It is so beautiful! It is shaped like a lotus bud, no, it rather looks like a jasmine bud! I would like to see it glow . . . but what if the gentleman gets mad at me!"

"There is a switch below . . . can you see it?" the young man asked her even as he was driving the car and casually watched her from the rear mirror.

She switched on and admired the lamp glow brightly; then she shut it off fearing it might consume too much power. Then she became conscious of herself; with her two hands she tried to squeeze water trickling down the top of head.

"Hm, why did I wear this damn upper garment today?" She cursed herself and tried to hold the tip of the garment and squeeze it dry. She heard something snap open: the young man was just then opening with his left hand a small compartment next to the steering wheel; she was thrilled to see a small red lamp glowing inside it, as he took out a small Turkish towel, and handed over to her.

"Thanks!" As she helped herself first to dry her hair, arms and hands, and then her face, she was pleasantly overwhelmed with the aroma emanating from the towel; she savored the smell by pressing her face even harder into it.

The car was now making a turn around a street corner and she suddenly lost her balance; frightened, she could only exclaim "Mother!" while her books as well the round, stainless steel lunch box rolled over from the seat.

"Sorry," the young man now smiled at her. He slowed down and continued to drive at a reduced speed. The young girl was a little embarrassed at her own reaction; she quickly gathered her books now scattered all around, and eased herself into a comfortable position.

Nothing was visible through the car windows because a layer of ~~smoke-like~~ moisture covered them; the girl wiped the window clean with the tip of her upper garment, and looked out.

The streetlights were now aglow; along the way, images of well-decorated shops could be seen reflected in the pools of stagnant water on the streets. She had heard people talk about a world underground. Could this be something like that?

Why is the car going on this street?

"Oh my god! My house is on the other side," her lips grumbled in a whisper.

"That is fine, who says no?" the young man too grumbled in a low voice, and smiled at her.

"This is certainly no fun," the girl told herself and nervously played with her hands. Because she was aware he was watching her, she kept smiling to keep him in good humour.

The car sped on.

It soon emerged out of the city's busy commercial district, passed along the wide lanes dotted by huge, tall buildings and avenues lined with beautiful bungalows and magnificent gardens, before turning into a trunk road away from the hustle and bustle of the city.

While a car ride in a hostile weather was a new experience and certainly thrilled her, it also stirred a vague fear deep inside her and caused some heartache.

But she could not bring herself to act like a child and keep pestering him that he should take her home at once.

She now remembered the girl who saw her off at the bus stand, and her parting words as she fondly touched her cheeks: "Be a nice girl and go home!"

"Have I become a foolish girl?" she pondered. "Is it not wrong for a single girl to get into a stranger's car? He does not seem like a bad guy; still I should have never agreed to go with him! No, I should not cry! If I cry he may get mad at me and drop me off somewhere and go on his way! How can I ever go home? I will never be able to find the way on my own! Tomorrow

I have to submit my zoology lab report, I have lot of work to do."

Her eyes were riveted on the opposite glass panel and the windshield wipers which seemed to be struggling, just like herself. Unaware of herself she was able to muster courage and ask him: "Tell me, where are we going?" The question had shot up like an arrow, but the young man was calm as he replied: "We are not going anywhere; we are just taking a drive!"

"It is getting late! My mother would be searching for me!"

"Okay, we will return!"

The car reversed the direction. It veered off from the trunk road and entered a huge, open meadow, where it traveled a considerable distance

before coming to a halt. The surrounding areas, so far as one could discern, seemed to be virtually under the command of rain and darkness. The place seemed like a jungle from nowhere with frogs croaking on top of their voices and the rain and wind turning even more violent and ferocious.

It was pitch-dark inside the car; the driver as well as the passenger couldn't see each other's face.

The car, suddenly stopping, frightened the girl. "Why has the car stopped? Any breakdown?" She asked, her voice mixed with concern and fear.

He gave no reply, but burst into a loud laughter. He wished to see her face and pushed the radio button; instantly a faint light followed by light music beamed from the radio.

In the dim light around them the girl was grinning and narrowing her eye brows and nervously regarding him; he, on the other hand, was smiling and seemed to be begging her for some favor.

A trumpet blared from the car radio growing louder with a ferocious intensity and was soon followed by 'Congo Drums' whose sound and rhythm seemed to echo the heartbeat of a frightened soul. The young man listened with his head swinging in tune with the music while snapping his fingers in accord with its beat and rhythm. He turned to the girl and asked if she liked the music. She smiled and nodded her head in agreement without even parting her lips.

He now opened a box next to the radio and took out two Cadbury chocolates and gave one to her. She studied him with fascination unwrapping the chocolate from one end - he didn't take off the whole thing - and then casually chewing the small pieces, one after another. He was thoroughly enjoying himself, comfortably laid back, with his other hand tapping the seat in resonance with the music coming from the rear.

He was certainly handsome and good looking, she thought. He was tall, his white dress seemed to fit him perfectly, and when seen in that dim light even his dark complexion was vaguely attractive - she remembered the majesty of a vicious snake. Viewed from the rear his left eye was only partly visible within her angle of vision, and it shone brightly. So did, in that dim light, his hair, dense and closely cropped, seemingly immune to disarray even in a storm, and the lush growth of hair near the ears. When

glancing at him sideways she felt his face would look even more attractive if he sported a thin mustache. And those eye brows! They looked so determined, twisting up and down, and downright menacing! She noticed the heavy watch with a golden strap on his left arm that lay stretched on the rear seat close to her, and could read the time as seven from the luminous dial. His thin long fingers were still tapping to the rhythm of the music, and the thin hair on his forearms seemed to shudder to the cold from outside.

"My god, it is seven!" She stopped chewing the chocolate while calmly watching him, and screamed aloud. He too checked the watch following her sudden outburst.

It was only when he opened the front door that the young man was able to notice the heavy downpour outside. He immediately got out of the car.

"Where?" Her question, mixed with anxiety and fear, resonated in his ears even after he closed the door behind him: "Where are you going?"

He was heavily drenched in the rain. "I am not going anywhere. I am coming over," he replied, opened the rear seat door and entered the car.

He sat next to her, took out from the seat the small Turkish towel he had given her a short while ago, and wiped his face and hair. He crushed the chocolate wrapper in his hand and threw it out. The girl was still chewing the candy. He took out yet another small candy pack from his pocket and helped himself with a piece and offered her one.

"What is it?"

"Chewing gum!"

"No . . . I don't want it!"

"Try . . . you will like it!"

She hastily finished eating the chocolate piece and reluctantly extended her hand to accept the gum from him.

"Here it is," he said, and refusing to hand it over to her, brought the gum close to her lips and gently caressed them with it.

She felt a pleasant burning sensation all over her body; she retraced a few steps away from him and accepted the gum from his hands, saying:



"Thank you!"

His two eyes were caught up with hers; she felt too shy to stare at him and struggled hard to shift her glance downwards over and over again, even as she was aware that his two knees were drawing close to her.

She looked through the glass window. Outside, in the dark, rain and wind were playing havoc with each other. She edged close to that window door and sought refuge there; he respectfully moved away from her, put his arms around his chest, and eagerly tried to probe her mind.

"How do you like this car?" His voice, begun in a dry ritualistic tone gradually became an intimate and private whisper that disturbed her. She remained calm and replied: "Oh, it is very nice!"

He seemed lost in some deep thoughts, sighed, lowered his head, and then spoke:

"Do you know this car has been roaming after you - every day - for the last two years? Do you know that?" As he raised his head to look at her, she felt overwhelmed by his compliment - it was as if that gentleman had just placed a crown on head.

"Really?"

"Really!"

His heavy breathing now warmed her hair. His intimate voice now caressed her mind and shook her heart: "Do you like me?"

"Hm. " Because she felt trapped and still desperately wanted to get away from him, he again politely withdrew from her.

Outside, it was still raining. The trumpet from the car radio was now playing music with new rhythm and beat.

"You like it here, don't you?" He was trying to gauge her mood in the atmosphere around them as well as her feelings towards him.

"I like it, but I am also afraid . . ."

"Afraid? Why? Why should you be afraid?" As he tried to shake her shoulder to comfort her, she felt her innate modesty shaken, and gently spoke her mind: "I am really afraid - this is all new to me . . ."

34 "Why do I need all these introductions?" He grumbled to himself. He now made up his mind not to retreat in his plans, and approached her again.

"May I kiss you?"

She didn't know what to say. She was tongue-tied; her face sweated even in that cold weather.

She felt her ear lobes, cheeks and lips suddenly exposed to scorching heat, and as she felt herself trapped in his hands and writhed in pain amid her cries of " Please, please", he grew fanatical and continued to assault her . . . .

Soon, her cries grew fainter and stopped. As if seeking vengeance, her hands were now entwined around his neck.

Outside, the sky seemed torn apart. Lightning struck pell-mell, thunder echoed far and near.

That lightning must have hit somewhere!

"I want to go home! My god, my mother will be searching for me!"

He opened the car rear door and got out. His shoes were caught in the swampy ground, and as he raised one of them, some of the mud fell on the car and soiled it. Through the open door a few water drops fell inside the car and also on the girl.

Because she was deeply hurt in body and mind, the girl was crying - in silence - without his knowledge- fighting the tide of tears overpowering her.

He returned to his driver seat and threw his muddy shoes out of the car window. Then he opened the compartment next to the radio and took out a cigarette, and lit it. He also kept on chewing a gum.

The girl's heart, mind, body and feelings were now enmeshed in a panic, but a sense of urgency hovered over them. She desperately wished she could be home at once so that she could seek her mother's warmth, cry out in one long stretch and pour out all her hurt feelings; that would be the only way to find some emotional comfort following the gross violence now meted out to her.

But he seemed calm, smoking a cigarette, and this irritated her. Her confinement inside the car made her feel as if she was trapped between two huge rocks in a cave; she felt fear as well as disgust, and added to these was the cigarette smell that churned her stomach; she felt the grimy, marshy soil splashing all over her body and defiling her . . .

She now detested the trumpet music from the radio-it was like a jackal barking in dark over an empty wilderness, hacking her body into pieces. .

She screamed aloud in an angry mood seemingly beyond her: "Are you going to take me home or not?"

He suddenly shut off the radio, and warned her: "Don't shout like that!"

She joined both her hands in a respectful gesture and desperately begged him. "My mother would be looking for me! Please take me home, and I will be ever thankful to you!" Deep in her heart she was blaming herself: "I acted really stupid. I should have never come with him! All these terrible things have now taken place! What a horror!" She felt profound guilt over what she did; she gnashed her teeth wishing she could go out and kill herself by dashing her head against some hard rock; her appearance at that moment frightened the young man.

"Please . . . don't make a scene!" He begged her and reversed the car in frustration.

The car sped along the streets with its bright lights illuminating the darkness around.

"What a pity!" he lamented to himself. "If she was against it, why didn't she say so in the first place? I have wasted a nice evening! Poor girl! I will be damned if I knew what girls like her are going to learn from a college education! And she is still crying!" He turned to her and offered an apology: "I am sorry . . . please forgive me if I hurt your feelings."

He wanted to leave her at her home, forget the whole episode, and get some peace of mind; he pushed down the accelerator.

It was still raining.

The car crossed the silent trunk road, passed along the avenues with

the beautiful bungalows and magnificent gardens, and then sped on the wide lanes dotted by big tall buildings, before entering the city's main commercial district; it finally entered a narrow street and was heading toward the girl's house. He slackened the car speed thinking the girl would demand that she be dropped and let go at some point before their final destination; but she seemed too naive for such an afterthought, so he stopped the car somewhere on their way, and informed her of his decision: "I am not supposed to take you all the way home; you have to get off right here." He even felt sorry and moved by her looks. He felt guilty and his heart rankled as if he was indebted to her in some way. His conscience pricked, his eyes seemed to gather a few spurious tears that were shining. Like a servant he opened the car door for her and stood in the rain. The girl, her emotions frozen, gathered her books, searched out her circular, metallic lunch box from under her car seat, emerged from the car and stood on the street, her eyes still averting him as she bowed her head down.

Because of the rain there was little traffic on that narrow lane. As he now noticed her little figure in the dim street light afar, he reproached himself for his behavior - but only in the inner depths of his mind. It was his unbridled freedom, he thought, that drove him to act like a rotten, mean spirited slave.

"Yes . . . I am a slave, a slave to my own passions," he thought. Then he whispered to her: "I am sorry!"

She raised her head and stared at him. What a look it was!

She tried to say something, her lips quivered. He could only murmur "What?" but felt his voice choking.

"Nothing," she replied and moved away.

As the red car sped ahead of her, its rear red light moved faster and merged into darkness.

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The hurricane lamp in the front room had been extinguished by the gusty wind; mother, busy in the kitchen, happened to notice the room darken. As she relit the lamp and hung it over, she noticed from the wall clock that the time was already half past seven; mortified, she turned around, and then noticed the young girl climbing on the steps.

The girl's very appearance - she was fully drenched, and her clothes were in total disarray - appalled her; she felt her stomach churn, and asked: "Why is this mess?"

The girl ambled her way to the front room like a statue, and stood passively under the hurricane lamp. Tears were overflowing from her eyes. She could only scream "Mother," and then plunge her head on her mother's shoulder even as she struggled to contain her emotions; she frantically tightened her hands around her and sobbed uncontrollably.

Mother sensed something serious has happened - yet she was ambivalent.

"What happened, why so much delay? Tell me, stop crying!" She didn't know the actual reason for her daughter's pain - the girl was still in her embrace, with her body squirming like an insect - yet, she shared the girl's pain and felt her eyes turn moist; she wiped the daughter's eyes with the tip of her sari, warmly patted her back, and inquired: "Why are you crying like this?"

The girl could not bring herself to stare into her mother's eyes; she nestled her head on mother's shoulder and spoke slowly. As she stopped crying and began to speak up, the mother immediately disentangled herself from the girl, pulled back, and watched her in disgust as if eyeing a wretched soul.

That naive girl was telling her mother: "There was a heavy downpour . . . the bus didn't come . . . that's why I got into the car . . . then . . . there was some place like a forest . . . there was nobody around . . . it was dark . . . even if I wanted to get out of the car and run away from him . . . I couldn't find my way out . . . what could I have done? . . . and then . . . oh my god, he . . . kind of . . ."

"Even before she could finish talking, the girl felt wildly slapped across her ears, forehead and some other part of the body. She felt butterflies float in air . . . She was flung aside to a corner while her books and the lunch box lay scattered all over the room . . ."

"You wretch! What have you done!" the mother wanted to scream aloud; she just opened her mouth, but then controlled herself.

A few neighbors in the vicinity - there were four houses in that block - hurried down as they heard some noise from the house.

"What happened?" asked a woman who lived in the rear portion of the block; she lost no time for gossips and came up to the front room after wiping off her wet hand with the tip of her sari.

"It is nothing, I can't understand this big hurry," the mother explained to her. "Why should my daughter come home like this, all wet, fully drenched, in this terrible downpour? I am spending all the money I can afford for her education, what if she falls sick right before the exams? Fortunately, her brother is not in town, otherwise, he would have taken her to task!" She indulged in mock complaint.

The lady from the neighborhood did not seem that interested in what was going on. Yet, she could not help commenting, before returning, "You are right, but does it mean you have to beat her up for something like this?"

The mother shut down the main door and the front room windows. She then stared at the young girl cast aside on the floor like a kitten; the daughter was not feeling hurt by her mother beating her up; if anything, she wished she was punished even harsher; she lay inert and wished her mother would trample her to death.

"What can I do with her? She has tarnished the reputation of a respectable family! Oh my god, what can I do?" The mother turned her back . . .

Flames in the kitchen hearth were encircling the logs - searing them red hot . . .

"What if I just unload a pile of that hot stuff over her head?" the mother thought. She saw the image of her daughter squirming like an insect and being scorched to death.

"But then, what happens next? Will her shame disappear? Oh, my dear! How can I go on living after killing you with my own hands? Should I kill myself too?"

"Hm . . . then? Will this shame disappear?" Mother was confused.

She gathered her daughter's tresses together, then touched her face and gently raised it.

She twirled the wick of the hurricane lamp to brighten the surroundings, carried it to where her daughter lay and examined every inch of her body, from head to foot. The girl recoiled with shame and guilt unable to bear such a close scrutiny. "My god, please don't look at me like that!" she screamed, turned her back to her mother, and buried her head into the wall amid incessant sobs.

"Oh my god, only you can punish that scoundrel." The mother silently cursed the anonymous villain to her heart's content. While she felt disgust to even touch her daughter she bore the pain because of her love and a concern that her daughter had nowhere else to go to seek comfort or refuge. "It is my fate!" she sighed, and became deeply aware that anger and punishment would serve no purpose. With the lamp in one hand she gripped the girl's arm with the other and dragged her to the bathroom.

"What am I to do now? Can I try to find out the fiend responsible for this inhuman act? Can I marry her off to him? Oh my god, how can I ever let her live with such an animal for the rest of her life? To kill her in cold blood would be a more humane thing! What can I do?" Her mind was in turmoil.

She asked her daughter to sit near the bathtub and then carefully set the lamp in a niche of a nearby wall. She prayed to all the gods in her memory to forgive and purge the shame and dishonor from the naive, innocent soul, who now sat there trembling in cold with her arms held crossing her bosom.

The mother spoke no words and calmly discarded all the daughter's clothes as she stood there like a statue with eyes closed. She loosened the pigtail hanging below the waist and spread it along her marble back. As the girl sat passively cross-legged, the mother poured over her head bucketful of water from the tub, one after another. Then she applied shampoo to her hair, and inquired in a faint voice:

"Do you happen to know that fellow?"

"No . . ."

"The scoundrel . . . what shall we do with him?" She gnashed her teeth, spreading her fingers laced with shampoo, her eyes brimming with hatred as if poised for a murder.

"Um . . . whether the banana leaf touches the thorn or the thorn hits the banana leaf, it's always the banana leaf that gets hurt!" She tried to contain the anger swelling within her, and as if trying to erase the curse weighing heavily upon the young woman, she scrubbed the shampoo even harder. She suddenly remembered her husband who had died leaving her with a two-year old baby, and cried, "If he were alive - thank heavens, he is not around to see these terrible things happening . . ."

"My dear child!" she addressed the young girl. "This incident should remain a secret and must never be revealed to anybody, never! Otherwise, an entire family will be destroyed! Nobody would pause even to think what might happen to their own family if the victim was one of their offspring . . . they will simply treat it like a curse plaguing one generation after another. Of course I am talking about others, but what about my own values? Will I be holding my tongue if this disaster struck another family? No, then my tone will be totally different . . . it has been like that for sometime now. To be honest, I had gossiped quite a lot in the past!" She snatched a towel hanging from the rope that ran across the bathroom and vigorously dried the girl's hair. Then she touched her daughter's chin, raised it to her eye level and fondly kissed the forehead; it was such a pure, unsullied face shining like a fresh porcelain plate that no adolescent stresses or strains could have corrupted it.

"My dear child, you are now purified! Totally purified!" the mother exclaimed, and continued. "Remember this! What I poured over your head a few minutes ago was not water, it was fire! It has cleansed your body and soul. What you have gone through was a trial by fire, and you are now as pure as a crystal. Your thoughts were pure and innocent to begin with, so how can anything corrupt your body? I know your mind, but the outside world doesn't! That's why it should never be told about this incident! Why do you keep staring at me like that? Are you thinking we can't keep it away from the public knowledge? Why not? After all what the world knows is only this: you came home in a car with someone! Nobody would dare say anything beyond that! So remember this, nothing happened! Do you think people will start badmouthing because they saw you coming in a car? Stop worrying about them! I know there is a crowd that is always indulging in gossip and spreading all kinds of rumors. But you must never be concerned about them. There is no flaw or blemish in your character, and I am saying this because it is true and I want you to believe it and feel that way deep in your heart. Now, while walking on the streets don't we sometimes

accidentally get our feet dirty in some filth? Does it mean we must cut the feet off? No, we can just wash our feet before entering the house and even go to the puja room to say our prayers - and God will not reject us! Would he? So everything depends on one's state of mind . . . one has to keep the mind pure. Do you know the story of Ahalya? She was purged of her sins when the dust from Lord Rama's feet touched her; Ahalya's mind was not corrupted by any impure thoughts, that's why she was blessed by Rama. I am saying all this because you shouldn't unnecessarily torture your mind with guilt and remorse. You must forget this unfortunate incident as a bad dream . . . nothing bad has happened to you!"

Then she asked the young girl to get dressed with the new, dry clothes hanging on the rope above them.

"What are you chewing in your mouth? What is it?"

"Gum . . ."

"Spit out the damn thing, " mother screamed. "Wash your mouth clean and follow me!" She walked to the puja room.

The mother was visibly moved as she stood before the altar for a few minutes in total surrender. She turned to the girl who now joined her, and spoke: "Pray and ask for happiness . . . I feel I am also responsible for what happened to you . . . It never occurred to me that as a college student my adolescent daughter is being exposed to the dangers of an outside world. Again, I always see you as a child, but you are no more a child! So, you must forget this incident . . . No, you should not forget this incident . . . You must go ahead in life keeping this incident always back in your mind . . . You must not discuss this incident with anybody! Never! As far as this matter is concerned, there are no exceptions! You must promise me that you will never mention this to anybody!" As she extended her hand as if protecting her secret, the daughter eagerly placed her hand on the mother's palm, gripped it, and told her: "This is my solemn promise. I will tell nobody!"

"I have been telling myself that you are a smart girl because you always get good grades," the mother answered. "Only now you have become a smart girl, and you must continue to be smart . . ." She held the daughter's chin with her other hand and applied the sacred ash to her forehead.

The eyes of that young innocent girl shone bright in the aura emanating from the lamp on the altar. It was not just the shadow play that produced the splendor; the mother could discern a ripe, mature womanhood reflected in that aura.

Now we see that young girl again on her way to college. Several luxury cars are crisscrossing through her path, but she scarcely looks at any of them. Occasionally she glances at them- but she is always mindful that neither she nor any car run into one another.

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## A PERSONAL REVELATION

Shiva Raman always took pride in his work: as an assistant editor of a weekly magazine, it was his task, day after day, to meticulously sort out and file the short stories from the huge pile of mail and stamp the rejections as "Returned to Sender - Not Suitable for Publication". Today he was a little surprised to notice a letter addressed to him. He was more than pleased to see the address on that long envelope, which simply read "Shiva Raman, The Assistant Editor."

As he carefully held the envelope flap between his two middle fingers and skilfully cut open the edge, a single sheet - presumably a cover letter - drifted from the rest of the pile in the envelope and landed on the floor. He picked it up and started reading:

"My dear Shiva Raman: God bless you. I pray to God to confer all the blessings on you and your family. I am really sorry I could not personally take leave of you and others. Still, I don't think it is a big deal. To come to think of it, deep in my heart I always feel love and affection for every one of you . . . What if I can't personally express my feelings? Still, I will be lying if I say I did so on purpose. The truth of the matter is I didn't have the courage to personally take leave of you, so I left with no parting word . . . Yes, one needs courage to express real feelings. I found it easier to do something rather than explain why I did such a thing. You know what I am talking about, you are a writer, you know what is right and what is wrong - in our daily lives we do so many things, yet can we make sense of each and every action and explain why we did such and such a thing? If I thought I could offer an explanation why I wanted to run away from home, I would have certainly done so, but in the final analysis, I might have simply stayed back. I know this much, none of you will really miss me. Nobody would have shed tears had I personally met with all of you and taken leave, but I am sure I would have made my feelings public, and cried . . . your wife used to call me 'that naive, foolish brahmin.' She is right about that.

Now I have a new life, you will be anxious to know where I am and what I am up to. I have enclosed a stack of papers in which I have scribbled my thoughts . . . when you have some time to spare - or when you have nothing else to do - you may read them . . . you will understand me as well as my conscience. I hope you will understand - I am not really worried whether you understand or not - but for the last one month I have been feeling guilty about not writing to you. . . To be honest, except for this single sheet, the rest of the stuff is not really meant for you . . . it is for my own understanding, I have been writing this, on and off, with no particular reason or motive. This is how I see myself, this is not self-analysis, this is a personal revelation! The other day I suddenly thought about you - so I am sending what I have written so far . . . May be this is not a smart thing to do. But remember this: Tell your wife a brahmin should never be foolish. If he is foolish, he is no brahmin. A brahmin is a treasure house of knowledge! I was born in such a caste, but I forfeited my ancestral name Ganapathi; I have been made fun of and ridiculed as a 'foolish Sastri' and lived the last sixty years as a laughing stock. Anyway, what is past is past. Now I am finally happy - after these sixty years of my life. God willing, we shall meet sometime in the future . . . It doesn't matter if you folks have forgotten me, I can face nothing."

Your father  
Ganapathi . . .

The letter was signed Ganapathi Sastri, and the word Sastri had been scratched out. His professional instinct led Shiva Raman to peer into the last page to know how many were in the pile. The pages carried no numbers, and because they seemed ripped apart from a school note book, their corners were torn open leaving traces of dregs. Some pages were written in pencil, some were in ink, and because the matter they carried came from a deep, reflective mind articulating the inner thoughts gathering depth over several years, there were no revisions or corrections.

Shiva Raman felt the urge to read the entire text right away, but he had other obligations demanding his immediate attention. He carefully folded the manuscript and tucked it away in his handbag. Before he did so, he scanned the cover letter and the envelope to find their place of origin. There was no information as to where the letter was mailed from, and he was stunned to notice from the postal stamp cancellation that it came from New Delhi.

He wondered, "What foolhardiness! How could he do such a thing - run away from home without telling a single soul and wander off into such

far away places?" He couldn't help imagining how badly his father - an innocent, naive man - was personally hurt to follow such a course of action. While his mind tried to grapple with the reason for his father's move, his heart was pained over such despair. His eyes became teary.

He suddenly conjured his father's image - a naive, dark, ugly face sporting an unshaven beard, dense, gray hair, a large mouth with front teeth missing, squint eyes, the facial contours marked by deep scars from smallpox . . . .

## 2

A month ago, the day after the new moon, Ganapathi Sastri suddenly disappeared from the public view . . .

For the first two days his family members - his two sons Shiva Raman and Mani - were not unduly worried.

When someone had mentioned that Ganapathi Sastri had gone to Kanjeeपुरam on business with four other priests, his daughter-in-law Rajam couldn't help disparaging him, as her wont, viciously, "Why can't this old man simply let us know where he is going? Does he think this house is just a chowtry or hotel to come and go as he likes?" But when those four priests on their return informed that Ganapathi Sastri didn't accompany them, Rajam was taken aback. Immediately thereafter, she totally stopped cursing him.

"Where could he have possibly gone?" She festered inside. She sighed deeply remembering that Ganapathi Sastri had neither a daughter nor other relatives who treated him with love and respect. Shiva Raman too was worried.

One day, while returning from work, Shiva Raman stopped by near the local temple premises wondering if he could spot his father among the priests sitting in a row on the wall surrounding the temple tank, engaged in heated arguments. His eyes groped in vain trying to locate his father.

What Shiva Raman didn't know was that even when Ganapathi Sastri was in town he had been always a loner - setting himself apart from the community of priests. The truth of the matter is why would anyone try to associate with a foolish brahmin?

As days went by Shiva Raman started feeling within himself a real concern for his father: "Where is he? What might have happened to him? Has he got into some kind of accident or something?" He too festered

inside but didn't share his thoughts openly with others. For one thing, he was afraid his wife Rajam would tease him with her acid tongue, saying, "What is the big deal! Don't tell me your heart is melting for the greatest father in the world!" He desperately wanted to know if his younger brother Mani was longing for his father or feeling indifferent, thinking to himself: "A good riddance - the old hag is gone!" If Mani indeed felt indifferent, Shiva Raman told himself, that would be his worst crime. He recalled the episodes from the past when both the brothers had felt ashamed about their father; then, he corrected himself: even now, they seemed to feel that way about their father.

It goes without saying that Ganapathi Sastri - with his dark, ugly face, squint eyes and a dry laughter - was hardly a person to make a great impression on others. Some took pity on him, while others considered him a joke. With a little innocence bordering on a child's fancy he would say things - with a gaping mouth and indistinct sounds.

Who bothers to listen and grasp the real message in those words? Many felt he was a bore. Sastri knew he had become a laughing stock and he saw some basis why his sons were less than willing to acknowledge him as their father. In the final analysis, Ganapathi Sastri commanded no respect in his hometown; on the other hand, quite often, he was even ridiculed.

Other priests enjoyed picking on him now and then. At home, his sons let him know they were ashamed of their father, and shunned him. His daughter-in-law simply disliked him.

Now, Rajam certainly had no particular aversion to her father-in-law. It was her natural habit to groan and complain. She couldn't help if Sastri often became her target.

So, what is the big deal? Did anybody, really, miss him?

Why are they reminding themselves, day after day, about his disappearance, murmuring: "It is ten days since he was gone", "It is twenty days since he was gone," and so on.

"Why did he do this to me?" Rajam, saddened, asked herself. "Has he been plotting this for some time now? Now the entire town is going to blame me for his action. Have I ever said anything to hurt him? This man has become my nemesis - first when he lived in this house, and now when he left it for good." As her wont, Rajam goes on with her indictment every morning. She continues to believe that she had never, at any time, uttered a single harsh word to her father-in-law in his presence.

