



BENIGN FLAME

S A G A O F L O V E



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Dedicated to **Naagamani**,
my better half for thirty-three years now,
who still leaves no stone unturned for my fulfillment

Part - I

That winter night in the mid-seventies, the Janata Express was racing rhythmically on its tracks towards the coast of Andhra Pradesh. As its headlight pierced the darkness of the fertile plains, the driver honked the horn as though to awake the sleepy environs to the spectacle of the speeding train. On that, in the S-3, were the Ramaiahs with their nine year-old daughter Roopa.

Earlier, from Ramavaram, it was in the nick of time that Ramaiah took Janaki to Vellore for the doctors to extricate her from the jaws of death. Now, having been to Tirupati for thanksgiving, he was returning home with his wife and Roopa they took along for the sojourn. While her parents were fast asleep, Roopa sat still on a side berth, reminiscing her times at the hospital where Janaki took one month to recuperate under Dr. Yasoda's care.

Soon the train stopped at a village station, as though to disrupt Roopa's daydreams of modeling herself on the lady doctor at the Christian Medical College Hospital, and as she peeped out, the ill-lit platform seemed to suggest that the chances of her being Dr. Roopa could be but dim. Ramaiah too woke up to the commotion caused by the incoming passengers, and was surprised to see his daughter still awake, lost in her thoughts.

"My darling," he said in jest, "what are you scheming?"

"Want to be a doctor," she said as though in a trance.

"Didn't the nurses say," he said affectionately, bringing her escapades at the hospital back into her mental focus, "you're a junior doctor?", and pleased with her idea, he patted her to sleep, even as he recalled his anxieties associated with her birth.

Ramaiah was jolted from his reverie as someone in the compartment switched on the light, to prepare himself to alight at the coming station.

"Surely she would shape up into a dusky beauty. Won't she be bright as well?" he thought, looking at Roopa in her deep sleep, and recalled her escapade when she was hardly three.

"You know how clever Roopa is?" said Janaki, at bedtime. "She wanted the timepiece to fiddle with and when I refused to give in, she cried no end. When she forgot what she was crying for, she cried to know why she cried at all! What a unique girl our Roopa is!"

As the train moved into a major junction, Ramaiah got down, looking for a coffee vendor. Unable to find even a tea vendor, he lit his Berkeley without a beverage. When the guard whistled the start, a half-naked urchin jostled past Ramaiah into the bogie to crouch in the vestibule. While the train was on the move, Ramaiah wondered whether the urchin

had crouched to draw warmth from his heart to ward off the chillness, and pitying him, as he gave him some money the lad took as a matter of right.

‘Isn’t there something called gratitude?’ thought Ramaiah, feeling disregarded. ‘Is he so naive that he knows not civility? Or could he be an outcast, unfamiliar with the niceties of society?’ Ramaiah looked at him intently as though for a clue.

‘Is it possible that his exposure to the elements in his nakedness should’ve robbed his body of its sense of feeling?’ he thought, finding the wretched lad as cool as a cucumber. ‘Now, what he needs most is a piece of cloth to cover himself with. After all, money wouldn’t provide warmth by itself, would it?’

Ramaiah went to his trunk to fetch a vest for the urchin. Seeing him wear it without even looking at him, Ramaiah wondered whether the lad was indifferent to the world in general.

‘Could life get worse than that?’ Ramaiah wondered, as he tried to go back to sleep on his allotted berth. How was he to know that one day, despairing for love, Roopa would personify the wretched side of life itself.

The outbreak of the day, which brought the sun on to the horizon, woke up Ramaiah. Realizing it would still take an hour to reach Ramavaram, he was inclined to inaction. The chillness of the wintry breeze and the warmth of the sunny dawn struck him for their contrast. Looking yonder, he saw the dew filled fields bejeweled by refraction and thought that they brought luster to the Master’s Creation.

When Janaki woke up, as Ramaiah folded up the berth, providing space for those in the aisle to rest their weary legs, there was enough room in the compartment for the assorted characters waiting in the vestibule.

Soon, the newspaper of the day was split into four that preoccupied as many. As its center page landed in the lap of the one opposite, Ramaiah couldn’t help but crane his neck to screen the bold print therein. However, all the pages came to him, though in a crumpled shape, enabling him to go through the copy before the vestiges of the paper were restored to whom it belonged, but not before the scandals in it were savored by those present.

Having finished with the newspaper in that intermittent reading, Ramaiah puffed away at his freshly lit Berkeley, and looking out from the window, he began to admire the scenery filled with greenery. When the landscape around looked familiar, he woke up Roopa and goaded Janaki to move towards the exit. Soon he too joined them with the bag and baggage.

Waiting near the wash-basin, Ramaiah remembered the lad and looked for him, and not finding him, he thought, 'That is life. It has a destination even for the destitute.'

Soon Ramaiah leaned out of the slowing train to ascertain the platform.

2

When the train screeched to the welcome chores of the waiting staff of the Ramavaram Station, alighting from it with the precaution associated with an occasional traveler, Ramaiah hurried his family towards the exit like a habitual commuter who catches the train on the move.

"The postmaster must have brought bagfuls of news," the ticket collector at the gate greeted Ramaiah, alluding to the village postmasters' penchant to peruse the post before delivery.

"The only news is that the Mails are running late," was the Ramaiah repartee as he handed over the tickets.

Once out, he engaged a rickshaw to take them home.

Ramavaram was a mini town as its residents loved to call it. With just five hundred houses, it was no more than a village in Ramaiah's childhood but grew rapidly to house thirty thousand souls by the time Roopa was born. Well, the explosion in its population owed more to the migration than to procreation, and that represented the trend all over. While the natives lamented that the place was bursting at its seams, the settlers felt it was brimming with activity. However, all were proud to belong to it, not to speak of the Ramaiahs.

Life was running its routine course in Ramaiah's household until fate ordained a tragedy, as though to ensure Roopa's resolve to become a doctor was not dissolved in the myopic dreams of her imminent maidenhood, Rukmini, her elder sister, orphaned her son for want of postnatal care at the government maternity home that came up by then.

"Nature's victim of procreation and man's means of recreation, that's what woman is," bemoaned Janaki.

'Only as a doctor can I help women,' resolved Roopa to herself.

With Rukmini's premature death causing consternation in the concerned households, the elders, in due course, went into a huddle, and decided it would be in the best interests of the motherless child if Suguna, the deceased's sister, married the widower. So after a decent

wait, while Suguna replicated her sibling in her brother-in-law's life, Roopa too matured as though nature intended to synchronize her body with her mind.

While Roopa resembled a flower at dawn with its dew on, her complexion of tan was in consonance with the radiance of her velvet skin. Even as her vivacious features acquired softness as though to project the sweetness of her nature, her gaze gave way to glances as if to convey her innate inclinations. While her nascent bust was akin to a curious maiden peeping out from behind the curtain, the *oni* she wore strived to veil her maiden form. Her emerging figure and her diffident disposition lent tentativeness to her gait that seemed like the calibrated movements of a virtuoso *dansense* on the way to the crescendo. Though in her interaction, she was modesty personified that strangely enhanced her sensual appeal, nevertheless, while watching the boys on the sly, she withdrew from them with inhibition. However, embellishing her unique persona, she came to have a mind of her own.

Once when she debunked the *puranic* tales of cock-pecked wives as perverse male stratagems to enslave women, Janaki was truly alarmed. "These tales of female fidelity have a purpose of their own," said Janaki to Roopa. "Since nature made men promiscuous, it's the female loyalty that holds the marriage in the long run, for the benefit of the family and the society as well. These tales have a moral for men as well for they underscore the fact that it's the wife who sticks through thick and thin with their man and not the lascivious lasses with whom they come to stray."

As Roopa remained unconvinced and minced no words about the fallacy of the proposition, Janaki realized that old wives tales were no longer a currency with the educated girls. So she thought it fit to reason it out with her and Chandrika, her unmarried daughters, about the pitfalls of premarital sex and thus closeted with them one evening.

"I think it's time I talk to you about the proclivities of youth," Janaki began enigmatically. "To be drawn to boys at your age is but natural and desirable even. It helps the healthy development of your sexuality. Infatuation is the narcotic of the nascent youth, and if only the dosage is right, it could bring in small pleasures that delight. On the other hand, a thoughtless overdose could cripple your womanliness forever. While being friendly with the boys, beware of their attitudes and be aware about your vulnerabilities. They pursue for the final favor doggedly until they are dog-tired. Nature made them that way and for a purpose; female fulfillment is the purpose of male desire. It's left for you to draw your own premarital lines. Do not get into those situations that might let you part with that for which they court you so fervently. If only you interact with easy virtue, your date could doubt

your ability to resist a future seducer. Thus, if you favor your lover in a hurry, you might end up losing him besides that by which men measure women. And that would be enough to put you in a doghouse for life.”

Janaki extracted a promise from Chandrika and Roopa that they wouldn't indulge in premarital sex.

3

Ramaiah's household was jolted from its routine that April at the news of his impending transfer to Kakinada, though on promotion. And as if to relieve them from the obligation to stay back, Janaki's parents passed away in quick succession even before the transfer order was on hand. Whatever, Ramaiah welcomed the development as it would entail better schooling for the children, especially to Raju his only son, and expose them to a liberal environment as well.

Once the dynamics of change came into play in Ramaiah's household, the inertia of lethargy gave way to the novelty of life. The house with a backyard that they rented in Ramaraopeta made everyone feel at home. While Janaki enjoyed the company of better-educated women from the neighborhood, the children were excited at the prospect of their schooling in the English medium. Exercising his increased power over an enlarged body of subordinates, Ramaiah too felt at home at the Head Post Office.

When he got Chandrika admitted in the PR College in the intermediate, he felt as though he was paying due respects to his Alma Mater. While Roopa enrolled in the Govt. Girls High School for her pre final, Raju joined the McLauren High School in the eighth class.

While Ramavaram became a distant memory for all of them, Roopa came to realize that she became the object of boys' attention and the subject of girls' envy. Nevertheless, she didn't see any contradiction in that, for she had come to appreciate the value of her sexuality. Her teachers' compliments about her cerebral caliber only furthered her sense of confidence.

Mid way into the first-term, when Roopa was on top of the world, Sandhya, the daughter of the new Joint Collector, joined the class. About the same age as she was, Sandhya was shorter by a fraction but rosy in complexion. While she looked cute and lively, in her slim frame, she carried herself with that grace often associated with the children of the well-off from the cities. The sophistication of her manner, and the chastity of her accent, acquired

at the Hyderabad Public School, put everyone in awe, the teachers included, but her modesty and friendliness enabled her classmates to flock to her in their numbers.

However, Roopa felt like the spirited person at a dinner party, who would have lost the audience upon the arrival of a celebrity, and acted in a like manner; she didn't join the bandwagon but when Sandhya herself sought her help to catch up with the syllabus, Roopa obliged her, having felt vindicated. While Sandhya was impressed with the keenness of Roopa's intellect, the warmth of Sandhya's persona attracted Roopa. The closer they became, the more they admired each other. Moreover, the more they came to know about one another, the fonder they became of each other. Soon, they were seen only together.

As the final exams neared, they co-studied at Sandhya's place during the preparatory holidays. With Kamalakar and Damayanthi, Sandhya's parents, having readily taken to Roopa, she felt at home at the Joint Collector's Bungalow, where she found a large collection of fiction, which she began to pore over. Ramaiah, recalling his teacher's advice to him that classics would improve one's language, deepen his vision and broaden his horizons, was glad that his daughter was on the right track though he himself had missed the bus.

Soon enough, Ramaiah was forced to take stock of his situation. Agricultural income became meager ever since they left Ramavaram. After all, the lessee of their depleted landholding made it a habit to blame it upon the drought to deny Ramaiah his due. Besides, as all the eligible accounts were discounted, there was no way to have a loan from his office. As for their ancestral dwellings, the modern houses that came up made them antiques already. Thus, Ramaiah began to feel as if he reached the dead end of Ramavaram.

"Why not dispose of all that? What with the diminishing returns, they're assets only for the record," he broached the topic with Janaki. "Well if only the old man were alive it would have been a different story."

"With the 'land for the tiller' thick in the air, better we come out clear," she gave the green signal. "You better sell away whatever little my father left me as well."

When he returned from Ramavaram, after having sold what all they had, he felt as though his umbilical cord with the place was severed. With those proceeds, he proceeded to acquire an old building in Gandhinagar as their 'old age shelter' as he put it. The rest of the fund he deposited in a scheduled bank to take care of future needs.

After that summer recess, with the reopening of the PR College, Roopa and Sandhya joined in the Intermediate, and as though to signal the end of their schooling, they shed their skirts to switch over to saris. Looking all the sweeter in their sweet sixteen's as they entered the campus that day, Roopa in her snuff chiffon sari and Sandhya in her Gadwal cotton one, they created quite a sensation.

The delectable contours of Roopa's well-proportioned body of five feet five appeared accentuated by her narrow waist as her curvy figure in that velvet skin lent form to her sari meant for enhancing her modesty. Her robust breasts that dared the veiling, and the thick seat, which hugged it tight, made it seem that her genes strove hard to enhance her sex appeal. While her tapered arms that abutted on her flowing frame lent poise to her persona, swung by the swing of her seat in her tantalizing gait, her hair in plait pictured a pendulum that caressed her bottom. As the radiance of her face gave an aura to her charming manner, her self-belief was in consonance with her sensuality. Moreover, the imbibed sophistication in Sandhya's company gave style to her substance that made her ravishing.

Sandhya's rosy complexion, in congruence with her angelic soul, imparted pleasantness to her persona. While her slim figure and sharp features defined aesthetics, her sparkling eyes reflected the spirit of her lively nature. Even as the evocative features of her supple frame brought fluidity to her movements, the radiance of her silken skin ennobled her womanly assets. As her smooth brown bobbing hair added style to her demeanor, her sweet manner lent poise to her figure. Enhancing her appeal her gait was such that the fall of her sari acquired the rhythmic grace of the loom on which it was weaved. With her gaiety being in harmony with her youth, the alacrity of her mind conjugated with her sprightly nature making her gorgeous.

Whereas the effervescence of Sandhya's ethereal beauty was apparent at espial, the magnetism of Roopa's charm compelled for its conjuration in interaction. The friends became a great hit with the boys who tried to befriend them. However, whenever accosted by a lad, Roopa tended to turn into a bundle of nerves.

"You make such a heavy weather of the whole thing," Sandhya was wont to tease Roopa. "The poor things might end up being dumb."

'When I could get on well with boys at school,' wondered Roopa, 'why am I ill at ease with them, now? Oh, won't the way they look at me make me feel different and diffident too!'

However, the searching look she espied in the male eyes thrilled her in her vitals. As she tried to visualize herself through their perception, her body, in her own eyes, acquired a new dimension. The more she became mentally closer to the opposite sex; all the more she distanced herself from the boys. Sandhya, on the other hand, proved to be a cool customer known to unnerve the dashers. While her glamour gave her a rare aura that overawed the boys, her father's position only confounded their confidence. Nevertheless, Chandrika, who by then was in B. Com., pre final, helped them in their initiation into the campus life.

5

When Chandrika got her degree and Roopa was through her Intermediate with flying colors, what with the recalcitrant Raju too seemed to mend his wayward ways, for the Ramaiahs it seemed time flew as if it developed wings. However, proving that good things won't last forever came the jolt as Roopa revealed the cards that she so closely held to her chest all along.

"Don't you know," said a surprised Ramaiah, "what it takes to be doctor?"

"You know I've topped the class," she said naively.

"Medical education costs a fortune," he said helplessly, "and it's beyond my means."

"But I'm craving to be a doctor," she said.

"Sorry, there's no way," he dismissed her in despair and left in dilemma for the Post Office

'How I took it for granted!' Roopa wondered all day, 'Maybe when one is obsessed with a singular aspect of a situation, the attendant issues fail to get the focus they deserve.'

When a distraught Roopa approached her mother pleading for her support, affected by her daughter's passion, Janaki promised to persuade Ramaiah. While Roopa hoped for a miracle as the condemned would to escape the noose, however, on Ramaiah's return, she avoided him like the one who tends to hide himself from the one commended for the favor. When Ramaiah sent for her, after what appeared to be an eternity for her, she went up to him with her heart in her mouth.

"Now I recall that night on the train when you were just nine," he said, patting her head as she squatted beside his easy chair. "Though I was pleased with your ambition, I never knew you were nursing it. Had I guessed it then, I would have cautioned you in time."

"*Naannaa*, it became my obsession," she sank into his lap. "I'll be miserable otherwise."

“You know we’re lower middle-class now,” he seemed to give an account of his helplessness. “The lands are all gone and I’m going to retire soon. Agreed there is some money in the bank but it would barely meet your dowries and your brother’s higher studies. This house, of course, is for your brother lest he should curse me for having left him nothing to inherit. As for your mother and I, the pension should see us through.”

“Pledge the house and raise the money,” she suggested with apparent hope. “I’ll redeem it in time.”

“Be realistic Roopa,” reasoned Ramaiah, “once you get married it would all be different. After all, your earnings would be your husband’s. Moreover, to marry you off as Doctor Roopa, I would have to cough up much more for your dowry.”

“What if I don’t marry at all,” she said with such a conviction that startled Ramaiah. “I want to be a doctor and that’s all.”

“Don’t be silly,” he said, showing her the reality of life. “The essence of life lies in its wholesomeness. You would realize later on, that nothing is worth in life to the exclusion of all the rest that makes it what it is. Besides, marriage is the key that opens life alike for the boys and the girls.”

“It’s my only dream and the sole ambition,” she persisted, hoping against hope.

“Ambition is a double-edged sword,” he turned to philosophy to help her soul. “Possessed by the resourceful, it’s cut out for success and in the hands of the lesser souls it tends to hurt their peace of mind.”

Then he recounted his own disappointment; his inability to become an advocate, and advocated to his daughter to learn to take life as it came, ordained by *karma*. “If I were an advocate, perhaps, I would have been rich enough to fulfill your ambition. However, it was not to be, and therein lies our fate - yours and mine as well,” he concluded.

Roopa, though reconciled to her situation, resented her fate. As if she were revenging on her helplessness, she shunned the sciences and opted for commerce. However, as per her inclination, Sandhya went in for the humanities.

“Got tired of dissecting frogs and all or what!” said Sandhya in jest as Roopa filled in the admission form.

“Like to have a closer look at the commercial side of life,” said Roopa mystically.

“Jokes apart,” said Sandhya as they got into a rickshaw, “tell me what’s wrong. I know you always wanted to study medicine.”

Roopa just sighed for an answer.

“A friend is one with whom you could think aloud, I read once,” said Sandhya empathically. “You know I think with you, now it’s up to you.”

“Know I love you the most,” said Roopa earnestly, and blurted out. “But somehow I wasn’t frank with you. From now on I’ll think aloud.”

Moved, Sandhya enlaced Roopa, which brought solace to the latter and induced warmth in the former, making both of them feel loved and wanted by the other.

Chandrika, who graduated that year, didn’t think in terms of post graduation as *la affair* Roopa gave the clue to her father’s mind and the family’s finances, and so, thought of a job for an occupation.

“Sit still until we fix a match,” Janaki was dismissive. “It might help improve your complexion a bit,”

“What if I work?” said the daughter spiritedly.

“I don’t want any complications, that’s all,” Janaki appeared firm.

When Chandrika persisted, Ramaiah, however, relented and persuaded his wife, “You have to change with the changing times. Moreover, some boys have started preferring employed girls for their brides.”

After a couple of unsuccessful attempts, Chandrika got an assistant’s job in an export firm for a salary of two-fifty. Her first take-home pay, however, enabled her mother to appreciate the virtue of having another earning member in the family.

6

Hardly a year passed before the ‘changing times’ stared the Ramaiahs in their faces in their complexity as ‘the other earning member’ of the family turned out to be an erring soul of the household.

Chandrika declared that she would like to marry her colleague, though of a lower caste, and Janaki threatened to jump into the well to spare herself her daughter’s shameful alliance. Ramaiah though tried to reason it out with Chandrika by saying that if she married out of caste as none would marry Roopa Besides, it won’t be in her own interest either, to live with someone from a lower caste as adjusting to married life in an alien milieu will be all the more difficult. When the time comes for finding matches for her children, shunned by both the communities, she would realize that she had a cross to bear. Better she gave up the idea, for her own good.

Given her own disappointment, Roopa was empathic to her sister's feelings and felt that she could understand the true import of Chandrika's predicament.

"What to do now?" said Roopa to Chandrika having led her out into the backyard.

"I wish I weren't in love," said Chandrika stoically.

"That's neither here nor there," Roopa was solicitous. "After all, you've to decide, one way or the other, isn't it?"

"I may end up being the Buridan's ass, unable to decide whether to first drink water or eat oats and thus perish in the process," Chandrika was melancholic.

"Why not try and forget him?"

"Of course, time would do that for me," said Chandrika, "but life without him is not what I wanted."

Roopa kept quiet as though inviting her sister to give vent to her feelings.

"I'm being pulled apart by the family sentiment on one side and the lure of love on the other," said Chandrika melancholically. "Love seems to be the most compelling of human emotions as it combines in it the craving of the soul and the desires of the body."

"I know your hurt," said Roopa sympathetically.

"I don't mind hurting myself," said Chandrika dejectedly. "I am worried about him and concerned about our mother. Moreover, how can I compromise your interests? That's my dilemma."

That her sister should think about her welfare, even in her predicament, melted Roopa's heart. 'If only I could go to her rescue in the hour of need,' thought Roopa. 'What if, I get married first to save her love? Won't my out of turn marriage save the day for us all?'

She felt she knew her parents well enough. They were conventional more for the society's sake than out of personal conviction. Besides, they loved their children dearly. She was confident that all would welcome her idea. The prospect of her averting an imminent schism in the family appeared heroic to her.

'How nice it can be,' she thought excitedly, 'if my sacrifice serves my sister's cause besides solving my parents' problem.' She was pleased to perceive herself in the role of a martyr for the family cause. However, on second thoughts, she contemplated the implications of her marriage without a degree as she was just through the first year of what appeared to be a three-year ordeal. 'How I nursed the dream of being a doctor,' she thought melancholically. 'Oh, have I not come to love myself in that role. Now that the bubble has burst, I couldn't care less. Hasn't life become humdrum, any way?'

As she recalled her own disappointment, she remembered the cause of it all. ‘After all, your earnings would be your husband’s,’ as she recalled her father’s words of objection, she saw a ray of hope in the situation. ‘What if my husband helps my ambition to further the family income?’ she thought excitedly. ‘Who knows I may as well get an understanding husband. What a happy life I would lead then! Won’t I love him even more for that? Let me take a chance and see what lies in store for me. Any way, I’ve nothing to lose, do I?’

It seems the feature of life that while darkness deprives man of his shadow; his hope lingers on in spite of the foreboding.

As Chandrika wept inconsolably, it seemed Roopa’s fear of the unknown was washed away in her sister’s tears. Having made up her mind, Roopa unveiled the contours of her plan of action, however, hiding the hope behind her apparent sacrifice and that about had the same effect on Chandrika, as sighting a boat in the high seas would have on a shipwreck; it raised her spirits. Chandrika was profuse in articulating her gratitude, and as if to convey her indebtedness bodily as well, she hugged her sister, while Roopa felt embarrassed as her own streak of selfish motive jarred with the purity of her sister’s outpouring. After all, the attributes our hypocrisy induces others to adduce to us would bring no value addition to our conscience.

As the sisters were confabulating without, Ramaiah had a tough time with his bitter half within.

“What went wrong with her brought-up?” Janaki said puzzled. “Nothing like this ever happened to anyone, even remotely related to us!”

“You know, women of the upper castes were insulated from men of the lower classes earlier,” he tried to explain to her. “Social intercourse between caste groups was limited to the persons of the same sex. Well, all that has changed now. The society is truly open to both sexes from all sections. The pull of man woman attraction being what it is, love has long since crossed the caste barrier causing marital trespasses. However, don’t get worried. For all that, her passion could be a passing phase, that can’t get past the first hurdle.”

Janaki prayed fervently for her daughter’s deliverance from that wretched affair. When Roopa showed the silver lining, just the same, Ramaiah remained unenthusiastic. “Inter-caste marriages would only lead to divorce as the couples tend to wind up the show at the first hitch,” he said. “Even otherwise, the inferior union would be ruinous in the end as they would be ostracized by the society for sure.”

“Though high caste men would have no qualms having a fling with low caste women, they seek to shield their women from men of that very stock,’ thought Chandrika, but said. “I’m prepared for all that.”

“After all, it’s her life,” said Raju, who was particularly fond of Chandrika and Roopa. “Why not let her decide for herself?”

“Don’t oversimplify matters,” retorted Ramaiah. “What are the parents for if not to prevent children’s follies?”

“When you say everything in life is ordained by *karma*,” interjected Roopa. “Why not take this as her destiny?”

Ramaiah didn’t respond but remained unrelenting.

The sisters pressed the issue, and went on a hunger strike. The mother’s heart melted soon enough, and the father’s resolve dissolved, in due course. It was thus Ramaiah wanted to have ‘a look at the fellow’ and see for himself, ‘What he’s worth?’

Soon word went round that Ramaiah was on the lookout for a suitable boy for Roopa.

7

It was a two-storied building in a by-lane of Chikkadapally, a rather congested locality in Hyderabad. Its owner, Padmavathi, was a widow in her early fifties. She let out much of the space to bachelors ‘to augment her pension’ as she was wont to maintain.

‘Bachelors are any day better,’ she would aver, ‘for they cause little wear and tear, all the while being elsewhere.’

Her tenants, for their part, showed an unmistakable preference for her dwelling. With both her daughters married off, and with no one at home, she rarely left the reclining chair in the portico. “The rent includes watch and ward for the lady doubles up for a watchdog,’ the lodgers joked amongst themselves.

And for her part, Padmavathi made it clear to them all that she would suffer none of any nonsense. Though she used to aver that all boys were equally dear to her, she was partial towards Sathyam, her tenant for well over six years. While believing that Sathyam was sincere by nature she felt that others were only behaving not to risk eviction..

Having been held up at his desk in the Sate Secretariat that evening, Sathyam was late in coming to his lodging. Not finding Padmavathi in the portico, he was a little surprised. As he went up, he found an inland letter in the door latch. Realizing that it was from his

father, he hastened into his room, and even as he started reading it again, he heard footsteps on the stairs.

‘Oh, she’s coming up,’ he thought indignantly. ‘How she craves for news and gathers the same as a rag picker would rubbish from all corners!’

“What writes your father *Pathrudugaru*?”

“Usual stuff,” he replied dryly. “We’re okay, are you okay?”

“It’s time you got married,” she said zeroing on the subject matter of his father’s letter, as if on cue.

“There’s a match it seems,” he replied reflexively.

“One should get married when still young,” she said, and added as though to justify her plain features. “But do remember the old saying; anxiety accompanies a beautiful wife as she attracts all and sundry.”

Having given him a bit of her mind, she left abruptly, as though she were late already for airing the news.

Sathyam read the appetizing portion of his father’s letter once again.

‘We all feel there is a suitable match for you. The girl is *Ramaiahgaru*’s youngest daughter. He works at the Head Post Office here, and is my friend’s colleague. We are all impressed with their family and our astrologer says both your horoscopes match to the tee. Moreover, the girl is very beautiful. If you like her, I would be done with my duty. After all, it’s time you got married. Take leave for a week and come as early as you can. Your mother wants you to spend some time with us.’

‘Moreover, the girl is very beautiful,’ he read aloud; and repeated again, as an encore to his ears. After all, he was particular that his wife should be a beauty; and made it clear to his parents.

Instinctively he remembered Vani, his erstwhile colleague, and his thoughts turned to her. He always wondered whether beauty and grace were at competition in her persona. How he used to daydream about marrying her! However, his desire to cut a figure only made him diffident in her presence. Moreover, his anxiety to impress her with his wit made him only dumb in her audience. While nursing his calf love, he used to wonder about her reciprocity. As though appreciating his fear of rejection, his eyes felt shy to convey his desire while his lips failed to address his love.

‘An arranged marriage brings the woman into man’s life on his terms,’ he thought presently. ‘And that gives a head start to marital romance, giving a short shrift to the uncertain courtship.’

He wondered whether this girl - he was disappointed that his father failed to mention her name - could be as beautiful as Vani. However, he couldn’t help wishing that she might be better looking. ‘After all, it’s the woman’s desirability that makes man covetous,’ he thought. ‘Besides, the allurements of woman’s beauty gives meaning to man’s life. And provide substance as well. A man’s job is half done if he has a cute wife for she doubles up, as a beautiful mother to ensure the children wouldn’t be ugly. Propelled by that welcome prospect, Sathyam boarded the train in beatitude the very next day.

8

Pathrudu’s message that they would be coming for the *pellichupulu* that Sunday set the ball rolling at Ramaiah’s house. As the day of reckoning dawned with hope in both the households, Roopa became the center of attention in her home, and the subject matter of discussion at Pathrudu’s place. Janaki insisted that Roopa oil skinned before her bath, and left her only after having shampooed her hair with some soap nut water. Sandhya however, descended on the scene when Roopa was still in the bathroom. After her bath, as Roopa wanted to come out, she found herself bolted from without. Readily realizing that Sandhya was playing pranks on her, Roopa began to fret and fume from within. At length, Sandhya removed the latch and rushed into Roopa’s room only to leave her mate stranded in her petticoat. However, it was only after Roopa’s desperate entreaties that Sandhya let her in, and as though for recompense took her into a palliative embrace.

“Soon your Prince Charming would have a feast or two for his eyes,” said Sandhya admiring Roopa’s assets.

“That is if you keep me without my sari,” said Roopa trying to loosen herself.

Debate ensued, with Janaki too joining in, regarding the ‘sari for the occasion’ for Roopa, and finally the consensus emerged in favor of the chocolate silk with a snuff border. After the lunch, as the countdown started, Janaki was at preparing a garland of jasmines to adorn Roopa’s plait as Sandhya toiled to tame her friend’s luxuriant hair. Such was its profusion that Sandhya’s delicate fingers seemed overwhelmed.

“A hair like this is sure to ensnare any soul,” whispered Sandhya to Roopa.

"If my hair has substance," said Roopa looking back at Sandhya endearingly, "your bob has style."

"She would be really lucky if they agree," Janaki interrupted their mirth.

"Doesn't she sound like a stuck up gramophone?" said Roopa in jest.

"Getting a girl married is no joke these days," Janaki addressed Sandhya. "He's their only son and they're propertied as well. The parents are hale and healthy, not needing the daughter-in-law's nursing. Moreover, the boy is in the government service. He won't be hard up for cash with people lining up to line his pocket. One can be sure about that."

"Bribe is bad mummy," said Roopa mockingly. "Know that from me."

"How could it be bad when it is the norm?" Janaki sounded dismissive. "All said and done, it's a man's affair. Why should a woman poke her nose into it?"

"If man gets the boot," Roopa protested mimicking, "won't it pinch the wife's leg as well?"

"Moreover, his father has five years of service left," Janaki resumed the resume, "and the boy is just twenty-eight. From what we've heard, he has no vices, to name any. He's neither the club going sort, nor the card playing type. He knows how to count his notes and keep them clean. Well, a disciplined bringing up one may say. Any girl should find him a safe bet to say the least. We're lucky to come across such a match these days when everyone is going head over heels to go astray."

Seeing Roopa unmoved, Sandhya thought that the bride was not half as excited as her mother, 'She has always been like that, would think of crossing the bridge only when she comes to it.'

When Chandrika joined them, after toying with some special preparations in the kitchen, Janaki said, "Hasn't she brought all this about, though by default? Well, everything is for our good only, as the saying goes. I've been praying that she could make the best out of a bad bargain."

"Don't worry," said Chandrika dryly, used as she was to her mother's deprecation of her condition.

Everything was in position by the time the guests were expected that evening. Nevertheless, Chandrika and Sandhya were barred from Sathyam's sight lest they should distract his attention from Roopa. However, they might satisfy their curiosity by peeping through the window as and when the party arrived. And Pathrudu did troop in with his party at the appointed time.

After making them seated in the hall, Roopa was ushered in immediately to beat the impending *durmuburtham*. As she squatted on the mat, Roopa stole a glimpse of Sathyam only to place her eyelids on guard for the rest of the rendezvous. On the other hand, Sathyam couldn't take his eyes off Roopa for he found her out of the world. Besides, the very thought that she could be his wife whetted his appetite. He found her exceedingly charming even with her head dropped and eyelids drooped. Savoring her beauty, he noticed the plain gold stud on her shapely nose. He felt a diamond would make her resplendent and thought of presenting her one during their first night.

"Silence isn't always golden," Ramaiah interrupted Sathyam's daydreaming. "You may as well talk to her."

"Why embarrass her," fumbled Sathyam.

Then Ramaiah engaged Sathyam in conversation about his work and times, apparently for Roopa's ears. However, as Sathyam betrayed his uncouthness and paraded his mediocrity as though to supplement his ungainly look, Roopa was truly put off. Meanwhile Durgamma, Sathyam's mother, moved closer to Roopa ostensibly to converse, however with the intent of feeling her legs for possible abnormality.

"What do you do in the spare time?" Ramaiah continued his interview, unmindful of Roopa's apparent disinterest in that.

"I make my meal," Sathyam said and instinctively looked at Roopa.

Noticing that she tried to suppress her smile, he felt embarrassed, and Ramaiah thought if fit to end his ordeal. As Pathrudu and party left after a while, promising to get back soon, Janaki started her monologue again, if anything, with greater conviction. However, the rest mobbed Roopa for her reaction.

"He's not for me," said Roopa shocking her mother.

"Have you gone mad or what! What's wrong with him?" said Janaki. "He's well-built and is not ill shaped either."

"Why place the cart before the horse?" said Ramaiah to preempt frayed tempers. "Even if they like her, well, it all depends on the dowry they demand."

Stung by her mother's reaction, Roopa retreated into her room as Sandhya followed her to confabulate.

"If you were me," Roopa asked Sandhya, "would you marry him?"

"I haven't seen him that way," said Sandhya, a little surprised.

"And that means," said Roopa, "you aren't impressed either."

While Sandhya kept mum, Janaki cribbed all along. Roopa for her part prayed that Pathrudu would ask the moon for a dowry, and kept her fingers crossed.

9

“They Okayed Roopa, without dowry at that,” said Ramaiah, as he came home the next evening, as though soliciting a ‘yes’ from Roopa.

“Roopa, think again,” pleaded Janaki. “One shouldn’t shun fortune when it beckons on its own.”

“Why not look for another match?” Roopa sounded pleading.

“But why reject this one,” Ramaiah seemed persuasive.

“I’ve nothing against him,” Roopa said as a matter of fact. “But I’m not enthused either.”

“Don’t be hasty, think again,” pleaded Janaki. “We all feel it’s a fine match, and you know that we wish you well.”

“No, he’s not my man,” said Roopa wishing that they spared her.

“Maybe, he’s a simpleton,” said Ramaiah, who seemed to have read his daughter’s mind, “but do realize he’s young and has a long way to go.”

‘If something isn’t presentable at its ninety per cent, it wouldn’t be much different either at cent per cent,’ thought Roopa but to buy time she said. ‘Give me time to think.’

However, after dinner, Ramaiah went up to a brooding Roopa in the verandah.

“If you’re not interested in this match, so be it, but if I don’t show you life as I’ve seen it, I might be failing you,” he said in all earnestness. “Matrimony is a vague hope nursed by the young minds. If marriages are made in heaven, I’m sure the gods would take the realities of life into account. In marriage, it’s only after consummation that couples come to appreciate the true meaning of married life.

In spite of its infinite possibilities, life has its own limitations. As you would realize, mostly it is situational in its reach and breach. As one incident doesn’t encompass life, ardency is not the only opportunity that marriage affords women. As you could guess, maternity is gift-wrapped by heaven for married women. Marriage is so much more than a private affair of the spouses. Know it’s an extension of the family that ushers in a new family. Gratification in marriage is multifaceted as well as multi sourced, like the success of a child can obliterate a lifetime of parental failures. Believe me; a couple could feel that their life was worth living just for the sake of that moment.

In the good old days, alliances were struck based on parental preferences. One might even say prejudices. Inclinations of the children didn't count; when married, they were too young to have a mind of their own anyway. I know times have changed, and I'm not holding a brief for the bygone era any more. However, I guess neither the new waves have washed any wisdom ashore.

The doors of opportunities in today's world have led to the advent of the salaried classes, with the attendant disparity in incomes. Social status seems to have shifted its focus onto the white collared. This insensibly upset the marriage order of yore, amongst the families of the communes. These days every maiden seems to feel that her wedlock is not secure unless engineered by an engineer! Parents too have come to equate their daughters' security with the sons-in-law's bank balances.

Every bachelor, forget about his own eligibility, has come to imagine that the bridal world is at his feet, to be kicked at his will. An Alanaskar Syndrome so to say! Well, in his unceasing search for someone better, even the pretty ones fail to get his nod till the law of diminishing returns catches him up by the scruff. Then with his eligibility on the wane and despondency on the raise, he lands up with a languid dame for all the sprightly in the race would have married by then. Of late, boys and girls are getting married past their prime, they being victims of the compulsions of their own making,' he paused for her reaction.

As he found her attentive, he continued. 'All said and done, nature seems to have loaded the dice against the maidens. One may like it or not, they are the perishable fruits of the marriage market to be disposed off well before they tend to rot. Even otherwise, it does often happen that a maiden would shun a Gog in time, only to opt for a Magog, past her prime, wasting her time in the meantime. In the final analysis, shorn of their shirts, all men are ordinary, save the extraordinary. Moreover, the odds against spotting the right man remain the same even if chance were to bring him to your doorstep as a prospective groom. Ignoring these realities can land one in the deserts of life, chasing the mirages of hope, of course until there is hope. If cultural prejudices produced child widows those days, social aberrations lead to the proliferation of spinsters these days. When maidens cross their mid-twenties, they find to their consternation that men whom nature meant for them by the logic of natural selection, were indeed bending towards the younger ones, tending them to fend for themselves as singles."

Ramaiah paused for Roopa's response and seeing receptivity in her demeanor, he continued.

‘Moreover, there is another angle to marriage; it is fallacious that parents wish idle comfort for their daughters, in their married life,’ he seemed to philosophize. ‘I would rather prefer that you lend your husband a helping hand to build the structure of your married home, brick by brick, hand in hand. In that lies a woman’s true fulfillment in marriage. The boys have proved to be no wiser either, failing to appreciate the joys of sharing the toils as just married. It’s a pity grooms should think in terms of furnishing their bachelor dwellings as if their brides are the paying guests.’

Carried away by his own rhetoric, he reached out to her to help her enlarge her vision. ‘Weddings have come to symbolize the vanity of the society. Designations of the grooms, conveyed in conversation and carried on the wedding cards, have become the new nomenclature of alliances. It’s as if business firms get free mileage when bachelors on their rolls get married! Who says there are no free lunches? The status of the fathers-in-law too is brought upfront as though to suggest that no protocol was breached. Alas, marriages are being turned into public *melas* from the family functions they used to be! I know you can appreciate that pomp and pageantry may adorn a wedding but it’s the warmth and love that sustain the marriage.’

Realizing that he reached the threshold, he paused for a while before he crossed it for her sake.

‘As for married love, know it’s the man who overwhelms his mate,’ he forced himself to tell her, ‘and nature in its wisdom induces woman to get drawn to the man who deflowers her. You couldn’t have failed to notice intelligent women adoring their mediocre husbands. You must also realize that happiness is not an accompanying baggage of marriage; couples have to mould it with insight and imagination. If anything, the woman has to put in the greater effort, but the rewards could signify the specialty of her life. Try to understand what I’ve said so that you can see life in its proper perspective.’

When he concluded the brainwash, Roopa was mystified by his rhetoric. After he had left her, she tried to weigh his words against her own inclinations.

Her innate urge, accentuated by the male attention she received, brought her femininity to the fore. The attractions she experienced and the fantasies she entertained shaped a male imagery that ensconced her subconscious. Her envision of a he-man ennobled her self-perception as a female. Insensibly, confident carriage came to be associated with the image of maleness in her mind-set. Her acute consciousness of masculinity only increased her

vulnerability to it, making her womanliness crave for the maleness for its gratification. That persona she envisioned as masculine, she found lacking in Sathyam.

However, though she felt that much of her father's expansive exposition was sensible, as her heart remained steadfast to her dream man, she developed second thoughts. In her predicament, she recalled that Damayanthi had reasoned that marriage would uproot a woman from her dreams to transplant her in her man's life. Thereafter, woman's marital fulfillment could induce a life force in her, enabling her to develop new roots in her in-law's environs. Soon as she would lose mobility, and with it her contacts with the past cease, so, Damayanthi maintained, that friendship between maidens was a mist that marriage would evaporate.

Roopa thought of seeking Damayanthi's advice but unable to bring herself to confide in her, she found herself closeted with Sandhya.

"If I were a man," said Sandhya in jest, "perhaps, you wouldn't have had this problem."

"Had you been married," said Roopa jokingly, even in her state of confusion, "I would have forced myself as your fellow-wife."

"God save that poor guy," laughed Sandhya.

"Why poor when he's doubly blessed?" said Roopa in jest, and was enamored by the idea of their love triangle. However, having come to the reality of life readily, she sighed and added, "Well, it's neither here nor there. Tell me what I am to do now."

"As you know, my mother says that love is a product of the married mind," said Sandhya as though parroting her mother's wisdom, "while romance is the enterprise of the spirited heart. Since we find our mothers in love with our fathers, we may as well follow suit, and end up being fond of our husbands. I know you're romantic by nature, but you should realize that for the best part, life is humdrum by circumstance. Perhaps, it all boils down to this; where your romance with life should end and the appreciation of its reality begin. It's for you to draw your own line."

"Maybe, I am romanticizing life, but he's too insipid to inspire," said Roopa feeling helpless. "Looks like my expectations from life are out of tune with the realities of my fate."

"Check up if you're holding the mirror of fantasies to the realities of life," said Sandhya, leaning on Roopa affectionately.

"I'm sure you too wouldn't have seen him any differently," said Roopa resignedly. "Well, as my well-wishers feel that the match is good, maybe I should match my mood as well."

“Compromise is the cornerstone of life, isn’t it?” said Sandhya in all empathy.

“Looks like it’s the millstone of my life,” muttered Roopa resignedly. “I wish I had your disposition of life, to be happy.”

“Don’t you worry,” said Sandhya, taking Roopa’s hand, “I will share every burden of your life to ease your life, all your life. This is a promise I mean to keep, all my life. After all, haven’t we vowed to disprove my mother’s theory about the brevity of female friendship?”

“Oh, Sandhya,” cried Roopa hugging her friend.

“Believe me Roopa,” said Sandhya, solacing her soul mate, “upon the tears of our friendship.”

“Won’t I need your friendship more than ever?” said Roopa contemplatively. “With an uninspiring husband in the offing, you’re the only hope of my life. It seems the first throw of the dice showed up for our vow. I hope our destiny ensures that your husband would empathize with our friendship.”

When Sandhya wanted to respond, Roopa closed her lips with her hand as though she wanted to hear nothing to the contrary.

10

For the impending wedding of Sathyam and Roopa, the concerned clans soon clustered in their respective homes. Her sisters’ satisfying remarks about the alliance and her brothers-in-law’s flattering compliments about the groom further increased Roopa’s self-doubts. ‘Am I being overcritical,’ she thought. ‘After all, everyone feels he’s fine.’

On the other hand, Sathyam’s relatives, in their hordes, who came to grace the occasion, gossiped in groups.

“Something must be amiss with this miss,” guessed a relative whom nature cursed with a cynical mind as well as a caustic tongue. “One could see love is very thick in the air these days, as girls are falling head over heels for boys on the campuses. Thanks to the influence of the movies, most of the girls have started saying yes to premarital sex without a care. It’s said that doctors are doing a brisk business at the abortion clinics. But, the truly wise catch the gullible guys for sons-in-law before their errant daughters show up the symptoms, and when the chips are down, the past is passed off as a premature issue.”

Maybe, he would have continued to enlighten his third cousin about the sleaze in the cities, if not for the summons the latter received from his better half. However, sensing an

unintended scandal in the making, Pathrudu's family huddled up to devise a counter before it got out of control. 'We liked the girl, and wanted the marriage hastened. After all, Sathyam's health was suffering thanks to the hotel food and all,' was the news that was put into circulation. As the corrigenda carried conviction, the conjecture collapsed.

A couple of Sathyam's friends and few of his colleagues made it to the marriage, 'in spite of their busy schedules' as Sathyam's mother bragged, and one of his friends who had managed to see Roopa, announced at the bachelor's party that evening, 'Sathyam is going to have a wife of our dreams.'

"I wish I had a wit like yours," said Sathyam pleased.

"Why forget Ramu," said another, "I've never thought he would fail to turn up."

"How I miss him," said Sathyam, 'as luck would have it, his sister's marriage coincided."

That summer night, the *kalyana mandapam* was truly lit up. Even as they welcomed the guests, Chandrika and Sandhya, who stood at the entrance, perfused them with rose-water. Women, of all ages and sizes, in their colorful silk saris, dusted for the occasion, were seen fluttering as if to attract attention of those gathered. Some men in the traditional *dhobhi*, worn for the occasion, were found rooted to their seats for they were keen not to be seen ungainly for want of habit. Conventional film songs orchestrated for the occasion rent the air, enlivening the gathering. As boys ogled at them, some maidens were seen putting on airs, and let loose by their gossiping parents, all the brats had a feast of a time.

Soon, Chandrika and Sandhya were on the dais behind Roopa in her *madhuparkam*, to raise her plait as Sathyam tied the nuptial knot. When the ordained moment arrived, Roopa bent her head to enable Sathyam do the needful.

"It's the only time when woman bows to her husband," commented Pedda Purnaiahgaru, the octogenarian almanac man, "to enable him to tie the knot. Afterwards, she would raise her head, only to see that he does not raise his again. She could be counted upon to ensure the hands that tied the nuptial knot are forever tied to her apron strings."

The marriage hall reverberated to peals of laughter that the statement induced. Soon though, the guests left after congratulating the couple, leaving the relatives to hang around for a little longer, till they could find a corner to lie down. However, the just married were awake a long while to go through the assorted rituals.

11

It was the night that Sathyam awaited in elation and Roopa approached with trepidation.

‘Guess what I’ve got for you,’ he said, reaching his bride reclining on the bedecked bed.

Bogged down with her own agenda, she wasn’t enthused to respond even though he repeated himself, and he tried to rationalize her indifference, ‘Well, she could be bridal-shy.’ Nevertheless, pressing closer to her, he persisted, “You’ve only three chances.”

How many times did he visualize, over the fortnight, the scene of their guessing game - a perplexed Roopa fudging, and he goading her to try again, and again! In his imagination, how charming Roopa was in her exasperation! He seemed disappointed with the reality his bride presented him instead. Unable to break the barrier of her sullenness at the threshold of their nuptial bed, he gave up in the end, and said instead, “Close your eyes.”

Downcast as her eyes were, any way, it took her no effort to oblige her husband. Then with one hand he took her hand and with the other he reached for the packet in his shirt pocket. As his touch sent waves of expectation all over her frame, she seemed to enjoy the resultant sensation. Having failed to respond whenever he laid hands on her during the ceremonies of the previous night, she was surprised at that strange feeling she was experiencing, and as her reservations about him seemed to dissolve in her anticipation, she found herself at ease.

When he withdrew his hand from hers to unpack the diamond nose-stud, he so fondly acquired for her. With eyes still closed, as her body missed his touch, her mind went into conjecture. After what appeared to be an eternity to her, he took her hand again, sharpening the sensation and enhancing her expectation.

“Open your eyes,” he said persuasively.

“Switch off the light,” she said coyly.

“How can you see then?” he said.

“I can still feel it,” she said mystically.

Her romantic anticipation made her indulge in blissful guessing about the gift of his love. She felt vulnerable and expected him to overwhelm her.

“I thought of it,” he said without stirring from his position, “the moment I’d seen you.”

He sounded joyously triumphant to his indulgently receptive bride. Imagining her instinctive response to his expected outrage, Roopa waited in anticipation. However, as Sathyam made no move in his preoccupation with unscrewing the nose-stud, she seemed puzzled and opened her eyes at length. As she found him fidgeting with the nose-stud, she felt that she was only flattered to be deceived.

“Believe me,” he said as if he had yet to reconcile himself to his good fortune, “I was not sure whether you would marry an office assistant like me when managers would have queued up for your hand. I was a nervous wreck by the time your father came to convey your consent. When he said ‘yes’, I jumped for joy.”

His sincere outpouring, coupled with his meek posturing, only helped dwarf his persona in her esteem shaped by the imagery of male élan. As he looked pygmean in her perception then, she felt as though she was rudely shaken from her daydream. All the reservations her intuition envisaged about him earlier that she recanted in her state of amorous anticipation seemed to return to the fore with renewed vigor. The implied compliment in his confounded state failed to flatter her, for it lacked forthrightness. What was worse, she construed his adoration as an admission of subjugation. All said and done, it was a let down she wasn’t prepared for.

“How do you like it?” he enquired while thrusting it in her hand.

“It’s nice,” she said sincerely though lacking in excitement.

Her simple gesture thrilled him no end, as it was his first experience with a woman. As he narrated in detail all the trouble he took to acquire it, being bored, she stopped listening. Preoccupied as he was with his own sentiment, he failed to notice the jadedness his present left on her sensitivity as twirling the thing, she felt as if she were slighted by it. That it should have obsessed him so much, at a time when she was available for his possession hurt her sensuality.

‘If only he’s passionate,’ she thought dejectedly, ‘I wouldn’t be holding this cold thing.’ She felt as though the diamond edges of that nose-stud cruelly clipped the sprouting romantic wings her heart started airing by then.

“Let me see how it goes with you,” he said eagerly as he was impatient to espy her glamour adorned by his present.

“I always knew it would suit you,” he said with a relish, as she obliged him becomingly. “You know, I went from shop to shop for it.”

‘Oh,’ she felt irritated, ‘what’s the god-damn obsession with an inane thing,’ and the very thought of life in the offing with him depressed her no end. She even developed second thoughts about broaching her passion to study medicine.

‘But won’t life be dull idling at home,’ she reasoned in the end, ‘that too being his wife? Moreover, who knows, he might as well oblige. And if he does, won’t I end up loving him out of gratitude. Well, any way, I’ve nothing more to lose now.’

“I wanted to ask you...”

“Be assured, you’re the first woman in my life,” he declared solemnly and felt pleased for assuaging her perceived doubts about his own virginity.

‘Hardly surprising,’ she thought derisively only to end up feeling it was a sort of consolation. Thereby, without much ado, she revealed her ambition with animation, and appealed enticingly, “I know you love me enough to help me out.”

Though he sensed her passion, he was taken aback by her proposition.

“It’s impossible,” he said in all helplessness, “and impractical as well.”

“Where there’s a will there’s a way,” she said coyly. “If you want, I am sure, you could help.”

“No way,” he said nonplussed.

“It all depends,” she said by way of emotional blackmail, “on how much you love me.”

“It’s not about any lack of love,” he protested spiritedly. “I love you with all my heart but I’ve a father who doesn’t believe in woman’s graduation. Didn’t he make it clear to your dad that you shouldn’t press with your B. Com. And now you want to study medicine! He would shout us down and there’s no way we can bring him around.”

His revelation completed her humiliation that dragged him along to the depths of degradation in her esteem. She felt deceived by her father as well for not letting her get a wind of the old man’s whim.

‘But then,’ she thought, ‘how could he have guessed my game plan as I never revealed it to him.’

The sympathy she helped generate in her despondent heart for her father made her view her husband even more unsympathetically, and he felt that she would get over her disappointment by and by. When he took her into his arms to cajole her, her sense of obligation made her surrender to his advances, and soon enough, with the bed-lamp for a witness, nature took over to facilitate their conjugal union. However, while his tenderness in foreplay was perceived as timidity by her passionate heart, his eagerness to possess her in the end seemed bestiality to her uninvolved mind. Sadly for him, she perceived his passion in their coition as force on her frame and his fulfillment as a proof of his selfishness.

So with a feeling of being used, lying in her nuptial bed beside him with closed eyes, as though to further filter the dim light, she folded her hand over her forehead, and as it touched his present, she thought it was as cold as her heart.

‘It would forever symbolize my nadir,’ she thought in despair.

Finding her perturbed, he didn't venture again, and thus left to herself she was struck by the contrast between the hope the wedding night held for her and the reality into which the nuptial night pushed her before sleep overpowered her weary self as if to save her soul from the exhaustion of thought.

12

Mid-day the next day, when Sandhya came to see Roopa, she saw her lay morose in her bed. By then, finding her truant to their taunts, her sisters, one by one, took to their heels.

"Got him right?" Sandhya cooed in Roopa's ear.

"Well," Roopa smiled wryly, holding Sandhya's hand, "he's a man."

"You look fabulous," said Sandhya to cheer her up.

"How I wish," said Roopa holding Sandhya's hand, "you were a man."

'You would have been my woman then,' said Sandhya squeezing Roopa's nose. 'Oh, what a lovely present he gave!'

As Sandhya's compliment symbolized the proverbial rope in the house of the hanged, Roopa could contain herself no more. She was in tears.

"Don't tell me," said Sandhya wiping Roopa's tears, "that something is wrong."

"Oh, I'm doomed," said Roopa hugging Sandhya. "He's a silly guy."

"Calm down my dear," said Sandhya, comfortingly sinking into Roopa's endearing embrace. "Why, he might improve."

While the thrill of her mate's intimacy struck Roopa's flustered mind, as the charm of their proximity captivated Sandhya's empathic heart, she too enlaced her friend, making their embrace all the more intense. When Roopa found herself pressing closer for self-solace, as their bodies lay twined in an emotional deadlock, they felt as though their souls got entwined. What with the experience of the nuptial night having lent a sexual touch to Roopa's flesh, Sandhya's embrace tickled her innate lesbianism at its very core.

Even as the ardency of Roopa's embrace stirred Sandhya's sensuality, the warmth of Sandhya's affection affected Roopa's sexuality making her crave for that in her mate what she missed in her man. Struck by Sandhya's nubility, Roopa, in her erotic mind-set got libidinally aroused, and driven by her lesbian love, Roopa was animated in Sandhya's embrace. With Roopa turning eager to press for her sexual solace in their sensual embrace, Sandhya's fascination for Roopa urged her into a surging closeness for emotional integration. As her own sensuality having been unleashed by her mate's sexual collusion,

Roopa turned eager to devour Sandhya's breasts, bringing her lesbian leanings to the fore, and stirred by Roopa's amorous assaults, Sandhya's libido induced reciprocity in her own responses.

While the fascination Sandhya felt for Roopa's frame imparted a sexual color to her friendly feeling as Roopa's lesbian passion reached the threshold Sandhya's ardor facilitated an erotic connivance to her own sexual siege. Espying the sensual delight Sandhya derived in their sexual excursion, Roopa turned enthusiastic to gratify her mate in their lesbian union with an oral go at the very roots of her mate's femininity. And overwhelmed by Roopa's unruly passion, Sandhya surrendered her soul as well to her mate who came to reign over her frame any way. However, as though to let Roopa have a measure of the joy she gave her mate, Sandhya turned the heat on Roopa's erotic essence. As that furthered her own delight, Roopa's well of womanliness whetted in reciprocity for Sandhya's satiation. It was as if Roopa wished to let Sandhya have a measure of the oral bliss that she herself had bestowed upon her mate before. It was thus; their enticing union infused a sublime emotion in them that only women are capable of experiencing. That chance encounter, brought about by Roopa's depressed psyche, forever transformed their friendship into bondage of lesbianism.

Sensing Roopa's indifference the following night as well, Sathyam thought of honeymooning at Ooty. 'Besides enlivening her mood, the thrill of the new environs might as well enthrall her mind,' he thought hopefully. However, Pathrudu would have none of it. "One wouldn't be taking his wife to hotels and all," he said rather dismissively.

However, when the time to report for work neared, Sathyam was forced to leave Roopa behind. "I'll be back soon after fixing a sweet home for us," he said at their parting, as though to enthruse her.

After Sathyam's departure to Hyderabad that day, to fix a sweet home for them, as he put it, undisturbed that night, Roopa had time to reflect on her time.

'My past was steeped in hope but my future could be filled just by despair,' she thought in disillusionment. 'Am I destined to partner disappointment? What had gone wrong after all? Though a simpleton, yet he's sincere, and what's more, he seems to love me wholeheartedly.' The thought that he loved her made her feel sympathetic towards him, 'Oh, if only I could get excited about him. Is the excitement I'm craving for a mere illusion that no man could possibly induce in a woman?'

She fondly remembered her intimacy with Sandhya in that moment of their weakness and tried to relive the emotions of their romance and attempted to visualize the sensations of their union in all their vividness. While the vague fulfillment she derived from their encounter that came to the fore made her long even more for it, her fondness for her mate only helped increase her craving for the he-man of her daydreams, and in that state, her passion was like a landscape in the sky, ever altered by the passing current.

13

Next morning Roopa reached Sandhya's place with mixed feelings and entering her bedroom dullish, she found her mate draping a Gadwal sari

"Why so late!" Sandhya said dropping the sari

"Blame my lethargy of anxiety," said Roopa, having outstretched her hands in invitation.

"How I will miss you from now on," said Sandhya, smug in Roopa's embrace

"I would be the worst hit," Roopa couldn't hold back her tears.

"Our love should give us solace," said Sandhya warmly, as her shoulder was warmed with Roopa's tears.

"The thought of losing you frightens me," said Roopa in between sobs.

"I swear I'll always be yours," said Sandhya as she tightened her hold on Roopa.

"But, what after you get married?" said Roopa. "It's only time before you wed."

"I won't let my marriage come in the way of our affair," Sandhya tried to assuage Roopa.

"I love you and need you as well."

"If I've a reason to live," said Roopa wiping her own tears, "it's for our love."

"The hope of my life is but the product of your love," said Sandhya

"Let it be our sweet secret," said Roopa mystically, reaching for Sandhya's lips as though to seal them.

"It's the charm of our life," said Sandhya in surrender. "Isn't it?"

When finally Roopa got up to leave, Sandhya wouldn't let her get down from the bed.

"Stay for a while," she implored to her mate with a feeling of wanting.

"Given half a chance I would get glued to you," said Roopa as she reluctantly weaned herself from Sandhya's vice-like embrace, "but as he rents a house in Hyderabad, I've to move into for my sour home then."

14

Sathyam, on a tip-off from a friend, contacted Kantha Rao, the owner of a corner house of a by-lane in Domalaguda.

“Are you,” enquired Kantha Rao on the wrong side of the fifties, “a vegetarian?”

As Sathyam answered in the affirmative, the interrogation continued.

“Are you married or not?”

“See, we don’t let out to bachelors, forced or otherwise,” chimed in Lalitha, the childless woman of the house.

As Sathyam certified his marital status, he was shown the place by the couple, however, only after getting convinced about his credentials. That first floor penthouse, thought Sathyam, would interest Roopa no end. Moreover, he didn’t find it wanting for privacy either.

“The rent would be a thousand rupees, while the electricity is to your account, metered by the sub-meter. Water bill is to be shared pro-rata,” Kantha Rao went about acquainting his prospect, as if he were delivering his maiden budget speech in the parliament.

“Why,” protested Sathyam earnestly, “it’s very much on the higher side for a hall and a room!”

“You don’t seem to count the kitchen and the storeroom with a loft large enough to hide an elephant, if you please. Besides, you can’t fail to take into account the excellent amenities, the western toilet, cupboards all over, the wash-basins and all others that lend comfort. Moreover, know it’s a penthouse that provides privacy,” smiled Kantha Rao meaningfully. No soul would ever get an inkling of the twining inside.”

A bargain ensued, and to the discomfiture of the landlord, Sathyam appeared adept at it. As both didn’t want to lose the other, they compromised for a rent of eight-fifty. Sathyam was excited that he could so easily fix an appropriate accommodation, while Kantha Rao was pleased that the couple, without an entourage, wouldn’t strain the water-bed during the summers.

Post-haste, Sathyam reached Kakinada to fetch Roopa, and Pathrudu picked up the Pedda Purnaiah’s almanac for the auspicious date for the journey. Meanwhile, arrangements were made on a war footing to transport the household goods through SRMT.

That evening, accompanied by their kith and kin, the newly weds arrived at the Town Railway Station to the announcement that the link train to Godavari Express was expected shortly. When the train did arrive from the Port Station, there was pell-mell at that Town Platform.

While the Sathyams were taking leave of those present, Pathrudu helped the porter posit the luggage beneath the lower berth in a first class coupe even as Sathyam made it to the bogie, followed by Roopa and Sandhya. Standing by the entrance, as Sandhya and Roopa were seen whispering to each other mirthfully, staring at them, Sathyam thought, ‘After all, she doesn’t seem to be serious by nature. But why she’s always morose with me?’

When its readiness for departure was announced, Roopa got into the train only to grab Sandhya’s hand greedily, as if it were a treasure.

Soon the guard gave the green signal that triggered a new phase in Roopa’s life, and as if hanging on to her memory, Roopa stood rooted near the gate and waved to Sandhya until she was out of her sight. Meanwhile, the train, for its part, curved to its right, seemingly enabling the driver to greet the guard at the rear.

“Come in Roopa,” she heard Sathyam and followed him.

As if to preempt a conversation, Roopa took the window seat and picked up ‘The Reader’s Digest’. Sitting by her side, Sathyam couldn’t help but admire her beauty in her profile.

“What a fascinating beauty!” he wondered. “But why is she so reticent?”

“What should’ve gone wrong!” he went into contemplation. “Was she forced into the marriage against her will? How it can be. After all, the matchmaker swore they were keen on our match. Oh, didn’t he maintain that if it ever came to missing our match they were ready to pull her out of the college and perform her marriage ahead of her elder sister’s. How pleased they were all at the gesture of accommodation. Was it no more than a mere white lie to hasten her marriage? But then, why it was so? Was she carrying on with someone? Oh, was she pulled out mid-course as it were to thwart her elopement? Or worse still, she might have got pregnant, prompting all that unseemly haste. Oh God, what’s all this!”

Whatever it was, he thought he should probe her forthwith. As he was about to open, she closed her eyes as though to stall his attempt. ‘How lovely she looks even as she closes her eyes!’ he thought endearingly, and espied her devotedly. As if compelled by curiosity, the wind surged through the window to have a glimpse of her wondrous demeanor. In

turn, her luxuriant hair unsheathed itself from the plait to veil her face as though to foil that bid. Undaunted by the nature of the camouflage, the surging wind tried to disperse the guards on duty to get a proper view for itself, only to find them regroup every time. The unfolding tussle amused Sathyam.

‘When she’s so enchanting in her reluctance, won’t she be as devastating in her eagerness?’ he surmised. ‘Is she upset that I didn’t concede to her request?’

“Roopa,” he called her tenderly.

“Hahn,” she was nearly inaudible.

“Why, did you marry me,” he asked hesitantly, “against your wish?”

“Who gave you that impression?” she said in embarrassment, though she didn’t appear surprised. Her manner even suggested that she expected him to say that.

“I can see that you’re just going through the motions,” he said dryly.

“I’m a little moody, that’s all,” she tried to be evasive, but seemed to be on the defensive.

“But not so with Sandhya, I suppose,” he sounded argumentative. “I could see that you’re quite lively with her.”

‘Oh, isn’t she the only joy of my life?’ she thought but didn’t reply.

“Are you not angry with me for refusing?”

“Maybe, you have your reasons, don’t you?” she said nonchalantly, and opened her eyes as if to grasp his feelings.

“Don’t say that, it hurts,” he said, and went into a winding explanation of his helplessness.

“I would never disappoint you all my life, I swear upon my love,” he tried to make her reconcile to the situation. He bared his heart to let her feel the love he bore for her. As she didn’t hold him high in her esteem any way, his love too didn’t mean much to her. Nevertheless, she was pleased at being adored.

Shortly thereafter, the train reached Samalkot to be shunted to the Godavari Express, expected from Visakhapatnam, and finding her still morose, Sathyam kept wondering what was amiss in their marriage.

“Are you in love with someone?” he asked her as the train moved out of the station at length.

“You should’ve enquired all about me before marriage,” she said curtly and added. “Even now, you could do all your spying and clear your doubts.”

“I’m sorry,” he sounded apologetic. “Not that I suspect any but you seem so disinterested.”

“Thanks,” she sounded uncharacteristically sarcastic.

He then withdrew into a shell in the manner of a person who commits an indiscretion. Seeing him sulk, she felt sorry for him. ‘Am I not being rude to him?’ she thought. When her conscience confirmed in the affirmative, her heart was filled with pity for him.

‘After all, it’s not his fault that he isn’t smart,’ she reasoned. ‘Didn’t I sense his shortcomings in the first meeting itself? Well, I knew from the beginning what was in the offing for me. Yet, I married him out of my own compulsions, didn’t I? Oh, why should I be cut up with him for no fault of his?’

‘I’m at fault for being cool towards him,’ she thought in time. ‘Moreover, he might have his own expectations from his wife and married life. Didn’t I nurse my own dreams though they turned sour in the end? Do I have the right to mar his life as his wife? Had I declined, who knows, he would have got a wife who could have adored him and made him happy all his life!’

When she realized that she was being unfair to him as wife yet she bemoaned, ‘But I can’t bring myself to love him. Am I not the worse for that?’ Then she thought that if only she could love him, her life would be lively as well and that very idea for the attendant impracticality made her feel bitter about her fate, ‘Oh, loveless life is no better than a lifeless corpse.’

‘But he loves me,’ she contemplated in the same vein. ‘Isn’t it said that it’s better to marry someone who loves you than the one whom you might love. Why, hasn’t it turned out to be true in his case? Well, for all his love, an unresponsive body for a mate is what he gets from me. How wasteful is misplaced love, for the one who loves and the loved one as well!’ As she was overcome with pity for him, she looked at him instinctively, and found him staring at her adoringly.

‘Why am I not being rude to him? Maybe cruel even!’ she thought as she felt guilty. ‘Since I’m not enthused about him, do I have the right to dampen him? Oh, I should accommodate him though I may not love him. Maybe, sense of fairness demands that.’

“I’m sorry,” she said, extending her hand to him, “for hurting you.”

Overwhelmed by her gesture, he was at a loss for words. As his eyes welled, he soaked her hand with kisses. Feeling gratified by the gratification she had caused, she found herself seeing life in a new light.

“How long does it take us,” she asked so as to start a dialogue, “to reach home from the railway station?”

“Just under half an hour,” he said as though her gesture relaxed his nerves. “My friend Ramu would be receiving us at the Secunderabad railway station. I had sent him the Lorry Receipt and he would have shifted the luggage to our house by now.”

“Did he attend our wedding?” she continued just to keep it going.

“He couldn’t make it,” he said with apparent disappointment. “It’s a different story though and you’ll get to know of it, by and by.”

“Tell me now,” she asked more to please him than driven by any curiosity.

“Ramu is in love with Meera, his colleague where he worked earlier. Though she agreed to his proposal, the hitch is, she is a Tamilian and he, an Andhra like us. They got around her parents in due course and anyway his father too is too broad-minded to mind the match. But it was thought ideal to postpone their wedding till his younger sister got married so as not to spoil her chances in our prejudicial times and since her wedding coincided with ours, Ramu couldn’t come to our marriage. When the dust settles down, Ramu would marry Meera. But, for the present it’s courtship for them.”

Roopa was startled, only to be relieved.

“Don’t you think they’re smart?” he asked her, throwing her into a dilemma whether to sound him about Chandrika or let events unfold for themselves.

“Is anything wrong with that?” he said before she could make up her mind.

“It’s not a bad idea,” she merely said.

“Sandhya seems to be very close to you,” he changed the topic to interest her.

“We’re childhood pals turned adult mates,” she said mystically, and he didn’t fail to notice the glow in her face.

“No friends like childhood friends,” he said nostalgically.

“Tell me about your childhood days,” she asked.

Then he went on narrating his childhood life and times at Guntur for long and added, “If not for my father’s transfer to Kakinada last year, perhaps, we wouldn’t have come across your match at all. That’s destiny at work, I suppose.”

As he became engrossed with his childhood escapades, she tried to be an enthusiastic listener, and having heard him speak highly of his friend, she asked him, “Are you in touch with your Prasad now?”

“Sadly we’re out of touch,” he said with a sense of loss. “But I’ve heard that he’s in Delhi, married to a millionaire’s daughter. Some industrialist seems to have lured him for his plain daughter by dangling a stake in the business empire. Surely he would have turned into a really handsome man. I have no doubt about that.”

“Was he ambitious?” she enquired as though she were comparing notes.

“Don’t you think it’s difficult to know one’s nature so early on in life?” he said like someone who didn’t apply his mind from that angle. “But one of our schoolteachers used to say that the character of a person would be known only after marriage. For all I know, he wasn’t good at studies. It’s I who used to help him with his lessons, maths in particular. However, he was the handsomest in the class and boisterous as well.”

When she proposed dinner, he changed into his *lungi*.

“I may end up being obese in due course,” he said as he helped himself liberally with the food she served him.

“It’s my mother’s preparation,” she said with a morsel in her mouth.

“You would find me doing justice to your recipes too.”

“Let’s see what’s in store for you,” she said, managing a smile.

‘If not Sauv  , he’s by no means naive,’ she reviewed her situation as she went to wash the plates. ‘Above all else, he seems to love me genuinely.’ The conviction that he loved her gave her some consolation. She instinctively knew that life wouldn’t be problematic with him, and the thought satisfied her.

“Looks like you’re a voracious reader,” he said as she took the Digest again on her return.

“I do read a little here and there.”

“I think you’re being modest.”

“What about you?” she enquired.

“My reading is more of a *time-pass*,” he said. “Maybe I can have the pleasure of hearing you read.”

When he downed the shutter of that coupe-for-two, and switched on the blue lamp, she found herself culled in his eager embrace, and as the receptivity she inculcated in her mind imparted a sense of reciprocity to her body, her motions in his mount seemed to synchronize with the vibrations of the carriage. While their nocturnal journey progressed, she felt that in due course she could be on course on the beaten track of married bliss.

15

As day broke out, Roopa awoke to reach for her purse in which she kept the silver anklets that Sathyam goaded her to remove during the night. Not finding the pair therein, she raised an alarm that awoke him.

“See if they fell down,” he said drowsily.

“I’m sure I’ve kept them here,” she said, unfolding her purse nervously. “Oh, Sandhya presented them at our wedding.”

They uncovered their air-pillows and upturned the basket of eatables to no avail but in the end, to her immense relief, he found them underneath the berth.

“You could have left them on the berth,” he said, handing the pair to her.

“No way,” she said as she wore them on her wondrous legs, “I know I’ve put them in my purse. Wonder how they landed on the floor!”

Looking down again, he found part of the baggage protruding from underneath the berth. Realizing that he pushed back the luggage as he picked up the anklets, he recalled that during the night he pushed in the luggage a couple of times only to find it protrude in time. Preoccupied as he was then, he thought amusedly, “The jolts and jerks are at work on the luggage as well.”

Now, seized by curiosity, he crouched on the floor and pulled out a suitcase only to be unnerved at finding a grown-up lad lying behind the rest of the baggage. Though he quickly regained his wits, as the import of the trespass on their privacy began to sink into him fully, he remained speechless.

“Hey come out,” he shouted, as he recovered at length.

The sight of a well-built lad of around twenty, crawling out from below the berth stunned Roopa out of her wits even before the echoes of Sathyam’s shout could die down in her ears.

“When did you get in?” Sathyam questioned him.

“Before you came in,” said the lad embarrassedly.

“So you’re here all through!” Roopa couldn’t help but exclaim.

As he bowed his head in confirmation, her embarrassment insensibly turned into an acute awkwardness.

“Why the hell did you come in?” Sathyam questioned the lad angrily.

“I’m ticket-less,” he replied by way of an explanation.

“When did you remove them from the purse?” Sathyam asked in enquiry.

“I found them lying on the floor,” he pleaded with folded hands. “I swear I didn’t touch them even.”

“You want us to believe that they dropped down from my purse just like that,” said Roopa still feeling embarrassed. “You can explain all about that to the police at the next station.”