During the past month, the family members, deeply concerned and desperately seeking to know Ganapathi Sastri's whereabouts have gradually grown anxious and affectionate of him. Now and then, Rajam dreads at the possibility that her father-in-law might be dead: the thought fills her with horror and guilt, and she secretly sheds tears. Neither Shiva Raman nor Mani knows anything about her inner turmoil.

Ten days ago, while returning from work, Shiva Raman, as usual, stopped by the temple tank and searched for his short, dark, father in the crowd. It was then that he was spotted by Venkittu Iyer, who stealthily followed Shiva Raman to the Market Street. After making sure that he was not being followed, Venkittu Iyer addressed him, "Shiva Raman!"

Shiva Raman turned around.

"Do you have any news about your father?" he asked after nearing him on a street corner. He was Ganapathi Sastri's boyhood friend and of same age.

Shiva Raman was suddenly overcome by fear that he did something grievously wrong. He bowed down his head saying, "I have no news. I simply don't know what happened . . . we have had no problems at our home, either. Now, you certainly know how we were taking care of our father . . ." He swallowed the words while guilt weighed down heavily upon him.

"Don't be silly," Venkittu Iyer chided him. "After all what can you do about it? Even if there are differences between a father and son - there could be several for that matter - does it mean he should run away from home? Now, you don't seem to know about this particular episode . . . ." He looked around, then whispered, "Please follow me," and led him to a spot on the street corner close to the temple prayer hall.

He recalled an incident that took place near the temple tank the day before Ganapathi Sastri left the town for good.

As they stood on the street corner, Venkittu Iyer spoke while helping himself with a pinch of snuff from a small packet tucked to his waist: "I know this much, your father was totally depressed because he felt insulted - yes, by that Sundara Ganapadigal. " His eyes turned red and teary as he inhaled the snuff through his nostrils.

Shiva Raman was confused. Sundara Ganapadigal had insulted his father? Why?

Shiva Raman and his family members had great respect for Sundara Ganapadigal, whom Ganapathi Sastri considered his mentor and guru. It was something of a family pride that he was the most favorite disciple of Ganapathi Sastri's father Parameswara Ganapadigal, a great pundit of his times. Ganapathi Sastri had studied the Vedas from Sundara Ganapadigal. A father figure at a ripe old age of seventy five, Sundara Ganapadigal commanded great respect. How could he have insulted his father, Shiva Raman couldn't help wondering. Granted Sundara Ganapadigal was given to quick temper, it still made no sense that Ganapathi Sastri - who always remained stoic and unruffled by verbal assaults - would be so driven by humiliation to flee the town.

"What are you saying?" Shiva Raman asked looking at Venkittu Iyer.

"I am telling you what I saw with my own eyes," answered the old man. "I am not afraid to speak out. My friends - the other priests-have banded together as a team and are not willing to utter even a single word of protest for this injustice done to your father . . . I am aware that Sundara Ganapadigal is a great man. . . but I think it was unbecoming of him to display such a violent rage . . . how could he bring himself to say such nasty things to your father? Does it behoove his high status? I find it quite disgusting . . ." Venkittu Iyer seemed agitated as he snapped words in quick succession and looked at Shiva Raman in silence to gauge if he wanted to hear more.

"Tell me what exactly happened," Shiva Raman asked, a little panic seizing him.

"I don't know anything."

"I too don't know . . . I was coming out of the temple . . . Near the temple tank area I heard a lot of commotion . . . I saw Ganapathi was standing all by himself as if frozen and in a stupor, and the Ganapadigal was jumping all over the place, his right hand was raised and he was hovering over your father ready to strike him . . . Now, I would certainly concede that the Ganapadigal has a right to punish your father if he wanted, but how could he bring himself to mouth such ugly, vulgar words? It was disgusting . . . Ganapathi stood silently as he was being verbally assaulted, left and right . . . then he couldn't take it any more. . . I can understand that, is he not human, after all? . . . So he challenged the Ganapadigal - that was a natural reaction - not necessarily a sign of disrespect : 'How can you say such vulgar things to me? Are you a brahmin?' He wouldn't take it



lying down, so he spoke up. The next thing we knew the Ganapadigal grew fiery with rage, he caught hold of the towel hanging around Ganapathi's neck, began squeezing it and exploded while chanting Gayatri, 'Come on, do you know the meaning of this mantra. Prove to me you are born into a brahmin caste.'

How dare you ask me if I am a brahmin! I demand everyone here to question your claim to be a brahmin.' As he continued his ugly, verbal assault the crowd grew bigger and I tried to intervene between your father and the Ganapadigal. I can't believe the Ganapadigal had so much strength, he pushed me away and I fell against the tank wall . . . He was so ferocious. He went on shouting at Ganapathi: 'Tell me the meaning of Gayatri mantra or admit you are not a brahmin!' Poor Ganapathi was helpless in his tight grip, he was simply scared. We found it impossible to talk to the Ganapadigal, he was so unyielding and stubborn, so we pleaded with Ganapathi: 'What is the big deal, why don't you just tell him the meaning of Gayatri mantra and end this hassle? Ganapathi stared at me, and started crying like a little baby.'

"———' I know only the mantra, I don't know what it means,' he said fighting off tears. I suddenly remembered our boyhood days when we studied together in the same school. I too broke down . . ."

"Suddenly your father freed himself Ganapadigal's grip. We were wondering what he would do next. Gnashing his teeth Ganapathi removed the sacred- thread from his body and cast it into air while screaming at the Ganapadigal, 'Leave me alone, I am no brahmin. . . I am no brahmin, ' and took off. The last time we saw him he was running all over the streets like a crazy man. I wanted to ask you about Ganapathi's whereabouts, and now you are telling me you knew nothing about this episode." In his summing up the details for Shiva Raman, Venkittu Iyer seemed to feel he and the other priests couldn't care less for a stranger who called himself Ganapathi Sastri.

As he painfully grasped the social malady lurking behind the episode involving his father, Shiva Raman grew silent. Saddened, he bowed down his head and moved away, without even formally taking leave of Venkittu Iyer. ✓

As soon as he reached home, he told himself, he would go to a room corner and vent out his inner turmoil by crying out aloud; that was very much on his mind as he walked home.

But once he was home, he didn't do anything of that sort. He gave up that wish lest his wife Rajam should get mad at his mourning his father.

One can understand lamenting over the fate of being born into a low caste; such a gesture has some meaning and may even provoke sympathy from others. But what can you do if you are born in a high caste and suffer the consequences from a perverse twist of irony in the Kali Yuga? Crying would be of no avail - and no sympathy would be forthcoming, either.

### 3

Today Shiva Raman, on his return home from work, didn't stop to search his father among the priests swarming near the temple premises. Because he desperately wanted to understand his father's inner turmoil as well as the shock and pain wrought by the changing times as Ganapathi Sastri articulated in those pages - it seemed like a story of blood, sweat and tears - he rushed home scarcely paying any attention to the temple crowd.

When he reached home Rajam was busy in the kitchen. Mani had not yet returned from work. Mani was employed as a salesman in a large shoe store in Mount Road and would be home only after he personally shut down the store at eight.

After changing, the very first thing Shiva Raman did was to open the envelope from his handbag and read from the pile of sheets in the privacy of his own room.

The very first sentence read like the beginning of a great literary classic.

"I see before my eyes a vast multitude of humanity in motion . . . every one of them is unique. . . no two persons look alike . . . Such a variety, so many human beings displaying so many, different colors and wonders! On this vast playground I see thousands of men and women marching ahead of me and behind me. I suddenly recall my childhood days - the first time when I took a ride on a merry-go-round - and had a strange feeling of thousands of men and women going around me in circles . . . I feel like a kid lost in a large festival crowd. . . I don't see a single familiar face. . . in a way I feel very happy that nobody from this crowd can recognize me . . ."

"This Delhi is an ancient capital, it was ruled by so many kings and emperors, like Ashoka, the Moguls and the British for over so many years. Now, we claim this world belongs to us, we often act as if we own

it . . . but this world has been witness to a vast number of generations of men and women. No person we see today existed in this world some two hundred years ago. Again, no one - not a single soul from that human race of the past two hundred years - survives today. They are two separate entities - who can say when the first one ended and the second one began? But this much is true - the old age has completely disappeared and the new one has fully established itself. To come to think of it, on the surface, everything about this world is amazing, including the total disappearance of the old generation and the full emergence of a new one. The past slowly phasing out, the new one also slowly taking over . . . . Under the divine order this transition takes place without a hitch . . . the same thing must take place - and it does - in the material world as well . . . .”

“There are no problems in the natural world; problems occur only in unnatural circumstances. I was caught in one such situation. Now, human life is really about getting entangled in one problem or the other. If we can't free ourselves from it, we can blame no one but only ourselves . . . .”

So far the pages were written in pencil. The next sets of the pages were written in ink. Shiva Raman felt this change to mean he was moving from one chapter to the other, while mulling over what he had just read. He couldn't help wondering, “Is this really my father - that naive man - thinking about all this heavy stuff?”

He suddenly conjured his father's image - a naive, dark, ugly face sporting an unshaven beard, dense, gray hair, a large mouth with front teeth missing, squint eyes, the facial contours marked by deep scars from smallpox . . . .

He was astonished to think that he - who took writing as a profession to fulfill his literary ambitions - could have never thought about these issues or articulated them on paper; yet here, his father, long ridiculed and dismissed as a dull and foolish man, could do it. Shaken at this discovery he continued to read:

“I don't remember even my father's face; I was nine when he passed away, I wish I had remembered him, but as you know, I am not smart, so I just forgot . . . But as I grew up I heard others talking about my father and I too came to know many things about him. He was indeed a great scholar. I am told he had as much proficiency in Sanskrit as he was in Tamil. Scholars like Sundara Ganapadigal were certainly privileged to study the Vedas at his feet. . . I didn't enjoy that privilege. My mother used to tell me:

‘you too should become a scholar like your father.’ She said that was my father's wish too . . . But you know - in the good old days that was how a brahmin couple dreamed of their offspring, they wanted their son to become a true representative of their community. That's all in the past, you won't find a single soul today with that distinction. Why go further? What have I got to show for my own birth in a great family?”

“I remember protesting to Mani - several times- that he must not work in a shoe company. Did he listen to me? He said: ‘You know nothing about these things. You don't know how hard I had to work to get this job. The salary is two hundred and fifty rupees a month and in a year I get a three-month bonus. Now, don't imagine my job has anything to do with killing a cow and working its hide to make shoes. . . No, I just receive the shoes in a box and sell them to the customer. . . You are still old fashioned and ignorant about these things.’ He shut me up and went to work in a shoe company.”

“Now, is Mani wrong? I don't think so. To come to think of it, everything in this Kali Yuga seems acceptable. Let me explain. I didn't want my sons to follow my own example - by sporting a tuft, wearing no shirt or footwear and ending up as an exclusive group - to be scorned and ridiculed by others. That was the reason I gave them English education and let them sport a haircut as they pleased. What does this mean? I wanted them to have and enjoy all the things that I could not possibly do. I myself grew up as a member of an exclusive club and now I am completely ostracized by others.

To say a particular caste is inferior is a big lie - it is as big a lie as saying that a particular caste is superior, and this becomes clear only when a caste that was deemed superior and extolled finds itself in a pathetic condition just like a caste that was considered inferior and discriminated. It is a good fortune that my sons, born into a higher caste and sporting a sacred thread have not been ostracized, but they have certainly ostracized me! I have noticed on several occasions how they are ashamed to introduce me as their father to their colleagues and friends . . . .”

“Isn't it strange? I feel proud about my father - even though I don't remember his face. My sons are ashamed of their father, fully alive and plainly visible to their eyes . . . But then, I am ashamed of myself, so why should I find fault with them? . . . .”

Once again, the following pages were written in pencil. The words become obscure as Shiva Raman's eyes turned moist. He tried to wipe the

tears off his face with a towel. Is he still crying? He let out a deep sigh. With blood shot eyes and quivering lips, he continued:

"Bharatiyar had condemned in the strongest language, saying, 'A brahmin who utters a mantra without understanding its meaning might as well become a barber.' I remembered reading that quote some ten years ago. One day I pondered: Do I know the meaning of every mantra I recite? I cried the whole day in shame as I recalled my great father's memory again and again. Sundara Ganapadigal who studied under my father was also a great scholar. I studied under Sundara Ganapadigal, but I was more scared of his harsh discipline, than his scholarship. He would flare up if I asked him anything a second time. So I always studied under a cloud of fear and never clearly or fully understood anything around the first time. I repeated the Vedas like a parrot, and at that time I didn't really think I was doing anything wrong..."

"I believed mantras are the divinely inspired, they deal with the holy and the sacred, so I got them by heart. Does a baby, when breast-fed by its mother, know what vitamins are in the milk? Still it is vital for the baby. A patient needs the medicine; does he have to know what chemicals are there in each pill prescribed for him? I told myself that mantras fall under the same category. One needs a mantra, and by chanting it, a scholar had written, one will receive all its benefits. I took comfort in that statement. But then, this argument didn't come in handy when I was caught in a crisis..."

"I was once asked to go to Lawyer Raghava Iyer's house to perform 'Tharpanam.' Now Raghava Iyer is a great man. He had a high regard for my father and he had extended that privilege to me even though I didn't deserve that honor. I knew him for the last forty years. When I arrived at his house I noticed he had a guest - his brother-in-law, one Vaidyanatha Iyer, from Delhi. I had to perform 'Tharpanam' for him also. He looked like an English man. From the way he wore the silk 'dhoti' for the ceremony I knew he never wore one before. I saw him coming down the stairs with the 'dhoti' - he looked so funny - and those shining slippers! What can you say? How have times changed! "

"I grinned at him and said, 'Sir, you must remove those slippers while performing Tharpanam.' He apologized for his absent-mindedness and said, 'I am sorry.' I replied, 'It is all right.' I too speak a few English sentences once in a while, it is a habit that became a part of my profession while socializing with others - even when I feel ostracized by this world..

"That day I had a heavy schedule ahead of me, so I finished the ceremony rather quickly and then noticed that the remuneration for my services was less than the usual amount; I felt a little irritated at his naiveté and said: 'How come the payment is reduced today?' He smiled at me and said: 'Haven't you reduced the mantras today?' Prior to this incident I had never been so humiliated. Only later did I come to know that he was a famous Sanskrit professor in the Delhi University..."

"He asked me: 'Are you not expected to uphold the honor and respect we show to your position? Can you recite the mantras without understanding their meaning?..."

I countered at once with my stock explanation, "Once a patient takes the prescribed medicine, he gets the benefits; must the patient know what is in the medicine?" The gentleman smiled again and said, 'It doesn't matter if the patient doesn't know what is in the medicine, but the doctor should...' I pondered a moment what to say, but couldn't come up with an answer. I offered my apology and took off on my bike..."

The clock strikes eight. Rajam emerges from the kitchen, nears her husband and glances, over his shoulders, the paper he is reading. She is overcome by boredom and indifference - thinking he was reading his office papers.

"Are you not done yet?" She asks. "Are you coming to dinner?" Shiva Raman's attention is now drawn toward her.

"Let Mani come," he begs her with a smile.

"Why don't you keep all this garbage to yourself at work?" Her voice betraying irritation, she picks up a weekly magazine on the table and takes a seat near the wall.

Shiva Raman turns the next page.

"I have been living mouthing useless things for the last sixty years. The very essence of brahmin community has fallen under disgrace because of people like me... I feel guilty when I perform the daily ablutions. I have come to feel strongly that my life is a lie... I wouldn't say the scriptures and the Vedas have lost their value in the present age. The most visible truth is that we have failed to accord them the respect and honor they deserve. Only in the last one month I have come to see myself as an individual. Prior to that I was like an actor in a play - who followed a script verbatim penned by others - I recited the mantras passively, they meant nothing to me..."

... If any of my old acquaintances now see me, they would hardly recognize me as their old friend Ganapathi Sastri... I too can't believe when I suddenly notice my own reflection in a mirror... The person I imagine in my mind still sports a tuft and has the sacred thread... It is not easy to get rid of thoughts that have accumulated over sixty years... Yes, I am talking about thoughts only..."

"Now I am neither a brahmin nor a Sastri. I am an honest man who has not betrayed his conscience... I have the most profound respect for my ancestors. I don't think I would be honoring their memory if I just pretend and act as if I am following their example. I know people continue to think I am crazy - especially those who saw me that day near the temple premises... Let them, I don't care. For scholars like Sundara Ganapadigal priesthood has always been an honorable profession. Whatever one may think how he treated me, on that day, I consider him my mentor for having opened my eyes. I feel as if the entire universe appeared before me in his form and shook me up with a thunder: 'You are no brahmin, you don't know the meaning of this mantra...' It was Sundara Ganapadigal who invested me with the sacred-thread and taught me the mantras I have been reciting all these years. Now he has declared me unfit to be called a brahmin. I still consider him my guru and I bow to him in deep and profound respect..."

"Now I got rid of my tuft. I wear a shirt as well as footwear. I just can't help laughing. They say brahmin priests are not supposed to wear footwear, but how come they are allowed to ride bikes? My own bicycle - I remember Shiva Raman bought it for forty rupees, it was a second hand bike when we bought it - is anybody using it now? Shiva Raman? or Mani? You know even old goods will be useful - till they completely break down..."

Shiva Raman raises his head and looks at the bicycle standing near the wall afar. Rajam who was looking at her husband now follows his gaze and finally rests her eyes on the bicycle. Silently, they both share their feelings and the inner turmoil. Rajam suddenly shatters the silence between them:

"I just don't understand where this goddamn old brahmin has disappeared?" she cries out, and continues: "We absolutely know nothing about him. As days grow, I feel terrible... my mind grows crazy. I just can't explain what is going on... I want to make a confession... Without your father, I find the whole house empty... Now, tell me, did you have

any fight with him? With two grownup sons in the family, why should he end up like an orphan?" Rajam covers her face with the magazine and sobs.

Shiva Raman, who had always considered Ganapathi Sastri totally naive in worldly affairs had just begun to see him in a different light; now, suddenly, for the first time, he became privy to Rajam's hidden feelings - in contrast to her openly declared aversion to her father-in-law. He was a little startled to realize that everything in the world seemed to embody something profound and mysterious within it. He retrieved the papers from the table - those he had already read - and silently passed them on to Rajam.

He let -without any semblance of shame-a few tears drop off his eyes.

"Is this a letter? Are you telling me this is actually from him?" Rajam is quite excited and pleased that her father-in-law is alive somewhere; she eagerly starts reading the sheets handed over to her.

Mani, who just then entered the house listens to the ongoing conversation and responds, "Is that from father? Where is he?" He too sits next to Rajam and tries to read the letter.

The clock strikes nine. But none of them has gone for the dinner. That pile of sheets will not be done that soon.

They have now split the pile and continue their exploration: each one is holding on to part of the whole text, trying to know the full measure of a man who now moved away from them.

Somewhere in the middle of a particular page, Mani can't help shouting in admiration: "Well done, father!"

Can we say what those family members are now reading, understanding and witnessing from those pages concerns only their own family member - an individual brahmin called Ganapathi Sastri of this twentieth century?

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## THE LUNCH BOXES

She had pinned her hopes, to a large extent, on the kindness of the wife of the 'Electric Company' proprietor. With her constant smile she had a knack for getting her way with others, and now she succeeded in eliciting a warm response from that woman - even as the lunch boxes changed hands between them - with a question,

"Andalu, what do you need?" Andalu always had a disarming smile; even when she smiled for no particular reason onlookers would be reading different messages in her facial expression. Can anyone imagine how Andalu's smile drove some men crazy - especially Naidu, the proprietor of the 'Electric Company?' Naidu is only thirty years old and Andalu is probably five or six years older than his wife. Andalu's lean, frail body certainly revealed her as a mother of three or four, yet there was always certain charm on her face. One might call it a lucky face. And how does that face cringe as Andalu pauses, now and then, before asking for a favor!

Anyway, she is not begging, is she? She is only asking for a small loan, an advance payment for her services to deliver lunch boxes. Where is the shame here?

"I need five rupees," Andalu informs the proprietor's wife, one of her longtime customers. "I have to pay the exam fee for my son." She feels a little bashful while asking money; but more important, modesty forbids her to talk about her son studying in school and now getting ready to take the finals.

"Is that right?" the lady - owner seems amazed at the news. "I never knew you had a grown-up boy? Now, tell me about that exam - he has to pay five rupees as fee?"

"They call it 'ESC' or something, he has to pay the fee by next Tuesday, otherwise everything he had studied so far would go to waste.

Somehow or other I have managed to get him the text books and other supplies . . . Now, my husband doesn't like our son going to school . . . Even yesterday he was telling me: 'What makes you think the school is good for him? Why don't you send the kid with me to the smithy shop, he can earn eight annas per day.' I got really mad. I told myself that if my son turns out like my husband or me, that would do him no good. So I yelled at my husband, and warned him: 'I am telling you, do not interfere in our son's education, which is my responsibility.' You see my point, don't you? My son is only thirteen, and what kind of work can he possibly do? He is studying in the city public school, and I hear he is doing well in his studies. I keep checking his progress with his teacher from time to time. My husband really has such a low expectation that he thinks eight annas a day is a big deal! He hates to see our boy with a notebook in his hand. 'Why do you hang on to the school?' he asks the boy. 'You are my son and how do you expect to digest all that stuff?' "

"Maybe your husband is worried about the money involved - if the boy is sent to school," the lady-owner said. "Don't you think he has a point there?"

"How can you say my husband is right? How much are we going to spend for the boy's education, any way? All I am saying is this: if the boy were given some decent education it would help him a long way into his future; but my husband is adamant and says: 'Education or no education, this boy will finally end up in a smithy shop. You are simply dreaming all kinds of big things for him.' So I really got mad at my husband, and I challenged him: 'Is that really what you think? Then let me tell you, I am going to educate our son before your very eyes. As long I am alive, my son would not even think of entering a smithy shop!' Andalu paused, and continued: "But again, what can we, ordinary humans do? We need the blessings of that Seven-Hills-God." The lady-owner now joined Andalu and nodded her head in agreement.

"Only last night my son told me he needs five rupees for exam fee, and immediately I thought of you!" Andalu said, and continued: " . . . ten more days remain for the next month, and where else can I go? I would be grateful if you can loan me five rupees; on the first day of next month, I would deduct my wages of three rupees and pay back the two rupees I owe you." She sheepishly exposed her teeth while making her pitch for help.

The lady - owner was just interested in listening to Andalu's story, and as soon as she heard the word 'rupee', she became down right practical

and started narrating her own domestic, financial condition, in full detail. The result: Andalu's request was denied. Andalu picked up her basket with the lunch boxes and started walking down the street. Her most-hoped-for source to raise five rupees ended in utter disappointment. where else can she go?

There were five more pickups on that street, but how could the people in those houses help? Ordinary coolies lived in those houses. Among all her clients, the one who was comparatively well off was Naidu, the owner of the 'Electric Company.' He was always turned on by Andalu's smile. Andalu recalled that Naidu always cast his leery look at her, but she would fend it off by laughing away at his behavior. Naidu, she knew, would definitely oblige her with five rupees. But no, what if he mistook her request and started flirting? She was immediately overcome with disgust. No, there is simply no way she would approach Naidu! So, she resumed her task as usual - started walking with her basket on the top of her head towards the downtown a mile away.

On her daily route she would briefly stop at a 'water junction', unload the basket from her head, and drink a mouthful of buttermilk to satisfy her thirst. She would untie the small pouch at her waist, and make a pan for herself - with a betel leaf, a small betel nut and some lime paste - and shove it into her mouth. Before she got ready for her next stop, she would gather a pinch of tobacco in her hand. As she continued her walk, somewhere along her path, she would cross a clock tower which would strike twelve. As if waiting for a cue, Andalu would stuff the tobacco into her mouth and start running! Yes, no more walking!

Within the next fifteen minutes she would deliver the lunch boxes to those hungry customers eagerly awaiting her. The first one in her route was the office peon in the printing press - he would get his lunch box and a bottle of drinking water; that would lessen some burden. The next in her itinerary was the auto shop mechanic who would get his aluminum lunch box; then Andalu would come to the 'Electric Company'. "I can't imagine how much that man eats!" she mumbled to herself. "His lunch box is so heavy! Half of my load would be gone when I deliver the lunch to him!" Naidu, the proprietor, would emerge from his shop smiling peevishly, exposing all his teeth. Andalu would smile in return but she would never, never personally hand over the food container to him. Not that she should not, she would be in such a big hurry! She needs to take care of two more hungry customers. So she would put the basket down on the ground- outside the electric company - take out from the basket two brass vessels and rush

to a magazine publishing company in the next block. There, two more hungry compositors would be awaiting her.

There was a large compound dotted with huge trees casting their shadows in front of the publishing firm. After delivering lunch to those compositors, Andalu would walk to the nearby water tap; she would spit out the pan in the canal running along the water tap. She would then wash her face and hands with the water flowing down the tap, and drink a few mouthfuls. Next, she would rest for a while under a tree. Her eyelids would grow heavier, and the incoming breeze would drive out the lingering hunger and frailty from her body. For the next ten minutes or so - such a short time - she would enjoy complete rest. The compositors would arrive after ten minutes and hand over the vessels to her. Now that the rolls of banana leaves accompanying the lunch boxes have also been used up, the lunch boxes would be also lighter to carry. Andalu would then arrive at the electric company. The brand new vessel, now lighter and absent banana leaf, would be waiting for her. Naidu would be chomping a pan, and as usual, he would ask her with a leery look and exposed teeth: "Andalu, have you had your lunch?"

That is when she would remember that she too has a hungry stomach. But her thought and sense of hunger wouldn't drive her into immediate gratification. Her customers, hungry as they are, also have warm hearts. Nobody ever returns an empty lunch box to Andalu; everyone makes sure that invariably some food is always left over. But can Andalu afford to satisfy her hunger with what is now available? What about the two more hungry mouths eagerly awaiting this food in her home?

At her home, the leftovers from the morning meal would be shared by her husband returning from the smithy, and the son leaving for school in the afternoon. The boy's two younger sisters would share just the gruel from the boiled rice her brother and father had - and would be awaiting their mother. Around two in the afternoon, Andalu would join her two daughters playing in the streets with other children, and share with them the leftovers from the food vessels returned to her.

When Naidu asks the usual question, "Andalu, have you had your lunch?" she would give a brief reply, with a smile: "Yes sir, I did," and move away. She would sit in a corner, open up her small pouch from the waist and make a pan - with a betel leaf, betel nut and lime paste- and stuff it into her mouth, along with some tobacco leaves.

Her mind would be preoccupied with the two hungry daughters awaiting her at home. She is always in a hurry - whether coming from her home or returning to it.

And how many hungry people actually depended on her!

But today, as she received the empty food containers from each customer, Andalu is not feeling hungry; neither does she think of her hungry daughters back home.

"Five rupees! Yes, I need them badly to pay for my son's exam. Otherwise, all that he studied so far would come to nothing. . . If I can only manage to get five rupees and pay off the fee, he would pass the tenth grade in next two years . . . then he can get a decent job like others . . . he would become an educated boy . . . If I fail to get the money, my son would wind up as a worker in the smithy - just like my husband keeps telling me, day in and day out . . ."

She did approach the compositors for advance payment; really they were in no position to help.

Naidu, the proprietor of the 'Electric Company' would certainly help, if she just asked him. But she couldn't bring herself to seek any favors from someone like him. His very looks disgusted her. "What if he interprets my request in some perverse way?" So, today, she walked away from Naidu in silence even without her customary smile. Then she sought help from the auto mechanic as well the boy in the printing press - in vain.

"Will my son end up in a smithy shop, just like my husband was saying?" The very thought brought tears swelling into her eyes.

An idea suddenly occurred to her as she was approaching 'Vandipettai'.

There, several women, who, like Andalu were eking out their livelihood by delivering lunch boxes, earned ready cash by selling the food leftovers from their lunch boxes to coolies and other day-time laborers. Andalu never sold food from her tiffin carriers. Not because she felt it was below her dignity or a dishonor; the price for that food was already paid for her two daughters home. But today she needed cash.

"How many more days do I have, to pay this exam fee?" She counted the days on her fingers: "What is today? It's Tuesday. Then I have Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday - and next Monday - it comes to six days!

Even if I could earn only eight annas per day, I will come up with three rupees. I can certainly manage the additional two rupees, one way or the other, can't I? After all, I need to pay the fee only on next Tuesday . . ."

She unloaded the basket at Vandipettai and pried open the lunch boxes. Five vessels had leftovers - rice, curries, and soups. Andalu carefully and steadily mixed the various items from the five food carriers and made them into three full-meal lots.

"Come here! Pay only four annas for a full meal! Hurry up!" she shouted with the other women selling the food.

A short, plump man, unwrapping his turban, came along and sat opposite to her. Like a smart businessman he tilted one of the vessels and took a measure of the food in it.

"What, did you say four annas?" the man asks. "Lady, I think you are greedy! There is so little food in this!" He rubs his chin and counts the change in his lap.

"Lady, listen to me!" he continued. "A few minutes ago I unloaded twenty rice bags from a truck across the street; I have not been paid my wages yet. I can't tell you how hungry I am! I have the appetite of a monster! If I could only afford, I would buy and gobble all the three food lots." He was breathless, and sweat was running down his entire body; even as the sinewy muscles around his shoulders and back looked strong and vigorous owing to his physical work, they were shaking due to high blood pressure. His belly was shrunk and one could see sweat running down the creases on his belly, and every time he took a breath, those creases rose and fell in a rhythm. When Andalu noticed the man's ravenous eyes, for a moment, she felt she should give away all the food for nothing. But then, what about her son's school fee? She became down-right practical, and made her offer: "Nothing doing, if you want this food - you must pay me four annas." "Lady, I am telling you I am awfully hungry, and you don't seem to care! You keep arguing with me. Okay, this is all what I have . . . take it!" The man dropped off the change into Andalu's hands and went into a binge - gobbling the food like a ravenous giant.

Andalu counted the change.

"Three annas - okay, that's fine."

She got nine annas by selling food that day.

The children awaiting their mother at home got no food. Instead she gave them two packets of 'pakora' bought for one anna in a neighborhood shop. And what about Andalu herself? Well, she had the pan and a few tobacco leaves.

She had collected eight annas that day toward her son's exam fee. She grew confident that she would be certainly able to pay off the fee within the due date.

That night she bought rice with the twelve annas her husband had earned at the smithy; along with cooked rice she also prepared some soup for the family. After the children and her husband had supper, she stored the remaining rice in water, and retired to bed.

Andalu told herself she was not hungry. Late into that night, she woke up and looked into the rice bowl. She was hungry but didn't feel like eating. She knew the next day also her daughters would be missing their lunch. Poor girls, how would they feel?

She put the rice bowl away. In the clay pot lying next to the fireside; with its mouth broken and gruel formed into a thick layer, she stirred the contents, added some salt, and drank it. What does it matter as long as she can satisfy her hunger? She even let out a few gurgling sounds to signal her satisfaction over hunger. She took out her pouch and made a pan for herself.

The next day she told her husband and her son, a lie. "It so happens nowadays we get no leftovers from our supper. So I am cooking some extra rice at night. So when you are coming home for lunch, please put away a small portion of rice for the girls." Thus Andalu was trying to account for the portion of rice she pointedly avoided eating at nights and which became available to the two daughters the following day during lunch time.

The next day, she drank the gruel, waited for her husband to leave for work, then fondly addressed her son as 'Raja' as he was about to leave for school. She fondly held his hands, and told him: "You must study well. You have to pay the fee only by Tuesday. am I right? Whatever it takes I shall get the money. don't you worry about it. Will you study hard and pass the exam?"

"Mother, just wait and see. I will do very well in the exams," the boy replied with pride.

"Everything depends on the grace of that 'Seven-Hills- God', said

Andalu and fondly kissed her son on the forehead.

Soon after her son's departure, she left for work around ten with her basket.

Today, she asked money from no one. After collecting the lunch boxes from her regular customers, she stopped at the 'water junction'. She drank more than a few 'lottas' of buttermilk to satisfy her hunger. Then she helped herself with pan and tobacco to forget her two-day hunger and carry on with her chores. She delivered the lunch boxes to her hungry customers. Then she came to Vandipettai, where, once again, she divided the food items from among the leftovers into 'full meals' and sold them. Today she earned eight annas.

She had saved one rupee toward her son's school fee

There was certain innocence, even naiveté in the way she followed that regimen for herself, day after day - rice gruel at nights and buttermilk in the daytime - tempered with pan and tobacco leaves. The pleasant dream that her son would graduate from school was enough to sustain her body and spirits, day after day.

The following Monday Andalu spent the entire night with no sleep. All that she could earn selling the leftovers - except for the Sunday - two rupees and eight annas, she tucked away in her pouch. She still needed two rupees and eight annas. She would make eight annas on Monday. That still left her short of two rupees . . .

"Raja, Raja," she fondly called out her son. He was full asleep, but she woke him up, anyway.

"This exam fee, can we pay it tomorrow, late in the afternoon?"

The very word exam brought the boy out of the slumber. "You mean tomorrow, late in the afternoon? Yes, I need to pay it before five in the evening . . ."

"Okay, go back to sleep. I will get the money before three in the afternoon . . ."

Then Andalu retired to bed.

"Andalu . . . Andalu . . .," now her husband called her.

"What?"



"Why do you keep thinking about this damn exam, day and night? Nobody cares for education anymore! After all, what have our folks achieved after going to school, anyway?"

"Well, what did you achieve by not going to school?"

"Why are you getting mad at me? I see you are worried whether you will be able to pay the fee by tomorrow. I have a plan. Why don't you send him to the smithy shop with me? I will make sure he earns a rupee every day!"

"Shut up!" Andalu sneered at him. "You are so low and mean!" Her husband became quiet.

Andalu was silent for a long time before retiring to bed. Her husband talked to her again - as if secretly whispering to her:

"Andalu . . . Andalu . . ."

"Hmm . . ."

"Why didn't you eat?"

"I did . . ."

"You are lying to me! You drank only some gruel. "

"What is wrong with the gruel, any way? It is good for the body!"

"I see . . . Andalu, you have become very weak" her husband leapt from afar in darkness and gripped her shoulders. Andalu didn't reply. He neared her, stroked her hair and inquired of her with warmth and affection: "You must eat well, why do you think we are working this hard? . . ."

"We are eating right, who says no?" She continued and felt like hurting him with some harsh words, but decided against it. She wanted to be nice to him while letting him realize a few things about their children. "Can I ask you something?"

"Go ahead, " her husband replied. But he was not really paying attention to her words.

"Suppose, god forbid, I suddenly die, how are you going to take care of these three children?" she asked. "If we can manage to get our son educated - by whatever means - then he would take care of the other children . . ." She felt her throat blocked half way.

"No, no . . . you are not going to die," he rushed and put his hand on her mouth.

"You really don't care if I die, do you?" She spoke with utter resignation. Her husband could not bring himself to reply to her.

For a long time into the morning, Andalu lay on her bed. She didn't wake up even after her husband left for work. Her son woke up his mother before he left for school.

"Mummy-I am going to school. Don't forget to bring money in the afternoon. Today is the last day to pay the fee," he reminded her.

"How can I forget?" Andalu replied, and arose from her bed. Her head was reeling. She clutched the wall next to her, and stood up. Her eyes were burning, the entire body, especially the head, grew heavy and seemed to push her to one side.

"Mummy, are you okay?" Panic gripped the boy. Concerned, he asked: "What happened? Are you sick? You suddenly look so different . . ."

"No, I am just fine . . . Once I can take care of your exam fee, I should be okay. Right now I have three rupees with me; I don't know where to get the extra two . . ." She had included in her savings the money she would be earning this Tuesday by selling the leftovers at Vandipettai.

"Mother, you must get those extra two rupees by this afternoon, " her son was desperately begging her." Even if it means getting from those whom you have not asked before."

"Have no fear, you will get the money this afternoon." She firmly assured the boy, who then left for school.

For a long time she was immersed in her thoughts.

"How about asking the lady of 'Electric Company' a second time for a favor?"

It is a question of only two rupees - I would beg her for help. Otherwise, I can beg those customers in the printing press - if I ask each one to get me a rupee, maybe they can help or even contact some of their friends, wouldn't they? Only the poor would understand the problems of the poor! I will tell them about the boy's school fee. If I can't raise just two rupees in an emergency like this, why should I keep working for these folks, any way?" Andalu paused to take stock of her situation. She grew a

little optimistic about her efforts for today and proceeded to work.

The lady of 'Electric Company', once again, refused to help.

"What a travesty, how do these people call themselves human beings?" Andalu cursed the lady in her heart. "Can't she just spare two rupees? Maybe she is jealous about my son getting education! Remember what she said the other day? She asked me if I have a grown up boy studying in school and what kind of exam he was writing! I noticed how she twisted her lips." Carrying her basket on the top of her head Andalu continued her walk.

"How come the basket is so heavy today?" She felt her legs twisting and trying to trip her. She managed to collect the lunch boxes from her usual pick-ups, and when she came to the last one, the lady over there was appalled at Andalu's condition. "Good heavens, Andalu, what is happening to you?" she asked, and Andalu dismissed her question right away, saying, "Oh, it is nothing!" Then Andalu heard - even as her growing hunger debilitated her ears - two girls talk among themselves about herself:

"Poor woman, do you see how her body has languished! Maybe she is sick!"

"Hmm . . . Just wait and see!" Andalu told herself as if challenging the two girls. "Once I take care of my son's exam fee this afternoon, from tomorrow I will start eating three times a day!"

She stopped at the water junction, unloaded the basket and drank two 'lottas' of buttermilk. She immediately experienced stomach upset, and vomited right there. Her eyes turned misty, and she leaned against the wall. An old woman selling fruits in close vicinity rushed to her help; she sprinkled water on Andalu's face and steadied her.

The old woman was worldly and experienced. "Are you hungry? Do you want to eat something?" she asked.

"No, no, I have already eaten," Andalu lied. "It's this summer heat makes my eyes go dark."

"Yes, I agree with you. The heat is terrible." The old woman cursed the weather and was gone.

"Could you please give me a hand - with this basket?" Andalu asked. "Let me have some pan." She helped herself with the pan and gathered a pinch of tobacco in her hand. The old woman lifted the basket

- how heavy it was!

As Andalu slowly approached the clock tower - it struck twelve. She shoved the tobacco into her mouth and hurried. Sweat flowed through her entire body. She kept on running, that is, she was desperately trying to run but ended up in a pathetic walk. When the beads of sweat flowed from the eyebrows to the eyes, she closed her eyes. Darkness overcame her: she felt like flying from the earth to some unknown world.

Then she felt really happy - just like she used to in the compound of that publishing company - under the shaded trees with cool breeze caressing her eyes and drifting her to sleep . . .

A large crowd had now gathered near the clock tower. The leftovers from the lunch boxes - the rice, curries and soups - were scattered pell-mell all over the street. Andalu was lying calmly with her face down on the road which was stained with blood flowing from the back of her head.

She had used her body to carry the load of the lunch boxes; now she has been relieved from the task of carrying her own weight!

All those hungry customers looking forward to her visit were disappointed. The food that was supposed to come down from the load on her head and enter into their stomachs was now scattered on the streets. If only a small portion of the food from those lunch boxes - which she delivered diligently to those customers all these days - had reached her stomach, Andalu would not have died in vain.

What was supposed to travel from head to stomach, ended up on the earth!

And that certainly caused no deaths!

The money Andalu had painstakingly saved - with hardship and sacrifice - two rupees and eight annas - was used for her funeral.

Still, many seem unwilling to believe that Andalu was dead and gone. There is only one proof to confirm her death.

Take a look!

Andalu's son paid no exam fee, so he wrote no exam, and, like his father, he ended up now working in the smithy!

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## THE MILLIONAIRES

**H**e was a millionaire - till six this evening.

At exactly fifteen minutes past six, Mr. Iyengar, his lawyer and legal advisor with a large caste-mark on his forehead, visited the young man. The lawyer entered the house with downcast eyes.

At the time the young man was excessively drunk. For the past few days, he had closeted himself in his room and was on booze the whole day. Occasionally, he talked to himself - giving in to some loud, but meaningless prattles . . .

He had not left his room for the last two or three days, even for an occasional shower, lunch or dinner. He had no intimate friends or relatives in the household to demand such an obligation from him.

He was no more a husband; neither could he call himself a father or a son; he was just the owner of the house. Those who lived with him were his servants. Therefore, like a wife, they were duty bound to serve him and were only waiting for his orders.

Occasionally, an old servant in the household would hesitantly approach the room, wait outside the door and fondly address the young man, "Brother . . . brother . . ." to draw his attention; hearing no response and sensing the rage and wrathful mood of his young master, the old man would beat a hasty retreat. It was widely believed that this old servant was a distant relation to the family and had been even very close to the young man's father. But all these rumors had originated from the old servant himself, who used his alleged connections to admonish or threaten other servants now and then when it suited him.

Yesterday afternoon, the young master, his face visibly darker and

eyes blood-red, opened his room door, craned his head outside and hollered: "Old man, where are you?" He extended a ten-rupee bill and ordered him to fetch a cigarette tin.

"How about lunch?" Even before the old servant could finish the question, the young man slammed the door.

The young man's friends, who used to throng around him, have now stopped visiting him.

His servants living with him spent their time gossiping about their employer's fate and dire consequences.

The young man emerged out of his room only once - that was a short while ago - when he put on new clothes and came down to receive his lawyer at the front gate. He looked pathetic, like a sick patient emerging from a hospital bed.

Soon after Mr. Iyengar's arrival at his private room, its doors were closed again.

Some time ago, when the old servant entered the room to serve coffee to the guest, he observed some papers and documents scattered on a nearby table. Unwilling to sit down, the young master was pacing up and down the room.

When the lawyer finally departed, he felt he was leaving the company of a long-time friend. He patted the young man on his shoulder. Even as he spoke, the lawyer removed his eyeglasses and tried to console his client while trying to contain his own feelings.

"This is something common among the rich and the wealthy," the lawyer said.

"As a professional lawyer this is just an ordinary event in my life. But when I think of your father's honesty and sincerity I feel this tragedy should have never happened to his family - certainly not to his own son! It is all God's play, that's all I can say for now. You must never lose your heart."

The words didn't sink deep enough into the young man's mind or intellect because he seemed lost in a stupor and was staring at the ceiling. For a long time after the lawyer was gone, the young man stood passively at the main gate.

And when he turned around to reenter the house he noticed his servants. All the while they had stayed away at the rear end of the house crouching close to a nearby pillar or door and stealthily watching their master's movements. Now, caught off guard, some of them darted back to their hideouts while others pretended as if going through their chores. The young master hated their guts, and exploded.

He cursed them in the most coarse and vulgar language he could imagine. Finally, he said: "You are nothing but dirty dogs! I wish you were all dead! After all you have lost nothing! You are all like a pimp living off other people's money! Now you will find somebody else to take care of you . . ." Then, addressing the old servant among that group, he shouted: "That goes for you too, get lost!"

Screaming obscenities he returned to his room and closeted himself, again. His father's photo hanging on the wall above a chair caught his attention as soon as he entered the room: instantly, the young man was overcome by a sense of shame that his behavior was most unbecoming of him, and he became quiet.

The letters Rao Sahib Aranganatha Mudaliar were engraved under that photo.

And his son lacked even the basic education to read and understand those letters.

He wondered what he could possibly do next, and was stuck. When he tried to sort out his present situation devoid of all his wealth, he felt he was reduced to a state worse than even that of his own servants. He could claim no professional skills - none, of any kind. He knew only how to spend and spend; even there, he badly needed someone to keep track of his wayward expenses.

He had once inherited a vast, ancestral property. Even after squandering his wealth in playful orgies with friends or in illicit love affairs and drinking bouts with other women, he was left with enough money to carry him through the rest of his life with family and a host of servants. But he lost all of it because of one minor flaw - he became too greedy.

There was a reason behind his voracious appetite for money.

Ten years ago, his wife totally rejected him because of his wayward life and free-spending habits. She left for her mother's house and never returned. She was a decent, educated woman, and when he walked out of

their house, she had blasted him with words that now pierced through his heart.

"What kind of man are you?" she challenged him in a tone tinged with contempt.

"You are living off the wealth inherited from others; your wealth has shown no growth since it came under your control - if anything, it has shrunk, and you are not even aware of it. I am telling you, one of these days you will find yourself on the streets . . ."

She uttered these words in frustration only after exhausting all her efforts at changing her husband's ways. She had put up with him for a while before finally giving up. He had felt so haughty and proud about his role as a husband that he rejected her pleas as of no consequence.

"Oh, come on, just see how I am going to multiply my wealth!" he had boasted to her; he tried to increase his assets by cutting corners and indulging in questionable investments.

Now he muttered to himself: "She was indeed a pure and noble woman, her words have finally come true!"

"Live on the streets?" No, no way! Never!

One of the servants in the front hall was telling his friends: "Looks like our young master has declared bankruptcy!" The old servant, who heard those words, bowed his head down in silence.

\* \* \* \*

Sometime around midnight or a few hours into the dawn the young man suddenly came to a decision and emerged out of his room. The four servants in the household were sleeping somewhere in the main hall or the interior rooms.

He was still tipsy, and as he groped in the dark he slipped near the door entrance and was about to fall down when the old servant came along, propped him up, and warmly enquired: "Brother, where are you going?"

"Old man, you have not gone to bed yet?" the young man replied with a touch of sarcasm. "Are you old folks keeping awake because you are afraid to die?" He broke into a meaningless laughter shattering the calm, silent night.

Still laughing, he went to the garage and let its metallic doors creak

open with a loud noise. He jumped into the car front seat, started the engine and reversed it. The car darted out of the garage and screeched to a halt on the road.

The pathetic young man at the steering wheel shocked the servant, who desperately ran toward the car.

"Please, don't go now!" he pleaded with his master. "You can take the car later- after the day- break!"

"Day-break?" The young man sighed. As far as he was concerned, day and night had lost their meaning a long time ago and he laughed to himself. He leaned from the car window to take a final look at the large house where his ancestors were born and he had himself grown up. He briefly riveted his eyes on the house because he would not be seeing it again. He closed his eyes and addressed the old servant: "You and your friends better vacate this place before you are thrown out . . ." He pulled out his valet from the shirt pocket.

He noticed he had too much money. He would hardly need any money, he told himself.

He threw the valet at the old man saying, "This is all for you. You can share this with other servants."

"Brother . . ." the old man sobbed, held up both his hands high and pressed them together to say something when the car sped away raising a cloud of dust. It was like a funeral rite for a life condemned, marked by a scattering of earth into a grave.

The old servant understood from the speed of the car that it was headed toward death, and he could only weep.

\* \* \* \*

The car sped on, its headlights tearing through the darkness but with no sense of purpose, direction, or goal.

The young man was now racing toward a destination where neither the car's wreckage nor his own corpse could ever be identified. What now mattered to him was not life, but death.

He recalled a hilly road he had driven through last year. He remembered how he had averted a major accident in a narrow turn along that hilly road and saved many human lives by his clever maneuver.

There, at the time, he had stood on the top of a steep incline and looked down the valley covered with huge rocks and large, overgrown trees; while the passengers - everyone of them - seemed frozen at the imminent danger from which they have been mercifully saved, he was scared even to imagine the consequences of the car falling into the deep precipice. Now he seemed to relish his secret plan to reenact that horror into a virtual reality, and he hurried on. Within a few hours after he had left home his car had already traveled close to a hundred miles.

"What time is it?" he wondered. He realized he forgot to take his watch with him because he was not himself when he left the house. Again, the clock in the car had stopped functioning because it had not been rewound in the last few days.

"Why bother about time?" he grumbled to himself and drove at breakneck speed while the cold, gusty winds continued to beat against the car. The tall trees lining along the roads seemed to go, on and on.

Then, as he came to a right turn, he saw a white line in the horizon. Along the center of that highway, at a far away distance, he saw a black spot - it was a lone human figure - spreading its both hands sideways as if blocking the oncoming car.

Why are people so trustful of one another? How dare this lone person - it was not clear if it was a man or woman - face up to a fast approaching car? I am about to die, the young man thought, and I simply don't give a damn! What would you call it, a premeditated murder? For someone who has decided to kill himself, another death would hardly matter! Until now, the young man had not been guilty of any murder; but he would not mind running through this lone person. Anyone blocking his way is welcome to join him in his final destination.

When he opened his eyes and saw clearly he noticed the optimist who stood on the highway was an old woman. Now, the young man was not certainly scared that he might kill her; here was a frail, old woman who stood alone propped up by a cane and hoped to stop a modern fiery monster in its tracks with a hand signal. Her faith centered on only one person - the driver at the wheel.

The young man could not bring himself to betray her simple faith in him. Besides, he reasoned, what would he possibly gain by wantonly killing that old woman. After all, his death has already become a foregone conclusion, and stopping the car for a few minutes now should be no big

deal. Still, he angrily stepped on the brakes and the car suddenly felt a jolt, curved across the road with its wheels dragged along the metal road, and finally hopped in front of the old woman.

Even before he could crane his neck out of the car and curse her she joined both her hands in a respectful gesture and ran toward him. She pointed her hand toward a cottage behind her and spoke in Canarese. And when the young man stared at her with a puzzled look she knew her words made no sense: she now made a sign with her hand - pointing it to her weak, shrunken belly.

He got out of the car. She grabbed his hand and led him to the cottage.

She didn't seem threatened by the young man's appearance or demeanor. As if negotiating some deal with him, she loosened the knot at the end of her sari and pulled out an old, soiled two-rupee bill that had been carefully folded eight times: she pressed it hard into the young man's hands and then fondly caressed his chin as if begging for a favor. The young man was quite amused by her gesture.

He tried to judge her age and realized that he had never met a woman that old.

Her eyebrows had turned gray; her thin, boned frame was firm, erect, and seemed endowed with enough agility in her movements.

He accepted her two-rupee bill in good humor.

He followed her to the cottage as she walked ahead of him supporting herself with her cane, her head down, the heart full of prayers, and occasionally looking back and forth and addressing him.

There, at the cottage entrance, was a young, pregnant woman in labor. She lay there, casually parting her legs, secure with the knowledge that she had full privacy with no males around her; she was profusely bleeding and writhing in great pain.

He now understood why the old woman brought him to the cottage. He was certain the pregnant woman was neither her daughter nor grand daughter; the way the two women carried on their conversation confirmed his suspicion that they were not related by blood. The old woman's attitude told him one and only thing - as he could make it out: if men and women can't bring themselves to render even this small help to one another, what

purpose could possibly served by a human body which is endowed with the gift of life but ends up doing nothing but counting the days go by?

He and the old woman held the young woman by their hands and slowly led her to the car: half way through, the young man realized their joint effort was not going anywhere, so he gathered the young woman in his arms like a child and carried her to the car while the old woman ran after him, occasionally supporting herself with the cane. As the old woman scrambled into the rear seat to take care of the young woman, he wondered where he could get the directions for a hospital.

The old woman understood his confusion and pointed the cane toward the rear end of the car.

He hesitated for a moment before assuring himself: "Because I want to oblige these women and go out of my way for a while, I am not actually giving up my suicide plan." The car that was only a few minutes ago racing towards death, now reversed the direction, retraced a few steps, and rushed along.

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It was almost dawn when they reached a non-descript government hospital.

He was amused by the irony of the situation; he was on his way to meet with death, and now he was about to witness a birth! It is funny, he thought, he wanted to enjoy the fun, and rested in the car. His body, having been deprived of rest, food and peace of mind for so many days, was now totally tired and exhausted; he felt his eyelids grow heavy, and the cool, morning breezes soothed his body. The birds just awake in their morning hours sang lullaby, and the young man slowly drifted into sound sleep.

He suddenly woke up after hearing either the baby's cry or the old woman calling his attention. She had come to invite him to visit the new baby. He woke up blinking his eyes under the bright sunlight and felt he was setting his eyes on a new world. The old woman grabbed his hand and led him into the hospital. As he walked into the maternity ward he noticed a new baby - like a fresh, flower-pot - at every bed on his way.

The old woman took the baby away from its mother - the infant was buried in its mother's breast and was ravenously suckling it - and extended it toward him. As he warmly received the baby, the young man couldn't help asking himself: This baby is no millionaire - does it mean he is not entitled to a life? As he held the baby close to his face as if offering prayers, the old woman again thanked him for his timely help.

He returned the baby to the old woman and soon emerged out of the hospital. Suddenly, he felt like crying, but felt his throat blocked half way. He was also hungry and remembered he had not eaten for many days. He ferreted out of his pocket the two-rupee bill the old woman had given him earlier and walked into a small grocery store next to the hospital. Soon, his hunger was gone. He also bought some candies to celebrate the baby's birthday.

He returned to the maternity ward and shared the candies with the lady doctor, the old woman, the new mother and others. Then he went to a teashop opposite to the hospital, with the change still left in his pocket.

It was the first time in his life that he found himself drinking tea in the company of ordinary people; he keenly observed the faces of those simple men and women who looked pleasant amidst their poverty and seemed to enjoy their lives.

"There is no millionaire among these men and women." The thought was so comforting to him. "Are they happy because of that very fact?"

When he recalled the events of the last few hours and the people who crossed his life - the poor old woman, the young woman who came under her tender care, and finally the baby the mother had brought into the world with faith and hope for its future, he could not help wondering how human life blossoms even among the low, rustic, common people.

As he pondered the basic question, "How am I different from these folks?" he felt he had been suddenly and violently uprooted by the strong eddies of flood called life and transplanted on a strange, foreign soil to begin a new life.

As he finished his tea and got up from his seat, he noticed afar a villager approach his car and grope for him at the driver seat. He also noticed another man come up and point his finger toward our young man in the teashop. Concerned, the young man arose from his seat and walked

to his car.

The tall villager next to his car in khadi clothes was saying something in Canarese.

Sensing that the young man couldn't understand the local language, the man next to the villager explained the situation in Tamil:

"He says he wants to go to Narsapur - it is ten miles away. There is a patient who had a major stomach surgery - it is important that the patient be taken with utmost care. How much do you want?"

The young man seemed puzzled. Noticing the stunning look on his face, the villager thrust a few ten-rupee notes into his hands and disappeared into the hospital.

Soon, the villager and a young woman - it was she who had undergone the surgery - were inside the car and on their way. Any outsider who happened to notice the driver's steady and cautious maneuvering of that car could have clearly understood that the car was now heading towards a new life.

The young man had understood it a long time ago.

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## HE IS ONLY A DEVOTEE!

**T**hat temple stood smack in the middle of the town. Still, it was quiet and made no waves. Modest in appearance, its 'gopurams' didn't soar high enough in the sky to be glimpsed afar by onlookers who might be moved to sing its glory. You would never feel intimidated or awed by the temple's exterior; you would just walk in as if it is your natural home. No large doors barred its entrance. There stood a four-foot corridor and a wall surrounding the temple. Once you find yourself inside, you felt the chill in the air as you step on the rows of black stones next to the shaded 'punnai' trees and their flowers; cool breeze continuously filled the surroundings. You would also notice on the ground remnants of marks made and abandoned by the cowherds who, after letting their cattle graze in the nearby 'iluppai' forest, indulged in playing the 'goat-tiger' games. During the day the cowherds would idle away their time either sleeping or playing, and the temple authorities didn't seem to care. The presiding deity of the temple was Balakrishnan - Lord Krishna as a child - who, with his constant smile, looked adorable, and very accessible; you would think all you need to do is just extend your arms through the metal bars of the latch and touch him, ergo, child Krishna would just jump out and land on your waist!

The temple was cherished and worshipped by the locals whose predominant language was Telugu, but the temple priest himself was a Tamil brahmin. Because the temple was invested with sizable property and funds, the traditional pujas were held twice a day and the annual ten-day festival was conducted with quite a fanfare and style. Women visited the temple in the evenings when the cowherds had already returned to their homes. The cuckoos from the neighboring forest would then start singing and the whole atmosphere in the evening would be totally different from the one of daytime. Appanna, the temple priest, normally stayed in the temple for long hours into the evening - sometimes even till nine - when, at the end of the day, he would lock up the metal doors - as if imprisoning Bala Krishna - within his small abode.

Appanna was totally dedicated to the temple. He performed the rituals not as an obligation on his part - as many temple priests are prone to nowadays - but with special care and love. He loved to deck out the Krishna idol everyday in preparation for worship and savored every moment he spent in the act - like a mother attending to her baby. Some of the priest's friends made fun of his obsession with the daily ritual as a way of compensating for his being childless. Appanna is now past the stage when he craved for offspring and actually prayed for them; now he is reconciled to his situation. He is already past fifty, his wife nearly fifty, so they are actually free from that concern.

The priest's wife Pattammal would occasionally visit the temple to collect flowers for daily worship. Most often it would be Appanna who came to the temple in the mornings to gather flowers. His wife would string them together and make garlands - a task to which she brought great love and dedication. She would also prepare, everyday, at her home, special food for Bala Krishna, which her husband would first dedicate to the presiding deity and later share with her.

One can see in front of Appanna's house a metal board with words 'Temple Food Available Here' scrawled across it. One might even say that the couple's survival depended on the temple food. However, they themselves never saw it as the mainstay of their livelihood, and they never compromised their integrity in preparing the prasad. The locals knew the prasad they were offered was indeed sacred because it was prepared with a deep religious fervor and dedicated to the temple deity.

Next to the temple prasad, the temple priest, and his wife - all connected to the Krishna temple - there was another woman - but she was not directly associated with the temple itself. She was simply called the Krishna Temple Old Woman; nobody knew her past or family background. She was spotted in the area a few years ago. One evening, she entered the iluppai forest with a cane in one hand and a bundle of rags in the other. Her head seemed to shake constantly as if proclaiming she had enough of this life.