“Please spare me,” frightened, the lad begged for mercy. “I took them from your handbag after you slept off. I thought you would look for them only after going home. When I realized that you found them missing, I kept them in your view so that you won’t be searching behind the luggage. Please let me go.”

“Let’s leave him,” she said overwhelmed by pity for him. “After all, he hasn’t harmed us. Moreover, he might fail at the hands of the police. These days, isn’t the air thick with the news of lock-up deaths?”

As the chap went out of the coupe relieved, the couple looked at each other embarrassed. However, the very thought that they were at lovemaking when that lad lay below embarrassed Roopa no end.

‘What would have happened had he strangled Sathyam and raped me as well?’ she thought at length and found the very idea spine-chilling. ‘Of course, the lad is well built and would have got into mood for that, what with our doings around him. Why, he even came out of his hiding to steal the anklets! God knows, in what shape he might have seen me, and for how long!’

She couldn’t believe that she passed through that ordeal unscathed, unknown to her but soon the embarrassment and the horror the moment embodied combined to produce even a feeling of adventure in her mind-set. Slowly the whole episode appeared exciting to her with the aura of a queer romantic adventure.

However, Sathyam was upset about the whole thing, ‘Could it be a bad omen for my married life? In a way, hasn’t Padmavathi prophesied just that?’ Thus he was nagged for long by many a doubt about his married life in the offing.

“Let’s forget about it,” he said at length as though to ward off the impediment by dismissing the incident itself.

“You handled it well,” she complimented him.

When the train approached the signal post, off the Secunderabad Railway Station, Roopa seemed to be in the right spirits to head towards his sweet home.

16

'7Up Godavari Express coming from Visakhapatnam will be arriving in a few minutes on platform No.2 Platform,' the Secunderabad Railway Station echoed to the ill-modulated voice of a male announcer.

"Just late by two hours," said Meera sarcastically, after checking with her watch.

"God speed the railways," said Ramu, who by then had finished four cups of coffee.

Relieving them of their weariness, soon the train came into view. When in time, it decelerated into the station; their spirits soared to the skies. Spotting Sathyam standing at the exit, they waved at him furiously to be noticed and when the train came to a halt, they paced up to welcome the Sathyams.

"Couple in the making welcome the made for each other couple," said Ramu as he embraced Sathyam.

Soon, they moved out following the porters carrying the luggage, Sathyam and Ramu hand in hand and Roopa and Meera side by side, and once out of the railway station, they got into the waiting Fiat arranged by Ramu for the occasion.

"We feel bad for not having come to your wedding," Ramu addressed Roopa.

"It's our loss no less," Roopa replied.

"We shall make up for all that," said Meera chirpily.

"If only she won't lock Sathyam in their wedlock," said Ramu in jest.

"You've said it," jibed Meera with her beau.

"Let me see if you don't tie him to your *pallu*," Sathyam retorted on Roopa's behalf.

As the Fiat stopped at the wicket-gate, propelled more by womanly instinct than any welcoming intent, Lalitha stepped out from the main one.

"We never had a more beautiful tenant," said Lalitha sounding helpful. "Do not hesitate to ask whatever you need from me."

Often, in human relations, one's latent nature to help exudes in the face of a prospective friendship but when the acquaintance fails to cross the threshold of intimacy, inevitably the inclinations too go into hibernation.

As Roopa stepped into the modestly furnished penthouse, she felt at home.

"I can't thank you enough," said Sathyam in gratitude as Ramu and Meera had by then arranged the furniture and positioned the luggage.

“I think to start with, the bridal couple should handle better things than household articles,” Ramu said heartily. “Moreover, it was not such a hassle thanks to your landlady’s prattle, it turned out to be great fun even. I wonder how women won’t get tired of talking! Isn’t it the irony of man-woman equation that the least exposed to the world should have a better say in life?”

Ramu ran for cover as Meera advanced towards him menacingly and when she caught him by the collar, he said theatrically, “Excuse me for snatching your privilege.” As Meera cuddled him, pretending as though she were crushing him, Roopa couldn’t suppress her smile. The mirth around, though gladdened her heart, nevertheless, cast a shadow on her soul.

“What about lunch?” Sathyam wondered aloud.

“Meera will prepare some *avial* for us,” proposed Ramu. “How come we haven’t thought of coffee yet?”

“You know Sathyam won’t have coffee,” said Meera, still smarting from his tease, “and you’re busy abusing women.”

“What a coffee-like coffee!” said Ramu, as Roopa served them some filter coffee.

“The credit goes to you for getting the right mix of a coffee powder,” said Roopa

“The Coffee Shop is down the lane for you,” said Ramu, “Sathyam, you would be the loser if you don’t fall in line.”

“What next?” Sathyam thought aloud.

“Ryan’s Daughter,” announced Ramu, “I’ve blocked tickets for the evening show.”

“Looks like your fiancé is very enthusiastic,” said Roopa to Meera as they went into the kitchen to prepare lunch.

“He’s good at heart,” said Meera, “but obstinate like a child.”

“May I know,” Roopa tried to sound casual though curious, “how it all began?”

“He was my rude boss once,” said Meera smilingly, “but later I realized he’s a committed and hard working disciplinarian. When I realized how soft he’s at heart, I developed a soft-centre for him in my heart. In time, he declared his love and I disclosed mine.”

“I wish you all the best,” said Roopa extending her hand to Meera.

Soon they had a sumptuous lunch after which the betrothed left the newly weds with a promise to meet at Liberty at 5.30.

After siesta, on their way to the movie, Sathyam took Roopa on his Lambretta to his old lodging to let her have a feel of his bachelor living, when riding pillion, she turned apprehensive as assorted vehicles whizzed past them. Moreover, she felt swamped in the traffic and worried about being hit from all sides, but soon, seeing those women, riding pillion, clutch at their men in a romantic fold; she ruefully recalled her own daydreams of yore. While Sathyam goaded her to get closer, holding the seat-handle for support, she sat erect, as though to distance herself from the reality.

As anticipated by Sathyam, they found Padmavathi in the verandah.

“Glad you’re married,” said the landlady after greeting them warmly. “But know I miss you sorely.”

“I told Roopa,” said Sathyam like the one freed from a necessary evil. “I had greatly enjoyed my stay here.”

“Roopa, no woman ever justified her name as you do,” said Padmavathi, bowled over by her beauty, “and he’s the best behaved man I know apart from my poor man.”

While Padmavathi pressed them to stay on for dinner, they excused themselves to go to the movie and Padmavathi allowed them to leave only after Roopa took the blouse piece she gave to commemorate that first visit. When the Sathyams reached Liberty, they found the engaged waiting for them.

Seeing Roopa engrossed in the movie, Sathyam didn’t disturb her with his witticisms. However, when it was intermission, he goaded her to go along with them into the lounge for refreshments. Overwhelmed as she was with the mystery of the love story, she preferred to remain in the auditorium as though to savor the setting.

“How did you like it?” Ramu asked Roopa as they came out in the end.

“It’s all so touching,” Roopa replied melancholically.

“After all,” said Ramu excitedly, “it’s a David Lean movie.”

“All said and done,” Sathyam sounded critical, “to me it appears odd that a married woman should fall in love with a stranger, that too, at the first sight. At that with a man who’s not even right in the leg! Well, seduction I can understand, but losing one’s head straight away and to part with the heart in a flicker is beyond me. Maybe, it could be the way in the West,”

“East or West human nature is the same,” said Ramu, “though it’s the cultural ethos that fashions our social mores. Openness could never be the sole cause of promiscuity and thus to picture the Western societies as loose is stupid, to say the least. On the other hand, our

culture that frowns at the mixing of the sexes puts paid to the Cupid. If ever love is fuelled by furtive glances, the fear of a scandal straps the enamored to their respective seats. Even if some enterprising were to venture regardless, our way of life foils their bid to find a place for lovemaking. Yet, one hears, even here, of illicit relationships in spite of the hindrances. Of course, it all depends on the condition of one's mind and the attendant circumstances of life."

"You've the knack of winning arguments," conceded Sathyam.

Roopa listened to Ramu with interest while Meera looked at him in adoration.

After dinner in a nearby restaurant, they parted with that exciting feeling associated with the flush of growing camaraderie among couples.

When the Sathyams reached home, they found that the landlord and his lady had already called it a day.

"It portends well," said Sathyam to Roopa, "for our landlady may not be waking up for long to monitor our moves."

'Maybe, it's a good omen for some eager couple,' thought Roopa. 'But what value fate could add to my life now? Well, as the saying goes, one never knows.'

17

Next morning, as Sathyam kick-started his Lambretta to make it to the office, Lalitha who waited at the gate to see his back, went up to Roopa.

"How do you like the place?" she enquired in a tone commonly assumed by all landladies while talking to their tenants.

"It's a nice little place," said Roopa who took to the penthouse from the beginning.

"For eight-fifty," said Lalitha condescendingly, "you can't get anything like this, anywhere in the city."

"Maybe," said Roopa, "you know I'm new to Hyderabad."

"You can take my word for it," assured Lalitha.

"I hope," said Roopa, "you don't mind having some tea."

"I don't mind," said Lalitha as if in repartee, "if you mind about sugar."

Over the cup of Lipton tea that Roopa served her, Lalitha enquired, "How are things otherwise?"

"I have nothing to complain about."

“That’s the way it starts for a bride but come middle life and all that changes,” said Lalitha getting closer to Roopa as if to whisper in her ear. “Woman needs a large heart to put up with the problems that her mid-life poses. Having mooned away during the honeymoon, she finds her life souring well before she turns forty as by then her man would have developed a roving eye.”

“You seem to be generalizing,” protested Roopa as Lalitha paused for her response.

“It’s stupid to think ‘it’s not for me’ way, and smartness lies in taking precautions,” began Lalitha in an undertone as though she were recanting some *taantric mantra* to Roopa. “Don’t fail to keep your man in your grip or else he would slip without your ever knowing it. Strong though he would seem, man has his weak spots and weaker moments besides. Though nature blessed him to make it a man’s world, when it comes to the crunch, it endowed women with what that matters most to him. Hold your own when he needs you the most and you’ll find him prepared to pay whatever is your due. That’s the time to fix him, and in time he won’t be bothersome, if only to reach the goal of his passion.”

While Roopa sat perplexed as all that sounded alien to her ears, after more of the same, Lalitha said, “Aren’t you looking for a maidservant?”

“Can you find someone reliable for me?”

“I’ll get you a decent woman,” Lalitha promised and left as a neighbor called for her. The next day, true to her word, Lalitha fetched Yamma, who looked twenty-five.

“Pay me sixty,” the prospect quoted after ascertaining the nature of the chores.

“When can you join?” enquired Roopa as she found Yamma quite decent-looking.

“If you’ve any work left still,” responded Yamma, “I’ll attend to it right now. Otherwise, tomorrow, sharp at seven.”

“Today being *sapthami*,” said Lalitha, “it would make an auspicious beginning.”

As Yamma reappeared with the broom, Lalitha took leave to leave the field wide open for the maidservant.

“I also work at Taraamma’s house, she too is beautiful, but you are better,” Yamma volunteered information. “She works in a star hotel and her husband in some private company; they have a boy and a girl. They live in a well-furnished house in the 7th lane. Like many she does not dump work on the maidservants to make hunchbacks out of them.”

Before Yamma swept the house clean, Roopa realized that had a chatterbox for company, however, living as she was in an unenthusiastic mode, even the novelty of the city life failed to lift Roopa's quality of life.

"I am getting sick," Roopa complained to Sathyam one night, "sitting all day at home and doing nothing."

"I believe," he said in jest, "bookworms worm their way through life."

"Good reading helps us visualize the failings of others with a feeling heart," she said a little stung. "But reading alone wouldn't make life."

"I've seen a lending library nearby," he said in smile. "It may keep you going till our offspring arrives."

"I'll find out, any way," she said, and thought, "How come, I'm not craving to conceive?"

"I only hope," he said as he took her into his arms, "your fictional characters won't block your favors to this character."

"You won't find me," she said dryly, "wanting in my duty."

"I want your love," he said persuasively, "though I value your commitment."

"Isn't being wife," she said evasively, "a measure of woman's love?"

"Yes," he said resignedly, "wifely love."

"Maybe," she said in spite of herself, "marriage provides opportunities to love and be loved."

"As the saying goes," he said meekly, "once an opportunity is lost, it is lost forever. I hope it won't be the case with us."

"Let's see," she said resignedly, "what opportunities come our way."

"I'm all for grabbing what's on hand," he said taking her into his arms, "while awaiting the future doles of fortune."

It is the characteristic of the life's curve that while hopes soar with its ascent, dreams nosedive in its descent.

18

The next day, when Roopa went down the steps, Lalitha, at the gate, invited her for a chit-chat. Promising to join her in time, Roopa went in search of the lending library that Sathyam said he had seen in the locality, but as she returned with 'Good Earth', not finding

Lalitha at the gate, she felt, ‘after all the book might have something better to reveal than the good lady’s gossip.’ However, on second thoughts, she felt that Lalitha might take it amiss, were she to fail to peep in as promised.

As Roopa stepped in, introducing her warmly to her friend Sangeetha, Lalitha said, “didn’t I tell you Roopa that once let loose; these men lean towards loose women. You may know from Kusuma’s story how far life could take us women.” And as if on cue, Sangeetha resumed the tale of the out-of-favor-woman from where she had left it:

Kusuma tried every trick that Vastayana postulated in the *kamasutra* to lure her husband back into her bed but to no avail. However, she didn’t think of divorce as it would leave her fending for herself, hounded by men as an easy prey. So preferring the married plough in her mental furrow, she hit upon an idea to pin down the philanderer at home and approached her widowed cousin Purnima, who was above average and below thirty.

“See you’ve no male to fill the gap,” said Kusuma to her cousin without any prevarication, “and my man believes that by filling his belly at home, he’s satisfying my appetite as well.”

“That’s the irony of woman’s life,” lamented the widow, who was privy to Kusuma’s predicament.

“It’s the malady of our men,” Kusuma sounded sympathetic, “that they won’t marry widows and spurn divorcees, leaving both to rot in their paternal homes.”

“That’s why it’s said,” Purnima’s lament continued, “better be none than a woman.”

“But to what avail is all that having been born?” Kusuma said driving home her point. “I’ve thought about a way out for both of us. With a little bit of give and take between us, we can make the best of it for the rest of our lives.”

“What has a poor widow like me got to offer you?”

“It’s your vulnerability,” said Kusuma, however, losing the irony of it all in her own stance. “When my hubby finds a hapless widow for a guest, won’t he imagine the possibilities?”

“That will only complicate matters,” said Purnima unenthusiastically, “for me and you as well.”

“Consider this,” Kusuma continued with her enticement, “as he would stay at home trying to seduce you, I would be able to allure him back into my arms. Once he behaves himself, I would let him have your favors for a bonus. I hope you will agree that in our situation, it’s better to share something than to have nothing at all.”

When Purnima came camping at her cousin's place, though in apprehension, said Sangeetha drawing the tale to a close, the man of the house began to feel more at home. True to her word, Kusuma made it a *menage a trois* with Purnima, and they, as the story ends, lived happily ever after

"You are too young to understand the intricacies of women's lives," said Lalitha to Roopa. "See how practical this Kusuma is!"

"Well," said Roopa in wonderment, "it looks like anything could happen in life!"

"When it comes to love life, nothing worthwhile can happen in a man's life unless woman concedes," said Lalitha as though to make Roopa privy to the ingrained characteristics of the feminine fecundity. "But let woman just wink, and men in scores line up to prostrate at her feet to cater to her every whim and fancy. Well, once she gives in, the man makes her dance to his tunes in turn, so if a woman is careless in choosing her lover, it could as well spell trouble for her."

'How come I've never heard of such things before?' Roopa thought leaving them, as it was time for Sathyam's return, "Maybe the exposure in the metros would make women more pragmatic. Books might educate, but it's the life that teaches."

"Sorry, I was held up at the office," Sathyam grumbled as he came home late in the evening. "The minister wanted some statistics, of course the irrelevant kind, and it's enough for the secretary to be after me. Though quick at extracting work, they're slow in rewarding the deserving. Even otherwise, the burden of work is borne by the likes of me, but the loaves of office are reserved for the scheduled castes."

"They too need a place under the sun," she said as she thought about Anand, "unexposed as they were to the light of life for so long."

"Not that I don't feel for them," he said stoically. "But nothing should be done at the cost of merit. Any way, there's nothing that can be done about it so long as the politicians have an axe to grind with them."

"Why feel frustrated," she said helpfully, "when it's beyond our control?"

"Whatever," he said still smarting, "how can one suppress aspirations?"

'It seems life's balancing act lies in reconciling the aspirations and the attendant limitations,' she thought but didn't offer any comment.

"Why crib about the routine," said Sathyam as though in reconciliation. "We would be having a gala time next Sunday. My colleagues came up with the idea of a picnic at Gandipet to felicitate us. As they insisted, I said yes, hoping you would agree."

“Have I ever spoiled your party?” said Roopa enthused herself, and, thought, ‘Maybe, it makes sense to go out at times than brooding at home all the time.’

19

That Sunday morning, the picnic spot at Gandipet, on the banks of Osmansagar, was crowded with holidaymakers of all descriptions. When Sathyam and Roopa reached the place on their Lambretta, the gathering found their bearings for reveling.

“Mrs. Sathyam is marvelous,” admired a middle-aged man within Roopa’s hearing. Though the compliment pleased her, the allusion startled her. She was galled at her social identity as Mrs. Sathyam.

‘Mrs. Sathyam could be the prop of my public stance,’ she despaired, ‘but who would know about my private reconciliation for accommodation!’

Besides the admiring looks of the males around, and the eagerness of the females to befriend her, enlivened her mood, Roopa didn’t fail to discern the amorous glances of men who loitered around her, though the not so forthright appeared casual, camouflaging their craving. When someone proposed a round of rummy, and produced three sets of unopened packs, as if to seduce the fence sitters, Sathyam, who was amusing himself with some children nearby, was summoned. Roopa too was roped in for a quorum.

“Five rupees a count,” proposed a regular clubman.

“If it were for stakes,” Sathyam tended to withdraw, “I’m not a game for it.”

“Card-game without stakes,” remarked the regular, “is like an amorous exercise with the incapable: the psyche gets no kicks, while the hands ache.”

“Oh, why spoil the party,” said his friend, “any way; you’ve your sidekicks at the club for your kicks.”

Seeing Roopa adept at the game, Sathyam asked, “How come you play so well!”

“We used to play at Sandhya’s place,” she said declaring yet another deal.

“Mrs. Sathyam,” complimented the regular, “I think you would make a fortune if only you turn into a pro. You’ve got the skill and luck as well in required measures to sweep the stakes.”

“Lucky at cards and unlucky in love,” said his friend. “Why bother her with your proposition.”

After scooting the next deal, Roopa looked up, as if on cue, and found a youth perched on a low branch. Sensing that he was looking down at her, she realized her *pallu* had

loosened its guard on her assets making her readjust her apparel to block her enticing valley to his probing glances. Blushing nevertheless, she seemed pleased at his enterprise and experienced a sense of romanticism underlined by his eagerness.

After the brunch, when the group gathered for a round of bingo with gusto, as Sathyam missed the house narrowly, commented a wag amongst them, “With a wife like his in his house, where’s the need for another house.”

Spending the day in mirth and merriment, and having agreed upon the need for future outings, the gathering dispersed towards the evening.

“I hope you’ve enjoyed,” said Sathyam as she got onto the pillion, “how everyone sings your praises! I’m really proud of you.”

“It’s a nice outing,” she said fondly glancing backwards as they proceeded homewards.

While the euphoria of the event cast an infectious spell on Roopa, synchronous with his spirits, Sathyam switched into the top gear.

20

As though to bring Roopa back to her humdrum routine, the next morning, Yamma turned up for work past nine.

“Why so late?” said Roopa in irritation

“I was held up at Taraamma’s house,” Yamma began her harangue by way of an explanation. “I was helping her pack up for her journey. Don’t worry *amma*; she won’t go out much, may be once or twice in a month, and that too just for two or three days, no more.”

As Yamma got on with her work, satisfied with the explanation, Roopa busied herself with the lunch-box for Sathyam. However, when the buzzer sounded that afternoon, breaking the monotony, Roopa expected the postman, and finding him, she experienced a sense of excitement.

“Have you moved in recently?” asked the postman handing her a couple of envelopes.

“My father is a Post Master at Kakinada,” she said, and seeing that the letters were from Sandhya and her father, she felt that it was bonus post for her.

“So we’re *baradaris*,” he said as he left. “I’ll treat your mail as our family mail.”

Closing the door behind him, she opened Ramaiah’s letter first, not wanting to get distracted from the bliss of Sandhya’s missive later. As she culled through her father’s letter, she gathered that all was well at home, and felt glad about that. But as she fondly

gazed at her address in Sandhya's hand, her eyes glistened with fondness. When she pressed the envelope to her bosom, her breasts started heaving as though to synchronize her emotions with Sandhya's anticipated feelings. As she unfolded the letter at length, her eyes became antennas to transmit the spasms of Sandhya's heart to her soul.

Roopa, my Lovey,

I couldn't think of a better way of addressing you than the one you thought for me, moreover, you are to me what I am to you, aren't you?

In our separation, I feel as though the vitals of my body and the essence of my soul were wrenched out from me. I have come to realize that your body is but an extension of my soul. I can feel your line like the flow in my veins - I've carried my body leaving behind my soul in your frame. Now I know, more than ever, that we are complete only in our togetherness. I pray that after I get married, we might become neighbors for all our life. Until then, we have to bear our separation and bide for the time.

Sorry for having kept you waiting for so long for my letter. Well, I was at a loss for words when it came to writing to you. Believe me.

Yours all,

Sandhya.

As Roopa read and reread the letter, her innate longing for Sandhya wrenched her every nerve. Thus at bedtime that night, having shown her father's letter to Sathyam, she said, "I want to go home."

"What's the hurry?" he said softly. "Any way we would be there for the *dasara*."

"Let me go now as *dasara* is far way," she tried to persuade him. "Then we can go together."

"It's not even a month since we've set up our sweet home and why sour it so soon," he said in smile and tried to take her into his arms, as though to whisper the prescription for her ailment. "Not that I can't understand your feelings but you've got to get over your homesickness."

Dodging him, she turned her back on him.

"Don't behave like a kid," he said affectionately, and tried to turn her to his side.

"What have you got to do with a kid?" she said as she resisted his advances.

"You know," he said softly, cuddling her, "that I didn't mean it that way."

"Never mind," she said withdrawing from his embrace. "I prefer being a kid."

"I am sorry," he said pleadingly, "if I've hurt you."

"If you are really sorry," she said, pulling a blanket over her head, as though it were curtains for him, "let me be alone."

The next day too Sathyam had to contend with a morose Roopa, and during bedtime, as if to preempt his move, she pretended headache. Unable to bear the tension born out of her regimen, that plagued him for a couple of days more, he gave in.

"Look," he said that night, "I've a surprise for you."

Though she smelt victory, she feigned indifference.

"I'll put you on the train," he showed her the reserved ticket, "this Saturday itself."

"Thank you," she tried to appear casual.

"Now at least," he said, taking her into his arms, "you can bring your bewitching smile back onto your fascinating face."

Having enfeebled him into setting a precedent, she was not averse to giving in, and thus said enticingly, "Switch off the light."

21

Roopa's arrival that Sunday morning took her parents, still at ablutions, all by surprise.

"What's the matter?" said Janaki apprehensively.

"Oh, don't imagine things," said Roopa heartily. "I've come to have some fun."

"Still Sathyam should've wired about your arrival," said Ramaiah in relief,

"If you're not pleased," said Roopa making a mocking move. "I'll go back right now."

"Stop it now," said Janaki holding Roopa's hand, and probing her daughter's demeanor, she asked, "how's your husband?"

"He's fine," said Roopa looking around. "But where are our devils?"

As though to answer her query, Chandrika emerged from the bathroom and Raju came from the vegetable market.

"So, Raju gives you a helping hand these days," Roopa said aloud before whispering to him. "What's the commission like my boy?"

"How is my poor brother-in-law?" Raju said in jest. "Hope he didn't pack you off to get rid of your nagging."

"What's the news from Suguna?" said Roopa..

"She's doing fine with her family," said Janaki with that sense of satisfaction mothers derive at the well-being of their married daughters. "But she complains that you don't write to her."

‘What of her?’ said Roopa, ‘why not find out if she ever wrote to me?’

‘How parents wish that their children develop a strong family bond that binds the coming generations,’ said Janaki stoically. ‘Sadly these days even the first cousins are not on familiar terms.’

However, proving her mother wrong, Roopa and Chandrika closeted over coffee to exchange confidences.

‘Won’t you,’ said Roopa eagerly, ‘show me the progress card?’

‘He’s on the lookout for a job in Madras,’ said Chandrika holding Roopa’s hand. ‘We want to move out of here to save embarrassment to our parents. Hopefully the decks would be cleared by December. You know he’s eager to meet you.’

‘It should be a pleasure,’ said Roopa, ‘meeting my brother-in-law in the making.’

‘I hope,’ said Chandrika hoping to hear in the affirmative, ‘your fears are but liars.’

‘When hopes are duped what’s there to fear?’ said Roopa resignedly. ‘Maybe, it’s in the nature of marriage that one learns to fall in line.’

‘I’ll know that any way but you should know,’ said Chandrika, ‘without you Sandhya is like a fish out of water. Oh, how she loves you!’

‘If not for her love,’ said Roopa closing her eyes as though to picture her friend, ‘there’s no hope in my life.’

‘I wish I too had a friend like her,’ said Chandrika, ‘your friendship makes me jealous.’

‘Roopa,’ yelled Janaki from the kitchen, ‘why not you have your bath.’

‘I’ll have an early lunch,’ said Roopa to Chandrika, picking up her bathrobe, ‘and rush to Sandhya.’

‘I know you would be restless till you meet her,’ said Janaki in smile as Roopa went into the kitchen on her way to the bathroom. ‘Tell me, how are you managing your home?’

‘Why not come and see for yourselves?’ said Roopa smiling.

‘We’ll come after you settle down,’ said Ramaiah joining them. ‘I hope you’re making the best of life.’

‘You should know,’ said Janaki to Roopa, ‘how your father is worried about you.’

‘No need for that,’ said Roopa thoughtfully. ‘He looks after me famously.’

After bath, in her anxiety to rush to Sandhya, Roopa joined her mother in the kitchen to pressurize her to speed up the cooking. But hardly could Roopa eat what her mother so fondly served her in time, and rushing in a rickshaw, she reached Sandhya’s place only to fumble in greeting Damayanthi at tête-à-tête with a guest.

When Roopa began to hop up the steps to Sandhya's room, Damayanthi in concern sounded caution, and told her guest, 'She's Roopa, Sandhya's friend, looks like they are born for friendship.'

Storming into Sandhya's bed without a word, Roopa overwhelmed her in a cyclonic embrace and buried her head in her sharp valley and excited by her touch for which she was craving, Sandhya wanted gratification for her soul as well with the timbre of Roopa's tone. However, even as Sandhya parted her sensuous lips to initiate a dialogue, Roopa in all eagerness to savor them, closed in on them for deep kissing, and even when her lips were set free, Sandhya couldn't give vent to her feelings past monosyllables as Roopa went on probing her labia with her craving tongue. But when Roopa's clamor rent the air as Sandhya plunged her tongue into her surging vulva to savor its flavor, they both had gratifying feeling.

'Oh!' said Sandhya in embosom with Roopa. 'It's as if it were ages.'

'How true,' crooned Roopa into Sandhya's ear, 'that you make me die for you!'

'I'm going crazy craving for you,' said Sandhya longingly. 'How I started wishing that you weren't married!'

'Wonder how we failed,' said Roopa fondling Sandhya, 'to make it before I was trapped in the wedlock.'

'Better late than never,' said Sandhya fondling Roopa, 'but, still we have so much life left for us.'

'If only,' said Roopa in apprehension, 'our men wink at our escapades.'

'Why not I,' said Sandhya joking, 'marry a blind one?'

'Jokes apart,' said Roopa in speculation, 'what if your 'would-be' spoils the party?'

'Why,' said Sandhya mirthfully, 'I would walk out on him. Are you for that?'

'Won't I make Sathyam blind,' said Roopa mystically, 'literally and otherwise as well.'

'Why soil the hand and then go for the soap,' continued Sandhya in the same vein. 'I will remain single.'

'But that would leave you without a manhood,' said Roopa in jest. 'Better you hook my dream man for our *menage a trois*.'

'It is fine,' said Sandhya, 'just to fantasize.'

'Why won't a threesome be fantastic,' said Roopa, 'as well in reality.'

'Given our love,' said Sandhya thoughtfully, 'it may be so.'

'But for now,' said Roopa, 'it's back to the reality.'

‘How are things with you now?’ said Sandhya

‘There’s nothing wrong with him,’ said Roopa as though grasping the reality, ‘and nothing goes right for me. That’s the irony of it all.’

‘Why this emergency landing?’ said Sandhya in seeming innocence.

‘Don’t you know that?’ said Roopa looking at Sandhya endearingly. ‘Your letter gave me wings, and I flew into our nest.’

‘Why not find a groom for me in Domalaguda,’ said Sandhya dreamily, ‘for our meaningful life.’

‘Good idea,’ said Roopa pensively, ‘but I’ve come to believe I’m born unlucky.’

‘I’ll do all I can to make you happy,’ said Sandhya overwhelmed, ‘our *ménage à trois* included. It’s my promise.’

‘Well it’s your love,’ Roopa was touched, ‘that keeps my life going.’

‘We will keep it that way,’ said Sandhya, signing the kiss of contract with her lips, ‘come what may.’

‘I know we would,’ said Roopa, grabbing Sandhya’s lips to seal the agreement, ‘at any cost.’

Buoyed by Sandhya’s commitment to their love and accompanied by Raju, Roopa called on her in-laws that evening.

‘We’ve always felt you would make a good daughter-in-law,’ said a satisfied Durgamma, after an hour-long enquiry. Taking leave in the end, Roopa promised to stay with them for a couple of days before she left for Hyderabad.

‘It’s terrible waiting for you all day long,’ Roopa said as she nestled into Sandhya the next evening. ‘Why not bunk the post-lunch sessions?’

‘Why, to let all tongues wag at the campus,’ said Sandhya in jest.

‘Coming to ours,’ said Roopa winking at her.

‘See,’ said Sandhya protruding her tongue, ‘how dry it is.’

‘I’m all wet for that,’ said Roopa shedding her sari.

‘Your figure dear,’ said Sandhya fondling Roopa in their embrace, ‘is flowing to perfection.’

‘Thank the change of the climes for that,’ said Roopa naughtily.

‘Don’t be mean,’ said Sandhya teasingly, squeezing Roopa’s. ‘Give credit to whom it’s due.’

‘Come lovey,’ said Roopa invitingly, ‘let me credit it to your account now.’

‘Oh!’ sputtered Sandhya in time. ‘I feel wanted.’

‘You make me live,’ continued Roopa.

Next day, when Roopa went to Chandrika’s office, she saw her with a man of about thirty, and felt that he could be her beau.

‘This is Roopa,’ Chandrika introduced her to him.

‘I am Anand,’ he said, ‘the ever grateful.’

‘Please, don’t make much of it,’ said Roopa in embarrassment.

‘Your gesture is love-saving for us,’ he said.

‘I’m glad you’re happy,’ said Roopa as though to shed part of her guilt. ‘How are you sure I didn’t have an axe to grind?’

‘Even then,’ he insisted, ‘it doesn’t lessen our gratitude.’

‘I don’t deserve it, though,’ she thought, but said, ‘I wish you all the best.’

‘Thank you,’ he said as he left them to exchange notes.

‘How do you like him?’ enquired Chandrika eagerly.

‘He has got good features,’ said Roopa shaking Chandrika’s hand in congratulation. ‘You’ve chosen well.’

‘Coming from you,’ said Chandrika in elation, ‘it’s a compliment.’

When it was time for Roopa’s departure, the mates felt wrenched from one another. Neither was Janaki satisfied. ‘You were hardly at home,’ she complained. Seeing his daughter in a happy frame of mind, Ramaiah, however, thought she got reconciled to her situation at last and felt relieved at that. However, the three days she spent in her in-laws’ house, with the constant reference to Sathyam therein, made her experience the effect of his presence more in his absence, which made her feel that she was in the annex of her own home.

22

Back in Sathyam’s arms on her return, Roopa felt as though she landed in the lap of reality after her reign in the realms of fantasy.

‘Isn’t he lucky in a way?’ she thought that night, lying beside Sathyam, who was asleep by then. ‘While he airs his dreams freely, I’m forced to bury my fulfillment at the bottom of my heart. Oh, whom can I tell how happy I’m in our lesbian love? What a paradox! Wasn’t it he that triggered my libido to explode in Sandhya’s embrace. But for that weak moment, could I ever have tasted the sweetness of a woman’s love in lovemaking!’

‘Is the same-sex syndrome abnormal?’ she asked herself. ‘What’s the yardstick to judge it? Why, both of us have that innate want, and suffer when we can’t have it. And when we make it, don’t we go to the depths of sexual delight and reach the heights of sensual ecstasy? Won’t our souls merge with our bodies to communicate our mutual craving in lovemaking? Love is our life-force, isn’t it?’

‘That we’re able to enjoy sex without guilt makes it normal after all,’ she seemed to feel at ease with her libido. ‘Maybe, woman could truly experience the beauty of femininity in lesbian lovemaking! Whatever, my same-sex fondness in no way hampers my weakness for the male embrace, does it? It should be no different for Sandhya when she gets her man, so what’s the hitch in being bisexual? It’s a different matter though that Sathyam fails to inspire love in me. Am I not the loser as my life is devoid of all that goes with loving a he-man?’

The mysterious thought of man’s love mystified her soul. Her intimacy with Sandhya and her exposure to Sathyam enabled her to visualize what was lacking in her womanly life. The more she valued her mate’s fondness for her, the cure for her melancholy, she was even more dissatisfied with her husband, which insensibly increased her innate craving for an enticing man of her own, and that made her daydream about him.

Roopa didn’t wake up until Yamma came at nine and as Sathyam was about to leave by then, she said, ‘Why didn’t you wake me up?’

‘Where was the need?’ he said affectionately. ‘Let’s go for a movie in the evening. I will ask Ramu and Meera to join us. Be sure you’re ready by the time I come home.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said apologetically. ‘You’ve to do without the lunch-box today.’

‘Don’t be sentimental,’ he said as he left.

‘How are your people?’ enquired Yamma after Sathyam was gone.

‘They’re fine,’ said Roopa. ‘But what’s wrong with you? You bunked yesterday and your sevens have become nines these days. Were you regular when I was away?’

‘Ask *ayya*, if you’ve any doubt,’ protested Yamma. ‘*Ayya* is a good man, not like the others who have nothing but lecherous looks for the maidservants.’

‘How’s your *Taraamma*?’ enquired Roopa, and thought. ‘Why am I inquisitive about an unknown woman?’

‘She’s fine,’ said Yamma. ‘Why don’t you meet her? I’ve already told her about you.’

‘What did you tell her?’ enquired Roopa as Yamma didn’t blabber on her own, for once.

'I've told her you're good at heart and beautiful to look at.'

'What did she say?' Roopa couldn't help but ask.

'I would love to meet her, that's what she said.'

By the time Sathyam returned, she was still lounging in the hall.

'You had all the time in the world to get ready,' he said in irritation, 'I'm afraid we would be late. When I rang up Ramu he said he has a surprise for us.'

'What else it could be but their wedding,' she said as she went to the bathroom.

When they reached the Skyline in time, leaving Roopa at the portico, Sathyam went to park his Lambretta. However, Ramu, who came on his Royal Enfield with Meera, spotted Roopa and dropped his companion for her company.

'How's your trip?' Meera greeted Roopa.

'Okay,' Roopa said in smile, 'but you're not to be seen even before the marriage,'

Soon Sathyam and Ramu joined them.

'We heartily welcome you,' Meera and Ramu invited the Sathyams in unison, 'to lend your hand in ringing our wedding bells, the first of next month.'

'Congrats,' the Sathyams said in one voice. 'We knew its coming.'

As she didn't find the movie engrossing, Roopa got bored. When she chanced to see Ramu and Meera at footsie, and finding Sathyam glued to the screen, she thought, 'romance is all about inclinations' and in the same vein, she took Sathyam's keenness for the formula movie by way of an explanation for his ungainliness. For the rest of the show, however, she found herself following the footsie on the floor more than the happenings on the screen as the betrothed anyway were too engrossed with themselves to be aware of her voyeurism. However, when the screen flashed 'The End', the rendezvous of the engaged had ended to Roopa's peculiar disappointment.

'Life without romance is like food that is stale,' she thought, as she got on to Sathyam's Lambretta. 'What is left of life shorn of romance?'

That evening, a week later, the Sathyams were at the much-awaited wedding of Ramu and Meera that was well attended too. As Roopa looked gorgeous in her grey maroon Kanchi silk sari, finding her cut a figure in the gathering, Sathyam couldn't help but gloat over his fortune. When in the end, after bidding adieu to the newly weds, as they reached the parking space, Sathyam thought that it's an irony that Roopa who should've adorned a palanquin had to ride the pillion instead. As her supposed deprivation made him feel guilty,

he realized how much he loved his wife, and thought that he should acquire a four-wheeler one day.

When they reached home, Roopa could discern a change in his demeanor and attributed it to the satisfaction he might have derived from Ramu's wedding. While she hit the pillow straight, for long he lay by her side looking at her as it dawned on him that they hover around different emotional planes in spite of their physical proximity.

Seems it is the weird fate of the unrequited love that even the physical possession of the loved one, wouldn't lead to an emotional union.

23

Time was on its languid course in Roopa's life until that winter afternoon, when Tara entered into it. Book-marking the *Madame Bovary* that she was engrossed in, an irritated Roopa opened the door to the sound of the buzzer, to be pleasantly surprised at finding a smart and beautiful woman across the threshold.

'I'm Tara,' said the visitor extending her hand to Roopa.

'Oh,' said Roopa taking Tara's hand with a strange sense of excitement.

'Hope I'm not disturbing you,' said Tara, glancing at the book in Roopa's hand.

'I was just browsing through it,' said Roopa placing *Madame Bovary* on the teapoy.

'I've heard it's a classic of infidelity,' said Tara picking up the book.

'It all depends,' said Roopa without taking a stance, 'how one looks at it.'

'I wanted to see you for long,' said Tara with a smile. 'But I've got an excuse only now. Yamma went to her native place and won't turn up till the weekend.'

'She's a great fan of yours,' said Roopa smiling.

'I think,' Tara said with her characteristic ease, 'it's the other way round. She says you're the most charming woman ever. Now I realize she doesn't exaggerate.'

'You've a rare grace,' said Roopa earnestly.

'We need a romantic man's judgment for that, don't we?' said Tara positing *Madame Bovary* back on the teapoy. 'Well, to be beautiful is one thing and to beautify is another. Woman's beauty could be a lovers' fortune but more often, I suppose, it's the husband's routine.'

'If only my dream-man were for the real,' thought Roopa, nevertheless, keeping quiet.

'What's your husband?' asked Tara appearing to sound casual.

'He's a Senior Assistant at the Secretariat.'

'I guess yours is a love marriage,' Tara said implying that but for the weakness of love, Roopa must have got a better match.

'It's a regulation match,' said Roopa sounding mysterious in her own way.

While Roopa was too young and inexperienced in life to infer Tara's innuendo, the latter for her part was puzzled to understand what was at the back of Roopa's mind.

'Why don't you come,' invited Tara enticingly, 'and grace my place?'

'Please excuse me for now,' said Roopa eager to continue with *Madame Bovary's* story, 'I'll present myself soon enough.'

'You know, I'm a working woman but now I'm on leave all this week. If not now, come later, but don't disappoint me,' said Tara and left, without waiting for a reply, in the manner of a person who would leave as though the argument was over with that statement.

After Tara had left, Roopa found herself contemplating, 'What a stylish carriage she has, backed by that confident manner! Won't she make the hallmark of grace itself? Oh, there's something casual about her remarkable beauty as well. What an impressive personality she has! Well, she symbolizes the modern woman.'

Though Roopa went back to *Madame Bovary*, it didn't take her long to realize that Tara's persona seized her mind, and unable to concentrate on the book she gave up in the end.

'Is this fascination for Tara owing to my lesbian leanings?' Roopa began contemplating. 'Oh, am I bisexual by disposition? No, it can't be, it was only my distress that triggered that union with Sandhya. Looks like Tara is no less enamored of me. Could she be a lesbian by any chance? If it ever the push comes to the shove, it won't be an unwelcome development, would it?'

24

After lunch, the next day, Roopa set out to Tara's place, and soon found herself pressing the door buzzer, though without a response from within. Realizing in time that there was load shedding in their area, she knocked at the door that Tara opened expectantly.

'Grace my house,' said Tara extending her hand to Roopa. 'I began wondering whether you would make it at all.'

'Who won't want the pleasure of your company?' said Roopa warmly grabbing Tara's hand.

'You seem to have a great taste,' said Roopa as Tara took her around the well-appointed place.

‘Thanks for your compliment,’ said Tara taking Roopa’s hand. ‘But it takes more than good taste to adorn a home. One has to make adjustments for that.’

‘Why, don’t I know,’ said Roopa pressing Tara’s shoulder sympathetically, ‘that the working couples have to put up with a lot many inconveniences?’

‘Enduring inconveniences may lead one up to a point,’ said Tara as the power supply was restored, ‘but it’s the compromises that count in today’s world.’

‘I don’t quite get you,’ said Roopa going blank.

Before she got the answer, the buzzer was on.

‘What a surprise!’ Roopa found Tara welcoming someone at the door.

‘Your thought got me into the mood,’ Roopa heard an ardent male voice, and turned her gaze instinctively to find a handsome man of about thirty-five taking Tara’s hand as he came in.

‘I’ve a guest,’ said Tara withdrawing her hand tentatively as he turned his gaze towards Roopa who kept staring at them wide-eyed.

‘Apologies for the trespass,’ he said as he came up to Roopa.

‘Not at all, she is Roopa my neighbor,’ said Tara in introduction. ‘He’s Ravi, my cousin.’

‘What a persona-synchronous name!’ he exclaimed as Roopa was flabbergasted.

‘How come you failed to tell me,’ he complained to Tara, while ogling at Roopa, ‘that you’ve such a marvelous friend!’

‘I had the pleasure,’ said Tara looking at Roopa in embarrassment, ‘of meeting her only yesterday.’

‘How lucky it’s my turn today!’ he said, without taking his eyes off Roopa.

‘I think it’s reciprocal,’ said Tara seemingly prompting Roopa. ‘What do you say Roopa?’

Though his forthrightness tickled Roopa’s psyche, her modesty reined in her enthusiasm, making her dumb.

‘You won’t find many like Ravi,’ said Tara, not hiding her familiarity. ‘I call him the businessman with romantic wings.’

‘That’s Tara for you,’ he said turning to Roopa, ‘an expert at handing out left-handed compliments.’

‘It seems you lost your wits after seeing Roopa,’ said Tara as if to clarify, ‘Haven’t you heard it said that love is a hackneyed expression unless backed by money? I was implying that you’ve the means to fan love in any woman’s heart. Isn’t it a fulsome compliment for a handsome guy?’

As Tara's characterization of Ravi thrilled Roopa's romanticism, she found herself staring at him endearingly.

'It's the case of beauty and brains at work together,' he said in mock exasperation, and sank into the sofa between the host and her guest.

'You men always underestimate women, of course, only to go wrong,' said Tara enlivening the conversation further, 'Roopa has brilliant brains and is a judicious reader besides.'

'Don't believe her,' Roopa inadvertently addressed him. 'She's exaggerating.'

'Is it possible to exaggerate your beauty?' Ravi addressed Roopa. 'With no need for makeup, you've all the time for intellectual pursuits. Won't that glow your persona all the more giving that special aura?'

'You're a difficult fellow,' Tara patted him in admiration while Roopa couldn't help feel flattered.

'Tell Roopa,' he said, mocking exasperation, 'is it not another left-handed give.'

'I had better prepare some tea for us,' Tara got up from the sofa.

'Let me also come,' said Roopa, however, without attempting to get up.

'Why leave our guest alone,' said Tara to Roopa.

'What large heartedness to make the lady guest your co-hostess,' said Ravi to Tara, and as she left smiling, he turned to Roopa, 'Do you think I'm a bore or what?'

'Why no,' she said eagerly, afraid that her silence would otherwise silence him depriving the excitement she was experiencing.

'I've seen many a beautiful woman before,' he moved closer to Roopa as he took out a pearl from his coat pocket. 'I always entertained the idea of presenting this to the 'Perfect Ten', if ever I come across one. In terms of money it costs next to nothing, but it symbolizes beauty at its very best, seen through a connoisseur's eyes. Though I've traveled the globe twice over, I didn't find the woman who I thought deserved this. And the moment I've seen you, I felt as though this is yours by right for you're more than perfect.' As he finished mystically, he grabbed her hand and thrust the pearl into it. Looking into her enamored eyes, he closed the fist, fearing she might drop it in her overwhelmed state.

Before Roopa could gather her wits, Tara walked in with the Chinaware.

'I didn't notice before,' said Tara to Roopa as they were having their tea, 'that you're left handed.'

'Oh,' said Roopa, involuntarily looking at her closed fist. 'Not really.'

‘One doesn’t get tea like this served even in Darjeeling,’ said Ravi addressing Roopa. ‘And to have it in such a lovely company, oh, it’s divine.’

‘My dear man,’ said a pleased Tara, ‘you are exaggerating really.’

‘Am I not at a loss for words,’ he said, staring at Roopa, ‘to express even a fraction of my feelings?’ Though her eyes were downcast, Roopa could envisage the darts of his desire piercing her breasts.

Then the clock struck three as though to suggest that Roopa might comprehend the situation better in solitude.

‘I’ll make a move,’ said Roopa, rising.

‘I hope for the pleasure of meeting you,’ he said extending his hand, ‘again.’ Though Roopa failed to extend her hand for him, she grasped his stress on the ‘again’.

With an embarrassing look for a reply, Roopa departed in bewilderment. Having hurried home in time, she leapt over the steps only to realize that she had left her wallet behind. Swirling in confusion, she sank on the steps and dropped her head on her knees. When she recovered a little at length, she realized that her fist was aching and it was only then that she felt the accentuated sensation of the pearl, which she found herself gripping in her fist, and though she loosened her grip, yet she couldn’t bring herself to open the fist as her mind refused to comply.

‘Oh, what should I do with this?’ she wondered, opening up her palm at length and unable to come to a conclusion in her confusion, she tucked it inside her bra, and thought, ‘let me think about it later. Would he be at her place still! Wouldn’t he have left by now? Any way, how long can I hang on here?’

She walked back to Tara’s place languidly as if to buy time, and reaching for the buzzer finally, she virtually leaned on it, having got sapped by then. However, it was a while before a surprised Tara opened the door, only after due enquiry from within.

‘I’ve left my purse here,’ muttered Roopa apologetically, still leaning on the wall.

‘Is it so?’ said Tara, and gave way to her, having recovered from her own embarrassment, ‘I didn’t notice it.’

Roopa sprang into the room and pounced upon her purse lying by the sofa.

‘Why, you look sick,’ said Tara who was composed by then.

‘I don’t know,’ murmured Roopa for an answer.

‘I was just laid up in bed,’ Tara seemed to explain her being in lingerie.

‘I am sorry.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Tara. ‘Have some water and go.’

‘No thanks.’

‘Do take care,’ said Tara herself putting on the nightgown lying nearby.

‘It should pass,’ said Roopa and began to move out.

‘I’ll see you later,’ said Tara accompanying Roopa up to the wicket-gate.

‘Thank you,’ said Roopa crossing the gate.

‘Bye for now,’ said Tara as Roopa hit the road, and thought. ‘Could there be a better way for me to seduce her than getting myself caught red-handed at that. Won’t Roopa, the platinum premium, go home and wonder about my double life? Won’t that portend well. Oh, if only we could hunt as a pair, what game that would fetch!’

‘Bye,’ said Roopa looking back at Tara, only to find her furtively glancing at the Impala parked near the gate.

25

Sinking into the sofa on reaching home, Roopa closed her eyes as if to eliminate the environs, and began to focus her thoughts on the object of her agitation. ‘This is yours by right,’ she recalled Ravi’s words as she felt for the pearl on her breast. Finding it in the left cup, she retrieved it like a treasure and posited it on her palm in adoration. Then gazing at it lovingly, she recalled his complement, ‘In terms of money it costs next to nothing, but it symbolizes beauty at its very best, seen through a connoisseur’s eyes.’

‘Those were the words of a confident man who is handsome as well,’ she thought endearingly. ‘How his eyes glowed the moment they fell on me! Didn’t his demeanor evidence the conviction his compliment carried.’ While the alluring praise endeared the pearl to her receptive mind, her innate vanity was catered to by the accomplishments of the man who presented it thus. She bowed her head, as though in reverence to it, and kissing the thing with affection, she held it by her lips while reclining like the reigning queen.

‘What he should’ve thought of me, for accepting it?’ as it occurred to her at length, she recoiled at that. ‘Haven’t I given him scope for hope? Oh yes, I did.’ It was only time before she was distressed that she had compromised her honor, and terrified, she dropped the pearl. ‘That’s why he stressed that we meet again. Oh, why did I allow him to take me for granted?’ She felt ashamed. As she got vexed with herself, she resented the very thought of him.

It's the character of man woman chemistry that feminine tendencies catalyze male proclivities. Carried away by the euphoria of her coquetry, man begins to woo woman with hope. With her vanity thus addressed by his advances, she turns flirtatious, furthering his passion for her possession. In the excitement of the moment, should he transgress the threshold of her sensitivity, fearing she had compromised her honor, she sinks in shame. Thereafter, she withdraws from him to brood over her infirmity, and in the end, as though to atone for her moment of weakness, she cold-shoulders him altogether, making him wonder what went wrong in the midst of his conquest.

Picking up the pearl from her lap, she flung it through the window as though to sever her humiliation. 'It must be his device to entice women,' she cursed herself for having given a poor account of herself to him. 'Why did I fail to fling the thing at him, then and there? Had I done that, it would have given him the real measure of my true worth. Instead of showing him his place, I gave him cause to think in terms of conquest. What a shame! But why did I allow myself to get carried away? Surely he would have taken me for a flirt or a slut even for all that. Oh, how I compromised myself.'

As she was smarting under her perceived humiliation, it occurred to her shock that Tara was a witness to all that. And that pulled her even more. 'What might she have thought of me? Won't she take me to be a flirt? What a disaster that a fellow woman should be privy to my waywardness. How can I face her ever?'

'For all I know, he could be her convenient cousin,' as her thoughts insensibly turned to Tara's relationship with the visitor, Roopa's bitterness began to wane, 'They seem to be on familiar terms after all. Her disheveled look and the time she took to open the door, that too in lingerie! Didn't that give her up? It's obvious that they were in the thick of it when I went there. Of course, her furtive glance at that Impala was a kiss and tell, wasn't it? Obviously, he's her paramour, oh, Tara!'

As the possibility of Tara's infidelity inexplicably brought tranquility to Roopa's mind, she began to review her own views about Tara. 'It's her affair any way, but what should be my stance? She appears to be good-natured and there is Yamma's word for that. Maybe, she has her own compulsions to take a lover, and why should it bother others, save her husband. Won't he be in the know of it, after all?'

While the idea induced curiosity in her, Roopa tried to apply her mind to it, 'Why, they seem to be making use of his nuptial bed for their illicit sex. Who knows, her man might be

ignoring her whoring though privy to her peccadilloes. Maybe, that's the compromise Tara was hinting at.'

'Where would her friendship lead me to?' thought Roopa trying to take stock of the situation. 'Won't Tara try to mould me into her fold, for company? Hasn't she dropped enough hints already at that? Is it possible that I may as well be tempted in her infectious acquaintance? But am I hankering for any thrills by the frills? No, never! Am I not clear about that! Well, I'm not up for grabs for some playboy like this Ravi. Temptations may come and go but surely I would stick to my goal. Let there be no mistaking that.'

'But how to go about with Tara?' she thought at length. 'Well, she is refreshingly intelligent and ineffably attractive and I have come to enjoy company, have I not? What sense does it make to forsake the pleasure of her friendship when I'm steadfast in my resolve? But, can I avoid the peril that Tara poses? Why not I take it as a challenge for the true test of fidelity is coming up trumps in the face of temptation by a seducer, let my craving is for romancing with that elusive he-man of my dreams and not to lust as the mistress of some moneyed. That's for sure.'

However, baffled by her own sympathy and understanding for Tara in spite of her questionable character, she thought, 'one is supposed to be critical in these matters, isn't it?' She was still lost in her reverie when Sathyam came home in the evening. As the sight of him brought back Ravi into her mental focus, her perceived humiliation at the hands of the trespasser made her feel disdainful about her man.

'Are you ill?' enquired Sathyam anxiously, seeing her distraught.

'I have a headache.'

'Wait,' he moved into the kitchen, 'I'll make some coffee for you.'

'Don't bother,' she followed him.

Aided by her resolve to bury the past, Roopa soon enough got over that nightmarish experience.

26

Roopa was daydreaming about Sandhya's amour, that afternoon, when Tara came calling evoking mixed feelings in her - while her presence irked Roopa for its association with her humiliation, her persona tickled her own visualization of lesbianism with her.

'Ravi is all praise for you,' said Tara at length, with an eye for Roopa's reaction.

'Well,'

Having noticed a subtle change of expression in Roopa's face, the result of her effort to be indifferent, Tara continued, 'He swore that he didn't come across a more charming woman than you.'

'Would you mind,' Roopa changed the topic, 'some tea for us now.'

'Why not we have it later,' said Tara not wanting to lose the momentum, 'if you please.'

'When are your kids back from school?'

'Around four,' said Tara eager to get over the nice talk.

'Yadamma says they're lovely,' said Roopa, 'like you.'

'Why not you see for yourself?' said Tara laying the trap. 'Shall I send them to you?'

'No, thanks,' Roopa was forced to say, 'I'd come sometime.'

'Welcome,' said Tara, 'but just t out of curiosity, are you thinking of taking up a job?'

'Frankly,' said Roopa, 'I don't hold a degree.'

'Impressed as he's with you,' Tara began tentatively, 'Ravi is keen to have you as his personal secretary, and the salary shouldn't be a constraint, that's what he said.'

'Thank you,' said Roopa, 'but I'm not for it.'

'I think,' said Tara in her attempt to lure Roopa, 'it's too good an opportunity to let go. I tell you his business is growing by leaps and bounds, so you can take your advancement for granted.'

'I told you,' said Roopa to dissuade Tara, 'I'm not a graduate.'

'With your assets and abilities,' said Tara not giving up, 'that shouldn't be a handicap. Frankly, any boss would consider himself fortunate to have you under his wings and it should be smooth sailing all the way up.'

'It's true that I'm not experienced in life,' said Roopa as though to bring that to an end. 'Just the same, I guess his offer won't further my idea of life. I'm sure, we can find many meeting points to keep meeting.'

'I respect your feelings,' said Tara resignedly, 'and would love to keep holding your hand of friendship. You can count me as a well-wisher.'

Then the conversation then turned general, and Tara left after quite a while, leaving Roopa to ponder over her double life. At length, pleased with herself for having resisted the seducer as well as the seductress, Roopa felt vindicated. But she was unmindful of the fact that in overcoming the temptation, she allowed her resolve for fidelity to get dented.

27

Feeling lazy that spring day, Sathyam bunked office, and as was her wont, Roopa went out to pick up some book from the library to the refrain of the librarian that ‘Madam does justice to her subscription’.

When she came back, she found Sathyam reading a letter that she thought was from her in-laws.

‘How’s everyone?’ enquired Roopa.

‘It’s from Chandrika,’ he said, having read it by then.

As he gave it to her, she went through that expectantly.

My dear Roopa,

I hope this letter finds you and my brother-in-law in fine spirits.

We got married this morning at the Registrar’s Office. Only our parents as well as his were present as witnesses. We both missed you to say the least. As you know, if not for your accommodation, we would not have made it at all. However, I did not insist on your presence, as it would be embarrassing to you in your in-laws’ house.

The first thing I am doing after reaching home is to pen down my gratitude to you. Whatever happiness life affords me from now on, I know that I owe it to you.

We will be leaving for Madras next week as he got a job there. After going there, I will try to find a placement for me.

Meanwhile with love,

Yours Affectionately,

Chandrika.

PS: Sandhya called on us yesterday and says she misses you as ever.

‘I think,’ said Roopa softly, as she folded the letter, ‘you should’ve left it unread for me.’

‘I thought,’ he said, taking offence to her statement, ‘there may not be any secrets between spouses,’ which she took it as a taunt, given the nature of the news the letter contained.

‘It’s not about secrets but about courtesies,’ she said coolly. ‘Moreover, it’s not my secret either. Just the same, you shouldn’t have read my letter.’

‘Don’t teach me manners,’ he tried to defend himself, aggressively though. ‘I don’t see anything wrong with it. As your husband, I feel I’ve every right to know about your affairs.’

'I don't think,' she said coolly, 'that by being your wife, I have lost my identity. I hope you would respect my feelings in future.'

'Are you suggesting,' he said volubly, 'that I am an insensitive character?'

'I stated a fact,' she said vexed herself. 'No more, no less.'

'Maybe,' he said provocatively, 'you're afraid that I would catch more of the skeletons as they fall.'

It's a behavioral pattern with many, in that having committed an indiscretion in the first place; they tend to assume an aggressive posture to provoke an argument, as though to obliterate the origins of their misdemeanor that led to the ordeal.

'It's not fair,' she said trying to be composed.

'Oh! You talk about fairness,' he raised his voice. 'Now I know why you were married off in such haste, dropping you from the college mid-course and all that.'

'Well,' she said defiantly, 'there is Ramu's parallel, isn't it?'

'His affairs,' he mouthed words for an argument, 'won't affect us but your sister's would.'

'If that worries you,' she said tersely as she went into the kitchen, 'you're free to divorce me.'

The unexpected turn of events shocked Sathyam, and he realized that it was all of his own making. He thought of apologizing but his pride came in the way of compromising with his wife. As a way out of his predicament, he went out, as though to give her time to cool down.

When he came back, he found food was laid on the table but saw Roopa lying in the bed.

'Oh, come,' he said going unto her, 'let's have dinner.'

'I've no stomach for food now.'

'Without your eating,' he said, sitting beside her, 'do you think I would fill my belly?'

She got up without a word, and he followed her to the table. After that silent dinner, seeing her make a bed for herself in the hall, he said persuasively, 'Let's forget about it.' As she didn't respond, he repeated himself, if only more earnestly.

'Maybe,' she said preparing to lay her makeshift bed, 'it's easy for you.'

'I am sorry,' he said sitting by her side.

'By now I know,' she said pushing him aside, 'your sorriness is meant only to obtain bedtime favors.'

'It's not the case,' he pleaded, 'I am really sorry.'

‘Last time too you said the same thing,’ she reminded him. ‘How am I to know that you’ve mended yourself?’

‘The proof of the pudding is in the eating, isn’t it?’ he said submissively. ‘Henceforth you would find me enslaved to my queen of hearts.’

‘Promise me,’ she stretched her hand with the palm outstretched, ‘that you would never hurt me.’

‘I, Sathyam, the once obedient son of Pathrudugaru,’ he said taking her hand, ‘and now the devoted husband of Roopa Devi, solemnly affirm not to hurt my better half in any manner whatsoever and etc.’

‘If only you were to hurt me again,’ she said as though she were cautioning him while he pulled her into his arms to affect her surrender, ‘you can write me off forever.’

‘Could I ever forgo your favors?’ he said as she coyly sank into his embrace. In surrendering herself thus, she ensured his surrender forever.

It’s the irony of woman’s life in that she tends to turn her assets to her own detriment in that while her psyche seeks to see her man strong; her instinct tries to weaken him.

Part - II

That December evening, Sandhya came home dancing to the tune, ‘Soon I’m going, to see my darling.’

‘When is she coming?’ at length, Damayanthi interrupted Sandhya in her mirth.

‘No mummy darling,’ said Sandhya still dancing, ‘It’s me that’s going.’

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Damayanthi.

‘It’s the NCC thing,’ Sandhya said excitedly, ‘I’ve made it to the state level, and God willing, from there to New Delhi for the Republic Day parade.’

‘Congrats,’ said Damayanthi hugging her daughter.

‘I’m proud of you my darling,’ said Kamalakkar who came by then.

‘Oh, if only,’ said Sandhya dreamily, ‘I make it to the contingent.’

‘We’re sure,’ said both the parents, ‘you would.’

‘Surely you’ve already posted the news to Roopa’ said Damayanthi. ‘How thrilled she would be!’

‘No way,’ said Sandhya rolling her eyes, ‘I want to surprise her.’

Soon, Sandhya landed at Hyderabad’s Langar Hauz camp for the girl cadets, and having gone through the rigorous regimen for a week, she made it to the Andhra contingent. However, that Saturday evening, before decamping to Delhi, she left the camp to spend the weekend with Roopa.

Though Sandhya was all eager to reach for Roopa’s arms, she chose not to hire an auto-rickshaw for she couldn’t resist the temptation to relive her childhood days by hopping in and out of the city buses. Alighting at Lakdi-ka-pul from the bus she boarded at the Langar Hauz, she awaited a connecting service to Chikkadapally with the idea of picking up some *bandar laddus* on the way. ‘Oh, how she would have loved those Kotaiah’s *kaajabs* even more - but then they aren’t sold here,’ she thought fondly reminiscing her amour.

However, she became impatient waiting for the right bus that was late in coming. At that, she leaned on the railing of the road bridge as though to relieve her anxiety. And soon, she noticed four youths crossing the road towards her. As they came nearer, she thought one

of them was quite handsome. It soon dawned on her that they joined the group of waiting commuters only to ogle her on the sly. When she instinctively glanced at the attractive guy, she found him staring at her searchingly. As the intensity of his gaze tickled her senses, she felt insensibly drawn towards him.

When the city bus barged into the traffic of their admiring looks, languidly boarding it from the front, she gave him a longing look that seemed inviting to him. Pulled by the passion in her stare, he plunged into the bus on the move, leaving his friends gaping behind. Wading his way up the aisle, he reached where she was seated. As though his proximity induced a magnetic force in her body, she rose from her seat impulsively and stood beside him in the packed aisle. Though she made it appear as a courtesy to an old woman, he got the message and so posited himself behind her. While she felt the pressure of his exciting, her inviting manner made him eager. Without much ado, he ardently pressed against her while she found herself enjoying his exertions. Galvanized by her acquiescence, he laced her from behind and caressed her midriff that sent her into a rapturous trance.

When the conductor announced the arrival of the stage, she pulled herself in spite of it all, thus ending their mutual excitation. Alighting from the bus dreamily, she sensed that he too got down behind her. As she walked towards the sweetmeat shop, she noticed he was following her. It was then that she realized the import of her impulsiveness and blamed herself for her indiscretion. Nevertheless, as he kept pace with her, she came to be worried about his intentions, and after picking up some *bandar laddus*, as she hurriedly hired an auto, she heard him hailing another. Feeling nervous and fearing that she might have got herself into a mess, when she got down at the dead end of that side lane in Domalaguda, she saw him staring at her from the thoroughfare. Then, alarmed at his persistence, she ran up to Roopa's penthouse.

When Roopa opened the door, Sandhya swooned into her embrace.

'Oh dear,' Roopa kept repeating amidst a shower of kisses, 'what a windfall!'

'Close the door,' said Sandhya gasping for breath.

'Where's the luggage?' enquired Roopa, lugging at Sandhya, as she tried to move towards the door.

'I'll tell you,' Sandhya persisted. 'But first close the door.'

With the door closed behind them, Sandhya opened her mind to her friend.

'I just can't believe,' Sandhya concluded in confusion, 'how did I let all that happen?'

‘Why, I’ll tell you,’ said Roopa in jest. ‘It’s the malady of the maidenhood, and I know the medicine for its remedy. Shall I post the prescription to your father?’

‘I am scared to death,’ said Sandhya in mock anger, ‘and you are joking.’

‘Let me see,’ said Roopa, herself turning curious, ‘if your Prince Charming is still there.’

‘Find out at your own peril,’ said Sandhya having recovered her wits by then. ‘If he sees you, I’m sure he would shift his glare and get glued to your gate.’

Nevertheless, Roopa peeped out of the window and found someone at beat near the gate.

‘Is he the one?’ Roopa asked Sandhya.

‘Yes,’ said Sandhya peeping out from over Roopa’s shoulder.

‘Oh,’ Roopa half raised her hand in zest, and teased, ‘he’s quite handsome. No wonder you lost yourself. I think you should call him in and give your dad’s address.’

‘Why,’ Sandhya said in jest, holding her hand impulsively, ‘do you want to make it worse for me?’

As though to stimulate her friend further, Roopa led Sandhya into the kitchen for coffee, and putting all that behind, the mates focused themselves on the endearments of their meeting. When they returned into the hall, Sandhya peeped through the window and exclaimed, ‘He’s still there!’

‘It looks like you gave him,’ said Roopa contemplatively, ‘enough scope to hope for a date, and more.’

‘I shouldn’t have,’ said Sandhya nervous all again, ‘got into this mess at all.’

‘Why get upset about it?’ said Roopa, and narrated her own encounter with Ravi in Tara’s house. ‘It was one of those small pleasures of life, isn’t it? We must enjoy them for what they’re worth.’

With the sound of the buzzer then, as her heart missed a beat Sandhya ran inside. However, she went back into the hall in relief as she heard Roopa exclaim, ‘Guess, who has come?’

Namaste, Sathyam greeted Sandhya.

Namaste, said Sandhya, all smiles.

‘Has he gone?’ Sandhya whispered to Roopa as Sathyam went in.

‘Yes,’ Roopa whispered back, ‘probably to fetch a stool for himself.’

‘Give him a chair if you wish,’ said Sandhya in jest, ‘Anyway, once I leave, it’s going to be your problem.’

'I envy your friendship,' said Sathyam to Sandhya, as he joined them, having changed into a *lungi*.

'You're a part of us,' said Sandhya affectionately.

'Thanks for saying that,' he said warmly. 'I wish I were your brother.'

'I would have loved that,' she said extending her hand.

'Then you be my *raakhi* sister,' he said taking her hand.

'Is it a gang-up on me?' said Roopa as she came with some snacks for them.

'Sandhya, I've a complaint,' said Sathyam to Sandhya, 'against your friend of course.'

'I will go out then,' said Roopa in jest.

'You know,' he said, 'that I keep no secrets from you.'

'Neither do I,' said Roopa, 'that is, in all that matters to you.'

'See Sandhya,' said Sathyam as Sandhya and Roopa looked at each furtively, 'she's always cut up with me.'

'I'm a little crazy,' said Roopa as though she was clarifying her position all the same. 'That's all.'

'Give her some time,' said Sandhya to Sathyam. 'She grows close slowly but steadily.'

'All said and done,' he said affectionately, 'I couldn't have hoped for a better wife than her.'

'A loving husband,' said Sandhya 'is rare indeed, isn't it?'

'Thanks for the compliment,' said Sathyam beamingly. 'Why don't we go out for eats?'

'You should know that Sandhya must be craving for a home meal,' said Roopa.

'Oh, that's true,' said Sathyam.

'We'll play caroms,' suggested Sandhya, 'Roopa says you're an expert at it.'

'You may be feeling cramped in our little place,' said Sathyam as he arranged the board in the hall.

'Your hearts are big,' said Sandhya heartily. 'And that's what matters.'

'Thanks for your compliment,' said Sathyam.

'I fail to understand why we should feel apologetic in the first place,' said Roopa in irritation. 'We have what we have as we live within our means. For those who seek comforts, ours is surely the wrong address. Why embarrass the genuine with these explanations.'

'Oh!' Sathyam complimented Sandhya after the first board that he won, 'you're classy with your scissors.'

'You're too good a player,' said Sandhya after conceding the game at 29-14.

'You're a tough competitor though,' said Sathyam appreciatively. 'What about another game?'

'I'm a game for it,' said Sandhya.

'It's a long since I've played like this,' he said, winning the challenge round 29-22.

'Since when have you become an expert Sandhya!' said a surprised Roopa.

'I took to caroms as a distraction,' said Sandhya squeezing Roopa's hand.

After dinner, Sathyam offered to sleep in the hall.

'No,' said Sandhya smiling, 'Guests too have their rights, don't they?'

'Don't worry,' Roopa told Sathyam, 'I'll give her company.'

While Sathyam slept, the mates got into the act and were awake well past midnight.

2

The next morning, having greeted Sandhya, Sathyam said, 'I hope you slept well.'

'Only after I allowed her to,' said Roopa who brought milk for him then, and when Sathyam left to the toilet, Sandhya paid back the innuendo with a smack on Roopa's seat.

'Guests first,' Sathyam said as Roopa gave him *pesarattu-upma* for breakfast.

'Women follow suit in our culture, don't they?' said Sandhya

'Why don't we invite' suggested Roopa, 'the Ramus for lunch?'

'They would love to meet Sandhya,' he said excitedly. 'I'll be back with them in no time.'

By the time Sathyam came back with the Ramus, the mates, as though to make up for the lost time, endeared themselves to each other.

'Looks like,' Roopa said warmly, 'you don't have time for us any more.'

'Of late he's not finding time for me even,' grumbled Meera. 'He comes home just to sleep. As you know, he can go on without food for days together. I told him to send me back to my parents' place and arrange a cot for himself in his factory itself.'

'Office is but,' Ramu said in jest, 'the last refuge for a man from his nagging wife.'

'This is my friend,' Roopa said in introduction, after the storm subsided, 'Sandhya.'

'Oh, I'm sorry,' said Meera a little embarrassed. 'Your name is ever on Roopa's lips.'

'As her better half,' said Ramu in jest, 'I second her statement.'

'I heard Roopa talk a great deal about you too,' Sandhya addressed Ramu holding Meera's hand. 'We admire your zeal to become an entrepreneur. We all know how difficult it is for someone to build from the scratch that too with none to back up. Well, it's a different

matter with families into business for long. In time, a new entity of the old group would come up for the brat to lord it over, isn't it?'

'How true,' said Sathyam while the rest nodded in agreement.

After a sumptuous meal that Sandhya savored, they settled for a round of rummy.

'With Roopa around,' said Meera, shuffling the packs, 'the winner is known beforehand.'

'You people,' protested Roopa, picking up her cards, 'make too much out of my little bit of luck.'

'Looks like,' said Sathyam as the opener was grabbed by Sandhya, 'we're going to get sandwiched between the friends.'

'It's no more than a beginner's luck,' said Sandhya smiling.

'Why withdraw,' teased Roopa, as Ramu scooted the next deal, 'at the very first reverse.'

'Look at her beaming face,' said Ramu referring to Sandhya's. 'One should be blind not to read her hand in that glow, though she holds the cards to her chest.'

When it was five in the evening, Sandhya was all set to leave for Langar Hauz.

'All the best,' she said, preparing to leave, 'to all of you.'

'Wish the same to you,' said the Ramus. 'It's nice that we met.'

'I'll long for another visit,' Sathyam turned sentimental.

'So do I,' Sandhya took his hand.

'Let me see her off,' Roopa said getting into her *chappals*.

'Why not I go with them,' said Meera to Ramu.

'Let's get on with the game,' dissuaded Ramu, 'moreover, they may like to be alone.'

As Sandhya looked around furtively as they stepped out, Roopa commented, 'Are you still expecting him!'

'Who knows?' Sandhya said casually.

'In that case,' said Roopa, teasing, 'it's only fair to favor him for his perseverance.'

'Oh,' said Sandhya in exasperation, 'you've become a devil lately.'

'Let me see,' said Roopa, pinching Sandhya, 'what a daredevil you become after your marriage.'

'That's some way away, anyway,' said Sandhya, 'but what's on in the New Year?'

'What difference does a New Year make for me but for the change of the calendar?' said Roopa gravely.

'Well,' said Sandhya squeezing Roopa's hand, 'we never know what surprises life has in store for us.'

‘Any way,’ said Roopa resignedly, ‘I’m tired of hoping.’

‘Hope for the best,’ said Sandhya, ‘and prepare for the worst, that’s wisely said, isn’t it?’

‘Come the Republic Day,’ said Roopa, as they reached the bus stop, ‘and I’ll be there to spot you in the live telecast.’

‘That is,’ said Sandhya laughing, ‘if the *video-wallahs* happen to focus on me.’

‘Why, you have the gait to parade men behind you,’ said Roopa adoringly. ‘And your face, well who can miss it, even in a crowd!’

‘Romantic as ever,’ said Sandhya pressing Roopa’s hand endearingly.

At length, as the city bus was spotted, Roopa pressed Sandhya’s hand and said, ‘Remember that I miss you.’

‘My own longing for you,’ Sandhya whispered endearingly into Roopa’s ear, ‘reminds me about your craving for me.’

‘Bye, sweetie,’ said Roopa as Sandhya boarded the bus.

Waving at Roopa, as the bus moved, thought Sandhya, ‘How lucky to have a friend and lover in Roopa. Oh, isn’t it clear that Sathyam is not a match for her, even though he loves her. It looks like she has adjusted to life with him. What else could the poor thing do?’

3

Once in Delhi, Sandhya found the winter severe and the rehearsals taxing. Nevertheless, the prospect of participating in the prestigious parade excited her no end. And to uplift her spirits further, her parents wired their coming to the capital to watch the spectacle.

Then came the Republic Day, and the nation was wont to celebrate. Marching on the Rajpath that 26th January morning, Sandhya envisioned Roopa glued to her TV set. Besides, she was conscious about the presence of her parents, somewhere in the crowd, waiting to see her march past them. The thought that her dear ones were savoring her every step enhanced her grace and enlivened her vigor in her smart gait.

Soon, a thrilled Sandhya, made it back to the camp, and waited for her parents in all eagerness.

When the delighted Kalmalakars came to pick her up, she was overcome with emotion in that joyful reunion.

‘We’re proud of you, dear,’ said her parents patting her.

‘I’m glad you’ve come,’ she nestled to her mother.

‘Are you put up with our Rao uncle?’ Sandhya said getting into the Ambassador.

‘Of course,’ said Kamalakar.

‘Oh, how he used to tease me in those days,’ said Sandhya, as the Ambassador headed towards Chanakyapuri. ‘If only he had a son, he would have made me his daughter-in-law, that’s what he used to say.’

‘In fact,’ said Damayanthi, ‘he recalled that as he received us yesterday.’

When the Ambassador came to a halt in the portico of the Madhava Raos’ house, they came out in welcome.

‘Here’s a smart girl for us,’ exclaimed Madhava Rao leading them into the drawing room.

‘Charming as well,’ said Chitra Rao who was all in admiration of Sandhya.

‘Oh, how I regret,’ said Madhava Rao in jest, ‘that we didn’t adopt a boy.’

‘We can still have her in our family,’ said Chitra who got a brainwave, ‘if she’s married to Raja Rao.’

‘No doubt it’s an idea,’ seconded Madhava Rao. ‘They should make a fine pair.’

‘Is the search on,’ enquired Chitra, ‘for a suitable boy?’

‘Now that she’s in the final year,’ said Damayanthi in contemplation, ‘it’s time we began the hunt.’

‘What’s the hurry?’ questioned Sandhya coyly.

‘Perhaps you’ll change your mind,’ said Chitra as though to put ideas into Sandhya’s head, ‘after meeting my nephew.’

‘It looks like you’re rooting for him,’ said Kamalakar thoughtfully.

‘That’s true, and his resume speaks for itself,’ said Madhava Rao. ‘He’s a Civil Engineer from IIT, Powai, and did his MS in Architecture at Brooklyn. Now he is a Senior Architect at Pioneer Architects, the market leaders. It’s rare to come across someone with his talents. Above all, he has the ability to think. And that should make him a good captain to steer ashore the marital ship through troubled waters. However, he’s twenty-eight, if that’s an objection, as Sandhya could be barely twenty.’

‘I would say,’ Chitra seemed to tempt Sandhya, ‘he’s handsome to the bone and romantic to the core.’

‘What about his family background?’ asked Kamalakar showing his interest in the matter.

‘Govinda Rao, his father is a GM in Larsen & Toubro’s Bombay Plant,’ said Madhava Rao. ‘His mother Visala is a fine woman. His sister Hyma and her husband Ranga Rao are both doctors, and they run their Nursing Home in Bombay.’

‘Are they propertied?’ asked Damayanthi.

‘Like us,’ said Chitra, ‘they too hail from Konaseema. They have an old house and some coconut plantations still at Kothalanka, looked after by our uncle Thimmaiah. If not well heeled, they are more than middle-class. What’s more, they’re quite cultured and good-natured.’

‘Your satisfaction is our satisfaction,’ said Kamalakar, ‘what do you say Sandhya?’

‘I would still say,’ she said shyly, ‘where is the hurry for that unless you want to drive me away.’

‘He usually drops in on holidays,’ said Chitra, pleased at the welcome development. ‘Just the same, I will ring him up.’

4

As Chitra was dialing his number, Raja Rao came in as though the aunt and the nephew were on telepathic terms.

‘Auntie,’ he said, unlacing his shoes in the ante-room, ‘I hope *sambar* is on the menu.’

‘Oh, think about the devil,’ said a delighted Madhava Rao, ‘Raja, come in and meet our friends.’

As Raja Rao entered the drawing room, Sandhya’s inquisitive gaze greeted his eager look. She could discern his piercing eyes acquire a lively look in interaction, which she later realized was frozen in her mind’s eye. She found him masculinely evocative with that romantic face of his. She felt that as his tall frame and broad shoulders made him look athletically handsome, his medium dark complexion imparted a rare virility to his persona.

The customary round of introductions over, Kamalakar asked Raja Rao, ‘Why architecture for an IITan?’

‘As a child I had been to many South Indian temples with my parents,’ explained Raja Rao. ‘The temple architecture seems to have left a lasting impression upon me. Though, it’s much later that I realized the possibility architecture offers as a profession. As you know a well-designed dwelling contributes to the quality of living.’

‘He has an intellectual bent of mind,’ thought Sandhya, while her parents seemed visibly impressed with his eloquence.

‘What are your hobbies like?’ Damayanthi took over as the interviewer.

‘He’s jack-of-all-trades,’ Madhava Rao complimented, ‘with a grasp on various subjects, including psychology.’

‘By inference,’ was the Raja Rao addendum, ‘a master of none.’

‘Of course, with his ability to think,’ said Chitra as though to stress upon the obvious, ‘that’s no handicap.’

‘What about your chess?’ asked Kamalakar, himself an ardent player.

‘Before I got into bridge,’ said Raja Rao, ‘I used to concentrate on chess. These days, whenever I find myself at the chessboard, I play more with my hand than head.’

‘Interesting,’ wondered Kamalakar.

‘Like chess,’ theorized Raja Rao, ‘bridge too is a scientific game. While chess is all about cold logic, in bridge, in spite of your grasp of the game, the element of uncertainty lends charm to it.’

Finding that Sandhya wasn’t taking her eyes off him, Raja Rao said, ‘You seem to be a keen observer,’ and added after a pause, ‘How do you find Delhi?’

Seeing the smile in his eyes, she felt shy, but said nevertheless, ‘It’s Capital.’

‘Your economy of expression,’ he said with a smile, ‘is admirable.’

‘You must be a well-read person,’ said Sandhya in admiration.

‘Whatever little I read,’ said Raja Rao, ‘I read well.’

‘His reading includes,’ said Madhava Rao, as though for Sandhya’s ears, ‘hand-reading as well.’

‘Would you like to show me your hand?’ Raja Rao asked Sandhya.

‘I don’t know if it would interest you,’ she said trying to gauge his feelings.

‘We’ll find that out after dinner,’ he said with a smile.

While all moved into the drawing hall after dinner, Raja Rao stayed back in the dining room as though to remind Sandhya about her engagement. Getting the cue, she rejoined him and without a word stretched out her left hand for his take.

‘May I have your right hand,’ he suggested as though getting her onto the right track.

‘When did you take to palmistry?’ she asked him, as he was feeling her palm all over.

‘When I could imagine the possibilities,’ he said, looking into her eyes.

‘What do you mean?’ she sounded suspicious.

‘I mean the possibility of holding hands,’ he said tantalizingly, ‘to read in between the lines on them.’

‘Oh,’ she withdrew her hand, ‘you’re cleverer by half.’

‘Never mind,’ he said, ‘you’ve a fine hand that’s promising too.’

‘This,’ she said teasing him, ‘could be your stock prediction.’

‘Never before with the same conviction and feeling,’ he said not to be outdone.

'You're truly impossible,' she said in that mock frustration in which a woman looks beautifully helpless.

'Honestly, let me see what it portends,' he said, reaching for her hand.

'Why are you so curious?' she said withholding her hand.

'Just to ascertain,' he said looking into her eyes, 'your marriage prospects.'

'But,' she continued as though under the spell of his charm, 'how does that concern you?'

'Why,' he said, ardently looking into her eyes, 'am I not a bachelor?'

Dropping her eyes involuntarily, she let him take her hand consciously.

'Lucky is the guy who marries you,' he said tentatively.

'You are supposed to predict my future,' she said to point out the faux pas 'but you're speculating someone's fortune.'

'Hi Sandhya,' yelled her mother, 'the newscast is on. Perhaps, we may find you in the visuals.'

'Oh, she's there,' said Raja Rao spotting Sandhya in time, 'Graceful really.'

'Thanks,' she said joyously, turning her head towards him, 'for your compliment.'

'I think,' said Raja Rao as he got up after the newscast, 'it's time I got going.'

As he got ready to go, he wished them good night.

'Good night,' said Sandhya, inviting his attention.

At that, their eyes met to convey their disappointment at the impending separation.

'Make it for dinner tomorrow,' said Madhava Rao who had by then sensed the infatuation that gripped his nephew and the guest.

'I would love to,' said Raja Rao, looking at Sandhya, as her eyes seemed all of adoration for him.

After Raja Rao had left, Madhava Rao asked Kamalakar, 'Don't you okay him?'

'I feel he's a marvelous guy,' Kamalakar pushed the ball into Damayanthi's court, 'what do you say?'

'I do agree,' Damayanthi kept the ball rolling, 'but it all depends on Sandhya, doesn't it?'

'We'll know that from the horse's mouth,' Madhava Rao said with the exaggerated manner of a compere, 'right now.'

'If you feel that he's right for me,' she said coyly, sinking her head into *'The Illustrated Weekly of India'* that she was holding, 'he's fine for me.'

'Leave the rest to me,' said Madhava Rao in all excitement, 'and contact your *purohit* for the *sumuburtham*.'

As the elders began recounting the like incidents of matchmaking they had heard of, none took note of Sandhya slipping into the guest room to be on her own.

5

Lay up in the bed, Sandhya tried to fathom the persona of the man that induced love in her heart. 'But what about him?' she thought at length. 'Why, surely he's enamored of me.'

She fondly recalled his disappointed look when he got up to leave, and the way his eyes glowed with life when Madhava Rao asked him to come the next day. 'Was it not owing to the prospect of meeting me again,' she thought endearingly. 'Why, it's clear that he's fascinated by me.'

'But would he like to marry me? Were it possible, for him it's no more than a calf-love in the euphoria of our youthful interaction?' she became doubtful and dispirited at that. 'Why, he's smart and is pretty sure of himself, isn't he? For all that, he could be a ladies man and not the marrying type, who knows?'

'Am I already in love with him? Of course, isn't there something in him that is fascinating,' she tried to fathom his persona. 'Is it his face? Oh, have I ever seen a romantic face like that before? Well, won't it compel women to admire him even as it evokes pity in their souls! Isn't it that unique feature of his face that makes him a rare persona?'

'Oh, there's much more to his personality than his physicality,' she contemplated. 'There's a flowing ease about his manner as well. Though he appears casual, he doesn't look indifferent. With all his accomplishments, he doesn't put on any airs. I wonder how he manages to look so confident without being arrogant! How does he sound so firm but without appearing adamant? Above all, his persona personifies romanticism, doesn't it? A real he-man if there was ever one.'

'It's as if in his thoughts,' she thought coyly, 'I've myself become a romantic! Oh, if only I become his wife, won't I turn passionate as well?'

As her imagination surged into romanticism, her thoughts turned to Roopa. 'Oh, I'm doomed. He's a silly guy' - she recalled Roopa's words. Having met the man who excited the dormant romantic in her, Sandhya understood the true import of Roopa's predicament. The exciting prospect of her marrying Raja Rao enabled her imagine the disillusionment of Roopa's life as Sathyam's wife. 'Though I could always feel the state of her mind then, oh, it's only now that I'm able to visualize the pathos of her heart,' she thought melancholically.

Caught in the conflict of hope for her self and despair for her mate, her heart seemed to have turned to love for solace much before sleep could provide it for her.

6

‘What a lovely girl she is!’ thought Raja Rao, for the umpteenth time. ‘May not be the ravishing type, but surely she’s the charming kind. Above all, she’s a wifely stuff. Won’t I be able to mould her into a matchless mate? What if I propose to her? It looks like we are of the same caste and that should make matters easy. But then, what of our sub-sects? Don’t they seem progressive to mind all that. But who knows? Appearances can be deceptive, can’t they? Oh, even then, one has still to reckon with the *gotthrams* that are to be different for an alliance to materialize. What an irony, the custom that prescribes alliances between blood relations proscribes *sagotbra* marriages! What’s a *gotthram*, after all? If anything, isn’t it a vague concept at its very best, based as it were on the precept of lineage of all. That too attributed to the obscure origins of just a score of *rishis*. What a fanciful notion! Don’t all peoples have their own idiosyncrasies? And yet, all are prone to ridicule others for their peculiar beliefs. After all, what is a custom but the collective prejudice of culture or a corollary of a religious precept?’

‘Whatever, she’s sweet and smart,’ he continued turning his thoughts towards her, ‘An ideal girl to take for a wife. Having taken to me in her own sweet way, would she be averse to marrying me? Why not seek auntie’s good offices as the matchmaker? Oh, even if she succeeds in brainwashing them all, that still leaves a question mark in matching our horoscopes. Some half-wit of an astrologer could make it naught with his crude calculations. How this new-found obsession is ruining many a match in the offing? Well, it’s only love that has the power to maneuver through these encumbrances.’

The thought of the power of love brought back the memories of that memorable encounter he had on the train the previous year. ‘Oh! What a lass she was!’ he thought, and reflected upon that incredible incident.

During that early winter, he went to Khajuraho to study the erotic architecture of its sandstone temples. After a weeklong stay there, that evening he boarded the Ganga-Kaveri Express at Satna to reach Madras to present his seminar paper. After exchanging pleasantries with a Father on the side and the trade unionist opposite in that four-berth coupe, he went about polishing his seminar paper well into the night.

Next morning, he was lazing by the window enjoying the refreshing landscape of the wilderness. At around eight, two girls came to greet the Father who was engrossed with the Bible. The one, who was almost in, was rather plain but the other behind her seemed tantalizing in her grey sari. With a black shawl draped around, she was a shade darker and an inch taller than her companion. Directing his gaze upon the charmer, he found her graceful though tentative in her flowing frame. As she surveyed the scene, she found him intently staring at her in wonderment. It appeared to him from her demeanor that the craving she espied in his gaze synchronized with the longing his persona insensibly induced in her mind.

While her companion was conversing with the Father, the young thing at every turn was espying him compellingly. He saw her enamored eyes enlarge as though to accommodate his admiring stare fixed on her. On occasion, when she intruded into the ongoing conversation, his ears danced to the tune of her soothing tone in Malayalam that was alien to him.

When the train halted at some station requiring the unionist to alight, the girls grabbed the space thus created with great relish. But having lost her senses in the ecstasy of their mutual attraction, she kept mum while her friend blabbered. After a while, as her friend got up to leave, the charmer too stood up as if in a reflex action. However, having come back to her senses, she let her friend go out of the setting while she stayed back to savor the moment further.

Having taken her seat opposite, she readily got up and sat in the space between him and the Father to continue her tête-à-tête with the latter. The proximity of her person and the proclivity of her posture triggered an emotional upsurge in his soul that occasioned a craving to caress her frame. Goaded by his desire to feel his love on her body, he gained her midriff left uncovered by her sari. The response of her flesh to the sense of his touch seemed to have induced warmth in her frame that provided solace to her soul. Imperceptibly she readjusted her posture as though to help him explore her state to the core. Enthused by her accommodation that enabled him access her recess, he surged on eagerly bustling about her buttocks as if they were the mounds of her essence. However, as though to address her heart, he reached for her breast from underneath the shawl, and even as he felt her pulsations, she gave a turn and dropped the book in hand. And that invited the attention of the Father.

To forestall an inquisition, he then initiated a discussion on Gibbon's views on the growth of the Christianity. Oh, how the Father found that enthralling that spared her an explanation! Having diverted the Father's mind to his favorite subject, he tried to take stock of the state of her mind. He found her blue in the face as she sweated in her palms. Seeing her thus, he cursed himself for being the cause of her fright. He reached for his notebook and scribbled his sorriest, and gestured for her forgiveness, and seemingly feeling his impulse, even in her nonplussed state, she glanced at his message only to ignore him thereafter.

Soon she left, still dazed, and he remained remorseful and too perplexed to follow her to apologize for his rashness but when he recovered from the shock of her hurt, he ventured through the vestibules to locate her on the moving train. As he sighted her, at long last, still in a state of shock, his heart sank into the depths of agony. He got vexed even more as he found her pixilated in spite of all those apologetic gestures he came up with to soothe her soul. Her indifference made him feel worse for her sake. Feeling wretched himself, he thought only his love could alleviate her hurt and their souls couldn't be solaced but in their embrace. Oh, how was he to convince her about that! Where was the privacy to pressure her into a love saving embrace?

Not to embarrass her further with his forthrightness, he sauntered in the aisle to attract her attention. As she failed to yield, he riveted near her to make her relent. At length, as though responding to his body language, she looked at him with a vacant look that suggested all was over between them. So as not to compound her misery with his embarrassing presence, he left her with a heavy heart.

Back in the coupe, he sat distraught in her thought. As he cursed himself for his misdemeanor, his craving for her pardon was accentuated. While his remorse helped nourish his love for her, nevertheless, he suffered on that score. Just the same, he didn't dare venture to see her again, fearing he might make her suffer even more. And thus, he never knew where her journey had ended and when her ordeal was over. But that incident, however, haunted him for weeks on end.

'Wasn't it a case of love at first sight that induced a sense of mutual belonging in us,' he reminisced presently. 'No denying it, though. I should've befriended her before proposing, and she couldn't have refused for sure. Maybe by now, we could have been expecting our first-born. Who knows?'

‘But, why did it all go haywire?’ he thought in regret all again. ‘I lost my head and went wayward on her body, didn’t I? What led me to mislay my hand on her? Was it owing to the craving of my flesh or the urge of my love? Oh didn’t I know that it was the passion of my soul to possess her that triggered it all. Until it all ended in a huff, didn’t we enjoy a smooth ride on the silken path of love? Wasn’t my urgency to close in on her breasts that alienated her heart, once and for all? Maybe, I was compelled to feel the rhythm of her heart beats rhymed by the emotions of her love for me. What a fall it was, after a dream start! Oh, what an ignominious end it was after that ecstatic beginning.’

‘When she was as receptive to my caress at her seat,’ he always thought in puzzlement, ‘why was it that she found my hand on her breast so offensive? Oh, how she should’ve expected me to envisage the borders of her sensitivity in my state of excitation. True, she would have felt that I transgressed; yet she couldn’t have failed to feel the pulse of my love in the nuances of my touch. Didn’t my heart descend on my hand to vent its love on her frame! Oh, how it rushed to my mouth seeing her disjointed! Why did she choose to punish me with banishment for the failings of my love inspired by her own looks? How she thought I deserved the deserts! Why didn’t she pardon me, finding me repentant?’

He racked his brains for an answer that he never got but was sunken whenever he recalled that episode, ‘Had she pardoned me, how rejoicing it would have been for both of us! Seeing me ecstatic, she should’ve been deliriously joyous, and what a triumph of love that could have been! But that wasn’t to be. What should’ve been a fairy tale romance ended as an unmitigated disaster for both of us.’

‘What could be her name?’ he often thought. ‘What a pity that the most ardent love I’d ever experienced should remain a nameless memory!’

That nameless memory presently took his thoughts to that encounter with Jaya, again on a train.

He was going to Guntur, by the Circar Express, after holidaying with his grandfather at Kothalanka. Seeing him reading *Walden*, a young girl borrowed the book to have a look at it. However, after leafing through a few pages, she said that the stuff was too stiff for her head. At the next halt, she welcomed her friend, whom she was obviously expecting. Her friend had memorable eyes that moved him. He always knew the eyes that speak insensibly drew him to the endowed woman. If the woman were to be dusky as well, with a tinge of sadness attached to her demeanor, well, he would find her all the more bewitching.

‘May I know your name?’ he asked the newcomer, who seemed to find him equally exciting.

‘What for?’ she questioned him spiritedly.

‘Don’t you think,’ he said memorably, ‘I need a name to pin your thoughts on?’

‘Jaya,’ she said coyly.

Though they exchanged many an ardent glance during that long journey besides their addresses, their inclinations went the way all acquaintances made in the travel time go - into memory banks.

Though their mutual liking during the sojourn might enthuse the hearts of the infatuated co-travelers, once they separate, unsupported by the habit that sustains a relationship, their enthusiasm for each other insensibly wanes, pushing the nascent ardor on to the back burner.

‘Even that minor attraction has a name to rivet upon, but this unique happening would remain a nameless memory,’ he sighed at that time. ‘Why not give her a name? Why not I christen her Swapna, the dream one?’ He pondered over the proposition and gave up in the end realizing that even the most evocative name wouldn’t move him since she didn’t lend her voice to it.

While he reached his flat with that reflection, once he hit the pillow, Sandhya reoccupied his mind, ‘Surely there’s something in her that induces a serene desire that’s conducive to peaceable love life. Oh, if only she were to be my wife, how blessed I would be.’

Hoping to make Sandhya his wife and envisaging the charms of a life with her, in time, Raja Rao slept expectantly.

7

When the postman came to deliver Sandhya’s letter that March end, Roopa nearly grabbed it from him to his amusement.

My Lovey,

Pardon me for my negligence in spite of a couple from you. With my exams nearing, I wasn’t in the right mood to write to you. But now, there’s great news to convey to you.

I was engaged only this evening to Raja Rao. Yes, I’m not able to believe it myself! We happened to meet in Delhi when I went there. Why imagine, it’s an arranged match, with a little bit of love thrown in by us to spice it a lot.

He is an architect in Delhi, and my father thought it fit to entrust me to his constructive care even as my heart is enthused by his romantic designs. There’s only one jarring note,

though, as you know. I have to move over to Delhi, far away from you. I'm hopeful of coaxing him in time to land in Hyderabad. The wedding is slated for 7th June and needless to say, I need you here before the countdown commences.

Convey my regards to my brother contained in this, need I say, the letter of my life. However, I shall send the customary invitation card to Mr. & Mrs. Sathyam in due course.

My love to all of you®

Ever yours® in waiting,

Sandhya.

Roopa reread Sandhya's letter that induced myriad feelings in her – while gloating over her mate's fortune in finding the right man, she was depressed visualizing the effect Sandhya's marriage might have on her own life.

However, struck by the sentence in Sandhya's hand, 'why imagine things, it's an arranged match, with a little bit of love thrown in by us to spice it a lot', Roopa began thinking, 'Can there be a sweeter way to state one's love. Isn't everything about Sandhya sweet for that matter? Sweet too must be the beau she has chosen. Why, Raja Rao could be smarter than the guy who attracted her here. Intelligent he must be for Sandhya wouldn't suffer fools. Surely he must be a dynamic character, as she doesn't fancy sluggards. Somehow his name too sounds nice though old fashioned. But Sandhya could have made 'Raja' his pet name that is for sure. Oh, how am I to address him! Raja might sound too familiar, isn't it? All the same, Rao would seem too formal, won't it? But how does he look after all?'

She tried to visualize Raja Rao's persona as per her own proclivities but soon enough gave up in despair for want of any picture of her own dream man. 'Why didn't it occur to her to post his picture? Or at least, she should've written a line or two about him as her love perceived him,' she thought at length. 'She surely would have a joyous married life. Oh, isn't it reason enough for my rejoicing. But then, they would be far away in Delhi. I won't be able to share her blissful moments. How can it be helped, after all?'

The thought of the distance depressed her all the more after her visualization of their joy, 'Besides, won't Sandhya's ardor for her man insensibly dampen her ardency towards me, sooner than latter?'

As she was startled at that, the fear of an erotic gulf between them froze her

'No, it won't be the case,' she tried to revive her spirits as she recalled Sandhya's words. "I love you enough to need you too", that's what she promised, didn't she?

‘What if the aura of Raja’s virility casts a shadow on her lesbian leanings,’ it dawned on her to her despair. ‘Oh, if I were to lose her, what would I be left with to live for? How cruel that would be for me. But what else could I do than keep my fingers crossed.’

The melancholy of the moment brought the memories of her family, and she found reminiscing, ‘Could there have been a better couple than them that ever parented? But how do we their children fare? Suguna and her husband are a contented lot, living within their limitations, one might call them colorless, but of what avail is all the color in life, if it can’t provide a shade of happiness to it! Well.’

As though to contrast her own life, she thought about Chandrika, ‘Didn’t she dare to be different and staked everything for love. What love should’ve given her in return?’ Compelled by curiosity, she thought of writing to her to attend Sandhya’s wedding, even as her thoughts turned to her brother, ‘Well, he wants to become an engineer, good luck to him, and how I craved to be a doctor.’

Recalling Rukmini’s fondness for her as her childhood memories came in torrents, she thought, ‘Perhaps, she’s the luckiest of us all, well, the dead have no problems to contend with.’

However, her reverie was broken when Ramu arrived towards the evening, and said, ‘I thought Sathyam would have come back by now.’

As she said, ‘It’s time for him to come,’ they heard Sathyam’s Lambretta.

‘I’ve some mixed news for you,’ said Ramu. ‘Sadly, my plans to acquire a unit here fell flat in the end, but thanks to the second string of my bow, I could take over one in Madras. We would have loved to be here but well, the opportunity lies elsewhere.’

‘Wish you all the best,’ said the Sathyams after congratulating Ramu heartily, ‘though we’ll miss you.’

‘You know,’ said Ramu, embracing Sathyam, ‘that our feelings are no different.’

‘I know what a tight schedule it could be. Still I hope you would spend some time with us before you leave,’ she told Ramu, and turning to Sathyam, she added, ‘Sandhya’s marriage is slated for 7th June.’

‘Good news galore,’ said Sathyam. ‘Who’s the lucky guy?’

‘Raja Rao, an architect from New Delhi,’ she said.

‘Sandhya’s smart in choosing an architect,’ Ramu said heartily. ‘Now she needn’t pay for the design of her sweet home.’

‘For yours,’ said Roopa in jest, ‘we can ask him for a decent discount.’

‘That would be a favor,’ said Ramu amusedly.

Seeing the satisfaction in Ramu, Roopa began to envision the measure of Sandhya’s happiness, only to end up thinking about her own unfulfilled life, ‘Why did life fail me, after all? Why has it denied me that life-filled moment to let me feel fulfilled?’

8

That midsummer though Roopa was in heat to meet Sandhya, as her apprehensions about losing her mate after her marriage bogged her, she felt like postponing the trip to Kakinada until the very end. However, as her love for Sandhya prevailed over her fear of her self, she set out on her journey as scheduled.

‘I’ll be there by the 5th Godavari,’ said Sathyam, as he waved her off at the Secunderabad Railway Station that 15th May.

On reaching home the next morning as Roopa hit the pillow, her parents thought that she might have had a sleepless journey. However, finding her languid even by noon, said Janaki, ‘I’m surprised you didn’t rush to Sandhya. Are you ill or what?’

‘I’m a little lazy. Maybe, it’s time I left,’ she said, and wondered. ‘What is bothering me after all?’

Before she could get a clue to her lethargy, Sandhya came in like a hurricane.

‘I couldn’t wait any longer,’ said Sandhya enticingly.

‘I’ve never seen her so dull,’ said Janaki as she left them on their own.

‘Congrats,’ said Roopa extending her hand, though besieged as she was by a strange transformation brought about by Sandhya’s sight.

‘I won’t have it that way,’ said Sandhya mischievously folding her hands at her back.

‘Don’t you know I’m cut up with you,’ said Roopa feigning anger, ‘for not writing about the valor of the man who captured your heart.’

‘I wanted you to figure it out yourself, so that I can have a second opinion,’ said Sandhya mirthfully. ‘In fact, I’m not going to let you see his picture till you see him in person.’

‘How unfair!’ said Roopa, ‘I’ll warn him that you are clever by half like when pinned down on the back yet you claim a win by crossing her legs over the victor’s back.’

‘He’s too smart to outsmart both of us put together,’ said Sandhya with a smile of reminiscence.

‘Then,’ said Roopa enthusiastically, ‘it should be interesting.’

‘What’s lacking now?’ crooned Sandhya, pushing Roopa’s head into her valley.

‘Why are you dull, my lovey?’ said Sandhya finding Roopa numb in her embrace.

‘I don’t know,’ said Roopa melancholically, ‘but I’m out of sorts really.’

‘I can understand what’s bothering you,’ said Sandhya with conviction. ‘Though I can visualize what his love might mean to me, I know I need you as much as I would need him.’

‘Thank you darling,’ said Roopa in gratification. ‘I love you all the more for our love.’

With the fears thus dispelled from her mind, Roopa went on devouring the lips that uttered those reassuring words. Then the rosy lien on their love seemed to have lent a new vigor to their libido as they indulged to the hilt.

When Chandrika landed a week later, Janaki turned sentimental all again, ‘She brought it upon herself, this ostracized existence. We can neither invite them to our house nor can we go to their place.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Chandrika, assuring her mother, ‘things are changing.’

‘I don’t see any,’ said Janaki and went into the kitchen in sobs. ‘But how I wish they do.’

‘I love to hear about your love life,’ Roopa couldn’t hide her eagerness.

‘We’ll come to that later,’ said Chandrika, ‘but tell me how your married life is.’

‘It’s routine,’ said Roopa, ‘with the capital R.’

Then suddenly Janaki rejoined her daughters with a rejoinder, ‘One shouldn’t forget the fuss Roopa made about the match. And you didn’t heed our advice.’

‘Why do you rake up the past?’ Ramaiah, who was within earshot, reprimanded his wife.

‘One must know that the path of the future is laid on the tracks of the past,’ retorted Janaki.

‘Let’s go to Sandhya’s place,’ Roopa proposed to her sister after a while.

The moment they stepped out, Roopa was impatient, ‘Tell me now.’

‘Life in a nutshell is challenging as well as charming,’ said Chandrika. ‘It’s as though the complexities of life are compounded in exogamous marriages. At times, it feels that the risk was worth taking, and on occasion, it seems it’s all a bad bargain. There would be depressing moments to go through as well as exciting events to gloat over.’

‘Save mine,’ said Roopa a little disappointed. ‘I suppose, that’s the way with most marriages.’

‘No way,’ said Chandrika in explanation, ‘inter-caste marriages would throw up myriad problems. We encounter sensitive situations and face peculiar pressures alien to the arranged unions. To make it worse, there are external factors that could upset our apple-

carts. All of us have personal preferences steeped in our upbringing that are shaped by our respective communal ethos. In endogamous marriages, the commonality of cultural attitudes could limit the deviations in personal proclivities. But the exogamous marriages won't have the in-built limit switches to keep the couple on course. We have to fend for ourselves in the pathless woods of personal prejudices. The spouses should be on guard always, lest some casual remark of one should hurt the communal sensitivities of the other. All this would only mean that one couldn't be his or her natural self in a given situation. On the positive side, however, it makes us more responsive to others' sensibilities.'

'Now I can understand,' said Roopa who was all ears for Chandrika.

'Once we opt for an inter-caste marriage,' Chandrika continued, 'it's as if we have burnt our bridges and cold-shouldered all shoulders to cry over. Unable to relieve ourselves from our pressures, we only help them build up to the breaking point. We cry in the privacy of our dwelling, afraid that the world would laugh at us if found wanting. Though it might provide a vent to the woman, it would invariably vex the man for that tends to suggest to him that it's all his making. We develop a siege mentality and imagine everyone wants to see us fail. We feel as though the world doesn't want us to succeed so as to make an example out of us for others to desist from venturing. All this puts pressure on us to make it right as though marriage is a task to be fulfilled. Forced to restrain ourselves, we interact selectively stalling our social integration.'

'Don't his people support you?' Roopa asked with concern.

'In a way yes,' said Chandrika nostalgically, 'but those who happen to come close to us tend to be a hindrance than of any help. If the wife were to be from an upper caste, then the man is congratulated, making her feel humiliated as a symbol of the caste conquest. Well, one should understand their psyche burdened by their collective humiliation occasioned by the age-old exploitation of their women by the men of the upper castes. Seen from their perspective, it's as if one of their clan has in some way avenged for all of them by roping in an upper caste female for his cohabitation. If on the other hand, the marriage were to be morganatic, then they condescend to descend as though showing her place in the privileged setting. In subtle ways, the society, by and large, would ensure that we carry the cross with the odd-couple complex all along.'

'Well,' said Roopa in apprehension, 'what's your balance sheet like?'

'On the whole,' said Chandrika, 'it does seem a profitable account, though it needs quite a lot of reconciliation.'

'I hope you aren't regretting.'

'Oh, no,' said Chandrika sincerely. 'If I've to decide all again, I might think twice over, but yet go the same way. The thrill of being different gives a halo to our marriage in spite of everything, though the pressures constantly lead us on a razor's edge.'

'What is he like?' asked Roopa.

'He is quite mature,' said Chandrika as her affection for him filled her voice. 'It's his maturity and my motivation that's carrying the day for us. Otherwise, we would have called it quits a long while back.'

By the time they reached Sandhya's place, Roopa was excited about the challenges that her sister's life posed. However, in time, seeing her sister's adventurous life against the backdrop of her dull marital existence, she felt depressed all again. That they didn't find Sandhya at home only further spoiled her mood, and as they walked back home, Roopa kept mum all along.

'I'll take you to the doctor,' Janaki told Roopa as they had their lunch. 'Don't go anywhere in the evening.'

'Why, what for?' Roopa feigned innocence.

'Don't you realize,' scowled Janaki at Roopa, 'its nearing two years now, and there are no signs of it yet.'

'What's the hurry?' said Roopa unable to share her mother's anxiety.

'Who knows?' said Chandrika in jest, 'Maybe, they're having an extended honeymoon.'

'When would your tummy show up?' said Roopa to Chandrika.

'Bear with us,' said Chandrika, laughing. 'We are at it.'

Many a time, it did cross Roopa's mind that a child should have filled her emotional void. However, Sathyam, in spite of his disappointment, felt that a trip to the doctor was premature.

9

The countdown to Sandhya's wedding commenced with the arrival of the marriage party on that 6th June. The groom's entourage felt the official clout of Kamalakara, who by then became the District Collector. Officials worked overtime to spruce up the government guest-houses for the occasion. Fleets of department vehicles were lined up at a hailing distance from the guests. The *kalyana mandapam* was so made up as to resemble the *darbar*

ball of a maharajah's palace. Attendants in their scores swarmed the place to be on hand for assorted errands.

Sandhya was wondering how to introduce Roopa to her fiancé. She couldn't take her to him, as custom ordained that a bride shouldn't move out of the house on the eve of her marriage. She wished that he would come home to see her but the norms left no scope for that either.

'What about going to the guest-house on the sly,' said Sandhya to Roopa.

'Why not,' said Roopa in jest, 'if you don't mind being labeled a groom-chaser.'

As they were wondering what to be done, Sandhya's mother called her, 'O, Sandhya, come down.'

'Seems she won't let me be on my own today,' grumbled Sandhya as she went down.

Springing down the stairs in irritation, Sandhya saw her fiancé following her movements from the drawing room. Even as her daydreaming brought him closer to her in her consciousness, she was still shy in his presence for the lack of intimacy. Thus, stopping in her tracks, she blushed to her roots.

'Oh,' he complimented, going up to her, 'you look sweeter than ever.'

'Thanks for the compliment,' she said coyly.

'It's I who should thank you,' he said taking her hand, 'for accepting my hand.'

'Why, you had started it all,' she turned coquettish, 'by taking my hand to read in between the lines.'

'What of your inviting gestures,' he said looking into her eyes.

'Don't tell me,' she said all smiles, 'you're blindfolded otherwise.'

'Won't your beauty,' he said joyously squeezing her hand, 'impart vision to the blind even?'

'Oh, come on,' she said enthusiastically, 'I've a treasure to show you.'

'I thought you've more than one!' he said mischievously, 'anyway, why a premature display?'

'Behave like a bridegroom,' she scolded him in mock anger, 'and don't act like a playboy.'

'Hope you won't frame rules for our first night and thereafter,' he said, making her suppress her smile.

'Tell me,' he said, picking up from where she had left, 'what's that you want to show me?'

'Simply follow me,' she led him to her room.

'Won't that be,' he followed her smiling, 'my lifelong occupation?'

When Roopa heard their steps, rather instinctively she kept her inquisitive gaze doorwards. In time when their eyes met, her gaze was frozen and he stopped in his tracks. As Sandhya was about to initiate introductions, her mother called her again. Hurried by her mother, she left her fiancé and her mate to fend for themselves.

As though guided by her charms, Raja Rao found himself walking up to Roopa without taking his eyes off her. But she stood rooted and fixed her gaze at him as if the slightest tilt on her part might distract his path of attraction. As he came near her, she insensibly extended her hand as though to ensure he wouldn't trip in his trance. While he took her hand, as if to hold on to the summit of his life, energized by her dormant desire, she found herself pressing it in all eagerness. As they held their hands thus, their eyes were locked, conveying to each other the convulsions of their souls. Lost as they were in their enamored state, they had no words for each other but heaving a sigh on hearing Sandhya's approaching steps, as though to alert him, she pulled out her hand and wrenched her look. As if cut off from the life force itself, his heart was seized and his hand dropped.

'This is my treasure,' said Sandhya to him, patting her friend while she herself panted. 'Roopa is her name.'

'Anyway you look at it,' he said extending his hand to Roopa all again, 'it's a privilege to possess.'

'Why hesitate, take it,' said Sandhya to a hesitant Roopa, 'to cement our friendship.'

Roopa didn't need any further persuasion to recapture the thrill of the past moment.

'If you're my better half,' said Sandhya to her beau, lacing Roopa, 'she is my other half.'

'Won't that still leave,' he said meaningfully, 'two halves to be reckoned with?'

'Be her friendly half,' said Sandhya warmly to him, 'besides being our philosopher and guide.'

'It's my pleasure,' he said to Sandhya even as he tightened his grip on Roopa's hand, 'to do your bidding.'

'It's my privilege,' said Roopa dreamily, 'to be part of you.'

In time, called by Kamalakar, they went down, the sprightly bride leading and the enamored souls falling behind.

'Isn't it tough grappling with our coastal humidity?' Kamalakar greeted Raja Rao.

'Short of altering the climate, sir,' said Raja Rao warmly. 'You've spared nothing to make us comfortable. Thanks a lot.'

‘Honeymoon at Kodaikanal,’ said Kamalakar to Raja Rao, ‘that’s what I thought. What do you say?’

‘I’ve Kothalanka in mind,’ said Raja Rao looking at Sandhya, ‘that is if you agree. You could enjoy the scenic beauty of Konaseema, and for me it would be like starting life where I came into being.’

‘I should love that,’ said Sandhya, seemingly excited. ‘I’ve heard that Konaseema rivals Kerala for its landscape.’

‘If it suits you both,’ concurred in Kamalakar, ‘it’s Okay with us.’

‘Seems our *purohit* is missing me,’ said Raja Rao as someone came to fetch him. ‘I better get going.’

While Sandhya saw him off with an expectant feeling, Roopa seemed lost with a forlorn look. After he left, Sandhya led Roopa to her room for exchanging notes.

‘How do you like him?’ Sandhya said excitedly, ‘Don’t you find him handsome?’

‘He’s better than my dream man,’ said Roopa inciting Sandhya to kiss her in response.

‘Oh, I’ve to leave you now,’ bluffed Roopa gripped by an urge for solitude. ‘Chandrika wants me to go with her for some purchases.’

However, Sandhya, who wanted to share more about her beau with her mate, tried to hold her longer, and Roopa, after spending some time with her mate in her absent-minded state, could persuade her to let her go.

‘Know that I would stay put in my bed till you join me tomorrow,’ said Sandhya, reluctantly setting her free.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Roopa as though attuning her mind to Raja Rao’s proclivities, ‘if you don’t show up in time, he would drag you all the way to the altar.’

‘Isn’t he the one?’ thought Roopa, closing her eyes as if to hold him in her mind’s eye. She felt as though the man she vaguely craved all along came in his form.

As though infatuation itself was enamored to feel the pulse of their love in tandem, it induced Raja Rao into reverie to review his feelings.

‘Oh, what a face and the figure to match it, as well!’ he thought excitedly, ‘a woman with a woman’s body, as Dostoyevsky put it, is she not? And what about that bewitching smile, well, what a fascinating woman she is!’

‘It’s as though he came straight out of my heart to delight my eyes,’ Roopa thought in amazement. ‘New, yet so familiar, unknown, but doesn’t it feel as if he is my own! Oh, how

it tickles, as though his gaze gauges me nude! Yet, I felt protected in his presence! Well, he's the Raja of my heart and soul, there's no mistaking that.'

'It feels as though we're born for each other,' he felt hopeful. 'It's clear that she's attracted. Oh, don't her eyes carry the poetry of her passion for me? Anyway to get infatuated, or to love even, is one thing, and an affair could be altogether different. But mercifully, I wouldn't be losing track of Roopa, unlike that Ganga-Kaveri girl. What an incredible fortune to meet this one so soon after losing that one! There could be a chance to make her my own some day, who knows?'

'Wasn't my hand languid in his clasp as if to feel the pulse of his love,' she sighed as she recalled the sensation of that incredible moment. 'Didn't his touch, touch the woman in me? And when he pressed my hand with passion, wasn't I possessed for his possession. If only I weren't married and he hadn't been betrothed, oh, what should've come in the way of our wedding? But well, I have to suppress my love, if not for fidelity, at least for friendship.'

'Even if I can't live with her,' he felt peaceful in the end, 'I would be able to love her still. If I weren't destined to have her, well, my passion in time could transform into a sublime affection for her. Being privy to our mutual affection, won't we nurse a fond feeling for each other? But then, would my distraction for Roopa affect my attraction for Sandhya? Oh, don't I know that my love for Sandhya springs from the depths of my soul. Surely, Roopa seems to rein in my heart, but won't Sandhya remain the soul of my love?'

'Thank God,' she consoled herself. 'We would have enough opportunities to meet. Won't I see him and be seen by him? Oh, I would be able to adore him while he admires me. All said and done isn't he mine, being Sandhya's man? Won't I get a feel of him while I make love to her?'

10

As day broke that 7th June, the chain of leading ceremonies for the momentous wedding commenced in right earnest while Sandhya clung to Roopa all the while.

'I'm too excited to be on my own,' Sandhya repeated all along.

'To me, your marriage gives,' said Roopa heartily, 'an idea of the mythical wedding of Rathi and Manmath.'

'You look no less than an angel,' said Sandhya.

'Of an enamored kind,' said Roopa alluringly as Sandhya laced her endearingly.

By dusk at the *kalyana mandapam* it was all din. Clad in a white cotton *dhoti*, Raja Rao like a robot obeyed the unceasing commands of the *purohit* via unending *vedic mantras*. As his hands were at exercising the rituals to the *purohit's* rhythmic renditions, his *angavastram* had a tough time balancing by itself on his bare shoulders. When Sandhya was brought seated in a bamboo basket by two of her uncles, all the way from the anteroom, to the decorated dais and well before the pretty load could be unloaded opposite the eager groom, a makeshift curtain was raised between them to preclude the ogling of the betrothed before the *sumuburtham*.

When Kamalakar's watch, set to the AIR time, indicated 08.26, the auspicious time chosen as the *sumuburtham* from the Pedda Purnaiah's almanac, Raja Rao was given the green signal by the *purohit*. Governed by his destiny and guided by the *purohit*, Raja Rao's hand, carrying the sacred paste, prepared for the occasion as per the religious prescription, reached out to Sandhya, from underneath the curtain. Goaded by Roopa, the bride bowed her head to enable the groom to affix that mass on her scalp to initiate their union and in turn, Sandhya was directed to follow suit, as though to cement their marital bondage. Then doing away with the curtain, the *purohit* ordained the just married to stay put in that posture as though to allow them time to grasp the import of the moment to their eventual life.

Amateur photographers, from among the relatives, vied for vantage positions with the professional ones engaged for the occasion, and in their eagerness to capture the moment for the family albums, they tended to block the view of the vintage event to the curious audience. When the couple was allowed to free their hands, they raised their heads to espy each other as man and wife. After having been satiated with Sandhya's demeanor, when Raja Rao's eyes met Roopa's stare, they seemed to acquire a longing look and sensing his ardor for her in her enamored state, Roopa felt as though the moment belonged to her as well.

Meanwhile, the *mangalasutrams*, symbolizing the nuptial knot, were taken around by the *chota purohit* to enable the married women to bless them. In time, as the junior brought the blessed things back to his senior, Raja Rao was ready to usher Sandhya into the dream of her life. While Roopa maneuvered the flowered plait of the bride, Raja Rao stood up to tie the *mangalasutrams* round Sandhya's shapely nape, and before he proceeded, Roopa heard him whisper to Sandhya, 'With your permission.' As Roopa looked at him in admiration for his ingenuity, he raised his head and gazed at her in fascination. Puzzled by his manner, as

Roopa wondered whether he had her too in mind when he sought that 'permission', Sandhya bent her head even more, as though to salute him for his thoughtful gesture.

The rituals lasted a little longer, fuelling the longing of the just married for each other. When Raja Rao and Sandhya were given the green signal to shower the *talambralu* over each other's heads, the respective camp followers egged them on for one-upmanship. Finding Roopa helping Sandhya to let her gain the upper hand, Raja Rao cried foul. 'Didn't I tell you that she's my other half,' said Sandhya, increasing the tempo unmindful of his protests. With Roopa lending gusto, the euphoria that followed amused the gathering no end. When a fistful of the sacred rice let loose from his hand landed on her head as well, Roopa wondered whether it was all merely accidental! Reflexively looking for Sathyam, she found him engrossed in a conversation with someone in the gathering.

When it was time for the gathered to greet the just weds, Roopa joined her husband.

'This is Sathyam,' Sandhya introduced joyously to Raja Rao, 'Roopa's husband and my *raakhi* brother.'

'Thanks for coming,' said Raja Rao, while he shook hands with Sathyam, and as Roopa scrutinized his demeanor to discern the nuances, he added, 'It's a pleasure meeting you two.'

'Didn't it sound like 'meeting you too'?' thought Roopa staring at Raja Rao, 'It's as if he won't miss an opportunity for a *double entendre*! Oh, how he's at it ever since we met. Maybe, that could be part of his charm.' In the end, she thought Raja Rao's eyes were smiling as though to confirm that she got it right.

'We wish you spend some time with us on your way to Delhi,' invited Sathyam, as Roopa's face lighted up.

'Thanks, we'll try, but,' said Raja Rao

'Why don't you recommend,' said Roopa to Sandhya imploringly as Raja Rao read the disappointment written all over Roopa's face.

'I'd love nothing more,' said Sandhya entreatingly to her husband, 'than going to their place.'

'As you please,' Raja Rao seemed to address Roopa's ears.

'That is sisterly affection,' said Sathyam warmly.

'We'll be waiting,' Roopa said camouflaging her longing.

'Can I detain Roopa for tonight?' said Sandhya to Sathyam.

‘Do you need my permission for that,’ said Sathyam. ‘And I don’t come in her way either.’

‘Is there any alternative path of salvation for a married man,’ Raja Rao was hearty in his comment and said to Roopa, ‘You take care of her till I take her over.’

Around midnight that night, the physically fatigued bride fell into the arms of her mentally exhausted mate.

‘Lovey,’ said Sandhya resting her head on Roopa’s ample breasts, ‘it’s all like a dream come true.’

‘Anyway, it’s all real now,’ said Roopa pressing Sandhya’s head deep into her valley.

‘Tell me,’ Sandhya asked thoughtfully, ‘how it would be like with a man.’

‘As mating itself is so exciting,’ said Roopa in all contemplation, ‘lovemaking must be a lot more fulfilling.’

‘I’ll be in your arms anyway,’ said Sandhya mystically, ‘narrating what it was like in Raja’s embrace.’

‘Promise me then,’ said Roopa.

‘Promise what,’ said Sandhya with a smile, ‘to land up in your arms in Hyderabad, or to kiss and tell about our honeymoon.’

‘Of course both,’ said Roopa taking Sandhya into her embrace. ‘You know how I miss male sexual romance. Thanks to your man, now I can experience that by proxy, won’t I?’

‘Oh how sweet,’ said Sandhya, in all eagerness, ‘But it all depends on how you make me want to come to you.’

‘Come,’ said Roopa pressing closer to Sandhya, ‘I’ll make you feel doubly wanting by the time your man comes mounting.’

Soon, Sandhya realized to her gratification that Roopa’s love meant business.

The next day, after seeing off the newly weds on their honeymoon trail, Roopa set out on the homeward stretch with Sathyam towards the evening.

‘While Sandhya’s love would find fulfillment in Raja’s passion, am I not left to pine for his possession,’ she felt as she struggled to find solace in sleep in that sleeper coach of the Godavari Express.

As the chauffeur-driven Ambassador crossed Kakinada, greenery greeted the honeymooners. 'I never knew that we're so close to nature,' exclaimed Sandhya leaning on her man.

'Once we're in Konaseema,' said Raja Rao feeling refreshed, 'you won't have eyes for me even.'

'How I wish,' said Sandhya, lost in her excitement, 'that Roopa were with us,'

'I'm beginning to get envious of your Roopa,' he said in jest, taking her hand,

'Why so,' she said lovingly, 'she only complements my love for you.'

'What's so special about her?' he tried to appear casual.

'Oh, she's unique,' she said emotively, 'though it feels nice being your wife, separation from her hurts me as well. We've grown up dreaming living as neighbors,'

'Why,' he said tentatively, 'it's still possible.'

'Can we move over to Hyderabad!' she said excitedly.

'I love that place like no other place,' he said as he made up his mind by then to try to win Roopa's favor. 'Let's see how soon we can make it.'

'But meanwhile,' she said, looking into his eyes, 'be prepared for my nagging on that score.'

'Won't I love that,' he said kissing her hand.

'Roopa would be thrilled to hear about that,' she said excitedly.

'Don't tell her,' he cautioned her, 'till we come closer to that.'

'How I wish,' she said, closing her eyes as if in prayer, 'it were now.'

'Oh,' he said, 'we have reached Draksharama!'

'Let's have Bhemeswara *Swami's* blessings,' she suggested,

'I think it's really prognostic of good tidings.'

'I too have,' he said smiling, 'a lot to thank Him about and pray for as well.'

Seeing her in reverence before the deity, he could discern the serenity of her beauty and thanked Him for the blessedness that life had bestowed upon him.

'What have you sought from Him?' he asked her as they got back into the car.

'I think, you can guess,' she said dreamily. 'What about your prayer?'

'Let it be my secret,' he said smiling.

'Then keep it under lock and key,' she feigned anger.

'It's all about love,' he said effulgently.

'I love you,' she jibed with him joyously.

Soon they reached the shores of Kotipally to cross the Godavari. Sandhya's fear of water shored up by his assurances *en route*, sunk her heart as she saw the mighty river in its lean summer course. While the prospect of boating across it shocked her water phobic psyche, Rao's coaxing of her, which bordered on pecking, amused the travelers and the boatmen alike. Caught between the onshore embarrassment and the offshore predicament, as Sandhya stepped into the boat as though she were slipping into the river itself, Raja Rao, having jumped into it earlier like a habitual, tended his perplexed bride tenderly into it, and once in, she reached for a cross plank seemingly considering the center of gravity of that which was afloat. Seeing her predicament then, those who sat on it moved away to enable the newly weds ensconced in the middle. In time, having adjusted herself in trepidation, Sandhya clasped Raja Rao as though he were the mast of the boat itself.

When he ventured during the voyage to toy with the waters, she pulled him in fear and reprimanded him for his daring. Whenever the boat was rocked in motion, she laced him in confusion, inducing him to cuddle her for her comfort. As her primordial beauty pixilated by panic evoked pity in him, he was empathic in addressing her apprehensions. Having got over her fears in his protective embrace at last, Sandhya felt she grasped the meaning of marriage. Seeing her at ease thus, he realized the power of love over the fear of the unknown.

After turning her attention to the horizon, lined with coconut trees, and watching it for long in fascination, she interested herself in the vastness of the Godavari, and felt that the wavy currents of its bluish green waters synchronized with the romantic beats of her expectant heart. Then looking lovingly at her man, she experienced rare warmth in her soul, which made her feel that the sheen of their love matched the glint of the river.

After voyaging for well over an hour, they reached the banks of Mukteswaram, the gateway of Konaseema, where, courtesy Kamalakar's clout, an Ambassador awaited them. Looking back at the river they just crossed, she felt relaxed and thought, 'Haven't my fears got dissolved mid-course making way for hopes?' At that, as she got into the Ambassador, it crossed her mind that by the next day around, she would be on the other bank of her virginal canal. Amused, she looked at her man in amorous anticipation.

Soon, entering the hinterland, they found the roadside canal on course, seemingly guiding the visitors to their respective destinations. While the unending rows of coconut trees resembled sentries on duty for the visiting dignitaries, the lush green carpets of paddy

seedlings went into ripples, as though stirred by their welcoming instinct. Lending variety to the landscape was many a mango grove apart from the fully-grown banana gardens and as if to avoid the monotony of the greenery, habitats abounded all along with cattle sheds as annexes.

‘It looks like life is closer to nature in these tiled houses and thatched huts, with cattle for company!’ Sandhya wondered aloud.

‘It’s an irony that we fail to fuse the new technology with the old environs in fashioning our modern way of living,’ he said ruefully. ‘It’s sad we’ve to choose between nature’s bounty in the villages and the make-believe of our cities.’

As if to demonstrate the difference, the driver brought them to Amalapuram, the commercial hub of Konaseema. After some snacks and coffee in a bustling hotel, they resumed their journey to their destination that was far from Hardy’s madding crowds and as they saw the back of Amalapuram, they came to face nature all again.

By the time they approached Bhatnavalli, the sun began to set, and the villagers were seen resting in their courtyards. While some men were seen rolling their cigars with *lanka pogaku*, others were puffing away at theirs. Women there were found gossiping with their neighbors across the fences as if they were mending fences over past quarrels. As the landlords rode home in their bullock carts, farmhands too started trekking back from the fields with their head loads. Giving a picture of the carefree life to the visitors, the youths were engaged in *kabaddi* and the children were lost in their marbles. As though symbolizing the surging spirit of the fair sex, village belles vied with each other to come up trumps in competitive hops in those eight square courts that were marked in the courtyards. However, the hen in helter-skelter disturbed them in between, making them cautious not to step on them.

‘This is the famed pilgrimage of Balayogi,’ said Raja Rao as they reached Mummidivaram, ‘the saint who’s said to have been holed up in penance round the year. He was wont to come out of his hibernation only on *maha sivarathri* for his devotees to have his *darshan*. It’s believed that he had the power to survive without food or water and lived long for all that.’

‘Is it possible!’ she asked in surprise.

‘Well it’s a matter of faith, and his devotees believe in his miraculous powers,’ he said. ‘However, for every devotee there could be ten to deride the god-men.’

As it was dusk by the time they reached Kothalanka, the Ambassador had a herd of cattle on the homeward stretch to accompany. It seemed the dust raised by the vehicle on the

kachcha road matched with the mood of the setting sun. While children ceased playing, watching the spectacle of the four-wheeler in motion, the elders craned their necks to second-guess the destination of the visitors.

12

When their journey ended at his uncle's courtyard, said Raja Rao to Sandhya, 'There's Thimmaiahgaru for you.'

As they stepped out of the car, the old man came out of the courtyard to receive them, all along blaming the transplantation time for his failure to attend their wedding.

'Oh, the farmhands have become a big nuisance these days,' grumbled Thimmaiah unceasingly. 'You've to be behind them always or else they would give the slip at every turn. Any way, I'm glad you've come with your wife to your native. I've got your house spruced up; let's see how your wife likes it.'

As he continued to engage them at the gate itself, Narasamma came out of the house, and reprimanded her old man, 'Why, do you want to send them back from the gate itself?'

Then turning to Sandhya, Narasamma said affectionately, 'I haven't seen a more beautiful bride all my life. Our Raja is very lucky. We've got excited when we received his letter that you're coming here. It's a very sensible thing to do. One shouldn't forget his roots. We would have loved your stay in our house, but it is only proper that you spend some time in his ancestral home. You might lodge there but know that your board is here only.'

'Thank you,' said Sandhya heartily.

'Why have you not asked them to come in?' retorted Thimmaiah.

'How are Krishna and Krishnaveni?' enquired Raja Rao as he led Sandhya into the verandah.

'They keep writing, asking us to join them, but how could we leave our hearth and home and stay with them, that too in the States,' said Thimmaiah stating their position. 'Though our thoughts are with our children, our desire remains to breathe our last here.'

'Now that you've got married,' Narasamma enquired, 'would you go back to the US?'

'On the other hand,' said Raja Rao playing music to Sandhya's ears, 'I want to come closer to you all. I'm planning to shift to Hyderabad.'

'Come on, I'll show you the place,' Thimmaiah led the couple to their honeymoon house. 'There won't be any end to her enquiries.'

‘Don’t hang around there for long,’ said Narasamma as though to get even with her old man.

Led by his uncle, Raja Rao crossed the road with his bride to enter his ancestral house as a prelude.

‘I let it be used as our village club,’ said Thimmaiah justifying his decision. ‘If locked up, it would only dilapidate.’

When Thimmaiah took them to the backyard, finding a flower-bedecked bed on a high-rise double cot, Sandhya felt embarrassed and looked the other way. As though to let her grasp the significance of it all, said Thimmaiah to Raja Rao, ‘I appreciate your sentiment in having the family cot here. I thought you would need a table fan as well.’ Then he switched it on, as a demonstrator would do in the laboratory.

‘Sorry for the bother,’ said Raja Rao. ‘But I couldn’t help it, knowing that we would land up late in the evening.’

‘Well, you’re like my son though he shuns his native,’ said Thimmaiah before he left them all for themselves. ‘I’m glad you’ve chosen it for your honeymoon.’

13

Being all alone for the first time with her man, Sandhya was overwhelmed by the privacy the moment had afforded them. However, as Raja Rao cuddled her in ecstasy, she cajoled him with love.

‘How long have I longed!’ he said, caressing her back as she molded into his embrace for a response.

Then, he raised her head as though to see the essence of her soul but saw her droop her eyelids in anticipation. He showered kisses on them, seemingly to cajole them to sight to make them witness his passion. As the ardor of the moment quivered her lips, he joined his to those for support. Gratified by his gesture, so it seemed, her lips played host to their labial guests. The reciprocity of their explorations that followed enabled them to experience the fondness of their love that permeated their souls. In time, he loosened himself from her enticing grip so as not to cross the threshold before the momentous event.

As they reentered the backyard with a compound wall, the softness of the bed, laid amidst a bed of roses, gladdened their hearts. Leading her up to the nearby well, he proposed that they bathe in the open.

‘Why fear?’ he said in mock innocence, as she protested in shyness. ‘I’ll keep guard.’

‘That’s the threat,’ she said, turning coy.

‘Let’s find a romantic balance,’ he said persuasively and went up to the cot in measured steps. He then gestured her to join him and having been amused, she obliged him demurely.

‘It’s half moon now and I would be twenty steps away,’ he crooned into her ears endearingly. ‘Why don’t you let me gloat over your contours that would shape the course of our love life?’

‘Gents first,’ she suggested, ‘in these things.’

‘Agreed,’ he caught her by her waist and led her to the well, ‘If it means courtship manners.’

As he handled the bucket over the overhead pulley, finding some coconuts afloat, she said in wonderment, ‘Oh, the village refrigeration!’

When he was down to his underwear, she thought he resembled a well-chiseled sculpture of a Greek warrior, and as he drew water from the well in bucketfuls, she was charmed watching the contractions of his shapely biceps.

‘Would you please,’ he said invitingly, ‘soap my back.’

‘Oh, I see, your desires are ever on the raise,’ she said mischievously. ‘Since you behaved well all the way, I took you for a gentleman.’

‘In other words,’ he said pulling her nearer to him, ‘you were afraid that the burden of initiative should’ve landed in your lap. What with the driver around, I had no go but to steer clear of your curves.’

‘I never thought,’ she said turning coy, ‘that you’re such a shameless character.’

‘If men were to turn shy at the threshold,’ he said in all smiles, ‘the burden of shame would fall on women. I’ll tell you an interesting anecdote. One of my cousins didn’t stir in the nuptial bed as though he was in meditation. Finding him tepid to her eager charms, crossing her fingers, his bride felt him at the right place! As you could guess, that did the trick for the rest of the night and ever after.’

Without further fuss, hitching her sari and tucking it, she obliged him.

‘I would like to have,’ he said winking, enjoying the sense of her touch in the slippery medium, ‘a little more pressure applied later.’

‘You seem to be quite experienced,’ she said taunting him.

‘Can’t that be imaged,’ he said tentatively, ‘even without going through the motions?’

After his bath, he filled the well-side tub for her use, and retreated to the cot as agreed. As he waited in anticipation, she started her bath with her clothes on. Crying foul, he rushed to the well and pulled at her sari, leaving her in her blouse and the petticoat. When his attack was directed at her midriff to untie the ribbon, she agreed to obey and sent him away.

As she began bathing with her back to him, he goaded her to be more open, and as she relented, seeing her myriad movements in nude, he felt as though some romantic poetry acquired her form. When she stepped out wrapped in her bathrobe, he nestled her from behind eagerly and whispered in her ears endearingly. 'You look sex fresh,' and as she blushed to her roots, he went on showering her shoulders with warm kisses.

By the time they arrived for dinner, he in his white pajamas and *kurta* and she in her light green cotton sari and a black blouse, Narasamma was ready to serve them some spicy dishes. Being hungry, and egged on by the aroma of the preparations, the eager couple ate well to the visceral satisfaction of the hostess.

After dinner, Narasamma adorned Sandhya's forehead with *kumkum* and gave her a white voile sari with gold border and said, 'Women should wear white for the nights. Of course sari and not that tent called the nightie, as it fails to move your man. Remember that there is none like the sari to lend appeal to feminine frame for the male eye, for it symbolizes the seductive dressing at its very best. Well, it is the sari that has in it how much to reveal and what to veil off a woman's bearing.'

When the fresh pair left, soon after, the old couple began to reminisce their own sweet times, and as it dawned on them that they forgot to place 'milk and sweets' near the nuptial bed for rejuvenation of the just weds, they sent them post-haste with a farmhand.

Soon, laid on the high-rise cot in the courtyard, Raja Rao was impatient for his bride's arrival and as Sandhya stepped out into the moonlight, he felt as though she were an angel that had descended from the heavens. However, as she neared him, her pace slowed down while his pulse increased, and finding her coy to climb up the cot, he clenched her waist to catapult her onto the bed. While she landed herself in his ardent embrace, even as her sari went askance, exposing her legs and baring her blouse, her pulse increased anticipating an ambush. What with her breasts heaving alluringly, as if to invite him to steady her impulse, as she felt the pressure of his hand on her bosom, she realized she was in the realms of masculinity. As he began feeling the softness of her belly, she felt fascinated by the

firmness of his touch and as his hands probed the contours of her bottom, she found herself rollicking in anticipation.

Soon, as he turned her naked, she dropped her eyes, as she felt shy to espy herself in his presence but when she sensed he was nude as well, she stole a glance to gauge the measure of his manhood. When he held her firmly against his hairy chest, her breasts had their first brush with maleness, and as he sought for her lips eagerly, she provided them readily. After stooping to her feet in passion, having conquered her heart with love, he found his way back on her silken slopes with the labial support, and rested his head on the slab of her midriff. However, as though signaled by its spasms, while he tended his lips to her labium, she moaned with his labial nuances before guiding him to enter her arena with his passion for her possession. As his manhood reached the threshold of her maidenhood, her womanhood connived with him to contrive its crossing. On their way to orgasm, they experienced the ecstasy of union brought about by the feeling of lovemaking.

Then fondling his back, as he lay on her in exhaustion, she felt life was worth living if only for that moment. Seeing he was fulfilled as well, she felt gratified for being the source of his fulfillment and as her own enjoyment, occasioned by him, made him even more endearing to her loving heart. Holding hands in satiation, wondering about nature's ingenuity in conceiving sexual gratification as a means of human fulfillment, they looked at the skies, as though to thank the stars for their union. Soon, Sandhya couldn't help but think about her intimacy with Roopa and felt, 'while lesbianism with Roopa entails our bodies delight our minds, in coition with Raja, oh, how our bodies and souls come to fuse.'

Before exhaustion overpowered their youthful exuberance in their nuptial bed and sleep overtook their adoring gaze, the moon was on its westward descent, and as though it got inkling from its fairer partner on the horizon, the sun lay in wait to catch a glimpse of the nuptial bride in sleep. As if influenced by his possessive instinct, Raja Rao woke up at dawn to catch the peeping tom at the act. Turning then to Sandhya who slept spread-eagled, he felt she looked splendid. It seemed as though she resembled the bedside roses, having herself flowered overnight after being deflowered. Seeing his bride thus in the nascent sunlight, he surged to have more of her fresh youth and as he pressed against her ardently, she woke up to his ardor to match him amorously.

When it was time for breakfast, Raja Rao and Sandhya went hand in hand to Thimmaiah's place to be greeted by Narasamma's steamy *idlis* and spicy *chutneys*, and having savored those, they set out for sight-seeing.

Thy sauntered in the paddy fields and roamed about the mango groves until Sandhya became sore footed to go any farther, and ignoring her coy protests, he carried her in his arms, inducing her to cling on to him comfortably. But once they reached their coconut plantation, she jumped to the ground as though to view the setting in its proper shape. Their *kapu*, so as to sweeten their palates and fill their bellies, fetched a couple of *ganga bondaalu*, and a rejuvenated Sandhya then accompanied Raja Rao to pray at the nearby *darga* of the legendary Vali Baba, who, it was said, walked on the rivers and wasn't wetted by rainwater.

Returning to the Thimmaiahs for lunch, they stayed back for gossip lest their hosts should feel that they were treated as mere innkeepers. Thimmaiah poured out the problems agriculture posed, and was pleased at having a person for an audience who didn't have ideas to differ with his own. Narasamma, however, tried to interest Sandhya with a game of dice and shells. After drubbing the bride in half a dozen games, Narasamma switched over to the sport of tamarind seeds. She spread a few score of them at random on the floor at arm length. Then she tossed one up and picked up another from the spread before catching the former mid air. As the play progressed, she increased the number of pickings from the spread and yet didn't let the tossed-up one slip through her guard. Sandhya, who watched in wonderment, made a mess of it when it was her turn to try her hand.

When it was time for tea, Sandhya offered to serve them and savoring her sweetened preparation, Thimmaiah complimented Sandhya, 'You seem to be one up on my old woman.'

'To be honest,' said Sandhya earnestly, 'I want to be her apprentice.'

'It's good to know that you realize that cooking is an art,' Narasamma said as though to begin the lessons for Sandhya, 'though nowadays it's being treated as a machine craft. Pressures of the times have brought in pressure cookers, and it's lost on the housewife that as nature takes its own time to deliver, cooking needs time to impart taste to the food. And if you pressure it to deliver, either way, it's going to be a premature issue. It has become fashionable to talk in terms of the recipes these days, though they're no more than the same *garam masala* with different brand names. Won't one lose the unique taste of the vegetables, the gravy being the same in every curry? Cooking seems to have fallen into the

hands of barbarians, and the family members too don't seem to mind any more. Anyway, I'll give you some useful tips before you leave.'

'I would be grateful for that,' said Sandhya eagerly.

'What about visiting a few temples?' Narasamma said as an after thought.

'Why forget they're here honeymooning,' said the old man jokingly, 'and are not on a pilgrimage?'

'Jokes apart,' said Sandhya, 'I'm keen praying at a couple of temples.'

'Raja you spend a night or two in a houseboat on Vasishta,' suggested Thimmaiah. 'That would be like icing on your honey.'

'That's when Sandhya gets over her phobia for water,' said Raja Rao.

'Then take her to Vodalarevu where the Gowthami makes a "T" with the Bay of Bengal,' said Thimmaiah. 'It's a sight to see.'

'I would love to witness that,' said Sandhya in excitement. 'Who knows, in time I might be a game for the houseboat even.'

'I feel Ryali is a must visit,' said Raja Rao to Narasamma's delight, 'if only to envision the sculptured fusion of Vishnu's front with Mohini's back in *saligrama*.'

'God bless you people,' said Narasamma, seemingly blessing them herself. 'It helps to place trust in God.'

'The days have changed,' said Thimmaiah. 'Nowadays, it's as though men are guided merely by religiosity and not by any religiousness. *Naro narayana*, man is God, that's what our *sastras* preach, implying that you only reach Him through the service to humanity. Nevertheless, man today seems to believe he no longer needs to serve man to please the Gods. In this jet age of non-stop flights, it's as though man thinks he can hop to heaven by merely visiting temples. One no longer prays to God for peace of mind; it's his prosperity that's at the back of his mind. Boon seeking has become the bane of the religious spirit. The more one is moved by his motive, all the more the fervency in his prayer increases. All the while, it's as though the fellow-beings count for nothing.'

'In my opinion,' commented Raja Rao, 'there is more to religion than meets the eye. It is the most effective means devised by man to hold human beings from cracking at the threshold of their anxieties. If you see, when a man is gravely ill, his wife fears that she's on the verge of widowhood and all that goes with it. Unable to bear the anxiety about her future without him, won't she turn to God via her religion to transfer her burden? God, please save him, she would pray for His mercy while waiting for his recovery in hopeful

anticipation. As a result, in the mean time, her own anxiety lies in suspension of belief, making it easy on her mind. In the end, if he comes out true and kicking, it's God's grace, but were he to kick the bucket, then it's God's will. However, life takes over where her man would have left it, and soon she gets adjusted in the altered situation. The feature of faith is it rescues us from going insane by helping us to face the vicissitudes of life with religious hope.'

Thimmaiah nodded in approval as Narasamma scowled her disagreement, 'What you say might be true but it could be too sensitive for your wife.'

'I would like to see life with maturity and not approach it with sentimentality,' said Sandhya. 'I'm glad that I've found the right guide in my husband.'

'That's the benefit of woman's education,' said Thimmaiah greatly impressed.

'But the real tragedy of man lies not in death but in life itself,' said Raja Rao characteristically. 'Man would nurse animosity lacking perceptivity, burdens himself with sentimentality, courts trouble thoughtlessly and then turns to god-men for deliverance. It's a pity that man meditates for peace of mind having purchased headaches at a discount.'

Seeing the nuptial couple yawn at length, Narasamma suggested that it was time they caught up with lost sleep under the mango tree in the backyard. After siesta, however, at Sandhya's behest, the aged couple accompanied the newly weds in the evening to the Sathyanarayana *Swamy* temple on the banks of the village tank.

After the *parikrama*, they had the Lord's *darshan* and sitting by the lake, Narasamma narrated the temple's legend thus:

When Lega Sathyanarayana of the village went to Annavaram, the Lord visited him in his dream and directed him to begin building a temple for Him at this very spot. Once Lega returned, everything fell into place by the blessings of the Lord and the benevolence of the villagers and the others. It was thus at Godspeed the temple for the Lord was built.

On their return, as the nuptial-couple headed home to have their way, the elderly, while preparing to receive them for dinner, reminisced about the finest day they had in years.

'Let me repay my debt,' said Raja Rao picking the soap, as they went into the backyard for bath.

'Wait for my call,' she said smiling.

'Don't keep me waiting,' he said ardently.