Having arrived at this village, the old woman stayed back permanently as if she had found her target. Everyday she would leave very early in the morning and return at noon or late afternoon with some rice stashed away in the bundle of her dirty clothes. Showing no immediate concern to cook the rice, she would spend the next several hours leisurely, and then rest. At night, around nine, Appanna, as he was leaving the temple



premises after 'imprisoning' Balakrishnan, would notice the old woman setting up three stones, like a fireplace - under a tree and cooking rice. The next morning, when Appanna came to the temple to gather flowers, he would notice the earthen vessels, dark and sooty, washed up, turned upside down under the tree. As if to prove that the old woman had entered the temple premises the previous day, the entire temple corridor would now look clean after scrubbing; a 'kolam' - in a zig zag fashion - resembling the old woman's ubiquitous, jerky head, would also be visible on the wet floor.

So far, neither Appanna, nor his wife nor the cowherds had ever seen the old woman within the temple premises. Still, everyone called her the Krishna Temple Old Woman.

Nobody knew the old woman's real name, because she was dumb. And no one ever knew what she thought of the name given to her.

One day Appanna was gone to a neighboring town on some business. He returned only around midnight. As he was returning home from the rail station - after crossing the iluppai forest next to the temple - he heard some human voice from the temple. As he peered ahead, he noticed the back of the old woman sitting in front of Balakrishnan idol.

"What could she be possibly doing there at this hour?" Appanna wondered. "There is no sign of rain at this time, either." Raising his head to examine the sky above, he silently entered the temple. Soon he could see not only the old woman's back; an earthen pot, empty and broken, as well as food from it sprinkled on the floor, were visible in the light from a nearby oil lamp.

The old woman took a lump of cooked rice in her palm and pushed it through the metal bars very close to Balakrishnan's face. She grew emotional as she muttered some entreaties in the presence of the idol. Then, seemingly satisfied that Balakrishnan accepted her offering, she withdrew her hand and started eating the food herself. Before she helped herself with every portion of the food, she first offered it to Bala Krishnan - like a mother feeding her child - with a smile, love and affection, and thoroughly enjoying the act.

Appanna felt outraged by her action, but he was soon overcome by pity at the old woman's apparent craziness. Still, he could not bear to see her desecrate the temple. He keenly listened to her words; he was unable to decipher her language, just the way he couldn't understand her strange

behavior. He had always known her as an old woman, and now she appeared to him like a four-year old girl.

From the way the old woman was carrying out her ritual, it became clear to him that this was no one-day incident. Appanna understood the old woman must have been engaged in this exercise from the day she had come down to this area. That indeed seemed to be the reason, he told himself, why she washed up and cleaned the temple premises everyday and made out a kolam in the corridor.

"You, old woman!" He screamed on the top of his voice. She didn't hear those words.

Appanna was a little scared he might be committing a sin by intruding into her joyful pastime. After standing there for a while, he returned - giving the old woman no hint of his presence. Sleep eluded him even after returning home.

He agonized if he, as a priest responsible for the temple upkeep, should have booted the old woman out of the temple premises, right away.

After all, who knows what dreadful things she has been cooking in those earthen pots? How dare she think of bringing that horrible stuff into the temple and polluting the holy surroundings? Appanna's mind was in turmoil. He told himself the next time he left the temple premises at night, he would make sure the main gates to the temple were totally locked up barring entry to the stray and the unauthorized.

Nowadays entry to the Krishna Temple is limited to a few hours in the morning as well as in the evening. It seemed practically a whole day was needed to permanently close the steel doors at the temple main entrance; over the years, having been left open for a long time, those doors seemed stuck up in the soil on which they stood, while the weeds mushroomed all around them. Last week Appanna was forced to have the temple services held up for one full day to rid the doors of accumulated rust, repair some of the damaged areas, and finally oil the door hinges, prior to their eventual closure.

The cowherds have now begun using the steps leading to the temple to mark lines for their goat-tiger games. The cattle continued to graze in the adjoining iluppai forest, so did the cuckoos continue with their music in the evening. The only change was in the old woman, who now ended up permanently outside the temple, under a tree from where she pathetically

looked at the metal doors barring her access to Bala Krishnan, and deeply sighed. Occasionally, she would leave her spot to go out and beg for food leftovers. Otherwise, she slept under the tree, whether day or night. The fireplace she had built in the iluppai forest - with three stones - was now empty and seldom used.

When Appanna came down to the temple - for worship or to gather flowers - the old woman would pathetically stare at him. Appanna dreaded even to look back. He would ignore her and hastily walk away. In fact, he did not even share with his wife the scene he was privy to on that midnight.

Ten days have since passed. It is now time for the Bala Krishnan Temple annual festival. A big shed was built outside the temple and a flag hoisted on a nearby pole specially erected for the occasion. Appanna, who always delighted in the daily ritual of decking out Bala Krishna idol for worship, was now all the more elated, and got ready for the festivities to begin.

He first slipped the bracelet into Bala Krishnan's front arm.

"What a fool am I?" he scolded himself. "I have mistakenly put the anklet in the arm, that's why it is so loose!" Laughing to himself, he tried to extricate it from the arm.

Then he noticed something. It was no anklet; it was actually the bracelet!

How did the bracelet grow so large? He remembered how it slipped beautifully into Balakrishnan's arm last year! His mind a little confused, Appanna now picked the anklet and tried to slide it into Bala Krishna's foot.

The anklet too didn't fit, and it fell off the foot as a loose ornament

The same thing happened with the waistband too.

"Why is the Lord testing me?" Appanna asked himself, and pathetically stared at Balakrishna's face.

Yes, he could see. Bala Krishnan did look thin and weaker . .

"But that is crazy! How can I ever explain this to anybody? These days when atheists are flaunting rationalism as their only weapon, I would be laughed at and ridiculed by everyone! Forget the atheists, what about

these devotees who are swarming this temple in large numbers? Would anyone among them believe my words?" For a long time Appanna stood there - silent, confused, and staring into the empty space . . .

Around nine, he came out of the temple and saw the old woman. She seemed totally absorbed watching, under the floodlights hung from the ceiling, the children from the neighborhood playing with one another - amidst joy and fun.

Appanna looked at her face. She was dumb and spoke no words - but how many expressions did that face reveal! Those folds and wrinkles spoke volumes of her long, sad memories.

Appanna started thinking about her.

"Today she is just a poor, lonely woman; but at her age she could have easily led a long life with her own children! We really don't know what happened to her. Maybe she is not accustomed to have her meals with no company - alone, all by herself! Perhaps that was the reason she wanted to share her meals with Bala Krishnan. I will never know about it by talking to her. Dumb people can't talk, they can only try to express what's on their minds. Balakrishnan doesn't talk either; maybe he too is trying to tell me something. One would be hardpressed to articulate these things. Now, intellect is hostile to devotion. Intellect and devotion are opposed to one another. I believe god accepts my offerings to him; the devotees here also accept my belief and consider the prasada is sacred and blessed by god.

Why can't I simply accept the faith of this old woman? Who am I to say that god wouldn't accept her offerings - tendered with love and affection deep from her heart? Seems to me Bala Krishna has been certainly looking forward to her offerings in these last ten days; I am afraid I have foolishly let him starve!" Appanna agonized over his conduct.

When he returned home that night, Appanna made sure that the temple's main gates were left wide open.

A few days later, sometime after nine at night, Appanna saw the old woman in the iluppai forest with the fireplace set up under a tree. Something was cooking in that earthen pot. The foul smell was too much to bear; as he was leaving for home Appanna covered his nose with a towel to escape the traces of its odor . . .

Poor Appanna! He is only a devotee, not God . . .

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## THE LOW CLASS

**S**o you wanna sit here on this railroad weeping in the dark? What the hell, forget that scum - call it a good riddance . . ."

The woman, who has been weeping all along while seated on a pile of stones next to the railway line branching off into five or six tracks, had expected neither that voice nor its owner. Overcome by shock and fear, she sprang from where she sat.

An electric train from afar came shrieking and sped past the man and woman; from its shaft of light the man now saw even more clearly the woman's face with bruises, swollen lips and large eyes. The woman instantly covered her face tightly with both hands because she was overcome by shame at the man staring at her pathetic face and also by the brightness of the light piercing her eyes. Long after the train was gone she continued to cover her face with both hands and went on sobbing, incessantly, while ranting:

"Go away! Why did you come here? Leave me alone. I want to throw myself before the train . . . I certainly deserve this punishment for betraying you." As she went on and on, the man too wiped the tears off his face - either because he was reminded of the woman's betrayal or because he now watched her in terrible pain repenting for her past sins. He suppressed his own feelings and fought off the tears; he raised his head to the sky and let out a deep breath.

The woman continued to stand there, sobbing; the man stood next to her, without making his feelings public.

"I expected something like this, yea, it is true, but what can we do? Now, don't blame yourself, you don't have to kill yourself over this. You must tell me where you want to go I will take you there. . . I owe it to myself because we lived together for last two and half years . . . I will take you

back to your village, this city life is not good for you; if you stay here any longer you will end up even worse. Yes, listen to me, you must go back to the village. "

Another electric train now came toward them from the opposite direction, and the woman now riveted her eyes on him.

The man's eyes were closed under the bright light. She imagined his face twisting and grinning in utter disgust of her very presence.

And she continued to bow her head down because she thought the man was fully justified in despising her and avoiding any contact with her. How could she possibly expect his continued interest in her? Why should he come forward to rescue her from utter helplessness? Even if he did, how could she shamelessly bring herself to accept his help? All these thoughts crossed her mind as she stood there scraping the front portion of right leg resting on the ground below.

The man broke the silence, and spoke. The words came as if he grasped the situation like an ordinary, decent, human being - with no reference to their relationship as a husband and wife or as victim and tormentor.

"I just don't get this . . . you are saying you want to kill yourself. A short while ago, when I saw you I thought you were just crazy - you seemed lost, you were weeping and your hair was all messed up - I actually thought the worst was going to happen. . . I got scared, my stomach started churning . . . I wanted to follow you in my *rickshaw*, but I was scared people would gather around us to see what is going on. So I took a side road - Gengureddi Road - and started pedaling the *rickshaw* hard . . . . Luckily, the rail gate was not yet closed. . . I was trying to take a left turn near the gate, and then I saw you wandering alone on the rail tracks. I even thought I can catch up with you near Chetpet rail station . . . . But then, you know what? As I came near the Poondamalli high road, this goddamn thing suddenly broke down - the chain got loose . . . By the time I fixed the chain and came to Nehru Park, I saw you standing here. . . so I dropped ~~the chain~~ right on the road and came running to you. . . Now, you may be thinking why I should come here. What do I care what you think? I am the fellow who married you and brought you from your village to this city, so whatever happens to you I am responsible for it. Yeah, I know I am doing the right thing. "

"Now you may ask: 'you brought me to the city, but I ran away with another man, and what have you got anything to do with me?' That's what

everybody in the village keeps asking me. . . Now, what do they know about me, anyway? But you know me, don't you, and if you don't, let me tell you right away. . . What if you ran away with another man? Am I here to take you back to my home and start my life all over again with you? Don't think like that and don't throw me out. . . . Whether you want to live with me or not, am I not the guy who married you - didn't I tie the knot in a ceremony before the village elders? So I have the right to be here. . . . Now, nobody is going to question me if I let you die here under a train, but my conscience wouldn't let me do such a thing. It will keep asking me: 'After all she is an ordinary village girl, she lost her head, went astray, and she finally paid a heavy price. . . . poor girl, she is now dead, and you are to be blamed for her death.'.. How can I answer my conscience? That's the reason I am here."

"Now, in the last two and half years we have not been together only for the last six months. We lived together for two years; during that time did I ever quarrel with you? Did I ever say anything rude or do anything to hurt your feelings? Did you ever complain you were hungry or needed money? Did you ever complain I was drinking or loafing around? Were we not happy those days? I think we were happy, we loved each other. . . . then something happened, some evil eye caught us, suddenly things came apart. . . but why talk about it, it is all over. . ."

"What is the point of two people hanging on to a relationship when they are not happy with one another? For some reason or other, my wife didn't want to live with me, and she left me. I asked myself: maybe I should look for another woman.

I certainly thought about doing something like that. . ."

"But you know something? I know you, and I also know that creep you ran away with. . . What do you know about this world, anyway? You are just a child, the city looks bright and flashing to your eyes, you stand before it completely taken by those outside attractions. Let me say this: you never deceived me, you deceived only yourself, yes, you deceived only yourself."

Like arrows, his outpour of words, now and then interrupted by pauses, deep breaths, and delivered with all their suppressed intensity, pierced her heart: as shame swept all over the body, she laid her soul bare at his feet.

"My god, why should I live any longer?" Now fully aware of her loss - what was snatched away from her by her own folly - she grew

desperate, clapped a hand over her head, and squatted on the ground.

"Don't cry, don't," the man tried to console the woman, climbed over the pile of stones and sat next to her. His shirt was soggy with sweat and torn across the torso. He pulled out a *beedi* from a shirt pocket. He searched for a matchbox from another pocket, and having failed to find it, stood up on the pile of stones, found the matchbox from a side pocket of his half pant, and lit the *beedi*. He inhaled the smoke deep into his lungs, savored it, let the smoke escape through his mouth and nostrils, and then examined the woman's face, thoughtfully. The woman sat there, still crying in low voices, her body cringing in shame, her legs stumped together on the ground, her face brushing against the raised knees.

He spoke in a gruff voice.

"Get this right away. I am speaking to you not as your husband, that relationship is a recent one, just over two years, but I knew you even before that. . . as a girl you used to call me 'uuncle' and we used to wander off outside into fields and farms. . . What was our relationship in those days? Whenever I came down to your village from the city you and your sister would come to me and demand I give you money and tell you stories. . . All that love and affection between us - was it actually based on any relationship? To tell the truth, I never thought of marrying you - that happened because you were an orphan and I was fond of you. . . then, when the elders in the village suggested I marry you, how can I say no? When I came to know some of the city girls I found them disgusting, and shunned them. . . It's true I wanted to marry someone - a nice, decent girl from my own neighborhood - but I am willing to take an oath on Iyengar and say this: before the village elders' suggestion that I take you as a bride, I never even imagined such a thing possible. . . Then I told myself: This girl is nice to me, why not I marry her? Where can I possibly get a better wife? That is what really happened. If you don't want to live with me, that am fine with me, does it mean my love and affection for you will suddenly disappear? All that affection we shared when we were together - do you mean to say it is all false? That is the kind of relationship I am talking about - that's why I am here. . ."

"Now, tell me, why should you kill yourself? What happened, after all? It's no big deal. . . You ran away with another man, but did you go with the right fellow?"

I can forget about the whole thing and feel contented that you are happy with someone, somewhere . . . but this fellow is a parasite! He gets hold of young, decent girls, takes care of them for three months and then dumps them as streetwalkers! He can't earn anything by his own efforts! He can't do any work! And you thought he is going to take care of you! I don't know if I should cry or laugh at your innocence. . ."

"That is why for the last six months I am utterly confused about this whole thing . . . I know you lost your mind and ran away with that wretch . . . I also know sometime in the future you will end up living on the streets. Even if I can't live with you, I must make plans for your future. Without those plans how can I possibly start life with another woman? If I did that, will I be here now? Let us say I don't show up here, and you throw yourself under the train. Then, who is going to answer for your death? That lowlife, or me? It was I who knew everything about that scoundrel yet let you go after him. . ."

As he went on and on, his words stirred her deeply - illuminating, again and again, her dark mind, making her realize about herself. His words were interrupted only by the occasional sounds of the trains approaching their vicinity in the opposite directions.

The man, unknown to her, was feeling sorry for himself, and silently weeping. Even as he felt assured that the woman would not be able to notice in dark the tears flowing down his cheeks, he suspected she might find out when he lit the *beedi*. So he shifted his head slightly to his left, and cleared his nose. Continuing to smoke in silence, he stared at his cycle *rickshaw* afar on the Poondamalli highroad, and let out a deep breath.

"I made no money in the last six months . . . what is the point of making money? The *rickshaw* needs fixing too . . . I have been thinking about the repair for the last three months. . . . What's the big deal? I couldn't care less. . . If I feel hungry, I go out and pick up a passenger, if I am not in a mood to work, I go hungry! Was I ever like this before? Have you ever seen me before in a torn shirt?" There was a brief flash of light when he raised the head, and now she had a very good look of his face.

The disheveled hair, unshaven beard, a sweaty, damp shirt torn across the chest, the rickety bones visible through the big opening. . . She responded with a sob, held her head with both hands, and wept even louder.

"Don't weep over this . . . what was supposed to have happened has

already happened. Do you know how often I wept when that scumbag, fully drunk, used to beat you up? I used to tell myself: 'She was so happy, and now see what has become of her?' I felt your pain like a father, a brother or some stranger. . ."

"That is how I have come here. . . I am not here as your husband. . . In a way it is good that the guy dumped you so soon . . . now I will take you back to your village . . . we will meet with the village *panchayat* board and annul our marriage. . . Then you can do whatever you want . . . I too will find some woman and live my life. . . let us not waste our lives. . . What do you say? . . . You don't have to say anything- let us get the hell out of here. There is a train at ten thirty. Let us go. I know how your mind works; if not today, some other day you might decide to kill yourself. . . You don't know anything about this world, you are just a child . . . that's why, I can never get mad at you."

"No . . . I don't want to go back to the village . . . You must push me before the train, and kill me. . . I will gladly accept death from your hands." Sobbing, the woman stood up and joined her hands in a gesture as if begging him.

"Are you crazy?" the man screamed aloud. "Are you telling me your parents got us married because I would push you under a train?" He raised his voice as if rebuking her.

"No, but I deserve that punishment for what I did. You must push me under the train. . ."

"Shut up," he screamed again. "How do you think the police would act if I ever do such a thing?" He scampered down the pile of stones; thinking if they stood there any longer, her suicide plan may gain strength.

As he came close to her she arose and stared at him with intense anxiety and uncontrollable pain. His look made her sadness even more intense and her copious tears blinded her eyes. She could no more bear the pain. She grabbed both his hands and sobbed incessantly.

"It doesn't matter whether you leave me back in my village or push me under the train right here," she screamed. "I am a slut . . ."

"So that is what you are weeping for?" the man admonished her. "Now, tell me, what is your crime, anyway? Are you telling me people never make mistakes? For that matter, I don't think it was a mistake on

your part. If a woman leaves somebody because she doesn't want to live with him, can you call it a crime? Your only crime is you went where things didn't work out right for you . . . Now you can go to the village and find someone you really like, and marry him. . ."

"My god, don't say such a horrible thing!" she cried again. "I didn't leave you because I didn't like you. I can't explain why I left you . . . I guess I became greedy . . . you are only a . . . driver, and I heard somebody say you are going to be a . . . driver all your life. . . So, just like you said, I became attracted to flashing things and ended up as a bad woman . . ."

A train now came along, and as it awaited the signal to proceed further, it stopped close to them. Under close scrutiny, the pair now took a full measure of one another.

His eyes teary, the face shrunk from weeping, the man moved his dry lips, and asked the woman:

"Is it true? You didn't leave me because you didn't like me or wanted to live with me? Really? Tell me, do you still like me? Do you want to live with me?" His questions, addressed in quick succession but in a slowly declining voice, ended with a secret message, "Do you like me?" whispered right at the woman's face, along with a tight grip of her shoulder.

The woman reacted as if she was waiting only for this very question and physical intimacy. Her heart eagerly seeking warmth and excitement, still crying, she leaned on his body, and found refuge in his embrace.

Their two hearts now mingled into one; they understood one another and they now lived for one another . . .

In the darkness following the train's departure, secret words - terms of endearment - emerge from their hearts . . .

"Uncle, will you forgive me? I betrayed you, didn't I? I am a bad girl.."

"You goddamn donkey, you talk too much! You have a heart of gold, so nothing else matters. . . For that matter, I too was a bad guy that was before I married you.."

"Uncle"

"You donkey, stop crying . . ."

"Uncle, that's what I like about you. Please call me donkey, just as you used to

Do in the good old days, that word brings back all those memories. I want to forget everything that happened in between . . ."

"You donkey, I know . . . that's why I keep calling you donkey."

"Uncle . . ."

"Donkey . . ."

The man keeps cuddling her with his own language of love.

Do you think his language sounds low class?

Yes. Only the language is low class. But can you judge a man solely by his language?

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## THE CROSS

### 1

**T**he bus sped on the highway at breakneck speed. Vowing that her eyes must not fall prey to the young man seated next to a window three rows away, the young nun peered out of the window of the moving bus and witnessed that scene.

It was a farm girl with a haystack on her head and a baby at her waist presumably gone to sound sleep on her bosom after ravenously sucking the mother's breast. The farm girl looking at the bus with one of her hands protecting the baby's face against the hot sun and the other on her forehead, came into the nun's view only after the bus passed her on the highway. Both the nuns in the bus were seated with their faces opposite to the direction the bus was speeding.

That scene – the farm girl standing with her baby – brightened the nun's face, and she slightly craned her head out of the window. Her blue scarf fluttered in the breeze; the farm girl smiled at her, and the nun nodded her head . . .

“God, the Father of mercies

Through the death and resurrection of his Son . . . .”

Her lips quivered. The farm girl reminded her of the statue of Virgin Mary – holding baby Jesus in her arms – in front of her church. As the farm girl slowly but gradually disappeared from her view, the nun's eyes reverted to the bus interior and again rested on the young man in the fourth row.

He was staring at her – at her small, round face – visible from her blue and dark outerwear.

Her body was aroused, the eyes flickered; she averted her eyes away from him.

“But why? He does seem handsome, but what if he is handsome? That's how sin begins, and one sin leads to another, and they keep piling up. Is not human life after all born out of sin? Where will be the human progeny if Adam and Eve had not eaten the forbidden fruit? Were they not created by Holy Father pure in their hearts?”

“And what did they actually do? They became sinners because they ate the forbidden fruit. It is because of their sin that all humans – those like me and those next to me, as well as Mother Envilada, who took care of me after I was abandoned by my parents as a three-day orphan, and made me a nun, the farm girl I saw a while ago with a baby in her arms, and the young man over there who keeps watching me – all are born on this earth! Sinners! All the human beings are sinners! They are worms –born from the forbidden fruit! Poisonous worms! Poisonous snakes!”

The bus was in full motion.

Her eyes again fell on the young man when she returned to the bus interior; when she averted his look and turned around, her eyes met the year-old child sitting on her mother's lap, and smiling. The nun's heart was overcome by emotion.

She smiled, and the child leapt towards her. She got off her mother's lap and began to pull down the loose length of the sari of Envilada sitting next to her. The old woman was deeply immersed in meditating over a cross hanging from her chain.

That was how the old woman handled her in bus journeys as other passengers had come to know her. For nearly the last two hours she has been meditating – with her head bowed, eyes resting on a silver cross – with Jesus engraved on it.

The old woman fondly lifted the child's chin, smiled and relished her company. The child tried to pull the cross from her hand. The old woman handed over the cross to her, joined the child's two hands firmly together, trying to teach her to pray: “Come on, say your prayers!” she told her.

The child prayed, turned toward the nun, and with her cheeks puffed up in a smile, she leapt toward her. The nun lifted her in her arms and warmly embraced her. Elated, she felt her emotions choked up: her turned

eyes

misty.

Envilada, once again, retreated into her meditation.

"Katharine! What time is it?" she asked the nun, her eyes still resting on the cross.

Katharine, who had buried the baby's spongy cheek on her own and was savoring those moments, didn't hear those words.

"Katharine! Are you sleeping? Be careful with the child! What time is it?"

"Mother, it is five!" Katharine carefully removed the child from her lap, set her down on the floor, and asked her to pray. The child complied. The nun also prayed along with her. Her glance once again returned to the young man on the fourth row next to the window . . .

Now her didn't waver; she rested her eyes on him as if attracted to him . . .

He could be around twenty. He was very fair in complexion, well-built, calm, and radiated grace. Because he was seated near the window in the direction the bus was speeding, his blue, silk necktie fluttering in the breeze was coiled around his neck, and his white, shirt collar. His cropped hair was disheveled and the locks gathered around his forehead. His lips parted slightly as he knew that she was staring at him. His bright, white teeth drew an instant smile from Katharine.

When Katharine smiled, she resembled an angel. Her face radiated with a divine inspiration echoing the sentiment, "One must show compassion to all living beings. One must love all human beings."

"Now - that young man, what would he think of me?" Katharine asked herself.

"Oh . . . what kind of look is that?" Her face reddened she felt like crying. She bit her lips. The young man too bit his lower lip. Unknown to others, the teardrops around the corners of Katharine's eyes wetted her scarf. The young man alone noticed her tears.

"What would he think of me? Does he wonder why I became a nun? Does he think I am a weakling unable to control my feelings and live up to the vows I have taken for a nun's mission? Does he see me as a coward who never stops thinking about sin?" Katharine suddenly averted her face

and looked at Envilada. The old woman was still engrossed in the cross in her hand totally oblivious to the world around her. A gentle smile hovered over her face, and her lips were murmuring a prayer.

Katherine's mind tried to compare herself with Envilada. "Oh, no . . . How I can ever think of coming close to someone like her?"

She began counting how many times, in the last eighteen years she had gone to see the Reverend Father for confession.

"Mother?"

"Yes, Katharine?" Envilada lifted her wrinkled face away from the cross and looked at the young nun.

"Mother, have you ever been to confession?"

"Of course, my dear! We are all sinners. But if we openly confess our sins to our Reverend Father, we are saved! The Lord bears all our sins. That's the reason why we confide our sins in the Lord, every night, before we go to bed. Thus our soul is purified! Again, because our sins make us feel guilty we seek out the Reverend Father and openly confess our sins to him and ask his forgiveness. Our Father prays to Lord on our behalf. I too have committed many sins." The old woman wiped tears off her face as she finished talking.

Katharine was really surprised. She wondered: "Was Envilada ever like me, when she was young?"

"Katharine! Then, I was your age," the old woman continued. "One night I had a dream - in the dream I saw myself getting married! What a sinful dream! I woke up and cried the whole night. In the dream I saw myself feeling happy about getting married, that is what made me cry! How can a nun ever dream of getting married? The next day I confessed my sin to Reverend Father. I spent the whole day in prayers - without even sipping a drop of water."

Now the old woman lowered her voice and spoke as if whispering into Katherine's ears: "On another occasion, I punished a girl in a class. She got a scar on her cheek when I spanked her with a ruler. I spent the whole day agonizing over my violent behavior. I sought confession for that too. I might have gone to confession five or six times . . ."

"That's all? Those are the only sins she had committed? I just can't believe my ears!" Katherine's mind was in turmoil.



"Is she trying to hide something?" Katharine grew suspicious. Envilada spoke now, as if answering her right away.

"It is Satan who makes us hide our sins. We must openly confess our sins and surrender to God's mercy. We can't hide anything from God."

"Yes, one can't hide anything from God." Katharine nodded in agreement. Then she took out a book from her handbag, laid it out in front of her, and started reading. Midway through the reading, she again cast her eyes on the bus window, the fourth row.

The young man was still staring at her . . .

"My God! What a look!" She began reading the book

" . . . . I say to you: anyone who looks lustfully at a woman has already committed adultery with her in his thoughts. If your right eye betrays you, blind it and cast it away. Rather than letting your entire body burn in hell you would be better off with just one limb severed from your body . . . "

Katharine could go no further. She closed her eyes. The book was open, but the eyes were closed.

"Why all these sinful thoughts?" Her mind was in turmoil. Why is he still in the bus? Is he Satan in human form? Is he testing me? Why should I care what he thinks?

"Our Father in heaven . . . "

She quickly touched the cross to her body and mentally offered her prayers.

Still, no use. When she opened her eyes, she was again met with his stare.

"Will man ever be saved from sin? How did the serpent and the forbidden fruit come into being when the Lord created, for Adam, the Garden of Eden, the paradise on the earth? Why did God create man as well as sin? Is it only an illusion that sin and joy go together? Is joy always sinful? Can it be true that the millions of human beings stand condemned and would finally end up in hell? Why am I the only person scared of my sins? This young man, handsome and attractive, seems ready to place the entire world at my disposal – which is how I read his eyes staring at me. Am I not, in form and desire, made like other human beings?"

Katharine noticed young couple seated opposite to her on the second

row. The woman was pregnant. She had closed her eyes, and because she was either tired or fond of her husband, she was leaning on her husband's shoulders. As she witnessed that scene, Katherine's mind was seized with a thought – as if echoing Satan's voice.

"That woman and I differ only in our clothes, don't we? What if I cast away my habit, run toward that man and fall on his shoulders? . . . "

"Oh my Lord, please forgive me! I keep on adding to my sins! Please save me!"

The bus having reached the destination stopped. The bus station was heavily crowded. The din and clang of that crowd was soon mixed with the clamor of passengers alighting from the bus. Katharine and Envilada waited till the bus was emptied of all the other passengers. Then they both climbed down the bus. A jatka – a horse-drawn cart- driver came along and greeted both the women.

"Going to the church, aren't you? Please follow me." He guided them to his cart.

There stood, under the evening sky now turning golden yellow, that young man, dressed in blue suit, white shirt, blue tie, and a suitcase in his hand. He -a messenger from Satan? – was strikingly handsome and good looking.

Katharine felt as if her ear lobes were being caressed, and smiled. The young man returned her smile, and approached the women. He first accosted Envilada with a Christian greeting.

The old woman acknowledged his gesture. When Katharine tried to return his greetings, she felt her hands tremble.

She felt her voice choke inside her. Her eyes swelled with tears.