When they reached the Thimmaiah's place for dinner, seeing Sandhya in an off-white voile sari with maroon border, Narasamma was truly impressed. Though Sandhya returned upbeat after dinner, nevertheless, Raja Rao found Sandhya morose in his embrace.

'Why darling,' he said in jest, 'did the honey turn bitter just after seven spoonfuls.'

'Don't be cruel,' she said. 'Somehow, I'm missing Roopa, that's all.'

'You should've opted to be co-wives then,' he said sharing her mood. 'Jokes apart, I admire your love.'

'To tell you the truth,' said Sandhya smiling, 'by the time we realized that, we both got married.'

'By the quirk of fate,' he said as if to put ideas into her head, 'it seems, someone had missed so much in life.'

'Let me not miss you now,' she said eagerly.

'Wonder how,' he said taking her into her arms, 'Roopa excites you as well as depresses you.'

'That is true,' she said before he sealed her lips.

Over their weeklong stay there, having gauged Sandhya's ability to take things objectively, Raja Rao thought it fit to lead her on the realistic path of life.

'Sandhya,' she heard him croon, as she lay exhausted in his arms that night, their last night of the honeymoon at Kothalanka.

'Hahn.'

'I must confess to you that I fancied some women and enjoyed a few of them even,' he said, 'I even imagined that a wife could be just another woman in my life. However, you've made me realize that wife is man's very own woman, different from all other women.'

'Are you upset,' he enquired, as she didn't respond, 'that you didn't get a virgin man.'

'No, not at all' said Sandhya. 'I was just thinking about something else.'

'Normally it is better that woman keeps her past from her man,' he said setting the standard for their relationship. 'As I appreciate the proclivities of youth, you can be open with me without any hesitation.'

Then she readily narrated her experience in the city bus, and said, 'All that would seem so funny now.'

'Well,' he said, making light of it, 'he stirred the nest and the bird flew into my hold.'

'Now I'm relieved,' she said, 'Oh, how it has been bothering me ever since.'

‘Treat that as one of those small pleasures in life, and no more,’ he said smiling. ‘But they have a place of their own in one’s life.’

‘Maybe, it’s my love for you,’ she said reaching for him, ‘which induced that guilt in me.’

‘While nature has conceived man-woman attraction for the furtherance of procreation,’ he said to let her understand the import of it all, ‘it’s man that invented the institution of marriage for orderly living. However, nature didn’t oblige us by altering the catalysis of man-woman chemistry to suit the structured need of marital fidelity. Thus, the human proclivity to get attracted to the opposite sex comes into conflict with the concept of adultery. That’s why it’s not fair to judge the sexual ethics of others.’

‘You’re an intellectual,’ she said in all admiration to him. ‘I am proud of you really.’

‘You are my angel indeed,’ he said, as he became eager all again. ‘I adore you.’

When the time came for the Raja Raos to leave, the old man hoped there would be similar summers to come.

‘But they should come with the newborn next time,’ said Narasamma, making Sandhya blush to the roots.

After being in the seventh heaven for over a week, the honeymooners left Konaseema for their new sojourn.

15

Roopa was languid in her bed that morning when she received Sandhya’s telegram -
ARRIVING TWENTIETH GODAVARI RECEIVE US STATION.

Overwhelmed, she threw her hands up in excitement. However, she picked up ‘The Hindu’ lying in the door latch as though to confirm the date. Thrilled at the prospect of meeting Raja Rao, she looked at the clock, and was shocked at what she saw.

‘There’s hardly any time left. Oh, the train would arrive in half an hour, the time that takes me to reach the station. Can’t the department show some consideration for such messages,’ she thought in irritation. ‘Why did Sandhya have to wait until the eleventh hour to wire?’

While cursing her friend impulsively, she reached for the mirror instinctively.

‘I’ve to appear before Raja unkempt or keep them waiting to freshen up,’ she thought, apprising herself of her appearance. ‘Oh, how I’ve been craving to see him for the past eleven days! When the longed-for moment is on hand, why am I bothering about my looks? If I don’t show up in time, they may try to make it on their own. Won’t that further

delay his *darshan*? Moreover, a mix-up would leave them stranded at the doorsteps. And that would surely present me in a poor light. Oh, no, I will change the sari and tend to my hair on the way.'

As soon as she got into an auto-rickshaw, she began goading the driver to go in top gear, all the while blaming herself for her predicament, 'Oh, how stupid! Wasn't it my idea to receive them at the station that has landed me in this mess? Didn't they say they would make it on their own even then? But, I insisted on receiving them, didn't I? Oh, how could I've anticipated all this? Was it my fault wanting to see him as he got down from the train? For all my longing, don't I deserve to see him as he alights? But as luck would have it, I might as well miss the bus.'

'What's wrong with you?' she berated the driver in annoyance. 'Where have you parked your driving skills?'

'Madam,' the driver said in apparent helplessness, 'what can be done when the roads are as bad and the tyres so dear.'

'Oh, the roads, they are as wretched as my life,' she felt dejectedly while her thoughts turned to Sathyam instinctively, 'Why had he to go today, of all days, on that god-damn tour? Had he not woken me up at four, I wouldn't have had a disturbed sleep later, and so should've got up as usual. It's as though ill-luck would shadow me in his shape.'

Having reached the Secunderabad Railway Station with such wayward thoughts, Roopa all but fumbled at the Enquiry Counter. However, on learning that the Godavari was expected shortly, such was her relief that she didn't bother to check up whether she was early in coming or the train was late in arriving.

Pregnant with expectations all again, she rushed to the designated platform and awaited their arrival with all her heart. 'Post-nuptials, how would Raja look?' as she thought, she tried to envision him with a peculiar sense of thrill. Instinctively she recalled the glow on Sathyam's face in the wake of their first night, and felt, 'Raja must be looking at his handsomest best given his unique looks.' As she recalled his enamored demeanor and the longing touch, she craved even more for him.

'It feels as though we met only the other day,' she thought in fondness. 'How two weeks have passed since! Oh, when weeks could roll by in his thoughts, then years could be but fleeting moments in his company. Why does he never leave my thoughts? It's as if I'm incapable of holding any picture other than his persona now! It's as though he has become an immutable essence of my consciousness.'

‘Would he have given me a damn all these days?’ it crossed her mind to her consternation. ‘Were it possible that he wouldn’t have thought about me at all? But then, didn’t the love bug bite us in the same vein? But still, wasn’t it just a brief encounter? Is it possible that it was just an agreeable distraction for him? Moreover, hasn’t he been with his beautiful bride all the while? Oh, how stupid of me to expect that he would long for me!’

Though startled by the thought, she nevertheless conjectured in hope, ‘He loves Sandhya for sure, and don’t I rejoice at her fortune for that. Still can’t he feel some fondness for me as well? In spite of his preoccupation with Sandhya, shouldn’t he be thinking about me in blissful anticipation? Of course, the same way I think of him while in Sathyam’s arms.’

‘What if the glow of my attraction had paled by Sandhya’s effervescence in his eyes?’ she thought in fright, as her doubts resurfaced. ‘Sandhya’s ardency should’ve nipped his passion for me in the bud. Oh, don’t I know how ardent she is. Besides, her ethereal beauty should’ve bewitched him, blinding his eyes to my charms forever. The softness of her manner should’ve seeped into the soft centre he could have nursed for me in his heart. Her love by now could have satiated his lust, obliterating the traces of his infatuation for me.’

As she turned gloomy thus, she thought melancholically, ‘I should’ve known that it wouldn’t lead me anywhere. Yet, how did I fail to rein in my enamored heart! Why this fruitless feeling for my friend’s man? Oh, won’t this fatal attraction for him engulf my life in passionate misery? Well, the dead weight of my hopes used to be a drag on my life but hasn’t this throbbing pain of love activated my heart. When it is so pleasurable pining for him, what a feeling it would be to possess him. All said and done, does it not amount to consciously coveting Sandhya’s man?’

Shocked by the thought, she questioned herself in disbelief, ‘Why didn’t my conscience caution me while my infatuation coveted her man? Is it because it’s love that’s at the root of my passion? After all, I’m not out to snatch him from her, am I? Of course, I wish to bestow my affection on the man whom she seems to adore. Given our lesbianism, what’s wrong if I want to augment her man’s happiness with my body and soul as well? How thrilling it could be for the three of us in a grand liaison!’

Having rationalized her proclivity thus, visualizing the ecstasies of their passionate orgies, she got excited.

Soon, the train halted on platform number two to unload its load of weary passengers. At length, when she saw him alight from a first class coach, she stopped in her tracks. ‘Didn’t

I guess it right? Oh, he looks so divine,' she thought endearingly, spying him alluringly. 'It's worth pining for him even though it's paining. Isn't pain better than the lack of any feeling?' In time when she spotted Sandhya, Roopa's look acquired a new found love. As she rushed towards them, she recalled that incident on the train, and felt, 'If that weird episode could romanticize my gloom, wouldn't his vivacity have overwhelmed her in a romantic whirlwind?'

When Roopa was at arm's length, Sandhya leapt towards her, losing her balance in the bargain. As Raja Rao instinctively tried to prevent Sandhya from tumbling, his hands clasped Roopa's arms calling the same bidding. Holding Sandhya in between them, as they looked at each other, his gaze portrayed longing and her look acquired the feeling of belonging. Later, as he was arranging for a coolie, the friends were boggled with tears of joy.

'How's Sathyam?' enquired Sandhya at length.

'He's okay but away,' replied Roopa. 'He went to Warangal before your telegram arrived.'

'How disappointing it is?' said Sandhya. 'Will he be back before we leave tomorrow?'

'I thought,' said Roopa in disappointment, 'you would be staying a little longer.'

'Honestly,' said Raja Rao, who joined them by then, 'we're hard pressed for time, but wanted to see you two nevertheless.'

'He's again at it with that 'too',' Roopa thought amusedly, but said softly. 'Can't you imagine what your coming means to me?'

'Why imagine,' he said seductively, 'when it's all so apparent. Thanks for the hearty welcome.'

'He's impossible,' Roopa felt thrilled by his audacity. 'He's not even worried that Sandhya might guess.'

Securing the rest of their luggage in the cloakroom, they exited with a suitcase that Raja Rao carried. Walking along with them, Roopa thought, 'Surely, he heard about Sathyam's absence but failed to voice the customary disappointment. Why, won't he know it's a godsend for him to make advances at me? It's clear that he knows that I have fallen head over heels for him, with all my heart and soul as well. The fact that he kept mum shows he's not a hypocrite, and how I abhor hypocrisy, though I was guilty of it with Chandrika then. Anyway, won't Sathyam's absence suit me as well, for the same reason? Well, it could be providential, couldn't it be? Besides, Sathyam's presence could have devalued me in Raja's esteem.'

Gladdened by Roopa's warm welcome, Raja Rao was saddened that he would have to bid her adieu the very next day. Though he toyed with the idea of extending their stay, he gave it up in the end, afraid it might give him away. However, he made up his mind to probe her heart while expressing his feelings to her.

16

By the time Roopa came out of the Railway Station with Raja Rao and Sandhya, the auto-stand wore a deserted look. Moving away from them to locate an auto, Roopa hailed at a passing one. The auto driver as though to show her, her place in the love triangle, drove in to form a wedge between her and the wedded couple. As Roopa got in from the right, Raja Rao stepped in from the left to place the luggage in the space behind. As he was about to step out to let Sandhya get in, he found himself pushed in by her, unmindful of the protocol. As Sandhya nudged him for more space for herself, he was pushed closer to Roopa that filled her heart and thrilled his senses.

Pressed between his wife and the woman he enamored, Raja Rao realized that his sex life would be dull without bedding the latter as well. The jerks of the journey thereon that jostled their man closer to them sharpened Sandhya's sensuality and deepened Roopa's desire.

'If a mere thirty minute ride with him could be so exciting, how exhilarating a lifelong journey would be then?' Roopa thought, reluctantly getting down when the auto reached her place.

Once they got in, Raja Rao went into the bathroom to shower himself, while the friends were engaged with the marriage albums.

'One might think,' said Roopa finding herself in every other picture, 'I'm photo-crazy.'

'On the other hand,' said Sandhya affectionately, 'we thought you're a value addition.'

'Who else?' said Roopa.

'Can't you guess?' said Sandhya pointing to her husband with her eyes as he came.

'Madam, I feel you've kept watch to catch me at mischief,' he said, making Roopa blush to the roots.

'I was only trying to measure,' said Roopa, composing herself readily, 'my friend's fortune in the making.'

'What a compliment!' he said, thrilled at that. 'Though it's said that beauty and brains won't coexist in feminine frames, both of you seem to have appropriated most of both.'

‘Thank you,’ said Sandhya thrilled by the romance of the moment. ‘But you better stop this madam business. Don’t you know she has a beautiful name?’

‘Won’t she feel,’ he said, looking at Roopa, ‘that it strikes a familiar note?’

‘Roopa,’ said Roopa, matching his gaze.

‘Roopa,’ he repeated, thrilling her senses.

‘I’ll go for a bath,’ said Sandhya, and left.

‘Roopa,’ he addressed her as she buried herself in an album. As the ardency in his tone signaled a note of urgency, she shifted her loving gaze from the groom in the pictures onto him in her presence.

‘Roopa,’ he repeated

‘Hahn.’

‘We’ll be leaving tomorrow,’ he said with a feeling of disappointment, which she noticed in the tenor of his tone.

‘I know,’ she said, as her hapless mind filtered the true feelings of her heart that read, ‘I know, but how I wish you would take me too.’

He kept quiet, staring at her in disappointment.

‘You could have stayed for a day or more,’ he felt she could have said without compromising herself. ‘Then I would have seized the chance to open my heart to her. And couldn’t she have poured out her heart in reciprocity? It’s apparent that she’s attracted to me, there is no mistaking that. Doesn’t her heavy manner belie the burden of her love even?’ The thought that she loved him pleased him even more for her presence.

Finding him truant, she realized that she goofed up her chance, and thought, ‘Any commonplace comment could have kept the dialogue alive, and who knows, what it would have unraveled. Why can’t he realize that it’s but a mere slip of the tongue, symbolizing the gulf between my feelings and expression?’

As though blaming him didn’t appeal to her, Roopa tried to rationalize the lack of forthrightness on his part, ‘After all, in his position, he can’t but be tentative, for the fear of offending my sensitivity.’ However, even as their lips were sealed in apprehension, their eyes continued their conversation without any inhibition.

Meanwhile Sandhya felt refreshed while freshening herself in her bath. ‘Roopa likes my man,’ she thought excitedly. ‘But then, won’t women find him fascinating if they happen to get acquainted with him? That way, he too turned fond of her. Why, can any man ever

ignore her either? Won't it be nice if only we three could form a friendly triangle? Oh, how lucky I am to have a friend like her and a man like him!

However, as Sandhya came out in excitement, she found them both immersed in their own thoughts.

'Being sworn friends,' Sandhya said in jest, 'why are you sitting like strangers?'

'Being a gentleman,' said Roopa smiling, as she left for her bath, 'your hubby seems to believe in ladies being first.'

While Sandhya laughed at the remark, Raja Rao was pleased with her innuendo.

As she entered the bathroom, the very thought that he had his bath there earlier thrilled Roopa's sensuality. As she undressed herself, she recalled his searching looks, which made her imagine herself in his presence, and his thought in her nudity induced pulsations in her frame, increasing her craving for his possession. Even as she showered herself leisurely, she sighed for him longingly, and while reaching for her soap, seeing theirs, she was drawn to it impulsively. Well, in her bath of fantasy that she had had, their soap became a fetish that freshened as well as excited her in equal measure.

As they gossiped after breakfast, the topic of children cropped up in time. 'What's your prediction about her children?' said Sandhya thrusting Roopa's hand at him.

'It would be a pleasure,' he said, grabbing what was on offer, 'speculating the prospect.'

'But don't turn it into a farce,' cautioned Sandhya, as he began fondly feeling Roopa's outstretched hand.

'What a lovely hand!' he thought, enjoying the feeling of her touch. 'Why, it's a classic psychic hand with those shapely fingers in their full length. How I failed to notice the beauty of her hands all this while!' While, he found himself fondling her hand, more to communicate his love than to envision her future, seemingly in a trance he thought, 'Obviously enamored of the character of her main attributes, I became oblivious to the charms of her remaining features.'

Then divined by desire to espy her features, he mapped her feet with his caressing looks. 'Oh, what an attractive woman she is! Won't she have a curvy frame from head to foot to make her deadly in bed? Oh, what a dame she is! Is there a better lass to possess?' as he thought, so he gripped her hand ardently goading her passion.

'What are the indications?' Sandhya was impatient.

'It's not very clear as yet,' he said gravely, however, not leaving the hand. 'As I told you, the lines are liable to change.'

‘But,’ said Sandhya pointing at a sideline below Roopa’s little finger, ‘I’ve heard that this line indicates children.’

‘The lines there indicate the affections for the opposite sex,’ he predicted with hope. ‘As Roopa has a single line, she is likely to have a deep affection in her life.’

‘What about her?’ Roopa asked, reluctantly withdrawing her hand.

‘You mean,’ he said naughtily, ‘affections or children.’

‘I know from her nature as well as her hand that she would have only one such affection in her life,’ said Roopa indulgently. ‘I want to know about her children.’

‘She could have two children,’ he said.

‘You mean,’ Roopa suggested correction, ‘you would have two children.’

‘Factually speaking,’ he said smilingly, ‘you see, her hand indicates the prospects of her maternity and not the source of its paternity.’

‘Now I know,’ said Roopa coyly, ‘how devilishly mischievous you could be.’

‘Well,’ Sandhya joined in the mirth, ‘you can figure out my lot with him.’

After lunch, when Sandhya proposed caroms, Roopa wondered how to go about it with only three of them around. At that, as Raja Rao said that he would watch the friends at play, Tara came around.

‘Oh here’s the godsend,’ said Roopa enthusiastically. ‘Tara, join us for the caroms.’

‘It’s my pleasure,’ said Tara, greeting all, ‘though I don’t know who is going to suffer at my hands.’

‘Who shall partner whom?’ Sandhya thought aloud.

‘Let it be the couple,’ suggested Tara, ‘versus the neighbors.’

‘Madam, you seem to be a sound strategist. Knowing that a man and his wife won’t see eye to eye, you want to pair us for your easy pickings,’ said Raja Rao, sending the females into peals of laughter.

‘Roopa, you had better partner him,’ said Sandhya amusedly. ‘If I say that we might pair, his tongue would wag yet another way.’

As Roopa turned out to be a novice and Tara being quite adept at the game, not to speak of Sandhya, Raja Rao sensed that there was a drubbing in the offing. As feared, Raja Rao and Roopa got the stick in the first board.

‘Oh, we’ve lost,’ said Roopa, apologetically, ‘because of me.’

‘Don’t worry,’ he seemed to assure her in more ways than one. ‘We shall make it in the end.’

'I suppose,' Sandhya teased him, 'playing caroms is not as easy as wagging the tongue.'

'In no way are we going to give up,' he said to Sandhya, and added, 'Are we Roopa?' Roopa for once got scared.

'How I wish I had a better hand to lend you,' said Roopa, having recovered her wits in the meantime. 'But I know that you'll make them run for their money all on your own.'

While the game progressed, as he began to regain his touch, he was seized by a desire to let Roopa savor the thrill of winning. In the euphoria of Roopa's praises then, he played like a man possessed, and that proved to be detrimental to their opponents in the end.

'I haven't seen you play,' said Sandhya, watching him in wonderment as he went on a pocketing spree, 'half as well at Kothalanka.'

'After all, I can't let down my partner, can I?' he said, thrilling Roopa no end.

Wrapping up the game in time, he involuntarily extended his hand to Roopa that she shook in excitement. Though sorry for Tara, Sandhya shook his hand in admiration. While Tara shook hands with him in congratulation, Roopa watched his demeanor in contemplation. 'Is he enjoying her touch?' she looked for signs of his crush on Tara, and seeing none she felt relieved, but thought nevertheless, 'Why this possessiveness for a man who's not mine even! But how could it ever be love unless one is besieged by jealousy?'

When Sandhya proposed a challenge round, Roopa was not a game for it as she preferred to preserve the memory of their triumph lest they should lose the challenger. But at Roopa's behest as they took to rummy instead, Tara talked about the stakes.

'You spell it,' said Raja Rao.

'Ten a count,' Tara proposed.

'I feel it's high,' said Sandhya.

'Not for an architect's wife,' Tara brushed aside the objection.

As dame luck teamed up with the members of her gender, as if to show where her sympathies lie, Tara said to Raja Rao, 'It looks like you have no way with dame luck today.' Picking up his cards deliberately, he looked stealthily at Roopa and said, 'But I'm hopeful that she might favor me in time.' However, as he found Roopa gazing at him as though expecting some such comment, he knew she was playing the ball with him.

Roopa though admired his audacity, nevertheless, was troubled lest Sandhya should take note of their flirtations. 'Sandhya seems to be in love with him to a fault, though she can't be faulted for that,' thought Roopa as she scooted that deal. 'It's as though some magnetic force would draw women to him! Isn't Tara, the veteran of many a fill, coy to him as if she

were a virgin? It looks like he appreciates Tara's undeniable charms but he doesn't seem to be enamored of her. Without a roving eye, won't he make a steady lover? Oh, had I not stopped him in his tracks then, daredevil that he is, he could have declared his love for me then and there. What a lover to have, if ever I have him. Well, I shouldn't miss the next chance as and when it presents itself.'

'Sorry,' said Tara, taking leave at length, 'for robbing the hosts.'

'We'll make it even next time,' said Roopa smiling.

'I always wish that you're better even,' said Tara in undertone to Roopa. 'It's still open.'

Fearing a possible misunderstanding by Raja Rao and Sandhya, Roopa clarified as Tara had left, 'She wants me to take up a job and promises to find me one.'

'Why,' said Sandhya, 'it's not a bad idea.'

'What's the hesitation?' he asked, finding Roopa unresponsive.

'You may not know,' said Roopa to Raja Rao, 'that I'm not even a graduate. I wonder who would employ me, and for what.'

'As I told you,' said Sandhya to Raja Rao, 'Roopa was the topper of our class before she gave up studies.'

'How does that help now,' said Roopa. 'Now it's all bygones.'

'Roopa, nothing is really over till the very end,' he said persuasively. 'Even after death, there would still be one last journey to make to the crematorium. You could have wanted to be a doctor to serve the sick. Well, there are other ways for you to do that. Apart from the doctors and the *ayahs*, health-care needs administrators as well. If you work for it, who knows, you might run your own clinic one day.'

'Honestly, I haven't thought on those lines,' said Roopa visibly impressed. 'Thanks for opening up my mind.'

'Who knows,' said Sandhya joyously, 'one day you might as well design her clinic.'

'Won't I put all my heart into it,' said Raja Rao heartily, 'making it all soulful for her.'

'Oh,' said Roopa extending her hand to him, 'it's like you're rekindling my ambition.'

'Meanwhile,' he said holding on to her hand, 'improve your academics through correspondence course, and enlarge your vision by observation. When the opportunity comes, thus you would have been equipped to acquit yourself well.'

'Well,' Roopa said as though in a trance.

'I know you could,' he said animatedly, and she pressed his hand warmly.

'You can count on us,' said Sandhya, embracing a moved Roopa.

Infected more by their euphoric love than his carnal desire, Raja Rao couldn't help taking them both in his arms for a fleeting moment that seemed eternity to Roopa.

17

After siesta that evening, Sandhya proposed a walk on the Tank Bund that they agreed to. 'Let's walk down,' said Roopa as they came out. In time, as they reached there, Raja Rao noticed many life-size statues lined at intervals and wished to see them all at close quarters. While they walked past a long row of imposing bronzes of renowned Andhras, installed on granite pedestals, as he read the inspiring inscriptions in gold on them, he marveled, 'A great idea.'

'Controversial though,' said Roopa.

'How?' he looked surprised.

'There was a minor row,' explained Roopa, 'raked up in the local press about the advisability of spending millions on them, bringing the schemes for the poor to a grinding halt.'

'It must be the handiwork of the politicians out of power who itch for mischief,' articulated Raja Rao, 'Even if one kid who sees them were to be inspired by the deeds of any of these greats, then the value of that life for the country would countervail the cost of all the statues put together. But why don't I find Srinatha.'

'I too find it odd,' said Roopa, 'that our *kavisarvabhojma* is left out.'

'When Thyagaiah is rightly accorded the pride of place,' said Sandhya in agreement, 'ignoring the most romantic of Telugu poets is indeed heartless.' In time, as they reached the statue of Sir Arthur Cotton, Raja Rao said, 'It's a thoughtful gesture to treat this Englishman as our own.'

After a go around as they relaxed on the lawns near the Nannaya's, the topic turned to culture and literature. 'The hallmark of greatness is the ability to appreciate the virtues of other peoples and their cultures,' said Raja Rao. 'Are you aware of what Appaiah Dikshitar, the Tamil poet saint said of us Andhras? He felt that to be born an Andhra and to be able to speak Telugu is a boon, which cannot be achieved without much penance. But normally bigotry makes people imagine they are superior to the rest of the peoples put together.'

As it started drizzling by then, they thought of leaving.

'I like getting drenched,' said Roopa

'Me too,' said Sandhya.

'It should be exciting,' said Raja Rao, looking at Roopa.

While they were caught in the pouring rain, they got wet to their roots, and falling behind on purpose, Raja Rao went on devouring Roopa's figure at its back. In her wet sari that tightly hugged her body, as though to squeeze itself dry, her provocative figure evoked passion in his groins. Her splendid back of tan exposed by the seeming dissolution of her brownish blouse induced in him a craving for kissing her there. Her narrow waist, left uncovered by her dress, enabled him to envision the carnal character of her frame. The slit of her seat, discernible at every step, stepped up his urge for a novel possession of her. As she hitched her sari artfully to part-bare her wondrous legs, their enticing shape enveloped his eyes. And whenever she turned at the street corners, the sight of her heavy breasts wetted by the Act of God whetted his appetite.

At length, as he instinctively turned his gaze towards Sandhya for an unintended comparison, he found her talking to Roopa animatedly. He felt the smooth contours of Sandhya's delectable frame gave waviness to the sari she wore. It seemed to him that his wife's rosy face glowed even more by the radiance of the lightning. The delicacy of her demeanor made him envision the evocative charm of a bunch of seedless grapes in the midst of the season.

'Individually they picture contrasting charms but together they symbolize beauty itself,' he analyzed his own state of mind. 'My cup of life would be half empty till I have Roopa as well. Oh, what a marvel of a woman! And imagine she's infatuated with me! Nevertheless, how painfully sweet love is in anxiety. That's the charm of it, isn't it? But as the urge surges, so would the pain for possession in the pangs of passion. Only her soothing embrace can bring solace to my troubled soul. Well, even if she were attracted, would she be inclined to bestow her final favor on me? In spite of her proclivities, won't it be a big hurdle for her to cross, to enter into a liaison with her friend's husband?'

'Why am I allowing myself to be distracted by her charms when my bride herself is so fresh?' he thought in wonderment. 'Isn't it said that love increases in proportion to the possibility of possession. That way, Tara is no mean a charmer either; any man would gladly put his soul on the line to win her favors. Oh, how these sexy women move me! Anyway, is there a way I can possess Tara? But for that who knows I might have been daydreaming about her. Thankfully, it's all different with Roopa for her friendship with Sandhya might as well usher in our love affair.'

Even as he felt hopeful of possessing Roopa one day, her enamored eyes and suggestive gestures he reminisced, had only fuelled his passion for her possession. 'Possession, to be meaningful, should be timely,' he reasoned, as he increased his pace to come closer to the women. 'When we would meet next time around, who knows, she could be carrying. Won't it then turn out into a regimen of seeing a bloated Roopa belatedly? Then, with nothing left to inspire possession, and having gained to make it difficult, won't she leave me pondering over her past contours in her rotund presence? Well, holding her child in my lap, won't I be left wondering as to what it would have been like had I possessed her before? Wouldn't the hoped-for possession on a grand scale passion end up a damp squib in a platonic fashion? It would for sure and sadly at that.'

'Won't it be sexy possessing her now when her figure is at its curvy best,' it crossed him as they turned the corner to reach home. 'Moreover, going by her hungry looks, she seems to be inclined towards me. What if I go to her on the sly after Sandhya falls asleep? Surely, she wouldn't be pushing me out were she to fail to invite me into her arms. But won't that be the cue for me to find ways and means to press ahead for her heart and soul encased in her sexy frame? Surely, that would begin a life long affair with her, won't it?

'But all that would have made sense if I were put up here,' he thought dejectedly. 'In a one-night stand, I might barely taste her flavor to savor which I would need the possession of a lifetime. Maybe the romance of a night might meet the demands of our urge but only the life long union could fulfill our craving souls. On the other hand, if I were to seduce her now into submission that might lead her astray in the end. Having had a fling with me, won't she, in my absence, succumb to the advances of an ogler? Should that happen, instead of giving her the solace of love, I would be the cause of her depravity.'

As he shuddered to imagine her fall, he resolved, 'It is better that we moved in here before I begin wooing her.'

When they reached home, in that wet setting, Roopa goaded Sandhya to go in for a shower.

'Have you seen Pakeezah?' Roopa asked him, once Sandhya was gone.

'I liked it,' he said sensing some inference from that love story, 'What about you?'

'I found the movie moving and the songs memorable,' she said, giving an impression that she left something unsaid.

'Especially that one, *yubi koyi*,' he said, as though he understood what was unsaid, 'about a chancy meeting and thereafter.'

‘Do you think,’ she began, as though to convey more than she enquired, ‘marriages are made in heaven?’

‘Maybe,’ he said, as if he was clarifying their position, ‘but why on earth shouldn’t one fall in love?’

‘I agree,’ she said after a pause, during which she conveyed her approval with her gaze.

When Sandhya came out from bath, Roopa tried to goad him into the bathroom, but as he insisted that he would be the last to go, she went in there disappointed. However, after her bath-of-dreams, about to clear the clothesline, she changed her mind and left her dirty linen behind. ‘Surely, he would scan my lingerie,’ she pondered romantically over the possibility. ‘That could be the reason why he insisted that I go in before him. Oh, what a clever chap. As he would pick up my brassiere to note the size, won’t he smell it as well for my body odor?’

At that, the thought of his fetishism involving her bra created a sensation in her body, which made her shiver expectantly. ‘Why not confirm by noting the arrangement,’ she thought mischievously and arranged her lingerie meticulously.

Thereafter, as he went for bath, she kept time. While she visualized him handling her brassiere, she felt as though he were squeezing her breasts, and when she anticipated him to smell the thing, she felt as though his breath had warmed her breasts but above all the idea that he would be toying with her panty pulsed her frame.

Lying in wait, she rushed into the bathroom as he came out of it, only to return with a satisfied smile much later.

When it was time to stop for the day, Roopa addressed Raja Rao, ‘I hope you don’t mind using the bedroom.’

‘Why bother?’ he said embarrassedly. ‘The hall should do for me.’

‘I would rather insist that you use the bedroom,’ said Roopa. ‘Though we’re fine otherwise, it takes us a little to accommodate our guests.’

‘The need of any family could be a couple of chairs besides a cot or two,’ he said as if to make them grasp the underlying irony of status. ‘The odd guest could be accommodated on some spare bed. However, the paraphernalia we acquire is meant more to announce our arrival on the social stage than to serve our needs. Having put them in place at great cost, and with much compromise even, we won’t rest till we show off to our acquaintances. Well, a house is where we take shelter as we live and vacate as we die.’

‘You make me feel at home,’ said Roopa to Raja Rao, ‘in my own house.’

'It's the best compliment,' he said, 'I've ever received from any host.'

'Don't hesitate to feel at home,' she said in undertone as Sandhya went in to have some water.

'I'd love to,' he whispered to her.

Calling it a day, Sandhya followed her husband, however after winking at her friend.

'It's a little embarrassing, isn't it?' said Raja Rao as Sandhya bolted the door.

'Never mind, I'll join her later,' said Sandhya fondly caressing his chest.

As she lay beside Raja Rao, Sandhya felt that he seemed fonder than ever for Roopa too was fond of him. For his part, as Raja Rao took Sandhya into his arms, he found himself fantasizing Roopa's presence as well and while he made love to his wife, he found himself craving his beloved's body too. Even though he got ecstatic in the climax, he nevertheless felt wanting in his fulfillment.

'Won't I need them both for my fulfillment?' he contemplated as Sandhya left him to join Roopa. 'Though my emotions for each are discernible, my love for them seems indivisible. But, how do they fit in our love triangle? Well, won't they adore each other? And that might ensure they are not averse to the idea. Just the same, I need to prod them a little to help them overcome their inhibitions. But once drawn into the love triangle, won't they find it fascinating to envision each other making love to me? Sandhya might feel fulfilled seeing the woman she adores gratifying the man they love. In turn, finding the man she admires at coitus with the woman she loves, Roopa could indeed feel fascinated. Having been fulfilled thus, won't Roopa enlase Sandhya in all empathy as if to share her joy? And if only Freud got it right, won't their latent leanings gather momentum to open the lesbian front to feast my eyes?'

Soon in her daydreams, Raja Rao sank into a deep sleep.

18

By the time Sandhya went up to her, Roopa was in luscious wait in her makeshift bed. Dropping her lingerie readily, Sandhya ardently merged with Roopa's nudity. As she felt ecstatic fondling Roopa's body after having been devoured by her man, Sandhya could discern the duality of her passion on a differing plane. She felt that while lesbianism ennobled her sublime femininity, union with her man gave her the measure of her womanliness. Thus, enjoying the emollient variation of her weakness, she began to savor Roopa's body, having comprehended its true value to her life. Having been satiated by

Raja's masculine passion, in her state of equity, Sandhya set out to satisfy Roopa with her feminine ardor even as Roopa turned delirious on Sandhya's frame with an urge to satiate herself where her lover felt fulfilled

The very thought that her lover copulated with her mate sharpened Roopa's sensuality, and that made her imagine she smelled him through his wife's medium. Even as she caressed Sandhya's frame, Roopa could feel Raja's masculinity in their feminine embrace and in Sandhya's deep kissing, Roopa felt as if she tasted her lover's saliva in her mate's mouth. Visualizing Raja's manhood in motion, while Roopa went oral at the source of its lubrication in her mate's frame, Sandhya went into raptures craving for her man's presence, even as her mate, as though to taste him, savored her where he mounted.

With the mutual solace their lovemaking afforded them, as they lay languid in their arms, said Roopa, 'Now kiss and tell what's it like with him.'

After whispering her reminiscences of her honeymoon for Roopa's ears, Sandhya said, 'Well, even the vigor of his virility can't subdue my urge for our union. Oh, how I wish you could come along with us.'

'I think my luck and love are poles apart,' said Roopa melancholically. 'If only I were single, I would have begged you to take me along with you as your co-wife. But what's worse for me, you would be so far away, increasing my misery even more.'

'Now I too feel,' said Sandhya moved herself, 'we would have been better off living together as co-wives.'

'I could divorce Sathyam for the Act-1,' said Roopa in half jest. 'But for the Act-2, having a wife like you, would your husband suffer me?'

'Shall I'll ask him then,' Sandhya got up, in mock seriousness.

'When needed,' said Roopa, as she pulled Sandhya back into her arms, 'I'll ask him myself.'

'Have you told him about us?' Roopa asked, fondling Sandhya.

'Not yet, though I was thinking about it all the while,' said Sandhya dreamily. 'In a way, our love doesn't take anything away from him as our amour is not hampering my ardor for him. Yet, I find the associated emotions so different. I see no conflict and I don't feel any contradiction either. After all, my love to you and him are nursed on different planes. But how come you never talked about it to Sathyam?'

'As I don't feel for him much,' said Roopa dryly, 'there's no emotional hitch as such.'

‘But now,’ said Sandhya, ‘it looks like you’re okay with him.’

‘Well, don’t I’ve a duty to perform as wife?’ said Roopa looking vacantly. ‘I thought I’ve no right to make him feel wanting due to my disillusionment. Somehow, I feel it could be risky to reveal it to your husband even, as he might not like it. It would be the death of me if he weans you away from my embrace.’

‘I love you for the way you feel,’ said Sandhya, kissing Roopa. ‘Even if I tell Raja, I know he’ll understand. Nevertheless, I would wait. Imagine, I told him about my escapade in the city bus.’

‘What was his reaction?’ Roopa sat up, as if to watch her Raja’s feelings in Sandhya’s face.

‘He made light of it,’ said Sandhya, ‘as no more than a small pleasure.’

‘I’m happy,’ Roopa kissed Sandhya as if the gesture was meant for him, ‘that you’ve got a confident man.’

‘Good night,’ Sandhya whispered kissing Roopa. ‘Let me see if he got up, you’ve made me need him all again.’

‘Good night,’ said Roopa winking at Sandhya, ‘Wish you the best of both.’

‘Why is life hard on some while being soft on others?’ Roopa contemplated after Sandhya had left. ‘The *sastras* would have us believe that it’s all owing to *karma*, while the philosophers stress that life is conditioned by a combination of circumstances. It could be true either way, but how does that help me anyway. For all that, does life play favorites? But that’s unlikely, for after all, why should life be partial to some when all bear its own patent. Yet, some like me get condemned, all the time, don’t they? But why is that so?’

‘It’s as though life has an obligation for itself as a whole and not to the beings that make up that whole,’ she tried to probe into the proclivities of life as though to solve the puzzle of her state. ‘It would appear as if life feels a monotonous regimen would bore people to death, bringing the creation to an unintended end. Therefore, for the larger good of itself, life could have found it expedient to take recourse to individual inequities to keep the general interest in it alive for all. Wonder how life prepares the black list for the fate to act upon! As all are dear to it, were it possible that blindfolded, it would go in for random selection with a sinking heart! Once fate takes over the earmarked, won’t weddings come in handy for it to impart misery in many wrong permutations and provide bliss in a few right combinations! Then is there nothing left for me to do than to regret my fate, all my life?’

As though her pain infected nature itself, it opened the skies to shed its tears, and closing the windows to avoid the spatter, she felt melancholic, ‘So that’s how I’ve got the rough

end of the married stick then. But why not grab the silken glove of liaison that is dangling before me now? Won't that meet life's need for variety as well? As it had imposed a husband of its choice on me, now let me choose the lover after my heart.'

When it stopped raining as though on cue, opening the windows, Roopa felt nature too desired her turbulence to end in Raja Rao's arms.

'Would it be fair to Sathyam?' she tried to analyze as she was consumed by self-doubts all over again. 'But then, what could be done when fidelity forces a loveless life on me? What's this infidelity all about? Isn't it man's idea to negate woman's amour. While male-female attraction is the cornerstone of creation, man seeks to blindfold woman with marital fidelity. Leaving that aside, what does a wife ought to give her man? Of course, she should keep an amiable home for him to recreate and procreate. As for love, woman needs it as much as man, doesn't she? Is love something of a recipe that a woman could prepare at her husband's bidding?

'How can I help when he doesn't inspire love in my heart,' she wailed at her plight. 'After all, was it not said that love is but a part of man's life while it is a woman's whole existence? Oh, it's every bit true! Sathyam is merry in marriage, enjoying all that goes with it, while I'm miserable, despairing for love. I can't be happy without Raja, that's clear by now, isn't it? After all, I owe something to my life, don't I? What's the contradiction, if while leading my love life with Raja, I look after Sathyam's marital needs as well? It seems to be the only sensible way to go about life than feel deprived all my life.'

Having resolved to have Raja Rao for her lover, she was at peace with herself, 'Of course, it would be unfair for woman to let the paramour father her child. Why, perhaps it's the only thing unethical about adultery, isn't it? A woman ought to take care that things don't be mixed up at that end. I would need Raja for my fulfillment and Sathyam can have his child if he could.' Having resolved on a liaison with her lover, Roopa slumbered in expectation.

19

At the break of the dawn, Roopa awoke to the sound of the buzzer, and was surprised to see Sathyam at the door. Seeing the makeshift bed in the hall, he was surprised in turn, but before he could enquire from Roopa, he got the reply from Sandhya, 'I'm happy you've come.' While Roopa took the briefcase from Sathyam's hand, Raja Rao who had joined

them by then, observed her demeanor to discern her emotions, and having noticed a perceptible disappointment in her, he felt vindicated.

‘Glad I’ve come back,’ said a visibly delighted Sathyam, ‘I didn’t want to waste my time there, as they weren’t ready with their paperwork. Had I known that you were coming, I wouldn’t have gone there at all.’ Somehow Sathyam always felt Sandhya’s genuine warmth elevated his self-worth whereas Roopa’s condescending love tended to undermine his self-esteem.

‘We came as you left,’ said Raja Rao in greeting, extending his hand to Sathyam, ‘and we would be leaving by the evening.’

‘Wish you stayed for a couple of days more,’ said Sathyam in disappointment.

‘We’ve planned to spend some time with my parents before we pack off to Delhi,’ said Raja Rao.

‘When will you come to Delhi?’ said Sandhya to Sathyam, leaning on Roopa’s shoulder, ‘at least in reciprocation.’

‘Let Roopa fix the *muburtham*,’ said Sathyam as he went to freshen himself.

‘I’ll wait for the call,’ said Roopa dreamily.

‘Do you really need one?’ said Raja Rao. ‘Don’t you know you’re always welcome?’

‘Oh, now I see,’ said Roopa joyously, ‘that it’s a two-way highway.’

After a while, having gone through ‘The Hindu’ in the meantime, Sathyam and Raja Rao began to chit-chat. In the kitchen however, Sandhya was assisting Roopa in the preparation of *dosas* and *sambar* for breakfast.

‘With all that clout,’ said Raja Rao, ‘it must be a heady feeling working in the department.’

‘True, it’s glamorous at the top,’ grumbled Sathyam, ‘but it’s drudgery all the way down, more so for honest folks like us. The conscientious carry the burden, and the unscrupulous walk away with the spoils.’

‘I always felt,’ commented Raja Rao, ‘there’s a striking similarity between a middle-class home and a government office. One earns for half-a-dozen that sit at home, and at the office, one works and a score gossip.’

‘If anything,’ lamented Sathyam, ‘the reservations ruined the work culture further. Seeing the way the scheduled casts and scheduled tribes are promoted out of turn, in double-quick time, others have come to doubt the virtue of hard work. The net result is that hardly anyone works in the departments these days.’

‘It’s the way he cribs to whoever listens,’ said Roopa to Sandhya in consternation. ‘Either he makes you mad by narrating how he’s being ignored in spite of his merit, or bores you to death by enlightening how the reservations are ruining the nation.’

‘That only shows his frustration,’ said Sandhya.

‘That’s okay, but there must be a limit to one’s lament,’ said Roopa, and added as though on a second thought, ‘more so in matters like these.’

‘I can understand your feelings,’ they heard Raja Rao tell Sathyam. ‘But, I for one think that it’s a subject that needs to be viewed with a broader perspective.’

‘I’m sorry if I’ve given you the impression that I’m unsympathetic to them,’ Sathyam said in clarification. ‘No, that’s not the case. What I feel is, and let me tell you, it’s the general perception, that the government could support them by extending all help to pursue their education. But let the job market be truly open for competition.’

‘I don’t think that’s how we should approach this issue,’ said Raja Rao. ‘Let me explain by way of an example. Would any father leave his plain daughter remain a spinster because none comes forward to marry her? You know that he would search the earth to find her a match. If it comes to that, he would cough up the extra buck for dowry. If her better endowed sisters were to grouse for that concern, won’t he say that he owed it to her to see her married as well?’

Raja Rao then paused to see how Sathyam reacted, and finding no bad blood, he said, ‘In case a son doesn’t shine as well as his siblings, would the father bask in the glory of his glorious sons, leaving the sluggard to his fate? Won’t he support him all through while bequeathing a little more in the end. If his other sons were to cry foul, the father’s soul might as well wonder in the heaven, ‘Why do these guys, enjoying the fortunes of a bright birth, envy the props I provided for their poor brother?’

‘It’s a peculiar feature of human nature that we love to see those close to us climb up the staircase of success, but, behind us,’ continued Raja Rao even as Roopa brought some coffee for him and milk for Sathyam. ‘If they happen to catch up with us, needing to share the space with them, we feel choked, and were they to overtake us, we feel morose, though they might remain friendly. It is because, used as we were to condescend to descend in our affections, we lose countenance, not counting our jealousy, that they too might seem patronizing from the altered stations.’

‘Is it unfair,’ questioned Sathyam spiritedly, ‘to expect the qualified from the scheduled casts to fend for themselves?’

‘Should the government wash off its hands,’ continued Raja Rao, ‘after doling out some sops here and providing a few props there, won’t that amount to a half measure? It has to support them at every stage until their faculties are developed, needing no more crutches. If others feel aggrieved about that, it only amounts to grieving over the recompense to the unfortunates while themselves enjoying the benefits of a more fortunate birth. Not that I can’t understand the individual inequities these reservations bring about, but for the greater social good, we’ve got to put up with these aberrations. After all, it’s these reserved positions that enable them to hold their head high in the social milieu which had spurned them all along.’

‘But for how long,’ said Sathyam, ‘and that too when they tend to misuse the opportunities?’

‘Perhaps, you’ve answered that yourself,’ said Raja Rao. ‘Hasn’t the society ostracized them physically and suppressed them morally for centuries, thereby sinking their collective consciousness into a morass. Knowing well what it takes to regain one’s self-confidence after a reverse or two, would it be difficult to envisage what it takes for the so-called SCs and STs to start believing in themselves? Do you honestly believe that the climate today is conducive to their emotional integration with the social mainstream? It’s surprising why we fail to put ourselves in their sectarian shoes, knowing that birth is a chancy proposition, after all.’

‘But where’s the need for the second-generation reservations?’ questioned Sathyam.

‘For that, let’s consider the affects of the withdrawal syndrome,’ explained Raja Rao. ‘As can be expected, some won’t make the grade and go back to square one. That would only dent the community confidence besides demoralizing the affected individuals. The key to their ennoblement lies in the caste confidence brought about by individual enrichment. It should be realized that those mandatory ministerial berths and the quota of secretaries would only help buttress their communal self-worth. Maybe, to better their lot, their general welfare is to be addressed while their community should be helped to build its economic base through tiny enterprise.’

‘In spite of being the most favored,’ Sathyam was critical, ‘won’t they still desert our religion?’

‘That’s the irony of the Hindu society,’ said Raja Rao sadly. ‘So long as they’re in our fold, we have nothing to do with them, but when they change their faith in frustration, we blame it upon them! What’s the use of gloating over our great religion, when we fail to

make them feel at home even in our Gods' abodes? Why we never give them cause to believe that Hinduism is their religion, do we?'

'Maybe,' said Sathyam resignedly, 'that's the way to look at these issues.'

'It seems sensitivity is all about the ability to see from the side of the deprived,' said Sandhya who came to serve them breakfast.

The rest of the day turned out to be uneventful for Roopa and Raja Rao though it enabled Sathyam and Sandhya get closer to each other. In the end, reaching the Secunderabad Railway Station in the evening, they retrieved the luggage from the cloakroom. As Sathyam volunteered to keep pace with the coolie, Raja Rao stopped at Higginbotham's. At that, Roopa slowed down, pretending to mend her *chappal*, even as Sandhya proceeded to keep company with Sathyam. Sensing Roopa's gesture, Raja Rao joined her hurriedly, picking up the current 'Sunday'.

'I hope,' he said, as he reached towards her, 'you remember.'

'Can I forget,' she said, without raising her head.

'I shall always cherish you,' he said lovingly.

As she was about to say something, he realized that they were in the earshot of Sathyam, and so he hailed him as though to forewarn her.

'While his presence has set the narrative of my life in poetic prose, won't his absence make it prosaic all again?' Roopa thought, and looked at Raja Rao longingly as they went up to Sathyam and Sandhya.

At length, when the guard whistled, Roopa felt as though Raja Rao's eyes whispered, 'I love you.'

Waving to them as the Minar Express chugged out, Roopa wondered, 'Would I ever be able to make my life poetic in his passion? Am I really destined for that?'

20

Unmindful of the sentimental ways of its passengers, while the Minar Express kept its westward course, reclining in the first class coupe, Raja Rao reminisced over that incomplete encounter with Roopa.

'What would she have said had I not drawn her attention to Sathyam's presence?' he began to contemplate, 'Could she have disclosed her love for me? Unlikely, but surely she would have said something to break the ice. How momentous it should've been if we were slower by a step or two. Isn't it clear to both of us that we're in love with each other? Haven't we

conveyed our love in so many words and in such subtle ways? What remained was affixing the 'I Love You' stamp to the envelope of our mutual fascination. Of course, to post it to the address of our affair, isn't it? Well, in spite of having Sandhya, life may not be worth living without possessing Roopa.'

As he thought about Sandhya, herself seemingly immersed in Roopa's thought, he tried to analyze her character and attitude. 'It appears that she had taken no note of our mutual infatuation,' he began to think, 'how she was lost in her own love for me and affection for her friend. Maybe, in the euphoria of her excitement, the unmistakable attraction Roopa and I felt for each other could have appealed to her as a manifestation of her own love. What a happy nature Sandhya has! What a blessed soul she is!'

'You seem to be upset,' he said, finding Sandhya pensive.

'More than the separation from Roopa,' she said, resting her head on his shoulder, 'it's the thought of the distance that's disturbing me.'

'You know it won't be that way for long,' he tried to assuage her feelings.

'Oh, how I long for that day,' she looked at him as though for a reassurance.

'I won't make you wait for long,' he said pressing her hand. 'By any chance, is Sathyam some sort of her relation before their marriage?'

'Why that doubt?' she said, even as she grasped what made him pose that question.

'Frankly speaking,' said Raja Rao, confirming what she thought, 'I think she deserves a better match than that. So I felt she could have been married off to keep her within the family. What a pity that many slight a bright match for an unsuitable alliance from the family circle.'

'I don't believe in talking about others' affairs,' she said moved by his talk. 'But as I feel you're as much my friend as husband, it is only proper that you too should know about her affairs as she is one of us. Don't you remember that she's your friendly half now? Hers was an arranged marriage anyway.'

'You can trust me as a friend,' he said, and added as though with an eye on the future, 'more than as a husband. As a friend, you would find me frank in interaction, but as husband, I might be selective in disclosing. I believe thoughtless openness hurts more than it helps relationships.'

'I appreciate that,' she said, turning thoughtful herself.

'After all,' he said kissing her hand, 'it's not that frankness alone brings a couple closer. It's the mutual respect that develops a feeling of togetherness between them.'

‘With Roopa,’ she said, as her face brightened, ‘the feeling of friendship fuses with the emotions of our affection.’

‘I suppose, that’s possible only in friendship between women,’ he said. ‘Though I am happy for you, I am worried about her.’

‘But why?’ she said, puzzled.

‘It’s very clear that theirs is an intellectual mismatch,’ he said gravely. ‘And given her faculties, she could be a mightily bored wife by now. Won’t that bring her face to face with the temptation for deviation? After all, liaison is the last resort of a bored woman. In a way, she could be on the thin edge of married ice. So, for her, while a fall could be grievous, life itself would be laborious in the long run.’

‘You’ve guessed it right,’ she said as if she were confessing on behalf of Roopa. ‘Whatever it was, she wasn’t enthused about Sathyam from the beginning, though she did mould herself into a dutiful wife. About the temptations and all, though it may be true otherwise, she is no run-of-the-mill for that.’

‘Left to her,’ he said concernedly, ‘what you say could be true. But do realize that she doesn’t live in an ivory tower anyway. Any man can sense the void in her wedded life and that would make him imagine the possibilities. The attempts at seduction that would follow could insensibly disturb her moral equilibrium to push her into the arms of a novice for solace. What’s worse, desertion that is a corollary to seduction could affect her self-belief all the more. It’s not the moral aspect that bothers me for it’s her private affair, but it’s the possible fallout of that which should alarm us.’

‘Oh, you scare me really,’ she said clutching at his hand.

‘You should know that by their very nature affairs are short-lived,’ he sounded pensive. ‘Of course, they are often brought to a premature close by the favored man. On the other hand, it won’t be the case of ‘once bitten twice shy’ either for the ditched woman. Bitten by the novelty bug, woman could itch for a new lover to supplant her lost paramour. And having got addicted to the illicit thrills, she could jump from bed to bed with gay abandon. God forbid, if Roopa’s life were to follow this pattern, then she could end up depraved in the end.’

‘I’m really worried, though I don’t believe she would ever come to that,’ she said, and tried to believe what she said. ‘Any way, she’s too decent to end up depraved.’

‘It’s a pity Roopa would have to suffer all the more for her sense of decency,’ he said himself feeling the pain. ‘A life of despair, in spite of her disposition, would leave her

exposed to the seducers, and the strain of resisting their advances could sap her resolve at some stage. Added to that is the burden of having had to remain a dutiful wife, and you could figure out the stress on her soul. All of which might combine to make her vulnerable to the male advances. So the boasts of men about their conquests would seem hollow since it's the vulnerability of women that fetches them their favors. In her case anyway, were she to succumb in her moment of weakness, then she would suffer even more for having failed to desist from it.'

'Oh, God,' she sounded helpless. 'But what can be done?'

'I don't think her problem lends itself to a clear-cut solution,' he said, thoughtfully. 'Surely, her destiny would have its own idea about reconciling her fate. Only we've to wait and see.'

Seeing her lost in contemplation, he thought over the matter, 'how my analysis has upset her. Well, won't I like to be proved wrong? Isn't the possibility of Roopa's fall for real? Someone might be lurking in the street corner to barge into her bed to bring about that.'

'But why didn't it occur to me when I was with her?' he thought as such a prospect pained him. 'Oh, how my fascination for her overshadowed my faculties! Why, she could drive men into distraction! Isn't she likely to attract many? If only her favored man happens to be a genuine lover, then that liaison is bound to be a blessing in disguise for her. I could be the one, but would her fate let her wait for me? What with the passage of time, won't her enamored feelings for me wane and her passion pale? Why shouldn't someone with the right access replace me in her heart? Anyway, her affection for me didn't cross the threshold of infatuation, did it?'

As the possibility of losing her unnerved him, he began to think, 'Were she to come across the right man, won't she be steady with him. Left in the lurch then, won't I languish for her all my life? Were she to abandon herself, won't her depravity cast its shadow on my life as well? Even if she were to come into my life after a couple of flings, wouldn't the purity of our love get polluted by then? Why, as affairs tend to be physical escapades, won't she miss the essence of love in the whirlwind of passion?'

'What about my own infatuation for her?' he questioned himself at length. 'No doubt, it's physical to the bones. Am I not dying to possess her? But then, my all-consuming passion stems from a deep-rooted affection for her. Can't I perceive the purity of my love for her in the depths of my heart? After all, my craving is not all about possessing her, fabulous though she is. Why, am I not dying to bring about the fusion of our souls through our

emotional togetherness? How fulfilled would I be, if only I could fill the void in her life, once and for all. Maybe, her feelings for me are no different. Haven't I seen the longing of her soul in her gaze as I felt the craving of her love in her touch? What else I can do than pray that she has the patience to wait for the fruition of our love in a momentous union. That is, without she falling by the wayside as a victim of seduction in the meantime.'

'Why did I fail to declare my love to her?' he thought as he went on recalling their romance. 'But then, didn't my eyes speak enough about my infatuation for her. Couldn't she have grasped my intent from all those innuendoes? True, she can't be expected to take all that as the testimony of my devotion to her. Had I let her know that I loved her, it would perhaps have helped her persevere with her own love for me. But then, that way I should've offended her sensitivity in the formative period of her affection for me.'

'What if I write to her now,' he thought, as a way out of the predicament. 'Won't it give rise to misgivings in her mind, besides compromising my position? And then, why can't all this be a mere flight of my own imagination? Being over strung myself, am I not going crazy in my head? Maybe, for her, it could be no more than a mere crush on me, and having seen our backs, she would have got back into her routine by now, wouldn't she have?'

The feeling that Roopa may not be in danger as feared, eased his conscience in spite of his surmised indifference of her towards him.

'Whatever it may be,' he seemed to have decided, 'better we move early and hope for the best in the meantime. I'll have to make her mine if I were to be truly happy. What a treasure she's to possess. What a remarkable woman she is indeed.'

Seeing Sandhya still uneasy, he thought, 'Haven't I scared her unwittingly? This poor thing loves that lovely one so dearly. It is better that way, as it may be easier for her to be reconciled to our liaison, if it ever comes to that.'

Sandhya, meanwhile, tried to comprehend the situation with apprehension. 'When it's so distressing to imagine, how horrible could be the reality, if that were to happen?' she began to think. 'Could Roopa ever go astray? What he said could be true in general, but isn't Roopa all so special? Why doubt that at all. She isn't going to be the one to lose her head to some silly seducer. After all, won't she keep vanity at bay? Surely, she would.'

Before she could put her doubts at rest, she remembered Roopa's tryst with Ravi at Tara's place that increased her fears about her mate's fate.

‘Won’t that confirm Raja’s apprehension about her situation,’ she became doubtful. ‘Didn’t Roopa lose her head like it happened with me in the bus? Can she keep her cool when someone comes wooing her the next time? After all, Raja could be proved right.’

Convinced about her man’s reading of the situation, Sandhya sought to analyze her mate’s mind-set, ‘It’s clear that Sathyam’s love is of no avail to her and he hasn’t got the vigor to dispel the euphoric clouds from her lovesick eyes. Hasn’t his wit failed to cater to her innate romanticism, leaving her ever more in amorous want? Won’t that make her vulnerable to the misty looks of the fast guys? Why, hasn’t she taken to Raja though she tried to hide her feelings from me? Well, haven’t I felt her romantic impulses in spite of my own excitement? Surely, Raja wouldn’t have failed to notice Roopa’s infatuation for him. How could he when he was the object of her adoration. Perhaps, that was at the back of his mind when he voiced his fears about her possible fall.’

‘Would Roopa then become a target practice for assorted seducers?’ she thought worried. ‘Is she sauntering on the volcano of temptation to be swept away by the lava of illicit passion?’ As she shuddered to think further, she tried to push that thought away, only to get bogged down all the same.

‘But, how can I remain indifferent to her predicament given our own intimacy?’ she thought at length, overcome with empathy for her friend. ‘Could I ever let my treasure slip into the garbage of vice? Shouldn’t I go to lengths to see that she might not fall into the alien hands? Won’t her indulgence with assorted characters sour our own amour? Having tasted the sweetness of her ardor, how could I forego the joy of our intimacy? How can I let things foul-up at her end? No way.’

‘I could have averted all this had I been genuine when Roopa wanted my opinion about Sathyam,’ she thought going to the roots of her friend’s ailment. ‘Well, how I lectured her to opt for the match, though I myself wasn’t impressed with Sathyam? How cruel that I placed the proverbial last straw on her emotionally unstable back then, though unwittingly. Unable to match her mood with the reality of her life, how she has been suffering in silence ever since? That is while I’m on cloud nine. How mean of me. If only I had been frank with her then, I wouldn’t have tilted the scales of her doubt with my immature ranting. Didn’t I insensibly impose this marital burden on her, forever? But the poor thing never blamed me for that, and instead bore it all resignedly! Moreover, when I got the man of men as my man, didn’t Roopa rejoice at my fortune without a tinge of jealousy? She doesn’t deserve to suffer, the poor thing. Didn’t Raja sum it up it all so well, when he said

that she would suffer even more for the nobility of her soul? Oh, God, how can I alleviate her suffering?’

Overcome with worry, she pictured the future, ‘If we move over to Hyderabad, I can be near her, but how that would help her? Finding me joyous, won’t she suffer even more for her deprivation? Caught between the joy for my fulfillment and the burden of her want, won’t she be worse off for that? But if we stay put in Delhi, Roopa would have to fend for herself when she needs me the most. What a classic Catch 22 to contend with!’

As the prospect of Roopa falling in love with Raja Rao in the eventuality of their shifting to Hyderabad dawned on her, she tried to visualize its affect on them all.

‘Roopa could be caught in a cleft of love and loyalty, leave alone fidelity,’ surmised Sandhya. ‘In that case, instead of bringing succor to her, won’t we compound her misery? If Raja too falls for her, won’t the lovers suffer for my sake, as they both love me? After all, which man can remain indifferent to her charms for long? Of course, a romantic like him is bound to rave about her. Isn’t he concerned about her already? As their infatuation would keep them morose, won’t my own mood turn sour?’

‘What’s the way out?’ she raked her brains. ‘Were I to leave her to her fate, and God forbid, were she to go astray, then I would never be able to forgive myself. My guilt-filled conscience would ensure that for sure. Won’t I feel miserable seeing her in the dumps? How can I afford to leave her alone? Come what may, I shall protect her, whatever it might take. Above all, we must shift first. Let life take its own course thereafter.’

‘Which course could it take then?’ she turned inquisitive to gaze at the crystal ball. ‘Roopa for all that may never cross the threshold of her romantic leanings, and might forever remain within the bounds of marital fidelity. In that case, our coming together will restore to us what we’ve been missing in our separation. Even if Raja gets attracted to her, unable to cross the hurdle of her fidelity, he would still confine himself to his lane of platonic love.’

As she wondered whether man-woman attraction could be bound by sentimentality, she ventured on the path of adultery, ‘should Roopa itch for a romantic escapade, then Raja could easily out-tempt every other suitor of hers, given his personality as well as proximity to her. Let it be so, if that’s the way it should be to keep her away from any amorous misadventure. Though I might have liked to keep my man all for myself, accommodation seems to be the only mode of my atonement, does it not? Won’t that bring cheer into her life and unburden my guilt as well. It’s all about my sharing my better half with my other

half, as much for their satiation as for my salvation. So be it. Well, won't that seem logical even, given my lesbian relationship with Roopa? More so, that would ensure that her amours are kept in-house. Well, the *ménage à trois* we were jesting about so much all along seems to be on hand, after all! What myriad amours we three could bring into our orgies.'

'After all, would it be fair to Sathyam?' she thought as her sympathy and affection for him came to the fore. 'But, how could it be helped? Maybe, it doesn't help man taking a lively wife if he's not up to the mark. What a fine soul Sathyam otherwise is! What a pity love doesn't take one's character into account for its leanings. If Sathyam were destined to be cuckolded, would it not be in order that Roopa is cajoled in Raja's arms. In a queer way, won't that ensure she remains in the family fold?'

As she couldn't help but envision the love life in the offing for three of them, she thought, 'Once we shift there, they wouldn't be able to hide their infatuation from me for long. It would be a great fun intercepting their signals and deciphering their gestures. I could even scare them by dropping hints that I was spying. Won't that pep up their sense of adventure before I pave the way for their lovemaking, only to envelop them in an amorous triangle? How marvelous would be those uninhibited orgies with the man and the woman I love!'

The thrill she felt in fantasizing their threesome fuelled her love for her husband and her friend, fusing them all into one erotic idea in her consciousness.

'Don't get upset, darling,' he said, as they sat for dinner at length. 'Your love will save the day for your friend.'

'Can I ask for more?' she smiled mirthfully.

'I'll join you,' he said folding his hands as if in prayer, 'in your prayers.'

'Thank you,' she said with a smile. 'And act as well.'

'You can bet on that,' he said solemnly.

'Down the shutter,' she said after their meals, coyly looking at the window.

'If you don't mind,' he said, kissing her forehead, 'why not we skip for tonight.'

'Well,' she winked, 'I can get you into that.'

'Your mere thought is enough for that,' he said apologetically. 'But somehow, I'm in no mood now.'

'I was only joking,' she said. 'Good night.'

'Obviously he's disturbed,' she thought endearingly. 'Is he in love with her already? He seems to be one step ahead of me, Raja the romantic.'

Having been assured of a love-filled future for Roopa, soon Sandhya slept pleasantly on the lower berth in that coupe for two.

21

That morning as the Minar reached Dadar, Raja Rao and Sandhya were all set to alight. Having exited from the railway station, aided by a couple of porters who carried their luggage, they hired a cab to Chembur. Soon, Sandhya stepped into that spacious flat to the warmth of her in-laws' greetings.

'How's he behaving?' said Gopala Rao in jest, taking himself away from 'The Times of India'.

As Sandhya smiled coyly, enquired Visala, 'How is everyone at Kakinada?'

'All are fine,' said Sandhya. 'My parents were particular that I should convey their *pranaams* to both of you.'

'Are the Thimmaiahs keeping fit?' said Gopala Rao to his son. 'Is the roof still in place at our house?'

'They're evergreen as ever, said Raja Rao, 'and nothing seems to change in Kothalanka.'

'She must have felt it funny there really,' Visala smiled.

'Oh, no,' said Sandhya reminiscently, 'it was all so wonderful, thanks to the grand couple.'

'How's Roopa? We all took to her a lot,' said Visala appreciatively, 'Hyma was just bowled over.'

'She values you all no less,' said Sandhya.

'Are they acting on our invitation?' enquired Visala.

'Maybe, they would be able to make it soon,' said Sandhya, and wondered. 'But why did Roopa fail to tell me about it! Well, didn't she lose her way in Raja's charms? It's nice that his family has taken to her too. And that helps, just in case.'

'How's Hyma and my naughty BIL?' enquired Raja Rao.

'They're all so eager to spend some time with Sandhya,' said Visala.

After having spent a mirthful day at her father-in-law's house all day, Sandhya with her husband went in the evening to her sister-in-law's place at Andheri.

'You look exquisite,' Dr. Hyma hugged Sandhya. 'And how's Roopa?'

'She is fine,' said Sandhya. 'She's all praise for you.'

'We've heard that you're great friends,' said Dr. Ranga Rao. 'It's nice to have a friend like her. She's quite impressive.'

‘Had she had her way,’ said Sandhya reminiscently, ‘she would have been well on her way to join your profession.’

‘Oh, how the medical fraternity,’ said Dr. Rao mimicking sadness, ‘missed a charming lady then.’

‘This is MCP syndrome,’ said Hyma in mock anger, ‘the inability to appreciate woman other than for her charms.’

‘Raja, it’s good you got married at last,’ said Perindevi, Ranga Rao’s mother, who joined them in the meantime, ‘and that too a nice girl.’

‘You look fifty at your seventy,’ Raja Rao greeted her while Sandhya bowed at the old woman’s feet who took a close look at her.

‘It’s courtesy my grand children. Think about the devils, and here they come,’ said the old woman affectionately as Prem and Preeti, aged five and three, flocked to her.

‘Don’t you remember me?’ asked Sandhya, inviting them into her arms.

‘You’re our beautiful Sandhya auntie,’ said Preeti while Prem remained shy.

‘Raja, I’ve heard that your father-in-law performed your wedding in style,’ said Perindevi. ‘By the way, how much dowry did your wife fetch?’

‘How I wish you were aware of the Archimedes Principle,’ said Raja Rao. ‘Just the same, you can appreciate that the more the groom is fascinated by the bride, the more he loses on the dowry. My father-in-law weighed me light for that.’

In the mirth that followed, as all eyes were on Raja Rao, none took note of Sandhya’s reaction to her husband’s banter.

‘It’s fun time with the relatives,’ said Raja Rao, as they stepped out of his sister’s place after dinner, ‘especially if wife is around.’

‘More so,’ she said trying to be sarcastic, ‘when her father is made fun of.’

‘You know,’ he said, cajoling her, ‘all that was in jest.’

‘Have I asked for your clarification?’ she said rather curtly.

‘So you want to hang me,’ he said tying his handkerchief to his neck, ‘without a hearing even.’

‘I only thought you’ve the gift of the gab,’ she said in the same vein. ‘And now I realize you’ve theatrics to boot.’

‘And you, in spite of your *kaali avatar* now,’ he said endearingly, ‘have the heart of an angel.’

For once, she seemed not pleased, and, in time, they boarded the city bus that barged in to the bus stop. After that long ride of silence they reached home. As Sandhya headed to the bed straight, however, after greeting her in-laws, Raja Rao followed suit.

‘Why make a fuss,’ he said turning her towards him cajolingly, ‘over some lighthearted nonsense.’

‘Who stopped you from finding a father-in-law who could have weighed you by gold?’ she turned her back to him.

‘I wonder how you took it all amiss,’ he said in wonderment. ‘Anyway, let’s forget about it. You’re God’s own gift to me, and you know that.’

‘Let’s forget about it,’ she said nudging him. ‘Good night.’

‘Sandhya,’ he said persuasively, ‘remember that sex is a gift of nature for both the sexes. If you start believing that you’ve more to give than receive in it, the woman in you would suffer as wife. Then, you’ll never be able to experience the joy of being a woman. Don’t ever demean lovemaking as an instrument of sexual blackmail. It helps you to know that sex is not about male satiation alone but is as much a womanly fulfillment.’

‘I’m really sorry,’ she said moved. ‘I’ll never make that mistake again.’

‘It’s not entirely your fault,’ he said, as he took her into his arms. ‘I should’ve known that any bride would be sensitive when it comes to her parents. You may know that I value your parents as much as I do mine.’

‘I love your mind as well,’ she said, melting in his embrace, ‘I’m proud of you, really.’

It is in the realms of man’s vision to ennoble his woman by enabling her taste the fruits of femininity rather than succumbing to her whims for his gratification with her allurements.

22

After grappling with Bombay’s gripping humidity for a week, the Raja Raos had to encounter New Delhi’s sweltering heat that June-end.

‘This is our sweet home,’ said Raja Rao, as he took Sandhya round that modest two-bedroom apartment and as if to buttress his feelings, she joined her lips with his.

‘It tastes all the sweeter,’ he said at length.

‘In our sweet home,’ she said leaning on his chest.

‘Basically I was a spendthrift, and besides, I never bothered to acquire things,’ he said, in explanation of the obvious lack of furniture and fittings in the dwelling. ‘But now I know that my bachelor ways won’t do any longer.’

‘Why don’t I take up a job?’ she said enthusiastically.

‘A thousand or more that you could earn may not be needed now,’ he said taking her into his arms, ‘but won’t be sufficient later if the need arises. I suggest you improve your qualification and acquire skills for a paying career.’

‘I always felt I’ve an aptitude for interior design,’ she said excitedly. ‘What about a diploma course.’

‘By that you can complement my work at architecture,’ he said approvingly. ‘And that is as and when we go on our own. Maybe, we could bring our package deals on board.’

‘It would be great indeed,’ she kissed him.

As she moved about the place thereafter, Sandhya felt the space was her very own. As though to express her gratitude to him for having given her that feeling, she enlaced him from behind, and said fondling him, ‘Now that I’ve got a home that I can call mine own, I’ve come to feel that I’ve an identity of my own.’

‘Why forget about me?’ he said in jest, and added, ‘It’s as well that we all need some space on which we’ve the lien. While man takes to his workplace, woman clings to the kitchen. Try asking a clerk to move his table to an inferior corner, he might not oppose but he would resent nevertheless. The mother-in-law syndrome is rooted mainly in woman’s compulsive need to reign in her home. When she is forced to share it with her daughter-in-law, she shows it in not-so-subtle ways. When it comes to a woman’s equation with her man, it’s said she might even share his bed with another but wouldn’t suffer a rival in her kitchen, strange though it may seem!’

‘I hope to mature by then,’ she said, and thought. ‘Why, am I not itching to share him with Roopa? Would it be any different sharing the kitchen with her?’

‘Given your sweet nature,’ he said affectionately, ‘I’m sure you would.’

For their first outing in the capital, that evening, they called on the Malhotras, members of Raja Rao’s bridge brigade.

‘Oh, you’ve a dealt GS for a wife,’ said Malhotra, obviously impressed with Sandhya. ‘I say, we missed you badly at Panaji.’

‘How did it all go?’ asked Raja Rao.

‘In the Swiss league,’ said Malhotra, ‘we failed to make it to the final round by just three VPs. I’m sure your presence would have seen us through.’

‘What’s with the progressive four?’ Raja Rao enquired.

‘It’s better forgotten but for MV Rao’s classic comment,’ laughed Malhotra boisterously.

‘What’s that?’ Raja Rao was curious.

‘Don’t you remember the ‘Queens of Trumps,’ began Malhotra mirthfully, ‘that ladies team from Bombay? They overbid LS against Sinha and Uday and went three shy. Nevertheless, as the worthy women eventually won the event, Sinha got ecstatic, as you know he would often. Then, he went on praising them, at the same time reminding that it was he who managed to give them a zero. Amused by Sinha’s raving, Rao *garu* pulled him aside and said, ‘*Sinhasaab* what’s so exciting about giving zeros to women? Had you conceded a ‘One’ to them or took ‘zeros’ from them, it would have been a cause for celebration, wouldn’t it have been?’