The young man raised his hands and waved them good bye after Katharine and Envilada boarded the jatka and took their seats. Katharine returned his compliments with an open laughter. The cart sped, and his form soon disappeared from their vision. Katherine's hands now grew limp, while her chest heaved.

"Katharine, who is he? I don't seem to recognize him!" asked Envilada.

Katharine replied with a wild laughter. She waved her hands and uttered a lie.

"Mother, at first I too had problem placing him. You remember Isabel, the girl studying in my class? He is her brother!"

"I see . . . ."

"My Lord, please forgive me! How many lies! How many sins!" Though she felt a tinge of heaviness and guilt, Katherine's eyes continued to savor that scene where the young man waved his hands as he took leave of both women. *152*

"I don't know anything about him! Will I be ever lucky to see him again? Did I say lucky? Will I ever get a chance to commit this sin once more?" Her mind longed for that single moment.

Her eyes turned teary when she realized she had no right to sin; soon, her voice, choked halfway through her throat, gave way to muffled sobs. But how can she cry? She is not permitted even to cry . . . .

Fortunately for her, the scarf fluttered in the air and covered her face. As her mind and body struggled to find harmony within that blue habit, the jatka proceeded toward its destination.

Mother Envilada continued to pray, totally absorbed in the cross in her hand.

## 2

Katharine spent the night with no sleep even as she continued to seek forgiveness for God for her sins.

Occasionally, she recalled the young man's face and smile, and let out a deep sigh.

Afterwards, she had a sound sleep. She had a dream. .

In that dream . . . .

Mother Envilada is carrying a large cross on her shoulders. After she walks a considerable distance, Envilada's form grows into a giant size – like a church. The cross she has been carrying on her shoulders now becomes a small one and rests on her palm.

The church bells start ringing. A brilliant, divine light is seen coming down from heavens and touching Envilada's body . . .

The church bells continue their chimes . . .

Another cross. Katharine comes down to carry it. She bends down and touches the cross. She can hardly move it, one way or the other. She keeps struggling, even as she feels having been subjected to whiplashes on her back. No use, she fails to move the cross.

Suddenly, a voice is heard from afar: "Katharine, my love! Katharine!" She turns around and sees that young man from the bus running toward her. Katharine leaves the cross and leaps toward him. She falls into his open arms, buries her head into his bosom, and sobs. The young man lifts her face and kisses her lips . . .

What a kiss!

"Am I committing a sin? I would rather live a sinner's life . . . .?"

She woke up. She is in tears; she feels guilty. .

Later, when she knelt down and joined others in the Lord's prayers, she could shed tears, profusely, to her heart's content. .

But . . . can one unburden all the sins one is carrying just by shedding tears?

## 3

That day Katharine went to see Reverend Father for her confession.

Stricken by guilt, she didn't feel comfortable even as she dragged herself to his presence. The Reverend Father, in holy garb, was smiling and his eyes exuded warmth and compassion.

"Father!"

"Yes, my dear girl!" He was listening to her confession.

"I am a sinner! I have committed a very serious crime! . . . I am a sinner!"

"My dear girl! The Lord forgives all sinners. Jesus doesn't judge others – he tells us he has come to change sinners' minds – haven't you read his words? If you are willing to openly confess your sins, you will be saved – instantly!"

Katharine knelt down before him and whispered in his ears even as she felt her body tremble and eyes swelling with tears. Her words emerged

slowly – in bits and pieces; the Reverend was stunned.

“Father, the sin I have committed . . . the most unforgivable sin I have ever committed is this: the vow I had taken to become a nun.” She continued to sob incessantly, feeling hurt and writhing in pain as if she herself has been crucified on a cross.

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## BEYOND LOGIC

**T**he word victory, on its own, has no meaning. If what you expect to happen becomes a reality, you call it a victory. If you are certain about defeat and actually lose, that too becomes a victory. I had quite a few such ‘victories’ in my personal life.

I had gone to a neighboring town in connection with a matter that was very important to me. As usual I had expected to lose, but contrary to my expectations, I lost - that is, my defeatism was proved wrong, and my life was totally altered.

I had secretly loved a girl of unimaginable beauty but couldn't bring myself to openly declare my love to her; I ridiculed my own attempts at courtship and expected total rejection from her. But then, willing to put up with her total indifference and even lukewarm attitude, I did look at her face and pronounce: I am in love with you! And lo, and behold, even before I spoke those words, my girl friend acted as if she needed only a cue from me; she reacted as if pining for my grand proposal, to be followed by a thousand kisses; with quivering red lips she fell into my arms! I was handed over a defeat!

I wanted to celebrate this defeat or victory. Should I wait till I returned home? Certainly not, I was determined to do it, right away; I am a man in hurry!

Now, a celebration is no big deal. It depends on how you relish the occasion and savor the moments deep in your heart. How this feeling manifest itself outside you is, again, no big deal. Some would celebrate the occasion with firecrackers illuminating the night sky; some might treat friends and acquaintances to a sumptuous feast; a few others might enjoy a meal all by themselves. It all depends on what one can afford - but the source causing these actions is essentially the same.

What is my present condition? I have only a silver coin – a rupee. So what? Can't I celebrate this occasion with one rupee? No. I can't. I need twelve annas to return home. So what? Can't you celebrate with four annas? Of course, you can

At Shankar Iyer's Hotel, I had a cup of coffee for two annas - ordered to my special taste - strong flavor, fresh milk, new decoction, and less sugar. I felt elated with a new vigor as I left the hotel. I still had two annas to spend on something - besides the twelve annas I had put away for the return trip home. I suddenly recalled the proverb:

"Spend your last penny like a king."

"Sir, can you spare some change - to this blind man?" I heard a voice. That beggar, a blind man, was sitting near the entrance to the railway station. A small aluminum bowl in front of him had only a few small coins. The two-anna coin I dropped into the bowl stood apart and really looked beautiful. The beggar picked the coin, felt it in his hands, and thinking I was still standing before him, joined his two hands in a symbolic gesture in that direction, and blessed me: "God will bless you all along your journey!" I was quite pleased that I had put my four annas to a good cause.

I stood before the booking counter, informed my destination and extended the change. After a while, instead of a ticket tendered to me, I felt the cash returned to me with the words: "One more anna, please!"

"The fare is only twelve annas, is it not?"

"That was till yesterday. Today it is thirteen annas."

My hand retreated with the twelve annas. I felt as if thrown into an abyss. Where can I possibly get one more anna?

"How about asking that old gentleman reading a newspaper in the corner?" The very idea - we are talking about just one anna - even as it occurred to me brought home that gentleman's likely response. Someone had approached him, I really don't know what he asked, but the old man's reply was heard by the entire world. I too heard it, and recoiled. I had given away two annas just five minutes ago, yet now I am reduced to debating if I should ever beg a stranger for one anna! How fascinating to think of human mind getting into a debate with life!

What about that two-anna coin shining with a smile in the beggar's bowl? It belongs to me, doesn't it?

"How can that be? You had given it away and that beggar had already blessed you for your charity!"

"But I am now stranded here, helpless! Am I not entitled to even one anna from that bowl? It is in his bowl, but I can still claim it! Would he oblige if I ask him? How does he know that it was I who had dropped that two-anna coin into that bowl?"

"What if go back and take a one-anna coin from the bowl? I see a man dropping half-anna and taking an anna from the bowl! Why can't I do the same thing - drop an anna and take out my two anna coin?"

"That would be theft, is it not?"

"Why call it theft? He would still get an anna from me. Let me be satisfied with my contributing one anna towards charity. I will take back my coin." I could rationalize my action through purely my current economic condition, still I felt like a thief - my hand trembled . . .

I dropped one anna coin. Picked up my two-anna coin and turned back.

"You mean, scoundrel!" I turned around. Those blind eyes were staring at me; the same mouth that had blessed me a few minutes ago now seemed ready to curse me.

"Sir, how can you do such a thing?" the beggar exploded. "Some noble soul offered me a two-anna coin, and you are stealing it and offering me one anna! Don't try to cheat a blind man, you will rot in hell!"

My hand, as if scorched by a red-hot iron, shook off the two-anna coin back into the beggar's bowl. My contribution to charity now stood at three annas.

"I picked up that coin by mistake, " I said still feeling like a thief when I uttered those words.

A girl came along, dropped an half-anna into the beggar's bowl, and took out an one-anna coin. The blind man now groped into the bowl, again felt the two-anna coin with his hands, and was satisfied.

It became clear to me that had not the blind man realized that the two-anna coin was still in the bowl, he would have condemned me as a thief; it is rarely that a beggar gets a two-anna coin as a charity, certainly he would not like to lose it.

I wondered: "Does it belong to him?"

"Yes, it does!"

"But I gave it to him."

One may voluntarily lend money to someone and reclaim it: but does such a thing apply to fruits of dharma - the right conduct one adopts in his daily life? One must ask for dharma before it is granted.

I stood there for a long time. Meanwhile, my train had come and gone. The next train was not due for a long time. I paid for my dharma by walking back to the next station, my legs aching all the way.

You have probably read about a train accident that occurred a few years ago in Tamil Nadu. The train involved was the very one I had missed.

How did I escape from that accident? Did my dharma save me?

I just don't know. It is all beyond logic . . .

## THOSE COWARDS!

**D**octor Raghavan, deeply enthralled while reading a racy Balzac novel under the evening light in the veranda directly in front of the house compound gate - with one hand holding the novel and the index finger resting on a page for reference, and the other sporting a cigarette spewing smoke - relaxed a little and settled into the easy chair.

The time was only seven. If one went by what was stated in the board displayed on the wall it was the time the doctor met with his patients. But if no patients showed up does it mean the doctor must shut himself up in his room? Normally, around this time, Raghavan would be awaiting his friends for company. Today, they too didn't show up.

Raghavan lived in a house that was divided in two sections - one to serve as his professional clinic and the other as living quarters. The cook Raman Nair was busy in the kitchen humming some tune in his native Malayalam; he too would be soon gone. Raghavan, a bachelor, has no other company, except his books. Actually, he needed no company. However, when he wanted to share his thoughts - having read and savored the sexually explicit novels like 'The Memoirs of Casanova,' or 'The Lady Chatterley's Lover,' and underlined with a pencil the racy and salacious passages from the books - he sought out a friend so that he could air his literary tastes openly in a frank, often uncouth, profane language - with no inhibitions whatsoever.

He was not yet done with the book presently in his hands, so today, he had not gone out looking for any company.

He closed his eyes, inhaled deeply into his lungs, discarded his cigarette butt, and reopened the book. Sensing his vision was obscured by dust or cigarette ash on the eye-glasses, he cleaned them and continued to savor the novel. The tingling sensation around his ears soon gave way to his face beaming with a smile, and his heart slowly warmed up to the

illicit love affairs and scandals of that eighteenth century France.

Raghavan's literary tastes as well as his conversations laced with profanity triggered some strange feelings among his friends. While they seemed to enjoy and relish his off-color parleys in his very presence, deep inside, his friends felt ambivalent toward him. But the truth of the matter is they could never lay a hand on his character: Raghavan is now thirty five, and remains a confirmed bachelor.

Some of his friends even spied on him to uncover what they suspected his double life: was he bragging openly to conceal a secret life? Again, they were forced to concede defeat after failing in their repeated attempts to 'unmask' him.

As far as Raghavan was concerned, he was free from envy when it came to sex or his discourses on that subject. More important, he believed sexual intercourse between a man and woman formed the noblest surrender possible between two human beings; he could not care less what others thought about his personal life or opinions. He never doubted, even for a moment, that he could be misunderstood. Certainly, his views were not formed under any selfish motive. He was like a philosopher exploring humanity in all its aspects, a connoisseur of art with a discriminating taste. He saw himself experiencing human condition - while standing apart from it - with dispassion and no personal involvement. That was how his tastes and opinions were formed - and if others found them crude, vulgar or even downright disgusting - it didn't matter. Raghavan was fully convinced of their weight and loftiness.

The simple truth that sex formed the basis of everything in the universe became a major theme of his outlook. He believed all his pronouncement on sex in his daily conversations glorified that truth. So he saw no need to camouflage his naked, private thoughts in some garb acceptable to the outside world.

He often wondered why ordinary men and women feel guilt and shame about sex, denounce it as obscene and look upon it as some sort of crime secretly indulged in by everyone. He also found a rationale for such a reaction, and offered his own explanation:

"When it comes to sex, every human being looks upon it from his or her own personal angle. Whether it is a painting or a description of a scene depicting the sexual intercourse between a man and woman, nobody wants to stand apart from it and treat it purely as a normal, human impulse. They

get personally involved, imagine their own participation in it and perceive it as their own experience . . ."

"In the case of a man, he projects himself into the role of the man in that painting or description of that scene; in the case of a woman, she too transposes herself into the other woman. What is missing here is an impersonal point of view, and what finally emerges is a minor irritant born out of pure selfishness. So people feel ashamed and practice hypocrisy. They see every sexual allusion as something personal, directed strictly at them. While they continue to feel good about such feelings in private, they try their best to cover them up in public, which is hypocrisy too . . ."

While Raghavan's opinions could be considered logical and even high-minded, they actually made his friends think of him as some kind of a jerk or even a pervert. Slowly, they began to desert him, and his practice too was losing clients.

But Raghavan himself was never affected by anything. Life went on as usual - he continued to have the books he wanted shipped from libraries and bookshops in all corners of the world.

As he presently finished a chapter from the novel in his hands he straightened up and wanted to smoke another cigarette; he eagerly sought the cigarette tin close by in the wall corner.

The tin was empty and as Raghavan turned around toward the house to address the cook, he saw Raman Nair walking toward him, his chores in kitchen done and presently wiping his face with a wet towel.

Because of the language barrier Raman Nair was in no position to understand what Raghavan said or thought. Still, he knew Raghavan was someone whose day-to-day activities were spent with no definite plans. He felt sympathy for Raghavan who ate at irregular times and often skipped meals while deeply buried in books. As a cook Nair was hired only to prepare food and clean up the kitchen every night; still, he very much wished to serve Raghavan food with his own hands before going home, something he eagerly looked forward to every day as he waited and longed for such an opportunity. On many a day, when he found out that the doctor scarcely noticed him while absorbed in books, Nair would remind him about meals and ask with a smile, "Can I go now?" Raghavan would simply miss the significance of that message and dismiss the cook right away. On several occasions when Raman Nair arrived at the kitchen his heart would

ache on noticing that Raghavan has left untouched the meal he had prepared the previous day.

"Would you like to eat now?" Nair asked Raghavan, who had a puzzled look as he raised his head and faced the cook. For a moment, he forgot why he had called Nair. He thought for a moment, and remembered as he opened the empty cigarette tin.

"I am not hungry," he answered. "Bring me the cigarette tin on the table in my room. Then you may leave." He raised his head and looked at the sky. The clock in the hall struck eight.

Raman Nair soon returned with a cigarette tin and immediately left, closing the compound gate behind him. Raghavan lighted a new cigarette, reopened the page where the index finger rested and again settled into the easy chair.

As he was savoring a racy passage from a new chapter of that novel, he heard someone opening the compound gate. He lifted the eyeglasses and straightened up. Because he could not see the face in the dark, his heart was elated to think some of his friends might be visiting him. Even though he was not yet done with the novel, he had read and savored enough from it to share his ideas with a friend. As he eagerly cast his eyes toward the gate, he slowly became aware that the person approaching him was a woman.

Now, Raghvan's patients were exclusively males. It was already past the time to see patients. Still, he didn't want to turn away someone who personally came to see him.

So he pulled out an office chair and offered the visitor a seat.

He remembered he had seen her before, then slowly, the events linked to her from his past began to take shape in his mind. Still, he was unable to recall her name.

He inquired of her grandmother - to let her know he still remembered her. The young woman didn't respond; her head bowed down, she seemed buried in some deep thought as she continued to bite her nails. Because she totally avoided his looks with her head bowed down, Raghavan was able to take a hard look at her.

He had seen her two years ago when she was on the verge of death,

now, her situation seemed ever more precarious. It was not just her physical condition. Her whole life seemed to have been shattered as can be seen from her clothes - her sari was no more than a rag in a fading color.

Unknown to him she wiped off a teardrop falling on her forearm, raised her head and answered him, lips quivering, her voice shrill: "Grandma passed away a year ago."

Raghavan let out a deep breath and averted his eyes away from her.

That old woman's face lingered in his mind, she was totally devoted to her grand daughter. He recalled a past incident. He asked her, "Your name?"

She answered without raising her head or even looking at him: "Radha."

In the few moments before she replied, he was able to recall that name.

"Radha . . ." he mumbled her name and looked at her. She too raised her head and looked at him. Her face was devoid of any emotions. Her eyes, empty and dispirited, seemed to resemble the ruins of a grand palace conveying its ancestral pride; whatever traces of beauty now remained on that face, they only attracted sympathy for her plight.

By temperament Raghavan forgot her name; but he knew her very well.

One day, two years ago, around this time, Radha's grandmother came running to him in panic and tears, knelt down on the floor before him as he was seated on the easy chair reading a book, and pleaded with him - pressing her hands together in a respectful gesture: "Doctor Sir! Please save a life! We are ordinary, poor people! Please come!" Raghavan consoled the old woman and followed her.

He could hardly believe his eyes that a residential area in the immediate vicinity of a chain of houses built as part of an upscale city development program could be so filthy and squalid.

Following the old woman Raghavan walked through several lanes, crossed many fetid sewers, occasionally even came close to sink his feet in some stagnant, cesspools and finally found himself inside a dark cottage.

The old woman asked him to wait outside the cottage while she

went in, helped herself with a match box and lit a lamp.

Noticing a young woman lying in the corner of a wall, Raghavan, for a moment, thought things might have gone out of control. The old woman, holding the lamp close to the younger woman, addressed her: "Radhamma, look at me, the doctor is here. . . ." She affectionately touched the young woman's cheek and sobbed.

"Please move. . . ." Raghavan addressed the old woman, knelt before the young woman and examined her eyelids. Then he held her arm and checked the pulse.

"What a horrible woman! I can't believe what she did," the old woman went on, sobbing. "You are like a God, you must help us!" Raghavan stared at the old woman, and asked, "Tell me what happened."

The old woman stuffed the loose end of the sari into her mouth, and spoke, "She has taken something - some horrible drug." She extended a small aluminum tumbler before the doctor, who took it, examined it in light and smelled its contents. He laid the tumbler on the floor and got up. He scratched his head for a moment, closed his eyes and pondered over his next step.

"Please . . . We are very poor. . . ." the old woman was pleading. "Is her life in danger?" and knelt down on the floor at his feet. Raghavan waved her to calm down. He took out the lamp and laid it inside a niche of a nearby wall. Under its light he opened his medical bag and pulled out a syringe. He twirled the wick in the lamp for more light, ferreted out a vial to ready a shot, and asked for water. As the old woman picked out the aluminum tumbler on the floor, she noticed his cold stare at her, asking, "Don't you have any other vessel?" She realized her mistake, her hands began to tremble.

"Have no fear, your daughter will be fine. " he assured her and raised the patient's arm to give a shot.

Soon the old woman brought water in a large vessel and continued her refrain: "This is not my daughter - she is my grand daughter. She has become an orphan in a very young age, it is fate . . . The truth is it is she who is taking care of me. I owe my life to her, and I don't understand how she could think of killing herself and leaving me like this . . . ."

Her words pierced his heart, still Raghavan's face displayed no emotion, and he cleaned up the syringe.

Before leaving the cottage, he handed over to the old woman a few pills wrapped in a sheet of paper. "Don't worry," he told her. "Your grand daughter would wake up shortly. Then - can you give her some buttermilk? If no buttermilk is available, give her some cold water, but nothing else. Give her one of these pills every two hours. . . ." As he finished and was about to leave, the old woman followed him.

"How about some soda water?" she asked.

"Of course, soda is fine too. See me in the morning and let me know how she is doing." Raghavan once again took a hard look at the young woman lying across the wall before he left.

"What a noble soul he is!" he heard the old woman express her heartfelt thanks to him.

Since that incident the young woman had visited Raghavan's clinic a couple of times. She had answered all the questions put to her with her head bowed down. From her silent gestures and occasional verbal responses Raghavan fully understood her background as well as her 'disease.'

As he thought about her and her grand mother, he understood they simply lacked the guts to directly confront the problems facing them. It was that weakness which spinned their problems out of control.

The young woman had lost her parents in her childhood and become an orphan, it was the old woman who ended up taking care of her. How could this young woman think of committing suicide? Then he recalled the old woman's words that day:

" . . . she is actually taking care of me . . . How could she think of killing herself and leaving me like this?"

During her visits to his office, Raghavan noticed, the young woman displayed a high sense of self respect. When she picked up the drugs from the clinic, she laid down two one-rupee bills on the table.

"This is all I could afford to pay for someone who saved my life," she seemed to be gratefully acknowledging his help, as she stood in his office, awkward and hesitant, her eyes shedding copious tears. Raghavan grasped the underlying sadness in her voice, and he spoke, his lips quivering and curling up in a smile. "Of course, I am in business, but I don't charge every patient." He refused to accept her payment. The young woman bit her lip and retrieved the bills from the table. Because she was silent, he



asked her sit on the bench opposite to him. He watched her keenly for a moment and suddenly burst into a question:

"Tell me, what kind of work you do? I hope I am not prying into your privacy, am I?"

She riveted her eyes on him now, fully aware that the doctor had been totally mistaken about her. Still, she calmly replied: "I have not done anything illegal or immoral. I got into this terrible mess because I trusted a wrong man to be my life's partner. And so I tried to get rid of . . ." She could not bring herself to say what was since gone from her body but was still very much in her mind.

Pat came Raghavan's brutally frank rejoinder, typical of him "Are you talking about that aborted baby?"

His words shook up her body and mind. She spoke, her eyes moist, head still bowed down. "I did nothing to destroy the baby. I really wanted to kill myself. I was not interested in living after committing a sin." As she continued to sob, Raghavan suddenly stopped her.

"I can understand all that stuff, even without your explaining it to me. Still, you have not answered my question - which is, what is your profession? If a woman spends her days thinking she is living in sin, she would feel guilty or hurt by imagining everyone is questioning her intentions or motives. Now in your case, your sin was trying to kill yourself. Instead of saying you made a wrong choice, had you given your partner courage, maybe you wouldn't have ended up like this . . ."

Her face ablaze with rage, she now stopped him.

"Teach courage? Can one teach courage?" she asked, her voice rising in anger and ferocity. "Again, when it comes to cowards, how do you expect them to act with courage, anyway?" Raghavan could notice her face blistering with rage against some coward who betrayed her trust.

He paused for a moment to change her mood, so softened his voice, and spoke:

"Still, you have not answered my question - about your profession. I keep thinking what kind of job opportunities are available in this world for a single woman who has no formal education . . ."

She too composed herself and spoke in a calm voice. "When I tell you about my profession, you must not assume all the members of that

profession could be lumped into one category. As you know every profession has good and bad people." After that brief introduction, she said:

"I am an actress." Since Raghavan was not in the habit of watching movies, he felt he could have never come across her name, so he asked: "You mean - in the movies? ....."

She responded with a dry smile, and said: "No, not in the movies. . . I act in the dramas only. I used to believe - a long time ago - that I could get a chance in the movies, but not anymore . . ."

That was all what Raghavan wanted to know about her. Since then she had visited the clinic a few more times and every time he helped her with medication, medication only. He had not spoken even one sentence with her - in order to console her or change her lifestyle. Raghavan didn't believe in preaching or mouthing empty platitudes.

Now, two years after those incidents, there was no good reason why Radha should linger in Raghavan's memory. It was only because he now encountered her in a situation much worse than before, he was led to compare her present condition with the past.

In just two years she seemed to have aged twenty years. Since her arrival she had been sitting there with her head bowed down, so he spoke to her in a tender voice: "What is wrong with you? I can see right away that your health has deteriorated because you don't have your grandmother anymore . . ."

She remained silent, her head still bowed down. Patiently, Raghavan waited for a long time for her to open up, and then he grew more and more anxious. So he volunteered a question. "Why are you here, at this time?"

"I don't want to kill a human life - as I did the last time. I need your help."

Now it was Raghavan who bowed down his head in silence. The young woman understood his silence and spoke: "I can't afford to go to another lady doctor." He now raised his head and stared at her.

He knew right away - the woman he saw now was a totally different person from the one he saw two years ago.

His eyes seemed to question her. "Didn't you tell me at the time that you thought of killing yourself rather than destroy the baby? What has changed now?"

She continued, as if talking to herself: "The last time I acted out of shame, but now that's not the reason I want to have an abortion." She recalled the doctor asking her the other day about her profession and her angry retort that she was not doing anything illegal or immoral. She realized her current situation and laughed to herself, thinking.

"Now everybody knows about me as well as my profession." and let out a deep breath.

Raghavan now spoke, gathering all the strength he could muster, in a grave tone: "What you are now trying to do is against the law. It is also a sin that violates basic human morality. The last time a crime was committed you were not responsible, you trusted a wrong man, and when you wanted to kill yourself, you had accidentally killed another life. But now what you are contemplating is a purely selfish act. You must give up this idea."

"Here is a plain, bookish fellow," she thought about Raghavan.

"So you are telling me it is a crime to end this baby's life..." she paused for a moment and continued. "Let us face the truth - the very process how this baby came into being is also against morality, don't you agree? Tell me: Will I be doing anything proud and honorable if I bring to this world a baby and condemn it to a life of total ignorance about its father while it curses her mother day after day why she was born in her womb? I don't think I would be contributing anything to the sin I have already committed - by ending this baby's life, now... I have given a lot of thought to this... How can I possibly answer when the child asks me who the father is - I mean, even as a simple act of consolation? I can't even imagine such a man in my life." She controlled her inner turmoil and spoke the words even as she continued to crackle her knuckle joints.

Raghavan was stunned by her words, as he deeply pondered over the paradox: her reaction was violent, but deep inside, lay a profound truth.

They both seemed to agree on the harsh reality facing the woman and carried on their conversation for a very long time.

Finally, Raghavan invited Radha inside the house and shared the dinner with her.

In the meantime, he was seriously thinking for over an hour and finally came to a firm decision. What he then proposed to Radha scared the hell out of her - for a moment she was not sure who had gone mad - was it

she or the doctor?

Raghavan told her:

"No human life should ever be destroyed; there is nothing in the world that brings more dishonor to the medical profession or womanhood. Get this, you need a father for your baby, am I right? Tell your child that its father is Doctor Raghavan. I would never refute that title, it is my solemn promise to you..." Radha was stunned by what she just heard and stood before him in awe with her mouth wide open, as he uttered these words with all the emotion he could contain.

They exchanged glances, in silence, for a few seconds.

Sensing that Radha's intuition was unwilling to accept what he had conveyed to her in an emotional outburst, Raghavan now toned down and explained his idea to her in simple terms: "Please understand: this has nothing to do with sympathy or pity. There is some selfishness involved here. Tomorrow, my friends would be spreading all kinds of rumors about you and me, that is fine with me. I really would relish some gossip about me." He stared at her, his mind imagining the scenes following such rumors about them.

Overcome by anguish that she had been in total dark about this noble doctor who deeply loved her and could have helped her avoid much of her agony and pain in the past, Radha now surrendered herself at doctor's feet and begged, even as she went on sobbing: "You are my savior. I am willing to spend rest of my life at your feet. I would be willing to bear any number of children for a noble soul like yours."

Her words, some mumbled to herself and others openly addressed to him, poked Raghavan's face like a needle threading its way. His nose and lips began to quiver and he suddenly broke down - crying like a baby in terrible pain.

Radha's entire body was frozen at this sudden outburst - a grownup man crying uncontrollably, both his hands fully covering the face, his shoulders sagging, the veins from across his neck becoming clearly visible. This lasted for some time when Raghavan seemed able to calm down, collect his thoughts, and look at her face to face.

"Radha, I am sorry I raised your false hopes for something totally impossible. Please forgive me. The truth is I can be father only to the baby presently in your womb. If you are thinking..." he agonized how to

explain his predicament to her, so he bent down and whispered in her ear 'that private matter.'

He couldn't convey that 'matter', as his wont, openly in a frank, uninhibited language. Gone was his old credo that his opinions were always impersonal, that he never mistook anything sexual as something personal. But now he was concerned about himself, his own predicament, and what now remained in his mind became an irritant born out of pure selfishness.

Radha heard his secret confession, she covered his face with hers and mumbled strong denials as if proclaiming her trust in him.

She now recalled those faceless cowards who encountered her in one-night stands and vanished like a magic. Now she warmly held Raghavan's face in her both hands, and looked up at the man who was to bring nourishment to her life, keep alive her dream, and commit himself to her future. This man with a courage seemed a lion compared to those cowards.

She felt his face aglow with manliness - something she was now experiencing for the first time. Proud and contented, she embraced him.

Radha's ear lobes continued to be soaked by Raghavan's warm teardrops.

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## ADULTS ONLY

That afternoon, around one, when he took out the lunch packet from his office desk, Ramaswamy Pilliai recalled his wife Mangalam's face earlier that morning - she was shielding her face with the tip of her sari even as her eyelids were swelling with tears, and she pook pooked away his question with words, "Oh, it's nothing," followed by a forced smile. The lady owner of their house - the prime cause of the incident that morning - also came into his thoughts, and Ramaswamy grew a little angry.