As Malhotra and Raja Rao laughed their hearts out, their women looked at each other in embarrassment.

‘How I have missed the fun of seeing Sinha’s face then,’ said Raja Rao as he calmed down.

‘You men and your filthy jokes,’ snarled Mrs. Malhotra.

‘Why, it’s the sexual subtlety that gives a cutting edge to party jokes,’ retorted Malhotra.

‘What else?’ said Raja Rao.

‘Mrs. Rajan was enquiring about you,’ informed Malhotra. ‘She still remembers the way you squeezed her hand at Madras last year.’

‘Mrs. Rao may wonder what this squeezing is all about,’ said Mrs. Malhotra in smile.

‘That’s why,’ said Malhotra, reaching for a couple of packs, ‘let’s initiate the bride into bridge right away.’

As the novice partnered the expert then, they had a long session at the table, followed by the North Indian culinary that satiated their palates as well.

‘With Mrs. Rajan,’ said Sandhya, as they left the Malhotras, ‘it should’ve been a pleasant experience even in bridge terms.’

‘It’s much more interesting from the human angle,’ said Raja Rao. ‘At Madras, last year, Malhotra and I chanced to play against a team from the Gymkhana Club. In the open room we had for our opponents Mrs. Rajan and her partner. Introductions over, I asked her whether she knew Hema, my cousin, who’s a regular at their club. Though she said she

knew Hema, yet she didn't enquire how I happened to know her. It was apparent that she shunned me for being a small fry and not for any lack of regard for my cousin.'

'Later, during the course of play, I executed a squeeze on her hand that changed her attitude towards me,' he said, after a pause. 'And for the rest of the tournament she sought my company at every turn.'

'It's obvious that she recognized the player in you,' said Sandhya, and added in surprise, 'In the first place, I wonder how come she didn't get impressed with you!'

'Because she didn't have your eyes,' he smiled. 'You may know it's not uncommon that people fail to maintain equanimity in their social interaction - either they turn obedient to those they perceive as superior to them in their station or remain indifferent to those they think are inferior to them in rank, of course, going by the appearances. However, if circumstances were to remove their mental blocks, then some of them may warm up to the deserving. You know the one thing that appealed to me in Roopa's character is her sense of equanimity. Not that you lack any, but it's remarkable with her, given her circumstances.'

'You've read her well,' she said and added in vexation, 'Wonder how the poor thing is. Oh, how I'm waiting for her letter.'

'Won't she have things of her own on her hands,' he said. 'You can't afford to let such things upset you. I wish you develop a hobby, as your involvement in it would provide you the needed diversion from the disappointments of life. The wider your interests, the lesser would be the time left for worrying.'

'Hope you would stick to your promise to shift,' she said smug in his embrace.

'How do you expect me to forget that when it promises so much to us,' he said in smile. 'Let me see how to go about it, and sooner at that.'

As Roopa's aura came into his focus at that, Raja Rao too turned melancholic in time.

23

Try as she did, Sandhya couldn't feel at home in the country's capital. The ethos of the society dominated by the concept of ostentation offended her sensitivity steeped in a refined taste. Her longing for Roopa and her brooding over their reunion confined Sandhya to her home, precluding the possibility of her socializing. It was in that state of mind that she felt the place a transit camp, and failed to get involved with the life and times of New Delhi.

When the Institute of Interior Design, as though to drag her out of her hibernation, granted her admission, Raja Rao who came home early that day said excitedly to Sandhya, 'I've great news for you.'

'So do I,' she smiled.

'Let me guess,' he felt her belly.

'Why are you in such a hurry?' she caressed his head.

'You know I've a double stake in that,' he said, continuing to caress her, 'as man and as a palmist. Well, what's the news you've brought me?'

'You tell me,' she said.

'Ladies first,' he said, 'if you please.'

'Yes, to listen,' she said, smiling.

'How smart of you,' he said visibly pleased. 'Congrats, you've got the admission.'

'Thank you,' she kissed him. 'What a coincidence it is! Roopa too has taken up the Annamalai University's correspondence course in Personnel Management. She wrote that she started learning typing and shorthand as well.'

'It's nice to hear all that,' he said, wondering whether it was a sign of his continued influence on Roopa.

'Don't you want to know how you figure in her mind?' she said as though to tease him.

'Isn't it full of regards and all that?' he said pretentiously, though characteristically.

'Roopa writes that as her friendly half, you've influenced her immensely,' she said heartily. 'I think you deserve all her praises.'

'It's a relief really that she's on the right track,' he said feeling happy. 'But why the long silence?'

'It seems she wanted to write only after making some progress,' she said, 'why not you read it yourself.'

'Oh, she has a beautiful hand,' he said, as he gave the letter back to her.

A few days later, said Raja Rao to Sandhya, 'Someone sounded me out about an assignment in The States, and I told him I would think it over, as I wanted to know your mind.'

'Is that good for your career?' she said with nixed feelings.

'You know I had been there before,' he said casually. 'Now I've to look at that more as an opportunity for your exposure.'

'You know,' she said coyly, 'the direction of my destiny.'

‘Don’t I know,’ he said as he felt relieved himself.

‘What’s this Western lifestyle is all about?’ she asked.

‘In the West,’ he said as if he were summarizing the essence of his observations, ‘they’ve a deep-rooted work culture, while the philosophy of life is better evolved here. For all their application of mind over things material, in matters of emotion, resilience seems to be conspicuous by its absence in them. Why, psychic care is the order of the day for the jilted lovers in their tender teens. Or it may not take more than getting the boot at the office for one to start fearing about losing his woman as well!’

‘Sadly for us,’ he resumed with a tinge of sadness, ‘our ineptitude at work tells upon our standard of living that is appalling in comparison. But the culture here enables us to take the vagaries of life in their stride. A novice of a friend would double up for a psychiatrist to bring solace to the jilted. Here even a man in the thick of adversity comes unscathed to look forward with hope.’

‘The fundamental features of the two cultures, as I see them are - while the Western thought probes the nature of man, Indian philosophy delves deep into his soul,’ he said in conclusion. ‘It’s the tragedy of our society that an evolved culture coexists with the worst of prejudice, hindering the outlook of our people. If only we could temper our social rigidity with the western individualism, it would do us a world of good. On the other hand, in the Western ethos, over time, individualism insensibly degenerated into rank selfishness.’

Shortly thereafter, to the delight of all, as Sandhya found herself in the family way, to her amusement, Raja Rao got into the habit of fussing about her diet and all. When they were in the seventh heaven of married bliss, as he was required to go to Hyderabad, disturbing his equanimity, his dormant desire for Roopa came to the fore.

‘I’ll also come with you,’ said Sandhya excitedly as he broke the news. ‘Oh, how I’m longing to see Roopa.’

‘Don’t you know that it’s still the initial stages?’ he said, feeling her tummy.

‘I can understand, but still,’ she couldn’t hide her disappointment.

‘Well, on your way for delivery,’ he said to cheer her up, ‘you could go to her and stay till she drives you away.’

‘Why, won’t she play midwife to me if it were needed,’ she said, and added mischievously. ‘Don’t fail to see her, but see her with my eyes before you espy her.’

‘Send me blindfolded then,’ he said, amused.

‘Won’t she bare your eyes to see my reflections in them,’ she said, and thought smiling, ‘and hers as well.’

‘Should I make Roopa the captive of my eyes,’ he said, striking a chivalrous pose, ‘and bring her to you.’

‘How I wish it were possible,’ she said closing her eyes.

‘What a friendship!’ he said taking her into his arms.

‘It’s more of love,’ said Sandhya dreamily.

‘The test of love is its ability to endure the longing,’ he said, and wondered about the longevity of Roopa’s infatuation for him.

Sinking into Raja Rao’s embrace, Sandhya could sense the feeling behind his comment, and hoped that Roopa’s love for him would endure in spite of everything.

24

That morning, alighting from the Dakshin Express at Secunderabad, Raja Rao headed towards the Ritz. Though the anxiety he felt all through the journey for Roopa wore him out, he felt rejuvenated upon landing with the thought that he was breathing the very air scented by her breath.

‘If only I could check into her house’ he thought dreamily. ‘How excited she would be if I knock at the door with my bag and baggage? Moreover, my stay there would have helped our flirtation, and even more, who knows? But then without Sandhya around, it would be highly embarrassing with Sathyam. Besides, how could I entertain the clients in their house?’

Checking into the hotel, he got busy to get ready. However, once in the cafe, he began to picture his prospective encounter with Roopa, ‘What would be her reaction to my unexpected presence? It has been five months since we’ve met but still it feels as though I’ve seen her only the other day! Why, hasn’t her persona got etched in my memory to the last nuance? How excited she would be upon learning that I’m planning to shift, to be near her. Why can’t I suggest that she might assist me as my secretary? Looks like, it’s now or never for our affair. If I fail to declare my love now, it might be too late later, if it’s not already the case. Well, let me see what fate has in store for us, and I have to meet her before Sathyam returns from his office.’

While he went on visualizing the possibilities of fruition of their love, as if to bring him back into reality, the bearer brought the bill for his signature.

Calling it a day early at Subba Reddy's Sai Constructions, Raja Rao reached Roopa's place by three-thirty. As he neared her house, he was overcome with apprehension, 'How can I be sure that she loves me still. What if she's having an affair with someone already?'

Greeted by the door lock that only lent substance to his surmise, nevertheless he decided to knock at Lalitha's door to ascertain the position.

'Where she might have gone,' he wondered as he went down to enquire with Lalitha, 'has she taken a lover?'

'Last night Sathyam underwent appendectomy,' said Lalitha with concern. 'It was all so sudden, and there was no time even to inform his parents. It was only this morning that I sent them a telegram. However, Roopa is managing all, on her own. She's really amazing! You can find them in the Gaganmahal Nursing Home, just nearby.'

'How sad,' he said, striving not to show his relief on Roopa's account, and thought on his way to the nursing home. 'Oh, the poor fellow, but isn't his falling ill untimely for me.'

As he pushed aside the door-curtain, he saw Roopa administering some medicines to Sathyam. As his eyes met her husband's, she turned to find Raja Rao to her delight.

'How are you now?' Raja Rao asked Sathyam.

'What a surprise,' said Sathyam feebly, 'I feel much better now but it was awful last night.'

'When did you come?' Roopa asked Raja Rao at length.

'This morning,' he replied, looking at her intently to probe his standing in her affection.

'Where are you put up now?' she asked him visibly disappointed.

'At the Ritz,' he said as if explaining his action, 'as I came on some official work.'

'You should've stayed with us,' she said nevertheless. 'We wouldn't have disturbed your work.'

'Thank you,' he said, 'I shall take note of it for the future.'

'You better do that,' she said without taking her eyes off him. 'How is Sandhya?'

'She's fine, but misses you as ever,' he said, and added as he handed her an envelope, 'It looks like she doesn't trust my communication skills.'

'Why, she's right,' she commented meaningfully as she opened the envelope, and having savored the letter, she told Sathyam later, 'Sandhya sends her love and regards to you.'

'It's nice of her,' said Sathyam to Raja Rao. 'Please do convey my affection for her.'

'Tell Sandhya,' she said making no effort to hide her unhappiness, 'I'm unhappy with her for letting you check into a hotel when I'm here.'

'Won't that add to my woes?' smiled Raja Rao.

Sitting by the bedside, Raja Rao entered into a conversation with Sathyam befitting the occasion.

‘How long are you here?’ she said to Raja Rao interrupting them at length.

‘I’ll be leaving the day after tomorrow by the A P Express,’ he said, and having noticed a disappointed look on her face, he added, ‘If you find time to scribble something, I’ll pick it up tomorrow evening.’

After spending some time with them, he felt uneasy, and in time left in disappointment.

‘What an inopportune time to meet her when the opportunity itself came after such a long time,’ he felt let down as he came out of the room. Then it didn’t even occur to him to look back to check if Roopa came after him.

‘Oh, doesn’t his mere presence vibrate my soul,’ Roopa thought overwhelmed. ‘Surely, he is my man, if there’s ever one. But where have those searching glances of his gone. Was he not looking more at Sathyam than me? Why didn’t he bestow a few amorous glances to add to my memory bank? Well, what else could he have done in Sathyam’s presence than remain poker faced? How handsome he looked even with that morose look. What a rendezvous has fate chosen for my love!’

Roopa couldn’t help smiling dejectedly as she began to her failure to seek an avenue to let out her love to Raja Rao, ‘Why didn’t I take him out on some pretext, at least I should’ve gone out to see him off. But then, wasn’t it all so sudden, and lo, before I could gather my wits, he was gone!’

‘Anyway, next time when he comes, I shouldn’t slip up at any rate,’ she resolved at length. ‘Didn’t he suggest that I could scribble something, for him to pick up? Given the constraints for a dialogue of love, wasn’t it his innovation to let me bare my heart to him. Won’t he come up with his missive of ardor to be on par after all? Well, I’ll make it a memorable one for him, nay for us.’

‘Can I ever express my love to him in writing as I experience it?’ she felt as she sat down to write to her Raja that night. ‘Would a ream of paper do to picture the craving of my soul for him? Even otherwise, won’t borrowed feelings mar love letters, robbing them off their originality? How else can a woman let her man see her soul than in lovemaking? Why not I simply write, ‘Raja, just take me into your arms to know how you’re loved.’ Yes, that will tell all, where a million words might fail even.’

While she waited for her Raja Rao’s visit in all anxiety, for his part, back at the Ritz, he was pensive.

‘What rotten luck!’ thought Raja Rao, all again, ‘I couldn’t even have a proper look at her? But how could I, given the circumstances. Oh, she looks as ravishing as ever, doesn’t she? If anything, in her pensive mood she’s more bewitching than before. Doesn’t she appear ardent as well? But can I ever make her mine?’

However, as he recalled her longing look and furtive glances, his spirits revived, ‘It looks like she still loves me. Isn’t that clear from her amorous gaze? In a way, won’t her craving for me sustain my longing for her? If ever we could make it, then our unfolding passion would lead us into a whirlpool of eroticism, won’t it?’

As the room bell rang, he thought, ‘well, there’s always a tomorrow, but for now it must be Subba Reddy.’

‘I’ve dragged my friend Ranga Reddy along,’ stormed in Subba Reddy, ‘for the pleasure of your acquaintance.’

‘I believe in reciprocity,’ said Raja Rao in welcome.

‘Ranga Reddy owns half of Rayalaseema,’ said Subba Reddy, patting his friend.

‘You can take a trillionth of it for a realistic figure,’ said Ranga Reddy to Raja Rao. ‘But I’m sure he couldn’t be off the mark when he says that you’re an architect to watch.’

‘Let a peg or two make its way into his system,’ said Subba Reddy, pulling a Black Knight from his briefcase, ‘and we could savor Raja Rao’s unfolding versatility.’

‘Our friend is all praise for your ideas about the way buildings are to be built,’ said Ranga Reddy, sipping from his glass at length.

‘It’s only a better talent that could spot some talent in others,’ said Raja Rao heartily.

‘Let’s divert the topic to the fair sex for any way its all bricks and cement all day long,’ said Subba Reddy, pouring another for himself, ‘Of course, it’s a different matter altogether if Ranga Reddy too wants to turn into a realtor.’

‘You seem to be putting ideas into my head,’ said Ranga Reddy.

‘Why it’s not a bad idea at all,’ said Raja Rao. ‘But let’s first finish with women as Subba Reddy won’t get started otherwise.’

‘What’s the latest,’ asked Subba Reddy, ‘in the capital’s grapevine?’

‘A man could have murdered his wife for gain,’ said Ranga Reddy dismissively, ‘or else a bored housewife could have taken a paramour. Isn’t it all that is grapevine? What’s there to the scandals but for the change of characters, the plot being the same?’

‘But the thrill of it never wanes,’ said Subba Reddy. ‘Does it?’

‘That’s true,’ said Raja Rao. ‘Whether we admit to it or not, all of us savor scandals involving paramours. At the back of it could be our innate desire to be the lover of every desirable dame that is born. In order to savor the details, we convert these private affairs into public scandals. If the involved were to be rich and famous, then we have them in the tabloids. It’s as if we try to supplant the woman’s lover in our dreams.’

‘Anyway,’ said Subba Reddy, ‘it’s well settled by now that all men are promiscuous though some claim to be romantic, whatever that may mean.’

‘Promiscuity is man’s nature,’ said Raja Rao, ‘while romanticism is one’s culture.’

‘Oh, isn’t it just semantics?’ said Subba Reddy dismissively.

‘I think,’ said Raja Rao, ‘unrestrained urge is promiscuity while passion refined is romanticism.’

‘That sounds very much true,’ said Ranga Reddy glancing at his watch. ‘Now I’ve something up my sleeve. Raja Rao *garu*, I’m doing nothing worthwhile at present, though I’ve means to take up almost anything. Why not we join hands to rebuild Hyderabad, or rather more of it?’

‘I’m planning to shift here soon to set up shop,’ said Raja Rao. ‘I won’t like to turn a realtor but love to be your consultant in case you take the plunge into the real estate.’

‘Done,’ said Ranga Reddy. ‘Let’s schedule it for this *vijayadasami*. Meanwhile, I would tie up the loose ends.’

‘Three cheers,’ said Subba Reddy. ‘When you come down, you can count on my account too.’

The next afternoon, when Raja Rao was all set to leave for the Gaganmahal Nursing Home to meet Roopa, he got a message from his boss that he should join him for a crucial meeting next day at Bangalore. As he hardly had any time to catch the Bangalore Express, he rushed to the reception to checkout.

‘Roopa would be terribly upset,’ he thought dejectedly. ‘But how can I help her now. What if I wire my resignation and sort out things with her. No, that’s not fair even for the sake of love, is it? After all, it’s a matter of my credibility. Let me try to get her on phone and explain my position and hint at my love even.’

As the telephone operator at the Nursing Home told him that Roopa was not to be found, Raja Rao left the message of his departure for her and headed half-heartedly towards Nampally Railway Station.

While the news dashed her hopes no end, as a jolted Roopa sank on her knees, alarmed, the receptionist guided a distraught Roopa into a chair to be attended by the duty nurse in time. 'Oh, I shouldn't have gone home at all,' Roopa began to think as others thought that she was down with exhaustion. 'But then, hadn't my mother-in-law insisted that I rest for a while. How I wanted to hang around till he came. Well, it's as if I had a premonition! What's the sense in living if hard luck were to trick me at every turn? Had I been around when he rang up, wouldn't I have expressed my feelings to him? Well, haven't I prepared myself for all eventualities? Even if I were to develop cold feet in the end, I could have still cried over the line to convey my love to him. After all, why didn't he peep in, before leaving? Oh, why did he leave me in the lurch? How could he be so cruel to me?'

'Well, he could have come, if only he cared,' she continued in her depression. 'Maybe, as feared, has he lost interest in me? Were it possible that he came yesterday only at Sandhya's behest. Was he friendly with me only for the old times' sake? Hadn't I noticed that his looks lacked passion? How I deluded myself then, all along thinking that he could have been inhibited in Sathyam's presence. Did his passion dissipate in our separation? Don't I count for him anymore?'

Feeling miserable and unable to steady her thoughts, she went home for contemplation.

'Oh God, is it possible that his passion was no more than a passing interest in me?' she felt nervous as she lay in her bed. 'Am I destined to be disappointed in love as well? If only he cared to tell me about it, I would have reconciled to my fate. Can I really? No, I can't live without him. Don't I want him at any cost? What am I to do now to make him mine? What if I beg him for love? Well, did ever begging beget love? Isn't it a cold welcome that awaits the fate of unrequited love? If not, Sathyam would have had the warmth of my love for so long now. Why it's so clear that my destiny is linked to Raja's passion for me, I'll be blessed if he takes me and if not, I would be doomed forever. Does he or doesn't he love me? Oh, isn't this suspense killing me.'

'Surely, I was cheated by fate to air my love to him,' she thought as she pulled from her blouse her missive for him and the letter she wrote to Sandhya, 'but won't my destiny let me have the last laugh in our liaison.'

Roopa reached that stage in love when a woman feels obliged to keep her love alive so as to sustain her belief in her ability to love and be loved.

Part - III

In mid-January that *sankranti*, the exhibition ground in Hyderabad came alive as the fair curious of all ages inundated the premises. While some sauntered in and out of the pavilions, erected by the government departments, others filled the private stalls, of consumer goods. But, what took the cake at the grand *mela* were the garment shops. Nonetheless, the sensible, so it seemed, stood rooted at the vantage points to ogle at the bevy of beauties who made it to the annual fair.

In the pavilion of the Austral Industries, its young Executive Director was figuring out the vital statistics of the female visitors while apparently reviewing the sales figures. Of particular interest to him was the impression the air-conditioners, their new product, made on prospective buyers. Satisfied with the bottom line, he came out into the open to ascertain the proclivities of the passing women who abounded by then.

‘Almost every woman in her youth is beddable,’ he thought, lighting his India King. ‘While some may be repeatable, rarely are they keepable. But, each of them is obtainable, though with some of them it may take some time and effort even. But then, the quick-fire affair affords man ego satisfaction as well as ready gratification. Besides, won’t that make it easy for man to bring the curtains down, when it suits him? It’s as well; women tend to hang on to the illicit stage that much longer.’

‘But should the dame resist long enough,’ he continued with his soliloquy, ‘for the adventurer that would be a different ball game altogether. Her reluctance to give in would only increase her appeal to him by the day, deepening his desire for her by the night. Won’t that make it difficult for him to give up, resulting in unwelcome frustration? What’s worse,

it could result in reverse seduction, tying the philanderer in the nuptial knots. And for the married man, courting singles could be a hindrance, for they harp on his divorcing the wife as a prerequisite for liaison. ’

‘But, oh, with their ripen wares, aren’t married women truly mouthwatering,’ he continued to delve into the proclivities of women, ‘and are ready-made for affairs. Maybe, some of them may need a man’s helping hand to cross the hurdle of their sentimental fidelity, for them to run the rest of the illicit race with him in their raunchy beds. Why, luckily for men, the hard nuts to crack for the final favor are few and far between! But then, the harder the struggle to win women over, the sweeter would be the pleasure in having them, wouldn’t it be? Oh, what else draws a man to a woman than his desire to access her persona specifics? Won’t woman bare her veiled assets for her fancied man to dabble with her private accounts? But after a few jaunts of his to her favored joint, what would be left in her for her lover to explore, and for her to show him more? And thereafter, how could she cater to his innate need for variety and what else she could conjure up to sustain his enticement? Oh, the poor thing, seeing his interest in her wane in time, won’t she turn more so eager to keep him in good humor? Of course, the more she gives her man; even more she satiates him, doesn’t she? And it’s only time before she finds her paramour bypass her favors for lesser flavors. That’s the woman’s bother, anyway, why should I bother?’

Noticing a pretty lass of twenty pass him by, he thought, ‘Doesn’t she swing her seat as if to suggest that there’s a way too right up there? Heaving boobs and bulging bottom with something passable for a waist in between, won’t that sum up woman for man? Didn’t La Rochefoucauld say that man is the sum total of all the women he had ever loved. Maybe what he meant was that the measure of a man’s worth is the aggregate sum of the vital statistics of the women he had ever laid. Why not I maintain a record of them all, at least from now on, to know my net worth at the time of my death?’

‘Not a bad idea after all,’ he felt amused, and pursued his course in applied sex. ‘Nature made me a ladies’ man and fortune gave me the means to lure them. Oh, how the Cupid fellow thought it fit to endow women with an ear for flattery as if to help his own ilk worm their way into their arms. Won’t a push with praise and prod with a gift bring the babes to bare their boobs? And aren’t women blessed with a weakness for successful men? How money bestows status upon men and brings power over women! Won’t that enable the well-heeled to pick up their fancied women, that too at the drop of a hat! Well, haven’t I

tasted the amorous flavors of countless randies in assorted ways? It's as though every lass is ready for a lay, of course, on the sly. Well, with the right tactics, isn't snaring women as easy as luring the greedy, but one should use the right tools to handle those fleshy wares in their horny beds. Then, won't it be a case of quick fixing them in wanton liaisons?'

'But access makes all the difference between the conquest and failure, doesn't it?' he felt as he thought about his insatiate passions. 'If not for the lack of that, wouldn't I've laid every woman I'd ever fancied? Given half a chance, won't women explore their passions in their paramours' private parts? Invariably, it's her man who turns out to be the hurdle in the path of her fulfillment. Why, one needs only to show a passing interest in the wife, and the husband can be expected to do the rest to put paid to it. Not content with shrouding his wife, he cold-shoulders the trespasser as if to nip his passion in the bud. It's as though men are prone to policing their wives than husbanding them! And, as if to celebrate the poetic justice to their predicament, won't women turn gleeful whenever they cuckold their caretakers?'

'But working women come on a different platter altogether, don't they?' he seemed to sum up the essence of philandering. 'Far removed from their shadowing spouses, and ensconced with their eager colleagues, aren't they clearly cut out for liaisons? Besides, won't the atmosphere at the workplace afford woman more emotional closeness with her doting colleagues, than with her man in the homely monotony? More than anything else, isn't it their compulsiveness to dress well that makes women seek paramours prepared to foot the bills? How many of them undress in the private arena only to cut a figure for themselves in the public domain. Didn't I come across many such? And the welcome thing about them is that, when the time comes to hang up the boots, there won't be any hangovers. It's their short-term needs that make the liaisons so lively with them, isn't it? Oh, it's as if all the pleasures of life are packed in female frames for the favored to savor them!'

Seeing a shapely woman get into the pavilion, he followed her instinctively. In time, sizing her up, he approached her.

'I'm sure you're familiar with our kitchen products,' he said enticingly, 'all designed keeping women like you in mind.'

'I find your mixer-grinder quite handy,' she said, looking flattered.

'Part of the credit goes to you,' he said looking mysteriously into her eyes, 'for its intelligent use.'

'Thank you,' tickled by her vanity, she blushed to the roots.

‘Why not try out our air-conditioner,’ he said enticingly. ‘I mean in the guest room.’

‘I know about the launch,’ she said in embarrassment, ‘but we don’t need one, at least, for now.’

‘Nevertheless,’ he said tantalizingly, ‘I’ll get it installed free of charge.’

‘But why?’ she said, looking puzzled.

‘I’m looking for a testimonial,’ he said suggestively, ‘from a pretty housewife like you.’

‘Let me think it over.’ she said, as she couldn’t refuse being unequal to his flattery.

‘Would you care to leave your address,’ he pushed a pad and pencil into her hand, ‘for me to remind you.’

‘Thank you,’ she said as she scribbled.

‘Why not indicate the convenient timings,’ he said having noted her contact address.

‘I’m a housewife,’ she said overwhelmed by his advances.

‘It’s a pleasure meeting you Mrs. Vanaja,’ he said extending his hand, ‘I hope you won’t disappoint me.’

‘Good night, Mr...’

Having tentatively withdrawn her hand from his, amusedly confused, she hurried home.

‘Isn’t she a pretty prospect?’ he thought pleased with himself. ‘Won’t some follow-up help? Let her in the meantime ponder over the tempting proposal besides playing a guessing game with my name. Oh, having been sourced in her anatomy itself, isn’t mystery the key to open woman’s heart to the thought of man?’

As he came out to watch her figure from behind, lighting another India King he thought, ‘what about going to The Nizam Club for a change? Why not I see who I might come across there?’

2

When the playboy executive was about to move out, seeing a woman of about twenty come nearby, he stopped in his tracks.

‘Oh God, a real stunner here!’ he ogled at her greedily. ‘What a flowing figure! Why, have I ever seen a more desirable woman ever? That is, in spite of my roving eye! What a dream stuff she is? Why, more than that, for I didn’t see such in my wildest dreams really. Well, it’s as if she’s shaped for sex, isn’t she? She is the woman to be laid, and there’s no mistaking it. How surprising she has a divine face and a voluptuous figure on the same frame? Won’t that make her the Goddess of sex? But is she a resident or someone here on

a visit? Whatever, this woman is too good to be lost. If only she goes into the pavilion, there could be an opening for me then. If not, I should follow her to her very doorstep, even if that takes me to the end of the world. But now I should be careful not lose her in this god-damn rush. If I get her, that would be the jackpot of my life, and I shall get her, whatever it might take.'

While he went towards her as if in a trance, with the fag burning his fingers, soon he came to his senses, and saw a man with two ice-cream cones joining her. As the man bore a familiar face, he moved towards him to realize that he was Sathyam, his long lost friend, and as he neared him he thought excitedly, 'Won't his nose give him away in a million?'

'Can you place me?' he asked Sathyam tentatively.

'Of course,' said Sathyam thoughtfully, 'you do seem familiar.'

'Sathyam,' said he patting him.

'Oh, Prasad,' Sathyam said hugging him excitedly, nearly spilling the ice-cream and all on them all, 'I'm glad we've met again.'

'How's life, buddy?' Prasad asked him as he extricated himself from Sathyam's bear-hug.

'I've no regrets, thanks to my wife,' said Sathyam. 'Meet Roopa.'

'How do you do,' Prasad greeted Roopa.

'*Namaste*,' said Roopa.

'I've heard you're a bigwig now,' said Sathyam in all excitement. 'Tell me all about yourself.'

'I've to play my cards carefully,' thought Prasad, affecting hiccups. 'It's so sudden, like a bolt from the blue. Well, it pays to play down my success till I get into the winning position and till then; I should mildly impress Roopa without unduly alarming Sathyam. Unless he sees the present as an extension of our past, he won't be too keen to renew our friendship. And for me, that would be back to the hiatus.'

'Why,' said Prasad at length, 'do you want to call it quits right now? I thought we've met not to part again.'

'Won't I drag you,' said Sathyam catching hold of Prasad's hand, 'all the way to my house.'

'Then,' Prasad pulled Sathyam into the pavilion as Roopa followed them, 'allow me to wind up.'

'My search has come to an end, after fifteen years,' said Sathyam in continuation. 'You don't know how I missed you all these years.'

‘Same is the case with me,’ said Prasad, ‘thanks to Roopa Devi.’

‘No suffixes please,’ said Roopa as if she were withdrawing. ‘But how am I responsible for your chance meeting?’

‘If not for women,’ said Prasad, ‘would men ever venture out on their own?’

‘I agree with you,’ said Sathyam. ‘Surely we owe all this to her.’

‘Give me five minutes,’ said Prasad so as to gain time. ‘In the meantime, our manager would take you around.’

‘Oh, how she turned out to be Sathyam’s wife!’ thought Prasad in excitement as he went into his cabin. ‘What an amazing development though! But how on earth did Sathyam land up with such a dame! Maybe, owing to my destiny to have her, who knows? Whatever, won’t his friendship prove to be a thoroughfare to her favors? Just the same, won’t she need some wooing as well? I might as well dazzle Roopa straight away by flaunting my credentials right away. But won’t that drive Sathyam into a shell, hindering my endeavor? Worse still, sensing trouble, he might even erect checkpoints all the way to her bedchamber. It looks like the Formula One won’t do for her final favor, even if I were to muster Senna’s skills and Sorkar’s stealth for that for surely Sathyam would ensure that I end up in the pit on my way to the putt, won’t he? Since overt courting seems to be risky, I better sneak into her bed under the shadow of his goodwill. Won’t that be fine with me? Going by his confidence quotient, Sathyam shouldn’t have made much in his career. So, the winning strategy is to downplay my success to develop my equation with him. Then, won’t his camaraderie issue me visa to land in his wife’s embrace?’

‘But what about Roopa?’ he tried to analyze her proclivities. ‘Doesn’t she wear that disinterested look I’m so familiar with in women? Maidens embrace it when they are lovesick, and in the married, it’s proof enough that their pudding had turned all too stale. Isn’t it clear that she’s unexcited about her marriage? Won’t that make her a candidate for conquest? But that subtle awkwardness discernible in women, when attracted to men, is missing in her, is it not? All the same, she doesn’t seem to be vainglorious either. Won’t that call for a change of tactics? As it appears, it needs some effort, and a lot many seductive tactics to bring her over to bed. Well, for all that, it appears to be a conditional access, after all. Thou art so near and yet so far, oh, Roopa dear!’

‘But, how do I go about it?’ he tried to analyze his moves to checkmate Roopa in her own bed. ‘What could be the path of least resistance to her favors? Won’t the first few steps decide the outcome of this ticklish tangle? While cultivating his confidence, I must

undermine her defenses as well. But with a stunning wife like that, any man would be on guard to see through the motives of the callers. Why not vouch brotherly feeling for her to keep him off guard? Won't that cut both ways in the triangle? That way, I can get closer to her and then worm my way into her affections. Besides, won't that enable me to appraise her weaknesses for later day exploitation? Why, that's a great idea, which can be implemented without alerting Sathyam!

Carried by his brainwave, a hearty Prasad came out of the cabin with great expectations.

'I'm at your service now,' said Prasad to the Sathiyams, as he came out.

'Let's go to our place,' said Sathyam.

'I don't know about your means of transport,' said Prasad, 'but I will have to hire an auto-rickshaw.'

'I thought you must be moving in limousines,' said Sathyam unable to hide his surprise.

'I use the office Ambassador,' said Prasad, who by then had instructed his chauffeur to report for duty the next day, 'which is in the garage now.'

'You haven't changed really,' said Sathyam all excited. 'Roopa, you know, he's always an adjusting type.'

'If it doesn't bother my sister, I would like stay on for dinner,' said Prasad as they walked towards the exit. 'Ever since Rani went to Delhi, I've been eating junk, and it's been a week now.'

'You're welcome,' Roopa smiled her invitation.

'Thank you,' said Prasad heartily.

As they got into an auto, Sathyam told Prasad, 'Now tell me.'

'As I spotted you,' said Prasad in jest, 'I've the first lien.'

'After graduation,' said Sathyam, all the while eager to hear his friend's story, 'I joined the State Government, and am working ever since at the secretariat. Now I'm a Senior Assistant, waiting to be promoted as Section Officer. In a nutshell, that's all there is to my life.'

'Why, you've missed the essence,' said Prasad. 'When did you get married?'

'Well,' said Sathyam smilingly, 'we're two years old.'

'What a wit,' said Prasad. 'Love marriage, I suppose.'

'It was love at first sight,' said Sathyam for a shocking effect, 'during our *pellichupulu*. But I heard yours is a love match.'

'Stop near that gate,' said Roopa to the driver.

‘Now tell me all,’ said Sathyam as they went in behind Roopa.

‘Let my sister serve some water first,’ said Prasad taking his seat. ‘At least that would help quench my thirst.’

‘Won’t you like to hear his story?’ said Sathyam, as Roopa turned back after giving them some water.

‘I’m afraid you’re giving an impression to my sister that there is a great deal of interest attached to my life,’ said Prasad. ‘On the other hand, my life is as ordinary as any but for the marriage. Rani was my classmate in Delhi and we happened to like each other. And I never dared dream of marrying her, as her father is a business magnate. But without my knowledge, she pressured her father for my hand. His fondness for his daughter, and my eligibility otherwise, made us man and wife in the end. I came here last year to put back on its rails a sick unit that we took over. At home, we’ve Gaurav and Omathi to engage my family time. That’s about it all.’

‘I feel,’ said Sathyam, ‘your wife could be a remarkable woman.’

‘Oh, no doubt about that,’ Prasad patted Sathyam while looking at Roopa. ‘But you’re better off for my sister.’

‘I reserve my opinion,’ said Sathyam, ‘till I see Rani.’

‘Rani is dear to me as wife,’ said Prasad, ‘and Roopa endears me as sister, and so you can rely upon my judgment, can’t you?’

‘I know how blessed I am,’ said Sathyam looking at Roopa in admiration.

While the friends continued to reminisce about their childhood days, Roopa went into the kitchen.

‘How lucky is Rani to have married a handsome man like him whom she loves as well,’ Roopa contemplated. ‘Why, there’s no denying that he’s truly handsome, but why does he refer to me as sister at every turn? How odd that a handsome man should keep calling me sister. It’s as if the sisterly reference takes away the very essence of my persona, or, has it got to do with my own vanity? Maybe, but even Ramu, being so close, doesn’t address me that way. Well it’s no more than a mere form, isn’t it? Am I obliged to address this man as brother or what, how odd it feels? What if I too address him as brother to make him feel sissy? Well, he’s my husband’s friend and just another interesting character, no more and no less. That’s all there’s to it, isn’t it?’

At the dining table, Prasad was effusive in his praises all the way, and as if icing his seductive cake, he said, 'I feel I've tasted food for the first time in life, it's like an *annaprasana* for me.'

'You exaggerate a great deal mister,' said a visibly embarrassed Roopa.

'You'll know how I feel if only you could taste your preparations with my palate,' said Prasad pursuing his game-plan. 'How I wish Sathyam will come out with an empirical formula of relativity of palates. Then, that should prove me right. Don't you know how good he is at maths?'

'Why don't you stay back tonight,' suggested an apparently flattered Sathyam.

'I would have loved to, but I have got to go now,' said Prasad, hoping to create the impression that he was not the one to take undue advantage of his friend's generosity.

'At least, till Rani is back from Delhi,' said Sathyam, 'keep having your dinners here.'

'It's worth going miles to have her preparations,' said Prasad, 'and enjoy your company. But why trouble my sister.'

'You're always welcome,' said Roopa in spite of herself.

'Then I'm no fool to miss out on the fare,' said Prasad to Roopa. 'Thank you, and good night for now.'

Though Prasad insisted that he would carry on his own, Sathyam persisted in seeing him off at the street corner. In time, as he returned home, said Sathyam to Roopa, 'That's why it is said it's a small world! How nice we met again. I hope you liked your new brother.'

'Looks like he's an interesting character,' said Roopa.

'It goes to his credit that there's no change in his attitude, in spite of his prosperity,' said Sathyam. 'Yet we see people putting on airs though they wouldn't get to spell the 'S' of success. How they spread the rumor that a businessman roped him in for his plain daughter! What a pity that a lovematch was dubbed as a mercenary marriage, and why not as through jealous eyes, all that is seen is green isn't it? Well, I'm sure we'll pick up the threads from where we had left them.'

Struggling to catch up with the elusive sleep that night, Roopa contemplated, 'If only Raja were to be in Prasad's place, what a different time it would have been! What would Raja be doing now? Does he remember me, leave alone craving for me?'

'What separates these two remarkably handsome men?' Roopa couldn't help but compare them. 'Whereas Prasad has a pleasing face, Raja's demeanor is demanding, isn't it? True, Prasad exudes self-confidence but Raja personifies self-worth itself. No denying that

Prasad looks handsome, but oh, how Raja abounds with that sex appeal. No doubt, Prasad is a pleasant person, but is not Raja a lovable persona. Prasad might charm women with his dash but Raja captivates them with his romantic aura. Besides, who would have Raja's compelling eyes with that penetrating looks. Above all, Raja is the he-man and my dream man at that, there's no mistaking that.'

It seems it is in the nature of woman to value her self by the worth of her man more than her own self-worth.

3

'Satisfactory, isn't it?' thought Prasad on his way back to his home. 'Haven't I played my cards with finesse? If anything, Sathyam's dinner gesture is a sure pointer. But the proof of the pudding is only in the eating. Anyway, it's still such a long way to get there, isn't it? But then, the goddess willing, won't I have it some day? Well, a good start might ensure the lead all the way.'

'Sathyam is a simpleton as ever,' he thought, trying to analyze his friend and his wife. 'If a man of thirty were to remain that way, he must either be kind-hearted or dung-headed. It looks Sathyam is a bit of both. However, Roopa - what an appropriate name she has - remains a puzzle, and I should ensure that she doesn't start quizzing me in time. What's it that makes this fabulous woman so irresistible? Sure there's much more to her persona than her oozing sex appeal. It looks as if the more one espies her; all the more he becomes obsessed with her. It's as though her whole body is endued with a magnetic layer, isn't it? If not, how can one explain her dusky complexion? Oh, some god could have turned horny while making her! Why else is she the *femme fatale* of the first order?'

So it occurred to him, 'Unless I'm on guard, I might as well trip on the path of attraction, and fall in love with her even. But then, that would be an unwelcome development, wouldn't it be? By the way, would sex become any more pleasurable if penetrated with love? Why at all this doubt, as if love would take that any deeper. Hah, hah! It's the lust that vests the thrusts with power, and any woman would know that for sure, and Roopa should be had before I develop any emotional hiccups for her. Only by taking her to bed early could I feel at ease, and remain safe in her enchanting company for which I should patiently hasten her into my arms. It doesn't seem easy though, and I should be prepared for a long haul even, but, once in bed, she would be worth her weight in gold, perhaps platinum, to be precise.'

Following his tested tactic to make women ponder a little over his absence, with Roopa in mind, he made it late to Sathyam's place.

'What happened, we've been waiting so long for you?' greeted Sathyam.

'Wait, I'll explain,' said Prasad dramatically. 'First let me apologize to my sister.'

'Oh,' she said visibly embarrassed. 'It's all right.'

'I won't take anything less than your forgiveness,' said Prasad looking straight into Roopa's eyes.

'What's wrong with you?' said Roopa all perplexed as Sathyam looked on amused.

'I know how vexatious it is to wait,' said Prasad to Roopa.

'Okay my friend,' smiled Sathyam, 'you're forgiven.'

'You should know that I've skipped lunch,' said Prasad, soaping his hands at the wash basin, 'to savor my sister's preparations.'

'I too have a *raakhi* sister in her friend Sandhya,' said Sathyam reminiscently. 'What a sweet soul she is.'

'Who can better my sister in any way?' said Prasad looking into Roopa's eyes, and turning to Sathyam, he added, 'When does the next *rakshaabandhan* come up?'

'That I'll let you know,' said Sathyam. 'Though I regard Roopa no less, know that Sandhya is all too different.'

'Maybe,' said Prasad with apparent conviction, 'but Roopa is Roopa.'

Struck by his direct manner, Roopa looked at him in awe, and thought in puzzlement, 'Isn't he showing an uncommon interest in me. What is he up to? Though he calls me 'sister', his demeanor doesn't reflect any brotherly sentiment, does it really? Why won't his manner betray lust? Oh, what a hypocrite he is to get into this sisterly mess. Isn't it proving to be awkward for him and embarrassing for me as well? Any way, for me, he's just a handsome man and an interesting company, that's all. He's like any other man in my life, is he not?'

After a couple of visits, Prasad failed to turn up for a week, leaving Sathyam in jitters, even as Roopa felt that she was missing him as well.

'Haven't I got used to his company,' she thought many a time, during that time. 'Or am I craving for his flattery? Hasn't he developed the knack of praising me without alarming Sathyam? And, it's not at all brotherly really, when Sathyam is not around, how he takes my name, with a certain emotion attached to it even! How longingly he looks at me, all the while holding his gaze at my bosom. Isn't his carnal bother troubling his brotherly candor?'

What hypocrisy, worse still, is it his strategy to hide his designs on me? Am I indulging in his character assassination by merely surmising? But then, isn't his want for me crystal clear to me. Whatever it is, it's his problem, and I've nothing to do with him anyway.'

'But is it as simple as that?' she felt as she developed second thoughts. 'Am I not missing him? And willy-nilly, am I getting attracted to him? But, how's that possible when I'm in love with Raja. Can anyone ever attract me that way? Am I then flirting with Prasad? Oh, no, I just happen to enjoy his company, bored that I am. That's all there is to it.'

When Prasad finally arrived, Roopa was all alone in her home.

'What's this vanishing act, mister?' Roopa found herself asking him.

'Didn't Sathyam tell you that I had to rush to Delhi?' he said staring into her eyes. 'And you know I had no way to personally contact you.'

'By the way,' she said avoiding his gaze, 'Sathyam became a fish out of water.'

'And I felt miserable all the while,' he said, making no effort to mask his desire. 'Need I tell you why?'

As she felt that she could discern an uninhibited desire in his demeanor, she thought, 'So, he wants me. Does he not look lustful to the bones? But then, how Raja's passionate gaze caresses my frame conveying his craving for my soul. Why, their eyes portray the contrast between lust and love, don't they? Am I not imagining things, strung by my craving for Raja? How does it matter really, when I'm clear whom I want? And to be clear is to be real, isn't it? Well, how could one grasp the reality of life without clarity of thought?'

'What are you thinking about?' he smiled.

'Oh, nothing,' she said embarrassedly.

'Haven't you heard it said that the attributes of woman's utterances have reverse inferences?' he said mischievously, and dwelled upon the proverb to probe the proclivities of the fair sex. 'The perception that women are ambiguous by nature is not unfounded for they tend to dissemble. But then, why should they, anyway? Won't the male dominated society seek to straightjacket them as role models to self-serve man's interests, and judge them on the scale of conformity? Since the male tenets are at variance with the feminine instincts, don't women come to pretend? And, unable to comprehend women, won't the confounded men end up according the benefit of doubt to them, at every turn. It's thus men come to hoist themselves on their own petard, and deservedly at that, so it seems.'

However, before he could get Roopa's reply, he felt Sathyam's pat on his back.

'Why man,' said Sathyam, 'what took you so long?'

‘You know,’ said Prasad, ‘a businessman’s time is not his time.’

‘Had you given us some inkling,’ said Sathyam complainingly, ‘we should’ve given Sandhya’s address for you to call on them.’

‘I would be often going to Delhi often,’ said Prasad, ‘but now we’re all going to my place for dinner.’

‘What’s the hurry,’ said Sathyam. ‘Can’t we make it leisurely?’

‘Rani won’t let me be in,’ said Prasad smilingly, ‘unless you both come along with me.’

‘You know how I value women’s sentiments,’ said Sathyam goading Roopa to get ready.

‘Sentiment is the essence of love,’ said Prasad affecting a sneeze. ‘What do you say sister?’

As Roopa gave him a searching look, Prasad smiled in all conceit.

Though they readily headed towards Prasad’s bungalow in the Banjara Hills, however, it was well past eleven when the host dropped his guests back at their home.

‘What a time it was!’ said Sathyam in ecstasy as Prasad left.

‘It’s plain boring,’ said Roopa unlocking the door.

‘What do you mean?’ he protested. ‘Rani was so courteous and the kids took to us. You’re impossible at times.’

‘Better realize,’ said Roopa in exasperation, ‘that she just condescended to descend, that’s all.’

‘I think its other way round,’ said Sathyam, ‘I felt that she’s so affectionate.’

‘Didn’t you try to endear yourself to her,’ she said indignantly. ‘Stop courting her and you count for nothing to her. I can bet on that.’

‘At least concede that she’s a fine conversationalist,’ said Sathyam in all eagerness, as if to make Roopa see some merit in Rani.

‘Why not,’ said Roopa in all irritation, ‘if only the conversation is all about enlightening others about her father’s greatness, her husband’s smartness and her kids’ brightness? But the advantage is that you might rest your vocal cords while she goes on with her monologue.’

‘Isn’t that natural for women,’ he said grudgingly though. ‘But you hardly have a word of praise for me.’

‘Forget about me,’ said Roopa showing Sathyam his place, ‘would you ever let go an opportunity to have a dig at my people.’

‘Neither would you miss a chance at nitpicking,’ he said in disappointment.

Bothered by her bickering, Sathyam couldn't sleep for a while, and disturbed by Prasad's forthrightness, Roopa stayed awake for long.

4

'Isn't it a fortnight since I laid the trap for Roopa?' Prasad tried to surmise his station in the route of seduction. 'Still the prey is nowhere near coming. On the other hand, my ardor is on the gallop as though to enslave me to her charms, isn't it? What progress is that? While jolly well enjoying my attentions, she shows no particular interest in me. Just the same, she has come to love my company, hasn't she? Oh, as it looks, that's the only thing to write home about. Could that be a cause for hope anyway? It's as if she doesn't abhor her married life altogether. Won't that make her a bed-hedger in the arena of adultery? But courtesy the darling, haven't I coined a new phrase for the flirting. Well, though only a few of them are beddable; all married women are bed-hedgers anyway, are they not?'

'Never mind his dull demeanor, Sathyam must be good in bed,' he contemplated in wonderment. 'Come to think of it, given a good time in bed, won't all women turn a blind to the faults of their men? How strange! But then, it's all so different with Rani. Though she loves me, doesn't she think by giving herself, she's doing me a favor? Why, she couldn't get rid of her Electra complex even after six years of sex life with me that made her mother twice over! Before her giant of a father, isn't every man a contemptible midget for her? Short of being explicit, doesn't she tend to imply that I owe my status and all that goes with it to her redoubtable father?'

'No denying it, though,' he went about drawing up the balance sheet of his married life. 'After all, it's our marriage that shifted my gear to the fast track of life from the middle-class morass that it was in. If not, I wouldn't have been any better placed than Sathyam. Maybe, I would have been even worse off for all I know. Oh, how I would have got a wife like his! Instead of eyeing Roopa, I would have been envying Sathyam now. Supposing I got a winner for a wife, won't it have been a tough ask to keep her wooers at bay, that too with my limited means.'

Then he recalled an incident that his wife had made him privy to. When someone made a pass at her, she told the bewildered dasher that he might hope for her favors after acquiring her father's stature and her husband's looks!

'Looks like man's status provides his woman the amour of fidelity against seduction,' he began to think. 'Isn't it better than the chastity belt of yore that would have still left room

enough for her deviancies. Well, fidelity apart, being sure about themselves, women of means lose their innate womanliness, don't they? Isn't it sad for the female persona, but none seem to care, even men! Is it not their vulnerability that makes women charming to men and sans a semblance of timidity, won't femininity suffer? But for all her perfect features, doesn't Rani lack that feminine grace that abounds in Roopa.'

'Am I in love with Roopa then?' he wondered. 'What nonsense, leave alone the patience, do I have the inclination to love? I'm just impatient to take her to bed, at the earliest that is. No more and no less.'

He tried to believe what he assumed.

Shortly thereafter, in the wake of the Prasads' return visit, Sathyam was disappointed. 'How I wish they had stayed back for dinner,' he told Roopa. 'But then, she had a prior commitment, didn't she?'

'By now you should know it's but an excuse,' said Roopa indignantly. 'But I won't blame her. Why, she got used to the posh living and so it's not fair to expect her to feel at home in our middle-class home. And to make matters worse for the visitors, you harp on your childhood as if you've stopped living thereafter. I feel these days even Prasad is getting tired of your flogging of the dead horse of your childhood.'

'Maybe you've read her right,' he said turning defensive. 'But I'm sure you're off the mark with him. Besides, if it comes to that, you and Sandhya are no different.'

'You should know that we don't harp on our past, memorable though it was,' she said turning nostalgic. 'We feel the present and dream about our future.'

'How I wish Sandhya visits us on her way to Kakinada,' he said, sounding apologetic. 'It's a shame we couldn't make it to Delhi in all these days.'

Recalling how their plans to go to Delhi went awry every time, Roopa thought dejectedly, 'Leave alone letting me gatecrash into Raja's life, fate keeps me out of Sandhya's embrace even.'

As if to place Rani's unease in their place in its contrast, that Sunday afternoon, Tara visited the Sathyams as they were having their tea after siesta, as Sathyam had developed a taste for tea, fed up giving an explanation for his abstinence.

Strange, indeed, is the way one tends to react to the differing peculiarities in others. None reminds the rotund about the obesity, for the fear of offending them, but when it comes to the lean, unmindful of embarrassing them, all tend to voice their anxiety.

'Got scarce these days,' Roopa welcomed Tara, 'Why so?'

‘You know its all to with the kids’ studies,’ said Tara as Roopa led her inside. ‘I feel their exam time is more of a testing time for the parents. What about you?’

‘If its typing and shorthand in the mornings,’ said Roopa, ‘then, it’s the course material in the afternoons. The days are passing by.’

‘What of the nights?’ said Tara.

‘Nights follow days,’ said Roopa, ‘don’t they?’

‘Why not let days lead into nights,’ said Tara holding Roopa’s hand.

‘That way, my dreams roll my days and nights all into one,’ said Roopa dreamily.

‘Roopa,’ said Sathyam in high pitch, ‘some tea for Prasad please.’

‘Prasad is his childhood friend,’ said Roopa. ‘See if he interests you.’

‘Do you think he’s a prospect then?’ whispered Tara.

‘Why not find it out yourself?’

‘With you around,’ crooned Tara, ‘who would have eyes for me?’

‘I always wonder,’ said Roopa, in all admiration for Tara’s charms, ‘if your timepiece turns anticlockwise to prevent time from advancing your age.’

‘After I’m done with it,’ said Tara winking at Roopa, ‘I would present that to you.’

‘But for now,’ winked back Roopa, ‘what if he...’

‘Let me see if he’s hook-worthy after all,’ said Tara smilingly, ‘but I tell you, if only you choose, you could hit many a bull’s eye.’

‘Well, one hit could be too many for me,’ said Roopa reminiscently, and led Tara into the hall with tea for all.

‘She’s Tara, my friend,’ said Roopa to Prasad serving him some steaming tea.

‘He is my bosom friend and a leading industrialist,’ said Sathyam to Tara with a sense of pride attached to that.

It is a peculiar characteristic of people that for some inexplicable reason feel nice about themselves when they cite their acquaintance with the successful.

‘How do you do,’ said Prasad.

‘Fine, thank you,’ said Tara.

‘I was on my way to a businessman,’ said Prasad as he got up to leave, ‘I’ll be back in time.’

‘We’ll wait for you,’ said Sathyam a little puzzled, and thought aloud after had Prasad left, ‘Doesn’t he look confused?’

After a short while, Tara too left, leaving Sathyam pondering over Prasad's predicament. But, Roopa felt that Prasad left fearing Tara might smell the rat from his manner, and resort to innuendoes that could alert Sathyam over time. And she knew he would come again to follow his seductive course. The longing she felt for her lover and the resistance she had to offer her seducer seemed to push Roopa to the brink.

5

Getting into his Chevrolet, Prasad drove straight into the 7th Street of Domalaguda. Parking his car near a pan shop, he chain smoked India Kings in all excitement and spotting Tara, as she entered the lane, he was impatient for her to reach her house. As Tara took note of him too, once in, she left the door ajar, in all expectation.

'Who's there?' she said nevertheless at the sound of the door buzzer.

'Your prodigal soul,' said Prasad pushing open the door.

'My body welcome,' said Tara pulling him inside.

'I'm glad,' said Prasad taking her at her waist, 'that I've found you at last.'

'Why not say, by default,' she said leaving his hand.

'Maybe,' he said, squeezing her waist, 'but still I'm glad.'

'Are you sure?'

'Do you need any proof?'

'As if your absconding was not proof enough,' she said sarcastically.

'I was busy in the beginning and lost track in the end,' he kissed her hand.

'What are you up to now?' she said winking at him. 'You want to come onto my tracks or wish to put me off yours.'

'Thanks for not embarrassing me there,' he said, taking her hand.

'Don't you know that I don't compromise my clients?' she said. 'Now tell me, what's cooking up over there?'

'Oh, nothing of that sort really,' he embraced her. 'But why are you so concerned about Roopa?'

'Love thy neighbor, say the scriptures, don't they?' said Tara looking into his eyes. 'But isn't she too sexy for your comfort?'

'Honestly,' he said, assuming a grave tone, 'I have no such ideas unless you want to put some into my head.'

‘Hard to believe you,’ she said winking at him. ‘Anyway, I don’t think you stand a chance.’

‘Forget about her,’ he said with a wink. ‘How are things with you?’

‘You should be the better judge,’ she said unveiling her valley.

‘You’re juicier than ever,’ he said digging into her bra.

‘I trust you’re no less spicy now,’ she felt him where it mattered to her.

‘You’re welcome to confirm,’ he said pushing her into her bedroom.

‘You’re more amorous than ever,’ he complimented her aggressiveness.

‘Hasn’t competition become the bottom line,’ she said jokingly, ‘even in our calling?’

‘How I welcome that,’ he said holding her assets, ‘if it were to herald a frenzied time.’

‘Can I hope to see you more often now?’ she said, as he repaired to leave after a while.

‘Am I a moron,’ he said, fondling her breasts, ‘not to be savoring these golden apples.’

‘Anyway,’ she said squeezing him meaningfully, ‘with the pathway to your passion so nearby, won’t you need a passage for relief close by?’

‘Oh, Tara,’ he said in all admiration, ‘you could corrupt the saints even!’

‘Is it so?’ she said as she winked at him, ‘but let me see if you could seduce her. In the meantime, you could count on my services.’

‘How on earth have these two got acquainted?’ Prasad thought on his way back to Sathyam’s house. ‘Is it possible Roopa doesn’t know about Tara’s double life? How it could be, given that Roopa is no fool. Well, didn’t Tara imply that Roopa is a tough nut to crack? Wouldn’t she have tried to rope in Roopa into her fold, only to have failed? It could as well be. Won’t the real thrill of sex lie in seduction, though paying for favors might be paying as well? More so is the case when the wares are of Tara brand. Isn’t Tara as good as ever? She hasn’t lost a wee bit, has she? But my appetite for the fair sex would have true satiation only when I solace myself in Roopa’s embrace. And that’s it. What about seeking Tara’s help to trap Roopa? After all, she might cooperate, but that might as well backfire. Oh, no, when it comes to seducing women, it’s better to keep one’s own counsel.’

When he reached Roopa’s place eagerly, he found it filled with Sathyam’s colleagues who came to canvass for their candidate for the presidency of their association. Nevertheless, when Sathyam suggested that Roopa might engage Prasad inside, she excused herself on the pretext of her going to help Lalitha with a new recipe.

‘Oh, this god-damn Roopa,’ thought Prasad as he left in irritation at missing the opportunity. ‘She won’t even let me make a pass at her. Looks like she’s lending me all her

eyes and ears with her heart tucked away in her attic. Why, isn't it clear that I can't seduce her by appealing to her mind? I should find a soft spot in her heart to gatecrash into her bed. But how am I to touch her Achilles heel? Doesn't she seem to be good hearted, after all? Well, that could as well be the chink in the armor of her virtue. Why not I invoke her pity by declaring my love to her? But what if she cuts me short and shows the door? Then, what about writing to her? Well, that could be the right move as love letter could be the best bet for a tentative lover. Won't that let the lover have the required space to modulate his passion even as it gives enough time for his beloved to crystallize her inclinations? But, if Roopa shows it to Sathyam, won't that put paid to my passion. Besides, won't that show me in a poor light to him?

'What about playing patience with her?' he thought as he began to explore the alternatives. 'Where would all that lead me to? Isn't she coy to my advances without herself giving anything away? Oh, how my wooing is warming her like a glove. Won't she like to have it that way as long as she could? Moreover, when I can't seduce her in the euphoric beginning, how can I win her over later, when familiarity would have bred contempt? Patience cannot be the right tactic to checkmate women into resigning, so it seems. Of course, time is the essence of an affair, to get into, as well as to get out of it, isn't it?'

'Well, nothing could be gained by playing the waiting game with her,' he resolved at length. 'I've got to take chances to improve the odds. So, let me draft a smart letter and hand it over to her. If she complains to Sathyam, so be it. What more have I got to lose if she is not inclined, after all that?'

After penning the missive that night, he thought about the mode of its delivery, 'If I try to give it at her home, she might refuse to take it. And even if I force it on her, she could tear it in my face. Well, I've to confound her so that she won't have the wits to refuse. Then, having taken it, she won't be able to resist the temptation of reading it, isn't it? Of course, once she goes through it, she can't keep me in the cold for long, can she? If only I could thrust it upon her, won't she wide open her golden gate of lust for me? And then, the rest would be our erotic history.'

Having hit upon the winning move at length, he couldn't sleep for long in anticipation. But he woke up early to take on Roopa as she came out of the Vinayaka Typewriting Institute. Accosting her at a street corner, he took her hand and thrust his letter.

'What's all this?' she protested in confusion.

'I'm dying,' he said with apparent passion. 'Read the prescription, and administer the medicine.'

Before she could utter a word, he drove away out of her sight. Though stunned at the development, she looked around instinctively. And finding none in the vicinity, she composed herself readily, and heaving a sigh of relief, she paced up to her home with her contemplation for company.

'What else is it, if not his love letter,' she thought in bewilderment. 'How dare he force the letter on me? What made him think that he could have his way with me? Did I give him any cause for hope? But obsessed as I'm with my Raja, how could I have coalesced with him? Well, it looks like there was a mix-up between my love for Raja and liking for Prasad in my interaction with the latter. Still, how could have I expected something like this from him? Oh, why didn't I fling his missive at his face? If only I had done that, wouldn't that have served him right? But it was not to be. What should I do with it now?'

6

Reaching home, Roopa pondered over Prasad's missive further, 'Why not I tear it and be done with it? But then, won't he assume that I've read it. Better I return it to him as is where is. Yes, that would give him a clear picture of how my mind is closed to him, having been locked by Raja's thoughts.'

Soon, having decided upon the mode of its disposal, she had hidden Prasad's missive behind the bookshelf, and tried to forget about it. However, as the incident haunted her no end, she tried to divert her mind, and to rid herself of the embarrassing trespass, she took a romantic ride on the thoroughfare of her heart.

'Had it been from my Raja, I might still be kissing the cover, unable to gather my wits to part my quivering lips from it,' she thought endearingly. 'Oh, while my eyes would have been kept in anxious waiting to read his outpouring, wouldn't have my heart missed its beat in anticipation.' However, as the reality of it all dawned on her, she thought melancholically, 'What a tragedy that the first love letter I've received should've caused fright instead.'

Fed by her anxiety, she had a meager meal, and as though to push the issue into her subconscious self, she settled for siesta. But as if to spare her subconsciousness from the dilemma, her consciousness kept sleep at bay keeping the issue alive in her mind.

‘What made him think I would take it?’ she contemplated in all humiliation. ‘And I did accept it, didn’t I? It was a cat and mouse between us all along, was it not? In a way, was I not enjoying it? Of course, he could be expected to strike at some point, wouldn’t he? Strike he did and what’s so surprising about it? Now that he has thrown down the gauntlet, won’t I have to ready myself for the battle?’

‘If not for anything else,’ she thought at length, ‘I need to read it to avert the threat he might be posing to undo me, so as to have idea about his attack to fashion my own strategy? Well, it makes sense to read his mind in his letter.’

So Roopa retrieved the letter from behind the bookshelf and began reading it with apprehension.

“Roopa, my hope,

I’m aware that my move would agitate you. But how am I to portray the thousand deaths I died wanting to avoid distressing you.

All these days, I’ve chosen to suffer silently without making you privy to my predicament. Then, it dawned on me that I owe it to you to let you know that a poor soul is bathing in the warmth of love that is inspired by you. That apart, do I have any right to deny my love its legitimate expression and how does that matter even if it’s unrequited?

On that fateful evening, when I’d first seen you, I felt as if the flood of love that spurted out of my heart would drown me to death. Unable to hold on my own, I ventured to seek your hand for support. Thus, as I was nearing you, I’d seen Sathyam coming to you with those ice-cream cones. Oh, how my heart froze, fearing that you’re married. But then, when I realized that you’re my friend’s wife, I rejoiced at his fortune, and chose to bury my love for you in the depths of my heart. Since I am not supposed to love you as woman and as I couldn’t live without loving you, I forced myself to adore you as a sister instead.

But, it didn’t take me long to realize that the brotherly affection is too limited to reflect the manly love I feel for you. Possessed as I am by carnal passion for you, my suffocation in the fraternal garb has been demeaning my soul ever since. Don’t I know that you too haven’t failed to notice the pain I experienced in those ungainly brotherly shoes? Now that you’re privy to my predicament, my only hope is that you would be sensitive to my sentiment. Why, am I not nursing the love you’ve given birth to? Aren’t you aware I love you as a woman and adore you as a person?

I believe that my sense of dignity demands of me to disclose my love to you. And what do I seek in return from you for my devotion to your person? I only beg for your

indulgence in letting me love you till my last breath. Since it's in your knowing now, how I see my love acquiring a new meaning. If only you let me love you, I'll feel rewarded no end for that. Were you to pity my wretched soul, I would feel vindicated as well? Either way, now I am at your mercy, and I know your nobility wouldn't belittle my love and betray my secret. But were you to give away my sentiment to any to make a mockery of it, my blood would be on your hands. And cursing your insensitivity, my restless soul would suffer eternally in heaven living like in hell.

Dying for your understanding,
 ever yours in devotion, I remain,
 Yours aspiringly,
 Prasad, the hopeful.

'Haven't I known that he's lusting for me,' thought Roopa, as though in hindsight. 'Isn't he trying to win my heart now by couching his lust with the sentiment of love?'

However, on second thoughts, as his passion for her seemed to reinforce her own draw, she wasn't displeased with his disclosure. Besides, the feeling of being loved by him seemed to please her vanity as well.

'Why, won't it feel nice to be loved, to be wanted,' she thought with a feeling of satisfaction. 'In a way, I too like him, don't I? But it's not the way for him to have his way. Oh, it must be really hard on him, the poor man. And don't I understand how miserable it could be for him? Can't I see his plight in the light of my own pain? But how can it be helped?'

'But, I can't be expected to soothe every man who craves for my body, could I?' she analyzed her predicament. 'Maybe, I should've welcomed him, if only I'm not myself in love. Seems misplaced love is wasteful for it serves no purpose, save massaging the ego of the one who is loved. Perhaps, it's another dirty trick of fate on my life - to keep the love I need hanging in the fire, and throwing in my lap the passion that doesn't help.'

Perceiving herself in the same boat with Prasad, she was overcome with pity for him. 'Am I not guilty in abetting his love with my flirtation, even though unwittingly?' she thought about her own contribution to his woes. 'Maybe, but how have I failed to notice his suffering, when he's supposed to be in such a turmoil. Is he not play-acting love to worm his way into my heart? Isn't it strange that the emotions of love and the afflictions of lust are look-alike, bewildering women from discerning the lover from a seducer and

unfortunately for them the language of love and the dialect of lust have a common alphabet causing this confusion.'

'Why not I test him to know his true character?' it occurred to her at length. 'If he were trying to pull a fast one on me, won't he get his just deserts then? But what if he were genuinely in love with me? But, that would only compound his misery without me rewarding him in the end. Won't that make it all so unfair to him? It is better he unfolds himself by and by. If his feelings are genuine, won't I let him taste the affection of my love on the platonic plane?'

'Why all that, why not I nip it in the bud, and be done with him,' she began to think. 'Then won't I need to take Sathyam into confidence for that? Besides embarrassing Prasad, that would hurt Sathyam as well. Moreover, who knows, both of them may put part of the blame on me, and shame me in the process. It's better that I handle him myself.'

'Given my own agenda, am I all that innocent?' it occurred to her in time. 'Am I not scheming to draw Raja into my life? For all that, I could have been flirting with Prasad as well. Anyway, I've to ease out Prasad without alerting Sathyam. Moreover, I must ensure that all this doesn't scandalize me with Raja. Won't he shun me forever should he get the wrong message? Oh, why didn't it occur to me all the while, what a risk I was running without my realizing it?'

It is the irony of woman's life in that she tends to tango her reflexes with the nuances of male proclivities. It is thus, woman's true feelings get camouflaged in her lullabies of compliance to let her man sink into the slumber of complacency.

7

'Is Roopa leading me up the garden path without so much as letting me hold her little finger?' Prasad thought in bewilderment that day. 'Why, it's two months since I wrote that letter with great expectations. Maybe she's coy, but of what avail is that? Well, she shows a little more interest in me than before, but where is the hint of her intent to grant? Is she a flirt for all that? How am I to know? Oh, women's god-damn coyness makes it difficult for men to probe their minds; it could be either a shield for their modesty or a shroud of their coquetry. But then, how can any man get to know what it is beforehand? Leaving all that aside, I would have the last laugh only in her conquest, that is all. Sure, I failed to seduce an odd dame on occasion, but didn't I come out unscathed for the loss of it. Now, as it looks, it's all so different with Roopa. In trying to seduce her, it's as if I'm getting seduced, isn't it?'

What a role reversal! It looks like that I might fall in love with her, that is, if I'm not in the thick of it already. Well, I should have her before she gets used to the status quo, shouldn't I?

'But what more could be done to lure her into bed?' he thought in exasperation. 'Why not I make a decisive pass at her, in a passionate way? But that won't help as she's bound to give me the boot. Instead, I should contrive to make her vulnerable to my amorous assaults. But how am I going to bring that about?'

So he took stock of the situation, 'Roopa has an orderly life with a mediocre husband in for constant company. Isn't that an infallible situation for a philanderer to pull off an amorous coup? I better destabilize her by hitting at her strength. Didn't Shakespeare say that women would fall when men are weak? Why doubt the master? Well, I'll try to weaken Sathyam to bring about her fall. Won't that open a new chapter in the art of seduction? But then, who knows, it could drag on into a volume as well. So be it, if that ensures her eventual fall. Well, even if her figure were to dent in time, won't she be worth possessing well past her prime. Oh, she could be still deadly even when she's left with no more than the remnants of her charms. And given her sex appeal, won't she be maddening in bed, at any time in her life? The long and short of Roopa is that she's an excellent short-term prospect and an enduring long-term asset, the endearing one, is she not?'

'What about Sathyam?' thought Prasad, looking for ways to bring about Roopa's fall? 'He's one of those colorless characters, without a conviction to name, and lo, the society labels such as good-natured! While their manner derives its means from the lack of exposure, their signature is not sourced in a strong character either. But it's these teetotalers that take the cake in our hypocritical society, don't they! How stupid is our society that it lives in the shadows of the old values of an ignorant past! Of course, it's another matter that these nice guys, when exposed to the niceties of life would end up chasing the goodies of the world. If only I could let Sathyam have a feel of the marketplace, won't that make him crave for the good things of life? And then, would it take long for him to lose his bearings. If only I could induce him to have a drink or two now, won't she find him swimming in ponds of liquor in time. But to start with, his drunken endurance as bonus won't Roopa the amorous, look the other way? That is as Sathyam embraces the Bacchus. And as his fondness for the drink increases, won't his ardency for her be a thing of the past. That's when he would be leaving her craving for an

extramarital fling, wouldn't he? Won't that be the time for me to get into his shoes to reach her sexless bed? After all, is there any surer way than that to lay her?'

'It's still better that I have a second string to my seductive bow, to be doubly sure,' he thought enthusiastically. 'Why, can't I try to wean away Sathyam from Roopa's charms? And with whorish support that is. Didn't the same master give his ruling that beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold? Who could seduce Sathyam better than the suave call-girls that abound these days? But Tara, the ace of the pack, is not quite the trump card in this deal. Taken by their seductive ways, won't Sathyam find Roopa a routine fare, and abstain from her altogether in time? Won't that make her think in terms of entrusting her fleshy wares to my amorous care? Does she care that's an illicit fare?'

'I must ensure that she won't get wind of my scheming ways,' he thought consciously as his excitement began to gallop, 'and, were she to spot the foul, she's bound to blow the whistle. Well, the idea is to give her my shoulder for her to cry over. In no way should she be able to see me with soiled hands and all. Well, don't I need a helping hand to carry out my plans? Of course, it shouldn't be difficult, as money these days would fetch hands for any errand. But then, who would foot the bill for all that?'

When Prasad had visualized the magnitude of the money needed for his grandiose project involving wine and women, his spirit was insensibly dampened.

'Will I be able to siphon off that kind of money without Rani knowing it?' he thought dispiritedly. 'And even if I could, it might turn out to be worse, if she gets wind of my spending spree. She might get it all wrong and curtail my freedom in the bargain. Is my plan then a non-starter, after all? Haven't I reached the dead end even before I have begun? Isn't there a way out?'

At that, as Prasad racked his brains for a solution, in time, he got a brainwave, as though to fashion her future, Roopa's destiny made a common cause with him.

'Why not enable Sathyam to take care of his needs all by himself?' he thought joyously, 'Of course, I can use my contacts to move him into the contracts section on promotion. And thereafter, the contractors would take care of the rest of it any way. At best, Sathyam might need a little bit of prodding from me and some pushing from some contractor. Well, that can be taken care of by me, to set the ball rolling. Haven't I myself brought many reluctant folks onto the convenient track of compromise? And once they get over their inhibitions, these scoundrels become past-masters at extortion, don't they? But then, they're inconveniently called corrupt by the left-outs, sour grapes. How the illicit side of

the behavioral pattern seems to be common for both sexes. Women too hesitate to step out of the threshold of fidelity, but once they cross it, they hit the fast track of debauchery, don't they?'

'Naive that he is, would Sathyam fall prey to all these?' he developed second thoughts. 'But don't I know that only a handful of men are incorruptible, either by nature or by conviction. Thus, leaving those oddballs, as with bed-hedgers among women, the bulk of them, watch which way the wind blows. When they see their colleagues and neighbors prosper through bribes, their jealousy makes them anticipate a tax raid. But when none of that happens, and if they happen to sit at the right desks in their offices, they too join the bandwagon. Doesn't that explain the ever-growing corruption in all societies? But the vast majority, without access to that extra pie, is the most vocal against corruption in society! Give them half a chance to line their pockets, and they're sure to quieten down like kitten. Any way, Sathyam won't have to complain any more.'

'But is all this trouble worth taking when I could get half a dozen randies for a song, that Vanaja included?' he was left wondering. 'If not for Roopa's distraction, was it not possible that I would have been carrying on with her by now? How disappointed she would be that she was only flattered to be deceived. Well, many a Vanaja like might come and go but isn't it worth covering the earth to lay Roopa. If things work out as they should, won't I have her soon?'

'But what if Sathyam gets wind of our affair?' he tried to foresee loopholes in his plan. 'What would he possibly do than become accommodative? That's what all cuckolds do, don't they? But then, what else can a decent man do when he comes to know that his wife has taken to a paramour. Well, divorce won't do as that deprives him of a home with the bed and all that goes with it. Substitution, though difficult, might ensure an encore, doubling the ridicule. Should he shop around for a younger one, wouldn't it be a matter of time before she follows the example set by the first one. On the other hand, if her were to settle for a middle aged, it might as well amount to inviting her lover into the marital fold. Anyway one might look at it; status quo would seem the better course for a cuckold to stay on course.'

'What if out of spite, Sathyam were to sue her for divorce,' he tried to visualize in the end. 'Won't I make her my mistress then? Why, am I not going back to Delhi by the year-end? Then won't my work bring me here often enough? Oh, how well, she, as my keep, would keep me in comfort in my home, away from home. Moreover, can't I fix her at the

office to keep an eye on the guys over there? What a loyal spy she would make. Whichever way it might turn out to be, all the same it should go easy on me. In fact, it would be better that Sathyam leaves her for my safekeeping. Isn't Roopa an eminently keepable woman? Well, she would learn what it's like flirting with me, sooner or later, one way or the other, wouldn't she?

8

That April evening, Roopa impatiently waited for Sathyam's return from the office. As though to keep irritation at bay, she was rereading Sandhya's letter delivered that day.

'When it's time for their coming, what do I get to hear from her,' she thought at length, folding her mate's missive. 'Isn't it about the postponement of her exams? Why not rename India as Postponeland? How something or the other comes in my way to Delhi. Come what may, I should go now to know where I stand on the ladder of Raja's love.'

Having realized that it was already ten, she felt worried and thought, 'What could have held him up? Why, the homebody that he is, he comes home straight, doesn't he? Is it possible that he's in some trouble? Or, is he gossiping with Prasad? Why don't I find out from Prasad? Anyway, let me wait for a while.'

When Sathyam didn't turn up even by eleven, she called Prasad, from a nearby P.C.O.

'Prasad here.'

'I'm Roopa.'

'My darling.'

'You shut up.'

'Oh, don't joke.'

'Is Sathyam there?'

'Has he gone missing or what?'

'Don't be silly,' she said, 'I was only checking up.'

'Okay, let's be serious,' he said. 'Can I check-in dear?'

'Don't bother, mister,' she hung up amidst his loud laughter.

'Some welcome development at last,' thought Prasad, still holding onto the receiver. 'Well, she would never ever get wind of my game plan.'

On her return however, finding Sathyam sitting drowsily on the staircase, Roopa said in vexation, 'I had to ring up Prasad for you.'

'I think it's time,' he said giving way to Roopa, 'I apply for a connection.'

As she opened the door morosely, he followed her drowsily. However once they went in, trying to take her into his arms, he said, 'I couldn't say no at the party. The leading contractor arranged it, after all. Now, isn't it your turn to say yes.'

'Oh, how you stink in your mouth,' she reproached him.

'How does that matter,' he said trying to grab her, 'as you're not given to kissing.'

'You should realize that I was scared to death,' she said pushing him away, still cut up with him.

'Though I'm sorry for you,' he said taking her hand all the same. 'I'm happy that you care for me.'

'And this is how you pay me back,' she said as she pulled her hand from him. 'Enough of it, let's have dinner.'

'I'm full any way,' he said fondling his belly. 'Let me serve you for a change.'

'Go have bath and I'll get you some buttermilk,' she said. 'It will make you a little steady at least.'

'Once in your arms,' he said winking at her, 'won't that be pole ready.'

'What happened to you!' she said a little surprised.

'Have a peg or two,' he said merrily. 'And see how you get lifted all ends up.'

As Roopa gave him a sharp look, pleased with himself, Sathyam slipped into the bathroom, but before Roopa could figure out what was happening to him, he came storming into the bedroom. Surprised at his gusto that night, she wondered, 'When a man on high has it so different for women, how come then that drinking became a taboo with them?'

'Oh, how nice it felt,' he said, as he got up at length.

'Don't make it a habit for that,' she said coyly. 'Why don't we go to Delhi now? Sandhya wrote again wanting us to make it soon.'

'You know it's not even a month since I took over the Section,' he said putting on airs. 'I can only think about it a little later.'

'It appears that we'll never make it at this rate,' she said. 'I better go on my own now.'

'Don't worry, we'll make it very soon,' he said cajoling her. 'If ever Raja Rao sets up shop here, I think I can be of help to him. You know, now I am getting to know some well placed people.'

However, as the idea of her mediocre husband helping her marvelous lover didn't appeal to her sensitivity, she thought, 'My Raja is too smart to need his help.'

She began to wonder at the new sense of confidence in her husband, 'Oh, what a difference a little recognition did make to his self-confidence! Why not? When a peg or more betters man in bed, won't a step or two up at the workplace, buttress the feel good of his?'

But in time, as he got hardened at drink, she found him a hard nut to crack in bed. This new feature in her marital life depressed Roopa as her husband's nocturnal abstinence made her daydream ever more passionately about her lover, the excitement of which brought her deprivation to the fore, making her craving to possess her Raja the mission of her obsessed life.

All the while heady with his newly found power, however, Sathyam had no thought for his wife's predicament. As if to add insult to injury, he thought it fit to bring the bottle home so as to give a face-lift to their middle-class home. Thus that late summer evening, he asked Prasad to feel at home over a bottle of Glenfiddich.

'You know it is Scotch, a present at that,' said Sathyam to Roopa. 'And Prasad would be here to celebrate.'

'Celebrate what?' she said in surprise.

'What else it is but my progress in life,' he said shrugging his shoulders.

At that before a nonplussed Roopa could respond to Sathyam, Prasad had stormed in.

'But why at home?' exclaimed Prasad as if to ingratiate himself with Roopa.

'Isn't it better than coming home dead drunk?' she said to Prasad's disappointment.

'How I wish you're more sensitive to her feelings,' Prasad admonished Sathyam as though to put a wedge between them, all by himself.

'I too wish she shares my excitement a little,' said Sathyam filling the glasses. 'I feel I was a mere file pusher earlier. Now I see the faces of those whose cases I handle. And it's quite satisfying that way.'

'I hear there's money to make over there,' said Prasad in undertone. 'I mean, under the table.'

As she happened to come with some roasted *papads* for them then, Roopa overheard him, and said, 'I warned him not to fall for all that. Set aside morals, who knows what might be the fallout of it?'

‘Sitting at home, it’s easy to sit in judgment over others,’ said Sathyam. ‘It’s not as if I’m dying for the bribe money. But what does she know about things as they stand in today’s world. Anyone in business would jack up his bid to take care of the folks. Even if I were to decline my share of the mark-up, still that won’t bring any discount to the table. It’s another matter though that project costs are overestimated everywhere, to accommodate one and all. The choice thus boils down to picking up your share of the loot or gaping at those pocketing it. Understand. Now tell me, by taking my cut, am I not just robbing the robbers.’

‘When it’s not your due,’ she said spiritedly, ‘why hanker for it, never mind the others.’

‘Isn’t coveting the part of being,’ said Prasad, imagining an innuendo.

‘It’s all about individual orientation towards the value system,’ said Roopa seemingly answering him.

‘Of what avail are the old world values any more,’ said Sathyam in exasperation. ‘Besides, who cares for them these days? Now, it’s the money that measures man’s worth. No one bothers how one comes to make the buck. What matters is how much moolah one has. One could choose values for company but prosperity seeks the pliable.’

‘So what,’ she said indignantly, ‘of what worth is money without virtue?’

‘Oh, don’t I know,’ said Prasad looking ardently at Roopa. ‘Without peace of mind, money is mere burden.’

‘That’s what all the moneyed say, while making more of it all the time,’ said Sathyam in irritation. ‘The only attribute of man is his wealth and you very well know about that.’

‘I won’t fault you for your feelings,’ said Prasad solicitously. ‘But it’s the sore foot that knows where the shoe pinches, does it not?’

‘Show me the currency,’ said Roopa thoughtfully, ‘that could be exchanged with happiness.’

‘How true,’ said Prasad ardently. ‘If there’s one, won’t my lot be a lot better.’

‘I’m sure you won’t part with a *paisa* ever more than needed,’ said Sathyam, serving himself another large. ‘That is, even for curing your ailment, whatever it is.’

‘Well, for a late starter,’ said Prasad playing up to Sathyam’s ego, ‘you seem to have covered a lot of ground.’

‘Capacities do differ, my boy,’ said Sathyam. ‘Well, I can stand on a bottle even.’

‘Because my sister is able to stand you,’ said Prasad. ‘What do you say, Roopa?’

‘If only I lose my patience,’ she said in half jest, ‘then you would know.’

By then, as he felt that it was wiser for him to leave the scene before he was forced to take sides, said Prasad joking, 'I had better left before that happens.'

When Prasad was all set to leave, Sathyam insisted that he stayed on for dinner. However, the guest excused himself to review the situation as he drove home.

'Oh how does one go astray when exposed to things that he was deprived of for years!' thought Prasad getting into his Benz, 'Sathyam is eyeing money as much as I ogle at his wife. Sure he won't let go an opportunity to grease his palms to the hilt. Left to himself, he might soon acquire the vice for making money, and could end up being a hoarder as well. And that might suit his progeny, if they ever arrive, but what of me. But wouldn't that jeopardize my plans of making it with her?'

'It's about time that I had activated the second string of my bow,' he resolved, answering his question all by himself. 'As Sathyam makes those extra bucks, I should enable him to part with some of them to the sex workers and as they give and take as well, are there any that deserve better than them. Besides, even if the last vestiges of hesitancy were to prevent him from going the whole hog at extortion, then the need to foot the bed bills and all would ensure a vice like grip on his corrupted psyche. Well, it's time that Sathyam got hooked onto the whores. All said and done, only the charms of the call-girls could wean him away from his wife, to make way for me as her paramour. And the craftier they are, the better it is for me, isn't it?'

'But then, is this gambit worth the gain?' he wondered at length. 'Wouldn't I have laid a couple of randies in their couches by now, that too with much less bother? Whatever, Sathyam is bound to have a time of his life, what with wine, women and all coming his way. If not for my obsession for his wife, he would have remained a frog in the marital well after all. It looks like it pays to have a smart wife, in more ways than one! That is because, I love Roopa as much as I could and crave for her more than I should.'

9

'What a fool I was, being a one-woman man all these years,' thought Sathyam, as he headed home in pouring rain that June night. 'Does it augur well that the monsoon too has set in today? Won't that portend women pouring in into my bed as it were? True, this Kantha cannot hold a candle to Roopa, but didn't she set the whole bed on fire, many times over. How promising it is that the pimp told me to expect better fare in future. Didn't he say his top drawer was empty by the time he had my requisition on hand. How

nicely he had put it, in his own pimpish manner. Isn't it time that I had my fill, having missed the fare all along? It would cost money for sure though it shouldn't be a problem managing the moolah. Well, if only I sit a little tight on their files, won't they cough up enough for me to maintain a harem? As Appa Rao has his guest-house all for me, can't I look forward to having horny rides on silken curves? That is for sure.'

'Having heard about the flesh trade all along, how I have failed to venture into it so far,' imagining what he might have missed all through lamented Sathyam. 'Well, in Kakinada, the Mirror House was just a stone's throw away from my place. Besides, all swear that the *bogamollu* of Peddapuram are apart, with the required skills to please, acquired from the past masters. Isn't a visit there overdue after all? Why don't I go there in August when the climate too would be cozy? And for home consumption, can't I give an official color to my absence?'

Thus whetted by the anticipated escapades, Sathyam made light of the accompanying impediments, 'What if Roopa gets wind of my doings? After all, she might cry in the beginning, only to quieten down in the end, won't she? Well, what else could she do, as it's the way with all women? Besides, what's her complaint about, she herself being half-hearted in bed? All said and done, don't I owe something to myself as well?'

All along, as his libido craved for sex, Sathyam was shy at courting women. However, with no need to be dashing with the whores and having found them willing on their own, he felt vindicated in the brothels he came to frequent. So, as he became closer to them, he moved away from his wife, and the more he felt comfortable with the Kanthas, his discomfort with Roopa increased even more. Of course, it had as much to do with the psyche of the sex workers as with the state of his mind.

Women in prostitution tend to perceive the male as the root cause of their fall. And the rudeness of those who frequent them further deepens their antipathy towards men. Besides, having lost their inhibitions through constant exposure, the whores become coarse to settle scores even with those they solicit. But with a considerate man, the innate woman in them comes alive, inducing them to shower themselves on him. It is thus they make such feel at home even in their brothels.

When, Roopa had reasons to suspect his philandering, she was more surprised than shocked. In time, however, as his brothel mania became a menace, she felt humiliated that he should prefer harlots to her. At length, having been disgusted with him, she thought of confronting him.

‘He would only confirm it, demeaning me all the more, wouldn’t he?’ she felt on second thoughts, ‘Maybe, it’s my fault for having driven him into alien arms. Oh, how I gave him a cold bed, in spite of his passion for me. Thus, having been uncaring all along, why am I so cut up with him now? Is it a case of wounded vanity then? No, it’s not so. But isn’t the very thought that he sleeps with all and sundry that’s bothersome. I’m simply unable to bring myself to take him. That’s all there’s to it.’

‘But what could I possibly do now?’ she began to deliberate coolly. ‘Well, precious little, so it seems. In one-way, it’s a welcome development, isn’t it? I needn’t feel guilty when I make it with Raja in the end. It’s as though the last vein of his moral rein on my heart got sapped. Haven’t I always seen love as the only justification for infidelity? And if required, even that qualification could be waived now for adultery. Why am I not a free bird now, though caged in marriage?’

Experiencing an indescribable relief at that thought, she felt that she couldn’t care less, but her philosophic indifference couldn’t come in handy in her daily regimen. Moreover, finding her situation humiliating, she continued to be confounded no end.

‘Hasn’t Prasad started pressing his suit further?’ Roopa reviewed her position that evening. ‘Why should not he? After all, finding me all alone, all the time, wouldn’t he have guessed that something is amiss in my life? Who knows, for all that Sathyam could have bragged about his lustful conquests. Whatever, aware that Sathyam is ignoring me; he could be licking his lips in anticipation, wouldn’t he? Why can’t he be hoping that I might as well warm up to him? Why, what’s my complaint against him? If not for his attentions, wouldn’t have Sathyam’s neglect been even more humiliating. Don’t I owe him on that count at least? Why not I let him have me? By that, won’t I be rewarding him for his perseverance while paying Sathyam back in the same coin? And as and when Sathyam discovers our liaison, won’t he get the taste of his own medicine?’

As though the crassness of the proposition didn’t appeal to her sensitivity, she reviewed her position all again, ‘But then, how does all that help me. All my longing for belonging would have no meaning if I were to bed with Prasad out of spite for Sathyam. Well, when it comes to Raja, it’s not any pique that drives me towards him, isn’t it? Why, having stirred my heart, hasn’t he earned the rights over my life, leave alone my body? Oh, I would give myself to him and him alone, body and soul. Next time around, won’t I gatecrash into his life; whatever that’s what I am going to do.’

In time, unmindful of the risk she ran on account of Prasad's fixation for her possession, Roopa went on daydreaming about Raja Rao.

10

On his way to Roopa's place that evening, Prasad began to review his position in the waiting game he was forced to play with her.

'Left to herself, she would let my passion remain in hibernation, wouldn't she?' he deliberated in desperation. 'Oh me, it's six months since I've been wooing her, and isn't that a record of failure for me? All the same, being coy to my attentions, she makes it appear as if it's only time, before she grants it to me. It seems she's retaining her option for a liaison without taking my tearing passion into account. It's as if she had put my lust in her mental loft, to retrieve it for use, just in case. But why so in spite of it all?'

'What is it that could be holding her up even now, after all that?' he racked his brains as he raced to her place, 'Of course, to start with, it could be the fear of desertion that is common to all women. But didn't I promise to make her my second wife, as and when she chooses to divorce Sathyam, it looks like her mental apathy lies in the fear of the unknown, which is common to all humans. But what is there for her to lose any more? Thanks to Sathyam's peccadilloes, isn't her married life in a shambles now? Perceiving herself a martyr, were it possible she's deriving some pleasure in her suffering?'

'Since the mental siege didn't help to break her resolve,' he concluded as he crossed the Secretariat, 'is not the physical ambush the only recourse left for me. After overwhelming her, I could use subtle force to pin her down to her bed. Won't my passion then ensure that she's subdued in her very vitals? Of course, that would help her explode on her own in time. What a rape by consent it makes, that too in her own den! It looks like there's no other way to gain her final favor. Why delay, let me have her right away.'

Buoyed by his resolve, he leaped up the steps, and as expected, he found Roopa alone in the sofa. As she got up to greet him when he neared her, he went down on his knees, as if in supplication. And before she could come to terms with herself, he enlaced her bottom with passion and buried his head there in hope. But as she tried to withdraw in panic, he tightened his grip with urge. While she turned dumb in fright, he declared his love with emotion, 'I'm dying for you. If you can't have me, kill me at least.'

'Oh, get up,' Roopa said confusedly, 'Tara would come.'

'I don't care,' he said, and buried his head back into her crotch.

'Don't be mad,' she pushed him with all her strength while pulling herself in consternation.

While he landed on all fours, Tara came out of the toilet.

'I'm sorry,' said an embarrassed Prasad repairing from his awkward posture.

'I better leave,' said Tara, herself overwhelmed at the development.

'Oh, no,' Roopa clasped Tara's hand in desperation, 'don't leave me now.'

'Why should I be the odd man out here,' he grinned, having meanwhile composed himself, and left.

'I hope,' said Roopa, still in shock, 'you haven't got it wrong.'

'It's your private affair, any way.'

'Believe me,' said Roopa pleading for Tara's understanding, 'there's nothing of that sort between us.'

'I believe you,' said Tara smiling mysteriously, 'but what comes later.'

'What do you mean?' said Roopa in all nervousness.

'Don't try to tell me that he just walked in and took you by your seat,' said Tara in all concern for Roopa. 'I'm sure he came for a fling on an invitation drafted by your flirting mind. Though he retreated for now, in time, he would be back to do your bidding. Take my word for that.'

'Oh, God,' Roopa nearly swooned into Tara's arms.

'It's time you know some home truths about us women,' said Tara making Roopa sit in the sofa. 'The radars of male eyes are sure to pick up the unmistakable signals emanating from unhappy women. In her married life, a woman is either satisfied or dissatisfied, that's all there is to it, and if someone persists with a married woman for some time, it's a sure sign of her own vacillation.'

'Maybe,' Roopa said, in spite of herself, 'you're right.'

'But every situation portends an opportunity as well,' said Tara with seeming conviction. 'The art of living lies in capping opportunities and not whining over problems. It's only a matter of time before you find yourself in the arms of a paramour, be it Prasad or some other. Either way, you better be prepared to be trapped in a man's seductive web sooner than later. Realize that the novelty of male sexuality manifests itself in the conquest of women. And it would ensure that someone is not going to rest until he beds with you. But when the novelty wears off, he's prone to cross over to fresher pastures, leaving you languishing for sexual love. Do you know what's going to be your likely response then? As

if to prove to yourself that your sex appeal hasn't lost its gloss, you'll take on another lover to sing the same praises of you.'

'I know nothing about all that,' said Roopa, beside herself, 'all I crave for is a soul mate.'

'Who doesn't despair for one,' said Tara affectionately, 'but there's no way of getting to know the man before giving in to him. And that means starting an affair, with all the associated risks, isn't it?'

'Isn't it the bane of being a woman then?' sighed Roopa.

'Can you alter the fact, having been born,' said Tara spiritedly. 'As you can't do that anyway, it's sensible to accept the handicap to start with. Man loves his time with woman more than her as a person. For all we know, females of the animal world are worse off for that. While the male would walk away, having had his fill, the female waits haplessly for the next mate for a like treatment. That's about the qualms of the male of the species. And it's the lot of the females to satiate the male, never mind her self-gratification.'

'Yet, all is not lost for us women,' continued Tara after having some water. 'Since cultures tend to underscore the male ego with the marker of virility, our grumbling on that score is sure to pull him down. Try dropping a hint or two that he's found wanting, and he's bound to submit to you in shame.'

'That's Tara's thesis of henpeckedness,' said Roopa laughing.

'It's no laughing matter though,' said Tara assuming a serious tone. 'Be it her man or her paramour, woman either remains vulnerable to him, to her hurt, or enslaves him, to her benefit. And it's for you to choose.'

'And end up being empty either way,' said Roopa sighing.

'Maybe,' said Tara, 'but still it is thrilling exploiting the exploiter.'

'Is there no mid-course for woman,' said Roopa, 'to go about her life without suffering from qualms?'

'It's the feature of nature that it didn't lay any mid-path on the earth,' said Tara to a baffled Roopa. 'While on the subject, it pays to know the proclivities of the sexes. Never count out a man as aged, since man never turns weary of woman's charms. It's stupid of woman not to realize, past her prime, she's no game for any man. Woman has a limited time for men to dote upon, and what a time they give us women in our time! If a woman chooses to remain a marital frog in her dried up well, she would wither away anyway. Even if a woman ventures out of her cold nuptial bed for warming up in her paramour's nest,

still she would gain nothing in the end. Well, having had his fill, it's only time before her favored man leaves her in the lurch. So it pays for a woman to barter her favors.'

'Isn't it an unethical outlook,' said Roopa, for once upset with Tara.

'Ethics, my foot,' Tara became animated. 'Don't we women have an innate weakness for successful men? If merit alone were to bring success in this world, that might still justify our preference. But don't you know the mettle of many of these successful men? What all it takes to succeed is a mediocre mind to serve the system and a slavish tongue to praise the powerful. Isn't it a sad commentary of our times that mediocrity is eulogized as dependability and buttering is sanctified as good PR?'

'How true,' said Roopa, 'but can anyone change that?'

'It's not the question of changing the world but of how to meaningfully live in it,' said Tara, as Roopa was all ears. 'It's high time that women realized that they run behind these mediocre minds, masquerading as successful men. As for their wealth, the less said the better, for it's mostly ill-gotten. As the social dice is loaded against the straightforward, it's seldom that you see an honest man prosper. Anyway, the righteous cut a sorry figure and we fancy them in no way.'

'But why this feminine weakness for the wealthy?' exclaimed Roopa.

'What can be done when we are made that way?' continued Tara, 'It's as well that these rouses hoard the gold, leaving us to live with the coppers. But if they eye our assets, why shower our favors on these with bladder egos, acquired on their shameless climb up on the social ladder? Ironically, it's to these pseudo successful that we give in, and won't that give away our poor IQ. That being the case, what's wrong if we put a price tag on our favors?'

'What's that but sex toll to get even with men,' said Roopa disquieted further. 'Is that your feminism?'

'What's wrong with that anyway?' said Tara not giving up. 'One needn't be an Amartya Sen to grasp that it's their black-money that skyrockets the real estate beyond our middle-class reach. Those positions, to which they butter their way through, might have gone to our men by merit, wouldn't they? And what gadgets they bestow upon their kids! Are we not forced to match those with our limited resources, lest our children should suffer from an inferiority complex? As the unscrupulous enrich themselves without a hitch, how is it immoral for us to filch them a bit, if they seek our favors?'

'Leave alone the merit or the lack of it,' said Roopa as though pleading for a review, 'I'm sure it's not your clarion call for woman's liberation.'

‘There’s a great deal that’s funny about advice, though the halfwits too feel they have a great deal of advice to offer,’ said Tara reminiscently. ‘But on occasion, a naive suggestion might turn out to be the shrewdest advice. Well, when my father died, we were penniless, and my mother had no clue as to how to arrange for my dowry. Then someone came up with the suggestion that I could use my body to raise my dowry. Though my mother cried foul, finding it sensible under the circumstances, I went along with it. As you can see, I haven’t lost a wee bit for that weird advice.’

‘It reminds me of that Shakespearean quote,’ said Roopa in apparent awe. ‘Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied, and vice sometimes by action dignified.’

‘It’s for you to decide what to do with your virtue under siege now,’ said Tara gravely.

‘Let me see what fate has in store for me,’ said Roopa melancholically.

‘But the irony is that others believe you’ve caved in already,’ said Tara to Roopa’s discomfiture, ‘Once, I overheard Lalitha’s sleazy remark that you could be barren, owing to the dilemma of your ovum, whether to let in Mr. Sperm X or Mr. Sperm Y.’

‘Oh, God,’ exclaimed Roopa in exasperation, ‘how people let their imagination run after absurd propositions! To tell you the truth, I’m in love, though not the fulfilled type.’

‘How I wish vice becomes virtue in your passion,’ said Tara, extending her hand to Roopa, ‘as and when it leads to possession.’

‘I can tell you that the one I’m eying,’ said Roopa dreamily, ‘has all the intellect for that.’

‘I always suspected that,’ said Tara affectionately, ‘and now I know the secret of your strength. But who’s that lucky guy, by the way?’

‘Can’t you guess?’ said Roopa joyously.

‘Maybe, yes,’ said Tara recalling the infatuation she herself felt for Raja Rao when they first met, ‘but won’t it sound sweeter hearing from the horse’s mouth.’

‘That’s for another day,’ said Roopa turning all the coy, ‘and thank you for saving the day for me.’

‘That too to the hurt of my client,’ said Tara with a smile.

‘Oh, really,’ said Roopa, taking Tara’s hand. ‘Don’t I owe you even more for that?’

‘Well, I won’t insist on having your lover for a client for compensation,’ said Tara winking at Roopa.

‘Thanks for that as well,’ said Roopa, all smiles.

‘Godspeed to your liaison,’ said Tara kissing Roopa’s cheek, ‘but take care meanwhile. I don’t know why, but I always liked you.’

'Now you've made me fall in love with you,' said Roopa hugging Tara.

'Why don't you preserve all your ardor for him,' said Tara affectionately. 'Good bye for now.'

The fact that she made Tara privy to her innermost feelings enabled Roopa feel as though she had shared the secret of her life with the world itself. The feeling that Tara could have rightly guessed the identity of the man of her dreams made Roopa even more ecstatic. It was in that state of mind Roopa bade good-bye to Tara at the wicket-gate.

11

As Tara walked down the road, Roopa found herself staring at her all the way. While taking a turn at the main road as Tara looked back, Roopa waved at her as if propelled by a sense of gratitude for that love-saving gesture of hers. Well after Tara went out of her sight, Roopa stayed put at the wicket-gate, reminiscing about the fascinating closeness that developed between them.

When Roopa was closing the wicket-gate, as Lalitha had opened the main door, recalling her sleazy comment, Roopa felt embarrassed in her presence and extricated from the tête-à-tête that Lalitha began. Once in, as if to fully grasp the import of the incident, Roopa sank in the sofa, and reliving the moment, she began to see Tara's character in a fresh light.

'Wasn't she in a position to abet Prasad's cause and then blackmail me into her calling,' thought Roopa in all admiration for Tara. 'What a noble woman Tara is, in spite of everything.'

And in contrast, as the brotherly mask worn by Prasad to hoodwink Sathyam to seduce her appeared ever more mean to her, she despaired, 'But in the man's world, Tara is a loose woman and Prasad a gentleman. That's the paradox of perceptions, isn't it?'

She tried to figure out Prasad's future moves to enable her to come up with appropriate responses, but as she failed to come up with a game plan, the postman came up with Sandhya's letter as though to show her the way.

All along, Roopa had hoped that on their way to Kakinada, Sandhya and Raja Rao would come to Hyderabad. That letter of Sandhya's helplessness conveyed that her father hijacked her when some work took him to Delhi the week before. The unexpected development depressed Roopa for it meant she wouldn't meet Raja Rao in the near future.

'Fate seems to be playing hide and seek with my love,' she thought at length. 'Now the least I can do is to go to his wife to hear her talk about him. Besides, that would keep me

away from Prasad's designs, if any. More so, I could consult Sandhya for a way out of this mess, couldn't I?

'Oh, how she got away! The slippery slut,' Prasad thought in irritation, as he recovered from the embarrassment. 'If not for Tara's unexpected presence, it should have been a different story to tell, well, instead of biting the dust myself, I should've made her eat the humble pie, wouldn't I have? Oh, if only I withdrew when she cautioned me. Wouldn't that have saved the embarrassment for both of us? Anyway, she would be damn cut up with me for having compromised her before Tara. Besides, haven't I lost my face as well? It is better that I lie low for now so that Roopa might feel pity for me in time. Why, isn't pity a surer way to a woman's heart than man's chivalry? What's the doubt about it? Well, I should wait for the right moment to strike it back.'

But how were he to know that soon Raja Rao's love would seal the oyster of Roopa's heart to his lust for ever.

Part - IV

That August afternoon, at the Premier Architects' office, holding Sandhya's letter, Raja Rao was immersed in Roopa's thoughts. 'How miserable she could be, the poor thing,' he sighed for the umpteenth time.

As though to get a measure of his beloved's misery all again, he read from his wife's letter once again. 'After a fortnight's stay here, Roopa left for Hyderabad this evening. Bogged down with her affairs all these days, I couldn't write to you. Roopa is distraught, to say the least. She says that Sathyam has gone astray, unbelievable though it is. And to add to her

misery, his friend Prasad has been pestering her for quite some time now. Now as I recall your reading of her situation, I am worried to death about what might lie in store for her. Though she feels she can handle her affairs on her own, I know she needs our support now more than ever. Any delay in our being near her might prove costly for all of us. Won't you ensure that we forthwith move over to Hyderabad?

As he read the letter once again as though to find a clue to Roopa's predicament, he became nervous, and felt something within him was about to snap. 'Oh, how I feared about all that coming true,' he thought in desperation. 'But why did I fail to act? Shouldn't I rush now and see if there's something left for me to salvage?'

Aboard the Indian Airlines flight that very evening, Raja Rao's thoughts hovered around what Roopa's present portends for his future.

'What I am rushing now for? Does she want me any more?' he began to crystallize his situation at length. 'Had I missed the bus or did that Prasad jump the queue? How does that matter had I lost her? Whatever it was, she would have given in to Prasad by now. Maybe, she couldn't bring herself to confide in Sandhya that she was in the thick of it with him. It appears that her part-confession was but a sounding-board to prepare her pal to her affair with him. Oh, why have I delayed declaring my love to her? How costly would that prove for me?'

As the thought of life without Roopa depressed him, even the attentions paid by the pretty air hostess failed to impress him. 'Am I destined to suffer in regret for letting her slip into Prasad's embrace?' he felt gloomy at the thought, 'If she's carrying on with Prasad, what sense does it make for me to shift over there now? Won't that be a suicidal move for me? What an irony it would be, had she transferred her affections to another, even as I'm on the verge putting in my papers for her! Anyway, the moment of truth seems to be on hand for me. Let me see what her life would reveal to me.'

When the plane landed at Begumpet, he left the airport with alacrity and with his heart in his mouth; he rushed to Roopa's place in a taxi.

Pacing up the steps, as he pressed the door buzzer, he felt as though his heart was short-circuited, and when Roopa opened the door tentatively, as her heart missed its beat at his sight, she was breathless. Unable to comprehend their respective positions, staring at each other, they stood rooted at the threshold.

'Won't you let me come in?' he said, at last.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ she gave him way, and bolted the door after him as though to secure him once and for all.

‘How do you do?’ he said looking at her longingly.

‘Pulling on,’ she mumbled, unable to come to terms with his unexpected arrival.

‘It’s been so long since we last met,’ he said as he sat down.

‘It’s over seven months,’ she sighed as she said, ‘and I thought you’d forgotten me.’

‘Why so?’ he said in protest.

‘You would know if only you’re a woman.’

‘Being a man,’ he said dejectedly, ‘it’s none the better for me.’

‘Don’t you think you should only blame yourself for that,’ she sounded critical in spite herself.

‘But why?’ he exclaimed in pain.

‘For having prefixed forgetfulness to your maleness.’

‘How can you say that?’ he protested haplessly.

‘Why, you didn’t come to see me as promised then, did you?’ she said as the bitterness his earlier failure to meet her overtook the sweetness, his presence occasioned.

‘You would never know,’ he said as his tone got the measure of his frustration, as he recalled his state of mind in which he had to leave for Bangalore that day, ‘how desperate I was to meet you then.’

‘Where there is a will,’ she said still smarting under the hurt of the perceived let down, ‘there is a way, isn’t there?’

‘Believe me Roopa, there was no way I could have come to see you. I had to catch the train on the move as it were,’ he said, and added after a pause. ‘I even thought of writing to you, but I couldn’t bring myself to do that.’

‘You should’ve written,’ she said in the same vein, ‘and that would have made so much difference to me.’

‘Roopa,’ he said with a pleading tone, ‘why don’t you understand me?’

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ she said as her love, aided by the presence of her lover, abetted her mind to overpower the bitterness it bore.

‘Let bygones be bygones,’

‘I felt like pouring out my pain to you,’ she said, ‘Go have your bath.’

‘I would rather wait for Sathyam,’ he said as he came out of the bathroom, finding her ready with dinner and all.

‘Why, do you want us to starve till he returns from his four-day tour or what?’ she said smiling. ‘Think of it, what a coincidence that he away when you first came with Sandhya!’

But then, how were she to know about Sathyam’s peccadilloes at Peddapuram on that supposedly official trip. Besides, at the threshold of the golden moment of her life, even if she were aware of it then, maybe, she couldn’t have cared less.

‘Oh, I see,’ he said tentatively. ‘I thought I could stay here for a couple of days.’

‘Why,’ she said smilingly, ‘do you think I would show you the door after dinner?’

‘I didn’t mean it that way,’ he said a little confounded.

‘But I mean to tell you everything,’ she said getting up from the dining chair. ‘Let me have my bath before that.’

‘Probably, it’s all over between us bar sighing,’ he thought pensively, sinking into a dining chair. ‘Hasn’t she said that my letter would have made so much difference to her? Oh, does that not imply that I have lost out to Prasad? Is it any consolation that I was her first choice? What if her current concern the courtesy of her past feelings? Or is her friendliness owing to my being Sandhya’s husband? What sense does the relocation to Hyderabad make for me? Won’t I feel miserable seeing her adoring someone else? What sort of a reward it would be for my unrequited love for her if Prasad turns up now. Won’t that embarrass us all, and what’s worse, my presence might lead to a misunderstanding between them. I better pack up after dinner for it’s not fair to spoil her party with her paramour. How stupid I am to lose a woman like her when she could have been mine for the asking!’

‘Isn’t it Godsend,’ thought Roopa in relief, making use of the soap he had used, even as she recalled the bath of fetish she had had with his soap during his first visit to her place. ‘Have I not been waiting for this day all my life? Oh, finally my destiny seems to have kept its date with him! I’ll make him mine even if it comes to raping him, won’t I? How we could indulge in lovemaking day and night for three days at a stretch. Well, without a care in the world. How fortuitous that he came at a time when Prasad too went on a foreign jaunt! Maybe, I can’t expect him to take the initiative, could I? It’s clear that his passion for me is kicking and alive though shrouded in hesitancy. If only I ignite his urge, won’t he engulf me with his ardor?’

‘Why not I wait till he advances,’ she thought having developed second thoughts about her own abashment. ‘Oh no, if I fail to lead him, won’t he take me to be a flirt and dismiss me forever? If I don’t let him have me now, I might as well forget about him in this life. Come what may, I shall grab this chance of a lifetime, now and here, with both hands at

that. Won't he keep me in his embrace as I lay there in coyness forever? Haven't I suffered enough to deserve the solace of his love? Have I any stomach left for misery, anymore?

When they sat for dinner, she served him silently as if the distraction of their conversation would hamper his eating. However, construing her contemplative mood as a proof of her embarrassment, he felt depressed at the tragedy of his own making.

When they rose from the table, sensing his predicament, she opened the gambit giving him *pan*, 'I'm glad you've come home this time, did Sandhya prevail upon you?'

'You know Sandhya is at Kakinada?' he said as her words rekindled his hope. 'I've come to see you.'

'I'm flattered really,' she said spreading her hands, 'and I welcome you ever more for that.'

'Tell me,' finding her gesture inviting, he played his move, to probe her position.

'About what?' she feigned ignorance.

'About you,' he said lovingly.

'Are you blind not to see it for yourself,' she said coyly.

'You look a little pulled down.'

'Didn't I tell you?' she said, 'I'm just pulling on.'

'Sandhya wrote to me,' he said hesitantly, 'that you're having a hard time.'

'Do you think Sathyam's neglect and Prasad's pestering could bother me really,' she said as though showing her cards. 'They are just allergies. But my ailment is different.'

'May I know,' he said sensing her mood, 'if it's not personal.'

'I always thought,' she said coyly, 'that you knew it well.'

'But then,' he said with rising hope, 'can one conclude from his own diagnosis.'

'Why not take a second opinion?' she said as if she were begging to be asked by him.

'Tell me then,' he said to reach out for the approaching moment.

'Didn't you hear my body language!' she said.

'But still..' he was at a loss how to respond.

'Maybe you need even more privacy to express yourself,' she said as she went into the bedroom in apparent invitation for him to cross the threshold

'Thank God, my fears seem to be liars,' he felt ecstatic. 'Is she not expecting me to break the ice and thaw it out? Why, hasn't she left enough hints already about that? After all her advances, does it make any sense for me to hold back now? Oh, in the entire path of love, the steps that lead up to sex are the most slippery, one false step and it could make man

slip out of woman's favor, forever. All the same, if he were not to venture, how could it ever result in an adventure? What else a lover could do than to enter into his beloved's orbit of familiarity? Then, won't she suck him into the arena of her favors? Where else one can find a better jaunt for that than the precincts of her bedroom?'

Even as Raja Rao began to stir in hope, leaving the door ajar, Roopa started shedding her sari. 'Why cover myself when he's coveting me,' she felt amused as she undressed languidly as if to allow him time to catch her in the act. When she became stark naked, she turned towards the door only to find it still ajar. Reaching her wardrobe then, she pulled the nylon lingerie that she earmarked for the occasion in all her anticipation and fondling it lovingly, she wore it leisurely. Soon she was in front of the mirror thinking amusedly, 'Won't it reveal my mind to him besides my body. It's time I find out.'

When Roopa was about to pull open the door, Raja Rao pushed it open for her.

'I love you,' he took her hand.

'I'm lovesick,' she said pressing against him, 'I need treatment.'

'Oh, how I've been dying for you,' he said, lifting her head and looking into her eyes with all his longing.

'I wonder how I didn't turn mad in my craving for you,' she said holding him deliriously.

'I felt wretched fearing I might have lost you,' he said tightening his hold on her.

'I was worried to death that I may not make it with you,' she said as she began to sob.

'Roopa, don't cry,' he said as he kissed her tears. 'Now I am yours forever.'

'Longing for this moment,' she said cuddling him, 'how I became an urchin of love.'

'I always felt your love in the pulsations of my heart,' he caressed her head even as she wetted his shoulder.

But when he felt her heavy, realizing that she had fainted, gliding her tenderly, he put her on her bed, and rushed for water.

'Are you okay, my darling?' he asked her, as she opened her eyes.

'Come on, feel for yourself,' she stretched her hands, inviting him into her embrace.

'I've always felt you are mine,' he rested his head on her ample breasts, turned heady by her heaving.

'You'll never know how I craved to be yours,' she said, running her fingers through his curly hair.

'Ever since we've met,' he said pushing his head into her enticing valley, 'I always felt my life would be half empty without you.'

'You know how scared I was about leading a loveless life,' she pressed him into her, further.

'I'll give you so much love that you can spare as much as you want to Sathyam,' he said enigmatically.

'I can never love him,' she said dismissively. 'Moreover, he doesn't need my love any more. Anyway, I could never think of loving anyone but you.'

'Roopa, you know I love you,' he said, 'but still it only a part of our life – yours as well as mine - and that is the reality of our life. If you are not happy in your home there is no way I can't be cool in my house. Of what avail is our love if it won't bring happiness to our lives. If not for his sake at least for our sake love your husband and make him happy so that we can be happier ourselves.'

She sat up electrified, and smothered him with kisses.

'Oh Raja,' she cried in ecstasy, 'I've always felt I loved the right man, but now I know that I've a noble soul for a lover. I promise you dear that for your sake I shall love him as much as I possibly could.'

'I'm glad really,' he kissed her hand.

'I love you,' she cried, rubbing her face against his, 'more than I love my self.'

'Roopa, I can never picture my pleasure in loving you,' he said gripping her all the more, 'and the pain I felt wanting you.'

'I'll give you every joy that a woman could give her man,' she said, reaching for his lips.

'You would find me more than reciprocating,' he said, after a kiss that both felt had lasted a lifetime,

While he was fondling her adoringly, suddenly, she jumped up onto the bed, and as she dropped her lingerie languidly, he watched her mesmerically.

'Oh, how your gaze makes me feel nude in your presence as well as in my thoughts!' she cried in ecstasy. 'I had fantasized about our lovemaking so much that I don't feel shy any more.'

'I'd never imagined,' he said sizing her up in nude, 'that a five meter sari could have hidden so much of a beauty! What a fabulous figure you have, my darling!'

'I dreamt a thousand dreams in which every inch of me gave you joy,' she said ecstatically, as he kneeled up to her in embrace.

'What a beautiful bush,' he said, caressing her in ecstasy.

'It's on fire to warm my dear,' she said joyously.
 'Oh, what a scent,' he said euphoniously.
 'You may find it's tasty too,' she said coyly, ruffling his hair.
 'Why, haven't you been told?' he said raising his head.
 'Orals I've reserved for our lovemaking,' she said pressing him to her declivity all again.
 'What a honeycomb it is!' he said in delight.
 'Drain it to the dregs,' she cried rapturously.
 'What a love it is Roopa,' he said to her at length.
 'It's all about my life darling,' she said pressing his head into her once again.
 'You're my wife no less,' he sputtered.
 'Hubby dear husband your ardor,' she said pulling him away.
 'What amorousness,' he said ecstatically as she herself fell on him libidiously.
 'Let me have my mouthful too,' she took him greedily.
 'Oh, how all my fantasies pale before how your fare!' he said dreamily.
 'Haven't I worn my mouth by half for that,' she muttered, 'oh, how I practiced with the dummies for this day?'
 'You know how to love a man,' he said affectionately, caressing her back.
 'Courtesy your manliness,' she said, reaching for his hairy chest.
 'Roopa how fortunate we both are,' he said caressing her back.
 'But Raja,' she said, unable to get over her bitterness of her past suffering, 'how wretched it was till now.'
 'Won't we make it all the sweeter for that,' he said reaching up to her lips.
 As though to draw the nectar of love to sustain her nascent life, grabbing his eager lips with her throbbing ones, she deep-kissed him
 'I'll ensure,' he said as she freed his lips, 'you're fulfilled forever.'
 'Know that I've only lived wanting to be yours,' she said kissing his hand.
 'I've never seen any so sumptuous,' he said, fondling her breasts. 'How they've been haunting me ever since I saw you last June.'
 'How my hands ached squeezing them for you,' she joined him in the act.
 'Don't I owe it to them then,' he kissed her palms.
 'Take it,' she pushed her breast into his eager mouth.
 'Splendid,' he sputtered.
 'Bite,' she crooned in his ear.

‘Maddening,’ he said, as he took the other one.

‘Pocking,’ she crooned, licking his ear.

‘Roopa,’ he said in ecstasy.

‘Make me yours,’ she said in want.

‘Have me then,’ he said with urge.

‘Inaugurate,’ she said, as she pushed up her bottom to him.

‘What a seat to take!’ he knelt behind her in ecstasy.

‘It’s nuptial for it,’ she helped him penetrate her.

‘How it came true!’ he cried in joy.

‘Oh, lovely!’ she moaned in pain.

‘Never better,’ he cried with pleasure

‘Go to the roots,’ she said, pushing herself all the closer to him.

‘Oh, you’re mine,’ he said joyously.

‘Give me more,’ she said greedily.

‘Roopa,’ he moaned at length.

‘Oh, you’ve injected life into me,’ she cried in relief

‘Oh, God how good,’ he said laying motionless on her.

‘I don’t mind dying now,’ she clasped him as they came to rest.

‘Oh, what a life!’ he crooned into her ears.

‘Just king size,’ she exclaimed. ‘How I wish Sandhya sees us mate.’

‘How my queen mates think about each other even as they mate their men!’ he said, patting her feelingly, and narrated to Roopa’s joyous ears as to how Sandhya never ceased thinking about her all through their honeymoon.

‘Lesbian like, isn’t it?’ she said mirthfully.

‘Or even more,’ he said admiringly. ‘Well, keep it up.’

She got up to switch on the geyser and when she returned, they went about scanning each other, admiring the charms of their frames that occasioned their emotional integration. In their bath that followed, he soaped her breasts admiringly, and said, ‘What a size!’

‘Why, the cup hasn’t changed since,’ she teased him, as she pointed at the clothesline

‘What a romantic spy you are,’ he said smiling, squeezing them both.

‘If only you had me then!’ she sighed, resting on him.

'I thought for long but gave up in the end,' he said, and explained what all he had contemplated then.

'Raja, why didn't you grab me then?' she cried in his embrace. 'Unsure of your love, oh, what suffering it was? All through, I was torn apart by the hope of love and the despair of passion. But as if to compound the miseries of my life and the dilemmas of my love, came in Prasad to push me into a liaison. Even as I was attracted to him, being in love with you, I felt ashamed of myself, and the more I was flattered by his attentions, the more I suffered in guilt. But as he began to charm me with his passion, in despair, I clung on to my love for you. Well, I always wanted to give myself heart and soul to you, and you alone. How I used to wish every night that you would come storming into my life.'

'Roopa, forget about all that,' he kissed her to assure her, 'I'll ensure you have no cause for worry any more.'

'Though I shudder to think about the past now,' she buried herself into his chest. 'The pain I've had has made this pleasure even more intense. Don't ever leave me darling. Now I'll die without you.'

'Can I imagine my life without you,' he said, lifting her head. 'You'll be in my arms till I breathe my last.'

'I'll live by your promise,' she said taking his hand.

'Hold your breath,' he said fondling her hand. 'I'm going to shift here soon.'

Like a child in disbelief, she asked him to repeat himself and sank back into his embrace seeking solace.

'Listen,' he crooned into her ear, as if cajole her subconsciousness, 'I'll be here soon, never to part again.'

'Oh, I may die of happiness,' she hugged him tightly, and said coyly, 'When is that?'

'Next month itself,' he whispered, as if it were a secret for her ears only.

'That means' she said, cupping him at the source of her joy, 'the Don would be on double duty.'

'Won't it be doubly blessed then? What a rare fortune?' he said joyously.

'What if Sandhya comes to know?' she said worried.

'Doesn't she love us enough to rejoice at our love,' he said dreamily.

'Then, why not put her into the loop straightaway?' she said looking at him expectantly.

'Wait for a while for it's no good jolting her now,' he said contemplatively.

'Do you feel guilty since you love her?' she asked in apprehension.

'I always knew that I wanted both of you,' he said with conviction. 'What about you?'

'I want to be a share-farmer and not a prick-robber,' she said thoughtfully. 'That's how I've always placed myself in our love triangle, as anyway, Sathyam never meant much for me. Now that you've come up with that unique proposition, I shall reorient my affection for him.'

'I'll look forward to it,' he said taking her hand.

'I can feel that,' she said overwhelmed with admiration for him.

'Now let's put your worries behind us,' he said raising her hand, 'and prepare us for three cheers.'

'Why not,' she said, as they toweled each other, 'I will prepare some coffee for us.'

'If it's in your birthday suit,' he said winking at her.

'Why that way?' she asked coyly.

'I would like to watch your tan vie with the coffee steam.'

'How I love seeing our skins merging on the canvas of brown,' she winked at him.

Soon they were back in bed after romancing in the kitchen for long.

'Roopa, this is as flat as a slate,' he said caressing her belly, having rested his head on her thighs. 'Let me scribble the poetry of our love here.'

'Raja,' she said in delight, 'how you make me feel a special woman!'

'You're the one, and the only one,' he said in all admiration, as he turned his forefinger into a slate-pencil to scribble - goddess of sex.

'Why it never occurred to me that it's fine being barren to keep my figure tight for your delight,' she gloated.

'I would love to father your child,' he said, looking into her eyes. 'Won't you have it darling?'

'How I would have loved to mother your child,' she said, disappointed herself. 'But I feel it won't be fair to Sathyam.'

'I value your sensitivity,' he said, as his face lighted. 'I'm proud to be your lover.'

'But having longed for each other for so long now,' she said on second thoughts, 'tonight is an exception to everything. If you catch my egg on the sly, I'll look the other way, but from tomorrow its all condoms.'

'I have the full measure of your love now,' he said kissing her in ecstasy.

'Take a shot and get it right,' she spread herself, as though to keep her word.

'I'm sure,' he said as he engaged her, 'I would be disappointed if I fail to father your child.'

'In a way,' said Roopa, 'I'm caught in a cleft as you know.'

'Anyway,' he said, 'let that not bother us.'

'It looks like life draws the limits even for its own fulfillment,' she said.

'Perhaps,' he said seemingly reconciled to the limitations of their love life, 'it makes sense to live within those limits.'

When he said, yawning, 'I think it's time we rest.'

'Mate,' she said going all over him, 'let's make it once more to match the date on which we met.'

Before exhaustion pushed them into a fulfilled sleep, that night, the light was on until it was about to dawn. It's a unique feature of life in that, a fulfilling moment, while surmounting a mountain of miseries, obliterates the nightmares of the past.

2

The next morning Roopa woke up at nine as if from a dream, and found Raja Rao still asleep, looking at him fondly, 'Oh, wasn't it better than all my dreams put together!' she thought ecstatically. Impulsively as she touched him as if to confirm that her fulfillment was in the realms of possibility, for once, as the softness of her touch failed to excite him in his slumber, he continued to sleep like a log.

'Oh, what a night it has been!' she thought, withdrawing her hand though without taking her eyes off him. 'Didn't I know that it would be marvelous with him? What a lover to have. Can't he be the one in a billion or maybe even in a trillion? Wasn't all that longing worth for this sense of belonging? It's as if he had pushed out all my frustration with his very first thrust itself! Haven't I experienced the feeling of lovemaking in his passion? Oh, how fulfilling it feels! What a joy being a woman! I wish to be a woman in every birth if only for being his woman. Well, but for Sandhya, I wouldn't have met him at all.'

'Don't I owe Sandhya in other ways too,' she fondly recalled about her friend, looking at their man. 'Why, some associations bring in happiness, and some, nothing but misery! Well, to start with, how I hesitated to befriend her! Can I imagine life without her now! Won't he cement that bond even more? But how would Sandhya take to our affair? Won't she feel betrayed at my seducing her man? One cold look from her, and won't I die of shame then and there. Why, she knows how I've been suffering for want of love, doesn't she? What if I

beg her for his love? Won't she push me into his arms without second thoughts? Then, as I cuddle in his embrace, won't she as well caress me for my comfort?'

'Until the other day, all I craved was for a corner in his heart, and no more,' she thought amusedly. 'But now, am I not yearning for orgies with him and his wife. That's what human nature is all about, isn't it? The more one gets, all the more one wants, doesn't one? Strange that my life is, who knows, that too might come true. Why, won't he like to bring that about himself? Surely he would love to see his women crawling all over him and on each other as well. Oh God, how maddening it is to imagine it even. How lucky I'm that I didn't give in to Prasad to spite Sathyam. I could have revenged myself on Sathyam all right, but how could all this bliss have been mine. Oh, negative emotions could aid to avenge, but it's the positive feelings that end in fulfillment, don't they?'

'Won't you get up my love?' she crooned in his ears, as he stirred.

'What's the time like, darling?' he asked drowsily.

'It's well past nine,' she caressed his back, as he laid his head in her lap. 'What about some bed-coffee.'

'What a time we had Roopa!' he said, enlacing her waist. 'Oh, it's like a dream come true, isn't it?'

'Now, I'm unable even to recollect my yesterday's suffering,' she whispered into his ears, as if to keep her feelings out of the earshot of her past. 'How well you've wiped out my past with your magic wand!'

'Promise you won't desert me,' he said earnestly. 'Having got you, I would die if I were to lose you. How greedy you made me to devour your love! How I love to savor life with Sandhya and you.'

'After all that waiting, do you think I'm mad to spoil my party?' she said in all fulfillments. 'I would be your Roopa Rao for the rest of my life. How our names match to make music!'

'Oh, to the tune of our love,' he pressed his self closer to her, 'to enthrall our life.'

Having gone into the kitchen thereafter, she woke up to the surroundings, 'Oh God, Yamma could have come and gone, having got no response!' she began to think. 'Maybe, there was a load shedding before I got up. Or used as they were to our love-talk, her door knocks could have fallen on our deaf ears. But what would she infer finding him here tomorrow? I'll tell her not to turn up for the next three days. But how am I to keep away Lalitha from peeping in? Well, I couldn't care less about her. But isn't discretion better part

of valor? On and off, I should go to her myself to ensure that she wouldn't come up calling on me. With that trespasser of a Prasad gone abroad, it would only leave Tara among the likely callers. Of course, it shouldn't bother me even if she gets the scent of it. If anything, it's welcome if she comes to know of it, isn't it? After all, won't it feel nice if someone knows that I'm loved? Why not announce the arrival of my man to her?'

'I was wondering,' she said, serving him some coffee, 'how we can carry on in the long run.'

'Why worry, trust our passion for that,' he said nonchalantly, '

'How can we meet without getting noticed?'

'Don't I need a Personal Secretary,' he said winking at her. 'Shall I say more?'

'Well, it won't work,' she said in disappointment. 'Sathyam won't like my working.'

'Won't Sandhya bring him around?' he said taking her hand.

'Oh you my little schemer,' she said in all admiration.

'Why not we eat out,' he proposed, 'and make it to a matinee too.'

'How sexy,' she said excitedly. 'We do owe ourselves a party.'

'Won't I deserve to show my fortune to the world,' he smiled taking her into his arms.

'What a man you are,' she said joyously. 'How you excite me with your looks, touch and talk.'

'What with your smell, skin and seat,' he said pinching her bottom, 'you're XXXX randy.'

'Do you drink?' she asked him.

'Yes, a peg or two at times.'

When they had their bath together, she opened her wardrobe to him, and said coyly, 'Why don't you choose for me?'

'You fascinate in any sari,' he said, picking up light brown chiffon, 'but ravish in brown and grey.'

'Why our tastes match,' she said taking the sari from him, 'and minds as well.'

'To fuse in our loving hearts,' he said enlacing her

'By the fortuitous hand of Sandhya's angelic soul,' she said smug in his embrace.

'Oh, you said it darling,' he said looking at her lovingly.

While mesmerically watching her wearing the sari, he said, 'What reciprocity between your body and your sari! Can't I see it gracing your persona while acquiring an alluring shape for itself? Oh, how you are bodily fashioned for lovemaking! To think that you're mine is gratifying really.'

‘How your passion solaces my soul?’ she embraced him.

‘Though your hair is fabulous in its plait,’ he said coiling her hair. ‘I feel you turn a charmer in chignon.’

‘Don’t I look an aunty?’ she said aiding him nonetheless, ‘but I’ll be what you want me to be.’

‘With your nape too showing its teeth now,’ he said kissing her bare back that her blouse exposed, ‘you’re all the more deadly. Oh, how fascinating you are, my darling!’

‘Then, from now on,’ she said kissing him, ‘this is the hairdo of Roopa Rao.’

‘There’s no way I can describe the spell of your charm,’ he laced her ardently.

‘Can’t I discern that from your visage,’ she said coyly.

‘Won’t a chain of pearls glisten on you velvet skin,’ he said endearingly, ‘that’s what I always felt.’

‘What in your eyes would glamorize Sandhya even more?’ she asked him.

‘Can’t you imagine corals on her rosy bosom?’ he said dreamily. ‘It would be the day when I can adorn you together.’

‘Well, the measure of a lover lies in his ability to envision the nuances of his woman,’ she said in all admiration, ‘and how you measure up to be a lover of lovers. I’m sure Sandhya too would love that day when you have us both.’

‘You know how to flatter your man,’ he patted her, obviously pleased with her outpouring.

‘Let me see if Lalitha is around,’ she said, as they were ready to leave. ‘At my signal, lock the door and come down.’

‘What an irony of a honeymoon it is for us,’ she said, as he joined her on the main road. ‘We’re both one in bed but can’t make a couple in the lane.’

‘Confined to its sheath the cutting edge of love remains ever so sharp’ he said taking her hand, ‘maybe that’s the charm of liaisons.’

‘Could be,’ she said pressing his hand, ‘but I’d love to be known to the world as your woman.’

‘Let’s not be too greedy,’ he said cajolingly. ‘Why uproot Sathyam’s life? Do remember your promise.’

‘Sorry, I was carried away,’ she said apologetically. ‘I shall keep my word, and love you ever more for that.’

When they sat at a table for two at Blue Fox, she said, 'How I wish it were for the three of us. Oh, you don't know how I love Sandhya.'

'You can't make me jealous on that count,' he said in smile, 'can you?'

'Why should you?' she said winking at him, 'isn't our love all yours?'

'How she has become a part of me,' he said reminiscently, 'her confinement is telling upon me.'

'Can't I understand,' she said taking his hand. 'Are you going to tell her about our meeting?'

'Let's mention it in the passing,' he said as he started footsie, 'to both of them that is.'

'I thought as much when you got into your *chappals*,' she said enjoying the sensual pulsations his touch had induced in her.

'Had you modeled Marlene Dietrich's legs would have been cut down to size,' he said in all admiration.

'I'm glad I've got a leg man for my lover,' she said joyously.

'Now, I'll give you some legwork,' he said, as he took his leg up above her calf. 'Find out an office space that caters to the needs of our passion and a flat that meets the taste of your friend. You know it saves the bother if you find them both near your house.'

'With pleasure,' she winked at him.

Having had a sumptuous meal, they hired an auto-rickshaw to go to Deepak for the matinee show. However, seeing some sari shops on the way, Raja Rao asked the driver to stop nearby.

'Come, let's get a sari for you,' he got down.

'Why now,' she said hesitantly. 'We can get it some other time.'

'Isn't time the essence of life,' he pulled her out of the auto. 'Why waste any more of it now?'

As both of them were scanning the sari in those rows of shelves, she picked up a brown Venkatagiri and began feeling it on her self.

'Won't it go well with me?' she said at length.

'And this as well,' he handed her a grey Pochampally.

'I'll have that then,' she dropped the Venkatagiri.

'You have them both,' he said.

'If only you promise,' she said to him in undertone, 'that you would have both Sandhya and me together.'

‘Would I love that any less?’ he murmured in her ears.

After she had selected matching blouse pieces for those saris they came out of the shop.

‘How else I can thank you twice,’ she said coyly, as they walked towards the auto-rickshaw, kept in wait for them, ‘than by wearing them both together?’

‘To tell you the truth, you look the best with none on you,’ he whispered into her joyous ears.

‘And to reveal my mind,’ she said turning coy, ‘you’re alike handsome, within and without your jeans.’

‘Oh, thank you,’ he said, as she got into the auto declared, ‘I’ll join you in a minute.’

‘What’s that?’ she asked him when he returned with a packet.

‘It’s personal,’ he winked at her.

‘Is that so?’ she said reaching for it.

‘I feel so,’ he smiled holding it back.

‘Then let’s go home,’ she said feigning anger, ‘to lock it in your suitcase.’

‘Anything to do with you,’ he said, cajoling her, ‘is personal to me, isn’t it?’

‘Well?’ she said looking the other way.

‘Some colorful thirty-sixes for you,’ he crooned into her ears.

‘Good memory,’ she smiled, thrilled to the core.

‘Haunting one,’ he whispered, ‘of our spheres of love.’

While she rested her head on his shoulder, as though made heady by his love, the auto took them to Deepak Theatre. But by the time they got into cinema hall, the matinee was already under way. And no sooner they settled in their seats than their legs sought partners for footsie. By the interval time however, while their legs got weary, their souls craved for fusion. So, as their looks conveyed longing, their legs signaled exit.

‘Pick up a few of those,’ she whispered as they came out of the theatre.

‘How many?’ he said heartily.

‘As many as you could wet,’ she said coyly.

While she waited at the exit, as he went out on her errand, and soon, as she saw him returning with a Vanilla large picked up at the nearby Kwaliti, she guessed his intentions and followed his coming in all eagerness.

‘Are you fond of ice cream?’ she said all the same, feeling his pocket.

‘It’s for you to blow hot and cold,’ he whispered leaning onto her.

‘What an imagination,’ she ruffled his hair in admiration.

'It's all your inspiration,' he squeezed her waist.

Soon they reached Domalaguda by an auto-rickshaw, and as though to shed part of her fear, she asked the driver to take them right up to the street corner.

'I'm sorry, but you have to come behind me,' she said as she went ahead of him.

'Why, isn't there the precedent set by you last night?' he said making her shy, '

When she gave him the green signal, propelled by his passion, he increased his pace to reach her place. Then, closing the door behind, he overwhelmed her in no time.

'Oh Roopa, in spite of her love,' he said, as they lay satiated in each others arms, 'life without you would have been empty, How lucky we could make it.'

'Give me the credit for enticing you in the end,' she said in a fulfilled tone. 'I can't tell you how desperate I was for your fill.'

'That's why, I owe you even more,' he clasped her hand.

'Raja,' she said, kissing his chest, 'the more you explore my body, even more I'm coming to know about my soul. I never knew love would mean so much in spite of my craving for you.'

'Even if I spend a lifetime on your frame, full time,' he said, fondling her, 'I'm sure it would still have nuances left to thrill my senses.'

Soon they had their nap as though to refresh themselves for the time ahead and as they woke up she said, 'I'll make some coffee for us.'

'Make it a little hotter,' he said winking at her, 'for better effect.'

'Why not,' she winked back at him, as she went into the kitchen.

'See how it differs from those ice-cream jerks,' he said even as she returned with two cups of steaming coffee for them.

'With you I'm a game for anything,' she said enthusiastically.

'Oh,' he shrieked in time, 'you are a marvelous woman.'

'For the marvel of a man,' she sputtered.

'I wonder whether the latex would lacerate for you're so hot here,' she said, condoming him at length.

'Oh! Roopa what a dame are you?'

'I'll let you know now,' she said, as she mounted.

'Oh, my bitch,' he cried in ecstasy.

'Abuse me even more,' she moaned in joy. 'I love it from you.'

'What a randy for me,' he said, as he took his turn in their lovemaking.

‘What a bully to boot,’ she said, satiated at length.

‘Roopa, I’m coming to see the commonality between sex and sport,’ he said resting on her belly in fulfillment. ‘Basics being the same, it’s the players who raise the bar.’

‘Oh, how true,’ she said caressing his chest.

When they bathed together in the evening, wanting to have him there too, she made him want her even more, and after bath as she started wearing the new Pochampally, he ogled at her, as if she were new to him.

‘I’m sorry that you’re caged here,’ she said apologetically.

‘Why feel bad as its Cupid’s own nest,’ he said taking her into his arms. ‘What a sexy captivity it is.’

When she got into the kitchen to prepare dinner for them, he offered to help her in the kitchen chores.

‘Why get tired here,’ she took away the kitchen knife from him, ‘when you’ve got to exert elsewhere.’

‘Will this do?’ he said in smile, as he squatted on the floor, leaning to the wall.

‘That’s fine,’ she said, assuming the posture of a monitor with a ladle for the stick. ‘But don’t dare stir out from there.’

‘If you don’t mind,’ he said hesitantly, ‘tell me what went wrong with you and Sathyam.’

‘Won’t I make my life an open book for you,’ she said. ‘But why spoil our party with my problems.’

‘Didn’t I tell you I want you to be happily wed-locked,’ he said concernedly. ‘Let’s see if we can improve things between you and him as well.’

‘I’m happy you care,’ as she said, she went up to him to kiss.

While she prepared their meal, she narrated her life and times, and said in the end, ‘I’ve only to blame myself, for I never made him feel wanted.’

‘I’m sure,’ he said, caressing her affectionately, ‘on his return; he would come across a different wife.’

‘To be honest with you, I could never love him the way I dreamt of loving the male,’ she said, cuddling herself in his embrace. ‘I shouldn’t have married him at all. That was the blunder of my life. It’s in a void that I lived till you swept me off my feet on that fateful 6th of June. Having got you after all that craving, I should have cared two hoots for him. But as you’ve opened my eyes to the real meaning of our love life, I shall open my heart to him as well. Now, I’m full of hope as your love has given me zest for life.’

‘I would love to see,’ he said reaching for her lips, ‘that day dawning soon in his life.’

‘Raja, I’m really proud of you,’ she said hugging him tightly as he released her lips. ‘I’ll bring that about, if only to prove the power of our love. I thought about what you’ve said and realized that it makes sense. As you’ve pictured the sentimental aspects so clearly, I could see the practical utility of it all. After all, adultery could be a double jeopardy for women, as liaisons wouldn’t address the marital irritants that push women into alien arms. To make it worse for women, affairs induce a feeling of guilt in them, pricking their conscience all the time. So, while still having to endure that which made them adulterous, women in liaison find themselves carrying the cross of infidelity as well. Besides, in time, the fear of exposure, imparts dullness to their sense of excitement, and that robs them of the thrills on the frills. When in the end, the inevitable desertion is on hand; won’t women wonder about the futility of it all? And it looks like your idea could be a *via media*. Oh, how I feel enslaved by your intellectual love.’

‘I’m proud of you Roopa,’ he kissed her ardently. ‘How nicely you’ve analyzed it all. I couldn’t delve that deep anyway.’

‘With all that rubbing we’ve been having,’ she said joyously, ‘a little of your intellect could have seeped into me.’

‘Add that to your charms and love, won’t you enslave me,’ he said in admiration, and added in jest. ‘But do spare me for I’ve to serve her as well.’

‘Don’t worry, by lending my helping hand, I’ll help you serve her better,’ she said as she winked at him, and thought, ‘How unique my life is! Isn’t it thrilling to have a man and his wife for lovers without the other being in the know? Oh, how exciting it is, being in the eye of the love storm.’

‘Let me see your course material,’ he said, as they came out of the kitchen in the end.

‘I know from your letters to Sandhya that your pen carries the beauty of your hand,’ he said, as she showed him her notes eagerly.

‘How can I ever show you,’ she said leaning on him, ‘the volume in my heart that I’ve penned with your name. Know it’s my *Rama Koti* of love.’

‘Oh Roopa,’ he said, hugging her, ‘How I would love to have your letter on hand, as I reach Delhi from Kakinada.’

‘After all this, nothing else is going to interest me any more,’ she said coyly. ‘So my boy, I would have nothing to write to you.’

‘Why,’ he said, ‘surely you can picture your reflections of our union for one.’

‘As if you haven’t seen them all,’ she sank into his lap.

‘Being unlucky in love,’ he said reflectively, ‘I never had any love letter to read. When I saw Sandhya, I wanted her in my life well before love entered my head. With you, as you know, I lost my heart to love at first sight. In a way, you’re the first woman I loved and had. If you feel it’s not risky, we could correspond till we come here.’

‘I’m happy being special to you but I feel sad that you had to wait for so long to love-mate,’ she said cajolingly, and added in disappointment, ‘Yet, I don’t want some postal mishap ruining our love.’

‘All the same, you can write, if not receive,’ he said, and added in jest, ‘If you fail to post your letter, I’ll send you a reminder.’

‘Blackmail,’ she smiled.

‘Lovemail,’ he laughed.

‘Okay boss,’ she said in all seriousness, ‘but tell me how I can assist you at work.’

‘With your presence itself,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘I’m really hopeful that we three could make it work. Your general abilities and her creative capabilities should do wonders for us.’

‘With two women backing your genius,’ she said in all admiration, ‘I’m sure we would succeed.’

‘Don’t be lavish in your praises,’ he said unpretentiously. ‘If only something goes on smoothly for some length of time at least, can one say that some genius is at work there. Well, we haven’t even started.’

‘I’ve a hunch that our sufferings are behind us,’ she said exuding optimism. ‘I’m sure that a rosy future awaits us.’

‘But what of the present,’ he said ardently.

‘Well, it’s in our mating, isn’t it?’ she said amorously.

In the ecstasy of their lovemaking quite a lot of midnight oil was burnt that night as well.

3

Waking up at his honeymoon time of nine, Raja Rao tiptoed into the kitchen to surprise Roopa. When he laced her at her back, she lay smug in his embrace for long.

‘What’s for the day darling?’ he crooned into her ears at length.

‘Why not a Lambretta ride,’ she said as she had an agenda on hand, ‘all the way to wilderness.’

‘It’s an idea,’ he got excited, but said on second thoughts. ‘What if Lalitha gets wind of it and alerts Sathyam?’

‘I couldn’t care less for once,’ she said nonchalantly. ‘If it comes to that, won’t I make up something for an explanation?’

‘Oh, what a perfect ten you are!’ he said, watching her wear the brown Venkatagiri sari

‘But Sandhya is ten plus one,’ she said. ‘Well, I mean it.’

‘You’re the passion of my life providing the life-force,’ he said contemplatively. ‘And she sustains that to solace me in life. Oh, how you complement each other to make it a meaningful life for me.’

‘Why not a *ménage a trois* then,’ she said enticingly.

‘Not that I want it any less that to happen,’ he said taking her hand into his, ‘but what I seek more is that you succeed with Sathyam.’

‘Though I would love to live with you,’ she said, moved no end, ‘I would try to make myself more eager towards him, if only as a tribute to our love.’

When they stepped out of the house and got onto Sathyam’s Lambretta for a ride into the wilderness, riding the pillion, as they crossed the city limits, she enlaced him eagerly.

‘Oh,’ he said, without turning back, ‘how pleasantly hard it is.’

‘It’s my dream ride,’ she hugged him closer. ‘Take me to some no man’s land.’

When he finally stopped the vehicle near Shamirpet, she spotted a place yonder for their rendezvous. Spreading a bed sheet under a banyan tree, they sat for a session of sweet nothings, and having eaten some *rotis* with *dalfry* bought at a *dhaba* on their way, they settled for siesta. No sooner they woke up than she goaded him to move around the place ‘like grazing cows’.

‘You’re crazy really,’ he said.

‘Am I not in love?’ she walked nonchalantly ahead of him.

Soon spotting a mango grove, she ran towards it, dragging him all the way and as they entered the grove, leaving him perplexed on the ground, she climbed up a well-grown tree. When she perched herself on a low branch, and invited him to join her there, he obliged her saying, ‘How you amaze me!’

‘Oh,’ she said cuddling him in delight, ‘how you brought out the real me.’

‘Roopa,’ he said holding her dearly, ‘even in the wildest of my dreams, I haven’t imagined anything near this.’

‘Oh, how I feel the animal in me coming to the fore now,’ she jumped down, pulling him along. ‘Couple with me the animal way.’

‘Now I’m feeling,’ he said lovingly, ‘that you’ve become truly insane.’

‘True, but then, I am a woman in love, am I not?’ she said excitedly. ‘I want you to lay me at every place where I’d craved for you. Maybe, it’s the only way I might be able to erase those painful memories of pining for you. How I wish you stayed put in me. Why has not nature made it that way?’

‘Oh, to be wanted like this,’ he said, as he followed her bidding, ‘is divine indeed.’