He felt no peace of mind even after coming to work. His conscience has been pricking him that he had committed and is still committing many sins in his personal life and in the process hurting others. So today he ended up making a few errors at work also, resulting in his supervisor's ire and irritation. Ramaswamy was now tired and near exhaustion.

He was not too concerned over the punishment meted out to him at work. "I wish there is a supervisor for one's life," he asked himself. "Then, he would punish me and I

I don't have to feel bad about my mistakes." But he was soon faced with another question: "Who is the supervisor for one's life?"

"God is the ultimate supervisor of human life."

"But God would never render punishment. God is responsible only for bringing men and women to this world, and they create their own lives. Man is responsible for his own mistakes. I have a supervisor at my office. I am the supervisor for the employees under my control. Man goes through many lives -at work, at home with his family, and as a member of the society. He plays a different role depending on the situation. He could play a supervisor's role in the office, while at home he could be a father or a wife."

As the word 'wife' appeared in his thoughts, the image Pilliai

mentally recalled was not Mangalam, the one who was only too willing to give in to his demands even as she remained an inexperienced, innocent child. It was Meenakshi, his first wife, now dead and gone from his life.

Nowadays Ramaswamy's family is being run just as it was under Meenakshi's responsibility. But does a family mean only checking out the groceries and paying bills for milk and house rent on time? Doesn't family mean working out relationships between its members and creating a bond between one another?

Well, is it not true that my relationship with Mangalam should be on the same basis as my past relationship with Meenakshi and myself?

Yes, it is true. A family becomes a reality when two total strangers commit themselves to a life of husband and wife; they have a common interest in their offspring who becomes central to their lives as they indulge in mutual love, responsibility and sacrifice. Each member of that family, at different time, functions as a family supervisor - first the father, then the mother and later, maybe the son . . .

Meenakshi played such a role. And two years ago when she died leaving their only son Somu, Ramaswamy blamed himself for her loss. He still feels guilty for committing a 'sin', which resulted in her death.

After Somu was born Meenakshi endured three more pregnancies - two ended in premature births, and the third in a stillborn baby. Meenakshi's health deteriorated following the surgery needed to remove the full-grown dead baby from the mother's womb, and she was warned to avoid the next pregnancy for at least four more years. But the very next year she died - following a premature, six-month pregnancy.

His guilty conscience over his 'sin' ravaged Ramaswamy's mind and body. It was Somu's presence that reminded the father that his life was not yet over and that he had a responsibility to carry on . . .

During those days all his friends and other acquaintances let Ramaswamy know that he was committing a sin by not taking a second wife. More than anyone else, it was the lady-owner of his house - she had known Ramaswamy for the last twenty years and before that she had been very close to his parents - who talked him into a second marriage and chose a bride herself. Ramaswamy believed - not just literally - the widespread notion from his well-wishers that a second marriage would ease his son's life as well as his education. So he married Mangalam.

However, the very first night he eyed Mangalam's youth and beauty, Ramaswamy agonized over his guilt for committing yet another sin.

But twenty-five year old Mangalam came from a poor family where she grew up with a nagging fear of spending her entire life as a spinster. If anything, she saw Ramaswamy as a godly messenger - a savior - come to her rescue. She wholeheartedly offered herself to share her life with him and it was only after her commitment to him became clear did Ramaswamy begin to understand about himself.

Somu became part of the crowd caught in the wedding celebrations, and for the first time since Meenakshi's demise Ramaswamy found himself separated from his son; the same night, he explained the situation to Mangalam.

"I didn't marry you for my sake . . ." he slowly began when Mangalam, bowing down her head and in a state of elation, interrupted him.

"Yes, I know . . ." she admitted, and continued. "This marriage is for me. Now I understand that my life, going nowhere, has a meaning." Her voice was choked with emotion.

"I am glad you feel that way. But my life as well my marriage are primarily concerned with Somu's future. Somu needs a mother even more than I need a wife. Do you understand? Somu is now a teenager, he is in an awkward age, and this cozy city life only adds to his turmoil. We can't afford to have wrong ideas crop up in the boy's mind; in a couple of years he would get things in proper perspective. I am now just forty, and I am nowhere close to old age, if you know what I mean." Ramaswamy made his case to Mangalam very clearly - albeit with some discretion and a touch of humor. 186

He was pleased to think Mangalam was willing to go along with him. Still he nursed a guilt that he was doing something wrong - given that he acted with some cleverness in bringing Mangalam to cooperate with him.

Still, he was willing to take Mangalam as a wife so that she would become Somu's mother.

It is now two months since Mangalam had arrived at Ramaswamy's home and assumed her new role as a housewife.

During these two months Mangalam has been living like an unpaid maid servant - someone who prepared timely meals for Ramaswamy and Somu and took care of the house. One could notice warmth and glow on her face as well as an excitement in her conversation. But how does she actually feel inside?

Ramaswamy dreaded to probe her mind. Unwilling to get intimate with Mangalam, he slowly drifted farther and farther from her. After his return from office he would take Somu for an evening walk. Later, he would help the boy with his lessons. The father and son would have dinner together. At the end of the day, Ramaswamy would make a bed for himself and Somu in the main hall that was shared by the owner's family as well as the tenants. Ramaswamy would entertain Somu with stories till the boy fell asleep, and then he himself would retire to bed.

On those occasions, Mangalam would keep her room door open, make her bed in a spot clearly visible to Ramaswamy and immerse herself in a book under a light bulb for several hours. Occasionally, she would listen to the tales Ramaswamy narrated to his son and enjoy them; those funny stories provoked laughter from her more often than they did from Somu, and that didn't escape Ramaswamy's attention. But Ramaswamy never knew - for that matter, he never acknowledged the fact that on several nights, long after he and Somu went to sleep, Mangalam lay awake on her bed staring at the ceiling amid deep sighs. Ramaswamy was fully aware that Mangalam was spending many a night with no sleep - only because he too was feigning his own sleep. Often his heart pined to go to Mangalam and comfort her. But then the thought "What if Somu wakes up when I am not around him?" would intervene and dissuade him.

Ramaswamy didn't have to confront such problems when Meenakshi was around. The main reason is Meenakshi was not someone who emerged before Somu all of a sudden. Again, Somu at the time was only a small, innocent, child. For two years following Meenakshi's death, Ramaswamy was very close to Somu sharing day and night with the boy. Now, Ramaswamy reasoned, the boy is conscious of another woman coming between him and his father; he naturally would try to probe the reasons for his father moving away from him, and this might cause Somu an emotional damage. And, beyond all this, there was something else: whenever he wanted to get closer to Mangalam, Ramaswamy could not help recalling the memory of Meenakshi and the attendant fear that by his lack of self control he had caused her death. So he decided to let time take its course and wait a little

longer.

So there was really a smokescreen between the two: Ramaswamy Pillai who had either deceived himself or rationalized his own actions and stayed away from his wife; and Mangalam, who by her very nature was compromising, and yet betrayed none of her false pride by closely guarding her real emotions under a false coloration. And it was the lady-owner of the house who purposely let the players confront one another and then suddenly ripped apart the smokescreen between them.

That event occurred this morning!

Two months ago, within a few days after the Ramaswamy-Mangalam marriage, the couple who owned Ramaswamy Pillai's house were gone out of town to visit their daughter. They returned home last week.

Now, the lady-owner of the house was someone for whom Ramaswamy always had warmth and respect. Yet, she was very talkative and many in the neighborhood, including Ramaswamy, hated her guts. She was outrageously frank in expressing her opinions and had no qualms about what to say, where to say it, and how to say it.

Her husband was virtually her slave; he was the first citizen subject to her rule. The family was quite well off - their lands in the village yielded good crops and they owned their house in the city. Both these assets belonged to the woman and the only job the husband ever had - from the day they were married - was being her dutiful husband. Considering the situation they were in, it was not surprising the woman was the aggressive type and the man a lightweight. Still, the woman was very deeply in love with her husband.

Ramaswamy Pill had known the couple from his younger days. As far as he knew he had never seen the couple part from one another - even for a single day. They were that close!

For the last one week, since her return home, the lady-owner has been keenly watching Mangalam. Maybe she reached a point where she found the situation intolerable and therefore directly confronted Mangalam. And what was Mangalam's reaction? Ramaswamy absolutely had no idea. However, this morning, when he happened to walk out of the bathroom and enter the house he was shocked to hear the words spoken by the lady-owner to Mangalam, "She is unnecessarily interfering and spoiling Mangalam's mind", was how Ramaswamy felt when he headed toward his

room to change.

At the time Mangalam was preparing coffee in the kitchen, and opposite to her stood the lady-owner delivering a harangue: the words came fast as her tall frame almost reached the room ceiling, while one hand rested on her chin and the other made gestures at Mangalam's face: "Why this outrage? Why should one starve for food even after getting a loan or spend the life of a bachelor even after marriage? How come your husband is acting so stupid? Even after all these years my husband, my man, wouldn't like to leave me alone, if you understand what I mean! How can a young couple like you afford to miss all the fun?"

She went on and on. Fortunately Somu was not home. Aware and relieved that the boy had gone to school to attend a special class, Ramaswamy coughed slightly from his room. Realizing her husband was within their earshot Mangalam tried to signal his presence to the lady-owner by twisting her lip, raising her eyebrow and glancing sideways at his room. But the lady-owner could care less.

"What if he is home?" she asked. "I thought he is worldly and educated, someone who could even teach a lesson or two to others. Now I know, he is a zero."

"Grandma," Mangalam interrupted her. "You know, this boy of ours," she tried to offer some explanation.

"Don't give me that crap!" the older woman retorted. "Are you telling me nobody else on this earth had to deal with a son like yours? Are there no homes where men had a second marriage and still reared their children from the first marriage? I just can't believe this! Children need to understand the facts of life - and they would learn them anyway. Otherwise, how would they ever grow up? I am sorry to say this, but I think your husband is a fool. What more can I say? Had I known this, I would have hired just a cook for him!"

As she was venting out her frustration in full blast Ramaswamy Pillai came out of the room and angrily asked her: "Did you talk me into marriage because you wanted to hurl all these insults at me? Had I known I would be subject to this humiliation, I would have never consented to a second marriage." He felt as if ready to burst into tears.

"I think you lost your head," the older woman calmly replied. "You did commit a kind of mistake with your first wife, and now you are

committing another kind of mistake with Mangalam. I feel terribly sorry her health has taken such a bad turn in the last two months! "She let off a deep sigh.

"Please don't blame me," Ramaswamy Pillai countered. "I did talk to Mangalam about this, and only after our mutual agreement . . . . .". He suddenly broke off, and with his head bowed down, became incoherent. He wondered if Mangalam had confided something to her.

"How funny," the lady-owner said, and continued. "Once a woman knows your mind, how do you expect her to go against your wish? Don't you think you owe it to her, to understand what she really wants?" She then walked out of the house. Ramaswamy was horrified to even imagine that Mangalam might have complained to the lady-owner about him. So he asked her in full earnest: "Mangalam, do you have any complaint against me? Am I making your life miserable?" He felt the answer lay in the very tone he put the question to her. Mangalam was all along silent with her head bowed. She now slowly raised her head and faced him.

"Mangalam, tell me. What is it I am doing wrong?"

Her lips quivering, tears swelling her eyelids, she shielded her face with the tip of her sari and said, "Oh, it's nothing," and forced a smile. Her reddish face and that smile now wrenched Ramaswamy's heart.

"It's nothing." In an instant, unknown to herself Mangalam had expressed all her deep-seated emotional outbursts on her face, and Ramaswamy now understood the truth; he could ignore her plight no more.

It now suddenly dawned upon him that the worst sin he had ever committed in his life was misunderstanding Mangalam's attitude toward him.

His mind was in turmoil following the morning incident. He wanted to deal with it right away. Only those who looked at things from his own perspective would understand how his love for his son Somu stood in the way he expressed his love for Mangalam.

"You may go!" Somu was so happy and pleased he immediately collected his books, put them away, changed his clothes and was ready to leave. Confusion enveloped his mind, and he still had the snack packet unopened. Then it suddenly occurred to him.

"Today is Saturday!"

Essentially Saturday was a half-day workday. The office manager worked only half day. But the rest of the staff usually worked till six in the evening. A few young men addicted to movies would carry files home so that they can watch a matinee show on their way home. A few others, like heads of the families, preferred office to home and spent the whole Saturday in the office.

Ramaswamy now remembered that Somu was gone for a special class this Saturday. He stuffed the snack packet in his shopping bag, locked his office desk and got ready to leave.

As he emerged out of the office, Ramani Iyer, his coworker who was busy stuffing tobacco into his mouth, inquired of Ramaswamy: "Getting ready for a matinee-show?" He teased him with a wink.

"No. No, no . . . I never go to matinee shows," Ramaswamy protested. "I have a doctor's appointment." He mumbled the words as he walked to the bus stand.

At the street corner he bought two strings of jasmine flowers for Mangalam, and even as he was standing at the flower shop he felt a little afraid and shy and bowed down his head lest some of the office workers should suddenly show up.

When Ramaswamy Pilliai reached home, he had an unexpected company – his son Somu.

Somu had spread out an atlas and a drawing pad on the floor and was tracing the national map. Surprised to see his father return home in the afternoon from office, he raised his head and stared at him.

"Daddy, how come you are so early today?" he asked. His voice also brought Mangalam rushing from the kitchen.

"Are you feeling okay? Do you have headache or something?" She inquired as she neared her husband to take the shopping bag away from him. Ramaswamy hesitated for a while to part with the bag because today it carried something unusual - jasmine flowers specially bought for Mangalam.

"I am fine," he assured her.

"All the folks in the office were gone home because it is Saturday. I didn't want to stay alone all by myself, so I brought the files home." Then he looked at Somu, and casually asked: "Didn't you say you had a special

class today? The school is for half a day only, am I right?"

"Yes, our teacher took the boys to a movie this afternoon . . ."

"How come you didn't go?"

"I haven't paid for the movie, so I didn't go . . ."

"Why didn't you ask me?" As he was taking out his shirt, Ramaswamy felt very proud as he heard the boy's reply.

"You make only a hundred rupees a month, don't you? I didn't want to trouble you for money to go to movies and dramas . . ."

Ramaswamy came over to the boy and hugged him.

"My dear boy, why do you worry about me? Who told you I make only hundred rupees? I make one hundred and fifty! Do you think I will not let you go to a movie with your friends? If I ask you not to see a particular movie, of course, you must not go.

But don't you think you should ask me first?" Ramaswamy was visibly moved when he spoke those words.

Mangalam too, standing afar, shared those sentiments.

"Okay, how much do you need?"

"One rupee . . ."

"Do you want it now?" He took a rupee note from his pocket and handed over to Somu. Somu took it, hesitated, and mumbled, "All the boys would have already gone to the movie." Then he gripped his father's arm, and whispered: "Can I have this?"

"I gave it to you, it is yours. If you are not going to the movie, how are you going to spend this?"

"I will go to another movie, by myself. There is an English theater in the neighborhood. They are showing a movie with lot of action and wild animals. . ."

The boy begged for father's permission.

As the boy was about to step out of the house and walk down the street, Ramaswamy followed him with a warning. "Watch out and be careful! Don't wander over other places!"

When Ramaswamy reentered his room Mangalam had removed the

jasmine flowers and the snack packet from his shopping bag and laid them on the table. She tried to contain her obvious feelings over his gesture and inquired of him: "Why did you bring back the lunch bag?"

"I was not feeling hungry." Ramaswamy's reply was terse.

"Well, I will prepare another snack at four. What is your favorite dish?" she asked him while tucking away a flower-string onto her hair.

Ramaswamy was suddenly overcome with shyness and youthful vigor as he understood Mangalam got his message: she had noticed her husband bringing flowers specially for her; he had sent the boy away, now he is alone with her and she had decked herself with flowers and is talking informally with him. Still, he could not bring himself to look directly at her, and he sat on the mat on the floor staring into empty space.

And Mangalam relished his awkwardness and seemed highly pleased. She sat close to him like a child, pulled his chin toward her and begged: "Tell me what is your favorite dish." He peered into her eyes, and that was too much for her. She felt as if a smokescreen masking a secret behind those eyes was suddenly ripped apart . . .

Still she could not let her eyes reveal her real feelings for him: she lowered them from his gaze and again asked: "What is your favorite dish?"

"Why do you always keep talking about food?" Ramaswamy feigned anger.

"I am not interested in eating all the time, neither are you a permanent cook in this house. It is time . . . ." Her face flushed red at his words.

"When did I become a cook in this house?" Mangalam too feigned anger and arose from her seat. Without loosening his grip on her, Ramaswamy asked: "Why are you trying to run away from me?"

"I am not running away," she dallied. "You are lying on a mat, let me get a pillow." She freed herself from his grip even as she was relishing his sweetness and affection in her company and moved away from him - only to return soon with a pillow.

The clock struck half past three. Ramaswamy, who had gone to sleep a short while ago, woke up because he found the room terribly humid. Outside, the air was raging hot and the sun's rays entering the room through the narrow opening of the window doors blinded his eyes. The room seemed

to grow hotter and suppress his breathing. He slowly removed Mangalam's arm from the sweat gathered on his chest and opened the window slightly.

How soothing does the body feel from the incoming light and breeze! He paused for a second to stare at Mangalam's face in the window light.

Sweating drops had collected on her forehead. The jasmine flowers from her tresses were now strewn across the pillow.

The incoming breeze in the room seemed anything but adequate. Ramaswamy used a towel to thoroughly scrub his sweaty back and chest, let the room door open slightly ajar, pushed his frame through the intervening space, and then closed the door after he exited from the room. Because the doors were very old, their two sides didn't mesh properly, leaving some gap between them. Ramaswamy peered through the intervening space into the room. He noticed, everything in the room - all the parts of it - was clearly visible through that opening.

"What if someone happened to show up here and pry into this bedroom?" he casually asked himself, and dismissed the idea as of no consequence. Then he crossed the main hall, arrived at the house main entrance, when .....

His entire body started sweating . . .

He felt as if his heart has suddenly stopped: he could hardly breathe . . .

His eyes stared out into empty space. He was overcome by shame and felt each and every lock of hair on his body forcibly pulled out through its root . . .

There, afar, he saw Somu cozily ensconced on a pial holding on to a pillar . . .

"Why didn't he go to the movie? If he wanted to return home why didn't he knock on the door? Why is he acting as if he has been ostracized and sitting on the pial? Is it possible he tried to come into the house? What would he have thought about the closed doors? Is it possible he knocked on the door?" Ramaswamy's mind was in turmoil.

When Ramaswamy began to think that the young teenager's mind would have been corrupted by all kinds of avoidable, wild, disgusting ideas,



he was ashamed even to look upon Somu's face. How jealous the boy would feel when he looks at his father?

But Somu seemed lost in some thought as he was rubbing his chin and contemplating the sky above. Like an adult about to deal with some earth-shaking situation, he pulled down his shirt - sleeves and surveyed the street, left and right.

Then, he went down the street below, turned to the right and began walking.

Where is he going?

"... Somu! Where are you going in this hot sun?" The question popped up in Ramaswamy's mind, but words failed him. He couldn't muster enough courage to address the boy, so he stood in silence.

Ramaswamy returned to his room and once again peered through the narrow gap of the doors into his bedroom. His whole body and eyes recoiled when he saw Mangalam fast asleep on the bed - relaxed, unaware of herself....

He left the doors open, entered the room, and then lay on the bed with his face buried on a pillow.

His heart swelling with shame, he grew angry with himself. He cried a little...

Around half past five Mangalam woke him up. She served him snacks and coffee. Sleep did clear his mind, and Ramaswamy now felt a little better.

When he went to the backyard to wash, he saw Somu returning home. Ramaswamy was about to beat a hasty retreat, but soon he changed his mind, thinking to himself, "What am I doing? I must deal with Somu anyway!"

He cleared his mind of all that happened in the afternoon, and addressed the boy:

"How was the movie?"

"Daddy, I didn't go to the movie. It was for adults only..."

"Didn't you rave about all those wild animals...?"

"Yes... but that movie had a last show yesterday... Today it's a

different movie, they said it is an adult movie, so I didn't go."

"Then, where were you all this time? You didn't come back here?"

"No, I went directly from the theater to a friend's house...."

"You could have informed us at home, and..." Ramaswamy swallowed the rest of the words

"You see, it has been a very hot day... I didn't feel like coming all the way home. My friend lives in the neighborhood, so I went over to his place. Now the weather is cool, and I am returning home." Ramaswamy's mind staggered as he stared at the boy lying to his teeth. He dreaded to think of a new, false screen now drawn across Somu's eyes.

"How dare you lie to me!" He felt outraged but immediately sensed the boy's cool strategy. "How delicately did he manage the situation, this crisis - embarrassing to both of us - with tact and poise, without actually revealing what he already knows..."

Ramaswamy had no further conversation with the boy and retired to his room in silence.

But he couldn't help mumbling to himself: "Some adult movie! But then, what new secrets is he going to learn from a movie that he had not already seen or known from this city life?"

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## ONLY MISTAKES, NOT CRIMES . .

**T**o come to think of it, Theresa's words were not hurtful enough: even her voice, when she spoke those words, didn't sound harsh.

One could even say that Theresa, who was normally soft spoken and had a pleasant voice, was showing some restraint in her speech. It was obvious that she was upset with Nagarajan; but from her facial expression one could not be sure whether she was hostile to him or even tried to shame him.

Had she spat on him or even hurled an expletive like "Damn", Nagarajan would have considered her reaction normal; after all, he has been exposed to such experiences before.

On such occasions, Nagarajan knew how to handle himself. His power, reputation, status, age or social standing would usually come to his rescue.

"I have been disgraced enough, what more can I do now?" he asked himself.

"How come, I never seem to learn anything?" His eyes turned moist, and he bowed down his head as shame and disgust overwhelmed him.

"I am a scum," he denounced himself. "I am already past fifty, I have a son reaching almost to my height, and a daughter in the college. Had my children been married, by now I would have been blessed with four grand children! How mean and evil have I become!" He gnashed his teeth and buried his hands in his coat pockets. He again closed his eyes, leaned on the chair, and turned his head left and right, uttering the words: "What a shame!" He felt quite frozen in body and mind.

He again remembered Theresa's face. A few minutes ago . . . .

Her face reddening, her tresses falling off the forehead, the red lips growing pale and tears swelling up in her eyes. . . .

She was pleading, "Please! Leave me alone . . . I am sorry. . . ." as she finally tore herself apart and ran away from him even as her whole body was still shaking . . . . .

A few tear drops had fallen on the top of the glass table - they still stayed dry there - before she tried to wipe her face with a handkerchief from her coat pocket.

She was embarrassed to make her feelings public; she tried to stop crying by burying her face in the handkerchief, and ran to her room. Nagarajan felt the creaking noise from her slippers slowly fade away, and then heard her whole body nestle down into her chair. . . . .

His ears tried to recollect Theresa's words, the mind vividly recalled her tears and pathetic face while she eagerly sought shelter in the

privacy of her room. Those words as well as gestures of the last few minutes now flashed before him over and over again . . . . .

"Theresa, what a noble soul!" Nagarajan could not help thinking. The very thought pricked his conscience.

"She would have never expected such a behavior from me!" he thought. He wished his whole body had been hacked into pieces.

He was heartbroken at the fall he had just endured. He started thinking:

"How can I possibly comfort Theresa? How can I ever escape from this shame? How can I regain her confidence and respect for me?"

"It's all over!" There was a touch of finality in his voice. "I have ruined everything! What a disaster!" He let off long sighs over and over again. He tried to wipe off the sweating drops gathering on the forehead. He wanted to cry aloud.

His guilt grew stronger as he began to realize something else: recently he had become more and more vulnerable to his own indiscretions. He has been observing changes in Theresa's attitude toward him - especially her smiles, hospitality, warmth as well as her disposition to treat him like a father figure; she had been frankly sharing all her personal problems and disappointments with him; so Nagarajan was led to believe that she took

to him. And that was the reason why he felt encouraged - rather foolishly, as the events later proved- in his belief that she would not resist his amorous advances . . . . .

For the last ten days Nagarajan and Theresa have been meeting for lunch; this has happened since the day Nagarajan's servant Kanniah - who regularly served Nagarajan his lunch - had suddenly disappeared . . . .

It was Kanniah who had suggested that Nagarajan have lunch in his own office. Kanniah had come to stay with Nagarajan two years ago, and prior to his arrival, Nagarajan used to go home in the afternoon for lunch. But soon Nagarajan found out that lunch at home meant extra time wasted in the afternoon nap and other things. He couldn't be back to work till four in the afternoon.

Now, Nagarajan could come and go as he pleased, nobody would ever question him. He was the second in command in the company's hierarchy, yet he occasionally shared even more responsibilities than the company's owner. Nagarajan has been at the company's headquarters for the last twenty five years, and because he was mainly responsible for establishing the numerous company branch offices throughout the state it was widely believed that he had heavy responsibility for the company's success and that he also enjoyed the owner's confidence and trust.

Once Kanniah started living at Nagarajan's household, he started bringing Nagarajan's lunch to his office, and personally serving it there. Previously, the main reason why Nagarajan preferred lunch at home was because he was neither comfortable nor accustomed to serving meals himself in his office.

It was widely believed by everyone that Kanniah was either Nagarajan's cook or his servant. Not many were aware that Kanniah was actually Nagarajan's cousin, as well as a boyhood friend. But Kanniah was always discreet in his behavior - he never did anything to make their blood relationship become public knowledge.

Kanniah was a loner - his life included no family, no marriage, no home and no relatives whatsoever. Occasionally he stayed for a while with others who accepted him as their relative; on such occasions, Kanniah would act like a bulwark to his hosts, helping them in various roles - as a nanny to their children, a servant ready to perform errands within an earshot, he would work in the garden, wash clothes, get groceries; split the wood, carry loads, and finally engage in pleasant conversation.

"That rascal Kanniah ran away without any warning or whatsoever," Nagarajan presently gnashed his teeth. He even wondered if Kanniah could be responsible - in some strange fashion - for his latest indiscretion.

"Had he been here as usual serving me the afternoon lunch. Theresa would not have become that close to me," that was how Nagarajan sought to put the blame on Kanniah. He recalled his recent memories with Kanniah . . . . .

Two years ago, Nagarajan was driving home around eight at night; when he tried to park his car in a shed next to his house he noticed a man with a beard, mustache and disheveled hair, sitting in a corner. Without shutting off the car lights, Nagarajan called, his voice slightly intimidating,:

"Who is there?"

"I am Kanniah," the man replied as he approached Nagarajan and introduced himself in soft whispers: "Don't you recognize me?" Nagarajan was visibly upset at the man's plight.

"You look terrible, what happened?" he inquired, and led him into the house. He introduced Kanniah to his family members and informed them that Kanniah henceforth would stay with them. Within a few days Kanniah became a valuable member of that household.

Initially, quite a few relatives warned Nagarajan against letting Kanniah become a part of his household. But Nagarajan ignored their pleas; if anything, he thought it was his duty to associate Kanniah with his family, though he was averse to make his views public.

Occasionally Nagarajan enjoyed talking privately with Kanniah about the boyhood days they had spent together.

During their boyhood days Kanniah was a quiet, decent fellow; it was Nagarajan who initiated Kanniah into smoking and drinking, he was not about to deny it now. Smoking and drinking were the fads that attracted teenagers like Nagarajan and Kanniah at an impressionable age; and once that fad was gone, Nagarajan found himself no more attracted to those vices. On the other hand, Kanniah had become addicted to those habits, much to Nagarajan's sadness and guilt.

As far as he was concerned, Nagarajan didn't feel sorry for Kanniah because of his so called moral lapses or virtual dependence on smoking and drinking. What concerned him, more than anything else, was how a

man addicted to these vices could be reduced to a pathetic state of life where he could be deprived of even common decency, and fall from grace. So Nagarajan took pity on Kanniah.

Nowadays Nagarajan occasionally drinks in a party or even at home, protected from public gaze. He smokes, and he also lusts after women when he sees them. After all, every man goes through life within certain self-imposed do's and don'ts; and when those limits are crossed, he falls flat on the moral plane. Doesn't he?

Kanniah had fallen a victim to his vices; and Nagarajan nursed a guilt that he was partly responsible for his fall from grace.

While others might despise Kanniah or look down upon him, Nagarajan continued to treat him deep in his heart as his equal. For his part, Kanniah never forgot where he stood in relation to Nagarajan. He never crossed the limit even as he treated Nagarajan as someone close to him.

Once in a while Nagarajan would invite Kanniah to have a drink with him. Kanniah would consider it a royal treatment. Still, he would act shy and hesitant; he would take just a glass of wine and drink it secretly in the room corner. He would politely refuse to have any more wine and try to flee the room.

If Nagarajan persisted and nudged him further, Kanniah would simply say: "I can't handle all this high class stuff. Why are you wasting your money? Please give me a couple of bucks." So off he would go with those few bucks, return to the shed late night; where he went and what he did nobody would ever know.

Once in a while Nagarajan would give Kanniah money for his own personal expenses. Of course, it will be all done in secret.