In the end, as the sun was all set to cross the horizon, they rushed back to the city, as if to beat it at its own game. But once they reached Paradise, they stopped for a cup of *Irani chai* that they shared by the roadside. Thereafter, having loitered on the Tank Bund for a while, on their way back home, he picked up four bottles of King Fisher.

‘Are you going to gobble up all that beer?’ she said surprised.

‘I thought we might share,’ he said tantalizingly.

‘Does it help me too?’ she winked.

‘Yes, to take the stuffing out of me,’ he said in smile.

Reaching home, they were relieved at finding a padlock on the landlord’s door.

‘Seems my bad-luck is a spent force now,’ she said, touching the door before she opened it. ‘Touch wood.’

‘That should auger well for our love life,’ he said repeating the ritual.

Having stuffed the beer bottles in the fridge, they went together into the bathroom for a shower. Though they went in together as if to save time, yet they took a long time coming out of it, to settle down on the bed readily for three cheers.

‘Isn’t it bitter,’ she said after the first sip.

‘You would feel better,’ he said in encouragement, ‘after a gulp or more.’

‘I know it would be better for me,’ she smiled, ‘even without me drinking it.’

‘You are impossible,’ he said.

‘Like Sandhya, you mean,’ she said, smiling.

‘Did she tell you she likes her peg having my peg?’ he said with a glint in his eye.

‘Why should I betray her secrets,’ she said in mirth, ‘even to her man.’

Soon as she lay in his lap, she retched, and he had his hands stretched.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ she said in embarrassment as he wiped her mouth clean, he having cleaned his own hands before.

‘Why, haven’t you taken all my cum?’ he said, cuddling her in his embrace.

‘If not for that what for a woman is made?’ she said smiling, looking into his eyes as he sought her lips eagerly.

While he made love to her, she readily surrendered her soul to him while her body sought him even more eagerly.

While she was at preparing meals for them, enjoying his drink, he kept her company in the kitchen, and as if the beer tasted better from his glass, she began to share it with him. Well, having been rejuvenated after dinner, they indulged themselves, as if there would be no sex life left after that night for them.

4

When Roopa got up the next day, finding Raja Rao staring at her longingly, she felt as if she woke up from a dream.

‘Why stare at me,’ she said, getting closer to him, ‘as if I’m new to you?’

‘I’m not able to believe that all your beauty is mine,’ he said, blowing into her navel.

‘Worried about the void you would leave in my life,’ she said pensively, ‘I couldn’t sleep for long.’

‘Won’t I be back in your arms before your love bites would lose their traces,’ he said baring his chest.

‘How I wish I were a vampire,’ she said biting him to the bones ‘to live on your blood till then.’

‘Ooh.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’

‘You know Sandhya’s delivery time is nearing,’ he said still in pain. ‘Don’t fail to make it to the *barasala* at Kakinada.’

‘If it were with you in a 1st Class coupe for two,’ she said, and got excited about it, ‘while make some coffee for us, think how to go about it.’

While preparing the coffee and picturing their togetherness on the train, she recalled her weird experience in the coupe, and as if the milk on the burner too shared her urge to narrate the episode to her lover, it boiled itself in double quick time.

‘That’s what life is all about, stranger than fiction, as they say,’ he said at her recap, trying to figure out the embarrassment she might have felt then. ‘Do check below the berths before all else.’

‘That is all about once bitten twice shy,’ she said eagerly. ‘But do tell me how we get in there in the first place.’

‘Book a coupe for us in the Godavari, party joining at Kazipet,’ he explained as they had coffee. ‘You ring me up so that I too can book my ticket as well. Since, Sathyam would be with you till the train moves out, you book another ticket for you by sleeper class. Then at Kazipet, we would move into the Cupid’s Corner.’

‘What a love on wheels that would be!’ she hugged him, spilling the dregs on him.

‘Haven’t you made it memorable even before we got started,’ he said rushing into the bathroom.

When the clock struck eleven, it occurred to her that in its forward march time would abet her lover to leave her for his wife’s place that evening, and that made her morose.

‘Cheer up Roopa,’ he said at last, ‘If you sulk, that would only make it worse for me.’

‘Maybe, you can measure my love on the scale of your misery,’ she sighed.

‘How true,’ he said, hugging her.

‘You can’t separate love and anxiety in a woman’s heart,’ she said, tightening her grip on him.

‘That’s why love is painfully sweet,’ he kissed her tears, ‘and salty too.’

By the time they reached the Secunderabad Railway Station in the evening, Roopa began to see Raja Rao’s impending departure as a necessary evil to their forthcoming togetherness.

‘As you make love to her,’ she whispered to him in the din of the arriving train, ‘give my love to Sandhya.’

When the Godavari Express languidly pulled out of that railway station, gazing at him lovingly, she waved at him furiously. If only her sense of longing for her lover had acquired a physical dimension, probably the train, in spite of its diesel power, wouldn’t have moved an inch forward.

5

The Godavari Express that Roopa boarded at Secunderabad that September evening seemed to have been powered by the pull of her passion. As it raced on the rails, the sound of its vibrations synchronized with the pounding of her heart beats but when the train came to a halt at Kazipet ending her two-hour long anxiety, it didn’t take long for Roopa to jump into the waiting arms of Raja Rao.

'I was afraid,' she said, hugging him, 'about your train reaching in time.'

'How did you think that I could have left that to chance?' he said, patting her head. 'I reached here yesterday.'

'Oh, sorry,' she said, not hiding her happiness.

'What is it before that year-long waiting,' he crooned into her ear.

As they reached the first class bogie, she pulled him towards the farthest entrance.

'I've something to show you,' she said

'Can't you wait till we get in?' he winked at her.

'It's a special from the Indian Railways for us,' she said, and read aloud from the passenger chart pasted over there.

MR. RAJA RAO

MRS. ROOPA RAO

'You know how to feel love,' he said pressing her shoulder, 'and express it as well.'

'I'm glad you appreciate it,' she looked at him lovingly. 'Don't they make a bold statement in those bold letters?'

'Either in small print,' he said lovingly, 'it makes no difference to our lovesick eyes.'

'Of brave souls, that is.'

'True,' he said.

'How are you dear?' she asked him when they settled down in the coupe.

'Don't you worry, I'm in fine shape,' he said winking at her and added. 'How are things with you?'

'Don't you find me happy?'

'How can I miss your radiance,' he said taking her hand. 'But what about your home work.'

'He became homebody all again,' she said in all smiles. 'Well, with bottle for company, whatever, at last, I could make him feel at home in his home. Anyway, you're going to meet him soon.'

'I'm glad at the development,' he said with an apparent satisfaction. 'How I would like to befriend him.'

'Why buy a headache?' she smiled.

'What could be worse than the heartache we've had,' he said squeezing her hand. 'Oh, how I shudder to think of those days.'

'What about these days?' resting on his shoulder she caressed his chest.

‘Don’t you see that my cup of joy is overflowing?’ he said reaching for her lips.

‘As I got the news of the new arrival,’ she said, ‘I felt as if I were her mother, since you are her father.’

‘That means,’ he said smilingly, ‘she will have a double protection against my pampering.’

‘Before I forget,’ she said excitedly, ‘especially since these days, everyone complains that I’ve become very forgetful.’

‘Lost in love!’ he said, interrupting her.

‘Don’t you know that?’ she said. ‘I’ve paid the advance for your office as well as her Sweet Home, both in Himayatnagar. You can occupy them any time next month.’

‘So, you’ve got the sets ready,’ he said pinching her crotch, ‘to begin the shoot.’

Shortly thereafter, the TTE had come and gone, leaving them on their own. Having bolted the door, Raja Rao opened his suitcase, and pulled out an ‘Intimate’.

‘When you’re around,’ she said, smelling it, ‘why do I need this?’

‘Oh, nothing is better scented than your body,’ he said, rubbing his nose all over her. ‘It’s just to make it a witness to our intimacy.’

‘You’re such a pet,’ she said, running her fingers through his hair.

‘I read your letter a hundred times,’ he said as he pulled it from his pocket, ‘for its romantic quality.’

‘Thanks for your compliment,’ she sank into him coyly, ‘for my maiden effort.’

‘Why don’t you read it for me?’ he gave her the letter.

‘Why do you want to embarrass me?’ she said gazing at it lovingly.

‘Why not try,’ he coaxed her. ‘Having seen your love in the print of your hand, now I want to savor it in the tenor of your tone.’

She smiled with satisfaction, but read with inhibition.

“Raja dear,

Believe me, for more than an hour now, I’ve been toying with my pen to picture the feelings of my heart so that you could feel them in my missive. Well, had you been around, by now we would have made love twice over. Is there any human expression other than lovemaking that is so full in its intent and content!

I wonder why I feel so diffident to find words to express that by which I breathe my life, is it not our love that helps me live. Perhaps, a woman prefers to preserve her love in the recess of her heart, as if its exposure, even to her lover, deprives it of its pristine purity. You know, I didn’t have any inhibitions turning nude that night, before your very eyes, that

too on my own. So, isn't it strange that I should struggle now to bare my heart, in spite of your command! It looks like the emotions of my love are closer to my heart than the feelings of my frame, if not, how could have I steered clear of all those temptations for the appointment with our fulfillment? Oh what a destiny!

Why, I'm annoyed with you still, for having insisted on my penning down my inner feelings, although I made you privy to every nuance of my emotion. Why, had I not conveyed my craving for you through my body, every time it was entwined with yours? But, as you know, I only live to fulfill every whim and fancy of yours.

All the same, I can feel your desire to behold our love in my hand, having seen it through my eyes. But be certain that whichever way you look at it, you will still find me fulfilled. If I could make you feel likewise, I would have a purpose to live, and a cause to die for. Don't you pull faces (she paused to see his face and found it aglow) I know what our love means to you too.

Thanks to our union, I have a revelation, as I find it hard to relive the sexual ecstasy I've experienced with you; the sensual pleasure of your touch has come to stay in my consciousness. It is as though the softness of your skin has seeped into my flesh.

I wait - to meet and mate.

Yours ever, by heart and soul,

Roopa Rao."

'I'm eager,' he said.

'I'll go through the ablutions,' she went about it.

'I too am thirsty,' he said in ecstasy.

'Let's turn 69.'

'Oh, my Roopa,' he sputtered at length.

'Let's roll over.'

'Don wants it,' he said pushing her away, at length.

'Dame too craves.'

'Oh, juicy welcome,' he said as she took him in.

'I'm getting mad,' she groaned.

'Your spasms tell,' he crooned.

'Oh, I'm dying,' she cried.

'How thrilling,' he moaned.

'Your motions reveal,' she was ecstatic.

‘Oh, I’m coming!’ he exclaimed.

‘I knew it from my orgasm,’ she cooed in the end.

‘You shall lay me,’ she said, as they lay in embrace, ‘in the very bed that I grew up daydreaming.’

‘Roopa,’ he said in all admiration, ‘you are a love rash really.’

‘If it’s a new coinage, the patent should be mine,’ she said lovingly. ‘Why not lay the hen in its very den. Won’t that be a game man?’

‘I won’t be surprised,’ he said, in jest, ‘if you target my den as well.’

‘Oh, imagine the possibilities,’ she winked at him, ‘with the other one around.’

‘Really, Roopa,’ he exclaimed, ‘you’re a love devil, if there is one.’

‘It’s about being devil in the bed and angel otherwise,’ she said joyously. ‘Haven’t you heard the adage?’

‘Now I’m coming to know,’ he said, and added after a pause, ‘What of Prasad?’

‘Why, are you jealous of him?’ she said coquettishly.

‘No one ever loved without being jealous,’ he said holding her. ‘Do you know of any?’

‘I feel sorry for him that I made him waste his time in my unsuccessful seduction.’

‘How generous you are,’ he said, ‘even to your adversary.’

‘But still, won’t he have a cause of action to claim opportunity costs from me,’ she said in jest, only to continue reflectively, ‘Shortly after you left, he came to force me into surrender. How he made it clear that he came determined to drag me into bed. Oh God, how intense was he in his intent then, and what a storm he created at that. How he tried every tool in his lusty kit to wrench my resolve, why he even threatened to kill himself with my kitchen knife. Since I yield even then, he injured himself with the knife on hand as if carrying out his threat to kill himself in his unrequited love for me. When, I remained unmoved after all that, he called me a frigid flirt and angered by my stony silence, he left in a huff, never to return.’

‘Maybe he too loves you,’ said Raja Rao

‘While he lusted after me like nobody else,’ she said reminiscently, ‘he never came to love me, why, my sixth sense warned me from the beginning about it, if not, he could have had me much before you made me yours. Oh, you can only see to believe the intensity of his passion that day! Thank God, your August visit saved the day for our love and me as well; otherwise, I don’t think I could have mustered the strength to resist him then.’

As she hugged him with the relief associated with having escaped some danger, he held her with the feeling associated in retrieving a valued object before its accidental fall, and said, 'But would he leave it at that. What if he begins spying upon you?'

'I told Sathyam about it all, to take the wind out of his sails of mischief,' she said coolly. 'But I don't think we need to worry about him any more. After all, the vanity of man makes him believe that if a woman shuns him, she would snub others as well, but, should man suspect that a woman is carrying on with someone, he would imagine that she could be an easy lay for him as well. It's all because man tends to picture woman's preferences through the prism of his fallacies, and not in the mirror of her proclivities.'

'Whatever,' he said, 'it's the woman's whim that prevails in the end, isn't it?'

'You shouldn't grudge us our only advantage,' she said while picking up some bananas from her basket. 'Otherwise, are we not at the receiving end, in every way?'

'I haven't seen you reading any Telugu Weekly before!' he said, finding an "Andhra Pathrika" therein.

'I picked it up at the Higginbotham's to keep my anxiety at bay,' she said, giving him a banana, 'I read a couple of stories, but I felt the characterization was poor.'

'Characters of fiction are authors' children and critics' neighbors,' he said enigmatically. 'Even if we perceive them as inadequate, nevertheless, we should appreciate the fact that they were the products of someone's imagination, however limited that might have been. It's not often that you come across a book from which you could quote much.'

'That' true, but in these writings, I find only the phantoms of wishful thinking rather than any products of imagination.'

'Do you have some more?' he asked her, having helped himself to a couple of them by then.

'It's the last one,' she offered him the one she was having.

'Never mind,' he persisted, 'you have it.'

'You know that my preference,' she pushed the banana into his mouth as a prelude, 'is for the one with the skin.'

When they savored the meal that she brought along with the *saada paan* for them, which rejuvenated them for their nocturnal exercise, so much so that when the Godavari approached Eluru at three, unable to part from one another, the lovers were still at caressing each other.

'At this rate you may be sending me to Sandhya's bed just to rest,' he smiled in the end.

‘Why, hasn’t she a clear lead of a year,’ she said winking at him. ‘That is, accounting for the off days. Let me get even before you can be even handed.’

After that journey of ecstasy, they reached Kakinada in the morning. At length, when they got to the exit gate of the Town Station, for appearances sake, they went their separate ways - he in his in-laws’ car and she in a rickshaw.

While a hiatus after lover’s jaunt is welcome prospect for that would afford sweet reflection upon the amour what is unwelcome is a long separation that entails painful craving for their reunion.

6

While the rickshaw-puller was peddling her home, Roopa tried to speculate about his wife and their life.

‘Would their married chores be any different from the middle-class mores?’ she wondered. ‘Maybe, for want of space in the slum life, liaisons could be but a handshake away. But won’t that take away the pining from love as well as the exhilaration in union? How am I to know?’

‘Welcome dear,’ Ramaiah greeted her warmly. ‘How are you doing?’

‘*Naannaa* you know the face the index of mind,’ she said joyously.

‘Yes, you look happy,’ said Ramaiah in apparent relief, as though her joy by degrees had reduced his guilt.

‘Glad you’re relaxed,’ she said noticing his mood, and headed towards the kitchen, shouting, ‘Oh, Janakiammagaru.’

‘Now you’ll have it from her,’ Ramaiah said to her in all smiles, ‘ever since Sandhya was in the family way, we all have had it from her on your account.’

‘I won’t let you go back,’ said Janaki, as Roopa joined her, ‘without a proper medical checkup. Be sure about it.’

‘You better sort it out,’ Roopa enlaced her, ‘with your son-in-law when he comes.’

‘Does he count at all,’ said Raju teasingly, ‘my poor brother-in-law.’

‘When you’re married,’ said Roopa smilingly, ‘you would know about that.’

‘But you look exhausted?’ observed Janaki.

‘Is it so?’ she said smiling.

‘Ask Sandhya, if you don’t believe me,’ said Janaki. ‘I know that her words are the gospel truth for you.’

At the thought of her impending meeting with Sandhya, what with her guilt feelings coming to the fore, Roopa was tied her to bed all morning, rationalize her affair with Raja Rao. Scared as she was at the prospect of facing her friend with her lover around, as her love for Sandhya got the better of her guilt in the end, she sprang up from her bed.

On her way to Sandhya's place, she recalled her state of mind when Sathyam returned after Raja Rao had left, 'How is it that I didn't feel guilty then, but felt it odd to think in terms of loving him, though I gave my word to Raja? But with Sandhya it's all so different, isn't it? Oh, it's her love that sustained my interest in life until her man turned me on. Won't seducing her man amount to betrayal? Well, if I develop qualms on that count, won't I end up in the doghouse of guilt? After all, I'm not for robbing her joy by grabbing him all for me, isn't it? What's wrong then, if I share his affection with her? Isn't it fine, given our lesbian connection, won't extraordinary situations call for extraordinary solutions? Why not we three engage our love in a round robin of ardor?'

Helped by that euphoric feeling, Roopa felt relieved by the time she reached the District Collector's bungalow.

'What's your secret Roopa,' said Damayanthi in welcome, 'that you look prettier than ever?'

'Surely you radiate!' said Kamalakar. 'Sandhya is dying to see you. What a friendship yours is! Touch wood, may God keep it that way for ever.'

As she began to climb up the staircase, Roopa saw it all in a new light.

'Sandhya might misread the cause of my joy,' she thought, 'won't she suspect that I'm carrying on with Prasad? What a pity that I can't clarify.'

When Roopa reached the threshold, she found Raja Rao cuddling his kid, even as Sandhya caressed his head. As Roopa coughed to announce her arrival, Sandhya jumped for joy.

'Oh, Roopa,' Sandhya reached out to Roopa with her outstretched arms.

'How's our little darling?' said Roopa, fondly looking at the baby over her mate's shoulders, in their smug embrace.

'Here she is,' said Raja Rao coming near.

Still enlacing Sandhya, Roopa pinched the baby, and said, 'So cute, like her mother.'

'Seems she too welcomes you,' said Raja Rao, to the cry of the child.

'Wasn't it my coercion,' Roopa said in all smiles, 'that led to the outcome?'

'Oh, how ravishing you look!' said Sandhya. 'You've never been better.'

'I don't know, but that's what everyone says,' said Roopa, and taking a hard look at Sandhya, she said in undertone, 'Why, you look fuller in your fulfillment. Won't those extra pounds come in handy to him and to me as well?'

'Won't I love that,' Sandhya cooed back.

'Well, what's the secret Roopa?' said Raja Rao with the intent of making Sandhya get used to his closeness with her friend.

'I'll tell you,' said Roopa winking at him, and then turning to Sandhya, she apologized, 'I'm sorry for being so late.'

'Who's she after?' Raja Rao sought Roopa's opinion about the newborn.

'She has her father's features,' said Roopa, looking fondly at the baby. 'And her mother's charms.'

'Hope she picks up,' said Raja Rao in jest, 'your diplomacy, as she grows up.'

'Oh, our dream is coming true,' Sandhya took Roopa's hand. 'How did it feel when he broke the news to you?'

'Can't you guess!' said Roopa reenacting the act, 'I nearly swooned.'

'Thank God,' said Raja Rao, 'she didn't collapse then.'

'Well, to spare you the trouble,' Roopa told Raja Rao, and turning to Sandhya, she said dreamily. 'It's all dream like you know.'

'I wish to join you by the month end but mom won't have it,' said Sandhya in all disappointment. 'She feels it's too early for me to manage the baby.'

'Won't I be on hand,' said Roopa, 'to lend a helping hand?'

'Who's for wasting your talents at baby-sitting,' said Sandhya, 'Can't we contribute at his office?'

'Won't I love that,' said Roopa in vexation. 'But you know how touchy Sathyam is about my working.'

'Leave that to me,' said Sandhya, sounding confident.

'That's a relief indeed,' said Roopa.

'Hold your breath,' said Sandhya, 'he wants to make us both his business partners.'

As Roopa started sobbing, for want of a better response, Sandhya couldn't hold her tears of joy either. The euphoria of their love insensibly impelled in Raja Rao the urge to merge with his women.

'What a fortune to partner your beautiful souls,' he said as they clung on to him as one, as he held them both in his arms.

‘Oh, how concerned you both are,’ said Roopa bogged down by tears of joy, ‘Now, I can live in joy and die fulfilled.’

‘Oh, Roopa, don’t get emotional,’ said Raja Rao patting her head, fearing she might bare her soul, overcome by remorse.

‘What would be my share of the investment?’ said Roopa, recovering herself at length.

‘Don’t bother about that,’ he said, ‘But it won’t take much investment to get started.’

‘Well,’ said Roopa, ‘I would like to contribute. Why, I can sell some of my jewels.’

‘Do you need to go to that length?’ said Sandhya.

‘I don’t want Sathyam’s favor,’ said Roopa, ‘and I don’t like to be a drag on you either.’

‘We better respect her feelings,’ said Raja Rao to Sandhya.

‘Well, as I hold your jewels in trust,’ said Sandhya, ‘we use mine as our common wear. Is that okay?’

‘Sandhya,’ said Raja Rao, ‘you’re a wonder.’

‘She’s the fortune,’ said Roopa to Raja Rao, enlacing Sandhya, ‘of yours and mine as well.’

‘Being your beloved,’ said Sandhya, taking Raja Rao’s hand, ‘is no less a fortune.’

‘What a circle of fortune it makes,’ said Raja Rao holding Roopa’s hand.

‘And I want to keep her for us, forever,’ said Sandhya holding their hands together.

‘Oh, how you’ve made me your slave with your love,’ said Roopa, coy in the circle of affection.

‘Why, haven’t you enslaved us yourself,’ said Sandhya affectionately to Roopa.

‘What about the little darling’s name?’ said Roopa.

‘Let him apply his mind,’ said Sandhya.

‘I welcome your suggestion,’ he said to Roopa.

‘I’ll second her stand,’ said Roopa, leaning on Sandhya, as though in solidarity.

‘As you’ve passed the buck to me, you both are equally accountable,’ he said mirthfully, ‘and as the ball is in my court, I can’t avoid taking a shot at it. Thus the name derives by itself - Sa - Ro -(Ra) Ja, - Ra being silent, Saroja.

‘Lovely!’ Sandhya exclaimed.

‘Creative!’ Roopa admired.

‘Inspiration of the friendly kind,’ he said, taking both their hands.

‘I’ve to leave now,’ said Roopa reluctantly, and withdrawing herself from them, she went up to kiss Saroja.

‘Come for lunch tomorrow,’ Sandhya kissed Roopa in turn.

‘We’ll come to pick you up,’ said Raja Rao in jest, ‘though your invitation is not forthcoming.’

‘I don’t think you’re the type to wait for an invitation,’ Roopa smiled. ‘Don’t keep me waiting.’

Sandhya couldn’t contain her joy that Roopa was so joyous, and thanked Raja Rao for enlivening her friend’s mood with his charm and wit.

On her way home though, Roopa wondered as to how to bring about a homely union with Raja Rao. However, as she reached home there was a godsend for her in the form of a wedding invitation to the Ramaiahhs.

7

The next morning as Raja Rao and Sandhya went to see Roopa, it was Janaki who received them at the door as Roopa was still having her bath.

‘Your in-laws speak well of you,’ said Janaki to Raja Rao, ‘and that goes in favor of any man. Besides, your wife too sings your praises, and so also my daughter Roopa. Now that you’re moving over to Hyderabad, we can relax about Roopa.’

‘I’m glad that Roopa comes back into Sandhya’s life,’ he said smiling. ‘She led only half a life in Delhi.’

‘Roopa tells me that you’re all going to stay nearby,’ said Janaki.

‘I wonder why Roopa didn’t look for a house of two portions,’ said Sandhya.

‘Oh, how they grew up glued together from childhood,’ said Janaki to him, ‘may God bless them.’

‘They have your blessings,’ said Raja Rao to Janaki, ‘and the support of us all for that.’

‘Oh,’ exclaimed Sandhya, sighting Roopa, coming out of her bath, ‘you would live for hundred years.’

‘That only interests me,’ said Roopa, slyly looking at Raja Rao, as she proceeded into her room, ‘if you too live along with me.’

‘Come, Sandhya,’ said Roopa, as she joined them at length, ‘we’ll show him my place.’

‘Why do you need me for that?’ said Sandhya, engaged as she was with Janaki.

‘Grace our house,’ said Roopa, leading him inside.

Once they entered her bedroom, she embraced him ardently, and he kissed her passionately.

‘Nobody will be at home tomorrow,’ she whispered to him, as he released her lips. ‘Make it by ten.’

‘Expect me with tons of love,’ he crooned into her ear.

‘Let’s get going,’ said Sandhya, as the lovers reappeared in the main hall.

Soon the three of them got into the waiting Ambassador to make it to the Collector’s bungalow. After a sumptuous lunch, that followed a lot of merriment, Sandhya closeted herself with Roopa, leaving Saroja to Raja Rao’s care.

‘You never looked sexier,’ said Roopa, having ardently kissed Sandhya.

‘I’m glad both of you feel the same way about me,’ said Sandhya. ‘It’s nice that everything is going my way.’

‘With all your generosity,’ said Roopa hugging Sandhya, ‘you’ve made me even more indebted.’

‘I’ve an axe to grind,’ said Sandhya taking Roopa’s hand. ‘And you know that.’

‘Oh, my lovey,’ Roopa kissed Sandhya affectionately.

‘How I wish we get fused into one,’ said Sandhya lovingly.

‘How are we to see each other,’ said Roopa in jest, ‘and gloat about us then?’

‘By making him a witness to our closeness,’ said Sandhya coyly to Roopa, ‘can’t we gauge how it feels from his eyes.’

‘Well, I’m afraid that our happiness is too good to last,’ said Roopa thoughtfully. ‘Just one misunderstanding would be the end of me.’

‘What misunderstanding is possible,’ said Sandhya making light of it all, ‘given our bondage?’

‘Why do you forget,’ said Roopa, ‘that we’re both married now.’

‘Don’t we know our men well enough,’ said Sandhya assuredly, ‘I don’t see any trouble coming from them.’

‘But I’m no *raakhi* sister of your man,’ Roopa said tentatively.

‘I know you’re his friendly half,’ said Sandhya, cajoling Roopa in her arms.

‘And that’s my worry,’ said Sandhya cuddling Sandhya.

‘Why, it should be a cause of hope, isn’t it?’ said Sandhya caressing Roopa.

‘Is it not said, by Napoleon if I remember correctly,’ said Roopa tentatively, ‘that man woman friendship leads to love.’

‘I’ve not only thought all about that,’ said Sandhya, kissing Roopa, ‘but also noticed how you gloat over each other. I know women tend to be touchy when it comes to the other

woman. But ours is a unique case, isn't it? The prospective other woman happens to be my own woman.'

'Oh, darling,' Roopa began crying.

'Why cry at the threshold of happiness?' said Sandhya, wiping Roopa's tears, 'If you're unhappy, how can I be happy? It's for both of you to decide whether you would like to sail on a platonic boat or swim through the erotic current. In any case, the circumstances of our lives seem to justify the latter course. Maybe, our jesting about sharing a man could have been the prompting of premonition.'

'Oh, Sandhya,' Roopa's eyes glistened, even as her lips reached for their counterparts that uttered those divine words.

'Oh, how you both,' said Sandhya kissing Roopa affectionately, 'bracket my life.'

'Oh, lovey,' said Roopa, sinking to Sandhya's feet, 'you're angelic really!'

'And you,' said Sandhya lifting Roopa into her embrace, 'my Goddess of Love.'

'What about our Raja?' said Roopa, carried away by that euphoric moment.

'Our Knight of Vigor,' said Sandhya in all love for her man and mate, 'if you please.'

'Oh how I've suffered,' cried Roopa, 'craving for one such.'

'Why not have a second look,' crooned Sandhya into Roopa's ear, 'to see if he's the right one?'

'Oh honey!' said Roopa, joining their lips.

'What happened with that Prasad?' asked Sandhya at length.

'It's all over now,' said Roopa, experiencing the sense of relief all again. 'I've just escaped by the skin of my teeth.'

'I was worried to death about that,' said Sandhya reminiscently, 'somehow, the idea of your affair with him scared me no end.'

'Now I realize it's my fault really,' said Roopa reflectively. 'I can't blame him for calling me a frigid flirt in the end.'

'He should've known,' said Sandhya winking at Roopa, 'that my darling is not for everyone's having.'

'It feels nice,' said Roopa winking back at Sandhya, 'that you have a lover in your mind for me.'

'It's up to you to woo him,' said Sandhya pushing Roopa in the right direction, 'as I stand performance guarantee.'

'Oh, how sexy,' said Roopa, 'to have an idea, let me see him pampering Saroja.'

'If you don't mind being a voyeur,' said Sandhya heartily, 'I can let you have the true picture.'

'Anyway, it's some way away,' said Roopa, winking at Sandhya, 'But isn't the way he derived Saroja's name thrilling?'

'Don't you think he's creative?'

'Of course,' said Roopa reminiscently, 'hope Saroja imbibes some of his creativity.'

'Hope she shapes up well,' said Sandhya, as they went back to Saroja

'Why not,' said Roopa in admiration, 'she having the craftsman of a man for her father.'

'Is it about me?' said Raja Rao, who overheard them, as they reached him by then.

'Of course,' smiled Roopa.

'I feel flattered,' he said with a smile, 'that you both find me interesting to talk about.'

'I better leave before you wish I had left,' said Roopa in jest to him. 'But isn't it too early to wish you good night.'

'Oh, you naughty!' said Sandhya smacking Roopa's bottom.

Feeling elated, Roopa came out of the sprawling compound, and got into a rickshaw.

'Hasn't she showed me the green light, the dear thing,' she thought in excitement. 'But won't she be hurt if she comes to know that we jumped the signal? Oh, why didn't I wait a little longer? But then, didn't we make it rather providentially. All said and done, can I conceive a better way to bring about our union? What an exceptional time we have had! But, if I were in Sandhya's shoes, would I be as generous? Not as much as much as she is.'

That night, the thought that Sandhya more than reciprocates her love seemed to please Roopa. And as she dwelled upon their love triangle, she had a sneaking feeling that her lover could be craving her more than his better half even.

What with her self-worth enhanced by her own feelings, Roopa sank into sleep, such as one which only a true fulfillment would occasion

8

Next morning, as Ramaiah goaded Janaki to get ready to attend the wedding of his colleague's daughter, pretending a headache, Roopa stayed put in bed.

'Why not I stay back,' said Janaki with concern.

'Why do you make me feel guilty,' said Roopa goading her parents to go. 'It should be okay soon. I may even make it to the lunch. Who wants to miss a *pellibhojanam*?'

Having seen her parents' back, Roopa in contemplation waited for Raja Rao.

‘Perhaps, it’s the fate of illicit love to cohabit with lies. What a paradox it is, that a noble sentiment like love needs the prop of a base instinct for its survival! It’s as though the pleasures of a liaison act as intoxicants to help dampen the sense of guilt in a woman’s heart.’

The thought of guilt made her feel odd about the rendezvous she had chosen for her adventure.

‘Am I not violating the sanctity of my parental place?’ she began to think. ‘How would my father react if ever he comes to know of it? But then, isn’t he guilty of brainwashing me into the marriage? Well, whether he likes it or not, he’s sure to shroud my secret. Who wants a scandal on his hands? But now, I’m more of Sathyam’s wife than his daughter, am I not? How marriage alters even the fundamentals of a woman’s life! Whatever it is, I won’t let these silly sentiments spoil my party with Raja.’

Though she breathed easier on the fatherly front, she continued to feel choked in the friendly arena. As she felt that her guilt of seducing Sandhya’s man lingered on, in spite of the nobility of Raja’s love, she was insensibly gripped by an urge to confess to Sandhya and seek her consent to carry on with Raja.

‘Why get bogged down by guilt,’ she thought at length, ‘when I can fly with the wings of accommodation provided by Sandhya understands? But I need his nod for that, don’t I? Well, I’ll make him understand that we’ve no right to wrong her any more.’

From then on, Roopa waited for her lover, more for the sake of his wife than for her own self. When she spotted him at some distance, she felt at ease, as though he were coming for her deliverance and when he took her into his arms, she sank in his embrace as if to deliver her soul to him. As he lifted her head to envisage her visage, he felt that it looked aesthetically beautiful and thrilled by the charms of her frame; he wondered whether the purity of emotions rarefies the soul to surface onto the face, to enable the fusion of the inner beauty with the outer grace. Won’t such demeanor get imprinted in the minds of those who espy that visage then!

‘Sandhya has issued the visa from me,’ she said in all eagerness.

‘Tell me what happened,’ he was taken aback by her manner, but as she pictured the magnanimity of Sandhya’s soul, he felt immensely relieved.

‘Roopa, I can understand your feelings,’ he said, hugging her. ‘And I love you even more for your sensitivity. Baring your heart might lighten your burden, but have you ever thought how that would affect her mind.’

‘Don’t you know how Sandhya loves me?’ she said ecstatically. ‘With open arms, she would invite me into your life.’

‘I too feel so,’ he said persuasively, ‘but we shouldn’t make it a bolt from the blue for her. Though shocked herself, she could be happy for you. But then, won’t she suffer for her own sake?’

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ said Roopa remorsefully. ‘How I’ve got carried away! Why I didn’t I think from her angle?’

‘Roopa,’ he said assuredly. ‘Have patience for happier times. Let her slowly get used to our closeness, and prepare herself for our intimacy. As we three go along together, let things lead from one to another. Only that would be smooth on her, and not your dramatic confession. Don’t we love her enough to care for her feelings?’

‘In the meantime, then,’ she said overcome by emotion, ‘let me bear my own guilt.’

‘What guilt is that,’ he said, after kissing her, as though to suck out her guilt, ‘when you’ve got the blank cheque from her. Some time in her presence, we might sink into embrace, prompting her to enlase us for making it a threesome.’

‘Imagine,’ she said dreamily, ‘how that would strengthen our love?’

‘In three fold ways,’ he said as he motioned her.

Then, Roopa in tranquility led her Raja to her bed, to let him solace her soul.

‘I’m glad our love isn’t a spoiler either way,’ she said, after he made love to her. ‘Don’t you find her sexier, being a little plumpy?’

‘Oh, she’s handier to fondle now,’ he winked at her, fondling her. ‘With both of you carrying equal weight, won’t that make it more of a balancing act?’

‘Oh, for me to have a greater fare,’ she thought recalling her same sex amour, ‘won’t her figure auger well?’

‘Whom do you love more?’ he asked her, finding her lost in her thoughts.

‘If not for her, I wouldn’t have had my savior in you,’ she said in all earnestness, ‘I led you into my heart, but in her tracts of love.’

‘But it’s not the case with the output of our ardor,’ he said a little disappointed. ‘You let it go waste.’

‘I’ll be on pills before you’re there,’ she said, ardently going over him. ‘But for now, so be it.’

‘Roopa to be honest with you,’ he said, holding her in his arms, as they felt satiated at length, ‘Often I delve into my heart, to gauge if the levels of my love for you both are any

different. As I realize to my relief that they are even, I probe my mind to monitor your emotional currents that stir my soul. Oh, how synchronous they both seem. Then, I check my conscience for dichotomy if any and I always find it filled with equanimity. It feels so soothing that you both sing the song of my love in tandem.'

'Raja,' she cried in joy, 'give her more of your love as she is the better one. Oh, how I owe all this happiness to her.'

'Roopa, now I know why Sandhya loves you as she does,' he kissed away her tears. 'I shall love her all the more for that.'

'I'm dying for our orgies,' she said ecstatically, 'when will you bring that about?'

'That will be, when it will be,' he said in all assurance, 'but come it will.'

Long after Raja Rao had left, Roopa kept wondering whether her urge for orgies could be the manifestation of her need to expiate her guilt in a sex triangle with her mates.

9

On the day of Saroja's *barasala*, Sathyam arrived to Sandhya's delight. Thanking him for coming, she hoped that he and Roopa would soon give her an opportunity for reciprocity. What with his dormant desire coming to the fore as he took Saroja, Sathyam looked at Roopa in hope.

'Write down her name,' said the *purohit* to Raja Rao, handing him the rice slate he made in a silver plate.

As that raised the curtains for the naming ceremony, Raja Rao went through the exercise, watched by Sandhya by his side and even as the *purohit* announced that Saroja was the name chosen, Sathyam said in excitement, 'a lovely name.'

'Thank you,' said Sandhya affectionately. 'But don't run away, I want to talk to you.'

When she closeted with Sathyam after the function, Sandhya briefed him about the idea to rope in Roopa in Integral Architects, the name Raja Rao had chosen for their enterprise.

'I take it as a brotherly duty to concede to you?' said Sathyam genuinely.

'I'm glad,' she took his hand, and said, 'Roopa was doubtful about your agreeing to it.'

'Well,' he said ruefully, 'I've learned from my mistake. Had I obliged her then, perhaps, we wouldn't have missed what we had missed all along.'

'Why rue over the past,' she said, pressing his hand, 'let's hope for happy times.'

'I'm happy,' he said seemingly happy, 'slowly she's warming up to me.'

'I heard you've been drinking like a fish,' she sounded dissuading.

‘But I’m trying to cut down now,’ he said.

‘Nice to hear that, let’s go and congratulate her,’ she said leading him to Roopa and Raja Rao who were engaged with Saroja.

As Roopa was visibly happy at the development, Sathyam felt as though he could shed part of his burden of guilt, and when Raja Rao said he would like to spend some time with him, he proposed a discourse over drinks.

10

At the gates of the Eagle Bar that evening, Sathyam was impatient for Raja Rao’s arrival. When he spotted him, he went halfway in welcome, and as Raja Rao apologized for making him wait, Sathyam turned boisterous.

‘You’re not late but I was early,’ said Sathyam, taking Raja Rao’s hand that was extended for him, ‘Isn’t drink known to beckon its addicts ahead of others?’

‘Why should I grudge that fact at all?’ said Raja Rao smiling.

‘I’m glad you’re soon joining us,’ said Sathyam, having in the meanwhile ordered one large Bag Piper each for them. ‘Roopa is delighted to say the least.’

‘They say girls’ friendship suffers in their marriage,’ said Raja Rao. ‘But they seem to prove the proposition false.’

‘Yet, they are so unlike,’ said Sathyam, gulping the drink that the bearer mixed for them by then. ‘Are they not?’

‘But alike at heart, I think?’ said Raja Rao, sipping from his glass. ‘It looks like their childhood affection took strong roots to grow into deep adult attraction.’

‘But, let me tell you,’ said Sathyam. ‘I used to be jealous of their closeness but now it feels divine watching them together. But I’m sore that I didn’t have a like childhood.’

‘Thankfully, I’ve had a great childhood,’ said Raja Rao dreamily, ‘though the memory of it is hazy.’

‘It seems happiness loses its focus in memory, even as unhappiness remains vivid in our minds,’ said Sathyam in all bitterness. ‘Unfortunately for me, I was handed out a bad childhood, what with my father believing in placing it in the locker of his experience. What’s worse, he didn’t grant me the freedom of an adult either. Left to myself, I would have been a better child and a less bitter man.’

‘But as it appears, there is no right kind of bringing up children, though there are many wrong ways of spoiling them,’ philosophized Raja Rao, as was his wont. ‘Having said that, I

might add, the mediocrity of man gets reflected in the bringing up of children. You may know, Jean Paul Satre feels that but for a few, men are mere fools, and it's not hard to imagine how such shape up their progeny. The problem with most parents is that they reduce their children to the toys of their joy. It's sad they forget that their kids would be better off, if only they're groomed to face the roughs and toughs of life.'

'Why, it's every bit true,' said Sathyam, animated by the discourse. 'My father all but treated me as his favored possession. When I wanted to study engineering at Manipal, he said I was too young to fend for myself. Oh how he ruined my career and all! Mind you, I wasn't a bad student at all.'

'I can understand your feelings,' continued Raja Rao, to Sathyam's solace. 'But we can't grudge our parents for having failed to come up to our expectations. The very fact that they hadn't reduced us to child labor was in itself a favor. If they chose so, being hapless at that age, there was no way we could have resisted them in anyway.'

'Whatever, my life would have been much different being an engineer,' said Sathyam, gulping his drink in all bitterness.

'That's life - full of ifs and buts, isn't it?' said Raja Rao, sipping the dregs.

'But then,' said Sathyam, 'don't parents end up blaming their children for the perceived neglect of them? Sulking in bitterness, they push their children into the vortex of guilt.'

'If only we had discussed this aspect of life before Saroja's birth,' said Raja Rao, even as Sathyam found his face lighting up, 'I'm sure, I wouldn't have had anything meaningful to say. But now I can tell you, it's we who owe our children for having made us parents, and the fulfillment that goes with it. Maybe, it's this subconscious sense of gratitude that tends parents to fend their children into adulthood, and beyond. But, it would be injurious for parents to imagine that their children owe it to them for having tended them all the way to their adulthood, and once the children are helped by the parents to be on their own, it amounts to the full and final settlement of the filial account. Then, how does the question of parents withdrawing from their children's account arise?'

'No doubt, it's a sound premise,' said Sathyam, and after shouting for the bearer, added mysteriously, 'Are you a moralist by any chance?'

'It's the context that holds, isn't it?' said Raja Rao tentatively, a little taken aback though.

'Well, about the so called kickbacks,' said Sathyam in an undertone as though the under-table thing owes that from the world.

'I was never exposed to its temptation,' said Raja Rao in relief, 'so I can't pass any judgment.'

'Oh, come on,' smiled Sathyam, 'don't be diplomatic.'

'Well, if I've to take a philosophical view of it,' said Raja Rao, applying his mind, 'the insidious corruption harms the economy while the incentive bribing bedevils the society. While the kickbacks bankrupt the nation, the bribe mongers pester its people.'

'Why don't you see the positive side of it,' said Sathyam with apparent conviction. 'Doesn't corruption place more money in more hands? It's only in the Utopian Republic of Uprightness that the nice guys remain straight and yet strike it rich. But, left to it, the world we live in warms up to the unscrupulous, all the while leaving the decent in the cold. But in the Commonwealth of Corruption, the resourceful are forced to part with part of their booty to bribe seekers. And won't that put more money into more hands?'

'What I can say,' said Raja Rao perplexed by the proposition.

'Won't bribe money honey society as well?' said Sathyam, pleased with his rhetoric. 'One has only to remove his hypocritical blinkers and view the social scenario to see that. Don't you find the bribe money coming in handy for the average in bettering their lives and improving the education of their children? But, if India were to be a Republic of Fairness, then we may have a few accumulating wealth 'disproportionate to the calling of luxuries', even as the rest struggle to make both ends meet. Well that would have ensured that we had more coolies in our country than we have professionals today.'

'All this should make one think,' said Raja Rao, 'not about justifying corruption but about developing the right climate for equitable growth.'

'Does that mean, you have contempt for the corrupt?' said Sathyam, and inexplicably feared Raja Rao's response.

'What right I have to judge others since I haven't gone through it myself?' said Raja Rao to Sathyam's utter relief. 'Perhaps, one should try to desist from it as far as one could earnestly avoid it. However, it's the truly ambitious that won't compromise, for they think in terms of greater glories.'

'Well said,' said Sathyam tentatively. 'But what if I confess that I'm a corrupt guy?'

'Set aside my views?' asked Raja Rao a little surprised, 'but what's the matter with you?'

'My friend, sincerity could occasionally fetch an accolade or two at the office,' said Sathyam spiritedly, 'which anyway won't get added to the pay cheque, would it? It's a fast buck that counts these days, and not being down to earth, you can't make any. Oh, six

years of honesty left me hand-to-mouth, but three months of worldliness, call it dishonesty if you must, got me all those goodies you might have noticed at my home. That was during your last visit, when I was out.'

'How does your wife take it?'

'In many ways, my wife is very unfeminine,' began Sathyam, and finding Raja Rao looking at him in surprise, he added. 'Let me explain. Haven't you found her lacking in vanity, jealousy and curiosity in true feminine measures? That being the case, can't you guess what might be her philosophy of life about bribe monies? She's dead against this greasing of the palms mess, or lining the pocket chore, as some would call it. Anyway, it's all one and the same, isn't it? Since she won't poke her nose into my finances, I'm not hard pressed to explain the source of my new life-style to her. Haven't you heard the jargon of the *incometax wallahs*, assets disproportionate to the known sources of income? Let them catch me if they can. By the way, your wife whom I made my *raakhi* sister is also unfeminine that way, though she's more pragmatic than my wife. Above all, Sandhya is an angel really.'

'I'm glad you value my wife as well,' said Raja Rao extending his hand to Sathyam, 'Honestly, I think very highly of your wife. Since Roopa is a contented character, why do you want to acquire what she doesn't value?'

'That's a good question,' said Sathyam. 'And I'll answer you frankly. Anyway, keeping secrets is not the right way to promote friendship. Though you haven't met Prasad, surely you could have heard about him, isn't it?'

'Sandhya told me about him,' said Raja Rao, thinking about how he almost lost Roopa to him.

'I don't know what Roopa told Sandhya about him, but that's beside the point,' said Sathyam, gulping all that there was in his glass, as a prelude to emptying his heart. 'We were quite thick during our childhood days. When I met him this January, that too after fifteen years, I believed we could pick up the threads of our friendship all again. But, as I came to know later, in the guise of our friendship, he wanted to get closer to my wife. Oh, while I was a first ranker at school, he used to just scrape through, that too with my help. Well, when the topic was about studies, he never looked at me straight. Imagine such a fellow eyeing my woman now!'

Finding Raja Rao's demeanor empathic, Sathyam continued after he ordered a fresh round of drinks for them, 'Do you know what had brought about this change in him?'

What else man, money, plentiful money. Why, he was lucky to marry a rich dame, and so he thought it fit to lure the wives of the not so rich too into his life. What is worse, he seems to think that wives of the middle-class are but whores in their own homes. All the same, gullible that they are, how these silly women lose their heads when wooed by the moneyed. But I'm proud of my wife, for she proved her worth, though that rascal tried his best.'

'I'm happy for you,' said Raja Rao, hiding his mixed feelings, 'and her as well.'

'As you know, earlier a man's worth went by his talent,' Sathyam continued spiritedly. 'That was all there was to it. Let's take a potter for example. If he made a pot right, he got the price, and if it were misshapen, then he was in for a discount sale. But were it to leak altogether, oh, he had nowhere to go. And these days, money is the only resource needed to make more of it, isn't it? If only you have money, no one is going to ask you how you got it and where from. That's for sure. With that as capital, you can get into the business of making money. Can't you hire the best of talent, never mind, your own capacity may be of questionable quality. But then, won't the guys pool their skills to fill your kitty. And you bask in false glory as a whiz kid of sorts, don't you?'

'I can understand your hurt,' said Raja Rao, moved by Sathyam's intensity. 'But then it had always been that way. Didn't Shakespeare aver that reputation is the most idle and false imposition, often got without merit, and lost without deserving?'

'Oh, sadly, how true it is,' said Sathyam excitedly, drinking to the dregs. 'But isn't it galling that these guys go about seducing the women of the honest, flaunting the money so made. Coming to this scoundrel of a friend, having vouched for a brotherly affection towards Roopa, he eyed her in a mean manner. Can it get any worse, morally speaking that is? As you know, even Ravan didn't stoop so low in snaring Seetha.'

'I agree with you,' said Raja Rao, driven by his own conviction. 'Seducing a woman is one thing and deceiving the friend is another. Are we through now?'

'Let's have one more round,' proposed Sathyam, as the waiter came around, and as Raja Rao excused himself, he ordered one large for himself.

'You know, thanks to my wife,' said Sathyam with an air of satisfaction, 'I've had the last laugh at him. When in the end, she exposed him to me; I took him to task really. This is what I told him - my dear fellow, money and looks are okay to an extent to lure women, but better realize it's the luck that enables one to lay them. Why, you can't screw even a whore if you're not destined to have her, your visit to the brothel would have coincided

with her periods, and the next time you're eager, she could have shifted out of the town itself. That's what I told him.'

'Oh, how true,' said Raja Rao, even as he recalled that Ganga-Kaveri girl.

'Now I'll tell you why I want to get rich,' said Sathyam, gulping from his glass, 'in double quick time that is. I don't want someone like Prasad ogle at Roopa in the hope of winning her, simply because she's a poor man's wife. I want to make her rich so that she can keep the lechers all at bay. You don't know how I love her. How can you, when she herself fails to delve into my heart.'

'Honestly, one cannot hope to be understood really,' said Raja Rao enigmatically, 'even by the spouse.'

'Maybe, but I adore her and no less crave for her love,' said Sathyam, as he lost all his inhibitions by then. 'To be frank with you, our marriage was stymied from the beginning. Somehow, she was unenthusiastic about me. Maybe, she could have felt she deserved someone better than me, and how can I blame her for that, as she deserves a superman, if there's one. If you don't mind my being boastful, I was a philanderer myself. But that is beside the point, coming back to my wife, she's a fantastic dame. All said and done, I'm sure no one can ever love her more than I do. Oh, how I find that song from that film, Ghazal, so poignant - Naively thought I've right to love, whom you love, hath right on you.'

'You haven't completed the stanza, I suppose,' said Raja Rao. 'Why not tell me whom you love, so that I can fetch him now.'

'It's all well for poetic imagination. But how can it be a practical proposition?' said Sathyam dismissively. 'And to be fair to my wife, she is a faithful one.'

'In some hearts like Sandhya's, love would reach such poetic proportions,' thought Raja Rao, and at that, he was gripped by an urge to be with her,

'They may be expecting us,' said Raja Rao, goading Sathyam to rise, 'So better we call it a day.'

'Tell me frankly,' said Sathyam, as they came out, 'what do you make of me?'

'Honestly,' said Raja Rao, hugging Sathyam, 'I wish I had your capacity to love.'

'I'll cherish your words all my life,' said Sathyam, as Raja Rao released him.

'How come Roopa inspires so much love and passion in men?' wondered Raja Rao as he headed home. 'And devotion in women as well. Isn't Tara too an obvious fan of hers?'

Buoyed by sentiment, Sathyam reached home excited, and in all pride, made Roopa privy to Raja Rao's praises. At that, she reflected how her lover's empathy for her, gave rise to sympathy for her husband in his heart. It was thus, the glare of her paramour's goodwill blinded her man's vision to gaze at her liaison.

11

On that *vijayadasami*, during October, the lane leading to the office of the Integral Architects Pvt. Ltd., in Himayatnagar, was lined up with assorted vehicles of those who came to grace the inaugural function.

While Roopa, in her grey Binny silk sari, was at the entrance welcoming the invitees with her bewitching smile, Raja Rao in brown corduroys and white T-shirt was ensuring that all were seated, as they entered. Handling the refreshments were Aslam, the drafter and Narasaiah, the *daftari*. As if to capture the moment for the posterity, Sathyam was busy clicking away with his new Canon, but suckling Saroja, Sandhya in her Gadwal sari was bogged down in the anteroom for long.

However, as the *muhurtham* for the inauguration approached, Raja Rao went up to Sandhya to fetch her for the *vighneswara pooja*. Sensing that she was putting Saroja to sleep on the *divan*, he signaled her to make it quick. When Sandhya came out the couple performed the *pooja* with Roopa in attendance and after the *prasadam* was distributed in the gathering, Raja Rao took the floor.

While thanking those present for gracing the occasion, he wished those who didn't turn up till then, would be joining soon. Reading out their resume, he introduced his partners, in turn. He was sandwiched, he said in jest, between Sandhya, the *malikin* at the house and Roopa, the boss at the office. That is why, he claimed, Integral Architects could be expected to be equally competent in handling homes as well as offices. In Aslam, he said, he found a competent drafter and that Narasaiah was courtesy personified. He hoped that their young team would come up to the expectations of their esteemed clientele.

At the auspicious time, Ranga Reddy was accorded the honor to unveil the name-plate, symbolizing the inauguration of the enterprise. When requested, Subba Reddy gladly put the drafting table to use, as a mark of the commencement of work. Ranga Reddy, in his address, recalled how he was impressed with Raja Rao when they first met. He said it was owing to his confidence in Raja Rao that he turned a realtor. He hoped that his Build Well Ltd. and Integral Architects would combine to contribute to the growth of Hyderabad.

Subba Reddy, who followed him, said that he was a man of few words, and the two words he had for Raja Rao were - account transferred.

One by one, everyone left after refreshments, leaving the staff and Sathyam behind with the core group. While Roopa was assisting Aslam to move the drafting table by the window, Sandhya tried to pacify Saroja, who had woken up by then. In time, when Narasaiah began to clear the rubbish, Sathyam went to Mahaveer Studio with the exposed film rolls. Shortly thereafter, to Roopa's delight, Tara showed up.

'Congrats,' she gave Roopa a large bouquet.

'I owe it to her,' Roopa passed it on to Sandhya.

'And I do to him!' Sandhya gave it to Raja Rao.

'How handsome,' said Tara, and added after a pause, 'your partnership is.'

'Thanks for coming,' said Raja Rao.

'I'm happy that Roopa is in the right company,' said Tara, 'and she deserves it.'

'Come on,' Roopa whisked Tara away, 'I'll take you around.'

'Why do you feel so insecure?' whispered Tara, following Roopa.

'Are you not a *femme fatale*, isn't that enough?' said Roopa in jest.

'Not of your grade anyway,' said Tara, taking Roopa's hand. 'I'm glad your patience has paid off.'

'Facilitated by your timely help,' said Roopa reminiscently.

When Tara entered the anteroom, Roopa stood embarrassed at the threshold.

'It should be okay,' smiled Tara, lying on the divan. 'What do you say?'

'You're impossible,' smiled Roopa.

'When's the lunch break?' Tara winked at Roopa.

'Oh, you,' said Roopa in all coyness.

'Where's the 'Don't Disturb' board?' said Tara, as she mock searched under the *divan*.

'It's on the way,' said Roopa in jest, and put Tara back into circulation.

As Tara got up to leave in time, said Sandhya to her, 'Do drop in as you please.'

'It would be my pleasure,' said Tara, squeezing Roopa's hand, 'if Roopa permits.'

'As if you're a sort to wait for one,' said Roopa teasing.

The next day, during the lunch hour, when Raja Rao led Roopa into the ante-room, she turned apprehensive, though she looked forward to it with all her craving.

'It could be risky,' she said.

'Isn't it worth it,' he said, pulling her into his lap, 'even at the cost of life itself.'

‘Why no bolster?’ she said stretching herself on the *divan*.

‘With your chignon,’ he said lying by her side, ‘I thought you won’t need one.’

‘Sandhya too says,’ she said, eagerly pushing his head on to her breast, ‘it goes well with me.’

‘Thank God, we’ve a place for us,’ he said, unbuttoning her blouse. ‘It would have been hellish otherwise.’

‘A homely office really,’ she said in relief. ‘What if Sandhya smells our homeliness?’

‘That’s what we want, don’t we?’ he said smiling, leading her on the amorous path of their fulfillment.

‘A married woman might enjoy her domineering role at home,’ thought Roopa, as they came out of the ante-room at length. ‘But in liaison, being submissive to her paramour, won’t she enjoy the joy of surrender. Won’t that make liaison a singular affair?’

In time, everything fell into a groove at the office and in their homes as well. Sandhya hired a girl to assist her in coping up with Saroja. Raja Rao would ride to the office on his Bullet with Sandhya at nine, leaving behind Saroja at home. Roopa would walk down to the office in time, after seeing off Sathyam with the lunch-box. Aslam and Narasaiah would report for duty on time, for Raja Rao was a stickler for time. While Aslam was always found rooted to his drafting table, for the most part Narasaiah was out on errands.

So to feed Saroja, Sandhya would head home at sharp eleven. And at the stroke of one she reaches the office with lunch-box for the three of them. Aslam, however, was wont to leave a little early for his *namaaz*, on his way home for lunch. Having savored the meal with her man and mate, Sandhya would leave the office by one-thirty, to be at home to suckle Saroja. Raja Rao would schedule his meetings to ensure his lunchtime presence for lovemaking in the office. While it was back to work for the rest of them by two-thirty, Sandhya, after siesta, would come back at three-thirty.

The synchronous harmony of their lifestyle enabled the couple and their lover live in ecstatic fulfillment.

12

While the work at the office gripped Roopa, the weight she came to wield there buttressed her self-worth. After all, Raja Rao came to depend on her for she readily picked up the work with her quick grasp. Besides attending to the office accounts, she helped him at structural calculations as well. As though to prove that she shared his passion for

construction, she traced the building plans that he had conceived. Indeed, she was heady with life.

It was in the midst of such a time, which Raja Rao called honeytime that he had to go to Madras for a week. At that, missing Raja Rao's passion, Roopa felt as if she were left in the cold, in spite of her physical intimacy with Sathyam, not to speak of her amorous time with Sandhya. Thus, it didn't take long for her to realize how her own fulfillment came to be pinned upon Raja Rao. Thus, by the time he returned, she was mad and eager.

However, as luck would have it, the day he returned, Sandhya, who brought them lunch, brought Saroja to the lovers' surprise. When Sandhya revealed that the housemaid had gone to the matinee with a friend of hers who came from Khammam, they felt let down. In time, with Sandhya around, the dismay of the vexed lovers began to vent itself in varied ways. At length, Sandhya noticed that Raja Rao turned irritable while Roopa remained morose.

'What's wrong?' she asked Roopa.

'Why, nothing,' replied Roopa.

Seeing Raja Rao berate Aslam on a trivial issue, Sandhya tried to calm him down.

'What's troubling you,' Sandhya said in surprise, 'that too after having bagged such a prestigious contract!'

'Oh, I'm sorry,' he said.

'Is it a mere coincidence that both of them are off color at the same time?' contemplated Sandhya. 'Isn't it clear that something is troubling them both? What it could be? Are they in love and in heat as well? Isn't it possible that they're having sex here in my absence? Now my untimely presence on top of a week's abstinence is what might be irritating them, isn't it? So it seems, they've made it to the post sooner than I expected. Why not I have a dig at them then?'

'Did you cash in the cheque, Roopa?' Sandhya whispered in her mate's ears.

'Which one you're talking about?' said a surprised Roopa.

'Why, that blank one I gave you,' said Sandhya, teasingly.

'But when was that?'

'You may recall the next time he withdraws it,' said Sandhya smilingly, and went up to Raja Rao, leaving a perplexed Roopa behind.

'I know why you're out of sorts.'

'Don't be silly,' he said in irritation.

‘More so now,’ said Sandhya.

‘What do you mean?’ he said getting subdued.

‘When not in the right slot one goes out of sorts, doesn’t one?’ said Sandhya mysteriously.

‘Oh, my lovely little genius, why don’t you write a thesis on that?’ he said managing a smile,

‘Why not, with so much material around,’ she said smilingly. ‘Let me see if that interests Roopa as well.’

While Roopa’s wanting remained unfulfilled for the day, Sandhya’s romanticism ensured Raja Rao’s fulfillment in that night. However, the next day, as the eager couple came out of the ante-room, they felt as if they had sex for the first time in their life. But a few days later, at the sound of the buzzer, fearing exposure, they were benumbed in their lovemaking.

‘What to do?’ Roopa whispered, instinctively covering herself.

‘Let’s not respond,’ he said in undertone.

‘What if it’s Sandhya?’ she said, worried.

‘Let me go and see,’ he said getting dressed at length.

However, while he came back relieved, she was only partially dressed.

‘Thank God. I escaped the quarantine,’ she said in relief, but added in apprehension, ‘I’m afraid we may not be lucky next time.’

‘There’s the Murphy’s Law to back your fears,’ he smiled.

‘It’s no laughing matter,’ she said in all nervousness, ‘If it is Sathyam, it is death, and if it’s Sandhya, then it’s shame though it seems she has guessed it.’

‘I too think so,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘It’s time that we seduce her into threesome.’

‘How I would love that day,’ she said, as she hugged him in hope, ‘nay, that night.’

However, as the buzzer never sounded again during their escapades, their fear of exposure was evaporated in the heat of their passion and so the urgency to rope in Sandhya into their orgies receded.

As the business improved, Raja Rao was getting bogged down at the office until seven, however, freeing his women by five. Back at Sandhya’s place, the mates were wont to melt in each other’s arms. The feeling that her husband was also enjoying her lover gave the cutting edge to Sandhya’s amour and as if to augment her lover’s pleasure with her mate later, with all her ardor, Roopa was ever eager to make love to her mate. As their fondness for their man grew, they were ever closer with each other in their lesbian domain and since

Sathyam too was keeping late hours at the Secretariat, the mates began to keep themselves in their arms for longer hours.

‘My lovey!’ resting in Roopa’s lap, said Sandhya that evening, ‘what a life!’

‘A love filled one,’ said Roopa, fondling Sandhya’s breasts.

‘Yet with yearning,’ said Sandhya winking at Roopa, ‘isn’t it?’

At that having looked into Sandhya’s eyes intently, Roopa buried her head into her mate’s bosom endearingly.

‘Take it easy,’ said Sandhya in all smiles, moving her finger meaningfully in Roopa’s erotic essence.

‘Make it hard now,’ said Roopa in ecstasy.

The affection Roopa felt for Saroja catered to her innate sense of womanly want. Fondling the baby, she experienced a motherly fulfillment as well. Whenever Saroja smiled in her lap, wanting to mother her sibling subconsciously, Roopa felt spasms in her womb. The mood at the office too was upbeat for them all. Even as Ranga Reddy’s ambitious ventures were rising to the skies one by one, Subba Reddy’s new contracts were wearing the drafting table a little bit more. New clients too were trooping in, making Raja Rao think in terms of expansion. Thanks to the word of mouth, Sandhya too was busy with the decor of the posh bungalows of Banjara Hills. And all that made it a dance and dinner in Roopa’s life.

13

That evening, as they were calling it day at Integral Architects, Narasaiah brought the disturbing news of a communal commotion in the old city.

The walled city of Hyderabad on the banks of the Musi, built in the 16th Century by Quli Qutub Shah around the Charminar, is a predominantly Muslim populated part of the modern metropolis. As the legend has it, Shah built the place to commemorate his love for Bhagmathi, his Hindu beloved, and named it Bhagyanagar. Manned for most part by the Muslims, His Court felt that a Hindu name for a Muslim capital would be a misnomer, and thus proclaimed it as Hyderabad for the posterity. Ironically, as history witnessed, the Hindu mind and the Muslim psyche failed to fuse with the spirit of love that brought the place into being. Instead, they preferred to imbibe the theory of the Court that the Hindu character and the Muslim identity are things apart.

‘It seems some pork was thrown into the Mecca Masjid,’ reported Narasaiah, ‘and the Muslims suspect a Hindu hand behind the defilement.’

‘That might spell trouble after all,’ said a worried Aslam. ‘But why do they provoke the Muslim sentiment at all?’

‘The fact, that the mere presence of pork in a mosque or beef in a temple could trigger a communal riot in our country speaks for itself,’ articulated Raja Rao. ‘There’s no denying that either way it hurts the hyper-religious, and it’s precisely for that reason that the mischief mongers from both the communities resort to such acts. If we allow such symbolic hurt to trigger a communal riot, it’s like walking into the trap laid by the cunning con men or the religious zealots. Everyone knows that the silent majority is peace loving and law abiding; not that they are spiritually enlightened or religiously tolerant. It’s just that all realize that orderliness serves their self-interest the best. But, thanks to the machinations of the mischievous few, all get engulfed in the communal frenzy. Regrettably, the politicians too developed a proclivity to fan religious passions to create vote banks for themselves.’

‘What’s the way out then?’ asked Sandhya.

‘Oh, there seems to be none really,’ articulated Raja Rao. ‘But common sense might help one to reach out to others across the boundaries of religious biases. Let’s take the present incident. Even assuming that it’s the handiwork of a couple of Hindus, can one say that all the Hindus of the city are behind it? But for all that, it could as well be the handiwork of a demented Muslim. The Muslims might rightly be outraged by the sacrilege, but won’t the Hindus themselves be wary about the tasteless deed? Instead of getting at each other’s throats, won’t it make sense for all to collectively voice their common consternation? If only we could do that, the miscreants from both the communities would realize that there’s no ground left for them to foment trouble.’

‘But who’s to take the lead?’ asked Aslam.

‘Who else but the middle- class as the pigheaded religious heads have failed the masses,’ said Raja Rao, ‘Partly, the problem lies in the tendency of those that tend to give a public face to their private faith. And that makes the others suspicious about their religious intentions and personal inclinations.’

‘Is it to suggest that the Muslims should desert their mosques?’ asked Aslam.

‘Who says that, but all should downplay the manifestations of their faith in the public arena at least,’ said Raja Rao. ‘Maybe, more than the others, the Muslims need to do a lot more social re-engineering for their own good.’

‘We, Muslims who believe there is but one God, can’t religiously relate to the Hindus who worship at the altars of so many gods,’ said Aslam. ‘That’s the source of the discord to begin with, something like an ideological dispute.’

‘If that’s the case, the Christians too believe that the God is one,’ said Raja Rao. ‘But still there were those crusades against the Muslims. But then, how can God be one, when all religions have their own One! As for the Gods in our religion, I would say without meaning any offence to other faiths, there’s no contradiction in that. As the modern organization has evolved round department heads, it seems to me that our ancient religion conceptualized various Gods for specific functions governing the Hindu destiny.’

‘But it’s the Hindu idolatry that is at odds with Islam,’ commented Aslam.

‘Well, religion is an emotion peculiar to the humans, the sensitivity of which increases in the face of criticism from those of the other faiths,’ said Raja Rao. ‘We, Hindus, feel incensed when others tend to reduce us to idol worshippers. The essence of Hindu *dharmā* is *aham brahmasmi brahma* - God is but the self of man. Where is the question of idol worship then? Our bowing before our deities is only a symbolism of our submission to the *paramatma*, that is, God. Being ignorant of this Hindu nuance of our devotional ethos, those professing the Semitic faiths naively take it as idol worship.’

‘Moreover, our deities impart form to the god we seek solace from, and thus help us stay focused in our prayer to Him,’ continued Raja Rao. ‘By way of an example, we can all recall the features of our beloved ones in their absence. But when we look at their pictures, won’t our emotions for them get focused in our minds. It’s time others realize that what they misconstrue as idol worship is but a Hindu way of concentrating on God. Besides, we the Hindus need distinctive images to envision our concept of God’s *avataars*. All the same, hasn’t the so called idolatry insensibly seeped into the religious ethos of Christianity and Islam as well? Won’t that prove, if proof were ever needed, that when it comes to spirituality, imagery comes naturally to man, and anything contrary, be it religious or be it ideological, is the pretence of the protagonists.’

‘Given the reality of human emotions,’ opined Roopa, ‘religious tolerance seems a mirage after all.’

‘Misplaced zeal for one’s faith and uncalled for bias against the other religions has been the bane of the humans,’ said Raja Rao. ‘It should be understood that no one can emotionally feel about a religion other than his own. If all realize this truth, then only it would bring about religious tolerance. Having said that, my intellectual perception of Hinduism and Islam is this: Hinduism is the most abstract of all religions, to comprehend which one needs a certain level of intellect, not common to the masses. This at once proved to be its strength as well as its weakness. The very character of their philosophy enables the Hindus to try to understand the *atma*, that is, the self. And this Hindu endeavor to understand the self brought about the evolution of a thought process of the highest order ever achieved by the humanity at large. On the other hand, the Aryan intellectual apartheid pushed the Hindu masses into abject ignorance, not to speak of poverty.’

‘Islam, on the other hand,’ continued Raja Rao, ‘is supposed to be a concise creed without any scope for ambiguity. It’s as though the faith was fashioned keeping in mind the intellectual limitations of the common man. Maybe, this clarity coupled with the egalitarian concept of its teachings could have led to the conversion of those Indian masses who were either unable to comprehend the precepts of the Hindu *dharma* or those oppressed by the prejudices of the caste order. But at the same time, this very virtue of definitiveness of Islam precludes any philosophical discourse about life, making it fundamentalist in its precept and practice.’

‘What do you think of Christianity?’ Narasaiah, a Christian convert, asked Raja Rao.

‘To my mind,’ said Raja Rao, ‘going by the progress made by its followers in shedding the dogmatic shackles, it’s the most dynamic of all religions. But its emphasis on sin is intriguing indeed.’

‘All religionists claim their religions preach peace,’ said Sandhya, ‘yet what governs the world is strife.’

‘That’s the paradox of the faiths,’ said Raja Rao in exasperation. ‘While one wails over the death of a co-religionist in a riot, the same person is indifferent to the slaughter of scores from the other community! But will it be a consolation for a woman who lost her man, that a dozen from the other faith were widowed in the same riot? Why, would ever wounds differentiate human bodies on religious lines to heal themselves? What else is religious strife but human stupidity?’

‘*Inshah Allah*,’ said Aslam, ‘let it subside without further trouble.’

What an irony that modern man, engaged as he is in the pursuit of knowledge, allows himself to be stymied by the dogmas of the Dark Ages, perpetrated as religious tenets.

14

When the curfew was lifted in the walled city across the Musi, it did seem that sanity was restored in the excited souls. Though the Hyderabadis began to venture tentatively to get back to their routine, the city was still tense in the emotional sense.

By two that afternoon, Raja Rao left for the Wahab Builders, in the bazaar near the Charminar, synonymous with the country's pearl trade. As Aslam availed a casual leave that day, and since one of the clients was pressing for the blue print, Roopa substituted as the drafter. As usual, Narasaiah was yet to return from an errand.

'Integral Architects,' Roopa answered the telephone call at three.

'It is Wahab calling. Tell Rao *saab* to stay back. There's rioting over here.'

'Oh, hasn't he reached?' said Roopa trembling. 'He left at two.'

'*Inshab Allah*,' said Wahab, 'he didn't cross the Musi.'

'Ask him to call us,' said Roopa almost inaudibly, 'as soon as he comes.'

'Oh surely,' Wahab hung up hurriedly.

Sandhya who just returned to work then, found Roopa pixilated, and at that she herself was perplexed.

'What's the matter with you?' Sandhya asked Roopa concernedly.

'Wahab rang up,' Roopa muttered incoherently, 'It seems they're rioting at Charminar.'

'Oh, Raja was supposed to go over there.'

'He hasn't reached there yet,' said Roopa, with tears flowing down her cheeks.

'Oh, God,' Sandhya swooned into Roopa's arms. 'If he's harmed, I would die.'

'So would I, that's for sure,' blurted out Roopa, as they wetted each others shoulders.

'Don't I know that, lovey,' said Sandhya wiping Roopa's tears, 'Hope God saves him for both of us.'

Unable to bear her anxiety as Sandhya sank into a chair, Roopa rushed to the phone to ring up Ranga Reddy, and relieved a little after talking to him, she told Sandhya that he promised to find out Raja Rao's whereabouts. Seeing Sandhya in shock, Roopa began cuddling her in silence, but driven by her own anxiety, every now and then, Roopa got up to ring up someone or the other, seeking their help to locate Raja Rao. However, Roopa's

updates such as, 'Subba Reddy had gone to Bangalore', 'Ranga Reddy went to the Police Control Room' seemed to fall on Sandhya's deaf ears.

But, exhausted by anxiety, and worn by despair, when Roopa herself dragged another chair to be near Sandhya, they found themselves locking their arms and staring at each other, drawing comfort from one another though without a word. When the telephone rang at four-thirty, Sandhya sprang up to her feet, but panicked to pick up the call.

'Sandhya here,' she said nervously, having lifted the receiver on the third ring.

'Raogaru is safe,' said Ranga Reddy, 'but he's injured.'

'Where is he now?' said Sandhya with relief, as Roopa rushed to her in delight. And as Roopa shoved her ear to the receiver, symbolizing the harmony of their love for their man, Sandhya shared it with her.

'He's at the OGH,' Ranga Reddy 'I'll pick you up around six after arranging curfew passes for you.'

'Didn't I tell you that he would be fine?' Roopa hugged Sandhya poignantly as Ranga Reddy hung up his phone.

'Why did you worry then?' said a smiling Sandhya in relief.

Roopa rested her relieved head on Sandhya's heaving bosom for an answer.

'So,' Sandhya patted Roopa's head.

'Can't you forgive me,' said Roopa, wetting Sandhya's blouse.

'Don't try to be smart,' said Sandhya teasing Roopa, while fondling her lovingly. 'Tell me the whole story, and then I'll see.'

'I'm sorry,' said Roopa, almost inaudibly. 'I just couldn't help it. I was fascinated the moment I saw him, and tried my best to restrain myself. But the more I tried to suppress my desire for him, the more I was drawn to him. I felt so miserable loving him that I wished I were dead. I became so insane in my longing for him that I lost all my sense of belonging to you. Blinded by my love, my conscience too failed me, and I didn't feel guilty, though you've trusted me.'

'Oh, lovey, why didn't you tell me before?' said Sandhya, moved herself.

'I just couldn't bring myself to it,' said Roopa, hugging Sandhya endearingly. 'Tell me; how am I to tell you that I was coveting your man? I always knew he too was attracted by me, but then, love is a different thing, isn't it? Just the same, I was living in the hope of being loved by him. Then came a time, when I felt that I was doomed by my unrequited love for him. But then, destiny seemingly dragged him into my longing arms. As you know,

triggered by your letter of concern for me, himself concerned, he came to me this August. Then, as Sathyam too was away, I could hold no more, and overwhelmed him with all my love and longing. Being his very own woman, you would understand what he could have given me in return for my overriding passion for him. Oh, how nice it feels that I too have some place in his heart, occupied for the most part by you. But, if at any time, should my presence in our love triangle irk you, I would withdraw from it without a word. Even then, I can live on, masticating the memories of his love and passion for me. Oh, won't all that last for a life time and more.'

'My lovey, how lovely!' said Sandhya. 'How I wish I were in your place. Well, it didn't take me long to realize that you loved each other, and won't be able to resist your urge for long. When I sensed that you're getting closer, I looked the other way, to let you experience the thrills of love in the making.'

'Oh,' Roopa kissed her, 'you're an angel, really.'

'But my love mad,' said Sandhya patting Roopa's head, 'why hide from me, even though I prompted you often enough? Don't you recall the 'blank cheque' episode and that 'take it easy' gesture?'

'How could I've missed those and more,' said Roopa scratching her head. 'But I couldn't dare, for the fear of losing your love as well as his. But at the time of Saroja's *barasala*, as you were forthright, I wanted to confess to you. But he only stopped me, fearing that a premature disclosure would hurt you no end. He felt that we should wait till you get used to the idea of our affair to make it easy for you.'

'Oh how handsome,' said Sandhya apparently pleased.

'Reward him,' said Roopa, winking at Sandhya, 'in threesome.'

Well before Ranga Reddy came as promised, fantasizing the presence of their man, the mates took their lesbian love to the frontiers of ecstatic bliss.

In time, as they began to wait for Ranga Reddy to come, Sandhya remembered about Sathyam.

'How I totally forgot about him!' said Roopa.

'In the triangular moment of our life,' Sandhya whispered into Roopa's ear mirthfully, 'where's the corner left for any?'

'But our man wants me to accommodate my man in my corner,' said Roopa.

‘Really,’ said Sandhya in delight, ‘Oh, what a man we have for us, lovey. Oh, how different he is from all other men. Won’t a paramour tend to wean the wife away from her man? Now, I see why Sathyam is so happy.’

‘Oh darling,’ said Roopa, ‘that’s why I don’t suffer any qualms about deceiving Sathyam, as it’s my affair with Raja that enables me to carry some love into his life.’

‘Oh, Roopa, how strange are your twin affairs!’ said Sandhya in contemplation, ‘While our affair lifts my soul, your liaison with my man, enables your man breathe easy.’

When Ranga Reddy arrived at length, not finding Sathyam at home, they left a message for him with Lalitha, and set out to see their man in the new dawn of their love life. In time, when they reached the Osmania General Hospital, they found Raja Rao, still unconscious.

‘You’re lucky really,’ said Dr. Wazir Ahmed. ‘Though the injury was minor, it was still critical. Luckily, he was brought in time, and soon he’ll be fine.’

‘Doctor,’ said Sandhya, taking Dr. Wazir Ahmed’s hand, ‘we would forever be indebted to you.’

‘Thank you,’ said the doctor graciously, ‘but we only did our duty.’

‘Can we shift him to the Gaganmahal Nursing Home, near their home?’ enquired Ranga Reddy.

‘You can take him there tomorrow,’ said the good doctor.

‘You know I need Roopa,’ said Sandhya to Ranga Reddy. ‘Please ask Sathyam to take care of Saroja.’

‘Don’t worry about all that,’ said Ranga Reddy.

‘Don’t fail to seek Sathyam’s *ex post facto* sanction for my absence,’ said Roopa to Ranga Reddy, as an afterthought.

After his system had shed the anesthetic effect towards eleven that night, Raja Rao regained his consciousness. Seeing both his women, on either side, he involuntarily stretched his hands towards them. It seemed to them that it was as though to bring about a rapprochement between them. Even as they warmed them with their tears, he felt gratified as both of them showered kisses on his hands.

‘Don’t you forgive us,’ he muttered to Sandhya, at length, having savored them for long in silence.

‘What for is the forgiveness?’ Sandhya smiled.

‘You are an angel,’ he pressed her hand feebly.

'How dare you slight her?' smiled Sandhya.

'Oh God, I've got to be on guard or what!' he said in jest. 'Haven't I asked for it?'

'Don't worry, as a loyal wife,' said Sandhya to him, as she took Roopa's hand, 'I'll stand guard at the ante-room.'

'How cute, but won't we drag you in, for more of our fulfillment,' he said in all happiness. 'But why do you keep mum, Roopa?'

'Oh, I'm benumbed with joy,' said Roopa.

'What about your guilt then?' he smiled.

'It all got dissolved,' said Roopa fondling Sandhya's hand, 'in our tears of joy.'

'How I love her romanticism,' he said, turning to Sandhya, 'as well as her ardency.'

'Don't I know, myself being her first lover,' smiled Sandhya, and whispered. 'She had me, much before you held my hand.'

'Oh, I thought I needed to goad you into it,' he pulled them towards himself. 'How lovely there is no need for rehearsals.'

'Sure you would find it thrilling,' whispered Sandhya into his ears.

'Hope, it's not a ringside view,' he smiled.

'Won't your virility,' said Roopa coyly, 'drive you into our arenas?'

'I'm all eager,' said Sandhya mirthfully, 'for our orgies.'

'Oh, lying in a pool of blood, how my heart bled for both of you in turns?' he said reminiscently. 'How lucky I am to survive that ordeal. Had I died, how would I have tasted all that's in store for us? But, what a frightening experience it was, really!'

'Why think about all that now?' said Sandhya persuasively.

'Where's Saroja?' he asked, at length.

'Don't worry about her,' said Sandhya. 'She's in Sathyam's care.'

'Honestly, I didn't think I would live to narrate my nightmare,' he said with an apparent relief. 'It's a miracle to be with you again.'

'You can talk all about that,' said Roopa, trying to restrain him, 'when it would have become a distant memory.'

That night, keeping vigil over their man that united them in their love for him, the mates didn't wink even for a moment. However, by the time Ranga Reddy came along with Subba Reddy towards mid-day, what with Raja Rao, raring to go, they were as fresh as the flowers at dawn.

'*Raogaru*' said Subba Reddy, 'what a fright you gave us all.'

‘If not for Ranga Reddygaru,’ said Sandhya ‘we could have gone mad by now.’

‘After all, it’s a minimum human courtesy,’ said Ranga Reddy.

‘Don’t tell me about human courtesies as I had seen the visage of inhumanity at close quarters,’ said Raja Rao, brushing aside Sandhya’s protests. ‘When I was a few feet away from Wahab’s office, some Hindu hooligans seeking out the Muslims for slaughter, accosted me. Oh, I was so dazed by the frenzy of those hate-merchants, that some of them felt I could be a Muslim in fright. After stripping me naked, to confirm my religion via circumcision, they advised me to run for safety. I was too shaken to comprehend whether I should thank the foreskin for having saved my skin, or feel ashamed of the crassness of my co-religionists. Then, hardly could I cross the street, when I ran into a Muslim mob that was after the Hindu blood. Before I could utter a word, someone stabbed me in my stomach. As I ran for life, with the shouts of ‘death for the *kafir*’, they chased me like a stray dog. When they were about to close in on me, I slumped to the ground, and taking me for dead, they left for good. As I lay in a pool of blood, I craved for life, while cursing the religions. Now, I vaguely remember to have been picked up by a police patrol. And as you know, Dr. Wazir Ahmed, and others here, retrieved me from the jaws of death.’

‘Why don’t you relax?’ Roopa tried to persuade him.

‘The wound I received at the Muslim hand is bound to heal in time,’ said Raja Rao regardless. ‘But the humiliation I felt amidst the Hindu mob would be hard to obliterate from my memory.’

‘This is the ugly face of these two great religions,’ said Dr. Wazir Ahmed stoically.

‘My good doctor, to say that all religions are great is a quid pro quo,’ said Raja Rao excitedly. ‘Well, the followers of all religions feel great about their faith. If not, how would they become believers in the first place? But, if we were to go by the static inscriptions of their scriptures, then, the one common drawback with all the religions is the diktat to conform to their unique dogmas. In the guise of preaching goodwill, all faiths effectually divide humanity on religious lines. Isn’t it the villainy of religion?’

‘On the other hand,’ he continued, after having some glucose water that Sandhya gave him, ‘should the behavioral pattern of the followers be the criterion to judge the greatness of a religion, don’t we find that all faiths are equally wanting? How can any religion claim to be great when it fails to inculcate human values in its own followers? Oh, it’s but the poverty of thought that veils us from the fallacy of the faiths.’

‘But then,’ said the doctor, ‘are there not good people in all faiths.’

‘That’s due to the diversity of human nature, said Raja Rao, ‘and not owing to any religious conditioning of human character.’

‘The trauma of the event could be but a passing sentence in the history of man,’ philosophized Ranga Reddy, ‘and life, except for the dead, would go on, on the familiar course.’

‘You can take him now,’ said Dr. Wazir Ahmed, after checking up Raja Rao’s condition all over again. ‘This is the case history for reference.’

15

Having thanked the doctors and the staff profusely, Raja Rao left the Osmania General Hospital with his family and friends for recuperation at the Gaganmahal Nursing Home. Once he was admitted there, he was gripped by an urge to see Saroja, and once Sathyam fetched her soon enough, he held her, as if he were clasping to his life itself.

‘How pleasurable it is to live?’ Raja Rao said, turning to Sathyam and seeing him visibly moved, he thanked him for his concern and expressed his regret for having detained his wife.

Towards the evening that day, Aslam came with tears in his eyes and a bouquet in his hand. Narasaiah, on hand, then narrated the tale, as if he were the eyewitness to the happenings.

‘*Inshah Allah*,’ said Aslam holding Raja Rao’s hand, ‘you will live long sir.’

‘I heard there was some problem at Musheerabad as well,’ said Raja Rao.

‘True, there were a couple of stabbings here and there,’ said Aslam in all emotion. ‘The saddest part of it all is that people go by rumors. It was said that the Musi turned red with the Muslim blood and that was enough to spur some of the Muslims in of our locality to goad others to join the *jihad*, for Islam was in danger. I wonder why the faithful fail to realize that Allah is all-powerful to protect Islam on His own. And being merciful, He wouldn’t approve killing people in the name of Islam. It’s sad that the thoughtless outrage of a few brings a bad name to our faith as a whole. If only the Muslim who stabbed you knows what a good human being you are, he wouldn’t have harmed your little finger.’

‘The communal jaundice colors our vision with the bigotry of our faith, to project hateful images of the people of other religions,’ said Raja Rao. ‘It pays to be more humane and less religious, as, the more religious one is, the more biased one would be.’

When Roopa was alone with Raja Rao, she told him that Sathyam was accommodated in that very room after his operation. At that, they reminisced how wretched they felt, unable to have a longing look at each other, owing to the patient's presence. And having recounted the tale of her anxiety after his sudden departure, she told him about the 'one line love letter' of hers that she kept ready for him then. At that, a visibly moved Raja Rao vouched his eternal love for her.

However, as his recuperation at the GNH took longer than it was expected, Raja Rao turned apprehensive about the possible fall out from Roopa's long hours at the hospital.

'If you hang around here this long,' he said to her that day, 'Sathyam could become suspicious.'

'Don't worry about that,' she said coolly. 'He himself asked me to assist you, as long as it takes. Why, when push comes to shove, won't I walk over him to walk into your home? Don't you know that Sandhya has kept the door open for me?'

'What courage!' he was amazed.

'What's love without that?' she cooed in his ear.

'How true,' he said, 'but sadly, it's jealousy that spoils love.'

'Jealousy is the device that denies man the divinity of love,' she said contemplatively. 'I wonder how our Sandhya is an exception! An angel, indeed she is.'

'How well you've put it,' he said, pressing her hand. 'You right you are about our dear.'

'And love can be the failing,' she said looking at him fondly, 'of the divine even.'

'But, only those who are in love would realize that,' he said patting her affectionately.

'It's not that I'm being good and all, but I feel our union is indeed great. I realized that, on that D-Day, that August day, even as I was desperate in having you to have a feel of sexual love,' she said, reminiscing about their first night's togetherness,

'Oh! Roopa!' exclaimed Raja Rao. 'Wasn't that day as much a Divine Day as it was the Deliverance Day?'

16

For the first anniversary of her D-Day that August, Roopa was dead set to be in Tirupati with her lovers. However, as she was clueless about keeping her man away from their love triangle, she got reconciled to Sathyam's ironical presence at her thanksgiving.

That afternoon, as Sathyam was helping Roopa pack their luggage, Rami Reddy, his department head, sent for him.

‘Yes sir,’ said Sathyam to Rami Reddy, having cursed him all the way to the Secretariat.

‘I’m sorry Sathyam,’ Rami Reddy sounded apologetic. ‘I have to cancel your leave.’

‘Why sir!’ said Sathyam dumbfounded. ‘You know, I’m going to Tirupathi with my family and friends.’

‘Don’t I understand,’ said Rami Reddy sympathetically, ‘but then, Nagaraju wants to talk to us about those World Bank Tenders.’

‘But sir, they’re due for opening only the coming Friday,’ said Sathyam pleading. ‘And I’ll be back by Wednesday itself.’

‘You know Nagaraju speaks for the Finance Minister, and no less,’ said Rami Reddy. ‘There’s ‘no way I can let you go now.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Sathyam helplessly.

‘Six sharp at 206, Royal Hotel,’ said Rami Reddy.

‘Oh, these are the inconveniences of life in the service,’ Sathyam thought, on his way back home. ‘Had I been into some business, wouldn’t I have been my own boss, as Raja Rao is? I should make a fast buck and start on my own soon. Obviously, Nagaraju would like the World Bank Works awarded to the Finance Minister’s *benami* firms. Oh, how could there be any hanky-panky in the open tenders? Well, the meeting won’t serve any purpose save for the record. And the boss knows that as well. All the same, Nagaraju would pressurize boss, and he wants to use me as a cushion, that’s all. Besides, won’t he want to be seen as trying his best, to be in the good books of the powers that be? And that’s why all this *tamaasba*. But surely Roopa won’t like it. Won’t she be dejected at yet another cancellation? Surely she would curse me, and drop out herself in frustration. What about Sandhya? Well, she was no less excited about the trip. Better that I let Roopa go along with them. At least, let them all have a good time.’

When at five in the evening, as the Sathyams and the Raja Raos reached Nampally Station, said Sathyam to Roopa, ‘Let me cancel my ticket.’

‘It’s with him,’ Roopa pointed to Raja Rao.

‘Give that to me,’ said Roopa to Sathyam as he took the ticket from Raja Rao. ‘It might take a long time for you in the gents’ queue.’

‘Perhaps it’s God’s wish to bless our Amorous Triangle in His Shrine itself,’ Roopa thought joyously, joining the queue for appearances sake. ‘Let this be the ticket for our orgies, in the bogie to begin with. Won’t we manage the TTE to keep that extra berth of privacy for us? Once he’s through with his checking business and all, we could lock the

cabin for the night. Can't this be the Lord's very own blessing for our lovemaking? While I wanted thanksgiving at Tirupati for that night of my life, the Lord seems to grant us orgies in His precincts no less. Does that mean our love has the sanction of the heavens? Who knows that anyway, but how is our affair taken on this earth?'

'Oh, how people wear moral blinkers, of the well-worn kind,' she felt, as her thought process had brought her face-to-face with the reality of life. 'The irony of it all is that, in spite of censure by the moralists, life tends to evolve in tandem with the ever changing human condition. Of course, they all start on the sly only to set the trend in the end. Once it comes into vogue, the new pattern becomes the value of the times, picked up by the world as the moral mantra of the era. That's all about the across the board morals, which fail to take into account the individual compulsions in the changing times. Thus, it makes sense for one to draw one's own boundary of ethics, of course, aided by a compass of reason, with the needle of equity that is.'

Buoyed by that new found feeling, Roopa left the booking counter and rejoined the Raja Raos and Sathyam. In time, they moved their luggage into the first class coupe for four. As though the driver was pushed by their urge for orgies, he blew the horn unceasingly, forcing the guard to show the green light. Thus, as that Rayalaseema Express began to move, waving off his wife and friends, Sathyam stepped out of the railway station, and stepped into the Royal Hotel across the road.

'Sorry Sathyam^{gam},' Nagaraju greeted Sathyam apologetically, 'for not fixing our meeting in a star hotel. But you know we might get noticed in any.'

'That suits me fine,' said Sathyam. 'Why, my boss hasn't come yet? Won't old habits die hard?'

At that, as the buzzer sounded, Nagaraju reached for the latch.

'Oh, you'll live a hundred years,' Nagaraju welcomed Rami Reddy. 'We were just talking about you only.'

'Sorry Sathyam,' said Rami Reddy, 'for spoiling your party.'

'That's all right sir,' said Sathyam. 'But what am I to do now?'

'Don't you know,' Nagaraju said dreamily, 'that all eyes are on the three World Bank Tenders?'

'How I wish your bids turn out to be L-1s,' said Rami Reddy resignedly. 'You know they're all Open Tenders.'

‘But the FM has high hopes on you,’ said Nagaraju to set the ball rolling. ‘He believes you could find some ways and means to put them into his pocket. Any way, it won’t be any favor but for barter that is.’

‘How kind of him,’ said Rami Reddy, and added throwing up his arms in the air, ‘but you know the procedures are all *pucca*.’

‘The FM wants you to work out on the tactics,’ said Nagaraju as though to lighten Rami Reddy’s burden. ‘And he’s ready to take care of the logistics.’

‘To my mind at least, to say the least, the procedures are foolproof and are not amenable to any twists and turns,’ said Rami Reddy, and turned to Sathyam as though wanting him to second his opinion. ‘What do you say Sathyam?’

You’re right sir,’ said Sathyam, unable to find a way through the tangle.

‘Accommodation in the Limited Tenders,’ continued Rami Reddy, ‘and passing the bills out of turn, are different anyway. Aren’t we managing them for you all the way?’

‘And that’s why it’s peanuts for you, thus far,’ said Nagaraju enticingly. ‘But get us these mega projects, and have a million each.’

‘Even if we click,’ said Rami Reddy, as though to raise the stakes, ‘it might lead us to the remand in the end.’

‘Well, to cover all risks,’ said Nagaraju falling for the bite, ‘you both can have an extra million each.’

‘Don’t mistake my saying that,’ said Sathyam to Nagaraju, ‘but when it comes to settling the accounts, invariably it’s all about excuses. Why, I know people shying away from parting with farthings.’

‘I appreciate that,’ said Nagaraju as though the deal was about to be signed and sealed. ‘Show us a foolproof plan and take fifty percent in advance, and the balance will be yours after the tenders are opened, but before you leave the office. And that should satisfy you.’

‘Tempting, though it is,’ Rami Reddy thought aloud, ‘I don’t see how we can pull it off.’

‘As you’re involved with the Tender Openings for more than a year now,’ said Nagaraju to Sathyam, ‘I hope you could see us through.’

‘I didn’t apply my mind to that,’ said Sathyam thoughtfully, ‘but on the face of it, given the stringent procedures, it looks a tough ask though.’

‘When the drink gets into the system,’ said Nagaraju opening the Johnny Walker with the black label, ‘it might throw up an idea or two, wouldn’t it?’

‘Anyway, it’s stupid not to give it a try,’ said Rami Reddy. ‘Sathyam, let’s review the whole process, and see if we can find any loopholes.’

‘Sir, as you know,’ Sathyam recounted the tender procedure, ‘at the scheduled time, the sealed tenders are opened with the bidders all present there. Even as they watch with their eagle eyes, of course from some distance, I sort out the documents, and encircle the bid figures of each of them. Then I place them all before the committee members for their signature. After that, as the gathered take note of them, I read out all the bids, one by one. The L-1 thus, would be an open secret by the time I would have announced the last bid. On the other hand, if we try to favor a higher bid, then, as you know, all hell would break loose.’

‘Why not we change the topic?’ said Rami Reddy, as if in conclusion. ‘You can report the matter to the minister, appended with my apologies. He might try his luck with the Tender Evaluation Committee.’

‘Why give up, when half the bottle is still for the taking,’ said Nagaraju, more out of hope than any expectation. But at length, when they all came down to the dregs, Sathyam said dreamily, ‘If only the Tender Committee chooses to look the other way, take it from me that the projects are already in FM’s pocket.’

‘Really!’ exclaimed Nagaraju, as his eyeballs almost came out of their sockets, as if to probe Sathyam’s mind. ‘Oh, come on, reveal the plot and leave the rest to me. If only you we can even put the blind on the committee.’

While Nagaraju laughed heartily at his own joke, Rami Reddy was piqued by his subordinate’s one-upmanship.

‘Let me see if it’s workable,’ said Rami Reddy, bogged down by his failure to come up with something on his own, but not with any idea to examine what Sathyam might bring on to the table. Any way, he was far too inebriated by then to comprehend much of what was happening then.

‘To start with,’ announced Sathyam, ‘FM’s tenders would have blank bids.’

‘What!’ Nagaraju exclaimed in surprise.

‘Only to turn into L-1s,’ said Sathyam with a triumphant look, ‘in the end.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Rami Reddy dismissively.

‘Why, let him explain,’ said Nagaraju, looking hopeful, ‘how that is possible.’

‘If only the committee members authenticate your tenders without bids,’ Sathyam unfolded the plan, ‘won’t I then turn them into legal L-1s at the end of the day?’

‘But how?’ said Nagaraju.

‘Once the committee turns blind to the blank spaces, and signs on the dotted lines,’ said Sathyam, assuming a measured tone, ‘I would place each of your tenders at the bottom of the respective piles. Then, for a given project, as I read out the bid figures of all the tenders from top to bottom, at every stage, I would make a mental note the prevailing L-1. Thus, in the end, as I pick up your empty tender lying at the bottom, I can utter the bid amount, lower than the lowest. Well, Nagarajugaru should be alert to note the figures I blurt out for all the three jobs. Once we’re done with the crowd, won’t we have all the time in the world to insert the lowest bids in those empty circles on our tenders? Now tell me, what do you think of the coup in the making?’

‘Brilliant,’ exclaimed Nagaraju.

‘Workable,’ said Rami Reddy.

‘There would be a few loose ends to tie up though,’ said Sathyam, with a top-of-the-world feeling. ‘For matching the typeface on the tenders on the whole, we need to use the same typewriter all through. We should buy a machine for our office, but before we take it in, we’ll use it for typing the bid-less tenders at my place. Thus, after the tender opening, as we fill in the blanks on that machine in our office, the typeface would come clean, even under the microscope. As a way of extreme precaution, on both the occasions, we might use the same typewriter ribbon. That would ensure that even God wouldn’t get a wind of our manipulation.’

‘This to say the least,’ said Nagaraju missing the point in his excitement, ‘it’s a Sherlock Holmes’ stuff really.’

‘You can take care of the typewriter and all,’ said Rami Reddy enthusiastically to Sathyam. ‘Put up a note tomorrow itself for my approval.’

‘Oh, unbelievable!’ exclaimed Nagaraju confidently, ‘Now the three biggest ever civil works would come our way. Isn’t it as good as that? All we’ve got to do now is to put in place a pliable committee to do our bidding. But that’s a child’s play for the FM. Well, you will get your million each by tomorrow evening, sealed and delivered at home.’

‘It’s time we left,’ suggested Rami Reddy.

As he headed home in ecstasy, Sathyam was jubilant in his exuberance.

‘Rupees two million for my billion dollar idea,’ he thought excitedly, ‘wasn’t that brilliant? Oh, it’s nothing short of genius, really. Why, it’s almost a revelation! A couple of blank bids to follow, and won’t I show the Prasads of the world their rightful place? If only

I could tell all this to Roopa, she would have an idea about her husband's grey matter. How sad it is that neither I can share my triumph with her nor present the booty to her, to show her that I care. Besides, I can't better our lifestyle either to make life lavish for her. How am I to explain my spending spree to her? Oh, why does she have such an aversion towards cutting corners? Well, after touching five or more, I should resign and venture into some business or the other. Won't I be able to pass off all this as business profit then, even from the beginning? And that would be the time to flaunt my wealth and make her move in a limousine of her own. Meanwhile, I've to lay low, tucking the money tight in the *attic*.'

'Would one ever come to suspect the secret show?' he thought, after reaching home. 'No way, isn't it all so foolproof. But what if it were to leak out later? How can I ever face my father, leave alone Roopa, if it ever comes to that? Mother, though, might understand. Won't the old man scowl that the fair family name was soiled. What an idiosyncrasy! Of what worth is a family name, when no one had heard of it? Well, the die is cast, isn't it? Even if I won't play ball, the play will go on, that is for sure. Why should I be the loser, after all? Besides, won't I have to make her rich, at all costs that is? What a lovely wife to have, how will Roopa be feeling now on the train now?'

17

Aboard that Rayalaseema Express, entwined with her man and her mate, Roopa in the seventh heaven raved, 'Oh, how I've been dreaming for our threesome in a racing train.'

'Its time to start the game,' said Sandhya amorously to Roopa.

'With both of us lending him our helping hands isn't it strange that he needs to double his effort,' said Roopa enlacing Sandhya.

In the uninhibited union that followed well into the night, while the lesbianism of the women charmed their man's eroticism, his libido, exhilarated by their eagerness, occasioned their gratification. While, the lovers felt equally blessed, as if the bliss of their love triangle had been seeping into her cradle as well, Saroja didn't stir from her sleep all the time.

By the time they reached Tirupati in the morning, it was well past ten and hiring a cab, they soon set on their journey to Tirumala, the abode of Sri Venkateswara, the Lord of the Seven Hills.

‘How is it that the Lord is also called Balaji?’ Sandhya asked Raja Rao.

‘I guess,’ he said, fondling Saroja in his lap, ‘it could be to make it easy for the North Indians who find our South Indian names tongue-twisters.’

Reaching Tirumala in time, they checked into a cottage reserved beforehand. Having rested after lunch, they visited Papanasam and other places of pilgrimage on the hills. In the end, spurred on by the spiritual stimuli, they spent the night in ecstatic union before going to the temple at dawn for the *thomala seva* of the Lord. While Roopa thanked Him for her fulfilled life, Sandhya prayed in gratitude for His saving her man’s life besides blessing her mate’s love. And Raja Rao wished that the Lord would nourish their love for one another, forever.

After the Lord’s *seva*, Raja Rao took out a coral necklace and a pearl chain from his wallet and gave them to the *poojari* to perfuse them with the Holy water, and even as he was chanting appropriate *mantras*, Raja Rao whispered to his women, ‘Hear him sanctify our union.’

In time, as the *poojari* handed him the ornaments, Raja Rao adorned Sandhya with the coral necklace and enlaced Roopa’s nape with that pearl chain, all with a feeling of blessedness. As though to demonstrate the weakness for his women did not overshadow his paternal feeling, he went through the same process with Saroja’s gold chain as well.

‘I’ll revere it like my *mangalasutram*,’ said Roopa touching the pearl chain to her eyelids, ‘blessed by Love and sanctified by God.’

‘It feels like He’s blessing us,’ said Sandhya mystically, and while fondling her pearls, Roopa fondly looked at the deity.

‘Even if we discount the belief of the devout,’ said Raja Rao, ‘that the Lord manifests here, one may still explain the aura of the deity. The faith and reverence of His devotees in His omnipotence could have imparted the power to His Idol.’

At length, as they went round the market place, Sandhya picked up a Nirmal painting, depicting the Lord and His two Consorts, Alivelu Manga and Padmavathi, all dressed up in the nuptial white.

‘I should’ve thought of that myself,’ said Raja Rao.

‘Let it be our inspiration,’ said Sandhya, taking Roopa’s hand, ‘that is spiritually speaking.’

In the end, as they reached their cottage, promising to be back in no time, Raja Rao went out again.

‘Oh! You look lovely in the corals,’ Roopa kissed Sandhya.

‘How the pearls come alive on you!’ Sandhya followed suit.

‘Oh, how he appreciates,’ said Roopa, ‘the variety of his women!’

‘And no less awes,’ said Sandhya, hugging Roopa, ‘with his virility in turns.’

When Raja Rao returned tonsured, Sandhya said teasing, ‘May we know to what avail the vow?’

‘It’s nothing like that,’ he said, fondling his scalp. ‘The custom could be to enable one to experience humility since hair in so many ways symbolizes human vanity.’

After a weeklong romance in their amorous triangle, strengthened by divine sentiment, the threesome, along with their little darling, left Tirupati for Hyderabad that evening.

18

Waiting for the arrival of Rayalaseema Express at Nampally that morning, Sathyam felt that only on Roopa’s return would the hidden treasure acquire its true value for its possession. As the train chugged into the railway station, he sighted Roopa leaning out to wave at him, and seeing her alight, radiating in that pearl chain, his own mood was further buoyed.

‘You look great,’ said Sathyam to Roopa, having greeted them all.

‘It’s a surprise from Sandhya,’ said Roopa fondling her pearls chain. ‘Why don’t you see how nice she is in that coral necklace?’

‘Anything goes well,’ said Sathyam, helping them in moving the luggage, ‘with my sister.’

That night, as he took Roopa into his arms, Sathyam could not take his eyes off the pearl chain.

‘I wonder why it didn’t strike me,’ he said a little disappointed, ‘that pearls suit you so well.’

‘Being a face-man, you thought about the nose-stud,’ she said alluringly, and thought adoringly, ‘But Raja, oh! Won’t he turn my face and figure into one? What a time we’ve had!’

‘One day,’ said Sathyam, fondling her affectionately, ‘I’ll make you a queen with the crown and all.’

‘I’ll await the coronation,’ she said in smile, but felt at the same time, ‘Oh, am I not the empress of love with a double throne.’

On the other hand, in that middle-class home with millions in the loft, Sathyam felt that he was in a *trisankhu swargam*. Though his net worth was enough to make people line up at

his doorstep, he felt that he had to run the errands for the IAS cadre. He was disgusted that though he had the means to let Roopa go around in a chauffeur driven Chevrolet, he was unable to offer her any more than a pillion ride on his Lambretta. In his frustration, he often thought of quitting the service, but the temptation to keep it going for some more time, ensured that it was status quo at his office, and home as well.

Then came Saroja's first birthday, and Sathyam couldn't resist the temptation to present her a gold necklace befitting his intrinsic worth and his innate love for Sandhya.

'Sandhya would surely like my present for her daughter,' he was lost in his thoughts, on the way to the birthday party. 'What a sweet nature she has. Oh, how she understands people and empathizes with them. And what warmth she has for people. What a rare woman, indeed. Wouldn't I've been better off had she been my wife, instead of a *raakhi* sister?'

'But then,' Sathyam continued in the same vein, 'Raja Rao would have made a better husband for Roopa. Oh, how she admires him? He's nothing short of an idol for her, is he not? And it's quite possible that she's enamored of him. But how can I fault her, even if she were in love with him? Isn't he a better man than me in every way? After all, it's all so apparent. But would her infatuation push her into a liaison with him? Oh, no. After all that, how unfair of me to even to entertain such a thought? Why, didn't she shun Prasad, that too when she was indifferent to me? By that, hadn't she showed her character, once and for all? But now, she says that she loves me even! And don't I know that she's not making it up. Maybe, she fantasizes about Raja Rao. Well, that's a different matter altogether.'

When he reached their place, Sathyam lost no time in placing the necklace on Saroja's person.

'I envy my daughter's luck,' said Sandhya, thrilled at his gesture, 'Oh, how nice it is that she has an uncle who treats her like his daughter.'

'I've always thought,' said Sathyam, feeling pleased, 'that we're all but one family.'

As Roopa began to dress Saroja in a plain cotton frock, Sathyam said it may not be right for the big occasion.

'Children are better off in cottons than in those suffocating synthetics,' she said. 'But, parents pay through their noses for the kids-wear, just to exhibit.'

'All that is fine for a drawing-room discussion,' said Sathyam. 'But the world sizes you up by the way you dress.'

'Dress might enhance looks,' said Roopa 'but it's the poise that pleases.'

‘Left to you, it looks like you would make a *sanyasin* out of Saroja,’ said Sathyam unable to reconcile to her philosophy of life. ‘Anyway, won’t I show Saroja the other side of the coin?’

‘You are welcome to do that,’ said Raja Rao who joined them by then. ‘But personally I like to be guided by the twin quotes that Dr. Ramachandra Rao, our family physician, religiously copies in his new diary without fail. Somehow that slipped from my mind when we were on the subject at the Eagle Bar that day. Let me quote them to you, one is - In bringing up children, parents should remember that not wealth, but education conduces most to their happiness. And the other is - ‘The best inheritance that a father can provide to his son is an education that will fit him to take an honorable place among cultured men.’

‘Rao, I appreciate your intellect, though I differ with some of your ideas,’ said Sathyam extending his hand. ‘But I do envy your experience without any discount whatever.’

‘Thank you for your compliment,’ said Raja Rao. ‘Intellect is all about the ability to analyze human condition and experience is the product of self-introspection. But people tend to attribute their failures to outside factors without reflecting upon their own role in the setbacks. That’s why we find many inexperienced oldies and a few experienced youths. All said and done, I feel you’ve an intellectual heart.’

‘Oh, you’ve touched my heart,’ said Sathyam patting Raja Rao.

‘Congratulations for forming a new Mutual Admiration Club,’ smiled Roopa.

‘Membership drive is still on,’ said Raja Rao, ‘you’re welcome to join.’

Soon, the invitees began to arrive with their kids, and in time, the place was all agog with excitement. At length, as it was time for high tea, announced Sandhya, ‘Pray it’s palatable, and pick up your plate.’

19

For the first anniversary of Integral Architects, that came close on the heels of Saroja’s birthday, Raja Rao planned to celebrate the occasion with the staff at the office. Besides, he wanted to wine and dine with their friends at Blue Fox in the evening.

Thus, after performing the customary *vighneswara puja* that morning, and having handed over the mandatory mementoes to Aslam and Narasaiah, Raja Rao called it a day at the office.

Soon they reached home, and Sandhya, as was her wont, sent Saroja with the maidservant to Lalitha’s place, so finding themselves all alone with their man, as the mates looked at

him admiringly, Raja Rao folded them tenderly with his 'I love you'. Having kissed them both, he handed them diamond ear-studs each, that they found fascinating.

'Cute,' said Sandhya excitedly.

'Radiant,' reflected Roopa reflexively.

'Like you two,' he said as they went about unscrewing their gold studs.

'Do you know Sandhya,' said Roopa mirthfully, 'how he used to pronounce 'two' as 'too', to seduce me!'

'Had I known that,' said Sandhya mirthfully, 'our orgymoon would have been my honeymoon.'

'Oh!' said Roopa reminiscently, as she tried to position the diamond ear-studs all by herself, 'how that would have saved me all that misery.'

'But it was your pining that made our meeting so poignant that night,' said Raja Rao, stopping her from changing the ear studs.

'Well, there's a price to pay for everything,' said Roopa, 'maybe, ordeals throw up rewards in the end.'

'Now for a romantic touch to our dalliance,' he said, and took the pair from Sandhya's hand, and gave one to Roopa, saying, 'let's together adorn the First Lady.'

'It's just love,' said Sandhya, as her man and her mate were at work on her ears.

'Are you not our love,' they said, biting the respective ear.

'Oh, you look wonderful,' said Roopa to Sandhya, 'look into the mirror.'

'Don't I know that from the glow on your faces,' said Sandhya, embracing them both.

When he invited Sandhya for a repeat performance on their lover, Roopa said mischievously to Raja Rao. 'You leave the right one to her, as she has the first right on me.'

Seeing her adorned, Raja Rao said, 'Oh Roopa, how your face glows in the diamond triangle!'

'Can't I guess that from the glint in your eyes,' said Roopa, '

'You are a rare gem,' said Sandhya, kissing Roopa.

'Spotted by your taste,' responded Roopa, even as Sandhya sucked Raja Rao into a grander kiss, she added, 'polished by his passion, and embedded in our love triangle.'

'I too love to wear a nose-stud,' said Sandhya, fondling Roopa's.

'Don't we think alike, darling?' he said, pulling one from his pocket.

'But then, won't she need a poke,' said Roopa, laughing, 'on her nose for that.'

'For that,' smiled Raja Rao, 'I don't mind sending her to any doctor.'

‘And for that,’ said Sandhya naughtily, ‘would I need any other needle?’

‘It’s time we chained him,’ Roopa winked at Sandhya.

‘Can I ask for a lovelier punishment,’ said Raja Rao, all eager.

Pressing herself to him at his back, as Roopa blindfolded Raja Rao with her palms, having removed his shirt thereafter, Sandhya slipped a gold chain onto his chest, and as her grateful man opened his arms, Sandhya sank into his embrace in mirth. But when she moved her hands to his navel, Roopa shifted her hands onto the chain, as though to rein him in.

‘Won’t our womanly togetherness adorn your manly chest?’ Roopa whispered to him, showing him the locket.

‘It’s amazing in its alphabetical reversal,’ he said, hugely pleased.

‘Let’s go by the precedent,’ said Sandhya, stripping him naked.

‘First lovers first,’ he said, holding them together, ‘that’s the right order.’

‘Won’t we take that as your order,’ said the mates, and began to show an unusual zeal in their lesbian togetherness.

Watching them in wonderment, he took out two waist-chains to adorn their nudity with those but as they reached for them randomly, he suggested they guess the respective destination of the gold and the platinum ornaments.

‘Who knows, you might bluff,’ said Sandhya, seconded by Roopa, ‘even if we guess it right.’

‘No way, as each of them’ he said in all smiles, ‘has a name of its own.’

As they guessed theirs’ right, he began with Sandhya, and exclaimed, ‘oh, how it vanished!’ and when it came to Roopa, he wondered, ‘how well it matches!’

In that euphoric moment, as his women lost no time to go to each other’s erotic roots, seeing their waist-chains sink into each other’s breasts, he said ecstatically, ‘What a rainbow of love to behold!’

‘Oh, enough of your voyeurism,’ sputtered Roopa in time, ‘why not you shoot now, having two strings to your bow.’

‘How can I,’ he said, feigning helplessness, ‘with both the targets out of sight.’

‘Hit here straight,’ said Roopa, raising her head, ‘before you aim at my rear.’

When nature ended the orgy, said Roopa dreamily, ‘Can anyone have an idea of our joy?’

‘If only they could,’ Sandhya said smiling, ‘won’t they die of jealousy for the lack of it?’

When Roopa returned from her bath, finding her waist bereft of the chain he gave her, said a disappointed Raja Rao, 'I thought you liked it.'

'I want it to witness only our lovemaking,' she said, embracing him with a feeling of emotional commitment to him.

Having slept for a while, Roopa returned home by the time Sathyam came from the Secretariat. At length, the Sathyams went to the Raja Raos' place to proceed to Blue Fox at seven. Among those who made it to the party in the evening were the two Reddys, Wahab and Dr. Wazir Ahmed.

Sitting beside Sathyam, Sandhya said, 'Haven't you noticed the ear-studs on Roopa and I have on us?'

'They suit you both,' he said, 'equally well.'

'We wanted to surprise you,' said Sandhya, 'as ever.'

'I'm glad you care for her,' he said. 'She's very happy these days.'

'Why don't you stop with that?' said Roopa to Sathyam in between her conversation with Wahab.

'These mixed dinners are for novices,' said Wahab. 'Aren't stags the answer for the regulars? What do you say Sathyam *saab*?'

'I would say cheers,' laughed Sathyam, lifting his glass, 'to encore, that is.'

At the other end of the table, Dr. Wazir Ahmed said to Raja Rao, 'I understand the architects are having a pretty good time these days.'

'Can't you see, doctor *sahab*,' Subba Reddy said in undertone, before Raja Rao could reply, 'with two pretty directors on the board, how could it be otherwise for our romantic architect.'

'Thank God, you've stopped at that,' muttered Raja Rao.

'Well,' laughed Subba Reddy, who was high by then, 'it's I who has stopped at that, isn't it?'

Sensing trouble, Ranga Reddy, who was sitting beside his inebriated friend, thought it fit to preempt the embarrassment in the offing, and announced thereby, 'I request Dr. Wazir Ahmed to present this miniature Charminar to Raja Rao *garu* on our behalf. We fondly hope that one day, Integral Architects would conceive a modern day symbol of Hyderabad.'

'Thank you all,' said Raja Rao, sounding closure after they had dinner, 'for a wonderful evening.'

'It's our pleasure as well,' echoed the guests.

Back home, in time, Raja Rao told Sandhya, 'Can't we look back with satisfaction?'

'Of course,' she said, making herself snug in his embrace. 'And hope for a lovely life as well. I've never been happier all my life. Isn't it all about the power of love?'

'And the favors of fortune,' he said fondling her lovingly.

'But, I'm worried at times,' she said in apprehension, 'Isn't our bliss too good, to last for long.'

'By some twisted logic of the law of averages,' said Raja Rao, 'Roopa's unfortunate past might as well ensure the future stability of our love triangle.'

'Well, for all that, going by your logic, it may come true even,' said Sandhya sharing her thoughts with him. 'But, what can be said about the strangeness of life and the singularity of the relationships it occasions? To start with, it was the mutual admiration that ushered in my friendship with Roopa. Then, our growing affection found its true expression in our lesbianism, triggered by, of all the things, by her post-nuptial depression! And our chance meeting in New Delhi brought you into my life to provide substance, as well as sustenance to it. Later, your mutual attraction resulted in your passionate liaison that catered to Roopa's craving for male élan, and yours, for your dusky dame. In the end, it was the reality of relationships that you presented me, helped me color our love triangle on the canvas of our sexuality. And then providentially at Tirupati, spirituality too insensibly seeped into our orgies, enabling us to experience divinity in our lovemaking. And above all, thanks to the innate empathy you have for the fair sex, the idea of woman in liaison loving her husband made you Roopa's benign flame, to light Sathyam's way. Oh, that's life.'

'Can we imagine our life without her now,' said Raja Rao contemplatively. 'What more can we ask from life?'

'Why not we make a *menage a trois* with her,' Sandhya said dreamily, 'Oh how we used to jest about it!'

'Find him a wife before she files the suit,' he said joking. 'But, one shouldn't be too greedy even in daydreaming.'

'Contentment is the finest thing,' she said, sinking into him, 'even in loveseeking, isn't it?'

'Doesn't it go against the other saying,' he said, winking at her, 'that variety is the spice of life?'

'But then,' she said, 'how our life covers both the grounds.'

'Won't that give us,' he said reaching for her lips, 'contented variety.'

'Here you have,' she said, turning amorous, 'the first of it.'

At length, the blessed couple sank into a blissful sleep.

20

Some six months later, it seemed, destiny was making a course correction in Roopa's life.

After Sathyam had his breakfast that Sunday morning, she herself feeling lazy, Roopa sent him to fetch some *bhindi*. On his way back from the nearby *sabzi mandi*, remembering Roopa's indent for matchboxes as well, he stopped at a pan shop and chanced to read the headline of the *Eenadu* on sale there. Though he couldn't believe his eyes, the caption there shook him to the core. Jeopardized by the news, he picked up a copy in anxiety, and ran home in fright. Racing up the steps, he sank into the sofa to go through the item with premonition.

'WORLD BANK TENDERS ROCK ASSEMBLY' the headline stared him in the face all again, making him numb. However, goaded by the fear of his future, he read the copy that read - Divakar Reddy, the leader of the opposition, alleged in the Assembly that the contracts of the World Bank Projects were fraudulently awarded to the *benami* firms of the Finance Minister, Rajanna Choudhary. Though the minister, who was present in the House, denied any irregularity, demanding an enquiry, the opposition staged a walk out and sat in *dharna* outside the legislature. Fearing a deadlock in the house, the Chief Minister agreed to hand over the case to the Central Bureau of Investigation.'

Sathyam could go no further, what with his eyes welled up by then.

Roopa, who meanwhile pulled herself into the kitchen, was at a loss as to why he was taking so long to return. At length, however, as she came into the hall, she saw him as white as a sheet in the sofa.

'What's wrong with you?' she enquired anxiously.

Still in a trance, he looked at her vacuously.

'Tell me,' she shook him anxiously, 'what happened?'

He gave her the newspaper for a reply.

'Tell me, please,' she asked, flinging the paper on the table.

'Read the headline,' he mumbled.

'I can't make head or tail of it,' she said, having read it.

'That headline might cost me my head,' he said nervously.

‘What!’ she said in shock.

‘I’m involved in all that,’ he said with mixed feelings.

‘I just can’t believe it!’ she said, and read the news in detail.

‘Believe it or not,’ he said, looking at her confounded, ‘I was the mastermind behind it.’

‘I think you’re imagining things,’ she said, as she gathered her wits, ‘Are you not assuming undue self-importance these days?’

‘How can I convince you,’ he said helplessly, ‘that it’s my idea to the last detail?’

‘Oh, really,’ she said in exasperation. ‘But why didn’t you tell me before?’

Then he narrated the contours of the conspiracy and the details of its execution with a sense of excitement, and added, ‘I wonder how anyone could have smelled a rat. Unbelievable really, for that was all so foolproof.’

‘No doubt, it’s brilliant,’ she said, making no effort to hide her admiration for his brainchild, ‘though wicked. Oh, if only you had put your brains to better use.’

‘Do you know,’ he said mysteriously, ‘what my idea was worth?’

‘Why, the crumbs of the cake,’ she said feeling sad. ‘And now we land in this mess.’

‘Hold your breath,’ he said proudly, ‘you’re a millionairess without your knowing it. I’ve made two millions from that single deal and another half a million for the assorted favors done over the time. The money is there for you, safely tucked away in the *attic*.’

‘To hell with your millions,’ she said, unmoved. ‘I’m worried about your future.’

‘More than the loss of face for me,’ he said dejectedly, ‘I’m worried about its confiscation, making you poor all over again.’

‘You know that I don’t care,’ she said, trying to calm him, ‘even if it were a billion that is at stake. I’m only worried about you.’

‘I’ve never imagined things would come to this pass,’ he said morosely. ‘I only thought that money might make you feel secure, and would earn me your love. It looks like, now I’m ruined in every way.’

‘Oh me!’ she said with a sense of remorse. ‘It’s my fault indeed. How I was cold to you! Don’t you know that I love you now?’

‘I know that,’ he said with his heart in his mouth, ‘but do you still love me?’

‘Oh, for the way you feel for me, I love you even more now,’ she said, taking his hand.

‘Roopa, you don’t seem to understand the value of money and the humiliation the lack of it could cause,’ he said, pushing the import of the calamity onto the back burner, as the sentiment of his love came to the fore. ‘Though it hurt me deeply, it was Prasad’s ogling of

you that had opened my eyes. If only I were a man of status, he wouldn't have dared even to daydream about you, leave alone wooing you. From then on, I strived to prepare a sheath of wealth for you to ward off the lecherous folks.'

'Oh, my darling,' she embraced him, 'how you love me!'

'More than you could ever imagine,' he said.

'I'm blessed, really,' she said, overwhelmed by love for him, 'but how do we get out of this mess now?'

'It's a consolation that you love me still,' he said. 'But how can I show my face to my father?'

'Don't worry, he would understand,' she said trying to cheer him up. 'After all, he loves you above all else.'

'You don't seem to know him,' he said in all remorse. 'For him, our surname is paramount. He would die of shame at this misdeed of mine.'

'Why not plead guilty and be done with it?'

'Maybe, the court could be considerate at that but Choudhary's mafia won't take kindly to that,' he lamented. 'Oh, how hopelessly I've compromised myself!'

'We all make mistakes don't we?' she said to him as much to herself. 'Yet, we deserve to be sympathized by others for the motive behind our moves. After all, it's for love that we both erred on the sly.'

Having said that, she realized that she got carried away to blurt out her secret and looked at him horrified. Being overwhelmed by his own predicament, Sathyam failed to note the oddity of her averment, and so didn't press her for any clarification on that count.

'Your sentiment gives me hope,' he said.

'We better talk to Raja Rao,' she suggested in relief, having recovered in the meantime.

'We'll think about it later,' he said, as he got up to go into the bedroom, 'but I want to be alone now. At times, solitude is the best company, don't you think it is?'

'True,' she said with understanding, 'I won't disturb you.'

'Why not I have a little drink to lighten my burden?' he thought aloud.

'I can understand,' she said, and went to fetch him some ice and water.

Drinking out of a bottle of Chivas Regal, of the three sent by Nagaraju the other day, thought Sathyam, 'What a paradox it is, that grief and relief should come from the same source!'

‘Am I not responsible for all this?’ felt Roopa, all alone in the hall. ‘Of course, having made him feel insecure all through, haven’t I caused his fall? If only I had made him feel wanted from the beginning, would things have come to such a pass? Well, wittingly or unwittingly, I brought him to this stage. But, he won’t even have one harsh word for me! Why have I devalued him and his love all along? Oh God, how I have come to wrong him!’

Overwhelmed by his new found virtues, and ashamed of her own insensitivity, Roopa resolved to stand by him through thick and through thin, ‘Even if the world belittles him, won’t I value him now, more than anything else.’

‘You better stop it now,’ she reproached him at lunchtime, finding him at drink all morning.

‘Roopa, please,’ he said pleadingly, ‘don’t try to stop me today. I can’t stand it, if I come to my senses.’

‘You’re making me helpless,’ she said.

‘Am I not helpless myself?’

‘At least, do have a bite,’ she said pleading.

‘Okay,’ he said, emptying the glass, ‘I shall join you.’

After lunch, exhausted by fear, he slept for long. At length, as he got up at five, he asked her to go to Sandhya’s place lest they should come visiting them.

‘How am I to leave you now?’ she protested.

‘Right now,’ he said embarrassedly, ‘to be honest, I’m uncomfortable with you even.’

‘I’ll be in the hall,’ she said, ‘call me if you need something.’

‘At least, he drinks to lighten his burden, and he deserves it as well. But what about me?’ she felt, reclining in the sofa, and began to picture her future. ‘What could possibly come of the scandal? He’s sure to lose his job, and might find himself behind the bars even. Oh, how that would ruin him and ridicule me. What have I done to deserve all this? Oh God, what’s wrong with my life? How long I have lived in a void for want of love, and then, that yearlong pining in passion. At long last, when I’m happy, here’s this tragic turn.’

‘Won’t high connections help?’ she thought at length. ‘Can Ranga Reddy come to our rescue? Isn’t he known to be close to the Home Minister? Even otherwise, won’t the case be hushed up, as the bigwigs are involved, no less than the Finance Minister? Perhaps our fears could turn out to be liars.’

At that, she went up to Sathyam to show him the silver lining, and found him still at drink.

‘How I wish it comes to that,’ he said, even a little relieved.

‘I’m sure all this is bound to fizzle out in the end,’ she said, sounding music to his ears. ‘Don’t we see, the reports of enquiry commissions whitewashing the scandals involving politicians. I’m sure this won’t be any different.’

‘God willing, we would get the hell out of time,’ he said excitedly. ‘We will go to Tirupati and I’ll get tonsured.’

‘Whatever may be the itch,’ she ruled for the future, ‘never ever grease your palms.’

‘It’s a promise,’ he said taking her hand, ‘I won’t undergo all this for anything. I’ll resign my job and get into some business with that money.’

‘Leave aside morals,’ she said, thoughtfully, ‘I think you deserve to keep the booty, if only for your motive behind grabbing it. And no less, for the way you’re suffering. Now let me call them so that you too can divert your mind.’

‘As you’ve given me hope,’ he said, ‘let me relax over a large. Why not you to their place and spend some time with Sandhya.’

‘I better do that,’ she said, changing her sari ‘But do mind about your drink.’

In time, as he drank out that large, it dawned on Sathyam that the calamity of the moment had brought Roopa emotionally closer to him than ever before. With his spirits having soured thus, as if to steady himself, he made himself one more ‘large one’.

21

Having dragged her feet all the way to Sandhya’s house, finding it under lock and key, a disappointed Roopa, nursing hopes of their early return, clung on to the gate for long. At length, however, caught between hope and despair, she felt as if her head was splitting into half.

‘Oh, what a miserable day,’ she thought in the end, as her weary legs took the homeward path.

At length, as she reached home in disappointment, she sank into the sofa in exhaustion. However, in time, gripped by an impulsive need for company, to shed her melancholic overburden, she went up to Sathyam, and found him emptying the bottle into his glass.

‘Why don’t you stop that god-damn drink,’ she said in irritation in spite of herself, ‘and start showing some concern for me?’

‘There’s no way I can help you now,’ he said apologetically, ‘why don’t you help yourself with a drink or two?’

‘Why not,’ she said without second thoughts, ‘if that makes it a little easier for me?’

When she returned with a glass, he looked at her amused, and as she poured for herself from the fresh bottle, he stared at her wide-eyed.

‘Oh, haven’t I failed you all these years,’ he said, clinking her glass for ‘cheers’. ‘Besides, it would have been a great fun drinking together. Oh, how we wasted our time!’

‘Better late than never,’ she smiled, as she sipped that Scotch. ‘Isn’t it well said?’

‘You’re a sport really,’ he said in all admiration. ‘And I love you for that. Oh, how I knew that, the moment I saw you.’

‘Don’t I know that?’ she said, turning coy.

‘Having been a cold fish all along,’ he said, at length, ‘I wonder how you turned into a hot chick overnight.’

‘Why rake up the past now?’ she smiled.

‘What had brought about the change in you?’ he said, suddenly seized with curiosity.

‘As one can’t drink from an empty glass,’ she said tilting her glass, ‘one can’t love with a lifeless heart.’

‘Won’t you let me see,’ he said, ‘the other half of your glassful now.’

‘Well, it is for my eyes only,’ she said, rolling her eyes. ‘By the way, why you want to drain it to the dregs?’

‘As I love the taste,’ he persisted nevertheless, ‘won’t I like to know its recipes as well?’

‘Oh, it’s the spice of my heart,’ she said, as she winked at him, ‘flavored by the Cupid.’

‘Oh,’ he said, giving up his probing. ‘You’re a hard nut to crack.’

‘Come on,’ she said, extending her hand to him, ‘let’s have dinner.’

‘I haven’t space,’ he said, feeling his tummy, ‘even for a morsel.’

‘In that case,’ she said drinking to the dregs, ‘why should I cook?’

‘What about your dinner?’

‘I’ll manage with the leftovers,’ she said. ‘Moreover, I’m too tipsy to light the stove even. I wonder how you can drink like a fish, and yet remain steady!’

‘Isn’t it the best compliment ever from you,’ he smiled heartily.

‘Pay back then,’ she held her glass, ‘with a peg at least.’

‘You’re game, anyway,’ he said, obliging her.

‘But with those,’ she said in a drawling way, remembering her lover’s averment, ‘who raise the bar.’

'In time, you may beat me at my own game,' he said in awe; as she gulped half from the glass at one go.

'Wait and see,' she winked at him.

'I've always felt,' he said holding her hand, 'I could have won your love had I agreed that night.'

'Why rake up the past now,' she smiled. 'Are we not happy anyway?'

'I know that, but still,' he said melancholically, 'we wouldn't have lost what we lost in those three years.'

'Let bygones be bygones,' she said dreamily.

'You don't know how I crave for your love,' he said ruefully. 'You've never really known me, in spite of everything.'

'Well, I was beside myself then,' she said. 'But I value your love now.'

'Now,' he suggested in hope, 'why not you study medicine.'

'It's too late, anyway,' she said resignedly. 'But that night I was desperate. Your consent could have made our life heavenly. And that's the reality.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Any way, that's life,' she said, 'full of ifs and buts, isn't it?'

'Can you ever pardon me?'

'I think all of us,' she said, taking his hand, 'in spite of our faults, are pardonable.'

'I always felt guilty on that score,' he said withdrawing his hand, overcome by remorse all again, 'and that made me feel uneasy with you.'

'I was aware of that, but I couldn't help it,' she said reaching for his hand again. 'But you know it's all different now.'

'You're the life,' he said, pressing her hand, 'of my life.'

'Thank you, but stop it now, for my sake,' she tried to dissuade him, as he was mixing some more for him, 'I'm feeling sleepy.'

'Why don't you sleep in the hall tonight?' he said pleading, 'I like to drink a little more.'

'Good night then,' she said yawning, and picking up her pillow, she went into the hall.

Having had some curd rice with a mango pickle, she took to the makeshift bed, and fell asleep, even as she hit the pillow.

'I've a brainwave,' said Sathyam excitedly, waking her shortly thereafter. 'With that booty, you can open a nursing home and serve the sick. That way the bad money would serve a

good cause, won't it? Above all, it will help me get rid of my sense of guilt. Roopa, don't say no.'

'Oh, what a love,' she said, hugging him tightly. 'I'll do anything for you now.'

'Let's move away the money to safety tomorrow itself,' he said excitedly. 'Who knows, there could be a raid soon.'

'Lie down here,' she moved away to accommodate him.

'Why not I celebrate my brainwave,' he kissed her good night. 'Three cheers.'

Having bid him good night, at length, an intoxicated Roopa fell into an exciting slumber.

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Roopa, with a hangover, woke up to Yamma's buzzer, at seven the next morning, only to realize that Sathyam was still in bed. At that, as she began to brush her teeth, Yamma set out to wash the staircase. Soon, as Roopa was at preparing coffee decoction for them and Sathyam, for he started having bed coffee for sometime then, Yamma began sweeping the hall. At length, while Roopa in the kitchen was keeping watch over the boiling milk Yamma went into the bedroom. Shortly thereafter as Yamma, taking *ayya* to be dead, raised an alarm, Roopa spilt the strong coffee she was preparing for Sathyam on herself. Then, rushing to him in pain, she felt his pulse, and finding it still, she fell unconscious over him. At that, fearing the worst, Yamma rushed with the news to the Raja Rao in bed.

Reaching her home post-haste, the nonplussed couple found their benumbed lover lay on her husband's body. However, readily realizing that Roopa was breathing still, Raja Rao hurried Sandhya to fetch some water to splash her into senses. In time, as Roopa opened her eyes, Sandhya took her mate endearingly into her lap, even as Raja Rao caressed the bereaved in assurance. Even in her state of shock, Roopa found their touch reassuring and began to feel solaced by that. There could be moments in life when a mere touch of a dear one conveys more empathy than a score of sympathetic words.

'What's this tragedy?' sobbed Sandhya, inducing a flood of tears from Roopa's eyes.

'He was upset the whole of yesterday, and went on drinking till midnight,' cried Roopa inconsolably. 'And he was no more by the morning. Oh, I can't believe it.'

'Maybe, he died of excessive drinking,' said Raja Rao gravely, looking at the two empty bottles of Chivas Regal lying near the cot. 'But why didn't you stop him at some point?'

‘What do you mean?’ Roopa said, perplexed, ‘Why, was he not dead drunk so often? Can one die of drink, really?’

‘As it appears,’ said Raja Rao, staring at Sathyam’s body, ‘sadly, he drank himself to death.’

‘But why didn’t you send for us all day?’ said Sandhya.

‘You were not at home when I came in the evening,’ said Roopa ruefully. ‘And in the end, unable to bear the tension, I myself had a couple of drinks, and slept off. Oh, if only I knew, wouldn’t I have stopped him in time.’

‘How I wish you did,’ said Sandhya bogged down with tears. ‘And that would have saved a fine soul for us. But as they say, God won’t keep Himself away from good souls for long. Wonder why it doesn’t occur to Him that the world needs such, even more!’

‘What else we can do now,’ said Raja Rao, consoling Sandhya, ‘than braving the cruelty of fate?’

‘Oh, how fate had chosen me,’ said Roopa melancholically, ‘as the villain in his life. What an irony our life has turned out to be! While I slighted him all through, he died burdening me with his magnanimity.’

‘Stop feeling guilty dear,’ said Sandhya cajolingly. ‘After all, he died with a feeling of being loved by you. That’s what matters to his soul and to your conscience as well.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Roopa, staring at Sathyam’s body, ‘that’s the saving grace of my life with him.’

‘It’s time,’ said Raja Rao to Tara who came by then, ‘we informed the police.’

‘Leave all that to me,’ said Tara, though beside herself, ‘and take care of her.’

At that, as Roopa realized that the police would come to take away the body for post-mortem, the irony of the tragedy dawned on her.

‘Oh, how he feared he would be arrested,’ she thought feeling sad about it all. ‘But they would be here soon, to take away his body. What if they revisit to confiscate his booty as well?’

Then, having recalled how relieved Sathyam was at his brainwave, she resolved, ‘No, I can’t let that happen, if only to see his soul rest in the Sathyam Memorial Clinic.’ Thus, closeting with Raja Rao and Sandhya, she narrated all that happened, and concluded, ‘He told me that he kept that money on the loft. We shall remove that before they start looking for it.’

As Raja Rao and Sandhya shared her sentiment and volunteered to shoulder her burden, the prospect of her immortalizing Sathyam's name through the clinic enabled her to face the calamity with equanimity. Shortly thereafter, Tara came back, and Sandhya went home to tend to Saroja. And as the Police began investigating into Sathyam's death so to assist them Raja Rao left Roopa to Tara's care.

'You know that I look life straight in its face,' said Tara in undertone to Roopa. 'You should welcome his death though in a weird way. Well, he lived believing you're faithful to him and died before knowing you've a lover. Don't you fool yourself; it was only a matter of time when he would have got wind of your ways, and how hard that would have been on him you can imagine. How he would have suffered all his life for that hurt and death seems to have saved him that fate. And that's life!'

'Oh, I haven't seen it from that angle,' said Roopa, even as she began to contemplate on that.

At length, as Tara's outlook insensibly gave her a new perspective of her life, Roopa began to see Sathyam's death in a fresh light. And late that night, to retrieve the treasure that Sathyam had left behind, Raja Rao, helped by his women, had crouched into the loft. 'If not for the sentiment attached to it,' he thought disconcertingly, 'how mean all this could be!'

23

The mourners' number had swelled by the next day, what with the arrival of relatives and friends from far and wide. While Ramu helped Raja Rao to keep things moving, Raju ran errands for his brothers-in-law and others.

When the body was brought back from the mortuary, while a shocked Pathrudu tried to console Durgamma, she went delirious over it.

'Why instead of him, didn't God take me away?' she cried inconsolably, 'how could He be so cruel to my son in the midst of his life? Did he ever harm even a flea, all his life?'

But while Janaki cried herself hoarse that her daughter got widowed so young, Ramaiah found himself burdened by guilt, 'Had I not then brainwashed her into marrying him, I might be busy now searching matches for her. Oh, what a fate it is.'

It was left to the Kamalakars, together with Sandhya, to console Roopa, as Chandrika was yet to arrive.

'No doubt it's sad,' said Kamalakar, patting Roopa, 'but you need to be brave.'

‘How sad, it’s all over for Sathyam,’ said Damayanthi, taking Roopa into her lap, ‘but you shouldn’t lose heart, knowing we’re always with you.’

‘That’s true,’ said Kamalakar, overwhelmed by Roopa’s plight at such a young age, ‘we would treat you like our second daughter.’

‘I love you all the more for your love and understanding for her,’ said Sandhya moved by her parents’ empathy for her friend.

‘We’re proud of you darling for your commitment to friendship,’ said Kamalakar, patting Sandhya,

‘Not to speak of yours as well,’ said Damayanthi to Roopa.

‘I never experienced a like moment,’ said Roopa, shedding tears of sorrow and joy in equal measure. ‘Your love lightens as well as burdens my soul.’

‘That’s what makes your life so unique,’ said Sandhya, ‘

‘And your friendship so singular,’ said Damayanthi.

By the mid-day, when everything was in place for Sathyam’s last rites, Roopa’s eyes were left with no tears to shed and when Sathyam’s body was lifted on a bamboo stretcher, Pathrudu, with a pot of embers, led the funeral procession. As the corpse was thus taken away, leaving the females behind, Sandhya held a benumbed Roopa from collapsing.

Consigning his son’s body to the flames on the funeral pyre, Pathrudu felt the quirk of destiny, ‘How our roles have got reversed by fate!’, and as he saw Sathyam’s body engulfed in flames, thought Raja Rao, ‘How tragic it is that the triumph of love was snatched away by the hand of death!’

One by one, the kith and kin, with heavy heart, took leave of the bereaved, leaving Roopa, her family and her in-laws to fend for themselves. Then came the twelfth day, the before the closing rituals, when Ramaiah took it upon himself to sort out the matters concerning Roopa’s future.

‘Sad though it is for the departed,’ Ramaiah addressed the assemblage, ‘life must go on for the living, as s we all know, without means, life is but a plight. Though it may seem inappropriate, since our minds are governed by magnanimity, and as our hearts overflow with sympathy to the survivor, it is the right moment to sort out the mundane issues.’

‘You couldn’t have said better,’ said Pathrudu approvingly.

‘As we lost our son, we would treat her as our daughter.’

‘I’ve never doubted about that,’ said Ramaiah to Pathrudu, ‘but don’t you think that she would be better off in her parental house?’

‘Well, it’s up to her,’ said Pathrudu thoughtfully, ‘but wherever she stays, she inherits our property.’

‘I can never thank you enough for your affection,’ Roopa tentatively told Pathrudu. ‘I would have loved to serve you both, but I’ve a mission for his memory and that keeps me here.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Janaki, taken aback. ‘How can we leave you alone?’

‘When I’m around, how can she be alone?’ said Sandhya spiritedly. ‘Moreover, it’s far easier for her to recover from her tragedy staying with me, and she needs our support to accomplish her mission.’

‘Don’t we know, how you love her,’ said Janaki, ‘but still, it won’t be appropriate that she stays with you.’

‘Whatever it is,’ said Roopa as though pleading for their understanding, ‘I need them to fulfill his last wish.’

Fearing that the discussion might take an ugly turn, not wanting to embarrass themselves and the others as well, Raja Rao and Sandhya slipped out, fully aware that, in spite of all the persuasions and dissuasions of others, Roopa would remain steadfast to fulfill the dictates of her life which fate had fused with theirs.

‘No cause is a right cause for a widow to stay away from her family,’ said Durgamma indignantly, ‘moreover, it would scandalize all of us.’

‘What she says is true,’ said Janaki, seconding Durgamma’s stance.

‘Whatever it is,’ said Chandrika spiritedly, ‘let’s see what serves her interests and not which suits your prejudices.’

‘Why do you want to rub your quirk ideas on her,’ said Janaki frowning upon her rebellious daughter.

‘It’s her life so let her decide about it herself’ said Raju.

‘You’re too young to air your views,’ Janaki was dismissive.

‘Why, he represents the future while you’re all but the past,’ said Chandrika in support of her sister’s cause, ‘and his views are only going to count in the days to come.’

‘Know we’re dealing with the present,’ said an exasperated Janaki.

‘But her life is about her future,’ said Raju, ready to take up the cudgels for Roopa, ‘and none could cater to it better than Sandhya-*akka*.’

‘What is to be done when children don’t heed our word any more,’ said Janaki, as though relenting. ‘What to do than to come down and stay with her.’

'Is that to jail her?' Chandrika sounded sarcastic. 'What's her crime, than being born a woman whom fate widowed when young? It's time you give up your jailer mind-set when it comes to your daughters' lives.'

'Oh, now the children don't want to stay with their own parents!' said Janaki, playing her trump card. 'In that case, let Raju stay with her, it may help him in his studies as well.'

'Why didn't you think of it when my brother-in-law was alive?' countered Raju spiritedly.

'Enough of it now, for she heard us all,' said Ramaiah, wanting to bring all that to an end, fearing the discussion might turn acrimonious in the end. 'Isn't she old enough to understand what's best for her? Let's leave it to her, for she's the worst affected of all.'

'I'll stay with them,' said Roopa with a sense of conviction that surprised all, and at that, as Durgamma wanted to protest, Pathrudu signaled her into silence.

'So be it,' said Ramaiah in a way that drew no further comment from those present, in spite of their reservations about her scandalizing proposition.

'What is happiness and unhappiness all about?' Roopa began reminiscing, struggling to sleep that night. 'Haven't I experienced them both in equal measure? After all, everything in life has to do with one's state of mind. But then, don't social constraints couple with individual proclivities to shape our attitudes? Oh, poor Sathyam, what a victim he was, of his psyche, shaped by the circumstances of his life. Why, his parents stunted his growth to begin with, and with my denying him the wifely hype, he went wayward in the end and then, how the vicissitudes of life victimized him.'

'That's the guilt with which I've to learn to live,' she thought, as she recalled her role in Sathyam's fall. 'Was he not a victim of human dishonesty as well, including mine and the inequity of life in general? Are not the Prasads of the world having the cake and eating it too? Do they really, in a way? Why, for all that, I'm no less a beneficiary of deceit, although by default, is it not so? Is it possible that Tara's life is the radical answer to make it equal to all? But is it really? Well, it appears that life tends to manifest itself only in ironies, doesn't it? Oh, while I married Sathyam in the hope of becoming a doctor, didn't he bequeath me a fortune to build a clinic! How fate has taken off at a tangent in my life.'

As if to ease herself from the burden of guilt, she turned her thoughts to the gift of her life - love, 'Oh, won't I be shifting to their place tomorrow, to start life afresh as their woman in a live-in. Well, it's only a matter of time before the world gets used to our arrangement, isn't it? But would I be content with the *menage a trois* forever, won't I want to be Mrs. Roopa Rao at some point of time? Would Sandhya then object to his bigamy? Oh

no, never, life in the offing would be thrilling and vibrant, with Saroja too propping it up. God willing, won't I beget her sibling? How we both crave to have a child of our own. And my degree too would be on hand soon as if to underscore my changed status. Oh, so much pain and as much pleasure, even before I turn twenty-three! But then, that's life, as Tara said on Sathyam's death.'

'Am I not being mean to envision bliss in my condition?' she felt as her line of thinking perturbed her. 'Won't all this amount to coveting life when my man is just dead? What if I renounce the world and turn into a *sanyasin*? But of what avail is life in a vegetable existence? Besides, won't my move keep alive the age-old prejudices against young widows that much longer? And what about them, without me, can life ever be the same for them? Moreover, haven't I led them into believing that I would never desert them, whatever it takes for that?'

Then guided by her innate instincts, she tried to reason her situation all over again, 'Oh is it fair to expect the living to lead a life of gloom in the shadows of the dead? Doesn't life impose its own compulsions on the living, regardless of the sentiment to the departed? But then, how can I ever reconcile my own craving for life with the memory of Sathyam? Why, in keeping his memory alive in the Sathyam Memorial Clinic.'

As she began feeling easy with her line of thinking, on second thoughts she felt that she was being hypocritical but resolved her position in the end, 'Whatever it may be I'm human, and a woman at that, with all that goes with it. Well, let me live normally and lead life like a woman. That's all, no more, and no less.'

While she sank into a reconciled sleep at that, all that night, her parents and the in-laws had a troubled time on her account.

The next day, after everyone had left, some upset by her conduct, and others apprehensive about her future, Sandhya and Raja Rao led Roopa to the assigned place of her destiny.

Leaving this narrative behind, in time, Roopa's mourning would have ended, enabling her to begin a life of subdued bliss.

End.

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