Nagarajan always enjoyed the lunch session when Kanniah served meals in his office. He felt so pleased and satisfied with Kanniah's service that once in a while he demanded such a service even at home.

Nagarajan's wife suffered from obesity. She used to get sick quite often and so Nagarajan was used to discourage her from getting up from the easy chair to serve him food . . .

A few times when Nagarajan used to drive the car - this happened only if the driver was not around - he would ask Kanniah to accompany

him so that they could talk to one another - just like the old time buddies. Their conversation would be natural, informal and Kanniah would even address him in as a singular person.

"Hi Kanniah," Nagarajan one day asked him. "What do you think of my secretary?" He had observed Kanniah a little embarrassed while watching Theresa, his Anglo Indian secretary not dressed in the traditional Indian *sari*.

Kanniah laughed away at the question and made no comments.

"Tell me, what do you feel when you look at her?"

"What do I think?" Kanniah lowered his head so the chin would touch his chest. Then he made a funny gesture. "I know what you have done to her!

I know everything!" He tried to giggle as he gestured with his arm.

"No, nothing like that, there is nothing between us," Nagarajan assured him. "Do you think I am still the guy of those good old days? No way, I am getting old too!"

"Maybe you are right," Kanniah replied. "But I know this much: that girl has an eye on you - no question about it!"

*Is it possible that rascal - Kanniah - had put some ideas into my head?*

Though Kanniah used to talk on matters very personal to Nagarajan when they were together, he betrayed no familiarity while serving Nagarajan lunch in the office. He would not so much as look directly at Nagarajan as he tried to gauge from Nagarajan's face what he would like to have served on the plate.

And Theresa too had watched with admiration Kanniah's excellent service during the lunch hour.

She had observed how during Kanniah's absence Nagarajan had his driver come up and serve the meals; that turned out to be quite a disaster. The driver knew nothing about serving food; and when Nagarajan lost temper and shouted at him, the driver was so scared that he even dropped the food on the floor. So Nagarajan had no lunch that afternoon; later he ordered food from a hotel. So the next day when she saw Nagarajan trying self-service, Theresa politely asked him, "Can I help you with your

lunch, if you don't mind?"

Nagarajan recalled Kanniah's words: *I know this much -that girl has an eye on you.* . . .

Theresa has been Nagarajan's steno for the last four years. But it was the first time his eyes cast an appreciative look on her body.

"You look great today," he complimented her. She thanked him. *211*

He invited her to share his table during the lunch hour. Initially, she was hesitant to share her simple lunch - brought in a little box- in his presence, but as he encouraged her, she finally agreed to share the table with him.

"Where is that man?" she inquired of Kanniah.

"That rascal ran away with my five hundred rupees." Nagarajan's voice was angry as he answered her.

"Five hundred rupees? That's a lot of money for a servant to get away with!"

"He was no servant, he was my cousin!"

"Oh! I am so sorry!"

"That is all right, to call even a thief a servant seems to be too much!"

"Poor man," she said. Nagarajan was a little surprised why Theresa was sorry for Kanniah. Then she grumbled: "He was very nice and helpful to you." Nagarajan sighed.

Nagarajan shared a few dishes with her, and she gratefully accepted them. She too was efficient like Kanniah when it came to serving him the meals with care and attention to his needs; Nagarajan freely partook the food from Theresa's lunch box.

While at work Nagarajan and Theresa usually limited their conversation to office matters; now they talked not only about general topics but even shared some personal matters.

Previously, after lunch, Nagarajan would rest on an easy chair in his private, air-conditioned room. However, during the last ten days he has been spending the lunch break talking with Theresa who shared a table across from him while he was resting on an easy chair.

Theresa was very open with him; because Nagarajan was an adult - very sympathetic and caring - she totally trusted him. She laughed like an innocent child, and because he seemed pleased with her talk and laughter, she deliberately humored him by talking more and even laughing more. But Nagarajan loved not only her talk and laughter, but everything about her. Her smiles, warmth and zestful mood were slowly driving him to a point where he eagerly sought to lose himself totally in sheer ecstasy . . .

A few days ago she had invited him for her birthday party the following week. During all the past four years of her employment with him, she had once given him a cake as a gift, nothing more, and had never invited him for a party. She did so because she now believed he was not just her boss but a trusted friend. However, Nagarajan misread her personal invitation.

"Will it be a cocktail party?" he asked her, mischievously winking his eyes.

"Of course, both my parents can drink. They are permit holders!" She had replied.

"Why don't you get a permit for yourself?"

"No, I don't drink!"

"I bet I will make you drink when I am with you next week in your party!"

"I do drink, on special occasions, for company's sake," she conceded. Then she described how her father would offer wine to all children during Christmas festivities that I had their willing consent. (But afterwards I would repent for my sinful behavior. Only today I have understood that I am a sick man - I have Theresa described in a zestful mood how drinking and dancing -between men and women- were encouraged in her culture for creating an emotional bond between one another. Then she recalled the celebrations of her birthday party the previous year. She also mentioned about her boy-friend, who, she had once believed, deserved her love and affection, and had since then broken off with her, she became quite emotional while talking about that boy friend, but pretty soon regained her composure, and smiled. X

Nagarajan, who heard all of this, understood them from an entirely different angle.

And the end result was just what happened a few minutes ago: they had both just finished their lunch together. Theresa had just then taken out her mirror from the handbag and was checking her lipstick, when Nagarajan, who stood behind her with the towel . . .

A few minutes ago . . . . .

Her face reddening, her tresses falling off the forehead, the red lips growing pale and tears swelling up in her eyes . . . she was pleading, "Please! Leave me alone . . . I am sorry for everything. . . ." as she finally tore herself from him and ran away even as her whole body was still shaking . . . . .

Theresa's face remained vividly in his memory.

The time was two in the afternoon.

Following the lunch break, the air-conditioned office room resounded with the employees moving back to the office premises and the typewriters being pounded from across the tables . . . . .

Nagarajan had chain-smoked seven or eight cigarettes in the last one hour.

He pressed the buzzer to call Theresa.

She soon appeared before him. Nagarajan couldn't bring himself to face her. He hung his head in shame even as he apologized to her.

"I am sorry . . . . Theresa!" he said.

He didn't know what she would do next. "Is she still crying," he wondered.

"Or is she about to throw her resignation letter at me?" Confused, he looked up.

Theresa stood before him as if nothing has happened - certainly she didn't look like someone who only a short while ago tried to cover her face with a handkerchief before disappearing into her room. She was now smiling and ready with her shorthand note book and pencil.

Nagarajan was now certain about one thing: she is not going to resign her job immediately. Her posture showed she was ready to take his dictation. She knew there was a lot of correspondence to be attended to. But Nagarajan suddenly decided that an important letter needed to be dictated right away.

He got up from the chair and started pacing behind the chair as he dictated the letter. "Please sit down." he said. Theresa took a seat before the table.

"Dear Miss Theresa. . . ." he began.

"Yes sir." she stared at him in anticipation.

"Put it down! This is a letter." he said, and she silently and dutifully obeyed taking the dictation. He continued pacing on the floor even as he made sure that only his back was visible to her:

" . . . Miss Theresa. I feel ashamed because I misbehaved with you, someone who is like my daughter and deserved my love and affection. Whether you will forgive me or punish me is up to you. I realize I have had a fall - in a matter of few seconds I have fallen down in your reckoning; that is a punishment enough for me. . .

"Theresa . . . I keep wondering why I acted that way . . . ."

"This is not the first time I have committed this crime. By openly admitting my imperfections to you I believe I will be freed from this terrible affliction. While you are much younger to me, I find you are a very decent person and a noble soul. So I want to make a confession before you and purge all my sins."

"My conduct earlier this morning was abominable; I have committed such crimes many a time in my life."

"When I usually found myself among large crowds either during my frequent travels or in some public places like theaters, I have exploited the situation and indulged in immoral acts. Because my victims usually remained passive - they were either afraid of me, or felt ashamed or even wanted to act decent in public, I got away with a feeling been all these days suffering from a mental disease. It was your noble gesture that cured me of that disease. So I would request you to forgive me for my unruly behavior and treat my conduct toward you as a father's affectionate kiss to his daughter. On the other hand, if you feel my fall from grace is not good enough punishment, I am willing to accept any punishment you may think appropriate." Nagarajan suddenly felt like a long distance traveler who had just then taken off a heavy load from his back and was settling down for a much needed rest.

Theresa applied her handkerchief a few times to her wet eyes. Her nose and cheeks had turned red.

"Please type this letter," Nagarajan said, and after she left, he lit a cigarette and remained in his seat. Soon he heard the sound of the typewriter in Theresa's room.

After a while Theresa returned with the typed letter, laid it on his table and stood there watching him. Nagarajan put on his glasses and started reading the letter: "My dear friend!" was how the letter began; he glanced at her.

Theresa respectfully bowed her head.

He continued reading the letter: "At the outset I want to apologize for bringing to your attention a letter different from the one you had just dictated to me. I guess you have dictated that letter because you wanted to have an open communication with me. The fact that you personally involved me in a letter seeking my own forgiveness testifies to your pure heart. The most meaningful words in your letter which reflect my own thoughts are these: *"Treat my conduct toward you as an affectionate father."* I am pleased to hear such a sentiment from you because that is exactly how I had felt about your conduct; it is just a slip, not a fall!"

He repeated the sentence, "Just a slip, not a fall!" aloud as if admiring Theresa's play on words, and again looked at her. He continued reading:

"If you say you are sick and suffering from a disease, what you need is a treatment, not a punishment. Those infractions are mistakes, not crimes. Only crimes ought to be punished, mistakes have to be corrected or forgiven. I consider myself a true Christian. Only those who forgive will be forgiven. I beg you, please forget this incident and stop feeling sorry for yourself."

"Just as we had agreed the other day, I expect to see you at my place on my birthday. I will drink to your health!"

"Yours truly . . . ."

"Theresa . . . ."

"Theresa . . . . You are a noble soul!"

When Nagarajan returned home later that night at eight and tried to park the car in the shed he saw Kanniah with his usual beard, mustache and disheveled hair at a distance. Nagarajan looked at his face without shutting off the car lights. Either because of shame or the brightness of car lights, Kanniah quickly covered his face.

Nagarajan's wife and daughter were standing on the veranda like two body guards. Nagarajan had instructed them that on no account should Kanniah be admitted into the house if he ever showed up before Nagarajan did.

As soon as Nagarajan alighted from the car Kanniah came over to him and sobbed.

"I am sorry for what I have done," he went on. "I just don't know what got into my head! I have been actually feeling terrible ever since I stole that money, never felt good about it! I am a scum!" He went on smiting his forehead, repenting over his crime.

Nagarajan remained silent; he loosened his tie, walked to the house entrance and sat on one of the cane chairs on the veranda.

His wife and daughter now retreated into the house. Kanniah came out of darkness and stood before Nagarajan, his head bowed down, the hands nervously playing with one another.

Nagarajan looked at Kanniah's pathetic face. He started thinking:

"If this Kanniah were a mere thief why would he now return to my house? After all, he has proved himself to be a good worker, and he should have no difficulty finding another job to earn his livelihood. To think that he has returned to this house for his mere survival certainly makes no sense. Is it possible the jasmine plant that has started blooming since yesterday in the garden had drawn him back? - after all it was Kanniah who passionately planted it, watered it and nourished it all these days. Again, I think of Kanniah every day when I have my meals; perhaps he too misses me the same way I feel for him! But then . . . . why was he tempted to steal the money in the first place and run away? Why, why?"

"Hi Kanniah," Nagarajan asked him. "Why didn't you ask me for the money? I could have certainly given you. Why did you steal it?" His voice was loud enough to be heard by his family members inside the house.

"That's what I have been thinking all these days," Kanniah replied sheepishly. "When I first saw the money in the shelf there was nobody around. I immediately thought if one finds money unattended one can just grab it; that comes from my thief mentality -and this is not the first time, it has happened so many times! I am a scum. I hate myself!" He started berating himself.

Nagarajan recalled the similar situation he was in that afternoon.

"You are sick." he said.

"Yes, I agree. I am sick." said Kanniah and scratched his head. "I am willing to accept any punishment." His eyes were teary, and his hands were shaking.

Nagarajan laughed.

"Sickness demands treatment, not punishment." He too felt a little emotional while he spoke.

"You need a treatment - only a heartfelt forgiveness will cure you of your sickness. So far no one has given you this treatment. I have forgiven you, you will be cured now, you may now go into the house! You have committed only a mistake, not a crime!" Nagarajan's words gladdened the hearts of his family members who readily lauded his compassion and generosity.

The truth of the matter is this: they never knew what has actually happened!

Only those who have been forgiven can forgive others!

\*\*\*\*

## MANY ANGLES, MANY VIEWS!

1

**R**ajalakshmi was lonely and terribly inconsolable. She felt like an orphan.

She has been sitting on the sofa in the reception room for nearly half an hour when Shankari, her in-residence cook, an old widow in her late seventies, slowly approached her mistress.

Since Rajalakshmi was so deeply immersed in private thoughts that she even failed to take note of her presence, Shankari asked her in a tender, gentle whisper: "Rajam, are you sick or something?"

"Oh no, I am just fine," Rajalakshmi answered her. "I am just resting . . . you may go back to the kitchen and attend to your chores."

Shankari remained silent for a while and keenly looked at her mistress. Then she smiled, and said, "Are you missing your daughters and their families who were here for two days and have since left? I am afraid you are expecting too much from them. Why don't you try to get your own son married off so that you can spend rest of your life with *his* children, right in this house? After all, how long can a woman expect to enjoy life with her daughters' kids, anyway?" After this brief lecture, the old woman walked back to the kitchen.

There was some truth in what Shankari was telling her, but Rajalakshmi felt those words didn't fully explain her current predicament.

It is true, of late Rajalakshmi's daughters and grandchildren have been visiting her quite often. Any special celebration, festival or some important occasion brought her daughters and their husbands to this house; they were always pleased to come, and Rajalakshmi and her son Murali loved to entertain them. When Rajalakshmi's eldest son, who is thirty-



five - still a bachelor - earns a salary of one thousand and five hundred rupees a month and enjoys privileges like a car and a fine bungalow why would his younger sisters think of spending all their time at home with their husbands? Again, even if they did, why would their mother let them do such a thing, anyway?

So when Rajalakshmi's daughters and their children, living within the city limits, had left for their respective homes some half an hour ago, Shankari was led to believe that their departure had saddened her mistress. Rajalakshmi smiled to herself - behind Shankari's back - over her ignorance.

Fortunately for Rajalakshmi, when Subbu Sastry came along this afternoon and when *that* incident took place, Shankari was already done with her afternoon chores and enjoying sound sleep in the backyard.

The old cook was actually Rajalakshmi's distant relative. Still people do develop certain habits in line with their occupation, don't they? It is certainly a good idea to keep some internal, family matters away from servants' ears . . .

But Shankari is an expert in sizing up a situation by just noting every move and the facial expression of the family members. She would know everything and form an opinion on everything; but she would never, never express her own opinion in public. Yes, she was not just a cook in this household! Otherwise, how can one explain Shankari addressing her mistress informally in singular and getting away with it?

Two separate notebooks now lay on a table opposite to Rajalakshmi

They contained two individual horoscopes. Rajalakshmi put on her eyeglasses from a leather case on the table and keenly examined them a few times, again and again, and in quick succession. Then she selected one of the horoscopes and carefully put it away in the drawer. She stared at the other in total disgust . . .

"This marriage can't take place . . . it should never take place." She muttered the words with a touch of finality in her voice. As she removed the eyeglasses and raised her head she saw the large photo of her late husband hanging on the wall; she felt he was keenly watching her . . .

As she eyed that photo, she sadly recalled the days gone by when her husband left her lonely and helpless with the ten-year old Meena and six-year old Kamala under her care. Rajalakshmi also recalled the youthful

face of her son Murali who gave his mother strength as well as confidence to shoulder her new duties and responsibilities as a widow and get moving with her life . . .

And how much has that boy of hers sacrificed for this family! He faced much hardship in his youth, he grew up in poverty and raised himself and his family to the present level of prosperity by steadfastly keeping his faith and making his dreams come true. At the age of twenty-five, he took upon himself the role of a father and with a great sense of responsibility and patience found bridegrooms for his sisters. Could Meena and Kamala have ever dreamt the comfort and marital bliss they are enjoying today?

There was a time when young Rajalakshmi had to eke out her livelihood by making *pappads* and assisting Shankari in her occupation as a cook. And was it not Murali whose efforts over the years brought his mother all those privileges - a car, a bungalow, glossy silk *saris* as well as these silver-framed eyeglasses? Then again, Murali did something else: he restored pride and dignity to his mother by bringing back Shankari - her former employer and benefactor - as her own servant in her own household!

So Rajalakshmi treated Murali - even if he was only her son - with high regard and great respect. Murali, now thirty-five, didn't seem interested in marriage, and he has been working hard, day and night, growing richer and gaining even more fame in his professional life. Rajalakshmi could not muster enough courage to discuss with her son about his own marriage.

So this afternoon when she learnt from Subbu Sastry that Murali was contemplating marriage and had personally handed over a girl's horoscope to him to match with his own, Rajalakshmi felt her life - happy and prosperous as it is - had found its ultimate fulfillment.

Now, as far as Rajalakshmi's family was concerned, Subbu Sastry was not just a professional astrologer; he was someone interested in that family's welfare and a close friend of Murali's father. That was the reason why Murali had asked Subbu Sastry to convey his marriage plans to his family members and seek out their reaction.

So this afternoon - just as Murali had suggested - Meena and Kamala had come down to their mother's place with their husbands. Subbu Sastry didn't believe his responsibility ended with studying the two horoscopes

and soliciting the opinions of the family members on the new alliance.

"These two horoscopes match excellently," he commented, and Rajalakshmi, who didn't even know who the prospective bride was, let out a deep sigh and expressed her satisfaction: "I am thankful to god for giving Murali the wisdom to think of marriage after all these years." At the same time Subbu Sastry noticed the face of Kamala's husband darken a little.

Kamala and Meena were evidently upset at Murali's indifference toward them as could be discerned from their facial expression; they resented the fact that their brother did not personally seek the opinion of his mother or sisters and that he made his decision conveyed to them through a third party.

A little shocked that nobody was sharing her joy and satisfaction, Rajalakshmi watched the faces of people around her. Meena's husband now spoke - breaking the uneasy silence in the room "What inspired your son to matrimony is not god as you seem to think, but the devil himself!"

"Oh my God! Why are you saying all these things?" Rajalakshmi closed her ears in utter dismay.

Now Subbu Sastry spoke in a voice, loud and clear: "Murali had asked me only to compare the two horoscopes. Today Murali is in a high position, but he is still the son of my close friend Sivaraman. That Sivaraman was only a poor clerk but, as everybody knew, he belonged to a decent, traditional, god-fearing family. I too have been thinking that the integrity of this family should not be compromised, and your son-in-law is now expressing the same opinion. I think he knows the details about the bride too, Am I right?" Before he could go further, Meena's husband intervened, and spoke aloud: "Where is the secret here? This bride is a laughing stock of this town . . . Don't be misled by her name, see the address on this flyer . . . Do you know the lady who lives in our colony on the sixth main street? She is the movie playback singer Prameela, and she is your son's choice!"

"What a cruel fate!" Rajalakshmi started cursing and smiting her head.

It is true that singer Prameela was widely talked about in the town. But nobody in this group - neither the listeners nor the talkers - seemed to care how much truth colored their conversation.

For a long time into the evening and even before their eventual departure, Rajalakshmi's daughters and sons-in-law, again and again, indulged in all kinds of tattle-tales about Prameela - some of them from public knowledge and others from hearsay..

They gossiped about one 'Minor Mannargudi Rajagopal' who, they alleged, has been literally living with Prameela for a long time; they commented on his sloppy driving under the influence of alcohol - how one day he had lost everything in Guindy horse races and, while returning home in full rage and drunken state, collided with a truck near Saidapet Bridge and died on the spot, his body disfigured beyond recognition; they mentioned too about his squandering all his wealth and property for the sake of 'this woman' even as he abandoned his own wife and children as destitutes to a life on streets. They discussed all this and more- as if they were actual participants in Prameela's private life, and embellished their stories with their own ingenuity - giving a spin here and a twist there to make the conversation juicy and interesting. Concerned and anxious, Rajalakshmi listened to their verbal interchange in silence with her head bowed down and an arm resting on her chin.

Finally, when they took leave of her she invited the sons-in-law for Murali's birthday the following Sunday. The eldest son-in-law was derisive and downright insulting as he replied to her.

"Our next visit to your house would depend on how you are going to handle this wedding," he warned her and turned to the younger son-in-law with a question, "Do you agree with me?" The two daughters now joined the younger son-in-law and voiced their combined opinion: "You may tell our elder brother that if he insists on this marriage we will be compelled to cut off all our relation with this house." Then they were all gone, leaving Rajalakshmi terribly lonely and inconsolable, with a feeling of total rejection.

She was convinced her daughters and their husbands were only fair, and spoke in good faith in expressing their objection to Murali's alliance with Prameela; yet she wondered how she could possibly talk her son out of it. Sitting passively on the sofa in the main hall, she pondered over her situation for a long time.

Shankari, who was attending to her chores in the kitchen, observed her mistress from time to time; she felt utter disgust at the whole episode and tried to contain herself:

"Why are women so selfish?" she asked herself. "This Rajalakshmi is only interested in enjoying her life with her daughters and the grandchildren . . . She would not mind her son toiling day and night and ending up as a old hag . . . As soon as the subject of the brother's marriage came up the daughters' faces became dark and grim! I can see where they are coming from, they now belong to another family! But what about their mother? Why does she look so paralyzed - as if she lost everything in a shipwreck? The least she can do is to feel happy over her son's upcoming marriage, can't she? Why did god create women so weak and timid?" Shankari's heart reeked with anger as she surmised the situation - in bits and pieces - from her own angle.

That is how people in general seem to react to a situation. They look at things from their own angle, thus comprehend only a part of the problem, and then make up their minds secure with a feeling that they have got the total picture.

## 2

As usual Shankari, the old cook, finished her chores in the kitchen at night around half past eight and spread out her bed on the *verandah*. Because she was given to hard work in her old age she would normally fall into sound sleep in no time, and start snoring. But today, the afternoon as well as now, she was only snoring.

As the clock struck nine, Murali's car came down the road illuminating the plants and shrubs in front of the house, and stopped at the gate. Murali alighted from the car, opened the gate himself, and parked the car in the garage before entering the house and going to his room upstairs. Within the next fifteen minutes he changed and entered the dining hall; only then did Rajalakshmi arise from the sofa.

For some time heavy silence prevailed in the hall. When she was serving him food, the son glanced at his mother without her noticing him; likewise, when he was enjoying the dinner, the mother stole a glance at him. Thus the son and mother, by their own looks, were trying to penetrate into each other's thoughts.

Murali was the first one to speak, and lighten up the atmosphere: "When did Kamalu and Meenu leave?"

"You had mentioned you would be home today very late, so they didn't want to wait for you, and were gone before the nightfall . . ."

As the voices from the kitchen slowly spilled into the *verandah*, Shankari's snoring became somewhat muted, but nevertheless continued . . .

After a while, Rajalakshmi spoke in a dry voice: "Subbu Sastry was here this afternoon."

"Hm." Murali acknowledged the news even as he continued to eat with his head down.

Rajalakshmi made sure the cook was sound asleep before she could discuss an important matter with Murali.

"He came to inform us about the horoscopes," she informed Murali. "He said the horoscopes show a good match. But . . ."

Murali stopped eating and raised his head to face his mother. Simultaneously, the snoring in the *verandah* totally stopped.

"People are saying all kinds of things about that girl Prameela . . . Maybe you are ignorant about such things . . . You are very naive, and you easily believe everything! Meena's husband was especially upset over this alliance . . . None of them is happy with your choice. In the beginning I knew nothing about the girl . . . I could never imagine you would have considered her for alliance with our family and given her horoscope to our Sastry I have been waiting all these years and was so happy that you had, on your own, decided to get married and settle down in life . . . Now, let me ask you, do you know anything about this woman's family background?" Rajalakshmi was breathless as she posed the question to Murali.

Murali smiled and calmly replied: "I know to what extent those who claim to have inside knowledge about her actually know about her. Any way, what do you think?"

"Meena asked me to tell you that if you don't give up this marriage idea, she would cut off all her connection with our family . . ."

"Did Meena actually say such a thing? Interesting . . ." Murali seemed to relish his sister's anger.

"It is not just Meena only . . . Everybody else said as much . . . They vowed never to visit this house again . . . Even Subbu Sastry is not too happy . . ."

Losing patience and irritated at his mother going down the list of people dissatisfied and upset with his decision, Murali abruptly cut her off, saying, "Leave out Subbu Sastry and Pappu Sastry out of this. I am actually interested in *your* opinion. Because you would hesitate to express *your own* opinion, I conveyed this news through Subbu Sastry. Now that you have brought up this subject, you might as well tell me your own opinion, then the matter can be settled in no time. . . What do you say?"

After remaining silent for a while, which seemed to convey her serious, thoughtful opinion on Murali's decision, Rajalakshmi spoke her mind: "I too tend to agree with their opinion . . . By entering into this alliance we would be compromising the integrity of our family . . . That is how I feel."

"Okay, Mother, I will abide by your decision. This marriage will not take place!" Then Murali finished his dinner, left the dining hall, went to the backyard and washed his hands.

He bowed down his head for a minute, then raised it and riveted his gaze on his mother. Seemingly lost in some thought, he uttered 'tsks' and nodded his head.

"My dear boy, I have given a lot of thought to this matter, " his mother was now saying. "I am aware you know enough to advise others on what is right and what is wrong. Even as a young man you have shouldered many responsibilities and gained a lot of experience. I even wondered if you are ever capable of making a mistake like this. But then, I told myself that even men with considerable worldly experience and those who arrive at decisions after much thinking and consultation with others are apt to fall in a trap in matters like these - they somehow or other tend to ignore the consequences of their decisions. That is why I feel strongly against this alliance. . . . But let me tell you something . . . You *must* get married within this month . Do you know how many parents - from so many good families - are eagerly lining up at our doorstep with their daughters to enter into alliance with our family?" Murali, who had just then washed his face with a towel, now squeezed the towel with his hands, bowed down, and spoke in a dry voice:

"Mother . . . I have understood your mind and others' opinions . . . I will abide by your opinion, I am not concerned about others. But you must try to understand my mind!"

I am not a young kid who is confused about love and other fads . .

Rightly or wrongly

I had a feeling I was in love with this woman. If that didn't work out, that is fine with me. But, I can't think of another marriage at this time, and you should not force me into it." His words tormented Rajalakshmi.

"If you can't think of marriage now, when do you think you will consider it?" She asked with a little concern.

"What if I never consider marriage as an option?" He replied with some irritation, threw the towel away and disappeared into the main hall.

Rajalakshmi, who stared at him as he moved away from her, was now beset with all kinds of thoughts weighing down heavily upon her. Desperate, she ran after her son to the main hall. . .

There she stood face to face with Murali who was now seated in a sofa with his eyes closed, and said: "I am a little scared at your stubbornness in this matter . . . Why are you saying you would never get married? Are you thinking of some relationship with that lady-singer even if . . . . . ." Her mind was in such a mental torture she could hardly complete her question.

"Oh mother, mother! How can you even imagine such a thing about me?" Murali looked at her with warmth and affection, and arose from the sofa. "Mother, I am Sivaraman's son, you need have no fears. I am committed to uphold the honor of this family. Please trust me!" After assuring his mother in so many words Murali left for his room.

Rajalakshmi spent that entire night with no sleep, her mind was in turmoil.

Contrary to his mother's concern, Murali actually didn't make up his mind to forego marriage and practice celibacy. He had already matured beyond such silly notions. Once he left home he knew he had to cope with several problems in his professional world. His deep interest in music brought him in friendship with Prameela, the much talked-about lady singer, and on a certain occasion, he happened to know from her that she was feeling very lonely; slowly, Murali came to realize his own loneliness, and the lady singer's disposition and good qualities impressed him so much that he was led to believe maybe it would be a good idea if he could have her as his life's partner. Still he wanted to marry her only if he could do so without alienating the affection and well being of his own family

members.

That was the actual truth as far as his relationship with Praneela was concerned; no love or anything close to melodrama had ever come between them.

Love - what it has got to do with horoscopes or their matching, any way?

### 3

The next morning, Rajalakshmi, as usual, stayed home alone after Murali left for work. She was distressed to think, over and over again, if she inadvertently broke her son's heart - the son to whom she and her daughters owed their life and prosperity. Does she now stand between Murali and his heart's desire?

Shankari, who managed to get some respite from her busy schedule in the kitchen, now entered the main hall.

"Hi Rajam, you haven't had anything except a cup of coffee this morning," the old woman told her. "How about taking a shower?" She sat opposite to Rajam, near the house main entrance, using her hand as a prop to support herself.

Rajalakshmi remained silent; her only response was to stare at Shankari and let out a deep sigh.

"Why are you staring at me like *that*?" the cook asked after nearing her mistress and fondly pressing her hand on to hers. Rajalakshmi's eyes at once turned teary. The old woman could control herself no more. Her entire frame started shaking, the voice was choked even as she let out a sob from within. Pulling her *sari* to cover her head even closer, her face reddening and lips quivering, Shankari spoke her heart out: "I know everything!

I know what is going on in this house! You are trying to ignore me and keep things away from me. I may be just a ghost haunting this house. The truth of the matter is Murali's conscience can't ignore me, and my heart wouldn't leave him either! My life as a cook wouldn't come to an end unless I have had the pleasure of attending Murali's wedding and personally serving him and his bride food in this kitchen! That is my dream, what else do I need? I have no children of my own!" Shankari was trying to convey to her mistress her special attachment to Murali.

"Murali would often come to the kitchen and fondly inquire after me . . .," the old cook continued, "and he would tease me one way or other, and do you know what I would tell him? That he is always acting like a child - making fun of this old woman. That he is incapable of finding a wife for himself on his own; neither his mother would do such a thing for him. Yes, if Murali remains a bachelor, Rajam,

I will certainly accuse you of shirking your responsibility. . . Hm . . . do you know something? This morning I watched Murali coming out of the bathroom drying himself, and I noticed his hair has turned gray, can you believe that? You seem to feel happy just with your daughters and grandchildren . . . ."

"And why do you look so paralyzed, as if everything is lost? Has Murali ever rejected any of the girls you had considered for him? No, certainly not. . . Now you and others are objecting to Murali's own choice! I don't claim to know about others - their minds and motives! But you are his mother, and even if you have not given your consent, you are feeling terrible inside, aren't you?" Shankari now realized that the widening gap between herself and her employer boiled down to the simple fact that she had no son of her own. She paused to control her emotions, and continued: "You have all the privileges that life can offer, still you look pathetic and are in tears; I feel so terrible to see you in this condition." She then went back to the kitchen to attend to other chores.

Some cook! Shankari was certainly more than a cook!

Rajalakshmi suddenly recalled the past when she used to be a cook like Shankari and how Shankari gave her warmth and support. She hastened to the kitchen from the main hall.

"I understand what you are trying to tell me," Rajalakshmi told her. "Still, people are saying all kinds of bad things about that lady - singer. What do you have to say about *that*?"

Shankari thought for a minute, then replied:

"Rajam, look here . . . Is Murali an innocent kid or something? Think about this - why do you think his hair has turned gray at this age? How many responsibilities has that boy shouldered over these years? Is he someone who would fall in love with a woman because of her physical charm? Murali is level-headed and worldly, and when he tells us he likes

a particular woman, there must be some good reason for his choice. I really don't understand this: how dare Kamala and Meena think of rejecting his choice outright - with hardly any concern for his decision?"

"Are you suggesting his sisters have no right to interfere in Murali's marriage?" Rajalakshmi asked.

"Why talk about rights? Talk about their interest in his marriage, talk about their concern in his future . . . Do you see any interest or concern on their part? Certainly, I don't. If they have any concern, would they accuse him in no time and disapprove his choice? I can tell you this much; any decision made without consulting others is like passing a judgment in a case without any trial . . ." Shankari's words, so forcefully expressed and logically argued brought home to Rajalakshmi the truth: Shankari was being fair and she cared a lot for Murali and Rajalakshmi's family. "I know where you are coming from," Rajalakshmi told her in a congratulatory tone. "After all your husband used to work as a clerk for a lawyer and I see you too argue your case admirably, point by point." Then she retreated to the main hall.

Meanwhile, she also made up her mind and arrived at a wise decision.

#### 4

"Why did Murali feel so strongly about marrying this singer Prameela? How can anyone object if Murali does have a good reason for his decision? Why should ↗

↘ I simply go along with others against this alliance and hurt Murali's feelings? It would do me no good, either." For a long time Rajalakshmi pondered over these questions and finally decided that she should personally meet with Prameela and come to know about her. So that evening she visited Prameela's house, on her own, without informing anyone of her intention.

On her way to Prameela's house Rajalakshmi was suddenly overcome with a fear that by accepting Prameela as her daughter-in-law she might be alienating the affection of her daughters and the grandchildren; she recoiled at that possibility and hesitated to proceed further.

But then Shankari's words came back to haunt her, and she thought:

*Didn't she say I am lacking in affection for my son?* Her conscience was immediately pricked by the old woman's barb that there were *others* who always seemed to merit Rajalakshmi's love and affection . . .

When Rajalakshmi entered Prameela's house the hostess was singing in the main hall with her eyes closed and a *tambura* leaning against her shoulder. Rajalakshmi was averse to interfere in her singing; so she silently stood there for a minute and let her eyes wander over every nook and corner of the house visible from where she stood.

What attracted her immediate attention was a photograph with a silk garland running along its wooden frame; its subject was a man, and Rajalakshmi easily guessed his identity. His lips were darkened by continuous use of *paan*, a minor's chain hung around his neck and his headgear seemed quite gaudy and pompous - all these suggested he must be the so-called Mannargudi Minor Rajagopal - the prime source of scandals associated with the singer. On the other side of the photograph stood a picture of Saint Thyagaraja flanked by two small lamps on either side. At the room corner was a teapoy on which stood a woman's photograph - presumably Prameela's mother. Rajalakshmi could surmise all this in less than a minute as she surveyed the scene before her.

Rajalakshmi took stock of Prameela as she was rendering Thyagaraja's composition in *raga Mohanam*: "My Lord! Have you walked to my abode to bless me?"

Prameela is certainly no beauty, Rajalakshmi told herself, not even fair in complexion. She could be above thirty. Rajalakshmi was trying to judge all of Prameela's qualities - except her competence in music - when the singer happened to open her eyes and see the visitor. "She stopped singing, put away the *tambura* in a corner, arose from her seat and formally invited Rajalakshmi into the house. All this happened in a very short time.

"I am sorry I didn't notice you," she apologized and asked the visitor to take one of the chairs in the main hall.

"No problem, dear child," Rajalakshmi told her. "Please continue with your music, go on . . ."

"That is fine . . . I keep singing the whole day when I have no company," Prameela explained. "For someone like me music is a very good companion. May I ask what brings you here?" she asked with utmost

humility in her voice. She thought someone had come to book her for a concert for some ladies club annual event.

"I am Muralidharan's mother," Rajalakshmi introduced herself and Prameela immediately joined both her hands in a respectful gesture, and said: "If you had sent a word I would have myself come down to see you."

"No . . . As a matter of fact I personally wanted to meet with you," Rajalakshmi informed her and bowed down her head in silence. Prameela used that opportunity to go into the kitchen to make some coffee.

After a while the two were engaged in conversation, but both pointedly avoided the issue upper most in their mind. They were beating around the bush discussing all the extraneous things; sometimes they seemed to close in on the main topic, but then drifted away to peripheral issues.

Prameela informed Rajalakshmi that during the last five years she has had opportunities to work as a play-back-singer in several films; however, recently, she has been getting invitations to give music concerts; this didn't really create any problem, she readily added, because she was satisfied that her present income was adequate to meet the needs of her single life.

Then Rajalakshmi started inquiring about Prameela's family background. When she came to know that Prameela lost her mother year ago and was now living as a single woman with the help of a servant maid, Rajalakshmi asked her, suddenly, but with a smile,

"How did you get acquainted with Murali?"

Prameela too, suddenly, steadied herself and answered: "I once visited your son's office to sing at their office anniversary celebration; I had met him before that in several concerts. I used to think of him only as a connoisseur of music - but later, as our contacts became more frequent, I realized he was also an exceptionally very decent man. On both the occasions - when my mother was sick, and when my uncle Raju, who had taken my car, died in an accident, it was your son who came to my rescue. But for his help I am not sure what would have happened to me! He was like a god . . ." As she went on and on with no restraint, the word 'Raju' caught Rajalakshmi's attention, and she was a little pleased that Prameela didn't elaborate on the name, and let it go; the truth of the matter was that

Prameela deliberately brought up that name to provoke the visitor and observe her reaction.

"You did mention about one Raju Uncle, didn't you? Who is he?" Rajalakshmi tried the question to hook Prameela and lead her into her own line of questioning.

The hook and the bait were caught together in a real situation.

Prameela now pointed her finger at that photo, and continued:

"That is Raju Uncle, he is not actually related to us . . . When he is in town he would give up anything - even his life - to attend my concerts. He was our neighbor, had a lot of wealth, I am sure you have heard his name - they called him Mannargudi Minor Rajagopal . . . Soon after my father died we also lost our house in debts. When my mother and I were left as orphans, Raju Uncle brought us to Madras and gave me break in movies by using his influence with some of his friends . . . If I am today able to earn hundreds and thousands of rupees it was all because of his timely help and kindness." Prameela now noticed Rajalakshmi's face register a change.

Rajalakshmi became silent for a while, then smiled again, and said: "You must not mistake my asking you . . . I want to know everything about you, hence my question to you. Do you know there are all kinds of rumors about this Uncle Raju? Do you think Murali is aware of those rumors?"

Prameela let out a deep sigh, and continued: "I will be really surprised if there is anyone who doesn't speak ill of Raju uncle; if he had only one vice it is possible the world might be ignorant about it. But all kinds of vices have found a refuge in him. What can one do? After all, everything depends on the way people are brought up, their family background, the company they keep with others, and so on . . ."

When she was struggling to recall those sad memories and talking incoherently to herself, Rajalakshmi, seemingly agitated, confronted Prameela with a quick, but what she considered, a fair question: "How could you allow your name to be associated with someone like him? Are you not concerned it would hurt your life?"

Prameela bowed her head a little as if lost in some deep thought. She knew right away the main reason for Rajalakshmi's visit - the visitor has been rightly confused and overwhelmed with so many questions that they needed to be addressed right away . . .

And she explained: "I believe nobody in this world is totally wicked or totally good. Your son used to tell me there are some who are totally evil, and some totally good, and he used to say that Raju Uncle belonged to the first category. He was also saying that if you actually come to know about these evil men, you would certainly find some redeeming qualities in them - worthy of our admiration. I believed your son was right - and I think he proved his point; after all, he himself served as an example, was he not a close friend of Raju uncle who was a personification of all evils? Are we right in assuming that evil men would always remain evil? As far as I am concerned, Raju Uncle has been a decent man when he helped our family in distress .. I am not really bothered by people saying all kinds of bad things about him .. . . ."

Rajalakshmi now intervened, and asked: "How can that be? Where there is fire, there is smoke! . . ."

"Yes, and you have put it so well," Prameela answered her. "Because there is fire, there is smoke! But people keep looking at smoke only and totally forget about the fire. What people seem to notice about Raju Uncle is that his notoriety has spread all over this town like a wild fire; still, even if he is an evil person - as they all think of him - can they forget that he is essentially a human being? Are we right in concluding all evil men have no heart? Because they are lacking in will power these men easily become vulnerable to vices and can't resist them. That is how I feel about Raju uncle .. There was a time when he used to live far away from me, but still he voluntarily offered to help when I badly needed it; then, some five years ago, he squandered all his wealth and ended up as an orphan. When he came to know that I am well off, he came to see me. I thought about it: this house, car and rich lifestyle became my lot only because of Raju uncle's generosity, and now I was willing to give him everything he needed. My mother kept on reproaching me, shouting, 'You are crazy! Why are you being so generous, one day you may end up with nothing!' Somehow it never occurred to my mother that had my uncle not helped us, we would have ended up just as two ordinary servant maids washing dishes in some of the houses in our village . . ."

" . . . . Raju Uncle needed financial help from me . . . I was in a position to help, and I certainly did help. . I do know about public opinion . . . why should we care about those who see only the smoke and refuse to acknowledge the fire? Granted that I was able to attain a high status in my life with the generosity of an evil man: will I be hurting myself - my name

and prestige - if I want to return his favor with my own sense of gratitude? If that ever happened, I told myself, let me go with it! You see, even my own mother couldn't appreciate what I was trying to do! But there was someone who understood my mind and soul - and that was your son Murali . . ."

"So when he asked for my horoscope - I could never believe he did consider me as his future wife - I felt as if a large bouquet of flowers was showered on me while all the gods stood around blessing my future! Still, I couldn't bring myself to believe that this marriage would become a reality. So I have been thinking a lot about it . My first concern was, would my horoscope match with your son's, and he is a noble soul; secondly, what is the guarantee that those horoscopes that do match would result in matrimony? Again, Murali is not somebody like me - I am single with no family or dependents. How would Murali's folks react to his decision to marry me? So my mind was in turmoil . . But I can tell you this much: even if this marriage never took place, I would still be happy. Why? Because by cherishing those small moments - as when your son thought of taking me as his wife and I felt an emotional satisfaction - by feeling as if I have been married to him for over many years and have attained marital bliss with him!" Prameela then noticed Rajalakshmi sobbing uncontrollably and wiping tears off her face. She panicked a little wondering if she had uttered anything wrong and offended her feelings.

"You are such a noble soul, I don't understand why people talk ill of you," said Rajalakshmi, and immediately thought of her sons-in-laws and daughters. "Oh god, please forgive them!" She now warmly grabbed Prameela's hands.

"My dear child! I feel something is going on in my mind. You have such a good heart, and I feel you don't deserve to go through all this. My daughters and their husbands told me they would totally cut off their relations with us should my son go ahead with this marriage . . If they are determined to oppose our good plans with all their might, how can we possibly stop them? Now I can see clearly with my own eyes that my son didn't make a mistake in his choice; fortunately, the horoscopes have also matched." As Rajalakshmi tried to control the tears flooding her eyelids and offered her consent in full warmth and happiness, Prameela paused, and calmly expressed her opinion.

"You need to have no fear or concern," she said. "It is not enough that the horoscopes have matched. This marriage would never take place.



You know why? A marriage is an institution founded by our elders with the main purpose of nourishing the existing relationships while building new ones; is it not a sin to destroy the existing relationships? I am contented to lead this life: I do have my *tambura* and my music; if I can count on the warmth, cooperation and understanding of people like you, what more do I need?"

"My dear child, don't say such a thing. I do feel strongly this marriage should and will take place . . . listen to me, relationships never disappear overnight . . . after a little time people would see the light and come around . . . I am going to see Murali at once and give him my whole-hearted consent for this wedding." Rajalakshmi hastily arose from her chair.

"Please . . . please . . . The matter is closed, don't try to revive it, "Prameela spoke with a touch of finality in her voice. "This morning your son came to see me and return the horoscope. We both have come to a decision - with a good heart - that this marriage should not take place. I would not like to be responsible for causing any disruption in his family - ~~after all he had nourished it over all these years and seen it grow and prosper.~~ I must admit people are saying all kinds of things about me - both facts and fiction are involved here - but the truth of the matter is I have been certainly subjected to that kind of talk, so we changed our decision. A decision can be changed only once, even if it is one-sided." As Prameela concluded her words calmly and with no sign of agitation in her voice, Rajalakshmi turned her face away to conceal her teary eyes.

## 5

The following Sunday was Murali's birthday.

Rajalakshmi's house was filled with her daughters, their husbands and the grandchildren.

Rajalakshmi packed a stainless steel food carrier with the assorted sweets that Shankari had specially prepared for Murali's birthday, and was getting ready to leave home, on this hot summer day, to visit a friend . . .

"My god, why did you create women so weak and timid?" Shankari, the cook, was voicing her protest from the kitchen

She was right - as far as she was concerned - limited by her own angle of vision and view. But doesn't life - observed in so many angles and interpreted in so many different contexts - embrace and reflect them as a total entity?

## INTERVIEW WITH JAYAKANTHAN

by Ranavir Rangra

Jayakanthan has a prominent place among the Tamil fictionists who came into the forefront in the post-independence era. He shot into limelight through his radical short stories like "Agnipravesam" and "Yugasandhi". These stories struck a terrible blow to the common man in the name of religion and morality. The custodians of morality could not take it lying down and rose in one to condemn his writings. But undeterred by his critics, Jayakanthan kept on mounting his attacks on the corrupt value-system and soon became a champion of the down trodden. His short stories earned for him brick-bats as well as bouquets, both in abundance.

Many other stories of Jayakanthan, such as "Irulai Thedi" (Towards Darkness) "Nan Irrukkiren" (I am alive) "Yugasandhi" were the subject of controversy for many years because of their realistic treatment and progressive approach. He has written novels and plays also. His prominent novels are, Oru Manidhan, Oru Veedu, Oru Ulagam (A Man, A Home, A World) and Sila Nerangalil Sila Manithargal (some people at certain moments). His well known novel is Parisuku Po. He has also published an autobiography Oru Ilakkiyavadhiyin Arasial Anubhavangal and Oru Ilakkiyavadhiyin Kalaiulaga Anubhavangal (Experience of a writer in the world of Politics and Art). He has won many awards including the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Rajarajan Award of the Tamil University.

RANGRA :

Many characters of your short stories and novels must have been drawn from life itself, though considerably transformed. Did you ever feel that your assessment of them in the real life underwent a major change in the creative process and you felt nearer truth?

JAYAKANTHAN :

I do take people from life and it is people from life in general, not any particular living person, who give me ideas. I put these ideas

in the form of characters. There are ideas and ideas, countering each other. Number one idea gets a character and the number two idea gets another character. So I learn from people in life to mould and create my characters. Through them, I portray the truth of life as experienced by me.

**RANGRA :** I was referring to the heroes of "Nan Irukkiren", and "Suyadharisanam" (Self- realisation). In the first story, a lame boy who is humiliated, runs away from home in an attempt to commit suicide. He comes across a leper who inspires him to live and struggle against all odds.

**JAYAKANTHAN :** There are two ideas: One is the leper who is condemned by everyone outright and the other the lame who is insulted, humiliated and hates life. I find both the ideas gripping and thought why not merge them and let them share the optimistic view of life. These ideas made me write this story.

**RANGRA :** But the end turns out to be pessimistic. The very leper who inspired the lame to live commits suicide all of a sudden.

**JAYAKANTHAN :** Because the idea of suicide is more contagious than its implication.

**RANGRA :** Do you start with images, incidents or persons?

**JAYAKANTHAN :** Images, incidents, persons, they all give me ideas to delineate the humane. Life as such is not humane. So through these ideas I instill a humane quality into these living beings. I concretise my stories with my ideas. My characters are not based on any living person in particular. No single person impressed me to this extent.

**RANGRA :** About your short story "Agni-pravesam", you have mentioned that you wrote a novel on

that theme and that people did not like the ending and they rewrote the novel with a changed ending

**JAYAKANTHAN :** Yes, that's right. In this short story I comment on a thing happening in life, implying that the girl be forgiven. This is the message, the idea and the content of the short story. But people do not agree - how could she be forgiven, how could the sin be condoned. So there comes a novel of mine dealing with the same problem. The name of the novel is Sila Nerangalil Sila Manithargal. This shows the role of people in creating the form. I write a short story which is brief in form i.e. "Agni-pravesam". They call this one a novelette, though I call it a short story. They come to me and ask me to write more. So I write a novel - my own creation on the same problem - with the same set of characters

**RANGRA :** But you could elaborate on the same problem, the same theme in a new novel different from the earlier novels with a new set of characters.

**JAYAKANTHAN :** But sometimes continuing with the earlier writing in the new volume helps the readers in linking it up with what they have already read. Thus, it is both the inner and the outer compulsions which are responsible for a change in the form. The inner compulsions reciprocate the outer compulsions.

**RANGRA :** You have depicted the feminine psychology in many of your short stories e.g. "Yugasandhi" and "Agni-pravesam". But some say that male writers are not able to do justice to their female characters, as they depict them from the male point of view. Do you find any substance in this contention?

**JAYAKANTHAN :** No. It is not relevant whether a man writes or a woman writes. A man can understand a

woman better than a woman because a woman can not understand a woman sometimes. I feel that the woman is a socially oppressed class, very different from the liberated one who makes this allegation, who cannot match the common woman. I cannot, therefore, understand this contention. So I don't agree with it. Premchand, Tulsi, Kalidas, Tolstoy - all were male writers and yet nobody can question their portrayal of woman, I don't say that woman writers cannot depict female characters. But in so far as I have read these modern woman writers, they ridicule the women folk. But they would not allow such a thing written by a man. Their own writing is at times reactionary. In fact, who writes is secondary, but it is what he or she writes that matters.

RANGRA : Could you name anyone of your writings which changed your outlook towards life considerably? I venture to ask this because I feel that it is not always the writer who creates his literary works, his works also create him without his being aware of the change brought about by them.

JAYAKANTHAN : No, it is the other way round. It is not my writings which change my outlook, rather my writings change as my outlook develops. I can even name one of my novels, Oru Manidhan. Oru Veedu, Oru Ulagam. The experience that went into the story made me a large-hearted man, whose equal I cannot find. After that I felt that there is no point in finding fault with anyone. It is life that makes a man what he is.

RANGRA : Your short stories highlight the confrontation between the old and the new values. The stories like "Nan Enna Seiyattum Sollungo" (Tell me, What shall I do) and "Pudhuchheruppu kadikkum" (New shoes pinch) uphold the old values, while the stories like "Yugasandhi" and "Agnipravesam" bring out

the growing tendency to adjust with the changing times. What in your opinion is the role of literature in the development of society? Must it indulge in social criticism at the conscious level, and if so, to what extent?

JAYAKANTHAN : Literature must indulge in criticism of the society to any extent. There are good and bad areas and not old and new areas. The values are changing and I should refer them back I can not take them for granted I should deal with the old and new values with a critical eye and without forgetting myself, my faith, my culture and my roots. So I have to be very critical of old as well as new.

RANGRA : When I was coming to Madras, I had one of your fans for company. I drew him into a discussion of your writing. I have a fan of yours in my family. My daughter-in-law Rukmini is from Tamilnadu and likes your stories very much. Both were happy to learn that I would be interviewing you. They told me that Jayakanthan was all fire. They wanted me to ask you why and where that fire has gone now. To them, it appears that of late you have started compromising.

JAYAKANTHAN : I want very much to compromise with society, but there are people and ideas who stand between us and don't allow us to do so. We don't want to quarrel, always. We do want to come to terms. My readers have formed an image of me as an angry man. Now I am not that angry. I have never been angry for myself. I am angry for others. Once people have formed an image, they want the author to stick to it. They forget that one changes as one grows.

RANGRA : What is the central theme of your novel Oru Manidhan, Oru Veedu, Oru Ulagam? It dwells mainly on its hero Henry who inherits liberal views from his Hindu father and Christian

mother, who do not impose their religion on him? What makes me ask this question is that its focus shifts suddenly to a mad girl towards the end.

**JAYAKANTHAN :** This is a symbolic end. This is the story of an orphan who has no father or mother. He was brought up by a man and woman who are not husband and wife as they were not married. I wanted to bring out a universal man from our religions. This universal man is found in our villages. Men in our remote villages are not communal minded. This evil has developed of late only rather imported from towns and forced by the present day politics. Sincerity among people transcends all barriers of religion, dogma, etc., They live, they love and they marry. All this made me write that story. This is only novel I have written on village atmosphere. There are 'mad' people like Sanyasin. They don't do anything bad. But people call them mad as they behave differently. They don't observe rituals. This universal man Henry has brotherly affection for all. He built a house meant for all. These ideas make our village people free from narrow-mindedness and they become universal. Thus, the main theme is to show the universality still existing in our villages.

**RANGRA :** We hear a lot these days about author's commitment. Do you subscribe to the view that every author must be a committed writer? If so, whom should he be committed to?

**JAYAKANTHAN :** Yes, I do subscribe to this view. The author should be committed to ideas I can say that I am committed to science, a scientific sociology. One may be committed further to Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Marxism, or Communism. He must be committed in life at the conscious level. But as a writer, he must be a committed person and committed fully at the writing level.

-Indian Literature

## GLOSSARY

- Anna** : A Monetary unit in India in late fifties. Sixteen annas makes a rupee.
- Avviyyar** : Legendary Tamil saint poetess of the Sangam period (100BC-250AD)
- Akalikai (Ahalya)** : Sage Gautama's wife; seduced by Indra, she was later redeemed by Rama, whose feet, raising dust, touched her.
- Beedi** : A rudimentary cigarette made by rolling tobacco leaf. It is very cheap but quite harsh on one's throat.
- Bharatiyar** : Honorific term for Subhramanya Bharati, a poet and social reformer
- Bus Conductor** : In India, unlike US, every passenger bus has a conductor whose sole function is to collect fare and issue the tickets
- Carnatic (Karnatic)** : Of or from the region / State of Karnataka in Southern India.
- Cycle-ricksahw** : A rickshaw propelled by a cycle.
- Chindanai Vattam** : A Readers Group Sharing their thoughts on Tamil culture and literature. An organization formed to promote Tamil.
- Chowltry** : A wayside shelter
- Doordarshan** : The national television net work run by the Indian government.
- ESC** : A slang or corrupted term for SSLC - Secondary School Leaving Certificate
- Gopuram** : Tower-gate of a city temple
- Ganapadigal** : A priest of high caliber
- Gayatri** : A daily mantra repeated by brahmins
- Iluppai** : Mahua tree
- Indra** : King of Immortals; also called Devendra.
- Iyengar (Ayyanar)** : A guard deity in Tamilnadu villages.
- Iyengar** : A member of Brahmin sect that worships Vishnu.
- Kali Yuga** : The fourth and final of the four stages of the universe, of increasing disorder and stress. The world is at present in Kali Yuga. The conventional general prospect of the world
- Kannada (Kanarese)** : A language spoken by some 24 million people

- in State of Karnataka*
- Khadar** : Home-spun cloth
- Kolam** : A decoration on the floor: Rice flour (plain or colored) is used of draw the patterns.
- Madras** : A city in India, now called Chennai
- Malayalam** : A language spoken by some 24 million people in State of Kerala.
- Naidu** : One of the subcastes in South India.
- Nair** : A member of community from state of Kerala
- Prasad** : Food offered to God during worship and later distributed to the devotees.
- Pappad (Pappadam)** : Indian wafers. Sold either plain or studded with black pepper (or garlic or red pepper) by grocers, they are deep-fried in hot oil for a few seconds or toasted very quickly. Served with most Indian Vegetarian meals.
- Pan or Paan** : A mild stimulant consisting of betel leaves and areca nuts.
- Paavadai** : A long skirt worn by Hindu adolescent girls.
- Pial** : A kind of step outside a house veranda.
- Punnai** : Mastwood tree
- Rama** : The warrior-king, hero of Ramayana, a great Indian epic.
- Raga** : A musical mode, a traditional form in Indian music characterized by rhythmic modes.
- Rao Sahib** : A title conferred by the British on the native Indians.
- Sacred-thread** : Received by a young brahmin to mark the transition from child to student.
- Sahitya Academy** : The Indian national institute to promote arts and literature.
- Sastri** : Honorific term for a scholar
- Seven-Hills-God** : Lord Venkateswara in Tirupathi, a religious site in South India.
- Sari (Saree)** : An outer garment worn mainly by Hindu women, consisting of a length of a lightweight cloth with one end wrapped around the waist to form a long

- skirt and the other draped over the shoulder or covering the head.*
- Sita** : Wife of Rama
- Seekakkai** : Fragrant and resinous powder that serves as a kind of 'shampoo' for women's hair.
- Telugu** : A language spoken by some 55 million people from State of Andhra Pradesh.
- Terminus** : A transit center for commercial buses.
- Thavani** : The stretch of cloth covering the upper part of the girl wearing
- Tharpanam** : Part of Hindu morning ablutions.
- Tampura (Tamboura)** : An unfretted lute used as a harmonic drone.
- Thyagarja** : An Indian poet, saint and composer (1767-1847)
- Tiger-goat game** : A game where two players remove their pieces across a chart marked on the floor.
- Tiffin - carriers** : Tiffin refers to packed lunch. A tiffin-carrier is a lunch box.
- Trial by fire** : Has allusion to the episode Agni Pravesam in Ramayana. Sita, Rama's wife is held a prisoner by Ravana, the Demon King, for fourteen years. After Sita was rescued, Rama tells he can not 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. She walks through fire and comes out of it unscathed. It is said the sweat on her brow due to her rage at Rama was still there after the ordeal; the lotus in her hair was still fresh. Rama claims he knew she was innocent all along but wanted to prove her chastity to the world.



"The first thing I remember about my high school days is getting hooked on Tamil weeklies," says Andy Sundaresan, a native of India who emigrated to US in 1976. For nearly twenty years he lived in Berhampur, Orissa, in surroundings far removed from Tamilnadu of his parents. He learnt Tamil at home, where his father, a teacher and a poet, and a sister, a successful Tamil short-story writer, initiated him to the magic of printed word. At sixteen, Sundaresan published his first Tamil short story in a popular children's magazine '*Kannan*.' At high school, he and another artist-friend published a humor magazine – *Kitakitalu* – in Telugu, entirely handwritten. He also translated two of his father's Tamil plays in Telugu for a local literary publication.

Sundaresan's interest in Jayakanthan's fiction dates back to sixties when the author was trail-blazing in Tamilnadu arts and politics. His fascination with the author was revived in 1994 when Sundaresan came across Jayakanthan's books in the public library of Cerritos, California. '*Trial by fire*,' is Sundaresan's first book of translated stories in English – hopefully, a first step in making them accessible to a wider readership – both Tamils and non-Tamils - in US.

An engineer by profession, a father of two daughters, Sundaresan makes his home in Berkeley, California.